It was exciting to us watching from the safety of the ground and of course to a child it was not a battle between men - we didn't think very much of the actual people who were locked in a life-and death struggle in the sky above us. During one battle when it seemed the whole sky for a few minutes was filled with twisting and turning planes, short bursts of machine gun and canon fire mixing with the roar of many high performance engines at full revs, we saw eight planes all coming down at the same instant in time, and I remember vividly watching and hoping that the aircrews would all bale out successfully. They didn't all make it, I'm sorry to say. We heard later that one Spitfire pilot who did get out of his plane was still very badly burned.

Some time in late August or early September a dog-fight took place at a lower altitude, and being in the open hop garden, for one of the few times that I can recall, we left the bins and took to a ditch. The picture is still vivid in my mind of us all huddled together, watching the fighting going on overhead, the planes twisting and turning in the sky, machine guns and cannon being fired in short bursts. I was crouching with Mrs Kate Robards and her very young baby (Anthony), and it made a lasting impression of my young brain.

(In November 2000, I managed to locate Kate again, and we visited her and husband Albert in Tunbridge Wells. They were well into their eighties, and we had a chat for two hours about our experiences, all so well remembered. They had been very good friends to me in the 1940s and 1950s, living in Apps Cottage, a little further down our unmade lane past the old shop.)

On Sunday 15 September the Luftwaffe launched one of their biggest daylight raids on London, and many of the aircraft came over our area. Official reports say that the German forces crossed the coast at Dungeness and set a course straight for London. We were very close to that direct course! The Hurricanes diving out of the sun onto the flights of bombers, shooting down some, and splitting the formations up created a lasting image in my memory. Unfortunately my father, who had fought in the trenches in France during 1916, and who probably remembered his experiences only too well, was too upset after the aerial battle passed from sight to eat his Sunday lunch.

I have no idea how many planes we saw shot down during the Battle of Britain, but as boys we cycled or walked to all the crash sites in the area and collected lots of bits and pieces. The nearest plane crash was about half a mile away. It was to the right at the bottom of Hook Green Hill, as you start up Sand Quarry Hill, on the way to Lamberhurst Down, just outside a wood on the edge of the field. It was a Me 109 and the pilot baled out to land at the top of Sand Quarry Hill near Stone Cottages. He landed in a garden opposite the Stone Cottages at the top of the hill, behind a man digging potatoes, who apparently hadn't been taking much notice of what was going on. He was very surprised when he heard a noise and turned around to see a German airman picking himself up off the ground and dealing with his parachute. Incidentally, any parachute material which we could get hold of during the war was highly prized for making clothes, and I know quite a few parachutes ended up in this way

One day during the Battle of Britain, when hop picking, there was a dog fight and one Me 109 was being chased at low level by a Spitfire, and we saw the pair of them, "hedge hopping", the Me 109 desperately trying to get out of the firing line of the Spit. They were literally having to climb to get over trees, then going low down over the fields. The Spitfire was giving the Messerschmitt very short bursts of machine gun fire whenever he could get him in his sights. They passed near the Abbey Ruins at Bayham, across the fields to the bottom of Bull Lane and to the bottom of Clappers Hill, disappearing towards Lamberhurst. We heard later that the Me109 managed to crash-land, and the pilot got out alive, but he must have been a very shaken man. My father was driving his motor cycle down Clappers Hill when they passed overhead, but due to the noise from the old motor bike engine, he knew nothing about them until they shot past him, just above his head, the Spitfire firing at the ME109. It shook Pop up, too.

Another lucky German crew, was that of an Me 110 during the Battle of Britain. They had been shot up and had to make a dead-stick landing (no engines) near Cousleywood. Making the best of a bad job, with all the trees there were on the Weald of Kent, the pilot put the plane down in a small field, then he must have seen a hedge coming up fast and having enough airspeed lifted the plane over the hedge, landing again on the other side, shot between two oak trees with barely enough room between them, crashed through the next hedge and came to a halt on the lawn of a farmhouse. The story goes that the crew got out, handed the farmer their revolvers, his wife made a cup of tea and they all sat down together waiting for the authorities to arrive to take them away as prisoners of war. The farmer I think was related to "our" Mr Brissenden of Hoathley Farm, near Hook Green.

We always went and saw crashed aircraft at the first opportunity, which was often as soon as they had come down. The smell of every crashed aircraft seemed to be the same, and was unmistakable. It must have been a combination of aluminium, oil, rubber, burnt cordite and other sundry items, but whether British or German, all the crashes had the same smell.

Another Battle of Britain plane was a Hurricane which crashed near to where the Bewlbridge Reservoir centre is now. In those days it was close to an old cottage where a school-friend ("Bandy" Fuller) lived. We went several times to see the crash site, and on one occasion I went there by myself just after a heavy fall of rain. The wreckage (which lay in a marshy area by a small stream) had a lot of the mud covering it which had been washed away, and I saw a Browning .303 machine gun amongst the debris. It didn't take me long to pull it out of the mire, wash it down in the stream and tie it to the top bar of my bicycle with some old hop string, and wheel it home. I had it for years, but in a clean sweep of a lot of "junk", my father unfortunately threw it away, possibly when I was doing my two years stint in the RAF in 1950 and 1951. Gone were also various incendiary bombs (defused by us boys!), shrapnel from different bombs, pieces of aircraft, and a Canadian officer's swagger cane which housed a very sharp-pointed steel dagger.

In the 1980's I was passing the area where the Hurricane crashed (the Bewlbridge Reservoir has now flooded the valley) and I was driving past a farm turning when I noticed a veteran car pulling out and I glimpsed the registration plate had "GX 5-- something" on it. In 1934 Dad had bought a new car with the registration "GX 5483" and this car was of the same make, so I immediately braked, did a quick turn back and caught the driver before he left. We had an interesting chat, as the owner of the car had lived there all his life (he was a couple of years older than I was, and went to Lamberhurst School as well, but we didn't remember each other). He still had one of the .707 machine guns out of the same Hurricane! In the 1980s I found out from Dad where he had dumped it but as it was on a farm rubbish tip the likelihood of finding it was very remote, so I haven't bothered to look.

We became quite expert in determining where a plane crashed. Seeing the direction in which it spiralled down, and the pall of smoke which rose up from the spot, we would go indoors to consult a chart which Dad had devised. It had Hook Green in the centre of a series of radiating lines, and each line was drawn in the direction of a village or other specific feature of our local area and labelled accordingly. Turning the chart round until the north-pointing arrow on the chart coincided with true north ( i.e. orienteering the chart), and estimating the distance from us we would read off the landmark nearest in that direction and dash off on our bikes to view the wreckage.

Our guess of the distance away was usually very good as we could count the seconds between the plane disappearing from our view and the time we heard the explosion. Dividing the number of seconds by five (that is the time that sound takes to travel one mile) and we knew how far away to look, and the appropriate direction. We used the same technique with bombs that fell, and automatically started counting the seconds whenever anything interesting happened.

We had a good laugh when an uncle from London was visiting. It was a dull gloomy day in the middle of winter and we were sitting down to our midday meal when a German bomber came droning over. We heard the whistle of a couple of bombs coming down. Uncle must have heard the same sort of thing in London many times, as he reacted very quickly and pushing his chair out of the way dived under our substantial old dining table. We all sat there wondering what he was doing during the few seconds that the bombs took to reach ground (they exploded harmlessly about half a mile away), and Uncle sheepishly climbed up from beneath the table. We explained that we no longer bothered to take any notice of such things - feeling that in the open country there was not really anything to worry about. In retrospect I must admit that this seems a little foolhardy because if the bombs are coming down you are just as likely to be in the wrong spot at the wrong time in the country as you would be in a town.

The German bombers came over mostly at night once the main blitz of London started in the winter of 1940-41 and I remember lying in bed hearing them drone across. We became used to the German planes coming over with their characteristic "wong wong wong" noise due to the airmen switching their engine synchronising gear off once they were over England. When they did this the engines would not run at exactly the same speed, giving a distinct beat-note. They thought that having de-synchronised their engines, our sound locating equipment could not determine the direction of the planes (but as it happened we were using Radar by then, so it made no difference).

We would watch the searchlights criss-crossing the sky, creating interesting patterns on the clouds as they moved around looking for the planes. Sometimes one searchlight would suddenly light up an aircraft, then all the searchlights in the area would swing round until they were be focused on him, the searchlight beams making a shape like a stack of hop-poles. Anti-aircraft guns would then open up and the resulting fireworks would be marvellous. Every fifth shell would be a tracer and on a windy night when our nearby Bofors guns opened up, the shells would wander around far more than one would have expected, presumably because the wind at various heights would be different. One had to be fairly near to the guns to see this effect as at a greater distance it would not have shown up, and the shells would appear to be travelling in a straight line or a slight curve without wandering around.

We didn't see a single plane shot down by anti-aircraft guns, which seemed strange when the searchlights lit the aircraft up so well. They looked like sitting targets, but I have read that about 30,000 shells were fired for every plane shot down. No doubt the aircrew would have been put off from aiming at a specific target by the barrage being directed at them, so the guns were probably doing some good.

One night during the firing there was a whine and a dull thud, heard I think only by Pop, who in the morning looking around the back garden came across a fair-sized hole in the cabbage patch. He telephoned the Army who duly sent a couple of Squadies to investigate. They had drain-rods with them and stuck them down the hole and decided that a four and a half inch shell had gone down about fifteen feet. "Too far down for us to dig" was the verdict. "It won't do any harm that far down" and there it remains to this day.

Reading about the German aircraft guidance system "Knickebein" some years after the war, I realised that the night bombers which we used to hear going through to London, one plane following the other after a short interval, were probably all following the radio beam laid down for them. Sometimes they were quite low, particularly on dark cloudy nights and at other times would be much higher. The low-flying ones must have gained height if they were on their way to London because there was a complete curtain of barrage balloons encircling the capital. On very clear days we could see them from Hook Green, glinting in the sunlight.

A very amusing incident comes to mind when thinking of barrage balloons. Although we didn't have any stationed anywhere near us, one had broken loose from somewhere when we were picking hops at Hoathley Farm, and the cables dangling from the balloon must have been heavy enough to keep the balloon flying very low as it drifted in the wind. When it came near we thought it was terribly funny when the cables dragged all along the length of a set of Hop Pickers' huts, whose roofs were made of corrugated iron and the drumming noise of the steel cables running along the roofs could be heard a long way off.

On another occasion an escaped balloon was at such a high altitude that it was almost out of sight. One of our fighters climbed up to it and made several passes at it, firing each time until eventually it shot it down. It fell very slowly and I do not remember any fire -- it probably just lost its gas. It was interesting as a demonstration of the time sound takes to travel, as we saw the fighter was firing at the balloon but heard no sounds of its guns for quite a long time afterwards. They were so high that it took many seconds for the sound of the machine guns to reach us.

One wet and windy night my mother was just saying goodnight to me in my bedroom when we heard an aircraft approaching at a fairly low altitude. It was obviously a German twin-engined bomber from the distinctive unsynchronised engines, and very soon we heard the scream of falling bombs. There was no time to do anything, and within seconds we heard the crump of the bombs exploding, very close by. The house seemed to be leap around as each bomb exploded. Dad, being the Air Raid Warden, went out to see if there was any damage in the village. When he arrived at Bull Lane Cottages, (a row of eight houses belonging to the Bayham estate), he nearly fell down a bomb crater right outside one of the cottages. Jerry had planted one of the bombs in their garden and the whole front of the place was demolished. Finding his way round to the back he knocked on the door and was let in. "What happened?" "It's draughty in here" were the words that greeted him and he had to tell them not to go into the front of the house because there was no front!

The incident amused us, as the people in that house were not the best of gardeners and we thought Jerry did a better job of digging the garden than they did. They were also the family which gave Dad the most trouble over the "Black-Out". He occasionally went round the village to check that everybody was keeping the place completely dark. This family had often been told that their lights were showing and asked to make sure that they maintained the Black-Out properly. It is very likely that the German aircrew saw their lights and dropped the string of bombs hoping that it was an area where something was of importance to our war effort. If so it was a pretty good aim on their part. For many years after the war the new brickwork of the repair to the house was visible and it might still be, even now .

When we looked around next day we found that two of the bombs had fallen in a field near us, one was in a small orchard by Woollett's farmhouse, very close to a large pine tree, which had been damaged. The next one was in the Bull Lane Cottage garden, and at least one more was at the back of the cottages in an orchard. I think a few chicken belonging to Mr Woollett were killed. There was a footpath known as the "Slip" which ran past the damaged tree and the bombing nearly claimed another victim when Alan Blackford was walking past the tree the day after it was dropped, when it suddenly started creaking and then fell in his direction. He ran out of its way just in time .

(Later in the war, Alan's older brother, Alec, was killed in a tank near Caen, and Alan was lucky to get away with being dropped at Arnhem and fighting in the subsequent battle.)

In Skense Wood the local game keeper came across an oak tree liberally spread with thick black oil whilst beside it was a fair size hole. At some time an oil-filled incendiary bomb had fallen but it did not cause a fire so no-one even knew it had been dropped. It might well have been there for weeks or even months as it was not near any frequented paths. There was also a big bomb crater further in Skense Wood on the side of one of the main drives, but as there were never any buildings or army personnel within a mile of the spot it was hard to understand why any German aircraft would have dropped it there.

Another H E (High Explosive) bomb fell right in the middle of the river a few hundred yards upstream of the Sheep Dip on the River Tiese below the forge at Little Bayham. The resultant widening of the river at that point is probably still there.

We also had a day off from school some time later when a one-thousand-pounder landed in the centre of the road between Lamberhurst and Hook Green, (very close to the crash site of the Me 109 in 1940). Unfortunately it only took the roadmen a day to reinstate the road so we only had the one day's holiday from school.

An unusual bomb exploded in a field of Watkin's farm on the south side of Hook Green early on in the war - one which was made of aluminium. Like the majority of bombs dropped around the village it did no damage .

The types of aircraft that we saw regularly were the Spitfires and Hurricanes, a few Defiants and Battles, Blenheims, and on the German side ME 109s and 110s, Junkers 88s, Heinkel 111s, Dornier 17 "Flying Pencils", and a very few four-engined bombers which only seemed to come over at high altitude with a lot of other aircraft. They were almost certainly Condors. Later on during the war the types proliferated and we would have to recognise such planes as Beaufighters, Beauforts, Typhoons, Tempests, Wellingtons, Manchesters, Lancasters, Sunderlands, Thunderbolts, Mustangs, Lightnings, Flying Fortresses, Liberators, Marauders, Walruses, Catalinas, and other less common types.

There was even a "Spotters Club" at Skinners School, to which I belonged, and a flimsy weekly magazine called "The Spotter". Aircraft recognition was an absorbing hobby and there were so many planes of one type or another buzzing around for much of the time that it certainly made a boy's life very interesting.

A lot of incendiary bombs were dropped at different times, and on one occasion Dad went out after a raid when there were a load of incendiaries burning to the east of us. I remember looking out of the bedroom window and in the dark night some distance away could see flames in several places. My eldest brother Stan went out with Dad and when they were cycling along in the dark near Neil's Cottages in one of our local lanes, Stan rode over a big bump. On looking down he saw that it was an intact incendiary, so he picked it up and brought it home as a souvenir.

Later on we often found them, many undamaged, in ploughed fields. They were usually in clusters, having been dropped all together from one plane. When they fell on soft ground such as a newly ploughed field they did not land with sufficient impact to set off the detonator and with a spade it was quite easy to dig them up. We used to take them home and make them safe by unscrewing the nose cone, hitting the cap with a hammer and a nail to explode it - it was only like a large cap similar to the ones in toy guns - and take the flammable powder out of the middle of the bomb, make a pile of it and set it alight. It did not burn very quickly but it had sufficient heat to set the outer magnesium case alight if it had remained inside it. The incendiary bombs were about a foot long, and three inches in diameter, the magnesium outer case being quite thick (about half an inch) and at the back end had a simple three-vaned sheet iron fin.

One very windy, cold and clear day in the winter about 1943 we were playing with Derek Boorman down at the Old Abbey on the Bayham estate when we saw a high-flying German bomber shot down. It was probably the first time the crew of four had had to bale out and in the panic of leaving the plane must have forgotten how high up they were up, and pulled their rip-cords immediately they got clear. With such a high wind they drifted as much sideways as they fell downwards and we watched them as they got smaller and smaller and finally went right out of sight disappearing in the direction of Pembury. We never found out where they eventually landed but it must have been a long way away and the poor fellows must have been absolutely frozen by the time they reached the ground.

I have read that the German bombs were primed when loaded onto the aircraft and from then on would explode on impact. This is in contrast to the British ones which had to fall for a predetermined distance during which time a small propeller on the nose spun round and primed the bomb prior to impact. If this is true it explains why the German crews, if they were unable to reach their intended target, dropped their bombs on any other likely target before leaving England so that they would not have the fear of landing back at base with a load of primed bombs.

In February 1944 at night we had a Heinkel 177, a four-engined bomber, circling low over Hook Green, on fire. It came round at least twice as I remember (Dad said three times), each time seemingly lower, still well alight, and suddenly plunged down, exploding in the direction of Lamberhurst. I was hanging out of the sash window in the bedroom and within about five seconds felt the shock wave from the explosion and heard the tremendous bang .

We will never know what happened - possibly the crew were trying desperately to get the fire out, and did not have enough height to bale out and were trying to save their lives by gaining height before attempting to bale out, but the crew of four went down with the plane. Next day we found it had crashed in the field at the back of the Chequers Inn in the middle of Lamberhurst. Except for a big hole in the field and debris of the plane scattered in a wide area, there was little left. I think they found enough of one of the crew to bury him.

Research has shown that “On 24th February 1944 about 150 German aircraft came over England. This He 177 was almost certainly from the Luftwaffe bomber group 3/KG100, and had taken off from Châteaudun in France at 2100 hours, to bomb London. Whilst approaching the target at 12,000 feet it was attacked by Ft Lt Hall of 488 Squadron, who had taken off on a freelance patrol in Mosquito HK228 at 2000 hours. Fire broke out in the bomber, and it crashed at Lamberhurst at 22.44 hours.”