

Squadron Leader Geoffrey Ambler AFC

Geoffrey Ambler took over the command of 609 Sqn in November 1938, ten months before the outbreak of hostilities. A Yorkshireman by birth, his family had been in the Yorkshire textile trade since the middle of the eighteenth century. A graduate of Cambridge, he had been a rowing blue, and had been the President of the Cambridge Union Boat Club for two years. He started flying in 1926, and in 1930 joined the newly formed 608 (North Riding) Auxiliary Squadron. When 608 converted to its fighter role in 1934 he became its commanding officer, and when he was transferred to 609, it was at the direct request of Squadron Leader Harald Peake, the first CO of the squadron, later to become Air Commodore, Director of the Auxiliary Air Force.

Under the command of Sqn Ldr Ambler, 609 was transformed into an effective fighter unit, spurred on by the increasing realisation that war was looking inevitable. Although the Auxiliary Air Force was still officially a part-time service, with the Auxiliaries holding down a civilian job, the squadron hours flown sometimes exceeded that of its regular counterparts. The enthusiasm and dedication of its personnel was amazing and it is generally accepted that this was due, in large measure, to the policy of recruiting from a cross section of local populace, with mutual loyalties, respect and comradeship as its driving force.

By the beginning of August, the squadron was due to re-equip with Spitfire Mk1's. Geoffrey Ambler flew back to 609's base at Yeadon from Southampton with the first of 609's Spitfires, L1082, which stayed with the squadron until almost the end of the Battle of Britain. The aircraft eventually collapsed after a forced landing by Andy Mamedoff on 24th August 1940.

On August 23rd 1939 Sqn Ldr Ambler was tasked to recall all his squadron and inform them that a general mobilization was under way. Immediately thereafter, the squadron was moved to Catterick in Northumberland. On 14th October, 609 took a small part in the first serious defence of the war when a section was detailed to patrol the coast at Berwick. Nothing was seen, but this was the first attack made on the UK since 1918 when a force of anti-shipping Ju88's attacked the home fleet anchored at Rosyth naval base. With the attacks made during the previous two days at Scapa Flow, this effectively lost the control of the North Sea for the Royal Navy. This largely determined the defensive pattern of the area north of the Humber for the next few years, and although the squadron did not yet know, this, in part, was the reason for their sudden move to Drem in Lothian, just 11 hours after the attack.

The move called for some ingenuity since official transport did not exist to move a whole squadron, but requisitioning of a couple of whisky trucks, and a friendly call to a local Whitley bomber base ensured that by the afternoon of the 17 October, just fourteen hours from the signal to move, Sqn Ldr Ambler was able to signal Turnhouse control that the squadron was fully operational.

Four days later, exactly the same thing happened, this time to Kinloss on the Moray Firth, although this only lasted a couple of days before they were returned to Drem. After the existing Flying Training School, already at Drem, moved out, 609 were joined by 602 (City of Glasgow) and 603 (City of Edinburgh) Squadrons. These two shared in the fame of bringing down the first enemy aircraft of the war to crash on British soil, when on the 28th October, they shot down a Heinkel 111. The airplane force-landed only 10 miles from Drem near a village which co-incidentally bore the same name as Flight Lieutenant Gifford, the leader of the section of 603 Sqn that was involved.

On the 5th December, 609 once again departed to Kinloss, this time to defend the eastern approaches to Loch Ewe where the home fleet were now anchored. Sqn Ldr

Ambler devised all the control and communications, since there were none available to cover the area, and within hours, he and a few communications technicians had rigged up a fully working operations room. He also had a landline installed to HMS Culew anchored at Invergordon from where he could obtain radar plots, and enrolled the local Coastguard as Observer Corps. During December, the weather closed in, but fortuitously there were no accidents owing to the masterly improvisation created by the Commanding Officer. All the intercepts were carried out successfully, even if they turned out to be friendlies. Indeed, it worked so well, that on 1st January 1940 Geoffrey Ambler was promoted to Wing Commander and was sent north to evolve a defence policy for the new sector covering Orkney, Shetland and North Scotland. Again he was successful and in early March the Home Fleet was able to return to Scapa Flow, and after two heavy defeats in April, the Luftwaffe left it alone for the rest of the war.

Geoffrey Ambler's subsequent posts included Commandant of the Royal Observer Corps, which he radically overhauled, Senior Air Staff Officer Fighter Command, and Aide de Camp to King George VI. After the war, he completed a conversion course on to jets at the age of 41. He was eventually promoted to the rank of Air Vice Marshal, the only Auxiliary to have done so through the war.

In 1946, when the (now) Royal Auxiliary Air Force were reincarnated, it was on the same basis as before the war, on a county by county basis, by the Territorial Associations. These were responsible for generating both a county air and land force, with the Chair and vice-chair being an ex-army and ex-RAF officer. The Vice-chair of the West Riding Association was Air Vice Marshal Geoffrey Ambler. After reformation, he also became the squadron's Honorary Air Commodore. The last Commanding Officer Squadron Leader "Big" Dave Shaw remembers the squadron's return from summer camp in Malta in 1956:

"The Station Commander at Church Fenton had pointed out to me the convention that a Royal Air Force Officer always wears a hat with civilian clothes. He would be happy if I would bring that sartorial custom to the attention of my officers. I did so and included our Honorary Air Commodore, Geoffrey Ambler, who was no better behaved in this respect. Arriving back from Malta, scruffy in sweat-soaked khaki drill, we were welcomed home by the Station Commander, immaculate in Sunday Afternoon Casuals, and smartly hatted. We were also welcomed by our Air Commodore, equally immaculate except for his head, which was covered by the most battered and disreputable piece of felt imaginable. Fortunately the Station Commander had a sense of humour."

Air Vice Marshal G H Ambler

Geoffrey Hill b: xx xxx 1904 r: N/A d: 26 Aug 1978
CB - 1 Jan 1946, CBE - 1 Jan 1944 (OBE - 24 Sep 1941), AFC, ADC - 20 Aug 1943,
MA, LL.D (Hon) - 1966, DL (West Riding) - 1949.
(AuxAF) - Plt Off : xx xxx 1931, Fg Off: xx xxx xxxx, Flt Lt: xx xxx xxxx, Sqn Ldr:
xx xxx xxxx, Act Wg Cdr: 24 Dec 1939, (T) Wg Cdr: 1 Jan 1940, Act Gp Capt: xx
xxx xxxx, (T) Gp Capt: 1 Dec 1941, Act A/Cdre: xx xxx 1942, (T) A/Cdre: 1 Oct
1944, A/Cdre: xx xxx xxxx, Act AVM: 1 Feb 1945 - 16 Aug 1945.
7 Feb 1931: Pilot, No 609 (West Riding) Sqn Aux AF.
30 Dec 1934: Officer Commanding, No 608 (North Riding) Sqn Aux AF.
1 Nov 1938: Officer Commanding, No 609 (West Riding) Sqn Aux AF.

24 Dec 1939: Operations Controller, RAF Wick.

xx xxx 1942: Commandant, Royal Observer Corps.

23 Jun 1943: Deputy SASO, HQ Fighter Command.

1 Feb 1945: SASO, HQ Fighter Command

Educated at Cambridge, he worked for Fred Ambler Ltd in Bradford, where he invented a system for accelerating the production of worsted yarn. After the war he returned to the business and eventually rose to Chairman. From 1947 to 1957, he was Hon A/Cdre to 609 Sqn. When he was appointed Commandant of the ROC, he became the first serving officer to hold the post, it previously having been held by retired officers.