

Greater Poland Uprising 1918-1919

<https://greaterpolanduprising.eu/pwe/history/insurgent-troops/3339,Greater-Polands-Military-Air-Force-in-1919-1921.html>
23.04.2024, 12:33

Greater Poland's Military Air Force in 1919-1921

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On 27 December 1918, the Greater Poland Uprising broke out. The insurgents occupied the most important locations in Poznań relatively quickly. However, a place of crucial significance, namely the Poznań-Ławica Air Base, with approximately 200 soldiers and aviation equipment that might be used against the

uprising, remained in German hands. There was also the risk that the aeroplanes would get evacuated to Frankfurt-on-Oder. In agreement with the Staff, on 5 January 1918 Sergeant Pilot Wiktor Pniewski attempted to start negotiations with the Germans, who rejected the proposition of capitulation. On 6 January 1918, insurgent forces of nearly 400 people, commanded by Second Lieutenant Andrzej Kopa, marched towards Ławica. They were composed of three companies of the 1st Battalion of the Guard and Security Service led by Second Lieutenant Bronisław Piniński, two cannons commanded by Second Lieutenant Kazimierz Nieżychowski, a mounted riflemen platoon commanded by Sergeant Major of Cavalry Jan Kalinowski and a voluntary unit of the Polish Military Organisation of the Prussian Partition commanded by Jan Kalinowski. A special group of aviators whose task was to protect the aeroplanes from any German attempts at destroying them was commanded by Sergeant Pilot Józef Mańczak. To prevent the Germans from blowing up the warehouse in the nearby Fort VII, where aerial bombs were stored, the main electric wire was cut off, and at 06:00 am the soldiers took their positions for attack. Envoys were sent with the proposition for the Germans to surrender, but it was rejected. At 06:25 am, the attack started with a feigned strike by the mounted riflemen, the purpose of which was to draw the opponents' attention from the main direction of the attack. The fight lasted merely 20-30 minutes, and the inaccurate shooting of the German machine guns did not cause great losses among the attacking groups. The action ended with two accurate shots fired by the Polish

artillery - they hit the barracks and the airport tower, which finally forced the defendants to give up. Approximately 26 - 30 aeroplanes in good technical condition were seized. On the same day, a Zeppelin hangar, which housed over 200 airframes of different types, some without engines, was also occupied. It became clear that the Germans treated Poznań as their reserve air base, because of their achievements on the Eastern Front of the First World War, which had ended with a quick march of German forces deeper within Russia, thus postponing the risk of a Russian attack. The city was also too distant from the Western Front, which is why the local air force facility played a minor role. The situation had its advantage - it was a warehouse for equipment.

Immediately after occupying the air base, organisation of the Polish military air force started. Sergeant Wiktor Pniewski became the station's first commander. Initially - from February to May 1919 - four squadrons (two intelligence squadrons and two with fighter squadrons) were created, and in April 1920 a fifth one, a bomb squadron, was formed. The 1st Aviation Company, which served as an aviation school, was also established. Its students were taught aviation according to German training patterns. Its first commander was Sergeant Józef Mańczak, and later, from June 1919, Second Lieutenant Pilot Ludwik Piechowiak.

The 1st Greater Poland Air Force Squadron

On 12 February 1919, General Gustaw Macewicz

gave the organisational order and on the next day, the formation of the 1st Greater Poland Air Force Squadron commenced. It was led by Pilot Wiktor Pniewski, who had been promoted to the rank of second lieutenant. By way of decree, the Supreme People's Council introduced a simplified procedure for granting officer ranks to aviators from Greater Poland and, at the same time, to former soldiers of the Prussian army, which practically lacked officers as a result of the German policy to avoid promoting Poles to this rank. This was one reason underlying the conflict between the second commander of the uprising – General Józef Dowbor-Muśnicki, and the Greater Poland residents, because in the absence of officers, he appointed his own officers from outside the region as leaders and commanders. The simplified promotion procedure was applied from 7 February to the autumn of 1919. By the summer of 1919, nearly a dozen veterans of the German air force had become second lieutenants. According to the official manning project, a squadron was to comprise 6 pilots, 4 observers, 2 riflemen, 20 non-commissioned officers and 115 privates of different specialisations. The fundamental armament was composed of 10 German, two-seater, multipurpose air planes of various types: Albatros C.V and C.VII, as well as models DFW C.V and AEG C.IV, equipped with machine guns and adapted to carrying light bombs.

In early March 1919, the Ukrainian offensive started on the eastern borders of Poland. Rail communication through Lviv and Przemyśl was broken, cutting off the soldiers defending Lviv

from the rest of the country. The Polish units were surrounded in the Lviv -Horodok area. The only chance for help was to receive air reinforcements. That is why on 14 March 1919, the 1st Greater Poland Air Force Squadron - composed of 5 aviators, 4 observers, 156 soldiers and 7 planes - was sent from Ławica to the Ukrainian front. The unit's tasks included: air surveillance, including taking pictures from the air and bomb attacks on enemy ammunition warehouses and command posts, as well as strikes on the Ukrainian positions. The squadron's action that went down in history in April 1919 was its operation code-named "Jazda" [Cavalry], the purpose of which was to occupy broader areas to carry out the offensive. The squadron fought as part of the 2nd Air Force Group equipped with 23 aeroplanes in total. The group was composed of the 9th Intelligence Squadron, the 5th Intelligence Squadron and the 1st Greater Poland Air Force Squadron. The group was commanded by Captain Pilot Camillo Perini. In terms of tactics, the group was subordinated to the command of General Waław Iwaszkiewicz's army. The 1st Squadron fought to the great benefit of the Greater Poland Land Forces commanded by Colonel Daniel Konarzewski. Meanwhile, it also carried out long reconnaissance for the army's command. With the movement of the front further towards east, the base of the squadron was moved initially to Medyka, and later to Stryi. After the first series of tasks and the liberation of the eastern part of the Lesser Poland region, on 10 June 1919, the squadron returned to Poznań. The Supreme People's Council honoured its military

achievements during the Polish-Ukrainian campaign. From then on, a badge with an eagle and an inscription saying "For the Defence of the Eastern Borderlands" was placed on the squadron's planes. Due to the growing tension along the demarcation line with Germany, the squadron returned to the front in Greater Poland. Although the day of the signing of the peace treaty in Paris was drawing closer, the Germans did not want to consent to the loss of Greater Poland, putting the allied countries under threat of attack. The 1st Squadron stayed at the airport in Wojnowice near Buk until September 1919. Its activity was limited to air reconnaissance.

In September 1919, the 1st Squadron was once again moved to the east, to Babruysk. On 14-16 September, it started assaults on the Lithuanian and Belarusian front, supporting the efforts of the 1st Greater Poland Rifle Division and cooperating with artillery in determining targets for attack. Solidification of the front line away from Babruysk allowed for a change in the unit's tasks, which now focused on reconnaissance operations at the rear of the Bolshevik armies. In the autumn and winter of 1919, the situation on the front forced a change in the military operations of the unit, which temporarily became more of a bombing unit than an observation squadron. The bombing raids were targeted at communication nodes and supply lines, as well as Bolshevik armoured trains. Nearly 6000kg of aviation bombs were dropped on Zhlobin and Rahachow railway stations.

Second Lieutenant Wiktor Pniewski, the commander, returned to Poznań due to illness. On

2 January 1920, command was taken over by Lieutenant Observer Maksymilian Kowalewski, and on 3 March by Captain Pilot Władysław Jurgenson. With the appointment of a new commander, the unit's name was changed to the 12th Air Force Squadron, and shortly afterwards to the 12th Intelligence Squadron. From then on, the squadron provided air support to the operations of the 14th Greater Poland Infantry Division, particularly in the battle of Śacilki, where it assaulted the enemy's infantry and cooperated with the artillery. Commander Captain Władysław Jurgenson's plane was shot down by the Soviets in an air battle. The commander was taken into captivity by the Bolsheviks and executed. Lieutenant Pilot Witold Rutkowski took over his duties as commander of the 12th Squadron.

The rapid course of attacks by Bolshevik units forced the Polish army to retreat. The squadron was withdrawn in stages, which ensured that there always was a group of planes ready for action. Together with the 14th Greater Poland Infantry Division, the unit went to the region of Białystok. Then it moved on its own to Warsaw, and was assigned to the command of the 5th Army of General Władysław Sikorski. During that time, the squadron carried out tasks to the Army's benefit, defending the capital from the north, in the Mława - Działdowo region. It was a particularly difficult period in the history of the unit, which suffered immense losses.

After a decisive battle of Warsaw in August, the 12th Squadron commenced bombing runs on the retreating Bolshevik forces. The front started to

move again to the east, and the opponent's armies were tirelessly pursued. As the Polish Armed Forces managed to occupy Białystok, the squadron was moved to the Markowszczyzna airport and assigned to the 2nd Army of the PAF. The Unit took part in battles on the Niemen River and the occupation of Grodno and Lida, where it finally stayed. After the cease-fire, in November 1920 the squadron was moved to Wilanów near Warsaw. It never returned to Ławica. In 1921, it became part of the newly-formed 1st Air Force Regiment in Warsaw.

The 2nd Greater Poland Air Force Squadron

On 14 February, the formation of the 2nd Greater Poland Air Force Squadron started in Ławica. The squadron was commanded by Rittmeister Pilot Tadeusz Grochowalski. Its equipment, including German two-seat Halberstadt CL.II and CL.V aeroplanes, and an Albatros D.III fighter plane, came from the unit's own resources. The squadron also had mechanised and horse-drawn vehicles and repair and servicing facilities at its disposal.

In early April 1919, the squadron, commanded by Second Lieutenant Edmund Norwid-Kudło, was sent to the Southern Front in Greater Poland. It was based in the airport in Klęka near Nowe Miasto, with its operations being mostly reconnaissance flights for the Greater Poland Armies along the border threatened by the hostile actions of Grenzschutz units, and propaganda flights outside the Silesian demarcation line. In the period preceding the outbreak of the first

Silesian uprising, the unit dropped leaflets addressed to the Poles living in Upper Silesia. The squadron's operations were subordinate to Central Command in Poznań. On 10 June 1919, the 2nd Squadron was moved under Kruszwica to perform air reconnaissance along the Bydgoszcz - Nakło - Piła line. At that time, the issue of annexing Pomerania to Poland awaited settlement. After the ratification of the provisions of the treaty of Versailles by the Parliament of the Polish Republic on 31 July 1919, the task was considered completed. In the meanwhile, support was needed on the Lithuanian and Belarussian Front. On 4 August 1919, the unit was transported to Maladzyechna, and on 6 August it commenced its operations with a bombing raid on the railway station in Minsk, seriously damaging its infrastructure and rolling stock. As a result of the bombing, two steam locomotives were destroyed, railway tracks were damaged in several places and a Soviet armoured train was destroyed. This action allowed the Polish infantry to seize the enemy's rolling stock two days later.

After the occupation of Minsk by Polish units, bombing raids were conducted on Babruysk, which, as soon as it was occupied, became another base for the squadron. At the break of autumn and winter of 1919-1920, the unit's actions, including reconnaissance flights and bombings, supported the 4th Army of General Stanisław Szeptycki, and the operations of the 1st Greater Poland Infantry Division - the squadron destroyed armoured trains and bridges along the Babruysk - Zhlobin railway line. At the end of February, the unit replaced its former planes with

Albatros D.III (Oeffag) planes, and in April 1920 it changed its name to the 13th Fighter Squadron. Despite being a fighter squadron, the unit's main tasks, due to the lack of enemy fighters, were still reconnaissance flights and bombings, with a few exceptions. The aviators were excellent in battle, which they proved a number of times, for instance on 17 April 1920, when they bombed a flotilla on the Berezina River and an artillery post. In spite of the hurricane-like anti-aircraft defence fire, the squadron managed to drop 600 kg of bombs. Some of the crews had to do two runs.

The main task during the retreat was to delay the Soviet attack, to destroy river crossings with air assaults and, at the same time, to protect the retreating Polish armies. In this period of greatest threat to the capital, the squadron operated from the airport in Siekierki near Warsaw, being assigned to the 5th Army of General Władysław Sikorski. The passiveness of enemy air force allowed the squadron to engage in shock and reconnaissance actions, mainly in the Pułtusk - Nasielsk - Ciechanów region.

During the retreat of the Bolsheviks from near Warsaw, the squadron's actions delayed the march of the Russians from the regions of Włocławek and Płock, and were directed against Gai-Khan's 3rd Cavalry Corps. When the front moved east and the Polish Army occupied Białystok, the 13th Squadron was moved to Dojlidy, where it was incorporated into General Edward Rydz-Śmigły's 2nd Army. During the battles for Grodno, the squadron covered the crossing of its own armies, carrying out air assaults within the town and in the Indura -

Odelsk area. In October, when the unit was in Grodno, the armistice was signed.

The 3rd Greater Poland Air Force Squadron

On 6 March 1919, the formation of the 3rd Greater Poland Air Force Field Squadron started under the supervision of Rittmeister Pilot Tadeusz Grochowalski. Shortages in equipment and men, resulting from the creation of the former two squadrons, allowed for the equipping of only 6 aeroplanes to the unit. On 4 June 1919, the squadron, commanded at that time by Lieutenant Colonel Marek Krzyczkowski, was moved to the airport in Góra near Jarocin. The uncertain situation directly preceding Germany signing the peace treaty required the allied countries to stay alert, especially as the daily number of armed incidents was growing. The main tasks of the 3rd Squadron were reconnaissance flights and a propaganda campaign (leaflet dropping) in Upper Silesia. Air reconnaissance was of particular significance at that time. Knowing the enemy's movements over the southern border of Greater Poland, the opponents' places of concentration and regrouping directions gave the possibility of preparation of effective defence of the most vulnerable sections of the front.

Then, under the command of Second Lieutenant Józef Mańczak, the 3rd Squadron was moved to the east, replacing the withdrawn 1st Greater Poland Air Force Squadron, and fought as part of the Group of Greater Poland Armies led by General Daniel Konarzewski. In July, the military operations carried out by the squadron included

reconnaissance flights and raids on communication lines in the rear areas of the front. In August, the squadron, operating from an airport in Berezhnytsia near Ternopil, carried out many bombing raids, which resulted in the destruction of the Tschebmelovka railway station taken by the Bolsheviks. On 19 August 1919, the unit returned to Greater Poland, to the airport in Buk, but in the second half of October 1919 it was sent to the Lithuanian and Belarusian Front (airport in Zhodino). Due to the severe weather conditions in the autumn and winter of 1919-1920, its tasks were carried out in a limited scope. They included long reconnaissance and directing the artillery fire of the 2nd Legions Infantry Division by radio communication.

In spring, the unit's name was changed to the 14th Intelligence Squadron. At the same time, bombing operations got more intense and so effective that the Soviets sent a fighter group commanded by one of their best fighter aviators, Alexei Shirinkin, to that area.

It should be noted that the task of the 14th Squadron was extremely difficult - it was notoriously disrupted by the actions of Soviet planes, and the spring/summer period was particularly abundant in air battles. In July, the squadron was withdrawn - as part of a general retreat - to Baranavichy, then by rail to Białystok. It reached Poznań on 1 August. The planes were, however, so worn out that the unit was unable to take any further part in battles. On 23 August, when the equipment was replenished, the unit was once again sent to the east, where it took part in operations against the retreating enemy.

Its bases were in the airports of Lublin, Chełm and Lutsk.

After the cease-fire, the squadron was moved to Grudziądz. Then, following its merger with the 21st Destroyer Squadron, under the name 14th Intelligence Squadron it became part of the newly-formed 2nd Air Force Regiment in Cracow. In October 1921, the unit, with its equipment severely worn out, was transported by rail to the airport in Rakowice, while its staff was accommodated in the Karol Chodkiewicz barracks in Prądnik Czerwony.

The 4th Greater Poland Air Force Squadron

The 4th Greater Poland Fighter Squadron, the formation of which started on 25 May 1919, commanded by Lieutenant Pilot Jerzy Dziembowski, had a number of candidates for aviators to choose from. In terms of equipment, its situation was nearly hopeless, owing to the lack of spare planes, which had earlier been sent to units from Cracow, Lviv and Warsaw, and which had been used to replenish losses on the front. The decision was made, however, to start the training of four pilots on three planes: a Fokker D.VII, Fokker E.V and Albatros D.III.

In February 1920, as a consequence of Poland taking control of Pomerania, the 4th Squadron was moved to Bydgoszcz, while in April, having been equipped with Fokker D.VII planes, it was directed to the region of Podolia. It made it there on 16 May, choosing the airport near Vapniarka as its base. Despite it being a fighter unit, it had

to carry out bombings and air assaults due to the passivity of the enemy's fighter planes. The need to destroy Soviet supply lines, artillery posts and armoured trains forced such improvisations. The attacks on the armoured trains at Malovanaya railway station (May-June) were close to legendary. All-day air assaults and bombing raids prevented the crews of the armoured trains from repairing the damaged tracks and retreating on time. "Bela Kun" and "Krasnyi Krestyanin" trains, in a usable condition, were cut off, taken over and adapted for military purposes by the 12th Infantry Division. Another armoured train, coming to their rescue, was immobilised as a result of attacks from air. In that period, the unit's name was changed into the 15th Fighter Squadron, although it still focused on bombing raids, occasionally installing 5- and 12-kilogramme bomb launchers in its planes.

During the retreat, the unit was moved further towards west. On 13 July it made it to Lviv. In mid-August 1920, the 15th Squadron, supported by several machines from the 3rd Air Force Division, played an instrumental role in blocking the march of Semyon Budyonny's 1st Cavalry Army. The Polish armies fired machine guns and bombed the columns of Bolshevik forces, which suffered great losses in men, horses and equipment. Fire from the planes' machine guns, shot in series from low height towards compact masses of soldiers was extremely effective, as the Russians said in their desperate radiograms. Through August, the 15th Squadron made approximately 90 combat flights. In only two days - on 16 and 17 August - 26 flights were made,

300 kilogrammes of bombs were dropped and 10000 bullets were fired. As well as the destruction of the enemy's forces, the attacks had another important role - they forced the enemy to disperse and weakened its soldiers' fighting spirit. As a result, Budyonny's Army resigned from occupying Lviv and started its march towards Zamość, still, however, having to deal with the air assaults of the 15th Squadron, operating from the airport in Korchova. The aviators from the unit were honoured many times. Most of them, even still during the war, were awarded with the Crosses of Valour and Virtuti Militari War Orders.

After the war, the squadron was moved to Ostrów Wielkopolski, and later to Poznań, where, in August, under the command of Lieutenant Pilot Tadeusz Jarina, it was incorporated into the 3rd Air Force Regiment. In June 1925, the unit's name was changed to the 112th Fighter Squadron, and in 1928 into the 132nd Fighter Squadron. In the defence war of 1939, it became part of the "Poznań" Army.

The 21st Destroyer Squadron

The creation of the 21st Destroyer Squadron was the idea of Lieutenant Ludomił Rayski - the then commander of the Higher Flight School in Ławica. After the project's approval on 15 April 1920 and after becoming familiar with the equipment, the unit was equipped with six AEG C.IV planes and one Gotha G.IV plane - a giant flying machine with two powerful Daimler IVa engines - 260 HP each. This, the largest plane in

the squadron was operated by unit commander Lieutenant Pilot Ludomił Rayski and Lieutenant Observer Czesław Filipowicz. 36 AEG C.IV planes were used in the Polish air force, 30 of which were built in Ławica. In May 1920, the unit was moved to the east, to the section occupied by the 6th Army. As part of the 3rd Air Force Division, it supported the 12th Infantry Division - it destroyed the enemy's armoured trains that hindered the actions of the 12th Infantry Division in the area of Malovanaya railway station. The 21st Squadron carried out heavy bombing raids in May and June, with the support of the 15th Fighter Squadron and several planes of the 5th Intelligence Squadron, which dropped light bombs. As a result of the operations, three Soviet trains were immobilised and taken, two of which ("Bela Kun" and "Krasnyi Krestyanin") were suitable for immediate military use by the Polish Army. A fourth one, which came to the rescue, was stopped and damaged by Polish planes. Cooperation between the two squadrons was crucial to the final success of the operation.

Under the pressure of the Bolsheviks, the Polish units started to retreat. The 21st Squadron moved to Proskuriv. On 5 July, together with the Tadeusz Kościuszko 7th Fighter Squadron (composed of volunteers from the USA), it created an improvised group - the so-called "Faunt-le-Roy's Squadron". The squadrons, moved to Goloby airport near Kovel and had a convenient base to attack Budyonny's cavalry, which was active in the Lutsk - Dubno - Rivne area. The 21st Squadron carried out initial reconnaissance, and then, together with the 7th Fighter Squadron,

conducted bombings and assault raids.

Losses in men and equipment changed the nature of the unit, which now lost the status of a “heavy” bombing squadron. In Ustilug, under the command of Lieutenant Pilot Franciszek Wieden, the unit acted as an intelligence squadron working for the 7th Squadron. From Ustilug it moved to Korchova near Sokal, where it was detached from the Tadeusz Kościuszko 7th Fighter Squadron and incorporated into the 2nd Air Division of the 3rd Army together with a change in its base of operations. This time, it was the airport in Motycz near Lublin. Due to shortages in men and equipment, and as a result of epidemic dysentery, the squadron was sent to Dęblin as the Supreme Command’s reserve. Having replenished the shortages, on 4 October 1920 the squadron was once again sent to the front, this time to Ternopil. The unit’s tasks were still bombing raids against Budyonny’s cavalry and long reconnaissance.

When the 21st Squadron was in Ternopil, the armistice was signed. In January 1921, it was incorporated to the 14th Intelligence Squadron and became part of the 2nd Air Force Regiment in Cracow.

Balloon armies

One element that made it possible to create foundations for balloon armies was the trophy seized from the Zeppelin Hall. These were two

covers of German Parseval-Sigsfeld observation balloons, an Alpina horse-operated winch and several hundred bottles of hydrogen. On 31 April 1919, Lieutenant Colonel Aleksander Wańkowicz took command of the newly-established unit. At the same time, an aeronautical school, organised by Major Feliks Bołsunowski, was founded. In February 1920, two balloon groups were sent to the Lithuanian and Belarussian front - the 1st Balloon Group commanded by Captain Jan Wolszlegier on 23 February, and the 2nd Balloon Group commanded by Lieutenant Sławomir Bilek on 26 February. Initial operations in the battlefield were successful. As long as the front line was relatively static in winter and spring (which resulted from the army's low mobility), conditions for the actions of balloon armies were excellent. The unit observed the enemy and directed the artillery fire. Later, however, during the Bolshevik offensive and due to the fast movement of the armies, the balloonists' situation got much worse, which prevented them from carrying out any operations whatsoever - mounting and dismounting posts for observation balloons consumed too much labour and time.

Colonel Wańkowicz suggested joining all of the balloons into one regiment and using it for infantry units. His suggestion was approved. The balloonists participated in the battles from 24 July to 14 August 1920. After the Red Army's retreat from under Warsaw, the initial structure, i.e. division into four battalions, was restored. The battalions were assigned as follows: the 1st battalion - Warsaw, the 2nd battalion (2nd Army) - Białystok, the 3rd battalion (5th Army) - Modlin,

the 4th battalion (4th Army) - Brest on Bug.

* * *

What observations can be made on the basis of the above considerations? That Greater Poland was open to the affairs of other regions and that it was eager to defend not only its own western borders but to aid others too. It is this image of Greater Poland that shows solidarity with other regions. The Ławica Air Base not only sent its very well equipped squadrons to the rescue of Eastern Borderlands, but also significantly contributed to the equipment of the air force formed in the core of Poland by providing fully usable planes to Lviv, Cracow or Warsaw. The aviators from Greater Poland fought bravely against the Bolsheviks, defending Lviv and Warsaw. The tradition of Greater Polish units fighting outside the region was continued in the period of the Second Polish Republic in the 3rd Air Force Regiment in Poznań, although it also included units that were not rooted in Greater Poland. During the defensive war in September 1939, squadrons from Ławica fought as part of the "Poznań" and "Łódź" Armies. After the September defeat, fighting was continued first in France and, after the fall of France, in Great Britain, where the 302nd Fighter Squadron "Poznański" and the 305th Bomb Squadron "Ziemi Wielkopolskiej" triumphed. These units always celebrated the memory of their Greater Polish origin. All these events deserve a place in our memory and are worth being proud of. These brave men and their acts must never fall into oblivion.

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