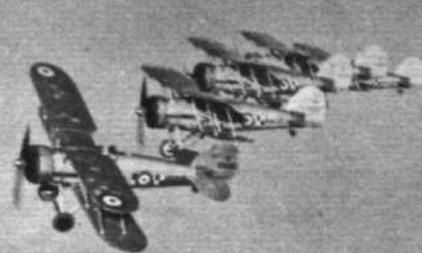




FLIGHT, 613
18 May 1956

No. 56 Sqn. was the only fighter squadron to receive the Swift 1 and 2; the view at left is of a rare formation of six. At right, the peel-off of Gauntlets taken in 1936 contrasts well with a similar view of Hunters (foot of page) taken last month.



Dunkirk and, in August, in the Battle of Britain. The squadron was then withdrawn to Boscombe Down and Middle Wallop, and, in September 1941, at Duxford, it became the first unit to receive the Typhoon 1B. In pioneering these aircraft a number of difficulties had to be overcome, and it was not until May 1942 that the Typhoons were taken into action. The first major operation came in August when top cover was provided for Operation "Jubilee," the combined raid on Dieppe. It was over Dieppe that the first inconclusive engagements with Fw190s, which were making their first appearance at about this time, showed the Typhoons to be superior to the new German aircraft in some respects.

Patrolling and fighter sweeps then occupied the time until June 1943, with the addition of the "Rhubarb" strikes, in the first of which one of the Typhoons killed a German gunner with its wing tip. Then the Typhoons were fitted to carry bombs and at the end of the year bombing attacks were made, by day and night, on

No. 56, as part of a Tempest wing, continued extensive operations right up to the end of the war in Europe and finished in a blaze of glory when, on the squadron's last operational sortie, on May 4, one of the pilots succeeded in sinking a German R-boat. After V.E. Day No. 56 remained at Fassberg until disbandment on March 31, 1946.

Once more the phoenix was called in and on the following day No. 124 Sqn. at Bentwaters was re-numbered No. 56 and re-equipped with Meteor 3s. The base was moved to Bixted, Wattisham, Duxford and Thorney Island before finally No. 56 Sqn. settled in their present home at Waterbeach on May 10, 1950. During succeeding years it set a high standard of efficiency in Fighter Command and was chosen in February 1954 as the first (and, as it turned out, the only) squadron to receive Swifts. The few Swift 1s were supplemented in August by some Swift 2s, and the squadron forced on despite several casualties and aircraft losses until finally the Swifts were replaced in May last year by Hunter 5s. A few Meteor 8s have been retained for general flying throughout this time.

Together with No. 111, No. 56 led the first swept-wing Battle of Britain fly-past over Westminster last September, and the Hunters proved very successful during the subsequent major annual air exercise "Beware." After that, however, a number of teething troubles occurred and the squadron is now slowly emerging, phoenix-like, from a rather depressing six months of aircraft unserviceability. It is to be expected that No. 56 Sqn. will shortly once again make a mark in Fighter Command in keeping with its proud traditions.



The second and last mark of Swift to reach No. 56 Sqn. was the Mk 2, here seen with four 30 mm cannon and kinked leading edge, but without saw-tooth wing, variable-incidence tail and afterburner as now standardized on the F.R.5.

V.1 launching sites. March 1944 saw the introduction of air-to-ground rockets but, when intensive practice with these had been completed, No. 56 was re-equipped with Spitfire 9s and took over No. 501 Squadron's task of weather and shipping reconnaissance and air/sea rescue. This was not without its excitements as weather reconnaissance sorties often brought opportunities for attacking ground targets which the pilots were not slow in taking.

On D-Day No. 56 made a weather reconnaissance over the beaches and later escorted gliders and tugs to their landing zones. After that beach-head patrols and convoy escort were the order of the day. A flying bomb was shot down during a convoy escort sortie. Tempests began to arrive at the end of June 1944 and, though operations with Spitfires continued, conversion training was completed in July and the main effort was switched to intercepting V.1s. Sixty-three of these were destroyed in the following three months. No. 56 also took part in the first Tempest sweep over Germany and frequently searched out and attacked V.2 launching sites. In September 1944 they successfully provided part of the anti-flak cover for the airborne landing at Arnhem.

On September 28, 1944, the squadron moved to Grimbergen in Belgium and straight away they bagged four out of "30 plus" Fw190s. By December 14, they had claimed their hundredth World War 2 enemy aircraft. From then onwards enemy surface transport became the main target and in February 1945 they bagged no fewer than 90 railway engines.

Peeling off from échelon starboard, the squadron's present equipment, Hunter 5s, are distinctively painted with red and white dicing on the wing-tips. The dicing on the nose is centred variously on a pale blue disc carrying the aircraft's letter, or on a squadron badge.



"Flight" photograph