

Polish Cavalry in World War II

The last great attack of the Polish cavalry

af M. Kamil Dziewannowski

Introduction

I would like to tell you about a cavalry raid that I took part in. It took place in Poland at the beginning of the Second World War, in the month of September 1939. Although it is 30 years ago (the article was written in 1969), it *seems* that was a hundred years ago. The attack will perhaps go down in history as the last great cavalry attack. Today, it is hardly possible to give an entire cavalry brigade the order: "Saber out! Gallop! Forward!" [1\)](#)



The now-retired Marshal Semion Budenny, former commander of the First Cavalry Army of the Russian Civil War, probably does not agree with this claim. (In 1967 he was interviewed by the New York Times correspondent in Moscow. The marshal was over 80 and still rode daily. To the journalist's question: "What role, in your opinion, will cavalry play in a coming war?" Budenny answered without hesitation the least: "A battle decisive role!")

My account concerns only a small part of the battles in which the Polish armed forces took part against the German invasion forces in September 1939. I was then a platoon leader in the 3rd Squadron of the 3rd Light Cavalry Regiment. My place was on the extreme left wing of the attacking force, and I had every opportunity of observing the whole formation of men and beasts advancing at a gallop. A magnificent sight that I will never forget...

Kavaleribrigade Suwalska

The Suwalska Brigade was stationed on the border with East Prussia, near the border with Lithuania. The brigade consisted of three cavalry regiments, an artillery regiment and some light armored vehicles. Since 1 September 1939, the brigade had been fighting day and night on the right wing of Army Group Narew. The task of the arm group was to stop the German General von Kùchler's arms attacking Warsaw from East Prussia. Armegruppe Narew was pushed back by the German superiority in firepower and armor. The Suwalska Brigade was more mobile than our infantry, and as we fought on the right wing of Army Group Narew, we had not suffered particularly heavy losses during the first days' fighting.

Close combat

Early in the day on 7 September 1939, the brigade was about 60 kilometers from the border with East Prussia. The brigade fought steadily against a light German arm, which was reinforced with the 1st East Prussian Cavalry Brigade - the only major cavalry unit then part of the German army. *(After the battles in Poland, the brigade became the foundation of the 1st Cavalry Division, which was expanded on 25 October 1940. oa)*

The enemy had an absolute advantage by virtue of his numerical superiority. All we could muster against hundreds of tanks were a good 20 light armored vehicles and a similar number of anti-tank guns.

The German preponderance in firepower was in the ratio 9:1. Everything therefore indicated that the Germans would break through the Polish cavalry - like a knife through butter.

That is precisely why we refused to give up. We were completely clear that we had to adapt to the conditions of the imposed war - and then make the best of the situation. Daily we became more adept at fighting an enemy who took cover behind armor plates. Our methods included pursuit, ambush, and stratagem. An armored vehicle that looked impressive from a distance was vulnerable up close - especially at night, against daredevils armed with fire bottles. Another method was to creep up to the vehicles, in order to destroy their belts with hand grenades. During the first week of the war, our anti-tank guns destroyed 31 enemy armored vehicles. By improvised means we destroyed about a dozen. We took over 200 prisoners.

Thus the formerly proud cavalry brigade transformed itself into a unit of panzer hunters; at night we set out to destroy enemy armored vehicles that had stopped or were on the march.

In the long run, the fight was hopeless. The superiority was too great. Also the beautiful late summer weather had apparently allied itself with the enemy...

Wished

The news got worse and worse. On the evening of September 8, 1939, we heard on the radio that the enemy was approaching Warsaw. We were determined to do our duty, whatever the cost. Mostly we were hungry. Over the course of a week, it hadn't turned into much more than three hours of sleep a day. Our poor horses suffered too. These magnificent chestnut animals, of which we were so proud, we often could not dismount for several days. The feed was also sloppy. The horses became despondent and vicious - and they gradually resembled skeletons.

We all had one burning desire, which we often discussed: if modern warfare left no room for cavalry, then we wanted one last opportunity to live up to the proud traditions of the weapon and carry out a mounted attack against the enemy.

The attack order

On September 9, 1939, we suddenly received the following command:

"In order to relieve the enemy pressure on Warsaw and to give the defense forces in the capital time to organize themselves, the Suwalska Brigade is to make a diversionary attack in the enemy's rear. Below this the bridge over the Narew, at Tykocin, and the railway line between Rypno and Fastow are to be blown up. "

During the subsequent issuing of orders, our gruff and grey-haired colonel gave us the following order:

"Gentlemen! We have just been given an important task. We are to assault the enemy lines of communication. To carry out the task, we will bypass the enemy lines in order to reach the area around Tykocin by night march along field roads. Avoid the country roads! Forward in the area, the engineer squadron carries out the assigned destruction tasks while the rest of the brigade secures. When the tasks are completed, we move east. The objective is the Bialowieza Forest, where we will switch to guerrilla warfare..."

Although we were dead tired, we were greatly encouraged by this news. Both officers and men received the order with enthusiasm. Finally, we felt, there was now an opportunity to operate as a united force and solve the tasks that we had practiced in peacetime. That same day we had carried out four assaults against armored vehicles and had two minor skirmishes. It had only been two hours of sleep.

At 19:00, after the sun had set, we moved out. Regiment after regiment, squadron after squadron, we passed the colonel and this smart, proud and grey-haired veteran of the previous war regarded his - though heavily decimated, but still capable - brigade. It turned into a grueling march along rutted roads, through thickets and uneven terrain. Throughout the march we were secured by a close screen of patrols. We avoided all forms of habitation and kept to wooded areas as much as possible.

An unexpected chance

At dawn - it was cool and foggy - on September 10, 1939, the brigade was at the northern edge of the great Zambrow Forest - 12-14 kilometers from the bridge that we were going to blow up. (*The original text mentions the date 9 September 1939. If the order was received on the 9th, then, if the chronology is to fit, it must be 10 September 1939. etc.*)

It was around 06:00 when sent out patrols brought the brigade commander a surprising message: an enemy infantry battalion was on the march along the road from Rypno to Fastow. There was no enemy flank protection observed, but rather a column of lorries which moved forward parallel to the infantry. What an unexpected chance!

The brigade commander now had to make a quick decision. We were hidden in the woods, about two kilometers from the enemy. The conditions for a surprise attack seemed ideal. It was now or never! On the other hand, the attack would reveal our presence and thus reveal our objective. Furthermore, a German infantry battalion possessed greater firepower than our brigade. Apparently they weren't protected by armored vehicles, but maybe the patrols just hadn't seen them?

After a few minutes of consideration, the brigade commander then made his decision. He ordered the brigade around and we quickly advanced towards a piece of wood that was between us and the enemy. The brigade's three regiments were formed behind the piece of wood. Between us and the road was a stubble field, about a kilometer and a half wide, and close to the road a dry piece of meadow.

We were higher than the road and could clearly see everything that was going on. What an amazing sight! A long line of marching soldiers moved forward through a cloud of dust, while lorries sped past the slower infantry.

The brigade commander's orders came quickly: "1st Lancer Regiment and 3rd Light Cavalry Regiment - ready to attack! 2. Lancer regiment - in reserve! The brigade's machine gun squadrons support - collectively - the attack! The anti-tank squadron secures the brigade to the west - there may be enemy armor nearby! The engineer squadron advances - under cover of the attack - towards the bridge and the railway line, and blows up the objects!"

The attack

The regimental commanders promptly carried out their respective orders. The squadrons advanced towards the edge of the forest, while the engineers rode away to complete their task. We saw them ride away at a brisk trot...



In the shelter of the wood, the squadrons were now massed for attack, and the command "Trot! Forward!" sounded.

The enemy had not observed us and the sunrise promised a clear day. The sight of the squadrons advancing through the patch of forest was so enchanting that it seemed unreal! A perfect subject for a battle painter, but where was our Vernet or Gericault?

At first we moved forward at a slow trot. The Germans continued their march and apparently still had not observed us. Suddenly all our machine guns opened fire and well-aimed volleys smashed into the enemy column. The great adventure had begun!

The commands "Saber out! Gallop! Forward!" flew down the line. We gripped the timbers tighter and leaned forward as we went forward like a whirlwind.

The enemy had now caught sight of us and there was wild confusion on the road. Shouts, commands and single shots rang out from the surprised infantrymen. We continued our attack. Fortunately, the first shots went over our heads. We were now about 500 meters from the road and saw that the fire from our machine guns had turned the enemy into a maddened mass of men. A few enemy light armored vehicles had made a stand, while others tried to push through the confusion. Some soldiers made desperate attempts to get into position in the ditch along the road, while others sought cover behind train wagons.

Suddenly we were fired upon by machine guns. The head of the column, approaching Rypno, had evidently recovered from the surprise. Their fire now gave us casualties and the first soldiers fell from their horses. We were now so close to the road that through the smoke and dust we could see the outlines of the enemy soldiers.

Suddenly our machine guns held in - it was necessary, otherwise they would have fired at us.

Seconds later we were on the road. Lancers and sabers cut violently into the enemy. Some sought to ward off our sabers with their rifle butts, while others sought to cover their heads with their arms; our lances, however, could reach even the soldiers who sought cover between the wagons.

The attack wave passed the highway and pursued those who tried to escape. Single shots from thickets and bushes hit the soldiers on the road - ours as well as the enemy's. The battle on the road was now almost over and large groups of the enemy surrendered. A squadron from the 2nd Lancener Regiment, which had been in reserve until now, was sent after the fleeing enemies.

Closing

We were out of breath and dead tired, but ecstatic at this wish-victory. Furthermore, the battle had not cost us the great losses. The panic-stricken Germans were apparently poor marksmen. Our horses had suffered the most and we lost between 30 and 40. We had a dozen wounded, but only three killed.

The morning sun was now high as our trumpeters blew to muster. We rallied slowly as we drove our captives before us. In all we had probably 200 prisoners, the vast majority of whom were mad with fright.

The villages of Rypno and Fastow were on fire and black clouds of smoke billowed lazily up into the clear morning sky. The remnants of the German battalion had evidently taken their revenge on the two innocent villages.

And then suddenly - from the north - there was an explosion. A few minutes later another one and then two more. We could thus hear that our engineers had completed their tasks. The bridge over the Narew and the railway line were blown up!

To note

1) The article appeared in the American magazine *Army*, April 1970. It was originally published in *Mankind Magazine*, Vol. 2, no. 4, December 1969. The text is also available on the Polish-American website Polish News: <http://www.polishnews.com/fulltext/history/2001/history4.shtml> from which the images were taken.

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