

# 303 SQUADRON

WORDS DAVID SMITH

Among the deadliest but least celebrated pilots to fight the Luftwaffe during Britain's time of need were Poland's fighter aces. This is the story of their finest hour

**A**ugust 1940: for three weeks, the men of 303 Squadron have been forced to wait while the German war machine readies itself to smash the last resistance in Western Europe. Not that they have been idle – pilots and ground crew have been training hard to operate their Hurricane Mk Is, and they are nearly ready to renew a fight that, for

them, began in their homeland of Poland and continued in France.

Everywhere the Poles have been, the Germans have proved inescapable, forcing them to find a new base from which to continue their struggle. The Battle of Britain may have been raging for weeks, but the men of 303 Squadron have already been fighting for a year.



**“THE BATTLE OF BRITAIN MAY HAVE BEEN RAGING FOR WEEKS, BUT THE MEN OF 303 SQUADRON HAVE ALREADY BEEN FIGHTING FOR A YEAR”**



**Rising from Poland's ashes**

The Polish Air Force (PAF) was reorganised just prior to the outbreak of hostilities in September 1939, with the bulk of the eskadras (escadrilles or flights, which were grouped together into squadrons) being allocated to Polish land forces. The exception was the Brygada Poscigowa, the 'Pursuit Brigade', which was tasked with defending Warsaw.

Despite the technological inferiority of its machines, the PAF downed more than 100 German planes and Pilot Officer Stanislaw Skalski of 142 Eskadra became the first Allied 'ace' of the war, downing four German planes and sharing in the destruction of a fifth.

As the Polish armed forces fell back before the German advance, they could count on the forests and marshland in eastern Poland to slow their enemy down on the ground, while new planes (including Hurricanes) were expected to arrive via neutral Romania at any moment to match the Germans in the air. Such hope was dashed on 17 September, when the Soviet Union invaded Poland from the east. The next day, the remaining PAF forces were ordered to make their way as best they could to Romania or Hungary. It was to be just the first step of a long journey. From their temporary havens, the Polish pilots headed for France, mostly by ship (the few P.11s that had been flown to Romania were left there), and quickly started preparations for the next stage of their war.

Some Polish forces, perhaps recognising the likelihood of German success in France, headed immediately for Britain. However, most, pilots and air crew alike, started frantic retraining on the Morane-Saulnier MS.406 – a plane with a passing resemblance to the Hurricanes the men of 303 Squadron would fly with such distinction during the Battle of Britain.

A total of 130 Polish pilots took part in the Battle of France, with many serving in the

'Montpelier Squadron' (so called because that was where they had undertaken their conversion courses for the MS.406), which was divided between several French formations.

The willingness of the Polish to fight wherever and whenever was exemplified by a squadron that trained in France in order to fight against the Russians in Finland. Before they could be transferred, however, the Finns made their separate peace with the Soviet Union on 12 March 1940. Even after being asked to fly the inferior Caudron-Renault C.714 Cyclone, a seriously underpowered plane with a wooden frame, the Polish pilots stubbornly persevered. French authorities declared the plane unfit for combat after early negative feedback, but with no alternatives available, the pilots flew on.

Of course, the end of this chapter came quickly. Having been credited with the destruction of 60 German planes (at a cost of 13 pilots killed), the Polish airmen were on the move once more after France surrendered. Scattering in any planes they could get their hands on, or making their way to French ports, the men headed for Marseilles, La Rochelle, North Africa and Gibraltar. Their routes may have been varied, but their destination was always the same – as far as they were concerned, there was simply nowhere else to go.

**The island of last hope**

The Polish airmen had put up a brave fight in their homeland and in France, and they could have headed for the USA or Canada with pride intact. But only one nation still offered the prospect of continued combat operations against the Germans.

Despite this, Britain was a very different experience for the Poles. Where they had enjoyed their own 'special relationship' with the French, which meant that most of them spoke excellent French, they had little or no



Below: Members of 303 Squadron after returning from a sortie in October 1940

Top: This Polish propaganda poster told the country its air force was 'strong, serried, ready' Right: A 1939 British tabloid reports on the Polish Air Force bombing Berlin



**"SOME POLISH FORCES, PERHAPS RECOGNISING THE LIKELIHOOD OF GERMAN SUCCESS IN FRANCE, HEADED IMMEDIATELY FOR BRITAIN"**

English. The French method of spreading Polish pilots through existing squadrons would be problematic in the RAF, but that was how the first men to arrive made their contributions.

Some of those who had moved on to Britain soon after reaching France were already in training. Fighter aces were even prepared to take up posts in bomber squadrons, so keen were they to keep fighting. This enthusiasm led to one of the many myths about the Polish Air Force – that their personnel were brave but reckless, and that they paid a heavy price for it.

The Polish fighters were indeed brave, and their preferred tactic – closing to extremely close range before opening fire on an enemy – appeared to the British to be quixotic.

It would take some time for this misapprehension to be remedied and for the Polish airmen to be recognised for what they were – some of the best pilots available to the RAF. Their experience was valued from the start, but it was with British units that they made their first contributions.

Of course, their support was badly needed. Britain, anticipating a major air confrontation with Germany, had been investing heavily in its air force since 1937, but when war came, it did not follow the expected pattern. German military planning was not based on massive strikes from the air, but on tight co-operation between air and land forces. The nightmare of bombing raids against cities was not part of the plan – it was only to be considered in retaliation for similar raids. Britain's army was small at the outbreak of war and was unable to make a difference on the continent.

The RAF, which had envisioned flying over home ground with the benefit of radar, was much less effective when shorn of these two major advantages. No fewer than 477 fighters and 284 pilots were lost in France. Fighter Command's Sir Hugh Dowding begged the War Cabinet to stop sending his precious planes over the Channel. Spitfires were not committed until the evacuation at Dunkirk, but even so the British lost 155 of their premier aircraft.

However, the war was about to enter a phase that the British had been planning for – a defensive struggle to prevent an invasion. On 18 June, Winston Churchill christened the battle to come when he declared: "The Battle of France is over. I expect the Battle of Britain is about to begin."

Polish fliers were airborne with RAF squadrons as early as July 1940, with the first kill credited to Flying Officer Antoni Ostowicz on 19 July, when in action with 145 Squadron. In one of war's many cruel ironies, Ostowicz was also the first Polish pilot to be killed in the Battle of Britain. Nearly 100 Polish pilots flew with 27 fighter squadrons, moving from one unit to another as needed. They would undoubtedly have been willing to continue in this manner, but it was quickly realised that they could be more effective in dedicated Polish squadrons, where the language barrier and the differences in operational doctrine would not be problems.

## THE PURSUIT BRIGADE

### HOW THE POLISH AIR FORCE TOOK THE FIRST FIGHT TO THE LUFTWAFFE IN 1939

One of the myths of the war, propagated by the Nazis, was that the Polish Air Force had been destroyed on the ground in the first two days of the German invasion. In fact, the Poles had known what was coming and had moved their fighters to new bases before the Nazis struck. The problem was that those fighters were badly outperformed by their German counterparts and even struggled to compete with bombers.

The Pursuit Brigade (Brygada Poscigowa) was comprised of two squadrons responsible for defending Warsaw. Three units, 113, 114 and 123 Eskadras, made up IV/1 Dywizjon (Squadron), based about 11 kilometres north of Warsaw.

**"THE P.11 HAD BEEN RENDERED NEARLY OBSOLETE BY MODERN DEVELOPMENTS IN FIGHTER TECHNOLOGY"**

Operating from a base about five kilometres north east of Warsaw, III/1 Dywizjon comprised 111 and 112 Eskadras. The famed 303 Squadron would largely be made up of pilots from this unit. Most of the pilots in the Pursuit Brigade flew PZL P.11 fighter aircraft, although 123 Eskadra had to make do with P.7s. Less than a decade old when the war opened, the P.11 had nevertheless been rendered nearly obsolete by modern developments in fighter technology. It had a distinctly old-world look, with its open cockpit and fixed undercarriage.

Unable to catch German planes from behind (its top speed was just 242 miles per hour), P.11 pilots were forced to tackle them head-on, and the relative weakness of the P.11 armament (two or four 7.92mm machine guns) meant that they had to close to the sort of ranges that would have made an RAF pilot blanche to have a chance of downing an enemy.

Seriously outnumbered as well, it is no surprise that the PAF lost about 85 per cent of its aircraft during Poland's brief war, but it also claimed more than 100 kills, and the experience gained by the pilots was to prove invaluable in France and Britain.



A Stuka dive-bomber claimed the first kill of the war in Poland, downing a P.11 as it was taking off



Above: The PZL P.11c may have been slow and lightly armed, but it was a tough plane with an all-metal construction



# SCRAMBLE!

## WHEN THE CALL CAME, PILOTS WERE RELYING ON THEIR GROUND CREWS

During the daily intensity of the ongoing struggle with the Luftwaffe, the RAF's ground crews were just as important as the pilots in the air. It was their job to ensure the planes were refuelled, repaired and re-loaded for take-off when the order to 'scramble' was given. Ground crews were also tasked with clearing runways of any debris from crash-landings. Pilots trying to steer damaged aircraft back to base as best they could often left a wake of carnage behind them.

*A group of pilots rush to their planes as the order to take off is sounded*



Giving the Poles their own squadrons would also enable them to keep alive the unit histories that meant so much to soldiers, sailors and airmen. It meant that 303 Squadron, the fourth Polish squadron to be formed, was able to resurrect the 'City of Warsaw' name that it had carried when part of the Pursuit Brigade. The squadron's roots, however, ran even deeper than this.

### Rise of the Kosciuszko squadron

Following World War I, Poland emerged from more than 100 years of partition to be an independent nation once more. The Polish-Bolshevik War, however, threatened to end this almost immediately, with Lenin intent on absorbing the country within the Soviet Union. Help for Poland came from many quarters, but perhaps the most remarkable was the squadron of American volunteer pilots formed by Merian Cooper. Taking their place in the Polish Air Service as the 7th Squadron, they were nicknamed the 'Kosciuszko Squadron', after a Polish general that had served with the Americans during their own War of Independence. The squadron's badge, designed by American pilot Elliott Chess, combined American and Polish elements such as red and white stripes and 13 blue stars (representing the original 13 American states) into an eye-catching emblem.

Following the distinguished service of the American pilots (three of whom died during the war), the Kosciuszko name was taken on by 111 Eskadra, part of the Pursuit Brigade, which in turn provided the basis for 303 Squadron.

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It was an illustrious history, based on the willingness of foreign pilots to fly in another nation's air force. It is difficult to imagine a more fitting background for the men who started training in Britain in August 1940.

The men of 303 Squadron were immortalised in a book by Arkady Fiedler. While many unit histories are written long after the events, with aging veterans recalling their days of service, *303 Squadron* is a very different text. Written during the Battle of Britain, it has an immediacy that instantly grips the reader. Fiedler was an emotive and emotional writer, but even the occasionally overblown rhetoric cannot alter the fact that he offered a glimpse inside the workings of a fighter squadron under the highest possible stress, and inside the workings of the fighter pilot's mind as well.

“The more-sensitive fighter pilots,” Fiedler wrote, “clearly feel that their nerve ends reach

to the tips of their aircraft's wings. They feel them physically and emotionally. If an enemy damages one of their wings, they feel the shock as if they had been wounded themselves.”

Fiedler also debunked another of the myths surrounding the Polish airmen – that they were consumed with rage when in the air. The young Polish pilots were, of course, hugely motivated by experiences in their home country, but in the air they were calm; their minds blank as instinct took over and they experienced “a sort of mental blackout.” Only in this state could they hope to react quickly enough to survive.

The men of 303 Squadron did not have to wait for their training to officially end before taking the fight to the Germans. On 31 August, the last day of their conversion course to fly Hurricanes, they were ‘vectored’ onto a formation of German planes. Bombers and their fighter escort were returning after a raid when 303 Squadron found them. Five kills were made quickly, while a sixth was added by Lieutenant Zdzisław Henneberg after he had patiently followed a group of four retreating planes. Six kills, all Messerschmitt Bf 109s, had announced the arrival of the squadron in no uncertain terms, and their admission to the official strength of the RAF was timely – German strategy had shifted to target Fighter Command specifically.

### The Luftwaffe attacks

Just as the shift to an air-based strategy suited the British, it caused problems for the Germans, who were used to combining their air and ground forces – independent



## THE ULTIMATE SACRIFICE

**MIROSLAW FERIC SURVIVED INVASION, EVACUATION AND THE BATTLE OF BRITAIN BEFORE FINALLY LAYING DOWN HIS LIFE IN AN RAF UNIFORM**

Born in 1915 near Sarajevo, Feric moved to Poland in 1919 and fought as part of the Pursuit Brigade during the German invasion of 1939. He shared in two kills, but also only narrowly escaped death when forced to take to his parachute after another sortie. He fled to Romania on 17 September, and then on to France, where he fought under Zdzisław Krasnodebski, who was also to become his commanding officer in 303 Squadron.

As well as destroying six German planes during the Battle of Britain (four Bf 109s, a Bf 110 and an He 111) he also somehow found time to set up a squadron diary, the *303 Squadron Chronicle*, which has proved invaluable for students of the unit.

Following the Battle of Britain, Feric fought on in Spitfires, destroying one more Bf 109 and damaging another, before he was killed in an accident on 14 February 1942.

Awarded the Silver Cross of the Virtuti Militari, as well as the Cross of Valour (with two bars) and the British DFC, Feric is buried in Northwood Cemetery in Middlesex. His name lives on as both a street name and a primary school name in Poland.

*Feric (far left) with other members of 303 Squadron at RAF Northolt*



**“FOLLOWING THE BATTLE OF BRITAIN, FERIC FOUGHT ON IN SPITFIRES, DESTROYING ONE MORE BF 109”**

air operations presented a new challenge. Famously, the British benefited from radar technology, but a far more prosaic system of ground-based observers was also available to Fighter Command and denied (obviously) to the Germans.

German tactics initially involved flights of Bf 110s (twin-engine heavy fighters), which were supposed to lure in British fighter units and leave the way clear for the bombers and their single-seater fighter escorts. However, the 110s suffered so badly they required their own escorts, nullifying their effectiveness. The ultimate symbol of the German way of warfare, the Stuka dive-bomber, also proved unsuitable for a role in the Battle of Britain. German bombers, meanwhile, especially the Junkers Ju 88, were good planes, but their payloads were small (the Ju 88 could carry 4,000 pounds of bombs, while the Lancaster would haul up to five times as much on its missions).

German high command appeared unsure over what strategy to pursue, targeting coastal defences, shipping and cities as well as fighter bases, but the overall aim was consistent, at least as far as the Luftwaffe itself was concerned – it was aiming to knock out Fighter Command. German bombers were initially expected to manage with only small escorts, as the fighters engaged their RAF counterparts. The RAF, however, prioritised attacks on the bomber formations, forcing the Germans to unite bomber with fighter into the sort of mixed formations that have become symbolic of the battle. The formations presented a big target to the pilots of 303 Squadron when they burst onto the scene on 31 August, and they lost no time in taking advantage.

*The Regia aeronautica, the Italian air force, also took part in the Battle of Britain*





**Wonderful madmen**

The successes of 303 Squadron during the Battle of Britain were so remarkable that some began to question the accuracy of their figures. Was it really possible for a group of reckless Poles to be outperforming every other RAF squadron? The group captain at RAF Northolt, Stanley Vincent, wanted to be sure and accompanied the squadron on a sortie flown on 5 September. He could hardly have chosen a better day. The nine Hurricanes that 303 Squadron could put in the air that day accounted for eight German planes to the loss of just one – and all their pilots returned safely. Vincent was amazed and delighted, calling his Poles ‘wonderful madmen’.

The dash and courage of the Polish squadron could not be denied, but following one of its greatest days, it then suffered through one of its most costly on 6 September. One pilot was killed, five Hurricanes destroyed and Major Zdzisław Krasnodebski suffered severe facial burns after his plane was hit. Despite the terrible losses, the day was a triumph for the squadron – a defensive action that saw its nine Hurricanes occupy huge numbers of German fighters and help to break up a major assault.

By stripping a massive bomber formation of its cover, 303 Squadron had allowed other units to get at the bombers themselves. Being a fighter pilot wasn't always about attacking, as Fiedler realised: “A fighter pilot's skill is displayed not only in the offensive, but also in the defensive role,” he wrote. “Above all, in the defensive role. While every soldier is easily able to take cover from enemy fire, a fighter pilot at an altitude of 20,000 feet has nothing but empty sky around him. Only lightning



The mascot of 303 Squadron, Misa, sits atop the 178th German aircraft destroyed by the unit

**“SOMETIMES THE MEN OF 303 SQUADRON ATTACKED, SOMETIMES THEY DEFENDED – ALWAYS THEY WERE PUSHED TO THE LIMIT”**

manoeuvres and exceptional, superhuman presence of mind can save him.’

The Battle of Britain played out in this fashion. Sometimes the men of 303 Squadron attacked, sometimes they defended – always they were pushed to the limit. The unsung heroes of the squadron, the ground crews (memorably described by Fiedler as the “colourless roots of brilliant flowers”) allowed the pilots to be sure of at least one thing as they ran to their Hurricanes: the planes would

not let them down. Despite the almost constant action, the ground crews of 303 Squadron failed to put 12 planes into the air on just four occasions. It wasn't always the same 12 planes. It wasn't always the same 12 pilots. The battle took a terrible toll on both groups, but the squadron was handing out more punishment than it was taking.

12 Dorniers were shot down on 7 September for the loss of two Hurricanes, with other British squadrons accounting for 61 planes and anti-aircraft fire destroying another 28.

Then came a dizzying 15 minutes on 11 September – a quarter of an hour in which the squadron scored 17 kills when engaging an airborne armada of 60 bombers, 40 Bf 110s and 50 Bf 109s. The first section of 303 Squadron, three planes, bypassed the fighters and headed straight for the bomber formation. The second section held the German fighters at bay, allowing the third to also target the bombers. Finally, the fourth section joined in the holding action against the fighters.

It was arguably the squadron's finest hour, but it came at a cost. Ground crews at Biggin Hill watched in appalled fascination as Sergeant Stefan Wójtowicz fought alone against nine Bf 109s, shooting two down before inevitability caught up with him. Also dying that day was Arsen Cebrynski, killed by machine-gun fire from a German bomber. RAF losses on the day totalled 24 planes and 17 pilots as well as the two fatalities in 303 Squadron.

By 15 September, the day that is now commemorated as Battle of Britain Day, the toll on 303 Squadron had become almost too much to bear. Three sorties were flown, but the grinding reality of the near- ceaseless combat was made clear by the number of planes that took part in each: 12 Hurricanes took to the air in the first sortie, nine in the second and just four in the third. Despite this, the Polish ground crews had 12 Hurricanes ready for action by dawn the following day. The ‘wonderful madmen’ had a supporting cast every bit as important as they were.

**HURRICANE MK I**

**LIVING IN THE SHADOW OF THE MORE ILLUSTRIOUS SPITFIRE, THE HURRICANE WAS ARGUABLY THE BACKBONE OF THE RAF DURING THE BATTLE OF BRITAIN**

The Hurricane comprised 55 per cent of Fighter Command's single-seat fighter force during the Battle of Britain. It was not as fast as the Spitfire (325 miles per hour compared to over 350 miles per hour), but it made up for this by being a more robust machine. From mid-August, Hurricanes were encouraged to concentrate on attacking bomber formations, with Spitfires handling the fighter escorts.

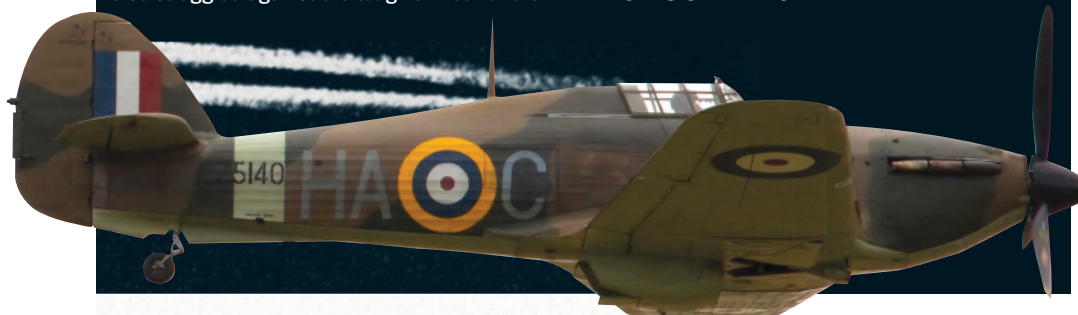
It's Achilles' heel, one that cost 303 Squadron's Zdzisław Krasnodebski dearly, was the lack of a self-sealing fuel tank. This defect was gradually rectified as the Battle of Britain progressed, but unmodified Hurricanes were prone to erupting in flames if hit in the fuselage-based tank.

The Hurricane's eight .303 machine guns also struggled against the tough armour of the

German fighters, and a mixture of incendiary and armour-piercing shells was used as well in an effort to compensate.

Propeller modifications were also introduced through the battle, adding to the Hurricane's ceiling and boosting general performance.

**“IT WAS NOT AS FAST AS THE SPITFIRE, BUT IT MADE UP FOR THIS BY BEING A MORE ROBUST MACHINE”**



**'I have fought a good fight'**

The pilots of 303 Squadron were not exclusively Polish. Two British, one Canadian and one Slovakian also flew with the squadron, alongside one of the most intriguing characters of the entire war, the Czech pilot Josef František. Unable to control his instincts when in the air, he would leave his formation shortly after take-off and head for the Channel, where he would wait, alone, to ambush returning German planes after their missions. Perfecting this technique to the level of an art form (the Polish pilots called it the 'František method'), he scored 17 kills in the Battle of Britain to add to ten from the Battle of France, but his mental state gradually unwound due to the intense and unrelenting pressure and he eventually died in tragically needless circumstances, crashing his plane while executing a victory roll.

The squadron remains most famous, however, for its 37 Polish pilots, nine of whom died in the six weeks the squadron was operational during the battle. During those six weeks, they shot down 126 German planes, the highest total of any squadron in the RAF. No less an authority than Dowding at Fighter Command recognised the tremendous contribution made by the foreign pilots when he said: "Had it not been for the magnificent material contributed by the Polish squadrons and their unsurpassed gallantry, I hesitate to say that the outcome of the battle would have been the same."

The Polish pilots within the RAF had at times appeared to be almost unstoppable. Sergeant Antoni Głowacki, of 501 Squadron, downed five German planes on 28 August, becoming an 'ace in a day', while 303 Squadron's Witold Urbanowicz was known as the 'ace of aces', once shooting down nine German planes in three

**MESSERSCHMITT BF 109**

**THE GERMANS' PREMIER FIGHTER IN THE BATTLE OF BRITAIN WAS A SUPERB ALL-ROUNDER AND A WORTHY OPPONENT FOR THE HURRICANE AND SPITFIRE**

The Messerschmitt Bf 109 could make a credible claim to being the best fighter in the Battle of Britain.

The superior armament of the 109 (a pair of 20mm cannons were teamed with two 7.9mm machine-guns) gave them a hefty punch, while they enjoyed significant performance advantages over both Hurricanes and Spitfires at higher altitudes. Richard Overy has claimed that "if the Battle of Britain had been fought at 30,000 feet, the RAF would have lost it."

The 109 also benefitted from extensive armour, added prior to the Battle of Britain, which protected the pilot, but it could not turn as tightly as the British fighters and the Germans also suffered badly in the logistical department;

damaged planes often had to be returned to Germany for repair and aircraft production never hit targets. Only 775 109s were produced during the critical four-month period from June to September 1940.

**"THE MESSERSCHMITT BF 109 COULD MAKE A CREDIBLE CLAIM TO BEING THE BEST FIGHTER IN THE BATTLE OF BRITAIN"**

days of action at the end of September. He finished with 15 victories to become the most successful Polish pilot of the Battle of Britain.

Although the battle was not to officially end until 30 October, 303 Squadron's contribution came to a conclusion on the 11th of that month when the exhausted men were moved to RAF Leconfield for some badly needed respite. The proud squadron became a training unit for a

while, but its war was not over. It returned to action in 1941, this time in Spitfires.

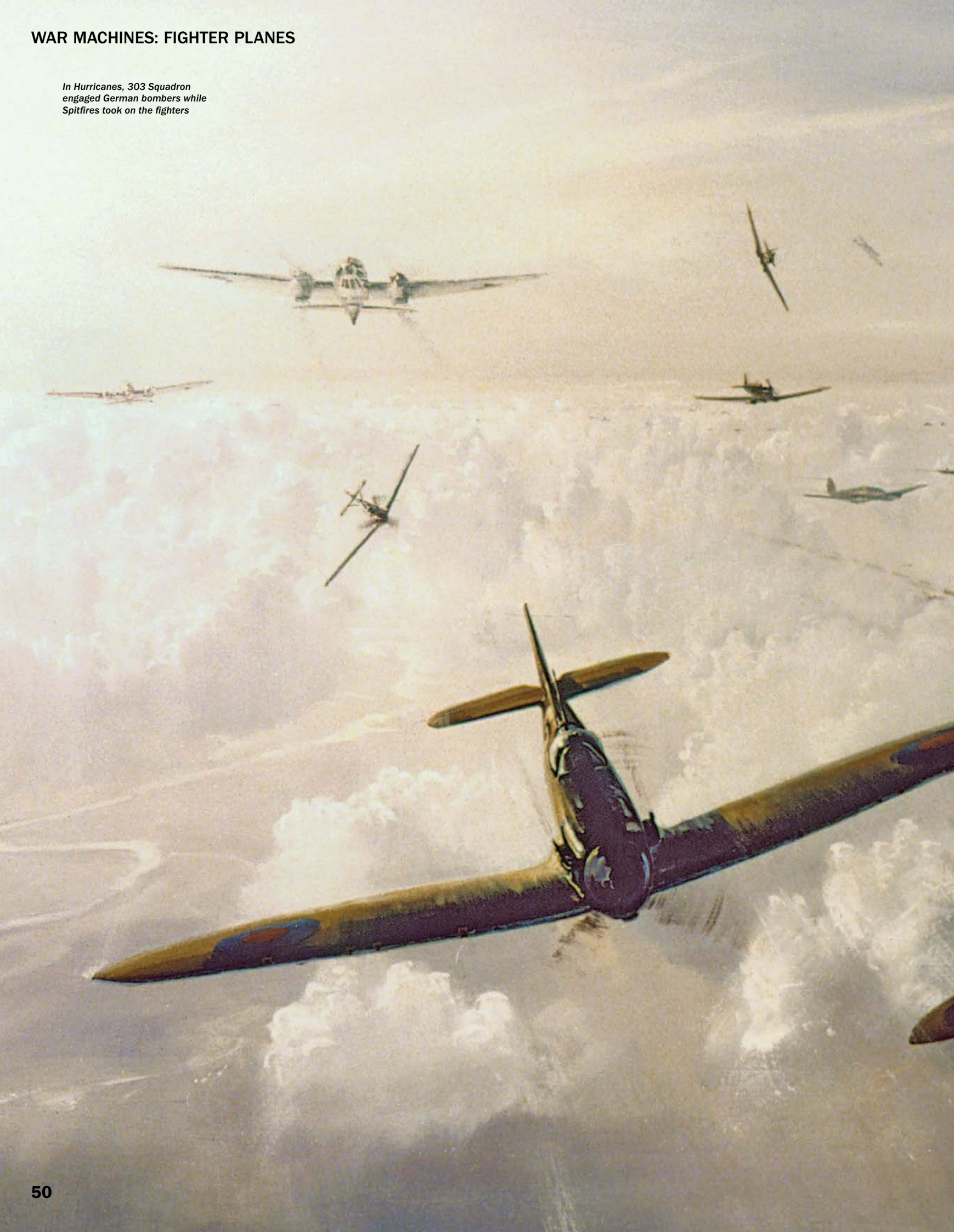
The memorial to the Polish airmen who fought during World War II was unveiled at RAF Northolt in 1948, carrying the names of the 2,408 men who gave their lives and bearing a simple but poignant inscription: "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith."

*Front row from left, Polish flying ace Jan Zumbach, Wing Commander Stefan Witorzenc and Flight Lieutenant Zygmunt Bienkowski of 303 Squadron*



## WAR MACHINES: FIGHTER PLANES

*In Hurricanes, 303 Squadron  
engaged German bombers while  
Spitfires took on the fighters*



**“HAD IT NOT BEEN FOR THE MAGNIFICENT MATERIAL CONTRIBUTED BY THE POLISH SQUADRONS AND THEIR UNSURPASSED GALLANTRY, I HESITATE TO SAY THAT THE OUTCOME OF THE BATTLE WOULD HAVE BEEN THE SAME”**

AIR CHIEF MARSHAL HUGH DOWDING



Images: Alamy, Getty, Mark Postlethwaite, Topfoto