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THE CHARGE OF THE LIGHT BRIGADE: RUSHING INTO THE RUSSIANS



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One of the most well known blunders in British military history took place on October 25 1854. The Charge of the Light Brigade involved 673 cavalry, armed only with sabres or lances, rushing into a valley with enemy soldiers firing on them from both sides, towards enemy cannons at the end of the far end of valley. The Russian enemy could not understand why they were galloping into suicide.

They had charged into the wrong valley.

But we will never find out the exact reason for the blunder because the messenger who conveyed the instruction was killed at the beginning of the charge. It was not the worst blunder in British military history but it is one of the most well known.

Britain went for 99 years – from 1815 to 1914 – with hardly any military involvement in the various wars on the European continent. The main exception was 150 years ago, when it allied itself with France and Turkey in 1853 to oppose Russia. Russia was seeking to control the Dardanelles and the Balkans, and so threaten Britain's Mediterranean sea routes.

Russia called the vast Turkish (Ottoman) empire the "sick man of Europe" and hoped to be able to grab parts of it. Its first battle against Turkey, the naval battle of Sinope in November 1853, was an easy victory for Russia. This was the most important European battle since Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo in 1815. The way seemed clear for a Russian advance into the Mediterranean.

Britain did not like getting involved in European wars. But the advance of the Russian bear was too much of a threat to ignore. British public opinion clamoured for a war (even though most people did not know where the Crimea was).

The Charge of the Light Brigade was only the most well known blunder of the three year war. The British campaign was one of the most inefficient in the country's history. British soldiers were poorly armed, poorly clothed and poorly fed. Starvation and disease killed more British soldiers than the Russians.

British journalist William Russell of "The Times" – the world's first war correspondent - wrote about all the mistakes. His articles led to eventual reforms of the British army.

Britain and France formally declared war on Russia in March 1854. Recalling Napoleon's failure to beat Russia in 1812, they avoided a full invasion of Russia and instead opted for a series of limited military actions to push back the Russia bear.

The first Anglo-French operations were in present day Romania and they went well. The Russians fell back. The British and French should have stopped there.

But they decided to continue their campaign by moving into the Crimea on the Black Sea (in present day Ukraine), especially the town of Sevastopol, where the Russians based their navy. They thought that if they could destroy that Russian naval facility, it would remove any long term Russian naval threat to the Mediterranean.

British, French and Turkish troops landed in the Crimea in September 1854. They began a siege of Sevastopol. The Russians tried to break the siege by attacking the only British supply base in the Crimea – Balaklava harbour.

This was a major Russian operation. Had they won, the British army would have been cut off from its supplies and so starved to death.

Lord Raglan was Commander-in-Chief of the British force. On October 25, he was based on high ground overlooking the entire battlefield of Balaklava, where several military operations were taking place simultaneously.

The Charge of the Light Brigade was the second of two famous operations that took place that day. The first gave rise to one of the most famous sayings in British military history.

The Russians charged the rifles and bayonets the 93rd Highlanders. Their heroic defence was described by the "The Times" journalist as a "thin red line tipped with steel".

It was a great victory. The Russians fell back. But Lord Raglan could see that some British artillery in the South Valley defended by Turkish soldiers was now threatened by Russian soldiers.

He sent a vague order to the commander of the Cavalry, Lord Lucan, instructing him “to prevent the enemy carrying away the guns”.

Lucan commanded two divisions, Heavy Cavalry and Light Cavalry. Light cavalry rode on fast horses and specialized in cutting lines of communication and harassing an enemy that was withdrawing. They carried lances or sabres that could slash away at the enemy. The men were recruited for their speed and daring. From Lord Raglan’s point of view, this was now required to stop the Allied artillery from being stolen by the Russians.

The message – conveyed on horse by Captain Nolan - was read by Lord Lucan, who could not see any guns from where he was based. He asked Nolan which guns he had to attack.

We will never know what happened in the next few seconds. Nolan waved vaguely in the air and said “there are your guns sir, and there is your enemy”.

He thought that Nolan was pointing to the South Valley, where the Russians had their own artillery in place. He asked his brother in law, Lord Cardigan, to lead his Light Cavalry division to charge the Russian guns.

Cardigan could not understand the instruction. That was not the type of operation for which Light Cavalry should be used. After all, they would not be able to do any damage to the Russians until they reached the artillery because they were armed only with lances or sabres. But his was not to reason why. An order is an order. Cardigan personally led the Charge of the Light Brigade.

Suddenly Nolan galloped down to Cardigan. Perhaps he realized that the Light Cavalry was going into the wrong valley and was trying to get him to charge course.

We shall never know. Nolan was one of the first people killed in the charge when a Russian shell exploded next to him.

Some of the Light Brigade reached the Russian artillery and tried to take the guns away. They killed the Russian gunners.

They then had to retire. Russian cavalry arrived at the battle and threatened to close off the way back.

But – in yet another mystery of the day – the Russian cavalry line opened up and allowed the remnant to pass through safely. We shall never know why they were so charitable – after all they had just seen their own artillery comrades sliced up by the Light Brigade.



Of the 673 men involved in the 25-minute charge, 118 were killed and 247 wounded. Only 195 men still had horses left. The Light Brigade had been destroyed as a fighting force and had no further military role in war. (The horses were redeployed to carrying heavy supplies in the winter and the work killed the lot of them).

Harsh winter weather and disease took their toll on both sides. Total Russian losses in the Crimean War came to over 600,000. In early 1856, Sevastopol was captured by the Allies. The war ended with both sides exhausted in February 1856. Russian dominance of south-eastern Europe had been avoided.

Lord Tennyson wrote "The Charge of the Light Brigade" in a few minutes on December 2 1854 after reading an article in "The Times" about the Battle of Balaklava. The article had referred to the charge as a "blunder" and Tennyson used the word as a theme for what is now one of the most famous poems in the English language. The poem celebrates courage and duty in the face of military stupidity.

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