

Donald Kennedy, Interviewed: ?

Q: Would you like to tell me what you were doing just before the war broke out in 1939?

DK: At the beginning of the war ... 1937 I was married, newly married, and I'd moved to my home in Rochester. And I took up a new employment with Pobjoy Air Motors and Aircraft Limited. They were a subsidiary company of Short Brothers. I previously had been working in public works, contract work. But decided on getting married that I would go into factory work so that I wouldn't be travelling the country. I thought that would have been much better for my wife, rather than me going about and being missing for days on end.

Q: Yes!

DK: And that sort of thing. It was a bit strange to begin with, going into the aircraft industry and being tied down to a bench, as an engineer. And the money was very small. Three pounds four shillings a week. And that is about one shilling and five pence an hour, which is a ridiculous sum to talk about these days. But there was the fifty shilling tailors, Burton's, down the road, in Rochester. And we managed to exist, get all the necessary things to keep ourselves well. And anyway, that was the beginning of my aircraft introduction. Which I found quite interesting, after a few months. They had what they called a 'Marker-off'. He was a man who did all the drawing of the components on metal. Because to purchase drilling fixtures and those sort of things were very, very expensive, and in the aircraft industry they didn't work on mass production as we know it today. One or two models they'd come out with, the cost of the equipment was very high. So this Marker-off, he would on castings, where they had to be machined, he would mark out the levels of machine phases. And the drilling of holes and all that sort of thing would be done ... Instead of drawing on paper, like a draughtsman, he would draw on the machines. The machine faces. And they would work from the markings he would give on the components. They worked to very accurate limits. They had height gauges that could be adjusted to a thousandth part of an inch, and all that sort of thing. And the tables would be big cast-iron slabs which would be flat and level to within a thousandth part of an inch, so those dimensions and accuracy were possible. Anyway, I was introduced to this because the Marker-off was one day found to have gone off somewhere else. And they had no one to --

Q: So it was you!

DK: -- do the job.

Q: You were going to do it, yeah.

DK: So they took me off making these tools and things that I was doing, and I

became the Marker-off! It was very interesting because this company was ... introduced itself to producing Spitfire wings, rudders, elevators and the Hurricane also was being produced by us. And we were the sole producers at the beginning of the war for these parts.

Q: Right.

DK: And where I lived, in Rochester, was at the top of what they called City Way. That was just off the ... it was a hill that ran right the way down into Rochester and on the other side there was another road that went right down into Chatham. Chatham and [Gillingham]. Well, Chatham and [Gillingham], of course, are military towns and there was lots of activity there with bands and all that sort of thing. When I started in the company, I happened to be talking to a young man, about what Rochester was like, because I had just come there from [Sunbury]-on-Thames. And I was finding things a little bit strange. And he told me that he belonged to a band. I said: 'A band? Oh, that's interesting,' I said, 'I used to be in a band!' He said: 'What did you play?' I said: 'Oh, I played a [cornet].' 'Oh!' Anyway, a week afterwards, I was asked to go down to the band room with him, and before I knew where I was --

Q: You were in the band!

DK: -- I was in the band! I was cornet player! That was my introduction. I had a grand time there for awhile. But, anyway, as we were working on the aircraft side of the Spitfire, Hurricane ... When the war came, or rather it came rather suddenly because I was on holiday! And with my mother in Cheshire ... My wife and I and my sister and husband went to a dance that evening. And in the middle of the dance, in the evening, they let out that war was imminent and that those who were on holidays be advised that they should get back home as soon as possible. So we left the dance hall and went home to my mother and got our little daughter that we had by this time, and ... In going back home, we were going by car. But the introduction of the car to go back home was very difficult because they decided that all lighting on cars was to be reduced. The headlamps were to be blacked out with the exception of a one inch diameter hole for the light to come out of.

Q: Yes.

DK: Well, to drive at night!

Q: Yes!

DK: Anyway, we left home for the journey from Cheshire to Rochester, which was about two hundred and thirty miles. We were going to drive all night back to Rochester. This we did, but it was an experience I wouldn't want to have again! There was numerous crashes on the road, naturally, by lorries and all that sort of

thing because all the lighting had been cut off! And just getting that one inch headlamp was not very good at all.

Q: Yes, yes.

DK: But we made it. The next thing I had at home was Anderson shelter. They supplied us with an Anderson shelter. Well, I had a bungalow up there, a beautiful bungalow, and I had to off with the jacket, and down with the spade!

Q: *Start digging!*

DK: That's right! We dug a big hole and got the shelter in and all that sort of thing. Well, by this time, we ... The factory was going as hard as they could and the war had started. The old plane had flown over and Neville Chamberlain had announced to all. Everybody thought the bombers were coming. But anyway, it was reasonably quiet for some time. Some months. Our introduction into the war. But then the sneak bombers started coming over. And we seemed to be in line with the bombing runs.

Q: *Up to London, yes.*

DK: And we were finding bombs dropping in the gardens. It wasn't very comfortable. There was one case where a milkman ... the air raid went and he left his milk float ... Took the horse off lead, off the float. And the German air pilot decided to shoot up his milk float. Made a mess of that! With the sneak bombers coming in, it made things quite different. Everyone began to realise that things weren't going just as they might. And then our factory was a target. And we were bombed several times. We had lookouts, but we were working through the air raids until somebody gave the shout that the bombers were near enough overhead. We'd then make a dive for the shelters outside.

Q: *Oh, yeah.*

DK: Once or twice we found the fire bombs following us in the shelters, things like that. And then it became extremely bad. On one occasion when they hit the factory and most things were sent all over the place. We had to start sorting them out again. At the other end of our factory was the Short Brothers, who were building Sterling Bombers.

Q: *Oh, right!*

DK: And half a dozen of those got peppered like colanders with shrapnel. They had to be partially stripped and re-built. After a few incidents of that kind, it was decided that we would have to move. We were too valuable to leave there to be getting bombed, because the Spitfire wings and rudders, and all this sort of stuff that we were making, was causing an inconvenience, and we would have to

double up our production anyway. Because of fighters being shot down and so forth. The loss was difficult to maintain. But what they did ... One night they came along and decided that the factory would have to go. They'd have to move. We came the next day and the factory was on the move and we were on the move as well! I had to get my wife sort of moved out of the bungalow because one of the bombs had made a bit of a mess.

Q: Right.

DK: And she had been in the shelter, but the delayed bomb was still a few feet from the shelter, so we had a couple of nights in the air raid shelter on concrete floors, and that wasn't nice.

Q: No.

DK: So I got out, took her back to her mother's in [Sunbury]-on-Thames. But when I took her back, I found that they were getting --

Q: Bombed as well.

DK: -- bombings that way as well. So she would be better with her mother anyway, because I didn't know where I was going to finish up. And what they did was they transferred me to Gravesend. And they started building there. They were followed by the Germans to Gravesend, so then I was shipped off to Biggleswade. That was another place ... They took over one of the [Keyser Bondor] Factories. It was a very nice factory. Biggleswade was a very nice, quiet sort of town. We were away from the major sort of bombing and that sort of thing. But the factory had to speed up, and that sort of thing. And life was quite busy and tedious. Certain things that we used to get, we couldn't get, and all that sort of thing. Food was tight, and so forth. But I used to travel at the odd few hours I used to get off, from Biggleswade to [Sunbury]-on-Thames, through London, and what have you, and all that sort of thing. It was always in a bit of a mess, when I was coming back in coaches, and that sort of thing. Some nights you would get it nice and easy, and another time it would be --

Q: Difficult.

DK: -- very hectic coming back.

Q: Going through to London.

DK: But it was difficult, but we managed to keep going.

[Break]

Q: OK, so you'd moved to Biggleswade, the factory.

DK: I moved to Biggleswade. In the factories, we all had to be identified. We had passes. They identified your position and who you were, and insured that no unauthorised person could get in. It was very good. We were working there on all sorts of components for various aircraft, of all types. DeHavilland's were about twenty miles up the road from us.

Q: *Right.*

DK: The Mosquitoes were building their production line for ... The Mosquitoes, we were building component parts --

Q: *Right, for them.*

DK: -- of all kinds for the Mosquito.

Q: *Yes.*

DK: They were a great aircraft. And they were so urgent, the components, they often had the transport standing outside the door, waiting for them --

Q: *Waiting.*

DK: -- to get these parts. But we also started producing, or preparing, power plants for various aircraft. [Former] aircraft.

Q: *Yeah.*

DK: All types of aircraft. And their engines were sent to us to ensure that they were ready for distribution to various other parts of the land, where they were required. And this kept everyone on their toes. They employed about two thousand there then.

Q: *Right.*

DK: But my position had changed considerably since I had started with the aircraft side. And I had gone to the Quality Department and I was now a foreman in the Quality Department.

Q: *Oh, yeah?*

DK: And it meant the control of quite a number of people, to ensure that everything was being maintained and delivered on time.

Q: *Yeah.*

DK: And at the quality required. No breakdowns or anything that were likely to cause trouble. My wife and I had also managed to get accommodation in Biggleswade. The government had supplied us with a pre-fab. But the pre-fabs were not the sort of pre-fabs that you saw latterly. Our pre-fabs were flat, slated, asbestos sheeting with walls, dividing walls, three inches apart and filled with wood chippings and sawdust, and everything to sort of try and make them sound-proof.

Q: *A bit sound-proof, yeah.*

DK: But the roof, that was just aluminium runners with flat asbestos sheets acting as the roof. Of course, in wintertime, you would have the icicles hanging from the top, and if the wind blew, you would have your ceiling going up and down! And believe me, the conditions were anything but good.

Q: *Yeah.*

DK: It's a wonder we all didn't die!

Q: *Yeah! Hypothermia!*

DK: Yes. And it was really terrible. But we made it. I had another daughter by that time.

Q: *Right.*

DK: She was born in Hampton. Near Hampton Court. My wife was in a nursing home and they were in a bombing raid. The roof was nearly knocked off the nursing home. And she had to deliver her daughter herself. She suffered rather badly with nerves and so forth, for years after this.

Q: *I'm not surprised.*

DK: And it was all very difficult. But we got through. We were happy.

Q: *In the factory, were there many women working?*

DK: In the factory, there was fifty percent women, yes. They were all very good and well-trained. Became quite accomplished workers. And I had about twenty of them that worked for me. And they were all very good and competent. My wages about that time would be about ... I was on the staff and I got five pound a week.

Q: *Five pound a week.*

DK: That was quite an increase --

Q: *Yeah, a lot, yeah.*

DK: -- from three pound forty.

Q: *Were you in a trade union? Was there a trade union there?*

DK: I belonged to the Aircraft Inspectors Association.

Q: *Oh.*

DK: And I acted as their representative in the factory.

Q: *Did you? Oh.*

DK: I was also on a small group who were enquiring about time-keeping, lateness, all types of labour within the factory. And then to bring them to book if they were losing time. And to make sure that the company didn't lose any time on production, and so forth. People were very good. There was very few cases that we had to reprimand. Another thing that I had joined a year or so earlier, was the Home Guard.

Q: *Oh, yeah.*

DK: And our factory had a section of Home Guard, and that made life very difficult sometimes, because we did do a rota of patrols and all that sort of thing. 'Dad's Army' might have been reasonably true at the beginning, but not latterly because once you received the training and so forth, you became really military-minded.

Q: *Oh, right.*

DK: You got the guns, you practiced the guns. You weren't getting the shotguns you had at the beginning! You got [Staine] guns, machineguns ...

Q: *So it was much more organised as --*

DK: You were. We were organised to a point where we would put up a good show if it was called on!

Q: *Yes.*

DK: But we used to do patrols on the railway and all that sort of thing. Factories. Walk the town at night. But doing that and --

Q: *And your job.*

DK: -- and your normal job, sometimes became a bit hard. You had manoeuvres at the weekend. Training, and military moves and all that sort of thing at the weekend. Mock battles and just to make sure that everyone was up to standard.

Q: *Yeah.*

DK: But it was hard. That was with the group I was in. The Bedfordshire Regiment.

Q: *Right.*

DK: But I found it enlightening. I enjoyed it.

Q: *Was there a canteen in the factory that you could eat in?*

DK: It had a canteen in the factory. The canteen ... They had quite a nice canteen. And they could provide meals for nearly everyone.

Q: *Right.*

DK: But of course, the meals were treated with the same conditions as everyone else outside.

Q: *Yeah.*

DK: The food was limited but it was sufficient to keep one hale and hearty. That was the main thing.

Q: *Yes. And did you ever, in either Chatham or Rochester ...*

DK: Did I?

Q: *Were there such things as British Restaurants in any of these towns? Did you ever go to a British Restaurant?*

DK: British Restaurants?

Q: *Or a Civic Restaurant, they were sometimes known as. Did you ever?*

DK: No, I never went to those.

Q: *No, no, no. What did you do after work? I mean, you had Home Guard ...*

DK: Well, my work was --

Q: *Or did you ...*

DK: I was nearly twenty-four hours a day.

Q: Yes, yes.

DK: I got home quite late at night. We had gardening.

Q: *Yeah.*

DK: And I did gardening. Though my wife was the specialist! There was one case where I was going to do some digging for her, and she said: 'You mustn't dig that part! Those are ...' I forget what they were now. Carrots or something or other, you know. And anyway, I said: 'Oh, that'll be fine. I'll see that everything's all right.' Anyway, she comes out half an hour later and she sees all these white bits and: 'What are those white bits?' I had dug all the --

Q: *You'd dug them up!*

DK: Ad chopped them up! In my ignorance to get everything put in!

Q: *Oh, no! What was the name of the factory, again? The original plant. I know you said it was part of Short's, but what was it called?*

DK: Pobjoy Air Motors.

Q: Yes, *how do you spell that?*

DK: P-O-B-J-O-Y.

Q: *P-O-B-J-O-Y Motors.*

DK: Air Motors.

Q: *Air Motors. So that's what the firm was, to start with.*

DK: That was the name of the company. Pobjoy was the designer of a small radial, seven-cylinder engine.

Q: *Right.*

DK: Which was the lightest aero-engine in the world at that time.

Q: *Right. I see.*

DK: And he designed that.

Q: *Oh, right.*

DK: It was a light aero-engine that in the later versions, was installed in the Sterling --

Q: *Bombers.*

DK: -- model aircraft for test purposes.

Q: *Right, right.*

DK: And it was banked to fourteen. Instead of seven, they double banked it. And made it a fourteen-cylinder engine.

Q: *Right, right, right. And so that was supplying parts to the Short Brothers? To Short's?*

DK: Short Brothers --

Q: *Which, of course, was in Belfast, the major plant.*

DK: We had merged --

Q: *With Short Brothers, right.*

DK: -- who were building Sunderlands --

Q: *The big ones.*

DK: -- and fire-flying boats at the time.

Q: *Yeah, yeah.*

DK: And we were making the parts for -- on sub-contract work -- for Short Brothers.

Q: *Yeah. Got you.*

DK: We did all kinds of work. For instance, the [Beach Head Jassy], they have big castings and shoes coming off into the flying boats so that they could beach it, bring it on to the ground. Well, I did a lot of that stuff.

Q: *Oh, right.*

DK: I marked that off so that they could machine that to get all the struts and all that sort of stuff.

Q: *Right.*

DK: I did a lot of lay-out on Spitfire and rudders and laid it inter-changeability gauges ... And that type of work.

Q: *Right.*

DK: Which was all very necessary to the build-up of the final product.

Q: *Yes.*

[Break]

DK: What was the last?

Q: *You talked about how people helped each other in the war.*

DK: Yes. In the factories, it was a very co-operative way of ... that people had adopted. They knew that if they didn't co-operate that things would be extremely difficult. But having been through the bombings and upsets and so forth, they joined together as one. They knew that there was an enemy and that enemy had to be defeated. I found them all very co-operative and nice people, which was a change from today. Present-day circumstances. It's become more of a selfish world today than it was at that particular time. The work that we did ... The ladies became most efficient and some were most outstanding, equal to any man that I have met. But they say it was difficult to work with men. It was difficult to work with women, but I didn't find that. I found them very good. The factory that I worked, was towards the end of the war ... was an ex-[Keyser Bondor] factory. And eventually, when the war was almost at an end, there was preparations being made for the re-accommodation of these places.

Q: *Yeah.*

DK: I was sent back from Biggleswade to Rochester as in charge of the quality of the factory there. And to reduce the staff down to last man out, which was a very upsetting and difficult problem. You'd been working with these people and then they were being discarded. You knew that yourself would be much the same. You would have to close up and move away. The factory, it was attempted by Mr Pobjoy to start it up in new business, but at that time, Sir Stafford Cripps wouldn't allow them to use it for new production. And that meant that the factory had to close.

Q: *Right.*

DK: So they closed and left everyone to find their own way home. The war took a new light. The ending of the war, of course, was a great delight. It like as though great clouds were lifted off your shoulders. The freedom of expression that came into people was wonderful. Even though there was wars continuing near Japan and Indonesia and all those places. In Britain itself, you knew that the great Hitler himself was defeated.

Q: *Was gone, yeah.*

DK: And the expressions and the relief was wonderful. It continues with me, anyway, right to this day, knowing that we are safe and well, at the moment.

Q: Yes.

DK: And a great relief for the future. For the children.