

THE ASHWELL CRASH STORY

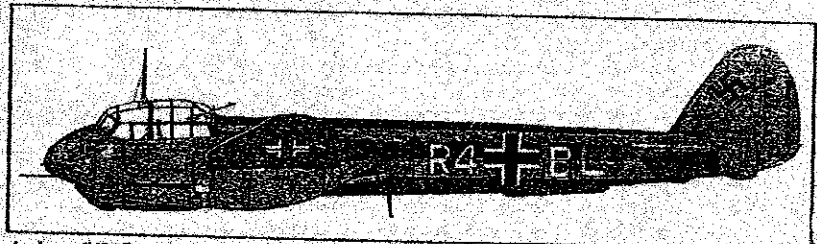
Julian Evan-Hart

Photographs: Julian Evan-Hart and Dave Stuckey

In response to recent rain the opportunity arose to consolidate some of my aviation archaeological research. Many years ago I heard that a German aeroplane had collided with a Wellington bomber and crashed at Ashwell. In the early 1980s information was not so easy to access as it is today. The only source was knocking at doors if you were lucky, somebody had published a local history booklet that might contain a few helpful details. However, I slowly gathered information as to what it had been and who the crew were. With the help of documents, the landowner, and eyewitnesses I built up a detailed picture of events. I hope readers will enjoy the "fruits" of this research contained in the following article.

For the real technical buffs out there, and the readers who may have experience of this particular collision through perhaps their own research, I know several records show this aeroplane to be a Junkers Ju88C2 (including the original German Luftwaffe records). However, this is not the case. Through research we come across no end of errors and contradictions etc that require further research in order for our accounts to be as accurate as possible. As can be seen this aeroplane had three 20mm cannons (one in the nose cone and one mounted either side of the gondola front). This specification, along with some others, makes it a Junkers 88 C4. As far as I can assess, Junkers 88C2's only ever had three machine guns and a single 20mm cannon contained in the nose cone section; they had no cannons contained in a modified gondola front.

This crash site was one of my early investigations, after reading in a local historical booklet that a Junkers 88 had crashed near Ashwell. The crash was the result of a collision with a Wellington bomber. Thus it soon became incorporated on my local "must visit" list. Borrowing a friend's bicycle I started the long ride from Stevenage. Arriving at Ashwell, I knocked on a few doors and eventually was directed to the farmer upon whose land the aeroplane



Junkers Ju88C4 coded R4+BL the night fighter of 3NJGZ's Ace Lieutenant Heinz Volker and his crew

had come down. The farmer and his wife were very friendly and indeed had some paperwork relating to the incident. They also had a shoe box inside of which were some golden yellow twisted pieces of metal. These were pieces of anodised alloy characteristic of Junkers manufactured aeroplanes. Asked if I would like a fragment, the reply was an almost blurted version of "Would I?" After bidding them farewell, I began my long ride home. It was a ride that was punctuated with frequent stops to ensure I had not lost my prized artefact. I actually had a piece from the Ashwell 88!

In 1986 I undertook a very brief field walk of the area and located numerous small twisted and once molten fragments, including a section of the cockpit clock. A year or so after this Peter Stanley and several other aviation archaeologists excavated the site. Amongst their finds were a small collection of Belgian coins and two dinghy paddles.

Some details of the Junkers 88 and her crew are as follows:-

Aircraft type - Junkers 88C4 night fighter.

This aeroplane was operating at the time with 3/ NachtjagerGeschwader 2 based in Gilze Rijen in Holland. The colour scheme was matt black under-surfaces, with extensive use of black distemper over the fuselage and tail section. The upper wing surfaces were again blackened but unusually this was gloss. Also on the upper wing surfaces the BalkanKreuz markings had not been painted over. This aeroplane had the Werke Nummer of 0842 and was coded R4+BL.

The crew were:-

Leutnant Heinz Volker, Flugzeugfuhrer, born at Bochum on 1 January 1914. He gained his night flying experience at the Blind Flying School at Neuberg/Donau.

Unteroffizier Herbert Indenbirken, Bordfunker, born at Pivitzheide on 29 May 1921. His Erkennungsmarke Nummer was 53577/1091.

Feldwebel Andreas Wurstl, Bord-schutze, born at Hoizlashof on 20 March 1914. His Erkennungsmarke Nummer was 53585/25

Volker's crew even in these early stages of the war had gained a prestigious reputation. Operating over all areas of England they had destroyed seven aeroplanes at night:-

On 28/10/40 at 03.00 hours a Hampden near Scampton.

On 22/12/40 a Blenheim near Cranwell.

On 04/04/41 a Wellington at 01.00 hours near West Rainham.

On 17/04/41 a Hampden near Finningley.

On 24-25/04/41 a total of three Blenheims near Lindholme.

The following account is based on historical facts, and where details are scant I have added certain factors to create the atmosphere of that night in 1941.

On the night of 22 July 1941 Heinz Volker and his crew were operational again. After a comparatively shorter than usual briefing, the crew walked across the drizzle swept runway of Gilze Rijen airfield. Soon they could make out the dim shape of their parked aeroplane. Some flickering lights below the port engine, indicating last minute

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checks by some ground crew. As Volker, Indenbirken and Wurstl climbed aboard their black painted Junkers night fighter, they were full of anticipation, excitement and nervousness. Such were the standard pressures on any crew in the Luftwaffe, whether they were beginning to be in the limelight due to their success or not. The familiar reek of dope and oil, combined with faint traces of burned cordite seemed pungent at first. However, it reassured the crew of an atmosphere of familiarity and, so far, security. The crew clambered into their positions. The feeling of security was also increased in the knowledge that the skies at this stage over wartime Britain were still reasonably safe. This crew also had the additional experience of having been to the same hunting grounds for some time.

air victories illustrate the intruder habit of lurking in the vicinity of RAF aerodromes looking for unlucky or inexperienced victims.

Concerning the Bassingbourn area Volker had only, so far as he knew, limited success. A brief burst at a Wellington bomber had been without effect. This area of Bassingbourn was starting to become very interesting to the pilots of NJG2, and would be for some time.

One eyewitness remembered a "Jerry" flying around the village, its engines sounding different to the British aeroplanes. This particular "Jerry" would circle Ashwell dropping flares all over the district; however, after the collision these particular nocturnal visits ceased abruptly. One can only surmise that this had been Volker and his crew, or perhaps one of his colleagues. However, it is strange that as soon as the collision had occurred these flare-dropping intrusions stopped.

Oberleutnant Schulz and his crew were in the same area on 10 April 1941, for they shot down Wellington L.4253.



Fragments recovered from the Junkers 88. The pieces on the lower right hand side still bear traces of the night fighter's black paint.

This Wellington dived vertically and crashed into a house, which was fortunately unoccupied at the time. Other German night-fighter victories and actions in this area are listed below.

On 24 April 1941 a Wellington of 11 OTU based at Bassingbourn was shot down whilst attempting to land. It crashed into stationary Wellington R.1404. Volker was actually flying that night but as can be seen from his victories, he was operating in the Lindholme area.

On 18 July 1941 yet another Wellington No X.3169 was fired upon as it was about to land at Steeple Morden aerodrome, and was quite seriously damaged.

Later on in the year, on 19 August 1941, Wellington 3005 was shot down north-east of Barrington.

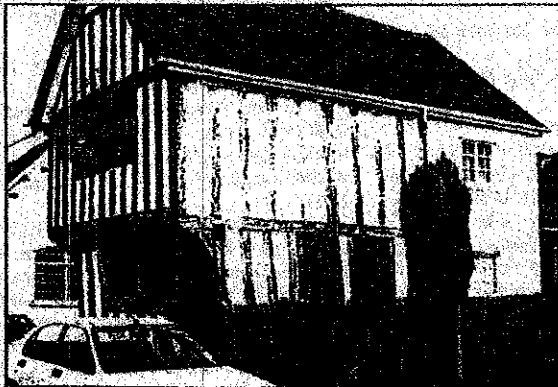
One very interesting point is that some years ago Dave located a fired German 20mm cannon shell from this area. In addition to this, yet another fired German cannon shell was located near to Bassingbourn some years ago by Tony. These are two small but very important artefacts relating to the early night war that took place some 60 years ago.

The slight drizzle at Gilze Rijen air-

field on the night of 22 July 1941 caused light to be reflected back from the slightly uneven runway surfaces. Outside the Junkers 88 a small group of ground crew stood around. From inside the aeroplane they could hear clicking and bumping sounds with occasional laughter, as the various pre-flight checks were carried out. From somewhere across the surrounding damp fields a lone farm dog barked. The glow of the illuminated cockpit instruments cast a faint blue-green light inside the front of the aeroplane. All three crew members were now settled in their somewhat cramped positions, space being further reduced by the presence of two additional gondola fitted cannons.

After taking off at 23.30 hours, Volker circled the airfield, making some final adjustments and then they were heading for England. Inside the cockpit conversation was now minimal, basically linked to something worth looking at far below, or indeed other aeroplanes they occasionally spotted. The continuous throb of the Junkers Jumo engines

The delightful medieval timberwork of Ashwell Museum.



Ashwell Museum's fragments relating to the collision. At the top are shown two pieces from Wellington R.1334. Below are three pieces from Volker's Junkers 88.



had been broken for a brief period over the sea, when the forward firing guns were tested. Streams of glowing white "golf balls" streaked and raced away into the damp night air. Then the cockpit seemed to fill with the familiar acrid smell of burned cordite that only slowly dissipated. They were now flying at an altitude of nearly 4000ft. This would mean a slightly descending flight pattern just before crossing the English coast. They crossed the "enemy" coast just below the Wash, skirting near the Norfolk coast, and then turned inland, passing near Newmarket.

Despite having been tracked for some considerable period of time on this incoming flight, little reaction was undertaken by the defences. Just south of Newmarket a single searchlight suddenly flicked on, the erratic beam waving into the night sky. However, after a second or so it was turned off. Volker and his crew had dropped to some 700ft altitude by this stage. The panic over, Volker smiled as he saw twinkling isolated lights speed by below to his sides; isolated farms not complying with the blackout, he thought. As his aeroplane pelted over the countryside at quite low level, many people were undoubtedly relieved when the loud roar of unsynchronised engines subsided into a distant beat. There would be no stray bombs tonight.

The Junkers 88 was now streaking over the flat-fieldd edges of the fenland, on its course to Bassingbourn. Now undulating hill tops with small copses or single trees became visible. The crew recognised this terrain to which they had returned to gain more victories. Volker then began a wide circling flight pattern in the hope of coming across either any raid returning British bombers, or preferably training flights. Having been circling for some minutes, at about 01.25 hours Wurstl suddenly shouted out. They had passed near something, he was sure of it. A huge shape had floated by and he had seen at least one yellow-blue flamed exhaust. (Wurstl was indeed correct, but what he could not know was that he had just had a fleeting glimpse of Wellington R.1334 on a training flight,



Jeff retrieves a target from near the crash site of the Junkers 88.

packed with trainees from 11 OTU based at Bassingbourn).

Volker swung the Junkers 88 around in a very tight turn, and they all scanned the sky. They could hear their heartbeats in their headphones the excitement was so intense. Was a chase on? Scanning they saw nothing, but then several hundred feet away a small pinprick of light was spotted, getting larger and larger. Then, faintly, the dark form of a huge aeroplane out in front could be seen.

"A Tommy, a Tommy bomber" shouted Indenbirken. "Heinz, see, see? Over there on the left!"

"I do see it!" Wurstl shouted in reply.

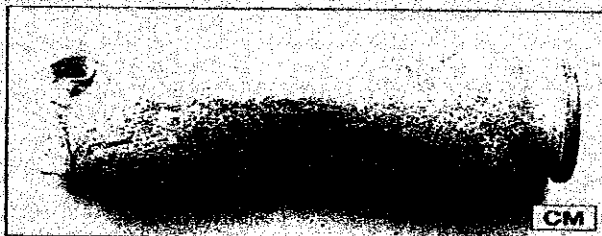
Heinz Volker had seen it too, but saying nothing he coolly throttled back allowing the British aeroplane to slide by ahead. Then, realigning his aircraft, Volker positioned himself behind his unwary victim. Just as the Junkers 88 opened fire, the Wellington began some violent evasive action. Volker followed and fired a three second burst at his target. The crew of the Junkers 88 could see the bright flashes of strikes as their shells exploded on the wings and inside the fuselage of their target, which immediately caught fire. Small sparks and various sized pieces of torn airframe hurtled backwards, tumbling and spinning past the Junkers. Despite the misses, the guns of the German night fighter had still put a little over 25lbs of metal and high explosive into the British bomber. Their target was now truly stricken, but still carried out

some evasive manoeuvres. These finished with an extremely tight turn to port. Volker, who had been watching these, was by now very close and intending to deliver another swift burst of fire. The flames of their victim caused an orangey glow in the cockpit. At about this stage Volker realised he had come in just that bit too close, and he attempted to out-turn the Wellington. However, at his speed that was simply not possible. Like a moth to a light Volker had been briefly mesmerised by the glow from his victim, drawing him in too close. Through the divided windscreen of the cockpit, and only some 25ft away, Heinz Volker could see the fuselage side windows of the Wellington. For a millisecond he noticed the ragged holes that his shells had punched, with metal and fabric flapping back from the victim. Then his hands shot up from the control column to his face.

At 600ft above Ashwell, this was the last thing this remarkable young ace ever did, before his world, that of his crew and all those inside the Wellington exploded in one terrific blinding white flash. This illuminated the countryside for miles around as the wreckage fell to earth. Locked together momentarily in the explosion, both aeroplanes then fell away. The cockpit area of the night-fighter was so damaged that one of the bodies of the German crew actually fell out and was found some distance away. The tail section had snapped off from the Junkers and landed fairly intact in the village. The remainder belly panned on the top of a local rise in the land, exploded and then caught fire. The Wellington fell away truly ablaze and dived into an adjacent field killing all on board. Volker had indeed achieved his eighth and last victory.

One eyewitness remembers the morning after the collision. At the

A fired German 20mm cannon shell case. This item almost certainly came from the guns of Volker's or Schultz's Junkers 88 night fighter.



impact point of the Junkers 88 metal was strewn everywhere, as were bullets and fragments of the crew. Mr Cliff Bonner remembered a dead German airman lying by a hedgerow "as if he was just asleep". For many years afterwards Cliff kept a souvenir from the incident, a manufacturer's plate with "Achtung Achtung" stencilled on it. This is unfortunately now long lost. He also stated that both the engines of the Junkers lay on the surface of the field very battered and blackened from fire. The wreckage of the German aircraft was of great interest to the investigating authorities. Much of it had been seriously burned out, and the identification code on the fuselage sides could not be ascertained. The airframe was discovered to have been manufactured by Junkers Flugzeug und Motoren Werke at Dessau. Dates on various component plates were mainly 1941, although one was dated September 1940. The engines were Junkers Jumo 21 IGs. The serial number of one of them could be read and it was PMB G1/3 18. Three MG 17 machine guns were also found, along with a single 20mm cannon. Shortly afterwards a second 20mm cannon was located in a quickly detachable pod. This appears to have been mounted to the front of the lower gondola. The cocking bottle and firing mechanism were also discovered. The 20mm ball ammunition had steel cartridge cases, of which a total of five were accounted for. No evidence of any ventral positioned armament could be traced. The forward armour was a large circular bulkhead through which three MG 17s and a 20mm cannon projected. No armour protection for the rear position was in evidence. The pilot's windscreen consisted of very thick glass. Approximately 10ft of one wing tip remained unburned and in reasonably good condition. Near to this were five unexploded 5C50 bombs, weighing 110lbs each, all had been fitted with a No 25 type fuze.

Also from the wreckage of the Junkers was salvaged a canvas satchel marked with British roundels and containing seven types of recognition flares. The report here is not very clear. Perhaps this was a satchel from one of the crew who decorated it each time they shot a British aeroplane down? Or perhaps it had been salvaged from a bomber shot down in the Netherlands, and Volker and his crew used its contents to confuse British airfields? This would possibly have allowed them nearer to maximise their chances of a kill. But who knows?

At the end of the first day of inves-



Once pinned to the tunic of one of the German crew, this crumpled bronze round badge illustrates the severity of the crash.

tigation one of the recovery crew picked up a small piece of cloth that had been blowing about. Just an ordinary piece of tattered uniform? Not exactly. This find caused some excitement as it gave its owners name "Oberfahnrnich Heinz Volker". It was thus confirmed that the "Experte" of NJG2 had met his death on this bleak Hertfordshire hillside. Sometime later, when the field was being harvested, a third 20mm cannon was found along with some blood spattered webbing and a flare pistol.

Searching The Crash Site

Numerous individuals have been given permission over the years to go and have a look at the site. Some very interesting finds have been made too, such as the radio line bell (a small bell-shaped object positioned on the cable from radio mast to tail fin). Lying on the surface of the field are numerous globules of once molten aluminium, broken electrical fragments, and exploded MG17 shell cases. Digging down to about 3ft there is a very burned layer of soil, full of steel components and clinker. It was from this section of the cockpit that the Belgian coins were recovered, along with a parachute buckle, and a small section of burned flying boot. Several aluminium dinghy paddles were also located, with a section of parachute harness. A small porcelain radio component bore the name "Rosen". Much of the wreckage is in good condition due to being anodised, and some even still carries traces of black paint.

Perhaps the most interesting item to have been found so far is the damaged German bronze wound badge. Prized from the plough soil by some keen eyed individual some years ago, it was located very near to where Cliff Bonner remembered seeing the dead airman.

Once into the subsoil of the impact point the intense heat evidence is very

obvious, with large areas of carbon and brick red burned soil. The crash site is still as windswept, bleak and lonely as it was in 1941. There are still a few people living in Ashwell who remember that night long ago. One does wonder what artefacts were "liberated" at the time by interested but loose fingered school children, and now lie forgotten in a garden shed, or under granddad's handkerchiefs in that old chest of drawers?

Undoubtedly some items will have been lost or thrown away in times of National Service or indeed death and house clearance. However, one still lives in hope of meeting an "Ashwellian" or other local who says "My Grandfather found an inscribed watch up there some days after the crash. Oh yes, we still have it".

Some of the more interesting items found were placed on an information board and presented to Ashwell Museum. These can be seen in normal museum opening hours, and I helped to clarify and give identity to the often heard "Oh I heard some old German aeroplane or something crashed here in the war" for many of the newer villagers.

Once again metal detecting ensures that fragments of such interesting periods of our history are conserved for all to remember and study in the future.

This article is dedicated to all those who fought and perished in the night air war over Europe during World War Two. Also, to the villagers of Ashwell who still remember the incident, to Peter Greener the museum curator, and especially to the Gurney family for their information and permission to search around Ashwell. However, my dedication is in particular to Sgt. F.S. Houston (RCAF), Sgt. R.A. Mcallister (RAAF), Sgt. B.C. Thompson (RAAF), and Sgt. P.T. Manning the crew of Wellington R.1334. The passage of time allows for this dedication to also include and be shared by Heinz Volker and his crew.

They flew the skies and in them found eternal freedom.

Update

Recently, Paul had an e-mail from the brother of James Graba, who is hopefully coming over to England this year. Readers may remember that James Graba was the co-pilot of a B17 bomber crew who were all killed when it crashed at Weston in 1944. Apparently, he is interested in seeing the crash site and the artefacts that have been recovered from it. His particular interest is in the officer's cap badge as there is a 25% chance that it actually once belonged to his brother. [TH]