

THE BATTLE OF GRAVENEY MARSH

THE CREW OF A SHOT-DOWN JUNKERS Ju 88 FACES OFF AGAINST A PLATOON OF THE LONDON IRISH RIFLES IN THE LAST BATTLE AGAINST INVADERS ON THE BRITISH MAINLAND

BY LLOYD HOSKINS

Most British history books record the last battle that took place on British soil was when Bonnie Prince Charlie's Jacobite rebellion at Culloden was crushed way back in 1746. However, nearly 200 years later there was another brief battle on the British mainland that is today basically forgotten.

With the sun passing noon over Britain on 27 September 1940, *Luftwaffe* bomber pilots could look out of their canopies and view with some pride the six formations of Junkers Ju 88s and Dornier Do 17s comprising 300 aircraft that were beginning to cross the English Channel with their target being London. The

bomber formations were flying at between 12,000 and 30,000 feet as they moved over the Dover coast. However, there was a problem. Where were the escorting Messerschmitt Bf 109Es? No sign could be seen of the promised protective fighters. What the bomber crews *did* see, however, were the first aircraft from 20 squadrons of the Royal Air Force rising to meet them.

One of the Junkers was the new Ju 88A-1 WNr 8099 that had been rolled out of the factory at the end of July and entered unit service just two weeks before this mission. Assigned to III/KG 77, the bomber had become the personal aircraft of *Unteroffizier* (Sergeant) Fritz Ruhlandt.

The plane carried the coding of 3Z+EL with E being the individual aircraft. It had also been named *Eule* (owl) and wore the distinctive shield insignia of KG 77 on its nose. Even though the bomber was new, Ruhlandt wasn't. He was a veteran of the campaigns in Poland and France and had seen plenty of action.

However, on this mission Ruhlandt was making his first flight with a new crew. They comprised *Feldwebel* Gotthard Richter who was serving as bombardier, *Uffz.* Erwin Richter was operating the radio and functioning as a gunner, and *Flieger* Jakob Reiner was the gunner in

the plane's under fuselage gondola.

Their target was a gas works in east London and destruction of the target would give *Kampfgeschwader 77* a badly-needed success. The unit had spent the summer in Germany as they trained on their new Ju 88s before moving to France at the end of August. By this point in time, British fighter forces had become much more organized and when KG 77 set out on 18 September to bomb Gravesend, the unit lost nine bombers from III *Gruppe* and this was one of the worst single-mission losses to befall any German bomber unit. Obviously, such a loss was grievously felt and replacement aircraft and crews had to be added so that the attacks on Britain could continue.

Records on that long-ago September day are fragmentary but it appears that Ruhlandt dropped his bomb load on or near the target. Departing the area as fast as possible and hoping to avoid the swarms of RAF fighters, Ruhlandt had the power all the way up. Passing over historic Upnor Castle, located east of London on the south bank of the River Thames, an anti-aircraft battery opened up on the German bomber and the right Jumo 211 V-12 engine took a *flak* hit in its cooling system; the pilot shutting it down the motor and feathering the propeller before a



The Ju 88A was a formidable weapon that could perform numerous tasks. It was fast, had a good range, and could tote a reasonable bomb load. It had a weakness in its poor defensive armament. Unlike the Americans, the Germans never really developed an effective defensive armament for their bombers. This example, waiting to be bombed up, has been modified to carry an extra rear-facing 7.92mm weapon along with a forward-facing similar weapon.

fire could develop. On two engines, the Ju 88 was relatively fast and, in a dive, it could escape a Spitfire if the bomber had a bit of a lead. With one powerplant out, Ruhlandt had no choice but to descend since the Ju 88 could not maintain its present altitude on a single engine. Descending also would mean running into more fighters and anti-aircraft fire.

Pushing the throttle all the way forward on the remaining engine and compensating with the rudder, Ruhlandt eased the control yoke forward and got the Ju 88 into a shallow

dive with speed increasing but the wounded *schnellbomber* (fast bomber) had been spotted.

Walter Schmidt was a gunner in one of the other Ju 88s escaping from London and, years later, he would recount, "It was one of the most memorable acts of enemy action that I took part in of all my 200 sorties from 1940 to 1945. The target was a gas works in London and we were flying with 18 Junkers of the first group in formation of two squadrons. The approach height was about 17,500 feet and suddenly the warning came through the intercom 'enemy fighters below right!' They were flying about 700 feet below us



Ich will daß si vorfechten



Shield for KG 77 carried on the Junkers Ju 88s.

It was September 1940 and aircraft were literally falling out of the sky all over southern England. Home Guard personnel, police, and locals check out a Ju 88A-1 that executed a text-book belly-landing in a farm field. Note how the entire propeller and nose case separated from the left Jumo 211 engine.