



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 ‘trepan’) 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 Deep 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.

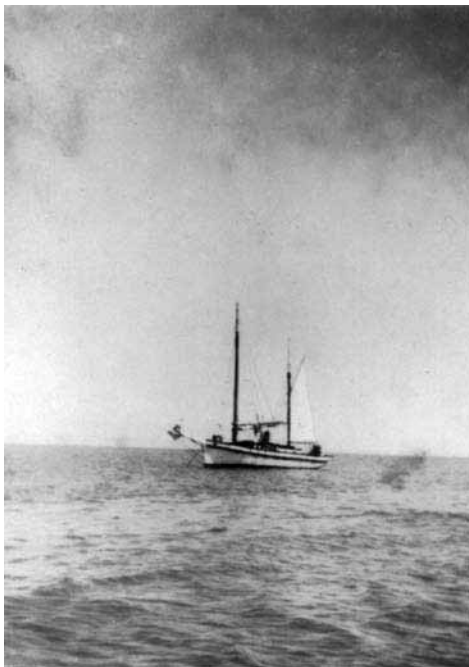
Later, on board the *Cuckoo*, the crew compared stories. None of the crews ever found out what was in there; they were in too much of a hurry to get out. They all had a good laugh and decided it must have been a big groper. Ali's crew didn't go back to the lagoon but they'd managed to fill an empty 44-gallon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