

## **‘Telling Our Stories, Finding our Roots’: The Polish Night Fighter Squadron in Exeter, 1941- 1943.**

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### ***Acknowledgement.***

*I am deeply indebted to an Exeter local historian, Michael Parrott, for all his research on this subject. All the information that follows is derived from his book, Exeter’s Guardian Angels (2013) and his public talks, unless otherwise noted. Many thanks, Michael.*

Many of us know that Exeter was bombed during the Second World War but did you know that the night flights which protected the city between 1941 and 1943 were flown by Polish pilots?

Between those years a squadron of Polish airmen was stationed in Exeter. Many of the men had lodgings within the city itself, while the officers were based at Farrington House near the airport at Clyst Honiton.

A number of RAF squadrons flew out of Exeter Airport at the time, and among these were the airmen of ‘307 Lwow Squadron’. This night fighter squadron defended the city of Exeter when the German air force was deployed to bomb the ‘Baedeker Towns’ (those towns of cultural significance which were listed in the German Baedeker travel guide) in reprisal for the British bombing of the unprotected German port of Lubeck in 1941.

But who were these Polish pilots and how did they get here? To answer these questions I have turned to Michael Parrott’s book *Exeter’s Guardian Angels* which was published locally in 2013.<sup>1</sup> I am deeply indebted to Michael for all his research and all the information here is derived from the book or from his public talks.

Michael is an Exeter resident, and his enquiry about the Polish pilots was generated by spotting a plaque in the Higher Cemetery, Exeter, which commemorates Kazimierz E. F. Jaworski who had flown in the Battle for Arnhem in 1944 and lost his life in the air in this combat. Jaworski’s wife was an English woman, ‘Betty’ (née) Morris, who, in her later years, had arranged for a plaque to be displayed in her husband’s memory in Exeter. It has a partner plaque in Jaworski’s hometown in Poland. Kazimierz (or ‘Kazik’ as he was known) had met Betty when he was stationed in Exeter, and they had a son, Richard. Michael traced Richard and also discovered that Betty was alive and able to shed light in the story of the plaque. Michael then began to follow the story of the squadron that Jaworski had flown with and to uncover the history of the night fighters’ presence in Exeter.

Polish airmen had left their country (which included parts of present-day Lithuania and Ukraine) when German forces invaded in 1939. The pilots’ purpose was to continue in combat from outside Poland. They travelled under cover by many difficult and hazardous means, aiming for France. However, when Paris was occupied in May 1940, their new destination became Britain. To make the journey from France to England at the time was very dangerous, and many Poles travelled long distances, some even sailing to South and North

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<sup>1</sup> *Exeter’s Guardian Angels: The Story of the Polish 307 Squadron in Exeter.* Precious Moments Press, Exeter, 2013.

America, in order to take the risky Atlantic crossing to Britain, to present themselves for service.

At first the British did not realise the Poles' proficiency as pilots but as soon as their skills were recognised the RAF included them in the squadrons. The Polish servicemen were initially stationed in Blackpool in 1940 but then moved to Lincolnshire when a new team was formed under Squadron Commander Stanislaw Pietraszkiwicz. It was named the '307 (City of Lwow) Night Fighter Squadron'. The City of Lwow, (often known by the Russian spelling of Lvov, by the English) is now called Lviv and is part of independent Ukraine. It had become part of Western Ukraine in 1939 when the Red Army took control but it was occupied by Germany from 1941 until 1944 and was known as Lemberg; it later returned to Soviet rule until independence came in 1991. This cosmopolitan city coincidentally has the same motto as Exeter: *Semper Fidelis*.

The squadron operated from the Isle of Man, Cheshire, and Bristol before arriving in Exeter in April 1941. Many men found accommodation in Heavitree and Newtown. They would be taken to the airport by bus, with women at the wheel. Some of the men in the squadron got married and set up homes in Exeter. Some had children in the city in these years before the squadron was moved to Wales in 1943.

The night fighters' role was to defend the towns and coast of southwest England from enemy air attacks undertaken in darkness. The pilots covered the area from Plymouth to Dorset and up to South Wales as well as the Channel and the Channel Isles. They became known as the 'Night Owls' or the 'Lwow Eagle Owls' and an owl, a plane and a crescent moon were included in their emblem. Other airmen acknowledged the squadron members by mimicking the hooting call of an owl in their presence.

Flights were made in Defiants, Beaufighters and latterly in Mosquito aircraft. Although the Polish pilots were skilled, these planes were subject to technical failures and were often difficult to land if one engine failed. Many of the twenty-one service men who died during the squadron's time in Devon were killed as a result of such problems.

Radar was still a relatively new technology when the 307 Squadron came to Exeter, but it was available to support the RAF's work. Good night vision was also important and teamwork was essential. The night fighters flew in crews of two all over the southwest. When they returned from combat they would sometimes perform a barrel roll over the airport to indicate how many attacking planes had been defeated, before landing.

In their time off the pilots' camaraderie was apparent in the George and Dragon Pub in Clyst St. George where they wrote their signatures on the ceiling. (These ceiling panels were removed in the 1970s and they are now held by the Exmouth RAF Association.) Many social events were also arranged in the city and the pilots joined with Exeter's community to make new friendships and support each other through the war.

From 1941 Jerszy Antonowicz was the Squadron Leader but he suffered a fatal accident on landing at the Exeter airstrip in October. In November he was replaced by Wing Commander Stanislaw Brejnak and then Jan Michalowski took the position in July 1942. Michalowski was an experienced pilot and had flown in the Battle of Britain in 1940. He was popular and charismatic.



Squadron Leader Jan Michalowski, with his Alsatian, Barry.  
From Michael Parrott, *Exeter's Guardian Angels*, p. 107.



Jan Michalowski making a speech in front of Exeter Cathedral, before the presentation of the Polish flag to the Mayor of Exeter, 15th November 1942.  
From Michael Parrott, *Exeter's Guardian Angels*, p.111.

Michalowski was a significant member of a ceremony which took place on 15<sup>th</sup> November 1942 outside Exeter Cathedral, to acknowledge Exeter's gratitude to the 307 Squadron and the reciprocal friendship of Exeter and Lwow. The Bishop of Exeter dedicated a Polish flag, which had been blessed by the Polish chaplain, and then Wing Commander Michalowski presented it to the Mayor of Exeter. The Bishop and other dignitaries and clergy attended along with the squadron. The Mayor spoke of the squadron as Exeter's 'guardian angels' and pledged to keep the flag in Exeter's Guildhall in perpetuity.

The 307 Squadron had protected Exeter in the concentrated overnight bombing raids which began in April 1942. From 23<sup>rd</sup> to 29<sup>th</sup> April, German planes had attacked the city (although, as Parrott notes, this did not stop the 307 Squadron team playing football against the Exeter Home Guard at St James' Park on 29<sup>th</sup> April, - and winning 3:1). Then, on the night of 3<sup>rd</sup>/4<sup>th</sup> May the most intense attacks occurred. At just after 1 o'clock on the morning of 4<sup>th</sup> May, the radar operators based at Exminster reported thirty bombers on their way from Paris. Against these thirty Junkers, the night fighters had just three serviceable Beaufighters available at the time. However by two-thirty in the morning one Junker had crashed near Topsham cricket pitch and three had been shot down. There were a hundred and fifty-six deaths that night; the German crew members who died are buried alongside other servicemen in the Higher Cemetery in Exeter.

During the bombing, the Countess of Devon was giving birth to her son, Hugh Rupert, at Powderham Castle. Hugh is the eighteenth Earl of Devon. On his birthday the next year the squadron sent him a birthday greeting, with a 'diploma' and the 'Eagle Owls' squadron emblem.

The raids continued over the summer and it was reckoned that the Polish squadron had defeated five hundred planes by the end of 1942. The Secretary of State for Air, Sir Archibald Sinclair, sent the 'wonderful Polish Squadron' a message of appreciation after the Exeter blitz.

On 2nd April 1943 the squadron was moved to Swansea but a sad event preceded their departure. In March, Jan Michalowski attempted to raise the morale of those pilots who had become discouraged by the number of accidents resulting from the instability of the Mosquito planes. He tried to demonstrate how a successful landing could be managed despite having one engine disabled, but tragically his landing was disrupted by a strong gust of wind and his life was lost, along with that of his co-pilot, Stanislaw Szkop. The accident shocked the servicemen and many people of Exeter who held Michalowski in high regard. He is buried in the Higher Cemetery in Exeter and four hundred people attended the funeral on 23<sup>rd</sup> March, no long before the squadron left for Wales on 15<sup>th</sup> April 1943.

Although the 307 Squadron left Exeter nearly seventy years ago, Exeter wants to commemorate the Poles' protective role in the war, and to acknowledge the contribution the pilots made to the city. Thanks to Michael Parrott's research, a new annual event has been initiated with the Mayor of Exeter. On 15<sup>th</sup> November, (the date the ceremony took place in front of the Cathedral in 1942) a new Polish flag is now flown outside Exeter's Guildhall. Now known as '307 Squadron Day', this commemorative event allows the people of Exeter to share in an act of gratitude and appreciation for the commitment made to this city by friends from far away, who fought for Exeter and with Britain, for a common cause.

### **Postscript.**

Michael's connections with the Polish community continues to grow and in March 2014 he worked with others to form a non-profit organisation called '307 Squadron Project'. This project aims to further promote and research the squadron and will use both languages, Polish and English. The project has a website: [www.307squadron.org](http://www.307squadron.org).

See also <http://www.exeterexpressandecho.co.uk/Honouring-brave-Polish-pilots/story-17573779-detail/story.html#axzz2eWU21wZN>