



Farewell Firebirds

56sqn depart RAF Coningsby

Perhaps finally, a signal that the long awaited arrival of the Typhoon is now imminent came on Thursday 27th March when 56sqn, the Tornado F-3 Operational Conversion unit (OCU) departed RAF Coningsby for pastures new. Heralding a new era for the Lincolnshire base as six months of construction work begins in preparation for the arrival of the RAF's new fighter, the Typhoon.

Photography Robin Powney unless credited.



The departure on the 27th caught a lot of enthusiasts napping, as early as last August we had been informed that the departure of 56 was planned for March 28th, all the signs that the info had been correct were positive until Wednesday 26th when a rumor quickly began to spread that the Squadron would be departing the following day.



Seventeen of the squadron's eighteen strong fleet of F-3's did indeed depart for RAF Leuchars on Thursday, much to the delight of the gathered enthusiasts that had made it to the base, a mass departure at 1500 saw no fewer than eleven F-3's blast off, all to return performing low level airfield attacks before nine aircraft returned once more for a formation flypast, bidding the Lincolnshire skies they have called home for almost eleven years a fond farewell.

Coningsby's complete closedown is planned for early June when the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight (BBMF) relocate to nearby RAF Barkston Heath. Whilst the builders are busy at Coningsby the Typhoon Operational Evaluation Unit (17(R)sqn) will begin flying evaluation from BAE Warton where final assembly of the planned 232 RAF aircraft is being completed.

Tornado departures courtesy of Terry Senior.

13-00 UT...TX...TA..
15-00 1-WK 2- TB 3- KT 4-TI 5-UH 6-VT 7-XI 8-WC 9-TG 10-TP 11-TR
16-00 XR....PT THEN later TC

56 Squadron - The Firebirds



56(F) Squadron was formed on 8 June 1916 at Gosport as part of the Royal Flying Corp. within a year the Squadron was serving in France and by the end of the war the squadron had brought down 427 enemy aircraft, destroying 200 in just 5½ months.

Out with the old and...



Between World Wars 1 and 2, the squadron disbanded and reformed a number of times and so in 1928, the squadron's badge, the Phoenix, was authorised and chosen to represent the series of disbandments and reformations after World War 1. At the start of World War 2 the squadron was based at North Weald operating Mk1 Hurricanes. In 1940 one flight was deployed to France to cover a German break through and destroyed 13 enemy aircraft in one week. The squadron also fought in the Battle of Britain destroying 59 enemy aircraft. By VE day the squadron had claimed over 130 enemy aircraft and destroyed 63 flying bombs.

In November 1946 the squadron, equipped with Meteors, arrived at RAF Wattisham and then later to Duxford. There then followed a period of transition from Meteors to Swifts and then to Hunters with a move back to Wattisham in July 1959. A changeover to Lightnings took place in 1961 and with the Mk3 variant they deployed to RAF Akrotiri in Cyprus in May 1967.



56(F) Squadron returned to Wattisham in January 1975. The following year, they spent a short period at RAF Coningsby re-equipping with the F4 Phantom before returning in July 1976 to operate in the southern sector of UK air defence region. The Phantom squadron was disbanded on 31 July 1992. The squadron was immediately reformed at RAF Coningsby as 56(R) Squadron, the Tornado F3 Operational Conversion Unit (OCU).

Friday 28th March.

At a misty RAF Coningsby the final 56sqn F-3 is ready to depart when out of the mist screams Eurofighter Typhoon BT001, the first of the British production aircraft and probably one of the first to enter RAF service later this year at BAE Warton when the RAF forms the Typhoon Operational Evaluation unit (OEU).

It is planned for the OEU and the newly formed OCU under the respective guises of 17(R)sqn and 29(R)sqn will move to Coningsby once construction work is complete and all subsequent Typhoon deliveries in 2004 will be direct to the base.

