

Czechoslovaks and Poles in Royal Air Force During the Battle of Britain

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The study deals with the involvement of foreign pilots in the Battle of Britain, both Czechoslovaks and Poles. Until now, there have been number of studies and monographies describing the formation and deployment of Czechoslovak and Pole pilots. Yet there has been no comparison of both sides. That is why this study focuses on a comparison of the legal status of Czechoslovak and Polish air force units, as well as their numbers, formations, and their structure. Using this approach, the aim is to answer in which aspects there were similarities and in which there were differences, thus, to set the phenomenon of Czechoslovak and Polish pilots in the RAF within a mutual context.

Key words: *Czechoslovak air force units; Polish air force units; Royal Air Force; Battle of Britain; 1940; Second World War*

During the Battle of Britain, the Royal Air Force (RAF) defeated the German Air Force (Luftwaffe). According to the British, the battle took place from July 10 to October 31, 1940.¹ In its course, there were not only pilots of the British Commonwealth who prevailed, but also fighter pilots from other nations, among whom the most significant numbers included Poles and Czechoslovaks. Their deployment, however, has been studied from a predominantly Czech(oslovak) and Polish point of view.

Both historiographies offer stories of their achievements, but in one important aspect the accounts are lacking. That aspect is analytic comparison,² which is why

¹ As mentioned below, since the Germans who initiated the battle were for a long time uncertain what to do, the beginning and the end of the battle varies. Germans, for example, consider the end of the battle to be on May 16, 1941.

² The research of Czechoslovak-Polish relations during the Second World War, including relations between armed forces is well established. The most comprehensive title represents: Friedl, J. (2005). *Na jedné frontě. Vztahy československé a polské armády za druhé světové války* [On the same Front. Relations of Czechoslovak and Polish Army during the Second World War]. Praha: ÚSD AV ČR.

the goal of this study is to present a generalized balance of their deployment, based strictly on facts. This approach especially benefits from the work of Polish historian Piotr M. Majewski.³

Since 1940, there have been number of publications, mostly by witnesses of these events that pertain to the involvement of Czechoslovak and Polish pilots in the Battle of Britain. However, a critical approach was unavailable for years.⁴ But the ‘magic’ year of 1989 was the key moment that enabled proper research on this topic without interpretations that conformed to the aims of the then communist regime.⁵

³ Majewski, P. M. (2004). *Nierozegrana kampania. Możliwości obronne Czechosłowacji jesienią 1938 roku* [The Unopened Campaign. Defence Abilities of Czechoslovakia in Autumn 1938]. Warszawa: Trio; Idem (2016). *Zmarnowana szansa? Możliwości obrony Czechosłowacji jesienią 1938 roku* [The Lost Chance. Abilities of Defence of Czechoslovakia in Autumn 1938]. Gdańsk: Muzeum II Wojny Światowej. The translation of this book into Czech language makes in fact its third, extended, issue: Idem (2018). *Bojovat, či ustoupit? Možnosti obrany Československa na podzim 1938* [To Fight or to Retreat? Abilities of Defence of Czechoslovakia in Autumn 1938]. Brno: Conditio Humana – Muzeum II Wojny Światowej.

⁴ Pertaining to sheer number of facts there are some older works that could be with critical approach used in present day, e.g.: Biegański, W. at al. (1981). *Polski czyn zbrojny w II Wojnie Światowej. Walki formacji Polskich na Zachodzie 1939–1945* [Polish Armed Resistance in the World War II. Deployment of Polish Formations in the West 1939–1945]. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Ministerstwa Obrony Narodowej; Iwanowski, W. (1976). *Z dziejów formacji polskich na Zachodzie 1939–1945* [From the History of Polish Formations in the West 1939–1945]. Warszawa: Ministerstwo Obrony Narodowej; Šmoldas, Z. (1987). *Českoslovenští letci v boji proti fašismu* [Czechoslovak Pilots in Combat against Fascism]. Praha: Naše vojsko.

⁵ In first place, there is number of synthesis on Polish exile army, for example: Peszke, M. A. (2013). *The Armed Forces of Poland in the West 1939–46. Strategic Concepts, Planning, Limited Success but no Victory!* Solihull: Helion & Company. Among titles devoted to Polish air force units see for example: Król, W. (1990). *Zarys działań polskiego lotnictwa w Wielkiej Brytanii 1940–1945* [Brief History of Polish Air Force in Great Britain 1940–1940]. Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Komunikacji i Łączności. The value of this books is due to fact that brings number of key pieces of information pertaining organization and deployment of Polish air force units. Rajlich, J. (1994). *310. stíhací peruť* [No. 310 Fighter Squadron]. Plzeň: Mustang; Rajlich, J. (2003). *Na nebi hrdého Albionu. Válečný deník československých letců ve službách britského letectva 1940–1945. 1. část, 1940* [On the Sky of Proud Albion. Military Journal of Czechoslovak Aviators in Service of British Air Force 1940–1945. Volume 1, 1940]. Praha: Ares – Naše vojsko; Rajlich, J. (2004). *Esá na obloze* [Aces on the Sky]. Praha: Naše vojsko; Sojda, G. – Śliżewski, G. – Hodyra, P. (2016). *Ci cholerni Polacy! Polskie Siły Powietrzne w bitwie o Anglię* [Those Damned Poles! Polish Air Force in the Battle of England]. Warszawa: Alma-Press. Other sources are quoted continuously.

This study benefits from both Czechoslovak and Polish historiography, since there were a number of texts pertaining to the deployment of Czechoslovaks and Poles in the Battle of Britain, although their choice could be only selective from the same characteristics belonging to archival resources.

The study is divided into six chapters, while the last one is a mutual comparison of main aspects, such as the legal framework of military deployment, the organisation of units and the results of their deployment in quantitative terms. The primary goal of this approach is to answer the question in which aspects the deployment of Czechoslovaks and Poles was unique and in which there were similarities. A final aim is to shed new light on the knowledge of their activities in which neither side is perceived as separated.

Battle of Britain

The Battle of Britain⁶ lasted, as indicated above, three and two thirds months and during its course underwent a number of changes. The key moment was July 16, 1940 when Adolf Hitler issued his Directive No. 16, i.e. an order to prepare invasion to the British Isles. Since there was indisputable superiority of the British Royal Navy over the Kriegsmarine (German Navy), the only option was to gain dominance in the air. That goal was not, however, expressed until August 1, 1940 in Directive No. 17.

By that time, the Luftwaffe in fact represented the most formidable air force in the world, combining two air fleets (Luftflotten) with nearly 2,700 airplanes against Britain, including nearly 950 fighter planes.

Britain, despite having fewer airplanes than Germans, totalling some 700 fighter planes, had its anti-aircraft system available, based on radar technology (so called Chain Home) and a highly effective organisation of its air defence command.

On the other hand, at the beginning of the battle, the Luftwaffe (German Air Force) lacked clear instructions on how to proceed. That is why its planes began attacking harbours on the southern English shoreline. But in a couple of weeks, Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring, the high commander of the German Air Force, ordered a reassessment of focus to defeat the Royal Air Force. During this phase of the battle that began on August 13, 1940, the Luftwaffe primarily assaulted

⁶ See e.g.: Cooper, M. (1981). *The German Air Force 1933-1945. An Anatomy of Failure*. New York: Jane's Publishing; Haining, Peter (2004). *Where the Eagle Landed. The Mystery of the German Invasion of Britain, 1940*. London: Robson Books; Lake, J. (2000). *The Battle of Britain*. Ontario: Prospero Books; Ray, J. P. (2003). *The Battle of Britain. Dowding and the First Victory, 1940*. London: Cassell.

British airports and bases and, later on, targeted the factories of the British aeronautics industry.

By the beginning of September, the German high command of the Luftwaffe, under influence of incorrect information that Royal Air Force was nearly defeated, decided once again to change its strategy. After September 7, 1940, the German planes would attack London in order to weaken the British will to resist. At the expense of civil inhabitants, the RAF and vital industrial complexes were protected against threat, enabling the restoration of full combat power for the British air forces. The Germans continued with this strategy until the end of 1940, although after October 31, 1940, the British ceased to consider Luftwaffe attacks as a serious menace and by that time the battle de facto ended.

Royal Air Force managed to shoot down more German planes than they lost. It is said that the RAF most likely lost 1,087 planes compared to 1,733 Luftwaffe losses. But sheer numbers fail to express the entire British victory. The most important aspect of the Battle of Britain was the fact that during its course, German advances were stopped for the first time and that the German High Command gave up their effort to defeat the British and dismissed its intention to invade the British Isles for good.

Formation of Czechoslovak RAF Units

At the same time that fights in the British sky reached their peak, Czechoslovak military units were formed in England, air force squadrons among them. The most important circumstances that enabled their existence were the evacuation of Czechoslovak armed forces from France, including pilots who served in the French Air Army (Armée de l'air). By August 15, 1940, there were more than 900 Czechoslovak pilots in the United Kingdom.⁷

A further aspect was the recognition of a Czechoslovak government-in-exile in July 1940. However, by that time Brits considered the Czechoslovak government to only be 'provisional'. Czechoslovak representatives had issues with legitimacy but managed to persuade the British that Czechoslovakia had not legally ceased to exist and Edvard Beneš was still its president, which allowed him to appoint a government. The Czechoslovak military agenda was organized by Gen. Jan Sergej Ingr, head of the Ministry of National Defence.

But the key institution was the Inspectorate of the Czechoslovak Air Force (Inspektorát československého letectva), established on July 12, 1940. Its chief was Gen. Karel Janoušek. Formally subordinate to the defence ministry, the inspectorate

⁷ Šmoldas, Z. (1987), p. 178.

was officially a department of the British Air Ministry. Its sphere of influence involved the administration and inspection of Czechoslovak RAF units, of course, but had no other operational authority.⁸

On October 25, 1940, a military agreement between Czechoslovakia and the United Kingdom was signed. While Czechoslovak ground forces, according to that treaty, were part of the Czechoslovak Armed Forces, air units had been assigned as an integral component of the Royal Air Force. That meant pilots as well as ground staff were members of the RAF and its Volunteer Reserve, but also recognized as members of the Czechoslovak Armed Forces. Principally, Czechoslovak squadrons should have been commanded by Czechoslovak officers, but provisionally its position needed to be 'doubled' until such time as the Czechoslovak commander was made sufficiently familiar with Royal Air Force procedures to assume sole control. According to the agreement, the main effort was to build one bomber and one fighter squadron 'as soon as possible'.⁹ However, it was redundant – or clearly apparent – because at the time the agreement was signed three squadrons already existed.

Two of them were subordinated to Fighter Command and one to Bomber Command. The first unit built was the No. 310 (Czechoslovak) Fighter Squadron that was formed near Cambridge, in Duxford on July 12, 1940. The respective order was issued on July 10, 1940. Because of language issues, the Czechoslovaks largely did not speak English, the unit had two commanders; one British and one Czechoslovak; those were S/Ldr (Squadron Leader) George Blackwood and Maj. Alexander Hess. Within a month, on August 17, 1940, the squadron was recognized as operational and on August 26, 1940 flew its first combat mission.¹⁰

The second unit was the No. 312 (Czechoslovak) Fighter Squadron that was established on September 5, 1940. The reason for delay in its formation, in contrast to No. 310 Squadron, was the fact that it was formed of pilots who previously served in Armée de l'Air and derived to the British Isles through a detour in North Africa. On October 2, 1940, the squadron was recognized as operational and six days later, flew its first combat mission. In the beginning of its formation it shared the same airport with No. 310 Squadron, but later was transferred to north-eastern England. Its commanders were S/Ldr Frank Tyson and Maj. Ján Ambruš, respectively.

⁸ Broft, M. (1988). *Vojenské dějiny Československa. IV. díl (1939-1945)* [Military History of Czechoslovakia. Volume IV (1939-1945)]. Praha: Naše vojsko, pp. 101–126.

⁹ Vojenský ústřední archiv-Vojenský historický archiv [Central Military Archives-Historical Military Archives], fund Československé letectvo-Velká Británie [Czechoslovak Air Force-Great Britain], box 112, inventory no. 213.

¹⁰ Rajlich, J. (1994), pp. 7–15.

Both fighter squadrons had the same organization, i.e. were formed of two flights of six planes each or of four flights of three planes – the organisation of all fighter squadrons was the same, including Polish units. Both squadrons were also equipped with Hawker ‘Hurricane’ fighter aircraft.

The third Czechoslovak unit was the No. 311 (Czechoslovak) Bomber Squadron, established on July 27, 1940 in Cosford in Middle England and later transferred to Honington in Eastern England. Its formation was under way much longer. This was due to fact that its training was more demanding and required rehearsals of both tactics and roles for each member of the six-man crews. Thus, its first combat mission was carried out on September 10, 1940. Its main weapon was the Vickers ‘Wellington’ medium bomber. Its commanders were W/Cdr (Wing Commander) J. F. Criffiths and Lt. Col. Karel Mareš (cover name Toman).¹¹

Formation of Polish RAF Units

The evolution of the Polish air forces in the United Kingdom underwent different course at their beginnings. First, Polish pilots had already arrived in the British Isles during December of 1939 and others followed in the next months. Since by that time Poles had endeavoured to build their own units within the French Air Force, the issue of their pilots in England was out of focus.¹² On June 11, 1940, the United Kingdom and Poland signed an agreement on the formation of a Polish air force; according to this document, there should have been two Polish units formed, but – despite Poles were all fighter pilots – to be bomber units, equipped with Fairey ‘Battle’ three-man light bombers. However, the fall of France and imminent German threat completely changed the situation.¹³

During June 1940, the Polish government-in-exile and president, Władysław Raczkiewicz, was evacuated from France to London. The primary figure of Polish authority was Władysław Sikorski, who held the multiple posts of Prime Minister, Minister of Military Affairs (Ministerstwo Spraw Wojskowych) and Commander-in-Chief of the Polish Armed Forces. Operational command belonged to the General Staff, with Col. Tadeusz Klimecki as its chief. Otherwise, the highest command authority of air forces was the Royal Air Force and its inspectorate (Inspektorat Polskich Sił Powietrznych) with Gen. Stanisław Ujejski at its head that was established on July 18 (nominally on August 5), 1940.¹⁴

¹¹ Idem (2003), pp. 66–91.

¹² See e.g.: Król, W. (1988). *Zarys działań polskiego lotnictwa we Francji 1940* [Brief History of Polish Air Force in France 1940]. Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Komunikacji i Łączności.

¹³ Biegański, W. at al. (1981), pp. 233–237; Sojda, G. – Śliżewski, G. – Hodyra, P. (2016), pp. 51–57.

¹⁴ Biegański, W. at al. (1981), pp. 211–216, 233–238; Iwanowski, W. (1976), pp. 91–93.

The Polish government had already gained recognition in France during September and October of 1939, meaning that at the moment of its arrival in London it was considered as the legal representative body of Poland, with all its prerogatives. It enabled, among other things, that the agreement between Poland and the United Kingdom was signed quite soon, on August 5, 1940. According to this agreement, Polish air units were formed, with their organization the same as the Czechoslovaks', i.e. all Polish air force members enlisted into the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve and all Polish units were integral parts of the RAF. Poles, however, made use of this agreement to renegotiate some norms of their previous air force treaty, e.g. Polish pilots were recognized also as member of Polis Air Force and were allowed to wear Polish insignia and decorations.¹⁵

Together, by the end of July 1940, Polish air forces were composed of nearly 6500 men, including more than 1200 officers.¹⁶ Following the previous endeavour to establish bomber units, the first Polish squadrons were assigned bomber tasks. No. 300 (Polish) Bomber Squadron was already established on July 1, 1940 in Bramcote in Nottinghamshire. But it took nearly two and a half months until that squadron became operational on September 12, 1940. Its first commander was Lt. Col. Waclaw Makowski and his RAF adviser there was W/Cdr K. P. Lewis.

No. 301 (Polish) Bomber Squadron was formed on July 24, 1940 mostly from pilots who had already arrived from France on April 1, 1940. No. 301 shared the same base in Bramcote with its 'sister' squadron. Its readiness for combat was declared on September 14, 1940. Lt. Col. Roman Rudkowski was appointed to be its commander and S/Ldr E. Skinner as his adviser. Both squadrons were aimed to be equipped with Vickers 'Wellington' bomber planes, which did not happen until November of 1940. That is why during the Battle of Britain Poles flew the Fairey 'Battle' they were already trained on.¹⁷

The first unit formed under subordination of the Fighter Command was the No. 302 (Polish) Fighter Squadron. Its commanders were Lt. Col. Mieczysław Mümler and S/Ldr William A. Satchell, respectively. The squadron was established by an order from July 10, 1940 (the same one that established the No. 310 Squadron)

¹⁵ Peszke, M. A. (2011). The British-Polish Agreement of August 1940. Its Antecedents, Significance, and Consequences. *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 24 (4), pp. 648–658; Stanisławska, S. (1965). *Sprawa polska w czasie drugiej wojny światowej na arenie międzynarodowej. Zbiór dokumentów* [Polish Case in International Relations in the Time of the Second World War. Collection of Documents]. Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, doc. no. 110, pp. 173–176.

¹⁶ Iwanowski, W. (1976), p. 95.

¹⁷ Król, W. (1990), pp. 160–164; Sojda, G. – Śliżewski, G. – Hodyra, P. (2016), pp. 104–113.

in Leconfield near Humber in Northern England, in North Yorkshire. The unit continued in the tradition of the Polish 3rd Fighter Squadron of the 3rd Air Regiment, both in its personnel and symbols. Finally, on August 15, 1940 the squadron became operational.¹⁸

Friday August 2, 1940 when group of Polish soldiers and officers arrived at Northolt, a suburb of London, is considered to be the beginning of the No. 303 (Polish) Fighter Squadron. However, its formation began earlier, on July 15, 1940 in Blackpool on the Lancashire coast in North West England. Its commanders were S/Ldr Ronald G. Kellett and Maj. Zdzisław Krasnodębski. The Polish commander, nevertheless, remained in command only for a short period of time and Lt. Witold Urbanowicz (also see below) became the newly appointed commander on September 7, 1940; but the letter was soon replaced by Lt. Zdzisław Henneberg. No. 303 Squadron carried on the tradition of the Polish 3rd Fighter Squadron of 1st Air Regiment. On the last day of August 1940, the squadron gained its operational ability.¹⁹ As well as Czechoslovak, both Polish fighter squadrons were equipped with Hawker 'Hurricane' fighter airplanes and shared the same organization.²⁰

During the Battle of Britain four other Polish units were formed. These were the No. 304 Bomber, No. 305 Bomber, No. 306 Fighter, No. 307 Night Fighter, and finally the No. 308 Fighter Squadron. However, none of them reached operational ability in time to directly participate in the battle.²¹

Czechoslovaks in Combat

Both Czechoslovak fighter squadrons were part of the No. 12 Group of Air Vice-Marshall Trafford Leigh-Mallory's Fighter Command, the operational command level that was responsible for the Midlands, Norfolk, Lincolnshire, and North Wales. The No. 310 Fighter Squadron was assigned to patrol and protect the air space of the neighbouring No. 11 Group in Southern England at times when their squadrons began combat. At these times, its airports and bases became vulnerable against air attack of Germans.

¹⁸ Król, W. (1990), pp. 41–44; Sojda, G. – Ślizewski, G. – Hodyra, P. (2016), pp. 84–93.

¹⁹ Król, W. (1990), pp. 56–59.

²⁰ Olson, L. – Cloud, S. (2003). *A Question of Honor. The Kościuszko Squadron. Forgotten Heroes of World War II*. New York: Knopf, pp. 74–108. The book is also available in Czech language, see: Olson, L. – Cloud, S. (2019). *Otázka cti. Kościuszkova peruf. Letci RAF za druhé světové války*. Praha: Euromedia Group, pp. 48–126.

²¹ Iwanowski, W. (1976), p. 108; Król, W. (1990), pp. 66–72, 165–168.

On September 1, 1940, the squadron was integrated into so called 'Bader Wing' (also known as 'Duxford Wing') named for its commander, S/Ldr Douglas Bader. The wing was an air force formation built from a couple of squadrons and by that time a newly established command level. As it was proven later, this innovation changed the way the RAF organised its forces.²² Except for Czechoslovaks in the wing, it was composed of the No. 242 Fighter and No. 19 Fighter Squadrons.²³

A week later, on September 7, 1940, the No. 310 Squadron took part in combat against a major Luftwaffe attack aimed at London. During dogfights, Czechoslovaks totalled eleven victories. But in addition to the No. 310 Squadron, all three units of the Bader Wing were exceptionally successful during the battle over London. This led to a decision to expand the wing and two other squadrons, the No. 611 Fighter and No. 302 (Polish) Fighter Squadrons (see below) were integrated.

The next major struggle for the London sky took place on September 15, 1940 and until now this event is commemorated as the Battle of Britain Day. By noon, all units of the Bader Wing took to the air and began to attack the Germans. Squadron Leader D. Bader decided that those squadrons equipped with Hawker 'Hurricane' should attack German bombers, while those with Supermarine 'Spitfire' fighters that had better manoeuvre capabilities would take on the fighters. The first wave was repulsed inflicting considerable losses upon the Germans. But soon after, another wave of attacking Luftwaffe planes followed.

Thus, the Bader Wing took off once again at about two p.m. Once in the battlefield, the planes of the No. 310 Squadron were attacked from above by German fighters and two of their planes were shot down. Later, Czechoslovaks managed to turn that unfavourable beginning of the battle. Together, they totalled thirteen air victories that included eight and half²⁴ German bombers and one Messerschmitt BF 109 fighter. The difference between number of victories and number of destroyed planes is result the fact that one kill was often claimed – rightfully – by more than one pilot.

During the following days and weeks, the Czechoslovak squadron took off a number of times, but no other combat was greater than that of September 15, 1940. By October 31, 1940, the No. 310 Fighter Squadron had carried out 938 combat take-offs with total number of 971 operational hours destroying 40 planes for certain and probably other eleven while six additional enemy planes were damaged. Squadron losses amounted to fifteen destroyed, ten damaged along with three pilots killed and seven injured.²⁵

²² Burns, M. G. (2002). *Bader. The Man and His Men*. London: Cassell, pp. 59–124; Ray, J. P. (2003), pp. 96–101.

²³ Rajlich, J. (1994), pp. 10–28.

²⁴ In situations when one kill was claimed by more pilots, each of them was acknowledge proportionally, i.e. one half, one third, etc.

²⁵ Rajlich, J. (1994), pp. 38–52.

The task of the second Czechoslovak fighter unit, the No. 312 Fighter Squadron, was to secure the air space over Liverpool, an important industry centre and communication junction in Western England. Since major combats during the Battle of Britain took place in Eastern and Southern England, its involvement was of a lower rate. Another influence was that the No. 312 Squadron was deployed in the final stages of the battle when the intensity of combat decreased. Together, the squadron carried out 85 combat missions during which they destroyed four and damaged five enemy planes.²⁶

The only Czechoslovak bomber squadron, No. 311, began its combat history on September 10, 1940 with an attack on the Brussels railway station. The next goal was Calais on September 21, 1940. Its base, however, was not Honington, but East Wretham, where the squadron was moved on September 16, 1940. Five days after the raid on Calais, the bomber squadron took part in an assault on Berlin. Nevertheless, during the return flight, the squadron suffered its first loss when one plane was forced to land in the Netherlands, then occupied by Germans. Soon the number of lost planes increased, especially high during a raid on Bremen on the night of October 16 and 17, 1940, when Czechoslovaks lost four of five bombers participating in that attack. The squadron was temporarily withdrawn. It also sealed its involvement in the Battle of Britain because its return to combat did not happen before December 9, 1940. Altogether, during 1940, the No. 311 Bomber Squadron flew 51 raids with an overall number of 250 operational hours, during which the squadron lost five planes and 27 crewmen.²⁷

Czechoslovaks, however, also served in other units of the Royal Air Force. Special recognition belongs to Sergeant Josef František who became one of the most honoured pilots of the Battle of Britain. He is also claimed both by Czechoslovak and Polish military history since he served in the No. 303 Polish Fighter Squadron. His service among Poles dates back to September 1939 when, among other Czechoslovaks, he was admitted into Polish Air Force. Before he lost his life on October 8, 1940, he numbered seventeen certain and one probable shoot down, being decorated with the Czechoslovak War Cross, Polish *Virtuti Militari* and the British Distinguished Flying Medal, etc.²⁸

²⁶ Ibidem, pp. 65–74.

²⁷ Ibidem, pp. 86–87.

²⁸ Fiedler, A. (1943). *Squadron 303. The Legendary Battle of Britain Fighter Squadron*. New York: Roy, pp. 110–119; Rajlich, J. (2010). *Josef František. Pokus o pravdivý příběh československého stíhače* [Josef František. Attempt to True Story of Czechoslovak Fighter]. Cheb: Svět křídel, pp. 168–294.

There was a number of Czechoslovaks in other RAF squadrons and many of them later became flying aces, i.e. pilots with five or more victories. In first place, there is Karel Kuttelwascher, the overall top Czechoslovak RAF pilot who scored eighteen kills. During the Battle of Britain, he served in the No. 1 Fighter Squadron along with Václav Jícha and Josef Dygrýn (cover name Ligotický), both flying aces. Other distinguished pilots served in the No. 111 Fighter Squadron, such as Otmar Kučera and Miloslav Mansfeld, or even changed ranks of more of them, like Václav Cukr serving in No. 310 Fighter, No. 43 Fighter and No. 243 Fighter Squadron. Their list is, however, much longer and contains 63 names.²⁹

Poles in Combat

Both Polish bomber squadrons were the first to be built but, as it was mentioned above, the process of their formation took more time. Thus, the first operational Polish unit became the No. 302 Fighter Squadron that saw its first combat mission on August 15, 1940. Its task was the defence of English air space from Hull to Scarborough in Middle England and the protection of convoys. Its first dogfight with German planes took place five days later resulting in a Polish victory. The combat intensity in the area was, however, lower than in Southern England.³⁰

Anyhow, shortly after that, the squadron was transferred to Duxford where it was needed. This meant that Poles fought together with Czechoslovaks in the ranks of the Bader Wing. The squadron remained part of this formation only from September 14 to 25, 1940 but managed to take part in defending against German attack on London on September 15, 1940. During their first take off shortly after noon, Poles counted eight sure and five probable kills without any loss. During a second sortie around 3.00 p.m. there were three sure and two probable destroyed German planes, although they sustained three losses. As part of recognition of its achievement a memorial was built in Duxford on the top of which there is a Hawker 'Hurricane' that was flown by Cpt. Tadeusz Chlopik.³¹

After its removal from the Bader Wing, the No. 303 Squadron transferred back to its 'home airport' in Leconfield. The next day, during a visit of English King George VI, the airport was attacked. Polish pilots immediately taking to the air, managed to shoot down eleven certain and probably one additional attacker. Finally, on October 11, 1940 the squadron was assigned to Northolt where took over the tasks of the No. 303 Squadron for the rest of the Battle of Britain.

²⁹ Idem (1994), pp. 96–98; Idem (2004), pp. 11–78.

³⁰ Iwanowski, W. (1976), p. 233–234.

³¹ Król, W. (1990), pp. 45–52; Sojda, G. – Śliżewski, G. – Hodyra, P. (2016), pp. 318–332.

Several fights took place on October 15, 1940. Poles destroyed two German planes, but their own losses were higher and consisted of two destroyed and two damaged 'Hurricanes' and one killed pilot. Another serious loss to the squadron was sustained on October 18, 1940. The planes took off despite bad weather conditions that claimed four planes and pilots. Luckily for the squadron, on the following days there was no-flight weather that protected Poles against further losses. During the Battle of Britain, No. 302 Squadron managed to certainly kill sixteen and probably ten German aircraft and damaged one more, while losing six pilots.³² During 1940, squadron carried out 923 take-offs with 1016 operational hours.³³

Combat history of the No. 303 (Polish) Fighter Squadron belongs to the most distinguished of the Second World War; it was also the only squadron of Czechoslovaks and Poles that began its combat history under No. 11 Group of Fighter Command. Even its first kill was unusual and took place during training flights on August 31, 1940, when Lt. Ludwik Paszkiewicz left his formation to shoot down Messerschmitt Me 110. Further air victories followed the same day, scoring six German fighter kills over Southern London. Two days later, thanks to Sgt. J. František, the squadron killed its first German bomber. After that, the squadron flew combat flights every day. On September 7, 1940 its pilots shot down fourteen German planes, losing two of their own. Four days later, when Germans carried out one of their most powerful assaults so far, another 17 of their planes went down.³⁴

Sunday, September 15, 1940 was also critical for the No. 303 Squadron which had its base in the close vicinity of London. During the day, the squadron flew a couple of times. Totally, Polish pilots managed to destroy sixteen German planes at a cost of three of their own 'Hurricanes'. A further demanding day was September 27, 1940 that resulted in 13 kills. Northolt, the squadron base, was in the exposed territory of Southern England, which was why it became the target of a bombing that took place on October 6, 1940. No. 303 Squadron had sustained considerable losses and needed time to rest. Soon after that, the squadron was sent to Leconfield where it replaced its 'sister' unit, the No. 302 Squadron.

³² Iwanowski, W. (1976), p. 238. There is also figure of 27 certain and 11 probable kills and two damaged planes on the cost of seven won pilots. Król, W. (1990), pp. 41–55.

³³ Iwanowski, W. (1976), p. 235; Król, W. (1990), pp. 41–55; Sojda, G. – Śliżewski, G. – Hodyra, P. (2016), pp. 343–388.

³⁴ Fiedler, A. (1943), pp. 95–103; Król, W. (1990), pp. 59–62; Sojda, G. – Śliżewski, G. – Hodyra, P. (2016), pp. 318–332.

Despite changing its position, even in Leconfield its airport was assaulted by Germans, this time on October 27, 1940, causing the loss of three 'Hurricanes'. In total, during the battle the pilots of the squadron certainly shot down 110 German planes, nine probably and damaged six others. Their own losses consisted of seven pilots killed and nine wounded. Thus, the No. 303 Squadron became the most effective RAF unit during the Battle of Britain.³⁵

During the night of September 14 to 15, 1940 the No. 300 (Polish) Bomber Squadron took off for its first combat flight. Its mission was to assault the landing boats of Germans berthed in Boulogne harbour on the English Channel. The No. 301 (Polish) Bomber Squadron took off with the same goal. In following days, both squadrons targeted landing boats and German units in Calais in Northern France and in Oostende in Belgium. Their first Vickers 'Wellington' planes had arrived on October 20, 1940 and Polish crews began retraining on the new planes. Till the end of 1940, both Polish bomber units lost eight crewmen.³⁶ During 1940, both squadrons carried out 97 missions totalling 368 operational hours.³⁷

A number of Poles also served in other RAF units. The list is far from complete, but the following pilots stand out. Lt. W. Urbanowicz, the most successful Polish pilot (second to Sgt J. František), with fifteen certain and one probable kills, was a member of the No. 303 Squadron, as well as the No. 145 Fighter Squadron and (unofficially) the No. 601 Squadron. Like J. František, he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross.³⁸

Sgt Antoni Głowacki served in the No. 501 Fighter Squadron, along with Lt. Stefan Witorzeńć and 2nd Lt. Stanisław Skalski. Sgt Józef Jeka was a member of the No. 238 Fighter Squadron, while 2nd Lt. Bolesław Własnowolski served, one after another in the No. 32, No. 607 and finally in No. 213 Fighter Squadron. It is said that Poles served in all RAF units. Together there was 39 out of 79 Polish pilots with at least one air victory (including probable destruction and damage) who served in non-Polish RAF squadrons.³⁹ Their combined score is 77 half certain and 35 probable kills, along with 29 damaged German airplanes at the cost of 19 pilots.⁴⁰

³⁵ Iwanowski, W. (1976), pp. 235–238; Król, W. (1990), pp. 62–65; Sojda, G. – Śliżewski, G. – Hodyra, P. (2016), pp. 343–388.

³⁶ Iwanowski, W. (1976), p. 236; Król, W. (1990), pp. 162–163.

³⁷ Ibidem, p. 254.

³⁸ For W. Urbanowicz see: Olson, L. – Cloud, S. (2003), *passim*.

³⁹ Sojda, G. – Śliżewski, G. – Hodyra, P. (2016), pp. 691–692.

⁴⁰ Iwanowski, W. (1976), p. 238.

Balance

There are several aspects that must be compared to understand the course of events within Czechoslovak and Polish RAF units. First, there are raw numbers and chronology. In the summer of 1940, there were some 900 Czechoslovak and 6500 Polish air force members in the British Isles, so Poles outnumbered Czechoslovaks by a factor of seven.

During the Battle of Britain, Czechoslovaks built three operational squadrons and Poles four, regardless of those pilots serving in other RAF units. But those Poles had the 'upper hand' over Czechoslovaks as they managed to have their agreement in the beginning of August, while Czechoslovaks needed to wait until October 25. The same applies to the pace at which the squadrons were built. Polish units were established from July 1 to 24 (or to August 2), while the terms of origin of Czechoslovak squadrons varies from July 26 until September 5 (or to October 8). Nevertheless, those were Czechoslovaks who as first took off for combat on July 26, 1940. The Poles were forced to wait until August 15, 1940.

All this means that Polish squadrons fought within the legal base of an international agreement. Czechoslovaks fought without any such document until nearly the end of the Battle of Britain.

Out of all seven Czechoslovak and Polish squadrons, three of them served as bomber units. In this aspect there was an important difference between both nations. Czechoslovak bomber squadrons were equipped with Vickers 'Wellington' medium bombers, which meant that its missions were substantially long-range raids that flew over the European continent, mostly over Germany. The primary weapon of both Polish units was the Fairey 'Battle' light bomber. This affected their missions, which is why the goal of Polish assaults targeted the shore of English Channel, in France and in Belgium. Together, Czechoslovaks carried out 250 operational hours, Poles 368, in both cases during the entire year of 1940.

As to the combat of fighter units, originally three of four squadrons (Nos. 302, 310, 312) were subordinated to No. 12 Group of Fighter Command, while only No. 303 Squadron began its operation within No. 11 Group; later, it was replaced by No. 302 Squadron. This means that while Czechoslovak units fought during the Battle of Britain in less exposed areas, Poles were deployed into the core of the combat. It is especially evident when No. 312 Squadron is taken into account, whose area of responsibility was above Liverpool, far from the area the main combats took place.

Together, Czechoslovak pilots numbered 56 confirmed and fifteen probable kills and ten damaged planes, some 81 victories in total (including J. František's). Their own losses consisted of 26 planes and nine pilots killed outside of those wounded and captured. In sheer numbers it gives ratio of 6.2 German planes to one killed Czechoslovak (compare below).

Poles, on the other hand, scored together 203 certain, 35 probable and 36 damaged planes, numbering 274 and a half victories in total (including J. František's). The cost on the Polish side was 33 dead. That means that loss of one Polish pilot was redeemed with 6.2 German airplanes; the same ratio even in decimal place is stunning.⁴¹ In comparison, RAF stated that one airplane of their own could shoot down three Luftwaffe planes before being lost; despite different methodology – counting not planes but men – there is obvious higher success rate of Poles (and Czechoslovaks).⁴² These results, however, had their limits due to fact that they rely on official statistics of the RAF. Nevertheless, the same framework at least enables an overall conclusion.

The fact that Czechoslovaks and Poles surpassed their British colleagues had its reasons. First, Czechoslovak and Polish pilots were a little bit older than their British colleagues and far more experienced.⁴³ Previous to their deployment in British airplanes, they operated number of types of planes within their national air forces that had none or very little radio and radar support. They were also trained for close combat and paid little attention to the British tactical doctrine, especially its inefficient 'V' formations. Even more, Czechoslovaks as well as Poles fought against the Luftwaffe prior to the Battle of Britain in Poland in 1939 and in France in 1939 and 1940.⁴⁴

There is one other aspect that is not particularly obvious. While Polish RAF units carried the traditions of the Polish Air Force units that were destroyed during September 1939, Czechoslovak squadrons were in fact built 'on a greenfield side', i.e. without any succession of Czechoslovak units.

During the Battle of Britain, RAF pilots achieved 2700 officially recognized kills (actually, it was ca. 1700). However, measuring the share of Czechoslovaks and Poles the result is that each 50th kill belongs to Czechoslovaks and each 13th to Poles. Together, it is one tenth of the total RAF effort.

⁴¹ The other sources claim 29 dead Polish pilots giving ratio 7 vs. 1.

⁴² Ibidem, p. 238.

⁴³ Rajlich, J. (2003). Několik poznámek k některým mýtům o československém letectvu 1939–1945 [Several Notes to Selected Myths about Czechoslovak Air Force 1939–1945]. In *Československá armáda 1939–1945 (Plány a skutečnost)*. Praha: Ministerstvo obrany ČR – AVIS, p. 105.

⁴⁴ Compare, e.g.: Olson, L. – Cloud, S. (2003), pp. 127–148.

Conclusion

Situation of Czechoslovaks and Poles in the United Kingdom and within the ranks of Royal Air Force was different regarding their political and legal positions and their numbers during the Battle of Britain; Poles outnumbered the Czechoslovak by a factor of seven, but managed to form four operational squadrons while Czechoslovak had three of them. Poles were, however, more intensively involved in the battle, numbering nearly four times as many kills. But the most important aspect is their effectiveness. Statistically speaking, both Czechoslovak and Poles held the same ratio pertaining to kills vs. own losses. This means that the quality of crewmen of both nations and their success was equal and, due to number of reasons, exceeded the RAF average.

For further research it must be stressed that there were not only Czechoslovak and Polish squadrons of RAF deployed during the Battle of Britain but also those of other nations, including Dutch, and later also Belgian, French, Greek, Norwegian, and Yugoslavian. That is why only a more complete context and comparison could properly evaluate the Czechoslovak contribution for defence of the British Isles.