

## THE MASONIC HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF NEW SOUTH WALES



**Bro. Lionel Douglas Van Praag:**  
Speedway motor cyclist and Airman.

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On December 10<sup>th</sup> 1936 at Wembley Stadium, London, an Australian won the first official World Speedway Championship. Lionel Van Praag won the title under somewhat controversial circumstances defeating the English competitor, Eric Langton., in a run-off. The Championship was decided by bonus points accumulated in previous rounds. Another Australian, Arthur (Bluey) Wilkinson, was unbeaten in the final race on the track but Bonus Points accumulated by Van Praag and Langton took them to the top of the ladder leading to a run-off.

As they lined up for the start Langton broke the tape which should have led to his disqualification but Van Praag said he did not want to win the title that way and insisted that a race should take place. In the race which followed Langton made it to the first bend in front and led until the final bend before Van Praag darted through the smallest of gaps to win by less than a wheel length.

Further controversy followed when allegations were made that the two riders had reached an agreement before the race that the rider who led at the first bend would be allowed to win the race. It was claimed that the two riders were then to share the prize money but these claims were disproved later as Langton had led into the first bend but Van Praag came through to win.

Lionel Maurice Van Praag was born on 17<sup>th</sup> December 1908, the only son of a Sydney Tailor, and attended Cleveland Street Public School. He became a typewriter mechanic and began racing motor cycles at the age of 15. After winning several races at the old Olympia Speedway at Maroubra he concentrated on the booming Sydney Showground dirt track. A natural rider he showed great ability, instantly becoming a serious competitor and after rejecting years of offers to ride in England he finally joined the Wembley team in 1931.

He became a regular member of the Australian riders test team riding in a further eight series against England. After the 1936 win Van Praag finished 7<sup>th</sup> in 1937 and 4<sup>th</sup> in 1938, the 1939 event being cancelled because of the outbreak of war. During this time in England Van Praag also appeared in the British film, "Money for Speed", which also starred Ida Lupino, John Loder and the speedway promoter, Johnnie Hoskins.

Lionel Van Praag lived on the Northern side of Botany Bay where he had plant and equipment to whet the appetite of any metal engineer.

Lionel Van Praag served in the RAAF during the second World War and as Sergeant Van Praag was the co-pilot of RAAF DC-2 A 30-8 when it was attacked by a Japanese aircraft on 26<sup>th</sup> January 1942 and forced to ditch in the Sumba Strait while on a flight from Surabaya to Koepang. Although some, including Lionel, were wounded the entire crew survived the ditching to endure thirty hours in the ocean while fending off shark attacks. For their bravery in ensuring the survival of the crew the aircraft captain, Flying Officer Noel Webster and Sergeant Van Praag were both

awarded the George Medal. This brush with death did not deter him and he then chose to fly unarmed and un-escorted C-47 transport planes supplying the Kokoda Track. Flying out of Townsville.

In 1946 he returned to speedway riding in Australia and went to England, riding for the New Cross Team in England and appearing in one more test series before retiring in 1948. In the early 1950s Van Praag made a few appearances before finally retiring in 1951.

He became involved in promoting Speedway Racing and enticed huge crowds to the old Sydney Sports Ground sometimes using somewhat risque promotions. He was known as the uncrowned "King of the Bondi Pubs" who it was reliably reported could beat anyone in a pub brawl.

In February 1951 he combined his aviation and speedway interests by contracting with Empire Speedways to carry the Great Britain and Australian competitors, along with their bikes and toolboxes, between the various Australian speedway venues in a Lockheed Loadstar. In 1957 Lionel began flying aerial top dressing flights in a Bristol Freighter. This same aircraft was lost in December 1961 when it crashed at Wollongong after an engine failure on a freight flight. Lionel and the rest of the crew escaped injury but the aircraft was written off.

He later flew for an airline in Pakistan for a year. Van Praag joined Adastral Airlines around 1962 as a pilot, later becoming Chief Pilot..

In 1968 Van Praag retired to his own island, Tempe Island South of Mackay and finally in 1973 he ferried Hudson VH-AGJ from Sydney to Strathallan Museum in Scotland.

On 21<sup>st</sup> July 2000 the Government of the Australian Capital Territory decided to honour several Australian sportsmen and sportswomen with the naming of streets in the Division of Gordon, A.C.T.. Included amongst the new street names was Van Praag Place (formerly Van Praag Circuit).

Lionel Van Praag died of emphysema on 15<sup>th</sup> May 1987 in Royal Brisbane Hospital

Lionel Van Praag is listed in the Sports Australia Hall of Fame

Lionel Van Pragg, known as Praggy, was initiated and passed on 28<sup>th</sup> April and 26<sup>th</sup> May 1930 respectively in Lodge Rose of Sharon No 116 No record of his raising was found although he had Master Masons Certificate No 113819. He called off on 21<sup>st</sup> January 1935 and then rejoined Lodge Rose of Sharon on 22 July 1946 finally calling off 22<sup>nd</sup> February 1954.

Lionel Van Praag



Photo:  
Alex Whitworth

