

Commentary...

The greatest warrior of winter

By Jim Cornelius
News Editor

As Sisters Country continues to attempt to shovel out from under snowstorm after snowstorm, as temperatures plunge as low as -26 degrees, and as the international biathlon season gets underway, thoughts turn to the greatest warrior ever to strap on a set of skis and a pick up a rifle: Finnish sniper Simo Häyhä.



It was late Fall, 1939. Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union had carved up Poland that September. Although bound together in a nonaggression pact, the two great totalitarian powers eyed each other warily. Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin feared invasion by Nazi Germany — Hitler had, after all, promised as much in “Mein Kampf.” The Red Army needed a buffer to protect the northern city of Leningrad — and Stalin demanded the territory to create it from the neighboring Finland. The Finns refused to be intimidated; they pledged neutrality and resistance to any German invasion, but refused any territorial concessions. On November 30, 1939, the Red Army rolled into the Karelian Isthmus. The Soviet Union had invaded Finland.

In the South Karelian village of Rautjärvi, a five-foot-three-inch, slightly built 34-year-old militiaman, a hunter, trapper and farmer of the Karelian forest named Simo Häyhä, picked up his Mosin-Nagant M28-30 and joined his infantry regiment to defend his homeland.

Häyhä brought significant skills to the battlefield. He was an expert rifleman with the M/28-30 variant, which was considerably shorter and handier than the basic Mosin-Nagant 91 and had excellent iron sights. Unlike most snipers, Häyhä eschewed optics and stuck with the old-school irons — which never fogged up in the cold or glinted in the icy northern sunlight to give away his position.

He was also, like so many Finnish soldiers, a capable Nordic skier, which gave him and his comrades a huge advantage in mobility against the road-bound Russians with their tanks and armored cars.

Häyhä possessed the fieldcraft and patience of the born woodsman, and he was equipped and adapted to handle the extremes of what turned out to be an exceptionally cold winter, even for the hinterlands of Finland.

Häyhä often worked alone, donning his white snowsuit, drawing rations rich in protein and fat, and stalking his Russian prey to take them out one by one with well-placed rifle shots. Just as often, he would join in lightning ski raids, cutting up Russian units with a hail of fire from his 9mm Suomi submachine gun.

Snipers have a psychological and moral effect on the enemy that no other weapon seems to match. The feeling that you are being stalked and selected for death strikes a primal terror into the hearts of the stoutest soldier. The Russians knew who Häyhä was — they quickly grew to fear him and gave him a name suited to their dread: The White Death.

They went after him with artillery strikes and counter-snipers, but Häyhä always escaped. In one instance, he out-waited a Russian counter-sniper, who was armed with a scoped Mosin-Nagant M91. The Russian waited for hours for a shot at The White Death. As the sun sank through the woods, he apparently decided to call it a day. He rose to one knee — and the last pale

light of the setting winter sun glinted upon his scope. A shot rang out. The White Death had struck again.

By the spring of 1940, Simo Häyhä had amassed an unbelievable total of confirmed kills: 505. He had probably killed half as many again in raids with his Suomi. The Russians — with their massed frontal assaults and stand-up tactics — made the job easier than it should have been, but the record remains an almost unbelievable battlefield accomplishment.

On March 6, 1940, Häyhä’s luck ran out. He was engaged, along with a small cadre of ski troops, in a firefight with a superior force of Russians when he was hit in the face by a bullet from a counter-sniper. This is usually described as an “exploding bullet,” but it was likely a bullet sectioned to be frangible on impact. The Finnish sniper suffered a grievous wound. The bullet tore off a portion of his lower left jaw and knocked him unconscious. He was rescued from the battlefield and lay in a coma for days before reviving. His war was over.

So, too, was Finland’s. Despite almost miraculous battlefield success against enormous odds, the plucky Finns simply could not prevail against the tremendous weight of the Red Army. They were forced to negotiate a ceasefire. They gave up territory, including the part of Karelia that Simo

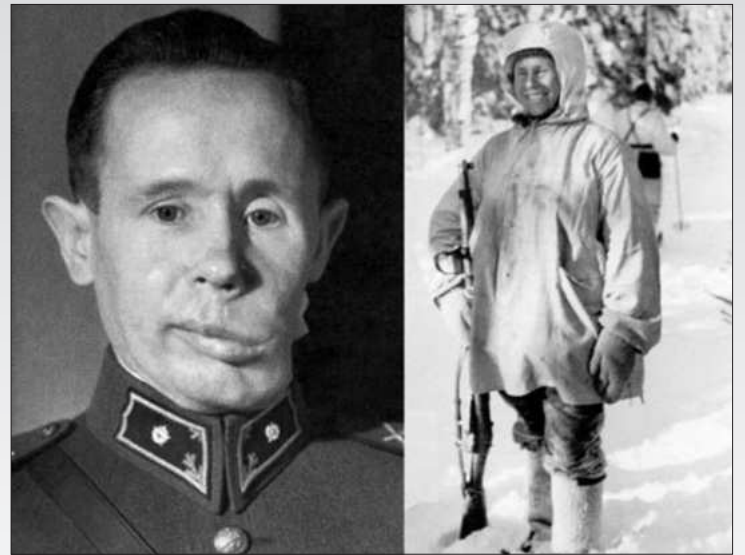


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Simo Häyhä turned the heavy snows and cold of Finland to his advantage in battling Soviet invaders in 1939-40.

Häyhä called home. As one Russian officer mordantly quipped, the Red Army won just enough land to bury their dead.



Ironically, the terrible performance of the Red Army against the determined Finns may have contributed to Hitler’s decision to invade the Soviet Union in 1941, confident that “the whole rotten edifice” would collapse. That, of course, proved not to be the case.

Finnish troops attacked the Soviet Union and regained the territory lost in the Winter War in what would be known as The Continuation War, 1941-44, where Finland acted as co-belligerent with — but not allied with — Germany. The recovered territory was lost again when the Soviet Union prevailed in the Second World War.

Simo Häyhä did not serve in the Continuation War. Rendered homeless by the

Winter War’s ceasefire agreement and treaty, he relocated to his brother’s farm. He never married, but roamed the woods as a trapper and moose hunter, unhindered by the injury that had disfigured him. He apparently exhibited no symptoms of post-traumatic stress either from his injury or from being the instrument of so many deaths. He regarded his actions in the Winter War as simple duty, performed to the best of his ability, and when the war was over, he was content to return to the life of a woodsman.

Häyhä became a noted breeder of hunting dogs, and an enduring hero to his countrymen. He lived a quiet and modest — and very long — life. He died at the age of 96, in 2002.

Occasionally, military enthusiasts would query him as to the secret to racking up hundreds of sniper kills. His simple reply always came with a smile: “Practice.”

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