

Night Flight

It was a refurbished and upgraded Bristol Beaufighter, one of the batch fitted with all the latest gizmos. It had been badly shot up on a sortie over Belgium and although only a few months old, their current aeroplane had been down rated, considered unsuitable for long haul flights. Patched up, it had been re-assigned to RAF East Fortune as a training aircraft fitted with dual joysticks making the cockpit crowded. In its new configuration, it would be used for low flying as a torpedo attack trainer using dummy torpedoes and as a photoreconnaissance trainer.

It was late September 1942. Everyone said the War was on the turn but there was still the threat of submarines, not just in the Atlantic but in the North Sea. Hence their destination, RAF East Fortune airfield, on the other side of the Firth of Forth from Anstruther where Roy Ernesto had been born and raised until his family had moved to Edinburgh when his father got a great job at Ferranti, designing and developing the latest military aviation technology. Jan Diederick had Dutch roots. Jan had been born and brought up in Glasgow, where his father had established a transport company importing fruit and flowers from Holland, a business sabotaged by the War.

It was a clear night but bitterly cold with a 25 knot north-easterly headwind. They had been scrambled from RAF Barton as tail-enders behind the RAF Ringway squadron flying off in support of the heavy bombers heading to targets in the north of Germany. Their flight routing was initially due East out to fifty miles clear of the coast before turning northwards at a height of 9,000 feet. Both men were qualified pilots and navigators well versed in the use of the new gizmos and radar devices which were part of the aircraft's development programme.

Listed as part of the RAF Volunteer Reserve, although both young men were Scottish born and bred, because of their heritage they had been rejected by the RAF, sidelined into the role of test crews and 'taxi drivers' delivering mainly Beaufighters to distant airports throughout the UK after their refurbishment and upgrading works had been completed. And, on occasion, collecting defective aircraft to return them back to the works at RAF Barton. Flying defective aircraft was always a risky business.

One bonus was this particular aircraft had been re-fitted with refurbished Hercules super quiet engines, a feature which had earned more heavily armed versions the nickname 'Whispering Death'. Clear of the coast they climbed to 9,000 feet, maintaining their speed at an economical 150 knots with both Hercules engines purring quietly.

As instructed, they maintained radio silence knowing their routing was being monitored

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by radar and, since their flight plan had been advised to Air Traffic Control and they were fitted with an ID beacon, another innovation, they should not expect any challenges.

Jan spoke on the intercom:

'Nesto, will you take her for a bit, I need to find my other glove.'
'Sure, I have the helm, heading is due north, 9,000 feet, and 145 knots with fifty-three miles to our turn for our approach for East Fortune.'

'Ah, here it is. These latest gloves are not as good as the old ones, are they?'

'I got my Mum to knit me liners, fine ply. I'll ask her to knit you a pair. How's your pinkie doing?'

'Giving me gyp, always does in cold weather.'

This injury was from a motorcycle accident when Jan was a teenager.

'They said it would be better after the operation last year but I think it's worse.'

'Arthritis, probably.'

'Arthritis? But I'm only twenty-seven. Arthritis is for old people.'

'No, Jan. My father has had it in his knees since he was a late teenager. Scuppered his cycling career. He used to be fifth in Scotland over fifty miles.'

'Hey, hold up Nesto. What's that rattle? Port Engine. The mounting, I reckon.'

'Port Engine readings are normal.'

'Try reducing speed, Nesto.'

'Righty-o, skipper. Speed now 125 knots.'

'Good, that's done it, rattles gone.'

They flew on in silence. Gradually the rattle from the Port Engine returned, coming and going.

'Nesto, this crate took a real pounding. Did you see her when they were working on her back at Barton? I thought she was for the scrap heap but they more or less rebuilt her.'

'Yes, the Beaufighters are strong aircraft. Probably my favourites. Do you agree?'

'For me they are second only to the Spitfires for me. Especially the latest ones. They're like racing cars.'

'Hold on, Jan, the Starboard Engine is overheating badly.'

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'Yep! Right, shut it down.'

The two friends had been in similar situations before. Flying refurbished planes meant bugs could arise and they had flown Beaufighters on one engine many times, including several forced landings. Nesto increased the throttle for the Port Engine and adjusted the trim to hold their course and altitude.

'Jan, let's head directly for East Fortune, it's the nearest option now and at least they should be expecting us.'

'Nesto, what do you think, should we break radio silence and send a warning?'

'No. Remember we have that new ID gizmo fitted so Air Traffic will know it's us approaching.'

'Yes, if all the pieces of their jigsaw are lined up. The last thing we need is some jittery ack-ack squaddie popping off at us as if we are a Gerry lone raider.'

'Jan, the rattle from the Port Engine is back. Can you see anything obvious?'

'No, nothing. It could be a spanner, remember the time before?'

'No, Jan, it's a deeper rumble, structural. Look at the joysticks vibrating. Pump in our new heading, there's a good chappie.'

'There you are, Nesto, go on then, take her in.'

'Jan, as senior man, should you not take the helm?'

'No, Nesto, my hand is giving me gyp. You take us in. Dead reckoning suggests 23 minutes.'

'OK, but that crosswind is going to be a right bugger when we try to land.'

'Watch out, your speed is dropping.'

'The throttle is not responding. Is it a fuel line blockage?'

'Then pull up the nose and we'll go in on a glide path.'

'That's what I'm doing but the controls are frozen. Could be a hydraulic leak.'

'No, not that as well. This bloody plane is a death trap.'

'Jan, check our time to East Fortune. Look, there's the Bass Rock so it can't be far.'

The sky around them started to pop with ack-ack tracers. Their Beaufighter took a few hits and seemed to shrug them off but unfortunately one of the shells hit the hydraulic manifold serving the landing gear.

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'Right, Jan, contact East Fortune and tell them we are on our way down.'

'OK, Nesto, see you on the other side, eh?'

From the control tower they saw the Beaufighter approach, crabbing and dropping steeply. Its undercarriage was still up. Its Starboard propellor was idling, its engine dead. At about half a mile out the pilot cut the Port Engine and the plane approached on a glide. It looked as if it might make a belly flop landing until it was hit by a blustery squall.

The sturdy aircraft missed the runway and veered towards the grass, the starboard wing hitting first, causing the plane to spin up and over at an angle before eventually coming to rest, the cockpit nose down into the ground buried under the body of the plane with the full weight of the Port Engine assembly crushing down on it.

The Commandant watched from the threshold of the door of his office, through his binoculars:

'Looks like our new addition from RAF Barton did not make it. Poor chaps are almost certainly dead and gone. Do we know who they are?'

'No sir. No details were given. Looks like the repair guys did another botch up job.'

'I suppose they are doing their best for us what with shortages, pressure of time and a lack of skilled manpower. My brother-in-law is at Barton. He says they are working around the clock trying to fix up damage planes and get them back into service. There's another a big push on, as you know.'

'Yes, sir. I believe these transfer pilots are RAF Volunteers, is that right?'

'Yes, volunteers. All sorts, really. Thank God someone else will get the job of writing to their families.'

The emergency recovery teams arrived and located the fuel shut off valves to prevent a fire. Then began the slow work of cutting away the fuselage.

Two hours later an ambulance left with the damaged airmen, heading for Edinburgh. The incident was reported to RAF Barton where the details were logged 'for future action'.

As the days turned to weeks the loss of the Beaufighter and its crew was quietly forgotten. Sadly, no one at RAF Barton took responsibility for writing to the airmen's families

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Roy Ernesto was operated on for six hours until the surgeon deemed his foot and ankle were beyond recovery then made the amputation two inches above the ankle joint, fully preserving the calf muscle and providing a good usable stump.

In due course, he was provided with a rudimentary prosthetic foot which fitted snugly into a leather sleeve held by straps from a belt around his waist. Looking around the other recipients at the clinic he soon realised he was lucky compared to many. Although his War Time artificial foot was awkward, heavy and not articulated, it was functional and, over time his pain abated to a dull ache, worse on damp wet days and less so in good weather.

Nesto tried to locate his friend Jan Diederick without success. Both had been logged into the hospital system as 'injured airmen names unknown'.

Jan's head injuries resulted in a trauma coma. After two weeks in Edinburgh, he was shipped off to a specialist unit at Mearnskirck near Glasgow where he was given the temporary name of John Doyle by the receiving nurse, Jane Doyle.

After seven months of diligent nursing Jane got her reward when Jan opened his eyes and return to consciousness. It took several years of therapy to recover his memory but only in parts. He returned to a semblance of his old self and, still calling himself John Doyle, he got a job as a postman and settled with Jane, living as man and wife while she waited for her 'missing in action' husband to return from the RAF where he had served as a rear gunner in a Lancaster.

In 1947 John and Jane married and moved to Ayr where they took over the running of Jane's parent's hotel. A few months later, they were blessed with a baby boy, named Tom after Jane's father.

Roy Ernesto was excused further War duties and after a spell as a lab technician at Edinburgh University, Nesto moved to the Royal College of Technology (the Glasgow Tech) where he joined a team developing modern prosthetics, legs, arms, ankles and hands.

In the department he met Moira Venters, a girl originally from Kirkcaldy where her father was a miner. In 1952 they married and had one child, Sarah, named after Nesto's mother.

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Since just after WW2 The National Museum of Flight at East Fortune has amassed an impressive collection of vintage commercial and military aircraft which nowadays are on display to the general public.

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In the summer of 2006 two vehicles parked side by side in the disabled area outside Reception.

Tom Doyle and his wife Janice opened the rear of their people carrier and manoeuvred the motorised wheelchair onto the hard standing and guided his father into the seat.

A few minutes later, Sarah and Trevor lowered a similar wheelchair onto the tarmac and assisted Roy Ernesto as he shuffled over to take his seat.

Apart from the usual polite pleasantries, no other conversation took place until much later when the two wheelchairs were stopped beside the Beaufighter on display.

It was Nesto who spoke first, leading the conversation, still unaware he was speaking to his lost friend Jan Diederick:

'They were tough old birds, the Beaufighters.'

'Yes, very tough. And quiet, most of them. What were those engines called?'

'The quiet ones were the Hercules.'

'Yes, I remember now, they called them Whispering Death.'

'I used to fly them, back in the day. Nearly died in one, right here in East Fortune. September 1942 it was. Lost my best friend on that night flight.'

After a long silence, John Doyle replied:

'The Port Engine developed a rattle and the Starboard Engine began to overheat. Had to be shut down. My hand was aching with the cold. Lost my pinkie eventually.'

'My God Almighty! Is that you, Jan?'

In a lowered voice Jan said:

'Yes Nesto but don't tell my son, whatever you do. I go by the name of John Doyle, nowadays. I knew I shouldn't have come here. I still get the nightmares. Do you?'

'Yes. I can still see the ground rushing up to meet us. I was sure we would be burned alive. Lost my left foot in the crash. Tried to find you but gave up when the War Department said you were dead.'

'Yes, I know. Still clinging on but for how much longer, eh?'

'But why are you in hiding, Jan?'

'Look, Nesto, no one else knows this. I owe everything to my wife Jane. She nursed me night and day. Recovered me when the others thought I was a goner. I had to marry her.'

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She wanted me and I could not let her down, and anyway, by that time, Sarah was on the way.'

'But Jan, your wife was called Harriet, wasn't she?'

'Nesto, trust me, it worked out for Harriet too. She got a widow's pension then she remarried and moved to Canada. Look, I had to let her go. Anyway, she had been mucking about with other men for years, even before we were signed up.'

'You had two girls?'

'Yes, Sally and Geraldine. To be honest, I was never sure they were mine, not really.'

'The Canada guy, was he their father?'

'Not sure. But Jane, well, she wanted me, even though I was well crocked at the start. And it was a good arrangement for her because her husband was MIA. Lancaster bombers. He didn't make it. So, she wanted me in his place.'

'Yes, Jan, it was all muddled after the War. My Moira's fiancé was lost in a submarine, near Malta.'

'Look, Nesto, can we just leave it, please? And remember, I'm John now, not Jan, OK?'

'Right John, So, where are you living these days?'

'In a care home. Tom and Janice own it. Jane's family had a hotel which they converted. I've been there three years now, since Jane died. She was older than me. So, what about you Nesto?'

'I'm in a sheltered housing unit, just round the corner from my daughter Sarah and her husband Trevor. They're lecturers in Software Engineering. They have a private sideline writing Apps for phones, iPads and tablets. Minted. They keep an eye on me. They built me a private workshop in their garden where I build model aircraft and drones. Keeps me busy.'

'Nest, watch out, here they come, Tom and Janice.'

'Well, John, it's been nice talking to you.'

'Yes, Roy, see you on the other side, eh?'