

A tribute to Michael O'Connor

Dr Brian Ridge



Michael O'Connor and Victoria's Governor John Landy, at Mike's investiture as a member of the Order of Australia.

Michael O'Connor was living as a child in Darwin when it was first bombed by the Japanese in February 1942. In the mid 1950s he enthusiastically underwent his turn at national service with the Army, and then stayed on in the Army Reserve throughout the late 1950s. After working for a decade serving the people of Papua New Guinea as a 'Kiap' (patrol officer) and district officer he returned to Australia for family reasons in 1966. He had joined the Royal Australian Navy Volunteer Reserve when on leave from PNG, and later served a long period of full-time service with the Navy in the late 1960s and early 1970s. All these experiences gave Mike a keen sense of the need for adequate national security planning and preparations. Many of the lessons and observations were incorporated into his very well received 1985 book on Australia's defence, *To Live In Peace*, which was willingly launched by retired Foreign Minister and Governor-General, Sir Paul Hasluck.

Mike has been a member of the Australia Defence Association from soon after its foundation in 1975. Since 1981 he has been at the helm of the Association as its Executive Director, first in a part-time capacity and then full time from 1989. Over the last 22 years he has effectively never taken annual leave. Being at the helm of a national body is, of course, never easy and is a far more an activist role than the simple phrase 'being

at the helm' might suggest.

Australia and ADA have been most fortunate to have someone of Mike's calibre actively involved in the debates, musings and action that have been, and continue to be, part and parcel of public policy making concerning Australia's national security. Mike has been a prime force in having defence taken seriously at all levels, but would no doubt modestly see his work as being part of a joint operation involving myriad groups all linked by the desire to see defence gain its proper standing in the Australian body politic. In the Australia Day Honours List this year Mike's sterling efforts were recognised when he was accorded membership of the Order of Australia for his services to Australia and the Association. Last year the Chief of Army awarded him a commendation for similar reasons.

Of course, there has been nothing insular about his approach and over the years Mike has honed links with many individuals and organisations overseas. All this has meant that ADA has remained truly global in its appreciation of what are the critical factors for the evolution and implementation of a credible defence policy.

Mike has also been tireless in making himself available for the press in order to sell the ADA's message. His patient and careful counselling of generations of journalists has made him the frequent



Mike and Colleen enjoy the garden party at Government House following Mike's investiture.

first point of call when defence issues arise. With the apparent muzzling of ADF spokesmen over the last few years Mike has had to take up an even greater burden as de facto ADF liaison officer to the media on many matters.

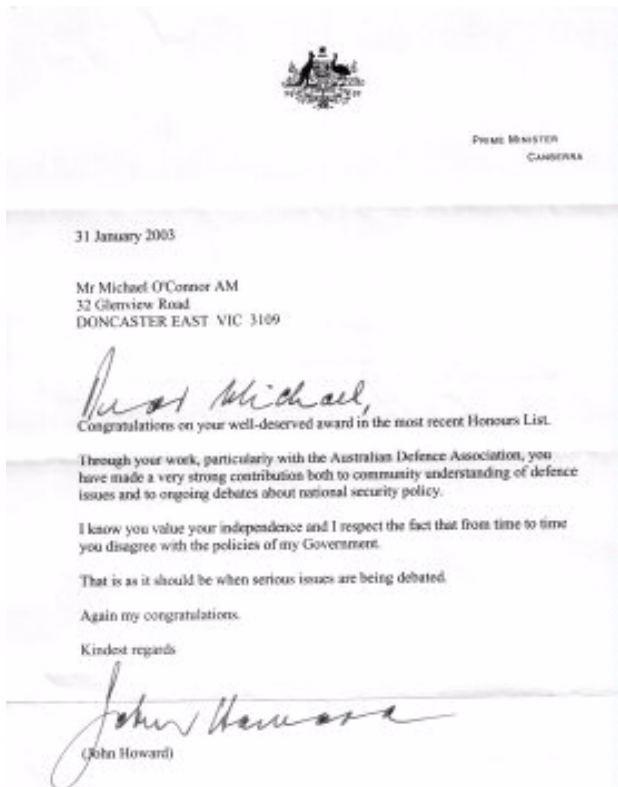
In the background Mike has also been able, in a very effective non-partisan way, to provide objective input and expertise to the major political parties when they periodically re-think their own stances on national security. This non-partisanship has been crucial for maintaining and enhancing ADA's overall public credibility. This credibility could not have been built or maintained without Mike's special insights, skills, mental flexibility and leadership.

A final sign of his basic farsightedness is the way Mike kept the Board on track in planning for his 'retirement' and searching for a successor. As well as facing the inevitability of retirement, Mike realised that the ADA, and ongoing debate and thinking on defence policy generally, needed to be handed on to the next generation. Mike is not giving up the fight entirely, however, and is remaining on the national board of the Association.

Mike's dedicated service to ADA has been greatly assisted by the support of his wife, Colleen, and his children: Joe, John, Catherine, Helen and Brian. The Association has always preserved its objectivity, independence and professional integrity, but this has, however, usually come at the price of limited financial resources. This, in turn, has unfortunately meant many and sustained personal sacrifices at times by Mike and his family. They would not have had it any other way but this in no way lessened the impact on them or lessens the moral debt we owe them.

The Australia Defence Association, in particular, and Australia generally, have much to thank Mike for. We wish him and Colleen good health and a very satisfying retirement — they have both earned it!

Dr Brian Ridge is the National President of the Australia Defence Association.



Mike's letters of acknowledgement from Prime Minister John Howard and General Peter Cosgrove.

