

# No. 303 Squadron

During the Second World War, Polish pilots from No. 303 Squadron RAF destroyed at least 200 German aircraft. They were the most effective unit in the Battle of Britain. The Poles, praised by the British media, became legendary in their home country thanks to the famous book by Arkady Fiedler, *Squadron 303*, which has been published more than thirty times in Poland.

“Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few,” said British Prime Minister Winston Churchill referring to the pilots taking part in the 1940 Battle of Britain. The pilots of 303 Squadron were particularly proud of that recognition. Their contribution to saving the United Kingdom was invaluable. In a clash with the power of the Luftwaffe, the German Air Force, they proved to be the most effective unit of the Royal Air Force.

The history of 303 Squadron began on August 2, 1940. It was then that a squadron, which inherited the tradition of the 1st Air Force Regiment stationed in Warsaw before the war, was formed on the territory of London's Northolt. “Most of its pilots came from Warsaw and took part in September 1939 Warsaw defense battles. After the September defeat, they served in France. Then, they were to face the Germans again,” emphasizes Grzegorz Śliżewski, who has authored historical books about the squadron's pilots.

The 303 Squadron pilots were to reach their combat readiness on August 31. They had their first score, however, ... a day before. During the training flight, Lieutenant Witold Paszkiewicz noticed the enemy's planes. He disconnected his Hawker Hurricane from the three-machine formation, and shot down the German Messerschmitt. Less than a month later, he died in a dogfight. He was buried in Northwood, and posthumously promoted to the rank of captain.

Meanwhile, the squadron was included in the units involved in the Battle of Britain, and it quickly began to be recognized prominent. Finally, by the autumn of 1940, Polish pilots, according to the calculations of the time, shot down 126 German aircraft. After the war, some researchers declared that the number in question was inflated.



*Lt Miroslaw Ferić, Capt John Kent (Canadian pilot, Squadron A commander), Lt Bobdan Grzeszczak, 2ndLt Lieutenant Jerzy Radomski, 2ndLt Jan Zumbach, 2ndLt Witold Łokuciewski, Lt Zdzisław Henneberg, Sgt Jan Rogowski, Sgt Eugeniusz Szapasznikow (1940)*

“In the decisive moments of the Battle of Britain, a huge number of aircraft operated in the sky. In such conditions, it is often difficult to decide which aircraft hit the enemy. The situation is dynamic; there is also stress,” explains Śliżewski. “During such aerial battles, it often happens that a couple of pilots report shooting down the same aircraft. So I wouldn't argue much about that,” he adds. British newspapers reported the achievements of Poles with appreciation; they were widely acclaimed by the public radio. However, Arkady Fiedler, a Polish writer and traveller, contributed the most to building their legend. “My father was in England at the time, and thought it was a fantastic story. While Poland was under occupation, our boys beat up Germans and everyone talked about them there,” recalls Arkady Jr., the writer's son. “He set out to write a book about them. He headed off to see General Sikorski, although he was convinced that there was already a considerable contingent of war correspondents in line. It turned out that he was the first one. He was allowed to go to Northolt, where he was warmly welcomed by the pilots,” says Fiedler. That is how the book *Squadron 303* was conceived; a book that has been

published more than thirty times in Polish (the first four editions were published in Poland under German occupation, as underground editions), as well as in English, French, Portuguese, Dutch and German. “In total, all of them sold in over a million copies, and the book had been on the list of school required readings for years. Now, it is a supplementary reading,” reminds the writer's son. The pilots of the squadron confirmed their mastery during the fighting offensive over France, Operation Overlord, i.e. the Normandy landings, the invasion of Germany. They also took part in Operation Big Ben, which consisted in destroying the V1 rocket launcher. Over time, the Hurricane Hawkers were replaced by Spitfire fighters, and at the end of the war, the unit was equipped with Mustangs. The 303 Squadron pilots completed their last task at the end of April 1945. In total, during the Second World War, they shot down over 200 German planes. “There were 238 pilots passing through the squadron,” notes Śliżewski. More than 40 of them died, and ten were taken prisoner. Poles lost 90 machines. No. 303 Squadron was disbanded on December 11, 1946. Most of its pilots decided to emigrate. The First Commander,

Zdzisław Krasnodębski, who had earned the rank of colonel, lived in Great Britain, the Republic of South Africa, and Canada. For some time, he worked as a driver, then as an inspector in an aviation company. Another commander, Witold Urbanowicz, who at the end of his life was promoted to the rank of Brigadier General, was arrested during a visit to Poland after the war by officers of the Security Office, a communist political police, but once released, he managed to return to the West. He lived in the United States and worked in the aerospace industry. On the other hand, Jan Zumbach, who earned the rank of lieutenant colonel, chased the life of an adventurer and troublemaker. As a mercenary, he arranged the aviation of the Congolese Katanga and Nigerian Biafra, and fought against the government forces of the Congo, Nigeria, and even the UN air force. He died in Paris in unexplained circumstances.

Today, the traditions of the squadron are inherited by the 23rd Tactical Air Force Base near Minsk Mazowiecki, a town located east of Warsaw. The fighters have been painted with images of the most renowned WWII pilots.

*Lukasz Zalesiński*

## THE “ZWIASTUN” PROGRAM

For over two years now, the Polish National Foundation (PNF) has been implementing the “Zwiastun” (“Herald”) educational program for NATO soldiers stationing in Poland. “The program is to present Poland as a modern, safe country which is developing all the time, but which also remembers its history,” assures Cezary Andrzej Jurkiewicz, member of the Board of the PNF. Within the program, the Foundation organised numerous lectures and educational trips. A few thousand soldiers participated in them, and they all emphasise that it helped them to know Poland from various perspectives. “This is a valuable opinion, because after they return to their homes, they will be natural ambassadors of Poland,” he adds.

The PNF continues to develop the program. In the following months, the Foundation plans to organize the Moniuszko concert, give lectures devoted to General Ryszard Kukliński and the indomitable soldiers. There are also plans to engage soldiers from other garrisons, not only in Orzysz.

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