I in the summer of 1939, the United Kingdom had its back against the wall.

The British Army had been kicked out of France by an all conquering German war machine - only the miracle of Dunkirk leaving survivors to talk about it.

The battle for France was over and the Battle of Britain had begun.

Only two things could save Britain from invasion - a primitive early warning radar system and the fighter pilots of the RAF.

If the Luftwaffe could gain air superiority, hundreds of barges moored in the French ports would ferry an invasion force to England and the centre of Empire and the British way of life would simply cease to exist.

Heavily outnumbered, the RAF faced terrible odds - the Luftwaffe had more pilots, many with vital combat experience from the Spanish Civil War and the invasion of Poland and the Low Countries - and they had the Messerschmitt BF109 fighter, superior at altitude to the Hawker Hurricane which made up the bulk of the RAF’s fighter defense.

During July of 1940, British losses were mounting, as the experienced core of RAF Fighter Command was exhausted by relentless German attacks. One by one, the best British pilots were shot down - a lucky few bailed out unscathed, but dozens were wounded daily, and many were killed.

These losses were replaced by mere boys: rushed through flight school and with only a few hours on fighters, their life expectancy was brutally short.

It was, the historians agree, our darkest hour.

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Later they would admit that they were driven by vengeance and had nothing to lose - but the impact of the hastily assembled 303 and 305 (Polish) RAF squadrons, and later the 303 and 305 (Polish) RAF squadrons was immense.

They attacked the Luftwaffe fighters and bombers with unbridled ferocity, closing to within yards of their enemy before firing - thus ensuring a kill.

The British airmen attacked aircraft, whereas the Poles attacked the Nazis in them - this was the difference in approach which meant that it was 303 (Polish) Squadron that had the highest kill ratio of the Battle of Britain.

The highest scoring ‘ace’ of the Battle of Britain was a member of 303 (Polish) Squadron: 26 year old Sergeant Josef Frantisek achieved no fewer than 17 kills during his six weeks in the battle, before he tragically died in an unexplained air crash in October 1940.

At the key point of the Battle of Britain, a full 30% of the fighter pilots in action were Polish - without them, most historians agree that the Battle of Britain, and by extension the war - would have been lost.

But then, as all hope was fading, we were saved... by a few dozen Polish airmen.

They had escaped their homeland as it was razed to the ground, fought their way through France and now a hard corps of Polish fighter pilots strapped themselves into Hurricanes and reached for the sky over southern England.

Never... in the field of human conflict, has so much been owed by so many to so few.

- Prime Minister Winston Churchill

With the assistance of local agencies the Polish RAF Group would begin a programme of education and information within the Loyalist communities of Northern Ireland, the overall goal of which would be to foster better relationships between the communities, based on common history and shared knowledge.

The Polish RAF Group would commission a series of murals depicting Polish RAF heroism during the Battle of Britain, along with a touring exhibition, which would visit and inform each Loyalist community prior to the unveiling of a WW2 mural in that area.

A television documentary would bring the story to a wider audience, with teaching packs for schools bringing the project before as wide an age group as possible.

The 75th anniversary of the Battle Of Britain will be celebrated across the UK on 5th September, 2020.

This project gives Northern Ireland the opportunity not only to take part in the celebration, but to lead it.
The best remaining example of a WW2 RAF control tower in Northern Ireland is at RAF Ballyhalbert, the easternmost point in Northern Ireland, less than twenty miles from the coast of Scotland.

RAF Ballyhalbert was ideally placed as a Luftwaffe bomber interceptor base during WW2, and the flat, coastal terrain made it a good base on paper, but proximity to the sea delivered crosswinds which made take-off and landing difficult, especially for Spitfires, with their trademark elliptical wing and narrow undercarriage.

Many pilots learned that landing on Ballyhalbert’s concrete runways was a bit like landing on a carrier - you got it right or you crashed, sometimes fatally.

RAF Ballyhalbert opened in May 1941, as an RAF Fighter Command base, where the primary weapon was the Supermarine Spitfire. The base provided local protection from Luftwaffe raids on Belfast and the rest of the Province.

During its lifetime, Ballyhalbert was home to RAF, Women’s Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF), British Army, Royal Navy and United States Army Air Force (USAAF) personnel.

Servicemen from Australia, New Zealand, Canada and Poland also saw duty at Ballyhalbert.

In 1943, the legendary 315 (Polish) RAF Squadron was posted to Ballyhalbert, which by then was an Operational Training Unit (OTU), where crews trained before going into front line combat - or, in the case of 315, rested after a long spell at front line airfields.

A unique photo archive exists of the various Polish squadrons which spent time at RAF Ballyhalbert, some examples of which are displayed here.

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The Polish RAF Group
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