

## **303 Squadron**

### **The Legendary Battle of Britain Fighter Squadron**

**By Arkady Fiedler [1942]. Translated by Jarek  
Garlinski, Los Angeles, CA: Aquila Polonica, 2010.**  
368 pages. Numerous Second World War photographs.  
Nine appendices. ISBN 978-1-60772-005-8. Paper.  
\$21.95.

**Adam R. Seipp**

There is something enduringly and indelibly compelling about the Battle of Britain. Despite all of the necessary historical revision that has punctured and deflated the headier myths about “The Few” and their role in the course of the Second World War, the air battles over southern England in the summer and fall of 1940 retain much of their totemic power in the history of the twentieth century. If nothing else, the failure of the German assault on Britain convinced the British people and a great many onlookers that the Nazi tide could be turned.

A considerable number of pilots who flew in British fighters came from elsewhere. Britain in 1940 began to resemble a catchment area for those displaced and exiled by the war. For the more than 1,500 Polish Air Force personnel who found themselves in Britain, this was complicated even further by the uncomfortable reality that they owed their flight to the dual occupation of their country by the Germans and the Soviets, dictatorships then linked in a bond of suspicion-laden convenience and later becoming enemies.

One of the Poles in Britain during that extraordinary summer was the noted travel writer Arkady Fiedler. Working with the government-in-exile Fiedler spent time with a remarkable squadron of primarily Polish fliers then engaged in regular and fierce combat against the *Luftwaffe*. The result was *Dywizjon 303*, published in English in 1943 as *Squadron 303*. The book was airdropped into Poland late in the war to be read by partisan detachments, has had a long and successful history in Poland and is still widely read there.

Now a new edition and translation of *303 Squadron* has been released by Aquila Polonica. This new press is committed to publishing fiction and nonfiction related to Poland’s experience in the Second World War. The volume they produced along with the translator Jarek Garlinski does a terrific job bringing to life an extraordinary moment in the history of the war and of Europe’s complex and violent twentieth century.

The subject of this book is air combat. Fiedler was clearly an avid listener and keen interrogator, speaking to pilots who were themselves running on little sleep and in constant danger of death from enemy fire, accidents, and strikes against their bases. At the heart of the book lies the crucial two-week period in early September 1940 when heavy losses among German bombers finally convinced the *Luftwaffe* to switch to less effective nighttime bombing and Hitler to indefinitely postpone the anticipated invasion of Britain.

The book's greatest strength is its account of the war in air. The twenty short chapters are mostly self-contained vignettes about incidents during those difficult weeks. These stories brim with keen insight into the psychology and bravery of inveterate risk takers. "The Cloud," a story of a young pilot trying to conceal himself from a German patrol, is a vivid portrait of the chaos, confusion, terror, and pain of dogfights in the air above England.

The political context of the book is never far from the surface. In English translation Fiedler clearly intended his work to convince Britons that Poles were a worthy ally against Germany, "that [Poles], just as they, believe in the existence of great human moral values—and that [they] will neither break [their] word, nor give birth to Quislings" (199). This can become a bit overwrought, as when he describes a pilot as "that unbowed lad from the Vistula. . . . He is a symbol of something indestructible. His pain and scars, and his sunlit eyes and smile, are indeed symbols of his victorious, if wounded, nation" (83).

The portraits of the pilots are fascinating by themselves. In the 1943 edition pilots' names remained concealed for fear of reprisals against families in Poland. This edition includes extensive biographical information about a number of these fliers. Their birthplaces and early careers tell a fascinating story about the changing borders of Poland in the early twentieth century and interwar creation of a Polish military establishment. The capsule biographies at the end of this edition also provide a sobering reminder of the terrible toll of air combat and training accidents. Those who survived scattered after the war, some returning to Poland while others sought new lives in emigration. The highest scoring ace of the unit, Witold Urbanowicz, lived long enough to return to postcommunist Poland from the United States to take an honorary rank in the Polish Air Force.

This new edition is slightly revised from the 1943 translation and is based on later Polish language editions. Garlinski deserves great credit for rendering the text into the kind of spare and muscular English that the military prose demands. I also commend Aquila Polonica for the exceptionally high quality of the book's production. They have included a number of maps and photos that nicely complement the text and have done so while still making the book available at a very reasonable price. Anyone interested in Poland's journey through the Second World War or in the Battle of Britain would do well to add this to their bookshelf. I hope that it receives a warm welcome from the broader reading public who are interested in the history of airpower and air combat.

That said, I wish I could recommend this book for classroom use. It would seem to be an appropriate supplementary text for undergraduate courses on the Second World War or Modern Eastern Europe. However, the volume badly needs a thorough introductory essay that situates the story of 303 Squadron in the broader narrative of the Battle of Britain, introduces technical issues about aircraft to a nonspecialist reader, and provides more than a cursory introduction to the complexities of Polish history during the interwar period. Instead, appendices deal with topics like the "Song of the 303 Squadron" and the history of the Polish Air Force Colors that are likely of marginal interest to anyone but enthusiasts. ◇

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