



EUROPE 1939

*Excerpted from "303 Squadron: The Legendary Battle of Britain Fighter Squadron"
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INTRODUCTION

The Battle of Britain and 303 Squadron

For two months during the summer of 1940, the fate of the Western world hung in the balance as Great Britain stood alone, desperately battling for its life against Nazi Germany.

Most of Western and Central Europe had already been overrun by the Germans. With its new Blitzkrieg ('Lightning War') tactics, Germany had defeated Poland in September 1939, and then in a rapid sweep between April and June 1940, conquered Denmark, Norway, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Belgium, and finally France, despite the nearly 400,000 British troops and the additional forces of the smaller Allies including Poland, who were fighting with the French.¹

Just weeks earlier, between 27 May and 4 June, the British had narrowly averted a disastrous loss of British and Allied troops at the French beaches of Dunkirk with an extraordinary nine-day rescue effort.

On 14 June, the Germans entered Paris unopposed. The following week France surrendered. Those British and Allied troops still fighting in France scrambled to evacuate to England.

¹ Previously, between March 1936 and March 1939, Germany had occupied the Rhineland, taken over Austria, and seized control of Czechoslovakia and part of Lithuania. The Germans had effectively neutralised the Soviet Union in August 1939 via the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, a non-aggression treaty with secret provisions for division of Eastern Europe. The United States was not yet in the war—it would be another eighteen months before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 triggered America's entry into World War II.

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The Battle of Britain began less than three weeks later, on about 10 July, with Luftwaffe raids on British shipping in Channel and coastal waters. 'Operation Sea Lion,' the German code name for the invasion of Great Britain, was launched in earnest on about 8 August. Over the next several weeks, massive Luftwaffe bombing raids targeted RAF airfields, London, and other major industrial and population centres. Their goal: destroy British air defence and weaken British resolve—paving the way for invasion by German ground forces.

Again and again, despite severe losses and overwhelming odds, RAF fighter pilots rose to meet the numerically superior Luftwaffe bombers and fighters. With those RAF pilots were Commonwealth pilots, and airmen from allied nations who had escaped to England as France was falling to the Germans. By far the most numerous of these allies were pilots of the Polish Air Force.

Initially Polish pilots were scattered throughout RAF squadrons, but in late July and early August a number of them were posted to two newly formed all-Polish fighter squadrons under joint British and Polish command: 302 Squadron, assigned to 12 Group RAF Fighter Command defending the Midlands and East Anglia; and 303 Squadron, assigned to 11 Group RAF Fighter Command defending south-east England and the vital approaches to London. It was 11 Group which bore the brunt of the Luftwaffe assaults.

The Battle of Britain reached its most critical phase over a two-week period, from the end of August to 15 September. The entire action of Arkady Fiedler's book *303 Squadron* takes place over these critical two weeks, beginning 31 August when 303 Squadron first became operational.

Despite early doubts by British commanders, the Polish pilots of 303 Squadron immediately proved themselves to be

among the most superb of fighter pilots, downing three times the average RAF score with one-third the casualties during the Battle of Britain.

The 303 Squadron record is even more remarkable in light of the handicaps that the Poles had to overcome in just the few weeks after the fall of France. They had to learn enough English to understand and respond instantly to operational commands over their radios. They had to reverse their instinctive reflexes in the cockpit: in their prior Polish and French aircraft, to open the throttle the pilot pulled; in British Hurricanes, the pilot pushed. Speed was measured in miles per hour instead of kilometres per hour. Rate of climb was expressed in feet per minute, and altitude, too, was in feet, instead of metres. Fuel came in gallons, not litres; units of pressure also differed.

Arkady Fiedler began writing *303 Squadron* during the Battle of Britain, spending time with the Polish pilots and ground crew of 303 Squadron at their base at Northolt, West London. He wrote the book in Polish under the title *Dywizjon 303*. The first English-language edition was published in Great Britain in 1942 under the title *Squadron 303*.

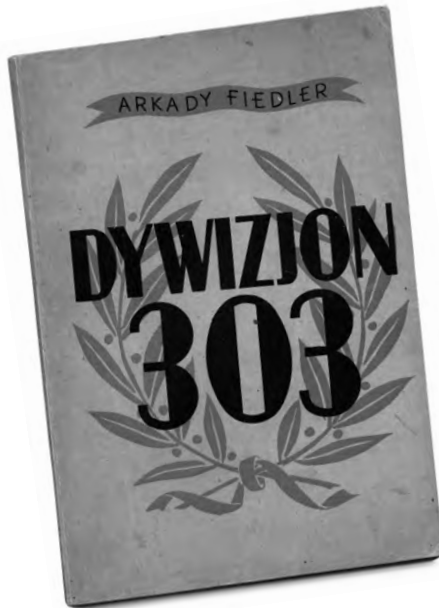
World War II was still raging across the globe, and Poland was suffering under the most brutal German occupation in all of Europe. A clandestine edition of *Dywizjon 303* was parachuted into German-occupied Poland in 1943. Copies duplicated by the Polish Underground were secretly passed from person to person. This report of the successes of their fighter pilots, fighting in distant lands for freedom, boosted morale enormously in the beleaguered country.

Dywizjon 303 went on to become a classic in Poland. It is mandatory reading for children in grammar school, and has gone through numerous Polish editions. This is the first new

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English-language edition since 1942. This story of bravery, determination and aerial skill is as fresh today as when it was originally written—a story of real-life heroes.

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The cover of the secretly printed
Polish Underground edition of *Dywizjon 303*.