**The Charge of the Light Brigade: What actually happened?**

* The Charge of the Light Brigade was an attack by British light cavalry against Russian troops. It took place in the 1854 Crimean War, during the Battle of Balaclava.
* The Battle of Balaclava was part of the siege of Sevastopol, which lasted from 1854 to 1855. The objective of the British army was to capture the port of Sevastopol from the Russians.

Lord Fitzroy Somerset Raglan, the British commander-in-chief in Crimea, where he believed the Russians were attempting to make off with some of his artillery guns in a place called the Causeway Heights. He ordered the cavalry, consisting of both the Heavy and Light brigades, to advance with infantry support “and take advantage of any opportunity to recover” the lost ground. Lord Raglan expected the cavalrymen to move immediately, with the infantry to come later. But George Bingham, the earl of Lucan, who commanded the cavalry, thought he wanted them to attack together. As a result, Lucan’s men sat around for 45 minutes waiting for the infantry to arrive. At that point, Raglan issued a new order, telling the cavalry to “advance rapidly to the front … and try to prevent the enemy carrying away the guns.” From his vantage point, however, Lucan could not see any guns being removed. Confused, he asked Raglan’s aide-de-camp where to attack, but instead of pointing to the Causeway Heights, the aide allegedly waved his arm in the direction of a Russian artillery battery at the far end of an exposed valley.

Lucan next approached his brother-in-law James Brudenell, the earl of Cardigan, who commanded the Light Brigade. The two men loathed each other so much they were barely on speaking terms. And neither was apparently respected by the troops. One officer in the Light Brigade went so far as to call them both “fools.” Cardigan, he wrote in a letter home, “has as much brains as my boot. He is only equalled in want of intellect by his relation the earl of Lucan.” Though perturbed by Raglan’s order, Lucan and Cardigan obeyed it without first checking back in to make sure they understood it correctly. At their bidding, the roughly 670 members of the Light Brigade drew their sabres and lances and began their infamous mile-and-a-quarter-long charge with Russians shooting at them from three directions (though never from all three at once). The first man to fall was Raglan’s aide-de-camp. Another soldier then had “his head clean carried off by a round shot, yet for about 30 yards further the headless body kept in the saddle,” according to a survivor. Other survivors spoke of being splattered with horse blood, of watching their companions lose limbs, of seeing brains on the ground and of going through smoke so thick it was like “riding into the mouth of a volcano.”

The Heavy Brigade, which, its name notwithstanding, resembled the Light Brigade except with regard to uniform colour, was supposed to follow in support but only went a short way down the valley before Lucan directed it to turn back. Somehow, the Light Brigade reached its destination anyway, crashing into the enemy lines with a vengeance. A few Russians even shot at their own comrades in a desperate bid to clear an escape route. The Light Brigade’s members didn’t hold the ground for long, though, before being forced to stagger back from whence they came. En route, Russian artillery pounded away again from the Causeway Heights—but not from the other two sides, as the Light Brigade had taken out one battery itself and the French had taken out another—while Russian cavalrymen attempted to entrap them. In the end, of the roughly 670 Light Brigade soldiers, about 110 were killed and 160 were wounded, a 40 percent casualty rate, some later did in hospital and some were captured by the Russians. They also lost approximately 375 horses.

**The Times 1854**

**The Charge of the Light Brigade,** by William Howard Russell

***November 14, 1854 dispatch in the London Times; written from the front of the Crimean War; led Alfred Tennyson to compose the famous poem of the same name, The Charge of the Light Brigade.***

HEIGHTS BEFORE SEBASTOPOL, OCTOBER 25 -- If the exhibition of the most brilliant valour, of the excess of courage, and of a daring which would have reflected luster on the best days of chivalry can afford full consolation for the disaster of today, we can have no reason to regret the melancholy loss which we sustained in a contest with a savage and barbarian enemy.

I shall proceed to describe, to the best of my power, what occurred under my own eyes, and to state the facts which I have heard from men whose veracity is unimpeachible, reserving to myself the right of private judgement in making public and in surpressing the details of what occurred on this memorable day …

[After losing ground to a British force half its size, the Russians retreated to the heights above Sebastopol, a port town on the Black sea].

At 11:00 our Light Cavalry Brigade rushed to the front... The Russians opened on them with guns from the redoubts on the right, with volleys of musketry and rifles.

They swept proudly past, glittering in the morning sun in all the pride and splendor of war. We could hardly believe the evidence of our senses. Surely that handful of men were not going to charge an army in position? Alas! It was but too true -- their desperate valour knew no bounds, and far indeed was it removed from its so-called better part -- discretion. They advanced in two lines, quickening the pace as they closed towards the enemy. A more fearful spectacle was never witnessed than by those who, without the power to aid, beheld their heroic countrymen rushing to the arms of sudden death. At the distance of 1200 yards the whole line of the enemy belched forth, from thirty iron mouths, a flood of smoke and flame through which hissed the deadly balls. Their flight was marked by instant gaps in our ranks, the dead men and horses, by steeds flying wounded or riderless across the plain. The first line was broken -- it was joined by the second, they never halted or checked their speed an instant. With diminished ranks, thinned by those thirty guns, which the Russians had laid with the most deadly accuracy, with a halo of flashing steel above their heads, and with a cheer which was many a noble fellow's death cry, they flew into the smoke of the batteries; but ere they were lost from view, the plain was strewed with their bodies and with the carcasses of horses. They were exposed to an oblique fire from the batteries on the hills on both sides, as well as to a direct fire of musketry.

Through the clouds of smoke we could see their sabers flashing as they rode up to the guns and dashed between them, cutting down the gunners as they stood. The blaze of their steel, like an officer standing near me said, "was like the turn of a shoal of mackerel." We saw them riding through the guns, as I have said; to our delight, we saw them returning, after breaking through a column of Russian infantry and scattering them like chaff, when the flank fire of the battery on the hill swept them down, scattered and broken as they were. Wounded men and dismounted troopers flying towards us told the sad tale -- demigods could not have done what they had failed to do. At the very moment when they were about to retreat, a regiment of lancers was hurled upon their flank. Colonel Shewell, of the 8th Hussars, saw the danger and rode his men straight at them, cutting his way through with fearful loss. The other regiments turned and engaged in a desperate encounter. With courage too great almost for credence, they were breaking their way through the columns which enveloped them, where there took place an act of atrocity without parallel in modern warfare of civilized nations. The Russian gunners, when the storm of cavalry passed, returned to their guns. They saw their own cavalry mingled with the troopers who had just ridden over them, and to the eternal disgrace of the Russian name, the miscreants poured a murderous volley of grape and canister on the mass of struggling men and horses, mingling friend and foe in one common ruin. It was as much as our Heavy Cavalry Brigade could do to cover the retreat of the miserable remnants of that band of heroes as they returned to the place they had so lately quitted in all the pride of life.

At 11:35 not a British soldier, except the dead and dying, was left in front of those bloody Muscovite guns …