

75th ANNIVERSARY OF THE BATTLE OF BRITAIN - 2015

As we speak, a Hurricane is just landing at RAF Northolt. It is in the markings of 303 Kościuszko Squadron and is the aircraft on the front of your Programme. It was at RAF Northolt that 303 Squadron was based and where it became, in only a few weeks, the most successful Squadron in the Battle of Britain. It convinced the RAF of the value of Polish airmen and it created a legend that lives to this day, as much in Britain as in Poland, and honoured equally by both British and Polish descendants of those who formed the Squadron.

Among us today are some who remember that Battle when its outcome was yet unknown, when the German Invasion was expected within days, and when the future of Britain - and a free Europe - hung desperately in the balance in that long summer of 1940. It is often said that Britain stood alone in its 'finest hour'. But that is not the whole truth. It still had one ally, bound to it in Treaty, whose Government and Armed Forces alone placed themselves alongside Britain for the common good. It was Poland. The only country in Europe, which was occupied by the Germans, but never surrendered, never signed an Armistice, never gave up the fight, at home or abroad, through six long years.

And in the summer of 1940, never was an Ally more needed. 6,000 or so members of the Polish Air Force had made their escape from Poland and reached England by June that year, where they re-formed as the Polish Air Force, flying alongside the Royal Air Force but not as members of it, and owing their allegiance to their own Government, now operating in exile in London. During the Battle of Britain, as well as ground crew and other branches, 146 Polish pilots were operational, giving their all *za wolność waszą i naszą* – for your freedom and for ours. As the Commander in Chief of Fighter Command, Lord Dowding later put it: “Had it not been for the magnificent material contributed by the Polish Squadrons, and their unsurpassed gallantry, I hesitate to say the outcome of the Battle would have been the same.” When the pressure from the enemy was at its greatest, they were enough to tilt the balance and at the crucial moment.

We remember others too, in particular the 88 Czech pilots who took part in the Battle, such as Jozef František, the most successful pilot in the Battle, who flew with 303 Squadron. His name, along with those of several other Czech pilots, is listed among the fallen behind this monument.

Those Polish Airmen of 1940 laid the foundations of the Polish Air Force in the west and all that its 20,000 members eventually achieved in all theatres of war. And it is in tribute to all of them that the London Borough of Hillingdon, in partnership with the Polish Embassy, has generously created the new Memorial Garden beside this monument.