

EVENTS ON THE NIGHT/MORNING OF THE 11th of MAY 1941

at

FULFORD HALL FARM

EARLSWOOD

WARWICKSHIRE

Notes and photographs of the German Bomber that crashed onto
Fulford Hall Farm in the early hours of the 11th of May 1941

At that time the farm was operated by a tenant farmer named James Keating Hay, who lived with his family in the main farmhouse. His family consisted of his wife, Rebecca, (formerly Gormley), and his two children, Olive, born on the 8th of May 1936, and Norman, born during May 1939. The crash happened in the early hours of the morning, but, Mr Hay, with Norman on his shoulders, went up the drive to see what had happened, but by then the Army and Home Guard were in charge of everything and would not let people near the burning aircraft.

In later years, Olive, now Olive White, recorded her own memory of what happened, and her testimony of that night is added to this narrative after this introduction. Olive passed away in 2015, but her testimony, although from a 5 year old, should be respected, as traumatic incidents in a young person's life are often remembered with surprising accuracy!

A local Earlswood resident, one Godfrey Null, later sought other testimonies from that night, and the testimonies received are stored in the Earlswood Village Museum. They are not a part of this narrative as this is personal to the Hay family, but they are very varied in the information that they provide, and the versions often show conflict!

Several books have been written covering this incident, but are often in error with what they claim through poor research!

A CHILDHOOD MEMORY OF MAY 11TH 1941 WHEN THE HEINKEL CRASHED IN EARLSWOOD.

I lived at Fulford Hall Farm with my parents and brother and I still remember that night. We were woken by the blast. I think at the time we were sleeping in the cellars of the farmhouse, which we did at times during the war: at first we slept on sacks filled with straw, like homemade palliasses which were put on the settles round the sides of the cellar. Eventually my father took a double bed down, which was a lot more comfortable and, I think, a cot for my brother who wasn't quite two years old.

Everyone thought the house had been hit. Father picked me up- I was five - and my mother grabbed my brother. My father's cousin was living with us at the time and we all ran outside to the end of the house and looked across to see a sheet of flames near to our cowman's cottage on the other side of the road. I remember my father saying: "it's a plane down in my good wheat field!" Did he get any compensation for his ruined crop? I don't know! I spoke to my father's cousin recently - she's now in her 90's and she confirmed most of my memories.

We were told afterwards that the plane had been caught in the searchlights from the balloon barrage at Wythall and had been shot at: The crew had tried to off-load the bombs they had before they crashed. I think there were five but my memory is hazy and I don't know where they exploded. Some of the farmhouse windows were damaged and dust came in everywhere. Leonard Neal was our cowman, then living in the farm cottage with his mother. It was the nearest building to the crash. The blast damaged the cottage badly, more or less lifting the roof and setting it down again. Leonard and his mother were very shocked and came down to join us in the cellar. I remember Mrs Neal shaking and not being able to speak. The smell of the burning metal etc. was awful.

My friend - a year older than me- who lived in Norton Lane says that her father was in the Home Guard, although he wasn't on duty that night, but he went up anyway and was talking to Mr Broom who was chauffeur to the Astons who lived in Fulford Hall. He lived in the last cottage in Fulford Hall Road and had heard the plane come down. I resented not being allowed in 'our field' for sometime after the event: fields where we normally were able to roam freely. There were lots of people guarding the remains of the plane - Home Guard etc. I remember walking up the farm drive with my mother and only being allowed to look across from the gate.

Winnie Curtis, a friend who lived in Rumbush Cottage with her mother and sister. was on duty at Solihull Hospital that night. Someone came looking for her as she had the keys to the mortuary and they needed them. She asked why and was told that a German bomber had crashed in Earlswood. When she heard whereabouts she was soon on her bike and peddaling home with her heart in her mouth. Luckily the plane

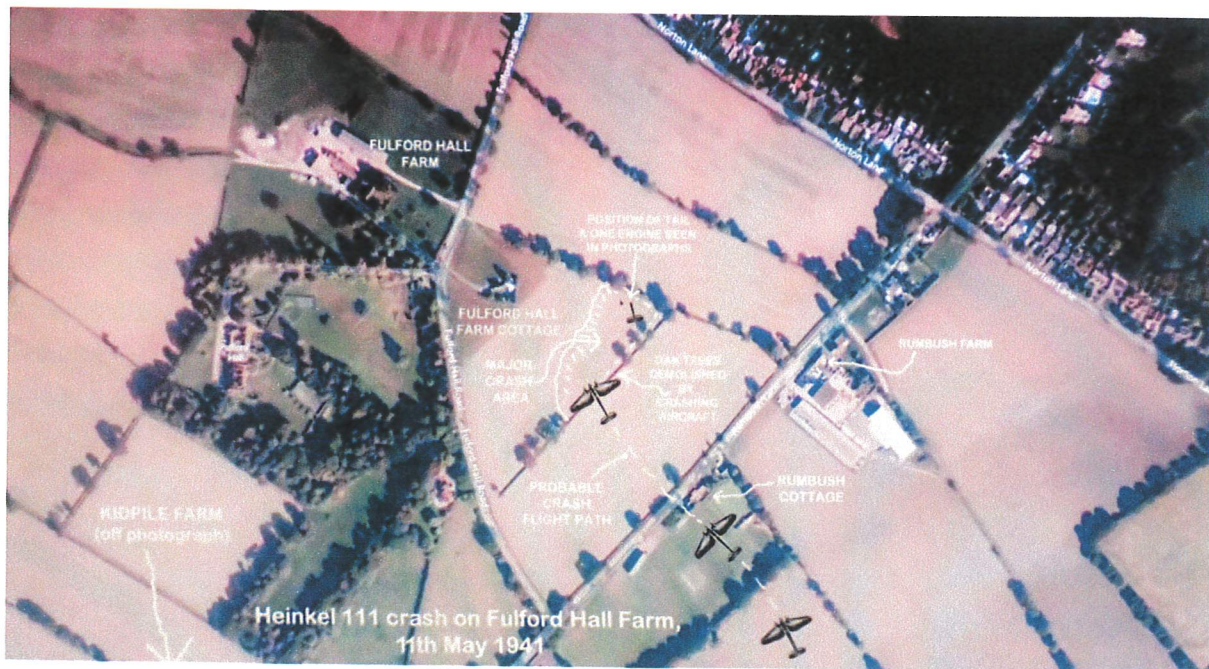
had missed her cottage, but only just. The plane, losing height as it came down, cut off the tops of many of the trees round the edges of the field: These remained a stark reminder of the incident for many years.

Some years ago I read a report in a paper that some sort of badge, presumably from the plane, had been found in a garden at Hall Green and it was surmised that turf had been cut and sold from the field where the plane crashed. This cannot be so. I checked with my brother who agrees with me that our father never sold turf from any of the fields on the farm. There were many souvenir hunters for weeks afterwards. I think this is the most likely explanation. We did collect a few pieces of metal but nothing of much interest. I hated the smell of it after it had been in the fire.

Even at my young age I couldn't and never have been able to get the thought of those young men, who suffered in that plane and were killed, with one badly injured survivor, out of my mind. I know that lots of soldiers and airmen died in the fighting but this was on our doorstep. I suppose even then I was a bit of a pacifist. I hated the drone of the bombers going over and war generally. Even when the war was over I would pray fervently that we would never have another one..

*I. O. White
June 2012*

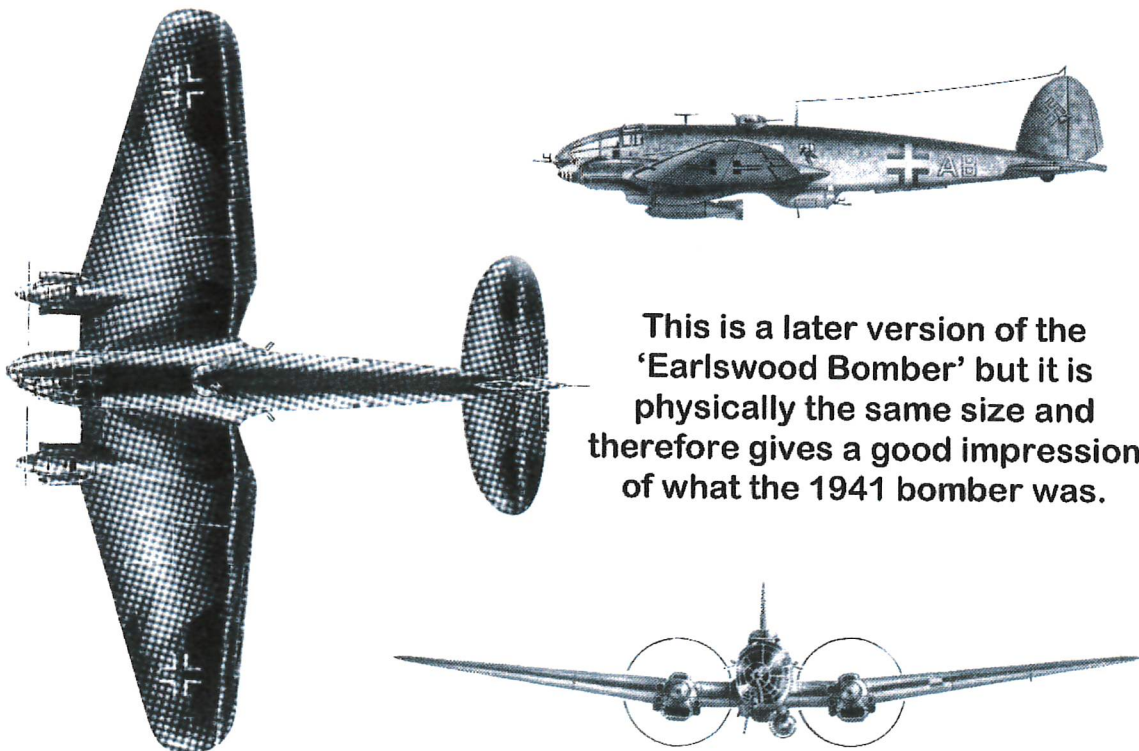
The following photographs and descriptions were made for the displays at the village museum, and are reproduced here with appropriate captions and descriptions.



This composite aerial picture was made by Glynne Bowsher (Son in Law to James Hay) to show the probable flight path of the aircraft before crashing in the Cottage Field of the farm.

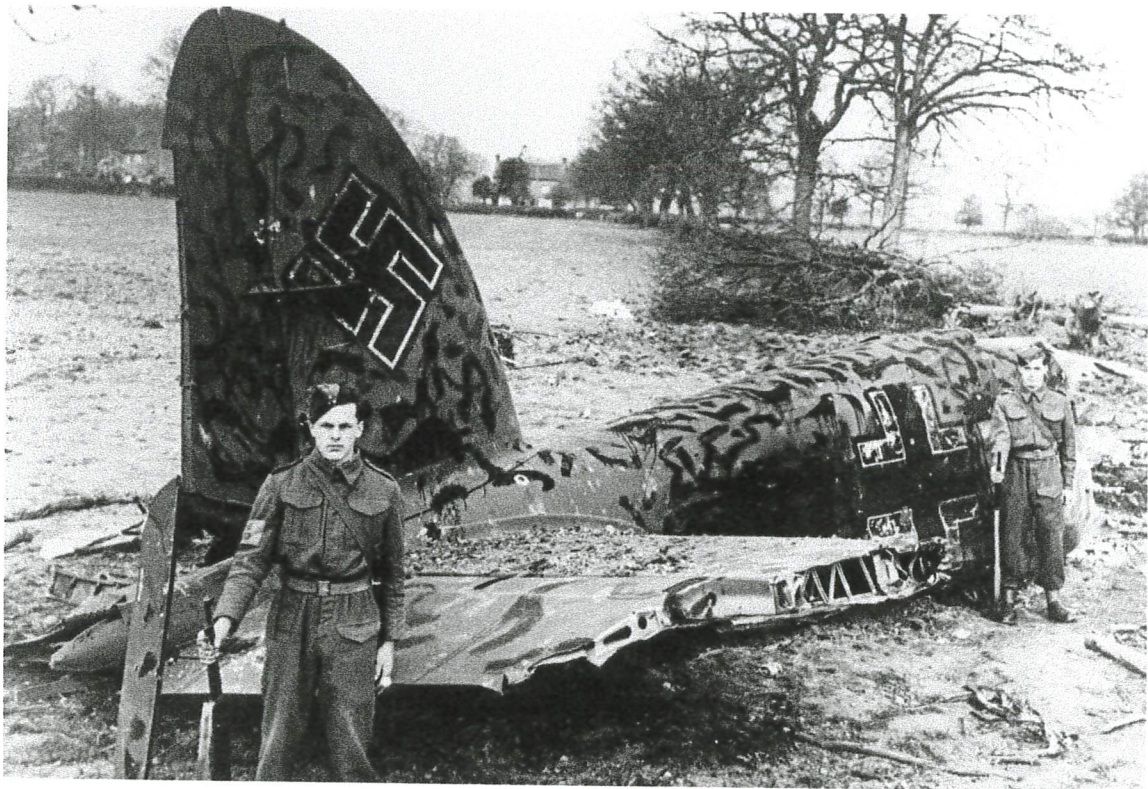
It relies heavily on the Microsoft image, which is acknowledged.

The type of aircraft.



This is a later version of the 'Earlswood Bomber' but it is physically the same size and therefore gives a good impression of what the 1941 bomber was.

It was probably the H-8 version of the Heinkel HE111 which crashed at Earlswood, the fragment details shown in the surviving photographs suggest this. The engine exhaust form is for the H-4 version, but the R.A.F Crash Report also notes the addition of Barrage Balloon cutting equipment ahead of the wings, typical of an H-4 version so modified to make it the H-8 version that crashed on Fulford Hall Farm.



Local Home Guard soldiers guard the remains of the Heinkel 111 in the cottage field of Fulford Hall Farm.

In the background the Farmhouse is to the right of the tailfin & the farm cottage is to the left of the tailfin.



**Aft fuselage & tail section + one engine in the corner of the cottage field of Fulford Hall Farm
Roof of Rumbush Farmhouse is visible over the left shoulder of the soldier viewing the engine.**



**Group of local Home Guard Soldiers
guarding the remains of the Bomber
in the Cottage Field of
FULFORD HALL FARM.**



The tailfin of the aircraft was taken as a trophy by the local Home Guard, and is seen here, presumable at their headquarters at Kidpile Farm.

The tailfin was later recorded as being at King Edward the 6th school in Birmingham, but seems to have disappeared – presumable scrapped?

SO WHY WAS THIS LONE AIRCRAFT FLYING OVER EARLSWOD?

Heinkel HE111 Bomber crash at Fulford Hall Farm, Earlswood, 11th May 1941

From the evidence available, this single aircraft had been ordered to drop its 2000 Kg bomb load on the Aluminium rolling mills at Quinton. Its flight path required it to find the two lakes of the Bittel Reservoirs and then follow the adjacent railway line towards its target. The time was approximately midnight, and the lakes would have been easily seen in the moonlight.

Through navigational or timing errors, the crew found the Earlswood Lakes and its adjacent railway line instead! It then followed that railway north, but failed to find the Birmetal Works, being many miles off course. The crew turned their aircraft back to the lakes to try again, probably more than once, but it was picked up by the searchlight battery at RAF Wythall and that of the 380 battery at Kidpile Farm. The aircraft was at low altitude, was fired at by the local Home Guard based at Kidpile Farm with their own Lewis Gun, and by the rifles of the soldiers on duty. The aircraft was hit multiple times, with the pilot either killed or injured by the ground fire. It then crashed into a field at Fulford Hall Farm at approximately 00.45 hours, passing over Rumbush Cottage before colliding with a line of Oak Trees bordering the crash site field. Power cables were brought down and little of the aircraft survived intact. Its bombs were released randomly before passing over Rumbush Cottage.

There was evidence of an attack by a night fighter, but this was probably prior to it arriving over Earlswood!

The pilot, Johannes von Speck died, together with Segfried Ruhle the flight engineer and Fritz Munn the observer. A survivor was Rudolph Budde, wireless operator, injured and taken to Solihull Hospital before becoming a P.O.W. Rudolph Budde returned to Germany post war, and died in 2003.

It is most unlikely that an injured crewman was chased across the fields by ladies wanting his parachute to make silk underwear, the remains of the parachute concerned being identified as one for dropping ordnance and not crew members! The same Home Guard would have been quickly in attendance, preventing locals from getting too close to the crashed aircraft, quite apart from the ferocious fire and that very early time of morning.

The only evidence today of this incident are the missing Oak Trees from those bordering the field that the aircraft crashed into.



The crash field some 81 years after the incident, with passive evidence still there!

And who crewed the aircraft?

The Heinkel Crew in 1940

On the occasion of their award of the Iron Cross 1st Class for bravery.



Siegfried Rühle
Feldwebel
(Flight Engineer)

Fritz Muhn
Feldwebel
(Observer)

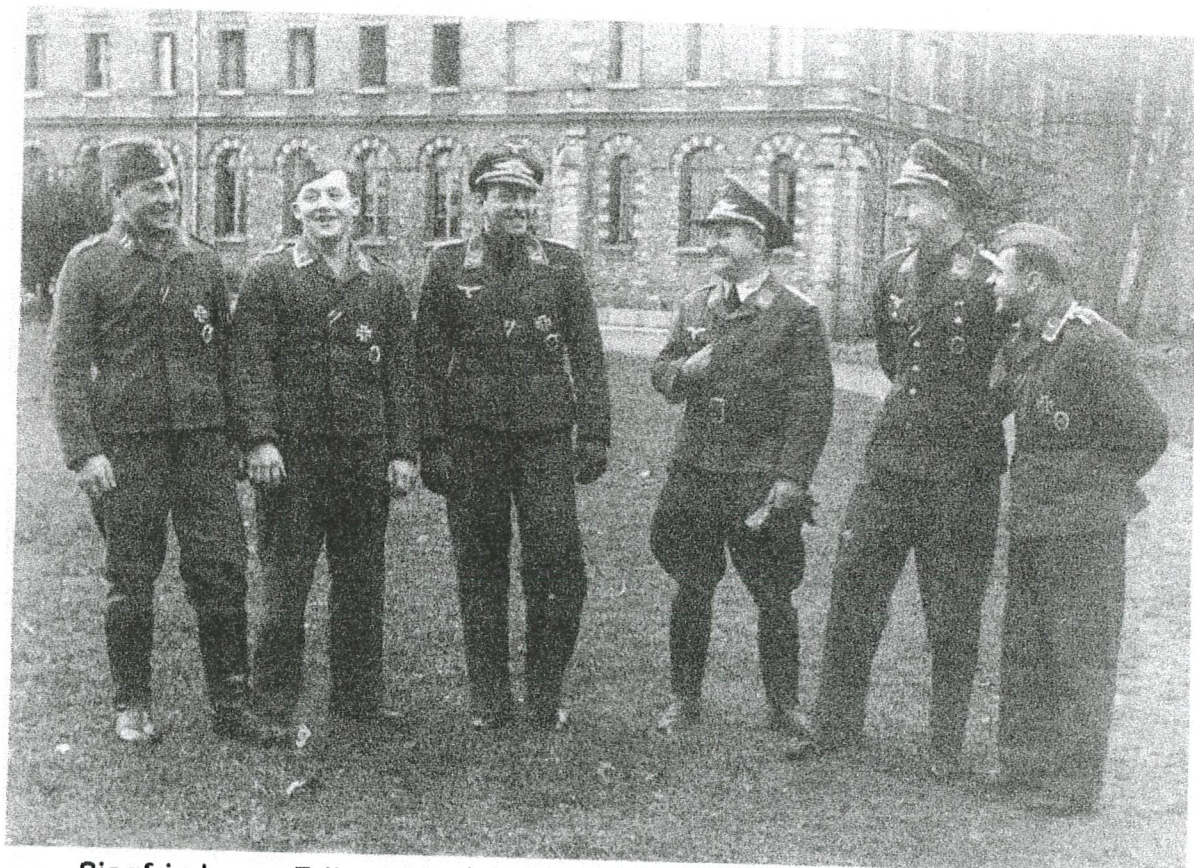
Johannes von Speck
Oberleutnant
(Pilot)

Rudolph Budde
Gefreiter
(Wireless Operator)

Killed in the Earlswood Crash 11th May 1941.

Survivor
Died 2003.

The crew of the Heinkel at their awards of the Iron Crosses



**Siegfried
Ruhle**

**Fritz
Muhn**

**Johannes
von Speck**

**Rudolph
Budde**

Other officers unknown

With other unknown German officers at the same location and time.

In more recent times a rather weathered and bent Iron Cross came to light in the same field that the crash occurred in, it is currently shown in the Earlswood Village Museum. It is likely that it belonged to one of the crew members, and will be one of those shown being worn in the pictures above, though its true identity is unknown.

There have been visits by family members of the crew to Earlswood to observe where their loved ones died, and some have left us with items of interest. We have a rather good portrait of Fritz Munn as a young man, in uniform, and it hangs in the museum with other parts of the aircraft wreckage salvaged by a young man of the day seeking souvenirs of this happening in the otherwise quite village of Earlswood.

The crew members that died were originally buried in the cemetery at Shirley, but they were later transferred to the German war grave cemetery at Cannock Chase.

In more recent years an item was sold that belonged to Siegfried Ruhl, it was a Silver Goblet, presented to German aircrew who had distinguished themselves in service. This item was

bought by Robert Johns from Washington D.C. and who is a military historian. It was brought by him to Earlswood to show local people, and to allow him to see the site where Siegfried Ruhl had died. A picture of this is shown below.



Compiled by: Glynn T Bowsher
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The Goblet has a Swastika dated 1939 on one side, and what appear to be fighting eagles on the other side.

G. T. Bowsher. 15th of June 2023.