

Chapter One: The Fields of Raclawice

Colonel Count Artur Branicki had never felt so alive.

The sights, sounds and smell of battle assaulted his senses as he surveyed the hordes of approaching Russian troops. Yet Branicki felt elated. More than that, as he pointed his sabre at the enemy, he felt invincible. Behind him, a squadron of lancers prepared to charge into action, brightly coloured pennants dancing in the breeze as their powerful steeds pranced and snorted.

In Colonel Branicki's mind there was no doubt. In one glorious charge he would sweep the advancing ranks of Russian infantrymen aside. An equine battering ram would soon crush any resistance and Poland would triumph over the might of Imperial Russia.

Its proud heritage—consigned to history by the cruel partition of Poland by Austria, Prussia and Russia—would be restored. This uprising would be the first spark in a revolution that would sweep through the former Polish territories.

Fate, however, would prove to be a fickle guardian of Polish history.

The brutal cough of muskets—a ragged volley discharged by the leading rank of Russian troops—was followed by their sudden appearance, striding forward out of a thick rill of smoke. With bayonets fixed, they screamed and yelled, before charging at an undisciplined body of Polish irregulars armed with simple home-made war scythes. These peasant soldiers were already reeling from the first deadly musket volley and the battle was in the balance as they wavered before the regimented Russian veterans.

But now it was the turn of the Polish cavalry.

Branicki lifted his arm high into the air and his sabre flashed as he thundered, 'Give them hell boys; for Poland and for glory.'

Spurred on by their animated riders and accompanied by the shrill tones of a bugle, a wall of horses stormed into action. Lances were lowered, pointing forward like a bristling hedge of steel. Brief moments later, the wild-eyed mounts were eating up the ground, galloping directly at the Russian troops.

At the sight of the rapidly approaching ranks of lancers, their discipline suddenly broke. Ignoring desperate orders to stand firm, weapons were tossed aside as terrified men fled for their lives.

But it was already too late.

Leading the charge, Branicki lifted his sword. It was what the cavalry excelled at. In a bravura charge, sabre hacked and lance thrust into the fleeing horde as the Russian advance dissolved into a scrambling rabble.

'Fear and speed are the keys to victory,' thought the colonel as his blade sliced into flesh and sent a Russian tumbling to the ground.

Moments later, he hacked down on a cowering soldier who seemed hypnotized as the reddened blade punched and tore through the skin and muscle of his exposed neck in a bloody explosion. Then Branicki swept on again, eagerly looking for another victim.

As he topped the crest of a ridge, Branicki spotted a new target. He knew instantly that this was his chance to swing the battle in favour of the Poles. Just three hundred metres ahead, Russian guns spewed dirty smoke and licked tongues of flame as they fired across the battlefield. Salvo after salvo of deadly roundshot carved bloody paths through the serried ranks of Polish infantrymen. Branicki could see blood misting the air as speeding cannon balls slammed home.

Still at the gallop, he turned in the saddle and raised his sword again.

'To the guns!' he bellowed. 'We can take them.'

His spurs dug home and Branicki felt his horse respond. Beneath him, powerful muscles punched into action. Glancing to right and left, he saw with satisfaction that his squadron was matching his speed as they thundered towards the enemy battery. Intent on smashing the Polish advance, the gunners had failed to spot the danger; all except one.

The excited cry of a Russian gun captain prompted one crew of gunners to explode into action.

Although the Polish cavalry was closing fast, they hauled at their cannon until it faced the rapidly approaching threat. At the head of his squadron, Branicki urged his mount on. It would be touch and go.

'Less than two hundred metres now; we'll make it.'

As a wall of horse-flesh careered across the landscape towards the battery, the gun crew could clearly hear the drumming of hooves on soil and the excited cries of Polish riders. But their discipline held and charge and canister were rammed home.

Now barely one hundred metres away, the lancers raked back their spurs and charged implacably on towards the enemy guns.

Adrenalin surged through Branicki's veins. There were just fifty metres to go; just fifty metres until his men could rip into the Russian battery.

He pointed his outstretched sabre at a gunner holding a glowing portfire and as he closed on him, Branicki felt strangely removed; as though events were being played out in slow motion. In this detached state, he watched grimly as the Russian gun was loaded with a canister of grapeshot.

Then he spotted the gun captain leaning over the breach. Branicki watched in horror, knowing that nothing could stop him as he dabbed his glowing portfire onto the gun's touch-hole. The Polish lancers continued to fly over the ground, determined to capture the Russian battery.

Only twenty short metres to go.