On Sunday 18th August 1940 the Luftwaffe launched three major air assaults against targets in Southern England. Kenley was one of those targets and the recollections of those on duty on the airfield, the pilots, and those living in the surrounding area are still vivid.

905328 AC2 Charles Gale was on ambulance duty and was sitting in the ambulance with the driver when they heard aircraft approaching. “Getting down from the vehicle we saw eight aircraft flying low in line abreast coming towards us. We saw the bombs begin to drop and ran quickly away from the ambulance and flung ourselves to the ground, as we did so the ambulance received a direct hit and was blown to pieces.”

“As we got up it seemed as though the whole of the station was on fire. Hangars and buildings were burning and the noise of the barrage that the Kenley defences were putting up was terrific. We did notice that some of the raiding planes had been hit.”

There was a three-ton lorry parked nearby so they got its started and drove round the airfield to seek out casualties. They picked up two wounded and some others who were in a state of shock from the blast and set off to find medical attention.

“We drove them to Sick Quarters but when we got there we found that the building had been bombed and was on fire. The Duty Medical Officer, Flt Lt Cromie of 615 Sqn. had been killed by a bomb whilst standing in the doorway of the Sick Quarters shelter. Since no other medical assistance was available at that time I told the driver to make for the nearest hospital.” After returning from Caterham they helped in clearing up the mess. “Firemen were fighting the fires and efforts were being made to salvage as many items as possible. Troops were busy filling in the craters in the runways and telephone lines were being repaired. In a very short time Kenley was again fully operational.”

“I shall never forget Sunday 18th August 1940, particularly as I was fortunate to be subsequently awarded a Mention in Despatches.”

Jim Crofts who is commentating for us today had been on duty in the Operations Block overnight and was coming off watch at 7.30am. “It was a lovely sunny morning without a cloud in the sky, as I made my way to the cookhouse for breakfast. I took things easy during the morning and around mid-day walked over to the sick quarters building for a dental appointment. This building was quite near to my billet, which had been one of the houses occupied by married families prior to the outbreak of war. Whilst sitting in the waiting room, the message came over the Tannoy system, ‘Attack Alarm, Attack Alarm – all personnel not servicing aircraft take cover’. This message came from the Operations Room and was only issued when enemy aircraft were in close proximity and was, in fact an order. I went to my billet, collected my tin hat and gas mask, and joined my
colleagues from the other billets outside the slit trench shelter immediately behind the houses. As we had done many times over the last weeks, we were having a chat and a smoke when suddenly, over the houses came three Dornier aircraft, their machine guns and canons blazing, this prompted a mad scramble for the shelter. For what seemed like a good half-hour, all hell was let loose on the airfield. Our trench was hit at one end and one or two of the occupants were partially buried. However, they were soon extricated with no sign of serious injury. After about 45 minutes when the din of battle had subsided, we emerged warily from our shelter to find a scene of utter devastation. The sick quarters, where I had been prior to the raid, was in flames, six of the seven hangars on the airfield had been destroyed and several bombs had been dropped on the runways. We soon learned that the shelter adjacent to the sick quarters had received a direct hit and that the three doctors on the station had been killed”

“The contingent of Royal Engineers did an unbelievable job clearing up the damage on the runways, the airfield becoming operational just an hour after the attack. Remarkably, during the raid, the Operations Room remained unscathed.

“I’m sure that today, as many of our younger generation pass by the old airfield, they may not be totally aware of the contributions that were made by all personnel who served there during the ‘Battle of Britain’. Kenley played a major part in the winning of this historic conflict and paved the way for the successful outcome of World War Two.”

From: Wing Commander J.G. Sanders DFC 615 Sqn. He had left his Red Setter (Rusty) guarding his room in the Officers Mess while the bombs were “raining down”. Having been scrambled he was “up above and taking on the Luftwaffe in earnest. Yes, bombs were descending from the sky and a string of these passed surprisingly close to my starboard wing. This was witnessed by my ever attentive No 2 F/O D. Home, who like me also survives; obviously these items were coming down from aloft and the birds dropping them were not swifts but Huns. I climbed vertically and there they were; I could now see them and was well placed to direct my eight machine guns at the nearest one leading and then the next one and then I rolled over and simply fell out of the sky.”

“Whilst inverted I spotted a parachute next to me and assumed I had scored with effect. I then chased a Dornier 17 hoping to catch up with it but a JU88 banked steeply in front of me, I gave it a full deflection shot and obviously killed the pilot as it flew into the ground and blew up. I was now out of ammunition and so flew back to Kenley and was the first to land after the attack. There were fires and destruction everywhere. I had expected the aerodrome to be the next one on the bombing list and had parked my car in a safe place behind the blast pen. It was thus perhaps the only serviceable private car left on the station. My colleagues, the auxiliaries, had parked their cars in a hangar that was completely gutted. Despite the horrendous ordeal and havoc sustained at Kenley, it remained fully operational and at 1530 and 1730 that day, as my log book records, I was again in the air thanks to those magnificent ground crews who should be honoured beyond praise”
“Our groundcrews and station personnel had undergone a terrifying experience and our squadron had lost on the ground our young and cheerful auxiliary doctor Flt. Lt Cromie and many of those lovely WAAF ladies who were so helpful and brave.”

“A sad and momentous day for Kenley and it is time that a suitable memorial is erected to honour and remember its pivotal part in the great Battle and those who died there to preserve the world’s freedom from tyranny.”

Peter Skegg was 15 and lived at 91, Valley Road with his parents and sister. His father was a Post Warden in the ARP and home was also Wardens’ Post No 48, Peter acted as messenger boy. As people went to their shelters Peter stayed in the road with his father. “We suddenly heard machine gun fire and the noise of aircraft flying very low and 3 Dornier 17’s came across the trees having come very low across the aerodrome after bombing the airfield and strafing the gun positions there. Dipping down into the valley they flew off over Riddlesdown exchanging fire with two 111 Sqn. Hurricanes pursuing them”. (111 Sqn. was based at Croydon). “And then the deeper drone of a large number of bombers flying at about 12,000 feet in box formation, we realised that Kenley was about to suffer its first major raid.”

“It was obvious that a number of bombs had fallen very close but I think the thing that I remember most of all was the piercing whistle as bombs came down. We discovered later that there were noise devices fitted to the fins of the bombs; a simple paper tube with a hole cut in it that created a shriek as the bombs fell. Most of the bombs were fairly small up to 250lbs and some didn’t explode. The rest of the day was spent helping the rescue and repair services. Later in the day when checking damage in Valley Road I have a vivid recollection of a hole, at the bottom this an unexploded bomb had been exposed and on it sat a soldier having a cup of tea!” This was outside the house called ‘Kirby’, just around the bend from ‘Denefield’ at the station end of the road.

Peter’s sister Maureen was about eight at the time and she remembers the terrific bangs from the Bofors and Machine guns from the airfield defence and the sound of low flying aircraft particularly. She recounts her time in the Anderson Shelter, wondering whether they would be trapped and have to dig their way out through the escape panel with the shovel that was to hand. After the attack Maureen recalls “looking out of the window with her mother and seeing quite a few people walking down the road to the station with suitcases.” Vacated houses were later requisitioned for use by troops. This impressionable little girl thought it was quite the norm for everyone to be dressed in uniform as her mother was an ARP Warden and later joined the WVS. As she went to bed an ARP Warden would be starting his shift by the telephone later to be relieved by the next warden who would tap on the window to be let in.

An interesting passage in Alfred Price’s book ‘The Hardest Day’ tells the story of Kathleen Rhodes and her fiancé, they had been to view a house locally. As they ran for shelter they were hit by gunfire probably from those pursuing Hurricanes.
She was hit in the arm and was hospitalised for the year following. Her arm was saved from amputation, which, as a nurse she had feared most. Her fiancé was unconscious and bleeding profusely from the back injury from which he eventually recovered. The remains of the Anderson shelter is shown in the picture of one of the two damaged bungalows, they were lucky to survive this damage as well! As they were taken to the ambulance Kathleen saw that their planned marital home was now just a heap of rubble.

Leading Aircraftsman Victor Milner having been marched to work in the 615 Squadron hangar was completing the rectification of a Hurricane using serviceable parts from an unserviceable aircraft. This ‘Christmas tree’ job had taken a week and as it was lunchtime the engineering officer decided to delay ground runs until the fitters had had their lunch. Whilst at lunch the Air Raid warning was tannoyed, after the all clear Victor goes on: “At the domestic site, looking towards the airfield, we viewed a rising pall of smoke and flames. Making our individual ways to the remains of the hangars, the confronting view of 615’s Maintenance area was only the external walls. The wooden lattice roof was no more. The remains of the Hurricane we’d so industriously spent time refurbishing to flying condition, hung in trestles, striking a pathetic picture, never to be airborne again. The adjoining hangar, which suffered the same fate as the other eight, had been unofficially used as the Station garage for privately owned vehicles. Fortune smiled on me that day, loaning my Triumph motor cycle to a long standing friend, Les Herbert, now an Old Coulsdon resident, had saved it from the fate suffered by other cars, bikes, etc. To Les, who I often see to this day, thankyou for going home to lunch some 60 years ago.”

Victor concludes that damage could have been much worse had the bombers been higher, but relates the sadness of losing two of his fitter mates as well as the Squadron Doctor and finally: “Today, Kenley returns to a quieter place – just the swish of 615 Gliding Squadron flying above.”

The 18th August 1940 was a pivotal day in the history of the Second World War. The planned invasion of the British Isles was dependent on air superiority but the Luftwaffe had seriously underestimated the RAF’s ability to defend. Overall statistics show that 69 Luftwaffe aircraft were destroyed with a further 27 damaged. 94 German aircrew died in the action and 25 were wounded, 40 became Prisoner’s of War. On the British side 31 aircraft were destroyed plus a further 8 that were on the ground. 11 RAF Pilots died, but deaths on the ground amounted to 51 military personnel and 13 civilians. These statistics tend to vary from source to source but the day’s action caused the enemy to rethink his tactics, certainly he was seen off with a bloody nose and wasn’t seen at all the next day. And on the day following that, the 20th August 1940, those immortal words “Never in the field of human combat was so much owed by so many to so few”

Photo’s: (1) Bomb damage in Valley Road. (2) Burnt Out Spitfire (3)Hangar – destroyed cars.