

June 2023



"It's your New York!"

The Rondout Reader



THE G.O.A.T.

AN INDELIBLE SCRAPBOOK

by Kevin Ahearn



"This dreadful rape of Finland."



"Only Finland, superb nay sublime in the jaws of peril. Finland shows what free men can do."



"There is no known cure for the idealistic assassin."

(FOR THE UKRAINIAN FREEDOM-FIGHTERS)



"I am a hunter. Not a killer, not an executioner.

"At fifteen, I shot my first moose--two hundred twenty yards.

"Hunting is not shooting. Practice will make anyone a good shot. Hunting is *before* the trigger is pulled.



"I am also a soldier. A teenager when I joined the Finnish militia *suojeluskunta*, training included woodland shooting. When I was able to hit a target sixteen times per minute from five hundred feet, I won the first of many trophies.



"The forest belongs to me. I notice and listen: *learn, learn, learn*, says the wind, the trees and the snow. I am thirty-four years old and at the snowy peak of my trade. I'd like to think of myself as an heroic knight, protecting the forest, but since I am barely five foot, three inches tall, more like a sharpshooting gnome.



"I want to live long enough to see more moose than ever, after I've killed a hundred of them. So far I've gotten twenty-six. Never more than two per year. What I kill, I eat and wear. The forest is in me, on me, *mine*."



In September of 1939, World War II had begun with the Nazis invading Poland from the west. By agreement, the Soviet Union got the eastern half, then expected England and France to attack Germany.

When the democracies did nothing for months, Stalin seized the small Balkan states of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia.



With winter approaching, the Russians massed an army on its border with Finland.



"Time to be a soldier again. Having no wife or family, dog or cow or plumbing, I take my rifle, a couple of days' hard rations, and head for the front.

"One day, I hope, a wife and children will feel even better in my arms than my Russian-made *Mosin-Nagant M-Ninety-One*.



VIC THOMAS

"The temperature is dropping as every day gets shorter. The moose are going to have to wait."



On November 30, 1939, the Red Army attacked with 23 divisions, totalling 450,000 men, bombed the capital Helsinki, and rapidly advanced to the main Finnish defence line.



Outnumbering the Finns 50 to 1 on the ground, 100 to 1 in tanks and 200 to 1 in the air, Moscow boasted that the 'Winter War' wouldn't last two weeks.



Anti-Communist countries sent material aid and medical supplies. Finnish immigrants in the [United States](#) and [Canada](#) returned home, and nearly 2,000 volunteers from free Europe and England joined the fight, including...





"The hunter embraces the forest. In my white robe and hood, I choose my post for maximum visibility. I *sit*, not lie down or stand. I pack snow under me to prevent my shot from disturbing the surrounding snow, and stuff some in the mouth to condense my breath.

"No telescopic sight. Makes me lift my head a couple of extra inches. A scope will fog up in the cold, and worst of all, flash a glinty reflection that'll spook a moose.



"From first light to darkness, I lock myself behind my iron sights, one with the forest, *my* forest. A hunter *knows*...a cracking of a twig, a spray of snow, a whisp of color. I do not think or analyze. I *know* and the bullet is instantly on its way.





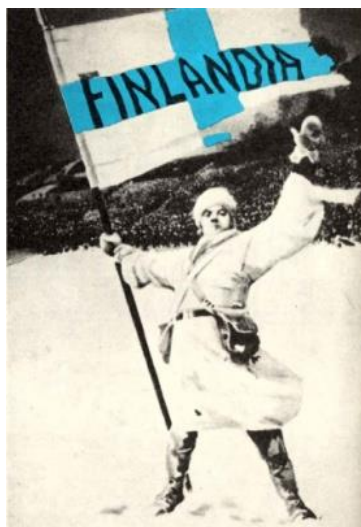
"I got three my first hour. Of course, I counted them. I don't know any of their names or where they were from or their families. I remember each with a number. I don't know what mine is yet; by the end of the week I am up to fifty-four."



"The very day the war with Finland started, Stalin didn't even feel the need to call a meeting. He was sure all we had to do was fire a few artillery rounds and the Finns would capitulate... There was a false sense of confidence on our side; a few days would pass and we would polish off the Finns."



**ЗА РОДИНУ,
ЗА ЧЕСТЬ, ЗА СВОБОДУ!**



ВРАГ БУДЕТ РАЗБИТ!

Sisu - *'The word that explains Finland', the Finns' 'favorite word' - 'the most wonderful of all their words.'* *The Russians had overwhelming force and superior heavy weapons; the Finns had **sisu**, a 'strength of will, determination, perseverance, and acting rationally in the face of adversity', 'not momentary **courage**, but the ability to sustain an action against the odds.'*

Sisu. *the Finnish spirit, 'bravado and bravery, of ferocity and tenacity, of the ability to keep fighting after most people would have quit, and to fight with the will to win.'*



The Red Army charged into Finland, commanding the woodland roads, a tank taking the lead, a second guarding the rear, the ideal formation for a motti.

Not far down the road, the Russians would find it blocked with fallen trees. Suddenly, the Finns would ski out of the forest and knock out the rear tank. The troop trucks were trapped. Encircled by sharpshooters, the Russian infantry would be cut down to the last man.

At the Battle of Suomussalmi, three Finnish regiments cut off, enveloped and destroyed two Soviet divisions and a tank brigade.

Sisu!



"Fahrenheit and Celsius are equal at forty degrees below zero. Perfect 'gnome weather'. The invading 'giants' need much more activity to stay warm. **Sisu** keeps me from freezing.

"Beyond the cold, the *stillness*. He who makes the first move is a moose.



"I counted past one hundred today. Dreamt about living long enough to kill one hundred moose, not enemies trying to take *my* forest.

"Eleven in two hundred and forty-eight minutes of daylight. I imagine not soldiers, but the frontline Communist futbol team.



The national team of Russia defeated by Sweden in Moscow in 1913. / La sélection nationale de Russie, défaits par Suède en Moscou en 1913. / L'équipe nationale russe qui s'incline à Moscou face à la Suède en 1913. / Das russische Nationalteam, das 1913 in Moskau den Schweden unterlag: N. I. Nikita Khramov, Nikolai Yekovlev, Leonid Zolotarev, Vladimir Akhmetov, Pyotr Zolotarev, Vasily Chibrikov, Dmitry Vashin, Andrey Akimov, Kosty Butuzov, Alexey Kharin, Ivan Egorov. Photo: Lukasz-Kerth

"Finland beats Russia 11-0!"



"I'd rather save Finnish lives than kill Russians, though I don't keep count.

"An artillery battery, set up behind a wall of fallen trees, had zeroed in on a forward sector. Safe behind cover, the Russians' accurate shelling provided by a spotting periscope.



"I spent an hour before dawn inching up on the position. From two hundred and fifty yards, the first shot took out its right 'eye'; my second blinded it completely.

"Then I wait patiently, but not another shot is fired -- no Russian is stupid enough to stick his head up to see where to aim the cannon.

"No more killing today. That must have put the moose at ease."





"The ladies of St Petersburg could not sleep peacefully as long as the Finnish border ran so close"

Stalin had heeded the warning of Peter the Great. In one of the coldest European winters ever, the Soviets launched a major offensive on the Karelian Isthmus. Nazi Blitzkrieg tactics, so successful against Poland, were supposed to rout the Finns.



His generals had doubts: "The terrain of coming operations is split by lakes, rivers, swamps, and is almost entirely covered by forests...The proper use of our forces will be difficult."

And costly. Time and time again, the mobile and daring Finns pounced on the Russians.



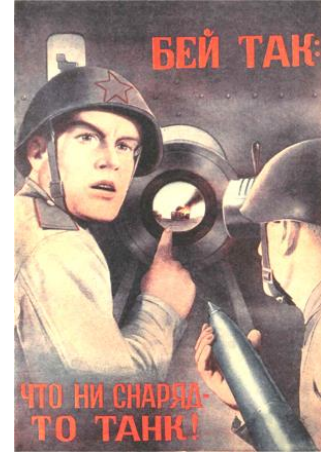


"In the bright of day or by the light of the moon, the hunter constantly calculates distance. I am lethal at three hundred and fifty yards. So is my enemy. Advancing any closer, especially wearing a dirty cape or dark uniform or running to a new position will be fatal.

"My Thirty-Fourth Infantry Regiment comrades assist me, spraying random machinegun fire to 'alert' the Russians to seek better cover. And when they do...



"Two hundred and twenty-five..."



Finnish success shocked the world. And humiliated the Russians. When word reached Western journalists that an unknown Finn had wiped out a Soviet regiment singlehandedly...

"Dead-Eye Dick", remarked one of the American reporters. 'A human machinegun."

'Two hundred and sixty-two," said a Brit. "'The Finn Reaper" with a rifle.'

"In less than a month of war.' marveled an Italian, "'Headshot Houdini" is who he has to be.'



To every Russian soldier anywhere in Finland, the daylight killer became known as Белая смерть - 'The White Death'.



For half the morning for a week, every cannon in the Soviet Army searched the enemy's forest...



"Russian swine! Ruin my forest to kill me! You got close. One shell tore off the back of my jacket, but not a drop of red on me. Not me, the little Finnish moosehunter you call the 'White Death'.

"Have I become the latest 'monster' of our times?"



"In just over four hours of daylight, I killed twenty-nine.



"More or less, a complete American baseball team.



"Oh, the agony of the hometown rooters, their beloved heroes gone forever.



"Communist children everywhere, yell and scream and jump up and down, demand that your Papas and brothers and uncles and cousins get out of Finland.

"Otherwise...The Red Army cannot see me, cannot find me, cannot stop me. To prevent an epidemic, your loving family members will be buried in the spring, far, far away. One fateful touch of the 'White Death' - A man doesn't live long enough to hear his brains and skull smattering on the snow!

"Three hundred and fifty-five!"



'Things that go bump in the night' may scare little children the world over, but in Finland, to the Soviet soldier the most terrifying sight of all was a clear, crisp day.

By early February, the Russians had penetrated the Finnish defense line at several points. Exhausted and running out of ammunition, would the Finns be forced to give up?

Not while the 'White Death' was still in the fight!



National honor at stake, Moscow called on their elite 'anti-sniper' team.



"The hunter has no use for 'tricks'. I set up no false blinds to get my attackers to shoot at a 'decoy'. I do not run fishing line to a tree branch fifty yards away, then pull the string to draw a shot. That might work against farmers six weeks off the plow, but if there is another hunter in the woods, the 'tricks' become *clues*, and he will track me back and kill me.



"To the untrained eye and ear, the forest appears still and silent. Not to me. No such thing as absolute stillness and quiet while one is still alive.

"A *glint* in the far trees...four hundred and two.

"A follow-up shot strikes within a yard of me. Not good enough...four hundred and three.



"Sooner or later, the Russians will understand. However well equipped a sniper may be, regardless of his training at a prestigious academy, or even how good a shot he is...a sniper does not *know* my forest.

"They might as well be grazing moose.

"Four hundred and four. Four hundred and five."



On the 31st of January, the Finnish government received the first tentative peace conditions from the Soviet Union.



The Russians had started the war to conquer and occupy all of Finland. Events had tempered their demands. Finland would give up the Karelian Isthmus, including the city of Viipuri, and Finland's shore of Lake Ladoga. The Hanko Peninsula was to be leased to the Soviet Union for thirty years.

Finland refused, hoping for military support by regular troops from Sweden, France and the United Kingdom or a [League of Nations](#) intervention. There would be no rush into peace negotiations.

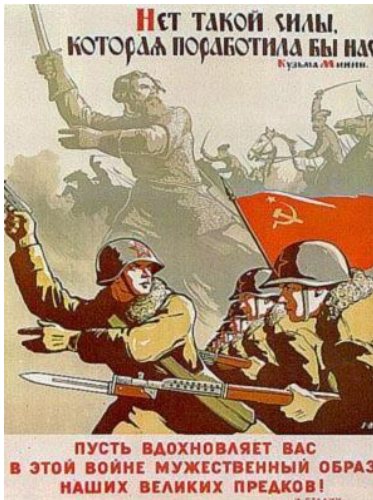


"I am given a new rifle by a rich Swedish businessman and anti-Communist.



"An excellent weapon once I remove the scope and adjust the iron sights.

"Four hundred and seventy-five."



The Russian onslaught raged on; the outnumbered Finns continued to adapt. The days were growing longer; soon the little nation would be without its staunchest ally: winter.



"A hunter fights one bullet at a time. With each Soviet soldier I kill, I hope he will be the last to die in my forest.

"Enough!" they'll all yell, 'We don't want to die in Finland' and the lot of them'll run back to Moscow.

"Instead, even more come.



"A fighter hunts on fully automatic. I am ordered closer to the front. A machinegun does not make a man a better hunter, but he must be quicker. Hiding in ambush, I await the Russians. Without warning I am up and firing, killing at fifty yards, twenty-five, ten...pointblank!

"For five days we fight like maniacs, shooting and killing every Russian in sight. At the end I count the dead as if they were spectators at a futbol game, lulled to sleep by incompetent play.

"Two hundred even. The complete graduating class of a Soviet military academy.



"Not hunting, *slaughter*. Had they been a herd of moose, I would have refused to fire. Six hundred and eighty-two!"



British aid to Finland arrived in late February; one hundred and forty-four bomber and fighter aircraft, a large quantity of hand-grenades, anti-tank rifles and machine-guns, howitzers and field guns. The rifles were .303 caliber, equivalent to 7-7 mm. To fit their own rifles, the Finns had to file down the ammunition.



Their transport took nearly two weeks. The Siberian 'Front Guard', northern Yakuts, hunters of elk, muskoxen and moose, hardened woodsmen who had learned how to kill before they could sign their names - the Soviet Union's first line of defense against the Japanese.



Border clashes on the Manchurian-Mongolian frontier had been going on for years. In May of 1939, an undeclared war broke out. Over 100,000 troops and 1,000 tanks and aircraft killing tens of thousands of soldiers. By August, the Japanese were crushed. Within weeks, World War Two began in Poland.

Stalin had trusted Hitler, not Hirohito. He had kept his fearsome 'Front Guard' on alert, awaiting another attack by the Imperial Japanese Army.

Bloodied and humbled by the 'Front Guard', the Japanese had had enough of the Russians; they would expand their empire not in Siberia, but in the Pacific.



Stalin promised a 'Hero of the Soviet Union' medal, the nation's highest award, to the sniper who killed 'The White Death'.

When told of the combat conditions, the Yakut leader laughed. "Siberians sweat in Finland."



"Night begins my day. I choose my spot with my eyes, not my feet. Once settled in, I cover my tracks with snow. One with the forest, I welcome the dawn.

"The brightening darkens me. With every waking ray of sunlight, I become more and more relaxed until I'm as still as glacial ice. Man and tool conjoined. The hunter knows, his rifle executes...another dead soldier, a new number.



"Not for a moment do I waver. Not a question of right or wrong, fair or unfair. I defend my forest, my Finland to my last bullet, my last drop of blood!

"I wait, I notice, I listen. Suddenly, a swath of color.

"But I do not shoot.



"It's a moose!

"A shot rings out. I see the flash. Bastard! Nobody kills a moose in my forest but me. Six hundred and ninety six.

"Another shot. Six hundred and ninety-seven, ten yards low, left.

"There are others out there. I can feel them. Waiting for me to make a mistake?"



"I have another enemy that can kill me just as dead as a bullet: *hypothermia*. I must remain completely focused, yet calm.

"I do not become frightened or nervous, don't allow my body to betray me by perspiring. A sudden harsh wind blows through my clothes, perspiration becomes permafrost, and I'm freezing to death and don't know it.

"An hour passes. Nothing. Another hour...no ordinary Russians, an 'anti-sniper' team. Two dead, how many more? Will they wait till dark and try again tomorrow? What do they tell their corps commander - the 'White Death' killed their comrades and got away with it?"

"Russian pride...Can't let themselves sneak away in the darkness to fight again.

"Lift your head to one take an extra peek...

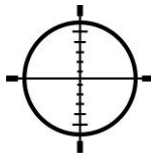


"I see you...six hundred and ninety-eight.

"One more, maybe two.

"A 'revenge' shot. I saw your flash, fool! Six hundred and ninety-nine.

"Sun going down behind my back. If there's another one...he looking for me...



"If he finds me, at that moment, his lens will reflect and I will shoot him right through his scope.



"Steady...Seven hundred, my God! Without sweating."



"We dine on moose tonight! Without special hometown seasonings, but delicious nevertheless.

"News from the front is not good. Promised aid will not be coming. We're running out of ammunition and soon the snow.

"'Seven hundred, seven hundred.' calls out one of my fellows. My fellows had been keeping score. 'There'll never be anyone like you in history!'

"'A bunch of medals, to be sure,' says another.



"If only Mama and Papa were still here. They'd be so proud."

"March the sixth, nineteen forty was yet another day in yet another war. There will be March Sixes every day of the year in wars around the world forever.



701



702



703



704



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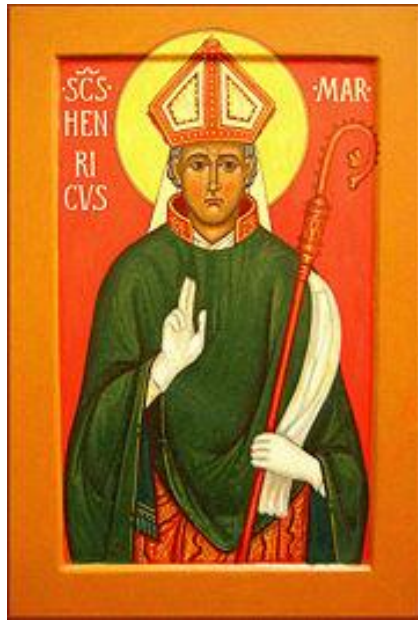
"When your number is up, it belongs to somebody else."



"I didn't hear the shot..."



"I believe I'm in the place all men must one day come... *Tuonela*, Land of the Dead.



"Piispa Henrik. Patron Saint of Finland, am I but one more corpse, one more number in this senseless war?"



"Or is there a place in Finnish knighthood for a sharpshooting gnome?"

"And the pages of history?"



"Do I tower over the last great hunter of the nineteenth century and the first great one of the twentieth?"

"Not from mammoth America or gigantic Germany...*Finland!*"



"Or should my immortal spirit journey across the Soviet Union to meet with the grieving families of sons, fathers, brothers and friends who never returned from Finland.

"I will not, because I cannot, apologize.



"Even if I had killed only one, I'd have been more sorry if I had killed one less. Finland had to remain free. I did what I was ordered to do the best I could."

"SIMO HAYHA...SIMO HAYHA...."

"Words I hear...someone is calling my name.



"I'm alive, but cannot speak. Something's wrong, half my lower face is gone.

"A hunter has no use for a mirror. The hunter looks forward, back, side to side and all around, but never inward. No time in war for self-examination. On my back in a bed, seeing my own reflection is suddenly unthinkable."



On March 12, 1940, the same day Simo Hayha awoke from his coma, Finland surrendered ceding 22,000 square miles, including Hayha's home forest, to the Soviet Union.

"Just enough land to bury our dead," said a Russian General.

At the cost of more than half a million lives, the Red Army had been taught how to fight under winter conditions.

The Nazis had been watching closely. The Russian soldiers the German had met following the conquest of Poland had been well-equipped and well-trained, causing Hitler to reassess the strength of the Soviet Union. The disaster in Finland made up his mind.

But the Nazis learned nothing from the Finns: "Hobnail boots in this cold. Might as well go barefoot."



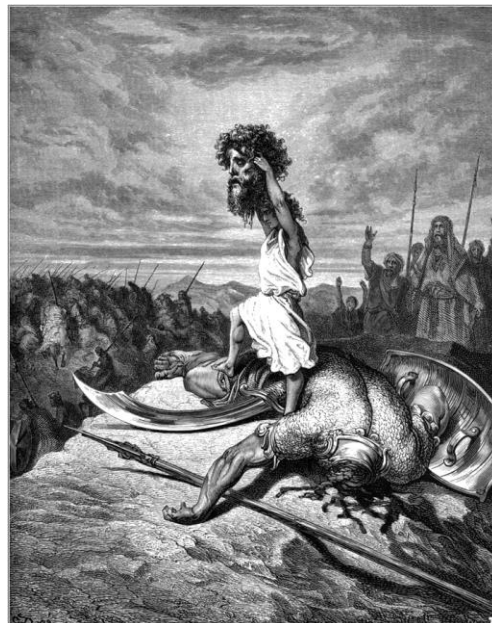
'The Great Patriotic War of the Soviet Union' was the biggest, bloodiest war in history. Victory over the Nazis cost nearly 28 million Russian lives, more than six times the population of Finland.



Simo Hayha had been struck in the jaw by an explosive shell. 'Half his head has been blown off', reported the team that brought him to a field hospital.

In a coma for eleven days, when he awoke, corporal Simo Hayha was promoted to second lieutenant and later declared a 'National Treasure'. It took several years for Häyhä to recover, but once he had, he was back in the woods hunting, once with the Finnish President.

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David would outlive Goliath. More than a decade after the fall of the Red giant, at age 97, Simo Hayha passed away, very much alive after killing his one hundredth moose.



Sisu!