

A Very Short History of 208 Squadron

208 Squadron is indebted to the following authors for their works on the Squadron history, from which the following article has been compiled:

Dr D G Styles 'All the Eights - Eight Decades of Naval Eight / 208'

Mr J D R Rawlings 'History of 208 Squadron' Air Pictorial, March 1975.

The Air Historical Branch.



Formation



During the Summer of 1916, the Admiralty agreed to reinforce the RFC, then hard pressed on the Somme, by the loan of one Squadron. Each of the three existing RNAS Wings provided one flight for the new Unit and on 26th October 1916 No 8 Squadron RNAS formed at La Vert Galant. Known as "Naval 8", it was commanded by **Squadron Commander G R Bromet** (later Air Vice Marshal Sir Geoffrey Bromet, KBE, CB, DSO, RAF (Ret'd)) and was equipped initially with a mixture of Sopwith Pups, Nieuport Scouts and Sopwith 1½ Strutters. Offensive operations were started from La Vert Galant on 3rd November 1916 and within less than a week the Squadron was able to claim the first of what was to be eventually an impressive list of enemy kills. For the next 18 months, "Naval 8" operated alongside the RFC under the appalling conditions then pertaining on the Western Front. The Squadron moved from airfield to airfield, was re-equipped several times and suffered severe casualties, but nevertheless managed to maintain a high standard of fighting efficiency and, to judge from contemporary reports, a high state of morale.

"The Mad Major"

On 27th October 1917, Squadron Commander Bromet handed over command of "Naval 8" to his senior commander, **Major Chris Draper**. (The "Mad Major" achieved a measure of fame when in 1954 he flew his light aircraft under London Bridge to show that there was still spirit in the older generation). During the period of his command, on 1st April 1918, the RFC and RNAS amalgamated to form the RAF and "Naval 8" became No 208 Squadron RAF. Shortly after the amalgamation, Major Draper was obliged to make a very difficult decision. The Squadron was then based at La Gorgue behind that part of the front line held by Portuguese troops. In the early hours of 9th April 1918, the Portuguese retreated and began falling back through La Gorgue in a disorganised rabble. Nil visibility in thick fog prevented any form of flying and, as it was clear to Major Draper that La Gorgue was shortly to fall into enemy hands, he ordered the Squadron's entire complement of aircraft to be burned and the personnel to be evacuated. Fortunately, aircraft re-equipment was a little speedier then than now and within two days 208 was back up to full strength and operating behind the new front line from an airfield at Serny. Following the Armistice 208 Squadron remained in Belgium and Germany until moved to Netheravon in September 1919 for disbandment. Fortunately the Squadron did not remain for long in limbo, for 208 was chosen to be one of the numbers allotted to permanent Squadrons of the RAF, and on 1st February 1920 208 Squadron was reformed with RE 8s at Ismailia. Thus began an unbroken period of 51 years' Squadron service in and around the Middle East.



An Uneasy Peace

Re-equipped with **Bristol Fighters** in October 1920, 208 next saw action in Turkey where it supported the Allied Forces in Constantinople against the threat posed by Kemal Ataturk and the loyalist Turkish Army. It was during this campaign that the Squadron developed and perfected some of the photographic and visual reconnaissance techniques that it was to use to such great effect in later years. Naval liaison operations also occupied part of the Squadron's time and amongst the more bizarre but less successful maritime experiments carried out by 208 was the dropping of bombs on a running torpedo. September 1923 saw 208 Squadron back at Ismailia where it was to remain for the next 4½ years training and operating in its primary role of close air support for the Army. A move to Heliopolis took place in February 1928 followed closely by a brief interlude in Palestine where British Forces were attempting to control an outbreak of serious fighting between Jews and Arabs. In 1930, coincident with a change of aircraft to the



Armstrong Whitworth Atlas, the Squadron adopted a **crest and motto** appropriate to its pioneering work in military reconnaissance. The crest consisted of a winged eye looking from an azure sky; the motto being "Vigilant". Mobility was the Squadron's keyword for the next few years and, following the Army in the field, it moved frequently throughout Egypt, the Western Desert and Palestine. In February 1938, His Majesty the King approved the new Squadron badge that, not inappropriately for one of the mainstays of the RAF in Egypt, depicted the Sphinx.



Second World War

The outbreak of war in September 1939 found 208, recently re-equipped with **Lysanders**, at Qasaba 10 miles east of Mersa Matruh. Until Italy entered the war in June 1940, the Squadron had little else more exciting to do than to patrol the Libyan frontier and continue its Army co-operation training. The pace of life changed considerably, however, with the enemy thrust into Egypt and the Squadron suffered many indignities in its outgunned and obsolescent Lysanders whilst endeavouring to carry out its Army co-operation missions. Fortunately, the Squadron's Hurricanes began to arrive in time for Wavell's December 1940 offensive although initially the aircraft were employed solely in the reconnaissance role.



By March 1941, 208 was back at Heliopolis preparing to support Allied Forces in Greece. With a composite force of **Hurricanes** and Lysanders the Squadron, barely recovered from the Desert War, moved to the Larissa Plain at a time when the Allies were being forced into an ignominious and chaotic retreat. Fragmented, and a victim of confused communications, 208 lost all its Hurricanes before retiring to Crete with the remaining Lysanders.

208 re-grouped and re-equipped in Palestine and by May 1941 was operating in the ground attack role from Gaza and Habbaniya against Syrian airfields. Following the suspension of hostilities in Syria on 12th July 1941, the squadron moved once again to the Western Desert in readiness for the second British offensive. From October 1941 to November 1942, 208 were engaged in continuous operations as the tide of the Desert War ebbed and flowed. Frequently the Squadron's long range reconnaissance sorties proved invaluable to the Army commander and General Auchinleck himself paid special tribute to 208s efforts. Reconnaissance missions were, however, particularly vulnerable and the Squadron's successes were bought dearly in terms of casualties.

In November 1942, the Squadron was withdrawn to Aqsu in Iraq for a rest from operations. To the consternation of the pilots, the rest proved over-long and throughout most of 1943 208 did little but train with Army units in Iraq, Syria and Palestine. However, in December 1943 208 re-equipped with **Spitfire PR IXs** in preparation for a move to Italy. The Squadron arrived at Trigno in Southern Italy in March 1944, and immediately began operations in support of No 5 Corps. As the Allied armies advanced through Italy so 208 leapfrogged from airfield to airfield behind them, taking part in the battles of Monte Casino and Rome, and in the assault on the Gothic Line. The Squadron remained at Florence from September 1944 until April 1945 carrying out up to 500 reconnaissance sorties a month. During the last month of the war, the Squadron flew long range sorties from Villafrance up to the Swiss and Austrian borders in pursuit of the retreating German armies.



VE Day brought but a short respite for 208 and by early June 1945 the Squadron was back from Palestine facing the increasing Jewish terrorist activity. The types of operations flown during the next 3 years included armed reconnaissance, oil pipeline patrols, the search for illegal immigrant ships, ground attack and, on 22 April 1948 air to air combat with Egyptian Spitfires – score 4-0 to 208! Later that month the Squadron finally left Palestine for Fayid in the Canal Zone and settled down to a regular peacetime programme of air combat, reconnaissance and weaponry training. This routine was broken between June and August 1950 when a Squadron detachment operated in Eritrea against the Shifta rebels.

The Jet Age



The next highlight in the Squadron's history was the re-equipment with **Meteor IXs** in March 1951. It is of interest to note that in these days it was considered quite satisfactory to convert pilots from single piston-engined aircraft to twin jet aircraft locally and without the benefit of a special conversion course. However, the changeover was uneventful and the pilots were soon grappling with the problems of air-to-air and air-to-ground firing in the new aircraft. Following a move to Abu-Sueir, the Squadron became increasingly involved in reconnaissance operations against Egyptian forces, that were then pursuing a policy of non-cooperation in the Canal Zone. A detachment of the Squadron saw further action in April 1953 operating from Sharjah during the Buraimi Oasis dispute.

It was in October 1953 that the Squadron lost one of its most treasured possessions. Following an exchange of visits with Naval units in Port Said, the Squadron badge, signed by King George VI, was found to be missing. It was finally located firmly bolted to the wardroom bulkhead of HMS Daring. All attempts to recover it failed and it has not been seen since. (Editor's Note: If any reader can offer a clue to the present whereabouts of the Badge, the present OC 208 will be most grateful). On 18 November 1955, at Abu Sueir, the Squadron was **presented with its Standard**. The presentation was made by the Squadron's first Commanding Officer, Air Vice Marshal Sir Geoffrey Bromet.



One of the first RAF Squadrons to be based in Egypt, 208 was also the last to leave the Canal Zone when in January 1956 it moved to Hal Far in Malta. In March 1956, the Squadron was on the move again, this time to Akrotiri to carry out patrol operations against terrorists. In June 1956, a permanent detachment of 4 aircraft was sent to Aden to face local insurgents in the Western Protectorate. The Suez Campaign found 208 back in Malta, at Ta Kali, with the task of intercepting all aircraft approaching the island. In February 1958, 208 re-equipped with Hunter Mk 6s and moved to Nicosia from whence in July 1958, a detachment of 6 aircraft was sent to Amman to assist in stabilising the Jordanian monarchy after the coup d'etat in Iraq.

Africa and the Gulf



On 26th March 1959, by a strange quirk of Defence Policy, 208 disbanded in Cyprus but immediately re-formed at Eastleigh in Kenya with De Havilland Venoms. By March 1960, however, the Squadron had once again re-equipped, this time with **Hunter FGA 9s**. In March 1961, the Squadron was presented with a ceremonial shield and 2 spears (now hanging in the crew room) by the Masai Chief of the Ngong area in appreciation of the display the Squadron had put on at the Ngong Trade Fair. The Kuwait crisis occurred in July 1961 and 208 were rapidly moved, via Bahrain, to Kuwait for dawn to dusk patrols of the Iraqi border. The Squadron was the last RAF unit to leave Kuwait and it returned not to Eastleigh but to Khormaksar which then became its permanent home. For the next 2½ years 208 was involved in close air support and reconnaissance operations throughout the Aden Protectorate whilst maintaining frequent detachments to Bahrain. June 1964 saw the final departure of 208 from Aden to a permanent home in Muharraq. Here it was to remain until 10 September 1971 when, consequent upon the British withdrawal from the Persian Gulf, the Squadron once again disbanded.

208 Becomes a Home-Based Squadron

On 1st July 1974 the Squadron reformed with Hawker Siddeley Buccaneer Mk 2A's at RAF Honington to become the first UK based Buccaneer overland squadron. Another first, was the appearance of navigators on 208 for the first time in the Squadron's history. It was not long before the Squadron was once again in the public eye. Its participation in the "**RED FLAG**" exercise in the USA in 1977, when clearance was given for 100ft flying against realistic targets in the Nevada Desert. This trail-blazing effort has been of great value to the RAF and many more Squadrons have followed in 208s footsteps. Another peaceful phase followed, as 208 settled down to a programme of routine training, trophy winning and the odd detachment to Gibraltar and Decimommanu.



In 1982, 12 Squadron, 208's neighbour at Honington, moved to Lossiemouth to continue in the Maritime Strike Attack role. By 1983, it was decided that 208 Squadron would join 12 and make way for Tornado squadrons at Honington. So in July that year, 208 moved up to Scotland to make its new home in Lossiemouth and to become the other Maritime Strike Attack squadron.

September saw more strife in Lebanon, where civil war in one form or another had raged for many years. Now, **Operation Pulsator** called for the deployment of six Buccaneers to Cyprus, where they would provide support for the British contingent of the International Peacekeeping Force in Lebanon. In true 208 tradition, the Squadron made the headlines, as a newspaper reporter sent back this dispatch under the by line: "... Buccaneers flew the Flag at 50 feet". To the second, the planes, two each time, screamed in from the sea at 500 knots to pass directly over the British base at Hadith before turning on their wing tips to head north for a sweep over the Lebanese capital. "Then, as we waited on the rooftop for the aircraft to complete their steep turns and come back over the hills in contour-hugging formation, the desultory shelling in the hills above the British position was joined by bursts of machine gun fire. After their second run, the planes passed no more than 50 feet above a pylon in front of the British base, then dipped to fly out to sea at minimum altitude. The two did a great deal for the morale of the British troops". At the end of their detachment to old haunts, all the 208 aircraft and their crews returned safely to Lossiemouth in March 1984.



Now, the Squadron could settle down to some peaceable flying for a while, though another event of major note was to take place in 1984, when Air Marshal Sir Humphrey Edwardes Jones presented Wing Commander Ben Laite, then the Squadron's CO, with the **new 208 Standard** to replace that presented by Air Vice Marshal Sir Geoffrey Bromet nearly thirty years before. During 1985, 208 took possession of its new HAS's or Hardened Aircraft Shelters and continued with all sorts of things, including the Sea Eagle missile. It is said that 208 became familiar with every oil rig in the North Sea!

THE SQUADRON'S 75TH YEAR

On a not-so-sunny day in 1991, 208 Squadron was minding its own business on exercise out of St Mawgan with the Navy, when the Western Coalition went to war over Kuwait, part of 208's old stamping ground. Everyone was glued to the television sets and then, on 23rd January, the Squadron was called back to Lossiemouth and ordered to deploy to Muharraq, where it had spent its last days as part of Air Forces Gulf just 20 years earlier. Now, the task was to support Operation Granby, an element of Operation Desert Storm. All this after a press statement had been released



the day before saying: 'I can tell you it is extremely unlikely that the Buccaneers will be sent to the Gulf.' The Royal Air Force moved with a speed of decision and action not witnessed since World War II as 2 '**desert pink**' **Buccaneers** flew out to Muharraq on 26th January, followed by 2 more the next day and 2 more on the 28th. finally, 12 aircraft and 18 crews were located in Bahrain. They flew with such aircraft names as 'Glenfiddich,' 'The Macallan,' 'Glen Elgin,' 'Famous Grouse,' and 'Tamnavoulin.' Sounds familiar? I wonder why?

During February, 107 sorties were flown without a single mechanical mishap. Initially, the Buccaneers provided laser designation for the Tornados, amongst which their targets were bridges, fuel / oil depots, then airfields, hardened aircraft shelters, silos and storage bunkers. Interestingly, the Buccaneer flew higher, faster and further than its counterpart and ultimate successor, the Tornado GR1. The laser designation of targets worked perfectly, and not one sortie was lost. Then 208 came into its own, carrying its own laser guided bombs as well as the laser designator to take out its own targets, including Iraqi aircraft left out in the open. In a press conference before the Buccaneers arrived in the Gulf, it was asked of the Defence Minister, Tom King: 'Why are we sending a 30-year-old aeroplane to a high-tech war?' The answer came back: 'to increase the accuracy of the precision bombing,' which is exactly what it did. But the best quote of all was Wing Commander Bill Cope's: 'I compare the Buccaneer with my Grandmother: old, but formidable.'



As the ceasefire was declared, so activities closed down and the Squadron prepared to head for home. On 17th March, a tanker connection was organised across the return route and all 12 'Buccs' were flown home safely. After a total of 33 years of service, 17 of them with 208 Squadron, the Buccaneer had well and truly proved its worth. To quote the Squadron's own notes: 'Now, with a couple of years left to run, the old lady of Brough will be able to retire content.' And retire she did, but not for another 3 years as the Buccaneer Wing at RAF Lossiemouth was to continue in operation until April 1994, when its squadrons would be replaced with Tornados. There was a period of deep apprehension as the news came out that 208 was unlikely to be converted

to the Tornado; disbandment being the more likely fate of one of the RAF's longest-serving squadrons, with a substantial history, a fine record in battle, and a deep tradition.

ADVANCED FLYING TRAINING - INTO THE NEW MILLENNIUM

The gloom was finally lifted, however, as it was announced that the RAF's fast jet training system was to be revised and the numbers of several distinguished squadrons were to be allocated to Hawk units, which would now be Reserve squadrons, having a full battle role in the event of any major emergency. They would be known as (R) Squadrons, rather than just 'shadow' squadrons, as had been the practice in many operational conversion units previously. Each squadron would have its own aircraft and its own Commanding Officer, carrying on the traditions of the former units. So it was that No 208 Squadron became 208(R) Squadron and was established with Hawk jet trainers at RAF Valley in Anglesey.

Today, 208 continues its traditions and has built up a proud record in its short existence as a Reserve training squadron. All trainee pilots destined for the front line units of both the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force can look back on the Squadron's highly creditable past and know that they will take a part of that spirit and ethos forward with them in their role as the combat pilots of the future.

