

Robert "Mick" Michael Collins

Premiers ANZAC Spirit School Prize



By Jasmine Baker

Part A:

“Resistance from inland was light, but the sky was on fire, the ground bubbled with bullets. The suicide dive bombers belted hell out of the convoy of ships, many sunk.”

– Robert Michael Collins, World War II Report: No Where to Run, No Where to Hide

It's not until the ghastly air attacks by the Japanese occurred; the Third Airfield Construction Squadron (3ACS) realised the significance of comfort. Comfort that they had once taken for granted. These men were sleep deprived, ill, injured, and nursing burn wounds. Through these conditions these men still worked relentlessly constructing the airfields on Mindoro; a Pacific island essential in the capture of the southwest island of Luzon and capital of the Philippines; Manila. These men saw 336 air raids over a span of two weeks (Collins, n.d.). The campaign drove many men insane. Life after the war was never the same for them.

On December 15th, 1944, the 3ACS arrived on Pacific island Mindoro after departing the island of Leyte. Amongst these men was Robert “Mick” Michael Collins. Mick was born on June 21st, 1926 to parents Ernest James Collins and Lillian Florence Collins (nee Briggs). At a young age, Mick began working as a farmhand for farmers around Cowell, Rudall, Cleve, and Elbow Hill. Something was always missing for Mick. He had a passion he wasn't able to fulfill whilst working on the Eyre Peninsula. Ever since Mick was young boy, he took an interest in planes and dreamt of flying them. This influenced Mick's decision to join the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) at age 16. As he needed to be 18 to serve, Mick felt it was necessary that he lie about his age; he claimed he was born on June 21st, 1924. In his interview form (Figure 1) for the RAAF he claimed that he felt it was his turn to go to war. He felt strongly that it was his duty to serve his country.

R.A.A.F. INTERVIEW FORM	
1. Name (Full Name)	Robert Michael Collins
2. Date of Birth	June 21 1924
3. Place of Birth	Woolshed, Eyre Peninsula, South Australia
4. Education	Woolshed, Eyre Peninsula, South Australia
5. Occupation	Farmer
6. Hobbies	Reading, Football, Model Aircraft
7. Statement	I feel it is my duty to go to war and to serve my country.
8. Signature	Robert Michael Collins
9. Date	15/12/44

Figure 1 – R.A.A.F Interview Form for Robert Michael Collins

Source: (National Archives of Australia 2002)

Mick was assigned to serve in the 3ACS, which consisted of 600 Australian men. These men fought and constructed airfields in the Pacific, and had a heavy involvement in the Liberation of the Philippines. The most influential campaign in Mick's service was the Battle of Mindoro. After arriving on December 15th, 1944, the Australians' work on the island continued for many months after the campaign had come to an end. They worked in the shadow of American troops to secure the vital San José landing site on

the island. The 3ACS had minimal training and were extremely unprepared. Despite this they were commended by Lieutenant-Colonel William J. Ellison Jr, who stated: "their efficiency, industry, and fortitude in the face of enemy attack was exemplary, and assured the successful completion of a key air-base on schedule" (Lucy, 1988).

Mick and his colleagues were constantly required to be alert. The Australians had minimal rest, which is not apparent when you consider the incredible amount work they completed on the island. The Japanese were unabating in their attacks. Some nights there would be bombings each half hour. The bombs would leave large craters (Figure 2). As cited in Alex Wilson's 2000 poem called, 'No Where to Run No Where to Hide' inspired by Mick's World War II Report - "The Kamikaze's are back, coming in low with the sun at their back" (Wilson, 2000). The Australians quickly realised that to survive, they must be on their toes. The 3ACS were required to guard their rations at night. The Japanese would take any opportunity given to slip out of the jungle and in between the gaps to steal food from the Australians. The men wouldn't dare light a cigarette at night, as the Japanese were waiting, ready with sniper rifles, to shoot anybody who would do something so foolish. The Japanese had a hatred towards the Australians. Perhaps it was because of the recent Australian victory in the Kokoda Track Campaign two years prior.



Figure 2 – Men in Third Airfield Construction Squadron in bomb crater on Mindoro

Source: (The Pictures Page of 3 Airfield Construction Squadron)

The 3ACS only experienced one fatality. Mick and a man named Norman Macleod had been working on a rock ripping machine. Norman climbed on top of the machine and accidentally trapped his leg between parts of the frame. The machine's grasp tore through a majority of Norman's leg with ease. This left Mick to saw through the remainder of bone and flesh that the machine hadn't quite severed, and pull him from the machine. Mick carried Norman from the worksite to the camp. Norman did not survive the journey, bleeding out in Mick's arms. Amongst the 600 Australian men that served in the Battle of Mindoro, Mick had to hold in his arms the only man to die.

The Americans worked hard to shoot down enemy aircraft, which effectively boosted morale of the Australians. Morale was very important amongst the 3ACS. They were deprived of some of their human rights, so the presence of high-spirits was important to keep them functioning. Based on a story Mick's son Andrew has told, one of his father's favourite memories involved the time they hired a local's boat. After hard work on the airfields one day, Mick and his mate thought a boat ride to catch some fish was well earned. They hired a boat from the locals and took a charge with them to kill the fish in the bay. It wasn't long after they threw the charge in the water, that it drifted back underneath the boat and blew them out the sides. As they scrambled back to shore, they were met by an upset owner of the boat. Mick and his friend were more concerned about the fact they nearly lost their lives. Luckily, they both came out unscathed, and the story was one to be joked about amongst the men.

After the battle had ended, the American troops moved on to another island. The Australians however believed their duty was not finished. Until June of 1945, Mick and his colleagues stayed on Mindoro constructing necessities the locals did not have the resources or knowledge to build for themselves. They constructed two more airfields, preserved 50 kilometres of roadway, built hospitals, and quartermaster stores. They cemented the foundations of a sixty-metre-long suspension bridge that they planned and designed over the six months following the campaign. The Australians had many reasons to be commended on their service, yet suffered a lack of recognition. It wasn't until 1995, after watching their American colleagues be congratulated for their service, that the Australians were finally commended. Mick strived for acknowledgement for him and his colleagues, and sent many letters to the Department of Defence pleading to be recognised for their actions. In one of his letters he states, "3 Airfield Construction Service and 3ACS. May well be entitled to THE PHILIPPINES LIBERATION AWARD – or some Australian Recognition" (Collins, 1995). In October of 1995, members of the squadron were invited to accept the Philippine Liberation Medal (Figure 3).



Figure 3 – Mick's Medals Left to Right: 1939 – 1945 Star, Pacific Star, War Medal 1939–1945, Australia Service Medal 1939–1945, Philippine Liberation Medal

After returning from the war, Mick worked in Iron Knob for both Environmental Weather Systems Australia and BHP. Whilst residing here, Mick met the love of his life; Kathleen May Collins (nee Petrie). Mick frequently travelled as a wood merchant when he and Kathleen first married. He sold wood to the railways surrounding Iron Knob and frequently travelled along the Nullarbor to Kalgoorlie for purchasers. They went on to have six children, Richard, Marie, Ronald, Helen, Terry, and Andrew (Figure 4).



Figure 4 – Mick and Kathleen (far right and middle right) alongside sons Ronald and Andrew (far left and middle left)

Source: Roxby Downs Sun Newspaper (2012)

In 1950 Mick established his business, Northern Earthmoving and Engineering. Around 1952, Mick began dam-sinking on stations in the surrounding areas, alongside his 15-year-old son Ronald and family friend Daniel Forbes. In 1975, Mick and his family moved to Purple Downs Station, where he continued earthmoving work for surrounding stations. Mick then began working as a contractor with Western Mining Corporation (later acquired by BHP). With the opening of Olympic Dam and Roxby Downs, an airstrip and roads inevitably had to be developed. With the knowledge Mick acquired during his time on Mindoro, the Olympic Dam airstrip was designed and built (Figure 5). Mick, Ron and Dan built many of the original roads in Olympic Dam, Roxby Downs and Andamooka. Old friend John Showers recalls accompanying Mick and Ron through the completion of the original road into Olympic Dam from Andamooka (Showers, 1999).

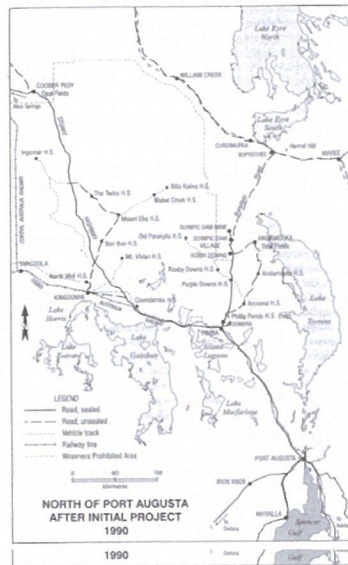


Figure 5 – Map of Northern Port Augusta displaying some of the roads built under Mick's business

Source: Return to Roxby Downs by John Showers (1999).

At age 68, Mick decided it was finally time to fulfil his dream, which he was unable to pursue in the RAAF due to his prior occupation as a farm labourer. Mick travelled to Port Augusta and obtained his pilot's license. He purchased an ultralight plane which he kept in the hangar of the Port Augusta Airport. Mick would travel from Roxby Downs to Port Augusta frequently to fly his plane. He found that this was where he was most at peace with himself (Arnold, 2020).

"And I thank you dear lord for saving my hide, When I had nowhere to run and nowhere to hide"

– Alex Wilson Poem, 'No Where to Run No Where to Hide'

Word Count: 1488 words

Part B:

Mick was evidently selfless throughout his service. Mateship is an Australian cultural term that encompasses equal opportunity, loyalty and friendship. This ANZAC Spirit characteristic is shown adamantly throughout Mick's service. Mick's dedication in attempting to ensure his friend and colleague, Norman Macleod, had the opportunity to pass honourably, exemplifies his continued display of mateship. Mick showed rapport with his mates in his boating adventure. It was at times like this when Mick's sense of mateship was most appreciated. Clouded by the danger of the enemy, Mick still found ways to build stronger connections with the 3ACS, which effectively boosted attitudes amongst the men. Mick never felt a sense of entitlement when it came to pursuing recognition. He pushed for all fellow colleagues to be credited for their actions. He valued every single one of his mates and believed that none of them should be left behind. Mick remained loyal to his American colleagues by consistently expressing gratitude, exhibited in his World War II Report (Collins, n.d.). Mick's actions demonstrated his continuous push for fairness, faithfulness and solidarity between servicemen. He heartily represents what true Australian mateship looks like.

Throughout his time on Mindoro, Mick showed extensive acts of perseverance. One could only imagine the horrors Mick witnessed. He remained resolute despite watching many of his comrades driven to insanity by the Japanese ferocity. A strong vigilance was required of him, and he persevered through the lack of basic needs such as sleep, nutrition and hygiene. He showed tenacity by working consistently on the airstrips and construction projects, despite a lack of training. Not only was Mick's physical perseverance tested, but also his mental capacity. Mick watched on as many of his mates were on the brink of physical and emotional collapse. Not only was Mick's physical perseverance tested through the humid, tropical conditions of the Pacific Islands at the time, but his mental perseverance was the most extraordinary of all. Mick carried the deadweight of his close friend as he became drenched in blood, and he did not think twice. He remained on the island carrying out humanitarian work even with his lack of knowledge in construction. His perseverance is highlighted strongly throughout his strenuous communications with The Department of Defence, ensuring the Australians get the recognition they deserved for their gallant actions.

The values of the ANZAC Spirit aren't always acknowledged. It is important we take opportunities like these to remember the sacrifices and the efforts that the ANZACs made towards their country. Mick kept the values of the ANZAC Spirit dear to him well after his service. The importance of mateship and perseverance never left him. Mick's personality is proof that when you hold the characteristics of the ANZAC Spirit, they will never leave you, or ever lose their significance.

Word Count: 462 words

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