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Wing Commander Gordon Pryor: wartime special duties pilot  
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A special duties pilot with 148 Squadron in the latter part of the Second World War, Gordon Pryor carried out supply drops to resistance groups in Italy and the Balkans, and was one of the airmen of the RAF, South African Air Force and the Polish Air Force who in August and September 1944 flew from bases in southern Italy to drop aid to the insurgents of the doomed Warsaw Uprising.

Richard Gordon Pryor was born in 1920 the son of a Cornish tenant farmer. He was educated at Helston Secondary School, from where he joined the Inland Revenue, in Truro.

On the outbreak of war in 1939 he joined the RAF. After a period as a flying instructor he volunteered for Bomber Command and in July 1944 was posted to 148 Squadron in southern Italy. Its task was to drop supplies and agents into enemy-held territory in northern Italy and the Balkans and to resistance groups in Poland.

By the end of July he and his Halifax crew had flown ten sorties, mainly to the Alpine valleys of northern Italy, hazardous operations in a large aircraft at low level in darkness and bad weather with mountains towering above. He and his crew, navigator, wireless operator, bomb aimer and gunners, were to remain a close-knit group throughout their tour of duty.

When, on August 1, 1944, the Polish Home Army in Warsaw rose against the Germans the expectation was that help would arrive either from the Western Allies or from the Red Army, which had advanced to within sight of the city. The latter was not to be forthcoming, the Soviet Army halting on its side of the Vistula while Stalin refused landing rights to Allied aircraft.

Allied supplies were flown from Italy by 148 and 178 Squadrons of the RAF, 31 Squadron of the South African Air Force and the Polish 1586 Special Duties Flight. The 2,000-mile return flight over Yugoslavia, Hungary and the Carpathians, with only a short period of summer darkness was a hazardous one. Supplies had to be dropped from below 400ft with speed reduced to 150mph in the hope that they would fall in the relatively small areas held by the Poles.

On the night of August 4-5, 1944, 148 Squadron sent seven aircraft to Warsaw. One returned early and crashed on landing, another was compelled to dump its cargo after engine trouble, and four were shot down, leaving just one to find the dropping zone. Pryor recalled in 2007, in a letter to the Warsaw Uprising Museum, that "this was not one of the squadron's better nights".

After this carnage Pryor, the last remaining officer pilot in the squadron, was promoted to squadron leader and given command of it. The Warsaw Uprising collapsed after 63 days

on October 2, 1944. The cost to the Allies was some 200 British, South African and Polish aircrew who lost their lives maintaining the Warsaw link. Pryor was awarded a DFC, and he was one of six British airmen to receive the Polish Cross of Valour for his part in attempting to succour Warsaw.

He was to complete further sorties over the Balkans in the autumn of 1944 flying aid to Yugoslav partisans. After the German withdrawal from Greece, when civil war broke out between the ELAS guerrillas and the British-backed Greek Government, on December 18 he captained his Halifax to drop supplies to a British HQ besieged by ELAS fighters. In May 1945 he was awarded a Bar to his DFC having been promoted to wing commander.

His flying duties left him profoundly deaf, which precluded a regular commission. He returned to the Inland Revenue in Truro, retiring as a district inspector at Winchester in 1980. In retirement he visited Poland several times, touched by the gratitude that Poles showed to those who had flown over Warsaw. He was especially moved by the devotion with which villagers cared for monuments that they had erected to mark the places where Allied aircrews had crashed and died.

Pryor reciprocated the hospitality shown to him in Poland, inviting Poles over to England and taking them to his beloved Cornwall. He was chairman of the 148 Squadron Association and was closely involved with the Warsaw Airbridge Club, which encompassed ground and aircrew of the British, South African and Polish units that had flown to Warsaw

A quiet and unassuming man, he did not talk about his wartime exploits other than with his close group of RAF veterans. In retirement he and his wife Elisabeth, whom he married in 1943, gave much of their time to the British Heart Foundation and to the Royal Air Force Association. She died in 2007; he is survived by a son.

Wing Commander Gordon Pryor, DFC and Bar, wartime special duties pilot, was born on December 10, 1920. He died on September 3, 2009, aged 88