

Enemies in the sky . . .

. . . but friends on the ground

By Roger Moroney
Staff reporter

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

Their is a unique friendship forged from a desperate few seconds in the skies over Holland nearly 45 years ago.

It was April 1944, and Jabs (pronounced "Yarbs") — a Messerschmitt 119 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 Spitfire Mark 9 fighter at the distant outline of the approaching ME110.

Their brief and violent meeting in the dull, lazy sky over Holland resulted in a friendship that now spans two decades, and has left the wartime circumstances that led to their deadly meeting as nothing more than memories.

Memories often recalled as the two old friends meet every three or four years.

Their conversations inevitably return to the days that set up their rendezvous over farmland near Arnhem when as young men they piloted aircraft built to destroy.

John Caulton, known to many Hastings people

as the man who owned and operated Rush Munro's ice cream parlour for 38 years, was born and grew up in Hastings and, like many young men, looked to serve in Europe as the war escalated.

At 21 he joined the RNZAF and in 1941 was being trained to fly for combat in Europe.

Unlike many Kiwi pilots, Caulton set his sights on a "mixed" squadron.



He was posted to 132 Squadron and realised a dream, he would be flying Spitfires.

His squadron was made up of Australians, Poles, Canadians and Norwegians, along with New Zealanders.

"We even had a Siamese prince," he remembers.

It was a fast way to live.

When the weather was good and there was action erupting all over he would fly several ops a day. He was always conscious that around him people were losing their lives and the enemy "out there" would take his without a second thought.

He didn't think about death too often. There was danger, yes, but for young men in their 20s this was the greatest adventure of their lives.



ITS back broken, Caulton's Spitfire lies forlornly in a Dutch farm paddock. The man who shot him down, Major Jabs, is in the cockpit while other Luftwaffe officers go souvenir hunting.

"You were young and it was a completely different world," he says.

"You thought about copping it sometimes but you thought it was something that would happen to the other guy."

Before he taxied out on Saturday, April 29, 1944, for a mid-afternoon sortie over Holland, he had encountered a few scrapes and "came close" a few times as he clocked up 200 operations.

He figured what within hours would turn out to be his last sortie for the war would be a fairly standard one.

He and five other Spitfires were to beat up stragglers returning to their bases after a huge allied bombing raid on Berlin.

Fighters which had scrambled to meet the allied attack would be scattered, their formations broken, and just the target for six Spitfires on the prowl.

And they found their straggler, but it was no ordinary straggler.

Luftwaffe pilot Hans Joachim Jabs was regarded by his countrymen as an air ace. He was an exceptional pilot who would go on to be credited with a least 60 "kills", and a legend in his country.

On hindsight, Caulton simply reckons, "I picked out the wrong man."

His CO, Squadron Leader Geoffrey Page, led the six well-spread fighters into Holland at an impossibly low altitude, hedge height or "zero" feet as Caulton put it, to avoid the German radar network.

Fields and scrublands disappeared under the aircraft as they howled across the lowlands in excess of 580 km/h.

Jabs, returning to his Arnhem base was drawn into combat with the approaching Spitfires simply because he was returning in their flight-line.

And it was Caulton's Spitfire he narrowed his vision toward. The two were racing head-on to-



ward each other and, in hindsight, Caulton reckons he should have banked away for a better approach.

But it has to be remembered that there was an explosive confrontation that was over in less than the time that 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 with its twin cannon and .303 machine guns from about 250 metres.

For just a brief few seconds the two aircraft lunged toward each other in an aerial showdown at an altitude no greater than the roof height of an average suburban home.

Jabs confirmed his skill for the kill.

Cannon shells exploded into Caulton's Spitfire, tearing open the leading edge of one wing and smashing holes in the radiator and oil tank.

Shells also blew the bottom out of his specially-fitted 400 litre long-range fuel tank.

He saw the fuel vapour gushing out behind him and realised there was oil and coolant smearing itself along the Spitfire's sides.

As his companions went hunting the ME110, Caulton turned for home.

He recalls clearly the last message he received from his CO.

"I'm sorry old man," Squadron Leader Page told him in his clipped RAF accent after Caulton had given a course for home, his aircraft dying,



FLYING OFFICER John Caulton as a member of 132 Squadron in Britain.

"I can't help you. Start walking."

Caulton kept the Spitfire in the air for just over 30 km until its 12-cylinder Merlin engine seized after pumping its oil out.

He braced for 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 160

km/h before hammering into a small earth bank.

The force snapped a seat restraint wire — built to withstand a seven-tonne force — and the body of the aircraft's just a metre behind Caulton's seat.



MAJOR Hans Joachim Jabs, an air ace with the German Luftwaffe who would go on to become a legend in his country.

It was the last time he would sit in a Spitfire's cramped cockpit for at least 15 months and perhaps if he'd realised that he would have been more dependent over his fate.

"The Spitfire was a lovely aircraft to fly. It had no real vices," he recalls.

"Someone once compared the Spitfire to a lady. Treat her gently, treat her right and she'll look after you."

However, on April 29, 1944, Caulton's gentle companion lay dead in a Dutch field and he was faced with more than just a gash to his head where he jolted forward into the gunsight and a smashed right knee (which still bears the scars), to worry about.

His crash alerted the nearby troops and a machine-gun toting German approached Caulton, who had been helped by a farm worker from the aircraft.

Caulton's reaction? "I was bloody annoyed he was pointing a gun at me."

"He knew I couldn't go anywhere with my leg like it was. I told him where to go!"

While Caulton was taken away by troops to a nearby hut the rest of his wing companions were also getting into strife.

They'd chased the ME110 and managed to hit it several times. However, as they chased it

further into Luftwaffe aerodrome air spaces they found themselves peppered by ground fire.

One Spitfire went down in a ball of flames, the pilot killed, and all the other aircraft were sprayed with shrapnel, one losing its canopy, another



other pieces of wing and Squadron Leader Page received a piece of shrapnel in the neck for his trouble.

The four surviving Spitfires would make it home to England though, leaving Caulton, in German hands, back in Holland.

"Everyone copped it that day," he remembers. A couple of hours after being shot down and taken to the hut, Caulton, feeling somewhat sorry for himself, watched as a group of well-dressed Luftwaffe officers arrived.

The last thing going through his aching head at that stage 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.

Continued on Tuesday — How a unique friendship was forged.

As enemies they met under the clouds of war

John Caulton, sitting in the midst of several German troops and accepting the notion that for him the war had ended, came face to face with a smartly attired Luftwaffe Major, and his two aircrew from an ME110.

He recalls how well-dressed the three were, thinking to himself at the time how shabby he must have looked to them.

He remembers the meeting vividly.

"He walked in, in full uniform and saluted. I acknowledged (the salute) 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."

As he gathered his thoughts Jabs spoke again.

"When is the invasion going to take place?" he asked. (Their meeting took place two months before the D-Day landings and the Germans knew there was something in the air.)

"Churchill hasn't actually told me I'm afraid," Caulton replied with a wry smile.

Jabs apologised for asking such a question and didn't raise the matter again.

Caulton 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 for 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 still has the crinkled, somewhat faded souvenir today.

Meanwhile, German troops and other Luftwaffe officers scoured the crumpled



45 years on they're still mates

Spitfire for their own souvenirs of the British fighter aircraft that even they held in great awe.

The aircraft was later destroyed.

Caulton was relaxed with the Luftwaffe officers who spoke quietly with him.

Despite being on different sides, and despite the "enemy" status each held toward the other, there was a common bond between them — the camaraderie of young men who respected each other's roles and regarded each other as worthy opponents in the air.

However, Caulton wasn't thrilled at the sight of the field security officers who arrived to take him away from the relative security of Major Jabs and his crew.

"They were the typical Hollywood image of German soldiers . . . cruel looking types who hardly ever spoke."

He was transported across Europe back to Germany at a time when heavy allied bomber raids

Food was basic . . . thin gruel stew from a pot heavy with the unwashed layers of previous meals. German bread, with imitation jam, was also provided. Asked today how it tasted, a look that mingles disgust and amusement crosses Caulton's face.

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Free, Caulton travelled to Paris, for a riotous celebratory few days, before returning to Croydon, England, where he married his English bride Marie.

Apart from some brief post-war stints in Spitfires and Tempests, the war — the great adventure where John Caulton made and lost friends — was over.

But he still had a friend to make, a friend who, on the other side of the world, wondered about the New Zealand flyer he shot down.

In the early 1960s Caulton picked up and read a book about the famous Battle of Britain.

Among the excerpts of stories was a piece writ-

ten by a Luftwaffe air ace called Hans Joachim Jabs.

"I realised then he was still alive . . . it was a strange feeling," Caulton said.

The opportunity to make contact with the man who ended his war came in 1968, when his daughter Jill went for a holiday to Europe after

from Caulton, and told him of his own fate during the last days of the war.

In his faltering English Jabs said: "The year of 1945 was naturally full of very, very hard fights which I passed safe and sound."

He was, however, made a prisoner of war himself, along with his fellow pilots and crew in the

Staff reporter Roger Moroney continues the story of a unique friendship forged from an enemy encounter.

were being unleashed on the country.

The attrition rate for United States Air Force bombers carrying out raids was about 20 to 30 aircraft at a time, and he came across many American airmen, also prisoners and on their way to POW camps.

"At that time they were coming down like confetti," he recalls.

Other images of being inside enemy lines and in an increasingly devastated landscape, come back to Caulton.

He remembers being herded into a rail boxcar which had a sign hung from its side.

It read: "Six horses or 40 men".

He spent 3½ months in a POW hospital, just inside what is now East Germany, as he recovered from knee injuries received when he crashed the Spitfire.

His internment lasted exactly a year give or take two hours.

"I was shot down at 3pm on April 29 and we were free at 1pm, April 29 a year later," he says.

He and 80,000 other prisoners at Mooseburg camp, near Munich, knew weeks before they were released that Patton's army was closing in.

The Germans knew it too and began leaving the camp to defend against the approaching allied forces.

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completing nursing training in New Zealand.

It was a long shot.

Finding a man with a fairly common name in the heavily populated country of Germany was a tall order . . . more so considering Jill had a limited time of stay in West Germany.

However, Caulton's brother-in-law, an officer with the RAF Security in London, came to the rescue.

He made inquiries to his counterpart at the West German Embassy and yes, they know of Hans Joachim Jabs.

Many people know of Jabs. He was an air ace of reknown, but also a successful industrialist having built up a firm specialising in farm equipment.

The West German Embassy was at first reluctant to pass on details of Jabs's whereabouts . . . especially to a man on the receiving end of his wartime ME110's cannons.

However, intentions were honestly established and the link was finally made.

Caulton wrote and Jabs replied.

In his first letter he expressed delight at hearing

Luftwaffe night squadron, and was released late 1945.

When the pair finally met in 1972 during a trip to Europe and Britain, Caulton remembers saying simply that the event was "amazing".

He can't recall what was said but the friendship was genuine.

"It turned out to be a liquid occasion," Caulton fondly remembers.

Old times were relived, memories rekindled, and the two men became firm friends.

In 1975 Caulton and his wife Morris made a second trip to Europe, this time visiting the area where as a 24 year old about 31 years earlier, he crashed his Spitfire into the farm paddocks of rural Arnhem in Holland.

He recognised the area, although the hut he was taken to had disappeared.

And he met up with another face from the past.

The Dutch farm worker who helped him from the wrecked aircraft still lived there, and the two enjoyed a remarkable reunion.

Since that first meeting in 1972, both Caulton and Jabs have met regularly — the last visit was by Caulton to Europe last year.

Sadly, plans for Jabs to travel to New Zealand for the first time may have been scuttled by the tragic death of one of his sons, who had been running Jabs' Laster manufacturing firm since his retirement.

Jabs may have to turn his back on a welcome retirement to run the firm.

Apart from memories, the two have exchanged memorabilia from their wartime pasts, and the deep respect they formed for each other, as pilots and gentlemen back in



ABOVE: Two good friends, in West Germany last year, Caulton (left) and Hans Joachim Jabs press their thumbs together. "That's the way we operated our guns back then," Caulton says.

ABOVE LEFT: Major Jabs (left) talks to the bandaged John Caulton about their air fight. The two members of Jabs' ME110 crew look on.

LEFT: The Luftwaffe ME110 crew ponder the words of John Caulton. The German soldier looking at Jabs was a ground troop and lacked the "gentlemanly" attitude of the Luftwaffe officers, according to Caulton.



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1944 has grown steadily stronger.

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