

# CANADIAN HERO IN POLAND

## STORY OF HUBERT BROOKS, Wing Commander

*He was one of only five R.C.A.F. officers awarded the Military Cross in World War II. He won the medal for his determined efforts on three occasions to escape from a German prisoner-of-war camp, the last of which was successful. For his service in the Polish Underground Army in the next two years Sqdn. Ldr. Brooks was also awarded the Polish Silver Cross of Merit with Swords. And for his "generous courage and bravery" in leading 40 fellow partisans out of a German encirclement he was awarded the Polish Cross of Valour.*

*This is his story of his escapes from Stalag VIII B and his years as a Polish partisan told in his own words.*

### PART III

The country we operated in was like the Laurentians where I had often skied before the war. Coming from the Clydeside, John had never learned to ski and since all our winter sorties were carried out this way, he had to learn now.

Like the Laurentians back home in Quebec, this part of Poland was a popular resort area with several large inns, chalets and hunting lodges dotted about it. The son of one innkeeper was a partisan and we were spending Christmas at the inn with him when word reached us that the camp had been raided.

We found the camp gutted and forlorn on our return. Two bodies lay among the ashes and bullet riddled stew pots. We learned that the 15 men who stayed in camp had gone on a Christmas Eve spree, raided a Volksdeutsche farm and returned burdened with schnapps; a pig and several chickens. They had barely finished their feast when the Germans, following their tracks in the fresh snow, attacked them.

The destruction of the camp caused a split in our unit. Our second-in command, Sgt. Maj. Ogien, took off with seven men and set up an irregular outlaw outfit. He was as much trouble to us as he was to the Germans and later the Russians and we tried hard to catch him and liquidate him. We never could.

Another disaster befell us early in 1944 after we had just raided the Polish-German police garrison at Ochotnice, disarmed all 25 men and

made off with a large cache of arms, food and clothing. The enraged Germans followed us and the next day in two-hour battle killed five of our A.K. boys. We finally broke out of the house we had been pinned in, but we returned to camp empty-handed and with our number reduced to 14.

The unit retreated to Slopnice to lay low while the Germans combed the area and reformed. By February the unit had been built to a strength of 110 men and was now officially designated at 1-st Company of the 1-st Rifle Battalion of Podpolesk; Podpolesk being our area of operation. I was promoted second lieutenant and given a section with John as my second in-command.

In early spring John and I were detailed to carry out our first liquidation. There was a Gestapo informer, a Pole named Sikora, we wanted to execute. He ran the lumber mill in the village of Lacko (Lasek) and we had orders to kill him and confiscate the big belts from the mill, as we were short of leather for our boot soles.

Our information about Sikora was detailed and complete. He lived in a strongly-built house with a large German shepherd as a watch-dog and he had a tommy gun, two rifles, a shotgun and several grenades in his bedroom. A frontal attack was out of the question.

I took John and two Poles with me and we proceeded down the mountains to the outskirts of the village before dawn. At 9:30 one of the Poles and I, dressed in civies, waited in the lane that led from the village to the mill. As we heard Sikora approach we sauntered

toward him, came face to face and passed him, then we whirled around and shot him. John and the other man were in the village knocking out phone communications. After disarming Sikora we left him where he lay and headed for his house at the double. I ran past his startled wife, let the police dog have burst and headed straight for the bedroom. I found and grabbed the French tommy gun and an excellent battery radio while my companion seized the other weapons. The rifles were all loaded with "dum-dum" bullets. Suddenly we heard a voice. "What's my husband going to say when he comes back and finds what you've done?" shrieked the woman. "I'm sorry, Madam," I said. "Your husband won't be coming back." Then we scrambled. As we joined the others in the village we noticed a post office truck parked in the street. The boys shot up its tires before we left. A week later we discovered to our chagrin that the postal truck was transferring a huge amount of government money. The driver had stolen it himself and blamed the theft on us.

Things were getting hotter and hotter as spring continued and we had several short actions. One of the most successful was a raid in which we ambushed a truck filled with Storm Troopers.

We killed several of them and captured two whom we used as hostages. We hoodwinked the hostages into believing we were heavily armed and strong in numbers, then sent one of them into the village of Kamienica with

an ultimatum to C.O. of the garrison to surrender.

A whole S.S. company was lined up outside the brightly-lit garrison when we arrived. We loaded up with arms, food and equipment, but we didn't shoot any of the men. We wanted them to realize that we were soldiers too and not just barbarians who shot everybody.

In practice it was usually impossible to take prisoners and when we captured Volksdeutsche-traitors we liquidated them summarily without holding any sort of trial.

Such was the case with our surprise encounter the day we waited for our first parachute drop from Italy. We had arrived at the drop zone early in the afternoon to ensure that everything was ready for the plane that night, when two hunters stumbled into our midst. It was good deer country there on the slopes of the Slopnice mountain and we were not surprised to find hunters.

We searched them and realized the name on one man's papers rang a bell right away. He was no less than the vice-president of the Polish Propaganda Department. We could not have let them go anyhow as they had discovered our drop zone, but the fact that he was a notorious collaborator sealed the vice-president's fate.

John and I and one of the men took the pair into woods and shot them immediately. When the Germans eventually heard of this, they executed 30 Polish prisoners in Cracow and although I myself never saw any, I know that posters were put out with a price on the heads of the two British soldiers who had participated in the liquidation.

The plane from Italy came through on time that night and we excitedly gathered up seven long canisters of Bren guns, hand grenades and medical supplies.

It was about this time I was told by A.K. brigade headquarters in Cracow that another British sergeant named Sullivan, who had fought with the par-

tisans in the Gorlice district, would be transferred to our company. A few days before the transfer Sullivan was taken prisoner by German Bahnschutz-(railway police) in surprise raid and, although he insisted he was an escaped P.O.W., he was executed on the spot.

We had occasion to attack a railway station at Kasina soon after that, and it was my section's task to assault and seize the building which was used as sleeping quarters for the Bahnshutz. I got the sleeping men out of their beds fast enough and lined up along the wall. I had sent one of the men out to check the other sections when all hell broke loose in the rail yards. We shot all the men in the room and left to reinforce the others who were attacking railway cars used as sleeping quarters by the famous Todt construction organization. It was our own private reprisal for Sgt. Sullivan whom we'd never met.

It was the middle of June now and with the summer's heat the fighting too increased in intensity. When we heard that 25 Germans were touring our area inspecting farms and tallying cattle for shipment to the Reich, we set up an ambush for them. On their route was a bridge over the Dunajec river. We set up a V ambush on the road beyond it; two machine guns hidden in clumps brush on either side of the road, six guys with tommy guns and a few more covering us with .303's. We opened up at 50 yards as a truck full of Germans crossed the bridge. Only one man escaped from the truck and he was shot as he fled into the woods. Afterwards we found the truck was so riddled with

bullets that the German arms were useless. The rifle butts were splintered like match wood.

A week later in the Tymbark district we ambushed 40 Germans herding 100 heads of cattle towards the German border. The Germans fled after we'd killed two of their number, although there were only 14 of us. We rounded up all the cattle and distributed them to neighbouring farmers. Then when we needed meat we'd ask a farmer to slaughter a steer and we gave him one steer for guarding our cattle.

We were having trouble at that time with Russian guerrillas fighting in south Poland. The bulk of them were Russian infantry cut off some time before by the Germans but Moscow had parachuted M.V.D. men in to organize them into a guerilla unit. They were living off the land and seizing cattle and food from villagers in our area.

We met them and tried to come to an agreement with them about food supplies and reinforcing each other in the event of pitched battles, but they were tough characters and although they made a mutual aid bargain they never stuck to it.

Our only consolation was that our renegade Sgt. Maj. Ogien joined them for a while and then stole a great portion of their supplies and arms.

There were no reprisals so far as I know for our slaughter of 25 German farm inspectors, but an unsuccessful attack on a train a Porabka in July brought terrible reprisals. We intended

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to dynamite the train, but either the caps failed or the charge was too small and we had to content ourselves with raking the train with small-arms fire. We must have shot someone important aboard the train for the Germans razed the village of Porabka, separated the 40 men, women and children they caught there and bayoneted them all before tossing them on the flames.

It was August before we discovered the whereabouts of the officer in charge of the Porabka massacre. He was in the village of Strzyzycze with a couple of horse-drawn wagons supervising the collection of supplies, food, and beer and so on, for the garrison eight miles away.

I set out immediately with John Duncan and three others to liquidate him. We caught the wagons in crossfire as they rolled slowly along the country road. We shot the commanding officer and another officer with him. We gave them the quickest burial I have ever seen. It could not have taken more than five minutes. We had to go back three days later and bury them deeper, for a villager warned us that one foot was still sticking out and there was an intensive search for them throughout the area.

The big battles were starting now. We were called in to reinforce an A.K. unit at Mysienice, which had been battling a vastly superior German force near the village of Lipnik for several days. The battle raged for two weeks with the Germans bringing up tanks, armoured cars and spotter aircraft for their artillery. There were 6,000 German troops by the time the 600 A.K. partisans pulled out.

They burned Lipnik to the ground and sent all the villagers they captured to the stake. They tied them all to stakes in a large barn and lit fires near to them, they opened the barn doors so that the draught carried the flames to the unfortunate villagers, then closed the doors and again opened them to prolong the agony.

I made sure at this time that hence-

forth my revolver would never be quite empty. There would always be one last bullet in it for myself.

We withdrew deeper into the hills to rest and regroup our forces as the Germans prepared to clean out the area.

John and I were staying in the house of some friends near Skrzydna a mile from camp one night and were awakened at dawn to learn that a troop of Germans were approaching the house. I raced out the back door and down a gully. I could see a large number of troops deployed along the highway a mile away and howitzer already in position.

Our company had realized there was a scare on by the time I reached them and had struck camp. They were heading straight toward the hidden howitzers. I ran up front of the column to warn the C.O. of the danger below. We reversed our course and started for the summit of the hill. I took a scouting party ahead and we had almost reached the ridge when one of my scouts opened fire. He had seen a German helmet above us. The hillside was suddenly blazing with fire. Volleys of small-arms fire poured down on us from the ridge and from below the howitzers fired in support of the ascending troops. We were surrounded. From the firing I figured there might be a gap open at the western end of the hill, so I took 50 of the men and led them through the trees that way. The encirclement was not complete there and we broke through. Two days later when we re-grouped I learned the rest of the company had escaped also. Amazingly we had not lost a single man.

The Gorals, with their unfailing knowledge of terrain gained from generations of goatherders and woodcutters before them, often gave us the advantage over the superior German forces. By this time anyhow, I believe our company of sharpshooters could have taken on any U.S. or British unit and proved a match for them. So many stories had circulated by the latter half of 1944 that the Germans began to

think there was a Polish partisan behind every tree, and undoubtedly took away some of their stomach for fighting in the hills.

We had many informants and stool pigeons helping us, but the Germans too had infiltrated our ranks. One of our members proved to be a German agent and because of him several staff officers were captured.

The brigade adjutant was one of those captured. During the interrogation they broke his arms in portions starting at the wrists. He lasted thus for three weeks, never told them what they wanted to know and only died when they put the police dogs on him.

The brigade commander's villa was surrounded by Germans. Instead of delivering himself to the Huns he shot himself. By now we had a full brigade fighting and Capt. Borowy was promoted to major and placed in command of the brigade. The Warsaw uprising had just taken place and a number of Allied crews bailed out when they were hit on supply drops.

Some of them reached our area and continued their fighting with the underground. Late that fall, John and I found ourselves with 18 American airmen. We maintained radio contact with London and they would send us code messages in dance tunes played over the BBC overseas programs. They now asked us to find an airstrip suitable for a rescue plane to land and take off the American airmen. The pick up never came off because of bad weather over the Alps, and at the end the American boys joined us in our own small unit separate from headquarters.

We fought two more major battles. Our camp at Ochotnice was attacked by 1,000 enemy troops and we fought for three days before we scorched our way out, leaving 200 Germans behind us. And in the middle of January, we fought for a week near the Szawa sawmill, but the end was then in sight. When we ate cakes and drank "monopolka," the potato gin of the region, in the villages that Christmas of

1944. we knew the Russians were advancing toward our positions.

We had previously started to round up the girls who had gone out with Germans and shave their heads. That too was a sign the end was near. John and I were on our way to Maj. Borowy's headquarters to fetch money for the boys when I first saw the Russians. Their motorized columns were streaming down the highway. Late that night, we slipped back through the Russian front line to our hideout only to find the U.S. boys already gone. They had walked up to the first Red patrol and, because they couldn't down the friendship slugs of vodka fast enough, the Russians had taken them prisoners for the time being.

I waited until the second line of Russians went through and after several farewell parties departed for Warsaw, in the latter part of January. John came with me and so did a Polish officer, Flt. Lt. Vladislav Schoeffler, who had trained with the R.C.A.F. in Canada.

A Russian patrol soon picked us up and made us march with them toward the front line on the Oder river. They locked us up with the Jerry prisoners they'd taken and treated us just the same. Then we were marched 120 miles on foot back to Nowy Sacz. We were locked up there and interrogated. Eventually, our American friends rejoined us in Nowy Sacz. The N.K.V.D. were looking for two British soldiers who'd fought with Armia Krajowa. We were wearing khaki uniforms now that had been sent to the partisans on the various para-drops from Italy and we swore we'd just escaped from a P.O.W. camp. Schoeffler threw away his Polish Air Force Identity card and used old R.C.A.F. station pass to convince the Russians he was a Canadian.

Even so, things got tighter and tighter for us "guests" of the Russians in Nowy Sacz, and I wanted to let London know exactly where we were and who was with me. Fortunately, Nowy Sacz was in our operating area.

That night I slipped out of the window of the house we were confined to and headed for the home of an A.K. partisan I had him deliver a note to Borowy who radioed our message to Britain.

Maj. Borowy had been ordered to disband the brigade and disperse the men to their own villages when the Russian advance reached us.

The underground's radio, however, still operated. I do not know whether my message to London had the required effect. Shortly afterward we were fitted out with Russian uniforms, fur hats, boots, and riding breeches. Then began our travels on the long route home to Lwow, Kiev, and Odessa. There we boarded an Australian troopship for Port Said.

I was taken at once to Cairo and flew on to London. I arrived on March 19, 1945, still possessing my Russian uniform and went straight to MI 5 and MI 9 for a long session of interrogations.

Twice since I have returned to Europe; the first time a few months later as a member of the R.C.A.F. Missing Research and Enquiry Service, seeking the wreckage and the graves of R.C.A.F. planes and crews. My area was Scandinavia. Later on I was appointed .C.O of 15 Section, M.R.E.S., in the American Zone of Germany.

I returned again in 1948, this time to St. Moritz, Switzerland, as a member of the R.C.A.F. Flyers who that year won the Olympic and world ice hockey championships. It was there between an arch of hockey sticks and with Barbara Ann Scott as a bridesmaid that I married Birthe Grontved, a girl I had met, not on some mysterious underground mission in Poland, but in Copenhagen when peace had once more returned to Europe.

I was never able to return to the scenes of my partisan days in southern Poland but I was able to help some of my A.K. comrades-in-arms.

Two brothers who were among the original 40 partisans at the time I

joined the A.K. live in Alberta. They were known to me as Iglica and Trzebina. Yet another of the Podpolesk partisans went to Hamilton, but I have since lost touch with him; and there are others in the United Kingdom and the U.S.

They were the fortunate ones. Many others must still be in Poland. They are accustomed, all of them, by history to the invader's heel. I'm glad that I fought beside them, and helped them in their cause.

\* \* \*

Here are the names of the partisans, who fought in the Podhale Region of the Carpathian Mountains and now reside in Canada:

*"Borowy" lieutenant-colonel Adam Stabrawa, commanding officer of the 1st regiment of the Podhale Riflemen of the Home Army and Inspector of the Underground in counties of Gorlice, Nowy Sacz, Limanowa, Nowy Targ. Resides in Vancouver.*

*"Sosna" second lieutenant Andrzej Stabrawa, responsible for security, residing in Vancouver.*

*"Krzysztof" second lieutenant Father Jozef Kochan, chaplain, residing in Edmonton,*

*"Szczerbina" second lieutenant Wacław Mankowski, residing in Edmonton.*

*"Iglica" second lieutenant Zygmunt Mankowski, residing in Edmonton.*

*"Nel" Nodzyńska-Kuczaj, intelligence gathering and medical, resides in Calgary,*

*"Maly" second lieutenant Jozef Weglarz, resident of Windsor.*

*"Harnas" second lieutenant Jan Kuczaj pl. "Kora", resides in Calgary.*

*Courtesy "Polish Bulletin", Calgary*