

ALAN CUNNINGTON

Alan came from a happy childhood, an only child of elderly parents. He played cricket, had a fine tenor voice, trained as an engineer and loved to travel and attend operas and movies. On a trip to Fiji, Alan met Mrs Vickers who was impressed and thought he would make a nice son in law. She invited him to visit if ever he was in Launceston, Tasmania. Alan did visit when he worked at the Mount Isa Mine, and fell in love with Yvonne, Mrs Vickers second daughter. Eighteen months later he proposed to her when she was just seventeen. Mrs Vickers asked him to postpone marriage until Yvonne was eighteen.

They married the evening before her eighteenth birthday. Alan was twenty-five. Two days before the wedding Alan arrived in Launceston and they bought the engagement and wedding ring. He was given only three days leave from training at Crib Point, so they had a one-day honeymoon. It was first love for both of them. They were together just over two years, and because they spent so little time together, it was like one continuous honeymoon. Alan wrote beautiful letters, which Yvonne kept lovingly tied with blue ribbon.

Alan joined the Navy at a time when war was a long way off. It was more a way to travel, one of his passions that led him to join up. He was a forthright sort of chap, who did not suffer fools gladly and spoke his mind.

Once war broke out he had a problem. He was a pacifist at heart, wanted desperately to spend time with the woman he idolised and be there when his first child was born. Jessie was born ten months after they were married, but Alan did not see her until she was eight months old. This made him dissatisfied and unhappy in his job.

Added to this his wife was now living in the 'big city' of Melbourne, away from her relations and friends, and she was terribly homesick and lonely. Alan's training on *HMAS Cerebus* and *HMAS Canberra* was completed by the end of March 1940 and he was posted to *HMAS Hobart* in April 1940 for troop ship escorts. He was not to see his wife or baby until 28 February 1941. So after waiting patiently for years to marry Yvonne, fate seemed to determine to keep them apart. In March he was posted to *HMAS Lonsdale* and then in the October, he was posted to *HMAS Sydney*.

He had problems with Navy bureaucracy and was unimpressed from his *HMAS Hobart* days with the way the British had such power over Australia and her ships. He was concerned that *Sydney* was in need of a refit, but adamant that the Navy would not send them to sea unless the ship was one hundred percent safe. Several meetings with Captain Burnett are alluded to in his letters. He was desperate to get out of the Navy to look after his insecure wife, who was struggling to cope with life and her little daughter.

Alan only joined *HMAS Sydney* on 7 October 1941. He compared baby notes with his mate 'Curly' Ayton, who had a young baby about the same age, and judging by his almost daily letters, he probably talked of nothing else.

I will let Alan tell you about his arrival on board *Sydney*, and how he finally got his wish to leave the Navy, until fate stepped in and robbed him of his chance at life.

Mess 6

HMAS Sydney

C/- GPO

Oct 9 1941

My dear Yvonne,

As you can see darling, I am on board once again. The ship is exactly the same as the Hobart; it will be here several days I believe. It makes one swear to be tried around here.

Old Lofty Wood left the ship, I never saw him as he left in Melbourne.

There is no fear of this ship going overseas, so that is one worry off my mind. I received your four letters also the one pound, thank you

darling, I can say it was badly needed. You poor dear, alone in that house, you did the best thing by going down to Sandringham to mum.

Don't let the place, I would hate to have strangers tramping all about it.

I suppose the dog is growing up fast, he will be as tall as Jessie soon.

Well darling I have to get the lie of the land in the ship before I say anything, as you have to be very careful.

There are many Hobart chaps on board so I am well known already so

they know my form. Curly Ayton has a nice little baby boy. He was showing me the photos the other day. Write as often as you can

darling and tell me about yourself and little Jessie, as I look forward so keenly to your loving letters. The Chief A.O is a very decent chap, and

he is very anxious to make me feel at home, as he has heard about me, news travels fast through the fleet. Give me a little time dear before I make a move, and when I do I will start the ball rolling. I think that is all the news for now sweetheart, so will close now with all my love to you both.

Your husband, Alan xxxx

Alan's short time on *HMAS Sydney* was not a happy time for him or the ship's hierarchy. A month and more than a dozen letters later, Alan 'made his move', and wrote to tell Yvonne.

Mess 6 HMAS Sydney

Nov 6 1941

At sea, bound for Fremantle.

My dearest Yvonne,

News at last, I shall be off this ship within the month. I have applied for my discharge from the service and the Captain has told me to state my case in writing, which I have done. They are typing it out, and all I have to do is sign it and away it goes to the Naval Board. My discharge will be strongly recommended. When you reply to me my darling make no mention of this matter in your letters, because they suspect me of stirring up discontent amongst the men so may open your letters to me. I hopped into them and told them what I thought of things, the captain told me that he does not want me on his ship and to apply for a discharge, which I have done. When the ship arrives in Fremantle it will go off with all my heartfelt wishes for success. Do not tell anyone dear, keep it to yourself till I give you further details. Well

darling we are in the Great Australian Bight and the ship is rolling all over the place, my inside does not feel too good.

I am longing to return to my darling, I do miss you so, I lay in my hammock at night thinking of you and wondering what my darling is doing. I long for your arms around me once again. I sincerely hope Jessie is quite well again dear....

We arrive at Fremantle on Sunday morning, I believe. I do not think it will be long before this ship returns to Sydney as one of the gun turrets is in a bad state. Well darling keep your chin up, it won't be long now.

Those historians and members of the Parliamentary Inquiry might like to take note of the assessment of the ship's gun turrets by a crewmember on the 6 November 1941. In a 'Letter of Proceeding' written by Captain Joseph Burnett the day before, on 5 November 1941, Burnett stated that extensive exercises involving 6' sub calibre and full calibre ...and 4' close range weapons exercises had highlighted a defect in the training of A turret and this had been remedied.^{iv} Did Alan know that the fault had been remedied, or did he still believe more extensive work was required?

In a letter dated 8 November, which Alan excitedly sent by airmail, he told Yvonne that his request for discharge from the service was taken down, typed and all three copies had been signed today, and would be sent to the Admiral and Naval Board.

Alan's final, poignant letter, dated 10 November 1941 is as follows:

Mess 6

HMAS Sydney

Nov 10 1941

At Fremantle

My dearest Yvonne,

Well darling the ship is sailing tomorrow (Tuesday). I think we are going north for a few days escorting the troop ship, and after this trip the ship is coming around to Sydney arriving sometime I believe in the last week of this month; so then dearest one will probably know my fate, which I am confident will be just what we want. I wore the socks you knitted me dearest one, they are perfect, I strolled off ship the ship last night to pose those letters to you, I had a meal ashore and came back to the ship after a couple of hours and my dearest I never had a drink, I spent 1/6 for the meal that was all the expenditure. Received an Australian Comforts Fund hamper, very nice too, the items were tinned peaches, cream, dates, plumb pudding, razor blades, shaving cream, tooth paste and brush and tobacco. All the ship's company received one, they came from NSW division of the Comfort's Fund. The weather here today darling is very warm indeed, I hope the ship does not go very far north as I do not want to roast. I do miss you my sweet one, I lay in my hammock last night and was thinking of my darling for hours, longing for the time to come around when I can hold you in my arms and tell you how much I love you. If the discharge comes through dear and the deferred pay is a nice sum, I would love to take you to Sydney for a couple of weeks we would have a wonderful time together. Lets hope dearest that things come out that way to make it possible. Well my darling one, will close now with all my love to you both.

From your loving husband Alan xxxxxx

p.s I love you my dearest with all my heart and soul.

I would like to extend my considerable gratitude to Jesse for sharing her parent's story with us. The 10 November letter was the last words Yvonne was to receive from Alan, although we can imagine him writing screeds more as the *Sydney* escorted *Zealandia* to the Sunda Straits and returned for home. This final letter was covered with Yvonne's tears.

Yvonne's last letters to Alan were returned to her from the Dead Letter Office, and remained unopened until she shared them with her daughter in the summer of 1989. Inside was the picture of his wife and daughter, which he had asked for, but never got to see. These letters show that Yvonne, although terribly worried by Alan's silence, did not suspect anything was amiss, even on the 24 November.