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Charge at Piniaziewiczze

After transporting the Greater Polish¹ 17th Lancer Regiment from Gniezno to Wilno [Vilnius], we remained in the barracks of the Gate of Dawn [Aušros Vartai] for two months. Nothing appeared to change our carefree garrison life.

Completely unexpectedly, on 15 April 1920, the regiment received an order to load up. The only question on our lips was – where to? There was not much time, as we were told to be ready to travel by the next morning. There were thousands of duties to complete before then.

Four days of rail transport dragged on at a truly tortuous pace, so it was with genuine joy that we finally reached Kalenkowicze station [Kalenkovichy, eastern Belarus] as our destination.

Here we received vague information that the regiment would be used for some great action and that we would be part of the 7th Cavalry Brigade, which was gathering nearby. This was soon confirmed by a regimental order, which stated that the 7th Cavalry Brigade was to be made up of the 1st Light Horse Regiment, the Tartar Cavalry Regiment, our regiment and the 7th Horse Artillery *Division*. The brigade was part of Colonel Rybak's operational group.

The regiment's transports arrived after three days, and finally, on 23 April the now regathered regiment set off to the south. After two days of hard march we reached Groszówka. There we learned the brigade's task.

In connection with our general offensive in the Ukraine, General Rydz-Śmigły's army was attacking from the Zwiahel [Novohrad-Volyns'kyi] area in the direction of Żytomierz [Zhytomyr] and Radomyśl [Radomyshl']; the 4th Infantry Division was advancing on Korosteń; and Rybak's group was to attack Owruć [Ovruch].

The cavalry had two tasks: the cavalry division was to attack Koziatyn² [Kozyatyn] and our brigade to attack Malin and the bridges on the River Teterew [Teteriv]; our aim was to cut Korosteń off from Kiev.

To achieve its task, which required surprise, the brigade marched through the forest following narrow roads and over heavy, muddy terrain. The wilderness exhausted the horses, which were not used to such efforts, often forcing us to march on foot, which then tired the men.

For the next two days, the brigade marched together, arriving in the evening of 26 April at Olizarówka [Olyzarivka], only 40 km from Malin. At night the brigade marched out of Olizarówka in three columns to the battle.

The first one, commanded by the brigade commander, General Romanowicz, was made up of a *division* of the 1st Light Horse Regiment, a *division* and the Technical Squadron of the 17th Lancer Regiment and a horse artillery battery, headed straight for the station and town of Malin.

The second column, commanded by Colonel Żychliński, the commander of our regiment, had the 1st, 2nd and Technical Squadron of the 17th Lancer Regiment, two squadrons of Tatar cavalry and an artillery battery. The column left Olizarówka around 02:00, with the task of reaching Malin through Piniaziewiczze [Ukrainka] and Horodyszczce [now a suburb of Malyn].

Finally, a squadron of the 1st Light Horse Regiment set off as the third column; it was given the task of capturing Teterow station [in modern Piskivka] and Makaliewicze [Makalevychi] village.

The 2nd Squadron of our regiment, in which I commanded one of the platoons, was quartered in the village of Buda, and there awaited the passing of Colonel Żychliński's column in order to join it.

Around 05:00 we reached the forest exit in front of the village of Piniaziewiczze.

Our squadron, marching as the advance guard of the column, stopped at the edge of the forest, where we learn from a passing peasant woman that there were Soviet troops with artillery stationed in Piniaziewiczze.

¹ That is, a Poznanian unit, from the area which had been under German rule up to 1918. At the start of Polish independence the Poznanian and Pomeranian units were separate from the rest of the Polish army.

² This is the famous "Raid on Koziatyn", one of Poland's great exploits of this phase of the war. This was a very deep raid – Koziatyn is nearly 150 km from the fighting related here.



Of course, despite inquiries, the woman could not tell us how many Muscovites were in the village, but she said several times that there were many of them.

The brigade chief of staff, Captain Radziwiłł, who was riding with the squadron, called me over; he gave me an order to capture the village with my platoon. Meanwhile, the rest of the column had already reached the place where we were standing and where the first charge at the Bolsheviks was about to take place.

With no time for reconnaissance or hesitation – as I wanted to take advantage of surprise – I deployed the platoon up to the edge of the forest.

Some 300 metres ahead of us, a little way down, lay a long village. Thin ribbons of smoke were coming from the chimneys of some huts; somewhere a dog barked, and others echoed it.

I drew my sabre from its scabbard and gave the signal to the platoon. We set off at a trot, quickly changing into a gallop. Without shouting, leaning forward on the saddles, we quickly approached the village, with the horses gaining speed.

Suddenly, halfway across, several shots were fired from the buildings of the village, followed by chaotic gunfire, then the steady rattle of a machine gun.

Fortunately, the fire did no damage, but the younger soldiers could not withstand it – this was their baptism of fire – and the charge started to falter.

I experienced some very dark emotions then. In a fraction of a second, one thought after another flashed through my head. It was clear that if we did not reach the village straight away that the charge would fail.

And now my platoon was really starting to disperse. Most of the lancers had stopped their horses, were hesitating and stood still; some turned back; the fire started to cause damage, several lancers fell to the ground from their horses ...

There was not a moment to lose! What I did in the next two or three seconds I did without thinking. I rode confidently forward and shouted! The hesitation left. The platoon rushed forward again, now shouting with all the power of their lungs – “Urra! Urra!” Soon we reached the village, chopping left and right at the heads of terrified and already fleeing Bolsheviks.

In front of us there was a Soviet artillery battery on the road, apparently getting ready to move away. The cannon was unprotected, but in a moment it would be ready to fire.

But my platoon had already turned left and charged into the battery; soon there was a tight crowd of horses and men, with the Bolshevik gunners huddled together, some even on all fours, trying to escape under their horses.

The battery was captured.

In order to create order and drive away the fleeing Bolsheviks I left the sergeant with half the platoon, and went deeper into the village with the rest.

Reaching a bend in the road in the village, we saw several carts full of Russian infantry.

At the sight of us, the Bolsheviks started to jump off the carts and run around; here and there one started to shoot, but in vain. We were already upon them and enjoying the sight of our victory. The Bolsheviks dropped their weapons, raised their hands in the air and surrendered in groups.

The lead two or three carts managed to get out and retreat to the south, the rest were in our hands.

A bearded wounded man, lying on the ground, aimed his rifle at me; Ulan Jasinski, who was passing by, pinned him to the ground with a strong lance thrust.

Now a new sight presented itself ...

Across the wintry fields, a dozen or so Bolsheviks galloped out; a red banner flying above them.

A thought flashed – an irresistible desire to not let such a valuable prey escape!



With only a few lancers I followed the retreating men. Luckily for us an open ditch crossed their path! I clearly saw the first horse struggling to clamber over the unexpected obstacle, and behind him the other horses were stopping as well.

That was enough for us: we collided with them. Someone in front of me pushed a lance into the side of the Muscovite holding the banner; I stretched myself forward on my horse's neck and grabbed the flagpole with my right hand; sensing resistance, I let go of the reins and with all my might struck with my left hand at the fist clenched to it.

A few Bolsheviks dropped their weapons, a few lay on the ground, and the rest ran across the field. Under the banner of the Soviet artillery regiment – as if a trophy taken by Zagłoba³ – and with our prisoners, we returned to the village.

The prisoners were put in order by arranging them in fours on the road, putting their weapons on the carts. The captured battery also stood in order, harnessed, ready to march.

I reported to the approaching Chief of Staff: "Sir, I report the taking of the village, the capture of an artillery battery, two machine guns and 500 prisoners."

Captain Radziwiłł did not have enough words of praise for my platoon, for the bravery shown in front of everyone.

We soon set off in the direction of Malin, where we were to undergo a hard battle, lasting many hours, with an enemy that was many times stronger than us. Captain Radziwiłł fell in that battle.

Today, when I look back and remember, I often recall this first charge on the Bolsheviks, a successful one, which took place in front of other squadrons, so it lifted the spirits of all the cavalymen, clearly showing them the value of a well used sabre and lance.

The crucial moment was when, receiving those first shots, the platoon hesitated and was just a step away from turning back. In that short time I experienced the full responsibility of a commander. I understood instinctively at the time that in moments of crisis people must be roused by example.

But there is no time to lose in war. Perhaps a moment more and it would have been too late – I would not have been able to control the collapse of morale in the platoon.

How happy and proud I was to be able to react in time, to rouse the men and impose my will to fight for victory.

Everything that happened after that was just the result of battle zeal and a bit of lancer's luck.

The battle deed presented here by the author is not only particularly successful and commendable, but moreover, it gives the reader a number of instructive moments.

The whole action is based on the role of the advance guard! A platoon of that is ordered to capture a village occupied by the enemy in order to open the way for the column.

This "capture of the village" should be understood in modern military language as reconnaissance by capture of the object.

The simplest – though undoubtedly most risky – solution to the task was given to the author, then a young officer, to attack the village directly in order to exploit the circumstances of surprise that presented itself.

Although the column was dealing with an enemy not yet morally shaken, operationally it was already in the enemy's deep rear. That circumstance favoured bold action against an opponent who was not yet broken.

The platoon set off. Halfway there it received fire that increased in strength, joined by the depressing crack of a machine gun. There was a quite understandable moment of hesitation among the lancers; there were

³ Onufry Zagłoba is a famous Polish warrior in the stories of Henryk Sienkiewicz.



also losses ... Men undoubtedly asked themselves whether they were able to throw themselves, given their weak numbers, into a great unknown, which manifested itself with increasingly stronger fire?

The platoon might have turned back after finding the village well manned. It would then have fulfilled part of its task – the first, reconnaissance part – but in a superficial way. The platoon's retreat would have necessitated the column attacking with manoeuvre; the time taken to do that would give the enemy an opportunity to cool down and organise a defence.

But the platoon leader sensed the situation with intuition and enthusiasm. He understood that a retreat was a defeat, that often costs more casualties than a daring advance. He was dutiful and understood his task completely. So he took a risk.

Sensing that his lancers were breaking away, he rushed forward! With that impulse he overcame the drop in morale in both himself and the platoon and rode into the village with a sabre in his hand.

The enemy was unnerved by the courage and allowed itself to break down.

The Brigade's Chief of Staff had sought to clarify the situation by risking one platoon. He was right, as the concept turned out to be feasible. It is easy to judge today, 18 years after the events, but at the time it was difficult to fulfil the task at the head of a weak platoon into the face of fire from superior numbers. The decisiveness of the execution was a result of the platoon leader's unprecedented merit.

All in all, the author's description is a beautiful and eloquent example of the execution of a so-called "sharp reconnaissance", that is, reconnaissance by force while taking risks.

Moreover, it contains a profound lesson that in every combat operation a emotional crisis arises from the enemy's counteraction, lined with cowardice, which must be ruthlessly suppressed in order to be morally stronger than the enemy and thus win.

At the same time the description illustrates how far cavalry bravado can balance out numbers.

Editor

