

Walter Forsström, Veteran of the Finnish Wars

By Gunnar Damström

On June 9, 1944 the Soviet artillery opened up along the entire Karelian frontline. During the ensuing charge by infantry, tanks and airplanes the Finnish defense lines were penetrated at numerous locations. The Karelian army made a mostly orderly retreat. The situation was grave.

June 12 the supreme commander Marshal Mannerheim ordered the 17th Division under the command of Major General Sundman comprising the mostly Swedish Finn 61st and 13th Infantry Regiments moved from the Aunus Isthmus to the Karelian Isthmus. June 15 Mannerheim appointed Lieutenant General Lennart Oesch commander of all Finnish forces on the Karelian Isthmus. June 20 the City of Viborg fell to the Russians.

Soviet General Govorov had orders to break the Finnish resistance, destroy the Finnish forces entrenched on the Karelian Isthmus, march on Helsinki and occupy the Country. At his disposal Govorov had the 21st Soviet Army consisting of fifteen infantry divisions; four tank brigades; five assault cannon regiments; and 110 artillery battalions and the 23rd Soviet Army consisting of five infantry divisions, three tank brigades, three assault cannon regiments and 36 artillery battalions, all total 240-260,000 soldiers, 440-460 tanks, 170 assault cannons, 1660 field cannons and 1500 airplanes.

Against this force the Finnish supreme command had at its disposal five infantry divisions, one tank division, 100 tanks, 25 assault cannons, 289 field cannons and about 50 airplanes, all total about 70,000 soldiers.

The decisive battle took place in the Tali- Ihantala section. The battlefield could be schematically described as a square with 8 km sides; the SW corner formed by the outskirts of the City of Viborg, the NW corner the village of Juustila; the NE corner the village of Ihantala; and the SE corner the village of Tali. In the center was Portinhoikka where two important roads crossed. The Soviets had decided to break through the Finnish defenses on this section. However the Finns were equally determined not to let that happen. On a 15 km wide section the 21 Soviet Army could concentrate 14 infantry divisions, 70 artillery batteries, 3-4 tank brigades and strong air force.

The Finnish IV Army Corps under Lieutenant General Laatikainen and consisting of the 18th, the 3rd and the 4th Divisions had frontier responsibility in this sector at the beginning of the battle.

June 19 the 17th Division arrived in Kaipola north of Ihantala. June 20 General Oesch assigned JR 13 to the IV Army Corps. Its three battalions were immediately placed in the line of fire, I/13 and II/13 to support the 4th Division on the left flank.

The III Battalion of IR 13, the Alfthan Battalion was assigned to the 18th Division. III/IR 13 was given the task to establish a 2 km wide defensive line between Kahlainjärvi and Leitimonjärvi on the Leitimo Isthmus. Two artillery groups, Niemi and Aalto, which included the 18th Heavy Artillery Battalion (Rask. Psto. 18) provided artillery support to III/13.

June 25 the Soviet 30 Guard Army Corps attacked the III/13 defense line on the Leitimo Isthmus. The troops were supported by 40 tanks and assault cannons. Against the Alfthan Battalion's hastily established defense line charged a force nearing 15,000.

Despite intense artillery support by the Niemi and Aalto groups and a heroic effort by the Alfthan Battalion the Russians, unconcerned about heavy losses broke through the III/ 13 defensive lines at Leitimo and advanced on Portinhoikka. Within two hours the III/13 had lost 142 men, 82 killed.

The remnants of III/13 retreated toward Portinhoikka and the attack was stopped at the next defensive line manned by Infantry Regiment 48. On the right flank of the battle field the 3rd Brigade fought heroically slowing the assault by the 97th Soviet Army Corps.

Having received information of the Russian break through, Lieutenant General Oesch on June 25 ordered the Tank Division under the command of Lieutenant General Ruben Lagus to mount a counter attack. The Tank Division had been pulled back for rest and replenishment in the vicinity of Tienhaara. Walter Forsström's observer platoon was on June 25 attached to the 2nd Battalion of the Tank Division Ranger Regiment.

For two days the Tank Brigade attacked the four guard divisions that had broken through in the direction of Ihantala, coming close to, but not succeeding in trapping three divisions cramped on an area two km wide and five km deep. The Russian advance slowed.

Two Finnish Divisions, the 6th under Major General Vihma and the 11th under Major General Heiskanen were being hastily transported to the Tali- Ihantala section. The 18th Division, including IR48 that had taken the brunt of the Russian assault had but 40% of its manpower left. On June 26 the 18th Division, close to collapse was relieved by the 11th Division.

June 27 the Tank Division had run out of steam. Its Ranger Regiment's five battalions had only 25% of their manpower left (some battalions reduced to 100 men).

June 27 Swedish Finn Battalions II/13 and III/13 were relieved from front duty having fought heroically and lost almost all their officers and 70% of their men.

June 28 the 6th Division arrived at Ihantala just as the situation was getting super critical. On the 29th General Oesch and General Laatikainen decided to pull back the defensive line (the VKT line) to the northern border of the battlefield (Ihantala- Juustila).

June 29 was one of the most difficult days for the defenders. June 30 the 11th Division, consumed after three days of intense fighting was relieved by the 6th Division and pulled back for rest and replenishment.

June 30, the battle of Ihantala slowed down some. 57 Russian tanks were destroyed June 30-July 1.

From July 1 the efficiency of the Finnish artillery became a decisive factor in the battle. Up till now the messiness of the battle had prevented efficient usage of artillery and mortar, but once the defensive positions held, the artillery could be used to efficiently break up assault formations before the attacks got under way. Still on July 3 the Russians were able to break through at Pyöräkangas but the positions were taken back after heavy artillery bombardment.

General Gusev knew that time was running short for a break through, that some of his troupes likely would be moved to the German frontier. The Russians had committed to attack the Germans as the allies landed in Normandy opening up a new frontier. Russian attacks became ill and hastily prepared and could be quelled by the artillery before they got underway. The Finnish tank killers using German bazookas were devastatingly efficient. During the Tali Ihantala battle about 600 Russian tanks were destroyed. The fighting spirit of the Finnish troupes was continuously improving.

The German air force Wing Kuhlmeier and Finnish Air Force Regiment 4 played a vital role in the successful stopping of the Soviet assault. The Kuhlmeier Stuka bombers destroyed more than 100 tanks in the Tali- Ihantala terrain June 23-July 7.

July 7 was the first day of relative calm on the battlefield. July 10 General Colonel Gusev directed the 21st Army to regroup for defense of the positions gained. Several divisions were relieved from the frontier and soon transported to the German frontier to take part in the race for Berlin.

The Russian attack had been stopped. The defensive victory at Tali- Ihantala was one of several that provided a good negotiating position for the Finns. An armistice was negotiated with the allies in early September 1944. The Finnish Army had fulfilled its goal: preventing the invasion of the fatherland. Finland remained a sovereign nation.

The Finnish Nation will never forget the heroic fight its soldiers put up, fighting against all odds and a well-equipped, numerically superior enemy. Neither will it forget the German soldiers and aviators that fought bravely along side the Finnish soldiers.

First Lieutenant Walter Forsström was one of two observers of the third battery of Rask. Psto. 18, formed 1943 from Swedish Finn conscripts. Walter, decorated war hero and veteran of the Tali-Ihantala battle, now retired and a resident of Bothell, Washington and member of FFSC kindly submitted to be interviewed.

Q: The Finnish Army managed an orderly retreat under extreme duress. For the uninitiated it seems chaos and panic was an ever present danger under the conditions in June 1944.

WF: “During the retreat you sometimes found yourself in odd situations. June 22 I had received orders to take my observer platoon to the vicinity of Mustamäki west of Tali. When we arrived I could not locate the infantry. They had made an unauthorized retreat. I decided we had better clear out ourselves unless we wanted to swim for safety”.

June 23-24 my platoon was assigned briefly to the 303 German Attack Cannon Regiment. I was introduced to the commander. I was flabbergasted and somewhat embarrassed. In the field the German commander was dressed in a smart parade uniform, complete with a monocle, a total contrast to me in my worn and dirty field uniform.

June 25 my platoon was assigned to Ranger battalion 2 of the Ranger Regiment that was part of Lieutenant General Ruben Lagus’s Tank Division.”

Q: Did you meet any acquaintances at Tali- Ihantala?

WF: “On one occasion I met Major Alfthan, commander of III/JR13 in the vicinity of Portinhoikka. My platoon and Alfthan’s battalion were heading in opposite directions that day. There was time only for a brief exchange. I don’t remember where we or they were heading that day”.

Q. The defense was very much reliant on close cooperation between infantry and artillery.

WF: “During the chaotic days in Tali- Ihantala June 20- July 7 my observer platoon was continually dispatched from one trouble spot to the next. I directed the fire of the 18th Heavy Battalion. It is characteristic that during the battle I never saw the 18th Heavy Battalion in fire positions.

“Communication between the observer platoon and the battery was all by radio. Field telephones never worked- the Russian artillery barrages cut off the field cables immediately during preparations for an infantry attack. The radios were heavy and clumsy. One person carried the battery pack, another the radio”

Q. Did you have sufficient ammunition during the battle?

WF “Our batteries had no lack of ammunition. There was no rationing like there had been during the Winter War. On one occasion I heard the noise of Russian tanks approaching through the woods behind a field right in front of us. We had plenty of time to determine the coordinates of the target area. After the artillery concentration our artillery commander colonel Lukander asked me over the radio if that was enough. I said “sure, it would have been enough ten minutes ago”, watching the destruction in front of me.“

Q. Was it scary to direct the fire to positions in the vicinity of yourself?

“It was scary alright. Sometimes we had to order the artillery carpet fire only 200 yards from our observer position. The battery fire positions were 6-10 km behind us. Gradually you learned which batteries were reliable, and which you had to be careful with.”

Q. “How long did you serve in the Finnish army?”

“At the end of the war I was fortunate to be the only one of the six observers in our Battalion who had escaped the war without injury. My last observer post before the armistice September 04 was on the Ämmävuori Mountain, overlooking Ihantalanjärvi.”

“I served in the Finnish Army 5 years, one month and sixteen days.”



Observer squad 3, 18th Heavy Artillery Battalion at Tali- Ihantala June 1944. From left: Radio operator Ljung; Sub Sergeant Nordström; unknown; Sergeant Kalle Järv; unknown; Lieutenant Walter Forsström; unknown; Sub sergeant Kronquist; Soldier Öhman; unknown.

Walter Forsström died in 2006. This article appeared in the SFHS Quarterly in 2004.