

## THE ACE AT ASHWELL

21 TO 22 JULY 1941

**Aircraft:**  
Junkers Ju 88 C-4 R4+BL 3./NJG 2  
**Location:**  
High ground, near Ashwell  
**Time:**  
01.30 hours

**Crew:**  
Leutnant Heinz Volker. (Pilot) (Killed)  
Unteroffizier Herbert Indenbirken.  
(Bordfunker) (Killed)  
Feldwebel Andreas Wurstl. (Bordschutze)  
(Killed)

Crashed as a result of aerial collision with Wellington R1334. This was the seventh and final enemy aeroplane to crash in Hertfordshire during World War Two.

On the night of 21-22 July, 1941, Heinz Volker and his crew were scheduled for operations again. After a shorter than usual briefing the three men walked across the drizzle swept runway of Gilze Rijen airfield in Holland. As Volker, Indenbirken and Wurstl climbed aboard their black painted Junkers night fighter the pungent aroma of dope, oil and feint traces of burned cordite greeted them.

Volker and his crew had been flying intruder missions in search of unwary British aircraft for some time, lurking in the vicinity of RAF aerodromes looking for unlucky or inexperienced victims. Increasing RAF activity near Bassingbourn had been noticed by crews of NJG 2.

One eyewitness remembered a 'Jerry' flying around Ashwell village, its engines sounding different to the RAF planes. This particular aircraft circled Ashwell, dropping flares all over the district, but after 22 July these nocturnal visits ceased. One can only surmise that Volker and his crew had been the visitor as these flare dropping missions stopped suddenly.

Operating in the same area on 10 April 1941 had been Volker's colleague, Oberleutnant Schulz, who shot down Wellington L4253. This Wellington dived vertically down and crashed into a house at

A tragic reminder of the human price of war; a crumpled German 'wound badge' picked up years later.



Ashwell. Fortunately the house was unoccupied at the time. Other night fighter victories are listed below, but have not been attributed to specific crews:

**24 April 1941 a Wellington of 11 OTU based at Bassingbourn was shot down while attempting to land. It crashed into stationary Wellington R1404.**

**18 July 1941 Wellington X3169 was fired upon as it was about to land at Steeple Morden aerodrome and was seriously damaged.**

**19 August 1941 Wellington 3005 was shot down north east of Barrington.**

Volker crossed the 'enemy' coast just below The Wash, skirted the Norfolk Coast, and then turned inland passing near Newmarket. Despite having been tracked by the Observer Corps for some considerable time, little action was taken by the defences. Just south of Newmarket a single searchlight flicked on, the erratic beam wavering into the night sky, however after a few moments it was turned off.

**A Junkers Ju 88C nightfighter of the type flown by Heinz Volker.**

By now Volker and his crew had dropped to around 700 feet. The Junkers 88 was now streaking over the flat-fieldded edges of the Fenland, on its course to the Bassingbourn area. As undulating hill tops with small copses or single trees appeared Volker commenced a very wide circular flight path across the



airfield in the hope of catching any returning British bombers or, preferably, inexperienced training flights.

In the early stages of the war Volker's crew had gained a prestigious reputation. Operating over various areas of England they had so far managed to shoot down a total of seven British aeroplanes:

- 28/10/40 – a Hampden near Scampton.
- 22/12/40 – a Blenheim near Cranwell.
- 04/04/41 – a Wellington near West Raynham.
- 17/04/41 – a Hampden near Finningley.
- 24-25/4/41 – three Blenheims near Lindholme.

## COMBAT

At about 01.25 hours, having been circling for some minutes, Wurstl suddenly shouted out. They had passed something, he was sure of it. A huge shape had floated by and for a second he was sure he had seen at least one yellow-blue flamed exhaust. Wurstl was indeed correct, he had just had a fleeting glimpse of Wellington R1334, packed with trainees from 11 OTU. The crew on board R1334 that night were:

- Sergeant C A MacAllister, Wireless Operator
- Flight Sergeant W A Stewart, Pilot
- Sergeant S Stewart, Wireless Operator
- Sergeant R E Hibbert, Wireless Operator
- Sergeant F S Houston, Pilot
- Sergeant T Manning, Gunner

The Vickers Wellington, mainstay of Bomber Command in 1941.





**Leutnant Heinz Volker, 'the Ace at Ashwell'.**

**Sergeant B C Thompson, Pilot  
Sergeant C M S Lewis, Observer**

Volker swung the Junkers around in a very tight turn and all the crew scanned the night sky. Many hundreds of feet ahead a tiny pinprick of light was spotted, getting larger and larger. Then in the darkness the form of a huge aeroplane could be seen. Heinz Volker had seen it too. He throttled back, allowing the British aeroplane to slide ahead. Realigning his aeroplane, Volker positioned himself right behind his unwary victim. Just as Volker opened fire the Wellington pilot began some violent evasive action as tracer shells skimmed past. Volker followed and fired a three second burst at the target. The crew of the Junkers 88 could see the bright flashes of strikes as the cannon shells exploded on, in and through the wings and fuselage of the Wellington. The Wellington immediately caught fire, trailing a great banner of fuel-fed flame from one wing. Small sparks and pieces of fabric and airframe

came away from the doomed Wellington and tumbled back past their attacker, but still the pilot tried further evasive manoeuvres.

Volker watched the Wellington go into a tight turn to port. The flames from the Wellington created a flickering orange glow in the cockpit of the Junkers. Volker realised that he was too close and attempted to out-turn the falling 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 and his crew in too close.

At 600 feet above Ashwell both aircraft exploded in one terrific blinding white flash that illuminated the countryside for miles around. The burning wreckage fell to earth. The cockpit area of the Junkers 88 had disintegrated and at least one body fell out from the main wreckage to land several hundred feet away. The tail section snapped off the Junkers and landed intact in the village. The remainder belly-panned on the top of a rise in the land, exploded and then continued to burn.

The Wellington fell away from the collision fiercely ablaze and dove into an adjacent field, killing all on board. The crackle of exploding ammunition could be heard from both crashes. This was Volker's eighth and final victory.



#### CRASH INVESTIGATION

The wreckage of the German aeroplane was of great interest to the investigating authorities. Much of it had been burned out and no unit identification codes could be seen. It was established that the airframe had been manufactured by Junkers Flugzeug und Motoren Werke at Dessau. Dates on various manufacturer's plates were mainly from 1941, although one was dated September 1940. The engines were Junkers Jumo 211Gs. Three MG 17 machine guns were located, along with a single 20mm cannon.

Shortly afterwards a second 20mm cannon was found housed in a detachable pod assembly that appeared to have been part of the front of the lower gondola. The cocking bottle and firing mechanism for this gun was also found. The forward armour was a large circular bulkhead through which the three MG17s and single cannon protruded.

It was noted that the pilot's windscreen was made of especially thick glass. Only about ten feet of one wingtip remained undamaged by fire. Near to this were five unexploded SC50 bombs, all having been fitted with No.25 type fuses. A canvas satchel marked with British roundels and containing seven types of recognition flares was found.

At the end of the first day of investigation one of the recovery crew picked up a small piece of cloth that was blowing about. This caused some excitement as it bore the embroidered name Oberfähnrich Heinz Volker. It was

**In the twilight hours  
a Wellington crew  
board their bomber  
for another sortie.**

thus established that the 'Experte' of NJG 2 had met his death over this bleak Hertfordshire hillside. The body and other fragmentary remains of the German crew were gathered up and buried in Bassingbourn cum Kneesworth cemetery, but were later moved to Cannock Chase. Months later, when the field came to be harvested, a third 20mm cannon was found. This German night fighter had been armed with a total of three MG17s and three 20mm cannon.

**The original wooden grave markers at Bassingbourn cum Kneesworth cemetery in the 1960s. Later the bodies were moved to Cannock Chase.**

#### **65 YEARS ON**

Numerous individuals have examined the crash site over the last sixty-five or so years, some have made interesting discoveries in the plough soil. Lying on the surface are numerous globules of once molten aluminium, broken electrical components and exploded MG17 shell cases. The wreckage penetrated to a depth of about three feet. Dutch coins have been found over the years, the zip from a leather flying jacket and a crumpled bronze German wound badge.

