

## South London memories



**DOOMED:** the stricken German bomber falls over the Kennington skyline

Picture courtesy of the Imperial War Museum ref no: FLM 196

Inset: Eye-witness Francis Jacques who saw the plane 3581/6/S

# the day we met the enemy

**FORMER** Kennington resident Martin Smart was born in Fentiman Road but now lives in Bognor Regis with his wife and two children. He recalls the day a German airman parachuted into Kennington Oval during the Battle of Britain

**A**S A child growing up in post-war London, I was entranced and captivated by stories of World War II, particularly my mother's recollections of various incidents that occurred in London.

In more recent years, as my mother's health deteriorated, I used to sit with her when she would once again revisit those wartime days.

There were many stories – the tragedies and hardships throughout the Blitz, and then, later on, terror of the Doodlebugs (V1s) and rockets (V2s), as Hitler tried to break the will of the British people.

One incident, however, stood out for me, the day some of Kennington's civilians came face-to-face with the enemy when a German airman parachuted down into Kennington Oval.

My mother, Ethel, was 18 years old at the outbreak of war, and lived with her mother and father, and younger sisters, Dolly and Joyce, in Alverstone House, a block of council flats adjacent to the Oval cricket ground.

She recalled one day seeing an enemy parachute pass close to the flats, landing beside the cricket ground.

An angry crowd gathered as the airman was rescued by the authorities and bundled into the cricket ground for his protection. She recalled his face, a blonde man, truly Germanic but didn't know what happened to the airman. I

promised to investigate but before I could begin, my mother suffered a stroke. A week later she died of bronchial pneumonia.

Her death, last February, is the driving force behind my work and it is appropriate that the investigation into the death of

Robert Zehbe be dedicated to her memory.

To begin with I read through many books on the war in my local library, and visited the Public Record Office

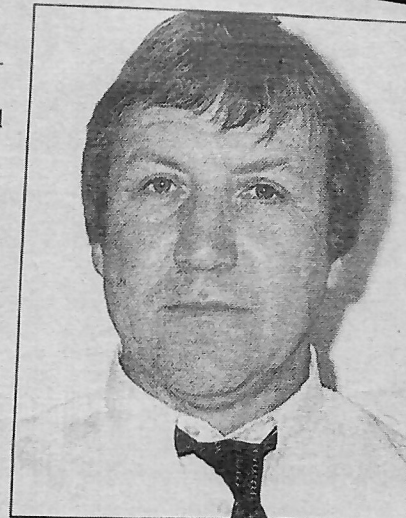
in Kew. I spoke to my aunt Dolly who recalled that it was a Sunday and I made the connection that it was 15 September 1940.

Sixty years ago, the RAF was embroiled in a battle with the Luftwaffe, for control of Britain's skies. The Battle of Britain began in July. By September, the docklands and power installations of major cities were being targeted. The turning point was 15 September 1940.

On that day the Germans launched two huge daylight raids on London.

The day began with a light mist, but soon cleared to provide fair weather. Londoners went about their Sunday business but across the Channel, the Luftwaffe was preparing its crews and planes for the first of these raids, timed for noon London time.

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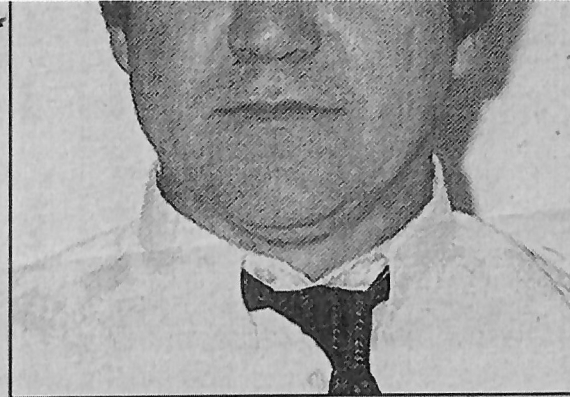
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Shortly after 10am at Beauvais, some 20 miles to the north of Paris, the 1st Gruppe of Bomber Geschwader 76 underwent final preparations. It was to join up with other squadrons for the first of the daylight raids on London. At the helm of one of the bombers, a Dornier Do 17Z (2361), was 27-year-old Robert Zehbe.

As the group crossed the English coast just south of Dover, accompanied by its fighter escorts, it met with fierce resistance from RAF fighters. The strength and preparedness of the British defences surprised the enemy. Robert Zehbe was an experienced pilot but this time his luck ran out.



### **Martin Smart**

His Dornier developed engine trouble and became an inviting target for the British fighters. The bomber was attacked as it came within sight of its target, Battersea, by Spitfires and Hurricanes.

Two of the Dornier crew were probably killed during the action. The bomber had suffered grave damage and two others were ordered to bale out. Zehbe

abandoned the bomber and the coup de grace was delivered by Sgt Holmes of 504 Squadron who ran out of ammunition and rammed the bomber.

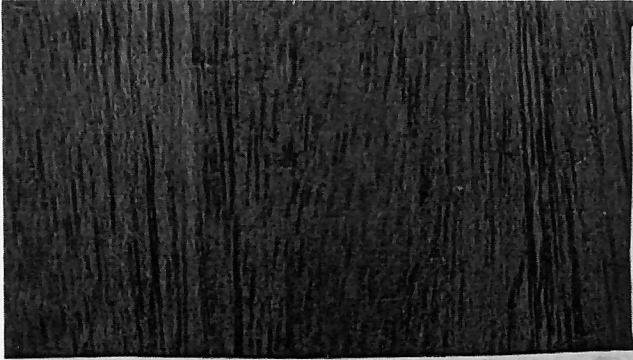
Pieces of the bomber scattered down into central London, the tail landing on a roof in Vauxhall.

Holmes' Hurricane span out of control and crashed, although Holmes managed to free himself and parachute to safety.

Zehbe's descent by parachute was watched by people in the Kennington area. A number of eye-witnesses, including Reg Burley who was an 11-year-old living in Kennington Lane, noticed that Zehbe's parachute had a torn panel, which was flapping in the wind as the airman tried to control his descent.

As Zehbe drifted inexorably toward the

Gillies, it has been said, rescued the airman into a police van, and ordered the driver to the ground, whereupon they drove across



Oval people began to leave their homes and shelters to rush to his expected landing point. Francis Jacques recalls running down Vauxhall Street with his brother toward the landing spot. He saw Zehbe's parachute was hooked over a lamppost. A police car with bell sounding raced out of Kennington Road Police Station.

What happened next has been the subject of some debate over the years. When I began my research, I came across references in various texts to the events of that day which seemed to cast something of a shadow on the attitude of the local population.

The *South London Press* on 17 September 1940 published an account with the headline: 'Troops Save Nazi From Angry Women'.

According to the *SLP's* version, the

wind had caught hold of Zehbe's parachute as it landed, causing it to lift up and drift a few yards along the road. It became entangled in telephone wires with the pilot suspended just above the ground. He was then dragged to the ground and attacked.

Similar inferences have appeared in historical texts over the years, some going as far to say that Zehbe died of injuries inflicted by a mob.

In July the *SLP* published an appeal for eye-witnesses for me.

The response was good and some of their memories have been included in this article.

What was undoubtedly clear was that people were angry, as was only to be expected, and there may have been something of a mob mentality. Indeed an extract from the local ARP warden's diary of that day reads: 'Enemy parachutist descended among hostile populace in Kennington'.

But did this amount to violence on the part of civilians?

The general feeling from my research where I came across words like 'frenzied attack' and 'fiercely attacked', may have been overstating the situation.



There is little doubt that Zehbe was severely wounded, but had this occurred before he touched down?

The day after the incident, Alan Hodgson reported in *The Daily Herald* that Zehbe put up his hands, uttering 'Kamerad, Kamerad. I am an officer. I am an officer'.

Hodgson also went on to state that 'Hundreds of women ran to get pieces of his parachute as souvenirs.

The pilot was led away by policemen and taken to hospital to have his wounds treated.' No mention was made of a violent assault. Perhaps the censorship that was heavily present during the war years had etched out the violent part of the story. But why, then, was the SLP able to be more bold?

When I questioned my aunts about the events, they confirmed the pilot's words.

My Aunt Dolly also confirmed seeing blood on Zehbe's parachute, presumably from wounds suffered earlier during the air battle.

Zehbe was arrested by Superintendent Gillies, of Kennington Road Police Station. Gillies, it has been said, rescued the airman from a lynch mob, bundled him into a police van, and ordered the driver to take them into the Oval cricket ground, whereupon they drove across the sacred turf, out the Vauxhall end, and then on to Millbank military hospital. Zehbe died of his wounds the following day.

Many people believed – and maybe this was British government propaganda – that the bomber's target was Buckingham Palace. Three bombs from the stricken bomber did strike the palace, but these were not primed, and had probably wrenched free from their mountings during the battle. The King and Queen were not in residence at the time of the incident.

Ray Holmes was a hero and pieces of the Dornier were carried triumphantly through the streets. Some remains of the aircraft — the only enemy bomber to come down in central London — are kept at the RAF museum at Hendon. Peter Spowage, who rang me as a result of the *SLP* appeal also has some remains of the Dornier. They belonged to his father.

Robert Zehbe is buried in Brookwood Military Cemetery, near Woking, but looking back this brief episode in the war is intriguing.

I have walked around the Oval trying to imagine what it must have been like during those years and somehow I feel a close affinity with Robert Zehbe: his inextricable link with the memory of my mother and my aunts has been compelling.

Attention has focused over the years on the crash itself. My quest is to find out more about Zehbe and the Germany Embassy in Belgrave Square has promised to help me.

However, Germany has strict privacy laws and many Luftwaffe records have perished. I hope this article will trigger debate and I would be happy to hear from anyone who can add to my research on 01243 867527 (evenings).