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A FROZEN HELL

THE RUSSO-FINNISH WINTER WAR OF 1939–40

Helsinki, 10:30 A.M., November 30, 1939. Soviet bombers drop from a cloud bank to unload their bombs on the capital city of Finland. In the weeks to come the world will watch admiringly as the tiny army of a small Baltic republic wages the kind of war that inspires legends against the invading military might of the Soviet Union. A forgotten war, until now.

WILLIAM R. TROTTER

A FROZEN HELL

(The Russo-Finnish "Winter War". 1939-1940; A military/political overview)

By

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1. THE RED GOLIATH CHOOSES WAR

On November 30, 1939, the largest, richest, most powerful nation in Europe (the Soviet Union, with a population of approximately 100 million) launched a mighty invasion against one of Europe's smallest, poorest, and weakest nations (the Republic of Finland, with a population of 3.7 million).

Militarily, the odds were so overwhelmingly lopsided as to seem grotesque. The Red Army comprised an active-duty force of 120 divisions (approximately 1,800,000 men, not counting its strategic reserves, which were, for all intents and purposes, virtually unlimited) supported by 10,000 tanks and armored vehicles, roughly15,000 artillery pieces, and an air force numbering at least 6,000 combat aircraft.

To defend its territory and democratic way of life, Finland could field only *nine* infantry divisions, two of which were at half-strength and only partially equipped when hostilities began, an active-duty force of 130,000 men (although as the war dragged on, urgent call-ups of second-line reserves and "Civic Guard" militia battalions would add another 100,000 men, many of them over-age veterans and boys barely given basic training)..

The shortage of heavy artillery was so grave that some Finnish batteries trained and fought with weapons that dated back to the Russo-Japanese War of 1904! The Finnish Air Force, at the start of the war, possessed only 48 modern fighters, 32

reconnaissance and dive-bombers, and a mere eighteen multi-engine bombers – when you contrast this to the approximately 2500 Red Air Force planes assigned to support the Soviet invasion, it seems incredible that the Finns were able to mount fierce resistance throughout the conflict, scoring 240 *confirmed* aerial-combat kills, while losing only 26 planes in exchange.

To subdue Finland's small, poorly equipped army and minuscule air force, the Soviet Union eventually committed 21 divisions (approximate 450,000 infantry), 2000 cannon, and 1500 tanks. The disparity between the two sides is perhaps best illustrated with regard to armor – in November, 1939, Finland did not possess a *single* operational tank! Anti-tank training was performed using a handful of antique Renaults, circa 1918; when Finnish soldiers actually confronted masses of Russian T-26s, T-28s (and even a few of the monstrous KV-1 heavy tanks) the initial effect was widespread terror, even paralysis.

Stalin's commanders did not expect their Finnish campaign to be much more than a large police action; the staggering amount of resources allocated for the attack was intended to shatter Finnish morale ("shock and awe" indeed!) in the first seventy-two hours of the operation, not to batter down a ferocious and prolonged defense. On the eve of war, the mood in the Kremlin was one of relaxed optimism. As Nikita Khrushchev recalled, Stalin and his inner circle threw down extraordinary amounts of vodka, toasting a victory that hadn't happened yet. "All we had to do was raise our voices a little bit, and the Finns would obey. If that didn't work, we could fire [a few] shots and the Finns would put up their hands and surrender. Or so we thought…"

Things didn't work out quite that way. Despite the Red Army's daunting preponderance of force, despite the utter hopelessness of prolonged resistance, the Finns stopped the Russian steamroller in its tracks, inflicted staggering losses, won a couple of spectacular victories in the vast trackless forests north of Lake Ladoga, and stirred the passionate admiration of the Western Democracies. Starved of modern weapons, fantastically outnumbered and out-gunned, the valor of "Brave Little Finland" made the vaunted Red Army look like a giant with feet of clay, and inflicted upon Joseph Stalin the worst humiliation of his career. If there was one thing more dangerous than Stalin in his cold-blooded-killer mode, it was Stalin in his angry-and-vengeful mode, and that was his mind-set by mid-January, 1940. So the war's ultimate outcome was never really in doubt. But for 105 stirring days, as Winston Churchill expressed it so eloquently:

"Only Finland, superb, nay, sublime in the jaws of peril…shows what free men can do. They have exposed, for all the world to see, the military incapacity of the Red Army…Everyone can now see how Communism rots the soul of a nation, how it makes [that nation] abject and hungry in peace and proves it base and abominable in war."

2. THE REASONS WHY

Even on his most paranoid days, Joseph Stalin could not seriously have entertained the fantasy that Finland posed a *military* threat to the USSR. Nor, except for some nickel deposits on the remote northern tip of the country, did Finland possess any natural resources worth waging war to obtain. The annexation of Finland would only add to the Soviet Union one more politically embittered satellite province and a vast amount

of rocks and trees – commodities that were hardly in short supply within the existing Soviet borders.

So why did Stalin even bother? The horrendous casualty lists came as a nasty surprise, of course, but even if the campaign had been the kind of walk-over the Kremlin strategists envisioned, the Soviet dictator must have known such an act of brutal, unprovoked aggression would enrage the very Western states whose good will he had been assiduously courting as a diplomatic counterweight to the possible threat of Hitler's growing military power. That Stalin was prepared to take such a calculated risk, indicates that there was *some kind* of valuable prize he wanted to seize inside Finland. As it happened, that prize was an intangible thing: peace-of-mind.

As has so often been the case throughout history, the Russo-Finnish War was fought over an obscure, intrinsically worthless bit of terrain which, through an accident of geography, just happened to be of enormous importance simply because of its location. It was a lovely, sparsely inhabited, pastoral region of Finland: The Karelian Isthmus. West of it lay Helsinki; east of it was Leningrad. It was flanked on the south by one arm of the Baltic Sea, and on the north by the vast and desolate coasts of Lake Ladoga. In economic and cultural terms, the Karelian Isthmus was a natural bridge between the great land mass of Russia and Asia, and the immense Scandinavian peninsula occupied by Finland, Sweden, and Norway.

From the perspective of a military strategist, however, this narrow corridor looks like either a classic strategic "choke-point" and or a dangerous sally port for aggression by any state or empire intent on attacking one of the most important economic and

symbolic targets in all of Russia: the city of St. Petersburg (in 1939, of course, "Leningrad").

Its strategic significance was historically well-established, and since the days of the Mongol hordes, army after army had washed across the Karelian Isthmus, coveting its possession both as a protective buffer and as a valuable diplomatic chess piece. Ironically, hardly *anybody* tried seriously to colonize any part of it other than its sheltered, heavily indented southern coastline, where both the Swedish and Tsarist empires desired control of the vibrant port city of Viipuri -- or *Viborg* as it was known in the days of Charles XIIth, when Sweden, during its relatively brief period as a major Baltic power, fortified the place with a majestic castle that still stands to this day (and which was so stoutly built by Charles's engineers, that shelling by modern artillery, in 1940 and again in 1944, inflicted no damage more serious than a few nicks in its granite walls). (1)

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(1) If you ever pass through Viipuri – and there isn't any other reason to **go** to Viipuri these days – I recommend that you make the effort to climb to the top of the keep; the view of the Gulf of Finland, especially in mid-winter, is awesome.)

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Possession of the Karelian Isthmus was, in fact, one of the major reasons why Sweden and 18th-Century Russia fought so many bitter little wars in that corner of the Baltic region. When Peter the Great finally finished constructing his long-cherished "Window to the West", St. Petersburg, (a ten-year undertaking that the European-minded Tsar pursued with brutal disregard either for the draining of his treasury or the lives of his

press-ganged subjects, at least 100,000 of whom perished during its construction), his next move was to trounce with Swedes so decisively that they would never again contest Russian supremacy in that area. “The ladies of St. Petersburg could never sleep peacefully so long as the Finnish border runs so close,” Tsar Peter is alleged to have said. To alleviate the ladies’ anxiety, Peter thereupon launched a massive military campaign to annex both the Isthmus itself, and a vast tract of Finnish Karelia covering its western approaches.

After Sweden’s imperial ambitions were forever checked -– and the cream of its elite army all but annihilated -- in the watershed battle of Poltova (1709), Peter’s brilliant but over-extended rival, Charles XII, lost the aura of invincibility that had sustained his empire-building ventures for so long. With St. Petersburg now girded by a wide security zone, whose handful of viable roads Peter heavily fortified, the Tsar had neither the motive nor the desire to conquer the rest of Finland; let the Swedes have it and bear the trouble and expense of administering a region almost wholly bereft of economic resources, inhabited largely by sullen indigenous rustics who spoke an incomprehensible tongue. Russia had annexed all of Finland she needed or wanted; the militarily weakened Swedes were welcome to keep the rest of it.

3. FROM OBSCURE PROVINCE TO INDEPENDENT NATION

All other things being equal, if one *must* be ruled by a foreign government, Sweden is not a bad choice. Swedish suzerainty, which lasted almost exactly one century after the Battle of Poltava, proved both benign and exceedingly mild. Swedish

bureaucrats ran the basic administrative services and aristocratic Swedes posted to Finland helped themselves to some of its most picturesque real estate on which to build their estates, but by and large they left the Finns to their own devices, amusements, and concerns. There was some grumbling among nationalistic Finnish intellectuals, but just as there was no overt oppression by Sweden, so too were there no acts of revolutionary violence against the Swedes themselves. The Swedes' worst offense was a certain attitude of snobbish superiority, but that was hardly provocation for rioting in the streets. And in any case, the Swedes departed just as nascent Finnish nationalism was starting to coalesce into a genuine political force.

The Napoleonic wars marked the end of Sweden's faded aspirations to be a Great Power. Militarily and financially exhausted, the Swedish monarchy derived less wealth from underdeveloped Finland than it spent maintaining control over it as a buffer between Stockholm and St. Petersburg. Tsar Alexander I (by Romanov standards, a fairly progressive despot) had been assiduously wooing Finnish nationalists, promising them virtual autonomy if they agreed to become a Russian protectorate. He demonstrated his good will by promulgating an Act of Assurance that conceded to the Finns numerous rights and privileges the Swedes had been reluctant to grant. It was an attractive, and in some ways remarkably enlightened, proposition.

Short of once more going to war with Russia, there wasn't a hell of a lot Stockholm could do to oppose the Tsar's intentions, so in 1809, King Charles XIII formally ceded all of Finland to the Russian empire. Thus was born a new, semi-autonomous political entity called "The Grand Duchy of Finland". For most of the ensuing century, this arrangement proved to be remarkably harmonious.

Romanov bureaucrats were appointed to the highest administrative responsibilities, but ambitious and talented Finns were encouraged to handle the day-to-day running of the government, and proved themselves efficient, honest, and loyal. Finland developed its own schools, banks, and legal institutions; indigenous culture flourished and the picturesque "second city" of Viipuri became a popular resort, where Finnish and Russian intellectuals nurtured a lively bohemian atmosphere, earning it, in time, the nickname "Paris of the North".

Whereas most upper-class Finns shunned a career in the Swedish military – which, after the collapse of Napoleon, didn't see much action any more, and which offered few paths of advancement for Finnish officers -- they were warmly received in the Tsarist armed forces, where they encountered no obstacles to their professional careers. Indeed, between 1810 and 1917, some 200 Finnish officers attained the rank of general in the Russian army, or Admiral in the Russian Navy – the most famous of whom was a Swedish-speaking hero of the Russo-Japanese War, the aristocratic Baron Karl Gustav Mannerheim.

Had the four Tsars who succeeded Alexander I been men of equal vision, the Russian Revolution might never have happened and Russia might well have evolved into a modern constitutional monarchy, somewhat along the lines of Denmark or Great Britain. Alas, they were men of narrow, reactionary convictions, who strove to keep Russia in a backward, semi-feudal state, and who cracked down with increasing brutality on liberal ideas, political opposition, and free intellectual expression, including those circulating in Finland.

When Nicolas II ascended to the Romanov throne in 1894, he gradually imposed upon Finland many of the increasingly repressive measures he promulgated on his own people, and these became heavier and more onerous at precisely the time when Finnish nationalism was becoming fervent and pervasive. In the aftermath of the abortive 1905 revolution, Finland's "autonomy" all but vanished as the Tsar introduced compulsory conscription, censorship, the curtailment of political rights, and infiltrated Finnish society with an extensive, thoroughly odious, system of secret police and paid informants.

The outbreak of World War One encouraged the more militant Finnish patriots to begin serious plans for severing all ties with Russia and declaring the "Grand Duchy" a free and independent nation. In secret, 2,000 young Finns traveled to Germany, where they hoped to receive the kind of professional military training that would enable them to become the core of a Finnish national army, when the time came to organize one. The Kaiser cooperated fully, assigning some of his best training cadres to turn these Finns into an elite military unit, and setting aside both arms and considerable funds to support them. The trainees' true identity was masked by designating them, quite innocuously, the "Twenty-seventh Prussian Jaeger (Light Infantry) Battalion".

When the Bolshevik Revolution deposed the Tsar and plunged Russia into turmoil, Finland seized the moment and declared independence on November 15, 1917, proclaiming itself to be a democratic neutral state and issuing repeated assurances to Lenin that Finland desired friendly relations with *all* its neighbors, and would remain scrupulously aloof from the internal affairs of Russia. Lenin was not pleased by this development, but his weak new regime was so besieged on all sides by White counter-revolutionaries and Allied interventionist expeditions that he could spare no troops to

impose Bolshevik control over the breakaway Finns. Nor could he afford to arouse pro-White hostility in the new nation – indeed, the Finns can cunningly hinted at what might happen if Lenin used force against them by quietly allowing Great Britain to base a squadron of torpedo boats at the small port of Hanko. Several ships of the Red Baltic Fleet, along with a handful of Russian merchant ships, had been sunk or damaged by this feisty flotilla. Officially, the new Finnish government professed to have no control over British belligerence; unofficially, they let it be known that in return for Lenin's recognition of their independence, the Royal Navy expedition would be "dis-invited" from Finnish territory.

Lenin was a realist – he "bought" Finnish neutrality by recognizing its independence only three weeks after the Finns declared it. The Finns kept their word, and the British PT boats went home. Red warships and commercial vessels could once more transit the Gulf of Finland unmolested.

Pragmatism aside, however, Lenin had reason to hope that Finland would soon turn Red without his overt intervention. By 1917, class antagonism was seething in Finland. Wartime shortages, conditions of near-famine in the agricultural regions, chronic poverty, and a widespread impression that the new government was indifferent to the sufferings of the working-class, had generated increasing unrest, which led to strikes that sometimes turned into riots. Bolshevik agents skillfully exploited these conditions and funneled both arms and military advisors into a clandestine "Red Guard" militia. Battalions of factory workers acquired considerable extra military muscle when their ranks were augmented by thousands of pro-Bolshevik Russian soldiers who had been

stationed in Finland prior to November 15, and whom the new liberal White government was quite powerless to disarm and expel.

When the exceptionally harsh winter of 1917 pushed thousands of working-class Finnish families to the brink of starvation, and when nationwide strikes and massive street protests brought no relief, armed conflict erupted with a suddenness and ferocity that took both sides by surprise. Red Guard brigades quickly took control of the capital, Helsinki, and of the vital industrial facilities at Tampere. Incited by their Communist advisors, the workers' battalions in Helsinki unleashed what became known as the Red Terror, a purge of liberals, aristocrats, and Westernized intellectuals (and the settling of many private grievances) that resulted in the slaughter of approximately 1,500 men.

Under the adroit and ruthless leadership of their new commander, Field Marshal Mannerheim, the Whites regrouped quickly. In a fast, heavily escorted convoy, the "Twenty-seventh Prussian Jaeger Battalion" swiftly deployed on Finnish soil and became the shock-troops of Mannerheim's army. With these crack troops came several companies of German armored cars and numerous pieces of field artillery. To seal off Helsinki, and to prevent any Bolshevik aid from moving across the Karelian Isthmus, the White government asked Germany to land an somewhat larger expeditionary force through Viipuri, and from that base of operations, to seal-off Helsinki from the east.

For the first time, Mannerheim revealed just how astute were his political instincts. While he knew that the infusion of some 3,000 elite German troops would cut-off the Reds from reinforcements, perhaps even decisively tip the balance of power in his favor, shorten the war, and permit the White Guard to liberate Helsinki without having to employ siege tactics or endure the brutalities of house-to-house combat, he strongly

advised the government to **reject** German aid. His reasoning? That by openly inviting the Germans to take part, Finland might be dangerously mortgaging its political independence, and creating – in Russian minds, at least – the impression of a close bond with Germany, thereby undercutting the new nation's claims of "neutrality".

Inflamed by reports of the Red Terror, however, the government ignored Mannerheim's warning; the German expeditionary force came ashore; the Red Guards in Helsinki suddenly realized they were surrounded and heavily out-gunned. And that they were about to be attacked by White soldiers whose friends and relatives they had been wantonly lynching from the capital city's lampposts only a few weeks earlier.

Unprepared to face armored cars and too undisciplined to withstand the artillery barrages that preceded each White attack, the Red Guard battalions crumbled rapidly. Tampere fell in late March; Helsinki on April 13, 1918. Desultory skirmishes continued for a while out in the countryside, but all organized Red resistance was crushed by the first week of May. Several thousand die-hard Reds, along with most of the prominent Finnish Communist leaders and their Russian advisors, fled across the border.

The Finnish Civil War lasted slightly more than five months, and the combat casualties on both sides were relatively light, considering the bitterness and rage that characterized the fighting. With woeful inevitability, however, the Red Terror was soon followed by an even bloodier White Terror. Red officers, Bolshevik agents and commissars, anarchists, and any man of any rank accused of taking part in the Helsinki killings, were all imprisoned on the fortified granite islands guarding Helsinki harbor. After summary trials, more than half of those men were executed, perhaps as many as four thousand in all. (2)

(2) As of 1964, at least, the Finnish government had never released a full accounting of these atrocities, claiming that most of the paper records had vanished or been destroyed. The "four thousand" is an estimate – it may have been six thousand, and if eye-witness accounts can be trusted, several hundred of those were simply beaten to death with rifle butts or bayoneted and thrown into the Gulf to drown. Mannerheim claimed he "did not know" the unauthorized killings were going on, and that is possible. On the other hand, if you walk a few blocks downhill from his house, you can **see** the islands where they were being conducted, and a 20-minute boat ride would have taken him to the scene. It is entirely possible, too, that he didn't want to know if the worst rumors were true, because then he would have been obliged to act. In any event, a majority of those executed did receive some kind of trial, and could truthfully be defined as "ringleaders" of the insurrection, not as hapless factory-militia recruits – as one Finnish interviewee told me "Mannerheim had a very pragmatic solution: shoot the leaders and send the rank-and-file back to work, under improved conditions and with better pay. That's more or less what happened, and it drew the fangs from Communist propaganda very quickly."

.This purge marked the end of organized internal Communist subversion. And when passions cooled, the new "social-democrat" government realized that if Finland wanted permanent domestic peace, serious legislative efforts must be made to address the grievances of the farmers and factory workers. For the next twenty years, a succession of

Finnish parliaments made admirable progress in the areas of social welfare, economic development, affordable medical care, and – most remarkable of all – the achievement of universal literacy. Finnish democracy was messy and sometimes paralyzed by the internecine squabbles of numerous splinter parties, but on the whole, it **worked.** This poor, remote, backward country strained every resource, and by the late 1930s, had achieved a standard of living that compared favorably with that of any other Scandinavian nation. Budgets were always tight, however, and military spending was parsimonious at best. Finland was serious about its neutrality, and created an army just barely adequate to patrol the borders against smugglers and little more. The only possible aggressor might one day be the Soviet Union, but why would Stalin attack a country he could not fear, and why would he fear a country that could not possibly pose a military threat? And if for some reason the Russians did show signs of belligerence, well, the Finnish politicians were certain that a defensive alliance with Sweden could be arranged on short notice, and the Swedish armed forces – which were not numerically much larger than Finland's, but which were superbly equipped and trained, would add muscle to the righteousness of Finland's cause. The Swedish government shied away from a formal mutual defense pact, but informally gave the Finns many assurances that Sweden would swiftly come to the aid of its former province, should the diplomatic situation become grave enough.

No doubt, many Swedish politicians and military men believed that to be the truth. When the crisis actually came, however, Sweden did nothing to help Finland except permit Swedish volunteers to form a small brigade of infantry, and Swedish fliers to volunteer individually for Finland's air force. If Finland wanted Swedish aircraft and

Bofors guns, it would have to buy them, like any other customer, although, to be sure, at a preferred rate The Finns were stunned by what they saw as perfidious betrayal; but which the Swedish government, not without shame it must be said, saw as *realpolitik* – "If you think we're going to get into a war with the Soviet Union, you're crazy."

4. THE VIEW FROM THE KREMLIN; NEUTRALITY IS NOT ENOUGH

If, at the start of 1939, you were a Soviet strategist surveying the world from the vantage point of a map room in the Kremlin, you had good cause to feel apprehensive about the future. Nazi Germany was rearming at a frightening rate, and the "surrogate" war in Spain between Communist "volunteers" and the Fascist Condor Legion had shown how superior many of Germany's new weapons were to those of the Red Army and Air Force. New and much more advanced weapons were on the Soviet drawing boards, but most of them would not be combat-ready for two years at least.

Western anti-Communism was so fervent that Stalin could not hope to forge any alliances that might cause Hitler to scrap his not-so-secret plans for conquering the USSR. In Europe, Stalin was friendless and his brutally despotic regime had made Russia a diplomatic pariah. In the Far East, too, Japan's sweeping early victories in Manchuria had brought a huge potentially hostile Asian army within striking distance of the Trans-Siberian Railroad. Stalin was heavily reinforcing that extremity of his empire, and had assigned one of his most brilliant tacticians, General Zhukov, to prepare a hot reception for the massive Japanese offensive that seemed inevitable. Should Zhukov fail, Russia

would lose the vital port of Vladivostok, access to important sources of strategic metals, and an enormous number of potential soldiers.

But to the eye of our hypothetical Kremlin strategist, no place on the map looked more dangerous, or more vulnerable, than the Karelian Isthmus, where the Finnish border was only 32 kilometers from the outskirts of Leningrad. Not only was Leningrad a major center of strategic industry and the home base of the Baltic Fleet, it was also the cultural and spiritual heart of the Soviet state, the birthplace of the Revolution. If necessary, Stalin, like Nicolas I, could abandon and incinerate Moscow and be deprived mostly of a lot of very bad architecture, but the loss of Leningrad would be a mortal blow, a dagger through the heart of Communism itself. The psychological effect would devastate the masses' will to fight.

Finland was no doubt sincere in its proclamations of neutrality, but in the event of a war between Germany and the Soviet Union, that sincerity would be irrelevant. Hitler simply could not **allow** Finland to remain neutral. Besides, Stalin was not being paranoid when he looked for signs of pro-German sentiment in Finland. Had not Germany provided the support that made a White victory possible in 1918? Had not Finnish right-wing elements launched an attempted *coup d'etat* in 1932, citing Hitler's *putsch* as one of their inspirations? Never mind the fact that the attempted Finnish *putsch* was so ineptly led and poorly organized that it collapsed overnight, with hardly a shot being fired! Soviet intelligence agents routinely exaggerated the depth of pro-Germany feeling in the Finnish officer corps, and wildly over-estimated the extent of class antagonism in the Finnish proletariat. Stalin was especially alarmed when one of his spies gained possession of the "secret" map of "Greater Finland" promulgated by an ultra-nationalist

splinter group called the Academic Karelian Society – a map which showed the future borders of Finland redrawn almost to the foothills of the Ural Mountains!

Of course, given the horrors of the recent purges, Stalin's surviving operatives tended to tell him what they thought he wanted to hear. In reality, the "Academic Karelian Society" was a tiny, utterly powerless, collection of dreamy-eyed fanatics whose fantasies of a "Greater Finland" were considered, by most ordinary Finns, to be laughable if not deranged.

So, by the start of 1939, our hypothetical strategist would have advised Stalin that he had good reason to be concerned about two equally dire possibilities:

1) Finland already **had** a secret alliance with Nazi Germany and would simply invite the *Wehrmacht* into the country, should Hitler attack the USSR. This would place German forces within easy striking distance not only of Leningrad, but also of the critical Murmansk Railroad, the sole strategic artery by which Russia could receive supplies brought into that country's **only** ice-free European port.
2) Finland was **not** allied with Hitler, but was too weak to defend itself if Hitler seized by force whatever parts of Finnish territory he wanted to use for prosecuting his crusade against Bolshevism. Considerable intelligence data suggested that at least **some** of Finland's ranking officers would be in sympathy with German motives, which meant that even if Finland did try to resist a Nazi invasion, not all of its troops would fight with equal zeal. Some, in fact, might not fight at all.

* * *

The subsequent Russian invasion of Finland was such a monstrous act of brute aggression, that it requires considerable effort to justify it for **any** reason. But from Stalin's point of view, Finland's "neutrality" wasn't worth a plugged *kopek* unless the Finns were willing to take concrete steps to prove their good will and to ease the Kremlin's anxiety. Therefore, in the autumn of 1938, Stalin authorized his diplomats to start sending out feelers to the Finns about negotiating a new arrangement, the essence of which would be a land-swap. Finland would pull back its present border on the Karelian Isthmus and demolish the strong defensive works constructed there, and in exchange for that, Stalin would cede a much larger amount of land in Soviet East Karelia – territory which Finnish nationalists had long been clamoring for anyway – and grant Finland a very lucrative most-favored-nation status as a trading partner. If politics were run on the basis of cool logic, Finland would have taken the deal – by Stalin's standards, it was an unusually generous one.

As Stalin saw it, he was making a more-than-fair offer, and one the Finns would be fools to reject. Implicit in the negotiations was the unspoken threat that if a peaceful accommodation could not be reached, the alternative was for the Red Army to storm across the frontier and seize by force what the Finns had been unwilling to cede through peaceful diplomacy.

Astonishing as it may seem, the Soviet dictator was genuinely amazed when his "reasonable terms" were spurned by the stubborn Finns.

5. FRUITLESS NEGOTIATIONS

Vaguely worded proposals along these lines were informally circulated between Russian and Finnish diplomats during the winter of 1938 to the spring of 1939 -- nothing formal, not yet, just cocktail-party chat between low and middle-echelon functionaries; suggestive editorials in the Soviet press; back-channel "feelers" in Oslo and Stockholm. The Russians were talking hypothetically, it seemed, and they never actually made any **threats**, so the Finns didn't take these informal discussions very seriously.

After Hitler's annexation of Czechoslovakia, in March – a move which put German forces dangerously close to Russia's best agricultural land – Stalin decided that, since the Finns couldn't recognize discreet hints delivered calmly over vodka and caviar, it was time to ratchet-up the pressure and spell out for them the strategic realities as Russia perceived them. Stalin's coldly brilliant foreign minister, Maxim Molotov, drafted a sternly-worded letter to Finnish President Kyosti Kallio and his Foreign Minister,.Elias Erkko, urging the Finns to send a negotiating team to Moscow at their earliest convenience, to discuss "concrete political matters". The very ambiguity of that phrase made Erkko uneasy… as did the fact that although Molotov's letter was worded as an "invitation", its tone and language were those of a **demand**. Molotov caught the Finns flat-footed. Finnish historian Max Jacobsen superbly describes the impact of this document:

For eighteen months, Finland had conducted a muted dialogue with her giant neighbor; the Russians had, from time to time, softly asked a favor or two, and the Finns had politely whispered their refusal. Now the tone was changed; this time, there was steel in Molotov's voice.

* * *

Formal discussions began in Moscow, on October 12, 1939. Stalin opened the first session by handing out a "shopping list" of concessions he wanted from Finland, and favors he was willing to do for the Finns if they agreed. Despite two months of intense diplomatic wiggling and desperate Finnish attempts to convince themselves that Stalin would actually settle for much less than his opening "bid", the Soviet agenda remained fundamentally unchanged Stalin's **first** demands already **were** his "minimum" demands:

1) The border on the Karelian Isthmus must be moved back, westward, almost to the edge of Viipuri, a distance of between 30 and 40 kilometers;

2) Before yielding this sanitized zone, Finland must dismantle or destroy the existing fortifications on the Mannerheim Line;

3) Finland must agree to lease to the USSR, for a period of 30 years, four small islands in the Gulf of Finland – useful outposts for guarding the great naval base at Kronstadt – and the small mainland port of Hanko, where the Baltic Fleet could establish a submarine and patrol boat base to protect the seaward approaches to Leningrad. To avoid alarming the Finnish people, Stalin was prepared to limit the base's garrison to 5,000 men;

4) **In return** for these considerable favors, Stalin offered to give Finland 5,500 square miles of territory in East Karelia, north of Lake Ladoga; extremely profitable trade agreements would follow; and, if Finland requested it, the Red Army would help defend against any German invasion.

* * *

It had not escaped Finland's notice that once you "invited" the Red Army in, outright annexation **by** the Red Army sooner or later followed. Stalin had offered a similar deal to the Baltic Republics of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, and what began as mutual defense agreements, ended up with the Soviet Union simply walking in and taking control of all three countries. Agreement might be possible about those islands in the Gulf – the only Finns who lived there were some fishermen who moved in during the spring and left at the first snowfall. But the Finnish population as a whole would never accept the other Russian demands.

Field Marshal Mannerheim, who had been brought out of retirement in 1932 to serve as Chairman of the Defense Council, offered to **make** the masses understand, through a series of dramatic radio broadcasts. Stalin was **not bluffing***,* said Mannerheim. At top secret meetings (November 18 and 26) with President Kallio and Foreign Minister Erkko, Mannerheim spoke very bluntly: "You absolutely must come to a diplomatic solution! The army is in no condition to fight!"

Indeed, even as the Marshal was speaking, Finnish ordnance technicians were assembling the first Bofors anti-tank guns to arrive from Sweden. Another three months would go by before the full consignment was shipped, conditioned for winter service, and gun crews fully trained – until then, Mannerheim had only enough anti-tank guns to parcel them out at the rate of **two per regiment.** He also showed the politicians aerial photos which proved that the Russians were building roads – in at least six locations -- leading from the Murmansk Railroad to within a few kilometers of the Finnish border. Vast supply dumps were being carved out of the forest. What other purpose could this activity have, Mannerheim dryly insisted, other than to prepare the logistical foundation

for a massive invasion? Without passing on a treasonable amount of detail, moreover, sympathetic German liaison officers had apprized Mannerheim of the existence of the "secret protocols" of the recent Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact – it would be folly to hope for German aid, these *Wehrmacht* officers warned Mannerheim, for Hitler had given Stalin a free hand in the Baltic region, and just as the Fuehrer had done nothing to stop the Russian annexation of Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania, neither would he oppose the invasion of Finland with anything stronger than perfunctory diplomatic protests. "If your government does not come to terms," the German military attaché told Mannerheim, "nothing will remain of Finland but a tale of heroism."

But President Kallio was listening to other, younger, more optimistic advisors. In their concerted opinion, Stalin **was** bluffing; Mannerheim was too old and too much of a 19th-Century monarchist to understand the domestic political consequences of backing down -- the masses of ordinary citizens would never agree to give up the expensive fortifications on the Isthmus, which gave them such a comforting illusion of safety. For its part, the USSR would never risk incurring the total diplomatic and economic isolation that would be imposed by the Western Democracies as punishment for naked aggression; and – the clincher argument – Sweden would never tolerate a Soviet invasion of Finland. If Russia attacked, the Swedes would wade into the conflict with their small but very well-equipped army and the best air force in Scandinavia; the Swedish government might abhor the idea, but the Swedish electorate would not permit a "Bolshevik" puppet regime to be imposed on Finland. So the Baron's wise and dispassionate advice, based not only on hard intelligence but on his intuitive understanding of the Kremlin's mentality, was discounted, with a degree of naiveté that seems, in retrospect, quite astonishing. President

Kallio and his cabinet listened respectfully to the Field Marshal's lectures and remonstrations, but they were happy when the old Tsarist knight had spoken his piece and could be shown politely to the door --.Mannerheim had become a nag, and his open disdain for men whom he regarded as gutless mediocrities was insufferable.

Mannerheim understood full well that the bureaucrats regarded him as a relic of the Imperial era, and when he had exhausted his powers of persuasion and military logic, he made the only honorable public gesture of dissent open to him: he tendered his resignation as head of the Defense Council, and Kallio accepted it on November 27. 1939.

Three days later, Helsinki was on fire from Russian bombs, and President Kallio signed an executive order naming Gustav Mannerheim as Commander-in-Chief of all Finnish armed forces.

6. ORDER OF BATTLE, THE RUSSIAN SIDE

Western historians – and particularly wargamers! – are conditioned to equate the words "Red Army" with images derived from the newsreels of that army's post-Stalingrad campaigns: tidal waves of tanks, inexhaustible masses of infantry, artillery tubes beyond counting, squadrons of Sturmoviks darkening the sky…an army inured to hardships and indifferent to casualty rates no other Allied force could have endured; the army that, in Churchill's memorable phrase, "tore the guts out of the *Wehrmacht*."

That was the Red Army of 1942-1945. But in the autumn of 1939, the Red Army was an unknown quantity and the quality of its performance in Finland would be carefully scrutinized by military observers on both the Axis and the Allied sides. On

paper, the Red Army looked like a mechanized juggernaut, capable of fielding five times as many tanks as all other European armies combined. Stalin's artillery power was unsurpassed – the Red Army could mobilize as many cannon as **both** sides had fielded in 1918.

But none of its commanders, from Stalin on down, really knew how this gigantic instrument of power would comport itself on the battlefield. The USSR's emphasis on mechanization showed how closely the Kremlin had followed the evolving doctrine of *Blitzkrieg* , but Stalin willfully ignored the Germans' emphasis on flexibility and local initiative. Red Army commanders who displayed the kind of drive and imagination that characterized Rommel and von Manstein, to name two masters of the *Blitzkrieg* technique, were more likely to earn a one-way ticket to the Siberian gulag than to be promoted for displaying professional distinction. During the horrific purges of the Thirties, perhaps as much as sixty per cent of the Red Army's most experienced field commanders were liquidated and replaced, more often than not, by servile Party hacks. Leadership beyond the NCO level, therefore, tended to be brittle and simplistic. Every field commander from battalion to corps level was burdened with a political commissar who had to counter-sign and approve, from the viewpoint of rigid Marxist orthodoxy, every significant tactical order. Whether the commissar was a nincompoop or a trained officer was almost irrelevant – he had the power to make or break the career of any officer with whom he was partnered on the battlefield.

Hence the Red Army's otherwise inexplicable, horribly wasteful, and tactically brain-dead reliance on repeated massed frontal assaults against the Mannerheim Line – officers who had the ruthlessness to throw away whole battalions by relying on such

primitive and inflexible plans were merely displaying the "politically correct" concept of waging war. In the armies of the Western democracies, such pointless butchery – evoking ghastly memories of the slaughter at Verdun, Passendaele and the Somme – was no longer tolerable and any commander who displayed such indifference to his soldiers' lives would have been sacked for it. In the Red Army of 1939, he was more likely to get a pat on the back from his political "advisor", along with a hearty "Keep up the good work, Comrade!" from Moscow.

Overall command of the Finnish campaign was given to General K. A. Meretskov, commandant of the Leningrad Military District. Diligent, if uninspired, the forty-two-year-old Meretskov had narrowly avoided arrest and probable liquidation during the purges, thanks in large part to the boot-licking deference he displayed toward Andrei Zhdanov, the **political** boss of the Leningrad District. By recommending Meretskov to command the invasion of Finland, Zhdanov was rewarding a lackey; he was also setting up a patsy in case the operation did not go a smoothly as Stalin expected it to.

Khrushchev and other contemporary observers suggest that Meretszkov had a far more realistic idea of the Finns' capacity to resist than did either Stalin or Zhdanov, but he was on a tight leash and was more or less compelled to devise the simplest, most rigidly orthodox campaign plan imaginable – and then to implement it with such overwhelmingly superior forces that it could hardly fail to bring a victory. What Stalin wanted was a quick, massive, set-piece attack that would demonstrate to the outside world how invincible his armed forces had become – as long as Merestkov's plans yielded a swift and crushing victory, Stalin was quite indifferent as to the number of casualties.

Meretskov's plan – to describe it as a "strategy" would be ascribing more sophistication than it deserves – called for simply overwhelming (or "over-awing") the Finns by penetrating their border at every location along its 1500-kilometer length where there was room to deploy a division or two. The points of attack did not correspond to any strategic objectives – in fact, the lack of discernable Russian objectives, the sheer irrationality of trying to funnel powerful mechanized columns westward along one-lane logging roads that were barely passable by reindeer-sleds – took the Finns entirely by surprise and created a lot of short-lived confusion. Mannerheim's staff wasted many hours pouring over their maps of the central forests, trying to figure out **why** the Russians had chosen to attack in this location or that, before reaching the conclusion that their perplexity was, in fact, the very reason why Meretskov had launched these multiple thrusts into wilderness areas so remote from Finland's centers of population and industry that the closest thing to a "strategic objective" might be a sawmill or a hunting lodge.

At the start of hostilities, Russian forces were deployed as follows:

SEVENTH ARMY: On the Karelian Isthmus, comprising twelve (later increased to at least fourteen) infantry divisions augmented by five tank brigades. Objective: to break through the Mannerheim Line, capture Viipuri, then sweep west and seize Helsinki. Logistical preparations and ammunition stocks were ample to sustain very intense combat for 16-18 days; but the campaign as a whole was expected to last no more than two weeks.

EIGHTH ARMY: On the border north of Lake Ladoga; six (later increased to nine) rifle divisions and two tank brigades. Objective: to outflank the Mannerheim Line and threaten the Isthmus defenses from behind, by breaking through the relatively thin line of Finnish fortifications extending north from the lake for a distance of approximately 62 miles. Once the Eighth Army had punched through this crust of resistance, its advance would be expedited by a fairly well developed road and rail network on the western coastline of Lake Ladoga.

NINTH ARMY: Attacking on a broad front, five infantry divisions, each accompanied by strong regimental-sized packets of armor and mechanized transport, were assigned the nearly impossible task of cutting Finland in half at its narrow "waist" and seizing the port of Oulu (on the Gulf of Bothnia, and Finland's most important link to Sweden) and the communications hub of Rovaniemi, the "Capital of Lapland". Even to approach within striking distance of these objectives, however, the Ninth Army's widely separated columns would first have to pass through 60-100 miles of incredibly dense, virtually roadless forests.

FOURTEENTH ARMY: Three mediocre rifle divisions, beefed-up with extra artillery and perhaps 200 tanks; based on Murmansk, this army's objectives were quite limited: to seal off Finland's only Arctic port, Petsamo, to prevent any outside help from reaching the country by sea, and to gain control of Finland's only significant source of strategic metals, a cluster of nickel mines on the Rybachi (Fishermens') Peninsula. If possible, the Fourteenth Army was to advance as far as Rovaniemi from the north, but the

lunar desolation of the treeless, ice-bound fells, and the difficulty of supplying any force once it moved more than fifty miles beyond the Russian border made this feasible only if the Finns lacked the resources to mount anything stronger than a token defense.

To support his ground offensives, Meretskov allocated more than 2,000 pieces of artillery and approximately 1500 aircraft, about one-third of them assigned the role of strategic bombing – more than enough bombers, theoretically, to obliterate *every* "strategic target" in Finland.

7. ORDER OF BATTLE, THE FINNISH SIDE

The key to capturing or defending Finland was the narrow Karelian Isthmus, and, secondarily, the northern coast of Lake Ladoga. The Finns were initially surprised and thrown quite off-balance by the size of the columns committed to attacking through the central forests and in the far north. The terrain in these regions was more primitive than words, maps, or pictures can adequately convey. There were very few roads, none paved, and none wider than single-lane wagon tracks, widely separated by vast tracts of forest that could only be traversed by well-trained men on skis. In mid-winter, when the snows piled up deeper than a standing man, infantry on foot could scarcely stagger forward more than a hundred yards before becoming exhausted. There was no shelter at all, except for isolated farms and tiny logging hamlets.

No matter how strong they might be, once the invading columns were committed to these regions, they were hopelessly confined to a handful of narrow roads, their tanks

and trucks strung out in long, slow, columns, hemmed in by dense forests which made it impossible for ski-less infantry to maintain any kind of flank security. Moving swiftly, silently, and invisible in their snow-capes, the well-trained Finnish ski troopers had all the advantages of mobility, while the ponderous Soviet mechanized columns could do nothing but creep westward at a snail's pace. Over and over again, demolitions, minefields, and ambushes mounted by a small Finnish detachments brought entire Russian divisions to a halt for hours – until the Russians slowly brought sufficient firepower to bear, by which time the Finns had packed up and moved on, perhaps already launching swift, stinging, raids against targets several miles behind the foremost enemy units.

Mannerheim and his staff had devised a strategy that was predicated on harsh reality. Obviously, Russia was the only nation they had any reason to fear, and that country's military strength was so overwhelmingly superior that it would have been sheer fantasy to think that Finland could fend off the Red Army indefinitely. Finland's only hope of survival was, ultimately, the conscience of the Western Democracies. Finland was an outpost of every value the democracies held sacred; surely, the reasoning went, those friendly nations would not permit a small, neutral, freedom-loving fellow-democracy to vanish from the map and be turned, by brute force, into a Communist satellite. Finland's strategy, therefore, was simple: to hold out long enough for the outside world to come to its rescue.

Finland did not have a big enough population to maintain a large standing army. Nor did it have the economic resources to multiply the effectiveness of its manpower by fielding a large number of artillery pieces, tanks, and aircraft. The Finnish Army would

simply have to learn to fight without the kind of heavy support taken for granted by the armies of larger, more prosperous, European nations. During the years between 1918 and 1939, Finnish training and tactics epitomized the notion of "lean and mean", and the only real "force multiplier" the Finns could count on, was the very ruggedness of the land itself.

Infantry training was therefore stripped to its essentials. Officers and men worked together to develop tactics and training methods that were specifically tailored to the nature of both the Finnish landscape and the Finnish national character. The forest itself dictated a strong emphasis on individual initiative and small-unit operations, a sort of "quasi-guerrilla" style of fighting. Marksmanship, physical conditioning, mental agility, orienteering, camouflage – these were the foremost soldierly skills drilled into Finland's trainees. Unconventional tactics – ambushes, long-range patrols and raids, sniping, deception and the fine art of booby-trapping – these were emphasized over the more sophisticated divisional and brigade-scale maneuvers studied in the military academies of France and Great Britain. The Finns might fight defensively as coherent divisions, but it was realistic to assume that they would rarely, if ever, have the time, resources, or opportunity to maneuver or counter-attack on any scale larger than the regimental.

The artillery branch invested most of its share of the meager military budgets in mortars and howitzers – the kind of light, high-angle weapons best suited to the terrain; gunnery experts developed new techniques to compensate for the limitations the forest imposed on range-finding and observation. Every part of Finland that might eventually become a target for Finnish batteries was meticulously mapped and ranged, down to the square meter, from every probable firing location. And when the shooting started, the

precision and economy of their fire-control techniques gave the ammunition-starved Finnish artillerists a decided qualitative edge over their more numerous and lavishly supplied Russian counterparts.

Finland was not, and never could become, a rich nation – and its successive parliaments, quite rightly, preferred to invest more heavily in education, industry, and infrastructure, than in military might. The officers grumbled about their parsimonious budgets, but they learned to obtain the maximum benefit from their very limited resources – it would be agreeable to have some tanks and more heavy guns, of course, but as long as they were fighting the Russians in the dense forests or from behind the fortifications on the Isthmus, they figured their men would give a good account of themselves.

By 1939, then, the Finnish army, man for man, was one of the toughest, best-led, and most tactically flexible armies in the world. Despite the scarcity of modern equipment, the men were confident of their soldierly prowess, passionately believed in their cause, and to a remarkable extent had learned to trust their officers. Besides, the accepted wisdom of Finland's best strategists – including Marshal Mannerheim – was that the Russians could not deploy more than seven divisions on the Karelian Isthmus, and had no earthly reason to deploy more than five along the whole thousand-kilometer-long border north of Lake Ladoga. With full mobilization, Finland could deploy ten 14,000-man divisions. Given the strength of the Mannerheim Line fortifications, the Russians would need more than the conventional three-to-one superiority in order to breach the Isthmus defenses. If the Finns massed six divisions in that sector, and two more covering the front north of Lake Ladoga, the bare numerical odds didn't seem so

daunting – at least, not at the start of hostilities. Eventually, of course, attrition would take a toll – but by that time, the Allies would have dispatched a relief force. Wouldn't they?

When the "balloon went up", however, the Russians deployed **twelve** divisions north of Ladoga, not five; and thirteen on the Isthmus, not seven. From the first day of battle, therefore, Mannerheim was stretched dangerously thin. Even worse: the British and French were now fighting for their lives, too, and however much their people might **like** to aid "brave little Finland," their leaders were unable to threaten Stalin with anything more dangerous than pious oratory (plus the feeble symbolic gesture of expelling the Soviet Union from the already-moribund League of Nations – the last formal act taken by that failed organization, other than that of its own dissolution!).

When hostilities began on November 31, Manneheim's army was deployed thusly:

THE ARMY OF THE KARELIAN ISTHMUS: Six divisions, under the overall command of General Hugo Viktor Ostermann, The right wing comprised Second Corps (the Fourth, Fifth, and Eleventh Divisions, commanded by General Harold Ohquist); the left wing, Third Corps, consisted of the Ninth and Tenth Divisions, commanded by General Erik Heinrichs. The Sixth Division was held in reserve, industriously strengthening the "Intermediate Line" and the "Final Line", two fall-back positions the Finns could retreat to when and if the Mannerheim Line itself was broken. Now that there was so little hope of outside help, the issue was more clearly "when" than "if", and neither of these two positions consisted of much more than rudimentary earthworks.

FOURTH CORPS: Two divisions, blocking the roads and trails north of Lake Ladoga, in a moderately strong fortified line, shaped like a concave crescent, under the energetic command of Major General Woldemar Hagglund. Excellent troops, these, but the frontage, sixty miles, meant that their line had more than a few weak points. When the Russians attacked, they exploited these with considerable skill.

NORTH FINLAND GROUP: From the town of Ilomantsi, where this sector tied in with Fourth Corps' left flank, this sector extended 625 miles to the Arctic Ocean. Since Mannerheim expected the Russians to deploy only minor, diversionary formations in the wilderness regions, there was no coherent Finnish front, as such. Border Guard and local reservist detachments screened the few usable roads, nowhere stronger than a battalion at the beginning. In overall command of this motley assortment was Major General W. E. Tuompo.

IN RESERVE: Mannerheim had but a single division as a general strategic reserve, the Ninth, headquartered at Oulu. It had not received more than 60 per cent of its arms and equipment before he was forced to start committing it, as one crisis after another flared up in the forests north of Fourth Corps.

8. EARLY SKIRMISHES

Having made up his mind to chastise the Finns for their intransigence, Stalin ordered his internal security forces – the dreaded NKVD – to concoct some kind of

"incident" that would enable him to assert that his invasion was a justified response to Finnish aggression. It was most unlikely that **any** such fabrication would have convinced the non-Communist world that Finland's 3.5 million inhabitants were wantonly provoking their gigantic neighbor, but that was almost irrelevant. However transparently bogus the cover story might be, diplomatic custom and internal propaganda needs required that there be one.

The resulting "border incident" was dreamed up and stage-managed by a brutal and cretinous NKVD general named Kulik (whom Stalin would have executed later for his abysmal incompetence during the first two weeks of the war with Germany). Even by the crude standards of Stalinist propaganda, Kulik's scheme was remarkably heavy-handed and transparently phony.

On November 26, seven artillery rounds detonated near the tiny Karelian village of Mainila, 800 meters inside Soviet territory. Several Finnish observers witnessed and triangulated the shell bursts; all concluded that the trajectory indicated they were fired from **within** Russian territory.

Later that afternoon, the Finnish government received a furious note of protest from Molotov. Four Red Army border guards had been killed, he claimed, in this reckless act of provocation; if Finland did not cease such aggressive acts at once, there would be dire consequences. From Helsinki, Foreign Minister Elias Erkko indignantly wired back that if Russian troops had been killed, it was not by Finnish shells. Indeed, it was **impossible**, because all Finnish artillery had been pulled back beyond range of Soviet territory days before, precisely to avoid even an accidental shot from crossing the border.

Molotov did not deign to reply; the cover story was on record, now, and Radio Moscow was filling the air waves with outraged indignation. These broadcasts continued for two days, claiming that numerous unspecified border violations were continuing. How long could the peace-loving Soviet people be expected to tolerate these outrages without taking steps in their own "self-defense"?

* * *

The answer came at 9:20 AM, November 30, a lone Russian aircraft suddenly zoomed low over Helsinki, dropping thousands of leaflets which urged the oppressed Finnish working class to rise up against their capitalistic government – their hour of liberation would soon come! When a true Socialist regime was established in Finland, the leaflets promised, the Finnish proletariat would gain new rights and freedoms, such as a guaranteed forty-hour work-week!

The leaflets' text had obviously been cobbled together hurriedly by some of the exiled Finnish Reds who had been biding their time since 1918, and it was clear to the citizens who read them that these almost-forgotten revolutionaries hadn't done a very good job of keeping up with the times: the 40-hour week had been passed into law more than twenty years earlier!

One hour after the leaflets rained down, nine SB-2 medium bombers, flying from newly built bases in Estonia, split into three-plane groups and dropped 12,000 lbs of bombs on various sections of the city, then sped away unharmed as the first, belated, bursts of Finnish anti-aircraft fire began dotting the sky. A second, larger, raid followed at 2:30 PM. Although Parliament, the central railroad station, and the main cargo facilities in the harbor were targeted, none of those targets was hit. Damage to stores and

apartment buildings, on the other hand, was severe and more than 200 civilians were killed.

As soon as he heard the sirens begin to wail, Gustav Mannerheim calmly put down the book he was reading, polished off the brandy he had been drinking, and donned his best uniform. He was driven through the chaotic streets, his car frequently detouring past piles of burning rubble, to the underground bomb shelter beneath the Parliament Building, where he sought out a somewhat dazed President Kallio and retracted his earlier resignation. Kallio shook hands with the Marshal and activated his commission on the spot as Commander in Chief of the Finnish armed forces.

Mannerheim then traveled to his already activated wartime headquarters, an inconspicuous cluster of rural buildings in the picturesque village of Mikkeli, a location he had chosen because it lay equidistant between the Isthmus and the sector defended by his Fourth Corps, on the north coast of Lake Ladoga. By the time he arrived, the place was a bee-hive, and for the next twenty-four hours, Mannerheim's staff were overwhelmed by a flood of reports, often fragmentary and panic-stricken in tone, filled with equal parts of fact, rumor, and exaggeration. Not until the afternoon of December 2 was the Baron able to form a clear, accurate picture of the military situation. When his staff was finally able to update the markings on their big wall-maps with reasonable accuracy, Mannerheim's brow grew deeply furrowed. A startling number of red arrows had pierced the border.

Not only had the enemy deployed far more divisions against the Isthmus and the North Ladoga fronts than Mannerheim had thought possible, but the Russians had also invaded at **seven** other widely-separated points farther north, sending powerful columns

into areas so remote from any logical strategic objectives that the only possible rationale for those attacks was simply to overwhelm the defenders with more threats than they had the resources to counter. Yet Mannerheim knew that, somehow, he **had** to improvise ways to halt **all** of those incursions. Even without serious opposition, it would take most of those Russian columns several days to crawl through the rugged terrain and reach open ground…but if they **did**, there would be a dozen powerful mechanized Soviet divisions half-way to the Swedish border, well-positioned to cut Finland's internal communications to pieces.

The old knight showed no sign of panic, studied the available list of uncommitted reserve companies, border guard platoons, and detachments of Civic Guard militia. The latter consisted mostly of forestry workers, fishermen, and farmers – many in their late thirties and early forties – who underwent two weeks of refresher training (during those years when the military budget would permit it), and whose remote assembly depots were short of uniforms, supplies, ammunition, and radios. Mannerheim must have wondered how those Civic Guard outfits would perform; he initially had little faith in their ability to stand up to Red Army regulars, or to mesh well with the younger, more disciplined Finnish detachments with whom they would soon be operating.

In reality, the militia units were good raw material; the men were strong and well inured to cold and primitive living conditions; they would be serving under officers who were also their neighbors and peacetime friends; they all reported for duty with rifles and full bandoliers of bullets; and most importantly, they would be fighting literally to defend their very homes.

As the very latest intelligence reports were collated, Mannerheim began to prioritize the approaching threats and to send out orders creating ad-hoc battle-groups built around whatever small active-duty forces were closest to the more critical points. By dribs and drabs, he would do everything in his power to reinforce these patchwork *Kampffgruppen* with mortars, machine guns, and a few pieces of obsolete artillery, but for the time being, these motley formations must confront and delay the powerful foe with nothing but small arms, hand grenades, and the deep national reservoir of *sisu* – a uniquely Finnish word that means something more than just "guts". It denotes instead a very macho amalgam of courage, stubbornness, and backwoods' ferocity.

Some of these improvised task forces were in motion by midnight, December 1; the remainder would be in action, often against Russian forces ten times stronger, by midnight, December 2. If they succeeded in checking the invader's progress – skirmishing and bushwhacking, then falling back to the next delaying position – until they could be bolstered by the penny-packets of reinforcements being sent to help them, then Mannerheim would be able to confront those unexpectedly dangerous Russian penetrations with a coherent defense. If they broke, or were overrun fighting to the last man, central and sub-arctic Finland was as good as lost.

As later, more reliable, reports were updated on his situation map, Mannerheim saw a very grim situation developing, all the way from Petsamo in the far north down to the rocky coast of the Gulf of Finland:

- At the top of the map, mounting a cross-border attack supported by heavy-caliber coast-defense batteries shielding the approaches to Murmansk,

combined with an amphibious landing backed by a sizable naval flotilla, the Russian Fourteenth Army had made quick work out of seizing the port of Petsamo – but not before the small Finnish garrison stationed there had demolished any facilities that might have helped the invaders to off-load supplies and equipment from their transports. Also torched were all the homes and commercial buildings that might have afforded some shelter against the brutal cold already gripping this region.

After withdrawing, the small Finnish garrison took up prepared delaying positions in the steep, craggy hills south of Petsamo – the last "high ground", in fact, before the one and only road leading to and from the port descended into the barren, treeless tundra of Lapland proper. The first Soviet patrols were met with scattered but accurate small-arms fire. For the past twelve hours, the landing force in smoldering Petsamo had showed no inclination to launch a real attack, but was apparently waiting for a much larger Russian force to close in from the east, where a handful of Finnish border guards and armed customs police were using their ski-mobility to frustrate the advance of two entire divisions.

Eventually, of course, both arms of the Russian offensive would link up, and all of those Finnish rearguard detachments would have to retreat, hoping to make another stand at the tiny village of Nautsi. But for the moment, their commander reported, morale was high, the Russians had suffered at least one hundred dead in the skirmishing in and around Petsamo, and none of his

soldiers seemed unduly bothered by the fact that they were outnumbered approximately forty-five to one.

- One-hundred-seventy-five miles to the south was Mannerheim's next area of concern, From a well-stocked supply base at Kandalaksha, on the westernmost arm of the White Sea, two divisions of the Soviet Ninth Army were already reported to be about half-way between the frontier and the small Lapp village of Salla. But they were entering some of the most rugged terrain in north-central Finland, and their thin, unwieldy column had been halted numerous times by pin-prick ambushes to the head and flanks, boldly executed by small Border Guard patrols. As the local Finns had feared, however, enemy aerial reconnaissance had spotted a primitive secondary logging track a couple of miles north of the invaders' route and parallel to it. A regiment, possibly two, had back-tracked to the frontier and re-crossed it on a bearing that would bring them to this parallel track. There was no way the Border Guard platoons could effectively delay a two-pronged Russian advance, and Mannerheim did not ask them to try.

  He gave their leader permission to fall back on Salla and dig in there before the Russians could coordinate their two columns. Roadblocks of felled trees would slow down the column on the northern trail, and some of the stout log buildings there could be turned into strong points. The Border Guards' commander thought his forces might be able to halt the Russians east of Salla for twenty-four hours, but if he did not pull back when the Russians brought

their artillery into play, his small command might be destroyed. The Baron sensed no panic in this appraisal, so he left the tactical decisions to the man on the spot, telling him: *Hold out as long as you can, but retreat before you are surrounded. Help is on the way!*

In point of fact, Mannerheim had already written-off Salla – he simply could not move enough men that far into the wilderness in time to build up a strong roadblock there. And, besides, Salla was not the focus of his worries. After the Russians had regrouped and rested there, he expected them to resume their advance in the direction of Tolvajarvi, the northernmost railroad stop in Finland. If those two divisions captured Tolvajarvi, they would be within striking distance of Rovaniemi, the next stop on that rail line. Rovaniemi was the industrial and administrative capital of Lapland; it even boasted a primitive airstrip, which the enemy could use to reinforce and resupply. Moreover, the dense forest behind the border thinned-out into open rolling tundra between Rovaniemi and Tolvajarvi, The same mechanized forces that had slowed down the invader's initial advance, would then have room to maneuver. If supplies, petrol, and ammunition were brought in via the airfield, and the local Russian commander had an ounce of initiative, the invaders might well be able to sustain an advance all the way down that railroad line to the port of Tornio, a vital land, rail, and sea link to Sweden.

With Tornio in Russian hands, and a secure supply line all the way back to Kandalaksha, the whole Lapland district would, in effect, be lopped off from the rest of Finland. Psychologically, if nothing else, this would be a major

blow. There was good defensive ground, however, around Tolvajarvi. Somehow, Mannerheim had to scrape up enough reserves to establish a strong defensive line at that point. If the enemy drive could not be halted there, and the Russians reached the more open terrain beyond, where they could bring their mechanized units into play, they would gain such advantage that Mannerheim could lose one-third of his nation.

- But as worrisome as the situation was before Salla, the prospects were even grimmer a hundred miles further south, at the center of the Russian Ninth Army's zone of operations. Mannerheim had never expected the enemy to deploy two divisions at that point along the border; the forest there was incredibly dense and the only town on the map was Suomussalmi, a center of the logging and wood-pulp industry. The place was hardly a major economic asset – Finland had a dozen such towns scattered around the county's narrow, heavily forested "waist" – but Suomusssalmi **was** a well-known bastion of Socialist politics and trade-union agitation. If there was one place in central Finland where the invaders might possibly find aid and support from pro-Communist elements, it was there. The town had been a major rallying-point of Red Guard activity during the Civil War, and the contemporary Socialist Party drew a large part of its support from trade union organizers in that region. It was anyone's guess whether the Socialist workers would now **fight** the Red Army…or **collaborate** with it.

Even if the Russians found no active supporters at Suomussalmi, capturing the town would give them access to a well-developed road network Intelligence reported that the two Russian divisions struggling toward that objective were top-heavy with trucks and prime movers, which might be carrying road-building equipment as well as towing field guns. Unopposed, the enemy could swiftly improve the roads leading back into Russia, pour in heavy reinforcements, and use the road nexus at Suomussalmi to facilitate a mechanized advance across Finland's narrowest part, toward the critical port of Oulu, where there were docking and unloading facilities capable of handling much larger cargo vessels than could be accommodated at Tornio.

If Oulu fell into Russian hands, Finland would effectively be cut in half, and the logistical problems of receiving Swedish aid would become almost insurmountable. That absolutely could not be allowed to happen! But, at the moment, Mannerheim believed the threat to Suomussalmi was not yet urgent. Even to reach the outskirts of that town, the enemy would have to drag two ponderous mechanized divisions through a metaphorical needle's eye: a pair of narrow, ice-glazed tracks that were utterly unsuited for tanks and other heavy vehicles. His intelligence concerning those two divisions was timely and detailed. Since crossing the frontier, they had been moving at the rate of two or three miles a day, no more. Even unopposed, it would take them about a week to reach Suomussalmi. For the moment, Mannerheim could afford just to keep a close eye on that front – if and when it became necessary to send

substantial forces up there, he could do so fairly rapidly, utilizing the very same road system he must deny to the enemy.

- The next two incursions (if one continued to study the map from north to south), involved the Red Army's 54th Division, advancing from the extreme left side of Ninth Army's frontage. Its apparent objective was the village of Kuhmo and its strength was estimated at 13,000 men, supported by 35 tanks and approximately 120 guns. The road was poor, walled-in by dense forest, and the division's advance was characterized by extreme caution. Just as well, Mannerheim probably thought, for the only force opposing it was a rag-tag assortment of Border Guard patrols and local, past-their-prime Civic Guard militia.

  Somewhat better odds obtained on the next threatened sector, some 100 kilometers south-east of the Kuhmo front, along the road to Ilomansti (a Finnish air base) and Joensuu, where the administrative and supply facilities were located for the regional Civic Guard. Finnish intelligence analysts had no idea why the Soviet 155th Division – presumably tasked with capturing those two objectives – was so relatively weak (7500 men, augmented by a mere dozen tanks and about 40 pieces of artillery). Mannerheim even toyed briefly with the notion of a counterattack, for that enemy thrust was being vigorously resisted by two battalions of Finnish regulars, and their morale seemed high. "Send us some artillery, and we'll cut them up", was the gist of the local

Finnish commander's reports (at present, he was supported only by four obsolete field guns and some light mortars). The Baron would have liked nothing better, but for the moment those battalions would have to hold with what they had. Mannerheim had no spare cannon anywhere closer than a warehouse in Tampere, where his ordnance teams were frantically trying to recondition some rusty old French '75s and a dozen or so Tsarist-era antiques that had literally been pressed into active duty from town museums and public parks. For the time being, the men defending the Ilomantsi/ Joensuu sector would have to fight without even those museum pieces.

- Starting at a point some forty km. south-east of the 155th Division, the map was so thick with menacing red arrows that even an untrained civilian – had such a person walked in while Mannerheim was making his survey – would have seen instantly that the stretch of land between Tolvajarvi and Lake Ladoga was the focus of the Field Marshal's greatest anxiety.

  In a massive effort to sweep around Ladoga's western shore and strike the Isthmus defenses from behind, General Meretskov had deployed six first-rate divisions, supported by two armored brigades, in a region where Mannerheim had predicted the employment of only two divisions. Like the spokes of a wheel, these divisions were concentrating on major intersections, railheads, and terrain features, the possession of which would in effect, "unlock the back door" to the Karelian Isthmus.

Against the strategic and vulnerable road nexus at Tolvajarvi, the enemy was moving an estimated 35,000 men, 60 – 70 tanks, and approximately 200 guns. To stop this crushing force, Mannerheim currently mustered 4,000 infantry and three batteries of field artillery, one of them equipped with ex-Tsarist guns that had been cast at the Tula Arms Works in 1886!

Against the fixed fortifications closer to Ladoga itself, at least three and possibly four divisions had been identified…so far. As to the number of tanks and gun batteries the Russians were committing in "Ladoga-Karelia" (as the Finns called this whole region) Finnish intelligence wasn't yet able to hazard even a guess. On the strongly fortified rocky islets out in the half-frozen lake itself, observation teams were so suppressed by shellfire and air attacks that they could only come out for quick glimpses at rare intervals of lull; and every time they did, they saw additional enemy tanks, prime movers, and towed batteries grinding steadily across the frontier. Mannerheim's commander on the scene, General Woldemar Hagglund, was reacting with admirable steadiness; he reiterated his belief that, once the enemy was fixed in place by running into IVth Corps' fortified line, the Russians would be wide-open for a counterattack against their right flank. That plan had been war-gamed extensively and it had seemed a promising maneuver – but in the wargames the enemy was presumed to be attacking with two divisions, and already Hagglund was facing an offensive three times larger than any he'd expected to face. Mannerheim decided that, despite the seriousness of the threat and the unexpected size of the Russian incursion, that well-rehearsed plan still offered

the best hope for stabilizing the situation on the northern shore of Lake Ladoga -- **if** significant reinforcements could reach Hagglund in time to beef-up his contemplated counter-attack., and **if** the Russians didn't break through Hagglund's fortifications.

* * *

Now the Baron turned his attention to the most vital sector of all: the Isthmus. There, at least, despite the unexpected scale of the Soviet commitment, the invader had not, as of the evening of December 2, made any significant breakthrough. In fact, despite the wholesale mechanization of their Isthmus attack force, the Russians were advancing very slowly and very cautiously.

The many lakes and bogs on the Isthmus were still only skimmed with ice, so the Soviet advance was perforce channeled through the corridors of rocky, wooded terrain between those obstacles. All civilians inhabitants had been evacuated from the Isthmus weeks ago, but not all of the hamlets and farms had been burned to deny the invaders shelter. Although the pattern of "scorched earth" demolitions appeared to be random, it was actually very calculated. The invaders' most advanced detachments were actually, and pleasantly, surprised to find that only about half of the dwellings and farm buildings they encountered had been burned. Naturally, the first ranking Red officers who came upon these intact structures promptly commandeered them for their headquarters.

Which was exactly what the Finns had hoped they would do. The weather cooperated: beginning on the afternoon of December 1 and continuing through the next day, temperature plunged, and the Isthmus was raked by high winds and periodic heavy

snow-squalls, which both hampered the overall Russian advance and had the desired effect of driving men into the nearest shelter available.

By the evening of December 2, even the coldest Russian soldiers had become wary of moving indoors. The first ones to do so had been torn-apart by booby traps hidden under floorboards, inside cupboards, under outhouses, in lamp fixtures, and buried beneath warm-looking haystacks. Wells had been filled with animal dung or the decomposed corpses of dead livestock. (3)

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(3) The Russians claimed extensive use was made of poison; I've been unable to verify that, but many Russian prisoners firmly believed it. Under conditions such as those of early December, the very **rumor** of poison was almost as effective as its actual use would have been. I tend to give more credence to the half-legendary stories about "The Firebug", an intrepid Finnish ski-trooper (or more likely a detachment of several) who sneaked back at night and ignited, with flares, incendiary grenades, or tracer-bursts, a number of barns and haylofts that had been pre-rigged with a mix of explosives and flammable accelerants, and were now crammed with sleeping Russians soldiers.

The cumulative effect of all these traps and hazards was what the defenders had hoped it would be: the forward Russian units got very little comfort from abandoned dwellings and stables. By the night of December 2, the rumor mill had spread the news: the buildings are death-traps. What percentage of them actually **were**, is conjectural, but the majority of Soviet GIs preferred not to take a chance. They spent the long, freezing

hours of darkness bunching around huge bonfires – which, of course, made them perfect targets for the ubiquitous Finnish snipers that had already picked off dozens of men before the invasion was two hours old.

From the moment they crossed the frontier until the last Finnish covering troops pulled back behind the Mannerheim Line, the Soviet columns were harassed and delayed by snipers who were seemingly all around them: under hollowed-out snowdrifts, in camouflaged outcroppings of snow-covered granite, and high above the invading columns, secured to treetops by quick-release harnesses. Warmly dressed, patient and stoic, these marksmen bided their time until a priority target filled the sights of their reliable Mosin sniper rifles: an officer, a tank commander popping out of his turret in hopes of spying a clear path through the murky undergrowth ahead, truck drivers towing field guns, a radio operator trying to rig an antenna – these were the targets of choice. Individual sharpshooters were augmented by three-man teams equipped with Lahti automatic rifles, or machine gun squads whose heavy Maxim guns were sled-mounted for a quick get-away.

Hundreds of Russians died from repeated lightning-quick ambushes during the first forty-eight hours of the invasion, but by the time enemy patrols could sweep forward to the presumed locations of these assassins, the Finnish delaying teams were long gone. In fact, very few Red Army men even **saw** a Finnish bushwhacker – unless it was a swift blur of white-on-white as their tormentors ski-ed away to their next prepared position. So expertly had the Finns mastered winter camouflage that many Soviet patrols struggled through the snow and underbrush less than thirty meters from reconnaissance parties who

were industriously gathering information about their numbers, movements, and tactical habits.

If the Finns presented elusive, fleeting, targets – when they could be seen at all – the invaders might as well have been wearing illuminated bulls-eyes, even in the midst of a swirling snow-storm. As incredible as it may seem, the men and vehicles of the Red Army poured across the border clad in uniforms of khaki or dark brown, and riding in vehicles similarly painted, making them starkly visible even at long ranges. Of all the early blunders committed by Stalin's legions, this one takes the proverbial cake. Not until late January, in fact, did adequate shipments of snow-capes, fur-lined boots, and skis, reach the Red Army's frontline units.

* * *

By the time Marshal Mannerheim had finished his exhaustive assessment of the overall situation on the evening of December 2, he was still most seriously concerned about several of the "surprise" Russian attacks in Ladoga-Karelia and in the far-off central wilderness, but he was satisfied that the primary danger – a swift enemy breakthrough on the Isthmus – had not materialized, and was not likely to do so for quite some time. The gigantic Soviet offensive there had nowhere advanced farther than five and a half kilometers from its starting points, and the narrow strip of Isthmus land the invaders had captured had turned into one enormous, chaotic traffic jam. Darkness and ambushcades alone had not stalled the enemy's progress; every practicable road and trail was now obstructed by wrecked or mine-damaged vehicles; so many platoon and company commanders had been killed or wounded that thousands of Red infantry were

leaderless and disarrayed, milling about, waiting for someone of the proper rank to give them orders.

Just to the rear of the front line, powerful armored formations were poised, waiting to grind westward, but quite immobilized, bumper to bumper, by the wrecks, demolished culverts, and the stubborn refusal of the lakes and bogs to freeze solid enough to bear their weight. Like Mannerheim, Stalin too was reading reports from the front, at his forward headquarters in Leningrad, and he was furious. He had set in motion a tidal-wave attack, including many times the number of armored vehicles the Germans had used in their Polish campaign, and after two days – during which his legions had not fought a single pitched battle with any Finnish unit larger than a platoon – all he had to show for it was a monstrous foul-up inside a strip of Finnish land about five kilometers deep.

Stung by angry orders, the commissars worked feverishly through the night of December2-3 to clear the roads, regroup disorganized units, and re-ignite the spirit of ideological zeal – at gunpoint if necessary. New officers went forward to assume command of strange units, and their men were under no illusions by the time the commissars finished haranguing them: tomorrow morning, the offensive **would resume**; little time would be wasted in regrouping and retreat was **not** an option.

[**SIDEBAR: SHIPS-VERSUS-FORTS]**

"A ship's a fool to fight a fort."

-- Lord Nelson

Readers will perhaps wonder why the Russians did not simply **outflank** the Mannerheim Line by conducting amphibious landings on the long, rugged, coast of the Gulf of Finland. True, the Baltic Fleet had neither the manpower nor the equipment to carry out an Inchon-style envelopment, but its marines were well-trained in this type of operation and so, to a lesser degree, were its sailors.

In point of fact, there may have been contingency plans to do just that. The coastline was thinly defended by scattered pillboxes and minefields, and even a small-scale landing party, once ashore, could have wreaked havoc on Finnish communications and supply facilities. But Mannerheim was not especially worried about that threat, because to get ashore at all, the Russian would first have to neutralize the powerful batteries of the elite Finnish Coast Artillery, a branch of the army that had a long tradition of efficiency and marksmanship, going back to the days of Charles XIIth.

Between December 1 and Christmas Eve, when the Gulf of Finland began to freeze solid, the Baltic Fleet tested the defenses of Hanko, Viipuri, and Turku. Powerful Soviet flotillas, supported, whenever the weather permitted, by aircraft, fought a series of intense duels with Finnish shore batteries, and got the worst of every exchange. One "heavy" destroyer was blown apart when a ten-inch shell penetrated its magazine; two battleships, one heavy cruiser, and a second destroyer were severely damaged. No amphibious landings took place. Russian submarines achieved more success, sinking two Finnish and three neutral freighters and one armed yacht on escort duty. There were no ship-to-ship engagements, although Finnish torpedo boats sortied aggressively whenever the weather permitted.

According to some contemporary accounts, the tiny Finnish submarine *Sauko* (the only submarine on either side that operated in Lake Ladoga) surfaced at night and took pot-shots at Russian truck convoys with her deck gun. It's a nice yarn, but I cannot verify that it happened. Her skipper would have been foolhardy to take such a risk – given the amount of Russian artillery passing by and the fact that he would only have had time for 5-6 shots before at least the tanks began ranging on his vessel; not to mention the small likelihood of doing any real harm with the 57-mm popgun mounted in front of the conning tower. Most likely, the little warship limited its activities to periscope observations and reconnaissance patrols; Lake Ladoga ices-over sooner than the Gulf, in any case, so the *Sauko's* active career would only have lasted two weeks.

[END OF SIDEBAR; RESUME MAIN NARRATIVE]

9. FORWARD TO THE MANNERHEIM LINE!

At first light on December 3, the Red juggernaut rolled forward again, following a massive artillery barrage and air strikes by hundreds of planes. By this time, General Meretzkov had gotten his armor forward and the attack was spearheaded by hundreds of tanks formed into massive wedges. Any Soviet company commander who did not resolutely lead his men forward understood that he could be relieved on the spot, by roving NKVD patrols, hauled off into the woods, and summarily shot for cowardice.

Frontal attack was the only "correct" tactic, and by mid-day of December 3, the Russians were running into significantly heavier opposition than they had previously encountered and suffering heavy casualties. Before deteriorating weather shut down air activity, Soviet reconnaissance flights reported large formations of Finnish infantry

glimpsed in the lake-spattered terrain between the front lines and the forward bastions of the Mannerheim Line itself.

These reconnaissance reports were the Russians' first indication that Field Marshal Mannerheim was about to attempt the implementation of his cherished "Forward Zone" strategy. The Russians had now reached a point where the Karelian Isthmus broadened to its widest extent, and where the configuration of its roads, bogs, and not-yet-frozen lakes would force the invading columns to diverge beyond the range of mutual support. Strung out on a handful of roads, the attackers were temporarily vulnerable to sharp, unexpected counterattacks. Mannerheim had therefore concentrated four "Covering Groups" athwart the main axes of advance, then back-stopped them with three-fourths of his entire First Division, massed in a central location where its flanks were shielded by the two biggest lakes on the Isthmus: Lake Suulajarvi and Lake Valkjarvi. Altogether, Mannerheim had 21,000 men deployed in this Forward Zone, and his plan was to maneuver them boldly, catch the enemy off-balance, and deliver such a series of stinging local defeats that he might delay the inevitable offensive against the Mannerheim Line by as much as a week – from these first days of the war to the final desperate hours, his overall strategy was shaped by the imperative need to **buy time** for the Western Allies to come to Finland's aid, a constraint that was not always foremost in the minds of his subordinate commanders, as we shall see.

The Covering Groups, fighting out of prepared positions, would fix the Russian columns in place by suddenly confronting them with far stronger resistance than they had yet encountered. When the time was right, Mannerheim would order-up units from his well-rested First Division reserves and use them to launch slashing flank attacks. As a

map exercise or a theoretical wargaming concept, the "Forward Zone" strategy looked as promising as it was daring. If units of the German *Wehrmacht* had been entrusted with this plan's execution, it might well have yielded disproportionate victories.

But the Finnish Army had neither the sophisticated command-and-control methodology, nor the training, to coordinate such risky, fluid tactics. Most of all, it lacked even a small reserve of tanks to supply the kind of "cutting edge" that might fracture the ponderous Soviet formations. General Oysterman, C. I. C. of all Finnish forces on the Isthmus, had long argued that the Forward Zone strategy was beyond his men's ability to implement; why, he contended, throw 21,000 irreplaceable men into a chaotic meeting engagement **in front** of the strong permanent fortifications that would multiply their effectiveness at least three-fold? Far better, he argued, to give those men a few days' respite, time to occupy their assigned bunkers and earthworks, build up their stocks of anti-tank weapons, and prepare themselves psychologically for the avalanche of steel bearing down on them?

By midnight, December 3-4, the wisdom of Ostermann's foresight was becoming all too apparent. It was one thing to lecture infantry recruits about how vulnerable tanks were, in the landscape of Finland, to close-assault with satchel charges, hand-placed mines, and souped-up "Molotov cocktails" (*), but this anti-tank indoctrination had taken place against wooden mock-ups. Few Finnish soldiers had ever **seen** a modern tank, except in newsreels, before being ordered to face large formations of the real thing. More than any other factor, it was the psychological impact of the Red Army's tanks that doomed the Forward Zone strategy. Even though, at this stage of the campaign, the

Russians' armor tactics were clumsy and primitive, Ostermann, in his memoirs, described their psychological effect upon his soldiers as "shattering".

Moreover, while the invaders might have been timidly led and prone to lose cohesion every time they ran into determined Finnish resistance, they were not altogether **stupid**. Each Russian division committed to the Isthmus offensive had well-trained squads of Finnish-speaking Karelians who proved highly effective at wire-tapping and breaking the Finnish Army's wireless security protocols. False orders and deceptive reports flew up and down the Finnish chain of command, generating confusion and causing needless alarms. One especially devastating series of bogus messages convinced General Ohquist, commander of the Finnish II Corps, that a dangerous Russian landing had taken place near the important coastal stronghold of Koivisto, and the unfounded report caused enormous consternation and confusion, before its true nature was discovered. In fact, by nightfall on December 3, the already over-burdened Finnish communications network had broken down completely; minimum efficiency would not be restored for approximately twelve hours – a very long time indeed under the circumstances.

If there ever had been any chance for the Forward Zone strategy to exploit the Russian columns' vulnerability, it was irrevocably gone by noon on December 4. Between the panic induced by tank attacks and the chaos generated by the breakdown of communications, Mannerheim was never able to employ his strong reserves effectively. Most of the time, he didn't even know where they **were**. Even though the Finns recovered from "Panzer Shock" with admirable rapidity once they discovered that, yes, tanks really **were** easy targets when attacked at close range (approximately eighty

Russian tanks were destroyed by close assault between December 3 and 5) General Ohquist had ordered all covering troops in front of II Corps to fall back to the Mannerheim Line proper. On December 5, the covering troops in front of General Heinrich's III Corps – who had been out of touch with Mannerheim's headquarters for almost than twenty-four hours – were skillfully conducting a phased withdrawal, using tactical plans improvised on the spot by their own company and battalion commanders.

In stormy confrontations on Dec. 4 and 5, Mannerheim accused his corps commanders of willfully ignoring his orders. The prickly Ohquist had enough guts to stand up to Mannerheim face to face and tell him that if he insisted now on trying to revive his failed Forward Zone plans, the enemy would probably capture Viipuri in a matter of days and just keep going, all the wat to Helsinki. Ohquist was prepared to resign rather than take responsibility for subjecting the citizens of Helsinki to the horrors of a protracted siege such as the one that had left much of Warsaw in ruins. If he had **not** started pulling his men back into the Mannerheim Line, Ohquist insisted, a cohesive defense of the Karelian Isthmus might no longer have been possible.

Mannerheim had no choice but to back down or risk a complete military debacle. By nightfall of Dec. 6, in any case, there **was** no more "Forward Zone": the Red Army had reached the Mannerheim Line and both sides paused to regroup. Despite the non-stop, chaotic fighting that had raged for the past three days, all the action up to this point had been merely an overture. The main drama would not start until the Soviet invaders brought forward their enormous formations of artillery, replaced their tank losses, and finalized their tactical plans for breaching the Mannerheim Line. To do that, they would

have to penetrate enormous minefields, massive lines of anti-tank obstacles, and storm numerous blockhouses and pillboxes thickly walled with reinforced concrete.

The paralyzing effect of tank attacks had been transient; the Finns seemed ready to put up a bitter defense; and General Meretzkov's assurances that his men would be marching through Helsinki only two weeks after crossing the border, now seemed like an empty boast.

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[SIDEBAR: HOW STRONG WAS THE MANNERHEIM LINE ?]

After Stalin gained his rather pyrrhic victory over Finland, he commissioned a vivid half-hour documentary film entitled *Mannerheim Line*. Only a few throw-away scraps of footage and narration make any reference to the other Winter War campaigns – all of which had ended in either a humiliating Soviet defeat or a bloody stalemate. You don't have to be sympathetic to Stalin in order to appreciate his motives for wanting to convince the Russian people that the capture of the Karelian Isthmus had been a great military triumph.

On the other hand, the ominous length of the campaign, and the visible presence in Leningrad-area hospitals of tens of thousands of wounded, frostbitten Red Army soldiers, made it impossible for the Kremlin to hide the fact that losses had been severe. In its 103-day war against a weakly armed neighbor, the Red Army suffered more battlefield deaths than it incurred during the entire five-year span of the Russian Civil War. For many Soviet citizens, it was hard to equate "triumph" with the fact that it had taken their army 103 days to advance less than sixty miles from its starting point, or with

the alarming rumors about whole divisions vanishing without a trace in the vast central forests.

The easiest and most plausible way to balance this tough equation was to focus the Soviet public's attention on the depth and elaborateness of the fortifications that had barred the way for so long. Through cunning editing techniques, the footage in *Mannerheim Line* makes the point with dramatic force: the Finns had created one of the most formidable fortified lines in history and the Red Army, through superior weaponry and matchless courage, had shattered it. So the audience cannot possibly miss the point, the narrator repeatedly claims that the Mannerheim Line was "as strong as" or "even stronger than" the Maginot Line (which had yet to be tested in war, of course, but which was already world-famous as the most elaborate and expensive line of fortifications ever constructed).

Thanks to hyperbolic magazine articles and dramatic newsreel tours of the "showcase" fortifications between Metz and Belfort, even the Soviet public had come to regard the words "Maginot Line" to be synonymous with "impregnable".

Stalin's documentary did not, of course, cite any real casualty statistics, but it powerfully conveyed the intended linkage: 1) the Mannerheim Line was every bit as formidable as the Maginot Line; 2) **no army** could overcome such powerful defenses without paying a heavy price; and most importantly, 3) the Red Army had broken through while other armies might have faltered or turned back. The eventual Russian breakthrough, proclaimed the narrator, was "a feat without parallel in the annals of war".

Naturally, while the fighting raged, the Finnish government did nothing to discourage the enemy's propaganda efforts; in the years immediately following 1945,

however, whether by conscious design or simple pride in the powers of their troops' resistance, many Finnish generals and historians tended to belittle the strength of the Isthmus fortifications, insisting that most of the Mannerheim Line consisted of ordinary entrenchments and log-covered dug-outs – that its real strength lay in the resolve and *"sisu"* of the ordinary Finnish soldier.

Even more frustrating to the researcher is the fact that no two Finnish commanders' description of the Line are in agreement! Mannerheim tells us that there were only 66 "strong points" built of reinforced concrete, and in between those "strong points", the defenses comprised ordinary bunkers, trenches, and sandbagged revetments. But Harold Ohquist, in **his** memoirs, lists 75 "strong points", about one-third of which were elderly bunkers of 1918 vintage which had never been completely modernized.

In Stalin's documentary, however, the cameras dwell on a few really stupendous-looking multi-chambered blockhouses that really **do** resemble the great dinosaurs on the Franco-German border. The Finns **had** built a handful of such monoliths, and certainly planned to build many more if time and money permitted. Exactly how many such "Maginot Class" works were finished and manned by December 1939, I was never able to ascertain, but my impression was that most, if not all, were constructed not in the middle of the Karelian Isthmus, but on the Baltic Sea approaches to Helsinki and to the ports of Viipuri and especially Turku, the only Finnish port capable of handling a large number of foreign vessels, be they naval or mercantile..

In the spring of 1964, I was able to get a vivid first-hand impression of the Mannerheim Line's actual strength by inspecting the ruins of several blockhouses emplaced at its most sensitive sector: a sharp westward "elbow bend" where the main

road and rail lines between Helsinki and Leningrad passed through the village of Summa (of which, not surprisingly, I saw not a trace). Since this was such a critical point – the site of the heaviest, most sustained Russian attacks, and a mere 3-4 miles south of the spot where the Red Army actually **did** crack the Mannerheim Line on February 12, 1940 – it is reasonable to assume that the demolished works I inspected were typical of the **strongest** permanent fortifications faced by the invaders. Those massive, multi-level works shown in the Russian documentary were probably **coastal** forts, and in 1964, those locations were simply not accessible to foreigners; indeed, many of them were still manned by Soviet coast artillerymen and had been thoroughly modernized as part of Leningrad's Cold-War-era defenses.

It was difficult to visualize the original configuration of the Summa works I photographed and inspected at close range: they all showed signs of terrible punishment from sustained heavy artillery bombardment. The largest one – which I was able to enter by crawling over a wicked entanglement of rusted steel bars and jagged slabs of broken concrete – looked like it had been beaten into the earth with a giant ball-peen hammer. The most intact gun-chamber, obviously designed to accommodate 37 mm. Bofors anti-tank gun and its crew, was protected by walls approximately four feet thick, which in turn had been reinforced by massive outer layers of sandbags, logs, and earth – long since blown away, of course, except for shards and splinters. At the start of the Winter War, few if any of these larger works actually contained anti-tank guns. There were too few of them for the Finns to tie down a single weapon in static defense; most likely, that gun chamber had housed nothing more potent than a Maxim machine gun.

The most striking difference between these fortifications and those of the Maginot Line was the fact that the French **buried** most of their forts inside hills and ridges, whereas the underlying granite of the generally flat Karelian Isthmus compelled the Finns to forego that additional protection – all of their bunkers and blockhouses were anchored to the landscape but did not extend very far beneath its surface. This limitation had serious consequences: so massive and sustained were the Russian bombardments, that a number of Finnish blockhouses were actually uprooted from their foundations and tilted out of alignment, ruining their intended fields of fire.

Beyond any doubt, the ruined fortifications I inspected were formidable defensive works, but they were in no sense comparable to the vast, multi-level, miniature cities that formed the heart of the Maginot Line.

So much confusion arose from the conflicting accounts of the Mannerheim Line's actual strength, that in the late 1960s, a Finnish historian set out to clarify things once and for all. He collected **all** surviving maps of the Isthmus defenses, and all surviving archival documents pertaining to them, then made a detailed, yard-by-yard comparison of the symbols and markings shown on all of the maps and all statistical tabulations in the documents. His conclusion: if you counted only the completed, occupied, works built of reinforced concrete – **regardless of their size and configuration** – the Mannerheim Line contained 109 "strong points" unevenly spaced along its 80-mile length. Everything else was a connective tissue of ordinary field fortifications built with spade and pick-ax and strengthened by logs, earth ramparts, and sandbags. While Stalin, after the Winter War, and the Finnish government **before** it, wanted the world to think of the Mannerheim Line as a thing of steel and ferro-concrete, its main ingredients were dirt, sand, logs, barbed

wire, and human courage. Manned by stubborn defenders, it was a formidable defensive bulwark, but when the attacking side could replace its staggering losses and the defending side could not, the breaching of such a line was simply a matter of time, firepower, and brute attrition.

Without denigrating the courage and ingenuity of the Red Army units who finally broke through the Mannerheim Line, their achievement hardly qualifies as "a feat without parallel in the annals of military history."

[END OF SIDEBAR; RESUME MAIN NARRATIVE]

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10. WHAT NEXT?

By the time the Russians launched their first significant probe against the Mannerheim Line proper, late on December 6, there were nine distinct campaigns or major battles simultaneously raging in eastern and northern Finland. For the most part, these were fluid, swiftly-changing engagements, waged for the control of villages, ridges, rivers, and road junctions whose names are utterly unfamiliar to most of you reading this and are somewhat confusing even with regard to the names on the maps (all those " –jarvi" and "-niemi" place-names!).

Several of these battles were not significant, in terms of the war's outcome, and can be dealt with in a brief summary; others warrant close scrutiny by any student of military history. My point is this: no purpose would be served by describing these events in strict chronological order, leaping back and forth over almost a thousand miles of unfamiliar terrain – the result would be a confusing, jumpy, narrative. It's far more sensible to group the battles according to an arbitrary but logical scheme.

Since the Karelian Isthmus was the most critical front – the place where Finland's fate would be decided – let's begin by following the events there, from the afternoon of December 6 to the collapse of the over-ambitious Finnish counterattack on December 23. In that theater of the war, in turn, we'll examine the slaughter at Taipale, the see-saw struggle for Summa village, and finally, the ill-advised Finnish counterattack launched on December 23.

Secondly, we'll shift our attention north, to the desperate campaign for Tolvajarvi, series of battles fought in the sector defended by the Finnish IVth Corps, north of Lake Ladoga. Next, I'll summarize the battles fought from the left-flank boundary of IVth Corps, demarcated by the town of Ilomantsi up to the coast of the Arctic Ocean, 625 miles to the north – many of which were very similar in nature and results. I'll zoom in on one of these engagements, however: the Battle of Suomussalmi. That is the only Winter War battle that is studied today in military academies throughout the world, and every student of military history will find it fascinating.

Finally, we'll turn our attention back to the Karelian Isthmus, where the war's largest and most dramatic campaign raged from February 1 until the cease-fire went into effect on March 13.

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11. HUMAN WAVE ATTACKS AT TAIPALE

If Mannerheim's cherished "Forward Zone" strategy did not yield any significant victories for the Finns, it did generate some unanticipated advantages. Foremost was the fact that thousands of Finnish soldiers have gotten their first taste of "Panzer Shock" and the experience of, first, running in terror from tanks and, second, rallying and coming

back to do battle with them again, had the effect a widespread inoculation program. When the Forward Zone veterans filtered back into the Mannerheim Line, they spread the word quickly to their comrades: yes, those tanks could scare the shit out of you the first time you faced them, but they really weren't as deadly or as invulnerable as they looked (apocryphal or not, the tale spread like lightning about one burly Finn who had immobilized a T-28 by ripping its treads off with a crowbar!).

Moreover, you didn't have to worry about letting the tanks roll through your lines or over your trenches, because the Russian tankists (as the contemporary term described them) seemed unable to pull off a successful deep penetration; having broken through Finnish lines time and time again, the big formations of armor advanced two or three kilometers and then came to an uneasy halt, either waiting for their escorting infantry to catch up or for someone of appropriate rank to give them orders. Since only one Russian tank per squadron was radio-equipped at this time, and since the radio sets almost never remained functional after the first fifteen minutes of combat stress, those orders rarely arrived (and if Sascha the squadron commander didn't like what he heard over his headset, he could simply pretend he never heard it), Soviet armored breakthroughs were usually followed by withdrawals. In only two or three days, therefore, the Finnish army developed a new doctrine of tank defense: if you can't destroy 'em, take cover and let 'em through your lines, then pop up and smash the masses of infantry attempting to exploit behind the tanks. And when the breakthrough tanks came rumbling back, without close protection by friendly infantry, they really **were** sitting ducks.

In any case, the Forward Zone vets assured their tank-virgin trench-mates, the important things to remember were that <u>everybody</u> feels fear and panic the first time they

encounter an armored attack – it's perfectly natural! – but the most dangerous thing you can do is run away from them! Just keep your head and hunker down until they've gone away (the crew can't see anything through those little slits anyhow!), then concentrate on mowing down the Red infantrymen, who would be winded and careless as they tried to obey **their** orders to stay close behind the tanks. Yes, to be sure, a big wedge of tanks charging at you is rather frightening, but they can't shoot you if they can't see you and once the tanks outrun their escorting infantry, **both** become more vulnerable. So keep cool, don't worry if the tanks overrun your line – just keep Ivan's infantry out of your trenches and all will be well. The panzers' "bark" is louder than their "bite".

This new and eminently practical anti-tank doctrine would serve the Finns well…at least, until the Russians refined their tank/infantry coordination with better training and communications in February.

Just as important was the other salient result of the Forward Zone episode. As chaotic and confusing as that period of intense skirmishing proved to be, it did have the net effect of giving the units manning the Mannerheim Line an extra, priceless, 48-60 hours in which to strengthen their earthworks, to build up their forward stocks of ammunition, and to deploy several dozen more of the precious Bofors anti-tank guns, which had still been en route to the front on Dec. 3. Generals Ohquist and Heinrichs now had enough Bofors guns to parcel out two weapons per **battalion** in the more vulnerable points of the front, and still retain a handful of spare weapons in reserve. From one end of the Isthmus to the other, the extra time bought by the Forward Zone fighting had allowed a numerically small but tactically vital thickening of anti-tank capability along the entire Mannerheim Line. Additionally, the extra breathing-space had allowed the Finns to

complete the forward-deployment of all their searchlights, hundreds of flare-pistols, and several thousand additional rounds of star-shell ammo for their mortar batteries. As the period of maximum winter darkness descended on southern Finland, these assets assumed added importance.

So once the early and most alarming incidents of "Panzer Shock" had been lived-through, and the proper lessons drawn from them, the inglorious retreat of the Forward Zone task forces did not spread fear and insecurity, but paradoxically caused the Mannerheim Line defenders to feel more confident than they would have if the failed strategy had not been tried at all.

As the Finns steadied down and awaited the decisive stage of the contest, new and invigorating rumors swept their ranks: massive shipments of Allied aid were said to be filling the holds of merchant ships in London and Le Havre! Hundreds of first-rate warplanes were being readied for service in Finland, manned by experienced volunteer crews of well-trained British and French airmen! Sweden was loading train after train with anti-tank and anti-aircraft guns! Thousands of Swedish, Danish, and Norwegian volunteers were signing up to fight with their Nordic cousins! If we can just throw Ivan back for a week or so, the Finnish GIs consoled each other, we can expect to see the first shipments of foreign weapons and volunteers streaming toward our lines!

The rumor mill spun its tales with feverish intensity. Unfortunately, the rumors – with very few and very small exceptions – would prove to be the product of wishful thinking. But by the afternoon of December 6, when the first strong Russian probes went forward against the Mannerheim Line proper, the Line's defenders were confident, steady, and resolute. So what if the enemy outnumbered them by ten to one? The Finns

dealt with that disparity by mocking it! “They are so many, and our country is so small,” went the popular refrain, “where will we ever find room to bury them all?”

* * *

Soviet General Meretzkov and his staff had a sound, if predictable, operational plan for breaching the Mannerheim Line. Since the ice over Ladoga and the Gulf was not yet thick enough to support tanks, they could not risk any large-scale maneuvers to outflank the Line. Instead, Meretzkov planned to open with a massive series of blows against the extreme Finnish left – what would soon be known as the “Taipale Front” – in hopes of drawing off Mannerheim’s reserves (which he knew to be extremely limited). If the Finns took the bait and shifted significant reserves to shore up the crumbling Tapiale sector, Meretzkov would swiftly unleash his own reserves (approximately four fresh rifle divisions and a full brigade of tanks) and shatter the Line asunder at its most vulnerable spot: the elbow-bend near Summa village. For the time being, he planned no massive assault on the strong Finnish right wing, where the rugged terrain of the coast and the formidable power of Finland’s coast artillery barred the shortest route to Viipuri – that part of the Mannerheim Line he would neutralize, pin down, and chip-away-at with non-stop artillery bombardments, constant air raids, and a rolling schedule of diversionary attacks launched almost hourly by units of up to regimental size. If he happened to score an additional breakthrough on that flank, so much the better; but if he succeeded in crashing through at Summa, neither the Finnish right wing nor its left would remain tenable for long. All he had to do, really, was to tear one big hole in the middle of the Mannerheim Line, **somewhere**, and the Finns would have only two long-term options: abandon the Line altogether, or be systematically encircled from behind. This early in the

war, it would suit Russian purposes just to get Mannerheim to commit his reserves, rather than allow **any** such hole to be created, anywhere on the Isthmus..

It was a sound plan, if wholly orthodox and predictable, and Mannerheim had read the Soviet commander's intentions perfectly. The only thing that surprised him was the sobering fact that Stalin had funneled twice as many men and three times as many tanks into the Isthmus as Mannerheim had believed possible. As things had developed by December 6, his forces were stretched so thin in so many places that he could not have shifted a platoon or a single mortar tube to the Taipale sector even if he had wanted to. The unit he had assigned to defend that part of the Mannerheim Line was his Tenth Division, one of the best in the army, and nature had made the terrain ideally suited for a stubborn defense.

On the Taipale Peninsula, the Finnish MLR (Main Line of Resistance) formed a wide-bottomed fish-hook shape, with the point on the coast of Lake Ladoga. From there, the fish-hook's shaft bent in a south-westerly direction along the rocky shores of a wide, steeply-banked shipping canal known as the Vuoksi Waterway. Between the Tenth Division's right-flank boundary with the Eighth Division and the "point of the hook" on Ladoga, the frontline formed a shallow bowl shape approximately two miles wide, its entrenchments scrawled along a stony plateau some 15-20 meters higher than the deep but narrow Tapiale River, an intracoastal channel that connected the Vuoksi Waterway with Lake Ladoga itself. Thus the entire Taipale Peninsula formed a low, flat-topped mesa surrounded on three sides by natural moats.

In peacetime, the minor lakeside port of Taipale was home to a small fishing fleet and a center of the region's modest commercial activities. Export commodities came

there, by barge down the Vuoksi, for eventual shipment to the outside world: timber products, leather goods, and some classic Karelian handicrafts, such as the exquisite hand-made Karelian *kanteles* – dulcimer-like instruments that resembled balalaikas but produce a rippling, silvery tone evocative of the Sibelian landscape. There were decent all-weather roads on the western coast of the Vuoksi, leading north from Taipale along the Ladoga coast, and laterally in between – this relatively modern road system enabled the Tenth Division to reposition its artillery and maneuver its modest infantry reserves with dispatch and efficiency – a fact which surely helped the division to survive the pounding it was subjected to, beginning on the afternoon of December 6.

Although the plateau occupied by the division was hardly a towering terrain feature, it did afford panoramic observation of the surrounding landscape. Large tracts of land on the Russian side of the Vuoksi were rolling, cultivated fields, bounded by strips of light-to-moderate woods, and the Vuoksi itself, although by now frozen solid enough to bear the weight of light tanks, was 500 – 700 yards wide; so any attacks launched from that side of the peninsula would have to cross about a mile of fairly open land, under Finnish observation from the moment the troops exited the distant tree-line. Superior numbers would not help; the defenders would have ample time to slaughter an entire division, if it came at their lines along that axis.

Nor would a wide flanking move on the surface of Ladoga be practicable, for the lake is fed by so many underground currents, along that part of its coast, that any force large enough to affect a successful turning maneuver would also impose such stress on the surface ice that it might be swallowed up by suddenly-opened crevasses. Trying to turn the Finnish left with armor, would simply be suicidal.

But there was a large U-shaped area of land on the Russian side, extending in an arc from a point roughly opposite the jumbled rocky outcropping named Patoniemi to the embankment across from Taipale's modest docks and warehouses, where patchy forest did provide some areas of concealment. Russian forces advancing from those wooded areas would face only a relatively brief passage over nakedly exposed ice – the Taipale River was deep but only 100-150 yards wide – before reaching dry land directly in front of Finnish lines: a low, undulating formation of scrubby brush and pebbly beach named Koukunniemi. Once they stepped off the ice on the western side, the attackers would still have to cover almost another mile before reaching the embankment where the Finns had dug their trenches and sited their bunkers. To get at the defenders, the Russians would then have to blast or cut their way through multiple lines of barbed wire entanglements. But Koukunniemi was not billiard-table flat and once the Russians got a foothold on the promontory, they could dig in, erect rocky sangars for protection, and bring forward their heavy machine guns.

And that was exactly what the Finnish defenders were counting on. Tenth Division engineers had worked hard to make Koukunniemi **appear** to be a viable place to establish a beachhead. As they had done in some of the border villages, the Finns made it look as though they had been feverishly clearing fields of fire on the opposite bank, but had been forced to abandon the work when the speed of the Russian advance took them by surprise. In fact, the tree-clearing had been carried on very selectively, to subtly channel the enemy in certain directions and not in others, so that from the first reconnaissance patrol reports down to the emplacement of forward artillery observers, the impression was given, then reinforced, that an attack straight across the Taipale River and

straight up the Koukunniemi promontory offered, by far, the fastest and most direct route for a mass assault to close with and overwhelm the extreme left wing of the Mannerheim Line. By selecting that point for his first major assault, Meretskov had unwittingly played into Mannerheim's hands.

And to the fullest extent possible, the Finns had turned Koukkoniemi into a death trap. Every square foot of the opposite riverbank, the frozen river, and the promontory itself, had been pre-registered for artillery barrages – and for sharp-shooting fire from a single battery or even a single tube. If Ivan wanted to hurl his bayonets into the Tenth Division's trenches, he would have to advance across 1.5 – 2 miles of open, virtually coverless ground, into the concentrated fire of approximately thirty Maxim machine guns emplaced in stout log bunkers impervious to anything but repeated direct hits, along with rapid-fire from 1800 Mosin rifles, 60 – 80 Lahti automatic rifles, and dozens of well-hidden snipers; supporting the defending infantry here were sixteen 81-mm mortars, and, further back, and cunningly sited so the cannon could be re-targeted in a matter of seconds, were nine batteries of field artillery. Different sources give differing totals, but the number of cannon was between 27 to 36 guns and, as usual on the Finnish side, it was a motley assortment of weapons indeed: modern 105 mm. howitzers, at least one battery of German "Seventy-Sevens" from the Great War, one battery (of either four or six guns, depending on which historian you consult) of potent, highly accurate Swedish 122 mm medium howitzers, and one battery of sliding-block breech-loaders of late Victorian vintage! (*)

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(*) I've never been able to ascertain the precise number and caliber of the Taipale artillery collection, aside from the maddeningly unspecific "nine batteries" – probably the largest concentration of Finnish field artillery deployed in one location during the whole Winter War. The weapons listed here were probably in evidence, though, as they were among the more common types of artillery found in Finland's polyglot arsenal. As for that one battery of antediluvian 19th-Century weapons, I can only say that, from the handful of blurry photos I've seen, they resemble British 15-pounders from the Boer War period – quite useless against tanks, of course, but as deadly against packed infantry as they ever were in the days of the Victorian colonial wars. Field guns of this vintage had no hydraulic mechanism for controlling recoil. To keep them more or less on-target, the gunners simply sledge-hammered a big iron wedge (which was permanently hinge-mounted to the gun's traveling tail) into the ground. This device mainly prevented the guns from recoiling horizontally, not vertically – when their barrels were set for flat-trajectory fire, they tended to take a sprightly leap every time they were fired, and were affectionately known to their Finnish crews as "Jumping Jacks". In any other European army, these pieces would all have been retired to museums or public parks, if not by the start of World War One, then surely by the end of it.

By Finnish army standards, that was a lot of firepower. But the Tenth Division had an even heavier resource to call on: four 6-inch coast defense rifles with all-round traverse. Their emplacements were so well camouflaged that despite almost daily air attacks whenever the weather permitted, the Russians never succeeded in knocking out a single gun.

Any Russian tanks that managed to reach the promontory would encounter mines, anti-tank pits, and – by the time the Reds launched their second all-out attack, on December 14, a handful of Bofors 37mm A/T guns, which were moved from one pre-prepared position to another every night or during the frequent intervals of heavy fog that shrouded the coast. The infantry massed behind those tanks found Kuokunniemi a dangerous place even without the Finns shooting at them – barbed wire entanglements had been hidden beneath mounds of snow and inside shallow ravines where men would be inclined to dive for cover, and by some accounts, remote-controlled explosives were positioned to blow gaping holes in the ice under their feet – although it's unlikely that this expedient could have been used more than once or twice before .Russian engineers located and disarmed the charges.

Under intense pressure from the high command to grab a piece of the Mannerheim Line at the earliest possible moment, a single Russian regiment charged across the Taipale River late on December 6, after a heavy but largely ineffective four-hour barrage by a dozen batteries of 76.2-mm field guns. Packets of tanks led the attack, firing on-the-move at first (with predictably miserable accuracy), then halting about five hundred yards from the slope at the eastern end of the promontory, in front of the first of several anti-tank ditches. At first, the Russians met only sniper fire – the Finns stayed under cover until Kuokunniemi was packed with targets. When the defenders could not possibly miss, they opened up with every gun they had. Kuokunniemi boiled with shell-bursts and streams of tracer fire swept back and forth through the tightly-packed mass of men and tanks. Although the Soviet battalions pressed forward doggedly, they never penetrated the Finnish wire, and when the coast artillery batteries added their massive

shells to the barrage, the attackers' morale shattered and the survivors fled pell-mell back across the river, leaving more than 500 dead and four burning tanks.

The Soviet commander was ordered to try again, just before twilight, and a fresh regiment was thrown at the peninsular, advancing on a narrower front along the northern coast of Kuokunniemi, where clumps of scrub and granite breakwaters afforded at least the illusion of cover. But the Finns already had a detailed fire-plan worked out for that approach, too, and the second attack fared no better than the first. When the Russians tried to dig in for the night on the thin strip of shoreline they occupied, they discovered another unpleasant thing about Kuokkuniemi: the water table was so close to the surface that anyone attempting to dig a foxhole would soon find it filled with icy water.

When night brought a halt to tank activity and negated the already marginal effect of the Russians' artillery support, Finnish counterattacks swept down from the embankment and killed or captured any pockets of Red infantry still clinging to the shoreline. When six-inch rounds began scoring direct hits on the invaders' artillery positions, the Russians hurriedly pulled their guns back into the deep woods. By midnight, one-third of an entire Russian division had been killed or wounded; Finnish casualties were negligible.

For the next offensive, Meretskov reinforced the artillery at Taipale and brought in a second, fresh, rifle division. Artillery duels, air raids, and large-scaled probing actions flared on all sides of the Taipale peninsula – the Red Army was trying to find a weak spot, and the Finns were demonstrating that there was none. But the weight of Soviet bombardments constantly increased, and by the morning of December 14, the odds

against the Finns had grown formidable: with their original nine batteries, the Finnish gunners were barely holding their own against **fifty-seven** Russian batteries.

On December 14, the second all-out assault on Taipale was heralded by a continuous, smothering barrage that lasted from first light until 11:30 AM, at which time the Russians launched a two-pronged attack aimed at the base of Kuokkuniemi. The Tenth Division's commander had decided to hold fire until the enemy was massed at point-blank range, so both Russian forces marched forward as though on parade. At least one lesson had been learned from the failed attacks on December 6: this time, the Russian tanks advanced in short rushes, then halted and delivered aimed fire at targets that had been pin-pointed by aerial reconnaissance. Losses began to mount, and the Finnish riflemen, who were not privy to the artillery fire plan, began to curse their own gunners.

With shattering effect, the Finnish batteries fired together when the enemy's foremost ranks were only a hundred yards away, followed a second later by two thousand rifles and more than thirty Maxim guns. As the Finns had hoped, the shock effect was devastating. One arm of the Russian attack collapsed in panic after enduring only five minutes' punishment, leaving approximately 400 dead and ten burning tanks. The other prong of the offensive pressed its attack for the better part of an hour, then it too disintegrated, leaving more than 1000 dead and 27 wrecked tanks to mark the path of its advance.

Having failed with three powerful thrusts, the Russians tried a subtler approach on Christmas day, quietly sneaking three battalions across the frozen Vuoksi Waterway under cover of a dense morning fog. A handful of Finnish sentries spotted the maneuver but were overpowered before they could report the location and size of the threat. With

admirable speed and efficiency, the Russians seized three beachheads (at Kelja, Pahkemikko, and Patoniemi), dug in to defend them, and sent word back across the river for a second, larger, wave to cross the Vuoksi and join them.

For the defenders, this was a dangerous situation: some 2000 Russian troops had established strong footholds on the Finnish side of the Vuoksi, and two of those lodgements were behind most of the Finnish artillery positions. Not all the Finnish sentries had been killed silently, but there were so many patrol clashes and so much long-range sniping by both side that Tenth Division HQ did not realize how grave was the threat posed by these stealthy incursions. Had the three beachheads been heavily reinforced as planned, the Russians might have driven right across the base of the peninsula, cutting the Tenth in half.

What saved the situation was a sudden, dramatic change in the always unpredictable weather on the Karelian Isthmus: the fog lifted just as the second wave of Russian troops was half-way across the Vuoksi, a dark mass of men and vehicles suddenly pinned under bright winter sunlight. This same sudden improvement in visibility revealed to the Russians occupying the foothold at Pahnemikko that they had entrenched themselves in full view of three Finnish machine gun nests, one of them only fifty yards away, and at right-angles to their left flank.

Despite coming under murderous fire, the Russians kept sending fresh troops on to the Vuoksi, and some of them got across because the Finns simply couldn't kill all of them fast enough. Fierce combat raged all day around all three Soviet penetrations, as both sides brought more and more guns to bear and the Finns launched repeated counterattacks against the ever-shrinking enemy perimeters. Not until 9:15 the next

morning were the last stubborn hold-outs killed, with hand grenades and, in some cases, bayonets. The Tenth Division was hard-pressed, and by the end of this furious see-saw battle the Finns had to bring up typists and supply clerks to replace infantrymen who were too exhausted to move. By Christmas Day, the Tenth had been reduced, by the steady toll of daily casualties, to about eighty per cent of its original strength, and during the twenty-eight-hour "Battle of the Vuoksi", it suffered another 400 killed and wounded. God knows how many the Russians lost – some of their dead were taken off the ice under cover of darkness, and many of the less seriously wounded walked or crawled off on their own, but on the frozen waterway and inside the beachheads, the Finns counted approximately 3,000 corpses.

By this time, the main weight of the Soviet offensive had shifted to the Summa sector, twenty-five miles southwest of Taipale, but Russian attacks continued right up to the morning of the cease-fire in the early spring of 1940, as did their massive artillery barrages and daily air raids. As one Russian division burned itself out, a fresh one took its place. Now and then, individual Finnish cannon were replaced, when enemy sellfire tagged a piece, but on the average, from Christmas Eve until the final day of combat, the odds remained grotesquely lop-sided: approximate 112 Russian batteries against nine Finnish, and one eroded, perpetually exhausted Finnish infantry division against five, sometimes six, Red Army divisions.

As I summarized this series of battles in A Frozen Hell:

For the Russian infantry, Taipale was a slaughterhouse …their attacks formed up in the open, advanced in the open, and were pressed home in the open…It was the Somme in miniature. To the Finns who witnessed these attacks, it seemed incomprehensible that any army, no matter how fatalistic its ideology or inexhaustible its supply of manpower, would continue to mount attack after attack across such exposed terrain…The butchery was dreadful. A number of Finnish machine gunners had to be

evacuated due to stress; they had become mentally unstable from having to commit mass murder day after day – instead of becoming inured to killing, some gunners had become – in their officers' opinions – "too sympathetic towards Ivan".

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12. SUMMA – THE VERDUN OF THE WINTER WAR

It took the Russians one week longer to mount their offensive against the Finnish center than it did for them to attack Taipale; the "Gateway to Viipuri", as the Soviet brass was already calling the Summa sector, was 18-20 miles farther from the border than the Taipale flank, and it was here that the Finns has concentrated the majority of their newest, strongest, most formidable fortifications.

Meretzkov prepared methodically for his attack – always conscious that the angry, baleful eye of Stalin was boring impatiently into his back (one is irresistibly reminded of the giant fiery orb of Sauron in The Lord of the Rings!). Subtlety was irrelevant and so were heavy casualties – what was critical was for the Red Army to score a breakthrough as quickly as possible, no matter how exorbitant the cost. For this offensive to succeed, all the ingredients had to be in place, especially literal mountains of artillery ammunition. Meretzkov wanted to smite the Finns a tremendous blow with his opening bombardment, then establish and sustain an operational tempo and concentration of firepower that the defenders simply could not long endure, no matter how courageous they were.

While constant pressured would be maintained against Taipale and the south-west slant of General Heinrich's III rd Corps, the Soviet commander prepared to commit two-thirds of his total Isthmus resources to shattering General Ohquist's IInd Corps. Ohquist commanded three divisions and a motley collection of perhaps 200 cannon (including a half-dozen heavy howitzers that dated back to 1877!); against his part of the Mannerheim

Line, Meretzkov had deployed **nine** first-class rifle divisions and two full-strength armored brigades. To soften-up the defense and keep the Finns massively suppressed in between successive waves of attacks, he had approximately 60 artillery batteries and 800 fighters and bombers (five times the number of planes in the **entire** Finnish air force). Depending on the vintage of their weapons, Finnish gun batteries were restricted to firing no more than 50 rounds per day, while Meretzkov's ammunition supply was, for all practical purposes, inexhaustible.

The Soviet commander planned to maintain unremitting pressure across the IInd Corps entire front, but he intended to land the knock-out blow on a 2.5-mile sector bounded by the otherwise insignificant villages of Summa and Lahde – the former was just behind the Line's fortifications, the latter was two miles to the rear. Through Summa ran the only hard-surface, all-weather highway connecting Helsinki and Leningrad; a thousand yards southwest of Lahde lay a critical road junction which, if captured, would open up for the Soviets' mechanized units direct access to Viipuri, alternative routes to Helsinki, and good roads to the far shore of Lake Ladoga and thence to many strategic locations in western and central Finland, including Marshal Mannerheim's HQ at Mikelli. If the Russians broke through anywhere between the two villages, and were not promptly ejected by Finnish counterattacks, the entire Mannerheim Line would become untenable, probably within the space of a single day.

Of course, the Finnish high command could read maps, too, and you can gain some idea of how sensitive they were to the importance of this sector by pondering these numbers: across the whole of the Line, the density of reinforced concrete works was approximately 3.5 per mile…in the two-mile segment between Lahde and Summa, they

had erected **sixteen** massive blockhouses and multi-chambered pillboxes. Two of the newest and most elaborate works, one of them completed only in the early autumn of 1939, were so notoriously expensive to build, and had monopolized such a large part of the available labor and construction resources, that the public had christened them, like newly launched battleships, with individual names. The "Million-Dollar" bunker commanded the high ground overlooking the Maja River (*Majajoki*) and the "Poppius Fortress" – named after the officer appointed to command its garrison – sealed off the road leading to Lahde village.

Numerous lakes were incorporated into the Mannerheim Line's configuration, and as new Bofors guns arrived in early December, many of them were emplaced on the Finnish side of these icy clearings. The Finns anticipated the enemy tank commanders, amid the confusion of battle, would lead their squadrons on to the surfaces of those lakes, where there was room to spread out and drive the tanks forward at high speeds. In their eagerness to penetrate the Line, however, those tank commanders forgot that, sooner or later, they would reach the far shores, where the forest closed in again. Finnish engineers had made sure to leave many tempting **entrances** to the frozen lakes, but only one or two narrow exits on the opposite end. Over and over again, Russian tank formations took the bait and charged full-tilt across the ice, only to be squeezed by the terrain, when they neared the farther shoreline, into dense, slow-moving herds, each vehicle jostling for position inside the narrow end of a funnel, straight into the cross-hairs of a well-camouflaged Bofors.

To obstruct or disorder the enemy's tank-fleets advancing over the more open land approaches between lakes, the Finns had placed much faith in their anti-tank belt of

granite monoliths, from five to seven rocks deep, which stretched across the whole Karelian Isthmus. An enormous amount of volunteer labor had gone into creating this impressive-looking barrier, and it would have stopped cold most of the tanks then fielded by the French, British, and German armies. But since at least 1936, every new Red Army tank design had incorporated the advanced boggier-wheel suspension system patented by the pioneering American engineer, J. Walter Christie. By adopting the Christie system, the Soviets had sacrificed heavier armor in favor of tanks that could cross rough terrain without throwing a tread and that had unsurpassed climbing abilities.

One of the nastier surprises sprung on the Finns was the revelation that any Russian tank built in the last two years was capable of rolling **over** the granite dragons' teeth. When tank drivers came up to the anti-tank belt, they simply shifted into low gear, backed up a few yards, then laboriously crawled right over the obstacles. It was still possible for a careless driver to throw a tread, but for the most part this supposedly impregnable barrier turned out to be merely an **inconvenience**.

Even so, tanks could not negotiate the rocks at any speed higher than dead-slow, and by climbing from flat ground to the top of the barrier, the tanks exposed, for two or three suspense-filled minutes, their weak underbellies. If friendly infantry was not close by to protect them, this was ample time for Finnish tank-killer teams to sprint out of their trenches and heave satchel charges or contact-fused mines between the grinding treads and the bogie wheels. Magnetized bundles of stick-grenades were also capable of snapping a tread, bending wheel sprockets, or actually blowing holes through the underside of the chassis. Lacking anything more potent, some suicidally brave Finns simply climbed atop an adjacent rock and emptied drums of Suomi ammo into the nearest

vehicle's observation slit. Seventy-one rounds of 9mm slugs, whanging and zinging around inside the narrow confines of a T-26's turret, usually shredded the crew.

But on the morning of December 17, when Meretzkov opened his "decisive offensive", there was no need for the tanks assaulting the Lahde Road sector to do any rock-climbing. While the Finns were pinned deep in their entrenchments by a stunning five-hour bombardment that began at 5 AM, a very brave detachment of Russian sappers laid a chain of high explosive charges against many of the boulders and then detonated all the charges at once, in a titanic, rippling blast that tore at least a dozen rubbly gaps in the anti-tank belt.

When the preparatory shelling stopped at 10 a.m., the dazed Finns manned their firing posts and beheld, emerging through the drifting shell-smoke, an immense growling phalanx of fifty tanks, firing on-the-move. Some drivers headed for the gaps in the rock barrier, others peeled off and tried their luck on the frozen lakes nearby. A similar attack simultaneously began against the Summa section of the Line, where damage to the anti-tank rocks was much spottier, since the sapper demolitions – if they had been tried at all – had not succeeded; most of the damage to the anti-tank rocks had been caused by random bomb and shell hits, which usually just fractured individual boulders or chip big pieces off the tops.

In every instance where the Finns faced armored attacks, they adopted the new tactics suggested by the early skirmishers in the Forward Zone. If they could not destroy enough tanks by close-assault, or if the accurate box-barrages from their supporting artillery did not break up an armored formation, the Finnish infantry simply took cover and let the tanks roll right over their earthworks, then came up again and focused all their

efforts on slaughtering the massive infantry formations that invariably followed the tanks. Or tried to. The hope was that when the by-passed tanks realized they were getting deeper into Finnish territory without any friendly riflemen to protect them, they would mill around for a while, shooting up random targets and getting bushwhacked by showers of Molotov cocktails, and eventually lose heart and withdraw. It was a fairly desperate stratagem – and if the Soviet tank crews had been properly imbued with a spirit of *Blitzkrieg* it would have opened the door to disaster – but in Finland, it worked.

It worked, however, only because, at this stage of the war, the Red Army's standard of tank/infantry tactics was universally wretched. Once the shooting started, coordination between the two arms virtually ceased. Tanks and infantry formed up together and advanced simultaneously, in the same general direction, but that was about all; as soon as Finnish shells began peppering their formations, the tanks surged ahead so they could cross exposed ground as fast as possible. If an armored formation did penetrate the Finnish MLR with most of its vehicles intact, it ground forward dutifully until it occupied one of its shallow objectives, or if an objective couldn't be located, the most likely looking patch of ground. Once situated, the tanks churned around aimlessly, trying to cover each other with hull and turret mounted machine guns, waiting for their infantry escorts to catch up. No significant infantry penetrations occurred, however – not anywhere along the whole length of the Mannerheim Line. When daylight began to wane, the isolated groups of tanks either withdrew to their starting points, or tried to keep possession of their hard-won ground by forming a "wagon train" circle and illuminating the surrounding terrain with their headlights – a practice which only made them easier prey for tank-killer patrols of prowling Finnish infantry.

Furious, chaotic fighting raged all day on Dec. 17, and despite their terrible losses, the Red infantry managed to seize control of several Finnish strong points, only to be driven out by hastily organized counterattacks. When the shooting finally petered out, around eight-thirty that night, the ground in front of Lahde and Summa was carpeted with Russian dead and sprinkled with the charred hulks of 34 knocked-out tanks, about one-third of the total number committed to battle that morning.

On the next day, Dec. 18, Meretzkov concentrated his strongest efforts against the Lahde Road sector, while strong diversionary attacks struck at Summa and at ten or eleven other locations across II Corps' front. Nocturnal Finnish patrols, however, had already spotted the shift in enemy priorities and had retargeted most of their artillery accordingly. Heavy bombing raids further eroded the anti-tank rocks, but the unexpectedly heavy Finnish barrage destroyed ten tanks before they even reached the rocks, and a further fifteen vehicles were set blaze by close assault. None of the Russian infantry units ever got close – they were all shot to pieces before they could get through the anti-tank rocks. Before darkness cut off visibility, the Finns counted 500 bodies snarled in their barbed wire. There wasn't any way to get an accurate count of the fallen Soviet infantrymen whose bodies littered the open ground between the wire and the distant tree-line, but they numbered in the thousands; a man could have walked that entire distance, using dead Russians as stepping stones, and never once set foot on bare earth.

Meretskov's secondary attacks, which came in so many waves that the Finns could not keep count, fared no better. Whole regiments were decimated. Total Russian tank losses for that day were estimated at no less than sixty.

On Dec. 19, an increasingly frantic Meretzkov made his maximum effort, committing major elements of seven divisions and approximately 120 tanks at a dozen locations between the Gulf coast and the Vuoksi Waterway. Such incessant, relentless pressure almost did the trick, for by now cumulative losses and sheer fatigue had sapped the defenders' energy and the stupendous air and artillery bombardment not only made it impossible for them to repair damaged fortifications, but the prolonged effects of sheer concussion had caused many Finnish soldiers to lose coordination, and otherwise resolute men to shake so badly they could no longer aim their rifles. By weight of numbers and remarkable determination, the Russians overran a number of Finnish bunkers and trenches.

On this day, too, the new heavy KV tanks made their battlefield debut, and had the Russians committed a larger number of them, they might well have ruptured the Mannerheim Line on that day instead of February 13, because Bofors' shells bounced off their frontal armor like spitballs. But fortunately for the Finns, the Red Army was just "field testing" a handful of these 44-ton behemoths, not deploying them in operational strength. Even so, their effect was dramatic, for a small wedge of KVs speared through the Line near Summa and led a force of about twenty tanks into the streets of the village itself, where a hastily organized Finnish task force ambushed them from the roofs and upper stories of buildings with a deluge of grenade clusters, Molotovs, and, in a couple of instances by simply pouring buckets of gasoline all over their turrets and setting it ablaze with tracers. Hurriedly, the tanks abandoned their gains and fled back to Soviet lines, leaving eight of their number burning in the narrow mud lanes, including three of the huge KV types.

Those burning tanks marked the high tide of the first Soviet offensive against the Mannerheim Line. In three days of savage, virtually non-stop combat, Meretzkov had lost approximately 200 tanks and six of his nine infantry divisions were so badly mauled that they had to be pulled out of the frontlines altogether. Despite thousands of aerial sorties and the expenditure of roughly a quarter-million artillery shells, the Red Army had thrown some of its best punches at the Mannerheim Line and the Finns had blocked every blow, killing or wounding ten Russians for every man they lost in return.

The long-suffering Russian infantry had attacked with what Mannerheim called "a fatalism incomprehensible to the European mind." Their assaults were conducted in waves or dense columns whose approach to Finnish lines was screened, if at all, by nothing more than haphazard tree cover and drifting smoke from their own artillery fire, and their tanks always plowed ahead without regard for the foot-soldiers left behind. In several locations, repeated frontal assaults were delivered straight through Finnish minefields that were "cleared" by an advance wave of men who used their own bodies to blast lanes through which the battalions following them could advance in safety: they linked arms, formed lines, and marched stoically into the mines, singing Bolshevik war songs and continuing to advance, always closing ranks to fill in the gaps left by fallen comrades, tramping ahead with an unfaltering, suicidal rhythm until they either reached the far side of the minefields or they were all killed. Not once did they turn and run, but kept marching ahead, eyes fixed on the stuttering line of muzzle flashes from the Finnish entrenchments, while man after man was chopped down, legs blown away, as though the on-coming tracers were no more than brightly colored raindrops, when what was actually raining down on their heads were the shattered feet and steaming entrails of their

comrades. As one Finnish veteran, a former Maxim gunner with the Fifth Division, described it to me:

"They sang rousing songs and shouted patriotic slogans and counted cadence until it was their turn to step on a mine, staring ahead with the glazed expressions of men who knew they were already dead, and *had accepted it*…. We didn't want to kill them any more, but we had to. I kept the firing button pressed flat, while my loader fed belt after belt into the gun, until I could no longer feel my own thumbs. After the first two or three times this happened, I became detached from my own body and the whole process of mashing the trigger and traversing the gun became mechanical, an action being taken by a robot. Your mind had to become disassociated from what your hands were doing with the machine gun, or you could not have gone on… well, at least I could not, although there were a couple of psychopaths in my outfit who actually enjoyed slaughtering so many people, and I've always wondered about how they adjusted to civilian life after the killing stopped!. It was no longer 'war' but mass murder. But in the end, those rows of legless, torn-open corpses accomplished what Stalin had ordered: they cleared out hundreds of mines, and so the battalions that came after them were able to charge at us across a carpet of frozen bodies, undisturbed by any more explosions under foot, and therefore much more dangerous to us. Another Maxim gunner, thirty meters to my left, suddenly couldn't take it any more. He started howling like a dog, threw his hands up from the gun handles, as though they were red hot, and ran screaming to the rear. We never saw him again. We understood that he'd reached the breaking point that every soldiers has inside, and in that sense we felt sorry for the poor fucker, but his hysteria so unnerved the rest of us, that if I'd been prepared, I'd have shot him down like a dog, just to prevent his panic from spreading! We were all close to becoming hysterical at that moment, and a nervous breakdown like that -- so extreme and so sudden -- is a communicable disease – it can break the will of the strongest veterans in your outfit, because it's like holding a mirror up to your own worst fears. You know: there but for the grace of God and Gustav Mannerheim go I…Fortunately, it all happened so quickly that we hardly stopped firing long enough to notice… A lot of guys, they'll tell you they got 'used' to committing mass murder, day after day – that they didn't even think of 'Ivan' as being human any longer, just a crowd of clay targets or something, but they're lying. Pretending to be the brave, tough, gangster types. It's all a pose. Nobody, unless he's an out-and-out psychopath, **enjoys** taking human life – that's why armies spend so much time and money trying to condition new recruits to perform the act of killing automatically, instinctively, before they have even a second to think about the enormity of it. And that's why the Nazis structured the routine of the concentration camp guards so that everyone had a share in the atrocities; if you spread the guilt around in a big-enough circle, each man's portion becomes smaller and easier to live with. Every Maxim gunner I knew dealt with it in his own way – one of my friends used to go off into the woods and vomit until he was just throwing up bile; another one developed a weird nervous disorder, so that his hands twitched and his fingers kept curling up, like he was gripping the firing handles, and it got so bad sometimes he couldn't hold and light his own cigarettes – we had to put the cigarette into his fingers, arrange them so he could hold it, and then light it for him. I heard about guys in other companies who actually shot themselves in the foot,

that sort of thing, but I can't swear that it happened. As for me, I just felt unbelievably foul, **physically unclean** after six or seven hours of cutting men down like stalks of wheat, so when that day's fighting had finally died down, I always made a bee-line for the sauna behind our lines, and stayed inside the steam until my skin was puckered and wrinkled and soft like an infant's. Freud would say I was trying to be reborn after each day's trauma, and you know what? He would have been right!

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13. THE FINNS TRY SOMETHING NEW (AND FAIL MISERABLY)

The first Red Army offensive against the Mannerheim Line ended three days after it began. It had been an unmitigated, shocking, disaster. For Stalin, and for the best of his generals who had survived the purges, the defeat was both a nightmare and a humiliation too bitter to endure. They all knew that Hitler and his generals were following the Finnish campaign very closely, and from the results so far, they could draw only one conclusion: the Red Army was a fumbling, inept giant with feet of clay rather than sinews of steel.

Even Gustav Mannerheim was dazed by the immensity of the Soviet failure, and at first he refused to believe the casualty reports handed to him. As he remarked to a British journalist who was granted a rare interview a few weeks later, in early January:

> "I could not believe the reports because, in my experience, battles simply did not have such one-sided results! I never would have believed that my men were so good, or that the enemy's commanders could be so bad. Their orders and their tactics, were not just incompetent, they were criminal. Nor could I rejoice in that first stunning victory – rather, it filled me with foreboding. I understood that the next time they launched an offensive on the Isthmus, they could not possibly be so stupid as to repeat the mistakes they made during the first one. We would soon be facing a new and much more dangerous foe…"

The astonishing Russian body-count, combined with the relatively low number of friendly casualties, generated a state of near-euphoria in the Finnish high command. Not only had the enemy taken staggering losses, but, according to prisoner and deserter

interrogations, their surviving comrades were in no shape to withstand a surprise counterattack; the morale of the frontline Russian units was abysmal; no mail had gotten through to the soldiers since they entered Finland; food and medical supplies were running low; relatively few supply trains were arriving from Leningrad and the few that did were all carrying ammunition and replacement tanks; infantry replacements, food, and badly needed shipments of warmer clothing were said to be on the way, but – warned the commissars -- it might take "several days" for these items to reach the men in the frontlines – which meant, the interrogated captives bitterly commented, that it might be **weeks**. The impression grew stronger as scouts confirmed what the deserters had said: the Soviet frontline units were over-extended, demoralized, and living on half-rations. They were, in short, as vulnerable to a surprise counterattack as a numerically superior army can be.

Not that the Finnish generals seriously believed they could roll the invasion back to the border, but it was their opinion that even a limited offensive victory would boost Finnish morale to the skies (no one asked the Finnish GI's if this was true – to a man, everyone of them I interviewed said that all **they** wanted to do in the relative lull that followed Dec. 21, was hunker down in the warm log shelters 300 - 500 yards to the rear and sleep; when they were ordered to make ready for a counterattack, their morale did anything but soar!). More valid were the conclusions that a swift little offensive victory would be a great tonic to the civilian populace, would generate even more admiration for Finland among the Allied electorates (which would, hopefully, translate into greater shipments of military aid), and serve to further set back Stalin's timetable for conquest.

"Fighting for time" – that was the fundamental motive behind many of Mannerheim's decisions from this point on. He alone among the field commanders was privy to the broader diplomatic context; he alone knew just how long and torturous was the process of acquiring foreign arms and then actually shipping them to Finland. If a modest counter-offensive would buy another three or four weeks before the Russians resumed their full-scale offensive on the Isthmus, that was a precious breathing space during which foreign arms might actually start to reach the Isthmus front, and if by some miracle the Mannerheim Line could hold out until the early spring thaws (which would make the lakes and Gulf once more impassable to tanks, if not yet to infantry), that would have the same effect as shortening the Line by 25%, freeing up thousands of men who could be formed into local reserves or used to thicken resistance around Summa and Taipale.

General Ostermann, Commander-in-Chief of Isthmus Headquarters, was now as sanguine and aggressive-minded as he had been cautious and foot-dragging during the Forward Zone battles. He drew up plans for a bold but seemingly realistic counterattack with limited objectives. A sort of Cannae-in-the-snow, the operation took the shape of a double pincers attack against the enemy-held salient in front of Summa. On the map, it looked impressive: a large pair of arrows inside a smaller pair of arrows, the large set representing the most powerful Finnish pincers, the smallerq set representing secondary, supporting attacks. If the two big pincers could penetrate the Russian front, then swing toward each other along an axis defined by a lateral road passing through the important Soviet supply dumps at Perkjarvi railroad station (a distance of approximately four miles

behind the frontlines) the resulting double envelopment would nip off three Russian divisions.

On the targeted salient's left, Ostermann proposed to attack with the fresh troops of the reserve Sixth Division (whose men might not have described themselves as "fresh", having spent the past two weeks digging back-up entrenchments around Viipuri while undergoing three or four air raids per day), which he planned to bring forward and interpose between the current boundary demarcating the sectors of the Fifth and Fourth Divisions. On the right flank of the enemy salient, the corresponding primary assault would be undertaken by the First Division, which the Russians had more or less left alone during the final, desperate assaults against Summa. Theoretically, the men of First Division should be more rested than their burned-out comrades of the Fifth, and when its commander pointed out that, while it was true that Russian ground attacks on Dec. 19-20 had been half-hearted, their shelling and bombing had continued with undiminished vigor, his protests were ignored. The First division was ordered to pierce the Russian line on the south-west shores of Lake Muolaajarvi until it reached Lake Perkjarvi, continue the attack with an oblique-right movement until it captured the Perkjarvi RR station. After securing this valuable objective, the First would pivot 90-degrees to the right and advance until it linked up with the Sixth, thus closing the trap behind the Summa salient.

Following concentric paths in a radius about three miles from the Sixth Division's right and the First Division's left, the Fourth and Eleventh Divisions would support the primary pincers by advancing to Lake Kaukjarvi and Lake Perkjarvi, respectively.

The last element of this elegant but clearly over-complex operation was the most dubious of all: "vigorous" feint attacks by the bone-weary men of the Fifth Division,

intended to fix the attention of the three target Russian divisions on their front, while they were, hopefully, being swiftly cut off four miles to their rear.

With quite a-typical optimism, Mannerheim allowed himself to be persuaded. Given how demoralized and over-extended the Russians were in front of the Mannerheim Line, and the fact that he was nowhere asking his men to penetrate enemy territory more than four-and-a-half miles, Mannerheim thought the potential gains far outweighed the risks. On the map, it looked like a military classic-in-the-making, and even though he allowed only thirty-six hours for coordinating plans and timetables among the staffs of **five** divisions, it was the sort of operation any professional European staff ought to be able to pull-together in twenty-four hours.

That was just the problem, really. While the staffs of five German, French, or British divisions might have coordinated such a plan as an efficient, by-the-numbers exercise, the Finnish army had never before in its history even **rehearsed** a multi-division offensive on a sand-table or wargamed one as a map exercise; never had such a complicated operation been practiced in field maneuvers – only three times since 1918, had the military budget permitted maneuver exercises on a divisional scale. To assume that five inexperienced staffs, just coming off the adrenalin high of a desperately-fought defensive battle, could switch gears overnight and concoct an efficient plan involving **two concentric double-envelopments** and a series of frontal diversionary assaults, and then manage to get all the units in their correct places before the mandated H-Hour of 6:30 AM, December 23…well, in retrospect, the very idea seems delusional.

Beyond the surreal assumptions underlying the plan, it had so many tactical flaws and fantastic assumptions that I scarcely know where to start listing them. Even if the

staff work had been perfect and coordination among the five divisions remained smooth after the first shock of contact, the plan was so ambitious that it stood almost no chance of success without two added ingredients: armored units to give the "big pincers" speed and cutting power, and massive, flexible, artillery support to protect their flanks and to knock out the unexpected Russian strong points they were sure to encounter. Of course, the Finns had neither of those assets.

It also needed **fresh**, well-rested troops, but the First and Sixth divisions were "fresh" only in comparison to the hard-used men of the Fifth. The men of First Division were still mopping up pockets of resistance when they were ordered to prepare for a counterattack; at best, they managed one night of sleep and a couple of hot meals before H-Hour. The Sixth Division, too, had been engaged in manual labor continuously for more than two weeks and subjected to punishing air attacks whenever the skies cleared over Viipuri. Given just thirty-six hours to drop their shovels and prepare for hard combat, they "rested" by means of occasional cat-naps, but spent most of that time sorting out chaotic supply snafus, locating several hundred missing pairs of skis, and loading sleds and lorries with the rations and ammunition they would need for the operation.

Instead of being moved forward in compact, organized contingents, the entire division marched from Viipuri to the Summa front in one great ungainly mob. At the same time they began their twenty-mile hike, the worst blizzard in twenty years came howling up from the Baltic, reducing visibility to fifty yards, raking the Karelian Isthmus with gale-force winds and arrowheads of snow that blew in horizontal sheets and penetrated even the warmest ski-trooper outfits. During the time it took the Sixth

Division to move from Viipuri into the frontlines, the temperature plummeted to eight degree (f) with a wind-chill factor equivalent to twenty-five below zero. Horses' hooves and sled runners sliced telephone wires into confetti and the intense cold shattered many of the vacuum tubes in the Finns' field radios.

Disoriented by the blizzard and unfamiliar with the landscape, numerous companies became detached from their battalions, and one wretchedly cold batch of stragglers, numbering about 500, ended up taking shelter in jumping-off positions that turned out to be eight miles west of their assigned sector – there was no time to shift them back before H-Hour, so they went into battle under the command of officers they had never seen before.

It's a wonder that the attack was launched at all. In fact, a group of captains, majors, and colonels who observed the straggling, half-frozen deployment of the Sixth Division in its jumping-off locations, were so appalled by the prevailing state of anarchy that they drafted an urgent message to General Ohquist, signing their names as a united group of objective professional soldiers, pleading with him to delay the offensive or cancel it altogether, but they were unable to raise II Corps HQ, either by telephone or by radio. And II Corps, in turn, had lost all contact with **two entire divisions** by eight o'clock that morning!

Ready or not, the counter-offensive jumped off at 6:30 AM, December 23, behind a downright pathetic artillery barrage lasting all of ten minutes – just enough time to alert the Russians, but not enough to do them any significant harm. To its everlasting credit, the untested Sixth Division attacked with surprising élan and broke through the Russians' forward crust of resistance in less than thirty minutes. Advancing in echelon and by

battalions, dragging its organic mortar batteries in sleds behind it, the division made steady progress, overcoming only spotty, desultory resistance, until its foremost battalion reached a large, camouflaged clearing about 1.5 miles deep in Russian territory, where they stumbled into a previously undetected tank park and maintenance facility. It was obvious the Soviet tankers had been warned of the Finns' approach only minutes before the two sides spotted each other, but the Russian crews were not panicking – instead, they were warning up their engines and gradually forming a "wagon train" circle to defend their encampment. The Finnish battalion commander, who later described this as "the juiciest artillery target imaginable" quickly tried to call down a powerful barrage, while the enemy tanks were still more or less clumped together in tight formation. He was authorized to call on two four-gun howitzer batteries, and to his amazement, the radio was working perfectly. Voice trembling with excitement, he gave the battery commander the map coordinates of his target and recommended fire-for-effect as soon as possible.

A dismaying groan came back from the battery commander as he checked his own map. Alas, he explained, during the confusion and rotten visibility last night, his guns had been directed on to the wrong road and had emplaced in a clearing about six miles south-west of the one they were **supposed** to be occupying – the mass of Russian tanks was just outside of his cannons' maximum range.

By now, the tanks were starting to form their defensive circle and one by one, they opened fire on every white-clad soldier they spotted in the woods. Frantic now, the battalion commander contacted his own mortars and tried to arrange a concentrated stonk – he might not be able to penetrate those turrets with 81mm high explosive rounds but the

mortar fire would certainly suppress the tanks long enough to start picking them off by close-assault.

Almost weeping with frustration, the mortar batteries' commander reported that his men had just pried open the crates of ammo that a truck had delivered to them an hour before dawn. Although the boxes were clearly labeled "mortar shells", the rounds packed inside were – ironically – armor-piercing Bofors ammo, even though the nearest Bofors gun was about two miles away.

Everywhere else on that dismal morning, the story was much the same. Both the big pair of pincer-attacks and the smaller ones designed to support them were able to cut through the enemy's frontline without encountering heavy resistance or major delays. After that, however, things went haywire rapidly. As it turned out, although the attackers had excellent information about the strength and disposition of the frontline Soviet units, virtually all the intelligence about what lay beyond the frontlines turned out to be completely, dangerously, wrong. In areas where demoralized Red Army survivors were supposed to be recuperating from their recent ordeal, the Finns ran head-long into bivouac areas full of fresh, well-armed replacements, newly arrived from Leningrad and eager to show the commissars their mettle. Fierce, chaotic firefights broke out. Like the vehicles encountered by the Sixth division, many small packets of Soviet armor were encamped in the salient, and their crews showed no sign of "demoralization" whatever. Either the tanks took defensive formations and blistered the surrounding forest with their machine guns, or they actually began chasing down Finnish detachments as though herding them through the trees were the greatest sport in the world.

For the forward artillery observers attached to the operation, this was a day of incredible frustration. Over and over again, they got accurate fixes on fuel and ammo dumps, radio hubs, officers' quarters, and similarly lucrative targets – only to find they no longer could make contact with friendly batteries, or if they did, they could call down nothing more than a few token salvos. Why? Because the shortage of ammunition was so severe that no Finnish battery was permitted to fire more than **ten rounds** per tube per hour!

It tells us much about the farcical nature of this supposedly "bold and slashing" counterattack to learn that one of the signal achievements of Finnish arms on that day, was the destruction, by elements of the First Division, of a quartermaster depot, where its riflemen slaughtered forty stable clerks and veterinarians along with 150 pack animals…

When the Russians managed to get their own artillery into the act, the tide turned decisively. This happened shortly after 9:15 AM, when a Soviet recon company managed to raise two huge observation balloons, which hung maddeningly just beyond rifle range, a height from which they could observe any forward movement by the Sixth **and** Fourth Divisions. Because the observers' radios were working perfectly, they were soon coordinating the fire of approximately 200 field guns, howitzers, and heavy mortars. Whenever the Finns attempted to outflank pockets of infantry resistance, they were stopped cold by walls of shell fire and compelled to withdraw until the balloonists could no longer track them from on high.

By 10:00 AM, the word "debacle" began to resonate more loudly in Mannerheim's mind with each new and often fragmentary report trickled through the over-burdened chain of command and landed on his desk. When General Ohquist finally

regained radio contact with three divisions of II Corps, he was appalled by what he heard. General Ostermann retained optimism for another half-hour, because he had a clear link to First Division and, after wiping out the stable-hands and burning tons of hay, that unit had made good progress against scattered, ineffectual resistance, and had reached the shores of Lake Perkjarvi, where its battalions were regrouping for the right-wing pivot maneuver that was supposed to enable them to link up with Sixth division.

But when last heard from, Sixth Division was hopelessly pinned down by heavy shelling, and even if it managed to either shoot down the spotting balloons or find an axis of advance that was hidden from their sight, it was still separated from First Division by a gap of nine miles. At 11:45, Ohquist forwarded to Isthmus Command the latest bad news: a large number of Russian tanks had been seen moving into the gap between the Sixth Division's right flank and the Fourth Division's left. Ohquist thought it was time to pull the plug on this whole misbegotten enterprise, before those tanks managed to cut off the head of a Finnish division. Ostermann updated his own maps and concurred: a tactical nightmare was taking shape and if one of the main purposes for this offensive was to **raise** Finnish morale…well, it was not hard to see how the day's events would be interpreted from that perspective, if an entire Finnish regiment got cut off and annihilated. Sullenly, tight-lipped, Ostermann dictated a coded signal to Mannerheim, requesting that the entire operation be cancelled immediately. Mannerheim was flabbergasted – Ostermann's enthusiasm for the counterattack was one of the main reasons the Field Marshal had been persuaded to authorize it – and refused to issue such an order until he had further "clarification" of the tactical situation.

But every dispatch reaching his desk told a gloomier and more ominous tale than the last. When he read an unconfirmed report that Fourth **and** Sixth Division elements were receiving fire from large formations of new and unscratched tanks – tanks Mannerheim's S-2 experts had told him **were not there** --tanks that were aggressively shifting from a defensive to an attack posture, the Baron's professional instincts sounded an alarm. At 3:00 PM, the Commander-in-Chief of the Finnish armed forces broadcast a terse, unambiguous order: abandon all offensive actions and withdraw, in good order but as rapidly as possible, behind the Mannerheim Line.

By the time that order reached the forward Finnish units, it was ancient history. On their own authority, the commanders of every Finnish regiment still in contact with the enemy, had told their men to pick up their wounded and pull back behind the Line. By about 4:00 PM, the last Finnish troops had managed to extricate themselves.

Finnish casualties totaled approximately 1,300 killed, wounded, and missing; another 200 men had to be evacuated for severe frost bite. The soldiers who survived were extremely bitter; the failure was not **theirs.** In the days to come, the operation was nicknamed with a virtually untranslatable Finnish idiom that means: "a-stupid-and-misbegotten-butting-of-heads"

Indeed, it was not, but in both planning and execution, the "great counterattack" proved just how raw, even amateurish, the Finnish army was at waging large-scale conventional warfare. The oversights and fantastic assumptions, the slipshod and wholly inadequate planning, the brushed-off "details" (such as packing 37 mm armor-piercing shells into crates clearly labeled "Mortar Ammunition"), the demonstrated fragility of

communications, the ludicrously feeble artillery support – all of these were symptoms of sheer inexperience.

Instead of raising morale in the ranks, this bungled and costly misadventure caused the enlisted men to revise downward their previously high opinion of Mannerheim and his staff. As for raising **civilian morale**, the very notion was grotesque and Mannerheim clamped a tight lid of censorship over the episode. Not until the war was over did the public at large learn that there even **was** a counterattack on the Isthmus.

A case can be made, I suppose, that this seemingly demented Finnish incursion **did** upset the Red Army's timetable for resuming offensive action, but if so, the delay could not have amounted to much, since both Russian casualties and material damage were too insignificant to have any real impact on the Kremlin's overall strategy (as silly as it sounds, the most serious damage inflicted by the Finns was probably the slaughter of those 150 horses along with their attendant veterinarians -- the latter, at least, were in short supply!).

In fact, the whole bloody episode seems to have made no difference at all, one way or the other. Except to the families of the men who died that day, of course, and the roughly 140 Finns who lost their toes or fingers from frostbite…

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14. IVTH CORPS IMPERILLED

If this were a movie, we would now fade to a flashback of that dramatic scene on the night of December 3, which depicted Field Marshal Mannerheim carefully scrutinizing his big wall map of Finland. Somber and sonorous, the Narrator's voice re-orients us, for at this point we have not only gone back in time, we have also temporarily left the Karelian Isthmus in order to catch up on the other events unfolding during that first, crisis-filled week of December.

Aside from the unexpected number of separate Russian incursions, with their overwhelming superiority in men and firepower, the most worrisome pattern Gustav Mannerheim saw in the myriad battles raging north of Lake Ladoga was in the behavior of his own army's tactical leadership. The majority of his regimental and battalion commanders were reservists, who were now facing a crisis (more accurately, a whole interlocking **knot** of crises) which their training had not prepared them to cope with. From the reports Mannerheim had studied, it was clear that most of these officers were un-nerved by the odds against them, particularly the enemy's reckless use of tanks in parts of Finland where it was theoretically impossible to deploy armored formations – and a palpable mood of pessimism emanated from their dispatches. From the descriptions of their men's early encounters with the invading columns, one would think that each Red Army soldier was ten feet tall, impervious to anything other than silver bullets, and commanded by officers of Napoleonic daring and skill.

Mannerheim had a very different take on the situation: as he interpreted the events in north and central Finland, the enemy's forward progress was sluggish and fitful, his tactical leadership timid and unimaginative, and his discipline on-the-march so sloppy as to leave his units wide-open to spoiling attacks against his flanks. But to the Field

Marshal's growing vexation, his own officers were simply not thinking aggressively; they seemed shaken, intimidated, far more concerned with preserving the basic cohesion of their units than in drawing blood from the invaders. In Mannerheim's long experience, a defeatist frame of mind inexorably led to **defeat**.

He had already dispatched small increments of reserves and firepower to the sectors where Finnish morale seemed to be especially shaky, and now he was deliberating as to where and when he should commit his handful of available first-class reserves. He still had a few – but only a few – cool-headed career officers whom he could place in command of those units. He remained confident that the rank-and-file, if led by officers of the highest professional quality, would be able to turn things around in the sectors most vulnerable to sudden collapse. Defeatism was a contagion and it could spread through an army like wildfire – Mannerheim had seen it happened in the streets of Petrograd and in the massed retreat following the collapse of the Brushilov Offensive in World War One -- but so could renewed confidence, once the jittery troops recovered from their "Panzer Shock."

Some of the same officers whose resolve now seemed to be wavering, would eventually recover on their own. But some, evidently, would not; the Baron by now had a good idea of who they were, and it was to their sectors that he would have to send his best uncommitted officers, whether they brought with them a company or an entire regiment.

Another twenty-four hours – thirty-six at the most – and Mannerheim would lose the initiative; right now, he could still **choose** the locations where his paladins would intervene with maximum effect. To delay for another 36 hours would be to cede his

freedom of action; after his emergency orders had been given, they could no more be rescinded than a spear, once cast, could be re-targeted in mid-flight. Mannerheim faced a classic dilemma: the longer he waited to commit his limited first-rate reserves, the more information he would have to buttress his decisions; but the longer he deliberated, the farther the enemy would advance and the higher the stakes would become when he **did** take action. For an army as small as Mannerheim's, there would be no second chance to get it right.

And the result of his decisions **must** be a signal victory, an outcome so decisive, on **some** battlefield, that it would raise his army's confidence on **every** front. Not even Mannerheim could conjure up a hero; but he could try to match the man to the situation and pray that a hero would **emerge**.

By Dec. 5, the Field Marshal had made his decision. He would risk everything in the theater of Ladoga-Karelia – that vast tract of forested wilderness from the northern coast of Lake Ladoga up to Suomussalmi. The Isthmus would hold, at least for a while, but in Ladoga-Karelia, mortal danger loomed. There, the situation had indeed become clear, and it was everywhere fraught with peril. Before he dictated the crucial orders, he once more surveyed the giant map of Finland, focusing his magnificent powers of analysis on the latest situation-reports regarding every far-flung battlefield from the Arctic Sea to the Gulf of Finland, to make absolutely certain that he had overlooked nothing, that the orders already crystallized in his mind would create a situations from which Finland might derive the maximum benefit from the relatively small forces he was about to set in the path of her infinitely more powerful assailant**:**

In the Far North: By mid-December, perpetual night would shroud the icy, desolate fells of Lapland, effectively shutting down large-scale military operations, The Soviet Fourteenth Army **had** captured Petsamo – no surprise there – but since securing that burned-out port, it had only advanced another 25 miles down the Arctic Highway. Ski patrols bushwhacked the half-frozen Russians constantly, and they were accompanied now by Lapp reservists and volunteers, among whom were several renowned hunters who routinely killed their targets from almost a thousand yards away. While the enemy inched forward, tormented by marksmen they could never see, the Finns methodically destroyed every man-made structure that might provide shelter or firewood. Prisoner interrogations revealed that Russian morale was already plummeting – it would take weeks to repair the demolished docks in Petsamo, so very few supplies were getting through from Murmansk. Between ski-trooper ambushes and frostbite, the three under-strength Russian divisions had already lost ten per cent of their manpower, along with the will to fight. Mannerheim expected them to get as far as Nautsi, and then go to ground until the spring thaw. Except for patrol skirmishes, the two sides would literally be frozen in place. The Arctic front, at least, was one sector the Baron did not have to worry about.

On the Salla Front: The Soviet 122nd and 88th divisions appeared to be stymied by the almost impassable terrain and by the increasingly stout-hearted resistance of the Border Guard and reservist companies harassing them. Mannerheim thought the enemy columns could be held at bay for a week or so, and he had already sent a few companies of newly mobilized Civic Guard militia, from the Tornio and Rovaniemi vicinities, to start fortifying a line along the western bank of the Kemi River. Additional Civic Guard

companies were under orders to head for the town of Kemijarvi, to bolster that line, but were delayed until enough rifles and machine guns could be located to equip them fully. There was also some artillery on its way to Kemijarvi: a four-gun battery of 76mm field pieces that bore the manufacturing date of 1887. Mannerheim thought the Kemi River line would hold through the rest of December, by which time arms and volunteers from Sweden – only 150 miles west of Kemijarvi – should have augmented Finnish strength to such an extent that a counterattack became feasible.

On the Suomussalmi Front: The town had already been evacuated and was expected to fall on December 7 or 8 – there weren't enough defenders in the area to do more than delay the ponderous advance of the 163rd Division. The Soviet commander, Major General Zelentsov, was pushing his men hard, but the route they had taken – a one-lane icy track that would bring them to Suommusalmi from the north -- was so hemmed-in by thick forests that no advantage accrued from being a "mechanized" division. Finnish lumberjacks had thrown so many impromptu roadblocks in Zelentsov's path that his command was now fragmented into a dozen segments – some moving, some paralyzed for hours, some engaged in sharp firefights with ski-snipers – and the distance from the head of the unit to the last packet of supply trucks was more than **eight miles**. Both instinct and the map told Mannerheim that the 163rd was a veritable sitting duck, so he had released a full regiment from the reserve 9th Division at Oulu and told its commander, Colonel Hjalmar Siilasvuo, to devise a plan for destroying the Soviet division.. To augment Siilasvuo's striking power, the Baron had authorized the transfer of several mortar batteries, a couple of howitzers, and a handful of the precious Bofors anti-

tank guns; the weapons and ammo were en route, and Siilasvuo – widely regarded as one of the more brilliant tacticians in the Finnish Army -- had come up with a bold plan for cutting the Russian division into isolated pockets, then destroying them one by one. The colonel hoped to begin offensive action on the 10th and Mannerheim had no intention of interfering. He had the utmost confidence in Siilasvuo and so, for the moment, his mind was at ease about the situation developing around Suomussalmi.

The Kuhmo sector: The Field Marshal had no earthly idea why the enemy had chosen to commit an entire division, the 54th, against the insignificant hamlet of Kuhmo, some 200 miles south-east of Suomussalmi. The terrain was so daunting, the local roads so few and so primitive, that the small Border Guard and militia Guard detachments had standing orders to be vigilant – which was their normal job, of course – and to expect no reinforcements, because none would be needed. Stunned by the appearance of an entire Soviet division where they had been told to expect nothing larger than a reconnaissance probe, and appalled by the deployment of tank formations in terrain where it was supposedly "impossible" to operate mechanized units, the Finns were initially paralyzed by the odds against them. But in the last four days, the Kuhmo defenders had begun to put up spirited resistance. They had learned that if you moved **through** and struck **from** the forest, those road-bound tanks were not so terrifying after all. And they had gained a lot of respect for the one force-multiplier available to them: camouflage. They **always** knew where Ivan was, but Ivan rarely caught a glimpse of **them** – all it took was one brief flurry of sniper fire, and the enemy would waste thousands of rounds spraying the trees blindly. As more and more tiny Civic Guard detachments converged on Kuhmo, a

thin but cohesive defense was forming, and the invading Russians – who seemed just as mystified about the reasons they had been ordered to capture Kuhmo as Mannerheim had been amazed by their appearance – were now digging in for the passive occupation of ten square miles of pine trees. On the Kuhmo front, at least, neither side had the strength nor the inclination to provoke the other; the Baron would be notified immediately if anything changed, but for the time being he saw no reason to worry.

He was grateful for that small mercy, because 160-odd miles southeast of Kuhmo, there were inter-connected crises flaring up simultaneously in five sectors of Ladoga-Karelia, and he only had the resources to intervene decisively in **one** of those places.

Down on the Ladoga coast, IV Corps was holding its own against exactly the number of Russian divisions Mannerheim had predicted: two. The 168th, advancing along the shoreline, was greatly hampered by interdiction fire from Finnish coast artillery on Mantsinsaari Island. To the north, the 18th Division was moving on a parallel but ultimately converging axis: the Uomaa Road. Both roads merged at Kitela, and when the two Russian divisions linked-up there, that was the moment for General Hagglund to launch his surprise attack on their right flank.

Only now, on the evening of December 6, that whole strategy was on the verge of collapse, due to the unanticipated attacks by three Soviet divisions whose clear intent was to envelope IVth Corps from above and behind its prepared defenses. Initially, the greatest threat seemed to come from the attack farthest away from Lake Ladoga itself, up at Ilomantsi, where the Soviet 155th Division was closer to the open terrain and vulnerable communications of Finland's interior. Fortunately, its commander, General Gushevski, was showing excessive caution as he slowly pushed toward Ilomantsi – he

had been stopped repeatedly by harassing attacks launched by the two rag-tag Finnish battalions blocking the way. By twilight on December 6, the division was still twelve miles east of Ilomantsi, and when daylight began to fade, about 4:00 PM, it halted and went into defensive *laager* for the night. At this rate, those Soviet soldiers would take another three days to reach Ilomantsi, even if nobody was shooting at them. The other two unexpected enemy divisions were led much more aggressively. When the 55th Division suddenly attacked on November 30, it drove across the border at a point only two miles east of the railroad depot at Suvilahti, at the southern tip of Suojarvi, a lake so big that it effectively prevented the staff of the 55th from supporting or coordinating actions with its companion-division, the 139th, which was heading for Tolvajarvi. Despite furious resistance and several counterattacks, the 55th made steady progress; by the night of the 6th, the division was regrouping on the northeast shore of the Kollaa River, last natural barrier between its armored spearheads and its next objective, the important road/rail junction at Loimola. If the Finns did not hold their line at the Kollaa River, the 55th would be able to strike IV Corps behind its left flank, and General Hagglund's long-planned counter-stroke would not take place. Mannerheim was trying to bolster the Kollaa Line with every man and gun he could scrape up (*), but for the first time in his career, the Field Marshal had been compelled to issue the grim order: *No retreat! Stand or die! Kollaa must NOT fall!*

For the time being, however, there was nothing else Mannerheim could do but hope the outnumbered defenders would obey that command.

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FOOTNOTE:

Throughout their retreat to the Kollaa Riverr, the Finns had repeatedly been saved from collapse by their one "tank": an armored train that chuffed bravely up and down the railroad line, providing heavy, accurate artillery support and even duking-it-out with Soviet T-28s. It's unclear whether the train's 75 mm guns actually destroyed any tanks – the gunners had no armor-piercing rounds – but they certainly banged-up a few and scared off many more; the train's thick slabs of old armor plate, forged to naval specs, easily deflected the 37mm shots directed against it. Four or five days after the bitter, protracted struggle for the Kollaa began, its defenders also received two more of those museum-piece cannon the Finns kept finding in forgotten warehouses: a pair of 3.5-inch French field guns whose barrels bore the casting date of 1871. Fully one-third of their antique ammunition refused to fire, and the rounds that did were not particularly lethal, but their black powder warheads scared the hell of Russian troops because of the enormous flash and thunderous report of their detonations – many of the less-educated Russian soldiers thought the choking gunpowder fumes were a new type of poison gas!

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15. CRISIS AT TOLVAJARVI – TWO HEROES EMERGE

There was, however, something Mannerheim **could** do to thwart the enemy's relentless drive on Tolvajarvi. Since no major Russian incursions had been expected in the forbidding wilderness between Lake Suojarvi and Ilomantsi, that entire 15-mile sector had been screened by an *ad hoc* formation, the sort of bits-and-pieces outfit the Germans dubbed a *"Kampfgruppe",* of about 4,000 men, mostly reservists, christened "Task Force R", after the name of their commander, Lt. Col. Rasanen.

Thrown off-balance, as so many other Finnish units were, by their first encounters with tanks, the men of T.F.Rasanen had been ejected from both of the defensive lines they had tried to hold, first on the northern end of Lake Suojarvi, and then at the Aittojoki River. On the afternoon of December 1, in a desperate attempt to ease the pressure, Finnish engineers blew up a large dam on the western shore of the lake. The resulting flood halted the enemy just as long as it took for the water to freeze solid, which in these latitudes was only about six hours.

That bought enough time for Mannerheim to cobble-together another *Kampfgruppe* of reinforcements, comprising about 400 lightly armed riflemen (including middle-aged militiamen and young recruits with only a few weeks' training) who now bore the uninspiring designation "Special Battalion 112". They were all from the quartermaster branch, but as there was precious little quarter-mastering to be done, they drew rifles and bandoliers and marched glumly to the front, where they were hastily inserted on one flank of rhw okieasnsdur ty aeutagtvtyr64tyweheyethe Aittojoki line. Not much was expected of them, yet when the Aittojoki line was breached, on the afternoon of December 4, it was Special Battalion 112 that saved the day by launching a mettlesome and rather wild counterattack that enabled their exhausted comrades to withdraw without being cut to pieces in the process.

On December 5, Mannerheim decided that, of all the developing threats above IVth Corps, the one that posed the most immediate and critical danger was the 139th Division's thrust toward Tolvajarvi. He had certainly lost confidence in Lt. Col. Rasanen, who had, after his second and last trip to inspect the frontline, burrowed into the dank safety of his bunker and never came out again. Even on the radio, you could hear the funk in his voice. It was at this juncture that Mannerheim took direct command of the reserve 6th Division, which – as we have noted – was industriously trying to build fortifications in front of Viipuri. He selected one of that division's three regiments, JR-16, and ordered it to board trains for Vartsila, the closest depot to Tolvajarvi. Then he telephoned the man he had chosen to replace the hapless Rasanen, and told him to stand by for the most important assignment of his career.

The situation demanded a firm, resolute, leader, and the Field Marshal had already picked his man two days earlier. Col. Paavo Talvela had commanded an infantry battalion during the Civil War and a Border Guard regiment during the uneasy years that followed. He was intimately familiar with the terrain north of Lake Ladoga, and during his stint at the Finnish War College, where he graduated at the head of his class, he had in fact war-gamed many map-scenarios based on the assumption that Russia could and would send large formations across the border there, precisely for the purpose of pinning down Finnish troops who would otherwise be available for deployment on the Isthmus.

Talvela's first action was to contact the commander of JR-16, his old friend Lt. Col. Aaro Pajari. He instructed Pajari to take the staff car he would find waiting at Vartsila, and while his men were unloading their equipment from the train, drive up to Tolvajarvi and made a thorough personal inspection of the situation there.

Pajari did so, and was appalled by what he found. When he delivered his report to Talvela, at 3:15 A.M., it was a grim forecast of impending disaster. Rasanen was worse than useless, he said – more distraught by the dressing-down he'd received from Mannerheim than he seemed to be about the fact that his men were physically drained and psychologically already beaten. They had been retreating under fire, or engaging in uniformly futile delaying actions, for a week, pounded by artillery they could not reply to and over-run by tanks they could oppose only with hand grenades and mines. The Soviet 139th was obviously a crack outfit, for its actions had revealed a high state of training and tactical cohesion. Moreover, if intelligence estimates were accurate, it was an uncommonly large Red Army division, comprising 20,000 men, between 53 and 55 tanks, and roughly 150 pieces of artillery.

The odds against the defenders were five to one; the enemy had overwhelming superiority in terms of artillery, not to mention an absolute monopoly in armor. Discipline in Task Force Rasanen was being maintained by a thread. One more hard push by the enemy, and that thread would probably snap. With Talvela leading them, Pajari concluded, it was just barely possible they could rally and hold Tolvajarvi, but for these dog-tired, pessimistic soldiers to wrest the initiative from the Russians and actually roll back their gains… That seemed beyond the realm of the possible.

Talvela gently rebuked his friend: It was only one Russian division, he said, at the end of a crude and fragile supply line, and its men were surely exhausted, too. The endless Finnish retreats had to stop **now** – behind Tolvajarvi village. there was just nowhere left to retreat **to.** While Pajari went off to snatch a few hours of sleep, Talvela phoned the gist of his report to Mannerheim.

The next day, December 7, "Task Force Rasanen" ceased to exist – it became "Group Talvela", a unified command incorporating all Finnish forces between Tolvajarvi and Ilomantsi. While the men of JR-16 marched from Vartsila, Pajari went ahead in his staff car and personally delivered the orders relieving Rasanen of command. Then he summoned all the company and battalion commanders and briefed them on the changes. He was happy to see a flicker of renewed hope and determination in their eyes when he told them about their new designation and the sacking of their previous commander. "It's about-damn-time," one officer growled. "My men will be delighted to hear it."

When Col. Talvela arrived a short time later, Pajari was at least able to report that the defenders of Tolvajarvi were heartened by his arrival and were visibly more alert than they had been on the night of his first inspection. Talvela wasted no time; if they were

going to do the "impossible", they would have to start just as soon as the lead battalion of JR-16 had eaten a meal and its officers had taken their first look at the surrounding landscape.

Pajari and Talvela went forward to make their own survey of the situation, finding an ideal observation spot atop a brush-covered knoll less than 500 yards from the nearest Red Army entrenchments. The fieldcraft exhibited by these leading Soviet elements was very good; their forward observers and outposts were manned by sharp-eyed, alert, sentries; those weapons that Talvela could see, looked to be well-maintained. On the other hand, the enemy troops appeared to be going about their business without making any attempt to hide their activities or locations from hostile eyes. They didn't even seem to be worried about snipers – for good reason, Talvela soon learned. Task Force Rasanen had become too demoralized to deploy any! Not since the early skirmishes around Suojarvi had the soldiers of the Soviet 139th Division been shot at by a single Finnish sniper! "That's going to change as of today!" whispered Pajari, adding an exclamation point to the notes he was taking.

By changing their positions carefully, the two Finnish officers were able to get a good look at much of the Russian encampment, and while it was obvious that the enemy troops were cold and unhappy to be there, Talvela could detect no outward signs of discouragement or low morale – this was a sharp-looking, obviously well-disciplined, outfit. Talvela concluded that it would not be easy to dislodge them from Finnish soil. He was more correct than he knew… and in the hard-fought days to come, he would gain a grudging respect for his opponent, Soviet General Beljajev.

Both Finnish officers read the tactical situation the same way: General Beljajev had two regiments forward and his third regiment resting in reserve (*). The Russians' right flank was anchored on the rocky eastern shore of Lake Hirvasjarvi; their left flank rested atop a steep, rocky islet called Kottisaari, which rose high above the eastern shore of Lake Tolvajarvi. The Reds' perimeter was obviously strongest in the center, where Beljayev's engineers could be seen busily fortifying a large, imposing, stoutly-built, two-story log building, which had been a popular ski resort and hunting lodge in peace time.. From the windows of its upper-level bedrooms, the enemy's machine gunners would enjoy excellent fields of fire. Beljayev's third regiment, Talvela figured, would be far enough back to rest, but close enough to be hurried forward in an emergency; its battalion commanders would have sought defiladed ground, gullies or deeply indented bowls, where their men could safely build enormous bonfires and thaw out. There was but one region on the map that answered all those requirements, a kilometer-square area .south-east of a narrow isthmus named Kivisalmi, where the road to Aglajarvi and Suojarvi threaded between lakes on a high embankment, was an area filled with steep narrow ridges and deep bowl-like depressions, screened from observation by both the mature of the terrain and by the dense forests that surrounded it.Another division could he hidden in that terrain and never be spotted from the air.. Pajari knew that area personally, and he told Talvela that there was room in those gullies and depressions for a whole brigade to bivouac, and for its men to build all the bonfires they wanted, without having to worry about Finnish snipers or mortar shells. Once Ivan thawed out around a bonfire, and enjoyed his first hot meal in days, he was likely to let his guard down; his officers –

military and political alike – were likely to be hitting the vodka pretty hard, too, once darkness descended.

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(*) FOOTNOTE: Actaully, that may not have been the case, at least not when the Finnish counteroffensive started. Beljajev appears to have had all three full reigmnets in line, and had organized a central reserve comprising one battalion from each – a function of having such a large inventory of troops. Unorthodox those thig method might have been, it amounted to more or less the same set-up as the textbook formula…
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Then ***that's*** where we'll hit them, Talvela decided.

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But for the moment, Pajari had to drive back down to Vartsila; he had promised the soldiers of his Third Battalion – the battalion he had commanded before being promoted to lead the whole regiment -- that he would lead them personally into the frontlines before Tolvajarvi village, and he intended to keep his promise. He would return to the front just as Soviet Generak Beljajev launched another strong attack on Talvela's weary men.

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Pajari's regiment, JR-16, had been arriving by train all day, starting with the First Battalion, /JR-16, which disembarked at Vartsila near dawn and was digging entrenchments north-west of the bridge that spanned the narrows (the Kivisalmi Isthmus) between Lake Tolvajarvi below the span, and Lake Taivaljarvi above it. Pajari had arrived late that same day, with the third and last battalion of his regiment (3/JR-16) and rather than take the staff car Tavela had sent to meet him, he led his battalion up to the

front on foot, marching proudly at their head as soon as he saw Finnish observers sizing up the new arrivals.

Then, when he heard sporadic gun fire ahead, he gave up the theatrics and double-timed the battalion forward. What he found and saw there was highly disturbing. A wide-based and strongly-supported Russian attack had smote the Finnish line about an hour previous, and despite initially spirited resistance, the Finns' morale caved-in from sheer weight of numbers, galling Russian artillery fire, and still-alarming pin-prick thrusts by two or three tanks at a time, jabbing here, turning broadside there, and constantly shelling and strafing, and providing each other with mutually supporting coverage. Only one – out of a half-dozen – Finnish tank-hunter had weaved through the machine-gun fire close enough to lob a satchel charge, and he had been wounded in both legs trying to escape. The explosive pack had knocked off a tread and caused something-or-other inside the engine compartment to seep a little ribbon of smoke, but the immobilized vehicle could still rotate its turret and could still fire. When darkness came, a Russian prime-mover would sneak up, attach a towing cable, and drag the vehicle away for repairs. It was not a mortally stricken tank, and would probably be back in action within 24 hours.

Un-nerved by its first encounter with rampaging tanks, and rendered, shall we say "insecure" by the heavy and continuous Russian shelling, Pajari's first battalion was hit hard, long before it had finished digging its earthworks, and its morale had broken all at once. While its men did not throw up their hands, drop

their arms, or scream hysterically, they did retire quickly and without turning to offer resistance until they had been chased all the was off the eastern coast of Tolvajarvi, across the Kivisalmi Bridge, and into the hilly, heavily wooded embankment that defined the western shore. Unfortunately, by bugging-out when and where they did, the First Battalion opened a gap in Finnish lines that the enemy spotted and was quick to exploit. Most of a Soviet battalion angled-in and through that gap and without encountering any significant resistance, took control of Kotisaari Island. What was left of the Finnish front on the eastern shore now crumbled swiftly, and the heartened Soviet battalions that had been confronting them, pressed on steadily and skillfully until they had ejected the last Finnish stragglers and had laid claim to the critical peninsula of Hirvasvarju.

Pajari and his 3rd Battalion arrived just in time to witness the pell-mell retreat of First Battalion. Sizing up the situation instantly, Pajari did exactly what officers are supposed to do in such a crisis: he strode forward briskly but calmly, paying no heed to the occasional Soviet sniper rounds cracking near his head, and by both parade-ground shouts and firm, steady admonitions, alternately cajoling or shaming the panic-stricken refugees into halting, taking cover, and pointing their rifles the right way. Far from acting in a "choleric" manner, most witnesses remember him as addressing the fleeing men in "reasonable" tones of voice, never threatening them or bellowing accusations of cowardice, but simply and calmly appealing to their patriotism and sense of duty: "If you don't stop running away, you're going to contaminate every other Finnish unit, and then the Russians will chase us all back to Vartsila! You don't want to run all that distance, do you?"

In truth, Pajari had some misgivings about the Third Battalion of JR-16. It was composed almost entirely of working-class Finns from the factories of Tampere, an industrial city that was in 1939, as it had been in 1918, a focal point of left-wing politics. Back in 1933, during celebrations marking the fifteenth anniversary of Tampere's capture by the Whites, Pajari had been involved in an ugly, controversial incident. On that occasion some of the more militant local Social Democrats had hoisted red banners underneath the Finnish national flag, as a protest against a ceremony that, in their opinion, commemorated the crushing of a genuinely spontaneous workers' uprising. Equally offended, Pajari had rounded up a band of some 200 Civic Guardsmen, and led them into the crowd to rip down the offending red flags. No shots were fired, but during the ensuing street brawl a number of Socialists were badly beaten and local police had to wade in with batons to quell the melee.

In the weeks of press attention that followed the incident, working-class resentment focused on Pajari, and a lot of unpleasant old wounds were reopened in the Tampere area. Memories of that incident certainly loomed large in Pajari's mind as he paced the rows of freshly dug foxholes on the western shore of Tolvajarvi, trying to set an example for soldiers, at least a few of whom might have wanted to shoot him dead only five short years ago. But on this day the Third Battalion stood firm and the panic that had dispersed the First Battalion ran its course. Fortunately the enemy – who had now been identified as the Soviet 609th Regiment, under the command of , was seemingly content to consolidate his gains, which were not small.

The Soviet 609th had pushed the Finns completely off of the eastern side of Lake Tolvajarvi. They had captured the isolated, steep-sided island of Kottisaari, which they soon turned into their communications hub because radio aerials erected on its summit afforded excellent reception; and they had seized complete control of the Hirvasharju Penninsula, a tactically important finger of rugged land that jutted out toweard Tolvajarvi village and separated Lake Tolvajarvi from Lake Hirvasjarvi to the north. The 609th had also won possession of the most strategically significant building for miles around: a two-year-old tourist hotel/hunting-and-ski lodge atop a 64-meter high plateau that was, except for the tip of Kottisaari, the highest point in the local landscape. It was a charming and very solid structure, two stories tall, constructed in the manner of a chalet, with its upper floor overhanging the lower. From the guest rooms on the second story, you could enjoy – in peacetime, anyway – a splendid panoramic view of the woods and lakes for miles around. Needless to say, the military value of the place was enormous, for with the chalet and Kottisaari in their hands, the Russians truly held the high ground – **all** of it. When General inspected the newly captured building, he was equally impressed by its value as an observation point and a ready-made bunker, and wasted no time turning it into his headquarters.

By the time Pajari and Talvela conferred early that night, the situation appeared to have stabilized. But both men had seen enough, since their arrival on the Tolvajarvi front, to know that the virus of defeatism had only been slowed, not checked. The rot that had set in during the final wretched days of Rasanen's command was still pervasive, in both veterans and replacements alike, and both

leaders agreed that some kind of dramatic action was necessary to curb the tendency toward panic, to regain some measure of the initiative, and to prove to their troops that the Russians **could** be beaten.

Finnish ski patrols had been active since nightfall and one of the latest reports brought back to Talvela recounted the presence of a battalion-sized assemblage of Soviet infantry bivouacked, with apparently lax security, in an isolated location alongside the road leading to Agalajarvi – far enough away from the ski resort and the main enemy perimeter for it to be vulnerable to a rapid commando-style raid, Talvela liked the sound of that and made preparations to lead the attack himself, but his staff talked him out of it. Instead, Pajari volunteered to lead the raid, in spite of the fact that he had already put in a very full and stressful day.

16. PAJARI'S RAID: A LEGEND IS BORN

With Pajari in command, the raiding party left the Finnish side of the lake at midnight. One hour later, the Seventh Bicycle Battalion – now reduced to about 60 per cent effectives after its bitter retreat from Suojarvi – was ordered to launch a noisy but not-too-aggressive feint against the Soviet positions around the fortified hotel; the noise and general commotion would probably mask the inevitable noise Pajari's troops would make when they left the smooth ice and climbed the rocky, brush-choked shoreline on the Russian side of the lake. From what they had seen during their reconnaissance, they were reasonably certain the enemy had not yet placed a strong garrison on Kottisaari island's

commanding summit – a work party was seen leaving the island at dusk, but no large body of troops was dispatched to the island after those men had gone. Pajari thought the earthworks there were not yet ready for occupation; that the raiding party would encounter only a few sentries in listening posts; and that from the island's jagged, heavily wooded summit, it should be possible to see straight down and into the defiladed area where Pajari believed the Russian division's third regiment was being held in reserve. The lack of aggressive sniping and patrolling by Task Force Rasanen might actually work to the raiding party's advantage – the enemy's bivouac hadn't been disturbed for the past two nights, so the level of vigilance would be low or nonexistent,

Weather conditions, at least, were ideal: no moon, thin cloud cover that muted the starlight, no snowfall expected until tomorrow afternoon. Out on the surface ice, Pajari's men moved through an eerie, inky void, the only sound was the soft rhythmic chuff-chuff of their skis. They swung wide around the southern tip of Kottisaari, and shortly after that course-change, Ninth Company. got lost. Once the raiders left Finnish lines, they had to navigate by furtively-taken compass bearings and dead reckoning; aside from the enemy-held island, there were no landmarks, and the powdery surface of the lake melted disconcertingly into the sky. If a ski-trooper suddenly took his eyes off the man in front of him, he was likely to suffer a lurch of vertigo, like a diver decompressing too fast.

That's apparently what happened to the entire Ninth Company. Its commander, a major named Ericsson, stopped for a quick map-and-compass check underneath a snow-cape, and when he emerged, he confidently led his men in exactly the wrong direction, **away** from Pajari's Fourth Company and straight on to the jumbled shoreline of Kottisaari, which he mistook for the eastern coast of Tolvajarvi. Performing their pre-

combat drill with admirable stealth, his men removed their skis and checked their weapons. Then a scout came scuttling back with the alarming news that there were several Russian machine gun nests on the higher ground only fifty feet ahead. Now Major Ericsson realized the extent of his screw-up, and tried to figure out what to do next.

Fortunately for Ninth Company, the Seventh Bicycle Battalion launched its feint attack on Kottisaari's mid-section, at precisely that moment.. Instantly reading the situation correctly, Ericsson led his men forward and contributed to the diversionary effect by ordering them to open heavy fire in the general direction of any Russian muzzle flashes they could see. The enemy responded with an enormous volume of wild musketry that lit up the northern end of the lake with streams of tracer and numerous flares, but both sides declined to come to grips. After banging-away lustily for about thirty minutes, the Finns broke off their feint and silence gradually returned. Having now revealed its presence on the island, Ninth Co. had only three choices: to dig in and fight, to attempt to pick up Fourth Company's trail (a dubious prospect, even if the enemy were not already alerted to their presence), or to withdraw to their starting point. Ericsson scrawled an urgent dispatch to Talvela, asking for new orders, and gave it to a couple of his swiftest skiers. Then he deployed his men for perimeter defense and waited.

Talvela's new orders arrived just before the Russians did. Aware now, from interrogating a prisoner the bike battalion had managed to snag, that Kottisaari was garrisoned by an entire battalion, supported by several artillery batteries and a hidden detachment of tanks, Talvela ordered Ericsson back to the Finnish side of Tolvajarvi and told him to position his company as a tactical reserve.

Meanwhile, Pajari hadn't wasted time searching for his lost company; in fact, he didn't even know it **was** lost until Fourth Co. was regrouping on the far shore and Pajari suddenly realized his head-count was down by about 200. Unsure how much damage he could inflict with a single company, but determined to inflict **some**, he ducked under a snow-cape umbrella for a quick conference with Major Urho Isotalo, Fourth Company's regular commander. Their discussion had barely started when it was interrupted by a returning scout, who brought excellent news. By sheer good fortune, Pajari's raiders had come ashore at an ideal location: smack in the middle of an unguarded patch of dense woods that separated one Soviet battalion's bivouac area from that occupied by its sister unit. Ivan was clearly not expecting trouble, the scout continued; each battalion had encamped in identical gullies, sheltered from the wind and from Finnish observation by encircling narrow ridges. Both battalions were clustered around huge bonfires, wolfing down hot rations and basking in the first real warmth their men had enjoyed in many days. As for security, it was beyond "lax". Only a few sentries were visible, and all of them were fixated on the sight of those bonfires, just counting the minutes until their relief.

Pajari studied his map, factoring in this new and priceless information. Whichever battalion he attacked, the neighboring enemy battalion could not possibly come to its aid in less than fifteen-twenty minutes. The trick was to hit the chosen target hard, pour fire down into the bivouac for ten minutes, then pull back to the place where the skis were hidden. The battalion on his left was slightly closer, so Pajari chose that encampment as his objective. He summoned the platoon leaders and issued simple orders: Rapid but silent advance – scout teams fifty yards in front – silent kills for any sentries encountered

– spread out the firepower evenly on top of the ridge overlooking the enemy camp – one concerted volley for shock-effect, then rapid independent fire for exactly ten minutes. Pajari reserved for himself the right to fire the first shot.

Near the base of the "bowl", his scouts encountered a small security patrol and dispatched every man silently with knives. No other sentinals were encountered as Fourth Company climbed the encircling slope and spread out on top. When Pajari crawled up the last few meters and peered through the snow-draped evergreen boughs that screened his skirmish line, he saw a target which he later described as: "Delicious!" Fourth Company's line was less than 100 yards from the center of the Soviet encampment. The enemy's campfires were enormous – whole trees had been dragged into piles and drenched with petrol – and the soldiers, officers and men alike, had clustered around the fires in thick rings. Few of them even carried weapons. From this elevation, Pajari could see two more glows in the night, where other enemy battalions were bivouacked near the Aglajarvi road.

It took a while to spread the ambush out properly along the ridge-top, and while Pajari's men were deploying, they heard the wildfire crackle of small arms' fire from out on the lake – the diversionary feint by the bicycle battalion! Pajari's men tensed – would the firing alarm the enemy troops below? Apparently not; the men standing around their bonfire merely glanced up, shrugged, and went back to toasting hunks of bread on their bayonet tips. By 2:00 A.M., one-hundred-forty-two Finnish riflemen and sixteen LMG teams, some of whom had exchanged their balky Lahtis for heavier but more reliable Russian Degtyarevs, were spread out in a semi-circle along the ridge crest, well concealed by snow and brush, grenades and extra magazines piled close to hand. Every

man had his first target lined up in advance – the officers, commissars, and non-coms would die in the first volley.

At approximately 2:06 A.M., Pajari fired, killing a Soviet lieutenant. On both sides of his spot, the ridge-top crashed and flamed as volley after volley swept the fire-lit gully. Starkly outlined against their fires, the Russians were hard to miss, and the impact of that first volley seemed to have stunned most of them into paralysis. In his memoirs, Pajari declared that he did not see or hear a single shot fired in reply. It didn't take ten minutes, either. After three minutes, the Finns were firing single shots at moving wounded and anybody they suspected of playing possum; many of the Russian bodies were deliberately shot three or four times, just to make sure. After four and a half minutes, there was no one left to kill. An entire Red Army battalion lay dead, the bodies piled in thick heaps around their untended campfires.

Pajari's men retired quickly to the shore, strapped on their skis, and withdrew at high speed. Behind them was chaos: the two surviving Russian battalions had managed to become embroiled in a wild firefight with each other. Half-way back to the western shore of Tolvajarvi, the Finns suffered their only casualty of the action: Colonel Aaro Pajari collapsed with a heart attack and was unconscious when his men carried him into an aid station.

Pajari rallied, and was hailed – quite deservedly – as the hero of the hour. When word spread of his raid's dramatic success, the news had a palpable effect on Finnish morale. The tired, dispirited men who had been harried back from Suojarvi, now began once more to move and act like proud soldiers. Radio intercepts proved that the raid had a serious impact on General Beljayev and his division, too. In less than five minutes, the

139th Division had lost 420 men killed, almost as many K.I.A.'s as it had suffered in all the earlier battles combined. Morale was shaken badly. Whence came this new spirit of aggression shown by the Finns? Obviously, they had a new commander and substantial reinforcements. Beljayev informed the high command that he could not undertake continued offensive action until he learned more about the changed circumstances and until his depleted ammunition stocks were replenished. Pajari's raid had stopped a whole division in its tracks, and in addition to the significant casualties his men had inflicted, they had bought a priceless forty-eight hours for Talvela's men to rest, absorb reinforcements, and gather intelligence about the enemy's dispositions.

yhe regiment's chief surgeon brought welcome news; Lieutenant-Colonel Pajari was recovered almost miraculously from his heart attack. With proper medication, he should be able to resume his duties in full by the end of the day – in fact, he was already storming around the hospital, raring to go. Talvela visited his friend and fully agreed: Pajari seemed in full, profane vigor, and ready to assume full command. Since Mannerheim had been on the radio several times already, "suggesting" that it was high time Talvela went up to Ilomantsi and try to stabilize the situation there, Talvela went. The change-over in command was accomplished with a handshake. Before he left, however, Talvela went over the planned Finnish counterattack with Pajari, and both officers were in full agreement as to what needed to be done, and which units needed to do it.

17. ILOMANTSI DELIVERED

Just to heighten the suspense! – let's interrupt the Tovajarvi narrative long enough to briefly examine how Talvela did manage to "stabilize" the situation on that adjacent front, following the action from start to finish. It won't take long, and it's an interesting pendant to the main narrative of the Tolvajarvi Campaign:

* * *

After he relieved the hapless Rasanen, Talvela had reshuffled the organization of the Ilomantsi defenders, forming them into a semi-antonymous *kampfgruppe* under the command of Colonel. Per Ekholm, yet another graduate of the Twenty-Seventh Jaegers and an officer in whom Talvela reposed full trust. "Task Force E" seemed to be holding its own. Ekholm had a firm tactical grip on things and had inspired his badly outnumbered troops to mount a stubborn defense against the Russian 155th Division.

As promised, Mannerheim had dispatched some badly needed additional firepower, but it hardly amounted to a dramatic reinforcement: four 81 mm mortars and two French 75s (one of which was found to be inoperable). Ekhom's force was now at peak strength: four battalions of infantry, 18 mortars, and five light field guns, the most modern of which had been manufactured in 1916. His opponents enjoyed a five-to-one advantage in infantry, and were supported not only by at least thirty tanks, but also with a powerful contingent of cannon – approximately forty pieces of field artillery and sixty mortars.

Despite the daunting odds, luck seemed to be with Col. Ekholm. On the very afternoon Talvela arrived for his inspection, one of Ekholm's long-range ski patrols

spotted a Soviet battalion trying to make a wide end-run around the Finns' left flank. They were now encamped for the night about five miles north of Oinaansalmi, and from what Ekhom's scouts could see of their situation, they showed little enthusiasm for their assignment. They seemed to be suffering badly from the cold; their movements were lethargic and they were expending enormous reserves of energy by trying to tramp through snowdrifts three feet deep without skis or sleds to haul their supplies. Their faces showed all the tell-tale signs of exposure, inadequate diet, and cumulative fatigue. Their flank security was weak and timid – the men assigned to that task simply refused to lose sight of the main column. Hence the ski-patrol had been able to get to within 100 yards of the enemy encampment without being detected.

On the spot, Ekholm decided to bushwhack them, provided Talvela approved of the plan. Talvela most emphatically did, and after giving Ekholm his blessing, he departed again for Tolvajarvi, confident that he had given the job of defending Ilomantsi to the right officer.

Ekholm's plan worked to perfection. The ambush party comprised 160 of his best skiers and he allocated sufficient extra firepower to insure that one-third of them carried automatic weapons. The ambushers waited until the sluggish Russian battalion broke camp, joylessly consumed a drab breakfast, and formed into a column-of-march. Lacking skis, the men had to exert three times as much effort to advance a single meter through the wilderness than they would have spent marching the same distance without snow in their way.

When the Finns sprung their trap, some of them were only thirty yards away from their targets. Moving in slow motion, or as though drugged, the Red infantry dispersed

and tried to break the ambush with random, uncoordinated attacks in several directions. Many displayed commendable bravery, but their efforts were futile. The snow was too deep for anyone to "charge", and man after man was cut down while foundering helplessly in drifts that came up to his belt-buckle. It was all over in twenty minutes. In the confusion, a few dozen Russians managed to escape into the deep forest, and over the next few days five or six of them would wander into Finnish lines and surrender, but ninety per cent of their battalion died in the ambush. Ekholm's men tried for an exact body-count, but lost track after 350.

To the Soviet commander of that division, it was as though an entire battalion had been swallowed-up by Tapio. Never again would he attempt so bold a maneuver.

"Task Force E" scored another sharp little victory on December 12, when a party of combat engineers assaulted a poorly guarded tank park and blew up four vehicles without suffering a single casualty. The following day, the Russians launched three strong probes against Ilomantsi, but each was repulsed without difficulty, and each attack cost them an additional 100-300 casualties; Finnish losses, in all three engagements, were less than 46 killed and wounded, mostly by shell fire.

Here and elsewhere on the Ilomantsi front, December 12 was the day of decision, even as it was down at Tolvajarvi. The double-pincers attack on Mohko, from north and south, failed to accomplish much. Another of the Finns' chronic breakdowns in radio communication was apparently the main cause of the failure. Up near Kallioniemi, however, the Finns scored a defensive victory by knocking out another quartet of Soviet tanks.

December 13 saw several large Soviet infantry probes repulsed at Kallioniemi, and a renewed Finnish effort against Mohko. But by day's end, it had become apparent that a stalemate had been reached across the whole Ilomantsi sector. Task Force Eckholm, though bravely and skillfully lead, simply did not have the manpower or firepower to throw back the Russians, and the 155th Division still didn't have any skis, nor did it receive any until only two weeks before the war ended – hardly enough time for its men to become experts.

After the fighting on December 13, savage weather descended on the Ilomantsi sector and paralyzed both sides with gale-force winds, furious snow-squalls, and temperatures that plunged to 25 below zero. Ekholm's men held good defensive ground, and as long as weather conditions made deep flanking molvements impossible, the Russians wouldn't be able to budge them.

At both Oinaansalmi and Kallionsalmi, position warfae became the norm. Ekholm waged an active defense, however, staging raids and probing attacks throught the rest of the war. The one ambitious Soviet effort, in mid-December, involved a deep flanking move by a Soviet battalion, which tried to slip around Ekholm's left flank and severe his line of communications. The Red battalion was exhausted by the time it reached its objective, and squad-sized bunches of its men kept peeling off to ransack Finnish tents and sheds, looking for food. Cohesion crumbled, and Ekholm personally rallied a counterattack force of clerks, mechanics, supply specialists and other rear echelon types and drove off this not-very-energized threat.

Although the Ilomantsi front was never really "quiet" – some shelling, sniping, and bushwhaching went on sporadically – for the most part both sides were frozen in

place. If there were no dramatic Finnish victories here, it must still be said that Talvela's men, especially Ekholm and his detachment, performed their primary mission admirably: they prevented a Russian breakthrough; they guarded the "backdoor" for the Finns at Tolvajarvi; and they contributed significantly, if indirectly, to the important victory Aaro Pajari was ultimately to achieve.

18. THE "SAUSAGE WAR" – AN INTERLUDE OF BLACK HUMOR

On December 10, Talvela finalized his plan for a major counterattack along the whole Tolvajarvi front. The offensive would begin just before first light on December 11; there would be no preparatory artillery barrage – Talvela's artillery support was so feeble that he figured its perfunctory little barrage wouldn't do anything but alert the enemy. Instead, he would move his mortars and heavy machine guns forward just behind the infantry, and use **them** as field artillery, at such close range their gunners could fire-by-sight.

Once again, however, Russian General Beljayev proved himself a wily opponent. He had either learned or strongly suspected that Pajari's attack was imminent and decided to pre-empt the initiative. On the night of December 10-11, he dispatched one battalion on a wide turning movement around Pajari's left; its objective was to fall suddenly on the Finns' rear-echelon support troops, maintenance facilities and supply depots (which were grouped in a vulnerable cluster, about two miles behind the front, on both sides of the Vartsila Road). Beljayev also ordered a second battalion to make a similarly wide out-

flanking march from Kottisaari Island across the southern end of Lake Tolvajarvi, and, more or less in concert with the northern pincer, to assault Tolvajarvi village from the south-west.

Beljayev's northern attack was successful…up to a point. When a Soviet battalion came boiling out of the woods, at about 11:00 A.M., only a hundred yards away from the tents and cabins sheltering a motley assortment of Finnish quartermaster clerks, typists, signalmen, cooks, two veterinarians, medics, troops, clerks, signalmen, and the regimental chaplain (who, according to some accounts, picked up a rifle and shot several Russians!).it achieved thunderclap surprise and triggered a wholesale panic. Aside from perfunctory air-raid trenches (which were rarely used), there were no defensive works; the only regular troops – aside from recuperating wounded – comprised the headquarters platoon of JR-16, about thirty men strong, and at first all they had to fight with were their personal weapons, mostly side arms. . For once, and in a manner that could easily have been decisive, Beljayev had gotten the drop on his Finnish counterpart!

And then something odd happened. The first target overrun by the Russian battalion happened to be a field kitchen where large vats of sausage soup were simmering. After scattering the handful of startled cooks, the attackers caught the scent of that food, and most of the Russian battalion paused to help themselves to the first hot, well-prepared, actually **tasty** meal any of them had eaten for many days. The momentum of their original attack, which initially had been devastating, simply vanished while the famished raiders took the opportunity to wolf-down bowl after bowl of sausage soup. To many of them, the effect of all that hot, heavy nourishment hitting their systems produced a sudden and profound condition of torpor – with distended, gaseous bellies, many of

them staggered around in a state of near-narcotic stupefaction, indifferent to the frenzied efforts of their non-coms to get them moving again. This bizarre interlude gave the panicked Finns a priceless chance to regroup.

As it happened, Col. Pajari himself was nearby – he had just checked himself out of the field hospital, in fact, determined not to let a minor thing like a heart attack keep him from taking part in the next day's counterattack. Moving swiftly from one group of Finnish stragglers to another, Pajari ordered them to grab the nearest weapon, fix bayonets, and do as he commanded. When some of the supply clerks and cooks protested that they knew nothing of infantry tactics, Pajari allegedly said: "I'll keep it simple, then. I'll shout orders, and you'll **obey** them!" As he herded this ad hoc task force back toward the field kitchens, he paused long enough to give some basic instruction to a young soldier who was having trouble attaching a bayonet to his rifle. "And by the way, corporal, the pointed end goes into the Russians! Like so!" The young recruit beamed in gratitude as Pajari slapped the bayonet handle firmly on to its mounting lug, and thereafter followed right behind Pajari like a bodyguard, eventually killing – though with bullets, not his bayonet -- at least two Russians who looked as though they might shoot the colonel. Great leadership legends are built of such vignettes, and those who witnessed the way in which Paraji galvanizing a fierce impromptu counterattack out of his rag-tag assortment of non-combatant volunteers, later swore that on that day and in that hour, Col. Pajari could have walked on water.

Pajari started "organizing" his counterattack by doing exactly what he'd promised to do: he barked out orders in a parade-ground voice audible to anyone within a

half-mile radius, limiting himself to only the basic close-order-drill commands recognizable to every man who'd undergone basic training. As he passed other knots of still-frightened Finnish refugees, Pajari hectored and shamed them out of the woods and into line behind him. When he estimated he'd rounded up at least one hundred now-gung-ho "warriors" and pausing only long enough to make sure all of them were adequately armed, Pajari led his motley force back up the road. From an ordnance repair tent he commandeered a couple of Degtyarevs and a trio of Lahti automatic rifles, along with musette bags full of spare magazines, and when he got within sight of the now-almost-empty field kitchens – observing the shambling, disorganized state of their Russian assailants -- Pajari took the time to site those automatic weapons well (their cones of fire would intersect 10-15 meters behind the crowd of food-drunk Russians, causing many of the latter to believe they'd been surrounded. Then, with impeccable timing and a berserker-Viking battle roar, Colonel Pajari led the only recorded Finnish bayonet charge in the annals of the Winter War!

Startled and made sluggish by the impact of all that heavy food on their malnourished bodies, the men of the Russian battalion broke into fragments and fled into the woods whence they had emerged such a short time ago, losing about twenty of their number to the enthusiastic, if not very well-aimed, fire of Pajari's newly-minted machine-gunners. An equal number meekly surrendered, and once they were rounded up and herded into a barn, they promptly curled up on the floor to sleep off their soup-intoxication. Still others, particularly those who had been

too late to get more than a taste of the food, grabbed their weapons and fought back furiously. It was perhaps fortunate that, by this time, two companies of Finnish reserves – experienced ski-troopers, all – began to arrive on the scene, alerted by the commotion and gunshots and eager to join in what would soon become a Winter War legend known as "The Sausage War". Chaotic skirmishing raged all through the day, but by 4:00 PM the surviving fragments of Beljayev's raiding battalion were in full flight back to Russian lines, stalked and frequently bushwhacked by Finnish "hunter-killer" teams (one man carried a huge flashlight, the other a Suomi loaded with a 71-round drum magazine; (Author's note: the temptation to use "deer in the headlights" similes is one I shall, in full dignity, refrain from yielding to…). Quick, murderous firefights flickered through the forest all night, but no accurate count of casualties could be made except around the empty field kitchens themselves, where the pathetic (but well-fed) bodies of 110 Russian soldiers lay sprawled, already iron-hard in the cold, many of them with bits of frozen sausage still clamped in their lips.

Beljayev's southern flanking maneuver didn't fare nearly as well. The Finns had listening posts out on the ice of Lake Tolvajarvi, and the Russian column was spotted almost as soon as it broke cover from Kottisaari and started marching over the barren lake surface. Alerted by the listening posts, three reserve Finnish platoons, each dragging a Maxim in a sled, silently surrounded the flanking column on three sides – out-flanking the out-flankers – and while Finnish mortars popped flares overhead continuously, caught the Russians in a murderous cross-fire, quickly scattering them and driving the panic-

stricken survivors back to the island. At dawn, the Finns counted approximately 200 bodies and helped themselves to 16 Degtyarvev light machine guns and a small number of the new and highly prized Tokarev semi-automatic rifles, along with thousands of rounds of abandoned ammunition. As successful as Talvela's men had been in repelling these spoiler attacks (and whittling down the 139th Division's strength by another 500 men), Talvela felt that he had no choice but to postpone his own offensive for another 24 hours, until the morning of December 12.

19. THE "ILIAD" AT A SKI LODGE

Beljejev's 139th Division was still mostly intact, cohesive, competently led, and it still outnumbered Task Force Pajari by a ratio of 2.5 to one in riflemen alone, never mind its overwhelming superiority in artillery and the approximately 40 tanks Beljajewv still had hidden somewhere in the gulleys and dense woods behind the resort, The Finns had been able to slow the division's advance, and the moral effect of Pajari's bold raid had stung the Soviets badly, but the estimated (accurately as it happened) 429-odd fatalities inflicted hadn't significantly reduced either Beljajev's overall strength or his soldiers' confidence, The odds against Pajari's counterattack remainded daunting. It was one thing to defend an entrenched line – the Finns were by now getting pretty good at that – or even to mount localized counterattacks from within a defensive posture, but it was quite another thing entirely to launch an all-out offensive against a well-entrenched enemy

force that enjoyed a distinct advantage in numbers and a crushing advantage in heavy weapons. And every man about to launch this risky attack knew that all through history, the Russian soldier had traditionally been much tougher and more sesilient in defense than when attacking. But, as Pajari wrote after the war, "The Finnish Army believed in intangibles – it was an article of faith with us." Today, on December 12, 1939, that faith, together with the courage, adaptability, and initiative of a small number of officers and men, would prove to be enough to tip the scales, but the margin was razor-thin.

While Pajari's northern pincer was coming unraveled, the southern pincer – the assault on Kottisaari Island – wasn't faring much better. Two companies of ErP-112 attached the southern end of the island just after 8:00 A.M., supported by a generous number of Maxims and three of the seven artillery pieces Pajari had at his disposal. But the second, and stronger, assault element (9/JR-16) failed even to show up at all. Even unsupported the men from ErP-112 managed to penetrate halfway across the island before being shoved roughly back by Soviet counterattacks. And what, you may well ask, had happened to 9/JR-16? Its commander had been ordered not to move out until he received a new jumping-off time from headquarters. That information never arrived because nobody could hail the company's radio on the supposedly more reliable regimental net. In loud vexation, Pajari sent a runner, but by the time **he** arrived, the designated new time was long past. Through no fault of its own, 9/JR-16 ended up twiddling its thumbs all day. Once again, the lack of reliable field radios had sabotaged Finnish plans.

Pajari's main effort, the thrust against the enemy center, also fared poorly at the start. Slated to lead the assault was the Second Battalion, JR-16. But Pajari was unwilling

to order his men to launch a frontal assault over open ground without artillery support, so he allocated four of his seven guns to that task. Unfortunately, the terrain leading to their optimum positions proved much rougher than anticipated, and it took the crews two extra hours to position them, register them, and commence firing. When they did, the results looked (and were) so paltry that Pajari cursed himself for having waited on them.

Throughout the bitter struggle for the Hirvasvarju Peninsula, Pajari's men tried, with some success, to compensate for their lack of artillery support by employing their heavy Maxim guns **as** field artillery. Finnish machine gun teams were trained to advance in very close coordination with the infantry and often deployed their weapons at hair-raisingly close ranges in order to engage specific targets with pin-point accuracy, Given the weight and awkwardness of the Maxim, even when it was freed from its tripod, it took strong men as well as brave ones to perform this duty, and in every offensive action where it was employed, casualties among the Maxim gunners were high. Time and time again, during the slugging match up the peninsula and the bitter fighting for the plateau where the hotel stood, the Finns employed their Maxims in ways a better-equipped army would have used bazookas, grenade launchers, or light mortars. This tactic provides yet another example of the Finns making the most of limited resources, and although it was sporadically decisive, it was a very costly expedient

The attack went in two companies abreast. On the southern side of the straits, Lieutenant Isotalo's Second Company (2/JR-16) reached the peninsula with surprisingly light casualties, thanks in large part to the cycloniv volume of fire poured out by his supporting Maxims, which did an excellent job of suppression. On the northern side, Sixth Company wasn't so lucky; for reasons unknown, most of the Soviet artillery landed

in its path, and the barrage was laced with a blazing tartan of tracers from well-emplaced automatic weapons. At first pinned down, when the company began moving again, it quite naturally drifted south, away from the densest concentrations of fire, and its men became intermingled with the platoons of Fourth Company. In keeping with Pajari's "staggered" plan of commitment, Fifth Company jumped-off about ten minutes behind the first twp and headed more or less straight up the middle. As a result, the peronnel of all three companies became dangerously mixed, which meant that basic command-and-control issues suffered greatly – for about fifteen minutes, the Finnish elements became a mob.

But they were a mob with considerable momentum still moving them forward and once the majority of them reached the wooded rubbly shore of the peninsula, the inner drapery of Russian shellfire was doing as much harm to friendly troops as it was to their assailants. Intense firefights sparkled up and down and across the western tip of Hirvasharju as individual bunches of Finns, often leaderless and acting on their own intiative, engaged the closet or more dangerous-looking Soviet emplacements. Under cover of a now-wavering Soviet bombardment, a number of Maxim crews hoisted their heavy weapons and staggered across the straits, then emplaced them where the infantry pointed, opening fire in gun-versus-gun duels and having considerable luck silencing a number of bothersome Soviet machine gun nests that had been enfilading the Finns from the coastline to the north-east, in the direction of Hirvasvaara.

In jerky, irregular spurts, like an incoming wave broken apart by pilings, Pajari's still somewhat intermingled soldiers advanced up the peninsula – five meters here, fifteen

there, sometimes pausing to regroup into coherent squads or platoons as they encountered familiar faces. By now, they had knocked out enough scattered Russian positions to largely negate the interlocking fields-of-fire that had initially proved so daunting – they were more and more engaging individual strong points, which in turn gave them a chance to put their tactical skills, as in fire-and-maneuver, to good use. When the terrain rose, rather suddenly and uniformly around the tongue of land, they suddenly could see the fortified tourist hotel looming ahead – a dramatic, even magnetic objective, and instead of intimidating them, the sight semed to spur them on; they knew that once that dominating structure was captured or neutralized, the worst would be over. Now that the Finns could see them, the gunners and snipers on the second story could also see the Finns, at least in flickering glimpses through the foliage, and the building erupted with jittering spikes of flame from its sandbagged windows, its embrasured walls, and the fifty or so rifle pits dug around its stone foundations. Pajari later inspected the second story and found ten Maxim guns alone bristling in the direction of the peninsula, with a dozen Dagtreyevs and several sniper rifles in support. All these and more were now ripping through the trees and periodically blowing out the back of a Finnish GI's skull. The battle had become one of platoon leaders organizing miniatuere companies, of friends banding together and fighting by instinct, training, and what remained of common sense amidst the chaos and demented volumes of noise.

Several Finnish platoon leaders were down; Lieutenant Isotalo was shot in the hand, but he paused only long enough to have it bandaged and then went back to the head of – if not his original men, then the soldiers who had elected to follow a brave man who

seemed to know what he was doing. The most intense fighting raged for control of a big oval area of gravel pits about 200 yards west of where the ski lodge loomed, remnants of the quarrying operation used to construct the hotel's driveway and parking lot. Here the Soviets had entrenched no less than 25 Maxims and Dagtreyevs along with a smattering of riflemen armed with the then-new Tokarevs. Staggering like winded oxen, several Maxim crews made it this far and began systematically hosing down the gravel pit foxholes, whipping cyclonic funnel-clouds of rock-spray as they traversed.

For twenty minutes or so, the gravel pits' defenders stopped Pajari's advance cold, until enough Finns arrived to reach parity of gun-barrels and most of them had also laboriously brought along satche;s full of stick grenades. The Soviet defenders quickly learned that if your're firing a Maxim gun, and a salvo of four or five sputtering hand grenades falls in and around your position, you either have to stop firing the Maxim gun and take cover, or rely on the law of averages to drop only one grenade in your lap, which you could then attempt to throw back…but even then, **you still had to stop firing the Maxim gun**, and if there were Finns within grenade-tossing range, they were also close enough to storm your position before you had time to resume firing it. Much of the gravel pit combat was point-blank or hand to hand – more desperate wet-work with rifle butts and razor-honed entrenching tools and, in one case, a Finn who simply swung his steel helmet by the chin strap and battered-in the forehead of a Degtyarev gunner, before turning the weapon on his former comrades. There seems to have been no wavering here – the gravel-pit defenders fought like cornered wolverines until, all of a sudden, the

survivors had had all they could stand and broke and fled into the shrinking band of trees encircling the ski lodge.

Just as resistance was crumbling near the old gravel quarry, and from a location no one could ever identify with certainty, three Soviet tanks suddenly appeared on the tar-and-gravel driveway that passed through the Hevosalmi Narrows and followed several shallow hairpin curves up to the parking lot. The road was so narrow, and the drop off on either side so steep, that the vehicles were comnpelled to grind dlowly uphill in low gear and single files. Had they reached the top, they would have debouched behind the middle of Pahjari's troops and very probably have smashed the Finnish attack with heavy losses. But Pajari, although he kept wondering aloud "Where the hell is that Bolshevik bastard hiding his tanks?", had played a hunch: that there was not room to hide tanks around the hotel, and if they were camouflaged close enough to intervene, they would almost have to appear where they in fact did; and during the night he had positioned his precious pair of Bofors guns on the Finnish shore of Lake Tolvajarvi and at a spot where they would at least have time to get off three or four rounds, broadside, at each passing tank..

But Pajari's anti-tank gunners, who had by now become experts at their specialty, didn't need three or four shots. They each fired twice at each vehicle in line, and each scored two hits, setting one tank ablaze, cracking-off the turret ammo in another, and with sheer velocioty alone punching the third one almost off the far side of the narrows, where it hung precariously, with its left-hand tread unwinding like a big limp snake and sparks shooting from pinched bogie wheels. Presumably, its crew abandoned through the underbelly escape hatch, but the end result was very satisfactory indeed: three damaged

and smoldering T-28s piled up close together, made a sturdy steel roadblock indeed, and no more armor could get past that bottleneck, not could any significant quantities of supplies, nor any infantry replacements not moving single-file. Assuming that Beljajev had deployed his units in the textbook-standard format of two battalions-on-line, with the third one in reserve – in which case fully two0thirds of the Soviet 609th was now bottled-up on what the Russians called "Ski Lodge Hill".

It was now slightly past noon, and most of Pajari's units had been fighting hard, and advancing uphill, for almost three hours. A portion of 2/JR-26 made a gallant but hopeless lunge for the hotel, but it was an uncoordinated and much-too-feeble effort; so heavy was the firing from the lodge that it appeared to be, itself, on fire and those Finns who didn't fall, quickly rolled or leaped or slid back under cover.

Pajari had at least driven the enemy from the forward slopes of the peninsula, hammered him out of the gravel pits, and compelled the withdrawal, into the lower but more heavily forested slopes east and south-east of the lodge, of virtually every Russian not inside the hotel itself. This may have stiffened resistance in those directions, but the firing from those sectors was at longer range and it had only marginal effect, due to the thick woods surrounding the resort. Now that therer were no more "friendlies" in the gravel pits or around the lower slopes, Beljajev's artillery began plastering the plateau frantically, dropping their shells no closer to the hotel than fifty yards – or at least trying to. Occasionally, an "over" or "under" would detonate on the roof, which proved to be so stoutly built that ever a square hit by a 150mm howitzer shell did little more than put a dimple in the surface (remember: this place had been built to withstand immense accumulations of heavy wet snow!) Pajari ordered a general reriement to the elevation of

the gravel pits and there paused long enough for his men to get their wind back, for hot rations to be brought up, for the wounded to be stretchered-out, and for a large quantity of munitions – especially hand grenades; lots and lots of them – to be distributed. A battery of 81 mm mortars crossed the straits and set up in defilade behind a shallow ridge west of the gravel pits, just in time to open a blistering and accurate barrage on top of the Soviet column that had been spotted trying to sneak around Pajari's right flank by attempting to force its way through the tangled ravines and boulder-masses on the eastern side of the Hirvasharju Narrows. This threat evaporated quickly, leaving approximately thirty Russian dead in its wake.

After a while, Red artillery fire tapered off and except for occasional sniper rounds, so did the gunfire, leaving a bizarrely tranquil mood over this picturesque landscape. Evidently either Beljajev was husbanding his drecreasing supply of artillery shells, or some observant spotter had radioed the Soviet batteries that all their rounds shells were doing, was throwing up fountains of loose gravel. Pajari certainly hoped it was the former.

And it was at about this time, while both sides were taking a strange kind of "lunch break", that Aaro Pajari finally received some hard information about what had transpired during that part of the engagement he hadn't been able to see from his command bunker. With such predictability that Pajari had to be restrained from bashing the machine with his Suomi butt, the radio net had once again gone completely bonkers and would remain useless until his harried signalmen unpacked new vacuum tubes from their straw-lined nests and replaced the ones that had burst during the previous night's cold snap. For the moment, nothing emerged from the speaker's grillework but an

occasional spatter of distorted vocalisms that sounded more like Martian than Finnish.. So when Pajari finally got some information, it arrived via the cracked lips of an exhausted runner. Things had bogged down on the right flank. Really bogged down. Finnish forces controlled the southern tip of Kottisaari Island, but without substantial help probably could not hold it much longer; offensive action from that foothold was out of the question. All of the units he had earlier committed had been hard-hit, and Second Battalion, on which so much had depended, was stalled. Having ejected the defenders from the gravel pits and taken shelter in their former foxholes, the exhausted survivors of this morning's action were not inclined to resume an uphill attack against that damned ski resort, which rippled with muzzle flashes every time its gunners saw, or imagined they saw, a target. It was now clear to Pajari just how heavily it had cost his men to get as far as the gravel pits – a steady stream of wounded men were now coming down or being carried down the peninsula and across the straits, and a dismaying number of the worst-hit were officers and non-coms.

Hard on the heels of that discouraging news came somewhat vague but uniformly bad news about his northern pincer. A surprise encounter with strong Soviet forces had routed one of his companies and blunted the attack of the other two, whose disheartened remnants were even now filtering back into Finnish lines. As far as Pajari could discern, there was at that moment not a single Finnish soldier on the eastern side of Lake Hirvasjarvi. That big flanking Soviet force might not be approaching still, but it was surely lurking about in the woods, menacing his left, which he had already stripped bear of significant forces, leaving only enough outposts to serve as a trip-wire.

Only in the center, where enemy resistance had been fierce and his own losses scary, had his attack carved out a salient in the Soviet perimeter. Pajari was a realist by nature, as befit a professional soldier of his rank, but for the moment he almost believed in "omens" and all that he could see were bad. If he even **could** get the attack on the ski lodge started again, he would have to commit the last of his already limited resources. Should he reinforce his qualified success in the center, and take a chance that the ferocious volume of fire coming from the hotel might be canelled out by the relatively short distance his men would have to run through it? Should be play a wild card and seek some hitherto undiagnosed opportunity around Kottisaari? And how serious, really, **was** the threat to his left – might not that Soviet flanking force has been just as spooked by his men as his men had been spooked by it? There were, of course, no answers. This was the moment Aaro Pajari later called "the Crisis of Command" – the moment when generals earn their pay. All his choices were glum; none offered much of a prospect for victory; but unless he choise his next orders carefully, there were sound prospects for defeat. For a timeless moment, he wavered on the edge of calling off the whole offensive and recommending to Mannerheim that the surviving Finnish troops withdraw and take up a purely defensive line between here and Vartsila. Quite honestly, he feared such a dispatch to the Baron would mean the end of his career, but however quickly his men assaulted that hotel, assuming he could even motivate them to try, there would be a sizable effusion of blood before the first Finnish boot reached its flagstone entrance.

While Pajari was mulling over these dark thoughts, Fate, with exquisite timing. intervened in the form of an urgent update from his extreme left flank. Contrary to the frist reports, there **was** a Finnish force still fighting on the northern flank. About three

platoons' worth of stubborn die-hards had dug themselves in atop Hirvasvaara Ridge, and there were scattered smaller pockets of stragglers on the loose, who had recovered from their panic and turned back to the fight. To the best of their ability, they were engaging the Soviet right flank, and the men up on Hirvasvaara were even popping off sniper rounds into the upper windows of the hotel, although at such long range that their effect was mostly psychological. That report, modest though it was, tipped Pajari's decision; some part of his original plan had succeeded after all, and some portion of the Russians' strength was being diverted in that direction. If he pressed the center attack, his men would not, after all, be facing the total remaining strength of an enemy regiment. All he could commit were small detachments, but if they each jabbed a needle into the enemy's remaining nerves, they might have a bigger impact than their numbers suggested. Galvanized now, he quickly ordered the Third Company of ErP-10 to reinforce the men at the gravel pits and add their weight and firepower to the assault on the hotel; The Second Company of ErP-10, he ordered to drive straight across Lake Myllyjarvi, head down and without pausing for anything, and to strike at the very base of the Hirvasharju Peninsula, aiming for a wishbone-shaped configuration of shoreline that was easy to see, and thence charge straight uphill to the base of the crowning plateau; once there, it was the commander's choice whether to open fire, as briskyly as possible, upon every portion of the hotel in sight, or to join in the assault – the object was pressure, puree brute pressure, from as many angles as possible and all converging simultaneously. Armed with his new intelligence, Paraji finally managed to make radio contact with a platoon leader who could actually see the northern face of the building, and asked him the initially bewildering question: "Can you see **any** amount of Finnish fire striking the

northern exterior of the building?" Puzzled at first, the fellow refocused his binoculars and confirmed that, yes indeed, now that the Colonel mentioned it, there did seem to be at least sporadic rounds impacting that face of the lodge. Even as he watched occasional puffs of splinters spewing from the walls and window sills, a shot from distant Hirvssvarju – either a very lucky shot or an incredibly skillful one – shattered a window pane on the second story just as a Soviet observer weas leaning out to ascertain there were still no Finnish flankers sneaking around on that side. The same sniper round, after spider-webbing the window glass, drilled straight into one lens of the observer's binoculars, continued on into his right eyeball, and exited the back of his cranium in a wild rosette of blood and bone-fragments. Pajari was almost deafened by the yelp of excitement his distant reporter emited into the microphone of his field radio. When he described that sniper hit to Pajari, Pajari felt a surge of confidence, It was still going to be close and bloody work, but his men were going to take that goddamned ski lodge!

He relayed to the front line, by radio if it worked, by sound-powered phone-line if the Russian shells had left it intact, and just to make sure, by redundant runners, the news that as Finnish diversionary attack was even then striking the lodge on its north face. Well, all right, he may have exaggerated the size of that rather small and distant diversion, but it didn't matter. For the first time all day, the attackers had grabbed the advantage of maneuver; it would no longer be a grinding frontal battle of attrition.

Maybe not entirely, but it might as well have been. Pajari's slightly fudged bulletin had the desired effect of energizing the men and getting then psyched-up for a do-or-die bash at the tourist resort, but once they emerged from cover, they ran into a veritable buzz-saw of resistance; I think it's safe to say that without that little extra goose

of hope and motivation Pajari instilled into their hearts, the attackers would never have gone in with the same energy and determination, and would probably have broken and fled within fifteen minutes of renewed combat. Did he "lie" to his men, knowing that by doing so he coujld more easily motivate them to face near-suicidal danger? Or did he give them the necessary spark that ignited a victory?

Only the Finns who died in the assault are qualified to answer that. Like all good officers, Pajari did what was "necessary" to fulfill the mission his nation had asked him to accomplish, and a majority of whose citizens lacked the kidney and will power to do on their own behalf. If he seemed hard and callous in the performance of that duty, what other Mask of Command might he have worn? Fatherly and sentimental? Although may would come to question his judgement and his tactics, no one ever questioned his courage. He was perfectly willing to take up a weapon and lead from the front – indeed, he had done as much on several occasions -- but from this moment on, the unfolding denoument of the Tolvajarvi Campaign more often required him to flail and bully and coerce and nag and kick-butt from behind. Soldiering only looks simple to those who observe its practitioners with simple minds; and Aaro Pajari was anything but a simple man.

20. A WILD WEST SHOOT-OUT IN THE LOBBY AND A DEAD COMMISSAR

Given a battery of even medium-caliber field guns, or a battery of really potent mortars (like the Soviet 120 mm behemoths). Pajari wouldn't even have to assault that

chalet-fortress. A single squadron of Stukas could have blown the place to matchsticks in a single pass. But Pajari's heaviest guns, old French 75s with worn-out rifling and sluggish recoil cylinders, simply weren't up to the job. Yes, his ordnance advisors said, you **could** shell the place to bits with 75mm guns, but you would have to somehow man-handled them up the slops, emplace them for point-blank fire, and even then, it might take a four or five hundred rounds to do the job – which happened to be about the total number of shells Pajari still had, for all calibers of his meager artillery combined. So except for an ineffectual slather of mortar fire, lasting perhaps five minutes, the climactic battle for the ski lodge would be strictly a mano-a-mano brawl, an alley-mugging, an arena full of starving pit-bulls, a sawdust-on-the-floor barroom brawl with automatic weapons instead of brass knuckles.

How many Russians defended the fortified chalet and the grounds surrounding it? No one knows for sure. Since Pajari's offensive started that morning, perhaps half of the 609th Regiment had been knocked out of action or had gradually disengaged as small parties of Red infantry declined to die where they stood and began slinking off toward the bridge over the Kivisalmi Narrows. That left approximately 1000 Red soldiers still deployed and full of fight. The chalet could only hold so many men, and every window, plus dozens of embrasures and loop holes bristled with Maxims or Degtyarevs – let us say there were 250 imen nside the building and 700 dug in on the rugged, upward sloping terrain surrounding it. At no point could Pajari achieve enough of a numerical advantage to break through the Soviet defensive ring – his companies had to gnaw through it one foxhole at a time.

For about an hour, the fighting raged and see-sawed. The Finns threw hundreds of grenades; sometimes the Russians threw them back, and some Soviet soldiers died or lost a hand trying to throw them back. The air above the plateau was black with iron. One by one, the Soviet positions were silenced and the soldiers manning them winkled-out with bayonet or shovel-axe. The attackers suffered proportionally, losing two company commanders in the first hour.

What tipped the balance was the arrival of Pajari's last reserve unit, Second Company, ErP-10, which executed perfectly the maneuver Pajari had assigned to it: a full-tilt charge across Lake Hirvasjarvi, and landing on the northern base of the peninsula, followed by an arrow-straight advance that put the company flush opposite the north-western corner of the lodge. After wiping out the scattered Soviet infantry still resisting around the base of the building, Second Company opened an intense, fire-at-will barrage of small arms' fire against every visible part of the building. Splinter-clouds, chunks of shattered masonry and multitudinous puffs of granite dust made that face of the building appear to be shrouded in a whirling mist. Now forced to divide their fire against two threats, and already suffering some casualties, the defeners shifted their weapons and the overall volume of fire from the fortified building diminished noticeably.

SIDEBAR (INFORMED SPECULATION):

THERE'S NEVER A GOOD ARSONIST AROUND WHEN YOU NEED ONE!

Perceptive readers are no doubt asking, at this point in the narrative: Why the hell didn't the Finns just set fire to the damned place? After all, most of it was constructed of wood!

Good question; no glib or precise answer.

The short version: because they were forbidden to do so.

The long version, I'm afraid, contains elements of semi-urban myth; you are free to believe the anecdotal version or just accept the short version. Before committing his

men to what would obviously be a costly hard-fought assault, Lieutenant Siukosaari – the gun-slinger whose Sixth Company actually seized the hotel – proposed just drenching the building with Molotov Cocktails until its logs caught fire, then killing the defenders when they tried to flee from the flames. It would have been a laborious process, perhaps, but there were crates of Cocktails sitting in Tolvajarvi village, and the Finns might have had to throw a lot of gasoline on the massive logs before they finally reached mass-combustion, but eventually that would happen, and the casualties incurred in storming the hotel would have been avoided. Suikosaari was, in fact, about to order those gasoline bombs brought forward, when a superior officer – a major, whose name unfortunately I do not know, nor his function that morning – flatly forbade it. Ruling out squeamishness about roasting the Russians, the most likely motive was the cost, to the local inhabitants, of replacing a facility that had been a major boost to their meager peacetime economy. So: how many dead Finnish soldiers was **that** worth?

Now we get to the nebulous but tantalizing "urban myth" part: According to popular legends, circulated by veterans of the Tolvajarvi Campaign, Field Marshal Mannerheim and Colonel Talvela had discussed the "torching" option a week before the Finnish counteroffensive began. There may even have been a discussion of improvising a portable flame-thrower, some kind of pumping system jury-rigged to a gas tank, which would have allowed the Finns, from a relatively safe distance and from a covered position, to simply drench the entire front of the building with petrol, then pop a couple of flares, or even a good healthy burst of tracers into the soaked logs, and ***POOF!*** **-=-** the biggest bonfire in the annals of the Winter War.

Well, to follow the logic of this maybe-so/ maybe-no rumor, somehow the President of Finland, Herra Kyosto Kallio, got wind of this proposal. Among his friends and political backers were members of the investment consortium who had helped to finance the construction of the hotel. They were appalled at the cost of re-building the place. So Mannerheim got a phone call from the one man in Finland who out-ranked him: the President of the Republic, ans told not to play with matches! One would like to have eavesadropped on that conversation! The upshot was a flat veto against burning the chalet. Talvela passed this on to Pajari, who for obvious reasons declined to share this sour piece of information with his soldiers.

And that, according to this urban legend, is why Finnish soldiers had to physically storm the place, in the teeth of murderous fire (at least twenty men were killed or wounded in the final charge up the flagstone steps) and wrest it from the defenders in close combat – instead of standing safely in the surrounding woods and enjoying the spectacle of Slav-kabobs leaping from the upper story windows and rolling around, screaming, in the snow, until some Finnish marksman popped them out of their misery. This is another one of those intriguing Winter War crypto-factoids that I can neither prove nor disprove; I merely pass it along the way it was recounted to me, 44 years ago, by a number of veterans of the Tolvajarvi Campaign.

[RESUME MAIN NARRATIVE]

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Gustav Mannerheim had his failings as a general (although fewer of them than many more famous commanders one could name!), but poor judgment of men was not one of them. In turning over complete responsibility for the Tolvajarvi front to Aaro Pajari, he was in effect making him responsible for the fate of IVth Corps, and by extension, the fate of Finland itself. When Talvela informed his old friend of the new command arrangement, Pajari greeted the news with a phlegmatic shrug, but his eyes more accurately reflected his true feelings; he was elated rather than dismayed by the new and heavier burden place upon his shoulders, for if ever their was an officer who thrived on going-it-alone, it was Aaro Pajari.

* * *

When Talvela yielded operational authority to Pajari, in order to obey Manneheim's wish for Talvela to take over at Ilomantsi, Pajari had not felt nearly as stoic and rock-like inside as he had schooled himself to appear outwardly. He knew the Soviet 139th Division still outnumbered his attacking units by a ratio of 2.5 to one, he suspected the wily Beljayev had emplaced his divisioonmal artillery so it could fire with equal effect through the full 360-degree radius; and lastly he knew, from first-hand experience in 1918, that the Russian soldier excels in defence; and that clearing the land surrounding the chalet would utterly negate the Finn's genius for camouiflage in other words, he knew this was going to be a brutal and downright primitive struggle, with little quarter

asked or given. And so it was proving to be, as his assault detachments, in a wild series of melees, struggled to eject, one-by-one the Soviet soldiers or gun teams dug in almost like a moat of flesh, to protect the castle-keep that was bistling with firepower and that Pajari had been **forbidden to torch**. As the penultimate stage of the battle began, the fighting reached a pitch of pitiless savagery unlike anything Pajari had ever seen or even imagined. And among the warriors on both sides, there on "Ski Lodge Hill", there was ample *sisu* to go around. Pajari could feel the ground shifting underneath the wholeness of his military carreer, and to whom could he unburden when the butcher's bill came due, to whom could he unburden? For he understood full well that a lot of those healthy, vital, young, idealistic Finns who had saluted him with such snap only this morning, would lie grey and stiff and dead – upon **his** orders – before the pale-pearlescent disc of sun went down. Ever since he had resolved to go over to the offensive, he had been steeling himself to wear convincingly the particular Mask of Command (that of the stoic, ruthless, get-the-job-done commander who cold-bloodedly sends young men in harm's way) which he hated the most, and felt the least comfortable wearing. He would have to drive his men today harder and more relentlessly than any soldiers he had ever commanded. By nightfall, some of the young recruits who'd stared at him with such open admiration as he took their salute, would hate him and revile his name. On this day, he could not afford the luxury of being the wise, compassionate old soldier his few close friends knew him to be; on this day, the greater strategic imperatives of the Winter War would force him to issue ruthless orders, and drive his men into the murderous fire of a well-trained, well-fortified enemy; not once, probably not twice, but as many times as it took to reverse the tide and wrest a victory out of the Tolvajarvi Campaign, which had been such a bleak shambles

before he'd taken command. From this day on, it would be the kind of protracted, soul-corroding contest that could only grow in viciousness until one side or the other broke. And Mannerheim had ordered him not to break. Pajari could foresee this much, at least, of the future: he would have to become, for the duration of this campaign, the kind of apparently cold-hearted military tyrant he in fact despised. On a much smaller scale, in fact, he would have to behave like…Joseph Stalin! For an instant the sheer irony almost made him laugh, but beyond his personal hierarchy of moral values, loomed the exigencies of loyalty and honor itself. There were much vaster historical dynamics at play, some of them international in scope, than he was now privy to but could not mention to anyone, and complexities he could not begin to explain to his subordinates, any more than Gustav Mannerheim was obliged to explain them to an unsophisticated colonel. But this one thing Aaro Pajari **did** know: if his will faltered from an attack of empathy, or his determination went slack because he felt pity for his soldiers, then their collective wills too would be eroded – the rank-and-file could smell it on an officer from fifty feet away; not the foul and sour odor of cowardice – for no man could rise to the rank of colonel in the Finnish army and still **be** a coward, and even poor Rasanen had been less fearful than un-manned by a suffocating feeling of irrelevance – but the loose-rivet tremor of indecision, the rust-and-rifle-oil effluvium of a leader made hesitant to lead. That, Pajari could not allow -- not in himself, nor in his men. Large and unseen matters pivoted on the outcome of what happened here today, and for better or worse, under the basilisk eye of History itself, what he and they did in the coming hours, **mattered**. On this of all days, he might win what Napoleon would have described as "Glory", and although as a patriotic young officer Pajari had dreamed of winning that, on

this day when he might at least fondle Glory's sagging tits, he was already eager to forgo the privilege! Win or lose, there would be Finns as-yet-unborn who would curse his name unto their grandchildren, holding him responsible for the seemingly pointless deaths of comrades, brothers, sons and fathers. And perhaps it was right that they would do so – because the unrelenting scourge of his orders, the stab of his finger upon a map-grid, the glower of disapproval or the rasp of accusation in his voice, would flog men forward who had earned the right to rest, would instill shame in men who'd done nothing shameful, and he would unhesitatingly use every rhetorical and theatrical trick in the officers' book to get those men up and moving forward one more time, and one more time beyond that, until they broke the Russians or were toppled into the snow by bullet, fragment, or bayonet. The ancient line reverberated stupidly in his mind, but that hollow soggy cliché had now acquired an edge that cut into the meat of his heart and jabbed a fish hook into his bowels: *..come back with your shield or on it!*

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SIDEBAR; POSSIBLY APOCHRYPHAL:

GUSTAV MANNERHEIM BARES HIS SOUL (but only just this once!)

In later years, much honored by their nation and much beloved by the fresh-faced, well-scrubbed young officer-candidates of the post-war Finnish Army, Paavo Talvela and Aaro Pajari would sometimes, after more drinks than were good for men of their age, attempt to describe the one private and almost nakedly intimate moment they had shared with the least intimate and most icily impenetrable man they had ever known, Carl Gustav Mannerheim. It had been on the evening of the day Mannerheim had summoned them to his headquarters to brief them about the crisis escalating here at Tolvajarvi. It had been a twilight hour of early winter, with a hard burnt-orange sunset glazing the sky, a color like molten steel, and even before the Baron had finished describing the grave responsibility he was asking them to shoulder, both men, like the experienced soldiers they werem had made Pavolvian promises of fealty: "Yes, Field Marshal, of course we accept the job with pride.", or words to that effect before Mannerheim had even sketched

the outlines of what was at stake; and on that same turning of the early winter twilight, Mannerheim flashed a gray-eyed glare of irritation ast their almost servile, rote, duet of acceptance; had, astonishingly, taken each man by an elbow and none-to-gently steered them into a small private conference room which was empty except for two weary-looking lieutenants who were updating the acetate overlay on the big wall map and who slunk out of the room like whipped dogs when Mannerheim curtly gestured to the door, and then the Baron had turned on Talvela/Pajari, his eyes as hard and cold as pack-ice grinding in a flood-choked arctic river, and then in his high-pitched metallic voice he had rammed into their minds and hearts the cold, bleak, implacable truth; told them what was really at stake up there at Tolvajarvi; travced for them the cause-and-effect outcomes of several diverging time-lines; issed orders as to what he and the nation and presumably God Almighty expected of them…

If it means ordering a thousand men to certain death, if it meant standing your ground alongside them and fighting to the last cartridge and hand grenade; if it means marching east in obedience to my orders when your wives and children lie to the east, the I expect you to do it. Not for me, but for those who follow us down the road of History; you will do those things, fight those battles, draw every breath ***in extremis*** *even if honor and a glorious death is all wou wish for and instead you live out your days in a Siberian camp where dogs live better and sometimes longer than men, I expect you to do it. I command you to do it! The front at Tolvajarvi MUST be stabilized, and you two men MUST do it, for I have none better, braver, or more loyal! Do not ask me why these imperatives are laid atop ytour already crushing burdens of command, for I, too, am bound by secrecy; I can only tell you that everything radiating outeward from this war is larger, more important, and darker witht the perils of defeat than you can possibly imagine! Just hear my words and accept them as though they were engraved in fire on the tablet of Mount Sinai: for a whole complex of interlocking political, strategic, economic, even moral reasons, the front at Tolvajarvi MUST be stabilized. Another Finnish retreat cannot and will not, on forfgeit of your lives and your honor as men and soldiers, be allowed to happen! A withdrawal of one hundred meters must not be authorized! A retreat of one kilometer is* ***NOT*** *an option!*

And here are the only reasons I, even I, am allowed to tell you: The general populace's will is faltering; they casualtiy lists are longer and harder to bear; the Swedes have forsaken us, content as they always have been to grow right off of wars fought by other states! The French are completely without scruples, energy, or valor – the GHreat War castrated them and left them diminished, whiney, mistaking bickering for debate and shrillness for eloquence, they are a nation in such effete decline thaty Schickelgrubber, when he finally attacks them, might be dancing with the keys to Paris in his hand after a week or two of puny skirmishing. The soul of the Maginot Line, gentlemen, was squandered long ago, at Verdun! The British? They've become a minor power frozen in time by their own Imperial mythologies. And the Americans, who are perhaps our truest friends, are half-a-goddamned-world-away!

There was pain in the Baron's ice-gray eyes, and when he suddenly slammed his fist afainst the desk, the impact was like a pistol shot.

There's the map, gentlemen – there's our reality. Our "Nordic Brothers" are a military joke! Denmark? The entire Danish Army can fit inside the Tampere football

stadium! Norway? They don't have an ***army****, they have a constabulary that dresses up in costumes out of a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta!*

The Finnish people's will-to-endure is already faltering. If we continue to keep the Reds at bay, their spines will stiffen and they too will learn to value sacrifice. But if the Reds make one breakthrough in Ladoga-Karelia, just one, that places them on the edge of good open tank country, then the game is up for us and for my army. What I am about to tell you goes no further than your ears: there are men in high places who, if the Soviets break through and threaten the Isthmus from behind, would not hesitate to launch a coup d'etat. The mechanisms are already in place, as are the men and weapons to implement the revolt. And their first acft, upon seizing power, will be to broadcast a desperate appeal to 'fellow freedom-loving Nordic brothers' to save Finland from the Godless Bolsheviks. Now, gazing at the map, tell me who fits that category and also has the military capability to intervene swiftly…"

As Pajari told it – or maybe Talvela; it depends on who I was talking to – both men felt their eyes inexorably drawn to…Germany. One of them stammered something about the non-agression treaty between Hitler and Stalin, and Mannerheim snorted like a horse.

'Non-agression treaty?' growled the Field Marshal, *Hitler wipes his bum with such documents! Within five hours of such an appeal being broadcast, gentlemen, the Luftwaffe would have two squadroms of Stukas, three of Messeschmit fighters, and enough Junkers transports on their way to Finland to begin cvoordinated air raids against the Soviet tank formations within twenty-four hours. German troops wouild be air-lifted immediately – remember, they did the same thing for Franco and that's what enabled him to win control of Spain! The Wehrmacht becomes the guarantor of Finland's survival, and our country becomes a puppet nation whose true commander-in-chief is that odious little weasel, Hitler! Our nation would be given away by Finnish Fascists who are so terrified of the Bolsheviks (and their long and vengeful memories!) that they wouldn't hesitate to mortgage not only our present-day freedoms, but our future, for generations to come. Stalin, quite naturally and with good reason this time, will react like a bear being goaded in a pit – he will hurl everty available unit of the Red Army at the German bridgehjeads, and what happens then? The two most powerful, more insane, tyrants in modern history will use Finland as a convenient mutually suitable battlefield, and within weeks, nothing would remain of our country but a lunar expanse of over-lapping craters and the ash-heaps where Helsinki used to be!*

As for the existing leaders? The well-meaning but ineffectual old fool Kallio will be hung from the balcony of the Senate building until his body turns into food for the seagulls in the harbor. And as for me…

They conspirators would have dragged Mannerheim out of a holding cerll and done their awful deed in seclusion and shameful privacy, in some hidden courtyard nook where no one could witness the grace and courage of his dying!

And before he would suffer such a pathetic ignoble end, he -- Baron Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim would climb the steps of the Parliament Building one last time, take from its saddle-worn holster the Nagant revolver he had carried since the day in St. Petersburg when Nicolas IInd himself had sworn young Mannerheim into the ranks of the Imperial Household Cavalry -- the same pistol with which Mannerheim had shot dead

three Uhlan lancers who had made the mistake of cornering him during the bitter siege of Lemberg -- and with that antique but honor-steeped firearm, blow out his own brains.

These things are known to me, Colonels; they are not an old monarchist's fantasies, but a carefully assembled mosaic derived from six months of dangerous work by secret agents paid from my own pocket! Such abominations, or other things still worse! Would surely happen in Finland, if the Red Army is not stopped at Tolvajarvi! Already, the invaders were forty per-cent of the distance from the borderline to the snaking longitude where the great forests began to thin-out and fade into a vast expanse of rolling agricultural land, almost custom-designed by Satan to be the perfect theater-of-campaign for the Red Army's tanks. You know what effect it had on our troops when they first saw forty, fifty Russians tanks in motion? Now conceive if you will of 500 tanks, a thousand! So far, Ivan has only deployed on the Tolvajarvi Road a modest packet of armor, but across the border to the east, hidden beneath the same forests – and Finnish agents have dfied under torture in order to convey this informationd -- there were just such gigantic formations of armor poised and waiting until the invading columns had reached a part of Finland sufficiently wide and open to deploy them in; a tidal wave of steel, grinding inexorably forward! And if the defenders of Tolvajarvi have to make one more retreat, Stalin will broadcast the code word and those tanks till roll.If the Finns at Tolvajarvi cannot make a stand, cannot hold, and then cannot push the invaders back, then that juggernaut of Bolshevik iron would roll and not God Himself, if he lay down in front of the tanks, could stop them! That tsunami of steel would burst asunder the forest itself, and rip the Mannerheim Line apart from behind; the democratically elected government would fall, the Nazi and Communist legions would pulverize Finland by turning it into a convenient equidistant battleground.

And those are the reasons why you two men cannot, must not fail in your new assignments. The reasons why your deaths, and the deaths of every soldiers you command, weigh as dust in the scales of History, compared to…what might happen. There are now three men in all of Finland who share these secrets; when you entered this room there was only one. Believe me, I know how horrible is the burden I've laid upon you by sharing this information, gbut I cannot ask you to go to a place where you may die, and where you must certainly send many fine young men to die, without letting you know 'the reasons why.' No time now for secret oaths – you've already sworn allegiance to Finland! Just shake my hand and be on your weay. May God go with you!

****

The oration had gone something like that, anyhow; Talvela could remember mainly its hallucinatory intensity, the Pajari remembered mainly the astounding passion and eloquence of Mannerheim's analysis, and his own bone-deep, Samurai-serious vow to either fulfill his mission and stop the enemy at Tolvajarvi, or die at the head of his soldiers, in the deep and trackless woods around tranquil Tolvajarvi.

Did it happen, this Dostoyevskian soliloquy by Mannerheim? No stenographic records were kept, of course, and the time-colored recollections of two old soldiers might not have been flawless in their recall of detail; but I gradually became convinced that *something* of this nature must indeed have occurred, for the chain-of-reasoning bears all the fingerprints of Mannerheim's sharp powers of analysis, and if he was burdened with such concerns, that fact alone would explain why some of his tactical orders verged on cruelty, why he asked for so much blood as the price of holding on to every square foot of Finnish soil his men still occupied.

I cannot vouch for this reconstruction as anything more than a creative exercise by the novelist half of my brain; the historian's half cannot produce a shred of corroborative evidence. But neither can anyone else disprove it, and the old veterans who alluded to it, when they spoke to me back in 1963-1964, were coinvinced that there was a kernel of truth under all the legends. I pass it along to you; make of it what you will. The scene has haunted me for four decades and this is the first time I have tried to put it down on paper.

21. THE SKI-LODGE CONQUERED

Newly arrived ErP-10 had just deployed and opened furious fire against the chalet from the north-west, causing its defenders to divide their fire and feel anxiety from yet a new point on the compass.

And it was at precisely this point in the battle that the Russian defense came un-glued. A few of the soldiers ordered to go upstairs and lend a hand on the south side, made the very pertinent observation that if the south face of the hotel was really threatened, that left only one side – the north side, where the barricaded kitchen door offered the only ready means of entry or exit, that was still not under direct Finnish fire. It was also a matter of elementary deduction to figure out that, once you started fighting on the second floor, the Finns would have an easier time breaking into the first floor, and once they cleaned out the first floor, how likely were they to stop for a comradely discussion of surrender terms? According to POW narratives, few of the Russians took seriously the commissars' yarns about bloodthirtsy Finnish lumberjacks whose favorite delicacy was Communist testicles spitted and roasted over open fires; but they were afraid of being summarily executed by their own commissars if they attempted to surrender without authorization. I cite this detail not to diminish in any way the courage shown by the Red garrison, most of whom resisted fiercely, but simply to illustrate that surrender, for them, was not a safe or easy choice – and this undoubtedly influenced the length and severity of the fight they waged.

The consequence of all these converging factors, was that an unknown number of Red soldiers waited until the ground-floor commissars' backs were turned, then quickly tore down sandbags and other obstacles and dove through the nearest window on the north side. Others, faster or stronger, ripped down the barricade blocking the kitchen entrance and fled down the back porch steps. and those form the loading dock. The first fugitives to leave the bastion were soon

spotted by those Soviet troops still holding out in the grounds around it, and – each thinking the other group new of some disaster or danger they did not – the exodus soon became numerous enough to Pajari's men to discern a slackening of resistance. When Russian refugees were also spotted trying to run away across the Kivisalmi Narrows, the analogy that came to Finnish witnesses was that old saw about rats and sinking ships. After quick under-fire consultation between Lt. Suikosaari and two of his colleagues, elements of three Finnish companies launched a concerted rush on the ski lodge, smashing holes through whatever blocked the first-floor windows and hurling dozens of grenades inside, rapidly silencing all further resistance.

But the enemy still held the second story and the volume of fire pouring from its positions now increased as determined reinforcements stormed up the steps from below. Clearly, there could be no general Finnish advance beyond the Hirvasvarju Peninsula as long as the Red gunners on the second story could observe and quickly Target anything that moved. And although the total volume of enemy fire had diminished as the defenders around the hotel were killed or decided to take their leave while the getting' was good, the defenders of the upper floor – who evidently had enough aummintion supplies to out-last the Siege of Byzantium – blazed away prodigiously at everything that moved through their all-around fields of fire. The chalet had become an obsession, a symbol of dominance; it was capture-the-flag time, or in this case a reverse-angle "take" on the Mt. Suribachi flag-raising!

Time to go.

Lieutenant Siukasaari had passionately requested the honor of leading the assault, and he'd assembled the best men he could find from three different platoons; this ad hopc task force had no official name, but let's call it "Task Force Siukasaari", because it was about to earn a small-scale place of honor in military history. After one salvo of smoke grenades, they surged forward (having left their skis in the forest) and mounted the flagstone steps like Marathon runners hitting the finish-line tape; and teams of Finns, spreading out on both sides of the veranda, smashed-in whatever was barricading the windows, and, using those musette bags full of missiles, pulled-counted-three-and hurled one hand grenade after another, smothering any Soviet attempt to scoop them up and throw them back. For almost ninety seconds, every opening on the south-face of the building rippled with the strobe-light detonations of grenades, and when the flashes ended and stinking clouds of fumes drifted over the porch, there were no sounds emerging from the ground floor excapt the groans of the wounded, and the glittering crackle of window-oanes being crushed underfoot. It was time for Forced Entry/

While several troopers stood close, hands cocked to throw more grenades, Lieutenant Siukusaari backed up a few steps for a running start while a pair of Suomi gunners stepped forward and fired point-blank bursts that simply obliterated the door handle and its locks, Siuskosaari kicked-in the splintered panel, a grenade in each fist and the flap on his sidearm holster already loosened. In a scene reminiscent of a Western movie's climax, he found himself staring into the hard eyes of a similarly well-armed and remarkably determined-looking

Soviet officer, who emerged from the doorway leading from the lobby to the kitchen, and in a surreal but unmistakable gesture of challenge, gently deposited his two grenades on top of the bar, their pins still firmly in place. While his dumb-struck soldiers watched, Lt. Siuskasaari did the same with **his** grenades. Then, at a range of about four-and-a-half feet, both men "slapped leather" simultaneously. In his seizure of macho excitement, however, the Russian bravo had forgotten to work the slide on his Tokarev, while the Finn had already cocked his piece. The Lahti went **BOOM!,** the Tokarev went ***CLICK***, and the triumphtly grinning Lieutenant Siukasaari led his cheering men forward, across the body of newly-slain Soviet major with a large pumping hole in his heart.

Once inside, the Finns made short work of the second story's defenders. They hurled a synchronous deluge of short-fused grenades up through the stairwell, then charged upwards a millisecond after the detonations. On the second floor, they found 28 Russians still alive, most of them wounded and none of them showing any inclination to resist, and a roughly comparable number of dead ones.. They also found the body of the commander of the Soviet 609th Infantry Regiment, and discovered that of the Soviet dead, a suspitiouslu large percentage wore the badges of Commissars. .

Far from being terrified by their Finnish captors, and their supposed fondness for roasted Slavic gonads, the new POWS were not the least bit shy about striking up a dialogue. Without revealing which of the survivors had pulled the trigger, they all seemed eager to point out the body of their unit's chief commissar, who had apparently taken an

entire Degtyraev magazine in his torso, so many hits in fact that the top half of him almost separeated from the bottom half when a curious Finnish corporal took a swipe at the dead politurk with his rifle butt. The lesser-ranked commissars, predictably, had been among the first Red soldiers to flee the upper story, climbing down a length of towing rope already knotted around the room oversized bed in a semi-detached hotel room.

"Honeymoon suite!" volunteered one of the new captives, prisoners, with a nervous but smutty grin. The rest of the tale was quickly told. The regimental commissar, a moronic petty tyrant universally despised by everyone who suffered under his authority (including the **other** regimental commissars!), had frantically tried to erect an impromptu barricade across the stairs as soon as he saw the "High Noon" duel play-out down in the lobby. No one lifted a finger to help him; ondeed, every man with access to a bedroom window immediately tore down the sandbags jammed across the sill and made a break for the woods, even if it meant twisting an ankle or breaking a hand. . Wild-eyed now with panic (for he apparently **believed** all those propaganda yarns about sadistic Finnish torture-masters!) the ranking politruk drew his sidearm and threatened to execute every erstwhile mutineer personally if all of them didn't pitch in to block the stairwell. Whether or not he had the guts to carry out his threat was another question entirely, and one which would never be answered, since Siukasaari's first salvo of grenades landed more or less at the commissar's feet, knocking him flat and inflicting him with numerous splinter wounds. What really capped the bastard, though, was that point-blank cross-cut-saw discharge of Degtyravev rounds, unleashed by an anonymous Russian private who had then, all the new POWS agreed, "made good his escape".

The Finns weren't buying **that** part of the story, but what was one more dead commissar to them? In addition to this loquacious band of prisoners, the Finns also rounded up several thousand documents and maps – some of which would prove to be of enormous interest to Finnish inietlliegnce in the days to follow; eighteen fully operational Maxims and Degtyarevs, and approximately 75,000 rounds of loose and belted ammunition, not to mention enough rations, medical supplies, spare grenades, and various other bits and pieces of gear to withstand an extended siege. .

* * *

It had taken Pajari's men six hours to advance from the far side of the straits to the forward edge of the gravel pits…ninety minutes to fight their way to the hotel's wrap-around front porch, and only ten minutes to clear out the building itself. This trend continued, for there was now a steady stream of dispirited and sometimes weapon-less refugees snaking down the hill and funneling across the narrows at Kivisalmi. In typically aggressive style, Pajari sent his very last "fresh" company across the straits and attempted to galvanize the Finns around the captured hotel into a vigorous pursuit, but few of them were capable of pursuing anything beyond a good night's sleep (unless perhaps it was one of the bottles of captured vodka that magically began circulating from inside the depths of the hotel kitchen's oversized pantry). Slowly and without much enthusiasm, however, Pajari's officers managed to get their men assembled for a mopping-up effort that dragged on until dusk and left the Finnis in control of the whole of Kevisalmi Penninsula The mop-up effort netted a disappointing total of two dozen prisoners, some of them wounded and/or frostbitten, but the majority of them just **fed up –** fed up with

the dog-crap rations (whose main ingredients were coarse black bread and tepid tea, commestables barely sufficient to sustain like under sub-arctic conditions; fed up with the cold, the politruks' petty tyrannies, the lack of mail, the oh-so-predictable parade of daily lies from the Party news-sheets, the wildly over-done lectgure about the Finns' barbarous mistreatment of prisoners, and the high command's failure to provide them with such idiotically obvious necessities as snow-camouflage capes. For the time and effort that went into it, the mop-up produced a very meager bag of quarry. And while it was going on, the rest of Beljajev's division, all those would could not or would not surrender, swiftlty and efficiently made themselves "long gone".

The realistic Beljajev has begunb to suspect, by noon, that his worn-out center regiment, the 609th, could neither throw back the Finns nor long delay their inevitable assault on the ski lodge. This painstakingly conscientious officer had already worked out an orthodox but highly organized "collapsing bag" withdrawal. To lay the groundwork, he'd ordered his highly efficicnet engineers to put up an effective smokescreen, and behind its cover, the engineers had shoved abd bull-dozed the three burned-out tanks over the steep roadside cliffs, unlocking the escape corridor over the bridges and culverts atop the Kevisalmi Narrows. In a hasty but orderly manner, he emptied his former perimeter of its heavy guns and ammunition, communication equipment, field kitchens, medical supplies, and numerous trucks filled with blanket-shrouded wounded. To his credit, Beljajev waited until all the injured were clear before making his own get-away, inside the turret of a speedy little T-26. The evacuatrion went smoothly, in part, because the only Finnish troops within rifle range so far from the center of the battle were long-range

ski patrols armed mostly with small arms. These harassed the convoys when they could, but inflicted only minor casualties and even less damage to the vehicles.

As soon as he realized what was going on, Pajari crossed the straits and began collaring and berating any officer he could find, trying to galvanize them into hot pursui, but every officer he tried to bully into an extra effort reported the same situation: the only thing his men were capable of "pursuing" was a good night's sleep (unless perhaps it was a bott;e pf the ca[ptured vodka some enterprising explorer had discovered, in floor-to-ceiling stacks of crates, in the depths of the hotel's pver=sized kitchen pantry). In his post-war memoires, Pajari defends his "choleric" behavior by insisting that "most" of his units still had enough energy to chase and snipe at the withdrawning enemy columes as far back as Risiniemi, a mere four miles east of the Narrows. I never interviewed a single veteran, no matter what his former rank, who believed that kind of super-human effort was even feasible, not without causing a significant portion of Pajaris men to collapse from sheer exhaustion. Finally, even Pajari was forced to believe the evidence of his own eyes, and rescind his advance-to-Ristiniemi order, figuring that his men were so far gone that even a token rear-guard ambush might inflict alarming and pointless casualties.

The most Pajari's men could do was press the Soviet rearguard hard enough to prevent the demolition of the last two culverts beneath the Kivisalmi road.By 9:00 P.M., the whole of the Hevosalmi promontory was securely in Finnish hands, and the threat to Tolvajarvi village had been permanently checked. What had looked like a defeat at noon – or at best a stalemate – had been turned into a sharp localized victory by nightfall, thanks to Talvela's steadying (if somewhat distant) presemce, Pajari's aggressive determination, and the initiative of the 160-odd Finnish stragglers who had seized

Hirvasvaara Ridge and started banging-away at the ski lodge simply because that seemed like a sensible thing to do.

Pajari was up before dawn on December 13, eager to renew pursuit of the 139th Division, but he simply didn't have any troops refgreshed enough to undertake that mission. Reluctantly, he decided to give his soldiers a day off; December 13 would be devoted to regrouping, bringing up hot rations and ammunition, and giving his burned-out infantry some much needed rest. Full-scale offensive operations were to resume just before dawn on the 14th. (*)

(*) A good thing he did, too, according to one Finnish veteran I interviewed: "In my battalion, at least, we were so angry about the friends we'd lost by having to launch those frontal attacks – when all we had to do, really, was just torch the goddamned place and shoot the Russians when they jumped out -- that if the son-of-a-bitch (Pajari) had tried to order us into combat the next morning, at least three men I knew personally planned to shoot him. Nobody would have testified against them, either.."]

The Red Army's 139th Division did not break on December 12, but it did lose the equivalent of half-a-regiment, casualties amounting to roughly 20 % of its remaining manpower, on top of the 10-12 % losses already sustained. By the then-doctrinal standards of the U.S. Army, Beljejev's division was on the border of being judged "no longer combat effective".

And so passed the day of crisis in the Tolvajarvi Campaign. A crushing Finnish victory was beyond the means of Pajari's under-gunned men, and the decision had been balanced on a razor's edge at several points during this furious day, but only one thing mattered at that day's end: General Beljajev's troops would never get one step closer to the town of Tolvajarvi than they had been at dawn.

It was indeed fortunate that none of Pajari's exhausted soldiers could possibly have guessed that the worst was yet to come.

22. TOLVAJARVI – THE LAST ENDLESS LAP

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Unfortunately for Pajari's weary soldiers, the situation on the Tolvajarvi front changed dramatically, and not in their favor, on the night of 12-13 December. The Red Army high command had sent observers from Leningrad to the 139th Division, and they reported that the outfit had sustained such high casualties and had such poor morale that it could no longer be entrusted with that all-important breakthrough to Vartsila. A fresh, full strength divison, the 54th, was therefore taken out of Eight Army reserve and dispatched thither to the railhead near Lake Oneiga; at least one regiment was immediately loaded into a truck convoy and sent west into Finland. The 139th's relief was well under way before the Finns learned about the switch-over; Mannerheim was not pleased to learn that an entire Soviet regiment had gotten to the Tolvajarvi vicinity without being spotted either by ski patrols or aerial reconnaissance.

Morale in the replacement division was not helped by the sight of the 139th's survivors limping east toward the border, those who could still walk; truck after truck was jammed with frostbitten and wounded men, and the companies still capable of marching were as gaunt and haggard as prisoners from the Gulag. As some of the veterans passed their well-scrubbed, well-fed replacements, they made sinister throat-cutting gestures with their fingers and warned the newcomers that "the Finns will sneak up at night, while you're half-frozen, and cut your ears off before you even feel it."

Finnish listening posts saw and heard what was going on, and by of 13 December, Pajari's listening posts, radio intercepts, and long-range patrols had leanred more about their new opponents: the 54th Division was at full strength, approximately 12,000 men, and was as well or better supported by armor and artillery than the 139th had been. His response was typically aggressive: he ordered his men to assault the new division on both flanks and in the center, at first light, before the newcomers had time to familiarize themselves with the terrain or to fully deploy their heavy weapons. Pajari's plan was cobbled together hastily, and his orders were necessarily (or intentionally, as some historians assert) rather vague; there was a slap-dash, improvised quality to this operation, in ominous contrast to the careful balance of risk and opportunity that had characterized Col. Talvela's offensive actions thus far. The situation was not helped by the fact that one-third of Pajari's company commanders were now new replacement officers, most of them lacking in the experience of the fallen men they replaced.

If Pajari was ruthless about trading lives for ground, he at least made sure his men saw him taking the same risks he was ordering them to take – he recklessly exposed himself to enemy fire, hastening from one company to the next, cursing and shouting and

cajoling any troops he thought were faltering or advancing too cautiously. Such relentless conventional assaults were unusual for the Finnish Army, but by mid-afternoon of December 13, Pajari's tactics paid off: the 57th Division's resistance began to crumble, then it cracked altogether. Asking for more effort than some of his exhausted soldiers were capable of giving, Pajari drove his troops forward until some of his men simply keeled over with fatigue. But by nightfall, they had inflicted 1200 casualties on the new Red division, and driven it back slightly more than one mile, recapturing Ristisalmi late in the afternoon. This was a remarkable achievement for an outnumbered, hopelessly out-gunned, and physically drained force, but it came at a disproportionate cost: Pajari lost at least 200 killed and 430-odd wounded and missing, a significantly higher percentage of the men engaged than he had lost in the assault on the ski lodge.

More bad news came at sunset, when a remarkably accurate Russian artillery barrage destroyed one of the Finns' two precious Bofors guns and knocked the other on its side so violently that the wheel spun off one of its axles. This left the Finns with just one functioning anti-tank cannon, and that one could only be shifted from one position to another by the brute muscle-power of five or six strong men. The enemy was wising up, too: all night long, the Russians pounded Finnish positions with random but heavy harassment fire, fraying their nerves, causing a smattering of new casualties, and robbing them of desperately needed sleep.

Nevertheless, Pajari ordered the general offensive resumed at first light on 14 December – same pattern, same ruthless orders: hit both flanks first, then smite the center, and keep going regardless of losses. Initially, the attacks went well. The new Russian divison had been badly shaken by the previous day's fighting. The Finns'

remarkable bravery gave the lie to what the Soviet recruits had been hearing from their commissars: that Finnish resistance was collapsing everywhere, from Lake Ladoga to the White Sea, because the working-class soldiers were starting to mutiny and to kill their own officers, so they could join hands with their Red Army comrades and overthrow the plutocratic government of Kallio and Mannerheim (never mind that Mannerheim didn't hold any elected office and so, technically, was not part of "the Finnish government").. *These* Finns certainly didn't seem eager to have anything to do with their putative "liberators" except kill them.

But the pre-dawn attack ran out of steam quite suddenly when a group of Russian tanks came charging down the Aglajarvi Road, hidden by the fierce glare of the rising run at their backs. The soldiers of ErP-9 were stunned by the surprise armored assault and had nothing to oppose it but ineffectual hand grenades – a fresh supply of satchel charges and "Super Molotovs" (gasoline bombs with ampules of nitro-glycerine taped to the bottles) was expected but had not reached them before H-Hour. An emergency call went out for the battalion's sole functioning Bofors gun, still being inched-forward by hand and almost half-a-mile behind the front.

The situation was saved by an enterprising gunner, one Corporal Mutka, who somehow contrived to graft a heavy-duty sled-runner from a supply vehicle on to the crippled axle of the Bofors gun, harness the entire piece to a pair of brawny draft horses, and hauled the weapon forward, while riding bareback on one of the draft horses, in truly Napoleon style. After the anxious soldiers from ErP-9 directed him to a suitable location, Corporal Mutka unlimbered the cannon and with the help of several infantrymen, rolled it

into some underbrush about fifty yards from the oncoming tanks. He fired four shots and set the two lead tanks ablaze, whereupon the remainder hastily retreated.

Despite some localized successes such as this, Pajari's men made little head-way on the 14 December. Their opponents had steadied-down now and were no longer intimidated by the partly theatrical ferocity their Finnish assailants; they were also making more and better use of their heavy weapons.

By the morning of December 15, the situation up at Ilomantsi had stabilized enough for Talvela to load 350 reinforcements onto trucks and send them south to bolster Pajari's offensive. This was just about enough men to replace the losses Pakari sustained on December 14, but the "fresh" troops turned out to be middle-aged reservists only recently arrived at the front – willing enough to fight, but badly in need of refresher training and not yet supplied with any mortars or automatic weapons.

Nevertheless, many of these forty-fifty-year-old reservists were Civil War veterans, and they won Pajari's admiration for their determined attacks on Dec. 16, spearheading a breakthrough that rolled one wing of the Russian line back a quarter-mile, to the western shore of Lake Hietajarvi. But at that point, the Finns ran into a stone wall: a complex of bunkers manned entirely by 200 young men who had just graduated from an officer candidates' school near Murmansk and who had been allowed to serve together as a kind of "shock company". Well-trained, in peak physical condition, armed with the newe semi-automatic Tokarev rifles, nattily dressed in their graduation uniforms, these fiercely motivated young men proved to be the toughest and bravest Red Army troops Pajari's men had yet encountered. Even after their positions were surrounded, they resisted fiercely. Not until Pajari's artillerists brought forward some French 75s to blast

the young officers' bunkers at point blank range did the Finns subdue them. Except for two gravely wounded men, the young officers fought to the death, and it cost the Finns 28 killed and 64 wounded to crush this single pocket of resistance.

By the morning of Dec. 16, even Field Marshal Mannerheim was expressing concern about Pajari's appalling casualties. The Baron authorized the transfer of two companies of veteran ski guerrillas to Pajari's front, now stalled several miles west of the Aittojoki River, scene of much heavy fighting during the war's opening days. Pajari immediately sent the guerrillas out on wide flanking movements, instructing them to strike deep at supply depots, truck parks, ammo dumps, and communications centers between Aglajarvi and the Russian border. He also gave up costly frontal attacks and began trying to turn the 57th Division's flanks.

That these new tactics were paying off seemed proven by the fact that on December 17, for the first time in the war, the Red Air Force suddenly launched heavy bombing and strafing raids all along Pajari's front, another ominous development which actually prompted a slashing attack by a small flight of Finnish interceptors – the first friendly combat aircraft Pajari's men had ever seen overhead.

Privately Mannerheim told Talvela that it was no longer necessary to complete eject the invaders from Finnish soil; indeed, the Baron feared that Pajari was bleeding his troops to death by trying to do just that. It would be enough, Mannerheim "suggested", just to push them back over the Aittojoki, then dig in and keep them pinned there for the duration of the war. , Mannerheim ordered. Publicly, the Field Marshal acknowledged the public's affection for the Tolvajarvi warriors by promoting Talvela to general and Pajari to full colonel. Talvela responded to his promotion by issuing a proclamation to all the

soldiers under his command, thanking them for their efforts and pleading with them to press on for just a little while longer. "Your last energies must be exerted to throw the invaders back to their starting point…"

Before sunrise on December 20, the 59th Division made its own final supreme effort to regain the initiative by launching an all-out counterattack against the Finns' line at Aglajarvi. After an intense artillery barrage and a ten-minute aerial bombardment, the Russians hurled all available tanks down the Aglajarvi Road. The tankers made one fatal mistake, however: they ran over the brand new Bofors gun Corporal Mutka had just received to replace the weapon he'd lost on 13 December. Enraged to the state of a berserker, Mutka ran through a hail of machine gun fire and jammed a sputtering satchel charge between the treads and bogie wheels of the offending vehicle, not only immobilizing it but also touching off its turret ammo with such violence that explosion tore off most of his snow-suit. Then he ran to the one damaged cannon, shoved the other gunners aside – ordering them to traverse the piece by brute strength, while he bore-sighted on the last tank in the approaching column. A direct hit on the engine compartment turned this vehicle into a torch, and, since Mutka had already destroyed the foremost tank, he had effectively bottled-up a column of eleven others. Ignoring the frantic bursts of fire directed at him, he calmy bore-sighted on the next tank from the last and destroyed it, then put an armor-piercing round into the main gun of the third-from-last tank, snapping off the barrel from its mantlet like a broken toothpick, rendering this tank, too, out-of-action (or at least impotent). He richocted his next round off the turret of the fourth-from-last tank, and that was enough – the crews of all the surviving tanks bailed out and fled for the woods, leaving the engines still running. Colonel Pajari had

just been presented with a platoon of perfectly functioning T-28s, which volunteer Finnish crews – with much more zeal than skill – soon turned upon any Soviet infantry within range.

Pajari wanted to keep attacking, but (perhaps fortunately, considering the losses his men were taking), the valiant, headstrong colonel was felled by a second, much more serious, heart attack on December 21. All subsequent Russian counterattacks were repulsed, and while the Finnish GIs were still willing to fight fiercely on the defensive, they made it plain that if Pajari hadn't been forced to leave the battlefield, several entire Finnish battalions were planning an organized mutiny for December 21. For virtually an entire week, they had attacked every day, against an enemy whose numbers and weaponry would always be superior to their own, and each day that had lost good men to what they considered bad command decisions. If attacked, a deputation of junior officers reported to Talvela, they would resist – they had not pushed an entire enemy division back this far only to let it invade Finland for a second time, but if Pajari or any other officer ordered them to make another frontal attack, they would strip the bolts from their rifles, throw them into the forst, and walk home – which for many of them was only a good day's hike away.

Thus did fate intervene at the last moment, and prevent a grave crisis within the Finnish Army. Mannerheim had already drafted an order compelling Pajari to cease all offensive actions and dig in where he was, but the order didn't have to be given. The extent of discontent among Pajari's soldiers was not then (or ever; the subject is barely hinted at in official Finnish histories) widely known outside of the Army's inner circle and beyond the boundaries of Group Pajari. To the public at large, Pajari was a hero, the

first architect of a Finnish victory in the war so far; no good would come of airing the army's dirty laundry in the newspapers, and indeed, so tight was censorship about the "Mutineers of Tolvajarvi" that not a single journalist got wind of the affair.

Mannerheim put a period to the controversy by simply declaring a victory and getting on with other matters, issuing a proclamation expressing thanks to the "men and officers" of Group Talvela and Group Pajari, promoting Talvela to the rank of general and Pajari to full colonel (gestures of gratitude that were scandalously overdue, in my opinion), and generously sprinkling various medals and commendations amongst the rank and file.. The Baron stopped short of claiming that the Tolvajarvi Campaign was a "great victory"; diplomat that he was, he used the phrase "This campaiugn has come to victorious conclusion", which is a subtly but significantly different choice of words.

Pajari recovered from his heart attack, but never held another field command, and there are those who claim that Mannehim snubbed him publicly on several occasions, after the Baron had read more about the December battles and had heard more detailed testimony from officers who were present on a number of very contentious occasions. Yet is was Mannerheim himself who put the Tolvajarvi battalions' assignment into such stark, apocalyptic terms that Pajari could be forgiven for thinking that the fate of Finland was in his hands, if not that of Democratic Civiliztion and Christianity itself, and any degree of sacrifice would be warranted. Perhaps, in theory, that was true. But Pajari's soldiers were human beings, too, as well as sentient icons of all Western Civilization and walking, fighting embodiments of its greatest virtues. At a certain point, Pajari's obsession with "the mission" became so all consuming and so one-dimensional that he began to think of the troops as automatons. And in his capacity as their commander,

Pajari was acting as a representative of the same government that had been too parsimonious to buy tanks or adequate modern artillery for its soldiers, leaving officers like Pajari – who clerarly was one of those rare men who spurns fear and thrives on adrenaline – no choice, if they are going to win battles, but to rely on their riflemen to perform near miracles. The question of ultimate culpability for the grievous losses Finland suffered in this "victory" is not a simple one, and if the nation itself hasn't yet reached a verdict, it would be pretentious folly of me to attempt one here.

What seems certain is this: the hard-won Finnish successes during the Tolvajarvi Campaign probably saved the Finnish IVth Corps from encirclement and, conceivably, saved the Mannerheim Line from being taken from behind. It was a remarkable feat of arms, but the cost was severe. Proportional to the numbers engaged, the Finnish Army suffered heavier losses in the Tolvajarvi Campaign than in any other of the Winter War: 630 killed and 1,320 wounded – one-quarter of the rank-and-file engaged, and fully one-third of the officers and non-coms.

The Finns' margin of victory was slim indeed; by the time Talvela relieved the unfortunate Rasanen, this was a **beaten** army, on the verge of total psychological and physical collapse. Yet in less than forty-eight hours – however demanding and even ruthless their styles of command – Talvela and Pajari had turned the situation completely around, and from the night of Pajari's nervy commando-style raid until the invaders finally were driven back across the Aittojoki, the Finns never again lost the initiative. When the civilian press began to trumpet "The Miracle of Tolvajarvi", the term was especially applicable to Aaro Pajari – small wonder that the man pushed his troops so

hard, when he himself fought with the knowledge that he could die at any moment from a heart attack!

Around midday of December 13, one of Pajari's battalions, advancing with no discernable urgency and against only desultory Soviet resistance, reached and occupied Ristisalmi; the rest of Pajari's command took the day off, while supplies were brought up from Vartsila and the wounded were brought down to waiting trains. It is difficult to imagine those troops being capable of an energetic pursuit, but in retrospect, that's exactly what Pajari would have demanded of them if he had known the consequences of that single day's respite. As it turned out, there was still plenty of fight left in the 139th Division, and it would soon be evident that the only way to keep such an outfit on-the-run, once it had been dislodged from a coherent defensive line, was by means of unremitting attacks. From December 14 until the war's last hour, Pajari would drive his troops mercilessly. Many of them came to hate him for it, at the time, but after the war, many of those same men reluctantly admitted that his tactics, costly though they were, had been the only correct ones under the circumstances.

What the Finns didn't know on December 14 was that a fresh Soviet division had entered the battle. It was the Fifty-Seventh Division, from Eighth Army's general reserves, and it had been sent in to replace the worn-out and badly mauled 139th. Pajari first learned of this ominous development from intelligence reports reaching him on December 16. Aerial reconnaissance from the morning of December 17 confirmed heavy enemy traffic moving in both directions along the Aglajarvi road. Fresh troops of the Seventy-fifth were moving west while the survivors of the 139th were moving east, withdrawing toward the border. There is some evidence that the spectacle of the

retreating 139th, its men half-frozen and both physically and psychologically burned-out, its column burdened with hundreds of quick-frozen dead, and hundreds more frostbitten, and downcast men, had a marked effect on the morale of the new men moving west. For a while, the replacements tried cheering and shouting Party slogans in comradely greetings to the haggard veterans, but the latter – when they bothered to respond at all, sometimes just glowered, their red-rimmed eyes glowing from the deep almost cadaverous pits of their sunken cheek bones, and silently drew their index fingers across their windpipes, in the universal and unmistakable sign that warned: "You'll be sor-reee!"

Pajari's response to this glum news was to push his men even harder. He renewed his attacks on December 14, with Er-P 9 as the leading element. Its attack was stopped cold when two Red tanks suddenly appeared, as if out of thin air, and began driving back and forth with impunity, firing at will and knocking over a dozen, then two dozen Finns, who were virtually pinned in place by the spine of a thin ridge running parallel to the road, and who had nothing with which to fight the vehicles except machine guns and hand grenades – not even any gasoline bombs were within reach. ErP-9's column ground to a halt, and word went back down its length that a tank ambush had nailed the vanguard company in place and was methodically cutting it to pieces – somehow, either by remarkably good scouting or sheer chance, the enemy had learned that the nearest Bofors gun was a mile back in the stalled column, along with the absent but urgently needed Molotov Cocktails and satchel charges. One of the Bofors gunners, a very enterprising corporal named Mutka, hitched his 37 mm.gun to a big burly draft horse and moved it forward through the Red-Sea-parting column in true Napoleonic style, himself riding

bareback on the shaggy barrel-chested animal! Once he reached the front, Mutka called for volunteers, (so many of whom crowded around the gun that he had to shoo most of them away), unlimbered the weapon quickly, and just as quickly drew a bead on the vehicles, which were uncamouflaged, and whose crews hand't spotted him yet – like targets in a shooting gallery. Mutka was a very experienced gunner, and a man with long enough arms and a powerful enough torso to load, eject, reload, and fire four well-aimed shots in the time it took most Bofors gunners to get off two. Four rounds is what he fired, scoring two hits on each tank, punching holes in the turrets and setting both on fire. This sudden, deus-ex-machina destruction of both tanks had a demoralizing effect on the Red infantry, which was surging ahead (quite properly) to protect them, and gave way to panic when the vehicles blew up in their faces, victimes of an apparently invisible, phantom, gunner. As the Soviet foot-soldiers retreated, Pajari's men staggered on in pursuit, racking up another solid mile of gains before being stopped again by prepared defensive works, along the crest of Metsanvaara (literally "Ridge-in-the-Woods"; I found that Finnish place-names tend to be either exquisitely poetic and evocative or insultingly banal and unimaginative!)..

On December 15, following successful engagements on the Ilomantsi front, Talvela was able to send about 350 replacements to Pajari, almost enough men to replace his KIAs since the storming of the ski lodge. For a few days at least, these newcomers turned out to be a dubious asset – most were over-aged reservists with no Civil War experience, and although they were willing enough to fight, they'd been only sketchily trained and were wretchedly armed. Nevertheless, they attacked the Metsanvaara

entrenchments with energy and courage, helping Pajari's units to capture that obstacle and resume their eastward progress.

The following day, December 17, the Finns ran into a veritable stonewall of resistance, comprising the entire 200-man graduating class of a regional military academy, decked out in their resplendent but hopelessly impractical dress uniforms, ski-less, wearing glossy spit-shined boots and Sam Browne belts, armed with factory shiny Tokarev rifles, these young men were -–in the opinion of the Finns who fought them – the bravest, most patriotic, and most professional body of Soviet troops encountered during the entire Tolvajarvi Campaign; True-Believer Marxists, one and all, steadfast Party members, splendid physical specimens, well-trained and ferociously motivated. Although Leningrad District High Command had planned to assign these elite cadets to traditional and widely scattered posts as they became open, the entire class volunteered to fight together, as one unit, immediately they could be dispatched to Finland. Weighing the options, Meretskov and his Moscow handlers agreed that the cadets' value as propaganda objects far outweighed their value as platoon leaders, so off to the front they went, in clean heated passenger cars, as opposed to the drafty, dung-encrusted box cars that served to transport more ordinary replacements. They volunteered to serve in the "point of maximum danger", and Beljajev obligingly put them in the center of his defenses, athwart the Aglajarvi Road. All through the day they fought, skillfully and gallantly, earning the grudging admiration of their Finnish assailants (and killing a disproportionate number of same – one company of ErP-9 lost six out of its twenty officers killed in a single hour of skirmishing with the cadets. Finally, after intense Finnish pressure drove the less-motivated (and probably much colder) regular infantry

from both flanks, except for thr 18 who shirked behind so they could surrender, giving Pajari a chance, finally, to surround the "elite" detachment on three sides, the cadets refused all entreaties to surrender and even Aaro Pajari was impressed by their steadfastness. And then he ordered his men to move in and crush them. The outcome was never in doubt – like the Old Guard at Waterloo, the cadets eventually stood alone, encircled by their foes, but rather than allowing the Finns to kill them at a sanitary and safe distance, the cadets fixed bayonets and charged, forcing Pajari's men to engage them hand-to-hand at the last and most barbaric phase of the fight, the cadets taking their stands, in small clumps, back-to-back until they were literally submerged or shot to bits. Out of these 200 young Soviet Spartans, only two survived, both seriously wounded and unconscious when they fell. In one of his post-war descriptions of this bitter skirmish, Pajari described the fallen cadets as "the bravest soldiers I have ever seen, either as comrades or as deadly foes. I can pay them no higher honor than to tell you they were the only Soviet invaders I ever regretted having to kill."

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At the rate he was making progress, a mile or less per day and with at least one heavy skirmish each and every day, Pajari thought it might be spring before he pushed the invaders back to the frontier. To speed up the process, he began to send wider and deeper turning movements around the Russians' successive defensive lines athwart the Aglajarvi road. Meanwhile, the situation up at Ilomantsi had become stable enough for Talvela, to dispatch 350 reinforcements down to Pajari – just about enough me to replaxs his K.I.A.s since this pursuit phase had started. Talvela also released for Pajari's use, every small scrap of un-needed reserves he could scour up. In the (surely redudndant,

given Pajari's style of command!) cover letter Talvela dictated to go with these new incremental reinforecements, Talvela admonished: "you must demand the expenditure of your troops' very last energies". Most of Pajari's troops already felt as though their last energies **HAD** been used up. In the same dispatch case came the official letter from Mannerheim onfirming that Pajaru was thereby promoted to the rank of full colonel (surely a gesture insultingly overdue!) and two days later, on 19 December, came word that Talvela was hereby been brevetted to the rank of major general (pending the arrival, from the manufacturer, of the correct insigniae!). High time, in both cases!

A new danger faced Pajari's little army on December 18, when the Red Air Force made its first appearance (rather curiously) over this theater, launching a series of persistent and fairly heavy tactical strikes (with results that were more disconcerting than damaging). The raids did, however, delay and discomfit the forces allotted to a pair of by-now-familiar wide flanking attacks (and I mean **wide;** five miles separated them and in between was the Russians' main line or resistance, running along excellent defensive ground that bisected Aglajarvi. The northern attack at least made a dent in the Soviet perimeter, but the southern maneuver, aimed at cutting the enemy's supply line at Poljavaara, ran into a strong, prepared defense that seemed to know the Finns were coming. Pajari had begun to suffer from clouded judgement; he had sent that southern force so far, so deep, and through terrain that was so exhausting, they could neither carry extra firepower nor summon the energy to attack without it. After several hours of desultory skirmishing, the Finns withdrew, their morale low and their spirits guttering.

That same afternoon, Mannerheim – who had after all practically threatened Talvela a n nd Pajari with drumhead executions if they not go "all-out" in this campaign -

- had become so concerned by the appalling friendly casualties on that front that he actually discussed with his staff the advisability of pulling the plug and ordering both Group Talvela and Group Pajari to go over to a defensive posture – a few more days of high losses and low achievements to show for them would create the exact opposite effect he'd been hoping for. As an old campaigner, the Baron had been keeping careful track of the Finns' gains and weighing them against the now-alarming casualty figures; he had almost reached the conclusion that Pajari's men could not hope to achieve much more before they burned-out completely, As though reading the Field Marshal's mind, Pajari put through a priority callto Mannerheim late on the 19th and argued that if his men were worn-out, the enemy's soldiers must be in even shakier condition – otherwise, why would Leningrad Command have begun air attacks for the first time? Give us a little more time and some more supplies, Pajari argued (shrewdly telling Mannerheim what Mannerheim really wanted to hear), and he believed there was still a good chance of breaking the Russians' Aglajarvi line and pushing them so bar back toward the border that the Tolvajarvi front would stabilize of natural causes (a nice euphemism for "mutual exhaustion"). Mannerheim agreed to give his paladin "a little more time", but warned him that if Pajari didn't stop sending his men into battles that cost so many Finnish lives, he was going to call a halt and this time it would be a direct order rather than a fatherly suggestion.

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In the predawn darkness of December 20, the Russians made their most determined sally out of the Aglajarvi line yet, using a relatively rested battalion of

infantry, robust artillery barrages, and nine tanks. The assault caught Pajari's men by surprise, and it soon became apparent that the target of this attack was the hiding place of his precious Bofors guns – the tanks came straight at them, firing on-the-move (and thereby increasing the psychological impact of their spearhead while greatly diminishing the tankers' chance of actually hitting anything). Before the startled Finns could do anything more than throw some wild grenades at it, the lead T-28 crashed into the camouflage netting ostensibly hiding the nearest Bofors piece, rammed it square in the gun-shield, and crushed the piece into the snow, scattering the gunners before they'd been able to load a single round.

Once again, a crisis was averted by the initiative of the formidable Corporal Mutka, who became so enraged at the sight of his cannon being ground into scrap beneath enemy treads that he ran for the nearest supply bunker, ducked inside, and came out with a lighted, sputtering satchel charge in his hands. With incredible audacity, he zig-zaged through zipper-spurts of MG fire, closing with the enemy vehicle faster than its hull gunner could depress his weapon, reached the blind-spot under the flaming muzzle, and shoved the explosive pack into a knot of crumpled Bofors gun parts and spinning bogie wheels. He swan-dived into a nearby gully just a couple of seconds before the charge exploded, and managed to stay low enough to avoid being decapitated by flying tread-segments and other large pieces of tank. The vehicle shuddered heavily, spun off its remaining tread, and gushed oily smoke from the escape hatch, the engine compartment and the muzzle of its turret-gun. Two of the crewmen, both gagging and choking from toxic fumes, managed to hoist their shoulders through the main hatch, but a fusillade of

Suomi fire shattered the skull of one and drove the other one back inside just as the fuel supply went ***WOOSH*** and roasted him alive. The smoldering wreck of the first tank blocked the remaining eight from advancing any further, but to their credit, the tankers did not flee back to the forest; instead, they maneuvered into a shallow bow-shaped formation and raked Finnish positions with blistering fire from all their weapons, making it impossible for even a man like Mutka to come within satchel-charge range. One sharp-shooting Russian machine-gunner even tagged a Molotov Cocktail in mid-arc – rather like a good skeet-shooter – and caused it to explode in a colorful but harmless puff of napalm-colored fire. None the Finns' remaining gasoline missiles, hastily thrown from too great a distance, did anything except scorch the paint of the remaining vehicles.

Taking advantage of all this commotion, the redoubtable Mutka had meanwhile snaked and shimmied and sprinted back to the hiding place of his second and last anti-tank gun, and now he launched a one-man campaign of revenge. Carefully bore-sighting the piece, he placed a good solid strike into the engine compartment of the last Red tank in formation, setting it afire and blocking the path of any other tanks that tried to extricate themselves in reverse gear! With amazing calmness he and a couple of brawny volunteers traversed the Bofors to the left and ***SPANG!*** A neat, perfectly round 37 mm. hole appeared in its turret. No secondary explosions resulted, but from the shrieking and metallic whip-crack noises boiling inside the turret, the round had done the next-best thing by punching-out on the reverse side of its point-of-impact, an expanding cone of red-hot fragments, which had nowhere else to go except to carom from one interior surface of the turret to the next, until all velocity was spent or their ricochets were

stopped by human flesh. The tank looked unharmed, when the zinging and whanging sounds finally subsided, but no one emerged from its hatches and it never moved again. When a couple of Pajari's medics gingerly pried open the top hatch later that afternoon, one of them peered inside with a flashlight and promptly vomited.

Finnish GI's who – like many of their Soviet counterparts – had largely stopped shooting in order to watch the results of "Mad Mutka's" next shots, broke into cheers when, apparently, and by means of whatever screwball trajectory, the Bofors warhead had knocked loose a cascade of ready-ammo and rained sparks down on one or more ruptured shell casings. A rapid-fire chain of greatly compressed explosions detonated within, then blended into one long puissant volcanic roar, while the entire turret, including most of its mantlet and mounting ring, spun majestically into the air before falling back onto the lid of the engine compartment, adding a harsh, reverberating climactic timbre that reminded one musically-sophisticated onlooker of a gigantic tam-tam being struck with a big hammer. Still in a berserk fury, Corporal Mutka began screaming obscenities in both Finnish and Swedish when he discovered there were no more shells within reach.

Not that it mattered; the remaining Soviet tank crews had seen enough of this madman and his wrecking-crew – they bailed out and ran for the woods, leaving the engines still running in the five surviving vehicles. With their armor out of commission, the follow-up Soviet infantry attack just evaporated – one instant there was a charging battalion, the next there was nobody in sight. One assumes Corporal Mutka was seriously decorated for his actions that day, for even the handful of sullen Russian POWs

proclaimed his deeds to be so valorous as to deserve the Order of Lenin! When queried about the incident – which had already receded in his mind like a half-remembered bad dream – the good corporal Mutka muttered: "I just got angry as hell, sir, when I saw that first bastard drive over one of **my guns**, that's all!"

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Aside from one crumpled Bofors gun, the only serious Finnish casualty from this dramatic skirmish was Aaro Pajri himself. How he had managed to carry on this long is beyond any explanation of medical science (remember, only two-and-a-half weeks earlier, this same no-longer-young man had been knocked into a coma by his first heart attack!). He suffered a second heart attack that afternoon, and this one nearly killed him. Many of his soldiers removed their helmets (or whatever type of headgear they were wearing), when the stretcher-bearers staggered past them on their way to the aid station, but after this public gesture of respect, many of those same men confessed to their closest comrades that, while they certainly hoped their commanding officer would recover, they also were also relieved to see the last of him.

For the first week of his time on the Tolvajarvi front, Aaro Pajari had been an inspiring and apparently fearless commander – on a number of occasions, he had taken up a gun and fought alongside his men, in addition to leading that nervy nighttime raid that halted the rot of Finnish morale on the whole front; but increasingly since, Pajari had not so much lead his troops as flog them into action, sending them into unequal and murderous confrontations time after time until he seemed almost to have stopped recognizing their humanity at all. "If they ever come up with a regiment of robots," one

Finnish veteran told me in 1965, "then Colonel Pajari would be the perfect son-of-a-bitch to lead it into combat! Yes, I admired his courage –all of us did – but there are still some mornings when I wake up wishing I'd squeezed the trigger when I had the fucker's skull in my sights! By the day he was evacuated, it didn't make a snowball-in-hell's-worth of difference who won or lost the goddamned battle for Tolvajarvi, not if every new skirmish was going to bleed another Finnish company to death."

He was not the only man I heard express, shall we say, "mixed" feelings about Aaro Pajari. Given the fraternal bond that unites most soldiers under the kind of stress Pajari and his men were going through during the campaign's final week, it reveals much to learn that the same soldiers who followed Pajari into seemingly hopeless fights against heavy odds, were at least some of the time the self-same men who wanted to frag the guy while he slept or pop a Moisin bullet into the back of his head. His replacement, Lieutenant-Colonel Kaarlo Viljanen (yet another of the seemingly inexhaustible supply of Twenty-Seventh Jaeger veterans!) adopted a less demanding style of leadership – he could tell within fifteen minutes of taking command that most of Pajari's men were right up against it, that invisible plate-glass wall, infinitely thin and brittle, that separates a "merely" exhausted infantryman from one who has reached such a state of pointless misery that he no longer **cares** about victory or defeat and has even become largely indifferent to his own survival, as long as **somebody or something makes it stop**. In any larger, better-equipped army, Pajari's soldiers would have been rotated out of combat by December 10, for by that date, every man who'd been in the line since.the war's first day had already spent almost three times as many hours under the strain of combat as the Marines who stormed ashore at Tarawa. And when the Mannerheim Line was finally

breached, it was due to those same cumulative effects, intensified by the wear and tear on human nerves caused by a sustained bombardment that smote the defenders with an average of 400 shells **per minute** per square kilometer, for two solid, uninterrupted weeks. Under such a colossal hammering, the effect of concussion alone had gradually but literally hammered the brain-matter of some men into a substance resembling peanut butter. Even General Talvela knew the end had come on December 23, when one of his steadiest battalions lost every single company commander on its roster in the space of four hours. Worst of all, the CO of another hitherto steadfast battalion, a normally calm, resolute, but middle-aged man who had no more business enduring six weeks of such pressure than a twelve-year-old child, suddenly and without any warning went insane in mid-battle and started ordering the nearest Maxim crew to swivel their weapon around and open fire on friendly troops. When the gunners balked, the officer, with the maniacal physical strength of a madman, literally kicked and punched them away from the weapon, grabbed the handles himself, and started sweeping the gun back and forth in the direction of his own men. He burned up half-a-belt of ammunition before three strong men could tackle and subdue him, and by the time they managed to wrest the grips from his claw-like fingers, there was foam coming out of his mouth. Once securely bound, the broken man appeared to sink into deep catatonia, but as a quartet of stretcher-bearers, not unkindly, were carrying him to the rear, he caught sight of some of the dead Finns his bullets had scythed down. His body went limp while his eyes regained rationality and focus and a long, anguished moan rose from his throat. When the survivors of his unit last saw him, he was wailing and sobbing like a bereft child. I could not track down any further information with absolute certainty (although I am firmly convinced this incident

really happened), but according to several veterans familiar with the incident, the man committed suicide not long afterward, probably with a hand grenade he;d been carrying in his pocket the whole time..

* * *

By nightfall on that same day, December 23, the remnants of Group Pajari, in one supreme final effort, had ejected five times their number of Soviet defenders from the western bank of the Aittojoki River, and thus had cleared Finnish soil almost back to the place where they had begun that nightmare retreat, as "Task Force Rasanen" at the start of the war. As a cohesive military command, Group Pajari was finished. Mannerheim ordered it, unequivocally, to cease all offensive actions as of dawn, December 24, and dig in for an indefinite period of static, positional stalemate. There was nothing else to do, really. Between the frozen river and the Soviet border, there was still a lot of good defensive ground, and however many Red Army soldiers Pajari's men killed on one day, replacements had made up for them within forty-eight hours. Truly, both sides had beaten each other into mutual submission. Except for routine patrols, the Finns did not advance one more yard to the east, nor the Red Army attempt to wrest one more yard of ground to the west. But in the end, Talvela and Pajari fulfilled their mission: they had stopped the invaders along the densely wooded banks of Lake Tolvajarvi, and thus had barred the way not only to Finland's interior communications, but to the vulnerable rear echelon of General Hagglund's IVth Corps, still unbroken north of Lake Ladoga, and now able to launch its long-frustrated counter-offensive without fear of being trapped from behind.

In proportion to the numbers engaged, the Tolvajarvi Campaign was the bloodiest battle of the war for Finland. Fully 35 % of Talvela's officers and non-coms fell in battle, roughly one-half slain and the other half wounded. Of the rank-and-file they commanded, fully 28 per cent suffered the same fates. The bare numbers don't come close to conveying the impact those percentages had on the Finnish Army as a whole, but here they are anyway:

Dead: 630 confirmed

Wounded: 1,320 confirmed

Missing and presumed dead:200-250 (estimated)

Red Army losses have never been accurately computed, not even after the archives of the former USSR were opened to Finnish researchers. It is likely not even Stalin received any reports more accurate than educated guesses. An unknown number – but certainly no fewer than 1400 – perished unseen and unrecorded in the deep forest – every year or two, new skeletal remains are discovered by hikers and woodsmen. What an awful and lonely death those men suffered! Not even a rough estimate exists for the casualties sustained during Task Force Rasenen's fighting retreat – the reader's guess is as good as the author's. During the haggard, bitterly contested Finnish march from the captured ski resort up to the Aittojoki, approximately 4,300 Russian bodies were tallied, and

fragmentary records suggest an additional 5,000 wounded or frost-bitten men were evacuated during the same time-period. Roughly 500 died during the attack on the tourist hotel, another 400-500 during Pajari's murderous nocturnal raid, and almost another 600 were taken prisoner. General Beljajev's division had originally crossed into Finland with 55 tanks in support, and 53 tanks were verifiably destroyed during the campaign – today, the rusted hulks of many serve as shelters for the red fox cubs that abound in these woods during the species' spring birthing season. And not the least statistic, given Finland's chronic shortage of equipment, 220 Maxims, Degtyarevs and other types of automatic weapons were collected, reconditioned, and pressed into service against their former owners.

* * *

Paavo Talvella and Aaro Pajari were an unlikely team: one was generally calm and methodical in manner, and didn't hesitate to show his compassion for the average soldier; the other was choleric, abrasive, and often seemed cruelly indifferent to the hardship and weariness of the men he drove so hard. (*) Neither commanding officer would have been as effective without the other, and if you could clone one-half of each man's personality, you might come up with something like the "perfect infantry commander".

SIDEBAR: PAJARI IN CONTEXT

(*) SIDEBAR:: Pajari may remind most readers of George Patton, but the one caveat regarding Patton's reputation that has always bothered me a little, is the fact that in virtually all of his World War Two battles, he commanded larger and better-armed forces than his opponents – it's a bit easier to score a ringing military triumph against inferior foes than it is under less helpful conditions. It's worth noting, I think, that the **one** time Patton was tasked with breaking through really formidable enemy opposition – the Siegfried Line – he seemed periodically confused, uninspired, resentful, and ended up turning in a performance that might charitably be described as "uninspired". I'd call it downright mediocre, but perhaps I'm being unkind. If I had to compare Pajari with an analogous American commander, I'd vote for General Sherman ("Crazy Billy" to his old West Point colleagues) He certainly shared Pajari's belief that hard-driven soldiers win battles faster than kindly-treated ones and thus reduce the cumulative suffering of all. But even Sherman couldn't always practice what he preached, because his most brilliant performance, the March to the Sea and his subsequent blitz through the Carolinas, after cutting loose from his supply base at Savannah, was also conducted against scattered, always much-smaller, Rebel forces led by over-aged Southern officers forced to scrape up their commands from the dregs of Confederate militia, Home Guard companies, the recuperating wounded. The one and only time he faced a cohesive army, led by a professional soldier whose capabilities were equal to his own (Joe Johnston at Bentonville), "Old Joe", who commanded with fire and tactical brilliance despite the effects of four major wounds from which he had never fully recovered, got the drop on Sherman's entire left wing and came within an ace of routing it with a force one-fourth as large! Like Sherman, Pajari's rough, hectoring, and profane exterior concealed an agile and first-rate military intellect, and he derived no personal pleasure from driving his men so hard.

**********END SIDEBAR ********

Although western historians have tended to slight the Tolvajarvi Campaign in favor of the more sensational "motti" victory at Suomussalmi, or the epic grandeur that clings to the Alamo-like defensive stand behind the Mannerheim Line, Tolvajarvi may actually have been the most remarkable Finnish feat-of-arms in the annals of the Winter War. If it had been lost, it is likely the war itself would also have been lost, well before the end of its first month. By halting and then pushing back the Soviet invasion in thatsector, Group Talvela stabilizd more than 150 miles of fr/ontline, enabling General Hagglund's counter-offensive to come within a whisker of absolute victory, and preserving the integrity of Finland's eastern border.

Psychologically, as Mannerheim had predicted, the Soviet check at Tolvajarvi provided an enormous boost to Finnish morale on every front. The 139th Red Army Division was in no way a second-rate outfit, and its leader, General Bejajev, was one of the most capable Russian divisional commanders to emerge from the conflict. His regiments were tough, aggressive, well-trained, and equipped as lavishly as any rifle division in Stalin's army. I have been unable to determine what happened to him afterwards, but would welcome information from any reader privy to it

* * *

All the Russian traffic along that road would be moving away from Finland now. The turning point had been reached and the balance had shifted.

But the price had been almost unbearably high. In proportion to the size of the armies involved, Finnish casualties in the Tolvajarvi campaign were approximately the same as the U.S. Army suffered on Omaha Beach.

23. THE "MOTTIS" OF GENERAL HAGGLUND

By December 15, those red arrows on the big map at Mannerheim's headquarters did not look nearly so threatening as they had one week earlier. The enemy had been checked at Ilomantsi, thrown back in front of Tolvajarvi, and along the previously insignificant Kollaa River (the "back door" to IVth Corps area of operations), two grossly out-numbered and out-gunned Finnish regiments were steadfastly holding on against murderous artillery fire (approximately 160 Soviet cannon versus 20 Finnish guns and the faithful old armored train), and relentless frontal attacks by first one, and ultimately three, Russian infantry divisions. The strategic situation in Ladoga-Karelia was as stable as it was ever going to be, so Mannerheim authorized General Hagglund to spring the huge trap the Finns had set in the almost impenetrable forests bordering the north shore of Lake Ladoga.

The lexicon of military history was about to acquire a new and exotic term: "Motti Tactics" – the style of large-scale guerrilla operations that would enable the Finns to immobilized, cut-apart, and ultimately annihilate Red Army formations four-to-six times larger than the Finnish detachments attacking them.

In Finnish, the word *motti* denotes a pile of large logs, held in place by stakes, destined to be sawn into convenient lengths of firewood. It is an apt analogy for the methods the Finns employed to immobilize, surround, and piece-meal destroyed, in the difficult terrain north of Lake Ladoga, and in the vast sub-arctic wilderness of north-central Finland.

The classic Motti operation had the following distinct phases:

1. Reconnaissance: Obviously, the first requirement was to locate and track every element of the targeted enemy unit. How long was his column, and into how many major segments was it divided? Was it advancing on a single road or using primitive, secondary tracks as well? Where in the column were its artillery assests? Its armored vehicles? It's radio vans and field kitchens? Once these basic facts were known, the first Finnish assaults were launched to halt the invader in place, restrict his lateral or retrograde movement, and pin his major segments within the most narrowly circumscribed areas possible.

2. Swift, lightly-armed ski-troopers tracked that division as it drove deeper and deeper into the central wilderness. When the enemy column reached suitable terrain, larger Finnish detachments were brought into play, establishing strong roadblocks at each end of the formation, so that it could neither advance nor retreat without elaborate, time-consuming preparations. Applying the principle of Concentration-of-Force, the Finns achieved brief localized superiority and executed multiple sharp, surprise attacks at the most vulnerable points along the entire Soviet column – sometimes eight-ten such attacks simultaneously. The objective of this phase was to chop the whole enemy force into as many isolated, weaker, fragments as possible;

3. The third and final phase consisted of the methodical destruction of each individual pocket – each *motti* – starting with the smallest and weakest ones, while hunger, cold, and constant sniper activity wore down the larger *mottis'* powers of resistance. This was achieved most efficiently by the systematic killing of officers, the destruction of radio teams – the psychological effect of simply **not being able to communicate** with friendly troops and/or higher authority created a sense of hopelessness and misery among the besieged – and most importantly, field kitchens. At twenty-below-zero, a hot meal can literally make the difference between life and death. Once the men trapped inside a *motti* were observed to be butchering their pack animals and roasting their meat over campfires, the Finns knew it was only a matter of time before the strongest enclave would incapable of effective self-defense, and if one final close-assault was needed to finish-off the survivors, the resulting battle was usually short and one-sided.

So impressive were the victories scored through the use of Motti Tactics, that even today, at West Point and Sandhurst, the Battle of Suomussalmi is taught as "a tactical masterpiece" – a paradigm of innovative professional thinking and an

inspiring example of how an outnumbered, low-tech army can use indigenous terrain, weather, and a set of shared psychological values, as "force multipliers". The Finns, or so the legend would have us believe, made cunning use of their limited assets and were thereby able to wrest a number of stunningly one-sided victories from situations in which they were faced with overwhelming enemy superiority in numbers and weaponry.

Well, of course the Finns are proud to accept whatever accolades the history teachers at West Point care to bestow, but if pressed about the matter, contemporary Finnish historians will admit that there is no firm evidence to prove that "motti tactics" **by that name**, were ever taught in Finland's pre-Winter-War training curricula. My own research leads me to believe that individual officers might very well have coined the phrase **informally**, at some point in the late Nineteen-Thirties, as a convenient and aptly descriptive idiom for the infantry combat techniques forced upon them by the exigencies of Nature and a succession of parsimonious governments – and, to a certain extent, by the well-known psychology of the only hostile army Finland was ever likely to fight…

During the heady, optimistic years immediately following the Bolsheviks' triumph in the Russian Civil War, the Red Army and Air Force were among the most progressive, technologically innovative military organizations in the world. The discredited reactionary "traditions" which produced the epic slaughters of World War One were swept away, replaced by bold new ideas and designs, and young officers who had risen to command, often from the humblest origins, during the Civil War, felt free to rise as high as their talent and energy might take them.

But the only places their independence of spirit "took" many of them, was to the labor camps in Siberia or the tile-floored basement rooms in every NKVD prison where the state "rewarded" them with Tokarev bullets in the back of the skull. By the time the Great Purges had run their ghastly course – in 1939m the number of **recorded** NKVD executions dropped to 2,552, from a 1938 high point of 328,618! -- perhaps three-quarters of the Red Army's brightest and most experienced officers had been liquidated; even their photographs were air-brushed out of new editions of history books. Henceforth, the Red Army would be the embodiment of Stalinist ideology **first**, and the shield of Mother Russia only after it had been reshaped into an army Stalin could trust This meant not only political sanitation, but intellectual stagnation, for which the Soviet Union would pay an unspeakable price during the first two years of its apocalyptic war with Hitler.

Field Marshal Mannerheim and his staff were considerably better-informed about these matters than their counterparts in France, Britain, and the United States. Finland had no "traditional" enemies, and only one potential current foe, so it behooved Mannerheim and his generals to stay abreast of Russia's internal affairs. He knew that the liquidation or banishment of so many experienced professionals would open a huge number of slots in the Red Army's officer-grades, and he knew the type of man that would most likely be elevated to fill those vacancies. "Working class thugs in uniform" was one of his more polite descriptions of the new, ideologically dry-cleaned officer caste. In battle, he suspected most of them would prove to be slow, timid, and tactically unimaginative.

While Mannerheim's memoirs reveal a subtle, grudging respect for Stalin-as-despot (after all, his excesses and style of governance were hardly unique over the long course of Russians history!), but he was dumfounded when the Kremlin promulgated its madcap edict requiring every officer from the level of company commanders on up to serve in tandem with a political commissar (a *politruk*) and forbidding that military officer to issue any combat-related orders to his unit without first having those orders countersigned by his political symbiote. It mattered little whether the commissar was an intelligent man or a nincompoop, a man with military training or a hapless bureaucrat who barely knew which end of a rifle the bullet emerged from -- . until that commissar countersigned the orders, in effect certifying that the commands were not only militarily sound, but also, um, "politically correct", the military actions those orders pertained to **could not go forward**! Thus did blind ideology trump the oldest, most battle-tested principle of military discipline: the chain of command itself!

Search though one may through the annals of military history, it is impossible to find another despotic policy so irrational, so absurd, so pregnant with possibilities for battlefield disaster and chaos. Hobbled by paranoia, the Red Army commanders of 1939 were not only expected to produce victories, but were required to do so from inside the stifling doctrinal corset of strict Marxist orthodoxy. Even the dumbest, rawest private in the ranks was encouraged to address a long-serving, battle-wise division-grade officer only as "Comrade General"; even the token respect-for-rank denoted by a salute was discouraged, or at best rendered optional! No modern army could function efficiently when hobbled by such grotesquely ridiculous policies, and

in the early days of the Winter War, the Red Army didn't. While Mannerheim and his staff never underestimated the courage and patriotism of Stalin's hardy but poorly educated peasant soldiers, they had only contempt for the servile Party hacks who, thanks to the Great Purges, had risen to field command over the corpses of better men.

The Finnish high command developed quite an accurate estimation of what the operational consequences of the *Politruk* system would be. Once the Russians actually committed whole divisions in the forbidding terrain of central Finland, it was a virtual certainty that those divisions would stay on or very close to the rough and widely separated roads. God knows, the average Soviet rifleman was every bit as familiar with harsh winter conditions as his Finnish counterpart, but the officers in command would be very hesitant about taking advantage of their troops' stoic powers of endurance. Those in command of the divisions that invaded the central wilderness would be loath to call attention to themselves by attempting any sort of imaginative tactics; they put on blinders, looking neither left nor right, and obediently lead their regiments west along the roads assigned to them, into the meat-grinder of successive, inflexibly conducted, utterly pointless, frontal attacks, until weight-of-numbers or the cumulative effect of Soviet firepower pushed the Finns back to their next prepared defensive position, where the whole ghastly process was repeated..

Wide flanking maneuvers, long-range patrolling, the tactics of deception and ambush – there was no **inherent** reason why the invading Russians couldn't execute such maneuvers just as effectively as the Finns, but such obvious and self-recommending tactics were never taught to the Soviet infantry. Of the two armies that

fought in this war, only the Finnish Army had been trained diligently to conduct fast, fluid, maneuvers in the deep forest. The utility of snow-camouflage would likewise seem self-evidently useful, to any military professional with half-a-brain, but only the Finns were taught how to make themselves all-but-invisible in their frigid surroundings. The single most critical difference between the two sides was simply this: the Red Army's recruits were **indoctrinated** while Finland's infantry was thoroughly and imaginatively **trained**. The mass of Russian G.I.s who invaded Finland would follow unhesitatingly the orders of their commanding officers, no matter how incompetent their leadership or how tactically idiotic, even suicidal, the orders they gave. If those soldiers objected, or failed to advance into near-certain death with the appearance of sufficient Marxist zeal, they could be shot for cowardice, and many hundred of them were. And the company commanders would follow their battalion commanders' orders for the same reasons and in the same brain-dead fashion, and the battalion commanders would follow the orders of their regimental superiors in exactly the same way, and so on up the chain of command. As a recipe for producing battlefield disasters, a better scheme could hardly have been devised!.

Only a small, highly restrictive menu of tactical options was available at all levels of the Red Army's TO & E: march westward until you encounter resistance, then crush that resistance by means of massive artillery barrages, followed by a vanguard composed of as many tanks as the landscape had room to accommodate, and ultimately by as many crude frontal assaults as it took to push their Finnish opponents back. . Either one charged forward over and over until Finnish resistance was quelled,

or one would be hauled roughly out of the ranks by one of the hundreds of NKVD patrols that followed the advancing columns and summarily marched into the woods to face the cold, implacable eyes of a firing squad. It was not that the average Russian soldier was "indifferent" to life, or so brutalized by the hardships of his civilian routine, or lobotomized by the Pavlovian harshness of his training regime to such an extreme attitude of fatalism that he came to regard his own death as insignificant compared to the needs of the State, it was simply a matter of two stark choices: attack and take a chance that the enemy **migh**t kill you, or refuse to attack and face the certainty that your own side **will.**

An anonymous Russian lieutenant's diary – found on his body and passed along to Finnish intelligence -- described his experiences in the earlier stages of the epic struggle for Summa. It is undated, but almost certainly records his experiences during the first few days of the Reds' opening offensive against the Summa sector. This young platoon leader was clearly an educated man and a conscientious officer, and he had enough sense not to write his name anywhere in the diary, for even in this brief excerpt, he expresses so many "counter-revolutionary" sentiments and "treasonous" opinions that he could summarily have been shot for these few paragraphs alone. That's the primary reason – fear of having your personal papers fall into the wrong hands -- why we have so few personal front-line accounts by Soviet soldiers (at least not until long after Stalin was dead and the ideological ground-rules had become more liberal). Out of all the kindred specimens I've seen, though, this one particularly haunts me – I get the feeling that this young officer was writing in the hope that his

voice might one day speak on behalf of his more timid, or less articulate comrades, all half-a-million of them:

The battalion commander, Col. Popov, called all his officers together for what was advertised as a "conference" but, as usual, proved to be a monologue:

"You first attack was a dismal failure! That attack will be repeated! And I don't want to see any of you lying down in the snow, day-dreaming about your wife's big warm jugs! That goddamned village" [Summa] "has to be taken! Company commanders, you know your orders! Any Red Army soldier who tries to retreat without proper authorization, or who even turns his back to the enemy, is to be made an example of on the spot! If you hesitate to shoot him down like the cowardly swine he is, the battalion commissars will arrange for you to share his fate!"

Not exactly Lord Nelson's signal before Trafalgar, but it did have a sobering effect on us. One does not have to be a psychologist or a prophet to predict how this renewed attack would fare. Plainly, our continued heavy shelling of the Finnish line, and all the shooting we had done during the first attack, hadn't done anything perceptible to improve the odds. And when we advanced for this second attempt, we would have to climb over the bodies of our own killed and wounded – what a morale-booster!

The first time we attacked, I was leading a company composed of 184 men. Maybe I missed a few during my head-count before we launched the second assault, but I tallied a total of 102, including the non-coms. We gave it everything we had, but this time instead of just mortars and Maxims, the Finns also dropped two salvoes of howitzer fire right on top of us, and when this second attack too was called off, and I counted heads after we regained our lines, I learned that I was now in command of a "company" consisting of 38 effectives. Among the casualties this time was Colonel Popov, who tried rather feebly to wave encouragement as he was carried off the field in a stretcher (he couldn't "shout" encouragement because a Finnish grenade had exploded close enough to blow off most of his jaw). We did what we could to re-group, with squad-fragments from the worst-hit platoons closing ranks to create new, improvised, "replacement" platoons. It made myself and the other surviving officers feel useful, although what practical good it was going to do, was a mystery.

Then the new battalion commander, replacing Popov, strode over and motioned for us to gather around and have another one of those "conferences". I'd seen this colonel before, but didn't know his name, and he didn't bother introducing himself. He seemed to think our association with him would be so brief, it really didn't matter whether or not we knew his identity! He was right; he was battalion commander for a period of about twenty-five minutes before he too was killed. In a flat monotone he said: "Comrades, I am your new C.O. I've just been on the field telephone to Division HQ and our orders remain unchanged, Check and synchronize your watched and in seven minutes I'll blow this stupid little whistle and we attack again…"

I had to fight down the urge to grumble "With what?"

At least our artillerists did everything they could to assist us, re-doubling their rate of fire and plastering Finnish lines with all they had for those seven minutes. The new

C.O.'s mouth was so dry it took him several tries before he could produce even a feeble bleat from his whistle, then off we went, more lurching and staggering this time than "charging", because we were so tired.

The rest I remember through a fog. At some point, one of our wounded men, obviously in the last extremities of despair, groped for my leg as I tried to step over him. "Water, Comrade Lieutenant' for the love of God!" he implored me. I did not want to tell him that he had been gut-shot, and that a drink of water would only kill him faster. "I can't", I blurted; "it would only increase your pain!" Desperately, he clawed up a handful of snow and stuffed it into his mouth, even though he, like the rest of us, had been warned against doing that. The chemicals from our cannon shells had fouled the snow so badly by that time that any man who slaked his thirst by sucking on the stuff, would suffer agonizing stomach cramps in fifteen minutes. In his case, that wouldn't make much difference, so I yanked my foot out of his other hand and kept on moving. He obviously mistook my attitude for callousness and his blood-shot eyes glared at me with such hatred that I actually found enough energy to run forward a ways, just to escape that doomed man's accusatory gaze.

When I realized I had gotten ahead of my men, I lay down in the snow and waited for them to come abreast before standing up again. I felt no fear when I stood up; the situation was beyond fear for me. I felt nothing but a numbing, all-pervasive mental and physical apathy, a complete indifference to impending doom. I could tell by their expressions that the men around me felt the same.

One thing was different about this attack: evidently hoping to lure us even closer, this time the Finns held their fire, "playing possum", perhaps hoping to persuade us that they had pulled back. I wanted to should "Don't fall for it, men, it's a trap!" but some of the newer, more gullible replacements fell for it and surged ahead. This time, the Finns waited until we were only fifty meters from their trenches before opening fire…"

* * *

In the post-purges Red Army, an officer who showed too much initiative, or who appeared too fond of "fancy" tactics, was just as likely to be arrested for political malfeasance as he was to be commended for his professionalism.

With the presumed enemy so well understood and the terrain of their homeland's wilderness areas so intimately known, it was natural for the pre-war Finnish Army's leaders to shape their tactical doctrine accordingly. Even if "Motti Tactics" were not taught **as such**, a set of specialized skills was emphasized that made such tactics a logical response to the conditions under which the central-forest fighting would take

place: individual initiative woven into small-unit cohesion (not unlike like a modern Special Forces team, every soldier in a ten-man long-range Finnish ski patrol was cross-trained to the point where each trooper was theoretically qualified to command the others); precise orienteering in trackless wilderness areas; cold-weather survival techniques; camouflage discipline; rapid movement on skis (and equally rapid techniques for getting rid of them when an unexpected firefight broke out); methods of quick dispersal and concentration; and the full range of bushwhacking skills, from individual marksmanship to the staging of elaborate commando-style raids requiring the near flawless synchronization of fire-and-movement by dozens or even hundreds of men; and not least, special techniques for using the massed fire of multiple sled-drawn heavy machine guns to perform many of the tasks usually assigned, in the more lavishly equipped armies of Europe, to field artillery, tanks, or tactical air strikes. **These** were the skills Finnish drill instructors sought to inculcate in every recruit. When used in conjunction with the advantages conferred by the forest's pitiless, primeval landscapes, were the ingredients of an **attitude** rather than a conventional tactical doctrine. In the crucible of combat, both skills and mind-set proved to be a formidable force-multiplier indeed!

When troops so indoctrinated, led in most cases by officers whom they knew well and trusted, were sent in to the vast central forests to stop the relentless advance of powerful but sluggish Soviet divisions, which were almost invariably stretched out in ponderous and grossly over-extended columns, confined by the surrounding landscape to rude one-lane roads and a few meters of level ground on either shoulder, the natural result was**…Motti Tactics**. But both the written archives, and anecdotal

evidence I obtained by interviewing numerous veterans, suggests that at least on some battlefields, the Finns didn't start calling what they were doing "Motti Tactics" until after they had seen the term bruited-about in the newspapers – after which, of course, the phrase became ineradicable.

Drawing their basic facts from the terse but on-the-whole quite reliable daily bulletins issued from Mannerheim'HQ, the foreign press embroidered their dispatches with as much color and imaginative flare as their editors would tolerate. No doubt about it: "Motti Tactics" contributed greatly to the stunning Finnish victories at Suomussalmi, the Kemi River front in Lapland, and in the IVth Corps' Sector north of Lake Ladoga, but this quintessentially Finnish style of combat was **not** a secret new technique than Mannerheim and his training cadres had been nurturing for many years, just waiting for Ivan to put his divisions into terrain where it could be successfully applied..

In reality, although Motti Tactics often brought about dramatic **tactical** victories, they were more often than not a **strategic** failure. General Hagglund's long-cherished counterattack plan was brilliantly successful in breaking three Russian divisions into a whole slew of *mottis*…but that result was **not** Hagglund's intent. His objective, rather, was to shatter those divisions so quickly and decisively as to knock them completely out of the campaign, either by killing, capturing, or driving them pell-mell back over the border. Having accomplished this, Hagglund could re-establish a strong fortified line from Lake Suojarvi south to the coastal highway running parallel to the powerful coastal batteries out in Lake Ladoga, on Mantsinsaari Island and its satellites. This would shorten the Finnish line **as a whole** by about forty per cent; the

enemy would need at least six weeks, in Hagglund's opinion, before he could shift enough fresh units and supplies from Leningrad to risk a renewed offensive. During that time, Mannerheim would have at his disposal the equivalent of a whole new reserve division, comprising victorious, experienced troops who could be deployed wherever they were most needed, in effect doubling the size of Finland's strategic reserves..

But instead of surrendering, routing, or wasting their strength in furious impromptu counterattacks, the Russians in Ladoga-Karelia responded to Hagglund's surprise attack by **voluntarily** concentrating in ten very well-fortified defensive *motti*s – in effect "circling the wagons" and digging in for a stubborn, prolonged defense. Stalin's combat engineers were good, and with a speed and skill which won the grudging respect of their opponents, those engineers transformed each surrounded *motti* into a self-sufficient fortress, bristling with field guns and made much more dangerous by their small detachments of tanks, which were used very skillfully as mobile pillboxes.

With the exception of the "Great Motti" at Kitela, which contained an entire division, dozens of tanks, and powerful contingents of mortars and artillery, none of these isolated positions would have amounted to much more than a speed-bump if the besieging Finns had been lavishly equipped with dive bombers, heavy artillery, and tanks – but those, of course, were the very weapons the Finnish Army did **not** have at its disposal! Lacking the requisite firepower to crush the *motti*s in rapid succession, Hagglund had to rely on hunger, cold, and sniper-fire to reduce their powers of resistance. This slow-but-sure method, in turn, required two more vital commodities

that were in very short supply: manpower (to keep the encircled areas tightly sealed-off from outside help), and **time** (for cold, hunger, disease, and cumulative despair to do their work).

Mannerheim had approved Hagglund's original plan, in fact, precisely **because** it offered an excellent chance to destroy the combat effectiveness of the targeted divisions before they could create strongly fortified pockets. As Hitler would do later, Stalin had decreed a policy which defined **any** ground occupied by the Red Army into a *de facto* piece of Mother Russia, to be defended with the utmost tenacity "to the last man and the last bullet". With the recent Purges still fresh in everyone's minds, the men trapped in those eleven *mottis* were motivated to mount a furious defense of their isolated chunks of "Russian soil". Surrender was not an attractive alternative – even those Soviet troops who were sophisticated enough to know the Finns were much too civilized to butcher their prisoners, they also knew that, when Stalin finally prevailed, the Finns would scrupulously honor their promises to repatriate those same POWs. Any Red Army soldier turned over to the NKVD for "debriefing" could expect no compassionate welcome.

* * *

The point of the foregoing digression is two-fold:

1. "Motti Tactics" did not comprise a planned, rehearsed, coherent tactical doctrine – as Hagglund said in his memoirs, "They just happened…"

2. If Motti Tactics worked to perfection at Suomussalmi, they actually worked against the Finns' long-term interests down in Ladoga-Karelia, creating a complex and frustrating situation that deprived General Hagglund of the swift, decisive, **strategic** victory he wanted so desperately to achieve, and by virtue of their mere existence, they actually constituted a dangerous drain of Finland's resources and manpower.

24. A WELL-LAID PLAN COMES TO GRIEF

In the preceding chapters, I've taken you on a round-about tour of the Ladoga-Karelia front, from the shores of Lake Ladoga up to Ilomantsi and back. Now we've returned once more to the focal point of all these frantic attacks and counter-attacks: General Hagglund's "Litte Mannerheim Line", a strong arc of permanent fortifications, its right flank anchored on the rocky, impassable shore of the lake and its left on Lake Syskyjarvi. From Syskyjarvi's eastern shore to the border, the landscape was so rough and densely-wooded that the "front" was defined only by scattered listening-posts and reconnaissance patrols. The Russians could never deploy mechanized units in that region, nor indeed any organized infantry formation larger than a company; Hagglund's scheme was predicated on the enemy's belief that the Finns couldn't operate large forces there, either.

But the Finns **did** have strong forces concentrated in this "impassable" wilderness, a total of eight battalions, organized into Task Force A (designated, as was the Finnish Army's custom, for the name of its commander, Colonel Autti) and Task

Force H (Colonel Hannukselka). Both detachments were encamped at least two miles north of the farthest known Russian patrol routes and so had remained undetected. They had confidence in their leaders and in Hagglund's plan, and had been straining at the leash since being moved into their jump-off positions in early December. But the crisis situations at Tolvajarvi, Ilomantsi, and along the Kollaa River had forced them to remain inactive, and General Hagglund knew as well as any good professional solider that a tightly-wound-up strike force cannot be left idle for too long, or it will lose its edge.

Operating on Ladoga's north coast were two first-class Soviet divisions:

1) 168th Division – advancing along the coastal road along the coastal road (known locally as the "Pitkaranta Road", after the small intracoastal port that was the first significant Finnish village west of the border);
2) 18th Division, advancing parallel to the 168th but four miles north, along the "Uomaa Road" (also rather unimaginatively named after a similarly insignificant village, situated uncomfortably close to the border). Of the two, this division was the more formidable, for it incorporated the powerful Thirty-Fourth Tank Brigade. Both divisions had been beefed-up with strong, well-balanced formations of artillery, including batteries of devastating 120mm mortars.

Only radio contact linked the two divisions as they slowly drove westward in the war's opening days – the land between the Uomaa and Pitkaranta Roads was a major part of Lake Ladoga's water-table and was more liquid than solid, containing hundreds of nameless meandering streams interspersed with more than a hundred lakes and a

fluctuating number of swamps, bogs, marshes and deltas. All but a few of the largest lakes remained quite impassable, even in mid-winter, because there were so many underground springs, channels and tributaries flowing beneath the surface ice. Even in peacetime, it was a dangerous place – to venture on foot through that region, without the help of an experienced guide, was to run a decided risk of vanishing into a quicksand bog, and when the spring thaw set in, flash-floods had been known to sweep an occasional trapper or unwary hikers into underground rivers and caverns not marked on any map – few who entered those grim places ever made it back to the surface. Need I add that there were no lateral roads, not even animal migration tracks, affording lateral connections between the two east-west roads.

The Soviet plan called for both divisions to converge on and reunite in the fairly populous market town of Kitela, situated opposite the center of Hagglund's prepared defensive line. That link-up occurred on December 10, several days behind schedule. The 18th Division suffered more delays from the terrain, and the strain it imposed on mechanized equipment, than from the actions of small Finnish patrols who planted some mines, demonlished some culverts, and engaged in sporadic long-range sniping that was more irritating than dangerous. Down on the Pitkaranta Road, the 168th Division encountered rather more opposition, primarily from a number of stoutly fortified and superbly camouflaged batteries of Finnish coast artillery (of four- to six-inch caliber), emplaced on Mantsinsaari Island and several smaller but equally rugged satellite islets. These weapons were well-supplied with ammunition, manned by highly trained specialists, and sited to command long stretches of the Pitkaranta "highway". Interdiction fire greatly hampered the Russians' initial thrust and continually plagued their re-supply

convoys and add greatly to the problem of evacuating its wounded. Eventually, only high-speed dashes by small tank convoys tried to run this gauntlet during daylight, but the coast artillerymen had anticipated that and sited several sharp-shooting three-inch pieces mounted on self-propelled carriages, so their positions could be changed nightly. One hit from those guns usually caused a T-26 or T-28 to disintegrate. Night-time convoys suffered less severely, but did not get through unscatched. Finnish forward observers crossed to the mainland just after dusk and, using an ingenious variety of signaling techniques, managed to alert their offshore comrades with such precision that the latter occasionally smashed a speeding tank they could not see. Those same fire-control parties also found time and room to haul mines and time-delayed booby-traps ashore, inflicting losses on Soviet convoys many hours or even days after the perpetrators had slipped away. They became, in short order, a major thorn in the Russians' side – and in time, they would pay a bitter price for their successes.

* * *

On December 11-12, the now conjoined Russian divisions commenced heavy attacks against Hagglund's "Little Mannerheim Line", but were unable to deploy their tanks effectively except along very confined strips of ground on the shoulders of the two roads – everywhere else, the steep, jumbled rocks of the coastline made tough going for infantry and no-going at all for vehicles. Both divisions were lavishly supplied with artillery and mortar ammo, and fired barrages of prodigious scale and duration – sometimes for three hours – in advance of launching their attacks, but the Finns had been planning for just such a confrontation here for several years and all of their positions were exceedingly well-fortified (this was the only sector in Finland, besides the

Mannerheim Line itself, where the invaders faced interlocking fire from emplacements built with reinforced concrete) and suffered relatively light casualties. Very selective counter-battery missions were occasionally fired by the big off-shore guns, and anecdotal accounts suggest the Russians may have had as many as a dozen artillery pieces smashed by direct hits from six-inch coast defense rifles – otherwise, General Hagglund forbade any retaliatory Finnish shelling, preferring to save his more limited stockpiles either to repel a cirectly threatening assault or to support his cherished counterattack plan.

For two very busy days, Russian probing attacks thrust forward, hoping to locate weak points in Hagglund's line; they didn't find any. Two or three massive tank-infantry attacks also were tried, but as mentioned, the terrain reduced those to tank UN-supported infantry assaults and the invaders accomplished nothing more significant than the very brief occupation of a few Finnish outpost bunkers (all of them quickly recaptured after dark by fast, sharp, counterattacks). Unlike the operational imperatives that drove the Red Army on the Isthmus, the Ladoga-Karelia front was not under the constant and increasingly baleful eye of Stalin, and the two divisional commanders engaged there were able to suspend their unproductive attacks as soon as they realized how strong the fortifications were opposing them, and how much more hostile the landscape was than they had reckoned it would be from studying maps and aerial photos. Prudently, they called off the blood-letting (the two divisions combined had suffered approximately 1,000 killed and wounded between December 10 and December 12). While their men took a well-deserved breather, the two divisional COs and their staffs assembled for a strategy conference on December 13, in a conveniently situated cluster of builingd near Uuoma village (some accounts say it was a rather clean and well-appointed dairy farm,

equipped with something almost as rare in rural Finland as it was in the Soviet Union at that time: central heating!) General Hagglund was closely informed about these developments – he had used some of his pre-war time and resources to put in place a small but very effective stay-behind intelligence network, and so far it was functioning superbly).

General Hagglund gave the order, just before dawn on December 13, for the long-planned Finnish counterstroke to begin.

And by doing so, he made certain that eight battalions of the Finnish Army were thereby given a dramatic first-hand lesson in the consequences of over-confidence, inadequate reconnaissance, and the yawning gap that so often occurs when a plan that looks terrific on the map runs into sources-of-friction that can't be **shown** on maps. It soon became apparent that both task forces had bivouacked much too far from the enemy's front line; and they moved out to launch their assault aiming to cut the Uomaa Road at its junction with a rutted, overgrown forest track known as the Siira Road – a path so insignificant and unsuited for vehicles that the Russians paid little attention to it, screening it only with a company of infantry and a few machine guns.

But of the several Finnish battalions trying to converge on that country crossroads, only **three** ever got within rifle-shot of their objective. Burdened with far more ammunition, mortar parts, radios, rations and brutally heavy Maxim guns than they really needed, especially on a mission that called for "light marching order"! Cohesion was lost long before contact was made with the enemy, and a significant amount of heavy equipment – which the exhausted first wave of attackers finally dumped in the forest,

marking their caches with flags so the follow-up reserves could retrieve the stuff – simply vanished forever under the heavy new snows that fell on the night of December 12-13.

So exhausted and disorganized were both task forces that Hagglund called off the operation on the afternoon of December 13, only seven hours after he had ordered it to start.. In a curious way, the abysmal failure of this first abortive counterattack worked to Hagglund's advantage. So spasmodic and feeble were the Finn's offensive demonstrations that the Russians didn't even interpret the incident **as** a "counter-attack", but as some sort of large-scale nuisance raid that had been handily thrown back by their light screening forces and a massive curtain of artillery fire. Fortunately for General Hagglund, the enemy made no subsequent effort to fortify the Siiri – Uomaa Road junction, or to beef up the size of its defensive garrison there.

Chagrined at having taken so much for granted (foremost among his mistakes was the hubristic assumption that terrain deemed "impassable" for the Russians' operational use should somehow prove any easier for the Finns to maneuver through!), and smarting from the tongue-lashing Mannerheim gave him – conveyed in person by a special envoy from Isthmus Command headquarters – General Hagglund swallowed his pride and made a methodical analysis of what had gone wrong on December 12.

As a result, when he launched his second effort on December 26, he did so only after careful preparations and without relying on the assumption that his troops were super-men, capable of forced-marching over terrain the Red Army considered too rough for its soldiers. In fact, Hagglund's second attempt was a model operation,

First, on December 17, he launched a quick, sharp, conventional frontal attack on a sector of the enemy's front between Ruokjarvi and Sysykyjarvi, supported by all the

artillery and mortars at his disposal. It certainly **looked** like a serious attack, but the battalions committed to it were given latitude to halt forward movement and start a gradual pull-back as soon as they began suffering significant casualties. As a counter-attack, the effort was a flop -- a few Russian trenches were briefly occupied and a handful of log bunkers destroyed – but as a **feint**, it succeeded admirably. The Russians promptly brought some reserves forward to the threatened sector and their attention was drawn away from the sensitive Siiri – Uomaa junction on their right flank.

Over the next nine days, Hagglund carefully maneuvered a third, new, strike element, made up of lightly armed but experienced ski-troopers, deep behind the enemy right, to a point just north of Uomaa village, where the enemy had established a major supply depot, repair shops, and set up very comfortable offices and living quarters for staff officers. Task Forces A and H, meanwhile, had carefully concentrated much nearer the enemy front and divided their battalions into a half-dozen sub-detachments. This time, speed was the key – when the order was given, these shock troops would barrel straight at the enemy and just keep going until they reached Lake Ladoga. Reserve companies in their wake would bring up the heavy weapons, and additional detachments of combat engineers would immediately start to fortify every place where the Uomaa and Pitkaranta Roads were cut.

Just before the right-flank assaults went in, Hagglund's main force would launch another determined-looking diversion between Syskjarvi and Ruokjarvi, and this time they were ordered to do it for real, to take as much enemy ground as they could and kill as many Russians as possible. In essence, Hagglund's plan was a classic example of "grab him by the nose will kicking him in the butt".

Intelligence reports indicated that the Russians had no inkling of the storm about to break against their vulnerable right flank. Weather reports indicated that a massive blizzard would strike the Ladoga-Karelia front on Christmas Day – fresh snow accumulations of two feet or more would contribute to the enemy's discomfiture by restricting **all** movement, whether to or from the border, to the two main, paralell roads. These conditions would make it very difficult for the enemy to respond to Hagglund's coordinated multiple blows fast enough to prevent the Finns from fortifying the gaps they cut in the Russians' two supply lines.

Not only were the Finnish weather reports accurate, but the storm was so heavy and sustained that the attack on Uomaa village couldn't be launched until the 27th, by which time its rear-echelon garrison was alerted to the situation and mounted such a stubborn defense that the Finns decided not to waste time and lives capturing the village, but to leave a light besieging force encircling it and bypass it in favor of sustaining the momentum of their drive toward Lake Ladoga.

At first, Hagglund's plan appeared to have succeeded as close to "perfectly" as any large-scale military operation ever does. By January 3, three-quarters of the 168th Division was in danger of being cut off and surrounded in a twenty-square-mile pocket that would soon be known as "the Great Motti". There no longer **was** a Russian "frontline". The entire enemy salient on the north coast of Lake Ladoga was irreparably fractured, even fragmented. Now came the pay-off – the rapid disintegration of the Russian fragments, and Hagglund – for the first time in the memory of anyone who had served with him – sometimes could be heard cackling quietly under his breath, so gleefully was he anticipating the first reports confirming his expectations.

By all military logic, an organized corps that had been broken into so many pieces, so rapidly, was supposed to react in one of two ways: its commanders would either launch furious counterattacks intended to relieve the encircled fragments and reestablish a solid front once more, or, in the name of simple self-preservation, the fragmented forces would attempt to link up, then stage an orderly fighting withdrawal to the Soviet border. Hagglund had made sound contingency plans for either scenario and was confident that the end result would be the elimination of all Soviet troops in IVth Corps sector, which would then enable him to present Marshall Mannerheim with a division's worth of veteran troops who could be used as Mannerheim saw fit, most likely as reserves on the Isthmus.

But the fragmented enemy divisions and their attached tank brigade did not do what conventional military logic dictated. They did not waste their strength in desperate counterattacks, **nor** did they try to regroup and stage a fighting retreat back to Russia. Instead, they re-deployed for perimeter defense, dug trenches, strung wire, constructed mortar-proof log-and-sandbag bunkers, and defended themselves tenaciously.

By the time Task Force A severed the last supply line into the 168th Division's "Great Motti" – on January 11 – the Finns were almost a week behind schedule, due to the need to peel-off detachments strong enough to prevent the encircled mottis from re-connecting. On the map, the Russians' situation looked hopeless. Inside the "Great Motti" at Kitela, General Bondarev and 80 pre cent of his division were completely surrounded; east of his perimeter, scattered randomly and mostly near the track of the Uomaa Road, were ten smaller mottis. No relief force was being massed on the Soviet side of the border. Hagglund's only option, now that the enemy had been shattered but

not physically expelled from IVth Corps' sector, was to eliminate each motti in turn, starting with the weakest ones, while whittling-away at General Bondarev's strength and trusting that cold, hunger, illness, and despair would reduce his division's powers of resistance, when the time came for Hagglund's men to storm the Great Motti.

That's not quite how things worked out. Even the smaller mottis possessed formidable powers of resistance: all of them contained ***some*** tanks (the two mottis near Lemetti village were bolstered by more than 100 tanks, as that village had been the headquarters of the 34th Armored Brigade before Hagglund's counteroffensive), and all of them contained plenty of heavy firepower, including a few batteries of the Red Army's mother-of-all-mortars, those hulking 120-mm monsters the Germans would come to fear so much – whose fire would be massed anywhere along a 360-degree radius. During the first days of the siege, the encircled motti garrisons used their tanks aggressively, driving them from one threatened sector of a perimeter to another, but even after their fuel tanks ran dry, the tanks were emplaced as pillboxes, covering the more vulnerable sectors, and they proved very effective in this static role, for their turrets still revolved and in most of the mottis, there was no shortage of ammunition.

Well-organized and largely successful aerial re-supply missions by the Red Air Force largely negated the weakening effect of hunger. Unlike the hard-to-see mottis up at Suomussalmi, the Ladoga-Karelia mottis were visible from the air, their drop-zones were clearly marked, and the Soviet pilots ignored the slather of light anti-aircraft fire Hagglund's men threw in their flight-paths. Mannerheim tried to send a few Bofors 40mm guns to Hagglund's sector, but Sweden's promised delivery of these weapons was infuriatingly slow and sporadic – there simply weren't enough of them to go around.

Even without the aerial supply missions, most of the mottis contained ample amounts of unappetizing but life-sustaining horsemeat. By mid-January, the encircled Russians were indeed tormented by hunger – parachuted food containers had to be guarded by commissars with drawn pistols, after some of the early drops triggered savage brawls that cost the lives of a dozen ravenous infantrymen – but they never faced actual starvation.

The tenacity with which the surrounded Russians defended their mottis won the grudging admiration of the Finns – here was a foe who displayed plenty of *sisu*. After one Finnish attack overran a part of the motti at Uomaa, isolating one Russian company from the main garrison, that company resisted to the last man, refusing an offer of honorable surrender even when 83 of its 85 men were killed or wounded.

Instead of being able to **release** troops to Mannerheim's general reserve, General Hagglund found himself in the humiliating position of having to request reinforcements **from** Mannerheim, just to contain the eleven mottis *in situ.* Mind you, none of these pockets would long have withstood a concentrated pounding by heavy guns, followed by simultaneous infantry assaults from several directions, but Hagglund just barely had enough men to keep them quarantined, and barely enough guns and mortars to maintain harassing fire – in order to mass enough troops for a direct assault on one motti, he had to weaken the containment cordons around several others. All his men could do was slowly chip-away at the pockets, take out the tanks one-by-one using satchel charges or point-blank fire from field guns laboriously manhandled through the forest by night. It was slow, grinding, costly attrition, and in-between their bite-sized attacks, the encircling Finns always had to be on guard for a sudden break-out attempt.

The most dramatic such confrontation took place in late January, near the "East Lemetti Motti", which was guarded by the Fourth Jaeger Battalion, a good outfit that had lost one-fifth of its strength during the past two weeks, from Soviet snipers, mortar barrages, and tank fire, and which had received no replacements at all during the same period. On the very morning of the attempted break-out, the Finnish commander, Colonel Aarnio, had received a fresh intelligence report: the East Lemetti garrison showed no signs of activity; the defenders have every appearance of being totally demoralized and were simply hunkering down in their bunkers, emerging only when they heard aircraft engines.

Aarnio's men were dog-tired, spread very thin, and groggy from long hours of standing-to in their picket lines. There was no advance warning when the East Lemetti defenders made their sortie. Colonel Aarnio happened to glance toward the motti's perimeter and suddenly a mass of Russian troops was just **there**, grimly, silently, and with expressions of fixed determination, the break-out force was only 100 yards from Aarnio's command post when they were spotted. Leading the attack in person was General Stepan Ivanovich Kodratjev, commander of the 34th Tank Brigade, in full dress uniform, and not one of the troops following him had broken discipline to fire a single shot. They overran the Finnish picket line before opening fire, then came steadily on, moving as fast as the deep snow and rough ground permitted.

For a few seconds, Colonel Aarnio was struck dumb by the spectacle, then he shouted the alarm and began rounding up a scratch skirmish-line composed of cooks, clerks, quartermasters, signalmen, even medics. The sudden eruption of small-arms' fire

alerted the rest of his battalion to the situation, and small groups of Finnish reinforcements converged on the spot as fast as their skis could carry them.

There followed more than three hours of sheer chaos, as individual Finns and Russians grappled to the death, and small groups of enemies waged their private wars across three square miles of wilderness. Approximately 600 soldiers from the East Lemetti motti succeeded in breaking out. But could find no place to go except inside the perimeter of the nearby West Lemetti Motti – in other words, they fought valiantly to break out of their own trap only to end up in another, slightly larger one.

Colonel Aarnio's battalion suffered more than 100 casualties in this swirling melee, but when silence returned to the scene, his patrols counted approximately 3,000 dead Russians inside the abandoned motti and strewn over the ground where the break-out force had begun its sortie. How many of those three thousand were already dead before the breakout, and how many died during it, was perhaps irrelevant, but Aarnio's men indulged in lively speculation as they traced the battle's progress. One indication of the fighting's ferocity: in the short distance between Colonel Aarnio's command post and the spot where he first saw the emerging Russians, there were 250-odd enemy bodies. General Kodratjev had lead his men bravely, but he had been among the first to die after their presence was discovered.

Fighting and dying at his side was his entire staff, including four female typists carrying Mosin rifles and stick-grenades. All had ritualistically donned their cleanest uniforms and cleaned their weapons as though preparing for an inspection. These were first-class soldiers, these 310 dead officers, and they had unhesitatingly sacrificed themselves so that some portion of their command might escape. Colonel Aarnio and

some of his staff could not help but feel a certain kinship, admiration, and respect for such foemen – nor could they help but feel an even deeper resentment towards Stalin, for wantonly throwing away the lives of such brave men…and women, in this unique instance.

* * *

By the war's end, only three of the original eleven mottis still held out: the Uomaa Village Motti, the powerfully armed hourglass-shaped motti centered on the Siiri Road junction, and of course, the Great Motti containing most of the 168th Division. It became a point of pride to the high command in Leningrad that the Kitela Motti should **not** fall whatever it cost to sustain its resistance. As other, weaker, mottis succumbed, Hagglund was able to strengthen his choke-hold on the Great Motti, but without strong air and artillery support, he hadn't a prayer of capturing it by direct assault. First of all, he barely had parity of manpower with the besieged Russians, never mind the axiomatic three-to-one ratio needed for an attacker to prevail over a well-fortified defender. Inside the Great Motti were approximately 115 cannon and mortars, their effectiveness compounded by all-around fields of fire and their stocks of ammunition ample for a ten-week siege. I have never been able to ascertain exactly how many tanks (as opposed to "armored vehicles" in general) were also present, but since almost every Finnish source gives a somewhat different tally, I averaged them out and got a figure of 36, which seems quite reasonable. There was plenty of fuel for them at the start of the siege, and always enough fuel for small detachments of them to move around, when they had to, and seal-off any Finnish penetration that might have threatened the motti as a whole. The vehicles drained of fuel

to keep those mobile reserve detachments in action, were dug-in at well selected points to serve as armored pillboxes – their turrets still rotated and by improving the defenders' strength in one place, they freed up additional manpower that could be shifted elsewhere.

Irony compounded! This is the only sector of Finland where the very landscape itself turned traitor. The terrain forming the Great Motti's outer circumference so resembled the ramparts of a castle that Nature might almost have sculpted it for defensive purposes. If you came at it from Lake Ladoga, you ran head-long into ramparts of jagged granite, some outcropping thrusting fifteen feet or slightly higher into the air – almost sheer on the lake-face, these ramparts were often beveled on the reverse, in shallower angles of drop-off, which the Russian engineers had improved with consumate skill, carving and jack-hammering revetments, platforms, and almost-medieval-looking crenellations into their highest contour-lines, so that infantry detachments and even light support weapons could be mounted and even, to varying degrees, shifted from one chord –f the arc to another, as the situation dictated; again, the anaology to a castle is very strong – properly led and motivated, a company could have held that ground indefinitely against a regiment.

Formidable ridges, cross-cut by saw-toothed ravines, characterized the motti's eastern face; Soviet engineers, once again, had improved upon Nature's generosity by constructing stout bunkers, entrenchments, and logged-over dug-outs atop those elevations. defined the Great Motti's eastern face, their summits reinforced with stout bunkers and deep entrenchments, the last hundred yards or so cleared of trees by Russian engineers, who also sewed the killing-zone with mines and thick tangles of barbed wire. The north and west sides of the motti were on more level ground, but there, the Finns

would have to attack across terrain they had already cleared in front of the “Little Mannerheim Line”. Without heavy air support, at least five times as many artillery batteries as he in fact possessed, and at least a brigade of fresh infantry, Hagglund simply did not have the strength to storm the Great Motti.in this battle that must have galled Hagglund and his men infuriatingly: some parts of the arc of defense incorporated ground that Hagglund’s own engineers had spent much time and effort rescuplting and entrenching as forward bastions of his Little Mannerheim Line; more than one hundred artillery and mortar tubes were located inside the motti, with all-around fields of fire and ample stocks of ammunition; I’ve never ascertained exactly how man tanks the Soviet commander had at his disposal, but a reasonable estimate would be about thirty, and there was plenty of fuel for them, so they constituted a potent mobile reserve that could be rushed to any threatened point on the perimeter

. Finally, the landscape itself made the Great Motti into something like a castle: if you came at it from Lake Ladoga, you ran head-long into ramparts of jagged granite, cross-cut with sharp ravines – a well-placed company could hold off a brigade on that front. Formidable ridges defined the Great Motti’s eastern face, their summits reinforced with stout bunkers and deep entrenchments, the last hundred yards or so cleared of trees by Russian engineers, who also sewed the killing-zone with mines and thick tangles of barbed wire. The north and west sides of the motti were on more level ground, but there, the Finns would have to attack across terrain they had already cleared in front of the “Little Mannerheim Line”. Without heavy air support, at least five times as many artillery batteries as he in fact possessed, and at least a brigade of fresh infantry, Hagglund simply did not have the strength to storm the Great Motti.

This is not to say that life inside the pocket was comfortable. One thing Hagglund **could** do, as the lesser mottis were extinguished, was to concentrate all his anti-aircraft weapons along the approaches the Red Air Force had been using for its food-drops, including the two 40-mm Bofors guns Mannerheim was able finally to dispatch. The first time a Red Air Force supply mission ran into the concentrated flak-ambush Hagglund built around those two guns, it lost three planes shot down almost immediately and four or five others hit so badly they veered away trailing smoke. All the other pilots were so rattled that most of them jettisoned their cargo aimlessly, jammed their throttles wide open, and scattered in all directions, providing the Finns with a lot of unappetizing Red Army rations along with significant quantities of medical gear, radio batteries, and grenade fuses. After several subsequent re-supply missions were also turned back, each flight losing at least two planes downed and several damaged by ground fire, the aerial supply operation was cancelled.

As an alternative (and an eerie foreshadowing of the famous Ice Road that would later sustain besieged Leningrad), the Soviets opened a tenuous supply line straight across Lake Ladoga itself, starting on or about January 20. By that date, the surface ice was thick enough to bear the weight of supply trucks, armored cars, even light artillery. When visibility permitted, heavily armed and escorted convoys set out every night, loaded with ammunition, rations, and replacements to the hard-pressed 168th and evacuating the more seriously wounded on their return trips. It took Hagglund's intelligence people several days to catch on to this daring new operation, and when they realized the magnitude of the effort, it became imperative for Hagglund to do his utmost to stop the convoys, or at least make them pay a heavy price for each mission.

But his resources were strained just to maintain his siege-line around the enormous pocket, so all he could spare were small volunteer detachments of ski-guerillas, armed with whatever light mortars and machine guns they could drag in sleds (the captured Degtyarevs, although hard "light" by infantry standards, were preferred for this work over the top-heavy and bulkier Maxims, which, if not carefully lashed down, could easily become over-balanced and tip over the very sleds that made it possible to transport them at all). Out there on the frozen surface of Ladoga, it was a different kind of war, fought in an eerie, almost alien world. A man unlucky enough to lose sight of the shoreline could become totally disoriented and, in full confidence that he was walking toward the Finnish-controlled coast, actually set of in the general direction of Leningrad. Without a compass, or exceptional good luck, he would wander, dazedly, barely able to distinguish horizon from sky, until he froze, went mad and killed himself, or simply vanished forever; such things did happen. Ladoga is the size of an inland sea; and in winter, a featureless ivory desert, a bleak and pitiless emptiness, raked by frequent gale-force arctics wind that could knife through the heaviest clothing like a straight-razor. The only possible location in Finnish hands froom which raids could be staged against the enemy's supply convoys were those same desolate islands already garrisoned by the coast artillerymen.

With the coming of night, the Russian convoys set out from Pitkaranta, following trails marked either by rock cairns or simply noted by compass bearings on map: long lines of horse-drawn wagons carried the bulk of supplies, interspersed with trucks, their headlight beams reduced to slits by black-out tape, machine guns mounted on the roof of their cabs, their cargo decks jammed with wretchedly uncomfortable soldiers "riding

shotgun" and huddled close together for warmth and psychological comfort. Also at intervals in the column were light tanks and armored cars, while larger and more heavily armed vehicles prowled along the flanks, like destroyers escorting a gaggle of wallowing merchantmen. At the first electrifying crack of a Finnish sniper's rifle, or the first terrifying ***CRUMP!*** of a powerful mine being detonated by camouflaged wire (the Finns tried to emplace those hellish devices atop parts of the lake where they knew the ice was thin because of unseen currents below – occasionally, the mines blew holes in the ice, and it was not unknown for entire truckloads of screaming Russian infantry to be carried through those holes into a black, freezing depths below), searchlights popped on, flares hissed skyward, and the convoy's guard began their hallucinatory nocturnal skirmishing with fitfully-visible assailants, white on white, in and out of fog banks and snow-devils, a war against ghosts and phantoms. At first, the ski-raiders were greatly helped by salvos from the coast artillery batteries on Mantsinsaari, but there was no way to hid their huge muzzle flashes of these weapons at night, and every time they fired, the Russians retaliated with a deluge of counter-battery fire from ashore. After several of the big rifles were damaged, Mannerheim forbade them to be fired at night – indeed, to conserve their ammunition, he forbade them to fire in the daytime, too, unless in the battery commander's opinion, he had a clear shot at some target of high military value.

So night after night as January gave way to February, the duels escalated between small bands of intrepid but lightly armed ski-guerrillas and the ponderous, slow- moving, but very heavily armed supply convoys. There was a weird, hallucinatory quality to these nocturnal battles, a fluid intermingling of tracer-streams and blinding explosions and almost-solid-looking searchlight beams, surrounded by near-absolute darkness, a

darkness as seemingly infinite and without meaningful human scale as the knighted gulfs between the nebulae of outer space. Distances were often great from one end of the convoy to the other, so muzzle-flash and tracer-fugue would wewave their sarabandes of light many seconds before the disjointed crackle of their reports reached the farthest ears that could hear them, a sensory confusion that added to the surreality; then throw in the near-infinite permutations of reflection, refraction, multiple mirror-images, bizarre and kaleidoscopic atmospheric conditions, temperature pockets and inversions and decoy fires whose origin and purpose were only known by the hands that set them. On many occasions, both sides fought pitched battles with "targets" that proved to be mirages. Or ignored obvious mirages until they suddenly raced forward with the speed and grace of an Olympic racer and slid a sparking satchel charge under a truck full of mortar shells, in which case all the men on both sides got to see a re-play of Krakatoa-in-miniature.

As conditions inside the Great Motti worsened and Hagglund's efforts to wipe it out grew more desperate, the Russians dispatched more, longer, and more heavily escorted convoys; the Finns responded with more raiders and mines, and in the final two weeks by emplacing mortars and their volunteer crews on tiny barren rocks farther out from shore, pinnacles for bereft of extra room that the mortar crews had to remain almost motionless, without fires, under camouflage all day. (*)

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FOOTNOTE: The Ladoga raiders' operations were still highly classified subjects when I did my original research, during 1963-1964; the official Finnisah histories mention them, if at all, only in brief tantalizing summaries or footnotes. General Hagglund went into more detail, but even his account seems tight-lipped and more perfunctory than you would expect, given how dramatic the topic is. I cannot recount them as facts, since my only source was verbal anecdotes told mostly by veterans who

"heard it from somebody who heard it from…", BUT, during the final week or ten days of the operations, the Finns not only emplaced mortars on rocky outcroppings barely large enough to hold a card table, but they may also have field stripped and transported a Madsen anti-aircraft gun (donated by Denmark), and a 37mm. Bofors piece, one major sub-assembly per sled and the barrel wrapped securely and actually towed across the ice. The idea was to emplace these relatively devastating weapons on seemingly uninhabitable islets within almost point-blank range of the convoy routes, and then make an all-out effort to annihilate a single supply convoy – every truck and armored car and man. Most of the veterans who spun this yarn believe it happened, and that it must have been a shattering ambush. Their reasoning? A tremendous increase in the volume and violence of fire two nights before the Russians launched their "final solution" offensive against the Finnish-occupied islands…plus the fact that no survivors from the Madsen and Bofors teams ever returned to Finnish lines. It was and remains a vivid and colorful tale, and I suspect that most if not all the guys who alluded to it in their interviews are long-dead by now, but I keep checking on the Internet, hoping some newly discovered or declassified documentation may surface. So far, none has. That's why this story is presented as a footnote…

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Both attackers and escorts fought each other with ever-increasing savagery. The Finns' had the advantage of camouflage and ski-mobility (the convoys could not travel appreciably faster than a good man could ski, due to the random but frequent changes in the thickness and flatness of the surface ice)), and sometimes they struck the same convoy a dozen times during a single night. Each morning, observers on shore and in reconnaissance aircraft could trace a convoy's route by the scattered hulks of still-smoldering vehicles and the stiff black hieroglyphs of the newly dead, whose vintage had to be recent if new snowfalls had not yet shrouded them, and who often lay srawled in astonishingly life-like poses, for so intense was the cold that men often froze, stiff as stone, in whatever position they happened to be when the fatal bullet stopped their hearts.

Six days before the war's end – by which time the issue was almost superfluous – the Russians made an all-out effort to destroy the coastal batteries and the ski-guerilla encampments on the rocky, un-named islets dotting the lake-ice.. Massive air raids and stupendous artillery concentrations methodically hammered each known or suspected

Finnish position (some of the smaller garrisoned islets were literally pulverized!), then wave upon wave of Russian infantry and light armor swept out from the shoreline to finish the job.

Resistance was ferocious; the coast artillerymen in and around Mantsinsaari waged a particularly desperate defense, firing their six-inch rifles at maximum depression, with shells fused to explode almost instantaneously, they cut down hundreds of attackers and smashed an estimated twenty tanks, but eventually, one by one, each concrete gun-pit was submerged beneath human waves. An orbiting Finnish recon pilot – until he was chased away by Russian fighters – reported that the hand-to-hand struggle in and around the main battery site on Mantsinsaari was so violent that from the air it resembled "a kicked-over anthill" – but that was his last transmission. From that fragment and a scattered handful of references that have appeared in Russian, it appears certain that the artillerists fought like demons and to the last man. To the best of my knowledge, less than a dozen Finns survived that frightful, near-apocalyptic battle, all of them ski-raiders who operated from the smaller islands, farther out. No prisoners were taken, that much seems certain. Every other Finnish position was systematically obliterated; the last audible firing ended about an hour before sunset. And later that night, a Russian supply convoy drove across the ice with its headlight blazing and horns honking.

* * *

So General Hagglund's plan – so well-thought-out, and executed with such consummate professionalism -- planted the seeds, by its very **tactical** success, of its own **strategic** failure. "Motti Tactics", it would seem, were brilliantly innovative, to be sure,

but they were nowhere nearly as **decisive** as the outside world thought (and to a certain extent, still thinks!). In the IVth Corps' sector, the end result of so much maneuver, fighting, and dying was, at best, a stand-off; and for Hagglund, that amounted to a defeat. True, the Russians never advanced beyond Kitela, and were thus thwarted in their plan to turn the Mannerheim Line from behind, but so many Finnish troops were required to simply **contain** those mottis, that instead of leading to an increase in Mannerheim's trained reserves, they ended up causing a further drain on those quite limited resources. And the consequences of **that,** when the Red Army finally got its act together and took on the Mannerheim Line for the second time, would be grave.

One cannot help but feel some empathy for Vidkung Haaglund. His plan was excellent, and his leadership unflagging; his men performed with the greatest skill and courage. He simply did not have enough **of them** to achieve his primary objectives; and, like every other Finnish commander, he was thwarted repeatedly by the paucity of his artillery support, the near-total absence of any air support beyond reconnaissance flights, and the scandalous lack of so much as a single squadron of operational Finnish tanks. Had he been able to field even a modest increase in heavy artillery, or been able to call upon a single flight of dive-bombers, Hagglund might have pulled it off – it would not have taken much to tip the balance in his favor, and that, in turn, would have strengthened Finland's hand in a crucial weeks of February and early March.

But Hagglund did not have those assets, and so finally he must be judged not as the architect of a brilliant victory, but as one of those hard-luck generals who (in the tradition of America's Jonathan Wainwright or Poland's gallant Bor-Komorowski) "did the best he could" with grossly inadequate resources, and thus, in my estimation quite

unfairly, he has been consigned to the margins of military history. I hope that – in addition to writing an accurate account of this almost-forgotten campaign – I have also rendered at least to his memory, some measure of the honor that he earned, and the respect that he deserves.

25. "A TACTICAL MASTERPIECE" – THE BATTLE OF SUOMUSSALMI

One by one, the Finns had halted or thrown back every Soviet attack north of Lake Ladoga, with the exception of the one I have saved for last in this part of the narrative: the Battle of Suomussalmi. It would be anti-climactic to end this account of the Winter War's first phase with any other campaign. It was this desperate, pitiless "infantryman's battle", more than any other, which gave the outside world its enduring image of the conflict: the intrepid white-clad Finnish ski-troopers who faced, and overcame, near-mythic odds, by virtue of pluck, "sisu", cunning, and by the superior tactics whose success gave Western observers (Hitler and the German General Staff in particular), the idea that the Red Army was a colossus with feet of clay.

As we have seen, in this account of the fighting on other fronts, the Finnish Army was not composed of super-soldiers…that some of its commanders were less-than-consistently brilliant (or even professionally competent in some cases)…and that some of its tactical and operational planning could be every bit as bungling and wrong-headed as the Soviets' – well, granted all of that, and with a healthy dose of skepticism thrown in for good measure, we military historians must still approach any study of the Suomussalmi Campaign with a feeling akin to awe. There, in the near-trackless and

sparsely inhabited wilderness between the White Sea and the western terminus of the immense forested zone covering the frontier with the USSR, the army of Finland executed a tactical masterpiece, a dazzling *danse macabre* whose casualty figures were so astonishingly lop-sided that historians have tended to gloss over the fact that the Battle of Suomussalmi was **not** a walk-over for the Finns. It was instead a savage, desperately-fought engagement in which both contending armies displayed phenomenal courage. Given the odds against them, in terms of both troop numbers and firepower, any realistic military analyst would have given the Finns **no chance** of sustaining a prolonged defense, never mind counterattacking with such ruthless efficiency that they ultimately annihilated two entire (and very powerfully equipped) Red Army divisions. That General Siilasvuo was able to do just that, provides historians with an example, one that is arguably without equal in the annals of modern warfare, of how mobility, psychological conditioning, and tactical savvy can be used as force-multipliers. Bear in mind that, although the commanders of those two doomed Russian divisions were not exactly paradigms of professional excellence, the soldiers under their command did not just roll over into the snow-drifts and apathetically die – they often resisted ferociously even when frostbite and starvation had reduced their physical condition to a state not much better than "Auschwitzian"; nor did those Russian GI's desert, surrender, or mutiny against the criminal stupidity of their officers – until the very hour of their disintegration, those who did not freeze, starve, or perish of disease, often fought with rabid courage as long as they had the strength to lift their rifles, and thereby gained the respect, as well as the pity, of their Finnish opponents.

But the cornered-rat ferocity of the encircled Red Army "mottis" does not diminish the achievement of General Siilasvuo and his men; at Suomussalmi, the Finnish Army gave a demonstration of small-unit tactics that approached the level of Art. This Finnish victory is still studied in detail at West Point and other premiere military academies, for there is no more sublime example of what can be accomplished by a compact force of light infantry, against a vastly more powerful foe, when all the elements of good training, strong motivation, and resolute leadership come together in terrain that not only favors small-unit initiative and imaginative outside-the-training-manual thinking, but positively rewards those qualities. Yes, the average Finnish GI was tough in mind and body, and fiercely motivated in the defense of his home ground, but the key to Finland's success in this Tannenberg-in-miniature were the captains, lieutenants, and non-coms who ignored the stupendous odds against them and provided courageous, cool-headed leadership, applying tactical innovations which are today often described as "brilliantly imaginative" and "daringly unorthodox", but which were really just a remarkably astute application of **common sense** vis-à-vis the terrain they were fighting in, and the known capabilities of their men.

At Suomussalmi, the Finnish Army mastered the Zen-like secret of fighting **with the grain** of the landscape, enlisting, as it were, the forest itself as their ally. For all their bravery and their capacity to endure hardships that would have generated mutinies in the armies of the Western Democracies, the Russian soldiers were equipped, deployed, and led in a manner than compelled them to fight **against** Nature as well as their Finnish opponents. I would go so far as to say that as much as any other factor, the Finnish triumph at Suomussalmi derived from the Finns' almost mystical connection to their

forest environment – an elusive, primal, even spiritual advantage which cannot be quantified in any printed-out manual, or inculcated from any series of classroom lectures.

Do you want a glimpse of it, Comrade Reader, as we limn the bloody twists and turns of the Suomussalmi campaign? Then I suggest you doff a good set of headphones and listen to conductor Herbert von Karajan's interpretation of the last and most mysterious tone poem by the great Finnish composer Jean Sibelius: *Tapiola*, a musical evocation of the deep Finnish forests, named after "Tapio", the forest God of ancient Finno-Ugric mythology. At the top of the manuscript, the composer penned these words:

W idespread they stand,
The Northland's dusky forests;

And wood sprites in the gloom
Weave magic secrets.

The average Finnish rifleman, whether he was a classical music fan or not, would instinctively have understood what Sibelius was attempting to evoke in tone, and as I can attest, from an experience so patently "mystical" I've never publicly tried to describe it, to walk alone in the depths of those forests is to enter a certified Realm of the Ineffable. There are…forces? Emmanations? -- in that wilderness for which we have no name; but that are as real and palpable as a papercut on your finger, I can assure you of it.

On the other side of the encircled mottis, the average Red Army conscript found those same forests to be unutterably depressing and alien; rather than mount aggressive deep patrols – which might have seriously upset the Finnish timetable for destroying the

mottis – the encircled Soviet troops feared and hated the surrounding woods and would not venture into them unless driven out by the commissars' pistols. In the dark shadows underneath those massive, snow-capped evergreens, Death lurked in wait for the Russian conscripts. Beneath the veneer of Communist indoctrination, the majority of the soldiers filling the ranks of the 163rd Division were uneducated, superstitious peasants; they would never have been reckless enough to say it when one of the hated *politruks* was lurking nearby, but amongst themselves they shared a belief in evil spirits and malign emanations from dark and sinister landscapes. Such as the one that surrounded them, impenetrable and vast beyond their ken, at Suomussalmi.

* * *

Refresh your memories now, Comrade Readers, and studying the location of Suomussalmi in relation to the other battles that were fought north of Lake Ladoga. It doesn't look like a major strategic objective, does it? And you would be correct in that assumption: before the war, it was a picturesque, remote, fairly unimpressive rural town that was home to about 4,000 people, most of them connected in one way or another with the logging, lumber-making, and wood-pulp industries. Intrinsically, it was the sort of "strategic" target you dropped your bombs on only if every alternative target was obscured by bad weather. But the reason why Stalin launched a relatively powerful offensive against it had nothing to do with Suomussalmi's modest saw mills and log-stripping sheds; it had everything to do with **geography.**

Although only two roads connected the town with the Russian border – both of them extremely rough and narrow – numerous logging roads from **other** directions converged at Suomussalmi and from their junction at the village, conjoined into a more

developed two-lane route leading to the larger village of Hyrynsalmi; from Hyrynsalmi, all-weather roads carried logs and other unfinished forest products to manufacturing and finishing plants in southern Finland, while another macadamized road carried both raw materials and a certain quantity of finished goods due west, to the important commercial port of Oulu on the Gulf of Bothnia. In peacetime, Oulu docks were where most of Finland's exports were loaded on ships for transport to nearby Sweden. In December, 1939, the docks and railroad depots at Oulu were also where the Finns unloaded the disappointingly small but nevertheless vital amounts of military aid send **from** Sweden. Oulu was also an important trans-shipment point for French, British, and Italian weapons now trickling toward Finland from the distant Norwegian port of Narvik – in other words, there were several legitimate military reasons why the Red Army would want to capture Oulu.

But more important was the hugely dramatic fact that if you captured Oulu, you literally cut Finland in two at its narrowest point, and if the invading Soviet mechanized units seized Hyrynsalmi, there wasn't much to prevent them from moving rapidly on to capture Oulu. Just beyond Hyrynsalmi, the eastern forest belt thinned out into lightly wooded piedmont, crossed by a good network of paved or at least gravel-and-tar covered roads. If the invaders penetrated that far into central Finland, they would reach good tank country and their armor could easily fan out and overrun several regional airports, which could then swiftly be pressed into service for hauling in supplies and reinforcements. So, to stretch the circulatory analogy: before it could command the arteries of commerce and transportation, the invaders would have to squeeze through the narrow capillaries, by moving their ponderous mechanized columns westward through those long, narrow,

primitive logging roads, hemmed in on both sides by some of the thickest and most impassible forests in all of Finland. When you study the road net's linkages on a map, and actually see the centrality of the otherwise insignificant village of Suomussalmi – like a tiny hub at the bull's eye of radiating spokes, you begin to understand why the Red Army defied all superficial logic by committing two of its largest and strongest mechanized divisions to the difficult task of wresting control of the town from its patchwork-quilt of defending odds-and-ends.

The scheme was therefore not nearly as bone-headed as it might initially appear to be. IF, those armored and highly mobile formations could force their way through the dense border forest and emerge in the more favorable terrain west of Hyrynsalmi, they would in fact be ideally situated to tear apart Finland's internal communications network, not to mention accomplishing the de facto amputation of the top one-third of the country's land-mass. In terms of domestic politics, popular morale, **and** the interruption of foreign aid, the results of such a deep Soviet penetration would be nothing short of catastrophic.

Moreover, Stalin's intelligence reports gave him reason to hope that his elephantine columns **could** traverse the bottlenecks in the forest zone without having to fight for every yard of progress. In the Finnish Civil War, most of the forestry workers in this region had fought for, or at least sympathized with, the Red side. Subsequent voting patterns in the area continued to display a left-wing orientation right up until the outbreak of hostilities. Soviet agents could and did slip over the border more easily in central Finland than elsewhere, and many of the exiled Red leaders from 1918 had established their headquarters in towns between the Murmansk Railroad and the Finnish border;

despite their increasing age and irrelevance, they had continued to plot their political come-backs, agitate, scheme, and do whatever they could to manipulate the burgeoning Finnish labor movement – often working out of border towns not too dissimilar from Suomussalmi. And Marxist sloganeering had by now become a boringly routine part of domestic Finnish politics, especially in the lightly populated forest towns near the frontier. So the Kremlin's hope that its troops would be welcomed as "liberators", or at the very least not shot-at because many Finns considered them "comrades", wasn't entirely delusional, just greatly exaggerated. Mannerheim himself had some doubts about working-class loyalty in east-central Finland and was pleasantly surprised when the domestic Left rallied to the defense of their country (if not specifically to the defense of the "bourgeoisie Capitalist" government in Helsinki), instead of forming a deadly fifth column of saboteurs and collaborators.

Marxist political parties existed in France and Great Britain, too, of course, but Stalin took the wispy discontents of Finland's ageing Reds far more seriously because, after all, they had already taken up arms for their ideological convictions, a mere twenty-one years ago, while the French and British Communists did little except spout hot air in their nations' respective parliaments and contribute a cadre of naïve (and militarily ineffectual) romantics to the Republican cause in Spain, where Stalin's cynical manipulations and ultimate betrayal of the Loyalist government – such as it was from one week to the next -- caused many British and American sympathizers (none more eloquently than George Orwell) to renounce Marxism forever.

Naturally, the network of Communist agents within Finland was run by Old Guard Bolsheviks who had been thrown out of the country after the White victory – in

other words, ageing political street-fighters who stood to gain both power, vindication, and a chance to settle old scores IF the USSR overthrew the current Finnish government. These rather pathetic old conspirators knew their fantasies stood no chance of coming true without the help of the Red Army, so their reports about unrest and militancy within the Finnish labor movement were intended to give Stalin the impression that the Finnish proletariat felt direly "oppressed" and were seething with class antagonism; the Finnish "masses", Stalin was repeatedly told, would either refuse to fight their Soviet brethren or they would actively aid the Red Army in overthrowing the government of President Kallio and dragging Marshall Mannerheim to the gallows for his "war crimes".

To be sure, there **was** lingering resentment among working-class Finns about the firing squads and the pestilential concentration camps of the Civil War period – how could there not be? But every "capitalist" government since that time had invested far more of the national budget in standard-of-life improvements **for** the working-class than it had on modernizing the armed forces. Finland's farm- and factory-workers enjoyed a forty-hour work-week, electricity, rights of collective bargaining, decent medical care, access to libraries, and universal access to education, either free, as a gift of the state, or on the university level, with such substantial state subsidies than virtually any child who wanted a college education, could have one. These improvements in working-class life were among the most basic things the Red faction had fought for during the civil war – and what else, really, did Stalin have to offer, considering the wretched lot of his own factory workers and peasants? Moreover, even the most isolated Finnish farm family usually owned a radio, and the freedom to listen to any station they could pick up; the Finnish "peasants" knew vastly more about the world outside than did their Soviet

counterparts, whose radio sets were pre-tuned exclusively to Stalin-approved stations. The Finnish working-class knew for a fact that its standard of living far surpassed that of its Soviet equivalent, and by extension, the rank-and-file Finnish soldiers knew how much more they had to fight for than the wretched Soviet conscripts who, ostensibly, had come to "liberate" them!

But as I have remarked before, Stalin's agents told him what they thought Stalin wanted to hear, so the Kremlin's notion of Finland's internal political malaise was little short of surreal in its mistaken assumptions.

How else can one explain the fact that the Red Army's 163rd Division – 17,000 infantry bolstered by about forty tanks and more than 100 pieces of artillery – crossed into the wilderness of central Finland encumbered not only with its normal heavy logistical train, but also with brass bands, printing presses, loudspeaker systems, truck-loads of propaganda posters and Finnish-language editions of "Pravda"; filing cabinets, typewriters, entire truckloads of complete forty-volume sets of *The Collected Works of Lenin* (a literary curiosity measuring more than six *feet* across and stuffed with some of the most stupefyingly **dull** prose ever put between covers , not to mention the suitcases and office supplies required to provide employment for several hundred superfluous and militarily worthless bureaucrats whose task it would be to set up a Soviet-style administration in Suomussalmi and other presumably sympathetic towns throughout the region. Perhaps the Kremlin ideologists believed that the sudden availability of Lenin's collected tomes would generate, outside the new Communist Party Book Shop, long lines of newly-educated Finnish lumberjacks, eager to while away the long winter nights by

pondering the great Lenin's interminable (and impenetrable!) meditations on the more abstruse tenants of Dialectical Materialism…

It was as though the soldiers of the 163rd Division – in addition to the hostile terrain and sub-arctic cold they already had to contend with – were also being ordered to carry 20-pound slabs of concrete in their knapsacks.

But if their commander, Major-General Zelentsev, had misgiving about all these added logistical burdens, he naturally kept them to himself. In the last days of November, the 163rd Division moved out from its assembly area (the town of Uhkta, a dismal White Sea port connected to the Murmansk Railroad) and advanced to the border along one of those top secret roads Stalin's engineers had constructed during the long futile negotiations that preceded the invasion. Finnish reconnaissance didn't see it coming – largely because the observers in their routine border patrol flights weren't normally **looking** for any traces of an overweight mechanized division slogging through terrain so utterly unsuited for its deployment. Therefore, when the division crossed the border, it achieved total surprise. But with its attached burden of propaganda apparatus and its attendant *apparatchiks*, Zelentsev quickly discovered that it was simply impossible to advance the whole unwieldy formation over the one half-way usable road in the area (the Raate Road, so named for the tiny border town which it connected to the rest of Finland). Instead, Zelentsev was compelled to split his command in two and send one-third of his force along a parallel but much more primitive track to the north – which meant that his ability to exercise effective, unified, command was undercut from the start.

One regiment advanced along the Raate Road; creating a backed-up column so long and ponderous that Zelentsev either had to wait for the spring thaws or re-direct his

other two regiments to the much rougher and narrower Juntussranta Road, some fifteen miles north of the Raate track and parallel to it. Physical contact between the two columns was impossible because of the long squiggly shape of Lake Kiantajarvi, which was not yet frozen solid enough to support vehicle traffic.

So confident were the Finns that Stalin would never commit so large a formation of troops on such primitive pathways, and against so insignificant an objective as Suomussalmi, with its population of only 4,000) that Zelentzev's only opposition consisted of some desultory sniping by a 50-man Border Guard company, whose commander had the presence of mind to count the astonishing number of tanks, prime movers, towed artillery, support wagons and… *loudspeaker vans???* that were inching their way westward along two narrow, primitive routes that were barely passable for horse-drawn wagons even during the dry period of summer. At first, Finnish headquarters discounted these messages as hallucinations borne of panic and inexperience. But when so many other, similar reports began piling up from other, similarly "impassable-for-tanks" border locations, Mannerheim's staff saw the emerging pattern of threats for what it was and reacted in the manner I've already described.

What the hell was so important about Suomussalmi, the staff officers kept asking? It was a picturesque little town – some officers liked to patronize the hunting and fishing lodges there during the proper season – but aside from its modest complex of lumber mills, it was hardly worth the attention of an overweight, armor-supported, artillery-heavy division! But when the Finnish staff began to trace the road junctions there back to Hyrynsalmi, and saw how just west of that railhead, the land opened up into good tank country and the crude forest tracks changed into macadamized roads…and how

vulnerable was the port of Oulu to any Soviet division that penetrated deeply enough to reach those roads, the crisis looming at Suomussalmi suddenly assumed the same urgency as those created by the enemy's equally "illogical" thrusts at Tolvajarvi, Ilomantsi, Kuhmo, and Kollaa… During the first four days of Zelentsov's advance, all that stood between his tanks and the roads to Oulu , was that fifty-man company of Border Guards, who at least had enough courage and resourcefulness to fulfill the one mission in their power to accomplish: to track the invaders' movements and count his cannon batteries (along with his truckloads of posters and his complement of tubas…). Whenever time permitted, the screening detachment also chain-sawed impromptu blockades of evergreens in the invader's path

Just how much of a logistical burden all this propaganda apparatus was, is indicated by the fact that it took Zelentsev's two columns – against negligible resistance – until December 7 to link up in Suomussalmi itself, by which time all the civilian inhabitants had been evacuated and Finnish HQ was desperately scrounging up reserve companies from hither and yon and sending them toward the town, by bicycle and foot if nothing faster was available; no coherent plan yet existed as to how this collection of middle-aged Civic Guards and inexperienced Border Police were expected to contain the big 163rd Division, once it had rested, regrouped, and started to roll again. Mannerheim had ordered the village burned to the ground, but the Border Guards had their hands full just trying to move the reluctant, frightened civilians out of town and only about half of Suosussalmi's structures were effectively torched. So Zelentsev and at least a portion of his troops were able to find shelter and thaw out in comfort and safety – naturally, the snuggest quarters were claimed by the officers and commissars. Zelentsev was not a

distinguished commander to start with, and be became less so quite rapidly, but he did have enough sense to realize that the Finns would be converging on his position with ever man and mortar they could mobilize, so his engineers began rapidly and effectively to fortify the surviving buildings, a task made considerable easier by the deep cellars under many of them.

Whatever Zelentzev's potential as a field commander, he was considerably hampered by the ponderous non-combatant "tail" attached to his combat regiments; evidence suggests that, despite the inhabitants' obvious lack of enthusiasm for their Soviet benefactors, headquarters in Leningrad was pressuring him to make sure no harm came to those bureaucrats and their brass bands – otherwise, some of Zelentsev's tactical decisions don't make sense.

By the time the first sizable Finnish reinforcement (Independent Reserve Battalion Er-P 16) began assembling to block a further Russian advance, Zelentsev's perimeter was overextended and poorly configured either for defense or rapid resumption of his westward advance. Left out-on-a-limb was Col. Sharov's 662nd Regiment, which was ordered to advance **out-of-contact** *with* most of the division, up to Hapavaara village (See Map), and then to dig in between that point and the road junction at Palovaara, anchoring on Lake Piispajarvi; his orders were to guard Zelentzev's right flank while the other two regiments, bolstered by most of his armor and artillery, resumed their grinding advance toward Hyrynsalmi. Exactly where Col. Sharvo's left flank was supposed to tie in with the main body of the division is unclear, and seems to have been equally so to Sharov. Was he to fortify where he was or keep pace with the rest of the division? Moreover, for no apparently good reason, Zelentsev ordered Sharov to detach one of his

battalions to rejoin the main force at Suomussalmi. Responding as best he could to these orders, Sharov ended up occupying a hook-shaped line between the thick woods around Palovaara and the even denser forests north-east of Lake Aglajarvi: a distance of more than six miles. When Sharov protested and rather testily asked for new and more logical orders, Zelensev refused to issue any – but he did promise to dispatch additional artillery and promised to keep communications open by sending out periodic strong armor patrols to make sweeps up and down the connecting road – again, brazenly refusing to explain why he wanted things done in so illogical a manner. "Be assured we have not forgotten you!" was one cryptic message Zelentsev radioed to his increasingly bewildered subordinate, who until that moment had rather assumed his commanding officer still remembered where all his regiments were!

Col. Sharov probably to ok small comfort from **that** assurance, seeing as how there wasn't enough room anywhere on that road to deploy more than two or three tanks in firing position, and along no part of the road would they be able to travel in any formation other than single-file.

Nevertheless, he dutifully attempted to push up to his next objective, Haapavaara village. But he didn't try **too** hard, however, and when Er-P 16 joined forces with the scattered platoons of Border Guards and local reservists already on the scene, the Finns for once enjoyed numerical parity with their attackers: each side fielded about 2,000 riflemen, and the Finns had been given time to throw up strong roadblocks, plant some mines, and establish well-hidden sniper and MG nests. Sharov's half-hearted probing attacks, on December 8-9, were beaten off without undue difficulty. Thereafter, he abandoned large-scale offensive actions (although he did force his recon patrols to go deeper and stay

longer inside the forest than his superior officer was able to do down at Suomusalmi). Some of these excursions provoked lively firefights, and whether Sharov's soldiers were advancing or pulling back, they were all soon gasping like fish-out-of-water, due to the added physical strain of just moving without skis in rough terrain now covered with two feet of new snow. That Sharov felt he'd been left out on the end of a dangerously long limb was evident from the sullen, put-upon tone of his radio communiqués to Zelentsev, which the Finns were able to read in detail, within thirty minutes of their transmission, after one of their top secret "Mobile Radio Intelligence Vans" arrived on the Suomussalmi front, late on December 10.

Stung by his C.O.'s rebukes, Sharov renewed his attacks north-east on December 14 and 15, after slathering suspected Finnish strongpoints with lavish but mostly ineffectual barrages of artillery and tank fire. The defenders stoically endured these noisy but rarely lethal shellings, then, as soon as the bombardments ceased, hammered the already pin-pointed Russian assembly areas with quick but punishing mortar barrages – which often took the steam out of Sharov's assaults before they even began. How was it, the Russian GI's must have wondered, that their regiment flung 500 shells at the enemy, but never seemed to cause any real damage, while the Finns routinely struck the Russians' assembly areas with ten or fifteen rounds of mortar fire and almost invariably killed or wounded with every burst? With ten times their firepower, Sharov's men could hardly shoot down enough trees to render the tormenting Finns visible. The situation was most demoralizing, to be sure.

And then, when the ski-less Red infantry did advance, lurching like club-footed giants through waist-high snows, more encumbered than protected by their huge woolen

coats and stiff, uninsulated felt-and-horsehide boots, the invisible Finns allowed them to churn forward to ranges of less than 100 yards – by which time the hapless Red infantry were gasping like landed fish – and then cut loose with converging cones of Maxim fire that cut men down like the Reaper's scythe, turning their targets into shredded bundles that steamed like fountains when hot blood hit frigid air. The bodies inside the riddled greatcoats were held together only by the frozen, stone-stiff confines of their belts and packs.

To his credit, Sharov seems to have ignored the regimental commissars and bluntly called a halt to these fruitless assaults as soon as he'd launched enough of them to send Zelentsev a respectable tally of his attacks. After decoding his rueful after-action reports to Suomussalmi, Finnisn intelligence learned than during those two days of sputtering, half-hearted attacks, Sharov's regiment had suffered another 210 battle casualties and his aid stations reported approximately 100 new cases of severe frostbite – in other words, since taking his assigned position on the division's extended right flank, he had lost 20 per cent of his effectives and so far his patrols had counted perhaps a dozen Finnish corpses…along with 50,000 brass shell casings strewn all around Sharov's perimeter. He was not yet truly "surrounded" – a large part of the Finn's success was based on sheer bluff – but he was starting to **believe** that he was and he kept asking Zelentzev for permission to contract his over-extended amoeboid position into something tighter, better situated on the ground, and more easily supported by his organic firepower. Just as many times as Sharov outlined the compelling tactical reasons for contracting his lines, exactly so many times did Zelentsev forbid him to take "one step back". As their colonel made little effort to hide his own deepening gloom, small wonder that his

soldiers' morale plummeted. Finally, two days after calling off that futile series of attacks, Sharov fired off a situation report that came within a hair's breadth of insubordination: his men were exhausted; the Finns had knocked out all but a few of his field kitchens; more and more, the patrols he ordered into the woods simply advanced until they were out of sight, then took shelter for a plausible amount of time and returned to friendly lines bearing no intelligence at all, or useless reports of ski-tracks heading this way or that. Patrols which did attempt serious recon work, usually returned in smaller numbers than they had started out with, having lost men to Finnish snipers, newly-laid mines, bushwhackers armed with Suomis, and quite often, forced to abandon men who had either slipped away in search of a Finn who would take their surrender, or who simply got lost in the trackless, everything-looks-the-same forest and just…vanished. Hikers still encounter their bleached skulls and rusted-out weapons even today, seventy years after they disappeared. Signs of despair crept into the radio intercepts: Unless Zelentzev promptly dispatched at least a battalion of fresh infantry, several tons of ammunition, and some replacement **field kitchens**, it was Sharov's conviction that his regiment was no longer capable of offensive operations. The bitter tone and stark professional reasoning in Sharov's message would have earned a reprimand if not a court martial in virtually **any** army; in Stalin's, thousands of men had been shot for much more circumspect messages.

Zelentsev's maddening reaction to his near-mutinous colonel was a terse reprimand for Sharov's lack of radio discipline. No mention was made about reinforcements or hot food.

Although Zelentsev **did** practice strict radio discipline (the prowling Finnish van obtained little new information from intercepting his daily sit-reps), the Red general's obvious reluctance to resume his glacial advance toward Hyrynsalmi certainly indicated that he, too, was waiting for reinforcements from inside Russia. Since the enemy had done such a splendid job of surrendering the initiative, Mannerheim saw a window of opportunity during which he scattered regional forces might be able to unite and strike the passive 163rd a crushing blow before those long-awaited reinforcements linked up at Suomussalmi. But the thing had to be done swiftly and with the utmost violence; the opportunity might last no more than a few days. The counterattack would be risky too: inactive or not, the 163rd Division was still a very large and powerful unit, one which was now strongly entrenched. Again, the cruelest and most chronic dilemma faced by the Finnish commander-in-chief: the invaders had left themselves vulnerable, but if Mannerheim waited to strike them until he had achieved numerical parity and somehow amassed at least minimal artillery support for his soldiers, it would almost certainly be too late – there would be **two** Soviet divisions massed at Suomusalmi and too damned little to stop them from rolling west and capturing Hyrynsalmi…or, God forbid, Oulu itself. Intelligence reports told of increased radio traffic just across the border from Raate village, and even though several recon flights went into Russian air space for a look-see, none brought back any useful photos. But, just as significantly, each flight had been met with massive concentrations of flak – unquestionably, a relief force was mustering under the forest canopy. Did Mannerheim have enough time to pull it off, or would his best option be to fortify the roads west of Suomussalmi and hope for a defensive victory.

But the old field marshal was still a cavalryman at heart, and all his instincts urged a series of quick, slashing, attacks, just as soon as they could begin. Command of such a desperate gamble was not an assignment many officers would want, but fortunately for Finland, Mannerheim was being pestered by an officer who not only believed he and his one regiment could do it, but was practically belching fire in his eagerness to get cracking. That man was Colonel Hjalmar Siilasvuo, a peacetime lawyer and reserve officer who was yet again another veteran of the fabled 1918 Jaeger Battalion. Recalled to active service in the summer of 1939, Siilasvuo now found himself commanding the very last uncommitted regiment in the Commander-in-Chief's Reserve, J.R. – 27. At least twice a day, Siilasvuo had phoned Mannerheim's HQ, importuning the Field Marshal to take his men off the leash and promising he would, if supported to the best of Mannerheim's ability, utterly wreck the Soviet division at Suomussalmi.

On December 16, Mannerheim gave the go-ahead, dictating his operational orders with a terse bluntness that implied deep faith in his chosen paladin, and giving Siilasvuo near-total freedom and authority to conduct the campaign as he saw fit. I shall try to convey the spirit of those orders, to the best of my rusty capability to parse written Finnish:

Advance your regiment to the Suomussalmi sector and establish coordinated relations with the patchwork task force already fighting there. Give the officers presently commanding those detachments considerable autonomy, for they have fought hard and well with very limited resources and they know the ground intimately. Over-ride their opinions only if you feel it is absolutely imperative. Acting swiftly and with the utmost audacitry, you will destroy the Soviet 163rd Division. Do it quickly. You will not be

reprimanded for high casualties if the deed requires them. This headquarters will strain every resource to increase your striking power and to provide you with artillery; as for air support, you will have at your disposal a single light bomber/ reconnaissance aircraft and a top-rated pilot/observer team and you may give them orders without having to clear those orders through any higher authority. If additional air support is imperative, this headquarters will do its best to procure it, but given Finland's situation, such help cannot be guaranteed. As for ground and artillery actions, you have full operational authority to take whatever measures you deem necessary for the fulfillment of your mission. In the event of major new developments, such as may impinge of matters of national strategy, you may contact me directly. You are to provide this headquarters with daily casualty reports, critical information gleaned from enemy prisoners and documents, and estimates of enemy losses and intentions; otherwise, you are expected to conduct your operations without tying up the phone lines or radio links to myself or my staff. If you have a sudden, dire, need for additional resources, I will do everything possible to provide them, but the need must be commensurate with the difficulty of reaching your remote sector. Proceed at once with our full confidence. God be with and grant you victory. Long live Finland!

Mannerheim

* * *

Siilasvuo intended to destroy the 163rd Division before it could be reinforced. Not just prevent it from resuming its cautious advance across Finland's narrow waist, not just eject it from Suomussalmi and harry it back to the border, but *to* **wipe it out utterly**.

When Siilasvuo and JR-27 arrived, he was to assume overall command of Reserve Battalion ErP- , together with the scratch companies of Border Guards and the platoon-sized militia detachments already on the scene. That would give him the equivalent of a single brigade … with no tanks, no artillery heavier than 81-mm. mortars, no air support, and not a single anti-tank cannon. The sole advantage his polyglot outfit possessed was a full compliment of skis, and his men were mostly loggers, factory hands from the wood pulp industry, and rugged individualists who lived by hunting, trapping, fishing, or driving trucks and heavy equipment during logging season: in other words, a stereotypical assortment of "burly Finns". Their intangible advantage was that these men lived in this remote wilderness because they **chose to**, because their spirits thrived on the vast silences of the primeval forest. This was **their** Finland, and they were intimately familiar with its myriad lakes, game trails, rugged granite outcroppings, and the location of its unmapped seasonally fluctuating bogs – some of which could be as dangerous to the unwary as tropical quicksand. They had learned to ski as soon as they could toddle and most of them were crack shots. If Siilasvuo's ad hoc brigade lacked conventional firepower, it had an abundance of the next-best asset: mobility.

Moreover, a new railroad spur connecting Hyrynsalmi with the main east-west line to Oulu had been opened only weeks before the start of hostilities, and the Red Air Force hadn't spotted it. So when Siilasvuo got his marching orders, he was able to deploy a full battalion, into well-camouflaged entrenchments athwart the road west out of Suomussalmi, without attracting the enemy's attention. When General Zelentsev resumed his advance on Dec. 9, his foremost battalion walked – or in this case, staggered (as the

183rd **still** hadn't received any skis via its long supply line back to the Murmansk Railroad) straight into a blistering ambush.

After sustaining more than 200 casualties, and finding that his tanks were unable to leave the road without lurching into brushy morasses that immobilized them or crashing into skillfully camouflaged pits and small but perfectly positioned minefields, the commander of that lead battalion retreated in disorder, causing the entire division to bog down once again only two miles from its starting point, about one mile east of Hyrynsalmi.

Heartened by the results of this first clash, Mannerheim gave Col. Siilasvuo and his men a psychological boost (and Russian intelligence a perplexing case of *déjà vu)* by officially designating Siilasvuo's command as the "Ninth Division", even though – except for JR-27, all the rest of the **rea*l*** Ninth Division had already been parceled out, one battalion here and another there, to flash-points from Tolvajarvi to the Isthmus. This shrewd bit of organizational legerdemain had two beneficial effects: it bolstered the shaky morale of the patchwork Finnish brigade already fighting on the Suomussalmi front, and it confused the hell out of Zelentsev's staff, who were baffled and a little disturbed by the Finns' seeming ability to conjure new divisions out of thin air.

Now utterly unsure as to the Finns' true strength, Zelentsev apparently gave up all thoughts of pressing his sluggish advance toward Hyrynsalmi, justifying his inaction to Leningrad District headquarters by claiming that it was only "prudent" to wait for a clearer picture of just how many Finns he was fighting and where their main positions were. Once more, Finnish radio intercepts painted a picture of confusion and indecisiveness on the part of the Russian division's staff. Siilasvuo decided that, as soon

as his two remaining battalions were assembled and given a hot meal, he would strike hard and fast, while the enemy was still confused. Displaying a good officer's understanding of psychology, he did not reveal his plan to the scattered covering troops who had been fighting so hard, and on such unequal terms, before he'd arrived to take command. He permitted the frontline rumor mill to interpret that "Ninth Division" designation as a sign that Mannerheim really was sending a division's worth of reinforcements. This encouragement, although it was for the moment chimerical, plus the enemy's strange lack of aggressiveness caused morale to soar. The brief lull in combat also gave the more exhausted Finnish troops a chance to get some rest, a steadier allotment of hot, hearty food, and a chance to visit one of their frontline saunas. Convinced that they were, at last, numerically equal to the foe, the formerly haggard defenders were greatly emboldened and became eager to teach the invaders a bloody lesson.

So far, of course, Siilasvuo's command posture was largely a bluff; Zelentsev still outnumbered the Finns by more than two-to-one and even though his troops were no longer attacking, they still had a tremendous superiority in firepower and an absolute monopoly when it came to tanks and armored cars. No matter how fired-up the Finns were to smite the invaders, cracking Zelentsov's defenses was a daunting proposition.

But Siilasvuo planned to launch his attack as though he really **did** have a full-strength division. And his Soviet opponent's curious deployment of his forces practically invited the kind of cut-and-thrust counterattacks Siilasavuo was about to unleash. After the semi-detached 612th Regiment ceased trying to cross Lake Piispajarvi, its commander, the sorely-tried Col. Sharov, fortified his T-bone-shaped perimeter, made himself

comfortable in a farmhouse near the tiny crossroads hamlet of Laovaara, and conducted no more offensive operations except for security patrols that rarely probed the forest beyond the range of visual contact with their dug-in comrades. The bulk of that regiment, following the bloody nose it had suffered when it was bushwhacked trying to advance on Hyrynsalmi, hunkered down passively. And even this curiously amoeboid perimeter wasn't continuous: the SW-NE road between Sherov's left flank and Zelentsev's right was thinly defended by bunkers and machine gun nests about fifty yard apart, the intervals between them blocked by nothing stronger than barbed wire entanglements and the odd listening post. The strongest deterrent the Finns faced in this sector were small, irregularly-timed tank patrols shuffling back and forth.

All told, the encircled 163rd – still greatly encumbered by its brass bands, loudspeaker trucks, mimeograph machines, and several tons of posters and newspaper stock – occupied an enclave shaped like a fish-hook; which measured on its longest, diagonal axis, 25 miles, from a point just below H Ridge to its read-guard rump about 8.5 miles east of Suomussalmi village. During the period when Siilasvuo was making his preparations (Dec. 10 to Dec. 12), Zelentsev shifted some of his guns and tanks to the rear – a maneuver that made no tactical sense unless he was expecting reinforcements to attempt a link-up via the Raate Road.

When he learned of this redeployment, Siilasvuo made his decision: **that** was where he would launch the first phase of his *motti* operation: to cut off the snake's tail, as it were, while its more dangerous "head" appeared to be quiescent. Zelentzev obviously expected a relief force to advance west along the Raate Road; intelligence reports indicated that such a force was, if not already poised to cross the border, then certainly

very close to it. Siilasvuo concluded that the only sensible place to make his first and perhaps decisive strike, would have to be at a point where a successful Finnish assault would prevent the junction of Zelensev's besieged division and whoever was coming to rescue them.

Although most of Siilasvuo's staff urged him to attack on Dec. 10, he chose to gamble and wait until all his scattered forces were concentrated and oriented to the terrain; when he **did** attack, he wanted to do so from as many unpredictable directions as possible. Cross-country mobility was his only real advantage, and to increase its effectiveness, he side-slipped the bulk of JR-27 from the roadblock across the Hyrynsalmi road to a well-concealed assembly area about five miles south-east of Suomussalmi village itself. He then ordered every able-bodied man he could spare to set to work, under the direction of his engineers, constructing an "ice road" parallel to the Russians' only significant line of communications back to the border, the Raate-to-Suomussalmi road.

The "ice road" was neither a new nor a uniquely Finnish idea – the Russians had probably invented the concept during the Napoleonic Wars and had certainly used it, on occasion, during both the First World War and the Civil War which erupted after the Bolshevik's seized power. Events suggest, however, that the technique had faded out of the Red Army's training curriculum during the decades since; it was still very much a part of the Finnish Army's training, and its combat engineers had perfected the technique. Siilasvuo's engineers had already collected an ample stock of power-saws, so when he gave the order to lay down an "ice road", his men were able to put down a very effective one in forty-eight hours. The technique could not have been simpler: trees were felled

and dragged to form a corduroy surface, then water was pumped on top, mixed, where possible, with gravel and wood-chunks to give added traction. Overnight, the water froze as hard as concrete, forming a road-surface that expedited the swift movement of men on skis, horse-drawn sleds and wagons, and even motor vehicles.

As soon as the ice road was functional for a length of about six miles, Siilasvuo studied the map, the reconnaissance photos supplied by his "air force" (a single antiquated Blackburn "Ripon" biplane whose only protection was its camouflage, its ability to fly at tree-top level at speeds that would stall-out a modern Soviet aircraft, and its observer/photographer's ring-mounted Lewis gun) and the reports of his ski-patrols, and selected the point where he would mount the first of many "road-cutting" attacks: a densely wooded defile about six miles east of Suomussalmi, where the Raate Road passed between two wide-open lakes: Kuomasjarvi to the north-east, and Kuivasjarvi to the south-west. The straight-line distance between the two lakes was approximate one mile, but impassable ravines, granite outcroppings, and impenetrably thick forests reduced the passable gap to something like 300 yards, with the Raate track running through the middle.

Once the Finns had severed the road at this point, Siilasvuo iuntended to construct a heavily fortified roadblock that would prevent any relief column from coming to the rescue of the beleaguered 163rd Division. No matter how strong a column was launched across the border, the shape of the terrain would inevitably compress that column's maneuvering room to little more than the width of the Raate Road itself and the two narrow strips of open ground on its shoulders – less than 200 yards -- would be suitable for the deployment of tanks and field guns by the time the enemy discovered Siilasvuo's

roadblock. In short, he had found the Perfect Bottleneck. The only way it could be outflanked would involve sending masses of infantry across the frozen lakes on either side of the Raate Road; and although the surfaces of both lakes could easily support a column of marching men, neither of them had frozen deep enough to bear the weight of tanks; any attempted turning movement, therefore, would be completely visible to the Finns and would have to be executed across a plane of ice as flat as a billiard table and totally devoid of cover. Siilasvuo rather hoped the enemy might try such a maneuver, for both lakes were screened with machine gun nests. His gunners could sweep the ice from the front and from partial enfilade.

The worst danger to the roadblock would be a much longer, deeper, end-run through the dense forest above and below the two lakes – a virtually impossible maneuver for infantry without skis and completely ignorant on how to use them. There was also the fact that, over and over again, the invaders had demonstrated an almost atavistic fear of probing so deep on their flanks as to lose sight of the road! Siilasvuo was gambling that the relief force, when it finally showed up, would prove equally reluctant to operate deep in the woods. The most likely scenario? The Russians would simply try to grind and gnaw their way through the roadblock, inch by inch, lavishly expending artillery shells and using their infantry like a battering ram constructed of flesh, in repeated frontal assaults. To defend the roadblock, he asked for volunteers; so many soldiers offered to undertake this near-suicidal job that Siillasvuo had the luxury of hand-picking every man. To command this all-important task force, he selected one of his toughest and most resourceful subordinates, Captain J. A. Makeninen. The total number of men that could

be spared to defend the roadblock was 350, but Siilasvuo authorized them to take four times as many Maxim guns as a company-sized unit would ordinarily control.

Siilasvuo was now confident that he could destroy what remained of the 163rd in a matter of days. IF the roadblock held…and IF the starving and frost-bitten survivors of the 163rd were unable to mount a strong defense, Siilasvuo planned to smash the encircled pockets as swiftly as possible, then regroup his men and smite the relief column with every man, Maxim, and mortar shell he could bring to bear. It was a plan that went beyond "audacious" and right up to the borderline of "reckless". And it all hinged on his conviction that Makeninen and his 350 men could stop an entire mechanized division in its tracks.

By the metrics of conventional military thinking, what Siilasvuo proposed to do was close-to-impossible. But Finland was fighting for its very existence and by resisting the Red Army for six weeks – after the "experts" predicted that Stalin would annex Helsinki in a eight-to-ten days, tops -- her people had already done the seemingly impossible. Motti tactics were designed to win "impossible" victories, and Siilasvuo's men were about to give the world a demonstration of operational prowess that bordered on Art, its precision, timings, and applications of force were not unlike the skills of a great ballet company..

Linchpin for the campaign would be Siilasvuo's first road-cutting attack, on December 12. If this initial assault didn't succeed, all bets were off, for the objective was to capture the ground upon which Makeninen and his task force would construct their roadblock. That first attack set the pattern for the entire Suomussalmi campaign.

Here's how the Finns did it:

1. The troops assigned to physically sever the road were moved into pre-selected positions just beyond the range of Russian recon patrols;
2. Each commander of a road-cutting force was at liberty to select his preferred route of approach, using the criteria that it must both facilitate a rapid advances or a safer retreat; it must terminate in a final assembly and regrouping area which was reasonably secure yet also close enough to the road so that the assaulting troops wouldn't get too winded before the fighting started;
3. The final step in preparation was an almost ritualistic discarding of heavy winter clothing – the assault squads would go in light and fast, wearing only a thin white sheet for camouflage and carrying every ounce of firepower it could; while the Maxim guns were very effective at laying down heavy volumes of suppressive fire on either side of the raiding force, the fighting was at such close quarters that the most effective weapons proved to be pistols, Suomis, grenades and sharpened entrenching tools;
4. Speed and shock were the primary ingredients of a successful road-cutting operation. While the main assault team was checking equipment and stuffing extra clips into every available pocket, scouts would creep as close to the Russian enclaves as possible, preferably within earshot, so Russian-speaking Finns could make last-minute adjustments in targeting and observe any new or reinforced Soviet positions. When the raiders came out of the trees, they would be guided by intelligence reports no more than thirty minutes old;
5. At the signal, Finnish mortars would unleash a short but precisely aimed

barrage and the Maxim batteries would pour a cone of tracers into the point of first contact;

6. Usually, these opening barrages lasted less than five minutes, and when the ordained time limit was reached, both mortars and heavy machine guns shifted their fire 100 meters to the right and the left of the point where the assault would strike, in effect sealing off a narrow corridor all the way from one tree-line to the opposite tree-line. It was vital for the Finns to establish a gateway through which they could shift forces from one side of the road to the other in comparative safety. When the raiding party's commander judged that such a corridor had temporarily been defined, that was the optimum moment for the attack to go forward.

A flurry of half-invisible men came boiling out of the forest, already incredibly close, grenading everything in sight, raking the nearest foxholes, trucks, and tents with Suomi fire…Demolition teams peeled off and raced parallel to the road, hurling their explosive packs into truck cabs, open tank hatches, field kitchens, mortar pits, each demo team accompanied by sharpshooters under orders to kill the officers, <u>politruks,</u> signalmen, and other specialists first. At this stage of the attack, enemy resistance became fierce, as desperate Red tankists leaped from their vehicles on to the skiers' backs, or infantrymen roared up out of their holes to meet them with bayonets or rifle butts. To those witnessing the close combat, it appeared as thought the roadbed itself were convulsing in spasms of flame, smoke, tracers, and bullet-spurts, figures in ice-crusted khaki grappling insanely with wraiths shrouded in bedsheets, hacking and stabbing and swinging their flaring Suomi muzzles like a legion of vengeful ghosts

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With Makanen's roadblock successfully established, Siilasvuo began methodically to tighten the noose around the now-isolated 163rd, starting with a battalion-sized diversionary attack against the Russians' westernmost salient, on the rocky Hulkoniemi Peninsula. The Finns gained little ground, but their efforts did cause Zelentsev to rush his armored reserves to that sector and to re-target most of his artillery. As soon as he did that, Siilasvuo launched a half-dozen sharp, quick harassing attacks on **other** parts of the enemy's perimeter. Finnish forces involved ranged in size from fifty to 200 men and the fighting, though seldom lasting more than a half-hour, was intense.

During these early pin-prick raids (Dec. 12 – 15), Siilasvuo furthered his overall plan: to keep the Russians off-balance, deprived of sleep, hot food, or any sense of safety **anywhere** inside their lines; these probes also allowed him to update his maps and locate the enemy's command posts, supply dumps, and radio sets. These were then subjected to brief but very accurate mortar barrages, which damaged several targets without, apparently fully destroying any. The net effect of this flurry of Finnish offensive action was to convince Zelentzev that he was now besieged by Finnish forces superior in number to his own, and the psychological effect was profound. The Russians increased the size of their security patrols, usually no less than one hundred men (roughly half a company), but this tactic only had the effect of making those patrols noisier, easier to detect, and much more inviting targets for Finnish snipers.

Siilasvuo had seized the initiative, making Zelentsev react to his moves. In doing so, however, he had suffered disproportionate casualties in his officers and non-coms, who had been trained to lead from the front and were often conspicuously exposed. Equally conspicuous, was the valor with which these young lieutenants, captains, and sergeants led their men into close-range firefights. One memorable example was a lieutenant named Remes, who took a Moisin bullet in the hand and was forced to turn over his command in order to seek medical attention. He refused an escort, deprecating the seriousness of his wound and assuring his men that he could find his own way back to the air station. He never arrived. Just before dark the following day, his body was found in the deep forest, riddled and pieced with numerous bayonet wounds. Sprawled around him were the bodies of six dead Russians.

Mannerheim was properly impressed with Siilasvuo's leadership and strained his resources to reinforce that officer's early successes. On December 16, Siilasvuo received his **first** artillery support: a four-gun battery of reconditioned 76.2 mm field guns dating back to the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05. Two days later, Siilasvuo welcomed four more cannon, of comparable weight but more contemporary design, and on December 22, Mannerheim sent him a fitting Christmas present: a pair of urgently needed Bofors anti-tank guns, a newly-raised battalion of long-range ski-guerrillas (designated "P-1"), and a full regiment of just-trained infantry, designated JR-64. With these reinforcements, Siilasvuo now in fact **did** command a "division" rather than a motley task force; with 11,500 men and eight

guns, he was at peak strength, and his plans for annihilating the 163rd Division were honed to perfection – insofar as any military plan can be described as "perfect".

Task Force Susi, which had all this time been containing the forlorn Soviet 662nd Regiment between Lake Piispajarvi and the Palovaara Junction, also received newly-trained reinforcements totaling approximately 2,300 men, and immediately used its new striking power to cut – for good, as it turned out – all contact between the 662nd and the main Soviet enclave around Suomussalmi. Neither tanks nor infantry could get through now, and Col. Sharov immediately ceased even limited offensive action, including patrols. Cut off, low on supplies, losing 50-75 men per day from sniper fire and frostbite, suffering from the torpor that comes with sustained malnutrition, the 662nd Regiment could still defend itself, but that was all. Zelentsev kept exhorting his subordinate to resume "aggressive actions", but Sharov's now-undisguised contempt for his commanding officer was evident in the terse "Message received" acknowledgements he radioed back. His regiment was eroding, hour by hour, and he could only respond to Zelentzev's out-of-touch pep talks by ignoring them.

On the same day Siilasvuo received his strongest reinforcements, Dec 22, he also received confirmation that the long-expected Russian relief force had finally crossed into Finland and was advancing west along the Raate Road. Finnish intelligence had already identified it as the 44th Division, and had compiled a remarkably accurate dossier on its commanding officer, General Vinorgradov. This was no second-rate cannon-fodder outfit like the 163rd. but (ostensibly, at least) a

first-line formation: well-trained, powerfully armed, and heavily bolstered with armor.

After the 44th's advance was confirmed, all that blocked its path was Captain Makanen's roadblocking force, and Siilasvuo knew that it **was** impossible for 350 men, no matter how determined and well-led, to offer more than speed-bump resistance to a fresh first-class Red Army division. Easing his pressure against the 163rd, Siilasvuo hurriedly dispatched three raiding parties east along the ice road, an aggregate total of about 750 men, with orders to smite the 44th's left flank in concert with a grab-him-by-the-nose demonstration launched by Makanen's roadblock force. All four spoiler attacks struck the 44th on December 20, at a time when it – like the 163rd before it – had become vulnerably strung out into a narrow but ponderous column measuring ten miles long, with its forward tank screen about 1.5 miles east of Makanen's roadblock and its rearguard just passing through Raate village. The surviving after-action reports are fragmentary, but as near as I can compute the facts, these more or less simultaneous attacks inflicted 200-300 personnel casualties on the Russian column, destroyed one tank, a mobile kitchen, 8-10 trucks or prime movers, and completely wiped out an entire battery of towed anti-tank guns that had gotten bogged down on a swampy, isolated stretch of road. **Why** the 44th was lugging anti-tank guns into the wilderness, when its intelligence service must surely have known the Finns didn't have a single operational tank, remains just one more mystery about this ill-conceived campaign. At least there was a flimsy rationale for the brass bands…

> None of these losses amounted even to a flesh wound for a division as powerful as the 44th, but they had a decisive effect on the subsequent campaign. General Vinogradov toted up his own casualties, duly noted that his patrols had only located five dead Finns, and promptly concluded that he was marching into a gigantic ambush. To judge from his radio messages, the man's imagination simply ran amok; perhaps confusing the Finns with the Indians who massacred Braddock's column, he pictured thousands of deadly wraith-like ski-troopers shadowing his column on both sides, ready to pounce.. Furthermore, the spirited assault on his vanguard by 200 of Makanen's lightly armed ski-troopers – which was heralded by a savagely accurate mortar barrage and a cyclone of tracers from the Maxim guns, threw his foremost tanks into such a panic that their drivers retreated before Makanen's raiders got close enough to hurl their satchel charges. Exaggerated estimates from the gun-shy tankists convinced Vinogradov that the roadblock ahead was manned by a full regiment, rather than two companies of light infantry supported by nothing heavier than 81 mm mortars. It would be hard to find a more vivid illustration of Napoleon's maxim about the "moral" and the "physical"…

On the night of December 23, Vinogradov therefore yielded the initiative before his division had fought a single real engagement! He ordered the 44th to tighten its formation, consolidate around its artillery and armor, and go into defensive laager. And there it sat, massive and powerful but quite inert. Even though Vinogradov's forward battalions were close enough to Suomussalmi to clearly hear the sounds of fierce fighting that accompanied the death-throes of the 163rd, he callously ignored his comrades'

increasingly desperate calls for assistance. The 44th Division as a whole never advanced one more meter to the west.

Amazed but gratified by the relief division's bizarre passivity, Siilasvuo reinforced Vinodgradov's paranoia by constantly harassing his dug-in column with snipers, sled-mobile mortars (unlimber here and fire four or five shells, move elsewhere and to the same), and stealthy infiltration raids by small parties of experience ski-troopers, who once again made field kitchens their highest-priority target. Meanwhile, he kept tightening the screws on the disconsolate 163rd, anxious to finish off that antagonist before the Red Army's high command came to its senses and replaced the feckless Vinogradov with a more aggressive officer. It seemed inevitable that this would happen, and if the 44th made a serious assault on Makanen's roadblock, or, even more appropriate, launched a deep envelopment around its flanks, the whole Finnish plan would collapse in a single day. Although by Christmas Eve, the 163rd was on the verge of disintegration, its morale would soar if it did link up with the 44th, and the combined strength of those two divisions would have compelled Siilasvuo to fall back and reorganize for delaying actions. Properly led and galvanized into energetic offensive action, the Russians still had ample forces to shove Siilasvuo's men aside and eventually threaten Oulu. Siilasvuo therefore had to assume that the quiescence of the 44th Division was a temporary blessing, and make every effort to knock out what remained of the 163rd before the equation changed against him.

General Zelentsev may have been second-rate if not marginally incompetent, but he was not entirely a fool. When Vinogradov absolutely refused to attempt a breakthrough, Zelentsev realized that his only hope was to organize a break-out using his

own resources. It was, indeed, his only chance, and if he launched the break-out in a coordinated manner, he might have succeeded. But his communications were now unreliable; some of his companies were out of touch completely; and all of his men were suffering from malnutrition, depression, and fatigue. Moreover, Siilasvuo was prepared for a break-out attempt and had re-adjusted his lines accordingly. For three days, Zelentzev's men launched one disorganized effort after another, flailing about and burning up most of their remaining artillery ammunition, hoping to discover one weak point in the Finnish ring through which they might affect a mass escape from the trap. It almost worked. The combined striking power of the division's artillery and its remaining armor pushed the encircling Finns back in several places, and had these penetrations been promptly exploited by infantry, the 163rd might have liberated itself. But the penetrations effected by firepower and tank thrusts always outstripped the lumbering, exhausted infantry struggling to exploit them. Tanks could only hold the gaps for so long without infantry support, and Siilasvuo frantically shuffled his priceless pair of Bofors guns from one flash point to the next, picking off tank after tank. If Soviet infantry did arrive, it was usually late in the day, in a state of exhaustion and confusion, and the Finns were able to eject them under cover of darkness, although not without some desperate fighting. By late December 26, the declining zeal of the breakout attempts, the shrinkage of Zelensev's tank inventory, and the virtual silence from his artillery convinced Siilasvuo that the 163rd had shot its bolt. During three days of frenzied and uncoordinated breakout attacks, the 163rd had suffered another 500 casualties and the

loss of at least eight tanks; had exhausted its artillery ammunition and surplus fuel, and its too-tired-to-give-a-damn infantry were starting to surrender in batches instead of ones and twos. Some of the prisoners were so astonished at how compassionately their captors treated them – kind words instead of brutal torture, prompt medical attention, hot rations, fresh cigarettes, decent quarters – that they voluntarily returned to Russian lines and spread the word that contrary to the propaganda lectures, surrender **was** *not just* a viable option but a downright enticing one. POW interrogations, always conducted in a way that emphasized respect for the Russians as individuals and coveveyed sincere appreciation for their courage, loosened many tongues. All the prisoners confirmed it: the 163rd wasn't capable of renewed offensive action; the men were freezing and reduced to half-rations; morale was at rock-bottom. The bitterest pill of all: that the full-strength division sent to rescue them had stopped trying and was entrenched only six miles away. For the remnants of the 163rd, this was the last straw, the end of all hope. Those who remained under arms had succumbed utterly to fatalism. They would fight if attacked, of course, motivated by brute self-preservation, but as a cohesive fighting unit, the 163rd Division was finished.

On December 27, Siilavuo went for the kill. He warned his subordinate commanders that the final struggle wouldn't be easy or without serious cost: the enemy might well be trapped, half-starved, dazed with cold and weakened by the lack of hot food, but even under those conditions, the Russian soldier could be expected to fight savagely in his own defense.

Siilasvuo massed his freshest units and his artillery (all eight pieces of it) against the two strongesty enemy pockets west of Suomussalmi itself: the strongly fortified

enclave dug in on the Hulkoniemi Peninsula, and the equally well entrenched battalion-plus occupying the rough terrain around the Jylanmaki road junction to the north. Smaller supporting and diversionary attacks would be launched simultaneously against half-a-dozen widely scattered points along Zelentzev's perimeter, to prevent him from reinforcing the two main objectives. The assault on Hulkoniemi went in at 8:00 A.M., the Kylanmaki attack thirty minutes later.

As Siilasvuo had expected, both Finnish attacks ran into a buzz-saw of resistance. Fighting was close, bitter, and costly, and by day's end, the Russians had not yielded any significant ground in either location. Despite lengthening casualty lists, Siilasvuo refused to ease up the pressure, convinced the enemy was close to the breaking point. His ruthless tactics began to yield results early on December 28, when after an hour of hard fighting, resistance suddenly collapsed at the Kylanamaki Junction. After occupying the abandoned Russian entrenchments, the weary victors managed to hold their gains, though just barely, against repeated desperate counterattacks.

At first, Siilasvuo's renewed assaults made no headway at all against the stubborn defenders on Hukloniemi, but at 9:00 AS.M., just as Siilasvuo was on the verge of throwing in his last reserve battalion, the Soviet garrison reached its breaking point and the defense fell apart in fifteen minutes. The collapse of resistance was so total and so sudden that it took the Finns off-guard and they hesitated to advance, fearing a last-minute trap. But just at that point, the evidence of utter route became visible: hundreds of Russian soldiers were seen running in all directions, some toward Suomussalmi village, but other mobs streaming across Lake Kiantajarvi in the general direction of the border.

The Finns were ready for them. Siilasvuo's recon patrols had long ago plotted the most likely escape routes that such a fleeing mass might automatically steer for, and the exits off the lake had been sealed with barbed wire entanglements buried under snow and picketed with Maxim posts well-sited to sweep the killing grounds that had purposely been left open, and through which the heedless mob now surged. Highly visible in their khaki uniforms, silhouetted starkly against the gray-white surface, the fleeing Russians made a helpless target, and Siilasvuo's Maxim crews chopped them down relentlessly.

Pausing only long enough to regroup and re-target his modest artillery assets, Siilasvuo launched the final phase of his plan. After pinning down the Suomussalmi garrison by means of three sizable diversionary attacks, the largest part of his infantry charged across the narrow straits separating the village from Hulkoniemi and swept into the Soviet division's final bastion. Between approximately 11:00 A>M. and 3:00 P.M., vicious street-fighting raged in the narrow lanes (something of a rarity in the Winter War, even on the village scale) and for possession of the town's stout log buildings. Each Russian cedllar/bunker had to be reduced individually, with grenades, satchel charges, and point-blank Suomi fire. Resistance from second-story positions was countered by showers of Molotov cocktails and some Russian soldiers came charging out, firing from the hip, even as flames covered their bodies.

Rather than compel the trapped defenders to fight to the death (and remember, these men had been told repeatedly that if captured, the Finns would torture them to death!), Siilasvuo had cunningly left one escape hatch open: the bare, corpse-strewn avenue of frozen Lake Kianijarvi. When organized resistance crumbled, just before twilight, hundreds of defenders abandoned their bunkers and poured out on to the open

ice. Siilasvuo's gunners were ready – indeed, he had dispatched a half-dozen additional Maxims to augment the crossfire. Finns who witnessed what happened next would be haunted by the sight for decades to come: fleeing blindly for the only visible exit, by scores and squads and companies, hordes of panic-stricken Russian infantry, many dropping their weapons as they ran, headed straight into the cone of fire. Behind them, the exhausted conquerors of Suomussalmi village became spectators to the last act. Twilight gloom blurred the details, but whip-lash streams of multi-colored tracers burned through the murk in a pyrotechnic frenzy, caroming in wild fountains from the ice and granite outcroppings and scythed down the refugees. The fleeing men jerked and twisted and skidded on the ice, their padded overcoats sparkling from multiple tracer hits, the hot slugs venting jets of steam when they plowed into cold flesh – two sounds only filled with twilight silence – the bell-like screams of the dying and the relentless steam-engine chug-chug-chug of Maxim belts running through weapons' bolts. By night fall, both sounds had diminished to occasional grease-fire sputters as survivors staggered into view and were cut down individually. By midnight, the only sound was the moaning arctic wind and the always unsettling grind and crack of ice settling and shifting from deep frigid currents.

By dawn, 28 December, all that remained of the 163rd Division was the ill-used regiment of Col. Sharov. His command post appears to have been located near the Palovaara Junction, but his now-dangling left flank was at least three miles down the road toward Kylanmaki. During the afternoon of Dec. 28, Sharov had received several hundred refugees into his lines from the fallen positions south of his perimiter. There had been no radio contact with Zelentsev for hours, and Sharov had personally witnessed the

flight and slaughter on parts of Lake Kianajarvi – these events and observations told him all he needed to know. He summoned his subordinates to his bunker and gave them permission to lead their units in break-out attempts when and if they could. When last observed, Sharov was passing out extra grenades and ammo to his own headquarters personnel, having told them that his own survival plan was to infiltrate through Finnish lines by stealth, reach the Juntusranta track, and head back for the Soviet border either on foot on by hitching a ride or, if necessary, commandeering a vehicle at gunpoint. What actually happened to him after that staff conference is not known. When the Finns occupied his C.P., there was no sign of his body among the dead. We're probably correct in assuming that he did make it through Finnish lines but then perished, like so many of his own soldiers, in the deep forest. He had no skis, and the land between his last known location and the Juntusranta track was filled with waist-deep snowdrifts. His bones lie in the forest to this day – a sad end for a worthy professional soldier and an officer who seems genuinely to have cared about his men.

Whatever Sharov's fate, the helter-skelter break-out attempts by his regiment were spasmodic, badly organized, and uncoordinated. Their Finnish tormentors in Task Force Susi were expecting such a flurry of activity and had prepared for it, using minefields and barbed wire to channel the likely escape routes straight into prepared ambushes. All through the night of December 26-27, eerie nocturnal skirmishes flared all through that region. At ten o'clock on the 27th, the largest, most disciplined, and most desperate break-out attempt was launched, with rabid courage, right into the gun sights of the surrounding Finns. At a cost of only twenty casualties, the Finns mowed down at least

300 would-be escapees; this was the last organized resistance from the shattered 662nd Regiment, a capable outfit whose troops deserved a more honorable fate.

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An entire division had been stricken from the Red Army's Order of Battle. The 163rd had ceased to exist. From the northern shore of Lake Piispajarvi to the smoldering basement-bunkers in Suomussalmi village, lay 5,200 Russian dead, the butcher's bill for just the last three days of fighting. Siilasvuo's men tried to get an accurate count of the bodies strewn across Lake Kiantijarvi, but fresh drifting snow made that impossible; estimates varied from 2000 to 2,600. Another two thousand, at the very least, perished, anonymously and invisibly, in the forest, most during the break-out attempts but some hundreds during the earlier fighting, when patrols went out and simply never returned, unaccounted for even by the Finns. Despite the last-minute surge in voluntary surrenders, only about 500 Russians were taken prisoner; most were either wounded or too debilitated from starvation and frostbite to resist.

Given the primitive nature of the terrain and the chaotic nature of the fighting during those final days, it was inevitable that some fairly large bodies of Russian soldiers would succeed in slipping out unnoticed. Siilasvuo's had scouts stationed north and east of the main combat zones to prevent such strays from regaining Soviet lines. The day after organized resistance collapsed, scouts reported spotting several large bodies of refugees, apparently under officers' command and still well armed, making their way toward the Juntusranta track. Once these troops had been spotted, and their likely point of intersection with the road calculated, Siilasvuo dispatched trucks racing to intercept them.

Some of these vehicles had been modified into mobile flak batteries and carried four-barreled Maxim mounts – murderously effective anti-personnel weapons. The largest organized body of refugees, almost a battalion strong – powerful enough to outfight Siilasvuo's truck-gunners. To deal with **them** , Mannerheim personally authorized the first and only Finnish air strike of the campaign: two Bristol Blenheims (one tenth of Finland's bomber fleet!) made two low level passes with fragmentation bombs, and a pair of machine-gun trucks, using the air raid as a diversion, crept within 150 meters of the refugees while they were taking cover from the highly accurate bomb salvos. The result was near-total annihilation: 400 Russians died and one Finnish machine gunner suffered a minor wound in exchange.

Finnish patrols continued to encounter isolated Russian refugees for the next four or five days. Disoriented and starving, some of these wretches gave up at the first invitation. Some tried feebly to resist and were shot out of hand. Some ran screaming into the forest and were never seen again.

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It offends anyone who values military honor to contemplate the fact that General Vinogradov made absolutely no effort to relieve Zelentsov's trapped division, even though the sounds of fierce fighting were clearly audible on the eastern side of Makanen's roadblock and frantic radio pleas from the 163rd made it abundantly clear that without intervention by the 44th, Zelentzev's command was doomed. Supreme headquarters in Leningrad finally realized that something shameful and dangerous was happening up there on the far-off Raate Road, and on the morning of December 28, almost too late to affect the situation, gave Vinogradov a direct order to link up at all

costs with the men he'd been sent into Finland to relieve. The efficacy of a deep turning movement seems to have never entered his mind; in compliance with orders, Vinogradov launched a series of stupid, predictable, and utterly futile frontal attacks on the roadblock. Each one melted away like a candle pressed against a hot skillet.

Making the most of the 44th Division's inexplicable torpor, Makanen had used the time to deepen, strengthen, and better camouflage his positions. From the ice road came sled after sled of mortar shells and cases of additional Maxim belts – a quarter-million rounds according to Finnish records – along with dozens of spare barrels, water pumps, and other accessories which would permit sustained firing for hours. He'd also received another hundred or so mines, which his engineers skillfully laid in patterns that would discourage flanking attacks. Proudly likening themselves to the Spartans at Thermopolae, Makenen's detachment enjoyed ski-high morale and had absolute faith in themselves and their commander. Of course, it was "impossible" for two companies of light infantry to halt the advance of a mechanized division, but Makenen's men were determined to achieve that impossible feat, and did so on December 28. Vinogradov's officers and men were now firmly convinced that their commander was both a coward and a hopeless incompetent, but they attacked with great valor and determination – not in order to please the general, but because they felt honor-bound to break through to their besieged comrades, whose plight was obviously growing more desperate with every hour. Repeated frontal assaults dashed themselves to bloody bits against the solid wall of Maxim fire pouring from the roadblock. Makenen's men expressed open admiration for the courage of their adversaries, along with scorn for their blockheaded commander, but no matter how fiercely the attacks were pressed, not one Soviet soldier managed to get

through Makanen's wire. One captured Soviet officer, a colonel whose entire battalion was torn to shreds in one of these frontal attacks, was astonished to learn that the Finns opposing the 44th amounted to a mere two companies, and described the attacks as being "like butting your head against a stone wall – the ferocity of your resistance was unbelievable!"

The staggering casualties he incurred trying to funnel battalions through a front barely wide enough to accommodate a company, finally snapped Vinogradov out of his funk. Leningrad HQ had made it clear: either he found some way to relieve the 163rd or he would be replaced and would finish out his military career in Siberia – if he was lucky. He was now willing to listen to advice, and reluctantly approved a wide double-envelopment around the roadblock's flanks, slated to begin at dawn on December 30 – by which time, even if it had succeeded, the maneuver could not have affected the outcome at Suomussalmi. But during the night, while Siilasvuio's exhausted soldiers were mopping up in and around the village, he acted on intuition and dispatched two ski companies down the ice road, instructing them to hit targets of opportunity in order to forestall any forward movement by the 44th along the Raate Road. The raiders were themselves so exhausted they could barely ski upright, and contended themselves with shooting up some quartermaster tents about a mile east of the roadblock. Little material damage was done, but the incursion caused great alarm and the wastage of some ten thousand rounds of wild retaliatory fire, none of it landing anywhere near the ski raiders. Once again, Vinogradov's nerve failed; this feeble raid spooked him so badly that he radioed Leningrad that his division was "surrounded" and that the Finns were capable of striking anywhere and any time they chose. He cancelled the double-envelopment before

the troops assigned to conduct it had even finished assembling. Throughout the next several days and nights, small parties of survivors from Suomussalmi staggered into the 44th's lines. Their appearance and their tales of hardship shocked their comrades.

After the firing around Suomussalmi died down, an ominous silence descended over the forests on both sides of the Raate Road. Vinogradov sought no further orders from Leningrad, nor did he issue any. His division remained as it had for several days: motionless, strung out in a narrow and vulnerable column, waiting for the Finns to dictate what happened next.

On the face of it, an incredible situation! Three hundred and fifty Finnish infantrymen, armed with nothing stronger than trench mortars, had halted in its tracks an entire highly rated mechanized division. We fans of military history are endlessly fascinated by such extreme examples of lop-sized victories, but this one bordered on the freakish. With all due respect for Captain Makenen and his stalwart soldiers, the 44th Division was so well equipped, so overwhelmingly superior in numbers and firepower, that had Vinogradov deployed it with the slightest imagination and leadership, it could have crushed the Finnish obstacle in a matter of hours. General Vinogradov's previous record, at the very least, indicates reasonable intelligence and no lack of personal courage…yet he remained inert, dazed, and barren of any tactical ideas that might have restored momentum to his advance and saved at least a portion of the 163rd. Why did he imagine the woods to be thick with Finnish bushwhackers when the total strength of the Finnish Army was well known and Mannerheim's resources were already strained to the utmost on every front? Where would these phantom battalions have come from? At this critical moment, when Vinogradov clearly had the chance of a career to merit becoming a

Hero of the Soviet Union, he failed utterly to rise to the occasion. To be sure, generals are not immune to the counsel of their fears; they feel the same emotions as the lowliest private. But they are, by virtue of training, experience, and professional self-respect, obligated to suppress their misgivings, to get on with the job; to lead men in combat without betraying their personal doubts and fears. Vinogradov was neither a cretin nor a servile Party hack: he had earned his stars, and until this moment, he had seemed thoroughly capable. What had un-manned him, at the climactic moment of his career?

My analysis of this campaign suggests several contributing factors:

- In both the Red Army's own TO & E, and in the intelligence dossiers of foreign armies, the 44th Division was categorized as a "first-rate" organization. It was heavily mechanized, often with the best equipment then available. Its cadre officers were well and thoroughly trained (and relatively unscathed in the recent purges. In contrast to the "B" and "C"-rated Red Army divisions, the 44th had honed its professional skills with numerous wargames and extensive field maneuvers. After its last equipment upgrade, two years earlier, its officers and supporting arms had trained as a team, its armored component had worked hard to integrate tactics with the infantry, and in every category of military skill, it had received ratings of "good" to "excellent". Much was expected of it, should war break out with Germany or Japan.
- What no one expected – from General Vinogradov down to the tank commanders who had trained with his infantry – was that a division so purposefully groomed for mobile warfare on the plains of Europe or in treeless Mongolia, would be committed to its first battle in the primordial conditions of

central Finland; where its every skill and advantage would be negated by terrain and weather; where none of the mobile tactics it had so assiduously rehearsed could even be attempted.

- It was sent over the border without snow camouflage, without any of the special lubricants and dietary supplements needed to keep its men, machines and weapons operating in – 35 degree (f) temperatures. Almost as an afterthought, and only hours before the division crossed into Finland, a truck convoy pulled up to the quartermaster's headquarters and unceremoniously dumped 12,000 pairs of skis along with crates full of hastily printed "manuals" so crammed full of bad and even dangerous advice that some of their "expert tips" looked dubious to men who'd never seen a pair of skis (particularly grotesque were the intricate diagrams purporting to show how a man might engage in bayonet combat while strapped into his skis, a proposition which violated about three of the basic rules of physics). But headquarters sent no ski instructors. Were the men expected to master cross-country ski-ing in their spare time?
    - Vinmogradov fine-combed the outfit for **anyone** who had ski experience and

commanded the handful of volunteers who showed up to train "long-range ski reconnaisance detachments – a logical-sounding expedient except for the fact that the men so tasked were all recreational downhill skiers, which is a very, very different skill from cross-country trekking. About the only thing the two pastimes have in common is the skis. The "instructors" made a game try of it, but the results were

such a shambles that Vinogradov abandoned the idea of crash-training novices after watching one or two drills, but he did form a reconnaissance unit out of the sport-skiers. These men made a brave effort to learn wholly unfamiliar skills, but in the time available, the hapless Russian sportsmen could not achieve even basic competence as cross-country skiers, never mind attain the fluent, to-the-manner-born grace and speed of their Finnish counterparts, most of whom had been skiing since they were able to walk. When Vinogradov sent his down-hill skiers out on one experimental security sweep on the division's flank, the results were pathetic: the patrol waddled like ducks, became hopelessly entangled in the dense underbrush, and were about as "stealthy" as a herd of water buffalo. The skis went back into their crates and stayed there for the duration of the campaign, or at least until the time came to use them as firewood.

When Vinogradov lodged a mild protest to the effect that his division was being "mis-used" in terrain it was not trained to cope with, he was slapped down with platitudes about how the Red Army man must always be "adaptable to changing realities", and that no more protests would be tolerated. The orders had been cut; the 44th would go where Stalin ordered it to go and achieve the victory expected of it. However, to palliate the obviously disconcerted general, headquarters promised that the 44th would be protected by "continuous" and powerful air cover, and technically speaking it was – at least, there were usually Red Air Force planes in the sky overhead, scouting the road and surrounding woods, dropping their bombs wherever the ground controllers requested a strike, serenely untroubled by Finnish interceptors (there were none anywhere closer than Lake Ladoga), and rarely opposed by ground

fire (which rarely hit any aircraft but did reveal a Finnish target for them to attack). Even if the Finns hadn't been masters of camouflage, their movements and dispositions were completely hidden by heavy snowfall accumulations in the dense evergreen canopy of the forest surrounding the Raate Road. On some rare occasions, when Soviet observers did glimpse their foe, the fighter-bombers unloaded their ordnance on approximately the right coordinates, but the swift and mobile Finns were usually long gone by the time the bombs went off. Now and then, of course, the bombers got lucky and tagged a real target, but as much as 98 % of their bombs and bullets did nothing but strip leaves and branches from trees. Every time Vinogradov's scouts went out to check on the results of an air-support strike, all they found were mushy craters and wood-chips. It quickly became apparent that the value of sustained air cover, under these conditions, was chimerical. Night-time sorties proved disastrous – the inexperienced pilots either unloaded over Russian campfires, or decoy fires lit far away from any actual Finnish positions. Eventually, Vinodgradov requested that no further nocturnal raids be mounted at all, so his men might build fires without being terrified of their own air force. By Christmas, moreover, unexpectedly heavy losses forced the Russians to limit their air support on the Suomussalmi front to an occasional token raid or reconnaissance flight – the big formations that had screened the 44th early on its march disappeared when the squadrons assigned to support the division were shifted to the Isthmus front.

So: by the last day of 1939, Vinogradov felt not only surrounded by ghostly enemy forces who could come and go as they pleased, but deeply betrayed by his own high command. Since his original mission – relieving the 163rd Division – was

now rendered null and void by events and by his own sluggish performance, he radioed HQ for new orders. None were forthcoming. If he retreated without authorization, he faced a court martial and probably a firing squad. Unsupported, his one division had no chance at all of advancing through the forest and threatening Oulu. Impenetrable terrain blocked any lateral movement. All those specialized tank/infantry tactics his men had perfected were meaningless when the tanks were restricted to a one-lane road and a few narrow clearings, and his infantry could not advance across-country except at an exhausting snail's pace, the soldiers struggling through waist-deep snow that hampered every movement and made it literally impossible for him to carry the fight to the enemy by means of maneuver. He was ordered to dig in where he was and await further instructions – none ever arrived.

As the new year dawned, the 44th Division was delivered into the hands of motti tactics as perfectly as though it had been set-up for a demonstration. From the air, it resembled a twenty-two-mile-long link sausage, with its biggest piece, a two-mile segment that started just east of Captain Makanen's roadblock, comprising a regiment of infantry, dozens of armored vehicles, and the majority of his artillery, deployed in wagon-train configuration for all-around defense. Smaller and less powerful segments straggled all the way back to the well-fortified supply depot in Raate village, where the primary field hospital was also located. Thence east to the border, were a few security detachments and communications specialists, primarily occupied with keeping the telephone wires open across the frontier and with guarding a number of culverts and wooden bridges whose destruction would effectively cut the whole division off from the Soviet Union. So narrow was the road

in places, that the column was not even a continuous line, but a series of lumps and bulges, separated by gaps of varying lengths which were at least nominally connected by armored patrols and outposts. Unable to advance because of Makenen's roadblock, forbidden to withdraw, the entire division was in operational limbo. All it had achieved was the occupation of a long, thin, strip of Finnish territory, which contained not a single strategic objective worth occupying. Perhaps headquarters intended to reinforce the unit and resume an eastward advance…perhaps there was some vague notion of tying down large Finnish formations and inflicting heavy casualties on them with artillery and air power (a kind of sub-arctic version of Dien-Bien-Phu), but that made sense only if the Finns shed their camouflage and obligingly attacked in the open. Logic demanded that the outfit been withdrawn while it was still possible to do so, but no orders were sent to that effect. The 44th Division was simply left where it was; ignored, forgotten, or just an embarrassment for which no higher authority wished to take responsibility, it no longer served any purpose but to afford Siilasvuo with an irresistible target.

The Finnish tactician planned to slice Vinogradov's division into smaller and smaller, ever more isolated, pockets, let cold and hunger take their toll and sap its strength, and then finish it off, piece by piece. If his men could annihilate *two* Red Army divisions, Stalin would not likely commit any other big formations to the central wilderness, and Siilasvuo's veterans could be shifted to other fronts, where they were desperately needed.

* * *

Siilasvuo deployed his already-weary men very carefully, making maximum use of the ice road network (which his engineers were expanding and improving every day) south of the Raate Road. Raiding and reconnaissance detachments, ranging in size from a platoon to a company, conducted harassing operations all the way back to Raate village, but the major road-cutting operations were assigned to two strong task forces. "TF Kari" and "TF Fagernas" (named, respectively, after a major and a lieutenant-colonel) went into assembly areas at Makala and Heikkila. Supplies were stockpiled; fresh reconnaissance undertaken. The Finns who had taken part in breaking-apart the 163rd Division were given hot meals and a few hours of rest, and then Siilasvuo struck his first major blow. The "honor" of opening Suomussalmi Part Two went to First Battalion, JR-27, the freshest unit of TF Kari, commanded by Captain Lassila. On the night of January 1-2, Lassila led his men into a pre-attack assembly area south of the Russian enclave dug in closest to Makanen's roadblock. Lassila's target was a suitable stretch of road about two miles east of the roadblock. Vinogradov's lack of deep security outposts – a function in turn of his lack of experienced skiers – cost him dearly, for Lassila's battalion was able to spend ninety minutes getting organized for its assault, while its commander personally observed enemy positions from a ridge only 400 yards away, and the Russians never suspected a thing.

Lassila's plan was conventional but sound: two companies, in line abreast, would attack from the forest just below his observation post, and hit the road at a right-angle. Each company would then pivot obliquely to the east and to the west, rolling up Soviet defenses as they moved, until they had opened a breech in the road

about 500 yards wide. A force of about one hundred combat engineers would follow close behind, and at the earliest opportunity would begin throwing up roadblocks at both ends of the breech. Wrecked or abandoned Soviet vehicles formed the "spine" of the barricades; blown-down trees, supply crates, portable wire entanglements, and mines would be used to add depth and bite to the roadblocks. And, as had now become routine doctrine, extra Maxim guns would be rushed forward to augment the infantry's firepower. Lassia held his third company in close reserve near the ridge, where he could quickly order it into the fray where and if needed. He also had his men man-handled a dozen heavy pound Maxims to the ridgetop, to provide massive suppression fire when the attack went in – astonishingly, the enemy did not detect this rather laborious endeavor.

Lasasila made sure everything was in order and passed the word for the attack to start at ten minutes past midnight, the darkest, coldest, most miserable shift of all for Vinogradov's shivering, malnourished sentries, many of whom proved to be either asleep or nearly comatose when the fighting started. The Soviet picket line was about sixty yards from the main perimeter defenses. According to most accounts, every one of the sentries was taken out silently. Thus, the Finns were able to launch their fierce assault from a distance of fifty yards or less. For the groggy defenders, the shock was extreme.

Lassila only made one mistake, but even that turned out in his favor: Siilasvuo had ordered him to attack an infantry bivouac, but his navigation was off by about 500 yards and his assault companies went in against a poorly entrenched artillery battalion, all of whose guns were pointed west, at Makanen's roadblock. Lassila's

men were inside the gun positions within a minute or so of opening fire, and most of the Red gunners were cut down by Suomi bursts or grenades thrown into their foxholes. The only serious resistance came from several trucks outfitted with quad-barreled flak mounts, whose crews put out a brief but spectacular flood of tracers – to little avail. The attacking Finns were already too close for the guns to depress effectively and the machine gunners quickly died where they stood – after which, of course, the Finns turned the captured weapons on targets of opportunity. This windfall of firepower added terrific momentum to the First Battalion's assault. By 2:00 A.M., Lassila's men had seized more than 500 yards of the Raate Road, killed at least 200 Russians, and had already erected roadblocks facing easy and west, incorporating numerous damaged enemy vehicles. By dawn, the engineers had brocaded the front of each roadblock with wire entanglements and planted minefields along the most likely avenues of any counterattack. Lassila's reserve company crossed the road without firing a shot and deployed on the northern side of the breech, greatly strengthening his position and opening Vinogradov's right flank to raids, reconnaissance, and sniper attacks – the latter commenced at first light, January 2.

Siilasvuo anticipated his opponent would react violently to this initial road-cutting action, and when reconnaissance updates indicated that Vinodgradov's best armor reserves were moving eastward to mount a counterattack, he took a calculated risk and sent both of his precious Bofors guns down the ice road and then due north into Lassila's position. The weapons deployed just in time: at 7:00 A.M., as two companies of tanks, formed up arrow-head style, came clanking west, firing on-the-

move against the face of the new roadblock. The drivers never saw the white-shrouded anti-tank guns under the trees until it was too late to engage them. In twelve minutes' time, the Bofors crews picked off seven T-28s, leaving the road clogged with burning wreckage and effectively making that side of Lassila's road-cut impervious to subsequent tank attacks.

When the fighting died down, hot meals were sent forward to Lassila's men on sleds, and construction was begun on a permanent bivouac protected by the same ridge Lassila had used for observation twenty-four hours earlier. Heated tents were erected, a field hospital and radio communications' bunker were added over the course of the next day, and by January 3, there was even a crude "field sauna" available for refreshing steam-baths. Whenever possible, each man in the roadblock garrison was given four-six hours off, enabling him to rotate back to this encampment, thaw out in a warm tent, enjoy hot food, and – the one luxury Finns could not give up, even on a battlefield – soak off both dirt and tension in a scalding sauna. These were Spartan comforts, to be sure, but they made an astounding difference in Finnish morale – the cold and danger were easier to bear if you knew that a warm bunk and a hot bath were waiting for you only 400 yards away, and sooner or later your turn would come to enjoy them.

Conditions inside the 44th Division mottis, by contrast, grew worse by the hour as the pressures of attrition, exposure, and starvation rations took their inexorable toll. Dubbed "cuckoos" by the Soviets, Finnish snipers now operated at will anywhere along the Raate Road. They waited patiently until an officer or a specialist entered their cross-hairs, put him down with a single shot, and then hurriedly

vanished into the forest, only to reappear later in another location. On January 2 alone, an estimated 35 Soviet officers and non-coms, signalmen and artillery spotters, tank commanders and cooks died from snipers' bullets. Roving sled-mounted mortars continued to pick off field kitchens and command posts.

And with each deadly pin-prick attack, the distraught defenders responded by firing wildly into the forest, wasting thousands of rounds and almost never hitting one of their tormentors. These panicky outbursts of firing burned up so much ammunition, in fact, that by January 3, even the most powerful mottis were compelled to ration their remaining shells and bullets, using them only to repel direct attacks, causing another downward spiral of Soviet morale…

Siilasvuo did not have the manpower to physically cut off and surround every Russian concentration as he had done with the westernmost motti, but he managed to sustain the illusion of doing so, by constantly shifting his ski detachments to different sides of the road and attacking only carefully selected targets whose destruction would have the maximum negative impact on Russian morale: field kitchens were the top priority, of course, followed by radio sets and operators, command posts, isolated gun positions, ammunition or food storage areas, and any Soviet vehicle that could be taken out without incurring severe losses. Anything that offered the surrounded enemy protection, warmth, shelter, or nutrition – these things were ruthlessly eliminated. By the end of January 3, most of the mottis were out of rations. Horses were hacked apart and roasted over open fires – which of course only drew more sniper fire. The weak and wounded were dropping in steadily increasing numbers. And the cold was so extreme that a mortally wounded man would often

freeze into a macabre, statue-like pose when his blood circulation fell below a certain point. Survivors saw, on every hand, stone-stiff marble-white corpses, stilled in astonishingly lifelike poses, and the psychological effect was dire indeed. Here in the arctic forests, Death wore a Gorgon's mask.

Vinogradov radioed frantic appeals for renewed air support, and this time Leningrad tried to send him some – headquarters had belatedly realized that Stalin was about to lose another whole division. But the hastily planned air strikes were no more accurate than the earlier ones had been: a lot of trees were stripped of bark and branches, but very few Finns were hurt. An aerial "re-supply" attempt on January 3 was so inept it amounted to a sadistic farce: three small bi-planes succeeded in dropping six bags of hardtack into an area where 17,000 men were going mad with hunger; they landed inside the motti closest to Makenen's roadblock, where they caused a riot among men who had eaten nothing for three days except gristly chunks of boiled horse meat.

Starting late in the afternoon of January 2, the Russians launched the first of many determined infantry attacks against Lassila's roadblock. Bizarre as it seems, Vinogradov never tried simultaneously attacking both sides of the road-cut; with appalling and costly predictability, he threw a few companies against one side of the Finnish position, and when that attack failed, he ordered another attack from the opposite direction. Lassila's men were thus able to concentrate their fire against each assault in turn without ever straining their resources. Madness was in the air.

Siilasvuo launched at least three more sizable assaults on the afternoon of January 2, in addition to stepping up his harassment raids. None of these resulted in

the sort of dramatic gains Lassila's battalion had achieved, and the enemy defenses around Haukila Farm proved to be much stronger than estimated, forcing Siilasvuo to call off that particular action, but elsewhere the Finns tightened their grip, reached positions from which new parts of the road could be brought under accurate fire, and increased Vindogarov's conviction that his division was being strangled to death by a force greatly superior in numbers to his own.

January 3 was, for the Finns, a day of rest and improving communications. New ice roads were laid down, game-paths were widened to accommodate sleds; the besiegers significantly improved their advantage in mobility.

Siilasvuo re-aligned his forces on January 4, in preparation for another series of punishing attacks on the Fifth: Task Force Fagernas was tasked with cutting the road where it crossed the Purasjoki River, and again farther east, near Raate village, about a mile from the Soviet border. A strong *kampfgruppe* under Colonel Makiniemi (comprising the whole of JR- 27, a battalion of JR-65, and the highly effective ski-guerrillas of battalion P-1) would make another and heavier bash, from the south side of the Raate Road, at the strongly fortified Haukila Farm sector, supported by six of Siilasvuo's eight guns; simultaneously, a colonel named Mandedlin would attack that same sector from the north, with a force of approximately three battalions, supported by the remaining two Finnish cannon. Task Force Kari, on Makinienmi's right (eastern) flank, would support and pin down enemy reserves with an assault on enemy positions around the eastern end of Lake Kokkojarvi. As was now customary, sniper activities, quick mobile mortar barrages, and ski-bushwhackers would range

up and down the length of all the mottis, ambushing vehicles and making it difficult for Vinogradov to shift reserves against the main Finnish threats.

The besieged Russians knew it was coming and this time had the presence of mind to disperse their artillery and remaining armor to provide direct, open-sights, support. When Siilasvuo's men advanced, they met with furious resistance. And, although it was somewhat late in the game, the Russians launched three uncoordinated but extremely vigorous counterattacks against Captain Lassila's road-cut. By 1:00 P.M., Lassila had suffered ninety-six casualties, reducing his force to about 60% effectiveness. The Finns were not supermen, and Lassila's detachment, in his opinion, had reached the limit of its endurance; he requested permission to pull out of the road-cut, re-deploy in the nearby forest, and attempt to keep the road interdicted by fire. His immediate superior, Colonel Makiniemi, whose men had also suffered significant losses, momentarily lost his composure and shouted into the field telephone that Lassila was not to retreat "one fucking step, or I'll have you court-martialed -- or maybe I'll just skip the formalities have your ass shot! Do you read me, Lassila?"

"Loud and clear," was the startled and bitter reply. In view of Lassila's valor and exceptional leadership, such an outburst was inexcusable – moreover, the colonel had been screeching so loudly that numerous nearby soldiers heard him. Both he and his remaining men resumed the fight, but their mood had now turned black and foul, and more than one man swore he would kill that colonel as soon as the battle was over. Of course, by this point in the campaign, everyone's nerves were frayed and jangled, so it's probably a wonder more such incidents did not occur. In any case, Lassila's

men continued to hold, and nobody court-martialed or assassinated anybody; although Lassila and the colonel never spoke to each other again. Some who were involved assert that, when Mannewrheim learned of the incident, he lodged an official letter of reprimand in the colonel's dossier. I was unable to verify this, but it would be nice to think that happened.

TF Kari's assault on the Kokkojarvi road junction also made scant progress, and when enemy tanks came out to engage them, his men were forced to break off their attack and request urgent dispatch of a Bofors gun – the landscape was too open around the end of the lake for the Finns to attack the tanks with hand-thrown weapons.

Fagernas's men made the best gains of the day. They found the Purasjoki bridge too heavily defended, but did succeed in blowing up a smaller bridge two miles east. Leaving the Purasjoki bridge well-screened, Fagernas reinforced his secondary success and went wide down the Russians' left flank, all the way to and beyond Raate Village. One of his ski-platoons successfully ambushed and virtually exterminated a company of fresh NKVD troops who had been sent west, only two days earlier, from the Murmansk Railroad – the only significant infantry reinforcements to reach the 44th Division during the entire battle. With all his other attacks stalled, Siilasvuo sent Fegernas a reserve company, and with this added power he doubled-back and finally captured the Purasjoki bridge at 10:00 P.M. This was a serious blow to the trapped Russians: the destruction of the smaller bridge, earlier, was an annoyance and a distraction, but the seizure of the Purasjoki bridge effective cut the encircled mottis off from their line of communications back into

Russian; the river was not frozen hard enough to support vehicles and the Finns were too well dug in for unsupported infantry to dislodge.

If the general Finnish offensive of January 5 did not break the encircled mottis, it put them under much greater pressure. Vinodgravov's orders were increasingly irrelevant and out-of-touch. January 6 began with a desperate Russian attempt to break Lassila's roadblock. While the animal-loving Finns watched in horror, the enemy drove a large herd of supply horses straight into Lassila's minefields. Hard fighting flared up and down the line of mottis all day; the Finns cut the Raate Road in two more places and several of the smaller Russian enclaves broke apart, their occupants either streaming into the woods or attempting to cut their way through to larger pockets, which had no effect on the Russians' powers of resistance other than to reduce the amount of food available per man to less-than-siege-ration levels. By mid-afternoon, Siilasvuo was receiving reports, from all along the chain of mottis, that the trapped Russians were losing cohesion and were obviously running low on ammunition. Some of Vinogradov's guns had fallen silent; others only fired short barrages against directly threatening attacks. It is virtually impossible to keep track of the maneuvering and road-cutting and break-out attacks on January 6. By 3:00 P.M., about one-forth of the Raate Road was in Finnish hands and virtually all of it was under direct fire and/or observation. Four or five of smaller Red Army pockets had collapsed and those that were still fighting were greatly compressed, short of ammunition, and manned by men who were gaunt with hunger and often gravely ill. In some places, the Finns overran enemy field entrenchments and discovered that the men crouching in them had simply frozen to death overnight. Vinogradov;s few

remaining tanks clanked around without any central direction, sometimes attacking with great courage but without infantry support, which permitted the Finns to take them out with close-assaults, using satchel charges, stick-grenade bundles, and the newly issued "Super Molotov Cocktails", which had small ampules of nitro-glycerin taped to the gasoline bottles.

Around four o'clock in the afternoon of January 6, Vinogradov issued his last order: all remaining formations of the 44th Division were authorized to break out and head back for the Soviet Union as best they could. It was every-man-for-himself, and the general's order was about six hours behind the pace of events – what remained of his division was melting like April snow.

January 7 was a day of fierce mopping-up battles and swift Finnish interceptions of fleeing Red infantry in the deep woods. The last hold-out pockets of resistance were wiped out at dawn on January 8.

Daylight revealed a sight which staggered the imaginations of the correspondents Mannerheim – making in this case a vital exception to his own rule – brought in to tour and photograph the Suomussalmi battlefield. From the high-water mark of the 163rd Division's advance, up at Piispajarvi, to the last burned-out truck between Raate and the border, lay the scattered corpses of 27, 500 Russian soldiers. Also strewn about were forty-seven gutted or abandoned tanks, and no less that 270 trucks, tractors, and prime movers, their windshields spiderwebbed with bullet holes or simply flipped over like dead giant beetles in the snowy morass along both sides of the road. The victors acquired significant booty: 48 working artillery pieces and mortars, 600 rifles, 300 functional machine guns and automatic rifles, four

salvageable tanks, and a motley but welcomed assortment of trucks, tractors, and armored cars. Approximately 1300 Russians were taken prisoner. And unknown number of men – certainly no fewer than three thousand and possibly as many as five thousand – simply vanished in the trackless forests. When the spring thaw arrived, hundreds were located by the stink of decomposition and hastily buried where they had fallen. To this day, sixty years later, Finnish woodsmen occasionally find lonely skulls and rusted bits of weaponry in the forest.

As for the two Soviet divisional commanders, they met with very different fates. Zelkentsov's body was never identified; the best theory is that he destroyed his identity papers, changed into the uniform of a common soldier, and fled during the chaos of the final struggle for Suomussalmi village – he died the same lonely and unrecorded death as so many hundreds of his men. General Vinogradov's end was deservedly ignominious. He commandeered a tank and fled back toward the border at twilight on January 6. Rather amazingly, he succeeded in eluding Finnish patrols and managed to cross back into Soviet territory on January 7. When he revealed his identity, he was immediately arrested by an NKVD detachment, hauled before a summary court martial, and condemned to death, along with three staff officers who had accompanied him in the stolen tank. At twilight, all four officers were taken into the woods and executed with Tokarev pistol rounds in the back of their heads. The official reason that went on record for Vinogradov's execution? "The loss of 55 field kitchens to the enemy…"

26. AFTER SUOMUSSALMI: BATTLES ALONG THE ARCTIC CIRCLE

Suomussalmi was the cleanest, most decisive, and most spectacular Finnish victory of the war– a paradigm of the qualities that make the Finnish ski-trooper into a military legend. The other battles in this part of the country were generically similar to Suomussalmi, and a detailed analysis of each one would be repetitious, confusing, and eventually tedious to read, at least in the context of this "Version 1.1" manuscript. In most cases, I think a summary is sufficient, although of course there were certain highlights that warrant closer scrutiny.

Let me refresh the readers' memory: By all accounts, Mannerheim's headquarters was initially stunned by the news that the invaders had chosen to deploy half of their available infantry and about one-quarter of their available armor in the far-flung northern wilderness. The Soviet Eighth Army's thrust toward Kitela made strategic sense, as did the supporting attacks on Tolvajarvi and Kollaa, for they served to tie down such a disproportionate number of Finnish reserves. What really struck Mannerheim as illogical were the four separate offensives mounted farther north, at Petsamo, Kuhmo, Lieksa, and Kemijarvi.

Responsible for the defense of the 400-mile region between Kuhmo and Petsamo was Major General E.V. Tuompo, a farmer's son who had risen by way of the Twenty-Seventh Jaegers to become a renowned expert on matters of national defense policy. Tall, slender, an obsessive worker by nature, Tuompo was a steady and resourceful leader, an expert linguist, and a respected amateur historian with several published monographs to

his credit. He would need all of his abilities to counter the unexpectedly strong Soviet incursions into the northern half of Finland.

To defend the northernmost sector – especially the small but strategically vital port of Petsamo (where it was still possible that the Allies might land an expeditionary force) and the Arctic Highway leading south (the only all-season road in that part of Finland), Tuompo deputized Major General Kurt Wallenius, a crusty, Patton-esque right-wing demagogue who had gotten in very hot water back in 1932, when he "masterminded" an singularly incompetent, attempted coup d'etat against the government of President Svinhufvud. Had the putsch not collapsed from its own bungling, Wallenius might have been sacked – if not shot – for treason. But because the "uprising" degenerated into a Keystone Kops farce less than a day after it began – there was little shooting; what fighting there was took the form of street brawls between opposing gangs of thugs –Wallenius got off lightly: a reprimand and a written promise never to be a bad boy again. Mannerheim retained his services. Wallenius might have been a braggart, a ruffian, and a Nazi in all but name, but he was also a tough, battle-wise officer whose men held him in high regard. Even so, the Marshal despised him for his disloyalty and never really trusted him again. Their infrequent meetings were frosty and correct, nothing more. It speaks volumes that Mannerheim never once mentions Wallenius by name in his *Memoirs*.

But however unsavory a character Wallenius was, he performed splendidly on the Lapland front. He'd fought Red partisan bands up there in 1918, he knew the terrain intimately, and with approximately 2,000 lightly armed ski-troopers, he managed to run rings around 10,000 fully equipped Soviet opponents.

When the war started, the Soviet 104th Division stormed ashore on the Rybachi Peninsula, powerfully supported by the guns of the White Sea Fleet and a number of heavy-caliber shore batteries sited to protect the approaches to Murmansk. Opposing the invaders at the first point of contact was the 104th Independent Covering Company, approximately 300 men, supported – if that's the word – by four 76mm field pieces dating back to 1887, half of whose antique shells refused to go off at all. The Russian advance on Petsamo was therefore contested only by brief delaying actions; the Finns simply didn't have enough troops to mount a serious defense. After a short, sharp firefight, the 104th Independent Company withdrew from the town in good order. Attempts to destroy the port facilities were only partially successful, and the damage inflicted was quickly repaired by Russian engineers.

Petsamo wasn't much of a prize – it had the dingy, clapboard-shack appearance of an Alaskan mining town in the days of Robert Service and was shrouded in darkness for four months out of the year; by contrast, the grimy sprawl of Murmansk looked like Paris. But Petsamo was a significant strategic objective. It was the terminus of the vital Arctic Highway, and the barren landscape around the tiny port there were large deposits of high-grade nickel ore. The invaders quickly turned the place into a major supply depot, and brought in a variety of heavy coast artillery pieces. The guns were not aimed toward Finland, however, but toward the Arctic Sea; their purpose was to repel any attempted Allied counter-landing, and if diplomatic events had taken a slightly different turn, they would have had plenty of targets.

As soon as the Russians had built up their supplies, they commenced the second phase of their Lapland campaign: a mechanized advance down the Arctic Highway,

whose wildly optimistic objective was the “Capitol of Lapland”, Rovaniemi. Outnumbered five-to-one, there was little Wallenius could do but fall back before the slow-motion onslaught, fighting delaying actions wherever the terrain was suitable. Mostly, it wasn’t; the fells of Lapland are treeless, devoid of any terrain feature that might be described as “high ground”, and constantly raked by polar winds. The Finns demolished culverts and bridges, launched pin-prick raids, and picked off quite a few Soviet officers (some of the native Lapps were exceptional marksmen, able to score a kill at extremely long ranges, and virtually invisible in their snow-camouflage). More effective as a deterrent, though, was Wallenius’s “scorched earth” policy: every natural or man-man object that might afford shelter, warmth, or comfort to the invader was ruthlessly torched, including more than a hundred construction-worker huts recently build near the new hydroelectric plant at Salmajarvi,

As a consequence, the slowly advancing Soviet column found no shelter anywhere in its path. By mid-December, this part of Finland is virtually uninhabitable – shrouded in perpetual darkness, paralyzed by temperatures that **averaged** 35 below zero. Worst of all, were the frequent gale-force blizzards that swept down from the polar wastes: hurricane winds that moaned and shrieked for days on end, lashing the region with horizontal blasts of snow so fierce it could peel the skin from a man’s face. The Lapland fells soon turned into a desert of ice, a desolate, savage landscape that reminded everyone who saw it of the surface of the Moon.

With every kilometer they advanced, the Soviet invaders’ supply line became longer and more vulnerable. An advance of two kilometers per day was considered a

good day's work, although at that rate the Russians could expect to reach Rovaniemi sometime in the year 1967.

These were exactly the conditions Wallenius had been waiting for, and as the invaders' advance slowed to a crawl, and their supply convoys arrived with less and less frequency, he undertook more and bolder raids, often striking far in the rear of the Soviet spearhead. What did it matter if the Red Army units were lavishly equipped with armor, mortars, and field artillery? The Finnish snipers who daily chipped-away at their strength were all-but-invisible. Occasionally, the Russians might spot a flickering blur of motion in the distance, but by the time their artillery could be brought to bear, the raiding party was long gone. By the end of December, the invaders had abandoned any hope of reaching Rovaniemi before the spring of 1940. By dint of incredible perseverance, they managed to capture the village of Nautsi – what was left of it after Finnish demolitions – very close to the Norwegian border; and there they stayed. To safeguard their fragile supply line, the Russians constructed heavily-armed blockhouses, every three-to-four miles, each sufficiently large to shelter a platoon and each one bristling with machine guns, barbed wire, and minefields. The stretches of road between them were patrolled, at unpredictable intervals, by strong detachments of armor. Except for the constant sniping and harassment raids, there simply was no significant military action in Lapland, from early January to the war's end. Wallenius didn't have the strength to tackle the invader's fortified positions, and the Russians were fully occupied with basic survival.

I've never seen reliable casualty figures for this remote front, but a plausible estimate would be 3,000 Russians and 400 Finns; frostbite, hunger, exposure, and sheer suicidal despair killed more Soviet troops than Finnish bullets – but that had always been

Wallenius's preferred force-multiplier and he used it with great skill. Most Finnish combat casualties were inflicted by the enemy's artillery, or by tank and armored car patrols that happened to catch a party of ski-raiders in the open.

Except for reconnaissance patrols, the 104th Division never advanced one kilometer beyond Nautsi. But the division it was supposed to link-up with, the 122nd, proved to be a much tougher opponent. Simultaneously with the amphibious landing near Petsamo, the 122nd Division drove westward from the White Sea port of Kandalaksha, bolstered by a fairly strong attachment of tanks and armored cars. In this part of Lapland, the forest ended just a few miles west of the border, giving way to rolling tundra that was impassable to vehicles during the warm season, but ideally suited for them during winter. Once again, the strength and aggressiveness of the Russian invasion took Mannerheim by surprise. Virtually all the Finnish troops in Lapland were already committed to stopping the 104th Division's advance from Petsamo, so Wallenius couldn't oppose this new threat with any force larger than a company of Border Guards. Undeterred by vigorous sniping, the Russians captured the picturesque village of Salla, paused briefly to regroup and allow their supplies to catch up, and then rolled toward Kemijarvi, an important road junction through which most of Wallenius's supplies had to pass. If the 122nd Division took that village, the Finnish forces in Lapland would be cut off. Somehow, Mannerheim's staff managed to locate four uncommitted battalions – all of them virtual incarnations of the term "raw recruit", none equipped with supporting weapons, adequate transport, or in some cases, **uniforms** – and rushed them to Wallenius just in time to prevent a total debacle. By the time these reinforcements detrained, the Russian 122nd

was less than twenty miles from Kemijarvi and had suffered only light casualties on its march from the border.

In a way, that worked to the Finns' advantage, for it made the invaders over-confident and lax in their security measures. Leaving only a thin screen of outposts to contain the 104th in Nautsi, Wallenius mustered every available man, gun, and reindeer to oppose the Russian thrust on Kemijarvi. In lieu of significant artillery support, and with no air support whatever, Wallenius used the only asset he had: personal charisma. He inspected each of his battalions in a whirlwind tour, roaring up in his staff car and swaggering around with his coat unbuttoned in temperature of thirty-eight below zero, he galvanized his rather motley battlegroup with blustery, profane speeches, reminding them that the invaders were little more than pigs in uniform, ignorant barbarians who could never stand up to cold steel wielded by strong Finnish arms. It was a virtuoso performance, worthy of George Patton, but in terms of military reality, rather more like George Custer. If Wallenius's men were going to stop the 122nd Division, they would more or less **have** to do it with "cold steel", since one-third of the new arrivals hadn't even been issued rifles! "Kill a Russian and take your rifle from him!" was the general's advice.

Wallenius was using bluff in place of field artillery, and amazingly, it worked. On the night of December 17, he ordered a counterattack against the northern wing of the 122nd, and so complacent had the invaders become that Wallenius's men were able to launch their wild assault from a range of under 100 yards, surging out of the woods in a berserker frenzy, howling battle-cries, bayonets fixed, even if the chambers were empty. There was nothing subtle about Finnish tactics; the encounter was a street-brawl in the

middle of a frozen wasteland. But this sudden, apparently deranged onslaught cracked the Russian defense like a hammer. Thus began the Battle of the Kemi River, and by dawn on December 18, approximately 600 Russians (along with an estimated 130 Finns), had been slain, many in hand-to-hand encounters.

Having regained the initiative, and with their firepower bolstered by captured weapons as well as a trickle of mortars and machine guns coming up the Arctic Highway from Rovaniemi, the Finns maintained the initiative, hitting the 122nd Division with short, sharp attacks, then fading into the wilderness when the enemy's tanks and artillery came into play. On January 2, the Russians withdrew to a line of low ridges roughly half-way between Salla and Kemijarvi – ordinarily, these terrain features wouldn't qualify as "hills", but compared to the open tundra to the east, they were positively alpine. Without artillery or air support, Wallenius's troops would have been slaughtered is they had tried a frontal assault; wisely, the "hairy-chested" little general called a halt. He lacked the firepower to eject the enemy from his new line, and the enemy lacked the will and supplies necessary to renew an offensive.

Under the circumstances, a stalemate in Lapland was the equivalent of a resounding victory. Neither of the two Russian divisions advanced another foot deeper into Finland, and the whole front quite literally froze in place from early January until the cease-fire in March. There was constant skirmishing and a number of hard-fought raids on the invaders' supply line, but no more large-scale battles would be fought in Lapland. The Russians did annex Petsamo, and ultimately Stalin was content with that prize. The nickel mines were worth fighting for, but Rovaniemi was not.

Wallenius was an unsavory, unscrupulous character -- not to mention a hardcore alcoholic -- but he saved one-fourth of Finland from being overrun and that was what counted at the time.

* * *

It was galling to lose Petsamo; Finland had invested heavily in developing the nickel mines in that region and, in time, the little port would have become a lucrative economic asset. But Mannerheim knew it was indefensible, and had been resigned to its loss. Much more alarming was the Soviet attack toward the town of Kuhmo, a border outpost approximately 75 miles south of Suomussalmi. Once again, the enemy's motives were shrouded in ambiguity: Kuhmo itself had no strategic value, it was almost too far away from Suomussalmi to constitute a "diversion", and as was the case everywhere in central Finland, the landscape seemed almost intentionally designed to thwart large-scale military operations. Most likely, the attack **had** no strategic purpose – it was just another means of exerting pressure on the Finns at every point along the border where the Red Army could do so.

In contrast to the two rather hapless divisional commanders who made such a shambles out of the Suomussalmi operation, the Russian commander on the Kuhmo front was one of the best in the Red Army, Major G. H Gushevski, and his 54th Division was a disciplined, well-equipped unit that proved to be rock-solid in combat. Advancing along two parallel logging tracks, the 54th had little trouble brushing aside the numerous but feeble roadblocks thrown up in its path by the handful of weak Border Guard detachments who initially opposed its advance. Bad weather and deteriorating road-surfaces slowed Gusachevski's offensive far more effectively than Finnish resistance.

Mannerheim had no choice but to throw small companies of local militia and forlorn detachments of over-age reservists into the path of the enemy's columns. In some cases, these men went straight into counterattacks only hours after climbing off the trucks or trains that brought them to the Kuhmo sector. This patchwork *kampfgruppe* attacked bravely (supported by nothing heavier than a few 81 mm mortars), killed a few Russians, disrupted Gusachevski's advance for a short time, and then were compelled to retreat in the face of heavy enemy firepower, usually after suffering more casualties than they inflicted. These rather pathetic attacks, however, did serve their purpose (more or less by acting, once again, as human speed-bumps). Gusachevski's leading elements were still ten miles from Kuhmo by the end of December, but if they seized the village, they would also gain access to better-quality roads, leading both north and south, and by striking in either direction they could do serious damage to Finland's internal communications. Mannerheim now began to see the shrewdness behind this Russian offensive, and he was sufficiently alarmed to order the Hero of Suomussalmi, newly-promoted General Hjalmar Siilasvuo, to shift the veteran troops of his Ninth Division from the Karelian Isthmus, where – as everyone now realized – the war would be won or lost, regardless of what either side did in the forested wilderness north of Lake Ladoga. Mannerheim's ordered Siilasvuo to do unto the 54th Division what he had done so brilliantly to the two divisions up at Suomussalmi: cut the 54th into pieces by using motti tactics, and then annihilate it one pocket at a time.

But Gusachevski, far from being intimidated either by Siilasvuo's reputation or made apprehensive by the mystique of motti tactics, saw the coming battle as a golden opportunity. Unlike so many of his colleagues, Gusachevski understood the Big Picture.

He knew that Mannerheim desperately needed Siilasviuo and his combat-hardened battalions down on the Karelian Isthmus, to provide the one thing Mannerheim needed most and didn't have: a strong strategic reserve, led by an aggressive commander, which could be used as a "fire brigade" all along with Mannerheim Line. Gusachevski planned to deprive Mannerheim of that asset, by tying down the Ninth Division in protracted siege warfare and under conditions that would largely negate the employment of motti tactics. He also knew that Siilasvuo's units couldn't be shifted from Suomussalmi to Kuhmo in one compact mass – the Finn s simply didn't have sufficient transportation resources to do that, and persistent Red Air Force attacks against the railroad system, while causing only a few hours' delay, did interrupt the flow of rail traffic in dozens of places, whenever there was good flying weather. All told, the Russian commander figured it would take between 12 and 14 days to fully shift Sillasvuo's division just 75 miles south of its previous location, then regroup and resupply its constituent units. He made good use of that time.

Instead of leaving his division strung out along the approach routes, he concentrated it for conventional all-around perimeter defense; his men cleared a "dead zone" in front of their lines, and used the trees to construct extremely durable bunkers and barricades – some of them impervious to multiple hits by the Finns' 76 mm. cannon. The rugged, broken terrain still offered certain areas where *motti* tactic could be employed to break some of Gusachevski's battalions into pockets, but the log bunkers would add considerable strength to **any** Russian defensive position, regardless of its size. or the number of troops isolated within. In terms of simple manpower, Siilasvuo and his Soviet counterpart were pretty evenly matched, and if the Finnish general had been able

to call down heavy-caliber artillery or close-range air support, he might well have dispatched the 54th Division in a matter of days, and then proceeded to the Isthmus, where Mannerheim urgently needed him. But Siilasvuo had no heavy guns, and his "air support" was both ineffectual and usually unavailable.

There was one glaring weakness in the Russian position, however: now that the entire division was concentrated, it had just one supply line – the rude and now-crumbling logging track from Repola westward to Kuhmo, and directly athwart that route was a long, low, heavily wooded ridge named Loytavaara. If the Finns could occupy that elevation in sufficient strength, Gushekvski's only means of resupply was by air-drops or by light planes landing on his improvised air strip. And on the eastern side of Loytavaara, a fresh Soviet division was forming up even as Siilasvuo's operations began. The 23rd Division was a mediocre outfit, but it was lavishly supplied with artillery and it had enough manpower to launch attack after attack against any roadblock the Finns established. It's even possible that Gushevski allowed the Finns to capture the ridge, so he could methodically hammer them with artillery and air strikes from the eastern side, without weakening his prepared defenses on the Kuhmo side. A battle of brute attrition was the antithesis of *motti* tactics, and could only favor the Russians. They could replace their losses; the Finns couldn't. The fight for control of Loytavaars thus became the key to victory, for both sides.

Siilasvuo just managed to occupy the ridge before the Russians did, by force-marching an entire battalion around the encircled 54th , each man loaded with as much ammo as he could possibly carry. They were instructed to hold the ridge at all costs, fighting with rocks and tree limbs if necessary, while adequate supplies of ammo, and

some Soviet 45 mm. anti-tank guns (captured at Suomussalmi) were laboriously dragged forward in sledges. Fortunately for the dog-tired Finns, the enemy didn't disturb them while they dug temporary foxholes. In fact aside from some desultory shelling, the Russians didn't take any offensive action against Loytavaara until a week after the Finns had claimed it. By that time, the critical importance of the ridge had become evident, and from mid-January until the war's end, the ridge was under constant, punishing bombardment. While the defenders dug deeper and piled more layers of logs on top of their bunkers, the 23rd Division brought up more and heavier guns, preferring to pulverize the objective rather than launch more costly frontal infantry attacks. Several such assaults were mounted in late January, always with the same result: three-to-six hundred Red Army casualties as opposed to negligible Finnish losses. By mid-February, more than forty cannon were targeted against Loytavaara, a piece of ground measuring only two km. long by one-half km. wide, consisting of 76.2 mm field guns, 122 mm. howitzers, and at least one battery of powerful 152 mm. weapons. Soviet ammunition stockpiles were inexhaustible, and on many days the Finns were pounded by 200 shells per minute for hours at a time. When the Russian gunners were taking a rest or waiting for new ammo shipments to arrive, the Red Air Force plastered the ridge with bombs ranging in weight from 220 lbs to 1,100-lb. blockbusters. The punch-drunk defenders emerged from their blockhouses during daylight hours only when the enemy launched another of his periodic, entirely futile, frontal attacks by massed infantry. Not one Soviet soldier ever got to the top of Loytavaara, and because of the terrain's configuration, flank attacks were impractical for any force larger than a company. The Russians tried it, of course, but were always stopped cold by minefields and pre-sighted Maxims protected by massively

thick bunkers that were impervious to anything but a direct hit with a 1,100-lb. bomb or a 152 mm. shell. By night, the Finns repaired whatever damage their fortifications had sustained during the day, and if by chance a bunker was smashed by a direct hit, there were plenty of logs available to build a new one.

The stalemate continued right up to the final moments of the war, when the Russians unleashed a pointless punitive barrage exceeding any that had gone before: more than a thousand shells rained down in fifteen hellish minutes. When the guns fell silent, the defenders emerged into a landscape utterly transformed. Once covered by dense forest, Loytavaara was completely stripped bare of vegetation. There wasn't even much snow left on the ground, just a bottomless morass of black, churned muck, crater-on-crater, and the splintered remains of demolished bunkers. By that time, the original battalion of defenders had been replaced several times over; only one man in five of the original garrison survived. The total Soviet casualties can only be estimated, but they must have exceeded 5,000, if you extrapolate from the body-counts reported after the first assaults.

Stalemate prevailed around the encircled 54th as well. Siilasvuo never had quite enough men to launch a full-scale assault in the face of Gushevski's 30-odd cannon, fifty-something mortars, and 30-40 tanks and armored cars. Siilasvuo had been counting on hunger to weaken the surrounded force, but although the defenders were never exactly comfortable, neither were they reduced to starvation as their comrades had been up at Suomussalmi.

Credit for the stand-off results goes mainly to the Red Air Force, whose pilots became very skilled at aerial re-supply techniques. Whenever the weather permitted,

three or four sorties per day flew over the besieged pocket, usually comprising three or four converted Ilyushin DB-3 bombers, capable of hauling more than six tons of supplies on short-range missions; fighter escorts were so numerous the Finnish Air Force seldom risked an attack. Often, the supply missions were accompanied by formations of SB-2 bombers, whose pilots circled the area until Finnish anti-aircraft opened up on the transports, and then vectored strikes against the locations of muzzle-flash and tracer-streams.

Attacker and defender played a deadly game of cat-and-mouse. Russian speaking Finns, breaking into the enemy's radio frequencies, sometimes managed to deceive the transports into dropping their supplies behind Finnish lines, and on several occasions convinced the SB-2s to unload their bombs on Russian positions or into empty forest. Because both the incidence and the flight paths of aerial supply missions were highly predictable, Siilasvuo was able to mass his anti-aircraft guns directly along the Russians' approach routes. In late January-early February, headquarters released a battery of scarce 40-mm.Bofors guns, which shot down two transports the first day they went operational. Ironically, the Soviet pilots were also menaced by Russian-made weapons captured at Suomussalmi, including a number of quadruple Maxim mounts that absolutely drenched the sky with tracers. Siilasvuo's infantry also experimented with massed rifle volleys fired just ahead of the supply aircraft, but the Ilyushins were too big and too well-protected to be brought down by the odd rifle bullet. Moreover, the Russians soon learned to recognize the pattern of these massed rifle salvoes and retaliated by strafing suspected Finnish positions with thousands of rounds. The "rifle-box" tactic was soon abandoned, although individual Finns continued to fire skyward whenever they had a good shot.

Having to run such a flak gauntlet two or three times a day, however, definitely had an effect on the pilots' accuracy and morale. After losing six Ilyushins to Finnish ground fire, the Russians stopped making daylight runs altogether, but the nighttime drops were sufficiently accurate to keep the 54th reasonably well supplied with food, ammo, and medical supplies. Critically wounded soldiers were evacuated, usually in the rear-gunner's seat of nimble Polikarpov biplanes, from the frozen-lake airstrip Gushevski had wisely staked out in the center of his perimeter – this, too, had a markedly positive effect on the morale of his men.

In late February, the Red Army made a concerted effort to relieve the encircled 54th by mounting the first large-scale ski-borne operation in its history. By combining the best skiers from reconnaissance detachments in a half-dozen regular divisions, General Meretskov created an ad-hoc outfit christened the Siberian Ski Brigade (despite the fact that it was not brigade strength, nor were two-thirds of its soldiers natives of Siberia). After recruiting some 2,000 of the best skiers into one unit, and giving them some hasty refresher training, the Soviet high command decided to commit them near the tiny village of Kiekenkoski, some twenty miles northeast of the encircled 54th. From there, the brigade would move south-by-south-west and spring a surprise attack on Siilasvuo's men from the rear. Simultaneously, Gushevski would launch a break-out attempt with everything he had. The confusion and shock of this offensive, in theory, would so disconcert the Finns that the 54th division, now reinforced with 2,000 expert skiers, could capture Loytavaara from behind, link up with its sister-unit, the 23rd, and resume its original march on Kuhmo.

It's hard to fault the operational plan; it was bold, eminently sound, and offered tantalizing glimpses of a Finnish rout. Had things worked out as intended, Siilasvuo's men would have been caught off-balance and virtually surrounded, by a fired-up enemy force that now enjoyed a significant edge in numbers, firepower, **and** ski-mobility. The plan might well have resulted in a stunning upset victory for the Russian side, and Mannerheim couldn't have countered the threat without seriously weakening his defensive strength on the Karelian Isthmus.

The men selected for the Siberian Ski Brigade were skilled and highly motivated; the officers were top-notch, the troops were given the best equipment available at the time; and a high proportion of them were armed with Tokarev semi-automatic rifles, a shrewd decision on the part of the high command – by carrying Tokarevs, the brigade enjoyed some of the advantages of machine-gun support without having to lug 27-pound Degtyarevs through the woods. Despite having trained together for only three weeks, the men had bonded into a cohesive unit. Morale was sky-high, and every man was in peak physical condition.

But the operation came to ruin because of a factor that's been the bane of commanders since the dawn of organized warfare: bad maps. Just prior to jump-off time, the Siberians were issued with freshly printed "highly accurate" maps of the Kuhmo sector. It did not take them long to realize that any resemblance between these maps and the actual landscape was purely coincidental. An hour after they began their approach march, the skiers were hopelessly disoriented.

Worse luck: they ran smack into a strong Finnish patrol and promptly discovered that their automatic and semi-automatic weapons wouldn't fire. Nobody had told them

that it was necessary to remove all traces of conventional lubricants from the guns before exposing them to extreme cold; nor had they been issued the glycerin-based lubricants needed to replace petroleum-based oils. The Tokarevs fired one round and then jammed solid, their mechanisms clogged by rock-hard gobbets of rifle oil. Just as this realization sunk in, the brigade commander – a man very much respected by his soldiers – was slain by a Finnish sniper. Until darkness pulled the plug on combat, the Siberians fought savagely with pistols, grenades, knives, and bare fists, earning the admiration of their Finnish opponents, who nevertheless killed dozens of them without mercy or hesitation.

Those who escaped death now found themselves in a dreadful situation: leaderless, lost, encumbered with weapons that wouldn't shoot, the "brigade" as such ceased to exist. The Russians banded together in numerous independent groups and struck out more or less randomly; some were determined to press on and do whatever damage they could to the Finns, others just wanted to find their way back to the border. Some groups augmented their numbers by absorbing stragglers, others just fragmented into smaller and more desperate bands of refugees, lurching aimlessly through the forest in search of leadership, warmth, and shelter.

And in the process, causing a great deal of mischief. Siilasvuo was forced to detach strong patrols to track down the more aggressive skiers, some of whom caused panic in the rear by bushwhacking supply parties, outposts, and in one case a squad of veterinarians, who were grooming horses when a dozen Russians stormed out of the woods, brandishing clubs and knives. One intrepid Soviet skier hijacked a sled containing the monthly pay for an entire Finnish battalion; most of the money was later recovered in the forest – the fate of the robber remains unknown. After two days of frantic skirmishes,

Siilasvuo's patrols managed to corner about seventy-five skiers in a cluster of isolated farm buildings. When the Russians refused to surrender, the Finns pelted the wooden buildings with Molotov cocktails and shot down every man who tried to escape the flames. When the excitement subsided, 1400 dead skiers were accounted for. A handful surrendered; some made their way back to Russian territory; more than two hundred were never accounted for – their bones still lie in the deep woods.

With the ignominious collapse of this relief expedition, the fighting around Kuhmo returned to a grim stalemate. When the cease-fire went into effect on March 13, 1940, Siilasvuo and his men felt cheated of a victory. One the one hand, they had totally neutralized the 54th Division; on the other hand, the 54th had neutralized **them**, at a time when Mannerheim desperately needed the Ninth Division on the Karelian Isthmus. When the emaciated but unbeaten Russian survivors marched away, the Finns entered their vacant *mottis* and found grim evidence of how desperate the enemy's condition had become during the final weeks of fighting: huge piles of clothing, parcels of personal effects, empty crates, bicycles, musical instruments, letters, maps, thousands of spent cartridges and shell casings, vast mounds of human and animal dung, heaps of amputated limbs, horses' heads stacked near cold, greasy field kitchens, and the frozen dead in their hundreds.

EXTENSIVE SIDEBAR: MR. MAYDANS VISITS THE KEMI RIVER

The Kemi/Salla front, as the Finns designated it in their official bulletins, was comparatively easy to reach from neutral Sweden, via the railhead at Rovaniemi.

Scandinavian, British, European, and American journalists all made the trek, hoping for a first-hand glimpse of this strange arctic war.

Among them was Carl Mydans, Time-Life Incorporated's crack photojournalist, a pioneering camera-artist whose war photos were distinguished by the same mixture of blunt force and poetry as those of his close friend, Robert Capra. Fortunately, Mydans was as good a writer as he was a photographer, and in his autobiography *Than Meets the Eye,* he left posterity some of the most vivid and haunting descriptions of the forest battles ever to come from a western journalist.

The first thing Mydan's noted, as he approached the Kemi battlefield, was the eerie, almost surreal quality of the light. In these latitudes, in winter, real daylight only lasts for two hours – the sun did not rise above the horizon until 11:00 A.M., and then it hung low and smouldering in a haze-filmed sky, drenching the primal landscape with a ruddy and somehow disquieting light, like rust mixed with water.

Even in Lapland, the words "Life Magazine" carried considerable weight. Mydans was given a ride to the front by no less a personage than General Wallenius himself. Mydans found him fascinating: "an old-fashioned strong-man type, with a real flare for the theatrical, and tough as reindeer hide." A few kilometers from the combat zone, the general's whitewashed staff car was halted by a couple of zealous, no-nonsense sentries who suddenly appeared in the middle of the road, Suomis gripped at hip level, and flagged down the car. The guards loudly commanded that no one in the car try to step out or make any sudden moves until their papers had been scrutinized; there were still armed and dangerous Russian stragglers wandering around this area. With grandiloquent vigor, Wallenius threw open the driver's door, fairly leaped out into the sentries'

flashlight beams, and flung open his overcoat to reveal a bare hirsute chest that bulged like a beer barrel with muscle. Both sentries instantly snapped to attention and began babble apologies for "inconveniencing" the general. Far from being inconvenienced. Wallenius gruffly replied, he was proud of both young men for the zeal they had displayed. "Carry on!" Then he cracked a parade-ground salute, hopped back into the car, and sped sway in a spray of gravel, obviously very pleased with himself.

Maydans arrived at the front only a short time after the Russians had begun their withdrawal. He could plainly hear the rumble and crack of the ebbing battle in the distance. Wallenius bade him farewell, leaving a handwritten pass that, he assured Maydans, "will get you anywhere you want to go except Heaven", then he drove on. Free to roam around the battlefield by himself, he began his self-guided tour by wandering through the recently vacated Finnish positions. He found little that reminded him of the formal "battle lines" he had seen in Spain and China. Deep trenches and elaborate earthworks were few; the reason, he quickly discovered, was that the soil was hard as granite. Mostly he found log-roofed huts and bunkers, or snow-colored tents staked out over shallow foxholes. The larger structures were floored and lined with moss, furs, or some similar form of insulation. The more elaborate bunkers, where Finnish ski patrols had rested between actions were filled with homemade blankets, straw. Animal hides, lanterns, and small smokeless stoves. The interiors were a bit funky from occupancy, but they were warm, and, given the environmental conditions outside, remarkably cozy.

During a career that included covering several wars, Mydans had learned to, as he put it, "read the dead". One could tell a lot about an army, he averred, from the condition of its fallen. A helpful Finnish officer answered his first question: No, neither side

bothered with steel helmets in the forest fighting; all that inert, freezing metal on top of one's head was more of an annoyance than a protection, and besides, it deadened a very critical "forest-sense" – one's ability to hear the subtlest, wispiest alterations in the ambient silence. Maydans also observed that the Soviet dead wore heelless, soleless, hard felt boots that looked to be of little value in such a climate. Their padded cotton uniforms reminded Mydans of the ones he'd seen worn by the dead Japanese he'd photographed in China. While he was poking around, a formation of Soviet aircraft flew overhead. Several nearby Finns, inspecting the enemy dead for anything that might be useful to their intelligence experts, paused long enough to glare up at the sky, make some universally-understood obscene gestures with their fists, and growl something in Finnish that Mydans later figured out was "Fuck you, Molotov!"

It was almost impossible to take pictures of the battlefield. Maydans's cameras froze if he exposed them to the open air for longer than thirty seconds. He had to carry them inside his clothing, next to his skin. Every time he whipped them out, quickly estimating his focal and light settings, he had first to remove his thick gloves, get a secure grip on the camera before tugging it free of his clothing, then set up and grab his shot in a split second. If he left the gloves off his hands for as long as a minute, his fingers began to throb agonizingly from the cold.

He visited a field hospital just behind Finnish lines. There he saw four seriously wounded Russians being given treatment ahead of a group of less-seriously-wounded Finns. This appeared to be the standard practice – the most seriously wounded men were given attention first, regardless of their nationality. A tour of the hospital left Mydans with a feeling that the Finnish medical service was unusually efficient and as well

equipped as that of any army he had ever covered. An examination of both the hospital's records and of the wounded men still being treated revealed what Mydans considered a remarkably high percentage of facial injuries, perhaps accounted for by the close-range nature of the recent fighting.

Mydans next encountered another foreign correspondent, a colleague of long standing. This man had just returned from being shown around the location of the bitterest fighting, and he thought Maydans might like to see it too.

"I think I've seen enough dead soldiers for one day," Mydans responded.

"No, Carl. You've never seen anything quite like this. Trust me."

Intrigued now in spite of himself, Mydans tagged along with his old friend. They reached the scene of maximum violence, very near the Kemi River's banks, just as the light was starting to be quirky with dusk. What Mydans saw there inspired some of the most vivid and eloquent reportage he ever penned; in my opinion, it is the equal to the best combat journalism Ernest Hemingway ever wrote:

> The fighting was almost over as we walked up the snow-banked path that led from the road to the river. In the sickly half-light we followed its stained track out on to the ice, where a mass of Russian dead covered the frozen river like some kind of leprous excrescence. They lay lonely and twisted in their heavy trench coats and formless felt boots; their faces yellowed, eyelashes white with a fringe of frost. Across the ice, the forest floor was strewn with weapons and snapshots and letters, with sausage and bread and shoes. Here were the bodies of dead tanks with blown treads, dead carts, dead horses, and more dead men, clogging the road and defiling the snow under the tall black pines. Here in the winter of nights with no days, on an obscure river north of the Arctic Circle, in snow that engulfed a man on foot up to his bayonet belt and made him stagger like a dying insect, in temperatures that solidified the lost and wounded into frigid statues, here the Finns met the Russians, and stopped them.

A hundred yards farther, on the road itself, the scene was even more nightmarish:

> Russian Ford trucks with windshields, radiators, and door panels shattered and riddled…bloodstained seats told what had happened to the drivers. But back on that narrow icy road and in the woods alongside it was a sight that even the most hardened

war reports have called the most horrible they have ever seen. Trucks and supplu sleds stood jamming the road. All faced Finland. Here and there they had gone into the ditch on either side, thrown there by explosive blasts or driven there by necessity and terror. Dead Russians lay about like fallen leaves. With them were their horses, and a shattered truck filled with ice-caked loaves of black bread, a big pile of old leather shoes, heaps of bologna tied with string and hauled like ropes, helmets, gas masks, packages of rice, spilled envelopes of red soup powder, cases of tinned fish, cotton sacks of cheap coarse tobacco, machine gun clips, shells, ammunition, sleighs, harnesses, cordwood piles of amputated arms and legs, and everywhere pink frozen blood in the snow.

As Mydans was finally leaving, in the oppressive gathering gloom, he passed some Finnish officers making a body count of the enemy dead. One of them who spoke English remarked, in a flat and infinitely weary voice: "The wolves will eat well this year."

After he returned to the rear, Mydans came upon a group of Finnish soldiers having some sport with a captured Russian. Circling around the man, snarling menacingly, they jeered at him and threatened him with their big knives. They feinted kicks at him, and clicked the mechanisms of their weapons at him. The prisoner was on the edge of hysteria. Only moments after Mydans arrived, a Finnish officer came for the prisoner and led him from his tormentors into the local command post, an abandoned country schoolhouse, for interrogation. Mydans followed, his reporter's instincts now in overdrive.

Once the prisoner was seated, he told the Finnish interpreter that he was a dairy worker from Leningrad and that he had left behind a wife and four children. His officers had told the men in his company that they were attacking toward Helsinki. At that point, the "audience" of Finnish soldiers who had crowded into the room began hooting and jeering at the prisoner once more. One Finn slipped up behind the man and suddenly yanked the blanket from his shoulders. The prisoner gave a little yelp of fright and began

to shake. Frowning disapproval, the major who was conducting the interrogation barked an order and the onlookers moved back.

Then, his face once more impassive, the major paused before resuming his questions again. When he did, his voice was very gentle, almost soothing, and he wrapped up the questioning in very little time.

Reaching forward, he offered the Russian a cigarette. The prisoner just stared at him and his outstretched hand. His tongue, large and white, licked his cracked lips and he slowly raised two blackened and bloodstained hands toward the cigarette. He hesitated, then looked full into the eyes of the Finn as though inquiring: Is it really all right for me to smoke that? The major nodded his head, and for an instant his face was almost friendly; he nodded encouragement. Suddenly the prisoner broke down, tears welled down his dirt-caked face and splashed on to his encrusted padded uniform. The room went silent. Gently, the major laid the cigarette on the table before the Russian, along with a box of matches, then turned away as if to study the papers before him. For a long moment he saw withdrawn in silence while the Russian continued to tremble, his face now smeared where he had rubbed the tears with his raveled padded cuff.

Maydans sensed he had a powerful photograph just waiting to be taken. He reached into his musette bag for his camera and flash gun. "You want to take his picture?" the Finnish major asked. He beckoned for Mydans to come closer, and as Mydans stepped forward the major turned the prisoner around so that he would be facing the camera.

The prisoner went rigid and shief from my touch like a mare…I waved several soldiers out of the background and the prisoner watched me frantically, As he looked around and saw himself standing alone, his knees sagged further and knocked audibly in the silent room.

"It's all right," said reassuringly, "I'm only going to take your picture." But the major did not offer to translate. I held my camera aloft to show him, but he only cringed away from me. Through the view-finder I saw him move his hands up as though to shield his face, and then he dropped them and went absolutely rigid. I flashed the shot.

The Russian wheeled around screaming. He sagged to his knees and grasped the table leg. There he remained, pounding his head on the table, weeping, stuttering in Russian.

For a moment no one moved. Then, in shame, some of the Finns slipped out of the room. The major jumped up and gently raised the sobbing prisoner. "You're not hurt", he said soothingly. "You're not hurt – we're only taking your picture, we're not going to shoot you." He reached for my camera and held it to the Russian's wet face. "Look through the window," he spoke as one would speak to a child…

The prisoner's furtive eyes flickered around the room. One eye caught the view-finder and two black hands reached up slowly and took hold of my camera. For a minute

he peered through it at me and then into the little group of Finns who waited, quiet and embarrassed. Suddenly he gave a flicker of a smile, then a laugh, then as the major held him he shook with screams of laughter.

Now the whole room was laughing, and half a dozen hands were poking cigarettes or bits of food at him. Someone put the blanket back over his shoulders and we followed him out through the blackout curtains. The major turned him over to some guards, who led him away in a manner that was not unkindly.

As the major passed me on the way back to the schoolhouse, he stopped, hesitated before me, started on again. Over his shoulder, he said harshly in English: "The Russians are pigs!"

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* * *

27. THE JANUARY LULL

With the failure of the ill-conceived Finnish counterattack, on December 23, large-scale fighting on the Karelian Isthmus petered-out. Aerial reconnaissance photos taken on December 27 revealed the Soviet frontline units were constructing bunkers and stringing barbed wire – sure signs that, for the time being at least, the invaders were hunkering down in defensive mode. The crushing losses sustained during the massed frontal assaults in December had exhausted Russian stockpiles of ammunition, decimated at least seven divisions to the point that they could no longer undertake offensive actions, and caused the destruction of about one-half of the tanks and armored cars originally committed to the Finnish campaign – approximately 300 vehicles. Another 150 or so damaged tanks were piled up helplessly near the handful of repair depots available; overwhelmed by the task confronting them, the mechanics worked until they dropped

from exhaustion, but could not possibly restore more than a handful of damaged vehicles per day. For the time being, the Red Army had shot its bolt.

The outside world marveled at the ferocity of Finnish resistance, and foreign military attaches (most critically, the Germans!) concluded that the enormous, vaunted Red Army was, if not quite a push-over, only a slightly more dangerous foe than the Poles had been. Big mistake.

Finland's early victories fired the imagination of citizens in the Western democracies. The so-called "Phony War" on the western front was beginning to bore people. The first month of the Winter War, however, raised the spirits of all those who were opposed to tyranny, especially because so few shots had yet been fired in tyranny's general direction. As Finnish historian Max Jakobsen summed it up: "So many small nations had been bullied into humiliating surrender, the dictators had won so many cheap victories, that idealism had been left starving… The Maginot Line might have reflected a feeling of security for those living behind it, but it could not inspire them as did the image of a Finnish soldier hurling a bottle at a tank…"

Even Field Marshal Mannerheim was taken aback by the defensive victories of December. When the commander of the Finnish 10th Division, for example, reported that his men had slain 1,000 Russians during a single night along the Taipale River front, while suffering only trifling losses themselves. Mannerheim at first refused to accept the report; battles, in his experience, simply were not **that** one-sided. Two days later, he received a meticulous list of serial numbers copied from more than 1,000 Moisin-Nagant rifles inventoried from those same dead Russian soldiers, along with stark photographs of the frozen river littered with corpses. Never again did Mannerheim doubt his officers'

reports. As the Marshal remarked to a visiting British diplomat: "I didn't think that my own men were that good, or that the Russians could be so bad…"

* * *

The very last thing Joseph Stalin expected to get from his ostensibly quick, cheap conquest of Finland was world-wide humiliation. His greatest wrath was directed at his old crony, Andrei Zhdanov, boss of the Leningrad Military District. Stalin's sixtieth birthday fell on December 21, and for a present, Zhdanov had promised his boss a victory parade through the streets of Leningrad, with Finnish battle flags heaped at the dictator's feet. Instead, Leningrad was threaded, several times daily, with long, slow, trains, their windows shrouded, crammed to the bursting point with wounded, starving, frostbitten soldiers. By December 10, there was no more room in Leningrad's hospitals, so the mournful trains kept on rolling, all the way to Moscow.

From all over the USSR, lavish gifts poured into the Kremlin and massive "spontaneous" demonstrations were held, to prove the people's love for and loyalty to "Comrade Stalin". Comrade Stalin made token appearances, smiling that cold avuncular smile and waving like a wind-up puppet, but behind the scenes, the mood in the Kremlin's inner chambers was rancorous and vituperative. If Stalin directed most of his ire at Zhdanov, he had plenty left over for the hapless "People's Commissar of Defense", K. E. Voroshilov, the chief architect of the disastrous Finnish campaign and the man who assured Stalin that the whole affair would be over in two weeks. In his *Memoirs,* Nikita Khruschev provides a telling vignette of the Soviet government's Inner Circle snarling at one another like rabid dogs. At a lavish banquet held in honor of Stalin's birthday, the prodigious consumption of vodka loosened tongues to such an extent that: "Stalin jumped

up in a rage and started to berate Voroshilov. Vorosdhilov was also boiling mad. He leaped up, turned red, and hurled Stalin's accusations back into his face: 'You have yourself to blame for all this! You're the one who had our best generals killed!' Voroshilov then picked up a platter of roast suckling pig and hurled it across the room."

Having lost faith in the "Leningrad Clique", Stalin was now ready to listen to the Red Army's calm, realistic Chief of Staff, General B.M. Shaposhnikov, who had expressed strong reservations about the Finnish operation early during the planning stages. Shaposnikov thought the coming campaign would be anything but a walk-over and drew up plans for a major, sustained, effort involving far more resources than Voroshilov considered necessary. Now, Stalin was ready to listen to viewpoints he'd considered "harmfully pessimistic" only three months earlier. Shaposhnikov was summoned to the Kremlin for a high-level conference and told to dust-off his operational plan and to be prepared to answer some tough questions from the Premier.

No stenographic record of the discussion has surfaced, but from the way events unfolded, we can reconstruct the meeting's broad outlines. Stalin requested a hard-nosed, professional assessment: what had gone wrong, and what would Shaposnikov do to salvage both victory and the Red Army's reputation? The Chief of Staff made these salient points:

. The senseless, brutal, frontal assaults on fortified Finnish positions must be halted immediately;

. There must be no more adventurous plunges into the central wilderness or into the lunar wastes of Lapland; the war would be won or lost on the Karelian Isthmus and

any operation undertaken elsewhere could be justified only if it contributed to success in that central theater.

. Without committing major ground units, every reasonable effort should be made to sustain the resistance, morale, and supplies of units already trapped in *mottis*;

. The discredited Leningrad Military District should be disbanded, or at least renamed and reformed, under aggressive, competent leadership – i.e., neither Voroshilov nor Zhdanov should retain any powers of tactical command. There were leaders who could replace them, Shaposnikov said, and who could get the job done, but only if Stalin gave them operational freedom and unconditional support. It is likely that a short list of names was passed across the table at this point in the conference;

. Shaposhnikov's final suggestion was bold; indeed, very few men would have had the courage to broach the notion while sitting across the table from Stalin. While the Russian people didn't know, and until fifty years later **wouldn't** know, the details of December's harrowing defeats, there was no disguising the magnitude of Soviet losses. The Party Line argument that the Red Army had gone to war for the sake of the oppressed Finnish working-class was transparently absurd – ninety-five per cent of the Finnish Army **was** "working class" and so far none of them had welcomed their Soviet counterparts as "liberators". It was time to soft-pedal the ideological clichés; Russian soldiers would face another meat-grinder when the second round of fighting began, and instead of hectoring them with speeches and ordering them to charge the Mannerheim Line shouting: "For the glory of Stalin!", the pre-battle indoctrination should stress pride, patriotism, and the simple human need for revenge. Put bluntly: the Red Army had been thoroughly humiliated by one of the smallest nations in Europe. Would the next battle not

be waged more vigorously if the participating troops felt themselves responsible for redeeming the Fatherland's martial honor? Instead of invoking the pedantic clichés of Karl Marx, Shaposnikov proposed, why not get the soldiers fired-up by reminding them of heroes such as Kutuzov, Peter the Great, and Alexander Nevsky!

Although some of Shaposnikov's ideas must have been unpalatable, Stalin saw the exigencies of the situation clearly enough to approve the Chief of Staff's basic concepts. And to make sure no rivals or conspirators tried to sabotage the new campaign, he publicly endorsed Shaposnikov's strategy and deputized him to act with the full authority of the Kremlin – anyone who questioned his orders would therefore be questioning Stalin himself, and not even a blockhead like Voroshilov was stupid enough to do that.

The Leningrad Clique was quietly kicked sideways, and both Zhdanov and Vororshilov were given "vital" new tasks that stripped them of any authority to issue tactical orders. The Leningrad Military District was given a new, more businesslike title: "The North-western Front", and reorganized along strict lines of military efficiency and accountability. To exercise operational authority, Stalin brought in one of his finest soldiers, Army Commander, First Rank, Semyon Konstantinovich Timoshenko, a true proletariat success story. Before the Revolution, Timoshenko had been a barrel-maker; during the Civil War, he had rising swiftly through the ranks by dint of sheer ability and strict ideological orthodoxy. His most recent assignment had been command of the Soviet occupation of Eastern Poland, a campaign which involved very little combat, but which demonstrated that Timoshenko had the ability to control a large, complex operation in a political context fraught with ambiguity. Moreover, although he was a stern

disciplinarian, the common soldiers regarded him with a degree of respect bordering on awe. A rugged, blunt-featured man with shaven head and flinty gray eyes, Timoshenko was famous for issuing orders in a powerful, drill-field voice that could be heard above massed artillery fire.

According to Timoshenko's own account, the "job interview" was brief. Stalin asked: Can you break the Mannerheim Line? Timoshenko replied unhesitatingly: Yes, Comrade Stalin, but it will not be a cheap victory. If I'm to command the operation, I'll need four times as many guns and tanks as Voroshilov deployed, ten times the ammunition, and air support roughly equal to one-third of the entire Soviet Air Force. Okay, Stalin replied, you'll get whatever you ask for. One more thing, said Timoshenko: I want a formal guarantee, in writing, that I will not be held personally responsible for the enormous casualties we will sustain.

It took brass balls to make such a request to Joe Stalin, but Stalin must have been impressed by the contrast between Timoshenko's forthrightness and the toadying equivocations of his predecessor. This most unusual "gentlemen's agreement" was actually put in writing and signed in front of witnesses by Stalin.

For his chief of staff, the man who would work out tactically the details of the new strategy, Timoshenko requested the officer who had recently inflicted a staggering defeat on the proud Japanese during the brief, undeclared war for control of Mongolia: Georgi Zhukov. Again, Stalin swallowed his pride – he'd always viewed Zhukov as a potential rival for power, and that was one reason why Zhukov had been exiled to the Far East. But Zhukov's brilliant use of armor and air power, which had cut several first-rate

Japanese divisions to shreds, made him a self-recommending candidate for the task of cracking the Mannerheim Line.

Once these two formidable officers took command, the flagging spirits of their regiments began to revive. The new Party Line – appealing to patriotism and raw emotion rather than pumping the men full of windy Marxist rhetoric – had an immediate and palpable effect on morale at all levels. Before formulating a new strategy, the new team assembled their divisional commanders and undertook a frank, no-holds-barred appraisal of what had gone wrong in December. The post-mortem analysis reached the same conclusion that Mannerheim had; the Finnish commander-in-chief likened the Red Army's December offensive to "a badly conducted orchestra". Coordination among the infantry, the tanks, and the artillery branch had been crude or nonexistent. Russian artillery resources had been immense, but their effect was never decisive. Huge volumes of fire were thrown at map coordinates, but seldom were the barrages fired in direct support of the tanks and infantry. Frontline observers lacked training and radio communications had broken down utterly under the stress of combat; infantry commanders were not able to direct fire when and where it was needed, and frequently had to advance through curtains of "friendly" fire just to approach their objectives.

Armored tactics had been a complete botch. Soviet tank brigades simply charged full-tilt at Finnish lines, and often broke through; but having scored a breakthrough, they waited in vain for new orders, usually just milling around like herds of oxen, waiting for somebody in authority to tell them what to do next. If such orders never came, the tanks usually withdrew at dusk, since without infantry to screen them at night, they were sitting ducks. Timoishenko and Zhukov immediately instituted rigorous training in tank-infantry

tactics, and completely overhauled the forward fire-control system. The tank commanders learned that it was pointless to score a breakthrough, only to yield the captured ground hours later. Artillery commanders learned how to shift their fires quickly and accurately. Forward air controllers practiced with real formations of aircraft overhead. More and better radios were issued, and radio discipline – which had been virtually ignored during the December campaigns – was rigorously imposed.

And finally, there was a thorough house-cleaning on the battalion and regimental levels. Incompetent or lazy officers were sacked by the truckload, replaced by men more dedicated to military excellence than to political brown-nosing. The Northwestern Front was reorganized, too, along much clearer and more logical lines. All Russian troops on the Isthmus were divided into two new corps; the dividing line between them was demarcated by the western terminus of the Vuoksi Waterway. North of that boundary, was Thirteenth Army, commanded by General V. A. Greendale, comprising four infantry divisions, two tank brigades, and powerful concentrations of artillery; Greendale's primary task was to maintain severe pressure against the Taipale River sector.

Three-fourths of all the Soviet troops on the Isthmus were reorganized and designated as "The Seventh Army", under Army Commander K. A. Meretskov. This was the sledgehammer that would break the Mannerheim Line: nine infantry divisions, five tank brigades, a "machine gun division", and enough artillery to achieve a front-wide ratio of eighty guns per kilometer.

Subtle tactics were not called for; Zhukov even christened the Russian approach as a strategy of "gnawing through". He knew the Finnish Army was fully extended; Mannerheim's reserves were few and weakly armed; foreign aid had increased the size of

Finland's Air Force (marginally), and augmented her supply of anti-tank and anti-aircraft weaponry, but not by much; ammunition stocks were totally inadequate for the sort of battle Zhukov planned to wage – on the Summa front alone, the Red Army could fire more shells in two hours than were contained in Mannerheim's entire strategic reserve.

First phase of the Soviet plan: a prolonged, sustained, merciless artillery and aerial bombardment, intended to destroy fortifications and exhaust the defenders manning them. When the Finns were deemed sufficiently "softened-up", tank-infantry assaults across the entire Isthmus would exert strain on the whole of the Mannerheim Line, making it difficult if not impossible for Mannerheim to shift whatever reserves he still held back; finally, General Merestzkov would strike a titanic blow against the Line's most vulnerable point: the sixteen-kilometer elbow-bend that ran from Summa through the Lahde Road junction to Munsauo Swamp – the so-called "Gateway to Viipuri". Powerful armored spearheads – fifty tanks was the accepted number for each, this time working in close coordination with one-to-three battalions of infantry – would crash into the Line and sooner or later, rupture it. As soon as a gap had been torn in the Line, Merestkov would pour additional, fresh, task forces into that breach, and each new wave would turn north or south behind Finnish lines, and begin systematically to roll up both sides of the initial puncture. This time around, each tank-infantry formation was assigned specific, realistic objectives and was under orders not to advance further until support fires were adjusted and fresh reinforcements brought forward to consolidate local gains and seal off the flanks of each penetration from Finnish counterattacks. The Mannerheim Line was still strong, and the Finns would fight ferociously for every pillbox and trench-

line, but it was also perilously brittle: a single big breakthrough might well cause the collapse of the entire Finnish defense scheme.

Preparations during late January were thorough and realistic. Soviet patrols sneaked up to the major blockhouses and pillboxes, and brought back samples of the concrete from which they were constructed; Meretskov's engineers carefully analyzed the composition of the concrete, and worked out a fire-plan for the artillery – what type of ammunition to use and how much of it would be needed to pulverize any given strong point.

Meretszkov assigned his premiere unit, the 123rd Division, to be the tip of the spear. Its objective would be the lynchpin complex of fortifications around Summa. Life-size mock-ups of the Summa works were constructed in identical area of terrain behind Russian lines, and three full-scale practice assaults were staged, so that every component unit -- from the sappers assigned to blow up anti-tank rocks to the new flame-thrower tanks intended to roast the Finns alive in their earthworks – could learn the necessary teamwork. To the extent that time permitted, every other spearhead division was also put through tough, realistic training.

Special attention was paid to the employment of tanks. No longer did the operational plan call for Poland-style breakthroughs followed by vaguely-defined and wildly optimistic rampages deep behind Finnish lines. Over and over again, tank commanders were admonished never to outrun their escorting infantry and never to move so far or so fast that they lost all touch with their assigned artillery support – however tempting it might be to launch a charge in the general direction of Helsinki.

But the most elaborate preparation by far was focused on the Soviet artillery. This emphasis was fully in keeping with centuries-old Russian traditions; if the dashing panzer commanders were the new battlefield gods for the *Wehrmacht*, their counterparts in the Red Army were the grimy, deafened artillerists; gunners were considered a professional elite in the days of Napoleon, and they remained a special breed in the new Soviet army. To hammer the Finns until they broke, Timoshenko assigned 2,800 cannon to support Meretskov's offensive, ranging in caliber from the versatile, rugged 76.2 mm field guns to batteries of huge, hulking 280 mm. howitzers, whose task it was to pound individual strong points into rubble. Backing up the field artillery were mammoth 12-inch railroad guns, capable of striking deep targets as far away as Viipuri. Well-trained forward observers, equipped with the latest field radios and making use of a completely redesigned system of communications, were assigned to every Soviet battalion and were able to call down powerful concentrations of shellfire on targets-of-opportunity. Targeting was also refined by the employment of observers riding 2,000 feet above the battlefield in captive balloons, each one well protected by squadrons of fighter aircraft.

Preparations on this scale could hardly be kept secret; the Finns knew what Zhukov was up to – their dawn-or-dusk reconnaissance flights photographed the ever-multiplying numbers of enemy batteries – but there was little they could do to interfere. Counter-battery or disruptive barrages were a luxury Mannerheim couldn't afford; all Finnish ammunition stocks were, by Mannerheim's direct orders, not to be touched unless it was to fire them against the most dangerous Russian assaults. The Baron did not, however, give instructions as to how, exactly, one determined the degree of danger posed by an attack-in-progress. Because it often took half-an-hour for a fire-mission request to

work its way up the radio net from frontline observers to Isthmus Command HQ, this oversight would have bad consequences, and Mannerheim soon revised his orders accordingly…but almost too late for the changes to have any beneficial effect. Periodically, the Finnish Air Force attempted to strike ammo dumps or convoys of towed weapons by launching sneak attacks with Bristol Blenheim bombers, but these could only be undertaken at dawn or dusk, when accuracy suffered, and the Soviet concentrations of flak eventually became so heavy that the raids were called off. So contemptuous were their Russians the Finns' ability to interfere with their preparations, that only the most advanced gun positions were even camouflaged – most of the weapons were just lined up, wheel to wheel, in the open.

To support the 123rd Division's attack on Summa, Meretskov allocated 108 guns against a section of the Mannerheim Line measuring approximately 1000 yards wide. Key to the defenses was a huge, multi-chambered fortress known as the "Poppius Bunker". It was one of the few Mannerheim Line works that actually did bear comparison with those of the Maginot Line, and it had been savagely fought-over during the December offensive, changing hands repeatedly. More than a thousand Russian soldiers had died trying to seize that one strongpoint. Poppius had sustained hundreds of hits – its concrete facings were scarred, pitted, and gouged so deep the steel rebars were exposed, but its guns had never stopped firing and it commanded a huge stretch of open ground. To deal with this monster, the Russians very carefully brought up a six-inch coast defense piece and under cover of loud diversionary bombardments, carefully camouflaged it only 500 meters from Poppius's embrasures. When the signal came, this gigantic "sniper's weapon" would open fire, flat-trajectory, at point-blank range, using a

mixture of high-explosive and armor-piercing rounds originally designed to penetrate the decks of enemy cruisers. Wherever the terrain made it feasible, other batteries were emplaced to fire straight-ahead at Finnish strong points. Aside from these deadly sharp-shooting pieces, targeted specifically against individual strong points, Meretskov's artillery was so massive that his gunners' preferred tactic was the "rolling barrage", a saturation technique which required the artillery crews simply to crank their gun tubes up or down by tiny increments, not even bothering with traverse.

For the curtain-raising barrage, the Zhukov intended to deluge the sixteen kilometers of the Viipuri Gateway with 300,000 shells in the first twenty-four hours alone. Not since Verdun had there been such a barrage. And it would continue, day after day, until the defenders were simply obliterated. Nor had Zhukov slighted the aerial component: it has been estimated that from the opening salvo on February 1, to the cease-fire on March 13, there were never less than 200 Red Air Force planes in action over the Isthmus at any given hour of daylight.

When the signal came to "Fire!" on the morning of February 1, the thunder of Zhukov's opening salvoes could be heard in Helsinki, one hundred miles away.

28. COMES THE DELUGE!

Finland alone, in danger of death – superb, sublime Finland – shows what free men can do!

- Winston Churchill, January, 1940

During the January lull, Mannerheim had reorganized his forces as best he could. The Fifth Division – burned-out from the fighting around Summa -- was pulled out of line and replaced by the Sixth Division. Elsewhere, all the Marshal could do was re-name some of his divisions, in the hope that Soviet intelligence would be deceived into thinking they were fresh formations (a rather feeble effort, which didn't fool anyone for longer than 24 hours). As earlier recounted, he had planned to use Siilasvuo's veteran Ninth as his strategic reserve, but with that unit bogged down on the Kuhmo front, he was forced to substitute the newly-raised and wretchedly equipped Twenty-First Division. He could also draw upon the exhausted Fifth, and another newly-commissioned outfit, the Twenty-Third, but instead of resting, filling-out their equipment requirements, and undergoing further training, all three reserve divisions were employed building fortifications along the "Intermediate" (fall-back) Line, five-to-eight miles behind the current frontline, and the so-called "Final Line", whose right flank was anchored by the city of Viipuri itself. In addition to performing heavy manual labor, the men of all three reserve divisions were daily subjected to air attacks and harassing fire from the gigantic 10 and 12-inch railroad guns, shooting with impunity from miles behind Soviet lines.

Mannerheim's final dispositions were as follows:: (See Map No. ???)

Second Corps (General Ohquist)

. Fourth Division (on the right flank of the Mannerheim Line, down to the Gulf of Finland coastline);

. Third Division, (on the left flank of the Fourth, covering the Viipuri Gateway sector, including the sensitive Summa and Lahde sectors);

. First Division (on the left flank of the Third, up to Lake Muolaa)

. Second Division: from Lake Muolaa to the Vuoksi Waterway

Third Corps (General Heinrichs)

. Seventh and Eighth Divisions (manning the Vuoksi Waterway's northern end, the Suvanto Waterway, and the Taipale Peninsula).

* * *

On the morning of February 1, a Finnish reconnaissance plane made its customary dawn photo-run over the Summa sector. When the Finnish photo-intelligence team gathered around the still-damp photos, there was a spontaneous gasp from each man: overnight, the number of Soviet guns emplaced before Summa had multiplied astoundingly. Just by counting the pieces in open emplacements, uncamouflaged, the Finns soon reached a total of 200. Just about the time this ominous news was being relayed to headquarters, the Russians opened fire, and everyone on the Karelian Isthmus could hear what was happening.

When it comes to describing, or attempting to describe, the bombardment of February 1, adjectives fail. On that single day, more than 300,000 shells crashed into the 18-kilometer-wide "Viipuri Gateway" sector; add to that the bombs dropped by an estimated 500 Red Air Force planes, and you're looking at one of the heaviest concentrations of firepower in history. Verdun was comparable, and maybe Kursk, but otherwise, I can't think of anything that equals it (yes, I haven't forgotten "Operation Cobra", but that was strictly an aerial onslaught). And Timoshenko had stockpiled enough ammunition to keep it up day after day after day, until the Finns could stand no

more. Some sections of Finnish trench-line simply vanished, the defenders torn to bits or buried alive, the rock-hard frozen Karelian soil blasted into warm paste. Telephone communications were gone by mid-afternoon; even wires buried three feet underground were severed. It became impossible to heat the large Finnish blockhouses – whenever the Russians spotted a wisp of smoke, they called down a typhoon of fire. They **wanted** the defenders to be cold, to turn the interior of their fortresses into freezing, desolate tombs.

Hot food and ammunition could only be brought forward at night, under constant harassing fire. Ammo got priority, and when the food arrived – if it arrived at all – it was greasy, cold, and thoroughly unappetizing. As the Finns had observed at Suomussalmi, under sub-arctic conditions, a hot meal can literally mean the difference between life and death.

But despite their improved morale and well-rehearsed tactics, the Russian infantry/tank assaults continued to be hideous blood-baths, just as they were in December. The attackers formed up in the open, advanced in the open, and died in the open. Finnish artillery, now the heart and spine of the defense, broke up attack after attack by firing short barrages with pin-point accuracy. By dusk, February 3, more than 1,000 Red Army soldiers lay dead in the cratered fields before Summa; between 90 and 100 tanks were destroyed during that same three-day period.

And still the bombardment increased. In the Summa sector alone, 400 shells per minute per square kilometer rained on Finnish lines. Somehow, the defenders hung on to their disintegrating positions; deafened, sleepless, half-crazed with shock, noise, and fatigue, they still repelled attack after attack, while the mounds of Soviet dead grew ever higher.. Bunkers protected by layers of logs and sandbags five feet thick were blown to

dust. The steel-reinforced walls of even the most massive blockhouses began to crack; so enormous and unrelenting was the concussion that a number of pillboxes were literally up-rooted and tilted to bizarre angles, ruining their fields of fire.

The inherent weakness of the Mannerheim Line forts was now becoming grimly apparent; no one had ever envisioned those works having to withstand so punishing a bombardment. The concrete foundations had not been sunk deep enough into the ground, the walls were not thick enough, not sufficiently laced with steel. Far too many bunkers had been constructed to command isolated parcels of ground, and too few of them were close enough to offer mutual support. Most of the strong points – although designed to accommodate anti-tank guns – were armed with nothing heavier than the reliable but slow-firing Maxims. These wrought massive destruction on waves of attacking infantry, but too often could be neutralized by a single determined tank driver, parking his vehicle in front of the embrasure.

Finnish strong points began to fall, submerged beneath waves of fanatically brave Soviet infantry, who were often able to approach by sheltering behind the rows of frozen dead from earlier, failed attacks. In some sectors the Russians captured pillboxes that appeared to have sustained only moderate structural damage, only to find the entire Finnish garrison stone-dead inside, unmarked by any wounds, but with rivulets of blood that appeared to have run copiously from their noses and ears before freezing. These men were killed by the cumulative effects of concussion alone – portions of their brains had been pounded literally into jelly.

Yet somehow, as the Russian offensive moved into its second week, the Mannerheim Line still held. There is no rational explanation for the defenders'

endurance. They drew strength from sources not usually tapped, even in combat; from the deepest primal reservoir of human determination and courage. As soon as the shelling let up and new attacking formations were seen beyond the shattered wire entanglements, Finnish officers would stagger through the trenches, blowing whistles, cursing, yelling, slapping, and threatening each soldier in turn, until all were on their feet and stumbling to their assigned firing positions. For ten unspeakable days, they held; they fought back; they recaptured lost positions in fierce hand-to-hand nocturnal counterattacks. The battle for the Mannerheim Line had become, in the words of contemporary journalist John Langdon-Davies: "the sort of nightmare that might trouble the sleep of an athlete, who finds himself entangled in an unending series of last-laps toward a goalpost constantly retreating before him."

On February 8, General Ohquist wrote in his private diary: "The Third Division is dead-tired and absolutely must be relieved." Both Ohquist and the division's commander pleaded with Mannerheim: the troops were collapsing in mid-battle, and the only reserve was a single worn-out battalion that was constantly being shuffled from one crisis spot to another. Could the Marshal not give the Third Division a few days' rest and insert the relatively fresh Fifth in its place? Mannerheim refused. He knew the men of Third Division were barely hanging on, but still they **were** hanging on; nowhere had there yet been a Russian penetration too wide and too deep to be neutralized by counterattack. Sooner or later, there **would** be, of course, and that eventuality would have to be dealt with by the Fifth Division, which was Mannerheim's only strategic reserve. He was resolved not to commit the constituent battalions piecemeal, and with icy nerve

he stuck to that decision, even as reports from the frontlines grew more urgent, indeed hysterical.

On February 9, the shortage of artillery ammunition forced Ohquist to order new restrictions on the guns supporting Second Corps: not a shell was to be fired except to repel a direct, threatening assault. Ohquist later wrote that this was the single most unpalatable order he'd been compelled to issue during the war. His frustration was caused by the fact that the Russians were forming up for mass attacks out in the open, presenting targets that were an artillerist's dream: "the fattest, most impudent targets one can imagine…", but due to the ammunition shortage, his guns could do nothing to disrupt those targets.

On February 10 and 11, the Russians widened their offensive by sending strong infantry columns and light tanks on wide flanking marches around both ends of the Line, at Taipale, on the shore of Lake Ladoga, and at Koivisto on the Gulf coast. These maneuvers may have appeared logical on the map, but in reality they were a costly shambles, for the Russians marched right into the mouths of six, eight, and ten-inch coast artillery batteries. The six-inch pieces were equipped with shrapnel shells, which detonated over the heads of the Russian columns like giant shotgun blasts; the heavier batteries fired only armor-piercing rounds, designed to smash warships, but the titanic weight and velocity of those projectiles broke the surface ice, dumping hundreds of men into the freezing black water beneath. In one assault on the Koivisto fortifications, the Russians sustained 600 dead and 25 tanks set ablaze; at Taipale, the results were similar, reaching a bloody climax on February 14, when 2,500 Soviet troops were cut down on the ice in the space of four hours.

29. BREAKTHROUGH!

As fierce as the fighting had been during the first ten days of February, it was still just an overture to the main assault. The specially-trained 123rd Division still hadn't been committed; the sharp-shooting artillery positioned to fire straight at the embrasures of Poppius Bunker and the Million-Dollar Bunker still hadn't fired. Meretskov had decided not to commit that division against Summa, but against the Lahde Road sector, one mile north of Summa. The terrain there was better suited for tanks; the armor's objectives included not only breaching the Mannerheim Line itself, but also penetrating a fall-back "support line" about 1,000 meters west of the main defenses. If the 123rd could punch through both defensive lines, it would be within easy striking distance of several critical road junctions, the very sensitivity of which would force the Finns either to abandon the Summa sector entirely or bleed themselves white in desperate counterattacks.

February 11 was a Sunday, cold (- 7 degrees F.), and generally foggy. During the night, Timoshenko moved eighteen fresh divisions forward, along with five tank brigades. In front of the Lahde sector, the hidden artillery pieces were unmasked, and additional batteries of 76.2 mm. field guns were laboriously moved forward by hand, to avoid rousing Finnish curiosity. The men of the 123rd Division made ready to launch the attack they so diligently trained for. They knew the eyes of the Kremlin were on them and they were determined to succeed where so many other divisions had failed.

At first light, a hefty vodka ration was issued to the whole division, and to the tankers of the Thirty-Fifth Tank Brigade, who had trained closely with the infantry. While the attacking troops drank their vodka, they watched the stupendous two-and-a-

half-hour bombardment that smote the Lahde sector. Finally, the Russians unmasked their sharp-shooting, point-blank artillery pieces, including the six-incher, which according to some accounts had the honor of firing the first shot, and inflicted punishing damage on both the Poppius and the Millions bunkers; their flat trajectory rounds gouged-out great chunks of concrete and buckled the armored shields across the embrasures.

General Meretskov didn't know it yet, but he'd chosen the ideal day for his breakthrough attack. Finnish troops had rotated in and out of the Lahde defenses, after midnight, and the new men -- Second Battalion, JR-9 – were woefully unprepared. Not only were they new to the ground, but they were also understrength: only 400 men to defend a mile-and-a-half of frontage. To compound the potential for confusion, this was a Swedish-speaking battalion while the units to its left, right, and rear were Finnish-speaking. Worse yet, their commander, a major named Lindman, was wound too tight even before the fighting started. The size and ferocity of the opening bombardment seems to have stunned him into paralysis; he issued few orders, remained hunkered down, shaking, in his bunker, and never tried to rally his men. Essentially, therefore, the Second Battalion was leaderless; company commanders and non-coms would fight the battle on their own.

All three companies were on-line, between Lake Summajarvi and the Munasuo Swamp: on the right, covering the Millions Bunker, was Lieutenant Ericsson's company; in the center, covering Poppius and the Lahde Road itself, was Lieutenant Malm's company; on the left flank, dug in behind Munasuo Swamp, was Lieutenant Hannu's company.

At noon, Leningrad time, the bombardment lifted and two regiments of the 123rd Division surged forward. One entire regiment attacked Ericsson's men and the Million-Dollar Bunker, while another determined battalion went after Poppius. The infantry was escorted by two companies of armor. Poppius resisted stoutly; the first Soviet attack was shattered before it got close, and Finnish artillery destroyed four tanks. Another, fresh Russian battalion was added for the second assault. This time, Poppius was overwhelmed, although the attackers lost two hundred men killed in the first ten minutes of fighting. In accordance with their new tactical doctrine, the Soviet tankers drove their vehicles straight up to the bunker's embrasures, ignoring the torrent of machine-gun bullets sparkling and whanging off their turrets and hulls. Lieutenant Ericsson had already requested a Bofors gun, but just as the enemy tanks were shutting-down his primary fortification, his runner returned with the depressing news that every Bofors gun in the sector was out of commission – not from direct hits but from the effects of concussion. In earlier battles, the defenders had always been able to sneak up on the parked vehicles and destroy them with Molotov cocktails, satchel charges, or grenade-bundles. That didn't work any more, for this time, the enemy tanks were closely screened by soldiers armed with automatic weapons.

At about 12:30, then, Lieutenant Ericsson ordered Poppius abandoned, and pulled his surviving infantry back into a complex of trenches and log-covered emplacements behind the massive blockhouse. A few minutes later, observers from the 123rd's start – line saw a red banner waving from atop the mangled blockhouse; there were lusty cheers, the first victory cheers most of these men had heard since the war began.

Over on the Finnish left, Lt. Hannu's men at first faced only infantry, as the ice skimming Munasuo Swamp wasn't thick enough to support tanks. The ground also slowed down the Russian troops, and provided little cover. So many died on the barren weed-covered bog that the ground was later christened "Death Valley". Hannu's men proved surprisingly steady, but he, too, was compelled to withdraw when he spotted a score of T-28s rolling up the Lahde Road, threatening to turn his right flank.

By 1:00 PM, only Lt. Malm's company, defending the Million-Dollar Bunker, still held their original positions. Four times, the big blockhouse was submerged under waves of Soviet infantry; four times they were cleaned off by hand grenades and Suomi fire. All afternoon and well into the night, the defenders resisted, sometimes using knives and sharpened trench shovels against individual Russian infantrymen who managed to fight their way in through the battered, shell-enlarged embrasures. Twice, under flags of truce, the Russians attempted to persuade the garrison to surrender:

You are now completely isolated and will soon be surrounded, by forces much too strong for you to escape through! Soviet tanks have reached your Support Line, so there will be no help from that direction! You have fought bravely and we salute your courage – therefore we offer you this last chance to surrender with honor intact! You will not be mistreated, and when the war is over we will send you back to your homes! Comrade Stalin has ordered this! Your position is truly hopeless, so don't be fools – take the hand we extend to you before it is withdrawn forever!

According to most sources, there were either 24 or 25 Finnish soldiers still hanging on inside the battered, pitted, sagging fortress, their ammunition gone, their food and water long since consumed. Yet they never wavered, and they responded to the

Russian translator's speech with a resounding chorus of *"FUCK YOU, IVAN!"*. Finally, at the stroke of 5:00 A.M., Soviet sappers lowered a 500-lb. block of TNT into the main gun chamber through a shell-crack in the roof. The resulting explosion killed every man inside, plastering body parts and body-shreds all over the inner walls, like a coat of fresh crimson paint. The force of the explosion ripped a 30-foot hole through the roof and those watching from a distance said that it looked like an erupting volcano..

Now reduced to forty men, Lt. Ericsson's company still continued to resist after the destruction of "their" bunker. His ordnance people got one of the Bofors guns working and knocked out four tanks with it before it jammed again, this time for good.

By nightfall, the 123rd Division and its tanks had secured a lozenge-shaped salient down the Lahde road and up to the edge of the Finnish support line. With darkness coming and Finnish counterattacks almost guaranteed, the Russian tankers wisely decided not to press their luck. They went into a strong defensive laager, signaled for resupply and reinforcement, and then broke out the vodka again. They deserved it; nowhere else on the Mannerheim Line had Timoshenko's big push that day succeeded in forging a breakthrough. Fierce, repeated attacks at Summa were all thrown back with heavy losses, and on the fronts manned by the First, Second, Third, and Fourth Divisions all Soviet lodgments were eliminated by counterattacks during the night of February 11-12.

Now was the time for Mannerheim to unleash his Fifth Division, while the enemy penetration was still relatively weak and disorganized. But the Baron had waited too long, and held the Fifth too far back from the front. Moreover, the parlous state of Finnish communications a caused decisive delay in Mannerheim's being informed of the

true seriousness of the threat – for most of the afternoon, reports about the Lahde sector sounded just like dozens of other semi-hysterical reports from Summa, Taipale and elsewhere. So what if some Red tanks had broken through – no big deal!! It had happened a dozen times already that day, and it was nothing to worry about; local reserves would bushwhack the tanks at night and seal the breach next morning. Only local "reserves" were unable to leave their trenches on the Support Line, due to continued heavy shelling, and would not have been able to knock out the tanks if they had; the tanks were now strongly guarded by infantry with lots of automatic weapons and a whole lot of flares.

By dawn of February 12, Mannerheim finally realized the seriousness of the situation at Lahde, and authorized the release of the three regiments comprising Fifth Division (JR-13, -14, and -15). His plan was to concentrate all three regiments along the Majajoki River and crush the Russian salient with a division-sized attack. Unfortunately events were now outstripping the Finn's ability to cope with them. General Ohquist was forced to commit JR-13 to the Support Line at the head of the salient – which the enemy was close to penetrating – and parcel out a second regiment, JR-14, to seal off another potentially dangerous breakthrough near the boundary of Third and Fourth Divisions. This left just one fresh regiment, JR-114, available for a counterattack against the Lahde salient. So chaotic were conditions in the Finnish rear, where long-range artillery and bombing raids constantly tore up roads, rail lines, and bridges, that JR-14 didn't reach its assembly area on the south bank of the Majajoki until after midnight, February 13.

While the Russians inside the Lahde salient absorbed reinforcements and regrouped for a new attack, fighting elsewhere on the 12th was as savage as it had been

the day before. Five assaults were hurled at Summa; five were thrown back. The Second Division's front was pierced in three places, but all the incursions were eliminated by prompt, vigorous counterattacks. Russian losses on the 12th, in this one sector alone, were staggering – at least 5,000 killed and twice that number wounded – but Timoshenko's strategy of attrition was paying off, because Isthmus Command lost 1200 men that same day. Timoshenko could lose ten times that number and never feel the pinch; Finland could not afford such losses indefinitely…or even for very much longer.

On the morning of 13 February, the Finnish counterattack went in against the Lahde salient: two Finnish battalions attacked from the Majajoki, and a third struck the head of the salient from the west, out of the Support Line. All three battalions made a brave effort, and some ground was retaken, but, unlike the situation in December, this time the enemy was able, swiftly and efficiently, to call down accurate, powerful concentrations of artillery fire, often breaking up Finnish attacks before they had really begun. After JR-14 lost its commanding officer and four successive battalion commanders, its men faltered, and then withdrew, unable to withstand the shelling any longer.

Finnish historian Wolf Halsti, who was an eyewitness to these events, wrote in his diary that afternoon:

> "The tactical situation in and of itself is not hopeless! Only the means of dealing with it are lacking! If only we had some heavy weapons! …What a pleasure it would be to form a battalion out of politicians and bureaucrats and then order *them* to make an attack without the tanks and artillery their stupidity has deprived us of!

Up at the salient's head, the Russians faced a curiously medieval-looking defensive work: a log palisade and an anti-tank ditch, strongly resembling the moat and

wall of a castle. Furious fighting raged for two-and-a-half-hours, with Russian tanks shelling the logs into jagged kindling and their infantry rushing forward to fill in the ditch with bundles of brush, logs, and in some cases, their own bodies. One Finnish company lost 85 men, launching frantic tank-killer attacks with hand-thrown charges and gasoline bombs. It was futile – this time around, the Russians had screened their tanks well, and in return for suffering 60 % casualties, the Finns only knocked out three or four vehicles, a veritable "drop in the bucket"..

At approximately 3:30 P.M., a wedge of fifty tanks crashed through the ruined palisade and drove hard for the Finnish rear. The first objective they overran was a battery of ammunition-less howitzers that had been manufactured in 1905. Much more serious was the loss of ten irreplaceable 150 mm. guns a few kilometers further back – these were overrun so fast that the gunners didn't have to even to spike the pieces.

And then, only one mile from the road junction that offered a clear run over good tank ground all the way to Viipuri, the armored spearhead stopped, reformed for self-defense, and waited for the rest of the 123rd Division to catch up. Why, with total victory so close, did the tanks stop? Indications are that the Russians simply didn't believe the road to Viipuri lay open and defenseless before them or that their victory had been as smashing as it was. They reverted to old habits of caution and thereby gave the Finns a priceless interval to rush men and guns into the tanks' path.

On the morning of February 14, an emergency conference was held at Second Corps' headquarters. Present were General Ohquist – looking haggard and wan – and General Ostermann, the head of Isthmus Command; and of course, Field Marshal Mannerheim. On one thing, the three commanders agreed: the Lahde incursion could not

be retaken with the forces at hand, so a major adjustment must be made to Second Corps' front. Predictably, all three generals give different accounts of the meeting in their post-war memoirs! Ostermann favored a major pull-back to the Rear Line, anchored on Viipuri, which would shorten the Finnish front by some 20 miles, and protect its right flank just as soon as the ice began to soften in the Gulf of Viipuri (usually, this happened by the last few days of March). Ohquist favored making a determined stand at the Intermediate Line. Mannerheim's behavior was cryptic: he pointedly snubbed Ostermann and directed most of his questions at Ohquist, a clear violation of the Baron's own chain of command, indicative of the friction that had been growing for some weeks between Mannerheim and Ostermann. Mannerheim made it clear that he agreed with Ohquist, but did not issue specific orders, leaving the other two generals in operational limbo. Finally, the Baron shared the latest news from the rear: Sixteen-year-old boys, and reservists in their mid-fifties, were being issued rifles and rushed through basic training courses, as were convicts who volunteered to fight in return for commuted sentences. A trickle of company-sized units from other fronts was being rushed to the Isthmus, otherwise… the bottom of the barrel had been scraped.

"What about foreign detachments? Volunteers or otherwise?" Ohquist inquired.

Good question. Mannerheim was forced, by political constraints, to give an equivocal answer: reinforcements from abroad were in the pipeline, but it would be foolish to count on them being numerous enough to make a difference. And then, after delivering this bit of enlightenment, the Baron departed, again without issuing orders. It's likely that he wanted to check on the latest diplomatic news before making tactical decisions. Mannerheim knew things Ohquist and Ostermann did not: that peace

negotiations were underway, that an Allied relief expedition was being assembled in Great Britain, and that Finland retained some power to influence diplomatic events only so long as its army appeared to be undefeated in the field. It was this factor, and not sheer bloody-minded stubbornness that caused Mannerheim to insist that every foot of ground be held as long as possible.

Back at his HQ on the night of February 14th, the Baron learned that no significant changes had taken place on the diplomatic front, that rumors about the Allied "relief expedition" were so contradictory as to be so worthless, and that a final counterattack to blunt the expanding Lahde incursion had fallen apart when the troops committed to it discovered that the anti-tank guns they'd been issued in the dark were **not** the same ones they'd trained on. They were still frantically trying to figure out how to load and fire the weapons when Russian tanks ran over them.

After dark, the battered defenders of Summa pulled out and marched toward the Intermediate Line. It was a bitter moment for them; they had held out for seventy days, against everything the Red Army could throw at them. Next morning, February 15, the Russians launched a tremendous attack, comprising two infantry divisions and 100 tanks, only to find their objective abandoned. When word was flashed to the Kremlin that Summa had "fallen", Stalin at first did not believe it. General Merestkov had to send a high-ranking deputation forward to see the red flag planted on one of Summa's battered pillboxes before Stalin would accept the news as genuine.

At four o'clock on the afternoon of February 15, Field Marshal Mannerheim authorized a general retirement of Second Corps to the Intermediate Line.

30. DANCE OF THE DIPLOMATS, ROUND ONE

By mid-February, Stalin was ready to end this humiliating and costly Finnish side-show. The operation had started out as a quick-and-dirty regional police action, but now it had mushroomed into a major war that had sucked in more than one-third of the **entire** military might of the Soviet Union! The campaigning season in Europe was not far away – who knew what might happen? By the end of March, the ice on Ladoga and the Gulf of Viipuri would start to melt, effectively sealing off both Finnish flanks. There was no doubt in Stalin's mind that, if he were willing to pay the price in carnage, his army could take Helsinki, but if he did so, two wild cards might come into play: first) the Allies might actually commit a strong expeditionary force against him, and secondly) he would assuredly face the prospect of a protracted and bloody guerrilla war in Finland, which would consume God-knew-how-many divisions and offer Hitler a perfect excuse for intervention on behalf of brother Nordics. So all things considered, Stalin was now eager to wrap up the Finnish war – but only after he'd humbled Mannerheim's army appropriately.

By mid-February, the specter of Allied intervention – previously no more than a distant rumble – had suddenly acquired substance. The French and Royal Air Forces had finalized a contingency plan to carpet-bomb the Caucasus oil fields, if Stalin didn't back off.

As for the proposed amphibious expedition, the reader should be mindful that in the late winter of 1940, the USSR was Germany's putative ally! Stalin was supplying Hitler faithfully with important strategic exports. By shutting off those goods, the Anglo-

French alliance thought it would be dealing Hitler a major blow at little cost, seeing as how the Red Army looked to be such a push-over.

There was another major consideration, too: forty per cent of Germany's high-grade ore derived from mines in the northern part of Sweden. Now, **that** was a strategic prize worth gambling for. Churchill had already tentatively approved a scheme to lay minefields in Norwegian territorial waters, to choke off the ore shipments, but now he began to entertain the notion of actually capturing those bases as part-and-parcel of a major Anglo-French effort to save "Brave Little Finland". Justification would be the League of Nations' condemnation of the Soviet Union, and as for Norwegian and Swedish neutrality, that was expected to cave-in when those two countries were faced with a bullying demand for passage issued by the French and British governments. The expedition would land at Narvik, then proceed to Finland alone rail lines that just happened to pass through the Swedish ore fields. Its leaders planned to establish their headquarters in the warm-water port of Lulea, which happened to be the place where the German ore-carriers docked to take on their cargo. It was fully anticipated that Hitler would react violently, but by the time he mounted a counter-offensive, the Allies would be dug in and able to smash the Germans with superior air and naval power. The notion of fighting a shooting war with the Red Army was not taken seriously, although if the plan had gone ahead, such a conflict might well have occurred.

Why did Finland not make that open appeal and thus trigger a major military expedition on her behalf? The main reason is because Gustav Mannerheim and Foreign Minister Tanner saw through the blustery Allied rhetoric and realized that the whole

scheme was likely to come to grief, without providing Finland with enough succor to halt the Red Army.

On paper, summarized, the plan might look bold, even visionary, and it certainly had a quality of breathtaking audacity that betrays the hand of Winston Churchill at every turn.

So what was wrong with the idea? Let me take a deep breath…

There were so many logic-holes and problems that one scarcely knows where to begin listing them. Let's take the biggest problem first: the blithe assumption that Norway and Sweden would be willing to let their countries be used by France and Great Britain as convenient, far-from-home battlefields. Next, there are the wildly contradictory estimates of how many Allied troops were actually going to be sent, and at various times during the diplomatic discussions, that total ranged from a wholly ineffectual 30,000 to a fantastic, utterly unfeasible army of 100,000. But whatever the total number, the Finns always saw, in the fine print, that the British, at least, never intended to send more than a single brigade into Finland, and it would be forced to stay close to its supply line. (Nobody knew what the French really planned to commit to this expedition, including the French government, whose outlines and estimates were so unfocused and vague as to be worthless, for planning purposes. Presumably, the French too would commit at least a brigade, but it would also have to stay in northwestern Finland, close to the Swedish railroads.

Two brigades?

That was a large enough "relief expedition" to allow Mannerheim to bring a few thousand men down to the Isthmus, but was not remotely enough to intimidate the Red

Army! And finally, no one in either Allied government seems to have taken into account the well-known fact that all of Norway's railroads ran on electricity! All it would take to bring the whole Allied effort to its knees was for one Norwegian technician to throw the master ON/OFF switch!

But Allied plans went ahead, anyway, gradually becoming more grandiose until the expedition had swollen to include 100,000 British troops and 50,000 French, along with sizable contingents of air and naval power. If Finland made a public plea for intervention, the first troop convoy would sail from England on March 12. God alone knew what would happen when it docked in Narvik…both Churchill and French premier Deladier were just winging-it now, hoping the thing would work out, but making astounding assumptions about all the "what if" factors surrounding the no doubt sincere desire to help "Brave little Finland".

The major weakness in the Allied plan remained what it had always been: the whole thing hinged on Norway and Sweden giving their permission. Astonishingly, little serious thought seems to have been given to what might happen if they did **not**. General Pownall, chief of staff of the British Expeditionary Force in France, was quick to jump on that point when the plan was revealed to him: "I cannot for the life of me see why they should agree" he wrote in his journal; "for what will they get out of it except the certainty that Germany would declare war on them and part of their countries at least would be used as a battlefield…"

The "so-called neutrals" would agree, Churchill kept insisting, because helping Finland was The Right Thing To Do!" In reply to all cautionary criticisms, the plan's advocates could only respond that the pressure of public opinion, once Finland had

actually made its public cry for help, would force the neutral countries to grant passage, whatever noises they might be making at the moment. Thus beneath all the verbiage and self-righteous posturing, the feasibility of an Allied intervention (as one Finnish historian has put it) “was in reality a gamble on the power of *moral persuasion*, a political force whose stock at that moment in history had seldom been lower.”.

Intense diplomatic discussions took place in Helsinki, from February 8 to February 12. The Finnish government was split: some favored making the appeal as soon as possible, some believed that Sweden would now cast its lot, militarily, in with Finland, rather than acquiesce to Allied pressure. All bets were off, however, when the diplomats learned that, for the first time in seventy days, the Finnish Army was in general retreat, for the Mannerheim Line had been irreparably breached.

31. FIGHTING FOR TIME

No great prodigies of valor were expected of the weary troops manning the Intermediate Line. Only in the “Viipuri Gateway” section (Lake Muolajarvi to the Vuoksi Waterway) were there fortifications comparable in strength to those of the Mannerheim Line. One Finnish historian disdainfully referred to the rest of the Intermediate Line as “nothing but a colored line on a map” -- scratched-out trenches, log-and-sandbag bunkers. hastily laid minefields, and barbed wire entanglements without depth.

Pursuit by the Russians was leisurely (not because of timidity but because of Timoshenko’s new tactical doctrine of keeping the component arms advancing in synch with one another), and it was not until the afternoon of February 16 that contact became general along the Intermediate Line. Brief as it was, this respite proved invaluable to the

Finns: Russian shelling tapered off, while the batteries were being repositioned forward, the weather was foggy but not frigid, neutralizing most of the Soviet aircraft; hot rations came up for the retreating Finns, entrenchments were strengthened; a handful of veteran companies were released from quiet sectors in the far north (thanks in part to a small but well-equipped volunteer regiment of Swedes who took over responsibility for the Ilomantsi front), giving Mannerheim at least a small tactical reserve, and a significant number of new Bofors guns were uncrated and rushed to the front, where they ere emplaced to cover the main avenues of approach to the new defensive positions..

On February 19-21, overconfidence apparently caused some Soviet tank formations to revert to December's tactics – they surged recklessly forward, leaving their infantry screen behind, and paid for it with the loss of approximately fifty vehicles.

A shake-up in command occurred on February 19, an event that shows how murderous the strain had become on the generals as well as the troops in the line. General Ostermann resigned his command "for reasons of health". Mannerheim replaced him, not with Ohquist, who was next-in-line – Ohquist was doing a superb job of holding the battered IInd Corps together and could not be spared --. Overall Isthmus command went to General Heinrichs, who's IIIrd Corps was taken over by General Talvela, the hero of Tolvajarvi.

Three days later, February 22, the coastal forts on and near Koivisto were in such danger of being surrounded that Mannerheim ordered them abandoned and their powerful cannon blown up, despite the punishing toll those batteries had taken on the Russians' left flank. After firing off every shell in their magazines (and for a couple of hours, subjecting the enemy to the sort of savage bombardment the Finns had been enduring –

an infantry division was decimated, a mechanized column wiped out, and two ammo dumps blown up), the coast artillerymen spiked their guns, shouldered their rifles, and marched off to serve as infantry on the numerous smaller fortified islets in the Gulf of Viipuri.)

No longer galled by the Koivisto shore batteries, the invaders surged ahead, pushing back the 4th Division's right flank and actually capturing an island in the Gulf of Viipuri on February 23. This was an ominous sign: the Mannerheim Line had held out for seventy days, but the Intermediate Line was starting to crumble after four and a half. When Ohquist learned that his right flank had been turned, he petitioned Mannerheim for permission to at least draw up contingency plans for a retirement to the Rear Line. The Baron refused. To Ohquist and his staff, the "old man" was being irrationally stubborn, risking the total collapse of his army. But, as before, Mannerheim had his reasons, which he could not share with subordinate commanders. Every square foot of Karelian soil that remained under Finnish control gave the diplomats that much more leverage in the on-going peace negotiations. Additionally, the Rear Line – except for where it ran through the ancient city of Viipuri, really was sketchy and poorly developed – every hour bought more time for the overworked Finnish engineers to strengthen its earthworks and bunkers.

And besides, the Baron later admitted in his autobiography, there was the principle of the thing: "Generals who start talking about defeat are already half-way there."

* * *

February 24: On this day, Finland launched its first and only armored attack of the Winter War, employing its one and only operational company of Vickers tanks. Despite being forewarned, some Finnish units panicked when tanks suddenly appeared behind them – until they recognized the stumpy-armed swastika emblem on the turrets. Initially, this valiant little counterattack drove a wedge into Soviet forward positions (the Russians were every bit as astounded to see **Finnish tanks** as the Finns had been), but before they could achieve anything truly significant, the Vickers machines, which were never very robust on their best days, either broke down mechanically, or were knocked into scrap iron by the heavier armament of their Soviet counterparts. The whole action – while carried out bravely – had a ring of desperation to it. The Vickers vehicles would have been much more useful as mobile anti-tank guns, and surely would have survived longer.

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32. A FINNISH BLITZKRIEG…NOT

Timoshenko had concentrated his full striking power against the Intermediate Line by February 26, planning to hurl two fresh infantry divisions and 100 tanks against its center, but the assault fell on empty trenches; on the night of February 27 - 28 Mannerheim had ordered a general retirement to the third defensive line, now being referred to as The Viipuri Line, which sounded, at least, less desperate than "The Final Line", but the difference was purely semantic.

There **was** no fourth Line. If the Finns held the Viipuri line until, 1) the ice melted in the Gulf, 2) Allied interventionist forces arrived, or, 3) a cease-fire agreement short of

abject surrender could be hammered out by the diplomats, then the Red Army would simply roll on until it captured Helsinki, Turku, and Tampere, and continue, if that was Stalin's wish, all the way to the Swedish border.

33. DANCE OF THE DIPLOMATS, ROUND TWO

As February drew to a close, diplomatic maneuvering room – for the Finns at least – became stiflingly narrow. Foreign Minister Vaino Tanner made one more, very tense, trip to Stockholm, in effect on bended knee, all-but-begging for Swedish military intervention. His Swedish counterpart was heartsick (and to their credit, the Swedish public was clamoring for action against the Red barbarians…but then, the Swedish public didn't know about the planned Allied incursion and annexation of their ore fields, or Hitler's predictably ferocious response to it, which might have turned Sweden into a major theater-of-war). The Swedish government was fully conscious of its relationship to Finland and the deep historical ties that bound the two nations, but no one in a leadership position was crazy enough to urge a declaration of war against the USSR. As before, foreign volunteers and arms shipments would be allowed to pass unhindered across Swedish territory, some more trainloads of Bofors AA and A/T guns would be dispatched immediately, but that was it. Stockholm, too, had its sources of inside information and the Swedish government was convinced that the Allied expeditionary force was just so much bluff and bluster, and militarily speaking, just plain un-do-able; that Hitler just wanted the whole distracting Winter War episode to go away; and that Stalin **was** in fact willing to settle for a truncation of Finland, rather than press on and to seek its utter subjugation. In light of these facts and suppositions, it would be suicidal for Sweden to march to

Finland's aid, and the Swedish Prime Minister very sadly told Tanner that Sweden would not mobilize – Finland was on its own.

No sooner had Tanner returned to Helsinki with this glum news, than the Soviet negotiating team revealed their conditions for a cease-fire:

1) Finland must cede the Hanko Peninsula to the USSR, for use as a naval base, for a period of thirty years;

2) Finland must give up the whole of the Karelian Isthmus, as far west as the old border defined by Peter the Great;

3) To prevent Germany from landing forces on Finnish soil, Finland must sign a mutual assistance pact with the USSR.

It was not Armageddon; considering what Stalin **could** have demanded, most members of the Cabinet thought these terms, while painful, were on the whole less severe than they had feared; these men voted in favor of accepting Molotov's terms immediately, biting the bullet, and ending the bloodshed while yet the Finnish Army stood unbroken. Others believed the situation was not so grim at the front as Mannerheim had been telling them it was, or that the chimerical Allied relief force would materialize any day now. Simple *denial* exerted a paralyzing effect on the Finnish Cabinet.

In any case, time was running out. If the Anglo-French expeditionary force were to sail in time to do any good, the Finns had to broadcast their open plea for succor by March One,. But more and more cables, telephone calls, and letters were coming, from highly-placed British and French sources who were urging the Finns to scale down their expectations. True, the very day the Finnish appeal was made, a

squadron of R.A.F. Halifax bombers would depart for Helsinki from a base in Scotland – although what earthly good a single squadron of obsolescent Halifaxes would do in the face of 500 Red Air Force interceptors, was never discussed. Assuming the Allies did bluster or bully their way across Norway and Sweden – dropping off garrisons at the iron ore fields along the way – Finland could expect to receive approximately 12,000 British and French troops, with modern armor, air, and artillery assets, by the end of March. "Substantial" additional reinforcements were in the pipeline, slated to arrive in Finland in early April, but their arrival was, of course contingent on Hitler mildly accepting the loss of 40 % of his iron ore. If the Allied brigade could assault Petsamo, Mannerheim suggested, and eject the Russians from Lapland, that would free up an entire division's worth of Finnish troops; but Petsamo was, ahem, too far from friendly supplies and not very close to the Swedish ore fields. That operation was ruled out as militarily too iffy (although in this historian's opinion, it was the most viable use that could be made of such a limited commitment, and might actually have worked to a certain degree). But by this time, the Anglo-French strategists had stopped seriously talking among themselves about helping "brave little Finland", and full extent of cynicism that underlay the plan was plain to see. As Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Sir Edmund Ironside, wrote in his diary: "We're most cynical about everything now, except for grabbing the iron ore…" The dithering of the British Cabinet over what to do if Norway and Sweden actually **resisted** struck the realistic Ironside as a pathetic display of Anglo-French impotence: "They're like a flock of bewildered sheep, faced with a problem they have consistently failed to take seriously…I came away disgusted with all of them." The R.A.F. Air Marshal, who had been invited to these strategy conferences only recently, was even

more blunt; he rose in mid-meeting and stormed out, growling over his shoulder, “This whole damned thing is utterly hare-brained!”

In the end, for all their righteous posturing, the Allies were prepared to give Finland just enough aid to prolong her agony, but nowhere near enough to redress the odds against her. The appeal was never broadcast; several Finnish Cabinet members resigned, but both Foreign Minister Tanner and Presdident Kallio held firm in their refusal to play the Allies’ game, showed that common sense, at least, had not deserted the Finns.

Traveling by way of Stockholm, the Finnish peace delegation arrived in Moscow on March 7. They had come prepared to haggle, but when Stalin didn’t even show up to greet them, leaving negotiations entirely in Molotov’s steely grip, the Finns interpreted this snub, quite accurately, to mean that even “haggling” was no longer an option. Molotov kept pleasantries to a minimum, and he presented the Finns with a new and much harsher list of demands:

1) The Isthmus border must be extended several miles further west, in effect stripping Finland of its best natural defensive terrain;

2) A larger swath of Lapland, and a 100-mile-long belt of borderland east of Salla were added to the already painful list of territorial concessions.

This take-it-or-leave-it package of demands, in effect, amounted to the loss of about 18 % of the pre-war land-mass of Finland. Taken aback by these new conditions, and by Molotov’s gimlet-eyed inflexibility, the Finns tried for several hours to find some wiggle-room. There wasn’t any. When one of Tanner’s aides mentioned “war reparations”, as a means of softening the shock to public opinion,

and reminded Molotov that Peter the Great had generously compensated the Finns for the territories **he** had annexed, Molotov snapped: "Well, send a telegram to Peter the Great, and if he authorizes it, we'll pay you some money!"

Molotov gave the Finns two choices: sign the agreement promptly and without any more bickering, or keep fighting and take the consequences. Mannerheim urged them to sign; in another week, he averred, there would no longer **be** an organized Finnish Army. There it was, then, in its starkest terms: Finland had been given a "choice" that was really no choice at all. With heads bowed, and some with tears in their eyes, the Helsinki delegation agreed. President Kallio was deeply bitter about the terms, and remarked as he affixed his signature: "May the hand wither that signs such a document as this!"

Two months later, Kallio suffered a stroke, which left his right arm paralyzed.

34. TIME RUNS OUT

The Gulf of Viipuri was well-defended … against attack from the sea. Nothing whatever had been done to prepare the western coast of the Gulf to resist an attack over land -- not even map exercises. In a normal winter, the Gulf ice would have started to soften by this time in March, but in the extremely harsh conditions of 1940, "General Winter" had turned traitor – the ice was still solid enough to support medium tanks and field artillery. The danger posed by a Soviet landing on the Gulf coast was almost mortal: by reaching, or even bringing under interdictory artillery fire, the Viipuri-Helsinki

highway, the invaders would be in a position to cut off Mannerheim's entire Isthmus army.

But before they could strike that vulnerable coastline, the Russians would have to subdue dozens of small, fortified islets that formed a breakwater across the Gulf. This would bring them – after marching across flat, white, ice-plains – straight into the sights of Finland's coast artillery, a small but elite branch of the armed forces, whose scattered fortresses housed the heaviest, most modern weapons in the Finnish inventory. Without sufficient reserves to mount counter-attacks, Mannerheim was resolved to losing the fortified islets, but he ordered each coast defense outfit to impose the maximum amount of delay and casualties on the Russian tidal wave; capitulation-under-favorable-terms, or an open plea for Allied intervention – however the Finns' hand played out, it was critical to fight for time. As long as the west coast of the Gulf remained under Finnish control, Finland had some leverage; once the Russians had torn out a beachhead, the only "option" remaining was to take Stalin's best deal and sue urgently for peace.

Subduing those dozen-or-so fortified islets was a costly and time-consuming tactical problem for the Russians. One of the first key positions to fall, little Tuppura Island, just west of the Pulliniemi Peninsula, was garrisoned by a single battalion, many of whose men were artillerists with only rudimentary infantry training. Nevertheless, it took the attackers twenty-four hours, and the loss of 14 tanks, and approximately 1,000 fatalities to seize the island. In addition to a pair of six-inch rifles mounted in concrete, the Tuppura defenders could call down monstrous 12-inch armor-piercing shells from a battery of heavy rifles across the bay. Although these potent weapons were accurate out to long ranges, their ammunition was designed to duel with battleships, not large

formations of infantry; nor had Finnish ordnance specialists figured out a way to turn the giant projectiles into anti-personnel rounds. In the end, the weight and velocity of the shells was enough, for the huge guns blasted big cracks in the ice, spilling men and vehicles into the icy waters below. Without special flotation gear and clothing, an ordinary infantryman might last two minutes after immersion in those waters. Here's a Russian survivor's description of one of the numerous attacks on Tuppura:

"*We heard [engine] noises behind us – our tanks were arriving! They drew abreast of us and we took advantage of their sheltering steel to resume our advance. The range decreased steadily … now the [Finnish] machine guns opened fire again, and the our tankists strafed the beaches with their own machine guns, then switched to shelling the coastline with their main turret guns. I could see our tracers splintering the rocky parapets on the beach ahead. It's hard to describe my personal feelings; we were entrusting our lives to those tanks and the protection they gave against a rain of Finnish fire. Now the Finns opened-up with their main, six-inch batteries, hurling time-fused shells which burst in the air above us. Soon, I could see a lot of wounded men writing on the ice around me…. Then, with a sound like a rushing freight train, those infernal shore batteries across the Gulf began hitting us again – their shells weighed many tons and wherever they hit, they tore jagged holes in the ice, sometimes, if a shell struck a patch of ice already weakened by an earlier hit, that whole area would just shatter like a pane of glass. The velocity of those big shells generated shock waves that caused floods of ice-cold water to wash up on to the undamaged surface, forcing us to advance with numbed feet through ankle-deep pools of white slush. [I had been] well-fed and my upper body was warm, but after my boots got flooded with that icy soup, I began to lose feeling in my feet. Suddenly, there was a mighty roar, as one of those naval shells smote the ice not far from me….the tank, behind which we had been advancing, suddenly shuddered … and began to rise into the air at an alarming angle. Then, with a great gulping sound, the vehicle took a nose-dice and instantly slid out of sight through a jagged rupture in the ice. I saw no survivors emerge from that black, icy grave.*

* * *

By the start of March, Mannerheim was taking the greatest risk of his career. The Red Army was throwing its inexhaustible strength at Viipuri and the Rear Line. Behind that line, lay the cultural, economic, and political heart of Finland. By withdrawing from the Rear Line and breaking his army into a multitude of mobile groups, the Baron would have enjoyed a terrain advantage: the Russians could advance toward Helsinki only

through narrow channels of dry land between and among hundreds of lake; even without time to properly fortify them, those areas afforded excellent defensive ground. And within ten days, two weeks at the most, the ice all over southern Finland would begin to melt – under such conditions, a numerically inferior army could delay a superior attacker indefinitely, especially if all the foreign volunteers and donated military equipment "in the pipeline" arrived. But adopting such a strategy would mean abandoning Viipuri before absolutely necessary, and Viipuri was the only bargaining chip the peace delegation could still move on the table. Weather charts were consulted, as though they contained divination in their numbers, and the Karelians on Mannerheim's staff found their memories confirmed: at the end of February or the beginning of March, there was normally a premature thaw – just enough of a taste of spring to turn the icy fields into quagmires and render the lakes impassable to vehicles. That "foretaste of Spring" thaw was long overdue. If it came, within the next seventy-two hours, Mannerheim might be able to hang on the Rear Line just long enough… If the enemy could be stalled outside of Viipuri, even temporarily, Finland might not have to give up her "second city", her beloved "Paris of the Baltic."

Of course, the Russians knew about premature spring thaws, too, and could be expected to throw their full might against the Viipuri sector continuously.

Mannerheim's most pressing worry, though, was: where to find enough men and guns to defend the western shore of the Gulf of Viipuri, deeply indented terrain which, in effect , added twenty-five miles to his defensive line. Men and guns had to be sent there, some kind of ad-hoc organization imposed upon them, and coherent resistance mounted. Part of the solution came from Finland's neighbors: 8,000 Swedish volunteers and 725

Norwegians – all well-trained men and perfectly acclimated – took over the quiescent Salla front on February 23, freeing five Finnish battalions and a handful of cannon, for transfer to the Viipuri sector. Added to the scattered companies of over-aged reservists and teenaged recruits already on hand, and stiffened by detachments from the coast artillery, the aggregate force enabled Mannerheim to create a new combat formation; COASTGROUP, whose only responsibility was to thwart enemy efforts to gain, or worse, expand, a bridgehead on the western Gulf coast.

Capable commanders were getting hard to find, so Mannerheim held his nose and ordered Kurt Wallenius to come down from the semi-independent command he'd held in the arctic north and whip COASTGROUP into an effective formation. Wallenius accepted the challenge boastfully; the old pirate had done a good job in the far-off northern wastelands, where he had more or less run the whole show by himself, and had proven to be a master of fluid, hit-and-run tactics. But when he arrived to take command of COASTGROUP, he found a very different kind of war. It is said that on his very first tour of the new front, he was so flabbergasted by the organizational chaos, the stunning superiority of Russian resources, the pathetic lack of ammunition stocks for the handful of guns under his hand, but mainly by the sheer, murderous, unrelenting noise and fury of the frontline fighting; in less than three hours, his nerves gave way completely. He cut short his tour of inspection, went back to his underground bunker, and proceeded to get reeling drunk. Indeed, over the next three crucial days, he appears to have issued few orders – permitting each company and battalion to fight as its local leaders saw fit – and at every staff conference for three days running, he was so obviously snockered he could barely stand upright, never mind seize control of the deteriorating situation. Reports went

to Mannerheim; officers on-the-scene dispatched sworn affidavits; Mannerheim acted (and probably was glad for an excuse to do so!). He fired Wallenius for dereliction of duty and offered him a chance to avoid the disgrace of a court martial only if he signed an affidavit agreeing never to serve in the Finnish armed forces again, except as a humble volunteer rifleman. Wallenius slunk away into ignominy – in their postwar memoirs, not even the officers who'd once sided with him politically mentioned him by name. On March 3, COASTGROUP received a new commander, General Oesch, one of Mannerheim's personal deputies at Isthmus Command HQ, dutifully undertook the first combat assignment of his career! To everyone's relief and surprise (not least his own) Oesch took control cool-headedly, refused to panic, and in truth performed a miracle of inspiring leadership by forming a thin but cohesive line, establishing rudimentary communications, and pooling his scant artillery resources so they could be committed swiftly and in unison against the most threatening Soviet activity.

Despite the iron will of their new C.O., and their own raw courage, it was too late for COASTGROUP to bar the way. The same night Oesch took command, the Soviet Twenty-eighth Corps pushed a massive attack across the Gulf and wrested control from the Finns of two small beachheads, at Vilaniemi and Haranpaaniemi; simultaneously, the enemy Tenth Corps struck across the Gulf in a northwestern direction and laid siege to the last ring of small fortified islands between them at the city limits of Viipuri, gravely threatening the main Finnish supply line. On that one night, approximately 600 Russian soldiers were killed, and fifteen tanks destroyed, by the bone-weary, shell-deafened little garrisons still hanging on to their tiny island fortresses. Back in his Leningrad headquarters, Timoshenko, too, was glancing nervously at his calendar and calculating

how much time he had before the spring thaw made it impossible for him to march troops across the ice. He shifted the axes of advance of a half-dozen divisions, angling them toward Viipuri, squeezing the defenders into a siege situation that could have but one outcome.

* * *

From the night of March 3-4 to the moment the cease-fire went into effect, the advancing Soviet formations actually earned the journalistic cliché "hordes". From the air, their columns looked like enormous anacondas slithering forward -- whole regiments marching as though on parade, each spearhead preceded by armored wedges of 30 – 50 tanks and the Finnish positions before them smothered by an endless rain of shells from 1500 cannon. Now was the finest, most desperate hour of Finland's diminutive Air Force, which carried out sortie after sortie, inflicting terrible losses on any Russian column that entered their sights. Finland's leading ace, Captain Eino Luukanen, described a typical ground-attack mission:

We no longer even had to search for our targets; the minute we flew over COASTGROUP's lines, we could see them: about six miles away, an endless winding column of men, carts, and vehicles trudging across the ice. I judged [that day's first] target to be a …detachment of about 500 men, and from the air the troops appeared motionless. Suursaari was covered with fog, so we had little to fear from Russian fighters, and as we closed with our target our Fokkers lined up in a single file for a strafing run. We could not have been offered a better target. The Russians were not even wearing white parkas as camouflage, and were sharply defined against the snow-covered ice. I gently eased the stick forward to commence my strafing run. I can only assume that the Russians had been promised some form of air cover, for they made no attempt to break column at the noise of our engines. I leveled off at thirty feet, loosing a stream of lethal bullets into the column from all four guns.

Panic immediately overtook the Russians as I roared past their heads. Some dropped in their tracks, others endeavored to hold the frightened horses, while others scattered in all directions, slipping and sliding on the ice. My undercarriage almost scraped some heads. Backwards and forwards we roamed across the remnants of the column, pouring some eight thousand rounds into them from our thirty-two machine guns.

* * *

March 2: General contact is joined along the entire Rear Line. When the Russians try to exploit a patch of good tank ground near Tali, northeast of Viipuri, Finnish engineers open the gates of the Saima Canal, flooding the plain to as depth of three feet, channeling the assaults into pre-sited kill-zones; but fanatically brave Soviet sappers ("among the most courageous men I ever saw, on either side," one veteran told me) crawl through the slush up to their chins in order to blow holes in Finnish wire and anti-tank obstacles – six hours after the inundation, the flooded land is frozen solid enough to support tanks.

March 4: There are now an estimated thirty Soviet divisions, supported by 1200 armored vehicles and 2,000 aircraft, hammering the Rear Line – about as many men and tanks as there is physically room to accommodate. Every Finnish shell destroys something; it's almost impossible for it not to, but there aren't many Finnish shells left. COASTGROUP recaptures Vilaniemi, then loses it again. Half the defended islands in the Gulf are now in Soviet hands and those still resisting are assaulted repeatedly, the attacks pressed into the bores of four- and six-inch coast defense guns and heavy concentrations of Maxim fire. Timoshenko is losing an estimated 700 men an hour out on the Gulf ice alone, and a dozen tanks and transports per hour as well. By Western standards, horrific, unsustainable casualty rates – one must look back to the opening days of the Somme even to find a rough comparison!

But it makes no difference whatever. Timoshenko will not run out of soldiers. But Mannerheim will; indeed, for all practical purposes, he already has.

One by one, the fortified islets are submerged and the inner ring of Viipuri's defenses grows thinner and weaker. As soon as one Soviet battalion falls to thirty-per-cent combat effectiveness, it's pulled out of line and replaced by a fresh one. Timoshenko has them lined up like crowds standing in line for World Series tickets, and the line stretches back almost as far as Leningrad. There can only be one outcome, arithmetically speaking…

March 5: Circumstances exert a murderous pressure. Mannerheim is taking a desperate risk, and doing it while confined to a chair with a severe case of the flu. If he gives the order to evacuate the Rear Line **now** – i.e., before noon on the 5th – an orderly withdrawal is still possible. But there are no new fortified lines between Viipuri and Helsinki; no "rested" troops of any kind, in fact, except for a few companies of terrified teenagers with ten days' training and a half-dozen clips of rifle ammo. Commanders in Viipuri itself are hastily drawing-up plans for a stubborn house-to-house defense; the most optimistic give the city 4-5 days resistance, but only if reinforcements and bullets are somehow funneled into the city. Where **those** would come from is anybody's guess – the modest state arms' export facilities were working full-bore, full-time and in the past four days their personnel have loaded hundreds of thousands of rounds of 7.62 mm. ammo on to boxcars, but between incessant Russian air raids and opportunistic local units helping themselves, very little's getting through the "narrow end of the funnel".

March 5: Timoshenko hurls an entire fresh division, supported by 100 tanks, into the confines of the Vilaniemi beachhead. Again, the heavy coastal batteries cause enormous casualties by raining armor-piercing rounds on to the ice, which spider-webs and cracks, pulling down whole companies of infantry and tanks by their twos and threes,

in a manner eerily reminiscent of the climactic "Battle on the Ice" scenes in *Alexander Nevsky*

March 6: Emergency signal from COASTGROUP to General Ohquist states that one Russian beachhead can be eliminated by counterattack provided ammunition resupply comes up for the outfit's handful of guns. Ohquist can do nothing. At the time he receives this plea, the entire reserve stock of artillery ammunition for IVth Corps amounts to 600 shells – for all calibers..:

March 7 – 8: The Finnish Twenty-third Division falls apart. One battalion finally reaches its limit and abandons its earthworks under shell-fire. A sister battalion, not having suffered quite so badly, is ordered to extend its lines to fill the gap. Whether spontaneously or by carefully choreographed plot, this battalion, too, declares that its men have Done Enough. Threats and entreaties by their officers only provoke open mutiny: two companies of the affected battalion simply point their rifles at their own officers, and then walk away from the battlefield, heading in the general direction of "Home." This is the first large-scale mutiny in the Finnish Army's history and the news sends a chill down Mannerheim's back. Despite enormous losses, the enemy has succeeded in expanding his beachhead perimeters by a few hundred yards. For the first time, Soviet forward oservers start calling aimed fire down on to the Viipuri-Helsinki highway. If that road falls permanently under enemy control, COASTGROUP will disintegrate. Without exception **all** radio and telephone communications have broken down by mid-morning, March 8. Only runners get through – sometimes. Thanks to the initiative of local platoon leaders and NCOs, fragments of shattered units coalesce into spontaneous *kampfgruppen,* each one fighting it own bitter and personal little war.

March 9 – 10: Mannerheim authorizes abandonment of all islets still in Finnish hands by that late date. Battalions from Fifth and Sixth Division begin setting up barricades inside Viipuri. The Russians concentrate heavy bombardments against the city's medieval citadel, but not even modern artillery can do more than chip the granite walls. Near midnight on March 9, General Ohquist writes in his private diary: "This is an awful gamble we are taking! It's just possible we can retain control of Viipuri for another twenty-four hours. If we're ordered to continue resistance beyond that time, either the garrison or the city itself is doomed."

Ohquist had just read the day's official casualty report. At the start of hostilities, Isthmus Command had approximately 160,000 men; it now has fewer than 75,000 considered fit for duty. IVth Corps, therefore, is now fighting at half-strength, in a more or less permanent state of exhaustion, against an enemy whose supplies and reserves are, for all practical purposes, inexhaustible.

By dawn, March 11, one cannot speak of a Finnish "line" as such: isolated bands of Finnish troops continue to offer frenzied resistance, but despite their all-out efforts, the enemy is now only six kilometers from the center of Viipuri. Hand-to-hand fighting rages all along the western shoreline, a flaming cauldron in which units of equally determined men savage each other with bayonets, grenades, rifle butts, and rocks. But despite their overwhelming superiority in numbers and guns, and their utter monopoly on armor, the Russians never quite penetrate COASTGROUP's zone in strength. By the time the cease-fire goes into effect, at 11:00 A.M. on March 13, the main Russian spearhead is only two kilometers from the ancient Citadel… but the Finnish flag still flies atop its noble cupola, although often hidden from view by roiling clouds of smoke, and although it is rent into

rags by shrapnel, no Finnish hand ever lowers it; it is still there, stirring in a fitful wind, when the Russians approach to claim their hard-won castle.

* * *

Firing died down slowly as eleven o'clock approached. Nobody on either side wanted to be the last man killed in a war already officially terminated. As things quieted down, dazed Finnish soldiers emerged hesitantly from their battered dug-outs, eyes wide in disbelief at the punishment the landscape had taken all along the 100-mile-wide Isthmus front. Where once dense woods had covered the shallow valleys, all that remained were splintered stumps and bare, blasted saplings; the land in front of Summa reminded more than one foreign observer of those photographs of the ground near the Somme, or the ruined vales in front of Verdun – thousands of raw, overlapping shell craters, "lunar escarpments" wrote one London correspondent, " poisoned-looking, a dun-colored, bruised landscape were the only bits of color were the icy filigrees of shell-chopped wire entanglements, glinting sharply under a wan, wintry sun."

In some sectors, Russian and Finnish soldiers had already begun cautious fraternization, united for a brief moment by the shared miracle of having survived 105 days of the heaviest sustained bombardment since 1918. But suddenly, at 10:45, the infantrymen from both armies lunged once more for cover, when someone in the Soviet high command initiated one final, crushing, bombardment along half the length of the Karelian Isthmus. Was there any military reason for this "parting shot", which added some 300 men to the casualty lists? No; there was none whatever. It was an act of sheer vindictive spite, a gesture of pique toward the exhausted Finns who had held the Red

Army at bay for 105 days.. Despite world-wide indignation at this final act of treachery, the Soviet Union never offered either an apology or an excuse.

And at precisely at eleven o'clock, the guns fell silent for good. The defenders of the Karelian Isthmus marched out of their entrenchments with heads held high. Following the methodical pull-back of Finnish troops, came a mass exodus of the civilian population, who piled their worldly belongings into sleds and farm wagons, and trudged westward behind the retreating soldiers, abandoning land and farms that had been theirs for three or four generations.

* * *

The great photo-journalist Carl Mydans, his assignment to cover the war for Life Magazine now terminated, dispiritedly packed his belongings and boarded a packed train for Sweden. Mydans was billeted in a tiny sleeping compartment with three Finnish officers, one of whom was a colonel. During the night, all four men maintained a polite silence, each wrapped in his own thoughts. The next morning, Mydans was repacking, with as much dignity and decorum as was possible under the strained circumstances and cramped quarters. The Finnish colonel was shaving, balancing his straight razor against the swaying of the train. At one point, he caught Mydans' eye in the mirror.

"You're an American?" the colonel asked in flawless English. Mydans nodded, noticing as he did so that the other two Finns were studiously avoiding eye-contact. As Mydans told it:

> The colonel began to scrape once more at his chin.
> "At least you will tell them that we fought bravely."
> Mydans felt his guts knotting, Unable to speak above a whisper, he promised that he would, indeed, tell the world about how bravely the Finns had fought.
> The colonel carefully wiped his razor, then dabbed at his face with a towel. He had cut his cheek and there was a tiny bubble of blood swelling there. After putting some

adhesive tape over the nick, the colonel began to button his tunic. Mydans observed that the officer's hands were trembling.

Suddenly he turned and glared straight at Mydans, his face twisted with anguish. He began in low, hoarse tones. "Your country was going to help…" Then his voice got louder: "You promised and we believed you…"

Then he grabbed Mydans by the shoulders, his hands really digging in, and shouted: "A half-dozen God-damned Brewster fighters with no spare parts is all we got from you! And the British sent us guns from the last war that wouldn't even fire!"

The other Finns turned their backs and self-consciously finished dressing. The train rattled into the station. The Finnish colonel dropped his hands, fell across the nearest bunk, and began convulsively to weep.

35. AFTERSHOCKS

For its unwillingness to dance to Stalin's tune, Finland paid a high price indeed. In human terms, the war cost the lives of 24, 923 Finnish soldiers and airmen; another 43, 557 were wounded. Almost a half-million Finns were displaced from their homes in the territorial concessions, which amounted to 25,000 square miles. If the casualty figures seem disproportionate, try viewing them from another perspective: in 1940, the total population of Finland was slightly under four million. If the same percentage of combat losses had been inflicted on the United States, based its 1940 population, they would have amounted to 2.3 **million** killed or wounded in 105 days of fighting.

We shall never know the exact number of Russian casualties. Given the hasty mobilization of some conscript units, the slovenly record-keeping endemic to such units, and the primitive conditions under which some of the campaigns were waged, it's unlikely the Soviet government ever had more than a rough estimate. Molotov's official data, released in the summer of 1940, tallies 48, 745 combat deaths and 159,000 wounded. No one believed those figures at the time and no one had given them credence since (with the exception of a single Russian zealot who keeps bombarding me and

several other historians who have web sites with shrill and belligerent claims that we have "swallowed Finnish propaganda" in our research and that it is the Finns who've been lying all this time, though God knows what reason they might have for doing so; I no longer bother responding to such emails – life's is too short to hold debates with close-minded zealots. Furthermore, no "official" Soviet statistic were ever published concerning the "missing", who numbered in the tens of thousands. In his *Memoirs*, Nikita Khrushchev flatly states "we lost one million men", but that is surely hyperbole. Modern Finnish historians, using the latest available documentation from now-accessible Soviet archives, tend to put the Red Army losses in the high-middle between Molotov's and Khrushchev's numbers, and I do, too. My best guess would be 230,000 – 270,000 killed and another 300,000 wounded, along with at least 25,000 "missing". Those are shocking numbers for a campaign that was originally envisioned as a three-week "police action".

To whatever totals you care to accept, be sure to add the roughly 5,000 Red Army POWS who were duly repatriated. Few, if any of them, were ever seen by their families again. Indirect evidence and anecdotal testimony suggests that all of them were intercepted at the frontier by NKVD units, packed off to secret camps in the wilderness near the White Sea, interrogated, and then taken into the forests and shot. Most of these men deserved a hero's welcome, or at least honor and compassion; to Stalin, however, they were a form of human virus – their brief enforced exposure to Finnish capitalist society had tainted them irreparably and they had to be exterminated because of the political microbes their brains might have become infected with.

Whatever the actual losses, the blunt truth was voiced by a highly-placed Soviet officer on General Timoshenko's staff who was heard to mutter, as he studied the treaty maps: "We seem to have won just enough land to bury our dead…"

The most profound consequence of the Winter War is also one of the hardest to quantify. Brutal though it was, the Finnish campaign exposed glaring, hitherto unsuspected weaknesses in the training, equipment, tactics, and leadership doctrines of the Soviet armed forces. Starting in April, 1940, the Supreme Military Soviet held a series of top secret meetings to digest and analyze the lessons to be learned from the Winter War; as a result of their findings, widespread reforms were recommended. The power and importance of frontline political commissars was greatly reduced – a stunning percentage of these Party stalwarts had revealed not only total military incompetence but cowardice as well; from now on, their role would be more along the lines of ideological traffic cops and morale-boosters than adjuncts to the actual conduct of operations. Old-fashioned forms of rank and discipline were re-introduced. Clothing, equipment, rations, and tactics for winter combat were all thoroughly re-evaluated. In short, professionalism was once more the top priority, not ideological correctness. Not all the suggested reforms could possibly be implemented during the fifteen-month grace period between the end of Finnish hostilities and the Nazi invasion of June, 1941; but enough **was** done during that interval to render the Red Army a much tougher and better-equipped opponent than it would have been if the Winter War had not exposed its weaknesses. To cite but one example, the vaunted T-34 tank would not have been ready for mass production until mid-1942, if the post-Finland shake-up hadn't made it a higher priority. One doesn't want to exaggerate the might-have-beens, but it's entirely possible that without the reforms

occasioned by the Finnish debacle, the Red Army would not have been able to recover from the German onslaught of 1941. Moscow held out by the thinnest of margins (and with the aid of a few timely blizzards) , and the reason it did may well be found in the changes the Red Army had implemented since the end of the Winter War, from improved equipment to the wide-spread use of snow camouflage.

* * *

Once Hitler decided to attack the USSR, a re-match between Finland and its giant neighbor was almost inevitable. After the Germans occupied Denmark and Norway, Finland was physically and politically isolated from any outside help the Western Democracies might otherwise have sent. France had collapsed with almost contemptible ease; Great Britain was fighting for its life; American was…well, it might as well have been on the other side of the Moon. Finland was friendless except for the one military strong nation that had helped the Finns achieve their independence: Germany.

Not the least of the Winter War's many ironies was the fact that by invading Finland and crushing her "neutral" stance beneath his tank treads, Stalin virtually guaranteed the creation of the one thing he feared the most: a military alliance between Finland and Nazi Germany.

Only it would never be formally defined as "an alliance". During an extended series of strategy and diplomacy conferences – which included a number of wargames postulated on cooperation between the two Nordic nations in fighting the common Bolshevik enemy (all of those map-exercises being described as "purely hypothetical", of course), it became increasingly obvious that both Finland and Germany stood to benefit from cooperation on the battlefield.

Less obvious, to the Finns at any rate, were the likely benefits of a close political affiliation; as for any ideological ties, there seemed to be no real basis for those, nor any discernable benefit Finland could derive from them. Having been an invaded country, Finland wanted to keep a reasonable distance between her own leaders and those of the Third Reich; for, while the professionalism of the *Wehrmacht*, in defeating the armies of Poland, France, and the Low Countries, impressed Mannerheim and his staff beyond mere "respect", it could not be forgotten that those victories had come, in part, because of unprovoked and large unjustified German aggression. Far from admiring Hitler, Mannerheim thought him a smarmy, "common" little bully, a beer-hall thug who just got lucky, and although he had tried to read *Mein Kampf*, like so many others with good intentions, he was defeated, glassy-eyed, before he got to page 300, by its dullness, its prolixity, and the unsavory nature of many of its arguments. But the Baron was already convinced that a titanic war was coming between Germany and the USSR; and a "neutral" posture was no longer an option for Finland. Neither was a "mutual assistance" deal with Stalin, for that had already been discussed and rejected, in thunderous terms. But Mannerheim wanted to preserve as much freedom-of-maneuver for Finland as possible, and so he rejected several drafts of an outright defense alliance with Germany.

But if Finland was going to war at Germany's side, it to define its diplomatic .posture **somehow**. Finally, some of the more experienced diplomats -- possibly Vaino Tanner himself -- suggested the term "co-belligerent" , for that was the phrase a nation uses to describe its military cooperation, in pursuit of overlapping but not identical political goals, with another nation whose ideology, leadership, or agenda it neither identified with nor approved of. Granted, to the public-at-large, both in Finland and in the

Allied nations previously so sympathetic to her, the distinctions embodied in that term were so subtle as to be almost invisible, but to foreign diplomats, the word's usage definitely conveyed what it was supposed to. Hitler knew exactly what Mannerheim was up, and he didn't like it much, but if a change in semantics brought Finland into the war on Stalin, he was willing to acquiesce.

Before the curtain rises on the so-called "Continuation War", it might be best to ask a few questions and also postulate answers to them. For instance: was there group of hardcore Nazi sympathizers in the Finnish officer caste?

My answer: Do the wild reindeer defecate on the tundra?

I suspect that there is at least a germ of latent Fascism in every professional military careerist, just as there is in virtually every corporate CEO, most police chiefs, and a sizable number of university presidents, for that matter. Our sense of that label is much changed from what it would have been in 1940, when the line between a crypto-Fascist and a dedicated anti-Communist was a lot fuzzier than it became after the war. And the mixture of those two ingredients varied greatly from officer to officer. Let's not forget, too, that virtually all of Finland's senior commanders received their training in Germany, and while they were **in** Germany, they had seen first-hand the pathetic failures of the Weimar Republic, and contrasted that chaos and economic shambles of **that** era with the clean, well-regulated state Germany seemed to have become. It is inconceivable that a people as basically decent and tolerant as the Finns would have acted in such close concert with Nazi Germany if they had known the extent and barbarity of Hitler's crimes against minorities. Finland at that time had so few Jews that they were more a novelty than a minority. But it did have one sizeable population that it could have turned on: the

indigenous Gypsies. Yet no accusations were made against them, no pograms were launched to round them up, and no camps were erected for their extermination. The Finnish gypsies pursued their traditional occupations [smuggling, fortune-telling, and horse-theft] with the same sporadic diligence as ever..

Of course it was true, in Finland as in many other ostensible democracies, including our own, that some officers were more zealous and more belligerent than others; but they all tended to mind their political manners, because at the top of the chain-of command was a monolith: Carl Gustav Mannerheim, and nobody ever has or ever will describe him as a sentimental liberal. And all of the Baron's actions, before and during the Continuation War, were entirely consistent with his life-long dedication to Finland and its prosperity, not to the furtherance of any particular ideology.

All the same, there are aspects to the Continuation War that still make Finnish historians queasy. The tragic irony of this second go-round is that no matter what the niceties of diplomatic rhetoric, many foreign observers were dismayed or even shocked by the apparent transformation of Finland from a shining beacon of political and cultural idealism into a battlefield partner of one of the century's two most odious totalitarian despots (the other one being, of course, Joe Stalin!) The image of Finland, if not the nation's very honor, was certainly tarnished by this episode.

And yet, one can scarcely blame Mannerheim for seizing the opportunity to reclaim the stolen lands of East Karelia or the beautiful ancient city of Viipuri, by hitching a right on the Nazi tiger's back. As soon as Mannerheim had defined the two nations' relationship and Hitler had agreed to that definition, actual strategic planning commenced in earnest. Finland would carry the burden of this war in the regions that it

wanted most to regain, by availing himself of the protection offered by an entire German army corps operating on his left flank, attempting to seize the vital ice-free port of Murmansk, by advancing across Lapland from its supply and administrative depots in Norway. And this time around, in contrast to the desperation Finland's population felt in November, 1939, there was enormous public approval of this "crusade of reclamation". If Mannerheim had not bowed to the demands of *Realpolitik*, he most likely would have been retired in favor of a commander-in-chief who would have backed the war much more recklessly than the Baron proved willing to do.

This time, Finland strained every national fiber to gain her stated objectives. Fully 16 per cent of the population served in uniform, including 80,000 female auxiliaries. Mannerheim was now able to field sixteen decently, if not spectacularly, equipped divisions, a total of 470,000 men. This time, the Finns had armor in some abundance, thanks to the 300-odd Russian vehicles captured during the Winter War and reconditioned during the 15-month lull; and considerably stronger artillery support – again, most of it supplied by the Red Army, for the spoils from the Winter War had included more than 600 support weapons of varied calibers. The Germans contributed some batteries of powerful 150 mm. heavies, some squadrons of ME-109s, and perhaps most importantly, around one hundred Czech T-38 tanks – agile, dependable machines which did yeoman service until the Reds began to deploy T-34s and large numbers of KV heavy tanks on the Finnish front, at which time the Czech machines became too badly out-gunned to engage in stand-up fights.

As for the Finnish Air Force, that polyglot service was unique and colorful. So many distant but well-intentioned nations had aircraft in the pipeline when the Winter

War ended that Finnish pilots in the Continuation War ended up flying specimens of aircraft from every combatant nation that waged World War Two, with the exception of the Japanese!

Even as late as March, 1940, it might have been possible for Stalin to woe the Finns back into a neutral stance, but the Kremlin's heavy-handed behavior seemed to indicate that Moscow regarded a new war as inevitable. Agents of the Kremlin continually interfered in Finland's internal politics, and did so with their customary brand tractor-factory subtlety, and so many of them were caught, as it were, red-handed that strained relations became ever more frayed. Starting in May, 1941, the Red Air Force began making reconnaissance flights over Finnish territory without so much as a by-your-leave. As reflected in radio broadcasts and newspapers, Stalin's attitude toward Finland was anything but conciliatory; in fact, he already believed there was a secret military alliance between Finland and the Allies, or between Finland and the Nazis – between Finland and *somebody* – and that if war broke out, the USSR would face either an Anglo-French landing at Petsamo or a massive German expeditionary force crossing the border from Norway, or steaming into Turku harbor and marching straight toward Leningrad. In point of fact, Russia was **already** treating Finland like a hostile country – several weeks, indeed, before the "hypothetical" Finno-German strategy conferences turned into real discussions of operational planning. Although Stalin was genuinely stunned when the Germans actually attacked in June, and had pointedly refrained from allowing his forces to do anything, or his state-run media to say anything, antagonistic to Hitler, he did nothing to curb the taunting, crude attacks on Finland that went on daily, through the editorial pages of Pravda and on the radio, and becoming, by early May, almost

ludicrously pugnacious. When Helsinki protested the almost daily violation of Finnish air space, *Pravda* responded by printing a bullying, hectoring series of editorials and running a series of scabrous cartoons (in which Mannerheim was portrayed as a degenerate-looking old rooster or a toothless lion toothless lion) which seemed openly to be taunting the Finns: "If you don't like it, *do* something about it." Three days after the launch of Operation Barbarossa, Finland did.

On June 23, two days after Hitler invaded the USSR, Stalin handed Finland a perfect pretext for declaring war, by launching a series of strong pre-emptive air raids pn targets deep inside Finland. The consequences were tragically foreordained: Finland declared war that same day.

In contrast to the mood that obtained at the start of the Winter War, the Finnish public was almost relieved when this new war began. But instead of a desperate struggle for self-defense, the Continuation War took a completely different form: it was, from the start, a national crusade of reclamation. Finland entered the conflict without illusions, but with every national resource strained for a maximum effort. Fully 16 % of the population served in the ranks, including 80,000 female auxiliaries. At its greatest strength, the field army mustered 475,000 men. In addition to the motley but large assortment of guns and tanks the Finns had captured during the Winter War, Mannerheim's strength was greatly augmented by German shipments of heavy artillery, ME-109 fighter aircraft, and approximately 110 Czech T-38 tanks, which proved to be agile and reliable machines, although hopelessly out-gunned after the Reds began deploying their T-34s. In Lapland, an entire German corps, including elite alpine regiments, lumbered across the Norwegian border and opened a dangerous secondary front against Murmansk.

There were aspects of this conflict that bordered on surreality. In one of History's most extreme role-reversals, Great Britain humored Stalin by formally declaring war against "Brave Little Finland". But the declaration was strictly a formality, and the British government made sure Helsinki understood that. The Imperial General Staff had not the slightest intention of waging serious offensive operations against Finland; when Stalin kept demanding warlike behavior of Great Britain, Churchill indulged him by authorizing a single long-range bombing raid against Turku harbor, during the course of which most R.A.F. crews chose voluntarily to dump their bombs into the sea.

All the Allied governments, in fact, understood how unpalatable Finland's situation was; understood her motives for going to war again; and more or less forgave her in advance for accepting German aid – where else would aid have come from? Indeed, when Mannerheim's troops finally recaptured the entire length of the Old Border, the first telegram of congratulations to reach Helsinki was not from Adolph Hitler, but from American Secretary of State Cordell Hull. Except for minor advances to seize local bits of favorable terrain, Mannerheim halted his whole army athwart the former national boundary and told his troops to start digging in defensively. Having reclaimed the land Russia had taken from them in 1940, the Finns halted most attacks, dug in on the best defensive ground they controlled, and quite openly informed the Kremlin that it had nothing to fear from Finland via-a-vis the besieged city of Leningrad. By the end of January, 1942, the early battles-of-maneuver had given way completely to long periods of almost stagnant trench warfare.

The immediate military effect of Finnish involvement was most crucial on the Karelian Isthmus. In the first, most desperate winter of the Leningrad siege, Russian

military resources were stretched so perilously thin that a determined Finnish offensive, if launched in conjunction with an all-out German assault, might well have cracked apart the city's already strained to-the-limit defenses. That such an offensive did **not** take place, goes a long way toward validating Mannerheim's unwavering contention that Finland's only motive for renewed war was the recovery of land that was rightfully hers. In fact, he forbade Finnish heavy guns from firing into the besieged city. Hitler exerted near-hysterical pressure on the Finns to renew their Isthmus attacks, but Mannerheim stood his ground; the Allies took note of this – the temptation to drive east and "finish the job" was nearly overwhelming, even for Mannerheim – and reassured Stalin that he could, in fact, take the Finns at their word.

By the start of 1942, the drive against Murmansk had stalled and was never to regain momentum. Bitter Russian resistance, dreadfully hostile terrain, and a fragile two-lane supply line back into Norway, made it quite impossible to sustain the advance against Murmansk. The mighty *Wehrmacht* was every bit as bogged down in Lapland as the Red Army had been, two years earlier.

All along the Arctic front, a stalemate ensured that lasted for two years. Eventually, some 180,000 Finnish troops were demobilized, in order to ease the strain on the nation's economy. By the start of 1944, Finland realized that Germany was losing the war. Peace feelers began extending from Helsinki to Moscow: let us keep most of our old land, and we'll be glad to sign a peace treaty. But when Hitler got wind of this development, he sent a sharp warning to Finland by suddenly halting all shipments of food and munitions. Within a week, Finland could feel the pinching consequences, both at the front and at the civilian markets in Helsinki, where even common bread suddenly

became impossible to buy. This chastisement had the desired effect: it reminded the Finns of just now dependent they had become on Germany and how rapidly their situation would worsen if Germany withdrew her largesse.

At this juncture, Finland faced an agonizing choice. If it sought peace unilaterally, Hitler still might opt for military occupation (as he in fact did in Hungary, when **that** nation too tried to leave the Axis and make a separate peace with Stalin). But if some kind of settlement weren't reached with the Kremlin, it was only a matter of time before Stalin could spare enough forces to turn his attention in a northern direction.

Not until June, 1944, could Stalin see his way clear to launch a knock-out offensive against Finland. Two years of static positional warfare had sapped Finnish morale, and by the time the Soviet offensive opened all along the front in Karelia, the Finnish Army was reduced in strength to 268,000 dispirited men. Against them, Stalin unleashed a stupendous assault by a half-million infantry, 800 tanks, 2,000 aircraft, and **ten thousand** cannon. Finnish defensive fortifications were pulverized, whole regiments fell apart. Viipuri, which had never fallen in the entire 105 days of the Winter War, fell to the Reds only ten days after their new offensive began – in a single day, after only desultory resistance. Even today, the fall of Viipuri is referred to as "the blackest day in the history of the Finnish Army".

Mannerheim had no choice but to choke down his pride and beg Hitler for help. Hitler certainly didn't want to Russians to occupy Helsinki, but he cruelly toyed with the Finns for thirty-six hours, only agreeing to send significant military aid after he'd forced President Risto Ryti to formally pledge fealty to the Third Reich. Ryti out-foxed Hitler, however. He swore allegiance by means of a personal hand-written letter to Hitler, which

soothed the Fuhrer's vanity but which was not, by international law, a document legally binding to anyone else in the Finnish government. In effect, Hitler got the satisfaction of turning the President of Finland into his personal bond-servant, but he completely missed the subtle diplomatic consequences of Ryti's shrewd ploy.

Once Berlin gave the green light, flotillas of German S-boats rushed north from their Baltic bases, carrying 5,000 of the deadly new "*Panzerfaust*" anti-tank rockets, while an air flotilla of Stukas, and a regiment of self-propelled assault guns roared straight from their bases into combat on the Isthmus. With this massive infusion of firepower, the Finns rallied, destroying more than 200 Russian tanks in the first ten days of July alone. Late in that month, up near Ilomantsi, they even showed some of their Winter War brilliance by applying motti tactics in the summertime and routing two entire Soviet divisions at only modest cost to themselves.

By the end of July, the Russian offensive had run out of steam. All those planes, tanks, and guns were urgently needed elsewhere, if Stalin were to realize his ultimate goal of capturing Berlin ahead of the British and Americans could. Allies. He was probably deterred, as well, by intelligence reports that the Finns had already pre-positioned supplies for a massive partisan campaign, in the event that Russia went ahead and tried to annex the whole country. That prospect wasn't appealing, and the eruption of a bloody guerrilla war in Finland might set a very bad example for the restive populations of Poland and the Baltic states. Stalin finally decided that he'd humbled Finland enough, for the moment, and that it would be more valuable to dominate that country politically and economically during the immediate post-war period than it would be to face an

endless, festering, guerrilla war in the forests. Finland had been taught its lesson; once Hitler was finished off, Stalin need never worry about his northern flank again.

An armistice was therefore signed on September 19, 1944. Stalin wasn't quite finished exacting his revenge on the Finns, however; one provision of the treaty was the Finland must immediately, and by force of arms, eject all German troops from its soil. Thus there came about a nasty "sideshow" conflict in Lapland, which pitted 150,000 Finns, which pitted 150,000 Finns against 200,000 German soldiers, doggedly hanging on and reluctant to pull back over the Norwegian border. Neither side had much stomach for the fighting; the Finns pushed where they had to, and the Germans defended themselves when pushed, but their position was ultimately untenable and by year's end, all German forces had withdrawn from Finnish soil. Personnel casualties were not heavy on either side, but property damage was immense. As the Germans lurched back, they systematically laid waste to Finnish Lapland, destroying everything of value. Even today, the low hills of Lapland are dotted with the blackened chimneys of humble farms that were put to the torch by the retiring Germans.

When this last and most distasteful conflict was over, so were Finland's wars. Although Finnish detachments have participated in numerous UN-sponsored peace-keeping operations, and in doing so have won great respect for professionalism The Finnish Army has not fired a shot against an external enemy in sixty years. By paying every penny of the USSR's brutal war reparations demand, Finland regained her honor. And by facing new economic and political realities head-on, Finland has become more prosperous and more highly regarded than ever.

Most of all, it has remained a free, democratic nation. The finest achievement of Gustav Mannerheim and his soldiers is just that fact. Of all the Baltic countries that negotiated with Stalin in 1939, only Finland resisted aggression with arms; only Finland survived as a sovereign state.

* * *

The mythology of the Winter War was powerful, but it proved to be short-lived. Too soon after the capitulation of Brave Little Finland, it became the turn of too many other brave little nations. But at the time, Finland's gallant stand against its huge, bullying neighbor gave the Democracies something to feel good about at a time when they sorely needed it. Or, as historian Max Jakobsen put it in his splendid book *The Diplomacy of the Winter War*:

> The Finns were defending democracy and freedom and justice, all the things the western democracies stood for, but had had, at the time, little actual chance to fight for. Many a modern Byron on skis volunteered to go to the scene of the action, and, though few of them got as far as the firing line, in most countries of the West there are men who think of Finland, a little wistfully perhaps, as the country they almost died for.

* * *

Let the final words in this account be those of Field Marshal Mannerheim, as he penned them in his farewell address to his troops:

Soldiers!

I have fought on many battlefields, but I have never seen your like as warriors! After sixteen weeks of bloody combat, with no rest by day or night, our army stands unconquered before an enemy whose strength has grown despite terrible losses.

Our fate is hard, now that we are compelled to surrender to an alien race, land which for centuries we have cultivated with our labor and sweat… Yet we must put our shoulders to the wheel, in order that we may prepare, on the soil left to us, a home for those rendered homeless, and a better life for all. And as before, we must

be ready to defend our diminished homeland with the same resolution and with the same fire with which we defended our original borders.

We are proudly conscious of our historic duty, which we shall continue to fulfill: the defense of western civilization, which has been our heritage for centuries. But we also know that we have paid, to the last penny, any debt we may have owed the West…

That an army so inferior in numbers and equipment, should have inflicted such serious defeats on an overwhelmingly powerful enemy, and, while retreating, have over and over again repelled his attacks, is a thing for which it is hard to find a parallel in the history of war. But it is equally admirable that the Finnish people, face to face with an apparently hopeless situation, were able to resist giving in to despair, and instead to grow in devotion and greatness.

Such a nation has earned the right to live.

- finis -