

London's Blitz before the Blitz

Frank Molloy tells the story of the controversial Luftwaffe bombing attack on Croydon Airport in August 1940.

In 1940, over a number of days in the middle of August, the south London suburb of Croydon and its surrounding area found itself at mercy of the German airforce.

Croydon would have been a key target for the Luftwaffe: the world's first purpose-built civilian aerodrome had opened there in 1920. Indeed, by WWII it was London's main international airport (Heathrow took over after the war). Several aviation factories and engineering works were based on the outskirts. In addition, it was home to an RAF fighter station, with two other key RAF stations in its vicinity: Kenley, three miles away and Biggin Hill, six. Thus, Croydon had a front-line role in the defence of Britain, and on August 15th 1940, it had a baptism of fire, being the victim of the first major WWII bombing raid on Greater London.



Croydon Airport control tower 1935 ~by afvintage. CC license BY-NC-ND 20



SKG210 Group Commander Walter Rubensdörffer

Luftwaffe Group Commander Walter Rubensdörffer was approaching 30 years of age. Born in Switzerland, he was an experienced pilot who had learned how to fly bi-planes as a teenager. He was respected in the Luftwaffe as a decorated veteran of the Spanish Civil War, where he flew with the German Condor Legion.

On July 1st, 1940, he was put in command of SKG210 group. This was a crack wing of hand-picked pilots originally formed as the operational test unit for the new Messerschmitt Me210 bomber. However, trial results were not positive. Instead, the group was switched to practice precision dive-bombing attacks using the existing Messerschmitt Bf110, and develop live ground-attack combat strategies for the fighter-bomber in general. Rubensdörffer himself devised the tactics. His prescribed method was a low-level sea and terrain-hugging technique, as radar was ineffective below 1,000 ft. Then a climb to altitude of at least 3,000ft for a bombing run. Then a fast but shallow 45-degree dive, pulling out at 1,000ft and releasing the payload.

A Luftwaffe wing was typically made up as follows: three squadrons of nine to twelve aircraft, divided into 'swarms' of four to six aircraft, and sometimes divided into 'chains' of three aircraft. SKG210 wing was 28-strong with 18 Bf110s divided into two squadrons, and one squadron of 10 Bf109s.

The Bf110 was a twin-engine, two-seater heavy fighter-bomber with a speed of up to 350mph. Most were equipped with two 550lb bombs, two cannon and four machine guns. A new version trialled by SKG210 carried a single more powerful 30mm cannon. The Bf109 was single-engine, single-seater fighter with a speed of up to 340mph. Most were equipped with variable combinations of cannon and machine guns. A new fighter-bomber version trialled by SKG210 was equipped with a high-altitude engine and a rack carrying one 550lb bomb or four 110lb bombs.

Luftwaffe General Albert Kesselring cherished SKG210 above all other units, but he was sceptical of their accuracy. Rubensdörffer was determined to prove him wrong.

From July 19th to Aug 11th, Rubensdörffer's fledgling force practised their techniques on the sea traffic in the English Channel. They claimed remarkable results of sinking around 90,000 tons of shipping including four warships. Kesselring personally congratulated them.

Then, on August 12th, they were honoured with the task of knocking out England's south coast radar system as a prelude to an invasion. The mission took off from Calais with 20 aircraft broken into four squadrons. Flight Lieutenant Hintze's Bf109s hit Dover, Captain Lutz's Bf110s targeted Pevensey, and Flight Lieutenant Roessiger Bf110's was given Rye. Rubensdörffer's own Bf110 flight took the inland station at Dunkirk near Canterbury.

Although the raids were pin-point accurate, and the stations were structurally damaged, the radar system itself was only temporarily disrupted. Based on Rubensdörffer's report, Kesselring made the mistake of thinking the RAF was now blind. The heavy toll of German pilots over the next three days convinced Field Marshal Goering otherwise, and he issued a directive banning any further radar missions as they were proving futile.



Depiction of a dogfight: RAF and Luftwaffe fighters battle it out in the skies above Britain. "Cosford" by Nigel Renny. CC license BY-SA 2.0.

Later that day, another flight of 20 bombers from SKG210 mercilessly pounded RAF Manston, the first major attack on a British airfield. They put such a fear of god into the ground crew that they barricaded themselves within underground bunkers. Shamefully, RAF pilots had to refuel and rearm their planes themselves. When the SKG210's Messerschmitts left, a load of Dorniers turned up to give it another going over.

The official start date for the German air attack on Britain was codenamed 'Adlertag' (Eagle Day). After several false starts, August 13th, 1940 took the title. The Luftwaffe mounted 1,485 sorties on the airfields of Essex, Kent, Sussex and Hampshire, however, the effectiveness of the raids was hampered by low cloud. Attacks on the 14th were also disrupted by the weather pattern and the Luftwaffe was reduced to less than 500 sorties, mainly confined to coastal areas.

At about midday on August 14th, there was 'a hell of a donny' over Dover. There were numerous dogfights at high altitude involving some 200 aircraft, including half of 54 and 65 Squadrons who were using Manston.

Using the melee as cover, Rubensdorffer's crack force came in low and unnoticed to hit Manston once again. With the ground crew still cowering below ground, the pilots of 600 Squadron were drafted in to man defensive guns. Under weaker protection than usual, many grounded Spitfires and Hurricanes were lost, and the station was once again put out of action. Poor Manston. Known as 'Charlie 3', it was the most easterly and exposed of all the airfields in the south east. Unloved except for the Luftwaffe's infatuation.

On the morning of August 15th, the RAF were no longer favoured by the 'typical' British summer. The clouds dispersed to reveal empty blue skies. The real *Adlertag* had arrived. On this day the Luftwaffe would launch nearly 1,800 sorties in a massive wave of attacks to try to overwhelm the RAF.

At about 3pm, SKG210 went out hunting as part of a larger formation, this time in Suffolk. Part of the group distracted the Hurricanes of Martlesham Heath's 17 Squadron 20 miles out to sea. Meanwhile, 16 Bf110s of the SKG210 team slipped through the net and spent five minutes bombing and strafing Martlesham in a low-level attack. They got away without loss, leaving the airfield out of action.

In the early evening, the fighter-destroyers and fighter-bombers of SKG210 once again headed out. This time towards Biggin Hill and Kenley airfields. They were about to mount the final raid of the day.

Rubensdörffer's Raiders were doing their best to seize back the finest hour from Churchill's grasp.

At about 6:30pm, on August 15th 1940, a huge formation of German bombers was detected heading over the Kent coast near Dungeness. Hurricanes and Spitfires scrambled from pockmarked airfields such as Manston to intercept, but the formation, when challenged, almost purposefully split into distinct groups.

One group made up of Dorniers headed north-east for Biggin Hill. The airfield's 32 Squadron were scrambled and met this force about 12 miles to the south-east. The Dorniers diverted eastwards and attacked RAF West Malling instead, with 32 Squadron still hot on their tail.

Meanwhile, 15 Bf110's and 8 Bf109's of the Luftwaffe SKG210 group followed in on the Dorniers' original path. Led by Commander Walter Rubensdörffer, they hugged the lowland between the High Weald and the Kent Downs before flying over Sevenoaks.

When they reached Orpington, they veered northwards towards Bexley with Rubensdörffer leading a climb to altitude. Suddenly, they turned sharply south-west, losing their main fighter escort in the process.

As the evening summer sun bathed the south London suburbs in an almost ethereal light, Rubensdörffer was heard to comment over the radio: “*Are we over land or sea?*” His next words were more ominous: “*I’m going in*”. But what was his target? Biggin Hill? Or Kenley?

At around 6:45pm, the answer was clear. From an altitude of about 9,000 feet, the force swept down to commence a bombing run over Croydon airport. They unleashed a mass of bombs on the undefended airfield and strafed the surrounding area with their cannon and machine guns.



Depiction of a Bf110 commencing bombing run on Croydon aerodrome. Copyright licence: London Borough of Sutton Museum and Heritage Service.

The Hurricanes of 32 Squadron were suddenly ordered to call off their hunt for the Dorniers and vectored back towards Biggin Hill. Against the setting sun in the western sky they could see huge plumes of black smoke not six miles distant. With a speed of 330mph, they were there in no time.

They were joined by nine Hurricanes of Croydon’s own Squadron 111. Only an hour earlier they had been in combat 50 miles away near Portsmouth. They had landed back at Croydon, refuelled, and been scrambled again to assist 32 Squadron over Kent. Luckily, they had taken off just minutes before the attack on their own base.

There was an initial affray, but without fighter escort the German bombers realised they were sitting ducks. They immediately formed a defensive ring. From above, the Hurricanes hungrily circled their prey. There would only be one winner.

This far from home, the Luftwaffe weren't prepared to mix it, especially with fuel running low. The Germans decided to go hell-for-leather towards the coast. Rubensdörffer himself broke formation. It was the moment the RAF had been waiting for. They moved in for the kill, and pandemonium broke out. The two sides engaged, and a vicious aerial battle was fought over Croydon.

Hurricanes and Messerschmitt's swooped high and low, at one point taking the tiles of a rooftop. It was reported that one RAF pilot plunged his aircraft into the evening traffic of south Croydon, but there is no confirmation of casualties here. You can imagine the town's children watching dumbstruck from their front gardens. Then being reprimanded to come inside by the parents, who would then stand there themselves watching the scenes unfold. Meanwhile, the kids have bolted upstairs to watch from bedroom windows.

The nimbler Bf109s left the straggling Bf110s behind to the mercy of the marauding RAF squadrons. 111 squadron leader Johnny Thompson led four Hurricanes against a chain of three Bf110s escorted by a Bf109. In a burst of machine gun fire over Croydon, the central Bf110 was hit. Even though the chain split, the Bf110 continued to be escorted by the Bf109. One Hurricane remained focused and chased them into Kent. There seemed something significant about this pair.

Group Commander Rubensdörffer was fighting a desperate battle trying to shake off the Hurricane that had remained doggedly on his tail all the way from Croydon. It had hit him once already. Now, as his ailing Bf110 headed south, he was relying on a chaperone for protection, a Bf109 flown by Lieutenant Marx.

What Rubensdörffer hadn't bargained for was an attack from another Hurricane, this time flown by pilot officer Ronnie Duckenfield of Gravesend's 501 squadron. Coming out of nowhere, his bullets ripped into the Bf110. The fuel tanks ruptured and the fuselage caught fire just as it flew over Winston Churchill's home at Chartwell. Over the radio, Rubensdörffer told Marx he was wounded and that his fellow crewman was either dead or unconscious. Having lost control, he would attempt a crash-landing. Marx pulled away leaving the commander to his fate.



Rubensdörffer's Bf110 was attacked in the skies above Winston Churchill's home of Chartwell in Kent.

On the balmy summer's evening of August 15th, 1940, the villagers of Rotherfield in Sussex cocked their ears to the scream of an engine which seemed to be coming from the direction of Crowborough. The sound increased in pitch and volume, and suddenly they watched in awe as a huge flaming chunk of metal roared in from the east and just cleared the spire of St Denys Church. A few moments later they heard a loud explosion. At Catts Hill, to the west of the village, a German Messerschmidt Bf110 fighter-bomber has just crashed headfirst into a line of trees. It had been in England for barely an hour.

The crew were dead. In the pocket of the pilot's tattered uniform was found a telegram from Luftwaffe General Kesselring, congratulating the pilot Walter Rubensdörffer on his Iron Cross, which he had received for courageous leadership. Four days later, he would be awarded another medal posthumously, the German Knight's Cross.

Rubensdörffer and his co-flying corporal Ludwig Kretzer were buried at Tunbridge Wells before being reinterred at the German Military Cemetery at Cannock Chase, Staffordshire.



Group Commander Walter Rubensdörffer's gravestone, Cannock Chase, Staffordshire.

Meanwhile, four miles away in Frant, Lieutenant Marx was brought down by a Hurricane. It was the first Messerschmitt 109 to crash on British soil. Marx managed to bale out and parachute down into the arms of the local police.

Five more Bf110s of the SKG210 group were brought down, at Hawkhurst, Hooe, Horley, Ightham and Nutfield. The surviving aircraft were still being hounded by RAF 151 Squadron as they made their way across the channel. In all, a quarter of the entire SKG210 wing were lost in this one mission. It was a major disaster for the group, made more acute by the loss of its founding commander.

Rubensdörffer's legacy back at Croydon airport was a scene of utter carnage. Hangars, workshops and terminal buildings were ablaze. The armoury was destroyed, the officer's mess was wrecked, and about forty training aircraft went up in flames. The airfield was heavily pockmarked and the station was effectively put out of action. There were 280 RAF personnel casualties, including six dead.

But it was on the outskirts of the airfield where the death toll was highest. 62 civilians were killed and 185 were injured, mainly in the factories and engineering works near the aerodrome.

The suburb's houses shook from the impact of the explosions. Walls were blasted, roofs were lifted and windows were shattered. It caused panic among the civilian population. The air-raid sirens were not sounded until fully 17 minutes after the attack had started. The blasts were felt as far away as Westminster and Woolwich. Londoners were shocked. Up to this point they escaped relatively unscathed. Croydon was the first major bombing raid on the metropolitan area, and it suddenly brought home the seriousness of the situation.

Over the following days, Croydon and the surrounding areas took the brunt of the Luftwaffe attacks, with subsequent toll on civilian life. On August 16th, the adjacent boroughs of Sutton and Merton were bombed with Beddington, Carshalton, Mitcham and Wimbledon suffering in particular. Why these areas were targeted were unclear. There were of no strategic value. The likely logistical answer is that a formation of German bombers heading for Croydon from the south-east was forced to overfly the airport by defending RAF squadrons, then ditched their fuel-sapping payload a couple of miles north-west before turning south to return to base,

Before the end of August, a further six raids on the borough of Croydon would see 311 casualties, including 40 dead. Indeed, before the Blitz on London had officially started on September 7th 1940, Croydon suffered more civilian casualties (514) than any other city or town in the UK. Only Portsmouth and Gosport suffered worse in terms of the number of deaths.

Nevertheless, August 15th turned out to be major success for the RAF in the Battle of Britain. The Germans lost 76 aircraft to the British 34. The Luftwaffe refer to it as 'Black Thursday'. The RAF call it 'The Greatest Day'. They had (just) managed to hang on.

Winston Churchill did not see the dramatic dogfight in the skies above his beloved Chartwell home that evening. Much as he would have surely enjoyed the spectacle.

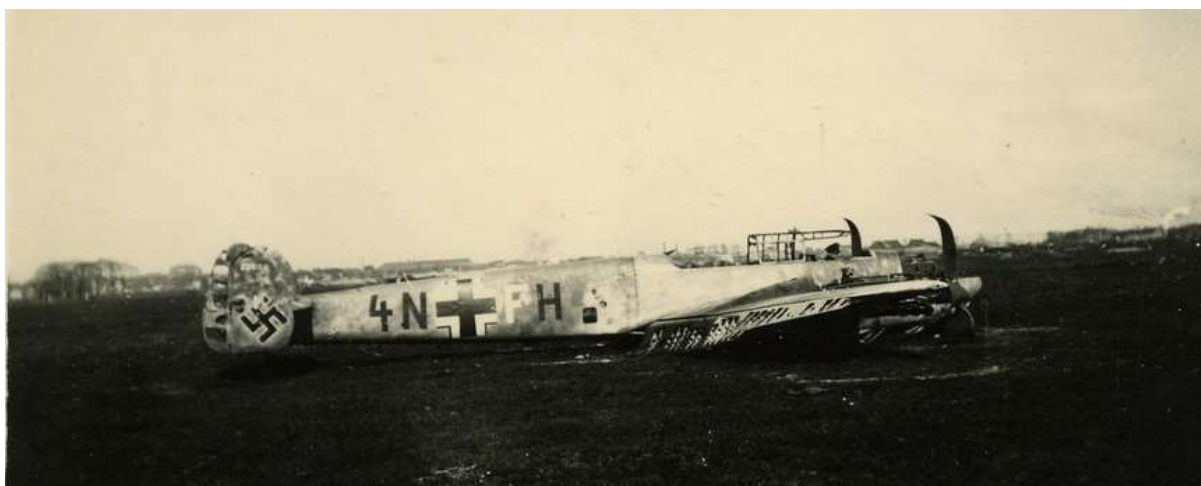
Instead, he had spent the day in Fighter Command Headquarters at RAF Bentley Priory. The following day, as he was being driven to Chequers, he uttered for the first time the phrase: "*Never was so much owed by so many to so few.*"

In Croydon, 'so many' would never hear those famous stirring words.

German aerial attacks Jun 18-Sep 7 1940 (pre-'Blitz').	Casualties	Deaths
Top 10 UK civilian casualty sites: city/town (+strategic target)		
Croydon (airport and aviation industry)	514	107
Portsmouth & Gosport (Navy and submarine bases)	479	127
Weybridge (Vickers-Armstrong factory)	341	47
Luton (Vauxhall plant)	332	66
Merton	328	72
Liverpool/Merseyside (docks)	317	55
Birmingham (industrial plants)	219	66
Swansea (docks)	181	56
Chatham & Gillingham (docks)	120	30
Aberdeen (docks)	107	27
<i>Entire Greater London area (not inc Croydon or Merton)</i>	<i>716</i>	<i>55</i>
<i>Note: Newcastle, Norwich, Plymouth and Ramsgate recorded casualties just below Aberdeen.</i>		

As such a calamitous event, for both sides, the Croydon Airport attack by the Luftwaffe SKG210 bomber group on August 15th 1940 seems to have been somewhat airbrushed out of history. Especially when you consider its impact: the first major aerial bombing attack on Greater London, the significant loss of life, the serious casualty figures, the major damage and destruction it wrought on infrastructure, and the high ratio of German aircraft losses.

Very few history books or documentaries mention it, and if they do, it's only in passing. For example, in 2020, Channel 5 ran a three-part series entitled: *Battle of Britain - Three Days that Saved the Nation*. Produced by Lion TV, it is fronted by the respected historians Kate Humble and Dan Snow. The first episode is all about August 15th, 1940. It is generally well presented with plenty of human angles. However, the day's events rather abruptly conclude with the bombing raid on Portland at 6:20pm, with the inference that it was the last of the day. Sloppy, really, as it was precisely at that time that Luftwaffe SKG210 bomber group were about to launch August 15th's final and most devastating attack.



Downed Messerschmitt Bf110 - image by Adelaide Archivist. CC license BY 2.0

Other historic accounts seem to dismiss the strategic accomplishment and importance of the raid because it is suggested that somehow SKG210 group 'mistook Croydon for Kenley'. There are various reasons given. One is that as they approached Kenley, the group was suddenly dispersed when it was intercepted by RAF squadrons. Group Commander Rubensdörffer regrouped his forces for another attack. But it is claimed they lost their bearings, and the airfield that (handily) loomed into their view was Croydon. A case of 'mistaken identity'.

Is it too much of a coincidence that the bombing raid on West Malling at roughly the same time is also labelled as 'mistaken'? In this attack, a Dornier group flew in ahead of the SKG210 force. Apparently, they were heading for Biggin Hill, but were forced north-east to West Malling by RAF 32 squadron. The Dorniers must have reasonably expected a 'welcome party' at some point, and pinpointed it south of Biggin Hill. On engagement, had the Dorniers turned north-east they would have brought the RAF squadrons right into the path of the incoming SKG210 group. But by turning north-west they drew the ire of 32 squadron, while at the same time making for the legitimate target of West Malling without any sharp detour. Did the diversion mask what was to be their original target anyway?

There is also the claim that the reason the fighter escort left the SKG210 bombing party was because it got 'lost' over Bexley. Fighter escorts were *always* 'inexplicably' leaving bombing parties. It was one of Goring's main complaints to his fighter-commanders. Perhaps on that day, as the SKG210 group rose in altitude to begin their bombing run, the escort felt they had done their job. They were already close to their 100-mile range.

Another theory is that the SKG210 group was flying into the low setting sun, and again, although their target was Kenley, they were blinded into attacking Croydon. Even crew members hint at this one. Remembering Rubensdörffer's comment "*Are we over land or sea?*" Lieutenant Koch said later he believed there may have been a "*haze*", and Lieutenant Hinzte mentioned a "*mist*" at high altitude. Was it all just a smokescreen? Had the Germans conjured up a scotch mist in south London for the history books?



Hurricane stain glass window at RAF Bentley Priory

Hazy sunshine or not. There is just no way you could mistake Croydon for Kenley from the air in 1940. The pear-shaped Kenley airfield was keenly surrounded by wooded countryside. Croydon aerodrome was nearly twice the size in area and situated in open fields at the edge of a large conurbation in a continuous ring of

south London suburbs. Aside from the control tower, hangars and other associated buildings that you would expect at London's international airport, there was a swimming lido in the playing fields opposite, closed but with high-diving boards visible. And more enticingly, a huge industrial plant lay just to the north-west of the airport. It included the Croydon 'A' power station (with its soaring wooden cooling towers), Beddington water-treatment works, the gasworks, and hundreds of production plants along Factory Lane and Imperial Way. Snaking through this landscape as a guiding landmark was the four-lane wide A23 bypass, built in 1924.

The pilots of SKG210 didn't just jump into the cockpit and fly blind over England. They would have spent hours poring over maps and reconnaissance photographs, studying topological models and examining landmarks. Göring revealed that his special crews made intensive studies of targets, planned suitable methods of attack, and examined navigational solutions. In short, they did their homework. It has also been suggested that many of the SKG210 team had been civil aviation crew members before the war, and who could easily recognise Croydon from when it had been London's main peacetime airport.

Furthermore, the most direct route for the SKG210 group from Romney on the Kent coast to Croydon was a straight line hugging the contours of the High Weald and over Sevenoaks, which would take you slap-bang between RAF Biggin Hill and RAF Kenley. It was too obvious and too risky to fly such a direct route. And they couldn't bank to the west as they would then have been squeezed between RAF Kenley and other southern airfields. What they did was skirt around the issue, and launch their attack unexpectedly from the north-east.

In addition, having 'mistakenly' hit Croydon, it is hard to believe that they bombed it with such precision. The targeting of the surrounding aviation industry buildings was surely not random, but clearly calculated. And there is no doubt the Luftwaffe were targeting strategic inland sites with precision at this stage. The Vauxhall plant at Luton and Vickers-Armstrong factory in Weybridge are testament to that.

Another claim is that Rubensdörffer himself was covering his tracks in 'mistakenly' hitting Croydon, because had he survived, he would have been court-martialled for going against Hitler's express orders forbidding the bombing of London targets. However, strictly speaking, Croydon was not part of London. It was a town in Surrey with a London suburban boundary and did not have any municipal connections to the capital until 1965.



Croydon Airport plaque - image by sleepymyf. CC license BY-NC-ND 2.0

Moreover, Hitler himself had issued a directive on August 1st, extending Luftwaffe operations to the RAF-related industries, and Croydon Airport would have definitely fitted the bill. Indeed, a mission by Luftwaffe bomber wing KG54 to attack Croydon was cancelled on the morning of August 13th as the weather was bad. And on the very morning of August 15th, Göring had issued a directive to all Luftwaffe commanders specifically referring to the enemy aircraft industry as an alternative and legitimate target of strategic importance. Finally, if Rubensdörffer was heading for a court-martial, why was he posthumously decorated so honourably?

In my opinion, SKG210 Group Commander Walter Rubensdörffer knew exactly what he was going for on that fateful day in August 1940: Croydon Airport. And he and his staff with Luftwaffe High Command backing, planned and executed the attack, diversionary tactics and all, with absolute precision.

Of course, there is always the possibility that Rubensdörffer was a something of a maverick, breaking the rules in a desperate bid to prove the effectiveness of his beloved dive-bombing squad.

Either way, it cost him his life, and the lives of many innocent others.

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