

## THE STORY OF PARATROOPER CHAPLAINS OF THE 1<sup>st</sup> INDEPENDENT PARACHUTE BRIGADE

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### Abstract:

*The 1<sup>st</sup> Independent Parachute Brigade was established in the UK under the command of Colonel Stanisław Sosabowski in 1941. Each front soldier of the brigade had to be a paratrooper. This requirement concerned the brigade chaplains as well. Priests Franciszek Mientki, Alfred Hubert Bednorz and Hubert Misiuda took part in the airborne landing at Arnhem-Driel as part of the Operation Market Garden in the Netherlands in September 1944, jumping on the battlefield by parachute. On the night of 25/26 September, during the evacuation of the brigade across the river Rhine, chaplain Misiuda died. Chaplains F. Mientki, A. Bednorz and, posthumously, H. Misiuda were awarded the Cross of Valour for their courage and dedication shown during the fights of the 1<sup>st</sup> Independent Parachute Brigade.*

### Keywords:

*Polish Armed Forces in the West, parachutist badge, Cross of Valour, Largo, Ringway, Arnhem, Driel*

### INTRODUCTION

Early in the evening on 21 September 1944, in the sacristy of the Roman Catholic church in Driel, a Dutch village situated on the south bank of the Rhine, a vigorous knock on the door was heard. The local parish priest opened the door, though not without fear as fierce fights continued in the neighbourhood for several days, and saw a soldier in front of him.



*A paratrooper in full gear has an intimidating look (...). The silhouette of the parachute brigade's chaplain is exactly the same as the one of its soldier. He is provided with the same equipment, the same kitbag<sup>1</sup>, and the same pouches. But instead of arms and ammunition he carries a portable altar set and the most necessary liturgical items. He can be distinguished only by a slightly visible white collar and a red cross armband on the sleeve<sup>2</sup>.*

A newcomer introduced himself *I am a Polish Army chaplain. My name is Alfred Bednorz.* Parish priest Poelman could not contain his astonishment as to how the chaplain appeared at his doorstep, to which priest Bednorz smiled widely and, raising his eyes, explained *I am coming straight from the sky*<sup>3</sup>. After a short conversation the Dutch priest was so moved that he took an antique cross from his desk and gave it to the Pole.

*This is for you, priest chaplain, to commemorate our liberation from the Nazi occupation*<sup>4</sup>.

## 1. THE BEGINNINGS OF THE CHAPLAINCY SERVICE AT THE 1<sup>ST</sup> INDEPENDENT PARACHUTE BRIGADE

Priest Alfred Bednorz was one of the three Polish chaplains who arrived at the field of the battle for the bridges over the Rhine near Arnhem straight from the sky, jumping by parachute together with other soldiers from the 1<sup>st</sup> Independent Parachute Brigade (hereinafter the 1<sup>st</sup> SBS). How did it happen that the priests became fully fledged paratroopers? Throughout the existence of the 1<sup>st</sup> SBS, from 1941 to 1947, during its training in the Great Britain, the fights in the Netherlands and occupation duties in Germany, eleven priest chaplains were part of the brigade<sup>5</sup>. Four of them were fully trained parachutists. One of these four chaplains made use of his skills taking part in a special courier and reconnaissance mission within the occupied territory of France already in 1943. The other three chaplains took part, as parachutists, in the operation under the codename Market-Garden, being the largest airborne operation of World War II, in September 1944. One of them paid the highest price and died a soldier's death on the battlefield.

<sup>1</sup> A receptacle for equipment, strapped to a parachutist when they jumped. It was provided with quick release toggles enabling before landing to reduce the parachutist's weight at the time of touchdown.

<sup>2</sup> A. Bednorz, *Kapelani na spadochronach* [in:] *Polscy spadochroniarze. Pamiętnik żołnierzy*, [s.l.] Mireki Publishing House, 2014, p. 275-277.

<sup>3</sup> G. F. Cholewcyński, *Rozdarty Naród. Polska Brygada Spadochronowa w bitwie pod Arnhem*, Warszawa 2013, p. 155.

<sup>4</sup> A. Bednorz, *Skaczą lekarze i kapelani*, op. cit., p. 378.

<sup>5</sup> A. Bednorz, *Kapelani na spadochronach*, op. cit., p. 275.



**Fig. 1.** Gen. Stanisław Sosabowski

Source: *S. Sosabowski Najkrótszą drogą*, London 1957

When in 1941, Colonel, and then General, Stanisław Sosabowski began to organise the 1<sup>st</sup> Independent Parachute Brigade, he insisted on the top quality training from the start. The principal rule was that every soldier had to be able to do a parachute jump, irrespective of their rank or function<sup>6</sup>. Parachute training could be abandoned only if so decided by the brigade's medical board. Soldiers who were fit to do parachute jumps, but could not overcome the fear were transferred to other forces. Actually, everyone was afraid of doing parachute jumps; in the brigade there was a saying that parachutists could be divided into these who were scared and jumped and those who were not scared and did not jump<sup>7</sup>. Sosabowski himself set an example by undergoing full parachute training at the age of 50.

The task of chaplaincy service performed by the brigade's chaplains consisted in their permanent presence among soldiers in the garrison, during any exercises and, finally, on the battlefield. It was a part of the Polish centuries-long tradition that clergy accompanied the army. Formally, the function of a chaplain was established already by the statute (the then-called constitution of the Polish Sejm) of 1690, appointing chaplains in all regiments of the Republic of Poland<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> S. Sosabowski, *Najkrótszą drogą*, London 1957, p. 57.

<sup>7</sup> W. K. Stasiak, *W locie szumią spadochrony. Wspomnienia żołnierza spod Arnhem*, Warszawa 1991, p. 58.

<sup>8</sup> J. Humeński, *Zarys historyczny*, [in:] *Wspomnienia wojenne kapelanów wojskowych 1939-1945*, ed. ks. płk. Julian Humeński, ed. II. Warszawa 1969, p. 29.



**Fig. 2.** Priest Colonel (Chaplain to the Forces First Class) Jan Szymała

Source: <http://www.encyklo.pl>

In the 1<sup>st</sup> Independent Parachute Brigade the chaplaincy service was formed by Priest Colonel Jan Szymała, whom the soldiers got to know as a good person with a great heart. Being past the age limit, and due to his health condition for the most part, he was not able to undergo training and do parachute jumps, but despite the above he participated in daily physical training on a regular basis. With his attitude he blazed a trail for his successors – parachuting chaplains<sup>9</sup>.

General Sosabowski described Priest Colonel Szymała in the following way *His kindness and understanding were so far-reaching that there were a few cases of abusing them, particularly when it came to lending money to some soldiers (...). Sometimes I had to intervene and restrain the manifestations of the priest chaplain's goodness and tender heart.* The brigade commander believed that soldiers were given all things necessary to them in the unit, including their soldier's pay, the more so as after their parachute training they were given extra money, the so-called parachuting allowance added to a soldier's pay. Priest Colonel Jan Szymała left the 1<sup>st</sup> SBS to assume the position of a dean of the 1<sup>st</sup> Corps of the Polish Armed Forces in the West<sup>10</sup>.

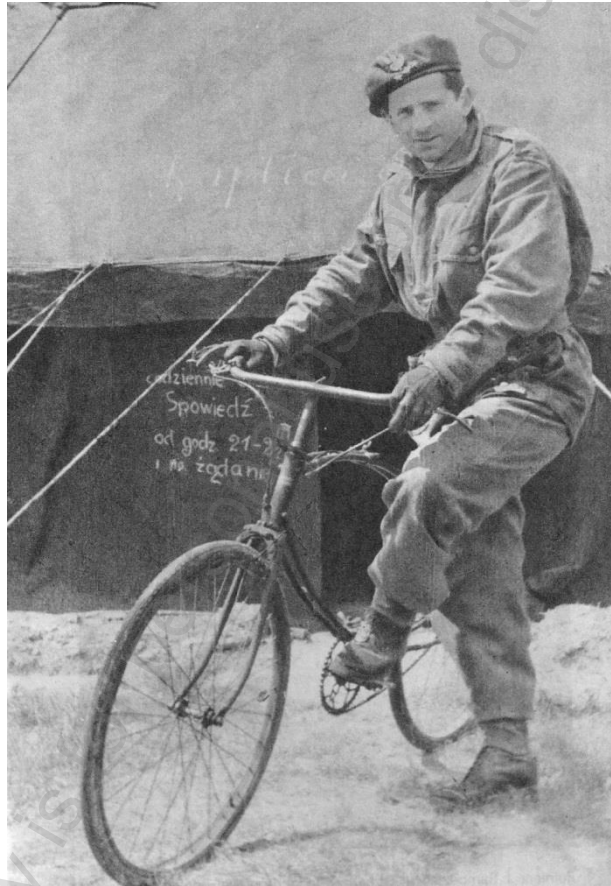
<sup>9</sup> F. Mientki, *Wspomnienia kapelana Wojska Polskiego. Bóg i Ojczyzna*, Warszawa 1985, p. 51.

<sup>10</sup> S. Sosabowski, *Najkrótszą drogą*, London 1957, p. 86.



**Fig. 3.** Main field altar of the 1<sup>st</sup> SBS in Tents Muir in Scotland, May 1943

Source: F. Mientki, *Wspomnienia kapelana Wojska Polskiego. Bóg i Ojczyzna*, Warszawa 1985



**Fig. 4.** Field shrine in a tent. Priest Hubert Misiuda in front of the shrine

Source: F. Mientki, *Wspomnienia kapelana Wojska Polskiego. Bóg i Ojczyzna*, Warszawa 1985

It should be emphasised at this point that the brigade commander obtained, by the order given by the Commander in Chief, exclusive powers for the Brigade Medical Board, headed by Major-Doctor Koźmiński, to decide on the fitness for doing parachute jumps<sup>11</sup>. Although a blind eye could be turned to the age of a prospective parachutists, the approach to health issues in the brigade was decidedly principled. According to the instructions for medical boards allowing soldiers to undertake parachute training, a candidate for a parachutist should be between 18 and 32 years of age<sup>12</sup>. Since there was a permanent shortage of people and only volunteers were recruited to the brigade, many parachutists and the commander himself were considerably past the age limit. When leaving, Priest Colonel Szymała recommended that his place should be taken by priest chaplain Franciszek Mientki, whom he knew from the time of his service as a chaplain at the Medical Training Centre in Combourg in France<sup>13</sup>.



**Fig. 5.** Priest chaplain Franciszek Mientki

Source: F. Mientki, *Wspomnienia kapelana Wojska Polskiego. Bóg i Ojczyzna*, Warszawa 1985

## 2. PARACHUTING CHAPLAINS. TRAINING AT LARGO AND RINGWAY

In 1942, after All Saints Day, priest Franciszek Mientki reported to the brigade commander, Colonel Sosabowski, in Leven, Scotland. In his memoirs he described the first meeting with the commander:

*His first question was as follows:*

- *Priest chaplain, will you be doing parachute jumps?*
- *Colonel, that is what I have come here for.*

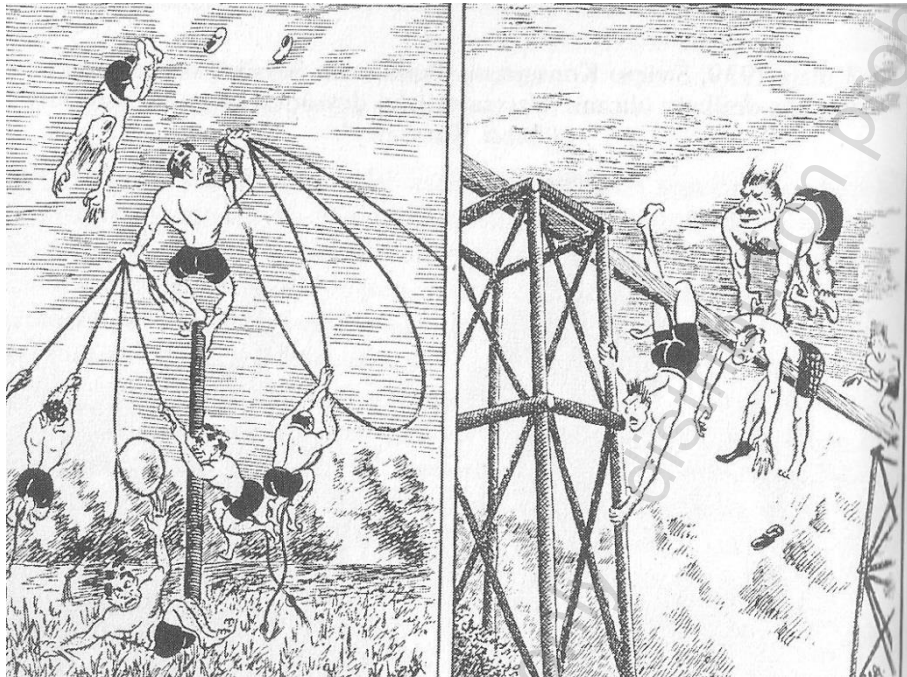
<sup>11</sup> S. Sosabowski, *Droga wiodła ugorem*, Kraków 1990, ed. I, p. 153.

<sup>12</sup> W. Markert, *Na drodze do Arnhem*, Pruszków 2000, p. 63.

<sup>13</sup> F. Mientki, *Wspomnienia kapelana Wojska Polskiego. Bóg i Ojczyzna*, Warszawa 1985, p. 99.

- *So tomorrow you will go to Largo*<sup>14</sup>

In Largo, Scotland, there was a centre for preliminary parachute training, called the Monkey Grove by prospective paratroopers. At the entrance to the centre premises soldiers posted a note demonstrating their gallows humour “Looking for death? Drop in for a minute”<sup>15</sup>.



**Fig. 6.** Caricatures drawn by Lieutenant Marek Gramski, presenting General Sosabowski during the training in the “Monkey Grove”

Source: G. F. Cholewczyński, *Rozdarty Naród. Polska Brygada Spadochronowa w bitwie pod Arnhem*, Warszawa 2013

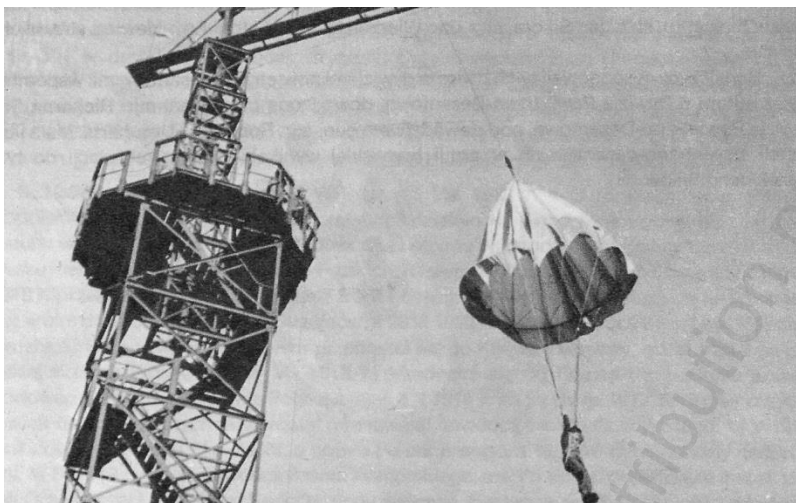
For a period of four weeks, each day from 8.00 a.m. to 6.00 p.m. with a two-hour break for dinner, the priest chaplain together with privates, non-commissioned officers and officers, as at Largo everybody got equal treatment, would acquire “monkey” skills while going through the contrived obstacle course<sup>16</sup>. Exercises were performed in all weather conditions, disregarding muscle soreness or minor injuries. The landing skills were trained using purpose-built chutes and swings or the plane’s fuselage, from which soldiers would jump onto the layer of sand covering the floor in the old stable specifically adapted to this aim. When the course participants were conversant with the basics of jumping and landing, they proceeded to jumping from the parachute tower, designed and built by the Polish sappers, supported by the local companies. Such training system was proven in practice, as the number of injuries sustained during jumps by the Polish trainees was lower by one half in comparison with the British, while it should be

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>15</sup> S. Sosabowski, *Najkrótszą drogą*, London 1957, p. 36.

<sup>16</sup> S. Sosabowski, *Droga wiodła ugorem*, Kraków 1990, ed. I, p. 167.

remembered that the Poles taking part in the training were in many cases older and at the start of the training their physical condition was often poorer than that of their British colleagues.



**Fig. 7.** Jump from the parachute tower at Largo House in Scotland, November 1942

Source: F. Mientki, *Wspomnienia kapelana Wojska Polskiego. Bóg i Ojczyzna*, Warszawa 1985

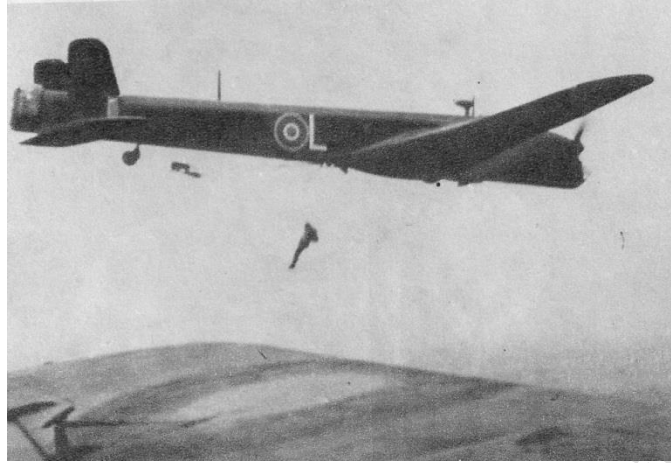


**Fig. 8.** Priest Mientki jumping from the parachute tower and priest Misiuda “catching” his colleague, Largo House, November 1942

Source: F. Mientki, *Wspomnienia kapelana Wojska Polskiego. Bóg i Ojczyzna*, Warszawa 1985

After the initial training priest Mientki with the whole group of trainees went to Ringway in England, where the centre for the proper parachute training was located. At the centre parachute jumps were made first from a balloon and then from a plane, first individually and later in groups.





**Fig. 9.** A training jump from the Whitley, Ringway, December 1942

*Source: F. Mientki, Wspomnienia kapelana Wojska Polskiego. Bóg i Ojczyzna, Warszawa 1985*

Having completed a series of jumps required in the training cycle, priest chaplain Franciszek Mientki returned to the brigade, where he proudly pinned to his uniform a parachute badge, being the representation of an eagle swooping to attack<sup>17</sup>. The parachute badge, informally called 'gapa' (a diving eagle), was ceremoniously awarded and presented by the brigade commander himself<sup>18</sup>. The badge was never treated as an honorary award and it was a visible symbol that the soldier who received it belonged to the military elite.



**Fig. 10.** Ordinary parachute badge

*Source: The author's archive and collections*

<sup>17</sup> F. Mientki, *Wspomnienia kapelana Wojska Polskiego. Bóg i Ojczyzna*, Warszawa 1985, p. 100.

<sup>18</sup> K. Kordas, *Człowiek spod Arnhem*, Kraków 1985, ed. II, p. 49.



**Fig. 11.** The way of wearing the parachute badge on the uniform tunic, over the left breast pocket. In the picture: Zdzisław Kilian, a soldier of the 1<sup>st</sup> SBS

*Source: The author's archive and collections*

During the absence of priest Mientki the chaplaincy service in the brigade was performed by priest chaplain Hubert Misiuda, who served in the brigade already from 15 September 1942, and was the first Polish chaplain who completed the parachute training. Probably, he was also the first chaplain-parachutist in the Allied Forces in Great Britain. He was, similarly to priest Mientki, in military service already in France, where, following the recommendation given by Józef Gawlina, Bishop of the Armed Forces, he attended and completed the Officer Cadet School<sup>19</sup>. The brigade had a high opinion of priest chaplain Hubert Misiuda's excellent sports abilities, including his effectiveness as a boxer. Władysław Klemens Stasiak, Brigade Staff Officer, would often serve as a sparring partner for priest Misiuda on the ring and in his memoirs he admitted that *Many times only my superior height and longer arms rescued me from being knocked down to the canvas*<sup>20</sup>.



**Fig. 12.** Ks. Hubert Misiuda

*Source: F. Mientki, Wspomnienia kapelana Wojska Polskiego. Bóg i Ojczyzna, Warszawa 1985*

<sup>19</sup> F. Mientki, op. cit., p. 139.

<sup>20</sup> W. K. Stasiak, *W locie szumią spadochrony. Wspomnienia żołnierza spod Arnhem*, Warszawa 1991, p. 173.

Two chaplains were not enough for the needs of the brigade, despite the fact that from time to time assistance was provided by chaplains from other forces, mainly by priest chaplain Ostaniewicz from the air force. In the spring in 1943, priest Alfred Bednorz joined the 1<sup>st</sup> SBS, and was enthusiastically welcomed by priest Hubert Misiuda. They knew each other still from the times of their studies at the seminary. The new chaplain started his services like the others, from the parachute training. The period of his initial training at Largo overlapped with the Easter of 1943. Both chaplains could not cope with confessions and priest Mientki, as the head of the brigade's chaplaincy service, obtained for priest Bednorz a discharge from exercises for the whole Saturday. As priest Mientki recalled *I wanted him to rest before noon so that he was able to help us in a confession box in the afternoon. He came on time, but he did not make use of his free morning. When he was on the spot the instructor managed to convince him to bruise his bones with various training devices for four more hours. However, when confessions were finished, he confided to me:*

*- You cannot imagine how much I regretted that I did not make use of my discharge. Today, I did penance for all my penitents. Although I had a folded blanket on the seat, I was only able to sit on one buttock at a time<sup>21</sup>.*



**Fig. 13.** Priest chaplain Alfred Bednorz

*Source: F. Mientki, Wspomnienia kapelana Wojska Polskiego. Bóg i Ojczyzna, Warszawa 1985*

It is just one of the examples showing the chaplains' commitment to military training, which they treated equally with their chaplaincy duties. The brigade commander had clearly defined requirements for chaplains with regard to their military fitness and treated them in the same way as his other officers. Priest Franciszek Mientki described a following episode in his memoirs:

*One day in the morning, after the mass, when I was going to the mess I met the whole group of officers from the brigade headquarters. General Sosabowski noticed me and called: Priest Chaplain! Today, we are examining the ability to throw a grenade accurately. You are welcome to join us.*

<sup>21</sup> F. Mientki, op. cit., p. 102.

- *General, I report that a chaplain goes to the frontline without any arms or grenades. So, I presume, you could discharge me from this.*

- *Priest Chaplain, you seem to be eschewing the examination. It is no use trying. Let's go.*

- *General – I lowered my voice at this point – I would like to avoid putting to shame the whole command, if I were to beat them. The officers burst out laughing and the General considered it to be a good joke. They did not know that the day before I spent several hours with a company practising grenade throws ... I was practising together with the soldiers and became quite skilled at it. Now, we were throwing from the same positions, so no wonder I recorded the best results<sup>22</sup>.*

In the brigade priest chaplain Alfred Bednorz met Corporal Tadeusz Wołoszyn. In November 1942, their complex war paths crossed in a French village Vernet-les-Bains, located in the Pyrenees, close to the Spanish border. A mountain hut, visited by young people in the time of peace, housed a secret camp for Polish refugees, who illegally crossed the border in the Pyrenees and travelled through Spain to Gibraltar to get to the Polish Army in Great Britain. Tadeusz Wołoszyn recalled:

*It turned out that the manager and organiser of the site was a certain quiet priest who directed the traffic through the place like a professional railwayman. During the memorable night before the departure he came soon after supper ... He gave us a lot of information in a brief way and hugged and blessed everyone. It was priest Alfred Bednorz<sup>23</sup>.*

These examples show how the chaplains won the soldiers' respect and trust. The chaplains could be seen among the soldiers during various exercises and not only in the shrine. Therefore, it is not surprising that paratroopers considered it to be a good sign when the chaplain was on board of the plane during their training. During parachute jumps accidents happened from time to time, which caused fear and discouraged soldiers from doing further jumps. In such case the chaplain who was staying with a given sub-unit informed that he would take part in the next jump, despite the fact he did not have it in his own schedule, owing to which parachutists could compose themselves and continued their training<sup>24</sup>.

Priest Konrad Stolarek was the fourth priest chaplain trained in the 1<sup>st</sup> SBS to be a parachutist. After his arrival in Great Britain he became a chaplain for the fighter squadrons and he also cooperated with the Polish Section of the BBC Radio in London. Then, he joined the paratroopers brigade. During the night of 15/16 May 1943, on basis of the order given by Commander-in-Chief and Prime Minister General Władysław Sikorski, priest Konrad Stolarek made a parachute descent on the occupied territory of France to initiate a contact, on behalf of the Prime Minister, with Cardinal August Hlond,

<sup>22</sup> F. Mientki, *Wspomnienia kapelana Wojska Polskiego. Bóg i Ojczyzna*, Warszawa 1985, p. 102.

<sup>23</sup> T. Wołoszyn, *Pół wojny w niewoli* [in:] *Polscy spadochroniarze. Pamiętnik żołnierzy*, Mireki Publishing House, 2014, p. 134.

<sup>24</sup> A. Bednorz, *Kapelani na spadochronach* [in:] *Polscy spadochroniarze. Pamiętnik żołnierzy*, [s.l.] Mireki Publishing House, 2014, p. 277.

staying in Lourdes<sup>25</sup>. Having completed this mission, priest chaplain Stolarek was again in Great Britain three months later. For the mission he was awarded the *Virtuti Militari*, and for doing a parachute jump in combat, in accordance with the regulations of the 1<sup>st</sup> SBS, he could add a golden laurel wreath to his parachute badge and he was promoted to the rank of major. In 1944, he made another parachute jump to get to France with a mission to obtain the information for the government about the conditions of operation of the secret Polish Organisation for the Struggle for Independence. This task was also perfectly fulfilled<sup>26</sup>. Priest chaplain Konrad Stolarek received the highest number of combat awards from among all Polish chaplains who were in service during World War II. Apart from the *Virtuti Militari*, he was awarded twice the Cross of Valour, twice the Air Force Medal, the French *Croix de Guerre* with Star, the British Defence Medal and War Medal, as well as others honours<sup>27</sup>.



**Fig. 14.** Gen. Wł. Sikorski awarding the *Virtuti Militari* to priest chaplain Konrad Stolarek

Source: *Wspomnienia wojenne kapelanów wojskowych. Pod redakcją ks. płk. Juliana Humeńskiego, Warszawa 1969*

Obviously, the chaplain officer completing special missions as instructed by the top government officials was not able to participate in the life of the paratrooper brigade on a regular basis. Already in 1944, priest Stolarek was transferred to the air force. Therefore, the regular chaplaincy duties were distributed among the other three chaplains. Priest chaplain Franciszek Mientki, as the head of chaplaincy service in the brigade, determined the distribution of chaplains' duties as follows:

- 1<sup>st</sup> battalion and the brigade command – priest chaplain Franciszek Mientki;
- 2<sup>nd</sup> battalion – priest chaplain Alfred Bednorz;

<sup>25</sup> J. Tucholski, *Spadochronowa opowieść*, Warszawa 1991, p. 172. ISBN 83-206-0838-4.

<sup>26</sup> *W sutannie i mundurze. O. Konrad Feliks Stolarek OMI „Samson” (1923-2007)*, oprac. MM. On the basis of: Agata i Zbigniew Judyccy (ed.), *O. Konrad Stolarek OMI. Kapłan, żołnierz*, ed. Vaudicourt-Warszawa, 2007 [in:] *Kombatant. Biuletyn Urzędu do Spraw Kombatantów i Osób Represjonowanych*, no. 1 (204), January 2008, p. 23.

<sup>27</sup> J. Humeński, *Zarys historyczny*, [in:] *Wspomnienia wojenne kapelanów wojskowych 1939-1945*, ed. ks. płk. Julian Humeński. Ed. II. Warszawa 1969, p. 63.

- 3<sup>rd</sup> battalion – priest chaplain Hubert Misiuda.

The service to the remaining units of the brigade, i.e. the so-called independent units, was provided by the chaplain stationed closest to a given company's location. Such distribution of duties worked well in practice and was in place till the return of the 1<sup>st</sup> SBS from their combat action in the Netherlands<sup>28</sup>.

### 3. PARTICIPATION IN THE OPERATION MARKET-GARDEN

When orders came concerning the participation of the 1<sup>st</sup> SBS in the Operation Market-Garden, the priest chaplains had to decide which items they should take to the battlefield as ministers, apart from the ordinary paratrooper's gear. They resolved that the risk of profanation or even loss of the Holy Eucharist was too high and none of them would take it. The chaplains packed the Holy Oils, the Rite, the Stole, a portable altar and a number of funeral forms and reports<sup>29</sup>. On the last Sunday before their departure, after giving the appropriate instruction, the chaplains granted general absolution to the soldiers.



**Fig. 15.** Paratroopers boarding a Dakota aircraft. 21 September 1944

Source: W. K. Stasiak, *W locie szumią spadochrony. Wspomnienia żołnierza spod Arnhem*, Warszawa 1991

When doing parachute jumps onto the battlefield the chaplains of the 1<sup>st</sup> SBS were exposed to the same risks as other soldiers, however, after the descent the danger increased, since soldiers were armed unlike, obviously, chaplains. Priest Alfred Bednorz described his jump onto the battlefield in the following way *I jumped out ... and felt the jolt of the parachute. When the engine rattle stopped, it seemed to me I was surrounded by silence. Soon, however, I heard the swish of bullets and the bang of exploding shells... Following the instructions I lowered the kitbag on the line and automatically started to look for a church tower... After landing next to the ditch filled with water I unbuckled the parachute and rushed to look for my kitbag. Unfortunately, I could not find it. It turned out that it was shot away during my descent, as indicated by the shredded rope. I got to*

<sup>28</sup> F. Mientki, *Wspomnienia kapelana Wojska Polskiego. Bóg i Ojczyzna*, Warszawa 1985, p. 102.

<sup>29</sup> A. Bednorz, *Kapelani na spadochronach* [in:] *Polscy spadochroniarze. Pamiętnik żołnierzy*, [s.l.] Mireki Publishing House, 2014, p. 277.

*my feet quickly and saw a German soldier, armed and crawling in my direction. Being unarmed I felt uneasy. However, my conscience would remind me 'you are a chaplain'. To make things worse a machine gun fire started. I jumped into the ditch. Paddling in waist-high water I was trying to reach our soldiers. When I got out of the water I noticed two medical bags. I thought that instead of the portable altar, lost together with the kitbag, I could bring two bags with dressings at least.*

Soldiers fight in larger or smaller groups and a chaplain tries to be in different places where he could be of service. There are wounded and fallen soldiers and a chaplain has to perform the last rites for the dead and cheer up the living with words of comfort or just with his presence. Priest Franciszek Mientki was confronted with a soldier's death immediately after landing, which he described in his memoirs: *over there, one of ours was killed! ... – someone called me. Where? – I asked quickly – along the ditch, behind the farm. I ran there and I saw the first fallen Pole. He had landed a few minutes before and already gave his life for the Motherland. I granted him conditional absolution and performed the last rites. He was lying calm and indifferent to the battlefield uproar. His forehead was covered with fair hair and blood. His open blue eyes were staring up into the blue depth of the sky. I knelt and, closing his eyes, said the first 'De profundis' on the Dutch land*<sup>30</sup>.

Apart from the above services the chaplains were trying, as far as possible, to help the medical staff in bandaging the wounded and transporting them to medical aid posts. At the battlefield priest Mientki made also use of his skills acquired during the service at the Medical Training Centre in France. When one of the officers was hit by shrapnel the chaplains happened to be near him. Priest Bednorz described this situation in his memoirs *Lieutenant Mróz has both his legs crushed and blood is streaming out. Priest Mientki quickly cuts the trousers with a knife and can feel warm blood under his fingers. He is bandaging both legs, while the nearby artillery fire is getting heavier ... He ties off the thigh to contain bleeding. The wounded is successfully transported to the back*<sup>31</sup>. The chaplains were all the time exposed to the dangers of the battlefield. When in the improvised field hospital one of the chaplains, making use of a temporary break in the enemy's fire, was celebrating the Mass, the bullet explosion blew out the whole window. Everybody present, including the altar boy, escaped and the priest chaplain, as he could not interrupt the mass after the Elevation, continued all by himself<sup>32</sup>.

Due to the ferocity of the fights the number of soldiers lost increased and priest Mientki, being the head of chaplaincy service, had to take care of the fallen soldiers. Therefore, he reported this to the commander, Gen. Sosabowski.

*- General, we should bury our fallen soldiers.*

<sup>30</sup> F. Mientki, *Wspomnienia kapelana z wyprawy pod Arnhem* [in:] *Wspomnienia wojenne kapelanów wojskowych 1939-1945*, ed. ks. płk. Julian Humeński. Ed. II. Warszawa 1974, p. 291.

<sup>31</sup> A. Bednorz, *Drugie forsowanie Renu*, [in:] *Polscy spadochroniarze. Pamiętnik żołnierzy*, [s.l.] Mireki Publishing House, 2014, p. 396.

<sup>32</sup> A. Bednorz, *Driel*, op. cit., p. 386.

- *You are right, Priest Chaplain. Please, get in touch with Captain B. and prepare a decent burial for them.*

- *Yes, General! They have deserved at least that*<sup>33</sup>.

Ten soldiers were designated to help priest Mientki and under the artillery fire a common soldiers' grave was dug at the local cemetery. Because of the threat of being under fire the funeral ceremony was held late in the evening, at the light provided by an electric torch. The priest chaplain said the prayers from the Rite and threw dust from the consecrated ground on the bodies on the fallen paratroopers<sup>34</sup>. During all days of the fights of the Polish parachute brigade in the Netherlands the priest chaplains were present on the battlefield, heard confessions, blessed, bandaged the wounded, helped in the transport of supplies, registered deaths and collected identity tags of the fallen soldiers. They shared the same fate with soldiers, being hungry and thirsty or lacking sleep and rest. Till the end they demonstrated the model officer's stance. They were courageous.

It is not the author's intention to describe in detail the origins or the course of the Operation Market-Garden or the participation of the 1<sup>st</sup> Independent Parachute Brigade in this operation. These facts have been described numerous times. It should only be noted that the planning of the operation was flawed and the only high-ranked officer who pointed it out from the very beginning and proposed a change in the tactics during the battle was General Stanisław Sosabowski. Unfortunately, his remarks were not taken into consideration. The general paid a price for being unyielding. The Allied commanders, looking for an alibi for themselves, were trying to shift the responsibility for the defeat to the general and to the Polish brigade. After the battle the general was deprived of command over the unit for which he was the 'founding father'. He devised the brigade, formed and trained it, and led it into battle. Owing to the Poles, hundreds of the British paratroopers were saved, as the Polish brigade, incurring heavy losses, covered their retreat across the Rhine. Priest chaplain Hubert Misiuda was one of the numerous Polish soldiers who paid the highest price during this crossing<sup>35</sup>.

Captain Misiuda was a Polish officer, not only a priest, and he knew that surrender was possible only if everything else failed. Since there was not enough boats or pontoons to be used for the crossing, priest chaplain Hubert Misiuda decided to swim across the river. When he was swimming across the Rhine he was hit by the German machine gun fire. Soldiers were looking with dismay at their beloved chaplain going under water. It happened during the night of 25/26 September 1944<sup>36</sup>. The chaplain's body was found

<sup>33</sup> F. Mientki, *Wspomnienia kapelana z wyprawy pod Arnhem*, [in:] *Wspomnienia wojenne kapelanów wojskowych 1939-1945*, ed. ks. płk. Julian Humeński. Ed. II. Warszawa 1969, p. 298.

<sup>34</sup> F. Mientki, *Wspomnienia kapelana z wyprawy pod Arnhem* [in:] *Wspomnienia wojenne kapelanów wojskowych 1939-1945*, ed. ks. płk. Julian Humeński. Ed. II. Warszawa 1969, p. 299.

<sup>35</sup> P. Witkowski, *Polscy spadochroniarze 1939-1945*. Warszawa 2015, p. 266.

<sup>36</sup> J. Bereda, A. Bednorz, *Śmierć Ojca Huberta*, [in:] *Polscy spadochroniarze. Pamiętnik żołnierzy*, [s.l.] Mireki Publishing House, 2014, p. 324.



in May 1945, on the polder in Oosterbeek, where he was buried at the war cemetery, next to other Polish and British paratroopers<sup>37</sup>.



**Fig. 16.** Grave of priest Hubert Misiuda

Source: <http://www.paradata.org.uk>

#### 4. CHAPLAINCY SERVICE AFTER RETURNING FROM THE OPERATION MARKET-GARDEN

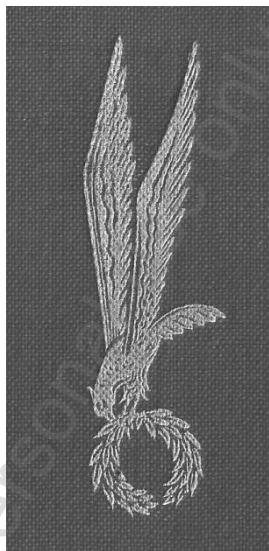
In the middle of October 1944, the brigade returned to their garrisons in Great Britain. General Sosabowski granted a well-deserved ten-day leave to the soldiers. On 30 November 1944, the ceremony was held to award the soldiers for their participation in the Operation Market-Garden. The Cross of Valour was awarded, among others, to priest chaplain Alfred Bednorz and priest chaplain Franciszek Mientki. The chaplains had already added a laurel wreath to their parachute badges for a parachute jump in combat. Priest chaplain Hubert Misiuda was also awarded, posthumously, the Cross of Valour.

<sup>37</sup> G. F. Cholewcyński, *Rozdarty Naród. Polska Brygada Spadochronowa w bitwie pod Arnhem*, Warszawa 2013, p. 241.



**Fig. 17.** Decoration of the Cross of Valour. First from the left priest A. Bednorz and next to him priest F. Mientki

Source: *F. Mientki, Wspomnienia kapelana Wojska Polskiego. Bóg i Ojczyzna, Warszawa 1985*



**Fig. 18.** Parachute badge with a laurel wreath

Source: *S. Sosabowski, Najkrótszą drogą, Londyn 1957*

In the Netherlands the brigade suffered heavy losses, 22% among soldiers and 23% among officer corps. In the autumn 1944, the end of the war was still far away and the brigade had to get ready to perform new tasks, especially since the British paratroopers recorded considerably higher losses than the Poles. Fortunately, at this time replenishment was not a problem. From the very beginning of the brigade's existence it was not possible to form fully-staffed paratrooper battalions due to personnel shortages. Now, sufficient numbers of volunteers would come to the 1<sup>st</sup> SBS. They were prisoners of war, the Poles coming mainly from Silesia, the area of Poznań and

Pomerania, forcibly enlisted by the Germans in the Wehrmacht. Whenever there was an opportunity they deserted or surrendered to the Allied units. After their verification in the prisoner of war camps they joined the Polish Armed Forces in the West. There were some amazing coincidences when among the soldiers joining the 1<sup>st</sup> SBS there happened to be also a few Poles formerly serving in the German paratrooper units<sup>38</sup>. In the autumn 1944, the staffing of the paratrooper brigade represented a real conglomerate. There were veterans of the September 1939 campaign and fights in France in 1940, afterwards, in 1941 and 1942, replenishments from the Soviet army were coming, from the corps created under the command of General Anders<sup>39</sup>. At the end of 1942, and at the beginning of 1943, after the defeat of the Afrika Korps, the first Poles from the Wehrmacht joined the unit<sup>40</sup>. In 1944, there was a huge age difference between newcomers and the soldiers who formed the brigade from the very beginning. Some of the prospective paratroopers were still children, aged 13-14, in 1939, when their older colleagues from the brigade already took up arms to defend their homeland. The brigade staff, and also its chaplains, faced a big challenge of enabling these people to find their place in the unit as soon as possible. For the new trainees it was important that the chaplains staying with them already did their parachute jumps on the battlefield. Such chaplain would quickly gain respect and trust of soldiers. It facilitated the process of new soldiers' integration with the brigade. The painful loss in the chaplaincy service, caused by the death of priest chaplain Hubert Misiuda, had to be compensated for. In connection with the above and taking account of the growing number of soldiers in sub-units two new priests joined priest chaplains Mientki and Bednorz. These were priest chaplain Jan Chwist and priest chaplain Brodzki<sup>41</sup>.



**Fig. 19.** In the middle priest Jan Chwist, a new chaplain of the 1<sup>st</sup> SBS, and priest Alfred Bednorz next to him  
 Source: F. Mientki, *Wspomnienia kapelana Wojska Polskiego. Bóg i Ojczyzna*, Warszawa 1985

<sup>38</sup> S. Zawadzki, *Moje wspomnienia z dzieciństwa i lat wojny*, Łódź 2010, p. 119.

<sup>39</sup> S. Sosabowski, *Droga wiodła ugorem*, Kraków 1990, ed. I, p. 166.

<sup>40</sup> W. K. Stasiak, *W locie szumią spadochrony. Wspomnienia żołnierzy spod Arnhem*, Warszawa 1991, p. 96.

<sup>41</sup> F. Mientki, *Wspomnienia kapelana Wojska Polskiego. Bóg i Ojczyzna*, Warszawa 1985, p. 110.

Till May 1945, the 1<sup>st</sup> SBS was several times alerted to be in combat readiness, but the Allied Land Forces moved quickly forward and the unit did not have to take part in battle. In the meantime, as a result of intrigues fomented by some high rank British officers, General Sosabowski with sunken heart had to leave the 1<sup>st</sup> Independent Parachute Brigade. He was succeeded by Lieutenant Colonel Stanisław Jachnik, who, after a serious car accident, was replaced for a short time by Colonel Jan Olimpiusz Kamiński, and at the end of the war the command was taken by Lieutenant Colonel Antoni Szczerbo-Rawicz. When the end of the war was declared the brigade was preparing for landing in France, near Dunkirk, where an isolated point of German resistance was located. Since the war operations were finished the brigade was ordered to go to Germany, to the British occupation zone, as part of the so-called British Army of the Rhine.



**Fig. 20.** On board the ship on the way to Germany

Source: W. K. Stasiak, *W locie szumią spadochrony. Wspomnienia żołnierza spod Arnhem.* Warszawa 1991

The unit was stationed in the north-western part of Germany, in Bersenbrueck, the so-called collective municipality, near Osnabrueck, where it stayed till the occupation of Germany ended in 1947. Apart from its patrol service and work to maintain order the brigade undertook activities aimed at preparing soldiers to civilian life. The chaplains also had other duties. In the war time they had to prepare soldiers to face death, whereas during the peace time they had to make them ready for civilian life and to encourage them to get an education and a profession. Near the place where the brigade was stationed a number of schools and occupational training centres were organised, where the Poles, former prisoners of war or people deported to Germany for forced labour, became teachers. The brigade took care of former prisoners of war and forced labourers, who were coming near the places where the Polish units were stationed, expecting, justly, to receive different forms of help. They were provided with medical help, food and new clothes. Many of them needed also spiritual support, which was offered by the priest chaplains of the parachute brigade.

## 5. PRIEST CHAPLAINS' LIVES AFTER THE WAR

When the war ended a question appeared whether or not to come back to new Poland. This problem actually emerged in 1946, when the first British orders to disband the 1<sup>st</sup> SBS were received. Although the orders to disband the brigade in 1946 were withdrawn, as the British simply needed the Poles on the territory of Germany, it became clear that the unit would soon go down in history. The same applied to the priest chaplains that served at the brigade.

After the war the lives of the parachuting priests from the 1<sup>st</sup> SBS followed different paths. Priest Franciszek Mientki went to Switzerland in 1947, to finish his studies, interrupted by the outbreak of the war, at the faculty of dogmatic theology in Fribourg. After graduation in 1948, he came back to Poland and joined the Community of the Missionaries of the Holy Spirit. In November 1949, he was arrested by the Office of Security and sentenced to 12 years of prison on the basis of groundless charges. In December 1956, on pardon resulting from Gomułka's Thaw, he was exonerated and released from prison in Wronki. After the release from prison he lived a very active life. He was, among others, the Superior at the Missionary house of the Community of the Missionaries of the Holy Spirit and a lecturer at the Higher Theological Seminary in Poznań. At the time of the People's Republic of Poland he was finally appreciated and promoted to the rank of major and then lieutenant colonel. He died on 20 May 1982, in Cielądz near Rawa Mazowiecka and was buried there<sup>42</sup>.

When on 25 September 1967, General Stanisław Sosabowski died in England, his ashes were brought to Warsaw by his son and former soldiers, in accordance with his request. Priest Franciszek Mientki, the general's former subordinate and the former head of chaplaincy service of the parachute brigade, took the general on his last journey and buried him in the family's grave at the Powązki Military Cemetery and performed the funeral exequies<sup>43</sup>.

After demobilisation priest chaplain Alfred Bednorz went to France, where he worked as a priest till the end of his life. He was awarded the French *Croix à la valeur militaire pour faits d'armes brillants au front*<sup>44</sup>. He was an active participant in the life of the Poles in France, teaching Polish to the young Poles belonging to the Association of Polish Youth. When it became possible he would often visit Poland. He died on 11 October 1981, and was buried in the tomb of the Oblate Fathers in Vaudricourt<sup>45</sup>.

After demobilisation in 1946 priest chaplain Konrad Stolarek went to France, where he spent the rest of his life. He was the first Superior of the district of the Polish Oblates of Mary Immaculate in France and in the Benelux countries. In 1954, he founded and issued the *Niepokalana* monthly, addressed to Poles. He was a co-founder of *Maison de la*

<sup>42</sup> F. Stopniak, *Noty biograficzne* [in:] F. Mientki, *Wspomnienia kapelana Wojska Polskiego. Bóg i Ojczyzna*, Warszawa 1985, p. 138.

<sup>43</sup> W. K. Stasiak, *W locie szumią spadochrony. Wspomnienia żołnierza spod Arnhem*, Warszawa 1991, p. 206.

<sup>44</sup> *Encyklopedia Wiedzy o Kościele na Śląsku*, [online]. [available: 11.02.2015]. Available on the Internet: [http://www.encyklo.pl/index.php?title=Bednorz\\_Alfred](http://www.encyklo.pl/index.php?title=Bednorz_Alfred)

<sup>45</sup> F. Stopniak, op. cit., p. 133.

*Polonia de France* (Association of Poles in France). He died in 2007, in France. He was buried at the cemetery in Vaudricourt<sup>46</sup>.

Priest Jan Szymała, who created the chaplaincy service of the 1<sup>st</sup> Independent Parachute Brigade, came back to Poland in 1946. In December the same year he became a rector in the parish of All Saints in Gliwice. Despite persecution by authorities he was actively involved in cultural activity in his parish. In 1954, he moved to St. Jack's parish in Bytom. He died on 31 December 1962, in Bytom, where he was buried.

The officers of the Polish Army, priest chaplains of the 1<sup>st</sup> Independent Parachute Brigade, have their place in the history of the Polish participation in World War II, marked by their extraordinary heroism and patriotism, military expertise and sacrifice.

One more member of the clergy took part in the brigade's parachute training, although he was not in regular service at this unit. It was priest Józef Król, a heroic chaplain of the Polish Independent Carpathian Rifle Brigade, awarded the Cross of Valour for his participation in combat at Narvik in Norway<sup>47</sup>.



**Fig. 21.** Priest chaplain Józef Król

*Source: Wspomnienia wojenne kapelanów wojskowych, (ed.) ks. płk. Julian Humeński, ed. II, Warszawa 1969*

In 1943, he volunteered to do a parachute jump on the occupied territory of Poland, to start his service for underground organisations. After completing a special training course, which included, as one of its elements, parachute training at the 1<sup>st</sup> Independent Parachute Brigade, he was ordered to get to the base of 'cichociemni' in Bari in Italy, from where he was to fly to Poland. The journey by plane started in England, with an intermediate landing planned at Gibraltar airport. On 17 April 1944, the plane crashed after take-off from Gibraltar. The crew and the passengers were killed. Priest chaplain Józef Król was buried at the Broockwood war cemetery near London<sup>48</sup>.

<sup>46</sup> *W sutannie i mundurze. O. Konrad Feliks Stolarek OMI „Samson” (1923-2007)*, oprac. MM. On the basis of: Agata i Zbigniew Judyccy (ed.), *o. Konrad Stolarek OMI. Kapłan, żołnierz*, ed. Vaudicourt-Warszawa, 2007 [in:] *Kombatant. Biuletyn Urzędu do Spraw Kombatantów i Osób Represjonowanych*, no. 1 (204), January 2008, p. 23.

<sup>47</sup> F. Stopniak, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

<sup>48</sup> K. Pruszyński, *Nasi nad Tamizą*, Kraków 1969, p. 411.

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