

## **OBITUARY**

### **Franciszek Kornicki**

*Last Second World War Polish air force squadron commander, who was selected as 'the people's Spitfire pilot' for the RAF centenary*

On July 23, 1941, Franciszek Kornicki, aged 24, flew his first mission over France. He was a member of 315 Polish Fighter Squadron based at RAF Northolt and was flying a Spitfire MkII. There had been reports on his radio of enemy aircraft approaching. "Somebody was fighting somewhere," he recalled. Fortunately he returned from that mission in one piece with the rest of the squadron. "I landed drenched with perspiration, jumped out of my aircraft, lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply," he said. By the end of August he had flown over France a dozen times.

Eighteen months later Kornicki took command of 308 Squadron, the youngest squadron commander from the Polish Air Force and the first from his cohort who had trained at Deblin, in Poland, before the war. In May 1943 he became commanding officer of 317 Squadron, which later carried out offensive sweeps in preparation for the Normandy landings. Whenever he flew, he carried two Crucifixes and the battered black attaché case that was issued during his training.

In September Kornicki came top of a public poll run by the RAF Museum to name "the people's Spitfire pilot" in preparation for the centenary of the RAF next year. Sir Douglas Bader was runner-up. Kornicki was typically modest about his success. "My aircraft was cared for by a fitter and rigger — great chaps, both of them," he said. "And my only regret is that I cannot recall their names, because they deserve equal recognition for everything this wonderful aircraft achieved."

Franciszek Kornicki, known as Franek or Frank, was born in Wereszyn, southeast Poland, near the border with Ukraine, one of six brothers, the eldest of whom had died in infancy. His father, Lukasz, was a coachman on the estate of Robert Bailkowski, the local landowner; his mother, Aniela, cared for the children. He recalled how "all immediate needs of the villagers, estate workers and farmers near by were taken care of by four Jewish families who lived in the heart of the village and ran three shops". Life in post-First World War Poland was harsh: a dozen houses shared a couple of lavatories, water came from the well and there were two pigs to be slaughtered each year, "one before Christmas and one before Easter". On Sundays the family marched a mile and a half to a neighbouring village to say Mass in Latin.

He received his primary education locally and, encouraged by a governess on the estate, paid his way through grammar school in Hrubieszow, 15 miles to the north, by coaching younger pupils. Unable to afford university, and on the basis of having enjoyed a gliding trip while at school, he enlisted in the Polish Air Force academy in Deblin, passing out third from a class of 173 cadets in July 1939. He was at home on his first leave when a telegram arrived: he was to report immediately to his unit. He would never see his father again.

When the Germans invaded on September 1, Kornicki was a member of No 162 Squadron, flying outdated PZL P.7 aircraft with no radios. Within a couple of days he was in action. On one occasion he tried to roll his aircraft to turn towards the enemy, but while upside down his straps failed to hold him in and he quite literally fell out; fortunately his parachute opened and he landed safely, although the aircraft was lost.

'I jumped out of my aircraft, lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply'

The Poles were soon suffering heavy losses and on September 17 they learnt that the Soviets had also invaded their country. Pilots were ordered to make their way to Romania and on to France. Travelling by road and rail, Kornicki reached the Romanian port of Balchik (now in Bulgaria), on the Black Sea, where he was furnished with false papers. He then sailed on the SS Patris to Marseilles, where he began training on French aircraft. When France fell, he travelled by train to Saint-Jean-de-Luz in the Basque country, winning several hundred francs from poker en route. From there he was evacuated on the Arandora Star to Liverpool, where his first task was to learn English.

By August 1940 there were 8,000 members of the Polish Air Force in Britain, formed into 16 squadrons and under the operational command of the RAF. After training on the Boulton Paul Defiant interceptor aircraft he was posted to 303 Squadron, which had just achieved the highest score in the Battle of Britain. In January 1941 he joined 315 Squadron, which in July was posted to RAF Northolt. From there he began flying over France.

On one occasion he was escorting a group of British bombers over northern France when he spotted a squadron of enemy aircraft attempting to intercept them and ordered a daredevil attack. Four German aircraft were shot down in the ensuing dogfight. "It may not have done much to advance the war effort," he recalled many years later. "But it was fantastic for morale."

After three years as a fighter pilot Kornicki was transferred to a ground job as a liaison officer before attending the Polish Air Force Staff College in Weston-super-Mare. Now a staff officer, he was forbidden from flying operational sorties, but he had just received permission to retrain on the latest Spitfire when the war in Europe ended.

Although the postwar Polish government recognised his wartime military service with several honours, Kornicki had no wish to return to a country under Soviet control. However, he encountered hostility in Britain. "At first it was like the British were ungrateful for what I did," he told the BBC. "Mr Bevin, the secretary of state, sent a letter encouraging us to leave the country. You can imagine how one would feel. We were, at the beginning of the war, the only allies of any consequence. When the war ended we were redundant and we were a burden." Meanwhile, he took a course in textile chemistry at Nottingham Technical College.

In March 1948 he married Patience Williams, who had served with the Auxiliary Territorial Service and was later a secretary. They had been introduced by her cousin and on their first date she offered to knit him a sweater. They had two sons: Peter is professor of Japanese at the University of Cambridge, while Richard is a retired senior civil servant and chairman of the Polish Air Force Memorial Committee. Patience died ten days after her husband at the age of 94; a joint funeral was held.

Figuring that the British did not mind immigrants, such as Italians, in the hospitality business, Kornicki took a six-month hotel management course. He joined Simonds brewery, starting at the Red Lion in Basingstoke where he discovered that the manager, a man of White Russian origins, held a longstanding grudge against Poles. Later, while running the St George and Dragon at Wargrave, in Berkshire, the actress Greer Garson was a customer.

In 1951 pilots, Polish or not, were being recruited to meet the Cold War threat. He was commissioned as a flight lieutenant in the RAF and once more took to the skies. Later he switched to the catering branch, serving in Malta, Aden and Cyprus. He returned to civilian life in 1972, working for the Gas Industry Training Board and the MoD, before retiring to West Sussex.

‘When the war ended we were redundant and we were a burden’

Kornicki did not go back to Poland until 1964, when he was reunited with his elderly mother for the first time in 25 years. He recalled being tailed everywhere by the secret police — who made no secret of their presence. He then returned on many occasions, most recently to Cracow in 2015.

His memoir, *The Struggle: Biography of a Fighter Pilot*, appeared in 2008 and contains heart-rending memories of the many comrades who were killed in action. It was translated and published in Poland and South Korea, “a small country with two bullying neighbours”, as he liked to say. At times Kornicki was reunited with the aircraft that he had flown during the war. Taking his seat at the controls of a Spitfire in 2010, to mark the 70th anniversary of the Battle of Britain, he declared: “This is a wonderful bird to fly . . . It brings back lots of memories and everything comes alive again from so many years ago.” Much of his wartime memorabilia, including the attaché case that he was issued with at Deblin — his only piece of luggage when he arrived in Britain — is now in the Polish Museum at RAF Northolt.

Kornicki, who had been the last surviving Polish fighter squadron commander from the Second World War, recalled how the British and Polish pilots not only fought together but played together, notably in the bar. “There were Polish and British pilots, and civilians from the local area, all drinking together,” he said. “The landlord looked after the youngest and poorest pilots with particular care, and when he noticed a chap trying to make his half pint last the evening, he would discreetly send him a pint on the house.”

Franciszek Kornicki, wartime pilot, was born in December 18, 1916. He died on November 16, 2017, aged 100