

36 SQUADRON - A WWI HISTORY



BY MICK DAVIS

THE GERMAN THREAT to Great Britain at the beginning of WWI had centred on the use of surface vessels, which had bombarded coastal towns, such as the Hartlepoons, Scarborough and Great Yarmouth. The defence of the country's coast was the traditional responsibility of the Royal Navy and one of its responses was the establishment of a chain of aerodromes and seaplane stations along the east coast. One of these was at Newcastle, to where a flight of four Bristol TB8s of 1 Sqn RNAS was detached in December 1914 and operated from the Armstrong Whitworth factory aerodrome on Duke's Moor. The flight moved to a new aerodrome at Whitley Bay on 15 March 1915, becoming an independent unit and facing a new threat, attacks from German airships.

Zeppelins of the German Navy had raided the North East twice in the first half of 1915; the second raid, on the night of 15/16 June caused considerable damage and met with no resistance from RNAS Whitley Bay. The North East was vital to the British war effort. Steel-making, shipbuilding and armaments were major industries and a considerable proportion of the output from the Durham & Northumberland coalfield was shipped to towns and cities in the South East.

There was a great deal of inter-service wrangling, between the Navy and the Army, over responsibility for aerial defence and while this was ongoing, the Army Council decided to create a home defence flight of the RFC, specifically for the defence of Tyneside, from 1 December 1915. The unit was to be based on a new aerodrome at Cramlington, some nine miles north of Newcastle. At 250ft above sea level, the new site was

less prone to being fogged in than the existing naval stations, which were on the coast.

BE2cs 2071 and 4121 were allocated to the new unit on 24 and 25 November, respectively. The flight formed on the intended date, under the command of Captain R.O. Abercromby, who had been a flight commander in 25 Squadron at Montrose. A further BE2c, 4130, was allocated two days later. The urgency of the flight's formation was at odds with the fact that the winter months were, effectively, a 'close season' for airship raids, with weather conditions over the North Sea curtailing operations.

The Navy and Army had sorted their differences over Home Defence and reached an agreement whereby the RNAS would be responsible for defence of the sea approaches while the RFC would handle the overland defence. To that end, the RFC brought forward plans for the creation of Home Defence squadrons, to protect areas of strategic importance.

The Tyneside flight was subsumed into 36 Squadron when that unit formed at Cramlington, under the command of Abercromby, on 1 February 1916, in 8th Wing and VI (Training) Brigade. By 23 February, the squadron's officers, apart from the CO, were Captain R. Blatherwick, Captain A. Wilson, Lt W.B. Ellis, 2Lt J. Nichol and 2Lt J. Armes.

In common with other home-based service squadrons, 36 Squadron had a responsibility for training pilots. The unit was retitled on 18 March, becoming 36 (Home Defence) Squadron, the first such unit in the RFC but still under VI Brigade and still responsible for pilot training in addition to its titular function. Abercromby handed over command of the squadron to Major C.S. Burnett on 26 March.

Four of the unit's original members: l-r Capt R.O. Abercromby, Capt R. Blatherwick, Capt A.M. Wilson, Lt W.B. Ellis.

:RAeC 134, 1778, 1951 & 1804

