



### ***303 SQUADRON: THE LEGENDARY BATTLE OF BRITAIN FIGHTER SQUADRON***

Reviewed John M. Grondelski

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In 1943, the Polish Underground received an Allied parachute drop. In addition to anticipated supplies came a canister with a manuscript, a manuscript subsequently duplicated and circulated throughout Occupied Poland. After the war, the manuscript was printed and became part of the prescribed reading list in Polish schools. That manuscript was *Dywizjon 303*.

The work had previously appeared in 1942 in English as *Squadron 303*. Written by a talented Polish travel writer then serving in the Polish Armed Forces in the UK, the book detailed the substantial and heroic contributions a band of Polish fighter pilots made towards winning the Battle of Britain. The story of the Royal Air Force's (RAF) defense of England, which stopped a German invasion of Britain, is legendary. What is not as well known is that, during the height of the Battle of Britain in September 1940, Poles downed one out of every eight German aircraft shot down using RAF planes. Of the 967 German planes brought down that month, the Poles bagged 121.

Unfortunately, like the Polish contribution to breaking the Enigma Code, the Polish legacy in the Battle of Britain has also been largely forgotten in the West. Although the Polish edition has been part of the reading canon in Polish schools, English editions have not appeared since the 1940s. (We Poles have an amazing propensity to talk to ourselves while adopting a false humility when it comes to telling the outside world).

Kudos, then to Aquila Polonica, a new California-based publishing house whose mission is to tell Poland's story in World War II. Aquila Polonica has truly found a lacuna to fill; the major Allies all have selective memories about the Second World War, and their selectivity, to a greater or lesser extent, tends in practice to Poland's detriment. Poland needs to be heard in its own voice, both in the interest of truth as well as in its own interest. Aquila Polonica is providing that voice, in English: it's high time we stopped writing our memoirs to ourselves in Polish.

Fiedler's book is exactly that — a memoir, written amidst the heat of battle. Approaching General Sikorski at the height of the Battle of Britain, he offered to memorialize the story of the valiant Polish fly boys who were defending London in the middle of the Blitz. Fiedler produced a lively epic of the experiences of 303 Squadron in September 1940 — the month that would make or break Hitler's plans to march through London, just as he had already marched through Vienna, Prague, Warsaw, Oslo, Copenhagen, Brussels, and Paris.

Fiedler's writing gives readers a thorough feel for the moment and the action. Here's how he describes the gravity of England's lot at that particular turning point: "... the summer of 1940 was horrific. The whole free world rubbed frightened eyes to dissolve a nightmare, but awoke to a reality even more dire. The world was shaken with hitherto unknown convulsions, the hearts of billions of people trembled from the worst premonitions, from anxiety, despair, doubt. Everyone ... the cockney on the Thames, the native from Brazil, the miner in Pennsylvania, the rancher in Australia, and the planter in Java, everyone watched as if transfixed. All hope was lost. They lived in anticipation of eventual defeat — the defeat not only of Great Britain, the last free bastion of Western Europe, but of the whole civilised [sic] world" (p. 1).

In the midst of despair, the RAF created a squadron of Polish fliers who, having faced the Germans in their own country and later witnessed the fall of France, were ready to stand with their British ally against the Bosch. Many in Britain entertained doubts about them in August 1940. Had they not been defeated at home? Were not some of their flying techniques, to put it charitably, "unconventional" (to put it uncharitably, "crazy"?) Whatever doubts existed at the end of August, however, were thoroughly dissipated by the end of September. The Poles had proportionately downed the most German planes with the least losses of men and equipment

Readers feel they're in those planes. Consider this excerpt of one Polish flyer, in hot pursuit of a German returning to France, whose plane was crippled by enemy fire. Having changed course back to England, he is aware that his plane had no engine power. His survival depended on whether the aircraft would stay airborne long enough to glide back. "The altimeter was merciless: 5,500 feet, 4,500 feet, 4,200 ... Still four miles to go, three miles ... The English coast was becoming clearer: 4,000 feet, 3,000 ... A thrilling race between two rivals: distance and height. Which would win? The sea was coming ever closer, now Ferić could see individual waves — but he could also see little houses on land. A few minutes more, and the wings seemed to be winning the race. Yes, they were. The wings were winning, those good, honest, and faithful wings" (p. 39). Equally poetic action is found in "The Enemy's Dance of Death" (which describes a Polish pilot's satisfaction with shooting down a German bomber, mixed with respect for a fellow airman's futile gyrations to keep his mortally wounded plane aloft).

The original text of the book is supplemented with a chapter on how Polish forces came to be in England, individual biographies of the distinguished airmen of 303 Squadron, and the Squadron's own history (another untold story — the Kościuszko Squadron originated with American airmen who volunteered to fight for Poland during the Polish-Soviet War of 1920, three of whom lie in the famous Eagle's Cemetery in Łwów/L'viv). Over 200 black and white photos fill its pages.

A "History Book Club" choice, the book is for history buffs, those who like a well-written action book, and those proud of Polish accomplishments. As Churchill said, "never was so much owed by so many to so few."