

Defensive war 1939

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Monument to a legendary tank commander in Kraków.

"Fire and movement are what counts on the battlefield. A soldier should not go into battle tired from marching. He must be brought as close as possible to the enemy," wrote General Stanisław Maczek, commander of the Polish First Armoured Division, in his memoirs published in 1961, entitled *Od podwoły do czołga*.



This thoroughly polonised descendant of Croatian highlanders, born on 31 March 1892 in Szczercz near Lviv, was supposed to become a philosopher and Polish philologist. He studied at the Faculty of Humanities of Jan Kazimierz University in Lviv. At that time, under the pseudonym "Rozłucki", he belonged to the Shooting Association, where he received basic military training. Just before he wrote his thesis, World War I broke out. However, he was not able to join the Polish Legions with his friends. Somewhere in the military files in Vienna, his records probably showed "Croatian". In the summer of 1914, he was called up, like his three brothers, to the Austrian army. The energetic, educated subordinate of Emperor Franz Joseph I was directed to the officer training school. After finishing his training, he struggled as a platoon commander in the national defense regiment. He must have demonstrated great talent as a commander there, because after a few months he was transferred to the elite 1st Imperial Tyrolean Rifle Regiment, and from there to the position of instructor in an officer training school, before becoming an officer himself!

In the autumn of 1916, the freshly promoted second lieutenant received command of the company in the 1st Regiment. He was the only Pole in the officers' corps there. As he himself recalled many years later, he needed and wanted to prove himself. Where other officers sent their soldiers - he led them himself. The sorties of the company became famous throughout the regiment, and he was "*decorated with medals like a Christmas tree*" and promoted to the rank of lieutenant. During one such action, in February 1918, he was wounded. He used the three-month recovery period to complete his studies.

News of the armistice on 11 November 1918 found him on the mountain front in the Alps. He put on his skis and rode down to Trento. In civilian clothes, he reached Kraków through Vienna. Formally, this meant desertion, but he himself decided that his place was in Poland, which was about to regain independence. On 14 November 1918, he joined the Polish Army. On the same day, he was assigned the position of commander of an infantry company, which was sent from Krosno to rescue the city of Lviv, which was under siege by the Ukrainians.

Infantry company? More like a mechanized assault team, loaded onto a train with its front wagons "armoured" with makeshift sand bags. In Ustrzyki Dolne, his company acquired a similar Ukrainian train, and later a railway junction in Chyrów. In the weeks that followed, his "independent assault company" was equipped with horse-drawn wagons formerly of the Austrian fleet as a means of "fast" travel. The company took part in conquering Drohobycz, Borysław and Stanisławów. During the Ukrainian counter-offensive, it covered the retreat from the city. In June 1919, it took part in the fight for the hill overlooking Cherniv and the surrounding area, which was defended by Ukrainians. After conquering the hill, as the first Polish Army officer in history, he was promoted on the battlefield to the rank of captain by Józef Piłsudski.

During the Polish-Soviet war he learned the bitterness of defeat and found out the importance of mutual trust between soldiers and commanders. On 1 July 1920, he took part in an unsuccessful assault in the region of Korçë. He commanded the rear guard of a retreating group of soldiers whom he did not know. The soldiers decided that they had been abandoned to the cavalry of Semyon Budyonny and fled the battlefield. After three nights of lonely marching, he reached Polish units in Rivne and immediately began to recreate his "independent company". Soon, it became the 400-strong "Captain Maczek rifle battalion". In mid-August 1920, his battalion broke the front of the 24th Soviet Division in the region of Waręż and enabled the cavalry division to pursue the 1st Cavalry Army.

After the war he remained in the Polish Army. He graduated from the *Wyższa Szkoła Wojenna* [War College] in Warsaw and proceeded to work in intelligence, before going on to command posts in other infantry units. His "independent battalion" was remembered in the autumn of 1938, when during the huge maneuvers in Volhynia, the experimental 10th Motorized Cavalry Brigade failed to fulfill the hopes placed in it to create a fast and strong strike unit. General Wacław Stachiewicz, Chief of General Staff, told him directly that if he did not bring the unit to a state in which it could perform its tasks, it would be

liquidated and its cavalymen would be reposted from trucks to horses.

Being an automotive enthusiast, he could not let that happen. He analyzed the reasons for the failure during the Volhyn maneuvers and demanded reinforcement of his two cavalry regiments (which were in fact the equivalent of two weak infantry battalions without heavy weapons) by tank and artillery units. His demand was met. An additional battalion of new 7TP tanks was assigned to the Brigade (in actual fact, a company of old Mark E Vickers that had been used for training), along with a battalion of sappers, a motorized artillery division, an anti-aircraft artillery battery and a liaison aviation platoon (the latter only on paper). This strengthened brigade was to bring up the rear of the Kraków Army in September 1939. It was expected that it would be used on the flanks of the defensive line in Silesia, or as an element of counterattack against the German forces, weakened in the battles to break down the local fortifications. Maczek and his staff officers visited all the Polish bases in that region. Each bump in the terrain that could be used to fight tanks was identified. Suddenly it became apparent that they were fighting in the southern direction - Polish intelligence found a group of armoured corps behind the Slovak border. There was no time for a thorough reconnaissance. Only once did Maczek visit Colonel Wójcik, who commanded a regiment of the Border Protection Corps defending this section. He came to the hill overlooking the Orava valley for only the second time after the war had started. Early in the morning of September 1 he was roused from his quarters by the order of the Army commander "to prevent the enemy from leaving the mountain gorges", and in an off-road "Łazik" vehicle he overtook his soldiers. Looking through binoculars from Wysoka at armoured vehicles crushing the Border Protection Corps soldiers who were desperately defending the area, he called in his anti-tank squadron "*immediately, at full speed*". The cannon towed by the trucks came just in time to repel the German attack. For five days and nights, the "black brigade", as the Germans called it, engaged the armoured corps in the Beskids. Then it withdrew behind Dunajec, behind Wisłok, behind San. In Zboiska, it went on to a successful counterattack, opening the way for retreat back to Lviv, and only for retreat - behind

the Dniester and, after Soviet aggression on September 17, to neutral Hungary.

It was a painful lesson. The commander gained another experience from this difficult battle. It is not enough to bring a soldier to the battlefield. Appropriate support and protection must be provided too. And this can be provided only by tanks, a lot of tanks. And one more lesson - soldiers, even hungry, fight. Tanks, artillery tractors, army trucks - need fuel. He tried to transfer this knowledge to the French during the reconstruction of the Polish Army in exile. They did not want to listen to the "defeated general". So what if the Polish Supreme Commander was convinced? So what if he appreciated the bravery and experience of the soldiers? So what if the 10th Cavalry Brigade became the Armoured Cavalry Brigade, and September veterans had the right to wear a black shoulder pad as a distinction? There were no French tanks, tractors, anti-tank cannons, or even the most ordinary rifles for them.

When in June 1940 the French defense collapsed along the whole line - only then did the supply of equipment and weapons for Poles begin. The French now demanded that the "anti-tank companies" be quickly deployed to patch the holes in defense. And Maczek dared to say no. The brigade will only enter the fight as one great unit. Preferably armoured. And then the tanks and tractors were provided. There was no time to train the right number of drivers. But a Separate Division was organized, which started to fight. It was to support two French infantry divisions. It quickly turned out that there was no one to support because the divisions "dissolved in the field". It was necessary to retreat, as in Poland, from the overwhelming German forces. And as in Poland, there was no fuel. As they were abandoned one after another, the last drops of gasoline were drained from the tanks, fleet trucks, staff cars, sanitary equipment, and finally the trucks carrying the uhlans, cavalry shooters and the dreamed-of tanks. After the last attack on the Montbard crossing, when it was impossible to break through the perimeter, the remaining equipment was destroyed, and the soldiers walked in small groups on foot to the ports from where

they were to be evacuated to the "Island of Last Hope".

The English, forced by military necessity, also demanded only Polish infantry to defend the coast against the expected invasion. The Poles, on the other hand, wanted the armoured unit from the very beginning. When the former commander arrived in Scotland, traveling from France through Africa, the soldiers dressed him in a black, armoured jacket and beret immediately at the train station. Maczek sent dozens of letters to the staff command in London. He recalled the merits of his brigade. He reminded them of the predominant role of tanks on the battlefield. Finally, during a meeting with General Sikorski, he heard that the requests "for tanks or reinforcements are unrealistic", but Sikorski added that they were unrealistic for the time being and they would return to this topic in due course. This was enough for Maczek. Semi-official driving lessons were started. First trucks, then light armoured personnel carriers brought from France by the evacuated reserves of the Podhale Brigade. Later, the English were reminded that their infantry had support tanks, so the Poles also deserve such tanks. Sikorski also constantly pressed Churchill regarding the supply of armoured equipment for Polish units. Finally, a decision was made. In February 1942, by order of the Supreme Commander, the 10th Armoured Cavalry Brigade, aside from maintaining its name, ceased to be an infantry unit. It received tanks. Additionally, the 16th Armoured Brigade was created. Both, supported by battalions of riflemen, artillery regiments, battalions of sappers and communications, became part of the 1st Armoured Division commanded, of course, by General Stanisław Maczek.

After two years of training, his division landed in France. In heavy battles with Germany, it gained new experience and another glorious victory. In the area of the Mont Ormel ridge and the town of Falaise it captured the German 7th Army in a trap. The armoured unit destroyed dozens of German tanks and hundreds of soldiers were captured. Over the next few months, they pursued the enemy through France, and liberated Belgium and the Netherlands. In the spring of 1945, they entered the territory of the Reich. On 4 May 1945, the crew of the

Kriegsmarine base in Wilhelmshaven capitulated to General Maczek.

The war was over. But for the former officer of anti-Soviet intelligence in Lviv, the road to his homeland was closed. He had to stay in exile in Edinburgh. On 26 September 1946, the Provisional Government of National Unity - at the request of Deputy Prime Minister Stanisław Mikołajczyk - deprived him of Polish citizenship (at the same time citizenship was also taken from his wife and children). He lived off the British minimum pension for Allied soldiers. He became a salesman and then a bartender at the restaurant of the Learmouth Hotel in Edinburgh, owned by one of the NCOs of his division. When it turned out that the liberator of the Netherlands did not have the means to come to the anniversary of the liberation of Breda, 40 thousand of the city's residents called for him to be granted Dutch citizenship. This demand was met by Queen Juliana, and he was also granted a general's pension. In 1971, the Warsaw government of Piotr Jaroszewicz restored his Polish citizenship. Despite this, he rejected the invitations issued by the Communist prime minister Mieczysław F. Rakowski to come to Poland.

The legendary commander of Polish armoured vehicles died on 11 December 1994 in Edinburgh. In accordance with his last will, he was buried in the cemetery of Polish soldiers in Breda.

His homeland appreciated his actions. He was awarded the Order of the White Eagle, the Cross of the Order of Virtuti Militari III, IV and V class, the Grand Cross of the Order of Polonia Restituta, the Commander's Cross of the Order of Polonia Restituta, the Cross of Valor and the Golden Cross of Merit with Swords, the Belgian Order of the Crown (Commander), the Croix de Guerre 1939-1945 with palms, the British Order of the Bath and the Distinguished Service Order, the French Legion of Honour (Commander), the Croix de Guerre 1939-1945 with the palms, the *Medaille Commemorative Francaise de la Guerre 1939-1945*, the Dutch Order of Orange-Nassau (Commander) and the entire collection of Austrian medals for bravery during World War I. A monument to his tank division was erected in Warsaw. He was

personally honoured by a stone with a commemorative plaque in Gdańsk and a bust at the gate of the barracks of the armoured brigade in Żagań.

On 5 June 2011, the General's bust will be unveiled in Kraków in Dr Henryk Jordan Park.

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