Most armed forces of the world recognize the long service of their soldiers. The form of such recognition and the duration of service necessary vary with each country. Some countries, the United Kingdom being a good example, honor only the long service of non-commissioned ranks. Officers’ service is recognized only in the case of reserve forces. Britain had a variety of awards for different types of reservists, usually separate for officers and other ranks, until these were all replaced in 1999 by a single medal for all reserve ranks and services.

The United States Air Force is the only service which has issued a longevity ribbon to denote duration of service. All services award a medal after 10 years of service in the reserves. The majority of National Guards and State Defense Forces also recognize long service of their servicemen and women.

In Canada, since 1949 all military have been eligible for a Canadian Forces Decoration after the honorable completion of 12 years of service. Each subsequent 10 years is denoted by a clasp on the ribbon and a silver rosette on the ribbon bar. Other countries have established their own decorations to be worn as a visible token of recognition for the years served in the armed forces.

Long Service Awards in Poland in the 18th and 19th Century

Poland has a long tradition of honoring her soldiers’ service. The first decoration of this kind dates to the 18th century, to the reign of Stanislas Augustus (1732-1798), the last king of Poland (Figure 1). In 1765, only a year after his accession to the throne, the king established a circular medal (Figure 2), conferred exclusively on other ranks who had completed 18 years in the army. On the obverse there is the three-line inscription STANISLAW / AUGUST / KROL (Stanislas Augustus king), surmounted by a royal crown and with a crossed laurel and palm spray below, while the reverse was inscribed ZA / DOSLUZONE / WCIAZ 18 LAT / W IEDNYMZE / CORPU- / SIE (for 18 years’ service completed in the same corps) and with two laurel sprays below. For some reason, cavalrymen obtained the medal with a different inscription: ZA / DOSLUZONE / WCIAZ 18 LAT / W IEDNYMZE / REGIMEN- / CIE. (for 18 years’ completed in the same regiment). Both sides of the medal are surrounded by a pearl ring. The medal, designed by a Saxon medaillieur, Johann Philipp Holzhäuser, was struck in sterling silver, although examples in bronze are also known. The diameter of the medal was circa 1 17/32” (39 mm), but because it was awarded for a long time, examples might vary in size. The medal is worn on a light blue ribbon of the Order of the White Eagle.
the White Eagle.

It is difficult to explain why the obverse contained only the inscription, instead of the usual royal effigy. It is possible that the king wanted the first medals to be given away as quickly as possible. Why he did not decide to alter it later is still a mystery, particularly when in about 1768 the dies were changed and the word CORPUSIE was altered to the more Polish looking KORPUSIE.

It is not known whether a soldier who had served for another 18 years became eligible for a second medal. Despite being conferred for nearly 30 years, the medal is a rarity today. The partition of Poland in 1795 put an end to its existence. The subsequent era of the Duchy of Warsaw (1807-1815) was too short to consider rewarding military service of the soldiers.

Following the downfall of Napoleon, the Kingdom of Poland was restored by the Congress of Vienna in 1815. The Kingdom was an internationally recognized country, with its own parliament, government, justice, schools, currency and army, as well as with a coat of arms and award system. It was linked to the Russian Empire through a personal union, which meant that each Russian Czar would become King of Poland as well. The sovereignty of the country was limited and subordinated to the foreign policy of the Empire.

In 1829, to commemorate the occasion of his official installation as King of Poland, Nicolas I established a new long-service decoration. It differed diametrically from its 18th-century predecessor in both form and method of award. It was awarded in two versions, one for military and another for civilian officials. The military type could only be conferred on an officer, while its civilian counterpart was conferred on officials in ranks equivalent to an officer. The badge is a brooch of pure gold (Figure 3), 1 3/16" x 1 1/8" (30 x 35 mm), but particular items could differ considerably in size. The number of years of service is indicated by Roman numerals within an oak wreath. It was worn on the left side of the chest, below other orders and medals. To be eligible, the recipient had to have completed at least 15 years of irreproachable service. A new badge with a higher numeral would replace the old one every five years. The military and civilian versions looked alike, the only difference being the ribbon. The ribbon for the military was light blue with black side stripes, (the ribbon of the Order Virtuti Militari), whereas that for civilian officials was the ribbon of the Order of St. Stanislas (red with double white edges). Except for the ribbons the decoration was identical to the long service decoration established two years earlier in the Russian Empire. The designer is not known, but it was most probably the same one who had designed the Russian badge. Some sources say that it was Nicholas I himself.

The life of the new decoration was short. The first and only bestowal took place in early November of 1830. Due to this and because of the fact that it was made of pure gold, it is one of the rarest Polish awards. Only one decoration for 50 years of military service (to Colonel Józef Seydlitz, commandant of the Veterans’ Corps) and one for 40 years of service (to Lieutenant Colonel Pflugbeil) were conferred. Ten officers received the decoration for 35 years, 28 for 30 years, 42 for 25 years, 391 for 20 years and 527 for 15 years service, a total of exactly 1,000 officers. The decoration was also awarded to 1,045 civilian officials. Grand Duke Constantine Pavlovich, Nicholas I’s elder brother and Commander-in-Chief of the Polish Army, was at the top of the list of military recipients (although with the lowest decoration for 15 years of service). The decoration ceased to be conferred after the outbreak of a national rising against Russian rule, known as the November Uprising, on November 29, 1830, just three weeks after the first awards were made. After the suppression of the uprising the following year, the autonomy of the Kingdom was abolished along with its awards system, including the Long Service Decoration. Eligible civilian officials began to receive the decoration on the black-red-black ribbon of the Russian Order of St. Vladimir in 1834. As the army of the Kingdom of Poland had been disbanded, no military awards took place after 1830 (officers of the Russian army wore it on the ribbon of the Order of St. George, orange with three black stripes).

The only decoration for 50 years’ service, to Colonel Seydlitz, was unique in form and differed very much from the other decorations (Figure 4). The Roman numeral
Figure 4: Unique decoration for 50 years awarded to Colonel Seydlitz, courtesy of Colonel S. Oberleitner.

L was placed on the round central shield of a skeletal gold cross with ball finials, very similar to the badge of the Order of Virtuti Militari. The cross was surrounded by an oak wreath, larger than the usual, with the ribbon placed underneath.

Long Service Awards in an Independent Poland

In 1918 Poland regained its independence after 123 years. The coat of arms of the country (a silver eagle on red background) and two major national honors’ the Order of the White Eagle and Order Virtuti Militari, were also restored in 1921 and 1919. The third of the former Polish orders, the Order of St. Stanislas was not revived, chiefly due to its proliferation as a Russian award. Probably for the same reason the Decoration for Long Service was not renewed either. And even though new honors continued to be established (Cross of Valor in 1920, Order of Polonia Restituta in 1921, Cross of Merit in 1923, Life Saving Medal in 1928, Independence Cross and Medal in 1930), the country had to wait for another 20 years before a new award for long service appeared. Finally, on January 8, 1938 the Parliament passed an act establishing the new award. This time it was a medal in three classes: bronze for 10 years service, sterling silver (Ag 0.950) for 20 years service and silver gilt for 30 years of service. The medal (Figure 5), 1 3/8” (35 mm) of diameter, depicted a crowned eagle on the obverse, surrounded by a wreath of rye and circumscribed ZA DŁUGOLETNIA SLUZBE (for long service). On the reverse there was a Roman numeral: X, XX or XXX and a laurel twig below. The medal had a distinctive bi-conical surmounting eye, typical of most Polish pre-World War II medals. The ribbon was claret, 1 13/32” (36 mm) wide, with a 7/16” (11 mm) white stripe down the center. If the service ribbon alone was worn, a small metal replica of the numeral in bronze, silver or gold metal was superimposed (Figure 6). The medal was designed by a professor of the Academy of Fine Arts, Stanislaw Ostoja-Chrostowski. Most medals were made by the National Mint in Warsaw, although some were ordered individually in private workshops.

It must be noted that the gold medal for 30 years of service was never awarded. As only service in an independent Poland after November 11, 1918 was taken into account, the first gold medals would have been conferred no earlier than sometime in 1948, but by then an independent Poland did not exist. It is known, however, that in 1947 the Polish Government in Exile in London considered making the awards and some gold medals were even ordered at Spink’s, but the whole idea was eventually abandoned.

If the recipient had the silver and bronze medal, both were to be worn at the same time. That was unusual, as in the case of other orders and decorations, Polish or foreign, only the most senior class was worn. The only other Polish honor in which all classes were worn simultaneously was the Order of Virtuti Militari.

Irrespective of the class, the Long Service Medal was conferred by the Prime Minister on the advice of the appropriate minister. It was designed as a universal
Zbigniew Puchalski, estimated the number of bronze medals at 200,000 to 300,000 and of silver at less than 100,000 awarded (about 10 percent were awarded to the armed forces).

**Long Service Awards after World War II**

After World War II Poland, along with other Eastern European countries, found itself in the sphere of Soviet influence, with a new pro-Soviet government and a foreign policy and economy subordinated entirely to the interests of the USSR.

Surprisingly, in the sphere of national symbols Poland was probably the only country of the Soviet bloc not touched by communist ideology. The red star and/ or hammer and sickle, so frequent in other Soviet-dominated countries, were completely absent in Poland. The country retained its coat of arms (although the eagle was deprived of its crown), flag, national anthem, military uniforms and other symbols. This was also true of the system of national awards. An Act on National Honors of December, 1944, maintained the nation’s five top decorations: the Order of the White Eagle, Virtuti Militari, Polonia Restituta, Cross of Valor and Cross of Merit (the Order of the White Eagle was never invested and was eventually replaced by the Order of Builders of People’s Poland in 1949). This however did not include lesser awards, including the Long Service Medal, which were not revived under the new rule. The explanation can be found in the official interpretation of the pre-World War II history of Poland, in which the coup d’etat of Marshal Jozef Pilsudski in May, 1926 separated the era of a fairly democratic country from the era of an authoritarian rule of ruthless generals and landowners. By coincidence, all of the highest Polish honors were established or renewed before 1926, whereas the lower ones were instituted after that year, which must have affected the perception of the new regime.

The Long Service Medal was one of these decorations which were not revived after World War II. For a few years the country did not have any award to honor long service. The need for such an award must have been strong though, particularly in the armed forces, so on May 26, 1951 the Parliament passed an act, establishing an entirely new decoration for long service with the fairly complex name of the Armed Forces in Service Medal (Medal Siły Zbrojne w Służbie Ojczyzny). Unlike the Long Service Medal the new award was intended only for professional commissioned and non-commissioned ranks and for civilians working for the armed forces. It was conferred by the President.

**Figure 6:** Gen. Władysław Anders (above), former commander of II Polish Corps with an impressive collection of ribbons, during the 1969 celebrations of the 25th anniversary of the capture of Monte Cassino, Italy. In the lower photo ribbons of the Long Service Medals are can be seen right under the Monte Cassino Cross. Note the incorrect order of wearing: the medal for 10 years comes before the medal for 20 years of service.

decoration, intended for a variety of services. Besides the armed forces, the medal was conferred on members of other uniformed services: the police, correctional service, customs and even state railways, as well as on judges, attorneys, university and school teachers, and to central or local government officials. Despite being bestowed for a short time (1938-39), they were one of the most popular Polish medals. Although no exact figures were recorded, a prominent Polish medal expert,
of Poland on the advice of the Minister of National Defense (or the Minister of Internal Affairs, when awarded to the soldiers of the Internal Security Corps). After 1952, when the office of President was abolished, the medal was awarded by the collective State Council. The bronze medal was awarded for five, silver for ten and gold for fifteen years of service. As only service in Poland from 1944 on was counted, the first silver medals were conferred in 1954 and the first gold as late as 1959.

In the center of the medal (Figure 7) there is a round shield with a superimposed uncrowned eagle, always in silver, irrespective of class, on red enameled background, surrounded by a white enameled ring, inscribed *SILY ZBROJNE W SŁUŻBIE OJCIŻyny* with a small five pointed star in the lower part. The ring was surrounded by a wreath of laurel, in bronze, silver or gold, depending on the class, with two crossed swords behind. Below the central shield there is a smaller red enameled oval one with the years of service in Roman numerals: *V, X* or *XV* respectively. The central red shield is 9/16” (14.5 mm) in diameter, the outer white ring, 7/8” (22 mm), while the outer diameter of the wreath is 1 1/4” (32 mm). It was one of the few Polish distinctions with a blank reverse. The medal was suspended on a ring with six distinctive x-shaped devices and worn on a red ribbon with double white side stripes, 3/32” wide and 3/32” offset. The ribbon was initially 1 1/4” wide, although wider ribbons, of ca. 1 5/16” - 1 3/8” (33-35 mm) were also used, especially in later awards. Unfortunately, the designer of the medal is not known. The diameter of the medal’s central shield and the its general appearance is similar to the Long Service Decoration of the Volunteer Fire Brigades’ Association (Figure 8) and it is possible that this medal was the prototype for the new long service medal.

As part of the national honors system the new medal occupied a surprisingly high position, after the Crosses of Merit and Medals for Merit on the Field of Glory and before commemorative awards for World War II. Medals for each of the classes should be worn at the same time, which became the rule for all decorations in post-World War II Poland. The medals in the form described above were conferred until the end of 1959. This first type is hard to find today; the gold medal for 15 years’ service (Figure 8) is now a rarity.

An interesting novelty took place when only ribbons were worn. Before 1954 it was not possible, to tell one class from another, as an identical ribbon bar was used for all. By decision of the Minister of National Defense of June 24, 1954 the silver class became denoted by a vertical lace of silver wire in the center, while the gold class was denoted by a similar wire in gold. This system proved very convenient and is still in use, indicating the
silver or gold classes of all Polish decorations (Figures 9 and 10).

On February 17, 1960 a new act on national honors, replaced the old one of 1944. It brought substantial changes, which also affected the Armed Forces in Service for the Country Medal. The most important change was its reduction to only two classes, in silver and gold, requiring 15 and 25 years of service, respectively. The class in bronze for five-years service was discontinued. Although the medal remained a state-awarded honor, its position in the award system of the country was much lowered, as it now followed all commemorative World War II awards and even the newly established Medal for Sacrifice and Courage, the post-World War II counterpart of the Life Saving Medal. The badge remained basically the same, with new numerals (XV or XXV) only.

The medal in two classes was bestowed from 1960 to 1968, when it underwent another modification. The duration of service necessary to obtain the gold and silver classes was reduced to 20 and 10 years respectively, and the bronze class for five years was restored. This set of medals is the most popular and most frequently encountered type. It was no longer a state award, but a decoration whose bestowal remained at the sole discretion of the Minister of National Defense. Due to that modification, the previous gold class for 25-years’ service was given no chance to be awarded, as the first bestowal would take place in 1969. Still, examples produced by the state mint are known to exist (Figure 11), although they are extremely rare. There are also copies made by private manufacturers.
An equally rare type was introduced in 1974 by the then Minister of National Defense, General Wojciech Jaruzelski. To commemorate the 30th anniversary of People’s Poland he ordered special gold medals to be made with XXX numeral (Figure 12) instead of the usual XX. That uniquely rare type was bestowed upon several officers (no exact figures are known) who had begun their military career in the People’s Army in 1943 or 1944 and were still on active service in 1974. It was a one-time event, as no more XXX medals were awarded in the following years. An interesting detail about this bestowal is that it did not have any legal record, except personal certificates for the recipients, signed by the Minister of Defense. This is probably why it is the least known fact from the history of the medal.

It should be noted that in the case of the medal in silver and bronze, the modification of 1968 meant the return to the type issued between 1951 and 1959. It can be difficult therefore to determine when particular medals were made, as they look alike. It is easier with the bronze medal, in which the angle between the arms of the Roman numeral V in the post-1968 medals is visibly smaller than in the earlier ones (Figure 13). The original ribbons of the early type also had a lighter, paprika shade of red.

In 1987 an instruction was issued for the armed forces, stating that only the most senior class of any order or medal should be worn. That was intended to reduce the huge number of medals or ribbons worn on the uniform, especially by high-ranking officers.
The total number of awards of the Armed Forces in Service for the Country Medal is not known. Until 1968, the last year the decoration was awarded by the State Council, the medal in bronze was conferred on 55,529 individuals, in silver to 50,707, and only 1,265 in gold, (to 1960, when the gold medal ceased being awarded).

**Polish Long Service Awards Today**

In 1990 the conferment of the Armed Forces in Service for the Country Medal was practically discontinued, although this was not confirmed in any official document. The bestowal of the medal was resumed with a regulation of December 14, 1995, which sanctioned it as a ministry decoration for professional military and civilians working for the armed forces. The duration of service was altered once again: five-years’ service was required for the bronze medal, 15-years’ service for the silver and 25-years service for the gold. Probably anticipating future changes, the new medals were issued without the oval shield with Roman numerals (Figure 12). Another difference in comparison to the older types was a crowned eagle in the center.

While collecting the material for this article, the author quite unexpectedly obtained information regarding proposed changes in the appearance of the Armed Forces in Service for the Country Medal. This story is unknown by most collectors and this is probably the first time it is being published. In 2006 the Polish Parliament debated on an entirely new medal for long service in the armed forces (Figure 14). The only two things which would remain the same would be the name and the crowned silver eagle in the center. According to the description in the proposed legislative act, the eagle would rest on a square knight’s cross surrounded by an oak wreath. On the reverse there would be a six-line inscription: **SILYZBROJNE/W/SLUZBIE OJCZYZNY/RZECZPOSPOLITA/POLSKA** (armed forces in service for the country, Polish Republic). The two final lines would be separated by an oak twig. The diameter of the medal was to be 1 1/2” (38 mm). Also the ribbon would be different, being 1 3/8” (35 mm) wide, red with two fairly wide white side stripes. The medal would be conferred in gold, silver and bronze; the duration of service to be eligible for particular classes would remain as 25, 15 and 5-years’ service respectively. The author of the new design has not been identified.

We may only speculate why someone would want to replace the old medal with which Polish soldiers had been so well-acquainted, with a new one, and why the whole project was eventually abandoned. The reason underlying the idea of the new medal was probably the fact that the old one originated from the era of People’s Poland, which was not well received by the Polish people. The reason why it was discontinued was probably that work was well advanced on restoring the Long Service Medal of 1938 that occurred at the same time and which was supposed to replace the Armed Forces in Service for the Country Medal.

An act of June 14, 2007, that established several new military honors of the country, also reintroduced the Long Service Medal in three classes. This medal was similar to the pre-World War II type; the medal is conferred “as a reward for service to the country,” but unlike before World War II, the medal is now conferred exclusively by the President of Poland. It occupies a fairly low position after all Crosses of Merit and between the Medal for Sacrifice and Courage and the Medal for Long Marital Life.

The main idea of its renewal was to release the overburdened Cross of Merit for which representatives of some professions were eligible upon completion of a predefined number of years. This function has been taken over by the new medal and the Cross of Merit should, thereafter, be bestowed solely for extraordinary merit. The Long Service Medal is awarded not only for military service, but also to members of other uniformed services, central or local administration officials, school teachers and representatives of some other professions.

The medal itself looks almost identical to its pre-World War II counterpart (there are some small differences in the details) (Figure 5). The new, slightly ordered design
was developed by a professor of the Academy of Fine Arts, Andrzej Heidrich. The silver medal is no longer made of sterling silver, but of silver-plated tombac. The new medals are also thicker than before (3/32” vs. 5/64”). The eye is no longer bi-conical, but flat, which negatively affects its beauty. Genuine mint pieces have the hallmark of the Warsaw Mint on the reverse: an arrow on the left of the twig base (1938-39 issue) or cipher MW (Mennica Warszawska) on the right of the twig base (current issue). An arrow and Ag 0,950 mark is stamped on the rim of the pre-WWII silver medal (Figure 15). The ribbon of the current issue is slightly wider (1 1/2”) and the Roman numerals on service ribbons are no longer made of metal and connected by a pin, but rather of narrow lace and pasted to the ribbon (Figure 16).

The first bestowal of the new Long Service Medals took place on October 10, 2007. As of the end of June, 2009, 17,989 gold, 14,910 silver and only 6,322 bronze medals have been awarded. The surprisingly low number of bronze medals in comparison to the other classes may result from the fact that unlike the Armed Forces medal, which is conferred practically automatically upon completion of the prescribed years of service, each recommendation for the Long Service Medals is (or at least should be) decided on an individual basis. Thus not everyone who has completed ten years of service may be found “worthy” to receive it.

It was believed that restoring the pre-World War II medal would put an end to the awarding of the Armed Forces in Service for the Country Medal, the first Long Service Medals were conferred as early as in 2007, and both medals continue to be awarded concurrently. Technically, such a situation is possible. Both are bestowed by different bodies (the President vs. the Minister of Defense). The number of years that must be served to be eligible for particular classes is different, but the very fact that two different medals exist that reward the same kind of service. It is expected that sooner or later the medal awarded by the Minister of National Defense will have to give way to its more senior counterpart.

As we can see, the tradition of honoring long military service in Poland with medals has been continued through different eras and political configurations. The form of the decoration and the number of years of service required to be eligible has changed with time (Table 1), but such an honor has always required many years of hard and devoted service, and this is something we should always bear in mind when seeing these small pieces of metal on a military uniform, in somebody’s collection or in a museum display.

The author is very much indebted to the Presidential Chancellery in Warsaw, the Ministry of National Defense and particularly to Colonel Stefan Oberleitner without whose kind help this article would not have been possible.

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**Table 1: Years of service required to be eligible for particular classes of long service medals**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Gold</th>
<th>Silver</th>
<th>Bronze</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Long Service Medal</td>
<td>1938-39</td>
<td>30*</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2007-</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armed Forces in Service for the Country Medal</td>
<td>1951-59</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1960-67</td>
<td>25*</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1968-90</td>
<td>20 (30**)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1995-</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Never awarded.

**Awarded once to a selected group of officers in 1974.