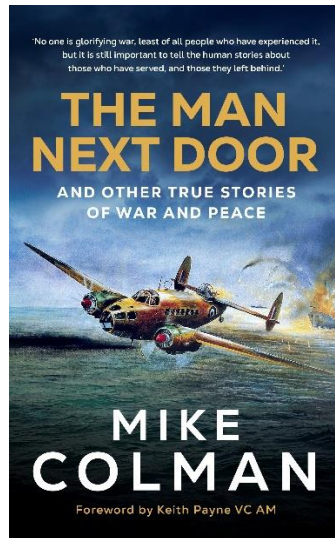


# STOKE HILL PRESS



## MIKE COLMAN INTERVIEW

Mike Colman is an award-winning journalist and the author of several books about sport and war. His tribute to Flight Sergeant Clifford Hopgood, who was killed after being shot down over Germany in World War II, won the Walkley Award for best magazine feature of the year. In this interview, he talks about the book and why it means so much to him to have some of his finest stories published in one collection.

*Mike, how did book come about?*

The seeds were sown at Gallipoli in 2007. The *Courier-Mail*, the newspaper in Brisbane where I worked, had just started a Saturday colour magazine called *Qweekend*. that offered the paper's journalists incredible possibilities in terms of time, space and budget. It gave me the chance to fulfil an ambition I had harboured for years.

'How about,' I asked the magazine's editor Christine Middap, 'you send me to Gallipoli on Anzac Day so I can follow in the footsteps of my grandfather and great-uncle? I'll write a story and can publish it next Anzac Day?'

'Let's do it,' Christine replied.

I will never forget the mix of emotions I felt when I made it to Anzac Cove, to follow in the footsteps of my ancestors. Today it's such a beautiful place, and so peaceful, completely different to what it must have been like in 1915. That story started something of a tradition — every Anzac Day, I'd write a story: the stories that make up a significant part of this book.

*How did that adventure lead to you writing the biography of Keith Payne, Australia's most decorated soldier of the Vietnam War?*

On the flight home I had a long stopover in Singapore and, still on a high from the excitement and emotion of the previous three days, I headed to a bank of computers and began looking up Australian military history sites. One covered the records of our Victoria Cross recipients, and I saw that Keith was our only living VC at that time. I decided to

contact him when I got home. The result was the book *Payne VC* and a long friendship with Keith and his wife Flo. The story of how Keith went back to Vietnam to search for a fallen soldier they'd left behind is part of this book. It was an honour to have him write the foreword.

*You won the Walkley for 'The Tree of Life', about Clifford Hopgood. How did that story come about?*

Not long after we moved from Sydney to Brisbane, I was driving with two restless daughters in the back seat of the car. As we went through a suburb called St Johns Wood, I saw a children's playground and decided to pull over. While my kids entertained themselves on the equipment, I noticed a large rock in front of a giant kauri pine. On the rock was a small silver plaque: a memorial to Flight Sergeant Hopgood that had been placed there in 1944. In my imagination I could see his family, friends and neighbours, some probably in uniform, planting a sapling and bowing their heads in silence. I pictured young Clifford as a small boy growing up nearby and playing in the very park my children were enjoying, and then as a young man heading off to war, never to return.

There's a story here, I said to myself, vowing to one day tell it. It's chapter 3 in the book.

*Why is the book called 'The Man Next Door'?*

Many of the stories in the book were originally published in *Qweekend*. I wanted to include something new, something I'd sort of known for a long time, but the full extent of which I only became aware of recently.

When I grew up in Sydney, in an ordinary suburban street, one of our neighbours was Ray McMillan, who I knew as 'Mr McMillan'. We moved there when I was two, and gradually I discovered that several men in our street had served in the war. One was the local bank manager who used to slash the long grass in his back yard with a Samurai sword he'd brought back from Borneo. Thinking about it now, you wouldn't know who had a tale to tell about what they had been through in the war. As I write in the book, it could be the milkman, the ticket collector at the train station or the bloke who drove the school bus. It could be the man next door.

Years later, after he died in 2009, I read Mr McMillan's war diaries and discovered an extraordinary tale of heroism and survival. It would have resonated with me whoever had written it, but this was an unassuming neighbour I'd known for many years. I wanted his memoir to be the basis for my opening chapter and am so grateful his family allowed me to do just that.

*Tell me about the cover image for the book.*

Inserted in Ray McMillan's memoir was a black-and-white photocopy of a painting that features his Hudson bomber being attacked by Japanese Zeros in 1941. The painting had a signature in the bottom right-hand corner: 'Frank Harding'. We couldn't locate the artwork when we googled, but we did discover that there is a Frank Harding Gallery at Renmark, South Australia, and they had a similar painting on display. My publisher Geoff Armstrong contacted Megan Harding, Frank's daughter, who manages the gallery, and she kindly agreed that that painting could appear on the cover of *The Man Next Door*.

Only problem was that this was a month before last Christmas, and the Murray River upstream from Renmark was in serious flood! The precious artwork was being moved to higher ground. The gallery didn't re-open until the new year, but fortunately we still had

time to produce what I think is a really striking jacket. It is a privilege for me, for everyone involved in the making of the book, to be able to showcase Frank Harding's work.

*Finally, is it fair to say there is a common thread through all your war stories ...*

Yeah, you're right. I look for ordinary people who did extraordinary things. What Ray McMillan experienced is unbelievable, same with Keith Payne, Charlie Blackman, who was an Indigenous Anzac in World War I, the Rats of Tobruk and all the others. It's important we never forget such heroes, their families and those who honour them.

***The Man Next Door, by Mike Colman, is  
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