

## **A brief History of No. 610 (County of Chester) Squadron of The Royal Auxiliary Air Force**

1. Led by keen and courageous pilots and supported by a loyal and efficient ground staff, No. 610 (County of Chester) Auxiliary Squadron was a R.A.F. unit of which, not only the County of Chester, but the whole of Britain can indeed be proud.

2. Its pilots took part in many of the "Big Shows" of the war. Patrols, escorts, reconnaissance, sweeps, anti-flying-bomb operations - all find a place in the Squadron records. No. 610 made the Hun pay dearly for his temerity, if figures speak for themselves. Apart from successes against shipping, transport, and sundry other targets, the Squadron's total bag during five and a half years of battle was: enemy aircraft destroyed 132; probables 46; damaged 53; flying-bombs destroyed 50.

3. A feature of this outstanding record is the fact that 120 of the total squadron 'bag' of 132 enemy aircraft, were destroyed in the first two and a half years of the war, accounted for by the large number of aircraft shot down by the Squadron during the Battle of Britain.

4. No. 610 Squadron was formed at Hooton Park in Cheshire, in February 1936, as a bomber unit. In January 1939 it re-mustered as a fighter squadron and in October 1939, moved to R.A.F. Station, Wittering, Northants. Spring of the following year brought a move for the Squadron to Scotland, but its sojourn here was brief.

A month later the Germans invaded the Low Countries and the Squadron rushed to the South for air operations covering the evacuation from Dunkirk. During these operations over the Dunkirk area between the 27th and 31st May 1940, inclusive. Ten enemy aircraft were confirmed as having been destroyed by the Squadron, for the loss of seven pilots.

5. The Squadron's first major clash with the enemy was on 27th May when a Heinkel, protected by about 40 Me 110s, was engaged, The fight which ensued culminated in the Heinkel and three of its escorting fighters being shot down. Throughout August the Squadron was involved in bitter fighting over the Channel and Home Counties. The enemy made determined and repeated attempts to knock out our airfields in the South of England and he met with the fiercest opposition from a small but gallant band of British fighters. During the Battle of Britain No. 610 Squadron operated from Biggin Hill, Hawkinge, and, on one occasion, from Croydon. The Squadron put up a terrific show and 40 enemy aircraft were confirmed as having been destroyed by 610 Squadron during August. The loss to the Squadron was eleven pilots killed during the Battle.

6. Throughout this tremendous period of history the ground crews worked miracles of skill in keeping the Squadron's aircraft up to the fullest operational efficiency. Rarely was a damaged aircraft allowed to remain unserviceable for more than a few hours, even if it meant the crews working every minute of the day and night to effect the necessary repairs.

7. In December 1940 the Squadron moved to Westhampnett, a satellite airfield of Tangmere and then north again, but in March 1941 returned to counter the enemy raiders making heavy night attacks on London. Its pilots made many night patrols and on 10th March the Squadron Commander destroyed a He 111 which dived into the sea from 6,000 feet. This is claimed to be the first occasion on which a Spitfire shot down an enemy aircraft at night. The Squadron was kept busy during the next three months and by June had accounted for another 18 enemy aircraft shot down mainly over the Channel and occupied territory during intruder sweeps.

Similar operations yielded seven 'kills' in July and August. At the end of August 1941, the Squadron moved to Yorkshire and stayed there until early 1942. In April the Squadron arrived at Ludham in Norfolk and was soon engaged on convoy patrols and reconnaissance. A number of combats took place and by the end of June 1942, the Squadron's score of enemy victims had risen to 120 aircraft destroyed, 40 probables and 37 damaged.

Note: During the many enemy air raids on Biggin Hill in August and September 1940 there were many casualties on the ground; on the 30th August there were over forty killed (RAF, WAAF and civilians employed on the Station). 610 Squadron lost four killed and at least two seriously injured.  
(E. Raymond Ellis August 1988)

8. August opened well with operations over the French coast. Many air engagements were fought culminating in the fierce and sustained battle over Dieppe on 19th August. The Squadron was in the air all day, only landing to refuel. Two pilots were lost but at least three of the enemy were destroyed and many others probably destroyed or badly damaged.

9. During September 1942, the Squadron was employed on shipping reconnaissance off the Dutch coast and intruder patrols over occupied territory, in addition to its usual activities.

10. On 9th October No. 610 took part in an operation which was hailed at the time as the biggest day bombing raid of the war - the bombing of Lille. The Squadron helped provide cover for the withdrawal of more than 100 Fortresses from the target.

11. After another short spell in Scotland, the Squadron moved south again, this time to Sussex. In January 1943 its pilots had several brushes with the enemy over occupied France but the highlights of the period did not occur until 29th March when two members of the Squadron engaged on cine gun practice decided to break cloud over Brighton. On doing so, they saw four aircraft over the town and explosions in the streets below. They immediately dived in pursuit, caught up with the enemy as they were leaving the area and shot two of them down.

12. During April the Squadron made numerous sorties over France as escort to our bombers attacking marshalling yards and airfields. At the end of the month a move was made to Perranporth, Cornwall, where No. 610 was engaged mainly on convoy patrols. In June the Squadron was again on the move. Bolt Head, Devon, was its new station and from here many convoy patrols and air/sea rescue sorties were carried out.

24th September was a red-letter day. Two Me 110s were destroyed, the first to be confirmed for some months.

13. No. 610 made several moves during the next six months, being engaged chiefly on patrols and shipping reconnaissance. With the approach of D-day, the Squadron's work increased in extent and variety. May 1944, saw its pilots on low-flying sweeps over Northern France, reconnaissance off the Normandy coast, cover for Typhoons attacking minesweepers, 'Beat-ups' of enemy camps, railway wagons and road convoys. It was the busiest month for a long time and the pilots logged no less than 562 flying hours.

14. At last - D-day. But the pilots who had looked forward to the thrills of combat were disappointed. The Squadron's part in the big events of the day lay in dull, though vitally important, convoy patrols. In the evening however, the prospect brightened when a special strike of Typhoons, with some of 610's Spitfires as escort, was laid on. A small ship, reported to be carrying 'Brass hats' from the Channel Islands, was attacked and hit by the Typhoons' rockets.

15. In the days that followed the Squadron, now based near Plymouth was mainly employed on convoy patrols and escort work to cover the Typhoons incessantly attacking shipping off the coast of Normandy. Then, on 18th June the Squadron joyfully received news that it was to move to West Malling, Kent. Two days later it made a good start on the job in the destruction of flying bombs.

16. No. 610 knocked down a dozen in five days before being switched to an airfield in Sussex to counter flying-bombs which had begun to appear in the area en route for Portsmouth and Southampton. Despite many weary hours on patrol, the pilots did not spot one flying-bomb, and within six days the Squadron was on the move again, this time to Friston, near Eastbourne, where a landing ground on the top of the cliffs was used.

17. On 4th July, two days after the Squadron's arrival, two more 'divers' were sent harmlessly into the sea. Both pilots, having exhausted their ammunition, adopted a novel technique in destroying their targets - they flew alongside the bombs and tipped them into a dive with their own wingtips. Throughout July, 1944, the Squadron patrolled incessantly against the flying-bombs. The pilots aggregated 719 operational hours in their Spitfires and destroyed 31 'divers' bringing their total to date up to 43.

18. The Squadron was kept on anti-flying-bomb patrols until early September by which time the pilots had flown, since 20th June, a total of 2,055 hours and accounted for 50 'divers'. Then, within a few days, fresh guns, and tanks to increase range, were fitted to their Spitfires and the pilots, tired of anti-flying-bomb patrols, gladly turned their skill to new operations.

19. 6th September 1944 was a historic day for the Squadron - it flew over German soil for the first time, crossing the frontier at Isselburg after a swoop across Holland. Days of reconnaissance of enemy weapon sites followed until 17th September when No. 610 aided the 2,000 aircraft and gliders which transported the First Airborne

Army into Holland by flying anti-flak patrols. On ensuing days the Squadron escorted reinforcements to the scene of operations.

20. In October the Squadron was transferred from the Air Defence of Great Britain to the Second Tactical Air Force and until 4th December was busily engaged on shipping reconnaissance and escorts for bombers raiding the Continent. On 13th November twelve of the Squadron's aircraft had the privilege of escorting the Prime Minister from the Continent to England.

21. To the delight of all its members, on 4th December No. 610 moved to the Continent where once more it came under the command of W/Cdr. Johnnie Johnson, triple D.S.O, double D.F.C., who was then Wing Commander Flying No. 127 Wing. He had commanded No. 610 from July 1942 until March 1943 and was a great favourite with all ranks.

22. Bad weather restricted flying but before the year was out the Squadron had taken part in a number of sweeps over the Munster-Hamm-Cologne area. The New Year opened on an exciting note when strong forces of Me 109s and Fw 190s raided the airfield where No. 610 was stationed. Happily, the Squadron escaped unharmed and was able to claim a 'kill'.

25. The bad weather continued but the Squadron did quite a considerable amount of flying despite the conditions. The Hun was steadily retreating through snow and mud and No. 610 was able to hit hard at his transport which congested the roads and railways. Following the recoiling tail of the enemy, the Squadron changed its quarters twice before the end of January 1945.

24. By February the Squadron had moved from Belgium into Holland and for the next few weeks its pilots ceaselessly harried the Hun, attacking locomotives, motor vehicles and barges, escorting our medium bombers and making reconnaissances of German transport and industrial centres. On 14th February one of the Squadron's pilots destroyed a Me 262 - the first German jet aircraft to fall to the Squadron.

25. Towards the end of the month the Squadron returned to England for a short air-firing course. Within a few days of its arrival at Warmwell, Dorset, information was received that for the time being at least, the Squadron was to be disbanded. Officers and men were posted to other units, with the proud knowledge that they had played their part in ensuring No. 610's place in the magnificent record of the Auxiliary Squadron during the war.

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#### Footnote

610 (County of Chester) Squadron was re-formed at Hooton Park in June 1946 with Spitfire XIVs giving way to Spitfire XXIIIs, then Meteor IVs and finally Meteor VIIIs. With the termination of the Royal Auxiliary Air Force the Squadron was disbanded in March 1957.