

**AzzopardiJ, Joe Azzopardi, 16 Aug 2002**

(AJ04): That's Choco, we had a carton. See that keg, that's full o'beer. My model A30, havin' a beer along the road.

I got the pump, pumping water into the tanker. That's Burnsy's jeep, that's a Landrover. Dirty water too, that's what we used t'drink. Sesbania I think it was. We were out o'water. I used t'be the cook n'the driver n'the mechanic. Peggy Chapman. She was good out there. She ended up comin' out there, she used t'cook f'the boys.

[Peggy was a nurse at the JC hospital. She married Joe in Innisfail, and died in 1963]

0.50: Inside the van. That's Peggy. That was our quarters up on top there. That's on top of the gooseneck, there's the kerosene fridge, the cupboard there, table. It was a big van, ae. An old army van it was. The stove was up here. We had a bed at the end and one bed on either side. There used t'be me, Bob Lennox, Jumbo, and two other drivers, four or five of us. And Peggy.

1.35: That's Alec Wall's aeroplane. I've had a few rides in that. I used t'go with him in the wet weather delivering mail, he had the mail run. Take it down slow on the station n'drop it.

1.55: That's the workshop. That's Burrows.

2.00: That's an FDE. Jeez I could handle them old FDEs. I could drive them, bloody good old tractor. What motor they had in them? O, Hercules motor. You oughta see all the cable that goes t'operate that bloody scraper.

2.25: That's along the road we stopped t'have breakfast, we camped there overnight. A jeep behind us there. I was drivin' the old Mack. There's a towel on the bonnet, just havin' a bit of a wash on the side o'the road. There's the dozer up on top there, Cletrac. They could pull them bastards, ae.

2.55: We used t'meet'm in the pub at night time. I used t'have a few beers with her. O, she was a touchy sort o'girl. I didn't do much with her. I would've like to.

That's Bob's [girl], that one on the right. I don't know what her name is. Jo I think. The other one [left] she was a local girl. Was there a Champney's there?

3.30: I was diggin' sorghum tanks out there. That's my bedroom there on the toolbox. See m'wireless up on top there? There was two of us used t'go n'do

them. We only had the one tractor n'the one ripper n'one scraper n'we goin' out doin' these sorghum tanks. Then somethin' happened n'it rained n'I was out there for days on m'bloody own, couldn't work, couldn't go anywhere. It was bloody lovely I tell y'. I was startin' t'talk t'myself.

4.15: There's Jumbo and the boy Burrows with the Willys. No beer while we were workin'. Rum we used t'have.

I was born in Innisfail, 1928. I was on cane farms with m'dad. My father had cane farms. From there I worked on steam locos, I had a couple o'years in the army then I ended up in Babinda drivin' timber tractors, dozers up there. That's how I met Jumbo Harris,

“How about comin' t'JC”

“What's in JC”

“I'm workin' f'Max Burns. He can't get drivers out there. All no hoppers. All the plant wants repairin'. How about comin' out there. It's good dough”

I'd gone off the dozers then, I was workin' on farms drivin' tractors.

“It's up t'you but I want t'get a couple o'drivers from here, I'm taking over the plant f'Max Burns.”

That's how I ended up in JC. Jumbo Harris got me out there. 1955 and all of 56, two years. I should never have left there. Old Max didn't want me t'leave.

6.05: I worked for Alec Wall there for a while. I left Max, me and Doug Bowman [confirmed in phone call to Joe]. Doug Bowman used t'work f'Max Burns n'he went with Alec Wall n'he said come with me. It was only a two man show. Good tractor, it was all hydraulic, no cables. It was a DDH. We were only building turkey's nest, weren't building big dams.

6.30: I drove out in a little A30 on m'bloody own. The bitumen road only went to CT. I met old Max Burns,

“What can I'do?”

“Get the plant ready”

Then I started workin' on them bloody Fords. Y'had t'crank'm t'start, had no wiring on'm. I was pretty handy because I'd worked in a Ford garage. I had all

the wires out o'one o'them trucks everything was in a mess. Trucks wouldn't run properly, self starters off'm.

One of the blokes walked in to Max... there was this Joe Pulley [not Bob Pulley but definitely Joe Pulley. Maybe a nickname because he pulled himself], we used t'call him Joe, he was a bit of a... poor bugger, he wasn't the full quid, bit backward, wasn't bad but, y'know, no good givin' him mechanical work t'do.

This bloke went in to Max,

“You oughta see what that Joe's doin' out there. He's wiring all them trucks. He's doin' a beautiful job.”

“What – Joe?”

“No not that Joe, the other Joe you employed”

Max come out n'put me on £35 a week. That was big money those days. Not dollars, pounds. I was only earning up in Innisfail, sometimes only £15 a week. And Max put me on £35 a week. O yeah, big dough. When we were out tanksinking we used t'earn up to £90 a week. That's a lot o'money. We worked seven days a week, bloody twelve hours a day. Night and day. I earnt it. Most of the time I was doin' the cookin', the blokes'd break down at night time or do a rope or the clutch had an oil leak in'm n'they wouldn't work. One of us'd have t'get up n'go out n'repair'm or put ropes through. Y'd just get back t'sleep again n'someone elsed'd breakdown or y'd get up n'cook breakfast for'm. No one wanted t'cook. They were hopeless bastards, ae. Then I'd have t'go n'get a sheep, skin it, cut it, chop it all up. I had t'do all that too. Cart water. Then go n'look f'wood, we had a wood stove – in those days no gas, ae. Plenty o'gidgee wood, that'd burn, ae. Heat.

9.20: I wired'm all up got the generators t'work. Max sent away f'self starters n'we wired'm up. We had'm all runnin'. Push a button, no keys on'em those days. Not them trucks.

We were in town for a month before we got some o'that plant t'move. Jumbo was a good welder. Bob was a diesel fitter. He taught me a lot on diesel motors. I used t'work with Bob. Then we had that Harry Goundry, he used t'help a bit.

Mrs Burns, she had a plant of her own. Harry n'Mrs Burns were partners. N'he had a bloke by the name of Scotty, he was a Scots bloke [Scott wasn't his first name or surname, just a nickname]. The boys didn't want him in their crew. They reckoned he was a lousy Scotsman. But he wasn't. After he moved in with

us they reckoned he was a good bloke.

The government had a sheep station n' we had t' work out there. I know when we went out there, Max told us,

"Don't cheat on this dam."

See, we could cheat a bit. When y' build a dam y' could cheat. When y' diggin' y' hole, y' got y' ground level, flat, see. So y' get the dirt out o' there n' y' put a bank right round the dam. But if y' put the dirt on top o' the bank, you're building it up, y' cheating. That would put a lot o' money in Max Burns' pocket. Instead of makin' the hole deeper, y' building the water table up. And that's all profit. The water table is the level of the dam.

GB: You're tryin' t' build up the level of the dirt on the outside. The owner comes along and he thinks ground level is higher than it really is.

Yeah. If y' done it f' the government, they'll put the theodolite outside n' they'll measure the depth. They'll put a bloke in there with a bloody stick. And they'll come out n' ask how come there's that much difference.

We done it but we were very careful. Y' had t' really roll it n' make it look good, y' know. Y' wouldn't notice it from outside. The cocky wouldn't notice it unless he was around watchin' y', y' know. I got pretty good at it. Y' learn a lot o' these dirty things, y' know.

12.30: Old Evie Douglas. She was a queer old bat. Bloody mad bitch. She bought a new Dodge ute off Max.

I think Toorak was the government station. That's the one we had t' be careful.

13.00: When we were on Sesbania we saw the Min Min light out there. And not too many people have seen it. I have. We were coming home. If we shifted anywhere, with that heat... y' never get into top gear with them trucks, it was always in low gear going across country, nothing was registered, at night time the machines didn't boil, everything got hot, so y' mostly drove all night. One night we were coming from Sesbania, there was me n' Jumbo Harris, I think I was drivin' one Mack, Peggy with me. And this bloody light, Jesus, it stayed there for an hour. It was the Min Min light. We drove all night and that light just stayed there. It comes up, it goes sideways, a dull sort o' light.

14.00: We had three tractors. Two on the scrapers n' one on the ripper. N' we had a little bulldozer t' dig drains out f' the fluming. We always built the dam where

there was a dry creek, so when it rained it filled the dam up. Prior t'building a dam, Max'd go out there, he'd probably spend a couple o'days out on the dam site with a big auger, drilling. sometimes Mad gone halfway through a dam n'struck rock. That was the end o'the dam. Abandon everything and go n'find another site. So before he ever built a dam, Max'd, O, they'd be there f'days with a post hole digger, puttin' pipes on it n'goin' down deeper n'deeper. It was a bastard of a job. I never ever done that, finding there's no rocks in the bottom of the dam. Then he OK'd the dam.

15.00: Pretty well all the same – 22000 yarders.

We'd have two drivers to each machine. Twelve hour shifts. Sometimes y'started at six at night and went right through the night. I tell you it was a bloody long night, specially if it was a cold night, y'd freeze, ae, night time, gloves on, y'had t'have gloves, n'bloody balaclava, bloody wind used t'go through y'. N'durin' the day y'burnt with heat.

Jumbo was a good crack driver, he'd have t'do the batter along the side o'the dam. Sideways he'd cut the batter, make it nice n'smooth. I was learning that.

We'd roll the scrapers sometimes, n'arse over head they'd go.

16.00: I did the cookin'. *Me*. Peggy came after. She was only out there about two or three weeks. During the day we'd have a leg o'roast, potatoes, we had plenty o'mutton, plenty o'bread. Bread'd keep out there. It wouldn't go mouldy. Plenty o'tin stuff.

16.30: I didn't get married out there. I got married in Innisvale. Peggy was only out there two or three weeks working for Max. She didn't stay long it was no place for a woman. Max paid her for lookin' after the men. One o'the blokes objected, said no, he wasn't gonna pay'r, but Max said she's gettin' paid out of your money.

17.00: [Story about camping arrangements in JC]

17.30: He was a funny bloke old Fred. He always had a girl friend, some old rattle bag,

“Why don't y'get married Fred?”

“Ooh, vhat? Get married! Don't have t'buy a dairy farm to have a glass o'milk.”

19.05: That's how he was, old Fred. We used t'call him Groucho

He lived in the back o'the workshop. One day this girlfriend was leavin'... sometimes of a Sunday when the Sunlander come in – it was a big day when the train come in – we'd all go down the station, see the friends come in, who got off. And old Fred's down there... he's a big German bloke with a moustache, and he was puttin' his girlfriend on the train, she stayed about three or four months then he pissed her off,

“Hooray, luv... hoooray”.

Next thing, another one gets off, and old Fred tells us later,

“Phorto finish”.

Fred reckoned it was a photo finish that day. One goin' n'one comin'.

18.30: And that day we put the rattle in his car. He had a Vanguard panel van,

“Ooh, sumtings wrong wit z'car. Make a lot o'funny noises in z'front vheels”

“Alright Fred, just leave'r there. We'll check it out for y' ”

We'd put these ball bearings in his hubcaps n'Fred couldn't work out what was wrong with it.

“We've fixed it Fred”

“Good boys. Vhat I owe you?”

“Carton o'beer n'we'll be right, Fred”

He went n'bought a carton o'beer, the poor bastard, ae. There was nothing wrong with it.

19.20: [Goundry] He was a funny sort of a bloke. Real Pom, yeah. We used t'call him Oilcan Harry. He's always lookin' f'the oil can. He was a machinist on the lathe. He had his own plant with Mrs Burns. He had a big caravan he used t'camp in. He used t'pull it with the Thornycroft. They had a little plant. It was only a small scraper n'they used t'do little turkey's nests. Him n'Scotty worked together.

I should o'stayed there for another year, really, with old Max, but I got married. I told Max I was goin', I was packin' up. It was raining, too, y'couldn't drive, so

we had t'load the car on the back of a train, on a wagon, so I stayed in the car, me n'the missus, I had a dog, n'when I got t'CT I unloaded the car.

20.30: Max was a bloody top bloke. I liked him. He treated me good. Max was a funny sort o'bloke. He was a bloke y'couldn't sit down n'have a yarn to. Talkin' to him he'd be walkin' away from y'. He could never look y'in the face, Max. He wasn't busy, that's how his nature was. He never bothered y'.

21.20: I knew his wife. She was a rough sort of a woman. She didn't muck around, she'd tell you off quick.

21.30: Your old man, he was a foghorn. He was a bit of an arsehole, your dad, I'll tell y'now. I didn't like your old man, he was sort of... waaa! Barry was different, I saw them get into a fist fight once. There was no love lost there. Barry was in the office. Donny was half mechanic n'half blah, blah. He'd come out on the dam n'start blahin' n'takin'over. I never really got on too good with your old man. He used t'come out there n'muck around n'help now and again. He never stayed there long. I christened him the Foghorn, yeah. Aah, aah, blowin' off all the time.

22.25: They had a television there, in 1955, but there was no television station there then. Max bought it from down south. That's the first television I seen in a house. Y'switch it on, nothin' happened.

We used t'have a few barbecues out there. We'd dig a hole with a little dozer n'get a heap o'railway sleepers n'go n'buy a pig from the butcher, light all the sleepers up n'let 'm burn all afternoon, make a gadget at the workshop there n'put the pig on the spit n'turn it round. Every bastard used t'turn up there. It was a big event, that was. We started that off, me and Bob.

I used t'help run the picture show. Me and a bloke by name of Forde. I'd wind the films back when they finished. The light wasn't automatic, you had to keep tuning the arc between two rods. If they got too far away the picture would black out. You looked through a black window n'y'could see the arc, if the rods got too far away you turned a knob t'keep the two rods together.

24.30: The old stinker, he was the leader of'm. He'd bring all the goats back and each goat knew his own pen of a night time.

24.50: There used t'be an old bloke, Nana Baker. Good old bloke, Nana. We burnt his arse one day. He was sleepin' on the verandah of the Nelia pub, n'his pants were down n'he had dags stickin' from his arse, he never used t'wipe his bum. We were all pissed so we got a bit o'grass and we put it near his arse t'burn

it out. Aw, did he get up screamin'.

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