

The Spitfire pilot who sang in choir

HE is one of the few surviving pilots who flew Spitfires during the Second World War.

And Peter Hale remembers how it felt to climb into the cockpit of the iconic fighter plane and fly on missions over occupied Europe.

The 94-year-old former Warrant Officer flew in various models of Spitfire more than 200 times during 1944-45, including sorties against the infamous Nazi V1 flying bomb. He also escorted Lancaster bombers on bombing raids over Germany.

Now you are most likely to see him singing hymns heartily at Church of the Ascension in North End, where he is a much-loved member of the congregation.

"I go there to keep my faith going," he said. "When I started there, they noticed that I had a fair voice because I can sing tenor. I had sung in church choirs before, but unfortunately there was no choir to join. But they can certainly still hear me singing!"

Peter's interest in flying started as a small boy. He saw his first plane in Sidmouth, flown by aviation pioneer Sir Alan Cobham, who was later to develop air-to-air refuelling. As a pupil at Chichester High School, he used to visit Tangmere and air shows.

He joined the Royal Air Force as soon as he was old enough, aged 18, in January 1941.

After some initial training at Booker, near High Wycombe, he and around 200 other pilots were sent by ship to Canada. They crossed the Atlantic in stormy weather over 10 days which included Christmas.

He ended up in Swiftcurrent in Saskatchewan for advanced training on Harvard II planes. By the age of 19, he was experienced enough to start a course to become an instructor.

His time in Canada allowed him to visit places like New York and the Niagara Falls that he would never have seen if war hadn't broken out.

The British servicemen were also encouraged to make friends with local families. Peter and three other pilots attended churches in Canada when they could.



Above: 41(R) Squadron with a Spitfire, with Peter Hale ringed; right: Peter gets his wings in 1942

"There were four of us going to church when I was in Moncton, in New Brunswick, and one of them had sung in the choir at Canterbury," he said.

"And one of the times we went to church in Saskatchewan, I was invited for lunch with a family. We had to drive 60 miles to get to their house!"

In 1943, he was posted back to Lincolnshire, and it was there that he flew Spitfires for the first time.

From then until D-Day, there were intensive exercises involving Spitfires and Hurricanes, which would support the massive

seaborne invasion of Normandy.

In August 1944, he joined 41(R) Squadron, based in Kent, which had been flying Spitfires throughout the war. Peter flew the new Spitfire Mk XII, which had a more powerful Griffon engine – only 100 of them were ever built. He later flew the Mk XIV too.

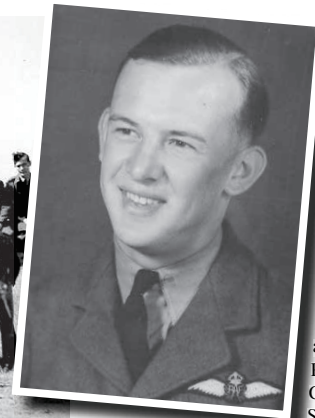
"I don't remember being frightened when we flew missions over Europe," he said. "We were concentrating on doing damage. You might see a train or a truck that you could open fire at. I would always aim for the engine of the train, where there weren't any people.

"Dogfights with German planes were rare until later

when we crossed the Rhine. We might accompany bombers into Germany, and we escorted planes carrying troops to and from Arnhem. I remember you would take some flak from the guns on the ground, but I never got hit.

"You knew that if you were shot down and had to bail out, you would become a prisoner of war. The Germans were particularly keen on the technology behind the Spitfire Mk XIVs, so we had instructions to set fire to them if we had to land behind enemy lines.

"The squadron moved to Belgium in December 1944, then the Netherlands and eventually



there, in the hot summer of 1947, he met his wife Hawthorn at a dance. She was working in Leigh House on what is now the Leigh Park estate.

They shared an interest in Scottish dancing and they joined Portsmouth's Caledonian Society. They subsequently

moved to Bedfordshire.

In 1959, he was posted to the Falkland Islands for three years by the Met Office. Hawthorn came on a later ship with their first daughter.

Peter continued to work for the Met Office until retirement in the 1980s, becoming a scientific officer.

He and Hawthorn had two daughters, and he became a parish councillor in Crowthorne near Farnborough. He was also on the local PCC and became PCC secretary for 10 years.

After Hawthorn died, he moved to Portsmouth and starting going to Church of the Ascension,

my faith

As a pilot of the iconic Spitfire fighter, Peter Hale played a crucial role in the Second World War. The former choirboy also learnt lessons about life that made him the man he is today

Germany in early 1945. Following VE in May, the whole squadron plus ground personnel flew into Kastrup Airfield, Copenhagen, to a tremendous reception. After three weeks it was back to Germany.

"I left 41 Squadron in Germany and flew back home in July 1945. Having reached there safely after five and a half years away, someone looked after me. You may know who!"

Once the war ended, Peter joined the Met Office, as his flying experiences had left him fascinated by changes in the weather. He became a scientific assistant and was posted to Thorney Island. While he was

in North End. It had the same kind of Anglo-Catholic style as the church he attended in London as a choir boy.

And on his 80th birthday, his friends organised a surprise for him. They took him to an airfield and he was invited to fly a Tiger Moth for the day. He still travels up to RAF Coningsby in Lincolnshire, where 41 Squadron is now based, to attend reunions.

"I'm proud that I can still climb into the cockpit of a Spitfire," he said. "I have to say that the war made me who I am. It gave me the ability to weigh a situation up quickly, and that has helped me throughout my life."

