

CHAPTER 14: BATTLE OF BRITAIN.

The western end of The Battle of Britain took place partially over West Dean Park and the surrounding areas.

I remember around noon time, one particularly nice and sunny clear-skied summer's day during school holidays. I was returning alone on foot from one of my excursions up to the St. Roche's Arboretum and walking across the Park Field right in front of West Dean House. Suddenly, all hell started to break loose in the sky overhead of me and towards the English Channel coast, which was about twelve miles away, there was a roaring of twin engine German bomber planes and single engine fighter planes, coming from the South-South East, diving and weaving and Flak explosions from Bofor's anti aircraft guns were occurring all around them. This was I believe, although I cannot remember precisely, the 'infamous' concerted attack by a large force of German aircraft, (mostly Heinkel He 111's and some Messerschmitt Me 110's and 210s) and fighter planes (Me 109f' and Fokker Wolfe's 190.). It was reputed to be a force of over 200 war planes. It was probably the heaviest Battle of Britain air raid ever executed, which took place on the 18th. of August 1940. This was intended to decimate the British fighter 'dromes and all minor 'air strips', all along the South Coast of England, from Kent to West Sussex, including some bases near to us, such as: Tangmere, Ford, Westhampnett, Funtington, Thorney Island, Goodwood and Poling and Trundle Radar installations being among the targets. The British fighter plane bases were distributed in multiple locations to strategically separate them as targets.

When the German planes crossed the coast and just inland they were met with an onslaught of the anti aircraft ground guns and black and grey smoky flak explosions littered the blue sky. I was standing still when a menacing snake like hiss passed down right in front of my face and plopped and disappeared into the turf a couple of inches in front of my toes. I felt with my finger in the hole made in the dirt and located something metal and warm to the touch. I dug down with the sheath knife that I always carried and excavated a two pound brass nose cone of a Bofor's shell. That was a near miss that was! I took the treasure home and put it into my war collection but My Dad confiscated it. He said: "it was still explosive. " When the ground anti-aircraft firing stopped; dangerous in air battles to friend as well as foe, Spitfires and Hurricanes were waiting for them high above. They had been forewarned by Radar and perhaps the broken

Enigma code and had 'scrambled'. The pilots ran and had jumped into their planes. They swooped down on the invading air force; sheltered by the bright sun behind them. This concerted and organized tactic created havoc among the German air fleet, consisting of the bombers and their protective fighter planes. They dived and scurried and scattered this way and that to escape the wheeling, swerving, diving and climbing British fighter planes. One had the feeling that engines and airframes were being strained to their limits by the sounds of the roaring engines and the moaning and whining of the maneuvering aircraft, looping, stall-diving and acute darting this way and that. White vapor trails crisscrossed the clear blue sky. There were frequent bursts of staccato sounding machine gun firing. Pretty soon I saw two single engine planes falling out of control, one pointing straight down in a dive and another like a falling leaf side to side. They were way over beyond St. Roche's Arboretum.

Two white mushroom canopied parachutes opened with inert black bodies swinging. They were probably from the doomed fighter planes and they slowly drifted and swung to the ground miles away behind the trees. I could not tell if these downed planes were German or British, they were too far away. However, one Messerschmitt Me 210 a 1, I did see over head, suddenly started diving with blue-grey smoke pouring in a trail behind. It fell making that peculiar ever increasing moaning whine of a crashing plane at about fifteen degrees angle towards the North and I estimated it crashed about two miles away. No one parachuted out.

There were people dying up there in the sky, which was hard to comprehend and brought home the fact that the war was now "on our doorstep" so to speak. I noted the approximate location of the downed aircraft and determined that later in the day I would go and look for it.

Every so often there would be the sound of the thump and bump of distant bombs exploding on the ground. Nearer to me, series of bullets thudded into the ground. I started running to home, which was about two hundred yards away, across the field and through the farm buildings; all the time machine gun bullet shell cases fell around me, with clipping sounds as they hit the leaves and branches of the beech trees and some hit the roofs of the farm buildings and fell off. I was never so glad to arrive home, safely, scared but unscathed and without injury. After about 30 to 45 minutes all sounds of battle and chaotic aircraft noise stopped, almost as quickly as it had started. The German bombers unloaded their bombs and those that survived, fled home with their fighter escorts, the latter only had enough fuel to stay over England for

about 45 minutes. I understood that the British fighter planes harried, chased and strafed them all the way back, across the English Channel.

After the war I read and learned that the reason why the British fighter planes could be ‘scrambled’ before the German planes arrived in Britain was because the German ‘Enigma’ code had been broken by the ‘boffins’ at Bletchley House and the British intelligence could collect wireless Morse code transmissions from German air bases and therefore knew when their war planes were taking off in Europe to attack Britain. It was officially revealed much later that the Germans were over confident of their imagined unassailable ‘Enigma’ encoding machine and slavishly believed it could never be ‘cracked’; they remained in denial for the whole of the war and the British and their allies managed to keep their power of interception and interpretation intact. Some commentators have said this single contribution was a major advantage in winning The Battle of Britain and the war as well. After the war I did National Service as a conscript in The Royal Air Force and for a time worked at The Central Signals Area, which was nearby to Bletchley Park, where I was billeted. The Enigma code breaking was no longer a secret by that time. Although much of the wireless receiving and transmitting systems were still in position and used for the Cold War. However, that is part of my story for later publication.

Late in the afternoon on the same day of the described air battle, I cycled in the direction of where the Messerschmitt Me 210 a 1 had dived and crashed. Actually, it was further away than I estimated. I found the crash site at East Droke hamlet, about three miles away from home. It was on the South side of the road in a hillside copse of chestnut and scrub oak trees and it was easy to locate because of the acrid stink of smoke hundreds of yards away. I walked up the slope and stood in the middle of the devastation. This military had not yet arrived to clear up the site; I imagine that the aftermath of a very heavy Battle of Britain day had left a large number of crashes to attend to and that was keeping them busy. This was normally a very remote country spot with hardly any vehicles using the road and a couple of lonely cottages half a mile away. Most people were staying indoors after the traumatic war events of the day.

It was a tranquil summer evening, no wind stirred the trees and little wisps of smoke managed to emerge from the desecrated copse ground. I remember standing, mesmerized by the freakish ambient conditions. I was just over 11 year’s old and the deep impressions of the catastrophe are stamped on my sub-conscious mind forever. The acrid smells and the disturbing complete silence: no country sound of the Chaffinch, the poo poo of the Woodpigeon or the

roosting cry of the pheasant. The sights of deer or rabbit were missing. This feeling of isolation amongst disaster, was emphasized by observation of what happens when a plane crashes head on into the ground; everything explodes into small fragments and the bits are flung every where. Heavy parts like the engines are thrust and buried into the ground and the former occupants are burst into pieces.

While standing alone and immobile, in awe for a while, taking in the atmosphere of the event, I spotted a nice leather flying helmet and thought what a great find for my collection; when I went to pick it up and turned it over, I discovered it was only one side of a helmet and further more it contained part of a person's bloody skull and some brain inside. Then I looked around in more detail and observed more bits of people, including, hanging in a bush, a forearm with a glove on the hand. Suddenly, with earnest desire, I wanted to get out of that macabre place but not before I had gathered some 300mm bullets and cannon shell part-belts of ammunition. I arranged them over my bike frame and took them home with contrasting feelings of exhilaration and doubt in possessing such amazing trophies, for albeit, in retrospect, it was an illegal and dangerous act. At the same time, my reflective innate depression for the violent circumstances I had witnessed was profound at the time and is with me to this day.

My journey home in the evening on my bicycle was remarkable; I travelled through three villages and I don't believe I saw anyone or a moving vehicle: everyone, it seemed, had scurried home and was staying indoors. The events of the day had probably traumatized most people. A German invasion was promulgated and they may have thought this was its beginning. People were probably glued to their radios listening to updates and warnings from the day's air battle proceedings.

Hitler was known to be planning the invasion of Britain under the code name "Sealion" and had hundreds of barges berthed from Hamburg to Dieppe in France. However, the Royal Air Force devoted a large part of its bombing force in destroying those barges, with great success and this formed a major consideration in Hitler's decision, not to invade Britain: this was supported by Goering having to tell Hitler that his protective fighter planes had suffered heavy losses in The Battle of Britain.

In my shed at home I studied the bullets and cannon shells I had collected and found that each of the bullet and cannon heads were marked with a colour, except one; red for explosive, blue for a tracer and green for armour-piercing. Four types in all. My army engineer friends at

The Bothy billet, gave me this enlightening information. They warned me of dire possibilities regarding the handling of the objects but did not report me. No one talked loosely, every one accepted that these were dangerous times for all people; including it seemed, young willful boys.

At my bench in the shed at the back of the house, I carefully took out the heads of the 300 mm caliber bullets; making sure I did not tamper with those which were explosive or tracer: then I removed the cordite which was in the form of 'spaghetti' of a deep honey colour and packed tightly straight and parallel with each other. The 22 calibre cannon shells I kept for a couple of years, until I got a metal drill and I drilled holes in the sides of the case and emptied out the gun powder. With all this explosive stuff and a box of matches, I was able to make my own fireworks. NB: There were no children's fireworks available during the war years. Much later when I was an electrician's apprentice I took off the copper casing of the armour piercing cannon shell heads and they were such hardened metal, I used them for centre 'popping' starter dents when drilling metal.

Another incident when I was a about twelve year's old, involving myself and munitions, was going to the firing range in Kingley Vale near the hamlet of West Stoke a few miles away from my home. I had heard that there were some good armament relics to be found there. This place was used as a military gunnery range. It was amazing that there were no guards posted at this dangerous location. However there was danger and risk every where in this time of war, as I believe I am tending to describe for the reader. I cycled over and looked around; there were remains of explosive munitions in profusion, spread all over the ground. This included some complete, unexploded mortar bombs. I decided, foolishly, it would be a good idea to try and pry off an attractive fin from one of these for my collection. I clearly did not consider the danger I was in, young boys think they are immortal. So I tried to remove a fin with my double edged and pointed sheath knife. No one bothered if you carried one of these knives in those days; Boy Scouts carried sheath knives as a matter of uniform. Anyway, my knife slipped on the shiny metal and penetrated through the first knuckle joint of my left hand. In retrospect, this occurrence probably saved my life. The bomb could have exploded at any moment. I later learned that some other boys had blown themselves up in Kingley Vale, while playing with munitions. I pulled out the knife from my knuckle and used my handkerchief to bind up the wound. Then I cycled back to West Dean and visited the Village Nurse, who treated it properly.

This became another of my personal secrets. I had to concoct an innocuous event and story to cover my stupid escapade and the reason for my injury.

In the early autumn of 1940 my Mother asked me if I would cycle over to nearby Chilgrove village and pick up some special apples from a lady; a type that we did not grow. They were to be made into apple chutney. I started off about mid day and took a short cut through The Warren and a farm lane and over the hill behind. There were about three five bar-cattle gates to open and close on this trip and the lane took me past Col. Hankey's house at the top; he was a Mustard-gas-blinded veteran from the First World War. He and his daughter both lived in this isolated spot. They were in their garden; and saw me passing by, they waved and I went over to talk to them. Col. Hankey and his daughter were charming people and friendly disposed to all classes of villagers, despite their rather aristocratic characters they had no pretence of superciliousness. The daughter ushered her father every where, with her arm linked through his and was his constant eyes. One could count on them always to appear arm in arm at the village events, fetes, jumble sales and etc. More descriptions of their ilk living in the West Dean Estate are described in different places herein. I mention this meeting with them, because it delayed my journey, placing me in a certain time, place and a most intriguing war event.

I eventually arrived at the house with the apple orchard, situated behind The White Horse Inn. The lady said to me; "You must be thirsty?" Then gave me lemonade and biscuits; more delay! Then we went to the orchard and picked enough apples to fill my basket. By now it was getting dusk and I only had shaded lights on my bike because of war time black-out restrictions. Every mode of transport had these shaded lights. I then decided not to return over the hill and take the longer distance but better Macadam surfaced roads down to Binderton and back to West Dean village and home. By then it was getting dark and I travelled southwards down the fairly straight Chilgrove road.

Suddenly, speeding towards me up the valley, I heard this enormous and growing, vibrating-roar of aero-plane engines. A giant black frontal part of what seemed a monstrous two engine bomber plane appeared before my frightened eyes. It was coming directly towards me about two hundred feet high and following the road. There were tracer bullet spots of light emanating in streams out of turrets in all directions. In particular there was a line of tracers from a nose gun turret, hitting and bouncing off the road and coming at me. I dived off my bike into the roadside ditch. The bike and the apples went flying and I landed in a patch of stinging nettles,

which stung my face, hands and knees. I was still wearing shorts at eleven year's old, which was not unusual in those days.

The tracer bullets and of course, the other classes of unseen bullet heads accompanying them, that I described earlier, veered to follow me as I leapt into the ditch, went around me and missed by about a yard; thud, thudding into the ground. I imagine that the nose gunner could just see my shaded bike light on this dark and lonely road and take aim at me, because they were flying so low. Another lucky escape for me! The instant that the enemy bomber was directly overhead with its machine guns continuing to spit tracer bullets in all directions; I could make out its ominous and boding black silhouette against the already starry early-night sky; the very air was disturbed and pulsated and the ground shook from the impact of the engine's noise. It was over in a few seconds but it seemed like an age. A smell of burnt Kerosene fuel was in the air, as rapidly the sounds of the plane progressed and retreated up the valley, until they were gradually lost in the distance.

It was not uncommon for the German planes to fly low to avoid Radar surveillance. Another ruse some enemy planes performed when they found the Portsmouth Naval Dockyard barrage and defenses were too formidable; was to turn away into quiet country areas and unload their munitions and then return home. Perhaps saying, "Mission accomplished!" In German, of course.

In the ensuing darkness I retrieved my bike and basket from the ditch and managed to find enough apples to half fill my basket. I then cycled towards home as fast as possible. Down to Binderton and back to West Dean village. During this latter journey from the direction of Portsmouth about ten miles away, there were now heavy bombing sounds and rapid fire anti aircraft response noises filling the night air, searchlights waving around the dark void above seeking targets, accompanied by constant flashes lighting up the night sky to the West-South-West.

I was never so glad to reach home but was most distraught because most of the apples had been lost however, my Mother reassured me and said she was just glad to see me home, when I had been missing for so long during the active evening attacks.

The foregoing story did not end there; the very next day my Dad told me that a German Junkers 188 bomber had crashed in a field at the top of Chalk Pit Lane, between Colworth Farm and the Home Farm Double Barns. This was undoubtedly the same plane that had machine

gunned me the night before, the crash location was directly in the line of travel the plane was taking when I saw it flying over me. I got on my bike and rode up to the crash site to look it over. There were very large gouges in the ground across a newly mowed field on the top of the hill. The plane had obviously hit a high-voltage electric metal pylon; one of the metal legs was distorted from the impact. There were tiny bits of the plane all over the field but the military had cleared away most of the debris and there were not much of interest to me. I followed a trail of gouged ground and at one point stepped on a soft-earth-patch, this caused a late air crew member's intestines to squelch up out of the ground. Another shocking experience for a youth! Obviously this was a non essential part of the body clean up that had been buried.

However, walking about 200 yards further and entering a forest adjoining the field, I came across an army encampment; I believe there was a camouflaged anti-aircraft gun placement nearby. Surprise, surprise; I looked into their cookhouse through a big hole in the wall and sitting in the middle of the floor was a large aero-plane engine. When planes crashed level along the ground, the engines because of their great weight and size, travelled some distance ahead of the main fuselage crash linearly and with extra inertia force. Then soldiers suddenly appeared and told me in no uncertain language to go home.