

608 Squadron - 1930's

608 Squadron were formed at Thornaby on 17th March 1930 as 608 County of York (North Riding) Bomber Squadron. The strength of the unit on formation was one Officer - Flight Lieutenant C.L. Falconer - and eleven airmen, with Squadron Leader William Howard Davies being appointed to command the squadron from 28th April 1930.

The new unit began recruiting from the local area, although some came from much further afield. The first aircraft of the unit, an Avro 504N was allotted on 7th May 1930, but owing to the lack of accommodation was kept at RAF Catterick until the first hangar at Thornaby had been completed on 24th July 1930. The other aircraft used by 608 around this time was the Westland Wapiti Light Bomber and, although no dates are given in the operations record books, they certainly had them by 1931 as evidenced in photographs from that year.

During the summer months service training was restricted to cross-country flights as no pilot had yet received their wings. The squadron commenced it's first annual training camp in 1931, but owing to the size of the unit the camp was held at their home base, and lasted from 9th July to 22nd July 1931. As much flying training as possible was carried out as far as weather conditions permitted. During camp Pilot Officers Shaw, Thompson and Wilson sat for their wings examination and all three passed having attained a high standard.

Occasionally other squadrons would visit 608 at Thornaby. A flight of 4 Bulldogs of No. 19 (Fighter) Squadron for example, arrived to carry out a weeks' affiliation with the squadron on 9th April 1932. Annual camp was to be held between 6th and 20th August at RAF Manston. The Squadron command changed on 20th February 1933 when Squadron Leader W. Howard Davies resigned his commission in the Auxiliary Air Force and Flying Officer J.W.H Thompson was promoted to the rank of Squadron Leader and appointed to command the squadron with effect from the same date. The squadron continued its recruiting and by the time their summer camp at RAF Manston came around in August 1933, the squadron had grown to 12 Auxiliary officers, 89 auxiliary airmen, 2 regular Officers and 41 regular airmen.

By 26th May 1934, the squadron had an establishment of 9 Westland Wapiti's and 3 Avro 504N's, some of which took part in the very first 'Empire Air Day' at Thornaby on 26th May 1934. This was also the month in which 608 were annoying their neighbours in Millbank Lane with revolver and machine gun practice. Annual camp was again held at RAF Manston between 11th and 25th August with 11 Officers and 103 airmen. During September the squadron were helping Flight Lieutenant Shaw in his preparations for the MacRobertson (London to

Melbourne) Air Race from RAF Mildenhall in October. Unfortunately, he was forced out of the race when his British Klemm Eagle's undercarriage was badly damaged at Bushire, Iraq.

During 1935 more affiliation work was carried out, this time with 32 Squadron and their Bristol Bulldogs. From 1st to 7th July the Royal Review was held at RAF Mildenhall where four of 608 Squadron's Wapiti's were to take part. The pilots attending were, the 608 Commanding Officer (since December 1934) Squadron Leader G.H. Ambler, and Officers, Newhouse, Garnett, Watt and Vaux. Annual camp was held at RAF Manston between 10th and 24th August. Bad weather prevented most of 608's aircraft from returning on the 24th and only two 504's and two Wapiti's returned, the rest returned on the 25th.

The 22nd May 1936 saw the appointment of Viscount Swinton C.B.E., M.C., the Secretary of State for Air, as the Honorary Air Commodore of the squadron. Annual camp was held at RAF Tangmere between 16th and 30th August and was attended by 10 auxiliary Officers and 118 auxiliary airmen, 2 Officers and 29 regular airmen and, for the first time the squadron band attended.

1937 brought changes for 608 when the Air Ministry redesignated them from a bomber squadron to a fighter squadron and they were renamed 608 (North Riding) Fighter Squadron. They re-equipped with Hawker Demon Fighter's on 14th January 1937 and, after a period of training, flew as a Fighter Squadron in number 12 (Fighter) Group from 5th May.

On the 15th August the squadron proceeded to Ramsgate Airport to carry out their annual training and on the 20th the squadron were inspected by their honorary AOC, Viscount Swinton, C.B.E., M.C.. On the 29th they returned to Thornaby on conclusion of their training.

On 29th January 1938, Air Commodore Leigh-Mallory, A.O.C. 12 (Fighter) Group visited the squadron at weekend camp at Thornaby and presented them with their new crest, a Falcon's leg with a Jess and bell. Over the next few month A, B and C Flights held regular weekend camps on the station and, although the weather was bad, the squadron took part in Empire Air Day which was held on the 28th May. On 14th August the squadron proceeded to No. 6 Air Training School, RAF Warmwell for 15 days annual training. The unit comprised of, 16 Officers and 134 N.C.O.'s and airmen (Auxiliary), 2 Officers and 40 N.C.O.'s (Regular).

On 21st October, a farewell dance was held for their Commanding Officer, Squadron Leader G.H. Ambler, who left to take up command of 609 (West Riding) Squadron, he was replaced by Squadron Leader G. Shaw.

The Squadron transferred from No. 12 (Fighter) Group to 18 (Reconnaissance) Group of Coastal Command on 20th March 1939 and replaced their Hawker Demons for Avro Ansons.

By the end of March, the strength of the unit was 19 Officers and 185 other ranks. The unit continued to receive applications for enlistment and by the end of April it consisted of 21 Officers and 234 other ranks.

The squadron took part in Empire Air Day on 20 May, and this would turn out to be the very last Empire Air Day. Following the war RAF displays would be known as Battle of Britain Week displays and were held annually on the nearest Saturday to the 15 September. By the 31st July 1939 the squadron consisted of 24 Officers and 278 other ranks. On the 12th August the squadron moved to their final camp before the war, again at No.6 Air Training School, RAF Warmwell for 15 days training. It was at this camp on the 23rd August at 16.00 hours that the squadron received a signal which gave them 1 hours' notice to return to Thornaby. By 19.00 hours the first 10 Ansons were taking off. Call up notices were now being issued at Thornaby and the squadron were embodied into the RAF for full time duties. The camp which was cut short at Warmwell, continued from 24th to 28th at Thornaby, whilst embodiment continued.

Full mobilisation of the squadron followed on 1 September 1939.

608 Squadron began the war operating the Avro Anson on convoy escort and anti-submarine patrols over the North Sea. One of the squadrons first duties was to take colour photographs of the camouflage paint at the I.C.I. plant in and around Billingham, as a result of which it was decided that the camouflage was too bright and needed to be toned down. The squadron's first wartime 'operational' sortie was on 21st September when they were tasked with photographing 'likely targets', although no mention is given as to what these targets actually were.

On 27th October 1939 tragedy struck the squadron when Anson N5204 was misidentified as an enemy aircraft and was shot down near the Humber Lightship by a Hawker Hurricane from RAF Digby. On board the Anson were, Flight Lieutenant Garnett (missing believed killed) Acting Pilot Officer Baird (missing believed killed) and Corporal's Wilson and Smith who were picked up by H.M.S. Ganges. Sadly, Corporal Wilson later died from his injuries. Following this accident instructions were received from Air Ministry that all RAF aircraft roundels were to be repainted and undercarriages were to be left down whilst flying near to shipping so as to make them more identifiable.