

POLISH AIR FORCE COMMEMORATION 2016

Opening Speech by the Chairman, Richard Kornicki CBE DL

I am particularly pleased to be able to welcome today, Mr Arkady Rzegocki, who has just taken up his post as Ambassador of the Republic of Poland, and also Sir Stephen Hillier, now Chief of the Air Staff, both attending our Commemoration for the first time.

While this is a Polish commemoration, it is also something shared with many in Britain, who want to mark the achievements – and the sacrifices – of the Polish Air Force in the West. When Polish aircraft flew from Northolt and Duxford, from Swinderby and Ingham, from Exeter and Woodvale, from Brindisi, from Libya, from Normandy, no one knew how the story would end. Victory was not certain; the task was unrelenting; and the price would be high. There are some 2,000 names engraved behind this monument; all of whom fought and died *Za naszą i waszą wolność* – for your freedom and for ours.

How ironic, then, that today the Ambassador of Poland will also be attending the commemoration of a fellow countryman murdered in Harlow a few days ago, and that the Borough of Hillingdon has just finished cleaning graffiti off a Polish inscription in our Memorial Garden.

Those may be the events which make the headlines, but they do not reflect the wider reality. In your programme you will see how English volunteers of the RAF Ingham Heritage Trust spend every weekend restoring a Polish Bomber station. Or go to Nottinghamshire, where the Calverton and District Royal British Legion Branch to this day maintains a memorial in the woods where an aircraft of the Polish 300 Squadron crashed in 1940, killing its three crew. In Exeter, November the 15th has once again become Polish 307 Squadron Day, at the initiative of an English resident. The young people of Clitheroe have been out on the bleak fells of the Forest of Bowland in the snow, laying wreaths at crash site memorials and making sure that the Poles among them are properly remembered. And every year, on All Souls' Day, you will find the Mayor of Newark standing among the hundreds of graves of Polish airmen in the town cemetery. Those are the places you should look to really understand the relationships between the people of Britain and of Poland.

For the links that bind our two countries were forged when our very existences were at stake. In 1940 Poland and Britain were the only countries who maintained their alliance to defend freedom together. As Squadron Leader Kellett wrote, when relinquishing command of the Polish 303 Squadron, "Together we have seen good days and bad, but English or Polish, we shared them. You have won for Poland a special place in the hearts of people in Britain". Political structures may come and go, but this will endure.