

# LIFE OF ALEXANDER VINRACE EAGAR

By Caragh Sleath & Madeline Blyth – Alex's sisters

Alexander Vinrace Eagar was born on 13 March 1917 in Brisbane, the first son of Kingsley and Kathleen Eagar. He had an older sister Caragh, a younger brother John and a much younger sister Madeline. His early schooling was in Sydney. His father, a Master Mariner, was away from home for extended periods mainly in the Pacific, Middle & Far East. Many of the ships on which he served commenced and ended their voyages in Sydney or Brisbane. The family tended to move around as his father's work demanded. Alex boarded at a preparatory school in Sydney very early in his school life. His letter to "Mummie" in Queensland indicates Caragh was also in Sydney at that time. **Illustrations 1 & 2**

The family permanently moved to Brisbane in 1926 when his father was appointed as towage superintendent with AUSN Co who operated the tugs for the port of Brisbane. Alex, or Buster as he was nicknamed, completed school at Brisbane State High School.

Alex was very involved with the Sea Scouts and sailing and continued this interest into his work life. Near Christmas 1933, when aged 16, he penned a poem of 36 verses, called *The Launching* in that describes the launch of two Snipe sailing boats built by the boys of his Sea Scouts Troop at Kangaroo Point. This describes the people involved with this venture and the competition with the other Sea Scout Troop - *Mowbray Mob*. Most frequently the stories and poems he wrote focussed on group activities and achievements and indicated a love and respect for the sea and seafarers. It is also ironic that these writings sometimes centred on tragedies at sea. **Illustrations 3 & 4**

Alex certainly was a complex character with contrasting interests and abilities in writing and sketching and had an outstanding level of fitness. Before gyms were fashionable, Alex built himself one under the typical wooden Queensland house on stumps where the family lived. Madeline can remember him doing chin ups with herself wrapped in his legs. After leaving school Alex worked for Thomas Brown, Importers, Brisbane in the Customs Section. He maintained his interest in fitness and regularly swam and boxed. Much to his parents horror he was invited to box at the Brisbane Stadium – then Brisbane's professional boxing venue.

In contrast, John, his younger brother, was more interested in social activities. A family story tells that when working overtime Alex would bring his evening meal from home so as to save the meal allowance while John would spend it all and probably more then ask the family for a small loan until payday. Alex's frugality was due to his saving for his flying lessons. . **Illustration 5.**

His artistic abilities were mainly in portraits, particularly of film stars of that era. However the nautical theme comes through with sketches of the Brisbane River with sailing boats so typical of the Brisbane River in the mid 1930s'. **Illustration 6.** He also sketched a forest scene, dark and foreboding, which his sister Caragh still has in her lounge room. She has always cherished this as she felt that this reflected his inner struggle with service and adventure while recognising the dangers involved in the world.

At that time he learnt to fly, obtaining his licence in the late 1930s' at Archerfield, which then was Brisbane's main airport. Madeline remembers well flying with him. It was around this time he became a member of the Naval Reserve, again reflecting his love of the sea and his yearn for adventure.

## RAN SERVICE

Alex joined the RAN on 14 September 1939 and was posted initially to *HMAS Penguin* then *Kanimbla & Cerberus*. A newspaper photo shows him leading those of the Naval Reserve in Brisbane on 9 October 1939, within a month of the commencement of WW2. **Illustration 7**

Caragh remembers him being quite ill from his vaccinations as he boarded the train in Brisbane to travel to Sydney when he joined *Kanimbla*.

Madeline, or Heckie as her brothers knew her, was at school in Brisbane when both Alex and John joined the services. As well as some of his literary efforts she still has many of his letters describing naval life. These cover his initial posting to Flinders Naval Depot in December 1939, his service on *Westralia* and the last one from the *Sydney* written in Fremantle on 17 October 1941, only a month from the fateful day. Here his literary skills shone as none of these letters have any indication of being censored yet they all give personal and interesting accounts of his naval experiences and where he was at the time.

### **Illustration 8, 9 & 10**

On 4 December 1939 he was promoted to Sub Lieutenant and on 17 January 1940 joined *Westralia*. It was here he served with a friend Frank Buckland who survived the war and eventually married Alex's cousin. **Illustration 11**

In a letter from *Westralia* he indicated he enjoyed Perth, the small "burgh" as he called it, and went surfing and visited the hills. He also said how glad he was to be back in Perth from Darwin as he could now get some unbroken sleep and taste some fresh food after a long period of rice 3 times a day. But then he says he and the crew had not lost weight while in the tropics and they had some difficulty in getting in the their blues. Again the focus is on physical fitness with "a fair amount of exercise" in Darwin including hockey and cricket and in Fremantle was taking a Union team ashore to play the Army and PT onboard. All this sounds a bit more than a "fair amount of exercise".

It was at this time that fate stepped in. While on *Westralia* he was accepted to undertake a meteorology course in England, which was to commence around, 22 September 1941. He was however posted from *Westralia* to *Sydney* on 19 September 1941. He was at that time aged 24 years. **Illustration 12**

Madeline remembers him telling her that he was observer on *Westralia's* Supermarine Walrus seaplane. It is very likely that he was on or near the *Sydney's* plane on that fateful day.

It is also ironic that his brother, John, who joined the RAAF was killed while training at Narromine NSW on 11 November 1940 just one year before Alex was lost with the *Sydney*. The deaths of both brothers were very deeply felt by his parents and his two sisters with the added difficulty of being unable to understand how Alex's life and the lives of the other 644 on *Sydney* could end without trace.

Looking back his writings and sketches gives one a feeling that he had a premonition of some bigger event. His comments about girls are quite rare as if he knows there are more serious pursuits required of him and time is short. In one letter to Madeline he said;

*"I see from your letter that you and John went for a walk with Fay & Co. John must certainly be a more friendly fellow than me, I never got that far, did I?"*

Had he survived, Alex would now be 86 years old in 2003. To his family, he will always be the fit young man in his naval uniform. **Illustration 13**

## Illustrations

	Description of File	File names
1	Letter from Prep school around 1922	Alex 1922.jpg
2	Children photo 1920	KC KJ AV 1920.jpg
3	Sea Scout photo Alex	Sea Scouts 4.jpg
4	Nautical poem <i>The Launching</i>	Alex Sea Scout Poem 1933.doc
5	Alex, Madeline & John – mid 1930s'	Alex, Madl, John1.jpg
6	Brisbane River sketch mid 1930s'	Alex Art 2.jpg
7	Alex leading Naval Reserve - 9 October 1939	Alex 13.jpg
8	Personal Letter of 16 December 1939	Alex ltr 3A.jpg Alex ltr 3B.jpg
9	Personal Letter of 5 June 1940	Alex ltr 4A.jpg Alex ltr 4B.jpg Alex ltr 4C.jpg
10	Personal Letter of 17 October 1941	Alex ltr 1A.jpg Alex ltr 1B.jpg
11	Alex on HMAS Westralia	Alex Westralia.jpg
12	Service History	Service History.jpg
13	Alex - RAN Officer	Alex 1.jpg