



# ONE HUNDRED YEARS VIGILANT

The Royal Air Force's No 208 (Reserve) Squadron is marking two huge milestones: its 100th anniversary plus the end of Hawk T1 flying training at RAF Valley.

report and photos: **Jamie Hunter**



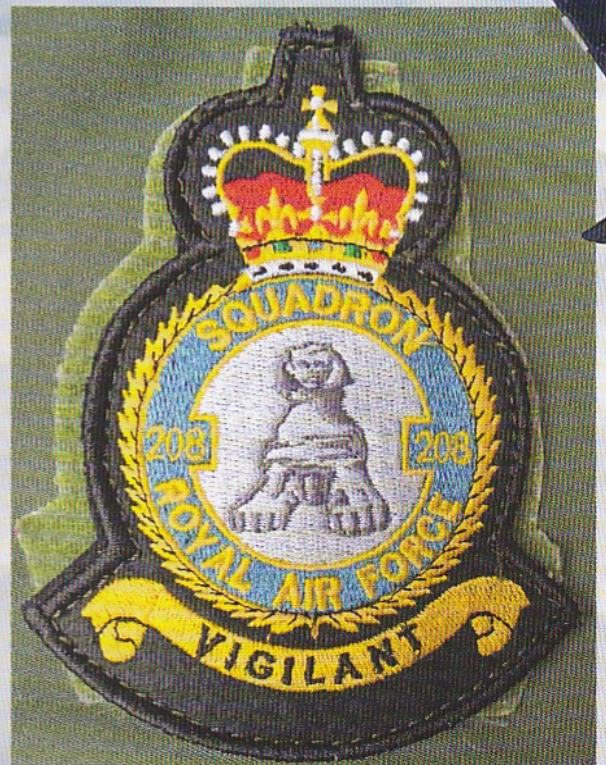
32

**A** JET-BLACK HAWK T1 trainer darts between the craggy mountains of north Wales. In the cockpit the young student pilot is working flat out juggling paper maps, a stopwatch and his jet's compass. This fledgling fast jet pilot is doing it the hard way — it's old-school in the Hawk T1, no multi-function displays are to be found here. The highest-tech piece of kit to hand is a monochrome GPS screen bolted onto the instrument panel.

Wg Cdr Chris Kidd is Officer Commanding No 208 (Reserve) Squadron at RAF Valley in Anglesey, North Wales. His squadron has been the last bastion of the original Hawk variant at this Royal Air Force fast jet training hub. 'The last mission in our op phase means [the student pilots] flying low-level as a pair of Hawk T1s up against another Hawk T1 'bounce' aircraft,' he explains. The 'bounce' is effectively

their adversary, flown by an experienced instructor. Kidd continues: 'The students are being fed threat information from the instructor, and those ground threats are moving around, so they need to keep track of them by plotting on their maps and then engaging those threats with a fictitious SEAD [suppression of enemy air defenses] package. The whole mission is driven by the instructor in the third aircraft who effectively acts as a simulated AWACS, whilst also providing them with an air threat.'

'The students are working to achieve a time on target [TOT] ideally within plus or minus five seconds, all with a map and stopwatch, whilst evading an air threat — that's a big ask in an aeroplane without modern aids. Once they hit their target they push up to CAP [combat air patrol] and then fly 2-v-1 ACM [air combat maneuvers] against the air threat. There's two distinctly different skill sets; evasion and ACM in a significant scenario.'







33 &gt;

'This is all about building capacity, because we've got to bridge the gap between a 40-year old, clockwork, steam-driven Hawk T1 and a modern Eurofighter Typhoon. The only way we can do that is by adding more and more elements and increasing the workload, so that when they go to the Typhoon and experience that workload, albeit in a different way, they can cope with it. We've had a 100 per cent hit rate throughout the Typhoon Operational Conversion Unit [OCU]!

### Proven and popular

The Hawk T1 is one of the great successes of modern military aviation. You don't have to look too far to find a fast jet pilot willing to enthuse about it and tell you that it's their favorite aircraft to fly. It's like a little sports car.

Built originally by Hawker Siddeley, latterly British Aerospace and now under the BAE Systems portfolio, this original incarnation

of the popular Hawk has been the mainstay of Royal Air Force fast jet training for the past 40 years. Indeed, the first Hawk T1s were delivered to RAF Valley in 1976. Over the following four decades the same Hawks have been repainted from their original red, white and gray schemes to overall air defense gray and most recently gloss black, determined as the best color to make the aircraft stand out at low level.

Not only has the Hawk T1 been the backbone of RAF fast jet flying training for 40 years, but it has also earned fame as the aircraft of the RAF Aerobatic Team (RAFAT), the Red Arrows. In the background, BAE Systems has rolled out ever advancing standards of Hawk, with over 1,000 now ordered. The latest are Hawk Mk165s for Saudi Arabia, 44 of which are currently in manufacture at the company's Warton plant.

The Mk165 is based on the RAF's latest Hawk, the T2, 28 of which are in service

**Wg Cdr Chris Kidd and unit XO (executive officer) Sqn Ldr Dan Arlett at the controls of the two centenary-marked No 208(R) Squadron Hawk T1s.**





with No IV (Reserve) Squadron, which has operated alongside 208 at Valley for the past seven years. The arrival of the Hawk T2 ultimately signaled the beginning of the end for its T1 predecessors at Valley. While the cockpit of the analogue Hawk T1 is a challenge for young ab initio student pilots, the Hawk T2 presents a far more advanced modern solution, the cornerstone of 'downloading' some of the training burden from the more expensive OCU stage.

The Hawk T2s are owned by the RAF and flown by an RAF squadron, but they are operated under the construct of the Military Flying Training System (MFTS), which oversees a series of civilian contracted organizations that are responsible for maintaining and providing UK flying training. The fast jet element of this comes under Ascent, a 50:50 joint venture between Lockheed Martin and Babcock International that provides training analysis, acquisition of aircraft, training design and curriculum development, provision of site facilities, hangars, classrooms, training devices and simulators.

Across the flightline, No 208(R) Squadron has continued its work, fulfilling a number of training roles, but as a traditional squadron outside MFTS. Wg Cdr Kidd

Above: **Climbing out over RAF Valley. The Hawk T1 has been here for 40 years and will be sadly missed.**

**New meets old. A Hawk T2 of No IV(R) Squadron leads a Squadron high in one of the VATAs (Valley Aerial Tactical Areas) of North Wales.**







Left: The cockpit of the Hawk T1 shows its age, but the instructors of No 208(R) Squadron know how to get the best out of these old aircraft to train the aviators of tomorrow.

Below: The Hawk is a sprightly performer — ideal for its role.

comments: 'MFTS is the future, and over at No IV Squadron they have a great new aircraft and training system and they are doing an excellent job. They are able to graduate an aviator who can operate HOTAS [hands-on throttle and stick] controls and who understands multi-function displays whilst building capacity for the next level through advanced tactics and systems. No 208 Squadron, while most definitely operating a 'legacy' platform, has to focus on building capacity in the more traditional sense.'

### 100 years of '208'

Formed as No 8 (Naval) Squadron at Dunkirk on October 26, 1916, the unit quickly passed to Royal Flying Corps control and flew early biplanes for artillery spotting. It formally became No 208 Squadron, RAF, on April 1, 1918.

Having briefly disbanded, the squadron re-formed at Ismailia, Egypt, in February 1920 flying RE8s and then Bristol Fighters. It is from this period that the squadron's crest with the Gizah Sphinx originates. Having received Westland Lysanders at the outbreak of WW2, as with many Middle East-based RAF units, No 208 Squadron became more heavily committed upon the Italian declaration of war in June 1940 as it received Hurricanes. Post-war the squadron flew Spitfires, switching to Meteors in 1951 and moving to Malta during 1956. It disbanded there three years later. In early 1958, 208 re-formed at Tangmere before







Radio callsigns 'Rockstar 1 and 2' — a pair of 208's Hawk T1s low down over the Llŷn Peninsula near RAF Valley.

Above: The Hawk T1 is being phased out of the advanced training role at Valley, but it will continue operating elsewhere in the RAF and Royal Navy.

Below: Down low at 420kt, en route to the next waypoint.

returning to the Middle East with Vampires and Hunters. Following another period of disbandment, on March 1, 1974, No 208 Squadron returned at RAF Honington with Buccaneers in the low-level strike role. It maintained a long affinity with the 'Bucc' until it disbanded in 1994 at RAF Lossiemouth as the type's last operator. The No 208 Squadron numberplate then passed to the advanced flying training element of No 4 Flying Training School at Valley, where it has remained ever since.

The advent of the Hawk T2 resulted in plans for

208 to disband in 2012, but it was given a stay of execution until December 2017, mainly in order to train IDT (International Defence Training) students for the UK MoD (Ministry of Defence). However, as the focus has moved onto the newer Hawk T2, combined with the need to retain life in the Hawk T1 fleet for other roles, the decision came to stand down the role of 208 at Valley as of mid-2016.

Kidd explains: 'This jet is 40 years old and we have the needs of the Red Arrows, No 100 Squadron at RAF Leeming and the Royal Navy's 736 NAS [Naval Air Squadron] to take into account.' Each of these units

fly the Hawk T1, and are likely to do so for many years to come. With No IV(R) Squadron fully up to speed and able to produce pilots at the required rate to feed the OCU, the call came to end No 208(R) Squadron's training role.

### The last chapter?

'I was serving in Kabul, Afghanistan, when I heard I was selected to command No 208 Squadron,' notes Kidd. 'I hadn't touched flying training for nearly five years and my understanding was that the unit was a preparatory squadron as lead-in for the Hawk T2. This was clearly not the case. In







reality, No 208 Squadron was effectively doing the mirror image of the T2 squadron in training new pilots for the OCU's as well as for IDT. In November 2015 we graduated the last five RAF students for the Typhoon and Tornado GR4. That was our last RAF ab initio course, and the guys did an outstanding job and will be hitting the front line soon. The establishment of the Typhoon force, coupled with the larger-than-expected Tornado GR4 force, meant that 208's services have been in high demand over recent years.

Wg Cdr Kidd's last course (TacWeapons 84) comprises four Royal Navy pilots and two Kuwaiti Air Force officers. They were due to graduate as these words were written in early April. 'The Royal Navy is building up 736 NAS at RNAS Culdrose, so we've seen a lot of refresher training for them as they build their future F-35 cadre. Plus we've had ab initio RN students [who] are headed to [the] Typhoon as well as Royal Saudi Air Force pilots. Our

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#### WG CDR CHRIS KIDD

two Kuwaiti pilots come from the F/A-18 community and they are here to become CFS-accredited qualified flying instructors [QFIs]. When they graduate they will head back to Kuwait to instruct on the Hornet training squadron.'

The foreign students have placed much value on their time at Valley flying the Hawk. Flying in great airspace that offers the challenges of both low-level flight and changeable weather clearly held huge appeal for the overseas aviators, giving them much expertise as they return to their regular billets.

With the end of No 208(R) Squadron comes the end of Hawk T1 flying at Valley. It also means that no more new ab initio British pilots will learn to fly fast jets on the Hawk T1. No 100 Squadron at RAF Leeming will run refresher courses for pilots returning to the T1, but otherwise it is the end of an era. 'At one point we had 26 different courses running here,' notes Kidd: 'the main advanced flying training course, the main tactical weapons course, a UK orientation course for exchange pilots, the RAFAT, No 100 Squadron and the 736 NAS refreshers, notwithstanding advanced

Above left to right: **From low-level up to medium-level, the airspace near RAF Valley allows the full spectrum of training.**

**Wg Cdr Chris Kidd, Officer Commanding No 208(R) Squadron.**





flying training and tac weapons QFI courses. These will now be spread between Nos IV(R) and 100 Squadrons.

'We have still used Pembrey Range in South Wales. The Aden cannon is no longer in service so we have simulated strafe, and we have only just finished using the 3kg practice bombs from the CBLS [Carrier Bomb Light Store] pod. The Hawk T1 is the last RAF type to carry the CBLS. Kidd adds: 'One of our experienced reservists flew the last mission and dropped the last 3kg bomb with our holding officer in the back seat.'

No 208 Squadron has two reservist instructors on staff, one part-time and one full-time. They were previously high-ranking pilots who have returned as reservists. 'They add a wealth of experience and depth of knowledge to the staff here,' enthuses Kidd. 'Our last two 'creamies' [ab initios 'creamed off' to become instructors] have just left the squadron, so we've had the full spectrum of people that you would see on any front-line squadron — the young guys running around causing havoc, with the older, wise heads to keep them in check!'

In November the squadron completed its last major detachment when five Hawks deployed to Solenzara, Corsica, for exercise 'Napoleon Sphinx'. The detachment was intended to experience operating from a foreign location under

simulated 'austere' conditions, and to further the training of the students on their tactical weapons course. The focus was air combat training, with excellent weather presenting the perfect opportunity for training to be achieved. The squadron was able to fly over 80 sorties in just six flying days. At the time Kidd commented: 'The detachment has been a huge success due to the hard work and organization of all involved. I am particularly impressed with the students who managed to complete the entire basic fighter maneuver phase in only six days.'

Back at Valley, the focus is turning to the future, while being mindful of the vital role 208 has played. The local airspace looks set to remain the cradle of UK military pilot training into the future as the new T-6C Texan II trainers arrive here to operate alongside the Hawk T2s. The North Wales MTA (Military Training Area) offers incredible low-level flying terrain, plus upper airspace that has been delineated into VATAs (Valley Aerial Tactical Areas), enabling the squadron to fly the full range of missions right on its doorstep.

In late March the MoD announced a £372-million commitment across four contracts for the continued in-service support of the Hawk fleet. This included a continued deal with BAE Systems to provide in-service support and post-design



38







back to the T1 will complete their ground school here before they convert to the aircraft with No 100 Squadron.

'CFS is the gold standard for flying training anywhere in the world. It is baked into the way MFTS works and they are even now working up an Officer Commanding advanced flying training over at No IV(R) Squadron on the Hawk T2. The IDT element has also passed over to them. 208 has had a valuable role to play and has been doing a sterling job here at Valley for the past 22 years. The vast majority of current British fast jet pilots learned their trade on this squadron and we've enjoyed a great environment, with brilliant people flying a fantastic jet. Our Babcock engineers are absolutely fantastic.'

'When squadron 'bosses' are asked about their time in command, they usually say that it's been an honor and a privilege. They say that because it's absolutely true. During my time here we've had a fabulous success rate on the Typhoon and GR4 OCU, which is a direct result of having a great team working for me. It wouldn't have been possible without them. We can truly go out with our heads held high.'

services for both the T1s and T2s, including design advice and modification and obsolescence management. BAE Systems and its maintenance partner Babcock have around 470 people based at Valley. Director combat air at DE&S, the MoD's procurement and support organization, Air Vice Marshal Sue Gray said: 'Our partners, BAE Systems and Rolls-Royce, will provide through-life support, including maintenance and the provision of spares, while delivering cost savings and providing a high level of aircraft availability, all of which will ensure our future fast jet pilots have the right equipment to conduct their flying training.'

Wg Cdr Kidd summed up his time leading No 208(R) Squadron. 'We are currently celebrating 100 years of the squadron. We are graduating our last course, and as we disband we will look to redistribute aircraft as we reach the end of [the] Hawk T1 at Valley. It won't be the last people will see of the T1 here because we always have five aircraft here on the depth maintenance track. We will also retain the Hawk T1 simulator here, so anyone coming

Left: **Pristine Hawks from 208 pose for the camera in their final month of flying training at Valley.**

Above: **An interesting contrast of a new Hawk T2 leading the predecessor Hawk T1.**

Right: **Climbing into the blue.**

