

Transcript of interview with Phyllis Elwood 10th November 2016

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Kenley Revival Oral History Project

Interviewee: Phyllis Elwood D.O.B

I was born in Maple Road Whyteleafe Surrey. You know Godstone Road and a little shoot called Maple Road which led up to the recreation ground, the Dobbin, which used to be our playing fields really. And then we moved down further on because my father worked in those days for the Croydon Gas Company where we lived and there was a great big gasometer and he was in charge of that and we used to play in these fields with cows and things and not worry about a thing and I went to Maple Road school till I was I suppose 11, infants and then juniors and then I went to another school. I loved it at Whyteleafe and it is so different now that's the point as one associates school with all these clever children and I was never a clever child and I did not have to worry about that. It was lovely. I loved it. But I was taken for a walk around Kenley aerodrome and it brought back all these memories and of course then came the wretched war didn't it? We had Kenley aerodrome and the valley, Caterham Valley and of course Biggin Hill was at that side of it and it went down into the valley, Caterham Valley, Whyteleafe, Kenley and Purley and up on this hill was Kenley airport and I used to say to my dad, this was during the war and I know I'm digressing, but how come they had children of that age, but now looking back I know our boys were children of 17 and the other side had only young lads. And my grandson said I will take you for a walk around Kenley and he did and it is not used as an aerodrome now except for gliders which is rather fun but which was a terrific noise a terrific noise..... (talking about a visit to Dobbin with her grandson)

I loved Whyteleafe and Kenley.

David When you left school how old were you? 14.

David So that was just at the beginning of the war?

Yes. My brother was 17 and he was in the army and he was called up to Caterham the drill hall they called it at Caterham in the Valley. And I remember that me and my Dad were standing by the road and we didn't dream of anything and these red buses were coming along with the stairs outside and my dad and me were leaning on the gate and all of a sudden we heard "hello Charles hello Bill" and there were my brother and my cousin leaning on the top of the stairs and that is my brother (shows photo) and when he came out of the army he was a Major. Fantastic brother. It was such a happy life and yet we had nothing in comparison to what they get now. Then I went to a place called Wapses Lodge School. It's a roundabout now and it leads off to the bypass. I went to that school but of course it has all changed. Quite exciting. Description of getting to aerodrome.....

I was seeing all the names of all the poor boys that had been killed (not sure where she saw these)
That was upsetting but it had to be didn't it?

I was 14 and I thought what do I want to do if I have got to go in this war and I thought I would be a nurse. And I am ever so glad I wasn't a nurse and so would the patients have been. So I became a land girl.

David: Did you have a job before you became a land girl?

Only in the local bakers up the road but I used to help my mum really she wasn't very well.

David: How old were you when you joined the land army? 17.

David So it would have been 1942?

Probably I can't remember but I've got it somewhere. I've got my badge but I don't know what I have done with it. A terrific life and I wouldn't have missed a single second of it but when I tell people now I used to have to be at work at 7 in the morning (coughs and pauses).

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Nothing recorded properly (a few seconds)

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I was very undecided whether to train as a nurse or go in the land army. My friend decided she was going to be a nurse so I thought oh no, she is better than me so she will pass her exams and I wouldn't so I'll go in the Land Army. But my brother had already told me that "I do not want you to go in the forces as such like the ATS and such but if you want to be a nurse fair enough". Think of the land army he said as you will be feeding us as well as yourselves. So I said alright jokingly so I joined when I was 17 and I was sent to Woking. It was very nice but it was one of those old tin huts that the Canadians had, not aluminium, tin and it was awful when it rained and it really did rain, pattering down and I thought I don't really like this after all and I want to go home. Anyway we were given £1.68 or something like that a week but we had to pay £1 or something like that for our food and lodging and that was a laugh. They were nice girls and so we got on. We used to go home and I used to go from Woking to West Croydon and then from West Croydon to my house but it was different somehow. No it was not the same as going in the forces and perhaps I should have gone in the forces but no I stuck to the Land Army and we used to have to go there to be at the depot at 7 o'clock in the morning and finish when it was dark but of course in those days we had double British summer time which meant that it was 11 or half past 11 at night that we left off work and then we had to get home but that was lovely because we did stooking. This is an awful thing but we used to get the stooks of straw and put them in 5s and stick them together and make sure they were as tight as we could and then they had to stay I can't remember now which is naughty but I think it was about 3 to 6 weeks to dry the corn and then they would come round with the old tractors and trailers and pitch them up. I say they would but we would and it was phew worn out by the time we got to bed. Then it was all the same thing the next day. It was hedging and ditching in the winter which was terrible and I keep saying and I still say to my family now "If the government had kept the land girls on there wouldn't be all these floodings in these places where there are". We'd better start up another land army but it was lovely and different places. I did all round here and I say to my family that is where I did so and so. Combining was horrible because as you had go along and pick some of these mouldy mouldy haystacks cornstacks wheat and that and you could smell it. Mouse and rats and hundreds of them. They were horrible, sorry, and I thought I don't think I am going to like this but I did a year's turn as it were and I got to like it. It was very nice, very nice indeed. But the hedging and ditching was oh my back oh but one felt as though you were doing something worthwhile shall we say. Of course the combining and things was when they brought the corn out of the back in those sacks off the back of the tractor, no not that, the thresher, the smell of the rats and they had the little dogs from the farms running round and round. They used to put a ring of barbed wire, no not barbed wire, wire netting around it to catch the rats and things like that in it, and this dog would wear itself out like that and I used to think I know exactly how you feel. Sorry we then used to tread on those because they were going to grow into rats and they used to squelch and I said "I can't eat my sandwiches today. I killed a lot of rats" but we had some fun. It was alright. I was quite alright until we went to Titsey Hill. I don't know if you know Titsey Place at all that's where the officers were there. We had xxx? and Italian

prisoners of war working with us. Well being quite crude we had to go tinkle somewhere so we had to go up to the woods. That was alright until I thought these Italians seem to be getting a bit fractious. I was quite naïve then and I have changed an awful lot now but they'd follow and they'd crack on a stick and you knew someone was coming and in the end we went to the chap, the guard. There was literally only 1 guard and he just had 1 gun and I said "what are you going to do with that?" and he said "they were frightened of it at the moment but I don't know how long that will last". I said "ask for some reinforcements we need them on the home front". That was another thing you see we didn't have any nice things to use it was awful but we succumbed and let them have, no we didn't let them have their own way, but we let them go before. Oh it was horrible never mind.

David Where were you living while all this was going on? At home

I went there and I said I am sorry it's the life I want but not the place I want. I was very lucky. And that was where I met my husband as he was a tractor driver so that was meant to be wasn't it.

David When you lived at home did you get weekends off? Well yes not in the summer we didn't as we were working at least 12 hours if not more but didn't have holidays as such a week's holiday as such I can't even remember saying oh I am going on holiday but there was never anywhere to go was there

General chat and reassurance

David What do you remember about air raids?

We used to get them but Biggin Hill was there the valley was there and literally and there was the train through Oxted to London Bridge and these Germans would follow the searchlights and the railway lines and I remember standing in our garden and then there was a field of cows and then there was the railway line and I said "look" and my dad said "what is it?" "I'm sure that's a parachute in that searchlight" as they had searchlights on the railway line as well and he said "you're right" and we also had a spare like a shed in the yard and they used to have their cups of tea in there and he got on the old bell (phone): "I think we've got the hopes of a prisoner here" and I thought what is he talking about and it was. They had caught a chap in the searchlight coming down and I said don't kill him don't kill him. My dad said "you go indoors now" but he was only a poor little kid as I say he was only a poor little boy and I thought that over there is someone like you is pining for you and we won't hurt you. Of course he couldn't understand a word we were saying of course bless him. They came and got him the home guard (the home guard: who do you think you are kidding and all that). But it was fabulous. I wouldn't have missed a single day of it. We didn't have holidays like you do now "Oh I'm going to so and so" you were lucky if you got a day out in the country.

David Did you see any doodlebugs?

Oh gosh yes. As I used to say to my dad if they came straight down I could bang his helmet off as you could literally see them looking down over the plane whether they were going to ... phone rings.

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Well I saw the first doodlebug and I thought what on earth is it? I thought it was a plane on fire. Which literally it is isn't it. I thought there was nobody in it but when the planes came that way I could see the pilots looking everywhere where can we bomb? them today. They were horrible because they had a horrible sound as when they stopped all the time it was ooooh it's alright wicked it's going over someone else's house not mine. I didn't like those. There was another plane wasn't there and the flying V2 the rocket. That was horrible.

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That's right yes. Then all of a sudden it would stop and then you knew that it was going to come in your street or your house. Once it stopped it just fell to the ground as the saying goes. It was horrible, yes, it wasn't very nice. But in those days to go to Kenley aerodrome I used to go up the hill and round the corner and my sister lived there and I saw a lot of guardsmen in the guards barracks too as well as airmen in the air but? I thought there's too many people here I can't do this. I used to have to go up to my sisters to collect the rent as she let her house out whilst her and her husband went to Chelmsford he was an engineer and he worked for I can't think now Marconi that's it as they had a factory down there so they all went down to that place. Albert didn't, he went to Coventry: that's my sister's husband. But I used to have to go up every so often to collect the rent but instead of just cutting through the aerodrome I couldn't do that now. I used to have to go all the way round. I went to see Douglas Bader in that film that was taken supposedly up there. Oh yes that's the plane trees and I showed you that when we went for that ride (to her daughter) I am getting a bit muddled up now. (Interview paused)

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Well I was just thinking about when they built the roundabout and the A22 is it? I'm not a driver I don't drive, only people mad as you can tell. I thought "what's this lot" and they must have done it all night. These different small tanks, armoured cars all sorts of things and they were all so... We were going up there at about 7 o'clock in the morning to go and I don't know where we went to work that day and then when they came to pick us up I happened to mention about these and they said what are you talking about and have you been on the drink today and I said I haven't been on the drink. Have you? When I came up here this morning this was packed chockablock with armoured cars and little tanks and whatever. No and they were just teasing us. They'd done all this before. And they were sent, someone told us afterwards, down to Newhaven to be taken across on the thing. And that was horrible because and we thought this is really going to happen. That's not very nice. But that's in spite of there being still potatoes to be picked and carrots to be plucked and all sorts of things like that. Then as I say we did the ditching and then the hedging and I loved that because it was the winter and you could chop away at the trees. Of course you're not allowed to do it now. You mustn't cut trees down. I liked that. We had a big park by Crowhurst. It used to go behind Uncle Dick's house didn't it. And another train coming and the soldiers were hanging out of the windows so they knew where they were going but we didn't...A bit much. I didn't like that to think that they were going to war. I didn't like that at all but it was good.

David Do you remember anything quite a long time before that when the big raid took place on Kenley aerodrome? On August 41? Do you have memories of that?

I haven't got anything to start on.

David You would have been working in the bakers then?

Yes it would only have been the local bakers and they used to deliver the bread 2 to 3 times a day. I don't remember anything. What did I do after the bakers? Here we go another one for the silly house.

David What memories do you have about the people who worked at the airfield: airmen the pilots and the aircrew.

Oh no. My brother said no I am not going to have my sister (laughs). The unfortunate part with him was .. He was out abroad the Black Forest I think he was stationed in for most of the time. He said I don't want my sister mixed up with these sorts of men. I know what sort of girls they

are and I don't want my sister to be (laughs) and it was years before I realised what he was talking about and I was ever so simple. I still am. But the point was he himself had married a land girl so he thought it was going to be alright but she didn't. She left him and went for an American. That ruined it? ? I thought I don't want to join in the Land Army I don't want to belong to the land army anymore. But I did. I kept going. I kept going. And got several people to join from my village you know. I think I was the only one at the time when I joined.

David From what you were saying you didn't work on one farm all the time?

No it was called the Surrey War Agricultural Executive Committee SWAC. ...That was what we belonged to. SWAC. And it was so funny because the first place I went to was near Woking and it had been raining and it was all frosty and I got the brown shoes which they allocated us but they hadn't got any gumboots and I said oh dear and she said I've got a pair here size 8 I take a size 4 so I had to take about 6 steps inside before my boots decided to move. But we had to get round all the people we could, to see if we could get a pair. I got a pair eventually. ... ? Funny. I thought I had better get my hero tin out??

David When did you leave the land Army? It was after the end of the war when you left the Land Army?

When was it? I can't remember. I should have got my medal not my medal my badge out.

David What do you remember about the end of the war?

Well I remember all the excitement. I went up to London but I didn't like it as I was a proper country girl at heart. But we just joined in. Then we came home and the porter or the guard I said can we get a train Oh he said you're not one of those mad lot been shouting your heads off. I've not been shouting I just been to see some many come home and he said your all damn fools and I said good night to you too. (Further general chat)

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Well it so happened that I met my husband while I was in the Land Army so that was a jolly good thing I did to join the Land Army. We would have been married 66 years this year, a long time

David How did you meet him?

He was a tractor driver

David Where was he evacuated to?

He was evacuated to Somerset and then the war ended and he decided to come home as his parents lived at Wallington. His mum made me laugh. She said "well I don't know" she said "I got fed up with Dennis coming home at night" and I can picture it now they had a bow window in their lounge and she said "she can remember him sitting there with a waste paper basket keep tearing out these pages". He was trying to write a letter to me tried to saying I don't want to catch you on the rebound. Oh yes I didn't tell I was engaged to a chap a local boy but he was in Belgium ...and he said and I said where have you got to go thinking it might be in England and get a train but he said it was Belgium. But the next thing I got it I was weeks without letters I used to write to him every day. That seems hard to believe but I did every day. He wrote this letter and my dad again who was at the garden gate (I must chop that down I think) he said I told you if you posted your own letters Colin would send you a letter and he did. But as I opened the letter all I could see at the bottom was Colin, no kisses and I opened it and it just said I've been meaning to write to tell you this I've found another girl that I like better than you. I thought give it to em straight boy. I was so upset. Charles (her brother) came in with

his officer's uniform on and he's got his pistol here and I said oh what are you doing.
(General chat)

Colin lived in Kenley just 5 minutes away. He used to love motorbikes. Funny how they all liked motor bikes isn't it. My Dad and I were standing there and he went by and he did just acknowledge me Colin did this time. And he drew up and said Oh would you like to go to the films and I said no thanks I've seen all the drama I've wanted to see with this war. My brother had the same happen to him: she went off with an American. He said I'm sorry but I've got my friend here and I stood up and he was quite tall my brother and I'm only little but I stood up to him and said that's nothing you would do as you're a Christian and you just wouldn't do it to us would you? And that's all I can remember saying to him.

And another funny thing was coming right back to Windsor Castle and I don't know if you've ever been to Windsor Castle down the hill and as we were walking up I thought don't you see some funny things when you haven't got your gun. I was with Dennis then and up came my brother's wife with her American and I knew she knew me but she didn't acknowledge me and I didn't acknowledge her and not give her any respect as she does not need it and does not deserve it.

[David So Dennis was your husband?](#)

Yes.

[David And he was evacuated to the West Country](#)

Yes

[David And did he farm down there?](#)

Yes. He went with his friend and they both went to Mitcham Grammar School and they went and were evacuated there and apparently they were evacuated with 2 old ladies, old maids. Can you imagine 2 14-15 year old boys being let loose on a farm? They stayed the first night and second night they both decided to get on their bikes and go round the farms to see if anyone would want them. And they did. Each one went to a farm. They were lucky because they were father and son farms so they were near each other and so were the boys.

And Dennis's mum said "I was fed up with Dennis using all my notepaper. He has to write to you instead".

[Question from Phyllis's daughter: Granddad was mayor of Wallington during the war wasn't he?](#)

Yes. They were mayor and mayoress my in-laws. General chat.

Back to Kenley airport. I can remember the path because I used to go from my garden round to New Barn Lane over the footbridge where they used to be Kenley School and then to Hilltop where there was a wood and we used to go bluebelling which we shouldn't have done but I liked flowers anyway. Course we weren't allowed anywhere near the airport when the war was on. No admittance, no admittance. When I had to collect my sister's thing she lived in Foxon Lane which is a couple of streets away from there and I used to have to go round to collect the rent. And there were proud men standing up there in their blue uniforms.

[David Do you remember any plane crashes?](#)

There was a plane crash before the war I remember that. That was horrific because we didn't realise there were any real planes up there. We didn't know a lot, we didn't know very much anyway. Seeing those things at the aerodrome now and see the plaques and things we didn't realise

there were so many killed. But you could tell by the noise whether it was a different plane or whether it was going to crash. It seemed to.. not very nice. I don't like to remember that. Our little churchyard in Whyteleafe has got quite a few haven't they? I went and saw them. As I said my mum and dad had 7 children. I don't think that 2 of the boys got married but the rest of us got christened confirmed married and some of them buried there amazing isn't it.

David How many children did you have?

3 Well 4 but I lost one. She died. 2 boys and 2 girls. One girl only lived a week she was a tiny baby. I got the best family in the world don't argue with me.

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Carol When you were in the Land Army how did you get to all the different farms that you worked at?

We had anything they didn't want virtually: an old lorry an old coach nothing nice no Rolls Royce turned up for us we thought we deserved more than that. No, they just gave us all the old lorries that had done its time in the army. And we were shaken about.

Carol And when you went to Woking you actually stayed near there. Can you say a bit about what that was like?

Ghastly. I didn't like it at all. Not nice at all. By that time I'd got used to being at home I wanted to go home again, which I did eventually because there was one girl who came from West Croydon and I said I would call for her next week. Oh yes. She said. She was only on the brow of the hill by the station so I knew that part I said I would come and call. So I went there knocked on the door she opened the door and said "I'm not coming" "I'm not coming" she said. "My mum and dad said I don't like it so I don't have to go" But you signed the form "No not coming. So I said "if you're not going then I'm not going". "Oh" she said and went back indoors. I went home and it was a Sunday and we went back on a Sunday so I had to wait till Monday morning to ring up to say I wasn't coming. Right I wish to see you in my office at Guildford: that's where the head office was. So my mum and I went to Guildford and she said what is it and I said I just don't want to go there Put me anywhere but not there I don't know why I don't want to go there. They was nice as pie I thought I was going to be put up against the wall and shot. No I did enjoy myself.

But I wasn't interested in any other men. I only ever had 2 men in my life and that was my husband and Colin first of course.

Carol Did you ever meet any of the foreign airmen that were stationed there?

I may have done but I wouldn't have understood them. We must have done. I tell you what intrigues me; we had a lot of airmen particularly come out with us to work like hoeing. Course it was a bit of a change sitting in the aircraft to (not ploughing) hoeing. Makes your back ache doesn't it. But I learnt afterwards and having got a brother who was going through the same which I didn't know at that time. They send them to do things to bring back their memories.it was the same with my brother we had a thing to say he had been killed. Oh Gosh what do we do now: dreadful we couldn't believe it. They sent him back to us to be in the bombing because he suffered with nerves. But he said it's alright we're sending a nurse with him but don't worry if he screams and goes runs in a corner because that's his whatever it was. That was a thing which was a bit frightening. I hadn't really come face to face with it as it were. We don't want any more I think we've had enough of war.

End of interview.



Phyllis is in the middle

