

2.3 Sealing in Bass straight...Promotion

I was on *Cape Barren Island* in *Bass Straight*.

"Don't you come over here," I screamed out.

"I'll get you, you convict scum," he shouted. For some time he had been abusing us and making threatening gestures

I watched this horrible hairy American sealer, and a younger man, over the expanse of the little rock pool. The waves were crashing on the rocks to my right, and the upright cliffs of rock face were to my left. He and the other man had big sealers clubs in their hands. I had a sealers lance with its spike in the end in mine.

He moved into the pool towards me, so I threw the lance. I got him in the right thigh. He was lucky because I slipped a bit as I threw it. *Jimmy* and I had been practicing throwing the lances on the beach.

Anyway he tumbled into the shallow rock pool screaming and cursing. The other man waded into to help him.

"Quick *Tarjack*, follow me," sang out *Jimmy Kelly*.

"Okay *Jimmy*, but he was lucky!" my blood was boiling in rage.

"Hurry over this way so we can get to that beach area in front of us, where I can see some of our mates."

As we stumbled along" Crikey! *Tarjack* that was close, I reckon he was going to bash us up like they did *Mr. Murrell*," *Jimmy* puffed.

"I know, how did they find us? Anyway we should be safe now, there is some of our men and some of the other sealing crews from *Port Jackson*?"

We joined our small group of *Mr. Underwood's* sealing men.

"What happened over there boys?" the fellow acting in charge of the group said.

Jimmy piped up, "We were sneaking up on a couple of seals along the rocks and suddenly the *Americans* stood in front of us and wanted to beat us up."

"Well don't worry we have more sealing men here than they have on their two ships. They have caught a few of our men and accused them of stealing their seals. Our men were beaten up and a few were whipped. That *American Captain Angelo Delano* is a real pirate. We won't let them stay on this island. Anyway the *schooner Governor King* should be here soon, so we can load our catch, and you fellows can return to *Port Jackson*.

It will be great to get of this very barren island. *Jimmy* would resume his apprenticeship with *Mr. Kable* and *Mr. Underwood* where he was learning the *Art or Mistory of a Mariner*, and I would start doing clerical work for *Mr. Underwood*.



Sealing in Bass Strait. A grim, harsh enterprise.

Back in *Sydney* I had to explain all about the journey to *Mr. Underwood*, and his business partner *Mr. Kable*. They had included me on the voyage to the sealing grounds, to observe what went on. I was to learn as much as I could about how the seal killing, skinning, curing and rendering the oil was actually carried out. I had to do this by actually doing all the jobs that were necessary to obtain the cargo. Yuk! What a horrible job. Most of the sealers were very rough men, not well liked in the colony.

I was also to observe the counting of the items of cargo. This was a direct result of my exposing a Timber Merchant thief who was used to overcharging and willfully cheating on the timber deliveries into *Mr. Underwoods* yard. When the day came that I had added the timber up, found it was short, and I exposed him to *Mr. Underwood*, he was not able to lie his way out of being a cheat. From that time on *Mr. Underwood* had me working for *Alfred* in the clerical sides of the business.

It appears that most sealing companies suspected that thievery and robbery was taking place, but the sealing islands were so remote, with extreme rugged conditions including very short supplies of food, they were not able to do much. *Americans* had been found to be terrorizing some of the sealing gangs as well as buying at a cheap price some of the finished stock. That also meant that the *Government* was losing tax money as well. *Robbing the Crown* was a hanging offence.

My Uncle Captain William Reid and Mr. George Bass were the first people to notice that prolific quantity of seals living on the islands in *Bass Strait*. The seal products; skins that were dried into leather for boots shoes and hats, and the seal oil that burned smokeless in oil lamps were sold in *Sydney*. The greater part, were exported to *China* or *India* in Mr. Robert Campbell's ships.

Back in the beginning, when I joined the yard, I did not know, or understand anything that went on in the yard. But gradually over a period of time by observing and asking lots of stupid questions I began to understand what was required to build a boat. Of course I steadily grew bigger and stronger, I seemed to thrive. My observation and questioning also developed, so that eventually I was able to reach where I am today as an adult. A part owner and reporter on the *Australian Newspaper*.

I learn't to keep small fires smoldering ready for use, keep pitch or tar boiling so that I could deliver it in large spoons to the caulker when he called out "*tar jack*."

I fact that's how I got my nickname. In those days lots of fellows were called *Jack* if you couldn't remember his name, and of course the caulkers were in the habit of calling out lots of times for "*tar Jack*." Even today my special friends call me Tarjack.

The colony was getting bigger and expanding not just up to *Parramatta*, but up the *Hawkesbury river* area. North along the coast line, and southwards down the coastline. Lots of areas were being settled in harbor itself. Because roads were very few, boats were needed to take supplies and pick up supplies from these areas. The *Governor's* restriction on the length of the boat being not more than 14 feet to prevent convicts stealing them and escaping meant that a lot more boats were required. The few large ships that were built were under special guard, and were for trading, being anything from 50 to 100 ton burthen. I remember helping work on the *schooner Governor King* that carried me to and from the sealing grounds at *Cape Barren*.

So I learn't more. Use of an adze to shape timber, heat iron rods to join ships ribs, be on the end of large cross cut rip saws, use a palm and needle to shape sails or mend them, use drills, cut tree nails, or if the ship was expensive learn how to use copper nails. I found very interesting, the names of the timber types, where they came from, and where they could be used on a boat. Was it cedar, hard eucalyptus, mangrove or ti tree and so on. Some timber was imported from *England* or *India* for the expensive ships. Some timber like cedar was sent to *India* or *England* for their ship building. *Mr. Campbell's* men always seemed to collecting some of our timber and taking it away, whether for building his ships, someone else's, or exporting to *India* or *England*. I just didn't know.

Needless to say, I was not an expert in many things, but more of a jack of all trades. *Mr. Underwood* especially encouraged me to learn. In fact he arranged for his clerk to teach me how to read a write, and do sums in our spare time during working hours.

We did not have much spare time. We began work at sunup, and stopped for 2 hours at midday, then resumed work until sundown. We had the day off on Sunday's.

Everybody in *Sydney Town* was supposed to grow vegetables to help out with food rations, but there was not much space free that was any good. Anyway, the local Indians and the rats, soon learn't where the good vegetables were.

The clerk's name was *Alfred*, he was a scrivener in *England* but was caught embezzling money, and sentenced to death, but was transported to Sydney for life. We became very good friends. He used to boast to all people in the yard that he was educating me. I soon told him that I wanted to learn, so that I could be as educated as the Officers and rich people. He soon became a very important person in my life. He did more than teach me rudimentary reading, writing and sums, he showed me how to practice and grow the skills