

Kenley Revival Oral History Project

Transcript of interview with Paul Farnes Monday 16th January 2017

Interviewer: David Meanwell; filmed by Amy Todd

Filmed at the interviewee's house

Transcript of recording 00013

My name is Paul Farnes and I was born on 6th July 1918

David: Where were you born? [incomprehensible]

David: Always been in the south east basically? Yes.

David: So did you have brothers and sisters? No

David: How did you come to join the RAF? I thought you wanted to know about me being born.

David: Please do. I was born illegitimate. I was fathered by an Australian in the Australian Expeditionary Force. The lady that he put in the family way was obviously my mother but more than that I don't know, we don't know much about her. He'd already got a wife and 3 children in Australia so he wasn't a particularly nice chap. Anyway that's why I was brought up. My mother died at childbirth, my real mother died at childbirth, and the lady who brought me into the world, the nurse, took a fancy to me and my father so-called said: "I don't want him: take him to the Dr Barnados or somewhere". The lady who brought me into the world said "No I won't have it. I'll adopt him" and she did. I couldn't have had a more wonderful mother I was very lucky.

David: where did you go to school? Surbiton. Well, initially I went to a council school in Walton on Thames. That's where I was brought up mainly until I was about 19, at Walton on Thames and I went to the council school there until I was about 11 or 12 and then some people staying at my hotel obviously... had a charity thing and they paid for my education and I went to Surbiton Grammar School in Surbiton. I was living at Walton on Thames so I would get the train every day. That was really my basic education. I was pretty useless at school. The only thing I was ever any good at was rugby ... to be honest I think I must have disappointed a lot of people. However, I made up for it later.

David: And when you left school what happened then? Well I left school and worked in a factory, Vickers factory. I joined the VR in 1938 which was a great asset for me it was the best thing I had ever done. I didn't think I would be accepted in view of my birth, and unknown to me, my mother (I refer to her as my mother, my adopted mother) wrote to the air ministry told them the circumstances and asked them if I would be accepted and they wrote back saying yes certainly, providing he can pass the necessary exams so I got in.. I got a permanent commission eventually so I spent... up to about the age of 40 in the air force.

David: So you were in the VR (volunteer reserve) when war broke out? Well before the war things were looking a bit grim and the government decided to increase the size of the air force by getting volunteers to join the RAF VR, which I did. That's how I got into the air force.

David: And then you got called up for active service? ...I joined the VR and flew with the VR and then the government brought out this scheme whereby if you were in the VR you could do a special course for 6 months with the regular air force and be trained up to fly modern

aeroplanes in those days. Which I did. Of course I went off to do my training in July 1939 but before I completed the 6 months, war broke out. So I never did go back. I went straight into 501 squadron at Feltham. From there I eventually finished up in France and spent a few weeks in France and then back to England and the Battle of Britain, which I was in the whole time.

David: What aircraft did you fly in? Hurricanes

David: Where you flying during the evacuation of Dunkirk? Were you flying sorties? I was in France. We didn't feature at Dunkirk we were being pushed back by the Germans. Eventually we finished up in the Channel Islands. And from there we eventually flew back to Tangmere and then we went pretty much straight into the Battle of Britain and I was in that the whole time. 501 was the only squadron which went right the way through the Battle of Britain without a break. All the other squadrons were posted to one of the quieter groups up north where it wasn't quite so hectic, as it was for 11 group. I was at Gravesend, Hawkinge and Kenley. I spent 4 months or nearly 4 months at Kenley.

David: You went to Kenley in August 1940? I went from Gravesend to Hawkinge in 1940 and we stayed there until about the 12th or 14th of December. That was it.

David: what particular memories do you have of Kenley? WAAFs mainly. We were very friendly with the WAAFs, I enjoyed myself there. I probably shouldn't say but I enjoyed the Battle of Britain. I know we lost a lot of people and that sort of thing but if you were competing and taking part I found it exciting. I enjoyed it. I didn't enjoy seeing my friends get killed obviously, but that was war.

David: Are there any of your combats that stand out in your mind? One or two I suppose do... On one occasion we were sent off to attack a squadron of Stukas which were dive-bombing the shipping off the Kent coast and coming around the Thames and I shot down 2 of them which was quite a good day. On another occasion I shot down a 109. The pilot bailed out and I followed him down and waved to him but I didn't get much of a response. He got down safely and I saw a farmer come out to take him in. I couldn't do anything about it. That was another instance. Another time I was flying from Kenley and we were sent up and when I got up to 15,000 feet either my RT or my ops wasn't working, I can't remember which now. Anyway I had to return to base so I flew down and got to about 1500 to 2000 feet and was flying up the railway line from Brighton to Kenley. On the way I suddenly saw a JU88 flying towards me so I whipped round and got on his tail and gave him a few bursts and he crashed on Gatwick Airport. He was alright, although one of the gunners was killed, but he was OK and I went down and landed and the station commander took me out to meet the pilot of the JU88 but I offered to shake hands with him but he didn't want to know. That was quite exciting and it was particularly exciting for me because I'd done all my early VR training from Gatwick and to have to shoot that aircraft there was quite an occasion for me. That was good.

Amy: That is an amazing story isn't it and you flew from Kenley on that occasion? On that occasion, yes.

David: What did you do on your off duty time at Kenley? Were there any pubs that you particularly went to? I can't remember the names of them now. I've never been back.

Amy: There is one pub that is still there called the Wattenden Arms. Do you remember that? It could be. Where was that? In Kenley?

David: Just off the airfield. It could be. I have a vague memory. Of course we did not get an awful lot of time off. We were generally on duty. Occasionally we wouldn't be called straight away but most of the time we were on duty by about 5 o'clock/ half past 5 in the morning and often did

not finish to 8 o'clock at night, sometimes later. So we didn't get all that much time to go down to entertain the WAAFs but we did quite a bit of it. It was great fun. I enjoyed it.

Amy: [There is one building on the airfield that is still there: the Portcullis club.](#) Oh yes. I've been back there. To the club, but not to the airfield a few years ago now. A lady did a diary for all the pilots that flew from Kenley. I forget her name now. But I've got the diary that she did. I can't remember her name. She would be well known and I would have thought you'd know her. Mind you she died a long time ago but I thought people would remember her because of doing all she could for the Battle of Britain memory.

David: [Were you ever on Kenley airfield when it was attacked by the Germans?](#) No, luckily we were airborne the time it got bombed. We were trying to chase the bombers. I can't remember now whether we attacked them. I know we were up in the air at the time, but whether we were actually involved with the ones that did the bombing. It's difficult to say because you're sent off and then you are on the track of the aircraft coming in and whether they went to Kenley I wouldn't know. They did a lot of damage to Kenley. A lot of damage. I think one of the WAAFs got a decoration for something during the Kenley bombing.

David: [Where did you go after Kenley?](#) Feltham. Home base, which was where the squadron was formed and we went there. Eventually, I didn't stay there all that long and we went off. I was commissioned while I was at Kenley right at the very end. I was commissioned about the last day of November and the Battle of Britain finished at beginning of October, no that's wrong the Battle of Britain finished at the end of October. 10th July to 31st October that was the period recognised as the Battle of Britain.

David: [So was that as a pilot officer that you were commissioned?](#) Would be then yes. I was commissioned right at the end of our stay at Kenley. I went right through France and the Battle of Britain as a sergeant pilot. I was commissioned and there's not a lot to say about it.

David: [Did you do flying on the continent after D Day or did you remain in England?](#) No. I was posted to Baghdad or somewhere. I was posted overseas and spent nearly about 6 and a half years in the Middle East altogether. I didn't enjoy that much. I didn't like the hot countries.

David: [So I assume you were in the Middle East when the war ended?](#) No I was at Tangmere as the war ended. I'd come back. No, we went up to London a whole party of us, it was rather good, quite a good evening.

David: [And you decided to stay in the air force?](#) Yes I did. I was very grateful that I was offered the chance because, after all, I got no experience in anything really. I had been a while in a factory and I went from there to another firm but I finished up in the drawing office. But I joined the VR during that period and of course all my weekends were spent flying and then of course I did the 6 months regular and of course July, August, September I had nearly 3 months at [\[incomprehensible\]](#) in South Wales which was good fun. We converted then to Hurricanes and flying [\[incomprehensible\]](#) but we converted to Hurricanes and it was very pleasant.

David: [What flying did you do after the war?](#) Oh bits and pieces. I had two squadrons. I was squadron commander of 2 different squadrons. You don't really want all the dates do you? They are all in my diaries.

David: [What were the 2 squadrons?](#) 164 squadron and I can't remember the other squadron.

David: [Don't worry It's a long time ago. When you came out of the RAF what line did you go into?](#) When I came out originally I went to [\[incomprehensible\]](#). You've probably never heard of them.

David: I have heard of them: brake linings and things like that. Brake linings and shock absorbers. I went there for a while and then someone I knew who was in who'd got a lot of contacts and he'd got a contact with me. They took me on and I spent there quite a few months. Then I got fed up with it. I got married of course by then and I got fed up with it and decided I would like to go off on my own and do something. I thought I would go fruit farming in Kent. Well my father-in-law when he heard that I wanted to go fruit farming in Kent with his daughter he said: "You're not bloody going fruit farming. You've got to come and work for me". So I went and joined him. He was a builders' merchant in Worthing and well established, so I joined him. I stayed there quite some time. Then eventually he Well it got to the stage where I was getting quite involved with the Beech Hotel by then in Worthing. My aunt was running it and the gentleman who owned it, he died and left a lot of it to my aunt, and I went and worked there as a director, I didn't work there I was a director of the company. I used to go down there for various meetings and things and eventually I got to the stage where I thought I would have to go down there full time because my aunt was not capable of running it. She was getting quite old, so I told my father-in-law: "I'm sorry but I'm going to have to leave you". He said: "well that's fine because I would like to retire." So that was it: he sold the business and I went to the hotel and ran the hotel for several years. And my two children my daughter and my son actually ran it when I left, I left it to them and they ran it. About 5 years ago we sold it and I got a block of flats and another hotel in its place. That's it. The story of my life.

David: So I think from what you say it would be fair to say that you enjoyed particularly the Battle of Britain and your time in the air force in this country? Yes I did.

David: So happy days at Kenley basically? Yes.

David: Have you any idea why 501 was never taken off the front line? Well I personally haven't but one of our officers, one of our flying officers Gibson, he was a well decorated fighter pilot in our squadron. Well after he left our squadron, he was flying, he was a personal pilot to one of the senior officers (I can't remember which one, I think it was Park) he said: "Why didn't we ever get a break?" and he said: "We couldn't spare you". That was the only thing I ever heard and I don't know why they couldn't spare us. Whether we were all that good or what. Anyway there it was: we didn't have a break but I don't think it bothered us unduly at that time.

David: While you were at Kenley did you get visited by any dignitaries that you can remember? Yes I can but I can't remember who they were. Park I think and one or two others. Flying in to see us as a morale booster I suppose.

Amy: Is there any other person at Kenley that you can remember? WAAFs or did you make any friends while you were at Kenley? I think I made a WAAF friend. I am rather ashamed to admit that I did meet a WAAF and when I was posted overseas, which I was soon, after I left Kenley, she waited for me while I was overseas but unfortunately I found someone else while I was overseas. So I had to break it off, so it was a bit of an upset for everybody concerned. But still it happened. No, not one of the best bits of my life. I feel rather ashamed of myself but still.

David: You were young and a year's a long time when you are young. I think and to be apart for a year is a long time. She waited 2 and a half years. There we are.

David: When you were fighting the Battle of Britain did you ever get time off to go into London? You never used to get special time off just the odd occasion. One or two of the chaps used to go up quite a lot when they got an evening off. But I always used to go the theatre that was always open run by Pat Moss's sister. I can't remember the name of the firm now but it was

one of these Folies Bergeres type places I used to go up. I was a bit naïve I think. I didn't join in their nightlife of London. I think I preferred the pub in Kenley. Wherever it was.

David: That was very good. It was a bit disjointed.

David: The magic scissors will take care of that.

Amy: we can edit things so that's not a problem at all. I can't remember anything particular. One thing that was quite amusing about Kenley. We were billeted of course in the various houses round about and 2 things: the first thing that stands out in my mind was that every morning about half past 4 or 5 o'clock, 2 sergeant WAAFs would come into our billet and they'd get us tea and dripping sandwiches to go out on our standby. They were marvellous. Every morning they would turn up. It wasn't part of the thing it was just their goodness of heart. They wanted to do it. That was great. And another thing we were billeted in the houses and the one which we were in, I don't know which one it was, they changed the billet and they moved all the WAAFs into our billet and moved us out. I don't know why: probably for some reason or another. Anyhow the first night we were in these new billets about midnight, Pete Moorfield one of our pilots [incomprehensible] 3 of our chaps had a room suddenly they heard a girl's voice saying: "Oh Jenny can I come in with you? I can't find my bed they've moved it" and Moorfield said: "Yes of course you can. Come on in". There was a muffled scream and she disappeared. Where she went to nobody knew. Of course they'd shifted her bed.

David: It's good that you enjoyed your time in the Battle of Britain. I think the only people I felt sorry for, and I wouldn't have enjoyed it, were those who had a commitment were married and some of them even had the odd children. See in the early part of the war when we were in France, the chap who ran the squadron, the CO, I don't know what age he was but he was probably around 35-40 well we were 20-21. Of course he was like a grandfather and it made life very different. Quite a lot of the pilots were VRs, no, they were auxiliaries and they were anything from 25-30 upwards. Of course the ones that got back from France they were the ones that realised of course ... it was better to use young people if they had them. But of course that was one of our troubles. We had plenty of aircraft at one time: we were well equipped with aircraft but we were very desperately short of pilots and we were getting pilots coming in to take their place in the squadron and quite a lot of them had maybe 3 or 4 hours on a Hurricane and on one occasion one man in our squadron had never flown a Hurricane so the CO said: "Here's one go and fly it." That was it. There was no other way. We hadn't got training facilities. One part of the war we were desperately short of pilots and it was very touch and go in many ways but we weren't too badly off for aeroplanes. There we are. A long time ago. One's memories are a bit vague about some things.

Amy: You are doing very well. Can't think of anything else particularly. I think it was at Kenley, no I know it was at Kenley, when we were sent up as a squadron to intercept and I was leading one of the [incomprehensible] and as a very experienced sergeant pilot I was quite often leading a section which was 3 aircraft: Red Blue Green and Yellow were the 4 sections. I would probably be leading one of them. On this particular occasion I was, and the CO who was leading it his RT was wrong, he couldn't get his RT to work properly and he managed to get a message to me and I think I was in Yellow section: "Would I take over the squadron?" And there was me, a sergeant pilot, leading the whole squadron which was quite an experience. Luckily in some ways, we didn't meet anything. We had to, we just returned to base after so long, after a certain time. I'm not absolutely certain that it wasn't the time when the aircraft had been bombed and we had to land and we had to be a bit careful where we were landing. I've got a feeling it was but I'm not certain.

David: Did you ever have to land somewhere else? Yes sometimes. Oh yes. I had to, on one occasion, we had been up about 30,000 feet flying with these 109s and I'd used up all my

ammunition so I put the old aircraft on its nose and got out of the way as quickly as possible. That was the thing: once you had run out of ammunition you didn't hang around. You got the hell out of it. On the way down, diving down, I was going pretty fast, the aircraft suddenly shuddered and did something peculiar and I thought I'd been shot. I thought one of the 109s had followed me down and was shooting at me. I was a bit concerned to say the least. So I thought I would bail out but I couldn't get the hood open so I managed to correct this dive eventually, and I landed at, I'm not sure at Manston, and we got down and we found that the aircraft, the Hurricane, was quite badly damaged on one side. There was a wooden canvas was broken in one place and I couldn't understand. Later what had happened in descending at high speed, I'd hit the aircraft's [incomprehensible] number which may or may not mean anything to you but it's the speed in relation to the speed of sound. Nowadays of course it doesn't worry anybody but in those days you had a number for the aircraft not that it meant anything to me at the time and I think the Hurricane was .8 or something of that sort and I'd obviously hit this number and of course when that happens the aircraft becomes uncontrollable and I think that's what had happened with me and that's why I couldn't control it why it got damaged. That's my experience then of what the number was, and what happened when you hit it. Nowadays you just go straight through. Don't even consider it.

David: That's very good. Amy: Thank you.