

## Article 12

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### Dr Marek Ney-Krwawicz, Women Soldiers of the Polish Home Army

The significant role played by Polish women in the Home Army (*Armia Krajowa* – AK) was the effect of both tradition (participation in the national uprisings of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the struggles for independence during the First World War) and of upbringing in the Second Republic, particularly at home and in the scouting movement. Many years of Polish women's endeavours to have their contribution to national defence legally defined came to fruition in the form of a statute of the Polish Sejm (April 1938, on comprehensive military duty) that granted them the right to serve in auxiliary detachments, including anti-aircraft, sentry and communications units as well as other services 'necessary for defence purposes.' Consequently, women's organisational structures that had been functioning since the start of the 1920s took on their ultimate form and in 1939 became known as the Women's Auxiliary Army Service (*Organizacja Przynsposobienia Wojskowego Kobiet* – OPWK), headed by Maria Wittekówna.

It was also Maria Wittekówna who in October 1939 took charge of the Women's Auxiliary Service – of the 1<sup>st</sup> Bureau of the Polish Victory Service (*Służba Zwycięstwu Polski* – SWP) GHQ. However, it should be stressed that the actual active engagement of women in the national liberation movement (in military operations both at home and abroad) was far greater than what was stated in official figures. Indeed, at the start of 1940 the Commander of the Union of Armed Struggle (*Związek Walki Zbrojnej* – ZWZ), Col. Stefan Rowecki, declared that the women in Poland were carrying out the same types of military service as the men, and thus decreed that the term Women's Military Service be used. In October 1941 the Armed Forces commander in Poland issued an order stating that 'women remaining in active military service at a time of underground warfare are soldiers facing the enemy.' In February 1942 the Women's Service in Poland was officially raised to the rank of Women's Military Service, and in April that year instructions were issued to 'make comprehensive use of the women's military service,' in preparations for a planned reconstruction of the Polish Armed Forces. In order for this military service to obtain full legal status the Commander of the AK sent Elżbieta Zawadzka as his emissary to the Polish Government-in-exile. The result of her mission (which coincided with legislative work being carried out by the Polish government and the Polish Supreme GHQ Command) was that the Polish President issued a decree, dated 27<sup>th</sup> October 1943, stating that 'female soldiers have the same rights and obligations as male soldiers.' This sanctioned the actual state of affairs, particularly in the AK, and provided legal grounds for resolving various issues, such as the matter of bestowing ranks. However, it was not until 23<sup>rd</sup> September 1944, during the Warsaw Uprising, that woman soldiers of the AK started being granted military ranks, and for that reason the order did not reach various Home Army districts before it was disbanded.

The abovementioned efforts to obtain official recognition for the women's service as being 'military' rather than 'auxiliary' were significant insofar as women accounted for approximately ten percent of Home Army personnel. Therefore one would have been hard put to find an AK unit that did not include any women. The day-to-day functioning of underground resistance in the previous ZWZ phase would have been impossible without women and they were already present at its initial, SZP, stage. From the very start they organised liaison operations, serving as messengers

and couriers. With time this service was termed Underground Communications and it included so-called VK Departments (Courier Liaison Departments) at each HQ. From 1939 to the end of the Warsaw Uprising the commander of the V-K GHQ of the SZP, ZWZ and finally AK was Janina Karasłówna 'Brońka'. Below her there was also the Department of Foreign Communications, headed throughout by Emilia Malessa 'Marcyca'. Contact with the headquarters of various areas and districts of occupied Poland was provided by two special units also run by women. In charge of the Head Office at the AK GHQ was Janina Bredel 'Marianka'. The internal liaison network of the GHQ was operated via the offices of the various detachments and departments where women usually worked. 'Every day, 14 to 17 meetings at various places in the city between 10.00 and 17.00 hrs, and each time being encumbered with secret letters to or from prisoners, clandestine publications, a multitude of things to remember or sort out and having to maintain constant alertness,' is how one woman courier recalled it years later. The situation was very similar within the AK structures of outlying areas. However, it would be a big mistake to assume that the contribution of women was reduced to the liaison services they dominated.

They also played a considerable role in the distribution of illegal newspapers and other AK publications. An efficient team of female couriers was run by Wanda Kraszewska-Ancerewicznowa 'Lena', who from 1941 was put in charge of the central office of distribution at the AK GHQ. Moreover there was a special women's diversion and sabotage detachment called DYSK (*Dyweryja i Sabotaż Kobiet*) commanded by Wanda Gertz 'Kazik'. There were also women's mine laying patrols which took part in 'Operation Wreath' to blow up railway lines around Warsaw. In territories beyond Warsaw, especially in partisan detachments, women played a vital role as field nurses, in organising first aid posts (in villages) and, during Operation 'Tempest', field hospitals. The Women's Military Service also provided logistic support to partisan detachments in the field during the difficult conditions of autumn and winter (by sewing warm clothes, knitting scarves and socks). Women distinguished themselves during the Warsaw Uprising in their work as nurses and messengers. Over 60 percent of a special platoon running a courier network in the sewers of the Polish capital were women. When the Warsaw Uprising fell the Germans granted over two thousand Polish women soldiers prisoner-of-war status, a fact unprecedented in European history. Women officers were sent to *Oflag* Molsdorf, whereas women of lower ranks were sent, among other places, to *Stalag* Oberlangen.

It has been estimated that almost 5,000 AK women soldiers perished during the war, i.e. almost ten percent of those in active service.

Many women soldiers of the AK received decorations. In the Lwów district (Area III) 20 percent of those who received the Cross for Valour were women, likewise 40 percent of those who received the Silver Cross of Merit with swords and 50 percent of those who received the Bronze Cross of Merit with swords. In a few exceptional cases women were decorated with the Order Virtuti Militari (class V).

After the disbanding of the AK some women continued the struggle for independence in the ranks of the Armed Forces Delegation and later the Freedom and Independence Union. They were subjected to repressions from the security services as much as the men. During the Polish People's Republic era those women who did not actively participate in freedom movement organisations (as well as those who returned to their families after being released from prison) continued and nurtured the Polish patriotic tradition. Women insurgents of the Warsaw Uprising who did not return home after their liberation from POW camps remained loyal to the cause and actively participated in combatant circles, including the Polish Home Army Ex-Servicemen Association and the Polish Underground Movement (1939-1945) Study Trust.

*Marek Ney-Krwawicz, Warsaw*