

601: The Flying Sword

The Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve was formed in 1936 to supplement the Auxiliary Air Force. Many men who wished to learn to fly joined the Reserve, which became the principal stream of aircrew entry into the Royal Air Force. The first Auxiliary squadron to be affiliated with the RAF was 601, the County of London Squadron, which was nicknamed 'The Legion' or 'The Flying Sword'.

601 Squadron was founded by Lord Edward Grosvenor at White's Club in St. James, London, although it was formally established at RAF Northolt on 14th October 1925.

Far from being a squadron for rich people to indulge their hobby, 601 was a fully operational fighter squadron in the Second World War which acquitted itself with distinction in the Battle of Britain, and in Malta, North Africa, and Italy.

Lord Grosvenor, the son of the first Duke of Westminster, was educated at Eton and served in the French Foreign Legion and later the Royal Horseguards. He was fascinated by aviation, and bought two Bleriot monoplanes as soon as they were available, becoming a passionate and skilled pilot. This passion for flying led Lord Grosvenor to lobby politicians and Air Force officials, including the Chief of the Air Staff Lord Trenchard, to create a civilian air force. This led to the formation of the Auxiliary Air Force and, and although it wasn't all his doing, Lord Grosvenor certainly had a hand in it.

It's because of Lord Grosvenor's background and some of the people that joined 601 that the Squadron was nicknamed the Millionaires' Squadron. A great many wealthy people, the people who could afford aviation as a hobby, joined. The second Squadron Commanding Officer Sir Philip Sassoon, owned many aeroplanes but didn't know how to fly. Luckily, a young instructor was posted to 601 as Adjutant. That instructor was Dermot Boyle,

who later became the first graduate of Cranwell to become Chief of the Air Staff, and the founder of the Royal Air Force Museum.

One of the abiding myths about the failed invasion of Europe at Dunkirk was that the RAF was not there. In fact, 601 Squadron played a significant role in defending the Allies in the skies over Dunkirk in late May and early June 1940. Many pilots died, and Roger Bushell became a prisoner of war, participating in the *Great Escape*. He was one of the men to escape Stalag Luft III in a well-planned system of tunnels, but was captured and murdered by the Gestapo along with forty-nine other escapees. His exploits were portrayed in the film *The Great Escape*, with Richard Attenborough playing a character based on Roger Bushell.

William Meade Lindley Fiske, an American citizen, pilot, and Olympic Bobsleigh champion, joined 601 Squadron in September 1939, almost three years before the United States entered the war. Like several Americans who wished to serve, Fiske pretended to be Canadian in order to sign up. His family were wealthy financiers who traced their lineage back to seventeenth century Suffolk. Fiske attended Cambridge University, and was a noted golfer. All these achievements were compressed into a 29 year life because almost one year after joining, he was killed whilst helping to repel an attack by Ju-87 Stuka dive bombers over the Sussex countryside. He landed his Hurricane despite being mortally wounded, and the much-needed aircraft was back in action within days even though its brave pilot had given his life. This assault was part of the Luftwaffe's campaign to break down the Royal Air Force in preparation for the invasion of Britain.

The Luftwaffe was suffering terrible losses in the battle, but they were not aware of how close the Royal Air Force was to being overcome. Another three weeks of battle would have seen it beaten. But on September 7th the Luftwaffe's tactics changed from attacking Britain's air defences to the Blitz, which was horrific for the people of London, but allowed time for the RAF to recover from the intensive war in the air which they had fought and won. 601 Squadron was moved from its defensive role over London, to Exeter, but

tragically William Rhodes-Moorehouse was killed in action at the very end of the Squadron's involvement in the Battle of Britain. Rhodes-Moorehouse was the son of the first man to win the Victoria Cross in an air war: his father had served in the Royal Flying Corps and was decorated for conspicuous bravery during the second battle of Ypres in 1915. He was the subject of an earlier RAF Museum Podcast.

In the later stages of the war, 601 Squadron aided the defence of the Island of Malta in 1942 and then in Africa (providing air support for Montgomery's push at El Alamein) and Italy. After the war, the Squadron was briefly disbanded and then reformed at Hendon, where it flew the North American Harvard. The era of the jet came soon, and 601 Squadron operated the Vampire and the Meteor, by this time at RAF North Weald. In its time the squadron had flown the Blenheim fighter-bomber, the Hawker Hurricane and the Supermarine Spitfire and, less successfully, the Bell Airacobra.

601 Squadron was disbanded for the final time in 1957. A Squadron which had informally been founded in a London club in the formative years of aviation, it proved itself to be among the best during the Battle of Britain, and had a formidable reputation in air-to-air and ground attack in Africa and Italy towards the end of the war.

A statue of the Squadron's emblem was unveiled at the Squadron's former home at the RAF Museum in Hendon on May 13th 2009, a permanent memorial to the men of The Flying Sword.