



AN INDOMITABLE SPIRIT

Anzac Day is a busy day for many in The Salvation Army and in particular its Red Shield Defence Service representatives. **KENT ROSENTHAL** meets the man who pioneered the work of the RSDS in Australia

When Mick Gilbert turned 65, he knew he was still too young to retire. So, he went on to establish The Salvation Army’s Red Shield Defence Services at Australia’s Royal Military College, Duntroon, where he served for another 10 years.

With his Armed Forces background, Mick was the ideal man to mentor the young Army cadets in Canberra where he became known as “The Saint” for his work serving refreshments and supporting recruits from both Australia and overseas.

When he took up the role Mick was given the status of envoy. Its non-religious connotation, unlike that of a chaplain, he believes gave him greater freedom to move among the military college’s multicultural population.

He recalls how it allowed him to bridge

the communication gap with a group of 14 Muslims from Kuwait who were training at the college.

“I was asked to be their mentor and I was able to sort out their prayer times, the food they ate – and we became very good friends,” he says.

“Because they were Muslims they wouldn’t talk to the chaplains but they would talk to me. I was just one of them virtually, as an envoy not an officer, so I had a lot in common with them.

“I came to The Salvation Army as an outsider virtually – as a 12-year-old from a non-Salvation Army family. My story goes back to 1934 when I heard the [Army] band in my street in England. The band used to come once a month to play for the patients at a hospital at the back of our place and the Lord touched me and I followed the band to the Army hall.”

Military service

Mick played in his local corps’ junior band until World War II broke out. He joined the Royal Navy, while still under-age, and went on to serve in the north Atlantic, Mediterranean, East Indies and the Pacific. He was a bow man on a tank landing craft in the D-Day landings in Normandy.

Mick immigrated to Australia in 1948 and worked as a baker. He’s been a Salvationist for more than 60 years. Around Canberra, he became well known for his volunteer work helping at fires, floods and any other disaster where a kind word and a good brew were needed.

He has a strong connection with Old Parliament House where, from 1978 to 1986, he was a chef and then for the last two years of service in the building, from 1986 to 1988, as a security guard.

“When I retired in 1988 I said, ‘where



Mick Gilbert with his wife Lyn, and (above) the Gilbert’s house in Canberra is adorned with many of the awards Mick has earned. Photos: Shairon Paterson

do I go from here? I’m not just going to sit around and die’. I still had plenty of energy so I went off to the Major General at Duntroon and told him, ‘I’m a returned serviceman, I don’t need a house, I don’t need a wage because I’ve got my own home – I’m on a veteran’s pension – can you find me something to do?’

“He said I was just the man he was looking for. And I knew I was where I was needed.”

So in 1988, Mick was appointed as the first Salvation Army envoy to the Royal Military College, Duntroon.

He was awarded an Order of Australia Medal for his 10 years with the Red Shield Defence Services and 15 years with Salvation Army Emergency Services, including a period as divisional director.

In 1997, he received The Salvation Army’s highest national award – the Certificate of Exceptional Service – for establishing the Red Shield Defence Service.

In 1998, he retired as envoy at Duntroon, at the age of 74. At his farewell parade he was awarded a Commander Training Commendation for excellent service. He had been made an honorary graduate of the college in 1997.

Street ministry

Since ending his service at Duntroon, Mick has been involved with the Red Shield refreshment booth at the ACT Family Law Courts, conducting a program for seniors (mostly war widows) and enlightening

visitors on naval lore at the Australian War Memorial’s Discovery Room.

Even now Mick participates in street ministry for the Gungahlin Corps (North Canberra) at a local market place. But he admits he’s starting to slow down.

“When you get to my age, 86, you say, ‘well thank the Lord! It’s been all worthwhile!’”

At their home in suburban Canberra, Mick’s wife Lyn laughs that their home is like a museum. There’s naval memorabilia lining the shelves in the living room and hallway, including models of ships Mick served on, portholes and lamps, flags, photos, plaques and even an old rum barrel and ration measurer. Mick quickly points out that his war ration rating was originally “U.A.” (under-age) and later “T” (temperance).

Mick and Lyn’s home is aptly named “HMS INDOMITABLE” after the last ship Mick served on in the Pacific at the end of World War II.

Mick’s passionate memories are a testimony to his life carrying the Salvation Army message in the arenas of both tragedy and joy.

“I’ve had a very full life. To God be the glory.”



Kent Rosenthal is News Editor and journalist for Pipeline and supplements.

The RSDS on Anzac Day

By JULIA HOSKING

The Salvation Army’s Red Shield Defence Services representatives will again be heavily involved in Anzac Day services across the country this year.

The RSDS acknowledges that its involvement with the military on Anzac Day is vital to its ministry, as it offers them a further opportunity to build relationships with Australia’s Army personnel.

RSDS representatives will lead or be involved in dawn services at seven Army barracks – Duntroon, Holsworthy, Singleton, Enoggera, Townsville, Puckapunyal and Darwin – while other team members will provide assistance at a further five ceremonies. It is supplying buglers for several community ceremonies, and in most of the towns where services are held, they will join the parade.

Chief Commissioner of the RSDS, Major Barry Nancarrow, believes that Anzac Day enables the representatives to “build a rapport with the Digger, and when they see us leading a dawn service, they get another dimension of what the ‘Sallyman’ is”.

Major Nancarrow says the motivation for his work and ministry is “Jesus for the soldier”.

“Everything that the Red Shield Defence Services do is driven by that, which includes our involvement with the Anzac Day ceremonies.”