

## Major of the General Staff Adam Sołtan

### Two Sides of the Coin

*At the outbreak of the Polish-Bolshevik war, the echoes of the artillery storms of the World War still echoed in the air, which many took to be a salute of honour over the grave of the cavalry. But capricious reality took an opportunity to play another trick on the strict doctrinaires, with whom it has been at odds for centuries. As one more warning against ossification in tactical or operational schemes, it staged – as if to emphasize the contrast with the gloomy, tortoise-like, clumsy tactics of the world war, where, for lack of the predominance of spirit, matter prevailed – a war with a completely different tactics. One in which maneuver again reigned supreme, and once more ruled the battlefields.*

*In such a war cavalry – as a "psychological" weapon, acting primarily on the morale of the enemy – immediately regained its purpose.*

*One often hears the argument that the examples of 1920 are unique, that they were exceptional conditions that will not be repeated, etc.. A quote from the words of the Commander-in-Chief<sup>1</sup> comes to mind, who said: "that this war, or rather brawl, almost shook the fate of the entire civilized world ... Let there be a brawl when the methods and doctrines for it are impossible."*

*To emphasize this psychological property of our mounted arm, I want to tell here two small and completely personal combat experiences, which by contrast alone allowed me to assess both the sense of superiority that my own speed gave, as well as the unpleasant feeling of powerlessness against a faster opponent.*

In May 1919, the regiment of Krechowce Lancers from the Małopolska front<sup>2</sup> was transferred to Volhynia<sup>3</sup> and became part of General Karnicki's group. That group was to cover from the north the main attack, which was from the region of Belz and Rawa Ruska aimed at breaking the Ukrainian front.

The commander of the group decided to provide the protection offensively, setting as the first tasks to cross the Styr and capture Lutsk.

The enemy (in this case the so-called Sich riflemen), after an unfortunate attempt to resist west of Styr, began a lively retreat to Lutsk. The group chased them, and the 1st Lancer Regiment was given the task of getting to the rear of Lutsk, to cut off the enemy's retreat.

At 3 o'clock on 16 May 1919 the regiment set off, and marched quickly towards the Styr, easily rejecting weak attempts by enemy troops to halt its march.

Around 7 o'clock, the squadron walking as the advance guard, in which I had the honour to serve at the rank of platoon leader, made it to the village of Boratyn Mały, located just above the Styr. We surprised and took captive a Ukrainian outpost, and then quickly moved to the eastern bank of the river. Past the bridge, the squadron ran face to face with a company of Ukrainian infantry, hurrying to the bridge. As we found out later, it was a company of cadets from the infantry officers' school. Reinforced by a team of machine guns, they were marching to guard the very bridge on the Styr which we had just crossed. They were only five minutes late, but were to repent severely for their lack of punctuality, because without hesitating the squadron commander deployed our unit, with scouts to the sides, and began to attack. It was my first charge.

In my war career to that time, I had had no luck with charges, because I specialized in winter actions, which did not give many opportunities for them. After two winters, one of which was spent fighting against the Bolsheviks in I Eastern Corps, the second in Małopolska, between Przemyśl and Chyrów, the long-awaited Volhynian spring finally arrived, bringing with it the first charge as if the first swallow. There followed a long chain of victorious charges, in which the 4th squadron under its then commander Lieutenant Chmielewski (the present commander of the Wilno Lancers) was to win the inter-squadron war competition, gaining for

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<sup>1</sup> Presumably Josef Piłsudski, though I cannot locate the reference.

<sup>2</sup> The province centred on Kraków, then in south-western Poland.

<sup>3</sup> Polish Wołyń, then the south-east of Poland, but much of it now in the Ukraine.



the unit the honourable nickname of the "shock"<sup>4</sup> squadron. Perhaps that is why the impressions of that first charge are so fresh in my memory.

The squadron, with scouts to the left of the road, started at a trot but immediately changed to a gallop. At a distance of about 400 paces I could clearly see the enemy line. On the flank a machine gun barked, accompanied by the rare and inaccurate bullets from rifles. As it turned out, the enemy had failed to send out proper pickets, allowed themselves to be surprised, and was already panicking. At the time, however, I did not think about that. To the rhythm of the long strides of my rather phlegmatic horse, "Assistant", who was carrying me towards the enemy's rifle line, a rather disorderly series of thoughts flashed through my head, more or less as: "So this is a charge – the bullets are going high – spurs are needed – nothing terrible so far – how will it actually go?"

The remarkable thing is that, while I remember well my personal experience of those moments, I have absolutely no recollection of what was happening next to me, who was beside me, etc. Apparently, I must have been totally absorbed by the sight of the enemy.

Finally, I decided that it was time to choose a victim and my gaze fixed on a tall figure wearing a Russian round cap and with a long bayonet on his rifle, drawing itself exaggeratedly high against the sky.

And strangely enough locating and materialising the enemy, which until then had been an anonymous line of rifles, immediately gave a different direction to my thoughts. My teeth clenched, my hand squeezed the (very uncomfortable) Austrian sabre more tightly – as a non-commissioned officer, I did not have a lance – and somewhere deep down, a "*furor polonicus*"<sup>5</sup> started to rise to my throat, which I admit I had not felt at all at the beginning of the charge. The enemy looked rather threatening from that distance, so I was prepared for a fierce clash when we struck.

The distance was decreasing fast. Two hundred paces, one hundred, fifty ... and suddenly the increase in the readiness for combat, rising steeply up to that moment, fell off a cliff, and fury gave way to disappointment, even a certain embarrassment. For I saw clearly how my opponent (incidentally, a boy of about two metres tall) wobbled, dropped his rifle, then knelt down on both knees, raising both hands in an unambiguously signal of peace.

At the sight of his face, convulsively twisted with fear, I was overwhelmed by a complex feeling of human pity and soldierly disgust. What to do? I yanked "Assistant" to the side so that he wouldn't do something stupid – a trumpet played a peel somewhere – the charge was over.

When I cooled down and analysed the event, I asked myself first of all: "Is it possible that both "Assistant" and I seemed so menacing that we knocked the weapon out of the enemy's hand by our very look?" Somehow I was not convinced, especially in view of the extremely peaceful disposition of my steed.

However, when I recalled the history of cavalry battles – when I realised that it was the privilege of our arm was to win at a ratio of five and six to one, not two to one – I understood that in the contortions of that Ukrainian boy's face I saw the secret of cavalry victories.

A year later I had the opportunity to get acquainted, in not very pleasant circumstances, with the reverse side of the coin.

Having graduated from the Cadet School during the winter, I caught up with the regiment on the Dnieper in May 1920. It was on the eve of the appearance of the First Horse Army in that theater of operations. The cavalry epic that followed, which began at Wołodarka, was to find its epilogue at Korosten on 10 October 1920.

An unpleasant disappointment awaited me at the start of my service as an officer. A few days after my arrival, the regiment – for reasons still incomprehensible to me – received from the rear a reinforcement unit, but on foot. It seems that the reasoning went that men, as delicate creatures, wear out more quickly

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<sup>4</sup> This is the same root word as the "shock" units of the Russian armies, so could also be "strike" etc.

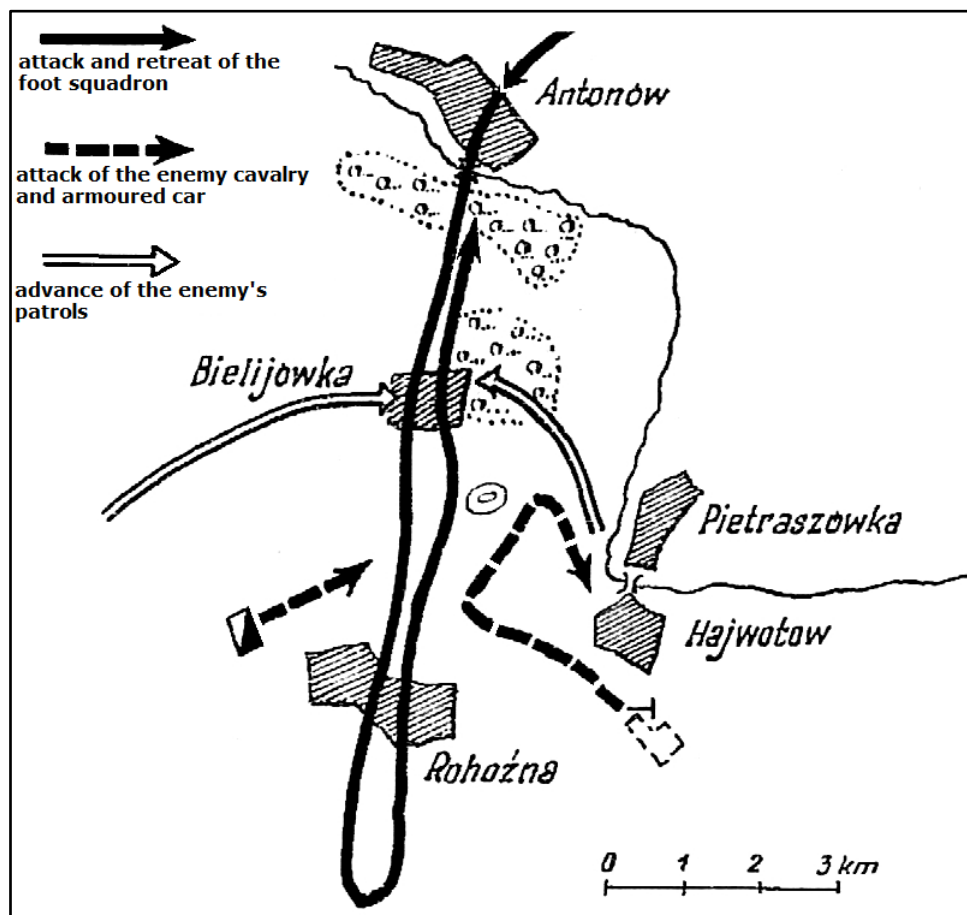
<sup>5</sup> Polish fury in Latin.



than a hard beast such as a horse, which will survive anything. So about a hundred, poorly trained, green recruits arrived, who, due to the lack of horses, could not be placed into the squadrons. A foot squadron was formed instead which had, with the exception of officers and a few NCOs, no experience under fire. Officers willing to take over that squadron were difficult to find, so the usual method was employed, which was to use the youngest – which included me.

Our squadron was supposed to advance on requisitioned carts at the tail of the division.

You can imagine what happened in practice. For successful actions, we usually came too late, when the laurels were already handed out. On the other hand, when there was a nastiness, we were required to help wriggle out of the unpleasant situation.



At dawn of 1 June, in a great style, the Battle of Rohozna [Rohizna, Kiev province] began – the first cavalry battle of the Polish-Bolshevik campaign.

Our squadron together with the 16th Lancer Regiment was ordered to take Bielijówka [Biliivka] as our starting point, then to capture the village of Rohozna as the first objective, and afterwards the chain of hills south of that village.

Thanks to us surprising the enemy, Rohozna was captured with few losses and the attack continued. When the squadron was about two kilometres past Rohozna, we received an unexpected order to retreat back to Bielijówka. That order seemed completely incomprehensible to us. As it turned out later, it was caused by the commander of the front giving the division a new objective, as a result of which it had to cease its successful action.

Although the order seemed beyond comprehension to us, it had to be carried out. So we started to retreat, initially in a rifle line, then after breaking away from the enemy, the squadron formed a column and set off, with flank cover for Rohozna and Bielijówka. In the course of this 16th Lancer Regiment received a new



task, mounted and rode off. We were left alone. The enemy behaved disturbingly passively. We felt that our position smelled bad!

Soon the situation began to get confusing. After passing through Rohoźna, we set off towards Bielijówka, from which we were separated by about four kilometers of table flat terrain. The only height was a small mound, located about one kilometre from Bielijówka. From the edge of Bielijówka, with binoculars you artillery on the position and a cavalry unit (as it turned out, a *division* of the 9th Lancer Regiment) in cover of it.

Sensing our position was unpleasant, we moved towards the safety of Bielijówka as quickly as possible, across the unpleasant billiards table that separated us from it. For the first time I felt the unpleasant feeling of being exposed on a plain with not a single house or bush for shelter – or even protection from observation. We had already marched about 20 km, of which about 8 during the attack. We still had some 10 km further to go to reach our carts.

When we were about two kilometers away from Bielijówka, a dance began. An enemy armoured car appeared to our right-hand side and began to fire at us with its machine gun from a distance of about 600 metres, with a clear desire to cut us off from Bielijówka. Under its fire we were forced to deploy into rifle line, which was unfortunate due to the need to keep our recruits strongly in hand. So we began to move quickly towards the safety of the mound, stopping from time to time to give volleys towards the car, the fire of which began to inflict losses on us (16 killed and wounded were to fall), and our recruits began to lose all their calm. Another misfortune struck once we finally made it to the height, which shielded us for a moment from the fire of the car, as on our opposite left wing appeared a mounted unit, one or two platoons strong, creating a new, serious threat.

Our soldiers were oblivious to what was happening. Those noble men did not show any desire to run, but simply lost their heads. Orders being given were no longer enough. It was necessary to literally take them by the shoulders and turn them towards the new opponent; whereupon they started firing again automatically.

A few volleys halted the Cossack unit, which was timid, but it did allow the car to get closer. Fortunately the artillery by the village came to our aid and with a few accurate shots forced it to retreat. What remained of the squadron entered Bielijówka.

Our position did not stop being dangerous. The artillery, having facilitated our retreat, withdrew. From the direction of the enemy an increasingly disturbing clamour could be heard, and no more could be demanded of our ulans. Our physical and nervous fatigue, the losses and the lack of ammunition influenced the decision to continue our retreat in the wake of the retreating division.

I walked with a handful of the more reliable men as the rearguard through the long, scattered village. Several times we came across small Cossack patrols, which had slipped into it from the sides and which we drove away with volleys.

However the noise and shooting became louder and louder from behind us as we neared the edge of the town, and then to top it off single ulans began to gallop past us, which caused my rear guard to melt away. And so I found myself in the village street by myself.

The situation was quite unpleasant. Alone, with 20 km in my legs, three bullets in my pistol and the prospect of meeting a cavalryman while on foot, and the worst thought of all: of being wounded and captured. My mood at that time, as I remember it, could be described in one phrase: a kingdom, indeed, an empire for a horse!

I felt so tired that I could not make any major effort. So I walked at normal pace, instinctively clinging to the side of a deeply rutted road, over which the crumbling fences of peasant gardens rose, at the height of an outstretched hand.

As I was approaching where a steep path which led towards the enemy turned off from the main village street, I heard a thud, a characteristic Cossack "whistle" and from around the corner rode out three riders on peasant horses – one with a lance, the second with a sabre, the third with a cut-down carbine. I stood still, as if awestruck, and my opponents likewise stopped. And so an interesting duel, from the



psychological point of view, of the speed of our reflexes began. The first point was scored by me. Quite reflexively, my left hand grabbed the fence of a garden above my head, and – I still find this incredible – with some acrobatics I jumped to a meter higher than my enemy, separated from them by an unsteady fence. What can I say, it is not only courage that adds strength. In turn, they woke up, but they made an unwise choice because they simply jumped up to my crumbly bastion – and stopped again. Now it was my turn, and I fired off my last three bullets from a distance of 15 paces and, oh horror, I missed – missed comprehensively. To this day, I can't forgive myself!

But before I realised how vulnerable I was, the drama was undone as quickly and unexpectedly as it had arrived. With the noise of the shots, the three of them spun on their heels and galloped off to where they had come from.

And I saw then how unlimited energy humans actually have. Five minutes before, it seemed to me that no force could make me move faster. But when the last tail of the horses disappeared around the corner, I took off so quickly that I caught up just past the village with an artillery platoon covering the retreat, and on the barrel of their cannon I made it to my own unit, who had already begun to worry about me.

A few weeks later, the foot squadron was disbanded, and I returned to cavalry work. And whenever I recalled my dismounted experiences in the more difficult situations, I felt as confident on my one horse as if I were riding a hundred of them.

And knowing both sides of the coin when I consider the experience of my first charge, I was less surprised by the impression I had made on my opponents at that time.

*The descriptions of these two episodes do not require further comment. The report speaks for itself.*

*The unpretentious way of presenting the impressions of the first charge is factual and psychologically it is very convincing. At the same time I emphasize the morale impression of the charge, manifested in the first example and finding in a certain miniature its inverse confirmation in the description of the second incident.*

*Of course, we must not forget that both examples concern opponents with a weak war spirit.*

Editor

