

Geoffrey Newman Alexander (1908 – 1975)



Geoffrey Newman Alexander (1908-1975) was one of the greats in the early years of Australian hydrology. He was a member of the working committee which produced the first Australian Rainfall and Runoff publication. He was also a regular contributor at hydrology symposia and in the Civil Engineering Transactions of the Institution of Engineers, Australia.

Geoffrey Alexander lived most of his life in Victoria, Australia, although he was well known to many hydrologists in other parts of the world. His contribution to the improvement of statistical hydrology in particular was a long term goal of his later life and it is significant that though retired from his full-time career, he was still writing original papers when he suddenly died in Melbourne on 17 January 1975.

Geoff Alexander graduated in civil engineering at the University of Melbourne late in 1929, when to his dismay, he had to join the ranks of

insurance clerks in order to gain an income. During the 1939-1945 war, he worked for an Australian Mission on the manufacture of tanks, in the USA – the most significant personal outcome being that he married an American despite his unorthodox approach to the relevant diplomatic procedures. It was this ability to see through an issue and argue a case for it that characterised him throughout his life.

After the war he undertook general civil engineering work and in 1950, he joined the State Rivers and Water Supply Commission, Victoria, to specialise in hydrology related to the capacity of reservoirs and the size of their spillways. From this base, and at a comparatively late stage in his life, he virtually started his main career.

Never satisfied with relatively inadequate techniques, he forever adopted a policy based on enquiry and new ideas. Consequently he developed into a research type, engineering hydrologist, published more than 100 papers in Australia and overseas journals, and attended many international conferences. In addition, his association with the USA was strengthened when he spent 12 months with the Geological Survey in Washington DC in 1957-1958. His work has become well known and respected internationally.

However, not the least of his achievements was the contribution he made quietly in Australia, in moulding an interest in hydrology amongst the younger hydrologists. The regular and well

attended symposia held by the Institution of Engineers, Australia, owe much of their present vitality to the keen mind, sardonic humour and sense of originality that he gave in the early years of this development.

When he retired from formal duties with the State River and Water Supply Commission in 1973, he became a part-time associate at Monash University, in order to concentrate on a treatise on floods. It is a great pity that his more leisurely activity was brought to an end so soon, but his general contribution will be long remembered.

In recognition of Geoff Alexander's contribution to Australian hydrology, the National Committee on Hydrology & Water Resources (subsequently the National Committee on Water Engineering) of the Institution of Engineers, Australia created the GN Alexander Medal for Hydrology and Water Resources in 1987. The award is presented to the authors of the best paper in hydrology and/or water resources published in an Institution publication at each Hydrology and Water Resources Symposium.

To honour his outstanding contribution to the water engineering profession, Geoffrey Newman Alexander was inducted into the Water Engineering Hall of Fame at the Water Down Under Conference 2008, held in Adelaide, April 2008.