



# Wojtek the Bear: Polish War Hero

*Aileen Orr*

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## **Wojtek the Bear: Polish War Hero** Aileen Orr

This is the inspiring true story of one of the Second World War's most unusual combatants – a 500-pound cigarette-smoking, beer-drinking brown bear. Originally adopted as a mascot by the Polish Army in Iran, Wojtek soon took on a more practical role, carrying heavy mortar rounds for the troops and going on to play his part as a fully enlisted 'soldier' with his own rank and number during the Italian campaign.

After the war, Wojtek, along with some of his Polish compatriots from II Corps, came to Berwickshire, where he became a significant member of the local community before subsequently moving to Edinburgh Zoo. Wojtek's retirement was far from quiet: a potent symbol of freedom and solidarity for Poles around the world, he attracted a huge amount of media interest that shows no sign of abating more than 45 years after his death. In an extended introduction, journalist and historian Neal Ascherson reflects on the Polish experience in the Second World War and gives full recognition to the Poles' heroic sacrifice and the extraordinary influence they had on the countries in which they served.

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