



## The heroic destroyer and “lucky” ship O.R.P. “Blyskawica”

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### Abstract

The destroyer O.R.P. “Blyskawica” is a precious national relic, the only remaining ship that was built before World War II (WW2). On the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of its service under the Polish flag, it was honoured with the highest military decoration – the Gold Cross of the Virtuti Militari Medal. It has been the only such case in the whole history of the Polish Navy. Its our national hero, war-veteran and very “lucky” warship.

“Blyskawica” took part in almost every important operation in Europe throughout WW2. It sailed and covered the Baltic Sea, North Sea, all the area around Great Britain, the Atlantic Ocean and Mediterranean Sea. During the war “Blyskawica” covered a distance of 148 thousand miles, guarded 83 convoys, carried out 108 operational patrols, participated in sinking two warships, damaged three submarines and certainly shot down four war-planes and quite probably three more. It was seriously damaged three times as a result of operational action. The crew casualties aggregated to a total of only 5 killed and 48 wounded petty officers and seamen, so it was a very “lucky” ship during WW2.

In July 1947 the ship came back to Gdynia in Poland and started training activities. Having undergone rearmament and had a general overhaul, it became an anti-aircraft defence ship.

In 1976 it replaced O.R.P. “Burza” as a Museum-Ship. At present it belongs to the Navy Museum. It also adds splendour to official ceremonies with the participation of the admiralty.



## 1 Introduction

After 123 years of captivity, Poland regained its independence in 1918, according to the Versailles Treaty. Many of the newly created offices and administrative institutions were appointed for the efficient control of the state. One of these institutions was the Polish Navy which the chief of state, Pilsudski Jozef, created following a decision on 28 November 1918. From that moment the growth of the Polish Navy began, alongside the building of harbours and related infrastructures.

Growth of the shipbuilding industry with a weak sea economy did not permit the building of ships according to aspirations and plans. In this connection small ships were built in Poland (e.g. minesweepers), while the building of larger ships was tendered to foreign shipyards.

In the twenties and thirties the destroyers "Wicher" and "Burza" were ordered, among others, also the submarines "Wilk", "Zbik" and "Rys", and the minelayer "Gryf", all of which were built in French shipyards. Two further submarines, "Orzel" and "Sep", were built in Holland. In England an order was also given for the building of two modern destroyers with a large part of Polish equipment. Contracts for building "Blyskawica" and "Grom" were signed in 1935. The value of the contract carried out was 450,000 pounds sterling for one ship, whose building lasted two years.

The launch of ORP "Blyskawica" took place on 1 October 1936, and on 25 November 1937 the Polish banner was raised – the ship was finished on service in the Polish Navy. After replenishment "Blyskawica" was moored in the navy harbour in Gdynia on 1 December 1937. Both destroyers, built in the English shipyard Samuel White in Cowes on the Isle Of Wight, characterised the modern shape, with one mast and one chimney; they were fast, manoeuvrable and strongly armed.

Many of new technical solutions were applied on them – e.g. two waterproof bulkheads divided the engine room, and a system of expression of air was brought to the boiler room and hearths.

In the year 1938 intensive training of the ship's crew was took place on board the "Blyskawica". The growing anxiety of war in Europe, as well as the expected aggression of the Germans in Poland, caused the signing of international agreements, e.g. with Great Britain. One day, before WW2 started, it was decided that three Polish destroyers, "Blyskawica" "Burza" and "Grom", would sail for England. The reason was to protect ships from certain destruction in the first days of the war (in the face of considerable superiority of Germans), and also to assure the better defence of Great Britain after accession to war.

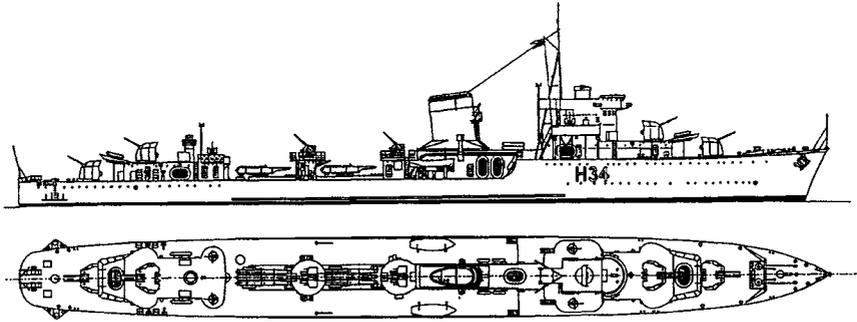


Figure 1. Blyskawica's diagram from 1937.

## 2 War activity (H-34)

### 2.1 At the side of the Royal Navy

On 3 September 1939 Great Britain entered WW2 against Germany. According to a Polish – British agreement, three Polish destroyers were seconded to the Royal Navy, under the command of Admiral MD Nasmith, with their base at Davenport. On 7 September 1939, while sailing through the Strait of Minches, (between Hybrids and Scotland) “Blyskawica” and “Grom” carried out a depth charge attack on a German U-boat. An oil slick was observed, so the British Admiralty assumed that the German submarine was at least damaged. It was the first attack on a U-boat during WW2. In this period escorting of troop carriers along the south coast of England was the main assignment of “Blyskawica”. The Polish destroyers received British tactical numbers: “Blyskawica” H-34, “Grom” H-71 and “Burza” H-73, additionally, a British Liaison Officer and three petty officers were assigned onto every ship.

In October 1939, at a time of shipbuilding repair, 120 tons of equipment was removed from “Blyskawica” and “Grom” in order to improve the stability and heeling, as the ships were found to be top heavy in the Atlantic swell. In October the Polish ships (plus five other destroyers) formed 22 Destroyer Flotilla (22 DF) with the task of patrolling and penetrating Irish territorial waters in search of U-boats. On 29 October 1939 the Polish destroyers were reassigned to the area of Harwich into the elite 1 Destroyer Flotilla (1 DF), commanded by Capt. G. E. Creasy. The task of the Flotilla was to carry out patrols near the area of Belgium and Holland to protect British harbours against the German Air Force, to lay mines in German shipping areas and to block the enemy's cargo delivery. On 7 November 1939 “Blyskawica” and “Grom” were attacked by German fighters. Two He-115's launched a torpedo attack, fortunately they missed as a result of a course change by the destroyers. It is considered to be the first air torpedo attack

*144 Maritime Heritage*

in WW2. On 17 November 1939, "Blyskawica", "Burza" and "Grom", and submarines "Orzel" and "Wilk", were inspected at the base in Rosyth by Polish Prime Minister and Chief of Staff General Wladyslaw Sikorski. In that period "Blyskawica" became famous for the rescue of 19 survivors from the merchant ship "Sherf Crest". On 17 December 1939, "Blyskawica" took part in minelaying operations near the German harbour of Emden. On 4 April 1940 the Polish destroyers were transferred to a base in Scapa Flow in the Orkneys.

After the invasion of German armies in Norway in April 1940 "Blyskawica" participated in Norwegian Operations. Polish warships operated in regions between Narvik and Lofoten Islands, e.g. protected landing operations of the British soldiers near Bodo, convoyed troop transport and supported Allied troops with artillery fire against the "Luftwaffe": during the course of one day the 40mm "Bofors" guns fired 2,300 shells. On 2 May 1940 during German air raids, "Blyskawica" was heavily bombed by enemy aircraft and dismissed to its base, and was replaced by the twinship "Grom". Unfortunately on 4 May 1940 "Grom" was sunk by bombs of the German Airforce. During the withdrawing of Allies from Norway, on 10 May 1940, German bombers He-111's attacked "Blyskawica" but its anti-aircraft artillery shot down one airplane, and damaged another. It happened thanks to the use of 40mm anti-aircraft artillery, made by "Bofors", with an effective range of fire of 5000 m. British ships used anti-aircraft artillery with a range of about only 2000 m.

In consequence of the offensive of the German armies in Belgium and Holland "Blyskawica" together with British H.M.S. "Gallant" and H.M.S. "Vivacjus" were involved in the operation called "Dynamo", that was the hasty evacuation of the of British Expeditionary Corps from the French harbour of Dunkirk. During this operation the probable next German airplane was shot down. In that period "Blyskawica" became famous for the rescue of 15 sailors from the French destroyer "Sirocco", she also towed the disabled British destroyer "H.M.S. Greyhound" to Dover. During the operation "Dynamo" Allies lost 240 ships, but they managed to evacuate 330,000 soldiers from the beaches of Dunkirk, including 100,000 French soldiers. After the end of the operation the Commanding Officer, two Officers, four Petty Officers and two sailors were awarded the Polish "Krzyz Walecznych" ("Cross of Valour").

On 6 April 1940 "Blyskawica" sailed to its mother shipyard in Cowes for repair, a refit and total rearmament. The Anti Submarine Warfare (ASW) systems were modernised and an "Asdic" device, for detecting submarines, was installed. After completing the refit on 31 August 1940 "Blyskawica" escorted a convoy on the Atlantic Ocean that consisted of 51 ships. In September 1940 "Blyskawica" "Burza" and "Garland" were assigned to the 5 Destroyers Flotilla (5 DF) The main task was patrolling French coasts, mainly at night, and later escorting convoys on Atlantic routes. On 13 March 1941, while German aircraft were bombing, the first loss was noted among the ship's crew: the sailor Spsychalski died because of a heart attack. In June 1941 "Blyskawica" came to the shipyard in Cowes for general repair and rearmament. Instead of seven "Bofors" guns of 120mm and an angle of elevation of 35°, eight universal Vickers-Armstrong cannons of 102mm and an angle of elevation of 85° were

installed, and 13.2mm anti-aircraft single rifles were replaced by 20mm anti-aircraft made by "Oerlikon". Additionally, artillery, radar and an early warning radar system were installed.

From December 1941 "Blyskawica" covered Icelandic convoys again, at this time it sailed a total of 20,000 miles. The most important events from this period were that a Swedish ship sunk on 2 January 1942 while escorting the passenger ship "Queen Elizabeth" and defending the Atlantic convoy (S.C. -94) sailing from Canada to Great Britain. In consequence of the breakdown of two boilers as well as damage of its superstructure and hull, "Blyskawica" was repaired for three months in Southampton, Portsmouth and Cowes. In May 1942 the crew of "Blyskawica" took part in the extinguishing of fires on the terrain of the shipyard and cities, and came to the medical care of citizens. Citizens of Cowes and the Shipyard's Management commemorated this brave and heroic event. The commemorative medal and plaque was issued and placed on the wall of the Town Hall. In May 2002 the delegation from the Polish Navy visited Cowes during the celebrations of 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the defence of the city by the crew of "Blyskawica".

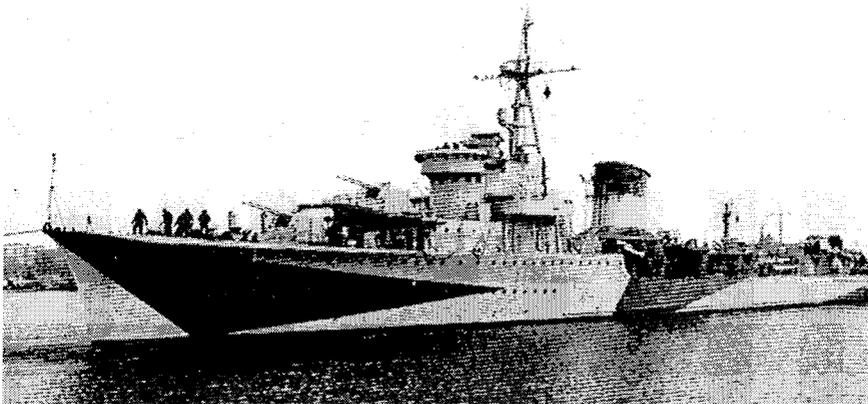


Figure 2. "Blyskawica" in camouflage, originally just like in 1941.

## 2.2 Mediterranean Sea

On 18 May 1942 "Blyskawica", with the new commander alongside British destroyers H.M.S. "Bramham" and "Cowdray", sailed to Gibraltar and into the Mediterranean Sea to take part in the Torch operation, that is the landing of Allies in North Africa. "Blyskawica" escorted aircraft carrier "Furious" which delivered thirty-two Spitfire fighters for the Malta defenders, and then escorted a fast landing operation composed of 32,000 soldiers into the region of Algiers. She also gave artillery fire support to the beaches of Beer Green in the region of Sidi Ferruch. On 12 November 1942 in the region of Cape Bougie, the ship fought off the heaviest enemy aircraft raid consisting of a strength of over forty bombers. Over 20% of the ship's crew were wounded and died.

### 146 Maritime Heritage

In December 1942 “Blyskawica” became assigned to the Forces “H” and it operated in the western part of the Mediterranean Sea. In March 1943 “Blyskawica” joined Forces “Q” with supply bases in Algiers and Bone and patrolled the region of the Sicilian strait, mainly to block German and Italian deliveries to North Africa. In this time, the ship also protected simulated landing operations of the Allies near Tunis. “Blyskawica” saved five British pilots around Gibraltar. For his activity in the Mediterranean Sea the Commanding Officer received the Distinguished Service Medal and the ship's crew got medals and congratulations from the Commander of the Fleet, admiral Andrew Cunningham.

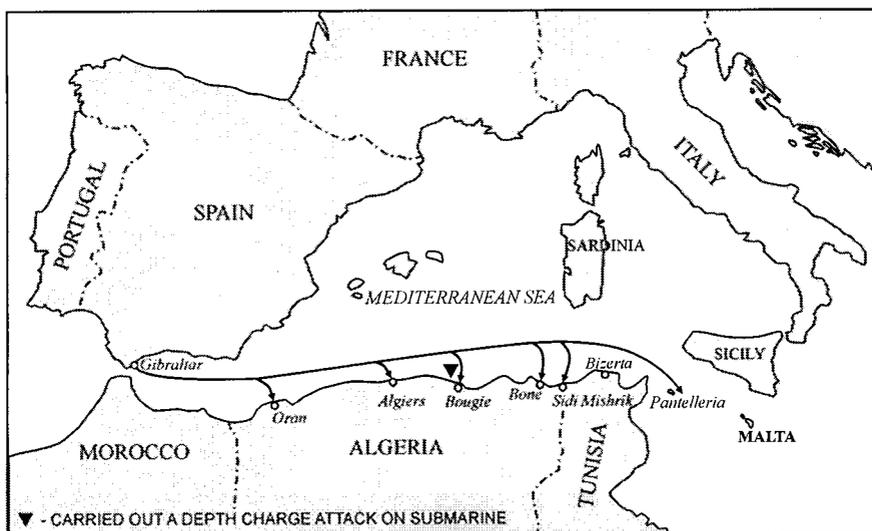


Figure 3. Combat missions of “Blyskawica” in the Mediterranean Sea.

### 2.3 North Sea

In May 1943 “Blyskawica” came back to Great Britain where general repairs in a shipyard in Cowes took place until November 1943. In December the ship was incorporated into the Home Fleet with its base in Scapa Flow and with the assignment of escorting convoys and single ships on a route to Iceland. Later, “Blyskawica” took part in the “Bayleaf” operation, which was the destruction of German Navy forces and bases in Norway. In connection with the planning of allied forces landing in Normandy – an operation called “Overlord” – the international Fleet of Destroyers was created (F-26) including 20 Squadron with the Polish destroyers “Blyskawica” and “Piorun”, as well as the British destroyers H.M.S. “Eskimo” and “Javelin” operating from a base in Plymouth. The squadron’s task was to patrol the region between Brest and the Island of Jersey. At night from 8 to 9 June 1944 the team fought a sea battle with four German destroyers from the base in Brest. As a result of the artillery’s fire, two

German destroyers, “Z-32” and “ZH-1”, were sunk. From July to October 1944 “Blyskawica” participated in 26 combat patrols sailing about 21,000 nautical miles sinking trade ships, escorting the British cruiser “Prince Robert” as well as providing the French Resistance with weapon and ammunition. At the beginning of 1945 some Allies ships were withdrawn from the line and were sent for repairs. “Blyskawica” was also included and traditionally sent to the shipyard in Cowes. The ship returned to service in July 1945 and managed to take part, together with the Polish destroyers “Garland”, “Piorun” and “Krakowiak”, in sinking over 100 German U-Boats.

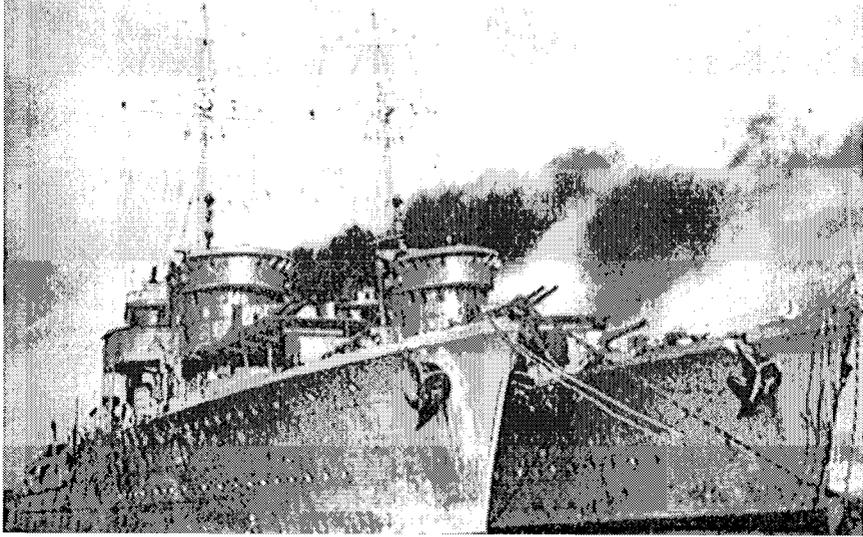


Figure 4. “Blyskawica” and twinship “Grom” during the Second World War.

### **3 War time’s resume**

In the time of war, the destroyer sailed 148,356 nautical miles, escorted 83 convoys, participated in 108 patrols and operations, took part in the destruction of two trade ships and damaged six surface ships, as well as three submarines, shot down four airplanes, and probably two more. It was damaged three times while carrying out its battle assignments. The crew casualties aggregated to a total of five killed and forty-eight wounded petty officers and sailors.

Between 1945 and 1946 “Blyskawica” was assigned to the Home Fleet again and then directed to a base in Rosyth. On demand of the British Admiralty, Poles passed the ship and they lowered the Polish banner. On 28 May 1946 sailors from “Blyskawica” alongside other crews of Polish ships were placed in camps for repatriates. In December 1946 British authorities agreed to conversations in a matter of the return of ships to Poland and an agreement was reached in April 1947. On 1 July 1947 “Blyskawica”, under the command of Captain B.



## 148 *Maritime Heritage*

Romanowski, with 177 crew and with equipment and armament, went out to sea and after 4 days, at about 9 a.m., after 94 months of service abroad, it moored in Gdynia.

### **4 After war back again to Poland**

In the first two years of its return to Poland, "Blyskawica" was used as a training ship and cruised with Officer Cadets on board. In 1951 "Blyskawica" visited Leningrad. One year later the ship's modernisation and total rearmament were undertaken. The main artillery was exchanged to 1934 B-34 model Soviet cannons with a calibre of 100 mm, and the anti-aircraft artilleries were changed entirely. In the place of "Bofors" anti-aircraft and "Oerlikon" guns, 1939 model 37mm calibre anti-aircraft guns (4 double "W-11-M." and 2 single "70-K"). were installed. In the place of the old 4 x 533, 4 mm calibre torpedo launcher, there was installed three model "53-38" tubular Soviet torpedo launchers. Depth charge launchers by "Thornycroft" were also changed to the Soviet model "BMB-2".

In 1955 "Blyskawica" together with "Burza" were abroad twice in July in Baltijsk, and in November in Portsmouth. In 1957 the ship was withdrawn from the line and it was sent for fundamental repairs for three and a half years. In June 1960 the ship came back to the line and it executed its training assignments. In the years 1961–66 the ship called at the ports of Helsinki, London, Stockholm, Copenhagen, Gutenberg, Leningrad (Saint Petersburg) and Narvik. Over time the ship was becoming technically outdated and a serious breakdown of its steam installation occurred in 1967. After an analysis of its physical state, some decisions were made about "Blyskawica" repairs, and it was then assigning to the system of anti-aircraft defence of the sea bases. In June 1969 after the disassembly of equipment, "Blyskawica" was towed to the navy harbour in Swinoujscie and was subordinated to the 8<sup>th</sup> Flotilla of Coastal Defence (8 FOW).

### **5 Museum-Ship**

Between 1960 and 1970 the dynamic development of rocket weapons took place. In addition to this, the immobilised "Blyskawica" degenerated quickly and the decision about its withdrawal was made. After 37 years of active service it was transformed into a museum. On 6 November 1974 the ship was towed from Swinoujscie to Gdynia where the Museum-Ship "Burza" was moored. At the beginning of 1975 adaptive works began on "Blyskawica" in frames of which the under-water part of hulk was preserved, and driving screws were removed. The fore naval rooms, officer mess and living room were transformed into a representative room called "Salon Kaprow", and rooms in the stern into exhibition halls. Special passages were built through the engine room, gangplanks and companionways were modernised and all, in addition to one of the steam boilers, were made accessible to sightseers. All adaptive works were finished on 24 April 1976. "Blyskawica" was placed in the centre of Gdynia at

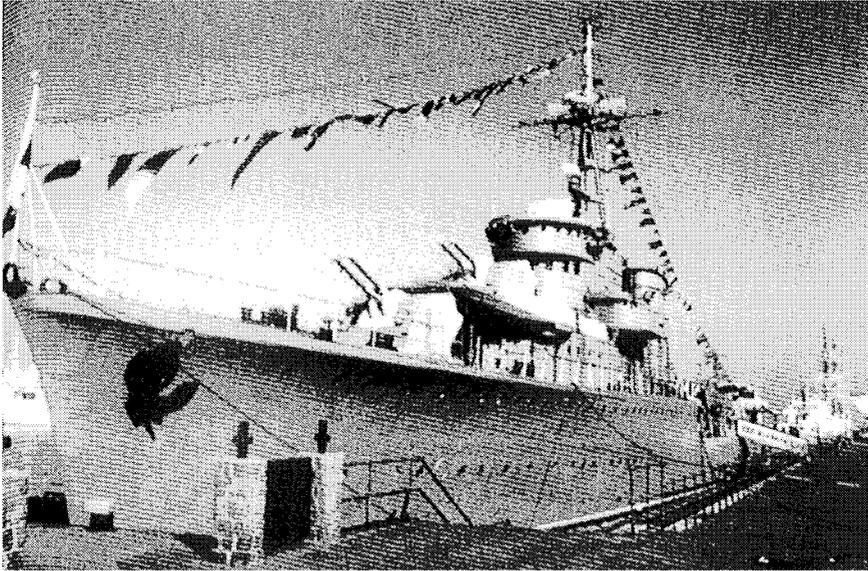


Figure 5. The Museum-Ship O.R.P. "Blyskawica".

Kosciuszko Square, where from 1 May 1976 it has been playing an honourable part of a Museum - Ship.

In the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary (1987) of service under the Polish flag the Minister of Defence honoured "Blyskawica" with the highest distinction: the Gold Cross of Virtuti Militari Medal

Museum-Ship "Blyskawica" is an integral part of the Navy's Museum in Gdynia. Visitors are shown the original bell from 1937, commemoration board listing all of the ship's crew killed, as well as boards with surnames of every Commanding Officer, and a commemorating board of the defence of the English town of Cowes by the crew of Blyskawica in 1942, founded and presented by the authority of the town to the ship on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of events (1992). All the armament on board is shown. Under deck are presented rooms with exhibitions of historical array. It is spread over a 170 m<sup>2</sup> area and demonstrates traditions of the Polish Navy at sea, since the Middle Ages till today, drawing special attention to the World War II period. Main exhibits are the ship models, arms, uniforms, decorations, flags and ensigns, documents, elements of deck equipment and other relics of the past.

The Museum-Ship is open daily for visitors from May to the middle of November, except Mondays and after-holiday days, from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. and from 2 p.m. to 5 p.m.

"Blyskawica" is a very popular place to visit for citizens of Tri-city and visitors from Poland and from abroad. (one million guest visited "Blyskawica" in the years of 1979, two million in 1983, three million in 1988 and four million in 1997).

## 150 Maritime Heritage

“Blyskawica” adds splendour to official ceremonies with the participation of the admiralty as well as annual promotions of cadets graduated from the Naval University of Gdynia for their first officer rank. Many promotions of marine books occur in the representative room “Salon Kaprow”. The most important ceremony which occurred on board of “Blyskawica” was the solemn oath and the ceremony of the take over of supremacy of the Polish Armed Forces by the President of the Polish Republic, Mr Kwasniewski Aleksander on 23 December 2001.

The ship is under systematic repair and refits, because it does not stand in dry dock, it floats on the water, so it has to be painted very often to protect it from corrosion. The systems of sweet water, drying, ventilation, electric cables and other equipment are constantly refitted.

Friends of the Museum-Ship “Blyskawica” Association was formed in July 1985, and made its aim to preserve this precious national relic for future generations. One of the task is to gather financial resources through voluntary fees of members and other companies, donations as well as statutory activity. From 1996 to 2001 the Association made possible the funding of maintenance work and redecoration for the sum of over 90,000 Polish zloty (about 25,000 Euro).

## 6 Conclusion

In conclusion, it is worth saying that the decision of building two destroyers in England was vital and gave hope for constructing more ships of this class in Polish Shipyards.

“Blyskawica” had a very modern shape at this time, was fast, manoeuvrable and strongly armed, apart from its problems with stability. Each Commanding Officer (between 1939–1946 there were 11<sup>th</sup> C.O.) and its crew showed that they were well trained, involved and eager to fight. The Museum-Ship “Blyskawica” is a part of the Second World War history, the Polish Navy and British shipyard’s workers pride, and a precious Polish national relic. It is also our national hero, war-veteran and very “lucky” warship for its crew.

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