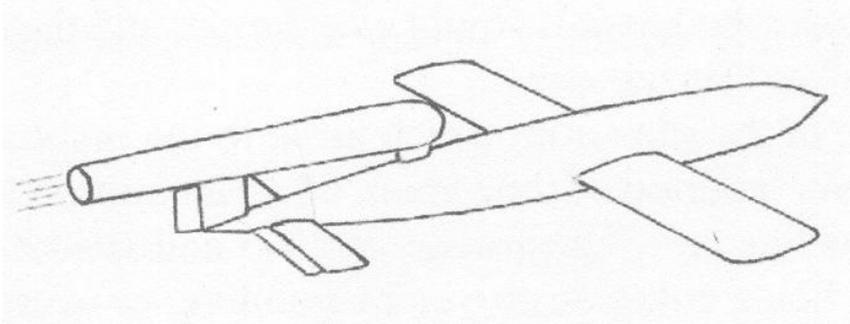


Doodlebug Days



In 1944 we were right in the firing line for the "Doodlebugs" as we called the German V1 pilotless flying bombs. These were driven by a simple "Ramjet" motor, and came over at fairly low altitude aimed mainly at London. They had a very distinct roaring noise which could not be mistaken for anything else,

We had many hundreds fly over during the few months that they were being launched by the Germans from Northern France and Belgium. At first there were a lot of anti-aircraft guns around the area, including "our" gun-site at Hook Green, where there were a couple of Bofors. One day I was with another boy, playing at the camp, and I remember how difficult it was when an aircraft came over to follow it with the gun. We were both sitting on the operators' seats, placed on either side, one having the handles to turn to raise and lower the barrel while the other had the handle for traversing round and round. To us it seemed very difficult to co-ordinate the two functions. Anyway, while we were playing on the gun there was a report of a doodlebug coming our way, and a few moments later we heard and saw it. The soldiers got us down into their slit trench quickly and were preparing to fire the guns when they realised that a Hawker Tempest was chasing it. We watch as the doodlebug approached, and saw the fighter come up behind and give it a short burst of canon fire. Nothing happened. Closer, and another burst of canon fire. Still nothing. Closer still and yet another burst, and in a sudden black cloud of smoke, the doodlebug disintegrated with a tremendous explosion. We all thought that the Tempest had gone with it, but to our relief he appeared straight out of the black cloud, apparently unharmed. He did a quick victory roll and flew off.

Just down the lane from us there was a little terrier dog who started barking a long time before we could hear the Doodlebug. His ears were very sharp, and he seemed to hate the things, and as he did not usually bark a lot, he was a good indication to us that another one was coming our way.

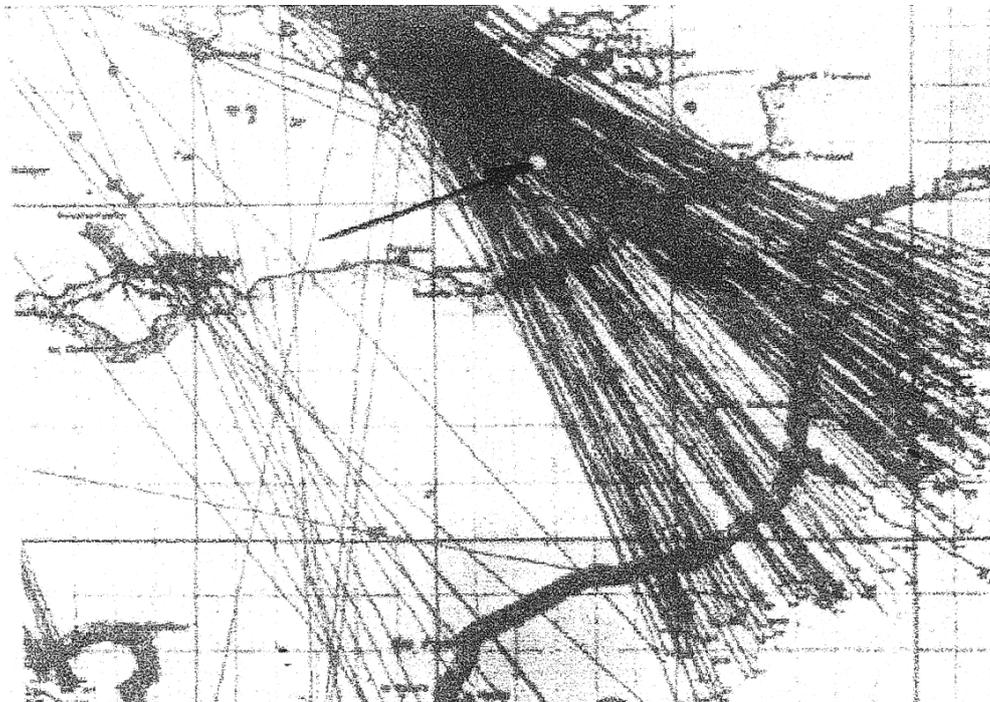
One evening at dusk, Tony and I were in the house, Mum and Dad having gone for a walk, when we heard a Doodlebug on its way towards us. Being upstairs it was natural to lean out of the window and have a look. We soon saw it roaring steadily on its way coming directly towards us. Then a few moments later a Tempest came fast up behind it. The plane got up fairly close to the Doodlebug and then we watched fascinated as the plane's wings started to blink with bright lights on its wings' leading edges. He was firing his guns, and to see the guns flickering like that could only mean that the cannon shells were going to be very, very, close to

us! Several of the canon shells could be heard hitting the pine trees by the house and one landed in the middle of the path at the front of the house.

11

As it was still just about light we dug down at the spot where the canon shell hit the path, and about a foot down found the 20mm canon shell. Luckily it was a tracer, and hence perfectly harmless and was a good souvenir for me to remind us of a near miss. I do not recall what happened to the doodlebug - it must have carried on past us, no doubt to be shot down soon after it had gone overhead.

A Tempest chasing a V1.



The tracks of V1s on their way towards London.

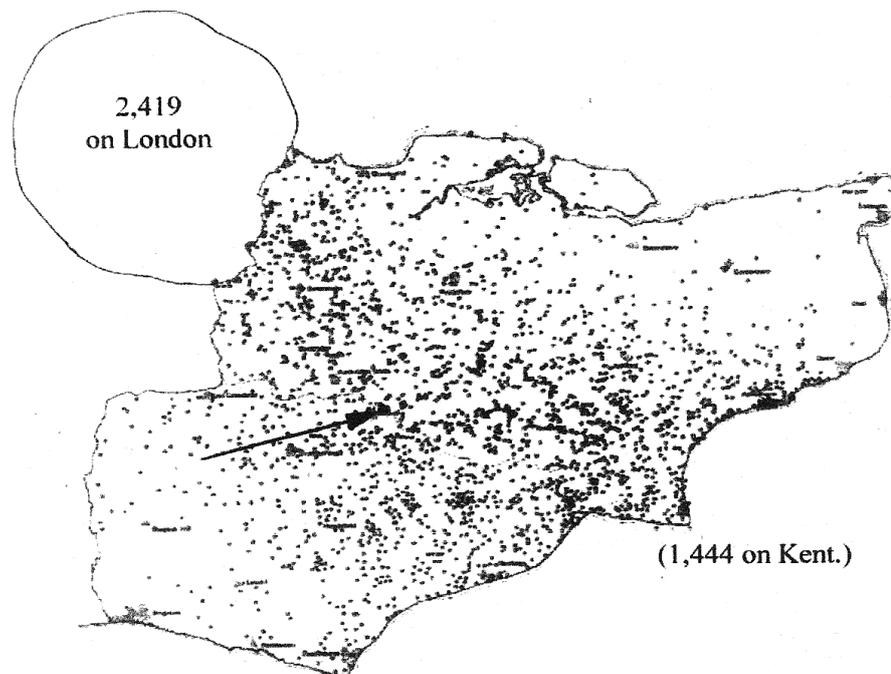
The arrow indicates the position of Hook Green. No wonder we saw so many.

Two friends, "Mot" [Maurice] Brabon and Derek Boorman were not so lucky. Derek's father worked at the forge at Little Bayham and Mot, aged about 14, was employed by him. Mot and Derek had somehow got hold of a twenty millimetre canon shell and had taken it up to the forge and clamped it in a vice. Mot was trying to unscrew the nose cap when it exploded.

Unfortunately Derek was standing to one side of the work bench and received a lot of the shrapnel, mostly into his abdomen. Mot was less hurt as the vice protected him more. They were in hospital for some time I believe - Derek the longest, being the worst hit, but both made a full recovery .

12

On one occasion at school in Tunbridge Wells, our form was in the Biology lab. at the top of the building with three flights of steel-capped stone stairs to go down, when we heard, unannounced a Doodlebug approaching. The sound of its engine grew louder and louder and then suddenly stopped. The teacher very calmly said "Well boys there is nothing we can do in the time before it crashes so, we will sit here and wait". Looking back it must have been a strain on the teacher, wondering if the Doodlebug was going to land near enough to kill us, but we were fortunate and when the bang of the explosion arrived we thought it was at least half a mile away. The lesson then continued as if nothing had happened.



Where the V1s crashed in Kent and East Sussex. (From the K & S Courier)
The arrow indicates the position of Hook Green.

About this time the new jet-engined aircraft were coming out, the Gloster Meteor and the de Havilland Vampire. These aircraft were faster than any of the piston-engined types which by then had reached the peak of their development. I witnessed an event which I later read about when I was in the RAF and had access to some very interesting books about the war. There was a description of the incident when one of the early Meteors was intercepting a Doodlebug when its guns failed. The pilot then inched his machine close under the side of the Doodlebug so that one of his wingtips was under one of the Doodlebug's wings and the violent reaction of the airflow caused the Doodlebug to flip over onto its back and crash to earth. There was no need for the wings to actually touch despite some stories which I have read. The RAF account said that "the Doodlebug landed in open country near Tunbridge Wells", which would be a fair description of the country around Hook Green. We probably saw two more Doodlebugs

brought down by aircraft in this manner but it certainly was not common - the risk to the planes and pilot was too great.

13

One Doodlebug crashed and exploded near the road just before the first Bartley Mill turning as you start to climb up into Bayham woods from Little Bayham. It knocked a large pine tree down about ten feet above the ground and subsequently was sawn off at ground level. Around 1980 I went with my sons Neil and Paul to the site and raking around in the dead leaves found the tree stump quite easily, so knew I was looking in the right place. A further ten or fifteen minutes' search rewarded us with a piece of Doodlebug shrapnel about eight inches long . It still hangs up in the garage, varnished to prevent it rusting any more .

Another Doodlebug landed near the Vicarage in Bayham Woods. This one seemed not to have exploded as violently as they normally did because I remember seeing the spherical compressed-air containers wrapped in hundreds of feet of steel wire lying near to the main wreckage. The compressed air was used to drive the motors in the gyroscopic flight control system and also the control surfaces.

The smell of a crashed Doodlebugs was somewhat different to an ordinary aircraft probably because they had far fewer different types of materials in their construction. For the first few days after they had crashed the smell was probably of the explosive chemicals but this slowly disappeared and there was only a vague taint of something slightly sinister in the air around the site .

(In 1999 until 2006 I spent five enjoyable weeks in Northern France looking for some of the 300 launching sites of the V1, and wrote up what was remaining of 90 of them. It was very interesting to find what remained, and is the subject of a booklet I put together afterwards.)

One incident which was not very funny at the time - in fact I must admit to being frightened - was when I had visited Gordon Potter, a friend from school who lived on the Mayfield road about a mile from Frant. It was probably the late summer of 1943, when Eridge Park, a very large area of open parkland, which extended right to the road by Gordon's house, was an Army training ground. It was out-of-bounds to all civilians for safety reasons, but as far as we were concerned that was not important.

We were on top of a small hill walking through bracken which was a bit taller than we were, when there were some bangs from a near-by hill, and a few seconds later we had mortar bombs coming down very close to us. Looking up, they could be clearly seen falling towards us. When fired from the tube they describe an arc, flying up until they reach a certain height, then descending under the influence of gravity, hopefully onto their target. No doubt the soldiers, being about a quarter of a mile away did not know we were there - which we weren't, very quickly! It was lucky for us that we were not hit, as a bomb would have killed us outright, and we were also lucky that they were smoke bombs instead of high explosive. I do not recall going to the park again after that incident.



Approximate positions of various incidents during the war.

The single dots are bombs 1 String of bombs including Bull Lane Cottages
 2 Bomb in river 3 Bomb in road. 4 Aluminium bomb. 5 Oil bomb (not ignited)
 6 HE bomb in pathway. **The four dots indicate incendiary bomb clusters.**
Crosses are aircraft crashes. 1 Me 109 (1940) 2 Horsa glider (1944)
 3 Hawker Hurricane (1940) 4 Me 110 (1940) 5 V1 (1944) 6 V1 7 V1
 8 He 177 bomber 9 V1

Other episodes might well have been forgotten.

In many ways we were lucky to have been brought up during WW2 in Kent. It was an exciting time for us children, with lots of things going on, and although the food rations were not exactly going to fatten us up, we did not go hungry. There was a very co-operative attitude amongst almost all of the population, each helping the other, which sadly seemed to largely evaporate when peacetime returned.

After the clothing and food rationing which we endured during my formative years, I still feel slightly surprised to walk into a supermarket and buy anything I need.

How lucky we are now.

Robert Geoffrey Dancy.