

## Colonel Zygmunt Podhorski

### Charge of the 203rd Lancer Regiment near Ciechanów on 8 August 1920

On 7 August 1920 the transports of the 203rd Lancer Regiment, initially directed to Mława, were redirected to Ciechanów, where the regiment began to unload.

It was only the tenth day of its existence.

Created in Kalisz, mainly from volunteers who had flocked to the call of the Commander-in-Chief, bringing their own horses, the regiment was supplemented by one march squadron and a dozen or so non-commissioned officers from the 3rd Lancer Regiment.

The officers came from various formations, only a small group, with Captain Adam Zakrzewski at the head, came from the 3rd Lancer Regiment.

By the order of the Minister of Military Affairs I was appointed the commander of the regiment.

I took command of the regiment on 1 August. By 3 or 4 August I received an order to immediately load the regiment and head to the front.

I barely had time to divide the regiment into squadrons and appoint squadron commanders. I recall that we had 800 lancers, 800 horses and the same number of saddles, but not yet allocated correctly. There were no rifles, heavy machine guns, lances, sabres or field kitchens at all.

In this condition the regiment was loaded and set off. On the way through Łódź I received lances, sabres and new English rifles that were still in their packs, together with plenty of ammunition for them, and finally two heavy machine guns.

I ordered the supply train to distribute these weapons, the officers to familiarise themselves with the new rifles and to teach the ulans how to handle them.

On passing through Warsaw I received the following order from the then Chief of Staff, General Rozwadowski: "A gap has appeared between Ostrołęka and Chorzele, which must be closed. The regiment must go to Mława, from where it will march to the Chorzele region, establishing contact with General Karnicki."

To this day I do not know why I did not reach Mława, although my first transport had already made it there. I was stopped in Ciechanów. An order to unload came. The transport at Mława was also pulled back.

I started unloading in the middle of the day. Because the ramp was very short only a few rail wagons could fit on it, and it went very sluggishly. In addition, the ulans did it unskillfully – they often did not know what to do at all. At the railway station I found out that there were reserve squadrons of the 4th and 7th Lancer Regiments in the barracks. I went there to find out if there was any news from the front and if they knew where General Karnicki's division might be. I left my second-in-command, Captain Zakrzewski, at the railway station, ordering him to speed up the unloading.

In the barracks I found the commander of the reserve squadron of the 4th Lancer Regiment, who was also the commander of the whole. Both squadrons had 2 platoons each. All the equipment and non-mounted had already been evacuated.

The two platoons of the 7th Lancer Regiment, under the command of Lieutenant Bukraba, were sent to Przasnysz. Soon a report arrived that they had been forced to withdraw from Przasnysz, which was occupied by a large unit of enemy cavalry.

I calculated the distance between Ciechanów and Przasnysz and come to the conclusion that, if the Bolsheviks continued to advance, they might reach Ciechanów in that evening, or night.

Moreover, at the rate at which the regiment was being unloaded, there was the possibility that the Bolsheviks would reach Ciechanów before I managed to have everything in hand, not to mention the supply train.

I therefore decide to immediately send those ready to march in the direction of Przasnysz, in order to cover the remaining unloading of the regiment.



I returned to the station and explained the position to Captain Zakrzewski.

I was pleasantly surprised that one squadron was already ready, and a second one would be soon. So I could send a *division*.

I ordered him to take command of both squadrons – the 1st under Lieutenant Lizon and 3rd under Lieutenant Plaszhecki – and set off immediately, to make contact with the enemy reported to be in Przasnysz. If they were advancing towards Ciechanów, then should delay them.

I wanted to have enough time to concentrate the rest of the regiment and to unload the regimental supply train.

As the squadrons were unloaded I would gather them to the east of Ciechanów; my staging point was planned to be Przedwojewo manor.

Around 19:00 the *division* set off. In the meantime I was informed that Lieutenant Bukraba, pressed by the enemy, was withdrawing to the barracks, so there was no Polish unit between the enemy and Ciechanów. I was even happier then that Captain Zakrzewski was marching in that direction.

During the evening hours I was already in Przedwojewo with Lieutenant Taube's 4th Squadron, the only one in the regiment with two HMGs and a communications platoon, although admittedly it was not sufficiently prepared for its function, and so I treated it as a large platoon of the line.

Second Lieutenant Koziello-Poklewski's squadron was also scheduled to arrive in Przedwojewo during the night, as it was still unloading. The supply train was also still in its wagons, and it would be lucky if it managed to be ready to march by the morning.

During the night, while in Przedwojewo, I received a report from Captain Zakrzewski that he had encountered an enemy unit halfway between Ciechanów and Przasnysz. He thought it was a security unit. He remained in contact with it and was scouting it.

This news was very valuable to me, since posting security showed that they had clearly halted for the night, and so were not now directly threatening me. That gave me some time to put the regiment in order.

At dawn we heard shots, and soon a report came from Captain Zakrzewski, that the *division* was being pushed back by stronger enemy cavalry. He intended to garrison Dzbonie with the dismounted 3rd Squadron.

I had with me the 4th Squadron, the communications platoon and two HMGs; the 2nd Squadron had not yet arrived. I alerted my units, just in case.

I placed the machine guns in Przedwojewo manor. The communications platoon was covering the flanks. The 4th Squadron was put on full alert. I awaited the further course of events and news from Captain Zakrzewski. I sent a messenger to find the 2nd Squadron and immediately direct it to Przedwojewo. The grumbling of the troops made me angry.

I went to the eastern edge of the garden where the squadron leader had set up his machine guns. They were perfectly camouflaged in the bushes. They had a good field of fire.

From my observation point, by the machine guns, I could see the town of Dzbonie and the hills lying on both sides of this village. They hid my view further to the east.

Between 06:00 and 07:00 I again heard shots from the Dzbonie area. Riders appeared on the hills. Through binoculars and I recognised them as ours.

Behind the garden the 4th Squadron was standing by their horses, in full readiness.

After a while our riders came down from the hills towards us quite quickly. Shots were still being fired in Dzbonie. I saw the horsemen entering a small village between Przedwojewo and Dzbonie. I guessed that they were the horsemen of the 3rd Squadron.

Behind our men a crowd of other riders appeared. I recognised them as Cossacks. Some surrounded Dzbonie, while some galloped behind our retreating lancers.



I had not a moment to lose. I was furious with the 2nd Squadron that it had not yet arrived. I got on my horse and galloped to the 4th Squadron. I give the command, "mount up!".

The squadron mounted quickly. I explained to Lieutenant Taube what our position was, and warned him that we were going to charge in order to enable the withdrawal of the 1st and 3rd Squadrons.

I forgot at that moment that we were dealing with untrained soldiers. Lieutenant Taube gave the appropriate commands, but most of the lancers didn't understand what he wanted from them. We started explaining to the lancers what was about to happen.

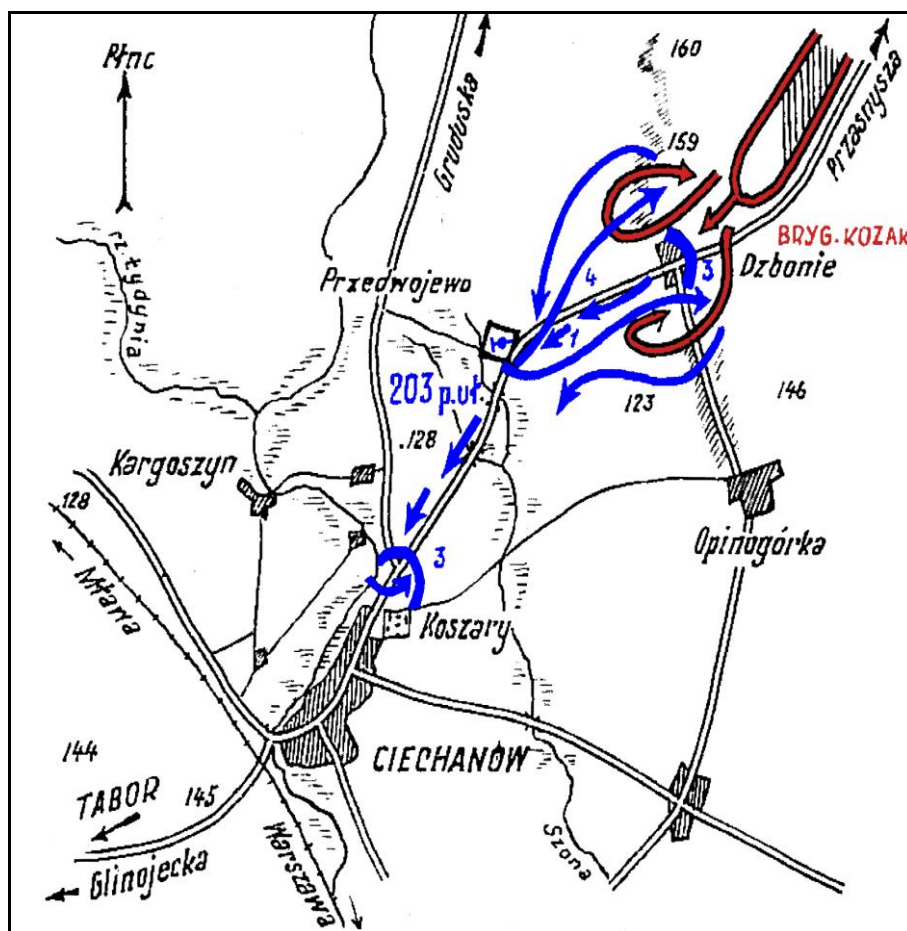
The platoons split up, we put them more or less into a line and finally set off at a trot.

At that moment the 1st Squadron appeared, galloping back to Przedwojewo. Captain Zakrzewski was with them, and reported to me that the 3rd Squadron remained in Dzbonie and was surrounded.

I called to Captain Zakrzewski to turn the 1st Squadron around, and to charge in the second line behind the 4th Squadron. We needed to relieve the 3rd Squadron. Together with the 4th Squadron they charged the Cossacks, who were already quite close to the 1st Squadron.

I looked around and saw that my volunteers were rushing forward, lowering lances, brandishing sabres and shouting "urra!" loudly.

The formation in which everyone is charging would probably be best described as: "*Kupa, mości panowie!*"<sup>1</sup> We were getting closer, soon we would meet and a hand-to-hand fight take place. With trepidation I thought about what that might entail. I looked behind me again, the squadron was racing, and behind it I see the 1st squadron was also charging.



Sketch of First Charge, and withdrawal of 3rd Squadron. 8 August 1920

<sup>1</sup> A battle cry of the Lisowczycy, 17th Century Polish-Lithuanian light cavalry. It seems to mean something like "flat out, gentlemen".



Unexpectedly the Cossacks in front of us suddenly turned around and ran away. This gave us a boost and we continued to chase them. We reached the hills and I saw the 3rd Squadron retreating on foot. I was pleased we had managed to save it in time. I passed a group of ulans carrying their heavily wounded squadron leader Lieutenant Plakhetski, who despite his wound shouted something cheerful and happy, tipping his cap to me.

Having reached the Dzbonie hills I stopped the squadrons. I did not want to venture too far, as we might be threatened by a counterattack of superior forces, as well as by blows from the flanks. I felt that the squadron would not be able to handle that, and it could lead to a disaster.

I slowly gathered up the squadrons and begin a gradual withdrawal to Przedwojewo.

My squadrons had not yet reached the halfway point, when I noticed that the Cossacks were returning from the hills and might charge us at any moment. I was not sure if the 3rd Squadron had reached Przedwojewo.

I told Captain Zakrzewski to join the 3rd Squadron, garrison the eastern edge of Ciechanów with it, find the 2nd Squadron, and order the regimental wagons to fall back. Finally, the HMGs left in Przedwojewo was to be ready to cover the retreat of the 1st and 4th Squadrons.

At that moment I noticed that the Cossacks began to charge.

I decided to counter-attack, to turn and drive them off, and then to withdraw under the cover of the HMGs to Ciechanów.

The 1st and 4th Squadrons once more turned and charged once more, naturally in the manner "*Kupą, mości panowie!*" The Cossacks again could not hold, and ran away. I was afraid to follow them too far. Behind the Dzbonie hills great surprises might lie in wait. I did not want to risk it. A few hundred paces away I slowed down, then stopped the squadrons. The Cossacks, seeing this, did the same. There was a long pause in which the two lines were facing each other, at a distance of no more than 100-150 paces. I did not like it. What would happen if the Cossacks moved? My untrained lancers would not be able to withstand a hand-to-hand fight with old cavalrymen like the Cossacks.

Quite unconsciously I called out: "Shoot while mounted" and I give the first shots myself with my parabellum. Here and there our line started to shoot, then more and more frequently. And what joy, groups of Cossacks started to leave.

I slowly turn around my squadrons, leaving those troops in contact who were still firing at the enemy from their horses.

The Cossacks having seen our retreat quickly turned around and charge. Behind them new units were coming down from the hills, an enemy HMG opened up. I knew that I couldn't charge back – all I wanted then was to get away from Przedwojewo with the squadrons. the heavy machine guns were to stop the charging Cossacks, in order to have time to get organised and then to garrison Ciechanów.

The squadrons begin to retreat at a gallop in a disorderly manner. The Cossacks were racing behind us, they were within 200 to 300 paces.

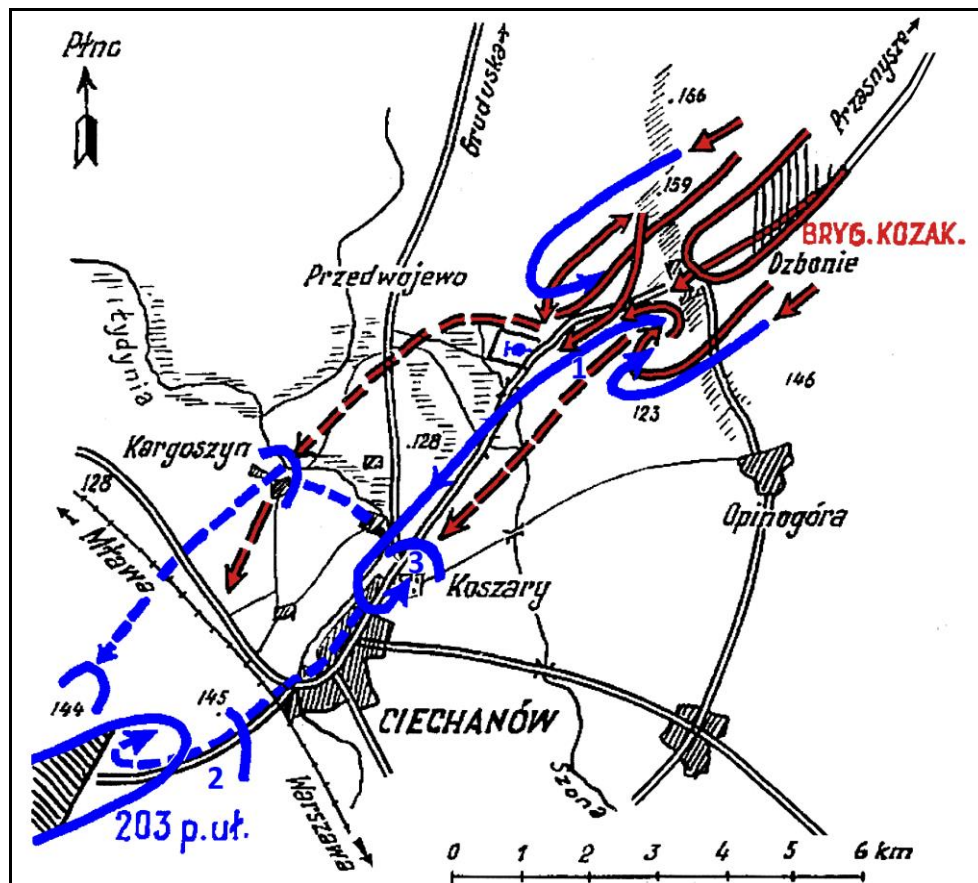
I reached the manor. The heavy machine guns were in position. I yelled for them to start firing. The crews bustled, but both guns were silent. They were jammed. Time flies – as did the Cossacks ...

The situation was becoming hopeless. If we didn't stop the Cossacks, they would catch up to our squadrons at the crossing near the bridge, just behind Przedwojewo. It would be a disaster – and in addition, they could easily capture Ciechanów on the backs of the retreating ulans .

I give an almost hopeless order to the HMG crews: "Shoot with rifles".

Almost immediately a dozen shots rang out. I couldn't believe my eyes: with every shot a Cossack fell. The ulans calmly and confidently continued shooting. They hadn't fired a whole magazine each and there were 20 Cossacks on the ground. I noticed a commotion among the charging Cossacks, the leading ones were retreating, which apparently spread to the others, and soon the whole Cossack host is running away. The brave ulans were still shooting, spreading death.





Charge of the 203 Lancer Regiment, 8 August 1920

1. the second charge
2. collapse of the Cossack charge at Przedwojewo
3. withdrawal of the regiment to Ciechanów
4. further withdrawal of the regiment

Our position was saved. I ordered the heavy machine guns to be taken from their positions, and then galloped back after the squadrons to Ciechanów.

It was a coincidence that some true sharpshooters, famous hunters, found themselves with the HMGs: Andrzej Potworowski, the Wyganowski brothers, and others, who – with all cold blood and composure – were able with a few accurate shots to repel the Cossack charge, inflicting upon them very serious losses. In truth, the regiment owed it to them that it avoided defeat and was saved.

The regiment, with three squadrons, were able to reach Ciechanów and awaited the enemy. The 2nd Squadron was still not there yet, it was marching behind the wagon train and occupied the hills west of Ciechanów. At first I was strongly dissatisfied with it, but soon I had to give it credit that by manning those hills it had enabled the regiment to withdraw from Ciechanów, taking the whole burden of the battle upon itself.

I was compelled to withdraw the regiment from Ciechanów. Although it offered effective resistance to the enemy from the front, it was threatened with encirclement and flanking from the north. I was no longer able to defend the town, and decided to retreat westward, beyond the Łódź River.

The first battle of the 203rd Lancer Regiment was a surprise. This ten-day-old newborn received its baptism of fire very well.

It charged twice at the front unit of the Gai Cavalry Corps. It was probably facing the leading brigade.

The squadrons, besides, were able to defend themselves with fire, as the 3rd Squadron did at Dzbonie, and later the regiment did at Ciechanów.

The regiment had considerable losses: 2 officers wounded, over 40 lancers wounded and one killed.





From that day it ceased to be a *“Towarzystwem i pospolitym ruszeniem”*.<sup>2</sup>

Its later strong combat work put it alongside the most distinguished regiments of our cavalry.

And now the question – was it right to charge?

Absolutely yes! It was the only way to save the 3rd Squadron, which was fighting on foot. And it was successful. The second charge enabled that squadron to retire, us to man Ciechanów and also save the 1st and 4th Squadrons from defeat.

Why were the Cossack charges not successful? After all, they were veteran soldiers, facing the untrained volunteers of the 203rd Lancer Regiment.

Apparently, the Cossacks' offensive spirit was lacking. The lances in the hands of the volunteers robbed the Cossacks of their spirit and they avoided hand-to-hand combat.

The next charge was broken by a few good riflemen with their shots, who forced the Cossacks to retreat.

In summary, we must come to the conviction that the advantage was gained by:

- 1) the morale of the Polish soldier, which was higher than that of the Cossacks,
- 2) the Poles had lances, unlike the Cossacks,
- 3) an accurate and controlled rifle fire, broke the spirit of the Cossack charge.

These facts speak for themselves: future cavalry commanders could and should draw the appropriate conclusions from them.

*The vivid description of the author, a distinguished cavalry commander from the epic of 1920, makes it superfluous to extend the remarks and conclusions which he himself gives.*

*Instead, I wish to draw the reader's attention briefly to two significant phenomena.*

*The first is the fact that the 203rd Lancer Regiment consisted of untrained volunteers. Well, in order to understand the conduct of the regimental commander at that time, please imagine a “regiment of recruits” supplied with a rare cadre of professional officers. Only then will we fully appreciate the reasons for the decisions taken, aimed at keeping the subunits fairly compact; not to expose them hastily to overly violent shocks or defeat, and to prepare them for battle gradually through successive battles; to fight and train at the same time. This allowed them to be preserved for the country, which was then in the greatest need, as a valuable volunteer detachment, which could give its all only after some time, when it had mastered its craft.*

*The second phenomenon was the firefight with the hunters from Kalisz, who saved the situation with their calmness and accurate fire.*

*It is a vivid example of the use of having good marksmen and, above all, it proves that a unit keeping calm and a clear head and making a good use of firearms has every chance of stopping the enemy, even a much superior one.*

*Editor.*

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<sup>2</sup> “Comrades and *levée en masse*”, recalling the historical term for calling out the adult population in medieval Poland.

