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Book Review

## How Polish airmen succeeded

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

By Arkady Fiedler

Translated by Jarek Garlinski

Aquila Polnica, \$27.95, 217 pages, illustrated

Reviewed by Robert F. Dunn

This is a story not previously available in English about Polish airmen in England at the time of the Battle of Britain. It's a story well known by the Royal Air Force (RAF) and those in England at the time who were literally saved from German invasion by them, but now mainly lost in the more popular histories of World War II. In August and September of 1940, as the Germans were pounding southeast England by air in preparation for landings and conquest, a small band of Polish pilots and their mechanics joined with the RAF to break the Nazi onslaught. Their success caused Hitler's armies to disembark from their assault craft loaded on the shores of France thus saving England from invasion.

The Polish fighters did not break the German onslaught by themselves. They were just one element of the RAF and other Allied air forces that did that; but pilot for pilot, aircraft for aircraft, they were by far the most successful. This book tells how and why.

Poland actually had a quite respectable air force in 1939, although when compared with what the Germans and the Soviets had, their equipment was antiquated. So when Hitler invaded Poland from the west on Sept. 1, 1939, and Stalin did the same from the east on Sept. 17, not only the Polish air force but all Polish forces were overwhelmed. Refusing to surrender, a large number of Polish airmen made their way to then-neutral Romania and on to France where they flew for a short time with the French air force. Upon the fall of France, they moved to England and that's what this story is all about.

The principal subject is, of course, the 303 Squadron, the pilots, mechanics and their British-provided Hurricane aircraft. Several Polish squadrons flying various types of aircraft, and individual Poles too, flew with the RAF, but 303 Squadron was by far the most successful. In the most crucial phase of the Battle of Britain, 303 Squadron downed three times as many

enemy aircraft than the average of other RAF squadrons, yet its own losses were only one third those of the others.

In describing how that came about the author's detailed descriptions of aerial combat, dogfights and other actions are superb. The reader can easily feel as though he's in the cockpit. That's probably because, as the author writes, "303 Squadron is written 'live,' under the direct influence of the events of 1940." That's about as close to oral history as one



A Spitfire belonging to RAF 303 Squadron

can get. The action scenes themselves are worth the read and the smooth flowing prose makes it easy to do so.

The Hurricanes flown by the Poles and the Spitfires flown by others slashing through Messerschmitts (ME) as they attempted to down Heinkel and Dornier bombers bound for London is a story of air combat about as exciting as it gets.

The author actually puts the reader in the cockpit as fighters climb and dive and twist and turn in dogfights. One can easily tell that this is the real story of real fighter pilots for whom an aggressive attack is the only way to best the enemy. But there's also frustration.

One afternoon over the Thames Estuary, a section of 303 Squadron aircraft sighted two columns of ME 110s heading for London — a most unusual flight configuration. (The ME 110, very different from the standard German ME 109, had two engines and a back-seat gunner). As the Poles were about to

roll into the attack, the 110s moved into a circle; nose to tail forming a 360 degree ring. Although the author did not name it as such, this was the classic Lufberry Circle, developed during World War I.

The theory was that each plane would protect the plane in

front and that an attacking fighter would be unable to attack any member of the formation without coming under fire himself. Perhaps the Poles didn't know this theory or perhaps they were just more courageous but, diving out of the sun, they soon broke up the circle and picked off ME-110s almost at will.

Unfortunately, in some of the nonflying narratives and in a few of the more philosophical passages, the author tends to become trite or corny, but if a reader feels uncomfortable with such, those sections can be easily skimmed.

There may also be a problem for readers who don't know the historical context as well, but that problem is easily solved. My

recommendation for them, indeed for all readers, is to read the section titled, "Historical Horizon,"

first. That section gives a synopsis of Polish history with a concentration on the circumstances and adventures that led to the establishment in England of 303 Squadron and other Polish squadrons in 1940 and thereafter. One of the more interesting anecdotes relates to flying different kinds of aircraft.

The Poles were all qualified aviators, having gone through pilot training in Poland, but some of the aircraft were quite different and required a bit of relearning. For example, in one type of aircraft, one would pull the throttle aft to open it up; in another, the more usual case, the pilot would push the throttle forward to go faster. In

the heat of battle that could make an obvious difference.

Beyond that there are explanatory footnotes, maps, great photographs and a plethora of appendices, nine in all, ranging from 303 Squadron biographies, a glossary of English, German,

French and Polish terms and acronyms and more. As one would expect, some are more helpful than others but given that the story was first written in 1942 and translated in 2010, they are all useful.

All in all, for anyone interested in the Battle of Britain, aerial combat or Polish history, "303 Squadron" is a must-read.

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Vice Admiral Robert F. Dunn, a naval aviator, is president of the Naval Historical Foundation and is chairman of the Association of Naval Aviation.