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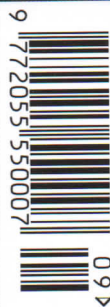
The RAF in the North West

The Fallen of World War I

An interview with James Martin

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The RAF in the North West

Andrew Harris reports



LEFT: RAF Woodvale from the air: the only remaining RAF airfield in the North West

ABOVE: There are many Air Cadets; here seen on parade in Liverpool



Perhaps the title should be 'The ATC and RAF in the North West' as with 60,000 cadets nationwide the Air Training Corps is nearly double the size of the Royal Air Force proper. The RAF has many establishments but is now reduced to only 8 frontline stations in the UK; and the north west has only 2 RAF stations – a training airfield at Woodvale in Merseyside and an electronic warfare range at Spadeadam, north of Hadrian's Wall in Cumbria.

It wasn't always like this. By the end of the 2nd world war there were 960,000 personnel serving world-wide in the RAF. Most Bomber Command stations were in East Anglia, Lincolnshire and Yorkshire and much of Fighter Command was in the South East of England. The North West had fighters for local defence, a major training role away from much of the conflict and the two biggest Air Depots in the world to reinforce the RAF and – from 1942 – to equip the US Army Air Force with aircraft produced in the USA.

During these war years there were 44 RAF establishments of one sort or another in our region. Some

were quite iconic; RAF Morecambe was the Midland Hotel which was requisitioned to be a hospital for injured airmen. From September 1940 RAF Barton Hall – not to be confused with Bartle Hall – north of Preston was the Headquarters for 9 Group of Fighter Command. It comprised an Operations Room, Filter Room and Communications Centre in three buildings which were partially buried for protection. For the defence of the region 9 Group had four 'sector' stations which were near Coventry, Jurby on the Isle of Man, Tern Hill in Shropshire and Speke in Liverpool – only the last being close. All the UK's RDF or radio direction finding system – later called radar - was along the eastern and southern coastlines which made it difficult in the north west to identify enemy aircraft and intercept them in time.

RAF Woodvale has a fascinating history and interesting present. By 1941, 9 Group had additional sector stations but the 4 best located - Speke, Squires Gate, Cranage in Cheshire and Tern Hill - only had grass runways and even had difficulty getting aircraft

airborne in wet weather. It was decided to build an all-weather airfield to relieve the pressure on the other airfields. Woodvale next to the A565 near Formby was selected as the best site and initial construction was completed by October 1941. The airfield acquired three runways up to 1.023 miles long – as pictured – and three main hangers. One of these and the original control tower are still used today hidden behind modern cladding. Other facilities such as heating came later and history records great hardship and many complaints about living conditions in the freezing winter of 1941/2.

The first daily orders were issued on the 10th December 1941 when the advanced party of 308 (Polish) Squadron arrived from RAF Northolt in London after heavy fighting and losing many pilots and aircraft. There were early fatalities when 28-year old Pilot Officer Krawczynski crash landed in the Ribble Estuary and Squadron Leader Wesolowski died in a mid-air collision. Both were buried in Our Lady's Church in Formby. During 1942, 308 Squadron were joined by 315 (Polish) Squadron, 356 Squadron with Beaufighters

and 317 (Polish) Squadron recovering from torrid operations in the south of England.

Sadly, later 'kills' of enemy aircraft were matched by fatal training accidents – a largely unreported feature of world war two.

74 years later RAF Woodvale is commanded – from last month – by Wing Commander David Hooton and provides three forms of training which are safe and highly professional:

- Two University Air Squadrons are based at Woodvale. One serves the universities in Manchester and Salford with the other serving the universities in Liverpool and Ormskirk. Interest in all the flying and ground branches of the RAF is encouraged but aeronautical engineering is a special priority. Bursaries can be offered and future employment in the service can be guaranteed for selected suitable candidates. UAS members get to fly as pictured.

- RAF Woodvale is home to a Volunteer Gliding Squadron which trains Air Cadets to go solo. For many this is the start of a career in flying or just a wonderful and character building experience. Flying is currently suspended whilst gliders are upgraded but normal service should be resumed shortly.

- Air Cadets can also gain Air Experience in Grob Tutors based at Woodford. For many this is their first real experience of powered flight – as opposed to sitting in an airliner - and can help cadets to decide if flying is the career for them. It is an exhilarating experience for everyone and gives

What they became . . .

RAF Barrow-in Furness – Lakes Gliding Club at Walney

RAF Barton – City Airport & Heliport for light aircraft

RAF Burtonwood – Omega Business Park, Warrington

RAF Cark – North West Parachute Centre, Flookburgh

RAF Crosby-on-Eden - Carlisle Lake District Airport

RAF Hesketh Beach – Use by Comed Aviation

RAF Knowsley Park – Knowsley Safari Park

RAF Poulton – Private Airfield & Gliding

RAF Ringway – Manchester Airport

RAF Samlesbury – BAE Works & Airfield

RAF Speke – Liverpool John Lennon Airport

RAF Squires Gate – Blackpool Airport

RAF Stanley Park – Blackpool Zoo

RAF Warton – BAE Works & Airfield

RAF Woodvale – Survives as RAF Training Airfield





young people a tremendous insight into military flying.

RAF Woodvale is also the base for 611 (West Lancashire) Squadron of the RAF Reserve. It is not unique but is unusual. It aims to recruit 129 personnel to be trained in a variety of specialisations so they can be deployed to fill gaps in the RAF rather than be deployed as a unit. The squadron was originally formed in 1936 and based at RAF Speke equipped with day bombers, acquired Spitfires in 1939 and saw action over Dunkirk and in the Battle of Britain. Following much war service using Spitfires then Mustang Mk IVs it was disbanded in August 1945. Re-formed in 1946 as part of the Royal Auxiliary Air Force it was based at Woodford and equipped with later versions of the Spitfire. It later converted to the Meteor jet fighter flying from Hooton Park on the Wirral but was disbanded again in 1957 along with all the Royal Auxiliary Air Force. Re-formed yet again in 2013 it brought the squadron back to Merseyside after 56 years!

611 Squadron is seeking reservists who want to be part of the RAF without losing their day job. 12 skills are sought and trained including drivers, chefs, physical training instructors, media experts, chaplains and – especially – mechanics and electricians. For details call 0151 522 6661.

The other RAF Station in the region is Spadeadam which is the only facility in Europe where aircrews can practice manoeuvres and tactics against a variety of threats and targets which they can face in contemporary warfare. This fascinating facility attracts aircraft from the RAF, Army, Royal Navy and NATO forces. The success and survival of aircrews over combat zones in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere are helped by the training provided by RAF Spadeadam.



TOP LEFT: Artwork by Bridge Graphics of Southport.
LEFT: 20 year-old Elana Payne is with the Manchester & Salford UAS. She is studying bio-medical science and hopes to go on to qualify as a doctor and serve in the RAF.
TOP: Part of 611 Squadron relaxing after an exercise.
ABOVE: Map reading is important in the air and on the ground. Air Cadets on exercise.

It aims to recruit 129 personnel to be trained in a variety of specialisations



The Red Arrows will represent the RAF at the Southport Air Show. Picture courtesy of Shutterstock Photos

The major presence of the RAF in the region is via the Air Training Corps which has 3 aims:

- to promote and encourage among young people a practical interest in aviation and the RAF;
- to provide training which will be useful both in the Services and in civil life;
- to foster the spirit of adventure and to develop the qualities of leadership and good citizenship.

There are about 7,000 air cadets in the North West who benefit from the ATC which has just celebrated the 75th Anniversary of being founded in 1941. It is a youth organisation which develops the potential of young people regardless of their career intentions.

Many forms of training are available to complement a range of flying, ground and sporting opportunities. Early awareness of how to work as part of a team is a huge advantage for young people and provides lifelong benefits in all walks of life.

Probably the most visible and dramatic presence of the RAF in the North West is when it participates in the Southport Air Show. This year the event is over the weekend 11-12 September which will mark its 25th anniversary. The RAF's Red Arrows will display and there is an Air Show Village for the very keen. Sadly, further details from Sefton Council did not materialise but for general information visit www.visitsouthport.com or call 01704 533333 for tickets.

We may not have much of the RAF based in our region but they still perform vital roles from afar and have a huge role in the community by way of recruitment, the RAF Reserve and the Air Training Corps. They are world-class.

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 is pleased to acknowledge the help of Squadron Leaders **Jak Rolfe and Martin Morris** in the preparation of this article. The pictures are Crown Copyright, courtesy of **Wg Cdr Eddie Challoner** of the ATC or by **Andrew Harris**.

