

Where Eagles dare

THE youngest of the three American Eagle Squadrons, No 133, flew into Biggin Hill on May 3, 1942, unfurled the Old Glory outside their dispersal hut and then serenaded a watching group of admiring WAAFs with their battle song. Having met the Station Commander, Group Captain Dickie Barwell, they then toured the countryside looking for an English pub to call their own. The "Yanks" settled for the Queen's Head at Downe, a small village on the far side of the airfield.

The squadron had been formed at Eglington on December 7, 1941 a few days before Pearl Harbour. Its pilots came from 13 of the States and had been inspired to join the RAF by their knowledge that Britain desperately needed men who could fly, by their desire for adventure and by their impatience at the delay of their own country entering the conflict.

Four pilots — George Middleton, William Arends, D.E. Lambert and Grant Eichar — came from the area around the small town of Visalia in California and were known as the "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse". Roy Beaty came from New York, Don Gentile from Piqua, Oklahoma, G.B. Sperry from Alhambra and Dick Gudmundsen from Burley, Idaho. There were about a dozen other men and most had flown light aircraft before volunteering.

Of the experienced pilots who had flown with British squadrons before joining the Eagles there was Spike Miley, Dusty Miller, Dickie Alexander and Don Blakeslee — a veteran of 401 Squadron who had insisted on a transfer when he knew his chums were coming to Biggin Hill. The Flight Commanders were 'Colby' King, a Hollywood stunt pilot and Red McColphin, from Buffalo, a poker-player of some repute. The Third Eagles had trained on Hurricanes and transferred to Spitfires before the move to Biggin Hill. "Give us the operations that are too tough for the Englishmen", they begged of Barwell.

By the end of September 1942 the three Eagle squadrons had transferred to the US Army Air Force and, of course, No 133 was among them. But it was a depressed, subdued group of pilots who listened to the AOC Fighter Command, Air Marshal Sholto Douglas say his farewell with a small address. There was no enthusiasm at the news that America had joined the war and they were to be part of No 4 Pursuit Group. There was no *esprit de corps*. 133 Squadron had been decimated.

Thirteen of the pilots who sang the battle song on May 3 and played shove half-penny at the Queen's Head were dead. The first was killed on May 31, 1942 and the last on September 26 — the day they left Biggin Hill to escort Flying Fortresses to Brest. Having achieved that, they were due to fly to Debden and take a breather.

First to die were Pilot Officers Moran Morris, aged 25, of Los Angeles and William Ford of Las Vegas who were shot down on Sunday May 31 while accompanying the mighty B-17 Flying Fortresses on their inaugural raids of Occupied Europe. On Friday June 5, 22-year-old Fletcher Hancock from Santa Cruz, California was killed near Abbeville followed by the first of the "four horsemen" Pilot Officer William Arends.

A month later, on July 26, Pilot Officer Gilbert Omens, 23, from Chicago died followed, two days later, by Ben Perry de Haven from Lexington, Kentucky and then the most senior of them all, Flight Lieutenant Coburn King, the stunt pilot from Hollywood who was shot down over Abbeville without ever having fired a shot in anger himself.