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History of the Polish Cavalry: Chevau-Légers of the Imperial Guard of Napoleon I

At the beginning of the 19th century, the fortunes of the Polish soldier were intertwined with the history of the Napoleonic France. Poles venerated their hope to regain independence in Napoleon and saw the only chance to make their plans come true by joining his military campaigns. On the wave of this sentiment, a very special military formation was created - the Polish 1st Regiment of Chevau-Légers (Regiment de Chevau-Légers Polonais de la Garde Impériale), unit composed of Poles, yet being part of the Napoleon's Army, financed by the Emperor's Treasury. On 6 April 1807 in Finsingen (Kamieniec Sukię) Napoleon issued a decree on establishing the Regiment. Warsaw was designated as the place of the Regiment's formation and its first military exercises. The Regiment was supposed to be a military unit for the elites - volunteer noblemen, who had to get equipped with uniforms, weapons and horses at their own expense. Colonel Wincenty Krasiński was appointed the Regiment's Commander and his deputies were French officers. In accordance with the Emperor's Decree there were 51 officers and 976 rank-and-file in the Regiment. The first company was ready to march out to France in June 1807. The Regiment's parade in Warsaw aroused great enthusiasm, especially as the Chevau-Légers distinguished themselves with their uniforms, which were modeled after the uniforms of the National Cavalry from the times of King Stanisław August. Thanks to perfectly chosen colours of their attire, the Regiment of Chevau-Légers inspired admiration wherever they showed up, making a particular impression on ladies.

The Regiment was deployed to France in parts, and following the outbreak of the Peninsula War, on 6 June 1808 the Regiment of Chevau-Légers started their service in Spain in extremely difficult conditions. The battle at the Pass of Somosierra on 30 November 1808 became legendary. The Regiment of Chevau-Légers commanded by Jan Leon Koziutski performed an unparalleled exploit - under continuous fire of artillery they charged up the Somosierra pass where four artillery batteries had been entrenched. The change took place over a distance of 2.5 km and lasted just about 8 minutes. Defenders fled in panic, opening the road for Napoleon's Army to Madrid. Out of the total of two hundred Chevau-Légers taking part in the change, eighteen were killed and thirty-nine were wounded.

In subsequent years, the Regiment fought on all the European fronts, participating in forty-five battles and major engagements in the Spanish campaign (1808), Austrian campaign (1809), Russian campaign (1812), Saxon campaign (1813) and French campaigns (1814). Light cavalrymen became famous for their valor and heroic courage. Thanks to their characteristic uniforms they were easily distinguished by all enemy soldiers who, as far as they could, avoided encounters with the Polish Regiment of the Imperial Guard. Even the Cossacks inspiring awe among the soldiers of the Grand Army, preferred to get out of their way.

In November 1809 under the Emperor's decree the Chevau-Légers were armed with lances and the formation was renamed the Regiment of Chevau-Léger Lancers of the Guard. The Polish Light Cavalrymen learned to use this weapon with great skill.

One of the main tasks of the Chevau-Légers - apart from fighting in the battles - was to serve as personal guards of the Emperor. Every day they deployed a squadron charged with round-the-clock escort service and protection of the Emperor. It was to them that Napoleon owed his life, being saved on three occasions during the Russian campaign in 1812 and during the fights in France in 1814.

After Napoleon's defeat and surrender of Paris defended also by the Chevau-Légers, the Regiment returned to Poland and entered Warsaw on 8 September 1814. The formation was finally dissolved on 16 February 1815.

The last great moment of the Napoleonic epic was service of the Chevau-Légers in the Volunteer Squadron on Elba, accompanying Napoleon in his exile. They were at the origin of the new Imperial Army thanks to which Napoleon tried to regain power. His defeat at Waterloo on 18 June 1815 put an end to his dreams.

The Chevau-Légers went down in the history of Poland as fearless, loyal and steadfast, the bravest of the brave and, at the same time, full of chic and fantasy.

At the times of the Second Republic of Poland the tradition of the 1st Regiment of Chevau-Léger of the Imperial Guard was perpetuated by the 1st Regiment of Chevau-Léger (Light Cavalrymen) of Józef Piłsudski.

Witold Głębówicz
Polish Army Museum in Warsaw