

SALTWATER MAN
A Life at Sea

BILL JOHNSON
as told to Bill Bottomley



Betts Bay off Nobby's



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Bill Johnson went to sea when he was 15 in search of adventure. He is now 85 and he is still addicted to an adventurous existence. This book attempts to capture the diversity of Bill's life. You won't find much here about his domestic life, because his work always came first and he was away from home a great deal, leaving his wife Viney to look after the domestic sphere and the education of their two children – a not uncommon situation for those whose job required them to do hard and dangerous work, rather than just driving a desk.

Most biographies and autobiographies (but not all, of course), are of famous people – people from the upper echelons of society. But it is the working lives of “ordinary” people that has held my interest over the years, and I have chronicled the working lives of quite a few men and women who are not particularly famous, but who have spent their lives keeping the societal show running. Some of these people, each in their own way, have lead almost heroic lives, and Bill is one of those. He is a generalist of the first order, and would seem to be able to turn his hand to just about anything.*

**(Mind you, Bill Johnson is a legend in the port of Newcastle).*

He has a dry sense of humour, and I hope I have managed to retain his idiomatic turn of phrase in my transcriptions. At one stage while I was interviewing him for this book Bill showed me a picture of himself in his prime and I quipped: “Hey Bill. You were a bit of a hunk when you were younger. I’ll bet you had a girl in every port” to which he replied “Well that’s not true, because I haven’t visited every port.” Another example was when he was telling me about riding out a particularly violent storm at sea “and most of the crew left their fingerprints embossed on the steelwork”. And I’ll always remember his description of a huge man sent to intimidate him who “had muscles on his eyebrows”.

These accounts of Bill's working life are not in chronological order. Apart from collecting them under several general headings, they are pretty much the way he told them to me. As we sat in his lounge room, surrounded by walls full of maritime photographs and marine memorabilia, he would leaf through box after box of photographs and regale me with accounts of the events that they brought to mind. He assures me that we have only brushed the surface though, and that he has many, many more.

Bill's memory is impressive. He rarely has to grope for a name, and can tell you erudite things like the bollard pull of tug boats he's known, or who skippered what ship when, and only once in our many talks did he tell me a story that he'd already covered – and we covered quite a few. I'm five years younger than him and I envy his obvious physical fitness. And threaded through his stories are well-entrenched values of fairness, egalitarianism and acceptance of diversity that, for me, make him easy to like.

Bill lives on Dora Creek on the NSW central coast, and his front yard is exactly what you might expect from a marine salvage expert. Old boats, hawsers, unidentifiable bits of machinery and coils of polyprop rope line his driveway. The value of this "might come in handy" stuff is appreciated by people of a certain bent – I happen to be one of them!



So this is Bill's story – or parts of it. We had to stop somewhere, after all. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed putting it together.

Bill Bottomley, October 2017



I was born in 1932 – 18/8/32. In Dora Creek ... not in this house, though, it was further up the road. I grew up here, though once I started working I was away a lot. We had a little gathering here last weekend for my birthday, and it was attended by 40-odd locals who I grew up with. It was the first birthday party I'd ever had, because for all the others I was always away at sea.

My old man was born in 1893, I think it was. He was a pommie and he came out here and jumped ship. I think the journey here took 96 days, which is a pretty good trip to do under sail. He was an AB, but he got a crook ticker when he was quite young – though mind you, he was married three times! He was self-educated.

I was the second youngest of seven kids – six boys and a girl. As I grew up as a kid I was Dad's offsider. I think I was a bit closer to him than the other brothers were. Whenever Dad wanted to go fishing or go somewhere or have some help with a bit of rope work it always seemed to be me that went with him. We went everywhere and he taught me a lot, so it's not surprising that I grew up to be keen on going to sea. When I was leaving school he pointed out to me that if I went to sea I could count on three meals a day and a bed, which wasn't always the case ashore.

I went to school here and at Wyong, and I used to box a bit when I was a schoolboy. I was trained by some toplineers. There was a young feller whose father was a top pug who came from The Entrance. They used to come from all over to come to Wyong school. Anyway, polio was going around at the time, and there was one poor kid who had polio playing in a pretty rough part of the school playground, and this other much bigger kid bowled him over, and it wasn't an accident. I jumped in to defend the kid with polio, like a big hero, and I got well and truly belted

up for my trouble. Somehow it got on the news -- an interview between the two of us. We had two good pugs here in Dora Creek who were fighting professionally. One was a State lightweight champion and the other one was an up-and-comer, but a very good one. They used to train at Bluey Jones' Gym at Newcastle. These blokes trained me to be able to take care of myself, but the condition was, for six months I wasn't allowed to raise my hand or do anything, and then one day they told me that I was ready. So they gave me that dressing gown that's in the photo, and the shorts, and the towel around my neck, and we arranged for a bout between me and the bloke that had beaten me the previous time. The Headmaster at the High School was a boxer himself, and they were all good sports at the High School. So I went to the Headmaster and told that I wanted a re-bout with this feller. He



*Bill ready to take on a bully
at school*

told me that I'd probably get my head knocked off, but I said that I definitely wanted to fight him again. So I was tutored in exactly what to do: first round I was to soften him up a little bit, second round a little bit harder, third round I was going to sit him on his arse properly, you know. But by the time we got to the second round they could tell what was going to happen. He never laid a glove on me because I was so well tutored. So, a lot of bets were lost and won on that fight. I was 14 at the time. They wanted me to keep going with it and turn professional, but I didn't have the killer instinct that being a pro required -- I'd step back and let 'em get up if I knocked them down. But I did fight for the school, and represented the school in the State. And there

were some tough kids, and some good kids, who went on to fight professionally. Gipper O' Brien was one I remember who was from Marist Brothers. He was very good.

I got married young. I was 20, I think. Viney and I have been married 67 years. We get on alright because I'm away at work all the time! (*laughs*). We've got two kids – a boy and a girl. They're in their sixties now. The boy teaches close quarters combat to members of the armed forces. He's got a gymnasium at East Maitland. He worked with me for a while, but he didn't like what I was doing as much as I did and he went on to do other things. He was always into physical fitness.

My daughter was a nurse, like Viney. She was a triple-certificated nurse, and very good at it too. She lives in Cairns now. She had five kids, which meant that she couldn't keep all her nursing qualifications up to date, so she had to give up nursing. She didn't mind nursing, but I think she was quite pleased when it finished anyway.

My wife Viney used to work at the Psychiatric Hospital in Morisset, and she then went to work at Prince Henry Hospital when we got married.

Teenage Seafarer

When I finished school at Wyong there was no work around here. You either worked at the psychiatric hospital, or you became a policeman, or you worked on the railway. None of those suited me, so I went to sea. I put my age up and I joined a ship called the *Time*. Howard Smiths had the *Time*, and the *Age*, and the *Period* ... their names all related to time in some way. The only other one they had was the *Lady Isabelle* and a couple of others that didn't fit that idea, though. So I got my father to put my age up a year, and I joined the *Time* in Newcastle as a deck boy. I was 15. The ship was about average for those times – about 4000 tonnes. It was built in about 1911, and had seen the war and been there, but they kept it in service. They didn't scrap the old ships then because we needed them for the war.

We lived forrard in the fo'c'sle, the officers and engineers lived amidships, and the firemen lived aft. I remember more about her than any other ship I ever joined, 'cos she was my first ship.

As deck boy you served the meals and you scrubbed the mess room out. Everything was scrubbed in those days. It was white timber and you scrubbed it, and as I had it explained to me, you had to be clean because of disease in a small confined area.

There were sixteen on deck – a deck boy, then ordinary seamen, and there was the bosun and the storekeeper and the rest were ABs. That was on the ship forrard. And then midships was the officers. Captain McSween was the master, and he was quite aged, but then everyone then was older than me. In those days you didn't retire. You just kept on till you couldn't do it any longer, you know.

We had people in the fo'c'sle... the storekeeper was a master under sail. In those days you weren't allowed to wear glasses as an officer, so then you came down the scale, and he sailed as the storekeeper. The masters had magnifying glasses to work with the charts and all that, but in those days it was the rule that there was no glasses worn. I was then in an era where the older chaps stressed to me that we didn't mix with the firemen, because they were latecomers. Under sail you had seamen, but firemen only came into the industry with steam, and I used to get into trouble for talking to them. A lot of these people had come into the industry and they'd be ex-army and all that sort of thing, and one of the things that I always remember is their disrespect for authority. We were brought up that the master of the vessel was next to God – or even a bit above!

As I said, I served the meals as well as my other duties. In those days they were in dixies. I'd go up to the galley and bring them back to the mess room where we had hotboxes because, being a steamer, we had steam and it was easy to do. So the meals were put in the hotboxes, and after they were eaten I had to wash up and scrub the mess room out, and then work on deck in the afternoon from 1 to 4 I think it was, and then prepare for the meal at night. After that meal I'd wash up and scrub up, and then I'd go onto the bridge to learn to box the compass until ten o'clock, and also learn how to steer. In those days the compass wasn't 360 degrees – it was quarter-points you used to steer by in those days. So that stood me in good stead as I went on. I only joined old ships anyway. I was on her for 12 months. That was my time as a deck boy.

I didn't have to go through any initiation process or anything, but I was sent to fetch some long weights (waits), skyhooks and

things like that. The ship had about 16 derricks on it, together with jumbo gear for heavy lifting. When the steam was cracked on deck on a cold morning, it would hammer going through the pipes, and I asked the bosun one day what caused it. He told me that it was a steam lock, and that you had to go down to the engineer to get the key. So I go down below to see the engineer and he gives me the biggest head spanner that you could get. So I struggle up with it through the engine room, much to the entertainment of everybody. I fell for all of the usual pranks, you know. When I went to the storekeeper to ask for a long weight, he told me to just sit over there for a while. So I sat there, and of course, had my long wait! But they were good people, though. All of them.

When I signed on, what you did in those days was, you stood up in the Customs House in Newcastle in a line. They called for a deck boy for the *Time*, and I stood up as tall as I could, and the master of the ship comes along and he picks you out. They did that with the ABs and everybody else. So I got picked, and when I went to the Shipping Master there was an argument going on, and I couldn't understand it. The Shipping Master didn't want to sign me on to this ship because it had a bad name – he was saying that the crew were all drunks and they were this and they were that. Eventually the old man said that they'd take care of me and that sort of thing, so I did end up joining what was probably the toughest ship around at the time.

On the *Time* we had two blokes, Lofty Munro and the Candy Kid. They were always arguing with each other – down in the messroom, anywhere. When things got a bit heated, Lofty would say: "Hang on, hang on" and he'd race forrard to the fo'c'sle and come back brandishing a piece of paper, yelling: "Here's my certificate of sanity. Where's yours?" You see, both of them had spent time in Morisset Hospital as inebriates. Back then they used to send drunks there to straighten them out. Anyway, Lofty, being tall, helped the Candy Kid over the wall one day and they skedaddled. In those times you only had to be out and stay out of trouble for six weeks and you were considered clear. The Candy Kid didn't have his certificate of sanity when this happened (though Lofty did). There was very little violence, actually, though we did have a couple of stabbings over the years.

On one job we had a little Maltese bloke who was the cook, and nobody liked what he served up. In fact, they threw him

overboard on the way into Cairns, and a fishing boat picked him up – unfortunately! We’d all had to go to the doctor, because the crew had claimed that they were all suffering from malnutrition. We didn’t have refrigeration on that ship – we only had ice – and when the meat started to go off we’d know, because suddenly we’d always be eating curry. The crew wouldn’t eat any of it, and when we all had to see the doctor the doctor said to me “Well, you’re in good condition. What do you do?” I told him that when I got rice pudding, for example, (my favourite) I’d soak the weevils out in the sink and they would float out and I’d get into it. Mind you, I thought that was pretty normal.

To go below in the dark, when you put the light on, the bulkheads would be a moving mass of cockroaches. But it’s not like now. The ships are beautiful now and you get nothing like that.

To give you some idea how much things have changed, when I was on the *Bonalbo*, in the early stages of my career, I had a room in Lower Fort Street. The *Bonalbo* used to shut down when she was in port, so I got a room to use when she was in port. It didn’t cost me much. To get there, I’d walk through the Argyle Cut, and at that time Sydney was known for its gangs. One night I passed a group of dodgy-looking blokes, and they looked pretty shifty, but all they did was to tell me to keep walking. I found out that the gang violence was mainly confined to their own enemies – they didn’t go around killing everyone – and that you were safe enough as long as you weren’t mixed up in their business.

When I joined the next ship, a deck boy joined with me and I signed on as a seaman and I got a very big raise because you have to do two years as an Ordinary Seaman before you can become an AB. So I joined as an Acting AB. I was sixteen at the time.

The second ship was the *Iron Monarch*, and when I got aboard I found that they had tablecloths on the tables and chairs instead of forms. One of the ABs said: “Oh, do you mind passing me the butter?”, so I nudged the deck boy who’d joined with me, and whispered: “I think we might have joined a ship full of toffs.” What I was used to was something more like: “Hey, throw me the bloody grease, willya?”, “We didn’t use please” and “thankyou”.

The *Iron Monarch* was probably one of my steepest learning



The Time

curves. I was treated like an apprentice by the officers, and the crew were great, and we all lived aft and we got on well. I was on the *Iron Monarch* for about twelve months. I went on quite a few ships, because I was always looking for adventure. The *Iron Monarch* ran on what they called the “black and tan run”. We took coal down to Whyalla, and we brought iron ore back. Both of those were quick turnarounds, and it was a good paying job because the ship was owned by BHP, but I was looking for a bit of adventure more than just a steady job.

As I’ve said, I went to sea at an early age. This means you grow up quick. When I came ashore and came home after my first big stint away I found that I saw the people I went to school with

differently. They were still playing around, whereas I'd had to grow up, and we didn't have much in common any more. At the time I didn't realize it, but I actually missed my period of growing up that everyone else has. So I thought I was old and knew everything then, you know.



The Iron Monarch

About twelve months later I left the *Iron Monarch* and joined the *Karuah*, which was quite a modern E-Class ship that was built up at Maryborough. On one trip we were in Launceston and I tripped and fell down the hatch, but luckily I fell onto a heap of wool. They put me in hospital under observation, and while I was there I was offered a job on the ketches which ran from Launceston, all around the Furneaux Group and King Island,

and all over Bass Strait. They were cattle boats, and we carried sheep and cattle. They were sailing boats, and I was after adventure, and that fitted in nicely. So I jumped at the opportunity.

So I joined the Royal Mail Auxilliary Ketch *Loatta*. Patsy Adam Smith, the author of many books about Australia,* was on another ketch at the time called the *Naracoopa*, which was a similar vessel to the *Loatta*. They were both built together. Her ketch belonged to the government, but ours was owned by a bloke by the name of Bill Hollymans. Patsy Adam Smith had come to the islands to write an article on the muttonbirding. She was on the *Shearwater* for some time, and then she got a job as a radio operator on the *Naracoopa*. She did that for six years. She was as hard as nails.

(**The one that deals with her time in Bass Strait was **There Was a Ship**, published in 1967. BB).*

You joked with me about having done well with the opposite sex when I was young. It immediately made me think of when I was on the ketches. We carried cattle down below and the only way we could get rid of the manure and everything was to carry it out in baskets. You'd shovel it up from the confined space. Then, when were back ashore, you might go to a dance on the weekend. I was all right when we were doing a slow waltz or a foxtrot, but when it came to a quickstep and you got warmed up a bit, the ammonia from all the animal urine that you'd absorbed into your body would come out of your pores, and I often used to end up like a wallflower with nobody to talk to at all. When I read her writings, I noticed that Patsy Adam Smith at no stage spoke of the aroma from her fellow-workers. Sometimes, if you had a dead steer, say, and you'd raise them and put a sling on the horns or anywhere you could get, when they lifted them all their guts fell out. So you'd have to say that my experience with the opposite sex was a failure.

In those waters we used to carry the sheep through the break and onto the boat. We used to run 'em out in little workboats. These sheep were on the islands and they'd cull 'em every three years. We'd take the cattle and sheep off the islands to Launceston to the abattoirs there. But only Whitemark, Lady Barron and Cape Barron had wharves. The rest of them we used to lay off, then row in. We'd drag the cattle out two at a time, put a sling under them and winch 'em aboard. And we did it









that way because that's all the gear we had. We didn't have wet weather gear, so going from island to island we'd be soaking wet. You've gotta keep the sheep out of the water, so you'd carry them on your shoulder out to the boat, which would be laying just outside the break. The water temperature was around four degrees, and we had no wet weather gear. You just walked into the water and that was it. We slept in our wet gear because you couldn't take enough clothes to have dry ones going from island to island. Nobody seemed to get crook, and for me, I don't think I've ever been fitter. I was only there for about five or six months when the *Loatta* hit a rock coming into King Island and had to be repaired, so we were all laid off. So I left her then and came over and joined another ship.

The people on all the islands were descendents of sealers and Aborigines. They were the only ones tough enough to stay on these places anyway. And when you come to look at it, I was the only white person in the crew, you know. And we lived in the fo'c'sle too, which was always wet. But they accepted it, and I thought it was great. They gave us a sheep every trip, and we



killed that and I can remember eating sixteen mutton chops at a sitting and things like that. And mutton birds. You had to get into a bath to eat 'em, they were so greasy. We didn't eat the adult ones though. You see, they burrow and lay their eggs there – they come down from Japan to do that.

We had an incident like Patsy Adam Smith relates in her book. We'd gone ashore at Goose Island, and we got all these young mutton birds out, and they were as big as a chook. Even before they can fly there are really big. And so you'd put your hand into the burrow and pull 'em out. At the time, Eric Worrall was collecting for the Melbourne Zoo, and with us he got about 60 tiger snakes in an hour and a half. And of course there were no medical facilities anywhere, and if you got hit by a tiger snake it was curtains. There was no antivenene in those days. But the islanders, they accepted it, and they did it, and that was that. You'd have to say that it was all a bit of an adventure, and looking back on it, I don't think you'd get anyone to do that today.



Building the steelwork at Wangi Power Station

After that I came ashore, and I worked on the Wangi Power Station. I was a rigger and dogman on that job for some time, but then the wife got sick, and the doctor said that she should go somewhere dry, out in the back country, so I went first of all out to a place called Damar, and I went into the stock and station agent looking for a job. He asked me what I did and I told him I was a seaman. Damar is on the NSW/Queensland border right out west. I ended up working on the railway there for a little while. I worked at Ninda Gully and all those places on the railway there.

The following photos are from when I was working at Wangi power station, and the crew I worked with putting the steel up. I would have been around 20 at the time.







I'd been reading about the dredging that was being done in Townsville at the time, and the call of the water was getting to me a bit, so my wife said to the ganger (who I used to give a hard time to) that I was leaving the next week. So he came in and he was as happy as hell and he said: "I believe you're leaving?" and I said : "Am I?" and he said that my wife had said I was finished. So we packed up and went to Townsville and I got a job on the dredge up there.

I worked the dredge in Townsville Harbour, and then John Hollands came in and said that they were looking for someone to put a crane together for us – an Anderson and Grice crane. I said that I could do that. I'd learnt how to do it when I was at Wangi Power Station. He said that there were only two of these cranes in Australia, and he knew where they were, and how was I going to put one together? I explained to him that we used to shift them all around the power station when I was working there.

I ended up as foreman on that job in Townsville. I wouldn't have been much more than 21, but because I'd been in the industry since I was 15 I thought I was old! It was the first bulk sugar terminal in Australia. It was also the first underwater construction job in Australia. We did all the piers and formwork with divers on that job. So then I became a diver. In those days we knew nothing about diving. The only ones who had good diving experience other than with a diving suit were the Italians during the War. We couldn't use conventional diving suits on this job, so we used very thin suits with a top and a bottom and a cummerbund around the belly, sort of thing. And then we used an ordinary mask with hooker gear (snorkel), and away you went! But we didn't know anything about how long you could stay down, because no-one had been doing much hooker work at that time.

Everything was going fine, and they decided to send me to Melbourne for an interview to be foreman. John Holland himself was the youngest Brigadier-General in the last World War, in the engineers, so he was pretty smart. So I went down to this group for an interview for the foreman's job, and one of the first questions was "What do you think of the CMF?" (Citizens' Military Forces), I said: "Oh, a heap of chocolate soldiers as far as I'm concerned". He then introduced me around the table and they were all army fellers! So I started to walk out the door and he said: "Where're you going?" I said: "Well, I just blew that, so I'm going back". And he said not to go 'cos I'd got the job. And after that he used to ask me that question to rib me, sort of thing.

I was about 21 at the time, and the engineer in charge had to go to Melbourne – Bob Milligan his name was -- because his father had passed away, and I was left with this job. We were sinking these 8ft diameter caissons and jetting down around the bottom with diving. We had an airlift pump to get rid of the muck and everything like that. Then we struck rock. It was not very deep or far out, so I rang Melbourne, and John Holland asked me if I'd had any experience with underwater explosives. I told him I didn't, so he said: "OK then. I'll explain it to you." And so he told me all about it – over the telephone!. So I dug holes down there, and I put all this gelignite in – a case and a half – and then we used Cortex fuse to the top and a little detonator on top, which I crimped with my teeth -- I'd read about people doing that. We shifted a caisson out of the way, and I had a brand new barge that they'd had built at NQEA at Cairns at great expense for those times – a steel barge – and I'm thinking to myself that there's about ten feet of water between me and the barge, and that should be alright, and I let the charge go. Well, it split the weld seam right through on the barge! So I got it ashore to be repaired, and the next day I had to go and pick up John Holland from the airport. On the drive back he asked me how the charge had gone. I said it had gone well, and it had done exactly what he'd said it would do, but that I'd blown the bum out of the barge. He wasn't too much bothered by this news -- he was more interested in how much charge I'd had, how much water, taking photos, and he was quite excited about it all.

Although I'd had little experience with explosives, I used to go down and dig it out when it didn't go off sometimes. The first time I dug out this mess, because it had all gone gooey, I put it in a sugar bag and rowed out in a little punt into the middle

of the harbour, put a short fuse on it, put a half stick of jelly in amongst it and just dropped it over the side. And it all just went up!

It was a massive learning curve. One day a chap came down who had quite a damaged face, and I was setting the next lot of charges up and chewing the det onto the fuse. He told me that he used to do it that way, too. I had another look at his ruined face, and I went straight up to town and bought myself a proper crimper!

It was a very interesting period. Hollands were a more advanced company than any I'd ever struck before. A feller came to give a talk on workplace psychology one time. He said, among other things, that there is no such thing as a lazy worker. This didn't gel with me, and he saw my dubious expression, and he said to me: "Well. What do you think?", and I told him that I could name him ten lazy workers right off the bat. He told me to wait till the end and we'd see what I thought about it then.

One of the things that used to happen then was the ten-minute smoke-o. The billy was never boiled on time because it was either too cold or too hot, too this or too that. The billy boy was about 70, and I decided to make him the timekeeper. And that solved that. It worked like a charm, because he had the time then, and when it was right he'd blow the whistle and everyone would go to smoke-o. So that was a success and things went on from there, and I found that that was the best way to go. The idea was, as this bloke giving the talk pointed out, that if you had someone who was lazy, it was because he was misplaced. He wasn't in a job that appealed to him, and it was your job to find him somewhere where he thought he was good, so he'd turn up on time and be a good worker. So, I was a disbeliever until the end of the talk, and then I saw the results. It was quite a big project, and I was there for about three years.

It's funny how I talk about psychology and how it reverses. They sent me and my family over to Magnetic Island to investigate a jetty over there – this was just as the Townsville job was coming to an end, you know? And I thought nothing could happen if I wasn't there. I thought I was indispensable. By this time I was really run-down, though, and they'd sent me over there for a bit of a rest. I was convinced they wanted to get rid of me and I thought: "Stuff 'em. They can build it themselves". So I pulled the pin and I left, and went to work at Mt Isa. I worked there for a while on the power station at Rifle Creek. When that section

finished I went to Darwin – I did a bit at Darwin, odd jobs and that. I took the first load of uranium out of Rum Jungle.

A lot of the locals have asked me if the blokes were rough that I worked with. Well, I was a schoolboy champion boxer, but it seemed like people didn't fight all that much. There were a few fights, but nothing like a lot of people think. And we had boxers going to sea with us – toplineers. You'd have to hit 'em with an axe before they did anything to you, because they knew how good they were.

I didn't have many fights. One fight I was in, a bloke offered me out on the wharf one day at Port Kembla. I was used to Marquis of Queensbury rules, and as I was taking my coat off my shoulders he hit me, and I got belted up considerably that time.

It made me realize that these fights could be serious, and they weren't three minute rounds with rests in between. I don't think this bloke had ever heard of the Marquis of Queensbury! But that sort of thing didn't happen all that often.



We had kangaroo courts on the ships, too, because you were sort of like a village on your own. For instance, in those days, if someone thieved something off someone else on board he'd lose the first joint off a finger, to mark him forever as a thief. It was tough stuff. When you were paid you'd come in and throw your pay packet on your bunk, and it would never be touched. That was the industry, and those sorts of practices remain to this day.

And they were hard drinkers, no doubt about that. The pubs opened at six o'clock in the morning for them. And they were hard smokers, too. I was one of them. At that time I'd run out of cigarettes and all we could get

hold of to smoke were Japanese Peace cigarettes. It took me about three weeks to learn how to smoke them, because they were so strong.

The wharfies here in Newcastle -- some of them were painters and dockers, and most of them went to sea. So these days I know the sons of many of them that I went to sea with. We had a job not so many years ago now unloading coal loader equipment from a ship onto my barge. At that time I had to go to my grand daughter's wedding in Cairns, so I put another skipper on. When he came to the job people asked where I was and didn't want to load the ship until they were told where I was, and that it was all legitimate, before they'd load the ship. They keep a close eye on what's going on.

I bought into the small tugs when I was doing the tows for WestHam dredging -- that would be about 55 years ago. I brought it in that on my ships there would be no grog -- they'd be dry ships -- because you've got seven or eight men on a small tug, and you haven't got anyone spare. I couldn't tell which of the crew could hold his grog, so I banned grog on my tug. All hell used to break loose, but that's become the rule today. On the oil rig supply boats, there's no grog on them. And the yanks never have grog on their tugs. Some people can hold their grog and some can't, and if you've got a new crew on you don't know what any of them can do. I used to tell them that if they couldn't stay off the grog for a voyage then they've got a problem that they should do something about. So that was the system that I used, and I was always in conflict with the unions over it. The seamen thought that they were prisoners because they didn't have the same opportunities as people ashore, who'd go and have a drink after they knock off work.

One of the worst things that ever happened to us as far as the industry is concerned... when all these things were being agitated for, they brought in food which was chosen by a dietitian, but the dietitians didn't tell them when to stop eating, you know? Then they put bars on the ships, so you had the food and the bar, and then they took the work away -- we always worked hard with derricks and cargo and all that sort of stuff, so when that disappeared and you got bulk ships, there was no heavy work like there was in earlier days.

The lifespan of a seaman was around 55 years average, because they destroy themselves with all the new ideas and regulations they've got. And these days they have their own cabin and en suite, and they become antisocial as well. In earlier times it was an open fo'c'sle and everybody had to mix in, and you had every colour, every religion and every creed and every nationality, so you learned to live with people of different races and different ideas. I feel that everyone should experience a fo'c'sle in their lives, and then we'd be better off all round.

I was amazed when I came ashore to work. We had pommies, and then Transfield came out, and they were Italians, and people would call them names and there was a sort of hatred there that we never had at sea. We had a Seamen's Book there at one time, and you were judged on your ability as a seaman – you were never judged by your colour or your nationality or anything else. To do that was foreign to me and offended me a lot. And we don't seem to be getting much better in many ways. That's why I think everybody should be shot into the one place and learn to live together, and those that can't learn that, well, they're the ones that have got a problem. And I still try to push that as much as I can.

Exmouth Gulf

The next place I went to was Exmouth Gulf, where I worked on building the jetty there for the Yanks. To construct it we had to put towers in place, and we drove the piles down through them.

When I lobbed there, there was supposed to be a barge coming down from Singapore, and a tug. What happened was, the feller who was over there doing the negotiations kept sending these nice reports back, but in actual fact he was enjoying being entertained over there and nothing was happening. So we ended up having to take this old heavy lift gear, it was an old steam, and we had a wooden tug. The design of the jetty was a series of towers, braced in between, and the timber deck was just laid loose so that if there was a cyclone it would just wash off and you wouldn't have that stress on the wharf from the elements.

The way we had to build the jetty was a bit tricky. I was about the fifth or sixth marine superintendent on the job. When I first lobbed there we came into a cyclone. As we were flying up there there was a cyclone warning current, and the pilot told us that

a cyclone would hit Exmouth a day or two after we got there. When we landed I went to the caravan park and found that they still had the annexes out, and they hadn't lashed the caravans down. The poles in the annexes would have been like spears in a big wind, so the people who had been brought in to do this job obviously had no experience of battening down for a cyclone. I'd had experience of cyclones, of course, so we began to set everything up in preparation for it.

The floating plant was very vulnerable, and I suggested that we should sink the main barges onto the bottom, in eighty feet of water, to keep them safe. See, they'd lost everything every year before. We put valves on the hatches and the manholes and we sunk the barges. Then we took the floating plant, the tugs and all the rest, down the coast a bit to a place called The Bay of Rest, near Learmonth. It's a little bay that they have pearl farms in. At the same time there was an old wooden tug coming up from Fremantle on its way to Darwin, and she called in, but she wouldn't come into the Bay. We went in, and made fast to the mangroves, but the tug, which had been caught outside the Bay, was washed over the mangroves and ended up at the airport,



Positioning the towers



inland! We ended up getting him back to sea with cranes and everything, and he went on. He was quite all right. So when the cyclone had passed we got on with the job. We had this steam-powered heavy lifting gear with a big frame on it and all sorts of stuff to organize.

I had this idea about why the job had been so much a problem so far. When I was down in Learmonth I got talking to one of the local fishermen – he used to catch the bait for the crayfishermen, and he understood the water flows. When the wind blew into the gulf, it would hold the tides up at Learmonth, then when the wind dropped it would all rush out past the place where the jetty was being built. It was about the worst place they could have picked for it. It would run past there at about six knots. And diving there, the mask would be washed off you, and away you'd go about two miles out to sea. The place was like an aquarium. Sea snakes mated there, there was every type of fish you could imagine.

Anyway, with all the pre-knowledge we had, we were quite successful with the first one and how we worked out to go about

it, and having that fisherman's local knowledge helped us immensely. Every jetty like this one that I've worked on has been different – they all are built specially for their site. This one used a jacket which had been already pre-built on the shore. It was brought out and stood up, similar to what they do with the oil rigs when they put them in Bass Strait. We used a system that employed “camels” as flotation devices. (*See section on salvaging the Kinei Maru*). When they were in position we'd sink them and allow them to turn over and we'd put them into position on the bottom. Then the piles were driven down through the jackets, which were set at an angle, and so the piles went down on the angle as well.



The crew at Exmouth Gulf. “They were rough as guts, but they were good honest workers.”

We couldn't keep divers on the job because of the conditions they had to work under, and it was a very isolated place, and you lived in camps, so it was very difficult to have the right people around you. We had every nationality under the sun.

We had one diver there whose name was Rod Culbeck. He was a stand-in for Lloyd Bridges who was doing Sea Hunt at the time. He used to do all his stunts. He lobbed there one day in a yacht, and said he was looking for a job, and that he did a bit of diving. Well, he was phenomenal! He was a great asset, and we built a team up of every nationality. They used to call us "The Mad Australians", but I think I was about the only Australian in the team! It wasn't all fun by any means, but we had a wild team and they were great at what they were doing.

One chap... we used to call him Flybait, and I can't remember his name now – he'd get drunk and play up and they'd put him in the locker. But we found we could take the door off the gaol by lifting it off its hinges on one side. Because of the currents and the tides sometimes we'd start work at 2 o'clock in the morning – whatever hour that suited the current. We'd lift Flybait out at about ten or eleven o'clock, and when we'd finished we'd put him back in the clink again – usually with a carton of beer.

Lyndon Johnson came out to open the jetty when it was finished. All the dignitaries were there, and we still had one dolphin to put in. Flybait was out of gaol at the time, and we were waiting for him to turn up, steaming around in our dinghy with all hands. Next thing, Flybait comes running the length of the jetty, which is a good half mile long, and you could hear the glassware in the Gladstone bag as he came through. He rushed straight through the assembled dignitaries to the end of the jetty and jumped in! One of the divers had to go down and get him because he was unwilling to let go of the Gladstone bag full of grog. Later on I was called into the office to explain what Flybait had done. I said: "He's the most conscientious man I've got. He'd missed his bus, cadged a lift, and didn't hesitate to run the length of the jetty and jump in." They just laughed and told me to get out.

One of the chaps was out fishing early in the morning one day — you know, anything to break the monotony – and he'd seen a distress flare off the coast. So we decided we go out and get him. Viney was with me on that job, so we took off with her, (because she was a nurse), the police, and our crew. When we got out to the low-profile island where the flare had come from, the policeman said that it was too rough to go ashore – too dangerous. We over-rode the police and went ahead to rescue these two people who would have been drowned because they were hiding in a low cave which would have gone under when the tide came in.

We brought them back. They were scratched and knocked about, and we sent them on to a hospital in Perth.

We were lined up the next day and grilled over the fact that we had taken the tug out unauthorized, and done all sorts of dangerous things, but the chap that we'd rescued turned out to be an American congressman. As far as the Commander of the operation was concerned we ought to either get a medal or we ought to get shot! So in the end we called it quits. And that's how it was on that job. Day by day it was always exciting. I was on that job for about nine months.

We had a lot of Italians on that job, because they took over from the Americans, who had been using Navajo Indians to put the towers in. But the Navajo Indians declared the job too dangerous, and Transfield came in to take over. When this happened I became the safety officer for the towers. The Italians like to have their fish on Friday because they were religious, and we conned the Americans to let us do the fishing. We'd take half a day off on Thursday and we'd go and catch the fish, which was easily enough done. This arrangement grew and grew until we were fishing all day Thursday. So we had our good times as well as our rough times.



That's how the jetty at Exmouth finished up. It's the first time that method of construction has been done successfully, getting them off the shore and standing them up. They had a lot of failures before we came along

Making docos for National Geographic

Because I did the jetty job at Exmouth I got a full security clearance with the Australians and the Americans which led to me getting various jobs with the Americans.

On one of the jobs I got with the Americans I worked with a bloke called Bob Ballard. To give him his proper title, Dr Robert



Ballard was the bloke who found the *Titanic* and the *Bismarck*. The job we were on was for National Geographic – making a documentary about the battles with the Japanese in the Solomons to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Battle of the Coral Sea. We proceeded to Honiara, the capital of the Solomons to begin the doco production on a boat called the *Restless M*.

When we got to Honiara, Bob and his wife Barbra flew in, and shortly afterwards someone came up to me and said that Doctor Ballard would like to talk to me. So we met, and we talked together about what had to be done. He said that I may have read his book about the *Titanic*, and I had to

reply that I hadn't read it. I think he was quite shocked. So we had him, and some people from the marine biological laboratory at Woods Hole in the US. There was another ship that was supposed to join us, but it had broken down in Hawaii – it was called the *Rose*, I think. Anyway, when we lobbed in Honiara we had our crew – the submariners and the side-scan sonar people, and then the Woods Hole people and everybody else, and we had to accommodate them. We got more rubber duckies and safety gear, and we ended up with everybody aboard our vessel. It was



This was a set-up we put on the after deck to help ease the cramped conditions when they all came to stay on the Restless M.

When I was given the job of getting the vessel to Honiara with the American submariners for crew, I didn't have much idea of what was going to happen. These submariners had been over in the middle east in the 1990s for the Gulf War. For six months they just sat on the bottom of the ocean without being discovered for the duration of the War. They came from that job to making the docs with us.

They were very dirty that the Russians had pulled out of what they were doing. The Russian and American subs used to chase one another and try to find one another and all that. Now if I asked them, they would me all sorts of stuff about Russian submarines, but if I asked them anything about the American subs then a barrier would come down, and they wouldn't say anything.

As I got to know them I found that the Americans weren't much good at improvising. They'd gone past that, but for us Aussies, if we haven't got it, we make it. If what they wanted wasn't readily available, then nothing would happen, whereas we'd be getting

out the pliers and fencing wire.

Bob Ballard was very gung ho – a big feller – he'd say things like: "OK Let's go and kick ass". Many times I'd be steering, keeping low to stay out of the filming, while he narrated the soundtrack to what was being filmed. But I've got to say, he was very very good at what he does.

How we found most of the wrecks turned out to be very easy. There was some volcanic activity underwater while we were there. It was night time, and to tell you the truth, initially I thought we had gone aground. We were right in the middle of it. The volcanic activity had disturbed a lot of the wrecks, and in the morning you could see these blobs of oil floating up. And that made it very easy to locate a lot of them.

Initially we had to find ten wrecks to make it a viable documentary and we ended up finding – I don't know how many it was in the end – about 20 or 30, I think. I was master of the survey vessel for the job. I took it over, and my crew were American submariners and we had some funny incidents there, too. I left here in Newcastle with them, and when we got up off Fraser Island there was a fire on board. Being an American vessel it had a DC system, 440 and 220 volts and so forth – right up to the bridge. And the fire blew everything up. It hadn't affected the engines or anything --- we could still steer – and we were making way, but the gyro and the radar and all that were out of action. They were all high-ranking submariners. A chap came up who was 2IC to the commander of the sub, and he said could he have a look at my gyro. I said: "Mate, can you leave me alone right now?" because in my book, once the gyro has fallen over that's the end of the whole thing. The next day he came up to me and asked again to have a look at the gyro, so I said: "Well, you may as well. 'cos you're not going to do any harm". He was at it for about four hours, then he said: "Have a look at the repeater on the gyro", and I had a look and said: "By gee, that's pretty good!" He explained to me that in a sub they have about five gyros, because every angle is controlled by a gyro. He said that one of his jobs had been to build them, so I said: "Well then, you'd better have a go at the radar as well." He replied: "Mate, I'm a submariner, I don't do radar!" But by the time we got to Honiara he had pretty well everything working again. They were pretty smart that way.



Making the documentary

So we did the documentary, and I learned all about the war in that area – the Coral Sea battle and all that. Because it was a documentary I was at the meetings where all that was being talked about.

When we got there, some surveyors that I knew were working with the navy. They knew the exact position of where the *Canberra* was, and they told me where it was, but they told me not to tell the yanks because, you know – the yanks had sunk it during the war – they intentionally scuttled it during heavy fighting. I steamed past the position they'd given me, and we found it. Side-scan sonar only gives you a silhouette, so they still had to identify it. I said I thought it was the *Canberra*, because that was the only Australian ship in that battle. And of course it was the *Canberra*. I had its position, so I knew, but they thought I was a bit of a magician, you know. That was quite an interesting period.

They ended up making four documentaries, because the Americans of course were fighting there for quite a bit, and the Japanese – both their fleets had a very hard time of it, so they made a documentary for the Americans, the Japanese, and the Australians, and... I don't remember who the other one was for.

So that's how I came to be with the Americans.

While I was up there in the Solomons there was a bloke who was a coastwatcher and he used to walk into the American camp and tell them where the Japanese were. He came from Melbourne – big fella, he was – and he was there right through the war, because he had a plantation there. When the Japanese came he hid. He used to hang around with a native friend avoiding the Japanese, but another native gave him up. The Japanese captured his native mate and tortured him, but he wouldn't tell them anything. National Geographic thought it would be a great idea if they took him up to the village and introduced him to the native who had given them up. The bloke who had been dobbled in grabbed this feller around the throat, and he was going to kill him, till they dragged him off. The film crew was quite young and didn't seem to understand the things that had gone on during the war.

I learned quite a bit about the war while I was there, because they were re-enacting things that had happened, and I found it very interesting. There was one story where a plane flew over the battleships that were coming down from Rabaul through what they called The Slot, and from there into Iron Bottom Sound, because Henderson Airfield was what they were after. It was the only bit of flat country in the Islands, and it was also within range of Australia, which is why they wanted to capture that piece of territory. The plane got shot up, and crashed into the sea, and the pilot swam ashore badly wounded. He made his way up to the US headquarters and told them that he'd just flown over the Japanese fleet. They didn't believe him, and thought he must be hallucinating. But of course, he wasn't.

There were a lot of stories came out that were quite interesting. We had an American destroyer there called the *Bluey*. The only Australian ship there was the *Canberra* (this was before it was sunk). They were patrolling with the *Bluey*, and the British had just given them radar, and they were convinced that radar was the answer to everything. But using radar was new to them, and when they saw all the clutter on the radar screen they thought it was just clutter, and didn't realize that the clutter was actually ships. The Japanese came in, went past the patrolling *Bluey*, and when they got within searchlight distance from each ship they put the lights on 'em and blew 'em out of the water. See, radar in the early days was much more primitive than it is today. There are so many stories... There was only one battalion

protecting Henderson airfield, and the Japanese could have landed and taken over the whole place. But they went round the back of the island with all their heavy armaments, and came over that way (the mountains there are 10,000ft high). By the time they got there they were finished – exhausted. There’s a place there called Bloody Ridge, which I went up onto. The Yanks had set up on this hill which was very sharp, and they just fired down onto the Japanese, and it was straight-out mass murder. If the Japs had just come in and landed on the beach they wouldn’t have had any trouble. How anybody won the war was unreal to me – there seemed to me to be so many cock-ups that could have been avoided.



This is a shot taken in the saloon. That’s Bob Ballard’s wife Barbra, and our navigator. They were watching the side-scan sonar – taking shifts.

While we were in Sandfly Lagoon I did a lot of the negotiating, because the Solomon Islander chiefs were still not comfortable dealing with people in full uniform. They distrusted uniforms – they’d had enough of all that. Initially we had to employ them to help us cart the transponders, which were a set of heavy batteries, up into the mountains. I was negotiating to get the transponders up the mountain, and the locals had been offered five dollars a head to get them up there, which was a slippery and dangerous job. I told them that they’d been robbed, and advised them to ask for double the amount, which they did – and they got it. I was appalled at how willing our mob were to try to cheat the poor buggers.



In Sandfly Lagoon

I have a memory of being in the lagoon while the local little kids were playing around the waterfront on a nice little beach. They'd sunk their canoes, and all the whitebait were swarming around and the kids were scooping them into the canoes. I was helping them because I like playing with kids, and it reminded me of my own childhood, 'cos that's the way we used to play around too. I used to get on well with the kids.

More Dredging

In between all these jobs there was the dredging. I worked as a dredging contractor for 40 years. See, with dredging, you get a big contract and you stay at it till the job's finished – like the Sydney Harbour tunnel. I worked on that for three years as a contractor, then after that we did Gladstone harbour, and Darwin. They knew they could grab me... well, I flew up to Darwin and I was only going to relieve someone for a month, and I ended up spending six months there. Gladstone was the same – I was there for twelve months. Singapore – I flew over there to relieve for a month – those were the sort of jobs that I did, and you had to stick with them till they were finished.

And again, with the dredging, at the start I did all their towing – like with WestHam Dredging, they take their plant from A to B, and I worked at the towing, sometimes using their tugs, sometimes with mine. One time recently the manager of WestHam who I'd known for a long time, came in to see if I was still alive! He was Dutch – everyone in the dredging business is Dutch.

I worked for West Ham, and we were doing the Newcastle Harbour deepening. They said to me that they needed a contract, and I told them that they had much more expensive solicitor than I could afford, so if they didn't like me they could tell me to go, and if I didn't like them then I'd go. And we worked that way for 40 years. I worked with Sides doing the preliminary drilling on the harbour before they dredged it. And there was Port Kembla, and Bunbury in the west. I was happy to go anywhere that was different.



That's my barge, with one crane at one end. We pulled a sludge line down across the Hunter River for BHP. A sludge line discharges all the muck and slurry from all around. In the early days it used to go to Kooragang Island. It was an interesting job, and we got it because nobody else wanted to do it. We'd often get jobs like that.

Dredging at Gladstone



That's my barge in Gladstone and the dredge. We did a fair bit of work up there. So that she's free to work, she's a cutter/suction dredge. She's ploughing away there, using a flexible line that floats, so she could move, and keep moving. They run the pipe over the barge, and it becomes the submerse line which goes ashore to where they pump it away.

You wrote about the debacle when they tried to tow the old car punts from Newcastle to the Philippines and most of them ended up stranded at Trial Bay.* (* See <http://www.billbottomley.com.au/words/car-punts-of-newcastle/>) I can tell you something about that. The guy organizing the tow was a bit of a shonky bloke – I think he owned an outfit called Goldfields Holdings. I set the tows up for the *Teralba* and *Branxton* with him, and he had a tug called the *Nullangine*. I slept on that tug, and it turned out that I slept in the same bed as Sophia Loren. On the back of the bunk in the radio room was a plaque that said "Sophia Loren slept here". There was a film out at the time called *The Keys*, it was about England during the war and the *Nullangine* was the ship that was used in the film, though under a different name. The *Nullangine* used to go out, and they took the keys to the place where Sophia Loren was shackled up, so the next feller wouldn't come back and the next feller would take over. That was the basis of the whole story – they were going out to salvage,

and this was the tug that we set the tows up on.

The shonky bloke didn't want to pay, so we left. He was the one who brought the Filippinos down, and he asked me to set the tows up for the car ferries and the showboat. I gave him a quote for something ridiculous – fifteen hundred dollars or something like that to set the tows up, and he said it was too dear and that the Filippino crew would do it. So they came down and did it, but when it all came undone and the car ferries and showboat ended up on the beach at Trial Bay he asked me to go up there and salvage them. But I backed right off. I could tell he wasn't to be trusted. He had about four companies, and he went bankrupt because he didn't pay any of his bills.

There wouldn't be too many blokes my age hanging out on the Web, but the changing technology in the workplace forced me into it. It all started when we were doing what we call sweeping, or bed leveling, and everything is on computers, so I had to learn to use them. They have to retrain me every now and again to keep me up to speed.

We're lucky in a way, because everything that goes on in Newcastle Harbour we're involved in.

Working on the Sydney Harbour Tunnel

On the harbour tunnel job I averaged 16 hour days, seven days a week, for nearly three years. The tunnel was opened in August 1992, and was built to relieve traffic congestion on the Sydney Harbour bridge.

With the harbour tunnel, WestHam had bought two vessels, and I delivered them to Sydney from Adelaide, and I worked one of the vessels while they were doing the approach tunnel. We were taking the material to sea and dumping it eight mile out. They brought the material they'd taken out of the tunnel in trucks, and they had a dumping area and they dumped straight into the barges. They were self-propelled hopper barges – they were split hoppers that opened up down the centre, fore and aft. This let the spoil drop out of the bottom, and then they'd be closed up again for re-loading. And I continued with that until the rest of the plant came, and we began dredging, which was when I used

the *Sea Rambler*.

We were the crew-change boat, the survey boat, we transported everyone around, and then when we got really smart we also carried the garbage. So we had flash jobs, but then we were the garbage boat as well. We were the gophers on the job, you might say.

Later on, when two of these barges were working full time, we had to wait until the crews came in from the last one, and then we'd transport them around to their destinations. And then we'd go and turn in for the night.

Some days we got away with 13 or 14 hours. I was being paid as a skipper, but then they were paying for the use of my boat as well. This gave me the money to buy the *Betts Bay*, the other tug, which I did at the end of the programme. I found the job an interesting one all round. We were working from just near the Harbour Bridge on the north shore of the harbour across to the Opera House – that's where it goes under.

There was quite a lot of variety during that period because the sections of the tunnel were being built in Port Kembla and they were delivered in sections. I forget how big they were. But then they were sunk in position. They kept one side of a rock wall up against them so that if a ship sinks it sits on the rock wall and not on the tunnel. The whole exercise was taking place about 90 feet deep.

When they sunk them, they put them on a jacking frame from the bottom so that they were not actually sitting on the bottom, then we got sand from Sow and Pigs out near the harbour entrance and put that under them so they settled onto a bed of sand. It was a massive job. The sand was put under them by conduits that went through the tunnel itself. Each section had a steel door on the end, which was taken away after the next one was in position. Once they were established on the floor, they could be pumped out and you could walk in.

We had a lot of funny things happen on that job. The fellow who designed it used to get fed up with being in the office, and he'd come on board our vessel to get a break, and so I learned a lot from him.



The Discovery



The Adventurer

The surveying was quite crucial. I'd worked with these surveyors a lot – Mick Powell and Graeme Ross – and they worked with a geodimeter, which took a lot of sorting out. (A *geodimeter* is a distance-measuring instrument, used in surveying, that measures the change in phase of a modulated light beam when it returns to the instrument from a distant point. BB). Then, besides my usual run-of-the-mill jobs, we'd wait till the ferries had stopped running and we'd survey the area till daylight, then I'd pick a crew up. The geodimeter was a base set-up, and we had a receiver on the mast of the *Sea Rambler*, and we'd run lines. We had to run 'em half a metre apart because you couldn't cross them. We'd go right across to the Opera House wall with them. So we'd go and do a survey about every week, because of the dredging. We had about five different plants dredging on that job. We had the *Gumai*, the *Kunara*, the *Resolution* (which was trailer suction), and I can't remember the names of the others. I suppose I felt that I pretty much built the harbour tunnel, but in the book I don't think I get a mention.

The *Gumai* also worked in Port Kembla when they were fabricating the sections for the harbour tunnel. We had to dig the coffer dam facing away to allow the sections to be floated out. That was her job on that bit, but she also worked on the harbour tunnel itself in Sydney, as I said. She was 100 tonne capacity.

I'll tell you a story about when we were working on the harbour tunnel. Stannard brothers came up to me and tried to put the heavies on me. They warned me that they did all the tug work in Sydney and then they told me to be gone by two o'clock that afternoon. They were just trying to look after their patch, sort of thing, and in the culture of the waterfront, protecting your jobs is something that is done physically. Now this isn't all that unusual, and at two o'clock that afternoon they came back, and they had this Irishman on board, and I swear he had muscles on his eyebrows, and he's all pumped up ready to go, you know? They brought their boat alongside and I said to the delegate: "If you've sent him to terrify me, then you've succeeded. So put him back in his cage and we'll talk." I could understand that they were keen to protect their jobs, but I was a seaman, I was international, and theoretically I could go anywhere I liked. The Irishman thought I was mad, but if it takes ten minutes to give me a hiding, but if I back down it's a lifetime that I've got to worry about it, you know. He thought I was as mad as a two bob watch, 'cos he worked out all the time, but as things turned out

he became my friend. And I didn't have to take him on because he thought I was crazy. The waterfront can get quite tough at times.





And then there was salvage, of course. We did Japanese longliners, (which we'll come to shortly) and I also salvaged one of the biggest anchors ever recovered in the southern hemisphere – just off Newcastle here. It was off the *Pacific Triangle*, the biggest ship ever to come into Newcastle Harbour. I've lost count now, but there's around 40-odd anchors out there on the seabed near Newcastle Harbour. You see, the sea comes up pretty quick, and what happens is, they can't build an anchor windlass strong enough to withstand the forces involved. Nowadays they have a rule that any ship in those circumstances should up anchor and go before the weather gets too fierce. Before that, because these shows are run by accountants, they used to stay on anchor. Then, what usually happens is that you'd be winching up your anchor and it'd get short and doesn't come away from the bottom, and it's a big jerk, you know, and you've got 100,000 tonnes pulling on that anchor. So something has to give, and usually it's the hydraulics on the windlass. We've recovered a few of them, but I tell them that it's cheaper to go and buy a new one than the cost of salvaging them. If a ship breaks her anchor, or drops her cable, they still come into port to be loaded. It takes about 24 hours to load, and they'd want us to go and get that anchor during that 24 hours! What they don't seem to realize is that the ship lost its anchor in very bad weather, and 24 hours later it's still bad weather, and they expect you to go and recover the anchor that they can't recover in that same bad weather.

There's a story to the anchor we did recover, too. I ended up getting belted up in the process. The anchor broke free when I was at the wrong end of the barge, and there was 1000 feet of cable on the barge and it all ran away. It was a 5-inch diameter cable and it really roughed me up. To give you an idea, the shackles on it weighed two tonne. The helicopter came out, and the police boats and everybody, and I ended up

in hospital, where they X-rayed me. The cable had thrown me into a reasonably safe spot behind the cable. I was in the last bay of the cable – I climbed over that, and the bitter end, as they call it, the last bit, was only about two feet from me, and I was crunched into a winch. When it came away it hit me in the back and injured a couple of vertebrae there, then it hit me on the bum, and I thought it would take my legs. Funny what goes through your mind, as I can remember thinking, oh, well I'll survive then! It didn't take my legs, despite the fact that when I went to hospital they said that the cable threw me about 20 feet in the air. One of the chaps who was with me was trying to bandage my head because it was split, but the bandage kept falling off. Then, when the paramedics abseiled down from the chopper they put a neck collar on me that didn't fit, and they thought I'd had a heart attack, a broken leg, a fractured head, and... there were five things, anyway. When I got to the hospital and they X-rayed me, it turned out that I had nothing! I was black and dirty, because we'd been working there for thirty hours straight and I was in a helluva mess. When they found out I had nothing serious I discharged myself at three o'clock that morning and came home. But boy! I was stiff, sore and sorry.



This is the grapple we use for anchor recovery

After I got bashed around by the anchor we went back again, and successfully retrieved it. I think we were told that it weighed about 16 tonnes, but the chain (or the cable, as we call it) weighed about 107 tonnes I think it was. There were shackles on it every ninety feet and each one weighed two tonnes. That's marked, so you can know how many shackles you've got in the water. When this anchor came up for recovery, I was asked if I was interested in going into a partnership because there was fair bit of expense and so forth, and I agreed to go in with another company. I supplied the barge, the tugs, the grapples and the winch gear. As it turned out,

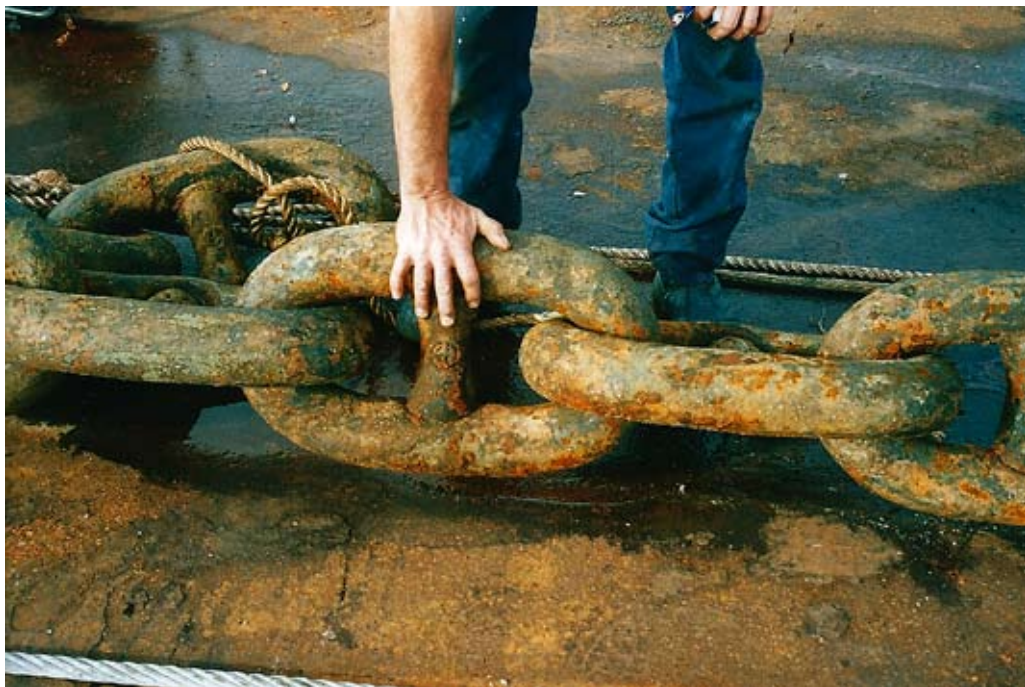


"Now this is an anchor!"

we did the job, but the other mob claimed the money! They took the credit for getting the anchor, but I supplied the barge, the tug, the winch, the grapple, and the expertise. They supplied me one man, who was good, but they took the credit and what money was left,

The *James Craig* was coming in the next day, so I went in and called on the radio. My accident had been on the radio the day before, so I called them up to tell them that I was coming in to attend the *James Craig*, which as you probably know, was a sailing vessel. He said that it was either a reincarnation or a good impression! How I got out of that one I don't know, but I got out of it quite well. These things happen, and I see it often when I leave here and drive to work at 4am or 6am – there's always something a bit crazy going on.

We've salvaged a lot of anchors, over the years. We did a lot of those with the *Reliance*. She had independent steering, so she was very manoeuvrable. You'd go stern first, picked the buoy up first, then you grabbed the chain and brought that up, then you'd get the anchor on board as well.



This gives an idea of the size of the anchor line

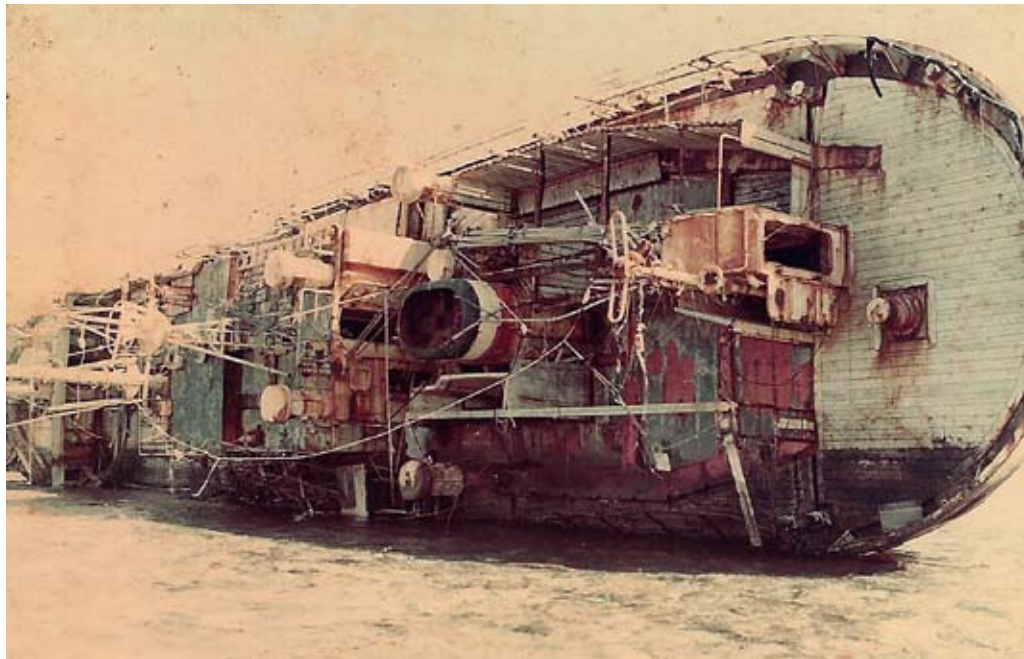


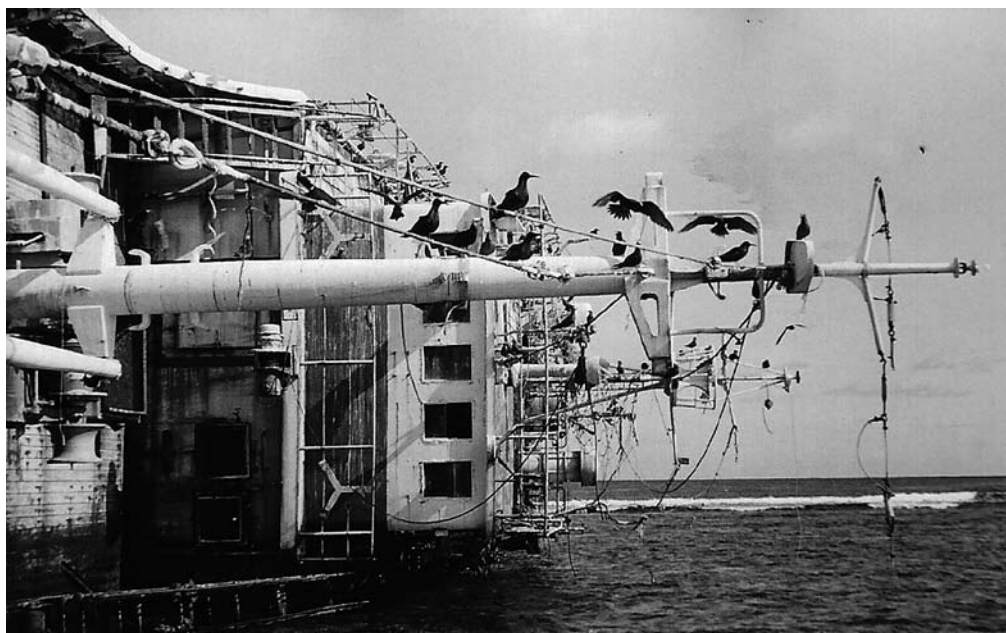
We salvaged lots of anchors with the *Reliance*.

More Salvage Stories

I was working in Singapore on a dredge called the *Seven Seas* – a trail and suction dredge, where you have a pipe trailing over the side, and it steams along and fills a hopper with what it dredges up. I went over there for a month, but I ended up staying there for about three months, and then we brought it back to Weipa. I came back as Third Mate on the dredge on that voyage. I left her in Weipa, and I think we went salvaging after that – that's when we started on the Japanese long-liners.

There were two of them aground on Elizabeth reef, the *Kinei Maru* and the *Kyoshi Maru*. Elizabeth Reef is about 80 mile north of Lord Howe Island. Only a little sand cay gets exposed, and about 30 miles north of there is Middleton Reef, and that had the *Runic* on it – one of the freezer ships. We went and got a lot of gear off it to help salvage the *Kinei Maru*, which was the ship we'd gone there to salvage. The story goes that the *Kyoshi Maru* had come in to help the *Kinei Maru*, which had run aground on the reef. She'd clipped the reef and rolled herself, and she was on her side.





You can see the mutton birds in the rigging on this photo. The mutton birds would come onto the *Kyoshi Maru*, but they wouldn't go anywhere near the *Keini Maru* because it had rats on it – big rats – but the *Kyoshi Maru* didn't. I used to go across between the two ships to catch some of the mutton birds, because we were getting desperate for some meat of some kind. At night time they just roost in the rigging and it's quite easy to just go and grab them. There were turtles around as well, but I didn't like killing turtles. There wasn't very much meat on 'em anyway – it was mainly in the shoulders, and the rest of it was mainly gut. The natives would eat the intestines, but I couldn't come at it.

A team out of Ballina were doing the salvage, and they went to do a delivery while I stayed and looked after the ship. They had all sorts of troubles – engine troubles, all sorts of delays – we got washed into the lagoon – all sorts of problems. To make money, 'cause we'd run out of everything, we stripped the *Kyoshi Maru* and put everything aboard the *Kinei Maru*, and then towed it into Ballina. It was quite an exercise – hard work and lots of problems, and no money, as it turned out. When we got into Ballina we couldn't find a buyer, and the mooring fees and the slipping and all that took all the money, so it was a bit of a disaster, actually.



Kinei Maru aground

To get the *Kinei Maru* off we had to blow a passage through the coral on Elizabeth Reef, to take the ship into the lagoon. We attached what they call camels to either side towards the stern. We towed them out, and once attached they gave the ship a little bit more lift. We had it ready to pull off when the weather came up and pushed us half way into the lagoon, and we decided that it would be quicker to blast a passage and keep going forward into the lagoon, which had an outlet to the sea. The whole job took nine months from start to finish. Towards the end I was in a bit of a mess, because of the bad nutrition. There was plenty of food, most of it in tins from the two ships. I'd open a tin from the stores, and because I couldn't read what was in it, I'd say "I'm gonna have steak today", or something like that. We never knew what we were going to get, but there was plenty of it.



Towing the camels out



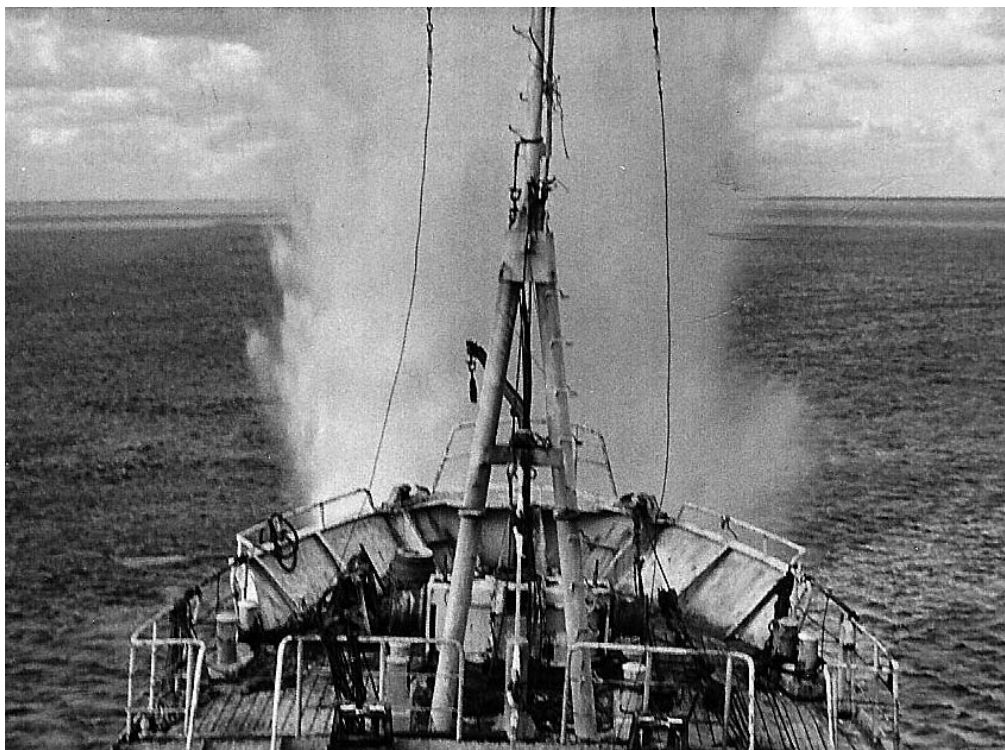
Drilling shot holes in the coral prior to blasting a passage to clear the Kinei Maru

We rigged up block and tackles and we got the winch going on board. We'd wait for the high tide, and then winch her through. A storm came up and smashed our camels. We only had 'em on for a couple of days. We had a lot of trouble with them, but they finally did the job.

We went on to salvage more of those Japanese vessels later on, at Holmes Reef and so forth, but with a different company.

I had been doing some salvage works before, but in a small way, but having had experience going to sea, rigging, and a bit of diving – all those things, they tied in quite well with salvaging.

There's a lot of talk about salvage. You've got to be in international waters, with nobody else having claimed the wreck you wanted to salvage, so salvage rights are very hard to get.



The blast going off



*The battered stern of the
Kyoshi Maru*

And also, you don't get the full amount of the salvage. If you went and brought a ship in, you'd get a portion of the money, which is allocated to you by the courts – like Lloyds of London or something like that. It usually takes about seven years to get payment. Just after the war there was a lot going on, and there were some big salvage jobs done, but not so much these days.





Kinei Maru with flotation aids (camels).



Ceremonial flags on the Kinei Maru

After finishing the *Kinei Maru* and *Kyoshi Maru* job, I used the *Moratai* again to take equipment to Lord Howe Island where they were building the airport. Before then they were using the seaplanes out of Rose Bay. I did about ten or twelve trips, and they used to fly over the top of me on the way out. It used to take 50 or 60 hours to get to Lord Howe by boat, and the seaplanes would fly quite low over the top of me, and they'd tell me I was so many miles off course, or whatever. Eventually I got an RDF (Radio Direction Finder), and I found I wasn't off course like I was told. I made sure I was always spot on when they flew over, but I didn't tell them how I came to be always dead on course. But then one day I left the RDF out in the wheelhouse and the pilot saw it, and realized that we were both using the same instrument. So that ruined his pleasure.

The *Poo Hee*

There was a Chinese ship we brought down from Singapore – that was a story on its own. When I'd finished in Singapore and brought the dredge back to Weipa, I was only home about a week, and Alan Stannard from Stannard Bros asked me to go back to Singapore and bring back a ship called the *Poo Hee*. With some of the crew that were still there we went down to the slipway to inspect her. The engineer gave the rudder a shake – and it fell off! To get technically specific for a moment, the engine was a '28 model semi-diesel, total lubrication loss engine. It was a Kinu & Seater engine, hot bowl. It was half as big as this room and produced 200 horses. They decided to buy distillate in drums, because over there it was cheap compared to here. So we loaded 300 tonnes of distillate in drums. She was running in the tropics on bitumen, virtually – a very heavy oil, and we said that that would be no good as we were taking her to Tasmania, so we decided we'd run her on the diesel that we had in the drums.

So we repaired the rudder and left Singapore. The pilot came aboard, but when he saw the flames required to heat the hot bowl up – it was like a flamethrower sort of thing that was used to heat the heads up to start it -- and when it went off it exploded, and all the carbon flew out of the top. It had awnings on it and they all caught fire – so the pilot left us. The old man said to me that since I'd been there dredging, and that I knew my way around, that I should take her out. So away we went,

and we were only gone about two days when we realized that the pistons were going up and down, but they weren't doing much in the way of compression. This was somewhere off Indonesia. So we pulled the main engine all apart, and found that we'd have to re-ring it. But we had no spare rings, so we had to build the rings up so they touched the cylinder walls. What had happened, all the carbon that was blown out in the explosion had been acting like a semi- liner, and when the diesel went in there it washed them all nice and clean, ruining the compression in the process. So we had to build the rings up, and we drifted for about five or six weeks while we were doing that. We were lucky to have a very good engineer on board, and he was most useful in building up the piston rings. We got thin bands of flat-iron, a bit like shims, and bent them all so that you could squeeze them like a spring into the grooves in the piston. It was pretty difficult, and that's why it took so long to do, because you had to be careful that the spring didn't drop out of its groove.

At one stage a boat came out to inspect us that we suspected was manned by pirates, but after they'd had a look at us they decided we weren't worth the effort!

We lowered the anchor down with about four shackles so that we could concentrate on the repairs. By dragging the anchor around while we were drifting we figured that we'd anchor up before we ran aground.

Before we left we were talking about victualling the vessel for the run down, and I said: "Don't worry about getting fish. I can take care of that, I'll catch fish for us on the way down. I don't remember how many thousand miles we did on that trip, but we ended up catching ONE fish on the whole trip! I wouldn't want to have to rely on my fishing ability to survive!

We got as far as Darwin and she still had very little compression. As we fronted up to Darwin Harbour the tide had changed, and was washing out to sea, and there were no tugs in Darwin at that time who were in survey to come out and get us, and with the 28 foot tides they have up there a bit of a hand to get in would have been appreciated. But anyhow, we finally got her in and did a little bit more work on her, and then we headed off for Sydney. We got to off Barrenjoey there at Pittwater and the navy came out, because we were registered as a Panamanian vessel. They put a signal up which said, in effect, "Show your colours or else", 'cos we had no flags flying or anything, and they didn't

know who we were. We immediately put the flag up, because by this they were taking the cover off the gun! Then we headed into Sydney, after which everyone left, bar me. Then, with a new crew, we set off for Launceston, in Tassie.

I know we were reported – somebody asked Melbourne radio if we had been seen – and a BHP ship said that they'd seen us, but that they didn't think we were going to make it, because there were big seas – we were rolling about 50 degrees. We eventually got into Launceston, and the pilot who was with us to go up the river -- about 45 mile up -- I was telling him about all that had happened. I said: "She doesn't go astern very easily. She sort of picks her time." To get her to go astern you had to stop her, then, as the flywheel's swinging around you waited till the right moment, then you'd fire her again, and she'd go back the other way. The pilot was astonished. "There's no ship built that doesn't go astern!" As we were coming up to Kings Wharf I said that I'd go up forrard because there were some people working on the wharf there, and if it didn't go astern then we'd be in trouble.

Eventually we got alongside, and while we were there the owner asked me if we could test a three-tonne crane while we were there. We needed the three tonne crane to load *Sheerlite* – that was the boat. I told him that it wasn't a three tonne crane, but only a one tonne. No, he said, I've got a test certificate from Singapore that says it's a three tonne. "Well," I said, "I was there, and they lifted a one tonne load three times, and that's how you got that certificate!"

We had the Surveyor there, and we lifted it, which was fore and aft in line with the keel, and the surveyor told me to swing it over the side. We'd borrowed some pile-driving monkeys to make up the weight. We needed three tonne plus 25% to proof load the lift. So I swung it over the side and it started to go on me, and I dropped the load. At that time in Launceston there was probably about thirty feet of mud on the bottom. So it unhooked itself and it all remained there. It was a caterpillar-track crane and it tore the deck up. So that ruined the idea of using the crane.

But going back to the ship: I'd been in Singapore for about a week before I started on the ship. When I lobbed there, I bumped into a chap who I'd salvaged with over there called Lennie Pearce, and he asked me what I was doing back in Singapore. I told him I was there to pick up a ship, but that he probably wouldn't know it, and that it was called the *Poo Hee*. "Know

it?” he said, “I’ve salvaged it twice! It’s rolled over alongside the wharf.”

We found out that double bottoms were common, and that if it had much fluid in it, it would all rush to one side, and that this could build up enough to take you over. When we were taking the oil out of the double bottom, we found that if she hit a wave she’d roll, and then she’d hesitate before starting back again. So, having the knowledge that she was inclined to roll over, we pumped the cavity up so she was stable again. We had a little hand pump, which I think did 620 turns to the 44-gallon drum. That filled our days as well.

When we were in Launceston the dock master and engineer from the dock paid us a visit – he liked old engines, and he said that we’d have to rip the engine out of her and put another one in. Cheekily, I pointed out to him that if he liked old engines so much, he be better off doing it up rather than dropping another one in. Which he did!

So we took her up to Stanley. She was going to work between Stanley and King Island, but after we’d done one run I was feeling that I’d been away from home a little bit too long, so I left her. I’ve got a photo of her somewhere, and she’s working now up in Borneo – the same ship, still going. So that was quite an adventure – in fact, most of what we do is adventurous.

Salvaging the *Gloria D*

My deck hand has worked with me for about 35 years, on an off, and he’s still with me. Deckhands are quite important. They’re your mate, and you’re not very successful without a good one. When people come aboard for work experience, from TAFE or somewhere, I tell them that that’s the place to start, no matter what qualifications they might have. Then, when they know the problems a deckhand might face, they have a better understanding of the rest.

One time we were to salvage the *Gloria D*, over here at Jenny Dixon’s Beach at Norah Head. It was a concrete vessel – ferro cement – and one of the big mistakes I made... the chap who put it up on the beach was having a heart attack, according to a doctor I knew, and I thought I could take this worry from him,

so I bought it, as was, up on the beach, and in the process I gave myself enough worries to last a lifetime.

The boat broke up badly, and I was forced to patrol the beach picking up all the bits and pieces. This was in the winter, and I'd start off in a wetsuit so I could run into the surf, then it got too hot in the wetsuit and I'd take it off, but of course, as soon as I took it off I'd see another bit of ferro cement floating around, you know, and you'd have to go and get it regardless. We did that for weeks and weeks, and the whole thing was just money wasted.

I managed to get the two masts out with a helicopter – a local feller here had a helicopter so we slung them, and lifted them. At that time I was living at Mannering Park, so he dropped them in my backyard. Those two masts came out of a vessel called the *Vim*, and they were quite good, they sold easily and I was happy to get them out of the backyard. So we got the engine and the masts out of it, but the rest of it we buried up in the sandhills. It wasn't the best of times – the council was threatening to sue, and if anyone had been hurt I'd have been gone a million, so I had to make sure I did it right.

Salvage at Escape River

There was a salvage we did at Escape River. Escape River is up past the Daintree on Cape York. It was quite an easy job. There's a bit of a story goes with it though. We were on Thursday Island after having flown there for another job. We heard of this stranding while we were there, so we flew back to Cairns and went up to have a look at the stranding with the assessor from Lloyds. Denis Cosby his name was. They chartered a vessel and away we went.

When we got there it was a bit rough, and there were others there who had put in for the same job – fishermen and so forth. They wouldn't go ashore, so Denis and I went ashore and we walked all around it. When we got back the skipper asked us for a report. We reported that she was full of water in all compartments and the fishermen tried to come the heavy on us, and warned us off putting in for the job. But that's how I earn my living, so I was wracking my brains to work out what to do.

Years before we had rescued a bloke from the Everglades in



The prawn trawler high and dry at Escape River

Florida who had taken out a lease on Wednesday Island, and he used to wrestle crocodiles for the fun of it. Anyhow, he walks into the pub where we were staying at the precise moment that I needed some help. I didn't even know he was anywhere around, and when he saw me he said: "How are you Bill" and I said it was good to see him. So I then put in for the job, and no-one said a word. Knowing him must have somehow legitimated me. And we got the job, too.

This bloke told them the truth about the beached boat being full of water. Although the compartments were full of water, when we walked around her she wasn't leaking a drop. So when we got back to Cairns the partner that I had at the time, George Hicks, asked what we were going to do, how were we going to salvage it, and where were we going to get a crew from? I said that there was an old chap that I had promised a run to who used to plant coconut trees all up and down the coast, and that there was him, George Hicks, and me. So we pumped her out and floated her off on the tide. She was in good shape. She was quite a big vessel for those times to use for trawling for prawns in the gulf. She was built in Western Australia.

Looking for the *Voss*

The *Voss* was a yacht that went missing, and we spent months looking for it. What happened was, there was this ferro cement yacht down in Brisbane Water. A 60 footer. So the crew gets as full as a boot, and buys a heap of chickens, and announces that they are going to sail to Lord Howe Island. Some 70 mile off Crowdy Head they're all seasick, and in a terrible way. They put out a Mayday call, and a chopper came out and lifted them all off. Then the yacht went missing. Everybody was interested in what happened to it, including the owner, because he wanted it back, obviously. Every time there was a sighting we'd go out in the *Sea Rambler* to get it, but when we'd get to where it had been sighted it's not there. We did this for months, and then my mate Arie Van Andel figured that it must be sailing itself, and it ended up it was found fifty mile north of Lord Howe!

It was usually fine weather when it was sighted, and the sail – mainly the jib – would drop. When the crew were taken off by the helicopter they didn't worry too much about the sails, and just dropped 'em. After it's been sighted, the wind comes up and fills the jib and away it would go. At one stage when we were out looking for her we were about 300 mile east of Jervis Bay, because that's where she'd been reported seen, when a full storm came on. We weren't sure where we were, and there was a container ship approaching that we could see. He was quite large, so I called him up and he said that he couldn't see any vessels anywhere. I told him we were just off his port bow, and he said he still couldn't see anything. Then he yelled: "Oh Christ, no! You wouldn't be in that!"

They'd lost two containers overboard because of the heavy weather. We rode out the storm, but we couldn't get contact with Sydney radio or anywhere because of the storm that had passed us, but was still between us and the shore. For a while people thought that we were lost too, until we turned up later like a bad penny. Then we worked out where it was, at least Arie did, so we went and found her and brought her back. On the way back, the only thing we could work out was that she must have hit a reef, which damaged the keel, because she sunk on us half way back. We were in about 2000 feet of water when it happened, so we didn't worry about her any more. The owner was a schoolteacher, and he went to the Himalayas to Kathmandu to teach after that. He'd had a gutful. And, of course, it wasn't insured.

Poor old Arie. We were mates for about 40 years, and I recently took his ashes to sea. Taking ashes out for a sea burial has become a sort of regular job for me now that we're all getting older. Matter of fact, we just gave one of our shipmates a send-off a couple of days ago. It was a good send-off, and we had the people in the church laughing and clapping. There were 80 or 90 people there, and we told them some stories about past times when he was alive.

One of these stories went as follows: One time there we took a barge up to Raymond Terrace to demolish the wharf there. We lobbied there just on dark and we had a meal, and one of the blokes said that he'd have first shower. The shower is in a little cubicle on my vessel, and it's got a toilet as well. You can sit on the toilet and have a shower if you want. After a little while we heard him yell out "Either we're sinking or this bloody thing's blocked!" It's wintertime, a southerly was blowing and it was cold. I said for him to stay there and that I'd kick the compressor up. We had a 250 cubic foot compressor, and my plan was to start it up, then give him the hose, then he could blow the thing out.

When I opened the compressor up, the compressed air raced down the shower pipe, which was clear. The blockage was outside, unfortunately, so it went to the least resistant part, ran up, blew the lid off the toilet and covered him with whatever was in the toilet at the time! So I got a hose off the wharf and hosed him down.

The audience was in stitches!

I reckon that you get to know people better at sea, because you're confined. You've got that atmosphere, and you've got the challenges all the time. You get to know them better than you would with anyone ashore. Of course you get unpleasant customers now and then, but I think I have to go back to where I said that you've got to be tolerant.

The *Troy D*

The *Troy D* was a little ship that went aground at Bass Point. A bloke called Devine owned it. Bass Point is just south of Port

Kembla, and she was running blue metal from there up to Sydney. They were getting the blue metal from a national park area, and this little vessel was transporting it up. She went aground there, and the chap who owned it was a notorious con-man – the waterfront’s full of them. I was coming down the coast, and they asked me would I come down and salvage the *Troy D*. I said no, because I knew of this feller. Then the harbour master in Port Kembla asked me would I do it because it was in a National Park, and if it remained there there would be all sorts of problems and it would destroy the whole job, you know, the whole exercise of getting the blue metal. So in the end I did salvage it.



But, because I was chartering a very expensive tug I finished up ringing Lloyds of London and getting insurance coverage on it, so that I was covered if anything went wrong.

It was quite an easy salvage and we towed it back into Newcastle and put it up on the dock. There was a chap walking along the dock with the dock owner, and the surveyor, and a few other people, you know. They walked up to me where I'd been inspecting the vessel, and the chap says: "There's one thing that I made sure of, and that's that Bill gets paid for this job".

I couldn't say anything because it would have embarrassed everyone, so I just said "Yeah. That's good". But he took credit for all the work I got by getting an insurance cover from London from the job, despite the fact that it was the insurance that paid me! Not him.

Another time Devine asked me to tow a barge. I was coming down from Queensland in the *Betts Bay*, and he had a barge in Brisbane that he wanted me to tow down for him, saying that he'd supply the fuel and everything like that. I'd heard about this job from a mob in Melbourne. I told him that I had a job to do for this Melbourne crowd, and that I was going to call in to Brisbane and pick a barge up. "Oh" he said "It's the same barge". When I refused him he asked me "Don't you trust me?" and I said "No". He's well-known. He's quite a rogue.

Mourilyan Harbour

We had a feller aboard once – we called him Porthole. He had that nickname because on one voyage we had some women on board, and he was caught doing a Peeping Tom through the porthole. (I don't have a nickname myself, as far as I know, but when I first went to sea they used to call me Skeeter, because I was only little – a skinny little bugger)

We were doing a tow to Mourilyan Harbour, which is in FNQ just south of Cairns. We were towing the *Gumai* I think (again). It's a long tow that takes quite a few days, and we had a young feller who got very seasick, to the point that I thought he might be dangerously ill, and I arranged to get him to shore on Fraser Island, from where he went up to the hospital at Maryborough. But this Porthole thought that the young bloke had had a better bunk than he did, so he jumped into the now vacant bunk. One day he came up to me and asked if the rest of the crew ever got itchy, and said he thought the young seasick bloke might have been lousy. Mischievously I began pretending to scratch myself, and said I wonder how that came about. So I gave everyone else the drum, and we all started scratching, pretending to be itchy. Porthole gets on the phone to Head Office and demands to have the ship fumigated.

Our programme was to go down to Townsville after Mourilyan

Harbour, pick up a jack-up drill rig and take it back to Mourilyan, so it was a pretty tight schedule. So I got the people at Mourilyan to give me the fumigation gear and we arrived at midnight. I told Porthole that from what he'd been saying, he seemed to know a lot about fumigation, whereas we knew nothing, and I gave him the job of doing the fumigating. But he backed away from doing it, and we sailed for Townsville.

To go back for a minute to when we got to Mourilyan at midnight, I called up the Harbour. The pilots have to come down from Cairns, so I talked to the pilot direct. He asked me if I'd been into Mourilyan before, and when I said that I had he told me to take it in myself. Which I did. It all went well, and when I was talking to him later he asked me when it was that I had been into the harbour before. I told him that it was when I was sailing in the *Time* – and that was in about 1946! He nearly had a heart attack! Mind you, with most ports you're better off coming in when it's dark because you've got lead lights and nothing to distract you. And I'm lucky in that if I've been to a port I can usually remember it and can go back again from memory. I do a lot of jobs where going into port are not pilot jobs, and you have to find your own way.

The *Seagar*

This is a salvage that we did north of Cooktown – the *Seagar*. She went aground in a cyclone, and we built a slipway of rolling logs to get her back in the water.





This is a dredge called the *Wombat*. We salvaged her with the *Betts Bay*. She was a cutter suction dredger built in 1974 of some 442 tonnes.

The grounding of the *Signa*

There was a famous grounding on Stockton Beach just north of Newcastle of the *Signa*, in 1974. I was salvaging up in Cairns at the time and I had a partner in the salvage business who I've mentioned earlier, George Hicks. I came down to have a look at the *Signa*. I had some good people – boilermakers I knew and so forth, and we came up with an idea for salvaging it. I think Huddart Parkers were the agents for it then, and I went to them and told them that I'd like to take on the salvage. They asked me how much money I had, and I said about \$1000. I forget how much they wanted, but they wanted the backing of somebody who had more like two million, you know, and they didn't want anything to do with us.

At the time we thought we could save it in one piece, 'cos it had just started to crack. I think it took a bloke called Imata about six weeks to get here to do the salvage. We did a bit of survey work for him in that time, but not much else. Politically, it was a timebomb.



What remains of the Signa on Stockton beach



Close up of the crack in the Signa

When it broke up, the bits were still floatable. In fact, at one stage they actually had it all off, but the tugs – and that's a story in itself – Fenwicks were the tug company involved at the time, and they didn't want to create a precedent and pay the crew triple time to recover it. When they got the bow off they took it up to Nelsons Bay, and I got the potential buyers for the bow and took 'em up to Nelsons Bay so they could inspect it on the mooring it was on up there. But that was all we had to do with it.



The Signa before she broke up

So it all became a big issue. They lost the stern part of it, which washed in and went aground again. There was a lot to it. The Japanese people didn't know what they were up to anyway, so they played soccer on the beach while it all went on.

Imata was an accountant, and he told me that he spent a million on the salvage, but that he sold the bow for a million. You see, you've got half a ship, and they wanted to sort of bolt on a new stern section. They build them in several parts these days, and just put them together. That's quite common.

The *Pasha Bulker*

It was a bit similar with the *Pasha Bulker*. They built a new bottom section for her, cut the bottom out of the *Pasha Bulker* and rebuilt it. Nowadays she's running out here, and is called *The Drake*. See, to repair a ship, if you've got to repair it underneath it's very expensive, and hard to do. So it's usually cheaper and easier to build a new bottom, cut the damaged one away and put the new one on.

We were involved with the *Pasha Bulker* in all sorts of ways. It was the craziest thing going, because there wasn't an exclusive zone around it when it first ran aground. We went out and put buoys around her to stop people coming in. There were massive seas – eight metres at the time, and no-one could go near it. We worked for AMSA – the Australian Marine Safety Authority



– on the oil pollution side of things. The first night the blow was on and she came aground, we were listening to her. This was when the floating dock had broken free in Newcastle, and we were attending to that – we had divers and things like that, and we secured her, but we spent the night there. The next day AMSA asked for both our boats to stay in there, and I don't think we got home for a fortnight or three weeks. From our point of view, we knew what was going on, but what was being fed to the public wasn't all that sensible or very accurate, you know. There was a batch of stuff that was told to the public, and what was actually going on. But it was a very well-done salvage.

So we were in Newcastle harbour, and we had the radios and we listened in to what was happening. David Hancock was the main fellow who did the job, and there was a lot of support for him. I can't remember the name of the insurance fellow from Eden now, but I'd worked with him too. The *Pasha Bulker's* crew seemed to be very old. It was as though you had to have a pension card or an Old Timer's card to get a job on her. David Hancock passed away about two months after that, and the fellow from the insurance company died shortly after too.

After she went, she left a rudder behind on the reef, which caused a lot of unanticipated problems. All the surfies reckoned that it changed the nature of the surf completely, and they

weren't getting the same breaks, so we got the job of recovering the rudder. When we started, they said it was only around 4 tonnes, but when we salvaged it, it was more like 22 tonnes.

But it was funny, because everyone was talking about the rudder, and we made quite a few attempts to salvage it because it was both in the surf and on the reef. When we did get it, we brought it in underwater under the barge because it was too heavy to lift on. Then we loaded it onto a truck, and it wouldn't go over the bridge because of the width of it, and we had to take it to Simsmetal, and to do this we had to take it right through town. I asked the owners if we could keep the rudder because people were interested in it, you know. But they wouldn't have it. So they put it up on Nobbys, and there was a little bit cut out of it, and an eye put in that points to where the *Pasha Bulker* went aground. You often see it on TV. It's painted red, with this hole in the middle of it. It was an interesting one.

You win some, you lose some

There was another episode in Cairns. I was salvaging out at Holmes Reef, about 90 miles east of Cairns. There were two Japanese long liners there, but when we tried to sell them back to the Japanese they weren't interested. We ended up selling them for scrap. Pretty well all those Japanese jobs we did were financial failures, but we did a few successful ones with the fishing fleets when we were working in the Gulf. Not right in the gulf, but between Thursday Island and Cairns.

When the job in Cairns was finished, I was using a tug out of Brisbane called the *Coringa*, but its original name was the *Empire Peggy*. She was steam – a big tug. She had an 18 tonne bollard pull, which was big for those days. So when we got no money from the salvages she had to go, and we ended up with a vessel called the *Torrens Four*, an ex-pilot boat, and we did quite well with that financially.

A lot of boats sunk, especially before GPS came in, and going up through the fleet of banana prawn boats that worked in the Gulf, they had radar, but they didn't have GPS or anything like that. All we had on the *Torrens Four* was a compass. We didn't even have an echo sounder. They were pretty wild days. We got into trouble with some of the fishing fleet, because when they had a

bad season up there – like, if they get no rain then the prawns don't show up – the boats seemed to have accidents more often. Funny, that. They would go crook because we were salvaging them, and we used to say to them that if you don't do it properly, and if you don't go to the pub and tell everybody, then we were going to salvage them, and that's the basis we worked on. At that time we didn't have any money, and we were quite lucky with the support we got, and we did rather well.



This is the salvage crew that worked with me out on the reef. They're a pretty rough-looking bunch, but you have to remember that there are no showers out there – no nothing

The salvage business has virtually disappeared since GPS came in. I mean, occasionally a ship will go aground, but these days it's not usual. You need a great deal of money to do big salvage jobs, so these days we do the smaller jobs, like buoys getting away on the outer Newcastle reef and that, and we get all those sorts of jobs. But they're only an hourly rate, not big money. All around the world salvage has sort of collapsed, and when you

think how many ships there are in the world at the moment, then there's not many accidents.

In earlier times we used to worry about landfalls – when you're coming into a place or finding a place from sea -- we used to take bets on where we'd make landfall, because back then there was a lot of estimating done. It wasn't all that accurate, whereas today you've got transponders and a thousand other things. I'm working with a system now in the harbour that shows me an image of what I'm doing, and my vessel in proportion, and everything's right in front of me. I also have a minimum of 17 satellites, and access to another 40. So there's no error in what you're doing.

There's another thing about the salvage business, though. The people who actually find the wrecks don't always get the credit for it. When I was working in Townsville harbour we had divers and that on the job, and there was a fisherman who kept losing his nets around Cape Bowling Green, and they asked if one of our divers could go down and see what was going on. We had one particularly good diver, Don McMillan, and he went out and found that there was a wreck there. She'd been missing since 1911. We got interested, and we recovered the safe out of it, but there was nothing of any value in the safe. Now Don McMillan found it – it was called the *Onggala* – and another one of our divers had a lot to do with it, but when I read about it now there is no credit given to them at all.

Tickets and other Qualifications

In between all these maritime adventures I still had to find time to go to tech and get the tickets I needed. Eventually I got them all, and they're still valid. My riggers, dogman, cranedriver and scaffolding tickets are still all valid, and as a matter of fact I did one today – we did an early job so that I could go and revalidate my ticket. The one today was a local knowledge ticket – for Newcastle Harbour.

Just recently the dredge was coming down from Brisbane, and I took all that crew, and the officers, and taught them all about the harbour. I spent a week doing that with them. When I have to go in to the office there's a fair bit of chiaking goes on. Some of the girls in the office give me a hard time. One of them, called

Maria, she does the safety side of things for the Port. Every two years we have to do the safety thing, and I was running a bit late the last time. Maria was eight months pregnant at the time, and as I walked in she was holding her belly in an obvious sort of way, and she said loudly to me: "Gee, Bill, I haven't seen you for eight months!"

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But you have to go through the formalities, even if it's a foregone conclusion. I have to produce my valid tickets, my first aid ticket and all of the rest of the safety stuff. I also have to write a stat dec saying that I'd done this and done that in the harbour. Then, every five years, I have to revalidate my own Master's ticket. Then there's GMDSS and the Maritime Safety Authority. We have to keep all that stuff up to date.

With the rigger's qualification and things like that, because I was coming ashore I was doing a fair bit of splicing and things like that. They used to give me a book, and away I'd go, then I'd sit for the exam. I did most of them like that, and then I taught splicing as well.

In the 60s I was working for a mob called Fernetivic in Western Australia. We were doing a salvage. I already had my harbour and river master's ticket, which allowed me to operate ships of unlimited size, but it had restricted seagoing. I had that from years before, so I sat for another exam and got my Unrestricted Mate ticket, and when I'd done the time that goes with that I got my Master's in Western Australia. In those days, qualifications from WA weren't recognized in other states (though they are now), so every time I got a job in another state I'd have to sit for another test. I've got books and books of tickets of all descriptions, but I've let some of them go because I'm getting older. I'm also a qualified engineer, and these days I just keep that and my Coastal Masters current.

I dunno where I found the time to do all that studying and passing exams. I never seemed to have any time off. Viney and I have never had a proper holiday in all the time we've been married. She came with me to Exmouth and to Singapore, but they were jobs. Viney has stayed home and looked after the kids' education, and that's how I could keep going to sea all the time. I suppose it's all the roving I've done, people seem to know me, and I seem to get a lot of jobs by word of mouth. These days I act as a consultant on different problems as well, you know. Just at present I'm working on the dock in Newcastle, which has been out of commission for some time. They draw on my previous knowledge of the place to help them out. I've got two of my barges up on the slipway, and we're going to put about 800 tonnes of water in them to test the rails and their strength before the navy uses them. They have to be tested and approved before the Navy can put any vessel on them. *(Bill doesn't get paid for this consulting. When I asked him if he might be being*

a bit generous with the crucial knowledge he has built up over the years, he just grinned, and said: "Well, I'm like that!" BB) He went on: "Actually, what they are doing with that project is something I want to see working, because there's a golden opportunity for it to work and it's what's needed in Newcastle, and I'm all for it and I'll help wherever I can".

You see, the Navy has mine hunters whose life they want to extend. They were built in Newcastle, and they're coming up for a re-fit. This will be done at the same facility where they were built, and it will be a great thing for Newcastle.

I've got a mate who's a skipper with Svitzer these days – one of the top ones, but when he was younger he worked for a while with me when I was building Marmong Cove Marina. On Sunday nights he used to go to the dance at the Palais Royal, and the bouncer there was the kickboxing champion of NSW. My mate would get a few drinks aboard and whisper to me: "I could take him, you know." He was a big, wild man. So in the end I said to him: "Look: Next Saturday afternoon you stand against that brick wall, and I'll get a lump of 4x2 and belt Christ out of you, and then you can recover on Sunday and be fit when you come to bloody work on Monday! If you want a fight, then pick someone with crutches or something. Don't pick on anyone that's any good!" He's still with Switzer. Dean Elvin his name is. He's a great bloke, and a top skipper.

Drawing a blank in the Canary Islands

One night here about ten or fifteen years ago I picked up the phone and it was a call asking me if I would go to the Canary Islands to salvage a vessel there. It was an ex-P&O ship that was being towed to Hong Kong to become a casino. It had all casino gear on it, and in a gale it ran aground near a place called Puerto Aventura, just off Africa. I said to the caller that I couldn't speak Spanish, but that I had a mate who could. He thought that was fine, and said to bring him along. I rang this bloke, Sammy Dominguez, and I asked him how long it had been since he'd seen his mother. He said it was about two or three years. I asked him how he felt about a trip to Spain, and he jumped at it.

So he came over with me. First we went to London, but for some reason we were on different flights. I was wondering how the hell



Sammy Domínguez

I was going to find him in the busyness of Heathrow. I went and had a shower, bought the piece of brown paper that they give you for a towel, and just as I was on my way out, I bumped into Sammy walking in! We were the only two having a shower, because Poms don't use them, you know!

So we flew down to La Palma and went across by helicopter to the island where the ship was aground. It was like a moonscape. It was a shocker – an ugly looking place. We were staying in a resort where all the tropical trees and that had been imported. The resort was a beautiful place, and we were living like kings. The next day we went to have a look at the wreck. We drove to the place and

inspected it, and we thought that it looked like it was going to be pretty awkward. When we got aboard there was nothing on it! It had been absolutely stripped! We stopped off at a cantina on the way back. It was full of rough looking types, and you could cut the atmosphere with a knife, it was that thick. I said to Sammy: "We'd better find out what's going on here. It looks a bit like we might get our throat cut."

As it happened, the island was where the French Foreign Legion trained. There's all these fit buggers standing up at the bar, and Sammy gets talking to them. They thought that we were trying to find out what had happened to all the gear missing from the ship, but Sammy quickly convinced them that we were as big pirates as they were. So after that they began to tell us the story. There were thirteen lifeboats of the old davit style on both sides of the wrecked P&O liner, and one of the blokes we were talking to said that he wanted to have one of them. So he tied the painter around his waist and went along and cut the falls. (The falls are rope block and tackles that lower the lifeboats). The boat only got half way down before the painter took up and half

of him went that way and the other half went this. That was the end of him.

So then they built a flying fox from the mast to the rocks to help get more stuff off the ship. (There were two grand pianos on board, and they got them off, too). They were running a boat in from Morocco, and they brought it in underneath. One fellow's there waiting to guide one of the pianos down when it broke away and the whole lot ended up in a heap and killed the bloke. There were about five people killed while they tried to take everything off it that they could. The Foreign Legion had been stationed there to be security for the ship, and we didn't fit in one bit.

I rang and told the people we were working for that there was nothing aboard. As we walked down to tea we bumped into the feller that ran the resort, and he said that there was nothing there for us at all. There was absolutely no value in the ship. We were supposed to take it to Malta and unload all this casino equipment, and everyone would make a lot of money. But it's still lying in the Canary Islands. So then we made our way back home again.



Wisemans Car Ferry tows

I used to tow the car ferries from Wisemans Ferry up the north coast for their regular maintenance. I did a lot of that. The RTA have a dock up in the Clarence River and we used to take 'em up there. Later on I took them to Port Macquarie. They're actually very good to tow – they run along very nicely, and there are rarely any dramas. The last new car ferry was built here at Forgacs at Tomago, and I took it down to Sydney and up the Parramatta River. They're great to tow.



This is one of the new car ferries that we delivered from Tomago to Sydney harbour.

All those tows have a bit of a story to them, too. I was doing them, and we were having a lot of success with them, but there was another company in Botany who wanted that job. He said to the RTA at the time, that the insurance I had wouldn't cover hitting a tanker or something really big. We were already committed to doing the job, but I had to go to London, to Lloyds, to arrange to get unlimited risk insurance. I've kept it going over the years, but they've reduced the cover to 500 million! Insurance is one of my biggest outlays, and because we're in salvage also it's a high risk business. Insurance is something you can't afford, but you can't afford to be without it either, doing what we do.

A towing adventure

Towing itself can be a bit dodgy at times. We're not a towing nation like the Americans, say, so I read a lot about towing as it is done around the world to keep up with it. I've worked out my own system that I have adapted from their expertise, you know. I had a lot of arguments about towing when we first started towing for WestHams Dredging. Some people have different ideas about towing to the ideas I came up with, but to me, if you could come up with a way of doing things that was safer than the way it was being done, then that was the way to go.

I set up the Eden buoys on towing, because I towed out of Eden as well, and they let me have my head and do it my way.

When you're at sea, the theory is that we have Norman pins and goblins. They've modernised it nowadays – they have hydraulic rams that come up, and they have a system that captures the wire going out over the stern. To stop it jumping out of that you need something to hold it down, and that's where the goblin comes in. The idea is, that if anything goes wrong, or you breakdown, or the tow passes you, or if anything like that happens, if it goes on the beam it can roll you, because you're towing something that is much much heavier than you are.

I proved that, in a different way, when we were towing two barges with the *Tasman Hauler* into the rip in Melbourne, which is a very risky old show. We were towing them down for a dredging job at Geelong. I think it would have been sometime in the 90s. We got a pilot on board, and I was on watch – I was mate and towmaster on that one – and the pilot came on board early. We



Tasman Hauler

were intending to go through the rip at slack tide, so I asked him if he had come out a bit early for a cup of tea, but he said no, that we were going in. It was around ten or eleven o'clock at night and as we were going through we weren't making a lot of headway because there had been a lot of rain up in Port Phillip Bay and it all had to rush out of this tiny space. The tide was still on the ebb. We were going nowhere, but that was all right because we were holding our own, and we were only drifting back a little bit so there was no real worry. But there was a ship coming out at the time, so we moved over a bit. Then the pilot took the wheel and put her hard aport – he'd suddenly decided to go back out to sea. He thought that the ship that was coming might need a bit more room. We were over Lonsdale Reef. Suddenly we were going around, and the wire, which was shortened up to 500 ft long dropped to the bottom and got caught up on the reef. Then we all came together – the *Hauler* and the two barges, but we didn't roll or anything because the wire was firmly attached to the stern. So we sat there until slack time, then we winched back around. We had the two tows on – one was on wire, and one was on rope, which was floating. It was

a floatable polyprop rope, but it chaffed off, and away it went.

So we took the one barge in, when we'd unraveled ourselves from around the reef, which was very difficult, and we anchored it up, then we went looking for the other one. Just after daylight someone reported that it was off Corsair Rock, sitting over there and still in the entrance. Even though the polyprop rope had chaffed off, you've still got a heavy chain bridle hanging down, and she had sort of anchored herself on Corsair Rock.

So we went over to it in a rubber duckie, and I'd borrowed the pilot's radio. We got over to it, and I climbed aboard. Then we stretched the emergency towline which always hangs out the stern. We lowered that into the water and I called Alan Boatman, one of my crew, in. There's a ladder hangs down the stern, with a big aperture, and we went in underneath, but we got caught in the ladder. A swell came in and washed us back out and we got tangled in the ladder again – a steel ladder – and it just chopped up the rubber duckie.

So we ended up in the water. It was July, and the water was pretty cold. We were hanging onto the emergency towline and the pilot called me. I'm in the water holding his radio aloft, and he said he hadn't heard from us for a while. I told him we were in the water, and he said that he'd send the pilot boat over to pick us up. I could hear the conversation over the radio, and the skipper of the pilot boat said that he "wouldn't risk his boat and his life to pick those silly buggers up". Those were his exact words.

Meanwhile, unrelated to this whole thing, a helicopter had landed nearby, and he was listening in on the conversation as well. He said: "Well, I'm here and the helicopter is still warm, so I think I'll pick them up". He came over to us and dropped the wire with the harness on it down, and like a fool I grabbed the wire. It was full of static electricity, so I got quite a shock from it. So I put my mate in the harness, and they winched him up and took him over to the beach. I'm still in the water, and they told me on the radio that I was right where the white pointers feed! You can imagine – I had my legs right up around the back of my neck! When the chopper came back to pick me up I did the same thing as I did before and grabbed the wire, (ouch again!) and then they dropped us both at the Pilot Station. They reckoned that we were suffering from hypothermia and said that we should have a cold bath. We rejected that idea and went and

had a hot shower instead, and then they dropped us back on board the tug. The pilot was still on board. I was the towmaster, and responsible for anything that went wrong, and the pilot said to me: "Mr Mate, when we go alongside that barge, I want you to jump over onto it with the oxy gear, and cut the bridle." I replied: "Pilot, I've just resigned." This upset him and he started to read the riot act to me, so I said to the skipper, who I'd sailed with before: "Sack him. He's mad!" And so he did, and that didn't make us too popular.

So anyway we snuck over and we grabbed the emergency towline. We were going to Geelong, and we ended up towing it stern first all the way to Geelong because we weren't game to turn or try anything else with it, you know.

Now I mentioned Alan Boatman earlier. While I was on the bridge a radio call came through from Alan Boatman's wife. I said that I'd get Alan for her, but she said that she wanted to talk to me. And this is what she said: 'If you ever volunteer my husband for any of your crazy schemes again I'll castrate you!' And, unfortunately, she would have been capable of doing it, too!

The Floating Dock

Recently we did a job in Newcastle with the floating dock – we set it up for the tow, and as things turned out we became something of heroes because of what happened. As a result they gave us lots of photos and accolades and stuff about it, some of which are hanging on the walls here. The floating dock was to go to Namibia, via Singapore. While we were setting up the tow the Mate was a Dutchman. We never contacted the master, we had to deal with the mate who was in charge of the setting up, and there was a Filipino crew. Our job was to set it up ready for the tow. The tug came in, and the mate was telling us how it was the best tug in the world, there was nothing it couldn't do, and that it was perfect in every way. When it left it was facing over towards Merewether St Wharf. We had tugs on the dock as well, and when it set off the mate gave it a bit of a hard pull, and then the engines and everything shut down on the tug and the dock was heading straight for the wharf at quite a bat. We just happened to be Johnny-on-the-spot, so we slipped in under the bow and pushed the bow away from the wharf. We were actually

touching the wharf when we got her turned. She was a big vessel. And then they asked us to escort her out of the harbour. This was about three years ago, after the *Pasha Bulker*.

When I was working in Darwin I did a salvage with a bloke called Karl Atkinson. He was like a big Viking. A massive man, a diver. He got the rights to the Japanese wrecks – well, to all the ships that had been sunk in Darwin harbour. He sold the rights to a Japanese salvage company and we were there during that period. The job that came up was to take out all the personal things from the ships before the Japanese got to them, because the Japanese were still looked on with suspicion, and had to stay on their ships. They weren't allowed ashore as this was pretty soon after the war, you know. It was quite an interesting period up there.

The wet season was coming on, and I wanted out of there, and we drove down... we couldn't go to the west as I had intended, so we drove back here via Adelaide. I worked for a while in a shipyard in Adelaide splicing. They had a non-rotating rope, and I have always been interested in splicing and rope work. So I did the splicing for the crane that they'd just bought for the shipyard in Whyalla. When that finished I came back and I worked on Vales Point power station for a while, which was interesting. I put the first two turbines together over there. The fellow in charge of English Electric was an old engineer, and I used to watch the water go past in the canal – the cooling water – and he said that from the look in my eyes it was probably about time for me to go back to sea! And that's what happened.

On one occasion there was a tow coming up the coast with the big dredge called the *Wombat* on it. They ran into bad weather, and it broke its towline off Norah Head. The company asked me to go down and standby, so when I got down there they'd picked the emergency towline up, and the skipper was a bit worried because there were all these ships ahead of him at anchor, waiting to go into Newcastle, and he was going to have to find his way through them.

When I got near him, still in the rough conditions, the skipper gave her full throttle and broke the emergency towline. I picked up the emergency towline, and although it was much too big for my vessel I towed the *Wombat* up into Newcastle. It took us 16 hours from Norah Head to Newcastle and another two hours

getting in. We were battling seven metre seas. We got it in and the owner of the tow company, a good friend of mine, was in Greece at the time, and he asked me what he owed me for doing this. I said “Half a bottle of Greek wine”. I’ve done him a few favours since, and as things stands now he owes me four half-bottles of Greek wine!



The picture above shows how far back the tow is in good weather. If the weather gets bad we put it back a bit further. The towline is usually wire, and they have what they call a “stretcher” at the end, which is a large polyprop line about three hundred feet long, which takes the sting out of things when you hit big seas. Otherwise, without a stretcher the line would be just like a piece of string, and you’d break it.

Hastings River barges

I took two separate barges up to the Hastings River – a pile frame barge and a crane barge – when they were putting the expressway through. I towed them in, but I had to find my own way in between the sand banks with these barges.

It was just on daylight when I went to go in, because you want the sun behind you so you haven’t got a glare. I went in an hour early, just to have a look around, and I came back out to sea to wait for the top of the tide. But when I looked up there was about 60 people up there witnessing what we were doing, but clearly they were hoping to Christ we’d come undone, because it’s more dramatic, you know.



Shot over the bow as we broke through the surf

But it got a bit hairy when we had to go through the surf again to get back out to sea. What I did was to drop the barge behind, letting it go slack, then I raced through the surf and got outside and then winched the barge through the surf. They've got a breakwall there, but the sand had built up against the breakwall and it was all sand for about a mile out from the breakwall. There had been a flood not long previously which had broken through the bar to find a passage out, 'cos it's quite a big river. It had come out where I went in, but there were no leads or anything. Up on the top of Pilot Hill, the pilots used to look out from there when they ran ships in there years ago.



Jack Up Drilling Rig

This is a jack-up drilling rig. Those vertical posts are the legs in the Up position. It used to get caught in the mud. It had big feet and when it would sink itself into the mud it was hard to get it up again. At that time there was from ten, fifteen, up to twenty feet of mud in Newcastle harbour. We wanted to know how much mud was there before we started.

And there was a lot of core drilling going on as well, but most of it was to establish just where all the silt and sand was.

There were times when I was working this job 24 hours a day. I didn't have a relief man, and sometimes they'd leave me on board while they were drilling, and I could snatch three or four hours sleep at a time and they'd call me when I was needed. That was how you worked in those days to survive. I was on a contract flat rate, so there was no overtime or anything like that paid to me.

When I bought the barge that we used for drilling – I called it the *Pulbah* – I bought it from the Clarence river, and it was a cane barge. It was an open barge and would have sunk on the way down, so I decked it in with timber to start with. I'd got some tallowwood quite cheaply, and I thought that I could build a fence with it when I got it down to Newcastle. After that I tarped it over with plastic and sealed it up.

Lord Howe Island to New Zealand

That was a tug that I took to New Zealand – the *Nautilus*. She's smaller than the *Betts Bay*. I went into Lord Howe with her because we were having a lot of trouble, and we became a tourist focus. "What, that silly cow is taking that to New Zealand?" sort of thing.



When planning the voyage with her to New Zealand, I didn't know how much fuel she would consume, and we had some steering problems, so I went into Lord Howe to get it all

straightened up before we took off for New Zealand.

The facilities at Lord Howe are nothing special, but you can easily fly someone in, you know. We had a technician flown in to fix the steering. It was a card that was the problem. We didn't have the old wheel on it, we had two toggles and a steering card like an autopilot that was jiggled into the steering. We were at sea when we first had the trouble, and I rang this chap about it. He told me to get under the dash and pull the card out. There were something like fourteen connections on the card, and he told me to mark them all, trace where the fault is by finding a burn mark, and bypass or loop it. I pointed out that we had five metre seas where we were at the time, and that the mast had just fallen down! So then he told me to go down to the stern and into the steering flap. The rudders were independent, but you could lock them together and steer with the engines. There we were with the seas breaking all over the after deck, so I asked him if he had any more suggestions. "Yeah," he said, "Pray!". Anyhow, we worked our way in to Lord Howe Island.

Helicopter to Lae



The bloke we took the helicopter to Lae for was the owner of Crowley Airways, and there was a big obituary for him recently

in the Sydney Morning Herald. He worked in new Guinea for a long time. We were delivering a vessel for Planet Exploration to Lae. They were looking for gold around the northern part of New Guinea. Crowley wanted to get a chopper to Lae and it was too long a flight to fly it there. So we took it with us on the Planet Exploration delivery. Crowley came with us, and his stories occupied us for the whole trip. He had some very interesting stories about his life in New Guinea.

We lashed the chopper to the deck, but that wasn't as simple as it sounds because all the weight in a helicopter is up top with the engine, and they want to fall all over the place, and they are terribly hard to lash down.

Repairing the *Wallsend*

This is a photograph of the *Wallsend*. It was a very big pile frame barge that was leaking on the bottom, and was very expensive to slip and repair. I made an offer to the engineer to roll it upside down while it was still in the water, and then to weld the bottom. This was a reasonably common practice years ago but everyone seems to have forgotten about it these days. It's called parbuckling. You pass a line right around it so that you're actually rolling it when you pull on the line. It was done quite regularly in places that didn't have much in the way of facilities. They used to do it to the timber punts in Sydney, and they used to put bitumen, then galvanised flat iron on the bottom. We went ahead and repaired it that way, and there were a lot





of cartons of beer won and lost with people betting whether it would work or not. I knew it would work because I'd done it before, you know.



That's a double tow I did with two hopper barges. I think we were going back to Newcastle after the Harbour Tunnel job.

Eating the Catch

We always used to supplement the rations on board with food from the sea. We caught all sorts of stuff. The fish in the photo below was a groper. We were on our way to Lae when they caught that one.





This is a dolphin fish. They're good to eat, and pretty to look at. The fins are all different colours.

Overleaf is a photograph of another boatload we caught at Elizabeth reef. We caught them in about an hour. We caught them on handlines – actually we used the thick cord lines that we got off the Japanese longliners. The fish would eat anything. At one stage we were putting banana skins on for bait, and they even went for that!





VIPs and sewage outfalls

Around 40 years ago I took a job with the Maritime Services Board in Sydney, and ended up as the Master of the Captain Phillip, which was a VIP vessel, managed by the MSB. It was brand new at the time. I don't know what happened at that time with the skipper who was originally on it. He was in trouble for some reason, and I got the job. At that time we hosted the king and queen of Nepal, Queen Elizabeth and Prince Phillip, the Pope, and the Prime Minister of New Zealand Keith Holyoake. We had a run of visitors like that. My job of course was up in the wheelhouse, and so even though we had all these dignitaries come aboard I had little to do with them.

I was given a week to practice for the Queen and Duke. They had come over in the *Britannia* and they were laying at the Quay. One of the things I had to practice was going under the Sydney Harbour Bridge at a certain time, and pass various points spot on, for security. So I practised those movements for a week, and then, when the actual operation came on, I found myself surrounded by police boats, navy boats and everything else, so I couldn't do anything wrong anyway! So it was all a bit of a waste of time.

But I didn't really fit in with the MSB. I was used to work, and it was a Government job. I'd get bored, and I'd go and do work around the boat, polish the brass and everything up – keep it neat and tidy. There was a chap who managed the MSB – we called him Captain Vague –and one day Captain Vague called me down and told me that I was making waves, and the crew were going crook because I was working all the time. And that was the start of my not fitting in. The other thing that irritated them was that they needed another hand for a game of euchre, but I don't particularly like playing cards either. They gave me lots of jobs, which was great, and I relieved everybody in the fleet. It was a big fleet in those days – they did all the dredging and everything on the harbour. So I had the opportunity of working on every vessel, so I was learning at the same time. This would have been around 1960, I suppose.

I worked for a while on *John Cadman I*, which used to be called the *Lady Scott*. Cadman's were big ferry operators. The *Lady Scott* was the first of those. This was when the Americans were coming to Sydney for R&R when the Korean War was on. We used to get sixty Americans, and sixty girls from around the Quay, and there was a dance hall down below on the ferry, and up top was the restaurant part. Most of the time the Americans were pretty well behaved, but there was a brawl one night on it while we were cruising around Sydney Harbour. My engineer was Bob Tanner, an older chap, and he came up and took the wheel and told me we had a problem down below. There was a big staircase leading down to the dance floor, and stomped about halfway down it and bellowed: "Righto! That's enough!" I could hardly believe it. They all stopped and stood to attention. Anyway, when we got 'em back to the Quay they were met by their commanding officer because they had misbehaved. I was telling him how all those big fellers, straight from the front in Korea, had stopped when I told them to. (By then I was walking around as though I was Joe Louis or someone). The officer explained that if they misbehaved while they were on R&R they got sent straight back to the front line! Of course, that deflated me considerably!

Surveying sewerage outlets

Somewhere along the line I worked for the Australian Museum. It was around 40 years ago. We spent three years studying the sewerage outfalls along the NSW coast. First we started with North head, Bondi, and then Malabar. We had an engineering group as well, and they would redesign the outfalls. The Director was Frank Talbot at the time and we had marine biologists and divers on that job. For the first part of the job we had to work in the sewerage fields. Originally, it all used to run down the cliff face! We ended up doing Burwood Beach at Newcastle as well. We used to leave about 4 in the morning, and get back about 6 or 7 at night.

In those days the sewerage outfalls only came to the cliff face, particularly at North Head, Bondi and Malabar. They were the first three that we did, then we came up and did Terrigal, Burwood beach and Newcastle. Nowadays they have a tunnel out, and they have what are called diffusers. They drill down into the tunnel, and then they have a diffuser system so that it is

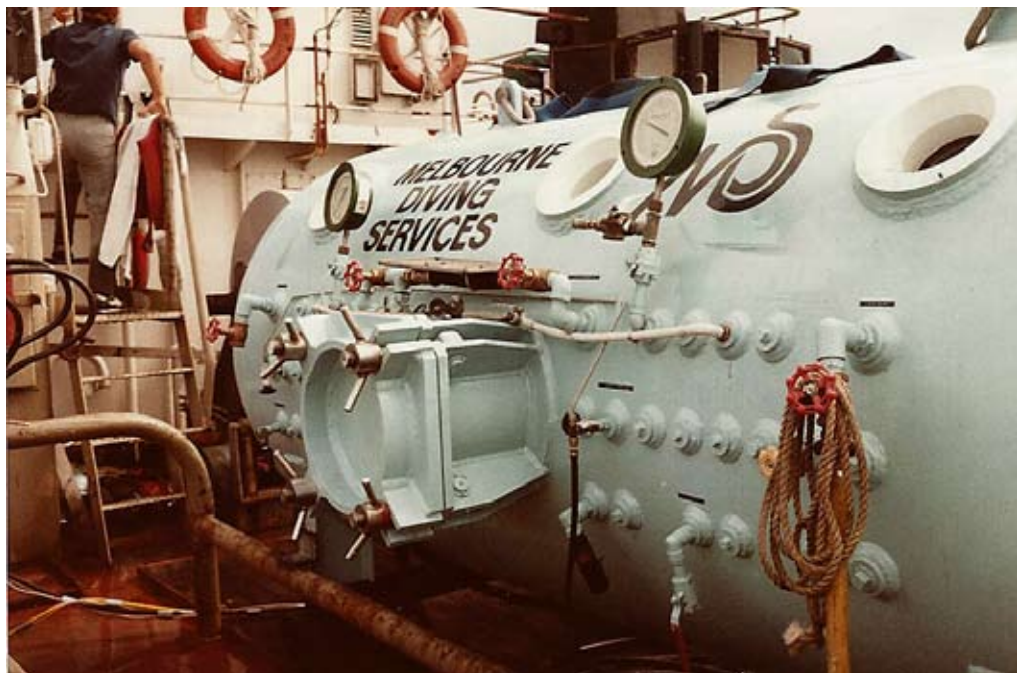
dispersed in deeper water further offshore.

With the Burwood Beach outfall near Newcastle ... we were in a meeting one time with the Water Board, and they told us to get a profile of the bottom so they could put the diffuser heads on. This entailed bringing special equipment out from England, and after a few enquiries we were told it would take about six months to get it out here. We didn't have anything like that sort of time to wait, and, being something of a smartarse, I said that if I couldn't design something to do the job in no time, I'd be surprised. They said then: OK you've got the job. So I designed and built this thing and it worked like a charm. And I can't remember charging them for that solution.



When designing the table for this invention, which is quite large, I got two crushing balls that they use to crush the coal up with, and hung them off the table to hold it steady. Then I had the compass rose painted on top so we knew where we were, and then it had a 30 ft arm, because that was the radius they wanted for the diffusers. It worked well from the get-go. We had to do twelve sites, and it fell to pieces on the last site.

They had 17 divers on that job to get the profiles done, so we needed a decompression chamber. That's what this is.



We had all sorts of scientific specialists to help us with all this. All these people we were working with were highly qualified. Some were from Sweden. One lass was from the Isle of Man, and she had, among other things, an ice diving certificate. They were either scientists or divers. We were using my pusher tug called the *Rottnest* on that job. We set it up as a research vessel.

The *Morotai*

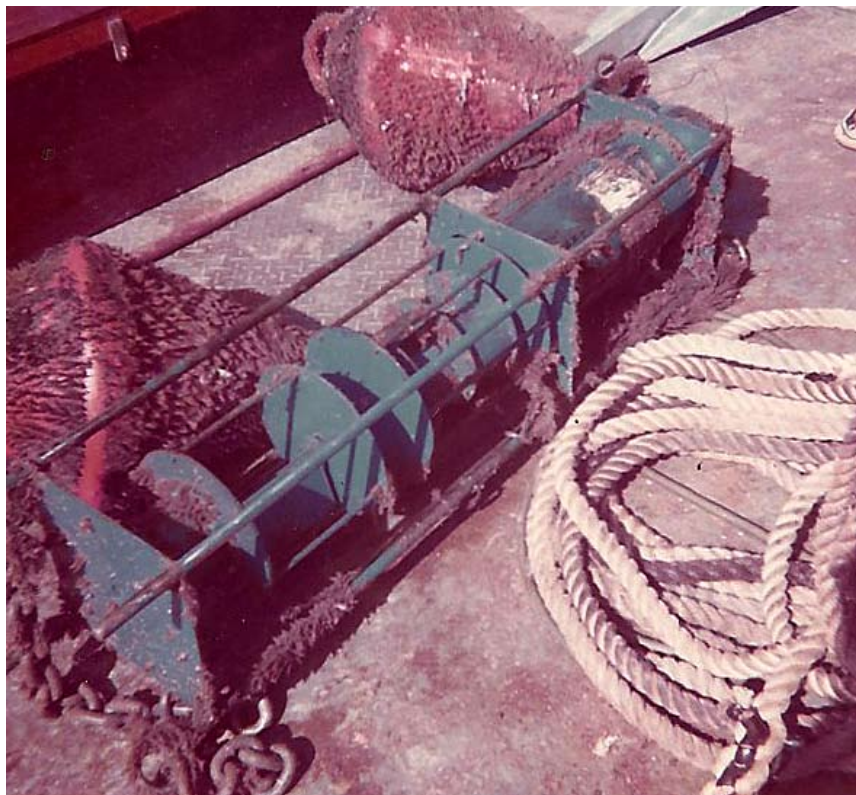
I bought the *Morotai* in Homebush bay. She was a wreck. I got her going and in survey for work. I'd worked on the *Morotai* on the first part of the investigation we were doing on the sewerage outfalls. That fell over after a while, and another company came to do the investigation and they told me to get any boat I could and they'd work with me. And that's what I did. The only boat I could afford was the poor old *Rottnest* – they called her the *Rotten Mess*. We did all sorts of jobs with her. At one stage we

built a drilling rig that you could put down underwater and drill from the bottom with a hard hat diver doing the drilling. We did plankton collections, and we had various grabs to bring samples of the bottom. We also did water collection from all different depths, and all of this we had to photograph, as well. And that's how we worked. We built our own gear and it was quite successful.



That's the Morotai that we worked on. She looks sleek, but she'd roll here, in the lounge room. She was a GPV (General Purpose Vessel) built during the war for the army.

We had current meters on the bottom and we had Shippex, to gather samples from the bottom. We'd drop it to the bottom, and when it hit the bottom it closed up and brought up a sample. When the current meters went down we had to have buoys so we could go back to them easily, but in no time the buoys had all been pinched! That's not all that uncommon in some parts for people to do that. We ended up using sextants – what they call horizontal sextant bearings – and we took bearings of the positions and did away with the marker buoys. We also had plankton nets, drift cards, and we used dyes in the water to measure how quickly it dispersed.



Current meter

We had to find where the currents were. We had a thermocline. The water is in layers, and this one was in the layer of fresh water. One of our investigations was to find that layer, because the sewerage would come into that water and stay in it, and disperse right round the coast – down to Gabo, then picking up the current going north near Lord Howe.

They also picked up bottom samples. We had an area where a camera was, and we'd haul in the different species of shellfish. We'd go to the same spot each time and monitor the growth. This was all in the old sewerage system that we were diving in.

Even though we were diving in the sewage all the time it was a difficult job to get the divers to take an injection. They might have been trained scientists, but that didn't stop them being scared of injections!



This is a two-man submarine. I bought that to investigate the reef where we were going to locate the sewerage outfall. Two men (with dive suits on) would go underwater in it, with the hard hat diver doing the drilling. It was actually taken off an Italian design that they had during the war for attaching limpet mines to ships.

I built a frame on the stern, because the scientists had developed a grab called the Smith and Macintyre after the two scientists who had invented it. They gave me the drawings for it, and I built a conveyor for it so it would go over the stern of the vessel and work. When they brought it aboard, to put the keeper on it, when you had it opened under a spring load, you had to put your hand inside between the two jaws. I figured that I might run out of scientists very quickly, or find myself with a lot of them who had only one arm left, so I barred it from coming aboard. There was no way I would work with this thing. I tried to tell them that there was commercial stuff available that was cheaper and better than the gear they had designed, but they thought they knew everything. They were scientists!

Looking for offshore gas



About ten years ago we did some work looking for gas deposits off the NSW coast. That's the end of the seismic sparker unit that we worked with out here off the coast. It has a trailer six kms long, and we used it to do the seismic gas investigations off the Wollongong Basin, which stretches between Nelsons Bay and Wollongong. We had a seismic ship from Russia and they had six kilometers of trailer. We followed it, to protect it mainly, and to warn other ships to stay clear. It explodes underwater and enables the geologists to work out the formations in the rock, and the cavities where the gas is. So we had 21 days just following that. We nicknamed it Dolly Parton. We were doing four knots for 21 days – out to the continental shelf and back in.

When the result were in, eleven kilometers off Catherine Hill Bay they found enough gas out there to supply Sydney for 20 yrs. It was the closest to the surface that they had seen.

The introduction of digital technology has changed the way we do our job these days compared to my early days at sea. We have multi-beam radar now, which enables the computer to print out coloured diagrams of exactly how the bottom that we are working on looks. This stuff is so refined that it can pick up a beer can in an old car tyre.

And it's improving all the time. The good thing for me about the way things are now is that I can get onto my computer support

network and they can sort of remotely take over my computer and fix it up when it misbehaves. That gets me out of a lot of problems. And if that fails I go looking for a 12 year-old kid!

In wintertime nobody wants to be working around Bass Strait, and when I heard that they were short of people for the *Tasman Hauler* that worked out of Eden, I went to Eden to see if I could get a place on her. The *Tasman Hauler* was a big tug – 150 ft long – and it belonged to a feller called Graeme White. He had the nickname “Lollies” because he only talked in hundreds and thousands. He’d got most of the crew together from amongst alchos and unemployed people -- he got the type of person who was down on his luck, sort of thing. I went to Eden and I hit it off with the local fishermen, and I got along there very well. I got asked back many times, and I ended up doing lots of tows and being sort of standby on the rigs.

The old *Tasman Hauler* – we worked with her with the oil rigs, and different tows. She was a big vessel, but quite useless. She didn’t have much bollard pull and not much manoevrability. It was 150 ft long, single propeller – you know, you needed half the ocean to turn her. But that was how tugs were then, whereas now you’ve got these little round things with all sorts of power – seventy tonne bollard pull, whereas she was at best 25 tonnes bollard pull. There was no comparison, really.*

* To determine the bollard pull of a tug, you put a line on a bollard ashore, and you have to “tow” it for twenty minutes at maximum speed, then you take a measurement with a device that measures the pull that you’ve got. Most tugs are judged on their bollard pull. BB)

We did a tow with her down to a place called Black Rock just outside the entrance to the rip at Port Phillip Bay for a sewerage job. We towed the *Gumai* down there with the big crane barge, and we were just north of the oil rigs when an 80 knots blow came through, and though under tow we never moved for about three days. The forces involved were terrific. We’d elongated the 75 tonne SWL shackles. We’d just made them flat. There was even seaweed up on the crane. It keeps us in awe of the power of nature. We claim that nature teaches us a lesson if we start to get complacent.

On a few occasions we've had the Symphony Orchestra from the University on my barge. We steam around with the orchestra on board where all the people are around the harbour. I tend to win all these volunteer jobs in Newcastle. They use my barge for firecracker nights, too, and things like that. And best of all, I'm working with good people – nice people.



Splicing

I learned to splice when I was a kid. You've got to know what you're doing, especially with wire splicing. That's pretty much a dead art now. Not many people do it. These days they use all sorts of techniques other than splicing because it's pretty hard yakka, you know. As I mentioned earlier, I did some splicing down south – this was when they first came out with non-rotating rope. There were twenty-something strands outside and twelve strands inside, I think, twisted in certain ways so that the rope doesn't rotate or spin. That was for a crane job in Whyalla shipyards. I had a go at it, and it was quite successful, but again we moved on to use many other ways of joining them together – hambones, they call 'em, and they're much simpler than splicing.

I learned to splice before I went to sea. Tug Wilson was a 22 stone man with tats from top to bottom. When I was a deckboy, (which is the lowest form of marine life), he asked me if I could splice. I said I could, and he let me have it with a backhander. Then he asked me again if I could splice, and this time I said I couldn't, and he said. "OK. Then I'll teach you." And he was the worst splicer that I've come across. When I got back into Newcastle, my father came aboard and Tug told him that he'd taught me how to splice. I'm behind him shaking my head at my old man, who woke up to what had happened and didn't say anything.

After I'd been there a while I was allowed to go aloft. Tug asked me if I had a knife, and I told him that I hadn't. He said I couldn't go aloft without a knife, so he gave me his belt which had a knife on it. I had to wrap around myself about six times! You need a knife in case you need to cut something, but there's a seaman's saying that if you're stuck up there it's better to cut your throat than starve to death. There's a similar saying among divers: you carry a knife when you're a diver because if you see a shark coming towards you, you stab your mate and swim like hell!

Ropes are still spliced a fair bit though. I used to splice the tow ropes for the oil rigs when we were towing them, but as the oil rigs and the tugs got bigger they went back to chain. I might have mentioned before that you have to have some sort of stretcher on a towline, or it will break, so you need something that will give the line some flexibility. So I made those stretchers a lot, and I still do it for my own vessels when I need to. Initially we had three stranded rope, which was manilla and sisal, and then they brought in the synthetics and we got nylon and polyprop, and eight strand, then twelve strand.

A chap came in with a full coil of this eight inch diameter eight stranded rope, and he asked me to put an eye in it at both ends. I told him that I couldn't do it, as I'd never seen this sort of thing before. So I went into Newcastle where there was a foreign seaman splicing on the wharf, and although we didn't understand one another, I sat with him and learnt from watching what he was doing. Then I wrote to Lloyds of London and I got the instructions for how to do it from them as well, and I still do quite a bit of it these days. We're setting up tows and doing this sort of thing all the time. And of course all our mooring lines have got to be spliced. I've got eight-stranded lines.

I've got an encyclopedia of knots and splicing, and fancy work and rope work as well. It was given to me by the Museum people after I was working with them.

When I was working on the oil rigs I made the stretchers up for the tows, but I also worked with the oil rigs – we did seismic work for them to find out where the rig was to go and I stood by a vessel called the *Diamond M Peacock* while she did the exploration drills down there in Bass Strait. I was also down in Bass Strait when they were putting the rig called *The Bream* together. I've spent a fair bit of time down there, mainly in winter, because nobody wants to work down there then!



That's another of the Shell barges. There were heaps of them. Shell 47 I towed to Cairns for a bloke called Frank Market. He took it up to the gulf and the prawn fisherman used to get their fuel from him, and stores. He carried everything on it. It was quite a good venture for him.



In my spare time I used to build seawalls. This is a big sea wall at The Entrance that I built.

Towing landing craft

I haven't mentioned the landing craft for the army. They were fabricated in Newcastle. Our job was to do the trials on them, and then take 'em to Townsville. There were six of them. I towed one with the other, in one case, but the rest of them were all running free.

They weren't very successful. They were badly designed and weren't very suitable. They cost six million each. They were to go on the *Manoora* and the *Kanimbla*. We did all the trials with

the *Manoora*, mainly, offshore and so-forth, but in the end they never used them. So quite a lot of money went down the drain with all that.



Two at a time towing

Recently we did some trials on a landing barge that went to Tonga. I had to train the Tongans, but it turned out that they actually knew more about it than I did! We had quite a bit of fun with that, but we didn't get the delivery to Tonga, which I wanted. The Australian Government shipped it over. They had built it for the Tongan navy, as a goodwill gesture. But that was very successful, that one. We spent quite a few weeks on the trials.

Babysitting a cable layer

There was a big cable-laying ship called the *Pacific Guardian*, and she was anchored at Narrabeen – just off the shore. She was to lay a cable going to Hawaii. We attended her, and then a big southerly came through. We were there to stop her being blown onto the beach and we looked after her till she could get away. When she'd gone we recovered the anchors that had been used

to hold her offshore. They had come from WA and we took them back to Sydney. We spent about a week minding the cable-layer.



At Narrabeen they sent a line ashore, connected there, and then they choofed off to Hawaii. She carried enough cable to reach there. It was fibre optic cable. We were stuck there for some time looking after her, but it was quite an interesting job.

Another encounter with barges

At one time I bought two Shell barges, that used to run up the Parramatta River from Gore Bay, where the Shell refinery used to be. When that closed down I bought two of them. The idea was for me to run fuel out to Lord Howe Island. I was going to have one there, and keep replacing them. But the contract didn't come off, so I ended up cutting them up for scrap. They'd become a burden to me and I couldn't do anything with 'em. So what I did was to take them down to Port Kembla, where the Harbourmaster was onside, and we dug a big hole in the sand on the beach in the outer harbour. We put them in the hole, then filled the entrance to it in, then we filled the hole full of water, and as the water lifted the barges up we pushed material underneath them until they came out at sand level, and eventually they were high and dry. Then I cut them up. I got most of them cut up by using an excavator with a cutting attachment that ripped them to pieces. It was the scrappy's excavator and he did it for free in return for getting hold of the scrap.



Dog Rescue Team

This was when we were dredging down in Botany Bay, and this is the crew. What happened was, they had a heavy storm down there and the little dog in the photo had been washed down the drain and into the bay. We all chased after it, despite the management going crook on us, and we rescued it. Anyway, apparently it had been under treatment by a vet and the people who owned it were very pleased. The local paper came down and interviewed us and took this photo of the rescue team.

Middle Harbour Sewerage

One job we had with the self-propelled hopper barges was inside Middle Harbour. They had a sewer there that we had to replace with a tunnel running across to Manly. What we were dredging was half sewerage spillage, and Hazel Hawke, Bob's wife then, li



lived nearby, and when we took the full barges out of Pittwater we had to cover them “for aesthetic reasons”, because people didn’t like to look at a barge full of sewage. We had to take it to White Bay and unload it, and then it was transported by road to be dumped somewhere inland.



The *Rottnest*

I bought her in Lake Macquarie over near Belmont. What happened, to go back to Sides Drilling for a moment, they had a jack-up rig that came up out of the water, so to get to the platform so I could get the people on and off I built an addition and covered it with rope. I'd just go straight up to the rig and they jumped on the platform and then came down the ladder.



The *Rottnest* came about because I'd worked everybody else's vessels and the owners were always a problem. When we were studying the sewerage outfalls for the Museum, we were a bit in conflict by the end of it, and I was semi-asked to leave. Then they found that they were in trouble and they said that if I'd get any sort of vessel of my own they would work with me. The *Rottnest* was the only boat I could afford. She looked like a hungry horse – every rib showed!

So we worked the *Rottnest*, and we developed her into a floating scientific laboratory. We collected water, we collected plankton, we collected bottom samples with Shippex, we did trawling, and we did the diving off her, and the current meters and all that. We worked with her from Sydney mainly, or Botany through to Nelsons Bay continuously for about two years. We built our own equipment. As we'd need it, we'd build it, and I always used to enjoy that challenge.

The scientists were interesting people to work with. I had strict rules for diving, for instance, and even now I still get told that I saved their lives on more than one occasion. The chap in charge of the program still rings me regularly on a Sunday, and we solve the world's problems! See, we were diving quite deep – around 90 feet of water, and you can get into trouble very easily.

It was a great study, and I got very involved in what they were doing, and I was learning all sorts of stuff at the same time. I even picked up a few words from them!

The *Rottnest* is still around. It's now called the *Leone*, and it's in Sydney.

The *Sea Rambler*

Later on, when the Museum project had finished, I bought the *Sea Rambler*. I'd come back from Singapore, and I delivered her from Thursday Island to Cairns. I liked it. It was a nice little twin screw vessel. She owed the bank a million dollars, and the bank asked me if I would like to buy her. I said "No way! She's too dear, and she's not worth it." So, later on, they rang me and said that they were into bricks and mortar, and they didn't understand boats, and would I take it off their hands at my price. I ended up paying \$60,000 for it. Then I found out that the

feller who owned it was trying to put one over me, so I went to the bank and said that since it was their money I was borrowing, they'd better come and protect it, which they did. I got a call from Westpac to come and get her, and the very next day John Hollands wanted to buy the *Rottnest* from me for a job at Hay Point which was about two thirds of the way to Cairns. So we took the *Rottnest* to Hay Point, sold it, then went on up to Cairns and brought the *Sea Rambler* back. At that time I was working a lot in the lake. I was building sea walls, moorings – anything to keep going, you know. Then I bought a barge which I called the *Pulbah*, and all that kept me going.



Sea Rambler under refurbishment

The manager of WestHam dredging had been yachting around the lake when the wife and I were knocking rust off the barge – chipping it. He saw us and came ashore to ask us if we owned the *Sea Rambler*, and when I told him I did, he asked me how I felt about using it as a survey vessel. He was Dutch, and I told him that I wasn't too keen on working with Dutch people, because I'd been doing so and wasn't impressed. He asked me what I would charge, and I gave him a figure, but I didn't think

either of us were taking the negotiations very seriously. The next thing I get a call from one of his project managers: “Where’s the *Sea Rambler*”. I said “In the lake”. “You were supposed to start here today. Where is it?” So that was how the job started. I lobbed up in Newcastle with the *Sea Rambler*, and we became the survey boat for the harbour deepening project. We spent the next 40 years working for them, on and off.



Sea Rambler moored at Dora Creek

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Accommodation

Forecastle - for 6 Persons

I guess I find Dutch people a bit remote. They haven't got a please, thankyou, or beg your pardon in their language. I found them a bit hard to get on with in the first place, but I learned how to live with that. But the people I actually worked with were quite different. I'd worked with them in Singapore and other places, and we had a great relationship.

The *Karra Line*

The other boat that I owned, the *Karra Line*... I needed another vessel to back me up on the harbour tunnel, so I bought the *Karra Line* in Fremantle. I was going to bring it over, because we had a break in the work on the harbour tunnel – I think it was in the period in between the dredging and bringing in the sections of the actual tunnel. Just after I'd bought the *Karra Line* and was ready to bring it over east, a job came up in Bunbury that called for a vessel such as the *Karra Line*, and so I used her to do this job. It was ideal for that job. We were working two shifts, and I had a skipper who was a really good bloke, and when the harbour tunnel job came good again I left him there to look after the *Karra Line* for the rest of that job over there. Then I got her road transported from Bunbury over to here. It would have been a sight coming across the Nullabor. They certainly blew a lot of tyres! They weren't tickled pink when they got here because they'd given me a fixed price, and they'd had lots of setbacks and they weren't exactly happy.



The Karra Line

When I bought her the dredging company got a contract over there. It was during the harbour deepening, and when the brake was on the harbour deepening I went to the West to Bunbury and worked the *Karra Line*, and she was very successful. I brought her back over here, and I used her here for a long time. I had her and the *Sea Rambler* at the same time. This was before I'd bought the *Betts Bay*.

The *Betts Bay*

Now, as to the *Betts Bay*: Harbour and Lighterage were a big show in Sydney – tugs and barges – and they were selling off all their equipment. While I'd been delivering out of Ballina they'd been building the *Betts Bay*, so I knew it very well. I went to the auction, but I didn't go there with the intention of buying the *Betts Bay*. I was after bits and pieces that might be of use to me. Older ships were going for \$300,000, so I was just standing back. But when the *Betts Bay* came up, for some reason the people who were going to buy all these were talking. When the



Betts Bay, just bought.

bidding got to 150,000 I put my hand up, because I did have that much squirreled away, but no more. Anyway, the auctioneer knocked it down to me, and the other buyers screamed their heads off. They asked me if I knew the auctioneer, and I replied that I didn't. Anyway, the auctioneer's word was final, and that's how I got it. I don't know why, and I don't know how I got it, but at the same auction a spare gearbox came up, and they said I ought to buy it, but I had to tell them that I couldn't, because I literally didn't have the money. A lot of luck, I suppose.

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Powered by 2 x 190 H.P. G.M. - 5 to 1 Reduction through Twin Disc. Gearboxes
Australian Registered Vessel - No. 375119.
Survey: M.S.B. - Coast Trade off the NSW Coast - No. 16818. - Commonwealth Survey.
Bollard Pull: Approx. 6½ Ton.
Survey for 6 Persons - 12 Passengers.
Survey Certificates held: U.S.L. - 2B - 2D.
Tow Winch.
Fuel capacity: 20 Tons.
Accommodation: 5 Persons.

Safety Equipment:

R.D.F. Liferaft - Karley float - Lifejackets.
Magnetic Compass.
Sounder.
Radios: V.H.F. - H.F. Codan.
G.P.S.
12 Volt - 24 Volt - 240 Volt.
E.P.I.R.B. MSB standard.
Radar: Goldstar Daylight.
Auto Pilot - Coursemaster.
15 Lifejackets.
16 Man Karley float.
E.P.I.R.B. Commonwealth standard.



One morning I got a call from a mate in Melbourne, who asked me if I had any glad rags that I could kit myself out in. It turned out that I had been awarded the Australian Merchant Navy Service Cross. It was presented to me on January 26th, 2001 -- Australia Day, in the big shed in Newcastle that they use for ceremonies like that these days.

Many of my friends from the Port -- pilots and that sort of people -- that I know in Newcastle, and my family came along and it was quite an occasion. It was a nice feeling to get an award like that and to have your contribution recognised. My good friend Captain Arie Van Ardel nominated me for the award.



Nowadays my business is a reasonably profitable enterprise. I used to put money aside to buy tugs or whatever I needed, but now I've decided that I've got enough in the way of equipment and that, and I'm sitting back a bit, and it has given me the opportunity to help the family a bit. We had nothing when we started, and we've built things up.

I go to work every day, but I'm not forced to. I do it because I enjoy it. I heard a chap say the other day, and I agree with him – and he was an old chap, too – that you should live as though you're going to live forever, because as soon as you say "that's me finished" then it's downhill all the way. You've got to keep going. But I do believe a lot of it is luck. I have to go for medical tests for my Masters ticket – AMSA stuff – and when I go to the doctor he's got a pile of papers about me that goes back 30 years or more – that's how long I've been going to him. But I have to admit that I do threaten him. I say to him "If you knock me back, then I'm afraid that I'd going to have to kill you..." Nonetheless, I do realize that at some stage I'm going to have to stop. But given how long I've been working in a dangerous and debilitating industry, and the fact that I haven't clocked up too many serious injuries – well, that's a matter of luck, too, I think. But then you've got the genes and all the other bits and pieces that contribute to make you who you are, but I do think that you've got to keep your mind active and things like that.

Being in reasonable shape physically helps, too. When I went into hospital to have my gall bladder removed, even though they had to cut me right open and found that it had spilled into my stomach and all that had to be cleaned up, I was still only there for three days.

I also had a lung collapse on me. I worked for three days with it, and finally decided to drive myself to the hospital (which got me into trouble), and again, I was only in there for three days. It seems to me that the fitter you are, the less trouble these things cause.

A lot of people ask me if I ever get really scared during these emergencies, and I always answer "Not till afterwards!" Even in the worst weather conditions I always feel that I'll be OK.

When I go to Newcastle where I know lots of people, and lots of people know me, it's a great feeling. It's like belonging to a really good community of people. That's why I still go there. And there's

so much humour around! We'll be working, and getting the job done, but the people I'm working with are always chiacking each other and making jokes.

It's an odd thing, but seamen are a weird lot – not particularly religious usually, but a bit superstitious and that nonetheless. They have their own thoughts and feelings, and when you're at sea and you've got nothing but endless ocean all around you, you either like it or you accept it, and I reckon that I'm being tested when I get out there and a bloody big sea comes on.

As for being religious, everyone has their own ideas. I'm of the opinion that He's not a bad joker, myself. I think the general image that is put around is wrong, and overall I think that he's not a bad character at all. That's if he's there at all!

I've sailed with people who are deeply religious – and atheists, anything you can think of – and I like the fact that everyone's different. I used to find, in the fo'c'sle when I first went to sea, that we had every kind of person you could imagine – alcoholics, people who had been in gaol... real bad people, and good people – it was a mixture of them, and if you can learn to live with them and accept them, then it's not a bad thing.

APPENDIX ONE

Viney's Perspective



(When Bill was a bit late for one of our recorded talks, I took the opportunity to have a few words with Bill's wife Viney, about how she saw Bill's life. BB).

Viney: Bill was away quite a lot of the time, and we had two children who had to be looked after and educated, and that was what I did. I suppose I didn't have much choice, really. And as well as the two children I had the garden and the house to look after. Bill was really happy to go to sea, so there was no problem there. That's where he wanted to be and he was happy when he was.

Before the children were school age I travelled with Bill all around Australia. We knew we couldn't take them once they were going to school. So we bought a trailer and a big tent, and we learnt to put it up in 20 minutes, and it had a hessian floor right through and everything. We were grey nomads before we

were grey. We saw a lot of Australia, and then when the kids were ready for school it was time to come back.

We built a little house at Mannering park and Bill used to go off to sea from there. He was happy doing what he was doing, and he was good at it, and it wasn't worrying me. He wasn't the sort of man you could hold on to – not that I ever would have tried to hold him – because the sea was always calling to him. He was born to be a seaman, and if he can go to sea he's happy. He could go away knowing that we were safe and secure, you know.

He was always quite happy to talk to me about what was happening at work, and he knew that I would understand what he was talking about.

Before I met Bill I was nursing over at the Psych Hospital, and then I went to Sydney to do general nursing, and Bill would come and visit, and then we got married. He didn't want to give the sea up, and then I was carrying our first child, so I had to give the nursing up. There's no complaint in my saying that, by the way, it's just life, and you take it as it comes.

Besides going to sea, Bill worked a fair bit in power houses, but he hated it. He did the job well, and we got the money, but he'd always rather be at sea. He can turn his hand to just about anything. He's a clever man (and I'm not saying this just because he's my husband), and when they're at sea they have to make-do a fair bit, and he's got a good mind and can think through things, and if he's got a problem he keeps worrying at it till he solves it.

He still leaves for work every morning at 6am, and he comes back home when he's finished what he had to do that day. So he's a man who's happy in his work and knows what he's doing and is happy to do it. He never shirks anything.

APPENDIX TWO

A Family Mystery

(At one stage in our discussions Bill mentioned this family mystery to me, and I decided to include it as an Appendix because (a) it's such a classic sort of maritime mystery for a bloke like Bill to have, and (b) who knows? someone reading about it just might have some information to help solve it. BB.)

Bill: My grandfather was lost at sea. He used to run scows from Auckland and Picton up to the Cook Islands, and to Tonga, and to Samoa. This was during the First World War. He was a Finn. The Germans had taken over Tonga and most of the islands and colonized them. Tonga had quite a lot of Germans, and during WWI some of them were sent to New Zealand, but most of them were confined to the islands, where they could keep going producing copra and that. Because he was exempt from that process my grandfather continued running between the islands and New Zealand.

I have a theory about what might have happened to him. This is just a theory, mind, and I haven't yet got the facts to back it up. He was lost when he was sailing a beautiful yacht which had been built for a doctor in Auckland or Wellington. He just disappeared altogether. I've been to the islands, and even today the communication system there is not good. In those days it was reported that he was lost at sea in the Auckland paper, and in the Sydney paper. All hands were lost, but how they found out about that I can't fathom.

My theory is that he was taking copra to Auckland and selling it, but he was selling it on a "one for you, two for me" basis. The war was about to end, and people were going to wake up to what he had been doing, and in my imagination I think he got this beautiful yacht and decided to just disappear. He had worked in South America some years before, and I picture him in South America, laying back and enjoying himself like Ronnie Biggs.

He had a daughter in New Zealand, and a son in Tonga. When I went over there, I had his will and testament and all his papers. He had left everything to this son in Tonga. As a start, I knew the island he had been living on. It was called Vava'u Island, so I

went there and showed the Assistant Harbour Master the papers I had. Since telephones don't work there very well he got on the VHF and said he had a bloke with him with papers that said he was the grandson of Leander Johnson, and he's trying to find out what happened to his grandfather. Well, as soon as he did that the place closed down on me and nobody would talk to me because they thought that I was there trying to get my hands on the money.

So it took some time to get them to talk, but finally I found out where his house was, and a few other stories associated with him which supported my ideas about what had happened. He must have been good, 'cos for a start he acknowledged all his children and looked after them. So I think he's probably a bit of a hero in my book.

There's a book out called *Germans in Tonga* by a bloke called James Bade, and I wrote away and got a copy because my grandfather is mentioned in it, since he employed quite a few Tongans in his business operations. He created a lot of jobs, but he also must have been pretty tough as well. From what I can gather from my investigations so far he knew the reefs round the islands back to front, and the reef he was supposed to been lost on was only about 30 miles from Foveaux Island. It's odd to have lost all hands, especially since the reports of them all being lost were in the Auckland and Sydney papers within a week.

I'm still intrigued by his story, and whenever I get the chance I do a bit more sleuthing to try to get to the bottom of it -- but I think I've got a fair way to go yet.

Acknowledgements

First of all, my thanks to Bill Johnson for deciding to share his interesting life, and to his wife Viney for her hospitality and helpfulness when I disrupted her domestic routine with my multiple visits to talk to Bill.

Thanks, too, to two very good mates of mine who are also involved with tugboats in the Newcastle region, Kent Shaw and Mark Crosdale. They heard that Bill was looking to tell his story, and, knowing that I am always keen to chronicle the lives of interesting people, put me in touch with Bill – which set the ball rolling. They also provided useful suggestions to improve the text as it developed. This book wouldn't have existed without their involvement.

And, as always, my thanks to my very best mate, Lorraine Banks, who proofread the text, offered useful suggestions, and was her usual helpful self throughout.

B.B.

Related References

There is a YouTube video of Bill and his offsidiers moving huge and unwieldy loads that readers might find interesting. Go to YouTube and enter *Fully Tanked*, to see it.

There is also a copy of the obituary for Bill's good friend Arie Van Andel at www.theherald.com.au/story/1651932/obituary-arie-van-andel/. There were many similarities in Bill and Arie's lives. They were friends for over 40 years.

If you put *Bill Bottomleys Cyberfiles* into Google it will take you to my website. In *Drawer One: Words* there are many more chronicles of people's working lives, as well as several books of NSW Central Coast oral history.

BB

