

Polish 2nd Corps and the liberation of Emilia Romagna Polish War Cemetery in Bologna-San Lazzaro di Savena

The history of the **Polish 2nd Corps** is closely connected with formation of the Polish Armed Forces in the Soviet Union commanded by Major-General **Władysław Anders**. This military unit was created after Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union, and the Polish Government in exile based in London led by Commander-in-Chief Władysław Sikorski signed a military agreement with Moscow in August 1941. The Polish Army in the Soviet Union consisted of Polish citizens from Soviet prisoner of war compounds and labour camps where they were sent to after being captured, imprisoned or deported by Stalin when Germany and the Soviet Union divided Poland in September 1939.

As a result of the Soviet Union's failure to comply with provisions of the above-mentioned agreement, in spring and summer of 1942 the Polish Government had to evacuate the existing Polish Army troops together with civilians to Iran, Iraq and then to Palestine which was then under the British rule. After it merged e.g. with the Polish Independent Carpathian Brigade, fighting from the end of 1941 in North Africa under the British command, the year of 1942 saw creation of the Polish Armed Forces in the East, of which an independent unit was formed in 1943, i.e. the Polish 2nd Corps. The intention of Polish allies – Great Britain and the United States – was to transfer this military unit to Europe to fight at the Italian front. This was also requested by the Polish authorities in exile, as then it seemed that the shortest way to liberate Poland would be through Italy.

The moment the Polish 2nd Corps was sent to Italy at the turn of 1943 and 1944, it consisted of three large units: 3rd Carpathian Rifle Division, 5th Kresowa Infantry Division, 2nd Armoured Brigade and three regiments of motorised cavalry (Carpathian Lancer Regiment, 12th Podolski Lancer Regiment and 15th Poznański Lancer Regiment), 2nd Artillery Group and support units. Having landed in southern Italy at the turn of 1943 and 1944, the Polish 2nd Corps became a part of the British Eighth Army which fought for Italy's independence together with 5th American Army.

The Polish 2nd Corps started its Italian fights in February 1944 near the Sangro River. In May 1944 it took part in the so-called fourth Battle of Monte Cassino. It suffered heavy losses, but managed to take over on 18 May 1944 a key position of German military fortifications at the Winter Line – an old Monte Cassino abbey that dominated the surroundings – and afterwards breached positions at the Hitler Line (Piedimonte), thus enabling the Allied forces to head towards Rome.

Beginning from June 1944, the Polish 2nd Corps was transferred to the Adriatic section of the Italian front where it fought independently, which resulted in liberation of Loreto and Ancona in July and then breaching of the Gothic Line in August and September. It was also then that this military unit cooperated with the Italian Liberation Corps (*Corpo Italiano di Liberazione – CIL*). The Corps also supervised operations of guerrilla Maiella Group until the end of warfare in Italy.

At the beginning of October 1944 the Polish 2nd Corps was introduced to operations in the Emilian Appenines to support displacement of German troops that effectively defended access to Bologna via Emilia. 5th Vilnius Infantry Brigade (5th Kresowa Infantry Division) started its offensive activities by entering on 14 October 1944 into the valley of the Bidente River supported by 4th Armoured Regiments (2nd Armoured Brigade) and 15th Poznański Lancer Regiment. On 18 October 1944 the Polish troops occupied Santa Sofia, on 20 October – Galeata, then Strada San Zeno, Civitella di Romagna and on 22 October – Monte Grosso mountain group, which prevented other military units from entering the valley of the Rabbi River. This action was supported by 6th Lviv Infantry Brigade (5th Kresowa Infantry Division) together with 4th Armoured Regiment moving alongside both sides of the valley

and 2nd Carpathian Rifle Brigade (3rd Carpathian Rifle Division) protecting its right side, aided by 15th Poznański Lancer Regiment alongside the Bidente valley. Between 24 and 26 October 1944 battalions of 6th Lviv Infantry Brigade (5th Kresowa Infantry Division) occupied a group of hills, namely Monte S. Pietro – Monte Mirabello – Monte Colombo, and on 27 October 1944, its 18th battalion entered into the family town of Benito Mussoliniego – Predappio.

At the beginning of November 1944 1st Carpathian Rifle Brigade (including 3rd Carpathian Rifle Division) supported by 12th Podolski Lancer Regiment entered the valley of the Montone River and seized M. Chioda, M. Gattone, M. Lechia, Trebbio and M. Casole in turn, while 12th Podolski Lancer Regiment conquered Dovadola. On 15 November 1944 it met battalions of 5th Kresowa Infantry Division in Castrocaro – Converselle region, which ended its combats in the Appenines. As a result of its operations, the capital of Romagna – Forlì – was liberated on 9 November 1944 by British troops. Between 19 and 24 November 1944 2nd Carpathian Rifle Brigade (3rd Carpathian Rifle Division) fought a close battle at Monte Fortino, forcing the enemy to retreat beyond the Lamone River. The last stage of Polish 2nd Corps' fights in the Appenines was another detouring manoeuvre which considerably helped British troops in liberating Faenza on 15 December 1944. It was then that battalions of 3rd Carpathian Rifle Division struggled hard to seize Monte S. Rinaldo – Montecchio mountain range (3-6 December 1944) and then M. Besdone – Casette (15-16 December). Polish troops and Italian Maielle Group fighting with them came to the valley of the Senio River where commander of the British Eighth Army suspended offensive operations for the wintertime.

It was then that both infantry divisions of the Polish 2nd Corps (expanded to approx. 60 thousand soldiers) were reinforced with third brigades and its combat arm force increased by creating two new heavy artillery regiments.

In the first phase of Battle of Bologna in spring 1945, the task of Polish 2nd Corps was to breach the fortified defensive line of the enemy in the middle course of the Senio River by two brigades of 3rd Carpathian Rifle Division supported by two armoured regiments and the British squadron of armoured sappers. This operation was synchronised with attack on the right side of 2nd Division from the British 5th Corps of New Zealand. The left side of Polish breaching troops was protected by the so-called “RUD” Group (called after the name of its commander – Lieutenant-General Klemens Rudnicki) taking positions on both sides of Via Emilia, consisting of two new infantry brigades – 3rd Carpathian and 4th Volhynian – as well as Polish and British armoured units and artillery.

The evening attack of 9 April 1945 was preceded by heavy bombing from the air and firing. Despite fierce resistance of high-quality German 26th Armoured Division, troops of 3rd Carpathian Rifle Division breached defensive line at fortified banks of the Senio River and on 12 April 1945 they reached a bridgehead behind the Santerno River. On the same day “RUD” started its attack alongside Via Emilia. As a result of successful detouring manoeuvres and effective cooperation with units of the British 10th Corps acting on its left side and, in particular, the Italian combat troops called “Friuli”, it was possible to liberate Castel Bolognese on 13 April 1945 and Imola a day later.

At the same time, 3rd Carpathian Rifle Division, tired of fighting in the centre of the battle, was replaced by two brigades of 5th Kresowa Infantry Division reinforced by Carpathian Lancer Regiment and 43rd Motorised Ghurkhas Brigade.

Moreover, the battle was joined in by the pursuit Armoured Group “RAK” (called after the name of its commander – Lieutenant-General Bronisław Rakowski). In the German ranks, 26th Armoured Division, very weakened due to fights, was replaced by high-quality 1st Paratroop Division, while 4th Paratroop Division fought in Via Emilia region. They all withstood attacks of Polish infantry troops and armoured units at the Sillaro River and

neighbouring canals. It was a spectacular success for 16th battalion from 5th Kresowa Infantry Division to seize an undamaged bridge at the Sillaro River near Castel Guelfo. This victory of 15 April 1945 was honoured by a congratulations letter from the Commander of the British Eighth Army General R. McCreery. A day later units of "RUD" Group operating on the left side managed to liberate Castel S. Pietro, and the Ghurkhas fought hard to seize Medicina, a town located at the right flank of Polish 2nd Corps' section. In its centre battalions of 5th Kresowa Infantry Division and a newly formed 2nd Commando Battalion supported by tanks of armoured regiments reached the line of the Gaiana River where they met with firm resistance of German paratroopers. It was there that an exceptionally fierce battle took place on 18 and 19 April 1945, during which both sides incurred heavy losses. As a result of Polish victory in these fights, the German command finally decided to leave Bologna.

While units of "RAK" Group and battalions of both Polish divisions were surrounding Bologna together with British troops, 3rd Carpathian Rifle Brigade moving alongside Via Emilia crossed the Quaderno River, and its 9th battalion, after having clashed with the enemy at the Idice River, entered the centre of Bologna at 6 am on 21 April 1945 as the first from the allied forces two hours before American and Italian troops. Residents of the capital of Emilia-Romagna cheerfully celebrated their liberation and spontaneously hung white and red flags at the highest tower Torre degli Asinelli and the Town Hall. Soon these were accompanied by banners of the American and British allies. As an expression of appreciation for services of Polish 2nd Corps in fighting for liberation of Emilia-Romana and Bologna, 9th battalion from 3rd Carpathian Rifle Division was awarded the title of "Bolognan". Moreover, 17 Polish commanders, including Major-General W. Anders, were given honorary citizenship of the town and 215 Polish soldiers were granted a memorial medal by the Town Council, which bore the following inscription: *Ai liberatori che primi entrarono in Bologna 21 Aprile 1945 – per benemerenza* (For liberators who first entered Bologna on 21 April 1945 – in honour of their services).

Liberation of Bologna ended 14 months of Polish 2nd Corps' operations during the Italian campaign in 1944-1945. Fights for Italian independence cost lives of almost 4,000 Polish soldiers who were killed in action, died of wounds or due to other reasons.

There are 1,432 soldiers (including 18 of unknown name) of the Polish 2nd Corps resting at the Polish War Cemetery in Bologna-San Lazzaro di Savena, the biggest of four located in Italy. They were killed in fights at the Gothic Line, in the Emilian Appenines and the Battle of Bologna. Among them there are also 14 soldiers who died between 1947 and 1957.

The cemetery was created on initiative of the commander of the Polish 2nd Corps Major-General W. Anders. It was constructed from 1 July 1946 to 15 December 1946 by soldiers of 10th Sapper Battalion of the Polish 2nd Corps with the help of Italian stone-cutters and designed by Z. Majewski, second lieutenant, engineer and architect. On 12 October 1946 the cemetery was consecrated by clergymen of all religions led by Józef Gawlina, Field Bishop of the Polish Armed Forces in the presence of Major-General W. Anders. Between 1962 and 1965 it was renovated due to efforts of General W. Anders and Captain Jan Jaworski from Turin and in the years of 1969-1972 thanks to Association of Polish Veterans in Canada. At present the cemetery is managed by the Italian General Commissariat for the Memory of Killed in War (*Commissariato Generale per le Onoranze ai Caduti in Guerra*).