

On V-E Day say 'dziekuje' to the Poles

by Gilbert J. Mros

Sixty years ago, the world celebrated Victory in Europe, and on May 8 (V-E Day) we remember those who fought to preserve the freedom that we now enjoy.

The United States, Great Britain and the Soviet Union provided most of the Allied forces during World War II, but few people realize that the fourth-largest contributor was Poland.

After being overrun by Nazi Germany in 1939, Poland relocated its government to London, but it never surrendered. Instead, hundreds of thousands of Polish army, air force and naval personnel continued to fight until the war ended in 1945, giving Poland the distinction of being the only nation to combat Germany throughout the entire war in Europe.

Poland was also the only nation to fight Nazi aggression on every front including engagements in Poland, Norway, France, England, the Netherlands, Belgium, North Africa, Italy and Germany's western and eastern fronts.

During the battle of Britain, Polish pilots accounted for nearly one-sixth of all German planes shot down. The all-Polish Kosciuszko Squadron downed 126 German planes -- more than any other Royal Air Force squadron. Nine of the squadron pilots became aces, and five were awarded the RAF Distinguished Flying Cross. Ultimately, Polish pilots destroyed at least 900 German planes, 190 V-1 flying bombs and 1000 German tanks. The Polish Navy served in the North Sea, North Atlantic and Mediterranean, and at Dunkirk and Normandy.

Prior to the final battle and sinking of the German Battleship Bismarck, the Polish destroyer Piorun was the first warship to sight it. After signaling Bismarck's position, Piorun attacked the huge battleship. In Normandy, the 1st Polish Armored Division blocked the last escape route for the German 7th army from the "Falaise Pocket." Their heroic two-day stand played a decisive role in destroying German resistance in Normandy and in hastening the liberation of France.

Across the Continent in Italy, the battle of Monte Cassino caused over a quarter of a million casualties. After three unsuccessful Allied assaults, the summit was finally taken by the Polish 2nd Corps, which then continued north, concluding its Italian campaign with the liberation of Bologna.

During the campaign on Germany's eastern front, 10 divisions of the 1st and 2nd Polish armies, fighting alongside Soviet troops, pushed the Nazi forces back to the center of Berlin. The 1st Polish infantry division celebrated this victory by raising Polish flags over the Victory Column and the Brandenburg Gate.

In one of the best-kept secrets of the war and post-war era, Polish mathematicians working in Warsaw before the start of the war solved Germany's secret military code and duplicated the enigma machine that generated it. The solution and working enigma machine were then delivered to England where they were used for decoding Nazi messages throughout the war, making possible the Normandy landings and saving tens of thousands of American lives. As the Iron Curtain fell across Europe after the end of the war, Poland was swept behind it and under the heel of Joseph Stalin -- a dictator as cruel as Adolf Hitler was. The freedom the Poles had helped gain for their neighbors was not to be theirs until Solidarity and free elections in 1989.

Because of lingering Nazi propaganda, Allied military secrets and Cold War animosities, Poland's contributions toward victory in World War II went largely unrecognized. Sixty years have now passed since the war ended in Europe, but it is still not too late to acknowledge the efforts of everyone who helped win it.

So, when we celebrate or remember V-E Day, let's give three cheers for the Poles.

-- With permission from Gilbert J. Mros --

Gilbert J. Mros, Columbia Heights, is a retired electrical engineer and a member of the Lomianki, Poland-Columbia Heights, Minn., U.S.A. Sister Cities International Committee.