



The ORP *Orzel* shortly after completion. The sub carried a crew of 56, displaced 1110/1473 tons, carried on 3.5-in deck gun and two 40mm weapons, and twelve 21-in torpedo tubes (20 torpedoes carried), was powered by two Sulzer diesels of 4740 horsepower that gave a top speed of 19 knots (surfaced), with a range of approximately 4000 miles. She measured 275.8-ft long with a beam of 22-ft, and a draft of 13-ft 6-in.



The 1939 Polish war flag.

# THE ORZEL INCIDENT

IN SEPTEMBER 1939, POLAND WAS REDUCED TO ASHES IN LESS THAN A MONTH BY THE NAZI WAR MACHINE. THE BALTIC SEA WAS UNIMPORTANT TO THE BATTLE, BUT THE SMALL POLISH NAVY PUT UP A BRAVE FIGHT. THE DAMAGED SUBMARINE ORZEL (EAGLE) SOUGHT REFUGE IN A NEUTRAL PORT ONLY TO BE INTERNED BY TREACHEROUS ESTONIANS. HOWEVER, THEY DID NOT ACCOUNT FOR THE BRAVE CREW OVERPOWERING THEIR GUARDS AND ESCAPING TO ENGLAND — WITHOUT CHARTS OR NAUTICAL MANUALS!

BY BARRY GREGORY

In 1939 the Polish Navy was new. Poland herself was new — a nation reborn after centuries of partition and servitude. The Mercantile Marine was built from a single ship. The Navy sprang from a handful of river gunboats, minesweepers, and torpedo boats. In the first years of her regeneration, Poland had to make her own ports. Gdynia was built from a fishing village.

The seagoing Polish Navy began in

1929 with the completion of the 1540-ton destroyer *Wicher* (Wind). During the next ten years, the *Wicher* was joined by three more destroyers, each with a displacement of 2144 tons: *Blyskawica* (Lightning), *Grom* (Thunderbolt), and *Burza* (Squall).

With the outbreak of World War Two in September 1939, the Poles possessed a small but efficient Navy consisting principally of these four destroyers and five submarines: *Orzel*



*Orzel* was built at the De Schelde Dutch shipyard.

(Eagle), *Sep* (Vulture), *Rys* (Lynx), *Zbik* (Wild Cat), and *Wilk* (Wolf). In addition, there were five minesweepers, one minelayer, two gunboats, three motor torpedo boats, one survey vessel,

one training ship, one transport ship, six tugs, eight river gunboats, six river monitors and 45 river motor boats.

In the event of war with Germany, the Poles knew they had little hope of defeating the Nazis in the Baltic but the Polish Navy had the will to fight. Polish sailors shared an immense pride in the new nation with their fellow soldiers and airmen. If the *Wehrmacht* dared to cross the Polish frontier, the Army would throw them out. It was the proud boast of the Cavalry that they could ride to Berlin in ten days!

The fight on land, sea, and in the air began in the early morning of 1 September. By the end of the day at sea, the *Wicher*, the minelayer *Gryf*, and the ex-German MTB *Mazur*, were done for at the hands of two German heavy destroyers and bomber aircraft. The German Army operating from the “Free City” of Danzig on the one hand, and German Pomerania on the other succeeded in cutting the



Sliding down the ways, *Orzel* feels water under her hull for the first time.



*Orzel* shortly after entering service.

“corridor” on the first day and were marching to the sea.

By 19 September, the Germans held the Polish coastline with the exception of the Hel peninsula. Hel did not capitulate until 2 October, five days after the surrender of the Warsaw garrison. The resistance by the naval garrisons at Hel and Westerplatte — small peninsula leased by the Polish government from Danzig — was heroic but futile in the face of overwhelming odds.

The destroyers *Grom*, *Blyskawica*, and *Burza* did not fight in the battle for Poland. They had departed from Puck’s Bay between Hel and Gdynia before the outbreak of hostilities in blind faith

that they could fight their potential enemy, Hitler and his Third Reich, more effectively serving with the British Navy. The fall of Poland saw these proud ships operating out of Plymouth on U-Boat patrols off the southern coast of Ireland.

Of the submarines, *Sep* badly damaged in combat, sailed to Sweden on 16 September and was interned. *Sep* was joined in Stockholm by *Rys*, also badly damaged a few days later. *Zbik* was in action for 25 days and was taken by the Germans at the time of the Armistice. There remained two submarines, *Wilk* and *Orzel*.

*Wilk* was hit on 5 September and made good her damage while

submerged at the bottom of the Baltic and on 14 September received orders to steer a course for England.

The 1000-ton *Wilk* had been built in 1929 in a French yard. The submarine was well designed and equipped but her very size was a handicap in the shallow waters of the Baltic. Her line of escape lay through the complex of the Danish islands. There were three possible routes: the Little Belt between Jutland and Funen, which is very narrow; the Great Belt, seared with reefs, tide-ridden and narrow between Funen and Zealand; and the Sound between Copenhagen and the Swedish coast.

Of these three, only passage through