



Bob Meadows

Born in Woollahra in 1908, Bob grew up at Gilgandra and in Newtown, and became an apprentice pastrycook at the age of fourteen. Just before the outbreak of the second World War he went to sea as a ship's baker. He baked on hospital ships and cargo vessels through the War and had several narrow escapes. After the war he continued at sea on ships ferrying service personnel and others back to Australia. In his fifties Bob left the sea and worked as a gatekeeper on the wharves at Darling Harbour, where he stayed till his retirement in 1972. He currently lives at Gorokan NSW, with his second wife, who he married in 1965 after he came ashore.

My father was a seafaring man but he left the sea through asthma - which is also why they moved to Gilgandra. We lived about five miles out of Gilgandra. I was born in 1908 and I think I was about four years of age when we went there. I went to school when I was about six, I think, and during my school holidays I used to go over to a neighbouring farm which was about three miles away. It was all bullocks in those days, pulling the big old wagons for the wheat and the wool, and my job on the farm was to lead the horse backwards and forwards lifting the wheat bags. As you moved him forwards it lifted a bag of wheat up, and the men were there to stack it. I got a shilling a week for doing that, and my meals. My Dad didn't mind me doing it because that's what you did then - you worked and didn't waste your time. I had three sisters and a brother, which made five kiddies around the house. The girls' job was to feed the fowls and help Dad feed the pigs.

Although Dad had this bit of a property, he also had to do outside work, and he went droving, woodcutting - he was a man of action, my father, an ex-Rugby Union player from New Zealand - he was a very athletic man. You were all

expected to do something. We never had much money, but we had plenty to eat. We had our own pigs.

The 1914 -18 War had come on then, and there were two young German chaps lived near by, but they were never interfered with - they were well-known citizens. They taught my father, and many other people in that area, to make their own bacon, ham and things like that. And they taught Dad how to make the old black sausage, the real black sausage - 'pudding' they called it then. So that was our life.

When I was about eleven or twelve, Dad decided that all the hard work was getting him down. He knew engine rooms, he knew them very well because he had been at sea, though he was a bicycle builder by trade. So he came back to Sydney - again for his health's sake - and he got a job at Sydney Hospital in the engine room, and he was there for 25 years. I had a couple of more years schooling, including about one year at Plunkett Street Woolloomooloo because my grandmother lived there, then we went to Newtown to live. Dad had to live in dry areas. I was never very clever at school - like all kids in those days I was itching to get away. In those days you had to work close to where you lived, because tram and train fares were very expensive and there were no cars yet, though some people had bicycles.

My father had worked out in the open and in the rough all his life, at sea and in the bush, and his idea of what he should do for his boy was to get him work in a place that was out of the weather. A friend of mine left school and got a job in Gartrell White's, a big cake and bread factory about a hundred yards away from where I lived. He came to me one day and told me that they needed another boy there, and before I knew where I was I was apprenticed to pastry cooking and I did five years in that factory and became a pastry cook. It was hard work - night work, Sunday work, anytime they wanted you to work you worked. They moved you about from job to job for you to learn the various aspects of the trade. They had a union, but it wasn't very strong in those days. The pay wasn't very much. I started off on a pound a week and threepence, (what the threepence was for I don't know!). In the second year it went up to one pound eleven and six (or something like that), and in the third year I was a millionaire - I got two pound ten a week! You also got a bit of overtime in such a big factory. If you worked after six o'clock you got two and six tea money. There were five of us apprentices. We all got on well together. We never fought or used fisticuffs amongst us. I had fights with other fellers, other young fellers in the factory - younger pastrycooks and people like that, but never among us apprentices. We sort of stuck together.

I came out of my apprenticeship and I left Gartrell White's and worked for a couple of years around Sydney at different bakehouses, and by the time I was 22 I was married. Also, I was working for some Greeks in Sydney, and they were very good to me. They were very wealthy and owned several big restaurants in the city and this lovely cake shop in Redfern where I was working. I worked for them for about twelve months, and they staked me in a business in Oxford Street which I'd have to pay back to them. But then the Depression set in and the business just went down and down as the Depression grabbed, and in no time I was out of work.

In that Depression you *knew* people were out of work. I look around these days and you don't know who's in work and who's not because they've all got money - they can go up and buy toys for their kiddies, drive cars, they can buy lots of things, or they can surf all day, or they can have a bit of a nice home at a decent

rent. But there was nothing like that then. If you didn't have a pushbike you walked. I knew a chap who used to walk to Sydney every day from Newtown, and that's a fair stretch - two sections in the tram. People walked for miles looking for jobs.

I had a kiddie by this time - it'd be roughly 1931 or 1932. (The Sydney Harbour Bridge had been built and was nearly finished. I saw all that. I was in town the day that de Groot cut the tape - all that.) Anyway, I lost the business - it was a small cake and tea rooms in Oxford Street. I put in for the dole and there was nobody more ashamed than I was - I was humiliated, and there were many young men the same. For the dole I got seventeen and six in coupons - so many for meat, so many for bread, and milk. I don't think we got eggs and butter, though on second thoughts maybe we did get butter. Anyway, it was hard. Everywhere you looked people were out of work - just sitting around. People would do anything for a job of any sort. I tried going out on the last resort of my life - the bottle cart. Our own class of worker would be making fun of my mate and me as we made a little money while they just sat on their tails.

We were allowed to stay in our own homes free of rent - if we looked after it. (Certain types were stripping the places of flooring or anything they could burn or sell.) With no money coming in, the clothes we had were made to last as long as possible. There was a butcher in Oxford Street who auctioned legs of lamb every Saturday morning. The most he ever got was two and six a leg. You could buy a quart of wine for one and ninepence, so we'd have a party, and with the piano going we'd forget our troubles. There always seemed to be a piano in someone's house, and there always seemed to be someone who could play.

(For many years when I was very young there was a man who used to go around The 'Loo and Darlinghurst every Sunday morning, throwing out handfuls of pennies for the kids in the streets. I don't know who he was... but bless him!)

I took a job as an usher in a picture show on Saturday nights for six shillings and the chance of a fight at any moment. Some people used to play up. They'd come in with a bottle of wine hidden in their pocket and start to talk and smoke. It was the old Broadway Theatre in George Street, just down from Grace Brothers. I don't think it's there any more. If the wife came and brought the kiddie she'd still have to pay. It cost a shilling then.

During the Depression I had five pound left in a very old bank in Newtown. I went up to take it out. Now, I can understand people being depressed and going out and doing things they shouldn't do. When I went into the bank there was an old chap there who was putting money into the bank, and he was counting a big stack of it. The bank clerk's back was to us, and I genuinely thought that if I grabbed a handful of that money and ran, that I could have got away with it. Then I thought, "Oh dear, no. I've got a wife and kiddie at home," and also the teller had a big Luger revolver lying near him, and I realised that he could well shoot me with it. Now of course what went through my head I didn't do, but about a fortnight afterwards a man actually did do the same thing in a bank in Mascot. He ran in, grabbed a handful of money, and as he ran out of the door the bank clerk shot him in the back and killed him stone dead. That could have been me. I certainly experienced the temptation.

You see, money really was scarce. One time I found a pound note on some rosebushes at the door of a house I was visiting. The little old Dutch lady who owned the house worked out that it had been dropped by an earlier visitor she

knew to be quite rich, and she told me to keep it. Well, that pound kept my wife and kids for about three weeks. Things like that happened, that brought a bit of pleasure to life, you know. But we were young, then. Something was always going to happen the next day. And everyone was in the same boat.

There were still rich people, but there were a lot of really poor people. I think it was an unfair system in many ways. I'll give you an example: While I was serving my time with Gartrell White's, the Gartrell boys used to work there. They had a wonderful life. They went to college, and at about seventeen or eighteen they were put into Gartrell White's to learn the ropes and they ended up managers. One of them, because he'd been in the militia when he was at college, when the war came on he was made an officer straight away, and he never had to see any active service. But the boys that were called up from that factory - the young pastrycooks - they went into the army, the militia. Some of them came back sadly wounded, and some of them never came back.

The sons worked around the place with us in the early days, and they were nice enough fellers. But they were always the boss' sons. If you played up a little bit, or wanted to pinch a cake and eat it, you never let *them* know. Whether they would have pipped on you or not I don't know, but they were different. They were better educated and they knew what they were going to be in the future. One of the Whites was a bit of a larrikin. He'd say hello to you like he would to any other kid, and if there was a bit of skylarking on then he'd probably be in it. I don't think he wanted to be what they wanted to make him, but he'd have to be or he'd have nothing else. He ended up the manager of one their big bread factories over near Moore Park.

It's hard to explain how they were different - (not that there was anything you could do about it). They weren't you. You were the son of a worker. They might come in and only work three or four hours, then they'd be up in the office, learning about what goes on up there. They were a bit like an apprentice at sea, training to be a mate - he might be a nice man, but he's different to the young ordinary seaman who's serving before the mast. They can be nice fellers, and mix with you, but once they knock off work they go their way. They've got their own mess room, they sleep up near the bridge - because they're trained to be men in charge. A lot of nice fellers amongst them, but they're different.

Anyway, I was out of work for about two years. I had a great friend called Charlie Fitzgerald - he used to work at Gartrell White's. Charlie was a man who'd been dealing all his life, and he was the sort of man that wasn't afraid to have a go at something. The strange thing about him that we found out years later was that he was very highly educated. Anyway, he came to me one day and said, "Bob, you can make meat pies, can't you? What about making a couple of dozen and I'll see how I go selling them?" Several of the factories were still working - IXL Jam and Pick-Me-Up Sauces, they were all round us - the Bradford Cotton Mills and various other places like the fire station and the police station. So I made two dozen pies in my mother's kitchen, put them in a nice basket with a nice white cloth, and away went Charlie. He was back in about an hour and a half. "Bad luck," he said, "nobody wants them." "Oh well," I replied, "we'll all have 'em for lunch." Then he whipped the cloth off the basket and he'd sold the lot! To make a long story short, we were doing that for nearly twelve months. We had the Newtown Fire Station used to come over, the Newtown Police, Bradmill, IXL Jams and others. Charlie was a bit light-fingered like just about everybody else those days, and as he walked out of the jam factory he 'borrowed' a big tin of apple. The next day I made apple pies, and they ate them too.

One day I got to know a certain person and he was in the chocolate business. He told me that Woolworth's were building a big new shop in town with a restaurant on top in Liverpool Street. He said, "I know Mr Christmas (he was the person who had started Woolworth's - Percy Christmas) and I'll give you a letter if you'd like to go and see him." So I went to see Mr Christmas who had started from nothing. He was a very highly-educated man - you've never seen anything like his office, and there's me a little young man walking in there looking for a job. Anyway, he talked to me for some time, then gave me the job, and that's how I started back into work again.

I was there for about 18 months, and as time went on I had my second daughter, and the war was coming on. I decided to go to sea to get away from slaving in a bakery for very little money - about four pound ten a week. When I first went to sea I signed on as a baker. It was just before the war started and I was on passenger ships. You did the pastry and the breads and all that, but you signed on as 1st Baker, 2nd Baker, and so on. I was at sea about five or six months when they made me Chief Baker. You were supposed to be something, then. You started to get all little perks. If you looked after the bakery on behalf of the Chief Steward and saved him a little money, then he'd look after you pretty well.

I hadn't been at sea all that long when the War came, and my life changed altogether. I went away a couple of times during the war on cargo ships as Second Cook. I was never good enough to be a Chief Cook. I saw many things happen and I enjoyed my sea life. I did five years of wartime seafaring, then worked on various ships until I left the sea in 1963. What took me out of it was that containers were coming in, and also aeroplanes were coming in and passenger ships were going out. I don't think we've got any passenger ships left today, anywhere in the world. There are only cruise ships, and they're not passenger ships. Towards the end of my time at sea I was with Burns Philp, and the Macquarie Stevedoring Company offered me a job as a gatekeeper. (They're finished now - they were in No 3 Darling Harbour.) They were wonderful people to work for. They were fair in every way. I was with them for about two years and they sold out to Patrick's - there was a merger. I ended up working for Patrick's for thirteen years, and that's where I retired from. I met my present wife after I left the sea. I think I was about 56 years of age.

Being a baker at sea is different to being in a city bakehouse - a different life altogether. You knew your trade, and you did the right thing - you made your bed properly and did everything properly, then you had the respect of everybody, and the men treated you with respect. You were in charge of four or five men, and you had to control them. Some of them could be nasty if they'd had a bit of booze and wanted a fight. You have to live and sleep around these fellers. I had my own cabin for years, but when you have to live and sleep with these fellers - I could have a terrible row with someone today, over nothing, and the next day we'd be talking and laughing. Because he might have to save my life the next day... No, it was a different life altogether.

The galley staff on a passenger ship took in the cooks, the butchers and the bakers. You had to have the breakfast ready for the passengers at eight o'clock, so you had to start pretty early. The average start on the passenger ships was six o'clock. You rose about half past five, had a cup of tea in the mess room, started work, and when breakfast was served away you washed down the bakehouse

and at half past nine you had an hour or so off. You had your own breakfast, and a rest, and a bit of a wash-up. Then you went back to work because the first sitting for lunch was at twelve o'clock. After lunch was served away you cleaned up a bit then went off to have your lunch in your own mess room and you didn't come back till half past three, when you began to prepare dinner. The first meal was at six o'clock and the second sitting about half an hour later. If the ship was carrying many children, there were stewardesses to look after them, and they ate separately at around half past five.

We'd be out of the galley by seven. We'd have it washed down, then we'd lock up, go and have our bath and clean up. If you were in port and you wanted to go ashore, well you went, or if you stayed on board you'd just sit around, or read books, or if it was nice weather you sat up on the deck of an evening and got a bit of fresh air. We were generally in bed by nine or ten o'clock, anyway.

We worked a ten hour day, which meant we got two hours overtime a day. It depended on your position. The Chief Baker might get an extra hour a day because he had to supervise other people. It was all according to what size ship you were on. Cargo ships were different. They worked slightly different hours because they had to provide the meals for the crew as well. On passenger ships we didn't have to do that, because the crew (the sailors and firemen) had a separate galley and their own cook.

Years ago the food for the ship's personnel was different to what the passengers had - you were only allowed to have certain things. For instance, when I first went to sea you got eggs twice a week - Wednesdays and Sundays you were allowed to have eggs for breakfast. But later on, particularly after the war came things were different, and they brought in what they called the common menu, where whatever the passengers got the seamen got.

It's a tricky life when you're in bad weather. I've seen stuff rolling everywhere. The sea comes up, but you're in no hurry, then all of a sudden a bag of flour flies through the air or something. I've seen a big bag of potatoes go several yards down an alleyway to the flood lock and land in the bakehouse! And of course the water pours through the portholes if they haven't locked them and the water comes into the galley. I've seen the breakfast washed right off on the *Wanganella* on one run to Australia. That was after the war. They had bars you could put on the stove to stop the pots and pans and things from rolling. The stock pot that they make soup in is a huge thing, (eggshells go in that, fish heads - anything that would make a soup) and they got that barred up, but before they did they had a big porridge pot full of hot water, and a steward lost his balance and sat in it. He was lucky it wasn't porridge or he would have scalded himself badly. They hadn't got the portholes closed up properly and five of them went. The carpenter was shoring them up for a long while - till we got to New Zealand. That was very bad. All you could do was, as they say, "one hand for the boss, one hand for the work and one hand for the shipping company".

Now say you had a baked custard on the menu (that'd be one sweet out of five or six), well you wouldn't make baked custard if the weather came up - you'd change it to rice pudding or something like that that didn't splash around. There was a lot to it. We made all sorts of sweets - the bakehouse had to make all kinds. And they do all the flour work for the galley side. If they want steak and kidney pie on the menu, they'd cook the steak and we'd make the crust.

I didn't have to order the provisions. The Chief Steward did that. He goes to each

department. He'd go to the butcher and say: "What have we got in the freezer, Dix?" (Dixie Dean was our butcher). "I've got sixteen carcasses of lamb left, a side of bullock left" (in those days they had to cut up the meat, which they don't do today) and so on, and work it out that way. They always had to ensure that there was a surplus in case of any holdup or something. Then he'd do the same thing with me. Then there's the storeman, who looks after all the apples and jam, and fruit, custard powders and all that. The company carries a *Provedore*. The Chief Steward puts his bill in (we called it a bill) of what he wants, and the *Provedore* gets it. If the ship was kept on the same run, like I was on the New Guinea run, then it's pretty much the same thing all the time.

You had to look after your own washing and ironing, but often you'd get it done when you were in port. They used to come around the ships in port for the laundry and take it away - bootmakers would come around and take your working boots away for repair, or your good shoes. This was with passenger ships - they didn't come around cargo ships much because the crew wasn't big enough.

When I first went to sea some of the cabins, they had nothing in them. We washed our clothes in buckets, there was nowhere set aside to dry them, the rooms were cramped. Amongst the cooks the most I've seen is four men to a cabin, which is pretty crowded, but I've seen the stewards fifteen to twenty men in bunks, one on top of the other. They called it a peak.

Times changed, and unions got stronger. I was usually a delegate on any ship I went to. (This is the Butchers Bakers and Cooks. The Seamans' Union was for able seamen and firemen. Then there was a Stewards' Union.) When modern things like washing machines came out, we asked for one. Oh! You'd think we'd asked for the crown jewels of England! But we eventually we got one allotted to us. Then, once you got one you had to find a room to put it in. I was friendly with the Chief Engineer on one ship I was on. He was always very nice to me. If he had a little party with his wife or anything like that he'd get on the blower: "Bob, I have the wife coming down," and he wouldn't actually ask you to, but you'd send him up another tray of cakes and something for the kids. Anyway, he found me somewhere to put the machine. The marine supervisor of Burns Philp nearly fell down with surprise. He was a big Scotchman. I told him I knew where there was a room for us to put the washing machine, and he said there wasn't a room left anywhere on the ship. "Yes there is," I said. It appears that the chippie, the ship's carpenter, had a room there that he didn't want. One day I was talking to him on deck and he told me about it, and showed it to me. Well the supervising engineer nearly collapsed at the thought of a ship's baker finding a spare room on a ship! It was like it was worth a million dollars!

I was on the *Wanganella* five times. I was on her twice in wartime when she was a hospital ship. I did the last two months of the war when she was a hospital ship. I thought to myself: "Well, this should be a pretty safe journey from now" so I stayed with her. After the war I was on the *Bulolo*. I did the last trip of the war on the *Katoomba*. I was on her earlier in the war, and I was on her the last trip she did to the islands to bring back troops. See, the troops came back according to the time they'd been in New Guinea. The government had control of all the ships at that time. During the war, all those ships had their names painted out, and they had a number.

I worked on the *Wanganella* after the war, too. From memory she must have carried thirty or forty stewards. You couldn't know them all - you'd just say "G'day Bill" sort of thing. You'd have your own mates that you'd mix with. I've worked

with cooks that I couldn't tell you their surname.

In your leisure time on the ship, after you'd done your work, they used to play a lot of cards. I started to play cards and it didn't take me long to wake up that some of those fellers were pretty sharp, believe me - they'd played cards all their lives, because they never had much else. I found out that by the time that trip came to an end I'd lost half my wages, and I was working damned hard, believe me. So I thought this was pretty silly, that I was not up to those standards and never would be, so I cut it out and I never became a card player. But a lot of them, I've seen them sit up the best part of the night playing cards.

I used to write letters to people. I never used to have a radio because most of the ships I was on got out of the range of radio. But each mess room had a ship's radio from the radio office. And I read a lot of books. Most of the ships had a nice little library. There was a steward on a cargo ship I was on after the war called the *Marakula*, which only carried twelve passengers. They'd give you a couple of bottles of beer per day at that time and we all used to save our empty bottles up and give them to this Kevin Tapp. He sold them for fourpence each in New Guinea because they'd built their own brewery there and needed the bottles, and with the money he made a lovely library for the ship. He went ashore in Sydney and got all modern books.

At one stage there, instead of making Sydney her terminal port, she went on to Melbourne. When we got to Sydney Kevin had enough money to hire a TV. He put that in the stewards' mess and we could go round there - the stewards and the cooks mixed together. So we could watch TV from Sydney to Melbourne, and if you didn't want to go ashore in Melbourne you had the TV.

But you didn't mix with the passengers. I've sat in pubs and listened to younger fellers talk, telling their friends about how they danced with this girl and that and did all sorts of other things. When we first started on the *Westralia* to Japan, carrying mainly the wives and children of soldiers who were already up there, there were five hundred ladies on that ship and their children. Not many of them were single, and they were going up to see their husbands. They were very, very well-behaved people. There might have been one or two of them played up - I don't know - because we only saw them in the distance. Later, after I'd become a watchman at Macquarie, a big ship came in called the *Woomera*, and I knew the chief cook on it. Most of the seamen had raced ashore, and I had dinner with him on board. There was a young man there, about 26 or 27 I suppose, I think he was a fireman, and he had about five young seafaring boys around him, and he's telling them all about this ship he was on. I was just the old watchman, I'm just there having my meal beside him at the next table, and he took no notice of me. I can still hear his words today: "Oh, this ship, you've never seen anything like it. The women! Did they play up! I don't know how many times I was up there," (and a bit more description than that, by the way). I let him go on and on till I couldn't restrain myself any longer. "By crikey, old mate," I said, "you must have had a wonderful time on that ship." He hardly deigned to look at me, as if to say, "Who's he?". I said, "What was the name of that ship?" and he said, "The *Westralia*." "Running to Japan?" "Yes, that's right." I knew it alright! Going to Japan with all those women on board! I said, "That's a very strange thing. I was on that ship from the very first trip till it finished up. It was chartered by the British government. It was eight months running out of a place called Trieste in Italy carrying British troops. I don't remember you on that ship. What department were you in?" He said, "Down below." "Well," I said, "I knew all the firemen and engineers because I was there for two and a half years." "Oh, I only did the last

trip.” he says. The last trip we carried about seven soldiers and about four able seamen. (In fact we lost a soldier over the side, poor fellow. Got drowned.) Anyway, he didn’t know what to say. You see, there’s a man telling young people how he used to go up and sleep with the women - and he might have been talking to a soldier whose wife went up on that ship - you don’t know. Even if it was true you wouldn’t say that. Men wouldn’t talk like that.

But we were not allowed to mix with passengers. I’m not saying that some of the stewards, if there was a lady there wanted a little bit of friendship, they might duck in for a while, because they could go up there to clean the rooms and all that. But we weren’t allowed anywhere near, and don’t let anybody tell you any different.

The officers were the same. They had to carry out their duties - they’d go to the dances. Actually they were told to go. The Mate handles it - he’s the working boss. And the Chief Engineer will tell all the younger fellers and they love it. They put their epaulettes on and they love it.

There wasn’t that much contact between us and the officers, though you come in contact with them in different types of work. They know you. (Actually there are no officers in the merchant navy. They’re mates, and the skipper is the ship’s master, he’s not a captain, though you’d call him captain - it’s only natural.) The engineers and the mates had their own mess. They ate in the saloon. The captain comes down and he sits at the table if it’s a passenger ship, and they have their own little saloon if it’s a cargo ship. They all knew me because I’d send them up extra cakes and that if they had a visit from their wives, or got engaged or something. And they’d send me down a couple of bottles of beer.

There have been a couple of my friends that have been skippers, and they’ve been nice men, but they weren’t *all* like that. The older hands - oh, no - they’d hardly say good day to you. But the skipper of the *Wanganella* was a gentleman in any walk of life. He gave a lecture one night when they were over in the Red Sea at Aden. They were waiting there for something to happen - they were going over to Italy to pick up at a place called Taranto. They were in Aden and didn’t know what to do with themselves. They couldn’t go ashore, so someone announced that the skipper was going to give the story of his life. He was 70 years of age, and had been to sea since he was eleven. Out of England. Some people thought that it was going to be boring, but he held them spellbound. He’d even been shanghaied one time and spent eighteen months on a whaler before he could get off it. And I’m sure that man told the truth. He was a wonderful man. Even if you were only on the ship for a couple of months or a year he’d know who you were. He’d always say hello to you where others would just walk by.

I’ll tell you how that man lost his life. He retired and lived at Watson’s Bay. There was a ship being sailed to some part of South America - I just forget where. It was a like a delivery - they call them Run Jobs. And the skipper that was to take it over took sick, so they came out and asked him would he take it, which he did. They hit a reef off Norfolk Island and the ship went down with all hands - straight to the bottom. And that was the end of that man’s life, and he was a lovely man.

Going to sea takes you to lots of places. I went a fair bit around Italy and the Middle East, and Africa and all that. I knew India pretty well -. I was sent from one place to the other by train one time. New Guinea I knew backwards. All up

around the Highlands. Japan. *(Pause)* I've never been to England or America. Five ships going to England I joined and they all went somewhere else at the last minute. The only time I was going to Vancouver I wanted to go, because Dad used to tell me about a place there that I wanted to see. I used to go to the pictures, and the night before I was due to leave I went to see *Gone With The Wind*. When I got home there was a telegram waiting and I knew straight away that I wasn't going. It was a ship called the *Niagara*, and it was a good job I didn't go on it because it struck a mine off New Zealand and went down! You might have heard of her. She was the one that the million in gold went down with. They recovered the gold by bringing out a famous diver from the Royal Navy who went down in a diving bell. It was one of the first times one had been used. I had the pleasure of meeting him later in New Guinea - he was a nice man. He was working on ships that had been sunk all around New Guinea - Japanese ships. The Japanese government hired him to locate these ships for their surveyors, and get them up for scrap iron and all that sort of thing. It was all done with the work of the Australian government.

It's a strange thing, but I never got scared that we might sink for some reason. There were ships sunk not far from me, a couple of air raids... and I never thought about it. Most chaps don't. "It'll never happen to me" sort of thing. We came out of Colombo on a big cargo ship, the *Wyuna*. It was a very big ship carrying bulk wheat to India. There was a ship there - about 15 or 20 thousand tons I suppose - a British ship loaded with lovely young girls belonging to the British Navy. We passed almost under her stern and they were all over waving to us and we're waving back. We went into Bombay first - we were on our way to Karachi. We unloaded something or other in Bombay and I was talking to a British soldier - just idle conversation, about three days after. I mentioned all those girls and asked him where they'd be going to. "I don't know," he said, "but I'll tell you where they are now. On the bottom of the ocean." He said she wouldn't have been an hour out of Colombo and they got her. And very few survivors.

When Mr Curtin brought all our boys of the Ninth Division and the Sixth Division back from the Middle East, well... I was in that convoy. We picked our mob up in Bombay - (they brought them across overland somehow or other), and it was my first experience of that part at that time. We'd just sat down for dinner. It was about six o'clock, just coming on dusk, and that's submarine time - (early in the morning or late in the afternoon because the men on watch can't pick them out so easily because of the glare). Anyway, suddenly Bang! Bang! It was the depth charges being dropped by the destroyers all around us. I knew an AB who was right up on the foc's'le head on watch and he said he saw a torpedo come across our bows and miss us by a whisker. He said he thought it was a porpoise at first. There were no phones. They generally had a man on the flags sending semaphore. They sent up the flags for torpedo attack. It broke up the convoy. Some went down to Madagascar and we went to Mauritius. We were there a week before we got out. The submarines were around, though you couldn't see them, and the destroyers were patrolling up and down.

I had a most interesting week at Mauritius. I picked up a magazine and it had the story of Captain Kidd in it, and Mauritius is where he used to hide. When they did away with slavery the British used to get after him and he'd go in to Mauritius because the French owned it. One day I was walking around the old quay that they had - you could still see the rings where they used to tie their horses up to,

and inside the breakwater there were all these rings where they used to tie their sailing ships up, too.

I reckon that big convoy was Mr Curtin's death. He worried that much, they tell me that he sat up for nearly a week without any sleep, waiting for news of the how the convoy was going. It broke that man's heart to have to bring those men back, but he had to. It saved Australia, till they got the Americans here.

I was in Port Moresby on the *Katoomba* taking troops to Rabaul when Pearl Harbour was bombed. It was Sunday morning and we went into Port Moresby just to take water on. One of the chaps come down off the bridge and told us that Pearl Harbour had been bombed. I guarantee an hour wouldn't have gone past before there was about twenty American cargo ships arrived in Port Moresby - all painting the flag out on the side. So we waited a week and took about 800 people out of New Guinea. You'd never dream that people like that lived in New Guinea. There were people in wheelchairs, people who were mentally handicapped - all sorts. Mothers with little kiddies, babies in arms. Damien Parer, the war photographer, his brother's wife came out with us.

I was night baker at the time, making bread of a night. One night at about one o'clock I hear a lady's voice say, "Is there anybody there?" and I look around and there's a baby in her arms, and she's got the titty bottle. "Could you warm the milk up for me?" Of course I did. But by the time we got to Brisbane I used to have a dozen women - Mrs Parer was one of them - all sitting around me on boxes while I warmed their bottles up for them. They really had no way of doing it themselves because they couldn't even run it under a hot water tap because the water was turned off most of the time because it was wartime. They had a great time, and it was a bit of fun for me too.

I miss the sea. I still miss it. Dad was at sea for many years and his father was a ship's master, but he ended up as a lighthouse keeper.

On the big cargo ship the *Wyuna*, the bosun was a lovely man. Jack Shearer. He was a real bosun, a real seaman, and a good'un. What he didn't know about seamanship... Jock, who was the second cook, and I used to be in the same cabin together, and Jack would come and sit with us. If we happened to get a bottle of beer ashore or something we'd sit and have a drink. One night I asked Jack why he'd never sat for his ticket. He said that he'd had a go six times already, but the navigation always beat him. We were in Bombay, and for some reason I don't remember they took us off that ship, and we were there two or three months. They eventually sent us all home on a little ship called the *Tanda*, but Jack didn't come with us. He'd had a fall and damaged his leg very badly and was in hospital. So Jack came home on the next ship. I forget the name of it, but it was torpedoed right in the middle of the Indian Ocean and there was severe loss of life. Although he was only a passenger Jack took charge of one of the lifeboats. (He had no navigation, remember.) The boat held 40 people. Amongst them was a young Indonesian woman with her two babies. Whichever country she was going to I don't know. Jack knew there was an island that they'd passed that morning and he set sail for that, but by this time it was getting dark and they missed it in the night by about a mile. Jack Shearer sailed that whaleboat and he had them singing, he had them praying, he had them doing everything. He rostered the water, he rostered the food, and he sailed 1800 miles to the coast of South Africa! He didn't know himself where he was, and there was a heavy surf running and they'd just about had it. Jack took the Indonesian mother and the two kiddies, and the others took care of themselves and everybody got ashore,

except that Jack lost one of the kiddies. He had the mother under one arm and the two kiddies under the other. The kiddie was alive when they finally did get it ashore but it died soon after. For that he got the British Empire Medal. What a man! He comes from Newcastle. I don't know whether he's still alive or not.

And that ship that we came home on, the *Tanda*, we had our own convoy. One night there was a light, and when he saw it the skipper turned the ship around and headed back. We were only passengers, but we were all up on deck. The ship carried an Indonesian crew - Indonesian and Chinese, and Lascars down below. Someone said that the skipper shouldn't have gone back because it was against all regulations in wartime. "Well," he said, "yes, all you blokes are seafaring men that I'm taking home, and I've been at sea all my life and I thought it might have been a seaman. I thought it might have been one of our mates - or somebody." It turned out to be nothing - just a light on a raft. They got it on it's next trip, that little ship - the Japs. The two radio men on it used to sit up in the radio room talking. They were there when the torpedo hit. There were seven Lascars down in the engine room. And there was an old lady coming back who wasn't able to help them help her get out and they had to leave and she went down.

While we were in Bombay on the *Katoomba*, (Bombay is like a series of locks) there was a big cargo ship alongside of us. It must have been five or six hours before all the troops were lined up and got on board, and then we sailed. Well we wouldn't have been fifty miles to sea when that cargo ship caught fire down in the hold. I read about it after. The skipper thought he could put it out but it got away from him. The first fire engine that got there was blown to pieces. The second fire engine that got there was blown to pieces, together with half the docks around Bombay. The cargo ship turned out to be full of ammunition.

I was on the *Bulolo* when its cargo of copra caught fire. This is after the war when they used to bring a lot of copra back. When they used to unload the copra onto the wharves they always covered it up and they had a watchman guarding it at all times. Nobody was allowed to smoke near it and if it looked like rain they'd cover it with a tarpaulin. The copra caught fire and they couldn't put it out. They poured tons and tons of that foam onto it. We were all ordered ashore bar the engine room staff and the able seamen. It ended up they took it over to Kerosene Bay, over there near Luna Park there somewhere and they sunk the bow to put it out. The water went all through the saloon - even our cabin got water in it. She was three months laid up. They never found to this day what caused it. Somebody said the wharf labourers were smoking, but the wharf labourers didn't work Saturdays and weren't there. The engineer said it was spontaneous, but nobody knows really.

People sometimes ask me about homosexuality amongst men at sea. There were homosexual men on many ships - particularly on passenger ships. At the same time, I must admit that they never interfered with the rest of the crew - unless you were that way inclined. They worked very well, and they were well thought of by the passengers - particularly the women, because they weren't interested in the ladies and could be cleaning up and that in their cabins and be no threat to them. They were pretty good fellers, really. Most of them were pretty good musicians. If there was a bit of fun going on, usually it'd be some of them playing the music. Some of them on the *Bulolo* even started up a dancing class.

I never had anything against them. I never saw one get the sack for playing up or anything like that. They were accepted. I can't remember seeing any of them

picked on or victimised or anything like that. Someone might call someone a poofter if he came back aboard a bit drunk or something, but it was forgotten the next minute. I certainly never saw them bashed up or anything like that on the ships, the way it happens ashore. Anyway, many of them could look after themselves. I heard of one instance ashore when a big wharf-labourer insulted a passing homosexual who promptly knocked him unconscious. Turned out he was a reasonably well-known boxer.

A lot of them were quite openly effeminate in their behaviour. Some even adopted girls' names. There were two on the *Bulolo* who called themselves Michelle and Elsie. They'd go around quite blatantly calling each other Michelle and Elsie, but everybody sort of laughed and didn't see it as offensive. This might be a bit hard to understand for men working in a factory who would probably never have come across this sort of thing, but when you're all living on the same ship, if you were in a shipwreck, that bloke might save your life the next day. I think that's the way they looked at it. I certainly never found them offensive, and I'd see them a lot in the course of my job in the galley. I've met larrikin drunkards who were much more offensive.

But being at sea does put a strain on your family, particularly in wartime when you mightn't get home for five or six months. Ordinary trips in peacetime - say from Sydney to Fremantle - would be three weeks. Then you might only be home for three days and you'd be off again. It's not a good life that way. I'd say nine out of ten of the blokes at sea were married. There's temptation put in front of you - and in front of the wife at home. I read somewhere that there's more divorce among seafaring men than any other occupation, and I quite believe it. You might go ashore somewhere with no intentions of playing up, but one thing leads to another, and the temptations are there, and invariably something happens that leads to divorce, and broken marriages. I went away because I was a bit adventurous, and I always wanted to go to sea. I was 26 when I did. But it meant that I never saw my kiddies grow up. I was home when the first one was born - that was when we had the tea rooms - but not for the others. No, it's not a good life for married men. But when you're doing it you become accustomed to it, and the wives become accustomed to it.

My job as a gatekeeper meant that I had to check the cargo coming in and cargo as it goes out - mainly what goes out. Tally clerks load the trucks in the wharf. One tally clerk might have three trucks to load. If it was a very valuable cargo then they might have the one tally clerk look after only that truck. He puts the cargo in rows - so many cartons in a row and so many high, and the tally clerk generally marks how many in each. I had to check that they were right as the truck went out the gate. Sometimes it was very hard to tell if anything had been pilfered, because if they want to steal a carton of stuff, they know how to stack it, those boys - don't worry about that. I suppose I missed some, but you just did your job honestly and as best you could.

When I started on the wharves it was an eight hour day, and then they brought the thirty five hour week in. The wharf labourers worked a thirty five hour week but we couldn't because we had different jobs to do. A ship might come in a bit late, or a bit early, or something like that. The gatekeeper had to work forty hours, so to even us with the rest they gave us a week off after every five weeks on, if I remember correctly. You got that on full pay to make up for that extra hour you worked every day. Taking it all round, it was an eight hour day, really.

There was night work too. Some ships worked all night. They'd have a shift from 4pm till midnight, then the midnight shift would come on till 8 in the morning. I went permanent after a while, but when I was still casual they had a thing called "The Pickup" which was run by the government. You never went by name - you were given a number. My number was 426 (I can't forget it). You'd be sitting there waiting for the first call and they'd sing out "426, So-and so Company", and they'd tell you where to go to work for that day. But then they mightn't want too many men for an early start, so you might miss out on the 8 o'clock Pickup, in which case you wait for the nine o'clock Pickup. It was an eight hour shift from when you signed on, and that applied to the late shift that started in the evening. A lot of blokes used to like the late shift because they got paid time and a half and double time.

I did a fair bit of night work at the beginning, but when I went to Macquarie Stevedoring as a gatekeeper I didn't do much - sometimes they might ask me would I stay back if a ship was running late or something like that. They were a very very good firm, Macquarie. They never dickered with you over the hours you worked. They were honest to you and you were honest to them.

Now the wharf labourer had a bad name. The tally clerk had a bad name. There's hundreds of men work on the wharves. There's the Customs men, then there's all the bosses, right from the foreman, the wharf supervisor, the wharf manager, and then the man that owned the place. Now the man that owned Patrick's (I won't mention his name but he ended up with a knighthood from bloody McMahon) he was known to be the biggest one of the lot of them. He worked there as a young man of about 24 and worked his way up from a wharf labourer to be the owner of Patrick's, and with a knighthood. There were men that were supervisors, or wharf managers - the stuff that they got away with, in cartons...! It wasn't seen as actually criminal, it was seen as fair play to beat the insurance companies. Among the ordinary men it was fair play to beat the shipowner, because he was a hard man. The shipowner gave you nothing - especially the seamen.

Now a ship usually has five holds, depending on the size of the ship. Each hold has a team of wharf labourers - there's eleven in a gang. Then there's a foreman in charge of each hold, and say there's four foremen on that ship, then there's a cargo supervisor to supervise the cargo and the loading of that ship and so on. It was very seldom that the labourers associated with the foremen and supervisors. In some cases, perhaps, if you live among them and know them well... I had a great friend who was a foreman, he's retired now, and he wouldn't associate with the men at all. See, the proper name for the wharf labourers' union was the Waterside Workers' Federation which was communistically led by one of the greatest men that Sydney has ever seen - Big Jim Healy. He came out here from England. But those men weren't commos. There's five thousand wharf labourers, and out of that five thousand there might have been two hundred that actually belonged to the Party. I've seen men, when they'd have a big meeting up in town, they'd go home to their wives and families. Only the dyed-in-the-wool fellers used to go to these demonstrations. But my friend Clyde, he hated them. He hated communism, and - although he should have known better - he thought every wharf labourer was a communist. Even today, you've only got to mention wharf labourer to him and he gets angry. He'd no more have a drink with a wharf labourer than fly in the air.

You didn't have to be a wharf labourer before you could become a foremen, though many foremen were. They have taken men who... well, they'd be seamen,

mostly, who understood the loading of ships, and the derricks and all that sort of thing. But the average feller that joins up would be on very easy tasks to start. He'd be just loading for a while - he'd learn to handle the loading of the ships, then he'd learn to handle the derrick, and so on from there. Probably the job where the man had to be most careful was the man who stands on deck when they bring the cargo out of the hold. They bring it up all by handwork - signals. He has to make sure there is nobody under on the wharf, like a stranger walking along, and guide the load on the derrick out of the hold on to the wharf. I'd say he had one of the most responsible jobs. He didn't get paid any loading for this, though. He was still one of the eleven men, and they all got the same pay. If you did that job one day, you might not do it the next - the foreman used to allocate people to jobs. Usually there'd be five men down the hold, two men working the derricks (if there was two derricks working, which there usually is) then more men on the winches - and that's how it went.

There's a fair bit of skill needed to handle a derrick. You've got to know its speed, you've got to be able to swing it around the mast loaded. And the men down below, the wharf labourers - if the ship's not stacked properly, anything in the cargo could move. Some of those men knew as much about loading a ship as the mate or the second mate. The second mate was generally in charge of the loading, and he goes from hold to hold. But the men doing the loading have to know how to stow cargo so nothing will roll, and so on. Years ago, before I moved up here, there was a ship loaded with steel girders. They struck a bit of bad weather, and because the cargo hadn't been loaded properly four girders went right through the side of the ship, and it went down. So everything's got to be stacked and wired down correctly, and wharf labourers have got to know how to do that.

You learn on the job. You might start by barrowing stuff along the wharf to the nets. They're mostly young men when they start - in their early twenties and that. There's a lot of hard physical work involved, and before containers men were often lumping heavy bags all day. Sometimes I used to do a bit of that sort of work - for something to do, see? Other delegates didn't like you doing that. They saw it as wharf labourer's work. One day I was loading rutile. We were at it eight hours a day for seven days. Those bags of rutile were so heavy! It was like lifting bags of salt. Oh boy! Most of the men were pretty fit, though you had those who were put on light duties on account of illness, or because they were getting a bit older. They were inclined to be a bit fatter.

Generally the foremen of the different shipping companies would get to know you. Every shipping company now has its own wharf labourers - they became permanent. That was in my time - around '65 or '67 I think it was. There was tons of work then. The company might have five or six ships in, and they might say they wanted three hundred wharf labourers and only be able to get two hundred. They fought tooth and nail, there were big meetings at the Stadium and all that, and they decided to become permanent. Then, when container ships came in they had all these wharf labourers on their hands. So in came the golden handshake.

Say a man was 60, and due to retire at 65. They'd come to him and offer him the top of the wages that he would have earned in that five years. I've heard of some blokes getting sixty, seventy thousand - and some got up to over a hundred thousand I believe. I knew some of them personally. They were offered the money to finish up because they were just sitting around doing nothing because of the containers. As a result there are not many wharf labourers today left on the

waterfront.

And of course with containers and less wharf labourers, the amount of stuff pilfered went down. I've seen a wharf labourer walking out with his lunch bag, and at the gate there could be the police, there could be the pillage squad (that's the plain clothes police), then what we used to call the cargo controllers, who were men employed by insurance companies who were often more severe than the police. They'd all be at the gate, so what could a wharf labourer do? He might nick a couple of screwdrivers, or have a couple of tins of sardines planted in his pocket, but that's about all he could get.

I believe that at one time there was a gang that got into it pretty seriously, paid off the wharf police and that, but I didn't experience any of that - because it was before my time. No, the wharf labourers didn't get much, but the top men...! I became very friendly with one of the top men at Patrick's. He was a supervisor and he might be doing six ships at once. He'd be here for an hour, there for another hour. He often used to pull up and suggest we take a lottery ticket together. I was supposed to look into his car and check it out and everything, you know, but I'd have been looking for a job if I did. So we'd get a lottery ticket. All of a sudden he disappeared. We hadn't heard what had happened to him. Apparently a big machine worth two thousand pounds disappeared off the wharf - I forget what sort of machine it was. Now Reggie Reid was the top man at Patrick's at the time and he loved men who had been ex-fighters, footballers - anyone like that, and I believe he stuck to this bloke. They'd been looking for this machine for months, and finally found it in this bloke's home - but Reid stuck to this bloke and helped him out. But he never worked around Sydney again. I think he went to South Australia to work at Whyalla.

There's all types on the wharves. They used to take me off the gate and let me work in the shed at night if I wanted overtime. We were on a midnight start there one time, and there was a chap there - a fine style of a feller - and he was telling the blokes all about the local actors and actresses, what they're like personally and all that. I asked one of the chaps listening how he knew all this, and he told me that he was an actor - a stage actor. But he was only a character actor which meant he often didn't get enough acting work, so he had to come and work on the wharves from time to time. Another time we were having lunch and the bloke sitting on his forklift began to sing. He had a beautiful what I call an Irish voice. I was talking to him after and he told me, "I've had three trips around the world, Bob, out of my voice. I go to weddings and sing, and to people's homes and parties, but I never get on concerts and things like that." There were ex-boxers, ex-footballers. Some funny characters.

There was one bloke there, The Rockspider. He was a Maltese - getting on in years, too. As soon as he got down in the hold, nothing would make him do any work. And of course there's the old unwritten Australian law that you never put anybody in. He'd just sit there on a case. That's why he got the name The Rockspider. At that time they had just put in all new toilets and amenities around the wharves, and all the locks started to disappear off the doors of the toilets. We used to have old wooden sinks, but now the new ones started to disappear. A wharf labourer walked up to the toilet one day and he heard a bit of grunting and groaning, and there's The Rockspider unscrewing the seat - one of their own, a wharf labourer! This chap told him to screw it back on or he'd put him in, but The Rockspider's answer was: "You're a wharf labourer like me." He knew he wouldn't get put in. In the end they found out he owned about eighteen cottages around Coogee, and this is where all this stuff was going.

There were all sorts of nicknames. The Pig was a tally clerk. He walked up the wharves and he looked for all the world like a pig, so that's how he got his name. I can't remember them all but there were all sorts of names. One of the head watchmen was called Perry Mason because he never lost a case. I didn't have a nickname. I was just Bob. I don't think I ever did anything outstanding to earn one. *(Laughs)*. My cousin was called The Brolga. He was about six foot tall and had very skinny legs - he was a winch driver mostly. One day he walked down the wharf with shorts on, a bit baggy, and one of the wharf labourers said: "Crikey! Look at the brolga coming along the wharf!" It stuck to him all his life.

A lot of politics was talked, in the mess room and places like that. But you had to be very careful what you said. Unionism was very strong. There were two blokes having an argument one night about scabs, and this young feller says (and I know what he was getting at when he said it), "in one way I admire a scab, because he's got to have a lot of guts to be a scab." (Everybody hated scabs. I've seen a scab nearly kicked to death alongside me in a hotel. It was terrible. He was man of nearly seventy, and the blood spurted all over my clothes and everything!) Anyway, some of the other blokes there took his remark the wrong way, (I also think that they mightn't have liked him much, either). They reported him to the union as being in favour of scabs and he had to go up before a committee of the union and explain what he meant (which they accepted).

I've worked with men that were communists. Three of them. (I'm talking about members of the Party, not some bloke spouting about nothing). I liked them. They were good blokes. At the time Menzies was in power and he was running them down, saying that the country was going to be ruined by communists, and in the actual Party at the time I think there were only about 150! Not many more - or so I understand. To Menzies every seaman was a communist, every wharf labourer was a communist, and every miner was a communist. Yet he was selling iron ore to the Japs when the war started!

When I first started on the ships the conditions were pretty rough, and many of the improvements were won by the unions. But I think wartime made things better, too. Most of our ships were built to run around the coast and over to New Zealand or Tassie in cool weather, but when they ran into the tropics with thousands of troops on board, and every porthole was locked as soon as sundown came and the whole ship was blacked out, they had to provide some decent conditions for them - which they did.

Taken overall, I've enjoyed my working life. I've had my ups and downs, and I've had a lot of pleasures. And I've met a lovely lot of people, too, through the work I did.

(Recorded May 30 and June 6, 1995.)

(Bob supplied the following list of ships that he has sailed on):

<i>BULOLO</i>	1950, 1951,1952,1954,1957,1958.
<i>JAMES COOK</i>	1943.
<i>KANIMBLA</i>	1953
<i>KATOOMBA</i>	1941,1942,1943,1946.
<i>MALEKULA</i>	1953,1954,1955,1959,1960,1961,1962,1963.
<i>MANUNDA</i>	1949
<i>MORINDA</i>	1946
<i>WAIRUNGA</i>	1943
<i>WANGANELLA</i>	1944,1954,1951,1953,1959.
<i>WESTRALIA</i>	1948,1949.
<i>ZEALANDIA</i>	1940,1941.
