

*Westerplatte from 1*

In the late evening of 31 August 1939 the phone rang on the desk of Major Jerzy Lyhoc, the Pomorze Chief of Staff. The man on the other end of the wire whispered the phrase in one breath, "The guests are coming across the bridge" meant: the German troops were crossing the pontoon bridge over the Vistula en route from East Prussia to the Free City of Danzig. In the command of the Pomorze Army Pomorze, Lyhoc's report ignited an understandable unrest. However nobody suspected yet that it was an ominous signal of the coming war. The words of the secret report were wired farther to Warsaw, to the General Staff.

At dawn 1 September 1939 on Westerplatte, Polish soldiers from the detachment of Warrant Officer Jan Gryczman were getting ready to march out to the barracks after a tiresome night duty. The soldiers were collecting their weapons when suddenly a rifle shot resounded. Its echo bounced off of the red-brick wall which surrounds the tiny peninsula of Westerplatte, it flew over the port canal and farther to the sleeping city, to the mouth of the Vistula, and vanished. Gryczman instinctively looked at his watch. The time was 4:17 am.

After Poland regained its independence in 1918, it was granted the right to establish its Military Transit Depot on Westerplatte to guard Poland's interests in the port of the Free City of Danzig. On 9 December 1925 the Council of the League of Nations issued a resolution, which allowed Poland to keep 88 soldiers of the Polish Army on Westerplatte. As the German-Polish relations strained, and the Free City saw more Hitlerite provocations and violence, it was decided to enlarge the Westerplatte garrison, and strengthen its firepower in case of an aggression. On 1 September 1939 the Westerplatte's (dubbed) "the dead garrison" numbered 182 well trained and armed men. They were supposed to resist for 6-hours, then increased to 12 hours. After that Polish troops would arrive to aid them.

On 25 August 1939 a Kriegsmarine's battleship Schleswig-Holstein came to Danzig for a courtesy visit. She anchored in the port canal right across the Westerplatte and did not leave after the visit was officially over. During this ostensible visit the garrison of Westerplatte was on guard 24 hours a day. In fact, under the decks of the German ship a 225 man German assault company was concealed. Till 23 August 1939 it quartered under command of Lt. Henningsen in the building of a grammar school in Memel.

After the war the West German journal "Quick" spoke to four of the Germans. Among them were artillery Mate Georg Wolf, later a doctor in Essen, and engineer Senior Mate Helmut Schauer, later an officer of the Bundesmarine and the commander of the corvette Kiel. Wolf recalled: On 24 August we were in Combat readiness at 19:30 hr.

We embarked in beautiful, warm weather. Yet we were surprised that instead of cabins we were quartered like herrings in a can in the holds at the very bottom of the ship with the equipment. We could not understand what was going on. Next day we learned from the radio, that our ship was going for a courtesy visit to Danzig. At 12:00 hr. we were told to arm, and collect the individual food rations and ammunition. On 25 August at 16:00 hr. we moored at the Danzig waterfront across the Polish zone, Westerplatte.

We were briefed by the ship commander Captain Kleikamp. General Eberhardt presented plans of Westerplatte, stating that Westerplatte lacks fortifications. The garrison numbers 100 soldiers. Taking the base cannot take more than three hours. An assault company will disembark at 21:30 hr. on the waterfront, which will be cleared by police. No lights to be allowed. Captain Kleikamp reads the order concerning combat actions of the training ship "Schleswig-Holstein." 20:15 hr. Radio surveillance receives the order "Military operation cancelled." Complete disappointment, Says Helmut Schauer:

For the several next days we spent time under the deck. One could walk out briefly at night. Sometimes our men were allowed

to run along the waterfront in one of the 59 civilian garments that Lieutenant Henningsen acquired, and we took turns wearing them. Once I ran as far as the wall surrounding Westerplatte.

On 30 August we learned about Hitler's ultimatum and mobilization in Poland. On 31 August at 18:35 hr. we received the combat order - attack on 1 September.

Gryczman did not neglect the earlier sudden alarming signal. He ordered his soldiers to re-assume their action stations. Intuition did not fail him. Exactly at 4:45 Schleswig-Holstein's eighteen guns of calibers ranging from 88 to 280 mm opened fire at Westerplatte. Their salvoes covered the barracks, outposts, storages, as well as the railway siding; under its rubble was buried its supervisor, Jan Najsarek - probably the first casualty of the Second World War. The artillery fire and explosions on Westerplatte merged in one hellish roar, which overwhelmed even the invaders. A former artillery officer from Schleswig-Holstein, Fritz Otto Busch, remembered curling clouds of smoke with columns of yellow-orange fire billowing here and there. Iron and steel, earth and wood whirling in the air and falling back to the ground. (...)

The crewmen who stayed on the battleship's deck watched with glazed eyes on the fire's bright glow. Their ears roared from the fire and explosions of heavy shells. The steady rattle of machine-guns, and eardrum-breaking barking of the anti-aircraft canons shooting at point-blank range. (...)

Is there anybody still alive? The chief petty officer asks his men servicing the guns, and stretches his neck to see anything through this firework in front of us. The sailors shake their heads in silence and wipe the sweat from their foreheads - no, certainly nobody... [Busch]

The artillery bombardment of the tiny peninsula lasted almost an hour. When the guns silenced, the Germans launched the attack with the forces of their infantry, SS Danziger Heimwehr, and naval infantry. On the other side of the red-brick wall the Polish garrison was waiting. As soon as the assault group leaps across the ruined wall into the shallow forest, a machine-gun fire bursts out, rifle shots rattle, and the hand grenades explode before the brave marines. [Busch] Corporal Edmund Szamlewski opened fire from his machine-gun barely from 50 metres and literally mowed the assailants. Those who were looking for cover from the bullets, lay for a moment, and then fled to safety. But then Gryczman's men opened fire from the flank. The Germans were stumbling and falling on the ground. Wrote Busch:

The Germans from the assault group realized, Westerplatte is not ripe yet for storming. (...)

This resistance must be broken - the sooner the better. The watch officer seems not to notice the excitement around him. He brushes away all the doubts, worries and fears:

Concrete bunkers are too strong, but no worries, mates, we'll try again. The Polaczeks won't hold any longer. [Busch]

The Poles did not let themselves be caught by surprise. The Hitlerites' first attack cost them dearly. Sergeant Heinz Denker from the naval infantry group visited Westerplatte again in 1979; he recalled the atmosphere of the fights on that day: We knew nothing about the enemy. We were attacking along the railway, having only an old 1:1000 map without pill-boxes marked. At once we noticed that the ship's huge 280 mm shells needed to go 600 m to explode, while in fact they made only 400 m. The first attack ended at 10:00 hr. Our company lost 127 men out of 225. (...)

We came back to the ship. I saw Greiser in the SS uniform and Eberhardt, who approached us and said, that we'd receive support of an SS squad. Our commander, Lieutenant Schuck who replaced the wounded Henningsen, said three squads wouldn't be enough. The Poles were fighting like lions and were well entrenched. We need air support.

Meanwhile an alarm sounded among the Poles. Soldiers hurried to put on their helmets and belts, grab their rifles and run to their action stations. Their commander, Major Henryk Sucharski, was issuing short

commands in a breaking voice. Westerplatte turned into a little fortress; later the Germans nicknamed it a Little Verdun. The Germans attacked three more times that day but all attacks failed. They lost between 80 and 100 killed. [Flisowski] The Poles would not cease fire even while seeing the Germans retreating. Platoon Leader Piotr Buder reported that he literally had to drag his men away from machine-guns to make them spare ammunition. [Zgorniak]

On 2 September the watch on Schleswig-Holstein reported spotting a white flag on Westerplatte, [Busch] but when the troops went to take Westerplatte into their possession, they encountered the previous fast resistance. For the rest of the day, Hitlerites conducted alternately artillery and air bombardments. Hundreds of bombs and shells fell on the small, inflexible peninsula. A witness of the fights, later a respected German historian Anton Bassarek, noted on that day:

Bomb after bomb fell, turning the battlefield into one hell of a fire, smoke and mud. People of Danzig were watching this spectacle from the roofs and the city's hills with admiration to the Hermann Goring's air force in action. This and that old veteran soldier, who spent many days under the shower of shells on the Somme and in the Flanders, would only shake his head, watching the exploits of our airmen. Because what was falling incessantly on Westerplatte must have had an impact on the defenders as horrible as the most thunderous fire of the great battles in the West. When our assault troops renewed advance after this cannonade, they encountered a real firestorm. [Bassarek]

At 14:00 Georg Wolf returned to the ship. Out of 49 men of his platoon he brought back 13. On 3 September at 14:40 hr. the Ju-87's finally flew in, recalls Helmut Schauer. Sixty machines dropped about 500 bombs on Westerplatte. When we went to attack the Poles welcomed us with the fire of the same strength as before. This soldier deserves respect.

Information services of the Polish Supreme Command repeatedly announced: "Westerplatte fights on", "Poland salutes the lions of Westerplatte"... German forces exceeded the Polish ones twenty times. The days filled with fights were passing, but no aid was arriving. Exhausted Polish soldiers were scrambling to gain strength so they could fight, casualties were mounting, and the wounded were agonizing without supplies. At night and dawn 3 September the Germans made two sorties by a battalion of naval cadets. The attacks were repelled, and then a lull came for the rest of the day. On 4 and 5 September the Germans did not try to take Westerplatte in fights. Instead they resorted to a heavy bombardment. Schleswig-Holstein and two torpedo boats anchored off Brosen, two batteries of 210 mm mortars, and the coastal battery at Glettkau all participated- it means from all the possible sides. [Busch] The artillery bombardment continued on 6 September in the morning, then in the afternoon the Germans decided to renew their assault. They tried to silence Polish emplacements by setting the forest afire. An armored handcar pushed a railway cistern filled with fuel towards Westerplatte's railway siding. Yet the Poles hit it with machine-gun fire and anti-tank shells, and destroyed it. The content of the cistern went aflame and lit the enemy positions. Three German plans were repelled that night.

The attack on Westerplatte was to be renewed on 7 September. Silence. The white flag on the roof. The Poles have surrendered. (...) It's 09:30 hr.

Indeed, as the food, water and hope exhausted, the Poles decided to surrender. After 7 days of fights, which cost the Germans some 300-400 killed and many wounded, the enemy took Westerplatte. The Poles suffered relatively low casualties: 15 killed and 53 wounded. [Flisowski] The commander of the German forces, Gen. Friedrich Eberhardt, let Major Sucharski keep his saber as a sign of appreciation of his courage. The Germans could not believe that such a tiny outpost without serious fortifications could resist so long. They saluted Polish soldiers marching into captivity, and protected them of Danzig town-folks, who wanted to lynch them.

Major Sucharski spent the rest of the war in a POW camp. In July 1945 he joined the Polish forces in Italy, but he had no strength to command the troops. The years spent in the prison camp had ruined his health. He died on 30 August 1946 in a military hospital in Naples. Before his death he begged to be buried in Poland. His wish came true 25 years later. On 1 September 1971 his remains were reburied on Westerplatte; the last surviving officer from Westerplatte, Lt. Leon Pajnok, commanded the ceremony.

The defense of Westerplatte already during the Second World War became the symbol of honorable heroic resistance, since the peninsula was of no military or economical significance. Its commander, Henryk Sucharski, became one of Poland's national heroes, never challenged from any point, whatever political divisions might split Polish society. It was not until 1994 that his fame was put in question. Captain Franciszek Dąbrowski was Sucharski's deputy in the days of the battle for Westerplatte.

After the war he worked many jobs; eventually a reference from a Soviet General helped him to obtain a license to keep a news-stand in Cracow. He died in 1962. Before his death he wrote a testimony with the provision that it be not opened until thirty years after his death. When the time came his son at first could not believe his eyes. The testimony said, that on 2 September 1939, after the hellish bombardment and casualties of the first days of the defense, Sucharski had broken down and ordered to hoist the white flag - probably the one spotted from Schleswig-Holstein.

The commander was shaking and blubbing; he had foam on his lips. Doctor's assistance was necessary. We fastened the Major with belts to a bunk and put a stick in his mouth. Westerplatte fought on against the will of its commander - those words seemed iconoclastic. [Borowiak] For 45 years Sucharski's name had been given to streets and schools, ships and boy-scout squads throughout the whole of Poland. Now his story was menacing with a scandal. It was not until two years later that the newspaper Polityka dared to publish an extensive article on the findings in Dąbrowski's testimony. The article went virtually unnoticed, but that was just the beginning. The story fascinated a Polish writer Mariusz Borowiak, who in 2001 published the book *Maia flota bez mitów* (Little fleet without myths), in which he presented results of his research. The book caused an outcry, and the author was accused in travesty of history and national imponderabilia. Several months later Borowiak published another book, *Westerplatte. W obronie prawdy* (Westerplatte. In defence of the truth), in which he did not leave room for further doubts - Major Sucharski did not command the defense of Westerplatte.

Borowiak did not base his work solely on Dąbrowski's testimony. He had also researched materials left by another officer from Westerplatte - 2nd Lt. Zdzisław Krugielski. Both sources are concordant: on 2 September Major Sucharski suffered a psychical break-down and ordered to hoist a white flag. Apparently he also had an attack of epilepsy. In those circumstances Captain Dąbrowski took over the command; he personally tore down the white flag and ordered to continue fighting. The resistance continued under his command. To avoid demoralization of the troops Dąbrowski did not let them have contact with Sucharski; officers and NCO's were obliged to swear an oath of silence. Yet on 5 September Sucharski appeared at the officers' meeting and begged them to lay down their arms. He was visibly depressed; I can't take it any more, I can't take it any more, he sobbed. Dąbrowski warned that he would detain Sucharski if the latter kept agitating for surrender. [Borowiak].

Borowiak's critics argue that his conclusions are far-fetching. His research is based solely on the testimonies of Dombrowski and Krugielski, which emerged like *deus ex machina* nearly 50 years after the war. During that long period no other evidence to support it ever became

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