

Hussar Charge Re-Enactment with Frank Bakonyi

By Nancy Skakel – May 2009



Frank Bakonyi, of the First California Hussar Regiment, gave a talk on the history of the Hungarian Hussars. Each piece of his authentic reproduction of an 1848 Hussar's uniform was explained in detail. His presentation concluded with a thrilling demonstration of the Hussar's lightening mounted charge.

The Hussars were the light cavalry of the Hungarian nation and later the main force of the Austro-Hungarian Imperial Army. While the foot soldiers, with their baggage, supplies, and camp followers, could only move 10 to 12 miles a day, the light cavalry could cover 50 to 60 miles day after day. The Hussar's famous tactic was to hide in the landscape, make a lightening charge into the midst of a surprised enemy, then wheel and disappear again. This was remarkable since even into the late 17th century all charges by any other cavalry were made at walk and trot.

Their horses were very thrifty and hardy. Originally they were a mixture of Turkomen and Oriental blood. During the 17th and 18th centuries, horses were imported from the Syrian Desert to improve the quality of the cavalry mounts. This led to the foundation of the Shagya breed. (Frank mentioned that a price of 26,000 golden ducats was paid for the founding desert-born stallion, Shagya.) The Shagya was taller than the Oriental horses, with a deeper body, and was substantial enough to carry a man, his armor, and their rations. Shagyas became known as the "Emperor's Horses". It was considered a mark of honor and prestige when a young officer was assigned a Shagya to ride.

Royal families in Europe frequently intermarried, causing many wars to be fought over inheritance rights. A Hussar generally fought in foreign lands, so their reputation as fierce and capable fighters was renowned. The term of service was usually 10 years, with a 6 year re-enlistment.

The Hussar's primary weapon was the saber. This is a long, relatively heavy sword, sharp on both edges at the tip. It was intended to cause injury to the enemy,

because an injured soldier required more manpower and supplies to care for than a dead enemy would. Horses were rarely purposely injured. Rather, they were captured for use by the winning side.

The Hussar's distinctive tall hat had several uses. It could be used as a bucket to water the horse. A wire frame helped protect the head. The markings on the hat identified the rank and regiment of the wearer. It had a cord which buttoned to the jacket so it would not be lost in battle.

The entire uniform was made of wool; warm in winter and when wet, and breathable in hotter weather. The styling allowed considerable freedom of movement. On the jacket and pants were lovely swirling designs of metal entwined braid which helped to protect the Hussar from saber cuts. Officers' jackets had 5 rows of buttons; lieutenants' jackets had 3 rows of buttons. The cape was worn over the left shoulder to protect the arm which held the reins. The right arm was left free to swing the saber. An embroidered "saber -sash " hung from the soldier's belt carried personal belongings, and helped protect the thigh.

A colonel hired the men to form his regiment, and paid for their horses, uniforms, and armaments. Usually, the Treasury would then reimburse him for his expenses. However, he was allowed to choose his own regimental colors and the regiment was usually named after him.

The horse's tack was also designed for battle. The horse's gut and flank were protected from saber cuts by the deep saddle pad. The bridle had brass decorations and a piece that crossed the horse's face to provide more protection.

The First California Hussar Regiment has a mission to provide Education, Entertainment, and Enjoyment. They can field from 12 to 18 riders in full uniform. Their musical keurs have been performed for the Hungarian Embassy in Washington DC and gala events throughout California. They strive to keep alive the memory of Commander Michael Kovats, the Hussar who organized the first United States Cavalry under General George Washington. During the American Revolutionary War, the Hussars often fought out numbered 10:1. Legend says that Commander Kovats died in battle in 1779 of Charleston. First they shot his horse than they shot him. Even when his horse collapsed and he was dying, he held up the American flag in his hand. Brigadier General Skully, who was the British commander, reputedly said of Kovats, "He was he best damn cavalry the Rebels ever had." Frank Bakonyi ended his talk with these words, "Like me, Commandant Kovats was Hungarian by birth, but we are American by choice."

We adjourned to the big outdoor arena where Bakonyi mounted his horse to give us a taste of what the Hussars' full gallop charge was like. He rode a big bay Hungarian Felver gelding, borrowed from a boarder at the Hawkveiw Ranch stable. The striking dark bay and the elegantly uniformed rider made an impressive picture. We all had our photos taken with this handsome pair.