

# REFLECTIONS ON MY FATHER

by Ellen Underwood

on the occasion of the wake for her father, lost at sea during World War 2

May 11<sup>th</sup> 2008

We would not be gathered here today, if 67 years ago there had not been a boatload of young Germans, and a shipload of young Australians sailing off the Western Australian coast, whose job it was to try and kill each other.

As obscenely barbarous as this sounds, it is what happens in war.

But this is just the background to what I want to talk about today. I want to take a personal view, and specifically to reflect on one of those young men, my father Allan Rowe. Some people might say he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Or perhaps it was his destiny to be in that place at that time.

As the Alexandrian philosopher Plotinus wrote:

*Being born,  
Coming into this particular body,  
These particular parents,  
And in such a place,  
And what we call 'external circumstances'  
Form a unity, and are  
As it were,  
Spun together.*

Talking about my father raises complicated and emotional issues. But basically my story is about a missing part of my childhood....a part I didn't miss until I was grown up. It is also a story told from the perspective of someone who is almost 66 years old.

Allan's parents were John Newberry Rowe and Alice Rubina McFadden. They met in Kalgoorlie, where both their families lived, in about 1910. John was in his early 20s, and working as a pharmacist. Alice Rubina, aged 19, worked in the drapery shop opposite. John was very straight-laced. Alice Rubina was not. She was pretty to boot, and loved to dance and sing the popular songs of the day. Perhaps he found her irresistible. Perhaps she thought she could change him.

By the Rowe standards of the day, the McFaddens were from the wrong side of the tracks. Nevertheless, John and Alice moved from Kalgoorlie to Perth, got married and produced a daughter and six sons. My father Allan was the eldest son. He was born on December 1<sup>st</sup>, 1915, in Murchison Street, Subiaco.

Perversely, and much to the chagrin of John, the children inherited the McFadden temperament, and took after their mother. Allan in particular was a determined and independent child, never willing to be under his father's thumb.

During the time the children were growing up, the family lived in Kitchener Street, Shenton Park. And the older they grew, the more battles there were with their father. It is indicative of the man, as well as the times, that he encouraged the boys to fight each other, and even built a small

boxing ring in the backyard, and equipped the boys with boxing gloves so that they could pursue 'the noble and manly art'. I make no judgements about my grandfather John. He was a product of his time, and a respected and well-loved pharmacist, and he wanted all his children to do well, as we all do.

The six brothers were adventurous and enterprising. They somehow acquired an 18-foot racing skiff, which they would carry down to the river at Matilda Bay to compete in yacht races. After the race they would carry it all the way back to Kitchener Street. They also sailed this craft on forays to Rottnest on several occasions, indicating remarkable seamanship, as the 18-foot skiff was by no means an ocean-going craft. The youngest boys would have not yet been teenagers when they sailed off on these adventures, and I doubt the yacht carried any safety equipment.

When he was still only a boy at primary school Allan was expected to contribute to the family coffers. His father provided him with a wheelbarrow and supplies of fruit and vegetables which Allan then hawked door-to-door around Shenton Park.

There is an amusing story about Allan, when he was a teenager in the early days of the Depression. He was walking home one day when he noticed that one of their neighbours (an elderly woman) had put up a sign on her gate, inviting passers-by to come in for a cup of tea and a biscuit, for ninepence. Allan went in, and ordered a tea and biscuit. The woman knew Allan, of course, and asked him to sit down, and then disappeared. Looking out the window Allan spotted her at the woodheap chopping wood to light the fire to boil the kettle. He immediately went out, and chopped the wood, carried it in and lit the fire. Tea was made, but then the woman apologised, saying she had no biscuits. So Allan ran home, got some biscuits, and brought them back. He and the old lady then sat down together and enjoyed the tea and biscuits, after which Allan paid his ninepence and went home.

After he left school, the Depression was at its height, and Allan could not find work. His relationship with his father was also an unhappy one. So he left home. Eventually he found his way up to the Kalgoorlie goldfields. There he stayed with his uncle Ernie McFadden (this was Len McFadden's father, and Len is with us here today), and perhaps also for a while with one of his Rowe relations. Allan then worked for a while on a farm at Three Springs, before finally moving across to Mildura in Victoria where there were jobs in fruit and grape picking. Perhaps there were also Rowe relations in Mildura. There must have been plenty of them around, as John Newbury's father was one of 23 children! While he was in Mildura, his brother Ron was married, and Allan sent a sugar bowl with a bunch of grapes on the lid.

When war was declared, Allan wanted to be in it, as did so many young men who had come to manhood during the Depression years. According to his brother Jack, Allan immediately returned to Perth by train, and en route he joined the Army in Kalgoorlie, the Navy in Northam and the Air Force in Perth. Perhaps it was his enjoyment of sailing that decided him on the Navy.

I still have his Royal Australian Navy enlistment form. He is described as brown-haired, brown-eyed and with a "fresh complexion". I can never understand why they did not add that he was extremely handsome. They also recorded that he had a small scar on his throat. This was a legacy from his having had diphtheria when he was a child and for a while had a breathing tube inserted into his throat.

Allan loved the naval life, and worked and studied to improve his naval skills. He sailed on several ships, including *Whyalla*, *Canberra*, *Manōra* and then the minesweeper *Bonthorpe*. He was thrilled to be posted to *HMAS Sydney*, the pride of the Australian fleet, which he joined just in time for its last fateful voyage. He also didn't forget his family....from the time of his enlistment to the time of his marriage, Allan sent home ten shillings a week from his pay to his mother. Ten

shillings equals one dollar, and this doesn't sound much, but ten shillings in 1940 is equivalent to maybe \$100 today, and must have been a high percentage of Allan's weekly navy paycheque.

Incidentally, all six of the Rowe boys enlisted, four in the Navy and two in the Army. Five returned safely, although some of them by the skin of their teeth.

There is another amusing story about Allan from his navy days. His mother Alice Rubina was constantly redecorating the house (on one occasion she painted the bathroom blood-red) and re-arranging the furniture (Roger says I have inherited this characteristic). By re-arranging I don't mean only within a room, but from room to room. Every time Allan came home on leave he would find the house seriously re-arranged. So one time he brought home a great length of rope and looped it through all the furniture and secured each item in place with powerful naval knots, so as to ensure he would be greeted by a familiar scene on his next leave.

In November 1940 Allan met Jessie, my mother. Jessie had left her parent's Group Settlement farm near Manjimup and moved to the city to find work and adventure and make new friends. Here is an excerpt from her story about those days:

*"[One day] my friend Iris Wood took me on a blind date. Her boyfriend was in the Navy and was coming ashore with one of his mates. The mate was a sailor called Allan Rowe. I agreed to go along on the understanding that if her friend was better than my guy, she would have him and I would have hers. As it turned out, I didn't want to swap.*

*We met in Barrack Street, midway between Hay and Murray Streets. Allan was 25 and I was 19. He was on the minesweeper HMAS Bonthorpe. From that day on, when the ship was in port he would meet me every night after work. We would have dinner in town and then go for a walk around Mounts Bay Road to near the Brewery, then back and up Jacob's Ladder to Kings Park and then down into town. We saw many movies and went to plays at His Majesty's – my favourite place.*

*We celebrated our engagement with dinner at 'The Wattle Café' in St George's Terrace."*

Jessie and Allan were married in Manjimup just a year after they first met, on September 18th 1941.

Mum remembers it was quite a day. Allan and his mother and father, his sister May, May's daughter and Grandma McFadden had all driven down together in the one car from Perth, and stayed with Jessie's parents in their tiny Group Settlement cottage on the farm. I grew up in this cottage and still cannot imagine how they all fitted in. On the morning of her wedding, Mum had to get up early and help her father get the cows in and do the milking (both of her brothers being away at the War), then draw water from the well, which was heated in a kerosene tin on the kitchen stove so they could all have baths. It poured with rain all day. At the last minute, Allan's naval mate, who was going to be the Best Man, had his leave cancelled and sent word that he could not be there. All of Allan's brothers, and both of Jessie's brothers were away at the War, so Mum had to walk down to the next-door farm to ask Claude Luff to fill in. Claude was sick in bed with the flu, but Mum gave him "no option", and he nobly crawled from his sickbed and did his duty.

The bridesmaids wore dresses of a very vivid pink – it was the only material available in Mrs Shad's haberdashery shop in that time of war-time scarcity.

There was a wonderful account of the wedding in the Warren-Blackwood Times. It said, in part:

*The bride, who entered the church on the arm of her father, was charmingly attired in a long-sleeved, full-skirted, white taffeta gown, trimmed with self-ruching and buttons to the waist at the back. The veil was held in place by a coronet of orange blossom, and she carried a bouquet of pink-tipped white roses.*

The quick-change from the milking outfit of earlier in the day would have done Superman proud!

The report goes on:

*The reception was held at Dixvale Hall, where over 100 guests partook of the wedding breakfast at tables nicely decorated with Crowea and Iceland poppies.*

Mum remembers one other highlight of the reception: Allan and his father for once joined forces, and between them dissuaded Alice Rubina from giving an impromptu performance of the popular song "Macushla".

The newspaper report concluded:

*The bridegroom's leave being rather short, the couple left the next day by car for Perth, and are now living at Bayview Mansions, Claremont.*

The journalist failed to point out that on this romantic journey to Perth, in addition to the bride and groom, the car also contained Allan's parents John and Alice, his Grandma McFadden, and his sister May and her daughter, and that the trip was undertaken mostly on gravel roads in ceaseless pouring rain. It seems to me that my mother and father must both have had a wonderful sense of humour and confidence in each-other to survive this journey with their new marriage intact.

<sup>Eight</sup>~~Four~~ weeks later HMAS Sydney was sunk. <sup>Eight</sup>~~Four~~ weeks.....but then it would have been insufficient time, I like to think, for Allan and Jessie to have had their first disagreement.

Talking to my mother and to people who knew my father, I think of him as a person who was relaxed about people, who took life as it came and made the best of it, and who was adventurous, quick-witted and funny. If he had any faults, nobody has told me about them.

I would have liked to have held his hand.

Finally I would like to pay a tribute to my mother, whose strength and resilience I never cease to admire – not just in the aftermath of the loss of her husband, but for all the years afterwards. She gave birth to, and raised a strong healthy child, and then later provided me with a sister and brothers, for all of which I am forever grateful.

Thank you all for sharing this day with me.

*Allan has a living legacy in his grandchildren Tim, Jane & Peter and his great grandchildren Hooper, Freya, Eve, Poppy, Will and a baby due next April.*