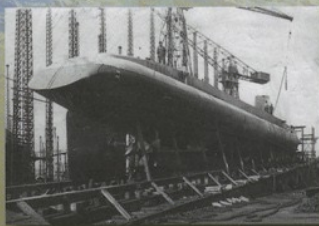


THE POLISH NAVY 1918-45

From the Polish-Soviet War to World War II



PRZEMYSŁAW BUDZBON

ILLUSTRATED BY PAUL WRIGHT

Author

Przemysław Budzbon is a naval architect who worked on warship construction for the Soviet Navy in the 1980s. He has written widely on the history of the World War II Polish and Soviet navies for *Warship* and other European naval publications. He contributed to Conway's *All the World's Fighting Ships* series and his book *Soviet Navy at War 1941–45* was published in 1989. He has recently published two books on Polish shipyards from the post-1990 era.

Illustrator

Paul Wright has painted ships of all kinds for most of his career, specializing in steel and steam warships from the late 19th century to the present day. Paul's art has illustrated the works of Patrick O'Brian, Dudley Pope and C.S. Forester amongst others, and hangs in many corporate and private collections all over the world. A Member of the Royal Society of Marine Artists, Paul lives and works in Surrey.

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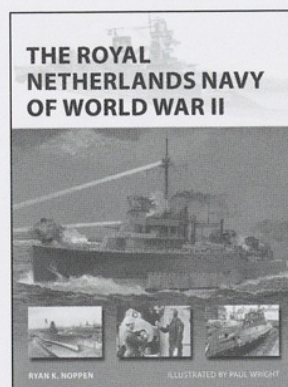
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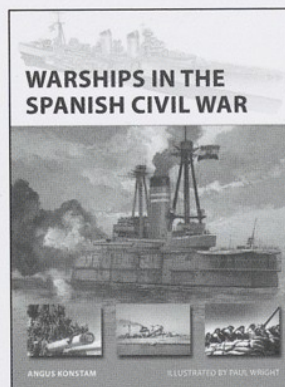
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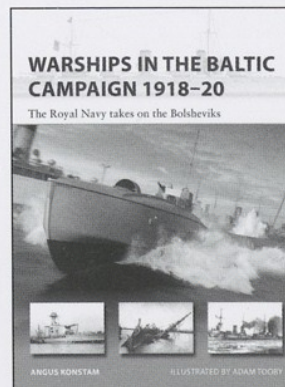
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Dedication

To Eve

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

4

- Poland regains independence, 1918

THE POLISH-BOLSHEVIK WAR

5

- 1919 campaign
- 1920 campaign

POLISH NAVY DEVELOPMENT 1921-39

10

- The navy from World War I remnants, 1921
- The first naval programme, 1925
- Between the Soviet Union and Germany

THE POLISH NAVY IN WORLD WAR II

27

- The German-Soviet assault
- Revival: the Polish naval detachment 1939
- The year of dashed hopes, 1940
- The Battle of the Atlantic 1940-44
- The Arctic convoys
- The North Atlantic
- The Mediterranean 1941-44
- Invasion of the continent 1944

CONCLUSION

46

FURTHER READING

47

INDEX

48



in what became the first naval-aerial battle of World War II. Although the Ju 87s failed to score any direct hits during multiple attacks which lasted 25 minutes, near-misses and machine-gunners proved fatal. The minesweeper *Mewa* caught fire, was disabled and had to be taken in tow. *Gryf's* captain (Lieutenant-Commander Stefan Kwiatowski) was killed, the ship's steering gear was damaged and a number of mines were derailed or damaged. *Gryf's* second-in-command (Captain Wiktor Łomidze) decided to jettison the entire load of mines, the consequence of which was that the Polish Navy's surface forces lost their *raison d'être* – the main German success of the day. Next morning *Wicher* and *Gryf* were berthed in Hela harbour, their operational use now restricted to the role of floating artillery batteries. *Gryf* was half-sunk in a dock to help conceal her prominent silhouette.

On the morning of 3 September, the German destroyers *Leberecht Maaß* (flying the flag of Rear-Admiral Günther Lütjens) and *Wolfgang Zenker* undertook a reconnaissance sortie towards Hela. Both ships were engaged around 0700hrs by *Gryf*, *Wicher* and the four-gun 6in Bofors battery (commanded by Lieutenant Zbigniew Przybyszewski) at Hela. During a five-minute duel, the Poles scored a hit on *Leberecht Maaß*, damaging her forward gun mounting. A German hit on *Gryf* knocked out one anti-aircraft mounting, while the already-damaged *Mewa* was hit in the bow.

Two hours later, an air raid by Ju 87s from 4.(St)/186 Trägergruppe caused several fires to ignite on *Gryf*, which had to be abandoned as a result. Following a near-miss, *Mewa* broke her moorings and sank. The air raid was repeated at 1510hrs and *Wicher* was sunk, while the burning *Gryf* received further hits and started to take on water. The burning wreck was demolished during a third air raid, this time by He 59 floatplanes of 3.(M)/KüFlGr 706 at

Gryf and minesweepers during the naval-aerial battle on the first day of the war, as depicted in a watercolour by the Polish artist Adam Werka in 1976. Since the early 1950s several generations of naval and maritime enthusiasts in Poland, including the author, have been brought up on Werka's maritime paintings. (Marta Werka Collection)



The wreck of *Gryf* a few days after sinking on 3 September 1939, the aft Bofors 120mm guns still in position. The guns were removed soon afterwards to reinforce the coastal artillery defences on the Hela Peninsula. (Marek Twardowski Collection)

1715hrs, by which time the main components of the Polish Navy's surface fleet had been annihilated. German forces cut off the Polish Corridor the same day.

A small flotilla of five armoured motor gunboats and several minor vessels operated on the Vistula. From 3 September, they provided anti-aircraft defence of key bridges and fords, and moved upstream in line with the Polish Pomorze Army retreating from the Polish Corridor. The gunboats attempted to reach the fortress at Modlin, but because of shallows

only KU-30 (thanks to her lightweight aluminium-alloy construction) arrived, dashing the last 85km under gunfire from the riverbanks which were already in German hands.

For the first week of hostilities, the Polish Navy's submarines, crowded in the shallows around Hela, waited in vain for the expected German landing armada. On 2 September *Sęp* fired a torpedo at the destroyer *Friedrich Ihn*, but missed and was heavily depth-charged at shallow depth. Next day, *Sęp* was attacked by U-14 but the torpedo exploded prematurely. In the days that followed, Polish minelaying submarines laid barrages which contributed to the loss of the German minesweeper M-85 on 1 October, (from the mines laid by submarine *Żbik*) and two fishing vessels.

The German invasion fleet did not appear on 4 September as expected, so *Sęp* and another submarine, *Orzeł*, left their patrol positions and moved towards the Swedish island of Gotland to replenish. The submarine *Ryś* was chased by German minesweepers and aircraft which inflicted damage on her fuel tanks inside the light hull. *Ryś* entered Hela base on 4 September for



The armoured motor gunboat KU-30 of the Vistula Flotilla breaking through the wrecked span of the destroyed bridge at Modlin, as depicted in a gouache by Adam Werka in 1969. His paintings have decorated the covers of widely read books on maritime affairs. (Marta Werka Collection)

and Palestine. In terms of the number of Polish military personnel who went on to serve in the armed forces, Poland became Britain's biggest wartime ally.

The German invasion of Britain seemed imminent at the time, which is why in June 1940 the Poles manned a dozen ex-Dutch and ex-Belgian fishing craft, which had been lying abandoned in British ports. The Trawlers' Group of the PND was formed (the craft were numbered P-1 to P-12) and detached to the Coastal Command Anti-Invasion Patrol, with which it carried out over 500 patrols until the craft were returned in October 1940.

Following the capitulation of France, numerous French warships were seized at various British ports. They were taken by force and were deliberately damaged by their crews, still angry at the Royal Navy's shelling of French ships at Mers el-Kébir on the coast of French Algeria on 3 July 1940. Free French naval personnel were not sufficient in number to man the warships in Britain, so a few were temporarily manned by Polish crews during mid-July 1940 as they were familiar with French naval technology. The warships – the largest one was the Bourrasque-class destroyer *Ouragan* – flew the colours of both nations and kept their original names. Unfortunately, each attempt at the use of *Ouragan* in operations in the North Sea and Atlantic Ocean during the winter of 1940–41 ended at a repair yard. *Ouragan* was returned to Free French Naval Forces on 30 April 1941, and modern Hunt II-class destroyers were manned instead.

Two converted French coasters which had found safety in Britain, *Médoc* and *Pomerol*, were in equally bad shape. Therefore, following a short commission in the PND, they were returned to the Royal Navy in October 1940; but because of a shortage of British officers, their Polish commanders remained aboard with a few of the crew in a training capacity. Both vessels flew the flags of Poland, Britain and France and served with the Coastal Command Anti-Invasion Patrol. *Médoc* was sunk on 26 Nov 1940 by a German torpedo aircraft off the Eddystone Lighthouse with the loss of 39 of the 87 men on board. *Pomerol* was handed over to its British commander in January 1941. Additionally, two submarine chasers (Ch-11 and Ch-15) were operated by Polish crews until February 1941. For a while the transfer of the French battleship *Paris* was considered by the Admiralty, but



The oceanic escort *Burza* (foreground) and US Coast Guard Cutter *Campbell* attacking U-606 on 22 February 1943, as depicted in a gouache by Adam Werka. All of Werka's artworks were painted with attention to the smallest details based on factual knowledge of the subject matter, often as a result of having consulted with eyewitnesses to the actual events. (Marta Werka Collection)