

Your Royal Highness, Your Excellency, Distinguished Veterans, Honoured Guests.

After 123 years of occupation, of suppression, and of resistance, in 1918 Poland at last recovered her independence. As the German and Austrian empires collapsed, and as Russia descended into the chaos of Bolshevism, that unquenchable Polish longing for freedom seized the moment, and reclaimed Poland for her own people. We are proud this year that we can celebrate the centenary of Polish independence; and with it, the centenary of Polish Military Aviation... And at the same time, we celebrate with equal respect, the centenary of the Royal Air Force, our partner, our ally, and our friend through so many years.

Most people think that Polish airmen first came to Northolt in 1940. How wrong they are. The first group of Polish airmen in fact arrived here in 1917. From Russian-ruled Poland Capt. Abakanowicz led a party of 120 officers and men, Russians and Poles, for technical and flying training at various British bases. Whilst here, he put his off-duty time to good use. He convened an unofficial group of the Polish members of the party. The subject of their private discussions? The formation of a future independent Polish Air Force. And before the war had even ended, Polish airmen were flying aircraft in Polish markings, fighting to establish a free Poland.

Between 1919 and 1939 there were frequent exchanges between the Air Forces of Poland and Britain. RAF officers were posted as observers of the Polish war against the Bolsheviks; Polish pilots came here to evaluate British aircraft with orders for Bristol fighters resulting; General Zagorski, the Polish Commander-in-Chief, flew in to Kenley for an official visit including discussions with Air Marshal Trenchard and the Secretary of State for Air; Britain evaluated the Polish designed and built P-24 as a possible purchase for the RAF; Bristol engines were supplied for Polish aircraft. There was a constant stream of bi-lateral technical and military contacts.

So when war came, the Royal Air Force and the Polish Air Force were no strangers. It is no surprise that they fought together. It is no surprise that when a committee of Polish airmen in exile determined to build this monument to their fallen comrades, they asked Air Chief Marshal Sir Roderic Hill, to be their Honorary Chairman and co-opted the Station Commander of RAF Northolt to help them. It is no surprise that Lord Trenchard and Lord Portal, historic figures for the RAF, were at the forefront of the fund-raising campaign. And it is no surprise that Poles and Britons stood here side by side when the Monument was unveiled 70 years ago, just as they do today.

Sadly, there are some people who claim publicly that Britain neither knows about nor cares about the contribution made by the Polish Air Force in the war. To that, there is a simple answer. Look around you; look at who has gathered here today. Look above you; where the Dakota of the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight has just paid its tribute to Polish airmen. Look beside you; where the people of this London Borough have created a Memorial Garden as their own tribute to Polish airmen. Look ... and doubt no more.

Remembering all those Polish airmen who gave their bodies to the earth, their souls to God, and their hearts to Poland, I call now on the Officer Cadets of the Polish Air Force Academy to carry out the roll-call of the fallen. Capt. Buśko ...