

**‘Polish Naval Academy’ written by Professor Dariusz Nawrot
„Akademia Marynarki Wojennej - Zarys Dziejów 1922 - 2012.”
Pages 49-63, translated from Polish by Jolanta Wilson**

On 24 August 1939, as the German invasion of Poland became a concrete threat, the Chief of the Polish Naval Authority (KMW) - Rear Admiral Jerzy Swirski – ordered the immediate return of all Officer Cadets and candidates from their training placements, some of which were on the Baltic coast, to Bydgoszcz where the Naval Warrant Officers School (SPMW) was located. Only eighteen Senior Cadets of the Maritime Faculty remained on the Baltic coast, as they received their assignments to serve on fleet ships. Six days later, on 30 August, six Officer Cadets from that group left Gdynia aboard the destroyers ORP Burza, ORP Blyskawica and ORP Grom, which, in accordance with the “Peking Operational Plan”, were ordered to sail to Great Britain to assist the British Navy in the event of war.

Seven days after returning to Bydgoszcz the Officer Cadets and candidates set off on the road again, the outbreak of war having forced the Commander of the 8th Corps HQ to order the immediate evacuation of the whole of the Naval Warrant Officers School to Pinsk.

The first two transports, with staff and teaching aids, left Bydgoszcz on 1 September, and the following day the next transport set off with the equipment.

On 3 September, at ten o’clock, the School Commandant, Captain Tadeusz Podjazd-Morgenstern, was the last to leave, after handing over the premises of the Naval Warrant Officers School to a representative of Bydgoszcz City Board. He travelled to Pinsk by road in a convoy of three cars with passengers and, after a three-day drive without major problems, the group arrived at their destination on 6 September.

However, rail transports were much less fortunate. The first evacuation train was repeatedly attacked by Luftwaffe planes but managed to arrive in Pinsk on 7 September. Immediately that same day it was directed to the nearby village of Horodyszczce Poleskie where two buildings – a local school and a tourist hostel – had been prepared to accommodate the Naval Warrant Officers School – its first wartime location.

The second evacuation train was halted near Lowicz as the railway line had been destroyed. When it became apparent they could no longer continue, the transport leader, Lieutenant Commander Tadeusz Kerger, abandoned the train journey and, together with the crew of the echelon under his command, proceeded using any means of transport he could find. This group reached Pinsk around 10 September.

Eventually, with considerable effort and following different routes, all the personnel of the Naval Warrant Officers School, including thirty permanent lecturers from both naval and civilian staff, made it to Horodyszczce Poleskie with the aim of implementing the war training programme for Warrant Officers. Unfortunately, however, due to adverse developments on the war front, the Officer Cadets, instead of joining the planned classes, were assigned to the anti-aircraft and

anti-subversive defence system organised by the Corps IX District Command. Soon any plans to restart Officer Cadet training had to be abandoned as the war front was getting progressively closer to Horodyszcze Poleskie, and on 11 September the School Commandant, Captain Tadeusz Podjazd-Morgenstern, received an order to dissolve the Naval Warrant Officers School and to direct all the remaining Officer Cadets still under his command to the Naval Battalions based on the Riverine Flotilla in Pinsk.

The dissolution of the Navy Warrant Officers School on 12 September 1939 accompanied a solemn ceremony attended by the entire personnel during which the special order of the Head of Naval Command, Rear Admiral Jerzy Swirski, was read.

As a result forty mid-year Officer Cadets were transferred to the senior year, while thirty-two candidates, who had been appointed Junior Cadets without even taking a military oath, were released from service. However, all former candidates volunteered to join the Naval Battalions. In these Battalions, based on the Riverine Flotilla, the Officer Cadets in their senior year were entrusted with duties of Deputy Platoon Commanders, Squad Commanders and heavy machine gun Commanders, while the newly-appointed Junior Cadet Officers were incorporated into the Battalions as rank-and-file riflemen.

The Soviet Union attacked Poland on 17 September 1939, and the following day General Franciszek Kleeberg, Commander of the Independent Operational Group, "Polesie", ordered the Naval Battalions to leave Pinsk. Initially they headed towards Warsaw, but after its fall made their way towards the Swietokrzyskie Mountains. So it was that, at Kock on 5 October, the Navy Officer Cadets, now soldiers of the Independent Operational Group, "Polesie", engaged in the last great battle of the 1939 Defensive War.

So came to an end this tragic but noble battle trail of the Naval Warrant Officers School and the Officer Cadets who fought – on land and in green infantry uniforms – for the honour of the Polish sailor far from the Baltic coast. A high price was paid by the Officer Cadets for the honour of fighting for "Polesie", the last large group of Polish Armed Forces to lay down their arms during the September Campaign.

The Officer Cadets who laid down their arms following General Kleeberg's order were taken into German captivity.

Eight had given their lives on the combat route from Pinsk to Wola Gulowska: Wladyslaw Dullewicz, Jerzy Steifer, Stanislaw Sawicki, Leszek Jastrzebiowski, Jan Konkol, Walerian Pilarski, Lechoslaw Porwisiak and Przemyslaw Rybianski.

A further eight were lost without trace and eleven were wounded.

Following the September defeat, one of the basic criteria for maintaining continuity of operations by the Polish Navy from ports in Great Britain was ensuring an efficient system for meeting the

demand for Officer cadre. This was not going to be possible without restarting the Naval Warrant Officers School.

The six Cadets who had left Poland on board three destroyers sent to Great Britain before the outbreak of war avoided captivity, as well as 60 Cadets performing their maritime practices on board ORP Iskra and ORP Wilja. However, those left defending the Polish coastline under the command of Rear Admiral Jozef Unrug were taken into German captivity on 2 October 1939.

On the day of the outbreak of war ORP Iskra was en route from Casablanca to Las Palmas. On hearing the news of war hostilities its commander, Lieutenant Commander Jerzy Umecki, decided to change direction and return to Casablanca. At that time ORP Wilja – which had been plagued by bad luck in the form of machinery failure almost from the beginning of the voyage – was also in Casablanca where the crew were undertaking the necessary boiler repairs.

So it was that on 2 September 1939 almost the entire first year of the Naval Warrant Officers School found itself stationed in Casablanca. (Officer Cadet Wladyslaw Szukszta was missing as he was in hospital in Dover, having broken his leg during the voyage on board ORP Wilja. However, a day later he joined the renamed Detached Navy Group in Casablanca, formed from the crews of both ships.)

Overall command of the Group was assumed by the Director of Science at the Naval Warrant Officers School, Lieutenant Commander Miroslaw Kownacki, enlisted on board ORP Wilja. On receiving instructions from the Maritime Attache in London, he ordered preparation for the evacuation of the Officer Cadets to Great Britain.

Having secured ORP Iskra and ORP Wilja in Port Lyautey (now known as Kenitra) in Morocco, the crews of both ships (13 Officers, 59 Officer Cadets, 131 Non-Commissioned Officers and sailors) set off for Great Britain as a Detached Unit on 13 October 1939. The seamen travelled from Port Lyautey to Casablanca by rail, then by Marrakech passenger ship to Bordeaux, and completed the final leg by train to Landernau in Brittany, assigned as their temporarily location. There an old former monastery building, Couvant Calvarie, had been designated by the French authorities to be put at the disposal of the Detached Unit.

Although the stay in Landernau did not last very long, a few Cadets left the Detached Unit. Six, who were keen to join the war front as soon as possible, entered an official request and were directed to the land units of the Polish Army organised in France. Subsequent requests from the impatient Cadets to be sent to the front were effectively headed off by Rear Admiral Jerzy Swirski's order to leave for Great Britain.

On 21 November 1939 the Detached Unit left Landernau and, sailing via Cherbourg to Southampton, reached Devonport for embarkation on ORP Gdynia. Under its former name of s/s Kosciuszko, this ship had been leased from the Ministry of Industry and Trade and had arrived in Devonport on 4 November. She had anchored opposite the North Dockyard and was

incorporated into the Polish Navy under her new name of ORP Gdynia. She was a six-deck unit with a displacement of 7,000 tons which could ultimately accommodate up to 800 people. In accordance with the order of the Chief of the Polish Navy, Rear Admiral Jerzy Swirski, ORP Gdynia was designated as the main base of the Polish Navy of Great Britain.

On 23 November the Detached Unit was dissolved, and its staff and seamen received new service assignments on ships and in institutions of the Polish Navy of Great Britain. The Officer Cadets became the first students at the Naval Warrant Officers School which was revived that day on board ORP Gdynia.

Reactivation of The Naval Warrant Officers School was founded on the terms of the Anglo-Polish agreement, signed on 18 November 1939, establishing the role of the Polish Naval Department in Great Britain. The primary task of this first ever Polish Maritime School in exile was to enable those Cadets who had begun their education back home to complete their training. Following the decree of Rear Admiral Jerzy Swirski, the commander of ORP Gdynia – Commander Lieutenant Wladzimirz Kodrebski – was to be responsible for initiating the Officer Cadets' training in Great Britain.

However, on 19 December, soon after the initial organisational work had been finalised, the Head of the Polish Naval Authority ordered the role of Commandant of the Naval Warrant Officers School to be undertaken by Commander Lieutenant Ludwik Ziembicki. At the same time the duties of the Deputy Commander and the Director of Science of the Naval Warrant Officers School were entrusted to Lieutenant Commander Miroslaw Kownacki.

On that day there were already fifty-eight Officer Cadets on board ORP Gdynia. The majority of them were students of the Maritime Faculty, with two from the senior year, forty-one from the middle year and two from the junior year. The Technical Department was represented by one Officer Cadet from the senior year. The remaining twelve Officer Cadets were from the middle year of the Administrative Department.

The group which had arrived from Casablanca were continually joined by Officer Cadets arriving in Great Britain from occupied Poland. Most of these, except for students from the Technical Department, had already started classes in November in an attempt to continue their pre-war curriculum. The conditions of service of the students at the Naval Warrant Officers School were the focus of the inspection carried out on 10 January 1940 at ORP Gdynia by the head of the Polish Navy, Rear Admiral Jerzy Swirski.

From the very first day of its inception in exile the Naval Warrant Officers School received goodwill and wide-ranging assistance from the highest state authorities of Poland and Great Britain. This was reflected, among other things, by the visit to ORP Gdynia by King George VI on 16 December 1939 and by the First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, on 15 February 1940. During their visits the distinguished guests showed a keen interest in the lives of the Cadets.

However, the substantial assistance offered by the leadership of the Polish Navy and the British Admiralty could not immediately solve all the problems associated with the functioning of the School. The implementation of the curriculum encountered significant difficulties, mainly due to the lack of appropriate teaching staff and the necessary teaching aids. At that time classes were led by Officers temporarily designated by the Commander of ORP Gdynia (the Naval Base commander in Great Britain) in response to the requirements submitted by the Academic Dean of the Naval Warrant Officers School. An additional problem faced by the authorities of the Naval Warrant Officers School was the urgent need to effectively train Officer Cadets in technical specialties.

The decision was therefore taken to begin work on a new military training programme for Officer Cadets, to be based on experience as well as on the requests and proposals submitted to the Naval Warrant Officers School by the commanders of the ships. It was also decided that the period designated for the School's adaptation to its new tasks should be used for the Officer Cadets' maritime practices. Additionally, taking into account the difficulties associated with the opening of the Technical Faculty, the decision was made to benefit from the British Admiralty's offer and refer Officer Cadets for further study at an English university.

As a result, Officer Cadets of the Maritime Department received service assignments onto three Polish counter-torpedo ships (which since 1940 had been called destroyers) – ORP Grom, ORP Burza and ORP Blyskawica - and two Polish submarines, ORP Wilk and ORP Orzel. Five Officer Cadets of the Administrative Department were divided into two groups and assigned to the battleships of the Royal Navy. Seven Officer Cadets of the Technical Department went to study at the Royal Naval Engineering College in Keyham, Plymouth.

The main emphasis of the military programme at the Naval Warrant Officers School was placed upon practical training on board ships. Theory was limited to the minimum necessary. The Officer Cadets' training programme in their mid-year included 30 hours of naval history, 40 hours of ship mechanics, 25 hours of maritime deviation, 15 hours of nautical science, 20 hours of astronomy, 12 hours of submarine knowledge and 12 hours of aviation knowledge.

After a six-month period of theoretical training, completed by examinations in February 1941, Officer Cadets were moved to their six-months' sea practices.

Officer Cadets of the senior year from the Administrative Department, already preparing for their promotion, were directed to the Polish destroyers ORP Burza, ORP Blyskawica, ORP Garland, ORP Huragan and ORP Piorun, while Officer Cadets of the Maritime Department embarked onto British battleships (Hood, Queen Elizabeth, King George V, Nelson, Rodney) and heavy cruisers (Exeter, London, Norfolk and Suffolk).

During their six months' practice the Officer Cadets took part in numerous naval operations. On 24 May 1941 the largest British ship, HMS Hood, was sunk in a battle with the German battleship Bismarck. Out of 1,419 crew members of HMS Hood only

three sailors survived. The list of fallen included four Polish Cadets: Stanislaw Czerny, Kazimierz Szymański, Leon Żmuda-Trzebiatowski and Kazimierz Żurek.

Later, however, almost all the ships aboard which Polish Officer Cadets sailed at that time took part in the famous pursuit of and battle with the German battleship. Bismarck's ultimate sinking was described - among others - by an eyewitness, Officer Cadet Eryk Sopoćko, who was serving on the battleship HMS Rodney at the time. Unfortunately, this undoubtedly significant success of the allied fleets came at great cost.

The six-month internship of Senior Cadets was their final test before promotion. All were successful and this was reflected in their assessments issued by the ship commanders and practice supervisors.

After their practice, the Officer Cadets returning to Devonport were no longer greeted by a friendly deck of ORP Gdynia. Due to the significant losses suffered by the Allies in the Battle of the Atlantic, a decision was taken to hand over ORP Gdynia to the Polish Merchant Navy. On 30 June 1941 the Navy flag was lowered aboard ORP Gdynia and the ship resumed its original name, s/s Kościuszko.

On 4 July 1941 the new headquarters of the Naval Warrant Officers School became a barracks building on Stoke Terrace in Devonport, handed over by the British Admiralty, which came to be called the "Polish Naval Barracks". This building witnessed the first ever promotion ceremony to the Officer rank of the graduates from the Naval Warrant Officers School in Great Britain. Setting the promotion date for 3 September 1941 was undoubtedly not a coincidence as it was the second anniversary of Britain's declaration of war. Jerzy Świrski, newly elevated to the rank of Vice Admiral on 19 September 1941, promoted a total of 40 Officer Cadets who had come to the West in 1939 on the decks of ORP Iskra and ORP Wilja. Under the decree of the President of the Republic of Poland of 12 March 1937 regarding military officer service, twenty-eight Officer Cadets from the Maritime Department, five Officer Cadets from the Administrative Department and seven Officer Cadets from the Technical Department were promoted to the rank of Second Lieutenant.

Two Officer Cadets from that year - Oskar Gliński and Eryk Sopoćko, who were still at sea on that day - were promoted at later dates (Sopoćko on 1 September 1941 and Gliński on 1 October 1941).

At the end of the ceremony a message from the Supreme Commander of the Polish Armed Forces, General Władysław Sikorski, was read:

Dear boys!

The day of your promotion to the rank of Second Lieutenant is a solemn ceremony.

I had sincerely hoped to be standing with you on this day¹ and to personally oversee your commission.

Unfortunately that has not been possible.

For the first time as Officers you shall walk onboard Polish ships bathed in the glory of the Polish Navy whose proud banner continues to promote the might of the Polish name.

I have no doubt that, mindful of the honour of Polish seaman, you shall nobly fulfil your duty under this flag.

May the memory of your fellow Officer Cadets who died onboard ships of the Second Republic as well as onboard battleship Hood be dear to you; let it shine on you as a living example of sacrifice and valour.

General Sikorski,
Supreme Commander of the Polish Armed Forces

Classes which started in the new academic year at the Polish Naval Barracks were carried out under new management. On 5 November 1941 the Director of Science, Lieutenant Commander Miroslaw Kownacki, assumed the duties of Commandant of the Naval Warrant Officers School. Following a systematically improved curriculum, classes were conducted only at the Maritime and the Administration Departments.

The function of the Technical Faculty was fulfilled by the Royal Naval Engineering College in Keyham when the College took over responsibility for training Polish Officer Cadets in technical specialties. Candidates for technical studies were selected from the volunteers serving in the Navy who, as well as possessing all the necessary

¹ Sikorski was in USSR at the time

qualifications, also had a good command of English. In 1942, on the initiative of Captain Włodzimierz Kodrebski, three-month preparatory courses were established in an attempt to best prepare candidates for study at the British college. As the level of achievement set for candidates was very high, only six out of the fourteen admitted for the first course successfully completed it. The course graduates became Officer Cadets on 1 May 1942 and commenced their studies at the Royal Naval Engineering College.

This system for training Officers continued until autumn 1943, when the number of students trained at the Naval Warrant Officers School decreased dramatically. At the same time the Navy experienced substantial shortages in the maritime Officers Corps. This difficulty was felt most keenly aboard ships where the need to fill Officer posts was particularly acute.

On 3 August 1943, the Supreme Commander of the Polish Armed Forces, General Kazimierz Sosnkowski, ordered that the division between active and reserve officers should be abolished, and this led to the establishment of the Naval Reserve Warrant Officers School (SPRMW) on 17 September by Vice Admiral Jerzy Swirski. (The division between active and reserve officers was retained only for record-keeping purposes.)

The Naval Reserve Warrant Officers School was established along the lines of and functioned in parallel with the Naval Warrant Officers School. From September 1943 it was based at the Navy Training Camp at Bickleigh near Plymouth. All teaching and administrative functions of the Naval Reserve Warrant Officers School were carried out by the staff of the Naval Warrant Officers School, supported by eight part-time tutors.

The curriculum envisaged by the Naval Reserve Warrant Officers School included ten months to one year of theoretical training (depending on the pace of the classes), three months of training onboard ships and two to four weeks of training in naval units on land.

To apply for admission to the Reserve Naval Warrant Officers School, non-commissioned Officers and seamen had to meet the appropriate character traits and moral standards required to become Naval Officers – as confirmed by the official assessment report. They were also required to have at least eight months' experience onboard ships, have completed secondary school with matriculation certificate, be in health category "A", and not exceed thirty years of age.

The application for promotion from Navy Cadet to the rank of Sub-Lieutenant required an appropriately high grade in theoretical examinations and practical training as well as

the assessment confirming suitability of the candidate for the position of Junior Ward Officer.

Classes for the first group of candidates to train as Reserve Cadets began on 1 October 1943. After a period of unitary training between 1 – 25 October, thirty Reserve Cadets commenced their training at the Maritime Faculty and twelve Reserve Cadets at the Administrative Department. On 10 November the programme of theoretical studies began. A full week of classes at the Naval Reserve Warrant Officers School comprised twenty-six hours of lessons, including two hours of English language, for both groups as well as one hour of drill.

In December 1944 the School was transferred from Bickleigh to the newly-founded Naval Camp, ORP Baltyk, in Okehampton. The Naval Reserve Warrant Officers School had already been fulfilling virtually all functions related to training Officers since 15 May 1944 when the last three graduates of the Naval Warrant Officers School were promoted to Officers. It now continued its activity, based on modified educational programmes, in its new location.

The Maritime Faculty curriculum comprised six weeks of basic training, an introductory period of three months, nine months of theoretical training and three months of maritime practice – a total of 16.5 months. Out of the total 728 hours allocated for the curriculum, which encompassed twenty-four subjects, 572 hours were designated for lectures and the remainder for examinations and tests including 59 hours for ship knowledge, 36 hours for artillery, 30 hours for navigation, 64 hours for English language and 20 hours for naval history and principles of strategy.

The Technical Faculty programme differed from the previous one as maritime internships were reduced by up to two months. However, half a year of additional study at the British Training Centre at HMS Marlborough in Eastbourne became an integral component.

The first promotion at the Reserve Warrant Officers School in Okehampton took place on 5 January 1945.

After the termination of war hostilities the training programme at Okehampton Naval Reserve Warrant Officers School continued. Classes at the Naval Warrant Officers School also resumed, providing education for the wartime lieutenants – now released from German captivity by the Allied forces.

Underway were preparations for the return to Poland and for the implementation of a new stage in Polish maritime education in accordance with the Polish Navy Expansion Plan of 5 December 1944. The keynote of the concept adopted in this document was the transformation of the Naval Warrant Officers School into a university of the highest academic level. With this target – bearing in mind that an education system did not function in Poland during the war – the intention was to extend the duration of the Officer Cadets' training to five years. Two introductory classes were planned to enable candidates to bridge gaps in their secondary education. Additionally it was envisaged that young people obtaining a secondary school certificate at other schools would also be eligible to apply to join the Naval Warrant Officers School.

Education at the Naval Warrant Officers School in Poland was to begin immediately in the first year after the war. This decision was dictated by the anticipated staffing requirements. To comply with this Expansion Plan and to achieve its intended level of full development fifteen years from its inception, the Polish Navy needed about 1,300 Naval Officers of various specialties. To meet this requirement about 330 candidates had to be admitted at the outset.

Taking into account the projected rate of learning, the following indicators after just five years would demonstrate consistent implementation of the Plan:

At the Maritime Cadets School (training candidates for the Naval Warrant Officers School):

- In the first year: 330 students
- In the second year: 300 students

Total: 630 students

At the Naval Warrant Officers School:

- In the first year: 300 Cadets
- In the second year: 200 Cadets
- In the third year: 100 Cadets

Total: 600 Cadets

An overall total of 1,230 Candidates and Cadets

However, the implementation of this concept, as well as that of the entire Polish Navy Expansion Plan, was prevented by a political solution to the "Polish Problem" adopted within the international arena. Following the post-Yalta decisions and the creation of the

Provisional Government of National Unity back in Poland in June 1945, the Naval Warrant Officers School and the Naval Reserve Warrant Officers School were closed on 1 December 1946 and four months later, on 31 March 1947, the Polish Navy in the West was dissolved.

So concluded the final chapter of the development of Polish Maritime Education of the Second Polish Republic during World War II.

Worthy of note is that, despite all the complex conditions of the ongoing war, the Naval Warrant Officers School, which was reactivated outside its homeland – Poland – in the autumn of 1939, contributed greatly to the honourable fulfilment of duties carried out by the Polish Navy from its bases in Great Britain. Supporting this statement is the fact that in exile 142 Cadets were promoted to the rank of Officers – 64 from the Naval Warrant Officers School and 78 from the Naval Reserve Warrant Officers School. Most of these justified their high qualifications during the war, demonstrating distinguished achievements as Officer Cadets both during the September campaign in Poland and in the course of their maritime internships.

Considering the small cadre of Polish Naval Officers in the West in 1939 it can also be argued that, without the Naval Warrant Officers School in exile, it would have been impossible to ensure the continuity of Polish operational activities at sea – from the first to the last salvo of World War II.

The ninety-year history of naval education under the white and red flag is primarily the history of people - commanders and educators, scientists and lecturers, administrative and logistic staff, cadets and civilian students, for whom the Latin maxim “Amor Patriae Nostra Lex” (“Love for Homeland is our Law”) has always represented the noblest values.

Thanks to those people it was possible not only to maintain the continuity of training between 1939 and 1946 on hospitable British soil, but also later to revive and expand further at a time of evolving economic conditions in Poland after World War II.

Remembering the achievements of all those who contributed to the transformation of the Naval Warrant Officers School into the Polish Naval Academy, one cannot ignore the special role of its superiors - the Commandants. Although at present we may not have sufficient perspective of time and it might be too early to assess the achievements of everyone, nevertheless it can already be argued that most of them regarded their work as a type of mission and a unique challenge in life.

This statement applies equally to Commandants from the period of the Second Polish Republic as well as those involved during the years of the Polish People's Republic and most recently at the time of Renewal.

Translated as part of the 'Telling Our Stories Finding Our Roots in Devon' project.