

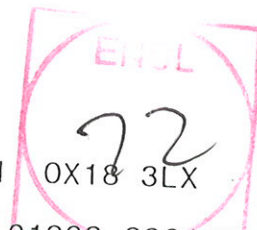


No 216 SQUADRON

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Dear Association Member

Reference:

Date:
Jul 98

NO 216 SQUADRON ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER 1998

1. Welcome to the 1998 80th anniversary newsletter of the 216 Squadron Association. On 1 April 1918, the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) and the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS) amalgamated to form the Royal Air Force. At that point 16 Squadron RNAS, flying Handley Page 0/200 heavy bombers, became 216 Squadron RAF flying the new Handley Page 0/400. The Squadron's role has changed over the years, from its original contribution to Trenchard's Night Bomber Force, to a 'bomber-transport' unit, to its current role of "bearing gifts" of a different kind at the forefront of 38 Group's Air Transport (AT) and Air-to-Air Refuelling (AAR) Force.
2. The ever changing international political climate has resulted in heavy tasking and made it yet another hard working year for the Squadron. Over the last 12 months, 216 Squadron has participated in all major operations, and has once again returned to the Gulf. A healthy "can do" attitude still prevails, but it often does so in the face of huge difficulties. A shortage of TriStar spares has resulted in poor aircraft serviceability, and the need to 'crisis manage' the remaining serviceable aircraft puts enormous strain on the groundcrew, and results in constantly changing programmes for the aircrew. Both sections find the result frustrating, but I have been impressed with the professional attitude of all Squadron personnel throughout this fraught time.
3. Throughout the 12 months since the last newsletter, 216 Squadron has continued to fly to the far reaches of the world. Although the Squadron still has regular schedules to the South Atlantic and the Former Yugoslavia, we are being tasked with more flights this year to the Far East and Australia; instantly popular with the crews! The withdrawal of UK air support to NATO forces in Croatia in April resulted in a decrease in our AAR flying hours. However, developments in Iraq and Albania have kept AAR and the trailing of fast jets to operational hot spots very much to the fore.

SQUADRON EVENTS FROM JULY 1997

4. July 1997 typified the varied year that has since followed. The Squadron participated in several exercises globally, most notably in Australia, which involved a deployment via Bahrain and Singapore. One TriStar was also despatched to Diego Garcia, in the Indian Ocean, to carry out a crew change on a Royal Navy ship. The high profile South Atlantic schedule to the Falkland Islands, which absorbs some 40% of our AT task, was notable for some rare delays to the normally punctual itinerary. Two aircraft diverted to Montevideo in Uruguay, one because of a generator malfunction and the other resulting from snow obstructing the runway at Mount Pleasant airfield on the Falklands. A third TriStar diverted to Rio de Janeiro because of smoke and fumes on the flight deck, caused by a faulty heated windscreen that had started to melt! Much productive AAR was flown this month, with many AAR sorties (towlines) being flown over the North Sea. Prior to one such flight, an aircraft was pre-positioned at RAF Fairford to take part in the Royal International Air Tattoo.

5. August is, traditionally, a lightly tasked month and several personnel took some much needed leave. The respite allowed those remaining a chance to take part in some typical Squadron social activities, an increasingly difficult achievement given the very limited spare time available, and the nomadic lifestyle of Squadron members. The annual Families Flight, barbecue and disco were much appreciated by all those who attended. Meanwhile, the Squadron continued its support of NATO operations in the former Yugoslavia and Army exercises in Canada, as well as its regular flights to the South Atlantic. Our Flight Commander Air, Squadron Leader Stu Mitchell, and his crew, have good reason to remember one flight home from the Falklands. At the end of the second leg of its homeward journey from Ascension Island, the aircraft had to enter the hold because of unforecast fog at Brize Norton and the diversion airfields. After orbiting for nearly 2 hours, the worried air loadmaster reported that one of the passengers had unexpectedly gone into labour. There followed a very tense period in the back of the aircraft as the loadmaster and air stewards prepared to deal with one of the ultimate airborne crises, while Squadron Leader Mitchell offered up silent prayers for the fog to lift. As events proceeded towards their inexorable conclusion, his prayers were answered, and Brize Norton appeared below him out of the murk. We are not sure what records were set, but the aircraft touched down in a remarkably short time! The Station's medical staff were on hand to meet them, and very soon afterwards, mother and baby were both doing well.

6. September and October very often witness the peak of tasking for the year's exercises, and so it was last year. In particular, the number of AAR hours increased, resulting from the Squadron's participation in 4 North Atlantic trails. In addition, there was an increase in the operational hours flown by the Squadron's AAR detachment at Palermo in Sicily, where crews conduct AAR missions over the Adriatic in support of the enforcement of the No-Fly Zone

over Bosnia. The Palermo detachment's hours increased because an additional crew was deployed in theatre at the time of the elections in the former Yugoslavia, when an increased military presence was required to deal with the heightened tension. Fortunately, there was no renewed fighting on the ground, and the second crew returned home in due course. October saw the Squadron returning again to Australia and New Zealand. During one of these flights, one of our senior captains, Squadron Leader Ed Cranswick, took the opportunity to visit his brother in Australia whom he had not seen for twenty years. The Squadron's crews also returned to more familiar exercise destinations such as Nairobi, Calgary, Edmonton and Las Vegas. Towards the end of October, the Squadron began a series of flights to Amman in Jordan, deploying the Army in the support of Exercise Desert Song. Considering the extremely busy AT programme, it was a testament to the TriStar and the Squadron's engineers that only 3 flights were significantly delayed.

7. Weather had a significant effect on the Squadron's operations during November. AAR missions from Palermo were worst hit, with only 60% of the sorties flown, largely because of low cloud and strong winds. In the UK, fog was the disruptive factor. The Squadron was operating to destinations as diverse as Atlanta in the USA and Cairo in Egypt. On one memorable evening, I recall returning from Cairo, listening to steadily deteriorating weather reports for Brize Norton and our nominated diversions. Ahead of me, Flt Lt Nigel Pitchforth and Flt Lt Bob Davies both diverted, because both Brize Norton and Lyneham were out in fog. They got into Manchester just before that airfield also became unusable because of fog. The only diversion available to me south of Edinburgh was Stansted, and after some rapid re-planning, that is where we went. The next morning, Stansted was blanketed in fog, and I was stuck there for the day. With other aircraft remaining at their departure airfields to avoid diversion, fog had, on this one occasion, stranded 7 of the Squadron's 9 aircraft.

8. December brought another respite in tasking, which provided further opportunity to catch up on social events. The month began with Squadron Leader Laurie Trask, our Flight Commander Training, visiting Buckingham Palace to receive his MBE, following the award in the 1997 Queen's Birthday Honours List. Also during December, Flight Lieutenant Ted Harlow completed his final flight in the RAF prior to his retirement. During his flying career, which spanned Vulcans, Hercules and VC10s, Ted amassed almost 11,500 hours and surely must be the only 216 Squadron TriStar pilot to have flown an operational tour on Meteors! As befits the season of good will, the Squadron rounded off celebrating Christmas with a variety of social events. The highlight for the aircrew was a visit to "the dogs", an excursion to the greyhound racing track in Oxford. The only successful person during the night was Flight Lieutenant Steve Aston, who promises to reveal his 'system' at the 80th anniversary!

9. The Squadron had an eventful start to the 1998 South Atlantic schedule, with 3 of its flights encountering problems. The first aircraft southbound was forced to divert to Tenerife in the Canary Islands because of smoke and fumes on the flight deck. The second flight had to return to Ascension Island on its northbound leg when yet another pregnant passenger suffered labour pains. The third flight departed southbound several hours late due to technical problems. Thankfully, all ensuing flights ran according to schedule and without incident. January also saw the Squadron's detachment move from Palermo to Ancona on the Italian Adriatic Coast. The move was the result of resurfacing work on the main runway at Palermo, and within a day of leaving Palermo, the Squadron was flying operational missions from its new home at Ancona. The Squadron owes a debt of gratitude to all those involved in this organizational triumph, both Squadron members and members of other units detailed to help in the move.

10. February proved to be the busiest of the last 12 months. Saddam Hussein's intransigence in not allowing UN inspectors to view weapons storage sites in Iraq resulted in the deployment of Harrier GR7s to HMS Invincible and Tornado GR1s to Kuwait as part of Operation BOLTON. 216 Squadron was immediately tasked to provide aircraft and crews to establish a slip pattern at Kuwait International Airport. Within a couple of hours, the Squadron became a hive of activity. Squadron operations staff drew up deployment plans, groundcrew worked flat out on aircraft to get them serviceable, and aircrew went through the hectic business of drawing nuclear, biological and chemical (NBC) warfare protective equipment, and undertook crash refresher courses in NBC warfare and weapons training. Having been a flight commander on a Hercules squadron at Lyneham during the Gulf War in 1990-91, I felt a very strong sense of déjà-vu, and I hoped on this occasion that Saddam Hussein would not push matters over the brink. Certainly, anybody who served on 216 Squadron during the Gulf War would have instantly recognized the scenes being played out before them last February. Fortunately, Saddam Hussein drew back on this occasion. After the initial intense surge in tasking to Kuwait, the Squadron quickly re-established its other routine tasks. The Squadron continues to fly regular re-supply missions to Kuwait and Bahrain in support of British forces still deployed on Operation BOLTON.

11. March and April were steady months, helped by the downward trend in AAR hours. After only a short time at Ancona, the Squadron's AAR detachment returned home in April in the wake of the Government's decision to scale down the UK contribution to enforcement of the Bosnian No-Fly Zone. Flt Lt 'Buck' Rogers and his crew trailed home the Jaguar detachment from Gioia del Colle, and so ended an unbroken Squadron presence in Italy that had lasted for 6 years. The Station Commander, Group Captain Vass, was on hand to welcome the crew home on the basis that, as a previous squadron commander of 216 Squadron,

he had 'counted them all out', and now as Station Commander was going to 'count them all in' again. However, experience shows that one must expect the unexpected, and within a matter of weeks, the Squadron redeployed in support of the demonstration of force along the Albanian and Serbian border by NATO air forces following the new crisis in Kosovo. The Squadron's destination was..... Ancona! So once again, the AAR detachment is in full swing again in what appears to be an open ended commitment at the time of writing. The forthcoming year shows all the signs of being as busy as that which has just passed and, if we are truthful with ourselves, we would not have it any other way!

ASSOCIATION REUNION

12. The 1998 Reunion of the Squadron Association will be held on 4/5 September 1998 and I look forward to seeing you at the celebrations. Due its popularity last year, the event will include an AAR sortie on the Friday, followed by a Ladies Guest Night. The following day will include a Church Service and an all-ranks barbecue, combining it with our usual Squadron Summer Families Day. More details about the celebrations, including maps and reply forms, are over the page. If you would like to attend this year's reunion, please return the slip to Flight Lieutenant Steve Cox at the Squadron's address. After a most successful and very eventful 12 months, we will have a lot to talk about and I look forward to meeting you all again and continuing our conversations from last year.

THE REUNION - 4/5 SEPTEMBER 1998

13. This year will hopefully be the start of the new format for biennial reunions for the 216 Squadron Association. As mentioned in last year's newsletter, this year's reunion will take on a "pay as you attend" format, depending on which function you attend. The itinerary for this year's reunion will not be finalised until after this year's newsletter is printed, therefore it may vary.

14. The visit will consist of:

4 September 1998

- a. ????-???? hrs. Arrive at RAF Brize Norton Gateway House.
- b. ????-???? hrs. Meet and Greet at the Gateway House.
- c. ????-???? hrs. AAR Sortie.
- d. 1930-2000 hrs. Ladies Guest Night - Officers Mess.

14. 5 September 1998

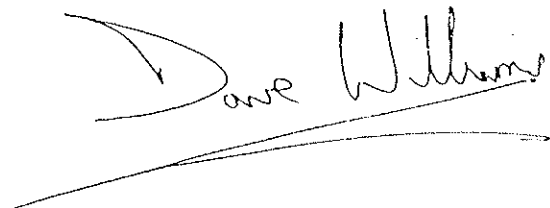
- a. 1000-1100 hrs. Church Service.
- b. 1145-1230 hrs. Simulator Visit.
- c. 1400-1830 hrs. Squadron Barbecue.
- d. 1400 onwards. Departure.

15. The costs for the weekend (per person) are as follows with the cheques made payable to the 216 Squadron Association:

- a. Ladies Guest Night £30-00
- b. Barbecue £15-00
- c. Gateway House Accommodation £26-40 (Payable at the reception)

16. If you would like to attend, please fill out the attached form and send to the above address. Included on the form is a small questionnaire regarding details about yourself. If you have any queries regarding the visit or otherwise, then please contact Flight Lieutenant Steve Cox or myself. Finally, any anecdotes or stories any of you might have from times past on the Squadron would be most welcome, not only for general interest and inclusion within the Squadron's history, but also to help out a hard pressed Squadron Commander who will have to sing for his supper during the Ladies Guest Night!

Yours

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Dave Williams". The signature is written in black ink and is underlined with a single horizontal stroke.