

## Further research into the charge of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Light Horse at Rypno, 8<sup>th</sup> September 1939

I'm afraid Mike is quite mistaken to class me as any kind of expert on the Polish campaign of 1939. France 40 is my thing really. Nevertheless, the Polish Army's tactical methods were very much based on those of the French whose military advisors had trained and staffed them in 1919-21 (incidentally these advisors included both General Gamelin and one Colonel de Gaulle!) I have studied a number of French tactical manuals, which give a certain perspective on what's described.

Anyway, although I can't definitively settle the question of whether lances were used in this charge or elsewhere, hopefully I can shed a bit more light on the issue. Or more likely add to the obscurity :-

Like you I'm sceptical of the total authenticity of this account. Where did you find it? I'm guessing in an American history mag, but different individual publications have different levels of authority.

To start with, the author who sadly passed away on 18th Feb this year aged 91, had a long and colourful life. He came from an aristocratic family in the Russian western Ukraine. As a child he saw successive Bolshevik and Ukrainian nationalist troops march past his house before the eventual arrival of the Poles who annexed this area from 1921-39. He worked as a journalist before WWII and I am convinced he did see service as an officer of the Polish cavalry in 1939 in the capacity he mentions. He was eventually captured by the Russians but used his fluency in the language to escape via Sweden to France. He there had some part in the Polish units formed before and during the 1940 campaign, from whence he wound up in Britain. He was an officer in the Polish troops in Britain, where his main contribution was in broadcasting to the Polish Home Army. After the war he declined to return to Poland and emigrated instead to the USA.

There he became a stalwart of the Polish ex-pat community and a historian, specializing in generous works on Polish history and somewhat less generous contributions to the American 'Soviet Studies' industry. From what I have read he was far from above letting the facts get in the way of a good story. For example he suggested his two Polish decorations from WWII were in relation to his cavalry service in 1939, whereas biographies say the medals were from the Polish exile government in London, hence for his slightly less dashing service with the BBC!

Anyway, some elements of his account can be verified. The *Suwalska* (or *Suwalki*) brigade did exist and included the units he mentions. There was a fourth cavalry regiment (3rd Mounted Rifles), but they could perfectly well have been elsewhere on the day in question. The brigade did certainly operate in the area he mentions and clashed more or less with the one German armoured formation which operated from east Prussia, ie the scratch *Panzerverband Kempf* which started with 182 tanks;

see: [http://www.orbat.com/site/ww2/drleo/011\\_germany/39\\_organ\\_army/39\\_kempf.html](http://www.orbat.com/site/ww2/drleo/011_germany/39_organ_army/39_kempf.html)

I have no concrete evidence to hand but I would be very surprised if this one brigade destroyed 43 tanks as he states, which would probably be more than any single Panzer regiment suffered in the entire campaign.

Anyway, onto this charge. Piekalkiewicz's *The Cavalry of World War II* (London, 1979) is not a particularly academic history, but it tries to cover the whole ground and its stock in trade is scores of accounts of dramatic cavalry charges. But it doesn't mention this one, which is odd since according to our hero's description it would be just about the largest (three whole regiments), the most dramatic (he paints a stirring picture) and the most successful cavalry charge in the whole of WWII (a whole battalion and a supply train destroyed, plus 200 prisoners for the loss of a few dozen men and horses). It is particularly odd that Piekalkiewicz didn't uncover this tale since he too is a Pole who fled to the West (in his case after the Hungarian uprising of 1956). Naturally his work covers the Polish experience in some detail. In an appendix he gives brief histories of each of the cavalry brigades. Of the Suwalska brigade he says it 'was stationed in the Suwalki area on the East Prussian frontier, from where the brigade launched a few raids into East Prussia with units of the 3rd Light Cavalry Regiment (ie the 3rd Light Horse or Chevaulegers, Dziewanowski's particular unit *JB*). The brigade was then transferred to the Zambrow area, where it was involved in fighting with elements of the 'Kempf' armoured division on September 9 and 10.' Of course this doesn't contradict Dziewanowski's account of this great charge being on the 9th Sept, indeed it puts them in the right sort of place on the right day. But it's funny that Piekalkiewicz doesn't mention the event when he evidently had some knowledge of the activities of this brigade, and the 3rd Light Horse. This knowledge must presumably have come from either a personal account or some sort of unit diary or official history, neither of which would fail to mention such a dramatic occurrence. So unfortunately we neither have any confirmation that this charge took place, nor any evidence that would make it impossible!

The specific details the Professor recounts equally don't prove things one way or the other. It is all the way such a charge *would* be mounted, at least according to the Polish/French doctrine (or dreams) of the time. There is the stress on how the commander instantly sized up the situation and made his decision (the beloved *coup d'oeil*), the rapid orders and preparation (thousands of men and hundreds of horse-drawn vehicles organised for an attack in the twinkling of an eye, in a wood too!) the establishment of a *base of fire* with the MG squadrons to give covering fire overhead and/or from a flank, the use of reserves and the tremendous moral effect of all this speed, daring and decisive force, 'terrifying' infantry, transport and even armoured cars. This is doing it by the book, the perfect, thrilling dream of a cavalry charge in the twentieth century. But this very rarely came off quite how it was meant to, even with all these favourable factors of circumstance and tactics. So, again, how come no-one had heard of this one before? In reality the Germans took the swords off their cavalry after the 1939 campaign, so they couldn't even try to charge. The French cavalry had swords but also a realistic appreciation of modern weaponry. So in the 1940 campaign there isn't a single verified instance of a mounted charge despite both sides having thousands of horsemen trotting around dreaming of Lasalle and Seydlitz.

OK we still don't have proof that the charge at Rypno never happened, but I am certain the account is more or less exaggerated. I feel we can discount at least one of the things he refers to, ie 'armoured cars pushing their way through the convoy'. What on earth would armoured cars be doing in a column of transport vehicles, far behind the front? As we know, nearly all German armoured cars were concentrated in the recce units of Panzer and motorised formations. Which this plainly wasn't, or else why would the infantry be marching on foot? First Wave infantry divisions were supposed to have three Sdkfz 13/14 cars in their recce battalion but the riflemen then ought to be either mounted or on bicycles. And why on earth would armoured cars have anything whatsoever to fear from mounted cavalry (or very long range MMG fire)? Nope, I can't swallow this one.

At any rate I suspect that reading a detailed account of the campaign would probably resolve the question of whether this charge or something like it took place. In English I understand that the Lannoy book I mentioned to Mike is the most authoritative. It's still in print I think, or you might be able to track it down via inter-library loan.

Finally let's talk about lances. Were they used in this charge or elsewhere? On first reading this account I thought I'd spotted an obvious contradiction in that he talks of the order to draw swords, but also mentions the use of lances. But on looking into it I found out that only the first rank of Polish cavalry ever had lances, so the second rank and maybe the officers and NCO's would indeed have to be ordered to draw their swords in a charge of lancers. Whether in fact lances were used at all in the 1939 campaign is, once again, debatable I'm afraid. Certainly they weren't supposed to be according to the regulations. But Piekalkiewicz says 'Although the lance had not been used as a weapon, even on manoeuvres, since 1934, and after being banned was carried only on baggage wagons, strangely enough cavalry troops re-adopted this seemingly outmoded weapon on the battlefield in September 1939.' This could be true. A regiment would only use about 300 lances after you take out all the officers, second-rank troopers, machine-gunners and bottle washers. 300 lances would go on a single wagon and it's perfectly possible they would take them on manoeuvres so as to conclude with a splendid march-past.

So maybe all or some units did carry them in the 1939 campaign, though I'm pretty certain without pennons. But I have to say I haven't found any other evidence for lances being carried at all. All the photos I have been able to find of Polish cavalry during the campaign are plainly from pre-war manoeuvres or parades, or else they actually show horse-artillerymen, who naturally wouldn't have lances. I have got one very big book on the Polish army 'Polska Zbrojna 1919-1939'. I can't remotely read Polish but it's full of nice plates and photos and I find I can make out the captions and charts. Two of the plates show cavalrymen in melee, with Germans and Russians respectively. These do represent 1939 and in one plate the Poles actually have a standard/guidon, complete with silver eagle finial, but there's not a lance to be seen. The only other book I have on the Polish army of 1939 is the *Militaria* special on the campaign. It shows a pre-war unit with just four lances amidst scores of sword-armed troopers. The caption comments 'during the campaign of 1939 lances

would soon be abandoned in favour of (modern weapons)'. Eh? This strikes me as a throwaway comment based on being more interested in AFV's than cavalry weapons.

To confuse the picture further, there was a practice of mounted units (including the pioneers and signallers of cavalry formations) carrying a single lance with a pennon as a kind of *fanion*. I suspect this would be to mark out the HQ or commander of squadron-sized units. Whether it was done in wartime I have no idea. I suspect not though, as it would be a bit conspicuous with the pennon and a bit useless without.

Right, that's my laborious two-penn'orth. I hope it's of some sense or interest even though it conspicuously fails to give the answers you were seeking. Incidentally, if you'd like to borrow the Polish book for a while you would be welcome. If you're toying with doing Poles of 1939 this book is a cracker, showing everything from MG carts to a motorised Catholic altar!

Cheers

John Boadle