

Lieutenant Colonel Edward Wania

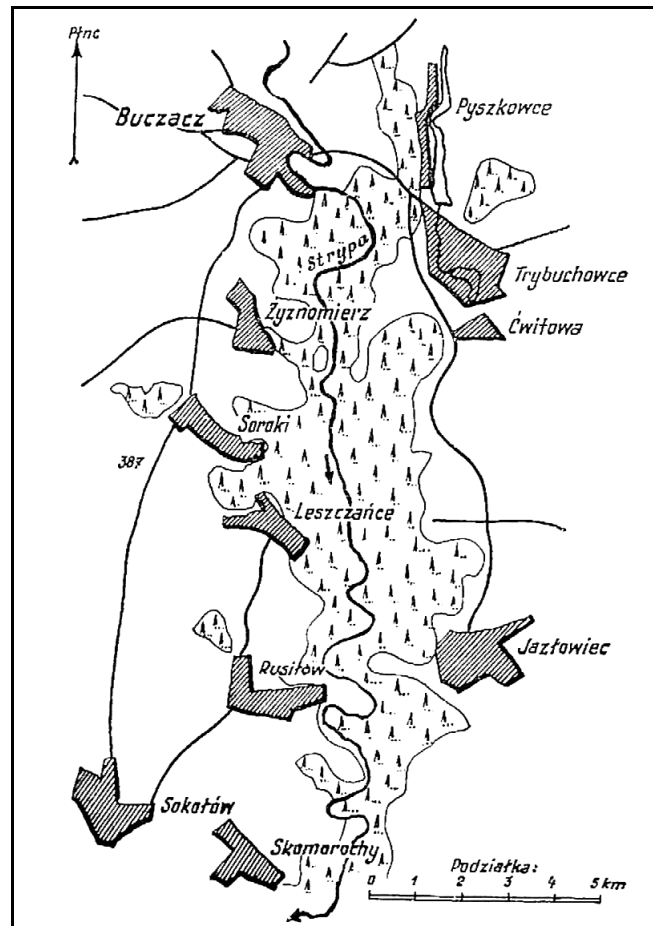
The Battle of the 9th Lancer Regiment near Soroky (11 June 1919 in Podolia)

The general course of action up to that time on the Ukrainian front seemed to indicate that the Ukrainian army¹, demoralised and broken, was no longer capable of further fighting. Our troops received orders to capture individual Ukrainian groups that were roaming around Podolia. No one expected organised Ukrainian resistance, so it came as an unpleasant surprise that the Ukrainians, squeezed into the forks of the Zbrucz [Zbruch] and Dniester rivers, reinforced there by Petliura's troops from behind the cordon, went on to offensive action with great vigour in the first days of June. Due to the shortening of their front, they had at their disposal a considerable number of infantry on their line of advance.

The 4th Infantry Division, under the command of the late General Aleksandrowicz, which included the 9th Lancer Regiment, was operating in Podolia.

The Course of the Action

The 9th Lancer Regiment after the battle of Ćwitowa [Tsvitova] was withdrawn and sent to Soroki [Soroka] with the task of covering the right wing of 4th Infantry Division by manning the crossings on the Strypa River. The Buczacz [Buchach] and Ćwitowa sections were occupied by infantry.



In the morning of 11 June 1919 the regiment occupied the town of Soroki. The regiment's commander assigned the 1st and 3rd Squadrons to man the fords in the area of Soroki and Żyznomierz [Zhyznomyr], while the 2nd Squadron remained in reserve in Soroki, which also housed the regiment's headquarters, the 1st and 3rd Squadrons' horses and the regiment's rolling stock. The 4th Squadron was assigned to the infantry on that day.

¹ This is the UHA, the Galician Army, not the UNR of Petliura. The fighting described here took part during the UHA's "Chortkiv Offensive", which was initially very successful.



A reconnaissance to Rusinów [Rusyliv] and Skomorochy [Skomorokhy] (to the south) was carried out by the 2nd Squadron. The general position was completely unknown, there was an ominous silence in the sector.

About 13:00 the regimental commander received a message that the regiment would be reinforced on its sector by an infantry battalion of the 4th Infantry Division. This was never to come true, as the announced infantry did not arrive at the regiment.

At the same time the 3rd Squadron reported that it had lost contact with the infantry (around Buczacz), who were also guarding the Strypa River in the Buczacz sector. As a result, the regimental commander sent a patrol that way which, after having not even travelled two kilometres, discovered the advance of a large number of Ukrainian infantry from Żyznomierz to Soroki. Some of these infantry were marching in the direction of the Buczacz highway. At the same time patrols sent to Rusinów reported that Ukrainian infantry was also approaching Soroki from the south, coming up through the forest.

The situation, determined about 13.30, showed that our infantry had left Buczacz and the river sector without informing our regiment that they were doing so. Meanwhile the Ukrainians, had crossed the river in the area of Skomorochy (south of Soroki, in a forested area), and were seeking to outflank the regiment from both sides, both north and south, and manoeuvre in our rear.

The regiment's position was becoming very difficult. Threatened by enemy encirclement from both sides, the regiment did not want to retreat, with the 1st and 3rd Squadrons advanced on the fords, it could not effectively cover them, as it would need to counter-attack in two divergent directions.

On the basis of the reconnaissance reports coming in, the regimental commander ordered the fastest possible withdrawal of the outposts and the retirement of the 1st and 3rd Squadrons from the crossings, while the 2nd Squadron was ordered to attack the Ukrainian infantry coming from Żyznomierz, as they were closer and the pressure from them was felt most keenly.

The counterattack of the 2nd Squadron was to enable the retirement of the 1st and 3rd Squadrons from the crossings.

Immediately after giving those orders to the 2nd Squadron, a rapid fire of the regiment's machine guns, which were directly protecting Soroki, commenced and a nearby "urra" from the Ukrainians on the northern edge of the village could be heard. The 2nd Squadron rushed in the threatened direction to stop the Ukrainian attack at all costs, and even to repel it, as had been ordered. Less than half an hour later, single shots started to come from the southern direction, where the Ukrainians had already managed to approach the village. Their rapid advance was temporarily stopped by one of the regiment's machine guns, which placed as an outpost from the southern side. In Soroki itself there was panic between the regiment's transports and the cavalry of the 2nd Squadron. (The cavalrymen of the 1st and 3rd Squadron had left much earlier for Barysh). The shouting in the village were intensified by the local peasants – they were Ruthenians² who, being sure of the regiment's demise, shouted out to show their joy and satisfaction.

So far, by virtue of previously issued orders, part of the 1st and 3rd Squadrons have managed to arrive in Soroki. The regimental commander had one platoon from both these squadrons at hand, some wagon drivers hastily gathered and organised into a detachment, and 4 heavy machine guns. The 2nd Squadron was in combat, fulfilling its orders.

The situation with the platoons was under control, with no trace of panic, as the old and seasoned ulans were aware of the seriousness of the situation and awaited their commanders' orders calmly.

The Ukrainian attack from the south reached the village itself; they took the edge of the village and Hill 387 on the road to Barysh, which was the line of retirement. From Kruchy hill (south of Soroki) the Ukrainians began artillery fire. On the northern edge of Soroki the 2nd Squadron was fighting fiercely to push back the Ukrainians and thus prevent the flanking and manoeuvring of the Ukrainians to the rear of the regiment.

² The Austro-Hungarian empire had called the Slavic peoples of this area under their rule "Ruthenians", to discourage them from thinking of themselves as Ukrainians, and so potentially siding with Russia. Many, but not all, Ruthenians nevertheless considered themselves to be ethnically Ukrainian.



The regimental commander, seeing the endangered direction of retreat, ordered the platoons of the 1st and 3rd Squadrons, supported by the fire of heavy machine guns, to attack under the command of 2nd Lieutenant Szymanski with bayonets in order to capture Hill 387, clearing a path for the regiment to break through in the direction of Barysh. The wagon driver detachment had the task of preventing the Ukrainians from entering the village from the south until the rest of the 1st Squadron, which was beginning to emerge from behind the hill, managed to withdraw. The rest of 3rd Squadron was to retire to aid the 2nd Squadron.

The two platoons made a daring bayonet attack on Hill 387, and after a fierce hand-to-hand fight pushed the Ukrainians slowly southwards. The rest of the 1st Squadron, now in Soroki, helped the wagon detachment to repel the attacks of the Ukrainians already inside Soroki. Retreating through the village fences, they headed towards Hill 387. This dangerous retreat, interspersed with frequent attacks by the Ukrainians, went on for about 3 kilometres. Those Ukrainians pushed back from the Hill 387, tried to smash the retreating units with a flank attack, but due to the firm stance of our squadrons, they limited themselves to firing on them.

As the bloody retreat continued, the 1st and part of the 3rd Squadron withdrew to Barysh around 18:00. The dead and wounded were taken with them. The 2nd Squadron, fighting valiantly and sacrificially against the superior Ukrainian infantry, at first rejected the enemy vigorously at bayonet point. Then, pushing them towards Żyznomierz, it took control of the road leading to the cut off post of the 3rd Squadron at the crossing. Individual ulans from the outpost began to dash to 2nd Squadron reporting that their unit had been attacked by the Ukrainians from all sides, as a result of which it had been broken up and some of them men had been taken prisoner.

In turn, the position of the 2nd Squadron became almost more dangerous than that of the rest of the regiment, as it was attacked by the enemy from the north and east. Then the route to Barysh, after the rest of the regiment had passed, was captured and closed by the Ukrainians. The only possible retreat was in the north-west direction, but even there Ukrainian troops were marching on the road from Buczacz to Jezierzany [Ozeryany]. There was no choice. The commander of 2nd squadron decided to break away from the enemy and retreat across the fields to Jezierzany.

Under the cover of two heavy machine guns the breaking off was completely successful. The squadron moved groups back in bounds to behind the nearest fold in the terrain. They were pursued only by enemy fire, as the enemy had recently learned a lesson in bayonet fighting and dared not attack more closely.

The squadron began its march through the terrain in extended formation; pursued by fire from the east. It also fell under flank fire from the direction of the woods (south-west of Soroki).

Despite some difficult and perilous moments, the squadron managed to reach the road (two kilometres east of Jezierzany) around 18:00. At that time the road was quiet. However soon after they started to march down it, with flank guards, a column of infantry from Jezierzany emerged from behind a hill. There was a moment of hesitation: was it our side or the enemy? In the sunset the fittings of lancers' helmets shone, mixed in with Ukrainians' caps. The platoon commander, who was walking with the lead unit, quickly realised what was going on and immediately gave the order to fight, striking at once "at the bayonet". The rest of the squadron, seeing what was happening in front, spontaneously advanced to the south of the road and immediately attacked the Ukrainian infantry, which at that moment was engaged in hand-to-hand combat with the platoon of the advance guard.

The enemy, finding themselves between bayonet assaults, gives up their daring attack and surrendered.

The path to our own side was open.

In Jezierzany itself there were only small Ukrainian patrols, and just behind Jezierzany, to the west on a hill, was infantry of our 4th Infantry Division

From Ukrainian prisoners, it turned out that the column was the one that had been seen by a regimental patrol from Soroki heading on the Żyznomierz to Buczacz road after the outpost of the 3rd Squadron had been smashed.

The Ukrainian company had had with them around 30 ulans of our regiment who had been taken prisoner, mostly from the 3rd Squadron outpost that had been smashed. Our men were released from their captivity.



While the 2nd Squadron was breaking through the Ukrainian infantry, ulan Surowiec, who was one of the captured men, was killed by the brotherly bullet of the attacking squadron.

During the day's combat the 2nd Squadron had only a few lancers slightly wounded – apart from that there were no major losses.

In the battle on the road the Ukrainians lost several dead and about 40 captured, while the rest managed to escape.

The only thing that disturbed the rest of the squadron's march to the regiment was the fact that while approaching an infantry position the squadron was shelled by our own artillery, but even there we were lucky, as we did not suffer any casualties.

During the night the 2nd Squadron joined up with the regiment in Monasterzyska [Monastyr's'ka].

So ended a bloody day, during which the regiment fought a hugely more numerous enemy, but managed to break through the Ukrainians twice, in two different places, recapturing its soldiers from captivity and even taking a few dozen prisoners with weapons, including officers.

The killed and wounded amounted to about 10% of the total strength, which was a very heavy loss for the regiment.

Conclusions

1. A lack of communications equipment in the regiment did not allow it to maintain wire communication with the infantry in Buczacz.
2. The departure of that infantry from the Buczacz sector without informing the regiment in Soroki contributed to the unexpected and violent attack on the outpost of the 3rd Squadron. Having smashed that outpost the Ukrainians were able to move directly to the flank and rear of the regiment. As we found out later, our infantry left Buczacz around 11:00. The most dangerous time for the regiment began around 13:00, so it seems that some communication (such as messengers) sent during those two hours could have saved the regiment from its catastrophic situation (the distance from Buczacz to Soroki is only seven km).
3. The lack of any communication between the regiment's sector and the infantry sector, by mounted means, which should have been sent by the regiment in this case, was to badly affect the regiment in the following hours.
4. Finally, the reconnaissance carried out to the south was too weak, as it did not detect the enemy infantry crossing the river, but only once they had crossed to the western side of the Strypa, although in enough time that they did not come as a surprise for the regiment.
5. The reason for the insufficient patrols for reconnaissance and lack of keeping in touch with the infantry was to be found in the fatigue of the regiment, which on 9 June had arrived after a forced march from the Podhajce [Pidhaitsi] area to the Buczacz area (around 45 km).

After a short rest it fought at Ćwitowa until late in the night of 11 June, from where it left directly for Soroki, and so had finished almost three continuous days without a break in operations.

As a result, one once more comes to the conclusion that good communications and reconnaissance are key for success in all combat operations. On the other hand, it is also an undeniable principle that there is no "no way out" in war – if the commanders at all levels have steel nerves and do not lose their heads, and these qualities are complemented by high combat value and morale in the soldiers, which characterized the lancers of the 9th Regiment.

It is significant that a seasoned and experienced combat officer such as Lieutenant Colonel Wania has chosen to take a combat episode from the Ukrainian campaign, and that during a particularly critical time. We are grateful to him for that. Although his description does not include spectacular deeds and great victories, it does relate to the actual combat. A fight in difficult conditions, when the enemy had the advantages of strength, surprise and poor co-operation among the Poles. An episode drawn from such conditions is close to the hard and frequent reality of war, and therefore particularly instructive.



There are several phenomena in the author's description that are supremely positive, to which I draw the reader's attention.

First of all, it is necessary to emphasise the bold decision of the commander of the 9th Lancer Regiment, Colonel Borkowski, who was to die in battle in 1920.

The offensive actions of the 2nd Squadron and the fight of the improvised group from the rest of the regiment, based on machine guns, enabled the departure of the 3rd Squadron, which were flanked by the enemy – this was the essence of his decision.

Despite the surprise, orders were sent out expediently, and calmly and ruthlessly executed.

There were some beautiful examples of the comradeship of war, with the example set by the regimental commander and the general confidence in him of his subordinates.

Ultimately that is the value of the soldier!

Only the sum of all these values in battle can give events such as the author describes to us. Above all, however, it took the fortitude of the commander and a sense of superiority over the enemy in all the ulans to allow the regiment to break through the surrounding enemy's ring at the crucial time with a handful of men and so finally turn the inevitable spectre of defeat into a tactical success.

Combat is above all a struggle of will! Only those who want to win more persistently, and who do not hesitate to make sacrifices, have a good chance of success.

To aid the author's description I have attached a sketch of the area of operations from a 1:100,000 map.

Editor

