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EXCERPT

303 Squadron: The Legendary Battle of Britain Fighter Squadron

by Arkady Fiedler. Translated by Jarek Garlinski. Aquila Polonica, 2010. 331 pp., \$21.95.

Arkady Fiedler was a Polish travel writer reporting on Tahiti when World War II began, but by the summer of 1940, he was living in London as British pilots defended their country from attacks by Germany's Luftwaffe during the Battle of Britain. Fiedler reported on the activities of the 303 Squadron, a group of Polish military pilots flying Hawker Hurricane fighters under the command of the Royal Air Force at Northolt, an airfield west of London. Fiedler's book, translated from Polish, was first published in English in 1942, and this latest edition—newly translated—offers nine appendices and more than 100 additional archival photographs, maps, and illustrations. The following excerpt is from the chapter "7th September: A Tasty Morsel—Dormiers."



Spotting a new wave of German bombers, [Witold] Urbanowicz hurriedly landed at the first airfield he saw east of London for more fuel and ammunition. He found the airfield

deserted. He taxied from one end to the other. Nothing.

Black clouds of smoke rose over the burning suburbs, darkening half the sky. From that airfield the situation looked serious, as if the whole of London was in flames. Somewhere nearby anti-aircraft guns continued to hammer, sending up a curtain of fire. A little further off, the distant thud of bombs exploding. The battle continued to rage all around.

At that moment a British corporal appeared and politely invited Urbanowicz into a bomb shelter. There the fighter pilot found a few other soldiers, the crew of a nearby machine gun position. It was just five o'clock, teatime. The men were calmly drinking

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Polish pilot Witold Urbanowicz stands in front of a Hawker Hurricane in England.

tea, smoking and quietly chatting. It didn't matter what was going on around them; after all, it was teatime.

"How about a nice cup of tea?" the friendly corporal asked and, not waiting for an answer, served his guest.

A bomb fell nearby, creating a shock wave even in the shelter.

"My, my!" The corporal smiled, and continued calmly to spread jam on his bread.

Urbanowicz could not stand it. His nerves were still strained: less than 15 minutes before he had been surrounded by masses of murderous Germans, flying and fighting like hell. This calm tea ritual seemed to him a crazy daydream. He shouted at the corporal to take him, at once—immediately—to an ammunition and refueling crew. The corporal stared at him in amazement, but did as he was bidden. This crew was also drinking tea in a bomb shelter, but the men gave Urbanowicz what he needed. As he took off, he felt that he was waking from a nightmare.

Back in his own element, Urbanowicz felt better. His anger passed and he grew more cheerful. But the words "a nice cup of tea" kept buzzing in his ears.

At 20,000 feet he picked up the trail of enemy bombers. He was back to his old self. He laughed now, as he remembered the corporal. And suddenly a great truth about this island of Britain struck him, like a revelation: A nation of such imperturbability must win, even if the Germans burned down all its "Londons."

ARKADY FIEDLER/AQUILA POLONICA