

Doug Wickens: Torpedoman aboard HMAS Nestor

Interviewed by: David Gist

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At: (telephone)

Doug you mentioned to me that you were a torpedoman aboard the *Nestor*.

Yes, that's correct.

Was this a branch that you went into during training or later on?

No. You joined up as a stoker or a seaman or a cook or something like that. The seaman branch, after you had been at sea for awhile and qualified as an AB, became an Able Seaman, if you got the right recommends you took a particular branch. Sometimes when there was a vacancy or you applied for you wanted to become a torpedoman or an AA gunner or a gun layer. The seaman branch, you sort of branched out later on when you became an Able Seaman. I joined in 1938.

A lot of the blokes have said that they joined because there was not a lot of work available. Was that your case?

It wasn't my case because I wanted an apprenticeship and I couldn't get it. The depression was still on

What kind of apprenticeship?

I wanted to be a fitter and turner, or a toolmaker, anything that was available, but there was nothing available at all.

Nobody was hiring?

No, more like firing. The war put an end to the depression, which was one good thing. But it came too late for me. I'd already joined the navy.

I'm assuming you went to *Cerberus*?

Yes. Most everybody went there.

After, where did you get your first draft too?

To the *Australia*, the heavy cruiser.

Were you with the *Australia* in the North Atlantic?

Yep Took some of the AIF away, the Sixth Division which was the first division formed. Took those away and we just carried on to Cape Town and of course Germany had more or less overrun Europe and were getting ready to invade England, and we went there as a backup.

At what point did you get sent to the N-class boats?

I was away about twelve months, came home, Hitler decided not to invade and concentrate on other things. Came home and did a quick upgrade and went overseas again.

Upgrade?

I did an upgrade on my torpedo qualifications and went away again. You went into torpedos or an AA gunner, the close range stuff. You could qualify ASDIC, which is now called sonar; there were a few other branches.

The torpedo set-up, I remember you said to me there was one set of them aboard the *Nestor*.

Yes. They were a set of five tubes, called a pentad. Depending on the ship, you would have a set of four or three, very rarely a single. *Australia* had two sets of four, one port and one starboard. The *Nestor* was a lot narrower than a heavy cruiser. You're going from ten thousand tons down to two thousand

tons, so they could mount them in the centre and fire them either side. Just wind them around manually and you could fire them port or starboard. You'll see the tubes mounted after the funnel. On the pompom deck, there are the tubes there, and you can wind them around port or starboard. There was a set of five.

I'm assuming the torpedoes were stored below decks.

Oh no. In the tubes. They weighted two tons. You can't manoeuvre those on a moving ship. They're stored in the tubes ready. They don't carry reloads. They carry reloads on submarines, but ships don't carry reloads.

So when you leave port you've got five torpedos and that's it?

Yes. There about twenty feet long. There's a lot of intricate machinery in them. They've got to have directions, they've got to have a gyro compass, a huge air bottle pumped up to about ten thousand psi, there's an engine in them, and about a thousand pounds' worth of explosive. There's a depth keeping device, they're not simple pieces of machines. They're very complex.

In your job you learned all this?

That's right. We had to be able to strip them down and put them together again, but this was something you couldn't do on a ship. Once they were in the tubes locked in and the ship was moving, they were just locked in. All you could do was keep an eye on the pressure in the air bottles and that's it. You can't do much else. The explosives are all attached ready primers, detonators the lot. They're ready to fire.

How are you able to aim them?

You don't aim them; you aim the ship. They're locked in ninety degrees to the fore and aft line of the ship. And the ship is manoeuvred to give you a spread.

You don't just fire them off straight at the one target. The ship's turning slightly and it gives you a fan spread so you're hoping to hit something.

You mentioned the air bottle; is that how they're launched?

No there's a cordite charge that launches them. The air pressure is to assist the engine, which is a semi-diesel type of engine. It fires up the diesel like the glow plugs on the diesel, it fires up and we used to run ours on shale oil, which gave it a semi-diesel which in accommodation with the compressed air. It left a trail but there's nothing you could do about that. The Japanese ran their's on oxygen. Its dangerous to have on board, well, everything's dangerous aboard a ship, but we opted for shale oil. Left a track. Japanese long-range torpedoes, I don't think they left a track. Their torpedoes were good. I couldn't tell you what the Germans ran, there's all sorts of different methods of propulsion. We opted for shale oil and compressed air.

I'm assuming that in your job your action station with the torpedoes or did you have several?

I had several [laughs]. Today it's called multi-tasking. In our day you just had three different places to run. Depth charges, they were in our ambit. the other was the low power electrical switchboard that was down below. Low power and high power in the one room it was quite big really for a destroyer, ten feet by fifteen feet. It was full of switchboards, motors and batteries.

Depth charges, how did they launch them?

You dropped a diamond pattern. There was a rack at the stern. They rolled one out, there's a slight pause, of course the ship is underway all the time at a designated speed, then you drop another one and fire two, and then drop another one which gave you five. If you put a dot on a piece of paper and go

forward a bit and put three and go forward a bit and put one, you'll find there's a diamond pattern. And then you go like hell and get out of the way.

Were you working on the depth charges when you guys got the sub?

Yes. It's a sad thing when you look back on it. Fifty blokes lost their lives, and we never even met them.

Did you hang around long?

That's right.

Is it true that submarines used to fire oil to try and fool you?

On yes, that's an old ploy. They'd stick some clothing in, a drop of oil, a few pieces of wooden grating, anything, and punch it out, because in their case it's a blast of compressed air they launch their torpedoes with. You get in to Germany on the internet, the U-boats, they acknowledge the loss to HMAS *Nestor*. In the Bay of Biscay.

U-127?

That's him.

Clarrie Atwell was telling me that it turned out that they were on their maiden patrol.

Yes, I did get it up on the internet but I can't remember. I remember looking that up. Poor buggers. It was their maiden patrol, but they were part of a force heading toward a convoy coming up from South America or Cape Town, not sure. A wolf pack was forming up and getting ready.

I've never served in the forces, like a lot of the public. Are you of the view that you were just doing your job?

Exactly right. That what it was all about. They were ordinary people like us. They were doing their job, and we were doing ours.

Wars never get fought by the buggers who start them.

I don't know why the kinds and queens and members of parliament can't fight it out.

There'd be fewer of them.

Hand to hand combat. Be good to watch!

So when the lookouts actually see the submarine, you caught them on the surface?

That's right. They charged their batteries over night. Nowadays you get submarines which run on nuclear power all the time, up above and down below. Down below they had to work on electricity to drive their motors. You can't run an engine down below; there's not enough oxygen to go around. They charge their batteries over night and then run all day underneath on their batteries.

I'm assuming that when you saw the sub, the captain sounded action stations. Were you on the depth charges?

Depth charges. Because before dawn every day the ship went to first degree of readiness, while it was dark, before first light when you're at sea. I don't know if the routine is still used today, but before first light the whole ship is closed up and everything is checked. All the instruments are lined up, it's all reported through to the bridge and you just stand there like a bottle of milk getting cold. People fall out after the sun starts to come up. So I think we would have been at action stations.

What does a depth charge look like?

It looks like a garbage bin with a hundred and fifty pound of TNT in it. With a primer with a pistol. The pistol, form a picture in your mind of a revolver, a

pistol two detonators when it reaches a depth, they were set in fifty foot increments, so you could set them fifty, one hundred, one hundred fifty, two hundred, two hundred fifty, three hundred, and when it reached its pre-determined depth it fired the thing of mercury which fires a primer, which fires the hundred and fifty pound of TNT. And the fact that its in water, water has the tamping effect, like if you lit off a cracker. Some of them you can just about hold the base of them when it goes bang. Put it in a letterbox and it'll blow the letterbox to pieces because it has a tamping effect. The explosion is contained well in water. There's a hell of an explosion underwater. It contains the explosion and increases the explosive value.

The work that you guys did in the Mediterranean. When the *Nestor* got clobbered it was guarding the Malta convoy. You guys were under a fair amount of pressure from air attack from the German air force?

German air force. That's right. It was pretty ferocious and we were getting tired. There's an end to you how long you can carry on. We'd been attacked for three or four days. They had submarines out and the Italian fleet was supposedly bearing down on us but we never sighted them. They had e-boats out, the fast torpedo boats, and aircraft, dive bombers, medium level bombers. It was a ferocious four or five days. We were getting a bit weary. You can only go so far.

When you're on the convoys, was your action station on the torpedoes or switchboard?

Mostly on the depth charges. The only reason you'd use your torpedoes is if you were attacking other ships. There were no enemy ships around at that particular time, so we spent our time on the depth charges.

I was doing my background reading. The planes that were attacking you were they Stukas?¹

No, we didn't see it because we were concentrating on picking up the Stukas or the low level bombers. Italians they were. Somebody else spotted the medium level bombers. They weren't dive-bombers that got us. Some say they were, but they weren't. Heinkels² or something like that they were.

Had *Nestor* been attacks by Stukas?

Yes, but the Stukas were concentrating on the merchantmen. There was about five of them. When they couldn't get at them they started on us, because we were there to protect the merchant ships.

Is it true that Stukas make this screaming sound?

Yes. Some of them have sirens on them. That was the story I heard. They just come into a dive and turn the speed on and their going like hell, about four or five hundred mile an hour.

Getting to the day when *Nestor* got clobbered. You were on the depth charges?

Yes, right down aft. The last part, right on the stern.

The bomb struck the starboard side?

Port. One port and one starboard. Supposedly one hit the mast and skidded close to the port side. It exploded in the water and blew a whole in the side of the ship. Once again the water had that tamping effect.

So where you were, did you know that something was wrong?

[Laughs] Did I ever! She lifted three or four feet, a two-thousand-ton ship. Mighty crash, she went up and flopped back into the water, and broke her

¹ Junkers Ju-87 German dive bomber

² Heinkel He-111 German level bomber

back. Frightened hell out of us. Just as if we'd run over a speed hump, at about eighty miles an hour.

So what happened then?

We just lost all power. The order came down to pull out the primers on the depth charges. There was about ten ready; we had to defuse those, and the rot set in because we'd lost all power and we were just flopping around in the ocean. Both boiler rooms were flooded so we had no power. We still had internal communications, but they run on wet cell batteries down in the for'd switchboard. That controlled the instruments, the instruments were still working. But there was no power for the guns, so they all had to be dragged around by hand which was a slower job. We still had internal communications. So we just had to carry on fighting, because once they'd found that the ship was sitting still, we were a prime target. It's easier to hit a target that sitting still than one that's moving. So they concentrated on us then, and they gave us one hell of a time.

The bombs that disabled the ship, they weren't the last plane you had to deal with?

They pick on you then. You're a sitting target then. They love it. I'd probably do the same myself.

Being one of the electricians on board, did you have a lot to do?

There was nothing you could do. There was no power to run the generators. No lights, nothing. All we had left was the power to the instruments, which was firing circuits and internal communications, which is phones.

Clarrie was telling me that some of you guys put explosives down below.

That was the next day. We had a lot to do between what just happened and early the next morning. We had to get all our depth charges, all fifty of them, we had to get them up from down below and throw them over the side. We unloaded all our depth charges. There's quite a lot of depth charges on the upper deck, and each one's got a hundred and fifty pound of TNT in it. It's pretty dangerous when you're under attack. You're not moving. They had to be unloaded, so we just rolled them over the side. We were dumping stuff. We didn't dump any ammunition because the guns were still firing. The other lads who had nothing to do with me were manhandling the ammunition up from the shell handling rooms and the cordite handling rooms. They're all down below, so the stuff had to be brought up by hand to the guns so that we could still fight. At a much slower rate. Everything had to be done by hand. We got rid of the paravanes and the depth charges: we threw them over the side. Not just because they were dangerous, but they were weighing the ship down. We tried to lighten the ship as much as we could. We unscrewed the depth charge throwers, six one-inch diameter bolts, and we threw the depth charge throwers over the side. Just on dusk we closed the stop valves on our torpedoes and fired them and got rid of them. The stop valves on the torpedoes are accessible on the tubes outside. You can close the stop valves and you fire your torpedoes, and they just sink straight to the bottom. We got rid of them to get rid of some weight and explosives off the upper deck. In those days it was about five thousand pound a shot. Each torpedo was about five thousand pound. You could build a mansion for that in 1942. We transferred to the *Javelin* early next morning. That's when they placed the demolition charges.

Was that part of your job?

No. It was part of our job, but I didn't get that thrown at me. I don't know why. I never thought about it. Billy Leston was one, and Vic Downe, he placed one of the charges.

Was that to punch big holes in the bottom of the ship?

Yes, to get rid of it quickly. They didn't want it hanging around. It was a danger to navigation. She would have sunk anyway, but they wanted to get it out of the way quickly.

Tell me about this cat.

[Laughs] Clarrie Attwell said 'what about the cat?' We'd been given the order to abandon ship. It was an orderly affair, not as they depict in the pictures where everybody panics and jumps. It was an orderly affair. We got the order to abandon ship and the *Javelin* came alongside, get the injured off first, and make it as quick as possible because you're a sitting duck while your stopped. *Javelin* weren't happy about it but they were willing to do it for us, as we would have done for them. I forget the captain's name; he was a good bloke. They ran alongside, we got the injured off, and they said 'right, go.' Clarrie said 'what about the cat?' I said 'bugger the cat.' I don't like cats anyway. Clarrie grabbed the cat and stuck it down his overalls and the damn thing scratched him. That was that. He saved the cat.

I heard that there were some blokes sawing the bell off the ship?

Yep. There's a funny story attached to that bell. I'm not sure about the time, but one of the stokers sawed the bell off and I wished him luck, because I wasn't waiting around sawing bells off. He got it off and lost it then. I don't know what happened to it, I know it went to the *Javelin*, and apparently it was

given to the captain. The captain put it ashore in Alexandria, and somehow or other it I don't know whether this is after the war or not, but it came up for auction so he made a bid for it and got it. That was his story. He got it and had it at home. His children were christened with water in the bell. When he died he passed it on to another member of the crew I don't know who it was, and he decided to donate it to the museum at Cerberus, the Flinders Naval Depot, and we all got an invite down, those of us that were left, to the dedication when it was donated. It's still at Flinders Naval Depot, it's in their museum. I don't know if anybody's allowed in Flinders Naval Depot now. But they have got a museum and the bell is still there. I've touched it and got a photo of myself somewhere standing beside it, me and Snowy Davis. It hasn't got HMAS on it, its got HMS, because actually the ships belonged to Britain. We only crewed them. They never ever belonged to Australia, but they were designated HMAS ships. They belonged to the Brits. they were on loan. They allowed us to use HMAS. The bell is still there. They haven't got a clue what it is now, 'what the hell's this? What's this here?'

After you transferred to the *Javelin*, what happened?

I went down to the torpedomen's mess and the RN blokes said to me you want a drink of rum I said yeah I'll be in that I was really thirsty and there was no water to drink during the night. They came down with a condensed milk tin full of rum. I drank about half of it. Then I laid down on the floor and went to sleep. We were really tired, so were they. Everybody was worn out. We hadn't had much sleep at all for days. Its just one of those things; it goes with the job.

They took you to this place outside Alexandria?

HMS *Takila*, it was a fleet air arm station. We were in tents. Was it rough! The tents were in the desert really. You'll probably find it's a suburb of Alexandria. Its right out on the western side of Alexandria. We could see the army stretch past either going or coming from the desert.

I heard about all the watches that went missing.

[Laughs] I'd forgotten about that. If you lost a watch you got two pound, so everybody lost a watch. 'You lose your watch sailor?' 'Yes.'

So you guys got issued with new kit?

New kit if you could call it that. You got the basics. I said to the petty officer on the ship 'what about an overcoat?' 'Son, there's a war on!' You just got a few things to get by. All your stuff was gone.

A lot of the blokes got sent to the *Norman* is that where you went?

Yes. Quite a lot of us got sent to the *Norman*. I can't remember how many.

Was Clarrie a good mate of yours?

Yes, he was in our mess.

He was telling me about how he'd lost his hair pretty early on.

I can't remember that but I'll accept it.

He was telling me about blokes rubbing all sort of stuff into his head.

Oh yes, there was always something on the go. I don't know what Clarrie used for his hair, but it didn't do him much good.

So you used to make your own fun?

Oh God yes. Keep yourself sane. You had to you get into the broad routine We weren't just sitting around in deckchairs. You had a job to do. You could be in two watches; it was four on four off. It got pretty tiring after about a fortnight at sea. You'd read penny dreadfuls, anything that came your way.

Reading a cowboy book Gunnery books they used to call them. Cowboy books, they were always known as gunnery study.

We're getting close to the end. Is there anything you like to add?

Discipline was fairly strict. The friendships you made have lasted forever. There was something about the navy friendships; it goes on today. Something that that army hasn't got or the air force hasn't got, which is the friendships, the camaraderie that we have on a ship at sea, well that's it. You're totally independent of everything else. You're not depending on anyone. The friendships you made on ships are just as strong today, although we're getting down in numbers now, I can assure you. We're disappearing at an alarming rate.

You mentioned discipline. It was fairly strict?

Yes, it was. It had to be.

But they didn't still use the cat o nine tails?

I met some officers that would have liked to. No many but some. It was strict, and you conformed. Smaller ships, they were all a lot easier going than the bigger ships. The bigger ones were all spit and polish. We did a lot of sea time, anything from destroyers down, did a lot of sea time, whereas the bigger ships spent a fortnight in harbour. It was wonderful, a fortnight in harbour if you got it. Occasionally you had to clean the boilers. It would go into dockyard hands and clean all the boilers. You'd dry dock the ship clean all the weed off, because the weed still grows on the ship while it's moving.

World War Two Service



L/SEA
DOUGLAS FREDERICK WICKENS
22668

SERVICE	ROYAL AUSTRALIAN NAVY
DATE OF BIRTH	30 APRIL 1921
PLACE OF BIRTH	BANKSTOWN, NSW
DATE OF ENLISTMENT	12 DECEMBER 1938
HOME PORT/PORT DIVISION	SYDNEY, NSW
NEXT OF KIN	ALBERT
DATE OF DISCHARGE	14 DECEMBER 1944
POSTING AT DISCHARGE	HMAS Penguin



Australian Government
Department of Veterans' Affairs