

# 100 years Vigilant

## New history celebrates squadron's centenary

On May 22, the standard of No. 208 Squadron will be laid up at St Clement Danes, just a few months short of the squadron reaching its centenary.

No. 208 began life as Naval Eight Squadron of the Royal Naval Air Service and was formed at Dunkirk on October 25, 1916 – in response to a request from Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig for squadrons to reinforce the Royal Flying Corps on the Western Front.

Initially equipped with a mixture of scout aircraft, it was soon fully equipped with the Sopwith Triplane, which it flew with great success before enhancing its reputation with the Sopwith Camel.

In just two years of fighting, the squadron developed a superb reputation and was one of the highest-scoring on the Front, with no less than 25 'aces'.

After a brief disbandment, the squadron reformed in 1920 at Ismailia, Egypt and so began many years as an Army co-operation squadron in the country. At the outbreak of World War II it was equipped with the Lysander, soon to be replaced by the Hurricane, flying tactical reconnaissance sorties throughout the fighting in North Africa and, for a brief period, in Greece and Syria.

Re-equipped with the Spitfire, it left for Italy in March 1944 and for

the next 12 months was in constant action as a fighter reconnaissance squadron in support of the British 8th Army and the US 5th Army.

At the end of the war it moved to Palestine and was in action during the difficult years before the British withdrew, when the squadron returned to Egypt where it re-equipped with the Meteor FR 9. It was one of the last squadrons to leave during the British withdrawal from Egypt in 1955 and, after a brief spell in Malta and Cyprus, it reformed with the Hunter F6 at RAF Tangmere before returning a few weeks later to Cyprus, where it was soon tasked to provide a detachment to Amman in Jordan.

For 18 months the squadron flew the Venom ground attack aircraft from

Flag at Nellis AFB, Nevada, the first non-US squadron to be invited to participate.

208 Sqn moved to Lossiemouth in July 1983 and converted to the maritime attack role in support of SACLANT. Within a few weeks it was involved in Operation Pulsator, the support of British forces in the Lebanon.

Using air-to-ship guided missiles and laser-guided bombs the squadron provided a formidable anti-surface-ship force.

Two weeks after offensive operations in the First Gulf War commenced, it was rushed to the region to provide

laser target marking for the Tornado force. The squadron's Buccaneers, which also dropped Paveway laser guided bombs, performed magnificently to gain its final battle honour 'Gulf – 1991'.

The Buccaneer was withdrawn from service in 1994 when the squadron was transferred to RAF Valley. For the next 22 years No. 208 (R) Squadron, flying the Hawk T1 (pictured inset left), has provided advanced pilot training to RAF, RN and overseas pilots.

Throughout its service, it has lived up to its motto 'Vigilant'. Its spirit continues through its squadron association and reunions.

By Graham Pitchfork

■ See RnR p8 to win copies of *Forever Vigilant*, Graham Pitchfork's history of 208 Sqn (published by Grub Street).



1917: Camels at the Front



1924: Khartoum Air Pageant



1932: Atlas rules the world



1944: Spitfire fighter recon in North Italy



1978: 208 Buccaneers with 1000lb bombs