

# MONTE CASSINO

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(Episode from my war experiences)

Remember, soldiers, that we have against us a formation of enemy, which is one of the best in the Wehrmacht – parachutists. Your task is: to destroy them. We have good and new weapons! Beat the Germans, take revenge for Warsaw, for Poland, for the fatherland – agreed with us the captain of the tank unit of the Polish Corps, which for several days has been leading the great battle at the foot of Mount Monte Cassino, in Italy.

We found ourselves on the Naples-Rome road. In mid-May 1944, the advance of the Second Polish Corps, led by General Anders, was delayed by the heavily fortified mount Monte Cassino – 519 meters. From there the Germans ruled over the whole area around and continuously spit fire. Victims fell there in the thousands. The Germans also suffered heavy losses.

... We entered the tanks, turned on the engines and the heavy machinery moved forward. But not far. Meanwhile, people had to seek refuge and camouflage in a ruined village. I waited.

From the mountain, the half-burnt church looked down on us. Like the gnawed teeth of a skeleton, which laughs at you: "Three thousand Englishmen could not take me, here they are all lying here – do you want to challenge me?!".

Now, there is silence everywhere. The nearby, higher mountain of Monte Cassino – Monte Cairo – is hidden in the clouds. It looks good without the red poppy flowers, with which the whole area is densely overgrown. But the area was covered with something else: German bunkers, trenches, firing holes, observation points, mined fields. They ruled here, had control and power over an area within a radius of 15 kilometers. Despite the slightest movement in the valley or uphill, a high-intensity fire soon opened. We lay hidden behind the tanks, rested, calmed down, a little bored, smoked and took a nap.

Suddenly a powerful cannonade is heard. We get out, to see our artillery "softening" the German positions. Then we get a command "*Motory w ruch, naprzód!*" ("Turn on the engines, forward!").

The reciprocal shooting does not stop – and we climb with the tanks into the very fire. The heavy bodies of the machines climb up the mountain and spit fire. The shells fall on the targets, I see wounded Germans running out of another bunker, raising their hands, in surrender. Many were killed inside. But there were no casualties from the Polish side.

The battle lasted a whole day. Yet one of the most bitter and merciless efforts to overcome this important strategic point. Some of our tanks are overturned, disassembled. The crews – already not among the living. I

hear a bump on the radio: "Retreat, quick, hide behind hill with rocks!" We can barely look back at the designated spot that heavy German bombers appear in the sky. But they are chased by English hunter-planes. We are witnesses of an air-battle. American planes come to help the English ones, which bomb Monte Cassino. It goes with a horrible slaughter.

Evening fell silent. Ambulances and medical vehicles pick up the injured. We climb out of the tanks; we want to breathe in some fresh air.

Suddenly I heard my name – and a question: "Can you speak German?" A jeep takes me to a bunker where two Polish officers, an English captain, a clerk and some soldiers, were staying. German prisoners of war sit on the ground. The Polish officer explained to me that because their translator was away at another point, they needed my help. The first interrogated prisoner of war was a German sergeant.

— Have you been to Poland?

— No!

I looked at his documents and found a note in his military booklet, saying that in 1943 he spent his vacation in Gniezno. I showed him the note. He stammered and told that returning from the Russian front, he was in Gniezno for two days.

— Why did you lie?

— I forgot.

I searched further in his papers and photographs. I found a picture of a ghetto, with barbed wire fences. On the background you can see a severely dismembered, emaciated Jew and half-naked children looking through the barrier.

— "What is this?" I ask.

— "A ghetto in Poland," replied the sergeant

— Where did you photograph this?

— Not mine, I got it from a neighbor.

After his lie, he was trying to deny his responsibility. And last night's hero falls to his knees and starts spasmodically shouting: "I'm innocent, I'm a soldier!"

I do not know what happened to me then. I quickly removed my steel helmet from my head and hit him on the back of his neck. He fell, covered in blood – and I shouted, "You Nazi, murderer – I'm a Jew! Now, this is your end!"

The captain takes me paternally around. "*Synu, uspokój się*" ("My son, calm down"). I fall away in helplessness. With a staring look, I look at the picture, at my afflicted brothers. I already knew that at that time. Bitter fate abounds in the gas chambers and crematoria.

I run outside. Now, there is silence, only the air bears the scent of battle, of dead and wounded. An ambulance stops near me. I hear a Jewish whine from inside with words: "Oh, mother... mother!"... I go to the wounded soldier, speak to him in Yiddish: "Calm down, calm down".

In a low voice he tells me about the perished crew of his tank, they were all burned. He alone was saved – for how long? I comforted him that, for him, the war was over. The end of Hitler can already be seen, he will now be taken

to hospital, healed and later the wounds of our nation will have to be healed.

He shakes his head, says in a quiet-quiet voice:

— You too will live; you will endure the war.  
Goodbye...