



Mr. Jack Meek

For this week's episode, we first go back around 45 years, to when Dave was a teenager, and we then jump back another 20 years or so, to the night skies over Germany ...

I was 15, and in grade 10, when I latched onto music as an all-consuming interest. It began for me by being placed into the band class at school, but my desire to spend as much time playing flute as possible sent me 'extra-curricular' and I joined a local community band, and then, once my abilities had developed a bit further, the Youth Orchestra in nearby Vancouver.

But that wasn't enough for me. Some other similarly inclined members of the orchestra and I formed a chamber ensemble (a woodwind quintet) and met each week to rehearse and develop our skills. You might think that perhaps this was now 'enough' but no, when the offer came to meet together with some local amateur recorder players who met once a week for an evening of chamber music I jumped at this too, and became a regular member of the group.

This was at first a bit awkward for me. These people were all adults with other jobs, and treated music as a pleasant pastime. They had no intention at all of performing in public, and the meetings were not 'rehearsals', but simply chances to socialize - a bit of wine and cheese, some conversation with friends, and a bit of music too. I was not 'social' at all, and mostly wished they wouldn't talk quite so much; I wanted to *play*!

But it was good for me in the sense of helping me learn to socialize, although one thing that I now find curious is the question of the wine. I was still under-age, and not technically permitted to drink alcohol, but I don't remember any problem with this. I think that they behaved in a sensible way with it, serving me a small glass together with everybody else, but (I presume) watching to make sure that I didn't make a fool of myself with it.

The music we played was almost all from the renaissance period. I myself had only a student level plastic recorder, but Jack Meek, the leader of the group, had a nice collection of them, and let me use whichever one was required to round out the ensemble for any particular piece of music.

Jack also supplied most of the sheet music, and it was a rare week when he didn't pull out something new to place on our music stands, usually something he had obtained from some obscure European publisher. He was a man somewhat older than my own parents, and was quite the 'gentleman' type - soft-spoken and always very polite. I don't remember clearly now after all these years, but I have the impression that he worked in architecture, or perhaps engineering.

Once I left high-school and went off to university, there was no longer time for me to keep attending these meetings, so I lost contact with Jack and the other members. But a short time ago, prompted by looking through my 'idea file' for A Story A Week, I Googled Jack, curious to learn what he might be doing these days.

I learned that he had passed away a few years back, and I also learned that there were many things that he had not talked about during those evenings of music and wine. It turns out that Jack had been bomber air-crew during WWII, working as navigator on numerous missions over Germany.

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As anybody who had read about those events knows, there was an astonishingly high attrition rate for those planes and their crew. As they flew off on their missions night after night, they knew that a number of them would not be returning to their base.

And that's exactly what happened one January night in 1943, when 32 of the Lancasters were lost in a single evening. Jack's plane was heavily shot up, and he himself was injured by *"shrapnel which went clean through his middle, entering at the right side of his back and emerging at the left front, just below his chest, missing his heart by inches."* But he managed to navigate the damaged craft back to England, where it made a belly-flop landing, as the landing gear had been destroyed.

As soon as he had recovered adequately, he was back in the air again, and completed his tour of duty.

I cannot imagine what it must be like to be in such an incredible situation, surrounded by such death and violence on a daily basis. And then when it was all over, to return to one's normal life, to meet with friends, drink wine and play music ...

And to never speak of what you had seen and done.

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