



Cambridge Archaeology Field Group

The Orwell Dornier

A story of local World War II history and
finds from our field walking

During the Second World War, the skies above Cambridgeshire and much of the east of England were filled with the sounds of aircraft, both Allied and Axis. A find from a recent Cambridge Archaeology Field Group fieldwalking exercise at Orwell, brought back to light one local incident from those dark times. The group had been walking fields at Rectory Farm Orwell with the permission of the National Trust. There were generally few finds from these fields, however, we did find the remains of a 20mm cannon shell casing. Stamped on the end cap was 1942, the year of manufacture and K2, which indicates that it was a type produced by Kynoch at Standish, Greater Manchester, part of ICI.⁽¹⁾ 20mm cannons formed part of the armaments of several WWII aircraft, including versions of the Spitfire, Hurricane and pertinent to this article, the De Havilland Mosquito.



Figure 1. The 20mm cannon shell casing from Orwell. (Photos: T Dymott)

Mosquitos were multi-role twin-engine aircraft, used as light/medium bombers as well as for air combat and defence. The Mosquito NF11 night fighter version was fitted with a MK V air intercept (AI) radar set in 1942 and was armed with four 20mm cannons and four 0.303 machine guns, all forward mounted in the main fuselage nosecone. In 1942, they replaced the Hawker Hurricanes and Boulton-Paul Defiant night-fighters of 151 squadron, based at RAF Wittering near Stamford.

The 'Box' Air Defence System

From early 1942 the standard air defence method used several 'boxes' within a series of sectors in a ring around London, part of the 'Dowding' system. Each box was 44 miles

long by 14 miles wide and had a stationary vertical searchlight 'beacon', around which a night fighter would circle. If an enemy aircraft was detected entering a box, more searchlights would be deployed, and defensive aircraft directed towards it under sector control. The major airfields within each sector had operations rooms, such as at Wittering and Duxford locally.⁽²⁾ At 22:37 on the night of 8th September 1942, a Mosquito, serial DD669, crewed by Flying Officer Ian McRitchie and Flight Sergeant Fred James (RO), was despatched from Wittering to S/L box 20, under Duxford sector control. While orbiting at 12,000 ft, they received 'smack'. This was an order to investigate a possible enemy aircraft. They observed searchlight beams to the south and a flare being dropped. Duxford ordered them to return to the beacon, but McRitchie obtained permission to continue looking as he was certain there was a 'bogie' nearby. Eventually blips were noted on the AI which spread, indicating bombs had been dropped, and explosions were later seen. Investigating another radar blip, it was identified by Sgt James through binoculars as a Dornier Do217, which they commenced to engage at a range of 300yds. During a four second burst of cannon and machine gun fire, several hits were made on the fuselage, starting a fire. The Dornier attempted to take evasive action, but a further three second burst set its port engine on fire. A further two second burst hit the Dornier's wings and it dived into the ground, exploding in a vivid bright flash: presumably some of its remaining bombs had exploded. The aircraft crashed in a field at Rectory Farm, Orwell at 23:35; all four of its crewmembers were killed ⁽³⁾

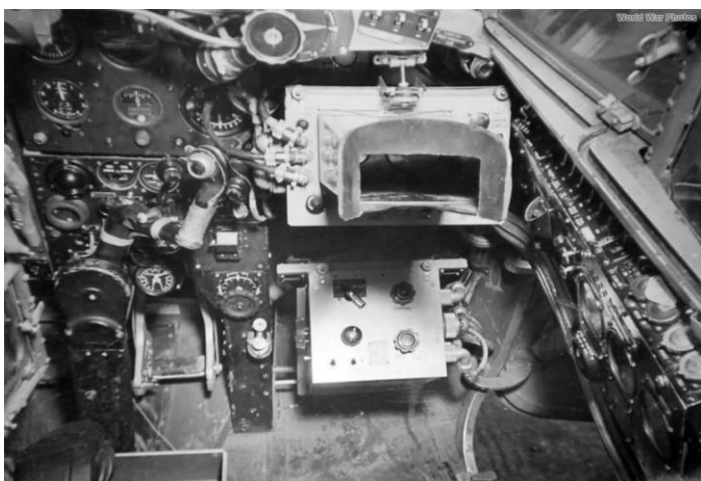


Figure 2. The cramped cockpit of a Mosquito Night Fighter, with the AI viewing hood to the right of the pilot.

(<https://www.worldwarphotos.info/gallery/uk/raf/mosquito/mosquito-night-fighter-cockpit/>)

Orwell Home Guard

On the night of the 8th of September, the Orwell Home Guard unit had been warned of possible parachutists and took up a position on high ground. They observed the fireball as the aircraft hit the ground. As they cautiously approached the wreckage, all that was recognisable was the tailplane with ammunition rounds occasionally exploding in the flames. The main road through Orwell was littered with British shell casings, which children were avidly collecting the next day. McRitchie's Air Intelligence Combat Report, records 296 cannon rounds and 804 0.303 machine gun rounds being fired. A cordon was thrown around the crash-site by RAF Air Intelligence, while three bodies were recovered from the Dornier and a fourth from the adjacent field. Fragments of the aircraft were strewn over 150yds ⁽⁴⁾.

The Orwell Dornier Do217,

Dornier Do217 E-4, Wk5502, was a member of the Luftwaffe Kampfgeschwader 2 (Combat Squadron 2), nicknamed 'Holzhammer' (wooden mallet), from its badge showing a gauntleted hand holding a mallet. By 1942, KG 2 were operating from Holland and France, attacking shipping, and making occasional night raids. ⁽⁵⁾. On the 8th of September, Dornier Do217 Wk5502 took off from Gilze Rijen airfield near Tilburg, Holland at 22:30. Its crewmembers were (with approximate rank): Pilot Feldwebel (Sergeant) Alfred Witting b.1918 (24) Oberfeldwebel (Sergeant Major) Friedrich Heusser b.1913 (28) Obergefreiter (Lance Corporal) Alfred Hoppe b.1920 (22) Unteroffizier (Corporal) A Eysoldt Witting, Heusser and Hoppe were originally buried together at Bassingbourn-cum-Kneesworth cemetery (Section K.K. Grave 12). They have since been reinterred at the Cannock Chase German Military Cemetery, where it appears graves were doubled up. Witting and Hoppe share one grave, with Heusser interred in another. No further information for the burial of the remains of Eysoldt has been found: perhaps there weren't many, or they were repatriated. ⁽⁶⁾.

Ian McRitchie

It was to be Australian McRitchie's last combat kill as he was awarded a DFC, promoted to Flight Lieutenant, and moved to training duties. He later returned to prominence on active duty in February 1944, when as now Squadron Leader, he piloted a Mosquito bomber in the famous 'Operation Jericho'. This was a raid on the Amiens prison in German occupied France, which it is claimed was to enable the escape of many French Resistance prisoners, who were due for execution. Unfortunately, McRitchie's Mosquito was hit by flak on the return run. He was wounded seriously, and his RO Fl Lt Richard Sampson was killed. After performing a belly landing on a snow-covered field near Dieppe, he was taken prisoner, eventually being held at Stalag Luft 1 at Barth, until the camp was liberated by the Russians in May 1945. Fl Lt Sampson (RNZAF) is buried at Poix-de-Picardie near Amiens.⁷ After learning to fly at an early age, McRitchie made his way to England at the outbreak of War. He was initially arrested and interned as an illegal alien, but eventually persuaded the RAF to give him a flying commission. Ian McRitchie returned to his native Australia after the war setting up an engineering company with former fellow wartime POW friend Sqn Ldr Leader Ken Watts (RAAF). He was a gifted engineer and metallurgist and rose to become Honorary Secretary of the Australian Institute of Metals and then Federal President. He was a Fellow of the Institute of Metallurgy. Ian died in 1997 at the age of 82. ⁽⁸⁾.

Orwell today

The fields within which the Orwell incident were brought to an abrupt and violent end, are currently being planted with trees. With hares scampering about the countryside and with only Red Kites and Buzzards patrolling the skies, it is difficult to imagine now, after 77 relatively peaceful years, the dramas and tragedies which were once a part of everyday life, even in rural Cambridgeshire. However, this one small chance find is a reminder of the struggles that our parents and grandparents faced and endured.

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