

Defensive war 1939

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The “Black” Brigade

While monitoring potential opponents in terms of organisation and armament in 1937, the General Staff of the Polish Army decided to upgrade a part of the cavalry and “seat” the soldiers onto Polish-made motorcycles and vehicles as well as provide them with light tanks.



That did not have any impact on the doctrine of tank use which concerned direct support to the infantry on the most sensitive sections of tank units no bigger than a battalion. The Germans used to create unaided armoured divisions at that time while the Soviets preferred corps each of which had several armoured and motorized corps.

When commanders of cavalry brigades and regiments heard that they were going to change the organisation, the great majority of them protested and struggled to count their units out of the “experiment”. Eventually, 10th Cavalry Brigade and its two regiments: 10th Mounted Rifles and 24th Uhlans were to be realigned. Neither the commander nor the staff could help it. The Brigade was to be motorised. To sweeten the pill, the “pure” cavalrymen were allowed to change assignments and the units could retain their traditional names.

In the summer of 1938, while large-scale exercises were going on in Volhynia, the Brigade was tested as a front unit. It turned out that two motorized cavalry regiments, aided by reconnaissance and anti-tank divisions, were not of significant value in that respect. They only represented no more than two reinforced infantry battalions. The conclusion came true when the Zaolzie region was captured with no direct fighting.

Thus, while Polish-German relations were getting tense in the spring and summer of 1939, the Brigade was expanded to include additional two motorized artillery batteries, a company of Vickers tanks, a company of light TKS tanks, a two-company motorized battalion of sappers and a motorized battery of 40mm anti-aircraft Bofors guns – all under the pretext of summer exercises. The entire forces gathered between Rzeszów and Łąćut where the Brigade was permanently stationed. On 14 August 1939, the General Staff assigned 10th Cavalry Brigade under the command of Gen. Antoni Szylling who then headed “Antoni Training”. After a night-long march, the Brigade sub-units deployed in the area of Skawina - Liszki - Bronowice - Wola Justowska at dawn on 15 August.

Gen. Szylling talked to Col. Stanisław Maczek and his Chief of Staff, Maj. Franciszek Skibiński about the Brigade and its purposes in case of war. It was meant as reserve for “Kraków” Army, and therefore its use was arranged after a few days of combat once the enemy’s intentions became clear. Reassured by that information, Maczek completed several field expeditions to the areas where his brigade was expected

to fight. He visited Pszczyna, Bielsk, Katowice and Zawiercie. He held talks with Gen. Bernard Mond, Gen. Jan Sadowski and Gen. Mieczysław Boruta-Spiechowicz whom he was to potentially assist. They “matched” maps with characteristic points of the area. They also analysed the forest edges and towns whether they were suitable for defence purposes. They assessed the condition of roads in terms of moving vehicles and tractors. On 29 August, Szylking informed Maczek that the Brigade might be assigned en route to Nowy Targ. They had no more time to study that area. Maczek only met Commander of 1st Regiment of the Border Protection Corps who manned that section.

Actually, hardly anyone believed that war was about to break out. Since the spring of 1939, the Brigade was on nonstop stand-by. Alarms were sounded to last for several hours or days. After the Brigade marched to the area of Kraków, the tension eased and the most pessimistic expected to spend the winter there. Even then, when the commander of the reconnaissance division in Liszki reported on 29 August that mobilization posters had been put up and later removed, they did not become worried – they treated that act as another provocation of the Fifth Column. Last day of August, when a worried waiter approached the Brigade commander over lunch at the Hawełka Restaurant in Kraków's Main Market Square to say that another mobilization had been announced. “This will not prevent you from bringing me a cup of coffee” – the commander snapped. And in the evening, 16th Motorized Artillery Division enjoyed a gala dinner to celebrate its creation.

On the following day, there was a phone call from the southern border several minutes after 5 a.m. to electrify the Army headquarters. “The Valley of Orava is bustling with hundreds of tanks. 1st Regiment of the Border Protection Corps will serve as Leonidas, but do think about your flank and rear” – reported 1st Mountain Brigade commander, Col. Janusz Gaładyk. The connection was broken after those words. A telephonist in Kraków tried in vain to establish a connection again, with his colleague calling the Army large units to say that war had broken out. All units confirmed the fact that the Germans had crossed the

state border while the sound of air bombing and the typical whir of Dornier engines dispelled any illusions: it was war.

Despite the war broke out, everyone remained calm in the Brigade headquarters. The operational reserve of the Army was to have several more days until it would go into action. The fact that the Brigade liaison officer had been summoned to the Army headquarters was treated as mere routine as to keep Maczek updated. The staff officers followed the same way. They would glue maps, sharpen coloured pencils and listen to radio announcements while the messengers' motorcycles waited hidden in fruit orchards. At 9:30 a.m., Cap. Stankiewicz telephoned from the Army headquarters to say that he was returning to the Brigade. Nobody expected any revelations but Maczek requested the commanders of regiments and divisions to gather for briefing so as to update them on the latest news from the Army headquarters.

A few minutes later, a quiet house in Wola Justowska, where the Brigade's headquarters stationed, was buzzing as if a beehive had been knocked over by accident. As soon as Cap. Stankiewicz arrived by car in front of the building, he ran into the commander's office. "This is Gen. Szylling's order. Defence is breaking up in the area of Jordanów. We have to support the Border Protection Corps immediately" - he pronounced. The staff officers leaned over the maps. There were brief commands spoken which secretaries transformed into the language of written orders, and hurriedly put into pre-arranged envelopes for respective sub-units. The messengers ran out to their motorcycles while the liaison officers called the squadrons to sound the marching alarm.

Col. Maczek left for the regiment command of the Border Protection Corps. The trucks, artillery tractors and light tanks of the Brigade formed two long marching columns and set out to the south via Kraków. 10th Regiment of Mounted Rifles went via Wieliczka and Gdów to the area of Kasina Wielka. 24th Uhlan Regiment went via Myślenice to the area of Jordanów. Both columns were headed by squadrons of

the reconnaissance divisions with the supporting units at the back. Shortly before they set out, the headquarters had received a telephone call from the the Brigade commander: "Send the squadron of anti-tank Bofors to Skomielna Biała IMMEDIATELY".

At noon, nine anti-tank cannons were deployed along Wysoka Mount. Moving slowly through the destruction and ambushes set up by the Border Protection Corps, 2nd German Panzer Division could no longer mount an attack deep into the back of the Polish units. The Germans started their operations at dawn on 2 September with heavy artillery shelling followed by tanks. Subsequent attacks failed under the fire of Bofors and anti-tank guns for many hours. Thirty wrecks remained in the foreground but the German artillery shot more and more accurately. They crushed one and then another Polish cannon. At 4:00 p.m. another wave of tanks invaded Wysoka Mount. The commander of 24th Uhlan Regiment gave a telephone report that he would send his last reserve... and then the connection was broken. Isolated from their spotters, the Polish artillery, deployed at the back, stopped immediately afterwards.

The counterattack, mounted by the hurried uhlans against the tanks maneuvering in the open air, was unsuccessful and caused significant losses. The Germans ultimately conquered Wysoka Mount, destroying the third Bofors whose operators under the command of Cpl. Dziechciarz, secured the retreat of their colleagues until the very end. Seven tank wrecks remained in front of a crushed anti-tank cannon, next to which a burned body of the cannon operator lied who had been hit with an incendiary bullet. The German attack had been stopped.

The Brigade regrouped its forces at night, blocking three roads to the north. Maj. Jan Dorantt's sappers laid mines over there. Uhlans and mounted riflemen fixed defence positions and awaited the morning attack. However, they witnessed an air raid of "Karaś" planes on German vehicles crowded on the road and later a long and tough artillery arrangement against the positions they had left late in the evening. With heavy fire, the reconnaissance division seemed as if the

entire force of the Brigade was behind them.

The same morning, the Luftwaffe bombers attacked the Brigade headquarters in the church of Lubień and a single bomber shelled on the staff vehicles on the road. That was to be the same until the end of the campaign. However, the Brigade was also successful. 10th Regiment managed to hold its positions, crushed several tanks and took some captives. One of them, a non-commissioned tankman officer was particularly arrogant towards Cpt. Stankiewicz who was questioning him in the Brigade headquarters. With hands in his pockets, he boldly said that he did not respect the Polish military ranks because only German could be a real officer. He did not manage to finish his speech when a two-metre tall uhlans staff guard smacked him in the face. It was not in accordance with the Geneva Convention on Prisoners of War. As a curative measure, however, had an immediate impact – the “*übermensch*” calmed down, stood at attention and answered all questions obediently.

In the same afternoon, the Germans started pushing the mounted riflemen out of their positions over the Skawa Valley and thus Maczek ordered his own Vickers tanks to strike back. The old machines, constantly breaking down and suitable only for training in time of peace, set off with roar of their engines and clatter of their tracks. Their very appearance on the battle field was such a huge surprise to the Germans that they stopped their attack and retreated to their starting positions.

In the evening, the Brigade received the order to mount a retreat and follow the Operational Group of Gen. Boruta-Spiechowicz which they could not make contact with, however. In that case, while he was studying the location of forces and the expected directions of retreat maneuvers, Maczek decided to transfer the burden of the operations onto the eastern flank where the Germans were more successful for a while. The enemy pushed away a regiment of the Border Protection Corps from its position near Kasina Wielka in the late afternoon. During the night, 24th Uhlans Regiment, the reconnaissance and anti-tank

divisions, two companies of tanks and sappers marched via Myślenice and Dobczyce to the starting positions near Kasina Wielka.

That march remained forever in the soldiers' memory. The road was jammed with crowds of refugees. The soldiers had to struggle forward, pushing carts with sick and exhausted people and remains of their belongings down into ditches. There was no time for sorrow and compassion. The Brigade HAD to arrive in the area of Kasina Wielka before dawn. Nobody counted how many times the staff officers and the traffic control platoon soldiers were cursed that night and the following ones. The Germans may well have heard some of the curses - black leather jackets and "German-style" helmets misled many people.

The morning rewarded the uhlans for the hardships of the night march. The regiment, aided by Vickers and TKS tankettes, launched an unexpected attack on 4th Light Division. It pushed the Germans down the mountain over Kasina Wielka and Mszana Dolna. Three tanks were destroyed and prisoners of war were taken. The Brigade lost two Vickers, several tankettes and 15 men. The German attack did not start until the afternoon and they recovered the hills they had lost in the morning with a strong support of their artillery though they did not move a single metre further.

Gen. Boruta-Spiechowicz, whose staff in Wieliczka was reached by Maj. Skibiński, confirmed the orders for the Brigade: while protecting the southern flank of the Operational Group, block the Germans' way out of Beskid Mountains and gradually withdraw over the Dunajec River. From the very morning of 5 September, the Poles continued to defend the area of Dobczyce and Kasina Wielka near Myślenice. 10th Regiment of Mounted Rifles launched a successful counterattack on the Germans who had been about to attack, chasing them as far as Pćim.

In the area of Skrzydlna, however, when the reconnaissance division was protecting the eastern wing of the Brigade, there was a clash which should be mentioned in every history textbook as a contradiction

of the false myth about the Polish cavalry fighting against the Wehrmacht tanks and motorized vehicles. That time, German mounted reconnaissance unit came upon the positions of Polish tankettes and was wiped out even before the “knights” could understand the situation. Not more than half an hour later, a cycling unit of 4th Light Division was treated in the same way.

At the end of the day, the Germans inserted 3rd Mountain Division and went across the mountains to circumvent the Polish defence positions in the area of Pćim. After they had caused huge losses to 10th Regiment of Mounted Rifles, they managed to push the Brigade to the north of Myślenice and to the east of Nowy Wiśnicz and Bochnia. The Brigade was defending the region all day on 6 September. However, it was expelled from the area in the evening. The Germans left the mountain gorges and could fully exploit their advantage of tanks, artillery and soldiers, circumventing the flanks of the Polish defence instead of launching a frontal attack against the defended positions.

On 7 September, the Brigade was forced to swerve to the east. Originally, the retreat route was to go through Zakliczyn, however, the Germans arrived there before the Poles. They reached the Dunajec River earlier and started crossing the river. Moreover, Maczek faced the typical hardships of war at that time. The majority of vehicles were running out of fuel. When Gen. Boruta-Spiechowicz ordered the units to march towards Zakliczyn, he had not foreseen that the region lacked stores of oil and fuel which were indispensable for vehicles. The stores, which had been arranged for the Brigade in Bochnia, were bombed. The only way to prevent the immobilization of vehicles and tanks was to cross the river in the area of Radłów and to supply the unit with fuel in Tarnów. The vehicles needed four hours before noon to reach the eastern bank of the Dunajec River over a narrow wooden bridge. Surprisingly, the Luftwaffe bombers did not appear. The Poles managed to arrive in Radomyśl Wielki where they were to restock their supplies and have a few days of rest as they were protected against the enemy by their infantry defence positions.

Nothing could be more wrong. 24th Infantry Division, which was supposed to defend the line of the Dunajec River, did not perform its task. They marched away to the east. Neither did the units of the "Boruta" Operational Group manage to keep the Germans to the west of the Dunajec River. The Brigade's quartermaster, who had left for Tarnów to search for fuel for the tanks, came across a German armoured reconnaissance unit and barely survived. The Poles had to defend the area where the sub-units were stationed while awaiting orders. They came from "Karpaty" Army command unexpectedly. Gen. Kazimierz Fabrycy took over 10th Cavalry Brigade and ordered it to approach the area of Rzeszów as soon as possible because the road and railway route to Lviv might be threatened by the Germans.

The Brigade set off to the east. They had to get through road jams while pushing carts with refugees and their property down into ditches. The Vickers ran out of fuel between Mielec and Kolbuszowa. The trucks with oil barrels, which had been sent from Rzeszów, did not manage to get through the crowds of refugees upstream and arrived too late. The Brigade lost its only one company of tanks. The armoured vehicles joined the "Boruta" Operational Group later and took part in the battles in the area of Lublin but they did not return to the Brigade ever again.

Uhlans and mounted riflemen secured the gap between "Karpaty" Army divisions fighting in the area of Krosno and "Kraków" Army units marching towards the San River. Their main task was to defend the area of Rzeszów and to cross over the Wisłoka River. The fight continued at the outskirts of the city for the whole day of 8 September. Its defence was essential due to the operations of the quartermasters who provided fuel for the vehicles and loaded trucks with spare oil barrels which had to suffice for the many days of battle to follow.

On 9-10 September, the activities concentrated on the area of Rzeszów, Łańcut and Albigowa. To support their tank attacks, the Germans twice used dive bombers. They counterattacked the Polish TKS tankettes which repelled the German attack for a while. To avoid being surrounded, the Brigade left Łańcut at night and crossed the San

River. The forces continued their fight in the area of Jarosław. After they had blown up the bridges over the river, they had to fall back when the Germans forded the San River near Radymno and found themselves at the rear of the Brigade.

The Brigade was nearly brought to a standstill due to the lack of fuel. Fuel was delivered by trucks from Lviv at the moment when they could only drive for a few kilometres more. After they had replenished their fuel stocks, the Brigade set out for Niemirów, Krakowiec and Jaworów. They moved nearly in parallel with the German 4th Light Division whose itinerary was slightly more to the south.

Both units headed towards Lviv. On one side, the Brigade was forced to make its way to the south-east among the German patrols struggling to overtake it. On the other side, the Brigade had to defend against the enemy forces which continued to press down on it from the west. Following the orders, it moved in the course of the battle to the north of Lviv while defending the city against 4th Light Division. For the following days (14-17 September), the Brigade fought over the hills round Zboiska. Maczek originally assumed that the hills were manned by some stray sub-unit of 4th Light Division but it turned out later that there were several infantry battalions of 1st Mountain Division supported by several artillery battalions and a company of tanks. After it had launched several unsuccessful attacks (it proved that the Brigade lacked great firepower because it did not have tanks and heavy artillery) which cost the lives of nearly 300 soldiers, the subsequent attack was successful. The Brigade pushed the Germans down the hills and the shortest route from the north to Lviv was free.

Then, they Brigade was ordered to immediately break away from the enemy and retreat deeper to the south-east, to Halicz on the Dniestr River where it was to await the orders from the Commander in Chief. In reality, Mar. Edward Rydz-Śmigły had already left the country and the Soviets were approaching the area which the Brigade had been directed to. When Maczek and the remnants of the Brigade were stepping onto the bridge over the Dniestr River, he came across an

officer from the Command in Chief. The officer wordlessly gave him a piece of paper with the following order: “10th Cavalry Brigade will cross the Hungarian border at the Tatra Pass near Tatarów.” The Brigade gathered in Stanisławów, refuelled the TKS tankettes and trucks, and then set out for Tatarów among crowds of refugees who were no longer pushed out of the way.

On 19 September, the “Black” Brigade, as it was christened by the Germans, crossed the Hungarian border. The TKS tankettes, tractors with anti-tank and anti-aircraft cannons, uhlans aboard trucks and mounted riflemen passed through the border gate one after the other. A neat formation of armed soldiers was moving into Hungary for two days. When they stopped at last in Beregszösz, the hosts finally ordered to disarm and detain the soldiers.

Unfortunately, contrary to the opinion widely spread, 10th Cavalry Brigade was not an armoured one. Its company of tanks numbered 16 Vickers E, six of which armed only with heavy machine guns. Furthermore, it had a company of 13 TKS light tanks (armed with 20 mm *NKM* heavy machine guns) and a squadron of the same 13 weapons in the reconnaissance division.

10th Armoured Cavalry Brigade, under the command of Col. Maczek, was created in spring of 1940 in France. It took over many of his officers and soldiers who had escaped from detention camps and adopted the traditions of 10th Cavalry Brigade. Its soldiers, by the order of the Commander in Chief, received the right to wear a badge of honour - a black epaulette on the left shoulder commemorating the “Black” Brigade. During the fight with the Germans in summer of 1940, they continued their traditions with dignity.

After France was defeated, Maczek and many of his soldiers managed to reach “the island of the last hope” where they formed the core of 1st Armoured Division. During the battles in Normandy, Belgium, Holland

and Germany between 1944 and 1945, it proved to be a worthy continuator of its predecessors.

The tradition is now preserved by 10th Armoured Cavalry Brigade which is stationed in Świętoszów.

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