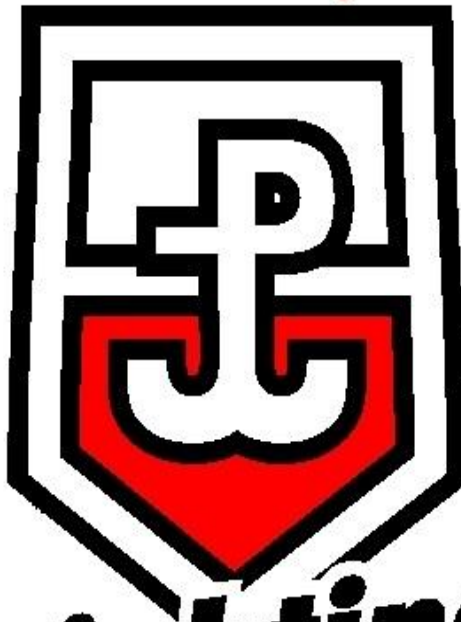


“Polish Exile Forces in the West in World War II”

**POLSKA
WALCZĄCA!**



***Fighting
Poland!***

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The Polish armed forces have a glorious and honorable history! Polish armies twice decisively defeated the renowned Teutonic Knights in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The Husaria, the famed “winged horsemen” under King Jan Sobieski, relieved the Turkish siege of Vienna in 1683 and prevented Western Europe from being overwhelmed by Muslim fanatics. The “Polish Legions” of the Napoleonic era fought fiercely from the steamy jungles of Haiti to the gates of Moscow to achieve and maintain their independence. Polish cavalry vanquished the vaunted Red Army in 1920 in a battle termed the “Miracle of the Vistula,” which halted the (then) seemingly irrepressible advance of the Bolshevik revolution. Yet, when one considers the modern era, popular consciousness of the role of the Polish military in World War II is generally influenced by the relatively brief military campaign following Germany’s invasion in September 1939. The impression is that the Polish armed forces were technologically and doctrinally inferior to the Wehrmacht. This notion is often visually reinforced by contemporary newsreel images of Polish cavalry attacking German tanks. After its surrender, Polish armed resistance to the Nazis is often forgotten, except for the poignant retrospections of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in 1943 and the Warsaw Uprising of 1944 by the Home Army (*Armia Krajowa*). In fact, Polish soldiers that fought with the western allies distinguished themselves in battlefields from North Africa, to Italy and France, and into the German heartland. Polish airmen flew fearlessly in the skies during the Battle of Britain and in both strategic and tactical bombing campaigns against the Axis powers over Western Europe. Polish sailors braved natural elements as well as German naval forces in the North Atlantic and Axis warships in the Mediterranean Sea throughout World War II. What makes this history all the more remarkable is that the Poles were able to play such a crucial role in

the war effort despite the prejudices and indifference of some allied leaders as well as the limitations of manpower, equipment, provisions and training resources. Yet, despite this remarkable legacy, the exploits of Polish exile forces did not have an ostentatious beginning.¹

While it was generally expected by the Polish government, the German assault on September 1, 1939, was overwhelming. As vividly narrated in their detailed study of the invasion, historians Steven Zaloga and Victor Madej relate that, although they fought with bravery and determination, Polish land forces were systematically encircled and forced to surrender or they were relentlessly pushed back toward the capital of Warsaw and the Vistula River. The air force, comprised mainly of outdated aircraft, was largely destroyed in the opening stages of the invasion. The navy fared somewhat better as a number of ships were either overseas at the time or were able to escape. Nevertheless most of Poland's warships were sunk or damaged beyond repair. Faced with the collapse of the front, the Polish high command hoped to organize an effective defense around the capital. But the treacherous entry of the Soviet Army on 17 September, along with the precipitous flight of the government and military leadership that same day, effectively forestalled any hope of sustained resistance. Warsaw surrendered on the twenty-seventh of September after being devastated by aerial bombardment and a conventional assault by land. Nevertheless, small remnants of the army and navy fought on until their capitulation on sixth of October. Yet, despite the end of the fighting within the motherland, the seeds of continued Polish resistance to the Nazis scattered and began to germinate.²

Although the Wehrmacht claimed to have captured approximately 580,000 Polish troops, a sizeable number of soldiers, sailors and airmen were able to escape into neighboring countries including approximately 40,000 in Hungary, 30,000 in Rumania and almost 14,000 in

Lithuania. As recounted by Jozef Garlinski in *Poland in the Second World War*, these included the cadres for what was eventually to become a Polish armored division as well as over 100 trained pilots and nearly 1,000 experienced ground crewmen. From these countries sizeable numbers were able to make their way to both England and France where they were either incorporated into existing allied forces (as with the Polish airmen) or organized into fledgling combat brigades, where they awaited new equipment and additional training. Polish naval units that had not been engaged in the opening hostilities, including three destroyers and two submarines, made their way to allied ports where they were re-supplied and integrated into the allied order of battle under the Polish exile government. As significant as these numbers were, an additional source of recruits for the Polish exile armed forces was to be found in the east.³

In conjunction with their invasion of eastern Poland, the Soviets seized approximately 200,000 members of the Polish army. While many of the officers were tragically murdered in the Katyn Forest in 1940, the enlisted men, along with sizeable numbers of civilians, were sent to labor camps in Siberia, Khazakstan, and Uzbekistan. Harvey Sarnier, the distinguished chronicler of the Polish 2nd Corps and its commander, General Wladyslaw Anders, calculates that as many as one million Poles were illegally exiled by Stalin and his henchmen. This reflected an attempt by the Soviets to redefine Polish society by eliminating intellectuals, politicians, teachers, and other members of the elite. Untold thousands died under harsh labor conditions while awaiting a change of fortune. A new set of circumstances would eventually occur. But this would have to await developments in the west.⁴

Following a period of time after the surrender of Poland known as the “Phony War,” both Germany and the western allies looked north. Renowned historian Sir B. H. Liddell Hart in

his seminal work on the history of World War II describes this phase of the conflict. To preempt anticipated Anglo-French support for Norway, Hitler launched his own invasion of the country on April 2, 1940. This was combined with a simultaneous assault on Denmark. Operating alongside allied land forces in the Narvik area was the Polish Podhalanska Infantry Brigade, which helped force the Nazis out of this port city after a period of intense combat. However, despite fighting valiantly, the Brigade, along with other allied units, were eventually evacuated because continued logistics support was problematic in the face of enemy successes farther south. Following Hitler's victories in Scandinavia, the world then awaited the expected Nazi invasion of France and the low countries.⁵

At the time of German offensive in the west, there were almost 50,000 Polish expatriates in France, loosely organized into four infantry divisions and an armored cavalry brigade. However, because of their poor state of operational readiness, most of these soldiers played no active role in the subsequent campaign, although the Polish 2nd Fusilier Infantry Division distinguished itself in a two-day battle with the Wehrmacht at Clos-du-Doubs near the Swiss border. As the prospect of French surrender loomed on the horizon in mid-June of 1940, frantic efforts were made to evacuate Polish forces rather than to surrender them to an uncertain fate under the Nazis. Using any available shipping, including the Polish ocean liners *Batory* and *Sobieski*, approximately 23, 000 soldiers and airmen were transported to Great Britain and the Middle East before the French government surrendered. Under the threat of German attack and despite French government disarray, this was a considerable feat. Nevertheless, these indefatigable warriors arrived with virtually none of their equipment. This condition was to significantly hinder their reconstitution into effective combat units in an England largely devoid of unallocated armaments.⁶

Following the evacuation of British and other allied forces from Dunkirk, the government under Winston Churchill confronted a host of critical problems. Principal among them was the reorganization of the tens of thousands of demoralized remnants of its armed forces and those of both the Commonwealth and the exile governments to confront the anticipated German invasion. While almost 340,000 soldiers successfully returned to England, these troops left the vast proportion of their weapons behind. Although the British armaments industry was still functioning and imports from America continued, there was a considerable shortage of every type of military equipment needed by the allies in England. In light of these shortages, priority was given to British and Commonwealth forces to the detriment of Polish exile forces (and others). Despite repeated pleas from representatives of the Polish government in exile, only insignificant quantities of often obsolete equipment were passed on to the Poles. Contributing to the understandable tendency of the Churchill government to favor its own forces with resources was the prejudicial views of the fighting abilities of French and Polish soldiers that were held by elements of the British high command. As described in *The Foreigner as Soldier in the Second World War*, historian Alfred Vagts attributes these attitudes to ingrained prejudices, concerns over ultimate loyalty, and a collective judgment of combat inferiority based on past defeats at the hands of the Germans. Nevertheless, despite these hindrances, Poles were beginning to demonstrate their fighting mettle in the skies over England.⁷

The allied high command realized the importance of effective air power to counter the Nazi's next military moves. Reflecting upon the limited base of trained British and Commonwealth airmen in England, Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding recognized the potential contributions of the veteran Polish fighter pilots then in the country. Beginning in

July 1940 and continuing through the summer and fall, the Royal Air Force incorporated expatriate pilots into existing British air formations and created new squadrons comprised exclusively of Poles. Within the latter category were four fighter (including two of night fighters), three bomber and one reconnaissance squadrons. The success of the fighter squadrons in particular was impressive, as evidenced by the number of confirmed “kills” (203) compared to the total number of German aircraft losses (1733) during the “Battle of Britain.” The “303 Squadron,” also known as the “Kosciusko Squadron” after the renowned Polish and American patriot, alone accounted for 110 enemy aircraft. This tally represented over six percent of all German losses. When one considers that it was one of a total of fifty-seven allied fighter squadrons involved in the battle, the Kosciusko Squadron ranks as one of the most proficient of all those committed. The bravery and skill of Polish airmen were also matched by their compatriots on the sea.⁸

Polish naval units that had avoided destruction at the time of the German invasion in 1939 included the destroyers *Blyskawica*, *Burza*, and *Orzel* and the submarine *Wilk*. To this small force was added the cruiser *Garland*, which was transferred to the Poles by the British government, and a number of vessels of French origin, including a destroyer, submarine chasers and patrol craft. As new warships were commissioned by the allies some were transferred to Polish command, including the escort destroyers named *Kujawiak* and *Krakowiak*. The Poles participated during the evacuation of Dunkirk, during which the destroyer *Burza* suffered significant damage from Nazi dive bombers. Polish submarines ranged the Mediterranean Sea and sunk a number of Axis vessels. The navy also saw distinguished service escorting allied convoys in the both the North Atlantic and Arctic Oceans as well as in the Mediterranean Sea. Convoy duty to the isolated island bastion of Malta was

particularly dangerous. Allied ships were subject to prolonged aerial attack from Axis bases in Italy and North Africa, as well as being threatened by both German and Italian submarines and other units. As vividly related in his history of the Polish navy in World War Two, historian Michael Peszke highlights the often intense surface action that occurred during these supply missions. Typical of many was the exploits of the destroyer *Kujawiak* in escorting Convoy W.S.-19 in June of 1942. After fending off repeated attacks from the Luftwaffe, the Poles' aggressive maneuvers and gunnery proficiency successfully forced an Italian flotilla to withdraw. Ironically, at the end of this action, after the convoy safely reached the Maltese harbor of Valletta, the destroyer struck a mine and sunk. Such actions characterized Polish naval contributions throughout the conflict. Polish valor was also demonstrated in desert North Africa against the Afrika Korps and their seemingly invincible leader Erwin Rommel.⁹

After the fall of France in June 1940 most Polish fighters in the west were evacuated to England. Considered more combat capable at the time, the independent Carpathian Brigade of the Polish exile army was transferred from France to Egypt and assigned to the British Eighth Army. In an attempt to bolster the defenses of the citadel at Tobruk against advancing German and Italian forces, the Brigade and other allied units were sent to this coastal fortress in August 1940 and assigned positions along the defensive perimeter. The Poles fought with distinction against repeated attempts by the legions under the Desert Fox to breach Tobruk's lines until the garrison was eventually relieved. Because of losses suffered in these battles the Brigade was transferred to Palestine for refitting. The extent of Polish involvement in the allied war effort now took a dramatic turn with developments in the Soviet Union.¹⁰

The Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 was devastating to Stalin's land and air forces. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers were captured by the Wehrmacht in giant pincer

envelopments. Because of this massive hemorrhage of manpower, Stalin was convinced that the expatriate Poles were a source of potentially valuable recruits. In an agreement signed with the Polish exile government in late 1941, the Communist dictator agreed to release the Poles then in confinement and to organize and equip both men and women of military age into an independent army to fight against the Germans. General Wladyslaw Anders, an independent minded veteran officer was given command. The Soviet dictator wanted a force that would be absorbed into the Red Army. The general, however, insisted on the formation of a fully independent army, under the autonomy of the Polish government in exile. After much coercion, including the withholding of rations and equipment by the Soviets, British and American political pressure resulted in an agreement to split Polish forces in the Soviet Union. Approximately 115,000 Polish expatriates, including 75,000 soldiers under Anders, were evacuated through Iran to British military bases in the Middle East. The remaining Poles remained in the Soviet Union, where they were organized into infantry and armored units and fought with distinction under General Zygmunt Berling in the Red Army until the German surrender in 1945.¹¹

From Iran the Poles under Anders were moved to Iraq, then to British bases in Palestine to make it easier for these disorganized yet eager fighters to be provisioned and trained. There, along with the Carpathian Brigade, they were reconstituted into a “Corps” of two infantry divisions, one tank and one infantry brigade...thus becoming the 2nd Polish Corps (the Polish 1st Corps was then being organized in England). The Corps initially comprised 64,000 soldiers and 3000 women of the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS). The ATS was similar in nature to the American Women’s Army Corps. An unanticipated problem that arose at this time was a significant number of desertions of Polish troops of Jewish background who, along with

their weapons, were enticed to join the Zionist underground forces, the Haganah and Irgun, which were organized to both defend Jewish communities from attacks by Arabs and to resist the British mandate authority. Some of the state of Israel's future military and political leaders came from this group, including Menachem Begin, future head of the Likud Party and prime minister. Despite steady advances in combat training, significant problems existed with the formation on the eve of its baptism under fire.¹²

The condition of the 2nd Corps prior to its initiation into combat was problematic. A general insufficiency of manpower characterized all of its formations. (Although a significant number of soldiers and recruits left the Soviet Union and arrived through France to enable 2nd Corps organization to proceed, there was no ready replacement pool. Consequently, losses that would be sustained as a result of illness or combat were not likely to be replaced. (Some effort was made to recruit soldiers from the Polish communities in the United States and Canada, but this proved largely unsuccessful.) Additionally, because Commonwealth and American combat formations received priority in equipment allocation, the Corps was significantly under strength in long range artillery and had no heavy mortars. These deficiencies would adversely affect combat efficiency in future operations against the enemy. Nevertheless, at the urging of the Polish government in exile and because of the need for combat troops to sustain the allied offensive in Italy, the 2nd Corps was transferred to the British 8th Army in December 1943 and was stationed along the Sangro River Line to gain combat experience. In mid-April they relieved the New Zealanders after the "Kiwis" had sustained grievous losses in futile attempts to assault German positions along the Gustav Line near the famed monastery at Monte Cassino. On May 12, 1944 the Poles were given the task of breaching positions that were held by elite German paratroopers. After two days of vicious combat and suffering a

casualty rate of over 40 percent, they were forced to withdraw. Undeterred, a second assault began on the seventeenth of May. By this time the Wehrmacht's capacity to defend the Gustav Line in its entirety had been undermined and a general withdrawal was ordered by the Field Marshal Kesselring, the German commander. The victorious Poles proudly raised their standards over the monastery that had been the focus of allied offensive operations for almost six months.¹³

After a period of rest and replenishment the 2nd Corps took part in subsequent attacks against the German Senger Line between May and September 1944 and in assaults on Wehrmacht positions along the Senio River in northern Italy from October to April 1945 which culminated in the capture of Bologna on April 21, 1945. Throughout these campaigns, the Poles demonstrated their perseverance and valor under fire despite hostile fire, limited supplies, uncompromising terrain and unrelentingly harsh weather conditions. Total losses in the 2nd Corps during the Italian Campaign included over 30,000 casualties, which demonstrated the intensity of combat conditions experienced by Poles. Such conditions were also destined to be faced by their compatriots in France.¹⁴

At the end of 1942 there were 5250 officers and 23,500 enlisted men in England with plans to form a 1st Polish Corps. Because of the inability to recruit sufficient manpower for an entire corps and with the support of the British Government a decision was made to organize an armored division. By the spring of 1944 the Polish 1st Armored Division comprised almost 16,000 men and almost 400 tanks of the Sherman and Cromwell types. It was placed under the command of General Stanislaw Maczek, an officer of proven abilities. The Division was landed in the recently recaptured French port of Arromanches on August 1, 1944 as part of the 2nd Canadian Corps. It saw its first significant action during the Battle of Falaise against

which it faced German armored units with the superior Panther and Tiger tanks. Despite fighting valiantly and losing 66 tanks, the advance failed. The Poles were subject to intense attacks between the nineteenth and twenty-first of August by the renowned 21st Panzer Division. These assaults were intended to prevent the encirclement of German infantry and armored units in what was known as the “Falaise Pocket.” With the help of the Canadian 4th Armored Division the Poles were able to repulse the German assault with significant loss to both themselves and the enemy. Following this battle and the subsequent German collapse, the Poles were part of the general “race to the Rhine” by allied forces. In mid-September 1944, the division advanced into Holland and occupied positions outside the city of Breda where the Germans had established strong defensive positions. As part of a general offensive, the Poles successfully captured the fortress on October 27 after sustaining losses approaching 60 percent in some front line units. The cumulative casualties in both manpower and equipment suffered by the Polish 1st Armored Division precluded future combat operations until the German surrender in May of 1945. Nevertheless, its exploits and the courage of its men since landing in France were praised extensively by allied military and political leaders. Worthy acclaim was also to be gained by Polish paratroopers.¹⁵

The 1st Parachute Brigade was authorized by the Polish government in exile in late 1941 and placed under the command of the irascible General Stanislaw Sosabowski, an officer with a distinguished prior military career. As with the 1st Armored Division, manpower problems confounded its organization. Compared to a roster of 2500 officers and other ranks in its order of battle, the Brigade counted only 2000 men in May 1944. (Recruitment was more problematic for the “paras” because of the more demanding physical qualifications that were required.) In light of the continuing manpower shortages, a decision was reached to disband

one battalion, with the knowledge that this would undermine the unit's future combat effectiveness. Because of equipment shortages, the Brigade was not utilized during the Normandy landings but was integrated into the plans for Operation "Market Garden," the allied attempt to secure all bridges leading to a crossing of the Rhine River. The Poles were allocated to the second echelon and were scheduled to drop on 18 September. Because of inclement weather which prevented departure from England on the second day of the operation, part of the Brigade was forced to land south of the Rhine, across from its intended objective three days later. The remainder of the Brigade landed on the north bank of the river on twenty-fifth of September. These delays caused the Poles to experience horrendous incoming fire from the now prepared Germans that resulted in enormous casualties. Two days later the Poles were ordered, along with remaining British airborne units, to retreat across the Rhine by boat to escape further attack. The failure of this hastily planned and poorly executed operation nevertheless provided Polish forces in exile with another opportunity to distinguish themselves in the face of a determined and capable enemy.¹⁶

May 7, 1945, the date that the Wehrmacht surrendered to the allies, found Polish exile forces deployed widely across the European Theater of Operations. The 2nd Corps was positioned in northern Italy, anticipating the resumption of its offensive. The 1st Armored Division was recovering in Holland from its recent actions around Breda. The 1st Airborne Brigade was recuperating in England after its devastation during Operation Market Garden. Polish airmen were flying nighttime bombing missions over Germany and were providing close air support to allied ground forces. Polish naval units continued their vigilance on convoy duty, in submarine patrols and coastal patrol craft. Polish air maintenance and army administrative support personnel were posted across Great Britain. With the end of hostilities

the focus of these brave men and women shifted to their post-war destinies. Most were repatriated to the motherland where they faced an uncertain future under a government increasingly dominated by the Soviet Union and local Communists. The remaining members of the Polish exile forces found safe haven in England or in America where they built new lives in an environment of freedom and opportunity.¹⁷

The historic symbol of the Polish military is a crowned eagle perched atop a shield. Yet when one considers the history of Polish exile forces in World War II the image of the mythical bird phoenix readily comes to mind. This is because, just as the phoenix arose from its own ashes, the Poles reconstituted themselves after the disastrous 1939 invasions. Polish soldiers, sailors and airmen who had been scattered to a half dozen countries to escape the advancing German and Soviet armies made their way to the west to fight again. Others, including civilians, who had been transported against their will to the far reaches of the Soviet Union, were freed from their harsh and illegal confinement in Stalin's labor camps with the help of the western allies and were organized and equipped into potent fighting units again. This process of renewal did not come easily as the Poles had to overcome grievous shortages of manpower, weapons and other equipment, food, the outward hostility of the Soviet government, and the prejudices and indifference of the allied military high command and governments. Nevertheless, despite these serious obstacles, the Polish exile forces emerged and fought with courage, perseverance, and distinction in countless hostile actions against Axis forces on land, sea and air throughout the European, North African, and North Atlantic theaters of operation. The honorable legacy that was earned by these valiant Poles during the Second World War can be added to those of their ancestors who fought for Polish ideals and independence in the centuries before.

Notes

- ¹Adam Zamoyski, *The Polish Way: A Thousand Year History of the Poles and Their Culture* (London: John Murray Publishers, Ltd.), 36-46.
- ²Steven Zaloga and Victor Madej, *The Polish Campaign of 1939* (New York: Hippocrene Books, Inc., 1985), 149-156.
- ³A. D. Divine, *Navies in Exile* (London: John Murray, 1944), 8-14.
- ⁴Harvey Sarner, *General Anders and the Soldiers of the Second Polish Corps* (Cathedral City: Brunswick Press, 1997), 6.
- ⁵B. H. Liddell Hart, *History of the Second World War* (New York: G. P. Putnam Sons, 1970), 56-63.
- ⁶Jozef Garlinski, *Poland in the Second World War* (New York: Hippocrene Books, Inc., 1985), 58-60.
- ⁷Alfred Vagts, "The Foreigner as Soldier in the Second World War" *The Journal of Politics* 9 (August 1947): 392-416. Journal on-line. Available from the University of Maryland University College, JSTOR.
- ⁸Lynne Olson and Stanley Cloud, *A Question of Honor: The Kosciusko Squadron, Forgotten Heroes of World War II*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003) 158-163.
- ⁹Michael Alfred Peszke, *Poland's Navy: 1918-1945*. (New York: Hippocrene Books, Inc., 1999) 104-106.
- ¹⁰Jon Latimer, *Alamein*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002, 35.
- ¹¹Michael Alfred Peszke, "A Synopsis of Polish-Allied Military Agreements During World War Two" *Military Affairs* 44 (October 1980): 128-134. Journal on-line. Available from the University of Maryland University College, JSTOR.
- ¹²Howard M. Sachar, *A History of Israel From the Rise of Zionism to Our Time*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976) 265-267.
- ¹³Robert Berezini, *The Second Polish Corps* (Database on-line); available from: <http://www.battleofmontecassino.com/pole1.htm>
- ¹⁴Harvey Sarner, *General Anders and the Soldiers of the Second Polish Corps* (Cathedral City: Brunswick Press, 1997), 199-201.
- ¹⁵Jozef Garlinski, *Poland in the Second World War* (New York: Hippocrene Books, Inc., 1985), 234-236.

¹⁶George F. Cholewczynski, *Poles Apart: The Polish Brigade at the Battle of Arnhem* (New York: Sarpedon Publishers, Inc. 1993) 177-180.

** World War II era symbol of Polish resistance to the Nazis.

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