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MAJOR GENERAL STANISŁAW SOSABOWSKI

‘POLSKI BOHATER’ (POLISH HERO)

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A drop zone at Arnhem, Holland—September 1944

THE BATTLE OF ARNHEM 17–26 SEPTEMBER 1944

Few battles in modern military history have provoked as much controversy as that of the Battle of Arnhem in September 1944. That it was a failure is not in doubt. A total of 11,920 men took part in the airborne operation as part of 1st British Airborne Division and the 1st Independent Polish Parachute Brigade. Of these, 1,485 were killed or died of wounds; 3,910 were evacuated south of the River Rhine (Rijn) on the night of 25 September leaving 6,525 as prisoners of war or attempting to evade capture.

By their very nature Airborne operations are highly complex in their planning and execution. This audacious attempt to end the war by Christmas 1944 has been analysed by military historians in considerable detail to identify the factors that led to defeat. However, it was the recriminations that followed the events of September 1944 that led to the attempted destruction of one man's reputation. He was the Commander of the 1st Independent Polish Parachute Brigade. He was Major General Stanislaw Sosabowski.

On 21 June 1940, the Polish 4th Infantry Division arrived in Plymouth from France, where it had been undergoing training. The speed with which the collapse of France had taken place had been breathtaking. Among the Divisional ranks was Colonel Sosabowski, former Commanding Officer of a Battalion within the 21st Infantry “Children of Warsaw” Brigade. His actions in the ill-fated defence of Warsaw in 1939 were legendary and his escape from occupied Poland remarkable. The Poles were moved to Leven in Fife, Scotland where most were transferred to the 1st Polish Rifle Brigade. Sosabowski found himself left with a battalion-sized unit, comprised mainly of officers. Following a tough winter, he was invited to send 20 of his men to Ringway, near Manchester, to undergo parachute training. Airborne Forces were very much in their infancy but the Polish troops applied themselves with tremendous energy and enthusiasm. Sosabowski saw this as an opportunity; he decided to form a Polish Parachute Brigade.

He had already firm views on what task the Brigade would undertake—the liberation of Warsaw. This was to be an independent unit, equipped and backed by the British, a fact that would align them with the Home Army and enable them to re-instate the Polish government-in-exile, thereby thwarting Stalin’s intent to drive the Germans out of Poland and establish the nation, once more, as a part of Greater Russia. Romantic idealism or a militarily feasible plan? The Poles trained hard, attracting the very best soldiers and the Brigade was officially formed on 23 September 1941.

Lack of aircraft for training parachute descents and vital equipment were in serious short supply. Sosabowski spent months demanding, pleading and cajoling the British chain of command to properly equip his fledgling Brigade. As with all great Commanders, he was determined to ensure that his soldiers were prepared for battle in every aspect. To a certain degree, he was



Badge of
the Polish
Parachute
Brigade

treated with slight condescension and promises were made but the equipment simply did not materialise. Sosabowski kept up his staggering training regime, convincing his men that the day would come when they would be at the forefront of the liberation of Poland. In return, his men showed consummate loyalty.

The British government were constantly applying pressure to the Polish government-in-exile to allow Sosabowski's men to be subordinated to the 1st British Airborne. To hold back such a highly trained formation on the premise that it was going to mount an operation deep into occupied Poland was deemed ill advised by the British. Sosabowski, with all of his military experience and understanding of the operational level of war, would have known this but such was the passion that made him a great Commander, he clung to the hope of one day liberating Warsaw.

D-Day, on 6 June 1944, saw the Polish government-in-exile acquiesce to British requests to take command of the Polish Brigade. This was the catalyst that released much needed equipment and Sosabowski moved south with his men to the Midlands and began training for a number of operations that, for one reason or another, were cancelled at the eleventh hour. It was a time of intense frustration. It also coincided with the presentation of the Brigade flag, made by the women of Warsaw and smuggled, at considerable risk, out of occupied Poland to England. It was a poignant reminder of what was at stake. However, another event was to plunge Sosabowski, now promoted to Major General, into inner turmoil: the Warsaw Uprising.

In August 1944, the beleaguered population of Warsaw was convinced liberation was at hand. It was the moment that Sosabowski and his men had



Embattled Polish Home Army (Armia Krajowa or AK) soldiers during the Warsaw Uprising

trained for. Requests to release the Polish Brigade were refused by the British on the grounds that the insertion of the paratroopers was ‘technically’ not possible. However, the fear of angering Stalin was far nearer to the real reason. The Russians had broken off relations with the Free Poles as Stalin had very definite plans for post war Poland. The stand off by the Red Army allowed the Germans to crush the uprising by 2nd October, after 63 days of bitter fighting and the loss of tens of thousands of defenceless civilians. Sosabowski, with agonising frustration, said: “*Can you imagine our bitterness and inner defeat?*”



The bridge at Arnhem

Thus, it was against this background that Sosabowski reported for a briefing by Lieutenant General Frederick ‘Boy’ Browning, Commander of the 1st British Airborne. The plan was for Operation Market Garden, involving the American 101st and 82nd Airborne Divisions seizing the bridges at Eindhoven, Grave and Nijmegen with the British 1st Airborne Division, under the command of Major General Roy Urquhart, clearing Arnhem and seizing its bridge over the Lower Rhine. XXX Corps, commanded by Lieutenant General Brian Horrocks, was to comprise the ground forces tasked with pushing north and linking up with the Airborne elements, thereby punching a deep hole through the German lines and opening up a route into the industrial heartland of Germany: the Ruhr. The link up was to be achieved in two days.

Sosabowski was first to challenge the plan. He maintained that the Germans would understand the strategic significance of Arnhem and would not leave this exposed area to attack. As on many occasions that were to follow, Browning displayed a mixture of irritation and condescension towards Sosabowski, observing that he was over cautious and dismissing his concerns. The Polish Brigade was to drop on 19 September, south of the bridge on D-Day plus one. Its Anti Tank six-pounder guns would be airlanded by gliders to the north.

The Poles were ready on the 19 September but the weather had closed in and they were on the aircraft when the order to postpone was given. Sosabowski recalled: *“Men cursed loudly, repetitively, venomously. Others screwed up their faces, near to tears with disappointment.”* On 20 September, the plan changed and the Poles were to drop near the village of Driel, close to the south bank of the river, and wait for the Driel–Heaveadorp ferry that was claimed to be in British hands. Sosabowski was suspicious and he was right to be so. In fact, a British reconnaissance unit had merely seen the boat, which by dawn on 21 September, had been sunk.

At 1400 hrs that day, 114 Dakota aircraft took off. The weather was still extremely poor and, once airborne, the RAF controllers ordered a recall. Only 41 aircraft picked up the order and turned back. Sosabowski was going into battle with only 950 paratroopers.



Major General Sosabowski (on the left) prior to Operation 'Market Garden'



Polish paratroopers boarding a Dakota aircraft during Operation 'Market Garden'

They dropped amid considerable flak at 1700 hrs and established a headquarters in a farmhouse in the village. Once established, a liaison officer with the British named Captain Zwolanski, having swum the Rhine, reported to Sosabowski with news that Major General Urquhart had prepared rafts to ferry the Poles over. The rafts were, in fact, ammunition trailers with which attempts were made to float them. They sank.

Unable to effect the crossing, Sosabowski decided he must attempt to make contact with the advancing XXX Corps to his south. This he did and, through a forward reconnaissance unit, he was able to inform Lieutenant General Horrocks of the Poles' situation. Throughout, the Germans continued to attack the Brigade who held their perimeter with the utmost tenacity.

Urquhart's Chief of Staff, Colonel MacKenzie, and his Chief Engineer Lieutenant Colonel Myers succeeded in crossing the river and told Sosabowski that the British were surrounded in a pocket near Oosterbeek. It was near collapse and reinforcements were desperately needed. Three dinghies had been dropped by air and the intention was to run a line across the river to ferry the Poles to the north bank. Sosabowski stood a Company up and the operation began. By 0300 hrs it was called to a halt. Only 50 men had made it to the other side and only one boat remained afloat. By dawn, enemy fire on the Polish positions had increased and a British liaison



Major General Sosabowski (*far right*) on the battlefield at Arnhem

officer arrived to insist that the Polish made another attempt under cover of darkness that night. The boats supplied were dangerously inadequate but, at 0300 hrs, the men clambered over the mudflats and down to the bank.

They were immediately engulfed in heavy machine gun fire and Sosabowski ran forward to pull them back. Despite the losses, some 200 Polish paratroopers did make it across to Oosterbeek and fought in some of the fiercest engagements in the Battle: around the crossroads of the Utrechtse Weg and Station Weg.

On the morning of 24th September, Sosabowski linked up with Lieutenant General Horrocks. It was clear to him that the direct approach across the river was failing, at too great a loss of life. He suggested to Horrocks that 43rd (Wessex) Brigade cross several miles down river from Driel, effecting a sweeping movement to link up at Oosterbeek.

Sosabowski was to meet up with Horrocks a second time that day—at a hastily convened conference at Valburg, five miles south of Driel. Present was Major General Thomas, commander of 43rd (Wessex) Brigade and Browning himself, who had landed with his Headquarters in a formation of 38 gliders near Nijmegen on 21 September—aircraft that were, in

Sosabowski's opinion, better used in the transport of much needed fighting troops.

The British officers sat on one side of the table, with Sosabowski alone on the other side with only his English interpreter, Captain Jerzy Dyrda. Dyrda recalled the meeting with great clarity. In this very confrontational setting, Sosabowski was informed that one of his Battalions was to be detached from his Brigade and seconded to the 43rd (Wessex) Brigade to follow the 4th Dorsets Battalion in yet another attempt to force the crossing of the river, exactly where the Poles had lost so many men.

This was a tremendous insult to Sosabowski. He looked to Urquhart for support but none came. To take away a Battalion from his already depleted force without any prior consultation angered him intensely. He argued that the crossing point was too dangerous and reiterated his suggestion to move further down river. Thomas repeated the order, ignoring Sosabowski. It has to be noted that both Thomas and Urquhart were equal in rank to their Polish colleague but here was Urquhart, his commander, backing up Thomas. Yet Browning remained quiet, saying nothing.

At this point, Sosabowski rose to his feet and spoke in English about the futility of what was being proposed. Dyrda recalls that his General said: *'For 8 days and nights not only Polish soldiers but the best sons of England are dying there in vain, for no effect'*. There was an uncomfortable silence; again, not a



Polish paratroopers in action



Polish paratroopers on the march at Arnhem

word from Browning. Eventually, Horrocks said: *“This conference is over. The orders given by General Thomas are to be carried out.”*

The British officers had intentionally angered Sosabowski. Dyrda reflected later: *“This strange conference was only intended to provoke him...they could then argue that Sosabowski’s well known independence and unyieldingness made it impossible to organise efficient help for the airborne on the north of the Rhine.”* In summary, they were preparing to place Sosabowski in the dock to accept blame for a failed mission.

There is evidence to explain Browning’s silence. He, along with Horrocks and Thomas, knew of the intention to evacuate the remaining 1st British Airborne. After the meeting, Browning did approach Sosabowski and angered him further by commenting that the proposed operation to cross the Rhine would probably fail as the boats, being brought up on the single road from Nijmegen, could not get through the supply route due to it being in gridlock. Yet the Polish paratroopers who were on board the 41 aircraft turned back on 21st September had finally landed near the bridge at Grave and had, by whatever means, managed to reach Driel regardless of any gridlock.

Deeply troubled by his orders, Sosabowski decided that these fresh troops would follow the Dorsets across the river that night.



Major General Sosabowski (left) with Lieutenant General Browning

As anticipated, the operation floundered under intense enemy fire from either side of the Oosterbeek pocket. It was abandoned; Sosabowski's concerns were yet again vindicated. The decision to evacuate was turned into orders and throughout the night of 25–26 September, in heavy rainfall, the British and Polish troops were withdrawn south across the Rhine. Operation Market Garden was over.

On 17 October, Montgomery wrote to the Chief of the Imperial General Staff. In his letter, he criticised the performance of the Polish paratroopers and stated that he wanted Sosabowski replaced. Browning subsequently wrote to the Deputy Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Lieutenant General Sir Ronald Weeks. He accused Sosabowski as being unfit for command and raised doubts over the capabilities of the Polish Independent Parachute Brigade.

“This officer” wrote Browning, meaning Sosabowski, *‘proved himself to be quite incapable of appreciating the urgent nature of the operation and continually showed himself to be argumentative and loathe to play his full part.’* It was a damning indictment of the Commander of the 1st Independent Polish Parachute Brigade and a clear attempt to lay the blame for the failure of the operation at his feet.

The Brigade returned to Britain in mid-October 1944. Recriminations continued to be directed at Sosabowski and he was relieved of command on 26 December 1944. Traditionally, Polish commanders kiss the flag as they leave their unit. On this occasion, Sosabowski saluted the flag, so carefully made by the women of Warsaw from the Cardinal's crimson vestments. For him, he left his men physically but they were never spiritually parted.

In 2006, at Driel, a memorial was unveiled with the inscription:

**THE BRITISH VETERANS OF ARNHEM HAVE RAISED THIS
MEMORIAL TO RECORD THEIR ENDURING ADMIRATION
FOR AN INSPIRING COMMANDER, A FEARLESS FIGHTER
FOR FREEDOM AND A GREAT POLISH HERO.**

Sosabowski could not return to his country in 1946, leaving the Army having been offered the final insult as Major General responsible for Salvage of Equipment. After 33 years of service, he had £300 and no pension. Aged 57, he bought a Boarding House and worked in the kitchens himself. This, eventually, he sold at a loss and he attempted many other ventures but he was not a businessman; he was a soldier above all. In 1949, the General found himself working in an automotive spares factory in West London, known only as ‘Stan’ and his past kept a secret. With immense dignity, he worked in the supply room until 1966 when, aged 75, he found himself unemployed. He died in 1967 and his son took his ashes to Warsaw, where he was at home, at last.

Reflecting on his life, Sosabowski – the great father figure of the Polish Airborne – wrote: *“There is no feeling like the one that soldiers have for their ‘Pops’... It is a sign that I am theirs and they own me. For that, it is worth living.”*

Major General Stanislaw Sosabowski, Knight’s Cross of the Virtuti Militari, Commander of the Cross and Star of the Order of Polonia Restituta, holder of the Polish Cross of Valour, awarded the Gold Cross of Merit with Swords, holder of an Honorary Commander of the British Empire award, bestowed by the Dutch Royal Family the Bronze Lion.

‘POLSKI BOHATER’ (POLISH HERO)

MAJOR GENERAL STANISLAW SOSABOWSKI, C.B.E. (1892–1967)



Colonel Mike Russell graduated from the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst in 1978. He has spent the majority of his 35 year career serving with British Airborne Forces when at Regimental Duty. He has served in Northern Ireland, Central Africa, Kosovo and Iraq. He is a Trustee of the Parachute Regiment and Airborne Forces Museum and has a keen interest in military history. He is currently Commander, Aldershot Garrison, traditionally known as the ‘Home of the British Army’.