

GLORY TO THE SAPPER

BY MICHAEL DIGBY

There are a number of poignant memorials around the world dedicated to the courage and bravery of bomb disposal teams and to those that paid the ultimate sacrifice while engaged in bomb disposal operations. The Felix Memorial Garden, the UK AT/ATO Memorial in Warwickshire, the EOD Memorial at Eglin Air Force Base, the US Bomb Technician Memorial at Redstone Arsenal and the Israeli National Police Bomb Disposal Memorial in Jerusalem are the few that I have been fortunate enough to visit.

Most memorials are tucked away on military or police installations, open to the public only upon special invitation or on certain days of remembrance. There is one city where their memorial is very public and quite dramatic.

Warsaw Poland is a city that suffered the brutality of World War II street combat, endured the shame of Nazi domination and experienced betrayal by its own Allies. It is a city that lost so many lives, with an infrastructure that laid in ruins for many years. But it is also a city that witnessed heroic resistance and inconceivable acts of courage. There has never been a shortage of pride and honor in Warsaw.

While much has been written about the "Warsaw Rising" of 1944 and the daring exploits of its underground resistance fighters, the formidable task of rebuilding this great capital city after WWII is every bit as much a story of sacrifice, bravery and of national pride. That task was made more daunting by the thousands of buried Nazi land mines, emplaced booby-traps, and the tons of unexploded ordnance left behind. The unenviable and dangerous task of disposing and defusing these explosive hazards fell squarely onto the shoulders of the Warsaw Sappers. In honor of their heroic work, the "Glory to Sappers" memorial site was dedicated in May 1975, a tribute to the more than 600 Sappers killed during bomb disposal duties. It is this silent memorial that I visited on a hot summer day in June 2012.

A short walk south of the tourist-busy streets of central Warsaw sits Marshal Edward Śmigły-Rydz park, a peaceful, tree-lined park alongside the Vistula River where today, families stroll and children play. It would be hard to imagine a more appropriate site. In fact, the park stands in an area where apartment blocks, shops and schools had once been reduced to rubble. Footpaths extending from neighboring side streets traverse the park and converge upon a concrete rectangular space, the centerpiece of which is an impressive twelve-foot tall statue of a kneeling Sapper.

Wearing 1945-era battle gear and helmet, a rifle slung over his shoulder, the Sapper is kneeling on the ground, his imposing gaze focused on removing a mine from the ground with his bare hands. Surrounding him are six towering 50-foot tall columns, each shaped in the contours of an explosive blast wave extending outward from his kneeling position. A scroll in large block letters reads, "Chwała Saperom" (translated - "Glory to Sappers") is wrapped around the base of the Sapper.



CHWAŁA SAPEROM



Lining the south edge of the space are knee-high stone tablets, bearing the names of more than 600 Sappers with the inscription, "Saperom Poległym W Czasie Rozminowania Kraju" (translated - "In Memory to the Sappers who Saved the City"). Fresh bouquets of red and white flowers, the national colors of Poland, adorned the base of the tablets and the kneeling Sapper, serving as a reminder that even after all these years, Warsaw remembers.

Today, Warsaw is a beautiful city, thanks in no small part to the heroism of the Warsaw Sappers. I would encourage any of my Bomb Technician/EOD colleagues to visit this memorial site and pay homage to the courage of these bomb disposal heroes - each of whom died for a free Warsaw. Chances are, there will be a fresh bouquet of flowers at the site, no matter when you visit.

About the Author

Michael Digby is a 34-year veteran of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, with fifteen years as a bomb technician on the bomb Squad. He can be contacted at mdigby@lasd.org.

SAPEROM POLEGŁYM W CZASIE ROZMINOWANIA KRAJU

