

DOWN UNDER and DIRTY

An EXCERPT from DAVID'S DIARY

by David Skillan

Some of the toughest jobs of my life took place in Australia and New Zealand. Thinking of those exotic lands down under gets me reminiscing about the several jobs I had there as a young man—jobs that, like my earlier military service, toughened me up and made me fighting fit.

Life as a jackeroo (odd-job fellow)—repairing fences, mustering cattle, etc., for a few months at Victoria River Downs in Australia's Northern Territory, then and now one of the largest cattle ranches in the world and today taking in paying tourists—was most interesting . . . and relatively easy compared to working as a wharfie (longshoreman) in Wyndham, in northwest Australia. For three weeks I was one of a gang of young men who, in searing 40-degree temperatures, carried and stacked 50-kilo bags of cotton into piles and nets for cranes to lift into waiting freighters bound for different parts of the world. It was so unbearably hot, humid, and exhausting that we had to take “spells” (breaks) every few minutes. We also took daily salt tablets.



Working for three months as a brickie's labourer on a new hotel on Queensland's coast, near the town of Gladstone, was just as tough. Maybe worse. Keeping impatient bricklayers supplied all day with heavy bricks, in sweltering heat, amidst a lot of yelling and shouting, was physically demanding, to say the least. Try wheeling a barrowload of bricks up a sloping, narrow wooden plank and then along a narrow platform 10 feet above the ground, sweating through every pore of your body, without stumbling or falling—for eight or nine hours a day. It required a certain dexterity and expertise one could learn only on the job, and was such hard work that even wearing gloves, my fingers bled so profusely that they had to be bandaged often with heavy-duty tape. I also learned to take it as well as dish it out, but all too often I was on the receiving end. And if—god forbid!—I got behind, there was hell to pay. But the money was pretty good, I slept well at night, and thankfully, on Sundays, our one day off, I could find some relief and escape on an Aussie friend's boat to nearby Heron Island, on the Great Barrier Reef. It was the mid-1960s, and there was no hotel or resort there then. Only the two of us and the wonders of Mother Nature.

Working as a roustabout on New Zealand's magnificent South Island also involved hard physical work. As beefy shearers went about their backbreaking task, my work of dragging struggling sheep to them and lifting heavy bales of wool inside the cavernous sheds was equally backbreaking, as was my job in the fields, where I helped lift and load massive bales of freshly mown hay into waiting trucks. Twelve weeks of apple picking, though extremely monotonous, seemed dead easy by comparison.

I also talked my way into a job as mate on a fishing boat in world-famous Milford Sound. Regrettably, much as I liked the job and the extraordinary scenery, I didn't last long: too seasick. (This was to plague me constantly during my world travels and prove to be my Achilles heel.)

Actually, I enjoyed life in New Zealand so much that I often tell people I would have happily settled there if I hadn't found British Columbia. New Zealand is, in my opinion, the most beautiful country on earth. →