

# LIGHT BLUE

Painted all-black for its night role, an Albacore sitting in dispersal at Manston carrying a full load of flares underwing; radar aerials on the wing struts and fuselage are also visible. VIA G R PITCHFORK



# FISHES

## FAIREY ALBACORES IN RAF AND RCAF SERVICE

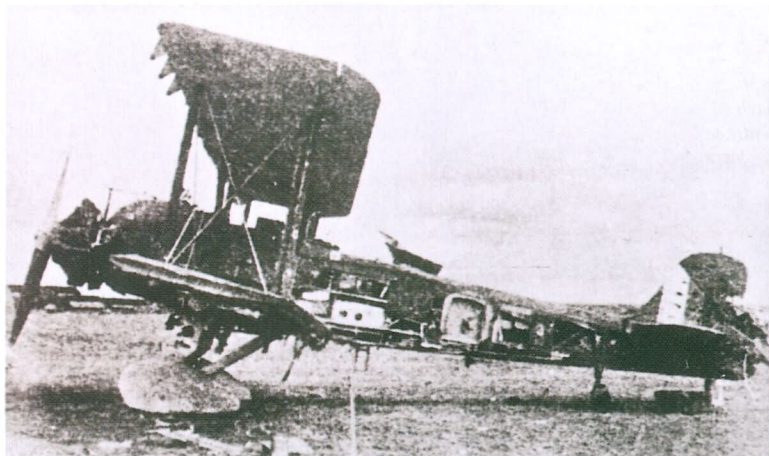
**AE** ANDREW THOMAS

*The RAF's first operational use of the Albacore was in Malaya when a few were used alongside the Vildebeeste of 36 Squadron. One of these lies derelict in Singapore, a mute testimony to that ill-fated campaign. 36*

SQUADRON RECORDS

**E**VEN BY THE TIME it entered service with the Fleet Air Arm, the Fairey Albacore was something of an anachronism, a monument to conservative thinking in 1936 when the original specification for a Fairey Swordfish replacement was written as S41/36. One hundred were ordered initially and the Albacore, designed for carrier-borne torpedo bombing duties, first flew from Fairey's Great West aerodrome (now Heathrow Airport) on December 12, 1938. The new type entered service with 826 Squadron at Ford, Sussex, on March 15, 1940 and first saw action on May 31, attacking coastal targets around Zeebrugge, Belgium. (An albacore is a large fish found in warm Atlantic and Pacific waters, valued for its tasty flesh and more often called the tunny - ED)

By the time of the Albacore's debut in action, several were already serving in RAF units, L7078 having been issued to the Central Flying School at Upavon, Wiltshire, on January 18, 1940. The following month, L7079 joined 'B' Squadron of the Aeroplane & Armament Experimental Establishment at Boscombe Down, Wilts, for trials: later in the year L7161 went to 'E' Flight at the Royal Aircraft Establishment, Farnborough, Hampshire, also for trials, joining L7131 at the Torpedo Development Unit at Gosport (also Hampshire) in 1941. Although these were RAF units, in effect they were all joint service test and training establishments, and the first Albacore to serve with a purely RAF unit was probably L7166, which was delivered from 15 Maintenance Unit, Wroughton, Wilts, to 3 Air Gunnery School at Stormy Down, Wales, on June 1, 1941.





## Far East Debâcle

The Japanese invasion of the Malay Peninsula, which began on December 8, 1941, found the RAF in Malaya flying a variety of obsolescent types, including the antique-looking Vickers Vildebeeste torpedo-bombers equipping 36 and 100 Squadrons at Seletar, Singapore. The evident quality of the Japanese air opposition encountered meant that the biplanes would be very vulnerable, but they still posed a significant threat to any invasion force, should they be able to get into a position to launch their torpedoes. On December 12, 36 Squadron was considerably boosted in strength by the transfer of five Albacores from Royal Navy storage in Singapore. There were sufficient crews available to man them as the squadron had a number of RNZAF pilots and RAAF observers and air gunners who had recently joined it from training units, and as a result the new aircraft were formed into a separate Flight.

In view of the planned re-equipment of the squadrons with Australian-built Bristol Beaufoots, both COs departed for Australia, so on December 19, 41-year-old Sqn Ldr Richard Markham assumed command of 36 Squadron. The staggering Japanese success in the Far East continued, and most of the squadron's operations took the form of night bombing by the Vildebeests against enemy transport as they advanced down the peninsula. On Christmas Day, 36 Squadron had 13 Vildebeest and five Albacores available. Singapore eventually came under air attack, and during a raid on January 21, 1942, two of the Albacores took off from Seletar and met up with an escort of six Brewster Buffalos to attack a group of boats that had been reported near Batu Pahat: nothing was found and, fortunately, no enemy aircraft were seen either. Nonetheless, these were thought to have been the Albacores' first operational sorties with the RAF.

### **"FINDING THAT THE ENEMY CONVOY WAS BACKED UP ALONG THE ROAD, THE THREE BIPLANES DIVE-BOMBED AND STRAFED IN TURN..."**

The following day, as the Japanese advanced through British positions around Muar, support operations to 45 (Infantry) Brigade were flown. At 09:00 hours, two of 36 Squadron's Albacores – T9135 flown by Sgt Keith Minton and another flown by Flt Lt B B Wilmott – made drops of food and medical supplies in company with a vintage Blackburn Shark of 4 Anti-Aircraft Co-operation Unit, flown by Fg Off Peter Ballard, these being the only aircraft immediately available. The promised fighter escort did not materialise but so desperate was the need of the trapped troops that Wilmott decided they would continue. After dropping the supplies, the three biplanes bombed Japanese transport they encountered on the road between Muar and Batu Pahat. Finding that the enemy convoy was backed up along the road, the three biplanes dive-bombed and strafed in turn,



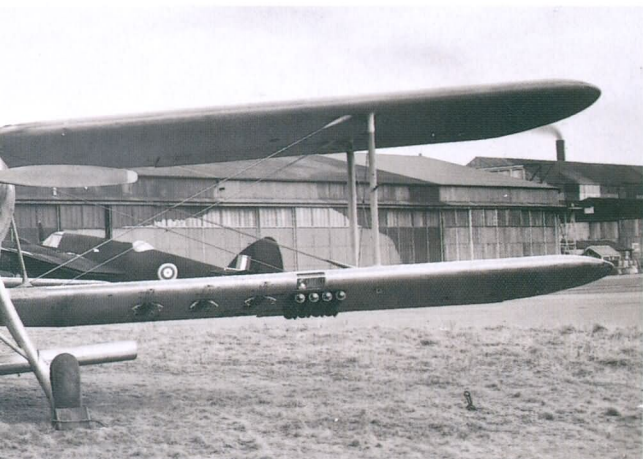
*Albacore I X9232 of the Aden Communications Flight at Khormaksar in early 1946. W/O L Scarlett is second left.*  
L. SCARLETT

each of them dropping two 250lb (113kg) bombs. This was the first biplane offensive operation carried out in daylight, although a cloud base of 1,500ft (457m) helped cover them from patrolling enemy fighters, some of which were seen on the return flight to Seletar where they landed in the middle of another raid!

Shortly after dark on the 24th, three of 36's Albacores accompanied six 100 Squadron Vildebeest to conduct raids in southern Malaya, the Albacores hitting oil storage tanks at Muar to prevent them from being used by the enemy. The aircraft then returned to Singapore where they re-armed, and the three joined all the available Vildebeest in making further raids on Japanese troops around Batu Pahat so that a cut-off British force could extricate itself. Overall it was a successful night's operations, though two days later, on the 26th, came disaster at Endau.

After a convoy was spotted off the estuary heading for a landing at Endau, a strike force was assembled which, in spite of having to attack in daylight, largely comprised the ancient biplanes of 36 and 100 Squadrons. The first strike, made up of Vildebeest and Lockheed Hudsons, left Singapore in the early afternoon and suffered very heavy losses. At Singapore a second strike was assembled, which included three Albacores from 36. The CO, Sqn Ldr Markham in X9106, led, with his subsection, comprising F/Sgt Peck in T9184 and Sgt Fleming in T9135. The formation reached the target area at 17:30 under clear skies and the biplanes were subjected to a barrage of flak and heavy fighter attack. The CO was shot down and his crew killed – as was Fleming's – while Peck's crew, having suffered damage, and in an apparently uncontrollable dive, baled out of T9184. However, in spite of the damage Peck managed to fly the battered Albacore back to Seletar, where he was amazed to find his rear cockpit empty! The strike had again sustained crippling losses, though the two landing ships did suffer some damage.

On January 31, all the 13 surviving Vildebeest and two Albacores of 36 and 100 Squadrons, some filled with wounded survivors from the disastrous Endau raid, evacuated from Singapore to Java, with the ground staff following on



*A view of an Albacore at RAE Farnborough – an explanation of the payload under the centre section and the 'aerials' on the cowlings would be appreciated. It is believed to be N4380, which served at RAE during November and December 1941. KEY-GORDON SWANBOROUGH COLLECTION*



the MV *Perak*. The squadrons, traumatised by their experiences and losses at Endau, re-assembled at Kemajoran, from where some operations were flown. However, neither unit was anywhere near at full strength and soon afterwards there was a reorganisation. The sole remaining Albacore and nine Vildebeest were amalgamated as 36 Squadron at Tjilamppek under Sqn Ldr John Wilkins, though they could be armed only with bombs as no torpedo facilities were available. The surviving biplanes were called back to action on February 28 when the CO led eight Vildebeest and the sole Albacore some 300 miles (482km) to Madioen to support the US in attacks on the Japanese eastern Java invasion force. On landing, the aircraft were refuelled and the crews briefed. In the early evening the CO led two flights of Vildebeest and the solitary Albacore, flown by Plt Off Doug Cummins, in an attack on the enemy transports off Pambang. Most of the biplanes attacked from low level and a number of hits were made. On their return they were quickly rearmed for a repeat attack, even though many carried damage from the heavy flak barrage. The attack was again pressed home in the face of heavy fire but several transports were hit. The squadron then returned to Tjilamppek, where the last Albacore was destroyed on the ground. The Allied forces in Java surrendered soon afterwards.

### Second Line Duties

In addition to trials units, several Albacores were used by second line RAF units in the UK, including two which served as trainers with 9 (Pilots) Advanced Flying Unit at Errol, Scotland. The first was delivered at the end of March 1942

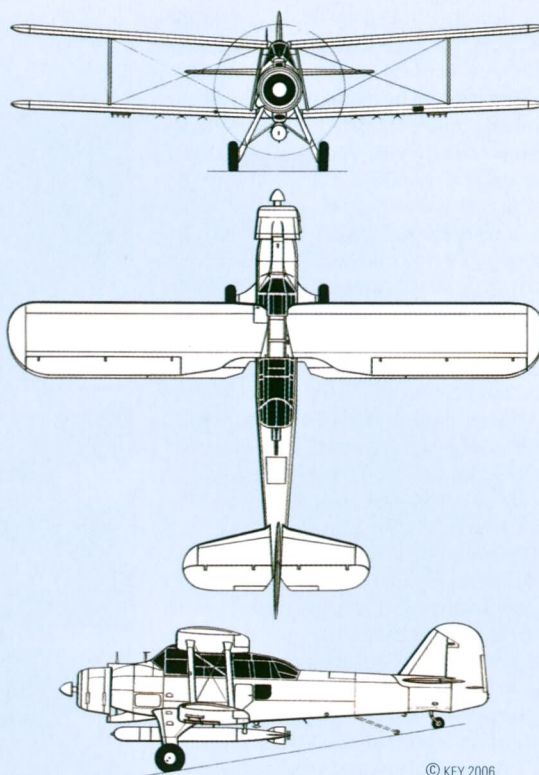


and they were used for just over a year. A couple were also used for occasional duties in Africa towards the end of the war, including X8967 which was equipped for anti-locust spraying and worked in the Juba area of Kenya in mid-1945. For some reason, however, the biggest RAF user outside the UK was the Aden Communications Flight, which between the middle of 1944 and August 1946 used no fewer than 17! The first to arrive appears to have been X9261, which was delivered in August 1944, though the harsh conditions soon led to its demise when it landed in soft sand at Beihan on October 6. Several other aircraft suffered a variety of accidents while on duty in the Aden Protectorate, possibly while carrying out 'policing' duties, though this is unclear. Further aircraft, all from RN stock, were delivered by sea on the SS *Empire Arun* in December 1945. These, the RAF's last Albacores remained in use until August 1946.

### Channel Operations

However, the greatest, and most significant, 'light blue' use of the Albacore took place much closer to home, in the narrow waters of the English Channel. There had been regular action between Royal Navy light coastal forces and their Kriegsmarine equivalents in the Channel and its approaches for much of the war. To support the RN motor torpedo and motor gunboat flotillas, several Fleet Air Arm squadrons were based in southern England for night attack duties. Latterly these flew the Albacore which, armed with a variety of flares and 250lb bombs, was well suited to the task. However, in mid-1943 the RN required these units for other duties and RAF Coastal Command was invited to assume the task. In the face of some opposition from the Canadian Government, the most available unit, 415 Squadron RCAF at Thorney Island, Hampshire, was selected, and it ceased flying its HP Hampden

### FAIREY ALBACORE I



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Powerplant:	One 1,085hp (809kW) Bristol Taurus II radial piston engine
Dimensions:	Span 50ft 0in (15.24m) Length 39ft 9 1/2in (12.12m) Height 15ft 3in (4.64m) Wing area 623ft² (57.8m²)
Weights:	Empty 7,200lb (3,265kg) Max all-up 12,830lb (5,819kg)
Performance:	Max speed at 5,000ft (1,524m) 159mph (255km/h) Range 710 miles (1,142km) Service ceiling 18,800ft (5,730m)

*FAR LEFT: In Ceylon, a single Albacore was attached to 11 Squadron for photographic duties in May 1942. It is shown taking off from Kalutra strip.*

A V SKEET

I torpedo-bombers on September 23. (An ironic choice of unit, 415 Squadron having a swordfish as its badge – ED.) In a very complex arrangement, the unit was reorganised on a multi-flight basis under Wg Cdr C G Ruttan DSO, one flight re-equipping at Thorney Island with the Vickers Wellington XIII, later moving to Bircham Newton, Norfolk, alongside the squadron HQ, and the second receiving Albacores.



*Largest RAF user of the Albacore outside of the UK was the Aden Communications Flight; X9287 illustrated in early 1946. L SCARLETT*



## **"ENEMY E-BOATS PRESENTED A SIGNIFICANT THREAT TO ALLIED COASTAL CONVOYS AND HAD THE POTENTIAL TO WREAK HAVOC ON ANY INVASION FORCE HEADING FOR FRANCE."**

Three weeks after the change was notified, six crews began conversion at Manston in Kent with 841 Squadron, which that November handed over the last of its aircraft to the Canadians. Painted all-black, the aircraft were fitted with anti-surface vessel Mk.II radar and VHF radios and could carry up to six 250lb bombs. Enemy E-boats presented a significant threat to Allied coastal convoys and had the potential to wreak havoc on any invasion force heading for France. Part of 16 Group, 415's 'A' Flight, also known as the 'Albacore Flight', was led by Sqn Ldr D T J Davis DFC RCAF, and was operationally controlled by the Vice Admiral, Dover. However, once airborne they were directed via VHF radio by Fighter Command radar controllers as some of the south coast radars could track surface vessels in the Channel. Operations began in November, usually controlled by Swingate radar. To further broaden the availability, the following month the Flight sent a detachment back to Thorney Island. No.415 Squadron's Albacores, which were flown with a crew of two – pilot and navigator – were soon in action and became the only biplanes to see combat with the RCAF.

The squadron's first 'star crew' was made up of Fg Offs D C Thompson and A H Bartlett, who made two attacks on enemy shipping in December and early January. On both occasions they located naval auxiliaries and barges just off the coast at Calais and bombed them successfully. On the night of January 20, 1944, they left Manston, along with another Albacore flown by Sqn Ldr Cowan, on another anti-shipping patrol carrying the usual load of six 250-pounders. Flying at 2,500ft they were vectored onto two destroyers sailing in line astern some five miles off the French coast at Le Touquet. The squadron history described the events: *On sighting the destroyers the Albacores turned a complete circle to port before attacking the starboard bow of the leading*

*The last operational use of the Albacore was by 119 Squadron at Knokke-le-Zoute in Belgium, where they were used for hunting enemy mini-submarines in the Scheldt estuary. WG CDR N WILLIAMSON*



*destroyer. The bombs were released from 1,000ft in a dive and three were seen to explode on the destroyer's stern where a big fire broke out. No flak was experienced during the run-in, but immediately after the bombs were released, accurate flak was encountered. The pilot turned to port after the attack, climbing and taking evasive action, but was then forced to dive for speed as the flak became more intense. They got away safely and returned to base unscathed.*

Unfortunately, attacking second, Cowan's aircraft flew into the barrage and was shot down. However, it had been a significant success and both Thompson and Bartlett were later decorated with the DFC.

Another of 415 Squadron's successful Albacore crews was Fg Offs Brasnett and Parnell, who on the night of February 15 were over the Channel when they were directed onto a fast-moving target near Barfleur. They spotted an E-boat moving at around 35 knots and delivered a textbook attack, scoring a direct hit amidships. However, the battle in the Channel was a cat-and-mouse game and 'A' Flight made only two more attacks that month. Due perhaps to

improving weather, the tempo of action increased markedly the following month, with the Albacore crews recording 16 attacks in the 'narrow seas', claiming hits on enemy shipping during six of these. Fg Offs Mackie and McFarland claimed two, hitting a coaster on the first: on the second they were vectored onto an 'M' Class minesweeper off Cap de la Hague. They hit this with at least one bomb, which was followed by a terrific explosion, and the vessel was enveloped in smoke and a dull red glow. Sadly, this promising crew were killed while flying X9117 on April 9, 1944: during a fighter affiliation exercise they lost control in a steep turn at 500ft and crashed near Bosham, Hampshire.

## **D-Day Support**

Thompson and Bartlett continued their run of successes in March. On the 2nd they attacked and damaged a small ship, and on the 23rd they dive-bombed a minesweeper off Berck-sur-Mer, leaving it on fire. The following day, Sqn Ldr Davis, the 'A' Flight commander, with Fg Off H J Thompson, used flares to illuminate a convoy off Dunkirk, which enabled RN motor torpedo boats to deliver a successful attack. However, on the debit side, during another attack on some E-boats one of the Albacores was badly hit and Fg Off Hughes died from his wounds. By this time the squadron's Albacores

were flying over 120 sorties a month and April brought further successful attacks on coastal traffic which resulted in one vessel sunk and up to seven damaged. On April 21, during an anti-shipping strike under the control of Swingate radar, Fg Off Mennie and W/O Leach were sent against a group of ten contacts seen off Dunkirk. Attacking through a heavy barrage of flak, they hit an R-boat (Räumboot – a small mine-sweeper) which was later deemed to have sunk. The same night, Fg Off Broughton and Plt Off Hawkins damaged a ship in the mouth of the Somme. Also in April, in preparation for the protection of the coming invasion, the 415's Albacore Flight concentrated at Thorney Island and increased in size to 20 aircraft.

On May 8, ten of these, with a dozen crews under Sqn Ldr Gordon, were detached to Winkleigh in Devon where, amongst other tasks, they patrolled the amphibious training areas to protect the landing craft from marauding E-boats. These aircraft, which were also held on standby at Bolt Head, were under the operational command of the Naval HQ in Plymouth and were controlled by radar stations of Fighter Command's Exeter Sector. The squadron also had a detachment at Ford until mid-May to support a D-Day rehearsal. This detachment only had one enemy contact, which came on May 3 when Flt Lt Armstrong and Fg Off Cuddon attacked two small ships near Le Havre. However, the Winkleigh element saw more success. On the night of May 17, Fg Off Eadie, with a USAAF navigator, Lt Pincknes, attacked a group of four E-boats and damaged one. Three nights later, coastal radar vectored Fg Offs McNeil-Watson and Tyler towards a group of seven E-boats located north of Guernsey. McNeil-Watson tipped his Albacore into a dive from 1,000ft and hit and sank the last vessel in the line. They must have hit a second one, too, as reconnaissance ►

*During a fighter affiliation exercise near Bosham, Hants, on April 9, 1944, Albacore X9117 of 415 Squadron crashed while making a low turn, killing all four on board.*  
415 SQUADRON



the next day spotted a damaged vessel in the same area. On the night of the 23rd Albacores 'NH-H1' and BF600 'NH-P1', flown by Fg Off Broughton and Fg Off Wilson, both hit vessels in a small convoy, one ship being sunk. Then, in the early hours of the 24th, X8940 'NH-R1' crewed by Fg Offs Brasnett and Parnell attacked a group of warships north of Port en Bessin. Dive-bombing from 2,000ft, they scored a direct hit on the torpedo boat *Greif* which exploded and sank seven minutes later.



The Albacore was replaced in 119 Squadron by its lineal predecessor, the more antiquated Swordfish, which lacked even the comfort of an enclosed cockpit!  
WG CDR  
N WILLIAMSON

### "MCNEIL-WATSON TIPPED HIS ALBACORE INTO A DIVE FROM 1,000FT AND HIT AND SANK THE LAST VESSEL IN THE LINE."

By this time, the squadron's crews had become expert in tracking enemy light forces and were able to carry out their task for the coming invasion with distinction. A few days before the landings, the Thorney Island element returned to Manston, followed on June 10 by the Winkleigh element. The invasion period was one of sustained activity, with anti-E-boat patrols and more than 100 sorties which involved laying smoke in support of naval operations. As the invasion fleet crossed the Channel on the night of June 5, 415 Squadron flew four Albacore patrols over the Straits of Dover, with other aircraft on call. The following night, five patrols were flown. Around midnight, Fg Off Parker in 'NH-E1' attacked a force of three E-boats, causing one to turn turtle, while off Cap Gris Nez a couple of hours later, flying 'NH-H1', Fg Off Mennie attacked six more, straddling and damaging two of them. In spite of poor weather, the unit's Albacore Flight enjoyed its greatest number of successes. Another E-boat was destroyed on the night of June 10/11 when it disintegrated after a direct hit. These sorties were not without risk and Sqn Ldr Gordon had a close call off Cap Gris Nez when a flak burst overturned his aircraft – he was just able to pull up above the tops of the waves. The Flight was particularly successful on the night of June 23 when one crew scored a direct hit on an E-boat and another crew damaged two more, while a third attacked another vessel. With the invasion successfully completed, the promise made to the Canadian Government had to be fulfilled and 415 Squadron was withdrawn to Bomber Command. On July 11, it flew its final Albacore sorties from Manston and became re-numbered as 119 Squadron, this formally coming into being at Manston on July 19. In practice, however, little changed, though there were some alterations in personnel and Sqn Ldr Davis was given command of the 'new' squadron.

#### Belgian-based

An unusual daylight mission on July 20, 1944 was among the new squadron's first sorties, when eight Albacores from Manston laid smoke to protect a convoy in the Channel. However, its main tasks stayed the same, though on August

9, 119 moved out of Manston to the nearby advance landing ground (ALG) at Swingfield, where its eleven Albacores were later joined by the Swordfish of 819 Squadron as part of 157 (GR) Wing. The first anti-shipping sorties were flown the next day, followed by further smoke-laying sorties. When a flarepath was laid on the strip, this allowed night E-boat patrols to re-commence and on the night of August 19 a convoy of small ships off Gravelines was set upon. Ten days later, an attack was made on five E-boats off Calais and one was left on fire; during the month, in which 119 Squadron flew 152 sorties, a U-boat was also attacked. On September 1, the squadron's Albacores co-operated with an RN force to stop a group of 30 enemy vessels evacuating the garrison at Boulogne. The attack with bombs was pressed home in the face of heavy fire and one of the aircraft was lost. In a further series of attacks, the following day the CO, thought to have been flying BF730 'NH-U', was shot down. He was replaced by Sqn Ldr Norman Williamson. The unit flew further smoke-laying missions off Le Havre on September 10, to cover a naval bombardment of the port. However, after this hectic period the pace of operations slackened somewhat and with the Channel ports neutralised, 157 Wing – 119 with 819 and 855 Naval Air Squadrons – moved to Bircham Newton

#### ALBACORES IN RAF/RCAF SERVICE

##### 36 Squadron Far East 1941-1942

T9135, T9184, X9106 plus two unidentified

##### 415 and 119 Squadrons

L7080, L7099, L7123 'NH-C1', L7130, L7139 'NH-V', L7155, N4380, N4412, T9150 'NH-N1' later 'NH-G', X8940 'NH-R1', X8949 'NH-B1', X8951 'NH-V1', X9027, X9051, X9053, X9074 'NH-O1', X9099 'NH-A1', X9117, X9140 'NH-X1', X9169, X9186 'NH-T1', X9215, X9220, X9222 'NH-A1', X9257 'NH-F1', X9272 'NH-J1', X9281 'NH-K1', X9290, BF586 'NH-M1', BF591, BF593 'NH-N1', BF600 'NH-P1', BF608, BF638, BF651 'NH-S1', BF727 'NH-S1', BF730 'NH-U1' later 'NH-U'.

##### Miscellaneous Units

Central Flying School - L7078

Aeroplane & Armament Experimental Establishment - L7079

Royal Aircraft Establishment - L7161

Torpedo Development Unit - L7131, L7161

11 Squadron - T9196

5 (Pilots) Advanced Flying Unit - X8951

19 (Pilots) Advanced Flying Unit - N4247, N4248, X9253

3 Air Gunners School - L7166

Aden Communications Flight - N4388, T9160, T9195, T9253, X9044, X9147, X9231, X9232, X9259, X9261, X9264, X9279, X9287, X9288, BF588, BF648, BF698, BF701, BF702

Communications Flight East Africa - X8970

Anti-Locust Flight, Middle East - T9171, X8967

at the beginning of October to begin an intensive period of training in night anti-submarine operations.

At the end of that month, when the training period was over, 119's Albacores moved to the Continent, initially to the captured Belgian airstrip at St Croix, near Bruges, and then to Knokke-le-Zoute, a pre-war airfield near the port of Zeebrugge where operations resumed. Still part of 16 Group, the squadron thus became the only Coastal Command squadron based on the Continent. Searches for, and attacks on, enemy shipping off the Belgian and Dutch coasts, and in the Scheldt Estuary, continued, though surface targets were scarce. However, from the end of the year the enemy began using the *Seehund*, *Molch* and *Biber* one or two-man mini-submarines to disrupt Allied shipping in the northern Channel and the Scheldt Estuary, and hunting these dangerous small targets became the squadron's main task. At the beginning of 1945, due to a spares shortage, 119 Squadron began to re-equip – with the Albacore's predecessor, the Swordfish! However, on January 23, it was one of the Albacores which made the first aerial sighting of a mini-submarine, though in spite of an attack with six depth charges the small vessel survived. This was the last attack the Albacore made on the enemy, as during February the aircraft were completely replaced by Swordfish. AE