

# 1. Polish Parachute Brigade field insignia

## Introduction

A few years ago I had the opportunity to see the flag of the 1st Polish Parachute Brigade at *The Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum, London*.

I first read about the fan in the book *The Parachute General* by General Stanislaw Sosabowski (Source 1) during the preparations for the Chakoten War Games from Arnhem in 1972. The General's memoirs were almost required reading as I had undertaken to enter the 1st Polish Parachute Brigade for that game.

More than 25 years later, it was a very great experience for me to see the brigade's flag in reality. For me, the flag stands as a symbol of the immeasurable sacrifice of the exiled Poles for a fatherland, which many did not get to see again.

This article describes the three "field insignia" - two pennants and a standard - that the brigade was presented with in England.



## About General Stanislaw Sosabowski and the First Polish Parachute Brigade

If you have seen the film *A Bridge too Far* and/or read the book of the same title by Cornelius Ryan, then you have got an impression of General Stanislaw Sosabowski, brilliantly played by Gene Hackmann in the film, as a stubborn and stubborn gentleman who did not keep his opinions for themselves.

The general himself does not hide this relationship, which characterized his entire career. However, it was just on

because of these qualities that he managed to get his 1st Polish Parachute Brigade on its feet.

After the fall of France in 1940, several of the Polish units fighting in France managed to get to England. Of these units, among others, arose later the 1st Polish Armored Division and not least the 1st Polish Parachute Brigade, which fought at Arnhem together with the English 1st Airborne Division.

The idea of creating a Polish parachute brigade was the general's own, and several officers of the Polish General Staff in England as well as politicians in the Polish government-in-exile quickly joined. The brigade was seen as an opportunity to support the Home Army (the resistance movement) in Poland proper, whereby the role of the parachute brigade became strategic, rather than tactical. However, the brigade never came to work in this role, although there was no shortage of particularly Polish wishes for this.

Heavily delayed by fog in England, on 21 September 1944 the brigade was dropped south of Arnhem, on the south side of the Lower Rhine. The Poles quickly secured the town of Driel, from where several heroic attempts were made to rescue the British 1st Airborne Division. However, the Poles did not succeed in getting across the river in large numbers, but the brigade fought hard against the German forces south of the river and acted as an occupying force when the British airborne units withdrew.

The brigade did not see combat again and was officially disbanded on 30 June 1947.

### **The brigade's banner**

The following is taken from the book *The Parachute General* from chapter 8, entitled "A Fane from Warsaw":

### **The prehistory**

A million stars twinkled in the vast night sky, and a group of men and women stood freezing in the dense undergrowth, almost forced to their knees by the cold.

It was in December 1942 <sup>1)</sup>. The white snow weighed down the branches of the trees almost to the ground, and everywhere the snow lay white and untouched, except for a few hare tracks. A tall and powerfully built man, whose face was almost hidden by a fur cap, looked at the luminous dial of his wristwatch and whispered in a calm voice: "Take your posts." The group disbanded, each going to his predetermined spot with shielded flashlights ready to send flashing signals up into the night sky.

They were members of the Polish underground movement waiting near Warsaw for a British airplane to drop parachute agents and supplies. The people in the drop zone had broken the German curfew, knowing that if a house search revealed that they were not at home, not only themselves but their entire families would be executed.

Faintly through the thin air they heard the distant hum of powerful engines, but the sound passed right over their heads and disappeared a good distance south of them. After two hours of waiting, during which their limbs became stiff and their fingers completely dead from the cold, they stumbled back into the forest. The manager hummed, "Same time tomorrow. We have to meet every night until they come." One by one they each went in their own direction to their beds to get a few hours sleep before they had to report to their usual work.

For their part, Operation "Jacket" was postponed for twenty-four hours.

But operation Jacket was, without them showing it, well under way. Even as they were on their way home, German soldiers were fighting the agents they had been waiting for, just on the other side of the demarcation line. The pilot had mistaken the drop area and had dropped them in the part of Poland incorporated into Das Reich, where they had dumped right into a German patrol. Six agents had jumped out and were immediately involved in the skirmish that began immediately after they landed. Two of them,

Effendi - codename for Lieutenant Swiatkowski - and Lieutenant Jurecki, stayed to fight and ordered the others to flee across the border at all costs. The group brought secret documents and new supplies of money to the underground movement. Both Effendi and his companion were killed during the fight. It was better than getting caught.

Captain Kalenkiewicz, who took command of the group, was wounded in the arm when they encountered a border patrol, but they made it into Warsaw, where they split up to carry out their duties. Kalenkiewicz had to stay hidden because of the wound in his arm, as the German patrol had found bloodstains in the snow, and the Germans were now looking for a wounded man. He stayed in the house of a freedom fighter along with several British airmen who had been shot down and were now waiting for an opportunity to escape. A doctor who had been secretly brought to the hiding place treated his wounds and put his arm in a cast.

Captain Kalenkiewicz had trained in the "Monkey Cave"[2](#)) and harbored a burning desire like the rest of us that the city of Warsaw would grant us a banner. Before he left on this mission, I had mentioned to him the possibility of having a banner made in Warsaw and somehow smuggled into England.

## The genesis

During his enforced idleness he was looked after by a beautiful young nurse who came from time to time to bandage his arm. She worked for an illegal doctor's office under the cover name Martha, and she had been given the task of seeking out the famous author, Mrs. Zofia Kossak, who was known as an ardent patriot. Martha did not know her personally. A few days later she mentioned her search to a Miss Maria Kann who knew where the author was staying. A meeting was arranged, and one afternoon the two ladies visited Kalenkiewicz, who told them about the Polish Parachute Brigade and that it was its task to help in the liberation of Warsaw. He also mentioned our desire that the city of Warsaw would give us a banner.



These two women organized a fundraiser across the capital; rich and poor alike were asked for a contribution, and it was amazing how everyone pitched in and how it was all kept secret from the enemy troops and Gestapo agents who swarmed like flies in the city. Famous artists were invited to a competition for the best draft of the fan. We had loosely outlined how we would like the fan, but left it up to the competition participants to design the final proposal. They worked in secret in their studios and submitted their drafts to a committee, which selected a proposal from a young architect, Michael Nowicki.

His draft followed the formal guidelines by which Polish military flags and banners had been drawn up for hundreds of years. The tabernacle was of red silk; on one side was the coat of arms of Poland with eagle and crown and the city coat of arms of Warsaw; in each corner was a parachute emblem. The other side showed Archangel Michael, the paratroopers' guardian angel; at the top the inscription *Warsaw 1942* and below the motto

*Surge Polonia* 3) as an expression of the desire of all patriots.

The fan committee met regularly in the nunnery that belonged to the Deaconess Church on Theater Square. The greatest secrecy was required because the Gestapo was very active at this very time and hardly a day passed without someone from the underground movement being arrested. Just outside the building where the committee was meeting, pedestrians were stopped and asked for their identification cards; houses close by were searched, but fortunately they left the church and the monastery alone.

But the risk was great. One day Miss Kann was on her way home from a visit to her brother, where she had picked up a plaster cast he had made of our parachute badge. With this print in her hand and with secret papers relating to the underground movement in her handbag, she was stopped in the street by a German patrol. She let the plaster cast fall to the pavement, where she stepped them out to a small pile of plaster that could not reveal anything, and she put some of the papers in her mouth, but was unable to swallow them. She was taken to the nearest police station where she was questioned by an officer. The sergeant who had led the patrol handed him the papers she hadn't managed to put in her mouth. After looking at them and asking her a few inconsequential questions, he tore the papers into tiny little pieces and threw them in the trash, then let her go. She was surprised, however, as the papers were highly compromising, and she could think of no other explanation than that the officer must be a member of the resistance movement who must have maneuvered his way into the official position of police officer.

The next problem was obtaining materials - and only the best was good enough. But it was impossible to buy cloth, as all the shops dealing in this kind of fabric were closed. It was also quite impossible to procure gold thread and thick embroidery silk. Professor Adamczewski heard of our difficulties, and presented us from a large collection of historical costumes of the eighteenth century, a splendid red cork robe that had belonged to Cardinal Dunajewski, one of the dignitaries of the Church. This gave the fan a most unusual and historical background. A search was now launched to find Mrs.

Madalinska, the old woman who owned the sewing room that had embroidered the military banners for many years. The shop was closed because of the occupation, but the old lady got some of her seamstresses together, found a stock of gold and silver thread, and secretly they began this difficult work. Gradually the work progressed under their skillful fingers, but it took almost a year before the fan was completed and ready for handover.

## **The initiation**

The banner dedication was fixed for 3 November 1943 4), at half past seven in the evening in the Deacon Church. The guard of honor consisted of Captain Kalenkiewicz and two other paratroopers who, under the cover names of Little John and Stork, were members of sabotage units of the underground movement fighting the Germans in Poland and Russia.

According to old tradition, Polish military banners always have godmothers as a symbol of all the women who sacrifice their sons for the motherland. As godmothers for our banner, Kalenkiewicz chose Miss Maria Kann and Mrs. Zofia Kossak, who had been at the head of the entire project at great risk to their lives.

As the consecration hour approached, solitary figures crossed the Theater Square and disappeared silently through the side entrance of the monastery. Just inside the dark entrance stood one of the nuns, admitting only those who knew the field cry. She led them through a long corridor that led into the church. At the high altar stood a few candles, whose little halos of yellow light emphasized the darkness of the church room, and by whose fluttering screen one could just make out the dark figures that glided back and forth in front of the altar like black moths.

There was only a soft shuffling of steps, the rustling of clothes and now and then a whisper when the participants in the ceremony were shown to their seats.

Only a very few were invited to the ceremony, but they represented all those who had put their lives on the line to carry out the project and the soldiers who would carry it forward into battle.

The sound of footsteps and whispering voices died away as the robed figure of Father Krause appeared ghostly in front of the railing around the altar. Slowly he reached the upper steps and, kneeling with his face lifted to heaven, called upon God to look in favor upon those gathered in his house and to protect and advance their plans.

The guard of honor and the godmothers knelt by the flag, which lay spread out on a cushion of red velvet. It was a moving moment. This banner in the middle of Warsaw in a country occupied by the enemy was a symbol of the victory that was to come. It represented the innermost hopes and longings of all true Poles. The flickering lights at the altar cast their warm glow on the silken veil, making it glow blood-red—perhaps a sign of the blood that would be shed in its honor. With his hands clasped passionately in prayer, Father Krause asked the Almighty to bless and protect the banner, to guide those who would defend it, and to help those whose only aspiration was the liberation of Poland to achieve their high goal.

As quietly as they had come, the participants disappeared into the darkened streets; only a few gathered in the sacristy to drink a glass of wine to commemorate the event. Then they too disappeared. Little John and Stork for their dangerous work in the underground movement, the others for less dangerous but equally important duties.

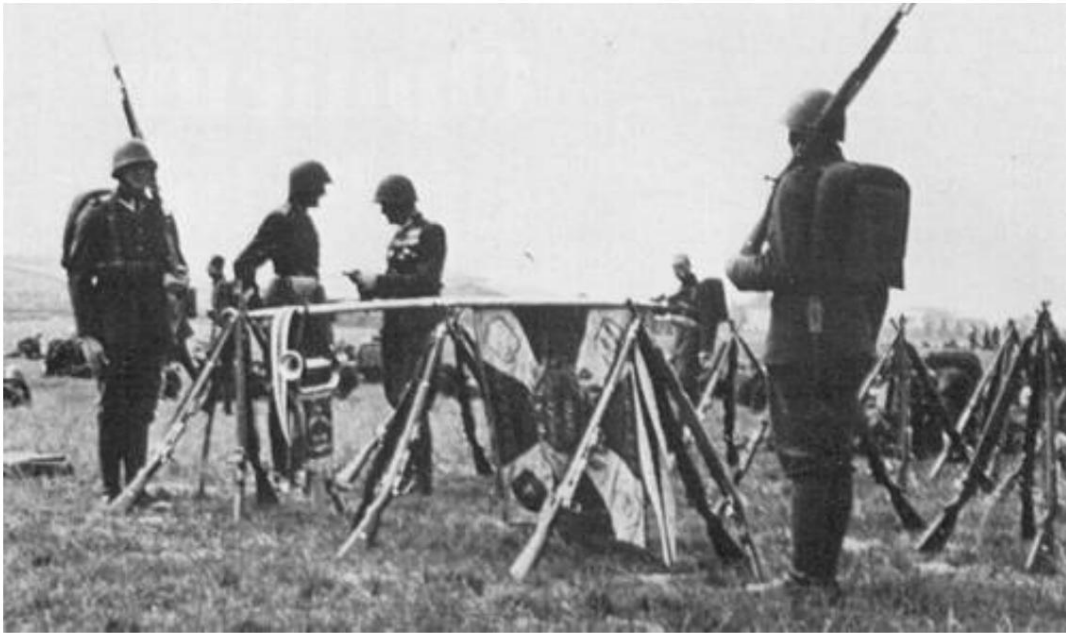
## **Transport to England**

But how was the fan to be brought to London? Not a few agents entered Poland by air or by other means, but few left again; those whose duties brought them back to England again were unable to carry the banner. It was therefore hidden for many months and many times it had to change its hiding place. Finally, it was sewn into a priest's dress and placed in the sacristy of De grå Søstres Kirke, where it remained until the spring of 1944.

Preparations were then made to evacuate some important people from Poland to England in an operation that went by the name of "The Bridge". An airstrip was secretly constructed near Belzyce, about a hundred miles southeast of Warsaw. There were five passengers: three officers from the army, including General Tatar Tabor, and two politicians, Deputy Minister Stanislawski and Mr. Berezovsky. The flag was taken to Belzyce and was taken on the machine that was to take the five to England. Wrapped in the tab was a letter from the inhabitants of Warsaw, in which they expressed their feelings and the impatience with which they awaited the day when we would fall from heaven and liberate them.

Different fates befell those who had helped to make and guard the tab. Mrs. Kossak was arrested by the Gestapo for distributing illegal magazines. She was sent to Auschwitz, but was lucky enough to survive. Today, like Miss Kann, she lives in Warsaw. Captain Kalenkiewicz, who had meanwhile become a lieutenant colonel, was killed in battle at the head of a group of partisans. Little John fell during the Warsaw Uprising in 1944. Stork was arrested in Pinsk in eastern Poland and subjected to brutal torture to get him to reveal the names of his comrades. Fearing that he would succumb to further torture, this brave man committed suicide the day before forces from the underground attacked the prison and freed all the prisoners.

## **The handover**



General Sosnkowski presented me with the banner in London on April 29, 1944, and asked me to make preparations for the ceremony at which it was to be handed over to the brigade. The banner was not quite finished, as they had not been able to procure the fringes to edge it at home in Poland, just as the silver eagle of the pole was also missing. The banner's arrival was kept secret from all but the three of us who saw to its completion.

The biggest problem was the eagle; but then I remembered that the banner of my old brigade "Sons of Warsaw" had been brought to London, and I thought it would symbolize a happy union between my old and new brigade if I had the eagle from the old banner copied and placed on the new.

On 15 June 1944, the entire brigade was gathered at Cupar. It was the first time the entire brigade had been lined up for parade, and in full gear it made an impressive sight. I was very proud of it.

From a grandstand, President Rackiewicz watched the parade along with most of his cabinet. Senior British and Allied officers were also present.



The day was doubly happy for me because my official appointment as major general had arrived the day before. The troops seemed to perceive this appointment as an official recognition of them as well. When I showed up for the first time after receiving the announcement of the appointment, they quite spontaneously cheered for me. That evening a party of them, without my showing it, melted down some silver coins and made general distinctions for me. These distinctions were presented to me just before the inauguration. Could a commander wish for greater proof of his troops' devotion?

An altar had been erected on the parade ground and the banner was placed on a table, ready for the blessing and presentation. A priest gave the blessing and celebrated the high mass; then my order for the day was read out. It ended with the words: *"This banner marks the beginning of our struggles that will end on the soil of Poland; we will not disappoint those who made it; we will bring it back victoriously to our beloved Warsaw."*

Then Deputy Minister Stanislawski went to the table, picked up the flag, turned to the President and prayed

him to make the handover. He rose, received the flag, and carried it to where I knelt with the flag-bearer, and handed it to me. I got up and handed it to the honor guard and ordered it to be paraded along the rails.

And as the banner was carried past the troops, the President moved, proclaiming: *"This banner is a precious treasure, symbolizing the unity that exists between our beloved, occupied country and you soldiers abroad fighting for its freedom."*

Then the Commander-in-Chief spoke: *"This tab is a measure of your obligations. It is a sign of the trust that the people of Warsaw place in you. In the same way that you receive it, you also receive the love and faith of your countrymen in you. Soldiers of the The 1st Polish Parachute Brigade never failed the trust thus placed in you!"*

The red silk cloth swayed in the light summer wind, while the banner was passed from department to department, which in turn presented rifles. And every man in the brigade saw the banner and understood its significance and the greatness of the moment.

... and here ends the general's description of the fan's history.



### **The brigade's other field insignia**

After the brigade's new banner was passed by the troops, it was led into position. The banner is photographed here together with the brigade's other field insignia.

After the brigade's flag, the somewhat smaller flag is seen, which was sewn by the women from Fife, where the units that later became the Parachute Brigade were stationed from 23 September 1940.

To the right of the picture is the standard that the English 1st Airborne Division handed over to the brigade at the end of 1942.





The flag from the women of Fife was presented to the brigade at a parade at Leven football station, 23rd September 1943. Lady Victoria Wemyss, lady-in-waiting to Queen Elizabeth (the recently deceased Queen Mother) presented the flag. Also present at the parade were Lord Elgin, Governor-General of Fife, local dignitaries and representatives of the British and Allied armies.

General Sosabowski writes: *"It was a ceremony which, by its cordiality, was a confirmation to us that we were now accepted and formed part of the community."*



At a parade at Edinburgh airfield in late December 1942, General Frederick presented "Boy" Browning Brigade, Commander of the 1st Airborne Division *"a maroon and blue standard with a pegasus on one side and a Polish eagle on the other."*

The inscription reads: "TO 1 POLISH PARACHUTE BRIGADE", "FROM AIRBORNE DIVISION NEW YEAR 1943".

General Sosabowski writes: *"It was a proud moment for us and I believe the standard was given to us in exchange for a large silver badge we had given them as a Christmas present."*



A drawing of the standard from the 1st Airborne Division.

The standard is on display at the Airborne Forces Museum, Browning Barracks, Aldershot, Hampshire, GU11 2BU.

The drawing shows the standard somewhat redder than it is in reality. The basic color is *maroon* - the same color as the berets of the British airborne units. I would probably rather describe the color as burgundy, rather than maroon, which is the "official" (Gyldendal's English-Danish dictionary) translation of *maroon*.

## Sources

### Written sources

1. *The Parachute General* by Stanislaw Sosabowski, Pocket Novel, Forlaget Skrifola, Copenhagen, no year. (circa 1965). The book's original title is *Parachute-General*.
2. *De Polen van Driel* by George F. Cholewczynski, Uitgeverij, Naarden 1990, ISBN 90-71743-10-1. The book's original title is *Poles Apart*. (I bought at the Airborne Museum, Hotel Hartenstein in Arnhem, so you can hardly get any closer to the "homestead".)
3. *1st Polish Independent Parachute Brigade, 1941-47, Parts 1 and 2*, which was published in the magazine *Military Illustrated*, No. 12 (April/May 1988) and No. 13 (June/July 1988).
4. *Wolsko Polskie 1939-1945* by Barwa I. Broj, Wydawnictwo Interpress, Warsaw 1984, ISBN 83-223-2055-8.

### Image material

The photographs reproduced here come from Source 2, while the color drawings come from Source 4.

The color drawing of the brigade's banner shows that after the Battle of Arnhem, "ARNHEM-DRIEL", "18-26-IX-1944" is sewn on.

### Field sign

The elderly Polish gentleman who showed around the *Sikorski Museum* was clearly no old paratrooper, as it took him a few tries before he could show the right flag. It was a great experience for me - to see and touch the strong silk, with the exciting prehistory ...

As mentioned , the standard from the 1st Airborne Division is on display at *the Airborne Forces Museum* in Aldershot. The standard is stored here behind glass. It was also exciting to see this field sign, but the experience was not quite on par with the sight of the real tab.

I am not aware of where the flag from the women of Fife is on display, if it still exists.

Per Finsted

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## Notes

- 1) The book mentions the year as 1943, but if the chronology is to fit, it must be 1942.
- 2) A field track that was built in the Parachute Brigade's training camp.
- 3) Surge Polonia means something like "Poland will rise again!".
- 4) The book mentions the year as 1942, but if the chronology is to fit, it must be 1943.