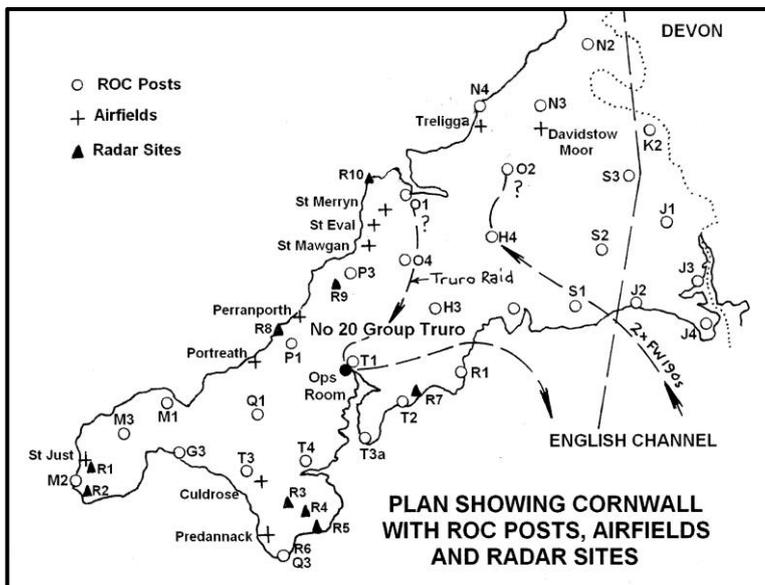


# “THE TRAGIC TRURO RAID OF 6 AUGUST 1942”

A Research Article by Lawrence Holmes

In the Cornish city of Truro, the evening of Thursday 6 August 1942 was lovely, sunny and warm. But there was some cloud about which could hide an elusive aerial aggressor. Many people in Cornwall had heard of German tip and run raids which had been carried out in other parts of the south west. They knew these raids were designed to undermine the will of the English (or Cornish) public, they were indeed ‘a nuisance’, but the people of Truro had never experienced such a raid. That was about to change.

The first hint at trouble from the air was a vague report (ROC?) around 1931hrs that two German planes had been spotted near St Issey, coming in low and very fast down the Camel Estuary. There was no radar plot, no warning or any assessment of where the enemy planes had come from or were heading. Then at 1933hrs there was a firm report that two German intruders had been seen flying fast and low near Grampound Road, and at 1934hrs a lady spotted them at Shortlanesend, three miles north of Truro. The attackers exclusively came from the 10/JG2 unit of the Luftwaffe and were probably FW190A aircraft.



There were a number of intruders around Cornwall that day and evening and most of them for some of the time were tracked by the watchful eyes of the Royal Observer Corps. ROC posts in mid Cornwall, approximately ten miles apart, were reporting the tracks of aircraft to the Truro Operations Room located in the Masonic Hall, Union Place in the centre of the city.

There, on a large horizontal plotting table, counters showed the tracks of all aircraft flying over Cornwall. But low level (100ft), fast flying aircraft (300mph), that had been missed by the imperfect radar system, were difficult for the human eye to see and plots would have been spasmodic. With the lack of plots, it was difficult to ascertain the proposed target and therefore issue air raid warnings to the public. The Truro ROC Post was set up in October 1940 as a satellite to the Truro Ops Room. It was not until 1943 this satellite was designated T1. The post was located on high ground one mile north of the city centre, just west of the road to Shortlanesend and about 1000 metres north of Truro Railway Station. Being a satellite post it was probably manned by only one observer and the post would not have been equipped with a post plotting instrument. Reports were simply given using eyes and assessment.



Tip and run raids on Southern England were carried out in period March 1942 to July 1943. The Truro attack was made by 10/JG2. Most reports state the aircraft were FW190A but the book ‘Forewarned is Forearmed’ says ME 109s were used.

Just after 1934hrs the Truro ROC post reported that two ME 109s had appeared suddenly at very low altitude. (Ed note – ROC records state that the two aircraft were ME109s but other reports say that the aircraft were FW190s. The aircraft in this account will be described as FW190s). In a later report which appeared in the Cornwall Gazette it was stated that ‘the aircraft came out of low cloud’. From the plots available, it should have been clear now that the attackers were heading for the city of Truro, which they reached at 1935hrs. Unfortunately no warning of the approach of the aircraft was given.

The intruders' initial objective was probably the railway station and sidings. The mail train from Penzance to London was standing in Truro Station and this may have attracted the German pilot's attention.

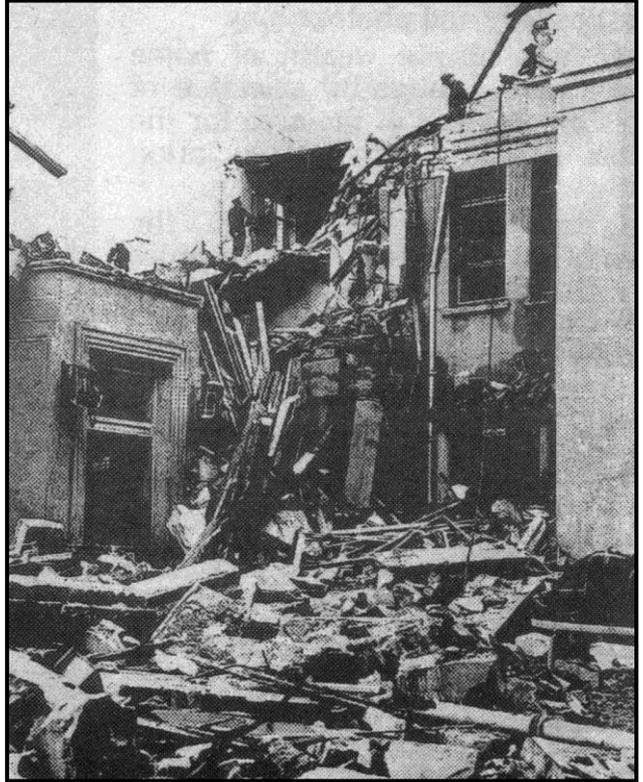
Many years ago former 20 Group Ops Room Duty Controller W/Off Daphne Steward (nee Paul) told me *".....some time after 1900hrs the coastal posts reported enemy aircraft approaching Truro. The Duty Controller reported this to the RAF Sector Ops Room at RAF Portreath. Rather unusually the RAF Controller said that there were no enemy aircraft in the vicinity and the ROC must be mistaken (a bit like the Hess flight). The ROC Duty Controller doubted this and several minutes later other reports came in from posts again stating enemy aircraft heading inland. He again reported these plots to Portreath and was again told that the ROC must be mistaken. Several minutes later the Truro Ops Room was shaken by the sounds of explosions and gunfire. By now a furious ROC Duty Officer snatched up the phone and roared to Portreath '....you know those B.....dy aircraft you keep telling me are friendly – well they are blasting the hell out of Truro' and slammed the phone down'. The RAF reply is not known ?"*

Levine Paddy recalled '...that he and a gang of other boys were playing cricket at Hendra (in the northern part of Truro). It was late afternoon on what had been a very hot sunny day. There were about 20 of us playing in the large field at Hendra, most involved in a game of cricket. The firing of the cannon from two German bombers flying low over the pitch interrupted play. They were so low you could see the pilots inside the aircraft. One of them actually looked at us children as we ran for cover. The young cricketers charged towards the St George's Road hedge to seek cover. One boy was screaming he had been hit - he had cut his hand on a broken jam jar'.

Coming off the train just before the enemy aircraft arrived was Malpas resident John Daniel. He and his mother and father had just arrived at Truro having travelled up from Penzance. They left the train, crossed the railway bridge and were almost at the Booking Office when the enemy struck. Overflying the Highertown area, the FW190 aircraft came in from the west with the sun behind them and attacked Truro railway station, strafing the area with machine gun and cannon fire. Mr A Hawke was waiting to catch the east bound train and he vividly recalls that he saw the enemy plane swoop down and strafe the waiting room, where the postman was killed and a number of women injured. He then saw the enemy fly low over the city and release a bomb on the hospital. When the train at long last left the station and crossed the viaduct, he could see smoke pouring from the hospital area.

Mr P Williams aged 54 years, a railway worker, and postman Mr E Pentecost aged 41, were killed and a number of others were wounded. Among the injured was a Mr S C Tomkin, who was out walking with his son. He pushed the boy into a hedge as the aircraft dived down on him and, in the process, one finger on his right hand was struck by a machine gun bullet. The damaged finger subsequently had to be amputated ! John Daniel heard a rattling noise and lots of bangs and his father almost lay on him to protect him. The rattling noise had been machine gun bullets hitting the road outside the station. John's father just had time to spot a German aircraft as it flew by and he saw a bomb leave the aircraft.

Whether one of the FW190 fighters misjudged releasing his 500Kg bomb destined for the station, is not known, but numerous witnesses state that just after the attack on the railway station, a bomb was released by one of the aircraft. Only 600 metres south east from the railway station lay the Royal Cornwall Infirmary full of patients having medical treatment of one sort or another. There was still no air raid warning of the approaching enemy aircraft and it was clear that the German tactic of coming in fast and low had, at least at first, eluded detection by both radar and partly, the Royal Observer Corps. At 1936hrs a German 500Kg bomb from one FW190 fighter bomber scored a direct hit on the Royal Cornwall Infirmary demolishing the south wing. The bomb fell near the main entrance, causing extensive damage to the dispensary and at the junction of the men's and women's wards. Bob Andrew, the Secretary of the Cornish Aviation Society, was only four miles away from Truro at the time of the attack and he remembers hearing the explosions going off. It was only 1937hrs.



Above shows the extensive damage at the Royal Cornwall Infirmary in Truro after the bomb was dropped.

Mr Harry Heard who lived in Daniel Street, Truro, was working on his allotment garden at Redannick (south east of the station) and saw the whole incident. He rushed to the hospital and was one of the first on the scene, even before the fire brigade. He entered the nursery which was burning fiercely and saw a bundle in a cot. He picked up the bundle, which contained a child, and carried it to safety.

There were over 200 patients in the hospital at the time of the bomb detonation. Ten people lost their lives (incl one added later), including Sister Kathleen Peacock, Nurse Rachel Appleby, Private Fred Morley, a patient, and his mother, who was down from her home in Leeds visiting him. Mr and Mrs P A Mortimore aged 33 and 34 years respectively, were at the hospital to see their eight-year-old daughter in the children's ward - all three were killed. Flight Officer M C Polglaze, a WAAF officer stationed at Portreath, and a baby were also listed among the dead. They were buried under tons of rubble and despite gallant efforts by rescuers, nothing could be done to save them. The girl manning the telephone switchboard just inside the main entrance to the hospital had a remarkable escape. Hundreds of tons of masonry crashed down around her but she escaped with a few cuts and bruises and was pulled out of the rubble through a window. Another patient, recovering from an appendicitis operation, was blown clear out of his bed and ended up with a fractured skull.

Fire broke out, making rescue work difficult, but luckily it was quickly under control. First aid and rescue parties were quickly on the scene, helped by the Home Guard and members of the forces, 40 airmen being rushed from RAF Portreath, all to join in the rescue and salvage work. There was a danger of fire breaking out again so the patients were quickly removed to pre-arranged safe places by ambulances and buses. Some of the most serious cases were taken to the nurses' home and an operation which was taking place at the time of the attack was actually completed in the nurses' home. Many of the youngsters in the children's ward had a miraculous escape. All the windows were smashed and children's cots were blown in all directions. The floors of the wards were littered with thousands of glass shards, up to half an inch deep in places, making the whole scene like the aftermath of a snow storm. But the German aircraft had not finished with Truro.



Above shows the western footbridge at Truro Station. On the side of this bridge can still be seen canon shell holes and marks.

As the FW190 aircraft flew fast and low from west to east across the city, at 1937hrs, another 500Kg bomb from the second aircraft exploded above Agar Road near St Paul's Church, partly demolishing a house in the road. The incident report records that this bomb first touched the ground about 200 yds north of the Cathedral. It then struck the concrete paving at the bottom of Campfield Hill, then turned nose upwards, breaking off the tail in two pieces. The bomb continued upwards and reaching a height of 90 feet, travelled in a forward direction nearly a quarter of a mile before exploding in mid air at a height of 30 feet at the lower end of Agar Road. Residents, Reverend and Mrs A J Ford, had their two grandchildren, David and Anthony, staying with them at the time. The youngsters had just been put to bed when the blast hit the house, burying all four of them. But they were all pulled out of the rubble alive by the rescue services.

The damage in Agar Road was widespread. Nearly every window in nearby St Paul's Church was broken and its roof was severely damaged. And hardly a pane of glass was left intact in the houses around. One house, 'Brucefield', was partly demolished by the blast. Not content with bombing the church, one of the raiders came round for another run, machine gunning and killing Mr George Gray from St Mawes, who was out walking. Mrs Mildred Hooper, a fire fighter, who lived in Agar Road had her leg blown off above the knee. Mr J Palmer and Mr F Tregidga bound up the limb and she was taken to hospital but she died later from injuries sustained in the raid. Nearby the Diocesan College and Wardens Post A2 and a convent, the Home of the Epiphany, were also badly damaged and one of the sisters was injured.

Barbara Grosscurth, who lived at Ingestre, near St Pauls Church, can remember "My father had been in the garage of the house, and, hearing a plane dive, he looked out of the door, and was hit in the arm by machine gun bullets, which threw him to the ground. This probably saved his life, as the car near him was riddled with bullets. The plane was so low that he could clearly see the pilot machine-gunning the area. My mother was on the telephone when the bomb exploded, and was fortunately protected by the stairs, but my grandmother was thrown by blast across the breakfast room, which then collapsed behind her. We were all very lucky, but a lady who was coming out of the gate of the adjoining house was seriously injured, and later died (Mrs Hooper)".

The whole attack may well have been plotted in the Truro Operations Room in the Masonic Hall near High Cross. One wonders if the observers took cover at all? One plotter can remember hearing a lot of noise and the sound of planes and explosions. The FW190 which dropped the bomb on Agar Road virtually flew over the Truro Ops Room. The Ops Room was also only 100m from the bottom of Campfield Hill where the bomb first struck. It has often been said that the Truro ROC plotters went on plotting despite them realising that a raid was taking place on their doorstep!

By 1938hrs the attack was over. The two FW 190s left a battered Truro, travelling at high speed in a north east direction heading for Probus and Tregony. It was about this time that the air raid sirens went off in Truro. They were four minutes late! As the German aircraft left the city they sprayed anything moving with machine gun fire. Several farms were attacked, one cow was killed and others injured at Trevorva Farm, Probus and buildings at Newton, Golden Cot and Carveth in Tregony were also damaged. Hay and straw ricks were set on fire and cattle injured at St Ewe, and by 1940hrs the FW190s were leaving Cornwall. No more ROC plots were recorded on the departing German aircraft and it is assumed that they flew out into St Austell Bay, over the English Channel and back to their base at Caen or Morlaix.

Two people were killed at Truro Railway Station, 10 people were killed at the hospital and 2 more were killed at Agar Road, a total of 14 persons. 65 were injured and over 100 houses were damaged. Three houses were demolished. No enemy aircraft were intercepted by RAF fighters, none were shot down and all the air raid warnings had come too late. Overall the 10/JG2 Jabos still very much had the upper hand.



The Mortimore Gravestone in Kenwyn Churchyard Cemetery, Truro. The wording on the grave makes no mention of Percy's ROC membership but does give details of the manner of the Mortimore's family death.

One of those killed at the Hospital was 33 year old Percy Arnold Mortimore. He was a member of the Royal Observer Corps. He was born on 17 April 1909 and lived in St Budeaux, Plymouth. He met Mabel Louise and they married and lived at Higher Trehaverne, Kenwyn, Truro. Percy joined the Corps on 10 January 1941 as a B Class Observer in the Truro Ops Room. He could well have been on duty in the Ops Room near the Cathedral on the evening of the attack. However, his 8 year old daughter Margaret Ann was ill with pneumonia and pleurisy in the Royal Cornwall Infirmary and he and his wife Mabel were visiting her when the bomb struck. All three were killed. They left one son who was later brought up by his grandmother.

Although the Royal Cornwall Hospital was virtually put out of action by the severe damage, within a week half of it was back in use again. The out-patients department never failed to function but had to move to another part of the building. Three days after the raid some emergency surgical cases were admitted and on the fourth day it was functioning as an emergency hospital with 50 beds. At the time of the raid there were 200 patients in the hospital. Within a month of the raid, 180 patients were back in the wards, thanks to the hard work of the staff and emergency services.

On Monday 10 August 1942 the funeral of Mr A E Pentecost was held and on Tuesday 11 August the funeral of Mr P A Mortimore, Mrs M L Mortimore and Miss M A Mortimore took place. 20 Group Deputy Group Commandant Obs/Lt First Class S Rosevear, Group Officer Obs/Lt C F Lodge and Obs A S Mogg attended the funeral of the Mortimore family. All three Mortimores are buried in Kenwyn Church Cemetery. After naming the three deceased, the grave says simply "...all killed by enemy action at R.C.I. August 6th 1942". The Mortimore names are also included on the Roll of Honour in Kenwyn Church, Truro.

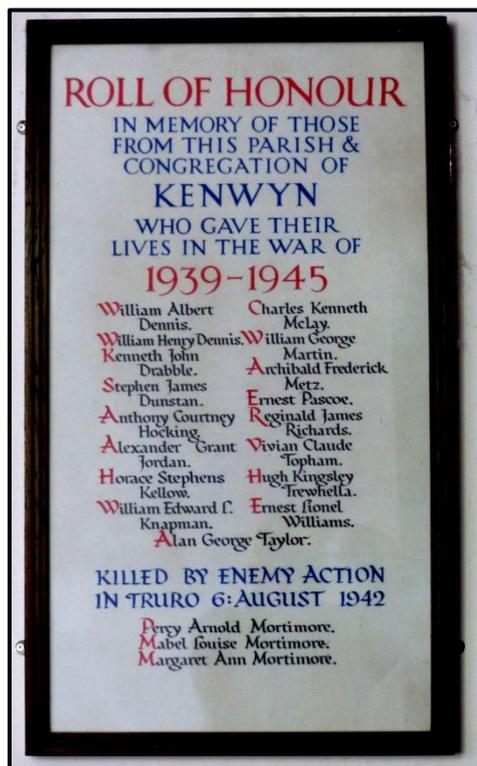
Information panels describing the attack can be seen in the Trelawney Wing at Treliske Hospital, Truro and commemorations to the two nurses killed in the attack are to be found in the Chapel at Treliske. The nurses are Sister Kathleen C Peacock and Staff Nurse Rachel Joan Dorcas Appleby.

Alfred Edward Pentecost was killed at Truro Railway Station, he was a postman. He is commemorated on a memorial to Post Office Workers killed in both wars, which used to be located in the main Post Office, High Cross in Truro. Since the closure of this Post Office, the memorial has been re-located in the main Sorting Office, Newham, Truro.

The raid caused more outrage, and is one of the best documented in terms of human reaction, than any other incident in WW2 in Cornwall. The raid was called 'pointless and callous'. It was thought the German pilots were dropping their bombs in a random way. There is a possibility that the tall chimney at the hospital may have caused the Germans to think that the site was of an industrial nature? There was much speculation about why the German pilots bombed a small town like Truro and why did they bomb a hospital? In early August 1942 there was a shift by the Luftwaffe towards specific inland targets starting with Yeovil on 5 August and it was speculated that they were revenge attacks for Bomber Command's attacks on smaller German cities. 6 August 1942 was one of the days when the war really did come to Cornwall. 2017 is the 75th anniversary of the raid.

**Sources :-**

- 'War over the West' by Eddie Walford
- 'When the Bombs Fell' by Phyllis M Rowe and Ivan Rabey 1987.
- 'Luftwaffe Fighter Bombers over Britain – The Tip and Run Campaign 1942-43' by Chris Goss.
- 'Forewarned is Forearmed' by T E Winslow 1948. History of ROC 1925 to 1947.
- 'A History of Truro Vol 2' by Viv and Bob Acton. Published by Landfall Books 2002.
- Research from Ian Coleman and Bob Andrew, Cornish Aviation Society.
- Lawrence Holmes ROC and Aviation Archive.



Left is the Roll of Honour showing the Mortimore family names, located in Kenwyn Church, Truro. Above is the base of a commemorative candle stick to Nurses Appleby and Peacock in the Chapel at Treliske Hospital, Truro.

**“This article is dedicated to Percy Mortimore ROC and his family”**