

Kenley Revival Oral History Project

Transcript of interview with Kenneth Raffield. 25th July 2017

Interviewer David Meanwell. Filmed by Coral Finch.

Transcript of 00035

David: This is an interview for the Kenley Revival Oral History Project and today is the 25th July 2017.

David: so can you say your full name and date of birth? Kenneth George Raffield r a f f i e l d or RAF field whichever way you want to look at it. Born in Norwood on the only day of the year I could have been born on: April 1st 1926 and I think it was 26 Knights Hill. I was born 3 o'clock in the morning, in a thunderstorm, and keeping in mind it was 1st April, feet first.

David: did you have brothers and sisters? One brother.

David: older than you? About four years.

David: so you were about 13 when the Second World War broke out did you have memories of Kenley Airfield before the war? Yes.

David: what did you used to get up to, to do with the airfield? There is a picture upstairs of two boys sitting on a gate and a Spitfire coming close over their heads (I should have brought it down) but it was a bit like that really my brother and I lived up there. I came up here to Old Coulsdon when I was 4, 4 or 5, and my brother would be 9; mad on aeroplanes so we were always running down from 197 Coulsdon Road which is where we moved to, and we could rush down from there and be up on the airfield in about 5 minutes so that was good but before that we lived before the age of 5 I lived in Thornton Heath. I could tell you a long story about how we came to come up here but maybe too long.

David: was it to do with your father's work? No, we lived in Carolina Road Thornton Heath and we had a lodger and he was into advertising: advertising the banners that they towed behind aircraft advertising whatever, and he said to my mother: "Do you think, would you like the boys to go up to Kenley Airfield as they might be interested to see the aircraft?" She said "Oh yes". He

had one of these banners he wanted to test it out up there, there were Siskins up there at the time on Kenley they were on the way out then, Bristol Bulldogs were coming in. His idea was that they might let him tow one of these things behind one of the Siskins as they were on the way out more or less. So we came up and he asked and they said no and he ended towing it behind his car all the way across Farthing Downs I don't know whether that helped. That's how we first came up here. Of course being two boys, the airfield and lovely countryside, hardly any houses and only a few chicken farms over here, and my brother and I loved it and kept saying to Dad how we liked it. Being my dad he was marvellous: within 9 months we bought a house on the main road 197 Coulsdon Road and that's where we were for the Battle of Britain and the Blitz on London then I went in the RAF (not sure of the date)

David: do you remember how old you were when you joined the RAF? 17

David: so that would have been about 1943? That's right.

David: so when war broke out in 1939 did you notice changes around the area straight away? What sort of things changed for you? No, nothing I wasn't here when war broke out.

David: where were you? Funnily enough we were all, we got an Aunt who lived in Tonbridge near Tonbridge Castle in Kent and we loved it down there because it was the River Medway and we could go fishing. We often used to go down there for weekends and proper holidays you know, two weeks and we were down there when war broke out. My mother and father were there my brother and myself but mum and dad they got a telegram from here saying will you come back because mum and dad were in the British Red Cross and also Dad, I don't know exactly when he joined, was in the Home Guard and my mother was an Air Raid Warden also, so they got called back but they left me. My brother he was 15 he joined as an apprentice at Cranwell. I can't remember if he was on leave or whether he went to Cranwell you might be able to work it out from his age but anyway I think he was on leave as well.

David: he would have been about 17? So you stayed down in Tonbridge to start with? They left me there and I could have stayed, they had even booked me into the local school. But when it got near to going to a new school I said "No I want to go home". So I came back here, I am glad I did.

David: So what did you get up to once you were here? You were still at school I would guess? Yes more or less. I was 12 or 13. We never had any lessons, very rarely. I was amazed at the preparation for the war. We had Anderson shelters before the war started. We all had gas masks at school before the war started. We had, when I came back, we used to have gas masks drill so we knew how to put them on properly and take them off and that sort of thing. I can always remember our Maths master at Smitham School and Chipstead Valley Road School, 2 schools, he was mad on aircraft recognition. Of course boys who didn't want to do Maths said "Sir did you see that aircraft?" and get him started on aircraft recognition and he wouldn't stop so we missed our maths lesson. Why I mentioned 2 schools was: there was Smitham School and Chipstead Valley School right at the end of Chipstead Valley Road, and Smitham School didn't have air raid shelters so it meant that Smitham pupils had to go to Chipstead Valley just for the morning and Chipstead Valley School pupils went in the afternoon. We were lucky we had the morning as it meant that we could spend the afternoons tearing across Farthing Downs, and that sort of thing.

David: were there any incidents like bombs or aircraft crashes before the Battle of Britain or was the Battle of Britain the first real action around here? No, 1937, 2 Gloucester Hornets they had night flying practising from Kenley and they were going every night especially when the weather was fine but it was dark, it had to be dark. I can remember that I was upstairs in the bathroom and my brother was in the back garden I think or downstairs anyway. He saw what happened: a flash and a fire in the sky and he called out to me: "Ken come quick. There's 2 Gloucester Hornets have collided". I came down, and in those days we used to go over the Downs in the dark with no problems but we got ready and went tearing across Tollers Field, down into Happy Valley then up through Devil's Den woods going towards this blazing fire in the middle of the field that eventually gets large enough to go as far as Chaldon Church in that field. There were 2 aircraft involved but this was the one that was on fire so we could see where to run. The other one we didn't know anything about because it didn't catch fire. But unfortunately it was found near Doctor's Lane at Chaldon. And it was said, from what I read, that the pilot was found hanging out of his cockpit but he was dead. But it wasn't on fire so we didn't know it was there that night. But the one, I don't know whether this is true, 2 farmers

were there when we arrived looking around the wreckage to see if there was anybody there that they could help. But they were past that. The next day or afterwards we heard that he had been found in a nearby wood hanging from his parachute with his leg off and he was dead also. I've got his name. His name was Victor Kean. I think I've got it all in there and I've got his age and he's buried actually at St Luke's at the back of Airmen's Corner. Quite a lot of things happened. We used to go to Empire Day up on the airfield 1935, and actually there is a picture I've got, not taken by us, but taken by somebody else. I can see my father. I can see us because mum and dad said: "we'll walk up if you want to go up on your bikes". So my brother and I took our bikes it's only on the opposite hill and you can see the bikes lying on the ground I'm sure it is us. I'm standing there in shorts with braces and my brother's got long trousers on: in 1935 he might have been at Cranwell, I don't know, I'm not going to work it out now.

David: when you were living here during the war what was your daily life like?

It was before the war started that Dad asked for soil to dig the Anderson Shelter in so we got involved in that. All that went very well and the Anderson was quite nice to go into at night and the dog always used to tell us when the air raid sirens were going to go off. She heard them about 10 minutes before we did so, we knew when the dog went to the curtains to try and get out the back door we knew it was time to go down to the shelter. That was alright until one night we went out there and it was full of water, so that happened to quite a lot of people so then what they brought in was the Morrison Shelter. Which was like a table made of thick metal and we used to get under that. They had another one after that. It was a brick built affair. I forget what they called that one.

David: What do you remember about the Battle of Britain here? So much really. Going to school, we used to go school on our bikes and I was going to school at Caterham then and kept picking up bullet cases and things like that along the road. When it first started all the youngsters were trying to find them and keep them, but after a while you didn't take any notice of them, you saw them as you were riding your bike but didn't take any notice you just kept riding on. So much about the Battle of Britain. Usually fine weather. Nearly always fine weather, beautiful days we had, weather wise. Vapour trails all

over the skies and you could hear them firing their guns up there and it was an everyday thing you know and it's hard to describe.

David: As children did you realise how close the Germans were. Did you have a perception of what it was all about? If we had lost the Battle of Britain we might end up with Germans on the doorstep? Very much so. I am going to ask you another question now if you don't mind. What do you know about Pickett Hamilton Fort?

David: Only the name I have to admit. That's the gun emplacement near the Portcullis Club. Do you know it?

David: I've seen it. What do you think that was for?

David: I imagine to defend the airfield. Was it not? Well partly I suppose. The gun emplacement wasn't necessarily a gun but when it was dug out and I wasn't doing the digging it was muddy and we'd found it and dug all the dirt out and by mainly done by Imps they were younger than we were and they did the digging. First of all they found some live rounds of ammunition which were used in a Lewis gun so they obviously had intended to or used a Lewis gun at some point but the actual gun but it wasn't a gun it was a mortar, it was overlooking Whyteleafe Hill: the trees weren't so dense then. I think it was definitely a week when we expected the Germans to invade coming over land or they pick out an airfield like Kenley or Biggin Hill to do a parachute attack and that's what the Pickett Hamilton Fort were mainly for: not to shoot down aircraft or anything but to shoot the parachutists as they came down. Equally the mortar down near the squash court was obviously for land defence, nothing to do with (gestures into the air) it was our own defence and I was surprised how prepared we were in many respects and certainly on the airfield, as although I didn't see them, there were piles of rubble round the airfield ready to fill in bomb holes should it happen and of course it did happen. And the other thing that I get quite upset about lots of things that happened at Kenley like the Ops Room was virtually after the war knocked down, there was nothing wrong with it. But they had to move out of the Ops Room at Kenley Airfield as the bombs had blown up all the cabling and they had no means of communication so they took over part of a butcher's shop in Caterham Valley as a temporary measure and then when they got more

organised they found the Grange at Old Coulsdon behind Old Coulsdon Church they took that over, the WAAFs. You've seen the WAAFs plotting the aircraft. It was all done at the Grange. The WAAFs lived in 5 small bedrooms right up in the roof. So they lived on the job really so they were handy to carry out their duties in that respect.

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And the Grange is right near to where the Messerschmitt 110 came down just over the hedge in the Golf course in Grange Park. Opposite Grange Park is the Tudor Rose and the Sixth Form College. Do you know anything about what happened there? A Hurricane came down there and the South African Caesar Hull, quite a brilliant pilot got a lot of kills, to his name and unfortunately he got killed more or less behind the Tudor Rose. A memorial was put up there for him. They put a dove on the top and superimposed a Hurricane on the top of that, and we went to a dedication a year or so ago. It's available there for people to see if they are interested enough to go and ask if they can have a look at it; it is still there. That was sad as he was a marvellous pilot. I expect he was trying to get to Kenley.

David: Earlier on you said about your brother had gone to Cranwell, your mum and dad both were in the Red Cross, your dad was in the Home Guard and your mum was an ARP warden. So did that mean you were home alone at night?

Yes. Sometimes. Because as far as I can remember I think we abandoned the Anderson shelter because it often had water in it and we were relying on a Morrison shelter. I can remember on one occasion I've never forgotten it and my mother used to put her head around the door and say: "you boys all right. I won't be long, I'm just going down Coulsdon Road they've reported an unexploded bomb and we've got to go and look for it in peoples' back gardens" so off she went. And that sticks in my mind and I thought afterwards she is quite brave to go looking for an unexploded bomb. But my father, I must mention, was in the First World War and he was wounded at Passchendaele on the Menin Road between Chantry Wood and Inverness Copse. Inverness Copse was occupied by the Germans and Chantry Wood was occupied by us. That's where he got wounded, he came home then. He reckons that getting wounded saved his life.

David: Do you have any particular recollections about the Hardest Day? I imagine you were here then. I can. I can remember every minute.

What was the first thing when you knew something big was happening? It was said in that newspaper article that I've shown you (if you read it and when you read it.) The first thing I knew was that the sirens went and on that day I should point out lovely day beautiful Sunday and we had our relatives from Norwood and Thornton Heath coming. Well they came and they were there and my mother was just about to put the joint on the table when the sirens went. She said a few nasty words and put it back in the oven. So we all had to go but because we had visitors there was no room for us in our shelter so my father my brother and myself: it was a shared driveway between the houses and next door had a gate through it to their garden and they were on holiday so we three went into their Anderson shelter which was not flooded at the time and we were in there and we took a photograph. My brother had a camera and my father wasn't very pleased when he said he wanted to go and take a photograph cos there was quite a lot of smoke coming from Kenley so he did that. My father, when the bombs were falling, he thought we'd be nervous wrecks my brother and myself. He said "don't worry there are our guns going off". But we knew that not to be true. And another thing about that day, I hadn't met my wife then, but my wife's doctor was killed up there, Doctor Cromie. There was a story, which I could show, you of a WAAF that was stationed at Kenley and she worked in the cookhouse and she cut her finger so she had to go round to the sickbay or medical centre at Kenley to get it stitched up so she was in there when the sirens went, and she went in obviously to get this stitched but was interrupted by the warning going so they all had to rush to the nearest shelter. I don't know yet where that is as it has all been flattened but it is still there probably. So there was her and other WAAs and Dr Cromie and another medical doctor, I didn't ever get his name the other one, they rushed for the shelter but unfortunately it was almost a direct hit on or very near the shelter and that's when Doctor Cromie got killed and this WAAF that was in there and she said herself it took them 6 hours to dig her out. They were so brave weren't they? She never ever got her finger stitched and she said that today I can still see the scar. What else do you want to know about the Hardest Day?

David: Did you go up to the airfield and have a look when it was all over. When war started we weren't allowed on the airfield at all. Before that we were always up there. We weren't allowed on the airfield. From 1943 for 6 years I was away in the RAF. Whilst I was away there was a house just opposite here it had the complete top floor blown off. It had to be rebuilt after which my cousin moved into there.

David: When you joined the RAF, where did you go away to initially? I went to Cardington for 10 weeks, I think it was, square bashing and it was the RAF Regiment that took us. Our billets were huts that we lived in there right alongside the colossal hangers that they have there for airships and things like that they're still there I understand that's Cardington near Bedford. That's when we were shouted at for 10 weeks.

David: When you joined up what were you hoping you would do in the RAF? Well I put in for being exactly the same as my brother that was a mechanic. I tried to put in for that but as I said to you earlier my education wasn't all that bright, so I didn't pass the mathematics anyway, so I was registered as suitable for straight wireless op and I am so glad I did because whenever my equipment went wrong, if there was anything wrong with it, I just had to call the Mechanic to put it right which suited me fine.

David: where were you sent to when the training was finished? I went to Compton Bassett, Wiltshire for the first part of the radio course and also continuous Morse code, and then we were sent for the second half to Blackpool and we did Morse code again there until the first leave came up which I was very pleased, about going on leave. I said to my mother "I'm coming home on leave" when I spoke to her on the phone then after that they said it wasn't just leave it's embarkation leave so whilst I was there in Blackpool they sent round a questionnaire: where would you prefer to be posted? So I had put down thinking oh this is good go to Kenley or Biggin Hill so I put down Kenley or Biggin Hill, so the outcome was that they sent me to North Africa. If it happens again I know what to do or what not to do. I don't know whether you will have heard in Blackpool that they used to march us up and down the street first of all in khaki drill as if to indicate you are going to be posted to the Middle East or furs and things that showed you were going to a cold place to try to fool the Germans. We didn't know where we were going

anyway and I went on embarkation leave we went back to Blackpool and then we went by train to Greenock in Scotland near Glasgow. And in the middle of the night, I can remember that, seeing this colossal ship, it was colossal to me because it was in fact the "Empress of Australia" which sounds wonderful but it was evidently from the First World War and it was used then in the First World War and it was also at one time the Kaiser's yacht. But it wasn't then called The Empress of Australia it was called the Tirpitz and they didn't realise at the time that what they were really getting on to the Tirpitz and not the Empress of Australia. Anyway we went in a very large convoy and I was going to be dropped off at Algiers and then we got a message that we were going on to Naples because they had a typhoid epidemic in Algiers so we weren't allowed to disembark at Algiers. So we stayed in Naples Harbour as far as I can remember 3,4,5 days until we got a message saying it was all right now we could go back so we went back to Algiers. I went to a place which was a transit camp didn't do any radio and then I got posted to an RAF rest and leave camp which sounded very nice but it was night duties, guard night duties, so that's what I was there for and that's what I did there was just standing out at night around this rest and leave camp. The message was when we first arrived that we were sleeping under tents there with oranges and lemons, not lemons tangerines. I don't know what sort of orchard it was but we were in tents in this orchard and I understood that three weeks before all the chaps in the morning have woken up and everything had gone: their tents, their kit bags, etc everything had gone. Whether this is true or whether it's something that somebody thought up I don't know but it's the sort of thing that could happen.

David: so can you remember when you next came back to Kenley what year would that have been? I came out in 1948.

David: you obviously had leave I assume. Oh yes we were in Italy I should tell you this: my brother being older I always seemed to be following him and a lucky thing happened was that I got posted to Leghorn in Northern Italy which is Livorno and he was on the same unit so I hadn't seen him for about 4 years so that was good, except it wasn't for long because they sent him to Malta and at Leghorn we were, I remember arriving there about 3 o'clock in the morning, on my own, nobody else, and instead of dropping me off at something like a station I was dropped off in the goods yard and there were all these trains

loaded up with tanks and vehicles and guns going off just not far away flashes. I thought you know I wasn't very sensible to come here but anyway it was fine. I think at that time it's called the Gothic Line and the Green Line we were at. I think it was one of the front lines as we got near the top of Italy cos the war soon finished. I had VE Day at Leghorn Livorno and I was on duty when somebody brought me a mug of something to drink and I just drank it which I know now that I shouldn't. It was a big mug full of cherry brandy I shouldn't have done that and soon after that I got posted to Udine Northern Italy towards Trieste and Venice, somewhere nice, and there I worked on HFDF and VHFDF. HFDF which had to be a mile or two away from objects trees, buildings, because they deflect bearing so you had to be on a plain with no obstacles in the way and on that HFDF we operated Morse code. VHFDF is in a vehicle with an aerial on top and that is speech not Morse, because you were giving bearings often to single pilot aircraft whereas HFDF you were dealing with larger aircraft, bombers, which often had their own wireless operator and others: rear gunners, bomb aimers, and the others depending what aircraft it was. So to give a bearing on VHFDF a vehicle with speech and what would happen is that they would ask for a bearing from whatever station I was on and then in the case of Morse Code they would say QDM which is a Q signal which meant they wanted a bearing.

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So we would send back a QTG which meant holding down the Morse Key so he sends out a continuous note while that's going you're juggling and in the case of HFDF you are doing it this way (shows with his hands) but in a vehicle when it is VHFDF Spitfires Hurricanes they be asked QTG they didn't say but we used the Q signal, they used to have to speak continuously 1234554321 whilst we doing this trying to find them. That's the difference between the two. HFDF VHFDF

David: So what do you remember about the airfield after the war? Obviously you weren't a boy anymore so you weren't spending as much time watching the aeroplanes I imagine as before the war? But especially as you had been in the RAF you must have still been very interested. Things happened. I was up there from about 1977 continually going to the Portcullis Club and I've always been interested in the history of Kenley anyway.

David: what do you think about the airfield now? Obviously we have got the Revival Project which is good but I assume you are sad about a number of the buildings that were knocked down after the war and that kind of thing? You wouldn't want me to say what I feel about it. I've had things there that made me quite cross. I don't know whether I should ask you another question but can you give me any reason at all why we looked on the blast pens as a capital E and some bright spark decided taking all the middles out to be some benefit I wondered whether you knew what it was and they must have had lorry loads of stuff taking these middles. Now you're putting one back. I'm so pleased. You can't go all the way round can you? I'm ever so pleased with what I've seen since, since you've started. It looks very nice.