

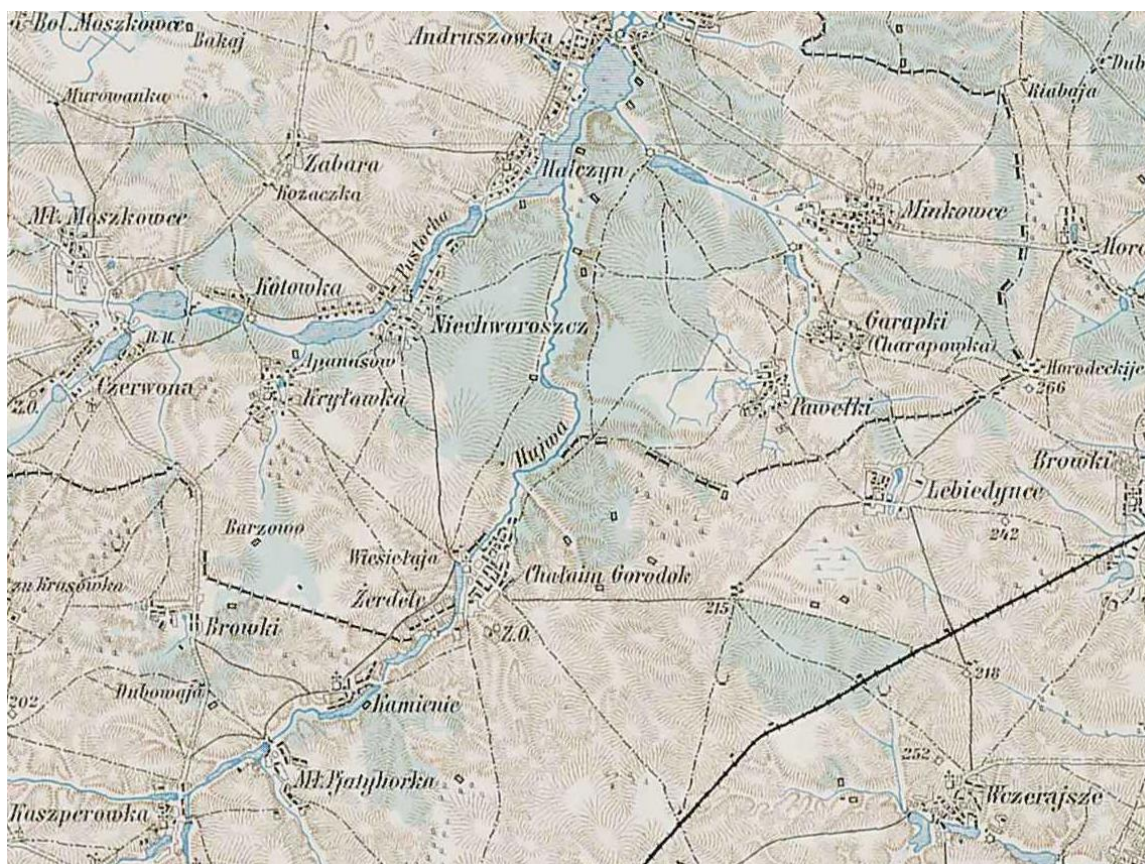
Warrant Officer Teodor Mory

Battle at Chaimgrodek, 11 June 1920

On 10 June 1920, the 5th Cavalry Brigade was sent to the Chaimgródek [Horodkivka, Zhytomyr Oblast] area, where it was to cooperate with the 3rd and 4th Cavalry Brigades, to enable the peaceful retreat of the flank of the 3rd Army.

Budienny's Horse Army, after breaking our front, remained in that area for several days. I was told by the sister of the local Catholic priest, who somehow exceptionally remained alive, that the Bolshevik cavalry leader himself was quartered for one night in Chaimgrodek. Budienny reportedly did not sleep, but worked and gave orders all night.

At 10:30 on 11 June, the 5th Cavalry Brigade set off from in the direction of Ubinkovce.



A map from the decades earlier, but showing the forest paths and river crossings.

The advance guard included the 2nd Light Cavalry Regiment and an artillery battery. They encountered the enemy near Andruszowka [Andrushivka], and attacked on foot, but heavy artillery shelling and machine guns forced it to retreat to Kryłówka [Krylivka].

One hour after this skirmish the leading squadron of the same regiment was heavily shelled by the enemy, who had occupied the village of Pawłki [Pavelky] assuming an attacking attitude there.

The lead units of the 1st and 16th Lancer Regiments located large numbers of enemy cavalry in Lebudzyn [Lebedyntsi] and a large column marching towards Chaimgrodek. A flank guard with artillery was also found.

This news was not good for us, as we had the Hoywa [Huiva] River on our left, which was quite a serious obstacle, and the strong enemy flank guard might surprise us and push us into the river.

From in front of our column came the sounds of fierce fighting, and the brigade's wagons, which had already partly disappeared into the woods, soon began to turn back. The reason for that had not been ascertained, as the 16th Lancer Regiment was in the rear guard and had not received any orders.



Seeing this, the regiment's commander, Major Światłodycz-Kisiel, galloped forward to get an idea of the situation. But at the same time the retreating 1st Lancer Regiment came out of the forest, and it gave the commander detailed information on the reason for the retreat. As a result, he turned our whole regiment, towards Chaimgrodek at a trot; crossing at the bridge. After leaving the horses in hiding and dispersing the regiment, we prepared to fight on foot.

1st and 2nd Squadrons and a machine-gun platoon garrisoned the right side of Chaimgrodek village; to be able to secure our right flank until the brigade crossed the bridge.

The 3rd and 4th Squadrons and a machine gun platoon remained on the left bank of the river to defend the crossing.

Loud shouts and uproar came from the forest; the sounds of shooting were getting closer and closer to us.

The road leading through the forest was quite narrow, and the forest was thick and high, so it was very difficult to turn back the wagons and artillery: the artillery had to unhitch the lead horses; some of the wagons even had to be partly unhitched and unloaded, because it was impossible to turn them around otherwise. The road was blocked; although some wagons and guns had already started back, it was impossible for the leading units to move until the entire column had been turned around and started moving.

With such a convoluted process, there was considerable shouting and uproar, which was further increased by the shooting from both sides.

During this confusion the 2nd Light Horse Regiment bravely faced the enemy, who fiercely attacked our column, and it was thanks to them that the wagons and artillery, after considerable hectic work, managed to withdraw from the forest and cross the bridge.

After such an unpleasant adventure, the wagons fled without stopping, while the artillery took up positions on the other side of the river and waited.

Soon enemy patrols from the flank guard began to appear in front of us; fired on by our machine guns they turned back, but after a short while they approached again; their artillery sent us a few shells to greet us.

After the withdrawal of the 2nd Light Horse Regiment and the 1st Lancer Regiment across the bridge, the Brigade Commander ordered the 16th Lancer Regiment to withdraw as well. Both regiments that were already on the other side of the river formed a line and covered our retreat, as the enemy in some places had already reached the river, and was showing a desire to swim across it.

The last to retreat was the 2nd Squadron, with the Bolsheviks at their heels, but the brave lancers of that squadron – who had already demonstrated much skill and courage in battle – once again defended themselves valiantly, constantly firing their rifles at the enemy.

After we had crossed, the fight began in earnest. The Bolsheviks pulled up two batteries and began to heavily shell the lines of the 1st Lancer Regiment and the 2nd Light Horse Regiment.

Just behind them stood, in concealment, the 16th Lancer Regiment, which had just returned to its horses. Our artillery fired salvos at the bridge in order to destroy it and prevent the enemy using it. However, when it turned out that the shells were too weak to do that, the regimental commander Major Światłodycz-Kisiel ordered the 2nd Squadron to burn the bridge.

Lieutenant Mirny, the squadron leader, sent one platoon under the command of Staff Sergeant Mory to carry out the order. The platoon instantly mounted their horses and set off towards the bridge. After hiding the horses near some mills, they proceeded to carry out the task.

The lancers brought a dozen or so sheaves of straw and a can of oil from the mill which, under a hail of bullets, they placed in the middle of the bridge and then set on fire. Both our artillery and the enemy artillery shelled it, the former firing HE to quickly destroy it and prevent the enemy from crossing, the latter firing shrapnel to try to put out the fire.

After setting fire to the bridge, the platoon returned to their horses, but at that moment two cannon shells hit the very centre of the platoon, wreaking great havoc. The moaning of men and horses was distressing.



A dozen or so colleagues and orderlies from the 1st Squadron rushed to our aid. When the wind blew away the choking smoke of the shells, a terrible sight appeared before our eyes. Six seriously wounded lancers were lying on the ground; Ulan Rossa was dying, and Stanisław Małeckı was already dead; besides them eight horses were killed and six seriously wounded. But the battle was getting more and more intense and there was no time to stare at the bloody massacre.

The orderlies quickly applied bandages, and the colleagues who had come to help carried the wounded to a safer place, where they were then placed on the ambulance and ammunition carts. Ulan Małeckı was already dead, lying on the ground with his head on his horse's neck, smiling as if he were sleeping. Shrapnel from a shell had shattered the back of his skull, so death came immediately. Meanwhile Ulan Rossa, who had been lying motionless, regained consciousness and began to ask to be taken away as well.

The wounded had already departed and there were no carts, so we put that poor fellow – the most severely wounded – on orderly Roguszko's horse. The medic supported the wounded man, as he no longer had the strength to keep his balance on horseback, and in that way we transported the nearly dead man to the rear. That unfortunate man had had his left foot torn off, his head smashed and his stomach ripped open to such an extent that we could see his entrails through the hole. We knew he would die soon, but who would leave a wounded friend to his fate? We carried him as long as he lived, which was a distance of two kilometres.

With the explosion of the shells the other horses had scattered in all directions and ran in terror across the fields, later being caught and led back to the squadron, which was about half a kilometre from us.

When we reached the squadron, completely exhausted, the 1st Lancer and 2nd Light Horse Regiments withdrew, as the brigade commander wanted to break away from the enemy.

While the 16th Lancer Regiment acted as rear guard, moving behind the retreating regiments, it noticed a kilometre-long column of rolling stock behind us. It was a convoy our division, which was retreating in the direction of Białopole [Bilopillya]. The enemy, wanting to attack that column, started to ford the river and cross the bridge, having put out the fire .

The commander of the 16th Lancers, seeing the dangerous situation, did not withdraw. On the contrary he lined his regiment up and, with the participation of one squadron of the 1st Lancer Regiment sent to its assistance, struck at the enemy, driving them back across the river and thus saving the convoy.

However, the Bolsheviks collected more forces. Their artillery started to fire again, killing five of our horses and wounding over a dozen more.

We were beginning to be surrounded, as the enemy had crossed the river again; so we withdrew about 800 metres. Acting on their own initiative the machine-gunners set up their guns and prevented the enemy from taking our flank. This fire surprised the enemy, and inflicted such heavy losses that the Cossacks began to retire towards the river. Our artillery also started to fire at the Cossack lines in front of us.

The regimental commander seeing the effectiveness of the artillery fire and machine guns took advantage of the moment of confusion and threw the regiment into another charge.

We pursued the retreating Bolsheviks, stabbing and hacking mercilessly, but we encountered ever new forces; we were forced to turn back and retreat as far as the road along which the division convoy, saved thanks to our charge, had been advancing moments before.

The enemy followed us again, but much more cautiously than previously.

Wanting now to break away from the enemy, we charged for the third time that day, but the Bolsheviks did not accept the charge, they began to retreat and flee in disorder.

During the third charge, our artillery did not support us due to running out of ammunition, but the Bolshevik artillery fired at us with cannister, killing eight more horses.

The regiment – together with the squadron of the 1st Lancer Regiment assigned to help us, which bravely cooperated with us during the whole battle – halted, in order to give the cavalrymen who had lost their horses a chance to withdraw and to give to our horses some rest, exhausted after charging several times.



In view of the futility of fighting further, as the Bolsheviks would not accept our charge, the regimental commander turned the regiment around and we started to retreat in a line. As the enemy abandoned further pursuit, the regiment moved into a march column in the direction of Brówki [Brovky Druhi].

The 2nd Light Horse Regiment and the 1st Lancer Regiment withdrew to Kryłówka. To the left of us fought regiments of the 3rd and 4th Cavalry Brigades, but under the pressure of an enemy four times more numerous they too had to retreat from the battlefield.

In looking at the results of these actions we can say that, despite our retreat, we were victorious to some extent! The enemy was unable to carry out its intended action, as we hit it unexpectedly, and thus our 3rd Army was able to continue its retreat in peace, in accordance with the Commander-in-Chief's plan.

The battle fought that day by the Cavalry Division cost the enemy many losses of men and horses, and especially of ammunition, which Budienny was to lack in his later battles.

In the evening, after a day's fighting and hardship, the regiment stopped for the night at Gorowce [Horodyshche], where the weary "faithful" enjoyed a well-earned rest. We forgot, if only for a short time, our recent war experiences and their horror.

The author's description is general and resembles a history, covering too wide a range of activities. On this basis it is difficult for me to draw specific tactical conclusions about the action of the 16th Lancer Regiment in the major cavalry battle at Chaimgrodek.

Nevertheless, the description is interesting primarily because it gives impressions of the battle as they were recorded in the memory of the participant – a non-commissioned officer in the line.

The balance of these impressions is that the battle was hard-fought and difficult, interspersed with moments of shocking horror, success and failure; that it had to be fought with persistence, without giving in to despondency. Eventually the brigade withdrew in view of the overall situation, but the troops left without feeling that they had been beaten and suffered defeat.

The latter is significant. That awareness runs like a golden thread through the history of our three cavalry brigades fighting Budienny's Horse Army from the beginning. Thanks to it our cavalry remained in good spirits until the end of the retreat, and – when the position made it possible – it went onto the attack itself and drove the Cossacks out of the country.

It is understandable that in the author's memory there remained moments that particularly impressed themselves. We give them here because they clearly show the difficulties of fighting in any battle.

The bridge had to be set on fire while both artilleries were firing on it. It was damaged, but not sufficiently, by improvised means. On that occasion there was a tragic incident of half the platoon being carried off by two accurate artillery shells. That caused moments of severe mental crisis.

Then a traffic jam on a forest road. Seemingly a trifle, but in reality an event directly affecting tactical decisions. Then the trouble with the division's wagon convoy – in those days they were often in such unfortunate situations, victims of complicated tactical positioning – in the midst of operations, on undetermined fronts with no wings and no certain rear.

Finally, the successful charges of the regiment, aimed at stopping the Cossacks.

From the description of all these phenomena we feel the true pulse of the reality of the war, against the background of the events that took place when Budienny's army first pierced the Polish front. At that time the initiative and most of the fighting was in the enemy's favour. I consciously put this example of a heavy battle at the end of the book. I wanted the reader, after reading a number of happy and easy episodes, to see the flip side of the coin.

The reality of war is huge. It covers the range of possibilities from the happiest to the most tragic. To win one must be morally strong, tough and persistent. One must be able to control all one's emotions, know what one wants and pursue by all means your specific tactical objectives.

Editor

