

## The night the Luftwaffe dropped in on Congressbury

Article by Clive Burlton and Chris Short

Shortly before sunset on May 7, 1941, several airstrips in northern France reverberated to the sound of 141 Luftwaffe bombers – mostly Heinkel He 111s - as they thundered down the runways. They were taking off on another bombing raid over England; the docks at Liverpool and Birkenhead being the intended targets.



The first of the planes in the sky that night - Heinkel He 111P, 1G+NA, Wnr 1391 - took off from Tours some 15 minutes before the rest. The experienced crew had a special task that night. In advance of the main bombing party, their job was to drop incendiary bombs on the Liverpool shipyards to light the area for the forthcoming attack.

The five crew, all holders of the Iron Cross, comprised Oberleutnant Johannes Maren, the observer; Oberfeldwebel Heinz Ronge, the pilot; Feldwebel Heinz Dietrich, the wireless operator; Unteroffizier Heinrich Eggert, the flight engineer; and Obergefreiter Helmut Hilger, the gunner.



L/R: Johannes Maren; Helmut Hilger; Heinz Ronge



Heinz Dietrich

In an account held in the German Archives, Johannes Maren recalled the flight:

*“I was an experienced observer and commanded the aircraft”, he said, ‘this being my 56th mission over the UK. You need experience to mark a target in the dark, although that night was rather bright and we nearly had a full moon”.*

Maren’s Heinkel reached Cherbourg and crossed the Channel without incident before arriving over Portland and turning north towards Bristol and Liverpool, flying at an altitude of 11,000 feet. Although the original target was Liverpool, owing to poor visibility over Merseyside, several crews among the 141 bombing party were diverted to other targets, including Bristol.

*“That night I wondered why no Flak guns were active as even the notorious batteries at Portland were silent. Furthermore, no searchlights were switched on except three beams from different positions, which moved towards us. As ours was the only bomber in the air at that time, I supposed that we were their target. We had been informed that there was a new system of defensive tactics by the RAF and we experienced it for the first time that night as night-fighters were active and one of them was being directed towards us.”*

Maren was not wrong. His Heinkel had been spotted at 23.40 south of Yeovil flying northwards. The night-fighter being directed towards them was a Bristol Beaufighter, scrambled from No. 600 Squadron based at RAF Fighter Command and Bomber Command airfield at Colerne in Wiltshire.



A Bristol Beaufighter of the type being flown by Flying Officer George Howden and Sergeant Fielding of No. 600 Squadron... now in pursuit of Maren and his crew on board the Heinkel.

Maren’s memoir continues the story:

*“Over Southern England we could easily see every road, field, house and tree from a height of 11,500 feet as well as the balloons around Cardiff and in the distance Swansea. I warned the crew to look out and ordered (Hilger) the gunner down below into the belly gun position of our Heinkel. The wireless operator (Dietrich) had to look out of the top position for enemy aircraft coming from behind’. As the aircraft approached the Bristol Channel he shouted, ‘Night-fighter from above behind the aircraft’.”*

The Heinkel’s crew had been taken unawares by the Bristol Beaufighter, which attacked from the starboard beam. From RAF and Air Defence records, it can be revealed that after a series

of dummy runs Sergeant Fielding switched on the Beaufighter's AI radar apparatus and on the second attempt a fair blip was obtained. This improved as he directed the pilot, and Flying Officer Howden obtained visual contact before maximum range was reached.

After the Heinkel had been identified as hostile, an attack was made from dead astern and slightly below while flying in the vicinity of Barrow Gurney. Two bursts were fired at a range of 300 yards closing to 200 yards after which the starboard engine was seen to catch fire.

In his memoir, Maren stated that bullets had hit the starboard wing and pierced the cockpit, while the crew had been unable to return fire or take evasive action. The rest of the crew reported they hadn't been hit but smoke was affecting them. Some of the bomber's incendiary bombs had caught fire and the starboard wing was glowing dark red as the engine had also been set on fire.

*"We dropped all of our bombs and the pilot dived as steeply as possible, but this was no help. I ordered Dietrich, Eggert and Hilger to bail out and wished them luck. The pilot Ronge and I tried to extinguish the blazing flames on the starboard wing by twisting and turning and losing height quickly. We had been attacked at between 10 and 12,000 feet and after seeing the silvery sparkling Bristol Channel I gave the pilot the order to bail out as he had to get out first as there was no fire on his, the port side, and I followed immediately. All of this happened in a calm and considerate manner and there was no panic at all. I was the last one out by which time we were already very close to the ground."*

The Heinkel then went into a long turning dive at the end of which it dived vertically into the ground and exploded at Lower Stock Farm, Stock Lane, Langford, at 00.12 hrs scattering its wreckage over a wide area.

*"I was at about 600 feet before I opened my parachute, but landed unhurt in a small field surrounded by hedges near a small village. I then looked around and saw three soldiers with guns coming towards me asking me to put my hands up. At the same time I noticed the other parachutes from the rest of the crew nearing the ground and could also see the wreckage of our Heinkel burning."*

All five of the crew landed unhurt. Several were captured near the 'Bell Inn'/Kent Road area (near Tesco Express today) by members of the Home Guard; another behind Wrington Lane and near where Verlands is today and the fifth near the 'Star Inn' on Rhodyate Hill by another Home Guard from the Congresbury Platoon.

It was a bright moonlit night in Congresbury and Connie Wookey in Mill Lane can still recall watching the parachutists come down across the river *"in the Kent Road - Wrington Lane area"*. Mr Wally Walter, who lived at "Green Pastures" recalled the clear night and seeing the descending airmen:

*"I saw the plane come down and it was like a firework display when it hit the ground off Stock Lane."*

One of the Heinkel crew, Heinz Dietrich, landed in the garden of Spring Cottage. He tried to escape over a wall to join his comrades but was quickly taken prisoner by a detachment of the Home Guard who were on duty at their headquarters nearby in a cottage (now demolished), on Wards Hill, off Wrington Lane.



Heinz Dietrich



Congresbury Home Guard HQ Hut



One of the captor's clearest recollections of the event was the sound of George Long's voice shouting from an upstairs window:

"Get off my bloody onions!"

The remainder of the crew were quickly rounded up and interrogated at the Police Station in Glen Yeo Terrace by the Constable on duty, P.C. Hillier, before being driven to the cells in Weston-super-Mare.

On the left is Ernie Lush with fragments from the stricken Heinkel and souvenir German crosses in his right hand.

There was an interesting sequel to this story when Heinz Dietrich returned to Congresbury in 1974 and met many of those involved in his capture as well as the new owners of Spring Cottage, Mr and Mrs Ernest Lush.



1974 and Mr & Mrs Lush showing Heinz Dietrich a piece of burnt rope recovered from the Heinkel aircraft in 1941.

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