



Flight
Lieutenant
Michał Karol
Maciejowski
DFC, DFM



HERO *of the* MONTH

by Lord Ashcroft

IMAGE COURTESY OF LORD ASHCROFT

A NUMBER OF 249 SQUADRON HURRICANES SCRAMBLE IN OCTOBER 1940, AROUND THE TIME THAT MACIEJOWSKI JOINED THE SQUADRON AND SCRAMBLED IN HIS PYJAMAS!
G PERRIN



“He was involved in what he called an ‘embarrassing moment’ when he scrambled at 5am still in pyjamas”

I have long had huge admiration for the Polish servicemen who fought with Britain and its allies to try and regain their homeland during World War Two. Scores of these brave men served with the RAF having already learnt to fly with the Polish Air Force prior to their country being invaded by Nazi Germany in September 1939.

Few Poles serving in the RAF between 1939 and 1945 were more courageous or more skillful than Michał Maciejowski, diminutive in stature but a formidable opponent in the skies. Affectionately known as ‘Mickey Mouse’ by his British comrades, because they struggled to pronounce his surname, he was awarded both the Distinguished Flying Medal and the Distinguished Flying Cross during a dazzling wartime career. Furthermore, I am delighted to say that I am the proud custodian of this wonderful man’s gallantry and service medals.

Michał Karol Maciejowski is believed to have been born in Poland in the town of Gródek Jagdowski on October 29, 1913.

After he finished his secondary education, his family moved to Poznań, where he entered St Mary Magdalene College, graduating in 1931. He then enrolled in the Department of Chemistry of the University of Poznań while carrying out flying training in the Polish Air Force Reserve.

Maciejowski was mobilised in August 1939 and posted to the 3rd Aviation

Regiment but apparently did not fly operationally due to a shortage of aircraft.

After serving as an instructor, he was transferred to a bomber squadron. In late 1939, during the fall of Poland, he was ordered to fly to Romania to escape detention by the Germans. There, he was interned for a short time before travelling by sea to Syria, arriving in January 1940. Another ship took him to Marseilles in



MICHAŁ KAROL MACIEJOWSKI VIA ANDREW THOMAS

southern France and from there he was sent to the Polish air base at Lyons for posting to a fighter squadron.

However, before France itself fell in June 1940, he flew to Britain and was soon posted to RAF Eastchurch, Kent. His initial brief was to learn English and familiarise himself with British aircraft.

Remarkable contribution

Experienced RAF pilots were initially cautious of their Polish counterparts, fearing they would not be up to the job.

Flight Lieutenant ‘Johnny’ Kent, who was posted to 303 (Polish) Fighter Squadron during the Battle of Britain, summed up the feeling of many in his memoirs: “All I knew about the Polish Air Force was that it had only lasted about three days against the Luftwaffe, I had no reason to suppose that they would shine any more brightly operating from England.”

His opinion of them soon changed.

It was shortly after arriving in Britain that Maciejowski became known as ‘Mickey Mouse’, a name that stuck and was particularly apt given he was only 5ft 4ins tall.

In September 1940, after training on Hurricanes, Maciejowski was posted to 111 Squadron at North Weald, Essex, and in October 1940 was transferred to 249 Squadron. On October 15 he was involved in what he later called an “embarrassing moment” when he could

not find his trousers as he scrambled at 5am still dressed in his pyjamas. After a dogfight over Kent, his engine failed and he later wrote: "I glided toward mother earth and landed in a meadow near an army barracks. A few farmers and army personnel came and thought that I was a German pilot in a stolen Hurricane. With my command of pidgin English, I made myself understood and gave them my squadron number and airfield.

"We became friends when it was confirmed I was a Polish pilot. Later that afternoon the mechanic fixed whatever was wrong – I took off and was on duty with the same aircraft the same day."

As indicated, Maciejowski's efforts were only a small part of the contribution by Polish airmen. A total of 145 experienced and battle-hardened Poles fought in the Battle of Britain: 79 in various RAF squadrons; 32 in 302 (Polish) Fighter Squadron; and 34 in 303 (Polish) Fighter Squadron.

One of the finest examples of their work was a remarkable feat accomplished by Sergeant Antoni Glowacki, 501 Squadron.

On August 24, he claimed five enemy aircraft shot down in three sorties during the one day, thus becoming one of only three pilots believed to have achieved "ace-in-a-day" status during the Battle of Britain.

Maciejowski's exploits in the air also left a favourable impression: he claimed a Bf 109 destroyed on October 29, another one on November 7, together with two probables the same day and another probable on November 28.

He ended the year with a fourth probable on December 5, followed by



A HURRICANE MK.I OF 317 (POLISH) SQUADRON IN 1941, WHICH MACIEJOWSKI JOINED EARLY THAT YEAR. THESE POLISH PILOTS ARE, FROM L TO R: SGT BRONISŁAW KOŚCIK, S/LDR HENRYK SZCZESNY, W/CDR STANISŁAW BRZEZINA, UNKNOWN, AND P/O WIKTOR SZULC R GRETZNEVER

the confirmed destruction of two Bf 109s on January 10 and February 10, 1941.

Cross of Valour

Upon the formation of 317 (Polish) Squadron on February 22, 1941, Maciejowski was posted to the unit where he claimed a probable Ju 52 on May 22.

Maciejowski was awarded the Polish Cross of Valour and Bar on April 1, 1941, and a second Bar to the award on July 15, together with the DFM on October 30.

The latter was based on the recommendation of Wing Commander F V Beamish, of RAF North Weald, Essex, which stated: "This Pilot NCO

has proved to be a cool and determined fighter pilot who always shows a calm yet extremely resolute intention of destroying the enemy. His courage and example are admired by all ranks. He has destroyed five enemy aircraft besides damaging several others."

There were still many more adventures to come. On December 30, 1941, he claimed two Bf 109s destroyed and on May 5, 1942, he was awarded the Virtuti Militari (5th class). In June 1942, Maciejowski was commissioned, and he saw heavy action over Dieppe on August 19, claiming a Ju 88 and an Fw 190 destroyed and a Do 217 shared destroyed.



MACIEJOWSKI'S MAIN MEDAL GROUP: POLISH VIRTUTI MILITARI (5TH CLASS), POLISH CROSS OF VALOUR (WITH THREE BARS), DFC, DFM, 1939-45 STAR (WITH BATTLE OF BRITAIN CLASP), ATLANTIC STAR (WITH FRANCE AND GERMANY CLASP) DEFENCE MEDAL, WAR MEDAL 1939-45 AND HIS GSM (WITH SOUTH ARABIA CLASP). HIS CATERPILLAR CLUB MEMBERSHIP BADGE IS ALSO INCLUDED
COURTESY OF LORD ASHCROFT



MACIEJOWSKI'S COMMEMORATIVE AWARDS: POLISH AIR FORCE ACTIVE SERVICE MEDAL, (WITH THREE BARS), POLISH WAR MEDAL 1939, POLISH ARMED FORCES IN THE WEST, MILITARY ACTION CROSS (WITH BATTLE OF BRITAIN AND AIR FORCE WAR OPERATIONS CLASPS), FRENCH VOLUNTEER COMBATANT'S CROSS, FRENCH COMMEMORATIVE WAR MEDAL 1939-45 (WITH CHANNEL, ATLANTIC AND GERMANY CLASPS) COURTESY OF LORD ASHCROFT

“He was forced to bale out and suffered his only injury of the war: part of his ear was torn off and then frostbite set in”

On August 25, he was posted to 58 Operational Training Unit Grangemouth, Stirlingshire, Scotland, as an instructor.

Maciejowski was awarded a third Bar to his Cross of Valour and the DFC on November 15. The latter was based on the recommendation of Group Captain A S Adnams, of RAF Northolt, Middlesex: “This officer fought with an English Squadron in the Battle of Britain and then joined his present squadron. Recently commissioned, he was the outstanding victor of the Polish Wing in operations over Dieppe on August 19, 1942.”

“In this operation he brought his personal score up to 9½ enemy aircraft destroyed and one probably destroyed, by the destruction of an enemy bomber and an enemy fighter aircraft, sharing in the destruction of a further enemy bomber.”

“Since the award of the DFM, he has destroyed a further 4½ enemy aircraft, and has at all times shown the greatest determination to engage and destroy the enemy.”

Maciejowski returned to operational flying on March 23, 1943, joining 316 Squadron at Northolt. He probably destroyed an Fw 190 and damaged another on May 4 and on June 11 he destroyed a Bf 109. Having survived every encounter with enemy aircraft, he was, ironically, finally brought down over Occupied France in a mid-air collision with a fellow pilot on August 9.

He was forced to bale out at 23,000ft and suffered his only injury of the war: part of his ear was torn off and then frostbite set into the wound.

The Spitfire of the other pilot, Flying Officer Lech Kondracki, broke up as it dropped from the skies and the airman,

unable to open his parachute in time, was killed.

Chockful of guts

Maciejowski was taken POW and held at Stalag Luft III, where he took part in tunnelling for the ‘Great Escape.’ He was not, however, one of those who exited the tunnel and was instead repatriated in May 1945 after Germany surrendered.

The Pole was a real character and, in their book about Stalag Luft III, *Escape to Danger*, Paul Brickhill and Conrad Norton devoted a chapter to him. They wrote: “The nickname Mickey Mouse was remarkably apt because it conveyed all the sense of a diminutive knight errant, chockful of guts, skill and a puckish, appealing wit – which was Mickey all over. He was a bare 5ft 4ins, topped by a close-fitting cap of dark, wiry hair, and built like a baby tank, sprouting knotty muscles from hefty shoulders and slightly bandy legs... his fighting career was quite spectacular until a stroke of fiendish luck put him behind the wire.”

Although Maciejowski’s wartime flying ended on August 9, 1943, he still emerged as one of Poland’s highest scoring aces of the war. All of his “kills” were made while operating from Britain.

Maciejowski returned to flying duties in June 1945 and attended a refresher course at 16 Flying Training School, Newton, Nottinghamshire. From there, he was posted on November 11 to 309 Squadron based at RAF Coltishall, Norfolk, and remained with the squadron until it was disbanded on January 6, 1947.

Unlike many of his fellow Polish pilots, Maciejowski did not return to his homeland. Instead, he settled in Britain,

changing his name to “Michael Manson”. After the war, he wrote of his early days flying with the RAF: “What I remember most of those days was fast-flowing adrenaline, scores of eager young men, some boys of bigger hearts than their awareness of the danger of a short life, quiet sadness and continuity of efforts and purpose of those who survived.”

He re-joined the RAF in June 1951 and flew as a test pilot until, in 1958, he was ruled too old to fly. However, the RAF remained loyal and offered him ground duties: he chose catering because he “wanted to learn to cook”. In 1963, he formally transferred to the catering branch and three years later he was put in charge of supply in Aden during the troubles there. By 1970, he was running the RAF Transit Hotel in Malta.

Michał Maciejowski retired at the rank flight lieutenant in 1972 and, soon after, emigrated to Winnipeg, Canada, where he enjoyed a full and happy retirement.

He died on April 26, 2001, aged 87. What a life, what a man. ●

HEROES OF THE SKIES



Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. His book *Heroes of the Skies* was published in 2012 and is available in hardback and paperback. For more information, visit www.heroesoftheskies.com.

Lord Ashcroft’s VC and GC collection is on public display at the Imperial War Museum, London. For more information, visit iwm.org.uk/heroes and details about his VC collection may be found at lordashcroftmedals.com. For more information on Lord Ashcroft’s work, visit lordashcroft.com. For Lord Ashcroft’s work on gallantry, visit lordashcroftonbravery.com. Follow him on Twitter and/or Facebook @LordAshcroft.

