‘Plain old Mike,’ thank you.

“On behalf of such a man I will boast; but on my own behalf I will not boast, except in regard to my weaknesses. For if I do wish to boast I will not be foolish, for I will be speaking the truth; but I refrain from this, so that no one will credit me with more than he sees in me or hears from me.”

2 Corinthians 12:5-6

On May 22, 2019, I was granted about thirty-five minutes on the phone with Michael Collins ’48. Mike’s service to this nation and the world are well-known and documented elsewhere, and although he downplays his life’s laudatory aspects, in this year of the fifty-third anniversary of Gemini X, Mike’s first space mission, and the fiftieth anniversary of his last, Apollo 11, we pause to celebrate these and other accomplishments he attained. We also find particular interest in how the young man who Michael was when he entered St. Albans on September 22, 1943, became the graduate, Mike, on June 5, 1948, and how he carried the fire he kindled here out into the wider world.

I was a bit short on prep time for the interview, but from the start, Mike set me at ease and responded in his direct and self-deprecating way.

“When I tried to call Mike “General Collins” or “sir,” he quickly corrected me. ‘I’m just plain old Mike.’”

In fact, the retired, two-star, Air Force Major General initially appeared more interested in my military service, the fact that I was a Marine sergeant who had served in Operation Desert Shield, Storm, and Calm as a diesel mechanic. Mike opined that a Marine Corps sergeant was someone who did “something useful” and that all he ever did as a reserve general was “push papers around.” He was also surprised and pleased to find out that St. Albans still has an active group of alumni serving in our nation’s armed forces.

With that ground covered, the interview officially began. “I’m not very good at answering questions. You will find that out in a moment, but you go. Start.” He may not have wanted to be called one, but clearly the general was in charge.

I wondered aloud: Why was Mike selected for NASA’s third astronaut group?

“I don’t know really. I can tell you, earlier, backing up before I got into the program in ’63, when they first started, before it really existed, no one knew what to pick in a way of a background for these new, strange things called astronauts.” Some thought mountain climbers accustomed to thin air, some suggested scuba divers, maybe even bullfighters—all daring, danger-pursuing professionals willing to put up with the inherent risks of space-flight training and missions: “They’re used to that stuff.” According to Mike,
FROM ST. ALBANS MAN TO SPACEMAN. Among the school’s archival treasures are the official NASA portrait of Michael Collins taken prior to the Apollo 11 mission, the patch he helped design, and a copy of the school prayer that he brought on the mission and later autographed. The background photo of Earth was taken during the journey, on July 16, 1969. View more photos online at stalbansschool.org/MichaelCollins

THE SCHOOL PRAYER

Ye bless the Church and the Church, O Lord, upon this School and upon all other works undertaken in thy name and for thy glory; and grant that all who serve thee here, whether as teachers or learners, may set thy holy will ever before them, and seek always to do such things as are pleasing in thy sight; that so both the Church and Commonwealth of this land may benefit by their labors, and they themselves may attain unto everlasting life through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Carried to the Moon aboard Apollo 11
Michael Collins 69
“These nutty ideas floated around until someone put on President Eisenhower’s desk a memo saying that the best candidates would be graduates of an accredited test pilot school. That took a world of millions and narrowed it down to just a couple hundred. So that was how I snuck in ... I just sort of eased in the backdoor because I was a graduate of an accredited test pilot school.”

Snuck in? It sure sounded like a pretty narrow door to just “ease” through.

Mike revealed that, as a test pilot, his favorite plane to fly was the Lockheed F104 Starfighter. At 55-feet long and only 12-feet wide, the streamlined Starfighter was “sort of half airplane and half missile.” Recalled Mike: “It flew beautifully but didn’t turn very well.” He described his job at Edwards Air Force Base as “the best job there was to be in fighter test and the test division there.” Later in the interview, I asked if he’d never become an astronaut, what he would have done instead. Clearly, continuing to be a test pilot held its appeal. “I had the prize assignment out of test pilot school to fighter test at Edwards. I was flying new airplanes as they came down the line or, more frequently, I was flying older airplanes that had been improved in one way or another. And we were trying to measure and value those improvements. So, I had the military flying world by the tail.” Mike’s analytical duties as a test pilot and his knowledge of, and love for, flying aircraft like the F-104 stood him in good stead in the endless hours and duties in training and atop the Titan II missile used in Gemini X and the Saturn V for Apollo 11.

When I asked Mike what he believed was the number one contributor to the success of the Gemini and Apollo programs, and the Apollo 11 mission specifically, he said, unequivocally, President John F. Kennedy.

When I asked Mike what he believed was the number one contributor to the success of the Gemini and Apollo programs, and the Apollo 11 mission specifically, he said, unequivocally, President John F. Kennedy. “He’s the one who made a speech and said our job was ‘to put a man on the moon by the end of the decade and return him safely to earth.’” For Mike, Kennedy was the “guiding light” who gave everyone a constant refrain to justify the fiscal and human costs. Mike returned to this sentiment when I asked him how, despite all the important, straining, and tumultuous events going on in the United States and the world in the late 1960s, the space program continued to maintain its focus: “I’ll say John F. Kennedy, period.”

Asked how he was able to maintain his focus throughout his training and through the tensions—the moments of doubt, fear and exhilaration—of the actual Apollo 11 mission, Mike pulled an old drill instructor trick. He turned the question right back on me. “How’d you handle a tough situation in the Marines?” I replied that we would fall back on our training—our procedures and processes. Mike agreed (duh, Sergeant!). He would do this again when I asked if national service by graduates of school like St. Albans is still important today, and if so, why? My short answer was that I think it’s absolutely essential, particularly as Marine Corps officers.
Mike’s reply: “Well, would you please put me down as old Mike is 100 percent behind everything Sergeant Wilkerson says about the Marine Corps and its applicability to today’s world and the social situation we have in this country!”

During the Apollo program, Mike also worked in the somewhat unheralded development of the astronauts’ pressure suits. “The design of a pressure suit is kind of half technology, a little bit of an overlay of science, and a lot of mysticism . . . It’s an amazing little sub-world in the world of space technology, and I enjoyed just being a small part of it.” He described the need for a space suit to conform to all the complex human body movements and mission activities in a zero-gravity environment while keeping sufficient pressure inside to preserve life. The resulting stiffness of the suit was the chief factor an astronaut had to overcome, to “be very flexible and to manipulate the equipment out there without becoming too tired doing it.”

Another area of technological advancements used in Mike’s era we discussed was the use of computers in the Apollo 11 mission. While the Earth-based computers in Houston and around the world were essential to the mission’s success, Mike described the one on-board Eagle as “really more of a backup . . . very, very primitive.” Said Mike: “We tried to make it easily understandable. We stole some terminology from English, we had verbs and nouns. I still remember if I told that computer ‘verb 16, noun 20, enter,’ it would want to realign my inertial platform.”

Mike had a few more observations regarding the space program in the 1960s. Asked whether astronauts were heroes and who his heroes are, Mike’s reply was extended and thoughtful. “That’s a good question. I like discussing the idea of heroism. I think the idea of heroism has gotten degraded in recent years. ‘Oh, did you hear what Fred said on that TV show last night? Oh, my gosh, you know, he’s my hero.’ You can bet he ain’t my hero. I think heroes are to be found in our society today. You know, the nurse in an emergency ward giving mouth-to-mouth resuscitation to some total stranger. There are a lot of hero models. Astronauts are definitely not heroes. We were good. We were highly qualified. We did our jobs, but that was what we were trained to do. It was our job. It’s not like the wording that I always go back to, the wording in the Congressional Medal of Honor—‘above and beyond the call of duty.’ Now that’s a hero, not an astronaut.”

Along these lines, Mike said that the mission patches for Gemini X and for Apollo 11 (the latter he had a role in designing) represented some of the unsung contributors to the success of both. “In the Mission Control Room of NASA’s Houston Center, crew patches for each flight are hung on the walls. All include the names of each crew member except two, Gemini X and Apollo 11, my two flights. The crew of these thought it better to use no names to emphasize the contributions of the other 400,000 Americans who had worked to make Apollo a success.”

That idea of support and teamwork came up again when I asked Mike about his family’s contributions to his accomplishments. Again, his reply was succinct and clear. “Well, I think the number one contributor coming from my family was my wife, Patricia Mary Finnegan Collins, alias Pat! She was not a big space buff, but her attitude was, ‘Okay, if that’s what you want to do, and you think it is the right thing for all of us, then, boy, I’m with you 100 percent.’ So even though her interests were more along the lines of liberal arts, English, and history, and less having to do with technology, space, and specifically NASA’s Gemini or Apollo programs, even though that wasn’t what she had been trained to understand and wasn’t what she particularly wanted to understand, she backed me 100 percent, and I think that was the most valuable contribution.”

Mike left NASA and retired from the Air Force early in 1970,
soon after the completion of the Apollo 11 mission and its associated world-wide celebrations. He was appointed as assistant secretary of state for public affairs (1970-71) and then the director of the National Air and Space Museum (1971-78), presiding over the construction and opening (ahead of time and under budget) of its new home on the National Mall in 1976. As if he wasn’t busy enough, he also served two terms on the St. Albans School Governing Board (1971-77).

When it comes to the current space program, Mike believes that we should go back to JFK’s type of singular focus but with a different destination: Mars. “After the flight of Apollo 11, I used to joke that they sent me to the wrong planet ... I’d like to take what I call the John F. Kennedy approach, just a straight shot. We want to go to Mars, let’s go to Mars ... I think it’s a much more interesting place than the moon.” Mike’s passion for a Mars mission goes back even further, according to an article (“At Home in Space”) he wrote for Harvard Magazine (July-August 1976). “From the time I was ten years old, I had wanted to go to Mars. The moon never interested me particularly, but the idea of walking on Mars and discovering its flora and fauna has always seemed to me a full life’s work.”

“It’s a wonderful, large, sunlit classroom. [The teacher] comes in, he closes the door, he steps up to the podium, and he begins to talk. And as he does, my body rises slowly and I claim attention deficit disorder!” Mike’s back story as a St. Albans boy and how these events fortified his passion for Mars goes back even further, according to an article (“At Home in Space”) he wrote for Harvard Magazine (July-August 1976). “From the time I was ten years old, I had wanted to go to Mars. The moon never interested me particularly, but the idea of walking on Mars and discovering its flora and fauna has always seemed to me a full life’s work.”

One of the things I was most interested in learning about was Mike’s education, specifically his time at St. Albans. I asked, first, what about his education was most difficult? Second, what was most important about it? His answers were enlightening, humorous, and candid.

Collins: “My most difficult thing at St. Albans was paying attention. I’m not a good student; my mind wanders. I have a hard time keeping it going down the line that the instructors want to go ... I was accused of being lazy. Now, I’ve done some research since then, and I claim attention deficit disorder!

“I can remember so clearly: it’s a wonderful, large, sunlit classroom. [The teacher] comes in, he closes the door, he steps up to the podium, and he begins to talk. And as he does, my body rises slowly out of the chair, goes right through those beautiful windows out into a nearby oak tree, to the highest branch, and I look back at the poor, suffering bastards who are stuck there in that classroom.”

Wilkerson: If that’s the most difficult, what was the most important aspect about your education at St. Albans?

Collins begins slowly: “I really don’t know, I haven’t a clue. They’re all important.”

He then takes off: “I do know that I’ve written four books. (I’m trying to work on number five.) In the first one, Carrying the Fire, the dedication was to Ferdinand Ruge, the English teacher at St. Albans. It read, ‘To Ferdinand Ruge who taught me to write a sentence.’

Now, that doesn’t mean, or it doesn’t only mean, he taught me how to write a sentence. But it’s more important that he taught me to write a sentence—in other words, get on with it, do it.

“And so, I think I would say English. I know very little about the theory of education and what makes a good educational round up and what doesn’t. I think if you believe STEM [science, technology, engineering, and math] is a complete education, you don’t quite get it. I like to insert an E in there for English. Other people, Buzz Aldrin, for example want to stick an A in there for art. I say no. I’m a watercolor painter. If I screw up a watercolor, there’s no harm done. But I’ve seen too many incoherent engineers, and it can blow a very important presentation. Because of their lack of facility with the English language, they’re not very good engineers. So, I would point toward Ruge and English: STEEM and not STEM.”

And with a brief discussion about St. Albans, its current physical plant, and the state of the student body, my thirty-five minutes were up. I had a nagging suspicion, however, that there might be more to Mike’s back story as a St. Albans boy and how these events fortified him as a student and fed into his later successes. As the school architect, I had to look. There certainly was more. According to faculty emeritus Ted Eagles ’54, former history teacher and Headmaster Jack McCune used to paraphrase Wordsworth when referring to the man a boy could become: “the boy is the father of the man.”

Closely examine the photograph opposite. It is of the Form II Upper School boys (the grade was then divided between both divisions) in the fall of 1943. Find the test pilot, the astronaut, the general, the assistant secretary of state, the museum director, the boy who became the man, plain old Mike, if you can. Or perhaps you can discern, among his classmates three future generals, two authors, several attorneys, a congressman, a cardiologist, a company executive, and a reverend canon of the Episcopal Church among other professionals. The journey of how the boy Michael kindled his spark toward becoming the man, plain old Mike, is worth tracing.

Michael Collins was born on October 31, 1930, in Rome, Italy, the youngest child of four siblings. A military family, the Collinses moved several times before Michael came to St. Albans. Oklahoma, New York, Maryland, Texas, Puerto Rico, and Miami Beach had been “homes,” the Army his hometown. A New York Times article from July 17, 1969, described the Collins family as “lively, cultivated, free of military stiffness ... The family’s gypsy life caused it to grow closer in support of each other.” In the same article, Michael said of his upbringing, “I think a life like that is good for a kid ... You learn some things twice in school, and others not at all, and you have to leave a lot of friends. But on the other hand, it’s a damned interesting life for a kid.” Collins added: “Today diversity is considered very important, and I had plenty of it in the first eight years of my education, and I am glad I did.”

His father’s military service brought the family to Washington in 1943. The initial inquiry about attending St. Albans came from his mother, Virginia Stewart Collins, on September 2 of that year. Wartime demands had led to an expansion of the student body, and space, and spaces were tight. However, on September 18, just four days before the opening of school, came the good news: Michael was in. Canon Lucas ended the admission note with the following comments, “He made an excellent impression upon True [head of the Lower School], who examined him. I do hope he will be happy with us.” As Collins described in the New York Times article mentioned above, “I’ve got to say that I just didn’t like school ... I think St. Albans let me in sort of to be nice.”
With fourteen other classmates, Michael’s school year began on September 22, 1943. St. Albans became his stable landing point and launching pad for the next five years.

With the family’s moving around came some scholastic costs, ones which would become fully clear that first year. At the start, Michael struggled academically, but he maintained a high C+ average. Spelling, Spanish, and Sacred Studies were among his better subjects. His grip on English grammar was “weak, class work irregular in quality, and especially poor in daily written lessons and tests,” according to his English teacher. His test scores varied widely. “Tests knock him down—probably not accustomed to tests,” remarked his Latin teacher, Mr. Marion Howison. However, Mr. Howison also noted: “Daily work not bad. He reads well in the sense that he comprehends what he reads.”

That characteristic—and an ability to focus on his work that we see throughout his career—would help a great deal as Mike slogged throughout the remainder of that first year and began to thrive at St. Albans.

By January 1, 1944, Mike’s parents were stationed 400 miles away in Columbus, Ohio, and Mike faced the additional challenge of life as a boarder. Eleven letters in the School Archives chronicle Mike’s first year at St. Albans. One of his main concerns, particularly from such a distance, was for his dog, Punch.

His mother continued to receive full reports from Canon Lucas on Mike’s life at school, and shared news from home, but clearly the distance and separation was a difficult situation with which to cope.
As is the custom today, Canon Lucas shared Mrs. Collins’s correspondence with Mike’s teachers so they could more effectively assist him in his work. The teachers’ responses brought welcome news to the family. “We were more than pleased with the last report card and delighted with Michael’s new attitude of responsibility toward his studies, for which we are very grateful to you and St. Albans.” The team approach was working, and Mike was buying in. In April 1944, Mike committed to some extra studying sessions and working ahead on Saturday mornings.

As the year wrapped up, and Mike passed all his subjects, Mrs. Collins’s concerns turned toward summer work. “We hope he’ll be on even terms with the other boys when he returns to you in September.”

On July 8, 1944, at the end of his first year, Mike sent a note of thanks to Canon Lucas and the school: “I also want to thank you for all that you have done to help me get by this year, and I hope next year I will not need as much.”

The remainder of his years at St. Albans, Mike, now an “old boy,” carried a B average (listed on the school’s reports as “Commendable”) and ranked in the top half or above of the class each year. Years later, as the December 1966 Bulletin reports, Mike would remark that the number one thing St. Albans students needed to be taught was “how to work HARD,” a lesson he clearly learned and carried forward from 1943-44.

Along with an increased academic focus, Mike became more and more involved in school activities as the years progressed. In the 1944 Albanian, he appears only once, playing on his first St. Albans team, third team football. In the 1945 Albanian, Mike appears twice, again with the third team football squad. The Saint Albans News on November 22, 1944, reported his shining moment on that team. In an upset, 6-0 win over Georgetown Prep, “Georgetown’s Joe Garland, hit behind his own goal line, fumbled, and Mike Collins recovered the ball, for St. Albans’ only touchdown.”

In his Form IV year, Mike is mentioned three times in the wrestling write-up alone. The St. Albans News lists him among the school’s cheerleaders and reports on a key at-bat in an 11-8 win versus Landon in a third team baseball game. “The real blow of the game came in this (the 4th) inning when Mike Collins tripled with the bases loaded.” That same year he attained the Headmaster’s List. His mother wrote, “Two years ago we were feeling it miraculous that he managed to pass, and I know how constant the efforts and understanding of his teachers have been to make such a change possible.” Mike was also baptized and confirmed that year, Canon Lucas officiating and stating, “I shall delight in being one of his godfathers . . . He is on the Headmaster’s List again as of today and, of course, I am pleased to death.” The spark had caught, the flame was glowing more and more brightly.

In Form V Mike made the varsity football squad and, with four wrestling teammates, participated in the Eastern Prep School Championship Tournament at Lehigh University, where they captured fifth place in the team competition. Mike earned his first varsity letter for these efforts, designated as a “major letter” thanks to the Lehigh competition. Mike also helped with recreational activities for students of the Industrial Home School (a residential school for “homeless and friendless” children on the site of today’s Guy Mason Recreation Center), and he was selected by members of the student Vestry to be one of seven Cathedral servers, assisting as acolytes at early Cathedral services each day. In the spring, he was named captain of the wrestling team for the coming season.

His senior year, 1947-48, Mike attained his highest academic average and the final ranking of 13th in his class. Fully engaged in school life, he appears more than a dozen times in the yearbook.
In December 1969, Michael Collins became one of only seven people ever awarded the St. Albans School medal, for “distinguished service to St. Albans and the community.”

participated on the spelling team, was chosen as one of nine prefects, and repeated as a Cathedral server. His sketch on his senior page shows him surrounded by cups of coffee, and in his Last Will and Testament he leaves behind no-doze pills and instant coffee for a classmate—the remedies to a wandering mind with a desire to focus through long study hours? Classmates selected him as one of their two favorite prefects and the third-most popular senior. Returning to Lehigh, Mike took fourth in the tournament and was one of five Upper School lettermen chosen by fellow letter-recipients to serve as an officer in the school’s Athletic Association. Yearbook predictions for his future included the rank of major general (and victories attained by subterfuge and camouflage). From the Headmaster’s Study, Canon Lucas wrote recommendations on Mike’s behalf: “well coordinated, strong, completely trustworthy, superior team-worker, public spirited . . . possesses great stamina and courage.” And “Mike Collins is a grand lad . . . He is one of the very best . . . His integrity and honesty are not to be questioned.” Assistant Headmaster John C. Davis later recalled Mike’s Form VI year: “[He was] highly directed—any goals he set for himself he ran for” (in the Los Angeles Times, July 13, 1969).

On June 5, 1948, Michael Collins graduated from St. Albans, headed next to the United States Military Academy at West Point. His yearbook noted: “Mike will vanish four years from the sight of mortal men to live the life of a soldier behind the cold gray walls of West Point. And because if anybody in the class can take it, Mike can, we know that he will emerge, eventually, an officer.”

In December 1969, Michael Collins became one of only seven people ever awarded the St. Albans School medal; it was by unanimous vote of the Governing Board for “distinguished service to St. Albans and the community.” (Canon Lucas, George Wharton Pepper, Mr. True, Mr. Ruge, and Canon Martin are the other six awardees.) In the winter 1970 Bulletin, editor Ben Fuller expanded on the reasons for the accolades. “Mike’s new commitment is as significant as his old one. In senses which only are beginning to dawn upon the school family, it is witnessing a redefining of its old motto, Pro Ecclesia et Pro Patria. Sons like Mike Collins in their lives of service reveal afresh the magnificence and mystery of God, the genius and the worth of Man. In the model of his life, Mike Collins has strengthened the lives of his family, his classmates, his teachers, and his friends. He is giving direction to the lives of the oncoming generations.”

So maybe no hero, Michael Collins, but certainly a shooting star, one whose bright path reminds us of the words of the school prayer he carried with him on Apollo 11. For all who serve, for all the works undertaken in thy fear and for thy glory, for the benefits of all your labors, for our terrestrial and toward our everlasting lives, Mike, thank you. As the summer wanes and September approaches, let us be thankful and grateful that every year our old boys return and our new boys begin their journeys with us, and that these boys are all, now and in the years to come, chasing their own flame. They are the boys, the fathers, of the men they will become. Amen 🙏