

by Douglas Martin

I WAS JUST NINETEEN, an immature recruit, having joined the RAF hoping to become a pilot or at least an heroic member of air crew with wings on my tunic. My eyesight had failed the test but the standards would soon be lowered; or so they told me. So, with my hair slicked back with Brylcreem (RAF men were called 'the Brylcreem Boys') I arrived at Kenley aerodrome with four other recruits at the beginning of September 1940. We had completed three weeks initial training (square-bashing) at Morecambe and had been posted to Kenley to wait for a training course on communications. Kenley, together with Biggin Hill and several other fighter stations in the South East of England, had been attacked in August. The German objective to destroy all fighter aircraft squadrons had failed. In spite of that the Luftwaffe was now concentrating on bombing London.

Our arrival at Kenley was not auspicious. In Salmons Lane in front of the guard room at the entrance of the aerodrome, there was a bomb crater with iron stakes and a rope around it. The sergeant in the guardroom seemed to be under stress. In fact all the permanent staff appeared to be tired and fraught. Five unskilled recruits in their new uniforms were obviously not welcome. Feeling an unwanted nuisance, I and the four others were directed to the front room of a bungalow No.11 Ninehams Road. This was to be our billet for the next six weeks.

The room was completely empty, the floor was bare boards. I noticed that the leaded light windows had suffered from blast, bulging inwards and partly detached from the window frames. We were given four blankets each and told that beds would arrive later. They arrived two days later, so the first two nights were spent sleeping on the floor. The beds arrived but no mattresses. None was available. Our mild protests were met with a common response in those days — 'Don't you know there's a bloody war on' — from the Scottish corporal. He was like private Fraser of Dad's Army in a bad temper. The mattresses, which were in three parts called biscuits, arrived a week later. We had to sleep on these iron bedsteads for a week before the mattresses arrived. I believe I still have the diamond-shaped scars on my backside caused by that iron bedstead, though I confess I have never been able to see them. Anyway I had joined up to be a hero so what did a little discomfort matter?

In the aerodrome itself there had been damage to roads, hangars and other buildings. Men from all five regiments of Guards were working on the roads. I understood that they were recruits awaiting training.

We were having beautiful September weather and I was conscious of being in a lovely part of the country. Whilst I was slightly excited or apprehensive about what the wartime future held for me, I realised that I was very small fry. The important people were the pilots who were being called upon to risk their lives every day. Air-raid sirens sounded two or three times a day, and announcements over the Tannoy loudspeaker system. These were of dramatic importance.



Douglas Martin, later in his RAF career

'Viceroy squadron scramble — Viceroy squadron scramble'. In the transmitting station, where I was given the job of sweeping the floor, I heard the reason for that command to the pilots. Over the intercom came the voice of the controller, '30 bandits crossing the coast near Dover heading towards London'. That sort of message was broadcast every day during those September weeks — and often more than once a day. The aeroplanes at Kenley at that time were Hawker Hurricanes and most of the pilots were regular RAF officers, sergeant pilots and weekend fliers. As I have said, I felt like an unwanted guest, willing to help but incapable of doing anything useful. But after a few days I began to feel a part of the war effort in a small way.

I was taken to the butcher's shop in the valley in Godstone Road. It had become the temporary control room after the original one had been bombed. It seemed to be covered in barbed wire. I suppose that was to stop anyone getting in via the roof. Then I helped to erect an aerial mast in a garden at the corner of Church Hill and Stanstead Road. That

was all to no avail. It was decided that the site was not suitable. I was beginning to learn that in waging war, things seldom went according to plan.

The daylight bombing of London was continuous. I remember being on the airfield itself laying a telephone line and looking across towards Riddlesdown. About 20 German aircraft in formation were flying towards London. Below them a steam train came puffing out of Sanderstead tunnel on the Warlingham line, apparently unaware of the enemy aircraft above. In this formation there were three planes which were black in colour. A wag in our group remarked that they were the night bombers which meant that they were getting short of day bombers. That sounded too good to be true. The front-page newspaper headlines at this time showed the number of enemy planes shot down the previous day. I believe the highest number was over 200. However many years later these figures were proved to have been grossly exaggerated. It seems that in a dogfight several pilots were claiming to have shot down the same aircraft.

One night at around 10 o'clock, I was summoned from my billet to a bungalow in Salmons Lane. A dozen of us 'erks' had been rounded up and we stood before a Flying Officer for briefing. The officer was very tense, and tried to impress upon us that the country was in a desperate situation. German paratroopers were about to land that very night on Coulsdon golf course. We were to be taken to an empty house backing on to the golf course. There we would be given pickaxe handles as weapons. No guns were available. We were then told to fan out over the golf course and be ready for action. When a paratrooper landed we were to jump on him before he had time to sort himself out. We could give him a whack with the pickaxe handle and make a lot of noise to raise the alarm. (this was Dad's RAF not Dad's Army). We were taken to the house - I think it was near Hartley Down - and prepared to carry out our instructions. It was a clear starlit night, peering into the sky was tiring - nothing happened. Indeed I had thought it was a false alarm from the start. I was stupidly naïve at this time. I knew that we would win the war. We were British, we had the Empire and surely the Yanks would help us sooner or later. Looking back now I realise how near to defeat we were at this time in 1940.

Towards the end of September the Luftwaffe changed from day bombing to night-time raids. Every night the drone of enemy bombers could be heard on their way to London. One Saturday I went to a tea dance in the Davis theatre in Croydon High Street. I thought I was dancing well and getting on well with an attractive WAAF until she told me that she had a husband and he was a squadron leader. A group of us RAF personnel went from the Davis theatre to a pub - *The Catherine Wheel*, and played darts. We knew that there was an air raid going on, but we were surprised at what we saw on leaving the pub. It appeared that every shop window in the High Street had been shattered by blast. The pavements were covered in broken glass. The old boot factory in South End was in flames. It was being used by Ebbuts as a furniture store. A group of servicemen, including Canadians, gathered at the end of the High Street. There were three lorries in a yard next to the boot factory and beyond them there was a petrol pump. We got together and pushed the lorries into the road away from the fire. There were no trains running back to Kenley that night. We were directed by the police to go to the Community Halls (demolished after the war) where we were to lie on the floor of the gymnasium. I did not sleep.

One night there was an incendiary bomb attack at Kenley. Each bomb was quite small, less than a foot in length. They were dropped in hundreds and they were burning as they came down. It was like a shower of stars in a firework display. Most of the burning bombs landed harmlessly in gardens, and it was easy to extinguish them by covering them with earth. I had found a spade in a shed in the garden of an empty bungalow in Ninehams Road and I thought I was being useful by covering the burning bombs with earth. One bomb did land on the low roof of an extension. I was able to knock it to the ground with the spade and extinguish it. So perhaps I saved that house from being destroyed. When I came to live on Whyteleafe Hill 18 years later I found a half-burnt incendiary bomb in the garage. Evidently it had landed in the garden. I presented it to the East Surrey Museum.

My six weeks at Kenley came to an end in October 1940. It was an exciting time for the immature youth that I was. Almost every day there was an incident of some sort. While I was in the cookhouse one day the

building and the barrack square were machine-gunned. One misty morning, as I was going to breakfast, a Junkers loomed out of the clouds at treetop height. I could actually see the pilot, he must have been lost; I do not know what happened to the aeroplane.

Several times an articulated lorry left the aerodrome to return with the remains of a wrecked aircraft on board. The green in Salmons Lane was strewn with this wreckage.

I feel that my experiences on the ground are boring trivia compared with what was going on in the air. As Churchill said, *Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few*. Some of them became famous, like Douglas Bader, and were rewarded; but many of the pilots were regular RAF sergeant pilots not much older than I was at the time. Many did not survive. Churchill's words have ensured that they will be remembered in history as - 'The Few'.

In 1958 my employment was moved to Croydon. I was living in North London, but I had not intended to move house. I took my family on a car ride to show them where I was going to work and where I was during the Battle of Britain. My wife was unimpressed with Croydon but the Surrey Hills were different. She loved the green spaces and the tree-lined roads. Having looked at the airfield, we proceeded down Whyteleafe Hill. There was a *For Sale* sign in front of a detached house. 'Stop the car', she said, 'I like that house'. I tried to convince her that we could not afford it, but the decision to move had been made. After looking at several houses around Croydon, we came back to Whyteleafe and managed to buy the house. We lived there for 20 years.

CONTRIBUTIONS to *Local History Records* are warmly welcomed. They should not normally exceed 1200 words, and should be sent to **The Bourne Society**, C/o 6 Tupwood Lane, CATERHAM, Surrey, CR3 6DA - to arrive **not later than 30th June 2009** for publication in the August 2009 issue. Illustrations are especially welcome. Comments and suggestions (whether negative or positive!) are welcome.

BYNES ROAD AND ITS CHEQUERED HISTORY

by Brian Roote

THE AREA AROUND Bynes Road South Croydon has been part of my personal history for many years. My Grandparents moved into a house there in 1899, being the first occupiers and lived there for the next 50 years until their deaths. My mother, her sisters and brothers and later myself were all born in the little two up two down. The history of the area has therefore always fascinated me.

The area was originally part of Haling Manor which was granted to Lord Howard of Effingham by Queen Elizabeth. He became Earl of Nottingham and the Queen's High Admiral which is commemorated in the weather vane of Whitgift School and the name of the *Blue Anchor* pub in South Croydon. The manor was bought in 1626 by the Gardner family and was split during the ensuing years. The southern part was held in trust for Abel Byne, part of a wealthy Carshalton family. The estate was eventually sold to a Mr Parker-Hammond in the early 19th century.

It was not until 1860 that the land was divided into plots for building purposes. One or two cottages were built but it was John Cooper, a boot and shoe maker from West Wickham who became the driving force behind the development of the area. The family had moved to Croydon and built a large factory on the corner of South End and Coombe Road. They realised that their workers needed houses, bought up idle land, and started to build cottages, starting in Brighton Road and then Sanderstead Road.

A new road was put in which they named Bynes Road after the original owner and the area became known as Snob's Island after the term for boot maker. So the history of Bynes Road commenced. The first incident of note occurred in 1884 when an apprentice bootmaker Edwin Sudbury was deemed to have been starved to death. Edwin was born in Bethnal Green on 25th October 1864 and was deaf and dumb from birth. His father was a blacksmith and had enough income, it seems, to have sent his son to a deaf and dumb asylum in Old Kent Road. From there he was apprenticed to Robert Bidgood, a bootmaker from Woolwich. He was just 16 years old.