

Major Wieczorkiewicz

The Battle for the Bridge near Szczółno

This description is a significant example of heavy machine gun work in a cavalry battle.

The course of events. From 2 June 1920, after capturing the farmstead of Szczolno and Ruska Wieś (see sketch), a *division* of the 11th Cavalry Regiment, consisting of three squadrons and two HMG platoons, was placed as follows:

- The 3rd Squadron, with my HMG platoon, was in Ruska Wieś, as advanced detachment;
- The 2nd Squadron manned the bridgehead in Szczółno manor, with one platoon in Tyczki village;
- The Technical Squadron, with the other HMG platoon, was in Krycewice, guarding the Wiata River from lake Szczółno to the Miech swamp.
- The *division* commander was in Krycewice village.

Around the 3rd Squadron during the day of 3 June there were some patrols, but apart from that there was no contact with the enemy.

In the evening of 3 June I got an order to report with my platoon to the commander of the 2nd Squadron in Szczółno farm.

I arrived there at dusk so I couldn't choose my positions. The quiet in front of the 2nd Squadron worried me and I expected an enemy attack on either the 3rd Squadron's positions in Ruska Wieś, or on the outpost of the 2nd Squadron in Tyczki.

With that in mind I suggested to the squadron leader that he leave my platoon in reserve for the night by the bridge. However, he demanded that one HMG be placed on the road to Ruska Wieś. I carried out the order, leaving the second HMG by the bridge, with a guard post facing Tyczki. I discussed with my deputy the likeliness of an enemy attack on the outpost in Tyczki, asking that if the outpost there withdrew, he would take up a position just by the bridge, to the west of the river, and at the sound of his fire I would move the second HMG across the river. I surveyed the possible positions there as much as I could during the night. We knew the terrain quite well, as the previous morning we had attacked along the road from Dębówka with the 2nd Squadron.

Around 11 p.m. I went with my courier to the squadron leader, who was quartered in the manor house.

Around midnight we fell asleep sitting on some broken stools. My messenger was sleeping on the porch.

Around 2 a.m. on 4 June I heard the sound of a single rifle shot through an open window and it seemed to me that it was coming from the direction of Tyczki. I got up and ran out onto the porch. The messenger had also heard the shot, for immediately, when he saw me, he reported: "Mr. Cadet, it's in Tyczki."

Without thinking I ordered him to take the 7th HMG (the 7th and 8th HMGs formed my 4th platoon), and I ran to the bridge myself. I was afraid that 8th HMG crew was asleep and might not get into position. I ran as fast as I could, but before I got close to the bridge, I heard a beautiful, long series of fire just across the river. I recognized the rattle – it was that of a Schwarzlose firing. I felt happier because I knew then that I would be able to move my remaining HMG across the river in time.

With a few more strides I reached the position. The sergeant reported to me that he had started firing on Tyczki, as he had heard the cavalry post of the 2nd Squadron retreating. It was still quite dark and foggy. The target was not visible.

I ordered him to fire short bursts and wait for the second HMG.

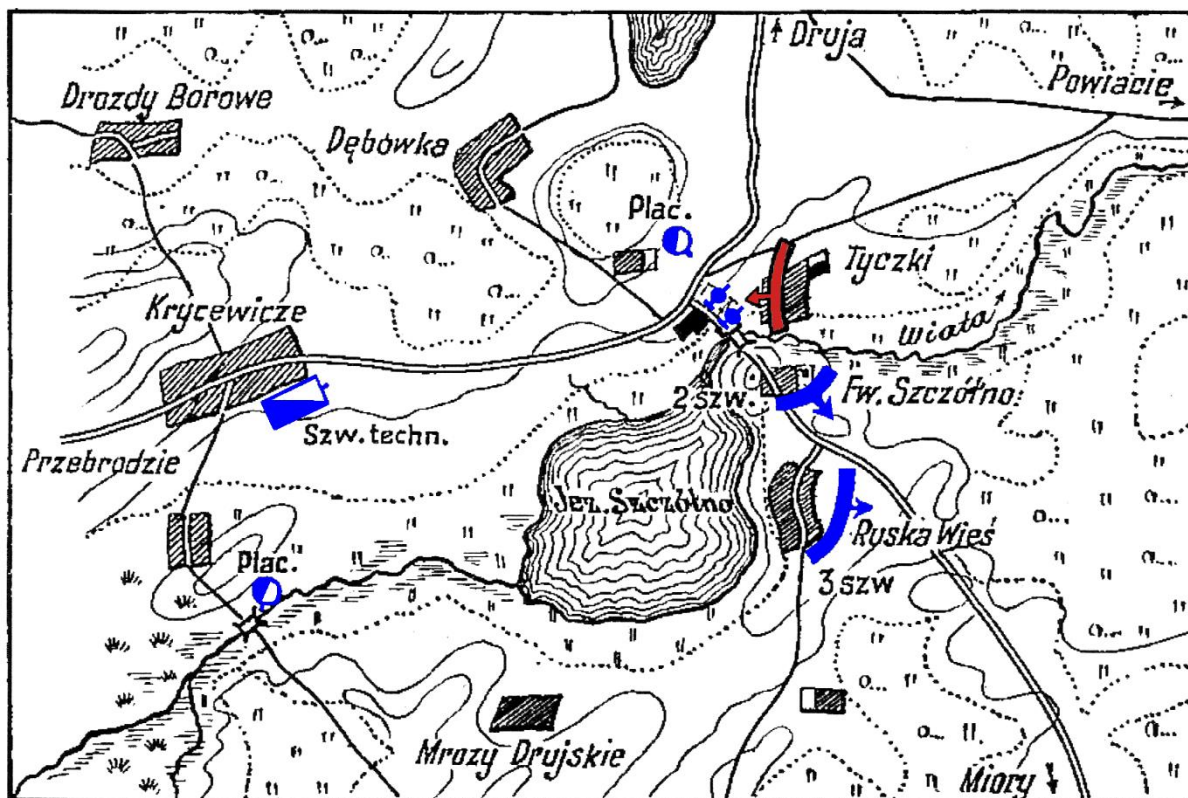
Meanwhile the enemy started to fire. From the sound I determined that they were 300 metres from the bridge.

A few minutes after my arrival the crew of the second HMG came running up. I indicated a position for them near a barn by the road, some 50 metres from the position of the first HMG.



I observed, or rather listened, as the fog was coming down and we couldn't see anything at ground level. In the meantime the commander of the 2nd Squadron with the 1st Platoon arrived and informed me that he was bringing the squadron to our side of the river and that we would wait for the 3rd Squadron, to whom he had sent a messenger ordering them to withdraw immediately.

The enemy fire intensified; 2 HMGs could be heard. I ordered to my men to fire more heavily, the platoon of the 2nd Squadron helped me, as they took positions just by the bridge.



The fog gradually disappeared, and it got clearer. The enemy fire was getting stronger, so that the remaining platoons of the 2nd Squadron from Szczotno galloped across the bridge individually and did not stay in our line. The enemy was advancing on the front of us, about 400-500 metres away. Their fire was becoming more and more fierce. My men took advantage of the better visibility and directed their fire to the nearest targets, firing very long bursts, at times continuously. We had very good positions in a roadside ditch, the ground in front covered with low corn and potatoes. My fire was effective; the enemy could advance only one at a time. I have already located five enemy HMGs, but it seemed to me that more were firing. I felt that the attack was very strong and an assault would undoubtedly come soon. With me was only the 1st Platoon of the 2nd Squadron. We were waiting for the 3rd Squadron, but the road to Ruska Wieś was clear. I did not know what would happen, I tried not to think about it. I observed the field and went to my HMG's positions using the ditch, I urged on the ammunition men, but every now and then I turned my head and looked at the road to Ruska Wieś, and it was still clear. Suddenly I heard the 7th HMG stopped shooting, so I moved towards it along the ditch; something took my forage cap off my head, I picked it up – it had been shot through. I moved to the position, but the HMG was already firing again; the belt-man showed me a shattered ammo box and a hole in the shoulder of his coat and said that the enemy had sent a good burst. I was glad that that was all that had happened.

After a while I looked again towards Ruska Wieś and I could not believe my eyes, so I looked through my binoculars and indeed I saw the 3rd Squadron hurrying along: it was about 500-600 paces from the bridge. I felt warmer.

Suddenly I saw the platoon of 2nd Squadron moving back (it had retired on the orders of the squadron leader). Then the 8th HMG ceased fire and I heard a Bolshevik "urra". For just a moment I became motionless, it had taken my breath away, it seemed to me that my gun was going to perish. With a hand movement I turned the gun towards to the assaulting infantry by the river, I shouted "shoot!" I reached



their position and saw that they had just changed the belt. The enemy riflemen line lay down. In the meantime the 3rd Squadron reached the bridge. I ran behind the barn and waited for the squadron leader; when he came, I asked him to cover my withdrawal. Meanwhile, the squadron crossing the bridge one by one along the road to Krycewice. The squadron leader nodded, and gave the signal "form line", the squadron tried to advance a few dozen paces across the road, but it broke down under the fire and went back, taking its wounded.

I then sent a messenger to the 7th HMG to retire into the rye and retreat up the ditch. At the top it was to take up position and cover the withdrawal of the 8th HMG

I heard a shout of "urra", so I grabbed an ammunition box and the staff equipment and we ran off. Several lancers shouted that they are wounded. A gunner was groaning and limping; the officer-in-charge took his HMG base from him. At the edge of the rye, Sergeant Ruszkowski, my deputy, leant his HMG without the base plate on some rocks, loaded and shot. The wounded crawled back. I looked in the direction of the enemy – nobody was chasing us, the fire from individual rifles was very weak. I looked at the bridge and there was a mass of Bolsheviks running towards Szczółno. I plucked up my courage, pointed out the bridge to the officer-in-charge and looked for the other HMG, as I didn't know if it had managed to withdraw. My anxiety was short-lived, as I heard a short burst of shots from the hill to my left. My nervous tension was gone, I was completely calm again and I went to look for the wounded. I found them in a dip about a dozen paces away. The target man was holding his knee and was in despair that he would lose his leg. I looked at his wounded leg and saw that the back part of the bullet was sticking out, so I grasped it firmly with my fingers and pull the round out. The second, a lancer, had a badly cut hand, I wrapped him up with a handkerchief and sent both of them back with ammunition boxes. The next lancer had a ragged jacket on his lower side and groaned that his hip hurt. I took out of his pocket a box of cartridges for his carbine and a bent Russian bullet, and saw his hip was only bruised. The fourth had his collar covered with blood, but only a small hole in his ear; they both stayed in the line.

I return to the position; Sergeant Ruszkowski was shooting, but the gun was now on its base. After a while rifle fire was heard from Dębówka and soon a line of our squadrons emerged. They attacked the bridge. We went forward again. We found several wounded Bolsheviks, among them a battalion commander wounded in the leg and several carts, which could not pass across the bridge. Szczółno was taken back. We were relieved by the newly arrived 4th Squadron.

The wounded commander of the Bolshevik battalion, who had been taken prisoner, told us that he had had received the task of cutting off our squadrons and taking them prisoner. At the sound of battle, the second battalion of the same Bolshevik regiment was to launch an attack on Ruska Wieś. The Bolshevik maintained that he did not succeed in his task because he was wounded in Tyczki immediately after the first series of shots from my HMG. In spite of this, the action was very close to being successful. Two squadrons would have been destroyed, as the only line of retreat was across the bridge.

The vigilance of Sergeant Ruszkowski, with his quick decision making, as well as the efficiency of the gun crews made it possible to draw out the action and give us time to retire, as the enemy was surprised by our fire and had to advance slowly, and the sound of battle alerted our squadrons. Finally, we had a bit of luck, that the first rounds of fire were well directed onto the target despite the darkness and dense fog.

The fight for the bridge lasted no more than forty-five minutes, but its violence was so great that my platoon used up almost the entire supply of ammunition carried on the saddlebags.

When I recall this fight, I always think about the moment when we withdrew, as it was a high point in the efficiency of the crews, who managed to take all their equipment.

My platoon was the youngest unit in the regiment, as it came from the cadre of late Autumn 1919, and I was the youngest machine gunner. I completed the HMG course in March 1920, and on 15 May I began my long time as HMG platoon leader.

My crews and I had a lot of practice with this kind of combat; we learned to operate as follows:



- We chose positions that were convenient for firing, but that provided as much cover for the crew as possible and that enabled us to retire to the rear in a concealed manner. In this way it was always easy to bring ammunition to the positions, so we never felt short of ammunition;
- empty ammunition boxes were immediately returned to the platoon ammunition wagon, where they were exchanged for full ones and the wagon crew immediately refilled the ammunition belts; in this way the two ammunition saddlebags of the platoon always had full boxes;
- we kept the HMGs in perfect order, so that they always worked reliably;
- finally, we were so familiar with close-range combat without support that even when our troops retreated, we worked calmly to the last moment with a feeling of confidence.

These methods supported by a bit of luck allowed us to fulfil our tasks and at times to escape from difficult situations, such as in the battle for the bridge near Szczólno.

It is good that among our memoirs we also find descriptions devoted to the operation of machine guns. The role of HMG was enormous in the battle.

The author of the episode rightly credits himself with saving the position at Szczólno. His HMGs won the time for the arrival of the squadrons; the fire of the HMGs paralysed the momentum of the enemy attack and undoubtedly inflicted heavy losses on the enemy.

In addition to the tactical conclusions mentioned by the author, I wish to draw the reader's attention to the following matters.

I omit to assess whether the grouping of the squadron was accurate and fortunate. It seems to me that the protection from the direction of Tyczki was too weak. However, it is worthy of recognition that:

- *That the young commander of the machine gun platoon was rightly interested in the positions within a wider radius;*
- *That he had worked out certain likely events, informed the machine-gunners of them, and arranged for the co-operation of the platoon for various incidents;*
- *That the machine-gun near the bridge commenced firing on its own initiative, for which I commend the operator.*

Finally, I would like to stress that an unsuppressed machine gun with ammunition can and should persevere to the last moment, because its fire has the ability to break the enemy's attack. In this respect I am also completely of one mind with the author of the episode.

Editor.

