

Pass It On®...

Bear with Me!

The story of Wojtek the bear, who joined the Polish Army in WWII.

Young soldiers, far away from home and missing their families, discover a bear cub. That's how the story of Wojtek begins, back in 1942. He was alone in the mountains of Iran; nobody knows how he got there.

When beleaguered Polish troops came upon Wojtek, they were immediately struck with emotions. They had been away from their loved ones for a long time. Their own families had been separated by war. They needed something to pick their spirits up. So, they nursed the baby bear with milk from a bottle and named him Wojtek, which means: *a warrior to whom combat brings joy.*

Wojtek wasn't much of a warrior, but he was officially adopted into the army. He traveled with the troops to the Middle East, providing comradery and entertainment. He would wrestle with the men, chase after oranges they tossed for him and follow them about like a puppy. He became their connection to humanity in a time when the light of peace seemed so far away. And, like a child, he was also mischievous. In the sweltering desert heat, he learned how to break into the showers and turn on the water. He could also be seen lugging crates of empty ammunition with the men or standing at attention in formation. Wojtek was also the chief intimidator of new recruits: He would literally bear hug them and hold them upside down for a good laugh.

Getting through the grind of war takes something extraordinary, something unexpectedly insane to preserve your sanity. That's what Wojtek did for the men who had been so long in the fog and uncertainty of World War II. An orphaned bear became the symbol of strength and resilience. The regiment even changed their insignia to one of Wojtek the bear.

Thankfully, wars end, and in the transition, Wojtek was not forgotten. He shipped with a group of men from his regiment to a farm in Scotland — a former camp run by the Scots to train Polish fighters — to rehabilitate for a time. The farm was a fitting place to retire for a bear with so much military

experience. Wojtek was a local celebrity. Stories of him kicking a soccer ball, attending local dances and parties, and enjoying jam and honey are still told today.

Retirement was good to Wojtek. He lived to bring a little joy and diversion to his fellow veterans and new visitors. And to everyone who knew him, Wojtek was the mascot that made a difficult time a little more — excuse the pun — bearable.

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By The Foundation for a Better Life®

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