



## 15 • Wartime

A part from the two World Wars, other wars have had an impact on our villages. The Boer War at the turn of the century took young men from our midst and particularly former boys from the Homes, as reports and letters from South Africa regularly included in the Old Boys Journal tell. The most notable was in 1903 when news was reported of Henry Crandon, a former Homes boy, who received the Victoria Cross. Crandon had, at Springbok Laagte, ridden back to the assistance of a wounded comrade, given up his horse to him and had run 1,100 yards on foot under fire.



*Henry George Crandon VC of the 18th Hussars  
Photograph from Old Boys' Journal Homes for Little Boys*

Another noteworthy story can be followed in the Journal which in 1900 published the obituary of Reginald Potter, reported by his regimental sergeant major as being killed at the Battle of Stormberg. A medal of his had been returned to the Homes in accordance with his “last” wishes.

The next edition was happily able to admit its error by printing a letter from Potter dated 1st February 1900. Extracts from this letter paint a vivid picture of his plight though do not explain how the mistake occurred:

“Just a few lines to let you know how I am situated at present. I got shot about 9 am. There being no British ambulance there I was lying on the field for twenty-one hours. Besides the pains of my wounds, the rain helped to make it worse, so eventually I was taken prisoner by the Boers. I have up to the present been treated first-class in every respect. I have been under operation, and bullets extracted, so I am pleased to say I have not lost any limbs, although the doctor says I had a narrow escape. I have not quite got the use of my left leg; I was wounded rather seriously... I am very sorry for being taken prisoner, as I am missing all the fun of the campaign, although it was no fault of my own, as I could not stand, much less walk. I feel rather weak at present, as I have been bedfast two months, otherwise am progressing favourably. This is a very hard country to fight in, it being so hilly and the range so deceiving, climate A1 so far. Kindly give my best respects to all officers and apprentices and enquiring friends. Hoping Mrs Stallworthy and yourself are in the best of health,

I remain, yours truly  
REGINALD POTTER  
Mounted Infantry”



*The late Reginald Potter volunteered for active service from First East Lancashire Regiment to the Mounted Infantry. Died of wounds received at the Battle of Stormberg.  
Photograph and caption taken from Old Boys' Journal, Homes for Little Boys*

The First World War took a ghastly toll of the young men of the two villages, as evidenced by the list of names on the War Memorial in the Church at Horton Kirby. An even greater number were taken from the Homes for Little Boys. Apart from the grief caused to relatives and friends of men killed or injured in the War, little was seen of the War itself. Spencer Gentry did, however, remember seeing a Zeppelin flying up the Thames over towards Dartford - a frightening sight in those days. After the War, a Village Hall was erected in memory of all those lost.

Although the list of dead was less in the Second World War, that war had a greater impact on the two villages. The Headquarters of the local A R P (Air Raid Precautions) was established in Avenue House, South Darenth.

Raymond Thompson, who worked at Crowhursts Farm throughout the war, recalled that there was a barrage balloon site in Chaplin's field up Mussenden Lane, one at the top of Rays Hill by the crossroads and another near the Little Boys Homes. There was a searchlight site by the cricket field in Franks Lane and a line of anti-aircraft batteries in the fields between Westminster Field and the main Dartford/Farningham road. He remembers a 1,000 lb bomb landing in Franks Lane during the night and the local Doctor, Dr Rogers, inadvertently driving straight into the crater. Two 500 lb bombs dropped on Saxon Place in September 1940. According to the book, *Hell Corner*, one bomb fell at the back of numbers 48 and 50 and all rooms except

one were destroyed. Numbers 46 and 52 were also rendered uninhabitable. Another bomb fell higher up the road. Fortunately the only injury was to Mrs Finch, who sustained a slight cut on her leg. The plane was brought down nearby and the pilot said "I thought I was bombing a barracks".



*War Memorial in St Mary's Church  
Photograph courtesy of Ken Allart*

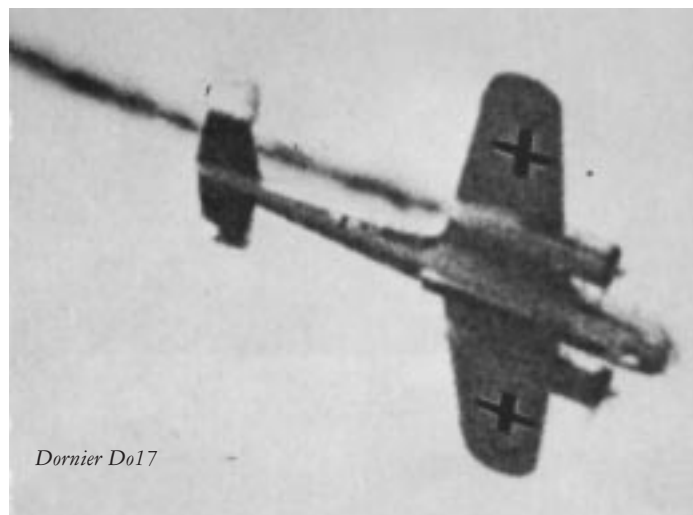
Later a phosphorous bomb landed nearby, as well as numerous incendiaries.

A platoon of the Home Guard was formed - No. 9 Platoon, D Company, 19th Battalion, Kent Home Guard - the Commanding Officer being Frank Tanner, later to be Chairman of the Parish Council. Linda Green also recalls her father, Harry Fellows, being part of a Home Guard Battalion stationed at Franks Hall under the leadership of Major Brown. At the same time her mother Rose Fellows and Lily England were helping to man the Red Cross Centre at Riseley.



*Frank Tanner's platoon with the Kent Home Guard Shooting Cup*

Frank Tanner recalled the incident on the morning of 8th September 1940 when three German aircraft were destroyed with one shot (or, more accurately, a salvo of 4 rounds). He relates that his Platoon was moving smartly along Horton Road that morning towards the Old Vicarage and its point of dismissal, when it was suddenly halted in its tracks. Overhead were some fifteen Dornier Do 17s flying in a "V" formation. Then it happened. The gunners from the Anti-Aircraft site at Green Street Green scored a direct hit on the leader of the formation. The plane blew up and, in so doing, severely damaged the two aircraft on each side. The leading aircraft was blown to pieces and parts scattered over a wide area, whilst the other two aircraft crashed. Frank remembered that dozens of small fires, caused by pieces of burning aircraft, were seen in the field between Westminster Mill and Dartford Road. He ordered his men to disperse and extinguish the fires with their steel helmets. A search was made for anything which would be of use to the Army Authorities. Parts of the wrecked plane were collected and quickly sold to souvenir hunters, with the proceeds going to the "Spitfire Fund". Frank himself collected the pilot's revolver, an oil compass and maps which clearly showed the target for the mission: all the bridges up the Thames. They were circled in red, the final one being Hammersmith Bridge. This last one was more heavily marked, as were the reservoirs close by, clearly indicating that the intention had been to destroy the main water supply for West London.



*Dornier Do17*

Of the two aircraft that crashed, one travelled in a south-westerly direction, picking up the railway line in the Rabbits Farm area, dropping bombs all the way, some of which severely damaged the Homes for Little Boys. Passing over Horton Kirby Village Hall, it finally exploded on impact with the ground between Creswick Nursery and Farningham Road Station. The other aircraft travelled in a westerly direction over the Roman Villa at Darenth, banking south near the Village Hall at Sutton-at-Hone. Following the A225 south, it jettisoned its bombs, causing severe damage to houses and shops near The Ship Public House. The only civilian casualty in the incident was Miss E Coulston of Station Road, Longfield, who was killed as she drove along the main road. The aircraft eventually came to rest near the southern end of the footpath which leads to Farningham Road Station.

It is understood that only one German airman survived, Oberfw Strobel, who came down by parachute and landed in an orchard near Pinden Farm, Longfield. He was captured by members of the battery which had shot him down (No. 208 HAA Battery) and escorted to the Southern Hospital, Dartford. However, according to *The Battle of Britain Then and Now*, five Germans were captured wounded.

Spencer Gentry also remembered this incident well. He was on his way to The Jolly Millers that morning when “all hell seemed to break out”. He ran to take cover in the fire station, only to find all the firemen sheltering under their fire engine.

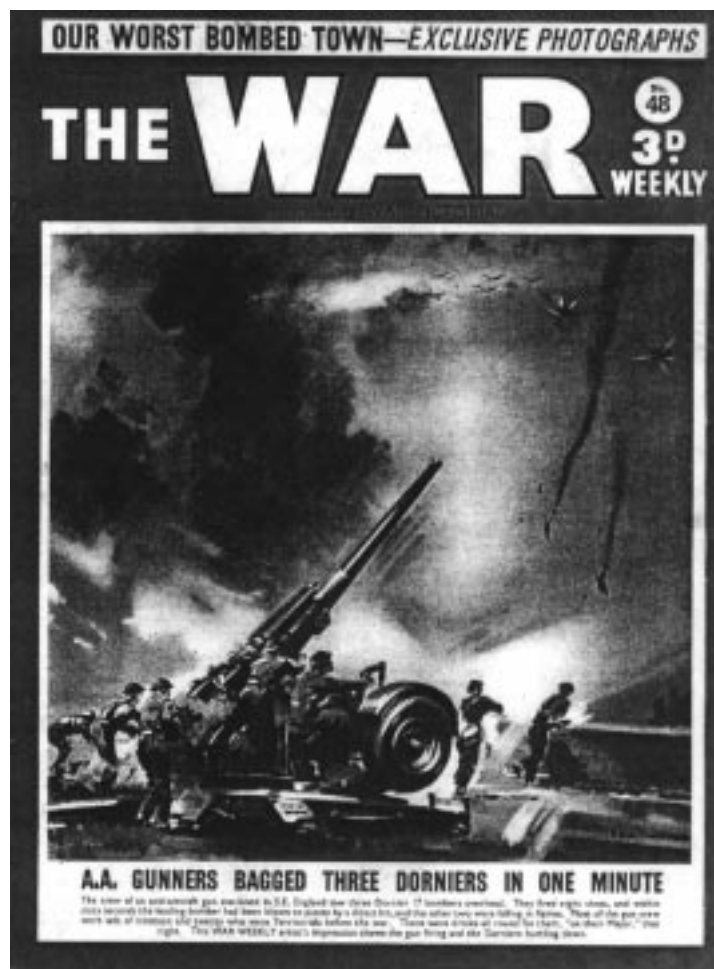
Although Frank Tanner’s and other eyewitness accounts refer to three planes being shot down, there is some controversy because details recorded in authoritative books on the Battle of Britain list only two Dorniers coming

down in this area, with a third at Leeds Castle. Whether or not this discrepancy will ever be cleared up remains to be seen but, for the purposes of this book, what matters is that this was a most frightening and dramatic event which will long live in the memories of those who witnessed it.

Throughout the Battle of Britain inhabitants of the two villages daily watched the unfolding of the Battle - the white contrails in the blue sky, the diving aircraft, the sound of machine guns etc. Raymond Thompson remembered that a Hurricane crash-landed near the Little Boys Homes. Ray Knowler also recalled the Spitfire which crashed in the dip along The Homes Road. Both pilots escaped unhurt, whilst another had a forced landing along Eglantine Lane.

Walter Millen remembered well that, in the Westminster Mill with all the machines going full blast, the sirens could not be heard. A listener had therefore to be appointed on the top floor in a quiet part of the Mill. The girl listeners said they were lonely, so two had to be appointed. When the sirens sounded the listeners pressed a button which rang a bell in an office adjacent to the braiding room. A loud gong was sounded which then sent all the workers hurrying to the shelters.

On the evening of 4th November 1940 the system worked well - which was just as well because, at precisely 7.20 pm, a bomb fell on the mill and exploded in the braiding room. Walter Millen was in a small brick shelter in a corner of the mill. He heard the noise of bombs falling and one particular explosion seemed to shake the walls of the shelter. On leaving his shelter he saw a hole in the roof and another in the floor of the braiding room. Some of the





*The crew of the Beaufort Torpedo Bomber (l-r) standing Sgt R Brown, F/Sgt A E Shaw, Sgt D G Liveston and (seated) Sgt D B Heron  
Photograph courtesy of Joan Wilkinson*

*Bristol Beaufort*



machines had been wrecked. Walter hurried to the main shelters and held a roll call. Fortunately everybody was accounted for. On the night of 29th November 1941 at 18.40 hours, a Beaufort Torpedo Bomber (No. N.1015) of No. 42 Squadron crashed in Horton Woods between the Mission Hall and Speedgate Cottages. Raymond Thompson remembered it circling round as though looking for somewhere to land. Unfortunately, it hit the high tension electric cables and crashed, the torpedo it carried blowing up on impact. The crew of four was killed and all that was left of the plane were parts scattered around.

During one of his regular Second World War propaganda broadcasts, defector Lord Haw Haw stated that the Luftwaffe intended to bomb the railway viaduct at Horton Kirby. German bombers attempted the target - and failed.

One memorable incident in South Darenth was the bomb which fell in 1943 on allotments opposite Yew Tree and Emily Villas. Phyllis Martin, who was living in Yew Tree Villas, had reason to remember it. Unknown to her at the time, a letter delivered that day from her husband in the forces disappeared through a gap in the floorboards created by the impact of the bomb. It was only discovered some years later when her husband, Roy, was able to prove he had written as promised, after all!

The bomb also caused East Hill to be blocked with chalk which prevented the fire brigade getting to incendiary bombs that were alight in the fields further up.

Later in the war, when the Germans sent over their secret weapons, about six V1s (pilotless planes, nicknamed doodlebugs) and two V2s (rockets) fell in this area. There are no reports of damage or casualties, so presumably they all fell in open fields. One doodlebug was brought down by the balloon barrage and landed near the main road to Farningham.

Today virtually no evidence survives of those stressful days apart from that list of names on the War Memorial.

On a happier note however, some good did come from the War, as far as Gwen French, now Gwen Opitz, is concerned anyway - she met her husband, Bill, a German prisoner of war who has now been living in Horton Kirby for nearly 50 years. Bill was first stationed at a PoW camp in Swanscombe before moving into lodgings on Rogers Farm where he carried out work with other prisoners of war. One surviving piece of work carried out by them still stands: the fence posts along the east side of The Homes Road (Skinney Lane) - "Vorsprung durch Technik" 1940s style!



*Skinney Lane showing the fence posts on the left hand side  
Photograph courtesy of Trevor Manning*

Other wartime romances blossomed between Nellie Price of Horton Kirby and German, Eric Meyer, who lived on Crowhursts Farm, and June Potter who married Bill Schmidt.

At the end of the War, all children of school age in the parish were given a Victory badge. This was in blue enamel with a large V in an oval with Horton Kirby in silver letters underneath.

Much more recently, Sgt Jonathan Dixon saw action in the Gulf War. He had celebrated his 21st birthday two days before the war started on the evening of 20th January 1991. His family were relieved and happy to welcome him safely back to his home in Paddock Close. The photograph shows him with younger brother, Ben, wearing a present brought home for him.



*Armistice Day  
marches c 1946  
Photograph courtesy of  
Queenie Drew*



*Ben and Sergeant  
Jonathan Dixon  
Photograph courtesy of  
Alison Dixon*