

Two of No. 56 Squadron's Hunter 5s photographed, against a splendid sunset, by Cpl. King of the unit's ground staff. The play of light on cloud is in some ways suggestive of the squadron's phoenix badge.



A Brief History of a Famous R.A.F. Unit

No. 56 SQUADRON

ONE of the most famous of all the world's fighter units, No. 56 (Punjab) Squadron, now based at Waterbeach, Cambs, recently received its Standard. At a parade on April 27 H.R.H. the Duchess of Kent made the presentation, which recognized well over 25 years of distinguished service in two world wars.

The unit has, in fact, been in existence almost continually since its formation on June 8, 1916, when a "cutting" was taken at Gosport from No. 28 Home Defence Squadron and renumbered 56. It became the first Squadron to receive the S.E.5 fighter and, under the command of Major R. G. Blomfield, it moved to France on April 7, 1917, two days after completing re-equipment. The records show that between that date and the armistice in 1918 the squadron accounted for 427 enemy aircraft for a loss to itself of 40 pilots killed, 20 wounded and 31 taken prisoner. Its members

included such famous names as Ball, McCudden, Rhys-Davids and Grinnell-Milne. Its roll of honours comprised two V.C.s, won by Ball and McCudden; five D.S.O.s and one bar; 14 M.C.s with seven bars and one second bar; twelve D.F.C.s and one bar; and several foreign decorations. And during this time only four pilots were killed and four injured in flying accidents.

Recalled to England to counter the Gotha raids, No. 56 was based at Bekesbourne, Kent, from June 21 to July 5, 1917. While it was there Capt. McCudden, already a famous fighter pilot, but then instructing at home, paid a visit and afterwards wrote "there was a wonderful spirit in this squadron which was entirely different from any squadron with which I had yet been in contact." He immediately arranged to join No. 56 and it was as a flight commander that he earned his V.C.

Those early days are better documented than is the case with most other squadrons, since two of the pilots wrote books about them—*Wind in the Wires*, by Capt. Grinnell-Milne and *Sagittarius Rising*, by Capt. Cecil Lewis. Lewis had joined No. 56 at London Colney in 1916 at the age of 19 when he had already won the M.C. with No. 3 Sqn. He says of Major Blomfield that "he had all his pilots out for a run before breakfast, kept them busy round the sheds all day, and turned them loose in town at night. They had to be tip-top aviators and bring down Huns. Nothing else mattered."

Capt. Albert Ball—already, on joining No. 56, holding a D.S.O. and two bars and an M.C.—is described by Lewis as a quiet, simple little man. "His one relaxation was the violin, and his favourite after-dinner amusement to light a red magnesium flare outside his hut and walk round it in his pyjamas, fiddling! . . . He never flew for amusement . . . He never boasted or criticized, but his example was tremendous. . . . Of the great fighting pilots, his tactics were the least cunning. Absolutely fearless, the odds made no difference to him. He would always attack, single out his man, and close. On several occasions he almost rammed the

No. 56 Sqn., ever conscious of the muses and arts, numbered among its World War I members two successful writers—and the magnificent para-military orchestra depicted at left.



Perhaps most famous in a galaxy of Squadron aces was Capt. Albert Ball, shown at left as a Lieutenant before joining No. 56 Sqn. At right is Lt. Keith Muspratt's S.E.5 at Bekesbourne in 1917.

