

**Notes on the Children of Sarah Jane Randle,
formerly McChesney, née Stevenson**

Children by Thomas McChesney:

*Eliza Euphemia, 7 January 1913, Goulburn, NSW, Australia.
Thomas, 31 August 1915, Invercargill, Southland, NZ.

Child by William Randle:

James Robert, 11 June 1922, Invercargill.

*Mother of John, Peter, Margaret, Randle and David Major

Eliza Euphemia (Greta) Major, née McChesney

Birth and registration

At some time before Thomas McChesney's first wife Catherine died, Sarah Jane Stevenson was employed as the McChesneys' domestic servant, and remained as Thomas's housekeeper after Catherine's death. It must have been a cause of great consternation and dismay to both of them when in mid-1912 Sarah found herself pregnant. To add to the stress, her mother was terminally ill, dying in early August. In order to keep the pregnancy secret, Sarah went or was sent to Goulburn, New South Wales, to give birth. The child, a girl, was born on 7 January 1913, in Montague Street, Goulburn, and was registered three weeks later as Eliza Euphemia Stevenson. Sarah, the mother, was 32 years old; Thomas, the father, 69.

Stephen Tazewell's 1991 book *Grand Goulburn* mentions two private hospitals operating at around this period in Montague Street: Nurse Foxall's, occupying what are now nos.46 and 46A, described as 'one of the earliest general hospitals', and at no.37 a hospital run 'by Nurse Wallace from an early period'. As Nurse Wallace's was probably a maternity hospital, it is most likely that Eliza Euphemia first drew breath at no.37 Montague Street.

But why Goulburn? It is likely that, in such a delicate matter, Sarah would be sent to be looked after by a relative – a Stevenson, a Kennedy or possibly a McChesney. The 1913 electoral roll (for Werriwa) lists two Stevenson families living in Goulburn. Also, in 1947 the new maternity wing of the Goulburn public hospital was named Ruth Stevenson House in honour of the woman who had been the hospital's matron for the previous 25 years. There were, therefore, Stevensons in Goulburn, possibly related to the Waianiwa branch, and who could have taken Sarah into their care.

By November 1913 Sarah had returned to New Zealand with the baby, who on 14th of that month was registered in Invercargill as Eliza Euphemia, but now with the surname McChesney.

Sarah had clearly renewed her association with Thomas – to the extent, in fact, that early in 1915 she found herself again to be pregnant. So this time, on 27 May 1915, Sarah Jane Stevenson and a probably reluctant Thomas McChesney were married

in the Registrar's Office, Invercargill. Thomas, their second child, was born three months later on 31 August. This second child was habitually favoured by his mother.

Thomas McChesney's death and Eliza's legitimization

Thomas McChesney died on 11 January 1920, aged 76, in his Spey Street house, less than five years after his second marriage. It is sad to note that on Thomas's death certificate it is stated that he has only one living issue – a male. After marrying Sarah, Thomas could at any time have legitimized his daughter but chose not to do so, possibly because of the social embarrassment this would have caused him. It was not until three years after his death that Sarah, as the mother, was able, under the Legitimation Amendment Act 1922, to initiate proceedings to legitimize the birth of Eliza, by then 10 years old. This procedure was officially completed on 27 July 1923.

As Thomas died intestate the Public Trustee was ordered by the court to administer his estate. As part of the arrangements then made, trust funds were established for both the McChesney children (despite Eliza's still being illegitimate at this time), each receiving a weekly allowance until the age of 21, at which time the remainder of the fund was paid as a lump sum; for Eliza this happened on 7 January 1934, about 10 weeks before she embarked upon training as a Salvation Army officer..

Education and employment

In 1920, after Thomas's death, Sarah, with young Thomas, journeyed to Nelson to stay for some months with Sarah's sister Susan. Eliza (known during her childhood as 'Girlie') remained in Invercargill, having been enrolled as a boarder in Melrose College, a private school run by the Presbyterian Church. This was the seven-year-old Eliza's first experience of formal education – apparently her role as a playmate for Thomas had been regarded as of more importance than her learning to read and write!

From her comments in later life it would seem that Eliza enjoyed her time at Melrose. As a boarder, she would have lived under the care of the matron, Miss Gibson, with about 30 other girls, mainly older than herself, at 48 Forth Street on the corner behind First Presbyterian Church. This was 'the home of the late Dr. Grigor' as the 1921 college prospectus informs us, on a site now occupied by the Hansen Seminar Centre of the Southern Institute of Technology. Classes were taught in Stobo Hall, next to the church. Eliza used to recall with pleasure how she was looked after by the older pupils, and how the boarders would dress for dinner in frocks of violet-coloured velvet. She also learnt to paint while at Melrose and, if the one example still extant is typical (pansies), showed some talent in this field.

By the time Thomas turned five in August 1920 Sarah had returned with him to Invercargill, and he too was enrolled in Melrose – he and Eliza both now as day scholars.

However, on 9 February 1921 both children transferred to Invercargill Middle School, part of the free state system. Eliza remained at Middle School for five or six years, leaving at the end of 1925 or during 1926 when she would have been 13 years old. The first few years of her time at Middle School were made unhappy by the scornful attitude of her teacher, occasioned possibly by Eliza's understandable educational deficiencies. This painful humiliation at school, on top of the harsh and unloving treatment she was receiving from her mother at home, must have made life for the young Eliza almost unbearable.

John Major, Eliza's eldest child, learnt about his mother's Middle School experience from a school friend of Eliza's whom he met in Palmerston North in 2002. John tells the story like this:

I was conducting Chapel at the Chiswick Park Eventide Home an hour or so ago.... After the service an elderly lady asked me if 'Girlie was my wife.' I told her that Girlie was my Mother.

Apparently this woman went to Middle School, Invercargill, with Mum in the early '20s. Her name was Muriel Arthur (now Mrs McDonough). She told me that Mum had a 'terrible time at home' and used to come to school 'all shaking from head to foot'. (Muriel demonstrated the shaking as she spoke.) Mum and Muriel had a teacher named Kate Murphy, a 'big, brutish Catholic', as Muriel described her to me. This Miss Murphy apparently gave Mum a very hard time as a result of her coming to school 'with the shakes'. Muriel was so upset about this that she went to the headmaster to complain but nothing happened to improve the situation.

Many years went by and one day Muriel, now adult and married, came upon the now elderly Miss Murphy in a restaurant. Muriel made herself known to Miss Murphy who immediately asked if Muriel knew 'what had happened to Girlie McChesney'. Miss Murphy went on to say that she was troubled in her conscience at what she had done to 'that poor girl' and hoped that Girlie's life had become happy – at last!

Muriel asked if I would pass the message on to Mum. I've done that and, of course, Mum was delighted – and sharp in her memory about the teacher, about Muriel and even about the name of the headmaster.

According to Eliza herself, after Middle School she attended Invercargill Technical School for a year, though no relevant records of her time there are extant.

Most of the four or five years from the end of her schooling until she left for Nelson in 1931 Eliza spent unhappily at home, though she did act as nanny to a baby, Michael Rider, for a while, and also worked for six months as a pastry cook in the 'Haere mai' tea rooms, losing that job in August 1931 when 'work became slack' owing to the economic depression.

Also, at some time during these years, possibly in April/May 1929, Eliza and Tom were sent on their own by bus to Nelson for a six-week holiday at the orchard owned by Sarah's sister Susan and her husband Tom Robinson. For Eliza this was a very happy episode, picking apples, and enjoying the care and attention she was denied at home. Eliza remembered that, as they left, Aunt Susy extended to her an invitation to return at any time if her situation in Invercargill became insufferable.

A step-father and half-brother

On 16 November 1921, the widowed Sarah had remarried, to William Randle, and seven months later, on 11 June 1922, had given birth to another son, James Robert, deeply adored by his half-sister.

Sarah and 'Girlie'

Possibly it was the shame and humiliation that she suffered at the time of Eliza's birth that led to Sarah feeling such strong antipathy towards her first child. She could hardly afford to direct her anger at the father, Thomas, the actual cause of her distress, as he was her only source of financial and societal security. In later life Eliza described her situation in the following words:

I never remember any happy child life, or any manifestations of affection from my mother, but my brother had different treatment altogether, & as I got older & began to understand what things meant, I felt I was being crushed and unwanted. At last one day, when I was 18 yrs old [1931], she knocked me down & kicked me that I thought I would die, and I made up my mind I must do something. The way opened & I left without my mother's knowledge & went to Nelson to my mother's sister, who previously had been kind to me. I was surprised on my arrival there to find she did not want me either, however God intervened & I have realised his guidance ever since. [Quoted from Eliza's application for appointment as a Salvation Army officer, candidate's personal experience.]

Eliza did not return to her home until she was a married woman with a child – and then only for a matter of days. In later years Greta told her own children very little about Sarah's treatment of her, however, in conversation with her son John she mentioned that the last work she did at home was digging up a lawn so that her mother could plant a garden. And Margaret recalls her mother, in the last year of her life, referring in passing to the hardness of the bed that she had to sleep on in the family home.

An indication of the depth of the rift between mother and daughter is given by the fact that in January 1934 Eliza's 21st birthday party was held in Dunedin at the home of her step-father's parents, and was not attended by Sarah or Eliza's brother Thomas. A photo exists of a strained Eliza, holding a traditional 21st birthday key, standing with her 11-year-old half-brother Jim; William Randle, her step-father, by this time living apart from Sarah, was also present.

Eliza joins the Salvation Army

At some time during 1930 the Invercargill Salvation Army Corps held an open-air meeting near the Randle residence on the corner of Spey and Deveron streets. The officer, Major Allan Montgomery, came visiting, but Sarah, though at home, would not answer the door; however, the officer, not deterred, left a note inviting the household to an indoor meeting. Out of curiosity, Sarah attended, taking 'Girlie' with her.

Eliza was greatly taken by the friendliness and warmth of the Salvationists and the joyfulness of their worship, and began to attend meetings regularly. She even spent a fortnight in Geraldine helping the officers at the corps there. At first her mother made no objection to this involvement, but when on 14 September 1930 Eliza 'got saved', and then (now calling herself 'Elizabeth') was enrolled as a senior soldier (26 April 1931), Sarah's coldness towards Eliza turned to active antipathy, and the mother did all she could, such as locking away her clothes, to prevent her daughter from attending meetings or participating in Army events.

It is interesting to note that Sarah was present in the meeting during which Eliza was to be enrolled, but it would seem that her intention was to prevent the enrolment from taking place, as only at the last minute and under strong pressure from respected Salvationists did she allow the ceremony to go ahead.

Leaving home

At some time in November of 1931 Sarah's anger erupted in violence, as described above. Eliza went to see the Salvation Army officers, Major Allan and Mrs Ruby Montgomery. They could see from the bruising and abrasions that Eliza was indeed being brutally treated by her mother, and so took her to the local office of the Public

Trust where it was agreed that money would be provided from Eliza's trust fund for her to be outfitted and travel to Nelson, to her Aunt Susy. William Randle, Eliza's step-father, was also involved in the plan, and arranged for her to be taken by car to Matura, where she stayed the night with the Salvation Army officer there, before catching the morning train for Christchurch.

In Christchurch she again stayed overnight with Army officers, but in the morning discovered to her horror that she no longer had her purse holding all her money and her train tickets – in her heightened emotional state she had handed it to the officer in Matura as she boarded the train there. However, eventually her purse arrived in Christchurch and she was able to continue her journey.

Nelson

On arrival at Aunt Susy's in Stoke, Eliza did not receive the welcome she had been led to expect. The very next morning she was told that she was to be taken to the Nelson Salvation Army for arrangements to be made for her to return home. Years later, Greta told the story as follows:

Fortunately, Brigadier and Mrs Briddock were wonderful officers at Nelson, and we went there. Aunt Susy drove to the quarters, and I stayed in the car – I'd only been converted about six months, but I prayed as I don't think I'd ever prayed before – and she came out and she said they [the Briddocks] had some friends and the wife had had a little bit of a breakdown and they needed just company in the house, not to do heavy work, and this happened to be on a farm, at the Glen. They said I'd go there for a few weeks and then I'd go back home, but I fitted in so wonderfully, and I went to the corps at Nelson, [so I stayed on.]

The Glen is not far out of Nelson, and the farm was owned by Salvationists Phillip and Catherine Charles. So well did Eliza fit into the Nelson Corps that when she left for Wellington a few months later, the Army band played on the wharf to bid her farewell.

Wellington and the training garrison

Early in 1932, after some months with the Charleses, Eliza took the ferry across to Wellington purportedly for a holiday with the Montgomerys, who had been appointed from Invercargill to Wellington City Corps in January of that year. On arrival in the capital Eliza was met by Mrs Montgomery and immediately (while sitting in the ladies' rest room in Post Office Square) persuaded Mrs Montgomery to let her remain in Wellington.

At first Eliza stayed with the Montgomerys in their quarters at 85 Rugby Street. Then she moved into the Army's hostel for young working women in Church Street and attended a typing school, the fees being paid from her trust fund. However, as she used to visit Rugby Street every day – a long walk – she soon moved back into the quarters, and worked as the Montgomerys' home help until she entered the Army 'training garrison' at 33 Aro Street in March 1934. At the corps Eliza (now called 'Greta') was an active and eager worker, being commissioned in October 1932 as a young people's company guard and a *War Cry* sergeant.

Greta's deepening spiritual life and her sense of calling to Salvation Army officership are described fully in her testimony, dated 6 December 1933, which was included in her application for training:

Prior to my leaving Invercargill the verse 'Certainly I will be with thee', helped me to really decide that it was His will that I should leave & truly now I can say 'All things work together for good to those that trust God'.

On the night of my arrival at my Aunts in Nelson God very definitely spoke to me & assured me of His leading as I took up my Bible and read Psalm 118 which ever since has been a great source [sic] of strength to my spiritual experience.

Gradually I have been conscious of the fact that God has been calling me to consecrate my all to His service as an Army officer. I held back feeling I had lost so many years of happiness that I would put it off until I had a few years of pleasure. However, I lost ground spiritually & felt that if I went on I would probably end a backslider.

Three weeks ago [i.e. mid November 1933], as I was walking down Tory Street to Juniors God very definitely spoke to me saying, do not waste your life selfishly but give your all entirely to Me & I will help you to show these people that there is a better life than seeking pleasure & breaking the Sabbath. So that Sunday night I definitely promised God that:-

All my days & all my hours,
All my will & all my powers,
Not a fragment, but the whole,
Shall be thine, dear Lord.

Since then I have been very conscious of His continual presence & have indeed realised more than ever 'That to obey is better'.

The medical certificate provided by Mr S.D. Rhind to accompany Greta's application summarises her state of health as follows: 'Has been suffering for some years from severe nerve strain & unhappiness and this has made her temporarily a very nervous subject but [she] will I am sure grow out of this condition now that she has security and happiness' He recommends her as suitable for training as a Salvation Army officer. Major Allan Montgomery, Greta's commanding officer at Wellington City Corps, stated his belief that she 'should develop into a very successful officer'.

And so 'Elizabeth' was accepted for training and entered the garrison on 22 March 1934. She is officially recorded as being out of Hastings Corps as she had moved there with the Montgomerys in January 1934 – she was 'one of the family'. Mrs Montgomery accompanied Greta to Wellington when the time came for her to commence her training, and the night before she entered the garrison they stayed at the People's Palace, Cuba Street. The next morning, such was Greta's nervous agitation, she dropped the breakfast tray 'and everything broke – so that was not a very good start'.

One Sunday while at the college, Greta happened to be in a brigade of lassie cadets that passed a lad's brigade while walking through the Mt Victoria tunnel, and to her embarrassment – or delight – was the object of a hearty 'Good morning, cadet' from Elliott Major, the tall, slim farm boy from Stratford. Regulations had been seriously breached! Could any good come of this?

But before we find out, the training course has to be successfully completed. Cadet McChesney's final report, signed by Colonel Albert Orsborn, the training principal, is encouraging and generally positive:

Enjoys a good spiritual experience and has improved during the Session in spiritual matters.

Study is difficult but she has tried with fair success.

A willing girl, sincere and generous to a fault. A good worker.

Health is not uniformly good but there is no direct evidence of constitutional weakness.

Neat and tidy in appearance.

And then there was 'the Work' to be done.

First appointments

Cadet Elizabeth McChesney, after 10 months' training, was appointed on 14 January 1935 as a probationary-lieutenant to assist at the Pahiatua Corps. After a year, with the commissioned rank of lieutenant, she was sent to assist at Waipukurau, where she remained until her marriage almost two years later.

Cadet Elliott Major, after only seven months' training, was appointed to assist at Upper Hutt where he remained for eight months, then to Dannevirke/Waipukurau for seven months, just exiting from there as Greta arrived to take up her second appointment. With the rank of lieutenant, Elliott then assisted at Karori from 16 January 1936, nine months later being appointed in charge of that corps, with promotion soon after to captain. It was from Karori that he was married.

Independent means

A significant under-lying element in the story of Greta McChesney's life is that, most unusually for a Salvation Army officer of her era, she had an independent income, the source being the fund set up for her by the Public Trustee from the estate of her father after his death in 1920. This gave Greta, and after her marriage Elliott also, a freedom in relation to the Salvation Army that other officers did not have. Greta's unprecedented purchase of a car, brand new, in her third year of service was the first evidence of her exercising this freedom, and the buying of a washing machine (to be hidden behind the wash-house door) after Peter's birth another; even more significant was the acquisition of a holiday home at Raumati South not far from the beach. But the greatest freedom a personal income conferred was that, in times of sickness or stress, she and Elliott were able to purchase a house and step away for a time from the demands of officership.

Not that this freedom was ever used or, I'm sure, even seen potentially as a bargaining tool in negotiations with the Army. Greta's commitment to officership was always total, and any time out of active service was most reluctantly taken. During such times, it was always she who took the initiative in pressing for a return to 'the Work'.

Having independent means also had a more subtle but, in a sense, more substantial influence: its effect on Greta's sense of herself – of her dignity and her social standing. Nobody could possibly accuse Greta of arrogance, but she always seemed to be aware, in matters of dress and grooming as much as in more significant areas, of the class from which she had come, her personal wealth, such as it was, being the constant proof and reminder of that. This sense of class could reveal itself in passing comments: about her time at Melrose College, for example, or about the 'humble' circumstances of Elliott's parents, or the status of her accommodation in the Rita Angus rest home. It is strange to think, though I believe it to be true, that the undeniable strength of Greta's personal and spiritual life was in part grounded upon her possession of material means.

[For the rest of Greta's story see the notes on Elliott McKane Major.]

Thomas McChesney Jnr

Birth

After the birth in Australia of Sarah's illegitimate child, Eliza Euphemia, in January 1913, Sarah returned to New Zealand and renewed her association with Eliza's father, Thomas McChesney – to the extent, in fact, that early in 1915 she found herself again to be pregnant. So, on 27 May 1915 a probably reluctant Thomas McChesney and Sarah Jane Stevenson were married in the Registrar's Office, Invercargill. Thomas, their second child, was born three months later on 31 August 1915.

This second child was habitually favoured by his mother. Eliza was tolerated as a playmate for Thomas, but otherwise treated with undisguised antipathy by her mother.

Education

After the death of Thomas McChesney Snr in January 1920, Sarah enrolled Eliza as a boarder in Melrose College, a private Presbyterian establishment in Invercargill, and took Thomas Jnr with her to her sister Susanna in Nelson where they stayed for about six months. Sarah and Thomas returned to Invercargill before Thomas's fifth birthday, after which he, too, was enrolled at Melrose College, both children now as day scholars. At the beginning of the next year, 1921, the children were transferred to Invercargill Middle School in the free state system. Thomas left primary school in 1927 having successfully completed Std 6, and attended Southland Boys' High School from February 1928, leaving in December 1933, aged 18 – having taken six years to complete his secondary education.

Employment

Thomas's newspaper obituary gives the following information about his employment and interests:

On leaving school Mr McChesney took up local body work and was with the Invercargill City Council for 10 years. He was town clerk of Matura, in Southland, for 14 years and of Dargaville for three years. He was appointed town clerk of Waipawa seven years ago [i.e. 1963].

Mr McChesney took an active interest in community affairs. He was secretary of the Rotary Club of Waipawa and the Waipawa Beautifying Society, treasurer of the Presbyterian Church, and a member of the Waipawa Bowling Club. His main hobby was gardening.

At some point in his maturity Thomas did as his father had done before him and informally added the name Elliot to his registered birth name of Thomas. Elliot was the surname of Thomas Snr's mother.

Death

Thomas McChesney Jnr died on 28 May 1970 in the Memorial Hospital, Hastings, after a short illness. He was 54 years old. His funeral service was held in St John's Presbyterian Church, Waipawa, followed by cremation in Hastings. His ashes are interred in the Invercargill Eastern Cemetery, T 01.36.

In his will, made in 1950, Thomas made no attempt to compensate his sister for the disadvantages she had suffered to his benefit, or to acknowledge the physical and emotional abuse that she had endured, in stark contrast to him, during her years in the family home. Apart from a sum of money given to a favourite Stevenson aunt, all his estate was bequeathed to his mother. It was only because both legatees were deceased by the time Thomas died that Eliza received anything at all from his estate.

James Robert Randle

Birth

Sarah Jane's first husband, Thomas McChesney, died on 11 January 1920. On 16 November 1921 Sarah married William Randle, a bachelor, and seven months later, on 11 June 1922, was delivered of her third child, a son James Robert. The birth took place in Invercargill.

Education

James (always known as Jim) had a somewhat shaky start to his education owing to the marital turmoil of his parents. At the age of five he was admitted to Invercargill Middle School, but within a year or so had transferred to Maori Hill School, Dunedin, probably moving with his father when he separated from Sarah. On 2 March 1931 Jim was re-admitted to Middle School where he remained until he gained his Std 6 proficiency certificate at the end of 1934.

He then went on to Southland Boys' High School where in December 1940 he sat the University Entrance (Matriculation) Exams, which he did not pass, failing in English, history and chemistry. However, Jim excelled at sport, playing rugby in the school 1st XV, tennis for the Invercargill Tennis Club, as well as badminton and golf at club level, and actively participating in swimming, athletics and harriers. Physically he was not tall (5' 8½") but was well-built (with a chest measurement of 37") and handsome – brown hair, blue eyes and a fresh complexion, according to his air force records.

Royal NZ Air Force – training

After leaving school, Jim obtained employment as a general clerk with Moffett & Co., Invercargill, bottle manufacturers, but this could not last – there was a war on, and in February 1941 Jim submitted to the Royal NZ Air Force an application for training as a pilot. It is interesting to note that in answer to the question 'Have you any knowledge of internal-combustion engines, construction of aircraft, mechanics, or electricity?' he writes 'None whatever', and when asked 'Have you ever flown either as a pilot, passenger or pupil?' the reply is 'Never'!

Before departing for war service Jim had begun courting, or even was engaged to, a young woman by the name of Marie. There is a poignant photo of William Randle, Jim's father, standing arm-in-arm with Marie in her bridal gown when, after the war, she eventually married.

On 30 November 1941, aged 19 years 5½ months, Jim was accepted into the Initial Training Wing, Levin, as a trainee airman/pilot. The official summary of his military service continues as follows:

James Robert Randle then proceeded 'early in February 1942 to Taieri for his elementary flying training. On 2 May he was posted to Wigram where he was awarded the Flying Badge on July 27 1942, and promoted to the rank of Sergeant on October 17 1942. He was further promoted to Flight Sergeant in June 1943, when overseas. Meanwhile he had embarked for the United Kingdom on 1 December 1942.

On his arrival in England he disembarked at No.3 Personnel Reception Centre, Bournemouth, early in February 1943, and was posted on April 26 to No.15 (Pilots) Advanced Flying Unit, Leconfield, Yorkshire. On June 15 he was transferred to No.11 Operational Training Unit, Westcott, Buckinghamshire, thence three months later to No.1657 Conversion Unit for conversion to Wellington aircraft. On October 21 he was posted to No.75 (NZ) Squadron, Feltwell, Norfolk.

War service and death

The service summary continues:

Flight Sergeant Randle (No.NZ416539) lost his life on air operations three days after his posting to No.75 Squadron. He was buried in the Borough Cemetery, Feltwell.

In fact, by the time Jim joined No.75 (NZ) Squadron it had moved from Feltwell to the RAF Station at Mepal, Cambridgeshire, and he is buried in the Cambridge City Cemetery, RAF war graves section, grave no.14323. The letter from the station commanding officer, Wing Commander R.D. Max, to William Randle as Jim's next of kin reads in part:

Your son's funeral took place at Cambridge Borough Cemetery on 29th October 1943 at 3 o'clock in the afternoon, the service being conducted by the R.A.F. Station Padre in the cemetery church, after which his body was interred there. Full Service honours were accorded, the coffin being carried by men of his own Squadron, which also provided a firing party, the coffin was covered with the Union Jack; the Last Post was sounded at the end.

On the fateful night of your son's tragic death, he and his crew had been detailed to carry out an operational sortie against the enemy, which task they completed with satisfaction, but it is deeply regretted that in attempting to land at base, the aircraft crashed and caught fire. It will afford you a great measure of comfort to know that your son did not suffer, for I have been assured by the Medical Officer that his death was instantaneous.

Your son had been with my squadron for only a few days, yet in that short time he had made several friends and was becoming popular with all ranks through his cheerful and willing disposition. There is no doubt that he would have proved to be a most efficient and skilful pilot. His loss, as grievous as it is to yourself, is also a heavy blow to the Squadron and to the Service....

I am enclosing a photograph of your son's grave, which I know you will treasure deeply.

Please accept the deepest sympathy of all ranks of my Squadron and of myself, during this time of great sorrow. We mourn with you in the loss of a loyal friend and a very gallant airman. His memory will live on in the minds of all those who knew him.

The 75 (NZ) Squadron Operations Record Book for this period describes the incident as follows:

24.10.43

OPERATIONS. MINING OFF THE FRISIAN ISLANDS

Two aircraft were detailed to carry out the above operation with mines of 1,500lbs. One aircraft returned early owing to a navigational failure and the other aircraft dropped its mines but on return as apparently about to land it crashed 1½ miles S.W. of this aerodrome [Mepal] and almost instantaneously caught fire and burnt out. The Captain F/SGT. J.R. RANDLE, the Navigator, F/SGT. P.M. EAST, the Air Bomber, SGT. J.J. PURVES, and the Wireless Operator SGT. W.R. MYHILL were killed. The F/Eng. SGT. I.E. JAMES and the R/GNR, SGT. E.H. BISSETT were admitted to R.A.F. Hospital, ELY. The M/UP. GNR. was uninjured

A fuller account of the accident is given by Errol W. Martyn in his book *For Your Tomorrow* (Vol.2), published in Christchurch in 1999:

Sun 24/Mon 25 Oct 1943

BOMBER COMMAND

Gardening – mine laying off the Frisian Islands and Texel (by 30 aircraft – 1 lost)

75 (NZ) Squadron, RAF (Mepal, Cambridgeshire – 3 Group)

Stirling IIIEF142/C – took off at 1744 to lay mines in the *Nectarines* area (Frisians) and overshot after making a normal approach on return to base. When going round again at 300 feet lost height, crashed and caught fire 1½ miles SW of the airfield at 2143. The captain, navigator and wireless operator died in the crash or within a few hours while the air bomber succumbed to his injuries the following day in the RAF Hospital at Ely. The flight engineer and rear gunner were also injured, but survived. Only the mid-upper gunner escaped unscathed. The three RNZAF airmen are buried at Cambridge. It was thought that control might have been lost on the circuit through the pilot being distracted in resetting the QFE (true pressure at airfield height) reading on the altimeter.

Captain: NZ416539 Flt Sgt **James Robert RANDLE**, RNZAF – Age 21. 253hrs solo (27 on Stirling)

Navigator: NZ426083 Flt Sgt **Patton Mason EAST**, RNZAF – Age 29

Air Bomber: NZ422207 Flt Sgt **James John PURVES**, RNZAF – Age 35. 268hrs.

Randle and East had joined the Squadron only three days earlier and may have been on their 1st op. Purves was posted earlier, arriving on the 9th, but his number of ops is also unknown.