

LUFTWAFFE IRRITANTS

Low Level Airfield Attacks: 1940

MAIN IMAGE:
Low-level
sortie viewed
from the
cockpit of a
He 111.

THE FIRST attack against an airfield during the Battle of Britain to result in an RAF casualty occurred on 4 August 1940. Sgt Norman Dougal of 30 Maintenance Unit at RAF Sealand, near Chester, was injured in an air attack probably carried out by a Heinkel He 111 of I Gruppe, Kampfgeschwader 27 (I/KG 27), four aircraft from this unit having been briefed to carry out attacks in the west of Britain. However, the first major attacks against

RAF airfields began on 12 August 1940 with Lympne, Hawkinge, Kenley and Manston receiving the Luftwaffe's attention. The following day, known as 'Eagle Day', would be an even worse one for the RAF. Unopposed, Junkers 87 Stuka dive bombers of IV (Stuka)/Lehrgeschwader 1 attacked the Coastal Command airfield at RAF Detling in Kent, killing 24 personnel from the Station and from 53 and 500 Sqns as well as the Station Commander, Gp Capt

Edward Davis AFC. A further 42 personnel were wounded. Air attacks were also carried out against RAF Eastchurch in Kent and RAF Andover in Hampshire where two were killed and one injured.

Similar attacks continued on 14 and 15 August 1940, but in addition to the major attacks on those days, the Luftwaffe also regularly carried out audacious attacks by one or two aircraft, the most effective of which occurred in the late afternoon of 16 August 1940.



AIRFIELDS CONFUSED

Hoping to use cloud cover, a total of 215 Heinkel 111s and Junkers 88s took off to attack airfields at Benson, Hendon, Northolt, Redhill, Brooklands, Gatwick, Heston, Heathrow, Feltham and Croydon. However, the cloud soon became a problem and many aircraft were forced to turn back. Despite this, a number of aircraft from KG 27 did make it as far as Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire, where they attacked a number of airfields including Halton and an unidentified satellite airfield

10km south-east of Oxford (probably Stanton Harcourt).

There is confusion about what happened, though. German records state that two He 111s of I/KG 27 successfully attacked RAF Benson hitting hangars, buildings and the airfield itself, destroying five aircraft on the ground and blowing up a fuel store. However, two crews, one of which was commanded by Oberleutnant (Oblt) Ottmar Dold of III/KG 27, also reported to have attacked Benson. Strangely though, Benson was not yet

fully operational and there is no record of any such attack.

Meanwhile, at RAF Brize Norton, approximately 25 miles north-west of Benson, two German aircraft (said to be Junkers 88s) appeared out of the cloud and at 1740hrs dropped 32 bombs, of which three failed to explode. Those that did explode caused major damage to 6 Maintenance Unit which included three petrol bowsers damaged, one tractor rendered unserviceable, a number of Avro Tutor aircraft superficially damaged by >>

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The period of the Battle of Britain which saw Luftwaffe attacks directed against RAF airfields is generally considered to have taken place between early August and 6 September 1940. In fact, the Luftwaffe continued attacking RAF airfields throughout the entire battle as **Chris Goss** explains.

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ABOVE:
The crew of a 9./KG55 He 111 gather around the tail of their aircraft marked with the tally of sorties flown against factories, airfields and military encampments.

RIGHT:
Lt Walter Bornschein of 4./KG2 pictured later in the war.

flying debris and a bomb crater outside No.4 hangar which, records state, was filled in within an hour. However, substantial damage was caused to 2 Service Flying Training School with Nos. 1 & 2 Hangars gutted by fire, 46 aircraft destroyed, the roof of one barrack wrecked and electricity and water supplies disrupted. In personnel terms, 61-year-old civilian worker Fred Harden was killed whilst five airmen (LAC Ernest Bunning, AC2 Roy Carpenter, AC1 John Orr, AC1 John Price and LAC Bob Talbot) and four civilians were injured. No Luftwaffe record makes mention of this devastating attack and so it seems likely that the German crews had got

the two airfields mixed up, especially when 30 minutes later, Harwell was attacked which resulted in two RAF deaths and four wounded. Again, there is no German record of any such attack but there is written evidence of an attack on an airfield 'near Reading' by three Junkers 88s.

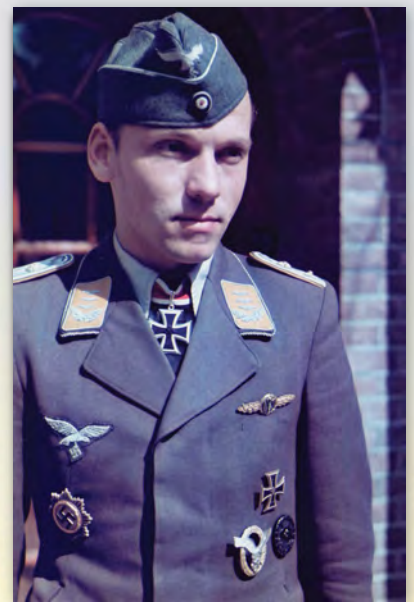
SUCCESSFUL ATTACKS

From now until 7 September 1940, airfields continued to be targeted, mostly by large formations of German bombers. But their tactics had to change following the failure of the massive attacks of 15 September 1940 and the switch of focus to London. Although the capital remained the main target for the remainder of the Battle of Britain, more attacks now occurred by night. The Blitz against cities remained the Luftwaffe's priority, but attacks against airfields were not entirely abandoned.

From early October 1940, smaller formations of German bombers used speed, weather and altitude to attack various airfields. The first such attack of note occurred at 0700 on 1 October 1940. Led by Maj Joachim Hahn, Kommandeur of Küstenfliegergruppe 606, four Do 17s took off from Brest to attack RAF Carew Cheriton in Pembrokeshire. Arriving over the airfield undetected, and attacking from 30 metres altitude, they dropped forty x 50kg bombs and 240 x incendiary bombs, after which they machine gunned the airfield before heading back to France. The attack caused some damage and the death of AC2 John Greenhalgh. Another four ground crew were injured, including Dutchman Leading Engineer C Barthen of 312 Sqn. This was one of many successful attacks for Joachim Hahn and resulted in his award of the Ritterkreuz (Knights Cross) on 21 October 1940.

The following day, a similar attack occurred at breakfast time. Between 0505 and 0555 hrs, six Ju 88s of II/Lehrgeschwader 1 lifted off from Orleans to attack the training airfield at RAF Penrhos in North Wales and the Coastal Command airfield at St Eval, Cornwall. Only two bombers successfully attacked, one at each airfield. At Penrhos, a single Ju 88 appeared over the airfield at 0715 hrs dropping four 250kg bombs from 100 metres altitude, causing slight damage and wounding Cpl Alan Pentin of 9 Bombing & Gunnery School. 45 minutes later, a Ju 88 appeared over St Eval dropping three bombs with unrecorded results but no casualties. This being the most successful attack on Penrhos to date, the RAF was forced to detach protective Hurricanes and Spitfires there as the nearest Fighter Command airfield was some distance away at RAF Ternhill, Shropshire.

Such attacks didn't just occur well away from London. At 1305 hrs on 6 October 1940, Hptm Walter Storp of II/KG 76 glided his Ju 88 towards RAF



Northolt to the west of London and from just 80 metres altitude, dropped two 500kg and two 250kg bombs hitting a hangar. He destroyed a Hurricane of 303 Sqn and damaged another two, killing pilot Sgt Antoni Siudak and AC2 Henry Stennett and wounding AC2 Kenneth Boyns. Despite 229 Sqn scrambling to intercept, Storp returned to France unscathed. It therefore came as no surprise that on 21 October 1940, Storp was awarded the Ritterkreuz, the day after the award of the Ehrenpokal (Honour Goblet); ten days later he was promoted to Major.

BUOYED BY SUCCESS

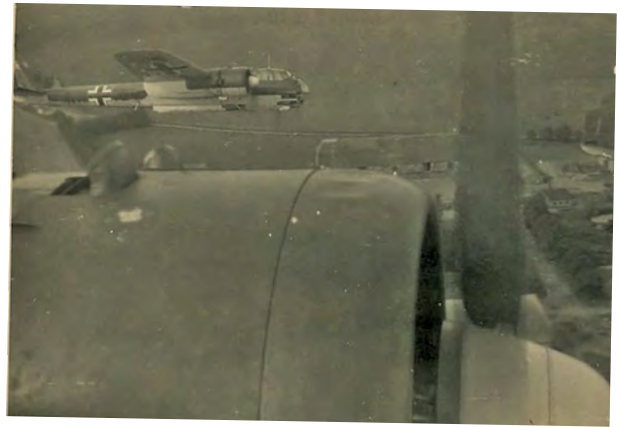
A classic example of 'irritation' attacks occurred on the evening of 8 October 1940 having had its origins five days earlier. On the evening of 3 October, five He 111s of III/KG 55 lifted off from Villacoublay near Paris to attack simultaneously at low level the airfields of Warmwell in Dorset and Ford in West Sussex.



It was hoped that attacking two airfields which were nearly 100 miles from each other would split the defences. Apparently, it did. Two He 111s appeared over Warmwell at 1915hrs at 50 metres altitude and dropped 10 bombs; 20 minutes later, three He 111s dropped 12 bombs from 40 metres altitude on Ford. The German crews were so low and so fast that they were unable to report the effects of their attacks, but at RAF Ford, bombs dropped on the 23 Sqn dispersal, killing AC 2 Bill Moon and AC1 Bill Pinder, whilst injuring another three ground crew as well as causing minor damage to buildings. Perhaps buoyed by their success, KG 55 would soon be back.

On the evening of 8 October, twelve He 111s from Hptm Heinrich Wittmer's III/KG 55 took off to attack the RAF airfields at Thorney Island, Ford, Shoreham and Tangmere in Sussex with three aircraft assigned to each target. At the same time, four groups of three aircraft from Maj Joachim Roeber's I/KG 55 took off from Dreux to attack the airfields at Yeovil, Christchurch, Warmwell and Exeter. From Maj Fritz Kless' II/KG 55, two groups of three aircraft took off from Chartres to attack Eastleigh and Lee-on-Solent airfields.

Due to poor light, the Yeovil and Exeter aggressors failed to find their target, as did the three aircraft that were assigned Thorney Island. The latter three attacked the railway line towards Portsmouth, where a number of their bombs fell at Havant; eight civilians were killed when bombs were dropped on an alternative target near Yeovil and another three were killed at Havant. At



Eastleigh, bombs fell on a balloon barrage site manned by 924 (Balloon) Sqn, killing LAC Stan Blaylock, AC2 Fred Greening and AC1 Garfield Pring as well as wounding another five. A further two civilians were killed. At Ford, the three German aircraft reported dropping at total of 42 bombs of varying calibre, destroying a 23 Sqn DB-7 (serial AX850), which became the first of what would later be called the Douglas Boston to be lost as a result of enemy action. One Blenheim was also damaged, whilst not far away at Shoreham, another 42 bombs were dropped on the airfield, railway line and town. >>

TOP: Low-level Dornier 17-Z aircraft roar in towards their target.

ABOVE: Low level over England! A image depicting a typical low-level attack sortie flown over the British countryside by a He 111 during 1940.

LEFT: Major Fritz Kless, Commanding Officer of II./KG55.



ABOVE & LEFT: A Heinkel 111 of 8./KG55 during 1940. Noteworthy is the 'three little fishes' emblem on the rudder. RAF Intelligence Officers inspecting the wreckage of the He 111 downed at Stansted Park on 8 October 1940 noted: 'On rudder is a yellow shield with three red fishes'.

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ABOVE: Officers of III./KG55 work on planning the final details of another sortie over Britain.

RIGHT: Major Joachim Hahn, the Commanding Officer of Kustenfliegergruppe 606.

FAR RIGHT: Lt Ulrich Flugge. (1940 MEDIA LTD)

BELOW: Low-level Junkers 88s.

The airfield was declared 'unusable' after the incident, and one civilian was killed in Shoreham and another five at Worthing. Apparently, the airfields at Christchurch, Warmwell and Lee-on-Solent were all successfully hit, with all strikes occurring in the space of 25 minutes.

BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION RAID

Two of the three attackers assigned to RAF Tangmere were commanded by Oblt Jürgen Bartens and Lt Ulrich Flugge, both of whom were observers rather than pilots. On board Bartens' aircraft was radio operator *Ofw* Fritz Pons who had been told by Bartens: 'It is your

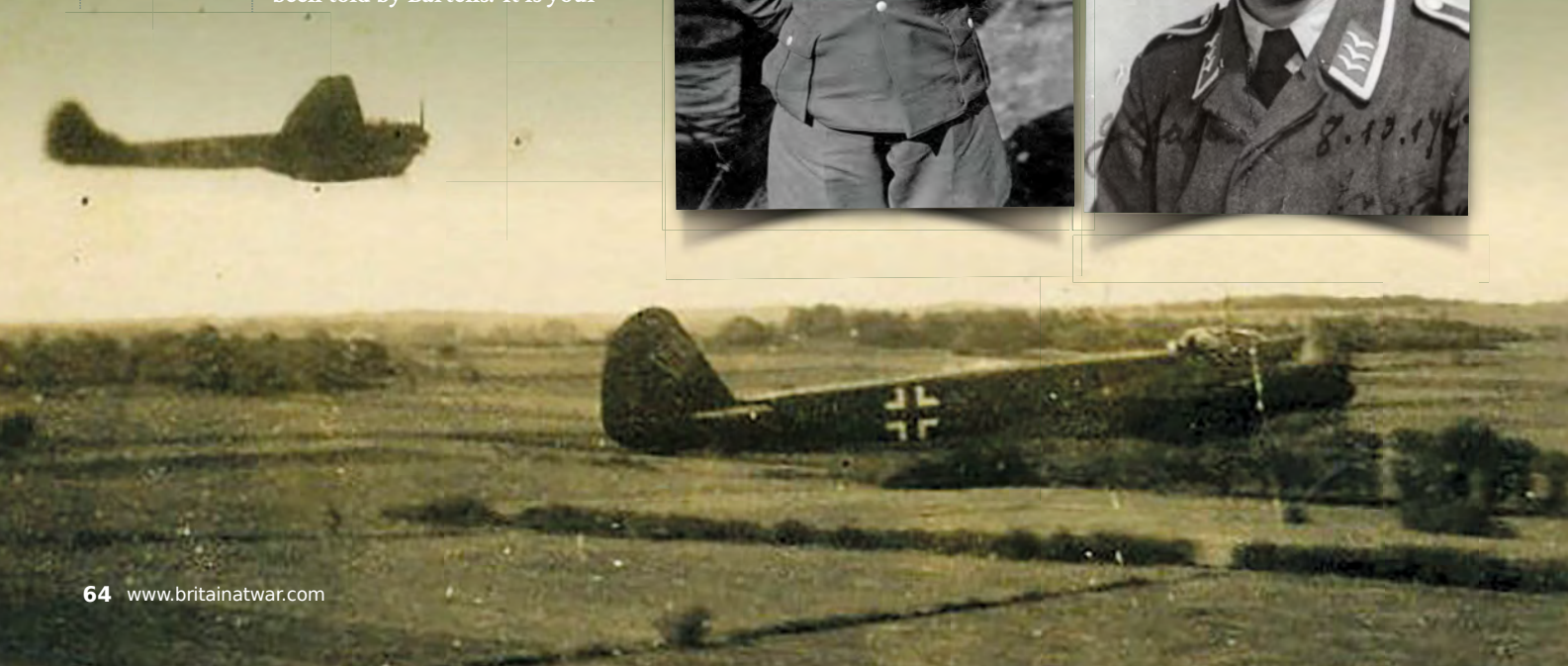
birthday, Pons. We'll raid England to celebrate!' Flying at extremely low level, they crossed the coast near RAF Thorney Island where Pons spotted what he thought was a Wellington, but was in fact a Bristol Blenheim of 235 Sqn probably flown by Flt Sgt Dick Nelson; neither aircraft opened fire but the RAF crew subsequently reported being shot at by their own anti-aircraft guns. Meanwhile, the German bombers apparently dropped 42 bombs on Tangmere, although according to records no such attack occurred. Meanwhile, the satellite airfield of Westhampnett was machine gunned; local reports show four high-explosive bombs falling at 19.20 in the parish of Westhampnett just to the south-east of the airfield but causing no damage.

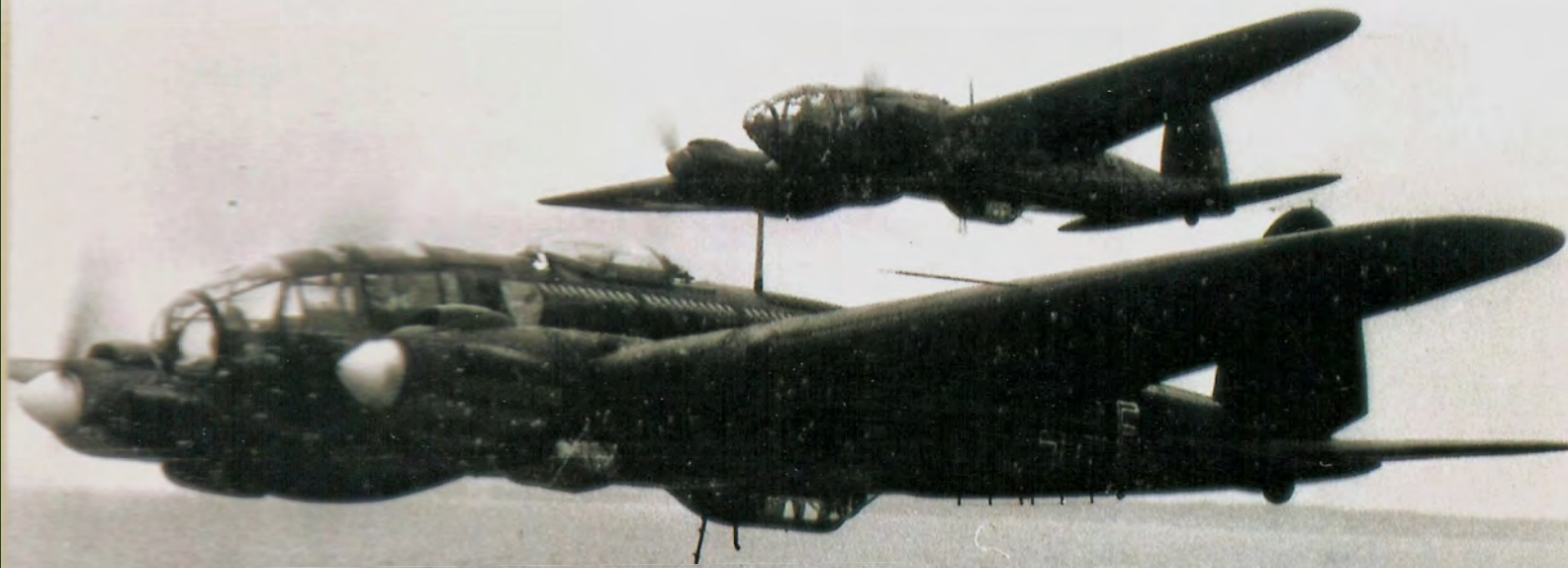
The raiders headed west out over Chichester, the German gunners now looking to shoot at any targets of opportunity before heading back to their airfield near Paris. Somewhere between Walderton and Stoughton on the Hampshire/Sussex border, however, Sgt Maurice Fancy of 391 Company, 48 (Hants) Searchlight Battery ordered his detachment to stand to and he and Gunner Frank Cruickshanks manned the sole Lewis Gun. As the three He 111s approached, they

opened fire, after which the aircraft turned away towards Rowlands Castle. Here, another detachment commanded by Sgt Tom Bridgeman opened fire with their Lewis gun. Fritz Pons noticed light flak coming up from the starboard side and opened fire from his position in the top turret. At the same time, he was aware of an explosion off to the port side of his aircraft, after which he could only see one other He 111.

Onboard the He 111 (codeS: G1+MS) the pilot, Fw Ernst Ens, struggled to keep control after the aircraft was evidently hit, but at such a low-level, he stood no chance. At Stansted House between Rowlands Castle and Emsworth, the stricken bomber collided with a tall pine tree, narrowly missing the house and its chapel, and ripping off part of its tail in the branches. The He 111 then hit the ground in front of the stately home and careered across the fields before eventually slithering to a halt, upside down, on the cricket pitch.

At nearby Westbourne, PC Sidney Reynolds watched the Heinkel's last moments and guessed it was going to crash near Stansted House. Pedalling like mad, he could see a wisp of smoke coming from the Park and four minutes later there was an almighty explosion which, it later transpired, broke every





ABOVE: He 111 aircraft of III./KG55. Note the sortie tallies along the length of the fuselage.

55 was wounded over Eastleigh, Uffz Herbert Heinzl and Uffz Josef Bogner (observer and gunner respectively) of 8/KG 55 were wounded in another aircraft over Thorney Island and, finally, gunner Gefr Herbert von dem Heyden of 9/KG 55 was also wounded in the vicinity of Thorney Island. The raid, then, had not been without cost.

LEFT: A Home Guardsman with wreckage of the He 111 downed at Stansted Park on 8 October 1940.

BOMBER COMMAND TARGETED

As winter approached, so the deteriorating weather and improved RAF defences forced low-level airfield attacks to be reduced, although they did continue with an added emphasis on Bomber Command airfields.

On 26 October 1940, for instance, RAF Lossiemouth in Morayshire was attacked at low-level by a He 111 from 3/KG 26 commanded by Oblt Georg Imholz. Hitting a parked Blenheim of 21 Sqn, the resultant explosion killed Cpl Oliver Holland and wounded five more ground crew. Shortly afterwards, either as a result of flak or the blast from its own bombs, the German bomber crashed, with the deaths of all the crew. >>

BELOW: The wreckage of Sgt Antoni Suidak's 303 Squadron Hurricane at RAF Northolt after the attack of 6 October 1940.



window in Stansted House and the chapel but luckily caused no major damage. On his arrival, he could see the remains of the aircraft blazing away but was not as yet aware of the drama that had just taken place on the steps of the house. Plt Off Gilbert Elliot from RAF Tangmere was staying there as guest of Lord and Lady Bessborough and on seeing the Heinkel crash, had rushed towards the scene to see if he could help. Local rumour was that one of the gunners opened fire on him, but it was more likely that he was seriously injured when the aircraft exploded. Elliott was taken to the Royal West Sussex Hospital but died of his wounds two days later.

Of the German crew, there was little to be found due to the ferocity of the explosion. The following morning, a torso was found and papers in the pocket showed this to be the remains of Ernst Ens, who was buried with military honours at RAF Thorney Island a few days later. The remainder of the crew,

Lt Ulrich Flügge, Uffz Johann Ehrensberger, Uffz Ernst Herber and Gefr Hans Pawlik, have no known grave and it must be presumed that their remains were buried with what was left of their Heinkel, which was pushed into the crater it had created. Three other He 111s returned with wounded crews; pilot Ofw Heinrich Struckmeier of 6/KG



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TOP LEFT: The wreck of Oblt Podbielski's Junkers 88 after being shot down at Duggleby, Yorkshire, on 27 October 1940. (1940 MEDIA LTD)

TOP RIGHT: A blackened Luftwaffe NCO's belt buckle recovered from the wreckage of the Stansted Park crash by PC Sidney Reynolds, probably belonging to Ernst Ens. (1940 MEDIA LTD)

ABOVE MIDDLE: Gefr Hans Pawlik. (1940 MEDIA LTD)

RIGHT: A low-level attack using SD-2 anti-personnel or 'Butterfly Bombs' delivered from a Junkers 88.

The next day saw a final series of lone airfield attacks in the Battle of Britain (although they did continue after the battle, weather permitting, albeit on a lesser scale). In the Do 17 unit KG 2, a number of crews were designated Zerstörerbesatzung (Destroyer Crews) and under the code name Moonlight Serenade, specifically targeted RAF bomber airfields such as Honington, Mildenhall, Wattisham and Great Massingham. In the first series of attacks during the evening of 27 October 1940, the Do 17 flown by Fw Peter Broich of 3/KG 2 attacked Honington, the crew of Ofw Walter Wolff of 6/KG 2 went for Mildenhall and the Do 17 commanded by Oblt Hubertus Piper of 8/KG 2 struck Newmarket. RAF records report four ground crew killed at Mildenhall with another three wounded, three killed plus one wounded at Honington and two wounded at Great Massingham.

Meanwhile, further north, nine Ju 88s of III/KG 30 under the code name Opera Ball were hitting Lincolnshire and Yorkshire airfields



at RAF Leconfield. These strikes did not prevent the airfields being used for attacks on German targets, while the enemy bombers did suffer casualties. One crewman was wounded in the Broich crew and the Ju 88 flown by the Staffel Kapitän of 7/KG 30, Oblt Friedrich Podbielski, was damaged by flak whilst attacking Linton-on-Ouse. It crash-landed at Duggleby where three of the crew were captured and one killed, whilst the Ju 88 flown by the Staffel Kapitän of 8/KG 30, Oblt Dietrich Marwitz, ditched off the Humber Estuary, either as a victim of flak or as a result of being damaged by three Spitfires of 54 Sqn. There were no survivors.

BUTTERFLY BOMBS

The penultimate day of lone aircraft attacks of the Battle of Britain occurred at Wattisham

in Suffolk on the evening of 29 October 1940 and ironically is believed to have been one of the most effective. It was carried out by either Ofw Hans Wolff of 6/KG 2 who attacked an airfield which had Blenheims parked on it or Lt Walter Bornschein of 4/KG 2 who attacked 'Wattingham' airfield between 1751 and 2029hrs German time. This sortie is believed to have seen the first use of SD 2 anti-personnel 'Butterfly' bombs against an RAF airfield and two armourers, Flt Sgt Bill Fisher and Sgt George Birkhead, were killed when the bombs were discovered and disturbed the next day. Flt Lt Fred Berry, the armaments officer, was wounded in the neck whilst trying to deal with them. A number of aircraft were damaged and the airfield rendered unusable for two days as the bombs had to be detonated in situ.

Lt Bornschein attacked RAF Mildenhall two nights later after which, according to his logbook, he returned to the Luftwaffe's main thrust of action; attacking London and other major cities.

It is paradoxical that the last of these attacks was one of the most effective, as over the years their impact has been forgotten, eclipsed by the major massed attacks of August and early September 1940. In terms of the Battle of Britain as a whole, they were little more than an irritation. ☺

