

8<sup>TH</sup> Oct. 1993

# A FEARLESS WARRIOR OF

## An enduring story of a gallant New Plymouth pilot, a 'Gentleman of the Air'.

The month of October is particularly significant for a New Plymouth family and their friends, as they recall the time 50 years ago when Warrant Officer Bert Wipiti lost his life at the tragically young age of 21.

Bert was one of the gallant band who fought the Battle of Britain from July to September 1943, but his luck ran out on 3rd October, when he was posted missing after being shot down over the English Channel.

Bert had volunteered for the New Zealand Air Force on the outbreak of war and received his early flying training at Ohakea and New Plymouth - his home town. Two months of flying Tiger Moths at Bell Block confirmed his inborn love of flying.

## HE SHOT DOWN THE FIRST JAPANESE BOMBER IN SINGAPORE.

He was posted to Singapore with the rank of Sergeant, the first Maori pilot to leave New Zealand in World War II, and on January 10th 1942, just six days before his 20th birthday, he and mate Charlie Kronk - also from Taranaki - took up the only available planes in their squadron and shot down the first Japanese bomber in Singapore.

This feat was seized upon as a tremendous morale booster when the news for the Allies was mainly bad, and a newsreel of the event was shown in the State and Mayfair cinemas, in faraway New Plymouth, in February of that year. This must have been a poignant moment for Bert's family and friends, to see him now, an expert and experienced flyer, and to hear of high praise being expressed by his senior officers as well as his co-pilots, for this perfect gentleman, yet fearless warrior of the air!

It was during his time in India, after escape from Singapore, that the Distinguished Flying Medal was conferred on Bert later in 1942. The citation states: "Sgt. Pilot Wipiti carried out a large number of operational flights against the enemy and has displayed outstanding courage and determination whilst engaging large formations of enemy aircraft. He has set a fine example to all."

Back in New Plymouth friends looked forward to receiving Bert's newsy letters and

shared them with the Wipiti family and neighbours in Merrilands.

Bert wrote cheerfully of the friends he had made and the fun they'd concoct for themselves between deadly missions, but the lads followed an unwritten rule not to tell the folks back home of the narrow margin of luck which they all took for granted as they fought the enemy aircraft.

Bert was thinking of going to university after the war to become a doctor, he looked forward to his achieving this ambition.

## A BUNDLE OF ENERGY WITH FLASHING EYES AND SPARKLING TEETH.

In March '43 Bert was transferred to Biggin Hill aerodrome in Southern England, and in June his promotion to Warrant Officer came through. Here he was described as "A bundle of energy with flashing eyes and

sparkling teeth, intent on getting to grips with the enemy."

Bert Wipiti was last seen in the thick of a violent dog-fight (aircraft in combat) on October 3rd 1943.

More than 40 years a friend has written a book of tribute to Bert and advertisements were placed for people who had known him during the war to get in touch, and there began an avalanche of letters, photos and newspaper cuttings, which is still continuing. Through these contacts she has met and corresponded with many people all over the world who knew and admired Bert Wipiti, and has compiled an impressive collection of tributes to him.

Last year at the New Plymouth Boys' High School, the unveiling took place of a memorial to the 63 former pupils of the school who fought in World War II and have no known grave, and Bert's story was read out as representative of those times of all 63.

Investigations are still continuing into Bert's tally of enemy planes shot down - if it can be confirmed that his total is 5 or more his name would be honoured again as the only Maori 'Ace' fighter pilot. Ω

## THE AIR

