



Still proud to be... 33!

OC 33 welcomes former COs back to the Squadron



Chris Royston-Airey, the 71st CO of 33 Squadron (first left) stands with some of his predecessors: (L-R) Mark Biggadike, Shane Anderson, Ster Howard, Chris Luck, Paul Lyall, Jim Grisdale, Sir Tim Jenner, Keith Harding, Graham Poyser.

A special event took place at RAF Benson on Wednesday 27 November 2019, when a group of very special gentlemen responded to an invitation from Wing Commander Chris Royston-Airey to visit their old squadron "... to convene, converse and gain an insight into 33 Squadron's current operations" at what might be the first ever 'Officer Commanding 33 Squadron Past and Present Lunch'. Squadron and Association records provided contact details for every officer that had commanded 33 Squadron since 1971, and the invitations were sent out at the end of August. Many replies were received, several apologising that they were unable to attend due to prior engagements and, unfortunately, a few more had to cry off closer to the event. In all, the nine former commanding officers who made it to Benson enjoyed a good look around the station and their old squadron, with a couple even managing a quick flight in the Puma Mk 2. They all received a quick, condensed version of 33 Squadron's impressive and diverse history and heard some stories about their predecessors before being fully briefed on current Squadron operations and future Force aspirations before heading off for lunch. By all accounts, they all had a wonderful day and Wing Commander Royston-Airey is keen to see the Lunch established as a regular event in OC 33's Diary.

Why was this gathering so special? There is only one other event like this recorded among all of the documentation and photographs held within the Squadron History Room. The black and white photograph above and overleaf, which has appeared several times in the last few months in the Association Battlefield Tour Guide and Reader, shows twelve former COs, and the CO at the time, gathered at RAF Leeming, where 33 and her Meteor NF 14s were stationed. The illustrious group of officers on parade that day - 24 April 1958 - were there to see the Squadron's first Royal Standard be presented to Wing Commander Norman Poole by Air Chief Marshal Sir Philip Joubert de la Ferté, the RFC major who had been tasked by Trenchard to form 33 Squadron at Bristol Filton Aerodrome on 12 January 1916. Names and details of the officers who were present at Leeming that day are shown on the next page.



RAF Leeming (L-R): Wg Cdr AK Furse, Wg Cdr RR Mitchell, Sqn Ldr NPW Hancock, ACM Sir JW Baker, AVM FP Don, ACM Sir PBJ de la Ferté, Wg Cdr N Poole, AM Sir H Walmsley, Wg Cdr WH deW Waller, Gp Capt JH McC Reynolds, Gp Capt J Bradbury, Wg Cdr RC Patrick, Wg Cdr RNG Allen

The officers on parade that day were excellent representatives of 33 Squadron's period of varied service between the formation of the Squadron on 12 January 1916 to the presentation of the Standard on 24 April 1958. There were six former RFC pilots: de la Ferté, Baker, Don, Walmsley, de Warne Waller and Bradbury; two were ex-infantry, two were ex-cavalry and two were ex-artillery, a very fair representation of the British Army of the time. ACM de la Ferté had been part of the initial RFC deployment from England to France in August 1914 and was part of the first ever aviation reconnaissance flights several days later. Wg Cdr Mitchell was a Battle of Britain veteran, commanded 33 in North Africa and brought it back to Britain in 1944 to prepare for the invasion of Europe. AVM Don and Wg Cdr Allen had been held by the Germans as prisoners of war, Don in WW1 and Allen in WW2. AVM Don had lost his arm while in captivity but took command of 33 when it reformed with Hawker Horsleys in 1929. Allen took command of 33 Squadron after being repatriated, to find that its location - Quackenbruck - was close to one of his previous POW camps. Wg Cdr Poole, 33's CO at Leeming, was the first navigator to command 33 Squadron and had flown on exchange with the USMC in the Korean War. Between them they had flown the BE2, the Hawker Horsley, Hart, Hurricane and Tempest, the Gloster Gladiator and Meteor, the Supermarine Spitfire, and the de Havilland Hornet and Venom in the skies above Britain, Europe, and the Middle and Far East.

The period of time between our formation and the presentation at Leeming was 42 years, a period that has already been surpassed, in continuous service, by the 33 Squadron that we know today. In 2021 we will reach the 50 year milestone, having flown the extremely versatile Puma helicopter throughout the entire period and, compared to the achievements of those who served before us, the Squadron has operated in an equally impressive list of countries across the globe in operational, humanitarian and peace support roles. We can all be very proud to be...33.

