

In 1967 following the "Woodward Conference" permanent employment was introduced on the Australian waterfront. This provided for a minimum weekly wage for regular waterside workers in major ports and reduced the retirement age from 70 to 65. A majority of employees would now be directly employed by the shipping companies with the remainder by the "Stevedoring Employers of Australia Ltd." (SEAL) The employers were now responsible for rostering and allocating work.

Vic Williams

Tiger And The Convicts

Tiger treated documents like snakes, with caution but no reverence.

"There's a trap in it somewhere," he said, lifting the form up by one corner as if to look at it through the light.

"Straight forward," said Burglar, at the next chair. "Just down the line. Put Adelaide Stevedoring at the bottom of the list, and you'll dodge them- and their bloody Borneo logs."

"Bit like voting," said Wandi, from the other side of the table. "Except you don't get fined \$2 if you don't put it in."

"But the officials said we had to fill it all in, put our preferences for the companies - as if we wanted any of them," said Burglar. "Wish we could vote to stay as we were in one pool."

"That's the agreement, all or nothing," chipped in the Quiz Kid from the end of the table.

"We get the guaranteed wage - over \$50 even if we don't lift a finger, and they get the labour spread around the companies. Can't have one without the other. That's the agreement, that's the little green book."

"There must be a trap," said Tiger, turning the form over to look at the back.

"Well, it won't catch me," said Burglar. "I've put Adelaide Stevedoring last."

"Need a dingo trap to catch you," said Tiger, settling down to the heavy job of writing his preferences.

"Adelaide last."

"Adelaide last," echoed the table.

Two days later Tiger and Wandi stood in front of the lists. "Can't believe it. Must be a misprint -my number's up for Adelaide Stevedoring."

"So's mine," said Wandi. "And I put it last to make sure I missed it - freezers, Borneo logs, wool, not for mine. Burglar's here too, and the Quiz Kid. They must have been reading the forms upside down - Chinese style."

"That's cross-wise," said Wandi.

"Reading I mean. Here's Burglar. Hey, seen this?"

Tiger pointed. Burglar nodded.

"I sure have. Been down to the Union office. They said Adelaide wanted a hundred and fifty downholders. They only got five for a start, so they took the preferences, right down to the bottom of the pack, and they got all of us."

"What about those who didn't fill in a form?" asked Wandi.

"Free as air," said Burglar. "We've been conned into it! Come on, up to the Union office and we'll fix this!" And Tiger led the way. But at the office the lists, the forms were put before them.

"Couldn't be any other way, Tiger," they assured him. "They had to get the last eighty from the last preferences. You were the last card in the pack. There it is in black and white; you can't get away from it."

"Words! I can bring down words and birds when they are on the wing - but once they're written I'm beaten. A bloody fence would never keep me in a paddock, but now I'm trapped with two words on a piece of paper. Come on Burglar, let's have a drink. We won't have time after the Company, gets us."

That was nearly true. Adelaide Stevedoring averaged its two or three ships in port, and with enough of their own men to cover the gangs needed for the day, evening and midnight shifts, they worked continuously. They had to be employed first by the Company. The old Sunday roster, that had previously spread the Sunday work at double time and a half evenly among the men, no longer applied. For three months they worked six and seven days a week. The other companies were slack part of the time; the SEALS, the pool of spares not in any company, to be used anywhere when companies had used up all of their own men, were often idle up to two and three days a week. Weekend work very seldom came their way; they were paid the flat rate for the five weekdays.

"Oh Seals are Seals and we are the bulls, and never the twain shall meet," said the Quiz Kid to Tiger and Burglar as they went into the usual waterhole on a Wednesday after work. But he was wrong; there were quite a few Seals in the bar when they walked in.

"Here are the arse-licking brown tongues," the Duchess sneered. "Give us a pound Tiger. You've got all the money and no time to spend it!" For him a dollar was still five bob; he wasn't one to acknowledge or welcome change - unless it was someone else's on the bar.

"Work for it Duchess," said Tiger and then ignored him. But the Duchess wasn't going to be ignored. He was a big man, a deckhand, with the habit of stripping down to his shorts on hot days. Someone had seen Dobell's painting and had named him "The Duchess Disrobes"; because of the similarity of build and the stripping habit the name stuck, although, or perhaps because, the Duchess didn't like it.

"How can we when you brown tongues pinch all the cream? We don't get an hour of premium shifts. You forget all about the roster when it suits you, you mangy cat!"

"Roster? You were one of the bulls what bucked against the roster when it first came in. You're nothing but a howling dingo, Duchess!"

Duchess moved in and swung at Tiger. Tiger blocked the punch and hit the Duchess on the chest. But before it went any further the men close by grabbed the both and pulled them apart without much trouble for neither wanted a fight to a finish.

"It's not the first of fights about this set-up," said Burglar.

"I don't like it at all," said Tiger. "One part of the union fighting another. Not what unions are for. They want their fair share of wages but we want a fair share of idle time."

Splinter, another of the Adelaide men, came in then waving an official looking document. "Does this ring a bell, Tiger?" he asked, and handed it to him.

"Convicts in transportation to Australia on board SS Brimstone." read Tiger wonderingly. "What to do with us?"

"Aren't we as good as convicts on all Adelaide ships and no chance of getting off?" asked Splinter.

"Sure we are," agreed Tiger. "Bakke boat convicts. Here's some of their names - Kingston alias Gordon. Day alias Knight. What's alias mean Quiz Kid? And their mark too?"

"The mark because they couldn't write. Alias means like a nickname." he explained.

"Oh, like Splinter alias Tack, or Quiz Kid alias Enos," asked Tiger.

"Or like Tiger alias -" started Burglar. "Leave it at that," warned Tiger. "Now, Quiz Kid, what about doing something about us as the Bakke boat convicts, and we'll get a list of the nicknames and marks of the Adelaide mob."

Tiger hounded Quiz Kid for two days about the writing, while the collecting of nicknames and the working out of the marks went on, with Burglar, Tiger and Orang Outang doing the editing.

"What mark for Quiz Kid?" asked Burglar.

"Big book open and a big ear sticking out each side." said Tiger.

"What's the mark for Tiger?" asked Burglar.

"Five scratches across your arse," said Tiger.

"Settled," said Orang Outang, looking shrewdly over his glasses.

The verses were finished, list of aliases and marks done. "That'll do," said Tiger. "That'll tell them how we feel about it. If they laugh at us they might cry too."

"Only if they get crying drunk," said Burglar, "Like the Duchess did after you left him."

Quiz Kid was serious. "I can get a stencil cut and run off -five hundred would be a ream - cost about \$2." "Right," said Tiger. "Now, Burglar, you go up the bar that way -get. two bob or a dollar from our blokes. Orang, you do the other side."

The next day Quiz Kid brought the ream to Tiger on the job. "Good enough," said Tiger. "Good enough. Now to get it around the port, the main water holes and the union and the company office. I'll do the Railway at dinnertime." And the leaflet was launched.

THE BAKKEBOAT CONVICTS.

We are the Bakkeboat convicts,
Chain gangs from ship to ship.
We might have still been sealing
But we missed the lucky dip.

Now we are freezer snowmen
So cold we croak like frogs.
We slide like half-drunk monkeys
Along the Borneo logs.

And when the port is empty
And every pub is full,
There's one ship in the harbour;
We're winging up the wool.

We thought we'd earned a breather;
We asked for idle time
But we were told "You're convicts'
You're sweating out your time!"

So day by day they work us,
The old, the lame, the lags.
We tried to beat the whistle
But there's one more sling of bags.

But our jailers aren't so wicked
When we groan and limp and couch,
They take the legirons off us _
"You can have the Sunday off!"

We are the Bakke boat convicts;
We're Kevins's merry men.
And boy, they'll never catch us
If we get free again!

The leaflet went like wildfire. "Want another five hundred at least," Tiger told the Quiz Kid. "It's going well. Mopoke was cutting up about it with his mark being on it - said he was barely game to take it home to his wife. Half a dozen signed their names to it, and took it up to the company office as a reason to get out. It's done some good. It's one way of telling them the set-up is crook. It's softening up the enemy, but what do we do next? Have you got an answer in your books?" "New one on me," said Quiz Kid, "but I'll work on it."

The work eased for a while; the Bakke boat convicts had some time free; the Seals got work with other companies with quite a lot of overtime shifts that gave them more than the guaranteed weekly wage. But then it came again; full weeks of work, evening and midnight shifts for the Adelaide men. A gang of four men were asked to push a big lift into place; they wanted two more men. "Can't get any more men," said the foreman. "You can do that - or else - or you can go home." and he left to see if he could get more men. Skippy said "Hear that? You can go home. Come on, what are you waiting for, he mightn't tell us again." He led them bounding across the deck and along the wharf and away. "Christ," snorted the supervisor, "I'd do better with sheepdogs."

After a full three weeks of it Tiger called a conference of war in the Railway bar. A committeeman was there so they moved around him "What's the committee doing about our idle time? The Seals are getting plenty of it." asked Tiger. "There's nothing in the little green book that says you've got to equalise idle time - only wages." "Which you're not doing. Seals are a long way behind us on points - and that comes from wages. They're getting hungry, even the blowies are in danger," said Quiz Kid. "Well give us time and we'll even that out!" said the committeeman. "How can you put them on our evening and midnight when we've got all the men to cover them, unless you give us some of their idle time and them some of our midnight?" asked Orang Outang. "Federal Office says if you do anything about equalizing idle time you draw the crabs; you could bring redundancy." The committeeman was getting uncomfortable and hurried his drink. "Bullshit," snorted Tiger. "Sharing the idle time can't add to it - unless the Seals turn the ships around faster than we do- and that won't happen!" "You're going against Federation leadership in this," said the committeeman stiffly. We've got to use the little green book." "As arse paper," Tiger' came back. "All right we'll use it. We've got the right to resign, so we'll all do it together and force something." "That would be the last card in the pack," said the committeeman. "Just what they called us at the union office," chipped in Burglar. The committeeman put down his glass. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do." he advised as he left. "We'll do what we want," said Tiger. "Your shout, Quiz."

"If we all resign we've got to each sign a paper," said Orang
"Or put your mark on it. What mark do you use in the jungle?" asked Burglar.
"Chewed nuts - could be yours," Orang's eyes gleamed over his glasses.

They worked out the wording of the resignation and Quiz Kid had the job of getting it typed and roneod. Next day they signed on bales of wool, on hatch covers and rails, in smoke rooms. "Pardon for Convicts" was the password as they signed and some added their mark or made one up. By the second day, Tiger's cubs had rounded up a hundred and forty completed forms. He and his small team took them round to the union office.

"Don't want to go right over your heads," he told them. You won't get anywhere with these," said the committeeman who was at the counter.

"We'll see," said Tiger, "But it's worth a try.
Only cost us half a ream and a hour's drinking time."

The pile of resignations caused a bit of a flurry at the company office. "We'll have to oppose all these. We're not against what you want, we think you deserve it but we don't want to lose our labour, so we must oppose them. It will be a week before your resignations will be heard."

They went back to their jobs the next day; Tiger to his wool, Wandi to groping in his freezer and the Orang Outang perched on Borneo logs and springing from sawdust bag island to sawdust bag. Then, after two days, the incredible rumour, from too authentic a source to be disbelieved, that the management in the main office in Adelaide had told the local office to oppose the resignations with the ultimatum "We want another forty general hands. Give them to us or we'll let that mob of convicts loose on the world." The leaflet had got as far as Adelaide. Then, two days later, a hurried top level meeting in Melbourne of the top brass.

"At our level it would be called panic stations," said Tiger.

"No, it's executive expertise in processing a problem," said Quiz Kid. "The advantage of collective bargaining without coercion."

"What race is that starting in?" asked Wandi. "Is it worth a bet?"

"Don't know," said Tiger, "but it's worth a bet that we'll get something out of this."

There was a special stopwork meeting called before work, the day set for the hearing of the mass resignations. The Branch secretary held up a sheaf of papers to get attention. "We have the documents from the Woodward Conference in Melbourne for your information. Forty more general hands are to be allocated to Adelaide Stevedoring. They will be drawn out in a ballot today. There is a scheme for sharing of idle time, between operational companies and SEAL labour by means of substitute labour. Now, this is not equalisation of idle time as some have been campaigning for. This is sharing, mind you, sharing, though the result maybe the same. Now, the other thing that needs to be done is that the Adelaide Stevedoring men who resigned, be asked to withdraw their resignations now, before the hearing begins, because they are not being opposed and cannot be stopped. Now, can I get something definite on that?"

Tiger looked round at his group, and all the Adelaide men behind them. They laughed and nodded.

"I'll stay with the logs," said Orang Outang.

"I'll stay in the dark in the daytime," said Mopoke.

"O.K.O.K." said Tiger to the meeting. "The convicts have T.V. in their cells, so we'll stay where we are."

Two days later the first substitute labour from Seal took over Tiger's job. The Seal labour was on evening shift and Tiger came down to the job to make sure, or just to gloat. The Duchess was at the winch by the gangway. "Satisfied, Tiger?" he asked.

"Sure am. Had a good day off. Just looking over the temporary convicts. And you?" "Sure am said the Duchess. "At least I'll be floating a bit off the bottom pay day next week." "Well, come and have a drink with me this smoko," said Tiger, "And I'll have one on you next pay day on the strength of this shift."

Signed by his Mark

Tiger
Orang Outang
Quiz Kid alias Enos
Burglar Bill
Captain Kon Tiki alias Wandi (deserted ship)
Wandi (four eyes) alias Broken Spear
Weebo
Eaglebeak alias Anteater
White Leghorn

Mopoke
Karate Kid
Rigor Mortis
Cuddling Skunk
Pedro

Signed by his mark

Goat Rider alias Barb Wire
Logger alias Bones
Morris 1100 (floats on fluid) alias Lion
Rubber Legs
Barney Rubble alias Gravel
Splinter alias Tack
Pumpkins
Skippy
Chicken Bones alias Lindy
DDT alias Dumb Dopy and Tired alias Drive Determination Tenacity

Bakke is a shipping company operating in the port of Freemantle in Western Australia.