

## 608 Squadron 1940's

As early as September 1935 the Air Ministry had set out specifications for a new torpedo bomber for Coastal Command. 608 Squadron would be the first, and only, squadron to use the Blackburn Botha operationally. In June 1940 the squadron began conversion from the Anson to the Botha, which they flew between August and November. The aircraft soon proved to be unsatisfactory for use on operations in Coastal Command having had underpowered engines and visibility from the aircraft being too poor for reconnaissance work. Following these failures the Botha was relegated for use in Training Units.

608 Squadron reverted back to the Anson (or 'faithful Annie' as she was affectionately known) for a brief period before re-arming with a mix of both the Bristol Blenheim Mk.I and Mk.IV in February 1941. The Blenheim, however, didn't last long and 608 would re-arm again, this time with the Lockheed Hudson Mk.V in which the squadron's first sorties were flown from July 1941, after a training up period. This aircraft proved to be the most potent of 608's aircraft so far and enabled the squadron to carry out more offensive raids much further afield than previously, such as attacks on enemy convoys, submarines, airfields and leaflet dropping, or 'Nickelling' sorties as they were known by their code name.

By now 608's Commanding Officer changed from Wing Commander G. Shaw, who had been their C.O. since November 1938, to Wing Commander R.S. Darbyshire, from May 1941 until 5 November 1941, when he and his crew were sadly lost in Hudson AM657. Wing Commander P.D.R. Hutchings would become their new Commanding Officer following the loss.

January 1942 saw the squadrons first move from RAF Thornaby to RAF Wick in the far north of Scotland, where they continued with anti-shipping strikes, anti-submarine patrols, and reconnaissance flights. On 16th June, the German cruiser 'Prince Eugen' was attacked. By this time the squadron had also become more cosmopolitan in character with Canadians, Australians, Polish and Americans making up the squadron strength as well as the pre-war Yorkshire auxiliaries still with the unit. On 5th August the squadron were again on the move, this time to RAF Sumburgh in the Shetlands, where they were tasked with attacking targets off the Norwegian coast and protecting convoys on route for Russia. Having spent just three weeks at Sumburgh, the squadron made a number of moves over the next three months. Firstly, south to Gosport in Hampshire until 14th September when they departed for RAF North Coates and, from North Coates to Exeter on 6th November when they finally left the UK for Gibraltar on 11th November 1942.

After their arrival in Gibraltar the squadron aircraft were painted white for their role in the Mediterranean theatre. The squadron took part in 'Operation Torch', the Allied invasion of French North Africa, the squadron were tasked with photographing ports, convoy escorts and attacking German U-Boats and Italian submarines in the Mediterranean. By 10th December 608 had moved to Blida in Algeria which would enable the squadron to escalate their attacks on U-Boats. By March 1943 a new Commanding Officer was in post, Wing Commander C.M.M. Grece who had been appointed in February, they'd also received the Hudson Mk.VI and a number of aircrew from other nationalities. A move again for 608 in August 1943 to Protville, Tunisia where they continued in anti-submarine attacks and escorting convoys in Sicilian waters. Further moves would continue in September, firstly to Augusta, then Borizzo and finally Palermo as the war moved into Italy. In October the squadron received a Hawker Hurricane from No.145 Maintenance Unit for use as a communications aircraft. 608 were on the move yet again in November, first to Montecorvino, followed by Grottagli then on to Gando where they would cover the landings at Anzio. 608 Squadron continued with anti-submarine patrols, convoy escort and Air Sea Rescue duties through until 31 July 1944 when they disbanded at Pomigliano bringing to an end an almost five-year stint in RAF Coastal Command.

608 reformed the following day as part of the Light Night Striking Force (Pathfinder Force) in No.8 Group, Bomber Command at RAF Downham Market in Norfolk operating the de Havilland Mosquito. Their new Commanding Officer would be Wing Commander W.W. Scott. During the final months of the war, 608 Squadron would have two more Commanding Officers, Wing Commander R.C. Alabaster from November 1944 until March 1945 when Wing Commander K. Gray was posted to command the unit. 608 would continue operating the Mosquito carrying out night attacks on Germany within the Pathfinder Force until on 2nd May 1945 when the squadron would drop their last bomb of the war, a 4000lb 'Cookie' on Kiel Harbour. The squadron disbanded at RAF Downham Market on 28th August 1945.

Following the war, 608 would reform as a light bomber squadron from 12 June 1946 in No.64 Group (Reserve) Command at their home base of RAF Thornaby-on-Tees and, although reformed, the first aircraft were yet to be delivered.

Their first post war Commanding Officer was a long standing pre and early war member of 608, Squadron Leader William Appleby-Brown, D.F.C., who was appointed to command from 9th September 1946. By the end of June, the first airmen had arrived and during July and August they were busy getting the hangar and offices the squadron were to use ready. The aircraft the unit were going to operate was to be the de Havilland Mosquito, the first of which arrived on 11th November 1946. They would also receive the Airspeed Oxford, the first of these aircraft arriving in December 1946. A press conference was held on 6th November announcing the date on which the recruiting of auxiliary personnel would begin, 8th November and by 4th December 90 applications for various vacancies had been received.

The new year weather was poor and flying ceased at the beginning of February and the airfield had to be closed down for six weeks or so due to severe snowfalls. The station was ordered to close down to a care and maintenance level during this period in order to conserve fuel, recruiting was also held up owing to the difficulties in travelling. Over the next few months more Officers were gazetted and more were awaiting gazette. On 12th April 1947, full Auxiliary Air Force training commenced, and numbers began to grow, and the squadron held their first weekend camp over 24th, 25th and 26th May with around 60% of personnel attending. Over the next few months more aircraft had been delivered and the squadron held its first Summer camp at Thornaby between 9th and 23rd August with 80% attendance. The squadron had also taken part in a number of defence exercises and exercises with the Royal Observer Corps.

By the end of January 1948, the squadron had a strength of 5 Mosquito NF.30's, 4 Mosquito T.3's and 2 Oxfords. A three-day Easter camp was held between 27th and 29th March, another Mosquito had also been delivered by this time. The first Harvard IIB Trainer, FT457 arrived from 45 M.U. RAF Kinloss on 15 April 1948, this was to be the beginning of the conversion from a Light Bomber to a Fighter Squadron. By the end of April, the squadron had a strength of 10 Mosquitos, 2 Oxfords and 1 Harvard.

The first Spitfire F.22, PK523, was delivered to the squadron from No.6 Maintenance Unit, RAF Brize Norton on 25th May 1948, they would receive their second, PK344, four days later and by the end of the month the squadron had 12 Mosquitos, 2 Oxfords, 1 Harvard and 2 Spitfires on strength. The squadron summer camp of 1948 was held at RAF Manston between 30th July and 14th August which resulted in four pilots converting to the Spitfire and seven to the Harvard. By the end of August, the strength of aircraft was 13 Spitfires, 12 Mosquitos, 3 Oxfords and 2 Harvards. The squadrons Mosquitos, Spitfires and Harvards took part in the Battle of Britain Display which was held on 18 September where a crowd of approximately 20,000 attended.

With 608's pilots now concentrating on converting onto the Spitfire, by the end of 1948 the squadrons Mosquitos had almost all been returned to various Maintenance Units, the last three of their Mosquitos were returned on 21st January 1949 when two went to Maintenance Units and the last was dismantled on the unit at Thornaby. The first weekend camp of 1949 was held on the 12th and 13th February where they would carry out their first night flying exercise on the Saturday. Sadly, the following day P.II Jeffries would be killed on the moors at Comondale after carrying out his first solo in Spitfire PK617, his funeral was attended by 100% aircrew four days later. Easter camp was held on the 16th, 17th and 18th April followed by another weekend camp on 21st and 22nd May. By the end of the month the squadron had a strength of 13 Spitfires, 3 Harvards and 1 Oxford. Summer camp was to be held at RAF Thorney Island, the squadron departed on 24th June returning to Thornaby on 9th July. Another weekend camp

was held on the 10th and 11th September followed a week later, on the 17th by a Battle of Britain fly-past over Whitby by six 608 Squadron Spitfires.

By the end of December, 608's aircraft comprised of 14 Spitfires, 3 Harvards and 1 Oxford along with 10 Officers, 9 Aircrew and 111 Airmen on the squadron. With the 1940's over, the piston engine era for 608 Squadron would soon be coming to an end and the new decade would usher in the jet age for the squadron.