



# There's Freedom

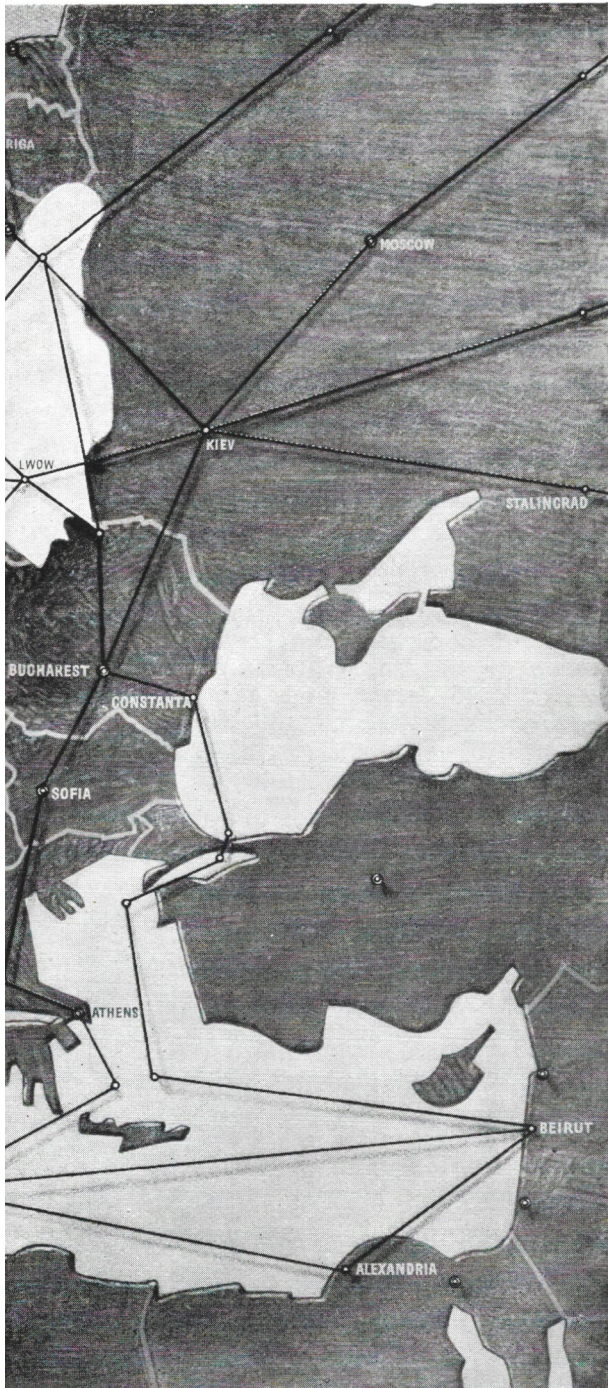
in

# the Air

6<sup>D</sup>.  
NET

THE OFFICIAL STORY OF THE ALLIED AIR FORCES FROM THE OCCUPIED COUNTRIES





## 1. They Wanted to go on Fighting

THE WAR between Poland and Germany began at dawn on September 1st, 1939. Between that time and the virtual end of Polish armed resistance on Polish soil three weeks later, the world looked on at the first mass bombing of a great European city. It saw what an organised air force of 3,000 planes could do against an air force of only 300 planes, at first organised, and then disorganised by loss and retreat. It saw the first of a series of triumphs of numbers over national faith.

Mere numbers are destructible; faith is not. When war began, the Polish Air Force had only 300 planes of action strength. Of these, half were P-11c Fighters, a type quite slow according to modern standards. Of the rest, 36 were medium bombers of the Los P.37 type, and 60 were light bombers of the Karas type. The rest were army co-operation aircraft. But behind this small number of planes were great numbers of men. Poland was a country under conscription; the number of recruits to the Air Force each year was therefore considerable. If its reserves of aircraft were poor and soon to be used up, its reserves of men were enormous. If it was not possible to save the planes from destruction by the Luftwaffe, it became evident, as early as September 14th, that it would be possible to save the men. Before active Polish resistance in Poland had ended, therefore, the escape of thousands of men of the Polish Air Force—and also of the Polish Army and the Polish Navy—had been planned. This escape, both because of its size and because of its triumphs over hardship and distances, was one of the most remarkable in history.

On the wall of the Intelligence Room of a Polish bomber squadron that now operates from an R.A.F. station in England is a map. It is a map of Europe, West Asia and North Africa, cut in wood. The continents and countries are





AIRCRAFT CAN BE DESTROYED. German soldiers examine the wreckage of one of the 300 Polish planes, which fought valiantly against the Luftwaffe's 3,000 during the invasion of Poland.

painted in colours. Europe, Africa and Asia are painted brown, Poland is bright red, England is bright green. All over this map, in a wide circle covering every single country except Germany, are scores of chromium pins. They are joined together with strings of blue wool. All these strings begin in Poland and lead ultimately to England. They are the journeys of escape.

There is scarcely a country in Europe, Asia Minor or North Africa to which one of these strings does not go. They extend as far north as Sweden, as far east as Russia, as far south as Syria and Egypt. They go through Roumania, where thousands of Poles first gathered after their defeat, through Greece and Yugoslavia, Turkey, France and Spain; even through Italy. The strings come, too, across the Atlantic, across the north from the United States, across the south from South America. They are scattered everywhere.

But on the map there are other strings. They are coloured yellow. They are not scattered. They are concentrated. Compared with the strings of escape they are short. They radiate from a single point in England to a circle of 60

different points, from Brest to as far east as the Baltic ports. These strings and these points are the record of retaliation. They are the record of the bomber operations of the Polish Air Force that was disrupted, scattered, and reunited, at last, in England. They are the journeys of retribution.

These strings partly represent the stories and certainly represent the aim of many thousands of men, men at first scattered, walking, train-hopping, sledging and plotting their way across Europe towards the two countries. France and England, where the red and white Polish flag was still flying as a symbol of passionate resistance against the regime that had destroyed Warsaw. Some represent the stories of men who, unable to escape before Poland's final collapse, saw the New Order come in, read the military decrees nailed up in Polish cities and towns by von Brauchitsch, disobeyed them and still escaped; who saw brothers and fathers tortured and beaten, wives and sisters sent to Germany; who picked up leaflets in Polish streets: "If you don't surrender we shall use poison gas at 12 noon to-morrow"; who smelled death on the streets after the mass bombings of September; who were told to surrender or go to German prison camps and who replied by forging passports—of men, in short, who put freedom higher than pain.

On a day in the autumn of 1939 a young Polish airman stood by a wall in a Polish farmyard, waiting to be shot. The Nazi firing squad stood ready with their rifles, awaiting the order to fire. As the Pole stood facing them one of the rifles accidentally went off. The noise startled the rest of the Nazi firing squad, who immediately turned their heads. In that moment the Pole clambered over the wall and was gone.

The first of these men of the Polish Air Force began to reach England in early December 1939; only three months after the collapse of their country. In a sense they were fortunate. Europe had not crumbled; France was still a free country; the avenues of escape were still open. For these reasons they were to be followed by many thousands of their countrymen. Meanwhile many Polish airmen had reached France. They had skied across the Carpathians. They had been through the prisons of Hungary. They had stolen boats and had rowed down the Drava River into Yugo-



slavia. They had come by steamer to Marseilles. They found themselves in a France on the verge of defeat and disunity.

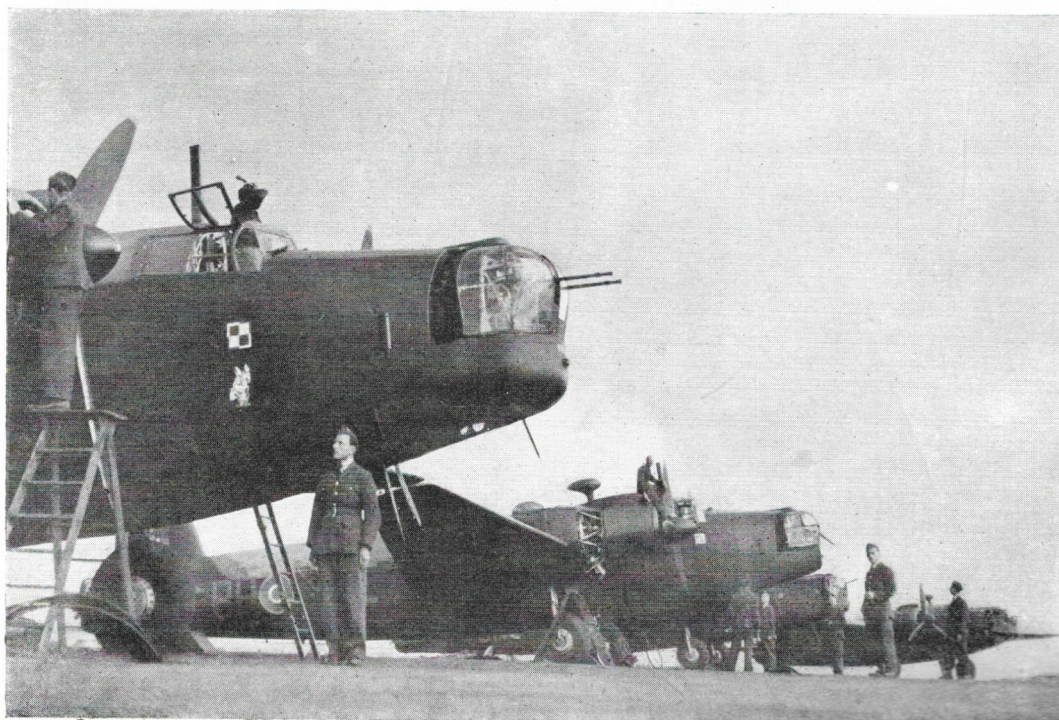
So in June 1940 their escape began again. There was now only one country left for them—England. “Thousands of us,” says one of them, “came away from St. Jean de Luz. Some were in uniform of the Palestine police. Some said they were French soldiers, some business men, some from Turkey. And so on. Really we were all just Poles wanting to fight the Germans.” And so, disordered, scattered, deprived of that self-determination which had been Hitler’s righteous and indignant cry in 1939, but not disunited and by no means defeated, the Poles began to come to England.

They were not alone. Nor were they the first disinherited people of the war, though their soil was the first on which war had been fought. For the Czechoslovaks the war began, not with the

invasion of Poland in 1939, but with the Munich Agreement in 1938. From that moment every clear-sighted Czechoslovak saw the inevitable course of events. Immediately after Munich, Czechoslovak nationals, and particularly airmen, began to escape secretly from their country under cover of darkness, singly or in groups, by all kinds of routes and means. They, too, like the Poles, had one object. They wanted to fight Germany. The word *wanted* is worth noting. It is the key word to these pages; it is the consistent emotion binding together, in one purpose, these undefeated representatives of defeated peoples. *We want to fight Germany.* There is no other desire or aim.

Many Czechoslovaks, anticipating events correctly, escaped in 1938 and 1939 to Poland. Some remained there; some wandered on, through Eastern and Central Europe, on what was to be the long journey to England. When war began,

... BUT FAITH IS INDESTRUCTIBLE. The faith of her airmen, surviving Poland’s defeat, enabled the Polish Air Force to be re-born in Britain. Wellingtons of a Polish Bomber Squadron on an English airfield.





many Czechoslovak airmen fought side by side with the Polish Air Force. When Poland fell, their way of escape was very difficult. Nevertheless, many of them reached France. There they joined the only Unit open to them—the French Foreign Legion—and it was not until France's entry into the war that they were embodied in the French Air Force. During that winter, there was little air fighting, and it was only in the spring of 1940, a few weeks before the collapse of France, that the Czechoslovak National Committee and the French Government came to an agreement whereby Czechoslovak airmen obtained their independence and were to be formed into national groups.

Like many other things in those days, it was almost too late. There was little time to organise. Over 100 Czechoslovak pilots were attached to various French squadrons, including the 5th Squadron of No. 1 Wing of the "Cigogne" Squadron, one of the most famous French fighter squadrons of the war. In these squadrons the Czechoslovaks fought themselves to a point of

exhaustion in the Battle of France. They fought with an extreme fanatical zeal and to the limits of physical endurance. There were many stories of pilots losing consciousness in the air and recovering just in time to make a safe landing. Some idea of the success with which they fought may be got from *Chasseurs de Ciel*, a book published by Captain Accart in the autumn of 1941. On the list of fighter pilots in France, Captain Accart places a Czechoslovak pilot, Captain V., as third with 15 enemy aircraft destroyed, another Czechoslovak, Lieutenant P., as fourth and a Lieutenant V. as 12th on the list.

On the collapse of France the Czechoslovaks found themselves in a desperate position. They were scattered over a country disrupted and disorganised by defeat. The Europe at which they looked now was a very different Europe from the excited but still unified continent of 1939. Poland, Norway, Denmark, Belgium, Holland, their own Czechoslovakia and now France had gone. For them, as for the Poles, there was now only one way of escape: to England. On the orders of their Commander-in-Chief, the Czechoslovaks assembled in the South of France and even in North Africa, to begin all over again the journey to a strange country in order to continue the struggle for their fatherland.

A first group of 19 pilots arrived in England by transport aircraft on the day after the French Armistice was signed. More followed immediately. On June 21st, Dutch and Polish merchant vessels, loaded with Czechoslovak airmen, arrived in English ports, and other vessels continued to arrive until the last transport reached Liverpool on July 9th. Only three days later, on July 12th, the Independent Czechoslovak Air Force was re-born. There was announced, with great national pride, the formation of the first Czechoslovak fighter squadron—No. 310. It practically coincided with the announcement of the first Polish Squadron, No. 300, to be formed in Britain.

Like the Poles, the Czechoslovaks were only just in time. They were in time for one of the great battles of history. It was a battle to decide, as we in Britain knew too well, not only whether Great Britain should survive as a free nation, but whether ultimately all Europe should survive, and it was right and opportune that the Czechoslovaks and Poles should take part in it.



TO GO ON FIGHTING. Czechoslovak airmen, after the fall of France, embark for Britain—the only country where they could continue the fight for their own fatherland.





CZECHOSLOVAK FIGHTER PILOT. On July 12th, 1940, the Independent Czechoslovak Air Force was re-born on English soil. Its first fighter squadron was destined to play a notable part in the Battle of Britain.