

Louis Nicholas Sampson

Louis Nicholas Sampson (known to friends and family as 'SAM') was born in St Peters, South Australia in 1907 to Olive Ellen and Nicholas Sampson. He was the eldest of what would eventually be three brothers. Frederick William (1909) and Wallace Walter (1911).

All three brothers served with distinction in the Royal Australian Navy. Two of them Louis and Fred started as boy sailors. All three rose to become Chief Petty Officers.

Louis joined as a "Boy Sailor 2nd Class" in 1922 on the HMAS Tingira, a sailing ship used to train boys in Rosebay. Fred joined as a "Boy Sailor 2nd Class" in 1925 on the HMAS Tingira and Wallace joined in 1929 at Flinders Naval Depot.

Louis's parents separated in 1921. His mother taking him and Wallace with her and leaving Fred with his father.

Louis and Fred did not see each other from 1921 until 1925 when Fred was on the HMAS Tingira. As Fred came down the gangplank waiting for him at the bottom was his brother Louis. The brothers embraced and despite some good natured ribbing from the other boys, they both cried and initially were unable to speak. The brothers remained close for the rest of their lives. (The retelling of this episode would still move Fred to tears over 75 years later).

Louis's first ship on leaving HMAS Tingira was HMAS Brisbane which he served on for a year. He went on to serve on HMAS Adelaide, HMAS Canberra and HMAS Sydney.

In 1930 at a production of the Noel Coward play "Bittersweet" in Sydney, Louis met the lady who would become the love of his life. The next day he sent Mary Murphy a telegram reminding her of the title of a song in the play, "I'd Like to See You Again." Mary was born on the 15th December 1911 and grew up on the family dairy farm at Numbaa, just outside Nowra, NSW. She left in 1930 to train as a nurse in Sydney, at the Mater Misericordia Hospital. Initially the name Murphy proved a hurdle to climb with Louis's mother. A staunch Methodist she did not relish the idea of his relationship with, heaven forbid, a Catholic! Despite these misgivings Louis and Mary were married on the 8th January 1935. Mary's quiet dignity and the birth of their first son John demolished any misgivings that Olive Sampson had.

In the same year that he was married Louis went to England on HMAS Brisbane to commission HMAS Sydney into the RAN. The HMAS Brisbane was a coal burning ship. Coal burning ships became very dirty from soot. As the Brisbane sailed into Portsmouth Harbour the Spithead Review was taking place with the British fleet lined up in gleaming

condition for review by the King. The HMAS Australia was part of the review and on board her was his brother Fred. The soot stained Brisbane received a big cheer as she sailed down through the lines of ships and into her berth.

The Australians took over the HMAS Sydney on the 27th September 1935.

On the 30 October 1935 Louis and Mary's first child John was born. Unfortunately for Louis instead of returning home as was expected when the *Sydney* was commissioned she was ordered to join the 2nd British Cruiser Squadron along with HMAS Australia.

On the 11th March 1936 the Cruiser Squadron arrived in Alexandria. Louis and Fred were able to spend some time together and the first thing they did was 'wet the babies head', celebrating the birth of John. It took them several days to fully recover from their celebrations.

HMAS Sydney finally arrived home on the 11th August 1936 and father and son at last were introduced.

The family moved to the Mornington Peninsula in Victoria in September 1936 when he was posted to HMAS Cerebus. On the 21st July 1937 Louis and Mary's second child, Frances Mary Sampson was born in Frankston.

On the 1st March 1938 the family moved back to Sydney as Louis was posted to HMAS Penguin.

On the 2nd July 1938 he rejoined the HMAS Sydney taking up what would turn out to be the final posting of his life. On the 26th December 1938, their third child Helen Judith Sampson was born.

Louis remained with the HMAS Sydney through her famous service in the Mediterranean until her loss on the 19th November 1941. When the *Sydney* put into Geraldton on the weekend of 18th, 19th October 1941 Louis drew a sketch in chalk of the ship, which he signed SAM and wrote "Good Luck to the Air Boys from HMAS Sydney". Fourteen officers from the ship signed the drawing and it was presented to the Sergeant's Mess RAAF base at Geraldton.

It became one of the last relics from the *Sydney* and can now be found at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra.

His many letters written while he was away were treasured by Mary until her death in 1994. His final letter written on the 8th November 1941 is filled with his longing for his family and his plans and dreams for all of them for the future.

The mystery surrounding the fate of the *Sydney* caused tremendous stress and ongoing pain for Mary and her family. All her life she longed

for some news of the resting place and actual fate of her beloved 'Sam'. Sadly in her life time this never came. Sadly also neither of Louis' brothers lived to see the ship found.

The finding of the HMAS Sydney in 2008 provided at last for John, Frances and Helen and their families answers to many questions that had haunted them for so long.

The publicity surrounding the finding of the HMAS Sydney produced an incredible, precious find for Louis' family. In 1939 Clare Smith (nee Merrigan) who was 8 years old at the time, went with her family to Wallaroo so that her father, William Merrigan, a keen amateur photographer, could film the arrival of the *Sydney*.

The family struck up a conversation with Louis after the ship had docked. Clare's memory of that long ago event was that he was "very handsome."

They invited him to accompany them to Victor Harbour where her father shot footage of Louis as he walked down the stairs at Granite Island.

With incredible generosity, Clare, when her father died, made sure the film found its way to Louis' family.

This short length of film surfacing miraculously after 70 years provided a deeply moving and tangible link to the father who had simply vanished all those years ago and brought 'Sam' back to his family in a way that no other experience could have provided and was all the more powerful for its complete surprise.

This letter was written immediately before the outbreak of the war. War was declared 8 days later.

HMAS Sydney
at sea
26/8/39

Darling

I'm still on deck and the ship still floats, no doubt in the last few days you have been a very worried little lady wondering where we were etc.

We are due in Fremantle at 7am tomorrow and not very long after that time your letter will be in the post office.

I have no information Darling, you will probably have a better idea than we have – the mail isn't delivered where we have been this last week.

It is difficult to express myself. I do not want to cause you alarm either by saying too little or by insinuation. No doubt the situation is grave, and may end in war, on the other side of the fence it is just as likely to be a repetition of previous scares.

I feel myself, that war would at least clarify much that is becoming too frequent – war scares etc and if life is continue year after year with the threat recurring – then let have it out now, it should ensure freedom for our children from such a cursed thing.

Do not think of me as a patriot willing to sacrifice everything for my country, [that word is used almost exclusively by those who never leave the country, they love it too well] but rather as one who is prepared to defend those he loves.

I do care very much about the sacrifice that is demanded from our wives and mothers. I would be very unhappy to leave these shores knowing that the country that asks so much of us, gives so little in return, and that, with the greatest reluctance. The evidence? We have had with us for twenty odd years. I can assure you Darling it isn't a very comforting thought.

I know that's a very gloomy outlook and I do not intend this letter to be a gloomy one. I know so little of the situation Darling that I'm at a loss for what is best to write you. Let's be optimistic Dear and pray that the leaders of the human- shall I say animal, remember in time that wholesale slaughter isn't the right and only solution.

If we are catapulted into another maelstrom I would like you to know Darling all my thoughts will be of you. I shall always love you and it is because you and our Babes that I am prepared for whatever is to be my lot.

I have made out a will purely as a duty in case things go wrong. I do not want you to feel that because of it I believe war is inevitable. I've done it in case it should and then I'd have little chance of getting it ashore. Father Lynch is an inspiration Dear and is celebrating communion in the morning which I shall attend. We have been steaming at high speed for days, the sea has been very rough and life is rather uncomfortable at the moment. We are keenly looking forward to calm water.

Darling I'll write you another letter tomorrow and it will contain only cheerful thoughts. Be brave my sweet, chin up, and please do not think this letter is written with a view to heroics.

X John
X Frances
X Helen

All My Love Dear
SAM

This was the last letter Mary received from Louis (Sam) before the loss of the Sydney. The Bill referred to in the letter is William Albert Owen, Warrant Officer Supply on the Sydney, who also went down with the ship. He and his wife Therese (Tess) were close friends of Sam and Mary.

8/11/41

Darling

I hope you have had a letter from me late this week. I've had no opportunities to write Dear and I am hoping I shall soon be able to get this on its way to you.

I'm very homesick Darling and trying to hurry the days along. I've heaps of ideas and plans to keep my mind occupied and I lean on them a lot when time is tedious. I can fully understand your impatience Darling for I'm just as excited and anxious as you are. I'm longing for a chance to collect your letters. They are always a tonic and help immensely.

Those snaps you sent to me are just about worn out. It will be grand to be with you and upset your routine etc. Bill is quite as sure as ever Darling so Tess will be happy too. I hope her operation was quite successful and that she is already over most of the pain.

I hope I can phone you before this reaches you. Slowly but surely the days are passing. How did our new roses come out Dear? What sort of a bloom has the *Julien Potin*? I'm sure you know that I have all sorts of jobs mapped out but we are going to have a holiday Darling. I'm sure you need one.

Gosh I miss you and it seems years since I left you. We have a lot to make up for don't we? And we will be good friends. I try to visualise your days and nights Darling and in doing so I feel lonely and miserable thinking of all that I am missing.

What sort of a birthday did John have? I hope we will be able to celebrate yours Darling. Sunday received three letters from Darling. I'll write fully in answer to them tomorrow. The letter you forwarded is from Pilot Officer Lewin he posted in South Africa on his way home to England. I was delighted to hear from him particularly to know he is still on deck.

I intend to phone you tonight Darling hence the short note now. I'm getting more thrilled at the prospect of getting home each day that goes. With regard to leave I may be able to wait for John or that I'll have to wait until I'm in Sydney.

I'm glad that Tess is well over her operation. I'm sure Bill will be delighted with your efforts Darling.

I hope our "Chicks" are well again. I can appreciate you had many memories on John's birthday. I am pleased he liked his present.

I am going to be busy most of today Darling so will stand over till tomorrow.

All of My Love Darling

SAM

X John
X Frances
X Helen