



# FINLAND

## IN THE WINTER WAR

An examination of Finnish Infantry Tactics  
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In the years before the World War II most of Finland's higher officer cadre had been trained in the military academies of Imperial Russia, Germany and Sweden. However, they soon started to see Finland's "peculiarities" and the needs to take them into account when developing military doctrine and tactics for Finnish Army.

Finnish combat doctrine before and during the war was attack orientated. The basis for this was the small size of Finland's population and economy and also the terrain over which any war with the Soviet Union – the only likely aggressor – would be fought. The idea that a well-trained and led army could use the advantage of natural the cover of Finland's forests and swamps to strike when and where needed would be far better suited for the defence of the country than a static army trying to fight mostly defensively against an invader with much greater resources. Throughout the 1920's and 30's this strategy was developed at all levels of the military.

Finland's infantry was trained with emphasis on attack. The idea of fire and movement suited Finland's terrain perfectly, and this was taken into account in training. The Finns emphasized the ability of individual soldier

as the basis for the effectiveness of the whole unit – only if the individual soldiers could be counted to perform as they were taught could the unit perform as expected. At Junior leader level all training encouraged using initiative when an opportunity arose.

The theory was that overcoming even a strong enemy could be done with localized attacks and flanking movements; thus splitting the enemy to digestible pieces and destroying them in detail, one pocket at a time. Preciely how this was done was left for the commanders on the ground to decide. The use of mission specific battlegroups (*taisteluryhmä* in Finnish) was encouraged.

**The following information has been taken from the original (3rd & 4th editions.) Infantry Officers Combat Manual (Temporary) from 1934 which was in use through the whole war.**

### THE INFANTRY PLATOON IN THE ATTACK

Finnish infantry platoon in the attack attack relied on any supporting MGs and its LMG sections (*Pikakivääriryhmä's*) to give covering fire for Rifle sections (*kivääriryhmä's*) advance. In Continuation War most rifle sections had a LMG after vast amounts of weapons were captured in Winter War. Artillery and/or Mortar support was the norm in theory but in Winter War the lack of material both in weapons and ammunition

left infantry many times without or with minimal support from these elements.

First, an enemy target was scouted and the best possible lines of approach were decided upon, using terrain and weather to gain the greatest advantage. Supporting weapons were given their own sectors of fire which were made known to sections to minimise friendly fire.

The LMG sections were to move ahead of the Rifles and suppress any enemy so that the Rifles could then either advance to join the firing line or remain behind to cover the line of advance. Depending on the situation sections leader could divide his Section into half sections, *puoliryhmä* in Finnish, or more if needed. It wasn't advised to spread section more than 50m apart because of the communication difficulties.

The use of a point man, a *tunnustelija* in Finnish, was encouraged if the section wasn't in contact with the enemy. The rifle and LMG sections were taught to advance by rushes, *syöksy* in Finnish, under enemy fire. Using the covering fire of their own section and other supporting fire from friendly units, soldiers were to advance in unsynchronised rushes forward using available cover as much as they could. The rushes were not to be made just straight forward but more of zig-zagging to make it harder for the enemys aiming. The idea was that the men would operate in pairs, where one man covers the other's advance before moving forward himself.

After the enemy was within assault range the amount of fire from all weapons, MMG's, LMG's and rifles, was to be intensified in order to suppress the enemy. Then the assaulting sections would rush forward and throw grenades. After the explosions the section(s) would assault the enemy position with, according to the drill manual, a unified cry of "hurraa" to break the enemys will. In practise this was usually was a litany of

expletives! The enemy were to be overcome in close combat. The SMG's ability to suppress and destroy enemy at this point was heavily emphasized. Then the LMG section would follow rapidly to prevent enemy counter attacks while the rifle sections were "rolling" up, *vyöryttää* in Finnish, the enemy positions with grenades and SMG fire. At this point the attack was to be driven on without hesitation in order to deny the enemy the chance to recover and re-organize his defences. The LMG sections could also take part in the initial assault where LMG gunner was advised to keep firing from on the move to suppress enemy. A task made simpler as the Finnish LMG was more of an automatic rifle.

After the position was taken the supporting MG's would follow and the advance would renew if part of a larger attack. If not, then the sections were to be ready for the immediate enemy counter attack.

Heavier enemy positions could be bypassed and left for the artillery and following infantry to destroy. When assaulted they were first studied in detail to find any weak spots or advantageous terrain to use as a cover. The actual operation happened usually during night or bad weather to further protect the attacking troops.

### **THE INFANTRY PLATOON IN THE DEFENCE**

Any defensive positions, *tuliasema* in Finnish, were to have good fire sectors to enemys probable direction of advance but also could be made into an all around defensive position if there was time and the need. They were to be organised so that the supporting weapons in nearby positions could also provide covering fire. Emphasis was on ensuring adequate cover which could be camouflaged well, rather than heavy emplacements which the enemy could spot easily.

Every soldier was to know his position and sector of fire in defence. Platoon and Section

leaders should be made aware of all the artillery's pre-planned target points in their sector. If there was time after the actual defence position was constructed and reinforced a covering position and troop shelter would be constructed behind the actual defensive position, *suoja-asema* in Finnish.

Taisteluvartio's (sentry combat-patrols) were to be used to combat the enemy scouting and to disturb and slow down enemys initial attack. These were dangerous missions and demanded much from men whom the task was given.

Defensive positions were to be manned at all times by sentries who could raise the alarm if the enemy approached. When alerted the Sections would move to their given positions as fast as they could. At no times should any Section be away from their position if enemy got within 200m.

If the concentrated fire was unable to break the enemy and they got within assault range or breached the defence then SMG's and grenades were to be used heavily to suppress them. Following immediately this the enemy was to be assaulted and destroyed.

Against enemy tanks sections were to concentrate their fire on any supporting infantry first. Once they were destroyed the tanks were much easier to destroy one at a time with grenades, satchel charges Molotov Cocktails and other more effective infantry AT-weapon when they were available (such as in the Continuation War).

Sections could move within the defensive positions accordingly to situation but at no times were they to leave their position unmanned without an order. If surrounded and not ordered to retreat they were to fight until a counter-attack could be made to relieve them. Only if the ammunition began to run low would they seek to break out. (this doesn't mean that Finns fought to last man in

their positions but they made heavy resistance and retreated when their commanders decided it was appropriate to retire).

When retreating the sections didn't usually do it as a full unit but a group at a time to a new defensive position so that enemy wouldn't notice the retreat and the remaining soldiers could slow down the enemy's advance.

**The following text is translated directly from the Finnish manual:**

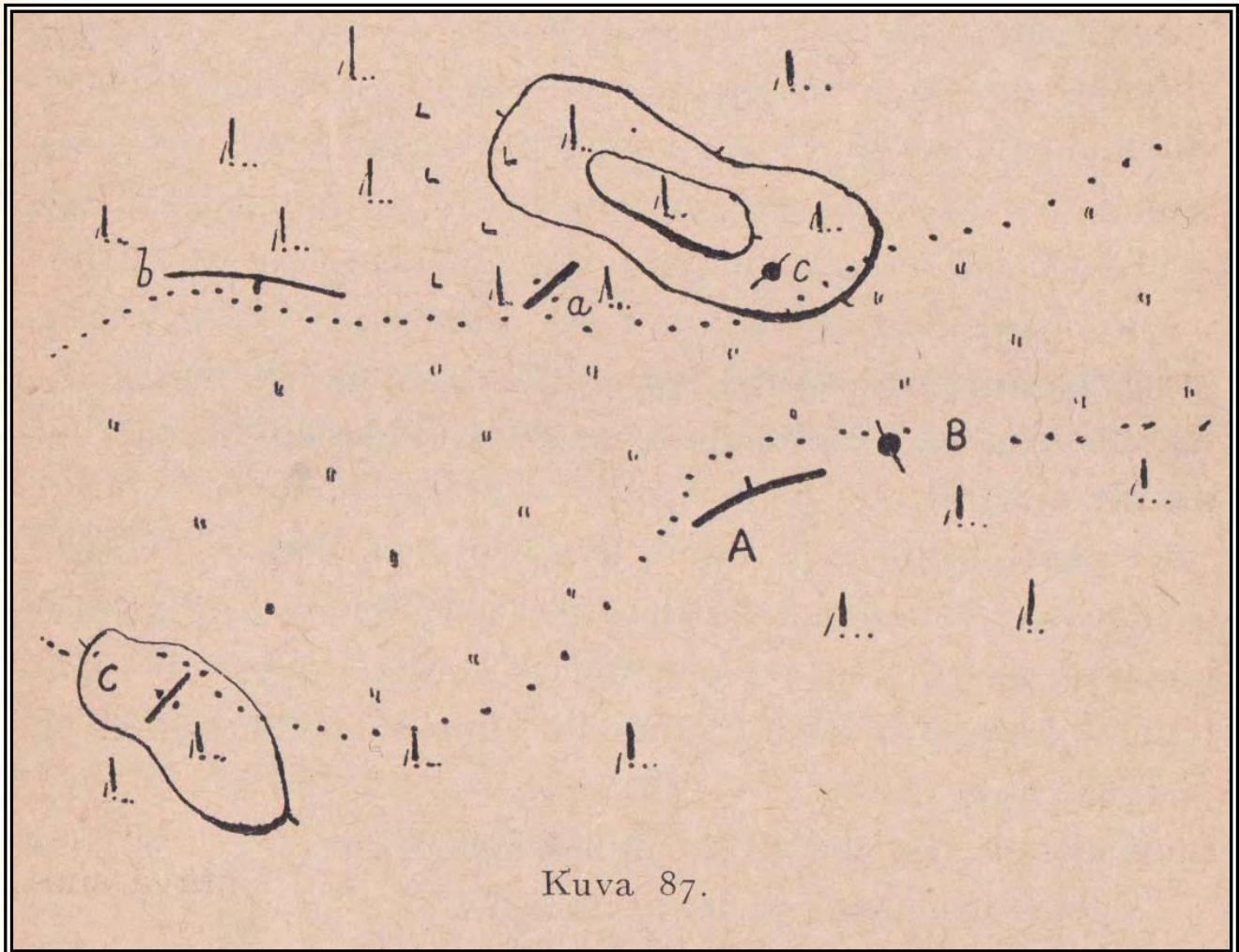
### **TAISTELURYHMÄ (BATTLE-GROUP)**

1. A battle-group is formed for a short period combat mission, usually on the orders of the platoon leader. When the mission is accomplished the battle-group disperses. Often the battle-groups are formed during the attack, especially during breakthroughs, to destroy well defended enemy positions. In these situations the closest junior officer assembles, from sections close by, a group with offensive firepower and combines these momentarily for co-operation in the mission at hand. In these kinds of situations section leaders rarely discuss forming a battle-group. Hand signs are sufficient for this.

A battle-group can also be formed by an order of a higher commanding officer, e.g. company's commander. This is more rare occurrence, the forming of a battle-group normally falls to the section and platoon leaders. Defensive battles are an exception in this, as a battle-group will often be formed beforehand and given a specific task to accomplish in these situations.

Battle-groups operational performance is all about co-operation of fire and movement. Thus a battle-group should include supporting automatic weapons and rifle sections. Mission and available weapons dictate the composition of the battle-group.

A battle-group can be formed for example



from

- a rifle section and a LMG section,
- a rifle section and a MMG,
- Two rifle sections and a mortar section and so on.

## 2. Taisteluryhmä in Attack

Situation:

About two squads strong group of enemy riflemen has been able to advance within assault range (illustrated below)

We have a LMG section in position in forest line **(B)** and a MMG team positioned on a hillock **(C)**.

Platoon's Varajohtaja (Assistant Leader) who is with a rifle section **(A)** decides to form a battle-group to destroy enemy's MMG **(a)** and to break into their positions from that same point.

An enemy position has been spotted at the forest line **(b)** from the incoming rifle fire and also on the hill **(c)** where their LMG has been positioned.

The Platoon's assistant leader, Sergeant Mäki, decides to form a battle-group with the knowledge of the situation. He has two missions to accomplish, namely:

- Forming of the battle-group and
- conducting a breakthrough into enemy positions.

First he has to form the battle-group. The LMG section **(C)** is near him he can contact its leader and inform him about the battle-group and its mission.

As the MMG teams leader is further away so informing him verbally isn't possible. The terrain however allows him to contact

MMG's leader from the forest line (**A**) using hand signs as he does.

Now the MMG and the LMG both focus their fire on the breakthrough point (**a**) where the enemy MMG is located. Following this sergeant Mäki with the rifle section begins the assault into enemy position using grenades and bayonets. (note: Finns didn't like to use bayonets and preferred SMG's, rifle butts & puukko's (traditional knives) in close combat). Meanwhile MMG and LMG move their fire to points (**b**) and (**c**) which are focussing their fire on the sergeant Mäki's group. When sergeant Mäki's breakthrough has been accomplished follows the LMG section in suit. The MMG supports LMG sections advance and follows them also when the time is ripe.

Following things must be taken into account in battle-groups formation and its mission

- a battle-group is normally formed by the platoon's leader or assistant leader but may, when the situation it demands, be formed by any one of the section leaders in the front line
- the decision must be made promptly and to be implemented in short order
- neighboring sections and groups and most importantly heavier weaponry must be contacted immediately either verbally or with signs so that they are informed what is about to happen and
- the firepower acquired in this way must be used instantly in support of the strike to the enemy position.

