

MY LIFE

LEADING SIGNALMAN JOHN VERNON DALLOW NZ11420

I joined the RNZN ON 13TH March 1947, one day under the minimum aged of 15 years 3 months, as a Seaman Boy 2nd Class. This resulted in giving me the doubtful privilege of being the youngest person in the RNZN until November when the next class of boys joined.

Back then, 6 boys were selected alternatively to become VS Boys or Boy Telegraphists. It was the turn of VS Boys for our class (John Barrett, Peter Shepherd, Doug Adams, George Walker-Redman, Don Smith and John Dallow), so I volunteered to become one. The sole reason for doing so being that you were given a badge of crossed flags to wear on your right arm. This rather appealed to me, as by then, I realized it would be a long time before a Boy would received a badge of any form.

Following 6 weeks of basic training, we were introduced into the world of Visual Signals. Our classroom was about half way up the water tower which was accessed by a steep vertical iron ladder. Our Instructor was [Yeoman Eddie Telford](#) who was a Signal Boy on the Achilles at the [Battle of the River Plate](#) in 1939. We never knew anything of this until many years later when he became quite famous as one of the 8 remaining survivors of the River Plate. His eventual funeral was the largest I had ever been to at the Naval Base. He is forever remembered at the Navy Museum as he visually dictates the story of the River Plate.

Eddie was a dedicated Instructor, teaching us the shapes colours and meanings of the then 81 flags and pendants of the Naval Code of Signals, together with semaphore at 15 words per minute and flashing light at 10 words per minute.

In May 1948 after spending 14 months on [Motuihe Island](#), we were drafted to the cruiser Bellona. Our first cruise was to take the Governor General, Sir Bernard Freyberg, his wife and Lady-in-Waiting, to visit 22 Pacific Islands. I doubt whether it had ever been done previously or since. Only 3 islands had a wharf. For the remainder we would anchor or heave to near the surrounding reef. The only vessel most of the islands had ever seen was a small trading schooner, so they came out in about 20 canoes to inspect us. The usual procedure on arrival was to launch the motor boat which carried the official party. On leaving the ship, the motor boat would stop and we would fire a 21-gun salute. The Bellona was equipped with saluting guns which were designed to make a big bang and produce lots of smoke. This scared the hell out of the natives in their canoes who probably thought we had come to introduce some gunboat diplomacy, as they took off rapidly for the shore. The GG who was all dressed up like a Christmas Tree with his tri-corn hat may have scared them some more.

The motor boat returned to take another small party ashore which included 2 Signal Boys who had to set up and man a shore signal station. I always remembered the island of [Kadavu](#) mainly because it was one of two islands where all the women were bare breasted which was a bit of an eye full for two sixteen year old Boys, who 70 years ago had lived a rather sheltered life! The other island was [Nuie](#).

After setting up our shore signal stations, it was unlikely that there would be anything to do until after the official ceremony so my mate decided to go off for half an hour and check out the talent. No sooner had he gone when I was called up from Bellona with a signal. I called out to a group of island boys

hanging around, asking if any could write in English. One volunteered, so I gave him a pencil and the signal pad telling him to write down exactly what I dictated. At the end of the signal. I receipted it and then pick up the signal pad and re-writing it neatly for it was for the GG's ADC. To my absolute horror, any resemblance to what I had dictated and what was written was pure nonsense! Other than picking out an isolated word, the rest was garbage. When my mate returned I told him what had happened and he managed to figure out an odd word. There was only one alternative, request a repeat of the entire signal. No one knows better than us that you don't receipt a signal and then half an hour later, ask for it to be repeated, so we knew there would be a Court of Inquiry on our return. The big problem now as to think up a reason for it that would satisfy the Chief Yeoman. After about an hour, we thought of something and thoroughly rehearsed it.

On our return to the [Bellona](#), I had scarcely out my right food down on the quarterdeck when the Quartermaster taps me on the shoulder saying that both of us were to report immediately to the CYS on the Flag deck. The conversation went something like this:

DD. "You wanted to see us Chief?"

CYS. "Dallow. I have been in the Navy for 14 years. You, I understand have been in for 14 months, yet you have experienced a truly unique occasion".

DD. (innocently) "What was that Chief?"

CYS. (with a slight snarl) "That Dallow, was receipting a signal and then half an hour later, requesting it to be repeated in full. (saintly) Pray, enlighten me on the reason for this."

DD. "Well Chief, we had no sooner received the original signal when we saw a tribe of huge pigs approaching us. They had big tusks and they were violently rooting up the ground and charging everywhere. We dropped everything and rapidly climbed up 2 trees. They were probably upset with the fact that their babes and small children had been killed and were now being eaten at the feast for the GG. When they had gone, we looked for the signal but it probably been trampled in the scrub, so we had no alternative but to asked for it to be repeated."

He glared at both of us for about 10 seconds and when he said 'Get out of my sight' we knew we had won.

Another island which I well-remembered was [Mauke](#). The only means of getting supplies ashore was to unload them from the Trading Schooner into a small boat. Two islanders were stationed on each side of the small gap in the reef to guide the boat through.

It was somewhat ironic that some 30 years later a nephew of mine was marrying a girl originally from [Mauke](#) but now living in New Zealand. Her mother came out from [Mauke](#) for the wedding and I had a chat to her. She remembered the visit of the GG very well. I had a large photo taken by Tudor Collins, who was the official photographer for the cruise taken of the GG in the motor boat being guided through the reef. She knew the names of the two islanders doing the guiding so I gave her the photo.

More to follow

