

239 Squadron was a mobile squadron and could be moved within half an hour, with support staff and vehicles following in half a day.



Their aircraft Mustang I (with Alison engine)

North American Aviation, Inc. Inglewood, California

Secret No 239 Squadron Operational Order No 4/43 Secret

Group directed that 239 Squadron, consisting of 22 officers, 15 senior NCO's and 158 * other ranks in the main party and travelled by train, together with equipment, should proceed to RAF Station Fairlop.

The advance party moved by road from RAF Gatwick on 20 June 1943 at 0930 hours. The main party moved by road, rail and air, at times specified, and the main party moved by road on 22 June 1943. There were precise instructions on the marking of vehicles, route to be taken **, dress code and rations.

* It is quite unusual for other ranks to be named. 239 Squadron was the only squadron to do this.

**The route taken ensured that the vehicles did not travel along main roads through Ilford and Barkingside, but rather to Gants Hill and along the A12 and avoided the low railway bridge at Fairlop Station.

From 239 Squadron Operational Record Book:

22 July 1943. F/O L.W. Bennett and F/O J.M. Vaughan took off from Fairlop to take photographs of lock gates near Ypres. They crossed the English Channel via Foulness and Ramsgate, to cross the enemy coast at Middlekerk. Nothing further was heard and they did not return.

P/O's Collis and Damsell took off to photograph a lock 8 miles south-east of Courtrai and did not return. A distress call was faintly heard, 30 miles east of Ramsgate, a search was carried out till dusk, nothing seen.

It is not clear what happened to each of the four Mustangs that left Fairlop. Two were claimed by Oberfeldwebel Hans Heitmann of 8/ JG26 15 - 20 km and 25 - 30 km respectively North of Dunkirk . F/O Gerald Collis reported that he was chased and shot by two Focke-Wulf 190's and they were responsible for him coming down in the North Sea. In the same account he reports that Len Bennett, clipped a tree and had to make a

forced landing, then tried to set his machine on fire , but this was prevented by German soldiers.

P/O Walter Anthony Damsell and F/O John Michael Vaughan, both died 22 July 1943, age 20 and are remembered on the Runnymede Memorial.

Len Bennett subsequently met Gerald Collis as Prisoners of War in Stalag Luft 3.

Years ago, David Martin gave a talk on Fairlop and a woman told him her neighbour, Stan Parsons served at Fairlop. He sent David thirty photographs, the day before he was moved to Billericay. Five were of pilots of 239 Squadron at Fairlop, the others, various aircraft in a desert, but Stan did not tell his new address. Years passed. David tried to trace him without success. Even publishing an appeal in the Billericay Echo, did not produce a response.



Clockwise from top left:

Corporal Basil 'Stan' Parson, F/O Martin, Wing Commander Peter Legge, F/O 'Scruffy' Holmes.

Centre pic: F/O Len Bennett

Photo: David Martin

David gave another talk and a woman gave him Stans telephone number In Billericay. After discussion, Stan gave David his photographs and agreed that the desert photographs should be donated to the RAF Museum at Hendon, so David made an appointment.

At Hendon, the twenty desert photographs of Italian, German and RAF aircraft, produced a positive reaction from the section members. David admits that this photograph collection of RAF, Italian and German aircraft, some showing severe crash damage, is outside his field of interest. They are now in the right place, where they are fully appreciated.

The Fairlop photographs include:

Wing Commander Peter Legge -
F/O Martin (no relation to the author) -
F/O 'Scruffy' Holmes -
F/O Len Bennett -
Corporal Basil 'Stan' Stan Parson

I looked after his aircraft
A great chap.
A great guy.
Memories of a great guy.

Words in italics, written by Stan Parsons on the back of individual photographs.

It is uncertain how many sorties F/O Len Bennett flew during the time he was with 239 Squadron, as ORBs are incomplete. His documented duties were photo reconnaissance sorties, although he did tell his children long after the war, that he was involved in strafing trains and ground targets.

In Leeds, Len's son Edward investigated his father after his death. He discovered he trained in USA, travelled by ship via Iceland and Canada, before a long train journey down to Alabama, where he commenced training in Montgomery and Tuscaloosa. He trained on dual control Boeing Stearman, Vought Vultee, then the American Harvard and achieved his wings in May 1942.

Len went to OTU (Operation Training Unit) and posted to 171 Fighter Recce Squadron, then based at RAF Gatwick a fortnight after his 20th birthday. There followed a great deal of training and reconnaissance sorties, especially ground attack missions known as 'Populars'.

Then came the last mission on 22 July 1943, when Len crashed and taken prisoner.

Edward searched official records at National Archives, Kew and RAF sites online. He learned of the posting from the well known RAF Gatwick to not so well known RAF Fairlop.

More research continued, until Edward found the site: www.fairlopplaintimes.com
For more information on Len Bennett's service, visit: <http://arafpilotstory.co.uk>

Edward and David exchanged emails, and it occurred to David that the photograph of F/O Len Bennett in his care, although now part of the history of Fairlop, should be with the family.

On a sultry evening in Manchester, David and his wife Barbara met Edward and his son Matt in **The Knott Bar** 374 Deansgate, M3 4LY where David handed the photograph to Edward, who surprised David by giving him a magnificent ball point pen he had turned from wood.

Lens photograph is now in the right place with his family.

The date of this meeting is an amazing coincidence. Originally, they arranged to meet on Tuesday, but last minute unforeseen circumstances, forced them to meet the day before. On Monday 22 July, David and Edward met on the seventy sixth anniversary of Len Bennett crashing and being taken prisoner!

Maybe there is such a thing as fate.



Top: David Martin and Edward Bennett outside the Knott Bar, in Manchester

Bottom left: F/O Len Bennett

Photo: David Martin

