

1st Battalion Polish Rifle Regiment (RGJ)

When British troops moved forward into eastern Germany, the Polish community in Britain with the support of the Polish Government in exile clamoured for the creation of a Polish unit. Many of the potential recruits were the children (and grand-children) of Free Polish Forces that had fought with the British Army in World War Two (and been granted special rights by the personal order of Winston Churchill in recognition).

Initially the response from the Ministry of Defence was muted, doubts were raised about the reliability of such a unit if it resulted in Poles fighting Poles and the Polish Government in exile had made it clear that they wanted any unit so formed to be available for fighting in Poland. After the raising of P Squadron, 22 SAS (later 27 SAS), the large number of Poles giving useful service in intelligence activities (including P Section of MI6, Joint Services Interrogation Wing and Sosobowski Company, 1st Bn, Intelligence Corps) and the volunteering of many Poles for normal army units, these doubts gradually receded.

In March 1997, the Ministry of Defence in a joint conference with the Polish Government in exile announced that Polish recruits would finally be given their own unit. Initially the plan was for it to be called

“While the patriotism and commitment of these recruits to P Section was outstanding, MI6 badly let them down. The training they were given in trade craft skills was adequate at best (presumably due to the rush to get them on the ground gathering intelligence). Worse than that however (to almost criminal level) was the inadequate preparation regarding life in Poland, agents were unfamiliar with slang terms and the conditions on the ground. Most did not blend in. One remembers getting on a train and despite the paperwork being examined and returned attracted continued looks from the conductor. As she got up to get off the train he stopped her and asked where she had managed to get such good shoes. She quickly scuffed them in the toilets to make them look more worn.”

From “Lost Eagles: Return of the exiles” by Juliet Harker, Oxford University Press, 2016

“The training regime at Proteus was tough, but then again it needed to be – look where we were going! The barrack blocks were like something out of the 1950s National Service era. There was a rumour that the camp had been upgraded for use as an overflow prison (possibly true as the gas fires were new, replacing coal fires), the prison service had taken one look at it and said that there was now way they could have prisoners there, there would be riot in a week (understandably). True or not it did get used as a location for a comedy film by Frank and Honest set in a World War Two PoW camp! If you look carefully you can see me here in the background of this photo playing a prisoner. We enjoyed the two days doing that, it gave us a great break.”

Rifleman Jan Kudlaty in conversation with the author.

9th (Polish) Battalion, the Royal Green Jackets (interestingly at this point there were only four other battalions so this was probably a deception measure). Many volunteers from across the United Kingdom gave their details at Armed Forces Recruiting Offices and were sent to local selection centres to assess the suitability for army life, fitness (both of which were lower than the pre-war standards by a substantial degree) and political reliability.

Starting in May 1997, the recruits who had passed the selection days were trained at Proteus Camp in the middle of Sherwood Forest, Nottinghamshire (which was used as an outstation for Chilwell Station in Nottingham). Despite the widespread belief at the time, training was conducted in English as all recruits were fluent in English and it was easier to integrate them into the wider army (stories of training being conducted in Polish are probably referring to P Section of MI6 or possibly 27 SAS who often trained alongside 9 (Polish) RGJ as a cover – in fact basic weapon training for P Section was handled by the instructors at Proteus although it placed more emphasis on Pact weapons than normal training). Staff running the training were a mix of Polish transfers from other units who would form the officer and NCO cadres of the unit when it deployed) and instructors provided by 1 and 2 Royal Green Jackets (who would remain to train replacements). This unusual



Illustration 2: Proteus Training Camp showing the 49 Brigade badge to which the battalion was later coincidentally assigned. Photo taken in 2007.



Illustration 1: Recruit Kudlaty being put through his paces at Proteus Training Camp. Courtesy of his son.

Royal Green Jackets, including the rifle green beret, marching with weapons at the trail and the faster paced march (140 paces per minute as opposed to the normal 120 paces a minute). The TRF became a Polish Eagle (with Polish crown) on a rifle green square (although an alternative of a small Polish flag was sometimes seen). The cap badge became a Polish Eagle in the centre of a Maltese Cross. The stable belt was rifle green with two small stripes of white and red (based on the Polish flag).

training system, outside of the main infantry training regime at Catterick and Pirbright was intended as a trial that could be extended to other regiments as the main training depots were overwhelmed by the demand.

Persistent lobbying by the Polish Government in Exile resulted in the battalion being renamed in July. Taking the name 1st Battalion Polish Rifle Regiment (RGJ) (abbreviated to 1POL), it retained many of the traditions of the



Illustration 3: 1 Polish Rifles (RGJ) Saxon APC moving from Proteus to Chilwell (photographed leaving Proteus Camp heading towards Mansfield). (The Mirror)

In August 1997, the Battalion was declared trained and a pass off parade occurred at Proteus Camp. Among the attendees were the President of the Polish Government in Exile, the daughter of Winston Churchill (Baroness Mary Soames) and the Defence Minister.

August 1997 Structure

HQ Company

10 (Defence) Platoon

Pioneer Platoon

LAD Detachment (REME)

A Company (rifle coy)

1 Platoon

2 Platoon

3 Platoon

B Company (rifle coy)

4 Platoon

5 Platoon

6 Platoon

C Company (rifle coy)

7 Platoon

8 Platoon

9 Platoon

D Company (support weapons)

11 (Anti-tank) Platoon

12 (Mortar) Platoon

13 (Recce) Platoon (includes sniper sections)

Following this ceremony, the 900 men of the battalion were given a week's leave before reassembling at Chilwell for deployment to Germany as part of 49 Brigade. A number of volunteers were detached at this point to attend P Company (those who completed this became 1st Polish Parachute Platoon attached to A Company of 1 Para). The remainder boarded Saxon APCs and started the long journey by road and ferry to Germany via Hull and Rotterdam.

During this journey the battalion took its first combat losses when the convoy was attacked by a Soviet SU25. Eight soldiers were killed and a further ten injured when two Saxons were destroyed to this air strike. Private Andre Kochewski was awarded the Military Cross for his actions in rescuing a number of the injured despite his own severe injuries and the danger of the vehicles exploding. Private Kochewski died of his wounds on November 7th 1997.

On arrival the battalion joined 49 Infantry Brigade as part of 2nd Armoured Division. Very quickly they were thrown into the fighting around Warsaw where they took severe losses in combat with the 22nd Tank Division. At the end of the I Corps withdrawal the battalion was down to company strength and had no surviving Saxons in serviceable order. Despite the desperate situation to the south with the Italian offensive, the battalion was kept back to absorb replacements and to act as rear area security.



Illustration 4: 1st Polish Rifles troops manning a checkpoint "somewhere in eastern Germany" late 1997 (MoD)

The Pact 1998 summer offensive saw the Poles rejoin 49 Brigade which had now been turned into an armoured brigade. As the defence held, the battalion was part of Operation Vista counter-attacking near Fulda (where it is recorded as fighting the Polish 15th Motor Rifle Division – a battle where the language skills were used to great effect in deception operations). As I Corps drove towards Czechoslovakia, 49 Brigade was badly handled by the Soviet 18th Motor Rifle Division (which is awarded the honorific Guards for the skilful withdrawal). By September the attack had stalled and the 1st

was again withdrawn to refit. By now replacements were fewer and a number of Polish prisoners were accepted into the ranks.

January 2001 Structure

Strengths in brackets.

HQ Company (15)

10 (Defence) Platoon (12)

Pioneer Platoon (20)

LAD Detachment (REME) (4)

Training Platoon (6 staff)

A Company (rifle coy) (5)

1 Platoon (12)

2 Platoon (10)

B Company (rifle coy) (5)

4 Platoon (9)

6 Platoon (9)

D Company (support weapons) (8)

11 Platoon (12) – nominally anti-tank but using Carl Gustavs more often in an anti-building role

12 (Mortar) Platoon (20)

13 (Recce) Platoon (includes sniper sections) (16)

These figures exclude the civilians used to fulfil many of the roles in admin and logistics. These number about 40. Also excluded on the return were the 20 recruits who had not yet been assigned to a platoon.

In early 1999 while still absorbing the replacements the battalion was withdrawn to cantonment in Germany. It was stationed near Hannover where it engaged in rebuilding and anti-marauder operations.

2000 saw the battalion preparing to advance into southern Poland to allow German troops to move north in Operation Atlantis to support Operation Ancient Mariner. With the Soviet counter offensive and the shortening of the front line this is



Illustration 5: Two members of the 1st Polish Rifle Regiment confer with US troops in late 1998. Note the rifle green beret worn by the Poles. This is probably a posed shot as most Poles removed the Polish flashes near the front line for fear of what would happen if captured. (MoD)

cancelled before the unit can move.

The fuel saved by the cancellation of the move allowed the unit to be easily moved to the Baltic coast in November when the 2nd Armoured Division (of which 49 Armoured Brigade was a part) was returned to the UK.



Illustration 6: 1POL Saxons move north towards the Baltic Coast (MoD)




Illustration 7: Rifleman Nowarti receives his Military Medal in October 2001 (The Sun)

By this point the battalion numbered 167 officers and other ranks (including attachments). Here it rerolled into a motorised infantry unit using a mix of 4 ton trucks and Land Rovers (both civilian and military).

In early 2001 the 1st Battalion was part of Operation Hutch when it acts as the blocking force outside Harwich allowing 3 (Commando) Brigade to land behind the defences and take the town. It was during this action that Rifleman Rafe Nowarti of the Pioneer Platoon was awarded the Military Medal. Rifleman Nowarti's section had come under heavy fire from an

improvised bunker. Taking two M72s he crawled forward to a position in range of them. The first malfunctioned and he abandoned it, the second hit the bunker but did not stop the firing. By making mad dashes from cover to cover and crawling along a roadside ditch he closed to grenade range. Throwing a fragmentation grenade into the bunker he followed this up with a charge to finally clear the position with his Stirling SMG.

<p>Battalion Commanders</p> <p><i>May 1997-July 1997</i> <i>Lt Col Stuart Kingston (IRGJ)</i></p> <p><i>July 1997-January 1998</i> <i>Lt Col Kowal Kuchar (killed in action)</i></p> <p><i>January 1998</i> <i>Major Andrez Podgorny (killed in action)</i></p> <p><i>January 1998-June 1998</i> <i>Major (later Lt Col) Jan Nowiki (evacuated wounded)</i></p> <p><i>June 1998-July 1998</i> <i>Lt Col Edward Zamoyski (psychiatric casualty)</i></p> <p><i>July 1998-August 1998</i> <i>Major (later Lt Col) Tadeusez Boleslaw (promoted)</i></p> <p><i>August 1998-September 1998</i> <i>Lt Col Kazimiriz Wisnieski (disease)</i></p> <p><i>September 1998</i> <i>Captain Piotyr Zaleski (disease)</i></p> <p><i>September 1998-May 2000</i> <i>Captain (later Major) Lech Nowak (retired)</i></p> <p><i>May 2000-January 2003</i> <i>Lt Col Jan Wojcick</i></p>	<p>On 7th June 2002 it was announced that from 9th September 2002 the Regiment was to be renamed the Polish Rifles in recognition of their sacrifices during the war. It had been briefly suggested that the crown be removed from the cap badge as the regiment was not a royal regiment but King Charles himself wrote to the MoD (after extensive lobbying) asking for an exemption. Eventually a compromise was reached and the name was changed to the King's Polish Rifle Regiment by royal warrant. The ceremony held at was attended by King Charles who became the new Colonel-in-Chief. As a rifle regiment the unit has no colours but following the rifle tradition the main battle honours are worn on the cap badge. These to date are Warsaw and Fulda (editor's note it has now been announced that Harwich will also be awarded).</p> <div data-bbox="948 725 1353 1218">  </div> <p><i>Illustration 8: The Polish Memorial top prior to the mounting of it on the granite plinth at the Royal Green Jacket Memorial June 2009. It was designed by Jacob Pienkowski who served with the Regiment from 1998 to 2003 reaching the rank of captain. Photo courtesy of the designer.</i></p>
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