

Wellington Bomber HE740

North Marston's Wartime Tragedy



**The North Marston plane crash that cost the
lives of six young men to whom we wish to
pay tribute**

THE EVENT

It was the bitterly cold evening of Thursday 4th January 1945 and the sixth year of World War Two. Like every other village and town, North Marston lay in total darkness as a precaution against enemy air raids. Clifford Cheshire was helping his father with grocery deliveries. They were a couple of miles from the village when Clifford heard the sound of a plane overhead: *"We were down Hogshaw on this particular evening....and we had stopped to open one of the gates on the road when we heard a plane coming over Quainton Hills."*

The sound of planes overhead at night was not unusual: there were a number of RAF bomber training airfields nearby.

Meanwhile, Eveline Parker was in the back yard of her mother's cottage at the top of Quainton Road when she heard a plane low overhead. Seconds later it crashed heavily in a field on the edge of the village at Brook Farm killing the six crew members instantly. Suddenly, the darkened village was lit up by a huge fireball from the burning fuel.

Cliff was half a mile from the scene: *"I heard a terrible crash; it looked as if the village was on fire from where we were." We came rushing back along the road from Hogshaw, round the bend and towards Stone Hill and the road in front of us was on fire. The plane had crashed in the field at the bottom of the hill."*

Tommy Gray recounts the efforts to find survivors: *"Several people, alerted by the explosion and fire, went to the scene and were organised into teams searching for any survivors."*

The next day men arrived to gather the remains of the crew. Local people were horrified at the loss of life on their doorstep but it was just another war-time tragedy in the midst of thousands of others. Some felt the sacrifice of these six young men ought to have been recognised, one of whom was the late Chris Holden.

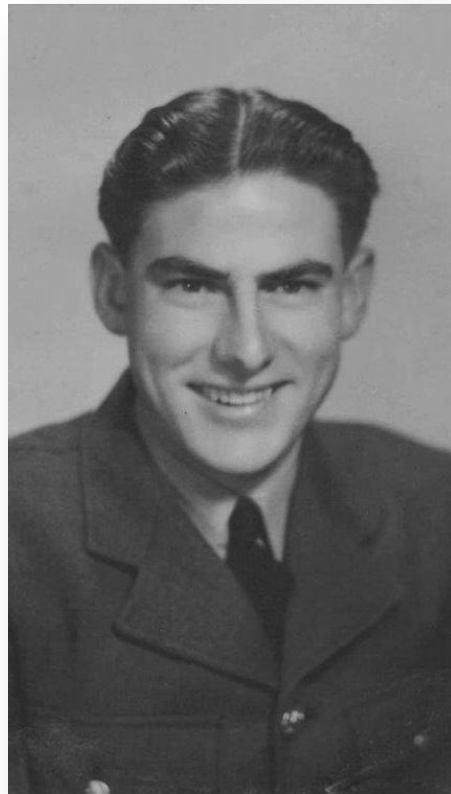
THE FLIGHT

The plane that crashed was a Wellington Bomber from Westcott OTU (Operational Training Unit) about seven miles away. It was on a night navigation exercise and had taken off only ten minutes earlier so, although not carrying bombs, it had full fuel tanks when it crashed. The plane was the latest version of this sturdy aircraft, affectionately known as a "Wimpy" by aircrew. The young crew were being trained to fly night

raids and had chosen to fly together as a team, each with a specialist role: pilot, navigator, wireless operator, bomb aimer and two air-gunners. Bomber crews were in urgent demand as losses were high and replacements were vital. During the war Bomber Command lost 8,000 aircraft and over 55,000 men, of whom 800 were killed in training, so the event that night in North Marston was by no means unique: in fact in the course of the war there were over 340 fatalities involving training flights from RAF Westcott!

THE CREW

FLIGHT SERGEANT MICHAEL REECE, PILOT, AGED 21



Flight Sergeant Michael Reece of the New Zealand Royal Air Force (No: NZ424260) came from Otago in New Zealand. His parents were Albert and Minnie Reece, and he was the youngest of four brothers, but his father had left the family when Michael was still a young boy. One can only imagine how terrible it must have been for Minnie, on her own, to receive the devastating news of Michael's death as, at the same time,

Michael's older brother, Frank (*pictured below*), also a pilot in the RNZAF, was "missing in action". Unbeknown to Minnie he was a prisoner-of-war for over four years in Stalag Luft 3 (made famous by the film "The Great Escape") in Eastern Germany. Frank was still in captivity when Michael died but, on arriving in England after his release (and billeted at the Grand Hotel in Brighton), Frank Reece came across a magazine containing his brother Michael's obituary....that is how he discovered the sad news.

Michael's brother, Jim, aged 93, still lives in Mosgiel, New Zealand and named his first-born son, "Michael". A friend of the family, Chaz Forsyth, remembers living near Mrs Reece and her older son, Dave, in the 1950s and 1960s, and recalls the framed letter on the wall which had been sent years before advising her of Michael's death. There are many living descendants of Michael Reece and, recently, his great-niece, Tina, visited the crash site in North Marston.



Michael's brother, Frank Reece, a POW for 4 years

FLIGHT SERGEANT ALEXANDER BOLGER, AIR BOMBER, AGED 23



Flight Sergeant Alexander Gordon Bolger of the Royal New Zealand Air Force (No: NZ428226) came from Otago in New Zealand. He was the son of Percival and Hilda Bolger. His brother, Fred (also in the RNZAF) was away fighting in the Pacific as was his sister Alma's husband.

my scribble I must thank you
very much for the cake which I
received yesterday. I'm now saving
but what it costs to the saying goes
I received from this of cake yesterday
a from mum & from Annie so some one
still loves me. I'm all set to go
now I'm in a new shoe NZ 9 I have
English boys a pretty good lot so
it's fun & games now. Although it
will take another two or three months
till the regiment starts that if
it's still going which looks very
likely I wouldn't mind if I had
a bit of your sweater over here
it's getting cool over here
now so I can see me putting
my winter woolies on very soon
I'll



Extract of letter sent by Alex Bolger from
Westcott on 26th October 1944

(L-R): Fred, Hilda and Alex Bolger

Tragically, a little brother, Bertie, had died aged two years. His mother, who had lost her brother Alex in World War One (his body having never been found), now faced yet another tragedy with the news of her son Alex's death. It is unimaginable what she must have gone through; the family say that Alex's death was never talked about by the older generation; it was too painful. Hilda is pictured on the previous page with her sons, Fred and Alex. At the time of his death, Alex was engaged and his fiancée kept in touch with the Bolger family all her life. The letter (*pictured on the previous page*) was sent by Alex from Westcott to his parents on 26th October 1944. It reads:

"I must thank you very much for the cake which I received yesterday. It never rains but what it pours....for I received four tins of cake yesterday, 2 from mum and 1 from Dulcie so someone still loves me. I'm all set to go now. I'm in a crew, three NZ and three English boys, a pretty good lot so it's fun and games now although it will take another two or three months till the excitement starts, that is if it's still going which looks very likely. I wouldn't mind if I had a bit of your weather over here for hell it's getting cool over here now and I can see me putting my winter woolies(sic) on very soon."

In another letter, dated 18th November (just six weeks before his death) Alex said:

"Well I'll start on the old topic the weather. It's B. Rotten and that's praising it. I'm looking every morning to see if I've started to sprout webbed feet. It's Saturday evening and everything is very quiet in the hut. The navigator is doing a spot of mending, very keen type, the pilot is amusing himself rolling smokes out of my weed. Before I go much further I must thank you very much for the tin of ginger snaps. They are just a bit of alright, in fact I rather like them better than cake for you can just stick a few in the old pocket and off you go and especially when you're a few hours up I can take them with me."

The Bolger and Reece families today still live near each other in Dunedin, New Zealand, and have met over the years but until North Marston History Club made contact with them they had not known that their relatives had died in the same plane crash!

**FLIGHT SERGEANT DONALD McLENNAN,
WIRELESS OPERATOR, AGED 21**



Sergeant Donald Wilford McLennan of the Royal New Zealand Air Force (No: NZ427046) came from Clevedon, Auckland and was the son of John and Christina McLennan. His nickname was "Midge" and he had three sisters, Maria, Mary and Ann (who still lives in Auckland aged 85 years). He also had a brother, Angus, in the New Zealand Second Expeditionary Force who, in December 1941, was tragically killed when, as a prisoner-of-war, he was travelling on an Italian ship, the *Sebastiano Venier*, which was torpedoed by a British submarine as she was not flying a POW flag.

So three years later Mr & Mrs McLennan heard the terrible news that their other son, Don, had been killed in an air crash in England. Don had a fiancée, Florence, whom he had met whilst training in Canada, and for the rest of her tragically short life she kept in touch with the McLennan family. She died at a young age (just after she had met and married someone else) when she grabbed a can of flaming petrol which exploded in her face. Florence's aunt visited Don's grave in the 1960s; he had obviously been very special to her family.



Don's brother, Angus McLennan, who died on a POW ship in 1941



Don's fiancée, Florence whom he met whilst training in Canada

In June 1946 the Air Department sent a letter to John McLennan which enclosed a photograph of a wooden cross on his son Don's grave and stated:

"The enclosed photographs of the temporary cross over the burial place of your son, Flight Sergeant Donald Wilford McLennan, have been received from Air Ministry with a request that they be forwarded to you. The Imperial War Graves Commission will start on the erection of permanent headstones as soon as conditions will permit, but I feel you will be comforted to know that in the meantime the grave will be carefully tended and maintained."

SERGEANT JOHN WENHAM, AIR GUNNER, AGED 19



Sergeant John Arthur Wenham of the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve (No: 1894709) came from Maidstone in Kent and was the son of Arthur and Susan Wenham. He is buried in Maidstone Cemetery in Kent. As a boy he belonged to the Tovil Scout Group and, as a result, his name is inscribed on their memorial (*see next page*). He had one older sister, Joy, who is now 91 years old and living in Luton. She is pictured looking at her brother's name (which appears beneath that of the famous Guy Gibson, who led The Dambuster Raid, as Gibson was an honorary Tovil scout).

Whilst awaiting discharge from the W.R.N.S in January 1945, Joy's husband-to-be arrived to tell her the dreadful news that her brother had died. Her service leaves had never coincided with her brother's so she had not seen him for 12 months. The shock of his death hit them all badly.



The cross in John Wenham's memory which hangs in the Tovil Scouts' building in Maidstone



John's sister, Joy, at the Tovil Scout Memorial in Kent

SERGEANT IAN SMITH, NAVIGATOR, AGED 22

Sergeant Ian Philip Hendry Smith of the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve (No: 160871) came from Beckenham in Kent. He was the son of Hendry and Margery Smith and had one sister called Margaret. He is buried in Botley Cemetery in Oxford. We have discovered that, in his will he left £103 (ie his estate) to his mother.

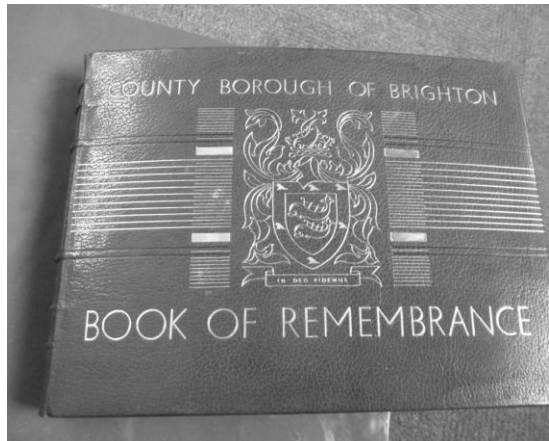
We unfortunately cannot trace any living relative of Ian Smith and have no photograph of him.

SERGEANT REGINALD PRICE, AIR GUNNER, AGE 19

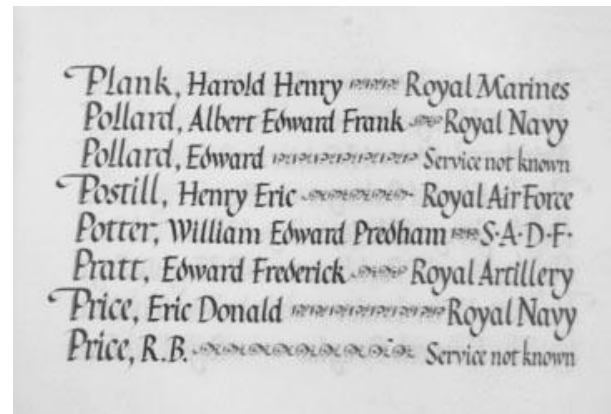
Sergeant Reginald Benjamin Price of the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve (No: 1899494) came from Brighton, Sussex and was the son of Rupert and Alice Price. He had two younger sisters, Marjory and Dorothy. He is buried in Botley Cemetery, Oxford. Could he have been the young air gunner to whom Alex Bolger refers in one of his letters home: *"At present our rear gunner is holding the floor and he is a wizzard(sic) and I am just about splitting my sides with laughing at him."*

He is only 18 and like most English boys have their heads screwed on the right ways”?

The photographs below are of the Book of Remembrance in St Peter’s Church, Brighton where Reginald’s name is recorded. At the time, relatives could submit family members for entry in the book and it is interesting that no service was listed for Sergeant Price.



The Book of Remembrance in St Peter’s Church, Brighton



Reginald Price’s name at the bottom of the page

We are sadly unable to find a photograph of Reginald Price.

THE CAUSE OF THE CRASH

An official enquiry concluded that *“In cloud at 5,000 feet, the aircraft went out of control and dived into the ground and burnt out”*. We will never know the true cause but mechanical failure seems likely. Whether by good luck or pilot skill, the plane crashed into an empty field yards from the village, avoiding many more deaths.

THE AFTERMATH

The families of the crew were formally notified of the tragedy by the RNZAF Headquarters and received a follow-up letter about the funeral from the Commanding Officer at RAF Westcott. An extract from the letter sent to Mrs Reece reads as follows:

Dear Mrs Reece,

“Before you receive this letter you will have been informed by RNZAF headquarters of the very sad loss of your son, Flight Sergeant Michael

Reece, who lost his life as a result of a flying accident on the night of 4th January 1945.

The aircraft of which your son was the pilot left this station on a normal exercise when at 19.35 hours the aircraft crashed at Long (sic) Marston, Buckinghamshire. At the moment there is no information to indicate the cause of the accident.....In cases of this kind, where all members of the crew are killed, it is unlikely that the actual cause will ever be discovered.*

In your sad loss, it will be of some consolation to you to know that the death.....was instantaneous and that at least he and his colleagues were spared any suffering.

Unfortunately it was not possible, for Service reasons, to ascertain your wishes regarding the funeral in the time available, and I therefore made arrangements for the funeral to take place at the RAF Regional Cemetery, Oxford. Your son's funeral took place at 12.00 hours on the 12th January....the coffin was carried by men of his own station and the Last Post was sounded.....I am instructed to explain that re-interment if this were desired could only be considered at the conclusion of hostilities.

*The personal effects of your son will be forwarded to the RAF Depository, Colnbrook, Slough, Bucks who will communicate with you...regarding their disposal." (*The wrong location being given was a considerable error).*

All the crew except John Wenham were interred in Botley Cemetery, Oxford. John was taken home to Maidstone Cemetery in Kent.



The five coffins are carried into Botley Cemetery, Oxford



In the background of this photograph can be seen the temporary crosses which were erected to the dead

THEIR HEADSTONES TODAY



Flt. Sgt. Michael Reece, Flt Sgt Alex Bolger and Flt Sgt. Donald McLennan



Sgt John Wenham



Sgt Ian Smith



Sgt Reginald Price

NEVILLE SELWOOD, aged 90, grew up on a farm in New Zealand just one mile from the Bolger family's farm and he knew the family well. Neville joined the RNZAF three months before Alex Bolger so, although they both trained initially in Canada and then transferred to Westcott in England, their paths did not cross. Alex's sister, Alma, received a letter from Alex when he was in Canada in which he said hoped to meet up with Neville but it was not to be. Neville Selwood went on to join the 75th Squadron of the Royal New Zealand Air Force at RAF Mepal in Cambridgeshire as a navigator in an Avro Lancaster.



Neville Selwood when navigator of a Lancaster in WW2



Neville Selwood pictured in October 2014 with Alex Bolger's niece, Jan Muir

When Neville sent us this poem (below) he said of Alex: "It's sad to realise what could have been for Alex's crew. He was a handsome, fine young man. I'm the one who's been allowed to get old":

**You can't believe how young we were back then
One thing's for sure: we'll never be that young again.
We were daring young men
With hearts of gold
And most of us never got old.
(Taken from "Billy Bishop Goes to War")**

Michael Reece, Alex Bolger, Don McLennan, Ian Smith, John Wenham and Reginald Price were all volunteers. Their deaths were noted by officials and the plane crash was remembered by North Marston residents. But, for their devastated families left behind, life would never be the same again.



Tina Reece, great-niece of the pilot, at the crash site in September 2014 talking to Clifford Cheshire who has clear memories of the crash

Since starting out on our project to write about the Wellington Bomber Crash in North Marston we have been privileged to have made contact with the friends and families of Michael Reece, Alex Bolger and Don McLennan in New Zealand and of John Wenham in England; all have sent us wonderful photographs and documents. We are extremely grateful to Dave Cannan from the Otago Daily Times (New Zealand) whose article in August first led us to making these contacts and to the Brighton Argus and Kent Messenger newspapers. We have also had the honour of communicating with Bomber Command veterans, such as Neville Selwood (above) and Squadron Leader Jack Jarmy DFC who have given us a tremendous insight into the life of the Bomber Command crews at the time. We intend to produce a more detailed publication in the near future which will encompass all we have learned from them.

A CHURCH SERVICE WILL BE HELD ON SUNDAY 4TH JANUARY 2015 TO REMEMBER THE AIRCREW ON THE ANNIVERSARY OF THEIR DEATHS

THE DEDICATION AND UNVEILING OF THE MEMORIAL IN THE CHURCH WILL TAKE PLACE IN APRIL 2015 (DATE TO BE ANNOUNCED)

Please turn the page to see how you can help us

WE NEED YOUR HELP

The memory of that January evening in 1945 lived on in the minds of many local residents. All his life, Chris Holden said the airmen should be commemorated in the church alongside the memorials to the local men who gave their lives in wartime. The money donated at Chris's funeral has been put towards helping to pay for a memorial plaque in the church, exactly as he had always wanted. North Marston History Club is commissioning a stone plaque to be mounted at the back of the church as a permanent mark of appreciation for the six airmen and their families. However, the memorial stone will cost more than we have available so we are asking for help towards the cost of the memorial to those six young men.

You can make your donation in whichever way is easier for you:

Put cash or a cheque made out to North Marston History Club in the envelope we have provided and post it or drop it off to either John Spargo, 10 High Street, North Marston, Buckingham MK18 3PD or to Janet Gowin, 2A Church Street, North Marston, Buckingham MK18 3PH

OR

If you have access to internet banking, you can make a BACS payment directly into the History Club's bank account. If you choose this way to donate, please label your payment "Memorial Fund". Our bank account number is 15310360 and our sort-code 30-99-74

Thank you for your help in creating a lasting memorial to six young men who gave their lives on our behalf