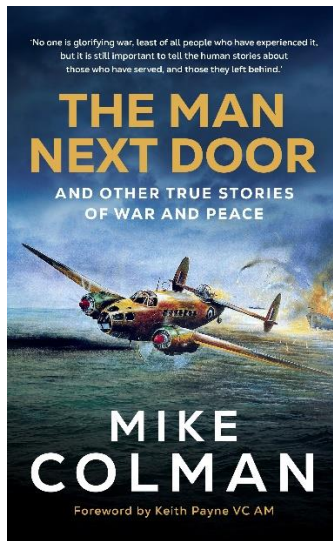


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Extract from *THE MAN NEXT DOOR*

By MIKE COLMAN

HE WAS THE MAN NEXT DOOR. His name was Ray, but I knew him only as Mr McMillan.

It was a very ordinary suburban street on Sydney's North Shore. We moved in in 1957 when I was nearly two years old.

The McMillans were already there when we arrived, and so were the Suttons in the next house up and the Donalds across the road. Everyone had kids around the same age, so we all knew each other pretty well growing up. Michael Sutton was my best friend. When we were about 10 years old, he told me that his dad had been a sergeant in the war. Another time, Bruce Donald from across the road and I were playing underneath his house and came across an old tin trunk of his father's that had the words 'Lt I. Donald' and some numbers painted in neat white letters along the side. It was no big deal in those days. Nearly everybody's dad had been in the war.

My father's best mate, Bruce Langford, lived a couple of streets away. Bruce was the local bank manager and Dad first met him when he went in to apply for a home loan. Bruce had been a captain in Borneo and brought back a Samurai sword that he used to slash the long grass at the back of their yard. Another family friend was Marshall Burgess, a Qantas pilot who had flown Catalina flying boats in the war, something I didn't know until I saw an ABC TV news item about the last meeting of the Catalina Association in 2011. Sitting in the cockpit of the only Catalina still flying in Australia, Marsh, then 89, told the reporter about the night he nearly didn't make it back.

I flew it down to about 20 feet above the water and if you can imagine, it was a pitch-black night and these bullets were whizzing everywhere around us, thousands of the things. Fortunately, they didn't hit us. How they missed us I don't know.

Like so many others, Marsh Burgess never talked about what he had gone through in the war. Not until much, much later anyway. Men like him were all around you in the 1960s and '70s. Not heroes necessarily, not old soldiers with a chest full of medals; just ordinary blokes who had gone away to war and done extraordinary things. It was many years after Bruce Langford's death that I stumbled onto a picture in the Australian War Memorial archives. The caption says: 'Beaufort, Borneo. August 27, 1945. Captain HB Langford, Officer Commanding, and members of B Company, 2/43rd Infantry Battalion, who have just returned from a patrol in the area.' Surrounded by his smiling comrades, Bruce is showing off the Samurai sword that I would later see him using in his garden. Crouching to his left, holding a Bren gun, is Private Tom Starceвич, who two months earlier had used that weapon to single-handedly clean out four Japanese machine-gun nests that had the company pinned down, earning him the Victoria Cross.

One of ten children raised on a farm at Grass Patch in Western Australia, Tom Starceвич returned to the area after the war and bought a small farm of his own. A quiet, shy man who avoided the spotlight, it was not until six years after his death in 1989 that a statue commemorating his wartime service was unveiled at Grass Patch.

That's how it was back then. You wouldn't know who had a tale to tell about what they had been through in the war. It could be the man who left the milk bottles on your front step every second morning, or the one who collected your ticket at the train station, or who drove the school bus. It could be the man next door.

RAY WAS A SINEWY, fit-looking man who always seemed to be tanned because he spent so much time in the garden. Their house stood out on our street of blond and red-brick bungalows because it was painted white, with a picket fence and a perfectly manicured front lawn.

I don't remember Ray ever touching up the paint job, but he must have, because it glowed, and the garden was immaculate. Roses out the front, fruit trees and veggies in the back. My mum was a keen gardener too, and she and Ray would sometimes talk through the back fence as they weeded or pruned. Never face-to-face, always through the fence, although occasionally they would pass over a cutting or some fruit they had grown.

Ray had been in the war too. I found that out when I was about 12 years old. For as long as I could remember my parents owned a Morris Minor, but around 1967 it was starting to show its age. Even using the crank handle on cold mornings didn't always get it started. And so, with great excitement, Dad traded in the old Moggie for a brand new Toyota Corolla. Talk about state of the art. It was turquoise with a white interior, and while it didn't have the automatic aerial of the top-of-the-range Toyota Crown, it did feature a radio and push-button cigarette lighter.

Dad brought it home on a Friday and the next morning he and I sat in it on the driveway reading the owner's manual, flicking switches and testing the horn. As we did, I noticed Ray looking at us from his front yard. Dad hopped out and walked across to him, maybe going to offer a spin around the block. Their conversation was short and appeared rather terse. Ray didn't seem to be sharing our joy about the new purchase. He shook his head, nodded grimly at the car, and headed inside. When Dad came back, I asked him what was going on.

'He was a POW in the war,' he told me. 'He said he'd never sit in a Japanese car.'

The last time I saw Ray was in February 2002, at my mother's funeral. I'd long before moved to Queensland and started a family of my own, but my parents had stayed in the old house.

Ray was still next door, the Suttons remained one house up and the Donalds were still across the road. Ray walked up to me after the service and shook my hand, reminding me who he was, as if I didn't know. He seemed smaller but just as wiry and tanned as I remembered.

'I'll tell you what Michael,' he said, looking genuinely sad. 'I'm really going to miss your mum.'

It was probably the longest conversation we'd ever had.

Ray died in November 2007, aged 91. My father went to the funeral where he spoke to Ray's son Stephen, who is now a barrister in Sydney. Stephen had delivered a eulogy and mentioned that a few years before his death, his father had written a memoir recounting his wartime experiences. My father told Stephen that he felt I would be interested in reading it, and a few weeks later a photocopied document arrived in the post.

It was titled: 'A Prisoner of War on His Journey to Japan 1939-1945

Written by hand on the title page was the dedication:

I present this brief account of my journey with the enemy to my son, Stephen. It was long and stressful, and the Japanese were extremely cruel and sadistic. Living was a day-to-day proposition but I always felt I would eventually make a safe return home.

I was about to learn more about the man next door ...

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