

## Tribute to Pilot and Crew killed in perilous test



It was one of the most shocking air crash tragedies in the West – the day exactly 50 years ago when a famous pilot and a test crew perished on a remote hillside in Wiltshire.

And now, to mark the half century since Cheltenham-educated flying ace Mike Lithgow died alongside six other crew members, a new memorial stone has been erected at the fateful spot.

Lithgow was the Lieutenant Commander of the Ark Royal during the Second World War, but swapped the Navy for a post-war career as a test pilot. In 1953 he became the fastest human who ever lived when he flew a Supermarine jet on a test run over Libya and reached 735.7mph.

In those days of the development of jet planes, he held the record for just a week, but proved to be the penultimate Brit to hold such an honour.

Ten years later, on October 22, 1963, he had moved into test piloting commercial jet airliners, and embarked on the fifth test flight of a new prototype passenger jet, the BAC 1-11.

That day's test, which took off from Surrey, was to see how the plane would respond to a deep stall, and from a height of 16,000ft, Lithgow deliberately stalled the plane.

But the plane could not be brought back from its almost vertical plunge, and crashed into a hillside near Chicklade, in south Wiltshire.

Lessons learned from the tragedy included recognising the "deep stall" where the wings block airflow to the tail elevators, preventing the pilot from rescuing the descent.

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