

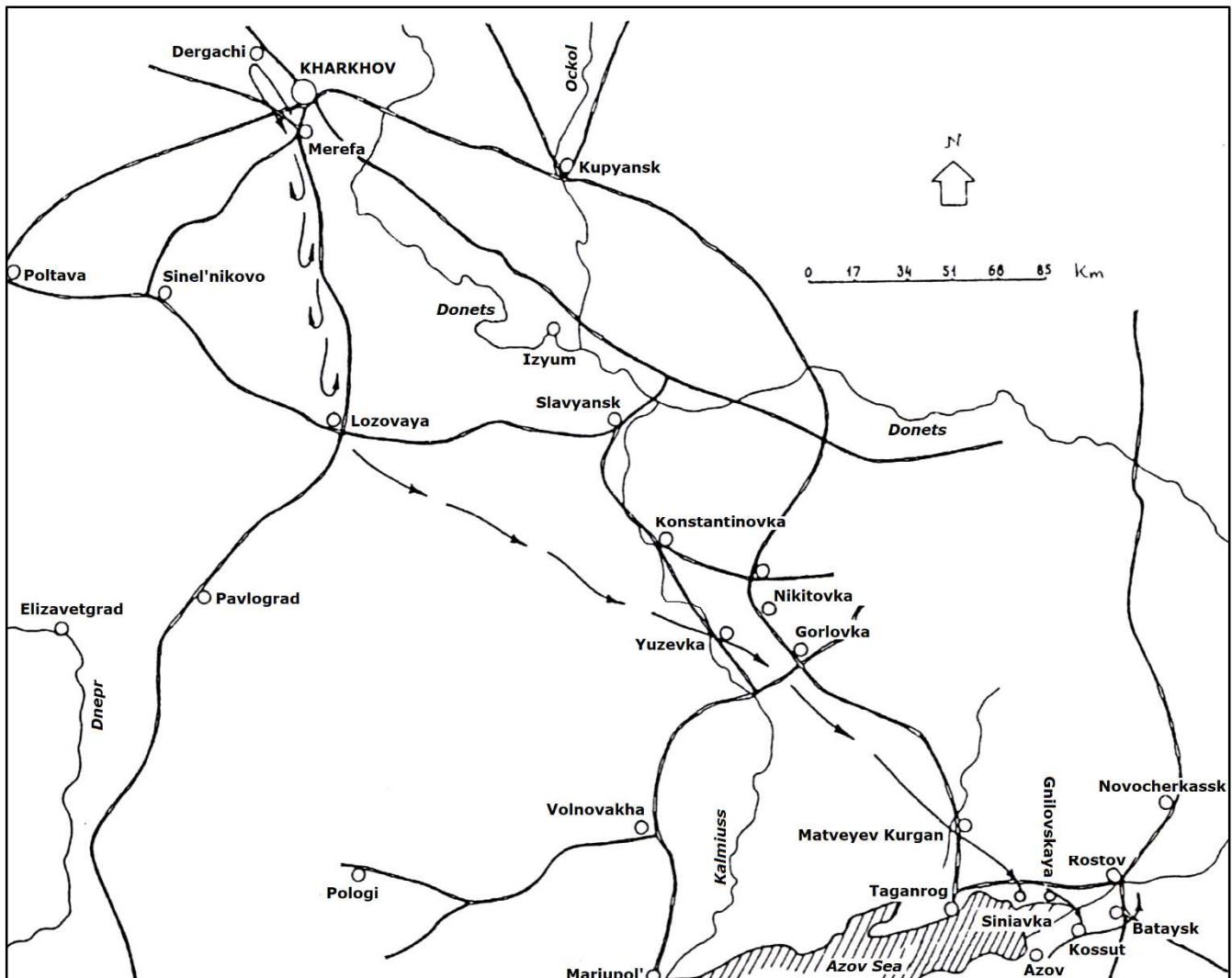
Chapter 13 – The Retreat

From Merepha to Lozova

The great retreat to the Don River began – for the infantry from Orël and for the regular cavalry from Sevsk. It is hard to say what the composition of the regular cavalry was at the time. It had reached two corps, that is four divisions, but due to losses, illness and campaigning it had once more become a division. Maybe there were units that went different directions from us. Later, near Egorlytskaya, we once again fielded a cavalry corps. The same process was observed in the infantry. Our four main regiments had each been expanded into a division, but during the retreat they were once again reduced to regiments.

The retreat itself was split into two very different parts. From Sevsk to Lozova it was a withdrawal, with constant battles. The retreat was slow, and we went directly south, that is, towards the Crimea. That was in October and the first half of November 1919. Frosts were rare, rains were frequent, and there was no snow at all.

From Lozova to the Don it was a real retreat. We marched by long transitions, avoiding battles, which were rare. The direction of our retreat changed to head southeast. Obviously, we had decided to give up the Ukraine without a fight. This lasted from mid-November to mid-December 1919. The weather was frosty with a little snow. I must note the excellent condition of the roads, which allowed us to make long marches at a go. Our goal was to be first to reach the Don River, before the Reds, so they couldn't cut us off from the Caucasus.



Battles

Up to Lozova, we fought long combats every day in the drizzling rain, without a really decisive attack by either side, and without hope of victory, which demoralised us a lot. In the evening, we would break away



from the enemy under darkness and retreat a bit further south. We spent the night with the units close together in case of a night attack, but I don't remember any. The Reds, although they possessed great numbers, advanced cautiously. They usually showed up at ten o'clock, or even later, and another tedious battle ensued before the evening departure.

We became masters at the art of retreating without fuss, so it became just like changing positions. Days of rest were extremely rare. The constant campaigning and battles exhausted the men, but especially the horses. Horses need to be watered and fed, but the tired men fell asleep and couldn't get up to feed the horses. However our entire movement depended on their condition. An officer was appointed to ensure that all the horses were sufficiently watered.

We stopped one evening in a village. It was getting dark and a light snow was falling. It had rained previously and everything was covered with ice. I was assigned to the well to check if that all the horses were watered. I put on my greatcoat and went out. Some dragoons came to the well. Lieutenant Rupchev was with them. He had served in the horse-mountain battery and then transferred to the dragoons. We stood talked together a little distance from the well. Rupchev had a sawn-off shotgun in his belt.

"I presume it shoots inaccurately."

"No doubt. But the peasants appreciate them because they are easy to hide."

Men drew water from the well and poured it into a trough, from which the horses drank. Two riders rode up and began to push themselves towards the trough.

"Look you bums," our soldiers swore. "We are drawing up the water, and putting it out for our own horses. Get off, you bastards, and get some buckets out. And then it will be ready. Parasites!"

The swearing grew, but soon subsided. They were all dead tired and didn't even want to curse.

"What's the name of this village?" one of the riders asked.

"How would we know?" answered my soldier and, turning to me, "Lieutenant, sir, what is the name of this village?"

The riders then nervously yanked at their reins, trying to get out of the mass of horses. But they struggled to do so. Our horses, reaching for the water, slipped on the ice. We looked at the riders in bewilderment. Then someone shouted: "Reds!" Well, we were all unarmed. The Reds got themselves out of the scrum of horses and whipped their horses to get them to gallop, but the horses slipped. Rupchev grabbed his sawn-off shotgun and fired. One of the riders fell, killed on the spot. The other disappeared into the twilight.

"You're good at shooting," I told Rupchev.

"This was the first time that I've shot a sawn-off shotgun."

The soldier addressing me as, "Lieutenant," had made the Reds realise that they were among Whites. If they hadn't shown so much haste, we wouldn't have noticed anything.

Returning from the watering hole, I shared this incident with other officers. Oboznenko told me how, somewhere near Lvov, they had had a guide take both batteries to the village of Seleznevka. Whether by mistake or on purpose, the guide took them to the village of Utkovka, then occupied by the Reds. Our battery was in front. It entered the village, and reached the middle of it. Fortunately, Oboznenko, who was in charge of the battery, understood the problem and didn't lose his cool. It was late evening and getting dark. Oboznenko turned the battery around it left the village just as it had entered, going some distance before moving to a trot. The mountain horse battery, which had been following ours, turned before entering the village. When a Red soldier spoke to Oboznenko, he hid his shoulder so that his golden shoulder board wasn't visible.

"Despite the fact that it was cold, I was sweating," finished Oboznenko. "Obviously, the Reds didn't notice anything either. There was no shooting."

From Lozova to the Don



As related above, our division changed direction after Lozova and went southeast, towards the Don. It was probably the second half of November 1919 and the weather was frosty with a little snow. The roads were frozen, with no mud, and it was like walking on parquet. That allowed for long distances to be made in a single march. There were no battles. We didn't see any Reds. They, of course, were following us and even trying to overtake us in order to cut off our retreat, but we didn't see them.

There were no rest days. Everything depended on the condition of the horses. It was very important to water and feed them well. But getting fodder was difficult. My riders of my team did an excellent job of this difficult task, and it remained in excellent condition. The other horses looked worse. Dura was tired, and I tried to make marches on foot, leading her by the bridle

The fatigue was terrible. If the column stopped for some reason, everyone immediately fell asleep sitting in the saddle and the horses also fell asleep. So, in order to move on, everyone had to be woken up. The retreat depressed us, of course, but we didn't have desertions – maybe one or two cases – and even then it was not desertion, merely men still asleep when the battery left, and then not catching up. Sometimes they slept for too long and fell into the hands of the Reds. There was no general collapse. Not in the regiments, not in the batteries.

Typhus, cholera and plague were rampant that winter, and they caused our losses. At first we were afraid to go into homes with sick people in them and went to look for others, but it was difficult to find a home without someone sick. In the end, we were so numb with dirt and fatigue that we would enter a house and order threateningly:

“All the sick, get out!”

Because often when we came, the peasants lay on their beds and groaned, hoping that their house wouldn't be occupied. The sick were moved to the other, unheated half of the house to lie on straw, and we lay down in their place – without undressing, of course. I got to see terrible maladies, some had bodies covered in what looked like ripe plums hanging off. Smallpox, perhaps?

Oboznenko, and quite a few officers and soldiers fell ill, with what I think was typhus. Staff-captain Skorniyakov took over the battery, and just Kazitski and I remained of the officers. The machine gunners had Captain Pogodin, but he stayed apart from the battery. That trio: Skorniyakov, Kazitski and I, made up the battery for a long time. We couldn't rely on Pogodin. He was an infantry officer, devoid of all energy and timid. When it was getting hot, I would see the hunched-over figure of Pogodin heading to the rear.

“Where are you going? The *tachanka* needs to guard this flank.”

“The machine-gun is jammed,” Pogodin would answer. Or, “We've got no cartridges.”

The volunteer Villebois would complain bitterly about him, “The machine-gun is fine, there are plenty of cartridges, but there is a lack of courage.”

Skorniyakov was an excellent officer. Ensign Kazitski, despite his youth, possessed boundless energy. I did what I could. And the battery kept on going.

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We passed through large village. Skorniyakov told me to ride at the back and not let the soldiers spread out to plunder.

Timoshenko, a soldier from the third gun, a looter and a rapist, rode up to me.

“Lieutenant, sir, let me get a drink of water.”

“No, I won't. Get to your place.”

The battery left the village. I rode along it to make sure that all the soldiers were in their places. Timoshenko wasn't there. How he dodged me, I don't know. Suddenly he appeared.

“Where have you been?”

“I have been here all the time, Lieutenant.” He looked me in the eyes, seeking assurance. I headed for the wagon with our belongings. The tarp was thrown back and there is an unfamiliar sack on it.



“Whose bag is that?” I asked the driver.

He averted his eyes and said, “I don’t know. I didn’t see who put it there.”

“Timoshenko, is this your bag?”

“Not at all, Lieutenant.”

“Whose bag is it?”

Everyone said they didn’t know.

“Great, nobody’s bag has arrived by itself. We will share it out among everyone, except Timoshenko, because he left the battery, despite being ordered not to.”

At the next stop, its contents were divided into piles, one for each person. One soldier turned his back, and the another would point to a pile and ask: ‘Whose?’ The one not looking would call out a name. The soldiers made fun of Timoshenko. I got a curtain, from which I sewed a shirt.

At Yuzovka we passed an estate. I couldn’t resist and turned off. The estate, of course, had been plundered. I rode through a wonderful park with old linden trees and, without getting off Dura, entered a large oval hall. A broken mirror reflected a strange picture of a horseman in the hall, which had seen lovely women, brilliant balls ... What stories were played out under these roofs? And now the half-shattered doors let snow into the hall, the mirrors were broken, the windows were shattered, and everything was broken ... Several shots rang out, and I put Dura into a gallop in the hall itself and joined the battery.

Racing the Reds

From Yuzovka, our retreat accelerated. We walked continuously, day and night, without overnight stops. We only stopped twice a day, for two hours, to feed the horses. We were racing the Reds to prevent them cutting us off from the Don. But despite the enormous marches, it wasn’t a hectic flight. Our cavalry, which was lighter and so quicker, moved on ahead of us. Both batteries went by themselves. I don’t know what route the other batteries took. During the retreat, we didn’t see them and we only met them when crossing the Don. In addition to our two, on the Don we saw the two Guards and 7th batteries. The 8th appeared later.

The road was excellent. It was freezing cold and there was a full moon, which made it easier for night marches.

Our horses quickly grew weaker. A horse is less resilient than a person. It is enough for a person to eat a bit and sleep a few hours and he is able to work again. But horses needs an occasional day of rest. We couldn’t take any breaks, we had to stay ahead of the Reds. We tried to compensate for the lack of rest with extra nutrition. But in the villages it was difficult to get barley. But my wonderful team stayed together despite the enormous marches. The miracle came about because of the love for their horses of my riders: Temerchenko, Baibarak and Yudin. I learned how Temerchenko took barley from the peasants for his horses. He would threaten them like a real Bolshevik, and could get it where others couldn’t. Sometimes I would stop and let the battery pass by to admire my team once more, and especially Yudin’s base pair – which were almost ideal horses for horse artillery, and which are very difficult to find. Such horses must be strong but also agile, and only rarely do those two qualities coincide.

The other horses were losing weight, and the sides of their groins began to sink in – a sign that a horse is exhausted. I noticed this even with Dura, although I tried to feed her and did all the marching on foot, leading her by the bridle.

In general our column moved dismounted, partly because of the cold, and in order to keep warm we would run for a while. One night it was so cold that the cannon wheels stopped turning and the cannon slid along as if on runners.

My duty was the wagon train. I needed to make sure that the carts didn’t lag behind, that the loads were properly distributed and that the soldiers didn’t try to sleep on the carts. They might freeze to death, and besides, it made the cart heavier. But it was so cold that the soldiers preferred to walk to keep warm.

Hallucinations



Due to some combination of fatigue, lack of sleep, the moon and the snow, hallucinations were frequent. We started to see things that weren't there. I began to often see out of the corner of my eye a hare jumping up, but when I turned my head there was nothing there.

One night with a full moon, several officers of both batteries were walking in front of the column. The hooves of the previous columns had loosened the snow, and one of the officers began to see roses in the lumps of snow. At first we laughed at him, but soon we all started to see lots of roses, of all colours – even blue and purple. It was funny for a while. These mounds of roses would appear about fifty steps ahead and then disappear when they were five steps in front. We walked as if on a carpet of roses. But soon it began to bother us, and we tried not to look at the road anymore, so as to not see them.

The battery was crossing a rail line. Skornyakov told me to stay, let the battery pass, and count all the carts to see if any of them were lagging behind. I sat on Dura. A railway watchman stood next to me and watched the battery. I counted the carts, everyone was there. I also glanced at the moonlit road – it was empty.

“How far to the next village?” I asked the watchman.

There was no answer. Surprised, I turned around. There was no watchman. I looked in all directions, but no one was there. There are no tracks in the snow where I had thought he had stood. And yet the details were so clear – his coat, worn-out felt boots, pointy lambswool hat, the two rolled flags (red and green) under his arm and in his hands an extinguished lantern. *Fata Morgana*.

Several boxcars were parked nearby. I went to see what was in them. Without getting off Dura, I pushed the door open. But the full moon made a dark shadow and I couldn't see what was inside. I climbed into the carriage from the saddle, but immediately got back in and left. There were frozen bodies in the car, probably abandoned patients. This time it was not a hallucination. I shuddered. Horrible! And there were probably many such abandoned people everywhere. There were no hospitals. The safest place was in the battery, on a wagon. The people in the units had grown close and you wouldn't be abandoned.

We were approaching the Don. The batteries were all walking, day and night, frenzied with fatigue, like automata. With only one thought: to get there and fall asleep, and sleep, sleep, sleep.

Finally we reached it, before the Reds, at the large village of Sinyavka on the mouth of the Don. We arrived in the evening. The weather changed dramatically and it started raining. Our entire division was there. We were told that the intention was to hold the Don line, that units were coming to relieve us, that an ice breaker had passed along the river so that the Reds couldn't cross over to the other side. And that tomorrow would be a day off. We unsaddled and released the horses. For the first time in days, we took off our boots and fell asleep. It must have been mid-December 1919.



Chapter 14 – On the Don

We Arrive

The battles along the Don were one of the most curious stages of the civil war. They took place in the second half of December 1919, in January and early February 1920.

After a long and difficult retreat from Sevsk to the Don, our exhausted regiments and batteries took up a position north of the mouth of the Don. A series of battles took place there, followed by our disorderly retreat – I would even say escape – across the Don. It seemed like a collapse was imminent. And then suddenly something happened. Those same cowardly fugitives somehow turned instantly into lions and were able to cause the Reds heavy losses. I end this period with the big cavalry battle near Egorlykская. Our regular cavalry corps were attacked by Budenny's cavalry and repelled it. The Battle of Egorlykская on 17 February 1920 was probably the last big cavalry battle in the history of mankind. After that there were cavalry combats, but smaller ones.

So, after a nightmarish retreat, we had finally arrived the village of Sinyavka, at the mouth of the Don. Here we joined our division, which had arrived before us. We put the guns in a park, unharnessed them and, with a sigh of relief, dispersed to quarters. In the evening it got warmer and it started to rain.

Two of our officers arrived from Rostov. They were very optimistic: Rostov and Novocherkassk would be kept at all costs, newly formed units were coming to replace us (why hadn't they arrived already?). An ice-breaker would prevent the Reds crossing the river. We would get all the supplies we needed. They sounded war-like, but the reality was different. The battery had three officers, but needed at least five. We hoped that these two would join us. But then they sounded hesitant, and immediately fled back to Rostov. This caution spoiled the first impression of their belligerence. I received disappointing news from them about my brother. The wagon train had equipped another gun, commanded by Captain Kovalevski, and Captain Kuzmin and my brother had joined it as an officer. There was no more news of that gun. Maybe it was with one of the lagging units, or perhaps it had gone to the Crimea, or ... Beside that, my brother didn't feel well. Typhus was suspected. Then I thought of the boxcar with the frozen patients and shuddered. The wounded or sick were quickly abandoned by new detachments that hadn't yet had time to cohere. I prayed often and fervently for him.

I think it's superfluous to mention that all the fine promises of the officers from Rostov remained in the realm of fantasy, except for the damned ice-breaker, which gave us a lot of worries when we had to hastily cross the Don.

On the morning of the next day, I passed the gun park. It had rained in the evening and there had been a frost during the night, and the wheels of the guns were iced up. In the case of a need to move quickly, the guns would be stuck. I reported this to Skornyakov.

"Let the men rest. We'll break the ice tomorrow."

But the ice bothered me. I gathered the grumbling soldiers and we chipped off the ice.

Mortal Danger

The ice was broken off just in time, as 20 minutes later shots rang out and the battery was hastily harnessed. Our division rolled quickly out of Sinyavka. Behind the village there was a small slope, covered with ice. The horses slid and fell. Skornyakov left me with the men to pull up our carts ourselves. When we had pulled out the last cart, everyone went to their horses. Dura was not there. I assessed the situation poorly, and instead of getting into the last cart or climbing on behind one of the soldiers, I told them to send Dura to me, and slowly began to climb up. The soldiers left at a trot. I was left alone. When I reached the top, my blood went cold. To the left above Sinyavka, the tops of the hills were occupied by a line of Red infantry. And below, just 400 paces from me, a Red cavalry division was deploying at a trot. Our men weren't visible. I ran with all my strength along the road to the right. Fortunately, I was overtaken by a lagging soldier from our battery, I managed to grab the tail of his horse on the fly, and she dragged me along, as before, near Mangush. But soon I felt that I was getting weaker and about to fall.



“Stop!” I shouted to the soldier. “Give me the stirrup, I’ll sit behind.” But the soldier looked around fearfully at the Reds and continued to whip on his horse.

I grabbed my revolver and roared, “I’ll shoot you if you don’t stop!”

This worked, and he stopped and gave me a stirrup. Without wasting a second, I launched myself behind him. The soldier squealed, “They are here, they are here. We are done for ...”

“Gallop!” And we set off at full speed.

I was afraid to look around so as not to lose my balance, but my ears caught the clatter of hooves very close by. Gradually they began to weaken and then completely stopped.

“Slow down!” I told the soldier. “Save the horse’s strength, you may need it later.

Polovinkin galloped towards us with Dura’s reins in his hands. The Reds lagged behind us. And a kilometre ahead our division was deploying for combat.

I moved over to Dura and didn’t say anything to Polovinkin because he had taken Dura away. What bliss to sit in the saddle of your horse and not flee from the Reds along the road! I think that this was the moment of the most extreme danger that I experienced during the entire civil war. And I got out only because the situation was already familiar to me. I had already tried out the method once, near Mangush, and knew what to do and how to do it, so I did it all without losing a half second.

Phew! Although I didn’t see them, I felt them very close behind me. It was a matter of seconds. We had ridden hard on the ice, saving our lives, but they were afraid of slipping and restrained their horses, and once they saw our division preparing, they dropped back. We joined the battery at a trot.

Battle near Sinyavka

Our division turned around and went to meet the Reds. Both our batteries opened fire. But the matter was resolved by two tanks, received from the British, which rattled terribly and didn’t seem to cause the Reds any fear. But once they opened fire with their machine guns, the Red cavalry took to their heels, and the infantry fled. An hour later, the battle had died down for lack of enemy. Apparently, there was no Red artillery, or it had wisely disappeared earlier, because there were no explosions near the tanks.

But in the evening the tanks were abandoned, doubtless due to a lack of fuel. Our division went to Rostov. The tankers went on foot.

There was a bitter frost. I rode up to our wagon and changed my leather boots for felt boots.

Crossing the Don

We walked all night. It was very cold. We cursed the frost: after all, the strip of water smashed by the ice breaker would freeze again. But it was that cold that saved us, allowing us to cross the Don the next day. Still we didn’t know that at the time and grumbled.

In the morning we saw houses on the outskirts of Rostov. We were confident that our infantry occupied the city. After all, this was the only bridge across the Don. We even sent Kazitski and three soldiers on ahead to find quarters. The division halted. All of a sudden a fusillade came from the city and so we learned that Rostov was occupied by the Reds. The news concerned us greatly.

And soon we were attacked by the Red cavalry that had been following us. Here panic seized the majority of our men. Units were mixed up, and a human avalanche rushed towards the Don. We were on a high bank some four hundred metres high. We couldn’t see the river. Everyone was thinking about the cursed ice cutter that had passed the river two days previously. Had the cold of the night had time to seal the ice again?

The fighting was disorderly. Nobody gave orders or, perhaps, they were given but they didn’t reach us. The units acted at their own discretion. Some defended themselves, others fled. Our battery fired and scattered a Red *lava* in front of us. We saw the Reds capture two cannons abandoned by the 7th Battery, in which Lenia Aleksandrov served. Fortunately, the Reds also captured the division’s wagon train and began



pillaging it, leaving us time to cross the Don. The main difficulty was to get the guns down the icy bank to the river and from there to ferry them across the still thin ice.

There was utter confusion and, without receiving orders, we had retreated to the ridge line of the bank and there deployed our guns.

At this time Colonel Kuzmin appeared with his 1st Officer Cavalry Regiment.

“What are you doing here? Get away and make it lively! We are the last, and then it’s the Reds. And you still need to get down the bank.”

Yet he stopped his regiment and deployed it into a *lava*.

To our right, on the rail line in the village of Gnilovskaya, a wagon filled with shells was on fire. The rounds were flying out and exploding. That served as our flank cover. The Reds were unlikely to move in that direction. We couldn’t see the river from the heights, but we saw a column of infantry and horsemen marching in the direction of Koykut on the other side. Thank God! We knew the ice would hold men and horses, but would it take guns? I had come up with an escape plan in advance if the ice turned out to be too thin: get a plank, lie on it and crawl across the thin ice with it. But then I would be saved, but the battery and Dura would perish.

The road zigzagged down the hill, and was very steep and icy. We unharnessed the two front pairs and braked the gun’s wheels, then Yudin crossed himself and began to descend with the wonderful base pair. We clung onto the gun, trying to hold it back, but it slid faster and faster. The gun started to tilt up, so that it was almost on the horses’ backs. The speed was increasing, and Yudin brought them to a trot so that the gun wouldn’t crush them, then to a gallop to avoid it crushing them. We watched him with concern. Would Yudin be able to take the bend, or would he plunge onto the slope? Yudin took the turn at the gallop, disappeared around it, appeared below. The horses were still at a gallop. Again he disappeared around a bend and appeared below. Yudin gradually restrained the horses and stopped. We breathed a sigh of relief: what a fine fellow Yudin was!

I gathered the rest of the team and ran down with them to ferry the guns across. And Yudin, with his wonderful pair of horses, took all four guns down the slope. It was unthinkable to entrust that dangerous operation to any other rider or horses. The 2nd Guards Battery had descended in front of us and left an overturned caisson on the cliff. Skornyakov and crews remained at the top to take the carts down, while I and the teams were down by the river. The ice was white, covered with snow, and in the middle there was an ominous transparent strip of thin ice, where the ice breaker had gone. I chose a place where there were many pieces of old ice. Harnessing only the front pair to distribute the weight and, if the gun went down, to save the horses. A board was placed under the forks so that it wouldn’t cut the ice. I myself stood on one of the old chunks of ice in order to chop off the lines in case anything happened.

“Well, Temerchenko, lead off! Let God guard us.”

Temerchenko, with a smile, led his black front pair. The ice was shaking under my feet. It was such an eerie feeling that shamefully I got off to run to the bank. But the gun went over safely. They began to cross with the others.

Suddenly Colonel Dmitriev, the commander of the 2nd Guards Horse Battery, rushed at me.

“I ordered you to harness the base pair, and you harnessed the front.”

“Colonel, sir, this is the 2nd General Drozdovski Horse Battery.

“Oh, sorry, I thought it was mine.”

A commander, I thought, who doesn’t recognise his horses, officers or soldiers.

We limbered up the guns, and, without waiting for Skornyakov and the crews that were busy with the descent of the carts, I took the battery at the trot a kilometre away from the slope and then stopped to wait for the others. When the Reds appeared on the crest of the slope, we were already out of range. Imagine what the Reds could have done, if they hadn’t been busy plundering our train, but put a machine



gun or a gun on the ridge, while men were still swarming below ... But God is merciful, and everything worked out.

That evening it warmed up and it started to rain. We had crossed the Don in time – the next day it would have been impossible. The rain gave us a few days of rest from the Red attacks, because between us the river was impassable. We made good use of these days to reorganise the units.

Our personal effects wagon was also seized by the Reds. It had my boots, and so I squelched around in the mud in my felt boots.

Reorganised Units

Our escape across the Don left the units confused. Men often got away individually, separated from their units. We lost Ensign Kazitski and the three soldiers sent to find lodgings. Kazitski couldn't find the battery and so they joined a dragoon regiment. Two days later, I accidentally met him in Koysut and returned them all to the battery.

We also found the horse-mountain battery by chance, having seen their smaller guns from afar. We spent the night at a farm, where the Izyum hussars also used. We decided to not argue over quarters and settled in together.

On the very first day, we stumbled upon Colonel Lebedev, head of the division's supply service. It was strange that he was so close to the front. He had clearly taken money from the Rostov treasury. There was shooting at the bridge, and Lebedev was clearly worried by it and tried to get rid of us and leave. But Skornyakov and I showered him with reproaches and demands – after the retreat, the battery was in great need of all sorts of things.

"I don't have any of the things you want here. The only thing I can give you is money."

He handed Skornyakov a pack of brand new five-hundred-rouble bills. The pack was evidently a hundred pieces, the size of a brick and couldn't fit into any pocket. In addition, bills of five hundred roubles were still large denominations and it was very difficult to change them. However, it would allow us to pay the peasants for the fodder we took.

The shooting intensified, and Lebedev rode off, without even taking a receipt from Skornyakov. We didn't need money – we couldn't buy anything. The shops were empty. The wad of money didn't fit anywhere, and Skornyakov suffered with it. He put it in his saddle bags, but then he couldn't move away from his horse. When he slept, he put the wad under the pillow, forgot it when leaving, and rushed back to the hut for it. Finally he gave it to me.

I refused, "No, spare me! I hate other people's money."

"Take it! I can't deal with it any more. It's no use for anything, and causes me nothing but grief. I order you to take it!"

It was my turn to suffer. In the hut I put it on the windowsill behind the curtain. We started to line up. The battle started, and suddenly I couldn't find the money. No, I left it in the hut. I galloped back. I burst into the hut, which was already occupied by some other unit, went to the window and ... a sigh of relief. The money was still lying there."

"And we've been here for twenty minutes," the soldiers said. "We've missed out on millions!"

After that incident, I told Skornyakov that I could no longer nurse the damn money. Otherwise I'd desert and take it with me. We decided to distribute a bill to each soldier and officer in lieu of their pay and keep the remainder – which would then fit into Skornyakov's pocket – for the needs of the battery. We did so and breathed a sigh of relief. The soldiers began to play cards and quarrel. In general, money brought us nothing but trouble.

And the rain continued to fall for several more days, which played into our hands. General Barbovich took advantage of those days, while the Reds couldn't cross the Don, to put the units in order. The squadrons received reinforcements.



While Rostov was occupied several officers came to join our battery. But for various reasons they didn't stay in the battery and disappeared under all sorts of pretexts. The officer personnel remained the same: Skorniyakov, Kazitski and me, plus Pogodin with the machine guns.

Defence of the Don

Then a few days later the weather changed: frosts returned and the Don froze. The Reds decided to attack. They had the impression that they would handle us easily. After the long retreat and the latest battles – in which they easily had occupied Rostov and our cavalry had fled across the Don, the likes of which hadn't happened previously – the Reds probably imagined an easy victory.

And indeed, when they crossed the Don, our units began to withdraw. But in those few days something happened with our men. They became no longer fugitives, but troops raring to fight. We withdrew to lure the Red infantry away from the cover of their batteries on the high bank. Then all at once we turned and attacked them fiercely. They weren't expecting such a trick at all, and were confused. But we didn't let them recover their senses and chased them all the way to the Don. Only darkness put a stop to the carnage.

The Reds had the advantage of numbers, the advantage of position – the high bank of the Don, from where their batteries could shell the battlefield easily while remaining hidden to us – and the advantage of the frost, which froze the Don and allowed unhindered movement to our side. They couldn't come to terms with their defeat and tried many times to cross, but they failed every time. They even decided to ferry artillery across to support the infantry advance. The result was that we took their guns from them, when they couldn't retire them back across quickly enough.

Over the course of two weeks, the Reds tried to cross the Don at least four times, maybe more, and each time they were beaten back. The battles were so similar to one another that I can no longer distinguish them. I only remember that the battles were stubborn and the enemy took large losses. I seem to recall that there was a fight every three days.

Our cavalry has been reinforced. The squadrons were squadrons again. The regular cavalry was now reduced to a corps, commanded by General Barbovich.

In the battles around Rostov, Colonel Kuzmin was especially distinguished with his 1st Officer Cavalry Regiment. But all the regiments and batteries behaved well.

Our unit patrolled between Azov, Koysut and Bataysk.

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While we were marching the soldiers of my gun rode up to me. The bombardier of my gun Shakalov was sitting on a wonderful bay horse, which I hadn't seen before. He was holding on to another identical one.

"Lieutenant, this is a horse for you. Dura should be given a rest. We have noticed for a while that you walk on our marches so as to not tire Dura. We were looking for a horse for you. This is it."

I was touched by the soldiers' concern. It is true that Dura needed some rest. The bay stallion was fabulous. A little young, perhaps.

"Well, thank you! He is handsome ... Where did you steal him?"

"The Germans.³⁹ Don't worry. The Reds will take everything away from them anyway. It is better that you get it."

"Well, thank you. I accept the gift. Pass me the saddle from Dura, I'll try him now."

The bay turned out to be a good horse, playful and not particularly mischievous. Not very strong due to his youth. But I didn't ride him for long. This is what happened to him. It was a foggy morning, when an alarm was raised. I dressed and left the hut. A Polish soldier was leading the saddled bay to me when a Red shell flew in at random (they couldn't see where they were shooting because of the fog) and burst between me

³⁹ That is, ethnic German colonists.



and the horse. Surprised, the Pole let go of the reins, the horse reared and disappeared into the fog. I sent the Pole to look for him, as I couldn't do it myself because the battle was starting. The Pole didn't find him. So the bay disappeared, along with my a saddle, saddlebags and things. Of course some cavalrymen had caught him and hid him. We looked for him when we were marching, but in vain. It was lucky that the wad of money was in my chest pocket, and not in the saddlebags. I had to return to Dura, who nevertheless had been able to rest little.

Bryukhovetskaya

All of a sudden, the battery received an order to go to the village of Bryukhovetskaya, where our wagons were, for replenishment and rest. Surprised and delighted, we decided to go immediately before the order could be cancelled. We hastily gathered and set out into the night, trying not to attract attention. We made it about a dozen kilometres before we spent the night in some farm or other.

The Kuban region begins at Kushchevka. We had been fighting in the Don region. The Don Cossacks treated us Volunteers without hostility. The Kuban Cossacks at the time were more separatist; they wanted to create their own state and were hostile to us. This change in the mood of the Kuban people happened every time things were going badly. They succumbed to Bolshevik propaganda quickly. Bryukhovetskaya lies about 150 km from the front.

The Cossack owners of my hut in Bryukhovetskaya were morose, and I got a room in the unheated half of it. I could have left and settled with the other officers, but my mood wasn't great thanks to anxiety about my brother, and I wanted to be alone. People annoyed me, so I remained in the unheated hut. I took books from the school library and read. But the village was rich, and our people and horses were able to rest properly. We celebrated Christmas in Bryukhovetskaya. General Kolzakov, Colonel Shapilovski and many other officers of our battery were stationed here. Oboznenko recovered from typhus. The battery was replenished with men, horses and officers. The wagons for the whole corps were in the village.

Inspection

Before returning to the front, the battery was inspected. General Prince Avalov, the inspector of horse artillery, was watching. There was a lot of snow, and the battery was lined up at the edge of a road near a vast parade ground with snow and individual trees.

No commands were given during the inspection. Avalov approached my gun, the first. We had, of course, cleaned and oiled the weapon, cleaned the horses, dressed ourselves up, cleaned our boots and fixed the harness. But all that was wasted. There were no caissons. Avalov glanced around at the crew, but looked more attentively at the horses. He took off the cover and opened the breach of the gun, looked inside, smeared it on the inside with his finger and held it up to the light. Then he bent down and opened the box on a gun carriage designed for the sights. There were no sights in it. The fact is that during marches, the iron box received shocks and deformed, so it would no longer close. In frosty weather, the sights became covered with ice, and needed warming and cleaning before shooting. We took a more practical approach: the gun layer carried the sights – that way they were always clean and ready for action. But, of course, this was against regulations. We had got so used to that system that it didn't even occur to us to put the sights in the box for the inspection.

Oboznenko and I followed on Avalov's heels. Shapilovski had stayed in his quarters, saying that he was sick. So, the box was empty.

"Where are the sights?" Avalov asked me.

"In the gun-layer's chest pocket, sir," I replied.

"What?!" he turned to Oboznenko. "Are you aware of this?"

"That's right, sir."

"And the sights for the other guns are also in the gunners' pockets?"

"That's right, sir. We do this because experience has shown ..."



"I don't want to see a battery like this !!!" shouted the prince, who waved his hand, turned and left with quick steps.

Confused, Oboznenko and I looked at each other. How could we forget to put the damned sights in the viewing box? Everything would have been all right, but now it's a scandal.

"What do we do?" said Oboznenko. "We have no choice but to go to the quarters ... To the horses ... Mount ... Battery at a walk, ma-rch."

And the battery left. I was ahead of the lead gun, while Oboznenko went at the back. Suddenly I saw Avalov. In his rage, he had taken the wrong path and was now buried in the snow. I gave the regulation orders.

"Battery, atten-hutt! Left face! Officers!" and I saluted.

Avalov, who had apparently changed his mind, ordered me to stop the battery.

I raised my hand (everything had to be done according to the regulations).

"Battery, Halt!"

A delighted Oboznenko appeared. Avalov began to give orders and made the battery do all sorts of manoeuvres. They were made awkward by the deep snow and trees. But there was an artillery officer in front of each gun, and therefore we performed them satisfactorily. Avalov, apparently, was satisfied. The inspection ended, and we were ordered to go to our quarters. Avalov talked to Oboznenko. The battery passed them by. They called me over. Avalov smiled.

"You, lieutenant, have a wonderful team. Especially the base pair. Powerful and lightweight. It is very difficult to combine these two qualities. That is why horses for horse artillery are the most difficult to find. Your harness is almost perfect."

I blushed with pleasure. Avalov was an expert on horses. And after the 'sights in the chest pocket', such a compliment was helpful. Avalov himself had a very unfavourable opinion of me. As if I was ruining the battery. But because my horses were good he forgave me a lot of that. Oboznenko probably also put in a good word for me.

It was strange that he didn't mention our lack of caissons. Had he recognised the benefits of our innovation?

Avalov didn't like our battery and didn't try to hide it. And since I was leading my gun, that is, leading the whole battery, he remembered me and often scolded me. It is easier to lambaste the lieutenant than the colonel, and so he got into the habit of scolding me.

"There is no discipline in your battery. You look more like a merry gang of Makhnovists than a horse battery. Fraternisation has replaced discipline."

But Avalov was an excellent officer. He couldn't help but know of our good work at the front and the fact that the cavalry commanders appreciated us. We were the second oldest horse battery, after the horse-mountain battery, which had the same disorder, or rather had its own special ways .

And the sights remained with the gun-layers.

At the Front

We were sent to the front not as a separate battery as previously, but as a *division* with the newly reformed 8th Horse Battery. This was the first time I had seen the 8th Battery. We went from Bryukhovetskaya to Bataysk. From there we would naturally work once more with the horse-mountain battery. That is, we had been grouped with the 8th only to deliver both batteries to the front. Colonel Sapegin of the 8th Battery commanded the *division* as he was the senior officer. Not wishing to serve under him, Shapilovski said that he was sick. Our battery was led by Oboznenko.

I was sent to find quarters in the village of Umanskaya. With a few soldiers, we trotted ahead of the battery. I naturally chose the best houses for our battery, while I placed the 8th on the other side of the square. I sent a soldier to meet the *division*, ordered a samovar, took off my boots and put on shoes.



The batteries arrived soon afterwards. Out of curiosity I went to look at the 8th. I put on my cap, my overcoat across my shoulders and still in my shoes I went out into the huge square.

Sapegin and Oboznenko were lining up the guns in the park. I stopped at a distance. Suddenly I saw Sapegin heading towards me, with Oboznenko following. Sapegin stopped his horse in front of me and saluted.

“Report.”

We had never seen the like. Nevertheless, I pulled myself to attention and, in spite of my shoes and overcoat on my shoulders, I saluted and reported:

“Colonel, sir, lodgings in the village of Umanskaya have been selected for the combined horse-artillery *divizion*.”

Then I fell silent, not knowing what else to add. Sapegin, apparently, was waiting for more, because he was still saluting. From behind his back, Oboznenko was silently signalling me with eyes and lips to do something. I was silent.

Seeing that this couldn't continue, Sapegin asked, “How many men are in your battery?”

I didn't know, but I answered without hesitation, “Sixty-two, Colonel, sir.”

“And horses?”

You won't catch me out here, I thought, there are horses in the teams that don't have riders, so there would always be more horses than riders. There was no time to calculate.

I confidently blurted out, “Seventy-three, Colonel.”

I saw Oboznenko breathe a sigh of relief, which means I was right. Sapegin turned to him.

“That is correct?”

“Correct, Colonel, sir,” Oboznenko confirmed without hesitation.

“I see that you aren't used to reports,” Sapegin said calmly. “But I demand it. Goodbye.” And he left without haste.

We restrained our laughter until we had entered a house, and then it burst out. Our officers had listened to my report from a distance. None of us knew the number of men or horses. But each of us could name every man and all the horses.

“Nevertheless, go count the men and horses,” Oboznenko told me.

I went out on the porch for a while, looking around, then re-entered formally, stood at attention and announced, “Colonel, the count of people and horses has been done. The 2nd General Drozdovski Horse Battery currently has 62 soldiers and 73 horses.”

Everyone burst out laughing and Oboznenko most of all. But since he was a very conscientious person, he went and counted himself. Others thought it was unnecessary. The numbers changed all the time anyway.

“You know,” Oboznenko told me later, “you were out by only two men and one horse.”

The next morning, we saw with horror that that the other battery had placed a sentry in the gun park, which we never did.

The 8th battery was taking their roll. And we didn't even have lists. Sapegin pretended not to notice the absence of any roll call. During the march, he counted our horses and, apparently, was pleased. He probably decided that he had made a mistake himself about the one horse.

Of course, we didn't have any caissons. But the 8th didn't have them either. Thus must have taken count of our experience and found out that, after all, it wasn't a bad idea.

I must say that Colonel Sapegin was an excellent and energetic officer. It was only thanks to him that we got on the steamer in Novorossiysk. This was January 1920. It was bitterly cold, with little snow.



Combats around Rostov

We returned to the front at Bataysk and joined the horse-mountain battery. In our absence, the fighting hadn't stopped, and with our arrival we took an active part in them. The Reds still hadn't managed to cross the Don, despite their superiority of forces, the high bank and the fact that the Don was frozen and didn't represent an obstacle.

The hero of these numerous battles can safely be said to be Colonel Kuzmin, at the head of the 1st Officer Cavalry Regiment. Each time he leapt to attack, broke the front, taking prisoners and guns. He was unusually lucky, with a great deal of success and few losses. People loved him. But the other regiments and batteries were also operating with aplomb.

On the night of 8 February 1920 the Kornilov infantry occupied the village of Gnilovskaya by surprise, which allowed them to flank Rostov and occupy the city. Our cavalry corps was brought up to Rostov and stationed there. But in the east, on the Manych front, the Don Hosts were unable to stop Budenny's mass of cavalry, which tried to surround the whole Volunteer Army near Rostov with a wide sweep to our rear. The defences on the Manych were designed for the summer, and the ice-bound waters and swamps made the fortifications ineffective. And the Don Cossacks weren't the same as they had been. So deep in the night, in freezing cold – everything creaked all around – our cavalry was taken out of Rostov to move to Bataysk and then to march towards Budenny at Salsk. We left Rostov without combat and without pressure from the Reds.

Our Meeting with Budenny

During our two days on the march to Mechetinskaya it became much warmer. The snow had melted, it was almost pleasant. There was no rain, although there were fogs. The Salsk steppes, where we were, is a hilly area without trees. The Don stud farms are there and the Kalmyks live on it.

To counteract Budenny's coverage of our rear, we concentrated all our cavalry at the village of Mechetinskaya. Our forces consisted of a regular cavalry corps under the command of General Barbovich, about 5,000 sabres with five horse batteries, and in excellent condition.

But the mass of our cavalry was made up of the Cossacks from the Don and Kuban. They were in bad shape. The Don units were demoralised by the loss of their territory and were incapable of fighting. They had lost discipline, with men discarding lances and rifles so that they couldn't be sent into battle. They weren't hostile to the Volunteer Army, albeit that they obeyed orders only reluctantly. Across the whole army there were probably from 4,000 to 5,000 sabres.

The Kuban units behaved quite differently. They were united, collecting the rifles thrown by the Donets. Each rider had two, sometimes three, rifles over their shoulders. But they were definitely hostile to us. They didn't want to fight the Reds. During further campaigns, we were advised to follow them along the roads. There seemed to be no open clashes, but somewhere on the Kuban River, the Cossacks drove all the boats to the other side and deliberately doomed the 4th Battalion of the Kornilov Regiment to death. Not far from Ekaterinodar, at a meeting of the Kuban and Don Hosts, it was decided to no longer follow General Denikin, to not go to the Crimea, to not retreat to Taman, but to go to Georgia instead. And later the Cossacks cried that the Russian units had left them in Novorossiysk.

Of course, not all Don and Kuban men succumbed to the Red propaganda – there were those who stayed with the Volunteers. Many Kubans believed that the Reds would recognise their independent state as soon as they broke with the Volunteer Army. There were about the same number of Kubans as the Donets, that is, from 4,000 to 5,000 sabres.

There were also some Terek Cossacks, slightly better preserved, under the command of our friend, General Agoev. But there were only a few of them, between 2,000 and 2,500. There were Kalmyks who were quite loyal to us, but they were only 500 to 600 sabres. In total, from 15,000 to 18,000 sabres were amassed by our side. It would have been a formidable force if the Cossacks were still motivated. We knew that our corps would have to take the whole blow.



As always with bureaucrats, everything looked good on paper. The command naively hoped that the Cossacks would still fight. We would have been better off if they had given us a regiment of *Drozdvtsi* or *Kornilovitsi* with a couple of batteries, and then we might have repelled Budenny.

Budenny had masses of cavalry. They said about a hundred thousand, but this is exaggerated. Of course, I may be mistaken, but here is what I witnessed: the Reds had, in my opinion, from 25,000 to 30,000 sabres. A very large number. But these were all new formations without good officers, and Budenny himself had only been a sergeant-major. On our side every cavalryman had already participated in a large number of battles and had excellent leaders. Our artillery was less numerous than the Reds, but the quality was much higher. We had five batteries: two Guards, our two and the 8th Horse. The 7th joined us later.

Mechetinskaya

In the village of Mechetinskaya we were lined up in its huge square. Regular cavalry on the one side, Don on the second, Kuban on the third, Tereks on the fourth. General Denikin flew in by plane and gave us a speech. But it was windy and it was hard to hear. In addition, he spoke for a long time, and soon it became tiresome and boring. Wrangel would have been better, in a Circassian coat, on a wonderful horse, giving us a few words, as at Spitseвка. That might have ignited the Cossacks. But not Denikin's small figure with a long, incomprehensible speech.

There was no need to propagandise to us, the regulars, as we were in excellent condition. The Cossacks were incapable of combat, but you couldn't make them combat-ready with a speech. On paper, there were from 15,000 to 18,000 of us, but in reality only 5,000 would do the fighting. Replacing the speech with the Kornilov regiment would have been much better value. The Cossacks needed to be sent to the rear, they were of no use, and might even cause problems. I don't know who commanded the operation at Egorlykская, probably Denikin himself, but Wrangel would have been better, as the Cossacks loved him. However Denikin didn't like Wrangel. Unfortunately, such sympathies and antipathies hurt our cause.

After the speech, the regulars went to the village of Egorlykская, but didn't enter the village, standing nearby, in movement columns. They didn't take us into the village, probably for two reasons: firstly, to be ready for battle as soon as possible, and secondly, because of distrust of the Kuban people: it is easier to attack quartered men than those in the ranks. So we stood in column all night. Fortunately, it wasn't very cold and there was no rain. The Don units remained in Mechetinskaya, but I don't know where the Kuban units were. I think in Egorlykская – I saw small Kuban units leaving the stanitsa.

Colonel Kuzmin was on patrol with his 1st Officer Regiment. Towards evening he sent a report, "Budenny is on the move. The columns are from horizon to horizon. The vanguard brigade (two regiments) occupies a farm seven km from Egorlykская."

They sent a brigade of Kalmyks, about six hundred sabres, against the Red brigade in the farm. The Kalmyks left. The shooting should have started about 20 minutes later, but there was silence, not a shot. We were perplexed: what were the Kalmyks doing?

Kalmycks

The night passed calmly. The Kalmyks appeared with the first rays of the sun. Several horsemen rode ahead, singing wildly, beating tambourines and waving several captured red flags. A shaman followed them in silence on a white horse. Behind the shaman, a rider was leading a horse by the bridle, on which it seems a commissar was tied. His face was covered in blood and he swayed in the saddle, but the ropes didn't allow him to fall. Behind him, a group of horsemen were pushing a dozen pale, frightened prisoners in front of them, dressed only in underwear. They pushed them with horses and the points of sabres. Finally the *sotnias* walked behind. Everyone screamed deafeningly and waved naked sabres, from which blood flowed. Some had planted severed heads on their bamboo lances. Each rider led one, two, and sometimes even three captured horses behind. All the saddles were loaded with goods: boots, uniforms, weapons.

It was an extraordinary and rather frightening sight.

Colonel Lukyanov nudged me with his elbow.

"Seryozha, they are Tatars!"



We involuntarily leaned back. There was some feeling of sympathy for those unfortunate prisoners.

The Kalmyks had crept up on the sly, taken out the sentries and cut through the entire Red brigade without firing a single shot. The Red Brigade no longer existed.

Neither captured *tachankas* nor carts followed the *sotnias*. I think that the Kalmyks hid them, fearing that they would be taken away.

Kalmyks are pure Mongols and in Mongolian they call themselves Oirats. They were the only ones who still had a nomadic lifestyle at the time. They formed part of the Don and Astrakhan Cossack Hosts. The Astrakhan ones had blue trousers with a yellow stripe. They were armed with bamboo lances,⁴⁰ a regulation carbine and a Don-style sabre. They sat on small, but hardy horses, using a Cossack saddle. They were dressed in dirty tight sheepskin coats, which were once white, and pointy grey lambskin hats.

The Kalmyks rarely fought against the Russians, but often kept other nomads in subjection: such as the Kazakhs and Nogais. They hated the Bolsheviks for stealing their idol of Buddha, which they said was made of pure gold.

Egorlykskaya

The battle soon began. It began with light shooting in the village itself. Obviously, a Red patrol had entered it. The Kubans left the village. Nobody pursued them, they didn't want to fight.

The regular corps was turned, and we went and occupied the top of a hill south-west of Egorlykskaya. The village remained to the left. From our hill, a long gentle descent led to the Yei stream (border of the Don and Kuban regions) and then ascended again to the southeast of us. There wasn't a single tree around.

The Reds appeared from behind that height to the southeast. It was 10 o'clock on 17 February 1920. The Red units appeared undeployed in columns, visible as dark quadrangles. I think each one was a regiment.

Our batteries were already in position, and we immediately broke up the first Red squares to appear. The distance was three kilometres and the effect of the shrapnel was quite noticeable. Those scattered were replaced by new squares from behind the hill, which suffered approximately the same fate. Finally, the Red horse batteries appeared, and we switched to dealing exclusively with them. This is a rule of battle: first neutralise the enemy's artillery, and then help your cavalry.

It seems to me that we succeeded in the first of our tasks – to silence (or almost) the Red artillery. We had to act quickly to break the Red batteries before they could shell ours. The entire hillside was now covered with dark squares — regiments and batteries. Too many targets presented themselves. We fired tirelessly. Many of the Red batteries were destroyed, they didn't even have time to unlimber them; apparently they had little experience in open field warfare.

I think we managed to crush the Red artillery, because the lively fire from the Red batteries at the beginning of the battle began to weaken and became much more isolated by the end. By the time we were convinced that the Red artillery was almost finished, the horse battle was in full swing in the valley by the stream. It was difficult to distinguish which side units were on. It was impossible to shoot there – you might well be shelling your own side. So we directed fire at the Red reserves, which were halfway up the slope and still in column, that is, undeployed. The Reds suffered heavy losses from our fire. It seems that these reserves never entered the battle due to their heavy losses.

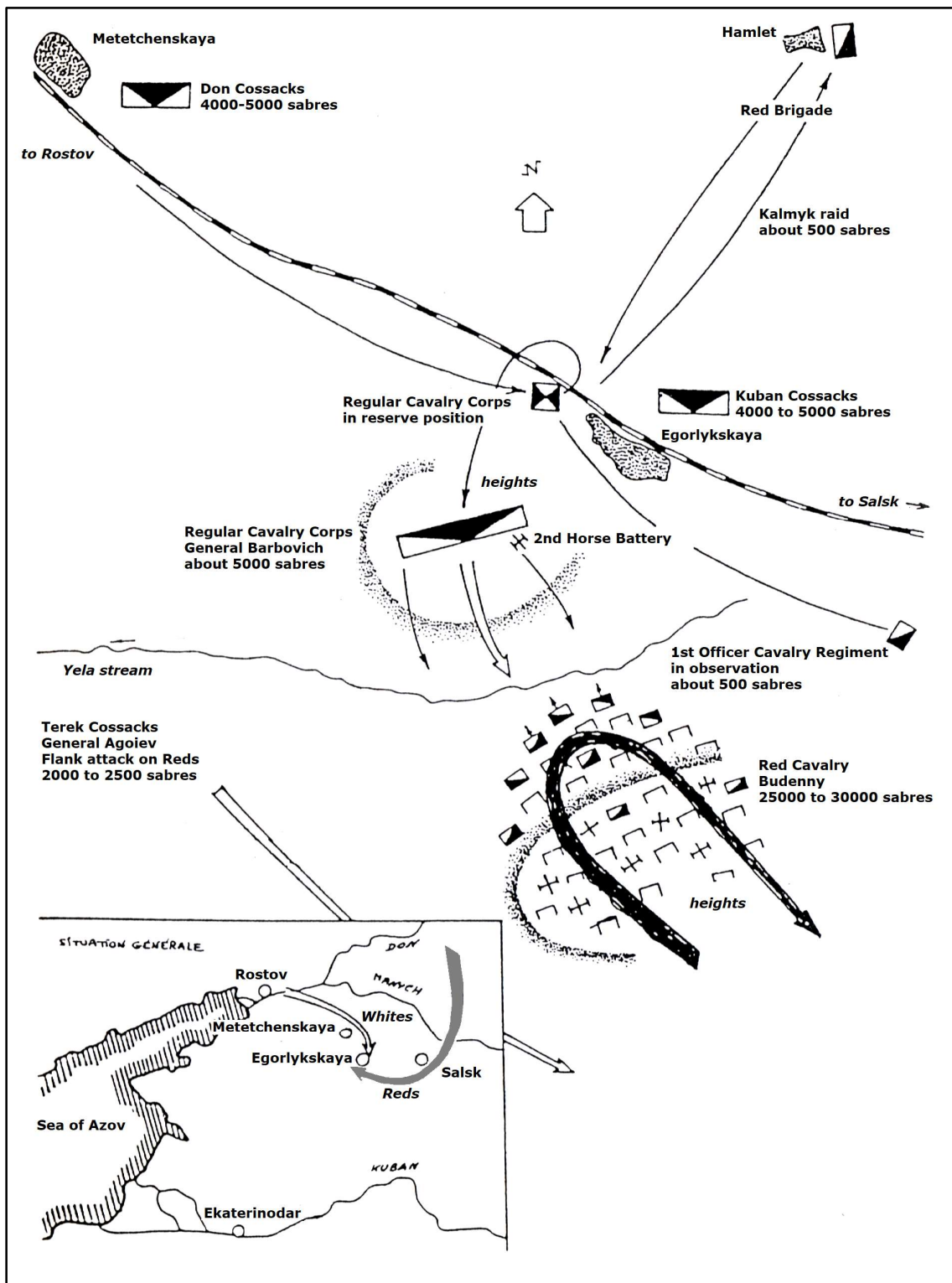
Everyone felt that the Red command was at a loss. It had no experience in manoeuvring large masses of cavalry. It didn't try to out-flank us, despite its enormous numerical superiority, it didn't even try to widen the front. They were like sheep herded in one direction, and in dense ranks too, which greatly increased their losses.

Budenny was used to easy successes. As a rule, when his masses of cavalry appeared, everyone fled and he only had to pursue. He hadn't expected resistance and, being caught out by it, was confused and unable to change the battle plan. Indeed, he probably never had a plan. He was a sergeant-major. I must say that our plan was also disrupted by the absence of the Cossacks from the battle. With their participation it would

⁴⁰ Of English origin. Russian lances were metal.



have been a complete defeat of Budenny. A blow from the Kuban to the right flank of the Reds, once we had smashed their reserves, would have been a decisive turning point. And a raid by the Don on Salsk, where the Reds' carts were located, would have sowed panic. But the Cossacks didn't move and thereby saved Budenny from defeat.



Eh, if the *Drozdovtzi* or the *Kornilovtzi* had been here, everything would have turned out differently. Our corps alone couldn't destroy an enemy seven times larger than us. It was already fighting as valiantly as it could.

While the Red command was weak, their soldiers fought well. There were counter-charges, which happens very rarely. Usually at the last second one of the opponents declines to engage.



In the evening, the Terek Cossack Cavalry Division, under the command of General Agoev, took the left flank of the Reds and forced them to retreat. It was just a manoeuvre. The Reds didn't fire at the *Tertsy* nor the *Tertsy* at the Reds. Still it helped our cause.

I think that Budenny, heading to Egorlykская, was aware of the success of Red propaganda among the Cossacks and was counting on an easy success. And then he stumbled upon our corps and received an energetic rebuff, so he was at a loss. The Reds retreated, and the battlefield remained in our hands. But while a success for us, we hadn't destroyed the Red cavalry, which we knew. The Reds had suffered heavy losses, but they would regroup and once again threaten us with attacks to our rear.

Of course, we had also suffered losses, but the corps remained fully operational, and the next day we again moved out to face the Reds, but Budenny didn't appear. The heavy losses must have put his Horse Army temporarily out of action.

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The fate of the Kuban territory was decided. Our army began to withdraw to Novorossiysk in order to move to the Crimea, where the struggle was to continue. The goal was to save the Volunteer Army. It would have been madness to use it to defend the Kuban when the Cossacks themselves didn't want to defend it. Frankly, at Egorlykская, the Cossacks betrayed us. We continued to fight rear-guard battles in order to delay the Red advance and give our rear services time to evacuate.

I believe that the battle at Egorlykская was the last big cavalry battle in history. I'm proud that I got to participate in it.

I will be precise. There were two more battles with a large number of cavalry: one in which Zhloba's cavalry group was destroyed, in the Taurida, and another across the Dnieper near Nikopol. But infantry also participated in these two battles, whereas at Egorlykская there was only cavalry and horse artillery.

There were also smaller entirely cavalry battles in the Kuban during the landing in August 1920, near Olginskaya, and two battles in October in the Taurida, southwest of Serogoz and near Rozhdestvenskaya. But those battles had only a cavalry division on both sides.

Here is a curious detail in the history of the cavalry. Despite the countless number of cavalry charges in history, a direct collision of two units is extremely rare: normally one of the units turns aside at the last moment. There was such a violent collision near Egorlykская, the units got intermingled and it was difficult to separate who was on which side.

A classic meeting and collision of two corps took place in 1805 near Austerlitz. There the French cuirassiers met the Russian Guards. Neither retreated, and after the attack there were only a few dozen horsemen from both corps. The White army at Egorlykская contained representatives of the same Russian units.

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The battle at Egorlykская was special, not like the others. Individual feeling disappeared almost completely, giving way to collective feeling. The fight was unusually fierce. That whole part of the steppe was covered with dark squares – regiments and batteries. There was no room to spread out the mass of cavalry. Movements were made by regiments – and even divisions – rather than by squadrons. It seemed like it was a battle of previous times.

All the batteries, both ours and the Reds, were in open positions, that is, they were visible to the enemy. Our battery was on the left flank. One of the Red batteries fired at us. A volley directed at us flew 50 metres past us and exploded in the ranks of the 12th Composite Regiment as they were passing behind us. One rider flew high into the air, spinning like a top. People and horses fell. But the regiment didn't flinch and continued to march, leaving the wounded and killed in the care of the orderlies following the regiment.

The regiment commander, Colonel Psel, turned in the saddle and commanded in an even voice, "Close ranks!"

And the regiment carried on as if nothing had happened.



We in the batteries, ducked our heads, expecting that the next volley would be right on top of us. But it never appeared. It turns out that the horse-mountain battery came to our rescue again. It had noticed the enemy battery firing at us, and silenced it.

I saw a horseman flying ten metres into the air like that again in the Taurida, near Serogozy. This obviously happens when the projectile explodes when hitting the horse's body.

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Then the terrible retreat began through the clinging Kuban mud to Novorossiysk. At Egorlykская, there had been no losses at all in our two batteries. I don't think the other batteries had them either.

Our corps could withstand a blow from the much greater number of Budenny's cavalry because of the skill of our commanders, the experience of the men and the superiority of the artillery. The Reds only had numbers, and that turned out to be insufficient for them.



Chapter 15 – Across the Kuban

Withdrawal

After the battle at Egorlykская, it turned out that we couldn't defend the Kuban region and the Volunteer Army withdrew to Novorossiysk to cross to the Crimea, where the struggle would continue.

We were prompted to leave the Kuban by the mood of the Cossacks. The Dons were demoralized and had lost their combat capability. The Kubans were clearly hostile to us, they didn't want to fight the Reds and wouldn't carry out the orders of the commander-in-chief, General Denikin. Both the Dons and the Kubans said that they didn't want to go to the Crimea. Actually, they didn't know what they wanted. They held meetings, and influenced by the failures they succumbed to Bolshevik propaganda and promises.

General Denikin ordered the Cossacks to withdraw to Taman, from where they, along with their horses and property, could be easily transported to Kerch. The Cossacks didn't go to Taman, instead some went to Georgia, and some to Novorossiysk, where they disorganised the transport and filled the quays. Now they suddenly wanted to go to the Crimea. Georgia extradited the Cossacks to the Bolsheviks. General Wrangel managed to wrangle several thousand of the Cossacks from Georgia by force, but the vast majority were taken by the Reds. The officers were shot, and the Cossacks were sent against the Poles. Of course, there was no talk of any autonomy.

During the marches, stretched along the roads you would see the Don Cossacks in single file or small groups, with no organisation at all, without rifles or lances. The rifles and lances were instead abandoned by the road, so that they couldn't be sent into battle.

There was a traffic jam on one bridge. The foot of a Don colonel's horse fell through, blocking it. The Dons rode around the horse and moved on, and the colonel didn't dare to order them to help pull the horse out. The commander of our battery, Captain Nikitin, having learned of the cause, was outraged. He grabbed a sword and forced several Cossacks to get off and pull the horse out. The Colonel thanked him with tears in his eyes. Another time, near Novo-Korsunskaya, a large Kuban regiment, in formation, refused to engage in battle with the Reds crossing the river and left. On each Cossack's back there were two, and some had three rifles – those that the Dons had thrown away.

It is clear that not all Cossacks held meetings. But the sensible ones were a minority. In the Crimea we had both Dons and Kuban units which fought well. We had Kuban Cossacks with our gun untouched by the propaganda. They were Cossacks of the Line, which I preferred to the Black Sea ones, as they are calmer and more efficient.

The Execution

Red propaganda also reached into our battery. Men began to desert at night, taking their horses with them. Losing the men didn't particularly bother us, as they were mostly unreliable, recent prisoners. It wasn't hard to replace them. But the horse and saddle were very unpleasant losses. We waited for the opportunity to restore discipline. Such an opportunity presented itself.

One day, a soldier who had served in the battery for a long time appeared and reported that a recent prisoner of war was conducting Red propaganda.

"This is a great opportunity to restore discipline," Colonel Shapilovski said. "Captain Kosovich, aren't you a lawyer?"

"Indeed, Colonel."

"I appoint you president of the military court. The members are Lieutenant Maltsev and Second Lieutenant Mamontov. Lieutenant Maltsev is to immediately arrest the accused."

That's how I got onto a military court, which I had always feared. It turned out during the questioning that it followed a quarrel after a card came, but the accused didn't deny making the propaganda. I don't remember his name. The trial was swift.

The other two members voted for death. I was silent in confusion.



Seeing this, Kosovich said to me, “Of course, I understand your position, it’s hard to sign a death sentence. It’s about a human life. But we can only shoot him if all three of us agree. On the other hand, you have to realise that by sentencing him to death, you are saving the battery. Think carefully.”

I signed, and the unfortunate man was shot. I noted two strange things. The soldiers assigned to shoot him did so with delight. I wasn’t present, but Maltsev told me. And then I felt no remorse. The desertions stopped.

The Battery Commanders

The Kuban was our main base, especially the city of Ekaterinodar. It is clear that many officers had families, wives or relatives in Ekaterinodar and they began to ask for leave to evacuate them.

At Egorlykская there were a lot of officers in the battery, but almost all of them left for Ekaterinodar at Sosyka railway station. The trio remained once again: Skorniyakov, Kazitski and me. And Pogodin with the machine gunners. We had no-one to save, and we believed that it was much safer to be in the battery when retreating than alone in a strange city. Skorniyakov fell ill with typhus. We had neither a doctor nor a veterinarian, and I made the diagnosis. Skorniyakov asked not to be sent to the rear – where would he find an infirmary during a general retreat? – but to be put on one of the battery’s wagons. So he was at least sure that he wouldn’t be abandoned.

To replace Skorniyakov, Kolzakov sent us Lieutenant Abramov as commander. But Abramov arrived already unwell and immediately collapsed. I diagnosed typhus and we put him on the same wagon as Skorniyakov.

Then Kolzakov sent us Captain Nikitin, a good and energetic officer from the horse-mountain battery. But he also didn’t stay with us very long.

~ ~ ~

I remember a tedious battle at the village of Ekaterinovskaya. I remember it because I was at position number two on the gun, opening and closing the breach, that is, in a soldier’s position. After a shot the breach of the gun stuck halfway open, which I reported to Oboznenko. He ordered us to stop firing our gun, and the technician corrected it. Commands were being transmitted by phone, and we were firing heavily from a hidden position, that is, we didn’t conserve ammunition.

From that we can conclude that there were a lot of officers in the battery – I was at a soldier’s post – and we weren’t retreating in a hurry – a phone line had been set up and shells weren’t being saved – and there was a technician.

Then we went through Sosyka and most of the officers, as I said, left us. In action at the village of Baturinskaya, we were commanded by Nikitin, being our third commander. We were economising on ammunition, but were still using a phone, so we weren’t in a hurry yet at that time. We withdrew slowly, delaying the enemy.

It was March 1920. The spring thaw began. Well, in late March and early April the black earth of the Kuban turns into glue. It’s impossible to cross a street without leaving a boot in the mud. Roads traveled by retreating units and refugees turned into a sucking quagmires. Guns and wagons got stuck, horses fell down from exhaustion. We had to pull out the wagons by hand every now and then, and pick up the fallen horses. During that march I became an expert in picking up fallen horses. I don’t remember how many I lifted, but it was a large number. Marches became a punishment. In a day of constant marching, with no rest at night and with only a pair of two-hour stops to feed the horses, giving it all we had, the battery would make twenty, sometimes to twenty-four, kilometres. Our train was lengthened by wagons with the sick and wounded, which slowed us down a lot. There was always a wagon getting stuck somewhere. Everyone was so tired that when they stopped, they immediately fell asleep – men and horses. The Reds following us were in the same conditions and couldn’t catch us up. Only the dirt separated us.

Baturinskaya

Strictly speaking, there was no real battle in Baturinskaya. That village, near Bryukhovetskaya, is divided by the Beysug River into two. In each part there is a church and a bell tower. We crossed into the southern part of the village and destroyed the bridge. Our observation post was in the bell tower, and there were



officers on duty. At noon, we changed them. We were commanded by Captain Nikitin. I was sent to the bell tower, and he stayed with the guns below. The guns were hidden by trees near the church itself.⁴¹ Nikitin had warned me that we wouldn't shoot because we had discovered we were short on shells. A telephone was taken up the tower, there were two telephone soldiers from the division and magnificent Zeiss binocular range-finder.

I was surprised that the officers of the horse-mountain battery hadn't camouflaged the observation post at all. I immediately closed the shutters, then took out a thin plank from them. We could observe through the resulting gap while remaining unseen.

Across the river, some 400 metres⁴² away, stood another bell tower. I predicted that the Red commanders would climb it to inspect the area. I told Nikitin about it on the phone, and he agreed with me. We carefully pointed the gun at the bell tower and even decided to send a couple of shots to range it.

Soon the Red infantry appeared from behind a height and began to descend into the village. I asked Nikitin for permission to shoot – the Reds were marching tightly packed and there were a lot of them.

"We are short on shells," Nikitin told me by phone. "We can only shoot at a battery or at a group of officers."

"I don't see any guns or groups of officers, but I do see compact masses of infantry. It would be possible to rout them before they can deploy into chains."

"I can't help. I received an order from Prince Avalov."

"If we don't shoot, how will we win the war?"

"Winning is out of the question. We've already lost it."

After this disappointing conversation, I had no choice but to watch the Red Infantry enter the other part of the village. As I expected, a Red soldier climbed the nearby bell tower. I could see him easily. There were no shutters on that bell tower. The soldier descended, but climbed the bell tower again, accompanied by several others. They examined the village with binoculars, passing by our bell tower but to my delight not lingering on it – so not attaching it any importance – and unfolded a map. I watched them closely. Of course, these were the leaders.

"To your guns! Two rounds ... fire!"

The bell tower was covered well by the shrapnel. I couldn't see if there were any injuries, but the observers ran down.

In response, an unseen Red battery searched for our guns, scattering shells all over the village. Then everything calmed down.

The Red observer cautiously climbed the bell tower again. He leant over and shouted something down. Others climbed. I waited for more of them to gather and opened fire again, with the same result.

A soldier-telephone operator handed me the phone.

"General Prince Avalov demands you to the phone."

"Lieutenant, I gave the order to save shells. Why are you shooting?"

"At a group of observing officers, Your Excellency."

"I'll come see."

"As you command, Your Excellency."

⁴¹ Russian churches usually have bell towers that are separate from the church building itself, hence the reference here.

⁴² The French version has 200 metres, whereas the Russian has 200 sazhen, or 425 metres. The modern river has been dammed and there are no churches, so we can't tell from that. I suspect the French translation merely forgot to convert from sazhen.



He was in a bad mood. Climbing the staircase to the bell tower made it worse.

“Where are your observers? I don’t see anything.”

“Wait a bit, Your Excellency. They’ll get back together.”

We had to wait for quite a long time, and Avalov took advantage of the time to reprimand me. The soldier observing interrupted him.

“Another one is climbing the bell tower.”

“Avalov himself looked through the range-finder.”

“Here’s a second, and a third is climbing ... What do you think, Lieutenant? Shoot?”

“I suggest waiting a bit, for more of them to gather.”

Avalov got carried away and gave the order to shoot several rounds. The division commander, General Kolzakov, became worried and called me on the phone.

“What are you doing there, Mamontov? You were told not to shoot.”

“It’s not me shooting. It is Prince Avalov.”

This latter, who could hear our conversation, coughed embarrassedly.

“Of course, we need to save shells. But it’s hard to resist when you have such a target in front of you.”

He came down from the bell tower. I didn’t shoot anymore.

On the same day, the horse-mountain battery hid a gun in front of the destroyed bridge. When the Reds began to repair it and were gathered on it in large numbers, it fired cannister at them. And then taking advantage of the general confusion, retired the gun.

Novo-Korsunskaya

At 10:00 we heard gunshots. Nikitin ordered us to saddle up, to limber up, and the battery left the village of Novo-Korsunskaya and headed south. Captain Aglaimov, a blond Tatar in the Akhtyr hussars, galloped towards us. He wore a spectacular peacetime uniform and a golden crescent earring in his left ear. He sat on a raven-black horse.

“Captain Nikitin,” he shouted. “There, to the left, the Red cavalry is crossing the river. Hold them until I bring my hussars... To the right, you can see some Kuban Cossacks heading away – they refused to fight the Reds.”

“Oh, bastards,” Nikitin said in their direction. “Okay, Captain, I’ll go to the river.”

Nikitin took my gun and Kazitski’s gun. The other two and the wagons were sent under Pogodin to behind some large haystacks, where they were told to wait.

We saw two or three squadrons of Red cavalry crossing the river. Many were already in it, and a few riders were even on our side. Our low shrapnel bursts caused them to panic. They began to rush aimlessly along the other side. Those who were on our bank threw themselves back into the water. Nikitin chased them with enthusiasm. But from the hills on the other side, two shells flew in, luckily too short. Then two overshoots.

“Captain Nikitin, we need to leave,” I shouted to him.

“In a second, just one more salvo.”

He was infatuated, and I thought we were already late in withdrawing— the Reds had already straddled us. Two shrapnel burst almost on top of the battery. Then Nikitin gave the order to withdraw.

“Let’s separate to reduce losses.”

The soldiers attached the gun. I walked over to the gun shield and tilted my head, pretending to help the gunners. At that moment, shrapnel drummed across the shield of the cannon. Sadyuk (a gun layer) screamed, wounded in the leg. I sat him down on the gun and, to avoid panic, ordered us to leave at a walk,



holding the bridles. We went to the left, Kazitski's gun to the right. A few more shrapnel burst around us, but we had no losses. We headed for the haystacks.

Behind the stack I found the two guns and the wagons in complete panic. The Reds had fired several shells their way, and quite a few were wounded. Pogodin had abandoned everyone and fled. I began to put things in order, swearing and getting the men to work. With the help of the wagon crews we began to set upright a cart of shells that had over-turned. We got it up, and then I remembered Sadyuk's wound and took a few steps towards my gun. Just then several HE shells exploded around me. This time the Red battery had our range. There were dead and wounded, both men and horses. All those who had righted the cart with me were killed. Those few steps I had taken saved my life. My beautiful two front pair of horses were dead, and Temerchenko lay next to them. Baibarak and Yudin were lightly wounded, as were their two pairs of horses. I was approached by Timoshenko, a soldier from the third gun, a robber and a rapist. He opened his dark green half-coat and showed the wound: a splinter had hit him. Sobbing, he climbed onto his horse and galloped away – I never saw him again.

It seemed that all the men and horses were injured except for me and Dura. There was a boy from the wagon train standing at the stack.

"What are you doing? Get to work!"

In place of answering, he raised his head. There was blood staining his neck. Lord! Literally everyone is wounded and I wasn't thinking straight.

As it turned out, there were indeed a lot of wounded men, but most of the wounds were light. The boy's skin had been torn. It was the same with the horses. Dura was safe.

At this point, Kazitski appeared. His appearance gave me strength and energy. Without asking too many useless questions, we began to work: detaching the dead horses, harnessing the lightly wounded, putting the seriously wounded onto the wagons, getting the lightly wounded to drive the wagons, after some stern words first to build up their courage. Fortunately, the Red battery has stopped firing.

I approached Temerchenko. He lay still on the ground, lightly tapping with his whip.

"You are wounded?"

"Leave me, Lieutenant. I'm done for. Get away! The Reds might be coming."

"Nonsense. I'll put you on that wagon."

I picked him up and almost let go again. He was a sack of broken bones. Blood ran in trickles. He didn't let out a single moan. I put him on a wagon of empty shell casings on which he probably suffered terribly from the bouncing. I wondered if it might be better to leave him to die peacefully on the ground. But you can't leave a man. In such cases what is the best solution? He probably died soon after. I've often thought about him, and still do. What kept him with us? Gratitude for Bakhmach or was it true what I heard at the barn? The complexity of the human soul.

Finally, Kazitski and I put everything in relative order. I sent all the guns and wagons separately in different directions so that the Red battery wouldn't pursue them, and told them all to gather at a mill on small hill two miles to the south. Then Kazitski and I, with Bondarenko holding our horses, remained at the haystacks to see if the Red battery shot at the guns – in which case we would come to their aid. But it went well, with the Reds not opening fire.

Only then did Kazitski tell me, "Captain Nikitin had his leg blown off by a shell. I evacuated him. You take the battery."

I inspected the scene again. What had we forgotten? On a broken wagon there were two corpses on top of cases of shells. Straight after the shelling, thinking they were resting, and I wanted to push them. But then I noticed that their skulls were caved in. They were left that way. We should have taken the shells and maybe the collar from the dead horse. But there were no men or wagons to do that. What's the point of a collar when you don't even know if the battery is intact.



“Well shot, pricks!” They were naturally under the command of a traitorous officer. “I hope that the Bolsheviks torture you to death in the Lubyanka. Scum!”

Later Aleksandrov said that the 7th Horse Battery had passed by the haystacks after us and saw that terrible picture: corpses sitting upright, dead horses, destroyed equipment, with blood and shell craters everywhere. Nevertheless, they did take the shells.

Reconstituting the Battery

At the mill, behind the hill, I found the remnants of what an hour ago had been one of the best batteries in the army.

Kazitski and I jumped off our horses and began, there and then, to put together a battery. Creating a new one from the remains of the old one. We began to unharness and then reharness, then swap soldiers and horses around. Eventually we put together a three-gun battery. The fourth gun lacked both healthy men and horses, we harnessed it with wounded horses, and put wounded riders on them, took out the shells to make it lighter and then sent it to the rear with the wagons. I went to inspect the wounded people and especially the horses. After all, our ability to retreat through the Kuban mud depended on their condition.

We had no doctor, no nurse, no veterinarian. But soldiers and Cossacks love their horses and will do everything in their power to care for them. It was with some relief that I found that my first pair were only slightly wounded. Yudin, himself wounded in the shoulder, was treating them by urinating on their wounds.

“Yudin, you are wounded. Do you want to evacuate?”

“No, I’m staying. I can’t leave my pair. Who will take care of them? No. My wound is minor. I will stay.”

Baibarak also decided to stay.

The Cossacks of my gun, among them wounded, replied, “We’re not going anywhere. We’ll stay with the battery to the end.”

It wasn’t for nothing that I started with the men of my gun. Following their example, all the lightly wounded of the other guns also decided to stay. I was satisfied. The battery still held together and even held tight. I approached the wagon where Skornyakov and Abramov were lying. Abramov was delusional, but while Skornyakov was weak he was functional. I told him what had happened and reassured him that the battery was intact.

Pogodin

While Kazitski and I were working tirelessly to reconstitute the battery, a *tachanka* soldier ran up.

“Captain Pogodin demands you, Lieutenant,” he told me.

“Tell him to go to Hell!”

“Prince Avalov is with him.”

“I can’t now, I’ll come when I’m free.”

That’s all we need! We knew that there would be no assistance from Avalov, only reproaches. Who told him? Probably that bum, Pogodin.

I walked the newly created three-gun battery to a recess behind a *kurgan*. It was a good semi-hidden position. The teams and horse holders were taken to a more hidden position lower down the mound.

The 7th Battery wanted to set up beside us, but two shells immediately flew in, and it quickly withdrew. The Reds didn’t bother us, despite the fact that we were very close to the 7th, but in the dip. They obviously couldn’t see us. After making sure that the battery was positioned well, Kazitski and I went to Avalov, who was talking to Pogodin down below the *kurgan*. I walked over, stood at attention, saluted, and started giving my report.

“Your Excellency, the 2nd General Drozdovski ...”



Avalov didn't let me finish. He lashed out at me furiously, "Lieutenant, you have no upbringing. You are interrupting me while I'm talking to your commander."

I even opened my mouth in amazement: Pogodin, our boss?! That's new. Avalov turned to Pogodin, pretending that I no longer existed.

"So, Captain, the 2nd Battery effectively no longer exists?"

But I interrupted it again, decisively. "The 2nd Battery is in position, Your Excellency, and it is ready for battle."

This time it was Avalov's turn to open his mouth speechlessly. He looked at me in surprise for a while.

"Where is the battery?"

"At the top of the height."

"I'll go take a look."

"Indeed ... I'd like to repay the Red battery that caused us our losses."

Avalov walked silently through the battery, carefully inspecting everything and left silently, without even nodding his head at me, without even saying goodbye and, of course, without thanking me for the quick restoration of the battery. He'd thought that his desire to disband us had finally come true, and that out of necessity, because of our losses. And then some random lieutenant and ensign create a new one from the broken one, within an hour even. So he, the inspector of horse artillery, had been placed in a foolish position.

We fired at the Red battery and it fell silent. Although I couldn't see anything, because it was well hidden, I was sure that my shells had fallen in its vicinity.

In the evening on the other side of the river, on the horizon, an enormous red column headed right. They were eight kilometres away.

I was approached by Colonel Psel, commander of the 12th Composite Regiment.

"Smash that column to smithereens!"

I don't like it when people who don't understand how things work interfere. But what can you do? You can't refuse. After all, it was Psel. If it had been possible, I wouldn't have waited for his order and would have opened fire myself. But this required shooting at maximum range, which is inaccurate and is bad for the gun. Shells were limited. We dug up a trench to lift the barrel to 43 degrees, and fired it twice. I didn't have binoculars and it was dark, but it seemed that the shells had fallen well. But Psel wasn't satisfied.

"I told you to smash the column completely, not snipe at it."

I didn't explain why to him, choosing to keep quiet and stop shooting. That day everyone was dissatisfied with me.

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After Avalov left, Kazitski appeared before me as red as a boiled lobster.

"Did you hear what Avalov said? Pogodin is our boss, the battery commander! I won't leave it like that. I'll go to Avalov and tell him. Why did you keep quiet? It needs to be said that he is an incompetent coward. The soldiers won't listen to him. The battery will fall apart."

"Calm down, please! I didn't say anything to Avalov, because I was stunned by the idea that Pogodin, who doesn't even command his own machine gun well, is suddenly the battery commander?! But we will arrange it in a family way, without fuss. I'll talk to Pogodin and advise him not to mix in our affairs."

"I want to be there."

"Okay. Come on."



I went to Pogodin and in a calm voice, without shouting, told him not to dream of commanding the battery. I wouldn't give him the battery. And if he did insist, I would tell the soldiers not to obey him. Kazitski confirmed this. Pogodin listened silently and then sulked at us. I don't know if he complained to Avalov. It's possible. But I know that Avalov asked Kolzakov and the sick Skornyakov about me and Pogodin. Skornyakov endorsed me. I think that Kolzakov approved of me, he knew about Pogodin.

In any case, they didn't send us a new commander and they left Kazitski and me to get on with it by ourselves, and we generally did quite well. No one entrusted me with the command of the battery, except Kazitski. I just took power into my own hands and everyone was happy with that, except Pogodin. I wasn't ambitious and I would have been be happy to give way to someone else, just not Pogodin. If they wanted the battery saved, it was imperative that Pogodin not touch it. I told the free-spirited machine gunner Villebois to fire the machine gun when necessary, without regard to Pogodin.

In taking command at such an exceptionally difficult time, I was aware that I might be taking on more than I could handle. But I considered it my duty. After all, there was no-one else. Despite the fact that all around criticised me, I still saved the battery from the Reds, from Avalov and from Pogodin.

A Quiet Escape

From Novo-Korsunskaya *stanitsa* onwards our retreat turned into a flight. But a slow one. You can't run through the Kuban mud. it grabbed the guns and wouldn't let them go. Solid mud encircled the wheels. The horses stopped thanks to the extra weight. I had to clean the wheels off every now and then, but it didn't last long. As luck would have it, the rains began and the roads turned into bogs. To lighten the wagons, we mobilised extra ones and spread out the loads. But this greatly increased the number of wagons, and each time one of the wagons got stuck. I had to go back and pull it out. As soon as it was pulled out, another got stuck, and so on endlessly.

Kazitski and I took turns with one of us in front of the battery sorting out the way, and the other at the end of the column. The one at the rear had a hard time of it — he had to pull out the stuck wagons of the train. They delayed us a lot. You had to get into the mud yourself, because only then would the soldiers also get off to unharness the fallen horse, lift it, and harness it again. Push! Pull! There was no end to it. People and horses were so overtired that they fell asleep as soon as the battery stopped. We needed to do everything ourselves, and then the soldiers reluctantly followed our example.

Pogodin sulked at us and didn't help in any way. He talked to us only when his machine gun got stuck. He wasn't even able to rescue it. He stood to the side, not getting his hands dirty and giving unsolicited advice. Killing wasn't good enough for him!

Our division entered the village of Dyadkovskaya. It was night and there was machine gun fire. Why? Reds? Kubans? We passed through the village without stopping, and moved on to spend the night in the village of Medvedkovskaya. We slept very close together to make it easier to regroup up in case of concern. On the floor of the hut laid out several sheaves of straw as a bed, then two sheaves to be pillows. We removed our sick officers from the wagons and lay them down next to us. Obviously, overwork and anxiety prevented Kazitski and me from contracting typhus.

The next day the cavalry, being lighter, left us behind. At first we moved along with the horse-mountain battery. But their guns were much lighter than ours, and it also left us behind. We marched completely alone. Kolzakov sent us a messenger who told us the name of the village where the division would spend the night. But we only managed to enter that village in the morning and see the regiments leaving. We couldn't follow them. Our horses were exhausted.

Our goal was to reach the Kuban River and cross it before the Reds could. After Medvedkovskaya we marched alone, clearly the last, behind us were probably only Reds.

Near the forge there was a heavy battery and their horses were being shod. That took time out to do that! We warned them that we were the last, but they seemed to ignore us. I admired their horses, solid Ardennais. These horses will pull out of any mud. We never saw that battery again. Did the Reds get them because of their lack of concern? We had the feeling that the Reds were out there, just over our shoulders, and only the mud separated us.



In the village of Novo-Velichkovskaya we were so exhausted that we decided to spend the night. We walked through the village passed and settled close together in the last huts. Kazitski and I went around all the horses and made sure that the girths were loosed, that the bits were taken from the mouths, that all the horses were sufficiently watered and fed. I set up a sentry, but I went to check it four times and found him asleep all four times. The tension was beyond human strength.

It bothered us that, judging by the map, there was no bridge across the Kuban where we were heading, but there was a railway. So, maybe there was still a bridge. Was it possible that Barbovich was leading us into a dead end?

Exhaustion

In the evening we came to the village of Novo-Myshastovskaya. We dragged ourselves in, after a mighty effort. The cavalry had left that morning. We decided to feed the horses properly and go all night without stopping.

Along the way, I had tried harnessing four or even five pairs of horses onto the guns. But I had to stop that and go back to the traditional three pairs. They pulled well on a straight line, but at the slightest turn of the road the middle horse fell. It would be suddenly jerked to the side but its legs were held by the mud. Riding a team is a difficult craft, and not everyone can do it. The Cossacks we had mobilised weren't capable of it, so I had to stop the experiment.

When our column stopped in the village, instead of resting, Kazitski and I started working. We had to go around all the horses, making sure for that the bits were taken from their mouths, that the girths were loosened, that there was hay. Two hours later, we needed to personally make sure that the horses had drunk and that they have received enough barley. Everything needed to be done in person, you couldn't trust anyone – they were all stupefied with fatigue. They would say "yes, sir" and then not do it. We needed to find a few new pairs to replace the weakest horses that held us up on the road. We removed the sick and wounded from the wagons, fed them, bandaged them, helped them relieve themselves if necessary. I couldn't assign the task to anyone – they wouldn't do it. It was even a bonus that all the men lay down and slept. Let them rest for a while.

Skornyakov gave me the money left over from the infamous supply officer. Buying fodder went thus.

I would turn to a gloomy Cossack and say, "I need hay and barley for the battery."

"There's no barley."

"Listen, I'm going to pay you. If you refuse, we will look for it ourselves and then we won't pay anything."

The Cossack saw that I wasn't joking and, after some hesitation, he agreed to sell me it. The Reds would take everything anyway.

I cared more about the horses than the men, because our forward progress depended on their condition. We demanded an effort from the horses that exceeded their strength. We stayed longer than two hours, but the horses were well fed and there would be no delays for a while. And after an hour or two, the feet would again begin to stick.

When the battery left, Kazitski and I hadn't rested at all. That time I was at the back. I watched the entire battery, counting the wagons and followed the last one. Night was coming quickly, it was almost dark.

I didn't notice falling asleep, and then Dura also fell asleep and stopped. I don't know how long I was out. I woke up from the silence, but it was in my room in Moscow, sitting in a leather chair. It was completely dark, someone had turned out the electricity. My mother mustn't have wanted to wake me. It's obviously very late because it's so quiet, there's no sound outside. I had to go to bed. But how nice it was to sit on that comfortable chair... I wanted to lean on the elbow pads of the chair, but there were no arms. Confused, I felt the seat. Of course, it was leather, but it wasn't a chair. What is it? What's going on with me? My groping fingers found something shaggy and warm underneath me, which stirred. I was horrified. I was afraid to move and was utterly confused. Suddenly, like lightning, consciousness returned: the war ... revolution ... civil war ... retreat ... Kuban ... Dura ...



Dura woke up too. It was a black night and silence was all around us.

Where was the battery? How long did I sleep? Did the Reds pass me by while I was sleeping? Where's the road? There wasn't a single star to navigate by, just solid black. I got off, hoping to find the road. Everywhere there was mud, more mud and only mud. Then I got back into the saddle and quietly pushed Dura. I let her lead. She headed off into the night. But I was sure she was following the battery.

After quite some time, I heard shouts in the distance as a wagon was being pulled out ahead of us. Mine or the Reds? Soon I caught up with the train as it marched. But I was afraid to call out, because I was hoping that I would recognise the voices. But as if ordered, everyone was silent. Finally I spotted a light spot in the darkness. We had a white horse in our wagon train. I moved further up the column and recognised the sound of guns on the march.

Then I dared to ask, "Shackalov, is that you?"

"Here, Lieutenant."

I breathed a sigh of relief and asked if all was going well.

Slavyanskaya

The roads were near impassable, the mud clung to us, the people and horses were completely exhausted. But the battery slowly, constantly, moved forward. Finally it started to get light.

On the left side we were approached by a unit of twelve horsemen.

"Reds, Lieutenant, sir."

"Why do you think that?"

"No lances, the rifles are held for use and the caps are different from ours."

"True, I guess you're right... Hey guys, get your rifles ready and but don't look like you are rushing. Don't shoot for nothing."

The machine gun had, of course, disappeared somewhere. I took the carbine off my back and rode down the convoy, ordering them to get ready to open fire.

The patrol approached to within two or three hundred paces and stopped, apparently not knowing what to do. I knew that my people, stupefied by fatigue, wouldn't put up much resistance. I could count on Kazitski and two or three soldiers of my gun. At best, men would dash into the fields, abandoning everything. I noticed that the rider of the third gun had already torn off his shoulder boards.

"Don't fret, keep going, they won't be able to attack us because of the mud. They come for us, and we will slowly shoot them all."

Oddly enough, the mention of mud somewhat cheered our men. Only one soldier, from the third gun, grabbed a sword with shiny eyes.

"Attack them, Lieutenant, sir!"

"You really shouldn't attack mud," I told him and smiled.

And I thought: three of us would attack – you, Kazitski and me. The others wouldn't move.

The situation was resolved by Baibarak, who always did everything at the wrong time. He suddenly began to sing! He sang badly, but loudly, and his singing was very helpful. They didn't attack the battery – people who sing aren't worried and carefree. They stood there, threw their rifles over their shoulders and left. We were easy prey, completely exhausted. But they were probably exhausted too.

~ ~ ~

In front of us the Kalmyks, fleeing the Reds, had herded countless flocks of sheep. The sheep had trampled the mud, forming as it were a kind of mattress. This flexed, but could take the weight of a gun. We took advantage of this and marched without getting stuck. The sun peeked out, and the mud seemed to have decreased. At midday we caught up with our horse-mountain battery, which had spent the night



somewhere. Our mood rose immediately, we were no longer alone. In the evening, we saw the outlines of the Caucasian mountains and with the officers of the horse-mountain battery we began to recall Lermontov's lines: "Once in front of a crowd of tribal mountains ..."

Finally, not far from the village of Slavyanskaya, we came to a main road. To think! A real road! The kingdom of mud had ended, we walk like on a floor. We moved with the column of retreating wagons. The railway bridge had been blown up, but it was still possible to pass through over it. The wagons crossed one by one. To the right of the highway was a high railway embankment. There was a battle for that. Gunfire could be heard, and occasionally Red shells would burst nearby. But no one was paying attention. Our goal was to cross the bridge, and we were nearly there. We moved forward five steps, a stop, five steps, a stop. It was good that we hadn't stayed overnight in Novo-Myshastovskaya. Tomorrow would have been too late. The Reds would occupy the bridge in the evening. We made it just at the last moment.

I was at the head of the column. I turned around and saw that I was only being followed by two pairs of horses, with their riders asleep. There was no gun and no battery behind them. I woke up the riders. A lever had unhooked, and the front pair moved on, but the entire battery stayed behind. We trotted back and found the whole column sleeping, as if in an enchanted fairy tale. We quickly woke everyone up, fixed the lever and trotted to the bridge, crossing it without any difficulty. Gosh! How happy Kazitski and I were. We had crossed the bridge before the Reds. We did what had been required of us.

We made it three kilometres more and immediately stopped for the night. Although the quarters were cramped and bad, we slept with no problems at all.

Kuban River

But in the morning we discovered that we had crossed only a channel of the Kuban River, and the main river itself was still ahead. Again we gathered the men, saddled up and the battery moved on.

Soon we reached the Kuban. There were a lot of units and wagons. Sappers were just finishing making a wonderful wide pontoon bridge.

To my great joy, Colonel Shapilovski came across from the other side of the river. We shook hands. I briefly described the condition of the battery. We went to Skorniyakov's wagon. Shapilovski left again. It didn't even occur to me to report to him. And he apparently didn't expect that from me. I was happy that a real battery commander had finally appeared and the burden of responsibility was lifted from me.

Shortly after his departure, an order was passed down the column, "2nd Battery to the bridge crossing."

We headed left, leading by the bridle. We were the first to cross the bridge that had just been completed, although many units had made it before us. I walked in front of the battery, Kazitski in the back. In the middle of the wide bridge, I saw our entire artillery staff: Avalov, Kolzakov and Shapilovski.

"Battery, at my command. Eyes left!"

Since Kazitski, the only officer, was behind the wagon, I omitted the second part of the command, which is addressed to the officers. Still saluting I continued to walk on, thinking that I should free up the bridge for the passage of the next units. But that's not what our headquarters thought, and in particular Avalov.

A message came up the column, "Lieutenant Mamontov, retrace your steps!"

I went back. Kolzakov glanced at Avalov.

"Report!"

I stood at attention, and saluted. "Your Excellency, the 2nd General Drozdovski Horse Artillery Battery arrived happily at the crossing of the Kuban River."

And then I was quiet. Once more, I didn't know the number of men and horses. I wanted to work them out, but there were wagons that complicated the calculation. I chose to remain silent. Avalov, unlike me, kept saluting. We were both silent.

Finally, seeing that there would be no continuation, he said, "Losses?"

I began to list the dead, wounded and sick (but from when?).



"I want to know how many guns, caissons and wagons you had to abandon," Avalov said with irritation.

I looked at him with bewilderment: we never had any caissons.

"Nothing was abandoned."

Avalov brushed it off, to indicate that the lieutenant was lying.

Then Shapilovski interceded, "The entire 2nd Battery has arrived, Your Excellency."

Avalov expressed obvious disbelief on his face, but Kolzakov whispered something in his ear. Then Avalov looked at me carefully and extended his hand.

"Thank you, Lieutenant. I must admire the first pair of the first gun. After such a march through the Kuban mud, the horses are in excellent condition. Where did you get them from?"

I should have answered some common formula – "thank you" or "glad you like them".

Instead I mumbled something about the horses, "I don't really know. They've been with the battery for a long time."

By now the whole battery and the wagons had passed us by and Kazitski was nearing. I caught him by the sleeve and pulled him across.

"Here, thanks to this man, the battery was saved."

Kazitski went as red as a beetroot, Avalov smiled, and we were released in peace.

Obviously other batteries, despite reports detailing the number of men, horses, guns, caissons and wagons, had had some losses even with a full complement of officers. Therefore, Avalov didn't want to believe that our battery with only two, and very young, officers made it with all their material. It is a pity that Avalov, an excellent officer, with his constant quibbles made it so that we avoided him as an enemy – knowing in advance that there would be rebukes. We never got any help from him. Is that the purpose of the artillery inspector? True, the comments flowed off us like water off a duck's back, but still ...

On the other side of the bridge, all our officers were waiting for us. To our surprise, we were given something like a standing ovation.

We were congratulated, they shook our hands, and envied us. If only they knew what a torment it had been and how happy we were to finally get rid of that unbearable responsibility!

Seeing that I was some kind of hero, I demanded, "Hay and barley for Dura. And for me, some tea and sleep, sleep and sleep."

The next morning Colonel Shapilovski called for me.

"You know, there are a lot of senior officers here, and so I can only offer you the third gun. I can't offer you more."

"Can I choose, Colonel, sir?"

"Clearly, you can choose after you have brought the entire battery back."

"I choose the post of the second position on my gun."

That position did almost nothing, he sat and was covered by the gun shield during shooting.

"What, a soldier's station?"

"Yes, thank-you, I want to take a break from responsibility."

The retreat continued, but in better conditions for me and Dura. Either the mud had dried up, or the soil became stonier closer to the mountains, but it became much easier to walk. The mud no longer grabbed the wheels of the guns and wagons.

The division went to the large village of Krymskaya. Behind the village began the mountains. Here, to my utter amazement, I was able to buy shoe leather at a shop, and not even expensive. All over Russia, stores were empty, and then suddenly...



In Krymskaya, we felt like we were in the Orient. There were cypresses, with the crescent of the moon between them and the sound of *zurna*.⁴³ There were Circassians.

Attempt at Resistance

From Krymskaya the division went back to the Kuban River. We tried to drag the guns through the mud of the road, and then put them on a railroad bed and walked along the sleepers. It was very frustrating. The movement was continuous shaking, but still better than mud.

Then Prince Avalov overtook us. Somehow no one noticed him except me.

“Battery, on my command! Eyes left! Gentlemen officers!” I growled, although I had no right to do so, as I was a simple soldier.

“Greetings gunners!” Avalov said as hello, and we answered him back rather poorly.

He recognized me and made a remark to me, of course.

“I obey, Your Excellency! I will pass on your remarks to the gun commander.”

“What? Aren’t you the gun commander?”

“No. I’m the breach operator.”

Avalov looked at me with amazement for a while, then raised his hands to the sky.

“What a battery! I don’t get you at all.” And he left.

That was the last time I met Avalov. A few days later, in the village of Natukhayskaya, he was killed along with Psel. A shell struck the hut they were in.

The division went back to the Kuban River. Apparently, they had tried to organize a front line along the river. But the combat capability of the units had decreased greatly. The only real battle was in the village of Natukhayskaya, which was long, tedious and unsuccessful. The Reds marched towards Anapa around our flank.

I went to look at the Kuban River. I walked through the reeds. Suddenly I came across a meeting of Kuban Cossacks, from the 3rd Uman Regiment. They were all sitting around and they didn’t pay attention to me. But they reeked of independence, and I hurried back to the battery.

The division marched towards Novorossiysk. The evacuation was very poorly organised. We boarded the steamers (or rather, climbed aboard) only thanks to the energy of Colonel Sapegin and our carbines.

The End of Dura

Dura came with me to Novorossiysk. When I was convinced that I couldn’t take her, I pulled out my revolver. But I couldn’t kill Dura, my hand wouldn’t do it. I found a garden with grass and a pool of water, unsaddled, unbridled, kissed her, closed the gate and left without turning around. My wonderful lead pair and their rider Yudin also stayed there. I threw my saddle into the Black Sea.

⁴³ A woodwind instrument of the area, similar to an oboe.

