

Hurricane & Dywizjon 303: Fact vs. Fiction

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Two WWII films about Squadron 303 hit cinema screens within a fortnight of each other. As we examine key plot points, we reveal which was the more accurate – and perhaps which was better.

One is a British-Polish production called **Hurricane** (Polish title: Bitwa o Anglię), and the other, **Dywizjon 303**, a Polish picture. Both were about Poles in the RAF during the Battle of Britain, and both claimed they were founded on fact. **Hurricane** had the larger budget – \$10,000,000 to **Dywizjon 303**'s \$4,000,000 – but the action differed in far more aspects than merely expensive special effects.

Spoiler alert: don't read if you haven't seen the films! Key plot details ahead...

Hurricane

1. Jan Zumbach stole a plane to escape to England

Hurricane began with the message that the film was 'based on fact', and quickly cut to a scene of [Jan Zumbach](#), played by renowned Welsh actor Iwan Rheon, using his Swiss passport to travel through occupied France. Under the noses of a group of relaxing German airmen, he succeeds in stealing a plane from an airfield and travelling to Britain.

Beyond the obvious suspicion about how Zumbach could possibly manage to pilfer a plane, of central concern here is the fact that Zumbach actually came across to Britain by boat in evacuation procedures. He definitely did nothing like that which is shown in the film and he probably didn't have a glove compartment full of watches either.

2. Gabriel Horodyszcz avoided shooting people



Gabriel Horodyszcz, photo: promo materials

Horodyszcz is shown establishing his own Catholic shrine in an air shelter and repeatedly refusing to shoot down the enemy, instead concentrating his efforts on prayer and morals. It seems unlikely that such an individual would have reached any combat efforts, let alone make the dangerous journey to Britain to fight with the RAF.

And such suspicions would be correct. The character of Gabriel Horodyszcz was an entirely fictitious figure intended to be a representation of, and tribute to, all Polish airmen. The sub-plot that leads to his 'reveal' – involving the [installation of small cameras](#) in the planes to monitor the guns – is also made-up.



Stefanie Martini as Phyllis Lambert (left), still from the film Hurricane: Squadron 303, photo: promo materials



3. Jan Zumbach had a romance with Phyllis Lambert

The character of Phyllis Lambert, played by Stefanie Martini, had personality, chutzpah and charm, and her relationship with Zumbach and career are given adequate screen time... but Phyllis wasn't actually real. Her ability to acquire banned nylon stockings to satisfy another love interest, Rollo, also seems far-fetched. 303 Squadron pilots, May 1942, RAF Northolt, photo: Wikimedia Commons

4. Josef František died on the cliffs of Dover One of the central – and real – characters is Josef František, who is shown running out of fuel and subsequently being killed when his plane careers into the white cliffs of Dover. In reality, František perished during a crash-landing in Ewell, Surrey – and, in any case, it seems unlikely that he would not recognise that his fuel supplies were depleting.

5. Zumbach watched the London victory parades from a hotel



Iwan Rheon as Jan Zumbach, photo: promo materials

The end of the film took the action immediately from battle scenes to an explicit reference to the true lack of any **Polish troops** in the London victory parades **after the war** was over. There was no mention of the fates of those in Squadron 303 for the remainder of the war, and no detail of their post-war fates aside from Zumbach, who was shown in London watching the ceremony and explaining for the audience’s benefit the situation of Poland and its Pyrrhic victory.

But in real-life, Zumbach was already back living in Switzerland at this point. And of course he never broke up with Phyllis Lambert in that hotel room since she never existed. What’s more, the reason he broke up with her – that she still loved Rollo, a British airman – makes us assume that Rollo was fictional too.

6. Other points of interest There were also historically inaccurate representations of daily experiences: on the roof of a London hotel, **Zumbach** gazes down at the dark city – with no lamps on in houses or streets due to the blackout – before he promptly lights his **cigarette** in an act that had, in real life, been banned by the government.

However, some elements of Polish experiences in the British airforce were accurate, specifically the details of their training. It has been well-documented that Polish airmen had to learn not only the English language but also how to operate different airplanes; the film touches on changes between kilometres and miles, and gallons and litres. There is also a scene showing a crash landing because the Polish pilot had failed to lower the wheels – the use of retractable landing gears was novel to Polish airmen, and so many others had faced similar issues.

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Dywizjon 303



Posters for the film Dywizjon 303, promo

Now we turn to the Polish production. Billed as the only film on the topic of Squadron 303 produced with the approval and support of the family of Arkady Fiedler, a journalist who personally witnessed and recorded action in the squadron – **Dywizjon 303** had a reputation of historical accuracy which it had to fulfil; but it never quite achieved the renown it promised.

1. Paszkiewicz only received reprimands for his training flight



Ludwik Paszkiewicz, Squadron 303 pilot, photo: public domain

Towards the beginning, Paszkiewicz’s training flight success was shown, though he was later seen called into a meeting with a number of British personnel, in which they refused to believe he had shot a Messerschmitt down, and instead rebuked his actions. It seems unlikely that he would have been reprimanded by at least five British superiors, and the lack of mention of the positive repercussions of his actions were decidedly fictitious.

At this point, we can’t help but mention that throughout **Dywizjon 303** the scenes with British officers were often lacking in accuracy – all the British characters, including a pub landlord, spoke in Received Pronunciation, whilst confidential discussions about the deteriorating successes of the RAF were given completely indiscreetly in the back of cars. British doubt of Polish competency was touched upon, though the constant referral to Polish officers and airmen as ‘Bloody Poles’ or ‘the Pole’ seems unrealistic.

2. The Poles relaxed listening to Mieczysław Fogg



There were also dubious scenes of frivolity in the Northolt airbase, when Polish airmen were pictured relaxing to the sound of [Mieczysław Fogg](#) records – it is highly unlikely that shellac would have survived being carried on the chaotic journey from Poland to Britain, which included the airmen escaping via Romania.

Poznan, Dec. 1969. Arkady Fiedler was signing his books in a bookshop of the International Press and Book Club. Pictured: the authograph-giving writer with his readers, photo: Zbigniew Staszyszyn/PAP

3. Jan Zumbach had a romance with Victoria Brown

Another relationship for Zumbach, and yet another that was completely fictional. There was no Victoria Brown, so pretty much every scene that relied on her presence as a plot point was plain false. That includes the British Major trying to use her to manipulate the Polish airmen into doing press photos – which they actually did as a result of multiple victories – and the scene where she and Zumbach watch a car explode on the road from an air raid... after driving towards it with their headlights on full-beam.

In any case, the focus on the coverage of Squadron 303 by the British press came as a catalyst for the romantic subplot, with Brown pretending to admire the airmen to satisfy her own career ambitions.

4. Urbanowicz knew German ace Wilhelm von Rüttenberg

One of the film's subplots involved Urbanowicz's friendship with a German fighter pilot, Wilhelm von Rüttenberg – who also didn't actually exist. There are reports that Urbanowicz knew some German pilots from the time he spent in Baden, but there are no records of their names, and certainly nothing on a party attended by Urbanowicz and his German acquaintances, as seen in the film.



A Supermarine Spitfire Mk.Vb, RF-D, flown by pilot Jan Zumbach (1915 - 1986) of the 303 Kosciuszko Polish Fighter Squadron of the Royal Air Force (RAF), World War II, circa 1943. The aircraft bears Zumbach's distinctive Donald Duck symbol, photo: Fox Photos/Hulton Archive/Getty Images

5. Other points of interest

The real triumph of **Dywizjon 303** was its battle scenes, which were accompanied by a dramatic soundtrack and accurately loud roar of the airplane engines, along with plenty of suspense. The fight scenes looked realistic rather than heavily animated – though the one dubious element was the lack of allied deaths in the film. But, where **Hurricane** had a balanced focus on dismal experiences, **Dywizjon 303** included little reference to any airmen losing battles; with the sole brief death being marked with the spontaneous singing of the [Polish national anthem](#) at a dinner party.



The 303 Polish Fighter Squadron In The Battle Of Britain, A group of pilots of No. 303 Polish Fighter Squadron RAF stand by the tail elevator of one of their Hawker Hurricane Mark Is at Northolt, Middlesex. They are (left to right): Pilot Officer Mirosław Ferić, Flying Officers Bogdan Grzeszczak, Pilot Officer Jan Zumbach, Flying Officer Zdzisław Henneberg and Flight-Lieutenant John Kent, who commanded 'A' Flight of the Squadron at this time, October 1940, photo: S.A. Devon/IWM via Getty Images

Digging deeper

As you may have guessed from the descriptions above, exaggeration of historical detail was a feature throughout **Hurricane**, which tended to focus more on the elaborate life of the pilots away from the air, rather than combat scenes. The British disbelief in the Polish pilots' skills – whilst true – was drawn out, and even when the squadron became operational, there was an elaborate and unrealistic [vodka party](#) the night before the first battle (we didn't list that above mainly because we couldn't disprove it, but it seems highly unlikely to have occurred).

Zumbach was the face of the British-Polish film, though the experiences of individual characters were told in depth, with specific stories generally keeping to facts. The fighter ace Witold Urbanowicz, who had achieved success in [other RAF squadrons](#) before 303, arrived to the cheers of his compatriots, and, later in the battle, there was an accurate portrayal of Zdzisław Krasnodębski suffering life-changing burns in an air accident. The story of the origins of Squadron 303 were also veritable: in this film, Paszkiewicz was pictured shooting down a Messerschmitt in a training fight, which – as was the case in reality – earned him first condemnation from his superiors, but also commemoration, and sparked a British trust in Polish airmen. Nonetheless, some artistic license was employed with characterisation.

Overall, the film attempted to stick close to fact, but the needs of dramatic action often swayed the plot into fictitious and occasionally unrealistic narratives.



Włodzimierz Chojnacki, photo: archive

As for **Dywizjon 303**'s attempts at realistic narratives, the combat scenes were the most accurate, whilst individual storylines fell by the wayside. Training – as in **Hurricane** – featured scenes of Polish pilots having their eyes tested; but where, in the British-Polish production, complications arising from language barriers were humorous, the difficulties of Polish adjustment to British aircraft was only brief in **Dywizjon 303**, though the [use of French instead of English](#) by airmen was a nice accurate touch.

That being said, it featured odd radio broadcasts with presenters who had American accents and, again, repeated smoking or using headlights in the blackout. It seems the small details varied in their veracity.



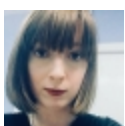
Witold Urbanowicz, Squadron 303 pilot, photo: Wikimedia Commons

However, Urbanowicz himself noted in his autobiography that Fiedler often exaggerated his narrative – if the basis for the film was inaccurate, then the film's promise that was based on that book would certainly demand it some exaggeration itself.

Nonetheless, characterisation was still relatively accurate, despite a lack of individual storylines. The Czech František, for example, was explicitly and truthfully referred to as Polish, the way he identified himself. The end of the film also referenced Fiedler's book and individual members of the squadron, though the end of the action was still within the midst of the Battle of Britain, and there was no coverage of

the rest of the war or post-war, which left one with a lack of closure. The closest it came to an ending was when Squadron 303 met King George VI, an event that really did happen, although it's hard to corroborate what was said. Either way, the rousing words the King of England spoke in the script were at least a positive note to end on, and certainly his signing of the squadron's diary – which Arkady used to support his accounts – was factual.

So in summary, both films only give a sense of the real story of Squadron 303, and cannot help themselves but tinker with truth. This is ultimately to be expected when translating a true story into the medium of cinema as audiences have certain expectations and plots need to hit certain notes to satisfy them. That being said, neither film is likely to win many dramatic awards, even with these embellishments, although **Hurricane** is slightly more nuanced, showing more of the tragic side of war. But when it comes down to it, compared to **Hurricane**, the Polish-only film really prided itself on technical detail rather than historical – so if you are a fan of airplanes, and we're sure that many viewers will be, then **Dywizjon 303** is probably the film for you.



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