



(Left) Capt. McCudden, the squadron's second V.C., left, with Capt. Ian Henderson, M.C., and Capt. Gerald C. Maxwell, right, the highest-scoring surviving member of No. 56 Sqn. in World War I. (Above) Sopwith Snipes at Aboukir in 1920-1922, after No. 80 Sqn. had been renumbered No. 56. (Below) A Gloster Gamecock of the type which No. 56 used in 1928 before replacement by Armstrong Whitworth Siskins.

No. 56 SQUADRON...

enemy, and often came back with his machine shot to pieces." Ball was an individualist in tactics and taste; he never enjoyed formation flying and, disliking the S.E.5 at first, he managed to obtain a Nieuport for his own use.

The squadron flew its initial offensive patrol on April 23, 1917, and achieved several victories immediately afterwards. Based at Vertgaland, it was in the sector covered by the Richthofen circus operating from Douai, but it soon began to make its mark. Lamentably, Capt. Ball was killed in a great air battle near Douai on the evening of May 7, in which all three flights of No. 56 were engaged, led by Ball, Crowe and Meintjes. Lothar von Richthofen was in that battle, too, and it may have been the German ace that Crowe and Ball were chasing when the latter lost his life. Von Richthofen landed with a severely damaged aircraft.

Despite the fact that from this battle only five of No. 56's aircraft returned intact the squadron's spirit was not broken, and other of its pilots came to hold a reputation almost as great as that of Ball. Capt. McCudden joined on August 15, 1917, and he was awarded the V.C. on April 2, 1918. He gained most of his victories by carefully stalking his quarry and manoeuvring for position, usually achieving success with one long burst of fire. McCudden shot down 54 aircraft, twice getting four in one day, before losing his life in a flying accident. It was McCudden who led a flight in the famous battle in which Rhys-Davids shot down Werner Voss, one of the renowned German fighter aces.

Maj. Blomfield was succeeded as C.O. in October 1917 by

Maj. R. Balcombe-Brown. He was shot down in May 1918 and replaced by Maj. E. J. L. W. Gilchrist. Already ill after an accident, this officer commanded the squadron until the armistice, when he had to be sent to hospital. Grinnell-Milne then took command until No. 56 was reduced to cadre and finally disbanded on January 22, 1920.

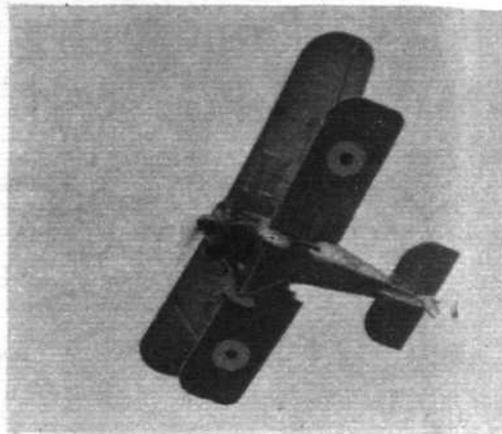
A month later No. 80 Sqn., flying Camels in Egypt, was renumbered No. 56 and, when this unit in its turn was to be disbanded in 1922, the Chanak crisis in Turkey arose and a flight was detached to Constantinople to work with No. 208 Sqn. In November, No. 56 was reformed with Sopwith Snipes at Hawkinge and joined there by the detached flight in August 1923. By the following year Gloster Grebes had arrived and the unit's base had changed to Biggin Hill. The year 1928 brought Gamecocks and then Siskins and in October a move was made to North Weald, which remained the squadron's base for the next 14 years.

It was in 1925 that the red and white chequerboard markings were officially sanctioned and in 1928 the phoenix was approved by the King as the squadron emblem. It signified, as it does today, that the squadron would rise intact whatever disaster might befall it. The standard of flying in those inter-war years remained high. In 1929 and 1932 the squadron earned the Sassoon map-reading trophy and, in the latter year, won the Sassoon Cup race and the Command air-gunnery cup as well; their score was 69.77. In 1931, No. 56 had come second. In the same year S/L. Rowley, then C.O., was second in the individual gunnery competition with the remarkable score of 77.7 per cent. But No. 56 had its little troubles and on November 8, 1929, three Siskins got lost in fog and forced-landed near Calais after taking off from North Weald for a battle flight climb test. When taking off for the return flight one of the machines burst a tyre and turned over. In 1928 F/O. V. Eyre, at 2,000ft in a Siskin, bent down to pick up a map and accidentally pushed the stick forward at the same time; not being strapped in, he was pitched smartly overboard, but landed safely by parachute. He was killed at the time of the Hendon Air Display in the following year.

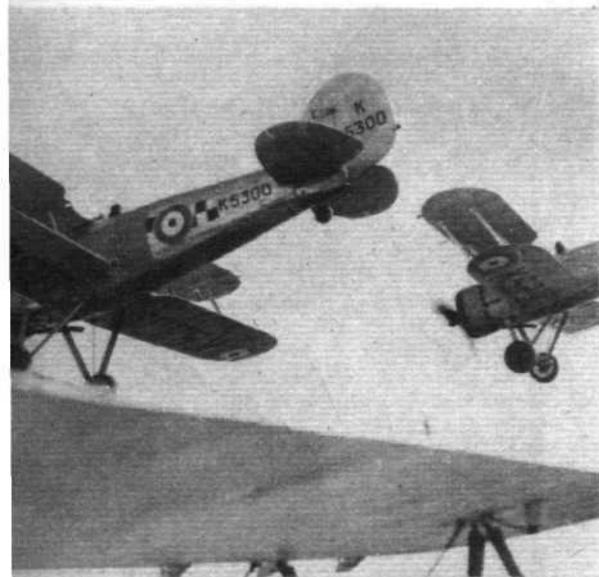
In the early thirties Hitler came to power and No. 56 Sqn. was well in the fore in the consequent re-equipment and strengthening of the Royal Air Force; 1932 brought Bulldog IIAs and these were followed in 1936, 1937 and 1938 by Gauntlets, Gladiators and Hurricanes respectively.

On the evening of September 1, 1939, the squadron, then commanded by S/L. E. V. Knowles, was mobilized at North Weald. Five days later it suffered its first losses when two Hurricanes were accidentally shot down by Spitfires. In later years No. 56 also lost two Typhoons to Spitfires, and other aircraft to Belgian and British A.A. fire.

Until May 1940 patrols were the main activity, but when the Germans invaded the Low Countries, "B" flight was sent to France. Thirteen German aircraft were shot down before the remaining Hurricanes were brought back six days later. "A" Flight, meanwhile, operated from Biggin Hill. Both flights were heavily engaged in covering the evacuation from



"Flight" photograph



"Flight's" photographer took the pictures of the 56 Sqn. Gauntlets at left and on the opposite page in 1936. The venerable Meteor (below) still a great standby in these Hunter days, was not too respectfully treated when the picture below was taken at Waterbeach some years ago.

