

# THE BATTLE OF BRITAIN

By August 1940, Germany occupied much of mainland Europe, from the Scandinavian countries in the north to France in the south, leaving Britain isolated against the Nazis. Only the English Channel prevented the expected invasion. Hitler knew that if he were to get his troops safely across the water, he would first have to defeat the Royal Air force (RAF).

The British had lost about half their fighter aircraft during the retreat from France and were greatly outnumbered by the German air force, the Luftwaffe. Hitler had planned to invade Britain on the 13th August 1940 but the RAF was still too strong a fighting force.

## The attack on 18th August 1940

On this day, the Germans launched a powerful air offensive on bases and communication networks in southern England.

About 100 enemy aircraft headed towards Kenley and neighbouring Biggin Hill airfields on a high level raid. Meanwhile, nine Dornier Do17 bombers came in low and attacked Kenley, destroying three hangars, the medical quarters and ten planes on the ground. One officer and eight RAF men were killed, with eight others injured. Fortunately, the operations room was left standing.



## Ground defences

The Germans had studied aerial photographs of Kenley and knew their targets. Their Dornier aircraft were equipped with cannons and bombs, specially designed for low level attack.

Kenley was defended by anti-aircraft guns positioned around the airfield's perimeter track. The most effective of these was the Bofors gun.

Another innovative defence measure was the parachute and cable system. Rockets were fired into the sky, trailing behind them a steel cable, which was suspended for a few seconds from a parachute. The drag of the parachute would bring down any aircraft that came into contact with the cable. On the 18th August, the system was fired, but just one Dornier was brought down. The burning plane was found by Air Warden Reid, who witnessed the crew die in the flames.

Artist's impression of the 18th August attack on Kenley, Peter North.

## Aftermath

Of all the German bombs dropped that day, only a few actually reached their target. Many fell on the surrounding towns. For both Kenley Airfield and the country this series of attacks became known as 'the hardest day'.

After the raids, civilians and military personnel struggled frantically to put the airfield back into working order. In testimony to their dedication, it was serviceable the following day.

*"The heat from the fire had been so fierce that all the wood of my tool box had disappeared; only the metal band was there. The wooden roof of the hangar was gone and on the floor beneath were scattered the several hundredweight of nails which held it all together."*

(Bill Fisher, airman of No 615 Squadron).



An airman reflects on the wreckage of a hangar after the 18th August attack.

## Reconciliation

That day, two airmen fought against each other in the skies but in their later years became friends.

Guenther Unger had already had an engine shot out on his Dornier. Harry Newton spotted the German from his Hurricane and thought, "Here's one that won't get back." Newton tried to shoot the German down but missed and found his own aircraft in flames. Earlier he had opened the cockpit to avoid being trapped but now this left his body exposed to the fire and he was badly burned. He managed to parachute to safety to a welcoming committee of 15 soldiers.

Unger's Dornier was still flying and he managed to make it back to the coast of France where he went down in the Channel.

*'For the first time in my young life - I was only 19 years old - I realised what war meant.'* Sgt. H. S. Newton.



36 years later Sgt. Harry S. Newton and Unteroffizier Guenther Unger were reunited at Kenley Airfield.



This board forms part of the Kenley Heritage Trail created and funded by a partnership between the City of London Corporation, Kenley Airfield Friends Group and Tandridge District Council.