



John Laming

A Messerschmitt and a Blackbird on a Tree.

My Uncle Alf died at the age of 102. He was a lovely old boy, who taught me the pleasures of watching and playing cricket. He lived in an age where there was no jeering at the batsman by the opposing team, no brain smashing bouncers, no swearing on the field. On his village green, cricket was a game of pure sportsmanship. A well-played cover drive was applauded by the bowler, albeit with a rueful grin. Fielders did not clap every time the bowler bowled. Not like now, where winning is everything and dirty play is applauded by the yobos in Bay 13.

Alf had been a British sniper at the Battle of Beersheeba in the First World War. He was only 18 when he got shot up by his Turkish counterpart. Alf had crawled into no man's land to try and rescue a comrade who lay helpless and badly injured in a minefield. They almost made it back to friendly lines when a burst of machine gun fire tore through Alf's legs. In great pain, Alf still managed to drag himself and the other injured soldier into the relative safety of the British trenches, but it was the end to the war for them both.

Between the wars, Alf built houses in the Seven Oaks area of Kent. He worked largely alone, his left leg held together with a metal brace. At weekends, he was opening bat for the local Cranbrook village cricket team and I was his 7-year-old runner. His batting style was beautiful to watch, despite occasionally falling head over heels as he went to hook to leg. When this happened, Alf would scorn any help, as he heaving his metal braced leg into place, he would lever himself up from the pitch. Taking guard, he would ask for middle and leg from the umpire and invariably scorch the next loose ball through the covers for four runs.

Despite this injury, which caused him considerable problems in the cold English winters, my Uncle became one of England's Dad's Army, officially known as the Home Guard. Armed with shotguns, Lee- Enfield 1918 rifles and pitchforks, the Home Guard was the last resort against the threatened Nazi invasion of England in 1940.



My mother had died in 1939 and my father decided to pack me off to America to escape the increasing danger of war in Europe. This plan was shelved when the BBC announced that a German U-boat had torpedoed the Athenian, a passenger liner enroute to America with several hundred young children aboard. Many were drowned and my father decided it would be safer for me to stay in England. Whilst he joined the British Army to fight in France, I was sent to stay with Uncle Alf and his wife Annie.

We lived in a picturesque village called Cranbrook, in the county of Kent. Cranbrook was one hour's bus drive from the invasion coastline and twenty minutes flight time in a Heinkel bomber from German occupied France. Whether living in Cranbrook was better for one's health than on a ship sailing across the Atlantic to America was now academic. I was to live in Kent for the next 5 years of the war.



As a 7-year-old, I attended the local village school, played cricket with Uncle Alf and fell in love with a pretty girl in my class called Angela. That romance was short-lived however, blamed by my heart throb on my madness for aeroplanes. Because instead of walking her home from school across the beautiful flower covered fields, I would disappear up to the crest of nearby Bluebell Hill, there to meet dear old Uncle Alf. Together Uncle and I would spend the summer evenings scanning all around us with powerful binoculars.

We weren't looking for summer swallows, nor Blue Tits, or even Great Emperor butterflies. We were after infinitely more dangerous flying things. These had big crosses on their wings, a swastika on their tails and had funny sounding names like Messerschmitt, Junkers, Dornier and Heinkel! I held the position of a junior unpaid volunteer member of the Royal Observer Corps.

The Observer Corps were the equivalent I suppose, of Australia's Coastwatchers, albeit a much less dangerous job. On hilly vantage points all over England, members of the Observer Corps (usually middle age or retired elderly people) would operate from small sandbagged emplacements, equipped with binoculars, thermos and sandwiches, tots of rum, .303 calibre rifles, shotguns and in my case a home-made catapult.



Communications was a telephone link to the nearest Royal Air Force Sector Headquarters. An aircraft sighting would result in identification-estimated course and altitude being telephoned to Sector, who in turn would add this information to the Big Picture. Early warning radar stations

on the East Coast of England were favourite targets of German fighter-bombers and as a gap in the chain could allow enemy aircraft to cross the coast unseen, the Observer Corps provided vital back up.

1940 was Battle of Britain time and when not at school I would be on Bluebell Hill watching the dog fights between the Spitfires and Hurricanes of the Royal Air Force and the Messerschmitt, Heinkels and Dorniers of the German Luftwaffe. Often there were only fleeting glances of aircraft, although above the clouds the sounds of machine gun and cannon fire could be heard daily. I became expert on differentiating the engine sounds of RAF fighters with their Rolls Royce Merlins and the Daimler Benz of the Messerschmitts, even though the aircraft were in cloud.

Aircraft spinning, trailing smoke and on fire, the high pitched sound of an unfortunate aircraft in a terminal dive, the occasional white silk parachute. These were almost daily events in the skies above our house in Angley Woods. I was enthralled but never frightened, perhaps because I had not seen death at first hand, only huge holes in the fields of flowers where a bomb had exploded, or the smashed wreckage of a once beautiful aeroplane after the ambulance had departed with what remained of the crew.

My Aunt Annie was a formidable old biddy who would have frightened the hell out of any shot down German airmen. When not cooking for Alf and other members of the Bluebell Hill Observer Corps, she furiously boiled up great blackened saucepans of hot jam. This was to throw into the face of an enemy invader, so she said.



I have loathed jam on my bread ever since....because I was forced to eat gallons of the stuff after the German invasion of England was cancelled when the RAF won the Battle of Britain. Our garden was a holding pattern for European wasps, seeking to enter the house in order to knock off strawberry jam. If the Nazi hordes had invaded our corner of England, not only would they have faced the awesome spectacle of an angry old woman hurling hot jam in their faces, but they would surely have been put to full retreat by a million bloody wasps!

It would now be obvious that members of the Observer Corps had to be skilled at aircraft recognition. We attended the local Ritz cinema twice a week to watch images of German aircraft flashed on the screen. Advanced recognition required that just the tail section or frontal profile be identified from various angles. We were given sets of aircraft recognition cards to study. The front of the cards were normal spades and diamonds. By my 8th birthday in 1940, I could pick the difference between a Dornier 17, a Dornier 217 and an Avro Manchester in a one second glance at the screen. A Spitfire and Messerschmitt 109 head on profile was more tricky, unless you spotted the bracing struts under the tailplane of the 109.

THE RAM

THE MAGAZINE BY & FOR SERVING
& EX-RAAF PEOPLE & OTHERS



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Free issues of the magazine "Aeroplane Spotter" were available, or you could buy it at the newsagents for three pence. My Uncle paid a shilling a week for the Aeroplane Spotter and two comics to be delivered at home. One comic, called "Champion", contained wonderful stories of the fictional character of Flight Lieutenant Rockfist Rogan, R.A.F.



Alarm bells clanged and Germans raced across the airfield to cut off the British raiders. Then, as one of the Nazi sentries came close to him, Rockfist leaped up and a hard punch sent the guard flying.

He was a hero to many a young would-be pilot as he shot down Germans with his Spitfire and won countless boxing matches against big bad bullies. The other comic, "The Hotspur", had lots of stories of far away places that had buried treasure, coconut palm trees and natives paddling outrigger canoes around the Gilbert and Ellis islands in the South Pacific.

So my early ambitions as an eight year old were fuelled from comics. From the moment I saw picture drawings of those Pacific Islands, I wanted to paddle an outrigger canoe in remote atolls, explore the Gilbert and Ellis islands, box like Joe Louis and fly a Spitfire against The Hun.

Over the years, I realized the first two ambitions by exploring the World War Two battleground of Tarawa atoll in The Gilbert Islands (since renamed The Republic of Kiribati). I paid a local

islander a dollar to let me go solo in an outrigger canoe from the black volcanic sand beaches of New Britain. Pity the blighter didn't warn me about the green ants nest hidden under the seat, which caused me to abandon ship 100 yards off shore. And I did fly a Mustang in the RAAF against the enemy. Perhaps I should add, however, that the enemy was a battered old tank hulk on the air to ground rocketry range at Williamtown, N.S.W.

One Sunday morning during the early days of 1940, I was press ganged into singing in the local church choir. The air raid siren sounded just as the choir and congregation launched into the old favourite "Onward Christian Soldiers" The siren warning was a normal daily event in those days and it was considered rather macho to ignore it.

We were into the third verse, the organist grandly poised, arms held high, about to pound the keyboard for the grande crescendo, when there was a roar of aircraft engines followed immediately by a burst of machine gun fire. I looked up from my hymn book in time to see the centuries old stained glass windows on the western wall of the church shatter to pieces as bullets and spent cartridge cases embedded into the stone walls, or fell still hot amongst the pews.

English reserve was forgotten as everyone hit the stone floor. Fortunately no one was hurt and the vicar urged the congregation to get up from its collective knees and resume singing. I must admit that I saw immediate financial advantage in the current situation, in that intact bullets, especially 20mm cannon shells, were worth money in the school swop yard - in a similar vein to exchanging basketball players cards in the 1990's.



As the grown-ups in the choir got to their feet and picked up the hymn from where they had left off, I was on my knees scrabbling under the knee cushions looking for hot merchandise. Being the shortest member of the St. Dunstan church choir, my disappearance remained unnoticed, until I touched a battered but still hot incendiary round. I swore an almighty "Damn", which in those days was my sole knowledge of the profane. Unfortunately my oath coincided with a pause between verses and the choir, vicar and sundry other church brass were quick to fix accusing glares at the scruffy cassock clad little angel who appeared scowling, whilst sucking a burnt finger.... I literally got the bullet from the choir for the next two weeks and to add insult to injury I was forced to forfeit my pay.

It transpired that a German bomber trying to escape detection had been spotted by an alert Observer Post. A RAF Hurricane was vectored to the area and line astern chase at ground level ensued. Closing in, the fighter fired a burst from its 8 machine guns. Some rounds hit the church walls and windows followed by a shower of spent cartridge cases.



The following Sunday my Aunt Annie ordered me off to morning church, where I was banished to the back pews. Midway through the service the red collection bag was passed along each row of seats by a smug kid from the choir, who smirked when he saw me sitting sullenly in the back row. Now I wasn't in the choir for the love of religion. I was there to pick up a monthly wage of sixpence, with which to bargain craftily for bullets and bits of pranged aeroplanes.

As the red bag reached me from a stiffly starched old matron next to me, I realized with horror that I had forgotten to bring coins for the plate. Rather than face the acute embarrassment of shaking my head (which would have delighted the little red cassocked sod waiting at the end of the pew), I shoved my hand deep inside the proffered bag and stirred the pennies and silver therein, hoping that the clinking of coins would fool the waiting LRCS at the end of the line. No one noticed my subversion and as the strains of Handel's Messiah sounded from the tall silver organ pipes I managed to slip away via an ancient oaken side door into the church yard. Scampering between the 18th century moss covered gravestones, I headed across the green fields which sloped to the crest of Bluebell Hill.

The air raid siren started to wail as I reached the sandbagged emplacement where Uncle Alf was on duty that morning. The Observer Corps post was sited amongst some low trees which acted as camouflage and these trees were home to many different types of birds. As the siren note rose and fell across the Kentish Downs, the birds would warble and tweet in company. I loved the blackbirds song most of all and in between checking out the horizon for enemy aircraft, I would spend time watching and listening to a pair of blackbirds who were nesting in a nearby old English oak tree.

As Uncle Alf watched towards the north, I scanned to the east, which was the most likely direction from which we could expect high flying bombers heading for London. It wasn't long before the first sounds of massed aero engines reached our ears and there at 10,000 feet, we could see many formations of tiny silver dots. Alf's eyesight was not that good and he handed me the binoculars. White vapour trails were forming above the massed formations and a nearby anti aircraft gun hidden in Angley woods opened up on the raiders. The evenings of aircraft recognition training in the Ritz cinema paid off and I quickly identified 50 plus Heinkel 111 twin engined bombers and 25 plus Dornier 17's (left), nicknamed Flying Pencil's because of their slim shape. The vapour trails were from high level escorting fighters, Messerschmitt 109's.



Alf was busy relaying this information to RAF Sector Headquarters when amongst the unsynchronized beat of engines could be heard the chatter of machine guns interspersed with the slower heavier firing of 20mm cannons. I spotted several RAF Hurricanes attacking the formation from both sides and watched fascinated as a Dornier fell back unprotected and streaming smoke.



Some friendly old soldier banter from Uncle Alf suddenly changed to a stern command of "Get down Johnny my lad - and fast..NOW", as he knocked the binoculars from my eyes and pushed me to the ground. Despite his less than perfect eye sight, Alf had spotted a salvo of tumbling bombs from the stricken Dornier which had been forced to jettison its load. I got a quick look at these black objects falling in our general direction and for the first time I became a truly frightened 8 year old.

Thirty seconds later the bombs exploded all in a row in a field half a mile away. Amongst them were two delayed action monsters, which were later defused by some very brave soldiers of the local bomb disposal squad.

The immediate drama over, Uncle Alf and I shared a thermos of tea brought by the redoubtable Aunt Annie, who ignoring the salvo of German bombs, had trudged up the hill a few minutes earlier.

We knew the raids over London would be over in the next half an hour or so and previous experience indicated we should be on alert for low flying German stragglers hugging the Kentish countryside on their way back to the safety of France.

I spotted the first easily. It was a Heinkel 111 battling along at 200 feet from the direction of Maidstone and its course was going to take it overhead of our emplacement. Through the binoculars one could see that the port propeller was windmilling slowly and a thin trail of smoke from the remaining engine indicated rich mixture at high power. Alf picked up the Lee Enfield which was leaning against the sandbags and with the palm of his hand, snapped a five round magazine into the rifle. It would take a miracle to bring down an aircraft with a rifle, but old Alf was a religious bloke who believed in these sort of things. I stuck my fingers in my ears as Alf blasted five shots at the Heinkel as it flew low overhead and I remember hoping the belly gunner couldn't see this crippled old Englishman trying to do his aeroplane GBH!

The black crossed Heinkel had hardly gone from view when the sound of Mauser cannon fire was heard nearby. I turned to see two silver barrage balloons writhing in huge red flames and falling earthbound. A lone Messerschmitt 109 circled, then lined up on a third balloon which was in the process of being frantically hauled back to earth by its ground crew. A short 2 second burst and the Messerschmitt really couldn't miss. I felt a moment of extreme sadness at seeing the fiery end of those beautiful silver creatures of the sky.



Barrage balloons were operated from army vehicles and floating usually around 2000 feet, were held by thick wire cables. Their presence were a deterrent to low flying aircraft, which



were forced to fly at higher altitudes where anti aircraft gunners had more chance at getting in a decent shot. Hidden deep in Angley woods were tanks and artillery of the British Armoured Corps. Also well concealed in the forest were several battalions of troops awaiting the expected arrival of German paratroopers.

To me it seemed a bit silly to station barrage balloons in the vicinity, as it would be obvious to any German reconnaissance aircraft that the balloons were protecting something of military importance. My Uncle told me in strictest confidence that British Military Intelligence placed great strategic value upon Aunt Annie's plans to attack the expected enemy paratroopers with hot jam and had therefore decided to ring the area with barrage balloons. I looked upon Annie with new respect, even forgiving her for sending me off to church without money for the plate.

As a couple of our parishioners had the suspiciously teutonic surnames of Schmitt, I felt it was not beyond the bounds of possibility that these folk might be spies who had signalled this vital information back to German Intelligence. Hence the pre-emptive strike by the lone Messerschmitt on our balloons. Such was the active imagination of this 8-year-old!

Between lessons at Cranbrook primary school, cricket practice on the village green with Uncle Alf and regular aircraft spotting duties, I found time for romance. Her name was Sheila Emms and as a mature 9 year old she was the captain of the school Under 10 soccer team.

I loved her with dog like devotion, principally because she had the best set of...wait for it...toy soldiers in our school. I would visit her house, a lovely thatched cottage and we would invent games with opposing brightly coloured armies. Sheila's mother taught us how to make toy parachutes out of real silk. During the battle of Britain there was no shortage of parachutes floating from the skies over Kent and it wasn't hard to knock one off after the incumbent had been rescued and taken away by the Home Guard for a cup of tea and a chat.



Now over 50 years later, children spend money on arcade games, slot machines, CD's or basket ball hero cards. In my younger days, we made toy parachutes from the real thing. A stone would be attached to the lines to act as a suitable weight and the parachute would be hurled high in the air. A well made parachute launched from the top of a hill, was timed as it floated down, its gently swaying descent admired by the watching children. It was good fun and apart from the occasional strained shoulder muscle from over enthusiastic hurling, it didn't cost a penny. That is if one discounted the cost of the downed aircraft that provided the raw materials!

Alas my romance with the beautiful Sheila did not last the summer. I was one year younger than she and I found out that like so many young nubile, she preferred older men. In Sheila's case, she found a cad of 11, who treated her badly, nicked her toy soldiers and who threatened



to kick in the spokes of her bike, unless she dropped her knickers for a quick look. To no avail I tried to counter with lavish gifts of used 20mm cannon shells and some rare shrapnel from a 250kg bomb. But like most women, they all seem to be mesmerised with bastards who treat them badly.

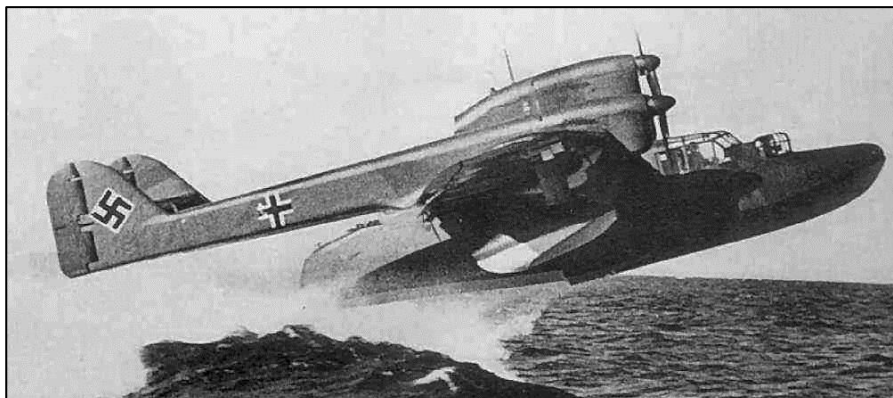
In 1990, after completing a Heathrow - Rhodes - Gatwick flight in a Boeing 737 of Paramount Airways, I drove to Cranbrook and wandered around my childhood haunts. I found the house where Sheila and her parents once lived. A gracious old lady answered the door and she turned out to be Sheila's mother. During Devonshire tea with jam filled scones (probably preserved from Aunt Annie's arsenal in Angley Woods), I was told that Sheila never married and now lived in Folkstone on the Kentish coast. I was shown photographs of her, now a still very attractive 60 year old woman. I wondered what became of her toy soldiers?



St Dunstons Church was almost entirely unchanged. Ancient tombstones leant at crazy angles, moss covered silent sentinels of the long dead. One wall still showed the pockmarks caused by stray bullets from the RAF fighter 50 years earlier. The Observer Corps emplacement was of course long since gone, although the oak tree nearby was still green leaved and strong and blackbirds still warbled amongst its wide spread branches. Overhead, the vapour trails of high flying aircraft disappeared towards France, taking holiday makers to the sun drenched islands of the Mediterranean Sea.

Sitting on the green knoll of Bluebell Hill, I let my thoughts wander back to events that happened after I left Cranbrook in 1941.

From 1941 to the end of the war in 1945 I was shuttled between relatives and foster families living either in Tonbridge, 15 miles from Cranbrook, or at the dockyard town of Sheerness situated on the Estuary of the River Thames. Both towns were 30 miles from London, the favourite target of German bombers.



At night the Germans would lay shipping mines in the Thames Estuary using Blohm & Voss floatplanes. The area was covered with barrage balloons moored on small ships. I don't know if the balloon cables ever brought



down enemy aircraft, but certainly the nights were frequently very noisy with anti aircraft guns banging away at unseen raiders.

A B17 Flying Fortress ditched a few hundred yards from the seawall, only 3 minutes' walk from my grandmother's house in Alma Road.



At high tide the tail was visible and at low tide one could wade out to the aircraft, which was relatively undamaged. Demolition gangs eventually hauled the Fortress up to the beach, where the wings and fuselage were cut off to be carted away on a low

loader. It was sad to see this great silver aeroplane become victim to the oxy-acetylene torch, but I managed to beat the schoolboy Mafia to the job and dragged dismembered pieces of fuselage, wings and plexiglass from the rear turret on my billy cart to my house.

This stuff would be priceless as war relics in future years, but my old grandmother saw no future in tripping over jagged edges of aluminium, which I had stored haphazardly in my room and backyard. Also diamonds might be a girl's best friend, but I worked on the theory that wooing with real wreckage would be cheaper.

My wicked old grannie finally lost patience and my novel theory on the seduction of females remained untested as I was forced to consign the remains of my beloved B17 to the sea, from whence it came.

Another time I picked up a few live cannon shells from a shot down Focke Wulf 190. I had bribed the RAF guard with a few fags lifted from my grandmother's purse. When she found out what I had done, her patience finally snapped and I was bundled off to live with a foster family in Tonbridge. At that stage I was about 12 years old, nearing the terrible teens.

News came that my father had been captured in Libya. He was the commander of an armoured car detachment, part of the famous Desert Rats. A month or so later, there was a knock at the front door of my house and there was my old man, looking decidedly tanned and fit.

It turned out that they had fallen foul of an Italian patrol, who imprisoned the armoured car crew in a bomb crater and surrounded them with barbed wire. That night, whilst the Italians were asleep, the crew managed to cut the wire and slip away into the desert. Consideration was given to killing the Italians, but because the Britishers had been well treated on capture, my father decided to let bygones be bygones and let the Italians sleep peacefully.

Back in England preparations were underway for the Allied invasion of Europe. The Luftwaffe no longer came over in massed formations and instead low level hit and run air raids became more common. A school colleague, John Williams (Willy) and I were good friends with a



common interest in aircraft recognition. It was school holiday time and the skies were busy with Typhoons, Tempests, sleek marks of Spitfires, Liberators, Marauders. More ominously were bomb carrying Focke Wulf 190's and the fast Junkers 88 light twin engined bomber.

At school we were warned of the dangers of picking up well disguised anti personnel bombs. Some of these were called butterfly bombs as they were painted in bright colours, waiting for a child to pick it up and get a hand blown off. On the school notice board, between cricket team lists and revised lesson schedules, would be army posters depicting the different types of anti personnel bombs.

One night a massive explosion shook the neighbourhood. There had been no warning sirens. A V2 rocket blitz had started and one of the 20 foot monsters had flattened the science block of our school. Shrapnel and shards of broken glass were strewn about the school playground and I picked up one small piece of jagged metal which to my surprise was highly magnetized. I



showed it to my Uncle Ron (male relatives were invariably Uncle) who absentmindedly threw it into his toolbox. (See video of the V2 [HERE](#))

On one of my visits to England in 1990 my now very ancient Uncle unearthed the shrapnel from between long unused tools in the garage and gave it back to me. It is still magnetic and is pride of place in my home in Melbourne, sharing space with a box of Japanese bullets from the battles of Guadalcanal and bits and pieces of war relics which I found whilst exploring the bunkers of Tarawa.

Perhaps the grimmest sight in my aeroplane spotting days was that of a Messerschmitt 109 gliding on fire with a Spitfire barely 100 yards behind it. The Messerschmitt pilot must have been dead because there was no evasive action as the Spitfire fired short bursts of cannon and machine gun fire directly into the stricken enemy. Both aircraft passed from view from my position as I was walking to school, with the sound of the Merlin engine and occasional rattle of guns fading.

Like most English people in Kent my school friends and I held no hate for the Germans. Captured German soldiers and airmen were marched to work through our town from a nearby prisoner of war camp. Some of us would wave cheerily at the columns of POW's marching to work and perhaps offer a sandwich from our school lunch. In turn, we received a wave back and a smile or two. The odd aggressive schoolboy yob would sometimes yell derisively at the tail end of the POW group but it was considered bad manners by the rest of us.



The war to we schoolboys in Kent was just like a sporting game of cricket. Our heroes were the fighter pilots of the RAF, the enemy were the planes with big black crosses. It was an exciting spectacle of diving aeroplanes, floating parachutes and few of us saw death at first hand.

One morning, Willy and I were walking up the steep incline of Deakin Leas, a picturesque suburban street. I lived at Number 58 and Willy lived at Number 33. The siren had sounded earlier, which we ignored. Willy saw the approaching aircraft first. It was about 2 miles away and coming towards us, it appeared to be following the main railway line to Sevenoaks and London. I considered myself as the school whip on aircraft recognition, but I initially could not place the front on silhouette, although it looked like an Avro Manchester twin engine bomber. It had two underslung engines, lots of glass panels in the cockpit and bomb aimer area, plus twin rudders. It appeared to be all black and it was going like the clappers.

The view was magnificent, because we were watching from a hill overlooking the Tonbridge main railway yards. This put us on the same level as the mysterious black bomber, which began to curve into a steep turn as it followed the railway line.

Seconds later the bomber rapidly straightened up and we were startled to see the bomb doors snap open and machine gun fire arced from a bottom turret. Now we could clearly see the black crosses and the unit identification letters as several bombs tumbled towards the main railway marshalling yards.



Immediately I identified the aircraft as a Dornier 217, the newest German light bomber, a very fast and well armed aircraft indeed. One of my "Aeroplane Spotter" magazines had shown



pictures of this aircraft in various and cautioned that it could be easily mis-identified with the Avro Manchester. The magazine was not wrong!

The bottom gunner loosed off three more bursts of machine gun fire and although we were not in danger of being hit by shrapnel, ricocheting bullets were a problem. I threw myself on the ground behind a hedge and called to Willy to do the same. To my chagrin he haired up the road crying for his mother.

The sight of him in tears and in headlong flight was the first time I had seen a person really panic. My initial reaction was to call Willy a stupid clot who could get himself shot unless he hit the dirt quickly. In the event, we escaped unscathed as the Dornier disappeared in the direction of the coast. Willy must have changed character after I had rubbished him for being a 'fraidy cat', because in later years he became a Lieutenant Colonel in the British SAS, spending time in Northern Ireland swapping punches with the IRA.



Minutes later, I heard another aircraft approaching at high speed and from behind my hawthorn bush, managed to correctly identify a Bristol Beaufighter in obvious hot pursuit in the direction of the fading exhaust trail of the Dornier 217. From my recollection, the Dornier top speed was 20 knots faster than a Beaufighter, so I felt that the 'British pilot was being an optimist.

At my school we were now accommodating schoolboy evacuees from bombed out London schools. Whilst we considered ourselves a moderately refined lot, in that we only kicked shins in the rugger scrum when the referee was not looking, the London chaps were a really rough lot. There were quite vicious battles with long knotted scarves and it became a health hazard to attend school.

One day , I was ambushed by several London boys on the way to school. They had mistaken me for one of our blokes who had earlier made mincemeat of two of their friends. The siren sounded as I went down, frightened but unhurt. I was momentarily grateful to the German Air Force as the Londoners ran for their lives towards nearby concrete air raid shelters.

As I mentioned previously, air raid warnings had never worried me unduly, so I ran in the opposite direction to escape from my attackers. Also, I was close to a good vantage spot where I could indulge in some exciting aeroplane spotting. My excuse for missing the dreaded maths first period, could be logically put down to sheltering from an air attack!



It never occurred to me that air raid sirens to the London school boys meant a strong possibility of an unpleasant death by mass bombing. These schoolboys had seen more death and destruction amongst their friends and relatives in London than I could ever imagine. Hence their hasty retreat into the nearest shelter.

In a few minutes, an unusually harsh engine noise was heard. It sounded like a motor mower at full throttle with an open exhaust. The noise came closer and between some tree tops I caught a glimpse of my first V1 flying bomb, later nicknamed the Doodlebug. I was fascinated by the



long exhaust flame from the ramjet tailpipe, which made the aircraft look like a Bunsen Burner with short stubby wings attached. The Doodlebug flew at 1000 ft at about 250 knots.

Behind it flew an RAF Tempest fighter, forming in line astern at 200 yards. The Tempest fired two short bursts from its four 20mm cannons and with an

almighty flash the Doodlebug disintegrated in a fireball of smoke and flame. Seconds later came a thunderclap explosion. The Tempest broke sharply to the right and emerged moments later from behind the hanging pall of thick black smoke. Wreckage from the flying bomb fell into the town sports fields and fortunately there were no casualties.

In the next few months I was to see many of these missiles flying low towards London. Many years later, I read that German spies who had been caught by British security services, were given the choice of being executed or sending false information back to their masters. It seems that the spies' mission was to note the dropping zones of the flying bombs around London. If the bombs were landing short of the city due to headwinds, a signal would be relayed back to the launch sites to adjust the automatic fuel shut off times accordingly. With a revolver behind their ear, captured spies were forced to send false information and subsequent missiles were then programmed to fly well short of, or far beyond London.

I pondered on this in years to come, when one day I was at school, waiting my turn to bat during an inter school cricket match. It was a lovely spring day, the grass was emerald green, the birds were singing and best of all we had the opposing team by the short and curlies.

The air raid warning had sounded unheeded, except by the London boys who had disappeared like rabbits into the school underground shelters. A lone flying bomb appeared from the east, its characteristic engine note menacing and noisy. It was on track to London 30 miles to the north-west and extraordinarily low at 500 ft. A lone anti aircraft Bofors gun situated on a nearby hill, blasted away at the missile, the black puffs of exploding 40mm shells trailing the bomb by several hundred yards.



As the Doodlebug scorched its way across the green English countryside, its ramjet leaving a bright red plume of flame, we heard the engine noise abruptly cease. The game of cricket stopped as all eyes looked up and saw the exhaust flame vanish. The sudden silence was a heart stopper and we watched the nose of the flying bomb tip over into a sixty degree dive.

Nestled amongst the fir woods, where the Kentish Downs sloped down towards the Medway River valley, were some of the loveliest cottages in Kent. Also amongst the woods was a 17th century mansion. The county was known as the Garden of England. From our cricket field, we could look across the valley less than a mile away. Spectators and white flannelled cricketers alike watched in mounting horror as the silent bomb now diving vertically, exploded on impact into the woods. Flames and a pall of black smoke belched above the trees and a few minutes later the sirens of fire engines could be heard in the valley. Later we were told that twenty girls of the Womens' Royal Air Force were killed by that bomb. They had been billeted in the old mansion, which had taken the direct hit.

Five miles from where I lived in Tonbridge was the village of Penshurst. Overlooking this picturesque village with its cosy pub named The Spotted Dog is Penshurst Place, a 14th century manor house. The then owner was Viscount De L'Isle, who won the Victoria Cross during the British landings at Anzio in Italy. He later became a Governor General of Australia and I was to fly him on many occasions during my RAAF service with No.34 (VIP) squadron in Canberra in the middle sixties.



Just five minutes bike ride, past the Spotted Dog with its welcome log fire in winter and at the bottom of a winding hedge lined lane, the view opened up to a large field big enough to take aeroplanes. It was in fact an emergency landing field for American B17 Flying Fortresses of the 8th Army Air Force. The Americans suffered fearsome casualties during their daylight raids on Europe, principally from German fighters.

From my house on Deakin Leas, I had a clear view across Tonbridge towards Penshurst. This view was shared by gunners of army Bofors teams, who regularly set up shop outside our house overnight and awoke the dead with seemingly non stop firing at night-intruder aircraft and Doodlebugs. One afternoon I saw formations of Fortresses and Liberators returning home from bombing occupied Europe. At least one hundred of these aircraft passed into view over a one hour period. My aircraft recognition skills were finely honed by now and like many schoolboys of my era, we became keen collectors of United States Army Air Force tail fin insignia. I kept a spotters log book of squadron markings.

Two Fortresses passed particularly close to my vantage point and even without binoculars I could see jagged holes in the tailplane of one aircraft. The second Fortress was in real trouble



with two engines feathered, binoculars revealing damage to the bomb aimers area. Their course was towards Penshurst and hopping on my bike I tore off in that direction.

Thirty minutes later and out of breath from furious pedalling, I freewheeled gratefully down the lane past Penshurst Place. Coming up the narrow road towards me drove three military ambulances, followed by several US army jeeps. I pulled over as the small convey passed and saw several airmen in flying gear who cheerily acknowledged my wave.

Parking my Raleigh at the aerodrome perimeter fence, I sneaked under barbed wire and started to walk over the meadow towards the two Fortresses which had belly landed 200 yards apart. There was a lone American guard with a rifle slung over his left shoulder and he watched me as I made my way towards him. I asked him politely if I could take a souvenir and I was delighted when he replied "Sure Buddy, go ahead and here have some gum". He was typical of



the many American servicemen I had met previously. They were always friendly and ever ready to offer chewing gum or some small gift.

Wandering casually towards the nearest Fortress, I looked inside the tail turret to see if I could knock off a belt of Point Fifty calibre bullets. I was somewhat

shaken to see a row of jagged holes which had punched through the fuselage skin a few inches from the gunner's seat. This must have been a close shave indeed for the rear gunner. I then climbed over the wing centre section to look into the cockpit area. Shrapnel damage was present around the mid upper turret and one of the barrels of the twin machine guns was bent.

I felt uneasy and my conscience nagged me not to try and retrieve any souvenirs. This feeling was reinforced when the guard gently warned me not to explore any further, as there were signs that someone had been badly shot up in the forward area of the fuselage. Several days later, I heard that several of the crew had been killed during an attack by an enemy fighter. The pilot of the Fortress that I had looked into, had been wounded, but had managed to bring his aircraft back for a well executed belly landing.

The months passed and as the Allies fought deeper into Europe, we saw fewer aircraft. Certainly no German raiders ever passed our way again. The dreaded tough London schoolboys returned to their bombed homes and with their departure, (and that of German intruder aircraft), all immediate dangers to my well being were gone. Or so I fondly imagined.

Fast asleep one night, I was awakened by a loud explosion which rocked the house foundations. Seconds later a noise like a vast rush of air was heard. Arriving at school in the morning, we were delighted to see the Science block badly damaged and a huge crater nearby.

There were pieces of shrapnel in all directions and everywhere were schoolboys gathering harvests of twisted metal.

One piece of shrapnel which I located amongst the smashed test tubes of the Science block, was half an inch thick and highly magnetic. That piece of lethal weaponry now has pride of place in my study. The weapon was a German V2 rocket and during the following weeks we saw the vapour trails of these stratospheric missiles curving through the upper skies towards London.

Fortunately, the Allies quickly located the V2 launching pads and destroyed them. But not before many hundreds of Londoners had been killed. There was no defence against this weapon, which would arrive without warning.

There was one more incident which I remember clearly. With the inevitable English wet weather, most aircraft passing overhead were unseen. One morning as I was being pressed into weeding the garden, I heard the sound of two single engined aircraft in cloud. Suddenly there was a sound of an aircraft in a high speed dive, its engine screaming at full throttle. I had heard the same sound on several occasions during the Battle of Britain and it always signified an aircraft out of control.



From the base of the cloud came an American Thunderbolt fighter in a full spin and minus one wing. It was in flames and going down vertically, it crashed into a heavily timbered area half a mile away and blew up. Another explosion was heard some distance away where a second aircraft had also crashed. The smoke trail from the first aircraft was still lingering below the

clouds when I saw a white parachute drifting towards the nearby hospital. That pilot was from the second Thunderbolt and he survived. The other pilot was killed.

It was a twenty minute bike ride to the still burning crash site of the spinning Thunderbolt. An ambulance passed me going away from the crash. After battling through gorse bushes and scrub, I came across the still smouldering wreckage spread far and wide amongst scorched trees. Several loud bangs indicated that live ammunition was being cooked off and I decided that it was too dangerous to hang around. I lost my yen for souvenirs after seeing that grim sight. A few more spectators had arrived, but they kept a respectable distance from the wreckage, which eventually burnt itself out. It was the first time that I had actually seen a burnt out aeroplane and it left me with an uneasy feeling of sadness and foreboding. Since those days I have seen too many of these tragedies and because of these experiences, I try to fly more carefully.



After the war ended, my interest turned to train spotting. With many other young enthusiasts, I would travel to London and, buying a platform ticket at Clapham Junction, would spend all day gathering train and locomotive names. The spectacle of huge rushing locomotives, belching hot steam and smoke, enthralled me. Curved brass nameplates with evocative titles, such as Cock o' The North, The Flying Scotsman and the Golden Arrow, stirred me. No wonder that most young boys of that era wanted to be train drivers when they grew up.

The sight of the sleek Golden Arrow boat train, which travelled from Charing Cross station in London to the port of Dover on the coast of Kent, captivated my imagination. It was painted green, with a splendid golden coloured flash on the side of the locomotive and it was beautifully streamlined. Only the rich seemed to travel in the Golden Arrow's luxurious carriages.....or so we fondly imagined. Its daily timetable was well known to all spotters and people would rush their dinner and hurry towards viaducts and bridges in time to watch the train speed by. We would wave at the passengers and be thrilled to see a glimpse of a return wave from the beautiful people aboard. The driver would sound his whistle in greeting and you could imagine his friendly grin beneath his coal dusted face.



The Golden Arrow would streak non-stop through Tonbridge and the huge steel railway line points would clang in position to steer the Arrow and its coaches curving south-east through One Mile tunnel. We would rush home from school at 4pm, school bags dumped on the front porches and head in the direction of the outlet to the Tunnel. This entailed scampering through the brambles of Deakin Woods, up and down flower strewn trails and short cuts, to arrive breathless at the top of the tunnel. The bolder ones would slide and skid down the steep sided embankment to wait with ears on the cold parallel steel lines for the first tremors of the approaching steam monster.

I was the self-acknowledged coward of our gang of train spotters and thus I stayed up high on the embankment taking no risks. The occasional country policeman on his rounds, was known to sharply clip the ears of young lads found placing pennies on the railway lines. Nowadays some idiot father would have the poor Bobby up for assault. As I said, I was a coward who had no desire to get a thick ear, hence I was a good boy!

The roar from the black depths of the tunnel grew louder and the boys below me scrambled to relative safety, leaving coins to be flattened on the rails. I found myself holding my breath in

pent up excitement. One long shriek of the whistle and the Golden Arrow would burst into the sunlight, its huge pistons driving massive steel wheels. This awesome spectacle of massed energy and thunderous power, never failed to scare the hell out of me, yet I always returned for the next repeat performance!

It was so strange. I was never really frightened of Messerschmitts, machine gun fire and things that go bang in the night. Yet I still feel an involuntary shiver, as I write of the Golden Arrow piercing the sunlight as it roars out of the darkness of Tonbridge Tunnel.

In 1992 my contract flying Boeings for a German airline came to an end. At age 59, it was difficult to obtain new employment in Europe, so I decided to return to Australia. After farewelling my old Uncle Alf who had reached his century in years, I hit the motorway to London airport. A signpost indicated Cranbrook to the left. A few minutes later, I parked the rented car in the village and walked past the ancient cemetery to the church of Saint Dunstan's. On the northern walls, high up under the stained glass windows, were the pockmarks of bullet holes. So it wasn't just a dream after all.

Now I walked up the winding track to the top of Bluebell Hill. The old oak tree was still guarding the summit and where the Observer Corps Post used to be, was a wooden seat. It was perfectly sited to see the air routes to France...

A blackbird was singing and I remembered the opening lines of a childish letter that I had written in 1940 to my father who was at war in France. It went thus; "Dear Dad, today I saw a Messerschmitt and a blackbird on a tree".

THE RAM

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You Never Know For Sure Until You Try