

About the first skirmish between English and German cavalry, 22 August 1914

Introduction

The imminent 90th anniversary of the start of the First World War is judged to be an appropriate occasion to describe the first skirmish between English and German cavalry at Mons in Belgium [1](#).

The skirmish took place on the morning of 22 August 1914 and involved *C Squadron/4th Dragoon Guards*, from the English 2nd Cavalry Brigade as well as parts of, among others, the Prussian *Kürassier-Regiment von Driesen (Westfälisches) Nr. 4* from 9. Cavalry Division/2. Cavalry Corps.

There are different accounts of what happened on this August morning in 1914, and the sources are far from agreeing on the times, the events or their order. In my account I have sought to describe the events in accordance with what appears to be the prevailing opinion.

Despite the situation's obvious potential for patriotic illustrations, I have not seen such depictions of the events. I have therefore chosen motifs from other English cavalry regiments 4th Dragoon Guards is that this as difference between the regiments shown and the regiment rode black horses; illustrations. The only real it was not for decoration that the regiment was nicknamed "The Black Horse".

Similarly, it has also been necessary to resort to other units to find suitable German illustrations.

4th (Royal Irish) Dragoon Guards

The regiment left England via Southampton on 15 August 1914 and numbered 26 officers, 528 non-commissioned officers and privates as well as approx. 600 horses; each squadron consisted of 6 officers as well as 152 non-commissioned officers and privates [2](#):

Regimental Headquarters

Lieutenant-Colonel RL Mullens, *Commanding*

Major A. Solly-Flood, DSO, *Second-in-Command*

Captain RJB Oldrey, *Adjutant*

DGF Darley, *Signaling Officer FA*

Dunham, *Quartermaster*

Captain AC Osburn, *Medical Officer, from Royal Army Medical Corps*

Captain HC Welch, *Veterinary Officer, from Army Veterinary Corps*



From *The British Army of 1914*
by R. Money Barnes,

Seeley Service & Co. Ltd., London 1968.

A Squadron

Major CF Hunter, *Commanding*

Captain HS Sewell

Captain J. Haddess-Lloyd, *from Reserve of Officers*

Lieutenant A. Gallaher

Lieutenant SJW Railston, *from 18th Lancers, Indian Army*

2nd Lieutenant RJF Chance, *from Cambridge University Officer Training Corps*

B Squadron

Major R. Hutchisson, *Commanding, from 11th Hussars*

Captain RK McGillicuddy

Lieutenant Sir AE Hickman, Bart.

Lieutenant OBSanderson

2nd Lieutenant RG Fetherstonhaugh

2nd Lieutenant R. Gordon-Munro

C Squadron

Major GTM Bridges, DSO, *Commanding*

Captain CB Hornby

Lieutenant JW Aylmer

Lieutenant HL Jones, *from 13th Hussars*

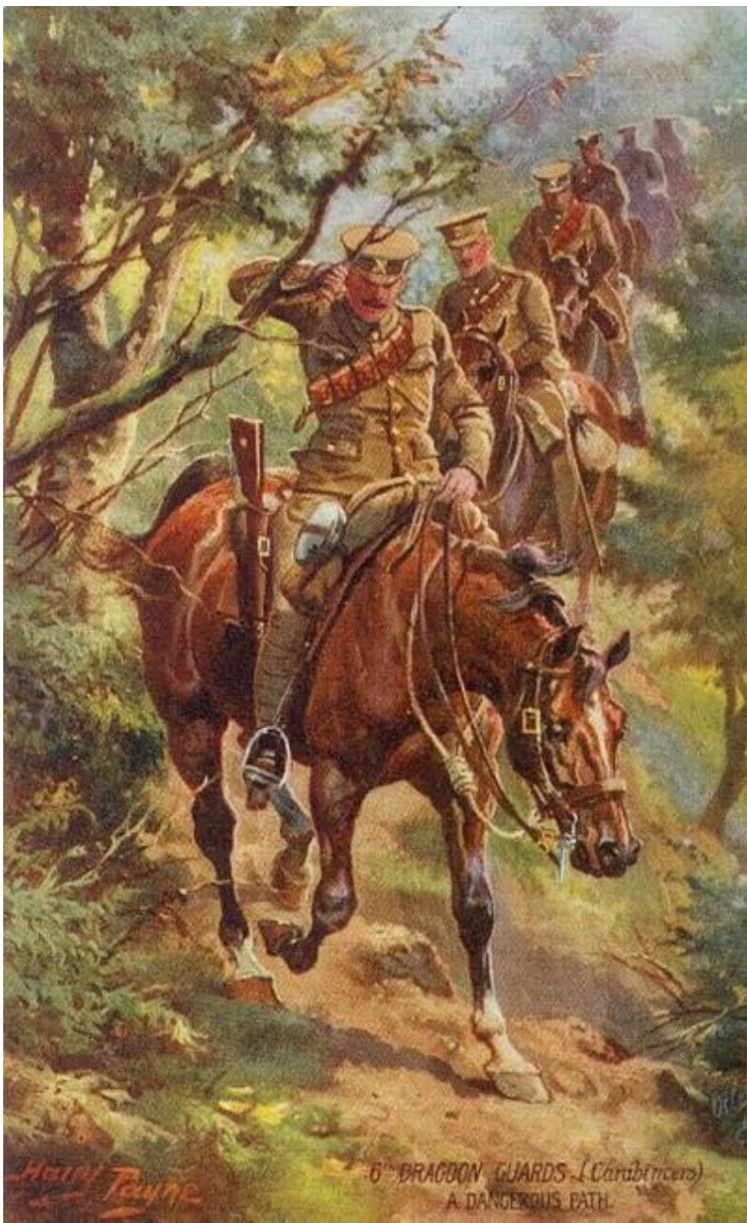
2nd Lieutenant FBB Pigeon

2nd Lieutenant J. Holman

Maxim Gun Detachment

Captain GH FitzGerald

(The overview has been prepared based on Source 2.)



6th Dragoon Guards - A Dangerous Path.
Simultaneous postcard drawn by Harry Payne.

The regiment reached Boulogne, where it encamped, awaiting the remainder of the 2nd Cavalry Brigade (9th Lancers and 18th Hussars). The brigade was part of *The Cavalry Division*, which is discussed in more detail in my article *English Cavalry during the First World War*.

On 18 August 1914, the brigade was increased and was then ordered to move to Bois La-Haut, south-east of Mons, first per railway since per road march.

There had not yet been skirmishes between the English Expeditionary Force and the advancing German units, whose exact location was somewhat uncertain.

On 21 August 1914, the regiment was ordered to clear the area between Mons and Soignies, which lay on the main road to Brussels, and C Squadron, under the command of Major Tom Bridges, was sent forward to solve this task.

From Belgian refugees it was learned that large German forces were advancing on Brussels, but the information could not yet be confirmed from other sources.

The squadron went into position south of the village of Casteau with the aim of intercepting one or more enemy patrols.

The squadron was augmented by two platoons (1st and 4th) mounted (the interception command) under the command of the second in command, Captain Charles B. Hornby, secured by the other two platoons that had been detached.

During the night and the early hours of the morning, various patrols were sent out from the 4th Division in the area.

Principle sketch



(The sketch was prepared based on Source 3.)

1. - C Squadron's ambush position.
2. - The German patrol stops when it suspects the ambush.
- 3rd - 1st Division mounted attack (*First Blood*).
- 4th - 4th Platoon disembarks at Chateau Casteau and fires at the retreating German cuirassiers (*First Shot*).
5. - Mounted cuirassiers return the English fire.
6. - The German cuirassiers withdraw, dismount and fire on the advancing English dragoons.
- 7th - 1st Division follows the German cuirassiers.
8. - Parts of a German cyclist unit shelling the 1st Platoon.
9. - On 21 August 1939, a memorial for the skirmish was erected here.

The road north of Casteau was in 1914 surrounded by roadside trees on both sides; south of Casteau the road was paved with cobblestones, in which lay tram rails.

First Blood - First Shot



Offiziers-Patrouille im Morgengrauen Jäger-Regiment zu Pferde Nr. 33).

Drawn by Erich R. Döbrich-Steglitz. From Source 6.

Around 06:30 on 22 August 1914, a German patrol of approx. 6 soldiers armed with lances, who calmly rode along the road, with their lances at rest; the patrol was led by a cigar-smoking officer.

Immediately in front of C Squadron's positions, the patrol halts as it suspects an ambush.



6th Dragoon Guards - A Patrol Reconnoitring.

Simultaneous postcard drawn by Harry Payne.

Possibly it was a dragoon from the 4th Division who, by pulling his horse across the road, gave away the position.

Another explanation is that it was a dragoon from the 3rd Platoon who got up from his position when he observed the enemy patrol, but this is not known for sure.

Although the squadron commander was not aware of which enemy units - in addition to the patrol - he could risk meeting, he commands to Captain Hornby " *Now's your chance, Charles - after them with the sword!*", after which Captain Hornby with 1st Platoon and the majority of the 4th Division (some dragoons were still

not returned from the night's patrol duties), sets after the German patrol, which hastily retreated towards Casteau.



1st (Royal) Dragoons - Charge!

Simultaneous postcard drawn by Harry Payne.

On the outskirts of Casteau, the captain sees parts of the German cuirassier squadron that had sent out the patrol, and realizes that he may be yawning too much.

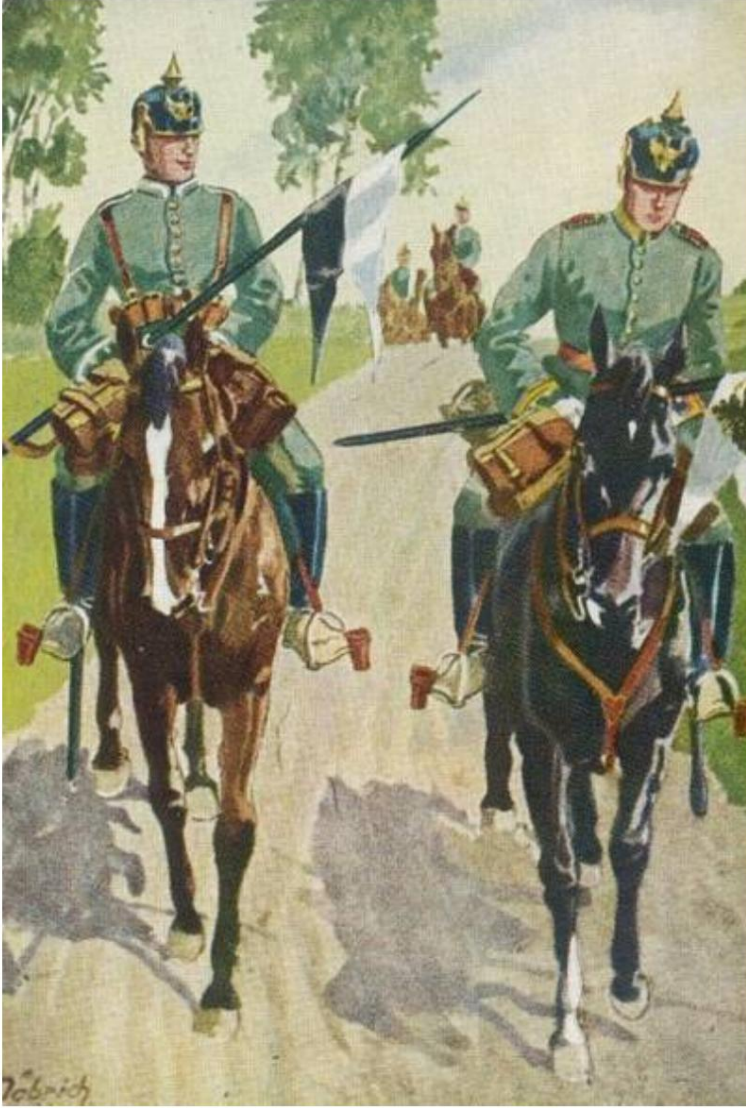
Before he can give counter orders, the two forces collide and the captain cuts down a German cuirassier by plunging his saber into the German's chest (*First Blood*); the captain's attendant - *Dragoon Tilney* - captures another German cuirassier.

The two forces engage in a deadly melee, during which the German cuirassiers find it difficult to use their lances, which they therefore throw away while trying to protect themselves with their sabres. It is estimated that 7-8 Germans were killed during this battle.

The German cuirassiers retreat fighting through the city and it is noted that the English horses have difficulty standing firm due to the smooth cobblestones of the main street. Approx. 1 km north of Casteau, the German cuirassiers halt on a ridge and take the attacking English under fire.

Captain Hornby commands the 4th Platoon to dismount and go into position along the road. The dragoons hastily return their sabres to their scabbards, draw their carbines, give the reins of the horses to the hand-horse drivers, who hastily lead the horses to cover behind a high wall that surrounds the Chateau Casteau; 1. Sharing remains

perched.



Unteroffiziers-Patrouille - Jäger-Regiment zu Pferde Nr. 8.

Drawn by Erich R. Döbrich - Steglitz,
reproduced from a postcard published by Schild-Verlag, Munich.

Soon after, the German cuirassiers retreat and Captain Bridges follows with the 1st Platoon. He once again makes contact with the enemy and during the ensuing melee several cuirassiers are killed and wounded; 5 German cuirassiers surrender after throwing away their lances.

The situation now becomes critical for Captain Hornby, as he is taken under fire from parts of a German cyclist unit that has disembarked on a ridge somewhat behind the German cuirassiers.

The sources do not agree on the presence and possible role of this unit in the skirmish.

Major Bridges at the same time - at a gallop - reaches Captain Hornby and commands the 2nd and 3rd Platoons in position on both sides of the road.

Here, too, we are talking about mounted hunters, reproduced from a maneuver before the war. As in the previous German illustration, the helmet cover is missing, but the drawing gives a good impression of how the German cavalry was equipped. Note the "shoes" on both stirrups in which the lance could be supported. (The figure on the right is a non-commissioned officer.)



6th Dragoon Guards - Charging up hill.

Simultaneous postcard drawn by Harry Payne.

It has been learned from the German prisoners that the cuirassiers are the vanguard of the 9th Cavalry Division, and with the prospect of being outflanked by the enemy, he orders Captain Hornby and his half-squadron back, after which he himself follows with his half-squadron.

The dismounted dragoons now seek cover behind the roadside trees and open fire on the German cuirassiers on the ridge, below which *Corporal E. Thomas* hits a perched, cigar-smoking officer (*First Shot*) who is in the process of commanding his soldiers to cover. It is unknown whether the German officer was killed or wounded.

After the game



Captain Charles B. Hornby.

From Source 3.

This first skirmish of the war lasted only a short time, but it was the opinion on the English side that they had secured a moral advantage.



Distinguished Service Order.

Reproduced

from *The Wonder Book of Soldiers*, Ward, Lock

& Co, London, no year (circa 1935).

On the English side there were no casualties among the personnel, but a few horses were killed and wounded. Source 3 thus mentions that a horse that was taken while being taken under cover at Chateau Casteau was able to carry its rider back, where a farrier had to knock it down, in order to subsequently hand over the body to a Belgian butcher.

The estimated German losses amounted to approx. 15-20 killed and wounded and 5 prisoners. The squadron brought back the prisoners along with some of the captured lances, which were placed on a wagon.

C Squadron joined the regiment, southeast of Mons, south of the Mons-Condé Canal. The squadron could bask in the envious glances of the other squadrons, and later the brigade, and the accounts of the morning's skirmishes were given no less than being retold.

This may explain some of the different versions of what happened this morning.

Captain Charles B. Hornby was nominated for a DSO (*Distinguished Service Order*) for his achievement. This reward was promised by the commander of the 2nd Cavalry Brigade, Brigadier-General H. de B de Lisle, to the officer who first killed an enemy using a Kavalerisabel Model 1908.

Source 2 mentions that the saber is on display at the regimental museum in York. I myself had the opportunity to visit the museum several years ago, but I am ashamed to say that I was not aware of the saber and its history. There may therefore be good reason to visit this otherwise excellent museum once again...

Closing

On 21 August 1939, a commemorative plaque was dedicated for this first skirmish of the war. The ceremony was attended by members of the regiment as well as a large number of honoraries and veterans. During the war, the memorial plaque was marked by a gun shot from a German officer, but it came through the war unscathed and should - as far as is known - still be at the site.



The commemorative plaque for the first skirmish between English and German cavalry, 22 August 1914.
From Source 2.

Postscript 1 - Psychological battle injuries

Source 1 and Source 2 fail to mention a further incident which surpassed C Squadron, but the case is mentioned in Source 3, which is based on the recollections of *Dragoon Ben Clouting*. The platoon leader of the 4th Platoon - Lieutenant Swallow - collapsed under the German fire. He became quite paralyzed and was unable to do anything. The incident took place at Chateau Casteau, after which Captain Hornby commanded in obvious disgust "*Get back to the lead horses, you cowardly bastard!*" The dragoons looked down in shame, while their lieutenant was thus shamed before everyone's eyes. The lieutenant remained with the regiment until 30 November 1914, when the regiment's war diary reads "*Weather mild with occasional heavy showers of rain. Lieutenant Swallow left for England.*" History tells us nothing about the fate that subsequently befell Lieutenant Swallow.

The initial overview of the regiment's officers per 15 August 1914, however, does not mention Lieutenant Swallow, which may be due to the desire to conceal his existence. Which of the lieutenants, if any, is mentioned in his place is not currently known.

Postscript 2 - About the German units

As a possible German-language supplement to the above presentation, which is based exclusively on English sources, Source 1 mentions the following: *Mons - Die Schlacht bei Mons, Der Grosse Krieg in Einzeldarstellungen, Herausgegeben im Auftrage des großen Generalstabes bei Gerhard Stalling, Oldenburg*. No publication year is mentioned.

The English soldiers consistently called German horsemen *Ulans*, and thus did not distinguish between cuirassiers, dragoons, hussars, mounted hunters and lancers, all of whom were armed with lances. However, the sources I have consulted all agree that it was *the Kürassier-Regiment von Driesen (Westfälisches) Nr. 4* who were involved in this first skirmish.

The regiment was part of the German 9th Cavalry Division, which was organized as follows:

Cavalry Division 9

Cavalry-Pioneer-Detachment 9

Maschinengewehr-Abteilung

7 III. Reitende Abteilung: 1 Hannoversches Feld-Artillerie-Regiment Nr. 10 von Scharnhorst
Kavallerie-Kraftfahr-Kolonne 9

Nachrichten Detachments: Schwere Funk Stelle 21 und Leichte Funk Stelle 8 & 17



German cuirassiers, 1914.

Cavalry Brigade 13 Kürassier-

Regiment von Driesen (Westfälisches) Nr. 4 1. Westfälisches Husaren-
Regiment Nr. 8

Cavalry Brigade 14 2.

Westfälisches Husaren-Regiment Nr. 11 Westfälisches
Ulanen-Regiment Nr. 5

Cavalry Brigade 19 Königs-

Ulanen-Regiment (1. Hannoversches) Nr. 13 Oldenburgisches
Dragoner-Regiment Nr. 19 (*The overview has been*

prepared on the basis of Das Deutsche Heer 1914; regimental names have been corrected according to Source 6.)

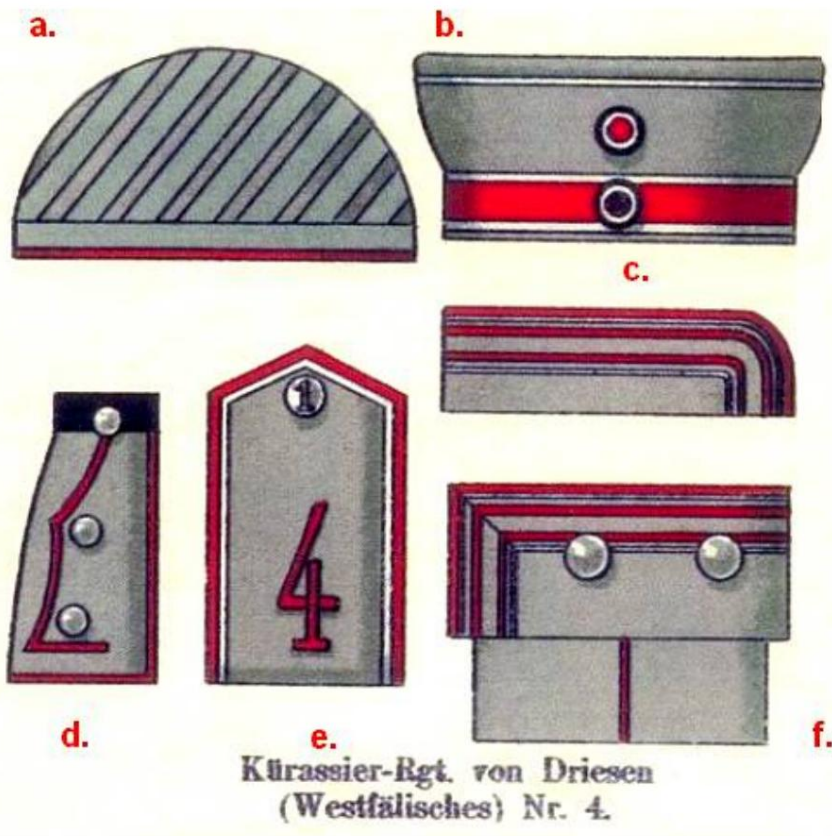
German Cuirassiers, 1914. Reproduced from *Farbiges Handbuch der Uniformenkunde*, W. Spemann Verlag, Stuttgart 1985, ISBN 3-440-81072-0. The book is an abridged version of the classic *Handbuch der Uniformenkunde* by Richard Knötel, Herbert Knötel and Herbert Sieg, from 1937; the original black-and-white plates are colored here quite deftly.)

A German cavalry regiment consisted of 36 officers, 686 non-commissioned officers and privates, and 765 horses. The regiment was organized in a staff squadron (signal division and training) and 4 squadrons (each with 6 officers, 163 non-commissioned officers and privates and 178 horses). (Source 1.)

The mentioned cyclist unit may come from one of the 4 hunter battalions that were part of the 2nd Cavalry Corps:

- Brandenburgisches Jäger-Bataillon No. 3
- Magdeburgisches Jäger-Bataillon Nr. 4
- Westfälisches Jäger-Bataillon Nr. 7
- Lauenburgisches Jäger-Bataillon Nr. 9

Each hunter battalion consisted of 4 light companies (each of 5 officers and 259 non-commissioned officers and privates), 1 machine gun company (each of 4 officers and 104 non-commissioned officers and privates) and 1 cyclist company (each of 3 officers and 113 non-commissioned officers and privates). (Source 1.)



It has not been possible to find an illustration showing one of the regiment's soldiers in 1914 uniform, but with the help of this plate from a larger series published by Verlag Moritz Ruhl, Leipzig in 1914, and the article's other German illustrations, then it should be possible to get a good impression of this.

The series, which bore the name *Die grauen Felduniform der deutschen Armee*, is reproduced in Source 7.

- a. Swaled (trumpeters and musicians) b. Felt hat c. Collar
- d. Braid
- trim e. Shoulder flap f. Sleeve roll-up

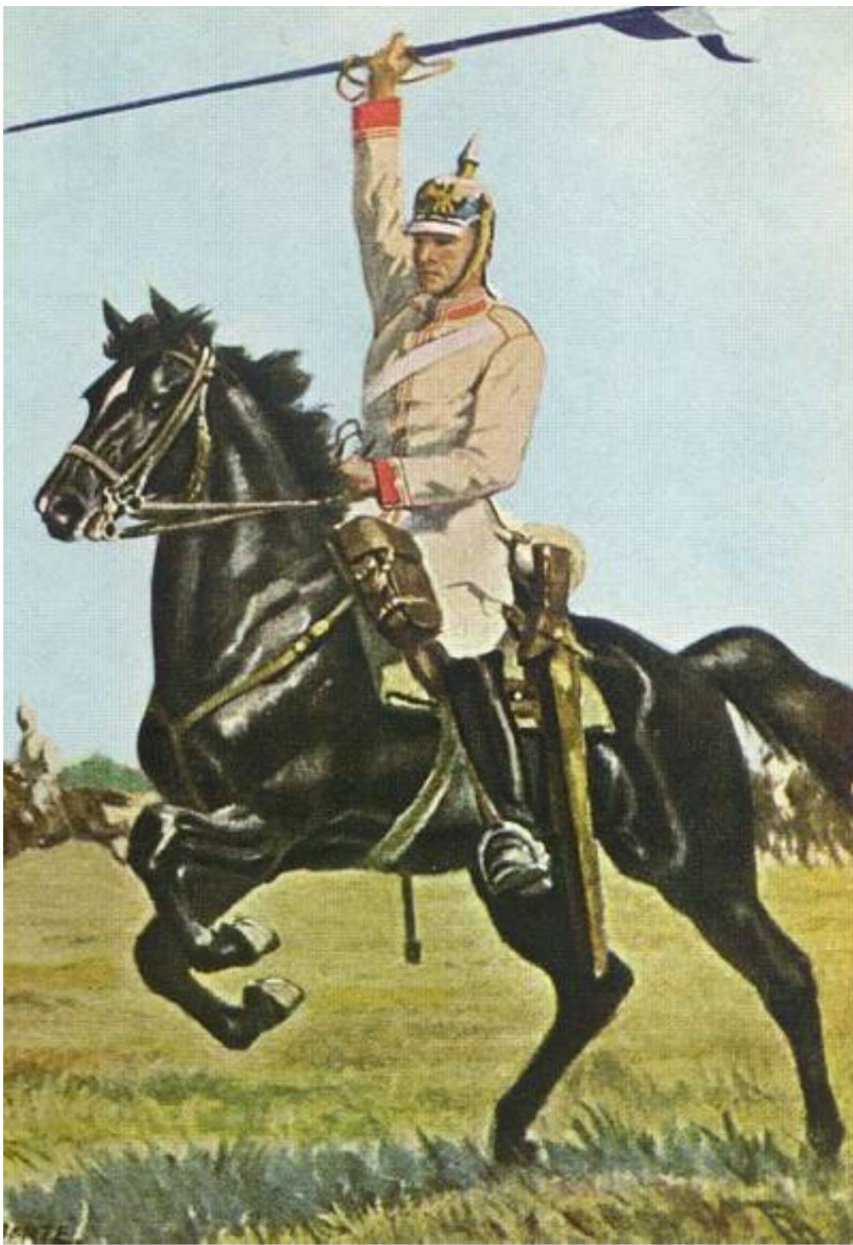
However, the reproduction does not do the regiment's orange-red (German: *ponceaurot*) coat of arms full justice.

Sources

1. *Official History, Military Operations, France and Belgium, 1914* by JE Edmonds, London 1922.
2. *The 4th/7th Royal Dragoon Guards 1685-1980* by JM Brereton, published by the regiment, Catterick 1982, ISBN 0-95083-310-X.
3. *Tickled to Death to Go - Memoirs of a Cavalryman in the First World War* by Richaerd van Emden (ed.), Spellmount Ltd., Staplehurst/Kent 1996, ISBN 1-873376-55-3.
4. *A History of the British Cavalry 1816-1919, Volume 7: The Curragh Incident and the Western Front, 1914* by The Marquess of Anglesey, Leo Cooper, London 1996, ISBN 0-85052-437-7.
5. *Riding the Retreat* by Richard Holmes, Pimlico Edition, London 1996, ISBN 0-7126-5862-9.
6. *Die Preußischen Kavallerie-Regimenter 1913/1914 - Nach dem Gesetz vom 3. July 1913* by Hugo FW Schulz, Podzun-Pallas-Verlag, Friedberg 1985, ISBN 3-7909-0236-5.
7. *Uniforms & Equipment of the Imperial German Army 1900-1918 - A Study in Period Photographs: Infantry, Artillery, Jäger, Landsturm, Mountain, Insignia, Weapons* by Charles Woolley, Schiffer Military History, Atglen, Pennsylvania 1999, ISBN 0-7643 -0935-8.

Sources 6 and 7 have been kindly lent by Niels Blangsted-Jensen, who is also thanked for his benevolent interest.

Per Finsted



Cuirassiers from *the Kürassier-Regiment von Driesen (Westfälisches) Nr. 4.*

Drawing by Erich R. Döbrich-Steglitz, reproduced from a postcard published by Schild-Verlag, Munich.

The lance and the lower part of the lance flag appear bluish instead of black, which is an error in the printing.

Notes:

1) Both English and German sources unanimously refer to this skirmish as the first (Source 1). However, this is only the first skirmish on the Continent, as it was *Regimental Sergeant Major Alaji Grunshi*, from *The Gold Coast Regiment*, who fired the first shot of the war from the English side during the fighting in Togoland, on 6 August 1914.

2) A detailed description of the strength of a cavalry regiment can be found in my article [Britain's figures - Horse-drawn wagons - Part 2](#).

3) It has not been possible to find suitable pictures of German cuirassiers in field uniform, so the choice fell on this excellent drawing of mounted hunters, which if nothing else fits the story well.

In terms of uniforms, there was not much difference between cuirassiers and mounted hunters. The most important detail, which does not fit with the situation from 1914, is that the riders do not wear helmet covers. The drawing must therefore originate from a maneuver before the war. See [Postscript 2 - About German Units](#) for an illustration of a German cuirassier, including helmet cover.