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Private Wojtek:

The Bear Who Became a Soldier

by Duane Schultz

----- He wrestled, smoked and drank, and even got promoted



Once upon a time—it was Wednesday, April 8, 1942, to be precise—a group of Polish soldiers in the Alborz Mountains of Iran came across a young boy carrying a small, emaciated, frightened, orphaned brown bear cub in a burlap sack.

What the Polish soldiers were doing there is another story. They had been prisoners of the Russians, held in Siberian labor camps since 1939, when the Russia occupied eastern Poland at the same time the Germans held the western part. The Polish soldiers were part of a massive, brutal deportation of more than one million Polish citizens to camps deep inside Russian territory.

Convoys of up to 100 trains transported more than 100,000 Polish people of all ages, who were locked in freight cars with no food, water or sanitation facilities. Those who survived

the weeks-long journey were settled in barren camps across Siberia; their average life span was one winter only.

As part of that evacuation, Russians executed 22,000 Poles in the Katyn Forest. The massacred victims included 8000 Polish army officers, 7000 policemen and 7000 members of what the Russians termed the “intelligentsia”—university professors, lawyers, doctors, landowners, factory owners, and priests.

The soldiers who reached Russia remained prisoners for two years, until Germany invaded in June, 1941. The Russians agreed to release the Poles to serve in the British Army that was fighting the Germans in the Middle East. But they had to get there on their own, along with many thousands of Polish civilians who had been driven from their homes and who then elected to go with the soldiers. But the trip from Siberia to Egypt was worse than the camps. Already sickly and starving, people died at the rate of 400 per month from a meager diet and disease—typhus, typhoid, dysentery and malaria. No one knows how many started the exodus from Russia, but only 114,500 survived.

It was at a British refugee camp established in the town of Hamadan (an ancient city in the foothills of Mount Alvand in Iran), that the Poles met the boy with the bear in the burlap bag. Instantly charmed by the adorable cub, they bought it from the Iranian boy for a few tins of food, a chocolate bar and a penknife.

The bear was assigned to the 22nd Artillery Supply Company and given the name Wojtek (pronounced voi-tek), a diminutive of *Wojciech*, which translates as “Happy Warrior.” The soldiers pampered the cub, feeding him condensed milk from an old vodka bottle and later, as he grew stronger, allowing him access to everything in their kitchen. He particularly liked marmalade, fruits, honey and syrup. One soldier wrote that Wojtek was “feeling like a member of our small military family.”

The bear was like a playful puppy, and it brought much-needed enjoyment to their otherwise bleak lives. The similarly-named soldier Wojciech Narebski recalled in a 2011 interview that “The soldiers had suffered much in the Soviet internment camps, and they were now still far from friends and family and living in difficult conditions. To them, the cute, cuddly bear seemed like their only source of joy.”

Narebski recalled the day he reported for duty with the 22nd Artillery Supply Company in November 1942. He was 17 years old. He discovered the bear sleeping on the floor outside of the office of the company commander, Major Antoni Chelkowski. When he introduced himself to the CO, the officer said, “You will be ‘Little Wojtek,’ and [the bear] will be ‘Big Wojtek.’”

Wojtek the bear developed a taste for beer, which he drank straight from the bottle. “He loved to drink from a beer bottle,” said Dymitr Szawlugo, one of the soldiers, “and when it was empty, he would look through the opening to see where the rest of the beer was.” He rarely had to wait long before someone would give him another one, but he never got drunk.



The Polish soldiers taught Wojtek how to salute by raising his right paw and how to respond to basic commands like “sit” and “stand,” when given in Polish. He was easily able to carry artillery shells that normally required two men to lift. He learned to smoke cigarettes, which he typically swallowed after taking a puff or two. If he was given an unlit cigarette, he would spit it out. He also chased after the oranges that the men used as practice grenades.

As the contingent moved farther south into the hotter climates of Mandate Palestine and Egypt, Wojtek quickly figured out how to break into the shower huts, turn on the faucets and sit down on the floor to soak up the cooling water. He also discovered the Mediterranean Sea and whenever they came in sight of it, he clambered across the beach and went splashing into the water.

As cubs do, Wojtek grew and grew until he stood more than six feet tall and weighed well over 500 pounds, which caused some of the men to be more careful when wrestling with him. Some men came away from these matches with scratches and bruises, but they knew the Happy Warrior had not intended to hurt them.

Wojtek was taught to confront new recruits and, as part of the initiation process he would pick them up by their boots, dangle them upside down and shake them. And although he could once ride in the passenger seats of the 22nd Artillery Supply Company trucks, at full size he now had to perch in the back. That did not seem to bother him; he was a happy, contented bear.

He became a hero when he captured a spy in the bath house. Wojtek had gone there for a shower; the spy had been sent to gather intelligence on the Polish outfit. A Polish reporter, Zostala Wylaczona, wrote in 2014 how "Wojtek slapped the spy's head, growled, and the man turned himself in. He thought the Polish soldiers had sent in a monster to eat him, and so he surrendered." In another brave incident, Wojtek discovered a thief in the ammunition compound where the bear had been sleeping.

A problem arose in April 1944, when the fully trained Polish II Corps, led by Lieutenant General Wladyslaw Anders, was due to board ships in Alexandria, Egypt, for transport to Italy to join the fighting there. The men were told no bears were allowed. Thinking quickly, and following army regulations to the letter, they gave Wojtek the official rank of Private, along with a service

ID number and a pay book. The papers were all in order, and so the bear was allowed to go to war with his friends.

His presence caused a sensation among the Allied troops and civilians. Some soldiers reported rumors that Private Wojtek was seen carrying heavy crates of ammunition to the front at the battle for Monte Cassino. Because of that story, the image of the bear carrying an artillery shell became the official insignia of the company and Wojtek was promoted to Corporal.



Aileen Orr, who wrote a 2014 book entitled *Wojtek the Bear: Polish War Hero*, claimed that the stories about the carrying of ammunition were true. “Although he had never been trained to handle the unloading of 100-pound boxes of 25-pounder shells, the fuses and other supplies, he simply observed what the men were doing and joined in. . . . Standing upright, he held out his front paws into which men loaded the heavy boxes of shells. Effortlessly, he carried the munitions to their storage areas beside the artillery positions and returned to the lorries to collect more.” Wojtek never dropped a crate and never seemed to tire from the heavy lifting.

When the war in Europe ended in May 1945, the outfit confronted a new problem. What should the peacetime army do with a soldier-bear? A solution arose when Wojtek’s unit was transferred to Hutton, a country village in Scotland, where they were stationed for two years.

They were based on a farm owned by the family of Aileen Orr, author of the book about Wojtek. "He was very much part of the community," she wrote, "and attended dances, concerts, local children's parties . . . He knew when he had done wrong; he showed remorse, happiness, kindness, subjugation when chastised, but was always well-behaved in social gatherings."

Orr described how Wojtek "swam in the River Tweed with the children from the village watching from the bridge . . . they would ride on his back. He wasn't forced to do it—he liked it. . . He liked to be groomed and was always very clean and tidy."

The Polish military units were demobilized in November 1947, but the majority of the 100,000 men did not want to return to Poland to live under Russian rule. The British allowed those who wished to emigrate to go to Canada, South Africa, Australia or New Zealand, while some 60,000 others remained in England, Scotland and Wales in resettlement camps, until they found jobs and integrated into their new cultures.

Wojtek stayed on in Scotland in a new home at the Edinburgh Zoo, where he quickly became popular with visitors of all ages. He was a frequent guest on a BBC program called "Blue Peter," the longest running children's television program in history.

Sometimes his old army buddies would visit. Augustyn Karolewski came several times and reported that Wojtek seemed to perk up when he heard the Polish language being spoken. "As soon as I mentioned his name," Karolewski wrote, "he would sit on his backside and shake his head wanting a cigarette." Some Polish veterans claimed that when no Zoo officials were looking, they would squeeze into the bear's cage and wrestle with him, just like the old days. They came away scratched and rumped, but somehow feeling young again.

And they always brought cigarettes, remembering to light them first. As Wojtek had done in the old days, he would take a puff or two and swallow them. It was reported that the zookeepers also tossed him cigarettes and gave him beer to drink.

As Wojtek got older, he was studied by Conor Kenny of Trinity College in Dublin, who was a specialist in mental health. Kenny wrote in 2012 that “the final years of Wojtek’s life are particularly sad . . . He was now reduced to a chain-smoking, depressed bear who drank to ease his sorrows in Scotland.” If true, he was not the only veteran of World War II to become depressed.

Corporal Wojtek was euthanized in 1963 at the approximate age of 22 after a long period of illness; he had lost weight, his appetite was diminished, and he seemed less capable of movement. The autopsy revealed damage to his esophagus, not from smoking cigarettes but from swallowing them while lit. His death received wide coverage on television, radio and in newspapers throughout England and Europe.

The memory of Private Wojtek is honored in the form of plaques and statues, including at the Imperial War Museum and the Sikorsky Museum in London, the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa, and in the city of Edinburgh, where he is shown standing beside a Polish soldier. On November 11, 2011, in commemoration of Armistice Day, the usual huge parade, with bagpipers marching through the streets of Edinburgh, included a eulogy, delivered in Polish, to Wojtek, the soldier-bear.

There is also a statue in Park Jordana in Krakow, Poland, unveiled on May 18, 2014, marking the 70th anniversary of the final victory of the Allies at Monte Cassino, led by the Polish Army in exile and its Happy Warrior bear. Wojtek’s statue stands in the proud company of other famous Poles including Pope John Paul II. In 2011, a documentary film was produced by BBC Scotland entitled, “Wojtek: The Soldier That Went to War.”

In the most unusual tribute, the City of Edinburgh’s bus company, Lothian Buses, introduced its “Wojtek Bus” on November 9, 2014. Painted on the side of the bus is a picture of

Wojtek carrying an artillery shell. Beneath the picture are the words “Wojtek Returns.” Another lasting tribute to the bear who became a soldier.

British historian Norman Davies, who in 2015 published a book about the Polish army in exile, described Wojtek as “the ideal soldier—undefatigable, loyal, fearless, and silent. . . . Wojtek never doubted, never wavered, never deserted, and never turned back.”

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