

# Trail of wartime tragedy leads to Limerick

1994

AT THE British military cemetery near Valkenswaard lie the graves of the soldiers who were killed on September 17, 1944.

That was the day that the Allies crossed the border from Belgium into Holland, on

their way to Eindhoven and further — into Germany itself.

One of these graves is that of a young County Limerick man, Michael Dee,

guardsman with the Irish Guards.

At his tombstone there is the prayer: "Please pray for the soul of Michael". And underneath it, is his home address: "Mountcollins, Abbeyfeale, Co Limerick, Eire".

Here is an edited translation of an article by a Dutch journalist, Ed van de Kerkhof who earlier this year came to the Limerick area in search of traces of Michael Dee meeting journalists here.

## A fine young Limerickman

By ED van de KERKHOF

SHOULD you ever wish to visit Mountcollins, go first to Abbeyfeale and then turn left. It is said that Abbeyfeale has one street, 52 pubs and one hotel. That little road to the left lies more or less past the end pub.

And if you then cross over two little bridges of stone, you are at a particular place where the undulating turf and the wet meadows of the counties of Kerry, Cork and Limerick meet each other under majestic skies, heavy with rain or light of a seemingly faraway sun — but always filled with the fragrance of turf fires.

It looks like a calendar sheet, made to recommend the splendour of Ireland's green tinges.

This is the land where Michael Dee was born on November 14, 1912. He was the only son which Old Paddy Dee would ever have.

Those who knew Paddy remember how he used to sing one of those old Irish ballads in a melancholic way about the son who left and died and never returned: "My only son was shot in Dublin, fighting for his country bold . . ."

And then Paddy would stare into the smouldering turf fire.

Michael Dee, however, did not die in Dublin. He was killed in the immediate neighbourhood of Valkenswaard on the first day that the Irish Guards set foot on Brabantine land.

When you have found the way to Julia O'Connor, in Mountcollins, you are standing in front of Michael Dee's only sister still alive. She is now 80 years old or thereabouts, and she is still in grief over that brother who never returned.

She was a bit nervous that day. She had let her children come wearing their Sunday suits, and those children had brought along their offspring, and one of the girls had to play the tin whistle to show how skillfully she could conjure up a reel.

One of the daughters had baked a rhubarb flan and a chocolate cake, and the best table cloth was put on the table.

And then Julia had told about Michael. She told that he had not been like the other boys of the hamlet. He was eager to learn. Until the age of 16 — or was it until the age of 17 — he went to school, and that was something special in those days. He used to walk miles and



Devout: Guardsman Dee.

miles, looking for books to satisfy his desire for reading.

Ah, yes! They were poor — just as poor as everybody else had always been in the hills. They had some cows and a pig, and a little potato field, but nothing more.

And they had God to whom they clung to passionately, just as they did to that land after which they hankered.

Oh, yes! Michael was devout.

Extract from a letter from Timothy Guiney: "His family was very pious. Every night of his life, his father went down on his knees and led in prayer, and I am convinced that when the Lord called in Mikie Dee, he found him prepared.

And then came the day that Michael disappeared.

They did not think it strange that Michael was suddenly gone. During the 'thirties, things like that happened daily throughout Ireland. Tired of poverty and the gloomy unemployment, thousands of Irish youngsters crossed the Channel to England or go to the Promised Land that is called America.

But Michael's departure had left behind a certain emptiness. His mother had died at an early age, and shortly after that his little sister, Ida, who had been three years old . . .

Ah, yes! He had written from England, where he had found a job with a fire brigade.

He had sent a picture and a postcard of himself. At the back of it, he had written that he was wearing his off-duty uniform and that was something to be proud of.

And once, he had even sent five English pounds, and that was a lot of money in those days. Ah! She and her father had understood that Michael wanted something more than those poor hills had to offer.

And then the war broke out, and in Mountcollins they

received letters and postcard from Michael who went to Europe as a soldier. They kept them for years, until they, one by one, slipped into time or got lost.

Julia O'Connor said that her father actually had not even recovered from the blow of receiving the telegram from England which was delivered to Mountcollins at the end of September, 1944.

"His heart broke," she said and that was literally meant. Paddy Dee got a heart attack when he heard that his only son was killed somewhere in Europe.

Paddy Dee would keep on grieving for the loss of his son until the year he died — 1955. And all those years, the little pension from his son, consisting of five shillings a week, was sent from England, and Julia O'Connor still knows the number of the pension booklet: RA 1041. And the British Army had also sent two medals.

That was all.

Julia O'Connor said that her father had never seen the grave of his son.

With the same diligence with which the Irish Republic hid itself from the Second World War, it hid the history of those thousands of Irishmen who had fought on the European and African fronts against Hitler — one and all, they were called Paddy, and they were reputed to be grim born fighters; their own country chose to forget them if they were killed far away from their green island.

Nowhere in the Republic will you can find the tiniest official monument that commemorates their death.

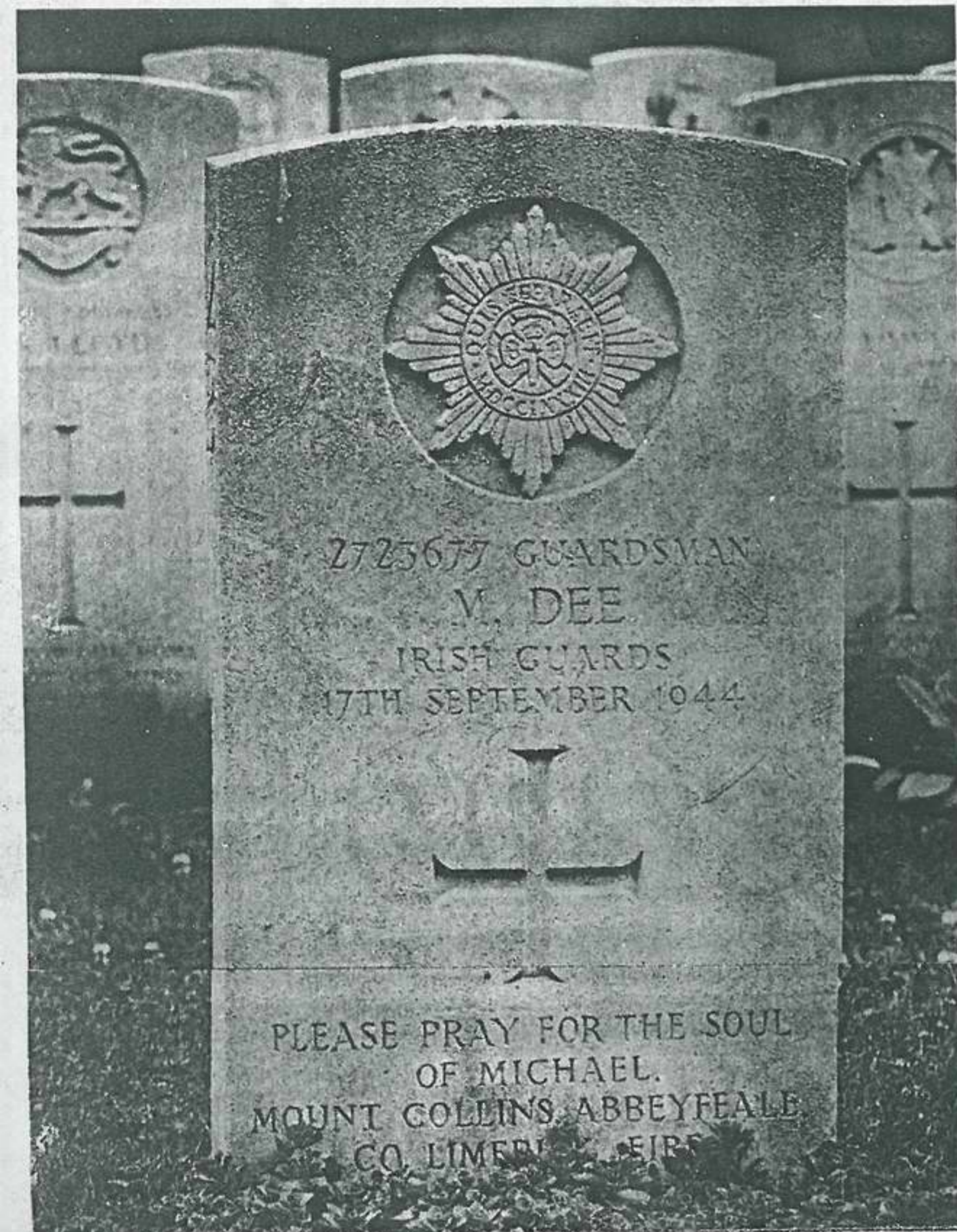
Only here and there, in old shoe boxes, or under a pile of yellowed papers in little farmers' houses like Julia O'Connor's, whose maiden name was also Dee, or wherever — somewhere also lie some medals. Or a brownish picture.

"He was a fine young man, tall, strong and brave — I could not speak too highly of him," Timothy Guiney wrote, 50 years later about "Mikie" Dee.

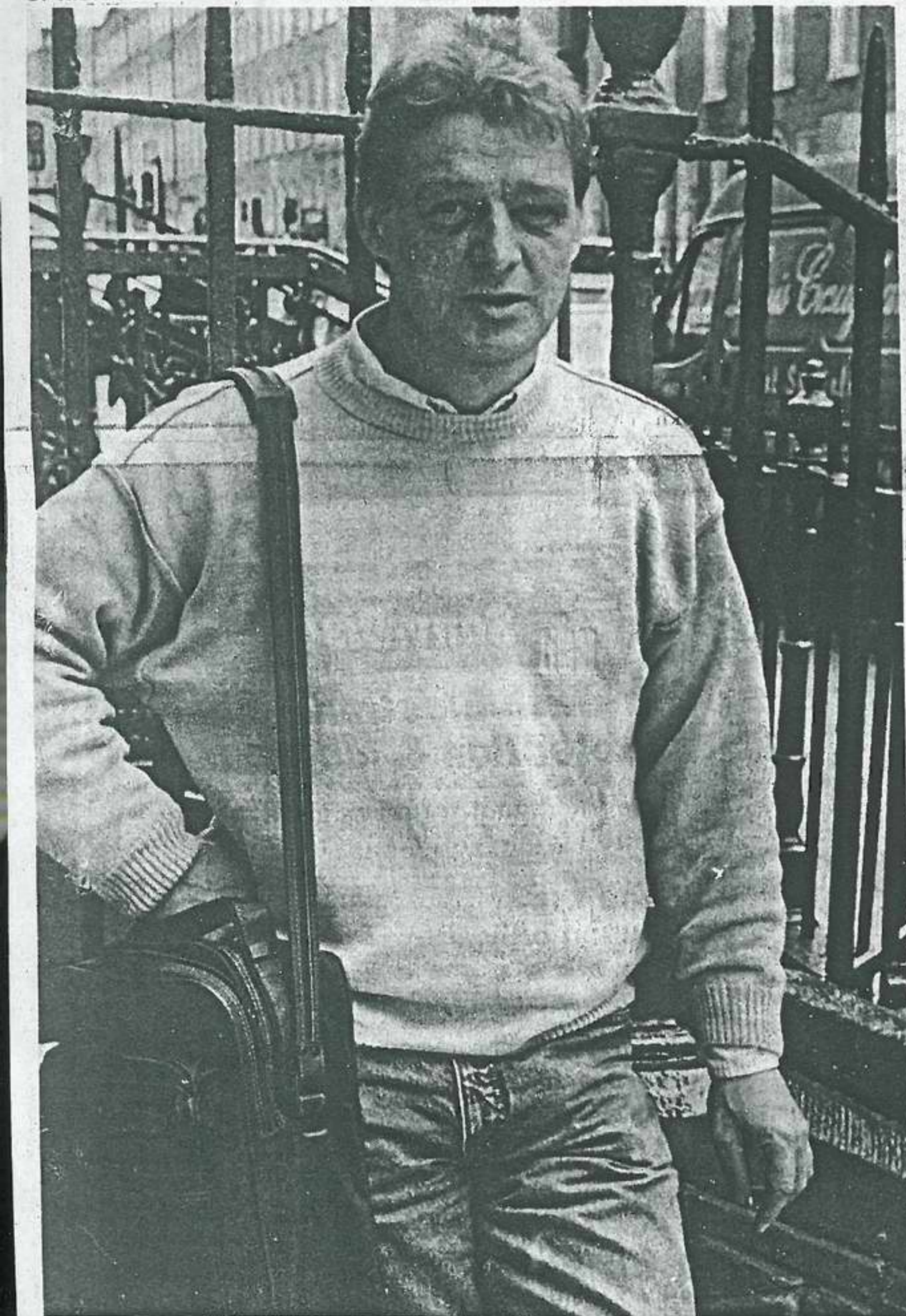
"Oh, yes," said Julia O'Connor, 80 years old or thereabouts. "Oh yes, we have always been so proud of Michael. So proud . . ."

And then she had become silent, and her eyes strayed away, and it was just like as if she had heard her father sing melancholy about that son who had never come back — "My only son was shot in Dublin, fighting for his country bold . . ."

Ah, Dublin or Valkenswaard, "What does it matter to a father?"



Michael Dee's Dutch grave. His father never recovered from the news of his death.



On assignment in Limerick: Ed van de Kerkhof of the Netherland's newspaper Eindhovens Dagblad. (LL)