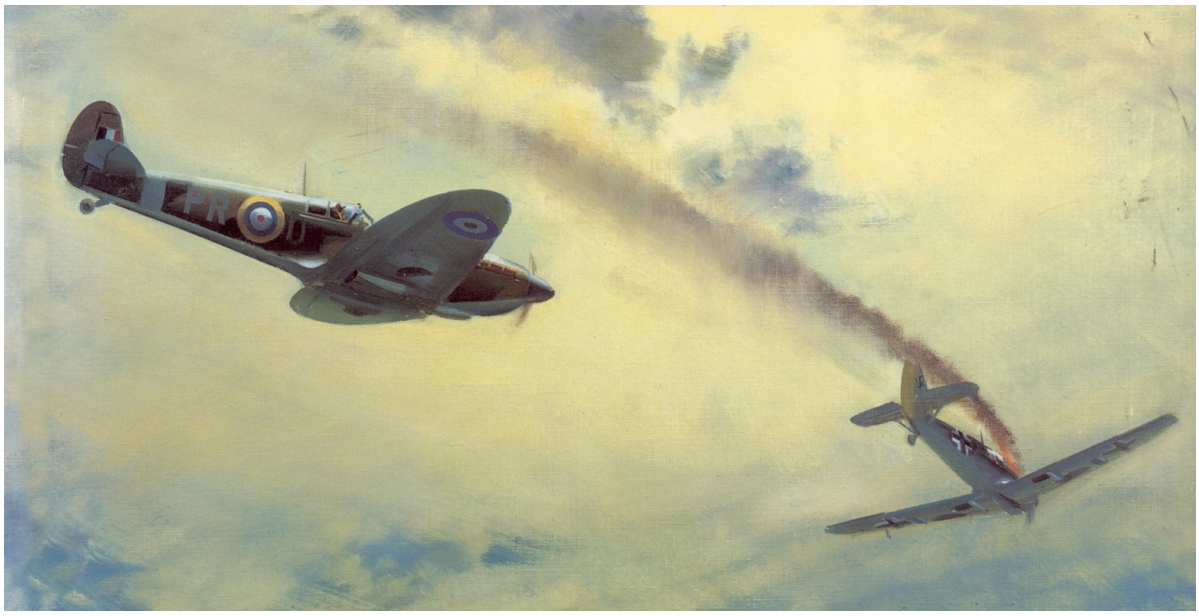
WARTIME IN KENT



Some reminiscences of Robert Dancy, born in 1931, and living at Hook Green
on the Kent-Sussex border near Tunbridge Wells throughout the war 1939-1945.
(Written in stages between 2001 and 2009 ©)

The start of the war in 1939 is very vivid in my memory although I was only eight. That Sunday morning I had been helping Mr Woollett, who had a small farm near us, take a cow to the bull at Furnace Mill Farm, about half a mile away. This particular cow was a "jumper", and was most difficult to get to go in the direction we wanted her to go. She had a nasty habit of jumping over hedges and needed several people to drive her. Mr Woollett would get us to help him, which was no problem, particularly as it usually meant a sixpence at the end of the job. On this particular sunny day, when we returned my father came out of the house onto the Green to meet us and told us the news. Although I didn't understand the full implications I realised that it must be a serious matter from the way that the grown-ups were talking.

Included here are lots of incidents, exciting to a small boy, and the impression might be gained that there were actions taking place all the time. Except for the Battle of Britain and the Blitz early on in the war, and the few months of bombardment by Doodlebugs in the summer of 1944, things were not so hectic. Life continued in much the same way, though after the beginning of 1940 austerity certainly reigned.

Soon after the outbreak of war, my father (“Pop”) was made an A.R.P. Warden (A.R.P. standing for Air Raid Precautions) mostly because we had one of the three telephones at Hook Green. One of his jobs was to put a big red flag out on the corner of the fence in front of the shop when he received a call to say that enemy aircraft had been

detected coming our way. This did not last for very long, because later on we had so many coming over that no one took much notice, and anyway we often saw the enemy when there had been no warning and conversely didn't see any when there were some!

Not a lot happened for months, as Hitler was much more involved in the conflict on the continent, and it was seldom that we saw any enemy aircraft. After the fall of France in May 1940, however, things changed and our life became more hectic. To a small boy of nine, exciting things were happening all the time. On the ground we always seem to have Army vehicles on the roads, despatch riders on their motorcycles, and often Bren gun carriers and, less frequently, tanks. On quite a few occasions we had a large number of troops arrive, put up tents on the green, camouflage their tanks and other vehicles, stay for one or two nights, then depart to some unknown destination. I think many of these events were when they were on exercises, getting used to travelling, setting up camp and then reloading and moving on.

In 1940 when the threat of a German invasion was very real, obstructions were put out in all the fields to prevent enemy aircraft from landing. Amongst the items in the field opposite us, on Hook Green Farm, was an old piano. This provided us with a lot of fun, as although it did not play very well with its keys we could at least use it as a harp, and before it finally collapsed in a heap of iron and timber we enjoyed ourselves twanging at the open strings.

In the air we saw more and more aircraft and we became very good at aircraft recognition. We were only about twenty five minutes flying time from the German airfields in Northern France, in a direct line between many of the airfields in France and London, so it was not surprising that we saw a lot of action.

Although we had a fair number of German planes over during the early summer of 1940 it was it was not until the Battle of Britain that we really started to see them in large numbers. It was a remarkable time, and seemed to last for much longer than a few months. Most of the major air battles took place in glorious weather when hop picking was in full swing. We had a "half-bin" in the home-pickers' set on Hoathley Farm, and being out of doors permanently from seven in the morning until about five in the evening missed very little of what was going on in the skies around us.

We saw waves of German bombers, Junkers 88s, Heinkel 111s and Dornier 17s, all in formation protected by Me 109 and Me 110 fighters. There would be about forty or fifty bombers, all close together, and around twenty fighters with them in a flight. Our own fighters, mainly Hurricanes, and less frequently, Spitfires, met them from a higher altitude, diving down out of the sun into the formations of bombers, usually shooting one or two down at the first pass and splitting the formations up, so that they could more readily pick off the bombers before the protecting fighters could engage them.

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Dornier 17 bombers in formation. This was what we often saw during the summer of 1940, trying to get through to London.

It was exciting to us watching from the safety of the ground and of course to a child it was not a battle between men - we didn't think very much of the actual people who were locked in a life-and death struggle in the sky above us. During one battle when it seemed the whole sky for a few minutes was filled with twisting and turning planes, short bursts of machine gun and canon fire mixing with the roar of many high performance engines at full revs, we saw eight planes all coming down at the same instant in time, and I remember vividly watching and hoping that the aircrews would all bale out successfully. They didn't all make it, I'm sorry to say. We heard later that one Spitfire pilot who did get out of his plane was still very badly burned.

Some time in late August or early September a dog-fight took place at a lower altitude, and being in the open hop garden, for one of the few times that I can recall, we left the bins and took to a ditch. The picture is still vivid in my mind of us all huddled together, watching the fighting going on overhead, the planes twisting and turning in the sky, machine guns and cannon being fired in short bursts. I was crouching with Mrs Kate Robards and her very young baby (Anthony), and it made a lasting impression of my young brain.

(In November 2000, I managed to locate Kate again, and we visited her and husband Albert in Tunbridge Wells. They were well into their eighties, and we had a chat for two hours about our experiences, all so well remembered. They had been very good friends to me in the 1940s and 1950s, living in Apps Cottage, a little further down our unmade lane past the old shop.)

On Sunday 15 September the Luftwaffe launched one of their biggest daylight raids on London, and many of the aircraft came over our area. Official reports say that the German forces crossed the coast at Dungeness and set a course straight for London. We were very close to that direct course! The Hurricanes dived down out of the sun onto the flights of bombers, shooting down some, and splitting the formations up. Unfortunately my father, who had fought in the trenches in France during 1916, and remembered his own experiences very well, was too upset, after the aerial battle passed from sight, to eat his Sunday lunch.

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I have no idea how many planes we saw shot down during the Battle of Britain, but as boys we cycled or walked to all the crash sites in the area and collected lots of bits and pieces. The nearest plane crash was about half a mile away. It was to the right at the bottom of Hook Green Hill, as you start up Sand Quarry Hill, on the way to Lamberhurst Down, just outside a wood on the edge of the field. It was a Me 109 and the pilot baled out safely, to land at the top of Sand Quarry Hill. He dropped into a garden opposite the Stone Cottages at the top of the hill, behind a man digging potatoes, who apparently hadn't been taking much notice of what was going on. He was very surprised when he heard a noise and turned around to see a German airman picking himself up off the ground and dealing with his parachute. Incidentally, any parachute material which we could get hold of during the war was highly prized for making clothes, and I know quite a few parachutes ended up in this way.

One day during the Battle of Britain, when hop picking, there was a dog fight and one Me 109 was being chased at low level by a Spitfire, and we saw the pair of them, "hedge hopping", the Me 109 desperately trying to get out of the firing line of the Spit. They were literally having to climb to get over trees, then going low down over the fields. The Spitfire was giving the Messerschmitt very short bursts of machine gun fire whenever he could get him in his sights. They passed near the Abbey Ruins at Bayham, across the fields to the bottom of Bull Lane and to the bottom of Clappers Hill, disappearing towards Lamberhurst. We heard later that the Me109 managed to crash-land, and the pilot got out alive, but he must have been a very shaken man. My father was driving his motor cycle down Clappers Hill when they passed overhead, but due to the noise from the old motor bike engine, he knew nothing about them until they shot past him, just above his head, the Spitfire firing at the ME109. It shook Pop up, too.

Another lucky German crew was that of a Me 110 during the Battle of Britain. They had been shot up and had to make a dead-stick landing (no engines) near Cousleywood. Making the best of a bad job, with all the trees there were on the Weald of Kent, the pilot put the plane down in a small field, then he must have seen a hedge coming up fast and having enough airspeed lifted the plane over the hedge, landing again on the other side, shot between two oak trees with barely enough room between them, crashed through the next hedge and came to a halt on the lawn of a farmhouse. The story goes that the crew got out, handed the farmer their revolvers, his wife made a cup of tea and they all sat down together waiting for the authorities to arrive to take them away as prisoners of war. The farmer I think was related to "our" Mr Brissenden of Hoathley Farm, near Hook Green.

We always went and saw crashed aircraft at the first opportunity, which was often as soon as they had come down. The smell of every crashed aircraft seemed to be the same, and was unmistakable. It must have been a combination of aluminium, oil, rubber, burnt cordite and other sundry items, but whether British or German, all the crashes had the same smell.

Another Battle of Britain plane was a Hurricane, which crashed near to where the Bewlbridge Reservoir centre is now. In those days it was close to an old cottage where a

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school-friend ("Bandy" Fuller) lived. We went several times to see the crash site, and on one occasion I went there by myself just after a heavy fall of rain. The wreckage (which lay in a marshy area by a small stream) had a lot of the mud covering it, which had been washed away, and I saw a Browning .303 machine gun amongst the debris. It didn't take me long to pull it out of the mire, wash it down in the stream and tie it to the top bar of my bicycle with some old hop string, and wheel it home. I had it for years, but in a clean sweep of a lot of "junk", my father unfortunately threw it away, possibly when I was doing my two years stint in the RAF in 1950 and 1951. Gone were also various incendiary bombs (defused by us boys!), shrapnel from different bombs, pieces of aircraft, and a Canadian officer's swagger cane, which housed a very sharp-pointed steel dagger.

In the 1980s I was passing the area where the Hurricane crashed (the Bewlbridge Reservoir has now flooded the valley) and I was driving past a farm turning when I noticed a veteran car pulling out and I glimpsed the registration plate had "GX 5--something" on it. In 1934 Dad had bought a new car with the registration "GX 5483" and this car was of the same make, so I immediately braked, did a quick turn back and caught the driver before he left. We had an interesting chat, as the owner of the car had lived there all his life (he was a couple of years older than I was, and went to Lamberhurst School as well, but we didn't remember each other). He still had one of the .707 machine guns out of the same Hurricane! In the 1980s I found out from Dad where he had dumped it but as it was on a farm rubbish tip the likelihood of finding it was very remote, so I haven't bothered to look.

We became quite expert in determining where a plane crashed. Seeing the direction in which it spiralled down, and the pall of smoke, which rose up from the spot, we would go indoors to consult a chart, which Dad had devised. It had Hook Green in the centre of a series of radiating lines, and each line was drawn in the direction of a village or other specific feature of our local area and labelled accordingly. Turning the chart round until the north-pointing arrow on the chart coincided with true north (i.e. orienteering the chart), and estimating the distance from us we would read off the landmark nearest in that direction and dash off on our bikes to view the wreckage.

Our guess of the distance away was usually very good as we could count the seconds between the plane disappearing from our view and the time we heard the explosion. Dividing the number of seconds by five (that is the time that sound takes to travel one mile) and we knew how far away to look, and the appropriate direction. We used the same technique with bombs that fell, and automatically started counting the seconds whenever anything interesting happened.

We had a good laugh when an uncle from London was visiting. It was a dull gloomy day in the middle of winter and we were sitting down to our midday meal when a German bomber came droning over. We heard the whistle of a couple of bombs coming down. Uncle must have heard the same sort of thing in London many times, as he reacted very quickly and pushing his chair out of the way dived under our substantial old dining table. We all sat there wondering what he was doing during the few seconds

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that the bombs took to reach ground (they exploded harmlessly about half a mile away), and Uncle sheepishly climbed up from beneath the table. We explained that we no longer bothered to take any notice of such things - feeling that in the open country there was not really anything to worry about. In retrospect I must admit that this seems a little foolhardy because if the bombs are coming down you are just as likely to be in the wrong spot at the wrong time in the country as you would be in a town.

The German bombers came over mostly at night once the main blitz of London started in the winter of 1940-41 and I remember lying in bed hearing them drone across. We became used to the German planes coming over with their characteristic "wong wong wong" noise due to the airmen switching their engine synchronising gear off once they were over England. When they did this the engines would not run at exactly the same speed, giving a distinct beat-note. They thought that having de-synchronised their engines, our sound locating equipment could not determine the direction of the planes (but as it happened we were using Radar by then, so it made no difference).

We would watch the searchlights criss-crossing the sky, creating interesting patterns on the clouds as they moved around looking for the planes. Sometimes one searchlight would suddenly light up an aircraft, then all the searchlights in the area would swing round until they were be focused on him, the searchlight beams making a shape like a stack of hop-poles. Anti-aircraft guns would then open up and the resulting fireworks would be marvellous. Every fifth shell would be a tracer and on a windy night when our nearby Bofors guns opened up, the shells would wander around far more than one would have expected, presumably because the wind at various heights was different. One had to be fairly near to the guns to see this effect as at a greater distance it would not have shown up, and the shells would appear to be travelling in a straight line, or a slight curve, without wandering around.

We didn't see a single plane shot down by anti-aircraft guns, which seemed strange when the searchlights lit the aircraft up so well. They looked like sitting targets, but I have read that about 30,000 shells were fired for every plane shot down. No doubt the aircrew would have been put off from aiming at a specific target by the barrage being directed at them, so the guns were probably doing some good.

One night during the firing there was a whine and a dull thud, heard I think only by Pop, who in the morning looking around the back garden came across a fair-sized hole in the cabbage patch. He telephoned the Army who duly sent a couple of Squadies to investigate. They had drain-rods with them and stuck them down the hole and decided that a four and a half inch shell had gone down about fifteen feet. "Too far down for us to dig" was the verdict. "It won't do any harm that far down" and there it remains to this day.

Reading about the German aircraft guidance system "Knickebein" some years after the war, I realised that the night bombers which we used to hear going through to London, one plane following the other after a short interval, were probably all following the radio beam laid down for them. Sometimes they were quite low, particularly on dark

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cloudy nights and at other times would be much higher. The low-flying ones must have gained height if they were on their way to London because there was a complete curtain of barrage balloons encircling the capital. On very clear days we could see them from Hook Green, glinting in the sunlight.

A very amusing incident comes to mind when thinking of barrage balloons. Although we didn't have any stationed anywhere near us, one had broken loose from somewhere when we were picking hops at Hoathley Farm, and the cables dangling from the balloon must have been heavy enough to keep the balloon flying very low as it drifted in the wind. When it came near we thought it was terribly funny when the cables dragged all along the length of a set of Hop Pickers' huts, whose roofs were made of corrugated iron and the drumming noise of the steel cables running along the roofs could be heard a long way off.

On another occasion an escaped balloon was at such a high altitude that it was almost out of sight. One of our fighters climbed up to it and made several passes at it, firing each time until eventually it shot it down. It fell very slowly and I do not remember any fire - it probably just lost its gas. It was interesting as a demonstration of the time sound takes to travel, as we saw the fighter was firing at the balloon but heard no sounds of its guns for quite a long time afterwards. They were so high that it took many seconds for the sound of the machine guns to reach us.

One wet and windy night my mother was just saying goodnight to me in my bedroom when we heard an aircraft approaching at a fairly low altitude. It was obviously a German twin-engined bomber from the distinctive unsynchronised engines, and very soon we heard the scream of falling bombs. There was no time to do anything, and within seconds we heard the crump of the bombs exploding, very close by. The house seemed to be leap around as each bomb exploded. Dad, being the Air Raid Warden, went out to see if there was any damage in the village. When he arrived at Bull Lane Cottages, (a row of eight houses belonging to the Bayham estate), he nearly fell down a bomb crater right outside one of the cottages. Jerry had planted one of the bombs in their garden and the whole front of the place was demolished. Finding his way round to the back he knocked on the door and was let in. "What happened?" "It's draughty in here" were the words that greeted him and he had to tell them not to go into the front of the house because there was no front!

The incident amused us, as the people in that house were not the best of gardeners and we thought Jerry did a better job of digging the garden than they did. They were also the family which gave Dad the most trouble over the "Black-Out". He occasionally went round the village to check that everybody was keeping the place completely dark. This family had often been told that their lights were showing and asked to make sure that they maintained the Black-Out properly. It is very likely that the German aircrew saw their lights and dropped the string of bombs hoping that it was an area where something was of importance to our war effort. If so it was a pretty good aim on their part. For many years after the war the new brickwork of the repair to the house was visible and it might still be, even now (in 2009).

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When we looked around next day we found that two of the bombs had fallen in a field near us, one was in a small orchard by Woollett's farmhouse, very close to a large pine tree, which had been damaged. The next one was in the Bull Lane Cottage garden, and at least one more was at the back of the cottages in an orchard. I think a few chicken belonging to Mr Woollett were killed. There was a footpath known as the "Slip" which ran past the damaged tree and the bombing nearly claimed another victim when Alan Blackford was walking past the tree on the day after the bomb was dropped, when it suddenly started creaking and fell in his direction. He ran out of its way just in time.

(Later in the war, Alan's older brother, Alec, was killed in a tank near Caen, and Alan was lucky to get away with being dropped as a paratrooper at Arnhem, and fighting in the subsequent battle.)

In Skense Wood the local gamekeeper came across an oak tree liberally spread with thick black oil, whilst beside it was a fair-sized hole. At some time an oil-filled incendiary bomb had fallen, but it did not cause a fire so no one even knew it had been dropped. It might well have been there for weeks or even months as it was not near any frequented paths. There was also a big bomb crater further in Skense Wood on the side of one of the main pathways, but as there were never any buildings or army personnel within a mile of the spot it was hard to understand why any German aircraft would have dropped it there.

Another H E (High Explosive) bomb fell right in the middle of the river a few hundred yards upstream of the Sheep Dip below the forge at Little Bayham. The resultant widening of the river at that point is probably still there.

We also had a day off from school some time later when a one-thousand-pounder landed in the centre of the road between Lamberhurst and Hook Green, (very close to the crash site of the Me 109 in 1940). Unfortunately it only took the roadmen a day to reinstate the road so we only had the one day's holiday from school.

An unusual bomb exploded in a field of Watkin's farm on the south side of Hook Green early on in the war - one that was made of aluminium. Like the majority of bombs dropped around the village it did no damage.

The types of aircraft that we saw regularly were the Spitfires and Hurricanes, a few Defiants and Battles, Blenheims, and on the German side ME 109s and 110s, Junkers 88s, Heinkel 111s, Dornier 17 "Flying Pencils", and a very few four-engined bombers which only seemed to come over at high altitude with a lot of other aircraft. They were almost certainly Condors. Later on during the war the types proliferated and we would have to recognise such planes as Beaufighters, Beauforts, Typhoons, Tempests, Wellingtons, Manchesters, Lancasters, Sunderlands, Thunderbolts, Mustangs, Lightnings, Flying Fortresses, Liberators, Marauders, Walruses, Catalinas, and other less common types.

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There was even a "Spotters Club" at Skinners School, to which I belonged, and a flimsy weekly magazine called "The Spotter". Aircraft recognition was an absorbing hobby and there were so many planes of one type or another buzzing around for much of the time that it certainly made a boy's life very interesting.

A lot of incendiary bombs were dropped at different times, and on one occasion Dad went out after a raid when there were a load of incendiaries burning to the east of us. I remember looking out of the bedroom window and in the dark night some distance away could see flames in several places. My eldest brother Stan went out with Dad and when they were cycling along in the dark near Neil's Cottages in one of our local lanes, Stan rode over a big bump. On looking down he saw that it was an intact incendiary, so he picked it up and brought it home as a souvenir.

Later on we found them, many undamaged, in ploughed fields. They were usually in clusters, having been dropped all together from one plane. When they fell on soft ground such as a newly ploughed field they did not land with sufficient impact to set off the detonator and with a spade it was quite easy to dig them up. We used to take them home and make them safe by unscrewing the nose cone, hitting the cap with a hammer and a nail to explode it - it was only like a large cap similar to the ones in toy guns - and take the flammable powder out of the middle of the bomb, make a pile of it and set it alight. It did not burn very quickly but it had sufficient heat to set the outer magnesium case alight if it had remained inside it. The incendiary bombs were about a foot long, and three inches in diameter, the magnesium outer case being quite thick (about half an inch) and at the back end had a simple three-vaned sheet iron fin.

One very windy, cold and clear day in the winter about 1943 we were playing with Derek Boorman down at the Old Abbey on the Bayham estate when we saw a high-flying German bomber shot down. It was probably the first time the crew of four had baled out and in the panic of leaving the plane must have forgotten how high up they were, and pulled their rip-cords immediately they got clear. With such a high wind they drifted as much sideways as they fell downwards and we watched them, as they got smaller and smaller and finally went right out of sight. We never found out where they eventually landed but it must have been a long way away and the poor fellows must have been absolutely frozen by the time they reached the ground.

I have read that the German bombs were primed when loaded onto the aircraft and from then on would explode on impact. This is in contrast to the British ones, which had to fall for a predetermined distance during which time a small propeller on the nose spun round and primed the bomb prior to impact. If this is true it explains why the German crews, if they were unable to reach their intended target, dropped their bombs on any other likely target before leaving England so that they would not have the fear of landing back at base with a load of primed bombs.

In February 1944 at night we had a Heinkel 177 circling low down, on fire. It came round past us at least twice, each time seemingly lower, still well alight, and suddenly plunged down, exploding in the direction of Lamberhurst. I was hanging out of the sash

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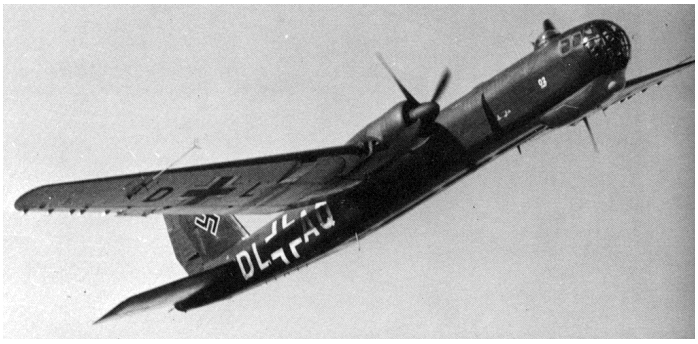
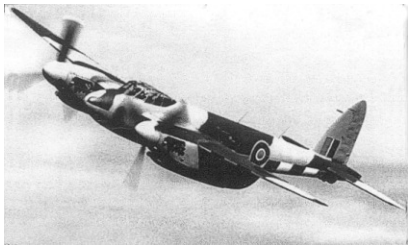
window in the bedroom and within about five seconds felt the shock wave from the explosion and heard the tremendous bang.

We will never know what happened - possibly the crew were trying desperately to get the fire out, and did not have enough height to bale out and were trying to save their lives by gaining height before attempting to bale out, but the crew went down with the plane. Next day we found it had crashed in the field at the back of the Chequers Inn in the middle of Lamberhurst. Except for a big hole in the field and debris of the plane scattered in a wide area, there was little left.

Research has shown that “On 24th February 1944 about 150 German aircraft came over England. This He 177 was almost certainly from the Luftwaffe bomber group 3/KG100, and had taken off from Châteaudun in France at 2100 hours, to bomb London. Whilst approaching the target at 12,000 feet it was attacked by Ft Lt Hall of 488 Squadron, who had taken off on a freelance patrol in Mosquito HK228 at 2000 hours. Fire broke out in the bomber, and it crashed at Lamberhurst at 22.44 hours.”



He 177 bomber



de Havilland Mosquito

In the spring of 1944, not long before D-Day we were at a meeting of the Young Farmer's Club, to which both my younger brother Tony and I belonged, along with several of our friends. We were at Furnace Mill Farm half way between Lamberhurst and Hook Green and Mr Marshall, the farmer there, was just opening the meeting outside his farmhouse when one of a group of Horsa troop-carrying gliders being towed by Halifaxes broke loose. It was not very high and obviously had to find somewhere quickly to land, having lost its motive power. It circled and then made an approach to its selected landing spot and disappeared behind trees.

Very much to Mr Marshall's annoyance we all leapt on our bikes and hurried off in the direction of the glider. We found it without much difficulty, safe and sound in the large field to the west of Skence Wood on Wickhurst Farm. It was a bit smelly inside (to say the least) as most of the soldiers who were in it had been suffering from air sickness. Talking to the pilot when we arrived, he said that he had put the glider down in the nearest big field he could find - and it certainly was a large one. It was there for a week or so before being broken up and removed, and provided us with a lot of amusement, as the rather bored soldiers who took turns guarding it were quite happy for us to sit in the pilot’s seat and operate the very basic flying controls. The Horsa was beautifully constructed, all in wood, the fuselage of beech, and presumably the wings

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were also of wood, all of it fabric covered. It was a pretty flimsy aircraft for those men to go to a major battle in.

Some time before D-Day we had a lot of Canadian soldiers staying for a couple of days on the common by our house, sleeping in tents and in their lorries. They left one night, and next day I was pottering around where they had been, when I found an officer's swagger cane, nicely made with a thin leather covering on it. I took it home, and kept it in the living room. A week or two later I was handling it and it occurred to me that it was quite heavy, and looking more closely realised that there was a slit in the leather cover, a few inches from one end. Holding the stick in both hands, I pulled, and out came a vicious-looking thin steel blade. It was not just an officer's swagger cane, but a very lethal weapon.

The blade was highly decorated with scrolls and leaves engraved along its length on both sides, and must have been an expensive item. The officer who lost it during their departure in the dark was no doubt very annoyed when he realised he had left it behind. What happened to it after the war? My father in his wisdom threw it on the dump, along with my Hurricane machine gun, the incendiary bombs, a 20 mm canon shell and the pieces of bomb and shell shrapnel and aircraft bits we had collected!

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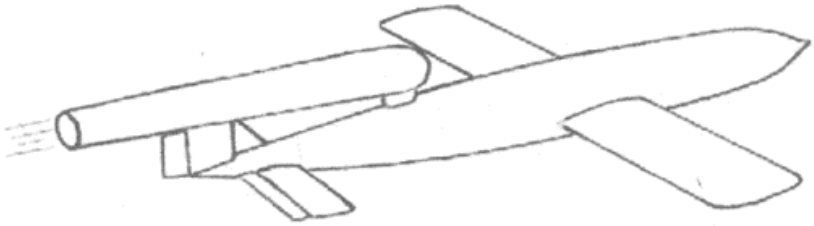
DOODLEBUG DAYS



In 1944 we were right in the firing line for the "Doodlebugs" as we called the German V1 pilotless flying bombs. These were driven by a simple "Ramjet" motor, and came over at fairly low altitude aimed mainly at London. They had a very distinct roaring noise, which could not be mistaken for anything else.

We had many hundreds fly over during the few months that they were being launched by the Germans from Northern France and Belgium. At first there were a lot of anti-aircraft guns around the area, including "our" gun-site at Hook Green, where there were a couple of Bofors. One day I was with another boy, playing at the camp, and I remember how difficult it was when an aircraft came over to follow it with the gun. We were both sitting on the operators' seats, placed on either side, one having the handles to turn to raise and lower the barrel while the other had the handle for traversing round and round. To us it seemed very difficult to co-ordinate the two functions. Anyway, while we were playing on the gun there was a report of a doodlebug coming our way, and a few moments later we heard and saw it. The soldiers got us down into their slit trench quickly and were preparing to fire the guns when they realised that a Hawker Tempest was chasing it. We watch as the doodlebug approached, and saw the fighter come up behind and give it a short burst of canon fire. Nothing happened. Closer, and another burst of canon fire. Still nothing. Closer still and yet another burst, and in a sudden black cloud of smoke, the doodlebug disintegrated with a tremendous explosion. We all thought that the Tempest had gone with it, but to our relief he appeared straight out of the black cloud, apparently unharmed. He did a quick victory roll and flew off.

Just down the lane from us there was a little terrier dog who started barking a long time before we could hear the Doodlebug. His ears were very sharp, and he seemed to hate the things, and as he did not usually bark a lot, he was a good indication to us that another one was coming our way.

One evening at dusk, Tony and I were in the house, Mum and Dad having gone for a walk, when we heard a Doodlebug on its way towards us. Being upstairs it was natural to lean out of the window and have a look. We soon saw it roaring steadily on its way coming directly towards us. Then a few moments later a Tempest came fast up behind it. The plane got up fairly close to the Doodlebug and then we watched fascinated as the plane's wings started to blink with bright lights on its wings' leading edges. He was

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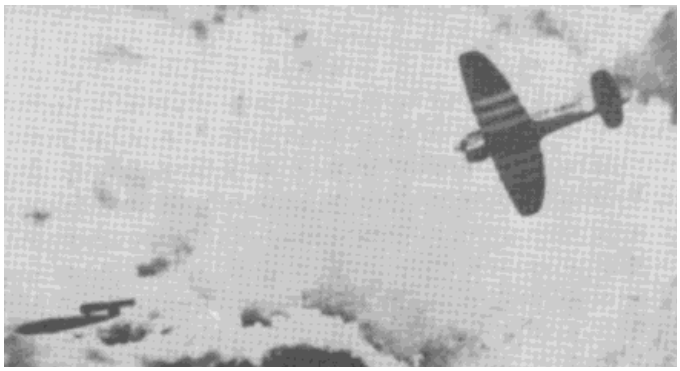
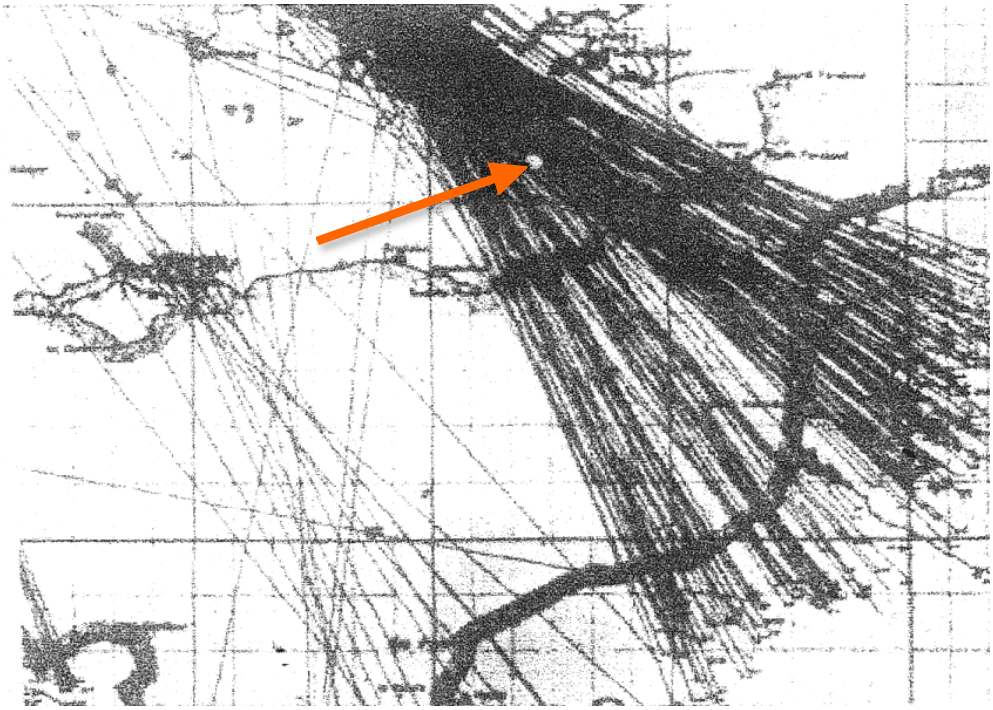
firing his guns, and to see the guns flickering like that could only mean that the cannon shells were going to be very, very, close to us! Several of the canon shells could be heard hitting the pine trees by the house and one landed in the middle of the path at the front of the house.

As it was still just about light we dug down at the spot where the canon shell hit the path, and about a foot down found the 20 mm canon shell. Luckily it was a tracer, and hence perfectly harmless and was a good souvenir to remind us of a near miss. I do not recall what happened to the doodlebug - it must have carried on past us, no doubt to be shot down soon after it had gone overhead.

A Tempest chasing a V1





The tracks of V1's on their way towards London.
The arrow indicates the position of Hook Green. No wonder we saw so many.

Two friends, "Mot" [Maurice] Brabon and Derek Boorman were not so lucky. Derek's father worked at the forge at Little Bayham and Mot, aged about 14, was employed by him. Mot and Derek had somehow got hold of a twenty-millimetre canon shell and had taken it up to the forge and clamped it in a vice. Mot was trying to unscrew the nose cap when it exploded. Unfortunately Derek was standing to one side of the workbench and received a lot of the shrapnel, mostly into his abdomen. Mot was

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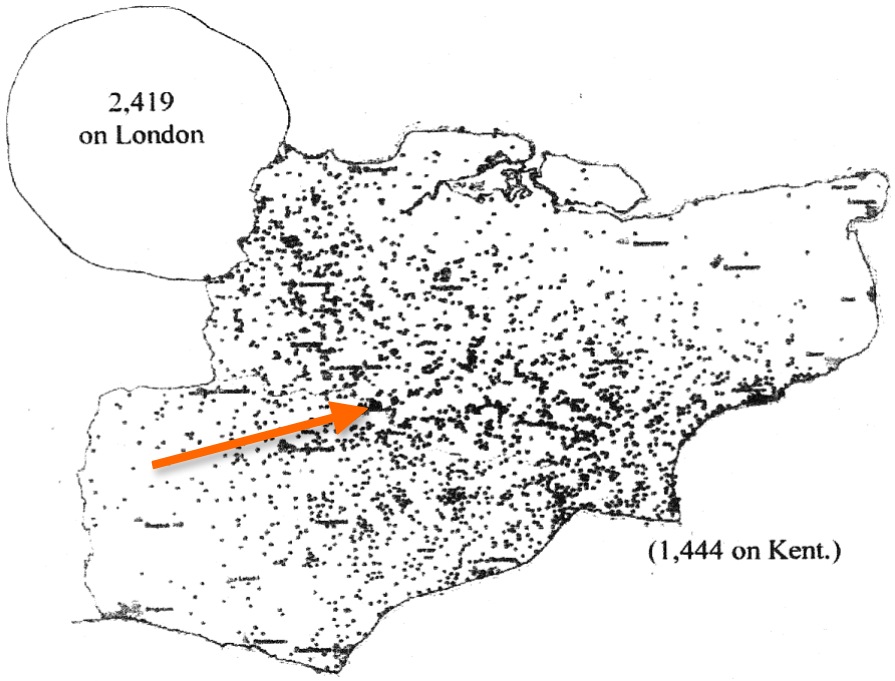
less hurt as the vice protected him more. They were in hospital for some time I believe - Derek the longest, being the worst hit, but both made a full recovery.

On one occasion at school in Tunbridge Wells, our form was in the Biology lab, at the top of the building with three flights of steel-capped stone stairs to go down, when we heard, unannounced a Doodlebug approaching. The sound of its engine grew louder and louder and then suddenly stopped. The teacher very calmly said "Well boys there is nothing we can do in the time before it crashes so, we will sit here and wait". Looking back it must have been a strain on the teacher, wondering if the Doodlebug was going to land near enough to kill us, but we were fortunate, and when the bang of the explosion arrived we thought it was at least half a mile away. The lesson then continued as if nothing had happened.



Where the V1's crashed in Kent and East Sussex. (From the K & S Courier)
The arrow indicates the position of Hook Green.

About this time the new jet-engined aircraft were coming out, the Gloster Meteor and the de Havilland Vampire. These aircraft were faster than any of the piston-engined types, which by then had reached the peak of their development. I witnessed an event, which I later read about when I was in the RAF and had access to some very interesting books about the war. There was a description of the incident when one of the early Meteors was intercepting a Doodlebug when its guns failed. The pilot then inched his machine close under the side of the Doodlebug so that one of his wingtips was under one of the Doodlebug's wings and the violent reaction of the airflow caused the Doodlebug to flip over onto its back and crash to earth. There was no need for the wings to actually touch despite some stories, which I have read. The RAF account said that "the Doodlebug landed in open country near Tunbridge Wells", which would be a fair description of the country around Hook Green. We probably saw two more Doodlebugs brought down by aircraft in this manner but it certainly was not common - the risk to the planes and pilot was too great.

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One Doodlebug crashed and exploded near the road just before the first Bartley Mill turning as you start to climb up into Bayham woods from Little Bayham. It knocked a large pine tree down about ten feet above the ground and subsequently was sawn off at ground level. Around 1980 I went with my sons Neil and Paul to the site and raking around in the dead leaves found the tree stump quite easily, so knew I was looking in the right place. A further ten or fifteen minutes' search rewarded us with a piece of Doodlebug shrapnel about eight inches long. It still hangs up in the garage, varnished to prevent it rusting any more.

Another Doodlebug landed near the Vicarage in Bayham Woods. This one seemed not to have exploded as violently as they normally did because I remember seeing the spherical compressed-air containers wrapped in hundreds of feet of steel wire lying near to the main wreckage. The compressed air was used to drive the motors in the gyroscopic flight control system and also the control surfaces.

The smell of crashed Doodlebugs was somewhat different to an ordinary aircraft probably because they had far fewer different types of materials in their construction. For the first few days after they had crashed the smell was probably of the explosive chemicals but this slowly disappeared and there was only a vague taint of something slightly sinister in the air around the site.

(In 1999 until 2006 I spent five enjoyable weeks in Northern France looking for some of the 300 launching sites of the V1, and wrote up what was remaining of 90 of them. It was very interesting to find what remained, and is the subject of a booklet I put together afterwards.)

One incident which was not very funny at the time - in fact I must admit to being frightened - was when I had visited Gordon Potter, a friend from school who lived on the Mayfield road about a mile from Frant. It was probably the late summer of 1943, when Eridge Park, a very large area of open parkland, which extended right to the road by Gordon’s house, was an Army training ground. It was out-of-bounds to all civilians for safety reasons, but as far as we were concerned that was not important.

We were on top of a small hill walking through bracken which was a bit taller than we were, when there were some bangs from a near-by hill, and a few seconds later we had mortar bombs coming down very close to us. Looking up, they could be clearly seen falling towards us. When fired from the tube they describe an arc, flying up until they reach a certain height, then descending under the influence of gravity, hopefully onto their target. No doubt the soldiers, being about a quarter of a mile away did not know we were there - which we weren’t, very quickly! It was lucky for us that we were not hit, as a bomb would have killed us outright, and we were also lucky that they were smoke bombs instead of high explosive. I do not recall going to the park again after that incident.

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During 1944 we saw many American aircraft during the day, most of the formations being four-engined B17 Flying Fortresses, with a fair number of B24 Liberators. They always had fighter escorts, Lightnings, Mustangs or Thunderbolts being commonly seen with them. One early morning in 1944 we were setting out for school when two large groups of American bombers, all maintaining good formation, approached one another at an acute angle, the two leading aircraft exchanged Verey-pistol signals (radio silence would have been the order of the day), one group fell in ponderously behind the other, engines working hard to gain more height. We started counting them, but they slowly went out of sight as we passed 700 of them, so there could have been up to one thousand four-engined bombers in one huge armada, off on a major raid, possibly involved with D-Day preparations, softening up the enemy. What a sight it was, with the fighter escort of another a hundred or more planes above the bombers, and the sound of thousands of engines and propellers. Such a sight will never to be seen again.

Although we were not near the American airfields, their aircraft had to pass over the south or east of England to get to their targets on the continent, and naturally had to return the same way. Many of them were action-damaged, with holes showing through their flying surfaces. Several of us were playing near Neil's Cottage, on the lane from the bottom of Hook Green Hill and Free Heath, when a Flying Fortress was coming towards us quite low, with very extensive damage, holes in the wings and tail plane, and one engine stopped.

We watched as it slowly approached, with the propeller of the stopped engine hanging slightly out of alignment. When it seemed to be more or less overhead, the propeller suddenly increased its angle, and then fell off. Its flight was interesting, partly rotating, and at the same time tumbling round and round. There was not much we could do but watch, as it was hard to see where it might fall, and anyway there was not much time.

It landed on the edge of a hop garden, about two hundred yards away from us. One blade was stuck firmly into the ground, and as each blade was about seven feet long, it towered above us when we ran over to it. We were delighted, thinking that we now had a really good war souvenir. However, much to our regret, a party of service personnel came a few days later and took it away.

Around the time of D-Day in 1944 there were a lot of low-flying aircraft around, particularly Mustangs, which would fly over at very low altitudes, presumably perfecting their Army ground-support role. As children we had acute hearing, and as they approached had a few second's warning. Dad often used to be working in the garden, but did not hear them coming until, with a tremendous roar of powerful engines they flew overhead. They were so low that we had a fleeting glimpse of the pilot's face. Dad was startled out of his wits for a brief second, and would shake his hand and swear in the direction of the plane's departure. We laughed, of course, but not loud enough for him to hear us.

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I do not remember why we looked towards Wadhurst one day in 1944, but we saw a Mustang diving vertically under full power, and a parachutist drifting down nearby. What happened to the Mustang is still a mystery. There must have been a reason for the pilot to leave the aeroplane, and we can only assume that something pretty drastic happened to his controls. It dived at high speed, and disappeared behind trees, but counting the seconds before we heard a bang, and a few seconds later, smoke rising, we had a very good idea of where it had come down.

Jumping onto our bikes, we headed for Wadhurst, and in a short time found where it had crashed, in the middle of a wood mostly of fir trees, on a steep slope. There was not a lot of aircraft to be seen - it had buried itself very deeply, such was its speed under full power in a vertical dive. As far as we know, the pilot was safe and unhurt. In the 1970s, a member of a wartime aircraft recovery association asked me if I knew of this Mustang crash, and luckily it was no problem to work out where it was. How much was recovered I do not know.

Approximate positions of various incidents during the war.

The single dots are bombs
1 String of bombs including Bull Lane Cottages,
2 Bomb in river, **3** Bomb in road, **4** Aluminium bomb,
5 Oil bomb (not ignited), **6** HE bomb in pathway.
The four dots indicate incendiary bomb clusters.

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Crosses are aircraft crashes
1 Me 109 (1940), **2** Horsa glider (1944),
3 Hawker Hurricane (1940), **4** Me 110 (1940), **5** V1 (1944), **6** V1, **7** V1
8 He 177 bomber, **9** V1
Other episodes might well have been forgotten.

In many ways we were lucky to have been brought up during WW2 in Kent.

It was an exciting time for us children, with lots of things going on, and although the food rations were not exactly going to fatten us up, we did not go hungry. There was a very co-operative attitude amongst almost all of the population, each helping the other, which sadly seemed to largely evaporate when peacetime returned.

After the clothing and food rationing which we endured during my formative years, I still feel slightly surprised to walk into a supermarket and buy anything I need.

How lucky we are now.

Robert Geoffrey Dancy November 2009

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"WARTIME IN KENT" – A CHECK ON SOME OF THE DATA.

To check on the accuracy of my memories of the Battle of Britain in 1940, and the V1's in 1944, some research was undertaken in 2014. For the Battle of Britain, an assumption was made that we could have seen an aircraft crashing within 10 miles of Hook Green, remembering that there would have been a conspicuous trail of smoke on the way down, and a big pall of smoke rose up from the site of the crash.

In a book, "Aircraft Casualties in Kent, 1939 to 1940", (ISBN 0948193 50 6), there were listed 85 aircraft crashes within a 10 mile radius of us. This was only in Kent, and as we were barely half a mile from the Sussex border, about the same number would have crashed in that county, within sight of us. It is therefore reasonable to add another 80 in Sussex, making a total of about 160 planes crashing in our vicinity. Almost all of them occurred in the ten weeks between the middle of August and the end of October, showing how intensive the action was at that time in 1940.

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In the case of the V1's, an assumption was made that the V1's (Doodlebugs) would have only been visible up to a distance of 4 miles, as they were quite small, and did not usually leave a trail of smoke when they were shot down. A map of Kent showing where they crashed, produced by the local newspaper, the Kent and Sussex Courier was used.

The map only included the V1's, which crashed in Kent, so it was necessary to add an estimate of those in Sussex, giving a total of about 66, which crashed and exploded within 4 miles of Hook Green in the few months of the campaign. Those that were not shot down, but passed within four miles of us en route for London were estimated to have been about 600, many of which we would have seen, as much of the doodlebug campaign was during the school summer holidays.

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The conclusion reached was that the memories were very close to the truth, but no doubt with quite a few incidents completely forgotten.

R G D August 2014

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