

C3i Magazine, C3i Nr.2 (1993)

Arctic Storm:

White Death – The Battle of Suomussalmi: December, 1941

By

David James Ritchie

A key element in the Soviet plan for the conquest of Finland was a rapid drive to the Gulf of Bothnia at Kemi and Oulu, slicing that small nation in half at its narrow waist and cutting overland communications with pro-Finnish Sweden. Vasili Chuikov's 9th Army was to accomplish this task by means of two independent thrusts. While one rifle corps marched toward Kemi through Salla and Rovaniemi in the north, Chuikov's main force would mount a multi-column advance from the Juntusranta-Raate area and from Rebola that would roll through the Finnish towns of Suomussalmi and Kuhmo, respectively, before converging on Oulu. In the event, the subsidiary Salla operation and the flanking drive from Rebola got nowhere, and both sides' attention soon focused on the main thrust through Suomussalmi.

Into the Jaws...

Occupying the shortest axis of advance toward Oulu, Suomussalmi had most of Chuikov's attention from day one. It also got his best unit, the powerful 45th Rifle Corps, with 48,000 men, 335 guns and 150 tanks and armored cars in two divisions: Divcom Zelentsov's 163rd Rifle Division and Divcom Vinogradov's 44th Motorized Rifle Division. On 30 November 1939, the Mongolians of 163rd Rifle Division advanced on Suomussalmi in two columns. The northern column (81st and 662nd Rifle Regiments, with supporting tanks and cavalry) moved on the town from Juntusranta, while the southern column, consisting of 759th Rifle Regiment and the division's recon battalion, marched up the road from Raate. Strung out on the road east of Raate, the Ukrainian 44th Motorized Rifle Division awaited word to advance in support of the thrust toward Suomussalmi.

Chuikov caught the Finns napping. Since they never expected anyone to attack through the almost trackless wilderness of central Finland in winter, only two battalions of covering troops were deployed to defend a 650-kilometer stretch of frontier. In the Suomussalmi area, two platoons of regulars and the reservists of 15th Independent Infantry Battalion were all the Finns had in the way of two reinforced enemy divisions. Hindered as much by the terrain as by the enemy, Chuikov's methodical advance proceeded more or less to plan during the first week.

Then, on 6 December, 662nd Rifle Regiment, which had turned north at Polovaara to develop a flanking movement, found its line of advance blocked at the Piispajarvi Straits

south of Peranka by the Finnish 16th Independent Infantry Battalion. While the regiment spent two days assaulting the Finnish blocking position, 81st Rifle Regiment kept moving south toward Suomussalmi, where it linked up with 759th Rifle Regiment on the 7th. By that time, the retreating Finnish Civic Guard had already evacuated the town, leaving behind only smoking ashes. On 8 December, 16th Independent Infantry Battalion, supported by a gaggle of small units, counterattacked 662nd Rifle Regiment and began driving it back toward Haapavaara.

On 7 December, as 45th Rifle Corps was taking over the embers of Suomussalmi, Finnish CIC Marshal Mannerheim ordered Lieutenant Colonel Johan Mäkinen's 27th Infantry Regiment to deploy to the area, where it was to form the core of a new independent brigade under the command of Colonel Hjalmar Siilasvuo. Most of Mäkinen's men were lumberjacks, perfectly at home in the deep forest, especially now that there was half a meter of snow on the battlefield. Their experience in the snow-clad woods was an important element in what followed.

Mäkinen's men started arriving on the 9th and immediately engaged Zelentsov's forward elements. The rest of Siilasvuo's new brigade reached the battlefield on the 10th, giving the Finnish commander 4,700 men with which to oppose 16,000 Soviet troops in the area. Outnumbered by almost four to one and with the enemy threatening to capture the Haukipier Ferry and encircle his fledgling brigade, Siilasvuo naturally planned a counterattack for the 11th.

On that date, the Finns cut the vital Raate road behind the main body of 163rd Rifle Division and brought the Zelentsov's only other supply route, the road from Juntisaranta, under harassing fire. On the 13th, Siilasvuo attacked Suomussalmi itself, initiating a bitter five-day struggle for the ruined town. Here the freezing Soviets (still in their summer uniforms) had hastily dug themselves into the blackened cellars of burnt-out buildings to escape temperatures that were plunging to -40 Fahrenheit. Despite their weakened condition, once out from under the forest canopy where their tanks could support them and they could use their superior firepower, Zelentsov's shivering Mongolians proved hardy fighters. Siilasvuo had to halt the attack due to extreme casualties. He tried again on the 20th, but that attack too failed in the face of stubborn resistance. Meanwhile, 40 kilometers to the north, ski troops of 16th Independent Infantry Battalion (shortly joined by 6th Bicycle Battalion and Lieutenant Colonel Karl Mandelin's newly formed 65th Infantry Regiment) cut off and pinned down 662nd Rifle Regiment near Haapavaara.

By this time, it was finally dawning on Chuikov that Zelentsov was in need of rescue. On 23 December, Divcom Vinogradov's 44th Motorized Rifle Division finally pushed up the Raate road to within seven kilometers of the 163rd's positions at Suomussalmi. In the isthmus between Kuomasjärvi and Kuivasjärvi, its lead 25th Rifle Regiment was halted short of a linkup by elements of Mäkinen's regiment and some local Civic Guardsmen, holding a tenuous blocking position. As the road-bound 44th's attack ground to a stop,

Finnish ski troops closed in behind it and cut off its retreat too!

The next day (Christmas Eve), Soviet bombers and fighters raked Finnish positions, while the ground forces mounted an all-out general attack on Siilasvuo's forces. For two days, furious fighting raged throughout the area as Vinogradov assailed the Finnish blocking position at Kuomasjärvi and Zelentsov tried to break out of Suomussalmi and link up with his would-be rescuer. The Soviet attacks finally spent themselves late in the afternoon on the 25th, and Zelentsov's demoralized troops settled down in their freezing holes to await events.

They were not long in coming. Even as the Soviet attacks were petering out, Siilasvuo's command (renamed 9th Division on 22 December) was reinforced by Lieutenant Colonel Frans Fager's 64th Infantry Regiment, a light battalion and 1st Sissi Battalion. These additions, together with the arrival of two artillery batteries and a battery of two AT guns earlier in the month, gave the 9th a total of 11,500 men and made it strong enough for Siilasvuo to prepare an assault that would destroy the two divisions caught in his trap at Suomussalmi.

...of Death

At 0730 on the 27th, the Finns counterattacked the 163rd, initiating a savage two-day battle in and around Suomussalmi. On the 28th, they breached the southern perimeter at Hulkonniemi, causing the Soviet troops west of Kiantajarvi to panic and flee across the ice. By 1900, the panic had become general, and two-thirds of Zelentsov's division was in flight, shepherded northward by a few remaining friendly tanks vainly trying to keep the pursuing Finns from turning the rout into a massacre. The Finns, though, were mercilessly efficient, and those who weren't cut down by suomi-toting ski troops were bombed or strafed by Finnish planes. Few made it back across the frontier. By 1200 on the 30th, the mopping-up was over. The last frantic Soviet breakout attempts had been contained, and the 163rd Rifle Division no longer existed.

The Finns counted over 5,000 unburied Soviet corpses on the Suomussalmi battlefield. Thousands more lay hidden under the snow, and nobody knows how many troops perished on the ice of Kiantajarvi or in the forest northeast of Suomussalmi. Only 800 surrendered. From Soviet positions, the Finns scavenged 200 trucks, 11 tanks, 68 guns (including about 30 AT guns) and thousands small arms, plus many more thousands of badly needed AP rounds. In honor of his victory, Siilasvuo was awarded his country's Freedom Cross.

On the 28th, while Siilasvuo was still preoccupied with 163rd Rifle Division, Vinogradov had rejected his officers' suggestions that he retreat and had ordered his division to dig in and prepare to defend itself in a series of hedgehogs strung out for 25 kilometers along the Raate road all the way back to the frontier. With an energy born of desperation, the Ukrainians felled innumerable trees to clear fields of fire and hacked shelters out of

the frozen earth. As the Ukrainians dug, hundreds of ski troops, lurking under the branches of the fir trees on either side of the exposed motorized column stepped up their harassment. Soon communications between major hedgehogs were only possible using tanks.

On New Year's Eve, just three days after shattering the 163rd at Suomussalmi, Siilasvuo's troops opened a new operation to cut up and destroy 44th Motorized Rifle Division. After several days of intricate maneuvering that included the construction of Winter Roads hidden under the dense forest canopy, the Finns launched their main assault at 0600 on 5 January. Their aim was to chop up Vinogradov's division so that it could be destroyed in detail. Enemy resistance was unexpectedly fierce, perhaps in part due to the presence of a new formation, the fresh 3rd NKVD Regiment, which was just arriving to assist the 44th. But at 2200 Fagern's engineers destroyed the Purasjoki Bridge, blocking wheeled traffic east of Likoharju, and the morning of the 6th found Finnish troops holding strong blocking positions behind mines and abatis at several points in the midst of the Soviet column.

On the 6th, there was heavy fighting all along the Raate road as the Finns continued to break up the 44th into bite-sized pieces. The Soviets tried to overrun Finnish roadblocks with armor, but the tanks couldn't maneuver in the forest and were reduced to making suicidal frontal assaults. Throughout the day, as brewed-up tanks piled up in front of Finnish positions and as crews bailed out of vehicles stuck in deep snow, the wreckage only made it more difficult for the Soviets to move at all. Finally, at 2130, Vinogradov belatedly ordered his division to retreat back into Russia. But the 44th was now far too chopped up to respond to orders. Like a dying snake, it continued to thrash about underfoot, but all purpose was gone.

During the long night, as final destruction loomed, individual soldiers and small units, many of which had been without food for five days, shed their equipment and took to their heels. Seeing the enemy dissolving before their eyes, the Finns lost no time in infiltrating the perimeters of the Soviet hedgehogs, and wild firefights lit the night along the Raate road. By morning, every large motti was in Finnish hands. A few small units made ferocious breakout attempts early in the day, but the battle was effectively over with the rising of the sun. Mopping-up went on for two days, during which the Finns rounded up hundreds of starving, frozen Ukrainians, many of whom were found sitting quietly in their dugouts awaiting death; their commissars had told them that the Finns didn't take prisoners.

On 9 January, the Finns closed the books on the battle for the Raate road. Like the 163rd, the 44th had been gobbled up. In the process, it had given over to the enemy a grand total of 1,300 prisoners, 1,170 horses, 43 tanks, 46 guns, 29 AT guns, 278 trucks 100 machineguns, 190 automatic weapons, and 6,000 rifles.

The combined battles of Suomussalmi and the Raate road destroyed the Soviet 45th Rifle Corps as a fighting force and cost the Soviets an estimated 22,500 men. The Finns lost 900 killed and 1770 wounded. It was the greatest victory of the Winter War and the one that captured the imagination of the world. Most important, it ended the Soviet threat in central Finland and forced the Kremlin to reassess its war aims.

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