

# CLASSIC TAG NEWS

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## RUSSO-FINNISH WAR

### Motti Battles

During the winter of 1939 the Soviet Union, seeking to buffer its northern frontier, attacked Finland. The Finns valiantly resisted for over 100 days and though ultimately defeated gained a treaty leaving them a free and sovereign nation. It was a classic David and Goliath confrontation. Finland's armed forces mustered a handful of airplanes, a mere nine infantry division, obsolete artillery, and no tanks. Against them the Soviets hurled some twenty eight infantry divisions supported by heavy artillery, armor, and air power. Despite this seemingly decisive superiority in men and matériel the Red Army suffered a series of catastrophic defeats in what became known as *motti* battles. (*Motti* is a Finnish word denoting a stack of firewood waiting to be chopped.



#### MOTTI TACTICS

For the Red Army, the war started badly. Numbing cold, thickly forested terrain, and determined resistance ground their opening offensive to a halt. As the Soviets stalled, the Finns counterattacked. Employing minimal forces with limited objectives, they achieved results beyond their wildest hopes. Attacked Soviets simply "circled the wagons" and remained obstinately rooted in place as they were surrounded, attrited by cold and hunger, and destroyed piecemeal. Quickly adjusting to exploit enemy intransigence, the Finns organized

*sissi* (light infantry) units to attack lines of communications and stalled road columns. Tactics were extemporized. A standardized *motti* manual was never published, but a general battleplan included these steps:

- 1. Infiltration** - Guerrilla bands plunged deep behind enemy lines, advancing parallel to road-bound columns.
- 2. Reconnaissance** - Each road column was thoroughly reconnoitered to accurately pinpoint its weakness.
- 3. Encirclement** - Firepower was concentrated on these weaknesses, shattering the column into a half dozen densely packed *mottis*.
- 4. Reduction** - The weakest *mottis* were attacked and destroyed in turn while cold and hunger attrited the stronger ones.

#### REASONS FOR MOTTI SUCCESS

Artillery is intrinsic to Red Army doctrine, the heavy gun is its "god of battle." But during the Russo-Finnish War's opening stages Soviet artillery performed poorly for the following reasons:

- A.** Most Soviet batteries consisted of flat-trajectory field guns. These guns were rendered useless, except at close range, by Finland's dense coniferous forests. Howitzers and mortars, capable of arching shot over the tall pines, were a relative minority.
- B.** In deep snow Soviet towed artillery could only move along plowed roads. Tied as they were to their heavy guns, Soviet divisions were incapable of cross-country movement. Advancing in road-bound columns, they were classic guerrilla targets.
- C.** Inexperienced artillery liaison officers failed to deliver accurate fire support to the infantry.

On the other hand, Finnish firepower was delivered by infantry. Despite Soviet sabre rattling during the thirties Finland failed to loosen its tight-fisted budgeting and the army couldn't afford modern artillery or anti-tank weapons. Lean budgeting did have a practical consequence, it forced the adoption of small unit doctrine and organization. Submachine gun toting ski troops, with 81mm mortars and Maxim machine guns, proved a frugal but ideal recipe for arctic warfare.

### OFFICERS

In 1915, about 2,000 Finnish nationalists volunteered for service in the German Army. They formed the 27th Prussian Jäger Regiment and fought Russians for Kaiser Willy. As Finland seceded from Russia in 1917, the country erupted into civil war and these veterans repatriated to fight the bolsheviks. At war's end the new Finnish army drew upon this cadre to build its officer corps. Shared politics and combat experiences promoted an *esprit de corps* amongst the field commanders; and thus, disparate units easily melded into cohesive battle groups.

Conversely, the Red Army's officer corps was just recovering from a 1937 purge that liquidated three quarters of its members. This vacuum was filled by hacks commissioned for political loyalty rather than military aptitude. Finnish officers viewed their Soviet peers as working class thugs, lacking the cultural and moral sophistication necessary to command.

### SOLDIERS

Tiny Finland could ill afford a large standing army and therefore was heavily dependent on reserve formations and militias. But the typical Finish reservist was hardly a "weekend warrior." Civilian life was spartan. Poor soil and a bitter climate required hunting to supplement the basic diet. Survival skills included skiing, marksmanship, and a knowledge of nature. This heritage bred fierce independence and Finns tended to drill miserably and openly flouted authority. However, they were imbued with a fighting spirit called *sisu* (guts), and they proved to be ideal guerrilla fighters.

Soviet soldiers were a mixed lot, trained, and equipped to operate in specific military districts. Gathered willy-nilly to do battle in severe arctic conditions, their performances varied widely. Siberians operated freely in -40° Fahrenheit weather and waist-deep snow, while Uzbeks and Tatars, drawn from temperate Turkestan simply squatted in apathetic misery and froze in place. Unit cohesiveness, already weakened by disparate cultures and languages, shattered in the numbing cold. The fate of a comrade over the next hill was of no concern to a miserable soldier desperately waging a private war of survival.

### LOGISTICS

Even modern armies face logistical obstacles in winter war that threaten basic survival, let alone combat effectiveness. For a

unit to function in severe cold, its soldiers must be supplied with increased rations, proper clothing, and adequate shelter. Beasts of burden require additional forage and wind-proof shelters. Special lubricants and maintenance items are needed to prevent engine and weapon failures. Losing just one of these items to logistical "snafu" risked catastrophe.



Traditionally, guerrillas forage for supply, but the arctic landscape provides no succor. In these conditions a soldier, limited to the contents of his rucksack, could only range three miles from base. Therefore a basic problem for the Finns was how to sustain guerrillas ranging deep behind enemy lines in thick trackless forest and waist deep

snow. Air-drops were impossible, the air force mustered just a handful of Blenheim bombers and obsolete fighters.

The solution was to first prep the battlefield with networks of snow roads. Vanguards of pioneers hacked through underbrush and compacted snow to clear the way for advancing troops and trailing supply columns. This long term and deliberate preparation was made possible by Soviet inactivity and effective Finnish radio intelligence. Eavesdroppers feasted on lax Red Army security. Their proficiency provided Finnish commanders decoded transcript of every pertinent enemy message within four hours of transmission.

Snow roads were built parallel to enemy columns and generally followed frozen lakes where the snow could easily be leveled by truck mounted plows. When requirements forced the roads to cut cross-country, the snow was tamped by teams of horses or reindeer towing sledges with progressively heavier loads. Once the snow road was in place, the *sisu* followed it towing their supplies on a boat shaped sleds called *akjas*. An *akja*, pulled by a reindeer or three skiers, with a trailing skier to steady the load, could carry a mortar or machine gun. Heavier loads were towed in larger sleds called *loijakka*.



For the Soviets the 1937 purge devastated the infrastructure of their

quartermaster corps. Command structures were leavened with *politruks* (commissars) vetoing requisitions on political grounds. When N. N. Voronov, Chief Marshall of Artillery, was asked by invasion commander General Mereskov to estimate his ammunition requirements for the war, Voronov replied he needed a two to three month stockpile. Voronov was overruled by a deputy-commissar named Mekhlis, who approved a twelve day supply. Mekhlis reasoned that the discontented Finnish proletariat would welcome the Soviets as liberators. Thus, Soviet divisions invaded with full regimental bands, contingents of civilian bureaucrats, and empty caisson. Other useless baggage included divisional anti-tank units. Retaining the 45mm AT guns made no sense, the Finns had no armor. Useless against fortifications and infantry, the guns actually became a liability when captured and turned against Soviet



tanks. While toting tubas and printing presses, the Red Army left behind essential items such as the whitewash and snow smocks used to camouflage tanks and soldiers. Skis were included as an afterthought, although the troops weren't trained to use them.

### THE BATTLE OF SUOMUSSALMI

From December 7th to January 8th, an *ad hoc* Finnish brigade, commanded by Colonel Hjalmar Siilasvuo, battled two Soviet divisions around the provincial town of Suomussalmi. Perfectly exemplifying *motti* tactics, the Battle of Suomussalmi is now an academy standard for teaching small unit tactics in winter war.

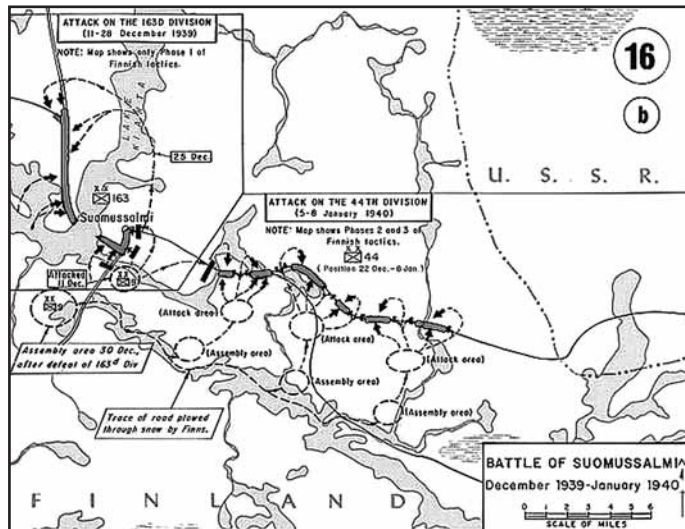
Located north of the arctic circle, Suomussalmi is the first town of consequence astride the route leading to the rail junction of Oulu. To capture Oulu and reach the Gulf of Bothnia, the Soviets committed the five-division strong Ninth Army. Soviet strategy was twofold: sever the only rail link to Sweden and isolate enemy forces in northern Finland. In actuality Oulu was worthless, the Finns were fully deployed to the south, and Swedish assistance was nonexistent.

Ninth Army's sector, covered by thick forests and snow, was cut laterally by a half dozen viable roads. Confined by heavy equipment to these few roads, Ninth Army's advance resembled the fingers of an outstretched hand with each fingertip tenaciously resisted by platoon and company-sized border constabularies. The methodical pace of the Soviet advance allowed the Finns time to rail reinforcements north and counterattack. Colonel Siilasvuo's brigade hit the Russian 163rd Rifle Division and adroitly carved it into a half dozen *mottis*. To save the 163rd, Ninth Army ordered the Ukrainian 44th Motorized Rifle Division, commanded by Colonel Vinogradov, down the Raate road to break Siilasvuo's siege. Alerted to the relief attempt, Siilasvuo ordered all out attacks on the *mottis* and the Raate blocked. Valiantly refusing to relinquish the siege, he risked being crushed between two enemy divisions. The gamble hinged on bluff; only a roadblock company and three ski detachments stood between the Russians and relief. As the Ukrainian vanguard hit the block, its flanks were raked by ski troops. Convinced he'd been bushwhacked by a superior force, Vinogradov halted within earshot of the surrounded 163rd. Averting catastrophe by a hair's breadth, Siilasvuo now exploited a monumental opportunity. While administering the *coup de grace* to the Russians, he ordered the Ukrainians flanked by snow roads. Thus, when the final 163rd *motti* dissolved on December 30th, Siilasvuo was able to rapidly redeploy and by January 2nd had a 1,000-man battalion in place to attack the 44th Division.



### ATTACK OF 1ST BATTALION

The 1st Battalion of the JR-27th Regiment, commanded by Captain Eino Lassila, was ordered to cut the Raate road by a cluster of buildings called the



Haukila farm. Advancing east on a snow road for two miles until drawing parallel to the objective, the battalion rested for an hour and ate a hot meal while a party of trail blazers cut a ski track to the farm. Because Soviet troops feared the *Belaya Smert* (White Death), they rarely patrolled far into the forest and the ski trail was cut within 100 meters of the farm. After establishing the ski track, the trail blazers selected a secluded assembly area for the main body, covered it with a picket line, and waited for their comrades.

First Battalion moved in under the cover of darkness and conducted a thorough reconnaissance. Returning scouts reported the farm defended in battalion strength. Prepared for a hard fight, Lassila's battleplan called for one company to stand in reserve while two assault companies, each supported by a mortar battery and six Maxim machine guns, hit the road. As they emerged from the forest, one company would peel east, the other west, clearing a 500 meter swath in the enemy column.

A skirmish line of scouts first approached the road. Removing their overcoats and leaving them in guarded heaps, the scouts killed sentries and radioed last minute coordinates back to the heavy weapon teams. (Finns attacked without heavy uniforms because lightweight snow smocks allowed freedom of movement and didn't cause an exerting soldier to perspire and become frostbitten in sub-zero cold.) Despite the thorough reconnaissance, following assault companies became disoriented in the darkness and emerged from the forest 250 meters east of the farm. It was a lucky blunder. Instead of hitting entrenched infantry, the Finns caught an artillery battalion with its guns pointing the wrong way.

Battle commenced with a concentrated barrage of indirect mortar and machine gun fire. Within minutes the barrage split, creating a clear corridor flanked by shot and shell. Down this path streamed groups of *sissi* armed with grenades and Suomi submachine guns. Laden with satchel charges, they ran down road ditches racing to destroy the artillery before it could be swung to bear. Between the assault teams and the gun batteries stood a screen of anti-aircraft trucks. Within moments the night was lit with streams of tracers, but the quad Maxim machine guns were mounted too high on the truck beds to engage ground targets at close range. Ducking under the AA

fire, submachine gunners sprayed the anti-aircraft crews while engineers hurled satchel charges into the artillery pits. Victory was swift and absolute. The Finns spent the remaining hours of darkness fortifying road blocks, sowing minefields and booby-traps, clearing the enemy dead, and improving the ski trail back to the snow road.

Brigade headquarters rejoiced at Lassila's success and Siilasvuo ordered 1st Battalion reinforced with his only two anti-tank guns. Manhandled up the snow road, the 37mm Bofors arrived just in time to repulse a Soviet combined arms attack on the eastern roadblock. Seven tanks were disabled and their smoking hulks further plugged the road, improving the roadblock's effectiveness.



As 1st Battalion hunkered in, sappers started building fortifications in the surrounding forest. Fanning around the *motti*, the sappers ringed it with dugouts at a range of 500 to 1,000 meters. The elaborate fortifications featured heated shelters, telephone networks, and supply depots. Here Finnish soldiers rotated out of the line every two hours to warm up in dugouts or twenty-man tents heated by wood burning stoves. Insulated by soft pine boughs these tents were so comfortable a soldier sleeping in his uniform didn't require a blanket. If battle conditions permitted, Finnish soldiers even enjoyed the luxury of steam baths in portable field saunas. As for the Ukrainians, Finnish ski patrols ruthlessly targeted their shelters, cooking fires, and field kitchens. Field kitchens were particularly prized, and their destruction was recorded prominently in after action reports alongside enemy artillery and tank losses.



Three other Finnish battalions now hit the Raate road at five-mile intervals. Despite great courage, they lacked the punch necessary to slice up mechanized units. Forced off the road, the Finns melted back into the forest. From this haven they forced advancing enemy columns to run a gauntlet of small arms fire.

This disruption denied Vinogradov the ability to coordinate his forces, and 1st Battalion was never struck at both roadblocks simultaneously. Though piecemeal, the Ukrainian attacks were fiercely incessant, eroding 10% of 1st Battalion's strength per day. As his battalion evaporated around him, Lassila desperately pled for reinforcements. None were forthcoming. Brigade even ordered Lassila to give up one of the Bofors.

With his perimeter inexorably contracting around him, Lassila attempted to stabilize it with several platoon-sized counterattacks. Unknown to him, the Ukrainians had manhandled a couple of artillery pieces forward, and his men were obliterated by point-blank fire over open sights. As the survivors turned tail, the Ukrainians followed them into their trenches. After six hours of bitter combat the Ukrainians were routed at the cost of ninety-six Finnish casualties. First Battalion couldn't sustain this attrition and by January 6th they broke ranks and stampeded for the border.

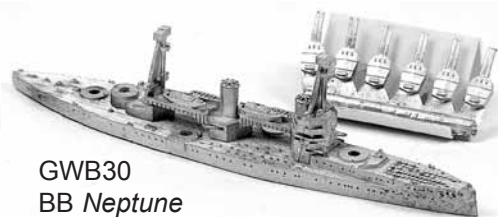
For the matériel-starved Finns the destruction of two Soviet divisions yielded an enormous cache of booty. The tally included 43 tanks, 70 field guns, 278 vehicles, 300 machine guns, 6,000 rifles, 1,170 live horses, and especially prized, the complete communication equipment for two divisions. Soviet dead exceeded 27,500 men while total Finnish casualties amounted to 1,500. As for General Vinogradov, he fled in a commandeered tank but was caught by the NKVD. Court-martialed on a number of counts, including the loss of 55 field kitchens, he was found guilty and shot.

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