

Of Enemies And Friends

by: Ian Brodie

John Jeremy Caulton (1931-35)



(Currently Silverstream's only surviving foundation student from 1931)

John Caulton, retired and living in Havelock North, and Hans Joachim Jabs, also retired and living in Ludenscheid, West Germany, became the best of friends.

Theirs is a unique friendship forged from a desperate few seconds in the skies over Holland many years ago. It was April 1944 and Jabs (pronounced "Yarbs") - a Messerschmitt BF110 pilot with the German Luftwaffe - tried to kill Caulton in a one - on - one air battle. Caulton too had the same fate in mind for Jabs as he aimed his near new Mk IX Spitfire at the distant outline of the Bf110.

Their brief and violent meeting resulted in a friendship than spanned over 30 years and left the wartime circumstances that led to their deadly meeting as nothing more than memories.

John Caulton joined the RNZAF in 1941 and was posted to England to fly with the RAF - realising his dream to fly Spitfires, flying with 132 Squadron.

As he taxied out that day in 1944, for a mid afternoon sortie over Holland, little did he realise as a veteran of 200 operations, that this would be his last of the war. He and five other Spitfires were to attack

Luftwaffe fighters returning from combat with RAF bombers returning from Berlin. Over Holland at low-level he found he was flying directly towards a Messerschmitt Bf110. This aircraft was piloted by Jabs, a Luftwaffe 'ace' who was an exceptional pilot ending the war with at least 60 kills, and becoming a legend in his own country.

Jabs was drawn into combat as he was returning to his base at Arnhem. The two aircraft raced head-on towards each other in an explosive confrontation that was over in less than the time it takes to read this sentence. From about 500 metres out Jabs opened up with cannon and machine gun fire. Red hot shells were hammering into the Spitfire as Caulton began to return the 'greeting'.

He was disadvantaged though. The Spitfire was effective from about 250 metres. For just a few brief seconds the two aircraft lunged toward each other in an aerial showdown at an altitude no greater than the roof of a suburban house. Cannon shells exploded into Caulton's Spitfire, tearing open the leading edge of one wing and smashing holes into the radiator and oil tank. Shells also tore the bottom out of his 400 litre long range fuel tank.

As his companions hunted the Bf110, Caulton headed for home. He managed to keep the Spitfire in the air for 30 kilometres until its 12-cylinder Merlin engine seized. He braced for the shock of a wheels-up landing, in a farm paddock uncomfortably close to a small group of German troops.

The Spitfire hit hard, jolting Caulton and breaking loose on its own uncontrollable path across the paddock at 100 mph before hammering into a small earth bank. Caulton, suffering a gash to the head and a smashed right knee, was helped from the aircraft by a farm worker and met a group of German troops pointing a pistol at him.

While Caulton was taken away to a nearby hut his comrades were still battling Major Jabs. Although they managed to hit the 110 several times, Jabs managed to shoot another of the team down and all the other aircraft were sprayed with cannon fire. Finally, Caulton's CO, Geoffrey Page, shot Jabs down just as he was landing at Arnhem. Jabs managed to walk away from the crash landing. Finding themselves deep in enemy territory the Spitfires decided to return home.

Caulton, meanwhile, was feeling rather sorry for himself in the small hut when a group of well-dressed Luftwaffe officers arrived. The last thing going through his aching head was that he was about to meet a man who just a few hours earlier had tried to kill him, and a man who would one day become one of his best friends.

Caulton describes the meeting. "He walked in, in full uniform and saluted. I acknowledged and stood up". He put out his hand and asked: 'You were flying the Spitfire?' Caulton said he was the pilot and Major Jabs simply said "I was the other pilot".

Jabs asked when the invasion was going to take place, Caulton replying that Churchill hadn't told him yet. He also told the Luftwaffe officers they didn't have a show in the war and cheekily suggested they give up on the spot. "You can't possibly win" he told them.

Twenty-five years later, in a letter from Jabs to Caulton, Jabs said: "You were right" about how the war was going with Germany. Outside the hut the pair talked, and Caulton suggested that when hostilities were over they might even meet again.

Jabs took a piece of paper, and in large black lettering wrote on it "Major Jabs". He wrote that the bearer was to be allowed to "keep this souvenir of Major Jabs" and signed it.

Caulton was relaxed with the Luftwaffe officers who spoke quietly with him. Despite being on different sides, and despite the 'enemy' status each held towards the other, there was a common bond between them - the camaraderie of young men who respected each others roles and regarded each other as worthy opponents in the air.

Taken to a shed by the security police, Caulton was eventually transferred to a prison camp in Germany where he was to spend exactly a year in internment. He still had the note from Jabs but thought that would he would never see the gentlemanly Major again. Liberated, Caulton travelled to Paris for a few riotous days before returning to England, marrying his English bride Marie and eventually returning to New Zealand.

In the early 1960's John was reading a book about the Battle of Britain and noticed a section of the book was written by a Luftwaffe ace called Hans Joachim Jabs. Realising he was still alive, Caulton had the

opportunity to make contact with the man who ended his war, in 1968. He asked his daughter who was travelling in Germany to try and track him down. With the help of Caulton's brother-in-law (an officer with RAF security) and the German Embassy an address was located.

Jabs was renowned as an air ace but also as a successful industrialist. The embassy was at first reluctant to pass on the address to somebody who was on the receiving end of his wartime cannons but trust was established, and the link was made.

Caulton wrote and Jabs replied.

When the pair finally met in 1972 during a trip to Europe and Britain, Caulton remembers the event as amazing. He can't recall what was said but the friendship was genuine. "It turned out to be a liquid occasion". Old times were relived, memories rekindled, and the two men became firm friends.

In 1975 Caulton and his wife Marie returned to the paddock where he was shot down. The hut had gone but he met again the Dutch farm worker who rescued him from his Spitfire and the two enjoyed a remarkable reunion.

After their reunion in 1972, Caulton and Jabs met regularly.

They were friends from different sides of the world. Friends who met under the clouds of a war, in the colours of opponents. Two men who forged a unique friendship after one violent afternoon in the skies over Holland, over sixty years ago.

Hans Joachim Jabs passed away in 2003.