

# Letter From Denmark

## At The Going Down Of The Sun

By Nigel S. Roberts

**I**t was an autumn evening in Denmark, and I was visiting the parents of the 17-year-old Danish student who'd lived with us in Wellington for six months.

Kirsten Hansen's father and I wandered round Lemvig, a small town on Jutland's west coast, about as far from Copenhagen as it's possible to go in Denmark. Fewer than 8000 people live in Lemvig; it's the equivalent of Gore.

Mr Hansen proudly showed me the large Lutheran church dominating the town square, and then suggested we walk home along the railway line and through the cemetery. Danish graveyards are a far cry from the bulk of New Zealand's ugly, overgrown, under-cared-for cemeteries. Danish cemeteries are like the Danes: neat, orderly and models of decorum.

I wandered round the graves, enjoying the last of the day's sunlight. Many of the dead were drowned fishermen, but in one corner I came across something totally unexpected: a Commonwealth War Graves site. It was very small — nothing like the rolling acres of First World War graves New Zealanders are used to seeing in France, "where poppies blow amid the crosses, row on row".

Denmark was never a British colony and the country isn't a member of the Commonwealth, but here were 44 Commonwealth gravestones. One of the guiding philosophies of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission is that all headstones are "of a standard pattern". Generals and privates, admirals and able-seamen, air aces and aircraft mechanics — all ranks are accorded the same treatment. In death all are equal.

I knelt down, not to pray, but to read the inscription on a headstone bearing a fern leaf and "New Zealand" in capital letters:

405299 FLIGHT LIEUTENANT  
D. I. McNAREY  
NAVIGATOR (BOMBER)  
ROYAL N.Z. AIR FORCE  
20TH APRIL 1943 AGE 27

Deeply moved, the first thoughts that came to my mind were the lines from Rupert Brooke's immortal poem *The Soldier*:

If I should die, think only this of me:  
That there's some corner of a foreign field  
That is forever England.



Here, in Lemvig, Denmark — in a place about as far on earth as one is able to get from New Zealand — is a corner of a foreign field that is forever New Zealand.

The date of Flight Lieutenant McNarey's death was the next thing to strike me. He died five days before Anzac Day — the day on which we've recalled the deaths of servicemen and women since 1915: the 16,697 New Zealanders killed during the First World War; 11,625 during the Second World War — McNarey's war; 41 killed in Korea; as well as 26 dead in Malaya and 37 in Vietnam.

There was one other strange fact revealed by his headstone. McNarey had died on Adolf Hitler's birthday. On April 20 1943 Hitler turned 54, exactly twice the age McNarey was when he died.

**I**t became determined to find out more about this RNZAF bomber buried in Jutland's foreign fields and was successful thanks to the dedicated work of Errol Martyn, a former Air New Zealand employee who has devoted most of his adult life to documenting the lives and deaths of RNZAF members.

David McNarey was born on February 5 1916. He went to Otago Boys' High School passing University Entrance and afterwards studying horticulture at the King Edward Technical College before working for the Dunedin superintendent of parks and reserves. He played football, cricket, tennis and badminton.

McNarey applied for aircrew training on his 24th birthday, February 5 1940, and trained at Levin, Taieri and Wigram before

being sent to Canada in July 1941 under the Empire Air Training Scheme. Seven months later he was in Britain, as an air bomber (or bomb aimer) on Stirling bombers.

As a member of 149 Squadron, he was based at Lakenheath in Suffolk undertaking bombing missions over Berlin, Frankfurt, Hamburg, Mannheim, Nuremberg and Stuttgart. Mine-laying operations also took him to the Dutch and French coasts.

On a mine laying flight to Bordeaux on February 15 1943, McNarey received shrapnel wounds to his legs and arms, but wasn't out of action long, and on April 19 he was promoted to Flight Lieutenant.

The next night McNarey and seven crew members — including RNZAF captain George Ellis — took off at 10.08pm in a Stirling bomber. It was McNarey's 22nd operational flight targeting Rostock on the north coast of Germany. The plane never returned to base, and is as Errol Martyn notes in Volume II of his book *For Your Tomorrow* "presumed to have been brought down into the North Sea off the west coast of Denmark".

On May 11, McNarey's body was washed ashore near Thyborøn, at the entrance to Nisum Bredning, a fiord on Denmark's west coast, and he was buried in the Lemvig cemetery. In an odd way, Lemvig is an appropriate resting place for David McNarey. He was born in Gore.

Had David McNarey not been killed, he would be 86 now. Does he have any relatives remaining in New Zealand? I don't know. I do know that there are no McNareys listed in any of the country's phone books — I've looked.

But he is not forgotten.

As Anzac Day approaches, I find myself highly conscious of the sacrifice made by Flight Lieutenant D. I. McNarey. What's more, I can't help thinking how his parents, Mr and Mrs John McNarey of 56 Rosebery Street, Dunedin, must have felt. Their son died at the age my son is now.

The day almost over, my host Mr Hansen suggested we head back for dinner. As we strolled home I found myself recalling two lines from Laurence Binyon's September 1914 poem *For The Fallen*:

At the going down of the sun...  
We will remember them.

We will, indeed.

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