

THE FLYING SHUFTIS MOVE ON

To say that November 18, 1955, dawned fine and sunny over Abu Sueir is all but stating the obvious, although being located alongside the Sweetwater Canal the station was not immune from early morning mist. Generally the Egyptian climate was hot enough to draw a sharp contrast between those buildings that were air-conditioned and those that were not.

As the only tactical reconnaissance unit in the Suez Canal Zone, 208 Sqn spent most of its time flying, and cut the bull to a minimum. Granted, the Boss liked to see the aircraft kept clean — and the pilots were the only immediately available labour force for aircraft cleaning — but we did not spend a lot of time on the parade ground.

Just this once we really had to pull the stops out: for, by any measure, a Standard Presentation was special. For a start, the presentation was to be made by Air Marshal Sir Geoffrey Bromet, the founder of "Naval Eight" and a man held in the highest respect by generations of 208 Sqn ground- and aircrew.

The squadron was in Northern France from the outset and very much in the thick of the battle. We were in awe of the man and cheerfully ready to endure the lengthy reminiscences that we knew would follow the port at that evening's dining-in night.

Further tales would, we knew, follow from the squadron's second CO, Flight



On March 31 this year the Standard of 208 Squadron was formally handed over at Lossiemouth to Royal Air Force Valley, where the squadron's number is to be carried by one of the Hawk training units. No 208 has not been in existence entirely without breaks, but it has one of the longest and strongest records of the RAF's operational squadrons. Here HUGH FIELD recounts memories of the days when 208 was first granted its Standard

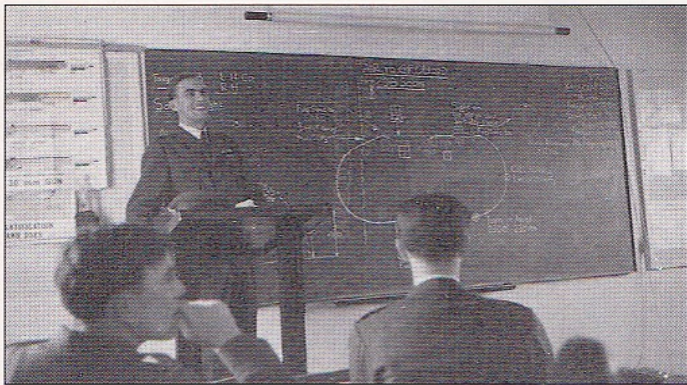
Heading photograph, 208 Sqn Meteor FR.9s inverted in a loop near their Abu Sueir base in 1952. Nearest the camera is VZ606 — see also page 59. Above, the squadron's early "eye" badge was later replaced by the Sphinx.

Commander (later Major) Chris Draper, who was much more notorious at that time for having flown an Auster under Tower Bridge the previous year.

The great day fell into three elements. The parade would best take place fairly early because even tropical kit could become pretty sticky after a few minutes in the sun. The VIPs, however, had to assemble from 205 Group headquarters at Fayid so we could not hit the cool of early dawn. Headquarters, Middle East Air Force (Middle East Air Force to us), was a lodger unit at Abu Sueir — so they, at least, did not hold us up.

Phase two was the flying, which again would have been more comfortable early on but, inevitably, had to follow the parade. The 1950s were the days when every fighter squadron in the Air Force prided itself on being able to put up a decent mass formation (known always as a "Balbo" after the Italian general who led a formation of 25 Savoia S.55 seaplanes across the Atlantic in July 1933). Indeed, squadrons were increasingly generating formation aerobic teams, and an eight-ship going over a loop featured in 208 Sqn's Christmas cards at that time.

Normally the Meteor was quite a civilised formation aircraft despite its neutral stability, but put it into the lumps and bumps of an Egyptian mid-day and you had your work cut out at



Above, chalk and talk — briefing for an air-to-ground shoot during armament practice camp at Nicosia. Each pilot fired 400 rounds but, thanks to the Meteor's notorious snaking, a score of 20 per cent was acceptable.

low level. All very well if you were number two or three tucked closely into the leader's flank, but if you found yourself flying number two in the number two section — tough! I see from my logbook that I contrived to miss this particular excitement because my role on the day was the individual aerobic performance.

None of us missed phase three, the dining-in night. In those days 208 Sqn had a handsome collection of silver which glistened for the occasion. The speeches, I recall, were somewhat lengthy but why not? Sir Geoffrey's was a classic and his concluding words have passed into history. "Whenever you, and those who follow after, salute this Standard," he said, "you and they will recall brave names and great occasions and be resolved by your actions and example always to maintain the old tradition."

Mobile task

No 208 Sqn is traditionally one of the great independent self-contained squadrons of the Middle East (see *The Flying Shuftis*, March 1990 *Aeroplane*) and our flying reflected our mobile task. There was always an army co-operation element — 208 was a Lysander squadron at the start of the Second World War — and this continued in the 1950s. We had a day fighter task, for which the ubiquitous Meteor 8 was ideal, but also were required to carry out low-level photography and close support with artillery batteries. The photography necessitated the camera nose of the Mk 9 variant.

We could practise many of our skills over the Canal Zone, including both air-to-air and air-to-ground gunnery, but we travelled far and wide so as to keep up navigational expertise against the day when we had to deploy in a hurry. From time to time a section of four aircraft would be detached to (the then) Rhodesia which meant an extended trip down the spine of Africa. We travelled the north coast of the continent for

Right, 208 Sqn Meteor PR.9s climb for a formation loop near Abu Sueir in 1952.



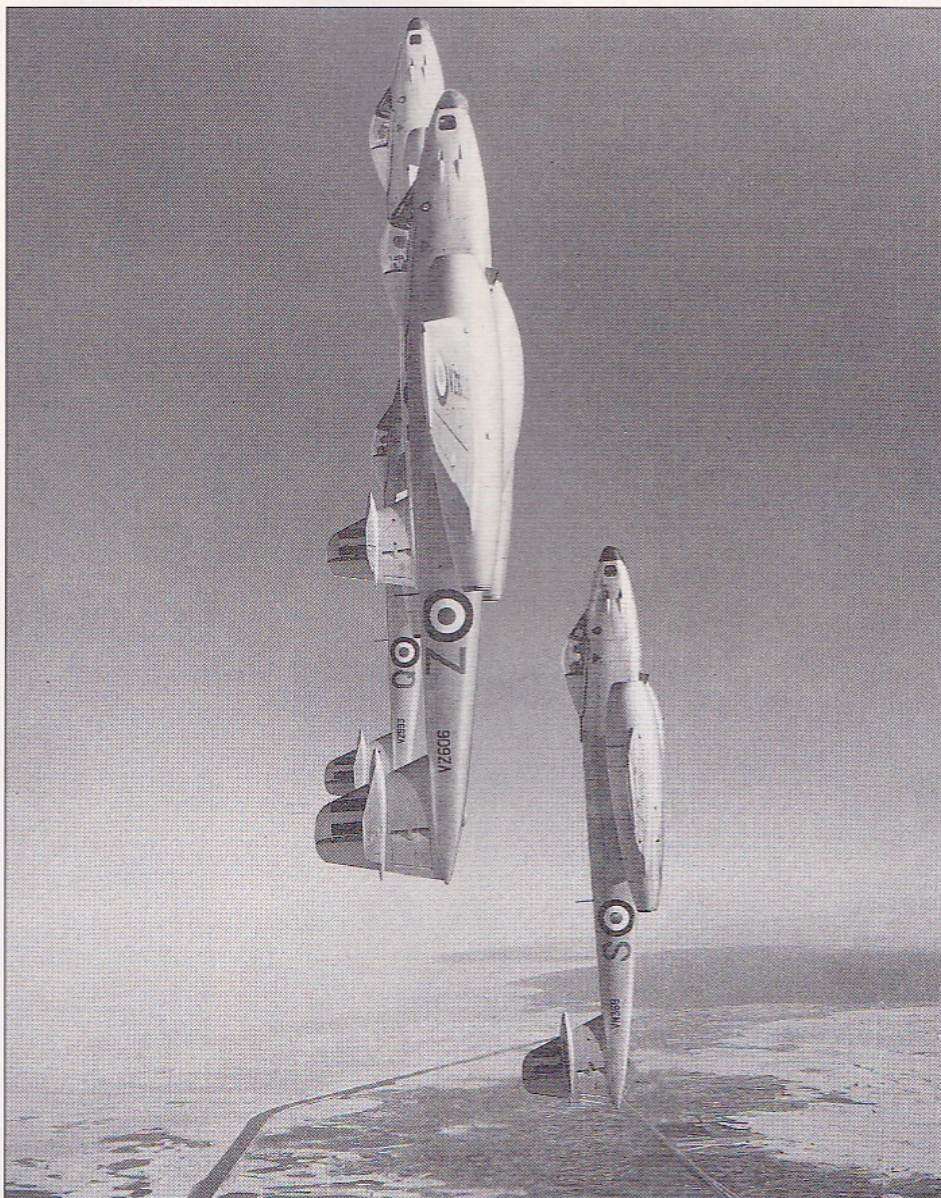
Above, a cheerful occasion for 208 Sqn in Nicosia during December 1954. The target is undamaged but, to judge by the smiles, Harry's Bar in Nicosia could well have been recovering from the night before.

weekends in El Adem (Tobruk), Idris (Tripoli), El Aouina (Tunis) or Malta or went east to Mafraq and along the pipeline to Habbaniya.

We had, of course, no onboard navigation aids — I believe only the Australians ever fitted ADF to day-fighter Meteor versions (when they operated in Korea) — and we relied on a pair of ten-channel VHF sets. These were crystal-tuned so you took good care to select the channels you needed on the long flights. Nor was the standard of ground radio equipment very high — certainly not down the Africa route,

where International Aeradio was in its early days of providing services for the Sudan.

Because of the paucity of ground help and doubtful quality of some airborne radios we flew in pairs over the long distances — unless, that is, it was administratively awkward for someone higher up. Let me explain.



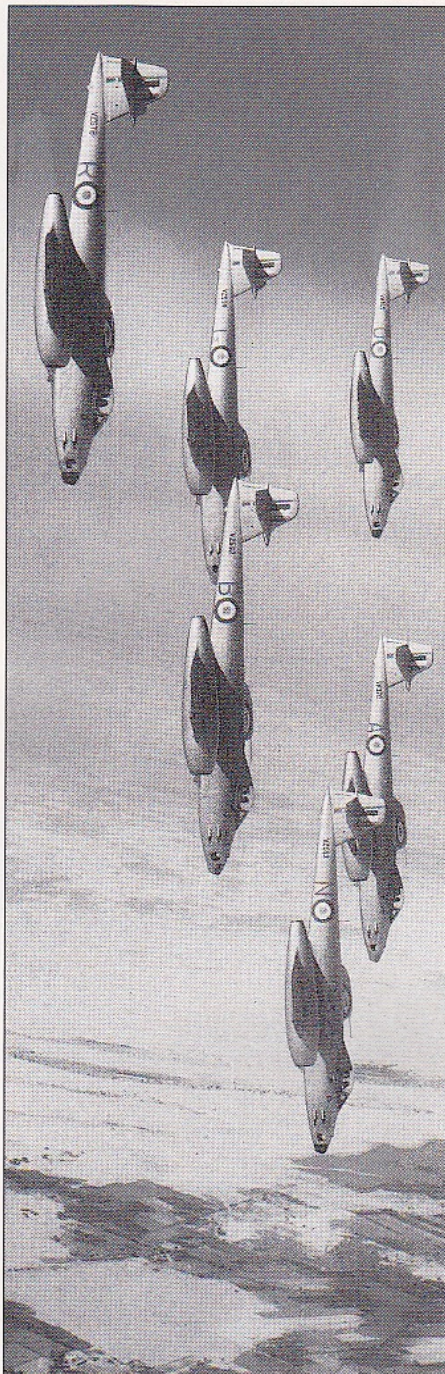
The standard nose-mounted camera was the F.24, a cumbersome piece of kit which could be installed facing to either side or forward. In 1954 Vinten produced the F.95 which was small enough to allow three units to be installed. Now the pilot could shoot in any direction (or even do a "three-way spray") and also had the choice of four or eight frames per second. "My" aircraft, WH556, was modified to accept the F.95s and I was tasked with flying down to Nairobi for operational trials.

Older readers will recall that at that time Kenya was in a turmoil as it struggled for independence. Conventional photographic reconnaissance using vertical cameras was in constant demand and this was provided by the Meteor 10s of 13 Sqn which joined us at Abu Sueir in 1954. Middle East HQ decided that tactical photography might be used in conjunction with mapping, to unearth the remote hides in the forest in which the Mau Mau were thought to live, so south I went in company with a 13 Sqn Mk 10.

I had one corporal airframe fitter and one corporal photographer, and that constituted our detachment. No 13 Sqn was more permanently positioned at Nairobi (Eastleigh) and so had a few more bodies and some Meteor spares.

The slopes of the Aberdare Mountains below the treeline are not featureless; it's just that, viewed from 250ft AGL, they all look the same. I would be briefed by the photo interpreters about the latest exciting targets revealed in the previous day's mapping and would then be given a grid reference in the middle of the forest as my task. It was widely held among the pilots who were operating in Kenya at the time (Harvards and Lincolns doing the bombing in addition to our modest photo effort) that the photo interpreters couldn't tell the difference between a mud hut and a pile of elephant wotsit. Could oblique pho-

Below, the rolling hills of the Aberdares made identification of any particular valleys difficult. **Right**, Meteor FR.9 VZ683 leads this 208 Sqn formation out of a loop in 1952.



tos from the F.95 provide the answer?

I suppose they probably could have done eventually, but the cameras far outstripped the capability of the photo interpreters, whose skills were fully employed on the main task of analysing the vertical shots. I flew 23 sorties over the area and produced more than 12,000 frames.

Once it became apparent that there was no more to be done I set about arranging the return trip and here is where convenience beat the Standing Orders. My partner from 13 Sqn went sick, raising a dilemma — did I stay or did I go it alone? I still have the signal from HQ 205 Group that says, in so many words, "Stuff the rules; get back here". So I did.

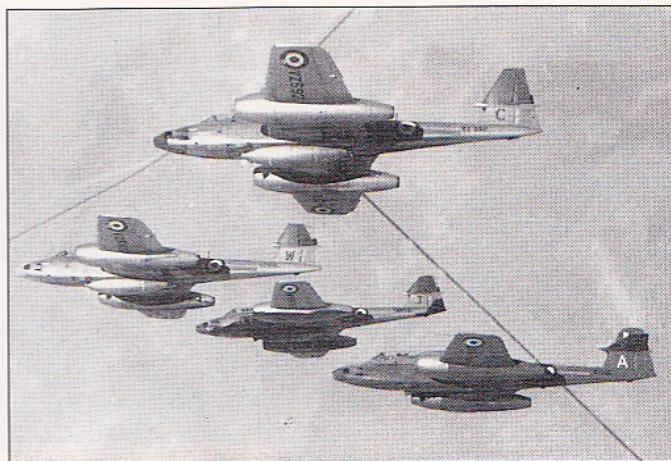
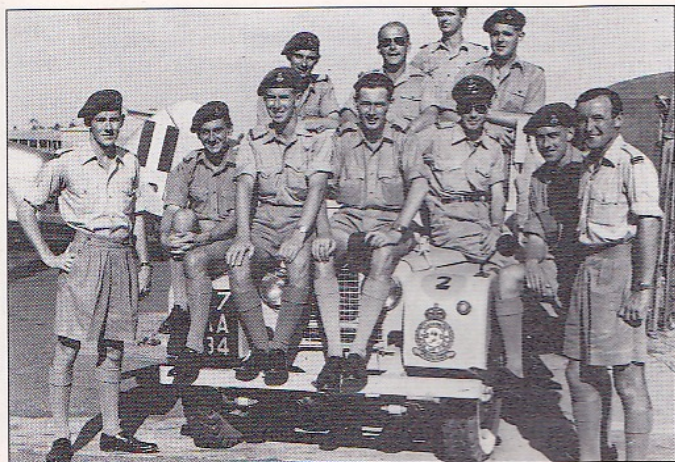
The four sectors took 5hr 35min in the air, over 9hr 5min elapsed time, with refuelling stops at Juba, Khartoum and Wadi Halfa. Somewhere along a journey like that you will cross the Inter-Tropical Front, and it lay across the track of my second leg. Thankfully WH556 behaved as aircraft usually do when you just take them away and fly them — it was fully serviceable and that included the cabin pressurisation. I passed between two Cu-Nims at 41,000ft and they still rose at least another 3,000ft above me.

So life for a squadron pilot was never dull and could be challenging. We flew normal fighter-type battle formation exercises but we also flew our own brand of low-level army co-operation sorties. These often took us over the Sinai Desert, east of the Suez Canal, or south of the main zone among the wadis between the Gulf of Suez and the Nile Valley.

Of course such a variety of flying was almost bound to lead to incidents and you did not have to transgress too severely to find a court martial being

Below, waterfalls were frequent hiding places for Mau Mau gangs when raiding upland farms. Oblique aerial photography could confirm intelligence from verticals, but the area was largely unmapped and navigation was by eyeball and prayer-book.





convened. One of our number — still far too active and respected a member of the flying community to be named — collected the aerial off a tank which earned a mild reproof; when he subsequently collected an AOP Auster by blowing it into the ground HQ MEAF took it very seriously.

The five-man court martial, attended by a legal beagle from the Judge Advocate General's department, heard evidence in the form of fact and opinions from expert witnesses as to the relative turning circles of Austers and Meteors and the relative visibility out of each. The upshot of the deliberations and expense: a severe reprimand!

Much the same happened when one of the Meteors wiped out the BABS box at the end of Shaibah runway except that the entire circus had to travel from the Canal Zone to Shaibah for the court. Cost was clearly no object and justice was thought to be seen to be done.

One of the facts of life with which any Middle East squadron member quickly learned to live was "the clefty wallah". Nothing of any value could ever be left unattended and on view as it would sim-

Above left, most of the 208 Sqn pilots in this 1954-vintage group went on to make their marks in other areas of aviation — at least four with Cathay Pacific Airways. *At the rear, Terry Bollans; middle row, left to right, Geoff Green, Chris Bush, Jack Symons; front row left to right, Mike Day, Brian Weskett, Brian Cross, Bernie Brennan, Frank Seaton, the author and Desmond Penrose.* **Above right**, a formation of four 208 Sqn PR.9s, with VZ592 nearest the camera.

ply disappear. I guess we all lost small personal items but there came an occasion when this skill entered the operational realm.

We did not normally let the early morning mist worry us and would launch off in the knowledge that it would burn off before our return. So there was nothing unusual about a pair take-off from Abu Sueir's 9,000ft runway into the mist. We reckoned to leave the undercarriage down for the initial climb until we were in the clear on top. Imagine No 2's surprise on reaching the sunshine to see the lead aircraft missing a mainwheel. Indeed not just a wheel, but the complete assembly from the knuckle downwards.

It was not difficult to draw a fairly small circle of uncertainty within which the wheel would lie, just off the western end of the runway, but did it? We scoured the dunes; we did things with Landrovers that are commonplace now but were positively pioneering then; but we were too late. The locals were ahead of us and quite a sizeable piece of aeroplane had vanished into thin air.

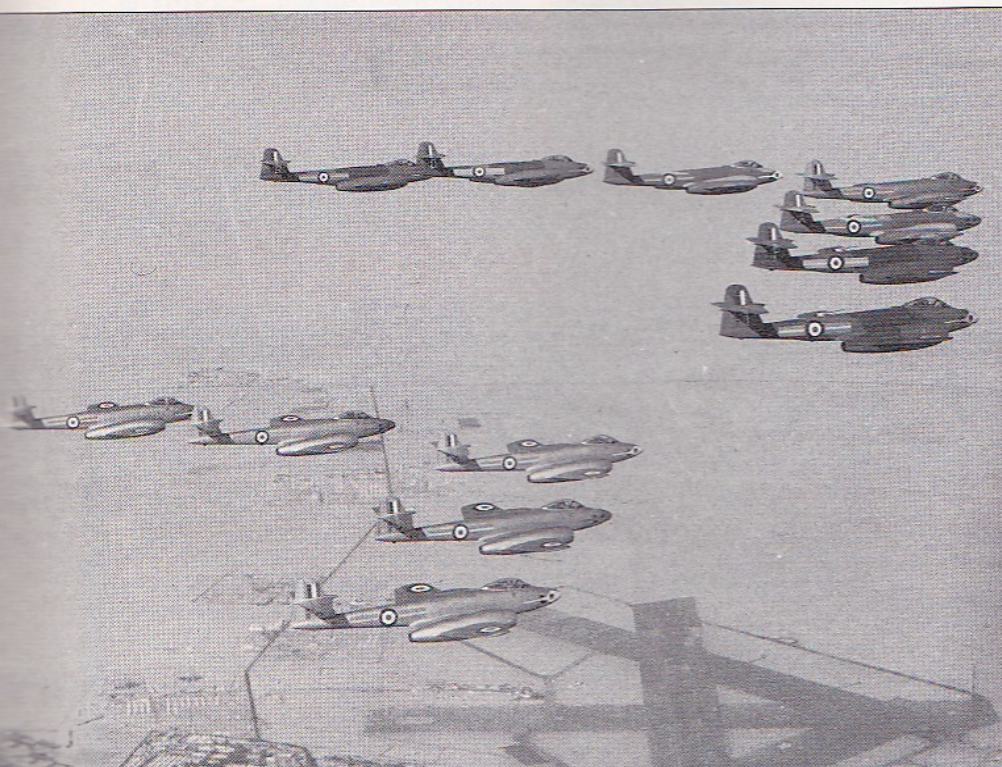
In fact the locals' propensity for acquiring anything movable even extended to our ground gunnery range where the chance of picking up 20mm cannon shell cases tempted the locals right into the danger area. A range safety officer had to work for his living and often the day's gunnery would end prematurely because there were simply too many locals scouring the area.

A waste of time

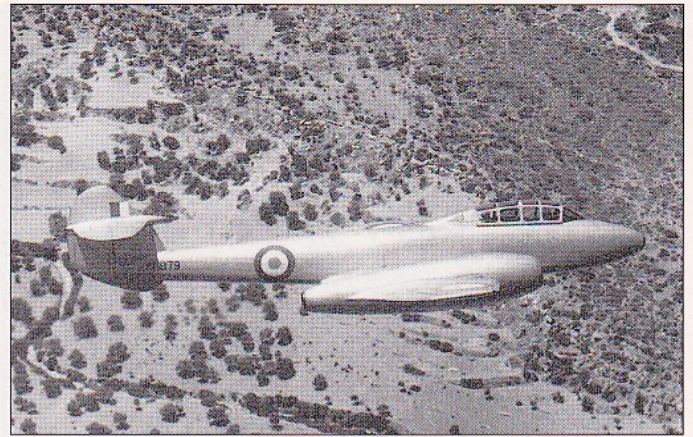
Air-to-ground gunnery in the Meteor was a bit of a waste of time because you were lucky to hit the target at all, never mind scoring anything as exotic as a bull. This was due to the notorious snaking behaviour. You could not do anything about it but let your feet ride the rudder pedals and hope to pass out of a snaking speed band into one where the aircraft would go more or less where it was pointed. These bands were at roughly 30kt intervals which led to some highly artificial techniques on the range.

The firing took place in a steep dive so you were constantly aware of your break-off height. Thus there was little temptation to go too fast down the hill. Using airbrakes to hold the speed in check was futile because that aggravated the snaking so some people tried entering the dive all but stalling, hoping to be down at firing level at a modest (and non-snaking) speed. They did not achieve any great success and it was not exactly a practical battle tactic.

Conventional air-to-air gunnery took place on ranges of the squadron's own gunnery instructors but we travelled to Nicosia for a full Armament Practice Camp. Here we did two weeks' intensive firing and were all assessed in minute detail. I may say that we all



Left, two vics of 208 Sqn Meteor PR.9s passing over Ismailia in late 1955.



assessed Nicosia in minute detail in the evenings, and most mornings needed the use of "oxygen HIGH" for the first detail.

We took the safety aspect of our live firing very seriously, which prevented us from obtaining a camera record of the great day when we bounced Central Fighter School's Hunters on their first visit to the Middle East. When not armed we would bounce anything that flew — any fighter pilot would — and if the gunsight cameras were loaded they were used.

On the day in question four of us were returning from the range just as the Hunters descended into our level on the way down to Abu Sueir. We were certainly not about to be restrained from having a good bundle with them but we could not record the happy event for fear that there might be a round stuck up the barrel; fingers were well clear of the trigger. This was a shame because the Meteors acquitted themselves well at low level against the Hunters, which they could easily outmanoeuvre. A photograph of the gunsight diamonds encircling a Hunter would have been very satisfying.

Nicosia had uses other than being a base for the APC; it was also a source of cheap gin. Most weekends would see a pair of happy pilots winging their way northwards some 250 miles for a Saturday night outside Abu Sueir's barbed-wire perimeter. What went north returned south on Monday morning, usually loaded with supplies for the mess.

Gin by the tankload

The British forces in the Canal Zone were not an occupying force in the classic sense and some lip service was paid to Egyptian import regulations, so liquor supplied through NAAFI sources was not particularly cheap. The four ammunition tanks mounted immediately behind the pilot in the Meteor 8 and 9 were capable of seriously augmenting the stock of gin and were put to this use regularly.

Eventually Authority came to hear of our little import agency and the military police hatched a plot to shop us. Thus, one Monday morning, as the returning pair was inbound, sundry military police vehicles positioned on the squadron's hardstanding, all set to

Above left, a wooden box, replacing the ammunition tanks, contained more than 1,000 eggs for shipment from Tripoli back to Abu Sueir. Canal Zone eggs were tiny, so this was a valuable use for a navigation exercise. Landings were made with extreme care. **Above right**, Meteor T.7 WF879, one of three of the Middle East Instrument Training Flight at Nicosia over the mountains near Kyrenia on the north coast of Cyprus.

Royal Air Force squadrons in the early 200 series originated as naval units; thus "Naval Eight" became 208 Sqn on April 1, 1918, when the RAF officially came into being. It had been formed on October 25, 1916 at St Pol, near Dunkirk, as a scout squadron. Disbanded on November 7, 1919, the squadron was reconstituted on February 1, 1920, at Ismailia, beginning its long association with the Middle East.

The "Flying Shufti" was adopted as the insignia while the squadron was re-equipping with Atlases in 1930. The eye reflected the continuing reconnaissance role, and what could have seemed more appropriate than the Eye of Horus, an Ancient Egyptian symbol? It was not to last, however, because the eye has evil connotations in heraldry. The Sphinx was chosen as the replacement insignia and this has lasted to the present day.

Hurricanes began to arrive on the squadron in November 1940 and in summer 1942 one flight had Tomahawks. Next, equipped with Spitfires, the squadron covered the land battle in Italy during 1944 and Spits in various versions remained the standard equipment until the arrival of the Meteor FR.9s in January 1951. These survived with a detached flight in Aden while a renumbering in the UK saw a "new", Hunter-equipped, 208 despatched to Cyprus in March 1958.

A notional disbandment a year later was immediately countermanded by another number change, 208 now emerging as a Venom unit in Nairobi. A year later the number stayed but the Venoms went, to be replaced once more by Hunters.

The second gap in the squadron's history lasted from September 10, 1971, until July 1, 1974, when the squadron re-formed as a home-based unit for the first time. The Buccaneers it received then at Honington continued until March 31, 1994 — almost 20 years of unbroken service. The squadron moved to its final home at Lossiemouth in July 1983 as its role changed to maritime support. Flexible to the end, 208 found its Buccaneers quickly painted in Desert Pink and on the way to Saudi Arabia where they played a vital part during Operation *Desert Storm* as laser designators for the Tornado force.

catch two miscreants red-handed. The main runway threshold was right in front of our dispersal so the police had a splendid view of the two aircraft landing. They were positively wringing their hands with glee!

The aircraft disappeared to the end of the runway and returned along the parallel taxiway. The pilots shut down and, as they left the aircraft, were asked to wait while an airframe fitter unlatched the rear canopy fastenings and hinged the canopies forward. The police scrutinised the removal of the ammunition tanks and their opening. They were empty.

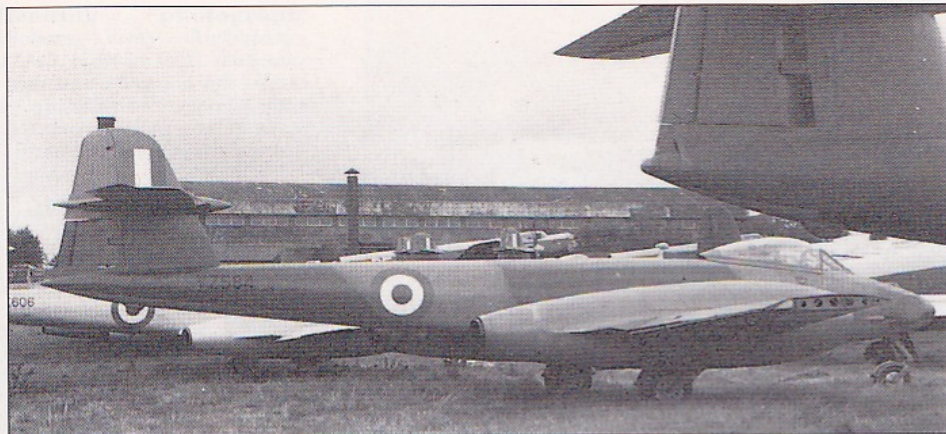
A serious failure of sense of humour took place about now, since the police at Nicosia had confirmed by signal that the aircraft had indeed been loaded. There had been no time for a diversion to unload elsewhere. An explanation was earnestly sought.

By now most of the squadron had gathered to watch the saga and everyone responded with blank denials when asked to comment. Eventually, after the joke was deemed to have gone on long enough, the Station Commander (in on the plot) intervened and all was, reluctantly, revealed.

Out of sight

Our intelligence was just as good as the police's and we knew they were going to meet the pair in Abu Sueir, however, had 9,000ft of runway so, since the eastern threshold was in front of the dispersal, the western end was well out of sight nearly two miles away. It is a tribute to the built-in quick turn-round capability of the aircraft that, way out of sight, a set of empty ammo tanks was transferred from the Air Traffic Control Landrover and replaced by the gin-filled tanks from the aircraft by a slick crew that scarcely required the aircraft to stop. There were red faces to be seen on the dispersal, and they weren't ours. Sadly, however, it did limit the importing for a while.

Bottles of gin were one load but the long-range navigation exercises came in useful on another occasion when the station threatened to run out of fresh eggs. Idris (Tripoli) was known to be a source of cheap fresh eggs, so off we went. This time a large packing-case substituted for the ammunition tanks, fitting neatly into the bay and capable



Above. Meteor PR.9s VZ584 and VZ606 at 20 MU Aston Down circa 1958. Both are former 208 Sqn aircraft and both have had their wingtips removed.

of accommodating more than 1,000 eggs. Abu Sueir had a glass-like runway that posed no threat but we needed a refuelling stop at El Adem where the surface left a lot to be desired. Were we ever thankful for that soft, trailing-link, main undercarriage!

There was one occasion when we flew a pair from Malta back to Abu Sueir without the statutory refuelling stop. We were really on song at that time with our navigation exercises, and careful recording of fuel consumption led to the conclusion that this leg (940 nautical miles) could be done. Meteor enthusiasts know full well that by the mid-Fifties most squadrons had a mix of aircraft with standard-sized intakes and those with the so-called "deep breather"; this was a slightly larger diameter intake, alleged to confer a performance improvement at altitude.

Inevitably we drew one of each when the time came to try the extreme-range flight so fuel recording became doubly important. In fact the outbound three legs showed that the two aircraft used exactly the same amount of fuel — not really surprising since we were cruising loosely together at the same height and airspeed and not fussing the throttles in formation.

I recorded 2hr 20min for that flight which was, even with ventral and wing tanks, good going for a short-span Meteor. A disbelieving acknowledgement was the response from El Adem tower when we told them we were giving them a miss.

Ultimately our trips could extend to

ferrying our aircraft back to the UK for modification, and this did not always coincide with a replacement being ready for the return. The alternative of an ex-BOAC Hermes, derated and unpressurised by Britavia, was tedious in the extreme.

When, subsequently, I became involved with the maintenance units, I was to find some very familiar serial numbers on the scrapheaps at 20 MU Aston Down and 38 MU Llandow, including my trusty Nairobi steed, WH556. They were worked over, given full-view bubble canopies to replace the half-metalled ones, given fixed fittings for the F.95 cameras and repainted in a European camouflage scheme that would have been a disaster anywhere beyond 20° East.

A squadron that flies and lives as we did develops a soul and, perhaps, some measure of that can be gained from the fact that 208 Sqn has a very active Squadron Association with an annual dinner. Generally there will be 100–125 diners and ten or more of that number are from the Meteor vintage in the Canal Zone. Time has taken its toll but it's a high proportion. Many association members made the pilgrimage to Lossiemouth to see the Standard passed on. We saw an immaculate parade which raised a lump in a few throats, while outside the hangar the wind whistled at 47 knots. The weather prevented the planned flyby of Buccaneers and Hawks — but, as the sound of the pipers died away, could there have been a faint echo of Derwents?