

## **Bob McColl**



Bob McColl was born at Strathmore, just 10km from Greenethorpe, in October 1918, and had he lived, he would have been 93 years old this year. As it was he died in 1970, having just completed his 52nd year.

He came to school here in Greenethorpe, by either horse or train, and then to Grenfell High School until he completed his Intermediate Certificate at the end of 1933. He worked for his father Hugh McColl on the farm at Strathmore, which by that time had grown to 700 hectares, including a 25 hectare prune orchard and cannery. For the next seven years he worked there, coming to grips with new innovations such as tractors and headers and learning the practicalities and difficulties of managing the large number of staff that were required to run the orchard.

The declaration of War in 1939 was a long way from farming families initially. Whilst there were radios, television was still a long way off, the Depression still had its hands around the country's throat, and the war was on the other side of the world. In the early period there was not the call to Empire as there had been in the First War. And anyway most people assumed, as they had in the First War, that it would all be over soon and everyone would come home.

Unfortunately though, the War continued, and continued with the eventual outcome less and less clear even in the farming areas. Australian troops were withdrawn from Africa and brought home to defend Australia.

In August 1941 Bob enlisted in the RAAF, and there was a mix of motivations in doing so. Firstly he had two uncles killed during WW1 (and their names I used to see every Sunday on the Memorial stone in the Methodist Church). Charlie Fisher from the 10th Light Horse was killed during the Battle of Jaffa and is buried near Alexandria in Egypt. Robert McColl from the 20th Battalion was killed on the Somme and is buried in the Australian Memorial at Villers-Bretonneux in France. Many people here today are related to either of those two. Dad told me that whilst he was not going off to seek retribution, the loss of his Uncles was a factor in his joining up. Of course another was a degree of adventure. Like countless generations of young men before him, going off to War was the ultimate adventure. And of course, just like those earlier generations, he was mistaken. But, the Depression had been very hard and long for

everyone and joining the RAAF was a type of escape. I have learned since that farmers were favoured as pilots because they usually had some mechanical knowledge, had experience with weapons of some sort and were naturally fitter than their urban comrades.

After basic training in Sydney he was sent to Tamworth to commence flight training, learning on Tiger Moth aircraft. He flew solo after 7 hours and completed his training in February 1942.

From there he went to Laverton in Victoria to learn to fly twin engine Avro Anson aircraft and the intricacies of Advanced Navigation, completing this course in May '43. By this stage he had around 100 flying hours in his Log Book. Very soon after this he was notified that he was to be sent to Canada as part of the Empire Flight Training Scheme and it was with mounting excitement that he and his mates embarked in Melbourne in July '43. The excitement of going overseas for the first time and the new aircraft they would be flying was tempered somewhat with the possibility that they could be torpedoed by German or Japanese submarines along the way. Their ship took a very tortuous route to the South of New Zealand and across the Southern Pacific to get to the Panama Canal. From there they travelled to Halifax on the east coast of Canada, stopping enroute to pick up survivors from a ship that had been sunk only 20km from them.

The next 9 months were spent at various Schools right across the breadth of Canada, learning about torpedoes, bombing, how to escape from burning aircraft, flying in extremely cold conditions and coming to grips with new and faster aircraft. Sadly up to 20% of student pilots were killed in this period, usually from their own mistakes. During this time they often had leave and were free to go where they wished. On two occasions he and his friend David Whishaw travelled from the Canadian west to San Francisco and from Nova Scotia to Washington. Nowadays that would not be such a big thing but for two farm boys who had never been past Sydney these were truly amazing and exciting times. In February 44, Bob completed all his training and was commissioned as a Pilot Officer, licensed to fly Tiger Moth, Anson, Oxford and Hampden aircraft. Quickly he was sent via ship to Liverpool (UK). After more navigational and gunnery training he was sent to join 455 Squadron, an RAAF unit flying Hampden aircraft armed with torpedoes and involved in attacking enemy shipping in the North Sea in the area from Altmark in Northern Norway south to Den Haag in Holland. Based in Norfolk on the East Coast, he very quickly learned why the training had taken so long. The flying was very difficult as often they were flying at sea level in very foggy conditions and losses were very high.

In May 44 the Squadron converted to Bristol Beaufighter aircraft, a very heavily armed aeroplane used for rocket attacks on shipping, mainly along the Norwegian coast and into the fjords. This was extraordinarily difficult and dangerous flying as the sides of the fjords are almost perpendicular, and up to 300m high. The only way to attack ships was to literally dive down the cliffs until the correct distance for firing their rockets was met. After firing they would then fly straight at the target until the last possible second and then level out to fly along to the end of the fjord. Whilst the squadron was very successful during its operations through the War, they paid a terrible price with more than 50% of their aircrews lost.

Almost inevitably, Dad was also shot down by German fighters in Feb '45 in an operation over Forde Fjord near Stavanger in Norway. That night the squadron was a pilot short and although he had completed his "tour" of missions, he went on another operation over Norway. My mother Catherine and he had only just announced that they were to be married. It was assumed that because his aircraft was seen to be on fire when he crashed in the sea that he and his navigator were dead. In fact they escaped from the aircraft with hardly a scratch and were handed over to the German Army. After interrogation

and 30 days in solitary confinement they finally ended up in Stalag Luft 1, a POW camp on the German coast of the Baltic Sea. Fortunately the war was coming to its long and bitterly fought conclusion and the POWs were released by the Soviet army in May '45. He was then able to return to England and reassure my mother that wedding plans were still in place. On 2nd June '45 they were married in London. Bob returned to Australia shortly after on a troop ship, having been away for almost 4 years. Flight Lieutenant Bob McColl DFC was discharged in Feb '46. Catherine arrived in Australia on a Bride ship in July '46 and they were reunited after a 9 month separation. They settled on "Girrahween" and went on to produce 5 children and to run a successful farming business until Bob became yet another victim of the War, dying suddenly after a series of heart problems in 1970.

Catherine, my mother, now lives in Sydney and at almost 89 is slowing down a little. In a way her new life in Greenethorpe was as far outside her experience as Dad's was when he went off to join the Airforce. It is hard to imagine the courage it took for her to leave her pretty comfortable existence in England to come here, knowing no-one, and into a big old house without power or any of the comforts of home. Not to mention the heat and unattractive wildlife. And a drought to make the package even more welcoming!

There are two footnotes to this story.

While Dad was on his way back to Australia he was Awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, (although he did not know of the award at the time) for "Courageous determination in attacking enemy shipping on many occasions, and in particular on the operation of 3rd Feb '45 where in spite of enormous anti-aircraft fire he attacked the targets twice, climbing out of the Fjord and returning to press his attack". The award was presented to him by the Governor General in 1946.

Some 3 years ago I was fortunate to be in Norway for a celebration commemorating the Battle in which Bob, amongst many others, was shot down. I met people who actually saw him crash into the sea and they were able to show me exactly where it happened, which was quite an eerie experience. One of them, a farmer's son who was about 10 years old at the time, showed me the pistol that Bob had given his Mother to save it from the Germans.

Coincidentally a Canadian film crew was there filming the Ceremony, and as a result a search was carried out using Remote controlled underwater cameras. Bob's Beaufighter was located, almost exactly where I was told it would be, in 180m of very dark and extremely cold water and apparently still quite intact, despite the ravages of 60 years. There are hopes that it may be recovered at some stage and some parts will come back to the War Memorial in Canberra.

Also an addendum: I mentioned earlier about my two Great uncles on my father's side of our family, Bob McColl Snr and Charlie Fisher, who were both killed in WW1. They are not the full story though as far as my family is concerned; add to them my mother's Uncle who was killed in the First War plus her brother and first cousin, both bomber crew and both killed in WW2 and it can be simply demonstrated that the cost borne by the families of those who went away was immense. And of course, it was certainly no adventure. Thank you for inviting me to be here today, it has been wonderful to be here. This stuff is really important for our children to know about, as the numbers of men with experience like my fathers are getting very thin. Even more so to have learned about Vic Smith, who was in the same class as I was at school here, and I understand, in Vietnam nearly the same time I was as well. Amazing coincidence.

Written by Bob's son Dick McColl for ANZAC Day 2011