

MARIA SMITH

The Capture of a German Airman A Family's Tale

From a young age, I grew up listening to **MY FATHER**, Raymond Stanley Douglas Backhouse, recount the extraordinary story of how he **captured a German airman** during World War II. Born on January 29, 1930, in Horn Hill, Whitwell, as the youngest of nine children, my dad moved with his family around 1937 to Skegsbury House in Kimpton Bottom, Kimpton. Nestled atop Skegsbury Lane, Skegsbury House stood alone, where my grandparents raised pigs, geese, and chickens. When war broke out, they built an Anderson shelter next to the pig sty at the bottom of their back garden as a precaution against air raids.

On **August 30**, 1940, a dramatic day unfolded at Skegsbury House. My dad, then just 10 years old, was home with his parents and eldest sister, Enid, when **German bombers** flew overhead. Frightened, they rushed to the shelter. As the bombs began to fall, the ground shook, and dirt cascaded into the shelter, causing my aunt to panic. She fled outside, sitting under a tree down the lane until my dad was sent to retrieve her. During this chaos, he witnessed **a dogfight** in the sky and heard a German **plane crash nearby**, igniting his curiosity.

Driven by a boyish fascination, my dad wanted to explore the wreckage and find pieces or bullets to show his friends. However, his grandfather, injured during the Battle of the Somme and unable to walk far, couldn't accompany him. Instead, my grandmother joined him on the walk to the **crash site**. By the time they arrived, several men were already at the scene, and my grandmother was urged to take my dad away, as the sight was gruesome. My dad later confided that he had already seen a decapitated German airman hanging upside down from a tree—a haunting image that stayed with him. Though they started back toward the house, my dad lingered to search the fields, while my grandmother, cautioning him not to delay too long, walked ahead.

As my dad retraced his steps **along the lane**, he spotted a man approaching and quickly realized it was **a German airman**. Hiding behind a hedge, he froze as the footsteps halted nearby. To his surprise, the airman, speaking perfect English, assured my dad he meant no harm and only needed to surrender to the authorities. Emerging from his hiding spot, my dad told the airman he'd need to inform his parents first and led him back to the house.

At the front gate, my dad warned the airman about Nipper, their German Shepherd, who would bite if he entered, instructing him to wait while he fetched his parents. Inside, my dad entered the kitchen, only to face his furious father, who demanded to

know why he was so late. Trying to explain that he'd captured a German airman waiting at the gate, my dad was met with scepticism. My grandfather, thinking it was an excuse, began to unbuckle his belt to punish him for lying. But my grandmother, returning to the kitchen, confirmed my dad's story, revealing the truth: there was indeed a German at the gate. Relieved, my dad was then told to bring the airman inside, where my grandmother offered him tea and cake. The airman explained he **wished to surrender**, promptly unloading and placing his gun on the table. When my dad, still curious, tried to touch it, he received a swift slap on the hand from his father. My dad was then sent to the bottom of the lane to find someone in authority, and the **airman was eventually arrested and taken away**.

Tragically, my grandfather passed away in 1944, but after the war ended, the German airman returned to Skegsbury House, before being sent back to Germany. Grateful for their kindness, he thanked my family, telling my dad that his blonde hair reminded him of his own younger brother back in Germany. With the help of my cousin's husband, Jeff Mustard, we later uncovered details about the incident: the downed aircraft was a **Messerschmitt Bf 110 of 4/ZG, shot down near Barley Beans Farm, Kimpton**, by Flying Officer Ludwig Paszkiewicz of 202 Polish Squadron, aided by Pilot Officer B.J. Wicks of 56 Squadron. German Pilot, Georg Anthony, was killed in the dogfight but received a full military burial: his coffin, draped in a swastika flag, was paraded through Hitchin before being laid to rest at Hitchin Municipal Cemetery.



MY MOTHER, Carmela Franzeze, born on June 13, 1932, in **Poggiomarino near Naples, Italy**, was one of 17 children (most of whom tragically died at birth or in infancy), also shared her own wartime experiences with me. She recalled how, during the war, **Germans occupied her village**, taking over the local school. Her grandmother struggled to feed the family, so my mother and her sisters would gather weeds from the fields to boil with pasta. One harrowing day the Germans **loaded people**, including her

mother and teenage brother, **onto a truck** and drove them away. Though her mother returned later, her brother did not, and no one ever spoke of what happened to him. In 1971, I visited Poggiomarino with my parents and brother, seeing the old school still marked by bullet holes on its outer wall. My mum explained that some villagers had been lined up and shot there. My parents met after my mother moved to England, securing a job with her sister as au pairs for Miss Williams and Miss Stella in Gustard Wood. They married in 1953 and lived at Skegsbury House until 1955, later moving into a new bungalow in Lawn Avenue, Kimpton, and finally to Caesars Road, Wheathampstead, in 1964, where they spent the rest of their lives—and where I still reside.

This family history, woven with bravery, tragedy, and unexpected kindness, reflects the profound impact of World War II on ordinary lives, leaving an indelible mark on my family's story. Meanwhile, conflicting reports persist about another crew member, Nordmeier, with the Battle of Britain Historical Society claiming he was paralyzed after a bad parachute landing, while he himself stated he sprained his ankles and hit his forehead before surrendering to a farmer and farmhand. Rebecca Brown, a resident of Preston, Hitchin, recalled on the BBC WW2 'Peoples War' archive the intense bombing over Luton, including Vauxhall Works, and the red skies over London from the Blitz. On that fateful August day, 20 Heinkel bombers, escorted by 30 Messerschmitts, targeted Luton airport and Vauxhall Works, only to be intercepted by fighters from Northolt and North Weald, leading to the dogfight that brought a Messerschmitt down at Whiteway Bottom, Kimpton, its pilot killed and buried in Hitchin, while a British fighter crashed in Harpenden.

[family memories of World War Two, recorded for this exhibition by Maria Smith, WHS member]