

Quest for freedom

A History of the 1st Polish Armoured Division



Jack Didden and Maarten Swarts



'Nor did this war serve general French or British interests, as was made clear both in the dilatory approach to fighting it these powers took –which left Poland alone on the battlefield in 1939- and in the final reckoning six years later, which left the French and British empires in ruins and Poland under Soviet domination.' *Sean McKee, Stalin's War.*

'it is a sobering thought to realize that in 1944-45 exactly the same number of countries were subjugated by communism as were reclaimed for democracy.' *Norman Davies, Rising '44.*

'In Poland the Grand Coalition presented itself in the worst possible light.' *Norman Davies, Europe at War 1939-1945.*



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General Maczek gives a speech during the unveiling of the monument in Wilhelminapark in Breda on 29 October 1949.

Preface

The Maczek Memorial Breda is there to keep the memory of General Maczek and the soldiers of the 1. Dywizja Pancerna, the 1st Polish Armoured Division, alive. Personal stories of members of the division, are told through multimedia applications. They enable visitors of the memorial to relive these impressive experiences. An exhibition of unique contemporary memorabilia supports these stories and the experienced guides make a visit to the Maczek Memorial Breda an unforgettable experience. Even so our story was missing an element because there was no complete description in English of the battles fought by the 1st Polish Armoured Division from Normandy to Wilhelmshaven or of what went before and what came after, including the tragic fate of many soldiers, including Maczek himself.

This gap has now been filled with the publication of this book written by military historian Jack Didden. He describes in great detail the operations fought by the division after it landed in Normandy. The text is based on primary sources including war diaries. The reader is able to trace the division's progress day by day until the very end of the war and in a way we are following in Maczek's footsteps from Caen to Wilhelmshaven. The superb layout is by veteran designer Maarten Swarts, a close collaborator of Jack Didden. The narrative is lavishly illustrated by photos, gathered by our own photo researcher, Merijn Cuber, as well as detailed maps drawn by Jack Didden and Maarten Swarts that enable the reader to trace the progress of all major units.

In addition each chapter contains a reflection and an analysis of the actions, not just of Maczek and his men but also of their superiors, British and Canadian. The book should therefore be of great value to anyone interested in the 1st Polish Armoured Division. Readers with a more general interest in military history will also find much of interest in the story which has been embedded in bigger story of the First Canadian Army and the Twenty-First Army Group. In addition the book tells the story of the liberation of many towns and villages and should appeal



Not just the Wehrmacht had to fall back on horsepower. Here a Fordson WOT2 light truck of the 9th Rifle Battalion is being towed along a muddy lane by two horses in the environs of Alphen (Netherlands) in October 1944.

to readers interested in local history. Last but not least, for descendants and relatives of Polish soldiers who fought in the division this is a major contribution to their own story and that of their ancestors.

This book is a welcome addition to the story of the Allied campaign in Western Europe in 1944-1945. A key role was played by the Polish soldiers who fought for 'your and our freedom'. A role often neglected in the more general military histories of the period. This book tells the story of the 1st Polish Armoured Division in its entirety based on original material. We are grateful and proud that we were able to realize this project together with renowned authors Jack Didden and Maarten Swarts who have built a solid reputation with earlier publications in the field.

*Chairman of the board of the Maczek Memorial Breda
Richard Tieskens*

Introduction

On 9 May 1945 the guns fell silent all over Europe. Hitler's Third Reich was finally dead and buried. The Netherlands, too, had regained their freedom four days earlier. Finally. The liberation of our country had taken a long time, a very long time, nearly eight months. It had started on 11 September 1944 and ended on 5 May 1945, just before the conclusion of the Second World War in Europe. Our liberators came

from the four corners of the earth: Americans, Belgians, Britons, Canadians, Dutchmen, Frenchmen and Poles. The latter served in two units: the 1st Polish Independent Parachute Brigade, during operation Market Garden, but by far the largest number were active in the 1st Polish Armoured Division commanded by Major-General Stanisław Maczek. This division entered Dutch territory on 15 September 1944. The liberation of northeast Groningen in April 1945 saw the final act of the Polish participation in the struggle on Dutch soil.

When the smoke of battle was slowly beginning to clear in the summer of 1945 a huge migration began all over Europe. Concentration camp inmates, forced labourers and demobilized soldiers were all returning home, or at least trying to. At the same time millions were being driven from hearth and home. At the Conference of Yalta (4-11 February 1945) the Allies had partitioned Europe into spheres of interest and they had agreed to shift the borders of Poland west as far as the Oder river. This meant that in addition to the Germans who lived in Sudetenland, those in Prussia, Pomerania and Silesia were told to pack up their things and head for what was left of pre-war Germany. Their houses were often taken over by Poles who had been told to leave their own homes in what is today the west of Belorussia and the Ukraine. The German inhabitants of Breslau for



Merksplas, Belgium, early October 1944. A wounded German is being taken to a field dressing station by two helpful Polish soldiers.

example were ordered to leave and their places were taken by Poles from the ancient university city of Lemberg/Lwów (today: Lviv in the Ukraine). Breslau was renamed Wrocław. Poland had survived as a nation but no longer resembled the proud and independent country where the Second World War had broken out six years earlier.

In effect, the Poles were among the major victims of World War Two. The ultimate irony was that the very country which was the casus belli, the reason that France and Great Britain had declared war on Germany on 3 September 1939, still was not free. During the abovementioned Yalta Conference Poland had been assigned to the Soviet sphere of influence. Stalin had agreed to hold free elections but that was an idle promise and the real power remained firmly in the hands of the Polish communists (the so-called Lublin Government) who were firmly under the control of the Russian dictator. As a result the Polish people saw one occupying force, Germany, go only to see it replaced by another, the Soviet-Union. The motto of the 1st Polish Armoured Division, 'For your and our freedom', thus acquired a particularly bitter taste.

All this geopolitical wheeling and dealing had a major impact on our Polish liberators many of whom were now cut off from their home country. They could either return to an uncertain future in a semi-occupied country or try and build a new life in Scotland, England, France, Belgium or the Netherlands. Because the division had been stationed in the province of North Brabant for five long months during the winter of 1944-45 emotional ties had developed there, sometimes amorous by nature. It is not surprising therefore that many decided to start afresh in this part of our country. More of that in the final chapter.

The Maczek Memorial Breda

It is also perfectly logical that Breda, the first -and only- major city to be liberated in the Netherlands by the division and its general gained a special place in the hearts of the Polish veterans. Here the Maczek Museum was founded after the war. In 1981 Kees Coenders, Jos van Alphen and Wim Mol created the Museum Breda-Polen 1939-1945 Foundation. However, in 1997 it was on its last legs. Under the inspired supervision of the new chairman, Frans Ruczynski, son of a Polish veteran, new life was breathed into the museum.



Maczek and burgomaster Geuljans of Breda at the first Polish memorial in 1965.

The collection moved from a private garage to a bigger site in the Trip van Zoudtlandt barracks and this revitalised Maczek Museum was visited by thousands of people each year. When it became clear in 2015 that the museum would have to leave the barracks a new location needed to be found. Eventually it was decided to develop the old museum into the current Maczek Memorial. The initiative was taken by Willem Krzeszewski, son of a Polish veteran, which gained the support of many people and institutions, including the town of Breda, the province of North Brabant and the Vfonds. On 27 May 2019 the foundation stone was laid. The first thing visitors notice is a huge photo wall with pictures of the liberation by the Polish troops that escorts them into the building. Here, we find a permanent exhibition, an information and documentation centre, a Chambre de Reflection and a movie theatre where the story of the Polish liberators is told. In the forecourt, spread all over the place like miniature bomb craters, are little plaques with the names of towns and municipalities in Belgium and the Netherlands who wish to pay tribute to the Polish liberators by contributing to the founding of the Maczek Memorial.

The book

This book is intended as an integral part of the story that the Memorial wishes to convey. It narrates the history of the 1st Polish Armoured Division from the early beginnings in Poland until the demobilisation after the war. Although the Poles themselves spoke of the *1. Dywizja Pancerna* the division was part of the British-Canadian expeditionary forces who went ashore in Normandy in 1944 and its official designation is therefore in English. The book takes the reader along on the journey that the Polish soldiers undertook all the way from their native country into the heart of Germany. It hopes to give some insight into the many problems that needed to be overcome and the bloody battles that were fought. Some of these problems were unique to the Polish division because it had to fight far away from its native country, cut off from and without any direct links to its home.

But why this book now? After all, since the war a number of books have been published about the division. There are a number of reasons why the board of the Memorial decided to ask the author to write this book. The first one is that a



On 19 May 1945 all Germans had to leave the town of Haren and it was used to settle Poles who could not or would not return to their native country. Initially it was called Lwów, but on 24 June it was renamed Maczków in honour of General Maczek. Two years later it was returned to Germany.



number of publications, most dealing with the division of a whole, or units within the division, are in Polish. This limits the number of readers. Of course they could be translated into English. But this brings us to the next problem: to varying degrees all suffer from a number of flaws. The first one is that the enemy side is rarely, if at all, discussed, let alone in any detail. But the Allies fought specific units with their own qualities and problems. Knowing them provides a better understanding of why the actions developed the way they did. This writer has made it his mission through various publications (see note 1) to rectify that omission. The second flaw is the lack of context. Maczek's division did not operate on its own but was part of a bigger organisation with operational and/or strategic goals. These need to be explained in order to understand the actions of the 1st Polish Armoured Division. Otherwise this book would not only become a repetitive and boring narrative with the division moving from A to B to C et cetera, but also would make little historical sense. The third flaw is that most publications lack an analysis. In order to appreciate the fighting carried out by the Polish soldiers it is necessary to understand what went wrong, what went right and what the consequences were, both for Maczek's division and for

the overall situation of which it was after all a key element. After all it is not the task of the serious historian to merely describe the when and where but, above all, to analyse and thus understand why things went the way they did. Finally, this author is fortunate enough to be able to use local French, Belgian and Dutch sources to supplement the information from the official ones. A recent production, *1 Dywizja Pancerna 1944-1947 Vol II* (2004) by Jacek Solarz, has very poor maps and contains so many errors that, in spite of its excellent photos and illustrations, it is not reliable. The book by Jacques Wiacek, *Histoire de la 1re Division blindée Polonaise 1939-1945* (2019) is by far one of the best studies about the division. It is meticulously researched and well written, but unfortunately it lacks decent maps which makes it hard to follow the narrative at times. The

most recent publication about Maczek and his men, McGilvray and Jarzembowski's *First Polish Armoured Division 1938-1947* (2022), has too many flaws to mention, but one of the major ones is a complete absence of maps and a focus on *10 PSK* while pretending to write a history of the entire armoured division.

We have tried to remedy these errors by focusing on primary sources and producing reliable and accurate maps. That said, the book before you is not the definitive history of the division, that would require a many-volume production, but it does chronicle day by day all major engagements fought by Maczek and his men in and in that respect aims to be as complete as possible within this scope. It also tries to explain the why of events, because after all that is the main task of the historian. It is also -so far at least- the only publication about the division with a complete set of maps showing all the engagements in detail. And here we hit a sore point with the author. After all, geography and military history are intertwined, they are two sides of the same coin. As this book shows geography more often than not determines the course and outcome of military operations. So, how can anyone publish a book about military history without the appropriate maps? In the author's view one cannot. It is as simple as that. Hence the abundance of maps in this publication, each necessary to clarify and illustrate the text.

Terminology

This book is about the 1st Polish Armoured Division. It is therefore a military story which means an abundance of military terms. This means that it is easy for the uninitiated to get lost in the jargon because the text is teeming with platoons, companies, battalions, regiments, brigades, divisions and army corps. What exactly is meant in each case? For a start: the previous summing up shows an ascending scale. With the important proviso that things vary from period to period and army to army, the ground rule is that a platoon numbers about 30 men, a company (or squadron in the case of tanks) 100, a battalion (four to five companies) 500-800, a brigade (three to four battalions) around 3,000 and a division (two to three brigades) anywhere from

10,000 to 16,000. To complicate matters further: in contrast to the British army in which the Poles served, German and American (as well as Polish pre-war) divisions consisted of two or three regiments instead of brigades. To confuse the issue even more, in Britain the term 'regiment' does not refer to part of a division but instead denotes a historical military entity and in the text -usually- refers to a battalion. An example from the Polish division is the 1st Armoured Regiment. This does not mean that it is the first regiment (of a division for example), rather it indicates that we are talking about the First Battalion of the (Polish) Armoured Regiment. So far so good, but there is another issue.

As for the names of the various units within the Polish division, here the writer faced a dilemma. By 1944 the division consisted of three armoured battalions, one motorized infantry battalion, a reconnaissance battalion and three infantry battalions; eight battalions in all. The problem is that in their own war diaries and reports the units of course use the Polish names, but contemporary English and Canadian documents and later books use English versions. What is the best option, translate every name or use the Polish designations? In most cases the answer is simple. For example *1 Pułk Pancerny* means 1st Armoured Regiment, so why not use that? In the same way the *8 Batalion Strzelców* translates as the 8th Rifle Battalion (where 'rifle' means the same as 'infantry'). This simple solution can be adopted for two armoured and two infantry battalions. However, the colourful and historic names of the remaining four units posed a bit of a problem. The reconnaissance unit is called *10 Pułk Strzelców Konnych*, in English 10th Mounted Rifles. That sounds very archaic, especially as these men no longer rode horses, which is why we have opted for an abbreviation of the original Polish name and will refer to the unit as *10 PSK*. Similarly, *1 Strzelców Podhalańskich* means 1st Highland Rifle Battalion. This is a particularly confusing name as for English language speakers it may appear to refer to a Scottish unit. Again we have opted to retain the original name in an abbreviated form and will refer to the battalion as *1 Podhalańskich*. Then we have the *24 Pułk Ułanów* where the word 'Ułanów' refers to a type of lightly armed cavalry, re-

ferred to as Lancers in the British army. Hence 24th Lancers will be the name used throughout this book. That leaves the *10 Pułk Dragonów*. The British army also used the antiquated term of Dragoons (traditionally infantry which arrived on horseback but fought on foot) therefore this battalion is called 10th Dragoons in the following narrative. But there is one more thing.

Two of the infantry battalions soon after landing in Normandy acquired nicknames. The 8th became known as the 'Bloodshirts' for reasons which will become clear in this book, whereas the 9th was nicknamed the 'Doctors' simply because their commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Szydłowski, had a Ph.D. For the sake of variety both sobriquets will sometimes be used. For any reader who is afraid of losing track of the different names: Chapter 3 explains the structure of the division and Appendix I shows the structure of the division with the various units.

Other issues

As is customary in military history and following the primary sources both in the text and the maps battalions, are indicated in Roman numerals. Examples are the 2nd Armoured Regiment, the British 49th (West Riding) Division and the German *711. Infanterie-Division*. Army corps are indicated with Roman numerals; for example II Canadian Corps and (German) LXVII. Armeekorps. German Armies are also indicated with Arabic numbers like the *15. Armee*, Allied ones with letters such as British Second Army and First Canadian Army. One final point about the use of Roman versus Arabic numerals: *II./Grenadier-Regiment 743* refers to the second battalion of the regiment in question, whereas *2./Grenadier-Regiment 743* refers to the second company. Readers familiar with two of my previous titles, 'Autumn Gale' and 'The Army that got away', will sometimes recognise extracts from these books. It seemed a tad pretentious or even just plain silly to try and rewrite certain passages describing actions in these books in which the Polish division was involved. Instead I have instead sometimes used extracts from both publications but in a different context, with a different emphasis and from a different point of

view. Of course, in addition the passages have been extended, enlarged and modified. To enable readers to pursue their own research this book concludes with a select bibliography.

Acknowledgements

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Jack Didden, Drunen June 2025

For a full register of names we refer to the website of the Maczek Memorial Breda: maczekmemorialbreda.nl

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The beginning (1936 - 1939)



Between 30 July and 4 August 1944 the various elements of the 1st Polish Armoured Division began to arrive in Normandy. Their part in the campaign, which was to end the war in Europe, was about to begin. To understand the origins of the division we need to travel back a quarter of a century to the period just after World War One.¹

Humble beginnings

Although the potential of the tank gradually became clear during 1917 and 1918, the last two years of the First World War, their part in the Allied victory was so small that it would take many years before countries began to assign the new weapon the key role that it would eventually play during the next World War. The first employment in 1916 of the British Mark I tank resulted in some local successes, but nothing more. However, in November 1917 over 300

A tank of 'G' Battalion, Tank Corps, 40th Division, passing captured German field guns at Graincourt on its way to take part in the attack on Bourlon Wood near Cambrai, 23 November 1917.

British tanks broke through the German lines near Cambrai and advanced an amazing ten kilometres before the penetration was sealed off by the Germans. It was a taste of what was possible. The next year, on 8 August 1918, British tanks achieved an even bigger success at Amiens. These spectacular breakthroughs were truly signs of things to come. It was evident that in future land wars tanks would be a major if not the decisive factor.

Soon after World War One military thinkers in Great Britain, France and Germany began to realize that to make the best use of tanks they needed to be more than just an infantry support weapon.² Tying down tanks to the slow moving foot soldiers meant surrendering their speed and mobility, the two features that set them apart from the

traditional arms. Theorists emphasized the use of tanks as powerful forces striking out at long ranges not only breaking through the enemy defences but also disrupting his lines of communication. From this the idea developed to concentrate tanks in big units to create a powerful steel fist. However, on their own tanks were found to be extremely vulnerable to enemy anti-tank guns and so there was a need to add motorized infantry, anti-tank guns and mobile artillery to neutralize anti-tank and other defences. The basic concept of what an armoured division should look like was born. However, these thinkers were ahead of their time and traditionalists resisted change for the time being. Some armies were more conservative than others and as a result the development of the tank arm took place at different speeds in various countries. The French were the first to set up an independent arm and as early as 1918 had a tank weapon. In England the Tank Corps was also



Renault FT-17 tanks of the Polish 1st Tank Regiment on the road, probably somewhere in the Ukraine. Note the drivers opening their front hatches to get some fresh air during the break.

transition was much slower and there was some apathy towards mechanisation. This was partly because of a sentimental attachment to horse cavalry, partly because Poland was still developing its heavy industry. This was despite the fact that Polish tanks had sometimes proved



The 24th Lancers (*Pulk Ulanów*) during summer manoeuvres in 1926. They are still equipped with horses.

established in 1918 but not until ten years later was the Mobile Force formed, the nucleus of the future 7th Armoured Division (the famous Desert Rats). The Soviet-Union experimented with tanks from 1929 and Germany took over the lead after Adolf Hitler came to power in 1933. From then on things developed rapidly and when war broke out in 1939 Germany boasted six armoured divisions. In Poland the

their worth during the struggle against the Soviets in 1919. Until 1914 Poland had been part both of the Russian and the Prussian empires as well as (the southern regions) of Austria-Hungary. After the Allied victory in 1918 the country had regained its independence but was involved in a struggle against the emerging Soviet-union during 1919 and 1920. The 1st Polish Tank Regiment had been

formed in France and was equipped with the French Renault 1917 FT tanks. The unit possessed nearly 200 of these light tanks which, unfortunately operated following French military doctrine. This meant that they merely supported the infantry. On 1 June 1919 the first tanks arrived in Łódź, ready to fight the Soviets. The results of the actions were mixed and in August 1920 only 33 were still operational. In spite of some local successes the Renaults were basically too slow (ten kilometres an hour) and their range was too short to cope with the distances covered in some of the engagements. This is another factor why the Polish army was slow to transform into a modern one. The victory over the Soviets was mainly achieved by what is called 'combined arms', a close cooperation between the more traditional arms, infantry, artillery and cavalry. The latter in particular, proud and fierce riders, were hugely admired in Poland. It is no coincidence that the symbol of the 1st Polish



Two Polish Vickers 7 TP tanks, both burned out after the fighting. The one on the right is the two turret version.

Armoured Division was based on the 17th century Polish heavy cavalry helmet and wing. During the 20's horses enjoyed higher esteem than the still primitive tanks who often turned out to be unreliable jalopies. In addition the Polish economy was unable to invest large sums of money in a weapon with an uncertain future. Basically the Polish operational doctrine was one of a war of manoeuvre albeit a different one that that adopted by the German army. It was based on infantry supported by cavalry.³ The potential of the tank and its main asset, mobility, was not realized and as a result armour was marginalised. All this changed, to some degree, in September 1930.

Polish tanks

That month an Armoured Forces Directorate was formed and tanks now became an arm in their own right. For the time being the committee under General Tadeusz Kossakowski, it was barely more than that, had to limit itself to paper actions. All kinds of questions needed to be addressed: what was the technology behind the tank, what shape should armoured formations take and how should they be employed on the battlefield? Always taking into account that financial means were very limited. The first armoured vehicles the Poles acquired were not even real tanks. These light vehicles, a kind of mini tanks weighing two-and-a-half tons, were rightly called 'tankettes'. They had been designed to carry out fast reconnaissance missions for the infantry and the cavalry. Poland soon constructed two modified versions itself, the TK-3 and an improved version TK-S. Both were based on the British



Carden-Loyd Mk VI tankette. The first vehicles rolled off the production line in 1931. It was the birth moment of the modern Polish tank arm. Soon other types joined in such as the heavier (six-ton) Vickers E, built in Poland as the VAU-33, some with one, other with two turrets, plus an indigenous design the 7 TP, weighing over nine tons, which also appeared in two different versions. The single turret version was equipped with a 37 mm gun. In the 7 TP the Polish army finally at last had a fairly modern tank to be used as it should be, independently, providing fire and movement at the same time. It was also a tank which would even turn out to be able to outfight light German tanks such as the *Panzerkampfwagen I* and *II*. It is therefore no coincidence that in 1937 with rising international



Another TP 7 which was destroyed in the September campaign.

tensions even the Netherlands showed an interest in acquiring the type. However, because of the international situation Poland decided to keep the tanks for themselves.

Discussing the constant changes in the organisation of armoured units in Poland in the thirties is outside the scope of this book, to which should be added that the majority of the vehicles were armoured cars not tanks. Suffice it to say that only in the autumn of 1936 the Polish General Staff finally began to realise that a powerful concentration of armour could punch through even the strongest defences or outflank them and thus secure victory. A powerful armoured unit needed to be formed. (Here is the core of what would later become the unit which would liberate our country.) But which unit should undergo the transformation from horse to horse power?

At the end of 1936 it was decided that it was to be the 10th Cavalry Brigade in Rzeszów. The first commander was Colonel Antoni Durski-Trzaska. The core of the new brigade would be formed by two ex-cavalry battalions, *10 Pułk Strzelców Konnych* (10 PSK) and *20 Pułk Ułanów* (20th Lancers). The soldiers needed to say farewell to their beloved horses. This met so much resistance in the latter unit that a sister battalion, *24 Pułk Ułanów* (24th Lancers) from Kraśnik, was assigned the task instead. Apparently these soldiers were more open to change. As mentioned above, tank units also needed supporting weapons. This took some time but when war broke out in September 1939

in addition to 10 PSK and the 24th Lancers the brigade consisted of the 101st Reconnaissance Battalion equipped with TK tankettes, the 121st Light Company with Vickers E light tanks, the 16th Motorized Artillery Regiment, the 71st Anti-Aircraft Battery, the 90th Engineer Battalion and the usual communication and transport units. By then the brigade numbered well over 4,000 men. This meant that it was about as strong as a regiment in a regular Polish infantry division. Put into context: the mobile branch of the Polish army was still formed by around 70,000 cavalrymen.⁴ Even before the biggest conflict in human history engulfed Poland some important events had already occurred.

Baptism of fire

During the first manoeuvres in 1938 with the new armoured unit, the 10th Cavalry Brigade, Colonel Durski-Trzaska had been found wanting. This was not necessarily a reflection of this officer's abilities, armour as a weapon was simply still too fresh and untested and introduced too rapidly for the more traditional minded professional soldiers. On 31 October 1938 a new commander took over the baton, 46-year-old Colonel Stanisław Maczek.⁵ He had won his spurs during World War One serving in the Austro-Hungarian army and had reached the rank of Captain. He had also been actively engaged in the war of independence against the Soviet-Union (1919-1921). He was a very experienced officer having fought Italians, Ukrainians and Russians. He had acquired a solid reputation and was familiar with all aspects of mobile warfare: moving rapidly around defensive positions and then outflanking and trapping enemy forces. Nevertheless, he himself had mixed feelings about his new appointment and was unsure whether to laugh or cry. He hoped that the new brigade was a kind of miniature armoured division such as Liddell Hart, De Gaulle and Guderian had described. He was to be sorely disappointed and the Chief-of-Staff of the Polish army, General Tadeusz Kasprzycki, opened his eyes. The brigade was to operate in a purely defensive role. To quote Maczek, it had the speed of 'a fire brigade which had to put out several fires at the same time.' In other words it



Members of Maczek's brigade meet their compatriots of the Zaolzie region near a border post in Spisz in November 1938. Note the German helmets which were still worn by Maczek's brigade in September 1939. Occasionally this would lead to confusion in the heat of battle.

Smaller picture: officers of the 24th Lancers (*Pułk Ułanów*) gather in Bohumin (Czech Republic) in 1938.



was to undertake counterattacks, an important aspect of any defence, but it was not intended as an offensive weapon which is what Maczek had hoped. As far as Maczek was concerned there were three priorities: technical skills in operating the vehicles, tactical skills in the employment of the weapons, and forging the various subunits into a powerful collective. He knew that all of this would take time. Unfortunately time had already run out for him and his men.

Maczek had barely assumed command of the brigade when it underwent its baptism of fire. Following the armistice at the end of the First World War the Austro-Hungarian monarchy had been split up according to ethnicity. The results were not always to everybody's satisfaction and some regions were claimed by different countries. The region of Zaolzie had been assigned to Czechoslovakia even

though most of the inhabitants spoke Polish. After the Munich Conference on 30 September 1938, where Germany had been given the westernmost part of the Czech Republic, the so-called Sudetenland, it became clear that France and Great Britain had left the Czechs to their fate. The Polish government decided to use this opportunity to occupy the Zaolzie region. On the same date they presented the government in Prague with an ultimatum. To enforce their claim Polish troops headed towards the Czech border, among them Maczek's 10th Cavalry Brigade. The Czech government quickly gave in to the demands from Warsaw and cleared the area. Even so there were a few minor engagements because the Polish government also demanded some villages in the region around Spisz, east of Zakopane. On 27 November some of the 24th Lancers became involved in a firefight with Czech defenders. They were the first casualties of the new brigade, they would not be the last.

The Black Brigade

In the spring of 1939 the foundations were laid for a second armoured brigade, the Warsaw Armoured Motorized Brigade, stationed in the Polish capital and commanded by



The Colours of the 24th Lancers (left) and 10 PSK (right) are paraded through Rzeszów on the occasion of the 3 May National holiday (Constitution Day). Note the long black leather coats which eventually earned Maczek's soldiers the nickname of 'Black Shirts' among their enemies.



Left: Polish soldiers of the 10th Cavalry Brigade with their Vickers tanks during the last days of peace.

Colonel Stefan Rowecki.⁶ However, it was now too late and this brigade would never grow to full stature. By then Maczek's brigade was almost at full strength and numbered just over 4,000 men and 42 light tanks. On 15 August it was transferred to the area around Cracow. The highest Polish military authorities were aware that the German attack would come from different directions and the 10th Cavalry Brigade was to serve as a mobile reserve for the Cracow Army (General Antoni Szylling). It was to act wher-

ever it was needed most. Then dawn broke on 1 September 1939. At 04.30 hours the Wehrmacht invaded Poland. The first shots of what was to become the Second World War had been fired.

Even though it fielded 1.3 million men against 1.5 million German soldiers Poland did not stand a chance of surviving the German onslaught. First of all because it was still fighting the previous war, as instructed by its conservative



Left: battle has begun. Polish TP 7 tanks drive towards the front cheered on by the population which still believes in victory.

Right: A column of German Panzer II tanks alongside the road await their marching orders.

that after fifteen days the French would launch a major attack on western Germany. That attack never materialized, and the German operation, codename *Fall Weiss*, was decided within a week.

highest military leader, Marshall Edward Rydz-Smigly. Basically the army that he commanded was obsolete both in weapons and in tactics. But it was mostly the geographical situation that made resistance futile. The Poles had – unwisely- decided to cover the entire frontier stretching about 5,000 kilometres, an impossible task to start with. The aim of any military campaign is to destroy the enemy's military potential as fast as possible, often through pincer manoeuvres. There lay the rub for the Polish defenders and an opportunity for the German attackers. After the Third Reich had occupied Czechoslovakia in March of 1938 Poland was faced with German troops in the west, the north and the south. On the first day of the war these crossed the border from Germany itself, but also from East Prussia and Slovakia. From the start the Polish troops were trapped. Even though most Polish soldiers fought extremely bravely the outcome was a foregone conclusion. The only hope was that if they could delay the Germans long enough the French and British might attack Germany in the west thus forcing it to pull back divisions from Polish territory. The Polish war plan was based on the expectation

On 6 September the so-called Corridor connecting Poland to the Baltic Sea was cut, East Prussia was reunited with the rest of the Reich and German troops in the south had advanced fifty kilometres. The Polish army had run out of reserves and the German air force, the Luftwaffe, had gained absolute air supremacy. The outcome of the campaign was now a foregone conclusion. The same day Cracow was captured, the very town that Maczek's men



Axis of Evil: Stalin shakes Ribbentrop's hand on August 23 1939, sealing Poland's fate.



Top: a Polish artillery unit has been annihilated by German dive bombers, Stukas, a dreaded weapon during the first two years of the war when the Luftwaffe had complete air supremacy.



Bottom: Covered by a Panzer I (never intended as a battle tank) German infantry advance during the fighting in the Polish capital, Warsaw.

had helped defend. The long retreat east had begun. The final blow was dealt by the Soviet-Union which invaded from the east on 17 September, the result of a secret clause of the Non-Aggression Pact that Hitler-Germany had concluded with Stalin in Moscow on 23 August. The two dictators had carved up the Polish cake between them and the fate of the country was now sealed. Even so, the campaign was still far from over and German infantry in particular acted far too cautiously and hesitantly.⁷ On 20 September for example it took the Germans

three days of bitter fighting before four Polish divisions and a cavalry brigade surrendered at Tomaszów-Zamósc. The Polish capital, Warsaw, did not surrender until 28 September and the last Polish defenders capitulated at



A map of the route taken by 10th Cavalry Brigade during the September 1939 campaign.

Hela on 1 October. What about the Polish armour? In addition to the 10th Cavalry Brigade various tank battalions had been distributed all over Poland, in accordance with French military doctrine where small tank units or even individual tanks merely supported infantry units. As a result of this piecemeal approach Polish armour stood little chance against the *Panzers* who operated in a concerted effort. Nevertheless, even here the battle was not one-sided and there were several occasions where the Polish tanks inflicted serious losses on the Wehrmacht.⁸ But these were isolated incidents and it was mainly Maczek's 10th Cavalry Brigade, the only decent sized tank unit, which achieved the biggest successes on the battlefield, even though they were mostly tactical by nature, that is: local and temporary.

Minor successes

The first few days the 24th Lancers, 10 PSK and the anti-tank

battalion in particular slowed down the advancing enemy troops in the foothills of the Tatra mountain range south of Cracow in the battle for Jordanów. Their defence benefited from the undulating terrain which channelled the German advance along the limited number of roads which could easily be blocked. Because of this their main opponent, XII. *Armeekorps* under General Ewald von Kleist, was unable to exploit their numerical superiority. Maczek's crews were dressed in black leather overcoats and the enemy soon nicknamed them the 'Black Brigade' or 'Black Shirts'. (Ironically, Maczek's unit was one of the few to retain the German World War I style helmets which must have caused some confusion occasionally.) Maczek's men soon cherished this sobriquet with pride and began to use it themselves. In spite of some local, tactical success the three divisions in Von Kleist's corps (the 2. *Panzer-Division*, the 4. *Leichte Division* and the 3. *Gebirgs-Division*) continued

their advance. On 5 September German units from the west began to come nearer and the brigade was in danger of being encircled. It was forced to fall back in a north-easterly direction (see map). This was the start of a very long retreat.

The German advance now began to gather pace and during the night of 7 to 8 September Maczek was ordered to the town of Rzeszów in order to prevent a German breakthrough. The following afternoon fierce fighting there began but again the 24th Lancers and 10 PSK succeeded in halting the German advance. Once again, the success was only temporary and inevitably the brigade was forced further east. Wednesday 11 September was the first day the brigade was

not involved in fighting and was able to get some rest. The break in the fighting was extremely brief and the very next day hostilities were resumed. The brigade had taken up position in the woods near Jaroslaw near the San river. Making use of the cover offered by the woods Maczek's once more fought a successful delaying action. The next day new orders arrived: the 10th Cavalry Brigade was assigned to the defences around Lwów (German: Lemberg) under General Władysław Langner. Maczek was ordered to cover the town's northern exits. This was the beginning of the second stage of the brigade's campaign in September 1939. Thanks to deft tactical manoeuvring Maczek managed to delay the advance of the German divisions in spite of their numerical superiority. Even more importantly: he inspired his men, gave them courage and continued to maintain the integrity of the brigade. For the first time the brigade went over to the attack and on 16 September, north of Lwów even succeeded in pushing back the Germans. But the victory was brief and with the Soviet invasion the following day all hope of a successful outcome went up in smoke.

Left: Polish soldiers are being marched off while German soldiers watch. Date and location unknown.

Bottom left: a joint Soviet-German parade in the town of Brest-Litovsk on 22 September 1939.

Bottom right: negotiations between German and Soviet staffs in Brest-Litovsk.



Top: soldiers of the 10th Cavalry Brigade on the Danube after their disarmament and internment.

Bottom: the last Polish point of resistance, the fortress of Modlin, has fallen into German hands on 30 September 1939.

Escape

Following the invasion by the Soviet-Union Marshall Edward Rydz-Śmigły ordered what was left of his army to fall back to the southeast to await an Allied offensive across the French-German border in the mountainous area there. The east of Poland (then: Galicia) was covered with huge stretches of primeval forest and large swamps. This offered some measure of security to the various Polish units, Maczek's brigade among them. Because both German and Soviet troops wanted to advance as rapidly as possibly their movements were constricted to the few metalled roads available. In this way large numbers of Polish unit, both big and small, managed to stay in hiding by day, get some rest and move on during the night, mainly to the south towards the borders with Hungary and Romania. In the end an estimated 90,000 soldiers succeeded in reaching these countries. On the other hand some 120,000 had been killed in battle and a million Poles were taken prisoner. In the evening of 18 September the



10th Cavalry Brigade crossed into Hungary via the Tatarów mountain pass. Most of the men and the equipment had made it out.

The brigade had lost about twenty per cent of its manpower, in other words it suffered 800 casualties. About half of these came from the unit's core, the 24th Lancers and 10 PSK. These two battalions had inflicted serious losses on the enemy and according to some sources Kleist had lost over a hundred tanks. Clearly Maczek's brigade was one of the, if not the, most successful Polish fighting units in

September 1939. It had benefited from the cover offered by the terrain and its mobility enabling it to move rapidly, but during the eighteen-day campaign Maczek and his staff had also shown tactical insight. The big question now was: was the war over for him and his men or would they get another opportunity to show their skills?

The response of France and Great Britain which had guaranteed Polish independence was not long in coming. The day of the invasion, 1 September, the respective ambassadors handed an ultimatum to the German government. It said that all fighting should cease immediately and the German troops should pull back to the border. Hitler was given two days to implement the instructions. After the ultimatum had expired both countries declared war on Germany on 3 September. The Second World War had begun. Curiously neither country declared war on the Soviet-Union after Stalin's men invaded Poland from the east two weeks later although according to the treaty they should have done so. The fact that they did not reveals that the Anglo-French guarantee to Poland was intended not so much to ensure that country's independence but rather as a way to stop Hitler's expansion in Europe. That is understandable and commendable but by not declaring war on Stalin they not only broke their promise to Poland but also sacrificed that

country to their own interests. It is therefore no coincidence that the country that was the *casus belli* would eventually pay the highest price. However, all that lay in the distant future while Maczek and his men recovered from their ordeals in Hungary and considered their future. Was their war over or would they get another chance to fight for their freedom?

Endnotes

- 1 This chapter, except where noted, is based on Barbarski, *Polish Armour*, 3-6, and Wiacek, *Histoire*, 10-79.
- 2 The most important names are the British theoreticians Captain B.H. Liddell Hart, Major-General J.F.C. Fuller, Captain G. Le Quesne Martel, the French Colonel Charles De Gaulle and the German Colonel Heinz Guderian.
- 3 For a full discussion: Zaloga and Madej, *The Polish Campaign*, 32-40. The operational level is between the highest, strategy, and the lowest, tactics.
- 4 <https://www.historynet.com/1939-polish-cavalry-vs-german-panzers.htm/2>
- 5 This section also based on Maczek, *Paardenwagen*, 52-56. More details can be found in the brief Biographical sketch at the end of this book.
- 6 Later, during the German occupation he was head of the Polish resistance, *Armia Krajowa* (Home Army), from 1942 until his arrest on 30 June 1943. He was eventually executed in August 1944 in Sachsenhausen.
- 7 Lessons learned were put to good use (at least from the German perspective) in the attack on France and the Low Countries the next spring.
- 8 Two examples in Barbarski, *Polish Armour*, 9-10.



Polish prisoners watched by German soldiers.

2

The struggle continues (1939-1940)



Polish soldiers in Camp Coëtquidan in early May 1940 just before the storm broke loose.

Even though France and Great Britain did not immediately come to Poland's aid after declaring war on Germany this did not mean that nothing happened. Even as they were engaged in battle the Polish military were preparing for the next stage, the battle for France. But in order to get there they had to cover a long distance, literally.¹

Sikorski's tourists

On 9 September 1939 the Polish and French governments signed an agreement which stipulated that the Polish government was to raise an infantry division on French soil which would be part of the French army. Three days later Camp Coëtquidan in Brittany was named as the place where the new unit was to be constituted. While the fighting in Poland took a turn for the worse, on 25 September General Władysław Sikorski arrived in Paris to take charge of the Polish troops in France. Five days later the Polish cabinet fled to Romania and resigned. Supported by the French and British, Sikorski formed a government in exile. On 9 November he was also appointed Commander-

in-Chief. The general, before the war an outspoken opponent of the conservative course of action taken by Marshall Edward Rydz-Śmigły, was a progressive military thinker and wanted to raise mainly mobile and armoured units. To do so he needed men who were experienced, technically skilled and preferably young.

Unfortunately most of these men were still far away in Hungary and Romania while others had become prisoners of war. Officially they had been interned in camps according to the rules of the Geneva Convention. Theoretically they should have been incarcerated in these camps for the duration of the war; theoretically. In practice they were granted so much freedom of movement that it stretched the rules of internment to breaking point. The relaxed attitude of the Hungarian authorities in particular annoyed the German government no end and the Minister for Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, spoke scornfully about 'Sikorski's tourists'. Gradually one group of Polish soldiers after the other sneaked away to the west while the Hungarian and



Left: Polish soldiers lining up for parade in Camp Coëtquidan. It is clear from the variety of uniforms that this picture was taken during the winter of 1939-1940 when the proper equipment still needed to be sorted out.

Below: April 1940, Polish soldiers and an ancient French Renault F17 training tank.

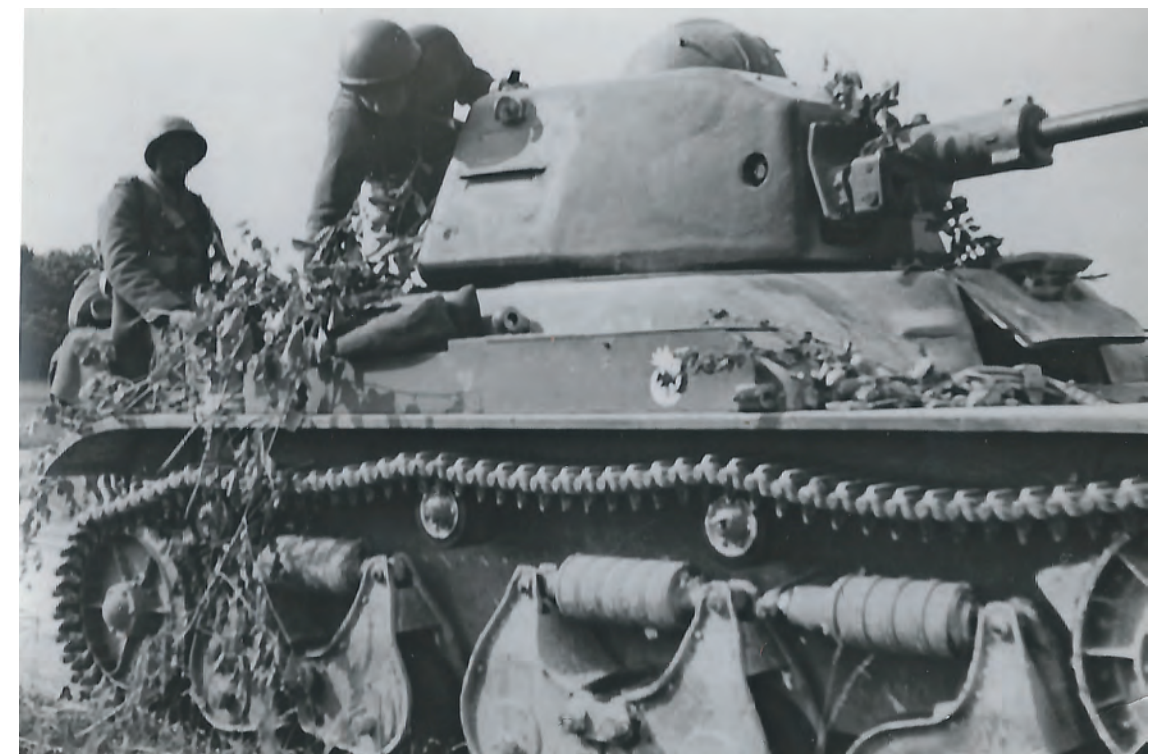
Bottom: the same Renault F17 negotiates a steep slope.



up to assist the Fins in their struggle against the Soviets. The armistice of 13 March 1940 meant that it was now available for the expected war against Germany. These men joined the 1st Tank Battalion. And then dawn broke

Romanian authorities turned a blind eye. Maczek himself arrived in France as early as 22 October. Because he had made a reputation for himself during the fighting in Poland he was put in charge of Coëtquidan and on 15 November was promoted to brigadier. Soon many of his officers and men joined him in France. They had travelled there via Yugoslavia and Italy and in February 1940 most of the camps for internees in Hungary and Romania were virtually empty. Only the older soldiers and the wounded remained behind. Now the real work began for Maczek and Sikorski. In the meantime they had requested and been granted permission from the French military authorities to form a mechanised division. That was to be ready for action by 1941.

In early 1940 the barracks in Coëtquidan began to fill with qualified Polish soldiers. In February the nucleus of a future division was formed: the 1st and 2nd Tank Battalions and a motorized cavalry group led by Maczek's right-hand man, Colonel Kazimierz Dworak. It consisted of the 24th Lancers and 10 PSK. Unfortunately their vehicles were below par, just 42 ancient Renault FT tanks dating back to the First World War. The rest of the equipment was even worse: big sticks represented heavy machineguns, small sticks light ones! In early May the group was joined by the so-called Finnish Company, a group of Polish volunteers originally set



Two members of the 1st Battalion of the 10th Cavalry Brigade and a modern French Renault R35 tank.



A Polish soldier on a French Renault R40 tank.

on 10 May 1940 and the time of preparations was over. The German attack on the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg and France had begun.

The Germans attack again

The first few days Allied measures were soon overtaken by events. The main force of the French and the British

streamed north into Belgium, exactly as planned, expecting the enemy to repeat the plan of 1914 and concentrate its strongest units in that country to stop the German advance long before it could reach France. But the German High Command had decided differently and instead launched a risky but potentially rewarding plan drawn up by *Generalleutnant* von Manstein with the focus on the



German left wing instead of the right one (as in World War One). While the Allies advanced north, south of them the German main body (including seven out of ten armoured divisions) speeded west hoping to reach the Channel coast before the Allies realized what was happening. The audacious plan worked and unexpectedly for the French and

The 1st Battalion during an exercise with French Renault R35 tanks in a wood east of Avize-Vertus.

British troops now deep inside Belgium a trap was sprung behind them. On 13 May the German armoured spearhead forced a crossing of the river Meuse and one week later reached the Channel coast near Abbeville. The bulk of



Beside the beach at De Panne, northeast of Dunkirk, a long line of neatly parked British trucks was left behind by General Lord Gort's BEF when it assembled around Dunkirk prior to the evacuation by sea. The vehicle closest to the camera is a 3-ton Thornycroft A5

the French and British were now trapped in a huge 'bag' and eventually only a portion managed to make it back to England via Dunkirk. On 22 May, in the midst of all this mayhem, Maczek was ordered to form a light armoured division right away. Because it was soon apparent that there was insufficient time that order was changed into the formation of a light motorized brigade only. This, the second incarnation of the 10th Cavalry Brigade, in addition to the two aforementioned tank battalions plus Dworak's cavalry regiment (the 24th Lancers and 10 PSK) consisted of field artillery, an anti-tank battery, anti-aircraft guns and the usual supporting units, such as transport, communication et cetera. Once again the outline of the future armoured division becomes visible.

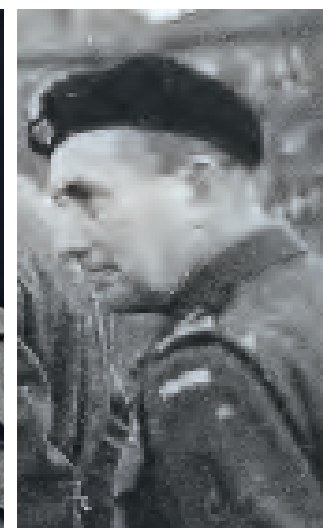
The brigade was moved to Paris by rail and the 1st Tank Battalion finally received 45 brand new tanks, Renault R35s. The 2nd Tank Battalion in turn got 21 Renault R35s plus 24 vehicles of an improved model, the R40. In all it was quite a sizable unit. The brigade, which by then numbered some 3,000 men, was finally ready to engage in battle. The tanks arrived, were prepared and on 6 June Maczek was able to report to the French military authorities that his unit would be ready for action within seven to ten days. They were just waiting for the last vehicles to arrive. The next day Maczek received a response to his report. It was rather unexpected. The newly appointed French Commander-in-Chief, General Weygand, issued Maczek an ultimatum: either the brigade

was ready for deployment the next day or the Poles would have to give up their weapons and hand them over to French units.

Maczek faced an impossible decision. Giving up the weapons was not an option since his men had only one burning desire: to fight the Germans. But the whole brigade could never be ready within the allotted twenty-four hours. So what should be done or rather: what could be done? Maczek decided to split up the unit. His best trained troops would join the fight and the rest was to follow as soon as they, too, were ready. An improvised unit was now formed around the brigade staff: the 1st Tank Battalion (Major Stanisław Glišński) and the cavalry (Major Władysław Zgorzelski) which consisted of two squadrons, one from the 24th Lancers and one from 10 PSK. Finally there were the artillery, anti-tank and anti-aircraft gun units plus the logistical, supply and other supporting troops. Well over 1,700 men, a little over half the brigade strength, travelled east by train through the Champagne to join the French Fourth Army (General Réquin). The rest of the original brigade, including the 2nd Tank Battalion, stayed behind under the command of Colonel Dworak waiting for the remainder of the tanks to arrive.

First contact

Maczek's rump brigade was unloaded south of Reims, the capital of the Champagne region on 10 June. Their mission was to cover the left flank of the Fourth Army close to the



From left to right: Lieutenant-Colonel Tadeusz Majewski, Major Władysław Dowbor and Major Władysław Zgorzelski

boundary with the Sixth Army (General Touchon). However, the rapid German advance put a spoke in the wheels of the French and eventually Maczek's unit was assigned to Touchon's army instead. First contact with the advancing enemy was near the town of Chaumbaert, twenty kilometres south of Reims, on 12 June.

This first engagement with the Germans since September 1939 was hardly an unqualified success for the Poles. A preliminary reconnaissance by Maczek himself revealed that the enemy was advancing far more rapidly than envisaged. He warned Major Zgorzelski but even so some inexperienced motorcyclists ran into an ambush. The first casualties were a fact. Nevertheless, the Polish action on 12 June caused a temporary delay for the Germans. That afternoon Maczek received new orders: he was to plug the gap between two French infantry divisions (the 20th and the 59th) which were falling back towards the southeast. The Poles managed to fulfil the order but, just as in September, it was a Pyrrhic victory as the retreat began the

very next day. Over the next few days the brigade joined the retreating French troops. Briefly the brigade found itself isolated because of constant air attacks but on 15 June contact was restored with the French main force. It was just in time for the single major Polish action of the campaign.

The Burgundy Canal

The entire French left flank began to crumble now. The Fourth Army was hotly pursued by Maczek's old adversary, General von Kleist, now commanding an entire *Panzergruppe* (three army corps with no fewer than five armoured divisions) instead of just one army corps as he had back in 1939. The French were streaming back in a south-easterly direction towards Dijon. The German plan of attack was to trap as many French units as possible, for the second time. In the meantime Maczek had established contact with General Pierre Keller of the French *42e Division d'Infanterie* near the towns of Tonnerre and Chablis. He confirmed to Maczek that the French left wing was beginning to disintegrate. Because he was out of touch with higher headquarters



Captured French colonial troops guarded by extremely relaxed Wehrmacht soldiers.



ran away. These were isolated incidents but they show how precarious the situation had become in a short period of time. In order to avoid being cut off by the enemy during the retreat Keller ordered Maczek to capture the small town of Montbard so that his division could cross the canal and the river Brenne there and secure a new position. The fighting for Montbard began in the small hours of 16 June. It was to be the final battle fought by the 10th Cavalry Brigade on European soil before returning there four years later. The plan was simple: capture the



Left: A Column of Polish Renault tanks is about to engage in battle on their way to Monrbard
Above: Heavy fighting near the Burgundy Canal, Maczek's last battle on French soil before the 1944 invasion.

Maczek decided to put his brigade at Keller's disposal and from then on their fates were closely intertwined for a time.

The rapid retreat, barely a day after the first contact with the enemy, seriously undermined morale. After a mere three days the brigade, just as in Poland in September, ran the danger of being encircled. Panic swept through the unit and many Polish soldiers began to fear for the immediate future. The officer commanding the 3rd Company of the 1st Tank Battalion for example ordered the crews to set fire to the tanks and disappeared in lorries with his men in a southerly direction. Elsewhere a platoon led by their lieutenant

two bridges in the town, one over the Burgundy Canal, the other over the Brenne river, and thus open a way out of the threatening envelopment. The first major problem became clear before the attack could be launched: there was no longer enough fuel for the entire unit. With a heavy heart Maczek ordered only those vehicles that were essential to be topped up. In the end this meant that the 1st Tank Battalion had only seventeen operational R35s left. The attackers set off in three columns, the vanguard was commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Tadeusz Majewski, the main body by Major Zgorzelski. At three in the afternoon the force headed south for an almost fifty-kilometre drive.

New orders

After just a few kilometres the advance was delayed by serious traffic obstructions on the way south as a large number of French units were fleeing in the same direction. Occasionally panic broke out again but it could always be nipped in the bud. At the end of the afternoon contact was made with the enemy, at Laignes, about twenty kilometres north of Montbard. The German vanguard was pushed back but part of the Polish column was cut off from the main force. Nevertheless, the advance was resumed and by nightfall Majewski's group reached the first houses of Montbard. However, it soon became apparent that the Germans had already captured the town. What should be done?

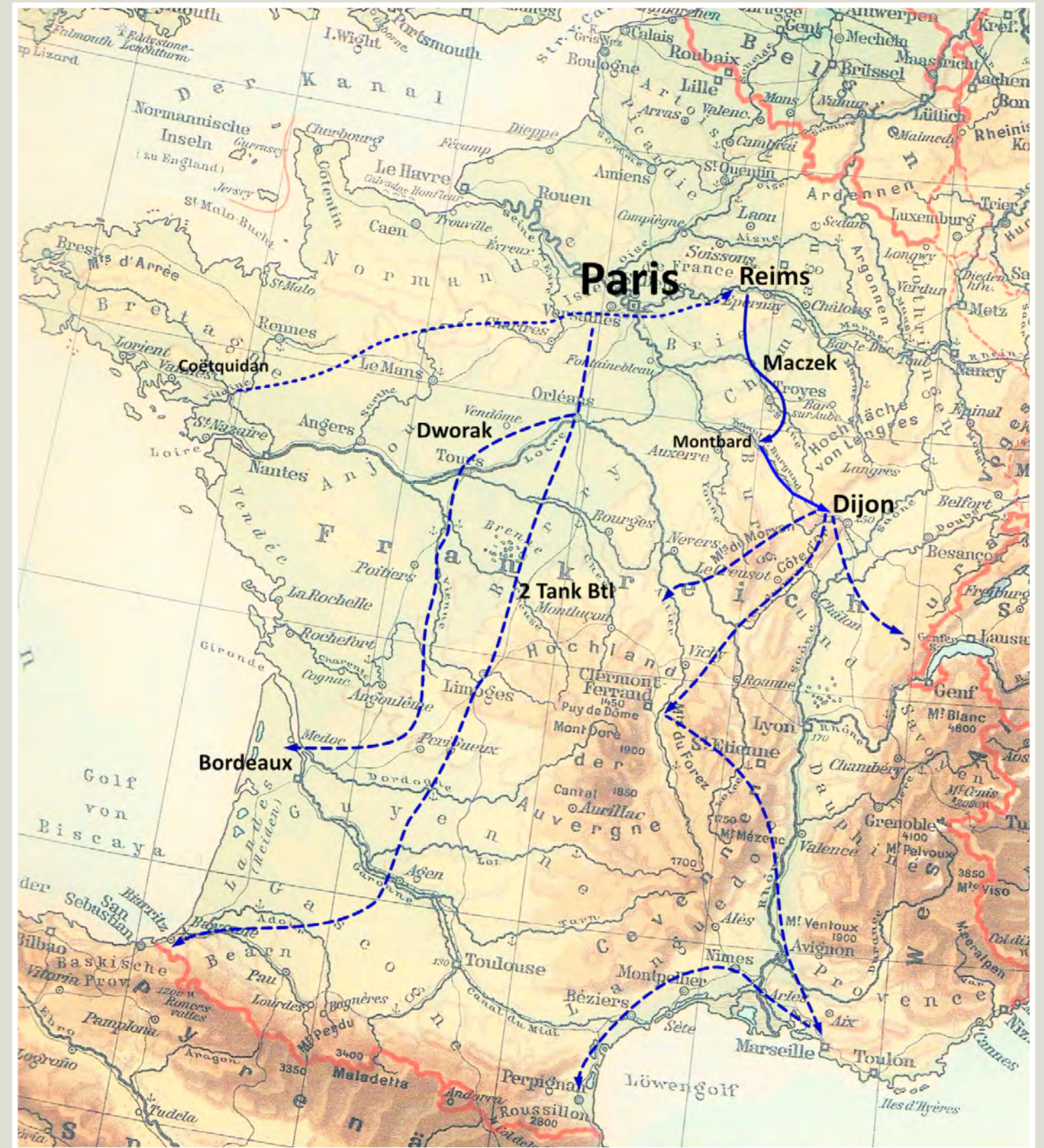
Maczek decided to launch a surprise attack by night. The tanks were to take the lead after which the motorized infantry would seize both objectives. In the meantime Senegalese soldiers who had lost contact with their parent unit, the *8e Division d'Infanterie Coloniale*, had joined the Polish tanks. The *25e Régiment de Tirailleur Sénégalais* was well-trained and generally fought well, even when cut off. Their morale was still high and so they would render invaluable help to the Poles during the night attack. Maczek called his officers for a conference. He emphasized the importance of the mission and reminded them that this was their chance for revenge. His words had the desired effect. The attack was launched at ten p.m. in darkness. The tanks quickly knocked a breach in the German defences (*13. Infanterie-Division*) and took the first prisoners of war. Maczek himself was leading from the front and cheering his troops on. Slowly but surely the Polish soldiers made progress. The bridge across the Brenne was seized as was the centre of town. All that remained now was the bridge over the canal. Fighting raged everywhere, German vehicles were burning fiercely, guns were barking and bright red and yellow tracer bullets bounced skywards against the cobbled streets. By now it was one in the morning. It was at that precise moment that Maczek received a new order from Keller. The French general had decided not to pull back through Montbard after all but instead head for Dijon. At the same time



A car with as caption in white paint on its rear stating that France has just capitulated.

Maczek learned from Majewski that the number of casualties was mounting rapidly. He realized what this meant: without Keller's infantry in support he would never be able to keep the escape route in Montbard open. The only option was to give up the town and also fall back towards Dijon.

For a change fortune now favoured the Poles. Although dawn was breaking on 17 June when they were forced to leave Montbard a sudden heavy morning mist had descended over the area which allowed the Poles to slip away unnoticed. The soldiers were exhausted but elated and proud at the same time that once again they had inflicted a sharp blow to the hated enemy. It had not been easy, however. During the short, sharp fight the Poles had suffered twelve men killed and forty-five wounded. Just three tanks were able to drive out of Montbard on 17 June, all the others had either been hit or had to be left behind because there was no more fuel for them. In a nearby wood Maczek's men were able to catch their breath. But the respite was brief. At eight in the morning the group was on the way once more. The German vanguard was close on their heels and was now approaching from three directions. At the end of the afternoon it became clear that the unit was once more in danger of being surrounded. The only way out was breaking out towards the river Loire,





A long line of lorries, full of Polish soldiers, on the way to an evacuation point in the port of La Rochelle after the collapse of French defences during the German invasion of France. Evacuation of that particular unit was from Ancenis between 16 and 19 June 1940 when they reached La Rochelle to be evacuated on the British steam merchant ship SS Alderpool.

straight through the German lines.

The wounded had to be left behind and fell into German hands. That same evening the last remaining vehicles and heavy weapons were destroyed. Under cover of darkness the soldiers marched south in small groups. General Maczek and four others formed one such group. They covered 250 kilometres in seventeen days, usually during the night. On 4 July the men arrived at Clermont-Ferrand, 'filthy, in rags, without a head cover but with their side arms'. By then, following the armistice of 22 June, France was divided in an occupied and an unoccupied zone. Around the same time the majority of Maczek's former unit reached the free zone to set off for England, just like their commanding officer. Some took the direct route by boat, others were forced to take long detours through North Africa and Portugal. That summer they were joined in Britain by the other half of the brigade under Colonel Dworak which had been forced to stay behind pending the arrival of their tanks.

The other half

The story of Dworak's band of brothers is slightly more complicated and we need to restrict ourselves to the simplified version here. As we have seen above the 2nd Tank Battalion was still waiting for the promised tanks when Maczek's group left for the front. The first Renault R35s arrived fairly soon after the 1st Tank Battalion had received its tanks. But the crisis at the front meant that they had to be handed over immediately to a French tank unit – *the 25e Bataillon de Chars de Combat*. It was not until 14 June that new vehicles began to arrive, the improved model R40s this time. While the crews were getting used to the tanks Dworak had been ordered to take all the rest of the brigade southwest, away from the advancing Germans. In vehicles driven by chauffeurs for many of whom it was the first time behind the wheel of the lorries a long column went on its way towards Tours, Poitiers and from there to Bordeaux on the Atlantic coast. As Dworak's group was travelling south on 16 June Marshal Pétain, the new French head of state, started negotiations with Germany concern-



Polish soldiers, both in civies and in uniform of Dworak's group on their way to England after the French defeat aboard one of the transport vessels, probably the Clan Ferguson (1938).



Polish soldiers disembarking in England from the Polish liner Batory (1936) which picked up stragglers in Saint-Jean-de-Luz. In all about 19,000 army soldiers arrived in England from France.

ing an armistice. The battle for France had been lost and it was time to lay down the arms. As a result the British prime minister, Winston Churchill, invited General Sikorski to continue the fight against Nazi Germany from British soil. This meant that now all Polish soldiers were to leave France as quickly as possible. In the port of Verdun-sur-Mer Dworak's group left behind their equipment and embarked on the 'Royal Scotsman' and the 'Clan Ferguson' which took them to Liverpool where they arrived two days later.

The tanks of the 2nd Tank Battalion meanwhile were still south of Paris. On 15 June the first company was ordered to join Maczek's force. A few days later the other remaining tanks received the same instruction. Once again they were to be moved by rail. Because of the increasingly chaotic situation and the German attacks from the air the journey was cut short. By then news arrived that all Polish soldiers were expected in England and so the 2nd Tank Battalion soon took to the roads. They veered towards the southwest and eventually arrived at the Spanish border at Salies-de-Béarn. There the crews disabled their tanks and moved to nearby Saint-Jean-de-Luz. Here they boarded the 'Baron Keannard' which took them to Britain where they arrived on 30 June to join their comrades.

On balance

What does the balance sheet for the second lost campaign show? Once again Maczek's men had scored a small tactical victory, once again it had been in vain. Of the original brigade which numbered 3,323 men we can only establish the casualties of Maczek's group of 1,709 men, who had actually been engaged in combat against the German Panzers. During this struggle which lasted six days the unit suffered 50 dead and 120 wounded. Well over one thousand soldiers from the group went missing during the chaotic campaign, some of them killed, others taken prisoner, but the majority escaping to England. It seems fair to say that overall the entire brigade had lost well over 300 men, dead and wounded, during the disastrous struggle, or ten per cent of the original number.

These losses were significantly lower than in Poland but that campaign lasted much longer. Moreover, once more all the equipment had to be left behind in France and Maczek was again forced to start from scratch. This time, however, the phoenix was to rise triumphantly.

The reader has come across quite a few names of Polish officers in this chapter. That was deliberate as we shall meet them again later in this book, starting with the next chapter.

Endnotes

1 This chapter is based on Barbarski, *Polish Armour*, 11-14, Maczek, *Paardenwagen*, 112-134, and Wiacek, *Histoire*, 80-119.

2 Three days later at Chasselay near Lyon nearly 200 would be murdered by German troops.