

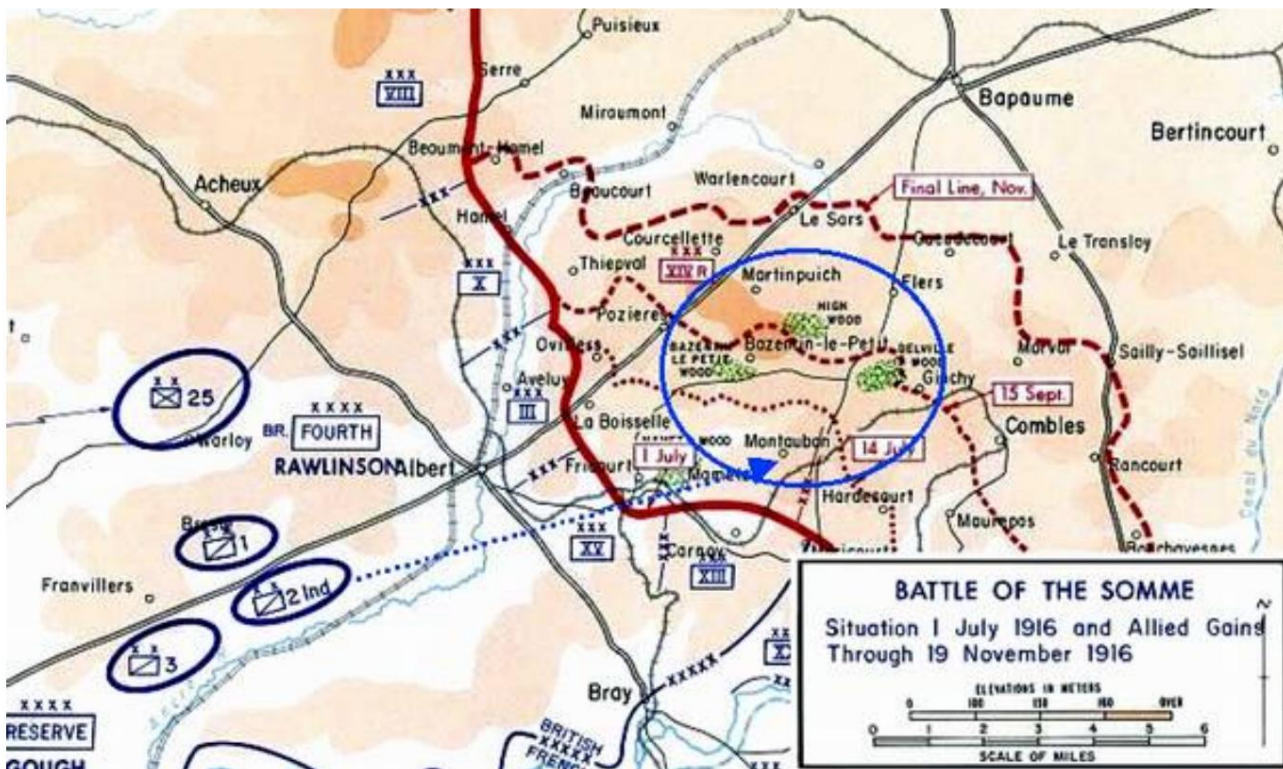
A cavalry charge at the Somme, 14 July 1916

Introduction

On 14 July 1916 at the Somme, the cavalry finally got the opportunity to carry out the mounted attack, which not least they themselves dreamed of and which everyone hoped would come.

As on several previous occasions, the cavalry was kept in readiness to break through the gap in the German front line which the offensive would create. It was a considerable force consisting of five cavalry divisions - three British and two Indian. Three of the divisions were initially marched up behind the 4th.

Army (Rawlinson), but by 4 July 1914 hope of a breakthrough had faded and only *the 2nd Indian Cavalry Division* (Major-General Henry John MacAndrew) remained in readiness at Morlancourt.



Excerpt from the map Peronne and vicinity, 1 July - 19 November 1916, which can be found on The History Department at The United States Military Academy's website.

Bazentin The ridge is conquered - the cavalry is sent forward

Early on the morning of July 14, 1916, units of the 3rd 7th

rd and 9th (Scottish) Division (XIII Corps) as well

and the 21st Division (XV Corps) carried out a well-planned and successfully executed attack against Bazentin Ridge. After a short artillery preparation, the infantry units were close to the lives of the German defenders, for whom the attack came as a surprise 1).



A successful dawn patrol near Bazentin-le-Grand, 1916 2). —

From the Illustrated London News, November 8, 1939.

The drawing was first published on 23 September 1916.

During the morning, the German forces withdrew approx. 7 km back leaving a large number of dead and wounded; approx. 1,400 men were captured, including two regimental commanders and 40 officers. Now was the opportunity that everyone had been waiting for, namely to advance through a gap in the German front, reach the artillery positions and then unravel the whole front.

2nd Indian Cavalry Division, which was located approx. 20 km behind the current front line received marching orders at 07.20 and were ready to move out after 40 minutes. The advance was significantly hampered by rough terrain full of trenches and shell holes and by midday the division's vanguard - *The Secunderabad Cavalry Brigade* - is at Montauban.

However, the vanguard - *7th (Princess Royal's) Dragoon Guards* - is ahead somewhat earlier and sends out patrols to the north-west and north-east. Enemy fire prevents the patrols from advancing far, but they report that their own infantry are engaged at Bazentin-le-Petit Wood and Bazentin-le-Grand Wood. (The latter is not shown on the map, but is located immediately south-west of Bazentin-le-Petit Wood.) The regiment then moves to the town of Carnoy, a little south of Montauban.

The Secunderabad Cavalry Brigade (1916)

Commander: Brigadier Charles Levigne Gregory 7th

(Princess Royal's) Dragoon Guards (Major JEF Dyer 3)) 20th —

Deccan Horse (Lieutenant-Colonel E. Tennant)

34th Prince Albert Victor's Own Poona Horse Squadron/Fort Garry Horse (from *The Canadian Cavalry Brigade* 4) 13th —

Cavalry Brigade Machine Gun Squadron N Battery,

Royal Horse Artillery Field Troop,

Royal Engineers 9th Light

Armored Car Battery (-) (= two Rolls-Royce armored cars) 5) —

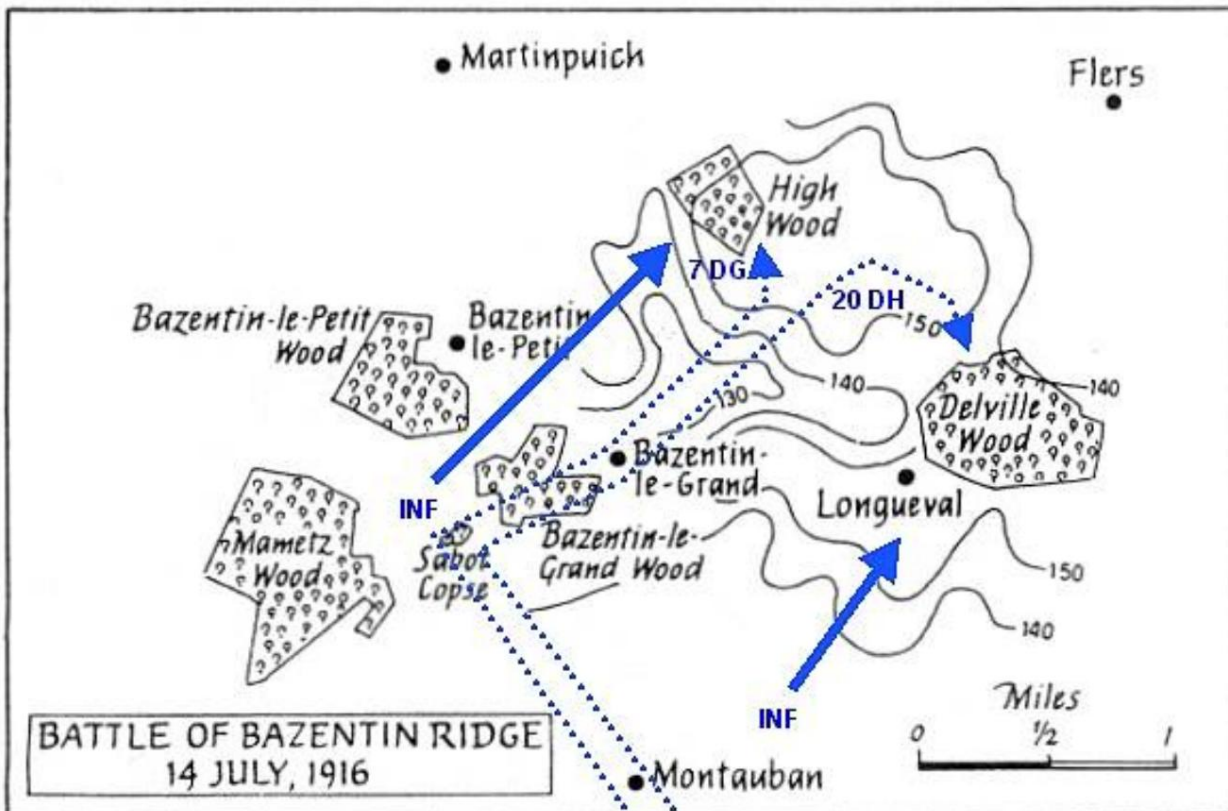
Precise intelligence is definitely in short supply and leadership is hampered, among other things, by erroneous reports that this and that locality have been captured. The brigade is ordered to wait until infantry units have captured the terrain around Bazentin-le-Petit Wood and Longueval (not shown on the map but immediately

south of Delville Wood). Time passes and the German troops have gradually recovered from the shock of the morning and are rapidly consolidating their positions, which are set up in the area's cornfields, among other things.

At 13.10 it is reported (erroneously) that Longueval has been captured and an attack against High Wood Delville Wood is ordered to be launched at 15.15. After five hours of waiting, the cavalry is ordered to support the attack.

The attack

The brigade commander recalls a number of work commands he has deployed to improve the march roads and, before meeting with the infantry unit staff to coordinate the deployment, receives a telephone message from the division commander that the attack has been postponed until 18:15. He chooses to send forward *the 7th (Princess Royal's) Dragoon 20th Deccan Horse*, keeping *the Guards* and *34th Prince Albert Victor's Own Poona Horse* in reserve.



From Source 1.

The plan of attack was as follows:

1. An infantry attack (*XV Corps*) was to be directed at High Wood. *The 7th (Princess Royal's) Dragoon Guards* were to support the attack and advance on the infantry's right wing with the task of attacking High Wood from the east.
2. *The 20th Deccan Horse* supported the advance, as far forward as the front ground between High Wood and Delville Wood, from which the regiment was to attack the latter, in support of the infantry attack (*XIII Corps*) there.
3. Delville Wood was already under fire from the artillery, which would lay down the fire at precisely 6:15 p.m. It was therefore vital that they moved forward with the greatest possible speed, so as to take advantage of this barrage.
4. The two attacking regiments were each assigned a section with four medium machine guns from the brigade's machine gun squadron.

7th Princess Royal's Dragoon Guards



Across the Enemy's destroyed Trenches.

From a contemporary postcard, drawn by Harry Payne.

Led by Second Lieutenant HW Pope's platoon of B Squadron, the regiment moved from Carnoy, through Montauban, towards Bazentin-le-Grand, where it deployed, with B and C Squadron in line.

B Squadron was armed with lances, while the other three squadrons only carried sabres.

However, the drawing on the left hardly depicts *the 7th (Princess Royal's) Dragoon Guards*, not for nothing was nicknamed The Black Horse.

Everywhere the dragoons were greeted with cheers and held their breaths - it was the first time since the beginning of trench warfare that a mounted attack had been seen...

It is not known whether the artillery fire was misplaced as planned, but the infantry attack had begun at 19:00 when the dragoons launched their attack. At first the infantry drew the German fire and the horsemen came forward fairly unscathed, although German machine guns did add to them some losses.

Approx. 200 m in front of the enemy's positions, the squadrons were sheltered by the terrain and could launch the decisive attack.



Lancers attacking Infantry.

From a contemporary postcard, drawn by Harry Payne.

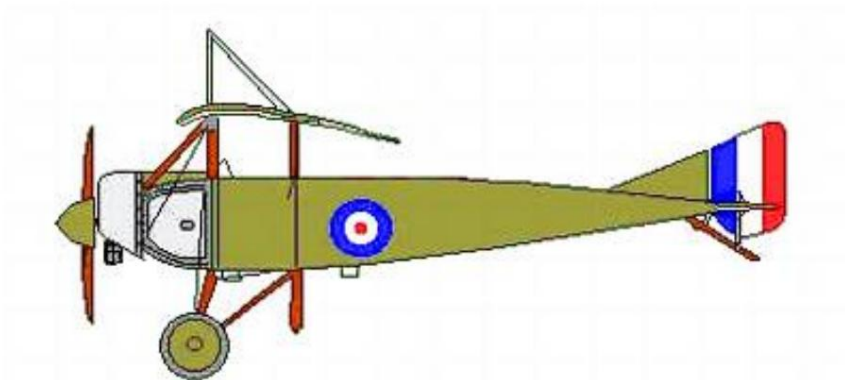
At full gallop they now rode towards the German soldiers, who were hiding in cornfields and shell holes.

This is how the dragons' attack could have played out. The horses are not black, so it is probably a different regiment, just as the grain in the fields at Bazentin Ridge was hardly harvested. Whether the term "lancers" is to be taken literally, or simply expresses lance-armed horsemen, is not known.

Approx. 15 Germans fell victim to the lances and while 32 surrendered immediately they saw how their comrades had fared.

The German fire was now so fierce that the dragoons were forced to dismount. The horses were led back under cover of a crete, while the dragoons took up the fight on foot.

Air reconnaissance had earlier in the afternoon reported that High Wood and the access roads to it were apparently clear of enemy units. But now, several hours later, the situation was different.



A two-seat *Morane* reconnaissance plane now observed the enemy positions from which the dragoons were fired upon. The machine now flew, repeatedly, very slowly over the German positions and fired light trails at them, so as to show the dragoons where the fire was coming from. The observer drew a hasty sketch of the area and threw down a message. It was picked up by the commander of N Battery, Royal Horse Artillery, who immediately began to fire his guns into the German positions.

The image comes from *Air of Authority - A History of RAF Organisation*, and shows a *Morane LA type machine*.

The machine-gun section, which supported the regiment, was on the right wing, but, owing to the high grain, could not give any reasonable fire. A machine gun that had advanced too far came under heavy fire. They tried to save the machine gun, but the pack horse that was supposed to carry the gun was killed.

However, they managed to salvage the gun and most of the crew, during which Lieutenant Anson was wounded.

Gradually darkness was falling and a calm settled over the battlefield and during the night (at 03.40) the dragoons were withdrawn.

The loss of the dragoons was calculated at: 3 dead, including an officer; 21 wounded, including 1 officer. The losses among the horses were calculated at: 14 dead, 2 missing and 24 wounded.

Second Lieutenant Pope was awarded *the Military Cross* for rescuing two wounded dragoons, during which he rode three times, under enemy fire, through the tall grain to recover the wounded. He was originally a *sergeant-major* in *the 2nd Dragoon Guards (Queen's Bays)*, and had joined the regiment in 1915 as a second lieutenant.

20th Deccan Horse

Lieutenant-Colonel E. Tennant received orders at Sabot Copse to advance to a position from which he could attack Delville Wood from the north and north-west and thus enable *the 9th (Scottish) Division* to capture the wood. The importance of connection to the neighboring units to the right and left is emphasized.

The brigade commander would follow forward, between the two attacking cavalry regiments.



A Charge at the Battle of the Somme, 1916.

From a contemporary postcard, drawn by Harry Payne.

The text on the back of the card reads:

*The Deccan Horse and Dragoon Guards charging the enemy
at the Battle of the Somme.*

A Squadron (lance armed), under the command of Captain F. Jarvis, forms the vanguard. The terrain was impassable and in places only passable in column of two, which somewhat reduced the speed of advance.

Forward in open ground, the squadrons spread out in line and follow the vanguard. Ahead of the tall grain, the Indian horsemen encounter small groups of terrified Germans who surrender, apparently under the impression that no pardon will be given.

As A Squadron reaches its objective, a clearly manned enemy trench line is observed north of Delville Wood as well as enemy artillery recognized by its muzzle flashes.

During the advance both the vanguard and the following squadrons are fired upon by machine guns in Delville Wood, and the regimental commander sends C Squadron out to secure this flank.

D Squadron is sent forward between A Squadron and *the 7th (Princess Royal's) Dragoon Guards*, while B Squadron is held in reserve to meet all eventualities.

Further advance with A Squadron will throw the two regiments' attack out of step, especially as the Dragoons appear to be further back and it is not possible to link up with the 9th (Scottish) *Division*.

Lt. Col. Tennant sends a message back to the brigade commander and asks for relative orders, but it is not possible to establish contact. The Vanguard reports that a larger enemy force is assembling, apparently to mount a counterattack. B Squadron is ordered to stand ready to move A to the rescue, but the German counter-attack does not appear.

It is now getting dark and the Lieutenant-Colonel now orders the regiment to assemble so that it may form an extended line on the right of the *7th (Princess Royal's) Dragoon Guards* and he hopes that during the night it will be possible to get liaison with the infantry attacking Delville Wood.

The withdrawal of the vanguard takes place at just the right moment, for the positions forward on the ridge have hardly been cleared before the German artillery takes the place under fierce fire.

At midnight, the German artillery again opened fire on the suspected English positions, but without success.

The rest of the night is uneventful, except for a single German patrol that runs into an Indian patrol.

The Indians take two prisoners - from the 16th Bavarian Infantry Regiment.

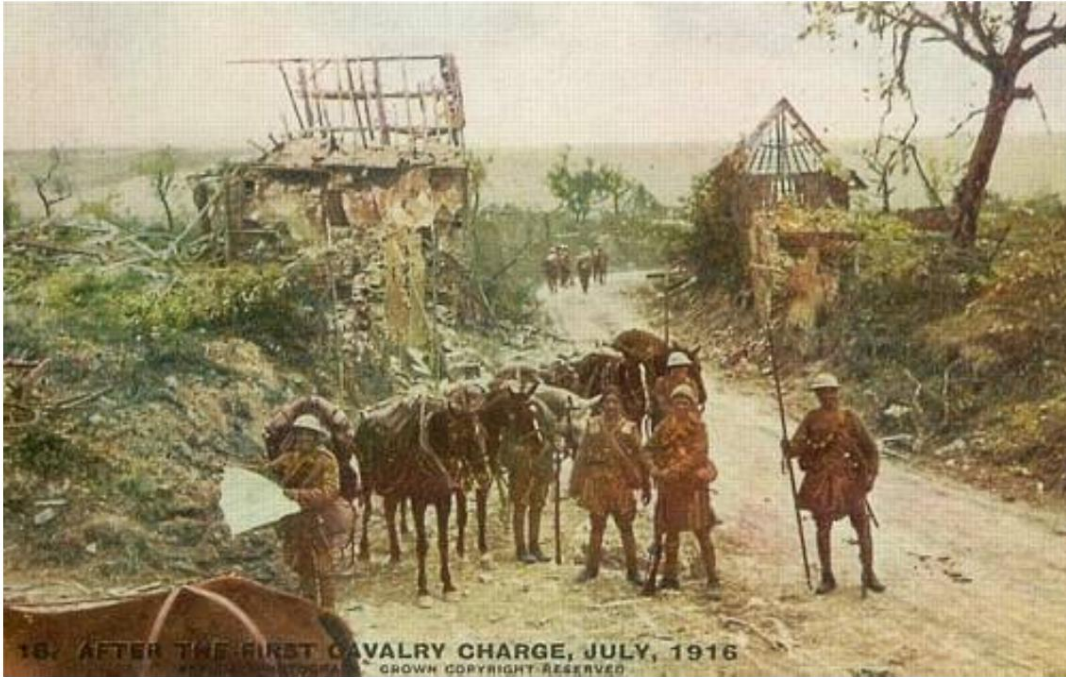
At 03.30 the regiment is ordered to withdraw. The withdrawal takes place under cover of morning fog and can therefore be carried out upside down. Once in Montauban, there is an opportunity to water and feed the horses, after which the brigade moves back to the bivouac area, which it had left in the morning the day before.

The regiment's losses are calculated at: 9 dead; 41 wounded, including two Indian officers. The losses among the horses were calculated at 19 dead and 53 wounded.

Closing

The brigade's total losses were calculated at 102 dead, wounded and missing and 130 horses. The losses must be said to be very small compared to what they could have been.

However, the timing of an attack that actually led to something was missed and ideally should have been launched much earlier, while the Germans were still reeling. But the relatively modest size of the losses must be taken as an indication that the German forces were, after all, rather affected by the morning's attack.



After the first Cavalry Charge, July 1916.

Reports of the attack reached the press, who made a big deal out of it - there was little good news from the front, and especially from the Somme...

From a postcard in the series *Official War Photographs (Series 3, No. 18)* published by *the Daily Mail* newspaper during the First World War.

The text on the back of the card reads: *A way-side group of gallant Indian cavalrymen, some of whom greatly enjoyed their share in the charge through the cornfields at High Wood on July 14th, 1916, with the Dragoon Guards.*

Some of these colored photographs were reprinted in 1997 and sold at, among others, the National Army Museum, London.

Sources

1. *A History of the British Cavalry 1816-1919, Volume 8: The Western Front, 1915-1918, Epilogue, 1919-1939* by The Marquess of Anglesey, Leo Cooper, London 1997, ISBN 0-85052-467-9.
2. *The Somme - The day-by-day Account* by Chris McCarthy, Arms & Armor Press, London 1993, ISBN 1-85409-206-5.
3. *The Somme 1916 - Crucible of a British Army* by Michael Chappel, Windrow & Green, London 1995, ISBN 1-85915-007-1.
4. *The 4th/7th Royal Dragoon Guards 1685-1980* by JM Brereton, published by the regiment, Catterick 1982, ISBN 0-95083-310-X.

Per Finsted

Notes

- 1) Read more about the attack, e.g. here: [The Battle of Bazentin Ridge, 1916.](#)

2) The caption is as stated in the magazine, which is why the word successful must be attributed to this source. The text *7th* indicates that the riders are from a *Dragoon Guard* regiment, so it may very well be the *(Princess Royal's) Dragoon Guards*.

3) 7th (Princess Royal's) Dragoon was temporarily led by the commander of C Squadron as the regimental commander Lieutenant-Colonel R. Sparrow had been wounded some weeks earlier.

4) The Canadian squadron carries, as something new, specially formed "spange" which enables the horses to pass over trenches.

5) However, the two armored cars were of no use as they got stuck in the rough terrain around Mountauban.