

Richard Kornicki
Chairman, Polish Air Force Memorial Committee

Your Excellencies, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen. Two and a half years ago, I wrote to M. Tarlet, Mayor of Plumetot, asking if we might mark in some way the presence of the Polish 131 Wing at Plumetot in 1944. The reason for the request was two-fold. Firstly, this small village and its temporary airfield marked the first stage of the journey of the Polish Air Force back towards Poland, rather than ever further away. And secondly, that the important role played by the Polish Air Force in supporting the Invasion, the Battle for Normandy, and the Liberation of France should be properly recognised in its own right.

That journey back to Poland could never be completed by many of those Polish Airmen. While they had helped secure the freedom of France, for them, there was no victory, as their country had been handed over to Communist tyranny. When the war ended, many, including airmen who served here, chose to stay in Britain. It is their widows, their sons and daughters, their descendants, who have again crossed the Channel to be with you today.

From the moment we first made contact, Plumetot and its people have astonished us with the enthusiasm and determination they have shown in wanting to honour Polish airmen who passed through their village so many years ago, and who fought for your freedom and ours. We, their descendants, have found here nothing but friendship, support, and hard work in a shared cause. Plumetot may be one of the smallest communes in Normandy, but it yields to none in the warmth of its welcome, and in the respect it shows to the memory of its liberators.

In creating this Memorial, we are extremely grateful for the very generous support of the Polish Institute of National Memory, which funded the steel work in Kraków, and to other generous organisations and individuals in Britain, France and Poland who have all helped fund the Project. We have been ably supported by the Polish Embassy in Paris, who have been closely involved at every stage. We chose Alexander Smaga as our architect through an international competition, we are deeply grateful to him for his inspired and beautiful design: I think that no one will be disappointed.

The Memorial commemorates the three fighter squadrons – 302, City of Dęblin, 308 City of Kraków, and 317, City of Wilno, which flew from here. It commemorates not only the pilots, but equally importantly, the tireless ground-crew who kept the aircraft operational in the most difficult conditions. More widely, it marks the part played by all Polish airmen, of fighter and bomber squadrons alike, who fought in the Normandy campaign and helped secure the liberation of Plumetot, the liberation of Normandy, and the liberation of France.

When those Polish airmen left this village in September 1944, they would never have imagined that we would gather here, 75 years later, in their name. They would be pleased, I think, that the links they formed with the village of Plumetot have been re-kindled; they would be reassured that Poland, England and France stand firm as NATO allies; but most of all, they would be rightly proud that the part they played in the liberation of France will never be forgotten: not in Poland, not in France, and most of all, not in this proud village of Plumetot, which has so taken their memory to its heart.