



**First to Fight: Threads of History**



## Memories which are still alive

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*Colonel Stanisław Berkiet*



It came to me recently that seventy years have elapsed since the start of World War II and that perhaps it would be wise to put down on paper those memories which are still alive and to share them with others.

For us as young men it was, of course, a great and at the same time terrible adventure which changed our lives forever. The difficult experiences that each of us went through during the entire duration of the war were, of course very different, depending on the places and circumstances in which we found ourselves, and so, in order to prevent this turning into a large volume,

I will describe the most important and the most memorable events that befell me.

Although I was involved in the underground army in Warsaw, I felt quite desperate because of the German occupation and so I came to the decision that, regardless of any dangers I might encounter on the way, I would endeavour to reach the Polish Army which, at the time, was interned in Hungary. And so, in April 1940, I began my journey. However, fate was against me and, in May of that year, after crossing the artificial Soviet/German border in Przemyśl, on the river San, Poland, I found myself in a Russian prison on the false charge of being a spy.

I spent nine months in two of the prisons, namely Przemyśl, and then in Starobielsk, in the Ukraine. I was sentenced to five years of hard labour in Kotlas. The conditions in the hard labour camp were utterly inhuman and the daily food rations were determined by work quotas set by the camp authorities and impossible to achieve. The starvation rations led to malnutrition, giving prisoners the haunting appearance of walking cadavers. Thanks to the Sikorski-Maiski agreement, I only served nine months.

After the release of the Polish prisoners of war from the prisons and labour camps, General Anders began to assemble the first detachments in August 1941, which was when he gave his first order to the newly formed Polish Army. In

March 1942, having overcome endless obstacles, I, too, finally succeeded in joining the Polish Army, a section of which was being organised at that time in Lugovaya, Kazakhstan.

The conditions in which the Polish Army in Russia underwent its training were exceptionally difficult: the lack of regular rations allocated by the Russians, problems with accommodation—particularly during the long winter months when the temperature dropped to below  $-43^{\circ}\text{C}$ , the absence of uniforms, the constant interference of the Russian authorities, but most significantly the lack of fighting equipment. All this made normal training impossible. Even we, as parachutists/commandos of Battalion 'S', did not possess anything related to our function, apart from the parachute practice tower which, however, was somewhat useless without the necessary parachutes, which we never received prior to our departure from Russia.

After difficult negotiations with Stalin, General Anders secured the evacuation of the Polish Army, and as many of the surviving Polish families as possible, out of Russia to Persia. This took place between March and September 1942. It must be said that, by this time, some of the detachments were close to resembling an army—but not quite.

Intensive training, at long last, took place in Iraq with fighting equipment such as tanks, armoured cars, means of communication etc., suitable for military operations. Our enemy called us 'the tourist army' since, after leaving the Soviet 'hell', we spent several weeks recuperating in Persia, after which we were transferred to Iraq, then Palestine and finally to Egypt where, after a short sojourn, we left to fight the Germans in Italy.

The war, for me, began with the Italian campaign after we arrived in Taranto on an English passenger ship which had been adapted for the transportation of troops. In Italy, we fought as part of the British 8th Army. I was in charge of the 3rd Platoon of the 4th Squadron, 15th Poznański Lancers' Regiment, which was assigned to the 5th Kresowa Infantry Division as the reconnaissance regiment.

I participated in the entire action of the 2nd Polish Corps, beginning with the Battle for Monte Cassino (11th-18th May, 1944), the bloody but victorious battle, after which we were in pursuit of the retreating German Army along the whole length of the 'boot' of Italy, including Loretto, Ancona etc, all the way to Bologna. From there, in December 1944, I was sent to Egypt as an interpreter in the British Army Training centre situated in Abbasia, near Cairo.

In the meantime, my regiment, the 15th Poznański Lancers, was transferred from Italy to Egypt. Therefore, when my term as interpreter on Abbasia came to an end, I was returned to my regiment, which subsequently was sent back to Italy in 1945.

Once back in Italy, I commenced my engineering studies at the Institute of Technology in Fermo, studies which I took up again after my arrival in England.

In September 1946, at the invitation of the British Government, the entire Polish Army left Italy and arrived in England, as political exiles. The invitation from the Government was one thing; the reception by the British public was another. The dire economic situation in Britain after the war, with high unemployment and the rationing of practically everything, was not conducive to creating a welcoming atmosphere. Notices with the words 'Poles go home', together with the negative attitude of the press, did nothing to ease those early post-war years for us exiles in a foreign land, who had lost everything we had fought for, while those around us celebrated their victory. As for the Victory Parade, at the insistence of Marshal Stalin, the Polish Army was excluded from participating.

After several years of being fed with propaganda films (promoted by the British Government) heaping praise upon the communist ally, namely, Stalin and his regime in the Soviet Union, English people were unable to understand why we could not go back to Poland. What we told them about the suffering we had endured in the Soviet Union was often greeted with disbelief and treated as anti-Soviet propaganda. It was difficult to explain that Poles, particularly Polish officers, could not go back to their own country for fear of being arrested upon arrival as being an enemy of the state, that is, the communist state imposed upon Poland by the Stalin regime. The punishment could be deportation, once again, to a prison in Russia.

One of the major problems we encountered in England was the attitude of the trade unions, which were so very pro-communist and anti-Polish; this usually meant that only the worst kind of jobs were available to us.

The majority of Polish soldiers and their families remained in England as political exiles. Everyone had to go through the transition into 'Civvy Street' and become independent and self-reliant, regardless of the post-war conditions. An organisation was set up specifically for this purpose, known to the Poles as the PKPR (Polski Korpus Przysposobienia i Rozmieszczenia or the Polish Resettlement Corps).

I returned to my studies, financed in part by an army grant and partly by means of earnings from menial jobs, which helped me to support my family and to ensure that my children received a good education. Once my studies were completed, I was fortunate enough to find my successful career as an engineer which enabled me once more to see the world, as not only the war, but also my work, took me to many interesting places I might not have otherwise seen.

Whilst constraints of space and time have prevented me from going into greater detail about my war experiences and the many adventures they contain, I trust that others might like to share their memories in a similar vein.

## Telling Times

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### *Lieutenant Colonel Stanisław Dmowski, by his children*



Adam Mickiewicz, the famous Polish-Lithuanian poet, wrote a verse where he said that Poles were famous all over the world because they loved their country so much that they were ready to leave it, to travel to the end of the world, to wander in poverty for many years and to fight and give their lives, if they had the slightest glimmer of hope that this might contribute to Poland's freedom and independence. The children of Lieutenant Colonel Stanisław Dmowski wrote in his obituary in 2002 that Adam Mickiewicz's verse sums up perfectly their father's life.

He was a trained army man graduating from the Officer Cadets Schools at Rozan [Różan? ] and Ostrów Mazowiecki in 1934 and already 30 years old when the Germans invaded Poland. In the Polish September Campaign of 1939 he was commanding the 3rd Machine Gun Company of the 10th Infantry Regiment, part of the 26th Infantry Division.. On 6th September 1939, the Division was in the area of Inowrocław, where it was used in the Battle of The Bzura, covering the eastern wing of 'Pomorze' Army. After the initial success of the Polish offensive, the Division recaptured several locations, the Germans organized a counterattack in which the 26th I.D. was subsequently destroyed.

On September 17th, wounded in both legs, Dmowski was taken prisoner and sent to a German hospital, from which he later escaped, as he had heard that Polish Army units were being re-formed in France. Crossing the Carpathian Mountains on foot and travelling further south through Hungary to Yugoslavia, he obtained passage to France with the assistance of the Polish Consulate.

On his arrival in France he joined the 2nd Polish Infantry Division, as a company commander taking part in the French Campaign. After Dunkirk, when France was about to capitulate, he was ordered by the Polish Army High Command to lead his company, along with other Polish troops, across the border into Switzerland where they were to be interned.

However, he and others did not like the idea of spending the rest of war in internment so after a five week 'holiday' in Switzerland, they crept back across the very same border and travelled south through Vichy France, planning to escape to Britain. He failed in his first attempt and after a taste of a French colonial prison in Oran, he was returned to Marseille.

His second attempt to escape from France was by crossing the Pyrenees and he managed it this time. Travelling through Spain into Portugal and arriving in Lisbon, he was again arrested, this time as an illegal immigrant! Fortunately, the Polish and British diplomatic services were able to help him and after a few weeks in a Portuguese jail he was released and via Gibraltar reached Scotland in October 1941, where he joined the Polish Forces there.

After several postings in Scotland, Dmowski volunteered for, and took part in the Commando and Diversion Course. Graduating from the Polish Staff College, he was posted to the Polish Motorised Division, which was going to take part in the Normandy landings in June 1944. He was due to travel on a reconnaissance mission to France, but at the last moment he was ordered to go to London instead. There he was briefed and sent to Italy, and from where he was flown to Poland and dropped at night by parachute into the country as a *cichociemny* (Silent and Unseen) operative (Polish Forces equivalent to SOE).

In Poland he made contact with the underground Polish Home Army (AK), using the pseudonym 'Podlasiak' he fought in Battalion 'Andrzej' operating in the area of Silesia, disrupting German communications and harassing their retreating forces.

After the arrival of Russian forces, Poland came under an interim government controlled by them, and Dmowski remained at the disposal of the Area Commander of Kraków where he was Chief of Action 2 and Military Intelligence, Home Army Headquarters. However, on January 19th 1945 the last commander of AK—General Leopold Okulicki made a decision to dissolve the military organisation.

Eight months later, in September 1945, Captain Stanisław Dmowski decided to reveal his identity to the Polish Home Army Liquidation Commission. Subsequently, he joined the Polish Forces of the Provisional Warsaw Government. After completing a Brigade Commanders' and Armoured Brigade Chiefs of Staff Course, he became Chief of Staff of the 4th Armoured Brigade, but because of his background, he was not trusted and the Security Police kept a watchful eye on him. Several months later, in March 1946, he was released from the Polish Forces of the Provisional Warsaw Government and was immediately arrested by the Security Police on suspicion of being a spy. During his interrogation it was only his knowledge of agriculture work, acquired in his youth, that saved him from being imprisoned. One of the interrogators, who was of peasant stock, remarked that no bourgeois spy could have known so much about farming!

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Released by the security police he decided not take any more chances and left Poland again using his Carpathian route south. This time he headed for the American zone in Austria, where again he was arrested and accused of being a Russian spy this time. After military superiors in Britain confirmed his identity, he was released and returned to Britain in July 1946 where his life changed completely. In the Polish Resettlement Corps, he was trained as a watchmaker and repairer, later he obtained qualifications as a draughtsman and worked for many years for GEC but his life in civvies was never as exciting and full of adventure as a *cichociemny*.



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Mr Stanislaw Dmowski

**Former Service and History:** Joined an Officer Cadets School Course at Rozan and an Infantry Officer Cadets School Course at Ostrow-Mazowiecki from 15.10.1931 to 15.8.1934. Posted to the 10 Infantry Regiment 15.8.1934 to 29.3.1939. Company Commander of the 26 Infantry Division 29.3.1939 to 16.9.1939. Commander of the 3 Machine Gun Company, 10 Infantry Regiment 23.3.1939 to 29.3.1939. Attached to the Independent Machine Gun Company, 26 Infantry Division 29.3.1939 to 31.8.1939. Took part with the 10 Infantry Regiment in the campaign in Poland from 1.9.1939 to 17.9.1939 (Czerlin, Galancz, Znin, Barcin, Lubien, Rybno, Sochaczew, Defence on the River Bzura. Attack from Kompina Village east of Lowicz towards Skierniewice, defence of Kompina Village, attack from Gagolin-North Village towards Sochaczew, retreat to Osiek III north of Lowicz, defence of Osiek III, night march in the direction of the southern woods Wyszogrod, attack from the southern woods Wyszogrod). Wounded in action in the leg on 17.9.1939 and admitted to German Field Hospital in Blonie 19.9.1939 to 28.9.1939. Escaped from hospital to his parents 28-29.9.1939. Crossed the frontier to Slovakia at Jasliski, 17 klm south of Rymanow 14-15.11.1939. Via the Balkans made his way to France and crossed the French frontier on 22.11.1939. Enlisted with the Polish Forces under French command at Bessieres Camp Paris on 24.11.1939. Posted to the 8 Company, 5 Infantry Regiment, 2 Polish Infantry Division on 5.2.1940. Took part in the campaign in France May 1940 - 23.6.1940. On crossing the frontier to Switzerland interned 23.6.1940 - 27.7.1940. Escaped from internment, stayed in France and after an unsuccessful attempt to make his way through Africa, via Spain and Portugal arrived in Gibraltar (3 weeks arrest in Oran, Algeria and 5 weeks imprisonment in Lisbon, Portugal) 27.7.1940 to 11.9.1941. Arrived in the United Kingdom and came under British command as above. Served in the United Kingdom 1941-1944 and 1946-1949 until finally relinquished his Commission. Assigned to the 7 Rifle Brigade Cadre 12.11.1941 to 22.2.1942. Completed a Rifle and Heavy Armaments Company Commanders Course at the Infantry Training Centre 22.2.1942 to 9.5.1942. Attached to the 2 Officers Training Battalion 10.5.1942 to 1.6.1942. Transferred to the 1 Independent Rifle Brigade 1.6.1942 to 24.10.1942. Assigned to the Infantry Officer Cadets School 24.10.1942 to 6.11.1942. Completed a special course 6.11.1942 to 5.4.1943 and then a Military Academy Preparation Course 5.4.1943 to 10.7.1943. Joined the 3 Military Academy Course 12.7.1943 to 18.12.1943. Completed a special course 18.12.1943 to 20.2.1944. Attached to the 1 Polish Armoured Division 20.2.1944 to 6.7.1944. At the disposal of the Personnel Unit, General Staff 7.7.1944 to 26.12.1944. Transferred to the Polish Home Army and parachuted into Poland on 26.12.1944. Served with the Polish Home Army from 26.12.1944 to 10.9.1945 (Home Army Battalion "Andrzej" in January 1945, at the disposal of the Area Commander Krakow 15.2.1945 to 25.2.1945, Chief of Action "2" and Military Intelligence, Home Army HQ, Slask-Dabrowski Region 25.2.1945 to 10.9.1945. Revealed his identity to the Polish Home Army Liquidation Commission on 15.9.1945. Registered with the Regional Commission Minsk-Mazowiecki on 19.9.1945. Joined the Polish Forces of the Interim Warsaw Government on 22.9.1945. Completed a Brigade Commanders and Armoured Brigade Chiefs of Staff Course at Modlin 23.9.1945 to 4.1.1946. Chief of Staff of the 4 Armoured Brigade 6.1.1946 to 3.3.1946. Released from the Polish Forces of the Interim Warsaw Government on 28.3.1946. Imprisoned by the Polish Communist Security Police (U.B) in Warsaw 27.5.1946 to 23.6.1946. Escaped from Communist Poland dominated by the Soviet Union and reported to the 1 Polish Armoured Division at Meppen, Germany on 1.8.1946. Arrived in the United Kingdom and rejoined the Polish Forces under British command on 25.8.1946 (Special Liquidation Commission, General Staff). Completed a two year contract with the Polish Resettlement Corps. Commissioned 2nd Lieutenant on 15.8.1934. Promoted to Lieutenant on 19.3.1937 and Captain on 1.3.1944.



## From Soldier to Sailor

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*Feliks Keidrowski by Andrzej Formaniak*



Feliks Keidrowski, 88 years old, has always been known as an ex-navy serviceman, however, as his whole WW II experience unfolds, we find a man with two different military career paths: a serviceman in the infantry but also one in the navy. At the beginning of 1939, when political tensions between Poland and Germany were mounting with every passing day in the expectation of a war that finally blew up in the summer 1939, when he was just eighteen and he says, “I had done my military course and was convinced that when the day of confrontation arrived Poland would be ready to fight Germans”.

“On September 1, 1939, whilst cycling in the neighbourhood, I met my youngest brother, who told me I had been called up to the Army. I tried to find out where I had to report, but the Army centre sent me away. It was finally on September 5th, 1939 that I reported to an 800-strong unit, The Battalion of Youth. The following day the Nazis gave the unit a taste of what to expect. We were marching towards Warsaw when a German plane flew over us, returned, and opened fire resulting in 30% of the unit being killed or wounded”.

When Poland was defeated by Hitler’s three-week blitzkrieg, many soldiers and officers wanted to carry on fighting against the Germans. Those not captured as POWs or discovered by Nazis as soldiers, tried to sneak out of Poland to join the Polish Army in France. Romania had proclaimed itself as neutral, granting refuge to members of Poland’s fleeing Government and the Polish Army. Although this neutrality could not be maintained for long, as shortly after conquering Poland the Nazis invaded Denmark, Norway, Luxemburg, Holland, Belgium, and in May 1940, France.

Feliks Keidrowski and his comrades crossed the Romanian border on September 18, 1939, where the authorities placed them with Romanian families



allowing them complete freedom but more and more soldiers were disappearing from Romania every day, making their way to France.

‘About six of us formed a group in January 1940 and as we were well supplied with American dollars, we thought we would be able to bribe Romanian soldiers. We were not lucky and were caught by a soldier who was resistant to our bribe. We were detained in a high security prison.’ A couple of months later his misery was ended by the intervention of The Red Cross.’ They came to check the prison and said that at the age of 19 I was too young to be in a maximum security jail”, he recalled. Freed in March 1940, he moved to a Boy Scout camp where he could enjoy the luxury of shelter, a bed, sanitation and food – but for him, it was not enough. He and his colleagues still wished to join the Polish Army in France, so as escapees, they decided to take a train to Bucharest. By this time, Romania was already ‘hosting’ Germans on its territory and identification was needed to travel. Feliks Keidrowski spoke German but had no documents. He bribed the train conductor to smuggle them on board the train but couldn’t believe it when they were placed in a compartment full of German soldiers! It turned out to be a very clever move as the Germans were never checked for security and consequently they managed to get through all the borders.

So, via Constantia, Romania and Turkey, they reached the Palestinian port of Haifa on 11th November 1940, joining the Polish Independent Carpathian Rifle Brigade the very next day. This Polish military unit, part of the Polish Army in France, was formed in 1940 in French Syria, from Polish soldiers exiled after the invasion of Poland in 1939. It was commanded by General Stanisław Kopański. Based in Latrun, the Brigade was equipped with British weapons, reinforced and trained by the French.

In October 1940, Feliks and his comrades left Palestine for Egypt when the Brigade moved to Egypt to undertake garrison duties and other tasks such as guarding POW camps and preparing the fortifications of Alexandria, a port on the west bank of the Nile Delta. However, as Poland was still formally at peace with Italy, the unit could not be sent to the German/Italian front in North Africa. From Alexandria they transferred to Tobruk, in Libya in July 1941. Transported in seven convoys, between 21 August and 28 August 1941, the Brigade took over the westernmost perimeter of the Allied defences and took part in what became known as the ‘Siege of Tobruk’.

However, sometime before, on 23 July 1941, Feliks Keidrowski had been severely burned on his back when a small petrol dump he was guarding had exploded. He lost consciousness but survived. He was under sedation for a long time and only regained consciousness after he had been brought back to Alexandria, where he made a full recovery, eventually rejoining the Brigade.

On 9th December 1941, in the final night attack on Tobruk, during Eighth Army’s Operation ‘Crusader’, the Polish brigade seized the strategically-

important 'Madauar Hill' town of Acroma, breaking through to the British Eighth Army and ending the siege. Because of their impact on this battle, the Polish soldiers were allowed the prestigious title of The Rats of Tobruk by their Australian 'comrades in arms'.

On 15 December, the Brigade, attached to the XIII Corps of the Eighth Army, took part in the attack on the Axis of Gazala's defensive line, held by Italians. The following morning the Italians tried to take their position back. 'We were short of ammunition, so all 6,000 soldiers had four rounds each. As I was a machine-gun carrier I had 40. The order was not to fire randomly. We stayed in position without shooting facing thousands of advancing Italian soldiers. They were 50-100 yards away from us and still no single shot, our nerves wrecked by the fear to withstand the Italians, now 50 yards from us still no flare signalling to us "open fire". Instead the order went out: "fix bayonets!" We charged towards them with a roar and all 16,000 Italians got out anything they could wave and surrendered—just like that. We didn't even fire a shot. We took them all as prisoners.'

On 17 March 1942, the Brigade was withdrawn from the front to the El Amiriya camp and returned to Palestine, where it was reformed into the 3rd Carpathian Rifle Division, once the Polish forces of General Władysław Anders joined them, after their evacuation from the USSR. The Brigade officially ceased to exist on 3 May 1942. This is when Feliks Keidrowski changed his military career and joined the Polish Navy. He travelled to various places across the world, including Cape Town in South Africa, Rio de Janeiro, Canada and New York.

In August 1942, he took part in the North Atlantic Convoys, carrying cargo outbound from the British Isles to North America during the Battle of Atlantic. His crew escorted aircraft convoys to Malta. But on November 12, 1942, an event happened which would destroy Feliks Keidrowski's naval career forever. He was on the Polish destroyer, ORP *Błyskawica* when on November 11, the *Błyskawica*, while escorting a big ship with soldiers to Bougie, North Africa, was attacked by the German air force and a German submarine at the entrance to the port. The destroyer with her anti-aircraft guns battled against 40 planes for several hours. One of planes dropped a bomb that almost hit the ship and an anti-personnel bomb exploded 10 yards behind the ship's stern but she also survived the attack. The ship was holed in 200 places, fortunately all of them above water level. A few navy men were killed but many more were injured. Feliks Keidrowski was amongst the badly wounded. A piece of shrapnel became lodged in the bone of his left arm. Another piece went through his nose, half an inch from his eyes. He had to have skin grafts and plastic surgery but he survived again. After 17 months in hospital he was no longer fit to resume naval duties and was invalided out of the service.

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Many years have passed since the War, during which Feliks Keidrowski married and settled in England, coincidentally in Alrewas next to the National Memorial Arboretum. More importantly he has finally lived to see the Poles' contribution to the Allied victory in WW II commemorated by the Polish Forces War Memorial—just where he lives!

'It is never late to say "thank you" to those who sacrificed their lives for our freedom. One of my friends, Stanley Puc, died on November 12, 1942, half a yard away from where I was standing.'

'I always wanted to visit the Armed Forces Memorial, so I could lay a wreath in his memory and I finally got to do that.'



## The Sewers of Warsaw

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*Marzenna Maria Schejbal by Andrzej Formaniak*



There is an old Polish saying, ‘where the devil doesn’t dare to go, there he sends a woman’, an interesting motto to highlight a short account of Mrs Marzenna Maria Schejbal’s WW II experiences that made her a living legend in London.

She was born as Maria Karczewska before the war and was only 15 when the Germans invaded Poland in 1939. During the German Occupation she got involved in making up cigarettes for Polish soldiers lying wounded in hospitals. She and her sister Ewa would make parcels for them, or take them soup cooked in special field kitchens, she says. Polish resistance forces against the German Occupation consolidated in the Polish Home Army or Armia Krajowa – (AK), and by 1944 the AK numbered 300,000 men and women and maintained a campaign of harrying the German garrison forces, keeping open routes for escaped prisoners and setting up a very successful intelligence service. The AK spy network supplied the Western Allies with invaluable early warnings of the German V-weapon programme.

However, Marzenna’s parents had forbidden both their daughters to join the resistance. Her father was already helping to smuggle Jews and partisans to safe houses, and feared the girls might compromise these efforts. Despite this, her sister Ewa, slightly younger, somehow had already got involved in the AK through her boyfriend and so it became inevitable that Marzenna would soon follow in her footsteps.

By the summer of 1944, the whole of Warsaw was in a state of conspiring, and the momentum of untamed hatred against the Germans was growing with the speed of light. Almost five years after the German invasion of Poland, the bubbling lava of the Polish Underground was ready to erupt. Almost by accident, both girls stumbled upon ‘W’ hour, the 5pm start of the Warsaw Uprising on

August 1st 1944. They were out in the city centre when the shooting and shelling started which trapped both sisters. It took four days to cover the two miles to get back home to say they were safe. Shortly after this episode, they reported for duty to the nearest AK unit. Ewa was already sworn in as an AK soldier, now it was 'Marzenna' (her pseudonym), who recited the oath to Poland's Black Madonna and so became an AK soldier too.

Marzenna was not trained to fight but she was ready to do anything and was soon acting as a messenger, stretcher-bearer, and forager for medical supplies. Female soldiers represented at least 10% of AK personnel. There were about 5,000 women who fought in the Uprising, which was meant to last less than a week!

After the first week, the AK seized the central districts—happy days when they all celebrated these first victories. Slowly, however, the whole military situation changed as the Germans amassed additional forces and as August progressed, the Germans relentlessly wore down the Poles using flamethrowers, rockets, explosive charges and remote-controlled tracked vehicles fitted with explosives—'*Goliaths*', to supplement their tanks, artillery and bombers. As the Poles fought their way through the streets of Warsaw, the Germans behaved in a particularly brutal fashion, executing civilians and prisoners alike, setting fire to hospitals full of patients, and driving civilians in front of their troops when attacking AK positions.

On the nights of the 1st and 2nd of September, Warsaw's Old Town was about to fall, the Poles, cut off from each other, kept communications going through their city's intricate sewer system. Marzenna was in the group fighting in the Old Town and once cut off from other AK troops, the group decided to escape from the area using the sewers. Her sister who had been wounded on August 13th was in a hospital and Marzenna didn't want to leave her to face the Germans. During the evacuation of her sister from hospital, a '*Goliath*' exploded killing three hundred people. Luckily, she survived and managed to find her sister and piggybacked her to safety. Ewa was then transferred with other wounded personnel through the sewers to the town centre.

Marzenna stayed on with her group of 39 soldiers; they were almost the last people to leave the old town through the sewer. She had no idea what it would be like to crawl through an 80 cm diameter pipe; it was a terrifying experience. They were told that the whole journey would take two and a half hours—it lasted seventeen hours! Somebody had died in the tunnel in front of them and the swollen body blocked the whole tunnel. They couldn't move—so they had to push the body to another manhole with a bigger opening. Everything was done in darkness as the Germans were becoming vigilant and could throw gas, petrol or grenades into the sewers. People panicked and started shouting, especially the men who became claustrophobic; some were ready to give themselves up to the Germans, and others who wanted to survive silenced them by covering their

mouths. There was some fighting as they were calmed down to allow the group to get moving. People were so exhausted that the first person who reached the last open manhole couldn't get out and collapsed from the sudden onslaught of fresh air after so many hours in the sewer. After this, the others were pulled out with ropes. Marzenna developed a fever and later collapsed when they were washing themselves in the public bath. Fortunately, she was found by her colleagues and the group doctor, who was in the sewers with them, tended her scratches and infections. A few days she recovered and returned to her duties—this time finding food for starving wounded soldiers. The Uprising was nearing its end with only one month's fighting left. On 2nd October 1944, the Warsaw Uprising was finally over. After 63 days of long struggle, General Tadeusz Bor-Komorowski, the Home Army Commander-in-Chief surrendered to the German Commander, SS General Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski.

AK soldiers were recognised by the Germans in the armistice as army personnel under the Geneva Conventions. The Polish troop leaders gave their soldiers two days to decide if they wanted to stay in the town or go as prisoners to a POW camp with the Germans. The capitulation agreement guaranteed that women fighters would be treated as soldiers, with the same rights as the men.

By this time, Marzenna knew that her mother hadn't made it through the sewers and that her father's fate was unknown, so together with her sister they decided to go as POWs not wanting to be liberated by the Russians. Marzenna and Eva, and 1,728 other Warsaw women were designated as the first women POWs in WW II. After a few transit camps, they ended up, in the freezing, rat-infested barracks of Oberlangen in Germany, near the Dutch border. This camp, previously closed by the Red Cross as completely unsuitable for POWs, was then re-opened for the Polish women soldiers.

Over six months later at 18.00 hrs on 12th April 1945, the Oberlangen camp was liberated by soldiers of General Maczek's 1st Armoured Division. The immense joy of being liberated by a Polish force lasted for weeks, but since the war was still on, and they had to wait another month before the women soldiers of the Polish Home Army and former POWs in the Third Reich could start the next chapter in their lives.

She found out that mother had been sent to Bergen-Belsen and had survived but that her father had been taken to a labour camp and perished. He was never seen again.

After Oberlangen both sisters ended up in Murnau. Oflag VII-A Murnau was a POW camp for Polish Army officers and generals in the Bavarian town of Murnau am Staffelsee. After the end of WW II, it became one of the camps for displaced persons. The girls did not want to go back to Poland as they knew what it would be like under Russian rule. Instead they chose Italy and after a few months there, the two sisters and their mother, who had by then joined them, left and arrived at a refugee camp near Pulborough in West Sussex.

Another chapter opened up in Marzena's life who was by now married to Witold Schejbal whom she had met in Murnau. This however is another story to be told on a different occasion. Marzena's struggle with the vagaries of life did not stop there but throughout her life as a civilian she remained as decisive, bold and efficient as she was in the AK. A woman who had resisted her fate by her persistence and untameability, perhaps that old Polish proverb should read, 'Where the devil doesn't dare to go, there he sends Marzena'.



Marzena and her sister as ex Home Army combatants



## Cavalry Charge !

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*Lieutenant Andrzej Żyliński by Jan Żyliński*



There is an historical myth that in 1939 Polish Cavalry units charged German tanks with mediaeval lances and sabres. Over the years many historians have disproved this propaganda spread by the Germans and the Polish Socialist regime. Let's look at one of them which took place between 11th and 12th September 1939, in fields outside the town of Kałuszyn near Mińsk Mazowiecki, and known as the Battle of Kałuszyn,

Major General Wincenty Kowalski, commander of both the prestigious Polish 1st Legions Infantry Division and the Wyszaków Operational Group formed around it, was one of the most successful officers in the Polish Army at that time. When the German forces seized the town of Kałuszyn, cutting off Kowalski's men from safe passage towards the Romanian Bridgehead, a decision was taken to go straight through the German cordon.

The Polish aim was to re-take the town and break through the German encirclement before German panzer reinforcements arrived and enemy resistance stiffened. After short preparations, the battle started overnight with a Polish assault on the villages surrounding the town. Polish forces managed to break through the positions of the enemy's 44th Infantry Regiment, which was disorganised and had underestimated the Polish forces still present in the area. At one point the commander of the Polish 6th Legion's Infantry Regiment ordered the 4th Squadron of the Polish 11th Uhlán Regiment to advance towards the town itself. This order was mistakenly understood as an order for a cavalry charge and the Squadron, numbering 85 men at arms and commanded by Lieutenant Andrzej Żyliński, rushed towards the enemy positions with their sabres and rifles. The effect of this accidental charge was that the Poles broke through to the town, despite suffering significant casualties (33 dead out of the

85 Uhlans who took part in the charge). The Polish infantry followed into the breach in the German defences and by the early morning the town had been liberated and the German division in retreat.

Losses on both sides were significant, but the German 44th Regiment had almost ceased to exist. Its commanding officer, Major Krawutschke, committed suicide. In the course of the heavy fighting, the town was almost completely destroyed. After the end of World War II, the battle of Kałuszyn was one of 24 battles of the 1939 Campaign to be featured on the Tomb of Unknown Soldier in Warsaw.

Jan Żyliński, one of Lieutenant Andrzej Żyliński's sons recalls this story in his father's own words:

'It was a dark, moonless night. I felt the cold and the pain of my broken arm which had not yet healed. We had been waiting at least two hours during the night of 12th September on the Jakubow-Kałuszyn road. At about 2pm I went up to Colonel Engel and asked what was happening. He replied that we were on the outskirts of Kałuszyn which was probably full of Germans. He was awaiting the return of his recon patrols. I went back to the squadron. A few minutes later a fire fight began at the head of the column which quickly ceased. In the ensuing silence I heard Colonel Engel's voice: "Cavalry Forward!". I took it as an order repeated by his HQ staff. The order: To take Kałuszyn.

Of course I was angry, because it was against regulations for cavalry to charge at night. Yet I knew that with cavalry charges seconds can make all the difference. I yelled 'Squadron gallop and charge.' The soldiers issued a blood-curdling roar and charged. We passed our HQ Group, the infantry positions and the forward scouts. The sand track was getting narrower, hemmed in by ditches on both sides. We reached a river ford and then galloped across the bridge. On the other side we met our first Germans, 6 or 7 of them. We couldn't tackle them because the roadside ditch was too wide to jump. So we rode on. Very quickly we reached the first gardens and vegetable plots on the outskirts of Kałuszyn. Masses of Germans were running away like rabbits, through the fences and gardens of the town. We drove on yelling our battle cries at the top of our voices. We reached a fork in the road with many abandoned German trucks and continued towards the town centre. Suddenly it was as bright as day. The Germans had set off illuminating flares. In front of us, dozens of Germans were fleeing as fast as their legs could carry them. An officer was trying to stop the rout. A few soldiers turned around and started firing back. I looked behind me and realised I was alone apart from one or two

horsemen and Sergeant Rudziński. The rest of my squadron were busy giving furious chase to the fleeing Germans. That was the moment I reined in my horse and shouted “Regroup”!

So as Jan Żyliński says ‘Led by my father, the Polish cavalry had taken the town. Hitler boasted that the German Army went through Poland like a knife through butter. There were many occasions when the Poles were able to pay back in kind.’

The cavalry charge of 4th Squadron, 11th Cavalry Regiment on 12th September 1939 was certainly one such instance of many charges of similar intensity by other units.

It is important to state that cavalry charges were not considered to be a way of conducting the fight against the enemy. In normal circumstances, horses were taken away and uhlans were supposed to fight on foot. However, as Poles say, ‘blood is not made of water’, so there were occasions where this ‘normal’ way of conducting battles was overruled.

There were many charges during the German Invasion of September 1939. Indeed lances and swords were often used in addition to rifles, automatic weapons and the devastating power of surprise, shock and speed which gave brilliant results.

Some of them are being better known than others. Italian war correspondent, Mario Appellius, who witnessed a Polish cavalry charge in Wólka Węglowa on September 19th, 1939, wrote:

‘There was a heroic advance of several hundreds of Polish Uhlans who all of a sudden appeared from the bushes. They advanced with their banner. All German machine guns stopped shooting, only artillery was covering the field with shells over a distance of 300 metres in front of the German defence. Poles were attacking like it was in mediaeval pictures with their commander with his sabre raised. The distance between the attacking cavalry and the wall of German shelling was diminishing with every second. It was unthinkable to continue this charge against certain death. But the Poles went through....’

General Juliusz Rómmel gave up his own *Virtuti Militari* Cross to Corporal Mieczysław Czech who picked up the Squadron banner from Captain Maziarski when his horse had fallen.

Polish soldiers who survived the battle of Wólka Węglowa were taken as POWs. The Germans asked them to admit who had taken part in the cavalry charge promising their release home in recognition of their heroism. This promise however was not kept, and all those who admitted their involvement were subsequently executed.

The undefeated spirit of Polish fighting men had been developed over centuries of defending the country against its foes. In fact 108 years earlier in 1831, the previously-mentioned Kaluszyn had also been a battlefield. That time it was Russian regiments that had been defeated!



Lieutenant Andrzej Żyliński

## Troubled skies

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*Wacek Włodarczyk by Danuta C Włodarczyk*



Wacek Włodarczyk was born in 1917 in the small town of Łask in the heart of present-day Poland. At the time, however, Poland did not exist as a country but shortly afterwards, at the end of the first World War, Poland was to become an independent country again after 123 years of territorial divisions of Poland by Russia, Prussia, and Austria.

One day, when Wacek was about twelve years old, youngsters in the town almost burst with excitement when they heard that a plane been forced to land nearby. He and a crowd of other boys ran to the river and saw the pilot emerge unscathed from his fragile single-seater. Aviation was still in its infancy at the time. Blériot's first cross-Channel flight had taken place only about twenty years before, but the new Polish government encouraged amateur flying and aero clubs had sprung up around the country. Polish pilots excelled in the annual flying races known as the European Challenge.

From the moment that Wacek first set eyes on the little plane and its leather-helmeted pilot, his ambition was to learn to fly. He attended the local grammar school but sometimes had to take a year out working in a bakery to earn money to finance his education as his family could not otherwise afford the fees. After passing his leaving exam in 1938, he applied to Dęblin, the Polish Air Force Officer Training Academy, and was thrilled to be accepted.

He began his training in 1938 at the age of 21, starting with a gliding course in the Tatra mountains. His year group were under the supervision of Wing Commander Bajan, a national hero who had twice won the European Challenge.

Unfortunately war broke out before Wacek finished his training. On 1st September 1939, Germany invaded Poland and airfields were one of the main targets for their bombers. At five o'clock in the morning Dęblin came under attack and 48 cadets lost their lives. The airfield and most of the planes were

destroyed. After further attacks, the remaining cadets were ordered to leave on foot for south-eastern Poland, marching by night and sleeping in the forest by day to avoid bombardment by the Germans.

On September 17th, they were shocked to hear that Russia had invaded Poland from the east. Unable to defend their country without planes against the combined might of Germany and Russia, the surviving Air Force personnel were then taken by bus into Hungary and Romania. It was planned that they would continue to fight for Poland under the command of General Sikorski along with Poland's allies, France and Britain.

Wacek spent three weeks in Nagycata, Hungary. Then he and his comrades were ordered to make their way to France individually or in small groups. They were issued with civilian clothes and false passports. Now a 'student', Wacek and three friends were given train tickets from Budapest to Athens. Here they were taken to Marseilles, crammed on a ferry with hundreds of other Polish troops. On arrival they were despatched to Bron airfield near Lyon where the Polish Air force was gradually re-grouping in France.

From Bron, small groups of fully-trained personnel left every few days for England where some were able to play a significant and heroic part in the Battle of Britain. For the cadets who remained, it was a frustrating time. Their training had been interrupted and they could take no part in the action. They had to kill time, first in Bron and then in Paris until May, 1940, when the Germans invaded France. The remaining military personnel were then evacuated by train to St. Jean de Luz in south-west France. Wacek caught the last boat to leave the port, a converted liner called the Arandora Star.

They crossed the Bay of Biscay and disembarked in Liverpool. Wacek and thousands like him were taken to Blackpool where they were billeted in the many hotels and guest-houses. English courses were arranged for the foreign troops and at last the Polish officer cadets could resume their training. It took them a year to master subjects such as navigation, meteorology and mechanics with all the lessons in English, a completely new language for most of them. Among the first words Wacek learnt were 'A pennyworth of chips, please'.

Then as now, Blackpool was a fun place to be. It seemed to be full of pretty girls and the best dance bands of the day regularly played at venues such as the famous Winter Gardens, a favourite haunt of the Poles. Romances with local girls blossomed, and one evening in the spring of 1941, Wacek met his future wife, Sheila, whom he married in 1943.

By June 1941 the cadets were considered ready to take to the air again and were dispersed to complete flying courses at airfields all over the country. After completing one of these courses, the young pilots were assigned to train either as fighters or bombers. Wacek was sent first to South Cerney for training on Oxford bombers, then to Bramcote in Warwickshire where he learnt to fly Wellingtons. By this time, Polish squadrons were being formed under RAF

command. Wacek joined 300 Squadron, the first Polish bomber squadron, which was now operating from airfields in Lincolnshire such as Hemswell, Ingham, Faldingworth and Syreston.

From May 1942 until January 1943, Wacek took part in 30 bombing raids over Germany, targeting cities such as Duisburg, Düsseldorf, Essen, Bremen and Hamburg. Losses were severe. Many comrades did not return from their missions. During the course of the war, 300 Squadron lost 85 aircraft and hundreds of crew. Wacek was one of the lucky survivors, although tragedy struck just before his final mission. He returned from a week's leave expecting to fly his last raid with his regular crew. Instead, he was shocked to hear that they had not returned from a raid on Kiel undertaken with another pilot during his absence.

After finishing his tour of 'ops', Wacek took a course in instructing and spent about nine months training younger pilots at the Operational Training Unit at Bramcote. Then, at the end of 1943, he was posted to Cairo to join RAF Transport Command. Here he spent the remainder of the war in a unit ferrying new American bombers, mainly Liberators, across North Africa and to the Middle East. Pilots were required to pick up these new planes in the Western Mediterranean or West Africa. Then they ferried them to the places they were needed such as Cairo, Baghdad or Karachi.

The thrill of flying in cloudless blue skies and of landing in numerous exotic locations are still among Wacek's most vivid memories and helped to blot out some of the more tragic aspects of the war. Off duty, he was able to visit the Pyramids, Alexandria and the Holy Land. Wherever he went, life was punctuated by chance meetings with fellow Polish airmen in favourite haunts such as Shepherd's hotel or Groppi's bar in Cairo.

Wacek flew to England from Algiers on May 8th, 1945. Flying over France, he heard on the radio that the war in Europe was over. On landing at Lyneham, he was in time to join the celebrations in the officers' mess before heading home to join his wife and the baby daughter he had never seen. These celebrations were muted for the Poles, however, as the independence of their country for which they had fought so hard had not been achieved. Wacek continued flying with RAF Transport Command until January 1946. He piloted Warwick aircraft carrying passengers and cargo, including newly minted currency, to the liberated countries of Western Europe.

After many years not knowing how his family had fared in Poland, Wacek eventually received news from his sister. Sadly, his mother had been killed by German bombing on 1st September, 1939. His youngest brother had been deported to Germany and was never heard of again. Conditions in Poland were grim. A few of Wacek's former comrades returned home, but ominously, nothing was heard from them. Very few Poles were able to stay on in the RAF after the war. The Polish Resettlement Corps assisted the others in re-training for new



professions. On leaving the RAF in 1948, Wacek had to 'come down to earth' quite literally. It was time to face the next challenge of forging a new life for himself and his family in post-war Britain.



300 Squadron, Polish Air Force  
breast badge



Wacek Włodarczyk, August 2009