

## Flight Sergeant Maurice Aubrey WHITING

Service number 1585651  
Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve  
17 Squadron, RAF  
Died on 19 July 1945, aged 22

Most people in Wells know 'Whiting and Son', the hardware shop on High Street, and Maurice is the 'Son'. He joined the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve in 1943, trained as a pilot, and was posted to 17 Squadron, RAF, in 1945. Maurice died in India on 19 July 1945, aged 22, about a month before V-J Day, when his Spitfire XIV crashed while training for the invasion of Malaya.



Maurice in uniform after getting his 'wings'  
Photograph courtesy of Mrs Michelle Machin, Maurice's niece

Maurice was born in Wells on 12 April 1923, to John Aubrey Whiting and Marie Suzanne née Gemey. He had one sister, Audrey, and spent the first part of his life at 13, Mary Road, Wells. In 1936, Maurice's father bought the shop at 68, High Street, and the family lived above it. Maurice was educated at Wells Blue School, and afterwards assisted his father in the business. In 1938, Maurice was Vice-Captain of the newly created Minor Football Club and played for them alongside Philip Stiles and Alfred Mallows, who also died in the war.

We know from the *Wells Journal* (27 July 1945) that:

At the outbreak of war he joined the National Fire Service as a messenger and was very popular with all the members of the N.F.S. at the Wells Station. He later became a member of the Home Guard and was called up for the R.A.F. in January, 1942. He received his training in South Africa and soon gained promotion.



Maurice in the garden of 68, High Street  
(now the site of Whiting's garden department)  
Photograph courtesy of Mrs Michelle Machin, Maurice's niece

In February 1945, Maurice joined 17 Squadron RAF at Ywaddon in Burma (now Myanmar), and flew his first sortie on the 24<sup>th</sup> in a Spitfire VIII. The squadron was commanded by Squadron Leader 'Ginger' Lacey, a famous Battle of Britain pilot. The squadron flew patrols, performed ground attack, and escorted VIP flights. On 22 March, Maurice flew as fighter escort for an aircraft carrying Lord Louis Mountbatten, Supreme Allied Commander, South East Asia Command.

17 Squadron was withdrawn from Burma to Madura (now Madurai) in southern India to re-equip with the new Spitfire XIV in preparation for the invasion of Malaya, when the squadron was to take off from an aircraft carrier in support of an assault on the Malayan coast. They arrived at Madura on 18 June, and their new aircraft started to arrive on the 27<sup>th</sup>.

On 19 July 1945, Maurice and Flight Sergeant Jack Edwards were taking part in a dive-bombing demonstration for Air Marshal Keith Park, Allied Air Commander of South-East Asia Command, when both aircraft broke up in the air while they were pulling out of dummy dive bombing attacks. The aircraft fell in the camp area, one of them narrowly missing the Station Sick Quarters.

These aircraft were among the first Spitfire XIVs delivered to India, and it has been suggested that the wing attachment had been incorrectly carried out: oversized pins that should have been refrigerated to enable them to be fitted had instead been reduced in diameter by the use of emery paper.

Maurice and Jack were buried the following day in Madura cemetery alongside another pilot from 17 Squadron. In 1952, the Madras War Cemetery, in Chennai, was created and Maurice was moved there. He is also remembered on the rolls of honour at the Blue School, Wells Town Hall and Wells Cemetery.

One of the Spitfire VIIIs that Maurice flew, YB-J, serial number MT719, has been restored to flying condition.

We would like to thank Mrs Michelle Machin, Maurice's niece, for her help in writing this article.