

## KOGARAH HISTORICAL SOCIETY – LOCAL HISTORY AWARDS 2018

### A NARRATIVE OF ONE LOCAL KOGARAH CITIZEN'S SPORTING AND OTHER ACHIEVEMENTS.

The Kogarah District can proudly boast of owning many great sporting champions. These include; swimmers, tennis players, cricketers, athletes, footballers, cyclists and sailors. There are many more, too numerous to mention. Kogarah provides the venues for such activities.

This story narrates the achievements of one citizen of the Kogarah region. Now in his nineties, who has enjoyed many years of sailing. His name is Stan O'Brien and he still lives in the region. With twelve years at the helm of the Connells Point Sailing Club as president circa (1949-1961) he was given the honour of 'Life membership'.

As a child Stan had a turbulent beginning due to his mother's untimely death from Tuberculosis when he was 2 years old. His two brothers were respectively 6 months and 4 years old. It was impossible for a lone father to rear the boys without family help. The boys were cared for by relatives for a time but during the Great Depression years when it became a burden, the two eldest boys were taken to Kincumber Orphanage. Stan remembers standing on a hill calling 'Grandma come and get me'. The boys remained there until their father remarried. They went back to the family home. Things did not turn out well as the step-mother cared more for her natural son. He had piano lessons while they had no shoes. The boys were mistreated and ill-fed. Their grandmother heard of their mistreatment when the oldest boy ran away and was apprehended by police for stealing loaf of bread from a baker's cart. She took the boys to her home in Balfour Street Carlton and reared them herself.

Stan wanted to leave school when he was legally allowed to do so. His grandmother made him stay at school for his Intermediate exam. He commenced work in the Post Master General's Department as a telegram boy. While riding in a lift one day, Frank Packer entered and said 'You're sacked' Stan took the chit signed by Packer. Packer then blurted 'Take this to the pay clerk and get your money'. Stan, took the chit. The funny part about the incident was that Stan didn't work there. Packer the sacker lived up to his reputation.

At sixteen Stan tried to enlist in the Navy but was rejected due to his small stature. The recruiting officer said 'Hop up on the scales, Sonny', followed by, 'Go away and eat your porridge!'. He later followed his older brother's example by joining the RAAF. He had visions of being a pilot but was horrified to see his papers marked 'Cook'. He trained at a camp in Melbourne, Victoria and later at Bundaberg, Queensland and went on to serve in to Papua New Guinea. While training at Bundaberg he and his mates stole a steam train to go to a dance. One of the lads had experience on steam trains allowing them to perform this feat. The local males were away on war service so these trainees were a welcome sight. They were given the name of 'the home wreckers'. On another occasion the trainees

were accused of being 'conspirators' because they refused to service the Dutch planes. The Dutch were beating the Indonesians and throwing them from the plane. The trainees rebelled and so were branded 'conspirators'. The Australian Military Police were called in to quell the dispute. No charges were laid.

At the same time Stan was summoned to the commander's office. He was relieved to know that it was good news. The commander told Stan that his father had returned to Australia after being a prisoner of war at Changi Prison Camp, he was asked if he would like to visit him in Sydney. There was a plane ready to fly him down. Stan accepted the offer and boarded the waiting plane. The plane took Stan back to Bundaberg to finish his training.

The war had ended and the servicemen in Stan's unit were commissioned to restore the airport runways in New Guinea after they had been destroyed by Japanese bombing. It was there that Stan had his introduction to sailing. On his days off duty he was taken by the local indigenous natives 'island hopping' in their lacatois (small sailing vessels). They were not simply joy rides, as the natives sailed to smaller islands to gather fish and other sea foods. Stan was to learn the power of wind and sail and sought this as his sport when he returned to Australia. The natives at that time were given the title of 'house boys' who served the soldiers by washing, cooking, making beds and sweeping the house.

On his return from duty in New Guinea Stan found it difficult to adjust to civilian life. He took 'time out' to visit his mother's sister in Newry Bar, in Northern NSW. He assisted his uncle in his bakery. Once the bread was baked it was delivered by truck to surrounding towns. Stan's uncle asked Stan to stay on in the business but Stan's roots were in Sydney and so he declined the offer. In Sydney, Stan took up the offer by the government of a rehabilitation programme set up to help returning service personnel readjust to civilian life. He elected to study a pastry cook's course but later developed an allergy to flour and had to leave that job. He tried some dead end jobs but was advised by his father who had now settled back into civilian life after war service to seek work with the government. He added 'it is a secure life- long employment opportunity'. Stan took his advice and commenced work with the Postmaster General Department in the area of computerised installation of telephone networks. The job lasted 30 years. He worked at the Kogarah telephone exchange.

By this time Stan had become interested in a young girl who also lived in the region. He would sometimes sit in the park where her Vigaro team played competition on Saturday afternoon. and on this occasion he was reading the Express, a local paper. His eyes spotted an ad which read 'VJ for sale'. It gave an address. Stan rode his bike to the place and saw the gleaming sailing craft. He persuaded his girlfriend to have a look at this beautiful sailing vessel. Neither of them were experts on sailing boats and to them it looked magnificent. Stan bought the boat only to find that when it was tested in the Georges River it leaked like a sieve. At the end of the first race it was so heavy with water inside that it couldn't be lifted from the water. He promptly got rid of that boat and bought another with wins to its credit.

In 1948 and Stan joined the Connells Point Sailing Club which met in a boat shed at the rear of Les Stewart's home in Queen's Road Connells Point. Meetings were held every Friday night in his garage. Races were held on Saturday afternoons from the beach at Connells Park. The sailing course ran from

Bald Face in the East to Green Point near Como in the West. Stan still had much to learn from his fellow sailors. He bought a book by Ted Wells called Scientific Sailboat Racing. This book was to teach him much about tide, wind and currents and 'lifts' off the shore. Gradually his skills were improving. But he was still not entirely happy with his performance and started to compare his boat with other competitors. He found that although they were theoretically similar in design there were still slight differences in design. He talked with a boat builder, Ken Minter who operated from his shed in Sans Souci. Ken built a Vaucluse Junior for him. From then on Stan's sailing skills improved. There was still more that he improved and this was in design of sails. He talked with a local sail maker, Jim Tapfield from Brighton. Stan designed a revolutionary sail with full length battens the entire width of the sail. This kept the sail rigid without curling on the edges. Now he had a real racing machine. He began to win races. His friends teasingly called his boat the 'Chinese Junk'.

By this time the Connell's Point Sailing Club members found that they had saved about thirty pounds. After some discussion as to whether they would have a night out or spend the money more wisely it was finally decided to build a real club house. Stan had heard that disused army huts were being auctioned at La Perouse. Several members of the club were assigned to attend the auction and for the princely sum of thirty pounds they bid for and obtained a hut. Many of the club members had building skills and together they erected their first sailing club, a wooden L-shaped construction. The Kogarah Council had approved a site on which the club house would be built: on the waterfront at Donnelly Park, Kyle Bay. Many years later a much larger red brick sailing club house was built. Sailing races are held there every Saturday afternoon and Learn to Sail sessions are provided for newcomers.

By this time Stan had married his sweetheart and they rented a house in Kyle Pde, Kyle Bay. It had a deep water frontage and on summer afternoons Stan hurried home from work, launched his boat and sailed for an hour before dinner. To say he was keen was an understatement. Fortune smiled on Stan as his f'ward hand was a young man named Roy Isaacs whose father, Don Isaacs, owned a chrome hardening factory. Don was generous and allowed Roy the use of his utility to transport Stan's VJ to all regattas, even as far away as Mordiollic, in Victoria. Other regattas were held at Jervis Bay, Brisbane Waters, Pittwater, Lake Illawarra, Vaulcluse and on the Georges River. Another very challenging experience Stan had was to be selected to try out in the Finn Class Yachts for the Olympics Games in 1956 to be held in Melbourne. It was an honour to be selected but he failed to live up to expectations in that particular class of one man boat.

Stan had fierce competition in the Vaulcuse Juniors from two brothers from the Central Coast who were sometimes beating Stan in sailing races. He talked with these lads and asked if he was permitted to measure their boat. They agreed that he could do so. He set out for the Central Coast on his BMA motor bike. The trip there was uneventful, however on the return trip it rained all the way home. He almost had to be chipped off his bike at journey's end. He had achieved what he needed and proceeded to build a new VJ according to the measurements he'd acquired. He built this in a spare room in his home. The place hummed with activity as helpers trudged in and out. The result was amazing. He had a boat within the guidelines specified and began to win championships. He had notched up the Kurnell Cup, the Pittwater Championship, The Sydney Harbour Championship and the Botany Bay

Championship. His performance won him selection to represent NSW in the National Titles in Perth in 1951. He was runner up in this event.

Even though Stan's life was full of activity he managed to fit in other interests. He had been persuaded by Fred Richardson to join a political party. This in turn led to a course in public speaking. He and fellow members of the ALP, Sen. Doug McClelland and Max Kelly formed a debating team. Competitions were held between other political branches. His team was successful in these competitions.

Early in Stan's sailing career his family enjoyed beach activities while sailing races were held but as the family grew and pressures mounted to build their own home, sailing activities had to be sacrificed. This was not the end of sailing altogether as Stan's skills were required by skippers of bigger boats. Meanwhile Stan's children had grown up and were members of the Scout and Guides Associations. Stan offered his services as a Sea Scout Leader, at 1<sup>st</sup> Kyle Bay Sea Scouts. He took on responsibility for the Venturer Unit. This age group consisted of young men and women aged between 15 and 18 years of age. Stan created an interesting and challenging programme for this group. Their activities included Scuba Diving. For this activity Stan recruited an ex commando to be quite sure that everyone was safe and in expert hands. Other activities included caving, abseiling, canyoning, canoeing and orienteering.

Stan was still with Telecom but he became disgruntled when he saw young freshly graduated students getting jobs higher than his own. He was not impressed because these students did not have the physical skills required for the job. They came to him for guidance. He came to the conclusion that he should return to education. He saw this as an opportunity to get ahead. When Gough Whitlam announced that higher education would be free even to mature aged students Stan accepted this offer. He, at first enrolled at an evening college to gain his matriculation and from there he enrolled in a university course. He chose psychology as one of his subjects and graduated with a Masters Degree in Clinical Psychology. He coupled this study with a hypnosis course. The two courses complimented each other.

Having graduated, his mind turned to finding employment. At age 52 many workers were being told that they were redundant. Stan was hopeful and answered an ad for the Navy. It was for a six month only position. He applied for the job. To his amazement he was given the job at Nirimba, Naval Training Base, Quaker's Hill. The selectors wanted someone 'with a fatherly image' and Stan certainly had that. At the end of the six months the former employee announced that Stan could keep the job as he would be moving on. Stan settled into this job which lasted until his forced retirement at age 65. This was however not the end of the road for Stan as he was accepted as a consultant for the Navy. His task was to service all ship's personnel as well as any issues faced by the recruits. Stan was regarded as an officer and as such was required to select recruits from each state in Australia. This meant that the selection panel travelled to each Australian capital with the exception of Darwin, every six months to interview and select recruits. The Northern Territory recruits travelled to Adelaide to be interviewed.

On the occasion of the Australian Bi-Centenary Britain gave the Australian people a Sail-training-ship – The Young Endeavour. Young people aged between 18-25 were invited to apply to travel on a Round-the World Voyage. It was Stan's job to interview the applicants and select the most appropriate persons. The tests were unbiased and the applicants came from all walks of life. One hundred individuals were chosen. Only 25 could be taken on the ship at any one time and so they were divided into groups. The first group would travel from Sydney to Greece where they would leave the ship. Another group was flown to Greece to meet the ship there. This group sailed to South Hampton where they were exchanged for the next group who sailed for North America. The final leg sailed to South America. From there they sailed back to Australia. Whilst on board the ship, all applicants learnt to handle all aspects of sailing including navigating, understanding the radar equipment, climbing the mast to shorten or lengthen the sails, scrubbing the deck, cooking and cleaning. By journey's end the applicants were adept at managing the ship without the aid of the crew. Stan was given the privilege of joining the ship at Sydney and sailing to Portland, Victoria where his brother lived. He was treated as an applicant and did the same tasks as they did. On their return to Sydney those selected for the voyage arranged a get-together for all concerned at Centennial Park as a way of saying 'thank you' for their inclusion on the trip. It was a most educational and valued journey.

Whilst with the Navy Stan's supervisor sent him for advanced training in the treatments used in psychology. The lectures were held in Baltimore Universities, USA. During the ten day lectures Stan learnt from experts about treatment for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The Americans had years of experience treating returned service personnel suffering PTSD. Stan returned home with an arsenal of techniques for use in his practice. It had been discovered that the sooner the client is treated after the traumatic event, the quicker the recovery. It works best if debriefing occurs immediately after the trauma occurs. Therefore a 'buddy help buddy' system was employed. Fellow workmates can debrief each other.

After the age of 65 Stan tapered off his work load from 5 days a week to four. Two days were spent with the Navy and two days with the Police Department. He became a part-timer. It was with the Police Department that Stan found his new training most valuable as he was asked to lecture at the Goulburn Police Academy. Here he taught police officers how to debrief fellow officers after they had suffered trauma. This venture proved so successful that Stan was seconded to lecture at the Glen Waverley Police Academy in Victoria. In NSW he held lectures at the Police Headquarters in Hurstville. Stan's services were required in many outback areas of NSW; anywhere from Moree to Deniliquin, from Jervis Bay to Braidwood.

I have related a story of one ordinary man doing extraordinary things. There would be hundreds of other ordinary men and women in the community weaving a thread to form the colourful tapestry that we know as Kogarah's history.

Monica O'Brien