

A String of Coincidences – Jake Newham

In September 1953 I completed my tour with 77 Korea, and found myself posted to 78 Wing Malta (76 Sqn, CO Bay Adams). In keeping with tradition I was given the job of squadron flying times clerk, and Mess Secretary, neither very onerous.

Soon thereafter, we were visited by SASO of Overseas HQ London, one GPCAPT Bruce Courtney. Late one evening Courtney was being entertained in the bar by Bay Adams and Bill Horsman, then CO75 Sqn.

How the conversation turned to risk of air collisions I do not know, but it attracted my attention as the tone became serious. Our guest took the view that the risk of collision in the thousand bomber raids was very much over-stated; typically Adams and Horsman took the other stand (in the interests of robust debate of course, nothing to do with the lateness of the hour).

Fast forward to January 1959. I was detailed to set up the staging arrangements at Labuan for 77 Squadron's Sabre ferry to Butterworth. We were ferried across in the base Dakota flown by AIRCDRE Keith Parsons CBE DSO DFC AFC, our base commander, a dab hand at flying having commanded 460 Sqn through a very tough period of its service with Bomber Command. That evening we had been invited to avoid the extortionate grog prices at the one motel at Labuan, by using FLTLT Mike Fleetwood's house and larder, all duty free, as Mike was on duty on the mainland that evening. Mike was RAF movements officer, and a very popular trader in items like Dimple Haig and Glenmorangie.

After dinner, the AIRDCRE and I settled down in Mike's lounge, each with a single malt, KP with his pipe. Some how Courtney's name arose and I mentioned the afore-mentioned discussion and in particular the strong stand taken by Courtney. Now Parsons was a very quiet and modest man, much admired for his intellect and integrity. He took out his pipe and said he'd been in such a collision, at 20,000 feet at night in cloud, over France whilst exiting a bombing raid. A dramatic story unfolded: another Lancaster crossed over his, right to left, wiped off his greenhouse and severed his port mainplane between the two engines. The aircraft spun, and KP graphically described his feelings as the forces of the spin prevented two of his crew as far as he could see, from reaching the escape hatch. He realised after a long period that he could do nothing but escape himself. He undid his Sutton harness and stepped out onto the fuselage, but found he could not kick free from his aircraft, due to the spin. Then something jolted him free and he realised he must get a chute pdq; it developed and in complete darkness he knew he was close to the ground because he could smell it. After landing he was helped by locals and in a short period was back at Binbrook. The collision had taken place after D Day when allied forces had taken most of France. Shortly after, he was promoted to Group Captain and made base

commander.

Forward again to early 1988: Ian Reece asked me to speak at a services dinner at Cromer Golf Club. After my talk, about ten ex-RAAF members came up to chat; I noticed that a well built chap, name Keith Collins, was sporting a caterpillar badge and facetiously asked him what the little worm was for. He grinned and said he'd been in the crew of a Lancaster that collided with another over France one very dark night and all but one of his crew survived and all but one of the other crew died. I was stunned; it could not be; nevertheless I blurted out "that would have been Keith Parsons?" Collins was equally surprised, "how did you know that ?" I answered that I was bloody air marshal, which got a few hoots. However, the string continues:

Later that year I spoke at a RAAF Association ceremony at Point Cook; afterwards we lunched in the mess and Keith Parsons emerged to say hallo. I told him about meeting Collins and he asked if I could get an address or phone number ... so he could make contact. Ian Reese fixed this.

A couple of months later KP phoned me to say he'd had a letter from UK Air Ministry asking about an apparent stowaway on his aircraft, because there was an unaccounted person in the wreckage of his Lancaster. He had replied saying he had no such knowledge and knowing his crew reckoned it very unlikely. Then, only a week later he phoned again to say the Air Ministry had told him the identity of the extra crewman had been established: it was the tail gunner of the other Lancaster.

So much for Edgar Bruce Courtney's assertion.