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Reconnaissance

Eighteen years have passed since June 1920. The reader will forgive me if I have distorted any detail; I remember the whole story, and above all my experiences, accurately and I share them with the reader.

In the middle of June 1920, General Żeligowski's 10th Infantry Division's left wing was holding the isthmus between Żado [Ilodo?] and Jelni [Yel'na] Lakes on the Jamna [Jamno] River. Behind the infantry stood the 13th Wilno Lancer Regiment in reserve.

On 15 June I was placed with my 3rd Squadron at the disposal of Colonel Jacynik, who was on the Jamna River with his 30th Infantry Regiment.

The 3rd Squadron, as with the other units, was very small, only about 30 sabres. So it was basically a platoon, without machine guns – but a strong platoon thanks to good officers and high morale of the soldiers. I had two tried and tested officers, Second Lieutenants Mikołaj Prosiński and Apolinare Krasowski, and Cadet Włodzimierz Prosiński, who could replace any officer whenever needed and always fulfilled his tasks to the best of his ability.

After reporting to Colonel Jacynik I received the following orders from him: the 10th Infantry Division and the 1st Cavalry Brigade were to capture Dżisna; the 10th Infantry Division would advance along the route from Hermanowicz [Germanowichi] to Dżisna, the 1st Cavalry Brigade would strike from the northwest between the swamps of Lake Jelni and the Dżwina [Daugava, Dvina] River. There was enemy infantry in front of the 10th Infantry Division. The task of the 3rd Squadron was to go to Baranczyki [Baranchiki] in order to establish and maintain communication with the 1st Cavalry Brigade, which was sending a squadron from Baranczyki to communicate with Colonel Jacynik. In his orders Colonel Jacynik put a special emphasis on the fact that upon meeting the squadron marching from Baranczyki I should not take it to be enemy.

Immediately after receiving the orders and issuing appropriate regulations I set off along the nearest road to Fiedosowo [Fedosovo] and Baranczyki. It was already well after noon; the left wing of the 10th Infantry Division was at that time attacking the enemy infantry near Okuniewo [Okunevo].

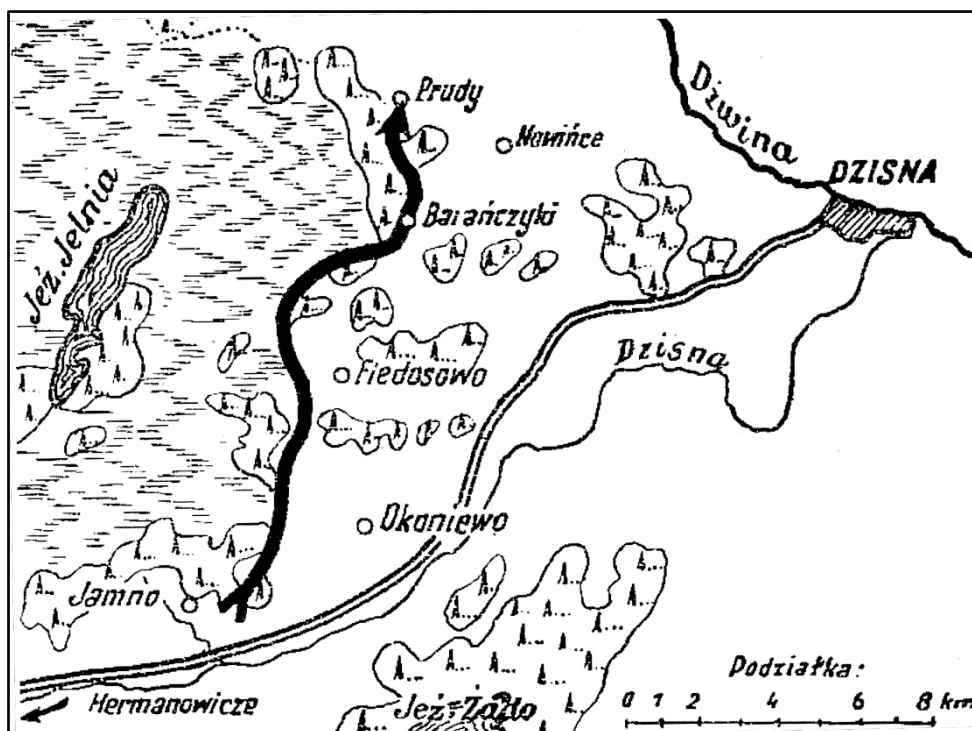
Before reaching Fiedosowo I heard rifle and machine gun fire directed at my leading section. At the sound I galloped with a lead unit towards the village ahead, ordering Second Lieutenant Prosiński to hide his squad in a nearby ravine. It turned out that the lead unit had lost its point scout; he was lying crushed by his mount under heavy enemy fire from Fiedosowo. The ulans were waving their lances and caps, thinking that it was not necessarily the enemy in front of us, but perhaps our squadron sent from Baranczyki to establish communications. With a few ulans I rushed to pull out the wounded lancer. When we crawled up to him, the enemy stopped shooting and sent some horsemen out towards us; apparently they were disoriented by the ulans' signalling and the lack of return fire from our side. While retrieving the wounded lancer and his saddle from under the dead horse, my ulan squad charged on horseback and took a captive. Seeing the charge, the enemy started to fire again, this time with no effect. From the fighting, the testimony of the prisoner, and the reconnaissance so far, it turned out that there was a Soviet battalion near Fiedosowo, and that the entire sector from the marshes of Jelni Lake through Fiedosowo to Okuniew was held by enemy infantry units.

After sending back a report, the wounded ulan and the prisoner of war, I headed west with the squadron, hoping to bypass the enemy through the swamps of Jelni Lake and reach Baranczyki by that route, as all other roads were blocked.

The marshes of Lake Jelni were thought to be completely inaccessible; on my 1:300,000 map (we didn't have a more accurate one) there wasn't even a path through the marshes, but I thought maybe a guide



could lead us through. I found a Pole who undertook to lead the squadron through the marshes to Baranczyki by an old, long-neglected causeway.



When we ventured into the swamps, it was already dark. I advanced with the guide at the front with the lead unit. The road through the marshes was awful, the lead horses moved well, but at the back it was worse: the horses kept collapsing because the road had been broken up by the horses in front. Minutes seemed like hours to me, I experienced terrible moments, I kept thinking: had I made a good decision? Would I drown my horses without even a fight? Did the enemy guard the exit from the marshes? Would the squadron die in either case without any benefit or glory, only as a result of my foolish stubbornness. Would it all end as a disaster and to my discredit?

In spite of these dark thoughts I pushed forward without hesitation, because it was the only way I could see to accomplish my task. That determination to complete my task gave me the power to overcome all the difficulties and frictions and to control my nerves.

After an arduous march of a few kilometres of swampy dyke I finally felt firm ground under my feet, and what a relief that was: the squadron was not lost, the task would be completed, we would reach Baranczyki.

I dismissed the guide, checked the condition of the squadron and set off with the lead unit in the direction of Baranczyki, which was nearby.

It was dark, sometime around midnight. Baranczyki was sleeping, without a single light. There was complete silence and calm – I sensed at once that there were no troops in the village.

After posting guards, I stopped briefly in Baranczyki to get some information from the inhabitants and to make a decision.

The questioning of the inhabitants took place in the old, tried-and-tested way – the officers or non-commissioned officers went to three huts, while I went to the fourth one. This ensured we avoided collusion and received true information.

The unanimous responses of the peasants said that in the morning our cavalry patrols appeared briefly in the village, and then there were Soviet patrols. During the day they could hear the sounds of battle near



Nowinieć [Novintsy] and Prudy, and in the evening the sounds of battle moved further to the north and began to diminish until they stopped altogether.

From the general situation and the testimonies of the population it appeared that the 1st Cavalry Brigade was not having any success, that it was now somewhere to the north of Prudy or Nowinieć, and that the enemy was between it and Baranczyki.

What to do now? My orders were to reach Baranczyki. I had done that, so formally everything was in order, I could stop, rest and send a report. But was it really all right? Definitely not. The situation was completely different from that Colonel Jacynik had imagined, and perhaps also General Żeligowski. I could not provide comprehensive information while remaining stationary, so I had to advance to Nowinieć or Prudy, or perhaps even further north, in order to finally clarify the position by establishing contact with the 1st Cavalry Brigade or by reconnaissance of the enemy. I now saw my task as that final clarification of the positions. I set off for Prudy – I chose Prudy rather than Nowinieć because of the forest in front of Prudy allowed the squadron's movement to be concealed, making reconnaissance easier.

It was a wonderful June night and a perfect road through the forest; every step we took the phosphorescent fire of glow-worms shone, reminding me of pre-war times in a beautiful village near now so distant Minsk.

As always in difficult circumstances, I advanced with the lead squad, with the squadron following.

Not yet in Prudy, I saw some lights in the village. That betrayed the presence of troops – but which ones, ours or the enemy? I ordered Lieutenant Prosiński to stay at the edge of the forest about 500 m from the village, while I and Lieutenant Krasowski with the scouts, moved forward on horseback to reconnoitre.

In the village street there were several dozen peasants standing by a hut, from which light spilled. In the glare of that light I could see their anxiety when they saw us come near. From their apprehension I guessed at once that there were Bolsheviks in the village – peasants were always afraid of a fight during which they could easily get hurt.

Just in case, I asked them: “Who is it? - “Bolsheviks, we are the cart drivers”, was the reply of the peasants, running away. Before I managed to stop them, the street was empty.

I made a decision immediately – we had to take a prisoner; for this purpose the lead unit needed to move quickly. Messengers were sent to the squadron – Lieutenant Prosiński received a verbal order: half of the squadron should quickly be sent to the village, while he with the other half of the squadron should stay in place on the edge of the forest to cover the others.

We had to act immediately while we waited for the reinforcements, so I gave the following orders: two ulans were to go to a hut to take a prisoner, I myself would go to another hut to fetch a prisoner, while Lieutenant Krasowski with two ulans remained in the street as cover and for communication with the men coming from the squadron.

I had only just given the orders, when my horse broke free from the holder and went into the yard of one of the huts. I ran after the horse, grabbed it and gave it back to the holder, ordering him to join the squadron.

Catching the horse, I noticed a harnessed cart in the yard, and a saddled horse by the cart: that was a sign of the presence of Bolsheviks in that hut, so I headed for it.

The entrance to the hut was from the courtyard. When I approached the porch, the door opened and a Bolshevik with a rifle emerged from the cottage. I rushed at him, grabbed his collar with my left hand and hit him on the face with the revolver I held in my right hand. Then I put the revolver to his head, discussed his ancestry, and announced that I would shoot him like a dog if he raised a shout or lied when answering.



The prisoner stated that there was one battalion of infantry in the village itself, that a second was in the cottages north of the village, and that a third would arrive in the village during the night. There had been fighting during the day and that the Poles had been beaten and had retreated somewhere towards the north. He himself was a sentry, guarding the ammunition wagon in the yard.

I gave the prisoner to one of the ulans in the street and ordered him to be escorted to the squadron.

As he was led out, the two lancers I had sent for a prisoner appeared. They were leading the battalion adjutant, who had gone out into the street thinking that the noise we had created with the peasants meant the arrival of the third battalion with rolling stock into the village. The ulans handed me some papers taken from him. While I was questioning him, the ulans brought the horses and the ammunition wagon out into the street.

The testimonies of both prisoners of war were exactly the same, the situation was completely clear.

What to do now? Go back, or use the element of surprise and attack the Bolsheviks? The following thoughts ran through my head. My task is completed, I only had to report as soon as possible and hand over the prisoners. There are 30 of us with officers in the whole squadron; sending the report and the prisoners required some men, so as a result 15-20 ulans would remain, and that without hand grenades – could one count on success with that? In the conditions we found ourselves in case of failure we would be able to retreat, but what would happen to the horses? If the enemy cut off our way of retreat across the causeway, the horses would die, though we would probably return on foot. Was it worth risking the horses, when we had so few of them, and they were worth their weight in gold – and the task was done.

Fear for the horses, the knowledge that no one could help, and a certain personal anxiety that began to take me from the moment I had completed the task, shook me. I didn't know what I would have decided in the end, if it hadn't been for the shots that started to ring out from the other end of the village, which showed that our surprise was passing. In addition, dawn was rising, which could easily betray our numerical weakness. As a result, I decided to leave the village and return.

We returned the same way, without meeting the enemy, taking our prisoners and two captured horses. We threw the ammunition wagon and Soviet ammunition into a swamp.

When I reported to Colonel Jacynik in the morning of 16 June, I could see the surprise on his face. I had the impression that he did not believe me and that it was only the presentation of the prisoners and the captured documents that dispelled his disbelief.

Shortly after my report I was released by Colonel Jacynik to the regiment, because the planned attack on Dzisna was cancelled and another squadron from the regiment was arriving in the morning.

It was significant my captive said, on the way back, that when I hit him he had initially thought that he was dealing with his superior, who was punishing him for leaving his post. Beatings, he declared, were the order of the day in the Soviet army.

The author describes a reconnaissance. In fact, of our many episodes, this is the only one that captures the experience and execution that corresponds strictly to the classical requirements of reconnaissance.

The description is very instructive thanks to the logic of consecutive and fundamental decisions of the squadron commander, to which he draws the reader's attention.

A very weak squadron had the task of establishing a line of communication. In view of the vague conditions of the time, it was of course by no means certain that the second liaison unit of the 1st Cavalry Brigade would be encountered on the Baranczyki road. Hence, the decision of the commander was correct, he understood and fulfilled his task of reconnaissance in the direction of Baranczyki.



But warfare would be too easy if reality did not put obstacles in the way. It so happened that the squadron encountered the enemy earlier than thought and found the route through Fiedosowo to Okuniew manned by enemy infantry. The way to Baranczyki seemed to be blocked.

Here was the second decision of the commander. It was to search for a safe passage through the marshes of Lake Jelni. That route was found, and it nearly always is, as experience shows that in practice there is hardly any area where a small detachment cannot slip through following the instructions of a local guide.

The third decision was to reconnoitre the village of Baranczyki and question the local, not always loyal, population. Following the information received and finding the situation different from what his superior had thought, to move on to Prudy, to deepen the reconnaissance.

Finally, to investigate Prudy, to take a prisoner, and then to correctly retire in order to report as quickly as possible the information gained – which was useful only when it could be passed on to a higher commander.

The author's description, given modestly, without the glitter of an extraordinary triumph, is close to the reality of combat and corresponds to the present conditions to a great extent. The squadron had against it an opponent compact and of good morale. It had to take into account the ratio of forces and had no right to enter into protracted fighting, in which it might suffer losses without gaining any more advantages than it had already obtained.

The author's decisions confirm that to discern means: to first make a certain plan of action or movement. To adapt this plan to the reality of the situation. Overcome difficulties with cunning or strength. Avoid unnecessary defeat and ensure that valuable information reaches the sending superior quickly and safely.

It is easy to write, speak and evaluate warfare today, years later, in the comfort and safety of our own homes. It has been and will be much more difficult to perform these acts in the face of the enemy.

It is beautiful to put a cap on your head and throw oneself with a sabre in one's hand at a surprised or low-value enemy; to chop, stab and take him prisoner. It is an action on the spur of the moment, appealing to the nerve.

Less showy, but perhaps more difficult, is to act deliberately over a longer period of time; successively overcoming difficulties and gaining chances of success; fulfilling the task under difficult conditions, where doubt and doubtfulness are, in fact, hard duels for the commander.

This form of action forms the everyday reality of war. The reader should be prepared for it. For these reasons, we must be grateful to the author that he told us about his experience, the significance, instructiveness and valour of which will be felt and understood fully only by those who will have to overcome the immensity of the difficulties amidst the "unknown" of the war situation.

A detachment of 30 horsemen being out in the wilderness for long hours in a terrain filled with an overwhelming and victorious enemy.

Editor.

