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II. A Sabotage Operation Against the Murmansk—Leningrad Rail Line (August 1942)

In the summer of 1942 the German Twentieth Mountain Army was committed in northern Finland. The XXXVI Mountain Infantry Corps held the center of the German front east of Alakurti and opposed superior Russian forces. After the German offensive, whose objective it was to gain control of the vital Murmansk-Leningrad railroad line, ended in failure, both sides established themselves in well prepared positions, and the situation remained stabilized. The German front was not a continuous line. Between the central and southern corps, and extending north and south of the Arctic Circle, there was a 45-mile gap that was protected by only two Finnish infantry battalions. Operations on both sides were limited to lively patrol activity and small-scale probing attacks.

It was, of course, no secret to the German military leaders that at the time the bulk of Allied lend-lease materiel, including ammunition, motor vehicles, rations, and clothing entered Russia through the port of Murmansk, which is ice-free the year round. From there the supplies were moved to Leningrad by rail. Even the most intensive efforts of German air and naval forces had little effect on the flow of supplies into Murmansk harbor. The Luftwaffe frequently succeeded in cutting the rail line to Leningrad, but the interruptions were only temporary. With both military and civilian labor forces standing by at all times, the Russians were invariably able to repair the lines and even the damaged tunnels and bridges with surprising ease and speed. The Germans finally came to the conclusion that the only way to disrupt traffic along this important supply artery was to effect a thorough demolition of bridges and tunnels by trained sabotage units.

a. The Special Missions and Sabotage Company (SMS Company).

Military operations in the densely wooded terrain, intersticed by numerous lakes, waterways, and swamps, as well as by some very hilly and rocky regions, confronted combat and service units alike with great difficulties. In view of these terrain hazards the idea of launching an all-out attack against the rail line was abandoned, one such attempt having ended in complete failure. Instead, there was a general agreement that this difficult mission could best be accomplished by a highly mobile and specially trained small unit. Such a unit was the so-called Special Missions and Sabotage Company, a GHQ unit attached to army and at that time stationed in the XXXVI Corps rear area.

The Special Missions and Sabotage Company (SMS Company)* was activated in the spring of 1942 as a part of the so-called Brandenburg Regiment. This regiment, operating under the direct control of the Armed Forces High Command, was responsible for the recruiting, organizing, and training of special intelligence and sabotage units of various sizes from companies down to teams and even individuals.

Unlike many other special purpose units within the German Armed Forces, these units were manned by hand-picked troops and exceptionally well supplied with weapons and equipment.

The commander of the SMS Company was an exceedingly energetic young officer who possessed superior tactical ability and an intimate knowledge of the Russian language. Each squad had an able and experienced German NCO and an expert Finnish interpreter who spoke fluent Russian. Two out of three of the men were former POW's or deserters from the Red Army, originating from the Ukraine or other parts of Russia and opposing the Soviet regime. The others were so-called ethnical Germans who hailed from southern Tyrol, the Balkans, and the German settlements along the Volga. Three men in each squad had undergone engineer training and were especially proficient in handling and setting explosive charges.

The company was equipped with Russian or Finnish submachine-guns. Each platoon had one 80-

mm. mortar and each squad one light machinegun. In addition, the company had two 75-mm. field guns that could be disassembled and transported in sections. Radio equipment enabled the company headquarters to maintain contact with higher echelons in the year, with each of its platoons, and with one of its intermediate supply points. Attached to the company was a detachment of 18 bloodhounds and watch dogs with 6 Finnish handlers.

b. Preliminary Preparations.

In mid-July 1942 the German armies were on the offensive deep in the interior of European Russia. At that time the SMS Company received orders to prepare for a long-range reconnaissance and sabotage operation against the Murmansk-Leningrad rail line. The operation was to take from 2 to 3 weeks and was to be launched early in August. Whereas the long summer days in the Land of the Midnight Sun were favorable for movements and operations, they made the problem of escaping enemy observation all the more difficult.

According to the plan the distance from the point of departure in Kairala to the demolition targets, about 150 miles, was to be traversed by negotiating the lakes and streams of that region. For this purpose collapsible paddle boats and outboard motors, weighing 50 and 20 pounds respectively, were issued to the company. The men were thoroughly trained in the handling and maintenance of both boats and motors at the company's training base near Kairala. During the training period it was quickly discovered that the best safeguard against capsizing, especially when the boats were driven by outboard motor or were being towed, was to lash them together in pairs with poles and heavy rope. However, frequent resort to this expedient was not anticipated since the greatest portion of the route could be covered only by manual propulsion. Furthermore, it was planned to use the outboard motors beyond Tumcha only in the event of an emergency.

To carry out its sabotage mission the company was issued a highly effective explosive charge newly developed by the Finns and equipped with a conventional time fuze. The latter could be adjusted to set off the charge with a delay period of as much as 8 days, thus giving the company ample time to return to its home base safely. During training the company conducted dry runs to familiarize every man with the handling and installation of the demolition charges.

The radio operators, too, had to undergo an intensive training course, which included instruction in using the Russian four-element code-group system (the five-element code group was standard in the German Army). It was necessary to adopt the Russian system for this mission in order to avoid recognition which might compromise the plans for the entire operation.

The company commander had two opportunities to reconnoiter the approach route and demolition target points from the air. However, both flights failed to reveal anything that necessitated a change in plans. They only confirmed that there were no Russian troops, labor camps, or permanently inhabited settlements west of Kovda. Finnish liaison officers who served as consultants during the preparations also discounted the possibility of encountering superior Russian forces along the selected approach route, provided the operation plans remained secret.

A Junkers 88 bomber and a Henschel 126 reconnaissance plane were standing by at the Alakurti airfield ready to airdrop supplies and evacuate wounded in the event of an emergency. They were to be contacted by radio and guided to their target area by smoke signals from the ground.

c. Final Preparations.

On 25 July 1942 the company commander received the following operations order from the commanding general of XXXVI Mountain Corps :

Jumping off on 2 August and utilizing available water routes, the SMS Company will move to the area west of Kovda and will effect demolitions of the Murmansk-Leningrad rail line at two or more points. Excluding a Russian attack, all combat will be avoided. Extreme precaution will be

taken to avert arousing enemy suspicion.

The company commander decided to use the route of march previously selected since it necessitated only one portage, across the watershed some 8 miles southeast of Kairala (map 35). To get off to a faster start and to conserve physical energy and motor fuel, the company was to be provided with several assault boats, so that the entire unit could be towed the first leg of the journey.

Some of the items of clothing and equipment normally worn by German arctic troops during the summer had to be discarded to reduce the danger of recognition. They were replaced with Russian-type rubber hip-boots, camouflage jackets, a Finnish dagger, and a small field bag for carrying ammunition and rations. The wearing of cartridge belts and rank insignia was prohibited. Each man carried mosquito netting and a Finnish insect repellent.

Because of weight limitations, neither mortars nor light field guns could be taken along. In place of a mortar, each squad was issued one rifle with a grenade launcher attachment, which had proven very effective in forest fighting. The grenades fired by this launcher had the additional advantage that they could also be hurled by hand during close-in fighting. Beside the submachineguns the company carried along 3 light machineguns, each with 2,500 rounds of ammunition.

The guiding principle was to carry relatively few weapons but more than the bare minimum requirements of ammunition.

The problem of supplying the company was not an easy one. To live off the land exclusively was impossible because the region offered only berries and mushrooms. Much game, including reindeer, elk, black grouse, hazel hens, and polar rabbits, could be found, but to shoot it might well have given the Germans away. However, the lakes could provide ample fish, which would serve as a ration supplement.

It was decided that the company's supply would be handled by seven teams of three men each. These teams were to shuttle supplies forward from Kairala and establish seven supply points along the route. Since the company could carry with it rations and other supplies for the first 6 days, it did not expect to become dependent on the supply teams until after reaching the base camp on Lake Kovd.

A doctor was not available, but an experienced medical technician and three litter bearers, one for each platoon, did accompany the unit.

Before setting out, the company commander requested that two roving reconnaissance patrols, one from each of the two Finnish battalions, provide security up to the Tumcha area. Should any Russians be encountered along the way, these patrols were to distract them by diversionary movements and radio deception.

The following was the projected timetable for the operation:

First day: Proceed to Lake Siyeminki, located at the head of the Kuvzhdenga River.

Second day: Continue to Supply Point 4, west of Tumcha.

Third day: Bypass Tumcha, send out reconnaissance parties, and establish contact with the Finnish roving patrols; then continue to Supply Point 6.

Fourth day: After reaching Lake Kovd, reconnoiter the region around Velikiy Island.

Fifth day: Reconnoiter in the direction of Pazhma Island and establish a base camp there.

Sixth day: Rest.

Seventh and eighth days: Reconnoiter eastward in the direction of the rail line.

Ninth through eleventh days: Commit three demolition detachments, consisting of one platoon each, against three separate points along the rail line. Place and set demolition charges in tunnels and under bridges.

Twelfth day: Return to base camp and rest.

Thirteenth through fifteenth days: Start return trip to Kairala using outboard motors only after reaching Tumcha.

d. The Course of the Operation.

Early on the morning of 3 August the company moved out. The paddle boats were lashed together in pairs and towed by assault boats in groups of six down the chain of lakes south of Kairala. Shortly before noon the 3-mile portage was reached. Some time was spent in traversing it, since as many as three trips were necessary to get all the equipment across. By late afternoon the boats were reassembled and paired off. They then moved downstream using the outboard motors whenever possible. After reaching Lake Siyeminki they stopped to rest.

The company continued the advance on the morning of 4 August and all movements went smoothly and according to schedule. Early that evening radio contact was established with the two Finnish patrols, which reported no Russian troops in and around Tumcha.

With the patrols still providing cover, the company proceeded along Lake Sush on 5 August and late in the evening reached Supply Point 6. Meanwhile, the Finnish patrols learned that a Russian patrol had passed through the now-deserted town of Tumcha some 3 or 4 days previously. Since it was a Russian practice to conduct such reconnaissance missions every 10 to 14 days, it could be assumed that they would not be back for another 7 to 10 days.

On 6 August the advance to the next supply point, No. 7, was delayed because the western part of Lake Kovd turned out to be full of bulrushes. One squad was dispatched to Velikiy Island during the evening to learn whether Russian troops or labor details were on the island. Later, the same squad was to act as a covering force while the rest of the company landed on the west side of Pazhma Island and established a base camp. A simple, abbreviated radio code was devised to report the presence or absence of Russian troops. The code consisted of only one or two signals for which the receiving station had to be constantly on the alert.

At 0700 the next morning a flash came that Velikiy Island was clear of enemy forces, while a second message at about 1130 stated that no Russians had been sighted on Pazhma Island either. The company could therefore go ashore and establish a base camp by late evening without fear of detection or interference. Base Camp A was set up on the western side of the island near the small bay into which a brooklet emptied. A cordon of sentries was posted to keep the old fishing village on the east side of the island under close observation.

It was assumed that any Russian scouting parties or labor details that might be in the area would take advantage of the blockhouses and running water afforded by the village. Velikiy Island was originally ruled out as a base camp since it was feared that camp fires could easily be spotted by the many fishing parties that were known to frequent the more heavily stocked northern part of Lake Kovd.

According to the schedule, 8 August, the sixth day of the operation, was to be a day of rest. When the first supplies that had been relayed along the route of advance arrived at the base camp, it was learned that one of the supplymen, a member of Supply Team 4, had drowned when his boat capsized. On their own initiative, the leaders of Supply Teams 4 and 5 decided to move Supply Point 5 about 5 miles westward because Team 4, with one man short, could no longer be expected to relay supplies the whole length of its assigned sector. Since fishing around Pazhma Island was good, the company could be adequately fed even if regular rations were delayed.

At dawn, on 9 August, the three platoons each sent out a patrol to reconnoiter the rail bridges and tunnels that were to be blown up. Of the three objectives that were to be involved, the central target was a bridge, which on the basis of aerial photographs was estimated to measure 1,600 feet in length. This bridge could be approached only by boat, and a small island located a short distance to the west afforded an excellent jumpoff point. However, and just because of these advantages, it was also expected that this bridge would be particularly well guarded against sabotage or other attack. This assumption seemed justified in view of the heavy antiaircraft fire

that German planes encountered while on bombing missions over the area.

Whereas the approach route to the smaller bridge to the north also seemed quite favorable, considerable difficulties were expected en route to the southern target—for example, the necessity of making two portages. The bridge itself, however, spanned a deep gorge and therefore would probably require much more time to repair than the targets farther north.

The three reconnaissance patrols had succeeded in reaching the immediate vicinity of the objectives in the late afternoon and early evening of 9 August. The explosive charges they had brought along were deposited in protected and well-concealed spots near the targets. During the exceptionally bright night they watched traffic and observed Russian sentries patrolling the rail line and being relieved.

The company commander decided to rest his men on 11 August. During the evening he ordered Company Headquarters and the 2d and 3d Platoons to move to the northwestern tip of Velikiy Island. The following day Base Camp B was established there to shorten the supply line and return route of those two platoons, while Supply Team 7 took over Base Camp A to support the 1st Platoon.

On 13 August additional reconnaissance patrols were sent out. The explosives were moved closer to the target areas and all contingencies were discussed in detail. The company commander ordered the explosive charges placed preferably between the hours of 0100 and 0300 because it was then that the sentries were prone to relax their vigil.

The three sabotage operations were carried out in the early morning hours of 14 August. The 1st Platoon had the misfortune of being spotted by a Russian sentry at 0200, before it was able to place its charges. Although the platoon leader did succeed in pouring gasoline on the bridge and igniting it, he was forced to withdraw after a brief exchange of shots with Russian guards who had meanwhile been alerted by the sentry. During the ensuing melee one of the boats was hit, and its oarsman killed. Another boat capsized, but its occupant was rescued. The Russian guards on the bridge made excellent targets for the German riflemen who picked off 8 or 10 of them.

Shortly after the firing began the Russian guards sounded the emergency alarm, which quickly alerted all posts up and down the line. This was soon followed by feverish Russian radio activity, some of which could be intercepted by the company command post at Base Camp B. When the company commander received a radio message from the 1st Platoon informing him of what had transpired, he ordered the other two platoons to set off their charges without delay. Using its outboard motors after again reaching Lake Kovd, the 1st Platoon returned to Base Camp B at 1700.

The 2d Platoon, committed to the demolition of the main target in the center, succeeded in approaching the bridge, protected by vegetation that lined the southern bank of the long outlet. Guided by their dogs, the three Finns in that platoon quietly overpowered and killed the two Russian sentries at the southern end of the bridge. The southern half of the bridge was then swiftly prepared for demolition at three widely separated points. The presence of the German unit had apparently not been noticed by the Russian guard posted at the middle of the span or by the sentries at the northern end. However, when the general alarm was sounded, guard reinforcements streamed across the bridge on the run and the Germans were no longer able to prepare and place a fourth demolition charge nearer the center of the span. Instead, the charges already in place had to be detonated at once. A skillfully emplaced light machinegun held the Russian sentries at bay until the bulk of the platoon could disengage and withdraw. While the demolition men were pulling back, a 75-yard length of the bridge was blown sky high. Only two of the Germans were slightly wounded, while Russian casualties were conservatively estimated as eight men hit by machinegun fire and several others caught on the bridge when the blast went off. By 0315 the platoon had reassembled and received radio orders from company headquarters to return immediately. Using its outboards the platoon got back to Base Camp B at 1100.

The 3d Platoon encountered some difficulties in approaching its target. -After first taking a wrong turn the platoon was further delayed by a strong current. One of the Finnish guides

commandeered a fishing boat and the members of the crew disguised themselves as fishermen. The platoon was able to make up the lost time and to reach the bridge in the early evening of 13 August. By 2100 the explosives were in place. The time fuses were set for only a 5-hour delay because the platoon leader wanted to observe the effect of the blasts from a safe distance.

Shortly after the Russian guard relief emerged from its shelter and made its way across the span, at about 0230, the charges went off, collapsing one of the piers and hurling several of the guards from the bridge. When the platoon leader reported the results of his mission to company headquarters, he was ordered to lead the platoon back to Base Camp B, where he arrived by midafternoon.

Soon after 1700, when the three platoons had reassembled, the company, including Supply Team 7, set out on the return trip. Russian reconnaissance planes appeared overhead and strafed the company with machinegun fire. Three men were slightly wounded and several of the boats were damaged.

While moving westward through Lake Kovd, the company's rear elements suddenly heard several motorboats approaching from behind at full speed. Cutting their outboard motors at once, the company barely succeeded in slipping into the reed-covered swamp to the south before six large motor boats swept by in a westerly direction. Each boat carried about 45. Russians armed with automatic weapons.

Contrary to the original plan, the company commander decided then and there to return by way of Lake Vizi in an effort to shake off the Russian pursuers. This change in plans could be communicated only to Supply Team 3 because that team alone was equipped with a radio set. However, all supply teams had been forewarned that, in the event the company failed to pick them up by midnight of 16 August, they were to proceed by the shortest route to the nearest German or Finnish unit.

The mouth of the stream connecting Lakes Kovd and Vizi was found with surprising ease, thanks to the skill of the Finns. The company proceeded under motor power to the western end of Lake Vizi, a journey that took all night. Five boats were lost in the rapids between the two lakes, but their occupants were safely hoisted into other boats.

Russian reconnaissance planes repeatedly circled overhead, but each time the company was able to find cover. On reaching the western end of Lake Vizi, the company rested for several hours on the northern shore, which was farthest removed from the Russian bases.

In the late afternoon, the main body of the company, following close behind the advance guard, was just about to negotiate the watercourse connecting the western tips of Lakes Vizi and Tumcha, when a Russian force of at least four platoons suddenly attacked from ambush positions on both sides of the stream. The men were forced to leave their boats and abandon all equipment, including the radio sets. Most of the men swam to the north, the remaining ones to the south bank.

It was fortunate for the company that the point squad had saved a machinegun. Having sized up the situation swiftly, the squad leader set up the weapon on the north bank and soon sprayed the area. As other members of the company reached shore, those whose weapons were still serviceable quickly joined the machinegun crew and brought their fire to bear on the Russian ambush force. Under cover of this defensive screen, the company was able to escape from the Russian trap having lost only five dead and eight wounded. A short time later the men assembled on the south bank of the stream.

From there the journey had to be continued on foot since almost all of the boats had been lost. By midnight the company reached a point about 4 miles northwest of Tumcha where it rested for half a day after establishing an all-around defensive position.

Roving patrols of the two Finnish battalions had been kept on the alert in the area south of

Tumcha since the morning of 15 August to cover the return of the SMS Company. When they noticed the circling Russian reconnaissance planes and heard an exchange of fire from the direction of Lake Vizi, they rushed northward and attacked the Russian ambush force from behind, killing or wounding at least 35. Other Finnish patrols picked up Supply Teams 4 and 5, which were making their way westward through the Tumcha area.

In the course of the confusion a member of Supply Team 4, one of the Ukrainians, managed to slip away. Through radio intercept it was later discovered that he had succeeded in joining the Russians near Tumcha. It is safe to assume the reward for his exploits was a one-way ticket to a Siberian penal camp.

During the afternoon of 16 August the company made contact with outposts of the Finnish battalion some 10 miles north of Lake Siyeminki and from there returned to Kairala by evening.

e. The Performance of Foreign Nationals.

The ethnic Germans, like the Finns, gave a good account of themselves during the operation. Their tenacity, self-sufficiency, and close kinship with nature proved very valuable. With the exception of the deserter from Supply Team 4, the former Russian nationals gave a good account of themselves. In this operation they were led by reliable German and Austrian cadre personnel, whose presence undoubtedly influenced their performance.

During two subsequent commitments in the XXXVI Mountain Infantry Corps area, however, the company failed to accomplish its mission. In the last instance the majority of the Russian nationals deserted after shooting down some of their officers and NCO's.