

MINISTRY OF NATIONAL DEFENSE
REPUBLIC OF POLAND

POLISH VICTORIES ON THE ITALIAN FRONT

Monte Cassino, May 1944

Ancona, July 1944

Bologna, April 1945



POLISH VICTORY

Monte Cassino
May 11–19, 1944

**For our freedom and yours,
we, soldiers of Poland,
gave our soul to God,
our life to the soil of Italy,
our hearts to Poland.**





BATTLE OF THE NATIONS

Monte Cassino, May 11–19, 1944

In the middle of the Italian shoe, in the Central Apennines between Rome and Naples, there is Monte Cassino hill, rising up to the height of 519 meters. Here, in the 6th century, Saint Benedict – who was later called, due to his role in the history of our religion and culture, the father of Europe – founded his famous abbey. Over 1,400 years later, this very hill became the place of particularly fierce fights between Allied forces and Germans, who cut crosswise of the Italian peninsula the road to Rome, establishing there the key point of their defense. In three bloody attacks on Monte Cassino in January and February 1944, American and French corps, with Moroccan soldiers, and the British corps, with Hindu and New Zealand soldiers, were defeated. Meanwhile, the US army aviation

unnecessarily bombed the Benedictine Abbey on the hill, which made it easier for the Germans to defend themselves. At the break of 1943 and 1944, in the south of Italy, the Poles landed as the Polish II Corps (a formation within the British forces). Its soldiers had gone a long way from their own country – through the infinite territories of Russia, the Central and Middle East and Egypt. The Polish II Corps attacked the hill twice, on May 12 and 17, which ultimately led to – amidst horribly bloody fights – the withdrawal of Germans, whose positions were in the meantime circumvented by the British XIII Corps. The road to Rome was finally open.

From that point onward, the war on the European continent was to last another year.

żur



United States
of America



Free
France



French
Morocco



United
Kingdom



Indian
Empire



New
Zealand



Republic
of Poland



Kingdom
of Italy

PHOTO: JAKUB SZWICZUK



MARIUSZ BŁASZCZAK
POLISH MINISTER OF NATIONAL DEFENSE

MONTE CASSINO. VICTORY OF POLISH DETERMINATION AND VALOR

Poland was the first victim of World War II – the invasion of Nazi Germany from the west and Soviet Russia from the east broke our line of defense, but never succeeded in breaking our spirit, love of freedom, let alone our will to fight. Polish soldier still fought bravely on many European fronts. The Polish II Corps commanded by General Anders, who had gone a long way from Russian gulags, was invincible, and fought fiercely on the Italian front. The Allied forces, after unsuccessful attempts to seize the strategically important Monte Cassino Hill, entrusted the Poles with this task.

General Władysław Anders in his order before the battle on May 11, 1944, wrote: "Long have we waited for this moment of retaliation and revenge on our eternal enemy. [...] for this ruffianly attack of Germany on Poland, for partitioning Poland jointly with the Bolsheviks, [...] for the misery and tragedy of our Fatherland, for our sufferings and exile." The soldiers of the Polish II Corps did not waste this opportunity, and seized the reinforced German position in the abbey ruins, which had earlier been resisting the gunfire, bombing and attacks of the Allied forces. German defense line broke under the pressure of Polish determination and valor. Polish soldiers showed evidence of their European solidarity, determination, patriotism and their will to fight. The road to Rome was wide open, which settled the success of Allies on the Italian front. The Poles also liberated Ancona and Bologna. They are well remembered by the Italian people. Polish soldiers fight bravely with much devotion, but are always chivalrous warriors.

In this particular moment – when we watch brave Ukraine fight with the Russian aggressor – we should keep in mind that Polish victory for the freedom of Europe in the Battle of Monte Cassino proves that no tyranny lasts forever, and we should join our forces and build alliances in the righteous fight for eternal values.



PATH TO MONTE CASSINO

September of 1939 was the time of partitioning Poland between Germany and Russia. On the eastern territories of Poland, occupied by the Soviet Union, selected social groups, including captivated Polish officers, were exterminated, and there were mass arrests and deportations of entire families into the distant lands of Russia. About 400,000 Polish citizens were put in prisons, concentration camps, and deported to places of forced exile throughout this country's infinite territories. The attack of Germany on the Soviet Union in June 1941 brought the change in the Soviet policy: the start of a diplomatic relationship with Poland, the release of Polish citizens and the formation of a Polish army in southern Russia, and later in Uzbekistan, which belonged to the Soviet Union (Polish Armed Forces in the Soviet Union). In 1942, the army was evacuated with a small number of civilians to Iran and Iraq, as part of the British army – and this was the beginning of the Polish Army in the East. From this army's ranks, an operational task force was separated, and called the Polish II Corps. In 1943, it was deployed to Egypt, and then to Italy. The Corps' commander, General Władysław Anders, agreed for his troops to attack the so far unseized enemy positions at Monte Cassino, which were key to the German Gustav Line dividing the Italian peninsula.

After a victorious battle, the Polish II Corps took part in another phases of the campaign, and finished fighting in May 1945 with the seizure of Bologna. In autumn of 1946, the Corps was transported to Great Britain, and then demobilized.

POWs, 1939–1941

110,000	Polish citizens arrested under Soviet occupation
62,500	arrested were exiled to the far lands of the Soviet Union
25,000	Poles were among deported prisoners



POLISH II CORPS 1943–1946

47,000 soldiers (1944)

Headquarters

2nd Warsaw Panzer Division

3rd Carpathian Rifle Division

5th Kresowa Infantry Division

non-division units (army and corps units)

POLISH ARMY IN THE EAST 1942–1944

62,000 soldiers (1943)

three rifle divisions

auxiliary division

artillery group

uhlan regiment

liaison battalion

geographical company

2ndLt Władysława Piechowska,
Commandant of Women's Auxiliary Service

General Władysław Sikorski,
Polish Prime Minister and
Commander-in-Chief, with Junaks

CONSCRIPTS, 1940–1941



150,000

Polish citizens were forced to join the ranks of the Red Army

49,500

young Poles were among the conscripts forced to join the ranks of occupant army

DEPORTEES, 1940–1941

317,400

Polish citizens were by force deported into the far land of the Soviet Union

189,200

Poles were among the deportees

Soviet Union

EXILES, 1941–1942

389,000

Polish citizens were released in the Soviet Union

78,500

Polish soldiers and 37,500 civilians were allowed to leave the Soviet Union

272,000

Polish citizens remained in the Soviet Union

Uzbek
SSR

TASHKENT

YANGIYO'L



POLISH ARMED FORCES IN THE USSR, 1941–1942

78,500 soldiers (1942)

two infantry divisions

four infantry divisions in organization

uhlan regiment

artillery brigade

training centers for the army, artillery and communication

panzer weapon organizational center

Women's Auxiliary Service

Junaks (cadets aged 11–17)

General Władysław Sikorski, Commander-in-Chief of the Polish Army (1939–1943) and General Władysław Anders, who was consecutively: Commander of the Polish Armed Forces in the Soviet Union (1942–1944), Commander of the Polish II Corps (1943–1946), and Inspector General of the Armed Forces (1946–1954). Middle East, 1943

MAP LEGEND



army headquarters

SFSR Soviet Federative Socialist Republic

SSR Soviet Socialist Republic

USSR Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (Soviet Union)

BATTLE OF MONTE

Raymond Graham Swing, an extremely popular radio broadcaster, in his afternoon broadcast on May 18, 1944, announced for all Americans to hear: “A marvelous flanking maneuver, which led to the capturing of Cassino, was successful due to the attack of the Polish forces, the greatest soldiers that the current war has produced.”

Without a doubt, the day when Polish soldiers planted a white-and-red flag in the ruins of the Benedictine Abbey at the top of Monte Cassino was a day of their great triumph. They were honored among all armies fighting for what had seemed to be an unconquerable German redoubt, blocking the Allies' way to Rome. Since the beginning of 1944, the best of Allied armies one by one bled out trying to take Monte Cassino. During the first attack, in January, over 2,000 American and French soldiers died in the mud-filled swamps of the Rapido river. The second attack, in mid-February, was initiated by the British. When they had bled out on Hill 593, Hindu soldiers took over, and were also heavily decimated. The Liri Valley was directly attacked by the New Zealanders, including the Maori fighters, who were famous for their spirit and valor, but their attack also ended in a fiasco. After heavy fights at Monte Cassino, the New Zealand corps was disbanded...

During the third attack, in March, the town of Cassino was turned into a pile of rubble, and another attack, this time by the brave Gurkha soldiers, was repelled at the ruins of the abbey – it was something unbelievable! As Melchior Wańkowicz wrote, the famous 4th Indian Infantry Division, which lost 3,000 soldiers in the attack, for the first time in its history failed to obtain the objective of the attack. The German paratroopers undoubtedly confirmed they truly deserved to be called Hitler's military elite. The Allies referred to them as the Green Devils.

Polish II Corps Enters the Scene

After the fiasco of the third Allied attack on Monte Cassino, in the second half of March 1944, the front was almost static. It became clear to the Allied forces that in order to break the Gustav Line, they needed fresh

reinforcements. Time had come for the Polish II Corps under General Władysław Anders, which had arrived in Italy in December 1943, and had been incorporated into the British 8th Army. At the time, Churchill wrote to General Alan Brooke, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff: “Entering the battle by the Polish soldiers is currently becoming a pressing matter.”.

On May 12, the initial moments of the attack already proved that the assault fire that preceded it had not done much harm to the enemy. The German paratroopers opened ferocious fire from their bunkers, perfectly incorporated into the terrain, concealed with boulders and bushes. They could only be located when the soldiers hidden inside began blasting their MMGs and LMGs. Regardless of the heavy fire, battalions of the 1st Carpathian Rifle Brigade managed to force their way up Hill 593, reach the so-called Ravine, leading to Massa Albaneta, and begin the fight for Hill 569. In the meantime, the 5th Wileńska Infantry Brigade successfully reached the top of the Phantom Ridge, which was given the name by Americans during their first attack. It was a real ‘molehill’, studded with bunkers which the Polish soldiers had to capture one by one, suffering tremendous losses. The 5th Kresowa Infantry Division tried to push their way towards Hill 575, but they did not get far, as the German artillery fire tightly covered the whole valley. The situation of the soldiers attacking San Angelo was even worse. Decimated companies retreated to Hill 706.

Another Attack

It quickly turned out it was easier to capture enemy positions than to keep them. The attackers and the defenders engaged in a lethal fight, fiercer than anything the battle had seen before. Unfortunately, the devotion and fanatical courage of the Poles was not enough to defeat the German paratroopers. Sending Shermans to the Ravine was also unsuccessful – most of them were lost on mines or destroyed by anti-armor weapons. The forces had to retreat, but that first, unsuccessful attack was not entirely in vain. As the Germans were forced to fully engage in the fight with the Polish soldiers, the Brits of the XIII Corps managed to capture bridgeheads and break the advanced positions of the Gustav Line.

In the meantime, at the headquarters of the II Corps, General Anders and his officers were already planning another attack. It was to begin at 7:00 a.m. on May 17. The Poles had one advantage – they could jump over fire barrages they had already learned about during the first

CASSINO

**A one-man band.
Commander of the Polish
II Corps, General Władysław
Anders, with his staff at
Monte Cassino, May 1944**



attack, which did not mean, however, that they were safe. The soldiers were killed not only by enemy fire, but also mines and traps. Nevertheless, the Carpathians and Kresovians were unstoppable. On that day, they captured the Phantom Ridge (except for its northern part), as well as Hill 593 and the Ravine.

On the morning of May 18, the Poles rose to fight. Around 6:00, the soldiers of the 6th Carpathian Rifle Battalion forced their way to Massa Albaneta. At the same time, the soldiers of the 5th Battalion went up Hill 569, breaking the defense of the German covering troops who were left behind after most of their forces had retreated at night. At 9:00, patrols of the 12th

Podolian Uhlan Regiment started making their way towards the Abbey Hill, pulling out of the bunkers the remaining few paratroopers who had not yet had a chance to retreat or had stayed with the wounded as medical orderlies. The uhlans were the first to capture the ruins of the abbey, where they planted their amaranth and navy-blue banner. Around 11:30, the soldiers of the third platoon of the 3rd Company of the 5th Battalion of the 3rd Carpathian Rifle Division, under the command of 2ndLt Adam Lorenz, raised a white-and-red flag over the ruins, "for everyone to see and know from faraway who captured the ruins at the top".

Piotr Korczyński

BLOOD RUNS DOWN THE MOUNTAINS

From January 1944, American, British, French, Hindu and New Zealand forces tried to remove elite detachments of German paratroop and mountain riflemen from their defensive positions, but it was all in vain. Germans would kill Allied soldiers with precise regularity. Advantage in the air brought no results. Bombing the abbey only made it easier for German detachments, as they could more effectively push away enemy attacks, which broke and retreated one after another. Even the fiercest of the fierce – the Ghurkas, failed to break through the fire of the Green Devils, as the German paratroopers were called. Only the Polish soldiers managed to achieve this. The day after the attack of May 17, 1944, the victorious white-and-red flag fluttered over the ruins of the abbey.

June 4, 1944



ROME

May 25, 1944

PIEDIMONTE S. GERMANO

VILLA SANTA LUCIA

San Angelo

575

No. 5 Phantom

MASS ALBANETA

569

593

No. 7

No. 8

ABBEY

Polish War Cemetery

Monte Cassino

1st Paratrooper Division

Road No.6 (Via Casilina)

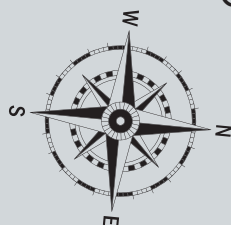
Road No.6 (Via Casilina)

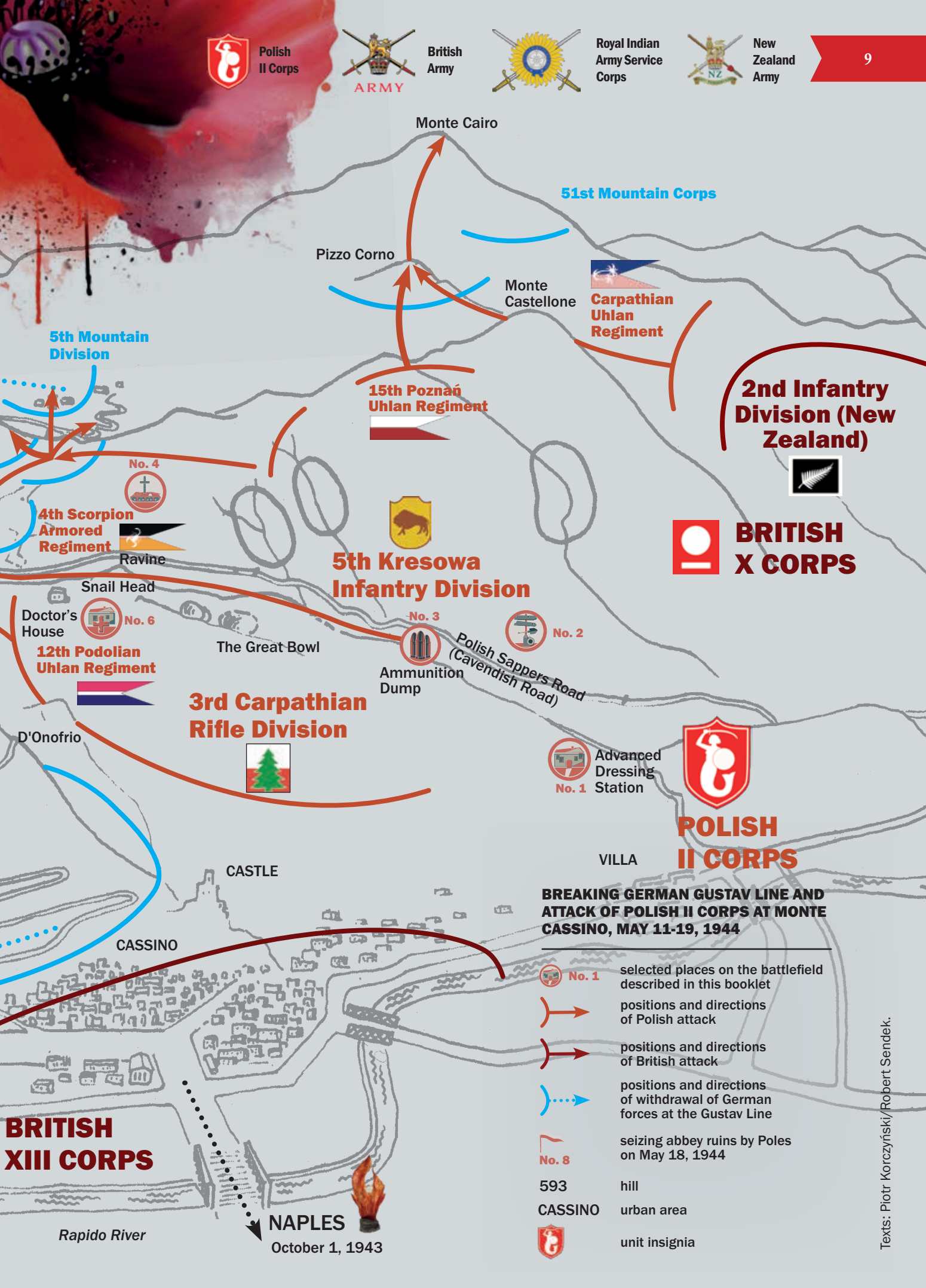
Railway station

78th Infantry Division (English)



4th Infantry Division (Hindu)





HISTORICAL TRAIL OF THE BATTLE OF MONTE CASSINO

The trail, which 78 years ago was followed by the Polish II Corps soldiers to end in victory at Monte Cassino



Download app from:



The trail is marked by twelve tables describing the most important phases of fights. The first table is in the center of Cassino city, and the last one is on the Hill 593. The tables are numbered from 1 to 12, and the trail is 12 km long. Tourists can download a dedicated application which can guide them through the trail. It has a weather and tracking feature for trip planning, but it can also guide the user to the nearest hotel.

The historical part in the app provides historical information about the Polish II Corps soldiers, their Commander Władysław Anders, and their fights on the Italian hills.

Monte Cassino app is available for iOS and Android in three languages: Polish, English and Italian. It can be downloaded free of charge from App Store and Google Play. After it is activated online for the first time, the app doesn't require constant online connection.

POLISH SAPPERS ROAD



No. 2

No. 1



ADVANCED DRESSING STATION

No. 3



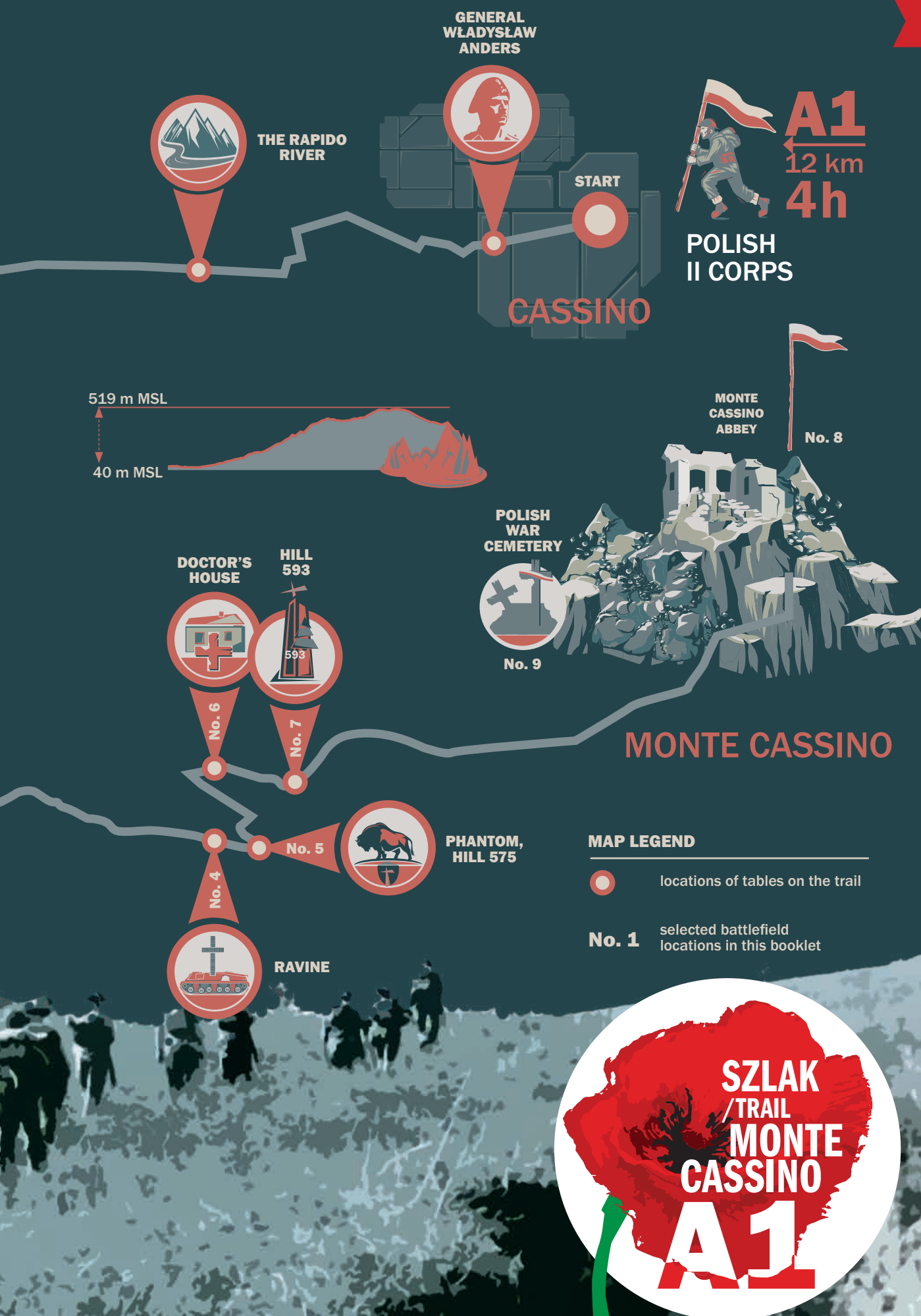
AMMUNITION DUMP

TANKS
CAME
FROM
HERE



ATTACK
POSITIONS
OF ALLIES





FOLLOW THE TRAIL

MONTE CASINO



Historical trail from the city of Cassino to the abbey hill is open for everyone. The trail is 12 km long, and awaits those who are passionate about history and challenges. This is a combat trail of the Polish II Corps soldiers, who in May 1944 seized the hill enforced with German positions. The trail runs along the legendary Polish Sappers Road. Wild nature did not manage to conceal the signs of history, still present there. In May 2022, in the 78th anniversary of Polish victory on Monte Cassino, the first international trekking event on the combat trail of the Polish II Corps took place. Don't take shortcuts! Cover the full distance of this historical trail, created by Wojskowy Instytut Wydawniczy (WIW, Military Publishing Institute).



Maciej Podczaski, Director of Wojskowy Instytut Wydawniczy (WIW), invites to the trail

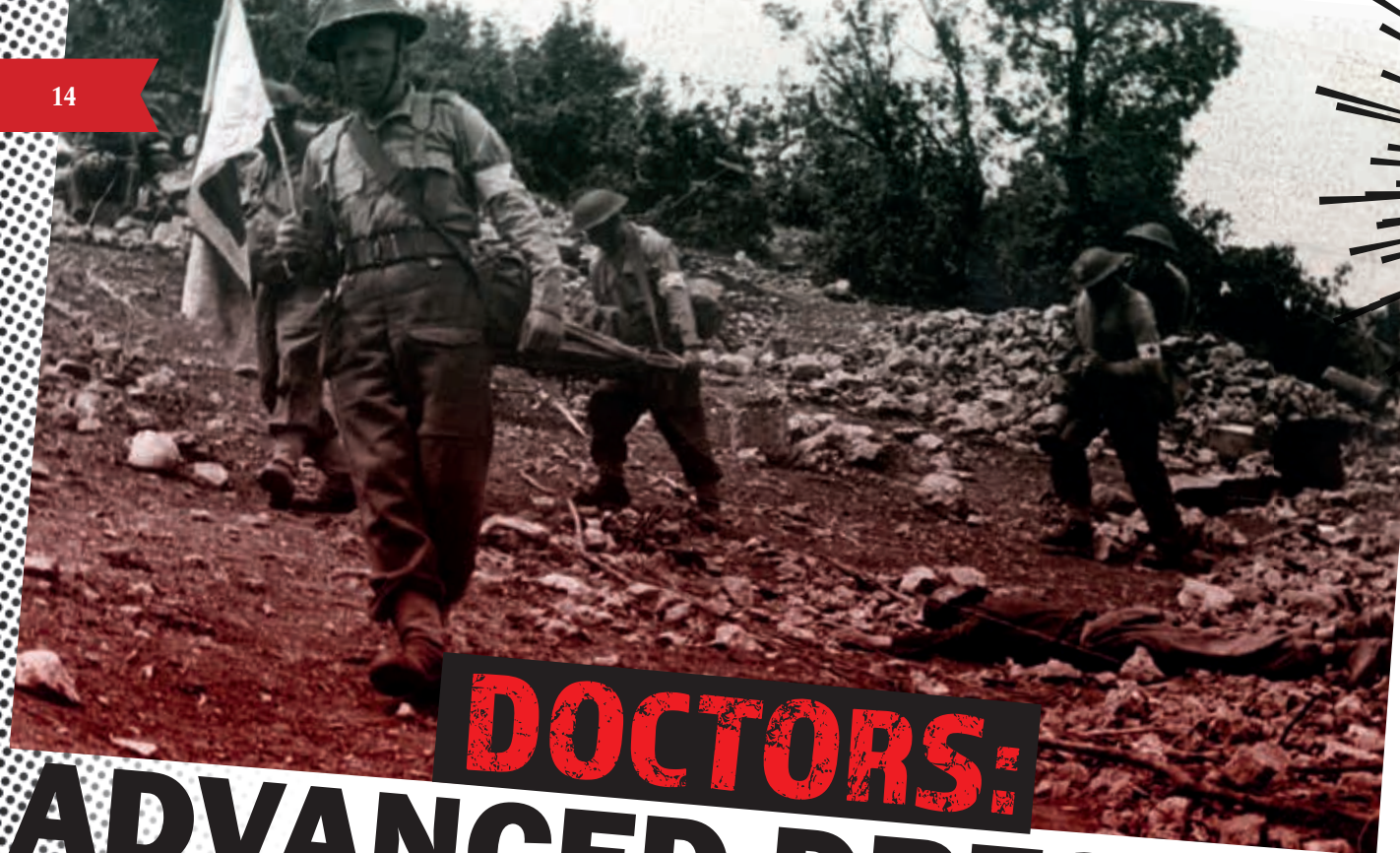


General Rajmund Andrzejczak, Chief of General Staff of the Polish Armed Forces, heading the trekking following the footsteps of Polish heroes

OF POLISH HEROES

SINO TREK





DOCTORS: ADVANCED DRESSING STATION



No. 1

I meet the late Dr. Rymkiewicz, who tells me that the seventy-year-old Dr. Szarecki had been standing at the operating table for the whole night (he would also stand there for the entire next day and night). [...]

On the operating table rests rifleman Kaca, a tough Silesian of the 15th Battalion. His arm lacerated, bone shattered – he lies there without anesthesia, smoking a cigarette, while Dr. Szarecki operates on him.

Dr. Skorczyński – the head of the transfusion unit, walks by the severely wounded lying on stretchers, which form a line along the walls of the tent. His eyebrows are pulled together – he must quickly and firmly administer human life. He has no time to measure blood pressure, or even take the pulse. He only looks at the faces; the temples that are already turning blue; the foreheads sprinkled with sweat. Walking, he listens to the breath and makes a slight gesture with his hand. It is a sign for the stretcher-bearers walking behind to grab the stretchers and transport them to the other bank of the Styx – to the transfusion tent.

Melchior Wańkowicz,
Bitwa o Monte Cassino

POLISH SAPPERS

ROAD



No. 2

The commander of the sappers of the Kresowa [Division], LtCol Hempel, has just come in. [...] He comes from the Polish Sappers Road. He saw the sappers under Maj Maculewicz and Lt Jęczalik repairing the road where the 14th Battalion is located, right under the nose of the Germans, sappers who were ducking under the whizz of bullets and straightening up again to continue their work.



He saw Lt Zapaśnik and his people hurrying to finish a shelter carved out in the rock – an observational point for the commander of the 5th Brigade. The sappers are working with hammers wrapped in jute and cloth. Sgt Kluś, hit in the chest with a big rock during a German missile explosion, passed out, but when he regained consciousness, he refused to go down.

Four heavy artillery projectiles hit the Sappers Road, creating four big holes that make it impossible to move around, while every single moment counts to stop the inflow of jeeps...

The whole sapper company: cooks, messengers, orderlies, message carriers, clerks – anyone with faith in God – gather to help, creating a chain, passing bags with sand and stones from one to another. Between 9 p.m. and 10:30 p.m. they manage to cover all the holes.



No. 3

5TH KRESOWA INFANTRY DIVISION: AMMUNITION DUMP

There used to be a saying: "A sapper has to be strong and not know how to tell time." This meant that sappers were considered labor force doing hard, physical work, simple-minded to the point of not being able to tell apart the hour hand from the minute hand on the clock. [...].

After the first fights in which we took part, everyone started to treat us more seriously, they understood that our mines and traps ensure a good night's sleep to the infantry, that we are the ones who provide the artillery with access to posts located in difficult terrain, who take apart enemy traps, and so on.

After Cassino – where we cleared mines from paths used by the infantry and pack transport, where we slithered like snakes under tanks during an attack, pulling Bangalore tubes out the front of tank tracks, using fire to clear the way for the Shermans in the mined terrain, where we sneaked up to the German bunkers with beehive explosives to make them, as if by magic, turn into rubble – the general opinion finally said: "Oh... Sappers!" with recognition and respect.





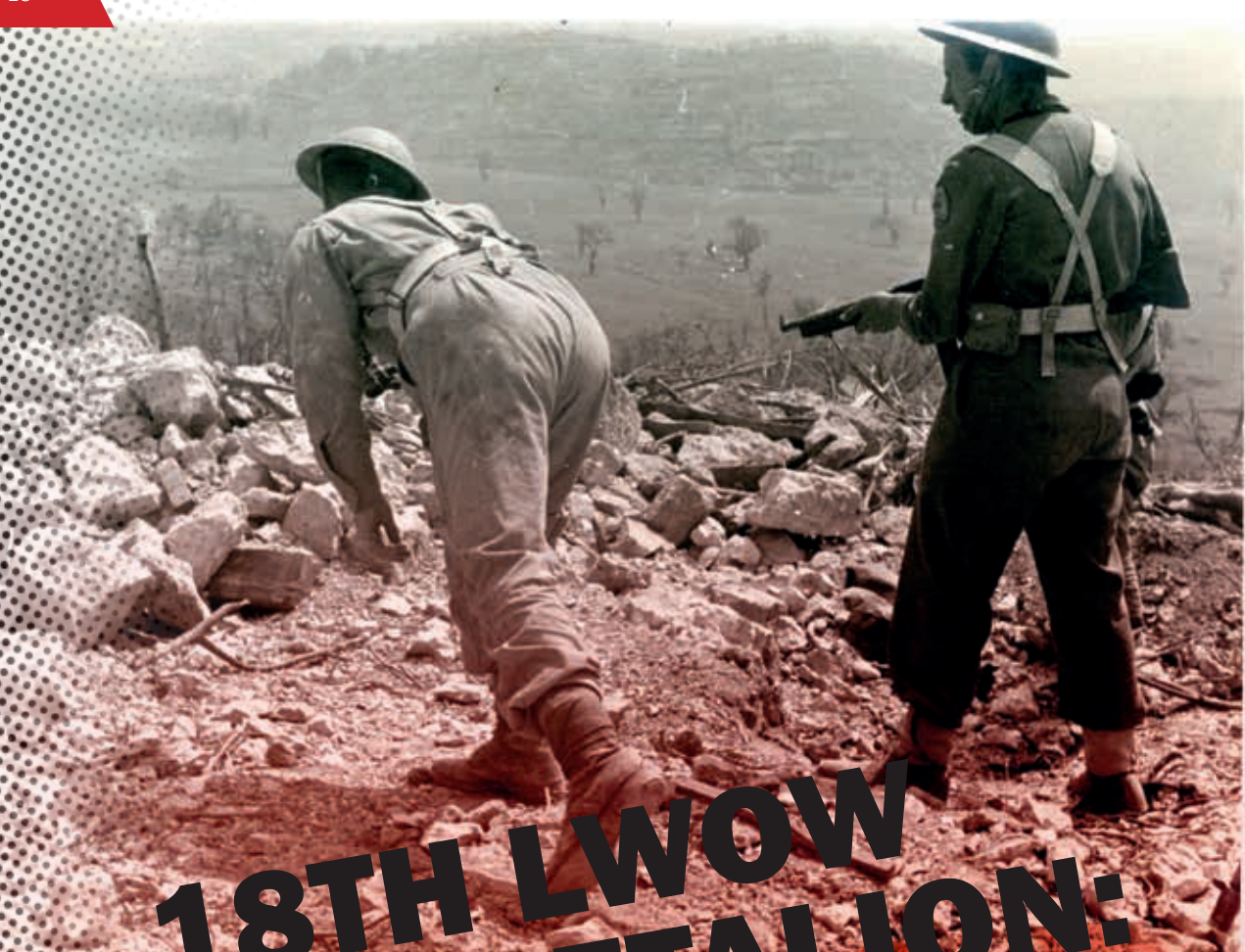
No. 4

4TH SCORPION ARMORED REGIMENT: **THE RAVINE**

Tanks were also sent [to fight], and due to the dedication and persistence of the crews, they created passages in the breakneck mountainous terrain, almost inaccessible even to the mules. The tank men, despite suffering heavy losses, executed their tasks perfectly, breaking the German defense with direct gunfire targeted at the bunkers from which our infantrymen had been shelled.

The Germans, stunned by the sight of tanks they had not at all expected in this terrain, shelled from tank guns and MMGs, lost their nerve and, reducing fire, lost precious minutes.

Our infantry reached the bunkers and began to destroy them with grenades, flame throwers and machine guns, killing the defending or dragging out the fear-stricken Germans. In frequent hand-to-hand fights, the fierceness and determination of both sides reached their peak. They fought with bayonets, rifle butts, knives and rocks.



18TH LWOW RIFLE BATTALION: HILL 575 AND PHANTOM



No. 5

Despite the constant artillery and mortar enemy fire, the increasing machine gun fire, particularly from the northern ridge of the Phantom, the soldiers behave and endure all this admirably: all officers, no exceptions, are in the first line.

Their fierceness is so great that no one who had not experienced the circumstances would be able to understand [them].

To offer an example, I report that Platoon Leader Gorgolewski of the 18th Lwów Rifle Battalion, pierced with an enemy machine gun, first continues to shoot at the bunker between his legs, and later, shot again in the chest, lifts himself up and shouts: »Fellows, kill these mother***kers!« and only then falls to the ground, struck in the head by a sniper, with a cry dying away on his lips: »Long live Poland!«

12TH PODOLIAN UHLAN REGIMENT: **DOCTOR'S HOUSE**



No. 6

When we finally took the ruins of the abbey, and my friends raised first the regiment banner and later the British and Polish flags, twelve captives – German paratroopers – were brought to our positions. They were truly tough soldiers, but they have also had enough of the massacre, even more so that they were extremely thirsty and asked for water. I went to find water for them; in fact, I was thirsty myself.

I went down to the so-called Doctor's House, our advanced dressing station, organized in a partly ruined farm building. There were two wells nearby, but in one of them there was a body of an American soldier, decomposing for at least several days.

I took some water from the other well, and I managed to bring it back to the German paratroopers before they were taken down the hill. And then, I still don't know how, possibly due to my weariness, I got lost. I was unable to find my unit. I slept through the night under a massive rock, surrounded by bodies of soldiers lying there since the previous attacks on the abbey hill...

In the morning, determined to somehow return to my fellows, I took small winding paths leading downhill. It wasn't safe, as the ground was still full of anti-personnel mines. I only calmed down once I reached one of the main roads, already cleared by Polish and American sappers. I kept walking until a jeep caught up with me and stopped. I noticed that only 'high ranks' were sitting inside it. They were American officers, but they talked with one another in Polish. I was very surprised, and one of them, also in Polish, asked me: »Which division are you from?« I answered that I was from the 3rd Carpathian Rifle Division. They took me to my unit, and that's how the Battle of Monte Cassino ended for me.

A memory of uhlan Józef Kowalczyk (Piotr Korczyński, 20 dni piekła ulana Józefa Kowalczyka)



No. 7

3RD CARPATHIAN LIGHT ARTILLERY REGIMENT: **HILL 593**



On May 19, having obtained the consent of the Divisional Artillery commander, I take a scout with me and we drive a jeep up to the front line. In places where the road is still shelled by enemy artillery, there are boards put out by our military police, saying: "DON'T BE STUPID, DON'T GET YOURSELF KILLED."

We approach our infantry's forward positions. The air on the battlefield is filled with a terrible odor of decomposing bodies that could not be buried in this rocky terrain full of piling boulders. The bodies of soldiers and transport mules decompose quickly in the May sun. There are corpses of American, British, French, Hindu, New Zealand and Polish soldiers.

With a heavy heart, I come down Hill 593 and, taking the path marked out in the mine fields with white tapes by our brave sappers, I make my way towards the abbey. At the foot of Hill 569, several of our soldiers are watching a captive. The German paratrooper is sitting on the ground and looking at his guards with eyes full of rage. His face expresses pure hatred, subdued somewhat by the hopelessness of the situation he has found himself in.

Bodies of fallen soldiers are piled up in front of the Doctor's House, only 400 meters from the top of Hill 593. They are brought here from the front line by stretcher-bearers. It is a very depressing sight. Every tenth body is of an officer. You can tell by the yellow shoes.

I go up Hill 593. [...]. Standing on this rocky hill, which ends with a steep cliff, I become aware of how awful the situation of our infantry units was – on this bare hill, shelled with artillery fire, mortars, and crossfire of machine guns from the Monte Cassino Abbey and Hill 575.

Władysław Filip Łuczyński,
Moje cztery kampanie.
Wspomnienia z kampanii:
wrześniowej, francuskiej,
libijskiej i włoskiej.

BANNER ON THE RUINS, UP IN THE CLOUDS

No. 8



The dawn of May 18, 1944, promised another sunny day. Perfect weather – but not for the soldiers fighting near the ruins of the Monte Cassino Abbey. This weather meant that dozens more of Polish soldiers attacking the hill would die in the scorching heat. However, this morning was different. The battlefield was quiet, only rare, faraway cannon shots disrupted the stillness.

When on May 12 the soldiers of the Polish II Corps initiated their attack, it seemed that the rule known since ancient times – that these cursed hills are unconquerable – would yet again prove to be right. Indeed, the Polish attack broke, but it was only the first charge. The Poles had many more scores to settle with the Germans than the British, French, Hindu, Canadian, Moroccan, Maori or New Zealand soldiers... They bled on the positions they had gained, but still kept them, and on May 16, again attempted to reach the Phantom, San Angelo, Calvary Mount...

The Germans were not so certain of their advantage any more. They knew their

long-time enemy. Death began to decimate them – Polish death... 2ndLt Kazimierz Gurbiel was thinking about all this, breathing in the unnatural quiet. Ultimately, tiredness took over his body and the officer nodded off.

Together with his fellows of the 12th Podolian Uhlan Regiment, he supported the infantry of their Carpathian Division in the fight. They not only attacked German bunkers, but also conducted regular combat patrols while the infantry regrouped before another attack.

Final Patrol

2ndLt Gurbiel was woken up by a familiar voice. It was the commander of his squadron, saying he was wanted by Colonel Mieczysław Sander. "It must be about another patrol, it seems that the silence did not bring ►

anything new," thought Gurbiel, but this time his gut feeling was wrong – this patrol was to be entirely different than the ones before.

When Gurbiel reported to the Colonel, the latter said straightaway: "Kaziu, rush to the abbey. Check what's going on. The word is Germans are gone. Don't believe it. Be careful as if they were still there." It turned out that at dawn a white flag had been spotted on the ruins. Gurbiel, electrified by the order, did not even return to get his helmet, his blouse or his Thompson. He led his thirteen NCOs towards the ruins in his shirt and field-cap, with a Colt in his holster. They went past olive tree stubs, jagged by the fire, and carefully treaded between stones and clusters of red poppies. They had to watch not only the decomposing bodies, but also the mines. At any given moment, they could be cut down with a series from a Spandau, or torn apart by a mortar projectile. They knew the methods of the Green Devils, who had already used the white flag – a symbol of surrender – to trick the adversary before an unexpected attack. This time, though, nothing happened.

After several hours of walking the path winding between the rocks that the whole 15th Army Group had not been able to capture, around 10:00 am the uhlans reached the thick but dilapidated walls of the Benedictine cradle of Christianity. They approached the least destroyed building, and when 2ndLt Gurbiel pushed open the door, they were all struck by an awful stench. Inside, there were 16 heavily wounded paratroopers lying on the floor, with several medical orderlies standing by their side. They were tough soldiers, but their eyes expressed the fear of knowing that Poles would come for them and take revenge for the German crimes committed in Poland. However, the Polish soldiers were better than Hitler's elite. With the help of his interpreter, 2ndLt Gurbiel said shortly: "We won't harm a hair of your head." He then went down to the basement under the medical room, and what he saw there made his hair stand on end under his cap: the casemates were full of boxes containing torn, disfigured bodies of fallen paratroopers, and among them, there were three seriously injured men, simply left there to wait for their end.

Victory

2ndLt Gurbiel ran outside to catch a breath of fresh air and compose himself, as the terror he had just seen was sure to move even the toughest and most experienced veteran. Walking in the ruins, he noticed two men climbing up the Abbey Hill. As it turned out, it was a Canadian officer and a German captive who was guiding him. After the Canadian, uhlan reinforcements – Lieutenant Leon Hryniewicz and his platoon – reached the top of the hill. One of the uhlans, Józef Bruliński, took

out from under his blouse a makeshift banner, quickly put together by combining a red and a dark-blue scarf with a piece of bandage, which together made up the colors of the 12th Podolian Uhlan Regiment, and put it high on a pole. Thus, the amaranth, white and dark-blue colors worn by the Podolian uhlans since Napoleonic times, became the first sign announcing to the world the Polish victory at Monte Cassino. Soon, it was replaced by a white-and-red flag, next to which, upon the order of General Władysław Anders, a British flag was hung. At 11:15 am, 2ndLt Tadeusz Drabczyński let out a carrier pigeon which brought to the headquarters of the Polish II Corps a report on capturing the Abbey Hill. There was only one letter written on the piece of paper – a huge "V" for Victory. At noon, Platoon Leader Emil Czech played St. Mary's Trumpet Call from the ruins of the abbey. This is how the Polish soldiers celebrated the capturing of the key position in the Gustav Line.

Piotr Korczyński



Great Britain 1946

Poland 1945-1946

Italy

FROM MONTE CASSINO TO BOLOGNA



The Polish II Corps in Italian Campaign, 1944-1945

The fights between the Polish II Corps and Germany in Italy started in February 1944, and the Battle of Monte Cassino in May were their peak. However, in total Polish soldiers participated in this campaign for 15 months, fighting in the mountains and in the coastal areas, forcing the rivers and fortification lines. Only as late as on July 1, the army succeeded in seizing Loreto with its famous Basilica of the Holy House (sanctuary of the Virgin Mary), the bridgeheads behind the Musone River, and started their struggle for Ancona. According to plan, on July 17, the Polish 3rd Carpathian Rifle Division launched feigned aggressive activity, which was to engage German forces, while at the same time the 5th Kresowa Infantry Division, supported by the 2nd Panzer Brigade and the British 7th Queen's Own Hussars, performed the main attack to the west of the city. The German forces however managed to withdraw part of their troops from Ancona. On July 18, at 2:45 p.m., Polish commandos, supported by the 15th Poznań Uhlan Regiment, entered the undefended city. They succeeded to achieve one of the main goals of the allied offensive – capture an undamaged port, at which five days later the first supply ships arrived. The Ancona offensive was the only operation that was independently planned and carried out by Polish soldiers

only. During this operation, General Anders commanded not only the Polish II Corps, but also – subordinate to it – the Italian Liberation Corps, and the British: 7th Queen's Own Hussars, and 17th and 26th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Regiments.

After the exhausting chase in summer and fall of 1944, the Polish II Corps shifted to defense activity at the Senio River. In March 1945, the Corps launched preparations for a new offensive to damage German forces in northern Italy. One of the main tasks for the 8th Army was given to the Polish soldiers, who were to force the Senio river and – after breaking down German defense – outflank towards Bologna and cut the enemy off. They launched a successful attack on April 9 with the support of the British corps and engineering units, artillery and aviation.

While chasing the enemy, the Corps was forcing consecutive water obstacles, and on April 21, it seized Bologna. This success significantly contributed to disrupting German troops in Italy, and in consequence, to their capitulation and ending the Italian Campaign by the Allies.

The Italian Campaign of the Polish II Corps took place in the shadow

of – incomprehensible to the Allies – tragedy of its soldiers. The eastern territories of Poland had just been annexed by the Russians: these lands were homeland for most Poles, who in 1942 left the Soviet Union with Anders' army. That meant their return to Poland was not possible. In 1945, Polish detachments in Italy were very close to rebellion against their previous allies. Ultimately, in the next year, the army was demobilized – the British agreed to transport the Polish army to England and Scotland. From there, Polish soldiers, having adapted themselves to civil life, left to eventually scatter around the world.

Wojciech Markert

Excerpt from the article "On the Italian Front," published in Polska Zbrojna (special edition), Warsaw-Monte Cassino, May 18, 2019

BOLOGNA
APRIL 9-21, 1945

ANCONA
JULY 17-24, 1944

ROME

MONTE CASSINO
MAY 11-19, 1944

TARANTO
DECEMBER 21, 1943 –
MARCH 16, 1944

Egypt 1943-1944



No. 9

THEY STAYED FOREVER

With the Polish II Corps, to Monte Cassino came the Corps' chaplains. They had travelled the same, long distance as their soldiers, from the Soviet prisons, camps and places of exile, across Persia, Mesopotamia, the Holy Land and Egypt, up to the German Gustav Line. This distance was also covered by the Field Bishop, Józef Gawlina, who wrote in his memoirs that during this battle he had experienced something unexpected, which made him rethink what he had hitherto believed to be true: "The mood of our wounded was completely different. Everyone asked the same question: »Has the abbey already been taken? How are things at the front?«. I couldn't

believe what I heard. Everyone praised their officers, even stretcher-bearers, and they were full of praise particularly for chaplains... One man from Warsaw was sorry he was wounded in »a place which I can neither name nor show to the Bishop, so they wouldn't let me stay until the end of the party«."

The bodies of those who remained forever at that party were buried in a war cemetery, consecrated by the Field Bishop on September 1, 1945, on the anniversary of the outbreak of the war, which had begun six years earlier in the faraway Polish land. Gawlina's wish was also to be buried there, among his soldiers. It was granted twenty years later.

żur

In the Battle of Monte Cassino, 923 Polish soldiers were killed, 2,931 were wounded, and 345 were missing.



Volunteers from the cartography platoon of the Polish II Corps at the Monte Cassino Polish War Cemetery celebrating the second anniversary of the battle, May 1946

Monte Cassino Abbey
in ruins. Sketch drawn
by the geographers
of the Polish II Corps,
1944



**"Soldiers of the Polish II Corps! If I were to choose soldiers to serve under my command,
I would choose you – the Poles. Respect to you!"**

Field Marshall Harold Alexander, Supreme Allied Commander in Italy, 1944

THE RED POPPIES ON MONTE CASSINO

**Do you see the rubble at the top?
There, like a rat, lurks your foe!
You musn't stop, you musn't stop
But from the clouds the enemy throw!
And so, onward and upward they went;
They went to avenge and to kill,
On the enemy's destruction, bent;
To their honor they harnessed their will.**

**The red poppies on Monte Cassino
Drank Polish blood instead of dew...
O'er the poppies the soldiers did go
'Mid death, and to their anger stayed true!
Years will come and ages will go,
Enshrining their strivings and their toil!...
And the poppies on Monte Cassino
Will be redder for Poles' blood in their soil.**

**The forlorn hope charged through the fire!
More than one was struck and felled...
Yet like the horsemen at Samoisiera,
They charged with a force unrepelled,
Like those at Rokitna years ago.
And they made it, and carried the day.**

**And they planted their red-and-white flag
In the rubble amid the clouds.**

The red poppies on Monte Cassino...

**Do you see the white crosses in a row?
That's where the Poles pledged their all.
The farther, the higher you go,
The more you'll find them fall.
This soil belongs to Poland,
Though Poland be far from here,
For 'tis crosses measure freedom's span —
That is history's lesson dear.**

The red poppies on Monte Cassino...

**A quarter-century has passed,
The dusts of battle no longer rise,
And the monastery's walls at last
Once again climb, white, to the skies...
But memory of those nights terrible
And of the blood that once flowed here —
Echoes in the monastery bells
That toll the fallen to sleep!...**

MONTE CASSINO WILL HELP YOU UNDERSTAND POLES

Monte Cassino – why is this battle striking a chord in every Polish heart? Because it holds a history uncomfortable to the world. The history opens with the Polish victory over the Bolshevik Russia in 1920. The same history closes with the betrayal at the Allied conference in Crimean Yalta in 1945, when the Polish ally, bled out in war, was sold to Stalin by the West.

It was the Poles who on August 15, 1920, near the Vistula River, stopped the Bolsheviks from going further into Western Europe under the banner of "setting Europe and the world on fire." It was the Polish army who made them back off. And it was Stalin, who in 1920 was a political commissar of Bolshevik army, and who 19 years later partitioned Poland with Hitler, which was certified by the criminal pact between Molotov and Ribbentrop in August and September of 1939. It was the families of Polish soldiers, the victors of 1920, who were by force deported to gulags in far-away Russia, Kazakhstan and other Soviet republics. Several thousands of Polish officers, again victors of 1920, were murdered in Katyn and Tver in Russia and Kharkiv, Kyiv (Bykivnia graves), Kherson in Ukraine.

When Hitler and Stalin were at each other's throats in June 1941, the Poles – dying of freezing cold and famine in the snows of faraway Russia – felt hope for leaving this 'cursed land.' By virtue of political agreements, Polish General Władysław Anders was freed from Moscow's Lubyanka prison and tasked with forming the army out of Polish exiles. The Poles, exhausted and emaciated from starvation and diseases, were coming to the conscription points.

Former gulag prisoners made an incredible army, who wanted to fight for freedom of Poland and Europe, but most of all for their return back home. Anders successfully managed to move a group of civilians out of the Soviet Union – including children, Polish and Jewish orphans, almost starved to death by the Soviets. Hence this Polish saying: "Freedom is measured in [grave] crosses."

It was during this march, called the journey of Polish hope, that Anders said those important words to Polish Jews whom he took away from Soviet slavery: "Let them choose!." It was the General, whose origin was the Polish nation unfairly accused of anti-Semitism,

who gave his consent to the fact that – while understanding the right of Jews to own their historical homeland – in Palestine the Polish II Corps deserters should not be punished and pursued. At that time, about 3,000 soldiers of the Corps joined Jewish paramilitary organizations like Haganah and Irgun, which fought for the creation of the state of Israel.

Why Monte Cassino is so important for the Poles? It is the Polish attack, in cooperation with the British forces that circumvented German positions, that forced the enemy to withdraw. On this mountain, in the fire of the fight, there were scenes of the greatest valor and devotion. The Poles fought as if looking for death, after they learnt that the leaders of Allied countries had given their homeland away to Stalin.

Why Monte Cassino? Our victory and loyalty to the Allies were awarded with shame and betrayal. On the greatest victory parade in London in 1946, there were marching the representations of the most exotic armies. There were however no Polish pilots of invincible 303 Squadron, fighting for the sky of England, no Polish soldiers of General Maczek, victors at Falaise in Normandy and liberators of the Dutch Breda. Absent were the heroes of Operation Market Garden, Polish paratroopers of General Sosabowski. Finally, there were no soldiers of General Anders, victors at Monte Cassino and liberators of Italian Ancona and Bologna. You ask why? Because the West "did not want to annoy" Stalin, who hated free Poland.

After the war, as a result of the West's betrayal, the communist authorities in Poland, which were the agency of Russian Kremlin, deprived General Anders of Polish citizenship, and his soldiers, as a result of incorporation of Polish eastern territories into the Soviet Union, lost their homeland. For that reason, you will meet their descendants scattered all around the world. Those, who came back, were tortured in communist prisons. Don't be surprised when you say 'Monte Cassino' and see tears in Polish eyes. It is still an open wound. If there is such thing as the world's conscience, it should be seriously disturbed by the post-war fate of Polish soldiers.

Anna Putkiewicz



POLISH II CORPS

FOR OUR FREEDOM AND YOURS



View on the Monte Cassino Abbey from the statue of the 3rd Carpathian Rifle Division. The statue was erected in 1945 on Hill 593, called Sacrificial Mountain, and commemorates 1,115 division soldiers killed in Italian Campaign of the Polish II Corps. The inscription on the statue reads:

For our freedom and yours / we, soldiers of Poland / gave our soul to God / our life to the soil of Italy / our hearts to Poland.



**POLSKA
ZBROJNA**

**HISTORIA
POLSKA
ZBROJNA**

Managing Editor: Anna Putkiewicz, Jacek Żurek

Graphic design: Marcin Izdebski, Marcin Dmowski (consultation)

Infographics and maps: Jarosław Malarowski, Paweł Kępka

Drawings: Piotr Korczyński

Texts: Piotr Korczyński, Wojciech Markert, Magdalena Miernicka,
Anna Putkiewicz, Robert Sendek, Jacek Żurek

Compilation of memoirs and reports: Piotr Korczyński

In the publication, the song *The Red Poppies on Monte Cassino*
was used (lyrics by Feliks Konarski, music by Alfred Schütz)

Photo source:

Archiwum Akt Nowych (AAN, Central Archive of Modern Records),
Wojskowy Instytut Wydawniczy (WIW, Military Publishing Institute)

Translated from Polish, revised, edited and proofread by:
Dorota Aszoff, Anita Kwaterowska

Advertising and promotion: Marketing and Promotion Department

Wojskowy Instytut Wydawniczy / Military Publishing Institute
Warsaw 2022

Print:
Drukarnia Kolumb
ul. Kaliny 7, 41-506 Chorzów