

# History of No. 208 Squadron

by J. D. R. RAWLINGS

IN 1916 THE Royal Naval Air Service in France was based mainly around Dunkirk for operations in connection with the Dover Patrol. The R.N.A.S. was in process of re-equipping with new aircraft, many of which came from the stable of Mr. T. O. M. Sopwith and which were highly superior to those turned out at that time by the "official" Aircraft Factory at Farnborough, in which the Royal Flying Corps pinned its faith.

In the autumn of that year the R.F.C. was being heavily pressed by the Germans and the R.N.A.S. agreed to loan one scout squadron for work with the R.F.C. on the Somme. To form this squadron detachments were drawn from Nos. 1, 4 and 5 Wings and on 25th October 1916 No. 8 Squadron, R.N.A.S., was formed at St. Pol, Dunkirk. Its C.O. was Sqn.-Cdr. G. R. Bromet and he had eighteen aircraft, six each of Nieuport Scouts, Sopwith 1½ Strutters and Sopwith Pups. The next day the squadron moved to Vert Galand where it joined No. 22 Wing, R.F.C., for operations. Throughout World War I the



squadron flew largely with the R.F.C., a harbinger of what was to be when the R.A.F. was formed—although No. 8 would have been very indignant to have thought itself anything but a proud member of the Royal Navy.

Conditions being very primitive and makeshift, it was several days before the squadron began operations, the first flying taking place on 3rd November. A week later No. 8 scored its first victory, a Roland shot down by Flt. Sub. Lt. Galbraith in a Pup; before the month was out it had lost its first pilot, too. By December the squadron had completely equipped with the Pup, but dreadful weather prevented much in the way of operations, neither had it improved greatly when the

*Line-up of the squadron's Sopwith Camels at St. Eloi, France, early in 1918. Note the white disc insignia behind the fuselage roundel used while the squadron was still "Naval Eight"*

squadron was pulled back to St. Pol, in the Dunkirk complex, for a rest in February 1917. While at St. Pol No. 8 re-equipped with the new Sopwith Triplane and this it took back to No. 22 Wing at Furnes on 14th February together with a few Pups which eventually faded out of the picture.

The next event of importance was the attack on Vimy Ridge in April and for this the squadron was tasked to escort No. 25 Squadron, R.F.C., on its bombing raids, a task which brought the naval unit really into the fighting, providing dogfights with the attacking German scouts. Both No. 8 and the Triplane proved themselves. Most of the flying for this had been from Auchel but, with the land advance, No. 8 could now move forward and set up a new base at St. Eloi. It was there that the squadron reached its peak in World War I.

No. 8 was now given the job of attacking the high-flying German artillery observation machines but soon found that, by sending up aircraft when the Germans were reported, it was too late; so No. 8 had to maintain a standing patrol high over the Front as most interceptions took place at upwards of 17,000 ft. This work was most successfully accomplished but it lacked the glamour of the big dogfights.

*Left: The Bristol Fighter served with No. 208 Squadron for a whole decade, up until 1930, and was used operationally in Turkey in 1922 during the Chanak Crisis. In latter years the squadron decorated its "Brisfits" with playing card insignia, as shown on JR6799. Right: Next type employed by No. 208 was the Armstrong-Whitworth Atlas, on which the squadron's "winged eye" emblem first appeared*





In July the squadron began a gradual re-equipment with Sopwith Camels.

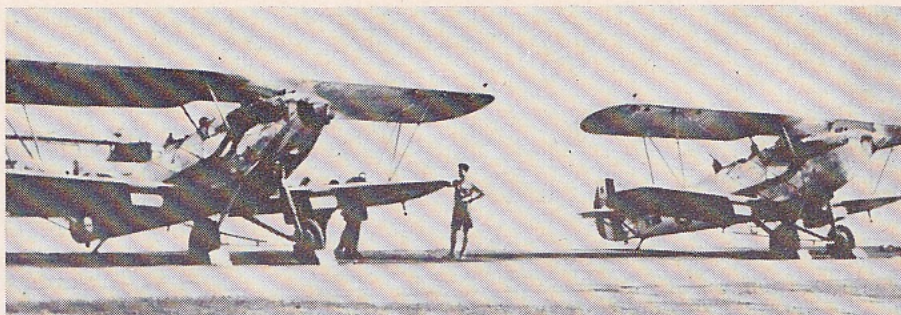
The flight commanders, Munday and Draper, decided to find some more offensive activities and specialised in attacking kite-balloon sheds at night with bombs slung under their Camels' wings, registering some success in this original field of operations. As the year drew on fighting flared up on the ground around Cambrai and No. 8 now went over to close-support, hedge-hopping around on recce. flights and attacking the enemy with bombs and machine-guns.

At the end of October Bromet was succeeded as C.O. by Chris Draper, one of the flight commanders. He built on the tradition that "Naval Eight" had already established with an indomitable spirit—it was the same Draper who flew an Auster through Tower Bridge in 1954 "to liven things up a bit". At the end of the year the squadron returned to its high-altitude work, achieving further victories and then, in the spring of 1918, returned to Kent for a rest.

### 86 victories in 5 months

At the end of March, however, things were so desperate in France that No. 8 was rushed back to help stem the German advance. The squadron went first to Teteghem, then to La Gorgue and it was there that No. 8 was overtaken by the advancing Germans; unable to fly its aircraft out due to fog, it had to burn them on the airfield and dash away in what transport it had. Back at Serny the squadron reformed with some more Camels and was back into the battle. It was based at Serny for five months, mostly engaged in air fighting and during this period shot down 86 German aircraft with only 6 casualties. On 1st April 1918 No. 8 Squadron, R.N.A.S., became No. 208 Squadron, R.A.F., and Sqn.-Cdr. Draper was now Major Draper. The squadron did not take kindly to the change at all, still called itself "Naval Eight" and even when Major Draper left the squadron in 1919, he and at least one other member of the unit were still wearing their naval uniforms! A change in the squadron markings had also taken place: up till then "Naval Eight" had been distinguished by a white disc on the fuselage side aft of the roundels, but from March 1918 its aircraft had two vertical bars aft of the roundels and sloping inwards at the top.

In July 1918 No. 208 moved to Tramecourt where one of its defence responsibilities was H.M. King George V, who was then residing in a nearby chateau, but in September it returned to its original No. 22 Wing from No. 10 Wing, taking up residence at the bleak Foucaucourt. From there it fought on until October, when signs of the final German collapse were showing. It moved on to Estrees-en-Chaussée and then Marez and there received the Camel's successor, the Sopwith Snipe. Before No. 208 could fly this type in action, though, the action had ceased with the Armistice on 11th November 1918. The squadron moved on into the



Above: By 1935 No. 208 had re-equipped at Heliopolis, Egypt, with the Hawker Audax. Note underwing panniers and message pick-up hook on the two examples shown here



Right: When W.W.II started the squadron had converted to the Westland Lysander, which it continued to use (later with Hurricanes) until 1941—L4677 is seen over Beirut harbour during the Syrian campaign that year (Photo: Imperial War Museum)

Army of Occupation where it spent ten months, at Stree, Heumar and Eil, before returning to England under Major Smart and disbanding on 7th November 1919 at Netheravon.

It was decreed that the peacetime R.A.F. should have a No. 208 Squadron so, on 1st February 1920, No. 113 Squadron, then at Ismailia, Egypt, was re-numbered 208. The "new" Naval Eight was commanded by S/Ldr. W. J. Y. Guilfoyle, O.B.E., M.C., and it was an Army Co-operation squadron equipped with R.E.8s. These were due for replacement and in October the first Bristol Fighters arrived; they lasted No. 208 a whole decade, during which time they served as general-purpose aircraft rather than simply in the army co-operation role.

In 1922 the squadron was in action again. The reason was Kemal Ataturk and

the locale was Turkey. The R.A.F. formed an Air Arm to help the Greeks stem the Turkish advance on Constantinople. No. 208 became part of this Air Arm, setting up base at San Stefano in September 1922. On 5th October it began its recce. work. Strategic and photo recces. were made of the forward Turkish positions and messages were dropped to the British Cavalry Corps. This was continued until hostilities ceased, by which time the Turkish General Ismet admitted that the British knew more about the disposition of Turkish troops than he did.

During this period in Turkey the squadron also carried out further experiments, one of which was a naval one and involved trying to bomb a running torpedo (see article "Chanak Crisis", July 1973 issue). With the Armistice signed in Switzerland in August, No. 208's stay in

No. 208's mount during the Italian campaign, and for the rest of the war, was the Spitfire IX. PV117 illustrated is a clipped-wing LF.IXE







*Meteor FR.9s of No. 208 Squadron in Malta sporting blue and yellow squadron markings each side of the fuselage roundels and blue and yellow flashes on the nose. Aircraft are WX956 and WX969. Parked behind are some Lockheed Neptunes*

## No. 208 Squadron . . .

Turkey ended and on 26th September 1923 the squadron was back at Ismailia. It is of interest to note that one of the Bristol Fighters flying with No. 208 at this time was D8096, the last remaining "Brisfit" to fly and now part of the Shuttleworth Collection.

Peacetime flying now involved the maintenance of a high standard of training and involvement in exercises. In October 1927 the squadron moved to Heliopolis, near Cairo, and two years later moved to Palestine, for operations, based at Ramleh and policing the Jewish/Arab fighting. During this period the squadron had its aircraft decorated with the four different suits of playing cards, usually on the fin.

In 1930 No. 208 at last relinquished its Bristol Fighters and re-equipped with the Armstrong-Whitworth Atlas. This gave the squadron a fillip and over the next few years No. 208's morale enabled it to win many cups and awards in Egypt. Its training duties took it as far afield as Baghdad and Khartoum and it designed its own unofficial crest (a winged eye), which was gaily painted on the rudders of its aircraft (and which has now reappeared on the fins of the Buccaneers).

Under S/Ldr. Whitworth Jones from 1933 onwards, the squadron expanded its ideas as an instantly mobile unit, being ready to go anywhere (almost) at a moment's notice (almost). In April 1934 yet another new type joined the squadron, which was now the only Army Co-operation unit in Egypt. Hawker Audaxes began to arrive at a leisurely pace, re-equipment being completed in August 1935. At the same time a fighter Flight was formed with Hawker Demons and, with the Abyssinian troubles in progress, No. 208

sent each Flight in turn on detachment to Mersa Matruh. "D" Flight, the Demon Flight, was attached to No. 29 Squadron at Amariya in January 1936 and was eventually absorbed by No. 64 Squadron. At the same time the whole squadron moved to Mersa Matruh until July, when it returned to Heliopolis and immediately showed its mobility by detaching to Ramleh again for active operations in September and October. By the end of the year No. 208 was back at Heliopolis.

Peacetime flying was continued and it was not until 1939 that the Audax gave place to the, Westland Lysander monoplane. By the time the war started in September 1939, the squadron had worked up on the Lysander and moved to Qasaba ready for action. No longer was the winged eye seen on No. 208's aircraft, although its identity was proclaimed by the anonymous code "GA". But in fact nothing happened until Italy entered the war in June 1940 and this gave the squadron time to establish itself more fully as a mobile unit—a feature which stood it in good stead when the fighting began.

### Against the Italians

With Italy in the war No. 208 began reconnaissance flights over the line and occasional artillery shoots on Bardia. However, it was soon found essential for the Lysanders to have fighter escort when enemy fighters were about. Usually the aircraft made a quick dash over the target and then high-tailed it for home, but inevitably one or two were caught and shot down. By November good news came to No. 208 with the arrival of Hurricanes to replace one Flight. Henceforth the squadron would fly both types. As these Hurricanes were fighters, most of their sorties were visual recces. This did not

prevent the squadron doing so well in the December as to earn General Wavell's praise. With fighter escort the "Lizzies" were able to do excellent close-support tactical recce.

In January 1941 No. 208 moved up to Gambut and a month later to Barce, where it was relieved on the 28th day by No. 6 Squadron, and on 3rd March moved back to Heliopolis. The intention was to give No. 208 all Hurricanes and re-equip its ground transport at Aqir in Palestine, but the invasion of Greece forced other plans and on 31st March the squadron left for Greece. Then began a succession of moves, all the while looking for a safe base, and in all these moves aircraft were lost. No. 208 eventually set up base at Amphiklia with two serviceable Hurricanes to its name. From there it moved back to Hassani. The two Hurricanes were attached to No. 80 Squadron while the ground crews, after several conflicting orders, and the Lysanders operated from Argos where they were shot up by Messerschmitt Bf 110s and destroyed. The personnel returned to Egypt via Crete.

No. 208 Squadron revived itself at Gaza in Palestine in May 1941. From there it sent detachments of Lysanders and Hurricanes to Habbaniya in Iraq and Amman in Transjordan, the latter attacking enemy aircraft at Damascus, preparatory to the invasion of Syria. The squadron concentrated at Gaza for this, sending one detachment to Haifa and another to Aqir, with long-range Hurricanes. The invasion began on 8th June and No. 208 immediately went in with the Army. Three pilots were killed in low-level work, two by Allied troops; the squadron was transferred to the Australian Corps to concentrate on the taking of Damascus and No. 208 picked up the information that the enemy was moving out, enabling the town to be quickly taken. With Syria subdued No. 208 concentrated at Ramleh.

In October 1941 the squadron went back to the Western Desert, to Gerawla to join 30 Corps. November 18th saw the start of a new Libyan offensive and No. 208 went out ahead to locate the enemy positions. From then on the battle was fierce and confused, raging back and forth across the desert. The squadron was engaged in many fights with German fighters, Messerschmitt Bf 109Fs predominating, and two pilots, F/O. Cotton and P/O. Moss, were awarded the D.F.C. for their actions. At the end of March 1942 No. 208 was relieved by No. 40 Squadron, S.A.A.F., and returned to Moascar in Egypt for a rest. During this heavy fighting the outclassed Lysander had faded from the scene and while in Egypt No. 208 received some Mk.II Hurricanes as well as the Mk.Is and a flight of Tomahawks.

On 15th May it returned to Sidi Azeiz and in June S/Ldr. Burnand, D.F.C., who had led the squadron through the last hectic fighting, handed over to W/Cdr. J. K. Rogers. Soon the enemy regained the initiative and No. 208, like the other forward squadrons, had to fly its daily

*Disbanded at Nicosia, Cyprus, in March 1959, No. 208 continued to exist by renumbering No. 142 Squadron at Eastleigh, Kenya, which was then flying D.H. Venom FB.4s. WR433 "F" is depicted at Eastleigh in April 1960 (Photo: T. Mason)*





sorties while retiring from airfield to landing ground, always moving slowly backwards. It was a tough and dispiriting period and by the end of June it had the heaviest casualties yet in the desert fighting. This toll continued and by September a high proportion of No. 208's experienced core had been killed; with a lull in operations a training flight was established to bring the new lads up to full operational trim. Also, the squadron now began oblique photography for the first time and this had to be practised. The Front opened up again at the end of October but before the big Alamein battles No. 208 was withdrawn from operations for a rest.

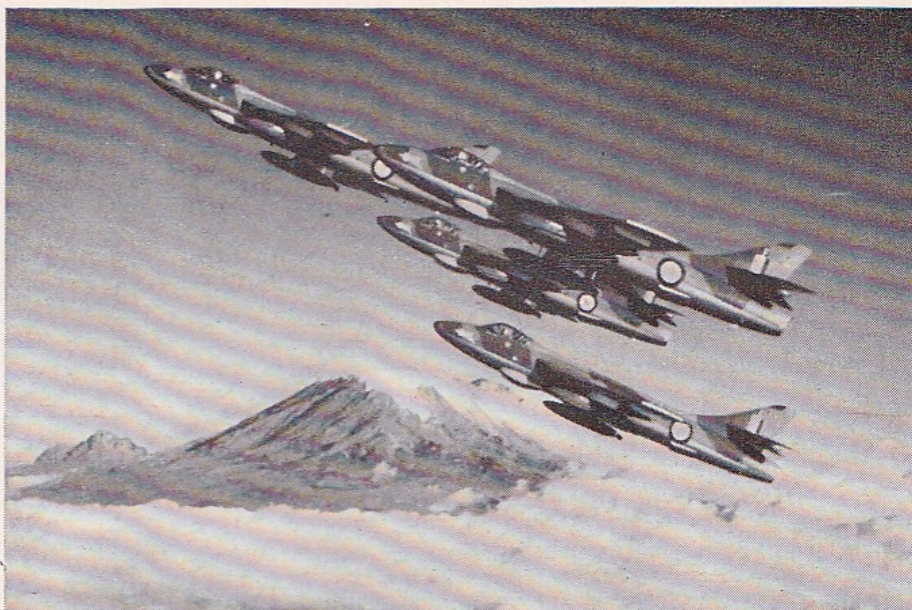
For this it retired to Iraq, being based at Aqsu and then LG K1. The next year was, in effect, a rest year for the squadron was non-operational for the whole of 1943. In November it moved across to Palestine, thoroughly despondent, but was cheered by the news that Spitfires were to replace Hurricanes. These came at the end of the year and in February 1944 they became operational—only to fly shipping patrols off Cyrenaica. By March, however, the squadron was on its way to Italy.

It joined No. 285 Wing at Trigno, a specialised recce. unit with two other fighter-recce. squadrons and a PR Flight. No. 208 now had a S.A.A.F. Commanding Officer, Lt. Col. Blaauw, formerly of No. 40 Squadron, S.A.A.F., which was itself part of No. 285 Wing. No. 208 immediately went into action, flying with No. 40 Squadron until familiar with the area, and they were there just in time for the assault on the "Gustav Line".

With the attack on Rome in May No. 208's attempt to provide continuous artillery observation was hampered by bad weather. With the "Line" broken No. 208 went over to tactical recce., following the German motorised columns. At this time it was flying about twenty sorties a day. Moves were the order of the day, too, and it was not until July that No. 208 really settled again, this time at Castiglione. Now the Germans had established the "Gothic Line" and this was fully photographed by the Wing before the offensive. Unfortunately for No. 208 this began in the east while the squadron was near the west coast. However, September was a heavy month with No. 208 averaging 36 sorties a day. At the end of the month the squadron moved to Peretola where it operated under the 22nd American T.A.C. Now the weather took over and for the next few months No. 208's only sorties were by its kind permission.

January 1945 saw the squadron directing artillery shoots on Bologna. Things proceeded in a desultory fashion until April when the final offensive was launched. This was quickly completed and after several moves No. 208 returned to the Middle East in June 1945.

In fact, it returned to Ramat David in Palestine, moving in August to Petah Tiqva, to a rapidly worsening political situation with riots and sabotage growing. In February 1946 seven of the squadron's aircraft were blown up by terrorists,



After a year on Venoms the squadron re-equipped, at Stradishall, with Hunter FGA.9s and then returned to Kenya, as shown here. Aircraft in the formation include XE607 "F", XJ687 "B" and XE544 "L" (Photo: Ministry of Defence)

depleting No. 208's patrols searching for illegal immigrants. The gallant Spitfire IXs were replaced by Griffon-engined FR.18s in August and early in 1947 the squadron had a welcome break with a goodwill mission to East Africa, putting on flying displays as they went.

After another year of shipping patrols No. 208 moved to Nicosia in Cyprus, in March 1948, with a detachment back at Ramat David. In April this detachment was operational once more to attack a terrorist hide-out in a brewery in Jaffa; their cannon and machine-guns drove the terrorists straight out. The squadron was also involved in continuous recce. duties for the Army—reminiscent of the days in Italy. On 22nd May, early in the morning, an Egyptian A.F. Spitfire appeared over Ramat David and bombed and strafed No. 208's aircraft, seven being damaged. Two more attacks were made, but No. 208 "scrambled" some of its own Spitfires and destroyed five Egyptian Spitfires. The following day the No. 208 detachment left Palestine.

In November 1948 the squadron returned to Egypt, being based at Fayid, and was used to report on the Jewish

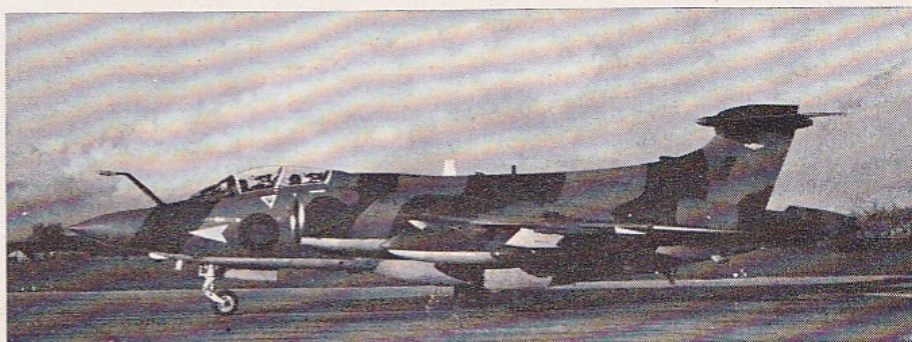
incursions into Egypt. While doing this a patrol of four of No. 208's Spitfires was jumped by Israeli Spitfires and all four British aircraft were shot down; one pilot was killed, two captured and one returned by Bedouins. Fortunately this was the end of No. 208's involvement.

### Changed to jets

The following year it received a Meteor T.7 on which to practise jet flying and in January 1951 the first Meteor FR.9s arrived. Being the only FR squadron in Egypt, No. 208 was the only Middle East unit to receive Meteors of this variety. S/Ldr. Morello was C.O. at the time of conversion, which represented a big change from the Spitfire. There now began a period of stability during which the squadron maintained the FR task until the Canal Zone was abandoned. On 18th November 1955, at Abu Sueir, the squadron's Standard was presented by its original Commanding Officer, now Air Vice-Marshal Sir Geoffrey Bromet, K.B.E., C.B., D.S.O.; three months later No. 208 left Egypt for ever.

Its new base was Hal Far, Malta, a naval base, but the squadron was soon

Disbanded in the Gulf in September 1971, No. 208 Squadron is now back in business, re-formed at Honington last July, with Buccaneers. S.2s, wearing blue and yellow nose flashes and winged-eye fin badges; note bulged bomb bay (Author's photo)





## No. 208 Squadron . . .

moved again to a trouble spot. In March 1956 it went to Nicosia where it patrolled to seek out the terrorists in Cyprus, but in August it was back again in Malta, this time at Ta Kali although it had had a detachment in Aden since March, operating against the Yemeni rebels. During the Suez crisis No. 208 patrolled Malta, identifying all incoming aircraft. The following year a detachment went to Bahrein to assist the Sultan of Muscat and Oman against his rebels, after which the squadron began running down. The Aden detachment joined No. 8 Squadron there and the Ta Kali H.Q. of No. 208 tetered to a halt.

In the meantime, at Tangmere in

Sussex, No. 208 appeared on British soil for the first time since 1919. At Tangmere, until the change, was No. 34 Squadron and the new No. 208 inherited a good part of its aircraft, Hunter F.5s, and pilots. A month later, February 1958, the squadron's brand-new Hunter F.6s arrived. These were immediately emblazoned with No. 208's official markings. For most of the war No. 208 had carried no squadron identity markings but from the Italian period onwards its Spitfires carried the code "RG" previously used on Hurricanes. This was dropped with the Meteors, which eventually carried an officially approved marking of sky blue and yellow horizontal bands, to signify the sky and the desert.

Thus painted, No. 208 took its Hunters

to Nicosia on 21st March 1958. The following month the squadron aircraft were "bombed" and one damaged. In July they detached to Amman to help King Hussein forestall a coup there, and No. 208 now began working up with rockets under the wings. However, a change of plan higher up brought about the squadron's disbandment at Nicosia in March 1959.

No. 208 did not die, however, for a month previously a new squadron had been formed at Eastleigh, Kenya. This was No. 142 Squadron and had Venom FB.4s. It was immediately renumbered No. 208. For a year the squadron maintained a presence in central Africa with a detachment to the Persian Gulf, but the Venom was running out of R.A.F. time and in March 1960 No. 208 flew back to Stradishall where it re-equipped completely with Hunter FGA.9s. These it took back to Nairobi in May and from there was detached to Aden and the Persian Gulf.

Thus No. 208 was ready in June 1961 when Kuwait was threatened and, on 2nd July, moved into Kuwait at the Sheik's request to maintain defensive patrols. It remained there until October, but then moved to Khormaksar, Aden, which was to be its new base, with periodic detachments at Bahrein. This back-and-forth life, with operations against the Yemeni rebels in Aden, continued until June 1964 when No. 208 moved permanently to Muharraq in the Persian Gulf, where it remained, as part of the Air Forces Gulf Strike Wing, until 10th September 1971 when it was disbanded.

Now a new No. 208 Squadron has been re-formed in a new role. It began to exist back in the summer of 1974 while the squadron aircrew were on course at No. 237 O.C.U. at Honington. The official re-forming date was 1st July 1974, but it was not until October that W/Cdr. Pete Rogers' unit began to seem like a squadron when its first Buccaneer S.2A arrived. It is now part of the Honington Strike Wing, alongside No. 12, the R.A.F.'s first Buccaneer squadron. No. 208 has adopted the official blue and yellow marking on the nose of its aircraft, modernised to an arrowhead, and has revived the unofficial winged eye on the fin to make sure that "Naval Eight" is well and truly on the map again.

### Representative aircraft

Sopwith Pup N5196; Sopwith Triplane N5479; Sopwith Camel B3845; Sopwith Snipe E8181; Bristol F.2B Fighter Mk.II JR6789; Armstrong-Whitworth Atlas K1569; Hawker Audax K3118; Westland Lysander I L4711 "GA:B"; Hawker Hurricane I V7670; Hurricane PR.1 P2638; Hurricane IIA BD793; Hurricane IIC HL830 "L"; Supermarine Spitfire IXE PV117 "RG:E"; Spitfire FR.18E TZ234 "RG:B"; Gloster Meteor T.7 WA606; Meteor FR.9 VZ606 "Z"; Hawker Hunter F.6 XF438 "R"; de Havilland Venom FB.4 WR530 "H"; Hunter FGA.9 XJ691 "G"; Hunter T.7 XL597 "X"; Hawker Siddeley Buccaneer S.2A XV156.

**RUSSIAN MARITIME AIR**—Top: High above the North Sea a Russian Tupolev Tu-95 "Bear D", snooping on British ships, is intercepted by a Lightning F.6, XR753, of No. 23 Squadron, R.A.F. Leuchars. Bottom: The Russian helicopter-carrier "Leningrad" photographed from 400 ft. by an R.A.F. Nimrod MR.1 of No. 203 Squadron, Luqa, Malta. On board can be seen two Mil Mi-8 "Hip" transport helicopters

