



MEMORIAL ASSOCIATION FOR FREE CZECHOSLOVAK VETERANS

BACKGROUND

Following WWII, two Czechoslovak veterans' associations were formed in the UK, the Association of Czechoslovak Legionaries Abroad (ACLA) in May 1949 and, later, the Free Czechoslovak Air Force Association (FCAFA). After the death of the last Czechoslovak RAF veteran living in the UK in 2017, the FCAFA was dissolved in 2018 and a new Association formed called the Memorial Association for Free Czechoslovak Veterans (MAFCSV). Discussions between the MAFCSV and the ACLA then led to the Associations amalgamating in September 2019, on the basis that they shared a common constituency and purpose. It was agreed that the amalgamated Association would keep the name the Memorial Association for Free Czechoslovak Veterans.

The MAFCSV is a not-for-profit organisation. Its purpose is to honour and remember the Czechoslovak servicemen and women and others who fought for the freedom and democracy of Czechoslovakia and Europe during WWII and subsequently, and to ensure that they are never forgotten and that their story lives on for future generations. It is recognised by both the Czech and Slovak Embassies in the UK and by their governments as the leading organisation with this role in the UK.

The Association engages in a large number of activities to further its purpose, including holding two major commemorative events annually, one at Cholmondeley Castle in Cheshire in July and one at the Brookwood Military Cemetery in Surrey in October.

CZECHOSLOVAK ARMED FORCES - WWII UK BASED

Few people know that several thousand Czechoslovaks fought alongside the British during WWII. Campaigns and battle honours include the Battle of France, the Battle of Britain, Tobruk, and the Siege of Dunkirk. Others took part in campaigns in the Carpathian Mountains.

Following the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Nazi Germany in March 1939, Czechoslovaks escaped through Europe to French held territory to fight with the Western Allies in the Battle of France in 1940, initially under the French Foreign Legion and then as the 1st Czechoslovak Division. As the Allies retreated, the Czechoslovaks withdrew from the Marne to various ports in the south of France from where they were evacuated to the UK in an operation organised by the Royal Navy using commandeered merchant ships. On arrival, they numbered some three thousand five hundred soldiers and airmen, the majority initially based in a camp in the grounds of Cholmondeley Castle in Cheshire. Determined to continue the fight, they reorganised quickly and formed a brigade and three Czechoslovak RAF Squadrons. In time, the overall Czechoslovak military infrastructure consisted of a Ministry of Defence, the brigade, four RAF squadrons and training and administrative units. Czechoslovak men and women also served in various other military units, in particular in British ones.

Britain was short of trained aircrew and the Czechoslovak airmen were a valuable addition to the RAF's fighting strength. They were soon in action with two RAF (Czechoslovak) Squadrons, Nos. 310 and 312, taking part in the Battle of Britain. A third squadron, No. 311, which also formed in 1940, was a bomber squadron; it later transferred from Bomber Command to Coastal Command to fly maritime patrols. A fourth squadron, No. 313, another fighter squadron, was formed in January 1941. All four squadrons played an active role throughout the War. A number of Czechoslovaks served in other squadrons, in particular in No. 68 Squadron, a night fighter squadron.

The brigade, 1st Czechoslovak Mixed Brigade, prepared for the expected German invasion and to playing its part in the defence of the UK. (A plaque in Coventry acknowledges the support it provided to the city following the blitz it suffered in 1940.) In 1943, reinforced by a Czechoslovak unit arriving from the Middle East, where it had deployed having fought at Tobruk, the brigade converted from an infantry to an armoured role. Restructured, re-equipped and renamed 1st Czechoslovak Independent Armoured Brigade Group, it disembarked in France in August 1944 following

the D-Day landings and in October was tasked with containing the strong and very active German garrison which was holding Dunkirk. After months of fighting, the garrison surrendered on 9 May 1945.

Some of those in the brigade volunteered for special operations. They were trained by the Special Operations Executive (SOE) and were known as 'Parachutists'. Their most notable operation, 'Operation Anthropoid', was the assassination of SS General Reinhard Heydrich, Acting Reich Protector of Bohemia and Moravia and known as the 'Butcher of Prague', in May 1942.

The brigade entered Czechoslovakia on 18 May 1945 and the squadrons returned in August 1945, all to become part of Czechoslovakia's new armed forces.

MEMORIALS

There are many memorials to the Czechoslovak Forces in the UK, ranging from major ones to those commemorating a particular incident/particular individual. Major ones include those located at Arisaig in Inverness-shire, Brookwood in Surrey, Cholmondeley Castle in Cheshire, Leamington Spa in Warwickshire and in Westminster Abbey. Three are mentioned below - at two of them, Brookwood and Cholmondeley, the MAFCSV holds major commemorative events annually.

CZECHOSLOVAK ARMY¹ MEMORIAL - CHOLMONDELEY²

The Czechoslovak Army Memorial in the grounds of Cholmondeley Castle commemorates the arrival of Czechoslovak forces in the UK and the formation of the Czechoslovak Army Abroad. It is dated 7 July 1940³. It was unveiled on 28 September 1940 by Jan Masaryk, the Minister of Foreign Affairs in the Czechoslovak Government-in-Exile based in London and son of Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, the founding father of the First Czechoslovak Republic.

George, 5th Marquess of Cholmondeley, then serving as a fire officer in London was represented by his younger son, Lord John Cholmondeley, at the unveiling and sent these words: *'I, or those who will come after me, shall forever, once a year, lay flowers at this Memorial which you will leave behind you here; the monument that is commemorating courageous people that suffer so greatly.'*

BROOKWOOD CEMETERY AND BROOKWOOD MILITARY CEMETERY

Brookwood Cemetery, also known as the London Necropolis, was established in 1854 in Brookwood, Surrey. Although smaller in size now than when originally established, it still covers two hundred and twenty acres and is the largest cemetery in the United Kingdom and one of the largest in Europe.

In 1917 during WWI, an area in the cemetery was set aside to provide a burial site for men and women of the Commonwealth and American armed forces who had died in the United Kingdom of wounds and other causes. This area, the Brookwood Military Cemetery, is owned by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and covers approximately thirty seven acres. Some five thousand and seventy seven Commonwealth servicemen who fell in the two World Wars are buried here. Alongside these graves, in other sections, are the graves of eight hundred service personnel from the USA and from countries occupied by the Germans during WW2 including Belgium, Czechoslovakia, France, Holland and Poland.

BROOKWOOD MILITARY CEMETERY - CZECHOSLOVAK SECTION

The Czechoslovak section in the south-east corner of the cemetery features a large Czechoslovak memorial and contains the graves of forty five Czechoslovak service personnel who died in the UK whilst serving with the RAF and with the Czechoslovak Brigade. The graves of three other Czechoslovak servicemen are in the RAF rows which lie close to the Czechoslovak section.

¹ The term Army as used here encompasses both Ground and Air Forces.

² The Czechoslovak brigade was at Cholmondeley from July to October 1940, at Leamington Spa from October 1940 to May 1942 and then at a number of other locations before embarking for France in August 1944.

³ It was carved by Private František (Franta) Bělský, at that time a young soldier in the brigade, who later became an internationally recognised sculptor.

BROOKWOOD CEMETERY - CZECHOSLOVAK PLOT

Those Czechoslovak veterans who returned home after fighting with the Western Allies in WWII found themselves labelled enemies of the state and persecuted by the Communist regime which came to power in 1948. Some escaped for a second time to the UK, joining others who had remained there. For very many years the political situation in Czechoslovakia meant that they could not be buried in their homeland, so the veterans established a plot in Brookwood Cemetery immediately adjacent to their 'brothers in arms' in the military cemetery. This plot has around one hundred headstones, including the largest group of Battle of Britain pilots buried in one place. It is maintained by the MAFCSV.

WESTMINSTER ABBEY

On the wall of the West Cloister of Westminster Abbey is a bronze memorial plaque, designed by Franta Bělský, to the Czechoslovak forces who served alongside the British in the Second World War. It was unveiled by the Marquess of Cholmondeley and the inscription reads:

"To the memory of all members of the Czechoslovak Army and Air Force who came as allies to this country and died in its defence and for the liberation of Europe 1940-1945. Unveiled on the 28 October 1993 on the 75th anniversary of the founding of the Czechoslovak Republic".

The event was organised by the then Chairman of the Czechoslovak Legionaries Abroad, Major-General Miloslav Kašpar, and among the guests were The Earl Kitchener of Khartoum and Mr. Winston Spencer-Churchill, grandson of Sir Winston Churchill.

As well as the memorial in the West Cloister, the Battle of Britain memorial window in the RAF Chapel includes the furlled flag of Czechoslovakia and the twenty Czechoslovak pilots killed in that battle are remembered in the Roll of Honour which is kept there.