

The Night 57 Squadron lost a Canberra

Introduction: R.A.F. Gutersloh

On the morning of Tuesday 15th October 1957, the SATCO (Senior Air Traffic Control Officer) 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 Flight Sgt. on the 57 Squadron line and asked if they had lost a Canberra (jet bomber). The F/Sgt 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 F/Sgt 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 perimeter track, with both engines running.

When 57 Sqd staff went down to inspect and recover the Canberra, they found the door open and a suitcase in the cockpit. It appeared that the suitcase belonged to J/T John Seville, an Electrical Fitter.

John Seville

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. They consequently 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 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 as he had a key for Canberras 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 Sqdn 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 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.

Hue and Cry

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 tyre thief aviator. It was the beginning of a bizarre series of events with a surprising ending.

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.

Meanwhile

We 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 card.

On arrival in the UK he went on the shuttle to London and booked in 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 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 showed his 1250 ID card 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 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 two 1250 ID cards taped together with the most recent one on top.

Back to Square One

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.

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.

Back to Germany

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 (Rail Travel Office) 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".

Arrested

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 Servicemen. 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.

Court Martial

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 (prison) 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.

Post- R.A.F. career

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 Canberras and Lightnings. 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.

After 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.