

Flying Lessons

BY LANE WALLACE



Forgotten Adventure in Real Time

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 unfolded: Like

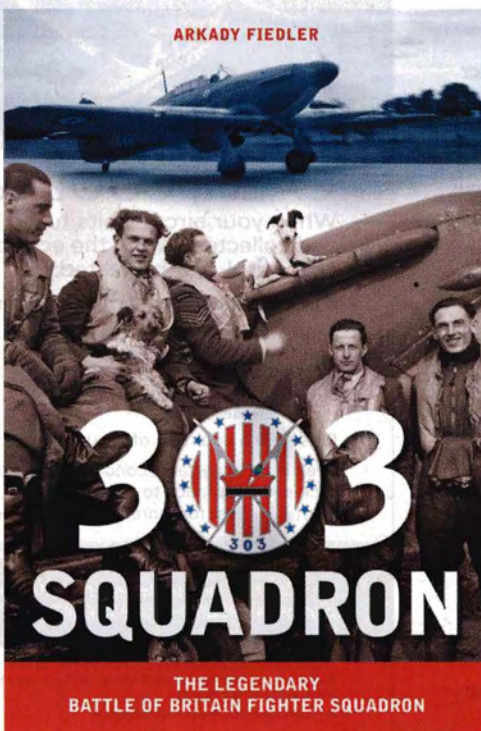
Magellan, they had a professional writer assigned to the squadron and tasked with making sure their story wasn't mistold or forgotten.

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 at the time, their story might very well have been forgotten, 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 after the fall of Poland. When France fell, Fiedler made his way to England, where the Polish High Command assigned him the task of recording the story of the Polish Air Force pilots who had escaped Poland, 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 Midlands area, and the other — the 303 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.

Until I read Fiedler's book, I wasn't even aware there were Polish pilots in the Battle of Britain. So imagine my surprise at discovering that in the critical month of September alone, the 303 Squadron shot down 108 of the 967 enemy planes destroyed by the RAF and its allies. And that, over the course of the Battle of Britain, its pilots shot down three times as many aircraft, with one-third



the losses, of any other RAF squadron.

What accounted for those results? Fiedler lists the usual “strong fighting spirit, high morale, superb aerial skills, determination and courage.” But he also credits what the greatly outnumbered Polish pilots learned fighting the Luftwaffe in their short-lived defense of Poland:

The pilots, Fiedler said, “made up for lack of speed by attacking head on, and for weaker armament by holding fire until at point-blank range. Such tactics, born out of necessity, later gave them a distinct advantage when they flew the more powerful and better-equipped Hurricanes during the Battle of Britain.”

Because the book was written as a series of battlefield reports, and so close to the moments of action themselves,

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it lacks the tone and perspective of a carefully crafted memoir or history. It is unabashedly partisan, lauding the effort of the Polish pilots while deriding their “Little Hitler” adversaries. It doesn’t attempt to tie up its chapters, which appear to have been written as stand-alone pieces, in any neat, thematic order or structure. But what the book lacks in polish, it makes up for in immediacy and intensity.

Fiedler interviewed the pilots right after their return to base. So we get the pilots’ raw reactions and recollections of battle events. Yet Fiedler is still able to step back and observe each pilot and his place in a greater whole, adding perspective beyond what any of the pilots themselves could have offered, even if they’d attempted to write about their adventures in real time. But what made the story so compelling for me wasn’t how it was written. It was the story itself, and the tragic injustice it highlighted. An injustice I was em-

barrassingly unaware of, up until now.

I was born half a generation after World War II ended. But I heard much, growing up, about the legendary French Resistance during the war — likewise the brave Warsaw ghetto fighters who died fighting to save their homes. But the Polish Resistance or the Polish Air Force-in-exile, which numbered 8,500 and continued to fight with the Allies for the duration of the war? Not so much.

Why was that? The answer is complex, but a large part of it seems to stem from the Allies’ sacrifice of Poland at the end of the war.

Poland and Russia had been adversaries for a long time. In fact, there was a Polish equivalent to the famed Lafayette Escadrille (American pilots

who flew for France before the United States entered World War I) in the Polish-Bolshevik War of 1919-1920. Poland prevailed in that conflict, but one of the reasons it fell so quickly in 1939 was that, as Germany marched into Poland from the west, Russia (which had an alliance with Hitler) invaded from the east. But then Hitler invaded Russia and Stalin joined forces with the Allies. And as the war wound to a close, Stalin began pushing for the spoils Russia would control once Germany was defeated. Poland became one of those spoils — a negotiating pawn and unfortunate “collateral damage” resulting from Roosevelt and Churchill’s need for Stalin’s help in the higher priority of defeating Hitler.

Despite all that the Polish pilots, soldiers and people had done to help the Allied cause, the United States withdrew its recognition of the Polish government-in-exile in 1945, and Poland was handed over to the country

that had invaded it in 1939. Many of the resistance leaders were killed, some of the pilots who returned to Poland were imprisoned, and the story of their heroism and contributions was largely silenced under a curtain of iron that lasted another 50 years. Indeed, one of the most heartbreaking aspects of the story is what happened to the pilots after all they had risked and contributed. Many of them died. Some remained in exile all of their lives, and others, who chose to return home, found themselves ostracized by their former squadron mates for becoming part of the communist state.

303 Squadron was published in English and Polish during the war, and a copy of it was parachuted into occupied Poland in 1943 where it was copied and distributed by the Polish underground as a morale booster for the Polish people. But after the war, the book, and the fame of the pilots within it, retreated into oblivion in the West. If a new version of the book is now available, it’s only because a tenacious woman in Los Angeles — a woman who’s not even Polish or a pilot — stumbled onto information about the Polish pilots in the stacks of the University of California, Los Angeles library while researching a character for a romance novel she hoped to write.

“I’m a sucker for heroes,” the woman, Terry Tegnazian, explained to me. “And this story of these pilots was so tragic, and so compelling, that I just felt it needed to come out again.” She ended up traveling to Poland to gather some of the lost stories of the Polish pilots and forming her own publishing company, Aquila Polonica, to issue the books again in English, to make them more accessible to the rest of the world. The romance novel remains unwritten.

History, it is said, is written by the victors, not the vanquished. Poland in World War II was both, and so the history of its brave pilots was written ... and then lost. I will continue to struggle with my new knowledge about the sacrifice of Poland after how hard its resistance forces — and its pilots — worked to help the Allies achieve victory. But I’m glad to know that some of their stories are at least being brought back into the light of day. ✈