“Her Majesty’s government will never forget the debt they owe to the Polish troops who have served them so valiantly and for all those who have fought under our command.”

Sir Winston Churchill

**TIMELINE OF THE WAR**

In this timeline some of the key events in World War II have been highlighted. These historical dates and events provide context to the involvement of the Polish Air Force in the conflict.

1 September 1939, 4.40 am Naś Germany invaded Poland. Poland had used a force of 392 aircraft to defend itself against 2,429 German aircraft. On 3 September Britain and France declared war on Germany.

17 September 1939 Soviet Russia invaded Poland from the East. Over 2 million Polish people were forced to leave their homes and deported to labour camps in Siberia and other parts of the Soviet Empire. Thousands starved and died.

September 1939 onwards Over 12,000 Polish aircraft escaped Poland and travelled to France and England, often via Romania and Hungary using fake passports.

Spring 1940 Polish Air Force fought in France under command of the French Air Force (Armée de l’Air). Polish pilots were mostly posted to French squadrons.

10 May 1940 Germany invaded France, Belgium and the Netherlands. France surrendered on 22 June. Polish aircrews made their way to England. Polish Air Force Centre was formed in Eastchurch then in Blackpool, and Polish aircrew started basic, then operational, training.

1 July 1940 The first Polish bomber squadron, No 300 “Province of Mazovia”, was formed at RAF Bransvoie.

10 July 1940 The Battle of Britain started. On the 19 July Antoni Ostowicz of 145 Squadron was formed at RAF Bramcote.

6 June 1944 Polish squadrons were involved in D-Day, the British and Allied invasion of France, in a major offensive against the Germans.

4 – 11 February 1945 The Yalta Conference was called by Britain, United States of America and Soviet Russia to decide what would happen when World War II ended. It was decided that the east of Poland would be absorbed into the Soviet Union and the west would be governed by the Soviet Union.

8 May 1945 Victory in Europe Day. Public celebrations of British and Allied acceptance of Nazi Germany’s surrender. On 15 August 1945 Japan surrendered, officially ending World War II.

8 June 1946 The Polish II Corps made the final assault on Monte Cassino, Italy. The day after the Polish Armoured Cavallery raised the Polish flag over the ruins.

8 May 1945 Victory in Europe Day. Public celebrations of British and Allied acceptance of Nazi Germany’s surrender. On 15 August 1945 Japan surrendered, officially ending World War II.

“Had it not been for the magnificent material contributed by the Polish squadrons and their unsurpassed gallantry, I hesitate to say that the outcome of the Battle would have been the same.”

Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding, leader of Fighter Command

17,000 REASONS TO REMEMBER

Our ‘17,000 Reasons to Remember’ exhibition commemorates the contribution of Polish aircrew during World War II. After Poland was invaded in September 1939, Polish aircrew fought alone for 17 days before beginning their incredible journeys to France and Britain to continue fighting against Nazi Germany.

Britain was initially reluctant to welcome Polish airmen into the Royal Air Force, however they were soon flying and fighting in Bomber Command, Fighter Command and Coastal Command.

With four bomber squadrons, ten fighter squadrons, flying schools, ground crew training centres and even their own football team, the Polish Air Force eventually became the biggest British allied aerial force in Europe.

Young people from Aik Saath — Together As One interviewed 12 veterans and their families. Their stories are integrated into the exhibition and give insight into the experiences of the 17,000 people whose stories this exhibition commemorates and remembers.
"Germany wanted to conquer the rest of the world for themselves."

Journeys

On 1 September 1939 Nazi Germany invaded Poland without any warning or declaration of war. German forces attacked Polish territory on several fronts – attacking the western borders of the country as well as from East Prussia in the north. A total of 1.5 million troops invaded and German planes bombarded Polish cities.

**Outbreak of War**

Andrzej Jeziorski was just 17 years old when war broke out. He returned home from his summer break to the sound of air raid sirens. He walked out into his garden to a formation of German Bombers flying overhead; the first sign that Poland was under attack.

Eugeniusz Borysiuk, despite being only 12 years old at the time, remembers large numbers of people making the journey from the west of Poland away from the German invasion. On 17 September, Poland was invaded from the east by Stalin’s Soviet Union. With two enemies attacking from both sides of Poland and no escape route, many Polish people were left trapped in the middle of the country.

As a result of the Soviet invasion many Polish people, including women and children, were deported to labour camps. Polish airmen assembled in Romania, stating his occupation to be an agricultural student, which enabled him to continue his journey.

On 19 June 1940 General Sikorski in a radio broadcast from London ordered all Polish forces in France to proceed to the French ports where English ships would pick them up and bring them to England."

Franciszek Kornicki

The most common way of travelling to France was through Yugoslavia and Italy on the train. Italy was neutral at the beginning of the war, so the pilots encountered few difficulties travelling through the country.

Andrzej Jeziorski recalls seeing people even managing to get across to France without a ticket!

Successes of Polish airmen fighting in the north of Poland

"On 19 June 1940 General Sikorski in a radio broadcast from London ordered all Polish forces in France to proceed to the French ports where English ships would pick them up and bring them to England."

Franciszek Kornicki

In June 1940, just six weeks after Hitler’s initial assault had begun, France had fallen as a result of Nazi invasion. The aircrews, still not admitting defeat and wanting to continue the fight, made their way to Britain.

Many of the Polish airmen, such as Gabszewicz and Kornicki, travelled from Saint Jean de Luz on the coast of France to Liverpool aboard the SS Arandora Star. Upon arrival, Kornicki was sent to Blackpool, which was the site of the Polish Air Force Centre.

Some airmen, including Franciszek Kornicki, took an alternative route to France by sea. Kornicki recalls boarding a Greek ship on the Black Sea at a Balchik port. Despite being designed for 300 passengers, the ship sailed that day with 1100 on board. As space was limited, Kornicki and three friends commandeered the bathroom space for their long, cramped journey across the sea.

**Journeys**

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Andrzej Jeziorski recalls seeing people even managing to get across to France without a ticket!
After France was devastated by Nazi Germany in June 1940, many Polish airmen were evacuated to Britain, which they called Wyspa Ostanniej Nadziei or “The Island of Last Hope”. They joined other Polish aircrew who had already made the journey to Britain in late 1939 and early 1940. Having fought against Nazi Germany, Slovakia and the Soviet Union in Poland — with some fighter pilots also fighting in France — the Polish Air Force were already experienced, and possessed a unique set of tactics. The Poles were keen to fight when they arrived, but the RAF was reluctant to let them fly operationally at first.

**Training and Tactics**

Polish airmen were integrated into existing squadrons in the Royal Air Force. In June 1940 the British government agreed upon a deal with the Polish government in exile, and in July 1940 two Polish fighter units, 302 and 303 Squadrons, were formed. 303 and 302 Squadrons were not made operational, however, until late August 1940 - the height of the Battle of Britain. A shortage of British and Allied aircrew during the Battle of Britain forced the deployment of the Polish squadrons.

The newly-formed squadrons were put through an intensive training regime. Additionally, in order to familiarise the Polish pilots with English terminology, the 303 Squadron would practice manoeuvres by riding bicycles around the airfield, following the commands sent to the radios that were strapped to their backs.

Miroslaw Feric, of the 303 Squadron, was one of 145 Polish pilots that fought in the Battle of Britain. Speaking of the Polish pilots' reputation for aggressive aerial combat, Philip Methuen Feric, Miroslaw's son highlighted the difference in tactics: “They adopted their own Polish tactics, quite different from the RAF. They went in as close as they could before they opened fire, so they saved on ammunition and shot down so many more planes.” Philip Methuen Feric tells of the Polish pilots' unique approach to aerial training: “One of the exercises they did when they were training in Poland was to fly at each other without blinking or changing their course of flight, until they could see the eyes of the other pilot.”

The Polish 303 Squadron became the most successful squadron during the Battle of Britain. Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding, Commander-in-Chief of Fighter Command, later praised the achievements of the Polish aircrew, “Had it not been for the magnificent contribution of the Polish squadrons and their unsurpassed gallantry, I hesitate to say that the outcome of the Battle would have been the same.”

**Wartime Experiences**

The wartime experiences of surviving Polish aircrew reflect the harsh realities of war. Their stories reveal how physically testing, emotionally draining and incredibly dangerous combat flying was. The German Luftwaffe attacks on fighter and bomber aircraft caused many to crash, and killed and injured thousands of aircrew.

Stanislaw Nawarski recalls being shot down whilst transporting a Hurricane. He was in hospital until January 1941 before returning to duty. Nawarski was involved in D-Day operations as part of 302 Squadron, and was told on the evening of the 5 June that they were being transferred to Tangmere — it was not until take-off that they were told they would be taking part in the D-Day operations. The role of the fighter pilots was to patrol the French coast and protect the Allied soldiers who were landing on the beaches of Normandy by making sure enemy aircraft could not get close enough to attack. Despite the incredible danger faced by aircrew, it was often downplayed with humour. Only a matter of hours after completing training Roman Szymanski survived after his aircraft crashed into a house. When he later joined a different squadron, the Squadron Leader joined at a briefing that they did not want anybody knocking off any chimneys on their flights!

Faced with the prospect of not returning every time they were sent on missions, even when they were involved in accidents and were badly injured many aircrew felt lucky just to be alive.

During his training as an air gunner Jan Stangryciuk was involved in an accident. His Wellington bomber crashed and caught fire. Stangryciuk escaped, covering his face with his hand trying to protect his eye. He was burnt on both hands and on one side of his face. Stangryciuk underwent pioneering plastic surgery under Sir Archibald McIndoe at the burns unit of Queen Victoria's Hospital at East Grinstead. Sir Archibald's procedures and treatments were completely new to plastic surgery and his patients were famously nicknamed the Guinea Pig Club, a name reflecting the groundbreaking approaches to treating burns that were being explored for the first time at the hospital. Despite being badly burnt, Stangryciuk recalls feeling incredibly lucky, as his fellow crew members died.
“It was ridiculous – English as can be, I would go down to the police station saying here I am for my fortnightly report!”

Patience Kornicki

BETWEEN MISSIONS

Like British and other Allied service men and women, the Polish air crew escaped the harsh realities of war by using their free time to take part in social activities, such as visits to dancehalls and the cinema. The Polish airmen earned a reputation for being popular with British women due to their heroics and gentlemanly behaviour. Jan Stangryciuk explained his reasons for training as a bomber air gunner were “good pay, easy promotion and make me very popular with the girls.”

One evening in Somerset, after leaving the cinema and being greeted by a torrential downpour, Aleksander Gabszewicz offered to share his umbrella with a fellow cinemagazer. After talking for some time, he invited her to a Mess dance at the RAF base. They were married soon after.

Patience Kornicki met her future husband Franciszek Kornicki when she was introduced to him by her cousin at a train station. Her cousin then boarded the train, leaving them to get to know each other over a cup of coffee. After discovering that Patience could knit, Franciszek asked her to a Mess dance at the RAF base. They were married soon after.

During the war Aleksander Gabszewicz’s wife was working for the Special Operations Executive in Baker Street, London. This role involved working with resistance movements overseas, paying particular attention to that of France’s, in order to undermine controlling forces in Nazi-occupied countries. As soon as she married Aleksander she had to give up this role, as regulations stated that such a position could not be filled by anyone married to an ‘alien.’

After the war, being married to a Polish man in Britain was not always easy for women, as Mrs Kornicki recalls. Many of those who had married Polish servicemen were treated with suspicion and scepticism, and were often discriminated against.

Mrs Kornicki was born in Winchester and raised in England. She remembers how, due to the law at the time, she became classed as an alien the moment she married a Polish man.

During the war Polish pilots of 317 Squadron lost 31 in action. Some of these were awarded DFCs. After the war, the squadron’s badge from a Mustang IV was displayed on the squadron’s banner from its Mustang.

In 1946, a Victory Parade was held in London. Whilst the Polish aircrew were invited to join the Royal Air Force, other branches of the Polish Armed Forces were not – for political reasons. As a result, the Polish aircrew declined the invitation. Stefan Gabszewicz, whose father had fought in the Polish Air Force during the war, remembers his father’s disappointment and hurt caused by the exclusion: “Considering the Poles had contributed so much to keeping Britain free, they were then snubbed.”

Furthermore, the map of Poland was redrawn at the Yalta conference in 1945, which increased the betrayal felt by the armed forces. The east was absorbed into the Soviet Union and the west was ruled over by a Communist government controlled by Moscow.

Eugeniusz Borysiuk recounts how the majority of people in Britain praised Stalin as a hero for his role in defeating the Nazis. Borysiuk explains that because the Poles were “saying, something opposite to the British Press and everybody” they were seen as “personae non grata” (unwelcome people). This sense was illustrated in 1946, when a high power visitation from Russia came to RAF Halton: “The RAF didn’t want the visitor to know that there was a Polish unit operating from there so they took down all the Polish signs and the Polish boys spent the day in the woods.”

During the war many Polish people were displaced. There was a high risk that if they returned to Poland they would be seen as enemies of the new Communist regime, and would face imprisonment or even death. Julian Michalski remembers not being able to return to Poland after the war; “I had a letter from my sister telling me not to return because I had been in the west and the Communist government wasn’t keen on seeing me. She didn’t tell me I would be killed or arrested, she just said that I wouldn’t be safe.”

Many decided to stay in Britain, whilst others travelled across the globe to start a new life. In 1947 a group of Polish airmen travelled to the newly formed country of Pakistan, where they were instrumental in setting up training programmes and technical institutes in Karachi to help establish the Royal Pakistani Air Force.

“A had a letter from my sister telling me not to return because I had been in the west and the Communist government wasn’t keen on seeing me. She didn’t tell me I would be killed or arrested, she just said that I wouldn’t be safe.”

Julian Michalski
“We had courage to fight that war and that’s why today we are free.”
Jan Stangryciuk

LEGACY

In 1948 a monument commemorating the Polish Air Force’s role during World War II was unveiled close to RAF Northolt, where all Polish fighter squadrons were stationed. The Polish Air Force Association, formed by a group of Polish airmen who remained in Britain after the war, campaigned to erect a memorial commemorating the Polish aircrew’s contribution.

The now disbanded Polish Air Force Association and the current Polish Air Force Memorial Committee have held commemorative services and events to honour those who served during the war, such as the Polish Air Force Memorial event which is held every September at RAF Northolt.

Whilst veterans still attend these events, many of the attendees are children and grandchildren of Polish aircrew who have become the custodians of this incredibly important history that should not be forgotten.

Important lessons can be learnt from the stories of these aircrew who fought so that future generations could live in freedom.

“Our project

“World War Two is taught in schools, there are memorials and those who fought are commemorated in remembrance ceremonies annually. The idea of war has never really left us but it wasn’t until this project that I realised just how narrow a lens we are taught the war through. There are a whole host of stories that need to be shared, some of which we have done through this project.” Damayanti Chatterjee

“This project has really helped me understand more about Polish Pilots during the Second World War. I have really enjoyed going on the trips to RAF Northolt and Bentley Priory Museum and learning about the amazing contribution the pilots made.” Zuzana Tenczyk

“Our project

“Important lessons can be learnt from the stories of these aircrew who fought so that future generations could live in freedom.”

Jan Stangryciuk

In my life time I met people who came from different countries to help us win the war, people from Australia, India, America and Canada. People who fought in World War II left the world for people to be happy, not fighting. Fighting gets you nowhere. It is always better to talk to each other. We had courage to fight that war and that’s why today we are free.”
Jan Stangryciuk

OUR PROJECT

March 2015
Research Workshops

Visit to Polish War Memorial, May 2015.

Interviewing John Kaye Kurowski, son of a Polish pilot, in front of his WW2 Tiger Moth plane.

Bentley Priory Museum, March 2015.


Visit to RAF Northolt, May 2015


RAF Polish jets at Northwood Cemetery, May 2015.

Tiger Moth – an aircraft produced in the UK and used by the Polish aeroworks in WW2.

“ contacto

“World War Two is taught in schools, there are memorials and those who fought are commemorated in remembrance ceremonies annually. The idea of war has never really left us but it wasn’t until this project that I realised just how narrow a lens we are taught the war through. There are a whole host of stories that need to be shared, some of which we have done through this project.” Damayanti Chatterjee

“It was a great experience to listen to and learn from the Polish war heroes.”
Karina Mammareen

March 2015
Research Visit to Bentley Priory Museum

Visit to RAF Museum Hendon

Research Visit to Bentley Priory Museum, March 2015.

RAF Polish jets at Northwood Cemetery, May 2015.

Touring the military section of a Polish photographer and a tour of the museum.

Storytelling Workshop, April 2015

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This exhibition was researched by the following young people:

- Haajrah Ahmed
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- Damayanti Chatterjee
- Julita Ciuba
- David Dabrowski
- Jakub Drozd
- Romina Ejaz
- Nikola Anna Ferdek
- Aik Saath – Together As One

The words ‘Aik Saath’ mean ‘Together As One’ in Hindi, Punjabi and Urdu. They also embody the ethos of our Queen’s award-winning charity – we believe in working together to prevent violence and hatred and to strengthen community cohesion. Our projects are led by a group of over one hundred young volunteers aged between 11 and 19. These young people deliver training to their peers and organise events and exhibitions with a view to making our community a safer, more cohesive place in the future.

www.aiksaath.com

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- Stanisław Wlosok-Nawarski

Aik Saath – Together As One

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“...it was a privilege to welcome veterans and young people to the Museum. As future custodians of this important heritage, we are inspired by the young people’s commitment to ensuring that the contribution of Polish aircrew during WWII is not forgotten...”

Bentley Priory Museum Director & Learning Officer,
Eleanor Pulfer-Sharma & Sarah Dinsdale