

## **The Sosabowski Dinner**

Held on Friday 15 September 2006-09-20  
At the Residence Roosendaal Restaurant Arnhem

**A Welcome by  
Sir Brian Urquhart KCMG MBE**

**Mr Ambassador, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen**

I just first of all want to say that this relationship of the people of what I call Holland – “The Netherlands”, particularly of the Arnhem area and the soldiers of various nationalities including British and Polish who came here in 1944, is something completely unique in my experience. This is still a sort of intimate family relationship of an event that happened sixty-two years ago and it was not even a great success. In fact it was a terrible disaster for the inhabitants of this area and yet it has become the most extraordinarily intimate, even emotional relationship and I very much hope that this will go on through the generations, because I think that this is something – a demonstration of the human spirit which is very rare and very important, and we all must be very grateful to all the people who have kept it going and I hope that it keeps going after we have all gone.

Of course we are here to honour Stanislaw Sosabowski, our old comrade, a great general, a great soldier, and a very remarkable man. A great Polish hero and indeed a hero to everybody I think, who actually took part in this battle sixty-two years ago.

I was the Chief Intelligence Officer to the Airborne Corps Commander, General Browning, and I had spent a rather uneasy two or three weeks trying to persuade him that the Intelligence on what was happening here, particularly the presence of the Ninth and Tenth SS Panzer Divisions, really demanded a reshaping of the plan. I became a general pain in the neck around Corps Headquarters, and Browning dismissed not only my argument but also me. And then a few days later I was called back to the Headquarters for the remainder of the battle.

Two years ago, I came back to attend the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Market Garden and particularly the Arnhem part of it. At that time I was shown archive material which I think was relatively new and I learned something I had not known before, that Browning had been the cause, with the connivance of General Montgomery, of dismissing General Sosabowski. They had also put around, - if one knew anything about it, - quite a grotesque criticism of General Sosabowski and the Polish Parachute Brigade. If anything could possibly have been wrong with them, it certainly was not lack of courage or fighting spirit.

I actually spent some time in the training of the Polish Parachute Brigade earlier on in Britain, and I must say they scared the hell out of me! I think they were great fighters and it was preposterous to question their courage.

I think that there is no question that General Sosabowski's dismissal was a shameful act and a gross miscarriage of justice.

In the report which I was shown, there was, a sort of a conclusion, and I always am very

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nervous about describing motives to other people in critical situations, but there was a conclusion that if the charges could not be justified, the purpose of this dismissal and the charges made against General Sosabowski and the Polish Parachute Brigade, had to have been caused by some desire to divert blame for what was a pretty spectacular failure here in Arnhem - the last stage of Operation Market Garden. And in some way, there was – whether consciously or unconsciously in the minds of General Montgomery and General Browning – a desire to find a scapegoat, and to call the Poles that scapegoat. And I must confess that it seems to me a justified conclusion and one that is very shameful to us British.

I just want to make a general observation here about historical injustice and I can think, in my own experience, of something like three or four major cases of historical injustice. It usually happens to people who stick to their own point of view no matter how unpopular. And if they turn out to be right – that is really devastating. That is the worst of all – if you turn out to be right in a major historical issue when you have been in a minority, your reputation can easily be ruined. And that, I think, is what happened to General Sosabowski.

I knew General Sosabowski (I was much younger than he was). I had met him on a number of occasions, but I was not aware, until much later, that he had been talking to Browning and anybody else who would listen, about the extreme weakness of the First Airborne Division plan in Arnhem. I do not need to talk to all of you about the weaknesses, where they were dropping them eight miles from the objective, and so on. And of the desperate need to rethink that programme, especially when it became clear that there were two SS Panzer Divisions stationed in and around this area.

No one – I hardly need to say – paid any attention to either of us, but I did not know that Sosabowski had protested on exactly these lines and I think he was absolutely right and unfortunately he turned out to be.

I think is not quite so well known that he also took part in another life or death decision in which he was completely ignored. He was to the South of the river at Driel and General Horrocks, General Dempsey and the Commander of the Wessex Division, (which I used to be in ages ago) were deciding at what was called the Valburg Conference, on a plan to put troops across the river, the Poles and the Fourth Dorset Regiment, to boost up the defence of what was left of the perimeter of the First Airborne Division. And Sosabowski, I think, quite rightly pointed out that if they went a little further down the river there weren't any major German positions on the North side of the river, and that was the place to go. And he was not even given a civil hearing. He made his statement, nobody listened and then justifiably he walked out. I think this was a very shameful occasion for the British Army. Because the fact of the matter is that he was absolutely dead right.

What they did was a total disaster. No troops got through to reinforce the First Airborne Division. And Sosabowski was sort of written off as a pain in the neck. When in fact if they had adopted his ideas, they might have made a show of it – and what a difference that would have made.

So, I think that he has a really remarkable record of being right against a majority on two extremely important life or death decisions and, as I say, there is nothing that makes a person more unpopular.

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Two years ago at the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, I met Mr. Geertjan Lassche and other people who had worked and were working at that time on a television programme which covers this story, and apparently caught the attention of Prince Bernhard who was then desperately ill. I was very proud to take part in that programme. And I think from it came a great wave of support from the Royal Family. Prince Bernhard unfortunately died shortly thereafter. But there was a great idea, typical I must say of the Dutch, that justice must be done. And from that beginning we had the ceremony in May presided over by Her Majesty the Queen of the Netherlands and now, and I have not heard of any precedent of any government awarding the commander and the soldiers of a military unit, the highest honour for what they did sixty years ago. It is sixty years too late but nonetheless, at least it is justice, to some extent, being done. And of course, now we come I hope, to the best and most, personally, the most impressive act of that process.

I know that all the veterans of Arnhem, the people who actually fought alongside the Poles, are delighted that this honour has been done to our comrades in arms sixty years later, and that the Dutch government have awarded the posthumous award of the Bronze Lion to General Sosabowski and the great award of the Military William Order (the equivalent of the British VC) to the Sixth Polish Air Assault Brigade. Unfortunately we were unable to come to that ceremony, but I hear it was very moving and impressive ceremony.

Last February we launched the *Sosabowski Memorial Appeal*, inviting donations from our Arnhem Veterans to raise money for a memorial to General Sosabowski and his Brigade. Our own Parachute Regimental Association kindly supported us and subscriptions have been coming in, very literally, from all over the world and I would very much like to thank Nicholas Humphrey and Mike Collins of the PRA who are here with us this evening. Thank you very much for all you have done.

We are extremely grateful also to the many Polish Veterans, and in particular, the members of the Sosabowski Family who have been extremely generous. I was amazed to discover that we have here, great grandchildren of General Sosabowski. It just shows that time marches on – I thought they would have been grandchildren ... but there it is. It is wonderful to see you all here.

I would like on this occasion to thank everyone who has contributed to this evening and also to tomorrow's ceremony. The amazing thing about the Arnhem area, is that there are so many people who do wonderful things in this cause and other causes related to that battle sixty-two years ago. I have been told that I should narrow this list down to two for exceptional mention. I must start with Arno Baltussen, our host tomorrow, and I know this kind of thing causes a lot of work for a lot of people, but it is well worth it, because in the end it is lasting and very precious to an enormous number of people.

Secondly, and I say this with great feeling, I know also the unbelievable amount of work that Hiltje van Eck has done. She is amazing. Goodness knows how she does it, but she does it, and the effects are really remarkable.

Now finally, and I am a little bit uneasy about this particular section of this speech but I think it is the right idea – let's try it anyway.

We are trying here to turn back the clock a bit on what is an extremely regrettable and really awful episode from World War II, and to my great shame, it comes from high ranking officers

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in the British Army in which both Tony and I were in for many years. This is not a happy episode by any means for our point of view.

Tomorrow, when we are unveiling the Sosabowski Memorial we want to try to make it – quite apart from remembering General Sosabowski and his wonderful Brigade and what they did – I think we want perhaps to try to make a little bit of an effect on the establishment, especially in the United Kingdom, and what I propose to say, and I hardly need mention that Tony is one of the authors of this, is as follows – and I quote:

“Major General Stanislaw Sosabowski was, is and always will be, a great hero in his native Poland, for whose freedom he fought all his life tirelessly until the end. This memorial was raised by his comrades in arms in the First British Airborne Division who fought beside him in the battle of Arnhem.

It affirms that despite the wounding and baseless slander that destroyed his career, he was, is and will always be to us, a great freedom fighter, a fine commander and very great hero”

Thank you.

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