

Gatwick Wartime History

by Harry Hawkins

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and July 2006 plus new additions*

Squadron By Squadron

After the outbreak of war, it took time to sort out airfield assets, consequently RAF activity at Gatwick did not begin until February 1940, when Croydon based 92 sqn set up a training element, and 18 and 53 sqns arrived as withdrawals from France. The airfield then played an increasingly important part in the war effort, indeed this effort went beyond the end of the war with VIP movements continuing until mid 1946, Gatwick finally being de-requisitioned on 31st August 1946.

The Public Records Office at Kew retains each squadron's Operational Records Book (ORB) and these can be inspected by members of the public. They are kept on microfilm reels and may be read, after registration, during normal office hours. For each individual squadron the record consists of the RAF Form 540, which is a daily summary of squadron activity submitted monthly, and the RAF Form 541, which is the daily detail of operational aircraft activity. There is a wide variation in the condition of these records, which reflects the variation in the people writing them. Some are well laid out and typed, making them easy to read, others are hand written and faded, these are the opposite! Also, there is little standardisation in the contents, again individual leeway seemed to be allowed, and for us this means that while some contain full serial numbers, others only have the numbers without prefix letters, while some only have the aircraft's individual letter codes.

These are the squadrons that were based here at various times during the conflict;

2 Squadron April to June 1944 Mustang I
4 Squadron April to June 1944 Spitfire XI
14 Squadron August to October 1945 Mosquito VI
18 Squadron May to June 1940 Blenheim IV
19 Squadron October 1943 Spitfire IX
26 Squadron Various times from 9/40 to 6/43 Lysander I, then Tomahawk I
then Mustang I
53 Squadron June to July 1940 Blenheim IV
57 Squadron May to June 1940 Blenheim IV
63 Squadron June to July 1942 Mustang I
65 Squadron October 1943 Spitfire IX
80 Squadron June to July 1944 Spitfire IX
92 Squadron Detachment only January to May 1940 Blenheim I
98 Squadron June to July 1940 Battle I
116 Squadron August to September 1944 Anson I
141 Squadron Several detachments late 1940 Defiant I
168 Squadron March 1944 Mustang I
171 Squadron August to September 1942 Tomahawk I, then Mustang I
175 Squadron December 1942 to January 1943 Hurricane IIb
183 Squadron April to May 1943 Typhoon Ib
229 Squadron June to July 1944 Spitfire IX
239 Squadron Various times from 9/40 to 4/43 Lysander I, then Tomahawk I,
then Mustang I
268 Squadron April to June 1944 Mustang Ia
274 Squadron June to July 1944 Spitfire IX
287 Squadron Several detachments mid 1944 Spitfire Vb

309 Squadron Several detachments 1941 to 1943 Lysander III, then Mustang I
400 RCAF Sqn Various times from 3/41 to 6/42 Lysander III, then Tomahawk I
414 RCAF Sqn Various times from 7/43 to 4/44 Mustang I
430 RCAF Sqn Various times from 7/43 to 4/44 Mustang I
655 AOP Sqn March to April 1943 Auster III

Naturally, many other support units were based here or passed through, these included, for example, Nos. 123, 129 and 130 Airfield Wings; 49 MU; No.404 Aircraft Stores Park; No.1 Aircraft Delivery Unit; No.1 AA Calibration Unit; No.71 Group (Army Co-op); Nos. 35 and 36 Army Co-operation Wings.

Below we have included a brief look at some of the aircraft these squadrons brought through Gatwick with them.

2 SQUADRON

2 SQUADRON arrived at Gatwick from Sawbridgeworth on 4.4.44 along with No.4 Squadron and their parent unit, No.130 Airfield. They brought with them their Mustang mounts, and were busily engaged on operational sorties from 7th April almost continually until the end of June. These dates, of course, represent the run-up to, and execution of the Normandy landings. (D-Day being June 6th).

During April, 44 photo-reconnaissance sorties were flown, and further work featured 34 Air-Sea rescue flights after a dinghy was spotted with an occupant in the Channel on the 13th. There were also 2 tactical reconnaissance sorties, and 4 so-called 'Noball' sorties, which were attacks against V1 rocket sites. Much training was done, a short detachment to Harrowbeer took place, and flying was only curtailed by bad weather on 4 days.

The pace was increased in May. 60 photo/recon sorties were made, plus 12 tac/recon trips, more training, and another visit to Harrowbeer for 'naval spotting'. In June, the emphasis changed with 36 photo/recon flights made on D-Day itself, followed over the next 21 days by a grand total of 318 tac/recon sorties. on 27th June the squadron moved on to its next base, Odiham, and the record is unclear on whether the 10 trips on that day were flown from Gatwick or Odiham.

Aircraft serial numbers do appear in this squadron's record, and those used during the period in question included these;

FD444 FD472 FD474 FD476 FD477 FD478 FD480 FD483 FD484 FD488 FD494 FD499
FD500 FD501 FD502 FD527 FD529 FD530 FD531 FD557 FD562 FD565 FD566 FD567
FR873 FR891 FR892 FR899 FR900 FR902 FR906 FR907 FR908 FR909 FR919 FR923
FR924 FR926 FR928 FR930 FR931 FR934 FR935 FR936 FR937 FR938 FR939 FR951
FR956

As is the nature of such things, in such a hostile environment casualties were sustained, and 2 sqn. was one of the more heavily affected Gatwick based units due to their significant effort in one of WWIIs biggest battles.

On 26th April FD478, flown by FO D.S.Buckie was airborne with his No.2 on a photo-recce over France when he was hit in the engine by flak, but he landed safely back at Gatwick at 1155L.

On 28th April both FL F.J.Reahil in FD567 and FL P.W.Leah in FD502 returned safely at 1608 and 1643 respectively after being hit by rounds from an enemy aircraft.

On 23rd May FL J.D.Furneaux was hit in FD530, he bailed out safely just south-west of Etretat.

On 28th May FL I.W.Harris was hit by flak in FD500 and baled out near Neufchatel, while Leah in FD502 and FL R.G.Gent in FD484 were attacked by a flight of eight Fw190s, though they completed their flight safely. Harris was posted missing.

On D-Day itself FO A.P.Crane was hit in the wing by flak while flying FR924, but he returned safely to Gatwick, while the following day saw the unlucky Furneaux crash on landing at the end of his sortie at Gatwick while in FD529, he was uninjured.

There followed a series of encounters with enemy aircraft, for example on 12th June Corrigan and Crane in FR919 and FR907 were fired on by two unidentified enemy aircraft, on the 13th Hope and Williams in FD565 and FR930 had to abandon their planned mission after coming under attack from four Me109s. Sadly, not all incidents ended with the safe return of the crews. On the 15th June FO D.G.Reich failed to pull out of a dive and crashed at Caudrec in FD565, and although only posted as 'missing' the assumption at the time was that he had been killed. Unfortunately just the next day a further loss was recorded when FO B.C.Tasker in FR892 failed to return after he and his wingman (FO R.C.Williams in FR919) were attacked by a force of 24 Fw190s. He was also posted as missing. On the 22nd FO P.G.Wilson in FR934 was hit by flak south of Versailles and was lost, reportedly possibly baling out. A difficult month ended badly on the 27th when Black was shot down in flames by flak at map ref. Q4606 while flying FR902. He was listed as 'missing, presumed killed'.

Proving that crews had to be alert at all times, a note appended to the sortie on the 16th June involving FO G.A.Percival and FO Kay-Hai Tan flying FR938 and FR934 respectively reads 'No.2 (Tan) was attacked and fired on by three Spitfires on return while passing the French coast after being followed for three minutes. Firing was inaccurate. (!).

Although only Gatwick based for a short period, 2 squadron is one of the more interesting records to look at because of their activity during the period.

4 SQUADRON

4 SQUADRON arrived in company with 2 Sqn, with whom they were linked under No.130 Airfield. Their record is also well preserved, but the writer of the Form 540 was more diligent, summarising the daily activities in more detail than the officer writing the 2 Sqn record. Although the squadrons undertook similar duties, ie photo- and tactical reconnaissance, 4 was equipped with Spitfires and Mosquitoes, rather than the Mustangs that were with 2 sqn. The two types were formed up in separate flights, 'A' flight featured the Spitfire, 'B' flight had the Mozzies. As we mentioned before, the two squadrons were at Gatwick during the very busy period each side of the D-Day landings in Normandy, but even with all the action going on, 'B' flight managed to re-equip with Spitfires in mid May.

The squadron arrived at Gatwick from Sawbridgeworth on 4.4.44 and began their operational flights over France on the 10th with 6 photo-recon sorties, 5 by Spitfire. 51 more operational sorties were flown during the month. Interestingly, the writer has noted his impressions of the airfield on his arrival, commenting that 'the runways are only just big enough for the Mosquito XVI, being 1400 yds, 1200 yds and 1000 yds, all with obstructions, eg buildings and the railway embankment'. These words were prophetic, for even before ops began Mosquito HJ756/X was written off on 9th April after an engine failure on take-off when it hit a dispersal hut, the crew were OK. Although enemy aircraft were encountered on occasion they were unable to engage with 4 squadron, though one operational loss is recorded on the 10th April when FO I.A.Turnbull 'did not return' in Spitfire PA901/J when flying as No.2 to Draper in PA857/F.

The more detailed nature of the record allows us to learn also that on 5th April three new Mosquitoes were delivered to the squadron from Benson, while on 23rd Mosquito MM299 flew to Northolt for some work on its pressure cabin, MM303 following the next day, this work only taking one day for each aircraft.

In May, of course, the operational pace increased, with 111 operational sorties being flown. In addition, nine aircraft plus the squadrons Oxford hack flew to Hartford Bridge for night flying

practice on the 1st and 2nd, while the conversion of 'B' flight to Spitfires took place from 11th to 18th inclusive. Presumably this was mainly by the transfer of aircraft from 'A' flight, for only three 'new' deliveries are noted with one aircraft arriving from Benson and two from Aston Down. Over at 2 sqn losses had already begun, but at 4 the only particularly noteworthy incident was on 12th May when Spitfire PA891/D with FL B.A.J.Draper at the controls returned with hydraulic failure and ran off the runway, the pilot was uninjured. Friendly forces were also a problem for 4 sqn, FL E.J.Lischke was intercepted on 30th May by four USAAF P-47s, though he was not fired upon.

Having flown more ops than 2 sqn in May, 101 sorties were managed in June, fewer than 2 sqn. This seems to be because 4 were only detailed photo-recon sorties, 2 were doing both photo- and tac-recons, and had a much bigger 'fleet'. In the first half of the month at least half of the sorties returned without having taken any pictures, presumably because of weather conditions. Happily, no losses were recorded, though one interesting incident on the 4th June saw FL R.M.Cowell suffering oxygen supply difficulties, he spent an hour semi-conscious over France at varying altitude before recovering to land back safely in PL787/Y with no memory of events. 4 squadrons sojourn at Gatwick ended on 27.6.44 when they flew off to Odiham with 2 sqn, 130 Airfield Wing, and 35 Wing HQ.

Aircraft allocated to 4 squadron and noted at Gatwick during their stay included these (unfortunately the Oxford serial is not noted);

Spitfires; EN680 PA852/E PA857/F PA884/A PA887/B PA891/D PA893 PA897/G PA899/H PA901/J
PA931/K PA949/O PL746 PL759 PL761/N PL762/L PL764/T PL765/P PL786/X PL787/Y
PL792 PL793 PL794/Z PL795 PL796/V PL831/S PL832 PL843 PL847 PL878

Mosquitoes; HJ756/X MM273/P MM286/S MM299/Q MM303/N MM309/O MM313/T
MM350/U
MM357/V MM361/W

14 SQUADRON

The 'RAF Squadrons' reference shows 14 SQUADRON based at Gatwick from 29.8.45 to 1.10.45 (ie after the end of the war) with a fleet of Mosquito VIs, but the Operational Records Book ends with the end of the war on 8.6.45. We have yet to find a way to recover details for the relevant period, and await an opportunity for further research.

18 SQUADRON

18 SQUADRON was one of the two squadrons which arrived at Gatwick having been evacuated from France in 1940. A note for April 1940 reads 'Records lost during the evacuation from France', so little is available for events prior to their arrival, and the record therefore opens in May 1940, and shows that the squadron's aircraft arrived from Watton on 26th May, the ground party arriving direct from France the following day.

The squadron moved on to West Raynham on 12th June where it was re-established to its proper numbers, but because of the dire condition the squadron was in while at Gatwick only one operational sortie was flown from here, this being a reconnaissance flight over France on 27th May in Blenheim IV R3734.

Although no serials other than this one can be confirmed, looking at the notes for prior to the Gatwick arrival and for ops from West Raynham in late June, these Blenheims were probably on strength during the period;

K3798 L1405 L6340 L8860 L8861 L8863 L8866 L9185 L9192 L9255 L9325 L9472 R3590
R3598

Though the first is difficult to be certain of in the record, and we would rather record it as K3(7)98 for the moment.

19 SQUADRON

19 SQUADRON arrived on 15.10.43 from its previous base at Weston Zoyland with its fleet of Spitfire IXs to join similarly equipped 65 sqn under 129 Airfield. Of particular note in the record is the fact that the Form 540 is very wordy indeed, entries recording items such as weather conditions in detail.

[Compare, for example, an entry in the 4 sqn record for an accident which reads thus; 'Spitfire 'D' returned with hydraulic failure and ran off the runway. Pilot (Draper) OK.' A similar incident in the 19 sqn record reads thus; 'F.Lt. Drinkwater returned early with undercarriage trouble. When attempting to land only the port wheel would lock down and in spite of all his efforts to release the starboard one from the up position he was forced to land the aircraft on one wheel. This he did perfectly with minimum damage to the aircraft and without sustaining injury to himself.].

The squadron also bought at least one Tiger Moth with them and some of its movements are noted, for example it flew Gatwick-Gravesend and return on 16th October. Only Gatwick based for ten days, the squadron undertook bomber escort and fighter sweep sorties over France. 16th October saw a wing practice undertaken with 65 sqn, on the 17th the first fighter sweep was undertaken in the Dieppe area, interestingly the 'whole' squadron participated in these sweeps with ten aircraft up together on this occasion. Further similar efforts were undertaken on the 18th (twice), 20th, and the 21st.

Bomber escort duties undertaken while at Gatwick began on 18th October when top cover was flown for 72 Marauders bombing Evreux, on the 20th to escort Fortresses to Douai and on the 22nd, with 72 more Marauders over Evreux. The squadron's last day at Gatwick was 24th October, on this day 12 Spitfires got airborne to act as top cover to 72 Marauders bombing Beauvais and then landed at their new base, Gravesend, while the balance of the squadron, seven more Spitfires, flew across from Gatwick to Gravesend at 1140.

A total of 121 operational sorties are recorded during the unit's short time here. While at Gatwick the squadron seemed to have a relatively peaceful time over France, no flak was experienced, nor were any enemy aircraft seen on any of the above mentioned operations. Aircraft used on ops while Gatwick based were these;

BS409 BS512 MA365 MA806 MA815 MA818 MA819 MA837 MA841 MA842 MH316 MH319
MH320 MH330 MH352 MH354 MH355 MH871 MJ215

26 SQUADRON

26 SQUADRON was one of two squadrons that can be considered 'our' own, being based here almost continuously from September 1940 to June 1943. 239 Sqdn. was the other, and with similar roles and equipment they later became linked and operated together as an Airfield unit.

Since the length of stay for these two squadrons was far in excess of that achieved by any other units based here, they merit a separate article to themselves rather than the brief round-up that they would receive in this format, therefore both will be omitted pending further research at a later date.

We will note, however, that the squadron arrived at Gatwick from West Malling on 3rd September 1940, bringing with them a fleet of Lysander Is. The Form 541 (see explanatory notes in the previous editions) records a far greater proportion of flights than in other ORBs looked at, including many ferry flights and other non-operational duties, at least in the early part of its time at Gatwick.

For the moment, we list here the Lysanders which were delivered in from West Malling on the day the squadron arrived, these being;

L4778 L4788 L4790 L4810 P1695 P1697 L1698 P1726 P9131 P9135

and, unusually, some of the squadron 'hacks' are recorded individually, these included Tiger Moth R4859, Magister L6898 and two Moth Minors, X9298 and X6460.

53 SQUADRON

53 SQUADRON was with us for just twenty-one days during 1940, arriving from Eastchurch on 12th June, and departing again for Detling on 3rd July. Despite the brevity of this visit twelve recce sorties over France were flown during this period using Blenheim IVs. These comprised a single sortie on the 13th June, another on the 14th, two more on the 16th and eight trips on the 18th. Of these last eight, three were flown together as a formation. Although this record is hand-written, Blenheims used on these missions can be deciphered as;

L9460 L9474 L9475 R3662 R3677 R3679 R3909 R3911

The ORB does note that on departure on the 3rd July the squadron took 20 Blenheims with it. Inspection of the record while the squadron was at Detling and at Eastchurch shows the following Blenheims were on squadron strength over the period and the Gatwick allocation MAY have included some of these;

L4841 L4842 L4843 L4847 L4848 L4849 L4850 L4852 L4860 L4861 L8853 L8863 L8735
L9329 L9330 L9331 L9332 L9339 L9459 L9466 L9616 L9735 N3551 R3596 R3605 R3634
R3691 R3700 R3703 R3715 R3733

One novelty item in the paperwork is the distribution of squadron personnel around the base and elsewhere, and the men were allocated as follows;

Squadron HQ offices, Ops office and Flight offices - In the terminal building.

Duty Pilot Office - Wooden building near north hangar

Personnel of A, B and C Flights - In the racecourse grandstand.

Officers - Messing at the Chequers Hotel, and living in tents and various houses around the aerodrome.

Personnel of HQ Flight - In tented camp in a field on the SW side of aerodrome

Thanks to some sterling further work on our behalf by Jock Manson at the 53 squadron association, it is now thought that the twenty Blenheims which left Gatwick for Detling at the end of the unit's stay comprised these;

L4849 L8789 L8794 L9238 L9460 L9474 L9475 N3551 R3605 R3660 R3661 R3677 R3678
R3679 R3699 R3779 R3819 R3849 R3909 R3911

It is just possible that L4847 and R3596 may have been on strength.

You will note that R3662, which flew an operation for 53 while at Gatwick does not appear on the list, this is because it has emerged that it was an 18 Sqdn aircraft presumably loaned for the occasion.

57 SQUADRON

Like 18 Sqdn previously mentioned, 57 SQUADRON is one of the units that had recently been evacuated from the continent, and an early note in the record reads, ominously, 'April 1940 : Records lost during evacuation from France'. During May 1940 the units operational element was based at Hawkinge, and other personnel were re-equipping at Wyton. The Gatwick sojourn began when Blenheim IVs arrived from Wyton on 27th May, to be followed by the Hawkinge element the following day.

This unit was another which stayed just a short while, departing again just fifteen days later back to Wyton. No operational sorties were undertaken from Gatwick, although on 28th May one aircraft carried out a dawn recce over France taking off from Hawkinge, encountering enemy aircraft, and returning there before ferrying over to Gatwick with the rest of the fleet. Time was not wasted though, with a visit received from AVM C.H.B. Blount, defence practice, cross-country flying and delivery of seven replacement aircraft on the 3rd June undertaken.

Unfortunately no aircraft serial numbers are noted during the time the squadron was at Gatwick, but by July the unit was based at Lossiemouth, and Blenheims on strength there, and therefore possibly on strength while at Gatwick, included these;

N3589 N3598 N3832 R3608 R3750 R3751 R3847 R3883 R3925 R3930

63 SQUADRON

Very interesting, this squadron, because they had the distinction of being formed at Gatwick! Official formation date was 15th June 1942, when elements of 239 and 241 squadrons were allocated to the new 63, the first aircraft arrived for them two days later when three Mustangs landed from 414 Sqdn. Wing Commander T K Lacey was posted in as CO on 20th June. Further notes provide an insight into the formation of new units such as this, with elements arriving piecemeal. The squadrons first flying had been undertaken on the 18th, before a CO had been allocated, when demonstration aerobatics were undertaken to mark a visit from AM Sir Arthur Barrett, then two more Mustangs were transferred from 26 Sqdn to allow the commencement of flying training.

In early July expansion accelerated, with four Mustangs delivered in from 4 Sqdn at York on the 4th, followed by two more the following day and six more on the 6th. On the 8th three fully modified Mustangs were collected from Speke. The squadron was, by now, slated to move on to Catterick shortly, and to this end eleven more Mustangs were delivered from Speke to Catterick on 10th and 11th July to await the units move up from Gatwick, which was achieved on 16th July.

Thus the new squadron had been formed up at Gatwick and had accomplished its first move all in just one month. Sadly the record does not include aircraft serials for the Gatwick period. Indeed, operational flights did not begin until February 1943 using Mustangs AG575, AM150 and AM154, but there is no evidence that these were on strength while 63 was at Gatwick.

65 SQUADRON

At Gatwick for a mere ten days, 65 SQUADRON packed a lot into this short period. The squadron was equipped with Spitfire IXs, and arrived from Ashford on 15th October 1943 as part of 129 Airfield which also included 19 squadron (see March 2003), but sadly the move did not go particularly smoothly with two aircraft lost, these being BS452/L (WO Gillham) on take-off at Ashford and MH362/N (F/Sgt Pittock) on landing at Gatwick, though both pilots were safe.

Ops from here began in earnest two days later when, after 13 aircraft were launched and recalled, 12 Spitfires launched for a fighter sweep over France at 1500 in company with a similar number of 19 Sqdn aircraft. The 18th had three operations flown, at 0830 eleven aircraft flew top cover, with 19, for 72 Marauders bombing Evreux, at 1340 thirteen aircraft, again with 19, flew top cover for Fortresses over France, then at 1610 thirteen more flew a fighter sweep over France. The next few days saw similar activity, with further fighter sweeps, and top cover for Marauders bombing targets in France such as Evreux (again), St. Andre and Beauvais. The Gatwick period ended on 24th October when twelve Spitfires flew top cover for bombers over France and then landed at their new base, Gravesend, where they joined 122 Airfield, having been only temporarily attached to 129 Airfield.

This period of operations turned out to be relatively routine, with no enemy aircraft encountered, but on landing at Gatwick after a fighter sweep on the 18th October FO Sutherland had his tailwheel torn off on arrival in MH848, damage being assessed as 'Cat A'.

These Spitfires were used by the unit while based at Gatwick;

BS144 BS286 BS347 EN473 MA420 MA628 MA812 MA832 MA835 MA845 MH328 MH358
MH372 MH373 MH376 MH378 MH388 MH824 MH851 MH873 MH908

80 SQUADRON

This squadron were very short term basees, only here for nine days in the summer of 1944. They left their previous base of Merston on 27th June but only as far as Tangmere, because the ground party was not ready to receive them until the 29th when they completed their transfer here with a complement of nineteen Spitfire IXs and a single Tiger Moth. They left again on 5th July to West Malling.

Aircraft serials for the aircraft arriving from Tangmere are given in the record, and were as follows;

BS392 BS409 BS512 BS556 EN127 JL227 MA226 MA230 MA301 MA376 MA639 MA806
MA845 MA899 MH378 MH828 MH873 MH881 MJ311

The squadron was very active during its short stay, however. Three operations were flown from Tangmere on the 27th before they even arrived at Gatwick, with pressure on them to support the relatively recent allied invasion of Europe now underway and making progress off the beaches of Normandy. This was followed on the 28th with the despatch from Tangmere of twelve aircraft to cover Lancasters bombing St Omer. On the 29th, now safely ensconced at Gatwick, two twelve-aircraft fighter sweeps were carried out over the Evreux-Alencon area, and on the 30th twelve aircraft, together with a similar number from 247 Sqdn escorted 22 Stirlings attacking Caen.

On 1st July low cloud restricted them to another escort, again with 247, this time to Halifaxes south of Amiens. Weather deteriorated on the 2nd and only five aircraft of 'A' flight were able to accompany Lancasters to Domleger and Beauvoir. With the worsening weather on the 3rd only eight aircraft could complete a single escort mission in the late evening with Mitchells to Argentan, though it was much better on the 4th when 25 sorties were flown, escorting Halifaxes to Domleger and later carrying out a fighter sweep once more to the Evreux-Dreux-Alencon area. The squadron departed at 1100 on the 5th July 1944.

Little resistance was reported over France. Some AA fire was encountered on the 29th July, light damage to one (unspecified) aircraft caused it to make a precautionary landing at the beach head. During the sweep later in the day a single Me.109G was seen and attacked, but no claim was made.

These were exciting and dangerous times for the RAF, and it is interesting to see Gatwick units so heavily involved in one of the most significant battles of WWII (see 2 and 4 Squadron notes for other examples of Gatwick's contribution to D-Day).

92 SQUADRON

In the early months of 1940 this unit was based at Croydon, and during January, February and March its Blenheims were regularly detached to Gatwick. Although the ORB mainly features Croydon activity happenings at Gatwick are outlined, but since there were no operations flown during this period only the day to day diary in the Form 540 was completed.

There are one or two interesting notes to make, though, for example the Squadron definitely also used a Master and a Magister during the period. An advanced training base was established by the squadron at Gatwick on 24th January, though due to bad weather and waterlogging it was not used until 10th February when the units Blenheims appeared for the first time, the whole squadron staying here all day for training. Local flying took place from here over the next few days, and AA exercises were also carried out. The detached aircraft

flew back to Croydon on the 21st, leaving a single aircraft here for one more day undergoing repairs.

The unit remained at Croydon for the next four weeks. On 20th March the squadrons pilots were loaded onto three Blenheims and flown to Shawbury tasked to collect the second batch of Spitfires allocated to 92, nine were picked up. On that same day, though, HQ Fighter Command ordered 92 to disperse all its serviceable aircraft to Gatwick, consequently many of these flew directly to Gatwick, others arriving here via Croydon. By that evening, fourteen Spitfires, 2 Blenheims and the Magister were here. Over the next few days various ferry flights between the two airfields were flown, mainly for maintenance tasks to be carried out, until 27th March, when Gatwick became waterlogged again and the Squadron went back to Croydon for the last time.

Although at war, over this period the pressure on units of the RAF at Gatwick was yet to build up to the levels reached later in the conflict. This is reflected in some of the fairly laconic notes in the diary, for example on 24th January it reads 'PO Williams had his [Blenheim] port engine and reduction gear fall off over Brighton, and he carried out a successful emergency landing at Gatwick' (.....some 30 miles away!) Similarly on 27th March 'no flying possible today since the Gatwick race meeting was in progress'.

Since no Form 541 was completed no aircraft details are available, but two months later the squadron found itself based at Northolt, and Spitfires definitely on strength by then included these, which could possibly have been on the books while at Gatwick;

N3192 N3193 N3194 N3248 N3249 N3250 N3285 N3290 P9316 P9367 P9368 P9370 P9371 P9374

Eagle-eyed readers will recognise N3194 as the serial number carried by the plastic replica Spitfire guarding the gate at Biggin Hill, it would be nice to know for certain whether this was ever Gatwick based.

98 SQUADRON

This unit makes an appearance in the column although their records are sadly very incomplete. 98 was attached to the British Expeditionary Force with Fairey Battles during May 1940 and was based at Chateau Bougon, but during the retreat from France these records were lost, as were those for June 1940 which had been logged with HQ No.2 Base Area at Nantes. On the 8th June 1940 orders were given to return to the UK, and during the following week all the remaining aircraft departed to Lossiemouth and then on to Gatwick. Several Bombay and Ensign aircraft were used to ferry out stores, documents and some personnel, and the CO left Chateau Bougon in the last aircraft on 15th June.

Worse was to come though, for many personnel were transferred to St Nazaire and were embarked in the SS Lancastria to return by sea, but this was sunk by enemy bombing on the morning of 17th June 1940, among those lost were approximately 90 members of 98 Squadron.

After gathering those remaining personnel and Battles together at Gatwick, it had been thought that the Squadron would be disbanded, but instead in the early part of July 1940 98 was reformed for new duties in Iceland. The squadron therefore set off for Newton on 24th July where it added Battles to bring its total up to nineteen aircraft before continuing its journey to Kaldadarnes on 27th August. Only nine pilots with the unit in France were still with it when it transferred to Iceland. The aircraft left Newton in two flights, one of nine aircraft and one of ten, and serial numbers of the first nine were noted, and these are shown here as they could include some which made it from Gatwick;

L5063 L5066 L5073 L5099 L5331 L5332 L5343 L5505 L5554

116 SQUADRON

This squadron was a short term visitor, arriving from North Weald on 27th August 1944 with a fleet of Avro Ansons. By the time they arrived they had been titled 116 (Calibration) squadron, and the difficult to read ORB features some very detailed and tedious weather reports, while the aircraft operations pages read along the lines of the entry for 1st September, for example;

01.09.44 SLC completed No.5 AA group; 1 HU site; 8 CS sites; GL carried out No.3 AA Group; Bristol 7 ended No.4 AA group; Birmingham ZH1 begun, Newport 71 completed, No.1 AA group; London S19 ended, Colchester CL5 ended, No.6 AA group; South Coast H7 begun, Portsmouth P50 completed, Southampton SC begun, Slough SM10 begun.

As you can see a lot of jargon and calibration short-hand has been used which will require more research than I am willing to put in to understand the squadron activities further. It continues in the same vein until 5th September, when the squadron moved on to Redhill. The record was inspected for several months before and after this visit, but no aircraft serials were noted.

By chance I happened to glance at the page for 14th January 1945, when the squadron was Redhill based, where it was noted that Flight Sergeant R.H.Flanders belly-landed Airspeed Oxford HN437 at Gatwick.

141 SQUADRON

In September 1940 this squadron detached its 'B' flight south from Turnhouse, first to Biggin Hill and then to Gatwick. Later, the whole squadron arrived from Drem. On strength were Boulton-Paul Defiant Is, and at least one Miles Magister, and the timetable for the period in question was as follows;

12.09.1940 'B' Flight leaves Turnhouse to Church Fenton where bad weather delays them.

13.09.1940 'B' Flight arrives at Biggin Hill from Church Fenton.

16.09.1940 First patrols are flown from Gatwick by aircraft detached from Biggin Hill.

18.09.1940 'B' Flight transfers from Biggin Hill to Gatwick, now sending aircraft on detachment to Biggin.

21.10.1940 The whole squadron receives instruction to transfer from Drem to Gatwick, the ground party leaves on this date.

23.10.1940 The aircraft leave Drem, but are once again held at Church Fenton by bad Weather.

24.10.1940 The aircraft leave Church Fenton and arrive at Gatwick via Reading and Farnborough

27.10.1940 The squadron receives instructions that it is to transfer to Gravesend on 29.10

28.10.1940 Yesterdays instructions to move are cancelled!

03.11.1940 The move to Gravesend is on again and the ground party departs, but weather delays the aircraft.

04.11.1940 The aircraft leave Gatwick for Gravesend.

Being night-fighter types, the Defiants flew over 60 night patrols from Gatwick during this short period and saw a bit of action, with enemy aircraft sightings reported on four nights, and even a pair of victories being claimed on the night of 16th September when pilot P.O. Waddingham and his gunner Sgt Cumbers shot down two He111s. On the other side of the

coin they also had to take a bit of punishment, for on the nights of 29th October and 31st October P.O. Constantine and P.O. Russell were both shot at by their own anti-aircraft defences! Registrations are given only for some of the operational flights, implying that these were some of the Defiants at Gatwick at this time;

L6988 L6999 L7000 L7014 N1537 N1549 N1552 N1566 N1622 N1625 N1725

One or two operational incidents are noted, for example on 28th September Waddingham crash landed at Gatwick in L7014 without injury to either crew, after damaging the wing tip of N1549 while landing just four nights earlier. An unidentified Defiant crashed on landing on the night of 29-30th October with Sgt Laurence at the controls.

Transferring the squadron around was also not without its problems, for when leaving Church Fenton for Gatwick on 24th October P.O.s West and Lammers had to catch a train because their aircraft were unserviceable, and during the ferry flight P.O. Edwards suffered undercarriage trouble and damaged his aircraft in a precautionary landing at Cottesmore. Similarly, departing to Gravesend in bad weather at the end of their stay, many aircraft had to land elsewhere, and P.O. Marsland crashed near Kenley, he was fortunately unhurt.

168 SQUADRON

This unit spent the best part of a month at Gatwick during the build-up to D-Day and was equipped with Mustang Is operating in the PR role. They arrived at Gatwick from Odiham on 6th of March 1944, one section having taken off from Odiham, flown a sweep over France, and landing at its new base here. They became part of the 139 Airfield Group while they were at Gatwick. They flew their first 'ops' the following day when AP167 and AM159 carried out a PR flight over France, and this type of activity continued during the stay, mainly consisting of a daily two-aircraft sweep over France, though on the 23rd March, for example, six aircraft flew a formation PR sortie departing at 1330 and returning at 1500.

These flights were not entirely unopposed, for on 9th March FO J D Stubbs was hit by AA fire in AP167 though he returned safely, while on 16th March FO J S Wright was not so lucky, he was posted missing in AM209 having failed to return.

The Form 540 gives details of several training tasks undertaken, for example it seems that a detachment to Bircham Newton had taken place while the Squadron was still at Odiham, and this detachment returned to join them at Gatwick on 11th March, while two officers and their aircraft positioned to Westhampnett from 22nd to 25th March. The squadron returned to Odiham on 31st March, seventeen aircraft departing at 1400, 'the remainder departing later'.

Slightly unusual is a mention in the ORB of the situation relating to the Squadron 'hacks'. Clearly while at Gatwick they were due to exchange their Miles Master for an Auster III, for on 8th March it is recorded that FO Stubbs 'collected the new Auster III from Ipswich', but unfortunately it was used to ferry a pilot collecting a new Mustang I to Odiham on 11th March where it crashed, being declared Cat.B. Sadly that didn't stop the disposal of their Miles Master, this was collected by Delivery Flight from Hendon on 12th March. Unfortunately no serial numbers are recorded.

The Form 541 does record serial numbers, and aircraft noted as having carried out operational flights while at Gatwick are;

AL969 AM141 AM159 AM194 AM197 AM204 AM209 AM210 AM225 AM244 AP167 AP195

171 SQUADRON

This unit was only short-lived, though it did have the distinction of being actually formed at Gatwick in June 1942. It stayed here until early December of that year before moving on to Hartford Bridge, though it was disbanded again shortly after, in February 1943, when it became the nucleus of 430 Sqdn, one of the Canadian units which later re-appeared at Gatwick. In fact 171 Sqdn was also revived later, in September 1944 as a bomber squadron.

15 th June 1942 was the day it came into existence, initially equipped with 12x Tomahawk IEs and 2x Tomahawk IRs, and it was quickly headquartered at the Gatwick Jockey Club. Strangely, orders were received almost immediately that the unit would transfer to Odiham, so they set to getting organized, their first three aircraft were delivered in from 414 (RCAF) Squadron on 16th June (followed by five on the 4 th July and three more on 5th July). HRH the Duke of Kent was entertained on 23rd June, presumably as part of the commissioning process. The order to move to Odiham came on 9th July but could not be executed until the 11th due to inclement weather, when seven Tomahawks were serviceable enough to make the transfer.

The unit was only away for six weeks, returning from Odiham to Gatwick on 25th August. Although the unit was still not committed to operational flying they did seem to have a fairly busy time training, for it is known that accidents to AH863, AK181, AH781 and AH932 all occurred during July while away at Odiham. They had also taken delivery of an unspecified Tiger Moth on 26th July.

Having returned, the training effort continued, as did the accidents, The ORB records that AH831 was damaged on landing on 27th August and was repaired by 49MU at Faygate, AH946 did likewise the following day, while on the 30th AH930 had an engine failure and force landed at Sussex House Farm in Cowden. 1 st September saw AH895 force landed in a field nearby and it was also sent to Faygate for repair. Several detachments were made for gunnery practice, four aircraft went to Madley (for the Sennybridge ranges) on 6th September, while eight more flew off to Weston Zoyland on the 10th . On the 16th September the Squadron's Miles Master, this time 'named' as DL646, was visiting the Weston Zoyland detachment when it had an undercarriage collapse while taxiing there, and it joined the queue of jobs at 49MU and was replaced when, on 23rd September, Master W8518 was allocated to 171. Mustang Is now came on strength as Tomahawk replacements, the log shows 76 hours flown in Mustangs during September (compared to 228 hours by Tomahawks), and although the ORB does not record any delivery details things must have changed fairly fast, because in October, when operational flying began, all 'ops' were carried out in Mustangs.

This was not the end of the Tomahawk with 171, for the October figures show 73 Mustang hours as opposed to 239 still by Tomahawk, many of these latter trips were made as training flights for attached Belgian Air Force pilots who were in for work-up on the type, this activity continued into November.

Initially, operations consisted of patrols along the south coast, the first being flown by Wing Commander P Hadfield in Mustang AG184 with PO J A Atkinson alongside in AG555. The first photo-recce mission came on the 18th October, and these types of mission continued for the rest of the time the Squadron was at Gatwick, though these were run down after 2 nd December, the unit departing to Hartford Bridge as described earlier on 7th December 1942. Serial numbers are given for the Mustangs involved in operational flying and these are recorded;

AG110 AG184 AG364 AG400 AG441 AG538 AG545 AG555 AG579 AM110 AM184

In addition, a further Tomahawk accident is noted on 20 th November when AH932 landed with its wheels up at Gatwick, so Tomahawks definitely on strength at Gatwick included all the casualties mentioned i.e., AH831 AH895 AH930 AH932 and AH946, together with the two Masters mentioned in the text and at least one Tiger Moth.

175 SQUADRON

This unit was here for a two month stay at the end of 1942, and brought with them a type which turned out to be unusual for Gatwick, the Hurricane II. The differing styles of the officers responsible for record keeping is well illustrated here, with the Form 540 written in a very chatty narrative style, and operations recorded include some which would not rate as operational flights in other records, for example local familiarisation flights and low flying

practice. So much the better for us though, as serial numbers are recorded and therefore a 'proper' full log could be compiled.

The squadron arrived from its previous base at Harrowbeer on 9th December 1942 with nineteen aircraft landing before lunch, and local flying began on the 11th, continuing throughout the month with some breaks due to bad weather. (Indeed it is recorded that two aircraft landed at Redhill due to weather on 14th December, though these serials are not specified). The end of December saw three days of participation in exercise 'Ghost', an Army Co-Operation Exercise happening in the area.

January 1943 began in much the same vein but, as seems usual at the time, orders were soon forthcoming to move on, and the Squadron left for Odiham, taking nineteen aircraft with it, on 13th January after a stay of just four weeks.

The aircraft involved in the delivery flight in from Harrowbeer were;

BE394 BE417 BE478 BE489 BE492 BE502 BE668 BE679 BP295 BP705 BP737 HV555
HV556 HV839 HV840 HV844 HV882 HW118 HW140

Straggler BE404 followed on the 12th. Those of you counting will notice that this makes twenty while only nineteen left, and this is because, sadly, on 5th January PO I S Galbraith crashed and was killed during a cross-country flight near Wroughton in BP705. Indeed further tragedy struck when another pilot, Sgt. W J Perry fell into a ditch on his way to lunch on 4th December, he died of his injuries on the 7th.

183 SQUADRON

183 Squadron were again only short-term visitors, but they seemed to pack a lot in to their stay of less than one month. They arrived from Colerne with their Typhoon IBs on 8th April 1943, joining longer term residents 26 and 239 Squadrons (both Mustang equipped), who formed 123 Airfield Group here. A rather downbeat squadron author noted on arrival that day that their first job was to put up the tents in which they were to live, though he did record that their pay increased by 5 shillings a day for the inconvenience, and that visiting London would be much easier!

This record is much stricter in its definition of operational flights, which began on the 14th with several standing patrols. On 17th April ten aircraft flew to Ford to get 'bombed-up' for the squadron's first bombing operation over France, though in fact they didn't go until the 19th due to bad weather the previous day, and this consisted of an eight aircraft sortie against a power station at Yarnville, escort being provided by 1 Wing at Kenley. Flying training then continued, and included 'Operation Curly Kate' another Army Co-Operation event, until ten aircraft were detached to Exeter on the 28th to prepare for an anti-shipping strike which was then cancelled due to bad weather, the aircraft returned the following day.

Orders had by this time come through for another move, and the unit consequently departed on 3rd May 1943 to Lasham, taking their fourteen Typhoons with them.

Aircraft serial numbers (only thirteen, unfortunately) recorded for the operational flights were;

R8884 R8885 R8944 DN242 DN249 DN257 DN263 DN268 DN273 DN275 DN297 DN344
DN377

229 SQUADRON

The record for this unit's time at Gatwick is disappointingly incomplete. It does record that in the ten days prior to their arrival they had been at Tangmere and Detling, and then Merston, from whence they flew in on 28th June 1944. The aircraft on strength was the Spitfire IX, and on the 28th six aircraft flew as cover for a Halifax raid on St. Omer landing back at Gatwick, while the rest of the Squadron proceeded directly. On the 29th eleven Spitfires carried out a

sweep over Lisieux and Evreux , and on the 30 th twelve aircraft escorted Lancasters and Halifaxes bombing Villers Bocage.

Sadly, this is where wartime record keeping is shown to be a bit hit and miss, for the Form 541 for June 1944 is not on the microfilm at PRO so aircraft details cannot be reported. After just the four day stay, one of the shortest noted in this series, the squadron packed up and flew out to Coltishall on 1st July 1944 taking seventeen Spitfires with them. Form 541 is present for this month but this historian only recorded code letters rather than serial numbers, for what its worth these were A B C D F H J K L M N P Q R X Y and Z ! It is also noted that the Squadron took a 'hack' Tiger Moth with them.

I did look further back in the record and some serial numbers, without letter code tie-ups, were recorded in April 1944, two months prior to their Gatwick arrival during a very busy period, so some of these MAY have been among the Gatwick residents;

BS340 BS393 MA220 MA817 MH372 MH835 MH855 MH909 MJ310. Also the Tiger Moth may have been DF182, which was noted with the Squadron in August 1944.

More Gatwick based squadron records will be reviewed in future editions of 'Hawkeye'. If you are not a member and would like to learn more, why not join the Gatwick Aviation Society and receive the 'Hawkeye' continuation.