

ROYAL BRITISH LEGION – SEDGEFORD BRANCH

EAGLE SQUADRONS

Following the Battle of Britain, with the RAF having deterred Germany from invading England, many Americans also wanted to join the conflict, but in 1940 the United States was officially a neutral power. However, Americans living in London were recruited to form the First Motorized Squadron, a Home Guard organisation, although the US Ambassador believed such efforts were in vain, as he held little hope that England would defeat Germany. After forming the motorized squadron, its founder moved on to recruiting what became known as the Eagle Squadrons. In June 1940, he wrote to the Air Ministry suggesting that an American Air Defence Corps be organised, and the idea was approved in July 1940, provided that he had 25 pilots and 25 reserve pilots already on hand.



The new unit acquired the Eagle Squadron name based on a shoulder patch designed for the Americans to wear on their RAF uniforms. The patch featured an eagle similar to that found on a United States passport. After seeing the patch, the designer's father thought up the idea of naming the new unit the American Eagle Squadron (AES). The name recommendation was presented for, and received, Air Ministry approval. The first patches had the letters AES on them but the A was later dropped and units were forever known as the Eagle Squadrons.

One group of Eagle Squadron pilots received their training through the Royal Canadian Air Force. These individuals joined the RCAF on their own accord and had no connection with those who instigated the Eagle Squadrons. On completion of the RCAF training, the graduates were more prepared for RAF service than were their counterparts, who went through the United States civilian contract training program, as the training received in the RCAF was oriented toward military flying operations, and standardized so pilots received the same instruction as participants in the Empire Training Scheme. The Americans in the RCAF remained RCAF members until the Eagle Squadrons transferred to the Army Air Forces.

In contrast to the early cloak and dagger atmosphere surrounding pilot recruitment, by August 1940 there was no effort to conceal the fact that American pilots arrived in England and joined the RAF. The *New York Times* noted at the time that about 40 American volunteers would be joining the RAF under the command of Colonel Charles Sweeny. This initial report suggested that these pilots would be flying Lockheed Hudsons, twin-engined aircraft used for anti-submarine and reconnaissance duty, as part of Coastal Command. In September 1940, the British Air Minister officially announced that a Colonel Sweeny was organising an "Eagle Squadron" made up of Americans who wished to fight for England. In September 1940, No 71 Squadron Fighter Command was formed at Church Fenton, near York, and although Colonel Sweeny did not exercise any operational control, and did not play a major rôle in creating the Eagle Squadron, he was made an honorary commander of 71 Squadron, and was granted the temporary rank of RAF Group Captain, as his presence lent publicity value to the squadron's formation.



American Pilots rush to their Hurricanes at Kirton-in-Lindsey March 1941

Initially, the RAF equipped the first Eagle Squadron with Brewster Buffalos, an American made fighter aircraft which did not compare in performance with Hurricane or the Spitfire. In order to rid the squadron of the unwanted Buffalos, the Squadron Commander told the pilots not to lock the tail wheel when they came in for a landing, knowing full well that this would cause the plane to go into a 'ground loop'. Squadron pilots followed his directive, and the damaged planes were replaced by Hurricanes in November 1940. Although eager to get into combat, the Eagle Squadron pilots were not declared combat ready until late January 1941. The American Eagles were assigned the job of escort duty for North Sea shipping. This necessary but hardly glamorous assignment did not last for long. The second Eagle Squadron, No 121, was formed in May 1941, flying Hurricanes on coastal convoy escort duties, although Hurricanes were replaced with Spitfires in November 1941. In 1942, its offensive activities over the English Channel included bomber escorts and fighter sweeps. The third and final Eagle Squadron, No 133, was formed at RAF Coltishall in July 1941, flying the Hurricane, but a move to RAF Duxford and re-equipping with Spitfires was completed by 1942. In May, the Squadron became part of the RAF Biggin Hill Wing.

When informed of the attack on Pearl Harbour, most of the Eagle Squadron pilots immediately wanted to join the fight against Japan, and representatives from two of the squadrons went to the American Embassy and offered their services to the United States. Pilots from 71 Squadron decided that they wanted to go to Singapore to fight the Japanese, and a proposal was put to RAF Fighter Command without success.

However, on 29 September 1942, the three squadrons were officially turned over by the RAF to the fledgling Eighth Air Force of the U.S. Army Air Forces and became the 4th Fighter Group, with the American pilots becoming officers in the USAAF. The Eagle pilots had earned 12 Distinguished Flying Crosses and one Distinguished Service Order. Only four of the 34 original Eagle pilots were still present when the squadrons joined the USAAF.

Sources: www.rafmuseum.org.uk, Wikipedia.