

INDIVIDUAL HISTORY

GLOSTER GLADIATOR Mk.II N5628
MUSEUM ACCESSION NUMBER 72/A/472

Fitted with 840 hp Bristol Mercury VIIIA Engine No.125168 (when built). Built 1939 by Gloster Aircraft Ltd as part of contract 773235/38, serial numbers N5620-N5649.

- 22 Apr 39 No.8 MU, Little Rissington (Aircraft Storage Unit).
- 27 Oct 39 To newly-formed No.263 Squadron at Filton. Codes HE - Intended for night defence of Bristol and South Wales. Squadron spent its first few months working up in training.
- Mar 40 No.263 Squadrons' Gladiators used to simulate bombing attacks in exercises with No.11 Group Squadrons. Also at this time the unit was readied to move to Finland, the move being cancelled with the end of the Russo-Finnish war.
- 09 Apr 40 German invasion of southern Norway. No.263 Squadron was used as part of the British attempts to provide fighter cover for Allied operations in Norway.
- 20 Apr 40 The Squadrons' 18 Gladiators, led by the CO Sqn Ldr W Donaldson ('Baldy' to his pilots) flew from Filton to Prestwick, via Sealand (refuelling stop).
- 21 Apr 40 The 18 Gladiators, including N5628 were flown onto the aircraft carrier HMS Glorious by Fleet Air Arm Sea Gladiator pilots from No's 802 and 804 Squadrons, in two flights of 14 and 4 aircraft respectively. One was a replacement for a No.263 Squadron aircraft that had ditched.
- 22 Apr 40 The 'Glorious' left Scapa Flow with No.263 Squadrons Gladiators and other fighters including Blackburn Skuas embarked.
- 24 Apr 40 The Glorious had sailed to within 150 miles of the Norwegian coast, and No.263 Squadron flew its 18 Gladiators off in late afternoon, arriving at their Norwegian base around 6pm, flying in two flights of 9 aircraft, each led by a Skua.

The base chosen by the advance party under Wg Cdr L T Keens was the frozen Lake Lesjaskog in the Roma Valley in central Norway, north of Vangmjosa, near Dombas. Here Keens recruited 200 local Norwegians to trample down a rough snow landing strip on the frozen lake surface, which was already suffering from an early thaw. Photos of the lake and the squadrons' operations from it are held in one of the photo albums of the man who found the lake, S/Ldr, later A/C Whitney W Straight, DoRIS Ref.B351. When the Gladiators arrived at the lake they were refuelled, with difficulty owing to the lack of ground equipment and facilities.

Thursday 25Apr 40 An early morning patrol (4.45am) by the two by then serviceable squadron Gladiators resulted in one pilot claiming an He115 floatplane shot down on this first sortie, though the victors may actually have been FAA Skuas. At 07.45 that morning the Germans began eight hours of continuous bombing and strafing attacks on the lake from heights of 500-6000 feet (160-1900 metres). The Germans' first attack at 5am by a lone He111 destroyed 4 Gladiators, with a further 4 being destroyed in a major attack at 7am and another 4 at 1.05pm. It is likely that N5628 was one of these 12 victims all caught on the ground. All the sources consulted differ to some degree concerning the chaotic events of April 25th; the account in the August 1947 Air Reserve Gazette states that by 12.30 10 Gladiators had been destroyed by enemy action - 2 by direct hits and 8 by fire following near misses. In return, Plt Off MacNamara did shoot down a He111 in Gladiator N5579 and Flt Lt Mills damaged another Heinkel causing it to crash on its approach to Stavanger airfield. The successive bombing raids reduced the lake to a shambles, and by the evening Sqn Ldr Donaldson led the 5 remaining serviceable Gladiators to a new landing ground at Setnesmoen near Andalsnes, from where they made a few more sorties until destroyed by their pilots due to lack of fuel which ran out on the 27th. Lake Lesjaskog was left pitted with over 130 bomb craters on the ice and littered with thirteen burnt out Gladiators, 2 burnt by the squadron when left unserviceable by German attacks.

Over the two days of operations No.263 Squadron had flown 49 sorties, engaging 37 separate German aircraft, claiming 6 of them destroyed and others damaged. The Squadron lost all of its aircraft, but none in air combat. The squadron personnel returned to England on 28 April, re-equipping with more Gladiators then returning to Norway within three weeks, flying further sorties from Bardufoss in the Arctic Circle until 8th June 1940, returning to the Glorious which was then intercepted and sunk by the battle-cruisers Scharnhorst and Gneisenau with the loss of nearly all hands including No.263 Squadron personnel.

Mid May 1940 The ice on Lake Lesjaskog melted and the Gladiator wrecks sank to the bottom, being sold by the Germans to a Norwegian scrap dealer. Some were recovered, including N5641 in August 1940 by a local Norwegian whose family stored it until it passed to the Norwegian Air Force Museum for restoration 1977-80. The other aircraft, including the substantially intact N5628, lay on the lakebed, occasionally visible during the summer low water period.

Aug 68 Trip to Lake Lesjaskog by 11 man diving team from RAF Cranwell Sub Aqua Club found N5628 in good condition in the lake. A recovery attempt was made but problems with the rubber dinghies used as airbags led to the fuselage breaking in two; the rear fuselage and tail was brought to the surface for photographs and the forward fuselage towed to shallower water where some parts including the port upper wing and instruments were stripped off for the RAF Museum and flown back to the UK in an Argosy transport aircraft. Photos - Gloster Aircraft (Putnam) p.434.

Aug 70 Visit to lake by diving team from RAF Wyton intending to recover one of the Gladiators lying in some 40 feet of water. The Wyton team recovered the engine and forward fuselage of N5628. Photo; Warpaint Series No.37 Gloster Gladiator (Spencer) p.47. They also identified the remains of Gladiators N5632, N5698, N5705 and N5725.

When recovered the remains of N5628 bore traces of the letter B painted below the cockpit suggesting its code as HE-B. By 15 September 1970 the remains were on a trailer at Akerhus Castle awaiting transfer back to the UK.

23 Jul 72 -8 Aug 72 Expedition to Lake Lesjaskog by Divers from the Berlin Sub Aqua Club intended to recover more Gladiator parts. More of N5628 was recovered including panels, rear fuselage, tail and wing sections. Parts were also recovered from N5589 and N5639 including two engines and a forward fuselage sub-frame and undercarriage section. The recovered parts made up two 4-ton truck loads and were flown to RAF Lyneham 31 October 1972 (N5628 components) for transfer to the Royal Air Force Museum store at Henlow, other parts (N5589/N5639) going to RAF Wildenrath, Germany. Photos and Article: Control Column May 1974 p.82; also FlyPast Oct 1983 p.48-50.

In 1998 some of these wing components passed to the Malta Air Museum to aid the restoration of their Gladiator 'Faith' and other wreckage ex Norway passed to the Gloucestershire Aviation Collection (Jet Age Museum) to aid the restoration of their own 263 Squadron Gladiator wreck recovered from Norway, N5914.

Aug 72 Previously recovered forward fuselage of N5628 placed on display in main hall of Royal Air Force Museum prior to its opening November 1972. It was treated with inhibitor but otherwise shown exactly as found, and remains on display at Hendon today. Photo – Royal Air Force Celebrating 90 Years p.123.

The Norwegian Air Force Museum, in addition to No.263 Squadron Gladiator N5641 have recovered and restored one of the He111s shot down by a Skua after attacking Lake Lesjaskog in April 1940, so this brief episode in the Norwegian campaign is well represented by Museum exhibits; in addition, ex 263 Squadron Gladiator N5719 is under restoration to fly in Gloucestershire as G-CBHO.

TEXT - ANDREW SIMPSON

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