



Life on the Water

*Diving down to forty fathoms at the Darnley Deep ~
Searching for the precious pearl shell the pearls to
keep ~*

*All aboard the pearling lugger ~ Grafton by name ~
crews are waiting for the divers ~ praying for some
rain ~*

*Goodbye to you farewell my love ~ Soon we'll be sailing
to the Darnley Deep ~ And in your heart please think of
me ~ for I'll come back to you from the Darnley Deep*

*Diving down to forty fathoms ~ Down deep below ~
How to find the precious pearl shell only divers know ~
I can see the other diver work here with me ~ Getting
shells at forty fathoms in the Darnley Deep*

*Sailing home for dear Old TI ~ Divers all asleep ~ So we
bid farewell to the Darnley Deep*

Forty Fathoms
Henry (Seaman) Dan [Hot Music]

With the death of both his parents, life changed direction dramatically for Ali. After he left school, he found work as a casual crew member on the *Haku*, a lugger with Cleveland Pearling Company. The only options for employment at that time for young men were pearling, or fishing for *bêche de mer* (sea cucumber and close relative of the sea urchin; also called ‘trepane’) and trochus. Ali decided to follow in his father’s footsteps and become a pearl shell diver. Trochus are large, conical-shaped marine snails found in shallow tropical reefs. Their mottled red–green and white shells contain a thick inner layer of mother-of-pearl (nacre). This was highly valued in the making of buttons until replaced by other materials, and in jewellery.

Pearling had become a boom industry in the Torres Strait around the late 1800s and early 1900s and Ali’s father had been a pearl shell diver, working the ‘old ground’, the area west of Badu Island and near Warrior Reefs.

Ali’s father had neither encouraged nor discouraged him from being a pearl shell diver. His brother, Bully, was later to try diving after World War II, but he didn’t remain in the industry. However, Ali was willing to learn and worked closely with the Japanese pearl shell divers. He was to work hard and refine his skills and stay in the industry for many years.

It was during shore leave from pearl shell diving that Ali met and courted his ‘first and only love’ — Carmen Villafor. It was a whirlwind courtship that saw Ali and Carmen marry during his next shore leave. As they were

both under 21, permission was required for them to marry. But there was to be no honeymoon: Ali returned to the lugger the following morning after marrying Carmen in 1936.

In his early days of pearling Ali met Thomo-San, a Japanese pearl shell diver who was to have a significant impact on Ali's life. Thomo-San became his mentor, passing on 'life's lessons' to the young Ali and showing him how to be a successful pearl shell diver. Thomo-San taught the orphaned Ali the value of money: 'to not spend it all at once, to save it and keep some aside for a rainy day'. Ali received basic wages when he first started pearling, which amounted to about three pounds and five shillings a month (about \$228.70 in today's money). He saved most of his money by depositing his salary in the bank and living frugally.

Ali's father had many friends who looked out for him. One friend was Bargo Ah Mat, a pearl shell sorter with the Cleveland Pearling Company. Bargo was one of the divers who had come to Australia with Ali's father. He later married and settled on Thursday Island.

Ali's life on the water saw him working on a range of vessels, never staying too long on any one vessel. Over time, the area Ali covered as a pearl shell diver ranged from Darnley Deeps in the east to Bobo Island, Daru Island, Bristle Island near Papua New Guinea to the north, and Arukun, Mapoon, Crab Island and Brilliant Point.

Japanese divers and Papua New Guinean men crewed the *Haku* where he worked for the three months of the neap tide, weak tides that occur during quarter moons. From March to May he joined the lugger *Jogen*, part of the Carpenter fleet, as a casual crew member, and from June to August the lugger *Zena* and finally, the Bowden Pearling Company as a crew member. He was the casual

cook of the *Sedney* for two years. Ali worked his way from apprentice to second then first diver, later becoming a skipper himself. Ali says that at the time 'he was young, daring and stupid'.

After his second year with the Bowden Pearling Company he left pearl shell diving to try collecting trochus and bêche de mer on the *Cuckoo*. The following year he went back to pearl shell diving as a second diver for the Hocking Pearling Company on the *Goose*. Ali moved between pearl shell diving and collecting trochus and bêche de mer, depending on the season, as did the other seamen. A season later he moved to another lugger in the Hocking fleet, the *Penguin*. The crews of both *Penguin* and *Goose* were Malaysian divers, with Papua New Guinean crew members. Through his working life in pearling Ali made many friends. He enjoyed and respected their friendships and recalls warmly now how his life was enriched by these relationships.

Life was also adventurous. Ali tells a story of a strange incident on the *Cuckoo*. They were working with another lugger on the reefs somewhere between Lizard Island and Cooktown on the Great Barrier Reef. The crew went out in dinghies at low tide and raced each other to the lagoons to look for trochus shell — three to four men in each dinghy. Ali was in a dinghy with Peter Adams, George Hollingsworth and Songhie Mills. In all, there were eight dinghies working that part of the reef.

At low tide the sea forms lagoons and exposes the reef, ideal conditions for collecting trochus shell. The men walked around the exposed reef, picking up any shell that they found, 'dry picking', instead of diving into the lagoons. When the tide came in again they headed back to their dinghies to return to the luggers, as the reef became covered in deep water.

Ali and his crew noticed one deep lagoon where the divers made speedy exits in their dinghies, having retrieved no shells. One crew after the other arrived and the same thing happened. The divers went in looking for trochus shell and left in a hurry, empty-handed.

By now Ali and his crew were curious. They followed the men and questioned them. The men replied that 'there was something big and black down there that came out towards them'. The crew hadn't waited around to find out what it was: they just jumped out of the water.

When Ali's dinghy reached the lagoon everyone in the boat jumped in. Before anyone had time to look for trochus shell, they saw a big dark shape coming towards them. None of the divers waited around to see what it was. They all headed back to the lugger as quickly as they could.

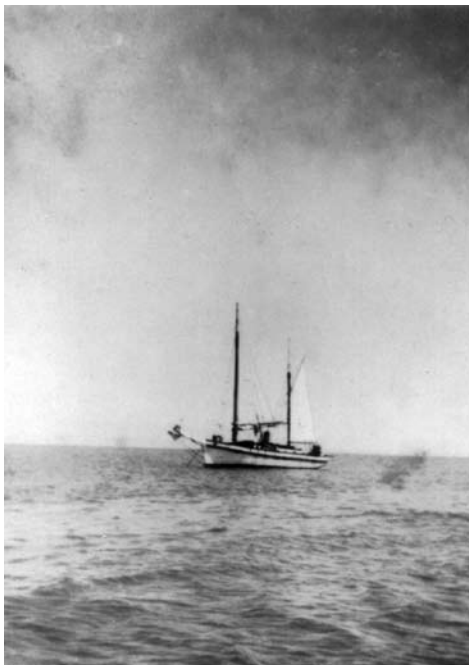
Later, on board the *Cuckoo*, the crew compared stories. None of the crews ever found out what was in there; they were in too much of a hurry to get out. They all had a good laugh and decided it must have been a big groper. Ali's crew didn't go back to the lagoon but they'd managed to fill an empty 44-gallon (200 litre) kerosene drum with trochus shell, so everyone was happy.

Ali remembers that during this time the waters of the Great Barrier Reef were clean and clear. You could see to a depth of two to three fathoms (about 5.5 metres). Beyond that the waters became too deep to see anything. You jumped in expecting to hit the bottom but you just kept on going down.

The Reef was a good spot for collecting *bêche de mer*. The season began in June/July and the luggers would unload their cargo in Cairns, then move on to collect trochus shell from September to December. At the end of December they'd sail home and then sign up crew for the next season.

Ali recalls another, more dangerous incident when he was working along the Great Barrier Reef. The crew had been working their way north along the Reef, collecting trochus shell, when they were hit by the tail of a cyclone.

The lugger rocked from side to side in the wind and fierce waves lashed the hull. Two anchors were dropped overboard but the boat didn't hold; the anchors dragged along the bottom of the ocean floor. The crew took turns to pump out the seawater as the waves washed over the boat. They started pumping after 1am and didn't finish till about 4.30am. The crew were fearful. A few men picked out objects to hold onto if the lugger sank; others were on the deck praying. Ali said 'You couldn't look out the front, the water was like having pebbles thrown at you.'



*The Nobby at sea
in 1948*

However, Ali was confident that the skipper was experienced enough and would see them through this ordeal. By early morning, after a night of pumping, the seas calmed and the wind steadied. In the daylight they saw they were opposite Green Island, going from Stanford and Elford Reef to Arlington Reef. Ahead they saw what they thought was a reef. However, it was moving, and surfacing slowly. When they were about twenty to thirty feet away (6 to 9 metres), they saw that it was a whaler shark which they reckoned was as long as the lugger when they saw it swim alongside them. The men believed the whaler shark had come into shelter from the cyclone too.

When the luggers were out at sea the crew would eat mostly fresh seafood: fish, turtle, dugong and fresh seafood. Their meals were supplemented by anything they came across, or traded. As cook, Ali would prepare rice and miso soup for the Japanese divers. When they were in port he'd cook meat. The lugger's rations included two five-kilogram drums of plain flour, three five-kilogram bags of rice, tin meat, tin goods (including butter, jam, dripping, baking powder, condensed milk, salt, golden syrup, tea coffee and sugar), tobacco papers and matches, onions and potatoes. The luggers also carried a first aid kit made up of bandages, aspirin, iodine, Epsom salts, Japanese plaster and seasick pills.

Before the neap tide, the Japanese divers would buy a large basket of Chinese cabbage and turnips. Once back on board they'd separate the cabbage leaves, wash and salt both the cabbage and turnip and pack them in an empty wooden case. At sea during meal times they'd take out the vegetables, wash off the salt and slice them ready to eat.

On the way out to the pearling grounds the luggers would sometimes call into Nagir Island (Mount Ernest) for a few

hours to visit old Frank Mills and his family. They gave him a bag of rice and a drum of flour and in return he'd give them the fresh produce they lacked: watermelons, young coconuts and any other vegetables he had growing in his garden. Fresh fruit and vegetables were rare at sea so they took any opportunity to trade with nearby islanders.

During the spring tide the crew would anchor at one of the islands, waiting for the next neap tide. Sometimes they'd go ashore to trade their rice and flour with the Islanders for fresh produce. Islanders on Yorke Island gave them bananas, sweet potatoes and dried wongai fruit, whereas Darnley Island was the main port of call for fresh water and a good shower.

Shellmeat was also eaten and often made into a curry. The shellmeat guts were used to make 'shokra', a before-dinner appetiser. Lemon, sugar, salt and vinegar were added to shellmeat guts in a bottle and the bottle was shaken once or twice a day. When it was ready to eat, the men would use wire bent into a hook shape to remove the shellmeat.

Ali learned his cooking from watching others. He would make his own yeast mixture for home-made bread. He would add rice grains, sugar, seawater and chopped potato pieces in a bottle. He made the mixture in the morning, bottled it and left it till the evening. However, he would shake it several times during the day. He would replace the rice grains during the week or make a new mixture.

For breakfast Ali would make soup, sometimes adding salted fish and bread during the day. Pancake and soups were also regular crew favourites. The lugger would lower a towline (a fishing line thrown overboard as the lugger was moving) during the day to catch seafood.

For dinner, Ali would fry fish to serve with bread and butter and a cup of tea. They seldom ate tinned meat and

there was no refrigeration. 'It was rough and ready in those days,' Ali remembers.

The majority of divers at the time were Japanese. Ali remembers they came from working-class backgrounds, hence their ethic of hard work and not wanting to waste food. 'A good cook would give you a good meal and make sure you didn't starve,' Ali said.

One day when the *Sedney* called into Murray Island for a few days Ali was invited to have tea with Payo Mabo and family. They ate freshly caught sardines for tea and Ali was intrigued as to how the flesh could be peeled off the fish without any of the bones being removed.

The ladies had cooked the sardines in salty water so Ali thought he'd try that method and see what happened. The next day Ali took his cast net and caught a bucketful of sardines. Back on board the *Sedney*, he put the sardines in a big saucepan of boiling salted water. He was unsure of the cooking time and over-cooked them; they were mushy and fell apart when he tried to eat them.

Ali threw all the sardines away and went ashore to ask the ladies how to cook them properly. The Mabo family had a good laugh when he told them what had happened. He was told to boil the water, add the sardines, then stir the fish around and allow them to settle. When their eyes turned white, they were cooked and ready to eat.

Another time, on a lugger with Papua New Guinean crew, Torres Strait pigeon was being prepared for dinner. The pigeons were caught and kept alive until dinner. The young chicks just about to fly were the most tender to eat. The cook took the pigeons, hit their head on a bench to kill them and cut their neck. On seeing this one of the Malay men loudly disagreed with this method. He drew his knife, grabbed one of the pigeons, said a quiet prayer and then slit its neck. He killed the remainder of the pigeons for dinner that evening.

Prior to World War II it was mostly Japanese who dived for pearl shell although there were Malay and Polynesia men and some Torres Strait Islander men. They would just skin dive in shallow water and there were no women divers on the company boats.

Most of the men on the pearling luggers had family on Thursday Island or the outer islands and only when the luggers came in to port could they see their families. There were no maps or charts to use in those days. Navigation was done by the stars, tides and weather.

The luggers could be out at sea for anywhere from six to seven weeks at a time, depending on the weather. The weather, and finding a 'good bottom' were the determining factors to a successful time at sea. However, Ali remembers that 'The Japanese worked in all kinds of weather. Even if the weather was rough on top, as long as the water was clear they worked. They were hard workers.'

After two years at sea, it was on the *Sedney* that Ali learnt to dive. The chief or number one diver was Thomosan, who took Ali under his wing in this as in other lessons in life.

At the Darnley Deep, an area just off Darnley Island, the dive was about 32 feet (9.7 metres) without reaching the ocean floor. The crew would drop the leadline to determine the depth. The water there was cold, with nothing swimming around.

The divers would hang in an empty space and it took an hour to stage. If their bodies shook they knew they wouldn't get the bends. As Ali describes it, the bends were 'like ants crawling all over you then it hits you — "boom" all of a sudden. You would only regain conscious when someone staged you, and you were like a yoyo going up and down'. The 'bends' or decompression illness occurs when divers surface too quickly. Under water, at pressure,

nitrogen is forced into the bloodstream. If divers ascend too quickly, not allowing time to 'off gas', nitrogen bubbles form leading to blotchy rashes, coughing spasms, dizziness, unconsciousness and an inability to bend the joints. On the surface, the nitrogen in the air is inhaled and exhaled without ill-effect.

Most divers didn't know the art of staging. Panic killed them mostly, or the watersnakes. They'd hold their breath getting to the surface instead of breathing out along the way up. Their lungs would burst when they reached the surface.

Ali was taught how to combat the bends by the Japanese divers. 'If you weren't feeling well after a dive and could feel the bends coming on, you stripped naked and put your feet in a bucket of water. Then you got the cold back in your body.' The Japanese men did it and he just copied them.

King-san, skipper and chief diver on the Bowden Pearling Company's *Minerva*, was thought to have developed the art of 'staging'. In turn, he'd taught other Japanese divers. He also developed the helmet (tin hat) and corselet for diving.

Ali remembers when King-san passed away. It was believed he had a heart attack going down at the Darnley Deeps. Unable to make any contact with him, the tender raised the alarm when he pulled up an empty helmet. King-san was missing for five to six hours. The *Sedney* stopped working and went to help the *Minerva* look for the missing diver. Both luggers dropped anchor and a diver from each lugger went below.

Engi-san, the second diver on the *Sedney*, found Kingsan's body and signalled for it to be pulled up. Ali helped the tender pull up Engi-san who was holding the body. A dinghy from the *Minerva*, came over to collect

Kingsan's body. The *Minerva*, flying half-mast, headed for Thursday Island with the other luggers following in a funeral procession. King-san was buried in the Japanese section of the Thursday Island cemetery.

Usually, just before dark, the divers came up to the surface after pearling and got ready to sail home unless they'd struck a 'good bottom'. When it darkened in the evening, the bottom of the ocean floor became lighter. Going down to the bottom, it became dark in the middle and then lighter at the bottom. Ali would remember the places he dived, and the position of the moon, tide and the wind. The Japanese divers kept diaries to record the places they dived.



*Unloading shell from
the Nobby at Thursday
Island Engineers Wharf,
1949*

There were different rope signals for different luggers. Ali remembers the signals which were as follows: 1: come up; 2: more air; 3: slack pipe line (air line), take in the slack/increase tension; 4: bag full; 5: bag up; 6: put marker buoy out; and 7: plenty fish.

Ali worked as number one diver for four years, both prior to and after World War II. The job carried a lot of responsibility as he had to find a good bottom and check on the weather. The old people would say to watch the sunset. If it was red that indicated a hot next day. If cockroaches flew around at night it would be windy in a couple of days and rough weather was expected. If you were working about 30 to 40 miles off Badu Island and that happened you'd head for home.

Ali remembers few bad days when he couldn't find any pearl shell. He used his brains and even if they had to scratch around a bit they always found some. The luggers would follow the 'neap'; the clear water. There were no favourite or horrible places to dive. Ali saw only sharks and turtles, but no mermaids!

When working in deeper waters, Ali remembers that the seabed looked like a beautiful garden, with pearl shells scattered everywhere. When he was growing up, he'd been told by the old people that every place had a keeper or guardian, even at sea. He was a visitor there, and as a mark of respect he should always ask permission to take some pearl shell, and when he had collected sufficient to say 'thank you'. Ali never forgot this practice and today his children carry on this tradition. Wherever they travel, they always ask permission when visiting a certain area and always say 'thank you' when they leave. This tradition of respect is always spoken softly.

There were many dangers when diving; some they expected, others they didn't. One time Ali saw two pearl shells nearby each other. However, given the drift of the tide, he calculated he'd miss one of them. He called for slack, more rope, to reach the shell further away from him. With the drift, he thought he'd still be able to reach the second shell. In his haste he accidentally stuck his fingers inside the open pearl shell and it closed on him. However, he went on and picked up the other pearl shell and put it in his shell basket.

When he came to the end of the patch his bag was almost full so he signalled to be pulled up. As he was surfacing he tried to release his fingers but the shell clamped down even tighter. The pressure intensified as he rose. He broke the surface and made it to the deck of the boat where he called for someone to bring him a knife. By this time his hand was white. A knife was inserted to open the shell and his hand was freed. Despite the pain, he still maintained his sense of humour, laughing that there was no pearl inside the pearl shell, even after the effort and danger he'd been through.

Ali took a year leave from pearl shell diving to spend with Carmen and his young daughter, Carmen Alexia. Ali and Carmen had started to build a family which would grow to include five daughters and two sons. See Family, p. 61.

After time away from the luggers, the following year Ali approached Don Farquahr of Farquahr's Pearling Company for a job. He was employed as skipper/number one diver of the lugger *Pearls*. By now Ali was 21. The remainder of the crew on *Pearls* consisted of Kara Kaprisi as second diver, two tenders, a cook, engineer and two crew.

Since becoming skipper and head diver Ali learned to notice the first signs of the bends and to take measures to avoid this happening.

Ali's first trip as skipper on *Pearls* was working with a fleet of luggers along the east coast of Queensland. The fleet were working in the main shipping passage and every now and then, they had to move out of the way of the big ships.

Despite his caution, Ali first got the bends working at Margaret Bay near Cape Grenville. He was one of the divers working at a depth of 10 to 12 fathoms (18 to 21 metres) and picking up good pearl shells. That evening after tea, Ali went over to the *Penguin* to see the skipper, Murphy Sullivan, to discuss where they'd be working the next day. While he was sitting down and talking, he suddenly noticed the lamp was blinking — an early sign of an attack of the bends. He lost consciousness. The next thing he remembered was waking up in a diving suit below the surface with another diver staging him. He signalled to the other diver that he was okay and to go up. Ali staged himself for another two hours. Reflecting on it later, Ali realised that he must have surfaced too quickly earlier on that day.

Ali remembers needing to be watchful of the weather, too. The *Pearls'* second trip down the east coast was as far as Flinders Islands near Princess Charlotte Bay. Another lugger *Wimble* from Hocking Pearling Company, skippered by Frances Sabatino, was working with them.

Both luggers were working on a good bottom in the main passage when a storm approached. This was the same area where another pearling fleet had been destroyed by a cyclone in 1899. The *Pearls* crew stopped working and went to shelter close to shore as they'd already collected one ton (.90 tonnes) of pearl shell. The crew on the *Wimble*

continued working. It was very rough and windy when the storm hit. A dinghy came from the *Wimble* asking *Pearls* to accompany them back to TI because during the storm the *Wimble's* foremast had been struck and damaged by lightning, so after a quick repair job, both luggers left for home. When they reached Animal Island, just off Newcastle Bay, about 40 miles from TI, the *Wimble* stopped to work but *Pearls* continued on.

Diving held a number of dangers, some more expected than others. Ali recalls another tale of diving for pearl shell. Three divers, Mickey Seden, Bully Drummond (Ali's brother) and Willy Missi were out. There was a long drift, and the men were far from the boat. On deck the crew were concerned because they saw lots of bubbles and the divers signalled for more air. Suddenly, without warning, the three men surfaced and got straight out of the water, all at once. They took Willy Missi's helmet off, but Bully couldn't wait and came out of the water with his helmet still on. There'd been a big shark swimming around in the water, so the divers had surfaced in a hurry, eager to be out of the water in case the shark returned.

Ali never lost a diver when he was skipper but he came very close to losing his own life. The incident happened when he was on the *Whyalla*, from 1951 to 1952, the last years of his pearl shell diving career. He was working near the top end of Warrior Reef, not far from Tudu Reef.

Ali was diving off the stern of the boat and was working at a depth of about 16 to 17 fathoms (28 to 30 metres), when he found a good bottom. He had almost filled his shell basket when he signalled for more air. His tender acknowledged but a minute or two later Ali was still waiting for fresh air. Ali signalled again for more air and

to be pulled up. Again his tender replied but Ali was still not getting any fresh air.

By now the air in his helmet was quite stale so Ali thought, 'This is it. Something is wrong with my airline. I'll have to throw my helmet and try to get to the surface for fresh air.' The way the airline and the lifeline was lying in the water, Ali thought the easiest way to the surface would be straight up. Just then the tender started to pull on his lifeline. Ali threw his helmet and started to swim up towards the surface. He didn't panic and on the way up he slowly swallowed seawater to cool his burning chest.

The crew became alarmed when only an empty helmet came up. Meanwhile they'd discovered that Ali's airline was caught around the boat's propellor. They knew he would be coming to the surface and were watching out for him.

Ali surfaced about 100 metres from the boat and called for them to hurry up and get him — he was tired and was finding it hard to tread water. In their haste the crew tipped over the dinghy in the water and lost a paddle. They eventually got to him and as they pulled him into the dinghy the saltwater he had swallowed started pouring out of his nose and mouth. Ali was exhausted and could feel his heart pounding.

Back on board the boat he was very angry and told the crew, especially his tender, that their carelessness had almost cost him his life. He'd earlier told his tender how to position the boat and to make sure to keep the airline clear from the stern of the boat. The exact two things the tender failed to do. Ali told them to cut and clear the airline from the propellor and then sail for Mangrove Island for the night. They later found that the piece of airline they cut from the propellor was twisted and flat.

The next day Ali took his turn diving and felt a lot better afterwards. When the *Whyalla* arrived in Thursday Island Ali went to the hospital for a medical check-up. His doctor found there was still nitrogen in his blood so he prescribed some liquid medicine to help disperse it properly.

Reflecting on what happened to him that day, Ali thought that he'd been saved because he hadn't panicked: he'd swallowed saltwater to keep cool, and he'd worn a raincoat jacket for extra warmth when working below – this had helped him to the surface and kept him afloat.

Another time on the *Whyalla* his tender acted quickly to prevent Ali from what he believed to be danger. They were working near the main passage along the east coast of Queensland, Ali wasn't far from the wreck of the *Quetta*. He wanted to see what she was like and how she was lying



Pearling on the Nobby, Cairns, July 1949

on the bottom. As he got closer to the wreck, his tender pulled him up. Ali was disappointed, but found out later that his tender thought he might get tangled in the wreck, and pulled him up to be well clear of the shipwreck.

A tender's role is important in the working life of a pearl shell diver. When the diver is below looking for pearl shell, his tender lowers him just a few feet off the bottom so that he can save his energy and drift along with the current, until he comes across a patch of pearl shells. The diver then signalled for his tender to lower him to the bottom to pick up the pearl shells.

In 1939 Ali was skipper and number one diver on the lugger *Charm*. His second diver was Jacky Smoke. The other crew consisted of two tenders, a cook, an engineer and two crew.

That season the *Charm* was one of the many luggers working near Bobo Island. It was a neap tide, clear and still, with a depth of about 14–15 fathoms (about 27 metres). Ali was working on a bottom where the edges would just drop into the ocean and he describes it now as like working on a table top.

The *Charm* followed the neap to start work just west of Deliverance Island. Ali and his second diver were working at 10–12 fathoms (about 18 to 19 metres) and picking up first-class pearl shells. They found the bottom was different to the old ground at Badu, as there was more mud and this produced shells that were thinner and lighter. They started diving that morning and at about 3pm, when the lugger was going back to do another drift, Ali again got the bends.

A helmet was put on the unconscious Ali and he was put back into the water with another diver to stage him. It was near 10 fathoms (18 metres) when he regained

consciousness. As soon as he started to feel better he signalled to the other diver to return to the surface. It was not until six hours later, that Ali was safely back on board.

The *Charm* also had a close call with a patrol boat in the waters off Papua New Guinea. Ali was picking up good quality pearl shells when his tender signalled him to come up. Ali did not want to go up but his tender started to pull him up. Ali was angry as he was not ready to come up. When he reached the surface his tender explained that a patrol boat had spotted them and was coming towards them.

The patrol boat must have had a diesel motor because the black smoke from the exhaust gave them away. Ali quickly told the crew to start the engine and to head back into Australian waters. With a good easterly wind behind them they soon caught up with some other luggers working very close to the border. They also stopped working and headed for Kemos Reef.

About two hours later all the luggers were safely in Kemos Reef. The patrol boat went amongst the fleet of luggers with a loudspeaker warning them never to cross the border again, because 'if we catch you, your boat will be confiscated and the crew will be sent to prison'. After that excitement some of the luggers went to Mangrove Island while the *Charm* moved on to work elsewhere.

When the luggers anchored in Aragon Bay at Badu Island to shelter from the weather, the crew would get together and have a singalong. The lugger crews would be out to seas for weeks at a time. There were about ten men of various ages and ethnic backgrounds and because they had to sleep, eat, dive, work and share a small space, it was important for them to get along when working, and relaxing.

Life B'long Ali Drummond

Some of the popular songs of the time were 'Goodbye to you, my Nona Manis', 'Red Sails in the Sunset' and 'Out on the Ocean' (a song made up by Kitchell Ano and friends). 'Red Sails in the Sunset' was a particular favourite of Ali's. Whenever he was feeling lonely, he would sing it.

**Goodbye My Love, My Nona Manis
by Danny Everett and friends**

Goodbye to you my Nona Manis

Don't you forget

Jangan la lupa kepada saya

But in your heart you will always think of me

Saya ada mimkpi kepada sayang

But I'll return, my Nona Manis

Wait for me

Jangan la lupa kepada saya

If in your heart, you always think of me

Saya ada tambah la dari

Sweetheart

Out on the ocean

Out on the ocean

That has no end

That's where we work

And that's where we play

The wind is so strong

We can't get along

So we set sail again

For TI

Nobody cares for me
There in TI
Nobody cares if I live or die
For I'm just a lonely seaman

And nobody loves me
I'm out on the ocean
Where there's no woman
On the ocean that has no end.

Pearly Shells

Pearly shells, pearly shells
From the ocean, from the ocean
Shining in the sun, shining in the sun
Covering the shore, covering the shore.

When I see them, when I see them
My heart tells me that I love you
More than all those little pearly shells
For every grain of sand upon the beach
I've got a kiss for you
And I've got more let over for every star
That twinkles in the blue

Pearly shells, pearly shells
From the ocean, from the ocean
Shining in the sun, shining in the sun
Covering the shore, covering the shore.

When I see them, when I see them
My heart tells me that I love you
More than all those little pearly shells

Life B'long Ali Drummond

Pre-World War II, the pearl shell divers wore a full suit which comprised a rubber suit, heavy boots, tin helmet and corselet. Post-war it was a lot cheaper and easier to work in sandshoes, flannel pants and shirt and the tin helmet and corselet.

The glass on the front of the tin helmet (viewing glass) was fitted last, just before the diver went over the side of the boat. This viewing glass was one inch thick (2.5cm) and had to be stored separately from the rest of the diving equipment. It was cleaned regularly with a spoonful of coffee grains wrapped in a wet flannelette cloth. A dirty glass could cause the diver to have double vision and lead to a serious accident.

Ali left pearling in about 1940 to join the Civilian Construction Corporation, based on Thursday Island during World War Two. (See *Wartime*, p. 43). Later he worked on the mainland cutting cane. (See *Life on the Land*, p. 53). In late 1947, when Ali was in Cairns, Kara Kaprice asked if he was interested in going back to pearl shell diving. Ali thought about it and went to Cairns staying with his sister Dahlia and family. In July 1948, he went back to pearling on the *Nobby*, a lugger with the Schimafanny Company.

During the post-war pearling, Ali noticed that the same men came back again to pearl shell diving. The ocean floor had also a chance to replenish. With the Japanese interned on Thursday Island during the war, only those Japanese men married to Australian women were allowed to stay. The remaining Japanese men were sent back to Japan.

On the *Nobby* in 1948, Ali collected nearly 4 tons (3.5 tonnes) during good weather on a neap tide. The most pearl shell he ever collected was just over 24 tons

(22 tonnes) for five months' work during the season. He received \$1100 (in today's money) for one season. He'd gone into partnership with Micky Sedan, his brother-in-law, and together they earned \$2200. They were paid by cheque and finished the season. Most of the crew finished the season (May to December) and were paid on Thursday Island where they signed on. Post-war Ali, as skipper of the lugger, was paid 40 per cent of the earnings of the season while 60 per cent went to the owner of the lugger.

When Ali found a good bottom he would put down a marker buoy. Over the years, he used many different types of marker buoys. He used a dry coconut from Mabuaign Island and tied it to a piece of bamboo cane. This marker



Ali during his pearling years, August 1950

was successful because the other luggers thought it was just a coconut drifting with the ocean currents.

One time on the *Nobby* he struck a good bottom on the way out to the old ground. He used an empty fuel drum as a marker and continued working. Another lugger came along, found the marker and stopped to pick up what they thought was a good drum. They soon discovered that this was Ali's marker so they started to work there too. Before long there were several luggers working the area alongside the boat.

Ali decided to change his marker buoys. However, after working that area for four days he estimated that he found two tons (1.8 tonnes) of pearl shell. They worked for another four to five days and collected just over three tons (2.7 tonnes) of pearl shell, which filled fifteen pearl shell cases. Each pearl shell case weighed one cut (one hundred weight, or 50.8 kilograms). During another good neap Ali collected three and a half tons (3.18 tonnes) of pearl shell. For some divers, the record for the season was five and a half tons (4.98 tonnes). For others, it was between 15 to 20 tons (13.6 to 18.14 tonnes). Ali's record was 22 ton (19.95 tonnes).

The *Nobby* worked from July to December. Bob McDonald, the Aboriginal cook, would make johnny cakes for breakfast, served with syrup and damper. Ali would drink coffee too, as this would warm him up. During the day, they'd work a section of the bottom, then come out of the water and eat while the boat went back to the original section. They would work the same ground for the day, back and forth.

The *Nobby* had two divers: Ali who was both skipper and number one diver and Micky Seden who was the second diver. Both divers worked from sunrise to sometimes late at night. Depending on the weather, and if there was a

good shell patch they worked on into the night, cleaning and preparing the pearl shells for their arrival back in port on Thursday Island.

Ali never lost a diver when he was skipper, but other skippers weren't so lucky, or careful. Divers on other boats died of the bends and were buried on Darnley Island. On all the small islands from Darnley to Thursday Island lie divers' graves, there being no medical checks at the time to determine the cause of death. An island lava-lava, a man's wrap around clothing for the lower half of the body, was used as a flag to let the other luggers know of the death of a diver. If the lava-lava was flown at half mast on the fore mast it would indicate the death of a forehead or middle diver. If it was flown at the main mast it would indicate the death of the stern diver/skipper.

During his time working on the *Nobby* Ali was almost involved in a brawl. One day he came ashore at Thursday Island and left the crew on the boat to unload the pearl shell and check on the rations. He went up to the Grand Hotel for a beer and was having his second beer, when three men started yarning and bragging very loudly. They were saying that they were in the Torres Strait during the war and that everyone else was 'akan', frightened or scared, to fight the Japanese. They said to Ali 'you akan, because you run away', referring to when everyone was evacuated.

Ali looked around to see who they were talking to and realised that they were talking to him. He became very angry, so angry that his right hand shook. He was so wild with rage he could barely hold his beer and remain composed. The other men continued to antagonise him by repeating the accusation.

Eventually Ali could not take it any longer, he stood up turned around and said, 'Fuck off! Where were you in the war? Well where were you? Answer me that.' Ali, of course had been a vital part of the war effort (see *Wartime*, p. 43). The men in the bar were surprised and taken aback at his outburst. Slowly, and apologetically the men left the bar. Just then Ali's brother Bully and Micky Seden came in. They noticed he was very upset and asked what was wrong. When Ali told them what had just happened, Bully got angry and wanted to go after them but Ali said not to worry about it.

Another day when Ali and another Malayan called Julianus (Paman Julie) went to the Federal Hotel in Cairns for a drink. The bar attendant told them that Torres Strait Islanders were banned from drinking there because they'd caused some trouble earlier in the month. Some men posing as Torres Strait Islanders had caused the trouble. There was a Malayan ship in port at that particular time and because Ali and Julianus were conversing in Malay, the bar attendant served them thinking they were from that ship.

A few months after joining the *Nobby*, Ali almost got the bends. He had to remove his helmet while ascending quickly to the surface from the ocean floor. From this recent incident he was found to have nitrogen in his blood. At this time, the family flew from Cairns to Thursday Island to be with him and eventually stayed there.

In another incident on the *Nobby*, Ali saved a Japanese diver's life. Ali was working on the old ground, with Badu Island in the distance, 60 to 70 miles (about 104 kilometres) away. The old pearling ground was 6–8 fathoms (10 to 12 metres). Ali went down and was collecting pearl shell. He sent one bag up but got no answer, when he pulled again. Upon surfacing, he found a Japanese diver

from the *Vera* was on board the *Nobby*. The Japanese diver had his right arm in a bandage and was covered in a coat. His face was white due to loss of blood. He had put his arm near the compressor to reach a fallen spanner. The machine caught his sleeve and rolled his sleeve and skin up in one motion.

Kukitchi, skipper of the *Vera*, asked if Ali could take the diver to hospital on Thursday Island as the *Nobby* was faster than the *Vera*. They left at 3pm and arrived at Thursday Island about 9pm. Ali saw his boss Walter Schimafanny fishing at the wharf and called to him to get a taxi. Kukitchi and the diver went ashore in a dinghy. Ali and his crew went ashore too. That gave Ali the chance to see Carmen and the family, but the next day he was back out to sea again at 6am.

Ali weighed about 9 stone (57 kilograms) at the time he was a diver. The bends affected Ali from the waist down and a doctor advised him to ride a bike to build up his leg muscles. Some of the other divers, such as Vincent Dorante and Tommy Nakata are, like Ali, still around today to share their stories

But pearling was the only job Ali knew. From the age of 16 to 35 he'd been a pearl shell diver. He thought he contracted typhoid fever at Badu Island in 1951, but didn't know how he contracted it. His doctor thought he may have been bitten by a mosquito while collecting water. Ali was immediately quarantined at the Thursday Island hospital. For 4 to 6 weeks and wasn't allowed any visitors. Carmen visited him along with other nurses and sisters. That, coupled with the scare of nitrogen in his blood made Ali retire from pearling.

The following table shows the boats Ali worked on in his long life pearl shell diving.

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Year/age	Lugger	Owner	Duration
14	Haku	Cleveland Pearling Company	3 months/1 season: crew
14-15	Jogen	Carpenter fleet	March – May: crew
15	Zena	Carpenter fleet	June – August: crew
15-16	Sedney	Bowden Pearling Co.	2 years: crew/cook; learnt to dive
17	Cuckoo	Bowden Pearling Co.	1 year: crew
18	Goose	Hocking Pearling Co.	1year: 2nd diver
1936/19	Penguin	Hocking Pearling Co.	1 year. 2nd diver
1937		Year off pearling	
1938/21	Pearls	Farquhar Pearling Co.	1 year. skipper, no. 1 diver
1939/22	Charm	Farquhar Pearling Co.	1 year. skipper, no. 1 diver
1940		Year off pearling Ali left pearling due to the war	
1948	Nobby	SchimaFanny/Van de Loo	skipper, no. 1 diver
1949	Gypsy		skipper, no. 1 diver
1950-1951	Whyalla		skipper, no. 1 diver