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JANUSZ ZUZIAK

JAN DŁUGOSZ UNIVERSITY IN CZĘSTOCHOWA, POLAND
ORCID 0000-0003-1568-5033

POLISH INDEPENDENT CARPATHIAN RIFLE BRIGADE IN THE SIEGE OF TOBRUK

INTRODUCTION

In the autumn of 1939 France created the Orient Theatre of Operations of the Mediterranean (fr. Théâtre d'Opérations de la Méditerranée Orientale) starting the organization of the so called the Army of the Levant. That move resulted from fears that German troops would seize Romania and Greece and probably would enter Turkey.

At the end of August 1939, the French government sent Gen. Maxime Weygand, a new commander-in-chief of that theatre to Syria. His task was to coordinate allied forces' operations in the Balkans and the eastern part of the Mediterranean. The Army of the Levant's backbone was the Foreign Legion at that time. The French did not have sufficient own forces there so Gen. Weygand began their re-organization and restructuring.

Still in October 1939, Michał Sokolnicki, Poland's ambassador to Turkey, discussed with Gen. Weygand the issue of a possible Polish units' organisation in Syria. Weygand stated then that he would be willing to see Polish units in Syria. Unfortunately, in his opinion it was impossible then due to the lack of equipment.

Talks with the French side were continued in December 1939, this time personally by Gen. Sikorski. Being aware of the French forces' potential in the Middle East, on 19th December 1939, Gen. Sikorski submitted a written proposal to Gen. Maurice Gustave Gamelin, the commander of the French forces to organize a Polish army unit and air force flights.

Negotiations conducted since December 1939 by Gen. Sikorski in person were partially successful. On 30th December, the French finally agreed to create one army brigade. They refused to set up a Polish air force unit justifying their decision by the lack of necessary armament.

FORMATION OF THE BRIGADE

On 10th January 1940, the Polish Ministry of Military Affairs ordered military attaches in Romania and Hungary to devise plans in order to evacuate interned soldiers to Syria. On 2nd April 1940, Gen. Sikorski issued an oral order to create the Carpathian Rifle Brigade (pol. Brygada Strzelców Karpackich) and appointed Col. Stanisław Kopański commander.

On 12th April 1940 Div. Gen. Władysław Sikorski, the Commander-in-Chief issued a written order concerning forming the Carpathian Rifle Brigade. The basic core of its structure consisted of the staff, two infantry regiments, mountain artillery battalions, reconnaissance battalion, engineers company and signals company. The Brigade's manpower was thought to number 208 officers, 6840 soldiers and non-commissioned officers (Bielatowicz, 1966, p. 8). The French authorities designated a military camp close to Homs, on the Syrian-Lebanese border as the place of the brigade's organisation.

The fall of France in June 1940 disrupted the process of the Polish Carpathian Rifle Brigade's organisation, equipping and training. This country's collapse led to signing a truce according to which all French forces stationed overseas were also to stop fighting. In that situation, Col. Kopański decided so that the Brigade would immediately march to Palestine and be subordinated to the British forces (Kopański, 1990, p. 123). The first transports of the Brigade left Homs for Palestine on 27th June morning uninterrupted by the French. On 29th and 30th June 1940 Brigade's remaining force left the territory of Syria moving to Palestine under the British command.

The British assigned the Poles a base camp in Latrum. In autumn 1940, the Brigade received British equipment for its infantry units. Due to the Italian offensive on Egypt, the Brigade was moved from Palestine to Egypt in October. Its

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1. Gen. Stanisław Kopański, commander of the Independent Carpathian Rifle Brigade, 1940; author unknown, source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kopanski_Stanislaw.jpg



task was to reinforce and defend Dikheil's positions west of Alexandria. In May 1941, the Brigade was transferred to Mersa Matruh fortress.

On 30th June 1941, the Brigade was replaced in Marsa Matruh by South African brigade and moved about 40 km east to a fort Sidi Baggush. While being stationed there, the Brigade not only worked on strengthening field fortifications but also intensively trained. On 12th August, the Brigade was reorganized. Its backbone was then three infantry battalions, independent heavy machine gun company, artillery regiment, anti-tank battalion, and engineers company. The Brigade's new manpower was composed of 308 officers, 4881 non-commissioned officers and soldiers.

BATTLE OF TOBRUK

In mid-August 1941, the British command with the agreement of the Polish Commander-in-Chief, Gen. Sikorski took a decision to send the Brigade to Tobruk in order to relieve the 9th Australian Infantry Division.

As a result of the German-Italian counteroffensive launched on 31st March 1941 in Cirenaica and the defeat of British forces, the Middle East Command decided to defend first the Gazala line, then Tobruk, not imagining initially the closure of their own forces in the sieged fortress and conducting a circular defence. In order to strengthen the forces in Tobruk, the 9th Australian Infantry Division under Leslie Morshead's command was transferred there. That division had been stationed before in Mersa Matruh. Having been deployed to Tobruk, the soldiers of the Polish Independent Carpathian Rifle Brigade (pol. Samodzielna Brygada Strzelców Karpackich) and the 1st South African Infantry Division were responsible for the defence of Mersa Matruh. Moreover, the 18th



2. Memorial badge of the Polish Independent Carpathian Rifle Brigade; phot. by Maciej Szczepańczyk, 2011; source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/bf/Memorial_badge_of_the_Polish_Independent_Carpathian_Rifle_Brigade.PNG

Infantry Brigade was shipped to Tobruk with a small armoured group, whereas two cavalry troops from the British 11th Hussars Regiment were sent there by land. Gen. Leslie Morshead was appointed the force commander of the Tobruk fortress.

The German-Italian forces commanded by Gen. Erwin Rommel tried to forestall the British-Australian forces to seize Tobruk. The first attempt took place on 11th and 12th April, the second one on 13th and 14th and finally the third one commanded personally by Gen. Rommel on 16th and 17th April (Bielatowicz, 1966, p. 69). None of them was successful. The first British units locked in the fortress on 11th April and since that time the siege of Tobruk started.

After the first unsuccessful attempts to seize Tobruk, Gen. Friedrich von Paulus from Wehrmacht's Command inspected the front. In spite of a critical evaluation of Gen. Rommel's command in the fights of Tobruk, Gen. Paulus allowed him to conduct one more assault. It took place from 30th April till 4th May. This time, after fierce battles on both sides, the German forces managed to breach the first line of defence and capture the dominating hill of Ras el Medauar that enabled to look inside the fortress.

The distance from Tobruk to Alexandria in the straight line is approximately 6000 kilometres. Reaching Tobruk during a siege was only possible by sea. The fate of Tobruk and defending troops depended solely on themselves and the British Navy effort. The whole area of the fortress was under enemy fire, constantly exposed to its air force. The actions of the fleet were limited only to a few hours of moonless nights. All supplies, armament, ammunition, wounded and sick evacuation and replacement of units were carried out at night by sea.

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3. Battlefields of the Independent Carpathian Rifle Brigade, April 1941 – March 1942; author: Lonio17, source: https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samodzielna_Brygada_Strzelc%C3%B3w_Karpackich#/media/Plik:SBSKarpackich.png

Before the Brigade's arrival in Tobruk, its defence was limited to intensive patrolling and raids to capture prisoners of war. An intensive artillery fire exchange and Axis permanent air raids posed extreme danger and inconvenience.

At the end of August 1941 before the Polish Rifle Brigade arrived in Tobruk, the allied forces under Gen. Morshead's command numbered 36 thousand soldiers, first of all 9th Australian Infantry Division, 18th Indian Cavalry Regiment, British 32nd Army Tank Brigade and six artillery regiments (Polskie Siły Zbrojne, 1975, p. 149).

Tobruk was sieged by three Italian divisions of the 21st Corps; 25th Infantry Division „Bologna” (in the east), 17th Infantry Division „Pavia” (in the south), 27th Infantry Division „Brescia” (in the west) and German 104th Motorized Infantry Regiment from the 15th Armoured Division and 115th Motorised Infantry Regiment from the 21st Armoured Division. The German regiments occupied positions captured before the breach at the end of April and beginning of May, incorporating the Hill of Ras el Medauar. Moreover, the enemy had in reserve the Italian 102nd Infantry Division „Trento” that joined the fighting in November on the line between the „Brescia” and „Pavia” divisions.



4. Commander-in-Chief Gen. Władysław Sikorski visits Polish soldiers in Tobruk, November 1941; source: <https://przystanekhistoria.pl/pa2/tematy/afryka/87001,Tobruckie-szczury-w-afrykanskim-piekle-Samodzielna-Brygada-Strzelcow-Karpackich.html>

However, the Italian divisions' manpower was not complete. The 21st Corps numbered only 26 267 servicemen, 176 guns, 25 anti-tank guns and 91 anti-aircraft guns. The Germans had 6604 servicemen, 48 guns, 45 anti-tank guns and 64 anti-aircraft guns (Biegański, 1988, p. 68).

Axis air forces supporting the siege were favourably placed on airfields nearby and numerous airstrips in el Adem, Gambut, Acroma Martuba, Tmimi and Gazala.

The main elements of Tobruk's basic defence structure were three lines of fortifications. The first and main defensive line was the so-called red line in the shape of a curve of 50 km length and diameter of up to 15 km. It consisted of the first echelon, i.e. numerous independent resistance points, each of them with 3 to 5 nests equipped with various types of weapons, built of reinforced concrete or cut in rocks. The second echelon of that defensive line, situated 200–400 metres from the first one inward was mainly composed of ground fortifications as resistance nests.

The second defensive line was formed by the so-called internal circle, i.e. blue line still enlarged during the siege. It was situated about 3 to 4 km from the green line and 5–6 km from the coast. It was composed of only one echelon,

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5. Soldiers of the Independent Carpathian Rifle Brigade decorated by Gen. Sikorski; source: https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samodzielna_Brygada_Strzelc%C3%B3w_Karpackich#/media/Plik:Karpac.jpg

mostly ground defensive positions, and sheltered by an antitank ditch that was also the starting point of counterattacks. At the same time, this line protected ammunition depots, fresh water intakes, port's anti-aircraft defence assets, rear equipment and the so-called small airport (Bielatowicz, 1951, p. 81–82; *Polskie Siły Zbrojne*, 1975, p. 147).

The third defensive line was the so-called green line, which in its planners' assumptions was supposed to protect directly the port and possible evacuation of the fortress. It was to lie on the distance of about 2 km from the sea. However, in practice it existed only in plans, as it was actually never built.

After transferring the Polish Independent Rifle Brigade to Tobruk, the first defensive line was divided into three brigade sections: the western, southern and eastern ones. All these sections were manned by Australian troops. The distance to the enemy amounted to 80 metres in some places in some areas of the German captured ground (breach), 2 km on the coastal section and 2 to 6 km on the eastern and southern ones (*Polskie Siły Zbrojne*, 1975, p. 150). Ammunition reserves of the defending forces were sufficient for 60-day fights, food supplies only for 30 days.

Having received information from Gen. Auchinleck about the Brigade's new task, Gen. Kopański ordered its concentration in the Amiriya camp near Alexandria, which took place on 17th–18th August. The operation of transporting the Brigade to Tobruk code named „Treacle” was an extremely complicated task requiring close and precise cooperation of the commands of the Middle East Forces, air force, navy and Tobruk's defence command. This operation could be conducted only during moonless nights, i.e. between 19th and 28th August.

Seven transports were needed to transfer the Brigade from Alexandria to Tobruk. The Brigade was one of few units that did not suffer any losses in spite of enemy bombardment and torpedo attacks. Within the operation „Treacle”, 6116 soldiers and 1297 tonnes of supplies were transported. The manpower of the Brigade on 28th August, when its transfer to Tobruk was completed, numbered 5065 servicemen, 288 officers including (Polskie Siły Zbrojne, 1975, p. 152).

The first task was assigned to the Carpathian Artillery Regiment commanded by Lt. Col. Stanisław Gliwicz. On the night of 20th and 21st August, this regiment replaced the British 51st Field Artillery Regiment and was tasked with fire support on the western defence line. Functionally Lt. Col. Gliwicz's regiment was incorporated into Artillery Group western line, which also included the British 144th Field Artillery Regiment. The first Polish shelling and shots in Tobruk's defence were fired on 22nd August.

The second Polish unit to receive a combat task was the Carpathian Uhlan Regiment. On the night of 27th and 28th August it replaced the Indian 18th Cavalry Regiment on a six-kilometre coastal line. It was a vital defensive line as the fresh water intakes were placed there.

Polish Independent Carpathian Brigade, without the artillery and uhlan's regiments, began to replace the 18th Australian Infantry Brigade taking over its positions situated on the second defence line. Occupying these positions was only temporary as the Brigade was assigned to be used on the southern defensive line.

On the nights of 2nd and 3rd as well as on 4th and 5th September, the 2nd and 3rd Brigade's Battalions replaced two battalions of the 20th Australian Infantry Brigade. The command on the southern line was transferred on the night of 5th and 6th of September. Operations conducted there had the typical position fighting character, with rare artillery fire exchange. Intensive observation of the foreground was made. The enemy, the units of the Italian 17th Infantry Division „Pavia”, which was located on that line in the distance of 3 to 7 km, did not show intense offensive activity. The life on combat positions was ignited at

night when both sides sent numerous patrols, conducted surveillance, repaired communication lines, built and repaired fortifications, improved camouflage or planted mines.

After one-month fighting, on the night of 28th and 29th September, the Polish Independent Carpathian Rifle Brigade was replaced on the first line of defence and moved to the reserve, manning the second line on the southern line of defence. After several relatively peaceful days, it was, in turn, sent to the western line, where it replaced the 26th Australian Infantry Brigade.

The western line of defence was composed of three sub-lines: coastal, central and Res el Medauar - one which was the key point of defence. On the German „breach” (i.e. Res el Medauar) positions, the enemy had in their disposal 15 strongly fortified rock and cement shelters, whereas the defenders were merely protected by primitive makeshift ground positions. The fights in that area were largely reminiscent of position fighting from the First World War. However, the enemy units occupied much more advantageous positions on the Hill of Res el Medauar, from which they conducted intense shelling on the fortress defenders' positions.

In comparison to the forces defending the Tobruk fortress, the enemy's strength was greater. The advantage was twofold in infantry, and overwhelming in ammunition, air surveillance and bombers' raids. The enemy usually conducted the main artillery fire attacks on the defenders between 7 and 9 in the morning and 5 and 7 in the evening. The aerial surveillance was performed between 10 to 12 am. The bombardment of defence positions in evening hours or moonless nights was carried out by 15 to 60 enemy aircraft.

On the Res el Medauar positions, there was adopted, having been initiated by Australian units, the custom of two-hour ceasefire after the dusk in order to provide a meal and strengthen the defensive positions, lay mine fields and re-supply ammunition. The series of flares shot into the sky was the signal to finish the ceasefire. The fighting forces used to hang out the Red Cross flag to allow casualty evacuation. However, Gen. Kopański soon resigned from this as the medic movement was clearly visible from the enemy positions and betrayed the layout of the defence positions arrangement.

In October, after the British 144th Artillery Regiment had been transferred, the Carpathian Artillery Regiment was responsible for the whole artillery support on the western line.

After replacing the 9th Australian Infantry Division commanded by Gen. Morshead, the fortress was commanded by Gen. Ronald Scobie, the command-

er of the British 70th Infantry Division. It was the Australians who for four weeks defended Tobruk's western defensive line, the longest before the Polish Independent Carpathian Rifle Brigade arrived there.

On 28th October, the preparations to the planned 8th Army's offensive, code-named Crusader, started. Two days later the fortress crew was included into that offensive. Yet, the siege of Tobruk protracted, diseases spread, mostly dysentery, scurvy and hepatitis. Fatigue increased; there was lack of reserves to replace the soldiers fighting on the first line of fire.

The Commander-in-Chief, Gen. Sikorski on his way to Moscow paid an unexpected visit to the Polish troops of on 13th–14th November. It was an important event in the several-month participation of the Polish Independent Carpathian Rifle Brigade in the defence of Tobruk. Gen. Sikorski arrived in the torpedo boat destroyer „Kipling” on the evening of 13th November. During his 36-hour stay in the fortress, Gen. Sikorski inspected several units, among others the ones located on the first line. It was the only visit of such a high rank commander and politician during the whole siege of Tobruk. Leaving the fortress on the night of 14th and 15th November, Gen. Sikorski issued an order in which he wrote:

Today I experienced with my own eyes that you are the paragon of virtue of survival strength, model of patriotism and soldier's dedication. You endure all hardships and toil. Therefore, believe that the day of payment and punishment for the enemy will come. At the same time it will be the day of freedom and happiness for us and our compatriots (Kopański, 1970, p. 197).

In turn, in the telegram sent to Gen. Kopański on 16th November we read:

The day that I have just spent among you in Tobruk will always remain engraved in my memory as one of the most beautiful days in my life. [...] I am proud of you, the Carpathian Riflemen, Poland is proud of you, Her sons who lay down their lives for Her (Kopański, 1970, p. 197).

Several dozen hours after Gen. Sikorski's visit at the dawn of 18th November 1941, the British offensive Crusader, among others aimed at liberating Tobruk, was launched from Egypt. Within the preparation to this offensive, on 6th November the Tobruk artillery staged a great demonstration on the „breach” positions displaying a moving fire curtain 600 metres wide and 1100 metres deep. Its tactical goal was to raise the enemy's vigilance in that defence trouble spot and cause an impression that an attack can be conducted from the Hill of Res

el Medauar. 72 guns of the Carpathian Uhlans Regiment and British Royal 1st Horse Artillery Regiment fired for an hour. Approximately 4000 shells were fired. The enemy also answered with an intensive fire (Bielatowicz, 1951, p. 89).

On 28th October Gen. Ronald Scobie made a decision to conduct an offensive from the eastern defensive line in order to meet the offensive approaching Tobruk. Consequently Gen. Kopański issued an order to create two detachments that in case of a successful course of action would be tasked with opening the entrance to the west and pursue the enemy along the road to Derna and cutting off the Medauar-Acroma retreat route in case of the enemy's withdrawal from the „breach”.

The plan of the British offensive assumed two assaults. The northern one by the 13th Corps was tasked to engage the enemy and protect the supplies delivery for the 8th Army and advance on a bearing of Tobruk. The southern assault by the 30th Corps was intended to cross the front between Sidi Omar and Maddalena fort and attack on a bearing of Tobruk. According to Gen. Auchinleck's plan, the Tobruk's crew's breakthrough towards the attacking British forces was to take place after immobilizing the enemy armoured weapons.

On 17th November at midnight, the British finished their preparations and at dawn of the following day the operation Crusader began. Gen. Rommel assessed this as a strong reconnaissance raid and did not call off his own attack on Tobruk.

On 21st–26th November a great armoured battle at Sidi Rezegh was fought. Gen. Rommel's armoured columns raids caused confusion among the British forces that resulted in the Germans taking over the initiative that, however, due to the lack of war materiel, among others fuel, they were not able to develop.

On the night of 23rd and 24th November, the Corps approached Tobruk from the east and its commander Gen. Alfred Reade Godwin-Austen took command of the fortress which was joined by the 13th Corps command on the night of 28th and 29th November. Due to German strong counterattacks, the contact between the attacking British troops and the fortress was broken on 1st December, and the 8th Army experienced crisis.

The British offensive was resumed on 2nd December. The 30th Corps' task was to capture el Adem, south of Tobruk. In turn, the 13th Corps was to clear the terrain between Tobruk and Bardia. British corps' offensive operations forced Italian Divisions „Brescia” and „Trento” to leave the fortress eastern and southern siege line.

On 6th December, the 30th Corps united with 70th Infantry Division fighting in Tobruk and cut off the Axis forces' group in the area of Sollun and Bardia, composed mainly of Italian troops. On the next day Gen. Rommel resigned from the siege of the fortress and took a decision to withdraw to Ain-Gazala's ground.

On 8th December, Gen. Kopański issued an order to attack on the Hill of Ras el Medauar. However, because of not enough transportation means, the attack was launched on 10th December. At 5.50 a.m. the enemy resistance nests on the top of the hill were captured and the Polish white and red flag was hoisted. On the night of 9th and 10th December the last enemy units abandoned the siege of the fortress and the Carpathian Uhlans Regiment, reinforced with several other detachments, pursued them. Gen. Kopański wanted to direct the pursuit to Gazala. Yet, the commander of the fortress decided to pursue them to Acroma which was seized, the airport including, without any contact with the enemy. In Gen. Kopański's opinion, the opportunity was missed to control the Gazala area in a pursuit. On 10th December at 3.30 p.m., the Carpathian Uhlans Regiment handed over Acroma to the British forces and five hours later it returned to Tobruk, completely unblocked at that time. The Polish Independent Rifle Brigade's epic struggle at Tobruk finished after 110 days of heavy fighting in the desert.

FURTHER FATE OF THE BRIGADE

After several weeks of fighting to defend Tobruk and participation in the pursuit crowned with seizing Acroma, the Polish Independent Rifle Brigade's soldiers counted on a well-deserved rest. Gen. Erwin Rommel lost the battle but his forces were not entirely defeated and still kept certain freedom of operation. Having abandoned the fortress in Tobruk, he did not abandon the idea of stopping the 8th Army's offensive. After three-week fierce battles, the British offensive reached a critical point and a moment of slowdown. Despite this, Neil Methuen Ritchie (he replaced at the end of November Gen. Alan Gordon Cunningham), the 8th Army commander intended to wage a decisive battle and final defeat of the enemy forces. However, in order to accomplish such a highly ambitious plan he needed more forces. This resulted in the change of initial plans concerning the Polish Brigade which on 11th December was ordered by Gen. Ronald Scobie, the commander of Tobruk to subordinate to the British commander of the 13th Corps on the following day. The Polish Independent Rifle Brigade as the only unit that directly took part in Tobruk's liberation was used in pursuits.

On 12th December afternoon, the Polish Brigade marched to El Adem in order to cover the airport there. It went there without the Carpathian Uhlans regiment as it remained in Tobruk for a few days and then detached for Cairo so as to be fully motorized and trained. On the next day the Brigade was tasked to move in the 13th Corps command area of responsibility to Bir et Tmer, approximately 10 km south west of Acroma.

Italian forces had prepared the enemy defence position at Gazala since the summer of 1941. It was defended by Italian Divisions „Brescia”, „Pavia” and „Triest”. The second echelon was formed by Division „Trento”, the defensive position southern flank was manned by Division „Ariete” and German 15th and 21st Armoured divisions.

The leading British units came into contact with the enemy on 13th December. However, defeating Gazala position failed. On the next morning, Gen. Kopański received an order to get into the gap in the enemy defence group between Gazala and Alem Hamza and cut off the way of retreat along the road Tobruk-Derna. Gen. Kopański decided to break off the enemy defence on the bearing of Hills 183 in the area of Got-el-Charruba and seize Carmuset er-Regem situated nearby.

The Polish Independent Rifle Brigade's assault was to be synchronised with the New Zealand 5th Infantry Brigade whose task was to engage the enemy forces on the north of the Polish Brigade's assault zone. The artillery preparation for the assault started several minutes after 3.30 p.m. Two battalions of the Carpathian Artillery Regiment and one battalion of the 1st Royal Horse Artillery Regiment conducted it. Although the artillery fire was not very strong, the 1st battalion managed to break the defence of the 17th Infantry Division's „Pavia” left wing and then directed the attack to the main enemy positions in the area of Carmuset er-Regem. By the end of the day, the companies of the first echelon had moved the enemy combat forces and captured Hills 183 and 187.

On 16th December, Polish patrols seized also Hills 157 and 163 in the area of Bir Chescua. However, due to a slower pace of assault of the Brigade's southern neighbour, i.e. the Indian Division and one of New Zealand's battalions, the Polish Brigade's movement to the west had to be slightly slowed down. On the next day after a night rest, the Brigade succeeded in breaking the enemy defence and went on pursuit.

The Brigade's victorious battle at Gazala positions had a huge operational importance for the further 8th Army's operations. Breaking the Italian divisions' defence forced them to retreat and enabled the deployment of the offensive in-

side Cirenaica. Gazala was the last line where the enemy tried to organize defence. After the lost battle and withdrawal, the enemy stopped on the border of Tripolitania. Gen. Alfred R. Godwin-Austen, the commander of the 13th Corps in a letter to Gen. Kopański wrote:

Let me express my utmost gratitude and admiration for praiseworthy deeds performed during recent operations by courageous officers and soldiers under your command. [...] Without your effort, our advance would not have been possible as your cooperation on the right wing greatly contributed to force the enemy to retreat. It was a great privilege for me to have the Polish Brigade under my command – this time in mobile operations (Kopański, 1990, p. 224).

Having cleared the area of Gazala from the remains of the enemy, the Polish Independent Rifle Brigade was sent to the 13th Corps reserve and moved to Ghazala Bay on 8th January to protect the airport where the British squadron was stationed. Next it operated in the area of Cirenaica and its artillery took part in seizing Bardia. Having incorporated thousands of Polish soldiers evacuated from the Soviet Union, it was renamed the 3rd Carpathian Rifle Division on 3rd May 1942.

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JANUSZ ZUZIAK

POLSKA SAMODZIELNA BRYGADA STRZELCÓW KARPACKICH PODCZAS OBLĘŻENIA TOBRUKU

STRESZCZENIE

12 kwietnia 1940 roku gen. dyw. Władysław Sikorski, Naczelny Wódz Sił Zbrojnych RP, wydał pisemny rozkaz w sprawie sformowania Brygady Strzelców Karpackich. Na miejsce jej zorganizowania władze francuskie wyznaczyły obóz wojskowy w pobliżu Homs, na granicy syryjsko-libańskiej. Upadek Francji w czerwcu 1940 roku zakłócił proces organizacji polskiej jednostki. W tej sytuacji płk Stanisław Kopański zdecydował, że Brygada natychmiast przemaszeruje do Palestyny i zostanie podporządkowana siłom brytyjskim. Dowództwo angielskie zdecydowało się użyć Brygady do obrony Tobruku. W ramach operacji „Treacle” do Tobruku przetransportowano 6116 żołnierzy. Bohaterskie zmagania polskiej Samodzielnej Brygady Strzelców Karpackich w obronie Tobruku zakończyły się po 110 dniach ciężkich walk na pustyni. Brygada zapisała w ten sposób piękną kartę w historii polskiej armii.

Słowa kluczowe: II wojna światowa, Afryka, Tobruk, Samodzielna Brygada Strzelców Karpackich, gen. Stanisław Kopański