

“From Poland to England without return” “Z Polski do Angli bez powrotu”

By Victor Lukaniuk

This year we commemorate the 100th anniversary of the First World War and as a child my father remembered as the men heroically marched off to war. Sadly he also remembered that after the conflict there were large numbers of empty seats in church where the men failed to return. Little did he realize at the time that within a generation the same fate would await him. I would like to title my fathers journey as : “From Poland to England without return” “Z Polski do Angli bez powrotu “ Wiktor Lukaniuk was born in Eastern Poland in 1910. He joined the Polish Army in 1933 this was a time when Hitler's war drums were beating louder by the day. In fact Marshall Pilsudski the Polish leader at the time was the first European statesman to plead with the Western Allies to take action against Hitler to prevent a much larger conflict. Regretfully it fell on deaf ears and within a few years all hell broke loose, Europe and beyond descended into total war which affected millions of innocent men, women and children.

In September 1939 with the collapse of Poland assisted by Russian collusion with Hitler my father escaped to Hungary and as he could ski and was trained in mountain warfare, he than made his way across the Carpathian Mountains to Rumania. It was the winter of 1940 when he volunteered to assist escapees from Poland to cross the mountains to freedom. A decision which nearly cost him his life. The Russians began to realize that the escape routes needed closing and their ruthless grip on the mountains began to tighten.

It was time to exit Rumania and thousands of Polish soldiers including my father sailed from the Black Sea port of Constanta to Syria in the Middle East. New terminology had now entered the military phrase books these soldiers were now to become known as the Polish Exile Army. Once in Syria they quickly organized themselves and formed the Independent Carpathian Brigade, came under British control and were equipped with British hardware. My father then became part of an artillery unit using the trusted and versatile British 25 pounder. They were ready for battle and were swiftly ordered to join the North African campaign in Tobruk a besieged coastal outpost. So within 18 months my father went from avoiding Russians in the Carpathian Mountains to fighting Germans in the North African desert, honestly you could not make it up!

Tobruk fell into enemy hands several times during the desert campaign but not on the Pole's watch and it's worth mentioning that once the Polish Exile Army were equipped by the British and American's they never lost a battle bar one (Arnhem). After demonstrating such tenacity at Tobruk the Carpathian Brigade were incorporated into the Polish 2nd Corps and came under the command of General Montgomery's 8th Army. In effect we had “Polish desert rats” fighting Rommel's Africa Korps.

Once the Germans had been defeated in North Africa it was onwards and upwards, orders were given to engage the enemy in Italy .For the first time in 3 years the allies could fight the Germans in Western Europe. Italy was a brutal campaign the mountainous terrain favoured the defenders and the allied advance was held up at Monte-Cassino . Polish 2nd Corps were ordered to eradicate the crack 1st German Parachute Division from the summit of Monte-Cassino this they eventually achieved with enormous losses. My father personally witnessed the burial of hundreds of his comrades. The Polish Cemetery is quite a landmark as you spiral up to the summit. In fact Cassino Court in Brandon takes its name from the battle. This was the last battle in history where the infantry and the infantry alone decided the outcome, it was fought on First World War tactics.

This victory opened up the road to Rome and Northern Italy . Polish 2nd Corps went on to liberate many towns and cities including Bologna where my father sustained extensive shrapnel injuries to his right side. Reported back to front line duty within 2 weeks and was awarded the Polish Honorary decoration for wounds received in action. It was at this stage where he met a young lady by the name of Clara Tug noli and as every story needs a happy ending this young lady (my mother) was to become his wife.

By 1945 the Germans in Italy were on the verge of surrender when the war ended. The Polish military had helped to win the war as far back as the Battle of Britain but were unable to return home due to Stalin's policy of ethnic cleansing. Sir Winston Churchill recognized their wartime contribution and made the decision to absorb the Polish Exile Army into the UK. So in 1946 125,000 men including my father sailed from Italy to Southampton and were given refuge in the UK.

Warrant Officer Wiktor Lukaniuk was demobilized from army duties in 1948. Many local people can still remember the Polish camps in Brandon and Weeting. My father had lost everything including his country but realized he was lucky to be alive and accepted that life can be incredibly cruel. He got on with the task of rebuilding his life, joined the Forestry Commission and remained there until his retirement. My father never returned to Poland as the communist regime regarded the Polish Exile Army as treacherous mercenaries (utter nonsense). A week never passed when he failed to mention his fallen comrades and when he could he would visit the Polish and British war graves in Italy. He died at 2pm 15th September 1995 at the West Suffolk Hospital. I leave you with an inscription which can be found on several Polish headstones scattered through Europe.

“A Polish soldier who gave his body to foreign soil, his soul to God and his heart to Poland”

“Polski zolnierz, ktory oddal swoje ciało do obcej ziemi, jego dusze do Boga i jego serce do Polski.”

