

A WARTIME MEMORY

By

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A BÔNAU CABBAGE PATCH SUPPLEMENT



Editors Introduction:

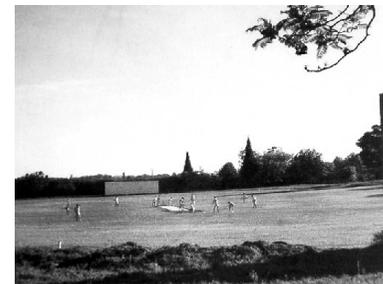
On June 8, 1946, the Allies celebrated their World War II success with the London Victory Parade without Polish colours flying and without Polish soldiers present. Among those attending was Abyssinia, Brazil, Persia, Mexico, Nepal and Luxembourg! Although the Poles had fought on the right side, they had lost. A few weeks after the Parade, "Poles go home" graffiti signs appeared on walls in Britain. In addition, the British press took an anti-Polish tone.

The Poles had no free democratic Poland to go back to, and they became an army of misfits in the political jigsaw puzzle that was Europe. Among them were thousands of Polish Air Force personnel - the fourth biggest Ally air force of the war. Still among them, were pilots who fought during the Battle of Britain, and undeniably helped to shift the balance for the British. To some extent, a certain amount of recognition and credit was bestowed upon them, but it was soon forgotten.

This memory of World War II by D Howell Rees may help re-address the balance.

In May 1941 the war was into its second year. It was a month that the world was astounded by the still inexplicable action of Rudolf Hess, Hitler's Deputy, in flying from Germany to crash in Scotland. It was the month that HMS Hood was blown out of the cold northern waters and obliterated by the German battleship Bismarck, which itself was sunk by British naval forces within days.

Those were just some of the events that dominated the May headlines and held the world's attention in those far off young days of our lives. I remember them well, despite the passing years. But one incident that occurred that month in 1941 stands out crystal clear to me from all the others.



It was a Saturday afternoon – the 17th May. I was at Stradey Park watching a cricket match, seated at the eastern boundary edge, facing towards Denham Avenue, and not far from the pavilion. As I recall, only a handful of spectators were present as the match continued its leisurely progress. Nothing disturbed the prevailing peaceful scene other than the crack of willow on leather ball, the calling of the batsman for a quick run, the scampering of the fieldsman.

Tranquillity reigned, but it was not to last. It was a peace that was about to be shattered with a terrifying, dramatic suddenness. Without warning, there was a roar of an engine, followed immediately by the sound of a loud bang and a flash of blinding light, just above and to my right. Before I had time to react and look to my right, speeding away from me, low over the cricket ground I saw an aeroplane. Then it rose slightly, its wings unsteady, clearing the roofs at Denham Avenue, still low in flight and disappeared from view westwards, towards Pwll.

The bang and flash of light had been caused by this disappearing aeroplane, having flown into the electricity power



cables which ran just on the eastern edge of the cricket ground, as they do to this day.

Naturally, there was a break in the cricket proceedings, whilst everyone gathered their somewhat shocked thoughts after such a dangerous interruption of the play.

Miraculously, no one had been injured as the result of the aeroplane striking the power cables or from falling debris from the aircraft, although some parts of its fuselage were found near the cricket sightscreen. Play subsequently resumed, but I did not stay to see the conclusion of the match, departing early to walk home. On arriving at Pwll, and passing Pwll Farm, located near the junction with Elgin Road and the main road I noticed some activity with people walking down past the farmhouse towards the railway and sidings, then situated just below the rear of Isfryn. I heard someone say that an aeroplane had crashed in the field (the present day cricket field) just beyond the railway sidings.

Naturally I went to see for myself. Sure enough, there was the aeroplane, a Hurricane, which I immediately recognised as the one I had seen earlier at Stradey. It was now grounded in the field close to the railway sidings and to the west of where used to be located the colliery slag tip. It was in a surprisingly intact condition bearing in mind its impact with the ground. It was said that the pilot, who I never saw, was a Pole and that on crashing he climbed out of the aircraft 'as cool as a cucumber'. "Just like stepping off a bus", as someone was heard to say.

Because of my witnessing the earlier incident at Stradey, this crashed aircraft was always of special interest to me. In writing this account I hoped to discover the actual reason for the crash and to identify the pilot, who displayed considerable skill in crash – landing in the limited space available to him. The result



of researches made has revealed the following information:

The pilot was F/Lt Wacław Wilczewski, born in Poland in 1908. He was a member of the Polish 316 Squadron stationed at RAF Pembrey. On the day of his flying accident at Pwll, he had been engaged on shipping escort and patrol duties, when he noticed his aircraft engine vibrating unusually strongly. He tried to reach his home base. However, when near Llanelni, the engine vibration increased and he looked for a landing spot. A sports field nearby could not be used on account of a number of people on it. He gained height and endeavoured to force-land in a small field, but saw it was impossible and had therefore to crash the aircraft at 70mph, on the right wing.

Thus did the 316 Squadron Operational Record Book log the incident. No mention of the aircraft striking the electric cables at Stradey. However, a further account recorded on the Aircraft Accident Record Report gives the following description of the accident: -

*"Hurricane No W9231.
Time: 1545 hrs
Date: 17.5.1941.
Squadron: 316 (Polish).
Place: Pwll.
Pilot: F/Lt W Wilczewski
Duty: Patrol Escort to Shipping
Nature of Accident: Attempted to get to base, but engine vibrations increased and was unable to do so. Struck wires looking for forced-landing field. Impossible to force-land aircraft. Crashed aircraft on one wing at 70mph."*

We have therefore, from the official records, the account of the occurrence. What they do not make clear, but which we know to be a fact, is that the distance

between the collision with electric cables at Stradey and the eventual crash site at Pwll is some 2 miles.

Contrary to reports circulating some months later, that the pilot F/Lt W Wilczewski had been killed in action, he survived the war.

The following are some details of F/Lt Wilczewski's career, which readers may find interesting.

He was a regular officer in the Polish Air Force holding the rank of Major before the war of 1939-45, participating in the September 1939 German campaign in Poland from 1st September 1939 to 19th September 1939 during which he made 35 operational flights. When the German campaign overran Poland he escaped across the Polish-Rumanian frontier, making his way to Paris, France via Yugoslavia and Italy. On arrival in Paris on the 9th October 1939 he joined the Polish Air Force under French Command and was posted to Le Bourget Airfield. After the surrender of France in June 1940, he was evacuated to the United Kingdom and posted to Gloucester, becoming a member of the Polish Air Force under British Command on 6th August 1940.

He served as a fighter pilot at numerous airfields in the United Kingdom during 1940 - 1941, joining the Polish 316 Squadron at RAF Pembrey on 23rd February 1941. He was promoted to Acting Squadron Leader and Commanding Officer at RAF Church Stanton in August 1941.



On 8th November 1941 he took part in a major operation, providing fighter escort to bombers making a daylight raid on a factory at Lille, Northern France. They were attacked by German aircraft and in the ensuing aerial combat S/Leader

Wilczewski was shot down and made a prisoner of war. He survived his period of 3½ years captivity, and at the conclusion of the war returned to the United Kingdom in June 1945.



Due to a gradual demobilisation of the Polish Forces under British Command, he was commissioned in the Polish Resettlement Corps/RAF, served in the UK until finally relinquishing his commission in August 1947 on his emigration to Venezuela.

He was the holder of the following Polish decorations:
Bronze Cross of Merit
Medal for 10 years service
Cross of Valour.



It is not known what became of Wacław Wilczewski after his emigration to South America, but after the wartime experiences he would surely have been looking forward with keen anticipation to a more quiet and uneventful life. He had served his country in its desperate dark hours of need and continued to do so after Poland's collapse against the German onslaught. After the turmoil of wartime action when he experienced its dangers at first hand, followed with his years of captivity by the enemy, it would be pleasing to think that all went well with him, and that he did indeed find a haven of peaceful existence, so richly earned, in far off Venezuela.

In compiling this account, I gratefully acknowledge the ready and generous assistance afforded me by Mr Steven Jones of Cwmafan, whose expertise in the field of Crashed Aircraft Research was of inestimable value, as was the unstinting aid given me by the staff of the Polish Archives Department in London.

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Editors Notes:

316 Squadron was formed at Pembrey on 15th February 1941 as a Polish fighter unit equipped with Hurricanes. It was engaged in defensive duties over southwest England until it was re-equipped with the Hurricane II and began sweeps over northern France. In October 1941 the squadron converted to Spitfires and moved to Northolt. After being transferred to Yorkshire at the end of July 1942, No.316 came south again in March 1943 for a further six months of offensive operations. In April 1944, Mustangs were received and the squadron moved to East Anglia for fighter-bomber and escort missions. In July it moved to the South coast to operate against flying bombs before resuming escort duties in October, which lasted for the rest of the war. On 11 December 1946, the squadron was disbanded

(The photographs used in this supplement are representational and do not necessarily reflect the true likeness of any individual or location mentioned in the text)

