

# Soldiers walk more than 200 miles in 10-day Polish Pilgrimage

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SPRINGFIELD - On Aug. 2, 2017 seven Illinois National Guard Soldiers and four Airmen, boarded a plane bound for Warsaw, Poland, to walk in the Polish Pilgrimage to Czestochowa, Poland. The Illinois National Guard sends Soldiers and Airmen every year to support the annual celebration in Czestochowa.



The celebration commemorates the 1655 Polish victory over Sweden and celebrates Polish Armed Forces Day. The Illinois National Guard's participation maintains an ongoing military to military relationship and cultural understanding between the Illinois National Guard and Polish Forces.

Latvian, Lithuanian, German, Slovakian and Croatian Soldiers also participated in the 10-day pilgrimage beginning in the heart of Old Town Warsaw on Aug. 4.

Jasna Gora Monastery, founded in 1382, has been a pilgrimage destination for hundreds of years. Inside the monastery is a statue of the Virgin Mary known as the Black Madonna of Czestochowa, or Our Lady of Czestochowa. The Black Madonna is an important cultural and religious icon for many Polish People.

"I'm planning to do the pilgrimage again next year. It's a matter of faith," said Pawel Rybus, a 19-year-old cadet attending the Polish Military Academy of Technology in Warsaw, Poland.

Rybus said he hopes more NATO nations will attend the pilgrimage in the future.

"I'm happy that Americans, Lithuanians, Latvians, Slovaks, Germans and even Croats attended the pilgrimage," said Rybus. "We build relationships so we can better work together in the future."

Rybus said after the first day of the pilgrimage he could barely walk, but he also remembers the atmosphere in Czestochowa on the final day. He said he also remembers pilgrims singing and cheering; spectators crying and giving Soldiers flowers before they entered the Jasna Gora. 2nd Lt. Urte Juodvalkyte, with the Lithuanian Armed Forces (MP), said this trip was her second pilgrimage.

"I would do it again a third, fourth, fifth, sixth time, again and again," said Juodvalkyte.

Illinois Air National Guard Chaplain, Capt. Dan Wilton of Peoria, Illinois, said when he was asked to travel to Poland for this pilgrimage he wasn't sure what to expect.

"I'm a Baptist chaplain that can't speak a lick of Polish and I'm a slow walker to boot," said Wilton. "But there I was taking step after step across the Polish countryside with Polish and other NATO military members."

Wilton said he believes each member of the U.S. group was impacted in some way by the generosity and kindness of the Polish people.

"I am thankful to have experienced some of their rich heritage of faith and persevering pursuit of freedom. It was special to walk the pilgrimage with other Illinois Guardsmen," said Wilton. "I hope our shared experience will make us better Americans for our state, our country, and our God."

Next year the Illinois National Guard plans to send more than 20 Guardsmen to participate in the Polish Pilgrimage.