



*Venom NF.2 WL830 of 23 Sqn with finned tip tanks. Sadly this aircraft crashed on 16 March 1954 with the loss of Paul Jackson and his navigator, Harry Drabble.*

## 23 Squadron Coltishall to Horsham St. Faith 12 October 1956

This squadron was the first to be equipped with Venom night fighters, and in common with the first squadron to receive single seat Venom day fighters (No.11) it suffered from the problems associated with service introduction. The CO, Sqn Ldr A.J. Jacomb-Hood, DFC, collected the first Venom NF.2, WL819, from 48 MU Harwarden on 5 November 1953 because there were no ferry pilots available. Three more were collected on 26 November, and another three on 29 December, except that one of them, WL829, never made it to Coltishall because its pilot, 24 year old Fg Off Alan Towle reported that he couldn't get more than 5,000 rpm from the engine, and was diverted to RAF Worksop. His next radio message said that he couldn't make the airfield and was going to attempt a forced landing in a field. Tragically as he was approaching the intended site near Tuxford, Nottinghamshire, the Venom was seen to dive into the ground from about 200ft and burst into flames, with fatal consequences. Investigation showed that the pilot had jettisoned the cockpit hatch which, through a faulty mechanism, had then struck and damaged the tailplane at a critical moment during the approach.

Worse was to follow because on Thursday, 21 January 1954 the CO, and his navigator Plt Off A.E. Osborne were killed during a weather check sortie in conditions of low cloud and drizzle when the Venom, WL828 was seen to climb then dive into the ground from about 600ft near West Raynham. It was later suspected that instrument failure due to an electrical problem may have been the cause. Sqn Ldr M.H. Constable-Maxwell DSO, DFC became the new CO, and faced the challenge of raising morale, and serviceability of the squadron's nominal strength of 8 Venoms which were afflicted with many snags, some attributable to the lack of modifications that should have been incorporated by the MUs prior to delivery.

*Magna Flux* at the beginning of March '54 marked 23's first air defence exercise with Venoms and although only 3 or 4 were serviceable they claimed 30 'kills' in 23 sorties. On 16 March Sgt Plt Paul Jackson, and his navigator, Sgt Harry Drabble, were killed when WL830 crashed into the sea off Happisburgh shortly after taking off from Coltishall; their loss was sorely felt as both had been popular members of 23 for 2½ years. In April cracks in the upper section of the flaps were discovered in some aircraft, which were grounded for modifications, and other restrictions on speed and altitude were briefly imposed. There were also serviceability problems with the AI.10 radar, despite it having been standard in RAF night fighters for a decade!



*Trio of 23 Sqn Venom NF.2s early in 1954, comprising WL823, 830, and 858. (Air Ministry via Robbie Robinson)*