

One Day I'll Fly Away

On the morning of Tuesday 15th October 1957 the SATCO drew up to the tower just as the Trabant left to check the airfield. He had just sat down to his coffee when he had a disturbing message from the Trabant and phoned the Chiefly on the 59 Squadron line and asked if they had lost a Canberra. The Chiefly looked out of the window and saw no gaps in the line and said he didn't think so. A few minutes later the SATCO called again and asked doesn't Canberra XH204 belong to your lot? The Chiefly guardedly agreed that it may belong to them. The SATCO smoothly pointed out that the self-same aeroplane was at the far end of the airfield bogged down in the grass off the peri-track with both engines running. When 59 Sqn staff went down to inspect and recover the Canberra B (I)8 they found the door open and a suit-case in the cockpit. It appeared that the suitcase belonged to J/T John Neville, an Electrical Fitter.

This was the beginning of a bizarre adventure and a troubling time for the powers in charge, I mean, was this the start of a trend for ground crew to borrow a kite to nip home to the UK for the weekend if they were homesick? If so, most National Servicemen would be on the first available plane

In the Beginning

In October 1957 Fingers was 20 years and one month old. He had gained the nickname Fingers at Melksham on his Fitters Course when he pressed the wrong button and discharged an aircraft battery with a loud bang.

He had recently purchased from a local scrap yard some second hand tyres for his car and had subsequently been interviewed and questioned by both the RAF SIB and the German Polizei on the provenance of these tyres and they had impounded his car.

The next Saturday he removed his car from the compound on camp with spare keys and went to a local dance. When he left much later he found that someone, reportedly from the car parked next to his, had let his tyres down. As the tyres were the same size as his, he and his companion jacked up and removed the wheels and replaced the deflated ones on his own car. He put his own wheels in his open boot; all of this was to the cheers and encouragement of the local Germans. The world seemed to be his oyster until he ran out of petrol on the main road a few miles short of the camp and the German police stopped to check it out. Well, here was a car supposedly impounded and subject to an investigation about stolen tyres on the public highway with a boot full of wheels. Not good news.

Over the next couple of days Fingers considered his situation not only with the police of two nations but also his current problems with his girlfriend and decided drastic

problems merited drastic solutions and he decided he would borrow a Canberra. His master plan included taking off from Gutersloh, flying to RAF Dishforth in Yorkshire, landing on the North/South runway parallel to the to the A1, taxiing to the boundary fence and jumping over it to hitch a lift to North of Manchester where his family lived. It should be piece of cake really he had a key for Canberra's and had studied the Pilot Notes.

In the early morning of 15th October 1957 he went out, taking with him a suitcase and small pack, onto the airfield to the 59 Sqn line and removed all of the covers and external attachments of Canberra XH204. He set up all of the necessary switches to start up on internals, did not arm the ejection seat and at 6:30 pm when Reveille sounded he threw the master battery switch thereby masking the noise of the start-up.

When the canopy had de-misted and the engines settled at 2700 revs he released the parking brake and started to move forward. He immediately found difficulty in steering with the engines and toe brakes but was making good progress until approaching Runway 09 when the combination of a slight slope and a curve in the track caused him to swing onto the grass and bogging down. Now panic set in and he thought there would be a hue and cry so he decided to abandon the aircraft and run to the boundary fence which he scaled and a German on a moped gave him a lift to Herzebrock Station.

He did not need to hurry because it was almost 2 hours after start up before the missing Canberra was discovered by the Control Tower and 59 Squadron initially denied they had lost it.

When they entered the Canberra cockpit and discovered the suitcase, the police quickly put two and two together and decided the documents in the case may lead to the identity of the tyro aviator.

These events led to a major investigation with more snowdrops on the ground than at Kew in January

It was the beginning of a bizarre and at times python-esque series of events with a surprising ending.

On the Run

During this period AVM Ubee the AOC of 2 Group made an indiscreet and probably miss-quoted reply to a question from the press concerning the capabilities of the Canberra bombers recently stationed in Germany to deliver nuclear devices. This in the context of the recently completed WWII, where tens of millions of people had been killed or injured by the Russians and Germans was political dynamite. This was at the height of the Cold War when there was a possibility of escalation into WWIII.

It was also in the context of the UK testing of thermo-nuclear devices in the Pacific.

Many fellow airmen were returning from Megaton Tours with suntans and loud Hawaiian shirts.

So when one of these nuclear-capable aircraft came close to being removed from a first line military airfield (this was the closest active station to the Eastern Block) it was a major incident. The first thing to be established was if the perpetrator had a political motivation or had there been some financial incentive. Where was he now? Was he going to appear at a press conference in East Berlin with an adoring blonde ballerina on his arm stating his disaffection with the basing of nuclear weapons in Germany?

A major investigation began at RAF Gutersloh with Tannoy messages asking for anyone with information about or knowledge of the whereabouts of John to contact their Officer i/c immediately.

A large number of interviews were conducted by strange men with large feet, blazers and bad haircuts. The interviewees were told that they would soon get him, checks had been instituted on all road, rail, air and sea exits from the area. The organisers of the activity at Gutersloh were F/Lt O'Niell and F/Sgt Clitheroe from the SIB in Sundern.

We had left John in the Herzebrock area on the morning of 15th October where he caught a train to Bielefeld and another one from there to Düsseldorf (it passed through Gutersloh station). In Düsseldorf he went to the BEA office and bought a services rate single ticket on a Viscount to Heathrow using his 1250 ID. On arrival in the UK he went on the shuttle to London and booked into the Union Jack Club overnight before going by train to Manchester and booking into digs. John loved the RAF and loved his job in it and it was always his intention to re-join it when he returned to the UK. To achieve this he visited the Manchester Recruiting Office and filled in the forms to join the RAF but was told he needed a National Insurance Number. The local Labour Exchange gave him his old number but were puzzled that he had not been called up for National Service. He went back to the Recruitment Centre to take tests but felt nervous and moved over the Pennines to Leeds where he went to the Recruitment Office there and again applied to join the RAF as a regular. He was told it would take a week or so before he would be called for tests etc.

Money was now running low so he hitch-hiked to RAF Dishforth where he showed his 1250 told the Cpl in the guardroom there that he was on leave from Germany visiting his brother and could he stay in the transit block. He was issued with bedding and was happy until he found a note on his bed asking him to report to the RAF Police Office. He then moved on to RAF Topcliffe and went through the same routine until he learnt that there was a letter and warrant in the Leeds Recruiting Office instructing him to report to Cardington on 20th November.

At Cardington he reported that he had some knowledge of electrics and Canberra systems and was sent to Melksham in civilian clothes for a trade assessment. The result of all of this and much more detail was that on 28th November 1957 the absconded 4168649 J/T Neville J. was now the newly recruited 4235478 J/T Neville J. He from that point on kept his 1250s taped together with the most recent one on top.

After the issuing of kit and the necessary jabs John was collected together with a group of other new recruits and sent on 3rd December to RAF Wilmslow for square-bashing again.

Back in the Fold

John had a heavy cold when he arrived at Wilmslow and a few days going through the mindless routines of square-bashing convinced him that he should return to Gutersloh and face the music, get it out of the way and get on with his life. His current quality of life was pretty dreadful.

So on the evening of 6th November he packed some belongings and jumped over the fence to catch a 31 bus into central Manchester.

He found out that the next sailing date for Germany from Harwich was on the evening of Monday 9th November and on that date he reported with his 1250 to the ticket office at Manchester station and reported he had lost the return half of his ticket to RAF Gutersloh. He was issued with a ticket to London and advised to report to the RTO at Liverpool St for further ticketing to Germany. He told the same story at Liverpool St and was issued with a ticket to Harwich and advised to contact the RTO there.

In Harwich when he reported to the Sergeant in the RTO office he showed his 1250 and repeated his story. He was asked to wait and the Sergeant left the room with his 1250. The Sergeant returned with a Corporal, a Flying Officer and two RAF police. He was asked "Are you 4168649 Junior Technician John Neville or are you 4235478 Junior Technician John Neville?". He replied "Yes, yes". He was arrested and escorted onto the ship to the Hook of Holland.

At the Hook he was met by F/Sgt Clitheroe and Sgt Hockey from the SIB at Sundern and driven back to Gutersloh where he was housed in the Detention Block (D Block) opposite the guardroom by the main gate along with two other prisoners. He was in the next few days interviewed by F/Lt O'Niell and F/Sgt Clitheroe from the SIB in Sundern and he made a full statement 12 pages in length.

John was marched to the Mess each day to be fed and I well remember the cheering which took place. He was something of a folk hero especially amongst the National Serviceman. He also intermittently appeared in the NAAFI on some evenings apparently unescorted. He was bought many beers by the homesick and disaffected. In this period his other kit was moved to D block along with the tools from his car, he now had two sets of uniforms with him.

The Court Martial was convened on 11th February and he was convicted and his services were no longer required. The findings were confirmed and he was transferred for a holiday at RAF Uxbridge which lasted with time deducted for that being served in D Block at Gutersloh until May 1958. He was on leaving paid a cheque for the time he was away from Gutersloh.

There were two really surprising things at the end of this affair, firstly that the evening trips to the NAAFI during his time in D Block were unaccompanied because they used his car tools deposited there to cut through the bars of a cell. This allowed the residents to go out in the evenings. This comfortable arrangement could have continued but the other two went out on the town and were discovered missing which caused search parties to be raised but they returned by taxi and demanded their beds back.

The major surprise was to find out that John had replied to a newspaper advertisement by English Electric of Preston for ex-RAF technicians to work on Canberra aircraft on RAF stations in the UK in their "out-working" teams. He was interviewed in late May and accepted for employment but could not start until September because he was under 21 years of age.

His first job in September 1958 was at RAF Upwood and for the next three years he worked on many other stations on both Canberra's and Lightning's. He was accommodated in the Sgts Mess. He met many people he had known in the RAF. They must have been surprised to see him.

Signs of the Times

I lived through the periphery of the bizarre and at times fantastic events previously described and had forgotten about them until recently. When I now look back 50 years I see that they should be placed in context.

Before WWII my grandfather was a miner and did his patriotic duty in raising 12 children to replace the losses of WWI. They lived through the Depression Years and their lot in life was for the boys to go down the pits and the girls to go into service. The girls worked 6½ days a week for £1 a month all found.

In the war years my Grandmother and her daughters went to work in the munitions factory at Thorp Arch. They were well paid, respected and their services were valued; none of the family ever went into service again.

In the immediate post war years the Education and Health Acts were enabled and children were guaranteed further education if they could pass exams.

As a result of this we were, in the 1950s, the first generation with the opportunity to become upwardly mobile. This did not mean that we had cars, flats, a lot of money or many clothes. Most of us lived at home; our social life was the pub, the dance and local sports.

Girls were always of interest but they just did not permit sexual activity unless there was a deep commitment. The best you could hope for with decent girls was a tentative fondle of the breast OUTSIDE the twin set whilst having tea and cakes in the front room (with the door left open) and listening to Songs for Swinging Lovers. The pubs closed at 10:30 pm and then you went home. You did not normally leave your own town except for seaside holidays and shopping trips to the big city. To get out of this loop it was possible to join the forces and get an independent life with overseas travel and trade training. A number of us took this option mainly to get some experience of life.

In Germany the war had only been over for 10 years when we began to re-arm them as part of NATO and we based bombers capable of dropping atomic bombs from German bases. The Russians were not happy and the Cold War was at its height. There was also a shortage of young men and a surfeit of young women in Germany. When a number of us who joined the forces for adventure were posted to 2 TAF we were not enthusiastic, we yearned for tropical climes and dusky maidens.

What we found was a place where we had duty free liquors and cigarettes, second hand cars cheaply available, cheap petrol subsidised by the West German Government, a fixed exchange rate of 12DM for £1=0=6, local girls who were ready willing and able (and we were glamorous figures, even the woolly uniform was admired). There was little or no supervision; if you did your job competently you were left alone.

If you were on a Squadron and wished to be respected you were expected to hold your drink and boast of servicing your share of ladies. Most of the people in positions of power had seen war-time active service and had an intolerant edge. So here we were, teen-age warriors, servicing aircraft and enthusiastically pursuing wine, women and song in the evenings.

On 79 Sqn the nose covers of their Swifts when laid out on the grass made excellent sleeping bags for the hung-over airmen. Profitable weekend runs with supplies of duty-free cigarettes and condoms were made to Enschede in Holland. In the early part of the week, when money was low, you could chase hares along country lanes and knock them over for a reward of 5DM in the local pubs who would sometimes allow you credit until payday

There was a collection for a German girl who did the bottle trick in the Malcolm Club at Christmas. Drunken driving was the rule rather than the exception (I knew of one person whose young wife was killed in an accident in the early hours of the morning). Women were regularly taken back to the barrack blocks. If you had dangerous tyres you went to a scrap yard in Gutersloh and ordered some "second hand" ones which arrived a couple of days later. The Avtag from defective drop tanks was siphoned into cans and put into cars; it worked at the right mix. The "redded" petrol for visiting piston aircraft was regularly removed and the figures adjusted on the next re-fuelling. The RAF Police went out drinking with us and legends were built by the antics of the aircrew on escape and evasion exercises

So when someone tried to nick a Canberra to solve a short-term problem it was a surprise but not really earth-shattering. The subsequent events were reported with glee and John became a folk hero especially for the National Servicemen who felt the government was stealing two years of their lives.

In this context John had run into a problem which snow-balled and he did not really have anyone to turn to.

I believe a major cause was poor supervision of the immature by the WWII veterans who encouraged laddish behaviour.

It may interest you to know that when John left English Electric he worked for various companies and managed to purchase his first aircraft. This led to him becoming a commercial pilot, a profession he continues to pursue with 12,000 hours flown. His two sons are also commercial pilots.

For me they were truly golden days, a magic and unrepeatable part of my life.

Some Other Quotes-One

Quote from Swift Justice by Nigel Walpole pages175-176:

"Before 59 (Canberra) Squadron left Gutersloh in November 1957, a junior technician reputedly on the run from the civilian police decided that there was nothing to this flying business and that he would return to the UK in a Canberra. He knew how to get into and start up the aircraft and bluffed the night guards into helping him to prepare and position the aircraft for an early morning sortie. He then

managed to taxi it to the end of runway 09 before slipping off the perimeter track into the mud, where it was found during the early morning airfield inspection, empty but with its engines still running. Exactly what this aspiring aviator had in mind and how long he remained at large after escaping across the fields is not clear, but it was certainly fortunate that he did not get airborne in the direction of the married quarters and the town of Gutersloh. Ian Waller believes that he rejoined the RAF under an assumed name and, after retraining, was on his way back to Germany when he surrendered at the Hook of Holland on hearing that his posting was to Gutersloh” I have just bought the book on the internet. I was amused by the aptness of the title.

Some Other Quotes-2

I recently found the passage below in Flugplatz Gutersloh by Gerry Lewis printed in 1987

The Canberras were to say goodbye to the station in November 1957 but not without furnishing a story of some fame in the wider Air Force. A Junior Technician had unwisely crossed the path of the local civilian police and even more foolishly sought to avoid the consequences of his action. He elected to return to the United Kingdom and his chosen method of travel was to be the B2 Canberra. Early one morning he breezily greeted the squadron guards—the famous stick and whistle patrol—charged with the safeguarding the line of aircraft and gave them a false story about having to prepare an aircraft for an early morning take off. His trade had taught him the necessary steps to start up the aircraft, and the unsuspecting guards helped him to remove the engine covers and release the various locking pins to facilitate aircraft movement. With a final and sufficiently confident wave the Junior Tech signalled for the chocks to be removed from the aircraft wheels and the aircraft taxied into the pre-dawn mist with the guards basking in the knowledge of being of assistance to their fellow man. Fortunately the Canberra did not get very far, as it taxied away it ran onto soft ground and tipped softly to one side. Here it was abandoned by the would be unofficial pilot and it remained with its engines idling until a keen eyed observer from the Air Traffic Control tower spotted it at dawn, just as the alarm was breaking on the squadron over the missing aircraft. Two red faced guards were very much in evidence but not the criminal airman who now elected to put some alternative plan into operation and fled from the grasps of both Service and civilian authorities. The episode has a footnote in that the airman is sup-

posed to have rejoined the RAF under a different name only to be eventually caught when his previous training and experience was revealed by too high examination marks when he undertook a second period of basic trade training.