

## BOOK REVIEWS

Arkady Fiedler (Trans. Jarek Garliński). *303 Squadron. The Legendary Battle of Britain Squadron*. Los Angeles: Aquila Polonica, 2010. Pp. 331. ISBN: 978-60772-004-1.

Aquila Polonica has dedicated its publishing mission to telling "The Greatest Story Never Told..." But in fact there are quite a few excellent English language accounts of the famous 303 (Polish) Squadron better known to most Poles as the Kościuszko Squadron, though its official Polish name was *303 Dywizjon Myśliwski Warszawski im. Tadeusza Kościuszki* [The Tadeusz Kościuszko Warsaw 303rd Fighter Division].

There were many other books published during the Second World War, both in English and Polish, describing Polish patriotic and martial endeavors. Some have undeservedly fallen into oblivion, but Fiedler's story of the 303 Kościuszko has become iconic of that period and was the first published account of the fabulous squadron. Thus, the book should be reviewed from two aspects, as a reprint of a classic historical artifact which brought pride to the Poles at a time when they needed to be encouraged, and as a great story of a famous squadron and its indomitable pilots.

It was translated into many languages and had numerous printings, including one in the United States in 1943 by Roy Publishers of New York entitled *Squadron 303, The Story of the Polish Fighter Squadron with the R.A.F.* There was even a German translation of the book, clandestinely printed in occupied Poland.

Seventy years after the historic air battle, many will ask three questions. Who were these Poles fighting in the air battle over the skies of Britain? How did they get to Great Britain? Why was their performance so outstanding? Fiedler answers all these questions and gives the biographies of all the pilots and, in this edition, the correct names.

In the Chapter "Historical Horizon, the Road to Britain," Fiedler provides a short background to the events in Poland in September 1939 and the process by which much of the Polish military, including the cadre of the 303 Squadron, were saved firstly in September 1939 by evacuation to Romania; and again in June 1940 from France to Great Britain.

In spite of many myths, often emanating from even responsible historians, and certainly embraced by the ignorant, the 303 (Polish) Squadron was not a collection of volunteers seeking freedom in the United Kingdom, but a unit of the Polish Armed Forces. It was formed in the

summer of 1940 as a result of the Polish-British Agreement of August 1940 respecting the Polish Forces in the United Kingdom. (British National Archives AIR 2/4213). This absolutely seminal agreement which dealt with issues of Polish military justice, discipline, and British military credits to the Polish government for the maintenance of the Polish land, naval and air forces in the United Kingdom after June 1940, is barely alluded to in a footnote on page 216. This reflects the character of the book. It is a story of heroic pilots who know no fear. But the reader, mesmerized as I was when at age ten I was reading the book in my Scottish boarding school by flashlight, is not going to grasp the complexity and depth of the Polish Air Force in the United Kingdom. The new edition merely settles for a listing of all the Polish Air Force units on page 329, the fourth largest allied air force in the European theatre of operations.

Finally, why were they so successful, having been credited with 126 enemy planes destroyed at a loss of only six pilots? This was the best achievement of any allied fighter squadron in the Battle of Britain!

The biographies of the pilots answer that question. Most of the pilots were graduates of the three year Air Force Academy in Dęblin and many had gone through the fighter training centre at Uleź. All were veterans of at least one campaign, and many of two. Their Polish trained ground crews were meticulous in maintaining the planes and the Polish air tactics were superior, at that point, to those of RAF pilots. This was eventually recognized when Janusz Żurkowski, who had been an instructor at Uleź, a successful Battle of Britain pilot and commanding officer of the Polish Northolt Wing, became director of tactics and training at RAF Fighter Headquarters in 1943. (The biography of Żurkowski, *Legend in the Sky*, was reviewed in *The Polish Review* Vol. LIII, no.2, 2008, 257-261).

To clinch the issue, in April 1942, the Royal Air Force Fighter Group 11 organized an aerial gunnery contest. The winners were the 303 *Kościuszko* Squadron, with the Polish 316 (*Warszawski*) and 315 (*Dębliński*) Squadrons coming in second and third respectively.

The book gives a brief history of the legacy of the squadron, which carried the tradition of the 1919-1920 Kościuszko Squadron formed by American volunteers in the Polish war against the Russians.

Finally, the book is well illustrated and the Polish pilots and ground crews present themselves in a very elegant and yet professional manner. As is inevitable with military units, photographs of marvelous dogs, squadron pets, compete for attention.

It is worth emphasizing that this book has been picked by both the History Book Club and the Military Book Club.