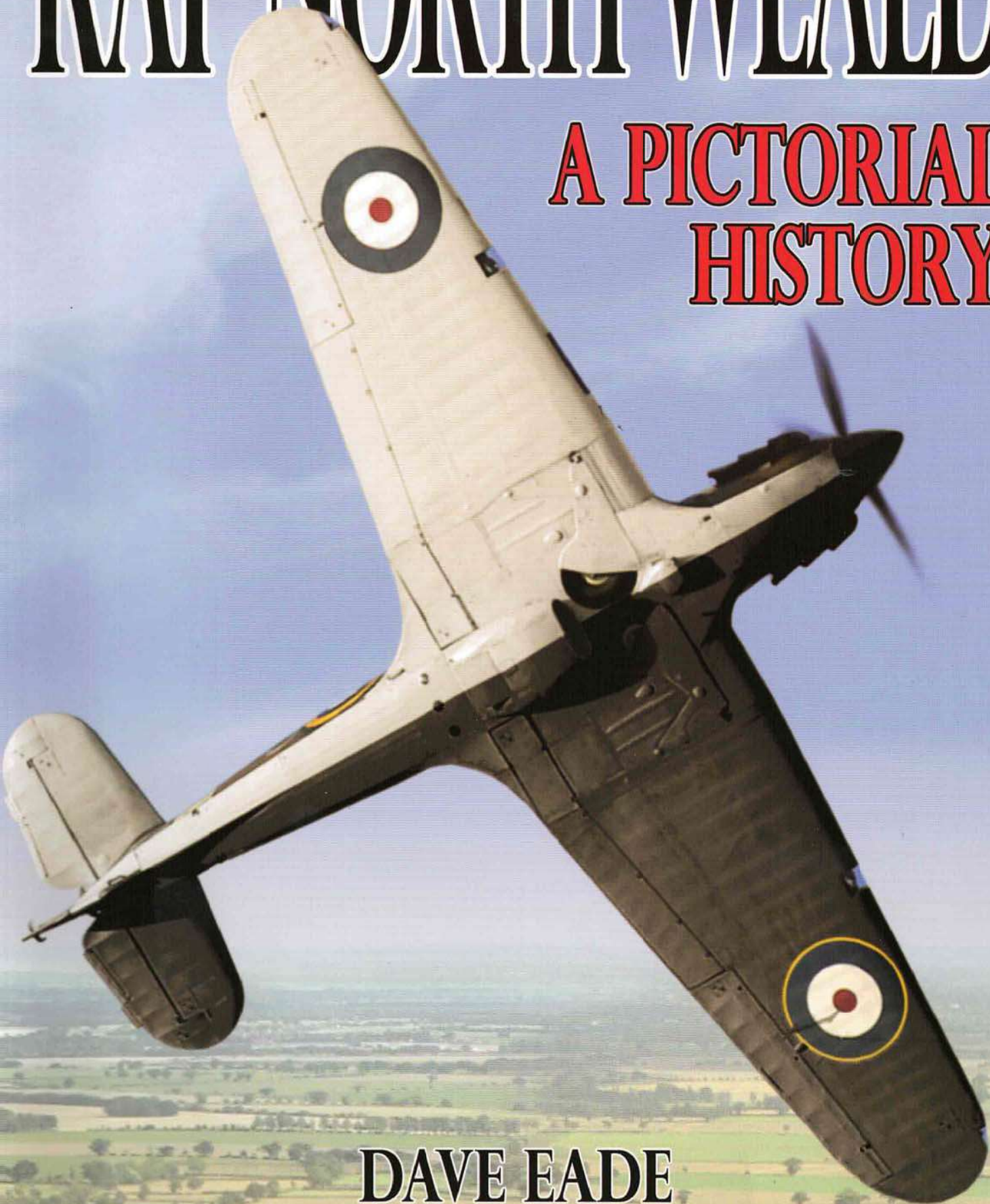


RAF NORTH WEALD

A PICTORIAL HISTORY



DAVE EADE

Foreword by the Rt Hon Lord Tebbit CH

ROYAL AIRCRAFT FACTORY

B.E.12a

Type: Light reconnaissance, fighting and bombing biplane
Engines: One 140hp R.A.F. 4a V12

Length: 27ft 3in (8.31m)

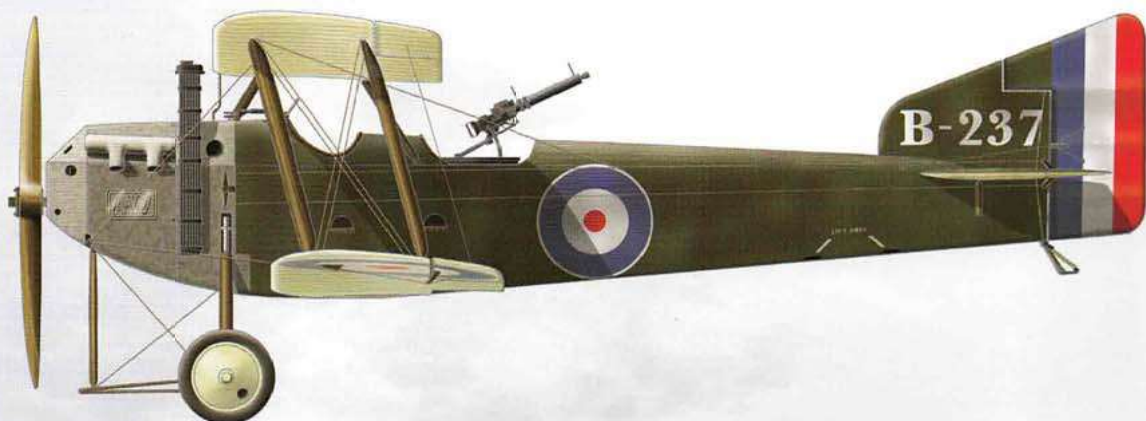
Wing span: 40ft 6in (13.29m)

Speed: 105mph (169kph) maximum

Endurance: 3hrs

Armament: One movable 0.303in Vickers gun and (optionally) two 112lb (51kg) bombs

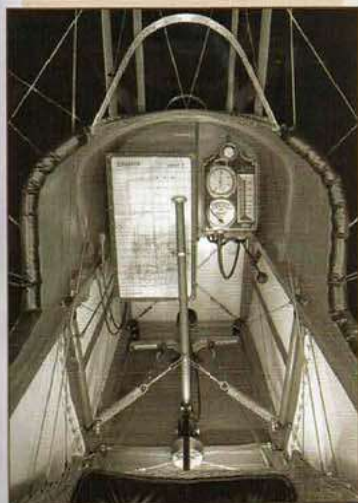
Crew: Pilot only



Right, upper: The B.E.12a was also introduced to service with No 39 Squadron at North Weald, the first recorded sortie from the aerodrome being in March 1917.

Right, lower: At least one Armstrong-Whitworth F.K.8 was issued to No 39 Squadron, and this aircraft, B237, is recorded as having carried out an early-morning patrol from North Weald on 22 July 1917. The style of markings depicted here is conjectural.

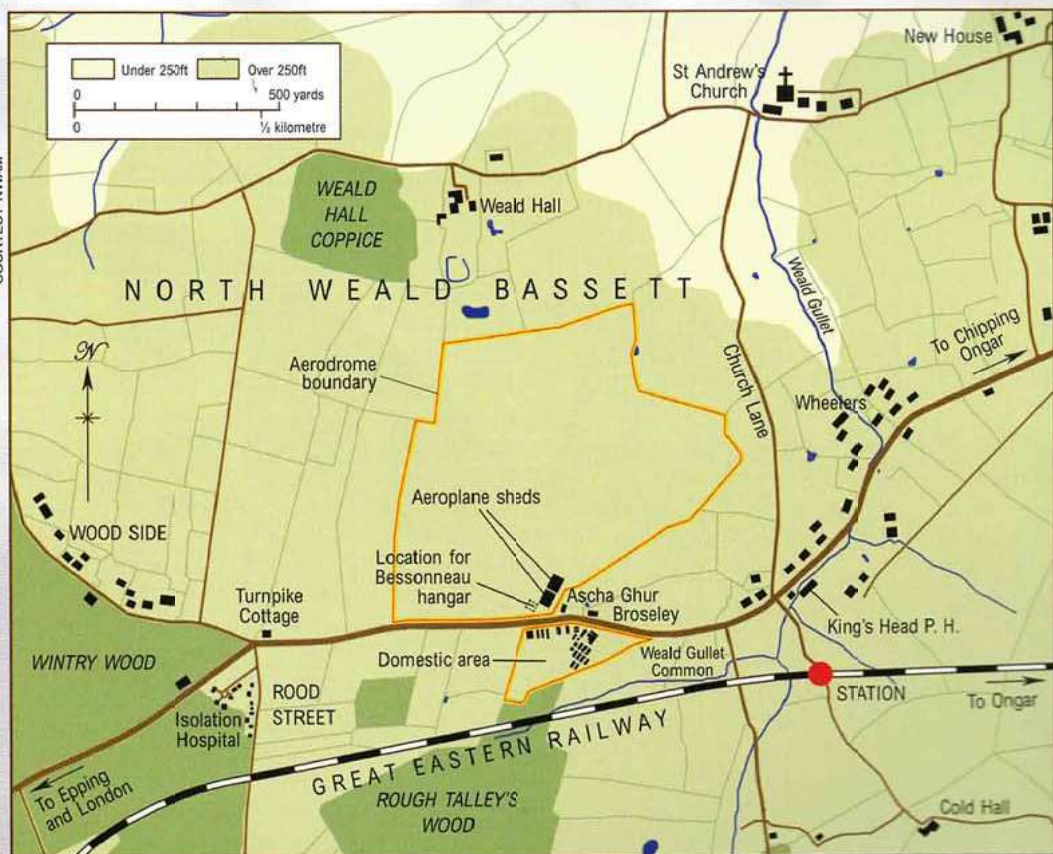
huge Gotha and Giant bombers. Armed with three 0.312-inch machine guns, each aircraft was capable of carrying about a ton of bombs (although in practice individual payloads rarely exceeded 1,000 pounds) over a range in excess of 500 miles and at a top speed of some 87mph. With a height capability of over 21,000 feet, the aircraft were all but



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Above: The cockpit of a replica B.E.2c, showing the very rudimentary controls and flight instruments.

Right: A map showing the general layout of North Weald aerodrome in late 1916. The site occupied 136 acres, with approximate dimensions of 900 by 850 yards. This early period of its use as a military airfield was officially terminated on 20 February 1920.



AD HOC PUBLICATIONS



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Above: A rather hazy close-up of the Lewis gun mounting on an Avro 504K night fighter. Right: An Avro 504K night fighter with a modified under-carriage awaits its next sortie.



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AVRO 504K NIGHT FIGHTER

Type: Converted trainer

Engine: One 110hp Le Rhône rotary

Length: 29ft 5in (8.97m)

Wing span: 36ft 0in (10.97m)

Weight: 1,830lb (830kg) loaded

Speed: 95mph (153kph) max.

Range: 250 miles (400km)

Endurance: 3hrs

Armament: One 0.303in Lewis gun on upper wing

Crew: Pilot only

on 1 July No 44 Squadron, equipped with the renowned Sopwith Camel (many of the aeroplanes adapted for night-fighting duties), took up residence. The tenure was short-lived: No 44 disbanded at the end of 1919, North Weald was henceforth reduced to Care and Maintenance and the site was officially relinquished by the War Office in February the following year. The final Officer Commanding was Major A. T. Harris, who, as Sir Arthur 'Bomber' Harris, was to become one of our greatest World War II leaders as C-in-C RAF Bomber Command.



Right: Profile of a standard Sopwith 1F.1 Camel serving with No 44 Squadron.

Below: The modified twin Lewis gun armament of a Camel night fighter. As can be seen, the weapons could be pulled down via curved racks to enable the pilot to change the ammunition drums when required.



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Right: Not all No 44 Squadron's Camels were modified for night fighting: this photograph shows one of its aircraft in the original form, its twin Vickers guns mounted over the front fuselage and synchronised to fire through the propeller

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Debden a little further to the north, severing an intimate connection with the airfield that had endured for ten years.

Then, in March the following year, a revolutionary new shape was seen in the skies above the airfield with the arrival, for No 56 Squadron, of the first Hawker Hurricanes. In a single aircraft design, staggered biplane wings, struts, fixed undercarriages, flying wires, rigging wires and machine guns firing through propellers had been abolished at a stroke,

Left: The Gauntlets of No 56 Squadron, chocked and lined up at North Weald in the winter of 1937/38. The pilot's gun sight is clearly seen on the nearest aircraft, projecting from the windscreen. Notice the individual identity letters carried above the gun troughs—which latter, it is believed, were finished in red on No 56's machines.

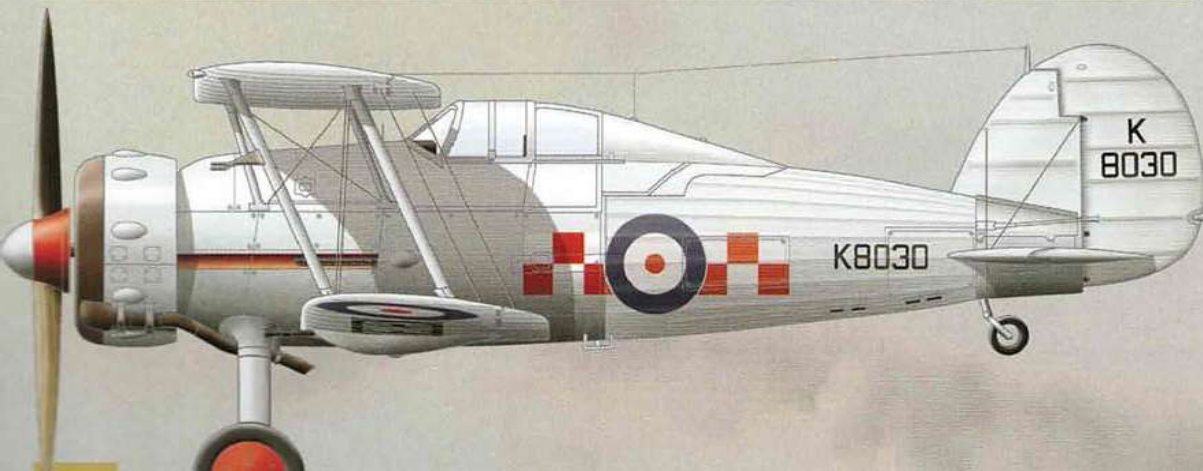
Below, left: No 56 Squadron's officers and airmen pose proudly at the front of their hangar with a Gladiator, August 1937—the aircraft easily distinguishable from the Gauntlet in this view by dint of the absence of inboard inter-plane wing struts.



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GLOSTER GLADIATOR Mk I

Type: Fighter
Engine: One 830hp Bristol Mercury IX radial
Length: 27ft 5in (8.36m)
Wing span: 32ft 3in (9.83m)
Weight: 3,220lb (1,460kg) empty, 4,595lb (2,085kg) loaded
Speed: 253mph (407kph) max.
Ceiling: 32,800ft (10,000m)
Armament: Two fixed Browning and two fixed Vickers (or four fixed Browning) 0.303in machine guns
Crew: Pilot only



Left: A Gladiator in the colours of No 56 Squadron. The Gladiator was the first RAF's four-gun fighter and the first with an enclosed cockpit—and it was the last biplane to serve in Fighter Command.

AS the winter of 1940/41 closed in, the tempo of flying operations began to dwindle, and RAF Fighter Command took the opportunity to regroup and prepare for the next phase of the conflict. No 257 Squadron's brief stay at North Weald came to an close on 8 October when the its aircraft and personnel returned to Martlesham Heath. No 46 Squadron departed on 14 December, and three days later some old friends were welcomed back to the airfield when No 56 Squadron

Eagles over Essex

The Author

As Britain came under ever more sustained attack during the first year of the war, countries from the British Empire began to offer weapons and manpower to help defend the mother country. Aircrews from European nations that had suffered under the advance of the Third Reich, for example Poland, also arrived in Britain and pitched in to assist in the repulse of the common foe. Less generally appreciated is the fact that US personnel also volunteered.

Very strict laws in the United States governed the supply of arms to other countries, and these applied to personnel also. It was against Federal Law for US citizens to join armed forces of other nations, and to do so would lose them their American citizenship. Even so, many found ways to circumvent these statutes and cross the Atlantic to fight for the British cause.

Back in 1939, Colonel Charles Sweeney, an American mercenary financier, had tried to raise troops to fight in the Russo-Finnish War but following the German invasions in Europe he had turned his attention to France. None of his recruits actually got to France, but many did find their way to England. Meanwhile Sweeney's nephew

was trying to get US pilots to join the Royal Air Force, having first encouraged Americans living in England to join the Home Guard units. Buoyed by his success, he then approached the Air Ministry with the idea of creating 'American' squadrons in the RAF—a scheme which met with enthusiasm and the founding of the so-called 'Eagle Squadrons', Nos 71, 121 and 133, all under the leadership of RAF officers. Over fifty pilots had by various means managed to arrive covertly in the United Kingdom, many by way of Canada. The organisation of these transfers was in the hands of World War I pilot Air Vice-Marshal Billy Bishop vc through what was known as the Clayton Knight Committee, a quite illegal organisation. In due course the Committee succeeded in recruiting over 7,000 US and Canadian people for the RAF, and it continued its campaign until the United States officially entered the war as a combatant nation in December 1941.

Below: A Hurricane Mk I from No 71 Squadron running its engine as another passes overhead. By the time the unit flew into North Weald, it had taken delivery of Mk IIBs—although it would soon relinquish these in favour of Spitfires.



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No 71 (Eagle) Squadron

Motto

First from the Eyries

Equipment

Hawker Hurricane Mk IIB (1941), Supermarine Spitfire Mk IIA (1941), Supermarine Spitfire Mk VB (1941)



No 121 (Eagle) Squadron

Motto

For Liberty

Equipment

Supermarine Spitfire Mk VB (1941–1942)

Right: Immaculate flying by No 111 Squadron as the five-man team displays its new colour scheme. Underwing serial numbers were now dispensed with, although they were carried in small red characters along the rear of the fuselage.

HAWKER HUNTER F. Mk 4

Type: Interceptor fighter

Engine: One 7,500lb thrust

Rolls-Royce Avon 113 turbojet

Length: 45ft 10½in (13.98m)

Wing span: 33ft 8in (10.26m)

Weight: 12,550lb (5,690kg)

empty

Speed: 700mph (1,130kph)

max. at sea level

Service ceiling: 50,000ft

(15,240m)

Armament: Four 30mm Aden

cannon.

Crew: Pilot only

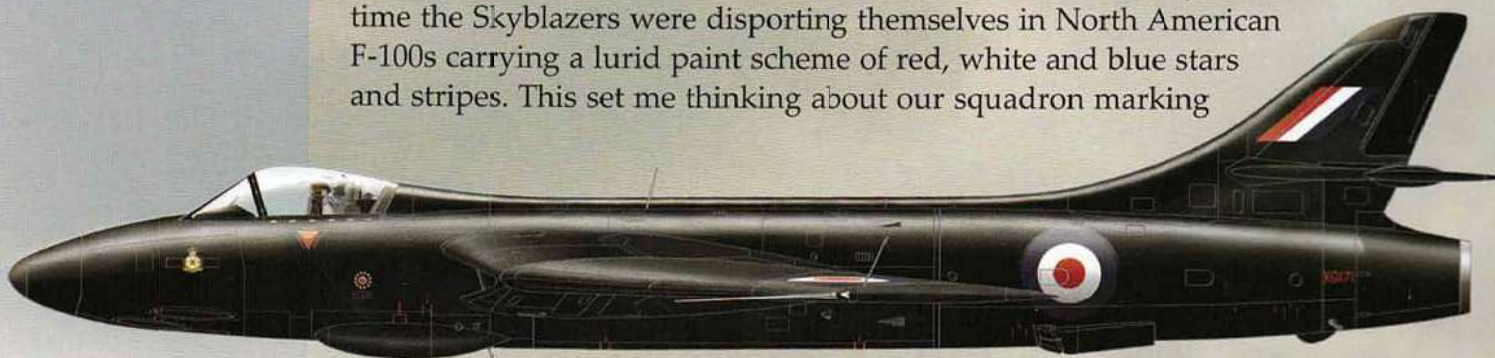


COURTESY PHILIP JARRETT

Then came something truly radical, as Squadron CO Roger Topp recalls:

'I had perfected the performance of the four-aeroplane team, so it seemed reasonable to add a fifth, thus creating a new "shape" and gratifyingly going one up on the United States Air Force Skyblazer four. But why leave it there? So I gained approval from Tom Pike at Fighter Command to incorporate a fifth Hunter, then a sixth, and eventually up to nine, which in three lines of three wrote a neat "111" across the sky! At that time the Skyblazers were disporting themselves in North American F-100s carrying a lurid paint scheme of red, white and blue stars and stripes. This set me thinking about our squadron marking

Below: A No 111 Squadron Hunter in 'Black Arrows' finish. The port side of the nose bore a miniature Squadron crest, the corresponding design on the starboard side being a Union flag.



Right: A formation take-off by the five-ship team at North Weald. Precision was the watchword—from the moment the pilots entered their cockpits until final disembarkation at the close of the display.



COURTESY MICHAEL THURLEY