

SQUADRON LEADER PETER DEVITT & THE BOMBING OF SHERBORNE

At 4.40pm on Monday 30 September 1940, Sherborne was heavily raided by a force of some 150 German bombers which, having been turned away from Yeovil by fighters, dropped several hundred bombs (about 60 tons) in a straight line from Lenthay to Crackmore. Seventeen civilians died as a result of the bombing and 766 buildings were damaged.

By a strange coincidence it was an Old Shirburnian, Squadron Leader Peter Devitt, who led the eight RAF Spitfires that intercepted the Heinkel 111 bombers over Sherborne on 30 September 1940.

Peter Devitt (1911-1997) had attended Sherborne School (School House) from 1924 to 1929. After taking private flying lessons at West Malling in a de Havilland Moth Gipsy I, Devitt received a commission to the Royal Air Force Reserve of Officers at Filton and in 1933 joined 600 Squadron at Hendon. On 24 August 1939 he was called-up for full-time service and in February 1940 was given command of 152 *Hyderabad* (Spitfire) Squadron. 152 Squadron was based at RAF Warmwell (5 miles SE of Dorchester) and was responsible throughout the Battle of Britain for defending the southern England sector.

DEVITT, Peter Kenneth	10075
Longspring Wood, Sevenoaks	
Born	4th. June, 1911 at Canbury, Essex.
Nationality	British
Rank, Regiment, Profession	Clerk
Certificate taken on	D.H. Moth Gipsy I
At	West Kent School of Flying
Date	9th. September, 1931.



Peter Devitt at Sherborne School in 1929.

Devitt had a remarkably lucky war. His closest call was on 25 September 1940 when the fuel tank of his Spitfire was pierced by return fire from a Heinkel 111 and he had to make a belly-landing at Newton St Loe, near Bath. Postings followed in 1940 to the headquarters of No.9 Group, and in 1941 to No.14 Group. From there he went to the Far East, to No.221 Group in Rangoon, and in 1942 he commanded the final withdrawal of British forces from Burma into the state of Assam. Promotions followed to Group Captain and Wing Commander. After retiring from the RAF, Devitt became a Governor of the Royal Merchant Navy School and held the office of Deputy Lieutenant of Surrey.

At 1608 hrs on 30 September 1940, 152 Squadron at RAF Warmwell was scrambled. In 1950, Devitt recounted his memories of the events of that day to Sherborne School's historian, A.B. Gourlay:

'The action was not a very satisfactory one from the Air Force point of view, and I know it certainly was not from Sherborne's point of view. It was very unfortunate that the School happened to be just where it was, as I am absolutely certain it was not the primary nor the secondary target, but was a convenient town to dump bombs when the enemy leader realised fighters were around.'



Squadron Leader Peter Devitt when CO of 152 Squadron in 1940.

You may remember the sky was clear over the School, but there was a cold front approaching from the West which produced total cloud cover over Yeovil (which was undoubtedly the target), so making it impossible for the enemy to actually locate and bomb their object.

I was commanding at that time No.152 The Nizam of Hyderabad (F) Squadron equipped with Spitfire 1s and were stationed at Warmwell near Dorchester.

Being so close to the coast we got the minimum radar and visual warning, with the result that very often we were not able to contact the enemy until their bombs had been released.

On this particular day, September 30th 1940, we had approximately 5 minutes in which time we were to take off and climb at our maximum rate of climb 1500 feet per minute to 20,000 feet. When airborne with 8 aircraft (all I could muster, and some of those should not have flown by peace time standards) I was ordered by Sector Control to proceed as quickly as possible to Yeovil, where a raid of 50 plus was approaching.

On arrival at approximately Yeovil (covered by cloud) there was no sign of the enemy. Thinking that perhaps they had delivered their bombs and swung round through 180 degrees to starboard, as they had done on a previous Bristol raid, I turned the Squadron eastwards in the hope of picking them up. They had obviously turned this way so as not to be silhouetted up against a background of white cloud for our fighters to pick up. It is always more difficult to pick up a camouflaged aircraft from above and with the earth below, but a fighter must have the advantage of height, in order to deliver his full weight in the first attack.

A few seconds after I had spotted them, I saw their bombs falling away from beneath their bellies. On looking down to see what the target was to my horror I saw the old school courts, which I knew so well. I was at that time just in position to attack, which I did, but was molested by a pack of Me.190s which I had not noticed sitting up above the Heinkels, and above me as well. I could not see much of where the bombs fell, as I was too intent on what was going on around me. I did, however, see in one instant a great deal of smoke around the old buildings, and so knew there must be some hits, and damage, and probably casualties.

We eventually got through the German Fighters, and into the bombers, but with so few aircraft and so many to slaughter (we accounted for only 2 Heinkels and 1 Me 109), for no loss to our Pilots, but with many bullet holes, all of which had to be patched before our next engagement which was that evening, when a small raid attacked Portland Bill.

I was commanding this Squadron throughout the whole of the Battle of Britain from Warmwell, and so completed a great many flying hours in the defence of the West of England towns, in addition, I may say, to backing up our Squadrons in the East when we were not engaged in the West.'

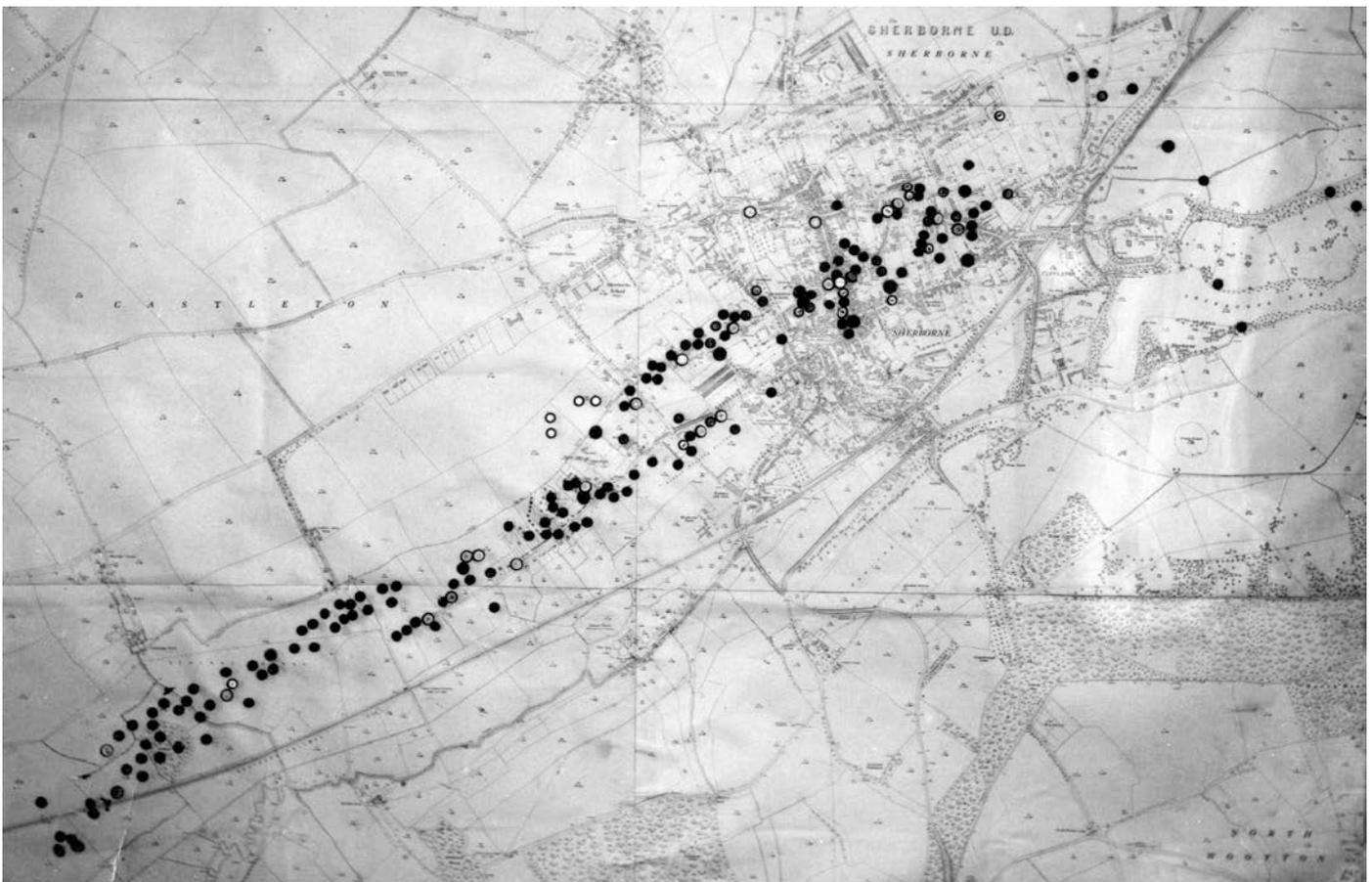


One heavy bomb and five light bombs fell in the Courts at Sherborne School.

In 1946, the Air Ministry released a statement in which they confirmed their belief that the bombing of Sherborne had not been the actual target of the German bombers:

'The German target on this occasion was the Westland Aircraft Works at Yeovil. The enemy force was despatched from airfields in the Cherbourg Peninsula and consisted of between 50 and 70 Heinkel 111 bombers escorted by 40 twin-engined fighters (ME 110s) and 50 single-engined fighters (ME 109s). It was heavily engaged by five squadrons and one flight of Spitfires and Hurricanes, which took off to intercept from Fighter Command airfields at Boscombe Down, Exeter, Warmwell, Middle Wallop and Tangmere. Attacks were made by our fighters at intervals from shortly before the German force crossed the coast near Portland Bill until it was returning to France over Weymouth Bay. A heavy attack was made upon it by one of our squadrons when it was near Yeovil, during which, or perhaps shortly afterwards, the German bombers dropped their bombs. This action of the defending fighters was responsible for the German failure to bomb the Westland Works, and Sherborne was hit instead. The total weight of bombs dropped on or near Sherborne was approximately 60 tons.

Official German records state that Westlands was, in fact, attacked. In view of the distance between Sherborne and the factory, this may be hard to believe; but we should bear in mind that the German formation has been under fighter attack on its way inland, which was doubtless not conducive to precise identification of the target. Furthermore, there is evidence, also from German records, that the German pilots did not claim to have observed their bombs hitting the target.'



Pins in the ARP map of Sherborne's operation room, showing the south-west to north-east pattern of the bombing across Sherborne on 30 September 1940.