

The Warsaw Rising – 70th Anniversary, 2014

This is a year of many 70th anniversaries for the Polish Armed Forces: the Normandy Invasion, where the light cruiser ORP Dragon was lost; Arnhem, where the Polish Parachute Brigade were dropped; Monte Cassino, finally taken by Polish troops of the 2nd Corps with such heavy losses; the Falaise Gap, taken and held by General Maczek's First Armoured Division. More happily, it is also the 70th anniversary of the formation of 663 Squadron, still operational in the Army Air Corps, and whose light blue berets are especially welcome here today.

But most tellingly it is the 70th anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising. On this day, 70 years ago, the Uprising had already lasted for 44 days and would continue until early October. During that period over 200,000 civilians were killed, many systematically slaughtered, block by block, by some of the most pathological groups of German, Russian and Ukrainian murderers let loose anywhere. In addition, some 16,000 members of the Home Army lost their lives. With the city emptied, there followed the attempt to raze to the ground even the physical remains of Warsaw.

During the Uprising members of the Polish scouting movement played a distinguished role: acting as messengers and couriers they risked their lives, and in many cases they gave them too. Young boys and girls, the same age as their successors here today. We are proud to have them with us, and we are proud to remember the traditions of service and sacrifice they too represent.

The planning for the Uprising had envisaged some five days of fighting, by when the Russian armies across the Wisła would arrive in support. But the Russians chose to sit across the river and watch Warsaw destroyed. Not only did they not help, they actively hindered Allied support by refusing landing and refuelling rights. The only support that could be brought in was by exceptionally long flights from Brindisi, carried out in the face of heavy losses as they attempted low-level supply drops to increasingly isolated Home Army units. This year, for the first time, we will have a wreath layed on behalf of the Polish 1586 Special Duties Flight, which carried out those missions. Fittingly, it will be the first of the Squadron wreaths we lay.

General Stanisław Jankowski fought in the Rising and gave it the simplest rationale: "We wanted to be free, and to owe that freedom to nobody". 25 years ago, in the first partially free elections of 1989, Poland finally won back its freedom, and owed it to nobody.