

Michael Reece in his flight gear.



SOME CORNER OF AN ENGLISH FIELD

Pamela Wade visits a village in rural England and finds the war-time deaths of her uncle and his two Kiwi airmen mates have not been forgotten.

PAMELA WADE IS A *NORTH & SOUTH* CONTRIBUTING WRITER.

It's just an ordinary field, deep in rural Buckinghamshire. Rusty iron gate, hedges, nettles, knee-high grass, a quiet country road running alongside. On a Thursday afternoon, all I can hear are sheep, skylarks, a bee buzzing over the bramble flowers. There's absolutely nothing remarkable about it whatsoever.

But this is where, a lucky person's lifetime ago, my Uncle Mike died at 21, along with two other Kiwi boys and three English lads, all of them aged between 19 and 23.

It was a frozen night in early January, 1945; they were on a training flight in a Wellington bomber HE740. Mike was



The memorial plaque to Michael and his crew inside St Mary's (above) and a newspaper report on his death (right).



at the controls, and something went wrong. No one knows the cause, or will ever know – ice on the wings is the educated guess – but the plane banked, fell from a height of 5000ft, and crashed into this field, bursting into flames and instantly killing all on board.

The plane is still there under the soil, and when the lush summer grass is nibbled short, the unmistakable shape of the indentation can still be seen, but the three Kiwis are buried 50km away, side by side in the Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery at Botley, Oxford. Two of their English crew-mates are at rest there, too, the third buried at home in Kent. Up beyond this green field, though, in the quiet, pretty village of North Marston, people still remember the boys who died in the flames that lit up that dark night, and in 2015 they did a wonderful thing.

Villager Chris Holden had always been sad there was no local memorial to the boys whose fiery deaths he and his neighbours had witnessed, and he talked of it often. When in 2013 he too died, his daughter Jayne Springer took a collection at his funeral, and in his honour donated the proceeds towards the cost of an engraved stone plaque to be erected in the village church. The North Marston History Club embraced the cause with enthusiasm, encouraging local contributors to top up the fund. Two years later, Holden's wish was granted.

On the sunny spring morning of Anzac Day 2015, 70 years after the crash, a procession through the village up to the

lovely and ancient St Mary's church included members of the RAF and RNZAF, the Army, the Royal British Legion, the local Scout group, a Lt-Colonel, a Wing Commander, two villagers who had witnessed the crash, and relatives of the dead men – seven of them from New Zealand. After a solemn ceremony of hymns and prayers, poems and readings, the memorial plaque was unveiled by Air Marshall Sir Colin Terry, KBE.

And here it is on the back wall of the church, the marble clean and bright, beneath the grey and aged stone plaque to another airman, a villager killed in 1943. There's my uncle's name, Michael Reece, and his Kiwi compatriots Alexander Bolger from Invercargill and Donald McLennan from Whangarei, along with three members of the RAF Volunteer Reserve: Ian Smith, Reginald Price and John Wenham, the last two only 19 years old.

They'd all met in October 1944 at RAF Westcott, an Operational Training Unit just 6km away as the Wellington flies. After initial training in Canada en route to Britain, this was their introduction to flying twin-engined bombers before transferring to Lancasters for active service. The formation of crews was a casual affair, the young men mixing freely in the operations room and deciding for themselves who would make up their crew of six: pilot, navigator,

wireless operator, air bomber and two air gunners.

In Vickers Wellingtons, nicknamed "Wimpys", for seven weeks Mike and his team built up their hours, practising cross-country navigation, bombing raids, fighter support and all the specific skills each crew member needed to master. Night flying was an essential part of the process; at about 7.20pm on January 4, a freezing, pitch-dark night, HE740 took off with full fuel tanks for yet another navigation exercise.

Ten minutes later, it was all over. North Marston villagers ran through the dark towards the fireball that had exploded so close to their homes, but there was nothing they could do. They watched, horrified and helpless, as the wrecked Wellington became a funeral pyre for six young men whose hopes, ambitions and futures swirled up into the sky along with the acrid black smoke.

Back home in Mosgiel, Mike's memory was kept quietly. In the small farmhouse at Wylies Crossing, the framed letter of condolence with King George's signature hung above my grandmother's bed. "The Queen and I offer you our heartfelt sympathy in your great sorrow," it begins; but Nan kept that sorrow to herself, and rarely spoke of Michael, the youngest of her four sons. Neither did my father. He had learned of his brother's death by reading a report of the crash in a back-copy of the *Auckland Weekly News*, which he picked up by chance four months later at the Grand Hotel in Brighton. He was being billeted there on his return from four years as a prisoner of war, after his bomber was shot down over northern France. He didn't talk about that, either. They didn't need to; it was part of who they were.

That bright morning in April, when St Mary's was filled with people, Michael's great-niece Tina was one of only a few there directly related to the Kiwi boys who had died so far from home.

It didn't matter. Their memory will always live on with their families here in New Zealand, and in North Marston, the plaque engraved with their names is now part of the fabric of a church that has stood since the 12th century.

Sue Chaplin, one of the driving forces behind the memorial project, looks at the plaque proudly.

She turns to me, smiling, and says, "They're all our boys now." +