

A BITTERSWEET VICTORY

Tragic consequences were soon to follow as a Heinkel He 111 succumbed to the guns of a Boulton Paul Defiant over Birmingham

WORDS: STEVE RICHARDS



The take-off time of Sgt 'Joe' Bodien and his air gunner Sgt Dudley Jonas was formally logged as 01.10hrs on 10 April 1941. The 'Fighter Night' operation was to patrol over the Birmingham area at 13,000ft. The weather was very good, with excellent visibility and a nearly full moon. Cloud was five-tenths at about 3,000ft, but that wasn't likely to be a problem. With the balloon barrage in place, no aircraft would deliberately fly at such a low altitude.

Bodien's Boulton Paul Defiant I, N3387/DZ-E, of No 151 Squadron was patrolling the city in an anti-clockwise direction shortly after 01.30hrs. Almost immediately he sighted a Heinkel He 111 moving at approximately 180mph, about 450 yards away at 13,000ft. The German was flying in a north-easterly direction near Birmingham. The RAF pilot wheeled after him.

The sudden manoeuvre alerted the gunner Jonas to the fact that something was afoot. Bodien closed in to about 200 yards and dead astern but slightly lower. Jonas fired his guns for three to four seconds. Still staying below the Heinkel, Bodien positioned Jonas on the bomber's starboard beam and his gunner opened fire again, this time for around eight seconds and from a range of 30 yards. The Heinkel dived steeply to the left followed by the Defiant, 300 yards behind. At 8,000ft the German aircraft levelled off and once more Bodien drew alongside, enabling Jonas to put in a long burst of fire from 90 yards. By now the bomber's starboard engine was glowing. The Luftwaffe machine peeled off to the left and dived steeply towards the ground, pursued by the Defiant in an equally vertiginous descent.



Unteroffizier (Uffz) Müller's He 111 had arrived over the southern outskirts of Birmingham shortly after 01.30hrs. The first that Müller's crew knew about the proximity of an RAF fighter was when bullets from Jonas' Browning guns started slamming into the underside of the bomber. Feldwebel (Fw) Egon Grolig got into a prone position in the nose in order to operate the machine gun. A devastating burst of fire from the Defiant's turret shattered parts of the heavily-glazed nose, destroying instruments and killing Grolig.

In an attempt to rid himself of the fighter, Müller dropped his bombs so as to lighten the aircraft, then turned and dived to the left. He vainly tried to make sense of the instruments. Having lost 5,000ft he levelled off. More bullets poured in and the starboard engine was ablaze. The Heinkel half-rolled to the left, going into a near-vertical dive from which it



appears to have recovered, and then a spiral descent earthwards.

Müller was now down among the barrage balloons, suspended by their lethal steel cables. The Heinkel, Werknummer 1555 coded 1G+KM of 4./KG 27, struck one of these balloons (site 17, operated by No 915 Squadron) moored at Quinton southwest of the city. Shortly afterwards a piece of burning debris from the aircraft is believed to have caused a fire in a row of houses in Balden Road, which resulted in the deaths of 75-year-old Sarah Davies at number 211 and three-year-old Anthony Smith at 213.

It was time to evacuate the aircraft and Müller duly gave the order over the intercom but, like Grolig, Fw Helmut Häcke was already dead, leaving only Fw Werner Strecke to receive the order. Extricating himself

ABOVE: Sgts Bodien and Jonas with their Defiant I night fighter. Above them looms an expertly-rendered skull motif, below and behind the exhaust stack.

VIA AMANDA LOW

OPPOSITE: Not a success as a day fighter, the turret-armed Defiant proved more effective by night. It was the first night fighter type operated by No 151 Squadron.

AEROPLANE

'A devastating burst of fire from the Defiant shattered parts of the Heinkel's glazed nose'

from his seat, Müller found that his foot was trapped beneath one of the damaged pedals. He succeeded in getting his leg out of his flying boot, but removing the roof hatch was a struggle, resulting in bloody hands. Hampered by his parachute, he tried to push himself through the hatch, but with the aircraft in descent the



ABOVE: When Bodien and Jonas engaged Müller's Heinkel, they were flying Defiant N3387/DZ-E.

VIA AMANDA LOW

RIGHT: 'Joe' Bodien at the controls of No 151 Squadron Defiant N1791/DZ-K.

VIA AMANDA LOW



BELOW: An air-to-air view of a Heinkel He 111 coded 1G+KN, belonging to 5./KG 27 – sister unit to 4./KG 27, one of whose aircraft was lost to the Defiant's guns.

VIA SIMON PARRY

slipstream kept pushing him back. Somehow, he finally managed to vacate the doomed bomber, and as he fell away Müller gave his full attention to making sure that he was well clear of the stricken machine before pulling the parachute's ripcord. Strecke also was successful in getting out of the Heinkel.

As the two Luftwaffe fliers struggled to cope with their plight, the RAF Defiant crew were also experiencing alarm and confusion. Having followed the Heinkel in its dive, Bodien soon found himself down among the barrage balloons. Realising the hazard, he broke off in a frantic effort to regain height.

He could not breathe easily until he had reached the safe altitude of 8,000ft. Colliding with one of the balloon cables would almost certainly have brought his fighter down.

Later, relating the incident to his sister Vina, he wrote with some degree of understatement, "At 8,000 feet I levelled off and ran my finger round my collar, because I don't like balloons". It was then that he noticed that the guns in the turret were stationary and pointing out to port. When not in action, they would point rearwards so as not to interfere with the trim of the aircraft.



Bodien concluded that Jonas must be dead or wounded, or that he had passed out from the effects of the g-forces. He radioed his base at RAF Wittering, requesting an emergency homing course and asking that the 'blood cart' (ambulance) meet them on the tarmac. He landed back at the Cambridgeshire airfield at 02.10hrs and, with what must have been trepidation, climbed from his cockpit to inspect the turret. It was vacant.

Jonas, alarmed at the severity of the dive into the balloon barrage, assumed that his pilot had been killed or hurt. Pointing his guns sideways, he was able to slide the turret's door — located behind him — and push himself out backwards, tumbling clear of the aircraft. His parachute opened successfully. Later, he reported that he had seen the Heinkel spiralling down, resulting in a huge explosion on the ground.

Jonas floated to earth and landed uninjured. The 19-year-old must have



been shaken, but he was soon in safe hands and found himself a guest of a barrage balloon unit — ‘E’ Flight of No 915 Squadron, RAF, located close to where he landed in Kings Norton.

Just minutes after Jonas had his feet back on terra firma, Müller was floating over Quinton. As he neared the ground, it was obvious to him that he would be landing in a built-up area. In fact he dropped into a smart residential neighbourhood. Müller found himself in Barston Road. In addition to his lacerated hands and heavy bruising to his leg, he now had a slight injury to his knee.

Initially, Müller was apprehended by civilians. Then a policeman arrived who administered first aid and gave him some cigarettes. As soon as the Home Guard came, they disarmed the German. Wearing only one boot, Müller was escorted by the Oldbury Home Guard to the Danilo Cinema, which served as their post.

The Oval, Smethwick was part of a council housing estate built shortly before the war. The road was a continuous loop on a steep incline. When two fire-watchers there were alerted to a parachute descending above them in the moonlight, they feared that it was a parachute mine and dived to the ground. In fact it was Strecke, who was to have a slightly more alarming landing than that of his pilot.



Strecke landed on the front elevation of the roof of 33 The Oval, home of the Scrannage family. Will Scrannage was out fire-watching but his wife Ethel was in the shelter with a neighbour. They heard a strange swishing sound followed by a bump on the roof and tiles being dislodged. The airman's parachute had become entangled around the chimney. Strecke and a number of broken tiles slid down onto the top of the bay window.

An audience soon gathered in the road as ARP wardens and Home Guard members sought to get the hapless German down. Strecke may have felt safer on the roof, as the crowd below was awash with excitement and some hostility. Shouting and aggressive gestures were tempered by others seeking to calm the situation. Those vested with authority took charge of Strecke's rescue and arrest. Once the parachute was freed, he dropped to the ground. Strecke raised his arms in surrender even before removing his parachute harness. He had injured his foot in the landing, and soon his now-removed flying boot had become the trophy of a schoolgirl, who was gleefully telling everyone, "I've got his boot, I've got his boot!"

An air raid warden and two members of the Home Guard led this



second unevenly-shod airman away. Warden Thomas Packer was at the local ARP (Air Raid Precautions) post when Strecke was brought in. Packer said, "He had an injury to his foot and limped. He was a smart-looking man and gave his age as 22. He was

English, that two more crew members were still in the aircraft. In an attempt to describe what had happened, he said, "Machine gun — balloon cable — bad luck — glad."

The most tragic aspect of the incident was about to be revealed.

ABOVE: Uffz Rudolf Müller poses in his flying suit in front of a Heinkel He 111.

RUDOLF MÜLLER VIA PETER KENNEDY

'A crowd gathered in the road as ARP wardens and Home Guard members sought to get the German down'

not armed and offered no resistance". While gratefully dragging on a cigarette and clutching an enamel mug of tea, the young German tried to explain to Packer, in broken

The German bomber finally hit the ground in Hales Lane, another residential area not far from where Strecke had landed in The Oval.

There was a dull crump as the aircraft



ABOVE: The aftermath at the crash site in Hales Lane on 10 April 1941, with the fin of the wrecked He 111 on the left.

TOP RIGHT: Dudley Everard Charles Jonas enlisted in the Royal New Zealand Air Force as an air gunner in July 1940. He embarked for England on the troopship *Mataroa*, and on arrival was attached to No 151 Squadron.

VIA AMANDA LOW

RIGHT: Bodien was a prolific letter-writer, describing in great detail each of his air combats. How he managed to get these past the censor is anyone's guess! This extract from a letter to his sister Vina, dated Saturday 12 April 1941, describes the time immediately after he had disengaged from the combat with Müller's Heinkel.

OPPOSITE: An unidentified Defiant prepares for another 'Fighter Night' operation.

VIA SIMON PARRY

Half rolled and went down beside him but saw the balloons go by so left him in his dive and concentrated on getting out of the balloons. At 8000 I levelled off and ran my finger round my collar because I don't like balloons. Then I noticed that my guns were stationary to the port so though my gunner was dead or wounded. Got home as quick as possible and told them to have the blood sent on the tarmac. As soon as I stopped had a look in the turret. No gunner - went up to Opps and gave them the go - got the crash confirmed - a Heinkel 111K. Then my gunner rang up from a place in Birmingham called Kings Norton - he said he thought I was dead and had baled out he's the same gunner as I had for my Dornier. The score that night was 4 and one probable.



hit the rear of numbers 281 and 283. The time was 01.40.

The machine had already been on fire when airborne and now the ruptured fuel tanks caused a huge explosion, accompanied by a blinding flash. Burning fuel, bits of aircraft and chunks of masonry were flung in all directions. A pillar of flame reached skywards.

It soon became apparent that the two wrecked houses had been occupied and that the Anderson air raid shelters in the gardens were empty. In number 281, Amy Hanson (48 years old) and her daughter Doreen (24) had died. Neighbours had seen them taking pails of water out of the air raid shelter earlier in the day, but they must have considered staying in the house a better option. Mother and daughter had left their London home some time before, having been casualties of the Blitz. Doreen's marriage was planned for two weeks' time, the banns having been read for the first time the previous Sunday.



Next door at 283, two related families were victims. Thirty-seven-year-old widower Alfred Smart, with his two-year-old son Malcolm, was killed. Alfred's brother Albert was out on fire-watching duty, but his wife, 34-year-old Doris, and their sons Albert (13) and Brian (eight) also perished.

British defences managed to bring down two German bombers in the Birmingham area that night. In one case, it proved a bittersweet victory.



Steve Richards is the author of the recent book *'The Luftwaffe over Brum'*. For more information, see www.birminghamair-raids.co.uk

'JOE' BODIEN: NIGHT FIGHTER PAR EXCELLENCE

Henry Erskine Bodien was born in Hackney on 26 October 1916. Known in childhood as 'Harry' and 'Snowball', he was nicknamed 'Joe' upon joining the RAF – that he did in 1933, initially as a Halton apprentice. Bodien was accepted for pilot training and served on No 48 Squadron, Coastal Command, flying Avro Ansons from Thorney Island. Transferring to fighters, he joined No 151 Squadron on the Defiant, and in April 1942 was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. The citation read: "This officer has carried out many night patrols. As a night fighter pilot he has shown great devotion to duty and a complete disregard of danger. On one occasion, despite having trouble with his own aircraft, Pilot Officer Bodien kept up a series of attacks on an enemy aircraft for some 45 minutes and finally destroyed it."

Rapidly promoted to Flight Lieutenant and Squadron Leader, Bodien became 'B' Flight commander within No 151 Squadron, which by now flew the Mosquito. He was posted to No 21 Squadron as commanding officer, still on the de Havilland type but flying night intruder sorties.

Bodien's post-war service took some interesting turns. He stayed in the RAF and spent an exchange tour with the US Air Force in 1950-51, flying Douglas B-26 Invaders in the Korean War. On his return he became CO of No 29 Squadron, overseeing its transition to jets in the form of the Meteor NF11. During 1954, having reached the rank of Wing Commander, he transferred to the Royal Canadian Air Force. It needed night interdiction expertise for its new Avro Canada CF-100 force, and Bodien was one of several RAF men who helped provide it. He retired from the RCAF in 1965, though later he spent six years from 1972-78 as a civilian worker at Canadian Forces Base Baden-Söllingen, Germany. 'Joe' Bodien passed away in Kelowna, British Columbia, in June 1999. *Ben Dunnell*

RIGHT: Henry Erskine Bodien, better-known as 'Harry', 'Snowball' and latterly 'Joe'. VIA AMANDA LOW

