

VÄINO AND LEMPI KOSKELA AND THE FINNISH-RUSSIAN WAR 1939-40

By Greg Jacob

OVERVIEW OF THE WAR

THE WINTER WAR, a military conflict between the Soviet Union and Finland, began November 30, 1939. It was a short-lived conflict, ending on March 13, 1940 with the Moscow Peace Treaty.

In 1939, Joseph Stalin, worried that German aggression would threaten St. Petersburg, wanted to install Soviet military facilities on Finnish soil, acquire territories on the Karelian Isthmus and the islands of the Gulf of Finland, and secure a 30-year lease for a naval base at Hanko (Hangö). Fearing Soviet expansion, Finland refused those demands, and Stalin, sure of expending little effort to get his demands, sent almost one million troops of the Red Army into Finland on November 30.

The Finns were led by Marshal Mannerheim who had his troops hunker down behind trenches and concrete bunkers, and had Finnish ski troops dressed in white conduct hit and run attacks on Soviet units during the freezing Finnish winter.

Even though the Russians lost five men for every one Finn, they had superior numbers, tanks, and relentless artillery bombardments.

When the Russian troops overran the Finnish defenses on the Karelian Isthmus, known as the “Mannerheim Line,” Finland, facing exhaustion and depletion of ammunition, agreed to peace terms.

Finland had to cede eleven percent of their territory (western Karelia), 22,000 square miles, to the Soviet Union and agree to the construction of a Soviet naval base on the Hanko Peninsula. The Moscow Peace Treaty came at a heavy cost for the Soviet Union, which lost over 300,000 men compared to 65,000 for the Finns.

VÄINO AND LEMPI KOSKELA

Väino and Lempi Koskela, 94 and 93 years old, both served in the Winter War and the Continuation War. On an invite from Väino’s uncle Sam, Väino moved to Duluth, MN in 1956. Uncle Sam lived in Floodwood, MN, but Väino landed in Duluth because of a job at a clothing store. A year later he sponsored his wife and brother. Twenty-one years later they moved to Astoria, Oregon where Väino got a job in the plywood mill. They bought Ralph and Nancy Mattilas’s house (Faith Swanson is their daughter) on S. Denver St. For several years Lempi



VÄINO AND LEMPI KASKELA WITH THE AWARDS PRESENTED BY THE FINNISH GOVERNMENT.

worked at Bumblebee Cannery where she filleted fish. Their daughter, Leila Collier, and her husband Mike live in Warrenton, Oregon. Their son, George and his wife Sherry live in Waldport, OR.

Väino was born in Kurikka, Finland on February 17, 1924 and Lempi Airitsalo was born in Uukuniemi (Karelia) on November 24, 1924. Both of them came from a large family, Väino one of nine children and the same with Lempi. She served in the Finnish Army for four years as a seamstress (likaviemäri) of army

uniforms. Väino went to Lappenranta for six months of boot camp in 1939, and then he was shipped to the front lines in places such as Sykiälä Kylä, Kanneljärvi, and Ilomansti. The conditions were rough. It was an unusual cold winter. The uniforms got so dirty in the trenches that troops used their knives to clean the seams of their overcoats. Many days went by without showers. Food wasn't easy to come by, except for potatoes and bread. All soldiers were issued ration cards. Trench warfare and guerilla tactics were used against the Soviet Army

who vastly outnumbered the Finns. “We spent much of our time digging a ‘korsu’ or dugout into the frozen ground,” said Väino.

In one battle, his unit sneaked behind the Russian lines by crawling through the woods for several days and nights to a bridge where they set explosives, thereby preventing Soviet tanks and weaponry from crossing a river. Väino said, “It was strange. Here we were on the enemy side of the line. The Russians were shooting at us like crazy. They managed to get out of the area, but they left behind lots of heavy equipment, which we Finns made use of.” A month later in Ilomansti, Väino was shot in the left leg during a furious firefight. “We had no place to hide other than to run and dive behind stumps. A bullet hit me in the leg. Eventually after the shooting died down, I was taken to first aid and from that make-shift station to Tampere by train. After two months I was sent back to the front, but by then peace was only a few days away. You know, after 70 years my leg still hurts.” Väino was awarded two Purple Hearts for his valor during the four-month Winter War.

He served two years during the Continuation War of 1941-1944, and during the summer before the war started, Väino was at Rovaniemi. He and other soldiers were widening a landing strip to accommodate larger

planes when they got word that Adolph Hitler was secretly landing to celebrate Mannerheim’s 75th birthday. They were ordered to hide in the woods, and they watched Hitler and his contingent land and drive to a secret rendezvous point with Mannerheim. Most Finns viewed The Continuation War as the second part of the Winter War. The Finns hoped to take back the lands lost in the Winter War, but after losing over 60,000 soldiers and seeing the Germans losing their offensive against the Russians, they signed a harsh peace agreement that reestablished the borders from 1940, resulting in the loss of the Petsamo area, and required the payment of massive war reparations to the Soviet Union.

After the end of WWII, Lempi went to work for Leevi Koskela, Väino’s older brother. Lempi took Väino’s place at his brother’s tailor shop because Väino opened his own tailor shop in Kurikka. Väino and Lempi had already met, of course, at Leevi’s shop, but one evening they showed up at a dance hall and that evening was the beginning of a courtship. On August 21, 1948 they were married, and on August 21, 2018 the two Winter War veterans will celebrate their 70th wedding anniversary.

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