

1. Youth

I was born in Concord West in Sydney's western suburbs on Bastille Day, 14 July 1929, and duly christened Robin Donald Chalmers at Chalmers Presbyterian Church in Chalmers Street, Sydney. My mother, Janet (nee Smith), was a country girl from Grenfell, NSW. Her father was Isaac (Ike) Smith, a friend of Billy Hughes in the early days of the Australian Workers' Union when they both organised for the union, riding bikes around New South Wales for the cause. My father, Robin (Bobby), was born in Wellington, New Zealand, and his father, John ('old Jack' to the family), was born in Scotland. Bobby's mother, Louise (nee Seager), a handsome woman, was born on the Isle of Wight. Her father, an engineer, played a big part in the development of the wharves in Wellington Harbour. Jack's father had a successful cooperage (barrel-making) business in New Zealand, and, according to family legend, a savage fist fight between Jack and his father ended in Jack smashing a prized miniature model ship in a bottle over his father's head. This led to the estrangement for life of Jack and his father. Jack was cut out of the will and successive generations have mourned this fist fight. Jack was a champion cyclist in New Zealand, and when he came to Sydney, he competed in the six-day bike races, sponsored by the notorious John Wren, who built a fortune on illegal starting price (SP) bookmaking in Melbourne, where he bribed coppers and politicians with aplomb (he was later immortalised in the Frank Hardy classic *Power Without Glory*). At the turn of the century, professional bike racing was a popular sport and at one stage the Sydney Cricket Ground had a bike track around its circumference. The African-American champion cyclist Major Douglas was a friend of Jack's and there is a family picture of my father, Bobby, sitting on the athlete's knee. In New Zealand, Jack built, and raced, his own 18-footer skiff on Wellington Harbour—a sport later taken up by his son, John (young Jack), on Sydney Harbour. Before World War I, the family—old Jack, Louise, young Jack, daughter, Leah, and my father, Bobby, the youngest of the tribe—moved to Queensland. Another daughter died when only about five.

Old Jack, Louise and the three children took up a prickly pear selection near Gayndah. Prickly pear from South America had overrun much of Queensland's good farming country and leases were available to those brave enough to take one on the basis that the land be cleared of this noxious weed. A 'peppercorn' secured a lease and the family laboured long hours in the struggle against the pear. They would start burning clumps of it at the bottom of a paddock, working their way up and, by the time they got to the top of the paddock, the burnt pear at the bottom had re-emerged. Prickly pear plants were brought to Australia on the First Fleet when Captain Arthur Phillip collected a number of cochineal insects from Brazil en route to Botany Bay. The red dye derived from

cochineal insects was important to the Western world's clothing industries, and was the dye used for British soldiers' red coats. The cochineal insects fed off the pear, which was also brought from Brazil. Prickly pear began to cause concern from about 1870 and, by 1925, was completely out of control, infesting some 25 million hectares in New South Wales and Queensland and spreading at the rate of 250 000 ha a year. Finally, the answer came with the cactoblastis moth, which biologically controlled and stopped the amazing spread of prickly pear in eastern Australia and is still regarded as the outstanding example of such control around the world. Six years after the release of the moth, most of the original thick stands of pear were gone and properties previously abandoned were reclaimed and brought back into production, but this was far too late for the Chalmers family; old Jack had finally given up and moved to Sydney well before World War I.

When World War I broke out, young Jack enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) and sailed for Egypt, where most of the AIF trained before heading for France or Gallipoli. One of the more demanding training regimes was a race to the top of the Great Pyramid of Khufu—the tallest of the pyramids. Young Jack was the first of his battalion to reach the top and he won his division of the battalion's boxing tournament. After Egypt, Jack was a stretcher-bearer in the hell of trench warfare on the Western Front. The stretcher-bearer heroes had the most arduous and dangerous of jobs: going out into 'no-man's land' and bringing back the dead and wounded. Bobby, who was younger than his brother, Jack, enlisted in the war but, fortunately, by the time he reached France, hostilities had ceased.

Jack married Marjorie, an English girl, and brought her back to Sydney to start a family. He and Bobby joined the North Bondi Surf Club and were excellent swimmers. Jack was the Australian champion belt swimmer at one stage and Bobby won the NSW breaststroke championship. Both were involved in separate and heroic episodes of lifesaving, which electrified Australia.

The weather at Coogee Beach on 4 February 1922 was cloudy, with a southerly blowing and the surf choppy; lifesavers from most parts of Sydney had come for a surf carnival. That day, prior to the carnival, young lifesaver Milton Coughlan was body surfing ('shooting the waves', in those days) when suddenly he cried: 'Shark! Shark!' This is a description of the shark attack based on Ray Slattery's *Grab the Belt*, a book about epic Australian rescues. Slattery describes the events at Coogee that day:

Following his warning cry, Coughlan, struck out for the beach but moments later the shark struck, attacking him savagely. It was a terrible fight, Coughlan struggling desperately, while the sea around him developed a widening red stain. Jack ran for the belt, found a reel and

the line all right but the belt was missing. This didn't stop him. Chalmers hastily knotted the line about his waist and ran into the sea while other lifesavers grabbed the reel. The shark kept returning to attack Coughlan whose resistance was waning. The grey shape swirled under water as Jack approached. Reaching the stricken youth he was shocked at what he saw. Coughlan's hands were gone, his arms badly mauled. At this stage, Frank Beaurepaire also from the North Bondi Club, rushed to give the beltman assistance. By then the shark swam parallel to the beach in a gutter a few metres from the shore. According to my father, Beaurepaire waited until the shark swam past him by only a few feet, before he plunged into the gutter and swam out to join Jack. Jack and Beaurepaire yelled and splashed as the shark kept circling its victim. The shark gave them some anxious moments before it turned and swam seaward. Many hands helped the group out of the water and Coughlan was laid on the sand. He was beyond help and died within a few minutes.

Slattery records how the tragedy shocked Australia: 'Jack Chalmers' courageous act fired the public imagination and he became a National hero overnight.' My uncle was awarded the Albert Medal—named after the Consort to Queen Victoria—the highest award for valour available to a civilian. Only a few seasons earlier, the Surf Life Saving Association of Australia had instituted a system of awards to recognise outstanding deeds of valour by its members. The Meritorious Award in Gold was the highest award and, until then, it had not been awarded. Jack Chalmers received the first and Frank Beaurepaire was awarded the second. Sean Brawley has a slightly different account of the rescue.¹ He says the rescue took place from the rocks at the southern end of the beach and that Jack slipped and fell off the rocks several times, lacerating his leg and at one stage dashing his head against a rock, sustaining mild concussion as a consequence. Nevertheless, he staggered on, found the reel had no belt and tied the line around his waist—a dangerous practice as it could tighten and constrict the swimmer. Brawley says when he got to Coughlan, Jack discovered too much line had been paid out and those manning the reel were still hauling in the slack. Instead of being pulled in by the lifesavers on the reel, Jack had to swim in, dragging Coughlan with him. Brawley's account of Beaurepaire assisting after Jack had begun dragging Coughlan towards the beach tallied broadly with other accounts. A Melbournian, Beaurepaire, the Olympian and Australian swimming champion, had spent the summer in Sydney and joined the North Bondi club. The national fund to reward my uncle was supported by the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Brawley says the amount Chalmers received was not known (and I cannot remember my father telling me). Brawley says Beaurepaire received £5000 from the fund and he agrees that, with others, Beaurepaire

¹ Brawley, Sean 2007, *The Bondi Lifesaver: A history of an Australian icon*, ABC Books, Sydney, pp. 103–4.

used this windfall to launch his tyre empire. The Beurepaire business became one of the best known in Australia and its founder was knighted. Beurepaire later became Lord Mayor of Melbourne. According to my father, the fund was entirely in recognition of Jack's bravery and he voluntarily gave Beurepaire a large amount.

The following year (1923) on 18 March, a huge sea was running at Bondi Beach. The beach was closed and my father, Bobby, was playing cards in the North Bondi surf clubhouse with some of his mates. Word came to them that three people had been washed into the sea at Ben Buckler—the northern arm of Bondi Beach. They were standing on a rock, sightseeing, and had misjudged how far they needed to be up from the sea. A monster wave grabbed all three and sucked them into the water. Only one, a youth, was a swimmer and he helped his non-swimming mate to struggle back to the Ben Buckler rock ledge. But the girl, Tui Kirby, only seventeen and a non-swimmer, was well out to sea. Her billowing gown filled with air and kept her afloat. Bobby and a group of lifesavers grabbed a reel with a long line attached to a belt and struggled around towards the Ben Buckler headland. They were buffeted and knocked over by massive waves; some suffered severe cuts and abrasions by the time they reached the rock ledge. They were then ready for someone to go into the sea. That somebody was Bobby. He got into the belt and by some miracle managed to launch himself into the sea during a lull in the waves without being washed back and smashed onto the rocks. But before he had gone far, the line attached to the belt snagged in a cleft in the rocks. Unable to go any further, he let the belt go and soon he was a long way out in a rough sea, in an area where sharks were prevalent and he could not see Kirby.

He looked around and, on the cliffs above Ben Buckler, onlookers were directing him using towels to wave signals, and finally he reached Kirby, who announced, 'I can't swim.' They were in mortal danger. They could not get back onto the rocks at Ben Buckler and Bobby decided the only course was to try to drag Kirby to the beach. This meant that they had to get clear of the Ben Buckler northern headland to get a good run to the beach. Then he would have to deal with the huge waves, when he finally reached the edge of the surf break, a long way from the safety of the beach. Meanwhile, the pilot ship *Captain Cook* had been ordered out from Watson's Bay and was steaming to pick up the two desperate people. The Doherty twins had a fishing shack on the northern headland of Bondi Beach, halfway between the beach and the Ben Buckler headland. During a lucky lull in the sea, the two brave fishermen managed to launch a small rowing boat and, with tremendous skill and courage, made it through the huge seas and picked up Bobby and Tui Kirby. The next day's *Daily Telegraph* ran a graphic account of the rescue, noting that upon returning to the clubrooms at North Bondi, 'young Chalmers was accorded a tremendous

ovation by the crowd for his plucky rescue'. For his bravery, Bobby was later awarded only the third Meritorious Award in Silver by the Surf Life Saving Association—thus, of the first three of these rare awards, the two brothers had won one each. I have only recently discovered in papers kept by my daughter Susan a copy of the program for a 'Testimonial Matinee' to 'Rob Chalmers & Doherty Bros, under the patronage and in the presence of the State governor, Sir Walter Davidson'. Listed were the 'musicians and artists' and the stage manager was a 'Mr Freddy Wallace'. Whether there was a presentation of funds to my father and the Doherty brothers is not stated. My father never mentioned this honour accorded him.

Not long after my birth, we moved to more salubrious rental accommodation in the beautiful Sydney harbourside suburb of Rushcutters Bay. The Great Depression was on and Bobby had a job four days a week testing electricity meters for the Sydney County Council in a building immediately behind the Sydney Town Hall. He walked a considerable distance to and from work every day to save tuppence.

Then, about the middle of the 1930s, the Municipal Council of Granville—then a suburb regarded as 'way out west'—built the first Olympic swimming pool in the western suburbs. Bobby applied for the job as manager and won—defeating some 200 keen applicants. He was made for the job: an ex-digger, a swimming champion, a surfing hero, a licensed electrician and a fitter and turner. He established a swimming club and the baths became the social centre for young kids and teenagers during the summer, in a suburb where there was very little to do and not much money about.

After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, Bobby left Granville for a job as a fitter and turner on the Garden Island naval base in Sydney Harbour. There was a sudden surfeit of flats at Kirribilli as many residents departed for safer areas. Kirribilli was close to what were considered two prime targets for Japanese bombing: the Harbour Bridge and Garden Island. We moved to a two-bedroom flat at Studley Royal, 59 Kirribilli Avenue, close to St Aloysius Catholic Boys' School, at the opposite end of Kirribilli Avenue to Kirribilli House, where John Howard lived during his time as Prime Minister. Studley Royal—a rather grand name for what had been the grand residence of an upper-class family in earlier years—had been converted to apartments and the former stables were now two snug flats. We lived on the second floor—reached via an elegant staircase with a polished wooden handrail. The flat had a balcony with a glorious view across the harbour to the city, Circular Quay, Sydney Cove, on the right the Rocks and the towering Harbour Bridge and, to the left, Bennelong Point (later the site for the Opera House), Farm Cove and the Botanic Gardens. You could throw a stone from our balcony onto the Jeffery

Street ferry wharf below. When about to leave for the city, I could watch the little ferry leave Circular Quay and have time to stroll down to the wharf to board it.

With Australia still at war at this time, we practised rushing to the basement air-raid shelter. Bobby was on Garden Island the night the Japanese midget submarines attacked the *USS Chicago*, an American cruiser anchored on the eastern side of the island. One of the submarines fired a torpedo at the *Chicago* but the torpedo ran under the cruiser and under the ferry *HMAS Kuttabul*, moored alongside Garden Island as a dormitory for young sailors. The torpedo struck the wharf directly alongside the *Kuttabul*, totally wrecking the vessel's wooden hull and immediately causing her to sink. Nineteen sailors lost their lives. At this stage, the very nervous Americans on the *Chicago* brought their six-inch guns to bear on almost anything that moved in the harbour and it was amazing that more casualties did not result. As a volunteer fireman at Garden Island, Bobby and his mates rushed from the machine shop where they were working on the western side of the island and dashed to the scene of the *Kuttabul* to see what they could do, but there was very little that could be done. As they arrived, many much younger men were pulling the dead and dying sailors from the water. At this stage of the war, there were 'brownouts' on all over Sydney. There was further alarm when the mother ship of the midget submarines shelled Rose Bay from the sea—unchallenged. It also dispatched a reconnaissance plane, which flew over the Harbour Bridge. After the war, Bobby left Garden Island to work as an electrician with the Sydney County Council, operating from the old convict-built two-storey warehouses lining the eastern side of Sydney Cove, with Government House standing out above.

I had my sixteenth birthday and Bobby decided that I should learn how to drink in moderation, so, a few days a week, I would meet him at the Milsons Point pub, joining in rounds of beer with his working-class mates. (I regret that the lessons in moderate drinking were not fully effective throughout my life.) Frank Miller, a drinking mate of Bobby's, was a tall, gangly, languid, likeable, typical Australian who enjoyed a laugh. Frank was not enthusiastic about work. Sometimes he would come into the pub after a day at the White Bay powerhouse near Pyrmont as a fitter and turner and Bobby would inquire: 'Well, how did you go today Frank?' 'Well, I beat them, I didn't strike a blow all day,' he would say with great satisfaction. Bobby and Frank Miller travelled on the same ferry from Kirribilli each morning for work. As the ferry came into the wharf at Circular Quay, Frank would heave himself to his feet and exclaim, 'Isn't work a bastard?' Having left school at the age of twelve, my father was largely self-educated, reading two pages of the dictionary every night. He was a keen reader and a conscientious worker. Like hundreds of thousands of his

generation, Bobby was convinced by the Depression years that the only way forward was Labor and socialism. He was devoted to the union movement, a supporter of Jack Lang and convinced of the theories of Douglas Credit.

Bobby was also intensely interested in international affairs. His list of heroes was diverse: Stalin (long before he was exposed as a monster), Gandhi, Nehru, Churchill, Eisenhower, Joe Louis, Don Bradman, Jack Crawford, John Curtin, Ben Chifley and Franklin D. Roosevelt. He was anti-colonialist and against racism—issues that were hardly heard of before World War II. I remember him taking me to an evening meeting in a hall near Granville when I was about twelve to hear Federal MP and Langite ‘Stabber’ Jack Beasley (West Sydney). My father was responsible for my interest in both politics and journalism, and encouraged me in many ways. Together, we would read the *Sydney Morning Herald*, but not *The Daily Telegraph*.

The latter was—and still is—favoured by most working men in Sydney, but my father loathed the proprietor, Frank Packer, whom he rightly regarded as anti-union. At the age of twelve, he had me reading books such as Dale Carnegie’s sociological masterpiece *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. I left school in 1945 at the age of sixteen with the Intermediate Certificate and thought about what I would do. My father’s encouraging words to me as I entered the workforce were simple: ‘Rob, remember you have nothing to beat.’ Having worked most of his life as a tradesman, he also advised: ‘Don’t start work at 7.30.’ At that time, working-class teenagers were expected to enter the workforce and begin earning money to contribute to the family. There was no thought of a university degree, which was regarded as far too expensive before the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS). There were scholarships, although it did not occur to my family that I should try for one. I did later qualify for university by matriculating at night school during my time in the reading room of the Sydney *Daily Mirror*.

My first job was hazardous. At Wynyard Station, in George Street in the city, there was a popular theatrette, running continuous newsreels as well as cartoons. A full session ran for about 1.5 hours. There was another theatrette in Market Street next to the State Theatre—both owned by the same company. The management had only one copy of whatever film was being shown so as a session finished I ferried the reels back and forth in a haversack on a pushbike. This involved frenzied riding through the cars, trams and buses up and down George Street to exchange the reels with the projectionists. Mercifully, such a hazardous occupation soon ended.