

History of 608 Squadron - 1950's - by Craig Willis

608 Squadron continued with their training on the Spitfire into the early 1950's.

On 12 April 1950, the squadron received their first jet aircraft, a Gloster Meteor T.7. two-seater trainer. By the end of the month, they had received their second Meteor T.7. On the 23rd of April the squadron were visited by the Secretary of State for Air, the Right Honourable Mr. Arthur Henderson, K.C., M.P., who addressed the squadron and thanked them for their escort of six Spitfires. He concluded that he was pleased by his visit and thought that Thornaby was a very happy station.

608 received the first of their Vampires on the 4th of May 1950 and, on the 7th, Squadron Leader F.A. Robinson, D.F.C., visited the squadron in connection with his forthcoming appointment to command 608, which he took up four days later on the 11th. May.

The squadron were now beginning conversion from piston to jet aircraft, and by the end of May another two Vampires had arrived. By the time of their Annual Camp at RAF Horsham St Faith, between the 8th and 22nd July 1950, the squadron had a mix of seven Spitfires, two Meteors, five Vampires, a Harvard and an Oxford.

On the 5th of August the squadron held an 'At Home' for friends and relatives of squadron members. All ground sections were open for inspection and Squadron Leader Robinson led a formation fly-past of Vampires, and Flight Lieutenants Hibbert, Newbould and Morris performed aerobatics in a Spitfire, Meteor and Harvard respectively.

By the end of August, emphasis was placed on instrument flying which gave pilots a chance to accustom themselves on flying Vampires in bad visibility. Between the 4th and 15th September, the squadron were busy practicing for the forthcoming Battle of Britain Display 'At Home' which took place on the 16th. The squadron continued in their usual training role for the rest of the year taking part in Rat and Terrier exercises, Practice Interceptions, Cine, Ground Firing and Instrument Flying. The last exercise of the year involved 2608 (North Riding) L.A.A. Squadron, also based at Thornaby, who deployed their guns and spotters around the airfield where 608 would attack at low level.

During a busy programme on the 14th of January 1951, an engine failure forced Sergeant Stewart to crash land on the runway, which held up flying until the runway was cleared.

On the 15th of January the last of the squadrons Spitfires were flown away for breaking up. On the 1st of February 1951, the squadron held a ball to celebrate its 21st anniversary in the Palais De Danse at Stockton-on-Tees.

For the first time since re-equipping, the squadron Vampires were flown at night with Squadron Leader Robinson, Flight Lieutenant Hibbert and Flight Lieutenant Newbould making a sortie each toward the end of February.

On 22nd March 1951, call up notices were issued to all auxiliary personnel for three-month training which was due to begin on 16 April. An intensive flying programme commenced on the 17th and by the end of the month a number of 608's pilots had converted onto the Vampire.

An operation order of June 1951 informed the squadron that they were to move north to RAF Acklington in Northumberland for 15 days armament training, in accordance with Air Ministry policy regarding training of auxiliary squadrons called up under Reserve and Auxiliary Forces Training Act 1951.

Following a further move to RAF Leuchars during the call up period, the squadron would lose another one of their own, Sergeant Pilot Yarrow, who had failed to return from a flight from RAF Leuchars on 29th June. On 13 November 1951, his body was washed ashore at St. Andrews, Fife. He was conveyed to Thornaby by rail and a full military funeral was held at his hometown of West Hartlepool on the 19th of November 1951.

608 continued with their call up training and would not return to Thornaby until 12th July and were not stood down until 20th July. The squadron took part in the 1951 Battle of Britain 'At Home' display in September. Sadly, during the display, Sergeant Kelley, a visiting pilot from RAF Tern Hill was killed whilst giving an inverted aerobatic demonstration in his Harvard. He was given full honours at his burial in Thornaby cemetery.

On 9th September 1951, another accident occurred when Sergeant Pilot H. Mincher took off in Vampire VT 863 to practice for the Battle of Britain Week 'At Home'

display, when he crashed at Hutton Rudby sadly losing his life.

By the end of the year pilot strength had been a cause for anxiety and steps were being taken to recruit more. No ex National Service men were yet expected, the squadron did however have several in the training pipeline.

During January 1952, 608 were taking part in the Command Exercise along with 607 (County of Durham) Squadron, who were based at Thornaby during the exercise. The squadrons carried out successful interceptions of Washington and Lincoln aircraft. The squadron continued with their normal flying training and a start was made by the squadron on target firing on Meteor Mk.7 aircraft and several successful sorties were carried out.

By the end of March, the squadron consisted of 4 RAF Officers and 52 RAF other ranks, 18 R.Aux.A.F. Officers and 136 R.Aux.A.F. other ranks. In April the squadron began re-equipping with the Vampire Mk.V which would replace their Mk.III's. The change coincided with a change in command for 608 when Squadron Leader G.A. Martin took up post as their new Commanding Officer on 22nd May 1952.

On 29th August the squadron proceeded to their Annual Training Camp at R.N.A.S. Takali, Malta, followed by the ground crews who travelled on the 30th by Hastings aircraft of Transport Command. On Friday 12th the squadron were setting course for the UK when another accident occurred when Flight Lieutenant T.A. Willis, the squadron Auxiliary Adjutant, was killed whilst taking off from El Aouina. The squadron night stopped in the south of France and completed the trip on the Saturday. The ground crews flew direct from Malta to Thornaby, returning on 14th of September. On 20th September the squadron took part in the Battle of Britain Week 'At Home' and despite a low cloud base which restricted aerobatic demonstrations a comprehensive programme was adhered to. On 3rd October a 'pilots party' was held at the nearby Pathfinders pub in Maltby and on the 17th a squadron dance was held in the Drill Hall in aid of the children's Christmas Party Fund. During December normal flying training was carried out including cine gun camera exercises, G.C.A. practice, air/air firing and practice interceptions. By the end of the year, the squadron comprised of 4 Officers and 54 airmen of the RAF and 16 Officers, 3 Airmen Aircrew and 128 airmen of the R.Aux.A.F.

The weather at the beginning of 1953 was bad, which resulted in no flying until the weekend of the 10/11th when the squadron were able to carry out a full weekend's flying training which included air/air cine, air/air banner firing, high altitude navigation and practice interceptions. On 21 February the squadron took part in exercise 'King Pin' where they successfully intercepted a formation of B.29 aircraft on their first sortie. Following the exercise, the squadron moved to RAF Ouston in Northumberland for the weekend to carry out wing formation drill with 607 Squadron on the Sunday morning and Rat and Terrier exercises in the afternoon where 608 made many interceptions on other sector aircraft operating as 'rats'.

At the end of April, the Squadron Commander, Squadron Leader G.A. Martin, remarked that due to the poor state that the Vampire V's were in upon receiving them almost a year earlier, and the fact that civilian contractors were taking six months to complete major inspections, severely impacted the efficiency of the squadron. That said, the weapons training throughout the month produced very promising results and the squadrons averages both for live air/air firing and cine work had improved. On Saturday 4th July, the squadrons aircraft consisted of 10 Vampires, 4 Meteors and 1 Harvard as they proceeded to their Summer Camp at RAF Tangmere. During the camp the squadron took part in a ground support exercise 'Water Scorpion' on the 15th in the Uphaven area where 24 sorties were flown, the squadron returned to Thornaby on 18th July. The squadron stand down following the camp ended on 6th August when normal flying training resumed on that day. The first weekend, 8th and 9th, was devoted to flying training and pre-momentum exercise and the following two weekends and Wednesday 19th August when the squadron was deployed at the Wing base at RAF Ouston. During the exercise the following aircraft were intercepted and destroyed by Vampires of 608 Squadron, 2 F.84's, 2 Meteor VIII's, 1 B.50 and 1 Lincoln.

During September normal flying training was carried out and special training was carried out for the 'At Home' which was to be held on the 19th. 608 contributed to other displays at Linton, Dishforth and Catterick, and at the latter they gave an aerobatic display of follow my leader formations. During late October 605 Squadron visited the squadron for a weekend for that squadrons air/air firing programme and Middleton St George commenced flying training from Thornaby whilst reconstruction work was carried out at their own airfield. A Christmas Party was held for the children of the Squadron Personnel and was voted one of the best so far. A 'very enjoyable' party was held for Officers and guests of the squadron when the ladies were present at a Dining-in-Night

on the 26th. By the end of the year 608 now consisted of 5 Officers and 50 airmen of the RAF and 20 Officers, 5 Airmen Aircrew and 116 airmen of the R.Aux.A.F.

The first weekend of 1954 was devoted to air/air firing on the Hinderwell range and of 35 sorties flown, 31 were effective. During the rest of the month general flying training progressed and concentrated on cine exercises and practice intercepts. By the end of January there were frequent snow showers and bad visibility which reduced flying to within a few miles of the airfield. February would fair no better as only one full day of flying was possible. On 21st February another air accident was to befall the squadron when Pilot Officer Webster was killed after his Vampire crashed near Old Lackenby during a practice stall. He was buried at Brotton Cemetery. Another incident occurred on 28th February when Pilot Officer MacKenzie made a wheels up landing after his starboard undercarriage leg failed. On the 27th of March yet another close call for the squadron occurred when two aircraft, each from 607 and 608, collided head on during a manoeuvre with one landing wheels up, VZ155, and one landing wheels down, VZ838, at Ouston, fortunately both pilots were unhurt.

Technical preparations by ground and air crews had begun in April for the squadrons Annual Training Camp and over the following month over 300 hours flying time had been attained. 10 Vampires and 2 Meteor 7's took off from Thornaby on 12th June for their Annual Training which was to be held at RAF Bruggen in Germany. During the camp the squadron produced a record number of flying hours, well in excess of the target of 400. The squadron aircraft returned to Thornaby on 26th June followed by the Ground Personnel on 26th and 27th via Valetta aircraft of Transport Command. For the whole month of June, the squadron attained over 500 flying hours.

During September 608 carried out close formation, cine and practice flying for that years' 'At Home' display which was to take place on 18th September, the Secretary of State for Air, Lord De L'Isle and Dudley and the A.O.C. Air Vice Marshall W. J. Grisham, C.B., C.B.E., would also attend. By the end of September, the squadron had attained more flying hours than for the whole of 1953, which was a record. 11 days of October were un-fit for flying, the rest of the month was normal practice flying, Rat and Terrier exercises, Q.G.H., night flying, high and low lever battle formation, cine and practice intercepts. By November 608 squadron had gained the distinction of being the first Royal Auxiliary Air Force Squadron to fly 3000 hours that year. During December only 9 days of the month were fit for flying, the squadron had also stood down

for 6 of them, although the squadron were still able to fly 244.15 hours which brought their total to 3300.50 hours flying time which was believed to be the highest figure achieved by an Auxiliary Squadron in peacetime. The children of squadron members received a gift supplied from squadron funds at the Station Christmas Party and on the 26th Officers of the squadron entertained their wives and girlfriends in the Officers Mess.

January 1955 saw the worst weather experienced in twelve months completely ruining the air-to-air firing programme, but air to sea firing was still possible. Only five full days were fit for flying in which the squadron carried out cine (high quarters), high- and low-level battle formation, QGH, x-country, practice intercepts, and a considerable number of bad weather circuits. By the end of the month the squadron had a strength of 4 Officers and 57 regular airmen and 20 Officers, 5 Airman Aircrew and 107 airmen of the R.Aux.A.F.

February fared no better than January with only seven full days of flying and no air firing had been done since mid-December. On the days which were fit, the squadron carried out practice intercepts, x-country, practice pan calls, battle formation, cine, aerobatics and a Northern Sector Exercise, which were quite common. On 16th April a Stag Party was held in the Squadron Club to say farewell to their Commanding Officer after three years, Squadron Leader G.A. Martin, D.F.C., A.F.C. The previous week a presentation was made by Auxiliary N.C.O.'s and airmen to Squadron Leader Martin and his wife in the Squadron Club.

Their new Commanding Officer, Squadron Leader H.D. Costain was in post on 25th April. On the 20th of May 1955 Squadron Leader Costain went on a proving flight to Gibraltar, he arrived back at Thornaby on the 23rd.

Annual Training began on 4th June when the squadron left for Gibraltar. The trip out, Thornaby-Tangmere-Istres-Gibraltar, was held up at Istres due to very bad weather and the squadron aircraft were forced to night stop there and continue to Gibraltar the following day. The camp was described as successful and a total of 464 hours of flying was attained in fourteen days, the squadron returned to Thornaby on the 18th.

608 were based at RAF Ouston for exercise 'Beware' on 24/25th September and 1/2nd October. The low activity in the Northern Sector proved disappointing for the squadron as they had not flown anywhere near the number of sorties they would have

liked to. The 1955 Battle of Britain Week 'At Home' took place on 17th September in which the squadron took part, a crowd of around 110,000 attended the event throughout the day. Normal training continued throughout October, November and December with night flying, practice intercepts, practice forced landings, navigational exercises, instrument flying, cine, QGH, Rat and Terrier and high- and low-level battle formation. On the 13th of November the squadron suffered another incident when Vampire VZ227 flown by Pilot Officer K. Temple suffered brake failure when landing on runway 05, and the front wheel also collapsed after exiting the runway and going into a field beyond the 22 thresholds, but the pilot was uninjured. By the end of December, the squadron had a strength of 4 Officers and 43 regular airmen and 24 Officers, 2 Airmen Aircrew, and 98 R.Aux.A.F. airmen.

In January 1956, flying was disrupted due to severe weather conditions and only four full days of flying was carried out and despite the drawback, 172.05 hours were flown including 9.05 at night. Ground training was caught up on with an emphasis on aircraft recognition. The pilots also paid two visits, one to the G.C.I. Station at Seaton Snook and the other to Dorman Long's blast furnaces when the weather was unfit for flying. Again, in February there was only four full days fit for flying which was devoted to cine, air/air firing, battle formation, QGH, practice intercepts, instrument flying and navigation. Vampire VZ227 was again involved in an accident when on 13th March Flying Officer H. Bates made a 'First-Class' forced landing at Stainsby Hill Farm behind Farley drive, Acklam due to an engine failure. This time the aircraft was written off, but fortunately Pilot Officer H. Bates suffered only minor cuts and bruises.

By April preparations were being made for Summer Camp and cross-country exercises with long range tanks had been carried out by all pilots. The rest of the month consisted of high- and low-level battle formation, night flying, practice intercepts, cine and instrument rating tests. The main theme had been long range navigational exercises in preparation for the Gibraltar run. The Summer Camp commenced on the 19th of May at RAF North Front, Gibraltar with the squadron aircraft setting off on the 18th. Every day except one was fit for full flying and the total hours for May were 462.55, which shows the amount of effort put in by ground and aircrews. The first week of the camp was solely air firing with a total of 16,817 rounds being fired, and the following week consisted of high-level battle formation, QGH and aerobatics. On 22 May exercise 'Gaulois' was carried out with the French Air Force following which four members of the French Air Force visited the squadron. On the 31st of May 608 took part in a fly-past for Her

Majesty the Queen's birthday and they returned to Thornaby on 2nd June. On the 4th of June the squadron carried out a fly-past and escorted the Royal Yacht Britannia down the River Tees when Her Majesty visited the area. Following a two week stand down the squadron commenced with normal training.

On the 7th of July 612 Squadron were attached to Thornaby for their Annual Training but operated as a separate unit. That evening the Officers and airmen of 608 held a cocktail party for 612 squadron in the squadron club and on the 12th, 612 gave a return cocktail party for 608. On the weekend of 22/23 September the squadron deployed to RAF Driffield for exercise 'Stronghold'. During the weekend 'trade' was disappointingly poor and only one interception was made, and the squadron were utilized exclusively on Anti-Rat Operations. On the 15th of September 608 Squadron Vampire and Meteor played an impressive part of the programme in the Battle of Britain Week 'At Home', giving four demonstrations even though the day was not a particularly nice one from a weather point of view. Special editions of the press gave great acclamation to both the flying and static displays. Normal flying training continued and in October only twelve full days were fit for flying, and November and December were much the same from a weather perspective when only twelve full days flying was attained in each, with the fuel rationing not helping either. The squadron did however reach their target of 3,000 hours for the year. At the end of December, the squadron consisted of 3 Officers and 41 regular airmen and 22 Officers, 2 airmen aircrew and 107 Airmen Aircrew of the R.Aux.A.F.

Although there had been rumours circulating that the Royal Auxiliary Air Force was to be disbanded, members of the squadron were still unaware if this were true or not. The following is taken from the 608 Squadron Operations Record Book:

Extract from the 608 Squadron ORB - January 1957

The first weekend of the month was fit for flying and most aircrew members did some flying. On Thursday 10 January Flight Lieutenant Meadley, Flying Officer Joyce, Flying Officer Swainston and Flight Lieutenant Lord each carried out local night flying. Although they did not know it at the time, this was to be the last flying training to be carried out by the squadron before disbandment.

On 10 January 1957 the Squadron Commander was called to a conference of Auxiliary Unit Commanders at Air Ministry where the forthcoming disbandment of most of the Royal Auxiliary Air Force including 608 Squadron was announced. However, as the Prime Minister (Anthony Eden) had resigned the previous evening there was no Air Minister to announce the disbandment in the House of Commons. For this reason, the Squadron Commanders were bound to secrecy until a public announcement could be made, which occurred in the following week and the strong rumour turned into reality. During the month all officers and airmen were interviewed and their choices for the future ascertained. They were joining 3608 F.C.U., the R.A.F.V.R. and R.Aux.A.F.R. and taking discharge in equal numbers, approximately.

The Squadron Commanders final remark for January 1957 was this:

It is with deep regret that at a conference of R.Aux.A.F. Commanding Officers, the Chief of Air Staff announced that the Royal Auxiliary Air Force was to be disbanded. The reaction of the squadron personnel was naturally one of extreme disappointment and may be summed up in the following verse:

"When we could serve by flying, we gave up our lives and flew; but now it appears our country, has nothing for us to do.

No doubt the boffins have got it taped; but we would like to make it clear, if they ever find anything else for us, they will always find us here"

(H.D Costain)

Squadron Leader

Officer Commanding

608 (N.R.) Squadron

Royal Auxiliary Air Force

The 608 Squadron Standard had already been approved prior to disbanding but was unfortunately not ready before disbandment. By 1959 the Squadron Standard, which bore their crest and battle honours, was ready for presentation and former members of 608 Squadron assembled at RAF Middleton St. George for the presentation ceremony by their former Commanding Officer, Air Vice Marshall G.H. Ambler, to Flight Lieutenant R.W.H. Goodrum, D.F.C. The Standard was laid up in York Minster on 14 November 1959 where it can still be seen today.