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Flying Lessons: Forgotten Adventure in Real Time

By Lane Wallace / Published: Mar 23, 2011

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(March 2011) WRITING ABOUT ADVENTURE – whether the adventure is climbing a mountain, fighting a war or flying a small airplane across the country – is something of a challenge. Not because the source material is lacking. To the contrary. But there's a reason explorers and generals who cared about recording their battles for history brought along professional writers to document their exploits. It's because the explorers and generals were too busy with the adventure itself to have the time, energy, mental perspective or focus to write about it.

So, OK. It's also possible that Magellan wasn't much of a writer. But Anne Morrow Lindbergh, an extremely talented writer who accompanied her husband on a number of his flights charting new routes across remote stretches of the Earth for the fledgling airlines in the 1930s, found herself in the same predicament. In the moment, she said, all she had the energy and time to do was to take a few scattered notes about what had transpired. She had to piece together her tales from memory after the fact, once she was back home and had the time and energy to write.

On some of my adventures, I've ended up with enough down time from weather or other glitches to write more extensive notes about what was going on around me as, or soon after, it happened. But when I flew across the country with my boyfriend's son, Connor, last summer, I realized that one of the reasons I've been able to do that is because I've done most of my adventures solo. So any down time was also alone time, with nothing better to do than write.

Don't get me wrong. Adventures are far more fun if you have others with whom you can share them. They just leave you immersed in the experience a much higher percentage of the time. And adventure writers have to be more like Mary Poppins, hopping in and out of the sidewalk picture as they alternate between participating in, observing and documenting the action. Get too close, and you lose perspective. Get too far away, and you lose the detail you need to make the story real.

I found myself thinking about this adventurer's paradox over the winter holidays while reading a book a friend sent me at Christmas about a famous and forgotten Polish fighter squadron that played a pivotal role in the Battle of Britain. Typically, fighter pilot stories are written either by individual surviving pilots or historians, after the fact. But the pilots of the Polish 303 Squadron had an advantage when it came to recording their adventures accurately as they writer assigned to the squadron and tasked with making sure their story wasn't mistold or forgotten.



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As it turns out, that was a very good call, because few of the squadron's pilots survived the war. If it hadn't been written down, the way events transpired. As it is, it was all but lost for more than 50 years.

303 Squadron was written by a man named Arkady Fiedler, a travel writer who'd been fighting with the Polish forces in France. Fiedler made his way to England, where the Polish High Command assigned him the task of recording the story of the Polish pilots who had been fighting with the French and were now preparing to fight with the British.

The Royal Air Force organized most of the newly arrived Polish pilots into two squadrons. One was based farther north, in the 301 Squadron – was based just north of London, which put its pilots in the thick of the air defense battles that raged there in September 1940.

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