

## **BRIGHTON BELLES:**

On Friday 20<sup>th</sup> April seven aircraft from 'B' Flight were detailed for a cross-country exercise... and as some were later to conclude, intent on a little mischief, as F/O Bob Soutar RNZAF recounts:

*"It all happened on Friday 20 April when we were all at bit of a loose end. It was decided therefore that seven crews should be sent on a X-country exercise with a routing Fulbeck - Dartford - Brighton - Swindon and back to Fulbeck. Now Brighton just happened to be a P.D.C. for Australian and New Zealand aircrew who were all waiting for a boat home. So it was understandable, there being an Aussie and a Kiwi as captains of two of the aircraft that they wanted to visit some of their fellow countrymen. As I understand it, four of the aircraft did some low flying along the coast... and over the piers at Brighton. Unfortunately for them, the District Air Provost Marshal was on the sea front and began to take some interest in the happenings, and began to write down some letters. At the same time, the fifth aircraft, that of Jack Littley 'O' and crew, began dropping toilet rolls out of the flare chute along Brighton prom... some landed near the DAPM! . All five then departed in the direction of Swindon. When my crew arrived over Brighton there were no other aircraft to be seen, but F/Lt Wright arrived soon afterwards. I did a circuit of Brighton and then also departed for Swindon accompanied by F/Lt Wright."*

(Author: 49 Squadron crews obviously thought that the Aussies and Kiwis would not be supplied with enough toilet paper for their long sea journey home, and were merely trying to relieve the situation)

This episode was to have far-reaching repercussions later in June 1945.

As a result of the 'alleged' low flying over Brighton 5 Group order a Courts-Martial to take place at RAF Syerston at 10.00hrs on Tuesday 5th June.

The first witness was Mr Charles Kingsley Brown of Montpelier Villas, Brighton; after being duly sworn he gave his evidence:

*"I am a gardener by occupation, and am a member of the Civil Defence Observer Corps. At 15.25hrs on the 20th April, 1945, I was on duty at No.3 Observation Post, Fairways, Dyke Road, Brighton and was stationed on top of a block of flats four storeys high. This post is about 1 1/2 miles inland from the sea. I have been a civil observer for over two years, and have considerable experience in identifying aircraft. At 15.25hrs I observed two Lancasters flying from north to south. At 15.28hrs two more Lancasters came in the vicinity, also flying north to south. All four were flying at a height of approximately 1,000ft. All four circled the town several times gradually getting lower. Except when they disappeared from my view near the sea front all four were continually under my observation. One after the other they circled my observation post at a distance of about 500yds from me; each flew down to a height of about 300ft above sea level. I was able to take their numbers and entered their numbers in my log. Each had a roundel between the first two numbers and the last one. The numbers of the four Lancasters were EA-P, EA-R, EA-U and EA-Z, I have no doubt whatsoever about these numbers. I checked on each one of them several times with the exception of EA-Z which I saw only once. When they left the vicinity of my post they disappeared towards the sea front. I estimated their height of 300ft because they passed the vicinity of the chimney on the Dust Destructor which I know to be 225ft. As regards the weather at the time; the sky was mainly clear and the visibility was good."*

When cross examined, Mr Kingsley confirmed that he had not observed any other Lancasters between 15.00hrs and 16.00hrs. F/O Bob Soutar RNZAF (pilot of EA-Z) recalls the outcome of the above charges:

*"It was after we had moved to Syerston that with the backing of Group, the Courts Martial were set up. Five of us were put under arrest and confined to camp! These included F/O's Robson, Westwood, Weston, Smith and myself, as all our aircraft letters had been noted - four had been noted by the DAPM and mine by the Observer Corps. Jack Littlely's letter 'O' was not noted by the DAPM but as I understand it, he admitted being there but not to low flying!*

(Note it was his aircraft that was alleged to have dropped the toilet rolls).

He was dealt with at Group HQ by being given a reprimand.

There were several Courts Martial as the RAAF and RNZAF accused had to have some representative of that Air Force on the Board. F/O Robson, F/O Westwood, F/O Weston RNZAF and F/O Smith RAAF were all found guilty of the charge and if my memory is correct, they lost three months seniority.

*"That didn't worry them as they were soon going out! In my case, with only the Observer Corps gentlemen getting my letter and coupling it with the others - when I wasn't even there; his evidence was torn to shreds by the defending officer. I had worked out that my aircraft would have had to fly at 203 knots to get there at 15.28hrs and 214 knots by 15.25hrs - no way could a Lancaster do that, especially as I was flying on 3 engines most of the way, as part of my own training!!... therefore I was found NOT GUILTY."*

On the date of the incident, F/Lt Jack Winter was acting as 'B' Flight Commander and it was he , who had authorised the training X-country. When Jack gave his evidence, he stated that the Authorisation Book had been destroyed. It was said that this happened when F/O Elkington crashed on the main site at Fulbeck... no one will ever say!

As Bob Soutar reflects:

*"With our incident, the Elkington accident and Dave Hytch coming to a sudden halt in The Wash, I don't think our 49 Squadron was very popular with Group HQ. I don't know what W/Commander Botting's thoughts were about all this, but I don't think he ever got a gong!"*