## Chapter 16 – The Crimea

### Novorossiysk

Novorossiysk... I shudder at the name. A huge bay, a cement factory, mountains without any vegetation and a strong north-easterly wind. Everything was grey, the colour of cement.

In this Black Sea port, our retreat from Orël across the whole south of European Russia ended. It had long been known that this was the only port in the Caucasus from where our troops could move to the Crimea, which was still holding out. The rest of Russia was lost to us.

They had known that ... and yet the vast warehouses were filled with abandoned goods. Nothing had been prepared for the evacuation. A dozen steamships were already packed to capacity with private property, rear area services and refugees. The infirmaries were overflowing with the wounded and sick, with no hope of leaving. Treason? No, I don't think so. General Denikin was a good general, but apparently a poor organiser. He couldn't cope with the evacuation. On paper things probably went well.

Exhausted, tired and morally undermined, the army dragged itself with great difficulty to Novorossiysk, only to see crowded steamships and crowded piers. How many of us have arrived? No one knew for sure. Maybe a hundred thousand, maybe twenty. The Russian units were better preserved than the Cossack ones. Most of the Cossacks units had lost their discipline and combat capability. Therefore, our division was positioned in front on the hills around the city.

In the evening, the warehouses were set on fire. We watched it from the mountain. A pillar of flames, a kilometre in diameter, rose directly to the sky. At the level of the mountaintops, the smoke was picked up by the north-easterly, and at right angles was blown out to sea. The sight was stunning, but creepy. The warehouses burned for several days.

In the beginning, we had confidence in those organising the evacuation. Then there were doubts and soon the conviction was that no one was organising it. During the few days that we were in Novorossiysk, the steamers could have easily made two voyages and, having unloaded the refugees in Kerch, returned for us. No, they all stood motionless for some reason, overwhelmed with people. Why? We decided to go and see for ourselves. The three of us – Milchev, Astafiev and I – headed for the city. The vast piers were literally packed with wagons, horses and people. Getting to the steamboats was unthinkable. No one was in charge. The steamers, as far as could be seen from a distance, were packed with people side by side. We were very concerned.

Driving past some burning warehouses behind a concrete wall, I decided to see what was there. There was a spot where people were climbing through the wall and coming back with packages. I let Astafiev hold Dura and went through at that place. I saw lines of wagons. One of the first carriages had English uniforms. Then cannon shots rang out. We looters all panicked. I grabbed a pack of English trousers and climbed back. There was a crush at the wall and I almost dropped my package. The shelling turned out to be the largest English vessel, the Emperor of India, firing from the bay in the direction of Tonnel'naya, 18 km away. It fired its largest guns, probably sixteen-inch guns. We could just hear the landing of the shells. We immediately threw away our old and patched trousers and put on new ones. I gave the rest of them to the crew of my guns.

I went to Shapilovski, who was with Kolzakov and the other colonels. I told him what we saw in the port.

"The steamboats are overcrowded, there is no more space. No one is in charge. If we want to get on a transport, we must rely only on ourselves and we need to act immediately. If we wait for orders, we risk being here when the Reds arrive."

My words clearly disturbed the colonels, which pleased me. Now they would do something, not sit back and wait for someone to pick them up and put them on a steamer.

We ate canned corned beef, which someone had taken from the stores, like my trousers. Washed down with a wonderful wine taken in Abrau-Dyurso. The quartermaster had left nothing for our arrival. It abandoned everything and fled to the steamers. These were the parasites that the transports were filled with. And we, the army, had no places!

Finally, on the morning of the third day, the division went down to port. The road led past the infirmary. Wounded officers on crutches begged us to take them with us, not to leave them for the Reds. We walked on silently, heads pulled in and trying not to look at them. We were shamed by it, but we ourselves weren't sure if we would be able to get on the steamers. So much time had passed and the wounded officers hadn't been evacuated! That sin is unforgivable. The battery stopped in a small area.

Colonel Shapilovski ordered, "Unlimber! Spike the guns!"

It was done silently.

"Unsaddle and unharness! We leave the horses."

"What?! Leave the horses?"

"It will be impossible to take them."

"Maybe just Dura and my lead pair?"

"Impossible. There's not enough room for the men. It will be a blessing if we all manage to get on the steamer. Look at this crowd.

I took Dura to the large garden of an abandoned villa. There was grass and a shallow pool of water. With a heavy heart, I joined the line of our men who, with saddles on their shoulders, followed Colonel Sapegin. It was impossible to get to the steamer because of the crowds. We had to walk beside the burning warehouses. They were blazing with heat, and we hid behind our saddles.

Yudin, from my team, stepped in front of me. "And the base pair?"

What should I say to him? After all, he loved them so much.

"Bring them. Maybe it will work."

He led them behind me. Finally we reached the wharf and saw the steamer. Terrible fear and anxiety clenched my heart. There was no possible way we could take any horses. The steamer was small, and people were standing on it wall to wall.

"Yudin, leave the pair. There's no point dragging them further."

"What? How do I keep them?"

"You can see for yourself what is happening."

Yudin unbridled the horses, stroked them and wept. I turned away to hide my tears. He followed me sobbing, then he waved his hand in the direction of the steamer and returned to his pair. I never saw him again.

**Embarkation**

We waited at the dock near the steamer all day. Evening came.

"I can't take anyone else. There is no room," the captain shouted into the mouthpiece.

"I have sixty gunners here," Sapegin replied. "You will take them all, even if there is no space."

"Impossible. The ship will capsize. You can see."

"You will take us all," Sapegin repeated resolutely. "And if there's no room, I'll create some."

He took his carbine from behind his back. Now we all laid down our saddles and, with carbines in our hands, clustered around Sapegin, who was standing on a pile of bags. There was silence all around. The breaches snapped as we chambered a round. The unfortunate junior officer on the boat cringed. What could he do?

"I will give you three minutes to think. Then I will shoot," Sapegin said very calmly, but firmly.

We would have shot. It was about life and death. In addition, the steamer was full of all sorts of rear guards, egoists and cowards, because of whom we lost the war. Those bastards wanted to leave, and we,

the army, wanted to leave! So no! Of course, if they had been troops or wounded, we wouldn't have shot, but these rats from the rear wouldn't arouse any regret in us.

A tedious moment of silence passed.

"Okay... I'll take the gunners, but without saddles and luggage."

"In good time... And no going back on it. I'll keep an eye out."

"Gunners, throw your saddles into the sea... Without hesitation. I order you... But keep the carbines - they may be useful to you."

One by one we got on the barge and then the steamer. Finally it was my turn. I took the plank to a barge so full of people that I had to walk on their shoulders to get onto the steamer. There I was grabbed by my arms like a bag and passed along. A thought flashed through my mind: would they throw me into the sea? But no. I was lowered onto the deck at the end of the relay. I grabbed him and could put one foot on the deck. There was no room for the other. I had my carbine under my shoulders and over a shoulder the bags I had taken off my saddle. In that moment, I was selfishly happy: saved!!! Well almost... Of course, it was terrible that so many people couldn't leave and would be taken by the Bolsheviks. The catastrophe of the White movement was irreparable. The loss of the battery, Dura and my pair was a tragedy ... But I'm on a steamboat, and that's the main thing ... I leaned on the handrails and, squeezed by the neighbors, fell fast asleep, standing on one leg.

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A strong fleet from the Western powers was located in the bay. Several very large English ships, one French, one Italian and even one American. It seemed to us that under the protection of such a mighty fleet, nothing unpleasant could happen to us. That fleet had such a mighty artillery, and in case of need it could take easily ten thousand people and even more ... It took five to eight hundred men to look the part but to avoid polluting their his light gray decks very much.

I slept uninterrupted and dreamless all night. In the morning I was awakened by gun shots. Two red three-inch guns, apparently a platoon from a horse battery, shelled the bay. Of course, their attention was drawn to the largest dreadnought, to which their shells couldn't cause any harm. They were attracted by the light coloring and elegant forms of the "Emperor of India". It was our luck, because for simple transports their shells would have been disastrous. But we were dark and unsightly, and they didn't pay any attention to us.

Shells, falling into the water, raised high columns, as in old paintings. I watched this spectacle with interest, marveling as an artilleryman that they didn't hit the ships. They must have been over-excited.

This shooting caused a short panic among the people squeezed onto our steamer, the "Ayu-Dag". But the captain's imperious voice calmed them down.

"I'm going to order everyone who panics to be thrown overboard. Stand still so that the steamer doesn't capsize."

The deck was overloaded and the hold was insufficient.

Several shells landed near to the Emperor of India, and to our amazement, the huge dreadnought started to smoke and set off, dragging the entire navy with it.

Of course, they had specialists: "Wait, they are just moving away to open fire that will overturn the mountains."

But the fleet simply and shamefully fled from two Red three-inchers. Two years later, the same fleet also fled from the Turkish cannons of Kemal Pasha.

This unexpected flight sowed panic among the transports. Everyone raised their anchors. Two empty transports had just entered the bay. They started leaving too. A cry of desperation rose from the crowd on the wharves. Like a living river, the crowd rushed along the shore in the direction of Tuapse. But at the southern end of the bay, a Red machine gun roared into action. The road to Tuapse was cut off. Rowing boats moved across the bay. Some brave souls tried to get to the steamers by swimming.

Our steamer “Ayu-Dag” fled like the others. It was towing a barge. The cable burst, and despite the screams of the men on the barge, it continued to flee.

I think it would have been better for us if the international navy hadn’t come to Novorossiysk at all. We relied too much on its protection, and its unexpected flight sowed panic among the steamers. The role of that mighty fleet remained a mystery to me. Why did it shoot the day before, without any apparent need, at Tonnel'naya and then didn’t shoot when it was necessary? I can’t believe the Navy was scared of two three-inch guns. Then why was it in Novorossiysk? To flee at the first shot and destroy the legend of the ‘power of the West’ among the Russian Reds and Whites – and the Turks, and many others who previously believed in it?

A good salvo from that fleet would have revived hope, make the Bolsheviks think and even change the course of history. But the eagerly anticipated salvo never came.

Only one small black destroyer didn’t run. It was the only Russian warship. It went to the middle of the bay and silenced the Red guns with its machine guns. Then he went to the south and fired at the Red machine gun blocking the road in Tuapse. It returned to the bay, stopped the empty steamers from fleeing. One empty one was forced to take some of the people from an overloaded steamer, the other was sent to Tuapse. The captains carried out his orders because he was very determined.

“Take the barge in tow, or I’ll torpedo you.”

In short, the captain of the destroyer brought some order to the general mess. I think he was the only one who didn’t lose his head. The other leaders, some of whom were very senior, didn’t show themselves.

We were very lucky – the sea was calm and none of the overloaded ships capsized.

Subsequently, the high command was accused of taking Russian units and refusing to take Cossack ones. That’s not entirely fair. I don’t think there was any malicious intent, just inability. No one was in charge of the loading. The units did it themselves. Those units that maintained discipline could force their way on because they represented strength. The Cossacks in most cases had broken up, lost their discipline and held meetings. They expressed clear hostility to the high command, and it is quite understandable that the command didn’t want to import that infection into the Crimea. This is indignantly denied by the Cossacks now, but then we knew it was certainly true.

In addition, not all the Cossacks held meetings, and there were many units of them who made it to the Crimea. Our two batteries worked in the Taurida firstly with the Kuban Wolves Regiment. Then they operated during the landing in the Kuban with the General Babiev’s Kuban 1st Cavalry Division. We didn’t work with the Dons, but we ran into them in the Crimea. I know that General Fiktselaurov’s Dons fought there: the 5th Kalmyk and 18th Don Regiments. General Wrangel sent a steamer with weapons and took the interned Kuban Cossacks out of Georgia after a fight. That was done at the risk of diplomatic complications not only with Georgia, but also with the Western powers.

That is, I believe that non-propagandised Cossacks were taken willingly, but they didn’t want to take those who opposed them, and they did the right thing. There were decent Kuban Cossacks in our battery, and they all went to the Crimea and remained in the battery until the end.

Novorossiysk was a disaster of the White movement. We lost a vast, fertile and densely populated area, all our material and probably two-thirds of our army. How many officers left in the infirmaries shot themselves? How many were shot and how many were drowned in the bay? In Novorossiysk, the results of a two-year glorious struggle were lost. The Allied Navy was present as a spectator. Our army never experienced such a catastrophe in the battles with the Reds. And so, this catastrophe was caused to by her own general staff. General Denikin had to give up command, which was taken over by General Wrangel.

We went to Crimea to continue the fight, more experienced and with fewer illusions. This happened in late March or early April 1920.

**Feodosiya**

The “Ayu-Dag” went slowly, as it approached the port of Feodosia. We were in the Crimea.

“Stand still!” the captain shouted. “Don’t pile onto one side. When we moor, don’t rush like sheep, but go slowly. The steamer can tip over even at the pier. Our hold isn’t loaded.”

Everything went well and we found ourselves standing on the wharf.

I was overcome with joy: saved! Alive! Wow! I started laughing, singing and almost dancing. We’d been elbow to elbow with death for too long, with all the aces in his hand. Finally, we were safe for a while. SAFETY, understand this! It can only really be appreciated by a person who has emerged from a long period of mortal danger.

I really wanted to eat. We hadn’t eaten or drunk anything for two days. Which was lucky in a way because the steamer was so cramped that it was impossible to cope with natural needs. I went looking for something edible. I didn’t find any, but I saw how a Cossack opened a jar, poured white powder onto his palm and put it in his mouth. The Cossack made a horrible grimace, and he began to spit it out. I looked at the label: saccharin. Immediately I bought a litre can for 200 roubles and later in Kerch sold it for 20 000,[44] and in the meantime the whole battery used saccharin.

The wharfs of Feodosia are like the wharfs in any ports in the world. But to me, they seemed like the height of beauty. This sparrow, how great it is. It jumps and chirps... And this stunted tree, what tenderness in it! What happiness to admire them, to see the sun, the sky. After all, my corpse could very easily have been rotting somewhere in the Kuban or in Novorossiysk or in the depths of the bay. And here I was – young, healthy and alive. Alive. Ha, ha, ha!

Colonel Shapilovski sent me with two soldiers to find quarters. We walked across town. I smiled at everyone I met. I guess my feelings were written on my face because everyone I met was smiling too. And the commander of some supply train or other, having learned that we were from Novorossiysk, gave us bread and canned food. We pounced on them like famished men, but still brought some back to the battery. Those of us in charge of quarters were recalled to the train station. Then we learned the happy news – our battery in the Crimea had two guns at the front. And my brother was alive and was with those guns. Glory to you, Lord. What double joy!

That gun had been formed by our rear supply unit and sent off with Captain Kovalevski to join us. But they were cut off during the retreat from the Don and instead headed for the Crimea by forced marches. On the way, they picked up and harnessed another, abandoned, gun. So now they were a platoon. They reached the town of Geniches’k and went down the Arbat Spit,[45] where they joined the front lines.

Aleksandrov also managed to leave Novorossiysk. The men of the 7th Battery had been evacuated on the British cruiser Calypso, in exchange for champagne which the 7th had taken in Abrau-Dyurso. Aleksandrov was allowed to move into our battery. He arrived in Kerch two days later than us, immediately fell ill with typhus and was in our infirmary for a long time. During the retreat, my brother had also suffered from typhus. He wasn’t abandoned and was taken along with the battery. I didn’t find him in Kerch, he was at Strelkov.[46]

Quite by chance I ran into my aunt Sofia Fedorovna Tuchkova in Feodosia. She had learned of her son’s death and had come from Moscow. We were very happy to see each other, and often went to Mitia’s grave together.

It turned out that that the intention was to disband us, because after Novorossiysk we had neither horses nor guns. But the existence of our platoon at the front changed the situation. There was no reason to disband us. General Kolzakov spoke to us, offering to merge back with the horse-mountain into one battery, as before. But the 2nd Horse decided to use the advantage the platoon at the front gave us, and left secretly for Kerch, under the command of Shapilovski. I felt sorry for Kolzakov, and I was personally ready to agree, but most of the officers declined. It was probably better that way though, because the horse-mountain very soon got guns and horses. The *divizion* was born again.

[44] The French version has 200,000 roubles.

[45] Arabats’ka Strilka.

[46] Ukrainian, Strilkove.

**Kerch**

In Kerch, we found our supply train and settled into nice quarters. Along the waterfront was a boulevard with a restaurant. When we had money, which wasn't often, we went there, but usually ate goby[47] soup, which we soon became bored with. Sometimes we bought a basket of herring at the market. It was so delicious that the whole basket was eaten in the first sitting. The fishermen talked about the abundance of fish in the sea, so that sometimes oars would bounce off a passing school. You could scoop them up with a bucket.

Above the city was Mount Mithridates, which they had excavated, finding coins and all sorts of objects – but it was dangerous to go there. There were tunnels in which all sorts of criminals and communists were hiding.

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After the disaster of Novorossiysk, General Denikin could no longer remain commander-in-chief. He was replaced by General Wrangel, who turned out to be an excellent organiser, and not just on paper. In a short time he created a cohesive army from the remnants of those who arrived from Novorossiysk. He carried out important political reforms concerning peasants and land. He had good authority. Looting in the army almost disappeared, and the Green movement went underground. Order had arrived.

Of course, we had no hope of defeating the Bolsheviks on our own. But the Communists were at war with the Poles, and this drew away the bulk of their troops. In the central regions of Russia, peasant uprisings were constantly happening, with an especially strong one near Tambov. Unfortunately, those uprisings took place when our troops were no longer nearby and we couldn't help them.

We still hoped that the Western powers would eventually see through and realise the dangers of Communism, then help us properly. Instead, they disowned us one by one. The Bolsheviks, excellent politicians, recognised their weaknesses and lured them in with interesting concessions – once peace came, of course. The Americans were the first to fall for the bait, then the British very naively asked us to make peace with the Bolsheviks! As if that were possible. And when we refused, they betrayed us. Only the French didn't betray us, but they weren't able to help us much. France was in an awkward position. The veteran Greek and French troops that had landed in Odessa, fled at the first shots and abandoned our Volunteer units to the mercy of fate. It goes without saying that the Bolsheviks, having achieved their goals, didn't give them any concessions to the Anglo-Americans.

But let's not forget that we were young, a little stupid and not at all interested in politics. That is, therefore, great soldiers. I was more interested in if a tailor would make me some blue trousers than foreign politics. And yet we continued our long and stubborn war with the Bolsheviks, with several major successes.

**The Arbat Spit**

Our two guns occupied a curious section of the front – the Arbat Spit. My brother and I were interested in this name, as we had lived in the Arbat area of Moscow.

The entire western side of the Sea of Azov is an almost straight sand spit (the waves replenish the sand in the shallow spots). The spit stretches from the city of Geniches'k southwards for 110 km across the sea until it rejoins the Crimea, where the Tatars once built the fortress of Arabat, from which the spit gets its name. The spit is 200 to 400 metres wide, and rises up to 2 m above sea level. To the east is the Sea of Azov, and to the west is the Sivash, or the Dead Sea. Near Geniches'k there is a channel connecting the two bodies of water. That's where the front was. The Reds occupied Geniches'k, which was on a height.

Between the main body of the Crimea and the spit is the Sivash. The sun evaporates the water, and so what remains is very salty. The width varies, from 3 to 30 km. It's shallow, up to a person's chest, but the bed is a viscous, thick layer of sludge. During the conquest of the Crimea, Russian troops took fascines and crossed the Sivash by fording.

[47] Rock dwelling fish with large heads.

The Sivash has a lot of salt mining. An area is surrounded by a mud wall so that more water doesn't penetrate. Then the sun evaporates the water and the salt is raked with a shovel. It is placed on the spit in huge *mastaba* (truncated pyramids). By them are the huts of their guards. Everything is salted there: the air, the water in the wells, cows' milk, chicken eggs. It is difficult to swim in the Sivash – it is difficult to find a deep enough area. When you get out, the sun quickly dries your body so that it is white with salt all over. Every scratch burns. You need to run to wash off the salt in the Sea of Azov.

In its northern section, the spit meets two islands and expands. There are villages there.

The Arbat Spit is a desert in the middle of the sea. There are frequent mirages. You see things you shouldn't see. Suddenly, houses appear in the middle of the sky, then trees or even a camel. But more often than not, you see some kind of hodgepodge, which you can't make out.

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After a good rest in Kerch, those coming from Novorossiysk were sent to the front to relieve those already there. We arrived by train in Vladislavovka, where we spent the night. From there on we could only go by horse. In the morning I went to see the ruins of Arabat fortress. I climbed a tower. The fortress seals off the spit, and when you look out from the tower, the spit goes straight into the sea. But it is impossible to follow the line of the spit into the distance, which enraged me. I tried several times, but couldn't succeed.

My name was called, as the crews were already harnessed up. We rode alongside the Sivash. The mixture of sand and salt creates beautiful solid ground, so it was like walking on a wooden floor. But if you turn off a bit to the left it was sludge, and to the right it was like quicksand, and you couldn't move through it. We slept very badly in a salt watchman's hut. We were thirsty. We thought swimming in the Sea of Azov would help, but it made it worse. The horses refused to drink the water from wells, although the men drank it. But the local people didn't suffer from the salinity of everything, they had gotten used to it.

We thought about water all the time. It turned into an obsession: you could see it, hear it, even feel it! And suddenly, a miracle! At the 55th km, that is, in the very middle of the spit, where the sea is no longer visible out to the horizon in all directions, was an artesian well with fresh, cold water. It had no trace of salt despite flowing freely and powerfully.

It is impossible to describe what a joy it was! Both we and the horses drank up. Then grass started to appear in the sand and even a stunted tree grew. And further north, every ten kilometres there was a similar artesian well, and there was life, and even villages.

In one village, I was lucky enough to meet a man "who watched the movement of water." I began to question him with great interest. He said he simply sees water flowing underground and can even roughly determine the depth and amount of water. When the artesian wells were drilled, the engineers always asked him where. Unfortunately, our officers came up and started making fun of the him. He fell silent and I couldn't persuade him to tell him further. It was very annoying.

The front on the spit was very stable. Trenches had been dug on both sides of the channel. The flanks were secured by the sea. The trenches were occupied by infantrymen, who didn't even fire a shot. We lived in a big village. The guns stayed in the same positions. The teams remained in nearby stables. Our carters decided to rest for a day before embarking on the return trip, which allowed me to see my brother, who I hadn't seen for so long and worried about. He left with our returning wagons.

**Red Mare**

While we were in Kerch, the struggle behind the scenes continues. Our 2nd Horse Battery, had two guns, and the 7th Horse Battery had horses and saddles. Their supply train had also withdrawn to the Crimea. The Inspector of Horse Artillery decided to merge those two batteries into one. The question was which battery would absorb the other. Because of our history we won and it was decided to place the men of the 7th into our battery. On paper. In practice, it turned out differently. We received fine Kabardian horses and saddles, and the officers and soldiers of the 7th joined the newly forming 8th Battery. It was a typical decision by the inspectorate. Instead of merging the similar 7th and 8th, which would have gone down well, it was decided to merge the very different units. We certainly didn't complain because we got some beautiful horses, but the 7th probably were bitter about it. The officers of the 7th on the spit didn't bother

to get to know us, and we reciprocated. My brother didn't take part in this boycott and became friends with them, and when I arrived, he introduced me to their company. I visited them often on the spit.

So it was no surprise when they left they said to me, "Take this red mare, she's the best of our horses."

To my shame, I don't remember her name. However, I didn't get to ride her for long. Nondescript in appearance, she was a good Kabardian breed, frisky and intelligent. As proof of her intelligence, I will relate an incident. I took possession of her and no-one much noticed. And I took great care of her, so that she would get used to me. And she seemed to have done that. Before leaving, the officers of the 7th had drinks and, as far as I remember, I was the only one of our officers invited. I arrived on the red mare. Naturally, I got drunk, I didn't stand up very well. On my departure I discarded the leash and clung to her mane.

"Don't worry, she'll take you home," an officer of the 7th said.

Indeed, the mare walked very carefully, and if I slid down, she would stop and with a movement of her back straighten me up on the saddle. On the way there was a ditch and with a board to cross on. While walking there, she had jumped over the ditch. But on the way back, due to my condition, she didn't. She stopped, straightened me in the saddle, then quickly, in small steps, crossed the board and straightened me out again and she took me right to the house. I think she had experience with that sort of thing with her previous owner.

So, I got hold of the best horse. At first, no-one paid any attention to that, but soon Colonel Oboznenko, who commanded the battery (Shapilovski remained in Kerch), began to eye up my mare. And his manner of getting hold of her wasn't very sporting. It was surprising to see Oboznenko do that, because he was mostly a gentleman.

He knew that I had found my aunt in Feodosia and that I would like to see my brother, whom I had only caught in passing. He sent me to Vladislavovka, to the new inspector of horse artillery with some kind of report and with leave to then go to Feodosia and Kerch. During my absence, he asked permission to ride my mare. Of course, I gladly agreed – she would be in good hands. But when I got back into the battery, he refused to give her back to me. And I refused to sit on another horse and so rode in a wagon. But fate itself resolved our dispute. Two days later, the mare was killed in battle, and I got Andromache, also a beautiful Kabardian horse. Bay-brown with red patches, my preferred horse colour.

**Naval Combat on Land**

The front on the spit was stationary, which we weren't used to. We languished with boredom and at times forgot that we were at the front. To remind us, the Reds had an armoured train with a magnificent six-inch gun. After 5 o'clock, when the sun wasn't in their eyes, it would appear on the heights near Geniches'k and send us several shells. From Geniches'k there was a branch of the railway to the spit, obviously for the export of salt. The heights at Geniches'k, were at the limit of our three-inchers, some 8 km. But, as I said before, such shooting is extreme range and inaccurate, is bad for the gun, and the gunners don't like it. Good shooting is at three to four kilometres. But the armoured train rarely came close enough that we might get it with a good, medium shot. So we responded to the shooting with silence, which angered us.

Somehow we got hold of some terrible moonshine. We sat and drank, wincing and spitting. Suddenly, two naval officers came in.

"Sailors?! Here on the spit? How does that happen?

"A storm threw our gunboat onto the sand. Now it's 5 o'clock and the armoured train will start firing at our vessel."

"And so you abandoned ship without a fight?!"

"What do you want? We have two outdated 42 mm guns that you can't reach Geniches'k. If the train comes down to the spit, then yes, but ..."

We were drunk and had recently arrived, meaning we were still full of energy.

"Do you have any shells?"

"Yes, a few."

“Let’s go, let’s give the train a naval battle!”

We quickly poured a glass of moonshine into the sailors to cheer them up, and enthusiastically ran to the ship. The sailors followed us much more slowly. After all, they knew the power of the train’s six-inch gun and the impotence of their own guns. They couldn’t keep up with us.

The ship could only be called a “military vessel” by a stretch of the imagination. It was a small, old coal carrier. On the deck were screwed two archaic cannons, almost out of use. And in the form of protection against fragments hung cork mattresses, which were very useful.

The sailors just had time to explain to us how the guns operated, when the armoured train appeared and a first shell raised a column of water and sand. The train continued to fire. Shells fell around the steamer. Apparently they didn’t have an officer, or they would have shot better.

Emboldened by our silence, the train began to descend. We let it get as close as possible and then on command opened fire and released what we could. The train also fired non-stop. It lasted a few terribly long minutes. The cork mattresses danced all the time from the shrapnel hitting them. Finally, the train raised steam and retreated rather quickly. It didn’t show up for days. Maybe we had damaged it.

It had done a lot of damage. When the fight died down, we went to inspect the results. The whole spit was ploughed up. Shell fragments were lying on the deck. And there was a hole in the side of the steamer. Fortunately, the walls were so thin that the shell hadn’t exploded, but instead had gone through both sides of the boat and exploded in the sand behind it. We cringed involuntarily. We’d been very lucky.

“What luck that the steamer was stranded. Had we been on the water, we would have drowned.”

The armoured train remained up on the heights for a long time. Finally, after making sure that we no longer had any shells, it came down and shot through the ship twice more. We had no more shells, and could no longer stage naval battles. We were very lucky, because we took no losses during all that.

But we didn’t want to leave it the last word. The infantrymen told us that there was a large dip in front of their trenches. At night we inspected it and silently brought a gun up to it. The horse team was taken back and we lay in the dip. It was painful, as it was impossible to stand upright – the Reds weren’t far away. Then we waited. The armoured train came down. We started to fire, landing shells around it. At the same time, our other gun began to fire from afar. The ruse succeeded. The train hastily retreated, firing into the distance. The next day, the it slammed a dozen shells into the dip. The Reds had found our hiding place. But it was empty, as we had taken the gun away during the night.

I didn’t participate in this last duel with the train, my duty had ended the day before. But from a distance we watched, and I think that we managed to land a serious hit on it. The train never descended again, at least while I was there.

**The Rear**

As I said, I got some leave thanks to my red mare, which Oboznenko had decided to take possession of. First, I went to the inspector of horse artillery in Vladislavovka, a general with a Greek surname, whose discussion with me I have already mentioned. I still really liked that, despite my low rank, he spoke to me as an equal. Then I met my brother at the station. A passing train had the horse-mountain battery on it. They now had guns, horses and saddles. They were going to the front on the Chongar peninsula.

I went to Feodosia, saw my aunt and headed to Kerch, where we spent a happy few weeks with my brother and Aleksandrov, who had recovered from typhus.

During the time I spent on the Arbat, the rear had changed a lot, and for the better. Wrangel proved to be an excellent organiser. The army recovered quickly. From the speed with which the horse-mountain received their guns, horses and saddles, one could conclude that there was some order in the rear units. We met quite a few infantry platoons on our way. They were no longer made up of confused refugees from Novorossiysk, but soldiers. Just from the way they carried their bayonets, it was clear that they were good, combat units.

There were no parades of regiments and batteries. Everything was done quietly, to lull the Reds' vigilance. Which it did. They said that the withdrawal of our army to the Crimea from the Taurida had been easy and was a surprise for the Reds.

The army was renamed the Russian Army. Agricultural reforms aimed at the peasants were carried out.

**Battles near Agaiman**

I didn't take part in the withdrawal from the Crimea, because I was in Kerch.

When my brother and I were sent to the front, we found the battery in the Taurida, near Agaiman. I got Andromache, a very good Kabardian mare. Shakalov had an identical one, called Anathema. They were sisters and so similar that we sometimes confused them. I immediately began to work with Andromache and very quickly achieved what I wanted: that she wouldn't run away from me, but walk after me like a dog, that she stood motionless while I mounted, and that she read my mind.

I did the following experiment with her. As we marched in a column, I let go of the reins and stirrups and tried not to move in the saddle.

But I mentally went to Andromache, "To the left. Left. Andromache, go left!"

She didn't want to leave the other horses.

She turned her head to the left and I read her mind, "Why do you want me to go to the left? There's nothing there."

But I insisted, "To the left. Left."

Then she decided, "Okay, to make you happy, I'll go to the left." And she did.

I then thought, "Trot! Trot, Andromache, trot!"

She switched to a trot, despite the fact that all the other horses were walking. I'm sure I didn't lean to the left and didn't push her on the trot, even inadvertently.

A lot of people didn't believe me. And I was surprised by something else. How was it possible that there was no mental contact between a rider and the horse he was constantly on? And that's for the vast majority.

I don't remember what horse my brother had. Was it still Rytsar? If it had been anything special, I would certainly remember.

The battery by now had four guns, and we were all on horseback. We worked with the Kuban Wolves Regiment. They were still on foot and we were very careful about our horses. The battery left the Crimea through the Chongar.

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The 'Wolves' wore a low papakha of wolf fur, which gave them a brutal look. We were slightly scared of them because of that. But over time, we became convinced that they were resilient in combat, disciplined, and could be relied upon. We never had any misunderstandings with them.

The first battle on our arrival in the battery wasn't far from Agaiman. We were attacked by a cavalry brigade of '*Chervonny* Cossacks'.[48] Three hundred paces in front of the battery was a chain of the Wolves. When attacked, they formed small groups, it would seem by sections, into hedgehogs, circles facing out with bayonets. This allowed us to shoot at the attackers in the gaps. The Red attack broke against the Wolves' toughness and composure. Their cavalrymen spun around the hedgehogs, and the Wolves would occasionally fire a shot. Meanwhile we mowed the cavalry down with cannister. The shooting was difficult, because we had to be careful not to hit our own men. That's very difficult when you are excited. The Red attackers were forced back. Captain Skornyakov, with whom we had made the great retreat, was mortally wounded in the stomach during this battle.

[48] Chervonny is a word for red, but a different word from that used to describe revolutionaries (*krasnyy*).

A hundred Wolves were mounted on horses obtained in that combat. Soon the entire regiment was mounted.

There was a moment when I flinched and looked around for the man holding Andromache. But the Wolves, they didn't flinch. They acted without fuss and very confidently.

"We don't shoot horses," a Wolf told me. "We let the rider approach, shoot him off, and then catch the horse. It's simple!"

"Is it simple?"

We fought northwards to the village of Vasilyevka by the Dnieper River with the Wolves. Then we turned left and came to the large village of Znamenka, near Nikopol.

**Nikopol**

The village of Znamenka is located just opposite the city of Nikopol. There is no *plavni* and the steep banks of the Dnieper are close together. There was no fighting. Our battery's observation post was in an abandoned brewery. We didn't shoot. Just once, when we forced a steamer aground and shot a hole in it, just in case.

The position was calm, and Oboznenko decided to use it to do some instruction. He invited me to quarter in the same house as him. It was rather unpleasant, because he was bound by the regulations and bored me with all sorts of questions. But I couldn't refuse. I didn't go to the instructions, but wrapped my head in my overcoat and pretended to be asleep. Oboznenko paced around the room.

Finally, he asked, "Sergei Ivanovich, how many shells do you carry in your limber?"

From under the overcoat, without moving, "I don't know, Evgeny Nikolaevich."

"Hmm ... And how many ..."

"I don't know."

Oboznenko left. When he came back, he asked me, "You didn't go to the training?"

"No, I didn't go."

"Why not?"

"I think it's playing at soldiers. Everyone knows their responsibilities very well. Why teach them what they already know? When there is a fight, believe me, I will be in my position."

Oboznenko didn't insist.

We went to Dniprovka. There were so many cherries that from a distance the trees seemed red. We ate only cherries, and stuffed ourselves. We made our own dumplings and ate them with sour cream.

Then we learned that our *divizion* was being transferred to the 1st Kuban Horse Division, commanded by General Babiev, our old friend from the North Caucasus. Remembering us, he asked to be given both of our batteries for the landing on the Kuban. That flattered us, but also alarmed us. It was flattering that the best cavalry commander appreciated us, but the landing didn't entice us at all. A landing is the last thing you want to do, because you have to win or die. And it's hard to win. There were two small landings: one in the Taman, the other at Berdiansk, and both were unsuccessful. And I didn't want to die at all.

We manouevred without fighting along the Dnieper *plavni*,[49] where the Kuban regiments were stationed, for some time. They were all now on horseback and were learning how to sabre. But the quality of the horses was mediocre.

[49] The word *plavni* will appear quite a lot in the rest of the book. It is often translated as "floodplain", but it is rather more than that. The great Russian and Ukrainian rivers have very shallow slopes and so are very wide, flat bottomed and braided. In between the braids, and out to the banks, is the *plavni*, which is often densely covered in high reeds, sometimes small bushes. Mostly it is quite sandy, rather than marshy, so passable. Each year in the spring thaw, the rivers flood across the *plavni*, often quite deeply, so they have no roads or buildings.

**Dnieper Plavni**

We were stationed in the area of the Dnieper *plavni*. Its high banks are 60 km apart and between them is swamps, bushy areas, braided streams and sandy islands. The navigable channel of the Dnieper flows near the other bank.

It was here, in the 16th Century, that the curious free state of the “Zaporozhian Cossack Sich” was formed. After the conquest of the Crimea, Catherine II abolished the Sich and transferred the Cossacks to the Kuban. The Kuban “Black Sea” Cossacks are the descendants of the Zaporozhians.

The First Kuban Horse Division consisted of: the 1st Kuban (Kornilov), the 1st Ekaterinodar, the 1st Uman and the 1st Zaporozhian Regiments. There were no Cossack horse batteries with them, which is why we were attached.

We passed through the villages of Vasilyevka, Balki, Belozerka and Lepetikhi. But there was no fighting. Then orders reached us to move to Akimovka, a small station, to load up. The train took us quickly, one night, to Feodosia.

## Chapter 17 – Landing in the Kuban (1-19 August 1920)

### Loading

It was early August 1920. Very early in the morning. The train of wagons stopped on an parking track near the sea. We were in Feodosia.

One soldier, a prisoner we had taken in the Taurida, was from Vyatka and had never seen the sea. He looked out of the boxcar.

“Look, a river!” There was a clear surprise in the voice because of the size of the river.

A voice came from the depths of the carriage:

“Oh you country bumkin. It’s the sea.”

“The sea?!”

The Vyatkan climbed out of the car, went to the water, stood for a long time and returned.

“Water, so much water! And all useless.”

We unloaded. Both batteries went to the city centre and lined up there in the square. General Wrangel gave us a speech and awarded our *divizion* silver trumpets on a Vladimir Ribbon for a our good work. (I can only imagine the horse artillery inspectorate, that still dreamt of disbanding us!) We were awarded the silver trumpets in Romny, and we had had the Vladimir pennant for ages. So it was only a confirmation of the existing situation. After that, we went to the wharf and began to load onto a steamer. We went on the same “Ayu-Dag”, which had brought us from Novorossiysk. But this time it only had our two batteries and an infirmary, so it was spacious.

The horses were loaded in a very curious manner. The winch picked up the horse using a very large sling. From the moment the horse’s feet lost contact with the ground under its feet, it would hang still, and the winch carried it into the hold. I was sent with a few soldiers into the hold to arrange the horses. We were still setting up the previous ones when we were given another one. She was stopped quarter of a metre off the floor and swaying on the cable. This flying horse aroused the hostility of all the other horses, and when it swung towards them they would lay their ears back, as if on command, and strike backwards. The poor horse would fly across to the opposite row, which sent it back in the same manner. It turned into a game of football, with the unfortunate horse flying in all directions, while we ran around trying to avoid it. Finally we thought to shout upstairs: “lift”. The horse was lifted. She continued to annoy the other horses, but was out of reach. We finally managed to place it in a corner.

By evening, everything was on board. The three of us, my brother, Aleksandrov and I, went to spend the night with Aunt Sonia and slept in a gazebo in the garden. Aunt Sonya Tuchkova announced to us that she had decided to go to Moscow. She felt lonely. No matter how much we dissuaded her, she left. Of course, she didn’t reach Moscow and died in prison in Ryazan.

She went to escort us to the pier. Colonel Shapilovski approached us. We introduced him to my aunt.

“Tuchkova? Of the celebrated family?”

“Yes, from Borodino.”

It was obvious that Shapilovski was impressed by this. My brother took advantage of this. He asked to stay, and not take part in the landing.

“What about your gun?”

“My brother can easily replace me.”

“Well, alright then ...”

Apparently, Shapilovski only agreed because of the presence of Aunt Sonya. I was genuinely happy for my brother. Landings are disgusting things. You never know if you’ll come back.

With a heavy heart, we said goodbye to Aunt Sonya, knowing that she was going to certain death. Then Aleksandrov and I boarded the steamer, and the Ayu-Dag moved away from the pier.

The landing on the Kuban was, of course, a secret. But everyone knew about the secret and talked about it. It goes without saying that the Reds also knew about the landing, and they had brought masses of troops to the Kuban. The only thing that was kept secret was the landing site.

**Sea Voyage**

In the evening, the Ayu-Dag went south into the open Black Sea. When it was completely dark, we joined a dozen steamers that were standing in the same place with their lights extinguished. It was a collection point. Steamships from different ports arrived. At midnight, when everyone had gathered, the steamers lined up in single file and headed north.

“Don’t smoke or talk.”

Taman was occupied by the Reds, who naturally had observers, and the strait is only eight kilometres wide.

The night was dark and moonless. The steamers stayed very close to each other. The Reds didn’t notice our crossing into the Sea of Azov. We sailed all night and part of the day and anchored right in the middle of the Sea of Azov, so that our ships couldn’t be seen from any shore.

During this time we were engaged in washing clothes in a simple way: the linen was tied onto a rope and dragged behind the steamer. Ten minutes later, the laundry was relatively clean but most importantly and all the lice were killed. But some didn’t tie their clothes on well and lost them.

Our fleet stopped in the middle of the Sea of Azov with the boilers extinguished, so as not to betray its presence with smoke. Thus we remained all day. It was hot and we started swimming. I almost drowned out of my own stupidity. In a conversation, I once stated that people jump into the water incorrectly. You need to jump head first to avoid injury. My words were taken up and I was asked to jump from the main bridge of the Ayu-Dag, that is, the highest point. I foolishly agreed, but when I looked down from the deck, it took my breath away. The “Ayu-Dag” was a small steamer, but from the bridge the height was three-stories or more. The audience and even the Sisters of Mercy gathered around. It was impossible to refuse, and I jumped. In the air, I felt like I was over-rotating and made a lower back movement to straighten up. When my chest entered the water, I felt something go in my back. I stretched out my arms in the water, expecting to be carried to the surface, but wasn’t. I opened my eyes. There was yellow light, but I couldn’t make out the surface. Obviously I had gone very deep. I wanted to avoid, at all costs, getting under the boat. I worked my hands and, just as I was running out of air I surfaced among our bathers. But my chest seized fast, and I couldn’t breathe or call for help. I began to slowly but surely sink.

“Well done. You dived after all. Weren’t you afraid?” said the watchers, not noticing that I was drowning.

“How stupid it is to drown among those swimming,” I thought.

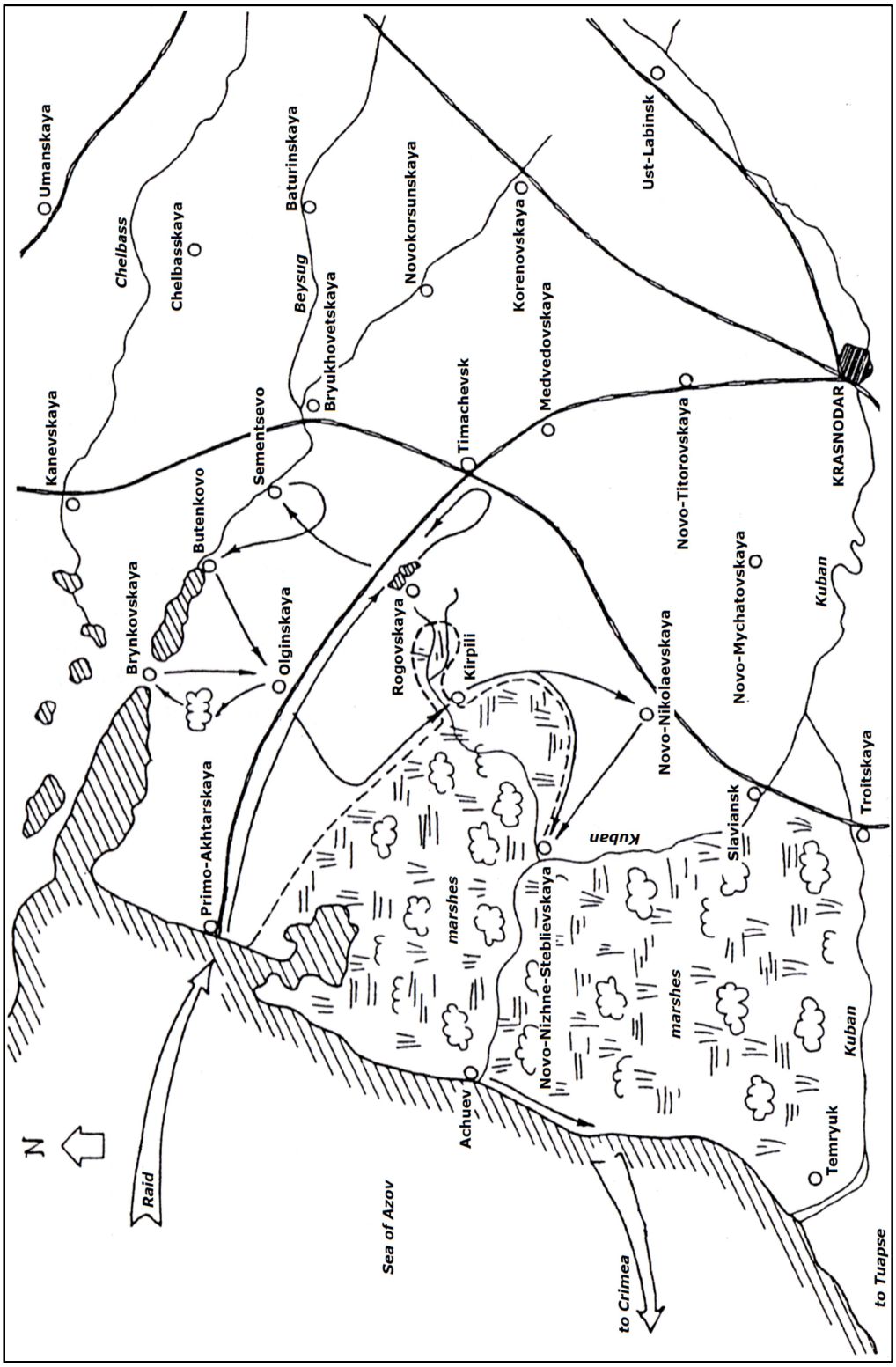
Suddenly, I heard with joy that Lieutenant Ladutko had paid attention.

“What’s wrong with him? Is he feeling bad?”

He took me under his arm and dragged me to the rope ladder. As soon as I grabbed it, my chest let go and I could breathe deeply. Saved. But I couldn’t climb the stairs, my legs weren’t working. Small waves slapped me against the side of the boat, which was covered with shells, which cut me up. Someone noticed blood. A rope ladder was lowered, I put my feet on it, and I was pulled up. The doctor came, covered me with iodine and said that there had been a slight dislocation in my spine. It didn’t hurt, but it was hard to get in the saddle. However, I was young, and my body soon adjusted.

At night we pulled up anchor and headed off. Early in the morning, in the fog, we heard distant gunfire. Our men had landed in at Primorsko-Akhtarskaya and were pushing back the Reds. The shore was very shallow, and they were landed with the help of shallow iron barges with a motor. They forgot to unload us, and we didn’t protest, because life on Ayu-Dag was pleasant. But the horses began to suffer from the heat and the lack of water.

Then General Kolzakov made a scene, and we were immediately unloaded.




**More Naval Combat**

All the military units had left, but the village was crowded with wagons, refugees and even women and children. God knows how they got here. What fools to take refugees on a landing! They only tied us down and were placed in danger themselves.

Our two batteries were immediately harnessed up, and went to look for the Kuban Division. I and a few officers and soldiers were left behind to find the wagons, load the shells and follow the batteries.

In the evening, all the steamers and the two escorting destroyers headed back to the Crimea. There was a painful feeling that our bridges had been burned and any retreat had been cut off.

In the morning we were awakened by the explosions of large-calibre shells. A house near us collapsed. As might be expected, after the destroyers had left a Red tug had pulled up a barge carrying a large gun. It was lucky that the Reds didn't have a proper navy. The shelling caused panic among the wagons. There were no troops left in Primorsko-Akhtarskaya. But we remembered that while we were unloading we had seen an English gun on the pier. Obviously, it had been placed there for just such an occasion – the arrival of the Reds from the sea. Several officers ran to the wharf. There were shells in the limber. The tugboat and barge were visible on the horizon. The English system was unfamiliar to us, but all the guns are similar in their basics. We set up the gun, pointed it, opened the breach and loaded it. But we couldn't make it fire. We began to pull anything that looked like it might be the trigger. The shot came unexpectedly: someone had pulled the correct lever. The first shell was a short by a long way. We didn't know how to use the sights and so simply raised the barrel to increase the distance. Soon we made such progress that our shells began to fall around the barge, and our opponents decided to leave before they took losses. I noted that the British gun shot further than ours, and was quite suitable for our naval battle.

Very proud of our repulse of the attack from the sea, we returned to the village – and found it empty. Everybody had run away. We eventually found our wagons, loaded the shells and left in the evening to look for the batteries.

**Behind the Division**

We were quite worried. We were a small group driving around in hostile territory, not knowing where to go or where our units were, and all the time looking around to spot any Red patrols.

I don't know exactly which units participated in the landing. But I think I'm correct in naming those we saw. It was the cavalry division of General Babiev, four regiments, and our two batteries, numbering about 2,000 to 2,500 sabres, and the Konstantinov Infantry School, of 500 to 600 bayonets. That was it. Absolutely not enough to conquer the Kuban. Wrangel had counted on a large uprising among the Cossacks, but it didn't happen, as the Reds had brought in masses of troops. But the attitude of the Cossacks was benevolent towards us, and many volunteers joined the ranks of our regiments.

The landing force was technically commanded by General Ulagai, but in fact by General Babiev. They talked about the "main forces of General Ulagai", which allegedly were to our right and were located in the area of the village of Novo-Nikolaevskaya. But it was a myth. There were no main forces, and General Ulagai sat quietly in the Crimea. But "to go to the main forces" was a conditional code and meant: to retreat in case of failure across the marshes to the village of Novo-Nizhne-Steblievskaya. After all we couldn't just say that directly, as the Reds would have occupied the village and cut off our retreat. That secret was known only to Babiev, and he kept it to himself. Anyway, the myth of the main forces served us well: firstly, we believed it ourselves, which made us feel less lonely. The thought of a main force lifted our spirits. Secondly, the Reds also believed it and were worried by it, as they couldn't locate them and thus felt they might be anywhere. This limited their actions. Apparently, they were convinced that our landing force was intended as a diversion, and then the main forces would land somewhere unexpected. This explains why the Reds didn't act decisively enough and why we were able to leave the Kuban.

Despite the raid's failure, it pulled a huge number of Red troops to the area, and thanks to that we had a major success in the Taurida: the encirclement and destruction of Zhloba's cavalry corps. At a critical moment, the Reds had no reserves, and Zhloba was killed. All the reserves were in the Kuban. Through-out the duration of the landing, we didn't hear any artillery shots other than our own, which proves that there were no other troops.

In reality there were other forces that took part in the raid, but they weren't very effective and practically invisible.[50]

Our little group drove off in search of our battery. When it was completely dark, we wanted to spend the night on some farm, but around it lay numerous bodies with shoulder-boards. There had been a tragedy there. That frightened us, and we decided to continue through the night, which was good because in the morning we found our batteries, and in the evening the Reds took the same road. If we had stayed

[50] This sentence is not in the Russian.

overnight, we would have been taken by them. We found our two batteries in the village of Rogovskaya, separated from the main road by two large ponds. The batteries hadn't yet found the division, but we could hear shelling. We headed that way. Soon we heard a machine gun, then individual rifle shots, and finally some shrapnel exploded above our heads. We had found them. The division was fighting at Timashevk *stanitsa*. The Reds had had time to concentrate large forces there, and the division withdrew. It is very likely that if our two batteries had been unloaded from the steamers in time, we would have taken Timashevk.

We were delighted to join the division. We felt safe with it. The division returned to Rogovskaya. It was our battery's turn to fight. An order from Babiev was transmitted down the units of the column.

"Battery, forward, at the gallop!"

We moved to the right and galloped forward. I pulled away to take a look at the battery. I was struck by the joyful expression on people's faces and the good condition of the horses. I shared my observation with Captain Malov.

"It's like they are on holiday, but they are going into battle!"

"They're well rested. You will see that in a few days the picture will be completely different."

He was right.

There was no real fight. We shot at some retreating Reds and brought in a few prisoners. That was it.

We spent the night in the village of Rogovskaya. It had the advantage that it was connected to the main road only by a narrow peninsular between two ponds. It was easy to guard.

Babiev told us, "Rest up properly."

He never spoke uselessly. We understood the meaning of his words later. Tomorrow we were to have a tough day.

Sending us on the landing, Wrangel had said, "Don't look backwards. Head straight for Ekaterinodar. Then the Cossacks will rise in mass revolt."

It was a very energetic order. But we looked backwards, because we wanted to live.

The Reds brought masses of troops to the Kuban, and therefore there was no general uprising. But the Cossacks greeted us with joy this time. They had tasted Red rule and there is no trace of the former hostility. The influx of volunteers was continuous. We returned to Crimea with more men than when we left. And that despite the losses.

The landing site at Primorsko-Akhtarskaya was well chosen. To the south it was bordered by the famous Kuban *plavni* – the traditional shelter of rebels – which would serve as a refuge for us in case of anything going wrong. From the north were a series of marshy lakes with only two crossings. One of these crossings, in the village of Brynkovskaya, was immediately occupied by the cadets of the Konstantinov Infantry School. Only the southeastern border of the quadrangle, 30 km wide and 70 km long, was open land. The Reds had positioned troops along the entire coast, waiting for our landing, but had overlooked Primorsko-Akhtarskaya, despite the fact that it is located near Ekaterinodar. But they came to their senses and began to gather up troops from all over. Babiev's goal was to smash the columns of Reds, separately as they arrived, to prevent them coalescing into a large force.

The Kuban River divides into two channels just past the village of Slavyansk, both of which flow into the Sea of Azov, but a long way apart. The entire vast expanse between those channels and then further to the north is occupied by swampy, uninhabited terrain.

Here we were in the Kuban to fight one more time. It was the third time for me, and we had officers for whom it was the fourth time. We had become fond of the Kuban.

An old Cossack told me "The Kuban and Don are well watered with human blood. All the invasions take place through them. That's why our land is so fertile."

It was August 1920. The weather was wonderful, I don't remember it raining. Watermelons and melons had ripened and served as our main food. They nourish and also quench thirst. Even horses will eat watermelons, but not melons. The watermelons were wonderful – huge, dark green, and inside red, sweet and cold. It is impossible to mount holding two watermelons. One of them will fall and crash to the ground.

**A Tough Day**

It started at midnight.

"Saddle, harness. No smoking. Don't talk or make noise!"

This meant that the Reds were very close, but unaware of our presence. Indeed, as soon as we had passed the narrow stretch between the ponds, we crashed into a Red column on the main road. Screams, gunshots, machine gun bursts in total darkness. We were prepared for the contact, and for the Reds it was a complete surprise. I think they scattered, but I couldn't see anything, even though the battery was at the head of the column. It was our day for the battery to be on duty.

"At a trot. March!"

We crossed the road and went due north. For a long time we trotted along, paying no attention to individual shots, which were heard occasionally to the right and left. It started to get light.

We were far to the northeast where they weren't expecting us. In front of us lay the village of Sementsevo. Some Red troops were sleeping peacefully in it. We disturbed their sleep very badly. Some surrendered and some ran. The regiments pursued them in the direction of the village of Bryukhovetskaya, where we had spent the last Christmas.

There was a crowd of prisoners in the square guarded by several Cossacks and our two batteries. We all lay down on the ground and fell asleep. We had walked all night.

"To your horses! Saddle up! Trot, march!"

We had been urgently called by Babiev. It was our day to be on duty. He stood behind a large haystack and was looking at something through binoculars.

"There's a Red battalion heading this way. It doesn't know about us, and is tightly packed. Get as close as you can and give them some cannister... I have sent for the regiments, but we can't wait for them. I will gather the Cossacks and attack them from the flank. Got it? OK. Godspeed!"

We left the stack and headed out in a column of guns, that is, one behind the other. The Reds looked at us in surprise, but didn't shoot. Then, when we were level with them, Shapilovski commanded:

"Guns to the right, march... Gallop, Forward!

"The guns turned, the battery deployed as a line and we went from a trot to a gallop. At this point the Reds got excited and started shooting at us. We had a horse fall, and another. But we were very close.

"To the left, in a circle. In position. Fire!"

After our first salvo, there was indescribable panic. Pushing and interfering with each other, they fled, and our cannister mowed down huge holes in the crowd. To the right, Babiev attacked them with his staff and two dozen Cossacks. The Reds dropped their rifles and surrendered. There were six hundred of them. We left our firing position and trotted up to them.

But the Red Commissars, having come to their senses, saw that there were only three dozen Cossacks.

"Comrades, there aren't many of them," they shouted. "Pick up your rifles and stab these dogs!"

And two of them rushed at Babiev, who stood out by his figure with wide general's shoulder-boards. He couldn't use his right hand, as the result of an old wound, so used to wield his sword in his left hand while the reins were in his teeth. But the comrades didn't choose their victim well. Although he only had use of his left hand, Babiev still knew how to use a sabre. In the blink of an eye, he deflected their bayonets and sabred both in the head. The rest hushed up.

"Sabre them all!" Babiev shouted.

We were trotting on up when we saw that something was wrong ahead. Without hesitation, we quickly deployed and fired a cannister into the raging crowd, choosing places where there were no horsemen to try to avoid hitting our own men. At this time, a regiment trotted by us and with naked swords and launched themselves into the crowd of Reds. We left our position again, but when we arrived, it was all over. The Reds were all chopped down.

The fight lasted no more than 20 minutes. It happened around an isolated farmhouse. The farmer looked around with horror.

“Lord, what am I going to do with all these dead? How can I live among corpses?” And he walked away from his farm without even taking his hat.

“Your fire was very good once more,” Babiev told us. “True, you also almost killed us too, but your cannister came exactly when it was needed. It chills your blood to see guns being fired at you from point-blank range. That’s exactly what artillery is supposed to do, in my opinion. Shooting from a distance isn’t as effective and much less impressive... But we can’t waste time. We still have a lot of work to do... On the horses! It’s finished here.”

He wasn’t exaggerating. Hundreds of corpses lay around the farm. And to say that a few tens of minutes before it had been a whole battalion! The fight was very short.

The division moved west. After a while, our patrols reported that a Red column was moving along a road parallel to us, just a mile away. We were separated only by a field of wheat.

We attacked that column, and it scattered without much resistance. The fight was uninteresting. When the battle was over, some Cossacks brought over the body of Captain Barski, the same one who scolded me for not watering his horse, to the horse-mountain battery.

No one knew how he was killed. He wasn’t robbed.

About two o’clock in the afternoon we stopped in a garden in the middle of the steppe to feed and water the horses: there was a well.

**Severed Head**

I used the stop to unsaddle Andromache, wipe her back with straw and let her lie on the grass. I myself stood with the saddle next to me and listened, ready to saddle again at the first shot.

A group of Cossack officers was talking nearby. One of the young ones was surprised.

“Why are there no beheaded men among those killed? Can you cut off a head with one blow? Sometimes you see beautiful blows, that cleave the head in two downwards, but you don’t see severed heads.”

A senior officer explained, “To cut off a head, doesn’t require a strong blow. It’s a matter of position, not force. You need to be at the same level and cut horizontally. If a mounted opponent bends over, and he always bends, then a horizontal blow is impossible. With infantry we are always use the sabre from up high and downwards ... Ah, it’s a pity, if opportunity presents, I can show how to chop off a head.”

In one of the previous combats, we had captured a commissar. In our hurry, he was put with General Babiev’s wagon, which just happened to be passing by. They had tied him up and forgot about him. The wagon served as Babiev’s office. At this stop, Babiev had dismounted and wandering over to his wagon, he was surprised to see the commissar.

“Who is this guy, and what is he doing in my train?”

“He is a commissar, Your Excellency,” the adjutant said. “We thought you might want to interrogate him.”

“Not at all. I have a lot of work to do. Get rid of him.”

The commissar was kindly asked to get off and go over to the officers who were talking.

“Here’s the opportunity I wanted,” the older man said.

The commissar was politely offered a cigarette, and the men began to talk to him.

I still didn't believe he was going to go through with his plan. But the older officer moved to behind the commissar and with a smooth horizontal blow cut off his head, which rolled onto the grass. The body stood for a split second, then collapsed.

I made a mistake. I would have watched the head, but I was attracted to his neck. He was a large man, probably a size 42, and suddenly the neck shrank to fist sized, as blood poured out of it.

I wanted to vomit and turned away. All of this happened without any malice, just as a demonstration of a good blow.

"That's nothing," the older man said. "It takes real strength to cut a person from shoulder to lower back."

He wiped his sword on the commissar's uniform. Human life was valued inexpensively in that era.

**Olginskaya**

After feeding the horses, we moved on and in the evening came to Butenkovo farm. Tired from the long march and various combats, we were going to spend the night here. There were no Red troops in Butenkovo, but the residents told us that in the village of Olginskaya, fifteen kilometres away, the Reds had surrounded the cadets. Babiev immediately made a decision.

"Let's go to Olginskaya and make it quick. It's evening. The regiments will walk on foot to allow the horses to catch their breath for a possible attack. But you batteries, come with me, at the trot."

Babiev, us and a *sotnia* of Cossacks went towards Olginskaya. Soon we began to hear gunshots, and when we approached the village itself, we saw Red chains. They were advancing on the village and presented their flanks to us. Apparently, they were unaware of our presence.

Everything happened in a very Babiev manner. We formed a line with the two batteries, went up and fired cannister. Meanwhile Babiev attacked them from the flank. Some escaped, some surrendered, and some were slaughtered. Their superiors didn't have time to realise what was happening and reform their ranks. It all lasted a few minutes. Of course, it was a dangerous bluff, but the fight was quick.

It was all over on our side when, from the other end of the rather large village, a dark mass of infantry making an odd noise, appeared.

We released a few shrapnel towards them that didn't stop them. Strangely, the infantry didn't shoot, but shouted something. We were getting ready to leave our positions when Babiev came to us.

"Well, heroes, you seem to be going to run away? Fear not — they are surrendering. But it is probably better not to let them get close to the guns. Go back to that small hill and load cannister, just in case. I have sent for the regiments. It's too many to surrender all at once to us, there might be 3,000 of them.

Finally our regiments arrived and we felt confident again.

It turned out that some survivors of the previous battles had run to Olginskaya and shouted, "The Whites are coming, they're taking no quarter."

They had sown panic, and when our salvos rang out, the recently mobilised Red Infantry, decided to surrender immediately. We made new regiments out of them, and they fought quite faithfully on our side.

In Olginskaya we freed the Konstantinov Infantry School cadets, who thought it was their final hour, as they were running out of ammunition. We arrived just in time. Everyone was exhausted, but still fed the horses well before they went to sleep. I consider that day one of my most difficult during the civil war. There were five combats and seventy kilometres or more of marching. Andromache endured the difficulties well.

**A Cadet's Story**

> "The Konstantinov Infantry School was the first to unload in Primorsko-Akhtarskaya. We pushed back the Reds and, after several minor skirmishes, occupied the village of Brynkovskaya. Our task was to keep the crossing between two large lakes and prevent any approach by the Reds. Which we did. But the Reds went through Butenkovo and surrounded us. We lost all contact with both Babiev's division and Primorsko-Akhtarskaya. And most importantly, we began to feel a lack of ammunition.

Finally, seeing the hopelessness of our situation, we went south, to the *plavni*. We were encircled the whole time. We walked at night, from melon farm to melon farm. The watermelons saved us from hunger and, most importantly, from thirst. We were allowed to shoot only at point-blank range, so as not to miss. We were ordered to keep two rounds, the last one for ourselves. We left the dead, but what was terrible was that we had to shoot our own seriously wounded.

Eventually we reached the village of Olginskaya and, due to the number of wounded and the lack of ammunition, we couldn't move on. We had no information about our units. All around were the Reds, who were pushing harder and harder. We were firing our last rounds of ammunition.

And then last night we suddenly heard a distant thunder, but the sky was clear. Were they guns? Ours? How do we contact them? The thunder stopped, but an hour later it appeared again, and closer. Without a doubt, it was guns. And the Reds, sensing that we might be saved, pushed on. Then everything went silent again. And suddenly, very close to the village, volleys thundered, and panic gripped the Reds, and then a Cossack platoon entered the village. It was deliverance."

**The Correspondent**

An English war correspondent joined us for the raid. He spoke good Russian and was perfectly supplied with everything, both necessary and unnecessary. He had a wonderful thoroughbred horse with a new creaking saddle, another horse with a pack saddle, leather suitcases, an orderly, and even a tent. To emphasize his neutrality, the journalist didn't carry weapons, only a camera and binoculars. He even wore gloves and a new English uniform. Everything went well on the steamer, but as soon as we landed, he couldn't get hot water in the morning to shave, and 'brikfest'. He was assigned to Babiev's headquarters. But that staff were continually on the move. Most of the things he had brought with him turned out to be useless, and only interfered. The tent was just set up when, look, the staff were on the move again. The tent had to be quickly packed away. In one battle he lost his pack horse, in another his orderly disappeared with both suitcases.

Finally, the day came when Babiev turned to his staff and commanded, "Sabres out! We attack!"

The correspondent hesitated. But being by himself was perhaps even more dangerous. After all, a Red patrol could appear, anywhere, at any time. So he spurred his horse. But his mount was enthusiastic and went far in front of the Cossacks, so he was among the fleeing Reds. They didn't care about his neutrality, and they began to chase this strange rider. He survived thanks to the speed of his mare and the efforts of Babiev. In doing so, he lost his binoculars, which he replaced with a revolver.

We all followed the evolution of the correspondent with great curiosity. I didn't see him for days.

"What happened to him?" I asked a Cossack officer.

"He's still here. But you won't recognize him anymore. Ha, ha, ha. Look, the second in the sixth row of the Zaporizhian Regiment. He's the one with the red beard."

"What? In the ranks? How did he get there?"

"He tried everything. If he could have left, of course he would have. But there is no communication with the Crimea. He didn't like Babiev's staff. He went with the wagon train and there almost fell to the Reds. He lost all his things. Then he asked to join the regiment. And he was right – that is the safest place. He serves as a regular soldier and is no different from any Cossack."

"And his wonderful mare and English saddle?"

"The mare was killed, he lost his saddle and he no longer wears gloves."

"Instead of 'brikfest' he has 'kavun'[51]," added another Cossack. "And it doesn't shave anymore, which is why he has a beard."

[51] The Ukrainian for watermelon.

During the drama of the severed head, the correspondent wasn't nearby. At first he didn't want to believe it, but he was shown the head.

Then he exclaimed, "Why wasn't I warned? It would have made an excellent photo."

**Brynkovskaya**

Thanks to the capture of the village of Olginskaya, which occupied a central position in the quadrangle between the lakes and the *plavni*, we were able to restore contact with Primorsko-Akhtarskaya, where our wagons, infirmaries and munitions were located. But the Reds occupied the village of Brynkovskaya between the two lakes and threatened our flanks and communication line.

After a rest day in Olginskaya, which was necessary for the horses, the division quietly headed for Brynkovskaya at midnight. Both batteries were ahead, with Babiev. The regiments followed behind. But this time the Reds were alert and met us with machine gun fire. It was pitch darkness and we had no losses from the Red fire. But the battery couldn't see anything and couldn't shoot. In addition, the Reds had dug trenches, which complicated matters for our cavalry. The fight dragged on.

Seeing that surprise had failed, Babiev changed tactics. There was a small forest. Babiev placed the regiments and both batteries behind it so as to hide them from any Red observer on the very high Brynkovskaya bell tower. He sent infantry against the trenches. I think they were the prisoners from near Olginskaya. Although we were hidden from the eyes of the Red observers by the forest, they suspected our presence there, and every three minutes sent us shells, scattering them in all directions. Hours went by like that. The indiscriminate bombardment made us very nervous: you didn't know where the next shell would fall. It's hard to tolerate shelling without being able to reply. The Cossacks became sullen.

There were some curious events. Three horse mountain officers were sitting on the ground playing cards. A shell landed on their cards, went deep into the soil, because they were shooting from a distance and the shells were falling almost vertically, but didn't explode. A camouflet! They were damned lucky!

I was lucky too. Anxiety gripped me all of a sudden. I got up and thought to take cover at the gun, but all the seats there were already taken. So I went to a limber and leant under it, pretending I was looking for something. I didn't hear the shell explode, but suddenly I found myself on all fours after something hit me hard on the back of my head. "I'm dead," flashed through my head. I carefully wiped my forehead and looked at my hand –there is no blood. I touched the back of my head in fear, expecting to find a terrible wound: nothing! Then shook my head from side to side: nothing! Moving my hands around: nothing! Then I got up and saw the crater just behind me, where I had been sitting. Obviously either a lump of earth or the footrest of the wheel, from the horses jerking when the shell landed, had hit the back of the head. I was very lucky, something warned me of the danger and made me to move, at a time when the shell was already in the air.

There were other similar cases, but there were also men and horses killed, and it lasted a very, very long time.

About three o'clock in the afternoon our infantry attacked the trenches, then turned around and started to flee. The Reds couldn't hold, climbed out of the trenches and began to pursue them. Ours men ran faster and faster towards the forest. The Reds lost all formation in their pursuit. It was what Babiev had been waiting for. Our cavalry suddenly flew out from behind the trees and began to cut down the Reds, now fleeing in their turn. On their heels the regiments broke into the village of Brynkovskaya and even through to the other side, chopping down the confused Reds everywhere. The damage was terrible, and the victory was complete. We batteries followed the regiments at a trot, but couldn't keep up with them.

Coming out from behind the forest, we saw a field literally covered with Red corpses. It was difficult to move the gun without rolling on one. The Cossacks had avenged their silent losses behind the trees. There were some beautiful blows: skulls were cut off so that the skull formed a bowl, held on as if by a small strip of leather. You could see how in antiquity they made cups from skills.

I walked ahead of my first gun, carefully choosing a path between the corpses to guide the battery without crushing them. And behind me instead my riders deliberately tried to run the wheels over heads, so that they would burst under the wheels like a watermelon. In cursed at them, but in vain as they swore that it

was happening by accident. Eventually I moved further ahead so I wouldn't hear that horrible crunch and disgusting cackle when the not-quite-dead Reds twitched convulsively. At this point, I hated my men. Some weren't humans, being simply Neanderthals.

But then a weird thing. They saw a puppy fall out of a sack of a man who had been cut down. Then all of a sudden everyone was complaining.

"We can't leave it here. It will die."

A Cossack jumped off and picked up the puppy.

"Be careful you, with your giant paws – he's still small."

What can you say? After laughing at the twitching of the dying? Man is a great mystery, but also a great prick.

Before reaching Brynkovskaya, both batteries stopped. A soldier, who had moved away a bit to relieve himself, returned running.

"There are trenches two hundred paces away, and Reds in them."

Our units had passed them without noticing – they were on the other side of the village. There were no other units around, and we were quite worried. We set up the guns and machine guns and sent out scouts. A company of Reds came out of the trenches and surrendered to us. We weren't happy with that at all. We were scared of having prisoners, as the batteries are defenseless while moving. But we certainly didn't show them that. They were treated harshly and led to the village. There, much to our relief, stood a large crowd of prisoners in the square with several Cossacks guarding them. We surrendered our prisoners to them, lay down on the ground and fell asleep. But we didn't get to sleep for long.

"To your horses! Saddle! Trot!"

Babiev had called for us.

**Battle at Olginskaya**

We learned that Red cavalry had occupied Olginskaya in our rear, sowing panic among the wagons and the wounded. The Konstantinov Cadets bravely pushed back the Reds, but we needed to rush to their rescue. Babiev returned the stalled regiments. The division gathered and moved in a deployed formation to Olginskaya.

We passed a Red patrol along the way, which mistook us for their own, and when they realised their mistake they were so unnerved that they collapsed on the spot, and didn't even try to run.

We hit the Red cavalry straight from the march, without a pause. The fight was very hard. Our platoon, two guns under the command of Captain Malov, was sent to the far right flank. We were isolated. Against us was a *lava* of Red cavalry and an armoured train. The train fired regularly with a six-inch gun, shell after shell landing just over us, and all in exactly the same place. Had they been moved down one notch, our platoon would have been blown to smithereens. I thought at the time, it was so bad that it couldn't have an officer commanding. Today I think it was the officer who was firing and that he fired very well. He obviously was sparing by firing in a way such that they all looked like direct hits from the train.

We were worried about the Red cavalry though. Despite our fire, they continued advancing towards us. Malov was neither brave nor composed. He sowed panic in us, suddenly yelling hysterically.

"Retire! At a gallop!"

The situation was by no means tragic, and we could easily have left at a trot. But panic is contagious. We left two boxes of shells behind and galloped away.

Just then, Babiev's *aide-de-camp* led our prisoners to help us. They bravely entered the battle and repulsed the Red cavalry. We were ashamed that we had run away too early and unnecessarily.

It all depends on the leader. With Babiev we were lions, and with Malov we were mice. I had no preference for either of them, but preferred to work under the command of Shapilovski, who did a good job and didn't take big risks.

The fight dragged on. We pushed back the Reds, liberated the village and our wagons, but were unable to inflict a decisive defeat on them. It became obvious that the Reds had managed to concentrate a large force, many times more numerous than ours.

In the evening we were near Babiev when a plane appeared. We spread out sheets on the ground, the plane descended and threw a cannister. It contained orders from General Ulagai that our division was to join the main forces, which were located near the village of Novo-Nikolaevka. Like I said, it was a code that meant: retreat into the *plavni*. But we firmly believed in our "main forces" and were surprised that we didn't hear their guns. (According to General Wrangel's notes, the main forces were indeed there.)

Then I had to boost the morale of my friend Lenya Aleksandrov. After our flight, the men were nervous and afraid. Suddenly, Lenya whimpered, looking up at the plane.

"Now they are going to bomb us from the air."

"Fool. That plane was one of ours and was bringing a message."

Lenya was offended by this, and the men began to smile.

The division spent the night in the village of Olginskaya. The wounded and wagons were sent to Primorsko-Akhtarskaya with an order that all the wagons in Primorsko-Akhtarskaya were to go through the *plavni* to the south, on a minor road. To escort the wounded and wagons, the regiment of prisoners were sent. And to escort these latter, they sent the Konstantinov School. Our division, on the other hand, stocked up on ammunition, mobilised empty carts for the future wounded, and prepared for a very difficult flanking march. I'm lying. We, the ordinary participants, knew nothing of Babiev's intentions and slept peacefully.

**Flank March**

We had no calendars or clocks – we barely knew what month it was. I learned some of the dates much later from books by senior generals describing the events in which I had participated. But the generals talked of them in general terms, not knowing the details of what happened to me. 'General Babiev's cavalry, pushing back the enemy, went to connect with the main forces.' Of course, this was true, but its brevity doesn't at all convey the battles, dangers and difficulties that we, participants in that most difficult campaign, had to face. It's the details that give the story some flavour.

It was just light when we left the village of Olginskaya in deep silence and headed south to the marshes, reeds, bushes and tall unmown grass that would hide us from the eyes of the Reds. We were aided by a thick fog lying flat to the ground. On that day, the horse-mountain battery was on duty and was placed at the entry to the tall reeds to allow the entire column to pass under its protection. We, the 2nd Horse Battery, were the tail of our column of wagons, so we were the last to leave Olginskaya.

Three kilometres in front of the horse-mountain a Red armoured train stood out over the fog of. It was a tempting target, and the horse-mountain battery couldn't resist. When we, the last in the column, were passing them, they shot several shells at the armoured train before departing. We could see it clearly, standing on a railway embankment. And it couldn't see us, we were below the band of fog. The armoured train seemed to wake up, began to retreat and shot at random. It turned out to be a major mistake on our part. The Reds had missed our departure from Olginskaya, and if we had stayed silent, wouldn't have noticed for another hour or two. Our shots woke them up, and they set off in pursuit, keeping on us until the evening.

Our two batteries were trotting to catch up with the departing column when, at one turn among the tall reeds, we came fact to face with a red armoured car. We set up my first gun and pointed it at point-blank range at the armoured car. But it didn't move, and its door was open. Then a few brave men approached it, carbines at the ready. The car was empty, but everything indicated that it had recently been abandoned by the crew. We searched the nearby reeds and pulled out three shaking Reds. I don't know what was done to them, because the battery set off to catch up with the column.

The division first went southwest and reached the edge of the *plavni*, then turned and went southeast along its edge. It was a dry period, and the edge was firm, wagons and even guns moved along it with ease. Soon the Reds appeared and surrounded us in a tight semi-circle.

To move forward, our column had to push away the Reds ahead of us, hold them off to the left, and fend off those pursuing. From early morning until late evening was one continuous battle. We occupied a very small space in our column, and there were Reds all around. Bullets flew from everywhere, except the *plavni*. We were hidden sometimes by the lie of the land and the tall grass, but not everywhere. There was no place in the column where bullets didn't buzz all around. I don't remember there being any Red artillery. The Red chains were so close to us that perhaps their artillery couldn't fire. Or maybe I just didn't remember it. Gunners don't pay attention to shells, but are afraid of bullets. The infantry is the opposite.

So all day we walked in a tight column. With another leader, such a march wouldn't have been possible, but we were led by Babiev, and we blindly believed in him, clenched our teeth and marched. Our two batteries were busy all the time – working as a shuttle. One would shoot back to delay the enemy and the other would rush forward along the very edge of the water, pop out at the head of the column and shoot cannister. Sometimes Babiev considered the situation favorable for an attack. Then the Reds would be immediately thrown back a kilometre or more, and the whole column would move at a quick trot to get through the vacated space without shooting. But soon the Red ring would shrink again.

I tried, as much as possible, to linger in the dips or behind bushes and to walk through the open spaces as quickly as possible. At first I was very scared, then the fear dulled. I feared both for myself and for Andromache. Occasionally I looked for Aleksandrov to check he was still there. I was glad that my brother had stayed in Crimea.

Twice the battery was sent back to protect the rear. As we passed by the wagons with the wounded, they asked us about the situation. We looked cheerful and avoided their eyes. Sometimes the wounded would ask them to finish them off so they wouldn't get taken by the Reds. They were reassured, but we tried to get through as quickly as possible. Yes, it was better to be killed than wounded. Andromache and I shared a watermelon – there was nothing else to eat. We started to run out of cartridges and shells, while the number of wounded continued to grow.

**A Dead End**

In the evening, a swampy creek blocked our way. On the other side, some 500 m away, was the hamlet of Kirpili.[52] The road ran along a dike through the swamp to the farm. Kirpili was occupied by the Reds. We were stymied in a *cul-de-sac*. There was a swamp on both sides and Reds on the other side. The situation seemed hopeless.

We were near Babiev when he gave the order to an *Esaul*.[53] Unfortunately, I didn't remember his last name.

"*Esaul*, you have to take Kirpili. That is our only chance of safety. Don't back down. Attack the dike. God help you. Go!"

When I heard the order, I became very concerned. Attack the 500 m of dike? On horse? It was impossible. A dozen riflemen could defend the dike against a regiment.

But the *Esaul* answered very simply, "I obey, Your Excellency."

"To distract their attention," Babiev continued, "I'm now going to attack with all my might. Take advantage of that moment."

The *Esaul* turned to his men, a sotnia of fifty cavalry, and commanded in a calm voice, "In threes, to the right. Forward, march!"

And off they went.

[52] I have been unable to locate the hamlet. I think it might be modern Redant.

[53] A specifically Cossack rank, equating to Captain. The commander of a *sotnia*.

We attacked the Reds in front of us as hard as we could, but weren't able to push them back. Lieutenant Abramov was wounded near me. I helped put it on a wagon. He grabbed my hand.

"Don't throw me to the Reds. Better to finish it now."

"What nonsense. We'll take you with us," I said, trying to speak in a cheerful voice, and avoiding his eyes.

Aleksandrov and I met eyes, said nothing, but understood each other. It looked like the end was coming. Suddenly, a soldier shouted and pointed his finger at Kirpili: horsemen had appeared on the other side of the swamp. They had the characteristic silhouette of the Cossacks.

"Our men!!! Kirpili is taken!!! We are saved!"

These joyful words swept along our men like a bush fire, unit by unit, like victory cry. It was even more, it was Deliverance.

Babiev immediately sent reinforcements to the *Esaul*. And we trotted along the long dike to take shelter in Kirpili.

Walking along the narrow road, I asked myself, how they could have crossed it? They had attacked at the gallop, in a line, and fought the Reds among the hedges and houses, that is, in the worst possible conditions for a mounted attack. And yet they took Kirpili and that for minor losses. They didn't even brag about it, thinking they had done a job like any other, rather than accomplishing an amazing feat.

"They were taken by surprise," they said.

The division was quickly withdrawn into Kirpili. Now we were separated from the Reds by a wide swamp, and we could breathe freely, at least for a while. We needed it: after a whole day of fierce continuous fighting, shells, ammunition and nerves were running out. The tension during the day was intense.

**Kirpili**

We stayed for two days in Kirpili. We were forbidden to shoot in order to save those shells and cartridges we had left in the event of an attack. But our battery was set up in position, and there was always crew on duty and an officer with the guns. Another officer was at an observation post, on a haystack in the middle of the swamp, and a phone line was run out to him.

I don't know why, and I remain surprised, but the Reds stayed on the other side of Kirpili Creek. For some reason, they didn't try to attack from our side of the creek. Obviously, the terrain wasn't favorable to military manouevres, as it was swampy. Our silence gave the Reds courage, and they set up a battery on the other bank in the open and walked around with large units in close formation. What a target! But not a shot was fired from our side. I attribute this to the great discipline that Babiev had installed in us.

Night and day, the Reds sent us a shell every ten minutes. They were scattered haphazardly so that it was impossible to predict where the next one might fall. It got on your nerves. We would talk, joke, laugh, then fall silent and listen. The shot of a cannon would be heard, a shell would fly, there was an explosion. Then everyone was would talk again, until the next shell.

I was on duty at the silent guns. Lieutenant Arsen'ev, who was observing, asked me in a whisper on the phone to come to the haystack urgently, but silently. I went almost at a crawl and lay down beside him on the stack. He put his finger to his lips and handed me his binoculars. I examined the other side, but saw nothing special. I looked at him questioningly, he pointed his finger down.

And indeed, it was a rare sight. Here on a pond were gathered, presumably while migrating, were snipes, woodcocks and all sorts of other wading birds, which you rarely get to see. We were both hunters and admired the extraordinary sight for a long time. What a thing to be able to fly. We envied them. If we could have, what joy with which we would flown to the Crimea.

Babiev was waiting for something. A local Cossack made his way to us through the swamps and informed us of the arrival of our wagons from Primorsko-Akhtarskaya. They were three miles from Kirpili, but on the side occupied by the Reds. They were sitting in the reeds and waiting for orders. They had used a small, little used road through the *plavni*.

That was the news that Babiev had been waiting for. He sent them a message telling them to head to Kirpili, at the trot, from the sound of the first gun shot. We waited a bit, to let the Cossack get back to the wagons. On his signal, our battery swept away the Red battery, so naively standing in an open position on the other side of the stream. The same fate was then dealt to a squadron in the process of manoeuvering. The regiments crossed the dike, and struck at the surprised and confused Reds, and pushed them away from the small road leading to the *plavni*. And already an endless stream of wagons from Primorsko-Akhtarskaya were rushing along that road. Running alongside the wagons with the wounded and ammunition, were soldiers in English uniforms, causing us bewilderment. It turned out that in order to free up some of the wagons for more wounded, the prisoners from Olginskaya had been given British uniforms. The entire passage of the wagons into Kirpili lasted no more than an hour. When the Reds finally came to their senses and pulled up their reserves, we were back behind the long dike. But now we had cartridges and shells, and the Reds had to keep away. It recall to me that during that sortie we had insignificant losses, if any.

Of course, the short phrase: 'General Babiev's cavalry, pushing back the enemy, went to connect with the main forces' describes very poorly, or rather doesn't convey at all the horror that we experienced in that very difficult march. We supposed that we were now not far from General Ulagai's main forces, which were supposedly located in the village of Novo-Nikolaevka, 60 km distant. I repeat, we supposed, because there were no in reality 'main forces'. But we firmly believed in them, and that encouraged us a great deal.

After giving the wagons a rest day, we headed to Novo-Nikolaevka. As if there were no Reds between Kirpili and Novo-Nikolaevka.[54]

**Novo-Nikolaevka**

So, we headed to the village of Novo-Nikolaevka. To sneak away from the Reds, we left in the middle of the night, in total darkness. Our batteries went up front, behind Babiev. Suddenly, a machine gun went off in front of us, but then immediately fell silent. It turned out that a sleepy patrol of the Zaporizhian Regiment hadn't figured out who was coming.

Despite this annoying noise, the Reds slept through our departure from Kirpili and didn't pursue us during the long and arduous trek. It was lucky because we had endless wagons with us and it would have been very difficult to guard them in battle. We kept stopping to let the wagons catch up.

The wagons separated from us and went right, along the border of the plavni, to the village of Novo-Nizhne-Steblievskaya[55] on the Kuban River. They were protected by the cadets of the Konstantinov School.

We, Babiev's division and the Olginskaya prisoners, headed to Novo- Nikolaevka. We walked all day and part of the night and came to the village around midnight. There were a lot of infantry in the village, and we concluded that this was our 'main force' under General Ulagai. We walked to the square, put our guns in it, unharnessed and dispersed to our quarters, which were quite some distance from the gun park.

Before we went to bed, we cut up a very large watermelon. Here's how it was done. It was cut and then dropped, and it would open like a rose. The best chunk was the one which the middle stuck to and everyone wanted to get it. The rules of the game allowed trickery. When the watermelon was released and was falling apart, I shouted, "There's shooting!" Everyone listened up, and so I got hold of the best piece. But to my surprise, everyone leapt up and began to fasten on their weapons, because there really was shooting in the village.

We threw away the watermelon and rushed to the guns. They were being hastily harnessed. A soldier handed me the reins of a saddled Andromache. Once I got on Andromache, I lost my fear. The guns were harnessed, and moving at a walk to avoid panic, we headed out of the village.

Here's what happened. Our riders with their unharnessed horses had headed to the houses that the quartermasters had allocated to them, but found them crowded with sleeping soldiers.

[54] Now Novonikolaevskaya.

[55] Now Grivenskaya.

“Which regiment are you?” they asked one soldier lying awake.

“237th Soviet,” he replied.

“Ah!”

Our riders had the presence of mind to head slowly back to the guns and reharness them. They warned the others. Meanwhile, gunfire had began and both sides started to flee. How did the quartermasters not noticed the enemy infantry? Of course, we thought it was our non-existent ‘main forces’.

When I remember this episode, the hair still stands up on my head. Very simply: we entered a village filled with the enemy, went to the central square, unbuckled our guns there and then peacefully went to our quarters. We were very lucky that we didn’t lose our guns. We managed to leave the village, and that without losses. At night, bullets don’t cause much harm. Passing by our house, I jumped off Andromache, went in and took my wonderful piece of watermelon, eating it in the saddle during the retreat. We left the village, walked away a bit and stopped. I lay down on the ground and held the reins of poor Andromache, who hadn’t been watered, fed or unsaddled after a very long march.

**Combat**

The battle began at dawn and soon took on a tedious, protracted character. The village was a no-man’s-land between us and the Reds. Babiev decided to take advantage of that to strike at the Reds’ left flank. He took our two batteries and two regiments, trotted along the main street of the village and turned right into a small street which led out of the village.

But this time, fortune didn’t accompany Babiev. As soon as we turned into the street, thick swarms of bullets flew towards us. We hadn’t surprised them. The Cossacks said later that there was a line of seventeen machine guns in front of us. Even if the number of machine guns is exaggerated, there were a lot of them, and there were even more bullets. The leaves of the linden trees started to fall off, as if it was autumn. There was no respite from the bullets. We bent down over the horses necks and galloped forward. The Cossack galloping ahead of me was killed by a bullet straight to the forehead, I saw a splash from his head. Exactly the same case had happened near Kharkov.

We left the village. There was an old river channel that hid us from the eyes of the enemy. Both batteries lurked there while the regiments went forward to attack. We were hidden from the eyes of the Reds, but not from bullets and shells. We stood doing nothing, neither shooting nor running away, but just standing there senselessly under heavy fire, taking casualties. Our numerous colonels had gone forward with the Cossacks and didn’t give us any orders. And the senior officers, who in such cases should take command, also couldn’t decide what to do and were criminally silent. Babiev didn’t take us with him to stand silently under fire? It would have been easier to endure the shelling if we were shooting back, rather than doing nothing. In addition, our fire might have taken out several machine guns and made it easier for the Cossacks to attack them. No, we did nothing, and I’m sure we would have fallen into Red hands if Babiev hadn’t found us by chance. Some incomprehensible stupefaction had befallen our commanders, especially Oboznenko. And these were all experienced and energetic men. Very strange. One excuse for our colonels was the fact that the commander of the horse-mountain battery, Colonel Alyab'ev, had his leg blown off by a shell. He asked General Kolzakov to finish him off. Kolzakov fired from the saddle and missed.

“Don’t you be nervous,” said the dying man, “get down and finish me off.”

Which he did.

We had losses in the battery to both men and horses, especially in my gun. One horse fell dead, we unharnessed it and harnessed another in its place, but then that one suddenly fell down dead. It was discouraging. Three horses were killed and two wounded, just in my gun. And there was nothing to replace them with. There were losses of horses and men in both batteries.

Both of our platoon commanders, Malov and Ptashnikov, weren’t distinguished by courage and simply left us. I turned to Oboznenko, the senior officer of the battery.

“Evgeniy Nikolaevich, don’t you find it stupid to stand like this under fire without doing anything? Give the orders to either shoot or run away.”

“I completely agree with you,” he replied. “But all our colonels have to give the orders, and they are silent. Everyone seems to have lost their heads.”

“Then take the situation into your own hands and order something.”

At that time, another horse in my team was killed. I lost interest in Oboznenko and so didn’t convince him to act.

I have to mention two brave men. The first was the paramedic Gulnogov, who ignored the shells and bullets to carry away the wounded away and bandage them as if nothing was happening. Thanks to his composure, all the wounded were carried out. I suspect his sense of fear had atrophied. It does happen. The other was Lieutenant Arsen'ev, the one who wanted to calm the crazy old woman in Izyum and who called me to the haystack to watch the birds. He was obviously afraid, like the rest of us, but by force of will made himself walk slowly back and forth, whistling.

I was terribly afraid. I lay down on the ground and tried to squeeze myself into it. Lieutenant Vysevka was wounded fifteen paces in front of me. It took a tremendous effort of will for me to get up and go to him. The earth drew me like a magnet, and it was hard for me to walk those few steps without lying down again. Occasionally, I would look at Aleksandrov and Andromache to make sure they were still intact.

Our regiments returned from a failed attack and passed us by. They had taken heavy losses, and probably all the dead and wounded remained behind, with the Reds. We didn’t see the wounded taken past us.

And we continued to stand there, waiting for orders, which never came. So the batteries would have fallen into the hands of the Reds due the clouded minds. But fortunately for us, the retreating Babiev appeared.

“What are you doing here? Get away, and make it lively. The Reds are heading this way.”

If Babiev said this, he could be trusted, he wasn’t an alarmist.

**Stuck**

The horse-mountain batteries went back down the same street we had arrived on, whereas our battery headed to the left and went down the next, wider street, holding the horses by the bridle to avoid panic. At the corner, my gun, drawn by only three horses — the rest had been killed — took it badly and the wheel of the limber got caught in a earthen wall. The horses yanked, the wheel of the limber came free, but the wheel of the gun became firmly wedged in the corner of the wall. Going back or forward was no good, not even unhooking the gun from the limber. The horses pulled, the men pushed — for no result. And valuable minutes passed by. It was suspiciously quiet all around. There was no-one to be seen. The battery had gone. The Reds were about to show up.

Bugger the gun! We wouldn’t risk our lives because of it. We could easily find another one. I gave the order to my men, or rather those who remained with me because some, including Aleksandrov, had disappeared.

“Unlimber it, remove the bolt and sights and we’ll gather behind the corner house on the main street, 200 metres on.”

After making sure everything was finished, I ran there. There I found my men, Arsen'ev and Oboznenko.

“Colonel, sir, the gun is hopelessly stuck. Let’s leave it so we don’t risk the men.”

But Oboznenko was an old school. For him, the gun was a like a regimental flag.

“No, no and no! You need to rescue it at all costs!”

We took the horses again and ran to the gun. Arsen'ev, a strong man, joined us. Oboznenko returned to the rest of the battery.

There was no one around, only an ominous silence. Somehow we hooked the team up, kicked, pulled, and strained beyond strength. And then the gun came free. We jumped on our horses and trotted off. We went behind the corner house, but we could no longer see any of our units. The trail lines on the team were all mixed up. Two were on the same hook, and one was wrapped around a horse’s leg. But it was too dangerous to stop. We trotted on. I am convinced that the Red infantry were engaged in looting the dead and wounded Cossacks, and that gave us the time to free the gun.

Finally we saw a chain of infantry coming towards us. They were in English uniforms – our prisoners from near Olginskaya.

“Finally, our men.”

As soon as we reached the line of infantry, we jumped off and untangled the lines. It only took half a minute. Then we remounted and trotted on.

Arsen'ev said to me, “The infantry look odd.”

Indeed, although all my attention was on the lines, I noticed that one infantryman was drawing waves behind him on the ground with a bayonet as he walked. They don’t go into battle doing that! We had the feeling that they were watching us go. Finally a turn in the street hid us from their eyes. We moved to a walk.

Suddenly, having run away during the shelling, Captain Malov appeared out of nowhere,. His shirt was drenched in blood.

“Sasha, are you wounded?”

“No, it’s horse blood.”

He sat on the gun, embarrassed.

Evil tongues (Lukyanov) claimed that Malov was so overwhelmed that he had climbed into the corpse of a horse that had been blown apart by a shell and had lain there throughout the battle.

A Cossack post pointed their rifles at us.

“Stop! Who are you?”

“Gunners, damn you. Lower your rifles.”

“Where have you come from?”

“You can see that we came from the village.”

“It is occupied by the Reds.”

“Not at all, we just met our infantry there.”

“They’re no longer ours. They killed the officers and went over to the Reds.”

That’s when I was really scared. Previously, all my attention was absorbed by the gun and there was no time to figure out the situation. Why did they leave us? Not kill us or take us prisoner? Our gun would have given them a good welcome from the Red commanders.

I think it all depended on the psychological moment. We had no doubt that they were our men and paid them no attention. If we had shown fear or distrust, they would likely have shot us. The Russian peasant is a slow thinker, he needs time to figure things out, and we didn’t wait. I doubt the Reds greeted them with joy, because they had fought for the Whites, and especially since they were in English uniform.

Now, on our way out of the village, the fighting resumed. The battery was very careful after our experiences. Shapilovski commanded the firing.

Babiev appeared and ordered, “Move forward, and use cannister.”

We looked at each other. We went forward, but not far, and shot shrapnel, not cannister. We were quite pleased when all the shells were used up and we were sent to the rear, to the village of Novo-Nizhne-Steblievskaya.

The failure of this last battle sealed the fate of the landing. We went into the *plavni*. You can see on a map, that the village of Novo-Nizhne-Steblievskaya is located on the northern branch of the Kuban River and a road on a dike runs alongside it to the sea.

**Novo-Nizhne-Steblievskaya**

The Kuban River is splits. One branch flows into the Sea of Azov at Temryuk, the other much to the north at Achuev. The entire space between these two branches and much land to the north as well is *plavni*. It is approximately 100 by 70 km. The marshes are uninhabited. The village of Novo-Nizhne-Steblievskaya stands on the northern branch of the Kuban River and on the border of the *plavni*. The river runs between to raised banks, of which the right is higher. A dike-road to the sea had been made, which didn't flood even in the rainy period. After the failure at Novo-Nikolaevka, we were forced to go to the sea along that road. Our wagons were already in Novo-Nizhne-Steblievskaya.

Having used all our shells, our battery went to that village. There were isolated huts along the way. We went into one of them to eat something. A peasant woman confirmed that there was a good road to the sea along the Kuban river.

"But it won't serve you anything," she added calmly. "This morning the Reds took over the village."

We were astonished and carried on with great concern. We had just reached the first houses of the village, when 4.8 inch shells began to explode around us. There was a moment of panic and confusion in the battery, but an officer announced in a loud voice:

"The bridge and the exit to the dike are in our hands. Go to the bridge."

The shelling ended immediately, and our battery crossed a bridge over a small river and went along the dike now in the *plavni*. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief and looked with smiles on our faces: Phew! Saved.

None of us knew where we were going or what would happen to us. But now we felt safe. No-one was shooting and there were no Reds visible. Captain Kuzmin, an officer of our battery, told us what had happened in Novo-Nizhne-Steblievskaya.

"Our wagons were all settled in the village when the Reds arrived by barge this morning. A battalion, with one howitzer. That was unexpected, and they easily occupied almost the entire village. But, fortunately, the cadets of the Konstantinov School were with us. They organised the resistance. Their commander mobilised anyone capable of carrying a weapon from the wagons, and the Reds were thrown back to the southern part of the village. As the only horseman present, I was sent on a scouting mission. The shooting had died down. I walked cautiously down the main Street. At a turn I stopped, as I was afraid to go any further. I accidentally glanced behind a wooden fence and was petrified. There were seven Red riflemen lying there. I began to turn my horse around when I noticed one of them raise his head, look at me and lower his head again. They were definitely afraid of me. Then I said in a menacing voice, 'Surrender!' One of them knelt down and raised his hands to indicate surrender."

"And the others?"

"I was terribly afraid of them myself. They had seven rifles and I had just my revolver. But six of them were dead from a burst of machine gun fire. Only the one survived. Then I collected myself, told my prisoner to collect all the rifles and took him to our commander, who praised me. The prisoner said what he knew. Then I saw our battery and, without saying anything, joined you. Because, who knows, they might send me on another scouting mission. It came off once, but next time it might go sideways."

**In the Plavni**

The battery moved slowly along the dike-road into the *plavni*, and we were happy. We had managed to escape from the Reds, there was silence all around, no shooting and, most importantly, safety. It was very nice. We had been deprived of that feeling for a long time.

The *plavni* was a special world. Not a forest, but with isolated low trees. There were reeds everywhere, taller than human height. It was a dry period. When it rains, everything is flooded with water. The Kuban River, or rather its northern branch, isn't wide – only forty to fifty metres,[56] but it is deep and has a strong current. They say that there is a lot of game in the *plavni*: bears, wild boars, lynxes and even deer. There

[56] Once again the Russian and French versions differ in measurement. Judging by the modern river, it was 20 – 25 *sazhen* wide, not 20 – 25 metres, as the French has.

was a huge number of waterfowl. Ducks often flew overhead. It was easy to get lost in the reeds that came right up to the edge of the road. A curious acoustic phenomenon was observed here: if you went out into the reeds a bit then you couldn't tell which direction the sounds of the column on the move were coming from.

Now the issue of food soon became a problem, especially for the horses. The only grass was on the dike, and there was none among the reeds. People will get by, tightening their belts, but horses have to eat to work. Of course our supply train didn't think to send a barge of barley downstream. Even a barge of watermelons would have eased our situation. It was annoying to think how well the supply train lived, but didn't take good care of the troops. None of the supply or rear organs ever did anything in that regard, and for some reason it was considered normal. They were neither expected nor required to. You have to ask why, since that's what they were created for. It was a annoying to think that there are so few good organisers, and yet so many stupid people.

Wherever I saw good grass on the dike, I would stop so that Andromache could graze, and then catch up with the battery. Okay, so that was Andromache, but what about all the other horses in the batteries? They hadn't eaten since leaving Kirpili, two days ago. The column stopped and spent the night on the dike. It was the end of August and still warm. I unsaddled and unbridled Andromache, but held the reins in my hand so she wouldn't wander into the reeds, where she would be hard to find. Every half hour I would wake up and change places so that Andromache would find a new spot to eat.

Then a horse from my gun's team drowned at a watering hole. The banks of the dam were steep. The horse slipped, disappeared underwater and never reappeared. I would never have believed that a horse could drown so easily. True, she was unfed, dehydrated and very tired, but still it was amazing. Perhaps water got into her ears or the coldness caused heart failure. I ordered the horses to be watered from a bucket after that, so that the same wouldn't happen to any others.

In the evening of the next day we reached the mouth of the Kuban. Here, by a lucky chance, was the post of Achuev, which was a warehouse with building material. So we could build a bridge across for pedestrians and a small raft to ferry the guns and wagons. That building material was so unexpected there that we said that Saint Nicholas must have arranged it in order to save us. The horses were ferried by swimming, accompanied by several boats. Despite the steep banks and strong current, everything went well. When the raft was ready, I did the foolish thing of going across with my gun first, to test it. The gun was screwed to the raft and pulled, first from the bridge, and then from the other side. Well, I was so afraid! The raft was too small for the heavy gun and threatened to tip over at any second. Of course, I wouldn't have been able to swim, as I was in an overcoat and boots, with a sword, revolver and carbine. I was happy when we finally landed it on the other side. Despite the precariousness of the raft, all the artillery and wagons were transported safely on it.

**On the Beach**

The limber and gun were ferried across, and all my men and horses were on the south side of the river. Colonel Shapilovski, in order to avoid a traffic jam, ordered me to harness my gun and walk along the beach. Three kilometres on the quartermasters would indicate the section of the beach for the battery. The guns would arrive as the crossing progressed. So we went first and walked completely alone on the smooth beach, which doubtless was rarely travelled by man. It was night, and a crescent moon was shining. On the left, the reeds rustled gently, and on the right, small waves whispered against the sand. There was silence and mystery all around. It was such a nice contrast to the crackle of machine guns and the thunder of shells. We walked spell-bound. I turned around in the saddle.

"How good this is!"

"Yes, so nice and quiet."

I already knew from experience of the Arbat Spit that there is a solid strip of sand on a beach, where a gun will move as if on a road. Turn right and wet sand will catch at it, turn left and you will get stuck in loose sand.

The silence and gentle whisper of the waves lulled us into sleep. I woke up because Andromache had stopped. I turned in the saddle and gasped. The horses and men were all asleep, and the gun was nearing the water and sinking into the sand as I watched. I quickly woke everyone up, and we raced to pull the gun out the sand. The horses pulled, while we pushed and shoveled away the sand so that wheels could roll. But all our efforts went nowhere. The gun just sank deeper into the sand. One wheel was already all the way up to the axle. The sand didn't want to give us back our gun.

"All together, one more time. Let's go!"

By some miracle, the gun was freed and stood on the hard sand. We stood around, looking at each other.

"It was the king of the sea wanting to take our gun."

"Don't be angry, Sea King! We still need our cannon."

No one smiled. It was night, with the moon and full of mystery.

"Strange," I thought. "In Novo-Nikolaevka, the gun got stuck and, apparently, wanted to stay there. The raft almost capsized, and then it went into the sand. It wasn't by luck!"

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The entire division was stationed on the beach. It wasn't bad, but we were hungry and thirsty. We tried to drink sea water, but without success.

In the morning we were awakened by a Red plane. He flew past often and always threw bombs. But in those days both planes and bombs were lousy. He made five passes, and only one bomb hit the beach and wounded someone. We shot at him with rifles. But to do that usefully you need to know that you should aim a lot forward and above the aircraft. Those who didn't know that were shooting in vain.

Aleksandrov and I collected all the flasks, took a canvas bucket and went to the Kuban River. They said that the other shore was occupied by the Reds, but we didn't see anyone.

Our horses, smelling fresh water, literally went into a frenzy. They rushed towards the water. We had to stop them – they would fall down the steep banks and the current would carry them away. This is where my experience as a horse holder came in handy. I held them while Aleksandrov scooped up water with a bucket. We had to let the horses drink first, and only then were we able to drink ourselves. On the way back we had to protect the flasks from the thirsty Cossacks.

"Go yourselves to the river! The Reds there are quiet."

I sent the men and their horses to the Kuban. On their safe return, the other guns noticed, and they too went. Then the horse-mountain battery and the cavalry.

**Kerch**

On the third day of our stay on the beach, steamboats came for us. We took the wagons into the water and made a jetty out of them. Flat-bottomed barges transported men, horses, guns and wagons to the steamships. The plane flew past again, its five bombs falling between the steamers into the water.

No-one had thought to put food or fodder on the ships. The supply services needed some good hangings! The sailors gave us half of their soup, which we greedily devoured. Of course, no-one got very much. But how delicious it seemed to us!! And yet we were happy. We had made it back. The landing was over, we were alive and even able to return in greater numbers than we had set off.

The landing was unsuccessful. The Cossacks didn't rise in droves, because the Reds brought in large numbers of troops. But the Cossacks met us as liberators and many joined us. There were too few of us to conquer the entire Kuban. We were outnumbered by the enemy three to one. We got out only thanks to Babiev. Landings are terrible things, God save you from them. I think we were lucky to make it back.

I lay down on the deck and fell fast asleep. When I woke up we were already in Kerch. The steamer was parked at the wharf. I was sent to the hold to unload the horses.

My brother was with the supply train in Kerch. He was very worried about me. The most fantastic rumours had been spreading. He went to the steamer. From down in the hold, I could hear his voice asking about me. I went up to the deck. We smiled at each other.

“Well, how was it?”

“Terrible. We barely escaped.”

“And Andromache?”

“It was very hard on her, but she endured everything well.”

I went back down to the hold again to finish unloading the horses. There was a feeling of happy fatigue. We had fought our way back, survived.

Although the landing on the Kuban was unsuccessful, it did divert a lot of Red forces to the Kuban and gave our troops in the Taurida the opportunity to encircle and destroy Zhloba’s cavalry corps (18-19 June 1920). When they needed them, the Reds had no reserves – everyone was in the Kuban.

## Chapter 18 – The Taurida

### Losses at Cards

Returning from the landing, both batteries stayed for two weeks in Kerch. The horses and guns were in the school's big yard. Oboznenko, with nothing better to do, came up with the idea of arranging classes with the soldiers in the classrooms. I regularly played truant from class, and my bad example infected the other officers. My brother played cards somewhere in town, and played pretty happily. When he was the winner, we went to dinner at a seaside restaurant.

In Kerch, we were given our pay. I received something like 3,000 roubles. The officers immediately began to play cards. I didn't usually play, but this time I was persuaded to take part. Very quickly I lost 52,000. I would have lost more if Captain Kovalevsky hadn't ordered the game to end and disperse. The thing is that the game didn't cause me to get excited, I simply didn't know how to play. Very depressed, I went to our quarters and told my brother:

"I lost at cards."

"I know, I've already been told."

"So what do I do?"

"You have to pay."

"How?"

"I don't know."

I lay down on the bed, the darkest thoughts swirling around in my head. I couldn't use my salary. I would have had to pay for years without spending anything on myself. There was suicide, since I couldn't honour the debt. But that seemed silly to me, especially after the landing, where I had avoided so much danger, and because an hour of playing cards, which I didn't enjoy. But what to do? It was getting dark. My brother walked in.

"Do you have any money?" he asked.

"Yes."

I was ashamed to give a winner my unfortunate 3,000. He took it and left. I spent a sleepless night. Lord, Lord, what have I done! Now he's going to lose because of me. (I knew he had gone to save me.) Why wasn't I killed in the Kuban?

He returned when dawn was just lighting up the windows a little. I pretended to be asleep, but I watched him closely. He walked over to the window and I heard the rustling of paper. I picked up my ears. The money?

How much have you lost? He asked, not turning around.

"Fifty-two thousand."

He counted and threw me a wad of money.

"Pay up. And never touch cards again."

He lay down without undressing and pretended to fall asleep. I couldn't wait for the morning. As soon as the sun rose, I went to the winning officer and gave him the money.

"Look, old man, what's this. I can't take that amount from a friend."

"Take it, because I played in good faith."

"No, right, I can't... Here's what I suggest. Let's play double or quits."

And he went to look for his cards.

"No, I'm not playing cards again. I've already paid for that lesson."

I departed, leaving the money with him. And I haven't played since.

**Feodosiya**

Both batteries were loaded into a long train and taken to the Taurida. The supply train went to Feodosia. Shapilovski and several officers went with, along with my brother, Aleksandrov and me. We were placed in dachas on the mountains.

Here we found Colonel Shafrov, who was officially the commander of our battery. He was sick with asthma and rarely visited the battery, generally being replaced by Shapilovski, who was next most senior. For us it was rather an unpleasant surprise. We were used to Shapilovski, and we didn't know Shafrov or, rather, didn't know his best side. In the North Caucasus, at Petrovskoe, he almost destroyed the battery, and in the Makhno area had quarreled with the head of the second group. But Shafrov was literally charming this time. He arranged dinner, bought plenty of good wine, and invited all the available officers in to get to know them. He asked Shapilovski to introduce us to him. For each person Shapilovski accompanied it with a laudatory phrase. I blushed red as a beetroot when he introduced me.

"Lieutenant Mamontov. He can sit on any wild horse, and it won't throw him."

This was greatly exaggerated, but it was nice to hear.

Our trumpeters played. Shafrov was cheerful and witty. He said a speech about youth, the joy of life, love. Oh, and happiness. At the end, we were all more than slightly tipsy. They let the trumpeters go, took possession of the instruments and began to try to blow them themselves. Can you imagine? Dogs all over the neighborhood accompanied us with howls. Finally we parted ways, each carrying a trumpet.

The next morning, Lieutenant Gorobtsov came to pick me up, and we went to Shafrov and Shapilovski's dacha, where our meeting was. We walked towards it, laughing and blowing on our trumpets. My brother came out of the villa.

"Don't make noise like that. Shafrov shot himself during the night."

He had left a note, 'I slept last night. I'm not drunk. I can't take it anymore.'

Lord, I thought, he shot himself with my stolen revolver. Little did I know at the time that all the cartridges were damaged in Shafrov's revolver. He couldn't have shot himself with it. Thy ways are inscrutable, O Lord. I contributed to his death without knowing it. So, last night's dinner was a farewell. He did it well. No-one could have suspected. And the howling of dogs? And we laughed. They howled at death.

**Funeral**

There was a gun in the supply train, and we decided to bury our commander, Colonel Shafrov, as an artilleryman should be, on a carriage. To do this, the barrel is removed and the coffin is tied to the base. Shapilovski appointed riders: my brother in the base pair, Gorobtsov in the middle and me in the lead. The horses, especially at the base, who had to bear the weight by themselves when we went down the mountain, were weak. With that and the inexperience of the riders, I feared somewhat for the fate of the coffin. The fact is that of the three of us only I had ridden as part of a team, and then only for a very short time.

A procession lined up in front of the house. At the front was a priest and a psalmist, followed by a choir of children, then our carriage with coffins, the trumpeters, a platoon of soldiers with rifles, a carriage with Shapilovski and then the rest of the officers and soldiers on foot.

"Atten-shun!"

Conversations stopped and everyone moved to their position. They took out the coffin and tied it on. Shapilovski had drunk all the wine left over from dinner with grief and appeared on the porch completely drunk. He wanted to say some words about the deceased, but we heard only vague mooing and drunken hiccups. He waved his hand and quickly headed for his carriage. He didn't calculate his trajectory very well – he climbed in one side and then exited out the other. Then, holding on to the carriage, he looked at us with a ferocious eye to see if we were laughing. Then he climbed in carefully, and installed himself in the carriage. The choir started to sing and the procession moved off.

Soon the descent down the mountain began. The road was narrow, dug into the hillside. There was nowhere to go: to the right was cliff, to the left was steep mountain. We put the brake on, of course, and my brother did his best to restrain the horses. They almost sat on their butts, but the carriage continued to move faster and faster. Gorobtsov and I couldn't help my brother in any way. All our attention was focused on not pulling on the lines and that the horses wouldn't slip. Finally the base pair switched to a trot to get away from the carriage. Gorobtsov and I also switched to a trot. I warned the choir of children walking in front of me.

"Hey, you! Hurry up or we'll crush you!"

They moved to the left and right, but realising that the road was too narrow for that, they started to run, taking the clergy with them. The children tried to keep singing on the run, but the result wasn't very harmonious. The trot gathered speed, and the choir and priest accelerated. I can't but laugh when I remember the portly priest who, with a cross in his hand, pulled up his cassock to run faster than the rest.

Finally we reached a flat spot and were able to hold the horses. The procession took on a decent character again. However, we were proud to have safely taken our commander to the cemetery without tipping over into the ravine. The orchestra played 'How Glorious Is Our Lord in Zion', the soldiers fired three volleys, the grave was filled in. There was no funeral service, as that is not done for suicides.

Shapilovski left in his carriage a, without inviting us to a memorial toast.

I think that Shafrov was the only officer of either battery who was carried on a gun carriage.

**In the Taurida**

The supply train moved to the Taurida, a small village. I was given quarters with the local witch, who didn't want to let me in. But I wanted to meet a witch, and I insisted. The conversation was conducted through a closed door.

"No, I don't want to. You'll mess up my herbs."

"I promise I won't touch anything."

"No, I won't. You're still going to smoke in the rooms."

"I don't smoke and I believe in God."

Silence.

"Look through the slot. I'll give you a piece of good English soap."

The witch couldn't resist the soap, and with a sigh she opened the door for me. Soon she and I became friends. The whole hut was hung with herbs. She explained to me which herb helped what. But due to my youth I have forgotten them all, which is a pity.

That's when I met Dr. Katalevtsev, the division doctor. He was small, with short arms and somewhat unusual. He had been in Abyssinia and related some interesting material about it. It was dangerous to be treated by him, but it was pleasant to walk with him. On one of the walks we went into a garden. It was guarded by an ancient but cheerful old man. He lived in a hut and said he had been a lancer in the Count Uvarov Regiment. It turned out he had fought in the Turkish War of 1877. He was annoyed that he didn't have a gun and boys were stealing his fruit. I liked him so much that I did something stupid and brought him a rifle and ammunition. He was overjoyed and immediately marched up and down the street with his rifle on his shoulder. Like our men! But when I went back to him, he was crying inconsolably. His rifle had been stolen. I tried to comfort him and promised to give him another. But my witch asked me not to. The old man fired bullets into the air in all directions over the village. He didn't realize that modern bullets went three kilometers. In the Turkish war, they only went 200 paces.

A grandiose tea party was arranged with Colonel Lukyanov. We sat under a linden tree, with a samovar. I drank eighteen cups. Lukyanov had a sense of humour which I appreciated. After the war, he entered the Foreign Legion, with the rank of sergeant.

**Serogozy**

In September 1920 I was back with the battery. Both batteries worked with General Barbovich's regular cavalry division. The division was stationed in Nizhniye Serogozy,[57] which is located almost in the middle of the Taurida. When there was an alert, that is the Reds were advancing, the division went to meet them, then after the battle returned to Serogozy. This time I had entrusted Andromache to a soldier of our gun and received him back without any difficulty and in good condition.

There were a few fights, nothing remarkable. The Reds usually withdrew after a short battle. I remember only one incident. We drove the Reds out of a farm and the battery stopped outside it. Suddenly, our soldier in charge of forage appeared from underneath the barn. He had gone to look for fodder, and when the Reds occupied the hamlet, he had managed to get under the barn and sat out the entire battle. He didn't know who was occupying the farm and was afraid to leave. But he saw our battery, recognised the horses and then came out.

My brother decided to harness Andromache and Anathema, Shakalov's horse, who were sisters and nearly identical, to a *tarantass*. The proud Kabardians didn't want to go into a harness. With patience and perseverance, we made them, and they were indeed a very elegant couple. But one day we met the division's chief of staff, who admired them so much that we decided to stop the trips. You never know, he might decide to take them!

A funny incident happened in Serogozy. I found a book of Gorbunov's stories in a peasant house. I lay down on the bed, alone in the room, reading and laughing uncontrollably. The hostess came in, stood and left. A few minutes later, Lieutenant Maltsev entered.

"How are you feeling?"

"Okay. Why are you asking?"

"Right. What are you reading?

"Gorbunov. Listen to this."

"Ah, now I get it."

"What do you get?"

"Your owner came to our hut and said that you had gone crazy – you are lying by yourself and laughing."

I started reading and we both laughed until we cried. The hostess came in, stared at us in disbelief and disappeared.

"Ha, ha, ha. She'll run off now and say we're both crazy. Ha, ha, ha!"

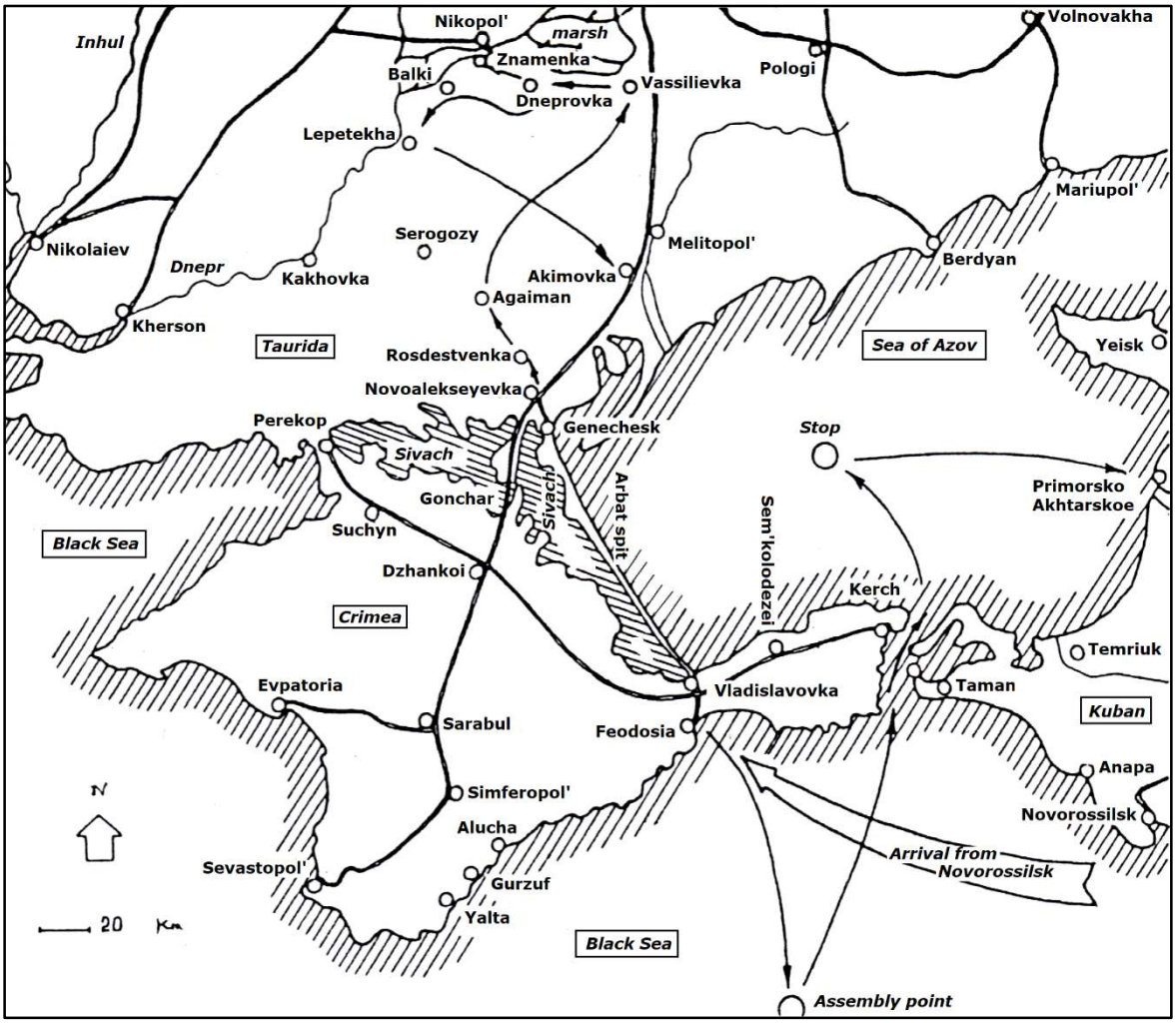
I loved the signals that the bugler played. The poetic tunes for lights out in particular. For lunch: 'Bring your spoon, bring your bowl, there is no bread, come anyway.' But I didn't like the very beautiful call: 'Riders, friends, prepare to march ...' – because it meant a march and a battle.

**Across the Dnieper (25 September – 1 October 1920)**

One day the call to march sounded, we saddled, limbered and headed in the direction of the Dnieper. To our great surprise, there was no combat and we met no Reds. We reached the village of Lepetikhi. We rested a bit, then started to head back.

It began to get dark when we approached the Dnieper, south of the city of Nikopol. The bank was gentle, and sappers were building a pontoon bridge. It was nice weather, the frogs were croaking. Our infantry had already crossed, but no gunfire could be heard. Soon the bridge was finished, and Barbovich's division crossed to the other side.

[57] Now Sirohozy.




We walked all night without meeting any Reds. In one point we passed under a high railway bridge. As our battery went under a red armoured train quietly arrived above us. We were actually walking under it. We saw a silhouette stick out of it.

It asked, “What unit are you?”

No one answered.

“Hey, you there! I asked, what unit are you?”

We sped up in silence.

“What the hell? Are you completely deaf?”

So he didn’t get any sense from us. After we had gone on a bit, there was an explosion from behind us. Obviously, one of our units had blown up the line.

And we continued to march. Finally it started to get light. In front of us was a small river, the Buzuluk, with rather steep banks. The infantry and cavalry crossed at a ford, but it was a serious obstacle for artillery. We began to ferry the guns across on a small raft. We could already hear shooting ahead. First, the horse-mountain battery crossed and immediately headed towards the fighting. Our battery struggled with the raft for a long time. When we were finally across, the fighting was somewhere farther away. We trotted around looking for our units.

Just as we rejoined them, General Babiev, the head of the entire operation, was killed. A shell hit the mill where he had set up his observation post. The command was taken over by General Barbovich. Babiev’s death caused some hesitation on our part, especially among the Kuban Cossacks. The Reds took advantage of this and attacked us. Our men were unable to resist and ran. The units were mixed up. Our two batteries also turned and trotted off, but in perfect order.

Around us was complete panic – screams, gunshots, shell explosions, men running, and dust everywhere. Two episodes are etched in my memory. One of our infantry was running when a Red cavalryman caught up with him and slashed at him. The infantryman fell. Several cavalrymen appear out of the dust. One of them was a White, who had a lance which he spun over his head to prevent three Reds from coming near him (Red cavalry don't use lances). Suddenly our man dropped the lance and ran it through one of his pursuers, who fell, and the lance was back spinning over his head again. The other two Reds drew back their horses and didn't pursue him any more.

The Reds didn't attack us as we moved in formation. Our battery was at a quick trot behind the horse-mountain battery. But they made a mistake on the road and rode into a farm which was a dead end. We weren't fooled and took the right road. Now we were moving in front and horse-mountain was behind us.

Leading the guns, Oboznenko was talking with my brother about something. Talking isn't really the right word: you had to shout at the time, thanks to the noise around. They turned around and called me using signs. I left the ranks to join them.

**Crossing the River**

"We need to cross the river at a trot, or we are done for. If we can get a few guns onto the other side, we will be able to stop the Reds. It is important that the first horse doesn't stumble ... The others will follow ... Are you confident in Andromache?"

"Andromache will certainly do it."

"Then go ahead, choose a good spot and lead the battery. God help you!"

I spurred on Andromache and galloped forward to the river, which wasn't far away. I looked carefully at its banks. To the left was a place where the bank climbing out wasn't so steep. There was no time to think. I galloped back to the battery. Oboznenko looked at me, I nodded my head in affirmation, he too. I turned to the riders. All three of them nodded their heads at me and understood. Pointing I directed my first gun slightly to the left. The battery followed. With my heart beating quickly, I walked up to the river. I crossed myself and pushed Andromache forward. She hesitated only briefly then stretched her front legs forward. I leaned back and we slid down like a sled. On hitting the water, we raised a cascade of spray. Let's trust that the bed isn't muddy! I took my feet out of the stirrups, but Andromache walked on, the water reaching her chest. Turning around, I could see the lead gun arriving. I spurred Andromache and she climbed, like a cat, up the other side. I lay on her neck and clung to her mane. At this point I appreciated the her Kabardian nature, a mountain breed. Andromache made another effort with her whole body and climbed the bank. The gun crashed into the water behind me. The front pair was already climbing. The riders, red with effort, screamed. I jumped to the ground, grabbed the lead horse by the bridle and dragged it up. My soldiers appeared in turn and grabbed hold of the lines. Everyone was yelling. The front pair was at the top, and were pulling the middle pair. Soldiers from other guns appeared and leaned on the lines. The middle pair made it up. That left the rear pair only. There was one moment when the weight of the gun and limber seemed to pull the horses backwards. But the soldiers pushed together, and the pair made it onto dry land. And the second gun was already crossing. Phew! I wiped my face with a trembling hand, covered in dirt mixed with water and sweat. They now know that it is possible, and they know how to do it, and there are a lot of men there. And the horse-mountain guns are very light. I went to my gun. The horses were still trembling and covered in foam, but the riders were smiling, though still looking stressed. My brother and Oboznenko appeared, water pouring off them. The second gun was up, and the third was just arriving. Oboznenko was already putting the battery into position.

Our two batteries crossed the river at a trot. It didn't take long – how can you tell how many minutes such a thing takes – but it was over quickly.

Both batteries immediately deployed in a line. The Guards and 8th Batteries joined them. They had had to go through the same process as we did. It turned out to be an impressive line of sixteen guns. I don't remember who commanded it. We met the Reds with cannister, and they left as quickly as they had arrived. To our left, Red horse reserves were coming down the hill to finish us off. They were so confident of victory that they were moving in march columns. We turned our fire onto them and literally turned them into porridge. We saw horses and men thrown into the air. The cavalry was horribly mixed up and recoiled

in disorder. And then there was silence. Our units were able to assemble, cross the river and retreat to the Dnieper. The Reds didn't chase us. Their artillery sent us several shells to clear their consciences.

When everything calmed down, Oboznenko and I went to the spot.

"Did two batteries really make it across here?"

"If I had been told it, I wouldn't have believed it."

During the crossing, no-one paid any attention to incoming shells or bullets, everyone was too busy with their own job.

The Reds were able to transfer huge forces from the Polish Front. Probably two horse armies. To the north of us, near the city of Aleksandrovsk, the other group from our army which had crossed the Dnieper, had as much success as us. Obviously, the Reds managed to find out our intentions through their spies, and we met large numbers of troops. But thanks to the good action of our artillery, we avoided defeat and were able to safely withdraw to our bank of the Dnieper.

There a squadron of the Izyum Hussar Regiment rode into a steep ravine, thanks to a fog. There were wounded men and horses.

It is very strange that the Red artillery fell silent as soon as ours opened fire. The division returned to Serogozy. It was about the beginning of October 1920.

**General Situation**

The army was still a very impressive force. But the population were tired of the war and the influx of volunteers had stopped. Wrangel's land reforms were announced too late and hadn't yet yielded results. They should have been announced when we were reaching Orël. We were unable to link up with the peasant uprisings. They were poorly organised and brutally suppressed by the Reds. We had no reserves. All our units had to fight all the time and win all the time. In the event of a defeat, there was no-one to replace them, and defeat could turn into catastrophe. Why did our command not create a reserve when we controlled half of European Russia? Even now, the rear was teeming with military skivers, all sorts of unnecessary institutions and supply columns.

We failed to convince the 'Allies' of the dangers of Communism and of the need to help us properly. Poland made peace with the Bolsheviks, and we had to expect an influx of troops to our front.

And most importantly, the Red Army had become much better. It grew not only numerically, but also in fighting quality. It owed this to the mobilisation of officers from the old Russian army. Those scoundrels hadn't come to us as volunteers, to fulfill their duty. They tried to sit back and hide. But they dared not disobey Red power, and served it diligently when called up. This Cain-like betrayal didn't save them from the concentration camps, prisons and execution though.

The weak point of our front was Kakhovka on the Dnieper. There the Reds had the high bank, and we had the low one. Many times, under the protection of artillery, the Reds tried to cross the Dnieper. Our units let them move forward until they were away from their artillery cover, then counter-attacked and drove them back into the water. But the Reds didn't concern themselves with losses, they replaced the missing in the units and reinforced the artillery.

Then our command came up with a very bold maneuver: to let the Reds reach Perekop and then attack them in the rear.

Perekop was strengthened all summer. Excellent trenches were dug, and even several rows of wire. But, as usual, the command forgot that the defenders were human, and didn't prepare dugouts, nor wells, nor firewood, nor warehouses of provisions, nor stores of ammunition and shells. When we arrived in Perekop in the bitter frost, snow and wind, life there was unbearable. True, it was unbearable for the Reds. But there were a lot of them and they could rotate.

Our batteries were never at Kakhovka, but were at Perekop. The Perekop fortifications were occupied by infantry, and we cavalry remained in Serogozy.

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It was October 1920, it was cold and snow had fallen. I ordered myself some *valenki* felt boots and went to get them. The boots were good and served me well.

When I paid the workman, he shook my hand and said, “You’re one of the few who paid me, most take it and leave.”

I was embarrassed for our men. I remembered a similar incident in the Manych steppes with the lambskin coats. As I walked away from the boot make, I heard the signal: ‘Riders, friends, prepare to march.’ I got the boots just in time.

We headed southwest, in the direction of Kakhovka. It was getting dark and it was snowing. I fell asleep on the march. We were walking holding bridles, and I woke up when I walked into the rump of the horse walking ahead when the column stopped. I had thought it impossible to sleep while walking. Well, it’s possible. We stopped in some village, whose name I didn’t write down. We didn’t enter the village, we stayed overnight in barns on the outskirts, so as to make it easier to assemble and leave quickly. We slept very badly. We remained there for a day.

From there my brother and Aleksandrov left to join the supply column in Feodosia. I had mixed feelings. On the one hand, I was happy for him, because fierce fighting awaited us. But on the other hand, I didn’t want to part with him in such troubled times. I gave him a carbine. It was the last time I shook my brother’s hand. I never saw him again. He died in Constantinople of meningitis.

**Combat**

Our division was somewhere very close to Kakhovka. Early in the morning the order came: “Saddle up, Limber!” We left the village and immediately bumped into a Red cavalry division. A very hard fight ensued. We were standing near General Barbovich when a shell landed in his staff and a horseman flew up like a spinning top, as near Egorlykskaya. The proximity to Kakhovka made itself felt, the Red division stubbornly withstood all our attacks, the battle was fierce. But from our lines, out of nowhere, there were suddenly twenty light gray ford light trucks with machine guns. They lined up and advanced on the Red cavalry. The method was new and was a complete success. The Reds fled, while the Fords chased them and inflicted heavy casualties. Unfortunately, almost all the Fords were abandoned in the evening, having previously been put out of service, due to lack of gasoline.

We trotted after the Fords. At one spot we passed a destroyed Red battery. There were two abandoned guns, dead horses, and corpses in red *chakchars*[58] lying there, which indicated that it had been a good unit. We took the shells from the limbers, but we weren’t interested in the guns. We just removed the bolts and sights and threw them into a well in the next village. We didn’t stop in that village, but marched all night and all the next day. It was very cold.

As he was leaving, my brother told me that he was going to Geniches'k and then the Arbat Spit, where we had been stationed. My brother and Aleksandrov left, and the next day we learned that the Reds had crossed the Dnieper at Kakhovka and a Red Cavalry Corps had marched across the Taurida to Geniches'k (18/31 October 1920). I was terribly worried about my brother. Did he have time to reach the spit, or?.. But our infantry was near Geniches'k, with a heavy battery and General Abramov’s Don Cossack Division. They surprised the Reds, defeated them, and the Reds fled as fast as they came. The enemy were defeated, but I knew nothing about my brother’s fate.

After a stubborn battle with the Red cavalry division, we realised that it wouldn’t be possible to attack the Reds in front of Perekop. The Reds had huge number of troops, and we had a shortage of shells and ammunition on top. The latter was our chronic flaw. We received ammunition and shells from old Russian military stocks from France, and they arrived little by little... Now we would happily go to the Crimea.

**Rozhdestvenka**

[58] This term usually relates to hussar trousers, often braided. Tsarist hussars generally had red dress trousers, so there were presumably some stocks remaining from WWI.

With the passage of the Red cavalry to Geniches'k we were cut off from the Crimea, but I was barely worried. We were a great division with a good commander and, one way or another, we would be able to break into the Crimea.

It was terribly cold. But due to the fact that the ground was frozen, it was easy to walk, and we didn't get stuck. We were no longer heading to Perekop, but to the Chongar bridge. After the battle with the Red cavalry, we marched without stopping, all day and all the next night. We only stopped to feed the horses. In the morning we found ourselves in front of the village of Rozhdestvenka. But the road to the Crimea was blocked by a Red cavalry division. A fight ensued that lasted all day, but we couldn't push the Reds out of the way.

It began to get dark, the battle gradually stopped. We moved back. But suddenly, out of nowhere, a battalion of the Kornilov infantry regiment appeared. They were riding in carts and heading towards Rozhdestvenka, occupied by the Reds.

"Ah, cavalry, we're told it doesn't go well for you? Do we have to help you? The *Kornilovtsi* shouted ironically to us.

It was made easy for them. Because of the bitter cold and thinking that they had definitively repelled us, the Reds failed to station guards. They were clearly all staying in the warm huts. The Kornilov infantry, not meeting anyone, went through the village to the main square, got off the carts and deployed. They fired a volley at the huts in one direction, then another, shouted "urra!", turned around and gave that direction two volleys and shouted "urra!" again. This was enough to cause the wonderful Red cavalry division, which had withstood all our attacks up to an hour earlier, to panic.

Hearing volleys and "urra", we trotted into Rozhdestvenka and ran into the fleeing Red cavalrymen. They were everywhere: on the streets, in gardens, in barns, in huts. The battery took seventeen prisoners without looking for them, they merely stumbled into us. How many had the regiments in front of us taken?

I also took a prisoner. Deathly tired, I entered the house indicated as my quarters and saw a rifle and a sword leaning in the corner.

"Where is he?"

The hostess silently pointed to the huge stove.

"Get out of there!" I said in a menacing voice.

A shaking cavalryman appeared. Just then Captain Malov entered.

"Huh, a Red? Now we're going to gouge out your eyes and cut off your nose."

He shook even more.

"*Laisse donc, Sacha, tu vois qu'il va pisser de frayeur*."[59]

"Why are you staring at me like a fool? Get to work. Put on the samovar!"

The prisoner was in such a panic that he didn't recognise what he had been told. But the hostess, delighted with the peaceful outcome, pushed him towards the samovar. Then he grabbed a bucket but was so nervous he spilled it everywhere.

"You loser! You can't even put on a samovar."

"Sorry, Mr. Officer, sir. I was so happy I didn't know what I was doing."

We were very tired, we wanted to sleep. But what to do with the prisoner?

"Climb on the stove and don't move for any reason. If you get off during the night, I'll kill you like a dog," Malov told him.

[59] He spoke in French so the Red wouldn't understand. "Let him be, Sacha, he'll piss himself with fright."

We lay down on the benches and instantly fell asleep. The prisoner could easily have stabbed us, but didn't. On the contrary, as soon as we woke up, he brought water for us to wash, put on a samovar and served us in every way.

We didn't think to ask where his horse was. Only now, typing this, that I thought about the horse. A bit late!

The bugler signaled the march, and so probably another battle. A Red cavalry corps was approaching Rozhdestvenka. We went to meet it halfway.

The platoon of our battery was on a hill. The regiments were advancing in the valley in front of us, and three Red batteries opened fire from a hill on the other side. The horse-mountain battery took care of one of them, we silenced another. But then the famous charge by the Horse Guards on the centre of the Red cavalry took place, and we got carried away and began to help them, shelling the Red cavalry. The third Red battery took advantage of that, taking our platoon under fire. Two shrapnel burst behind us, another two in front. Straddled. One had to expect the next ones to be on top of the battery.

I shouted to my neighbor, Lieutenant Menshikov, to quickly hide behind the gun's shield, and I ran to my own gun, and only just got behind it when four shrapnel burst above us. Menshikov, who didn't have time to escape, and one soldier of my gun were wounded, and the horse holder for my gun, Chuduk, was killed by a shrapnel fragment to the temple. He fell, but didn't let go of the horses. So he served even after in death. I looked to make sure he was holding the horses tightly, and left him there. The guns went separately to avoid further losses. But to our amazement, the Red battery stopped firing. We found out later that another platoon of our battery had seen the flashes from the Red battery firing and rushed to suppress it.

When I returned to take Andromache's reins from the dead Chuduk, I had to forcefully unclench his hand. We took the his body to bury him, but since we were always on the march, we didn't bury him until we were in the Crimea, at a farm near Yushun. A coffin was made and he was buried in it. People said those prayers that they remembered. It was touching. Not everyone got such a funeral. They made a cross out of boards and wrote his name in ink. The rain soon probably washed away the inscription. His mother waited in vain for his return.

We pushed back, but didn't destroy the Red division. Obviously, in front of us were masses of Red cavalry, probably Budenny's entire army. If he had been a better commander, he would have prevented us getting into the Crimea.

We decided, fortunately, that the path into the Crimea was free. Of course, the Reds did everything to keep us out.

**Loyalty of the Prisoner**

I went back to the hut for my things. My prisoner was eagerly awaiting me.

"Are you leaving? Don't leave me here. Take me with you."

I was in a quandary. I didn't want a prisoner. What would I do with him? He wasn't a peasant, probably a factory worker.

"You know what, the Reds are sure to come soon, stay in this hut and wait for them."

"No, I'm afraid to stay. If one of your men looks inside, he will shoot me. Besides I'm very reluctant to go back to the Reds, who will treat me with suspicion. Who knows how they will welcome me?"

In that, he was right. But my captive's loyalty bothered me. How could I get rid of him?

"Then go into the garden and say you've been hiding there the whole time we've been here."

"No, no. I'm lucky that I got found by you, and I don't want to split from you. Any other would have just shot me."

"I guess you're right, but understand that I don't have time to mess with you. There will be combat. And my soldiers won't accept you, because you are a *Budennovtsi* cavalryman. Stay, it's the easiest thing you can do."

Finally on some pretext or another, I escaped from my prisoner, leaving him to fend for himself. But before that, I took off his spurs. On occasion, I would talk about it.

“I took these spurs off a *Budennovtsi* cavalryman... It was near Rozhdestvenka, there were fierce battles...”

“I wasn’t lying, but it happened quite differently from how you might suppose from the words. But I forgot his horse, and saddle too.

**To Chongar**

The road to the Crimea seemed free after the battles at Rozhdestvenka, but we needed to hurry, because the Reds, wound naturally make every effort to block our way. So we marched once more through both day and night, without stopping. It was cold, but there was no snow. Sometimes it was reasonably warm during the day, but at night it was terribly cold.

In addition to the gun, I was assigned to keep an eye on the wagons. I often stopped and let the wagon pass me by. I counted them, made sure that the loads were evenly distributed and that soldiers didn’t sleep on them. That made the wagons heavier, and the soldiers could easily freeze.

One night I checked the wagons. They were okay. Then it occurred to me to do for myself what I forbade others to do. I decided to sleep on a wagon. I picked the least loaded one, hitched Andromache to it and got on. But before I fell asleep, I wondered why the wagon was empty. I started to wave my hand around to see what was there. My hand met the icy hand – it was Chuduk’s corpse, that I had forgotten about. I leapt off the wagon, having lost all desire to sleep. I mounted Andromache and caught up with the gun. The driver told the soldiers. The next day I heard my soldiers whispering.

“Lieutenant Mamontov mistakenly lay down next to Chuduk.”

“That’s a bad sign... The dead man called him.”

“You’ll see, in one of the next fights...”

I tried to convince myself that it was foolish superstition, but it was nevertheless unpleasant.

Because of the cold, the marches seemed endless. As we walked the Crimea seemed to be moving away from us. We didn’t head directly for Chongar itself, but to the northern tip of the Sivash *liman*.[60] To the village of Novo-Troitskaya. To stay ahead of the Reds, who were trying to cut us off.

It got a lot warmer during the day, meaning it wasn’t that cold. The individual units from the Taurida collected there, forming a very impressive column. There were cavalry, infantry and artillery. With such forces, we would of course get to the Crimea, even if the Reds reached Sivash before us.

Indeed the Reds did arrive, but only patrols for the time being, albeit with machine guns. They didn’t dare to attack our huge column, but moved ahead and sideways and fired machine guns at us. I remember one case: a Red patrol hid in a farm, four hundred paces from our column, and fired a machine gun at us constantly. But the firing was poor, and fell slightly short. Our battery was just passing by. The dust from the bullets was clearly visible thirty paces away. For some reason, we didn’t react and carried on. Had he raised the sights one notch, the bullets would have landed right on the battery. Finally, some battery or other decided it had had enough, set up and sent some low shrapnel over the farm. The shooting immediately fell silent. It should have been done long before.

Finally we reached the village of Novo-Troitskaya and saw the Sivash. The Reds also arrived at about the same time, intending to cut us off from Sivash. Too late. There was a short fight, in which we didn’t take part. The Reds were thrown back and it was calm.

Our battery was placed southeast of the village, near the road. The column halted.

**Novo-Troitskaya**

The officers of our battery and many soldiers of the went to the village, three hundred paces away, looking for food. For some reason, I stayed on the battery. Suddenly, I heard frequent and nearby shooting. Judging

[60] A large, shallow lagoon, more or less cut off from the sea by a bar. Very common along the Black Sea.

by the sound, it was in our direction, that is, Reds. But I couldn't see anything – tall dry grass blocked my view. But things were definitely bad. I looked around and saw that I was the only officer with the battery. A horseman galloped by and shouted to me, "Reds!" Then I decided.

"Battery to battle! To the right, march. Stop. Deploy!"

There weren't many soldiers with the battery. So I manned three guns with them, adding some riders. I hoped the dry grass wouldn't catch fire from the shots.

"Straight ahead, towards the shooting. Height 20, aim 20. First, Second, Third! First, Second, Third!"

The grass, thankfully, didn't catch fire. The firing in our direction fell silent as if by magic, and there were even individual rifle shots coming from us towards them. We had become well-practiced at listening to determine where and who was shooting.

Shapilovski appeared, out of breath from running. I thought he would reprimand me for shooting blindly and without his orders. But he nodded his head at me and shouted.

"Keep going! Good as you are."

I added a bit of height – because the Reds were running away – and fired three more bursts. Our shooting intensified, one of our machine guns even started, and then everything fell silent again.

"Cease fire!"

Our divisional chief of staff of appeared, on horseback.

"You opened fire at the just the right time," he told Shapilovski. "Thanks to you, their surprise attack failed. Congratulations on the accurate shooting."

"Hmm...," Shapilovski replied and glanced in my direction.

Our officers ran in one by one and told us what had happened. Comforted by the fact that after the previous battle the Reds had apparently dropped back, our men had set up camp and started to eat. Naturally sentries weren't posted. A Red battalion took advantage of this and, hiding behind an uncut field of maize, had snuck up and suddenly attacked. Panic took hold and our men ran. But at that very time, my shrapnel arrived and by pure chance struck the Reds, not us. Two shrapnel shells had exploded low in their midst, killing some Red infantry right in full view of the others. The Reds hesitated, our men rallied, and the Reds ran away into the same corn they had came from. Ours men set off in pursuit. That's it.

Oboznenko didn't want to believe that I couldn't see anything and shot by sound alone.

Some time later eight of our officers assembled to eat some canned 'corned beef', when suddenly a Red shrapnel shell exploded low above us and showered us with its cone of bullets. By wild luck, no one got a scratch, and in theory we should have all been killed. The Reds had also fired by ear, not seeing the battery, but suspecting its position by sound. Not seeing the brilliant result of their shooting, they didn't repeat the shot. Meanwhile we had instantly scattered.

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We went along the Sivash to the Chongar Bridge. One Red battery shot very well. It chased our column until dark, remaining invisible itself. Only dusk silenced it. It was an officer commanding, as he used shells with a timer expertly, which a simple soldier wouldn't have been able to.

Captain Derevyanchenko, a machine gunner with the horse-mountain battery, was wounded by a shell fragment in the abdomen, a wound which was almost always fatal. He was driven past me. I said something to him. He didn't answer, but his face said he understood that it was the end.

We passed the fortifications around the Chongar Bridge at night. They were good trenches with wire, occupied by our infantry. We crossed the bridge. Finally, then, we were in the Crimea.

I fell fast asleep in the saddle, and thanks to the cold, Andromache sped up and went with a hussar regiment that was marching ahead of us. When I woke up, I didn't recognize anyone.

I was sent to find quarters in some farm. The quarters were ridiculous. Our two batteries were given one small hut. Not everyone could fit in it and we were constantly rotating to keep warm. As darkness fell, it became wildly cold and the wind picked up. I took possession of a chair as a quartermaster and slept despite the 'brass-monkey' weather. Our poor horses, unfed and unwatered, stood in the cold. But still we were in the Crimea. The Reds had failed to cut us off.

**Chirik**

Our cavalry division was put in reserve to rest. Our two batteries were stationed in the hamlets west of Chirik. After all the marching and the cold, it seemed to us that the quarters were wonderful. Warm, spacious, satisfying, and there were even books.

It was here we buried Chuduk.

From the Perekop area the cannons roared day and night, without ceasing. It was impossible to distinguish individual shots, it was a ceaseless hum. It must have been uncomfortable.

The Sivash separates the Crimea from the mainland. They are shallow sea lakes with a muddy bottom and very salty water. Because of the salinity, the Sivash does not freeze. The Crimea is connected to the mainland in three places: the Perekop isthmus, 8 km wide, the Chongar dike with bridge and the Arbat Spit. The average width of the Sivash is 12 km. But in October and November 1920, it was extremely cold and windy. The frost reached –21°C and even –26°C (–6 to –15°F). The Sivash froze to the bottom, which never happens. That greatly increased the length of our front. Nature itself helped the Reds.

Some Red infantry crossed the ice over to the Chuvash Peninsula at night and intercepted a patrol guarding it. My uncle, Nikolai Savvich Mamontov, was killed there with a squadron of Sumy Hussars. But I didn't know that at the time.

We were alerted and went to the Peninsula. At dawn there was a battle. We drove the Red infantry back, they went across the icy Sivash, where our cavalry couldn't pursue them – the horses just slid on the ice. The ice went down to the bottom. Even our shells didn't cause a column of water as they usually did. We pulled back, and during the night the Red infantry crossed Sivash again. Again a battle, and again we drove them back across the ice.

Some of our guns were placed on the edge of the Sivash, without teams. The gunners asked us to move the guns farther from the shore, which we performed with our harnesses. Some infantry unit or other replaced us, and our cavalry division was moved to Perekop.

The Crimea is mountainous to the south, but in the north it is very flat and low. These are the salty steppes, with no trees, no streams and no rivers. Villages are very rare.

**Perekop**

The trenches on Perekop were good and even had lines of barbed wire. But again, our staffs had forgotten that they were dealing with real people. There were no dugouts for the men, no warehouses, no firewood, no wells. There was only huge a stack of straw. But it wasn't the supply services who provided it, but the inhabitants. It did us well. The stack protected us from the wind and in part from the cold, served to feed the horses and kept us warm, whenever possible. It even served as the battery's observation post. However, there was no water. The horses and men had to eat snow, of which there wasn't enough.

How long we stayed for the battles on Perekop, I can't say exactly. There was one continuous and very stubborn battle, day and night. We lost track of time. Maybe just a few days, probably a week, maybe ten days. I don't know. Time seemed like an eternity to us in those terrible conditions.

The Reds were, naturally, in the same bad conditions as us. But they had a huge advantage in numbers. Units rotated and went on leave, which we didn't. The same units fought continuously on our side, until men became apathetic with fatigue. We slept in this way: everyone pulled as much straw out of the stack as possible, and then we lay down as a heap, covered with straw. Everyone tried to get into the middle of the pile. We would sleep for 20 minutes, then someone would wake everyone up and we would dance around to loosen up and warm our stiff arms and legs. Then we would fall into a heap again and sleep for another 20 minutes. And sometimes we didn't sleep at all thanks to the fighting.

The battery was placed in a dip not far from the haystack, half-hidden from the eyes of the enemy. The trenches were a hundred paces in front of us.

We were hungry and thirsty. There was nothing to eat, and instead of water we ate snow. My boots had taken on great importance. I stuffed straw into the front and back of my English greatcoat, and then tightened my belt so that it wouldn't fall out. Clearly during that time we didn't undress and didn't wash. Lice abounded.

The Reds brought up enormous forces, ignoring their losses. Their artillery buzzed day and night. Shells screeched over our heads. The attacks followed one after the other. I witnessed an entire brigade of Red cavalry attack the trenches and all perish on the wire. They didn't retreat, shouting and waving swords, and they were mowed down by our cannister and machine guns. Our men laughed at them, but it scared me, because if their troops didn't break when being massacred, then they would break through us sooner or later. The impression was that the Red cavalrymen were either drunk or on drugs.

We all got nervous. I saw Oboznenko lowering his head to flying shells, which he had never done before. There were losses both in our battery and in the horse-mountain. Once our cavalry had to drive our own infantry back into the trenches when they tried to leave, which was absolutely understandable. Constantly sitting under heavy fire, in the cold, without food – that leads you to fall into despair.

There were several lines of trenches, and sometimes we did change positions and retreat to the next line back. Obviously that was after the Red artillery broken the wire and damaged the system. But the change of position didn't bring much relief. The Reds brought up their artillery, and the attacks began again.

One night I felt a tug on my leg. I lifted my head. One of the soldiers from my gun, put a finger to his lips and beckoned me. Worried, I followed him. Far away from everyone else, in a shell hole, the soldiers of my gun had cooked a soup of snow and mutton, which they had got from goodness knows where. They cooked the soup in a bucket, which we used to water the horses, so not very clean, but it was oh so delicious, that soup! We took turns, using our only spoon to scoop from the bucket. I was very touched that my men hadn't eat without me. Usually, in such difficult moments, people become selfish. I felt a friendly connection with my crew: it was a nice feeling.

**A Small Feat**

We were about to retreat to a new position. Colonel Shapilovski called me.

"Lieutenant Mamontov, I'm ordering you to find food for the battery. We are starving."

"As you order, Colonel. But tell me, where should I look?"

With a hand gesture, he pointed to the steppe.

"That's up to you. Buy, steal, rob, do what you want, but get us some food. That's all the money the battery has. There is 200,000 roubles. With the depreciation of the money, it's not much, but I don't have any more. Go and don't come back without food. That's an order.

It was a difficult mission. I sat down on Andromache, took two soldiers with me and set off, not knowing where to. Like a hero in an old epic. A little further on was a fairly large village. Cavalrymen were stationed there. I turned to a farm owner. He waved his hand hopelessly.

"You can see what's going on!"

I saw and understood. But suddenly I saw a huge pig.

"Sell me the pig." They'll take it away from you anyway, and I'll give you money.

"I don't want your money. They no longer have a price. It's the only pig I have left."

"Look, the pig is wounded, it will die anyway."

The pig had indeed been wounded by a bullet, but very lightly. I was deliberately exaggerating.

"No, no. I don't want to."

The situation was not easy. What can you do? At that critical moment, I got help ... from the Reds. Yes. They began to pepper the hamlet with shrapnel. I noted that the peasant was stunned with fear. On purpose, I increased his panic even more. We barely reacted to the shrapnel, being so used to it.

“You see that everything is going to be gone! At least you’ll have the money. “

And, almost forcibly, I squeezed a wad of money into his hand.

Now I was the owner of the pig. But we needed to take it, and protect it from the claims of the cavalrymen. It wasn’t at all easy. The pig was very fast. I asked a cavalryman to lend me a rifle to shoot it, and missed it at a stone’s throw distance. The pig ran, I followed, and the cavalryman behind me went to get back his rifle. Bullets started to whistle around, and the cavalry were starting to leave the village. We had to hurry.

The cavalryman took his rifle and shot the pig. One of my soldiers cut it in two with a sword, because it would be impossible to lift it in one piece – it was huge.

I sent one of my men for a wagon, but it was too late. The last wagons were already trotting past the farm, and the bullets were becoming frequent. Were we going to have to give up the pig? Luckily, I saw our batteries’ field kitchen moving off. I jumped on Andromache and chased after it. The cook didn’t respond to my order to stop, and indeed whipped the horses harder. Then I pulled out my revolver and that immediately did the trick. I brought the kitchen to the pig and together we loaded it up and fled among the last.

Sappers were already closing off the way with barbed wire. We found the battery. I set my two men to guard the pig, and I went to Shapilovski.

“Colonel, sir, I found a pig.”

“How big?”

“Huge.”

“Well done! I knew you were going to find something. Enough for horse-mountain as well?”

“Easily, Colonel.”

“Take men to guard the kitchen while they cook the soup, or someone will steal the meat. The men are becoming savages with hunger.”

I placed a cordon of guards around the kitchen, with orders to not allow anyone to eat meat, not even the battery commander. However, I violated my own order and cut off a piece of meat. I took some flour and a fired shell case from the gun.

By chance I met my brother’s high school friend, Gerasimov. He was an officer in a heavy battery. We went a short distance away. I kneaded the flour with snow and put the dough in the sleeve. I covered it with dry grass and lit it. We ended up with poorly baked dough. The burnt gunpowder of the cartridge case served as salt. The meat was fried on a spit. It was a sumptuous meal – everything is relative.

**Last Combat**

And so the intense battles on Perekop went on in terrible conditions. One morning, I think it was 12 November 1920, we saw a black line south of us. It moved from right to left, deep into the Crimea. It was Red cavalry. They had broken through the front to our left and cut off our line of retreat. All the war, all the casualties, the suffering and the losses suddenly became useless. But we were in such a state of fatigue and stupefaction that we received the terrible news almost with relief.

“We are retiring. We are going to load onto steamships and leave Russia.”

First, however, we needed to make it to the ships. We needed to cross the columns of Red cavalry.

General Barbovich’s regular cavalry division lined up in march column, that is, in the most compact way possible. The regiments, now quite reduced, in front and horse batteries in the back. There were four batteries: the Guards, the 8th and our two. And the last retreat began.

It got much warmer that day. It could have been around eleven o’clock in the morning.

Two Red horse corps could be seen with the naked eye. Between the columns was a gap of three kilometres. The head of the first column disappeared towards Ishun'. The tail of the second was not visible. In fact, both columns covered our entire southern horizon.

Our plan was extremely simple, and bold. In march formation we trotted to the rear of the first column and crossed the road between the two Red corps. They couldn't imagine such audacity and only realised who we were after we crossed the road and continued south, at right angles to it. Immediately, a mass of cavalry separated from the second column and headed diagonally towards us. I think it was a brigade (two regiments). They were about four kilometres away.[61]

Everything happened in complete silence. Not a shot. Why didn't their artillery fire? Maybe they weren't totally sure we were Whites? This silent pursuit lasted for hours. All the time at a trot. The regiments up front, then our batteries some distance behind, and then the Red cavalry, drawing ever closer. Our horses had been exhausted by the poor conditions in Perekop. The batteries, with more work to do, began to lag behind regiments more and more. As time passed, we got further and further from our cavalry and closer to the Reds. Eventually we were closer to the enemy than our own units.

Our horses were exhausted. It was about three o'clock in the afternoon. There was still silence. The soldiers began to tear off their shoulder boards – a bad sign. The officers were silent. It was clear that our regiments wouldn't stop to protect us. A decision was required: either to discard the guns and escape, or to shoot. All batteries reported a shortage of shells, but each gun had kept a few shrapnel, just in case. And now a "just in case" situation presented itself. The silence was broken by a Red machine gun. There weren't any losses, but we weren't far off panicking.

That's when the young general, the new inspector of horse artillery, Shchegolev, came out at a light gallop in front of the batteries, turned his horse and commanded us in a loud, calm voice.

"Batteries. On my command!"

"Thank God," I thought. "Finally, someone has decided to do something."

"Batteries, deploy!"

And Shchegolev spread his arms, indicating the line along which to do so. Starting from the 1st Horse-mountain, we formed an impressive deployment of sixteen guns. Such power!

"Halt! In position! Prepare to fire!"

There was a moment of hesitation in the ranks. Should we do this? I confess, I felt it too. But our lives depended on the exact execution of orders. I jumped off my horse, others followed my example. I gave Andromache's reins to the holder and thought.

"Will I see you again, Andromache?"

I ran to my gun. The soldiers had disappeared, as always happened in moments of great danger. The gun was left with Ensign Kazitski, Medvedev (a volunteer from Romen) and me. It was too late to look for the soldiers. I stood in the gunner layer position but forgot how it was done. Then I opened the bolt of the gun and, turning the handle, lowered the barrel until I could see the attackers down it. This was good enough, because cannister flies in a cone.

"Cannister ... Three rounds!"

Shchegolev galloped over to the left flank of our front and moved forward slightly so that all the guns could see him. He raised his cap above his head.

Medvedev charged the gun, Kazitski closed the breach. I took the firing cord and stared at Shchegolev's cap. There was silence. Then from the steppe came a sound like hail. Was it my heart beating or the stomping of a thousand galloping horses? I had a burning desire to look at the attackers. But it was important to give a good salvo, and I didn't take my eyes off Shchegolev.

[61] The French has "about six kilometres away".

Shchegolev leaned over, leaned forward with tension (they said that he had waited to the last possible opportunity). He lowered his cap sharply. Sixteen guns blazed fire with a roar. Medvedev charged another round, and I fired again.

Something hit me in the shoulder. Was I wounded? I turned around. A horse without a rider had galloped past and hit me with a stirrup. I stopped fire. Once a horse had galloped past, there was no one in front of us. Either they had passed by us, or we had destroyed them.

I looked through the gun shield. Dust was everywhere making it impossible to see. In front of us, a horse on its back waved its legs in the air and to the right you could just make out the silhouettes of three fleeing riders. That was all I saw of that last classic and decisive fight. I call it a classic because every gunner dreams of stopping a cavalry charge with a volley of cannister.

My soldiers dug themselves out of the ground with shining faces and shoulder boards in place. They scurried around the gun, trying to make me forget their desertion.

“How we did for them! Just swept them away!”

I only then realised that we had won. Suddenly, I felt weak. I sat on the gun and said nothing to the soldiers about their disappearance. The horse holder brought Andromache.

“Still together, sweetheart.” I stroked her.

The retreat continued, but now at a walk. We didn’t see any more Reds. The soldiers laughed and discussed the battle. The officers were silent. I had a headache. I don’t know how the infantry got out, but we cavalry had escaped the Red encirclement. The road to the south was clear. And we owed that to the good and calm orders from Shchegolev, who organised a simultaneous salvo. The Red brigade ceased to exist.

There were officers who thought the Reds made a major error in taking us head-on. I think they weren’t so wrong. After all, they judged us by their standards. We shouldn’t forget that our soldiers tore off their shoulder boards and ran away. If the batteries had been crewed just by them, the Red attack would have been successful. But the batteries were full of officers, and that changed everything. The officers didn’t run.

**The Last Shrapnel**

By evening we reached some village, whose name I unfortunately, didn’t record. There was a hill in front of the village. The division stopped there. The cavalry stayed at the bottom, and the batteries on the top of the hill. As soon as we arrived, two shrapnel came in and burst above us. Obviously the Reds had followed us from a distance, but were hesitant to stick close anymore.

There was no need for us to be on the hill. Down below was a spot that was obscured from the Reds.

“Evgeny Nikolaevich,” I shouted to Oboznenko, “why are we at the top, sticking out, when a few dozen paces away we would be hidden?”

“I don’t know why,” he replied, “and I think it stupid to expose myself unnecessarily.”

Two shells struck the horse mountain battery. There were wounded. But there was no order to move. Then, without waiting for orders that would apparently never come, I turned to my gun.

“Trot behind me.”

I set off with Andromache and was twenty paces ahead of the gun. Then a low shrapnel landed right on me. Bullets ploughed the ground around Andromache, who even sat down on her rear. I thought that we both wouldn’t be just wounded, but riddled with fragments. But once again, neither she nor I had a scratch. It was amazing. Only one bullet pierced my overcoat above my groin and got stuck in the front of the saddle.

It was the last shrapnel the Reds fired at us, and just at me. We didn’t see or hear the Reds again after that. For me, that shrapnel was a warning that my contract with Destiny was coming to an end. It was as if I could hear the voice of my guardian angel: ‘I have kept you safe throughout the war. Now you are vulnerable. There is no need to fight anymore.’

Indeed, it was the first time that a bullet had come that close to me. Bullets hadn't pierced my clothes before, and no horse beneath me was injured. I believe I was unique in the battery in that regard. And then the last shrapnel was specially released exclusively at me. Weird.

Our division stayed the night at this village. Our supply train was there. It was getting dark. We replenished our empty limbers with shells. Don Cossacks were walking down the street.

"Thank you, batteries, you did well" they shouted to us. "We caught some good horses."

The Don cavalry had been following us, to our left. They saw the Reds chasing us and our volley from a distance. Being Cossacks, they couldn't resist rushing to chase horsemen and horses without riders.

In the wagons we found tea and sugar. But my comrades all fell asleep, and I was the only one who drank the tea. With what pleasure after the Perekop battles! Hot tea, and even sugar! Before I fell asleep, I went to water and feed Andromache because I worried about the horse holders. In the last fight, I had the unpleasant conviction that if we had faltered, that the holders wouldn't have brought up our mounts, but would have taken off. I was pleased to know that Andromache was at my side, and in the event of a night attack, I could saddle her in a flash. Also, I think I fed and watered her better than any soldier.

The stable was good. Ignoring the order not to unsaddle, I did so and even removed her bridle. She drank for a long time, with pleasure, then also hugely enjoyed her feed of barley. She also appreciated the good stable after ten hungry days spent in the cold.

"Andromache, my dear, you have served me faithfully. Serve me one more time! Take me to the steamer!"

'And then you're going to leave me!'

"What can I do, Andromache? Yes, I'll leave you. Just like I left Dura. It will be impossible to load the horses. And what would happen to you abroad? No, it's better to stay in Russia. Believe me, parting with you will be very bitter for me."

Then, for the first time in a long time, I fell asleep on the floor, not undressing, but in a warm house, not in the yard. What a luxury!

We never did see the Reds again. It got a lot warmer. The snow was completely gone. The sun was almost warm. I still didn't know anything about my brother and was very worried for him. Did he have time to get to the spit or did the Reds beat him there?

**A Great Feat**

The sun came out, and it got quite warm. Our cavalry division marched south to the steamers. Judging by the map, the junction station of Sarabul lay in front of us. Some warehouses of our quartermasters were there. In full confidence in the inability of that organisation to provide food for the steamships, I decided to take matters into my own hands. I rode to the head of the column to find Colonel Shapilovski.

"Colonel, sir, what do you say if you go to Sarabul and look for food for us on the ships?"

"Great idea! Knowing our supply services, they certainly won't have prepared anything for us. Everything will be left to the Reds when they run away. Take some men and go ahead."

I only took two soldiers with me. I regretted later that I didn't take more, but I didn't like the idea of trying to control a flock of them. At a trot we outpaced the column and entered Sarabul. There was complete chaos. The supply services, seeing our approaching column from a distance, mistook us for Reds, abandoned everything and ran away. Crowds of armed soldiers wandered around, looting.

On the main street we were able to catch a cow and a young bull, who must have broken away from a herd. "That's already something," I thought, "but we can find better things here."

We stayed on the road waiting for the battery to arrive. We saw the supply wagons of the horse mountain battery and Colonel Lebedev, their commander. I rushed over to him.

"Colonel, sir, do you want me to give your battery a cow, but on the condition that you save a bull for me?"

"Of course, I'll even keep it for you overseas".

And to my surprise, he actually kept it. One day in Gallipoli he asked me.

“What to do want me to do with your bull?”

“What? You kept it?”

“I’ve kept it.”

“Make a present of it to the battery.”

After freeing ourselves of the animals, we headed to the station. There on some side tracks were several wagons with seals on the doors. I broke the seals. It was just what I was looking for: five wagons with corned beef, flour, sugar, English uniforms and boot leather. I quickly closed the doors, twisted them with wire, put my men on guard, and rushed to the road to look for reinforcements against the looters who were already gathering around the wagons. The three of us couldn’t prevent the wagons from being looted. The looters were numerous, armed and aggressive.

On the road I came across General Barbovich himself. I pushed resolutely towards him and reported my find.

“Your find is extremely important, Lieutenant. But I want to see it with my own eyes.”

“Indeed, Your Excellency, it’s near... Here are the five cars.”

By this time, the looters, guided by some secret marauding scent, had gathered into an impressive crowd.

“Open it, I want to see,” Barbovich said.

“Your Excellency, please don’t do that. We’re not numerous enough to deter the looters,” I protested.

“Open it!” Barbovich insisted.

One of the soldiers of his retinue opened the door. It was a wagon with uniforms. What I had feared then happened. I apparently had more experience with this than the general. The crowd of looters rushed in, pushed the general and his retinue out of the way, broke into the car and instantly emptied it in seconds. Barbovich was embarrassed. He wanted to open the next car, but I resisted in the most vigorous way, and he didn’t insist.

“Stay here, Lieutenant, I’ll send you help and notify the regiments to send carts for supplies.”

“Your Excellency, please notify the batteries as well. And ensure that the reinforcements come as soon as possible. Twelve men, at least.”

“I’ll send you thirty, to keep these pillaging bandits away.”

“... And that the wagons also come with guards.”

“Thank-you, Lieutenant. I will give all the necessary orders.”

And Barbovich and his staff went back to the road. We were left with the wagons and a menacing, enraged crowd of looters. It was probably four or five o’clock in the evening.

Reinforcements didn’t arrive. The wagons from the regiments arrived between midnight and two o’clock in the morning, each with an officer but no other guard. Fortunately for the regiments, our batteries’ wagons were the last, at around three o’clock in the morning. If they had arrived earlier, I would have left with them and abandoned the wagons. Because it was a struggle beyond all human strength. And I endured that struggle for at least eleven hours continuously. I don’t know how I did it and why the looters just didn’t kill me. It was continuous shouting, arguing, threatening with my revolver, diving under the wagon to help out one of my men who the crowd had pushed there. And so on without a break. There was no thought of food or drink. The division went to spend the night far to the south. Sarabul was left unoccupied. The Reds could have arrived at any minute. A crowd of looters, apparently having pillaged everything in the town, all went to the station. They consisted of violent criminals who had lost their humanity, were armed and enraged.

One of my soldiers held our horses. In the event of Red cavalry, they were our only salvation. Another soldier stood as a sentry, but afraid to show any initiative, he stood like a pole. So protecting the four cars,

that is, eight doors, fell to me alone. True, I kept hoping that the promised help in the form of thirty soldiers would appear, and that kept my spirit going.

The most difficult moments were when wagons arrived from a regiment, without guards and with a timid officer. We needed to open the doors to load the products, and that was the most dangerous time. Then I started negotiating.

“Shut up for a minute! Listen to what I have to say! I’ll give you a bag of sugar, to divide among yourselves. Step away from the door!”

I threw a bag of sugar into the crowd, which they immediately tore apart like beasts, and, crawling on all fours, got in each other’s way as they scooped it from the ground. Taking advantage of that fuss, I would close and twist the door with wire, and then from the other door I would quickly throw two or three bags of sugar onto the wagon and twist the wire on the doors from the outside. Negotiations began on the corned-beef. The corned beef was very well packaged. It was in solid boxes and twisted with thick wire. The tins were conical, and you could pull one out the box if you grabbed it with your fingernails. But if you tried to get several at the same time, you couldn’t pull them out. I threw out two cases. The looters rushed to them and a silent fight for them began. Squabbling, they pulled at it in all directions without any method until they finally tore the wire and planks off the cases. I had time to load up on corned beef, flour, and even leather, while they were busy.

Every officer, on leaving, swore to me that he would send guards, that he would notify our battery... and they did neither ... “We got our lot, we don’t care about the others...” And I kept hoping and cursing my battery to turn up. Some carts from horse mountain battery arrived. I tearfully begged the officer to warn my battery.

And finally, at three o’clock in the morning, the carts of my battery appeared, also unguarded. I loaded them as full as I could and even a bit too much. Marching later, in the mountains, one of the overloaded wagons broke down and was abandoned in my absence, as no replacement could be found. The carter of a second, seeing the first, decided to break down too to be able to keep the products. But I was there and made him fix it, and he continued under the guard of a soldier with a whip. We had enough food not only during our retreat, but also for some time in Gallipoli.

The supply services, of course, hadn’t prepare anything for the crossing. I would have been astonished if they had.

I consider my activities in Sarabul to be one of my greatest feats of the entire civil war. Thanks to me, our entire division was fed on the steamer and afterwards, while others were starving.

Exhausted, I lay down among the goods on the wagon, hooking on poor Andromache, who was also unfed and unwatered. Before that I enjoyed myself, after getting some hundred paces away, by telling the looters that they could now have the remains. They rushed like savages and instantly devastated everything. When they broke into a wagon with flour, they all ended up dusted in white, like millers. In the end, they didn’t get very much – everything was torn apart and trampled on.

In my quarters, I received my reward for my exploit. Lenia Aleksandrov was waiting for me, with my brother’s coat. He told me that they hadn’t found any lodgings in Geniches'k and so moved on to the Arbat Spit. An hour later Geniches'k was occupied by the Reds. So they escaped death by luck. God be praised, my brother was alive!

**Over the Mountains**

We came out the next morning and we were warned that in Simferopol, through which we had to go, there had been an uprising and we had to be at the ready. That news was unpleasant, but in practice it turned out that no-one shot at us. The rebels apparently were afraid of us and remained hidden. Still, the division marched without stopping or breaking away from each other. From the other side of Simferopol the valleys began, and soon behind them the mountains.

This time the evacuation was well planned. The army was loaded in different ports. Infantry in Sevastopol, regular cavalry in Yalta, Kuban Cossacks in Feodosia and Don Cossacks in Kerch. Only the Kuban Cossacks

had any issues. Our supply train, with my brother, was in Feodosia and loaded there. In the other ports, everything went smoothly.

Soon we entered the mountains, covered on the north side with a thin deciduous forest. As we climbed, it got cold. I put on my brother's coat. Men often had to push the wheels of the guns and wagons in places where the climb was particularly steep. The harness horses were steaming, and we had to stop to let them catch their breath. Only by the evening, just before sunset, did we reach the pass and stop, enchanted. It was a grand vista. To the left, red rocks reflected the sun, to the right was Chatyrdag (1,525 m). In front of us was the infinite dark blue sea, and at our feet were green gardens with white houses. Beautiful! I would have stayed to admire it, but there was little room on the pass and we needed to free it up for others.

The road went down steeply. We put the brakes on the gun. I sat on the gun carriage, wrapped both hands around the bolt and fell fast asleep. I strictly forbade soldiers to get on the carriage. While dreaming, you can fall off and be crushed by the gun. The team trotted down. Sparks flew from the locked wheel, and I slept in the most serene way imaginable.

I woke up because the gun stopped. It was dark all around. I was very warm in the coat. Some strange noise surprised me. Ah, it's the sound of the waves! We were beside the sea. We were in Alushta. What a difference. On the other side of the mountain was winter, and on that side it was spring. We stayed overnight in Alushta and bought some very expensive, but bad wine.

**Wine**

A lovely road runs from Alushta to Yalta, not far from the seashore. On the right, the Crimean mountains separated us from the Reds. The mountains are impassable, they can only be crossed on the two or three roads. According to our information, there were no such roads between us and Yalta.

There was an earthly paradise all around. Orchards and vineyards. Blue sky and dark blue sea, white houses and frequent beautiful villas. On the right were the green mountains. The division left in the morning from Alushta and headed west towards Yalta.

Oboznenko rode up to me.

"The road passes by some wine cellars. That is a great temptation for our soldiers. Tonight we will remain in the rearguard. I ask you not to get drunk, and try to hold back the men."

"I'm not going to get drunk. But as far as the soldiers are concerned, I'm powerless. They'll be drunk anyway."

Clearly the highway was built specifically for the transportation of wine. All along the road were cellars, one after the other. They were dug into the mountain. The gates were all open. Rows of barrels were visible, from which wine poured onto the ground. The soldiers pulled the corks out of the barrels and didn't bother to stick them back in.

The division column became noisier and more cheerful. In the end, It looked more like a wedding procession than a valiant army on the eve of leaving its homeland. I found Oboznenko.

"Evgeny Nikolaevich, it seems to me that you and I are the only sober ones in the column. It doesn't matter anymore, the cellars will be our best rearguard. The Reds are sure to also get drunk, and our men may already be sobering up... I want to take advantage of this extraordinary opportunity too..."

"Yes, you're right, off you go!"

I hooked Andromache to a wagon and entered a cellar myself. It went deep into the hill. On both sides of the cellar were barrels in three rows, one on top of each other. Wine poured out of all of them. On the ground it was already ten to twelve centimetres deep.

I folded my hands into a cup, tasted the wine and spat it out.

"It's too young, it needs to be aged more."

I wandered through the wine into the depths of the cellar, occasionally tasting. But because I did it so many times, I lost my sense of taste. The floor sloped down a bit and the wine got deeper, and I had to tighten

the shins of my boots. I felt like I was starting to get drunk from the fumes. Better to go back. I might get drunk, fall down and drown in the wine. Sure, it's not the worst way to die, but still... Then I stepped on something that moved, and fell into the wine. I lifted my legs to pour the wine out of my boots. It was utterly dark. Only the distant light square of the gate was visible. Groping around, I searched for what I had tripped over, and found a dead drunk soldier. I took him by the collar of his overcoat and tried to pull him. But his clothes were all soaked in wine, and he was too heavy. Was I going to fall down and drown because of him?

I pulled him across to the barrels and jammed his head between some. The first time he slipped out. Then I pressed my boot into him and he remained more firmly fixed. His mouth was a few inches above the level of the wine.

"Here, unknown soldier, I did everything I could for you. Don't thank me. If the wine rises above your mouth, then you are out of luck."

I walked out of the cellar and was amazed. The highway was empty, the column was gone. And I thought I had been away for about twenty minutes.

I unfastened the holster of the revolver, so I could get to it in case of anything, and started off with long strides along the highway, carefully inspecting the bushes. Because in the mountains there were "greens", bandits who attacked loners. Beside the road were bodies of soldiers, only the traces of vomit indicated that they weren't dead, just dead-drunk. There were a dozen or two of them. Suddenly, I saw a rider balancing dangerously in the saddle. Taking a closer look, I was happy to recognize Lenia Aleksandrov.

"Lenia, how glad I am to see you."

"Me too, Sergei, glad to see you."

He was really not well, and almost fell off his saddle.

"Listen to me carefully. I was left without a horse."

"Take mine."

"No, but go to the battery and send Andromache to me with a soldier who isn't very drunk. This is very important. And don't fall off!"

He went off at a lively trot and I watched him anxiously. But he didn't fall, and after a while Polovinkin brought me Andromache. How glad I was to see her! I joined the battery, which was with a squadron of Guards cavalry on a huge cliff dominating the road, above a valley. Down below was the town of Gurzuf, nestled by the sea between two rocks – one of the rocks was called Ayu-Dag. The entire division was heading to Yalta to load onto a steamer.

**The Last Night**

To my surprise, Aleksandrov and the officers of the battery were already sober, which couldn't be said for the soldiers.

I put my gun on the main road. It was a fine position, able to shell all approaches and detours. Thus, my gun had the honor of standing in the final positions. We sent one officer down to a large villa and he brought us five roasted ducks and two boxes of fine wine. We shared them with the soldiers.

We didn't sleep during our last night in Russia. Sitting on a cliff near the gun, I exchanged thoughts with Aleksandrov. What would our parents do in Moscow? How would we notify them of our fate? We'd leave the next day. For where? What will we do abroad? Will anyone meet us there? We would need to a new start life from the very beginning. Would we be able to return to Russia or was it for ever? What would become of Russia under the Communists? What would happen to the people?

We wrote a postcard for our parents and gave it to the locals, asking them to send it a little later, when things calmed down. There were only two phrases in it: "We are alive, healthy and on a long journey. Lenia is with us." I signed it "Sima": it meant Sergey Ivanovich Mamontov. The postcard arrived and made my mother very happy. She told Lenia's father.

Sometimes a wagon loaded up with the bodies of drunks would pass by. Compassionate peasants had loaded them up and carried them. We examined the drunks and pulled out of a bunch of our soldiers. We put them on the grass, and the next morning the whole battery was assembled and sober.

**Through Earthly Paradise**

Early in the morning, Captain Chicherin came from Yalta with exciting news. It turned out that there was a "royal path" through the mountain, a road that led to the imperial estate of Massandra, which was in our rear. The Reds could therefore cut us off from the steamers. We became worried and immediately moved off towards Yalta. Our fears were unnecessary, the Reds did nothing.

In Massandra we took some boxes of very good wine. The director wanted to discourage us, but we had no time to argue.

"You will report tomorrow to the Bolsheviks."

"What does that mean?"

"That means that we are leaving – and tomorrow the Bolsheviks will come and smash everything here." He was terribly confused.

"Take whatever you want."

This time the road ran high in the mountains above the sea. The sun was shining, the sea was glimmering, it was warm, and the mountains somehow glowed. Umbrella pines stood all around, looming beautifully in the sky. Far below us were very small houses in the gardens. And blue sea to the horizon. It seemed that Russia was smiling at us as we left. We decided to destroy my cannon so that the Reds wouldn't get it. We chose a deep gorge. We took off the sights and the bolt, rolled up to the very edge and pushed it down on command. The gun hit a rock, turned over in the air, bounced, hit a rock on the opposite side and fell to the bottom of the abyss. We couldn't see any broken parts through the binoculars. It had been a well constructed weapon. The sights and the bolt were thrown further on, into another gorge. My heart sank at the sight of the limber without it.

We reached the outskirts of Yalta and stopped. We unharnessed and unsaddled the horses. On the alarm whistle of the steamer, we were to go to the pier. We were warned that local communists might shoot at us.

**Farewell**

I traded the boot leather with the villagers for a cup and spoon, which I found very useful in Gallipoli.

Three soldiers from my gun, line Cossacks – the Shakalov brothers and Bondarenko – came up to me.

"What will you do, lieutenant, sir?"

"I'm leaving."

"What would you advise us to do?"

"I don't know. We will go abroad. Life will be difficult there. Without the language. Who knows if we can come back."

"That's just the point. We have families. We have decided to stay. But we didn't want to leave without saying goodbye to you. After all, we have experienced so much together."

"Thank you. Don't forget that the Reds won't forgive you. But if you think you can get out, go. I have nothing against it. Take Andromache with you. I suggest you follow the "royal path" from Massandra – you will meet fewer people that way. Take some canned food from the wagon train. And God bless you."

"Thank you. May God grant you happiness."

We shook hands tightly. I stroked Andromache for a long time. They started to leave, then turned around.

"If you return with the army, we will find you."

With a heavy heart, I watched them go.

**Departure**

This time the evacuation was well organised. In Yalta a large steamer, the ‘Sarych’, was waiting for us. Only regular cavalry and horse artillery were loaded onto it from the army, and of course, refugees from Yalta. There was no crush.

We left the guns, after spoiling them, and the horses at the border of the city.

An officer came to us from the steamer and said that they had decided not to give the alarm whistle so as not to cause panic. Everything was ready and we could go. As soon as we got on the steamer, it would leave. A silent line of soldiers with rifles over their shoulders walked towards the pier. The last Whites to leave Russia. Defeated.

It was hard on my soul. But there was a proud feeling that we had done our duty honestly. Nobody shot at us. We crossed through the city and got on the steamer, which departed immediately. I believe that it was 3/16 November 1920.

General Wrangel came up to us on his yacht the ‘Kagul’ and said a few words to us. The fight wasn’t over. “Urra!” was his answer. The guards sang the national anthem. It was thrilling.

Crimea disappeared into the evening haze.

We left Russia, forever.