

# Kathleen (Tassie) Dunstan, née Mernin

## Early years

Kathleen was born in 1918, the second of five children. Her siblings are:

- **Madeleine** (her best friend) who was born in 1915, who married Tom Vaughan
- **Josephine**, born in 1920, who became a St Joseph nun
- **Rita**, born in 1923, who married Phil Cawthorne
- **Vincent**, born in 1927

Her parents were Margaret and Patrick Joseph Mernin, who lived at 51 Austral Street, Penshurst.

## Education

Tassie did well at St Joseph's Primary School, Penshurst, and won a scholarship to the Bursary Class at St Joseph's high school, Rockdale, just a few suburbs away. But after 12 months, she had to leave because the family couldn't afford the rail fare. This was during the Depression years.

After Third Year/Intermediate (now Year 10), she went to St Patrick's Business College in Sydney, then was accepted into the NSW Public Service.

## War years

During the Second World War she worked in the Public Health Department, which was later combined with the Hospitals



*Young Kathleen wearing the uniform of Catholic United Services Auxiliary (CUSA) during World War II.*

Commission. She held down both a secretarial job AND filled in for a male clerk, who was at the war. All this for the princely sum of 10 shillings a week!

Tassie joined a services auxiliary to learn first aid and home nursing. She then signed up with the Voluntary Aid Detachment. This meant she travelled to Lewisham Hospital every Sunday to do wardmaid's work, helping with washing and feeding patients.

Once a week, after getting home from her double day-job, she walked 5 km to a school to attend emergency services practice with others. They slept in stretchers, then walked home at 6 am.

## Marriage

She met **Allan Dunstan** when he was working for the Hospitals Commission. Later, he joined the Army and they married in June 1945. In those days husbands and wives were not allowed to work in the same department of the public service, so she left.

They lived with his parents at Brighton-le-Sands and subsequently bought this house from them in the 1940s. She lived here until for about 50 years she went into care.

After the war, she worked for an architects' secretarial service near Wynyard in Sydney. This was very demanding work: imagine using a manual typewriter to type thousands of specifications over many years — each with 10 carbon copies!

Her husband Allan loved fishing and thought that Yamba was a wonderful place for this. They went there many times for fishing holidays. First they stayed in a guest-house, then later at a waterside apartment.

Tassie never complained about always going to Yamba for holidays, nor about the many fish she was expected to clean and cook. Her family did that for her!

Allan, a lifelong smoker of roll-your-owns, died in the 1990s, aged 79.



*Wedding day 9 June 1945 at St Declan's Church, Penshurst.  
From left: Rita Mernin (sister of bride), Allan Dunstan, Kathleen Dunstan, Laurie Dunstan (brother of groom).*

## No kids, but nieces and nephews

Tassie never had children, but she dearly loved the children that her two sisters had. They loved her right back!

For them, she was the Fairy Godmother who knew what they secretly desired – unlike their practical parents who catered for their needs.

Niece Josephine recalls: “She bought and dressed my gorgeous bride doll when I was three; made my fairy dress, complete with wings, crown and wand, when I was six; and gave me a beautiful gold watch when I was nine.”

On and on it went, over the years, for all of them.

In more recent years, she gave her nieces and nephews occasional gifts of money. In her gracious way, she made it seem a favour to take the money off her hands. “One of my investments matured. The time to be happy is NOW,” she’d say.

## Helping her family

She retired from paid work in the 1980s and spent time doing voluntary work at a **palliative care hospital, Calvary**. She was thrilled to receive awards for her long service, upon retirement.

Because she was employed and earning money, unlike her two sisters Madeleine and Rita, who were stay-at-home mothers, she made sure that her family benefited.

She helped her younger brother Vincent financially when he set up in business as an electrician, and even did his book-keeping for him.

When her sister Josephine (Sister Mella) was posted to a very poorly resourced area, Kathleen made sure her sister and her fellow nuns had necessities like a proper set of crockery.

## Faith

Tassie’s strong faith means she has been a lifelong churchgoer.

She has done a lot of work to help the efforts of St Thomas More’s Catholic Church, just around the corner from home at Brighton-le-Sands, and has been very involved in its parish life.

One of the highlights of her life was shaking hands with Pope John Paul, in a visit to Rome in the 1980s. She’s got the photo to prove it!



*Left: Tassie’s beloved pet Wiggie, an Australian terrier with a very determined personality and a deafening bark that drives her family crazy.*

## Travel

Later on, when Allan had been weaned off Yamba for holidays, he and Kathleen enjoyed trips to every Australian state and New Zealand. It was almost as if he’d discovered these places!

## Pets

Tassie is a great animal lover. She particularly loved little dogs, and had some as pets. Tiny, Mandy-Lou and Wiggie were all Australian terriers.

Wiggie is a rescue dog, brought to her by her niece Josephine when Allan was very sick, to give them both another focus. They quickly taught this dog some bad habits: how to enjoy eating dog biscuits in bed with Allan; how to catch peas that Allan would flick, like marbles; how to drink tea with them at morning-tea time. Out of a cup and saucer.

Her niece Peg Westcott is currently looking after Wiggie.

## Dignity and humour

Dementia is possibly the worst affliction, but she bears this with great dignity and even humour.

Her sense of humour, sometimes vulgar, is delightful. Once, when going for a colonoscopy, she said, “They’re going to look up my kilt to see if my hat’s on straight.”

She hates being barely five foot high — especially when trying to get served in a shop. She’ll often say, “When I come back, I’m going to be six foot tall!”



Her life has been a great success story, because it is a life full of love. ◇

*Left: Brother Vincent Mernin, Kathleen and sister Madeleine Vaughan.*

*They often meet for lunch at Sydney’s Catholic Club, “... where the sandwiches are always freshly cut.”*