

The Shepherd

From *The Shepherd* by Frederick Forsyth 1976 and *Vintage Wings of Canada*¹

Introduction

An incident occurred on Friday, November 7th 2008 that was uncannily similar to Frederick Forsyth's novel, *The Shepherd*². Temporarily blinded by a mild stroke, the pilot of a light aircraft was rescued by an RAF pilot who flew alongside the light aircraft and 'talked down' or shepherded its pilot to a safe landing at RAF Linton-on-Ouse in North Yorkshire. In Mr Forsyth's novel, another airborne 'shepherd' rescues a pilot in distress.

Christmas Leave

It is Christmas Eve 1957 and a moonlit night. A 20-year-old RAF Flying Officer takes off in his Vampire jet fighter from RAF Celle in North Germany. His destination is RAF Lakenheath in Suffolk. He's on his way home for Christmas leave and all goes well – for a while.

Lost

10 minutes over the North Sea, the Vampire suffers a main fuse blowout. Its radio and compass are dead, so the pilot can't raise Lakenheath for a heading as he'd intended. The auxiliary compass isn't working either, probably accidentally jarred. The pilot heads for the Norfolk coast, thinking he can find an RAF base where they'll switch on the landing lights when they hear the sound of his approaching aircraft. Then another problem arises - fog.

Fog

The fog blots out the landscape. His fuel will run out so the pilot follows standard procedure: *those people down there [don't] pay for us to drop a screaming monster of ten tons of steel on top of them on Christmas Eve... You turn your aircraft out to sea.* He does.

Prayer

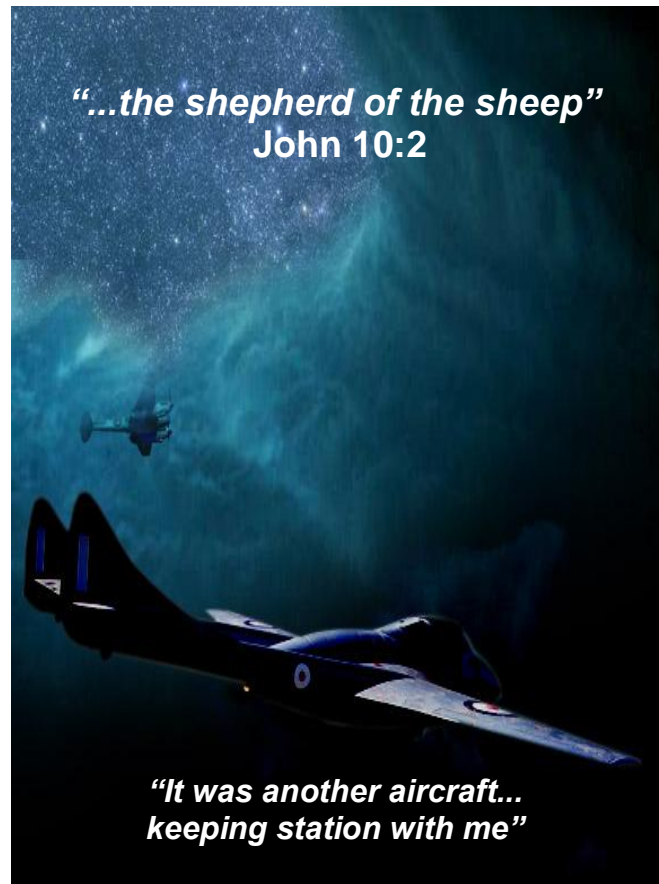
By now, this lad is desperate enough to pray. But he thinks, *I, who now had need of Him, had taken no notice of Him for so long He'd probably forgotten all about me.* But had He?

Triangles

The pilot flies in slow triangles, to alert a radar operator to send out a guide aircraft, or shepherd. But no-one comes. With less than 10 minutes of fuel left, the pilot is resigned to his fate. Even if he survives the bail-out he will die of exposure in the North Sea. Then he sees a black shadow silhouetted by the moonlight pass across the cloud layer and recognizes it. *It was another aircraft, low against the fog bank, keeping station with me.*

Found

The Vampire pilot closes up on the other aircraft - and is taken aback. *To my surprise, my shepherd was a De Havilland Mosquito, a fighter-bomber of Second World War vintage.* It has the letters JK painted on its nose. The Vampire pilot decides that the Mosquito must be a weather aircraft from RAF Gloucester, diverted to bring him in using GCA, Ground Controlled Approach, because only RAF Gloucester still has Mosquitoes in service. The pilots communicate by hand signals so the Vampire pilot raises five splayed fingers and



then draws his forefinger across his throat – meaning five minutes' flying time. The Mosquito pilot acknowledges and takes the Vampire down through the fog. He signals *Please lower your undercarriage* and then *Fly on and land*. With the last of his fuel, the Vampire pilot descends below the fog bank and sees twin rows of landing lights. He touches down safely. The Mosquito hurtles past, the pilot waves and then he's gone.

Safe

A middle-aged station officer in a vintage staff car collects the Vampire pilot and tells him he switched the landing lights on when he heard the Vampire's engine. He says, *"We don't have GCA...[We're] a storage depot."* Because it's Christmas Eve, the only other person at the base is Joe, the elderly mess steward. The staff officer summons Joe, who arranges a room with a fire for the pilot, a change of clothes, a bath and a meal. The pilot phones the nearest RAF base with GCA to tell them he's landed. But the duty officer says they can't have guided the Mosquito because they've been shut down for Christmas since 5 p.m. Only bigger stations, like Marham or Lakenheath will still be operational and they are too far away to have provided the GCA for the Mosquito. The Vampire pilot then phones RAF Gloucester but they know nothing about him either and they don't fly Mosquitoes any more. They replaced them with jet-engined Canberras, three months before.

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The pilot notices a photo of a WW2 Mosquito and its pilot on the mantel-piece of his room. The pilot is in his early twenties and the Mosquito has JK painted on the nose. Joe says *"That's a photo of Mr John Kavanagh, sir. He was here during the war. An Irish gentleman. This was his room...I was his batman."* Joe explains that the storage depot was a base for a Mosquito Pathfinder Squadron during the war. He says that after a raid over Germany *"[Mr Johnny] would have his Mosquito refuelled and take off again alone, going back over the Channel or the North Sea to...find some crippled bomber making for the coast and guide it home...sometimes they had their radios knocked out."*

The Vampire pilot thinks he has the explanation. Kavanagh made pots of money after the war, bought a Mosquito from an RAF auction and refurbished it like his old aircraft. The pilot reasons, *[Johnny Kavanagh]'d been flying back from some trip to Europe, had spotted me turning in triangles...and taken me in tow. Pinpointing his position precisely by crossed radio beacons, knowing this stretch of coast by heart, he'd taken a chance on finding his old airfield...even in thick fog. It was a [huge] risk. But then I had no fuel left, anyway, so it was that or bust.* The pilot intends to trace Kavanagh via the Royal Aero Club, to thank him.

Joe adds *"I remember [Mr Johnny] saying to me once, standing right where you are [sir], before the fire: 'Joe,' he said, 'whenever there's one of them out there in the night, trying to get back, I'll go out and bring him home.'"*

The Vampire pilot says *"Well, by the look of it, he's still doing it."*

Joe says with a smile *"Oh, I hardly think so, sir. Mr Johnny went out on his last patrol Christmas Eve nineteen-forty-three, fourteen years ago tonight. He never came back, sir. He went down with his [Mosquito] somewhere out there in the North Sea. Good night, sir. And Happy Christmas."*

Our Shepherd

We should never forget that 2,000 years ago, another Shepherd came on the scene. Like Mr Johnny, He died but like the shepherd in the story, He is still out there, bringing home the lost sheep.

"I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep" John 10:11. That is what Christmas is about.

References

- ¹ www.vintagewings.ca/en-ca/vintagenews.aspx Aviation Culture
- ² news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/north_yorkshire/7715345.stm