



*Hawk T1 XX174 of 208 Squadron,  
based at Valley, Agglesey.*



**Left**  
FSL Bob Little was Naval 8's most successful pilot, claiming 38 of his 47 victories with the unit.  
VIA NORMAN FRANKS

**Right**  
Flt Sub Lt Booker's Sopwith Triplane N5482 'Maud', in which he achieved 17 victories. J M BRUCE/G S LESLIE COLLECTION



# Naval Eight's Eyes

In our series on RAF unit heritage, **Andy Thomas** focuses this month on 208 Squadron, whose roots firmly lay in the Royal Naval Air Service

To aid the hard-pressed Royal Flying Corps squadrons on the Somme, the Admiralty pledged 18 aircraft of the Royal Naval Air Service on October 25, 1916. To do so, flights from each of 1, 4 and 5 Wings were combined to form 8 Squadron RNAS, commanded by Sqd Cdr [a RNAS rank] Geoffrey Bromet. As part of 22 Wing, 'Naval 8', as it became known, was based at Vert Galand in north-west France and began patrols over the Somme at the beginning of November.

The unit soon found action. On the 10th, Flt Sub Lt (FSL) Murray Galbraith, a Canadian who had

previously gained three victories, was in a Sopwith Pup near Bapaume when he sent down a Roland scout to claim Naval 8's first success. Six days later he destroyed an LVG to claim his fifth 'kill', becoming the unit's first 'ace'. In early 1917 Sopwith Triplanes took over from Pups.

After supporting the Canadian assault on Vimy Ridge, Naval 8 moved to St Eloi where it became one of the leading British scout units. FSL Bob Little soon began to build a formidable reputation flying the 'Tripe'. At the end of April he was in action near Arras: "I dived on the [enemy] and

fired at it. I saw tracers hit him, through the sight, and he stalled and spun. I last saw him spinning at about 3,000ft [914m]."

In the swirling dogfight a few minutes later, Little fired on a red Albatros about ten feet above him: "I saw tracers hit it. It started to climb, then stalled and went down in a dive. I last saw him at 1,000ft when I lost him in the mist."

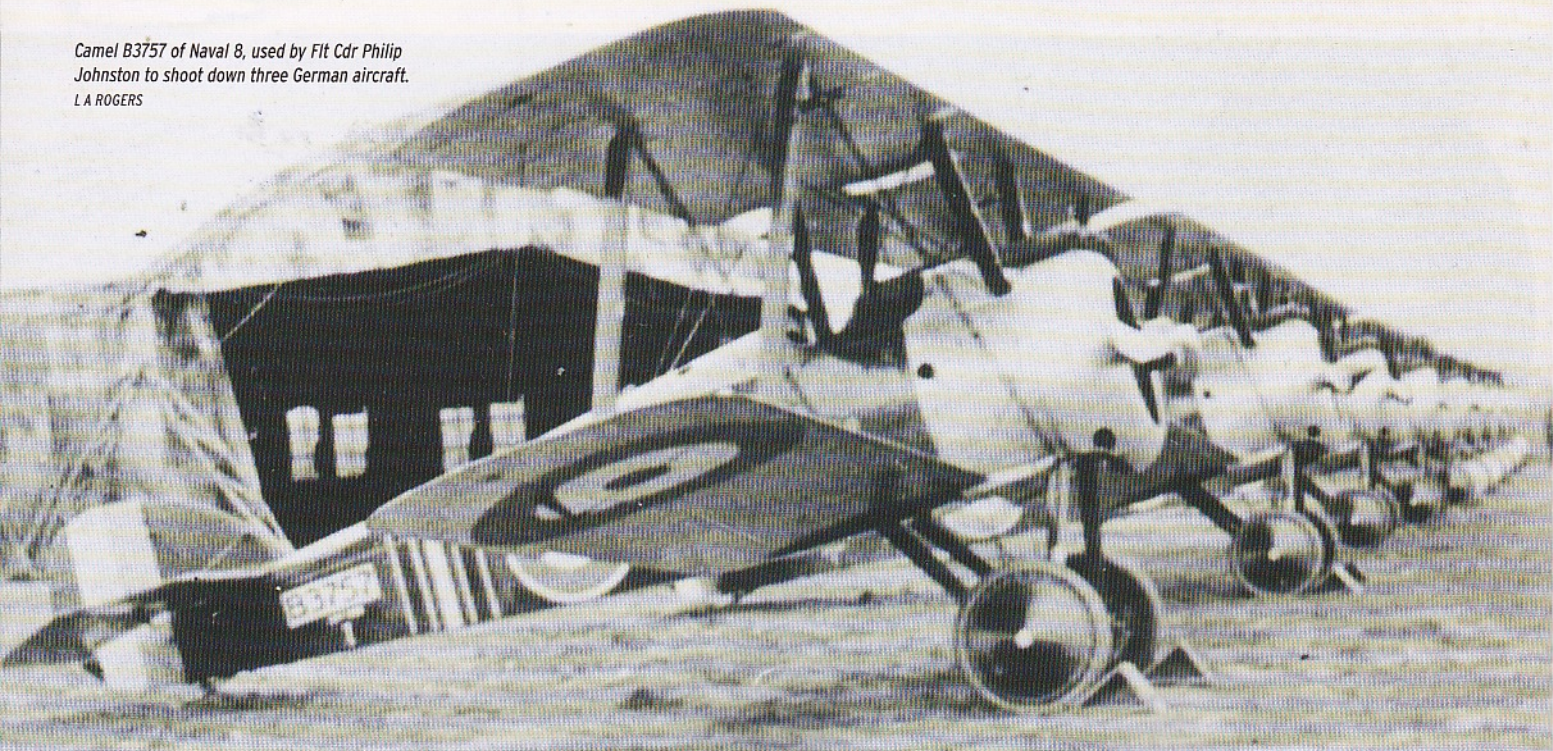
Naval 8 was fully involved in supporting the offensives at Arras in northern France and Messines in Belgium. On the evening of August 11, Flt Cdr Charles Booker led his flight into

a memorable combat over 'No Man's Land' and shot down the all-black Albatros of Oblt Adolf Ritter von Tutschek, who was wounded. Booker was then badly shot-up by LtN Viktor Schobinger of Jasta 11, but managed to coax his Triplane, which he had named *Maud*, to a forced landing. In all, Booker claimed 22 victories on the type.

During the summer Naval 8 re-equipped with Sopwith Camels. Flt Cdr Phillip Johnston had successes on the type, but in a dogfight over Hamblain on August 17 he collided with another Camel and was killed. ➔

Camel B3757 of Naval 8, used by Flt Cdr Philip Johnston to shoot down three German aircraft.

L A ROGERS



Through the autumn the unit flew ground attacks during the bloody Third Battle of Ypres and at the end of October, Sqn Cdr Christopher Draper succeeded Bromet as CO. Draper led Naval 8 through the winter, and when the German spring offensive broke through at the end of March 1918 the unit had to evacuate quickly in the face of the advance. Unable to fly due to fog, the aircraft had to be burned to avoid capture.

On April 1, 1918, when the Royal Air Force was formed, the RNAS squadrons had '200' added to their number to avoid confusion with former RFC units, Naval 8 becoming 208. Despite being part of the new, independent force, Draper continued to wear naval uniform. Post-war he became known as 'the Mad Major' because of his predilection for flying under the Thames bridges. Shortly before the Armistice in November,

208 received Sopwith Snipes and remained on occupation duties until disbanding a year later.

### Mobile force

With its exceptional record, 208 was one of the units selected to remain as part of the permanent post-war RAF. No.113 Squadron, flying army co-operation at Ismailia in Egypt, was renumbered 208 on February 1, 1920 and its Royal Aircraft Factory RE.8s gave way to Bristol F.2b Fighters. In 1922, instability in post-war Turkey resulted in the Chanak Crisis: 208 was dispatched to the Dardanelles area, supporting British cavalry and mapping Turkish positions until September 1923. During later negotiations, the Turkish commander commented that

### No.208's Badge and Battle Honours

The badge depicts a sphinx afrontée. The Gizah sphinx was selected to commemorate the squadron's long association with Egypt. It was approved by King George VI in February 1938. The squadron's motto is 'Vigilant'.

Battle Honours: Western Front 1916-1918, Arras\*, Ypres 1917\*, Lys, Somme 1918\*, Egypt and Libya 1940-1942\*, Greece 1941\*, Iraq 1941, Syria 1941, El Alamein\*, Italy 1944-1945\*, Gustav Line, Gothic Line, Gulf 1991\*. Honours marked with an asterisk are emblazoned on the Squadron Standard.



the British were more aware of his dispositions that he was!

In 1929 a flight of 208 was sent to Palestine to help quell unrest between Arab and Jewish groups, the veteran 'Brisfits' strafing terrorist groups. Armstrong Whitworth Atlases arrived in 1930 and were flown on 'flag-waving' as far away as Khartoum in the Sudan and Baghdad, for 208

had been designated as a mobile unit. Five years later the elegant Hawker Audax appeared and, in response to Italian aggression in Abyssinia, 208 moved a flight to Mersah Matruh in Egypt to monitor the Libyan province of Cyrenaica.

With war clouds looming, 208 spent the final years of peace training. In January 1939 it re-equipped with Westland

The DFW C.V that Bob Little forced down on April 24, 1917. VIA NORMAN FRANKS



No.208's time with Sopwith Snipes was spent in Germany on occupation duties. J M BRUCE/G S LESLIE COLLECTION



to just a handful of aircraft. The squadron was ordered to evacuate to Crete on the 24th and then onwards to Egypt. It had been a bitter experience.

## Desert wars

In early May the unit reassembled at Gaza in the Middle East to regroup with new Hurricanes and Lysanders. A revolt in Iraq saw detachments from 208 supporting a relief column until the Iraqis surrendered at the end of the month. On June 8 Vichy French-held Syria was invaded by the Allies and 208 worked closely with an Australian army division, initially encountering stiff resistance. Flt Lt Aldis' Hurricane was shot down over Damascus by a Dewoitine 520 flown by Sous Lt Pierre Le Gloan.

A few days later Fg Offs Holdsworth and Macrostie in

When 208 first ventured into army co-op it briefly flew RE.8s. J M BRUCE/G S LESLIE COLLECTION



Each of 208's flights decorated its Bristol Fighters with playing card symbols on the tail and under wing - F1731 was 'Clubs'. AUTHOR'S COLLECTION

## "In 1929 a flight of 208 was sent to Palestine to help quell unrest between Arab and Jewish groups, the veteran 'Brisfits' strafing terrorist groups"

Lysanders. As a specialist army co-operation unit many of its 18 pilots were seconded army officers, including Lt Tailyour of the Cameron Highlanders, who insisted on flying in his kill!

### Italian encounters

When hostilities with Italy began on June 10, 1940, the CO, Sqn Ldr Sprague, was fully prepared. No.208's 'B' Flight was forwarded to Sidi Barrani, Egypt, for border patrols 'along the wire' and Italian ground forces were occasionally attacked.

Flt Lt Webber tried to improve the offensive capability of the 'Lizzie': "We experimented with two 20mm cannon, but they were not successful owing to the sandy conditions. During this period, we flew with and without fighter protection, doing tactical, photographic and artillery reconnaissances before and during the first capture of Tobruk."

Lysanders were very vulnerable to Italian fighters and 208 suffered its first casualties on October 15 when Plt Off Druce took-off for a recce over Giarabub deep in Libya's Cyrenaican desert. He was spotted close to the ground by three Fiat CR.42 pilots of 92 Squadriglia: all three attacked the hapless Lysander and eventually Tenente Ranieri Piccolomini delivered the killer strike. The Lysander hit the ground and blew up, killing its crew.

Another Lysander fell to CR.42s in mid-November during a recce to Maktilla. The biplane fighters repeatedly attacked from astern and the Lysander's gunner was hit in the leg, but continued firing until his gun jammed. The engine failed but the pilot succeeded in crash-landing just as one of the Fiats, hit by the return fire, crashed. The gallant Lysander crew were picked up by a patrol of

the 11th Hussars.

A few days later the first Hurricane Is, one of which was fitted with cameras, arrived to equip a single 208 flight. Close support to the offensive in early December helped to repel the Italians, resulting in the capture of much of Cyrenaica. No.208's efforts drew particular praise from General Wavell, the Commander-in-Chief of British forces in the Middle East, and operations continued until the end of February when the unit returned to Heliopolis for a rest.

At the beginning of April, 208 was moved into Greece to support operations against the Italians. However, within a few days the Germans opened a blitzkrieg in the Balkans, and Allied forces were soon withdrawing towards Athens. Marauding Messerschmitts shot down a number of Lysanders and destroyed others on the ground - and within days 208 was reduced

Hurricanes attacked Vichy troops north of Merjayoun, the latter being killed by Allied fire on the 15th. During a black day Holdsworth was also brought down by Free French forces as he tried to drop them a message. Somewhat depleted, 208 continued 'ops' until an armistice on July 12.

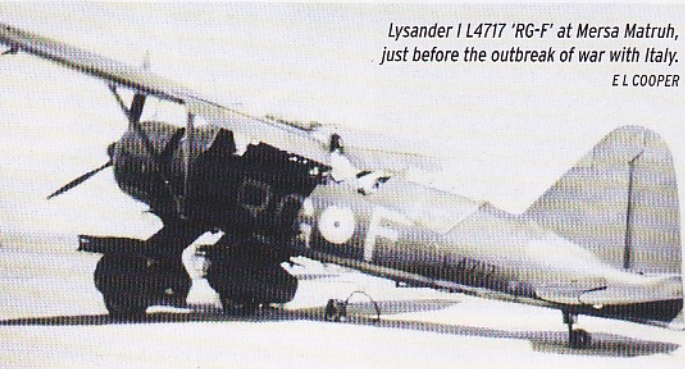
No.208 remained in Palestine until mid-October when it returned to the Western Desert in time to support the next British offensive. Operation Crusader in November was soon blunted and, when Rommel counter-attacked, 208 once again found itself in retreat.

Fg Off Cotton was on a recce to the Tobruk area on the afternoon of the 29th when he was jumped by a pair of Messerschmitts. Unit records noted: "One broke away and started a stern attack, whereupon Fg Off Cotton flicked his aircraft over in a violent right-hand turn and spiralled towards ➤"

**'Winged Eye'**

An unofficial 'winged eye' squadron badge was in use from July 1930 until 1937 when an official version was approved. In Ancient Egypt, the Eye of Horus was a symbol often used to protect the dead and many ancient artefacts carry it. Horus was a hawk-headed god of Egyptian mythology, the son of Isis and Osiris and a guardian against evil spirits.

As 208 was a reconnaissance unit stationed in Egypt, it was reasoned that the Eye of Horus was an appropriate emblem. It first appeared on the fins of AW Atlases but then lay dormant until being resurrected on the tails of Buccaneers in the 1970s and is perpetuated on 208's current Hawk T.1s.



*Lysander I L4717 'RG-F' at Mersa Matruh, just before the outbreak of war with Italy.*  
E L COOPER

**"The next major enemy defensive redoubt was the Gothic Line and 208's pilots directed artillery fire onto gun positions as the battle to breach it commenced in the autumn"**

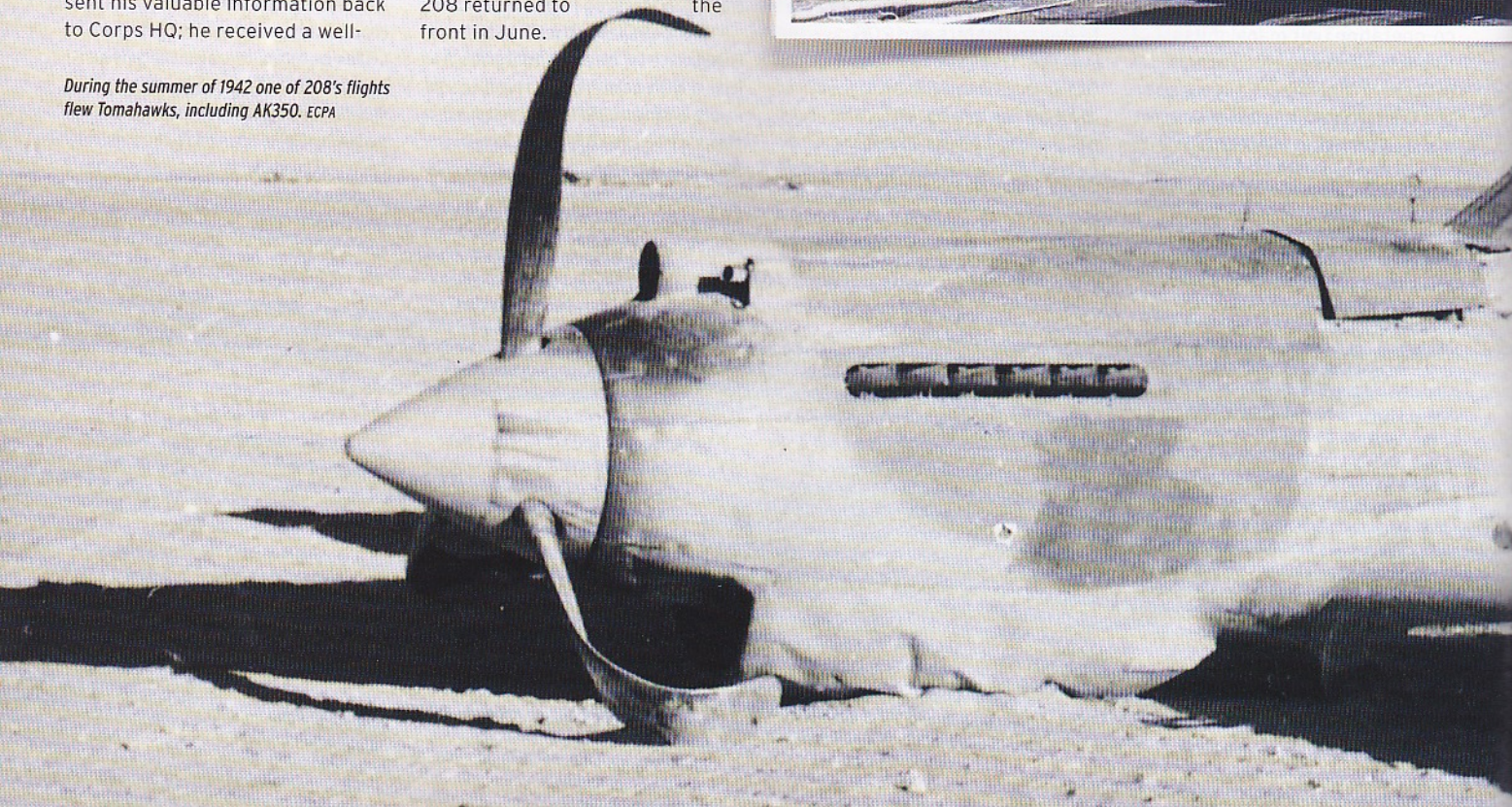
the earth. Each successive attack was foiled by evasion tactics. The chase went on for nearly half-an-hour during which time his aircraft was repeatedly hit."

The 109s finally broke off their attacks and Cotton managed to force-land just short of base - but sent his valuable information back to Corps HQ; he received a well-

earned DFC for this sortie. No.208 remained in support of the ground fighting until replaced in March 1942 by 40 Squadron SAAF, and Sqn Ldr Burnand led his exhausted unit back to Egypt.

Re-equipped with Hurricane IIs and a flight of Curtiss Tomahawks, 208 returned to the front in June.

*During the summer of 1942 one of 208's flights flew Tomahawks, including AK350. ECPA*



*No.208's Audaxes forming a circle with Valentias of 216 Squadron and Station Flight Gordons at Heliopolis in 1936. S SCOTT*



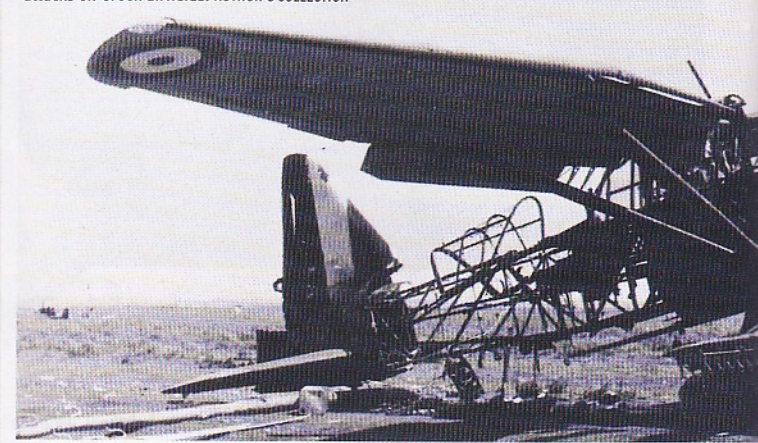
It covered the withdrawal to the Alamein line, often leapfrogging from one landing ground to another, and suffered heavy casualties. It kept this level of activity during the opening rounds of General Montgomery's great desert offensive in late October until being withdrawn.

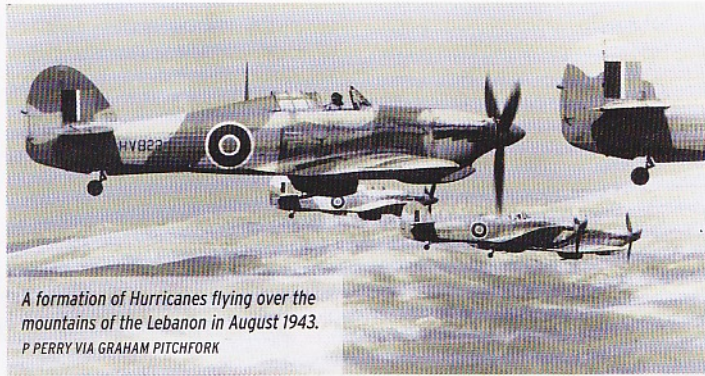
**Road to Rome**

The squadron spent most of 1943

on garrison duties near Kirkuk in Iraq and at Rayak in Syria. At the end of the year it received Spitfires and, after working up in the fighter-reconnaissance role, it moved to Trigno on the Adriatic coast to support the Eighth Army's long, slow flog up Italy. No.208 was firmly back in business and was soon feeding its HQ with valuable information of the well dug-in German forces in front of them.

*Skeletal remains of a Lysander bearing mute testimony to the effectiveness of German strafing attacks on Greek airfields. AUTHOR'S COLLECTION*





A formation of Hurricanes flying over the mountains of the Lebanon in August 1943.  
P PERRY VIA GRAHAM PITCHFORK

At the beginning of May the squadron moved west for the final assault on the Gustav Line; with the fall of Cassino, the road to Rome lay open.

German light flak was deadly and losses were regular, among them Flt Lt 'Judy' Garland, a former infantryman. By now 208 Squadron was flying about 20 sorties daily, but in September the tempo increased to more

than 36, latterly from a new base at Peretola near Florence. The next major enemy defensive redoubt was the Gothic Line and 208's pilots directed artillery fire onto gun positions as the battle to breach it commenced in the autumn.

Whenever weather permitted during the bitter winter of 1944-1945, operations were mainly in support of the US Fifth Army south of Bologna, when the Spitfires were used to direct the fire of long-range artillery. For these 'ops', Sqn Ldr Perrrens received 208's only DSO of the conflict.

### Spitfire v Spitfire

The squadron returned to Palestine in the summer of 1946 equipped with Griffon-engined Spitfire FR.18s. The Holy Land was in ferment and searching for illegal Jewish immigrant shipping bringing settlers trying to get to Palestine was a major task for the squadron, lasting throughout 1947. The creation of the State of Israel the following May saw hostilities erupt and 208 moved to Nicosia



One of 208's Spitfires taxiing past a 'sangan' at Ein Shemer, Palestine, in 1947. AUTHOR'S COLLECTION

but maintained a detachment at Ramat David.

On May 22, Ramat David came under attack from Egyptian Spitfires, in the belief it was an Israeli base. A patrol of two of 208's own Spitfires, flown by Fg Offs Roy Bowie and Geoff Cooper, were ordered to intercept aircraft that were strafing landing RAF Dakotas. Bowie shot down one Egyptian fighter and another fell to ground fire.

A third pair of REAF Spitfires appeared a little later and a fresh pair of RAF fighters, led by Fg Off Tim McElhaw, went after them. He caught one at very low level over the desert: "I gave him three short bursts from close up and he just went straight in. It was the first time I had done any air-to-air firing!"

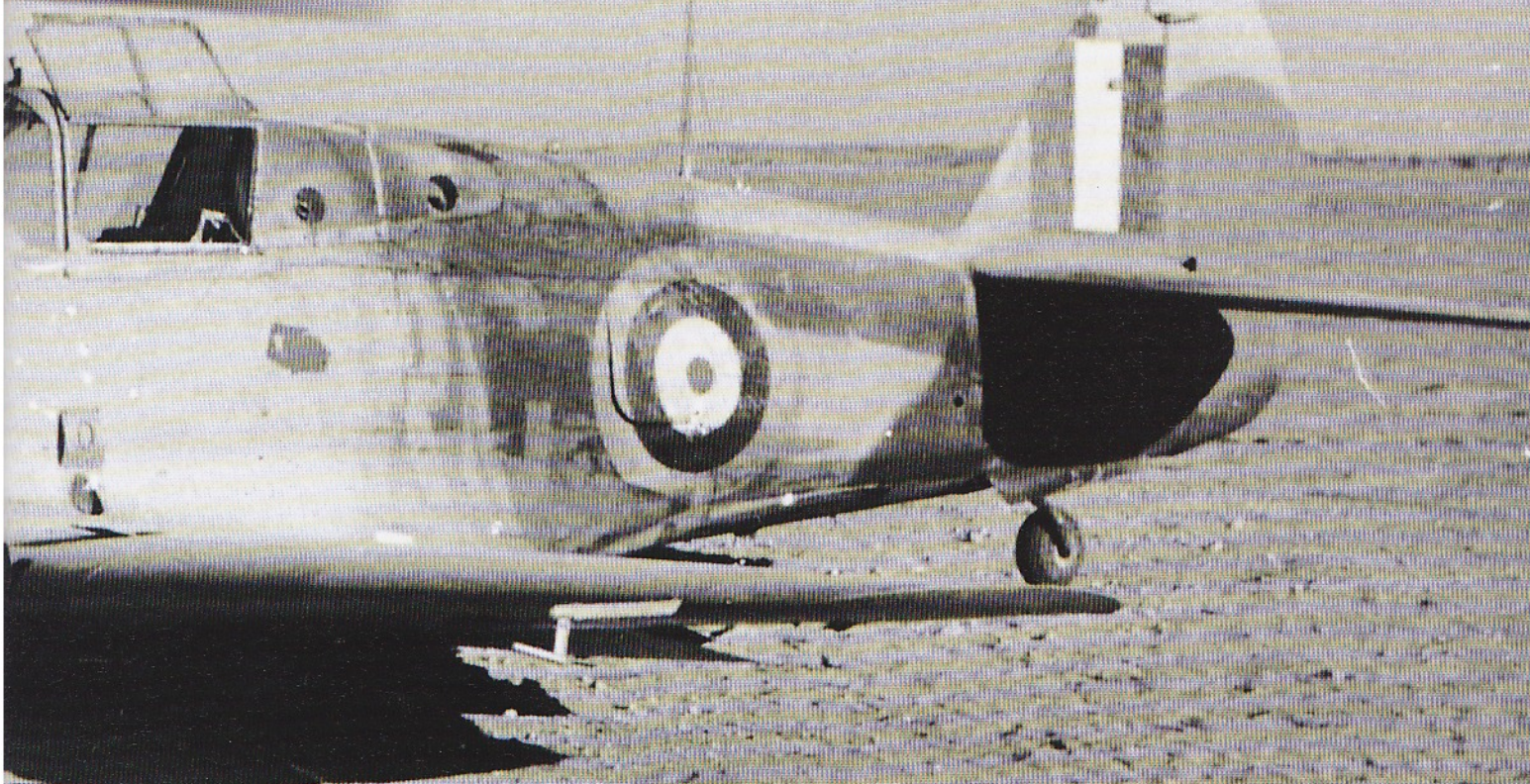
Tim McElhaw spotted another: "I checked his markings - green, white, green - but he just ignored me. Les took a 'pot' at him, and I put in a longish burst. Some bits came off and down he went - he made a good prang when he hit the ground." It is ironic that the last air combat victories

to be claimed by an RAF Spitfire squadron should be over its own most iconic aircraft type.

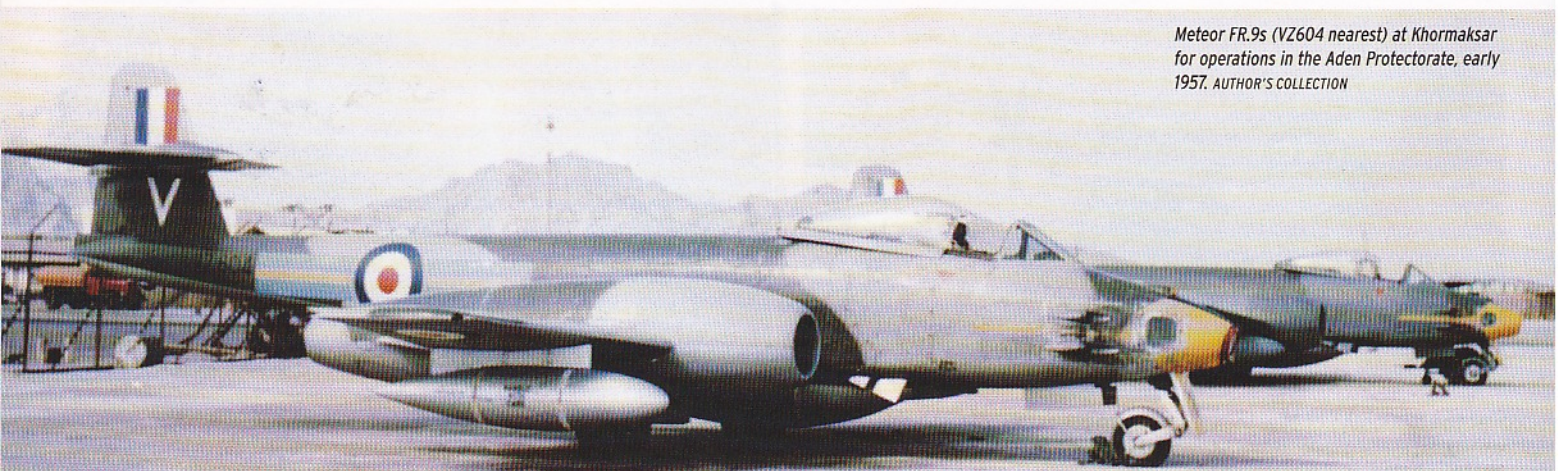
The detachment withdrew the following day and later in the year moved down to Fayid in the Suez Canal Zone for security duties. Hostilities between Israel and its neighbours continued intermittently into 1949 and 208 flew over the Sinai Desert to monitor the situation. On January 7 a recce patrol failed to return having been shot down (apparently in error) by Israeli fighters; and though three - including Fg Off McElhaw - baled out, one pilot was killed. A further patrol by 208, escorted by Hawker Tempests, and was also engaged; one of the escorts was shot down.

### First jets

Spitfires remained until March 1951 when 208 received its first jets - Meteor FR.9s. The squadron remained in the Canal Zone, regularly sending operational detachments to Oman. Soon afterwards the British withdrew from Egypt and 208 moved



Meteor FR.9s (VZ604 nearest) at Khormaksar for operations in the Aden Protectorate, early 1957. AUTHOR'S COLLECTION



No.208's Aircraft

Type	From	To
Sopwith Strutter#	Oct 1916	Nov 1916
Nieuport 17#	Oct 1916	Dec 1916
Sopwith Pup	Oct 1916	Feb 1917
Sopwith Triplane	Feb 1917	Sep 1917
Sopwith Camel	Sep 1917	Nov 1918
Sopwith Snipe	Nov 1918	Nov 1919
RAF RE.8	Feb 1920	Nov 1920
Bristol F.2b Fighter	Oct 1920	May 1930
Armstrong Whitworth Atlas	May 1930	Aug 1935
Hawker Audax	Apr 1934	Jan 1939
Hawker Demon#	Sep 1935	Jan 1936
Westland Lysander I and II	Jan 1939	May 1942
Hawker Hurricane I#	Nov 1940	May 1942
Curtiss Tomahawk IIb#	Apr 1942	Sep 1942
Hawker Hurricane IIa/b/c	May 1942	Jan 1944
Supermarine Spitfire Vc	Dec 1943	Aug 1944
Supermarine Spitfire IX	Mar 1944	May 1947
Supermarine Spitfire VIII#	Jul 1944	Sep 1944
Supermarine Spitfire FR.18	Aug 1946	Apr 1951
Gloster Meteor FR.9	Jan 1951	Mar 1958
Hawker Hunter F.6	Mar 1958	Mar 1959
de Havilland Venom FB.4	Apr 1959	Mar 1960
Hawker Hunter FGA.9	Mar 1960	Sep 1971
HS Buccaneer S.2B	Oct 1974	Mar 1994
HS Hunter F.6A#, T.7#	Oct 1974	Mar 1994
HS Hawk T.1A	Apr 1994	To date

Partial equipment is marked #

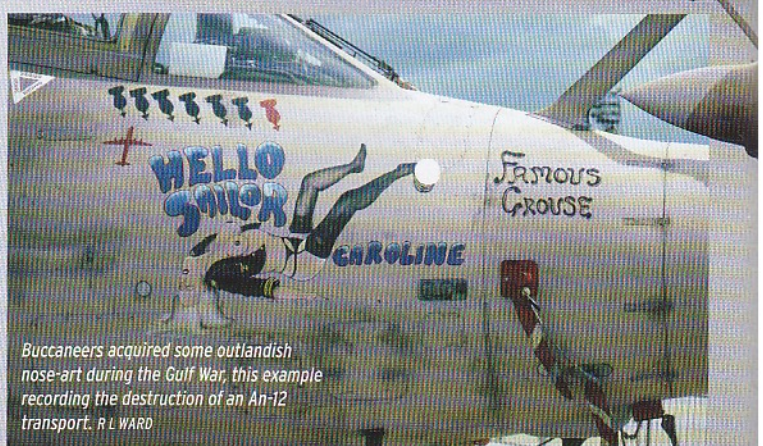
Venom FB.4 WR493 of 208 Sqn at Eastleigh, Nairobi, in April 1960. TIM MASON



Hunter FGA.9 of 208 Sqn landing at Sharjah in 1970. 208 SON RECORDS



The unit was the first to participate in the US Air Force's 'Red Flag' training exercise in Nevada... One US aggressor pilot said: "If we can't see them, we can't kill them - and they're flying at 50 feet flat out!"



Buccaneers acquired some outlandish nose-art during the Gulf War, this example recording the destruction of an An-12 transport. R L WARD

to Malta, where it provided air defence at the time of the Suez Crisis in October.

In early 1958 No.208 came back to the UK for the first time since 1919 to convert to the elegant Hawker Hunter F.6 - which it took to Nicosia, Cyprus, in March. This phase lasted for just a year and the squadron was disbanded on March 30, 1959. However, the following day 208 effectively returned to Africa when 142 Squadron at Eastleigh in Kenya was renumbered. The 'new' 208 flew ground attack DH Venoms, a role that continued with Hunter FGA.9s the following year.

In July 1961 Iraq threatened Kuwait and 208 deployed there as part of a major deterrent force, remaining until October. The following month it moved down to Aden where 'Naval 8' was based alongside 'the other 8' (the former 8 Squadron RFC) for the first time. Occasional operations in Yemen lasted until mid-1964 when Sqn Ldr Lewis led 208 to Muharraq, Bahrain, to cover the Gulf area. It was disbanded there on September 10, 1971.

### Low and fast

The squadron was resurrected almost three years later at Honington in Suffolk when it was re-formed with Buccaneers. The former naval bombers were an appropriate mount for a one-time RNAS unit. The new role was

long-range, low-level attack for which 208's new aircraft were particularly well suited.

The unit was the first to participate in the US Air Force's 'Red Flag' training exercise in Nevada, which became a regular fixture. One US aggressor pilot said: "If we can't see them, we can't kill them - and they're flying at 50 feet flat out!"

In the late 1970s the unit was led by Wg Cdr Graham Pitchfork, now a regular *FlyPast* contributor; under his leadership 208 continued its punishing schedule, including regular detachments to Norway. After the arrival of the Tornado, 208 moved north to Lossiemouth in 1983 where it joined 12 Squadron in the maritime attack role. Soon afterwards it detached to Cyprus to provide visible support to British troops on policing duty in strife-torn Beirut. This task lasted into 1984 when 208 returned to its demanding maritime attack duties. A highlight of the following year was when 208 sank the hulk of the frigate HMS *Salisbury* using laser-guided bombs.

It was with these weapons that 208 went to war again following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990. In early 1991 it moved with 12 Squadron to Bahrain to participate in the assault on Saddam Hussein's forces. Initially the 'Buccs' provided laser designation for Tornados but then began their own strikes -



A 208 Squadron Hawk T.1 flying along the Menai Straits, east of Valley, RAF VALLEY

targets including bridges, airfields and other infrastructure. Following the ceasefire it returned home, but soon afterwards a post-'Cold War' defence review announced the withdrawal of the Buccaneer. No.208 was the final Buccaneer unit to go and it disbanded on March 31, 1994.

### Fighter training

To maintain the traditions of such a senior unit, the following day 208 was reformed at Valley, Anglesey, by the simple expedient of renumbering 234 Squadron. It now flew Hawk T.1s, providing advanced training for future military fast-jet pilots before they moved on to tactical and weapons tuition.

With the arrival of the Typhoon, the Hawk T.2, fitted with modern avionics and systems, entered

service in 2009 - and it was decided to concentrate all of them into a single squadron. As a result the future of 208 was in doubt for a time.

At the time of writing, the squadron, under Wg Cdr Eugene Moriarty, continues in this vital role but will shortly hand over the training of all ab initio RAF fast-jet pilots to 4 Squadron and its Hawk T.2s. No.208 will then assume the tasks of training fast-jet pilots for the Royal Saudi Air Force; and providing refresher training for foreign exchange pilots and those destined to fly the Hawk T.1 with 100 Squadron or the 'Red Arrows'. Additionally, 208 - multi-tasking since its earliest days - will provide frontline troops with close air support training before their deployment on operations. ●



A pair of 208 Buccaneer S.2Bs fly low through the Scottish Highlands during a training sortie. BRITISH AEROSPACE