

Taking the salute at Lyneham from a Land-Rover, Air Marshal Sir Donald Hardman, accompanied by S/L. Swift and A.V.-M. McKee, drives past No. 216 Squadron's Valettas on their return to England. "Flight" photograph

# VALETTAS TO COMETS

## No. 216 Sqn. Returns for its New Rôle

ON Thursday of last week No. 216 Squadron returned to England after 38 years' continuous service abroad. Early next year it will take over the first of the Comet 2s now being prepared for service with Transport Command.

The squadron flew its eight Valettas back from Fayid via Malta and landed at its new base at Lyneham, Wilts, to be welcomed by Air Chief Marshal Sir Donald Hardman, Air Member for Supply and Organization, and A.V.-M. A. McKee, A.O.C.-in-C. Transport Command, with many members of his headquarters staff. All previous commanders of the squadron had been invited to witness its return and many of them came.

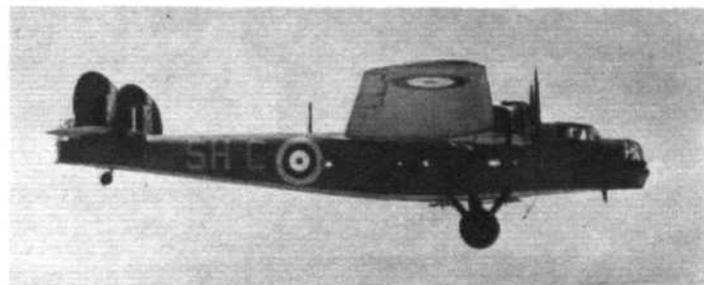
No. 216 was first formed in 1917 at Manston as "A" Sqn., R.N.A.S., but a few months later became No. 16 Sqn., R.N.A.S. Finally, six months after its formation, it became No. 216 Sqn., R.A.F. Formed specifically as a strategic bomber unit to attack industrial targets in Germany, it dropped 176.5 tons of bombs in 162 raids before the armistice led to its being employed on mail-carrying to Cologne and Valenciennes. The new rôle was continued when the squadron was moved to Egypt and passengers and mail were flown to Palestine and Iraq.

Equipment then consisted of Handley Page 0/400s (World War I), D.H.10s (1921), and Vimys (1922) before 1925 saw the unit's redesignation as a bomber/transport squadron with Victorias. The Cairo-Baghdad mail had occupied No. 216 for some time when, in 1930, the unit was given the task of surveying the little-used central-African route to Takoradi, which became so important in World War II. Valentias were issued in 1935 and Bombays were coming in in 1939 when war broke out.

When Italy too entered the war the Bombays were hurriedly fitted with bomb-racks and flown against the Italians at Sidi Barrani and Benghazi. For the longer-range sorties at this time four-gallon petrol cans were carried and dumped overboard when the tanks had been replenished.

From 1940 onwards the squadron worked exclusively on transport duties, supporting the movement of squadrons to Greece and being actively employed against the Rashid Ali revolt in Iraq. A party of sappers was flown out to blow up a vital railway bridge on the Syria-Mosul railway. Supplies were flown to Tobruk, and in November 1941 five Bombays made the first Allied airborne landing in North Africa, dropping 54 airborne troops at Tmimi. On July 29th, 1942, the squadron carried fuel to a point 200 miles behind the enemy lines to enable Albacores to refuel and attack an enemy convoy. After the El Alamein battle supplies were carried to Landing Ground 125, 400 miles behind enemy lines, to allow a Hurricane wing to operate from there. A short period with Hudsons followed before the unit was re-equipped with Dakotas in 1943, and it spent the remainder of the campaign supporting fighter wings as they followed Rommel's retreat.

No. 216 Sqn. was at Salerno soon after the landings, bringing in reinforcements, and many sorties were flown in support of operations in the Dodecanese Islands. Four aircraft supplied official transport for the Teheran conference in 1943. During the following year a detachment went to South-East Asia for supply-dropping operations in the Imphal-Kohima area where,



Earlier equipment of No. 216 Sqn. included the Bombay (above, centre) and the Valentia, in one of which Cameron Highlanders are seen embarking at Ismailia in 1938. The Valentia was a developed Victoria.

in three months, they dropped more than 600 tons of supplies, carried 7,200 passengers and evacuated 500 casualties.

After the war the unit remained in the Middle East and has since ranged over the Mediterranean and south to Aden and Nairobi. It holds at present the Vickers Trophy for the most efficient transport squadron in the Middle East Air Force.

S/L. W. J. Swift brought the squadron back from the Canal Zone to Lyneham, but when the Comets arrive his place as commander will be taken by W/C. B. D. Sellick, who is at present on a course at the R.A.F. Flying College, Manby. The squadron has secured the distinction of returning to England as a complete unit without being disbanded and reformed; this fact, together with the new rôle as the first jet transport unit in Transport Command, will undoubtedly make this, their first full tour of service in England, a memorable episode. As a unit, No. 216 Sqn. was based in England for only four days in 1917 before going to France and, whereas a squadron pilot took eight and a half hours to fly to Cologne and back from his French base during World War I, the Comet 2 will cover almost five times that distance in half that time.

(Left) At Lyneham to welcome No. 216 Sqn. were A.V.-M. McKee, A.O.C.-in-C. Transport Command; Air Marshal Sir Donald Hardman, Air Member for Supply and Organization; and G/C. Waterhouse, Station Commander. (Right) A group of the squadron's commanders were assembled for the return, including (l. to r.) G/C. P. Q. Chichester, A. Cdre. C. O. S. Modin, G/C. C. W. Mackay, S/L. W. J. Swift (present commander), G/C. G. R. Howie, W/C. C. M. Fell, S/L. R. T. Mason and W/C. B. D. Sellick (commander designate).

