

Kenley Revival Oral History Project

Transcript of interview with Stanley Ford.

Date: 17th November 2017

Interviewer David Meanwell. Filmed by Coral Finch

David: so, can you tell us your name? My name is Stanley Ford and I was born 25th 10th 1919.

David: and you were at Kenley in the RAF so tell us about that? I joined the 615 squadron at Kenley in September 1938, and I was working or learning about engines. I was going to be an engine fitter. I carried on with that and at the time we had Audaxes and Hectors and we was attending. We could go Tuesday evenings, Friday evenings, Saturdays and Sundays. But if we wished we could stay over the weekend and we had sleeping quarters just up by the medical place. We carried on there: we had flying, mostly on a Sunday and we had lots of people along Hayes Lane watching. There was a quite a few people and that was a regular thing. Then we changed over to Gauntlets, we had a couple of Gauntlets.

David: and was this during the Second World War? No, before: 1938. I was with them till, being taught different things, right round until May Day. That was another thing. May Day 1938 was an Open Day at Kenley and people were allowed to come in and wander around and all that. And I was on a wing of a Hector helping the boys and girls up on and into the cockpit and out and after that we come down to August and we went to the annual camp which was at Ford Naval Air Station near Littlehampton. I just remembered the name of it: HMS Peregrine that was the name of it. While we were there, I don't know the actual date, but we were at this Ford Naval Air Station, and we was mobilised because of the war. We went back into Kenley and we stayed there for a while and then we moved to Croydon and then, while we were at Croydon, the squadron moved to France and I went off on a training course. I didn't go to France as I was ill at the time, so I finished up my training course. After the French do in, I think it was May 1939, the squadron came back to Kenley.

David: so you were training at Kenley and then at Croydon and did your course and then you came back to Kenley? Yes. When the squadron came back to Kenley in May 1939, I rejoined them there and stayed there. (He looks at some notes that he had). We came back to Kenley for a while and a Prince joined us probably the only Prince that served at Kenley aerodrome and he was called Prince Obelensky. He was a Russian prince and he stayed

with us for a while and then he was moved, and I believe shortly afterwards he was killed.

David: perhaps we can go back a bit and can you explain what your job was? First of all, what squadron were you in? I was in 615 squadron all the time from 1938-1945

David: what was your job? I was a flight mechanic. What we had to do in the morning we had to go over the aircraft and whatever check on everything with the engine and the riggers would go over what they had to do with the wings ailerons controls and all that. Then I had to sign form 700, I think that was right, all we done after that we had to wait until something happened. With our squadron we used to be on readiness: first readiness, second readiness and third readiness with Kenley, Biggin Hill and Croydon. When we were on first readiness Croydon would be second readiness and Biggin Hill would be third. When we were on first readiness the fitter used to sit in the cockpit and on the parachute with the straps over. And if we got a scramble the rigger was on the battery and the fitter was in the cockpit would start up and when the pilots came out they jumped in over, strapped in and they was off. Some of the films, what I've seen you, see the pilots have run out with the parachutes strapped to their backs and their bottoms but our chaps just used if they were sitting inside or outside the hut and they would run in the plane and they was off.

David: so they could scramble really quick? Really quick yeah. So anyway, another thing while we was there, the squadron leader Joe Carl. He came down and I believe he took over from Harvey, who was pre-war commander and he was an MP and Joe Carl took over from him. I didn't see it myself but some of the chaps did and he said, "I'm Joe Carl and I want to be known as Joe and if you speak to me I'm Joe, nothing else unless someone of higher rank is about," and so that's what happened. We was known as Christian names and all that, all the pilots. We had two French pilots one was René Mouchotte we used to call him Reenee and the other was Henri Lefonte and we used to call him Henry. And another one was a South African pilot called Petrus Hugo and we'd call him Dutch, and he was known all the way through as Dutch Hugo and what started that off was that when he came to the squadron, someone said like, an old saying that sort of thing, "I can't understand him he's talking double Dutch," and that's where the name came from and all the way through we called him Dutch and all the other blokes were by Christian names and the last list of the association in 1990, so I don't know how many of them are left. Carrying on through the war the

squadron was doing patrols of the channel and that sort of thing and then we moved to somewhere.

David: I think you said you moved to Croydon? We moved to Croydon before we went to France and this is after that now. Joe Carl, he left and we had another squadron leader called Holmewood, Squadron Leader Holmewood, and he got hit and bailed out and his parachute caught fire and he was killed. After that, this was during the Battle of Britain but actual dates I can't remember, it was taken over by Tony Eyre. Tony Eyre was an auxiliary, he lived in Purley and I believe his father was a bank manager in Purley or Croydon. He flew off one day and never came back and we thought he had been killed but then after the war, we found he turned up he'd been taken prisoner so that was a happy sort of moment, really, to find he was still alive. Then we went to (cutting short a bit) coming to August 1939, when they were lots of air raids and there was a big scramble on the 15th August, and I believe we lost two or three pilots that day. One of them was Collard, Flying Officer Collard and he used to fly KWP quite a lot and he used to say Peter, P for Peter and that's what he used to say for my plane and when we came on to the 18th which they called the Hardest Day.

David: If we go back to the Hardest Day, 18th August 1940 and if you could tell us what were you doing on that day? On the 18th August, it was just a normal day. I believe it was quite a sunny day. Anyway, we sort of waited: we was on readiness that day and we heard that there was a big amount of aircraft coming around the coast, sort of thing, and we was told that we might have a scramble so we was all ready for it. I think it was around dinnertime, midday around that area, and we got a scramble so our aircraft took off and we just cleared up what we had to do and got ready for the aircraft to come back, in case they wanted refuelling and go off again. So, anyway, they was in the air and a little time after we didn't really (well I didn't) really hear anything, then all of a sudden there was a terrific roar and I'm on this side of the aerodrome and they come from the other side where the main buildings are. And they were saying about 8 or 9 Dorniers that came across there and they were right on the ground, more or less, as they were very, very low and they dropped the bombs in the buildings and as they came over they dropped loads of bombs and they dropped some a bit too late for the buildings and they landed on the airfield. They skidded, loads of them skidded and I am standing there by the dispersal hut and I thought I can't do nothing, if one comes towards me I will jump over it, you know, nutcase (laughs). Anyway, none came right over there so I was lucky and

there were some that didn't detonate. They were three or four that I remember detonated, but all the others didn't. So, I thought to myself, "well, that didn't last long". They were saying that previously there was a great big amount of aircraft. And then all of a sudden, (roaring sound)...

(Stan gets emotional, remembering the event – pause)

00029

David: Nothing much had happened it was just a normal day for you? Yes until the first lot of Dorniers came over and then a few minutes afterwards there was all these aircraft and the sky was absolutely full, it was like a big cloud of aircraft.

David: so you say the first lot of aircraft went over? Tell me again about the second lot. When the second lot came over there was a terrific roar and with all these aircraft there was like a big cloud of aircraft coming over and, I am not sure how many there were, and there was a lot of smoke coming up and I don't know whether they dropped very many bombs on the main buildings, but I expect they dropped some but I was otherwise engaged. Anyway they went over and then they sort of seemed to split up and that was that. But there was all these bombs on the airfield, loads of them. I don't know how many. Some people said 100 and some people said 50 and some people said a couple of hundred but I never counted them so I don't know (laughs). Anyway that was that, then everybody who was able to, got stuck in to finding out where people were injured and the army was called in about these bombs on the grass and it took about two to three days and everything was cleared up. While the raid was on, aircraft could not come into land, so some of our aircraft went to Croydon and I believe some went to Redhill.

(Pause)

David: In the days when they were clearing up what were you doing? On the airfield there were four or five holes that were filled in with stuff and that's what I was doing, and then after about three days the aircraft was able to land back in, so the aircraft came back. During that day my friend, Peter Walley, was killed and apparently when he was coming down, he was over Morden or Merton and apparently he was going down into a school so apparently he pulled up over the school and landed in a field behind and he was killed and there is a plaque in Merton College depicting what he'd done on the wall in the college.

David: that was very brave of him when he was coming in like that to actually try and avoid the school. Oh yeah. So, we stayed there a couple of weeks till the end of August and then we moved to Prestwick for a rest. That was all right there Prestwick. (laughs) We had people make our beds. The place we stayed at was like a hotel. We didn't have to make our beds. They put on sheets and blankets for us and made our beds for us. (laughs) Then after that we come down to Northolt and we stayed there for a little while and then, I believe, we came back to Kenley again. That was the same routine as before on readiness and working around etc.

David: So can you tell us what would a normal day be like? Normally we would get up about 6 o'clock something like that, then breakfast and then get out to dispersal point, then check over the aircraft which we were allotted to and as I say you go over it and make sure everything's whatisname. You get in the cockpit as a fitter and you get two chaps to sit on the tail and then you start the engine up and you rev up to 30,000 revs and keep it on that to see if it was juddering or anything like that. And once you'd done that you'd shut down and I think it was the form 700 that you had to sign, and then the rest of the day you were finding out whether you were on readiness and what readiness you were on and you would potter around doing things really. There wasn't really a great deal you could do. That was that.

David: Would you have lunch? Oh yeah, we had lunch and that sort of thing. Just normal. Sometimes they would come round on a lorry to our dispersal point and sometimes you could sit in the cockpit for hours on end and nothing was happening. And that's how the day went.

David: When did you actually stop in the afternoon or evening? At night-time when it got dark, we didn't do, as far as I remember, a lot of night flying and we was more or less free to do what we wanted: play cards or something like that.

David did you stay on the base? Oh yes. Certain days you was allowed out. You got especially when you was on third readiness you probably get A flight might have a day off or B flight might have a day off or some of each. I used to live in South Norwood then so I would pop home and pop back again in the evening.

David: did you have to be on the base at night? Yes, I think you did. You couldn't stay out because you had to book in at the guards' room and that is when you came through the gate on the left-hand side, I think it was. And then start again the next day.

David: When you were based at Kenley did you have much interaction with the local people at all? No, none at all really. They weren't allowed on the aerodrome and you were always in the aerodrome. It was only when you had the day off or something like that you went out.

David: So, you were isolated from the people in Kenley? Oh yes. As far as I remember I didn't know anyone at Kenley, at that time. After that we left again and went to (pause). We left Kenley and we went to Valley in Wales and we stayed there for a while and then went to Fairwood Common and from there we went on embarkation leave and ended up in India. It took us three months to get to India by boat: we were rowing (laughs). We got on this boat at Liverpool, it was called the Johan van Banerbildt. We went up to Scotland, Greenock and we joined a massive convoy and went out into the Atlantic. And a couple of the blokes had compasses and they were working out. And the thing was we was going that way (points to his right) and then that way (points to his left) and so on. Altering the course all the time, in case the Germans reckoned we were going that way and could wait for them. Apparently, we were almost all the way to America and we came back and hadn't gone that far from England really and we went into Freetown and we were there for a couple of days and they down to Cape Town, South Africa, and then to we went on to India, Bombay. I was there for the rest of the war.

David: You told us a bit about what happened during the day. I'm interested to hear were you given a particular aircraft to look after or would you have a set of aircraft? No, in the morning when you go out, you'd get you're on P or you're on D or X or whatever, and that's what you do: you never really had one particular aircraft. You may get X today and tomorrow X is gone, X may have been shot down, it was changing all the time.

David: What sort of aircraft were you working on? During the war through from '39 it was Hurricanes. And when I left 615 at a place called Fenny in India and they still stayed in India for a long time. I didn't mention a little fact a little while ago: when we was annual camp we was called up and it proved to be the longest summer camp ever: it was 7 years for me. You was called up and never went back home. You was in the Air Force and that's it.

The first pilot, I remember getting killed was Pilot Officer Banbury. His wife, Felicity, became the head of the Women's Auxiliary Air Force. He was the first pilot we had (that was) killed, he crashed in Dorking somewhere.

David: At the base, what was it like for food and supplies, that sort of thing? Do you think you were quite well looked after? Oh yeah. Everything seemed to be alright. All the aircraft stores and all that. We had a maintenance unit, which I didn't know much about that because we were on the flight. I was always on 'B' flight and we had 'A' flight and 'B' flight, and the maintenance unit did all repairs and that sort of thing, patching up bullet holes or bits of shrapnel on the aircraft. We were looked after pretty well. A lot of things you try to remember but you can't remember. I've got a few photographs and a couple of little stories.

David: You said there were some other things you wanted to tell us about. Yes Peter (Petrus) Hugo, who we called Dutch. When we was at Kenley he came back with a little black retriever puppy and he was in 'A' flight and when they used to go round that way I used to have a little game with him and chase him around and all that. Every time I went round that way as you had to go that way to get to the main buildings and I used to run after him and he used to run away. Anyway, Hugo he got shot down and he wasn't badly injured but he was in hospital and I was sitting in the dispersal hut and, he was named Winston, (the puppy) as Winston Churchill was our Air Commodore and we was known as Churchill's own squadron. Anyway, Winston came in there and he was (barking noise), and I said (to the puppy) "what's the matter with you," and he kept looking at me and I thought, he must be hungry or something, so I got him a bit of food and some water and he sat down, quite happy. He stayed with me for two days and when I woke up one morning he'd gone, and I thought, "where's he gone?". Hugo had come back the night before and he'd gone back. I didn't know but how he knew, I don't know. We was on the move again, I think it was at Angle, a place called Angle and Hugo got hit again. The dog came up to me and (barking noise), "are you hungry again then?", and he stopped with me and he was with me for quite a while.

And it used to follow me around and everything like that. And we got to Fairwood Common and we was told that we would be going abroad and we were going on a fortnight's embarkation leave. Well I'd got Winston and I thought, I can't get in touch with Hugo because they said that he won't be back to the squadron because he's been promoted and gone to another squadron. And I couldn't find out what squadron he went to, so the only thing I could do was take him with me. And I took him back to my Mum and Dad's house in South Norwood and that's where he was and he passed away in 1958. So he was 18 years old. So what happened was, my granddaughter wanted to know about it so I've got this thing here which I've printed off for her. The thing that happened was, in 2014 we went to Capel-

le-Ferne and they was opening up what they call "The Wall". I don't know if you've heard of it but there is a big black wall with all the names of the pilots in the Battle of Britain. And as I walked along (getting emotional again) I touched the [names of the] pilots what I knew and I touched this Dutch Hugo and a woman standing near me said, "Did you know my father?" I said, "Well, I knew him when he was in 615 squadron", and she'd come over from South Africa for the opening of this Wall and she said "my dad often wondered what happened to his dog". He survived and he passed away in South Africa in 1986. While I was there I was asked to sign a Battle of Britain bat which I did. I've got a picture of that.

David: So that's incredible. You've got this dog that adopted you it seems like, rather than the other way around and then all that time you meet his daughter. Talk about coincidences. That's right just as I was going around touching, and she was there with her daughter and her name was Angela. Her daughter's name was Kate. See, things keep coming. Anyway, after that we went in to Capel-Le-Ferne and it is quite a big place now a Battle of Britain memorial and they had a museum now that we walked around and they had a video on of a scramble on the Hardest Day and it was only 615 squadron planes with KW on it. That was marvellous. I was looking for photographs of my mate, Peter Walley, and it was quite good there and there is quite a lot of extensions. That's near Folkestone. If you have time to visit, then it's quite a good place to go.

David: Do you remember them filming at the airfield? If you saw these pictures of your squadron someone must have been taking photographs or film. Do you remember them at all? No. Never seen them taking off or anything like that. In actual fact it was hard to get photographs unless it was like a special printed in the paper or something like that. Like I've got a picture of Churchill after the bombing of Kenley. Churchill came to visit the squadron and little pictures like that, I've got them and also, I've got pictures of the aircraft that 615 squadron ground staff flew to France in. The aircraft themselves they flew over there and I think they went to Meurville.

(Shows photos)

They were Imperial Airways passenger planes. That's where they used to fly, from Croydon. They were the ones the ground staff went in to France.

That is Rene Mouchotte, French. After he left us, he became Commander of the Free French Airforce.

David: It sounds like you were working with some very important people. Oh yeah! (laughs)

David: Do you have a photograph of you at that time? No, I was too ugly.

That one was Henri Lefonte.

That one was Peter Walley, my friend.

This one was Dutch Hugo and that was Tony Eyre. He was a Croydon person.

(Holds up picture of cockpit of Hurricane with Croydon written on it.)

That's Henri Lefonte.

That's just a group of our pilots. On the end there is Lefonte and Mouchotte. They've got their French uniforms on.

And that one was when Churchill visited us after the bombing on the 18th August.

Coral: Did you get to meet Churchill. Oh yeah. It was only passing along. He didn't speak to me. I think he was tongue-tied.

That was when I signed the Battle of Britain bat.

At the start, I didn't tell you how I came to join 615 squadron. Peter Walley and I were friends. And he said to me one day: "Stan I've seen an advert in the Croydon Advertiser asking for chaps over 18 to join the Auxiliary Air Force at Kenley. And I'm going to go for it. What about you?" So, I said: "yeah, okay I'll do the same". So, we got application forms sent in, but he got in a long time before me. I don't know why, they must have lost my papers, but anyway we had an examination and all that sort of thing when I was called, and someone said they are going to make the squadron up to 100 and there's only 2 places left. And at one end of this room there was about 20 blokes in there and I thought I've not got much chance. And there was this exam: different things, angles and triangles and all different sorts of things. A week later, I had passed, and I had to come up to Kenley and went to that house on Whyteleafe hillside. There was a big house which was the officers, where they were. I don't know what they done there, but I think they slept there and that sort of thing. And I had an interview with three officers, and I was asked to join, and I think it was September. The squadron had just come back from their summer camp at Old Sarum was the place and then I joined them just after they come back. There was only two was wanted to make the 100 up and that turned out to be two Stans. Stan Ford, me, and Stan Ford

the other bloke. So, my number was 819098 and his number was 819099. We was apparently the last two to join the Aux. Anyone with the 819 number was in the Auxiliary Air Force. The other ones who did join the squadron during the war were not the Auxiliary blokes. They was being called up for regular airmen. So, that's when I got in.

(Conversation with Coral - Coral shows Stan a map of airfield)

Coral: That's the Officer's Mess, is that where you were interviewed? That building is still there. Yeah, I remember, from Whyteleafe Hill there used to be a gate there that's where I would have gone in. It was their shortcut to save them going all the way out and down.

Where's the Church from there? (Coral points out St. Luke's Church on the map) Because I went to Peter's funeral, and as we come out the Church, he was buried there.

Coral: So, our archaeology dig, happened just here (points on map), so if this was Sunncroft Farm, it would be on the airfield side of Sunncroft Farm. And what we think we have found is a rifle range, was there a rifle range there? There may have been. It may have been for the aircraft just for the Spitfire and Hurricane guns.

Coral: There is a really big wall, which we have called "The Rifle Range" for quite a long time now, but what we think is that it is too big for a regular handgun rifle range. This big one is still standing, and we have done conservation work to it to keep it sturdy. We thought they must drive the planes up from the airfield, face the wall and fire. Some of the holes in the wall are quite big so they must have had big bullets. That's what could have happened, yeah. Some of the Spitfires and Hurricanes had canons on them, so it could have been those.

Coral: We uncovered two of these complete circles about a metre and half round, touching each other and there are at least three that we have found around the airfield, we are thinking that they are not the right size for a gun emplacement, so what we are thinking is maybe they were long-drop toilets? I remember we use to go behind the huts (laughing).

They had positions around the aerodrome, and when the aircraft would come over and they would shoot, like a parachute up in the air, with cables on them.

Coral: So, we know what that is, we call it a Parachute and Cable System.

I had nothing to do with them, but I can remember them. I believe they went up on the 18th August when the planes came over. I think one of them [the Dornier] flew into it. I think it might be that the plane came down in Sunnycroft Farm, I've got a picture of it, actually.

(Coral shows Stan pictures of the archaeology finds)

Coral: We found a little plaque, found very close to where the building, and it said (I can't remember the exact words), something like "do not take off without full fuel and ammo".

We had inside the dispersal huts we had all different things like that, "don't forget your parachute", more like a joke.

(Coral shows picture of blast pen with middle wall still standing)

Coral: As far as we know there was camo netting over the top of the blast pens.

I don't think so, because to be honest, our planes never used to be in the blast pens, they used to be out on the grass, ready to take over, they wouldn't be in there. We used them for testing running up the engines. When we were there we were always on readiness.

Coral: There are areas around the blast pens in the grass, like concrete triangles with metal loops.

For stormy weather and for tying down, underneath the wings there was a ring to tie the ropes for windy weather, as they could be turned over or turn on their side and break the wings off.

(Stan says that he has a story about the blast pens)

That's the last list of chaps that was sent to me in 1990. A chap called Sammy Samson who was running the Association then sent it to me. I don't know how many of them are left. The chaps have got to be my age or over, over 98 to be still alive.

Before that I will tell you another little story about Henry Lefonte. I was standing by an Avro Tutor. I was just looking at it. It had just come from maintenance and Henry Lefonte came along and he was looking round it and he said, "I have to test fly this plane," so I said, "that's alright then." He said, "I'll go and get ready." "Are you gallant?" in a French way, so I said "yeah." Anyway, I went back and was sitting around by the dispersal hut

and Henry came along with two parachutes, two helmets and he said Joe said: "You fly with me."

We get settled in the aircraft. He said, "when I put hands like that (up in the air) you fly the plane." So anyway, we took off and all along Purley Downs and all round Purley, but we didn't go any further than that because of all the balloons. He done a few stunts and that sort of thing and then we were flying along in a straight sort of line and up come his hands. He told me to put me feet on the rudder control and the joysticks and we went (he gestures from side to side) and anyway I got it all right after 2-3 minutes and I'd managed to whatisname it. Anyway, he'd had enough of me and took back over me.

When we went down (flying) along a road, and there was a bloke on a cycle, and he went right down, and the bloke fell off!

In the film when Douglas Bader was going to Kenley, the same thing happened to him. He came off his motorbike, that was in the film, but I don't think there was any connection with what we done.

Coral: You said you had a story about the blast pens? After the war, my wife's eldest sister and husband owned Sunncroft Farm and we used to go up there quite often and take the kids up there and one day when we went up there, he said: "I've been given some land by the Air Ministry which I never knew anything about so they must have taken it off the previous owner. So, shall we go over there?" So, we went over there, and it turned out to be where 'B' flight was with the two pens there and that strip of land there. He said "I can't do nothing with it. If I knock them down, I've got to get rid of it all and I won't be able to do nothing with it anyway. So, they might as well have it back". So, whether he give it to them back I don't know but they are still there. We used to take the kids up there at the weekend (shows photos). They liked the animals.

Coral: How many aeroplanes were roughly on Kenley at any one time? We had about 16 with the squadron with 'A' and 'B' flight and then there would be some in maintenance and I'm not that sure if there was another squadron at times and they would have had the same amount as us so maybe about 50 odd.

Coral: Thank you so much. It's been a really good interview and you've given us so much with your stories and we'll take some photos and get the spellings of the people you've mentioned.