

## Speech of Minister Kasprzyk, Head of the Office of Veterans and Victims of Oppression

Ladies and Gentlemen,

‘A man discovers himself when he pits himself against an obstacle’. So wrote Antoine de St Exupéry, the great French writer in *Night Flight*. As a pilot himself, he knew what he was talking about. He knew what a man can be capable of when he finds himself in danger: he can reach the greatest heights, but he can also fall to the very depths.

During the Second World War, Polish airmen had a long road to tread. Poles were the first to find themselves faced with the might of the Third Reich, and none resisted the invader longer. Our airmen enjoyed enormous renown, partly due to a rigorous selection process necessary for a profession requiring exceptional qualities, but also thanks to the experience gained in numerous campaigns. By 1940, during the Battle of Britain, Polish pilots were already among the best, destroying a record number of enemy aircraft. As the war years went by, their experience could only increase.

In June 1944, the airmen of the Squadrons forming 131 Wing of the Polish Air Force took part in the Normandy landings, which were such a crucial turning point in the course of the War. Among them was Lt. Stanisław Wandzilak, a pilot of 308 Fighter Squadron, whose aircraft was shot down in August 1944 near Rouen. Many years later he recalled the experience in these words: “I only know one thing, that never in my life have I known such fear as at that time, and never have I known such satisfaction as in those days. Hiding from the Germans, I saw the 7<sup>th</sup> German Army literally in shreds, fleeing towards the East. I saw our armies approaching, and at that moment I understood the difference between flying and the other armed forces. I knew that the air was my element, and on the ground, in the face of the enemy, I was like a fish out of water.”

These words, expressing the pride of a Polish pilot who had taken part in these critical events, convey the very atmosphere of that time, at the moment when the definitive victory was being shaped.

Sadly, that victory had a bitter taste for Poles. Our country found itself under the Soviet yoke, and Polish soldiers were not invited to the 1946 London Victory Parade. Only Polish airmen were welcome, but, out of solidarity with the rest of the Polish Armed Forces, they declined to participate.

Many years later, Poland became famous thanks to another ‘Solidarity’, this time with a capital ‘S’, which in the 1980s took part in a victorious struggle to throw off the communist yoke. The sign uniting the supporters of Solidarity was the letter ‘V’, made with two fingers.

This universal symbol of victory and of hope is understood and recognised across every continent. The people who will come to this spot in the future will get the same clear message about the airmen honoured by this Memorial, men who served in a just cause. From the bottom of my heart, I would like to thank all the organisations and all the kind benefactors who have contributed to the creation of the Plumetot Memorial.