O
fficially, the Battle of Britain had ended the day before, but to those participating in the aerial fighting over the United Kingdom, and those living and working beneath it, this fact would probably have passed unnoticed. The war still had to be fought.

With hardly any warning, and barely seven hours after the battle had concluded – a battle that marked the first major campaign to be fought entirely by air forces and which had been the largest and most sustained aerial bombing campaign up to that date – a Hawker Hurricane crashed into the rear of the Roberts family home. This house, at Thornton Cottages, 128 Robin Hood Road in Knaphill, and the adjoining semi, number 126, was virtually demolished. Only the front wall of the property was left standing. As for the rear of the building, all that remained to be seen was a pile of debris mixed in with pieces of smashed aircraft.

The Hurricane, Mk.I P3118 of 87 Squadron, had taken off earlier that morning from RAF Bibury (twelve miles north of Swindon in Wiltshire) on a night patrol. The pilot was 21-year-old Battle of Britain veteran Sergeant Laurence Arthur Thorogood.

Thorogood had joined the RAF Volunteer Reserve in 1938 as an engineering apprentice. Called up when the war started he was given the opportunity to train as a pilot. After pilot training, and having been awarded his flying badge on 25 April 1940, he was posted to 87 Squadron in June 1940. At this time, the squadron was recovering from the losses in pilots and aircraft it had sustained during the Battle of France.

From the end of June, 87 Squadron was based at Exeter as part of No.10 Group, Fighter Command, protecting the West Country. During the Battle of Britain it flew many sorties to intercept enemy aircraft crossing the coast between Southampton and Plymouth. On 25 August 1940, Thorogood shot down a Junkers Ju 88 in the vicinity of Portland.

As the Battle of Britain progressed, the squadron began flying night defensive patrols. Indeed, night fighting soon became its major task and on 3 September 1940, half of the squadron were sent to RAF Bibury near Cirencester in Gloucestershire, to concentrate on night patrols, though the battle continued.

Its last day, Thursday, 31 October 1940, was a bleak day of almost constant drizzle with strong westerly gales blowing up the English Channel. As midnight came and went, in the period 02:45 to 06:00 on 1st November, some half a dozen enemy bombers were detected crossing the coast in the Weymouth area making for Birmingham and the north.

It is likely that Sergeant Thorogood was ordered up by the Filton (Bristol) Ground Controller to intercept these aircraft. After an hour-and-a-half on patrol, with no contact with the enemy, Thorogood had become lost and was starting to run short of fuel.

With no inland radar in 1940, a single-seat fighter flying at night over blacked-out Britain, apart from when ground features could be picked out, relied on two methods to navigate. One was to ask for their position by broadcasting their radio signal (the controller would ask the pilot to "transmit for fix") which would be picked up by two or more manually-operated ground-based high frequency Direction Finding stations. They would relay the bearing of the pilot's signal to the control room where they would be plotted. Where these intersected indicated the aircraft's position.

The other method involved the use of Pundit beacons (powerful mobile red lights that could be seen from at least twenty-five miles away on a clear night – see Issue XX) in the vicinity of active airfields. The beacon flashed the two-letter identity of their associated airfield in Morse but would only be switched on briefly when a friendly aircraft was expected.

The beacons were operated away from the immediate airfield location and were periodically moved to stop the enemy making use of them. Pilots would be advised of these changes in relation to the airfield’s position.

At about 07.00 hours on the morning of Friday, 1 November 1940, the war for the Roberts family of Knaphill in Surrey became very close and personal. Frank Phillipson investigates a shattering event in Robin Hood Road.
open land before he jumped. As he landed on Horsell Common, an area of Heathland north of Woking in Surrey, he slightly injured his ankle.

A local cowman, Bill Ford, from Cartchers Farm, found him at about 07.30 hours trapped in a gorse bush. Bill told him "I’m arresting you. You’re a German". Undeterred, Thorogood replied: “No I’m not, I’m one of you”!

Later the same day Sergeant Thorogood flew a Miles Magister with a passenger from Farnborough back to his squadron’s main base at Exeter. Then, on the 5th he flew Hurricane V7404 from Exeter to RAF Colerne where he had to explain the circumstances of the incident to the Air Officer Commanding.

So much for Sergeant Thorogood – but what of the house his Hurricane had demolished?

Henry Roberts had left for work on the railway when he realised that he had left his scarf behind. He retraced his steps and entered the kitchen through the back door. His wife Hilda was there, along with his seven-year-old son John and his ten-year-old nephew, Charles Gosden. Charles had come to stay as the area of his home in Deal, Kent, had become subject to shelling by German guns on the French coast.

The two boys were asleep in the under stairs cupboard. They slept there as a matter of routine – especially since a number of bombs had fallen nearby a few weeks before. Mr. and Mrs. Roberts slept under a stout wooden kitchen table.

Just as he was getting his scarf, Mr. Roberts became aware of the scream of what he thought could be a bomb. He shouted at his wife to get under the table while he threw himself over the two sleeping boys. As he did so Thorogood’s Hurricane slammed into the back of the house.
Even after all of the wreckage and rubble had settled and come to rest there was dense choking dust everywhere. Mrs. Roberts started shouting for her husband and the two boys, but Mr. Roberts could not answer as soot from one of the chimney breasts had covered him and filled his mouth.

The stairs had partially collapsed but had been held up by a recently-purchased sturdy brown Bush radio – this survived the incident and with one or two new valves continued to be used. All around the table there were complete or partial belts of live .303 machine-gun ammunition which had spilled out from the aircraft.

When the Hurricane struck the house its Merlin III engine became detached and ricocheted up through the upper storey of No.126 which was occupied by an elderly lady named Mrs. Baker. The engine bodily lifted up her and her bed and propelled them through the wall. Fortunately, she was then flung off the bed as it was set alight by the red hot engine.

At 07:10 hours, the Woking Air Raid Precaution Report

ABOVE: A street plan showing how part of Robin Hood Road was in the immediate pre-war years. (Author)

ABOVE: A modern aerial satellite image showing the area of Hurricane P3118’s crash site. The yellow dot indicates where 126 and 128 Robin Hood Road once stood. (©2009 Google-Imagery ©2009 DigitalGlobe, Infoterra Ltd & Bluesky, GeoEye, Getmapping Plc, The GeoInformation Group)

ABOVE: A section of a 1949-dated map of the area around Knaphill and Woking with both the crash site of Hurricane P3118 and the landing site of its pilot indicated. (Author)

LEFT: Sergeant Laurence Thorogood pictured with an 87 Squadron Hurricane at Exeter during the Battle of Britain. Laurence Thorogood ended the war in the Far East as a Squadron Leader. He stayed on in the RAF after the (Courtesy of the Dilip Sarkar Collection via Author)
Centre received a call notifying them of the incident. Responding quickly, they despatched a fire engine, two trailer fire pumps, a rescue party, two ambulances, two stretcher parties and a car for any walking casualties.

Firemen rescued the Roberts family and Mrs Baker, first taking them out to the street. Here, Mrs Baker lay on a stretcher having been winded by her fall. She had a false leg which she hadn’t been wearing in bed. One of her rescuers went and retrieved the leg for her, but when she saw it she informed him that it was an old one and that she wanted her new one!

Mr. Roberts had sustained a cut to the back of his head, believed to have been caused by the aircraft’s wing, and was taken to hospital where he had three stitches put in it. Miraculously, Mrs. Roberts and the boys were uninjured.

The Roberts family lost virtually all their possessions in the accident. This included their mahogany furniture which had made for them by a cabinet maker relation as a wedding present, and two new bicycles.

However, they had recently taken out an insurance policy against war damage and this paid out £39. After the incident the family went and lived with relatives in the area.

In the days after the crash an RAF officer came to the site and apologised to Mr. Roberts for the accident. At the same time, an RAF Maintenance Unit recovery squad took away all the aircraft wreckage that could be found. In the remains of one wing a ‘Lucky Horseshoe’ that had hung over the backdoor of 128, was found jammed up a machine-gun barrel. One of the RAF team offered to cut the section out for Mr. Roberts to keep as a memento, but he declined, replying that he had “already seen enough of it”.

So severe was the damage to the two homes that the building was subsequently demolished. Because of shortages of building materials, it was not until the early 1950s that a single detached house was built on the site.

Even today, nearly seven decades after the crash, every now and then the occupants of the replacement house still unearth the odd fragment of Hurricane, reminders of the night in November 1940 when one family and their neighbour and an extremely lucky escape.