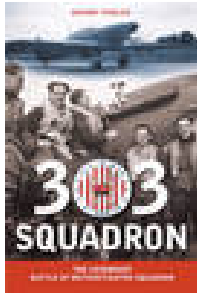




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303 Squadron

Summer of 1940 and the Battle of Britain -- the darkest days of WWII. England stood alone, fighting for its life against the powerful German war machine. The celebrated squadron of Polish fighter pilots whose superb skill in the air helped save England during its most desperate hours -- lionized by the British press, congratulated by the King, adored by the British public--is painted with an immediacy that vividly brings to life those harrowing days.

Bookseller Review

by Henry Coningsby at Waterstone's, Watford

Overall rating: ★★★★★

My Book of the Year

07 December 2010

I'm sometimes asked, by authors and agents with too much time on their hands, what separates a book with four stars from one with five. Other reviewers have their rules; mine is quite simple. If a book moves and inspires me, if it gives me that indefinable sensation which Germans call the holy shiver, if the prose takes flight and soars, then the fifth star follows like a sunrise. By that standard, Arkady Fiedler's '303 Squadron' deserves five stars for every single one of its pages. Vivid and thrilling almost beyond measure, this acknowledged classic tells the story of the Poles who fought by our side in the darkest and most desperate days of the Second World War.

Fiedler wrote his book while the Battle of Britain was at its height, interviewing the pilots in their rare moments of leisure between sorties. This gives it an immediacy and force unparalleled, I believe, in aviation literature. The publishers of this edition, the first in English for seventy years, are to be congratulated for having found in Jarek Garlinski a translator so alive to the animating spirit of the original: 'Point-blank bursts of fire cut through the Dorniers in a massacre like few others in the annals of air combat. Paszkiewicz's section was the first to attack, targeting the rear bombers. Urbanowicz's section tore into the enemy's rear flank. Henneburg's did the same on the port flank. Forbes's section hit the leading ranks. They took the enemy from all sides. Twelve angry hornets with murderous stings. Twelve raging hounds ripping into the carcass of a wild boar'.

Even without Fiedler's descriptions, and the many splendid photographs which adorn this beautifully-produced volume, the heroic feats of 303 Squadron speak for themselves. Consider the statistics. On September 15th 1940, which we remember as 'Battle of Britain Day', 303, representing less than five per cent of the total allied strength, accounted for one-sixth of all enemy aircraft shot down. So what was their secret? To be sure, the Poles were better trained, having learnt their trade in the pre-war Polish Air Force. As Fiedler explains, their tactics 'hinged

on not messing about too long with their adversary. They liked to seize the first possible moment and strike like the wind, to get in as close as possible, almost to touch the enemy, then let him have a full, murderous, eight-machine-gun blast from a distance of only a few dozen yards. Outside experts initially criticized such close-range tactics as unnecessary, madcap bravado - until they realised that the 'madcaps' were getting more kills and, strange to tell, were suffering far fewer losses'.

But there was more to it than that. For the aces of 303 Squadron, Paszkiewicz, Zumbach, Karubin, and the greatest of them all, Frantisek (actually a Czech, but one who stoutly resisted each attempt to transfer him to a squadron of his countrymen), every bullet that struck home in a 'Little Adolf' was fired, in the words of the squadron's unofficial motto, 'For your freedom and ours'. The tale of how the second half of that motto turned into the cruellest of jests is widely known. Instead, let us recall them in their days of glory: so brave, so handsome, so young – the laughing hussars of the sky. I think the difference between our two countries is this. If I were not English, I should want to live as a Pole. If the men of 303 Squadron were not Polish, they would not have wanted to live at all.

<http://bit.ly/eT5zDQ>