



**303 SQUADRON COMBAT AREA
31ST AUGUST TO 15TH SEPTEMBER 1940**

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CHAPTER 1

The Battle of Britain 1940

ALL OF us saw it, all of us lived through it, and yet we clearly need to remind ourselves of it once again: the summer of 1940 was horrific. It was a dreadful time for all people of goodwill. That July no birds sang for them, no sun could warm them, not for them even the simple pleasure of sharing daily bread with their loved ones.

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, from the highest to the lowest, sensitive souls and more ponderous ones, the cockney from 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 world.

Their desperation was not the result of enemy propaganda

or fifth column¹ influence. They had another source for their fears: facts. Bare facts. The cold iron logic of facts.

And these are the facts they faced:

After only a week of fighting, the might of Nazi Germany had dealt Poland, known as a valiant warrior, a mortal blow, and after four weeks had completely trampled and prostrated her. In a similarly short time, it had crushed and subjugated wealthy France, another Ally and one with the reputation of having the finest soldiers. Along the way, it had swiftly destroyed five smaller nations. It had managed to inflict two defeats on Great Britain, the last remaining Ally: a painful reverse in Norway, and a crushing blow in Belgium. Fortunately for Britain, these were defeats on foreign soil.

Now, everything pointed to a final battle on the final field: the British Isles themselves. Given what had happened, how much hope remained?

The situation was grim indeed. Winston Churchill had bluntly said so to the British people. With brutal honesty, he cautioned his nation on the likelihood of invasion, and vowed that, if necessary, in a final desperate effort British citizens would defend every beach, every house, every street, every pasture.

The German preparations took six weeks following the Fall of France in June. On the 8th of August 1940 the offensive began,² ‘the final act of this drama of war, which would,’ so the

¹ The term ‘fifth column’ refers to a group of people who clandestinely work to undermine a larger group from within, usually to the benefit of an external enemy. It was used in Poland at the beginning of World War II to describe Poles of German descent who helped the German invaders, and was also widely used in Great Britain to refer to German spy rings operating within the country. Translator’s note.

² The 8th of August 1940 is frequently cited as the official beginning of ‘Operation Sea Lion,’ the German code name for the invasion of Britain. During the prior month, beginning around the 10th of July, the Luftwaffe had focused on attacking British shipping in the English Channel. Translator’s note.

insolent tyrant Hitler boasted, 'see the British Empire scattered to the winds by autumn.'

The Germans brought in no new weapons for this offensive. They attacked England with a well-tried method: the Luftwaffe, their air force. This terrifying spearhead, using the fury of bombs by the thousand to sow destruction, had carved out a path for the German ground forces to achieve victory in all their campaigns to date, in Poland, Norway, Holland, Belgium, Denmark, Luxembourg, France. There, the Luftwaffe had been decisive. It was now expected to be no less decisive in Great Britain.

Starting on the 8th of August, swarms of German war-birds massed over England. The first day there were 300 of them, a few days later 600. The Battle of Britain exploded into life.

This battle, which was to last for a full two months, was one of the most extraordinary in the history of man, and also one of the most momentous. One of the most extraordinary, because it was conducted entirely in the air—a few hundred British fighter pilots defending against thousands of German bombers and fighters.

One of the most momentous, because the stakes were so high. If the Germans succeeded in controlling the skies overhead, then England would be at their complete mercy. Destruction of principal British centres of life would be only a matter of time and number of bombs. Defence against actual invasion would become virtually impossible. But first the Luftwaffe had to control the skies. Over the two months of the Battle of Britain, the Germans launched ninety-eight major attacks using approximately 6,000 aircraft.

Wave after wave of German planes stormed the skies over England with uninterrupted violence. The hordes of aircraft hurling destruction attacked from the south and the east.

Repulsed and scattered, they would return like so many heads of the Hydra transformed into wings bearing the black cross.

The Luftwaffe's initial objective had been to paralyse British shipping in the English Channel, and destroy the ports and coastal airfields. It did not destroy them; it paralysed nothing. The gates for the invasion were not opened: in the way stood the Allied fighter pilots.

During the battle's second phase, the German High Command wanted to throttle the RAF in its nest by destroying the airfields that protected London. It failed. Allied fighter planes retained command of the skies. In the battle's third and final phase in September, London itself, its existence and Britain's heart, now became the target. London survived; Britain's heart was not ripped out.

The middle of September saw the climax of the Germans' pressure. The invasion of England was scheduled to be launched between the 15th and 20th of the month. Preparing the way, the Luftwaffe unleashed its fiercest attacks, relentlessly hurling brimstone and fire to terrorise and finally crush the British. On the 15th, the Germans launched two decisive major offensives. Each contained more than 250 bombers and fighters representing over 400,000 combined horsepower and a corresponding weight of firepower and bombs. At that moment England was defended by 250 fighter aircraft armed with 2,000 heavy machine guns. The British defended, and they won. The wreckage of 185 German aircraft, over a third of the total, was scattered over the fields of Surrey, Sussex and Kent; an equal number of damaged German planes limped home; the rest, having accomplished nothing, fled.

The German aerial armada was defeated. There was no invasion.

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Swarms of German bombers gather over France...

Bundesarchiv Bild 141-0678



...and skim across the English Channel on their way to bomb England.

RAF Hurricanes take to the skies as
the Battle of Britain explodes into life.



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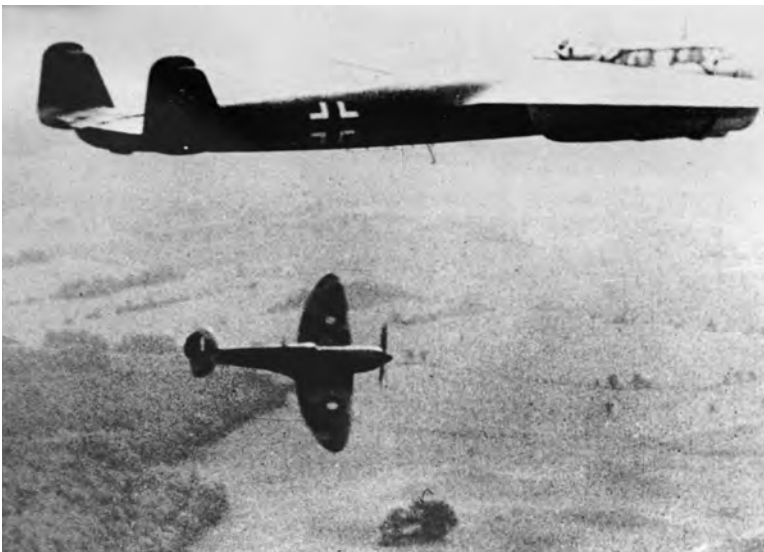
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Preceding page: A stream of German bombs hurtles towards a harbour installation.



A 303 Squadron Hurricane destroyed during the Luftwaffe bombing of RAF Northolt on the 6th of October 1940. Antoni Siudak, a 303 Squadron pilot, was killed on the ground during the same bombing raid.

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Photographed from a German bomber, an RAF Spitfire flies below a Luftwaffe Dornier bomber during a dogfight.

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Pilots of 303 Squadron.



Mechanics of 303 Squadron, with one of the squadron mascot dogs.

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One hundred and twenty-six victories—the official score of 303 'Kościuszko' Squadron in the Battle of Britain, making it the highest scoring RAF squadron during the battle.



303 Squadron roll of honour in Officers' Mess at RAF Northolt. A portrait of Tadeusz Kościuszko hangs at the top, with photographs of those killed or missing displayed in rows below. The airmen killed have a black diagonal stripe across the right corner of their portraits.

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Victory in the Battle of Britain not only saved the British Empire. It broke an evil spell for humanity—people now realised that the Germans could be beaten. They were not invincible, and their weapons, though powerful, were not omnipotent. In July 1940, the Luftwaffe was still a spectre haunting the whole world. Two months later, the devil's charm had dissolved: the sun began to shine again for people of goodwill, their daily bread regained its flavour.

This was achieved by a handful of Allied fighter pilots—wonderful, young, oh so young men, real and unflinching heroes. They were modest men, smiling, healthy and strong. The Luftwaffe threw into the fray its excellent and best equipment, and its finest airmen. However, the British Hurricanes and Spitfires turned out to be even better machines, and the Allied fighter pilots champions over the German aces.

Already after the battle's first phase, Winston Churchill accorded the British pilots the highest accolade. Speaking bluntly, he uttered the memorable words: 'Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few.'

Indeed, there were few of them, but what they accomplished equalled, in the opinion of some chroniclers, the Battle of the Marne in the First World War.



This valiant band included Polish fighter pilots alongside the British. The famous 303 'Kościuszko' Squadron, stationed at RAF Northolt near London and composed almost entirely of Polish fighter pilots, joined the Battle of Britain in its final decisive phase. 303 Squadron was in combat for forty-three

days of the Battle, from the 30th of August³ to the 11th of October 1940. This squadron, with a glorious and long tradition, had been named in honour of the group of gallant American fighter pilots, known as the Kościuszko Squadron, who had flown with the fledging Polish Air Force in the 1919–1920 Polish–Bolshevik War. Now, true to the Kościuszko emblem, 303 Squadron astonished the world with its valour, courageously fighting shoulder to shoulder with its British colleagues in defence of English soil.

Altogether, in the course of the Battle of Britain, 303 Squadron shot down a total of 126 German aircraft, of which the Polish pilots' haul was 93, its three British pilots' was 16, and its one Czech pilot's was 17. The squadron took part in more than a dozen major engagements, and in several it clearly played a decisive role.

In just one month, the critical month of September 1940, 303 Squadron shot down 108 out of the 967 enemy aircraft destroyed by the entire RAF with all its Allied pilots, in other words about 11 percent. In a friendly rivalry with its Allied comrades, 303 Squadron then held the record for 'kills' among all the fighter squadrons defending Great Britain, while the next highest-scoring squadron, a British one, had only 48 kills, in other words, less than half.

The Polish squadron bought this victory with the death of five of its pilots, a loss which was disproportionately low, indeed two-thirds lower than British losses that month.

The 15th of September was to become the anniversary for the RAF of the Battle of Britain. It would also become an

³ 303 Squadron entered combat even before it was officially operational, when Lieutenant Ludwik Paszkiewicz broke away from a training exercise on the 30th of August to shoot down a Messerschmitt 110, initially claimed as a Dornier 215. Translator's note.

anniversary for the Polish fighter pilots serving in England, since it was on that day they distinguished themselves by their valour and success. This joint anniversary will surely become a mainstay for all time of Polish–British amity.⁴

⁴ Sadly, these words, reflecting the feelings of the majority of Polish airmen in Britain during 1940 and 1941, did not come true. Certainly, the 15th of September became an important anniversary for the RAF, but the Polish airmen were brutally and unceremoniously cast into oblivion.

In the first post-war years the RAF celebrated the 15th of September every year, and all newspapers and magazines in Great Britain expatiated at length about the Battle of Britain of 1940—but for the most part nothing was said about the Poles. If they were mentioned at all, the coverage was embarrassingly meagre, monosyllabic, or even clearly skewed, as in, for instance, the edition of the otherwise serious journal *The Sphere* from the 25th of September 1948: in an article entitled 'Recollections of the Battle of Britain' there was not a word about the contribution of Polish fighter pilots to the Battle of Britain. The article did mention 303 Squadron in glowing terms, but it completely omitted to say that it was composed mainly of Poles, whereas—in an act of supreme perversity—all that it said of them was that one of the Polish pilots had written a story called 'The Cloud,' which the author of the article personally felt to be one of the best novellas of the war. I am gratified that that contributor to *The Sphere* had read my book *Squadron 303* and honours one of its chapters with such a mention (he even calls me a pilot), but it would have been more honest of him if he had not in the meantime forgotten about the real heroes of those days: the Polish fighter pilots. Author's note.