

# Honouring a Sister in Arms: ORP *Błyskawica* Celebrates 50 Years as a Museum Ship

By Rick Bialachowski, 6 July 2025



*ORP Błyskawica in the Polish port of Gdynia. Photo IWCP Archive.*

This year, 2025, marks a proud milestone for our Polish sister ship, ORP *Błyskawica*, as she celebrates her 50th anniversary as a museum ship in Gdynia. For those of us who cherish the legacy of HMCS *Haida*, this is not merely a distant celebration—it is a moment to reflect on the shared history, courage, and enduring friendship between our two nations and their navies.

Commissioned in 1937, ORP *Błyskawica* (“Lightning”) was the second of two Grom-class destroyers built by J. Samuel White in Cowes, England. At the time, she was among the fastest and most heavily armed destroyers in the world, capable of reaching 39 knots and bristling with firepower. Her sleek design and advanced capabilities made her a symbol of Poland’s naval ambitions in the interwar period.

As the clouds of war gathered in 1939, Polish and British naval planners devised a bold strategy to preserve Poland’s most modern warships. The **Peking Plan**, named after the codename “Peking,” was a preemptive operation to evacuate three destroyers—*Błyskawica* (“Lightning”), *Grom* (“Thunder”), and *Burza* (“Storm”)—from the Baltic Sea to the United Kingdom. On 30 August 1939, under sealed orders, the ships slipped out of Gdynia and navigated through the Danish straits, evading German warships and aircraft. They arrived safely in Leith, Scotland, on 1 September—the very day Germany invaded Poland. Though controversial at the time, the plan proved prescient: the destroyers avoided certain destruction and went on to serve with distinction

alongside the Royal Navy throughout the war. Of the three, only *Blyskawica* and *Burza* survived the conflict.

Over the course of the Second World War, *Blyskawica* served with distinction in the Atlantic, Mediterranean, and English Channel. She escorted 83 convoys, conducted 108 patrols, and logged over 146,000 nautical miles. Her wartime record includes damaging three U-boats, downing at least four enemy aircraft, and participating in the Battle of Ushant in June 1944 as part of the 10th Destroyer Flotilla—alongside HMCS *Haida*.

Perhaps her most legendary moment came in May 1942, when she defended the town of Cowes on the Isle of Wight from a massive Luftwaffe raid. Undergoing repairs at the time, *Blyskawica*'s captain, Commander Wojciech Francki, defied orders to disarm and kept the ship battle-ready. When the attack came, her crew unleashed a fierce anti-aircraft barrage and laid a smokescreen that helped shield the town. The people of Cowes still honour her bravery, with a street named Francki Place and annual commemorations.



Banner in Cowes, UK Celebrating *Blyskawica*'s defence of Cowes



Bridge of ORP *Blyskawica* decorated with Golden Cross of the Order *Virtuti Militari*

After the war, *Blyskawica* returned to Poland in 1947 and served as a training and anti-aircraft ship until her decommissioning in 1976. She replaced *Burza* as a museum ship and national monument in Gdynia. Today, she is the **oldest preserved destroyer in the world** and the only Polish Navy ship awarded the **Virtuti Militari**, Poland's highest military honour.

In 2006, the twinning of HMCS *Haida* and ORP *Blyskawica* was formally recognized in a ceremony held in Gdynia. This twinning honours their shared wartime service and symbolizes the deep bonds between Canada and Poland. Commemorative plaques aboard both ships remind visitors of this enduring connection.

As *Blyskawica* celebrates 50 years of educating and inspiring visitors, we salute her crew—past and present—and the people of Poland. May her decks continue to echo with the footsteps of those who seek to understand the cost of freedom and the strength of international friendship.

**Sto lat, *Blyskawica*! Here's to the next 50.**