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The last cavalry charge

Ninety years ago today, a Canadian officer led a suicidal attack against troops armed with machine-guns. It was one of the last cavalry charges in history.

By John Boileau



During the First World War, Lord Beaverbrook arranged for the English painter Alfred Munnings to be attached to the Canadian Expeditionary Force to record Canadians in action in France. Munnings completed many oil paintings of Canadian soldiers, including this one, entitled Charge of Flowerdew's Squadron.



The headstone marking Gordon Flowerdew's grave in Namps-au-Val British Cemetery is inscribed — like those of all Victoria Cross recipients — with the outline of the famous medal. There are 425 Allied soldiers buried in the cemetery.



This painting by British war artist Alfred Munnings is entitled Strathcona's Horse on the March. Munnings became one of the most famous equestrian artists in the world and was later knighted.



In this oil painting by noted British equestrian and military artist Joan Wanklyn, Lt. Gordon Flowerdew and his men prepare for their fateful charge at Moreuil Wood. The painting was commissioned for the 75th anniversary of the battle in 1993.

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FOR THOUSANDS of years, men on horseback were an essential component of warfare. Mounted soldiers—cavalry—were used as scouts, reserves or attack forces, where speed, shock action or long distances were involved. The man-horse combination was a proven and necessary component of most armies.

Early in the First World War, the face of warfare changed dramatically. Machine-guns, barbed wire, trenches, minefields and artillery barrages not only led to huge increases in casualties, they also severely restricted mobility, a key advantage of cavalry.

But the cavalry generals were not yet ready to concede that the day of the horse was over and give up their beloved mounts. As a result, long after the war started in 1914, all the belligerents maintained cavalry. For much of the war most mounted units were held in reserve, waiting for a gap to appear in the enemy's lines through which they could charge into the rear areas.

Then, in the last year of the war, a rare opportunity arose to use cavalry units in their classic role — and Canadian soldiers made history.

AT 4:30 a.m. on March 21, 1918, a million Germans launched Operation Michael, a surprise attack against British and French lines on the Western Front. The Germans were desperate to gain the upper hand before America entered the war in strength.

The massive assault was aimed at the juncture of the British and French armies, to force the British north towards the English Channel ports and the French south towards Paris. One of the German intermediate objectives was the important rail centre of Amiens.

Facing the Germans was the British Fifth Army, weakly spread out along a 65-kilometre front. In the face of the overwhelming German advance, British units were overrun, decimated or forced back. Confusion reigned.

To halt the Germans, Fifth Army's commander called on part of his reserves, the Canadian Cavalry Brigade, commanded by British Brig.-Gen. Jack Seely. The brigade consisted of the Royal Canadian Dragoons, Lord Strathcona's Horse (Royal Canadians), Fort Garry Horse and a machine-gun squadron.

Known respectively as Dragoons, Strathconas and Fort Garrys, each cavalry regiment had three 150-man squadrons, each of four 36-man troops. All regiments were under strength, some by as much as 50 per cent.

As British troops pulled back, the Canadians were sent west of the small village of Moreuil on the Avre River, about 20 kilometres upstream from Amiens, to await further orders. They weren't long in coming.

On March 29, a five-kilometre gap had opened up in the Allied line, centred on a tree-covered ridge that overlooked Moreuil. The next day — Easter Sunday — the Canadians awoke to a cold, foggy dawn, the sun hidden behind a heavy mist.

At 8 a.m., Seely received orders to move forward to support French infantry in the area of Castel, just west of and across the Avre River from Moreuil Ridge. Leaving the brigade to follow later, Seely rode off to conduct a reconnaissance, taking with him his brigade major and signal troop. When he arrived at Castel, he found the French about to withdraw.

Seely convinced the French commander to remain, promising that he would attack the ridge shortly and needed the French to provide supporting fire. He quickly devised a plan and passed it to his brigade major, who would brief the brigade units as they arrived.

Seely then galloped up the ridge through enemy fire to set up his headquarters in a small outgrowth at the northwest corner of Moreuil Wood, which the Germans had not yet occupied. Five of his 12-man signal troop were cut down by enemy fire as they dashed towards the small copse. By 9:30 Seely was in location, a red pennant jammed into the ground marking his headquarters.

MOREUIL WOOD was a triangular-shaped wood, with its 1,500-metre-long sides facing north, west and southeast. Seely's plan was to send a Dragoons squadron around the north and west sides and a third through the middle. One Strathcona squadron would gallop around the northeast corner to disperse any Germans trying to move into the trees, while the other two would clear the wood from north to south in a dismounted action. The machine-gun squadron would provide covering fire on the flanks and the Fort Garrys would remain in reserve.

The Dragoons led. The three squadrons deployed roughly as ordered. Squadron A made it well into the woods, dismounted and drove an estimated 300 Germans from the trees. The other two squadrons were not as successful.

C Squadron ran into a German infantry battalion and its supporting artillery battery and was cut to ribbons at the southwest tip of the wood, while B Squadron — reduced to 80 men — entered the northern side and immediately ran into heavy German opposition, halting further progress.

C Squadron of the Strathconas, commanded by Lt. Gordon Muriel Flowerdew, headed for the northeast corner of the wood. He sent Second Troop ahead under Lt. Fred Harvey, who had earned the Victoria Cross a year earlier, to seize the corner, which was occupied by Germans.

On the way, Harvey and his men sabred five Germans. As he neared his objective, Harvey dismounted his men to attack when Flowerdew rode up.

Harvey briefed the squadron commander, who told him, "Go ahead and we will go around the end mounted and catch them when they come out."

Flowerdew then returned to C Squadron, which was waiting in a nearby draw.

Flowerdew led his men out of the draw and up a steep embankment. As they reached the higher ground, they saw about 300 German infantrymen deployed in two lines in the open some 300 metres to their front, supported by an artillery battery and a machine-gun company.

Flowerdew waved his sword in the signal for the squadron to deploy into line, turned in his saddle and shouted, "It's a charge, boys, it's a charge."

Riding directly behind him, the squadron's boy trumpeter raised his horn to blow the charge but no sound came, as horse and rider were shot down.

Although it was certain death, the Strathconas galloped bravely forward, sabres drawn, directly into intense rifle, machine-gun, mortar and artillery fire. The toll on men and horses was terrible.

Afterwards, Trooper Albert Dale recalled that "everything seemed unreal, the shouting of the men, the moans of the wounded, the pitiful crying of the wounded and dying horses."

Sgt. Tom Mackay later counted 59 bullet holes in one of his legs; the holes in the other couldn't be tallied as they ran into each other.

As the squadron neared the first line, Flowerdew went down, wounded in the chest and both thighs. The squadron flooded past him, cutting down more than 70 Germans with their sabres.

Only one Strathcona made it through both lines. When Sgt. Fred Wooster found himself alone after running his sabre through one German and clubbing another on the head, he made his way back to Seely and reported the situation, before joining Harvey's troop.

MEANWHILE, about 20 Dragoons had also joined Harvey at the northeast corner of the wood. Two of Harvey's group retrieved Flowerdew and handed him over to four others who carried him back to a field ambulance unit.

As Flowerdew was evacuated, the sun finally broke through the mist, lighting up the battlefield.

To assist the troops still fighting inside Moreuil Wood, Seely committed his reserve. One Fort Garry squadron circled south along the west bank of the Avre to bring fire to bear on the southwest corner of the wood, while the other two were sent into the wood.

Losses for all three regiments were severe, in the order of one-third to one-half of their strength. Hardest hit of all was Flowerdew's squadron, which lost over 70 per cent of its men.

Intense fighting continued for a couple of hours, until the British 3rd Cavalry Brigade arrived about noon and with the Canadians succeeded in pushing the Germans to the southern edge of the wood. Together, they held out against several counterattacks until relieved that night.

The German advance had been stopped cold and could go no further. Operation Michael ended on April 5.

Flowerdew died of his wounds the next day, at the same time as his promotion to captain was announced.

For his gallantry in leading what became one of the last great cavalry charges in history, Flowerdew was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross, Britain's highest medal for valour in the face of the enemy.

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John Boileau commanded Lord Strathcona's Horse (Royal Canadians) from 1985 to 1987.