

Kenley Revival Oral History Project

Transcript of interview with Audrey Eldridge. Caterham - 30th June 2016

Interviewer David Meanwell. Filmed by Amy Todd

David: This is an interview for the Kenley Revival Oral History Project and today is the 30th June 2016.

I am Audrey Eldridge and I was born in Beechwood Road, Caterham on 12th September 1925.

David: so, you are a local girl? I am.

David: Where did you go to school? I went to school Caterham Hill Council School as it was called. It's now called Hillcrest.

David: so, you would have been about 14 when the war broke out? I was 14 in that September.

David: still going to school? I was yes. I was just about to go to a commercial college.

David: and did you go? I did and that was at Wimbledon.

David: did you have any memories of the Battle of Britain? Oh yes. Oh yes. I lived through the Battle of Britain. We, my family, were still living in Caterham and where we lived was just in the valley below Kenley airfield, and the first experience I ever had with an air raid was when I was visiting a school friend at Wallington, and we were out and we had our younger brother and sister with us at Grange Park and we suddenly saw things in the sky, aeroplanes in the sky doing things we'd never seen before, so we stood and watched and suddenly someone came out of a house on the other side of the road and dragged us in and we really didn't know what it was all about. Afterwards, you know, we were told, and it was quite an experience for us because we had to go back home to Caterham which was very difficult because this air raid that was the air raid over Croydon in 1940 over Croydon Airport.

Anyway, we got home safely. And then the following week, on the Sunday morning, my friends and I had a regular take the dog for a walk over the fields down in the Woldingham Road in Caterham Valley and these aeroplanes started coming over and the sound, and because I'd had the experience the week before I said: "Gosh we are going home" and we ran for home and the air raid sirens went, and we went down into the shelter and I think to this day that if I had not had the experience in Croydon, I would have probably stood there and watched it. The bombs actually fell from

more or less where we had been, all the way up Caterham bypass and not one of them hit the road: they all fell in the field along the side of the bypass. So that was the second experience we had. My mother collected us all up and we went down to our Anderson shelter, quite frightened really, as you don't know what to expect as it was the first experience of actually being affected. We knew we'd been at war since 1939 but there had been very little to frighten us youngsters as such, and that was quite frightening. But after that we got really used to it. I used to go to Wimbledon, to school, through air raids. Get our train. Ooh you'd have to go down to the shelter until the all-clear goes. We got so used to it that it was a part of our daily life, you know. So that was my experiences really of the Battle of Britain and we used to hear stories from my father who was in the local civil defence, and he had quite a lot to tell us. They used to know more that went on than we did because they were called on to all the instances and if they could help. As time went on it quietened down a bit and then it started more concentration on London, and we just knew, and we could see, it was all around us at night when it got dark, flashes of gunfire and again that became just a way of life and we only knew the horrors of it what we read in the papers when they came out the following day, of how London was suffering so that was the beginning, you know, of the feeling of war, that we were at war.

David: did you have brothers and sisters? I had one sister 8 years younger than me. She was very young so a very different age group. We just wanted to help at 14, 15, and 16 we just wanted to do something so that was when the cadet forces were really set up. First of all, the ATC in Caterham became very strong. Bert was one of that first ATC.

David: Bert's your partner? No. Well he's my partner now. And then we girls were knitting socks for (interrupted by heavy rain noise).

David: so, the different age groups? Yes. We girls could help knit woollen socks for sailors and things like that but really it was not enough for us. We wanted to be active. There was an air raid warden whose husband was an officer in the ATC said, "why don't you set up a girls [equivalent]", so the Women's Junior Air Corps came in to being thanks to this Mrs Pearson. We all joined and there were two flights and it was just something we needed. We had a corporal from Kenley aerodrome come down, drill us, make sure we can march properly and do all that kind of thing. We had some Morse code, we had lectures all over the place, and we also had quite a bit of socialising together which was very nice and so we became very air-force friendly, so of course when it came to approaching 17 and 17 and a half, we could volunteer to go in any of the services that's what we chose: the Royal Air

Force. So, I went to Croydon with a friend when I was 17 to join the Air Force. I didn't go to join; I just went up for a Saturday afternoon jaunt around the shops. Not that we ever had any money to spend but it was nice to look. And there was a big poster outside of the recruiting office in West Croydon with three girls one in Air Force blue, one in Navy blue, and one in khaki, and I said, "I don't think I would like khaki, but the Air Force is very nice". Someone came out, obviously a recruiting officer and said "Are you interested?" and we said "Yes" and he said "You'd better come in" and to cut a long story short I was too young by 6 months, so they told me to go home and I would be sent for, but the friend I was with was 18 and she was signed up there and then and that's how it was. 6 months later I got my calling up papers.

David: where did you have to go when you got them? I had to report to the Air Ministry building in London and then we were taken to what was Euston, but we had no idea because there were no place names as all the names had been taken down. So, we went to a railway station and got on a train and someone said you're going up north which was a horrifying thing because in my history books was all black country beyond Watford, and I was expecting it to be really horrible. Anyway, when we got out it happened to be up in Manchester, a place called Wilmslow and it was beautiful I couldn't believe it. It was lovely country and I thought is this the North? Then we had initial training for about 4 to 6 weeks and then I was stationed at Stafford.

David: What did you do at Stafford? I was a clerk provisioning which was a clerk special duty really. We didn't really know at the time exactly what we were doing, it was more numbers and what have you, but they found us jobs to do. I had been a shorthand typist as that is what I did at commercial college, so I was in stock control office there, shorthand typing and then we went on this course, and after that we did things.

David: did you get to come home on leave from Stafford? Yes, I came home on my leaves. Yes, I came home. My first leave, after we'd been out of initial training for about a week, we were allowed to go home for a long weekend. It was a long journey really. It used to take a lot longer than it does now. But I wanted to come home showing my uniform off, you see, so we managed that weekend and got that in and after that came. ...I liked it there. I was stationed in Yorkshire, Redcar for a while and I really liked Yorkshire. I would have liked to live up there. So, when I was posted from there, I was posted back to Stafford and I really was at Stafford for most of my service after that. Except when I had used to have to go, was sent to another station which was short of whatever it was they wanted that I could do.

David: Did you ever think it might have been nice to be transferred back to Kenley and live at home? Well everybody thought that, but everybody knew that if you said that's where you want to go, you would be sent to the other side of the world practically, so you didn't ask. Anyway, by that time it was really quite nice to see other places. We were quite open to going anywhere we were used to going where we were told and doing what we were told really.

David: when you were at Kenley before your service, and when you used to come home on leave, do you think that the very large presence of the air force here changed the character of the area? No, no because Caterham had always been a garrison town. We had the air force there, we had the army, the Guards Depot. We were used to military. I don't think it altered it one bit.

David: I imagine that probably where you were, it became more diverse: Czechoslovakians, Norwegians perhaps? Oh yeah. Well I was used to that before I went into the Air Force proper, when I was in the Women's Junior Air Corps we used to come up and serve teas in a little church army canteen in the corner of Kenley aerodrome and we used to have pilots of all nationalities coming: Canadians. Canadians were there for a while, there was always one Polish or one Czechoslovakian. Oh, yeah, we were quite used to that as well. So that didn't really make much difference and of course when I was in the services, we were very cosmopolitan.

David: I imagine that when the war broke out obviously the airfield itself underwent a lot of changes gearing up for modern methods. Do you remember much about what went on, the building work and things like that? In 1938 we went all through that process of preparing for war. We spent our school holidays filling sandbags to stand up against the hospital walls. All the time there was that preparation, because we were on a verge of a war. But when Mr Chamberlain came back and it was all over. Oh well what a wasted effort we felt about it all and the sandbags after a year started crumbling off of the walls, so I don't really quite know how I reacted when it all flared up again. I don't really remember. All I can remember that 1938 and everybody working the way all through the summer to make sure that when war was declared, and the relief, all the adults being so relieved that it was all over and that it wasn't going to happen, and then of course it did and I can't really remember, if I'm honest, any feelings about that. There it was, it's come. Well, we'll have to fill the sandbags up all over again.

David: You mentioned the raid on Croydon which was the air raid that made you really realise that it wasn't safe to be out. Do you remember the big raid on Kenley? Oh yeah, 18th August. That's the raid when we were out with the dogs in the morning. Oh yes, we remember that all right.

David: What was the aftermath like? Well it was very hush-hush outside. My father he worked, I told you, he was civil defence and the civil defence came and there was obviously on an alert but there was a restriction and it was contained within the defence, the RAF I suppose I don't know, and it was very played down and it was only afterwards we realised just what had gone on and what had happened there.

David: By afterwards do you mean after the war? No, after the raid. We knew there was a raid, we knew it must have been Kenley, but for us civilians it was very much played down until maybe it gradually leaked out because we had people stationed there. There were WAAFs billeted out at in this road you can see along the back of here that were actually killed that day. There were the fatalities and injuries over there, but even the civil defence ambulances they were told just go to any civilian where there were problems with houses in nonservice houses, but as far as going onto the airfield...

David: That was a closed area. Yes.

David: Did you have any evacuees in your area? We had one in our house. His father was a guardsman and he had been evacuated from London and he was put in the care of 2 very elderly ladies that couldn't cope with him and they said they couldn't cope with him and they couldn't put him anywhere else down in Wales, I believe it was Wales. And his father was contacted, and he had to find him somewhere, and the mother apparently had been blinded in an air raid, so he needed looking after. So, my mother heard about this and she said she would have him, so we had one evacuee during the war.

David: For very long? He was with my mother about 4 years.

David: so pretty much most of the war really? Yes. Yes.

David: Did you notice when you were in the air force, what was the attitude of the men towards the women in service? Did you notice a difference in the forces of the attitude towards women? Because I know things were different then, women weren't supposed to do certain jobs. No, in a word. We did everything and the men seemed to accept us very well. I never felt that and when I read about that, I've often seen things on films and thought it wasn't like that. No. Other people may have thought that way, but I certainly didn't

feel it at all. The answer is definitely no, and we were always accepted very well. Some of the girls did jobs that you would not believe they could do. I always think the balloon operators for example, they had a terrible life really. The work that they did was man's work, but they did it and enjoyed it most of them. Can't say for everyone, can you?

David: So, you enjoyed your time in the air force? Oh, I did.

David: When did you get demobbed? Beginning of 1946.

David: then you came back home I assume? Yes, I came back home. It had changed from the Women's Auxiliary Air Force to the Women's Royal Air Force WRAF and we had to choose did we want to sign on for a period or did we want to go. Well we'd been through the war everyone wanted to get home, and everyone wanted something different, and if I wasn't going to sign on, I would have to come home because we had no money. Well we had air force pay all the while we'd been in, certainly not enough to save anything so we had no option at 21 really to come back home to Mum and Dad. So that was it, I came back to Caterham.

David: did you find a job OK? Oh yes. I got a job as a shorthand typist.

David: Locally? Well, it could have been, but I did not want to go back to where I had worked. I couldn't go back to my little office, so I got a job in London. I worked for a shipping company in Cheapside so that's where I went and stayed until I got married.

David: So, after the war you came back home to Caterham. The airfield was still an active airfield obviously. What memories do you have of the airfield then? Well it was still quite restricted, so the only time that we really went there was social they used to have dances and you had to have a ticket but it wasn't much different to what it was before because as I said, that's how it was. There was the Air Force there, the Guards and the hospital and it got back to more or less usual. They were still taking recruits in the Guards, and recruits were still coming into Kenley, so it wasn't really a lot different to what it was when I went away in 1943. I can't think of anything different really. There were changes obviously as everything changed during the war really: buildings that were there before weren't there anymore and things like that and it seemed to get back to normal fairly quickly.

David: Did you notice much change when it stopped being an active squadron base there? Well it really went down quite gradually and by that time I think changes were changing in my life so therefore I wasn't interested in what was going on in the airfield.

David: You were busy sorting out a family I suppose? Yes, I got married and as it didn't involve anybody on the airfield. I was really quite interested in it up to a certain point because my father-in-law had served at Kenley. He was with number 3 squadron right back in the late 1920s early 30s. Number 3 squadron at Kenley, and when he left the air force, he was on reserve so he was called back into the air force in 1938 and he went off into the Middle East in the beginning of 1940 and he didn't come back to England until 1945 so when he came back, he went back to Kenley to do his demob period, so he had to come back to his station. So, I was sort of loosely interested in it but not to any great extent. He had left the air force by then and was working at St Lawrence's Hospital in Caterham so that was how it was at the time.

David: did you keep in touch with anybody that you were in the WAAF with? Oh yes. But sadly, I am the only one left of my friends that I served with. They've all departed. But I kept friends for a long time. I had civilian friends in Stafford as well as the air force friends that I always kept in touch with. There is just one that might possibly still be alive. And that was a New Zealander, but I haven't had my usual Christmas card and letter for a year now and I haven't heard. She has got family, but I didn't know them. There was no connection so maybe she is still alive but just can't write. You never know do you?

David: what do you think about the airfield now and the work that's been done? I'm really pleased. I can't help but be really pleased with the way things have turned out for that airfield. I mean it's been a part of my life. I had dogs and I used to walk every morning, twice a day sometimes, over on that airfield. And it was beginning to get a little bit jagged around the edges and then when they decided that, and of course we had the army there after the air force left. That was okay while they were there, and they used to keep it reasonable all around. But when they went, and their personnel's houses started to get really neglected and that kind of thing I thought it was going to happen. And when the land which didn't belong to the Corporation of London was sold off, I thought that was the thin end of the wedge. I'm really very very pleased with the way it's turned out and what's being done. The only sad bit of course is the Officers' Mess and the way that's been dealt with but that really is a sorry story.

David: Anything you want to add?

Amy? I would just like to ask: there seems to be a big sense of pride around Kenley do you think that's true? Before, when you left to go and serve, did people know about Kenley? Now this is something. Kenley aerodrome was in Caterham. Kenley was the road that ran along the valley into Purley, the

Godstone Road. Only very big houses with lots of land were up here at Kenley. So, Kenley Aerodrome was Kenley Aerodrome, Caterham. The children came to our schools. The services' financial affairs were all done at Lloyds Bank in Caterham, so it was in Caterham. So, we had a terrific pride in that airfield. Caterham people are really Kenley people (Kenley Aerodrome people). All the people living in these new houses in Kenley have only come since the war, after the war. They're fantastic the way they've taken it on board but of course it's called Kenley rather and that's understandable: it's Kenley. Their Kenley.

David: but it is Caterham's airfield basically? It is or rather it was Caterham's airfield as far as we think about it. We think yes that was ours. The Air Cadets, this is all part and parcel of this little story about Caterham, the airfield belonging to Caterham. The Air Cadets that were set up were Caterham and Warlingham ATC and they had to think of a name they wanted to call it, so they called it the Warcats. They turned it round so it was the Warlingham and Caterham ATC, and then we had the branch of the RAF Association. That was set up by a Caterham man. It was his idea because we all needed to be comrades so let's all have an air force association branch so that was set up and started down in Whyteleafe Tavern and that was set up in 1947. So, we had the Caterham and Warlingham ATC, and we had the Portcullis Club that did not come into being until 1970-something. The Royal Air Force Association Branch was the Caterham Branch. Well in 1974 when we were able to acquire the Portcullis Club. It was great and then for 2 years and then at the AGM it was suggested that because of its prestigious links, the branch should be called Kenley Branch. All the Caterham ones, we opposed it, but we got voted down, so it became the Kenley and Caterham branch. It has always been a little bit of a niggle with me. I'm the only one left that worries about it. But that was how it came about. Caterham and all Caterham people had a great pride having that airfield there especially as it turned out.

David and Amy: What a lovely picture.

There should be a photo to go with this transcript, but it is not on the video.