

**The assault by a Polish mounted brigade against a column of infantry and motors - only a fragment of the fight against the German invasion in 1939 - was executed in the glorious tradition of the horse cavalry's saber-wielding charge.**

The account I am going to give you is of a cavalry charge in which I took part at the very beginning of World War II in September, 1939, in Poland. Although it all happened 59 years ago, it now seems like a century away! It may well be that this attack will rank in the history of warfare as the last great charge of cavalry. Is there another chance of the whole cavalry brigade, sword in hand, obeying the order "Gallop, march!?" The old Marshal Semion Budenny, former commander of the Soviet First Cavalry Army during the Civil War, would not agree with this. (In 1967, during an interview with The New York Times correspondent in Moscow, the old retired marshal, who is over 80 and still rides horses every day, was asked: "What role do you think cavalry will play during the next war?" "Decisive!" answered Budenny without hesitation.)

My story is a fragment of the fight the Polish armed forces put up, defending their country against the German invasion in September of 1939. I was a platoon commander in the 3rd squadron, 3rd Light Horse regiment. My place was on the extreme left of the charge, so that I was able to see the whole mass of men and horses wheel around to the gallop. A grand spectacle, never to be forgotten.

The Suwalki Cavalry Brigade, stationed at the frontier of East Prussia, near the border of Lithuania, was composed of three cavalry regiments, one artillery regiment, and a group of light armored cars. Since September 1, it had been fighting night and day on the right flank of the Narew army group, whose task it was to stop the left flank of General von Kuechler's army, pressing on Warsaw from East Prussia.

The group was pushed back by the sheer weight of German firepower and armor. The brigade, being more mobile than our infantry, and assigned to the right wing of the Narew group, was less affected by the initial German push; consequently, we had relatively small losses during the first days of fighting.

Early on September 7, the brigade still stood almost 40 miles from the border of East

Our sentries did not see any patrols, but reported that a column of transport trucks was moving parallel with the infantry. What an unexpected chance!

The brigade commander was hard put for a decision. We were hidden in the woods about a mile and a half from the enemy. The condition for a surprise attack seemed ideal. It was now or never. On the other hand the risk was great. An attack by the entire brigade was bound to betray our purpose.

Moreover, the firepower of a German infantry battalion was superior to that of our brigade. They seemed to have no armor but our patrols might have been mistaken.

After a few moments of hesitation our commander made up his mind. He stopped his brigade and reversed the direction of our march. We briskly crossed the strip of woods separating us from the enemy. Our three regiments assembled at the edge of the woods. Between the enemy column on the highway and us ran a strip of stubble field over a mile long. Close by the highway was a stretch of dry meadowland.

Since we stood on higher ground, we saw plainly what went on the highway. What a magnificent sight! A long splotch of troops wound its way lazily through a cloud of dust, while the motor transport swiftly flowed by the slowly marching infantry.

The brigadier's command came fast: "The 1st Lancer regiment and the 3rd Light Horse regiment prepare for a charge. The 2nd Lancer regiment will be in reserve. The brigade's heavy machine-gun squadrons will get together and support the charge with their massed fire.

The antitank squadron will screen the brigade from the west against a possible tank attack. The German's armor might be in the vicinity. Meanwhile, the engineering squadron is to take advantage of the charge to reach the bridge and the railway track as quickly as possible and blow them up."

The regimental commanders promptly carried out their respective orders. The squadron pushed ahead to the edge of the forest, while the engineering squadron left us to do their job. We could watch it marching off at a brisk trot.

Meanwhile, the squadrons stretched out in attack formation on the open field beyond the forest. The command "Trot, march" rang out. The enemy had not yet seen us, and the rising sun promised a clear day. The picture of the regiment emerging from the woods was so enchanting that it seemed unreal. What a perfect model for a battle painter! Where is

Prussia. It was fighting a defensive battle against a light German army group, reinforced by the East Prussian cavalry division, which was the only great cavalry unit the Germans possessed at the time.

The advantage of numerical superiority was definitely with the invaders. All we could throw in against their hundreds of tanks were about 20 light armored scout cars and two dozen antitank guns. In firepower, the Germans had a superiority of about nine to one. It seemed, therefore, that the Germans, because of their superiority in firepower and armor, would cut through the live mass of Polish cavalry like a knife through a loaf of bread.

And yet, in spite of this unequal struggle, we refused to give up. We were fully aware of the fact that we had to adapt ourselves to new methods of warfare.

After all, we had to make the best conditions imposed on us by war, not of our seeking. Each day, our techniques of fighting the enemy hiding behind armor improved. It was a technique of pursuit, of ambush, and of ruses.

A machine that looked formidable at a distance began to show, especially at night, its impotence against daredevils who had the nerve to approach the tanks and throw gasoline-filled bottles. Others crept up to wreck the caterpillar treads of these tanks with bunches of hand grenades. During the first week, our antitank guns destroyed 31 enemy armored vehicles. We smashed at least a dozen of them with bottles and grenades. We took over 200 prisoners.

Thus, step by step, from a proud cavalry brigade we had turned into an outfit of tank hunters. By night we lost ourselves in woods and marched over trackless ground to harass the enemy's armored columns at rest stops or on the march.

We realized, however, that in the long run, it was all hopeless. The numbers and the firepower were against us. Moreover, the beautiful, sunny weather seemed to be conspiring with the invaders, helping the speedy progress of their armor facilitating the bombardment.

The news grew steadily worse. On the evening of September 8, we heard over the radio that the Germans were closing in on Warsaw. We resolved to do our duty, come

our Vernet or Gericault! First we proceeded at a slow trot. The Germans still marched on, apparently unconcerned. Then suddenly our heavy machine-guns, hidden in the woods, gave tongue with a well-timed salvo. It went straight into the enemy column.

### The great adventure was on!

The command "Draw sabres, gallop, march!" flew down the lines. Reins were gripped tighter. The riders bent forward in the saddles and they rushed forward like a mad whirlwind.

Meanwhile, the surprised serpent of enemy infantry on the highway stopped. Soon the road became a scene of wild confusion. There were shouts, confused orders, and chance shots. We, however, continued our gallop. Fortunately, the first German shots went over our heads. We were then about 1500 feet from the highway and saw that under fire of our heavy machine-guns the Germans were becoming a frantic mob. Some enemy armored cars stopped, while others tried to ram their way through the confusion. Some of the enemy soldiers made a desperate attempt to make a stand in the ditch by the roadside. Other sought cover behind the transport wagons.

Suddenly the fire from machine-guns began to score hits in our ranks. The van of the column, which had been nearing Rypno, seem to have mastered its panic; soon its fire began to tell. The first casualties fell from horses. We were then so close that we could see vague outlines of men in the cloud of dust. Suddenly our machine-guns ceased firing. They had to do it to avoid hitting us. Meanwhile, within a few seconds we reached the highway.

Sabres and lances went to work fiercely. Some confused German infantrymen pushed off our sabre blows with their rifle butts. Some simply tried to cover their heads with their arms, but our lances reached even those who tried to hide between the wagons.

The wave of our charge crossed the highway and pursued those who sought flight. Stray shots from the thickets kept falling into the mob on the highway, killing the enemy as well as us. The battle on the highway was practically over. The Germans began to surrender in large groups. A squadron of the 2nd Lancer regiment, which so far formed our reserve, was dispatched in pursuit of the fleeing enemy.

We were out of breath and dog-tired, but elated by the dreamed-up victory. Moreover, it was paid for with no great loss of life. The panic-stricken Germans were decidedly poor marksmen. The horses fared the worst; we lost between 30 and 40

what might. Most of the time we were hungry, and for a week we had about three hours' sleep at night. Our poor horses, those beautiful chestnut horses of which we were so proud, could not be unsaddled for days on end. With fodder growing scarce, they were becoming dispirited and vicious, sheer skeletons.

One desire was uppermost in our minds, and we discussed it in our short talks at officers' roll calls. Should modern warfare depose the cavalry, then we would make a dignified exit after just one more glorious tradition of our cavalry.

Suddenly, on September 9, we received the following order: "To relieve German pressure on Warsaw and to give the capital time to organize its defenses, the Suwalki Brigade will make a diversion on the enemy's rear, blow up the bridge over the Narew River, near Tykocin, and tear up the railway track between the stations of Rypno and Fastow." At the officers' roll call, the tall, gray-haired, taciturn brigade Commander, General Podhorski, told us:

"Gentlemen, we have received an important assignment. We are to sabotage the enemy communications. To execute our task, we must march all night over the field-paths and avoid main highways, and penetrate behind the enemy lines to reach the region of Tykocin. When on the spot, the engineering squadron will proceed with the wrecking jobs as ordered, while the rest of the brigade will act as a covering screen. Once the assignment is executed, we shall head eastward and plunge into the Bialowieza Forest. From then on we shall wage partisan warfare."

Dead tired though we were, the news electrified us. The order of the brigadier was received with joy by officers and men alike. We felt that finally we would have the chance for action as a body of cavalry in a task for which we had been trained.

On that very day, we made four ambushes against tanks and fought two skirmishes. We had little more than two hours of sleep.

We moved off around 7p.m., after the sun set. Regiment after regiment, squadron after squadron, marched at a trot before our brigadier, a smart, proud, gray-haired veteran of the last war, as he reviewed his decimated, but still brigade. It was a grueling all-night march over broken ground, through thickets

of them. We had a score or so of wounded men, but only three were killed. The morning sun was high when our bugler blew assembly. We came up slowly, driving our prisoners ahead of us. We took about 200 men, most of them insane from fright. The villages of Rypno and Fastow were aflame. They belched dense clouds of black smoke, which lazily rose to the morning sky. In withdrawing, the remnants of the German battalion did not miss the chance to set the torch to two innocent villages. Then, suddenly, from the north a sound of an explosion could be heard. In a few minutes there came another, and after a while two more shook the air. This was the signal that our engineers had done their job. The bridge over the Narew and the railway track had been blown up.

M. Kamil DZIEWANOWSKI is a professor emeritus of Contemporary Russian and East European History at Boston University and Associate of the Russian Research Center at Harvard. He has published several books:

The Communist Party of Poland - An Outline of History, Harvard University Press, 1959 and 1976

1. A European Federalist - Joseph Pilsudski and Eastern Europe, 1918-1922, Hoover Institution, 1969. 20th Century Poland, Columbia University Press, 1977 and 1979
2. A History of Soviet Russia, Prentice Hall, 1979, 1984, 1988, 1992, and in 1996 under a new title
3. A History of Soviet Russia and its Aftermath.
4. War at Any Price: A History of WWII in Europe, Prentice Hall, 1987, 1990
5. Alexander I - Russia's Mysterious Tsar, Hippocrene Books, 1990
6. One Life is not Enough, Marszalek, Torun, 1994 (in Polish)

His article makes clear that he was a junior officer in the Polish cavalry at the beginning of the Second World War and participated in the cavalry charge he describes.



and over rugged terrain. We were protected by a dense screen of patrols, but we avoided human settlements, cut across roads, and stuck to the forests and untraveled ground.

On September 9, an early dawn, misty and chilly, found the brigade at the northern edge of the large Zambrow forest, eight to nine miles from the bridge that we had to blow up.

It was almost 6a.m. when the patrols suddenly reported to the brigadier a startling piece of intelligence: a battalion of enemy infantry was marching along the highway between Rypno and Fastow.