

**John Dickman: Seaman/gun loader aboard HMAS *Townsville***

**Interviewed by:** David Gist

**On:** Sunday April 24, 2005

**At:** (telephone)

I was on the *Townsville* from June 44 until May 1946

**When you joined the *Townsville* had you other drafts previous to that?**

I'd done six months on the *Broome*, another corvette.

**Was the *Broome* your first draft?**

Yes

**After you'd been to Flinders, do you become qualified as an AB later on?**

You leave there as an ordinary seaman, and you have a certain time to pass your AB's exam. We only did three months at Flinders. Three months training isn't much training for a ship.

**What was your job on the *Broome*?**

I was a seaman, same as I was on the *Townsville*.

**Whereabouts was the *Broome*?**

When joined her, I joined her in Sydney and we did a couple of convoys to Melbourne. One of the convoys, I think it was the first one coming back to Sydney, we had a submarine alert around about the same spot where the *Townsville* had a torpedo fired at it. We fired a few depth charges and stood off, but we lost the contact and carried on with the convoy to Sydney. From there we went up north to *Townsville* and Cairns and we were doing trips between Milne Bay and Port Moresby and a little bit further up the coast,

Wewak, Lae and places up the New Guinea coast. Much the same work as we were doing on the *Townsville*.

**Was the Townsville still doing convoy work when you went to her?**

Yes. We were doing quite a few runs to Milne Bay and Port Moresby. At Milne Bay we had to go out searching for a supply vessel that got lost, the *Matafele*. We were in Milne Bay and there was a storm out at sea. A small navy supply vessel sent out an SOS and we were sent out to search for it. The seas were very heavy; they were breaking higher all over the ship and it was very difficult to see. We never found anything. The ship was rolling at forty-five degrees at times. I thought I was going to get thrown out of the crow's nest.

**You were up in the crow's nest?**

Yes, they always had a crow's nest lookout and port and starboard lookout. We had to look out for submarines all the time.

**The last time we spoke you mentioned something about barges.**

Yes, that was when we took a convoy into Wake. We just went and anchored in the bay unbeknownst to the ship what the situation was there. I remember sitting up on the after-gun deck with a few of the boys. We could hear this gun going off. We could see splashes in the water. We thought it was the Americans practising but it turned out it was the Japanese down in the other corner taking pot shots at us. So, we were ordered to move further out. That night these barges had been cut loose. We sent crews out and rounded them up. A couple of our fellows pinched some of the gear off them, including a point five machine gun and ammunition. In fact, one of the fellows was using that when we were doing the bombardment. I think the *Gleneig* was the other corvette along in that show, she sent over a whaler ashore to pick up a

landing party. They picked up the landing party and were rowing back out when they were fired on by machine guns. I don't think anybody was injured but when they were hoisting the whaler back on board it fell in half from the bullet holes.

**Wake, is that up around New Guinea?**

Yes, I can't remember the exact location. It's mentioned in the corvette book [Frank Walker: author] There are a lot of big gaps in it of places where we went. It doesn't mention Melbourne. I don't know why. We went there several times.

**Did you stop in Melbourne for convoys?**

No actually we went there for refits. When the war was over and we had come down from Rabaul and minesweeping along the way, we headed to Melbourne to join the twentieth minesweeping flotilla. On the last trip down the skipper contracted chicken pox, and we were left off Wilson's Promontory for a week or so in quarantine. We used to row the whaler ashore and mess around on the ninety-mile beach. So, we were a bit late getting into Melbourne to join the convoy to start minesweeping in Bass Strait.

**So, the navy ordered you to anchor?**

Yes, we just had to stay there until the skipper got over his chicken pox. The boys were spitting chips because they were all keen to get back to Melbourne and get ashore.

**When things got a bit dull, what did you do?**

We didn't do too bad up in the islands where we visited. We used to use the whaler. It was fitted with oars and a mast and a drop keel and I think there was about five corvettes involved in it. We used to have sailing races around

the islands. We didn't do too good until we got a new first lieutenant who used to be a yachtsman. We started to win a race or two then. We could go ashore and look around the town, go swimming on the beach with the natives. There was always a bit of bartering going on when we were off on those islands. They'd come out in their lakatois and barter for cigarettes or grog or whatever they could get. I remember one of the stewards treated one of the poor fellows. He wanted sugar so he gave him a tin full of flour and topped it up with sugar. When they made the exchange the native, he was cunning. He took his finger and stuck it in and found the flour in the bottom. He did his block. He kept saying 'titi bar gus', which means 'no bloody good!' Other times we tied up against liberty ships and we'd do a bit of trading with them. They weren't allowed to have grog on board. I believe the ships stewards managed to pinch a few bottles of whiskey to trade with the sailors on the liberty ship. They'd give us pillow slips and sheets and things that we couldn't get. Another story in Madang, where we were taking a grog on board a case with six dozen bottles of beer on it and dropped it in the bottom of the river. I think its still there. At Langemack, we were there a few times and had several trips ashore for stores. We were allowed to go to the picture shows there. A couple of times at the picture shows there'd be a raid alert and the picture shows were shut down. There was a yank camp at Langemack and we were pretty good at pilfering things. We went through it and helping ourselves to stuff that got left behind like tinned food. We pulled a few tents down and kept the canvas. We fount it handy for making awnings on board ship. Three of my mates we used to sleep on the after-gun deck of a night. It was too hot below, and there wasn't much room anyhow. So, we used to throw up a lump of the canvas and

lay it across the bottom of the hammocks. It used to rain usually in the middle of the night and we'd pull the canvas over us to keep dry.

**Tell me that story about the contact and the star shell.**

That's when we were towing. We had five barges in tow; I can't remember where we were taking them too. We had these five barges full of dead American soldiers and we had to take them back to the mainland somewhere. All of a sudden, a four-engined plane arrived and started circling us. The signalman was signalling and it wasn't answering, so we closed up at action stations. The plane incidentally wasn't showing IFF, which is identification friend or foe, a signal which our aircraft used to send out. So, after we closed up action stations the plane signalled back. It turned out to be one of our own. They were signalling with an aldis lamp. The searchlight was also used as a signal lamp too. It was a big one, about eighteen inches across I suppose.

**Last time we spoke you were telling me about some blokes fishing.**

Yes. We were doing night patrol off Langemack. We made contact with some object out on the water. The signalman signalled it with the aldis lamp and got no reply, so we closed up action stations and put a starshell over the area. It turned out to be some air force bods out doing a spot of fishing. Must have given them a hell of a fright!

**So, on board ship when things closed up at action stations, whereabouts were you?**

I was a loading number on the four-inch gun.

**Was that your only action station?**

No, I had several. There was about six or seven altogether in the crew. Ken Rowlands, I think he was a gunlayer.

**Talking about the image of the ship, the look of them, I've heard they rolled.**

The beam's about thirty feet and the draught was about ten feet. They had a flat bottom. They used to roll as far as forty-five degrees in rough seas. In rough weather we used to rig up lines for and aft with strapping on it so you could get from one end of the ship to the other. You couldn't walk from one end to the other in heavy seas. You'd get washed overboard. Water would come in on the mess deck. You'd have several inches of water and things getting washed from one side to the other every time it rolled. They had combing about a foot or so high but that never kept the water out.

**Where was the roughest weather that you encountered?**

Bass Strait would be the roughest I would think. Apart from that storm in the Coral Sea; they used to get some bad weather up there. But when we were out minesweeping the ships were all strung out with the minesweeping gear and I can remember looking back and seeing one corvette rise that high you could see halfway under the bottom of the ship. You could see the asdic dome underneath before it bashed down again. Sometimes we had to go into Hobart or Melbourne; it was just too rough to sweep.

**When Townsville was with the twentieth minesweeping flotilla where you involved in minesweeping or on the gun?**

The watch used to take turn about and take a bit of activity in all the affairs that went on. We had a Bofors on board, we used to have to train on that; the minesweeping as well. We used to go below splicing serrated steel wire rope, which is a pretty hard job. You use in minesweeping serrated steel wire, the rope used to cut the mines loose. Strange thing, we were using one of those

ropes when we were towing those barges, and during the night the movement with this serrated steel wire rope and cut through the bollard nearly half way, hacked like a saw. Lucky, we didn't lose them.

**When you say splicing and linking bits together, what was it for?**

We were making eyeholes, splicing for different sort of operations.

**The whole minesweeping process. Talk me through it.**

We had a big float, and a paravane that had about five flukes down it. The paravane used to hold it up and carry the float out wide about a hundred yards each side, which gave you the width of the sweep. There were cutters attached to the steel wire rope as well. I can't remember picking up a mine. I think there was one picked up when I wasn't on duty. They pulled all the gear in and there was a mine stuck to the gear, the paravanes that pulled the float out to the distance you wanted. Someone managed to cut it loose. I don't think it exploded. A lot of these mines I think over the years became useless. Salt probably got into them. Although later on in 1945 one of the corvettes was sunk and lost four men: up in North Queensland.

**These mines, were they defensive mines?**

The ones in Bass Strait were laid by the Germans. And the ones up around Rabaul were Japanese. They were a different mine to the ones we were used to. They were a funny looking, yellow, round object. We shot it up and it just sank, it never blew up.

I never got ashore at Rabaul, some of the fellows did. There was a lot of thieving going on. There's a lot of caves there and our fellows were going through them. One brought back a big pair of binoculars on a tripod. The big

boss ashore said no more shore leave, so I missed out. The volcano used to send out stinking yellow smoke all over the bay. It wasn't very pleasant.

**These caves that you mentioned in Rabaul, were they Japanese?**

They had huge tunnels all through there. The allies rounded most of it up and dumped it in the sea. How I happened to be over there, we were in Melbourne doing a refit after hitting an object off the coast of Borneo and had to sail back to Melbourne for a refit and go into dry dock. After we left there we went back to Sydney and there I got a telegram saying that my eldest brother had died. He was a prisoner of war at Sandakan. They gave me a week's leave. I missed the boat ride back to Sydney so they put me in Balmoral navy depot and I went over to New Britain on the *Manoora*. It was a strange thing there was a naval seaman on board, Allan Jones, one of the fellows I joined up with. I used to share his turn at the wheel. I had to work my passage over there. They dropped me off at Jacquinet Bay at the bottom of New Britain. Then we went up to Torokina, about halfway up to Rabaul. We picked up a couple of Japs on a raft, miles out at sea in the middle of the night.

**How did they get out there?**

A lot of them didn't like being captured. They got onto a raft and just rowed off. There was no need for them too. When we got to Torokina, this was when the war had finished, we went ashore and there was Japs just walking up and down the street. I thought this was a bit strange: they weren't even under guard!

**Your brother, was he in the navy as well?**

He was in the army. He was taken at Singapore. There were only four survivors out of four thousand. That was in Borneo, the east coast of Borneo,

up the top there. The death march. They sent them over when they knew things were going bad for them. They took them to a place called Ranu through the jungle and most of them died. We had five boys in the services. My younger brother Philip, myself, Steven who was Middle East and Kokoda track, brother Syd who was on Crete, Middle East and Kokoda track, and Fred who was taken at Singapore. We all came from Bowral.

**Don Bradman's home town?**

That's right. We lived in his house actually, after he moved out. That film that was taken off it, we were living there when that was taken.

**[Break]**

**When war broke out you were still a young fellow?**

Yes. I joined the navy in May of 43.

**I'm curious to know what the times were like. Was it a foregone conclusion that a young bloke would join up?**

I think most of them did. There's a big new cenotaph at Bowral, and there seems to be hundreds of names. Some of them go back to the great war, some of my uncles. One of my uncles was in eth Gallipoli landing. Or great uncle. I came from a family of thirteen so you can imagine there's plenty of us.

**In the years before you enlisted, did you enlist basically out of school?**

No. I left school when I was thirteen. I was working at a timber mill in Bowral when I joined up.

**Were you 17 or 18 when you joined?**

Eighteen. A few of them used to cheat. I don't know how they got away with it. A friend of mine Ron Patten, he joined up when he was sixteen, I believe,

because he was a big fellow and he got away with it. He's a year younger than me actually.

**Did they require some kind of proof of age?**

Well I had to send in my birth certificate, and they sent an exam paper up. I had to do that to get in. Pretty simple stuff: a bit of reading and spelling and so forth. I wasn't very good at it either. I was always a bit of a mug at school. I always worked pretty hard. I used to get up and do a dairy run before I went to school.

**So, it was like an aptitude test?**

Yes.

**Did you have to send it away, write a letter away...**

No. Myself and my mate went down to Sydney and joined up at navy house. A week or two later we got these exam papers. We sat together to do them we gave them to the headmaster and he sent them back to the navy.

**Was it just a matter of waiting then?**

Yes. We didn't have to wait very long.

**What happened then?**

I had to go down to the depot at Sydney and wait a couple of days til the *Broome* came in and I was posted aboard.

**You mentioned up in the crow's nest. If you're a lookout generally is there a system?**

We had three watches, red white and blue, I was in white watch. You had to do the different watches and come off watch and your watch would go on. You always had to post a lookout in the crow's nest, port and starboard, one on the wheel and one acting as quartermaster. He had the bosuns pipe. He

used to deliver the messages around the ship, like any changes that had to take place. Wasn't a bad life on corvettes: we didn't have all the parades and rigmarole that they had on the bigger ships. We just had to line up of a morning and the bosuns mate would dish out the jobs we had to do, which was mostly hammering rust of the side of the ship and putting paint on, or doing a bit of work down tiller front making ropes, doing a bit of splicing, general cleaning. I did six months as what they call the captain of the heads. I didn't have to report. I just have to go around to all the heads and I had to keep them tidy. It was a pretty good job really. You were your own boss. You just went around cleaned up the officers' cabin and the toilets. Same with the captain; he was up under the bridge. Look after his, and do some odd jobs for him. He got me to do a bit of painting for him one in his cabin. He wanted a fancy line around the two different colours in the cabin. One of the stewards, I didn't know anything about painting and he saw me trying to paint and I wasn't doing too good a job, so he showed me the right way to do it. He wanted his cabin tarted up a bit. I think we were on seven six a day, six shillings but once you get your first issue uniform you had to buy your own. We had a slop store on ship and you bought your stuff from there, cigarettes and clothing. Quite often these sailors would be leaving stuff lying around. That was always picked up and put into what they called a scam bag. They'd have an auction on the focsle every now and then. That helped make you keep tidy, otherwise you lost your gear.

One time when we went ashore to the Yankee stores, you could always buy better stuff there. You could buy candies. I remember one place we went to we were buying their sweets and they gave us each a box of cigars. Trouble

is, they wouldn't keep in the tropics, they'd go off, so we decided we'd get rid of them. We used to get comfort-spun tobacco but that used to go mouldy. It was capstan in a blue and white packet. By the time we got it had gone mouldy and you couldn't smoke it. We were never short of cigarettes. We were smoking Yankee cigarettes most of the time. When we went ashore at Port Moresby we went to the airport, and all the wrecked aircraft used to get bulldozed off the runway and into the scrub at the side. We used to go through there and gather what rations and stuff that were lying around. We also got Perspex from the windows and set up a business making badges for our girlfriends. We used an officer's coat button, heat it up and press it and it would leave an impression and you'd write your girl's name underneath and paint it all up. It finished up quite a professional job. Spent a lot of time polishing them to get them nice and smooth. Used to make them in the shape of a heart mostly. I think a lot of the aircraft are still there, they just bulldozed them into the ground. They were very wasteful the Americans. I remember some big harbours; we would be going across and there was stuff floating everywhere. It was dangerous. We picked up several drums of oil once. There was other boxes and stuff that just fall off the barges and the yanks didn't care. The oil once we used it, we were out at sea, we chucked the empty drums overboard and used them as target practice.

**So, there was just boxes off stuff floating around?**

Yeah boxes of tinned food or could be anything. They were pretty well supplied. When we went ashore, I got off at their wharf. It was loaded with gear. When we got back in our liberty ship to go back, we'd always knock a box or two off.

**You mentioned that you were refuelling somewhere...**

We were refuelling alongside a tanker. The galley blew up; there was a huge fire. We had to rush around with hoses and help, well, we were the main ones in putting it out. I think there was a bloke killed. There was a barge working underneath. They were painting the ship and the barge underneath, and the yanks were all panicking and running around and one jumped overboard and landed on the barge and got killed.

**So, it started in the galley on the tanker?**

Yes. We were halfway through taking oil.

**How did it start?**

Well somebody must have spilt some fat or something and there was a fire in the galley. I could never understand ships catching fire the way they do, because their mostly made of metal, but still, they do.

**With regard to fire fighting, what's the process? Any protective clothing?**

The only safety gear we had was anti-flash gear for action stations. It was this white material. You pull the big thing over your head in case of flashbacks from guns. Up there we were mostly in sandals and shorts. The rules weren't that strict. On the big ships you had to be in the dress of the day. They'd pipe what the dress of the day was, whether it was whites or blues. Up north we were issued with khaki uniforms. We used to buy our own shorts and sandals, which we wore mostly. And t-shirts.

**Did corvette crews get leniency?**

I think the officers were just more lenient on those ships. The only thing we had to do at night, we had to clean up the mess decks up and the officer did

the rounds of a night. At six o'clock we had gunnery practice, what they called the bullfight. But later on, say about seven o'clock he would come around led by the quartermaster. I got caught once. The boys used to play cards and dominoes, or read books. I remember sitting in the corner there when the rounds came around. I was that engrossed in the book I didn't hear the pipe going. You've got to stand to attention when the officer comes through. I got nabbed and got a week's stoppage of leave.

**With fire fighting, I'm assuming you used saltwater.**

Yes, salt water pressurized.

**Tell me about the bullfight.**

Yes. Everybody went to action stations and went through the routine. Imaginary aircraft coming. We had a dummy projectile that we used to whack into the four inch and you catch it as it came out. I remember the first time we went into action I was that used to catching the dummy projectile coming out again, I put the shell in and stood there and caught the hot shell as it came out. I didn't hang onto it long!

# World War Two Service



ABLE SEAMAN  
JOHN DICKMAN  
S/8895

SERVICE	ROYAL AUSTRALIAN NAVY
DATE OF BIRTH	1 MAY 1925
PLACE OF BIRTH	BOWRAL, NSW
DATE OF ENLISTMENT	16 JULY 1943
HOME PORT/PORT DIVISION	SYDNEY, NSW
LOCALITY ON ENLISTMENT	BOWRAL, NSW
NEXT OF KIN	DICKMAN, HOWARD
DATE OF DISCHARGE	21 MAY 1946
POSTING AT DISCHARGE	HMAS Townsville



Australian Government  
Department of Veterans' Affairs