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I am going to talk about the 303 Kosciuszko Fighter Squadron and its part in the Battle of Britain. The 303 Squadron is a most appropriate topic to consider because its insignia was adopted as the symbol for this Institute's Kosciuszko Chair, to whose purpose and continuance we are assembled here today. The Battle of Britain is an appropriate topic to address any summer and autumn.

I was asked for a title to my remarks. I could not imagine the words adequate to express fully the profound sacrifice, dedication, courage, honor, glory, and ineffable sadness of this history. And so, I don't have one that I think is appropriate and satisfactory to the subject. My talk could be entitled *Verlorene Siege*, which may seem inappropriate because of the language and because it is the title of *General Feldmarschall* Manfred von Manstein's post-World War II memoir, who, of course, was on the other side of the events of which I will speak.

Why *verlorene Siege*? Because I think the nuanced connotations suggested by the adjective aptly characterize the events of which I will speak: For the British and the West, the events were a glorious triumph against great odds and the basis for a victory that, without exaggeration, saved Western Civilization; however, for the Poles, the victories were for nothing. They were lost, left behind, abandoned, and largely forgotten, leaving an unassuaged sadness and depthless disappointment tinged by bitter betrayal. For the Poles, repeated heroic risk to one's life became a punishable crime in their own homeland. Ignorance, indifference, and ingratitude rather than recognition were the sins of the Allies except for that one so-called Ally who slandered that service and rewarded it with death. Such are the cynical vagaries of immoral alliances.

The events that I will touch on, as instrumental and essential as they were in saving Western Civilization, are largely unknown and unappreciated ancient history to the young, even the supposed well-educated, having occurred seven decades ago. The events are known, appreciated, admired, and commemorated officially in the United Kingdom and Poland and by people mostly of an older generation, usually Poles and Englishmen, veterans, airmen, patriots, or historians, rarely by any Americans and never even acknowledged by Russians.

The events that I will comment on are the four months-long Battle of Britain, the only battle to be fought entirely in the air, and the fighter pilots who fought that battle, "The Few", the fighter pilots of Fighter Command, among them in particular the Polish fighter pilots of 303 Squadron "Kosciuszko" of the Royal Air Force and subsequently the Polish Air Force in World War II.

But the story of 303 begins almost exactly a score of years earlier in the century, when a restored Poland and its newly-formed armed forces, including the 303 Squadron's predecessor, fought in defense of Western Civilization. It was the only Polish squadron with an unique tie to the United States, hence its insignia of red and white vertical stripes circled by thirteen stars in a roundel, in the roundel a cap from Kosciuszko's battles atop crossed scythes, the weapon of his volunteer peasant force. The squadron had been organized by Merian Cooper, a pilot who had served in France in the American Expeditionary Force during World War I, whose great great grandfather had served with Brigadier General Kazimierz Pulaski, the Polish organizer of the American cavalry, who gave his life in the War of American Independence. Cooper wanted to support Polish independence as repayment of a historical debt. Cooper recruited pilots from the American Expeditionary Force to form the squadron, including Colonel Cedric Fauntleroy, who became its commander. The squadron, then designated the Seventh Squadron, served with distinction in the Polish-Bolshevik War against Lenin's attempt to spread his Revolution to Europe. After that war, it was redesignated the 111th Squadron, and as such it fought in 1939 against the German invaders.

After the abject surrender of France, a Polish 303 Squadron in the Royal Air Force was formed on 2 August 1940 at RAF Northolt on the northwestern edge of greater London at the intersection of Hertfordshire and Buckinghamshire, while the Battle of Britain was already underway. The squadron was equipped with 12 Hurricane fighters. The initial complement of the squadron was 13 officer pilots, 8 sergeant pilots, and 135 ground staff, all of whom had been evacuated from France. These airmen had flown in the French Armee de l'Air in combat against the German invasion of France. 303 Squadron, or the *303 Dywizjon Mysliwski Warszawski imenia Tadeusza Kosciuszki*, was only one of sixteen Polish squadrons in the Royal Air Force and later the Polish Air Force during World War II, but it became the most famous one. There also were many Polish airmen in British squadrons, who chose not to leave those units, and there were some foreigners in the 303, notably the Czech Frantisek, the highest scoring ace in the Battle of Britain. Colonel Francis Gabreski, then of the United States Army Air Force, flew a few missions with the 303. (Parenthetically, Colonel Gabreski, one of the highest scoring American aces, was, many years later, my commander in the 18 Tactical Fighter Wing on Kadena, Okinawa.) Each Pole flew under a nom de guerre so as not to endanger his family remaining in occupied Poland. There were other RAF squadrons manned by foreigners from German-occupied countries: French, Belgian, Dutch, Luxemburger, Czechoslovak, Danish, and Norwegian. The Poles, about 8,500, were the most numerous of the Allies who had escaped from Nazi conquest. On 19 June, Prime Minister Churchill had told General Wladyslaw Sikorski, the Polish Commander in Chief , "We are now united for better or worse."

Although the Polish pilots were combat veterans and several were already aces, having flown combat against the Germans in Poland and France, the British assumed that they were demoralized, undisciplined, unskilled, and unsuited to fly fighters in combat. In

contrast, the replacements for the 300 pilots already lost by the RAF in France were inexperienced; they were taught how to fly their fighters, but not how to fight them. Moreover, Air Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding, Air Officer Commanding in Chief of Fighter Command, needed an additional 300 replacement pilots per month. In August, Fighter Command lost twice the number of British pilots that it could replace. Dowding had no choice: the Poles had to be part of the intake of fighter pilots. Later on, Dowding was to become concerned about the so-called infiltration of foreign pilots and their influence in RAF squadrons. Ironically, he had changed his views one hundred eighty degrees: he now favored the organization of all-Polish squadrons. The Poles wanted nothing more than to fly combat missions; their desire was to kill Germans. Their morale suffered when they had to stand down from combat missions. 303 Squadron was particularly unhappy when they were given the day off on 1 September, a year to the date of Germany's invasion of Poland.

The Poles had to learn enough English to be able to operate in the British air defense system. They had no experience of a modern system in Poland. Insufficiently available numbers and types of British aircraft, administrative delays, and difficulty in adjusting to British culture and Royal Air Force regulations, practices, and tactics were most frustrating to them. When King George VI visited the Poles on 30 August at their Operational Training Unit, he asked what was most difficult for them to adjust in Great Britain. The Polish Squadron Leader replied, "King's Regulations, Your Majesty." These issues were resolved on 22 August when Parliament passed an enabling law permitting the presence of sovereign Polish armed forces on British soil, an unprecedented and anomalous constitutional act. In many ways, the demands of doing things the British way in flying were the least of their difficulties. The British simply non-plussed the Poles in so many ways.

The summer of 1940 was unusually warm with long hours of mostly bright light, blinding sun and everywhere blue fading into a distant haze – perfect flying weather for air combat. But all the war was not confined to the air. The Battle of the Atlantic was still underway. The German U-boat campaign interdicting supplies to Great Britain was not decided until early 1943, after the Battle of Britain had been won. There was still the possibility that the *Unterseebootswaffen* could bring about the defeat of Britain since the United States with its Navy had not yet entered the war. After conquering all of Europe by the end of June 1940, Hitler expected Great Britain to sue for surrender. Hitler disappointed, was uncomprehending of the British character and psychology, as had been Kaiser Wilhelm II. Not until 16 July did *der Fuehrer* resolve to invade the British Isles, which was scheduled to take place during 15 to 20 September. He had no strategic alternative if he was to defeat Britain. To attempt such an invasion, it was essential for the Luftwaffe to clear the English Channel of the Royal Navy's warships and then to establish command of the air over Great Britain by destroying the Royal Air Force's Fighter Command, at least long enough for the German naval and ground forces to make landings on the English coast in sufficient strength. Without air cover from Fighter

Command the Royal Navy could not have opposed the invasion. After the Luftwaffe's victories on the Continent, it had to re-equip and replenish and to prepare the captured airfields fronting the Channel. Similarly, the British also used the lull to rebuild their fighter strength.

Fighter Command, under Air Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding, composed of 4 groups numbering some 600 fighter aircraft – far fewer than the opposing German air forces – was charged with providing the air defense of the British Isles. Dowding had organized Fighter Command so that radar, high frequency direction finding, and spotters communicated information on enemy intrusions from sectors to a filter center. Group commanders could then scramble fighter squadrons as needed. 11 Group, under Air Vice-Marshal Keith Park, headquartered at Uxbridge on the northern edge of London, stretched from Lowestoft round to Dover, Bournemouth, and Northampton. 11 Group consisted of 18 day fighter squadrons and 4 night fighter squadrons, including the Polish 303 Squadron, was responsible for the defense of the southeastern counties of England and London. It was 11 Group that would bear the brunt of the Battle of Britain.

11 Group was opposed by *General Feldmarschall* Albert Kesselring's *Luftflotte 2* in northwestern France and the Low Countries. The British had the inestimable barrier of their Channel, the "moat defensive", and the advantage of flying combat over their own homeland in close range to their own aerodromes where they could rearm and refuel. The Germans, having to fly to their targets, had less time over target.

German air attacks on Great Britain began the day after France surrendered. On 18 June 1940, Prime Minister Winston Churchill in his "Finest Hour" speech in the Commons, accurately portrayed the events that were about to occur and their historic consequence, when he said "…the Battle of France is over. The Battle of Britain is about to begin, upon this battle depends the survival of Christian civilization, upon it depends our British life…." This was to be the final battle for the Nazis' conquest of Europe. Hitler said that he expected to "…see the British Empire scattered to the winds by autumn". "For two months during the summer of 1940", as Arkady Fiedler wrote, "the fate of the Western world hung in the balance as Great Britain stood alone battling for its life against Nazi Germany."

On both sides, combat air operations preceded and continued after the Battle of Britain. But it was the Germans' numerous and massive continuing air attacks on Great Britain that constituted the Battle of Britain, which began 10 July and ended 31 October. In the months of the Battle of Britain, the Luftwaffe launched 98 major attacks, using 6,000 aircraft. Rarely was there a break in the German air attacks, even between the day and night raids. At all the German airfields, everyday the song *Bomben auf Engeland* blared over loudspeakers. *Reichsmarschall* Hermann Goering declared 13 August to be *Adlertag*, Eagle Day, the decisive offensive against England. Goering took personal command of *Luftflotte 2* for that day, ordering his fliers "to deliver blows into the

enemy's heart". The objective for the Luftwaffe was to destroy Fighter Command. The objective for Fighter Command was to destroy German bombers before they reached their targets. The Battle lasted through several phases determined by the Germans' concentration on different target sets. The Luftwaffe progressively attacked targets further inland, from ports, to airfields and radar sites, to London, the ultimate target. The attacks on London were meant to break the population's morale and the government's will. The crucial period occurred from 25 August to 15 September when the Luftwaffe attacked Fighter Command's stations around London, Great Britain's last lifeline.

As operational results were not satisfying Goering's expectations, he met with his fighter commanders in France and with his usual superficial *Gemuetlichkeit* asked Adolf Galland, a top ace and later *Inspekteur General der Jagdwaffe*, what else he needed, Galland replied "Give me Spitfires". Goering angrily turned on his heel. The decisive day was 7 September, when *der dicke Hermann*, as he was known to his aircrews, switched the primary target of the attacks from Fighter Command's bases to London, thus initiating The Blitz. This was a strategic error of the greatest importance by the *Befehlshaber der Luftwaffe*. Fighter Command recovered its strength with increased production of fighters, chiefly Spitfires, and the intake of new, though inexperienced, pilots. Because of Goering's fateful switch and Fighter Command's increase, the Luftwaffe's loss of aircraft and aircrew was large enough to show clearly that the Germans could not continue to sustain such large losses, particularly since German aircraft production remained insufficient. Thus, a German invasion of Britain was rendered impossible, although the German air offensive was not halted. After three all-out attacks by the Luftwaffe in the morning, afternoon, and evening of 15 September, even Galland admitted that "September 15th proved that penetrating the British defenses and the taking of London was now as far distant as ever".

In the meantime, 303 Squadron was most anxious to fly and to join the fight. During 303's final training flight on 30 August, Flying Officer Ludwik Paszkiewicz, the commander of B Flight, downed a Messerschmitt 110 fighter, the squadron's first kill even before the squadron was operational. The squadron went on to down 5 Me109s on the same mission. The next day, 31 August, the squadron was declared operational and on its first sortie downed a further 6 Me109s. On 5 September, the RAF shot down 39 German fighters, 303 shot down 8 of these for a score of 20%. This kind of kill ratio was to continue throughout the Battle of Britain. The King sent 303 his congratulations. The Royal compliments were to be sent several times to 303. The British Air Ministry also congratulated the squadron several times. After about the fifth congratulatory telegram from the government, the British squadron commander requested that telegrams not be sent and that it would be rather better to send a case of whisky. The whisky duly arrived the next day.

On 6 September, Squadron Leader Krasnodebski was severely burned in a dogfight and bailed out. Witold Urbanowicz took command of 303. On 9 September, the

squadron downed two Me109s and a Me110. On 11 September, the squadron claimed 2 Me110s, one Me109, 3 Dornier 17s, and 4 Heinkel 111s. 11 September began the worst week with daylight and nighttime bombing raids on London daily. That day saw the 303's greatest victory: 12 aircraft downed 17 German aircraft in less than 15 minutes, 17 of the RAF's total of 65, or about 25% of all the kills for that day. 303 scored high percentages of kills on each of the next few days. On 15 September, the Luftwaffe attacked with almost 1,000 aircraft. Twenty one RAF fighter squadrons were involved. There were no Fighter Command reserves left. Churchill was so worried about the outcome that he spent that day at 11 Group headquarters at Uxbridge, following the air battle as it unfolded. That decisive day, some RAF pilots flew as many as seven sorties. Some 250 pilots saved Britain and the West that day. 303 flew nine sorties in the morning, scoring nine kills: 6 Me109s, 1 Me110, 2 Do17s; two afternoon missions brought six more kills. These were typical missions for any RAF fighter squadron during that time. It must be remembered that often entire dogfights lasted only minutes and individual engagements were over in seconds.

Several times Churchill unannounced looked in on 303 on his way back to London. The King also visited 303 several times. On 12 September, on one such visit, while the King was conversing with several pilots, the scramble was announced and the King was jostled aside, an offense of *lese majeste*, as pilots ran for their Hurricanes. That evening, George VI, not having taken offense, requested the results of 303's mission. Buck House was told that the 303 had scored 11 kills and one probable and that the German bombers were scattered and turned back before they could bomb Portsmouth. On 27 September, over the Isle of Wight, 303 bagged its hundredth kill. These selected missions are only samples of the kinds of combat missions that 303 and the other squadrons of Fighter Command flew day after day for more than two months during the Battle of Britain. By mid-October, when 303 was transferred to Leconfield in Yorkshire, it had scored the highest number of kills of any RAF fighter squadron, twice as many kills as the next highest scoring squadron, and three times as many as any other squadron. During the Battle of Britain, 303 had destroyed 126 German aircraft, with 13 probables, and 9 damaged. Significantly, 303 also had the lowest number of losses in proportion to its number of kills. Dowding later wrote of this record and the record of other Polish fighter squadrons, "…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 battle would have been the same." "The Few" defeated the Luftwaffe's massive, sustained offensive, which was superior in numbers and more experienced in combat, simply through unmatched courage, indomitable determination, and exceptional skill. "The Few" are the ones whom Churchill immortalized when he said, "Never in the field of human conflict has so much been owed by so many to so few".

Throughout the Battle of Britain, 303 put up 12 aircraft, the entire squadron, every day but two days, when they managed to have operational only 9 fighters on one day and 6 fighters another day. On 12 September, at the end of the day, ten aircraft were not

operational and the British squadron leader expected that 303 would not be able to fly the next day. Nevertheless, by dawn, the ground crews produced twelve fully operational aircraft. Their dedication throughout the war was magnificent. Considering that on many days, each aircraft was scrambled for four sorties, this is a remarkable record.

303 took a break in April 1942 to fly in 11 Group's gunnery competition and swept the contest while Polish squadrons 316 and 315 respectively came in second and third.

303 continued to fly combat sorties until the end of the war, transitioning to Spitfires soon after the Battle of Britain and at the end of the war to P-51D Mustangs. From 19 July 1940 through 8 May 1945, 303 had flown 15,866 combat hours in 9,900 sorties; it had destroyed 297 1/6 German aircraft, with 35 probables, and damaged 25. The squadron was disbanded on 11 December 1946 after an exceptionally distinguished history. The Kosciuszko Squadron had twice been involved in the thick of the fight to save Western Civilization, in 1920 and 1940. Truly, 303 had served as the *antemurale Chistianitatis*.

General Sikorski had considered the Polish air and ground crews to be the least expendable of all of the Polish armed forces not only because there was not a source of replacements and not only for their specialized experience. He had hoped to use the Polish Air Force based in Great Britain as a strategic combat asset to reinstate a free Polish government in an independent Poland. This was not to be as United States diplomacy and Soviet Russian advances on the ground rendered this intention impossible. Nevertheless, in the end and more importantly, without the victory of the Royal Air Force in the battle of Britain, the later Allied invasion of France on D-Day, 6 June 1944, would not have been possible.

The magnificent and gallant record of six continuous years of aerial combat compiled by the 303 Kosciuszko Squadron is but another historic example of the unselfish readiness to sacrifice one's life for the greater cause inspired by the Polish motto *Za wolnosc wasza i nasza*, For your freedom and ours. The airmen of 303 Squadron had fought to save Britain and to restore a free and independent Poland. Unfortunately, the latter was to be long in coming. As Poland was abandoned, the airmen were abandoned, and their victories were for nought; their victories were lost to them and left behind. Polish airmen, including those of 303, found themselves homeless and stateless at the end of the war. Some stayed in Great Britain, some settled in diverse countries alien to them, some saw opportunities in surprising places. Those who returned to Poland were arrested, imprisoned, and tortured. Some were executed. Those who survived imprisonment were forced to serve in the Communist Polish Air Force. Such were their rewards. So, for many members of the Polish Armed Forces, World War II did not end until 1989.

Because the Polish Government in Exile was no longer recognized by the Allied governments, the Polish airmen, including those who had served during the Battle of Britain, were not invited to participate in the great Victory Parade held in London in 1946. Several years after the war, a monument was built on the White Cliffs of Dover listing all the RAF fighter squadrons that had fought in the Battle of Britain; the Polish 302 and 303 Squadrons were not included.

In 1996, 303 was resurrected when Witold Urbanowicz, who had commanded the squadron in the Battle of Britain, passed the unit's color to the commander of the First Fighter Squadron in a free Poland. In 1999, the Kosciuszko Flight of the squadron was the first Polish Air Force unit assigned under NATO command at Minsk Mazowiecki.

So, at last and again, the Kosciuszko Squadron lives despite its *verlorene Siege*.

Note: This article relies heavily on Adam Zamoyski's The Forgotten Few

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