

The Charge of the Light Brigade

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On the 22nd October 2009 the UK contingent celebrated the Charge of the Light Brigade, which was a charge of British **cavalry** led by Lord Cardigan against Russian forces during the Battle of Balaclava on 25 October 1854 during the Crimean War. The charge of the Light Brigade continues to be studied by modern military historians and students as an example of what can go wrong when accurate military intelligence is lacking and orders are unclear. Sir Winston Churchill, who was a keen military historian and a former cavalryman, insisted on taking time out during the Yalta Conference in 1945 to see the battlefield for himself.

The charge was made by the Light Brigade of the British cavalry, consisting of the 4th and 13th Light Dragoons, 17th Lancers, and the 8th and 11th Hussars, under the command of Major General the Earl of Cardigan. Overall command of the cavalry resided with Lieutenant General the Earl of Lucan. Cardigan and Lucan were brothers-in-law who disliked each other intensely. Lucan received an order from the army commander Lord Raglan stating, in appalling handwriting, that "Lord Raglan wishes the cavalry to advance rapidly to the front, follow the enemy, and try to prevent the enemy carrying away the guns. Horse artillery may accompany. French cavalry is on your left. Immediate." In fact, Raglan had wanted the cavalry to prevent the Russians taking away some naval guns from the redoubts that they had captured on the reverse side of the Causeway Heights, the hill forming the left side of the valley (from the point of view of the cavalry).

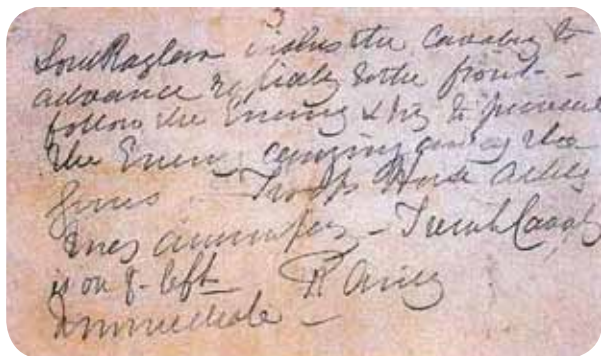
Raglan could see what was happening from his high vantage-point on the west of the valley, but Lucan and the cavalry were unaware of what was going on owing to the lie of the land where they were drawn up.

The order was drafted by Brigadier Airey and was carried by Captain Louis Edward Nolan, who carried the further oral instruction that the cavalry was to attack immediately. When Lucan asked what guns were referred to, Nolan is said to have indicated, by a wide sweep of his arm, not the Causeway redoubts but the mass of Russian guns in a redoubt at the end of the valley, around a mile away. His reasons for the misdirection is unclear, as he was killed in the ensuing battle.

In response to the order, Lucan instructed Cardigan to lead 673 cavalry men straight into the valley between the Fedyukhin Heights and the Causeway Heights, famously dubbed the "Valley of Death" by the poet Tennyson. The opposing Russian forces were commanded by Pavel Liprandi and included approximately 20 battalions of infantry supported by over fifty artillery pieces. These forces were deployed on both sides and at the opposite end of the valley. Lucan himself was to follow with the Heavy Brigade.

The Light Brigade set off down the valley, with Cardigan out in front leading the charge. Almost at once Nolan was seen to rush across the front, passing in front of Cardigan. It may be that he had then realized the charge was aimed at the wrong target and was attempting to stop or turn the brigade, but he was killed by an artillery shell and the cavalry continued on its course. Despite a withering fire from three sides that devastated their force on the ride, the Light Brigade was able to engage the Russian forces at the end of the valley and force them back from the redoubt, but suffered heavy casualties and was soon forced to retire. The surviving Russian artillerymen returned to their guns and opened fire once again, with grape and canister, indiscriminately at the *mêlée* of friend and foe before them.

Lucan failed to provide any support for Cardigan, and it was speculated that he was motivated by an enmity for his brother-in-law that had lasted some 30 years and had been intensified during the campaign up to that point. The troops of the Heavy Brigade entered the mouth of the valley but did not advance further: Lucan's subsequent explanation was that he saw no point in having a second brigade mown down and that he was best positioned where he was to render assistance to Light Brigade survivors returning from the charge. The French cavalry, the Chasseurs d'Afrique, were more effective in that they broke the Russian line on the Fedyukhin Heights and later provided cover for the remaining elements of the Light Brigade as they withdrew. War correspondent William Russell, who witnessed the battle, declared "our Light Brigade was annihilated by their own rashness, and by the brutality of a ferocious enemy".



Cardigan survived the battle. Although stories circulated afterwards that he was not actually present he led the charge from the front and, never looking back, did not see what was happening to the troops behind him. He reached the Russian guns, took part in the fight and then returned alone up the valley without bothering to rally or even find out what had happened to the survivors. He afterwards said all he could think about was his rage against Captain Nolan, who he thought had tried to take over the leadership of the charge from him. After riding back up the valley he considered he had done all that he could and then, with astonishing *sang-froid*, left the field and went on board his yacht in Balaclava harbour, where he ate a champagne dinner.

The brigade was not completely destroyed, but did suffer terribly, with 118 men killed, 127 wounded. After regrouping, only 195 men were still with horses. The futility of the

action and its reckless bravery prompted the French Marshal Pierre Bosquet to state "C'est magnifique, mais ce n'est pas la guerre." ("It is magnificent, but it is not war.") He continued, in a rarely quoted phrase: "C'est de la folie" — "it is madness." The Russian commanders are said to have initially believed that the British soldiers must have been drunk, and the reputation of the British cavalry was significantly enhanced as a result of the charge, though the same cannot be said for their commanders.

Slow communications meant that news of the disaster did not reach the British public until three weeks after the action. The British commanders' dispatches from the front were published in an extraordinary edition of the *London Gazette* of 12 November 1854. Raglan blamed Lucan for the charge, claiming that "from some misconception of the order to advance, the Lieutenant-General (Lucan) considered that he was bound to attack at all hazards, and he accordingly ordered Major-General the Earl of Cardigan to move forward with the Light Brigade." Lucan was furious at being made a scapegoat. Raglan claimed he should have exercised his discretion, but throughout the campaign up to that date Lucan considered Raglan had allowed him no independence at all and required that his orders be followed to the letter. Cardigan, who had merely obeyed orders, blamed Lucan for giving those orders. He returned home a hero and was promoted to Inspector General of the Cavalry.

Lucan attempted to publish a letter refuting point by point Raglan's *London Gazette* dispatch, but his criticism of his superior was not tolerated and in March 1855, Lucan was recalled to England. The Charge of the Light Brigade became a subject of considerable controversy and public dispute on his return. He strongly rejected Raglan's version of events, calling it "an imputation reflecting seriously on my professional character". In an exchange of public correspondence printed in the pages of *The Times*, Lucan blamed Raglan and his deceased aide-de-camp Captain Nolan, who had been the actual deliverer of the disputed order. Lucan evidently escaped blame for the charge, as he was made a member of the Order of the Bath in July of that same year. Although he never again saw active duty, he reached the rank of General in 1865 and was made a Field Marshal in the year before his death. ■