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Thoughts on the Charge of the Light Brigade

By William Warner

Half a league, half a league,
Half a league onward,
Into the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.

No, it's not about US troopers in Afghanistan or Iraq; it's about British cavalrymen in Ukraine. And it's the beginning of a famous poem about an infamous mistake. Tennyson's *Charge of the Light Brigade* is a resounding remembrance about a forgotten folly: a small cavalry force makes a daring but disastrous assault against an artillery line.

Cannon to right of them,
Cannon to left of them,
Cannon in front of them
Volley'd and thunder'd.

Its 150th anniversary was overlooked on October 25th, but with the year coming to an end – a perennial time to reflect on the past – it's worth looking back. And with the Christmas season, it's worth recalling that a candle in Bethlehem ignited that war. The match that lit the Crimean conflict was struck in the Church of the Nativity. In June, 1853, Roman Catholic monks tried to place a silver star over Christ's manger but were

restrained physically by Orthodox monks; a riot developed resulting in the death of several monks. Thus a long-smoldering quarrel between the Roman Catholic Church, backed by France, and the Orthodox Church, backed by Russia, finally, and violently, caught light. Religious zealots starting a war: sound familiar? The real cause of the conflict, however, had nothing to do with bickering bishops but everything to do with geographical and strategic aspirations of powerful nations. Now that does sound familiar.

But why take time to remember a military blunder, in a senseless war, far from home, so long ago? We often justify our appetite for history with Santayana's famous cliché: 'Those who fail to study history are doomed to repeat it.' It's another myth that has cantered along with Tennyson's famous poem. Whether or not we study it, history repeats itself.

Historical facts of the Brigade's charge are not as glorious as the myths, but they are more awing, edifying, and (sadly enough) quite pertinent to our battling world today. Current casualty figures of US troops in Iraq are oddly similar to those in the Crimean War. US non-combat casualties (whether 15,000 reported by the Pentagon or 20-30,000 issued by other sources) far outnumber deaths in combat.

In terms of numbers, the Light Brigade's charge was a bloodbath but not as devastating as the troopers' horrid living conditions. Sickness, not battle, had crippled the cavalry. The Grim Reaper's scythe of cholera, caused by the lack of basic sanitation, proved more deadly than any saber, lance or cannon. The embarkation strength of the Light Brigade was approximately 1570 men. When the morning bugle called that fateful morning barely 42 per cent of the Brigade's original number saddled up. Tennyson's 'valley of Death' was full of graves before the first Russian cannon fired.

And there was consternation about support equipment. (It echoes today.) In 1854, the English cavalry had shed fifty percent of its strength since Waterloo. There had been no major war for 45 years, and the need for more horses (not only remounts for the cavalry but, literally, thousands more for commissariat duties) was pressing.

Facing the 26 Russian cannons were 665 regimental horsemen. The tally afterwards was: 110 killed, 130 wounded, 58 prisoners. This gives an overall casualty figure of 298, or 45 per cent. A terrible price to pay for nothing, but nowhere near the severity that similar strength battalions suffered sixty years later (WW I) – and fought on.

Considering what happened – that the Russian cannons fired about 200 rounds in some seven and a half minutes – the statistics are more startling when looked at from the point of view of how many returned rather than how many were killed. 306 survived with barely a scratch. When the prisoners were released a year later the number of men who lived to tell the tale was an astounding figure of 540. Discounting those who later died of wounds or as prisoners, only 103, or 15 per cent, were killed on the battlefield. Looked at another way, of those who rode down the valley — and back up it again! – only one man in six died in the saddle. Not quite the picture so often painted. Equally astonishing, the horsemen bridled their wild-eyed mounts at a steady trot or canter for most of the way.

“Forward the Light Brigade!
Charge for the guns!” he said:
Into the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.

The officer who led the charge left a lasting legacy. Not only in military history but also, of all things, in the history of clothing. Lord Cardigan – yes, the sweater label is his – was the first to cross the Russian battery. He was also the first horseman back, leaving those he led in a melee... without a leader.

But Cardigan was only one of the four critical figures in the blunder. He merely *executed* the order. The second, Lieutenant-General Lord Lucan, who also happened to be Cardigan’s superior, brother-in-law and nemesis, *received* the order. The third, Captain Nolan, a hot-head chomping at the bit for glory, *delivered* the order. And lastly there was Lord Raglan, the Commander-in-Chief who *gave* the order. (By coincidence, an article of clothing is also named after him: a ‘raglan sleeve’ continues in one piece up to the collar.) Each agent of the order played a role in its predictable fate.

“Forward the Light Brigade!”
Was there a man dismay’d?
Not tho’ the soldier knew
Someone had blunder’d.

All the generals involved knew full well that there had been an infamous mistake. But before the day was out all but Captain Nolan (he’d died in the attack) were like many leaders, before and since, in similar situations (including military, business, and public disasters), determined to deflect the blame from themselves to others. The recriminations and accusations were to fly around for months, indeed years, afterwards. A blunder that the military were anxious to play down and keep ‘in house’ was eventually trumpeted in the public domain via

speeches and debates in the House of Lords, letters and articles in *The Times*, and court battles in the Queen's Bench. Today, many with 20-20 hindsight see familiar patterns of passing the blame – in the military (e.g., Abu Ghraib), in government (e.g., 9/11), and in business (e.g., Enron *et al.*).

Having said that, and putting second-guessing behind us, we *can* learn from the Light Brigade's blunder. And three lessons-learned apply to the battles we fight day to day, from major military campaigns abroad to minor business activities at home.

First, get the right person for the right job. The cronyism and purchased commissions of the British military 150 years ago were not so unlike the political and corporate favoritism today. Of course, not all public officials and private executives are smuggled in by friendship and money; however, if we look at the leaders associated with blunders, we'll see most were simply not the right person for the job due to personal deficiencies in judgment and intelligence. (Don't confuse judgment with wisdom, or intelligence with knowledge.)

Secondly, knowledge *and* intelligence are required for executing wise judgment. The four horsemen lacked all these qualities. Lord Raglan, mounted on the heights overlooking the gathering armies, could see what was before him; however, he neither knew nor could he figure out what was going on. 'Lack of intelligence' is the operable (excuse) term today. From his vantage-point the Brigade faced *two* valleys (north and south); for the other three officers, who were below Raglan in terrain as well as rank, the line of horsemen faced only one (the north). Nolan carried Raglan's order, though historians debate whether he knew what the order actually meant. Which meant that when Lucan received the order, and failed to understand it, the

glory-seeking messenger, eager to get on with it, proved more harmful than helpful. And finally, Lord Cardigan executed the order without knowing what its purpose was. Cardigan's charge was like a dog chasing a car – not knowing what to do after it's caught. Of course, there's no use in ordering a dog if you bark a garbled message.

Thirdly, clear communication is the heart of any directive. Again, the four horsemen stumbled, this time on the rocky ground of clumsy orders. Lord Raglan had given three previous orders that morning, all conflicting, before the fourth and fatal. And to add confusion, Raglan preferred to imply or suggest than directly order. The word 'charge' does not appear in the fourth written order, nor does the word 'attack'. Raglan's rather pathetic plan envisaged the enemy retreating in haste at the sight of the cavalry advance. (Haven't we heard similar pathetic plans?) The written order carried by Capt. Nolan said:

'Lord Ragan *wishes* the cavalry to advance rapidly to the front – follow the enemy and *try* to prevent the enemy carrying away the guns – Troop Horse Artillery *may* accompany – French cavalry is on your left – Immediate.'



At the very last moment Raglan then told Nolan (who was racing the order to

Lord Lucan) that the Brigade was to ‘attack immediately’. Giving that verbal message to Nolan of all people was what sealed the fate of the Light Brigade.

The message was certainly confusing because the use of words such as ‘wishes’, ‘try’ and ‘may’ are seldom conducive to decisive military action. Moreover, it did not revolve around the previous orders. It spoke of following an enemy that was *not* retiring. Equally critical, it did *not* order a charge or even an attack against the guns, which were to the Brigade’s left, right and front. Lord Lucan hesitated, quite understandably, which infuriated the hot-blooded Nolan. Nolan then introduced Raglan’s verbal footnote ‘attack’. Lucan’s incredulous retort, “*Attack*, sir! Attack, what? What guns?” resulted in Nolan pointing to the cannons at the end of the (wrong) North Valley, “There is your enemy, sir! There are the guns!” Or so the stories go. Conflicting accounts of what actually took place at that critical moment leaves room for uncertainty.

Uncertainty remains. Not just on that confusing morning 150 years ago, but in today’s confusing world. Leaders, both in public offices and private boardrooms, issue orders not unlike Lord Raglan’s, frequently conflicting and laced with weasel words to hide behind (later). Messengers of the order often see ‘the big picture’ with the myopic vision of Capt. Nolan. And yet, they eagerly point, stridently, with personal ambition, “There is your enemy, sir! – terrorists, corrupt CEOs, fraudulent accounting firms, disgraceful soldiers, ignorant intelligence-agencies...” They might have the right enemies, but often they’re pointing in the wrong direction.

Our enemies are scattered across the globe, surrounding us like Russian guns on the Light Brigade. But the enemy is not only people – misfits who threaten freedom and profit from

corruption. Nor is war the only enemy of life. (Today, as it was during the Crimean War, the lack of basic sanitation claims more lives worldwide than armed combat.) Moreover, the enemy is not only ‘out there’; it’s also within us – the way that Raglan, Nolan, Lucan and Cardigan were the enemies of leadership within the Brigade. And the recriminations – whether they be in a government commission, corporate audit, military investigation, or an intelligence reform act – continue to search-and-destroy internal enemies on the battlefield of blame.

The British love a glorious military failure. The charge of the Light Brigade was precisely that, and so it has been remembered in the public mind ever since. Some find it fashionable to ridicule Tennyson’s poem as a glorification of war and paean to those who blindly, and stupidly, follows orders.

Theirs not to make reply,
Theirs not to reason why,
Theirs but to do and die.

But the fact is – and it is a fact – that there are times when obedient acts of self-sacrifice and courage merit both admiration and profound gratitude. Florence Nightingale, not Lord Cardigan, was the quintessential hero 150 years ago. (She was baptized a nurse in the Crimean War’s blood.) Today’s Light Brigade consists of all servicemen, all volunteers who ride bravely ‘Into the jaws of Death.’ But those abroad do not have a monopoly on bravery. Honor goes to the ‘noble six hundred’ at home: firefighters and police officers charging into a mouth of hell, corporate whistleblowers who trumpet corruption, government employees who dare to reason why and

challenge an order, and relief workers toiling in the valleys of death, everywhere – blunder or not.

When can their glory fade?
Oh, the wild charge they made!
All the world wondered.
Honor the charge they made!
Honor the Light Brigade –
Noble six hundred!



Whippoorwill E-Comment is the electronic journal of J. Hill Hamon, 1515 Evergreen Road, Frankfort, KY 40601. E-mail address is KyHamon@AOL.COM. This issue is a collaboration with a former student and colleague Bill Warner, who lives in Norway. Bill is the best thinker and writer of all of my myriad former students. I asked him for a brief autobiographical statement and his reply is below.



I once had a mentor in college. I was an art student; he was a biology professor. Our fields of study were as different as our ages, our clothing, our hair... We met in 1968, on the sleepy campus of Transylvania College. It was an anxious time (like most times in history) and I was the quintessential student of the time: slouching, shuffling, shouting... and smiling as much as dead men dance: the perfect personality-palette for an

art student. Talent, however, was missing. I never painted; I simply applied colors on canvas. I dabbled because I was a dilettante, and that bothered me for the next three decades until I realized a simple fact. A truth my mentor whispered when we first met: *I am who I want to be.*

Mentor originates from the name of *Mentor*, advisor of Telemachus in Homer's *Odyssey*. My odyssey is, in fact, my mentor's as well. I traveled from Kentucky back to Ohio, then to Wyoming, Georgia, Maine – interspersed with treks to Africa and Europe – before settling down in Norway in 1986. I put down the palette and brush after college and tried my hand at administration (and failed miserably as Director of the Atlanta Botanical Gardens), at research (and failed there as well, though it took two books and thirty-some articles before I realized it), and education (where I succeeded at Dartmouth College but foolishly said no to a job offer, twice). Like island hopping in the Aegean, my odyssey has weathered storms and doldrums. My adventure is nothing unique; rather, it's characteristic of most common lives. We sail through the swells of life; troughs of doubt and despair rise to peaks of hope and happiness – over and over and over.

Today I am doing what my mentor always advised: write. It's neither a vocation nor an avocation. It's a life. Whether a letter penned to a friend or a proof polished for an editor, writing forces one to think carefully, with deliberation. *How can you know what you mean unless you see what you write?* My mentor posed that question years ago while we sat in his office. I was staring out the window; he was setting type.