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led some parents to keep them at home.⁷ Parents of children at the Victoria Girls and Infants' Schools in Chelmsford expressed concern because of their proximity to the railway and local factories, and because of the general structure of the buildings. Recognising the legitimacy of parental concerns, the borough council ordered both schools to be closed and the pupils transferred.⁸

The threat from the skies suddenly came home to Essex on 30 April, when a Heinkel bomber which had been carrying two mines was hit by anti-aircraft fire over Harwich and crashed in a residential area in Clacton. One of its mines exploded. The crew of four died, as did two civilians – the first civilian deaths of the war on the mainland. A total of 156 people were injured, 34 seriously.⁹ The county then had a three-month reprieve before serious air attacks began. Although the skies over Essex were not the central focus of the Battle of Britain, there were numerous dogfights overhead. James Hough, the headmaster of Brentwood School, recalled: '[W]e had about half a dozen battles round and above Brentwood, twice in particular the air seemed full of them as one looked up, far too many to count and it all seems over in a short time as they leave us and draw nearer to the coast.'¹⁰ During August 1940 the appearance of German aircraft became more frequent and the novelty of the experience was conveyed by an excitable *Essex Chronicle* reporter:

Then we had the thrill of our lives – coming in from the sea was a huge squadron of German bombers, in very exact formation, a leader in front, with the others in set echelon fashion strung out behind. We counted thirty-four quite easily, and it was really a fine sight, desperate in its fearsomeness. The menfolk cheered defiantly, the ladies rushed up banks and on to higher land to get a better view, while boys climbed trees, yelling with excitement. It was a cheering demonstration of the irrepressible high spirits of English folk when faced with danger.¹¹

On 26 August Eric Rudsdale saw a large-scale dogfight above Colchester. 'We have all heard this sound so often on films that it really seems quite natural,' he noted, 'and one tends to forget that this is real, and that you are watching young men go down to a particularly unpleasant death.'¹² Essex newspapers now carried pictures and silhouettes of German aircraft – troop-carrying gliders as well as fighters and bombers – to encourage people to learn to recognise enemy aircraft.¹³

7 BA 31 August 1940.

8 ChBC minutes, 11 June 1940.

9 ECC Report of ARP Committee, Essex County Council minutes 1939–45.

10 ERO D/DBg 80/30, James Hough letter, 25 November 1940.

11 EC 23 August 1940.

12 EC 26 August 1940.

13 ST 26 June 1940.



Figure 2.2. A downed Luftwaffe pilot under arrest at Shoeburyness railway station in August 1940, at the height of the Battle of Britain. (Essex Record Office)

German air activity over Group 7 developed in the form of armed reconnaissance raids by day and night, and only about 120 high explosive bombs were dropped between the end of July and the end of August. Nevertheless, the number of ‘alerts’ – the term used to describe the period between the sirens sounding and the ‘all-clear’ being given – was increasing. The first very long night alert, from 9.27pm to 3.37am, occurred on the night of 26/27 August 1940. It was to be the first of dozens of alerts which went on night after night, lasting ten, eleven or twelve hours at a time, and which was such a distinctive feature of the Blitz. However, in early September the Luftwaffe changed its tactics and launched a sustained attack on the oil refineries around Tilbury, on the north bank of the Thames.¹⁴ These attacks, at Thameshaven, Coryton and Shellhaven, created blazes which were almost impossible to extinguish and

¹⁴ The next section is based on ERO C/W 2/3/2, Group 7 Operation report.



Figure 2.3. The modernistic Waker air-raid shelter in Dagenham. (London Borough of Barking & Dagenham Archives and Local Studies Centre)

fire brigades were brought from the Midlands to fight them.¹⁵ Casualties were light but the German tactics were recognised by the civil defence authorities as extremely ominous. On 6 September Group 7 received the following message:

In future please report at once ... serious fires caused by enemy bombing which may act as guide to enemy aircraft and invite further attack on the same night and one hour before sunset any such fires which are still burning as the result of earlier attack.¹⁶

In August and September 1940 Essex was the county which bore the brunt of the growing German air offensive. Its residents, particularly along the coast and in the metropolitan area, were becoming accustomed to frequent alerts and very long periods of overnight residence in shelters. As they emerged they must have been surprised that comparatively little damage had been done and few people hurt. From 31 August to 7 September only 81 people were killed and 236 hospitalised with serious injuries in Group 7.¹⁷ People began to take these things in their stride. On 6 September the Civil Defence authorities in Ilford, Leyton and Walthamstow, for instance, reported that ‘Morale of population excellent’.¹⁸ That morale, however, was about to be tested to its limit.

On 24 August 1940 German bombers dropped several bombs on London and Churchill ordered retaliatory attacks on Berlin. Hitler was enraged and authorised a massive bombing campaign against London, promising to raze it to the ground. The date set for this campaign to begin was 7 September,

¹⁵ ERO C/W 1/6/1, Operational Summaries, Extra-Metropolitan Essex, 1–8 September 1940.

¹⁶ ERO C/W 2/4/1, Group 7 general file, 6 September 1940.

¹⁷ ERO C/W 1/5/11, Group 7 Situation reports 27 July–29 September 1940; 2, 7 September 1940.

¹⁸ ERO C/W 1/5/11, Group 7 Situation reports, 6 September 1940.