

ALEXANDER (BUB) HEAGNEY, 1890-1955

An outline of the life of a wonderful man

September, 2002

Alexander Heagney is the only decorated war hero that I am aware of in our family in the 150 years that we have been in Australia.

How could a man who was known as 'Bub' by the whole family from the time of his birth to the day he died, be awarded a medal for bravery second only to the Victoria Cross?

Alexander Heagney was a cousin of my grandmother Annie Walsh. Their mothers were sisters, Christina and Alexandrina, whose father Donald Ross had come from Scotland to Bulla, near Sunbury in 1854.

Alexandrina had married James Heagney in 1888. Jim Heagney was recognised as one of Australia's leading sportsmen, excelling in running, jumping and horsemanship. He won an important footrace in Sydney in 1888, the Grand Botany Handicap, which celebrated 100 years of white settlement in Australia.

Jim used part of his prize of 520 sovereigns to buy the Nelson Hotel (now the Lord Nelson Tavern) in Malop St. Geelong in the same year, and he and Alexandrina moved there from Melbourne. In 1891 he bought the Red Lion Hotel in Moorabool St.

Their first child, William (Willie) was born in 1889, but unfortunately Alexandrina died when 'Bub' was born in 1890.

Jim Heagney arranged for Alexandrina's unmarried sister, Catherine (Aunty Kate) to move down from Bulla to live at the hotel and look after the two young boys. When Aunty Kate died in January 1908, Willie (18) and Bub (17) went to live with the family of my father Maurice Walsh (Maurie). Dad's mother, Annie Burke, also from Bulla, had married Daniel Walsh in Geelong in 1901. Their only child was born in 1903, and although he was much younger, Dad always got on well with the two older boys.

Willie trained as an engineer and eventually joined the SEC. Bub was apprenticed as a bricklayer and worked on the construction of buildings and railway bridges in Geelong.

Bub enlisted in the Australian Army in 1915. He was too soft-hearted to carry a gun or to kill, so he joined as a stretcher-bearer.

Stretcher-bearers were always unarmed and were expected to go out on the battlefield and bring back injured or dead soldiers and airmen of both sides.

After training in Australia and Egypt, Bub eventually went to the Somme, an area near the border of France and Belgium where the Allied armies fought the Germans for several years during World War 1.

There was a big push by the Allies in the latter half of 1918 which eventually led to the end of the war, in November. Casualty figures on both sides were enormous.

Lance Corporal Alexander Heagney (our Bub) was awarded the Military Medal:

"For conspicuous bravery and devotion to duty on 9th and 10th August at ROSIERES. L/Cpl HEAGNEY was in charge of a Stretcher Bearers squad during the advance of the 2nd and 3rd Bds. and

showed great courage and initiative under heavy hostile M.G. (machine gun) fire. In spite of great danger and difficulties incurred during the advance he was always able to keep in touch with the Regimental M.O. and by his pluck and initiative greatly facilitated the evacuation of the wounded, at the same time setting a splendid example to his men." (Wording from war archives).

After the war Bub spent some time in England and Ireland before returning to Australia.

I do not think he was physically injured or gassed, but the stress of the battlefield affected his nervous system. This resulted in a form of dermatitis that came out in an itchy rash for most of his life. Although he made several attempts to return to bricklaying, he would have to stop because the cement in the mortar made his skin condition intolerable.

Bub never married. He died in Melbourne on the 23rd July, 1955.

MEMORIES OF BUB

by Allen Walsh

Alexander Heagney was apparently named 'Bub' by his brother Willie because he couldn't say 'baby'. Willie was only about one year old when Bub was born. The name stuck with Bub all his life.

Bub was 5ft 6ins tall and weighed 9 stone 4 pounds when he enlisted in the AIF in 1915. I doubt whether his weight ever exceeded 10 stone, but he was not thin. He had his hair cut so short you could hardly see it – just like today's fashion, but he did it due to his skin problems caused by the war.

Our family lived in Wales Street, West Brunswick from 1928 and one of my earliest memories of Bub was when he arrived just after tea, as we called our evening meal. I would have been about five, Nancy six, and Brian three or four.

Bub was a very ordinary-looking man, in his early forties at that time, and was talking quickly as he came into the Kitchen where we were still sitting at the table. It seems that he happened to pass the lolly shop on the way and he dug three paper bags of lollies from his pockets and passed them around to us kids. Bub often spoke quickly, as though he might run out of time before he had finished.

We were always glad to see Bub, and not just because of the lollies. He had the knack of showing interest in children's activities and for the rest of our childhood we seemed to be involved in his life and he in ours.

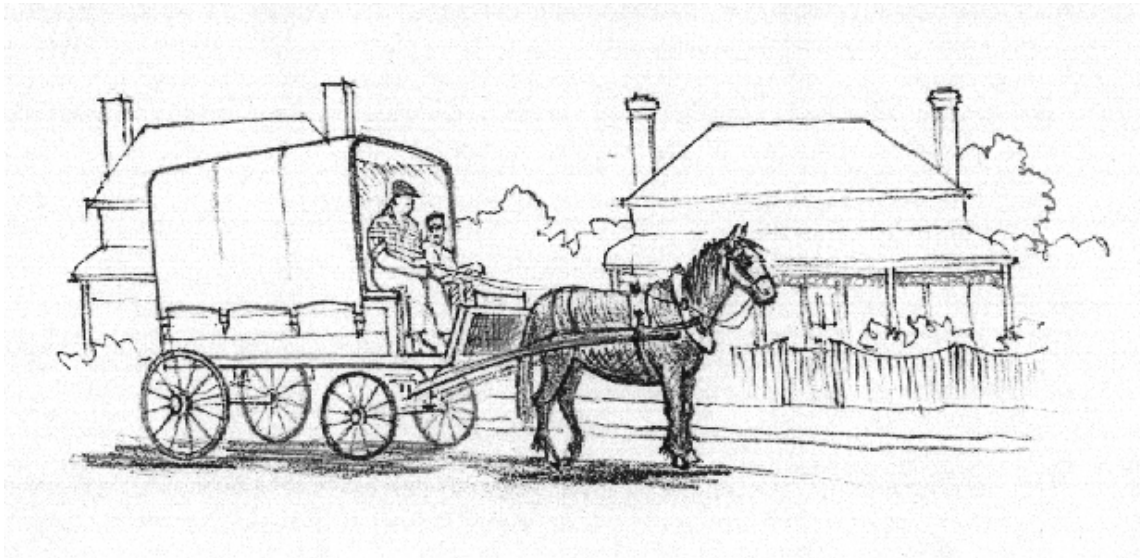
Bub never married. Our father told us he was once engaged to a girl in Geelong – probably before he went to the war – but we never heard any details. Perhaps the fact that he had no children of his own allowed him to give time and attention to us, and to children in the other branches of the Burke and Gillon families.

Like most of our family, Bub was a Geelong football club supporter and Dad told us that after Geelong's first Premiership in 1925, Bub threw a party at the home of the Burke family in Broadmeadows. Everyone was invited.

Alexander Burke (Uncle Ally) and his wife Jean had a large family, and their daughter Elsie, who was our great friend until she died recently, would have been about fifteen at the time.

In the early 1930's Bub was living in a very small house in Whitby Street just around the corner from Melville Road, and only 100 yards from the West Brunswick Presbyterian Church where we Walshes were to spend so many busy years. The house was one of a very old single storey pair, and all I can remember of it was a very dark slate roof which sloped down to the front and across a verandah, leaving very little height below the front spouting.

Bub might have had a small war pension, but because his health prevented him working as a bricklayer, he tried various jobs to try to produce an income. The great Depression was not over, but Bub had worked up a small 'round' in Brunswick, delivering soap and small grocery items to his customers' houses. The deliveries were made using a pony and cart which were kept in an open stable at the back of the house, where there was access via a laneway. The pony, which was called Buddy, was small, tubby and looked well-fed. He was treated like a pet. The cart was reasonably small with a white canvas covering to the sides and top.



When Brian was about 5 years old, he and I walked around to Whitby Street (about $\frac{3}{4}$ mile) and saw Buddy for the first time. Brian was patting the pony's shoulder when Buddy lifted one small iron-shod hoof and lowered it on Brian's big toe. Brian was wearing brown canvas runners, as we always did except in winter, and the pain must have been excruciating. Even small ponies can be very heavy and Brian could not budge him. Eventually Brian's yells alerted Bub who was able to lift the hoof off the flattened toe. Buddy seemed to be wondering what all the noise was about. Brian lost the toenail for a few months, but eventually it grew back.

Not long after this Bub offered me the chance to go with him on his 'round' on a Saturday, and of course I jumped at it. I was up early and around at Whitby Street at the agreed time. Bub must have been up earlier than I was because he had Buddy harnessed and the cart

loaded ready to go. This day's 'round' was in East Brunswick, more than a mile away, in a part of Brunswick I did not know.

The area we visited included De Carle St., Donald St. and Mitchell St., and at every house he visited Bub would have to secure the cart by wrapping one end of a heavy strap around the rim of a wheel to stop it turning if the pony took fright. I would wait in the cart, sitting on the wooden driver's seat which was softened by a folded tartan blanket.

The weather was fine, no wind and a blue sky. Bub chatted away between stops and we seemed to cover a lot of ground. As the morning wore on, the early start seemed to be having an effect on me. I started to feel a bit weary and extremely hungry, but of course I could not mention this to Bub.

Eventually it was lunch time! Bub found a quiet stretch of street, strapped the wheel again, and hung a chaff bag on Buddy's head. As the pony started his lunch, Bub unwrapped ours – tomato sandwiches, which he had made before I arrived. I had never been very interested in tomato sandwiches, but after nearly seventy years, I can still remember the taste of these. They were made from white fresh bread with butter in dabs rather than thinly spread, thick juicy slices of tomato, salt and lots of pepper. I think it was the pepper that made them so different from anything I had eaten before, and I suppose the long spell since breakfast helped. Whatever it was, they tasted wonderful, and I was set up for the rest of the day!

Bub had for a long time hoped to start a small egg farm when he saved enough money, and in about 1936 he bought a 5 acre (2 hectare) block of land on the Bulla Road at Tullamarine. Tullamarine at that time was a name almost unknown except to locals, but there was a sign 'Tullamarine Post Office' on a small timber building about a mile on the Melbourne side of Bub's place.

That portion of Bulla Road is now called Melrose Drive and I estimate that Bub's would have been within a mile of the present main buildings of Melbourne Airport, towards Melbourne. It was a narrow triangular block with a frontage of perhaps 80 metres (260 ft.) to the road and extending to a point about 500 metres (1650 ft.) back from the road in a north-easterly direction. I don't think Bub had ever lived in that area, but his parents when young, and many of his relatives certainly had. His grandfather Donald Ross, who was my great great grandfather, settled with his wife Johanna (Sutherland) at Bulla when they arrived from Scotland in 1854.

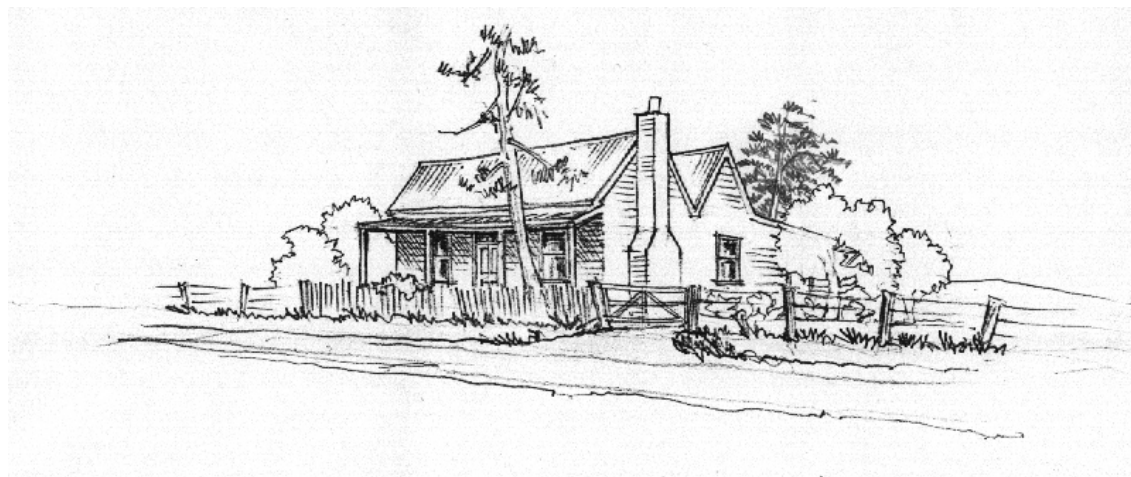
Donald Ross in 1888 owned the Inverness Hotel which was only a little further along the Bulla Road from Bub's place. Donald Ross had a small farm, but worked as a stone mason on the Bulla Presbyterian Church (1859) and the bluestone Bulla bridge (1869), both of which are still in use today (2002).

The old timber house on Bub's land was built close to the road, with an ancient pine tree at the front and peppercorn trees at the sides and back. It would have been built about 1870 and resembled the small cottages still to be found in the old goldfields areas. It was double fronted, with the central door opening from a verandah into the longer of the two front rooms. Next there were two bedrooms separated by a short central passage which discharged into a skillion roofed Kitchen which was used as a general purpose Living Room.

The house was in poor condition when Bub bought it, but was all right for a bachelor farmer. There was no electricity. Heating and cooking were provided by a cast iron wood stove, and lighting by hurricane lamps and three or four quite interesting kerosene lamps. These

kerosene lamps had wide, plain or coloured glass fully-enclosed containers for kero mounted on short metal legs which would sit on a table. An adjustable woven cotton wick emerged from the top of the container and when set alight the wick illuminated a surrounding white lace-like mantle which gave an incandescent glow. The whole of this top section was enclosed in a bulbous tall clear glass open-topped 'chimney' for protection. These lamps gave a good white light and were much safer than candles which were the cheaper alternative.

Behind the house there was a brick-lined well about 5 metres deep covered at ground level with the usual domed brick and cement top. Although it was old, after Bub cleaned out the well, it held water satisfactorily. There was no pump, and water could only be removed by bucket. There was also a small corrugated iron tank which collected drinking water from the roof.



Apart from his furniture and other belongings, Bub took with him to Tullamarine Buddy the pony and a small black and white fox terrier dog called Spot. As there were no shops nearby he bought a cow to provide milk, cream and home-made butter.

There had been a small dam not far from the road on the Melbourne side of the house and this was cleaned out and enlarged by hand to provide water for the pony and cow.

Bub built a fowl-house. They didn't appear to call adult birds chickens in those days, it was an American term. The building was timber-framed with corrugated iron walls and roof, and held about forty white leghorn hens. The birds were outside most of the time, but needed to be locked up at night for protection. The nearby Oaklands Hunt Club which had been founded at the Inverness Hotel nearly 50 years earlier (1888) had apparently not removed all the foxes.

The late nineteen-thirties were fairly dry years in Victoria. Melbourne's all-time hottest day was recorded on 13th January 1939 (114° F, approx. 45° C) and dust storms were common. Bub needed to supplement his water by putting two 44 gallon tanks on the cart, harnessing up Buddy and driving to the Tullamarine Post Office. There was a tall standpipe outside, having a horizontal arm with a floppy canvas hose hanging from it. Locals were able to borrow a key to a tap, drive under the hose, and fill up. This system is still in use in some country areas today.

Soon after Bub moved in he invited Brian and me to stay for a few days during the school holidays. We had a couple of old bikes by that time, so away we went.

We lived close to the edge of civilisation at West Brunswick. Beyond our back fence there were mainly open paddocks until you crossed the Moonee Ponds Creek into Essendon. Houses in Essendon became more numerous as you travelled further west to join the Mt Alexander Road near the Essendon Railway Station.

Mt Alexander Road headed roughly north-west, and after crossing the Keilor Road intersection, became Bulla Road. There was a brick hotel at Keilor Road and a new Fire Station at the Woodlands Street corner, but after that the buildings rapidly thinned out again.

After climbing a long slope we would reach Essendon Airport, known as the Aerodrome before the war, and the ground there was level. We would often ride in to check out the aeroplanes. Essendon was the only aerodrome in Melbourne at that time and most of the planes were quite small, although the first of the Douglas interstate passenger planes were just being introduced. From there on, the Bulla Road veered further west and followed the line now known as Melrose Drive, passing Sharps Road and Mickleham Road.

All the land beyond the Aerodrome was farming country, dead flat and dreary, with very few houses or trees. A good site for an International Airport! One conspicuous nice house belonged to people called Scott and was called 'Gowanbrae'. Gowan is the Scottish word for daisy. Gowanbrae is now the name of a residential area along the east side of the Western Ring Road.

The Scott property was on the north-east side of Bulla Road and the house was large, fairly new, single-storied and in the fashionable Spanish Mission style, surrounded by a neat garden and many young golden cypress trees.

Brian remembers a man called Ellis who had a pig farm on the other side of the road, who was a helpful neighbour to Bub.

I was always on edge when bike riding with Brian, as I felt responsible for the little blighter. He was the original suicide pilot! The Bulla Road beyond the aerodrome was of bitumen less than two cars in width, and although there was not much traffic, it was hard to know when a car was going to overtake you from the rear. It was legal to ride two abreast, but if you tried it on that road you might not last long. I would tell Brian to ride ahead and keep near the edge of the bitumen, but he would not concentrate, talked a lot of course, and seemed to be continually swerving out towards the middle of the road.

At about this time Brian had ridden his bike, which had a 'fixed' wheel and no brake, fast down a side street and across Albion Street not far from home. He hit the side of a moving car and somersaulted over the bonnet. He was not hurt, but the car driver, who delivered him home was in a state of shock. Nancy says that she also rode out to Tullamarine with Brian, but she couldn't remember any dare-devil riding!

Our sleeping accommodation at Bub's was on stretchers in the large front room. There was a big old heavy table in the middle of the room, but it was not used for eating meals. Each table leg sat in a bowl of water to prevent mice climbing to the top, which was loaded with sacks of wheat, dried buttermilk, bran and pollard for the fowls.

In the general-purpose Kitchen in the mornings there were usually two large enamel bowls of fresh milk, still warm from the cow, with cream settling on the top. I cannot remember seeing

a churn for making butter but there must have been one. There were certainly ribbed timber butter pats in the Kitchen. These were used for shaping the butter into rectangular blocks.

There were no conventional pictures or decorations in the house, but in the Kitchen there was a portrait of an actress taken from a magazine, and a simply framed coloured picture of an elegant lady in a full-length dark gown.

The actress was a young Australian, Mary McGuire, who had just accepted an offer to go to Hollywood to make films. The lady was Queen Alexandra, wife of King Edward the Seventh, who reigned 1901-1910. Alexandra was a princess in Denmark before her marriage. It is possible that the picture was a reproduction of a painting done by the Australian John Longstaff, which was referred to in Henry Lawson's amusing poem, 'The King, the Queen and I'. Alexandra's name is commemorated in the Alexandra Gardens and Alexandra Avenue in Melbourne, and in many other places throughout the country.

Melbourne's strongest winds are often registered now at Melbourne Airport. Soon after going to Tullamarine Bub realised that a windbreak was needed on his western boundary. He planted regularly-spaced trees extending well back from the house, but due to the dry conditions in those years he had to cart water just to keep them alive.

Bub did quite well with the eggs for a number of years, but then the Victorian Egg Board was formed and all eggs had to be sold through the Board. Because the eggs had to fit into the standard cartons for sale, all large or small eggs were rejected by the Board and it was illegal to sell them privately, resulting in great waste, but he kept working at it.

The second world war years came and went, and with the shortage of tradesmen in the new building boom, Bub tried the bricklaying again but after a few months had the same health problems. He later worked with Ansett for some time, cleaning the interior of aircraft. At Ansett he was a friend of two of my good mates, Jim Hume and Alby Trevaskis who referred to him as 'old Alec'.

Bub eventually retired and went to live with my father's mother in Munro St. Coburg. She had been widowed for the second time and had been living alone.

Bub, our wonderful relative and friend, died there on the 23rd July, 1955, aged 65.

MELBOURNE AIRPORT

The Tullamarine property was left to Willie's son, also Alec Heagney, and not long afterwards it was compulsorily acquired, with all the surrounding land, for the building of the Tullamarine International Airport, later renamed Melbourne Airport.

AUNTY KATE'S GRAVE

Aunty Kate's grave can be found in the Presbyterian Section of the Eastern Cemetery at Geelong (Row 5).

The Headstone reads:

*In Memory of
our dear aunt*

CATHERINE ROSS

*who died at Geelong
17th Feb. 1908*

*Erected by her loving nephews
William and Alex Heagney*

*Ever her memory shall be cherished
In our hearts a sacred spot
for her loving acts of kindness
by us shall never be forgot*

BUB'S HEALTH

The dermatitis from which Bub suffered due to his war experiences, continued for the rest of his life. The itch at times would be unbearable, and occasionally he would be forced to have a spell in Heidelberg Military Hospital. The returned soldiers were always well looked after at Heidelberg. If Bub felt hard done by with his health problems, he never complained.

ALF ARMOUR

A relative of Bub, Alf Armour, lived with Bub for a year or two at West Brunswick and later at Tullamarine for a time. Alf had been married to my father's Aunty Teeny (Christina Burke) who died at their house in Reynard's Road, Coburg in the 1930's. Alf Armour was an extremely thin, quietly spoken man who had been a wool classer for most of his life.