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An Unknown Account of the September Engagements Fought by ORP “Wicher”

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WAR!

The events of the 1939 Polish campaign still remain a living part of Polish history. Probably, it will never be possible for Poles to fully come to terms with this episode in the history of their state. In social awareness, but also in historical memory, it is a defeat more bitter than all others, a wound that never heals.

This may be due to the immense importance that the Polish people attached to the revival of Polish statehood in 1918 after over 120 years of partitions. The Second Polish Republic was a long-awaited and longed-for state. For the generation that had struggled for and secured the country’s independence, it was a good greater than any other. For the generation brought up in the Second Republic, it had become a symbol of power, something to be proud of. Of course, state propaganda played a huge role in building this image. Unfortunately, the reality behind this image, which came to light in September and October 1939, was dramatically painful. A state that had had colonial ambitions and had fancied itself a European power, was defeated in a little over a month, attacked by its three neighbours, and was left completely alone, without any real support from any of its allies. It is hard to imagine a more dramatic case of crushed dreams and ideas.

Historians have been trying to evaluate those events and this extremely painful turn of fate for the Polish state since the end of World War II. To assist their efforts, it is extremely important to introduce into historical discourse every preserved source of reminiscence even if it was created many years after the events and is burdened with the sin of knowledge and experience of the following years. Such accounts still

constitute a record of how much the notion of Polish power was incompatible with Poland's actual combat potential in the Polish campaign of 1939.

The Polish Navy, established pursuant to Józef Piłsudski's decree of November 1918, was built with a huge effort of the entire society since it was one of the types of armed forces which were particularly costly to create and maintain. In 1939, it was formally very impressive, given that it had been built in only 20 years, and especially when its potential was compared to that of the fleets of other Baltic states. It is true that it was inferior in tonnage to both the German and the Soviet fleet, as well as the Swedish and the Finnish fleets, but it was also much younger than any of them. Compared to the Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian naval forces, however, it proved that a lot had been achieved during those 20 years. With its four modern destroyers, one minelayer, six minesweepers, five submarines and a dozen auxiliary ships, the Polish Navy was more than just a representation of Poland's flag.¹ This did not mean, however, that it did not have its weaknesses. Firstly, it had no safe wartime base for its vessels. Neither the military port in Gdynia-Oksywie nor the port in Hel could perform such a function. Despite the fact that both of these ports had been expanded at a large cost, still no security arrangements had been made for the country's fleet. The narrow coast and the lack of a strong air force condemned the Polish fleet to defeat, especially in the clash with the Kriegsmarine.² In addition, the fate of the fleet depended on the command, whose headquarters were located in Warsaw and not on the coast. One could even go so far as to say that the fleet was abandoned, in a slightly similar way to Land Coastal Defence, which had no chance of getting support from the forces of The Pomeranian Army (Armia "Pomorzanie").³ The outbreak of World War II was a dramatic moment for the Polish Navy. Some of the vessels would go to Great Britain, some would be interned in Sweden, some would eventually fall into German hands, and the rest would sink while defending their own coast. Such was the fate of the first Polish destroyer ORP "Wicher" (Republic of Poland's Ship "Gale").

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- 1 I wrote about this in more detail in an article on the Polish Navy in the interwar period, Maciej Franz, "Polska Marynarka Wojenna w dwudziestolecu międzywojennym – próba oceny," in: *Morze nasze i nie nasze*, eds. Piotr Kurpiewski and Tadeusz Stegner (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, 2011), 291–304. An attempt at a full discussion can be found in the first part of Józef Wiesław Dyskant's unfinished monograph on the Polish Navy, see Józef Władysław Dyskant, *Polska Marynarka Wojenna w 1939 roku*, part 1. *W przededniu wojny* (Gdańsk: AJ-Press, 2000).
 - 2 The Command of the Navy asked the Command of the Air Force to establish an air force group in the area of the Polish coast, consisting of eight PZL P-11C fighter planes and six PZL P-23B Karaś bombers. Unfortunately, even this combat group was never formed due to the lack of equipment in Polish military aviation, Ryszard Kaczkowski, *Lotnictwo w działaniach na morzu* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo MON, 1986), 88.
 - 3 Vice Admiral Jerzy Świrski, the then head of the Naval Command was in Warsaw between 1 and 5 September, and then began the evacuation to the south, to finally get to Romania. In such conditions, he was unable to command the fleet, and yet he was formally responsible for it, Marcin Graczyk, *Admirał Świrski* (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Finna, 2007), 188–189.

ORP "WICHER" AND ITS COMMANDER

ORP "Wicher" was the first Polish warship in the class of torpedo boat destroyers, which were later simply called destroyers. It was placed into service under the Polish white and red flag as an effect of political and economic decisions.⁴ The plans for the expansion of the Polish Navy, which had been drawn up during the term of office of Vice-Admiral Kazimierz Porębski, were never implemented. Rear Admiral Jerzy Świrski, who had taken over as head of the Polish Navy in 1925, following the so-called mine scandal,⁵ supported a much more modest vision of the development of the Polish fleet, a vision that better matched the country's economic potential.⁶ As a result of this and the political and military alliance formed with France in 1921, Poland placed orders for three submarines/submarine minelayers and two TBD's at French shipyards.⁷ The construction of the first two Polish destroyers was commissioned to the shipyard "Chantiers Navals Français" in Blainville. Their design was based on that of the "Bourrasque-Simoun" class ships built at that time by French shipyards.⁸ ORP "Wicher" began to be built on 19 February 1927. Despite difficulties, including delays caused by strikes that were consuming the French shipbuilding industry at that time, the ship was launched on 10 July 1928. The launch was not perfect as the hull of the ship got stuck in the middle of the slipway and she had to be pulled into the water by French tugs.⁹ The process of equipping the ship took as long as the process of building her. As a result, it was not until 10 July 1930 that the Polish war flag was raised on the

4 An important factor that influenced the choice of the French shipyards was that Poland obtained a loan from France in April 1925 to provide the Polish Army with more arms, Mariusz Borowiak, "ORP «Wicher». Pierwszy kontrtorpedowiec II RP," *Morze* 9 (2018): 31.

5 Maciej Franz, *Sprawa o honor. Przypadek wiceadmirała Kazimierza Porębskiego*, in press.

6 In 1924, the then Polish government formally approved the fleet expansion plan submitted by Vice Admiral Kazimierz Porębski, which included the purchase of 3 cruisers, 6 destroyers, 12 torpedo boats, 12 submarines and 36 small coastal vessels. See: *Zarys historii i kronika dywizjonu niszczycieli Marynarki Wojennej PRL* [History outline and chronicle of the destroyer squadron of the Navy of the Polish People's Republic]. *Rozpoczęto 20.06.1963. Zakończono 13.04.1971 r. Arkuszy 195. Kategoria "A."* [Started on 20.06.1963. Ended on 13.04.1971 r. 195 Sheets. Category "A"], 7.

7 The three Polish submarines which were planned to be built as part of the order placed with the French shipyards, were the later ORP "Wilk," "Ryś" and "Żbik."

8 Jerzy Pertek, *Niszczyciele "Wicher" i "Burza"* (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo MON, 1971), 4–5.

9 Already at the launch, the first voices (or "initial concerns were raised saying that...") were heard saying that the event was a bad omen for the ship. Considering that the twin ship "Burza" (the "Tempest") was launched without any problems, these opinions turned out to be somewhat true. The "Wicher" was already sunk on the 3rd day of the war, while the "Burza" survived wartime, returned to Poland and served in the Polish Navy until 1960, and was used for the next 17 years as a museum ship. Its scrapping in 1977 along with the scrapping of the submarine ORP "Sęp" were some of the most flawed decisions of the military authorities of the Polish People's Republic, as the two vessels were among Poland's most meritorious combat ships.

“Wicher”. Five days later, the ship entered the naval port in Gdynia for the first time. It was commanded at that time by Lieutenant Commander Tadeusz Podjazd-Morgestern.

ORP “Wicher” was at that time a modern warship, a classic representative of her type. She displaced 1,540 tons standard and 2,100 tons full load. Measuring 107x10.2x3.1 metres, she was armed with four 130 mm main artillery guns, two water-cooled 40 mm Vickers–Armstrong 2 automatic anti-aircraft guns (model 1928/1930), and two twin-mount 13.2mm heavy machine guns. The ship was additionally armed with torpedo tubes, depth-charge launchers and side throwers and could place up to 60 sea mines. Engines with a power of 33,000 HP allowed the ship to accelerate to a speed of 33 knots. All this made ORP “Wicher” a modern, well-armed destroyer. Together with the twin warship “Burza,” they added new combat value to the Polish Navy and raised its aspirations in the Baltic region.¹⁰

For nearly a decade, the ship was not only home to a crew of 155 sailors, but also an important element of the Polish state’s maritime policy. Her subsequent visits to ports of the Baltic states were to be a sign of Poland’s growing importance in the region, a testimony to its economic and military potential and political aspirations.¹¹ At the same time, during all these years, intense training was conducted for successive classes of marines, who gained their spurs on the “Wicher.” The “Wicher” was famous for providing good training, as evidenced by the fact that its artillerymen always placed first in the whole fleet in annual ratings. Some historians have pointed out that this factor was the reason why the authorities made the decision for the “Wicher” to stay in Poland in September 1939.

The imminent threat of war made it necessary to take decisions with regard to the destroyer squadron. The circles close to the Navy Command had had no doubt for several years now that no adequate defence could be provided for these ships in Polish ports. Despite substantial expansion, neither the war port in Gdynia¹² nor the military port of Hel could be used as a safe base for the destroyers. This was clearly pointed out by Second Lieutenant Commander Rafał Czczott in one of his speeches.¹³ In this situation, a decision was made to send three destroyers to Great Britain as part of the

10 Witold Supiński and Mieczysław Lechowski, *Torpedowce i niszczyciele* (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Morskie, 1971), 49–50.

11 Such a role was certainly played by the visits to Stockholm in 1932, or Kiel in 1935.

12 State Archives of Ivano-Frankivsk Oblast (Derzhavnyi Arkhiv Ivano-Frankivskoy Oblasti), *Stanisławskij okryżnij komitet towaristwa “Liga morská i kolonialna,” m. Stanisław Stanisławskiego powitu Stanisławskiego wojewódstwa, Liga Morska i Kolonialna. Okręg Stanisławowski*, fond 414, description 1, case 4, page 31.

13 Rafał Czczott, “Działania marynarki wojennej,” in: Maciej Franz, Mariusz Kardas, *I wojna światowa na morzach w opiniach polskich teoretyków i praktyków* (Oświęcim: Wydawnictwo Napoleon V, 2018), 102.

Peking Plan.¹⁴ The ORP "Wicher" stayed in Poland to provide artillery cover for the minelayer "Gryf" and the minesweepers which were to set mine barriers to prevent access to the Polish coast and ports by the enemy.¹⁵ This decided the fate of the ship, which was to be sunk in an engagement with the future enemy, since no attempt whatsoever was made to provide at least partial cover for the fleet from the air.

The commander of the ship at that time, Lieutenant Commander Stefan de Walden, surely harboured no illusions about the possibility of carrying out the tasks set for him and his crew. He was too experienced an officer to believe that the "Wicher" would be able to make a real contribution to the defence of the Polish coast if it were to be attacked by the Third Reich. He was born on 27 December 1896 in Vilnius. He gained his naval experience in the Imperial Russian Navy, in which he served from 1917, after completing his training in the Marine Cadet Corps in St. Petersburg. Initially, he served on small minelaying vessels, to be recruited, at the end of the war, on the cruiser "Askold," where he took up the position of deputy commander. The events of the revolution of 1917 elevated him to the rank of ship commander. Thus, he came from the tsarist fleet, like many future officers of the Polish Navy.¹⁶

The disintegration of the existing political system spurred his decision to leave the service in the tsarist fleet and to come in 1918 to the nascent Poland. He joined the newly built navy and was assigned to the Naval Battalion in Modlin.¹⁷ Navy lieutenant Stefan de Walden took part in the Polish–Bolshevik war, fighting in the ranks of the Pinsk Flotilla against Bolshevik ships, as the commander of the armoured motor boat "MP-1" and then the ammunition tug "Leon."¹⁸ In the second half of 1920, he commanded the monitor "Mozyr," and then even became the commander of the Vistula Flotilla. The end of the Polish–Bolshevik war found him again on board the ships of

14 To this day the opinion persists that by sending these three vessels to Great Britain, Polish authorities wanted to protect Poland's most valuable surface ships from destruction, see Walter Pater, "Udział Marynarki Wojennej w wojnie obronnej Polski w 1939 roku," *Bandera* 9 (2019), 10: 13. This makes one wonder to what extent the ORP "Wicher" was less valuable than the other three Polish destroyers. I am much more inclined to agree with the opinion presented by Andrzej Drzewiecki and the views of the then Polish Navy officers he quotes, Andrzej Drzewiecki, *Polska Marynarka Wojenna od Drugiej do Trzeciej Rzeczypospolitej. Studium bezpieczeństwa morskogo państwa* (Gdynia–Oświęcim: Wydawnictwo Napoleon V, 2016), 414–415.

15 Piotr Stawecki, ed., *Zarys dziejów wojskowości polskiej w latach 1864–1939* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo MON, 1990), 715.

16 Jerzy Będźmirowski, "Współpraca polsko-brytyjska a bezpieczeństwo morskie polski w okresie międzywojennym," *Zeszyty Naukowe Akademii Marynarki Wojennej* 49 (2008), 3: 77.

17 Tadeusz Kondracki and Jan Tarczyński, "Polskie flotylle rzeczne w wojnie polsko-bolszewickiej (1919–1920)," *Biuletyn Informacyjny. Miesięcznik Światowego Związku Żołnierzy Armii Krajowej* 30 (2020), 8: 47.

18 Stefan de Walden, Krystyna de Walden-Gałuszko, Władysław Szarski, *ORP "Wicher" i jego dowódca* (Hel: Muzeum Obrony Wybrzeża/Stowarzyszenie Przyjaciół Helu, 2013), 22.

the river flotilla.¹⁹ In recognition of his merits and heroism, he was awarded the Polish military decorations of Silver Cross of the Military Order of Virtuti Militari²⁰ and the Cross of Valour. He received particular appreciation for his services in the defence of Płock during the Bolshevik offensive, during which the armoured ship “Minister”²¹ he commanded successfully engaged in artillery duels with Bolshevik artillery batteries.²² It was already then that his personal commitment and the ability to control his crew, which allowed him to achieve the goals set, were appreciated.

In his further military career he trained new generations of marines and worked in the Command of the Navy. In 1932 he was appointed Second Lieutenant Commander. On 1 April 1938 he was reappointed commander of the ORP “Wicher”²³ on which he was to serve until the outbreak of World War II. It was on this ship that he was promoted to Lieutenant Commander on 19 March 1939.

He was a good, experienced officer, and had no doubt that the war would be a huge challenge for him and his crew. His command in those three difficult days at the beginning of September did not raise any objections. He fulfilled his duty with the dignity of an officer. The ship entrusted to him completed her tasks well but succumbed to the power she could not resist – the German air force. During the Second World War, aerial forces turned out to be the greatest threat to warships of all the world’s navies.

On 1–3 September, Lieutenant Commander Stefan de Walden was one of the most important Polish naval officers. After the death of Lieutenant Commander Eugeniusz Kwiatkowski, the commander of the ORP “Gryf” on 1 September 1939, he was next in line to become commander of the Polish Navy’s surface fleet. Apart from the night patrol of the “Wicher” on the night of 1 September 1939, however, there was no opportunity for de Walden to command the surface naval force. Both the destroyer he was in charge of and the “Gryf” were converted into floating artillery batteries based at the naval port in Hel.²⁴ He still managed to contribute to the success of the Polish side in an artillery clash with German destroyers on the morning of 3 September, although

19 Kondracki and Tarczyński, “Polskie flotylle rzeczne,” 47.

20 Dziennik Personalny of 26.01.1922, Vol. 3, no. 1, 10.

21 Grzegorz Gołębiowski, *Obrona Płocka przed wojskami bolszewickimi 18–19 sierpnia 1920 r.* (Płock: Towarzystwo Naukowe Płockie, 2015), 179.

22 Lech Trawicki, “Marynarze w wojnie 1920 roku,” *Po wachcie*, 2 (2010): 7.

23 He commanded this vessel for the first time from June 1934 to June the following year, Jan Kazimierz Sawicki, ed., *Kadry Morskie Rzeczypospolitej*, Vol. V, *Polska Marynarka Wojenna. Dokumentacja organizacyjna i kadrowa oficerów, podoficerów i marynarzy (1918–1947)* (Gdynia: Polskie Towarzystwo Nautologiczne, 2011), 301.

24 This was an effect of the decision made by Rear Admiral Józef Unrug, who believed that, given the enemy’s clear advantage, the ships would do more good as artillery support for the defence of the Fortified Region Hel than as part of a freely-operating fleet, Pater, “Udział Marynarki Wojennej,” 14. Years later, after the end of World War II, Rear Admiral Józef Unrug considered his decision wrong. Drzewiecki, *Polska Marynarka*, 454.

the decisive role in forcing the enemy ships to break off the engagement was played by 152.4 mm guns which were used as the Heliodor Laskowski headland battery entered into combat.²⁵ He could not save the "Wicher" from sinking in the German bomber raid on Hel on 3 September.

Deprived of his ships, he was appointed Head of Communications of the Fortified Region of Hel.²⁶ He remained in this position until the decision to capitulate was made. With the personal consent of Rear Admiral Józef Unrug, he attempted to escape from Hel. He took command of the fishing boat "HEL-117," nicknamed "Adela" and, together with a quickly recruited crew, set out to sea on 1 October 1939. Unfortunately, the vessel was spotted by two German patrol ships, the "Nautilus" and the "Pelikan," which were part of the naval blockade that the Germans had set up around the Hel Peninsula.²⁷ He was taken prisoner by the Germans.

In the summer of 1945, after release, he decided to return to the Polish Navy. He became the Chief of the Navy Division at the General Staff in Warsaw. This probably was the reason why in 1947 he led a military mission to Great Britain, which was to arrange the return of the Polish warships to the country. He returned to Gdynia on board the ORP "Błyskawica." In the same year, he was promoted to the rank of commander.

Still actively engaged in the matters of the Navy, Commander Stefan de Walden also took on the duties of the head of the Historical Department of the Main Staff of the Navy in 1947–1949.²⁸ Unfortunately, shortly afterwards he was transferred to the reserve. He was never to return to service in the Navy. Until his death on 17 January 1976, he actively participated in the life of marine circles in a variety of ways. He particularly appreciated his visits to the new "Wicher" and the opportunity to pay tribute to the vessel he used to command. The wreck of the first "Wicher" had been lifted by the Germans from the bottom of the port of Hel. Despite plans to renovate her and incorporate her into the Kriegsmarine, she was eventually towed beyond the breakwater and laid aground in the harbour roadstead. After the war, nobody was interested in retrieving the wreck from the sea. Towed further into the Bay of Puck, it became a training target for naval aviation. Finally, partially dismantled, the wreck disappeared under the surface of the bay's waters where it remains to this day.²⁹

25 Commander Stefan de Walden, in his memoirs, presented this dramatic moment of the September campaign, emphasising that it ended with the success of the Polish side, Stefan de Walden, "Walka artyleryjska z niszczycielami niemieckimi w dniu 3.09.1939 r.," *Przełąd Morski*, 7 (1974), 8: 115–123.

26 S. de Walden, et.al., *ORP "Wicher"*, 23.

27 Piotr Sykut, "Próba przedzierania się drogą morską przez niemiecką blokadę polskiego wybrzeża 1 IX – 2 X 1939," *Saeculum Christianum*, 23 (2016): 287–289.

28 Jerzy Przybylski, "Działalność publicystyczna, promocyjna i edukacyjna w zakresie polskiej Marynarki Wojennej oraz polityki morskiej państwa," *Studia Gdańskie. Wizje i rzeczywistość*, 15 (2018): 172.

29 I had this special honour of going to sea on the hydrographic vessel of the Polish Navy, the ORP "Heweliusz" and laying a wreath at the eternal resting place of the ORP "Wicher" in 2011.

As it was written in one of the documents:

Only the “Wicher,” after a desperate fight against the overwhelming power of the Nazi air force, having repelled numerous attacks by the enemy’s planes, die[d] on 3 September 1939, remaining faithful to the white and red flag.³⁰

This is also why every preserved account from those days is so precious.

WITOLD HUBERT

In the interwar period, the Polish Navy trained hundreds of ratings and officers, thus building its personnel and expanding its combat potential. For many of these sailors, the Polish campaign of 1939 was to be the most important event in their military career.

One of them was the author of memoirs from the three September days of combat on the destroyer ORP “Wicher,” the then mate, acting as a non-commissioned signal officer, and ultimately a navy captain, Witold Hubert. He was born on 7 October 1916 in Lviv, still under the rule of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, but already in the atmosphere of the ongoing world war and the dreams of Poland’s independence, which were becoming more and more of a reality. He came from a working-class family. His father, Jan Hubert was a steelworker, and his mother, Eleonora née Kostecka, took care of the house and family with a prudence characteristic of Polish women from the Eastern Borderlands. Having completed his schooling, at the age of only 17, he decided to run away from home and join the Polish Navy.³¹ After just two years, he began his military service.³² He served on several Polish ships, including the destroyer ORP “Błyskawica.”

News of the growing threat of the outbreak of a new world war found him on board one of only four of the Polish destroyers that had been kept in the country to defend the coast. Accordingly, on the morning of 1 September 1939, he was in the port of Gdynia and not in the waters of the North Sea. The three dramatic days of fighting on the ORP “Wicher,” on the one hand, were a source of pride, as the crew successfully repulsed the enemy’s attack in the first air-sea battle of World War II, i.e. the clash with German planes in the Gulf of Gdańsk and the artillery duel with German destroyers on the morning of 3 September. At that time, Hubert’s ship was in the port of Hel and served

30 Stawecki, *Zarys historii*, 17.

31 On the role of the activities of the Maritime and Colonial League and its predecessors in creating maritime propaganda and instilling in a generation of young Poles a love of the sea and the desire to serve in the Polish Navy, see my article, Maciej Franz, “Tylko propaganda czy także «szkolnictwo podstawowe»». *Liga Morska i Kolonialna a aspekt szkolenia przyszłych kadr dla Polskiej Marynarki Wojennej*,” *Biuletyn Historyczny MMW*, in press.

32 Leszek Walkiewicz, *Patron darłowskiego portu*, accessed 26.01.2022, <http://www.infodarlowo.pl/echo,artykul1512.html>.

merely as a floating artillery battery. The advantage of the enemy, especially in the air, was so great that the risk of losing the ship in open waters was almost certain, and so she was held in port to avoid the loss of many lives. However, it was in the port of Hel, that the "Wicher" was sunk, hit by air bombs on 3 September 1939. Leading seaman Witold Hubert was one of the last sailors to leave the ship.

On 4 September, he was included in the crew of the Fortified Region Hel and put in charge of the anti-landing defence squad in the sector commanded by Second Lieutenant of the Navy Julian Czerwiński and, in mid-September, he came under the command of Lieutenant Commander Jan Wiśniewski as he and his squad were moved to the first line of defence in the area of Chałupy to relieve the marines from the Navy Aircraft Squadron of Puck, who had been defending this part of the front line until then.³³ He stayed there till 2 October, the day of the capitulation of Polish troops. Just like the vast majority of Polish soldiers and sailors,³⁴ he was taken prisoner by the Germans.



Photo 1. Witold Hubert as a sailor of ORP "Błyskawica" before 1939

Source: Leszek Walkiewicz, "Patroni Darłowskich ulic, rond i mostów," *70 Lat Polskiego Darłowa*, maj 2015, no. 3, accessed 11 November 2022, <https://archiwum.darlowo.pl/gazeta/201505.pdf>.

After the war ended, he returned to Pomerania. This time, however, fate did not lead him to Gdynia, but to Czołpin, where he got a job from the Maritime Office in Szczecin as a lighthouse keeper. At the same time, he was sent off to a course for naval pilots, and his working class background allowed him to find his place more easily in the new "people's" homeland. In 1949, after completing the course, he was transferred to the Harbour Master's Office in Ustka, on the middle coast, with the rank of

³³ Piotr Derdej, *Westerplatte – Okrywie – Hel 1939* (Warszawa: Bellona, 2009), 179.

³⁴ Small parties attempted to escape on a few small vessels, hoping to penetrate the German naval blockade around the Hel Peninsula and escape into neutral Sweden, Sykut, "Próba przedzierania," 276–293.

a lieutenant mariner. However, he could not dream of returning to the Polish Navy. His reliability at work was appreciated by his superiors. In 1955, based on the decision of the Maritime Office in Słupsk, he was appointed the captain of the port in Darłowo. It was this port and town that he devoted the rest of his life to. For nearly 20 years, he worked for the development of the port. He sent numerous letters and project proposals to authorities, dreaming of its modernisation and increasing its handling capacity. Unfortunately, most of his plans were not implemented, and Darłowo remained a fishing port and a charming town on the Polish coast, visited in the summer months by thousands of tourists who wanted to spend their holidays on beautiful Polish beaches.

Even after he had retired, in crisis situations, he still participated in piloting ships into the ports of Darłowo and Ustka. He was highly respected by many captains, including the great Polish traveller Krzysztof Baranowski, who always gladly visited him in his port, or Leonid Teliga. In his free time, he wrote poems, always thinking with affection of his beloved sea.³⁵ He died on 15 March 1999 and was buried in the cemetery in Darłowo. In 2002, at the request of his former long-time subordinate and associate, Jerzy Druchal, supported by Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Ziemi Darłowskiej (the Society of Friends of the Darłowo Land), the City Council in Darłowo named the extendable bridge in Darłówko after Captain Witold Hubert.³⁶

Though born in the faraway city of Lviv, he dedicated his life to the Baltic Sea and the Polish coast, becoming a permanent part of its history.

THE MEMOIRS

When conducting research, historians base their findings on evidence from historical sources. In their work, they use the widest possible range of such sources. Memoirs, similarly to accounts, are a highly subjective category of historical sources that require careful scrutiny. However, when no other data are available, they play a very important role, allowing one to look at past events from the perspective of an individual. A look at the past, not through formal documents, but through the memory of an individual person, gives history a more individual, human-related context. For this reason, it is worth introducing memoirs into historiographic circulation, also those relating to the history of the Second World War, including the Polish campaign of 1939.

The memoirs presented in this article were written down as late as 1970. As a consequence, they lack accuracy when it comes to the timing of the events they are describing

35 Some of them were published in the collection of poems, Leszek Walkiewicz, ed., *Utwory poetyckie o Darłowie i wiersze darłowskich poetów* (Darłowo: Sagittarius Wydawnictwo, 2014).

36 Leszek Walkiewicz, „Patroni Darłowskich ulic, rond i mostów,” *70 Lat Polskiego Darłowa*, maj 2015, No. 3, accessed 11 November 2022, <https://archiwum.darlowo.pl/gazeta/201505.pdf>.

and adequate detail that could be expected of an account written shortly after the end of the war. We owe the memoirs to the efforts of the employees of the Naval Museum in Gdynia, who, most likely in 1969, asked the then captain of the navy, Witold Hubert, to write down his memories of the Polish campaign of 1939. As a result, two documents were created. The first one contains Captain Hubert's recollections of his service as a mate and a non-commissioned signal officer on the destroyer ORP "Wicher" on 1–3 September.³⁷ This record has never been published before and so is unknown to Polish historiography. The second document, parts of which are already known and used, includes Hubert's memories of the period from 4 September to 2 October 1939, when he participated in the defence of the Fortified Region of Hel.³⁸

The memoirs were typed, and then the author made corrections on the typescript with a pen, certifying them with his signature.

The time the memoirs were written was so distant from the actual events that it is impossible to clearly separate the author's opinions presented by him in the text of the memoirs from those that he added while working in the Polish People's Republic, especially the critical views of the preparation of the Polish state for the outbreak of the war, or the opinions presented by members of the crew of the ORP "Wicher." This raises some doubts, because they were, after all, propaganda clichés, quite intensively used in the historical policy of the "people's" Homeland. Of course, it is difficult to say for sure that Witold Hubert had not had a critical view of the authorities before September 1939, but there is no evidence for it. He came from a working-class family. He escaped from his family home in Lviv and volunteered to join the Polish Navy. If he had lost his illusions about Poland's power at sea in such a short time, this would mean that the educational and patriotic activity of the Polish Navy at that time was of a really low quality. This, in turn, strongly contradicts popular assessments of the activities carried out by the naval authorities of the Second Polish Republic.

It is worth adding that these doubts relate in particular to the critical evaluation of the actions taken by the command of the Navy, and not the general criticism of the preparations of the Second Polish Republic for the war in 1939. It cannot be unequivocally stated from the current time perspective to what extent the reflections expressed in the memoirs were Witold Hubert's views from 1939 or 1969. The thirty years separating the events from the time when they were written down may have mattered in this case.

As a result, some of Hubert's opinions, especially his political assessments, should be considered with caution. What is undoubtedly valuable about his account is the

37 The Naval Museum in Gdynia – Archival Fonds, ref. no. 231R, *Witold Hubert, Wspomnienia z ORP "Wicher" z dni września 1939 r.* [Memoirs from the ORP "Wicher" from September 1939].

38 The Naval Museum in Gdynia – Archival Fonds, ref. no. 300R, *Witold Hubert, Obrona Helu 3.09.1939 – 2.10.1939 r.* [The defence of Hel /3.09.1939–2.10.1939].

attempt he made at showing the atmosphere on board the ORP “Wicher” in the first days of the war. Of course, it still needs to be remembered that the author wrote down his recollections more than 30 years after the events. This is an important perspective, because the influence of post-war naval literature, especially Jerzy Pertek’s books, is manifest in the descriptions of the events of the night patrol of 1–2 September or the morning duel with German destroyers on 3 September.

Of course, one cannot say for sure what opinions prevailed on board the Polish destroyer, which, being placed in a covering position to shield the operation in which the “Gryf” and the minesweepers were to lay a mine barrage, spotted the silhouette of an unknown, probably German combat vessel. In his memoirs, Hubert mentions a cruiser, but the ship could not have been one since there were no German cruisers in these waters at that time. The ship that was spotted from the “Wicher” was most likely the German Z-2 destroyer “Georg Thiele” or possibly the Z-4 destroyer “Richard Beitzen.”³⁹ Both of these identifications, however, are quite uncertain. It was difficult to clearly identify the vessel in the dark of the night. There is no doubt that the “Wicher” came into contact with an unrecognised enemy ship, but the vessel was misidentified. Similarly far from the truth is Hubert’s assessment of the ship’s commander’s decision not to open fire at the enemy ship. The author of the memoirs presents a logically rather odd interpretation, while the reason was prosaic. Lieutenant Commander Stefan de Walden was convinced that the mine operation was underway as no one informed him that it had never been started.⁴⁰ Not wanting to reveal Polish operations, in compliance with his orders, he neither opened artillery fire nor launched a torpedo salvo. Following the orders he had received, he decided that keeping the mine operation secret was a priority. Of course, a non-commissioned signal officer did not have to know this and so his deliberations could have been as distant from the truth as those presented in the memoirs.

Similar doubts are raised by the description of the encounter with German destroyers on the morning of 3 September since it is certain that no German vessel of this class was sunk in the Baltic Sea in 1939.⁴¹ It is possible that one of the two German destroyers was damaged in the course of this duel. However, this matter remains uncertain to this day. The fact that the enemy laid a smoke screen and broke off combat was the effect of the headland battery entering the fight, and not a success of the Polish ships berthed in the port of Hel. Witold Hubert, in his memoirs, presents a version which may have been common among the sailors on board the “Wicher,” but it may equally likely have become part of his picture of the events as an effect of reading the marine books by

39 Borowiak, “ORP «Wicher»,” 41.

40 Mariusz Borowiak, “Trzy dni wojny ORP Gryf,” *Historia. Wojsko i Technika*, 5 (2019): 83.

41 Polish historians articulated this finding with conviction only in the second half of the 1980’s, Edmund Kosiarz, *Działania floty w drugiej wojnie światowej* (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Morskie, 1989), 92.

Jerzy Pertek.⁴² They were not only suggestive, but also the first editions clearly pointed to the victory of the Polish side, which was due to the sinking of one German destroyer and the damaging of another. These "findings" of the Polish marine writer were verified many years later.⁴³ Witold Hubert does not mention in his memoirs that the German side was astonished by the presence of the Polish ships at the Hel base, meanwhile the truth is that the headland battery engaged in the battle came as a surprise to the enemy. The Germans hoped that the intense bombing of the previous day had excluded it from the combat. Seeing that this was not the case, on 3 September they mounted heavy raids on both the hypothetical positions of the headland battery as well as the military port of Hel, in which the "Gryf" and the "Wicher" were sunk.⁴⁴

The reminiscences from his service on the ORP "Wicher" end with a description of the ship sinking in the German air raid. Part of the information contained therein is not found in other reports or historical studies. Therefore, it can be concluded that in this respect the account makes a valuable supplement to the existing knowledge. The commander of the ship wrote down his reminiscences, which initially appeared as a short report in the magazine "Przegląd Morski,"⁴⁵ and were then published in a larger volume, already quoted here. The perspective of the ship's commander is different from that of a sailor, but they both complement historians' knowledge of the events of 1–3 September 1939.

Witold Hubert was only a non-commissioned officer; though he held an important deck position, close to the ship's command centre, he was still too low in the ship hierarchy to be aware of all the nuances of the decisions made by those in charge.⁴⁶ The state of knowledge about the events in the military port of Hel taking place between 1 and 3 September was incomplete also among the officers in the highest ranks of the Polish Navy, who formally should have complete knowledge of what was happening

42 The description of the artillery duel on the morning of 3 September 1939 changed in the successive editions of Jerzy Pertek's book. The certainty that a German destroyer was sunk slowly eroded. In the 7th edition published in 1972, the author adopts the stance that both German ships were damaged, Jerzy Pertek, *Wielkie dni malej floty*, 7th ed. (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 1972), 79–81. Jerzy Pertek based his initial description of the events on the conceptions adopted during the war by the Polish side, W.A.K.L., "Morski czyn Polski," *Poland on the Seas*, 5 (1945), 1: 2.

43 The commander of the ship, Lieutenant Commander Stefan de Walden, questioned about this artillery duel by the German commission, supposedly also insisted that one German destroyer was sunk and the other was damaged, de Walden, et. al., *ORP "Wicher"*, 76.

44 It is difficult to agree with the idea that it was only during the artillery fight on the morning of 3 September that the German side learned the position of the Polish warships, Tadeusz Górski, *Polska flota wojenna 1939–1945 na tle flot europejskich* (Gdańsk: Civitas Christiana, 2001), 62.

45 Stefan de Walden, "Ostatnie dni «Wichra» 30 VIII – 3 IX 1939 r.," *Przegląd Morski*, 5 (1948): 19–33; idem, "Walka artyleryjska," 115–123.

46 A motif that runs through various stories about Witold Hubert is that he was the last sailor to disembark the ORP "Wicher". Without questioning these opinions, it should be stated that the entire crew was successfully evacuated, except for the Signalmann Able Seaman Edward Kwiatkowski, Edmund Kosiarz, *Wojna na Bałtyku 1939* (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Morskie, 1988), 212.

in their area of responsibility. Meanwhile, Vice Admiral Jerzy Świrski received highly distorted information, as evidenced by the records contained in the report of 7 October 1939.⁴⁷

The reminiscences discussed here are part of the memoir trend associated with the 1939 campaign. They provide valuable historical material as each such recollection expands our knowledge about the emotions and the events of the past. Documents alone say too little, because they do not show human emotions. Only when backed up by personal reminiscences and accounts do they bring us closer to what those days really looked like.

EDITING SOURCE DOCUMENTS

Principles

THE NAVAL MUSEUM IN GDYNIA, ARCHIVAL FONDS

REF. NO. 231R

Witold Hubert, *Wspomnienia z ORP "Wicher" z pierwszych dni września 1939 r.*

[Memoirs from the ORP "Wicher" from early September 1939]

31.08.1939

I act as a signalling non-commissioned officer on the ORP "Wicher," which is anchored, along with other war vessels, at the roadstead of the Gdynia-Oksywie naval port. War is "in the air." The crew's mood is heavy but not depressing. There are quite large differences of opinion. Some believe that we are "all locked and loaded" and that "we will not give up a single button," there are those who believe that should war break out "they will be in Berlin in two weeks" because [Adolf] Hitler "has tanks made of butter." Others, among whom I count myself, see the seriousness of the situation, but still delude ourselves that it will all end up with threats. Knowing [Adolf] Hitler's war machine, strengthened by the bloodless conquests of Austria, Czechoslovakia, the Rhineland and part of Lithuania, we still believe in our own strength backed by the English-French alliance. But why do I have reservations about the departure of the remaining ships of the destroyer squadron, which left for England a few days ago?! I remember us moving in a line-ahead formation, the ORP "Grom," "Błyskawica," "Burza" and "Wicher." I see their silhouettes in the last rays of the setting sun, and then a radio and optical signal from the Hel o[bservation] p[ost]; The ORP "Wicher" remains at the disposal of the fleet command. Signed by Fant 8 /Time 22.00 Acting Chief of Staff/. And a farewell signal from the Commander of the squadron: "God bless for the glory of the homeland" – farewell flag signals from the "Grom," "Błyskawica" and "Burza" and our return to the port in Gdynia. Did they not believe in victory at that time and

47 Tadeusz Kondracki, "Polska Marynarka Wojenna w początkowym okresie II wojny światowej – meldunek kontradmirała Świrskiego z 7.X.1939 r.," *Zeszyt Naukowy Muzeum Wojska* 7 (1993): 150.

did they not want to doom the three best warships the same way they sentenced us, the "Gryf" and the other vessels?!

Time 22.00; Navy o[bservation] p[ost] Gdynia-Oksywie Fleet Command transmits a light signal to all units: "On 1 September 1939 at 05.00, 3 planes will be passing from WEST to EAST. Hold fire. Signed by Fant 8. I ordered to report the signal immediately to the officer on duty Lieutenant [Zbigniew] Kowalski, who, confirming the receipt of the signal, commanded the signalman who had passed the signal to increase vigilance. No wind, a calm night, Good visibility."

1.09.1939

Time 05.00 a.m. – a growing noise of aircraft engines can be heard from the west; they are getting closer, the watchkeepers are at their stations prepared for battle. At one point we see 3 planes / as in the signal / coming from WEST towards us at an altitude of 300 to 500 m[etres]. They are already above us. And only then do we notice the sinister black crosses on the wings. Battle stations! Artillery pieces from the "Wicher," "Gryf" and the trawlers in action. To no avail. The planes passed over us, turned over Gdynia, and flew over Oksywie. They disappeared on the west side. All hands are on board, the engines are running. Comments: where did this signal about planes come from and why" hold fire?! Is it a provocation – after all, the war has not started yet?!

Time 09.00 a.m. – on the west side, from the Puck Bay comes a rising secondary noise of working airplane engines. The ships in the roadstead have raised anchor – waiting. They pass in waves – several dozen aircraft, presumably "Junkers," pass from the starboard and port side, approaching the Oksywie naval port. Whistling noise and bomb blasts, columns of smoke in Oksywie. The anti-aircraft artillery from the ships and from land repels the attack. An unexpected and treacherous attack. Bombs are raining down on the port, on the positions of the submarines, which were led out of the port by the squadron commander between 5.00–9.00 a.m., on torpedo boats, the diving base, on all objects that have been selected as a target presumably by the Nazi command after they inspected the photos taken by the first three, reconnaissance aircraft. End of bombing, enemy planes have disappeared on the horizon. The engines of the "Wicher" are running "slow ahead," we are in the bay.

Time 11.00 a.m. – a trawler pulls in to a side of the "Wicher." The commander of the trawler passes to the commander of the ORP "Wicher" Second Lieutenant Commander [Stefan] de Walden, a large sealed envelope, presumably containing orders.

Time 12.00 [noon] – The envelope has been handed over, first messages have been handed over – the ORP "Nurek" sunk, the ORP "Mazur" sunk, heavy casualties. During the bombing of the port, no bomb was dropped on the ships in the roadstead. Again people are commenting. The trawler is still at the side of the "Wicher," when an ominous noise of incoming machines is heard from the direction of the Puck Bay

again. The trawler takes off, engines “half ahead,” course – the Hel headland. On the left side, the “Gryf” is sailing about 300 m[eters] from us – farther away are some scattered trawlers. Aircraft. I’ve counted up to 40. They were flying in squadrons dipping above us. A hellish chuckle of bombs falling on us and the “Gryf” and again on the “Gryf” and on us. All anti-air artillery pieces of all ships in action. The enemy is using on-board arms, especially against the defenceless trawlers, which, with their insignificant anti-aircraft weapons only make Nazi pilots more insolent. The commanding officer of the ship Commander [Stefan] de Walden is cool, composed and resolute. Short commands to the helm: “Bring her to starboard!”, “Bring her to port!”, and so over and over again. The ship is zigzagging, bombs – fountains and water columns are bursting from starboard and port side, and again I hear the commander’s voice “Bring her to starboard”, “Bring her to portside,” we are going “full ahead” in a zigzag. Bombs on the starboard side, bombs on the port side, in front of the bow and behind the stern. Those falling farther away and those almost rubbing against the sides. Explosions, columns of dirty water flooding sailors at their combat stations on board. Thousands, tens of thousands of dead, stunned fish. I can see their white bellies next to the ship’s sides, we are breaking through a mass of dead fish. And in the distance I can see the “Gryf.” It sails heavily with several hundred mines on board; the slow speed and the wide hull do not allow her to make quick turns. Bomb after bomb falls behind the stern of the “Gryf.” I can see scattered trawlers, they ineffectively try to “snap back” at the bombing planes, which are at the same time decimating the trawlers’ crews with machine gun fire. End of attack. The enemy planes are gone. We count the enemy’s losses and our own losses. I do not know the enemy’s losses; as for our own losses: a dozen or so sailors from the “Gryf” killed, a dozen wounded. Commander of the “Gryf” killed. A dozen or so seamen from the trawler “Mewa” killed and wounded, and there are losses on other ships, too. We were lucky. The speed and good manoeuvrability of the ship, and the commander’s decision to zigzag saved us from losses – one man slightly wounded with a ricochet shrapnel, and black, muddy uniforms. These are the only effects of the bombing of the “Wicher.” We receive additional sad news, the Commander of the Naval Aviation Squadron in Puck – killed. Casualties. War.

A criminal attack on a defenceless nation. Combat alert called off – combat watch in positions. The ship is moving very slowly forward, we are in the bay. In the distance, our other military units, each on its own course. On the horizon, the last merchant ship flying Greek or Swedish colours, which left the port of Gdynia already during the bombing. From the direction of Gdańsk you can hear distant detonations of exploding bombs and you can see smoke. It is Westerplatte fighting. Twilight is coming. The ship is located on the route Hel – Gdańsk. I am in the forward room with almost all of the free watch deck crew. The mood is unhappy. Despondency and rage and

regret. A certain period of life that was interrupted by the war will end. From the radio speaker we hear continuous: Attention, attention incoming. Attention, attention arrived. I start:

We won't forsake the land we came from
 We won't let our speech be buried.
 We are the Polish nation, the Polish people
 From the royal line of Piast.
 The crew carries on the words of the song.
 With the words:

No German will spit in our face
 I hear the voice of the ship's boatswain:
 You're right son – but the motherfucker is spitting!

I go out on deck. Night. The ship glides slowly on the water. Change of the combat watch. I take up my post on the navigation bridge. Nearby, there is the commander, deputy commander captain [Radosław] Nowakowski, commander of underwater weapons, Lt. [Tadeusz] Okoński and the artillery commander, Lt. [Zbigniew] Kowalski, steersman, signalmen / mate Jędrzejewski Edward, able seaman Tomaszuk Leopold /.

1.09.1939 – Time 23.00

Peaceful and quiet night. I am in position, we are still in the bay area. We sail slowly forward, from the stern the rising or setting moon is visible, illuminating the silver surface of the water behind us. Combat blackout – on the horizon of the waterways – nothing. From a distance you can only see the glow over Westerplatte, which is still fighting, and you can hear the murmurs of distant, sinister squadrons attacking the Polish shore. At one point, the signalman's muted report: course 170o, silhouette of a warship! Report handed over to the commander – everyone on the wings of the bridge. Yes, you can clearly see beyond the stern of our ship a few miles from us, the silhouette of a sailing German cruiser as it passed the aft from WEST to EAST. She is visible in the moonlight – we are floating in the shadow, invisible. Crew's tension, commander's voice: rangefinder – distance? Rangefinding mate Kukiełka tracks her with a rangefinder from the battle bridge. We all hear "distance 11,000 m[etres], distance 10,500 m[etres] (...), distance 9,000 m[etres] Torpedoes in launchers, commander of submarine weapons on the bridge. Do we torpedo her? The crew is waiting. The crew wants revenge. For the sunken ships, for the brothers in arms killed, for the treacherous attack, for Poland. The crew is waiting. In the dark, we hear a voice: I don't know whose voice, laconically stating" WE HAVE NO ORDER TO START WAR! Absolute silence, you can see beyond the stern the shadow of the cruiser, and our torpedoes in their launchers. And she glides calmly, sailing towards Gdańsk. Rangefinder's voice: distance 10,000 m[etres] (...), distance 11,000 m[etres]. The cruiser moves away (...)

“We have no order to start war” – despite the “Mazur” and “Nurek” having been sunk by the Nazi “Luftwaffe.” Bombing of Puck, Westerplatte, the entire coast, all of Poland. It is incomprehensible to me – tragic. I hear the voice again, this time from the commander: “Probably the “Gryf” has laid mines on the cruiser’s course.” We are going on our own course, at some point I see a calling light signal, transmitted by a blinker signal lamp: X-3, X-3, X-3. It’s us. I report with a blinker, I get the identification signal of the “Gryf.” Commander’s order – transmit the signal “Did you lay any mines?” Immediate response “Dropped mines but unarmed.” The chance was lost, the enemy cruiser sailed away unharmed, not hit by our torpedoes and not torn by mines that “were dropped unarmed.” There were no comments, just stinging bitterness rising to the throat.

2.09.1939 – morning

We enter the naval port of Hel. Torpedoes disembarked. In the naval port, on the other side of the basin, ORP “Gryf” has moored; behind the stern of the “Wicher” – ORP “Mewa.” A sunny, warm, cloudless day. Breather. The day passes calmly, interrupted by several attacks by diving “Junkers.” Bombs have missed. From the radio loudspeaker constantly: attention, attention incoming, attention, attention passed and news: our troops are fighting with the overwhelming force of the enemy, retreating. England’s ultimatum to [Adolf] Hitler for the suspension of hostilities in Poland (...) And where is the alliance with England and France? We bleed, and where is their aerial power? Where’s the help, where’s the second front on the French side? Doubt sneaks into our hearts, but we are ready to make a sacrifice of our lives, because the Love of the Homeland is not an empty phrase in each of us, it has probably been “sucked with mother’s milk.” This is what each of us, from the Commander to the mess specialist, feels. Evening and night come. Throughout the night, at 15-minute intervals, our ships are bombed by single enemy planes diving. Anti-aircraft artillery of the “Wicher” and the “Gryf” and batteries located in Hel successfully fight the attacking aircraft. I see one of the burning enemy machines, which, hit in the air and burning, fell onto land or into the sea, on the other side of the Hel peninsula. A restless night, the entire crew in their positions.

3. 09.1939 – Time 9.00

On the horizon, from Gdańsk, there are three German TBD’s of the “Leberecht Mass” type, distance of about 13,000 m[etres]. Battle stations. German ships show their sides, flashes from the broadsides, and in a moment the roar of exploding missiles. The first ones that are too short hit us like shrapnel, because in front of us on the water – like a rain of bullet fragments bursting at the water. Our main artillery in action. Artillery of the “Gryf”, too. I am on the battle bridge, next to the artillery relay telephone, on

the bridge there is also the Artillery Commander, Lt [Zbigniew] Kowalski, rangefinder, signalman, as well as Second Lieutenant [Julian] Czerwiński and two non-commissioned officers operating particular apparatus. Lt [Zbigniew] Kowalski communicates in a controlled voice at first: single fire, bursts of fire, the rangefinder states: too short, too short (...), on target. Lieutenant's orders: continuous fire. Shells from the "Wicher" and the "Gryf" fired from our guns at an increasing pace towards the enemy. Shells from the enemy ships with a hellish whistle fly over us, one of them hitting the side of the "Mewa" berthed behind the stern – it tore her hull, creating a hole with a cross-section of more than 1 m[etre] above the waterline. That "Mewa," whose crew suffered the most during the air raids, with the highest number of casualties and the wounded. One shell struck the side of the "Gryf" above the waterline, killing an officer and two seamen. We are still lucky. The shells are flying over us, they are in front of us, they are next to us, but they do not hit the "Wicher." The roar of our guns is mixed with the whistle of passing enemy shells so I do not know who is firing or when. The smell of burnt gunpowder, dozens of discarded shell casings on deck and in the water beside the ship's side. Due to the shocks caused by our own artillery, the failure of the telephone transmitters, combat paint peels off the voice pipes. I see the faces of my companions on the bridge, feverish, sweaty, with hard, fierce features – acknowledging with an automatic move every whistle of a passing shell. And then the German ships in a smokescreen. And again the voice of Lt [Zbigniew] Kowalski "Continuous fire into the smokescreen! Rangefinding mate's voice: on target!" Report: warships go about – escape. We are the winners. Apparently, one ship has sunk and one has been damaged. This artillery duel revived our hearts and restored our faith in our modest strength. Apart from the "Wicher" and the "Gryf," the [Heliodor] Laskowski battery from Hel took part in the artillery duel. Whose shells were on target was unimportant, we fought together, we were the winners in the first (...) and last sea battle in the Hel region. End of the combat alert, hours of respite and then the radio message "England and France declared war on Germany". Joy, restored faith in the alliance (...), faith in victory, and then around 2 p.m. a raid of enemy squadrons sent to sink the "Wicher" and the "Gryf" by the Nazi command enraged by the defeat of their TBD's. And the already known facts: bombs on the "Wicher," bombs on the "Gryf." The "Gryf" is on fire, the "Wicher" is sinking by the wharf, the ship topples over on its side. Suspended on the yard, the body of a colleague Able Seaman Kwiatkowski Edward, thrown onto the yard by a bomb explosion hitting the part of the bridge on which he was standing. Torn side, sailors jump onto the quay and into the water, the commander's order to abandon the ship, uniforms floating on the water and low-flying enemy planes, firing machine guns on the crew saving their lives. The end of ORP "Wicher," but not the end of our fight, nor the end of the war. The "Wicher," for us – defence of Hel.

Note: the given hours should be treated as approximate hours, because the time has blurred the exact terms, as it has blurred some names and some faces, fixing others.

Darłowo – 12.02.1970. Hubert Witold.

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English version: Radosław Dolecki, Mark Atkinson

SUMMARY

The memoirs of Witold Hubert, a non-commissioned officer from the destroyer ORP "Wicher," were written down in 1970. They cover three days of combat in September 1939. The account has never been published before. It supplements in an important way the existing knowledge on the engagements of the Polish Navy in the Polish campaign of 1939. The publication of the memoirs reminds readers of the tragic days of September 1939 and the figure of Witold Hubert.

Nieznana relacja z wrześniowych walk ORP "Wicher"

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: kampania polska 1939, ORP "Wicher," wspomnienia, Witold Hubert, niszczyciel.

STRESZCZENIE

Wspomnienia Witolda Huberta, podoficera z niszczyciela ORP "Wicher," spisane zostały w 1970 roku. Obejmują trzy dni walk we wrześniu 1939 roku. Nigdy nie były publikowane.

Stanowią ważne uzupełnienie wiedzy o walce Polskiej Marynarki Wojennej w 1939 roku, w toku kampanii polskiej. Ich publikacja przypomina tragiczne dni września 1939 roku i postać Witolda Huberta.

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