

# The skirmish at Néry, 1 September 1914

## Introduction

The following account is taken from the book *The First Seven Divisions* by Ernest W. Hamilton (Source 1). The text has been adapted to contemporary orthography and translations of unit names have been fundamentally changed to English: the translator's wording has been retained. The illustrations are intended to be as true to the times as possible.

## The skirmish at Néry, 1 September 1914



*Hussars Skirmishing on the Western Front.*

Drawn by Harry Payne.

The motif is more likely from 1914 than 1917.

During the night the 1st Cavalry Brigade had been quartered in this little village with "L" Battery, Royal Horse Artillery, which had been assigned to the brigade.

The village lies low in an area filled with hills and valleys. To the south and east, the terrain rises suddenly and very steeply, so that it forms a long hill ridge that juts out into the plain to the north. Along this ridge Second Lieutenant Tailby of the 11th Hussars was patrolling early on the morning of September 1st and in a very dense fog when he suddenly came upon a detachment of German cavalry.

He had hardly had time to gallop back and alert the brigade before the shells rained down on the town. The German force consisted, as it later turned out, of no less than six cavalry regiments with two 6-

cannon's batteries, and there is every reason to believe that it was as surprised at the encounter as the 1st Cavalry Brigade.

However, the advantage, both as regards position and numbers, was absolutely on the side of the Germans, who, from the crest of the hill on which they were situated, completely commanded the lower ground. Even the sun favored the Germans; when it broke out at approximately 05:00, it was in the back of the enemy and right in the eyes of the defenders.



*Tysk 7,7 cm field cannon, ca. 1914.*

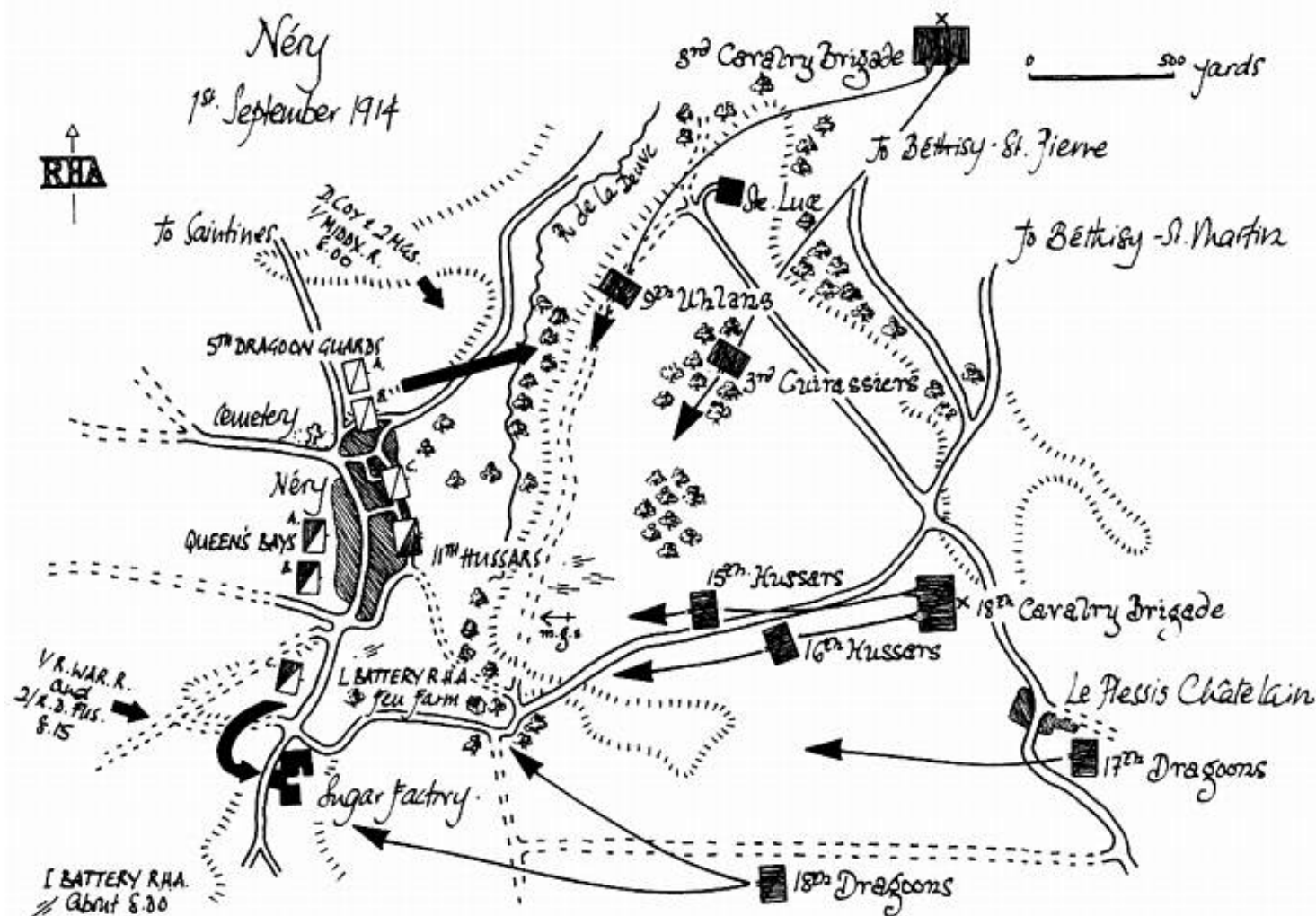
The drawing used as an illustration in an English language book about the First World War, is seen for sale at MILPRINTS, from whose catalog the image originates.

When the fog cleared, it soon became clear to everyone what the situation was. On the crest of the hill above, with the sun at their backs, six detached German cavalry regiments were in position, supported by 12 guns.

Down in the hollow in an easily visible orchard on the west side of the village were the 2nd Dragoon Guards and L Battery. They were still staying where they had bivouacked for the night.

On the other side of them, but somewhat farther away, had the position of the 5th Dragoon Guards. The 11th Hussars were on the south-eastern edge of the village closest to the enemy, but more or less concealed and protected from the enemy fire by the terrain conditions. So began one of those rare episodes which will live in history.





From source 4.



11<sup>th</sup> Hussars (Cherry Pickers), Somewhere in France, ca. 1914.  
 Drawn by Harry Payne.

L-Battery's position was not chosen with combat in mind. Had it not been foggy, it would never have been taken by surprise there either. But now it was there once and had to accept it and make the best possible out of the situation. Only three of its guns, due to the undulations of the terrain, could fire on the enemy position, but they also quickly got into business.

The 2nd Dragoon Guards, which of the cavalry regiments were the most exposed to the enemy's fire, first brought their horses to cover, but then commenced a heavy magazine and machine-gun fire, all seeking the best cover they could get; however, it was not large, and they also had the sun in their eyes. None of these disadvantages, on the other hand, were felt by the 11th Hussars, who from their concealed position could direct an extremely effective machine-gun fire against the enemy's left flank. However, for the time being we will leave this regiment's activities unmentioned.



*Royal Horse Artillery in Action.*

From a postcard, sent 31. juli 1911.

The focal point of the fight was the small battery in the apple orchard. It now became the target of a veritable rain of projectiles, aimed at it from a distance of only 400 meters. Two of the three guns in action were quickly silenced, and the enemy batteries, machine guns and magazine guns, now concentrated their fire on the only serviceable gun remaining.

Commanders and crew joined together to operate this gun. A shell tore one of Captain Bradbury's legs, but he braced himself as best he could, and continued to direct the fire until he fell dead. First Lieutenant Campbell fell beside him, and also Major Cawley 1), who had come with orders from the commander of the cavalry brigade.





*The Last Stand of 'L' Battery.*

From a series of cards - Battles for the Flag - published in the 1950s.  
The motif is drawn after a print by Fortunino Matania.

First Lieutenants Gifford and Mundy were both wounded, and Staff Sergeant Dorrell had to take command of the battery. Assisted by Sergeant Nelson, Constable Derbyshire, and Sergeant Osborne, he continued the unequal duel unabated.

However, the 5th Dragoon Guards had been ordered to make an immediate movement so that it could make a thrust from the north-east against the enemy's right flank. The regiment was also partially able to do this, albeit with some losses, thus got, among other things, Colonel Ansell right at the beginning a bullet in the head and died on the spot.



*6<sup>th</sup> Dragoon Guards,  
Scouting in the early morning, ca. 1914* [2](#).  
Drawn by Harry Payne.

However, the regiment was not strong enough to make more than a demonstration on its own, and the situation was anything but pleasant, when the 4th Cavalry Brigade, by some form of heaven, appeared quite unexpectedly, came galloping forward from Compiègne.

It immediately dismounted and took up position next to the 5th Dragoon Guards, after which the four cavalry regiments sent a deadly fire into the enemy's right flank.

Shortly afterwards, the English force received further reinforcements from the 1st Battalion, Middlesex Regiment, which heard to the 19th Infantry Brigade.

This changed the situation, and as the Germans now found that it was becoming rather hot for them, they retreated as quickly as possible towards Verrines with the loss of eight of their field guns and a machine gun.

They first tried with the help of the crew to haul back their guns, but our horseman's constant flanking fire, now further supported by a frontal fire from the 2nd Dragoon Guards, which by then had its machine guns placed in the sugar factory west of the village, they were still too much and they abandoned the attempt.





*11<sup>th</sup> Hussars (Cherry Pickers), A surprise Attack, ca. 1914.*  
 Drawn by Harry Payne.

The whole affair had so far only lasted a little over an hour, but the last word in the matter had not yet been said, for the 11th Hussars now hastened to their horses, mounted, galloped after the enemy, captured 50 horses, and took a number of men.

The Germans had a number of killed and wounded, and on our own side the forces in the orchard had suffered heavy losses.

The 2nd Dragoon Guards displayed great courage and activity throughout the affair. The regiment lost 7 officers, and of L-battery only three men came out of the battle unscathed 3).



*Engelsk Maxim maschinegun, ca. 1914.*  
 From a contemporaneous postcard, sent June 22, 1915.

The map here is intended to illustrate one of the two machine guns, which supported the 1st Middlesex capture of the eight German field guns 4).

To the survivors of this battery, however, it will forever be a satisfaction to think that the last shot of the unequal duel was fired with the battered and bloodstained 13-pounder down in the orchard, and that it was fired into the back of the enemy .



*English Cavalry, ca. 1914.*

From a contemporary French postcard

There is a small aftermath to the affair that should not be left unmentioned. The 1st and 4th Cavalry Brigades were quartered at Borest the following night and continued the march south through the Ermenonville Forest the next day.

Here they found hidden among the birch trees two 5) of the cannons that the Germans had managed to bring with them from Néry. A small thing to be sure, but a very satisfying ending nonetheless.







*Another case, my lads! Royal Army Medical Corps, ca. 1914.*  
Contemporary postcard, published by Raphael Tuck & Sons.

### Postscript - Loss figure

The casualties on the German side were in the order of 188 men, including 78 prisoners of war, and 232 horses. In addition, there were 12 field guns.

On the English side, the losses were calculated at 133 men and a good 390 horses. Added to this were the 6 field guns, leaving the English Cavalry Division with only 3 batteries for a month, until "H" Battery, Royal Horse Artillery, took over the decimated L Battery's place.

The table below, prepared on the basis of source 2, specifies the English losses.

English losses at Néry, 1. september 1914	Dead		Wounded		Horses
	Officers	privates	Officers	privates	
1 <sup>st</sup> Cavalry Brigade HQ	1	--	--	--	--
2 <sup>nd</sup> Dragoon Guards	1	8	8	31	Ca. 150
5 <sup>th</sup> Dragoon Guards	1	7	2	11	60-80

11 <sup>th</sup> Hussars	--	--	--	2	2
'L' Battery, Royal Horse Artillery	3	20	2	29	150
Royal Horse Guards (4 <sup>th</sup> Cavalry Brigade)	1	--	--	5	Ca. 7
1 <sup>st</sup> Bn. Middlesex Regiment (19 <sup>th</sup> Brigade)	--	--	1	--	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>390</b>

## Sources

1. The first seven divisions by Ernest W. Hamilton, translated into Danish by lieutenant colonel E. Holten-Nielsen, Pios Boghandel - Povl Branner, København 1917.
2. *Nery, 1914 - The Adventure of the German 4<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Division on the 31st August and the 1st September* by Major A.F. Becke, Naval & Military Press, London 2004, ISBN 1-84574-030-0.
3. The action at Néry, fra The Die Hards - 1<sup>st</sup> Bn. Middlesex Regiment, 1914-1918.
4. *Riding the Retreat* af Richard Holmes, Pimlico Edition, London 1996, ISBN 0-7126-5862-9.
5. Guns, Kites and Horses - Three Diaries from the Western Front af Sydney Giffard (red.), The Radcliff Press, London 2003, ISBN 1-86064-906-8.

Per Finsted

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## Notes:

- 1) Major John Stephen Cawley, 20<sup>th</sup> Hussars, was stabschef at 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Brigade.
- 2) 4<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Brigade: Composite Regiment of Household Cavalry, 6<sup>th</sup> Dragoon Guards (Carabiniers) and 3<sup>rd</sup> (King's Own) Hussars.
- 3) The loss figures match only partially with information in Source 2. The exact loss figures are reproduced in the postscript to this paper.
- 4) See Source 3 for a mention of the 1st Battalion, Middlesex Regiment's participation in the skirmish. The battalion was part of the 19th Infantry Brigade, which also included: 2nd Royal Welsh Fusiliers, 1st Cameronians (Scottish Rifles) and 2nd Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders.
- 5) Source 2 states that it was actually all four guns.