

## Captain Jan Chludziński

### Episode from the Raid on Korosteń – October 1920

*Chludziński commanded an MG platoon in the 201st Volunteer Ulan Regiment.*

We marched on for the second day without encountering any enemy.

We passed Kropiwne [Kropywnya] and Koszelówka and continued on. Where to, none of us knew the answer – anyway nobody asked about it much, especially our rifle-armed comrades. But we all knew that sooner or later shots would be fired somewhere in front, and then we would hear the voice of the “Old Man” (our squadron commander): “Machine guns, forward!” So we marched calmly, waiting patiently for our turn.

The warm, bright days of October and a long rest previously in Smoldyrewo left a good mood in us soldierly brothers. The sun smiled at us in a friendly way, and clouds of dust accompanied us throughout the march.

The local people watched us curiously from behind their fences and peeking out of their houses, and the women cried quietly, giving the jokers the opportunity to mock. Franek Szulecki from Pelcowizna asked, “Captain, sir, they seem to be running so well, we can’t reach them in two days.” A voice from behind replied, “Well – and you seem to want to see them so much! But only those on foot, seeing you always get to be on a horse.”

The day’s marching passed quickly with such chitchat. We marched quite fast, often trotting. Dusk began to fall. It was already completely dark when we reached Chołosno [Kholosne]. “Halt! Dismount!” sounded the Old Man’s voice. “Try to get some hay, boys, we won’t stay long!” Then the Old Man gathered all the platoon commanders and senior NCOs for a briefing and explained to us that the cavalry corps was making an advance on Korosteń, that we were not far from it and that the attack of the 6th, 7th and 8th brigades was about to begin. However, the 9th Cavalry Brigade had set off at 4 a.m. on 10 October through Domołocz [Domoloch] – along the railway track and would attack Korosteń from the northeast and east. The order of march was: 1st Light Cavalry Regiment, 1st Battery of the 7th Horse Artillery *Divizion*, 201st Ulan Regiment, 1st Battery of the 4th Horse Artillery *Divizion* and the advance guard. All the wagons would remain in Chołosno under the cover of a regiment there.

Having listened to the Old One very carefully, we returned to the platoon to check the rigging, sort out the cartridges, oil the guns and fill the radiators with water. In the meantime the cavalrymen were carrying hay in from the fields, while the kitchens were cooking warm food for the men. There were no quarters; we had to spend the night in the field. Wiara, having saddled up her horses, lay down by the fires. Luzak, wrapped in his coat, with his cap lowered over his nose, was taking a nap, sitting by the horses. Slowly the chatter of the cavalrymen died down and after a while we could only hear the horses crunching the hay. The sky began to cloud over slightly, which boded ill for the next day’s weather. Somewhere in the squadron, horses began to bite each other. “Hey you, such sons of bitches!” roared a horseman’s voice, then silence fell again.

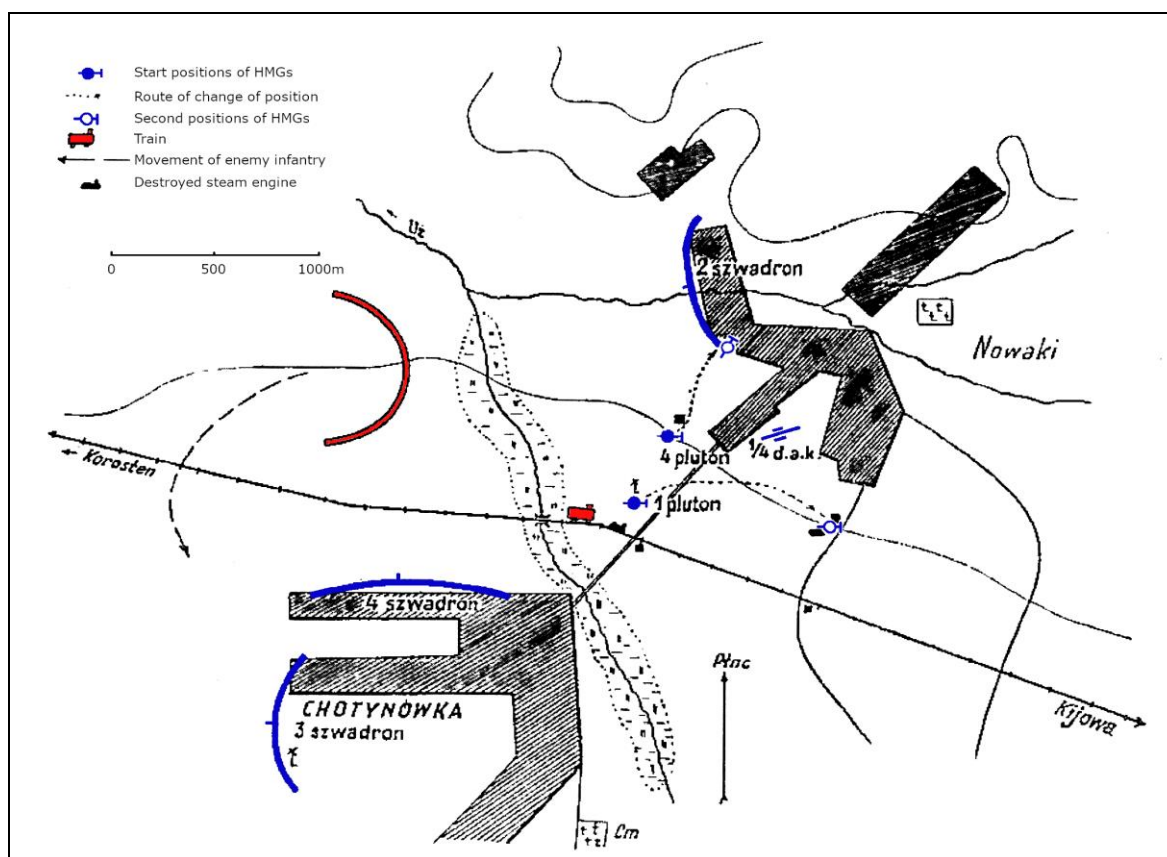
The hay was disappearing fast. At one point I wanted to wake up the groom to bring a fresh ration, but I felt sorry for him and decided to do it myself. I left the village in the direction from where the hay had previously arrived. My natural sense of smell quickly led me to my destination. Two hundred meters outside the village there was a haystack, so plucked by the cavalrymen that it looked more like a mushroom than a haystack. First I twisted some twine, and then I began to pull out the hay. As this was going rather poorly, I decided to get down to work more energetically. I pushed my right hand deep into the haystack, and as I was pulling it back, someone from inside the haystack grabbed me firmly by the wrist. I jerked my arm harder once more, but in vain. Someone was holding on very tightly. Despite my will, I looked behind me. There was nobody. To shout would be shameful. A thought flashed through my mind: “A Cossack caught a Tartar, and the Tartar is holding his head”. Having cooled down a bit from the first impression, I



decided to consider more calmly who was playing the trick on me – quite an unpleasant one in fact. Just in case, however, I tilted my body to the side, so that I wouldn't get a spike in the stomach from the middle of the stack. As my left hand was free, I started to move it carefully along my right arm up to the wrist. I did this very carefully so as not to have it also be caught. Lightly touching my fingers, I felt that my right hand was stuck in the spokes of a bicycle wheel, hidden there for some reason. I cursed quickly and at the same time felt the cap on my head fall back into place. Leaving the bicycle where it was, I threw the bundle of hay on my back and returned to the horses. At this time a cannon was fired somewhere in the distance, then another and a third. The cracks of rifles began to reach my ears.

Before 4 a.m. the piercing sound of a trumpet woke up those sleeping. A dozen or so minutes later the squadrons set off in the ordered direction. The grey, dirty, rainy morning of 10 October was dawning. Silence reigned in the ranks. We were focused on our riding, ready to fight. The joking stopped completely. From the incessant roar of cannons at Korosteń we concluded that the battle had begun in earnest. We anticipated we would attack, and prepared to meet the enemy at any moment. We pushed the horses as fast as we could.

About 7 or 8 a.m. we reached the village of Chotynówka [Khotynivka], sitting by the Korosteń to Kiev railway line. When the squadrons reached the village cemetery, a cannon shot was fired at the head of the column. Our hearts were beating faster, but we did not hear the words of the command we knew so well: "We fight on foot". But we did not wait for long. As soon as the squadron passed the railway track moving from Chotynówka in the direction of Nowaki, we saw a column of enemy infantry marching along the northern side of the railway track from Korosten to Nowaki. A Bolshevik steam locomotive was standing on the track, having been hit by an accurate shot from our artillery. A short order was given by the squadron commander: "Enemy infantry to the left. We fight on foot." The 1st Platoon galloped to the windmill, while I went with the 4th Platoon and took up a position 200 metres north of the 1st Platoon, on the dirt road from Korosteń to Nowaki, by an isolated house.



We started to fire quite soon. The cavalry had not yet managed to hide in Nowaki, when both platoons began to fire. We judged the range well. The first bullets dug into the ground in front of the enemy column,



which was marching without cover, and then with an adjustment moved along the vulnerable column. It became muddled up. Then it began to scatter to the north and south of the tracks, taking up a loose formation in several lines. Only a few dozen Reds remained on the line, having given their souls to the devil. Some brave ones tried to gather themselves, but then slunk back; they had had enough. They began to return fire. The belts were rapidly emptied. The ammunition men were running back and forth like men possessed, bringing in new boxes of ammunition. Steam started to hiss from the radiators and we had to keep adding water. Mietek Frenkel's gun liked to jam sometimes, but that day it had no misfires. It continued to spit lead incessantly, jumping up and down. I was not worried about the second gun, Koszewski's, as it never failed. The whole platoon shot, and shot beautifully. The neighbouring one, with Cadet Serkies, was the same. The faces of the aiming officers became very pink, and their eyes shone like those of wolves. Their silhouettes were slightly bent, muscles tensed, eyes fixed on the target ... "quality work". The terrain in front of us was open, level and sandy, which made it easy to observe the range and find targets with the naked eye.

Having finished shaking out into loose formation, the front waves of the Reds here and there tried to move forward by bounds but, hit by accurate fire, they abandoned any further attempts. They all lay stationary on the ground. After some time some vigorous movements by message runners became noticeable. They did it so awkwardly that one could easily deduce where the commander was. I ordered the second gun to transfer fire there immediately. Whilst I was giving that order, a smoking armoured train emerged from the forest from the direction of Korosten. It moved slowly in our direction. Meanwhile a courier from the village ran up to our 1st MG platoon and it began to withdraw. We marked this with heavier fire, but at the same time something squeezed inside me. Why are we retreating? "What the hell is our artillery doing? It's silent, as if someone had shoved a stick down its throat," said one of the ammunition officers. Actually, I too thought it should have been firing by this point. At the same time I heard Janek Chmielarz's voice, maybe even louder than the expected artillery shots: "What's the matter, you bastards, you got itchy feet? Do your own thing, son, and bugger the consequences". These words were not directed at me, but I felt ashamed. I recovered instantly, shouted at the ammunition men to remove all the ammunition from the horses, and ordered them to get more ammunition from the ammunition wagon. If they had ordered me to withdraw at that moment, by God, I would not have obeyed the order.

In the meantime the armoured train reached the back of the Red lines and began firing artillery at the village. Shells flew over our heads with a clatter. I watched them. They hit the village and started fires in several places. The village was full of horses and carts. The situation was very difficult. The streets had deep ditches on both sides and high barbed wire fences, which made it very difficult to get off the road and hide outside the village. In the village one could hear shouting and see horses wandering around panicked. One of the shells hits the ammunition wagon of the 1st MG platoon. Platoon Sergeant Majewski was killed, cut in half, and the horses' bodies were torn to pieces.

Meanwhile, in front of us, the Red infantry were unable to withstand the constant and very effective fire of our platoon, and began to retreat in small detachments southwards behind the railway track. I was very pleased with the sight, but at the same time – I do not know why – I shouted "bastards" after them.

We sent a few more rounds from our guns after them, but then we received a dozen or so rifle shots from the northern edge of Nowaki village. Observing the alleged enemy it turned out to be our own 2nd cavalry squadron, which had started to occupy the northern edge of the village from the west. They had taken us for the enemy – fortunately the shots did us no harm.

Meanwhile, the armoured vehicle slowly approaching our positions with impunity. It stopped for a moment before reaching the bridge over the River Uzh, then it crossed it slowly and went up to a locomotive that had been thrown off the rails. Without any orders, both machine-guns directed their fire at the armoured train. You could hear the bullets hitting the steel walls without causing any damage. I ordered a cease fire, but the train, noticing it was us, began to fire at us with all its heavy machine-guns. We were not dug in,



because we had had no time for that. The only thing that saved us was a slight dip in the dirt road where our positions were. We all clung to the ground and God knows how long we would have lain motionless, had it not been for the shots of our artillery directed at the train from Nowaki village. As a result of those shots, the machine-guns of the train shifted their fire to our artillery, leaving us alone. The fire of our artillery was inaccurate, the shells flying over or hitting the base of the railway embankment, without causing any harm to the vehicle.

Far to the north of Nowaki some other artillery could be heard. Their effect was the same as from our guns, the only difference being that some of the shells fell near our platoon. Emboldened by the ineffective fire, the Bolsheviks left their wagons and started to raise the broken engine in front of them. Some of them got on the roof of the wagons. In a low voice I give a command: "Corporal Frenkiel, aim at the observers on the roof of the armoured wagon. Corporal Koszewski, target the people working at the repair of the locomotive. Distance 400 metres." After a moment I heard the answer, "Ready" ... "Fire!" I commanded. The wheel of the locomotive got stuck, the observers dropped from the roof to the ground. In response to that we again received fire from the train, but having learnt from the previous experience we had managed to dig some shooting pits for ourselves. When the fire calmed down, I heard the squadron leader's voice from the village: "Sergeant Chludziński, withdraw with your guns to the village"

Under the cover of the house, creeping on our stomachs, we withdrew to the north and took up positions on the south wing of the 2nd Squadron, on the edge of the village. While we withdrew the Reds resumed work on the broken steam engine, but this time hiding behind steel shields. After placing our guns in their new positions, we started firing at the workers, but it was to little effect. The Reds put the broken locomotive on the rails and, pushing it in front of them, withdrew to Kiev. As if to say goodbye, a short burst was fired from a machine gun of the Bolshevik "Subotnik". Corporal Frenkiel, hit in the heart, fell to the ground without saying a word, having served his country well. The battle was over.

The enemy infantry battalion, which during this battle had crossed the railway tracks, fell into the hands of the 3rd and 4th Squadrons in Chotynówka. The leading units of the battalion surrendered, but the rest turned back to Korosten. The 4th Squadron followed in pursuit on horseback and took those who had escaped prisoner. The total captured during the day [by the 201st Volunteer Ulan Regiment] was 500 prisoners and one machine gun.

*An interesting episode from Colonel Rommel's cavalry corps attack on Korosteń.*

*Out of five enemy armoured trains, grouped within range of the Korosten railway junction, "Subotnik" was the only one to break through and survive.*

*She did so because she had a brave commander and good technical services. In the fight to break through it inflicted serious losses on our cavalry, as well as on the horse artillery. The action of this train – although that of the enemy – may serve as a good example.*

*The author's description is based on the background of his tactical perspective at the time with an MG platoon, or rather section, so does not provide sufficient information to assess whether the Polish side could have stopped the train. Maybe it was possible, if the artillery fire had been more accurate. In reality, only artillery could have inflicted effective blows on its armour. But our battery was countered by a train with thick armour, numerous machine guns and artillery. Since there was no surprise to our fire, all the advantages of the fire fight were on the side of the train.*

*The lucky escape of the train was an act of selfishness, sacrificing the remaining Soviet troops to their fate. In the aftermath of events they were taken by us. The train saved itself, but did nothing to save its comrades-in-arms. In that respect I do not set it as an example.*

