



BIGGIN HILL AIRPORT BUGLE

News from our Airport at Biggin Hill - established 2005



CLUB AND AIRPORT NEWS
ISSUE No. 90

BIGGIN HILL AIRPORT SOCIAL CLUB LTD
www.bigginhillclub.co.uk

In Ass. with BigginHillReunited.co.uk
1st August 2012

RAF KENLEY AUGUST 1940: PETER CHANNON

Aug 18th 1940 1.25pm; It would seem that Kenley was finished, with brick and chalk dust still lingering in the sky, giant bonfires from the wooden hangar roofs were sending cascades of flames, sparks and smoke spiralling upwards, then with delayed action bombs starting to go off the next raid came in; this really had to be the end.

Only minutes earlier nine Do17's had streaked in across Caterham and delivered a 'knock out' attack at incredibly low level, with the eight shot up survivors now desperately fleeing back homewards on their own fight for survival.

That they had succeeded seemed in no doubt, over 150 50kg bombs had been placed smack on the main targets and destruction was evident everywhere, 'Kenley was kaput' or was it!

When as a 12 year old I walked past the guardroom one summer evening in 1959 looking for the local ATC unit; it was like entering a historic time warp. Opposite, were the Station sick quarters with a small brass plaque commemorating those who had fallen in the 1940 raid, (when the original sick quarters had been destroyed). Continuing down the main entrance road (Victor Beamish Ave) with its tree lined lawns, the original 1933 barrack blocks stood overlooking the

parade ground 'I noticed that they still bore the signs of their camouflage paint'

normal 'parked' attitude whilst making the wing root difficult to climb on for a peek into the



On the left were wooden huts (offices) and then the Sergeant's mess buildings, with the brickwork bearing signs of wartime drab paint, plus noticeable bullet/shrapnel marks. Opposite this and commanding a majestic presence on the north side of the parade ground stood the impressive Airmans mess with the famed NAAFI alongside (as featured in the film Reach for the Sky), a substantial flagpole installation completed the scene. Standing guard at the end of the avenue was a very airworthy looking Spitfire with its undercarriage and tail wheel sitting on small plinths about two feet high surrounded by a grass verge. This arrangement had advantage of giving the aircraft a

gun sight, seat, and control column with dual cannon and mg button this was one of the machines left behind when the filming of (Reach for the Sky) was completed, but had been spared the fate of being towed to the airfield dump unlike a sister ship. It was a MK16 (RR263) (LZ-B) and still had its serviceable Rolls Packard Merlin under the cowlings.

Years later this machine would be presented to the French Air force at Tours where it was restored and flew, before eventually becoming a museum exhibit at Le Bourget in French Squadron marking.

Having passed the Spitfire the operational part of the airfield started to open up, although large open spaces seemed to be evident

that looked like parade grounds, however once clear of a wartime steel hangar the unmistakable sight of a 1917 double Belfast shed hove into sight. My destination on that first visit was to 450 (Caterham and Warlingham) Squadron) ATC with their HQ right alongside the edge of the airfield on what would now be called an apron, in fact their parade ground 'complete with its own flag pole' was on part of the old apron.

If one stood outside the headquarters looking north, the mighty Belfast shed was on the left, the open vista of the airfield was ahead and the grandeur of the Officers mess with attendant trees and tennis courts over to the far right. This then was the place that would become a second home to me for over 15 years and steer me into a life forever linked with flying.

It is easy to forget, that in a world devoid of the internet and electronic publishing, historical information with regard to old airfields was somewhat lacking and the presence of several 'parade grounds', and pocked marked buildings bore no real significance at the time, with even the local ATC unit having no record of the history that had gone before. It therefore came as somewhat of a shock to find out later that Kenley had possessed no less than 14 Belfast sheds in 1917 and 8 up to 1940; 'the parade grounds mystery was solved'.

Kenley came into the aviation world due to the Great War and a requirement for what were then called 'aircraft parks' that were needed to assemble and store the increasing requirement for military flying machines in France. Such places had to have access to railheads and also be close to areas of production.

The choice of Kenley Common in Surrey for such a park was not an

obvious one other than it had several stations nearby, was conveniently placed for onward deliveries to the front line in France and happened to be close to the home of the officer in charge of arranging the parks! In what at the time would have been a massive construction project 14 aircraft (sheds) were built and comprehensive workshop and camp facilities completed. A local road (Hayes Lane) actually ran through part of the park and an elegant brick house (Flintfield) that was situated nearby was taken over for use as an HQ and mess.

Why the nearby Beddington (Croydon) location was not enlarged remains a mystery, as the clearing of trees and removal of a golf course at Kenley must have been a fairly onerous task. The Corporation of London owned the common as one of its many open spaces (it still does) and its proposed use caused considerable disquiet in the area. When the war finished considerable pressure was used to have the structures removed, but the then "war office" decided that with so much having been spent the location should be retained as part of our Defence of the Realm. Aircraft of the day were covered in doped fabric and were garaged from the effects of rain and sun when not in use, even so Kenley with its 14 hangars was certainly well provided for. What had become the 'Royal Air Force' then entered a period of being divided between established home bases, and overseas operations to police our various interests in the middle and Far East and in 1926 a permanent Officers mess was constructed. Kenley was then chosen to become one of our main fighter sector stations for home defence and in 1933 (marked on the brickwork) was subject to a major upgrade with elegant new brick buildings replacing those from WW1. However the original hangars were kept, consisting of

double bay structures utilising elegant buttressed brick walls and a curved wooden roof covered in a bitumen-felt material. These are certainly the most attractive of all hangars ever made, (known as Belfast truss sheds) even down to the arched brick ends that held the open doors, unfortunately the wood roof element would prove to be a limiting factor in a future conflict. Kenley then took on the mantle of a red-bricked country club, with neat lawns and tree lined avenues that opened up onto the all grass airfield. With the silver doped biplane fighters of the day arranged in Squadron order for the day's flying on this Surrey hill, it would have made a magnificent sight, more akin to a flying club but with little in the way of a means to protect itself from attack. Empire Air Days were held to give the public a chance to see the RAF at work, with air displays and demonstrations, plus the chance of spotting one of the new monoplanes that were to be the future Airforce. One may think that the Air Ministry of the day were somewhat remiss in the reality of a situation that had seen enemy aircraft attacking our Country only 15 years before with long range bombers and that advances in aircraft design and performance would certainly not preclude this happening again. Kenley would not be alone in being one of our main defence airfields tasked with protecting the South East yet with no real thought on how it would be protected itself!

With the reality of yet another conflict to be addressed, 1938-9 saw Kenley subjected to a rapid improvement scheme that had the size of the flying field enlarged, and eventually provided with hard runways, a taxiway, aircraft blast pens, air raid shelters and slit trenches, but only a limited addition in the provision of airfield defences. This expansion also

required the removal of 6 of its original hangars.

Having satisfied the OC 450 Sdn that I could probably measure up to their standards, I was informed that parades were two evenings a week plus Sunday mornings, but being underage, I would have to wait for a uniform. I was also in the local scout troop at the time down in Whyteleafe village so got a strange look to my suggestion that perhaps I could turn up with my scarf, woggle, and Baden Powell hat as a temporary measure. When I look back to this dual membership, my "Rhino" patrol certainly improved its drill capability on scout nights, and the cadets were subject to an unusual requirement for large bonfires whenever the excuse presented itself on exercises. However the ability to eat like a lord in the airman's mess for a shilling a day (plus the chance of flying) compared well with ash covered soup from a Billycan and freezing to death in a damp tent. Like all youth organisations we were always looking for the exciting activities on offer whilst desperately avoiding the chores. In the Scouts the dividing line between the two was finely balanced but in the Cadets on one side you had:- shooting, night exercises, summer camps with proper beds and good food, flying, swimming, sport, going solo in a glider and an airfield to cycle around. Balanced against this was: - drill, polishing lino floors, more drill, lectures, polishing boots and being shouted at by the NCOs. My first brush with authority set the scene for even more outrageous capers later. Very soon after getting my uniform a 'Chipmunk' allocation came the squadron's way for a Sunday at White Waltham. Unfortunately for me on one of the evening parades that week I committed some heinous crime, 'late on parade', (I had walked over two miles to get

there), so was removed from the flying rota, (mortified was the word). On the Sunday morning the coach picked up the happy bunnies to go to WW with the officer who had reprimanded me. Those who were left behind were detailed to break out the bumpers and tins of floor polish (so big you could nearly stand in them) and to have the HQ spotless with mirror like floors before we went home. The civilian (retired officer) helper who was to supervise us duly issued the equipment and then departed hot foot for the mess.

After a few minutes an RAF Landrover crunched to a halt outside our HQ and an oddly attired figure (jacket cold weather and trousers cold weather) appeared, with a strange peaked cap. He asked to speak to our Officer, but with no one around left a message to the effect that 'could he send a couple of cadets over to the gliding school for trial air experience flights'!

There were 2 youngsters and 4 of us with our new kit. What were we to do! Using my scout initiative I sent the youngsters off home early and then the rest of us marched over to the gliding school with the tale that two could fly and two could help. Of course we all flew (a couple of launches each) and then after helping for a while marched back to our HQ to go home. The sequel to this was at the next parade when we found out that the WW party had not flown due to high winds and were not very happy; (we kept quiet). It was about two weeks later that the powers to be found out about our trips, the NCOs were furious, but could do nothing as we had only accepted an invitation (and nobody had even noticed the unpolished floors)

With Kenley's airfield now being prepared for the new monoplane fighters entering service, its 'flying club' atmosphere disappeared

forever and more Surrey fields were added on to its western boundary. The original Hayes Lane was sealed off and diverted around outside of the new perimeter track. Two hard runways now traversed the grass area, with twelve fighter blast pens giving the area a new military look.

The old biplane era was going but a few Gladiators lingered on although they lost their silver finish. Hurricanes and some Spitfires were now to be seen in greater numbers as squadrons re-equipped and were capable of all weather operations from the runways. Over by the Officers mess what looked like a brick bungalow surrounded by an earth bund was the only hint to the main improvement in Britain's defence. This was the sector operations centre where all information with regard to Kenley's area of responsibility was fed by GPO landline to co-ordinate the new RDF (Radar) information and Observer Corps visual sightings. The information received, via HQ Fighter Command at Bentley Priory and 11 Group ops at Uxbridge, was used to 'scramble' the fighter squadrons, and direct them as required.

Kenley was therefore prepared for its part in defending the Realm again, however it was poorly placed to defend itself. True there would be some anti-aircraft guns and several light machine gun posts but these could only be used during an attack and not to prevent one reaching the field. None of the important facilities were underground or bomb proof and with its squadrons away intercepting raids there was no spare capacity to have a defensive screen of fighters for individual airfield protection. It had been planned that 12 Group would cover these airfields when required but in practice this failed to happen in time to prevent incoming raids.

All our defensive eggs were firmly in the hands of radar and the Observer corps but it was a well-tuned system and it worked. It had been realised early on that the radar system might well have 'gaps' due to many operational and offensive reasons; therefore a comprehensive system of visual reporting posts covered the country that fed sightings of all aircraft movements back to HQ Fighter Command. Frequently this was a duplication of the radar information but if a low level penetration of the system failed to be picked up on the screens, it was quite likely the Observer Corps would get it. Another (secret) facility was the availability of 'Ultra' information that used the code breaking services of Bletchley Park to glean any useful radio traffic from the Luftwaffe. Before Kenley was called upon to test all this out, one of its squadrons (615) with Gladiators, was despatched to France as part of the BEF. The lack of a credible air defence system in France gave the Luftwaffe a major advantage and many of our aircraft were damaged or destroyed on the ground, the whole campaign being a confused and frustrating exercise culminating in the Dunkirk evacuation.

The valiant efforts of the squadrons involved did at least gain them useful combat experience and also the first 'Hurricane aces'. During the withdrawal period Squadrons started to operate both from Britain and France and when the evacuation started Kenley provided its share of aircraft to cover the beaches.

Having settled in to my ATC life, Kenley provided fabulous facilities for a young cadet. We had use of the small arms range near Hayes Lane (still there) with a gymnasium and squash court standing near the tennis courts that could be used for wet weather

activities. The imposing airman's mess / NAAFI was the source of good food and upstairs were snooker tables and the camp cinema (Astra). The surviving Belfast shed housed the MT section on one side, and private cars and caravans in the other. However the only resident flying unit was 615 Gliding School that had use of a wartime steel hangar near our HQ. They mainly operated at weekends therefore we only saw them during our Sunday parades but after my first outing with them I decided to cycle over when free to see if any 'help' was required. Eventually I wore them down with help to the point that they gave me some denims and wellies and I sort of infiltrated the system because no one told me to go away. An interesting interlude saw the steel hangar used for a 1962 Royal Tournament practice, utilising a Seafire F17 (SX137) (folding wings) (with electric motor driving the prop) in a Battle of Britain tribute. I then had the added bonus of seeing it perform at Earls Court where it trundled across the arena (wings down and prop turning) with 'Merlin' sounds coming from loudspeakers. (This had been painted to represent a 1940 RAF machine and is now on display at Yeovilton back in correct naval colours)

Another Kenley gem was its dump. I had arrived too late to see a complete Spitfire 16 (TB885) ex Reach for the Sky) sat there but there was another half buried hulk (Mk 22 PK665) on the edge of the common. (The battered remains of both Spits were dug up years later)(Sans moteurs) A camp tidy up would produce a source of 'goodies' as various stores were cleared out and deposited there, plus a motley collection of old cars. On one notable occasion a Saturday morning visit found hundreds of .303 mg links scattered around; that was followed at different times by:- a 3 inch rocket

(as used by Typhoons) with 60lb war head, a Spitfire seat, aircraft harnesses, broken instruments, engine cowlings, and a complete Spitfire control column with its gun buttons and switches. Spiriting this away on a bike could be difficult and many 'night ops' over the common were made during this time. One had to do this before the weekly visit from the bulldozer crushed the condemned items into the ground and then covered it all with a new level of earth; (Relax, we did not leave much for the bulldozer). On one weekend exercise we had the use of an old concrete flight hut situated on the edge of a wood near the small arms range. I remember the Canadian Maple leaf symbols on the walls (providing a hint of its previous use) but was even more impressed by the complete Merlin engine on its transit packing that was sitting in one of the rooms. The weekend was also memorable for one of my huge bonfires, plus an explanation to the 'Equipment Officer' as to why an RAF greatcoat had perished in the flames! To my horror the hut and its contents suddenly disappeared one week when the 'works and bricks dept' decided to have a tidy up.

The Gliding school aircraft were the trusty T21 Sedburgh and Cadet Mk3 two seat open cockpit trainers. They must have been the best value for money items the Airforce ever bought, being pulled into the air by the twin drum MB wild winch that had replaced the older V8 engined barrage balloon types. Your first launch in the front of a MK3 would make a white knuckle ride at Alton Towers seem pretty tame, whilst a loop in the Sedburgh with no parachute or helmet was never forgotten. Providing the required transport and ground tugs for this operation were a collection of surplus air force Landrovers and the mighty I ton Austin 4x4 Truck. One of the Landrovers was an early mk1 swb

which was nearly as much fun as a Willys jeep; being frequently stripped down to a bare body with the windscreen folded flat. This was done in the summer months but frowned upon by the powers to be in case anybody fell out. It was not unknown for this stripped Landrover to carry out night ops on the adjacent common to look for foxes, the penalty for being caught was unknown but would have probably meant excommunication (we never found out).

With the Dunkirk evacuation over, Kenley, (with two squadrons being based there at any one time) and the other 11 group fields braced themselves for the inevitable onslaught. A couple of valleys away in Kent Biggin Hill had its own sector and a few miles away in suburbia Croydon airport was now a Kenley satellite as was the small grass airfield at Redhill. Across the Channel Goering rejoiced at the Luftwaffe's success and boasted of its ability to 'finish off' the Royal Air force; the board was set and Europe's most important game of aeronautical chess was about to begin. History can debate whether an invasion was possible in 1940 but the Royal Air force would first have to be defeated even if only to force a situation where we might sue for peace. With Churchill in charge this would never have happened but had he been 'removed' from giving such commanding and decisive leadership at this desperate time, then who knows!

With many Hurricanes lost in France, Goering was confident of a quick victory, however our Spitfire squadrons were mainly intact and Hurricane production was flat out. There had been pilot losses in France and over Dunkirk but in the main they had also taken a good toll of the enemy, with useful combat lessons having been learned that would be now passed on to others via the new training

system. An offensive force has the advantage of deciding the time and place for attack and Goering needed to lure our fighters into battle in order for his fighters to deal with them. 11 group would be taking the brunt of this assault but with 10 group to the west and 12 group to the north, sufficient back up should have been available to prevent them from being overwhelmed; however, at this critical time various factions in the Air Ministry and Fighter Command formed a disruptive element that nearly tipped the balance against us. To their everlasting credit ACM H.Dowding (head of fighter command) and AVM K.Park (11 group chief) never lost sight of the situation and kept focused on the important requirement for our force to remain in being whilst causing the enemy sufficient damage for him to lose confidence in his ability to gain a complete victory. 11 Group was akin to being the front line trench without the benefit of having reserves within easy reach.

Most of our fighter bases were a legacy from an earlier conflict and were not designed or located with a view to resisting a serious aerial attack. Like Kenley; they were comfortable, well-manicured sites where one could walk to all the main facilities with ease, with hangars close to the main camp. Kenley's all important sector control room was not underground or dispersed at this time, however, an emergency ops room was planned for in nearby Caterham, whilst a new one was being built into a house in Old Coulsdon.

With the Luftwaffe now settled into a convenient selection of former French airfields and also constructing new ones from the abundance of flat farmland, a start could be made in probing attacks on coastal convoys and harbours, but in August 1940 a change of tactics saw the start of a serious

attempt to take out the radar sites followed by our airfields. Had they known the vital significance of these large aerals they may well have made this a priority to be dealt with before switching to the airfields, but although much damage was incurred, the system was never knocked out and temporary mobile systems and the trusty Observer Corps filled the gaps as required! It soon became quite clear that the J87 dive bombers and long range ME110 twin engine fighters were not going to survive in meeting up with our fighters, therefore Goering was soon faced with having to provide single engine fighter support to cover any offensive bombing actions. With the Radar sites spared complete destruction and no hint that Churchill would seek a truce, the air fleets in France were tasked to deal with our aircraft industry and airfields. Adler Tag (Eagle Day) was to be the start of the air assault to finish off the RAF, which would then allow operation Sea Lion the invasion of England to begin.

In the sixties Kenley had long since lost any operational status, with only the 'Fretwork Fighters' of 615 to be seen overhead at weekends. True the odd Anson, Devon, Chipmunk and Helicopters would call in and the MT section still had a large 'Follow Me' sign attached to a mini van to act as a guide to a suitable parking space, (years later the sign turned up on the dump).

In Aug 1962 Kenley hosted the World Radio Control Aircraft Championships, with one 'Maynard Hill' (USA) being the chief judge. The Americans won the individual prize with Britain taking first place in the team event and Maynard himself went on to set world records for RC aircraft including an Atlantic crossing in 2003.

The question was how long would the station continue to stay open at

a time when bases were closing all over the country, but the answer came with a decision to build new quarters for staff attached to the MOD in London. Flat roofed structures appeared on an area once occupied by a double Belfast shed, and despite being of a plain concrete design compared with the elegant red brick buildings of 1933, they at least spared Kenley from closure for the time being.

With the MT section still occupying the pre war Belfast hangar, 615 GS were still housed in the steel hangar and at the time were equipped with: - 3x cadet mk3, 2 x T21, 3 x Landrovers 1 x Austin 1 ton 4x4, 1 x airfield control caravan, 2 MB Wild glider winches, plus an assortment of self built trailers and glider trolleys. 615 had a CO (George Nunn) who's day job was a tech officer at the Woolwich Arsenal, with access to the scrap bin there. It was no surprise then that 615 were the best equipped gliding school when it came to building its own ground kit. On non-flying days the hangar would always be a hive of drilling, cutting and bolting together of the duralumin plates and bars, as George dreamed up another piece of kit for airfield use. During tea breaks in the control caravan with everyone crammed in together, it was inevitable that someone would say 'tell us a story George' and there would follow tales of 'blowing up tree stumps for the home guard' (to great effect we were assured) or the early days of ATC glider instruction when the aircraft only had one seat! When old enough (16) I had gone to Swanton Morley to do the 'quick' one week gliding course which did not go down well with 615 and nearly ended my helping there, but I ignored the moans and wore them down with even more help which by then included driving the Landrovers, and winch launching the gliders; eventually I was nearly forgiven and allowed to take other

cadets on air experience trips, before becoming an instructor. As a change we used to pop over to Biggin Hill which by then had become the light aviation centre of the southeast when Croydon had closed. It had acquired a huge main runway due to jet operations but had lost its Belfast's in 1940. The number of flying clubs were already into double figures, with several of us eventually gaining our power licences there.

My first connection with Biggin started in 1958 when we moved from South London to Surrey, and there was that moment we happened to drive past the camp to be confronted by the Hurricane and Spitfire outside the memorial chapel.

In those days they were 'real aircraft' not plastic replicas and this meant that evening outings from Surrey frequently 'diverted' to see them.

Years later when us 'Kenley-ite' came over to visit; one of the highlights was crowding into Dillows Café where we were subject to ribald comments from the itinerant Pilots and Engineers.

As it was, several of us used our Gliding hours to do a condensed PPL with many of the clubs, some of them going on to join the RAF or gaining a commercial licence.

In fact eventually Biggin became the 'parent station' for Kenley and so the 'links' joined up. Some years later I would return with the 'Tiger Club' to fly at the 'Air Fairs'. Below is a lovely display with the



Turbulents, and then in 74 attended with my Comper Swift G-ABTC..



This association lasted for several years, and also led to attending many of 'Jocks' shows around the country.

In December 1981; Biggin (Cobbys) would be the snowed covered departure point for the Australia attempt (that ended in Iran). (See comments and pictures at the end of this 'news letter' from the editors (JB) cache of memoirs).

Another interesting interlude found me spending some days in Kent looking for a Hurricane that had gone down in flames in Aug 1940 whilst flying out of Kenley; the clue for its whereabouts having come from the book *The Hurricane Story*. With about 10 square miles to cover (and no map) I worked through woods and fields on this quest but was rewarded on the third day by coming across a 3 bladed propeller hub (with shattered blades) still attached to part of a reduction housing. This was lying at the bottom of a slope on the edge of a wood. I then

started up the slope into the wood using the hub as a datum and was astounded to come across a Merlin engine with a bent crankshaft flange lying on its own. About 20 yards upslope from this lay the pile of rusty tubing and debris that had once been Hurricane P3115 (253 Squadron, Pilot T. Gleave). The Site was revisited several times afterwards with me taking staff from 615 along. Many years later the headline TV news one evening announced a Hurricane had been found in Kent (the same one). Fast-forward to 2005 and I had some spare time before a flight at Stanstead, with a quick trip to Duxford possible. Having entered hangar 4, I carried on around the Hurricane on display and spotted a familiar friend; 'Sitting there with its bent crankshaft flange and no reduction housing was my Merlin' (it made my day).

With the Battle of Britain now raging overhead, Kenley's squadrons were in action all the time but would be rotated for a rest and replaced with fresh ones as required. As yet no serious raids had affected the station but in mid August 1940 this was to change. Several RAF stations had been subjected to heavy attacks although many of these were not fighter bases and therefore of little consequence to the immediate results required by the Luftwaffe. However the vital sector airfields would now be selected for special attention, the nearest ones to France being Biggin, Kenley and Tangmere.

On the 16th Aug part of a large inbound raid split off and dived on Tangmere. Within minutes this peacetime station was reduced to chaos with the control room unable to function. Aug 18th was planned for the end of Biggin and Kenley, with the latter due for some special attention. Biggin Hill's airfield was a more difficult target to deal with due to it having two camps on a

more open site. Kenley had a compact camp like Tangmere but it merged with the local extended built up area of Caterham and was not such an isolated target.

Over the channel the 'coup de grace' had been decided on for both stations, with a large force of Heinkel III proposing to finish Biggin in one huge raid bombing from medium level. Kenley however was to be the subject of a co-ordinated attack from three separate formations designed to hit the station within minutes of each other. The initial force was to be JU 88's carrying out precision dive bombing of key installations, this was to be followed up by a medium level run by a formation of Dornier 17's and then the final thrust would be a formation of 9 machines from a special low level (staffel) that would appear from nowhere with their DO17's to deal with any buildings still standing. All the med level units would have fighter support but the low level raid was to rely on nap of the earth flying all the way from France to achieve a complete surprise. With nearly 170 aircraft committed to deal with two airfields it was thought that the defences would be unable to prevent a successful operation, however, both sector stations were still fully operational at this time, with the vital sector control rooms able to function as designed. Poor visibility on the morning of the 18th led to a delay message being sent to the units involved but when conditions improved the various formations set off and proceeded with their fighter escorts, whilst from a grass field at (Cormeilles-en-Vexin) the 9 DO17's of the 9th staffel of BG76 took off on their specialist task. With fighter command still able to plot the main incoming formations, our fighters were directed to intercept as required and there was a running battle all the way to the targets. Biggin was attacked but the bombs failed to hit the main installations

and it remained operational. The main Kenley attack force was also intercepted but their own fighter protection enabled them to continue to target. After skimming the waves over the channel the low level Dorniers headed inland and started their hedge hopping dash. Unseen by radar they had failed to appear on the plotting table of Fighter Command but once inland the Observer Corps posts started to send in reports and track the raiders.

At this stage Fighter Command had no confirmation of the intended target but after a change of course to investigate this raid and anyway there would have been a delay in the plot being received due to the routing and filtering of the information. Taking a keen interest in this situation was Kenley's own station commander; on his initiative he ordered that all flyable aircraft were to disperse and that the Croydon based aircraft (111 Squadron) be scrambled; the airfield was then put on full alert to expect a low level attack from the south. The leading Dorniers followed the rising slope of the chalk downs and then with the camp in sight lined up on their individual targets; it seemed very quiet, and it was, (they were not the backup raid, but the first on the scene) then suddenly there were Hurricanes around them, followed by an explosion of airfield defences. Those precious moments had given the anti-aircraft guns and the light machine gun posts enough warning to prepare; the Dorniers now flew into a hail of shot. With their own gunners returning fire the formation sped across the roofs and started to drop their loads all the time taking hits and then flying through the first explosions. With a trail of destruction and burning hangars behind, the aircraft streaked across the cratered landing ground only to be faced with rising columns of smoke from an aerial mine deployment. One shot up

machine hit these and crashed, whilst another caught a wire but escaped. Of the 8 aircraft that cleared the field only three would get back for a normal landing in France and one of those with a dead pilot. This was not quite the end, as the high level raid then arrived to add to the chaos, followed by the JU88's. With smoke and dust obscuring the target the mid level Do 17's did not add much to the damage and the JU 88's decided to proceed to the alternative target of West Malling. Kenley had taken a pounding but the airfield craters were easy to repair and the sector ops room was still standing. Most of the casualties were caused by hits on the sick quarter's shelter and 6 out of 8 hangars were destroyed together with aircraft and ground transport, but Kenley's own fighter squadrons had been airborne on intercepts, therefore not caught on the ground. What was supposed to have been a decisive attack on 11 groups sector fields had failed to achieve the required result, with losses on both sides heavy, but the reported damage must have convinced the Luftwaffe that Kenley was 'out of it', whilst Biggin was subjected to several more heavy raids in the weeks to come. One of the bombers had carried a war correspondent who took a remarkable set of images of the low flying aircraft, with an even more remarkable shot of a Spitfire sitting in its blast pen near Hayes Lane as they cleared the field. Their shot up machine would get them back to France on one engine to survive a crash landing. The vulnerability of the op's rooms was recognised by moving them 'off camp' and Kenley's moved first to a shop in Caterham and then to a requisitioned house in Old Coulsdon. Another feature that appeared later in the locality was a substantial 'flak tower' built to cover the southern approaches to the airfield (it is still there in 2011). With the change of tactics away

from the airfields and focussed towards London, Kenley was able to play a major part in the September battles which culminated in some huge aerial fights over the south east and London itself. With the RAF still able to mount a stiff resistance to any raids sent over, Goering had to admit defeat and any possibility of an invasion for that year was finished. The Luftwaffe then went on to a night blitz program that failed to bring the country to its knees but allowed the RAF to rebuild itself and prepare for its (offensive) role in the New Year. Fighter command was also changing and the architects of victory succumbed to the 'politics' of the day with Dowding and Park posted out in an appalling manner. Their actions had proved to be correct; with history confirming this but at the time being 'right' against so much antagonism would not help them. The new regime would see in an offensive policy that would cause more pilots lost than in the Battle just won. Kenley like the other stations in 11group had held the line; battered yes, but never out of action and always able to control its sector it had performed a role never anticipated when constructed. This small 'common' in Surrey had helped to save Britain; it would now start to free Europe.

The New Year (1941) saw Kenley re-organise itself to take account of its role as part of 'taking the fight back to the enemy'. Blister hangars around the perimeter would help to replace the cover required for all weather servicing of aircraft, with the squadrons now taking part in 'Wing' operations designed to keep pressure on the enemy defence system. A typical operation would consist of many fighter squadrons covering a small bomber force (sometimes of only 6-12 aircraft) on a sortie to bomb a factory or rail complex. This was intended to draw their fighters up and erode

their capability but the enemy losses claimed at the time proved to be optimistic and post war analysis would seem to confirm that we lost far more pilots pro rata.

The runways at Kenley would be extended to permit heavier fuel and equipment loads, with more hard-standings provided to cope with the extra aircraft now based there. The Kenley Wing became part of the offensive force that would keep the pressure on the enemy with both fighter protection for our bombers and very low-level fighter attacks on military installations. These offensive sorties would be the pattern for the next 3 years leading up to D-Day, with the top scoring 'Johnnie Johnson' (who led the Canadian wing) being based there for part of this time. Kenley would lose its Wing status in early 44 as our fighter units adopted a more mobile capability to be near the forthcoming allied advance in Europe. Its inability to extend its runways even more to accommodate heavy fighter-bombers and the new jets would see its use confined to the 'piston engine era'. The familiar sounds of those Merlin engines would now be a memory of a past glory (so they thought) as the airfield adapted to a less aggressive future. With the threat of enemy bombers now gone Kenley adapted to a communications role and eventually the venerable Avro Anson moved in to provide a vital service with our forces now advancing in Europe; then it was all over and peace returned. The Ansons fitted in well with the architecture at Kenley and were still there when it closed years later. Tiger Moths, Austers, Harvards, Chipmunks and gliders would also be based there at different times. In 1951 the Merlins returned with a 'Hurricane' film 'Angels One Five' but in 1955 the station relived its past when the film 'Reach For The Sky' (The story of Douglas Bader) brought a

squadron of flyable Hurricanes and Spitfires together to make this classic movie, that also gave us a record of the many surviving buildings and Belfast Shed.

Douglas Bader had been stationed at Kenley (23 Sdn) when he flew his Bristol Bulldog to Woodley on the 14th Dec 1931. He had taken off to return after lunch but 'rolled' into the ground (and the history books) during a low level run across the airfield. His story mirrored that of Kenley in that they both survived against considerable odds and were to do great service for their country.

Kenley's own Spitfire was duly acquired from the films, stock of 'extras' to find its place looking down the main entrance avenue.

In fact the Merlins would never fade away completely, as on Biggin Hill's (At Home) days the Hurricane from Dunsfold (PZ865) and Spitfire from Wisley (AB910) would rendezvous at Kenley before running in for their display.

The flying activity was now running down, apart from the renamed 615 Gliding School, which was an amalgamation of several units from other bases, but by 1959 the station had closed as an RAF Flying unit. Apart from the lack of powered aircraft the normal camp services continued to operate, as the role changed to that of administration and quarters for MOD staff. The MT section seemed to cling on to its 'flying association' as they were still the proud custodians of a very smart fire engine, ambulance and 'follow me' mini van. Lined up in the Belfast with the normal array of staff cars, were: - 3 ton trucks, 1 ton trucks, Landrovers, coaches, minibuses, a snow plough and assorted lifting equipment. The runways were adorned with huge white crosses but the odd civvy aircraft would drop in when weather or engine trouble dictated.

Every year the Surrey Wing ATC would hold its main parade at Kenley and an impressive event it was, with much marching, inspecting, saluting, shouting and following bands around the 'apron' as hundreds of keen cadets swung their arms and kept in step. On one notable Wing event a Saab Safir mistaking Kenley for Biggin Hill landed on the main runway (to the delight of the assembled cadets), this prompted a whole host of staff cars to roar off in a cloud of smoke to deal with the offending visitor. After a huge b.....g which included being threatened with boiling in oil and used for medical experiments he thanked the interrogators for their kindness and set off for Biggin where he got another huge b.....g from customs. He could not quite understand all the fuss as he said it was not that long ago that 'dozens' of pilots from all over Europe used to land in his country with all sorts of aircraft without any permission!

Kenley's brief excursion into 'jet' operations came in the form of a French Vatuor twin engined bomber that was taking part in a race (Arc to Arch) and should have been landing at Biggin. He trundled through the flimsy fence at the end of the main runway onto the common but after being extracted from the grass was repaired and flown out some weeks later.

Despite the new quarters the time was approaching when Kenley started to lose its autonomous status and came under the auspices of nearby Biggin Hill. Normal camp facilities were run down or withdrawn and the MT section vacated the last Belfast shed to be replaced hot foot by 615 who also moved into the adjoining control tower for use as its HQ. With our own historic hangar and control tower overlooking our own airfield we were safe for the time being; the local café's replacing the closed

NAAFI. That Belfast shed was a truly historic location that had a presence of its own with my Beetle and AC getting serviced amongst the ghosts of doped biplanes and battle scarred Hurricanes. When 'Flintfield House' was vacated (it had been used as Station HQ) the staff cadets from 615 moved in to use it as weekend quarters. This historic building was older than the Airfield and had been in use since 1917 both as a mess and HQ. I was interested to find the fittings for the wartime 'Davey fire escape system' still attached to the upstairs floors near the windows but years later the whole building would be demolished before someone thought of listing it. A strange situation ensued, as our keys were no longer drawn from the guardroom in the mornings (it was closed) with the deserted camp taking on the mantle of an empty film set. The Spitfire had left its parking place (fittingly it went to France where so many of its counterparts had fought and fell) and with it went Kenley's proud symbol of a time it fought for Europe to be free again.

By this time I had being drawn into powered flight and acquired a VW engined Turbulent (G-ATKR), which was stabled at Redhill. This intrusion into the domain of the famous Tiger Club did nothing to keep me attached to bashing the Kenley circuit, with the odd visit in the Turb not going down very well. Inevitably and after nearly 4,000 launches I slowly drifted out of ATC gliding into a unique world of: - Formation flying, air displays, aerobatics, air racing, breakfast patrols, and general aeronautical high jinks that I never knew existed, but was quite normal at Redhill.

Having finally severed my connections with the ATC after 15 years of great fun and adventure I used to see Kenley from a different viewpoint when passing en-route to

numerous Tiger Club events or 'saying hello' to the parents down in the valley. I therefore did not need to be asked twice when a local motor car group asked the Club to provide some aerial entertainment for a charity motor show they had organised at my old stamping ground. This would be the first 'show' since pre-war Empire Air Days were held there and as organiser and participant it would be like coming home. If that was not enough, a couple of years later another 'benevolent' event was planned on a much larger scale; the club being invited to attend with the team, plus I also brought along a 1932 Comper Swift to display (G-ABTC). Having arrived in the normal manner (normal for the Swift that was) I sat her down on the grass alongside the runway and before the 'Pobjoy' engine had stopped was the centre of attention from the many Air Cadets keen to assist with its parking. Relieved that no one had said hello to the 7-foot prop, a rather oily pilot jumped out to be greeted by his smiling former CO from 450Sdn (it was great to be back home)

The army had temporary use of the old barrack blocks and in the long term the Officers' mess would be used as a 'Radio laboratory' for some years and together with the Airmans' institute would be 'listed' and remain when all around were felled; but that sturdy Belfast shed became the defiant bastion of Kenley's flying history, continuing as a proud provider of refuge to the fretwork fighters. A truce now ensued, with parts of the camp scheduled for future housing development but the airfield being kept available for gliding in the foreseeable future. This happy state of affairs was shattered on the 23 Oct 1978 when the hangar (and 61 years of history) went up in flames, consuming its contents in a scene reminiscent of the 1940 raid. With its home and all of its equipment

gone 615 may well have been Kenley's last flying attachment to its historic past, however a temporary canvas hangar of WW1 design was eventually erected on site followed by replacement gliders and associated kit.

However fate intervened yet again one winter when a heavy snowfall caused this hangar to collapse onto the new glass aircraft underneath. This was by no means the only such incidence of an old hangar collapsing onto new aircraft so in the end 615 got their even newer fleet under proper protection.

With the Army having no further need for the camp area the west side was prepared for housing development, with more demolition of both old and not so old buildings. The Airmans' mess/institute was spared, but the barrack blocks went, as did all the quarters near Hayes Lane. Steel fences eventually appeared, to contain the new hangar and HQ's of 615 and 450, with the Officers mess standing empty and forlorn behind its new security screen. A civilian Gliding club (Surrey Hills) had risen (phoenix like) on the site of the last Belfast shed and out on the field the 'common' was making a comeback. It had been decided that gliding could stay at Kenley but that the areas outside of the peri-track would be returned to common use and military structures removed. This meant the classic blast pens would go (or be landscaped) together with any pillboxes and gun pits. In fact the pillboxes did go but then in a typical British way the remaining pens were 'scheduled' as important monuments and the majority were saved. The most famous blast bay of all (as featured in the German raiders photographs) had been part demolished but the rear portion with its air raid shelter still stands. New houses sprang up on the old camp but at least they are built in brick, with the new roads proudly

bearing the names of aircraft and pilots from the past. Over near the Officers Mess stands the Portcullis Club and from this original airfield building a dedicated band of enthusiasts operate the local RAFA, and have kept the history of the airfield alive.

Major efforts over the years ensured that parts of the area were preserved and in Aug 2001 a memorial to all who served there 1917-1959 was unveiled in a landscaped former aircraft blast bay near to Hayes Lane. This event prompted a flypast by the BoB Flight and is repeated regularly.

450 SDN ATC still has its HQ on the old camp and 615 VGS carries on the Aircraft connection from its new hangar with glass gliders, using the number of the former (County of Surrey Squadron) that had formed at Kenley in 1937 and flew Hurricanes from there in 1940.

One of the Hurricanes (KW-Z) (L1592), which had fought in France before the Battle, scrambled from Kenley on the 18th Aug and later forced landed at Croydon. It survives today however at the Science Museum South Kensington.

With the MOD still requiring the field for gliding and the Corporation Of London still protecting its land, Kenley can hopefully now look forward to a peaceful retirement that allows visitors to walk around the peri track on its 'Heritage walk' and wonder at the past of this Surrey common that served our country so well for so long.



A typical trussed Belfast Hangar.

We salute its part in our history.
And how it held the line when it
mattered

Kenley's Station Shield
incorporates several aspects of
its history. The Portcullis Gate
symbolizes its link in the chain
of airfields protecting our
country, with the Rose and Lilly
defining the strong connection
between England and France in
two conflicts.

The Motto:

NISI-DOMINUS-PRO-NOBIS

Roughly translates into:-
Except the Lord Be On Our
Side.

The problem was 'everyone'
thought he was on 'their' side, in
hindsight perhaps it could have
been

Nisi Dominus Pro Nobis Opto Radar !

Statement from English
Heritage APL 2000.

RAF Kenley is the most
complete fighter airfield
associated with the Battle of
Britain to have survived in its
original state.

This gives us a modern
Battlefield on a peaceful Surrey
Common in a unique state, and
is a fitting tribute to all those
that made it possible. RAF
Kenley lives on together with
the memory of those
challenging times that it coped
so well.

Peter Channon 2011



The Kenley and Biggin Crests forming the link - and a Belfast Hangar

PETER CHANNONS—COMPER SWIFT AFTER
AN ARGUMENT WITH AN
AIRCRAFT AT FARRANFORE IN
IRELAND DURING AN AIRSHOW
Peter had previously attempted to fly this aircraft to
Australia —1981- following the route of the original
Comper Swift many years hence. My last words to
Peter before he left Dubai were 'don 't land in
Iran if things go wrong'. Well it did go wrong,
and he landed in Iran - he was promptly arrested.



When he next appeared at Cobbys
for some repairs in 1983.
He asked the editor ...! (JB)
Remember what you told me in
Dubai UAE before heading East.

Over the years Peter has been actively engaged in photography and
banner towing which suffered a chaotic set back on 13th July when a
large tree fell on his small hangar, crushing his Rallye aircraft.



Peter's famous Comper Swift.

The Comper Swift was a remarkable sporting aircraft built during the 1930's and well worth a Google search.