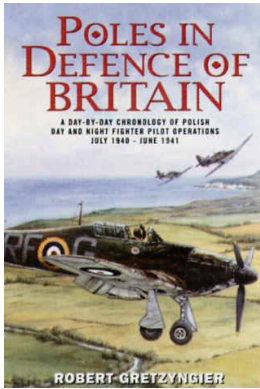

Poles in Defence of Great Britain: July 1940 - June 1941 by Robert Gretzyngier in association with Wojtek Matusiak (2001), 294 pages



This is a day-by-day chronology of the Polish fighter pilot operations (*samoloty myśliwskie*) covering twelve eventful months of the "Battle of Britain." It was published in London, though the author resides in Poland. The reader will be immensely impressed by the meticulous effort this work required to assemble the material in England after 60 years. No wonder that the British friend Christopher Shores who edited this book offers his highly sympathetic praise, as do many collaborators who still remember those times or the recollections of their older friends or relatives. This is a historical record similar to those of regiments that fought in ancient, long forgotten wars.

It is not one continuous story but rather a compilation of dozens of them (actually flight reports), reduced to a paragraph or two. For example, Stan Skalski tells us how on September 2, 1940, he flew in the Yellow Section when at 20,000 ft. his squadron sighted a large force of Do's (Dornier bombers) with many MF 109 escorts spread in a wide formation behind them. He attacked one, which then crashed near a bomber; then he shot down a second one, which flew out over the sea, and came down. Ultimately Skalski was forced to land with a pierced pipe, just as his engine died. Sometimes one needs to read between lines as the book offers only a few editorial comments. It contains pure facts. But one learns in passing that the British Hurricanes were often no match for the German Messerschmitts; they were too slow. The situation improved with the arrival of new Spitfires.

In the summer of 1940, the Polish pilots were truly a godsend for the British. Many were highly qualified, and some had had actual combat experience in September 1939. They were faithful allies after the disastrous French campaign. True, there were some language problems. A minor one involved Polish names such as Pniak and Własnowolski. The men were promptly nicknamed Cognac and Vodka, while Nowierski and Ostaszewski became Novi with Osti. The Poles were a bit upset to find that British throttles operated in the opposite direction. One pilot could not land properly due to lack of English, and so the British command regretfully did not allow Poles to fly at night when radio communications are essential; there was a danger that a Polish boy would not comprehend the cockney slang of a London colleague giving him vital instructions. Of course, there was much serious flying by day, and certain handicaps were overcome. Some pilots were placed on duty with only a few hours of flying a Hurricane, and training in aerial gunnery was simply unavailable. A routine army training had to suffice. The principal function of the Polish squadrons (*dywizjony*) was the defense of southern England from German bombers and their fighter escorts and yet the British planes of that period were, by today's standards, quite primitive and accident prone. They had frequent problems with landing undercarriages.

The Polish squadrons used "300" numbers, from 302 through 317, of which 303 became the most famous. The spirit of the flyers was admirable. When the royal family visited them and a sudden scramble was declared, the planes were in the air within five minutes. Perhaps the toughest day was September 7 1940, when 1,000 German planes headed for England, watched by Hermann Goering from his Calais base. During that month, the Poles shot down 100 enemy planes. Their own losses were also high: 80 pilots died during those memorable months. This thorough book lists amazing details, including all sorties in the course of twelve months. The activity slowed down considerably in June 1941, when the entire German air force was moved east to face the war with the Soviet Union.

George E. Suboczewski