

McHugh, Maurice

Pilot Officer

Royal Australian Air Force

410858



Maurice McHugh was born in St Kilda, a suburb of Melbourne, Australia on 9 July 1923. He was one of four children to Augustus and Annie May McHugh. He had two older sisters Nancy (1919) and Kathleen (1921) as well as a younger brother John (1925).

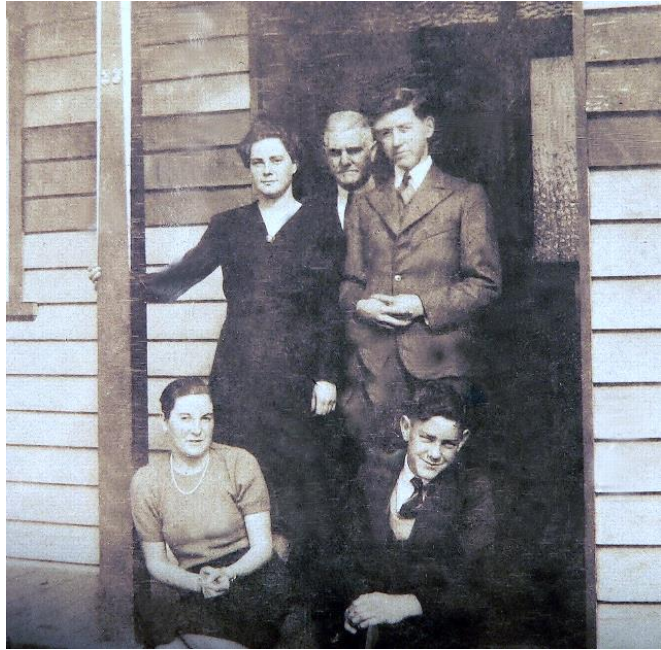
Maurice was educated at South Preston Primary School and Northcote Boys High school.

Maurice's father, Augustus McHugh, worked as a signaller for the Victorian Railways and moved several times before settling in Preston in a newly built family home at 34 Breffna Street in 1942 where they stayed for the rest of their lives.



Brothers - John (on bike) and Maurice.

McHugh family (circa 1937) – standing from left Kathleen, Augustus, Maurice – sitting Nancy and John.



Maurice had a girlfriend in 1941, Dumell McDonald, who also lived nearby in Preston. They wrote to each other while he was in England during the war. Dumell kept in touch with the McHugh family long after the war.

Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF).

Maurice joined the Air Force Reserve in October 1941. He worked as a law clerk at Rigby & Fielding, 60 Market Street in Melbourne.

In February 1942, when he was 18 years and 6 months old Maurice enlisted in the RAAF. His service number was 410858. He began his RAAF training at the 4 Initial Training School (4 ITS) at Victor Harbour in South Australia.

After this training Maurice moved on to the 11 Elementary Flying School (11 EFTS) at Benalla in June 1942 where he learned basic flying skills in Tiger Moths.

No. 4 INITIAL TRAINING SCHOOL
R.A.A.F. — VICTOR HARBOUR, SOUTH AUSTRALIA.
No. 18 FLIGHT, "A" SQUADRON, COURSE 25.



Maurice at 4 ITS - standing centre row third from left.

He continued his training at the 6 Service Flying Training School (6 SFTS) at RAAF Station Mallala, South Australia in October 1942 flying Commonwealth Aircraft Corporation (CAC) Wirraway trainers before switching to twin engine Avro Anson's.

RAAF Wirraways
After graduating from Mallala Maurice received his "wings" and was promoted to Flight Sergeant on 5 February 1943.



11 EFTS - Benalla

Maurice had a younger brother, John McHugh. He was also a RAAF pilot travelling to Canada as part of the Empire Training Scheme in 1944.



Brothers, John and Maurice McHugh (with his wings) at 34 Breffna St, Preston, around February 1943, before leaving for England. It was the last time Maurice saw his family.

Posted to the Royal Air Force (RAF) in England.

Maurice embarked from Melbourne for England on 6 March 1943 and arrived at Halifax, West Yorkshire, on 19 April 1943.

In England he followed several training courses including 15 Advanced Flying Unit (15 AFU), 81 Operational Training School (81 OTU). He continued training in heavy bombers and towing operations for gliders including 1665 Heavy Conversion Unit (1665 HCU) at Tilstock in Shropshire.

His military record mentioned a slight rebuke in July 1943 for a minor offense "wearing his pilot's suit outside the boundaries of the camp in violation of the recruit's standing orders" and he got a severe reprimand.

The next day he got in trouble again for rudeness to Flight Lieutenant Butcher, but got no further punishment.

Maurice resigned from the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) on 7 May 1944 to take up a commission as a Pilot Officer with the Royal Air Force (RAF).

Maurice also got into trouble in May 1944 for flying too low over the airfield. He was flying an aircraft with a Horsa glider in tow over the centre

of the airfield about 100 feet above the ground. On completion of his training, on D-Day, 6 June 1944 Maurice and his aircrew were posted to 620 Squadron based in RAF Fairford, Gloucestershire flying a Short Stirling Bomber.

The Short Stirling was the first four-engine British heavy bomber of the Second World War. Entering service in early 1941 the Short Stirling had a relatively brief operational career as a bomber and was relegated to second line duties from late 1943, when other more capable four-engine RAF bombers, notably the Handley Page Halifax and Avro Lancaster, took over the strategic bombing raids on Germany.

The Short Stirling was also used for bombing German port areas and played a major role as a glider and supply aircraft during the Allied invasion of Europe in 1944–1945.



Short Stirling Bomber Mk 1V

Maurice survived D-Day flying operations with 620 Squadron, dropping paratroopers of the 6th Airborne Division near Caen as part of Operation Tonga.

Operation Market Garden

From June till September, the Special Operation Executive (SOE) carried out 25 missions to France with 620 Squadron. In September 1944, the Allies under the command of Field Marshal General Montgomery began a fateful campaign to capture seven strategic bridges in the Netherlands and invade Germany, called Operation Market Garden.

Pilot Officer, Maurice McHugh, England - date unknown



On the first day of Operation Market Garden, Sunday 17 September 1944, thirty-eight aircraft took off from RAF Fairford base in Gloucestershire, flying the northern route to Arnhem with the 1st Parachute Brigade and the 1st Airborne Division.

Maurice and his crew of five left at 10:50 am in their Short Stirling Bomber (L J-946) and tow a Horsa glider loaded with 12 soldiers, a jeep and a trailer with mortars and ammunition to the drop zone at Arnhem. There was little opposition from the enemy on the opening day of Operation Market Garden, and his plane returned safely to Fairford at 3:30 pm.

By crossing the Lower Rhine at Arnhem, the Allies wanted to be able to encircle Germany's industrial heart in the Ruhr area from the north. At Arnhem, the British 1st Airborne Division met much stronger resistance than expected.

Shot down and killed - 20 September 1944.

On the fourth day of the battle, Wednesday 20 September 1944, there was heavy fighting around the bridge at Arnhem and also further west around the village of Oosterbeek.

At 10.00 am the crews at RAF Fairford attended a briefing for their next supply operation. By this time, news had been received that the initial target drop zone had fallen into enemy hands. The dropping was then moved to a new location at Oosterbeek within the shrinking British perimeter.

British 1st Airborne soldiers used parachutes to signal to allied supply aircraft from the grounds of Division HQ at the Hartenstein Hotel in Oosterbeek, Netherlands, September 1944.

Later in the morning, it was decided to postpone the departure time from Fairford by two hours, so it was not until 14.40 pm that the first of seventeen aircraft from 620 squadron took off along the southern route to Holland. This new information about the delay in departure was not adequately communicated so the planned fighter cover for the mission did not match as planned.

Maurice once again took off in his Short Stirling bomber, LK-548 (fuselage code QS-Y) with a crew of seven men including two British army dispatchers from Fairford at 14.45 pm to supply besieged British paratroopers on the ground in Oosterbeek who were being slowly encircled by German tanks.

He never returned...

Official reports indicated that while flying low and slow in the drop zone, the aircraft was hit by anti-aircraft guns, incendiary bombs and bullets, causing the starboard wing to catch fire. But the crew bravely continued their mission. After successfully dropping their supplies and while reversing to fly back to England, the plane was hit again. This time by a large artillery shell, which went right through the large petrol tank on the starboard wing, but fortunately without exploding. However, this is soon followed by a high-octane fuel fountain that degenerated into a roaring jet of fire at the wing and inside the fuselage.

While struggling to maintain altitude, Maurice then ordered to abandon the aircraft when it had descended to a height of about 800-1000'. Three members of the crew (Evans, Gasgoyne and Hume) managed to leave the aircraft with their parachute. They sustained injuries in the jump, two were unconscious. They made their way back to England via Brussels with the help of the Dutch Resistance within a few days after the crash.

The navigator Flight Sergeant Hume reported that Maurice refused a parachute that was offered to him but continued to fly the plane to let the other crew escape.

On their return to England the three survivors made official witness statements. These are held in the Australian National Archives and confirm the story that Maurice refused a parachute when it was offered to him and stayed in the plane to allow his aircrew escape.

Two of the seventeen Stirling's from 620 squadron sent to Arnhem on 20 September failed to return and many others limped back seriously damaged. Maurice was one of 13 Australian airmen, who did not return to base. He was only 21 years old.

Maurice continued to fly the burning plane towards home base until it crashed in Vorstenbosch around 5:00 pm, five men were killed in the crash:

1. Pilot Officer, Maurice McHugh
2. Wireless Operator - Flight Sergeant, Eric Arthur Bradshaw
3. Rear Gunner- Sergeant, Thomas Vickers,
4. Dispatcher - Lance Corporal, John Waring
5. Dispatcher - Driver, Ernest Victor Heckford.

Three men could bring themselves to safety with their parachute and manage to escape capture by the Germans:

1. Navigator - Flight Sergeant, John (Jock) Hume.
2. Flight Engineer - Sergeant, David Evans.
3. Bomb Aimer - Flight Sergeant, Nicholas Gasgoyne.

Those killed were initially buried in the Nistelrode General Cemetery, later reburied at the Groesbeek Canadian War Cemetery in a collective grave **XII. C. 9-12.**

Driver Ernest Victor Heckford, Royal Army Service Corps is missing, his name is mentioned on the Groesbeek Memorial, Panel 9.

Maurice was the only Australian on board of the aircraft, all other crew members were British.



Biography: Gijs Krist, Research Team Faces To Graves.

We thank Maurice's nephew Peter John McHugh, son of Maurice's brother John for the information and photos, as well as Jan Smolenaers.

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Peter McHugh received a letter from the Smolenaers brothers in November 2014:

*"Dear Peter ,*

*Here's a story of two boys from VorstenBosch, at that time eleven and twelve years old, who want to tell you what they saw on Wednesday 20 September 1944.*

*That afternoon we were picking potatoes in the field in front of the farm of Jan Van Uden's farm. It was about five o'clock in the afternoon when we saw a burning plane approaching from the north, so from the direction of Nistelrode.*

*We saw people leave the aircraft by parachute. But a little later more people jumped, but the plane was already so low, so they were sucked by the plane. The plane, which was losing more and more height came straight towards the farm of Bertus Verhoeven, a family of 7 people. At the last moment the pilot, who had not jumped out of the plane, managed to pull the plane a little so it just flew over the farm.*



*In our opinion the pilot, by giving his own life, saved the life of the family Verhoeven.*

*The plane crashed less than one hundred meters past the farm.*

*We were barely 200 meters, see situation sketch, of the place where the plane landed.*

*Young as we were and knew no danger, we immediately walked to the plane but had to take cover in a ditch about 50 meters from the plane for all the ammunition that exploded.*

*The time after that we went every day to look at the place where the plane had fallen.*

*We then also saw how Sister Emmanuel, whom we knew well, collected the remains, a foot in a shoe, a hand, and many more in a coffin.*

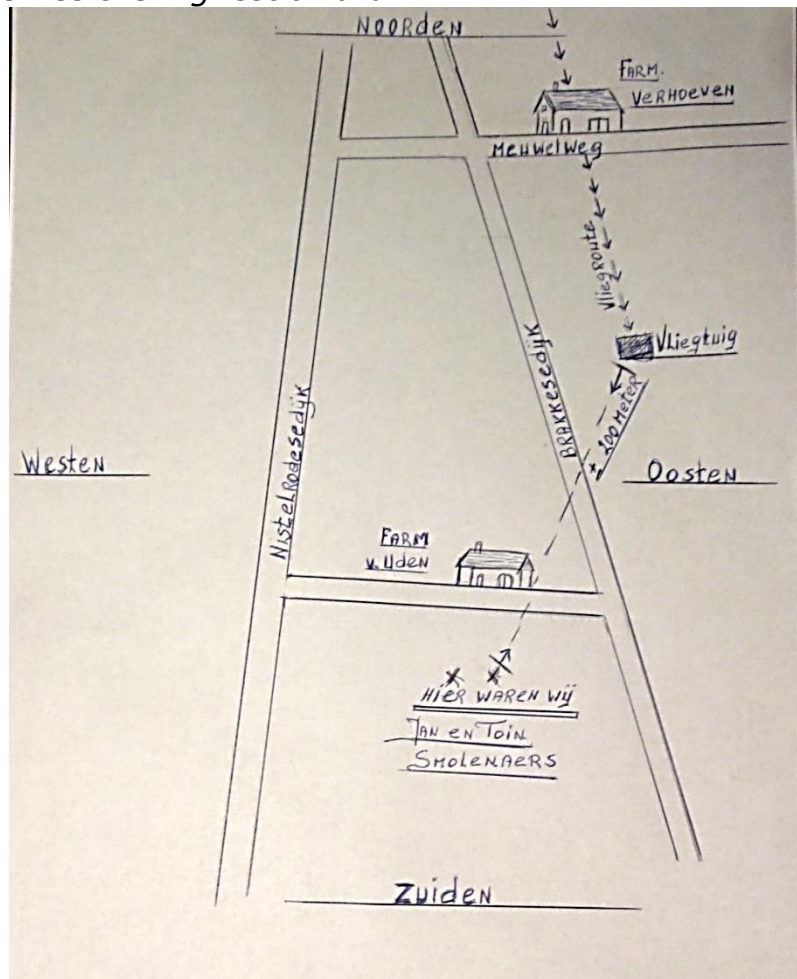
*We are happy that after 70 years we can still tell you our story.*

*We believe that the pilot of this plane just for this heroic act, which he paid with his life, still deserves the highest award.*

*Partly because of the heroic actions of this very young Australian pilot, we have been able to live in freedom for many years.*

*With cordial greetings from Vorstenbosch*

*The brothers Toine and Jan Smolenaers*



A copper plaque bearing the name of Maurice along with other RAAF airmen who died during Operation Market Garden was placed in the café part of the Hotel Hartenstein in Oosterbeek, where the Airborne Museum is located. This was the headquarters of the British paratroopers during the battle.

The Verhoeven family as well as the Smolenaers brothers witnessed the crash and told how they saw my uncle deliberately pull back on the controls at the last minute while trying to land, lost airspeed and crashed heavily before bursting into flame. Maurice's actions to avoid hitting the Verhoeven family home undoubtedly saved the lives of a family of seven people including five young children. Jan Smolenaers told how he and his brother Toine rushed to the plane but were forced to lay in a ditch as the ammunition exploded from burning wreckage.

They all later saw the local nun Sister Emmanuel come and take the bodies of the airmen to be buried at Nistelrode. This would have been a very dangerous thing to do during the German occupation. It's comforting to think they were laid to rest properly and she said a prayer for them.

Local families also tell the story of how the Dutch resistance bravely rescued the three airmen that parachuted out and hid them in either the local church or the Van Hintum family farm before helping them escape back to England.



*Recovery of wreckage by Dutch authorities December 1977.*

Peter McHugh visited Vorstenbosch - 14 September 2014.



*Toine Smolenaers - Peter McHugh- Jan Smolenaers.*

A ceremony was held with wreath laying at the crash site.



Peter-Defense Attache Bill Showry and the Mayor of Vorstenbosch Rien Wijdeven.

Photo from Peter McHugh and Jan Smolenaers.



Peter at crash site with Brigadier Bill Showry.



Peter brought a plaque which he handed over to the Mayor of Vorstenbosch; later shown in the Town Hall.

Peter visited the "Traditiekamer" at the military airbase in Volkel where he was shown the propellor of the RAF Short Stirling Bomber LK 458, he was very touched.



One year after Peter's visit a beautiful monument, initiated by eye-witnesses and financed by the municipality was unveiled on 20 September 2015, the date of crash. In which the plaque, brought by Peter, is integrated.





*In Vorstenbosch at the site of the crash is a monument to remember and honour of the crew.*