

And now for something completely different...

I'd like to tell you a story – it's not really *Kettle* related, but it does relate to a certain individual who is known by all who populate *planet Kettle*. That person is of course *Barry Sheene*. This year marks the twentieth anniversary of Sheene's death and I thought that it would be nice to remember him, but perhaps not quite in a way that you might expect.

Barry died 10th March 2003 aged just 52. Whilst whiling away some time delving into Barry's life and achievements, I stumbled across a remarkable story, verified by none other than the *German Gestapo!* Yes - I thought that might get your attention... allow me to elaborate.

In 1984 Barry fronted an ITV show called 'Just Amazing' – a light entertainment production in which Barry hosted and interviewed people who had achieved feats of daring, by accident or design.

One such individual was a chap called Nicholas Alkemade, who had jumped from a burning Lancaster Bomber at 18,000 feet and lived to tell the tale. "Well?" you might say, after all, lots of people have parachuted from airplanes and survived. True. But in the case of Nicholas, he did so on that fateful night... *sans* parachute!



One of 7 crew members; Flt Sgt Alkemade (115 Sqn RAF) was one of those brave unfortunates that manned the most vulnerable, but vital positions on any bomber; that of 'Tail-end Charley' – a tail gunner. As a tail gunner on this aircraft, his parachute had to remain within the main fuselage because there simply wasn't enough room for it within his Canadian built FN 21 turret, whilst sight of his target. Little did he or his crew know that they were being stalked by Heinz Rocker, who would become Germany's 8th most successful night fighter pilot (64 RAF bombers by the war's end). Rocker had cunningly

positioned his aircraft under the Lanc's port wing and at the right moment, unleashed the full force of his *Schrage Musik* heavy calibre cannon, totally shredding the port inner engine which disintegrated along with most of the wing, covering the stricken bomber in burning fuel and oil.

In shock and upon hearing his Skipper's order to 'bail out', Nicholas instinctively operated the hand crank to align his turret with the fuselage so that he could open his hatch, retrieve his chute and jump from the rear crew entrance door. But as the hatch swung inward, it was like opening the door to a blast furnace and suddenly he was faced with 2 distressing options – burn to death or stay with the stricken aircraft until impact. He quickly reclosed the hatch and had almost resigned himself to the latter, when he noticed that the night fighter's cannon had also removed a large portion of his turret; just large enough for him to squeeze through. His fate otherwise sealed, he decided on his course of action, turned his back to the hole and tumbled out into the inky black void.

Nicholas described to an awe struck audience, how in a fraction of a moment, he went from utter chaos to a state of total calm and peace - falling from 18,000ft to the earth in 90 seconds, reaching speeds of 120mph – incidentally slower than Sheene's high speed crash at Daytona. But where Sheene was catapulted along the unforgiving tarmac, breaking his pelvis, wrist, collar bone and shattering both legs; Nicholas's rate of descent was arrested nearer to the ground by the branches of some fir trees, sited on the slope of a soft, snow covered embankment. Miraculously, he suffered nothing more than a sprained ankle.

Thereafter, Nicholas was captured by the enemy and interrogated by the Gestapo, who refused to believe his story and were about to execute him as a spy, when news arrived to confirm that the metal pull rings of a rear gunner's parachute had been recovered from the wreckage of the Lancaster, which had crashed some 20 miles away. Amazingly, upon receiving proof of this remarkable feat, the Germans gave him a certificate to verify his story and placed him into a POW camp, where he remained for 14 months until the end of hostilities.

That happened in 1943. 2023 also marks the 80th anniversary of this incredible story. Sadly, Nicholas like Sheene, is no longer with us having passed away in 1987 aged 64.

So let us take a moment to remember these 2 legends who met each other back in 1984.

In honour of - **Barry Sheene 1950 -2003 and Nicholas Alkemade 1922-1987**

Stupot Collins