

Captain of General Staff Felix Bolechowski

Surprise

Below I relate my own experiences against the background of the 6th Infantry Division's expedition from Lutsk to Dubno to liberate the 17th Infantry Division, which had been cut off there.

After marching all night, in the morning of 20 July 1920 the 7th Lancer Regiment, under the command of Major Piasecki, reached Ostrożec [Ostrozhets']¹.

The commander of the 3rd Squadron, Capt. Klepacz, ordered the horses to be watered and fed without being unsaddled. The horses were tied to fences on both sides of the street ; they were groomed to be fed. Soon the crunching of hay, so pleasant to a lancer's ear, was heard. We also had to think about ourselves, as the squadrons had not brought their field kitchens, being on an expedition.

I was busily eating some juicy apples when I heard the voice of Sergeant-major Józefowski calling my name. I had been assigned as commander of a picket: we were to cover the regiment's rest to the north.

We tightened the harnesses and assembled. Apart from the sergeant and myself the following were also going: Corporal Antoni Starnawski and ulans Dobrowolski, Wołk and Semeniuk.

We set up our outpost on the south of Worotniów forest.

Semeniuk and I were on the first lookout, the rest were deep in the forest. In front of us all was peace and quiet. There were no suspicious movements anywhere to be seen.

Suddenly a message arrived with Ulan Forma, with an order from the regiment's commander: "You are to join the regiment immediately; it is advancing from the town of Ostrożec through the town of Pianie to the Moskiewszczyzna [Moskovshchyna] forest with the task of covering the wing of the 6th Infantry Division advancing along the road."

We were returning. It was a sweltering July mid-day. We were riding in twos at a walk ... not covering our flanks – what could threaten us from the north or east, when the whole horizon had just been thoroughly scanned?

We arrived in Ostrożec, with the heat is getting on our nerves and our thirst getting strong. The face of some Israeli popped up at a window.

"Give me some water!"

He brought out a whole bucket. We dismounted from our horses and drank greedily.

While drinking the water I saw a Bolshevik patrol appear in the alley through which our road to the regiment led. I see them clearly, there were five of them. The commander, with a big red ribbon on his breast, was waving a lance in his hand.

"Comrades, let's get rid of the Whites, urra! urra!"

The comrades, seeing our numerical superiority, did not share their commander's enthusiasm: although they readied to charge, they turned back.

I shouted: "Sergeant-major, Bolsheviks!"

"How can the Bolsheviks be here now," said the cavalryman phlegmatically without stopping his drinking, "it's our light horse!"²

"Oh, it really is Bolsheviks! Shoot, boys!" We all sent a shot and mounted our horses. Suddenly a cloud of horsemen appeared in the street through which we had just ridden.

They had already seen us and were galloping. Swords gleamed in their hands.

"Urra! urra!"

¹ This is the one in Rivne Province, not the one in L'viv Province.

² *Szwolężerowie*, a regiment of whom were also on this expedition.



There are at least 50 horsemen. There was no question about it – we were not in a pleasant position. There was not a moment to lose.

The Bolshevik patrol that had blocked our way did not yet know that we were surrounded.

There were only five of them in front of us, we could run over them.

Before we reached them we saw a side street – instinctively we all turned on the spot.

We got out onto a causeway: on one side was a half-dried pond, on the other a mill. Halfway down it we came under machine gun fire from the buildings south of the pond.

It became a complete mess: two horses were killed, some of the others tumbled down over the dead bodies. Semeniuk was killed.

With difficulty I crawled out from under my dead horse. My left hand hung uselessly, it was dislocated or broken. Stefan Dobrowolski gave me Semeniuk's horse and helped me to mount it.

At the same time as we received the burst from a machine gun, pursuers appeared behind us on the dyke. The front riders were fired upon at the same time as we were – forcing them to retreat behind the nearest houses of the town. The machine gun crew, however, apparently then recognized their own men and ceased fire.

All this was in just a few seconds.

We pulled ourselves together and carried on. But not all of us on horseback: ulan Forma was without a horse, he ran on foot, holding on to the stirrup of Dobrowolski's saddle.

The machine gun stopped firing, because behind us the chase had reappeared. We took advantage of that and reached a park between the manor house and the river. In the park we noticed a Bolshevik machine gun set up near the manor house, with a few crew by it. It was apparently a patrol with a light machine gun.

We were now galloping along the western slope of hill 225, and 20 paces behind us a large group was pursuing us. They were firing pistols and short carbines, brandishing sabres.

I looked my colleagues: they hadn't lost their nerve at all, nor was there any sign of fear on their faces. On the contrary, they were brandishing their sabres, and there was a visible desire to face the enemy, while also feeling a sense of shame that it could not be done, because strict rational calculation did not allow it against an enemy ten times as numerous.

Tough luck! You cannot run headlong into the sun. Our retreat cannot be called an escape, either: we were simply withdrawing because of a disadvantageous position.

Ulan Forma, who so far had been running holding on to the stirrup and whom Dobrowolski tried, unsuccessfully, a few times to get onto his horse – having run out of strength – stayed behind. (He rejoined the squadron three days' later).

So far we had been heading for Swiszców [Svyschiv], because the road to Pianie had been cut off by an enemy unit advancing towards us. And now the road that way was cut off by a strong patrol that appeared suddenly on the road from Zaława [Zalav'ya].

So we turned into a field, which as it turns out, was crossed by wide drainage ditches. The horses jumped willingly, although we had never taken on such wide ditches before!

Suddenly we reached a meadow and ... the horses sank up to their bellies.

We were very sad to part with the horses, but there was no choice – we had been driven into a trap. The river, which was completely invisible from a distance, we were now in the middle of – the water was hip deep. We were still in the water when the Bolsheviks caught up with our horses; some of them raced to pursue us with fire. You could see them laughing faces as they knelt to obtain their goal.

We were now walking across a sun-dried field, heading some woods that could be seen not far ahead. Bullets whistled past and raised pillars of dust as they fell.



My colleagues withdraw according to regulations: every now and then they fall down to give a few shots. Unfortunately, I can't help because of my hand.

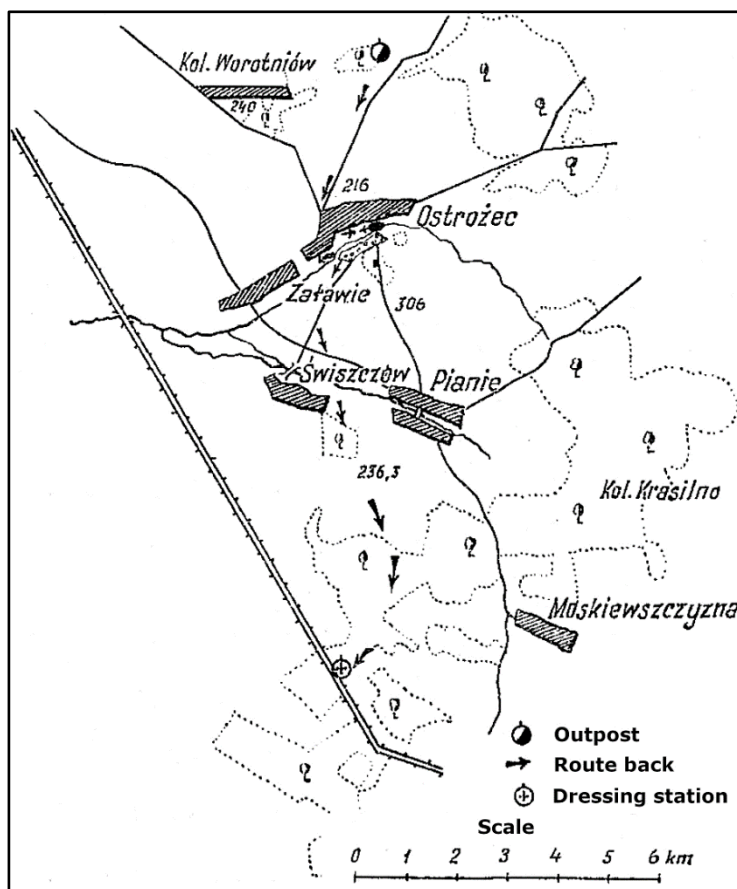
About 300 metres from the forest I was wounded in my left thigh. It felt like my leg was hit by a strong blow from a stick. My trousers were full of blood mixed with water. Flecks started to flicker in my eyes. I moved only with difficulty.

After a while I felt a wound in my right leg. But it is apparently light, as it hardly hinders my progress.

Since none of my colleagues were wounded, I concluded that all the fire was concentrated on me: apparently my navy blue trousers with piping (the rest were in grey) attracted the bullets!

During this we could see a strong column of Bolshevik cavalry marching along the road from Pianie apparently to the south. Lances glittered in the cloud of dust. Then, from the same direction, we heard machine fire, followed by artillery.

We realised that the Bolsheviks had overtaken us, so that we were probably in their rear.



We entered the forest. There was a fresh, humid breeze, which made it seem like a paradise in comparison with the scorching heat in the field.

The colleagues discussed what to do with me, as I was unable to go any further on foot. Starnawski was to go to the regiment for help, and Dobrowolski to get a lift to the nearest village.

In Świszczów the local Ukrainians, who apparently sympathised with the Bolsheviks, tried to capture Stefan. So we marched on, heading for the sound of gunfire. Wołk and Dobrowolski supported me from both sides.

We left the forest, emerging into a field covered with bundles of rye.

With the heat and my weakness I was overcome with a strange apathy and resignation: I did not care what happened to me – at the time I just wanted peace. So I ask them to leave me under a bundle of grain.

They didn't want to hear any of it. How could they leave a wounded colleague?

We keep moving forward, towards the sound of the shooting.



We reached another forest. I lost all strength and was delirious. They couldn't carry me any further. Wołk went to scout around.

In the meantime, Stefan laid me down in the bushes, collected all the cartridges on the ground in front of him and prepared both carbines for shooting.

"If the Bolsheviks come, I will fire all the cartridges, then I will shoot you and myself in the head."

Time passed as we waited. At times I was delirious, then in moments of awareness I reflected.

The shooting in front of us died away – the fighting seemed to have moved further on.

I tried to assess my position: badly wounded and in the Bolshevik rear (as it seemed to me).

I didn't think I would be able to get out of the situation unscathed – I had to examine my conscience. I lost consciousness again.

They called my name. I opened my eyes: there was Wołk and with him four ulans from our regiment. They put me on a horse and held me so that I don't fall off. The ulan who gave me his horse led it by the reins.

After a dozen or so minutes we passed a section from one of the squadrons of our regiment, which was guarding the division from the north. It turned out that we were on the flank.

In a village they requisitioned a carriage for me. Now we said goodbye: they returned to the regiment, I was taken to the dressing point, which turned out to be nearby. From the dressing point I was driven in my carriage to the assembly point for the wounded, which was near the road.

Evening was approaching. It was already getting dark when rifle bullets started to whistle from the north-western through the thinning trees of the forest.

Gloomy news started to reach the wagons by word of mouth: the division had been stopped, the attack had failed, the infantry had dug in in all directions – we were surrounded, etc. We had to retreat to Łuck [Lutsk].

We started to retreat to Łuck.

The wagons stretched out in a long column. To protect them a squadron or a company marched every few dozen wagons. The night dragged on forever. The slow march on the shaking wagon was agony. I was babbling. I thought that I was sailing on a ship, and I took the steady creaking of wheels for the murmur of waves.

Once or twice I was woken up by the roar of rifle shots, then I saw a blinding light from up close in the night. It was a Bolshevik ambush.

At dawn we reached a bridge over the river Styr near Łuck; the area around the bridge was strongly protected, with horse corpses in front of the wires.

Yesterday the Bolsheviks had wanted to take advantage of the fact that a strong advance had gone beyond the Styr to capture Łuck and the bridge in its rear.

We passed our line of defence; it was a wonderful sunny morning; the night terrors had passed, and my spirits were cheerful and happy, as they usually were after getting out of trouble.

Conclusion

Sergeant-major Józefowski's unit, returning from the outpost, was surprised by the Bolsheviks due to the lack of cover both during the march and the momentary halt.

During the march from Worotniów to Ostrożec the commander of the picket should have taken into account that he might meet the enemy.

Watching to the north did not exclude the appearance of Bolsheviks from the east, especially as this was their natural direction. And if so, advancing on foot, we should have allowed for the enemy reaching Ostrożec before us.



The commander of the picket during the march could not count on the fact that the regiment would wait for him in Ostrożec , nor even on the fact that the picket, which was in the forest to the east of Ostrożec , would return the same way.

So one had to reckon with meeting the enemy already settled in Ostrożec.

If the commander of the picket had a map, or if he had been able to get an idea of the terrain in the area of Ostrożec during the day, he would have come to the conclusion that the capture of that locality, due to the river crossing, threw us off following the regiment's advance. In order to avoid that we should have hurried from Worotniów, trotting not walking. And in Ostrożec we would join the rear guard. (In any case, ulan Forma had brought a clear order: join immediately).

Counting on meeting the enemy we needed to watch in front of us. Stopping in Ostrożec, even to drink water, should not have occurred for two reasons:

1. it was too large a town for such a small unit to guard itself, even if only for a moment,
2. because the crossing were the first priority, and only then stop.

The commander of the post did the worst thing: he stopped in Ostrożec without checking it thoroughly.

One thing that should be underlined as a positive is the camaraderie, that went as far as heroism. Dobrowolski, under fire from a machine gun on one side, and under pressure from the charging pursuit on the other side, firing at the attackers, got me out from under a dead horse, gave me another one and helped me to get on it. When he had dealt with me, he rescued Forma, whom he tried several times to put on his horse.

Unfortunately, he did not succeed, as the Bolsheviks were breathing down his neck. My other colleagues covered both these feats with carbine fire.

When I was wounded, Starnawski, Dobrowolski and Wołk, despite my requests, did not allow me to stay in the field and led me out of what seemed to be a hopeless situation.

We can add nothing to this description. The tale related by the author is very factual and realistic. There is no doubt that there were very brave boys in the patrol.

The tactical analysis or criticism made by the author is also correct. The commander was careless and unlucky! Tough luck – a patrol working honestly is always vulnerable. The possibility of enemy arrival from any direction always exists for a small patrol. Of course, as far as possible (other than when ordered otherwise) one should avoid settlements, which are particularly treacherous for small units, because they make it easier for the enemy to ambush or surprise them.

Editor

