

EULOGY FOR IRENE SIMKIN

BY TOBY SIMKIN

On behalf of my sister and brother, all of Mums grandchildren and her goddaughter, I would like to thank you for coming today to remember Irene Simkin.

A special thank you to the many overseas and out of town friends who sent an outpouring of heartfelt condolences, and are remembering her at this moment, and to DJ Wizniak, who had an extremely close relationship with Mum in her later years, and spent last month helping our Mum, but cannot be here due to his own fathers serious illness and his 103 year old grandmother in Canada. Thanks to technology, he (along with others from around the world) are watching this live via streaming right now.

Having spent the majority of her adult life traveling the globe, Mum had the sheer joy and springiest steps when arriving off a ship or airplane to a new destination. She was certainly happiest when traveling. In her latter years, her body could not keep up with her love of life and desire to experience new things, of travel, of experiencing new cultures, of meeting new people, of future technology.

But it was her devotion and love of family that kept her grounded throughout her life. Her ongoing love & respect of our father, years after their sad divorce. Her unwavering support for my oldest brother Richard, despite some of his non-traditional life choices; her commitment and adoration of my Sister Mandy, proven when Mum put a hold on her own life to race to the other side of the globe to babysit and support the birth of her first granddaughter; her pride in my brother Tim for achieving military career success; and of me, the raggedy, rambunctious little me, that was impossible to control but Mum still found it possible to deeply love.

Mum openly talks about her difficult childhood in Sheffield, Yorkshire. Essentially given away by her birth mother at a very young age, Mum was fortunate to fall into the loving embrace and role model of Majorie “Paddy” Paddock, Mum’s school teacher, who became mum’s guardian and lifelong mentor. Mum is happy to be reunited with Paddy at long last.

As a young girl under Paddy’s care, Mum conducted school orchestras at the age of 6, warranting local press coverage. Mum firmly believes that faeries lived in their back garden, and likely is searching them out in heaven as we speak.

Having lived through the ravages of World War 2, witnessing first hand the German bombings of her hometown, and her family home, and death of friends in these raids, while on school break, she worked farms to help prepare crops and support the food supply for both soldiers and those left behind. She became determined to put on uniform and on the day of eligibility, joined the Royal Air Force.

With this military career, she commenced what would become her lifelong love of exploring the worlds and learning about new cultures. Awarded the Malaya Medal (as some in this room can attest, proudly one of the rare King George VI medals) for her services in the theatre of war in Singapore/Malaya, she returned to England to work alongside many famous military and political leaders, including Sir Winston Churchill at Bushy Park and at Whitehall.

Out of desire to push her personal limits, she found herself parachuting (her only protection was called “a rubber band” around her head which I now treasure). It was around this time Mum met her future husband, after he was famously boasting to her about how difficult the parachuting course was he was taking, only to be told by another officer that my mother had already done it.

Mum resigned her Royal Air Force commission and headed down under where, in 1953 she married our father in Melbourne.

The travel intensified with Dad's military and diplomatic career, as well as giving birth to Richard and Mandy in Australia, Tim in Malaysia and myself in England.

With our full family now complete, "us 6" experienced a rare moment in our family history with all of us living together in Canberra. This is where I have happy memories of family dinners - for example sneaking boiled brussel sprouts in our napkins at the dinner table and clearing the table to throw the gooey sprouts away — it was years before Mum realized none of us liked them. I had happy memories of family Christmas, and Santa Claus until such time as my older brothers showed me Mum's closet on the night before Christmas with all of Santa's gifts — thus Mum became Santa Claus to me.

Our swimming pool was where Mum taught me to swim. The nearby rivers became our family holiday destinations. It was at this time, as a family, we learned the news of Man landing on the Moon.

This moment of complete family life on Mugga Way in Red Hill ended when our Dad was posted to Vietnam. Upon his return we moved to Brisbane with Mandy and Richard staying behind at boarding school. After a short time in a fabulous home called Beau Rivage in Brisbane, where Mum was often worried about Tim and I playing in our backyard bomb shelter near the river, and often helped Tim and I with local school rag drives, we left Tim in boarding school and Mum, Dad I headed off to Washington DC for 3 years.

I believe Mum was in her element and happiest in Washington DC. Her military career, childhood hardships and love of different cultures and travel made her an idyllic diplomatic wife, hosting perfect parties and enjoying the social scene of

Washington, with lots of side trips to explore new and interesting places. She loved doing Kookaburra calls at dinner parties, while rubbing shoulders with ambassadors and generals. Here in Washington she formed lasting friendships with both military, political and business leaders that last to today.

Washington life ended in the US bicentennial year of 1976 when we drove across the USA exploring farmlands, deserts, NORAD and California. We sailed the South Pacific from San Francisco to Melbourne to ultimately reach Brisbane where shortly after, Dad retired from the army.

Our parents divorced, and for the next several years, Mum went through a challenging period, while creating a new single life for herself.

Our parents set about keeping active, with Dad managing the Flying Doctor Service and Mum managing Accreditation and later Hospitality for the Commonwealth Games in 1982.

My sister gave birth to Mum's first granddaughter, Ashley, in 1991. Fortunately, my sister & husband Paul gave Mum a new life calling, by asking her to return to the USA and help as a nanny to Ashley, since both Mandy and Paul were working. To this day, Ashley refers to my mother, not as grandmother, rather as Nana.

US immigration was not her friend — so after learning she would not be permitted to stay in the USA, I coordinated Canadian Landed Immigrant Status for her and moved her into DJ's and my home in Toronto — a half day's drive to Mandy, Paul and Ashley.

In 1995 a Grandson, Troy was born. Mum was overjoyed to meet for the first time in 1996. Mum was extremely proud of how Tim was clearly a loving father. In 1997, Emma, her second

granddaughter, and sister of Troy was born. 3 months later, another grandson, and baby brother to Ashley, Brett was born.

Half a century ago, Mum's sister Margaret headed off from Sheffield to create a new wing of the family in South Africa, which fortunately embraced Mum, thanks to a reunion after 32 years apart, combined with the technology age of Facebook and a long visit from England through Southern Africa.

When Mandy, Paul and Ashley returned to Australia, Mum followed, setting up her retirement life in Monash, joining PROBUS, and building a new circle of very good friends, many of whom are here today.

Her love of Asian culture endured through her life. Starting in 1947 with her Royal Air Force posting to Singapore, where she was stationed at Changi, but spent a lot of time enjoying Malaysian, Chinese and Indian cultures. When my father was posted to Malaya in 1957, Mum felt like she was returning home. In Canberra in the late 60's and early 70's she was active with the Woman's International Club, spending a lot of time with the Thai, Japanese, Chinese, Vietnamese and Indian wives of military and diplomatic attaché's. Finally, her extended trip throughout China in 2009 gave her extremely happy memories and enduring friendships with a number of Chinese, all of whom have sent sincere condolences on her passing.

Everyday, I see Mum in different ways in her surviving children - I see Mum's caring, compassion and commonsense in Mandy. I see Mum's desire for order and tradition in Tim, I feel Mums undeniable love and emotion inside me everyday.

Mums smile and warmth was endearing to people she met around the world... regardless of race, language or culture. She easily made friends with anyone... from Zulu warrior chiefs to Chinese kids captivated by her persona.

Mum was a teacher, a moral compass, a woman of worldly experience and strong virtue. She taught me to walk, She caught me when I fell, She taught me to swim, She instilled in me a love of music, and a belief to pursue my inner dreams.

Mummy, you entered this world without love. You leave this world full of love for you, forever.

Let's us all now briefly reflect on Mum's amazing life...

(VIDEO: Nimrod/Abide with Me)