

Polish Cavalry in World War 2

Myths or Realities

Introduction

This summary will provide a brief overview of my articles on Polish cavalry.



Did the Poles really charge German tanks and armoured cars head-on? Like all other myths this contains a fragment of truth.

At 5 p.m. on September 1, 1939 the myth was born when the Polish 18th Lancers of the Pomorska Cavalry Brigade charged units from the German 20th Motorised Division. This incident took place near Chojnice in the Western part of Poland. The attack was meant to be on infantry units marching eastwards, but the Poles were surprised by German tanks and armoured cars which appeared out of nowhere. It was a massacre!

The German propaganda quickly grasped the situation and incorporated a - staged - cavalry charge in one of their propaganda movies - Geschwader Lützow - from 1941. (In the movie Luftwaffe Avia 534B trainers - of Czech origin - acted as Polish PZL-11 fighters, cf.

http://www.dalnet.se/~surfcity/avia_germany.htm.) The German film company UFA showed similar scenes in weekly newsreel; my father has strong recollections from seeing this a boy, in the early 1940'ies.

The last Great Charge of the Polish Cavalry

The memoirs of a former platoon commander of the Polish 3rd Light Horse Regiment - M. Kamil Dziejannowski - were published in the US Army magazine *Army*, in April 1970. Today text is available on the Web - from the Polish-American homepage Polish News <http://www.polishnews.com/fulltext/history/2001/history4.shtml>. A few photos of Polish cavalry are included as well.

The charge which took place on September 10, 1939 (the text gives the September 9, as the date of the charge but this is not in sequence with the other events mentioned in the memoirs). The outcome of the charge was very different from the first Polish cavalry charge.

The Polish Cavalry of 1939

The following URLs presents information the Polish Cavalry in 1939:

Organisation: http://www.freeport-tech.com/wwii/029_poland/organizations/brig_cav.html

Weapons and equipment: <http://www.heroica.org/polish.htm>

Armoured vehicles: <http://derela.republika.pl/armcarpl.htm>

Forward! Follow me! The last charge of the Polish Cavalry

In his excellent book *The Cavalry of World War II*, Orbis Publishing Limited, London 1979, ISBN 0 85613 022 2, Janusz Piekalkiewicz tells the following story of what must be the very last charge made by Polish cavalry - from the First Polish Army, in Soviet service:

"West Pomerania on the morning of March 1, 1945. A chill wind was sweeping low, heavy, threatening clouds across the rolling countryside; small lakes sparkled among the dark forests and, here and there, patches of dirty snow could still be seen. In a village near to the small town of Schönfeld, the military band was playing the Polish national anthem "Poland is not yet lost". [The "Dobrowski Marski" in Polish, as far as I know/PEFIN.]

Two cavalry squadrons was trotting in front of a group of senior officers. One of the squadrons, under Lieutenant Spisacki, wheeled round to the right towards the forest as the other, under Lieutenant Starak, moved straight ahead towards the railway line. A few kilometres further on, in a valley, lay Schönfeld, behind flat meadows criss-crossed like a chessboard with irrigation canals. The town was divided by the railway line with a trunk road running directly parallel; on both sides were lakes, while beyond were more meadows and woods. It was here that the Pomeranian "wall" was situated - the last German defence line between the Oder and Berlin.

The horsemen of the 1. Samodzielna Warszawska Brygada Kawalerii - a cavalry brigade fighting on the side of the Soviet Union as part of the 1. Armia WP, the 1st Polish People's Army - had a tough nut to crack: they were to break through the Pomeranian wall if at all possible. The Poles had already been trying to storm the German lines for two days. The tanks and infantry storming party had got stuck in the boggy fields the previous day and was then wiped out in a hail of anti-tank grenade fire from powerful tank-busters, well camouflaged in the irrigation ditches. The infantry was forced to withdraw with heavy losses under heavy machine-gun fire. The task, which the T-34 tanks and the assault infantry had failed to achieve, was now to be undertaken by two cavalry squadrons supported by the remaining tanks. The cavalry could only hope that the Germans would direct their anti-tank gunfire at the T-34s and not at the horses.

A few tanks moved in line towards the trunk road, and a red very-light soared into the air in a high arc:

this was the signal for the cavalry to attack. The squadron commander Lieutenant Starak, raised his sabre and ordered: "Forward - Follow me!" Yelling "Hurrah" they galloped off and rapidly crossed the road. Thick billows of smoke from the burning tanks formed a protective blanket. They were quickly upon the horrified and astonished anti-tank gunners: "Russian Cossacks, Russian Cossacks!" The gunners had probably thought it impossible that cavalry would be accompanying the tanks. Behind the German positions, the horsemen dismounted and attacked from the rear.

The second squadron, under Lieutenant Spisacki, had assembled in a small corpse and was soon in difficulty. Even before their charge, a section of the tank force had got stuck in thick mud and was now in flames, hit from the side by German anti-tank fire. The exploding tanks made the horses shy, and the thick black smoke caused confusion. They galloped blindly through. In the trenches ahead of them all was quiet, then suddenly shooting broke out. Possibly the Germans had been disconcerted momentarily by the sight of the cavalry galloping towards them. The squadron's horsemen jumped over the forward German positions, found cover in a hollow a short distance from Schönfeld, and dismounted. It was the last Polish cavalry charge in history.

Both squadrons fought their way nearer to the town. And by evening, with tank and infantry support, Schönfeld, which was fortified with a few dugouts, had been captured. The infantry losses were 370 dead and wounded, but the cavalry lost only seven uhlans."

The Polish Cavalry serving along the Red Army

For further information on the 1. Samodzielna Warszawska Brygada Kawalerii refer to:

Red Death, Soviet Mountain, Naval, NKVD, and Allied Divisions and Brigades 1941-1945 by Charles Sharp, Volume VII in the series *Soviet Order of Battle World War II - An Organizational History of the Major Combat Units of the Soviet Army*, George F. Nafziger 1995.

Regarding the drawing

Although incorrect in many details - e.g. Polish and German uniforms - the drawing present an image in accordance with the myth. Besides I find it very impressive.

The drawing derives from an Italian magazine, about 1960 judged from the text on the reverse.

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