



לזכר אבי מורי ר' פסח ב"ר אברהם בלנקט ז"ל
To the memory of my late father, Peisach Blankett.

Peisach "Peiso" Blankett
in the Winter and Continuation Wars of Finland (1939 – 1944)

As a little boy, I remember my father telling me stories of his wartime experiences. They were "adventure stories" of times spent in the forests with his comrades-in-arms, of exhausting marches in the summer, and no less exhausting treks on skis in the freezing winter temperatures through the snow-covered expanses of the Karelian forests, of falling asleep standing up on one's skis out of sheer exhaustion, of "explorations" to abandoned villages and fields in the hope of finding crops, mainly potatoes, often dug up from the frozen terrain, left there by the fleeing inhabitants, to replenish the meager supplies provided by the army. The more gruesome aspects of the war were apparently "censored" by him and not considered suitable subjects for my bedside stories.

Then when I grew up the stories stopped. Maybe I lost interest; maybe my father felt it was time for him to push aside the wartime memories; or perhaps the times in Finland were changing, and Finnish society – certainly its youth born during or after the war - was busy in an effort to rebuild the country and try to reach a "modus vivendi" with its big and threatening (and for some Finns fascinating) eastern neighbour, the Soviet Union. These were not times for nostalgic reminiscing of the heroism of the past wars, and its patriotic glorification became the "privilege" of the political right wing.

Be that as it may, after I grew up I hardly ever remember my father discussing his personal experiences during the war. It was not an issue in family discussions at home over the dinner table, or in his frequent heated debates with his siblings during the holiday meals we had in my paternal grandfather's home. In spring and autumn, when the climate changed, I remember my father complaining of aches in his left thigh where a big scar was left from his wound in the Winter War. And sometimes my mother speculated about father's heart problems "stemming from the war". A box containing all the medals he had been decorated with during and after the war provided material for games my sister and I played but the realities behind these medals were not mentioned. Only once a year, on the Commemoration Day of Fallen Soldiers, marked in Finland on the third Sunday of May, I remember my father wearing these medals

on his dark suit when participating in the memorial service organized by the Jewish Community in Helsinki in the local Jewish cemetery, to commemorate the 23 Finnish Jewish soldiers who lost their lives in the Winter and Continuation Wars. And once in my early teens, when the family spent a summer holiday in the area of Luumäki in south-eastern Finland, not far from the Finnish-Russian border, I recall a walk with my father in the surrounding forest where he pointed out to me and described – with the tone of one who knew what he was talking about – the remains of army trenches and bunkers from the war, by then largely overgrown with vegetation but still discernible.

That more or less summarizes what I knew about my father's wartime experiences – hardly anything. And then, as so frequently happens, by the time I finally did become more interested in the subject, many years had already passed since my father's death and there was nobody left to ask. My father died on November 30, 1990, but only after my mother's death, some 18 years later, did I finally become intrigued by this part of my family history. Among the papers which my sister and I sorted out in my mother's apartment, we found the box with my father's wartime medals which we remembered well from our childhood games, as well as my father's Army Passport. At the time, I put it aside among other family papers with an intention to take a more careful look when I would have time.

It took me several years to find the time but when I finally did, I found myself leafing through the many pages of a document which to a large extent consisted of "military shorthand": names of army units where my father had served, and names of locations, and battles in which he had participated. The abbreviated names of the units – even after I finally succeeded in deciphering them - had little meaning to me, and most of the locations I was unable to trace on Web maps.

Then I found a couple of online discussion groups which provided a kind of virtual meeting place between people like me, lost in their efforts to learn more about their fathers', uncles' or grandfathers' wartime histories, and on the other hand experts on the military history of the Finnish army during the Second World War. Following advice from these groups, I obtained from the Finnish National Archives a copy of my father's Army Service Record ("sotilaskantakortti", or "militärstamkort", as the Swedish-language record I obtained was called) – more military "hieroglyphics" providing a slightly more detailed description of my father's military service during the war years than what I had found in his Army Passport.

Little by little, over the following months, I found myself drawn deeper into an effort to make more sense of these records and to try to translate their bureaucratic jargon into something a bit more tangible and understandable – my father's "history" during the years 1939-1944, the years of the Winter and Continuation Wars in Finland.

I found myself studying websites describing and analyzing the different stages of the wars, vaguely reminding me of things I may have once learnt at school (and apparently completely erased from memory), and reading books relating more directly to the wartime activities of the specific army units in which my father had served, as well as reading the scanned versions of these units' military diaries, now available online. I poured over personal accounts written by war veterans who had actually "been there", serving in the same units and participating in the same battles with my father, and tried to find and study old maps in an effort to locate the place names mentioned in the records and accounts – many of which did not exist anymore, or had changed names in the process of changing nationality.

The following, in brief, is what I learnt.

The Winter War – 1939-40

P.B.:s (for brevity, I will use my father's initials) first call-up for army service was on September 2, 1938 – just after his 20th birthday, as the Conscription Act of the time stipulated. He was found fit for regular army service (fitness class A1) and his date of entrance to active army service was set for January, 1940.

At the time of P.B.:s first call-up, the Germans had completed the annexation of Austria, and the Spanish Civil War had continued for almost two years – but the beginning of World War II was still a year away, and Finland's Winter War would only begin some 15 months later.

By the time P.B. begun his regular army service, on January 19, 1940, the situation had changed drastically. In August 1939 Germany and the Soviet Union had signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, the secret protocol of which divided parts of Europe to "spheres of interest" of each party – Finland being included in the Russia "sphere". On September 1, 1939 Germany invaded Poland, France and Great Britain declared war against Germany - and what soon became the Second World War had begun.

When P.B. entered the 7th Infantry Training Centre (apparently in Kokemäki, in SW Finland), in January 1940, the negotiations between Finland and the Soviet Union on the Soviet demands for border changes had broken down. The Soviets demanded that the border between the USSR and Finland on the Karelian Isthmus¹ be moved westward, to a point only some 30 km east of the Finnish city of Viipuri (or Viborg, or Vyborg) thus increasing the distance between the Finnish border and Leningrad from some 25 km to abt. 100 km, and that the Finns destroy all existing military fortifications on the Karelian Isthmus. The Soviets also demanded the cession of several islands in the Gulf of Finland, as well as the lease of the Hanko Peninsula (some 120 km SW of Helsinki, strategically controlling the entrance to the Gulf of Finland) for 30 years, and permission for the Soviets to establish a military base there. In exchange, the Soviet Union would cede two municipalities further north along the Finnish-Russian border with twice the territory demanded from Finland

The Finnish government rejected the Soviet demands and in October 1939 when the Soviet demands and threats continued, it begun a partial mobilization of its army reserves. In November 30, 1939, Soviet troops initiated an air attack on Helsinki, and an armed invasion of Finnish territory on the Karelian Isthmus with some 20 divisions, close to 500,000 men. These military acts soon developed into a full-scale war - the so-called Winter War.

While the war was already raging, P.B. underwent a brief one-month basic military training, and upon completing it took his military oath on February 17, 1940. The following day he was transferred to the 4th (Rifle) Company of the 1st Brigade (4\1. Pr.) – a company forming part of the 2nd Battalion of the brigade and consisting mainly of Swedish-speaking soldiers - where he first served for a

¹ The Karelian Isthmus (in Finnish "Karjalankannas") is the strip of land, between 50 and 110 km wide, separating the Gulf of Finland from Lake Ladoga ("Laatokka") in what till the war was the south-eastern corner of Finland. The (formerly Finnish) city of Viipuri (Vyborg), and the Russian city of St.Petersburg are located on this isthmus.

month as a rifle man, and then till the end of the Winter War (in March 13, 1940) as a light machine gun assistant². At the time P.B. joined his assigned company (February 18), the 1st Brigade formed part of the army's 1st Division, stationed on the Karelian Isthmus and participating in the desperate effort of the Finnish army to try and stop the advance of the Soviet armed forces there.

After the initial successes of the Finnish Army in December 1939 - January 1940 in maintaining the 132 km long so-called Mannerheim-line of defence across the Isthmus, and thus preventing the advance of the Soviets, in mid-February the Soviets had finally succeeded in breaching the Finnish defence lines and had begun a slow progress, under very hard topographic and weather conditions, toward the city of Viipuri. The Finnish Army units retreated to the less well prepared so-called Intermediary Defence Line, stretching across the Isthmus, from the Gulf of Finland to Lake Ladoga, further to the N and NW of the Mannerheim-line. Along this defense line the Finnish Army now tried to halt the advance of the Soviets. The 1st Division, where P.B. was fighting in its 1st Brigade, was responsible for the defence of the areas to the south, and east, of Viipuri.

The second half of February saw a steady slow advance of the Russian forces towards Viipuri with heavy casualties on both sides. P.B.'s records make special mention of his participation in the hard battles of Kämärä, some 20 km SE of Viipuri and the battle of Lyykylä, just east of the city. [The records also mention a battle at Kotiranta which I have so far not been able to identify]. Finally, the Soviet army begun to advance its troops also to the west of Viipuri, over the thick ice covering the Viipuri Bay – more than a meter thick in temperatures reaching below -40 C – which allowed the Soviets to move tanks and heavy artillery pieces across the bay and its multiple islands and peninsulas. The Soviet army began a concentrated effort to bypass Viipuri and cross over the bay to reach the mainland and establish a bridgehead on the north-west side of the bay, in order to advance from there and seize the roads connecting Viipuri to Hamina and Helsinki in the west. In the beginning of March part of the Finnish 1st Division, among them the unit in which P.B. served, was sent to try and defend this part of the coast, in a desperate effort to try and stop the Russian advancement. Here, at the village of Tervajoki³, on March 12 – the day that turned out to be the last day of the Winter War - P.B. was severely wounded in his left thigh by an explosive bullet.

A soldier who fought at the battle at Tervajoki in the same 2nd Battalion of the 1st Brigade as P.B. later described this battle: *".....The fiercest attack took place on March 12, in the middle of the night. We had our bayonets fixed to our rifles. It seemed strange that when we advanced we noticed four dead Russian soldiers lying next to each machine gun. We couldn't carry with us the heavy machine guns so we just had to leave them where they were. Having advanced a bit further these guns began shooting at us from the rear. The Russians were not dead – they had been pretending to be. Byholm [the battalion commander] gave orders to open fire in the morning there were 400 Russians lying dead on the snow. Our Battalion had lost 38 men....."*⁴

² Hannu Rautkallio in his book "Suomen juutalaisten aseveljeys" ("The Jews of Finland – Comrades in Arms") (Tammi, 1989), on p.57 mentions Peisach Blankett (and his four brothers) among the many Finnish Jews who served in the 3rd Company of the 10th Infantry Regiment, nicknamed the "Jewish company". In my email correspondence with Rautkallio he told me that he had based himself on the oral information he received at a meeting with several Finnish Jewish war veterans in Tel Aviv on December 16, 1988 – a meeting I know my father also attended. Rautkallio's claim may be true regarding my father's brothers but all existing army records in my possession seem to indicate that he was mistaken at least regarding my father.

³ Probably near the place known as Tervajoki (Vahviala), in Russian: Bolshoje Pole, see: http://fi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tervajoki_%28Vahviala%29 (in Finnish).

⁴ Told by Gunnar Jussil in http://www.veteraanienperinto.fi/svenska/Kertomukset/sotilas/sotilas/talvisota/Vorabor_i_Forsta_Brigaden.htm (in Swedish).

Måndag 11. 3. 40.

Hela bataljonen gjorde sent på kvällen ett anfall vid Tervakoski i Viborgska viken. Härda strider följde hela natten. Vårt komp. miste sin komp. chef res. från 4. sk. Högst seut flera andra värder blod annat stupade och i vår komp. Lindberg. Res från Francke övertog kommandot, vid vårt komp. Striderna följde ända till 6 tiden på morgonen då de sista ryttarna flydde lömnande efter sig ett rikligt byttbyte.

Tisdag 12. 3. 40.

Ungfär 7 tiden på morgonen kommo vårt kompani tillbaka efter sista nattens strider till sin förläggning. Stämningen bland gossarna var nedstämt trots segen de varit. Det berodde mycket på de förluster bland kavaleriet vilka blev på slagfältet. Under dagens löpande utlade vi oss för att på kvällen åter vara färdiga för ett annat anfall vilket vi inte skulle behöva göra fast vi redan staga i skogen flera timmar färdiga att rycka på. Allmän glädje i komp. då vi fick veta att vi för många tillbaka till förläggningen alla vara vi ena troen efter sista nattens strider.

Onsdag 13. 3. 40

Fred har slutits mellan Finland och Sovjet det let strängt om vi fick veta det litet före kl. 11.00 ända till

Excerpts from the 4th Company's official diary:

Monday, 11.3.40:

The whole Battalion attacked late in the evening at Tervakoski by the Vyborg Bay. Heavy battles throughout the night. Our company lost its company chief... many others were wounded..... the battle continued till 6 in the morning, when the last Russians fled leaving behind substantial booty.

Tuesday, 12.3.40:

About 7 am our company returned to its camp after last night's battle. The atmosphere among the guys was depressed despite our victory, due to the number of comrades that were left on the battlefield. During the day we rested in order to prepare for a new attack in the evening – which in the end we didn't have to carry out although we had already advanced in the forest for several hours, ready to attack.....

Wednesday, 13.3.40

Peace has been declared between Finland and the Soviets, it sounded unbelievable when it was announced just before 11 am.

.....



Areas ceded by Finland to the Soviet Union in the Moscow Peace Treaty in March 1940.



The Finnish – Soviet border on the Karelian Isthmus before and after the Winter War.

On March 13 Finland finally gave in to the Soviet demands and signed the Moscow Peace Treaty which went into effect the following day. The Winter War had lasted for a total of 3 1/2 months; P.B.'s part in the war had lasted for about 2 months – of which about a month had been at the front lines. These last few weeks saw the most severe and bloody battles of the whole war. Of the total of some 26,000 Finnish soldiers who died in this war, about a third has been estimated to have died during these last two weeks of the war.

The total number of soldiers in the Finnish Army fighting on the Karelian Isthmus amounted to some 130,000, against a total of some 250,000 Soviet soldiers. Some 26,000 Finnish soldiers, and abt. 1,000 civilians, died in the Winter War, and the number of wounded has been estimated at 43,000-44,000. The Soviet casualties amounted to some 125,000-135,000 dead and some 190,000 wounded.

Finland was forced to cede to the Soviet Union the entire Karelian Isthmus as well as areas to the north of Lake Ladoga, including the town of Viipuri, Finland's second largest city, and the towns of Sortavala and Käkisalmi (today: Priozersk) on Lake Ladoga. Most of the Salla district in northern Finland was also lost, while the south coast port town of Hanko had to be leased to the Soviet Union as a naval base for 30 years. The total surface area of the ceded territories amounted to some 35 000 km² - one tenth of Finland's total surface area. Almost 430,000 Karelians, about 12 per cent of the country's population, lost their homes and were evacuated to other parts of Finland.

P.B. ended the Winter War in a military hospital – severely wounded and only narrowly escaping an amputation of his left leg. He later recounted that upon returning to consciousness he saw around him men and women all dressed in white, toasting, singing and celebrating. He was convinced that he had died and reached Heaven – until he was told that it was the hospital personnel celebrating the end of the war !



P.B. in hospital after being wounded on March 12, 1940.



The Interim Peace years 1940-41

During the 15 months between the end of the Winter War in March 1940 and the outbreak of the so-called Continuation War in June 1941 – a period later referred to in Finland as the "Interim Peace" period ("Välirauha") – we know very little about P.B. Following his wounding on the last day of the Winter War, he must have spent time in a military hospital and after that perhaps recuperating at home in Helsinki⁵. Since his medical records are not made public till 2040 (50 years after his death), we have very little factual information on his medical situation in this period.

The little we know indicates that he was apparently not released from army service, and continued his regular two-year army service in the 1st Brigade's 4th (Rifle) Company. The first official record we have of this time shows him being assigned on November 25, 1940 to what apparently was a course on gas-warfare protection ("GSS-kurs") that lasted till December 14, 1940.

Perhaps he was granted furlough at the completion of this course since his army passport indicates that on 16.12.1940 he was sentenced to one month in prison for a 9-hour delay on returning from furlough !

Then his Army Record Card shows him being transferred, on 16.1.1941, to the 2nd Company of the 4th (Rifle) Brigade (in records indicated as 2\4 Pr.), and again about a month later, on February 28, to the 2nd Machinegun Company of the same Brigade (2 KKK\4 Pr.). This 4th Brigade was located at the time somewhere in the eastern parts of the coastline of the Gulf of Finland, in the vicinity of the town of Hamina, near the "new" Finnish-Russian border – not far from the frontline where P.B. had been wounded at the end of the Winter War.

A few weeks later, on March 18, 1941 he was again transferred, this time to the 2nd Machinegun Company of the 13th Brigade (2 KKK\13 Pr).

In the months of the Interim Peace period the political and military scene in Europe changed quickly. In April 1940 Germany occupied Denmark and Norway, and in May the German army invaded France, Belgium and the Netherlands. In June the same year the Soviet Union occupied the Baltic countries.

The situation in Finland after the war was difficult, both economically and politically. The loss of large areas of agricultural land and cattle, the necessity to quickly re-settle the population evacuated from Karelia, and the effect which the expanding war in Europe was having on Finnish imports and exports, put a heavy burden on the country's economy.

On the political scene, Finland, like neighbouring Sweden, in the beginning tried to remain neutral and avoid involvement in the wider political and military warfare of the European continent. It strove to establish a political and defense union with the other Nordic countries but Soviet opposition and the German conquest of Norway and Denmark, prevented this. Continuous Russian political pressure on Finland and arguments about the implementation of the statues of the peace agreement led Finland to fear a

⁵ In an application for War Veteran Compensation, sent to Finnish authorities in the 1980s, P.B. mentions having been hospitalized during March-May 1940. The attached medical records indicate that he was hospitalized in either the Kouvola or Hämeenlinna military hospital.

possible Russian invasion, and the Soviet incorporation of the Baltic countries, in June 1940, increased this apprehension. Part of the population also nurtured thoughts of a "revenge-war" against Russia and hopes for a rectification of the harsh terms of surrender, widely perceived as unjust, and re-capturing of the territories lost in the Winter War.

The advances of the German army in Europe during 1940 finally led to a situation where most of Europe, and certainly the geographic areas of immediate strategic and economic importance to Finland, became effectively divided between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany – at the time still formally allied under the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. Britain had had to withdraw its forces from the European mainland. Finland came to realize that its possibilities to maneuver between these two powers were quickly vanishing, and that it would have to make a difficult choice – an alliance with one of these powers, which most probably would sooner or later lead to a military conflict with the other. Of the two, Finland in the end chose to side with Germany with which it till then had officially maintained rather cool and restricted relations.

At the same time, during the autumn and winter of 1940, Germany started to become more interested in Finland, as its own plans for an attack on the Soviet Union (the so-called Operation Barbarossa) began to take shape. Gradually the two countries began to move closer to each other. Germany began to supply Finland with much needed grain and fertilizers, as well as military equipment for the Finnish army, and Finland in its turn agreed to allow the Germans to transfer troops and equipment via Finnish ports to German-occupied northern Norway. During secret meetings in December 1940 and January 1941 between high-ranking Finnish officers and their German counterparts (and still without the knowledge of part of the Finnish political leadership), Germany informed the Finns of their plans to initiate an attack on the Soviet Union, and Finland gradually conceded to allow German forces to be concentrated in northern Finland, and to provide Finnish military assistance. At this stage Finland still insisted on remaining officially neutral and not actively participating in the German war operations - unless attacked first.

In the beginning of June 1941 Germans started to move military units into northern Finland and the Finnish army was mobilized. Finally, on June 22, 1941, Germany and its allies launched a massive attack on the Soviet Union along a nearly 3,000 km long front, from the Arctic Sea in the north, across the outskirts of Leningrad, the Baltic countries and Poland, all the way to the Ukraine and the Black Sea in the south. For a few days, Finland still refused to allow Germans to attack the Soviet Union via Finnish territory and limited itself to providing assistance, for example in the mining of the Gulf of Finland which effectively cut off the Russian Baltic fleet, stationed near Leningrad. On June 25, the Soviet Union launched an extensive air attack targeting 18 Finnish cities, bombarding mainly military installations and airfields but also civilian targets; the worst damage occurred in Turku where the medieval Turku Castle was destroyed (it was later rebuilt). The same day the Finnish Prime Minister Rangell announced in the Parliament that Finland had been attacked and was again at war with the Soviet Union. The "Interim Peace" had ended and a new war, named by the Finnish "the Continuation War" ("Jatkosota") had begun.

During the Interim Peace period and up to the spring of 1941, the Finnish army had reorganized its forces and begun preparing for what seemed like an ever increasing probability of a new war against the Russians, this time together with, and assisted by, the German army. Within the framework of these preparations, it was also felt necessary to strengthen the army units stationed on the Finnish side of the border on the Hanko peninsula – a strip of land near the town of Tammisaari, west of Helsinki, jutting out into the Gulf of Finland that had been handed over to the Soviets at the end of the Winter War. It was feared that the heavily

manned Soviet military base in Hanko might in a situation of war be used as a bridgehead for an attack into southern Finland. Among the Finnish units concentrated in Hanko was a newly established 13th Brigade to which mainly Swedish-speaking soldiers were transferred from other units. Two of its three infantry regiments were completely Swedish-speaking, and the other units apparently had a strong Swedish-speaking contingent. Among these was its 2nd Machine Gun Company, to which P.B. was transferred on March 18, 1941 – about three months before the outbreak of the hostilities. At the time of mobilization of the Finnish army in June 1941, the brigade was re-organized, became the 13th Infantry Regiment (JR13) and was incorporated into the 17th Army Division, the so-called "Oak Division" ("Tammidivisioona"), based in the Draksvik garrison near Tammisaari. The division was charged with a dual task: on the one hand it was to assure the isolation of the 25,000 man strong Soviet military base and strengthen the Finnish defence fortifications on the peninsula separating it from the rest of Finland, and on the other it was to prepare for a possible Finnish attack and capture of this military base.

When the war broke out, there were some minor skirmishes between the armies on the Hanko peninsula and the hundreds of small islands surrounding it, but no major battles ensued. The front line remained static and the hostilities there took the form of trench warfare, with artillery fire and some limited patrolling activities across the border. Both sides were apparently interested in avoiding a full scale ground battle. This situation continued until the Russians finally decided to evacuate the military base in the beginning of December 1941, and the Finnish army could take control of the by then empty town of Hanko.

However, in July 1941, long before the final Russian withdrawal from Hanko, the Finnish army, assisted by German armed forces especially in northern Finland, had started a major offensive across most of the Finnish-Russian border, from Lapland in the north to the Gulf of Finland in the south. On July 17, 1941, Field Marshal Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim, the Commander in Chief of the Finnish army, gave the order to move most of the 17.th Division from the Hanko peninsula to the front in Eastern Karelia where the Finnish army was fighting to push the Russian forces back towards the east. Among the many units sent to the East Karelian front was also the 13th Infantry Regiment where P.B. was serving in its 2nd Machine Gun Company, part of the Regiment's 2nd Battalion.

And so, following a train transportation from Tammisaari to a station some 80 km south-east of the city of Joensuu, P.B. found himself among the 3,500 or so soldiers in his regiment that started their long march – mainly by foot – towards the "old" (i.e. pre-Winter War) border with the Soviet Union, and from there across the border further on towards the front lines of the retreating Russian army. The Russians were regrouping and trying to reorganize their defence lines in the centre of a region known in Finnish as Aunuksen Karjala (Olonets Karelia), often also just referred to as East Karelia. This vast region consists of all the Karelian lands beyond those that had formerly belonged to Finland and had been ceded to the Soviet Union at the end of the Winter War (territories which by July 1941 had already been re-conquered by the advancing Finnish army), across the "old border" and further to the south-east along the 150 km broad isthmus⁶ separating Europe's two biggest lakes, Lake Ladoga (Finn.:Laatokka) and Lake Onega (Finn.: Ääninen), and all the way to the Svir river (Finn.: Syväri), connecting the southern tips of these two lakes.

⁶ Note: this isthmus should not be confused with the Karelian Isthmus (Finn.: Karjalankannas) which has already been mentioned above in connection with the Winter War. As mentioned, the Karelian Isthmus is the strip of land between Lake Ladoga and the Gulf of Finland, including the cities of Viipuri / Vyborg and Leningrad (today: St.Petersburg).

It is not my intention here to elaborate on the various stages of the 3 1/2 year long Continuation War⁷. I will try to concentrate on those developments and events of the war in which the 13th Infantry Regiment – and especially its 2nd Battalion⁸ (officially designated II/13 JR) including P.B.'s 2nd Machinegun Company - took an active part. But in order to put these developments in a context of the overall picture, I will try in the following to interweave a few brief notes on the main stages of the war.

The Finnish offensive in the summer of 1941

When in July 1941 the Finnish armed forces launched their overall offensive against the Russians, the army crossed the interim peace border on several different sectors across the some 1,400 km long border separating the two countries. In northern Finland and Lapland the attack was carried out mainly by German armed forces, assisted by Finnish units subordinated to the Germans, whereas the operations in central and southern sectors of the border were the responsibility of the Finnish army, with only minor assistance from the Germans.

The operations begun with the re-conquest of the Ladoga Karelia areas handed over to the Soviets at the end of the Winter War, and within some two weeks the Russian defences were overcome and all these territories were again under Finnish control.

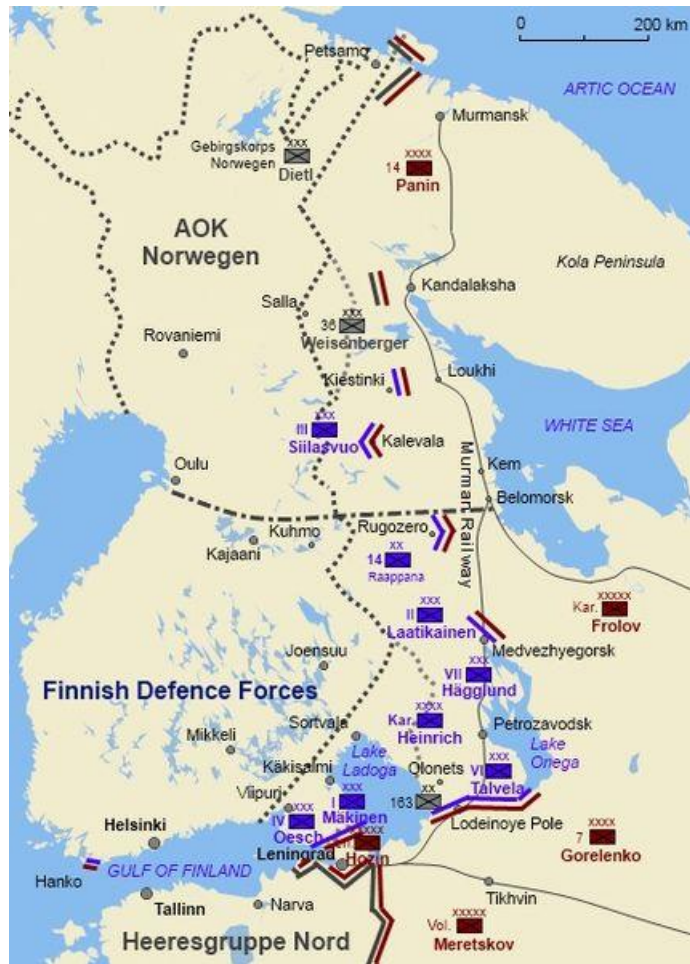
Then, in the beginning of August, the attention switched to the Karelian Isthmus. Here too the Finnish forces managed to defeat the Soviet army units and following a month of fighting the Finnish army had gained full control of the isthmus up to (and in some places slightly beyond) the pre-Winter War border between the two countries. Viipuri was conquered on August 29, and the Finnish forces were now only some 20 km from the outskirts of Leningrad thus effectively contributing to the German siege of the city. The Finns, however, turned down all German requests to bombard the city, let alone to try and conquer it. Nor did they allow the Germans to bring their own land forces to the Finnish lines in this sector.

The Finnish population evacuated from Karelia during the Winter War begun to return to their old homes. It is estimated that some 70% of all the refugees returned in the wake of the advancing Finnish army - until the last stages of the Continuation War forced them to leave the area anew, never to return again.

In early August the Finnish army renewed its attacks in East Karelia transferring additional forces to this front line – among them its 17th Division (in the 13th Infantry Regiment of which P.B. served) – crossing the old pre-Winter War border with Russia and pushing ahead deeper into Russian territory. Despite protests from the leftist political groups in Finland, and the Western Allied countries, and in spite of some Finnish soldiers refusing to cross the "old" border in what was by them seen as turning a so far justified war into a war of conquest, the Finnish forces pushed on, and in early September crossed the Svir (Syväri) river connecting the southern tips of lakes Ladoga and Onega. After heavy fighting, the front line finally stabilized in mid-September on the southern side of the Svir. Thus the Soviet army had been driven out of all of East (Aunus / Olonets) Karelia, the city of Petrozavodsk (or Petroskoi) on

⁷ For a general description, the relevant article in Wikipedia will give a good overview - see : http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Continuation_War

⁸ During the Continuation war, each complete infantry regiment consisted of some 3,600 men, divided into a headquarters unit, three infantry battalions, a grenade launcher troop, a canon and anti-tank troop, and a support unit. Each of the three infantry battalions (some 1,000 men in each) was in turn divided into three infantry companies, one machinegun company and one grenade launcher team.



*Front lines in December 1941, after the Finnish offensive.
Blue-Finnish; Red-Soviet; Gray-German.*



Territories captured by the Finnish army in the 1941 Summer offensive. The gray line indicates the Finnish-Soviet border before the Winter War.

Lake Onega was conquered (and renamed Äänislinna during the Finnish occupation 1941-44), and the 1,500 km long Kirov railway, connecting Leningrad with the ice-free city of Murmansk on the Arctic Ocean was cut off at several points.

The advance of the army deep into East Karelia was in Finland justified chiefly by military arguments - making the front-line (and envisioned future border) shorter and more easily defensible - but there was also political and public pressure from nationalistic

groups and organizations in Finland calling for the establishment of "Greater Finland", incorporating into one political framework all territories populated by Finnish and Karelian "tribes", and "liberating" the ones under Soviet rule.

The German attacks in northern Finland, with some Finnish assistance, were less successful and they never succeeded in reaching the main target of the so-called Operation Silver Fox, the conquest of the Russian city of Murmansk on the Arctic Ocean – an important sea port and a strategic link between the Soviet and Allied forces during the war. Determined Soviet defence and the difficult arctic conditions, to which the German forces were neither prepared nor equipped, saved the city from German occupation despite extensive destruction.

The success of the Finnish offensive in the first months of the war is attributed to several factors, among them miscalculations of the Soviets and an underestimation of the increase in strength of the Finnish army during the Interim Peace period, both in size and equipment, and its re-armament by the Germans; the Soviets' inability to concentrate sufficient forces on the Finnish front while at the same time trying to halt the attacks and advances of the German army throughout eastern Europe ("Operation Barbarossa"); the high motivation of the Finnish population and army to rectify and revenge the harsh results of the Winter War; and the superior tactics and strategies of the Finnish army, relying on smaller, quickly moving units more adapted to warfare in the forest-covered landscapes of Karelia.

Back to P.B. As noted, at the time of mobilization of the Finnish army on June 16, 1941, P.B. was assigned to the 2nd Machinegun Company, part of the 2nd Battalion of the 13th Infantry Regiment (2 KKK / II / JR 13)⁹. The Regiment formed part of the 17th Division based on the Hanko peninsula, preparing the defence lines against a possible Soviet attack from its military base in Hanko. Had it not been for the approaching war, P.B. might have completed the remaining six months of his compulsory army service there in January 1942 (unfortunately for him the service time had been extended in January 1941– with retroactive effect - from one and a half years to two years), and could have returned home to his family in Helsinki.¹⁰ This was not to be. Instead, his regiment spent a mere one month on the Hanko front before being transferred, on July 17, to take part in the pursuit of the retreating Soviet armed forces between the lakes Ladoga and Onega, and the conquest of East (or Aunus/Olonets) Karelia.

At the time of mobilization, on June 16, 1941, P.B. underwent a medical examination by the regimental Medical Examination Committee no.7604 which classified his medical fitness category as B1, based on his thigh wound from the Winter War, and assigned him to "assistive service". Some two weeks later, on June 30, while still at the Hanko front, he was promoted to the grade of "korporaali" – equivalent to the rank of Lance Corporal, or Private 1st Class.

⁹ A similar machinegun company is the "chief character" of Väinö Linna's 1954 novel "Tuntematon sotilas" ("The Unknown Soldier"), probably the most famous war novel ever written in Finland, based on the author's own wartime experiences in Infantry Regiment 8.

¹⁰ There is a possibility that P.B. might already have been freed from active armed service one-two months before the June 16 general mobilization order, and then re-called – his army records are a bit vague on this point. But it is more likely that the insert "begun service 16.6.1941" in the records simply signifies a kind of "military re-setting of the counter" when the army was re-organized upon general mobilization of reserves in the country. P.B. probably just continued his service in the same unit without ever having being released from active service.

P.B.'s medical profile was probably the main reason for his being appointed to the position of "komppanian kirjuri" (roughly translates as the "company scribe" or "company clerk") of the 2nd Machinegun Company – a position which he seems to have held till the end of the war.

Since I have not been able to find an English-language equivalent for a "company scribe", I'll try and briefly describe the position. A regular wartime machinegun company – a unit capable of independent action on the battlefield but usually providing support for the rifle companies of the regiment – consisted of 154 men, of which 4 officers, 29 NCOs (non-commissioned officers) and 121 men. These were divided into 3 machinegun platoons (each with 29 men and 4 machineguns), a command platoon (Finn.: komentoryhmä) (20 men), and a delivery (or supply) platoon (Finn.: toimitusjoukkue) consisting of 46 men. The delivery platoon was headed by the Company Sergeant Major (or First Sergeant) and was responsible for the administration of the company, the contacts between the company and the regiment command, the supply and servicing of arms¹¹ and ammunition, transportation (and since much of the transportation was carried out by horse-pulled wagons or sleighs, a veterinarian was part of each delivery platoon !), tasks of the company medic, first aid and transportation of the wounded and dead from the battle field, etc.

The company "kirjuri" assisted the Company Sergeant Major with everything that had to do with documentation, written communication with other units, keeping track of roll calls, lists of wounded and dead, typing out memos, keeping record of the company's equipment, administering furloughs etc. When in garrisons, and in battle field in static situations of trench war, the "kirjuri", as well as other members of the delivery platoon, did not usually take an active part in the battles, and usually the delivery platoon was located at least some 500 – 1,000 meters behind the front line. But during quick offensive movements, and retreats, the distance could become shorter and members of the platoon, including its "kirjuri", could be called in to replace casualties, help in setting up defence positions etc.

It is interesting to note that both P.B.'s Army Passport and his Army Record Card mention his position as "kirjuri" under the rubric "special training in army" but neither give any dates or locations for any such special course or training. So either the participation in any such special training was overlooked in the records, or perhaps he just learned the duties and tasks involved in the job "in real time" during the first month(s) in the company.

As already mentioned, on July 17, 1941 the 13th Infantry Regiment – and P.B. with them – was released from its duties in the defense of the Hanko area and sent to take part in what soon developed into the conquest of all of East Karelia, up to the Svir river. On July 22, after having been transported by train to the vicinity of the Interim Peace border, the units started a strenuous march, mostly by foot, and usually – for security reasons - by night, with strict "marching discipline", 30-40 km per day (or night) with a 10-minute break each hour. Whether P.B.'s thigh-wound gave him any special privileges regarding transportation (maybe on the horse-pulled wagons or even the occasional lorry), we don't know. In the first week the regiment crossed territories where other Finnish army units had already fought in the preceding days and weeks and pushed back the Russian army towards the south-east. The later descriptions by soldiers of these units mention large numbers of military equipment left behind by the fleeing Russians and a stench in the air, caused by the cadavers of dead horses, and rising from the hastily dug too shallow graves of the fallen soldiers. At the end of the month the old (i.e. pre-Winter War) border was reached, and crossed, and the march continued through Karelian forests and mostly deserted villages, and around lakes and swamps, toward the new defence lines set up by the retreating Soviet army.

¹¹ P.B.'s military records also indicate that for a very short period of three months he had held a position of a gunsmith – probably sometime in the period just before the mobilization of the army in June 1941.

To this period belongs the only letter written by P.B. which I have found, a short letter written on August 1, 1941 to his eldest brother, Simon, at the time serving in another military unit – apparently also somewhere in East Karelia. This is a translation of what he wrote (I'm attaching a scan of the Swedish-language original at the end of the text):

"1.8.1941.

Dear Brother, thank you for your letter, I received it today. As you can see, the delivery of mail has been delayed by a full two weeks. A lot has happened meanwhile. I am no longer in contact with Haimele and Ruben [his other two brothers] since I am now in Russia. Believe me, it felt great to march into foreign territory without having to present customs authorities with a passport. Note that I am now in the eastern border area, same as you, so perhaps we will meet soon. For the moment we can take it easy. I do nothing but rest. But it is really needed after having marched for long distances each day. I wonder why the boys [prob. ref. to his brothers] don't write to me – but they probably don't have my address [he is referring to the unit's coded address number]. You could write and give it to them. I also don't have their address. Well, that is all I have to tell you for now. Take care, and try to be careful. "Jump to the ground" if you hear that it begins to whistle. Hope this letter arrives quicker than yours did. Best regards, Peiso. My address: KPK 4, 7625. [the coded address of his unit]."

Finally, after a few days' break, on August 13, having covered a distance of some 250-300 km, of which some 60 km only the preceding day, the regiment reached the village of Varloi where contact was made with Soviet army units arranged for defence - and the company's first heavy battle in the war ensued. The battle of Varloi, specially mentioned in P.B.'s army records as one of the battles in which he took part, lasted for two days during which the 13th Regiment lost 90 men, and nearly 300 were wounded. P.B.'s 2nd Battalion (of about 1,000 men) suffered 20 deaths and some 80 were wounded. The Soviet forces were pushed back from Varloi, and the regiment's units continued their progress south - south-east, facing continuous resistance from the Russians. On September 1, P.B. was granted the Medal of Liberty, 2nd class, of the Order of the Cross of Liberty (Vapaudenristin ritarikunnan 2. luokan vapaudenmitali). This decoration was granted for "military merit" and was awarded during the Continuation War, by special order of Marshal Mannerheim, to wounded soldiers for their sacrifice, as Finland has no separate decoration for the wounded.

I will leave a detailed description of each battle to military historians. P.B.'s Army Passport and Record make special mention of him having taken part in the battles at Galvatselkä (sometimes: Halvatselkä or Kalvatselkä), Kulkinanmäki, Saarimäki, Novinki and Nurmoila.

Then, on September 8, the troops reached the Svir (Finn.: Syväri) river and crossed it with small boats to the south side of the river where they blew up the Leningrad – Murmansk railroad which at this point crossed the river on a bridge. The troops then proceeded on September 14-18 to take part in the heavy battles around, and finally conquest of, the town of Podporozhye on the Svir river – re-named by the Finns "Syvärin kaupunki" (the Town on Svir). Following a week of rest, part of the 13th Regiment was again commanded to cleansing operations along the southern side of the Svir river, between the Svir and one of its tributaries, the Jandeba river.

This bridgehead held by the 2nd battalion of the 13 IR on the Jandeba river, southwest of Podporozhye / Syvärin kaupunki – a stretch of forested terrain some 7 kilometers in length – was to become P.B.'s new "home" for a period of 2 years and 8 months.



P.B.'s transfers during the Continuation War.

Red – in summer 1941; Green – in 1942-1943; Blue – in summer 1944

The static trench warfare of 1942-43

To return briefly to the overall situation in the war: following the initial Finnish attacks and advances of July-December 1941, the front-lines largely stabilized and there followed a long period of nearly two and a half years during which the war took on characteristics of a rather static trench war. There were occasional Soviet efforts to break through the Finnish defence lines but almost all of them were defeated by the Finns.

Despite the Finnish military successes, the war started to put an ever increasing burden on life in Finland. Although some army recruits were sent home during this time, the number of men serving in the armed forces and needed to protect the long front lines achieved, in addition to the number of young men killed - some 26,000 Finns, mainly young men, had lost their lives in the first months of the war – and the number of people needed to administer the newly occupied territories, meant that the economy was faced with a serious shortage of working-age men. At the same time Finland's cooperation with Nazi Germany, and the progress of the war in Europe, led to a break in Finnish relations with the Western Allied countries – a development that effectively halted most Finnish exports and seriously diminished the possibilities for imports. The severe food shortage that ensued, and the urgent need to replenish army supplies, led to an ever increasing dependence on supplies from the only available source – Germany. Finland had expected a short war and a quick German victory over the Soviet Union, and was not prepared for a prolonged mobilization. The lengthening of the war and the Soviet victory over Germany in Stalingrad in the winter of 1942/43 caused the Finnish political leadership to start secretly looking for a way out of the war. However, German opposition, backed by threats to stop all food and military exports to Finland, and a Soviet refusal to negotiate on the terms suggested by the Finns, put an end to these feelers. The result was a balancing act by the Finnish political leadership which on the one hand strived officially to maintain good relations with Germany while at the same time trying to limit Finland's involvement in the "German war". It resisted German pressure to attack Leningrad and refused to send the Finnish troops in Lapland to cut off the railway line which enabled Allied supplies to reach Russia from the port of Murmansk (this so-called Kirov line had been cut off by the Finns at several points in the south but the Soviets had succeeded in rerouting part of the line to circumvent these breaches).

Before describing the major Russian counter-offensive in the summer of 1944 which finally led to the end of the Continuation War, I want again to return to the little we know about P.B. during the above period. Almost nothing can be learned about this period from P.B.'s military records – not surprising as no troop transports or battles worth mentioning took place on the Svir-Jandeba section of the front during this long period. Accounts later written by soldiers serving in the same battalion describe it as a period of low-intensity warfare across a stable front-line. Both sides engaged in almost daily (and nightly) exchanges of artillery, mortar and machinegun fire on the other side's positions, the surrounding forests were active with patrols, and sniper fire was a continuous risk. Both sides also tried to – and occasionally succeeded in – taking prisoners, and made an effort to interrupt supply transports of the other side. And there are also descriptions of a few deserters crossing the lines and then actively participating in the continuous propaganda warfare aired in Finnish - or Russian – from loudspeakers across the lines.

This whole period saw only one serious effort by the Russians, in April 1942, to launch a coordinated counter-offensive and try to break through the Finnish lines. The Finns managed to repulse this attack and keep their positions along the length of the Svir river, including those of the 2nd Battalion of the 13th Infantry Brigade along the Jandeba river.

Descriptions indicate that slowly the daily life apparently became a routine, and the soldiers were mainly busy with guard duties along the trenches and positions newly dug along the company's defensive parameters. More time could be spent in strengthening the defenses, and as it became evident that the situation was going to remain static for a long time, and winter was quickly approaching with temperatures that could drop to -30 centigrade, new shelters ("korsu" in Finnish) begun to be built to replace the temporary covered fighting pits and tents used in the beginning. Although the companies were not well equipped for construction work, the new "korsu"s were constructed of logs, in plentiful supply, half dug underground (which often led to serious drainage

problems), with primitive heating arrangements and usually no windows. Only much later in 1943 were some of them connected to an electric network. The bigger "korsu"s could provide room for up to 30 persons, on bunk beds, but most of them were intended for 10-15 men each. At the end of their stay in Jandeba the 2nd battalion had built some 135 of these shelters.

Another building project of utmost necessity was the construction of saunas, of which several were built. Most of them were "ordinary" saunas but a few were specifically aimed at the important function of fighting lice - a parasite which spread freely among the soldiers in the primitive sanitary conditions and was the prime reason for many epidemics of hepatitis among them.

When the static military situation continued, some of the older soldiers were freed from active service and sent home, perhaps partly to try and remedy the severe lack of manpower of the Finnish economy. Among those who stayed at the front lines, furloughs became more frequent and longer. The only note in P.B.'s army records that relates to this period is a note of a number of furloughs granted him during the year of 1941 (the records make no mention of furloughs during the years 1942-44).

The dates mentioned are: 11 – 19.4. ; 2 – 3.10; 11 – 12.10; and 30.12.41 – 10.1.42.

Interestingly, these dates seem more or less to coincide with the Jewish holidays of that year: Pesach was on 12-19.4., Yom Kippur on Oct 1, and Succoth on 6-14.10. All this could of course be a mere coincidence but we do know that there was a special army ordinance by the military headquarters regarding these furloughs, listing the relevant holidays on which Jewish soldiers, where only possible, were to be given a furlough. The application of these ordinances was probably to some extent a question of the attitude of the local officer in command. It should be noted that in the 2nd battalion of JR13 where P.B. served there was, as far as I have been able to ascertain, only one other Jewish soldier, named Moses Tokazier¹².

A short two-day furlough would of course not have been long enough for P.B. to travel back and forth from his placement in Eastern Karelia to his home and family in Helsinki – even allowing for train transport most of the way. But another interesting and attractive alternative became available in May 1942 when the 24th Infantry Regiment took over the defense of another section on the Svir river frontline, further to the west and closer to Lake Ladoga. The 24th regiment also consisted of mainly Swedish-speaking soldiers, most of them from southern Finland, and especially among the soldiers of its 3rd battalion there were many Jewish soldiers (one of its companies is even said to have had a Jewish majority for some time)¹³. One of these soldiers, Isak "Scholka" Smolar, took the initiative to establish a "field synagogue" (nicknamed "Scholka's Shul") to serve the religious – as well as social – needs of the Jewish soldiers. He managed to get the permission of the headquarters which provided a big army tent for the purposes, supported by cardboard and plywood, and located about a kilometer from the frontline. The headquarters also gave an official order to allow Jewish soldiers not only of the 24th regiment but from other near-by units, to go on leave in order to attend religious services on Shabbats and holidays. The Helsinki Jewish community provided a Torah scroll for use in the synagogue, and as word spread among Jewish soldiers, it developed into a communal meeting place where soldiers arrived even from distant units, some by bicycle or on horseback, and others by foot - and during the winter on skis.

¹² Another Jewish sounding name, Bror Hassel Lipkin, appears in the rolls of the battalion but I have not been able to trace any such name in the records of the Jewish community.

¹³ At the time the vast majority of the members of Finland's Jewish community were mainly Swedish-speaking.



Jewish soldiers outside the field synagogue ("Scholka's shul") at the Svir / Syväri river (P.B. is not among the soldiers in this photo)

It is quite probable that also P.B. was able to occasionally attend services and meetings in this synagogue and it may also have provided him with a good opportunity to meet with at least some of his three brothers, Simon, Herman ("Haimele"), and Ruben ("Frade"), all of whom were recruited into the army during the Continuation War, as well as friends and acquaintances from the Helsinki Jewish community.

One of the interesting paradoxes of this war was the fact that for a short time this field synagogue was located in close vicinity of the German 301 Regiment of the 163 Infantry Division (the "Engelbrecht Division") – at the time it might have been the only such active synagogue on the Axis front lines across all of Europe. The Germans apparently had to accept the existence of such a synagogue to avoid damaging the relations with the Finnish comrades in arms.

In total, some 300 Finnish Jewish soldiers took part in the Winter and Continuation Wars, out of a Jewish community numbering some 1,700 members. Of them, 23 were killed in action.

P.B.'s military record pages note that he completed his two-year compulsory army service in the 2nd Machinegun Company of the 13th Infantry Regiment on January 18, 1942. The next line in the register informs us that on 19.1.1942 – the following day - he begun

his service in the army reserve as a "kirjuri" in the same unit. Apparently, under the circumstances, this "change of status" was a mere formality and had no real implications on P.B.'s service or duties, and he continued serving in the same unit almost till the end of the war.

The Russian counter-offensive in the summer of 1944

By the time all the officers and soldiers of the 17th Division, including those of its 13th Infantry Regiment – and P.B. among them - were finally withdrawn from their positions on the Jandeba river in Eastern Karelia, in mid-May 1944, having served there for two and a half years, the situation on the European front was quickly changing.

In January, 1944, the Soviet army advanced into Poland in its efforts to push the German army further west into central Europe, and on January 27 the 900-day long siege of Leningrad was finally lifted, after more than one million civilians, and a similar number of Russian soldiers had died during the siege and in the defence and liberation of the city. The Soviets were now ready to turn their attention to the Finnish front with the aim of forcing the Finns to surrender and thus to free Russian forces to a concentrated major attack against the Germans, leading to the conquest of Berlin and a final victory.

In the following months Finland would have to pay a heavy price for having chosen to side with Nazi Germany. Whether or not the country and its political and military leadership really had had another realistic choice is a mute point still lively discussed by historians in, as well as outside of, Finland.

Ever since the battle of Stalingrad, the Finnish political leadership had begun secret diplomatic efforts to find a way of leading Finland out of what was increasingly becoming clear – a defeat of the Axis countries and those allied with them. Feelers had been sent through various diplomatic channels to ask for the Russian conditions for a possible separate peace treaty but the terms offered by the Russians were considered too harsh, and were rejected.

In April the Soviet armed forces initiated three massive aerial bomb raids against Helsinki (as well as a few other Finnish cities), with some 2,000 bombers dropping a total of 2,600 tons of bombs¹⁴. Due to the effectiveness of the Finnish anti-aircraft defence systems, and successful efforts to divert most of the attacks to targets with minimal damage-potential, only some five percent of the bombs fell on planned targets, leading to relatively little damage in the center of Helsinki and "only" some 140 civilian deaths.

In early June the Soviets began concentrating large numbers of armed forces and equipment in the vicinity of the frontlines facing the Finnish forces. These movements were largely missed, or their importance ignored or underestimated, by the Finnish army intelligence. When, on June 9, the fierce concentrated Soviet attack begun across the Finnish lines on the Karelian Isthmus - timed to coincide with the Allied armies' invasion in Normandy - the Finnish army was to a large extent unprepared for it. Following the

¹⁴ These bombardments have sometimes been compared to the bombing of Dresden, a year later. In Dresden the Allies used some 1,300 planes to drop a total of close to 4,000 tons of bombs, leading to the death of some 25,000 people.

two-and-a-half year long military standstill, many soldiers had been sent back home to assist in agricultural work, many of those remaining were not sufficiently trained for active warfare, and the building and strengthening of defence lines was in many locations seriously delayed and unfinished. A massive bombardment of the Finnish positions from the air, and by artillery from both land and sea, was followed by an advance of the Soviet ground forces that managed to break through the Finnish front lines north of Leningrad, near the shore of the Gulf of Finland. In less than a week the Soviet tanks and infantry, supported by intensive fire from artillery and ground-attack aircrafts, were also able to penetrate the second Finnish defence line (known as the VT or Vammelsuo-Taipale line) which crossed the Isthmus from the Gulf of Finland to Lake Ladoga some 20 km further back to the north-west.



Finnish defence lines on the Karelian Isthmus in 1944

The Finnish forces began a hurried withdrawal toward their third, still mostly unfinished and much weaker, line of defence – the so-called VKT, or Viipuri-Kuparsaari-Taipale line – which crossed the Isthmus from Viipuri, following the Vuoksi river in a south-eastern diagonal, to Taipale on the shore of Lake Ladoga. In many places the quick withdrawal became chaotic and panicky with a large number of soldiers simply leaving their positions and weapons and fleeing from the approaching Soviet forces. On June 20 the Russian army conquered Viipuri facing hardly any resistance.

An assessment of the seriousness of the situation led the Finnish high command to start a hurried transfer of army units from the "second isthmus" – between the lakes Ladoga and Onega - to the Karelian Isthmus (among these units also "P.B.'s" 17th Division – of this more later). Thus, when the Soviets launched the second prong of their planned attack, across the Svir river, the diluted Finnish units there were unable to present much defence and most of East Karelia was quickly seized by the Russians. On the Karelian Isthmus the Soviet forces are estimated to have outnumbered the Finnish forces by over 2 to 1 and this ratio was much greater in regard to planes, tanks, artillery, heavy mortars and other heavy equipment. The Finnish army was especially lacking

in modern anti-tank weaponry to be able to stop the advance of the heavy Russian armored forces. A quick appeal to the Germans for such weapons, as well as a request for additional support from the German air force was met by an unconditional demand that the Finnish leadership guarantee not to seek a separate peace arrangement. The Finns had at this point no choice but to accede, and on June 26 President Risto Ryti provided what was later described as "his personal guarantee" for this, signing the so-called Ryti-Ribbentrop pact.

Having retreated some 100 km from their positions at the outbreak of fighting, the Finnish army finally succeeded in re-organizing its units for defence roughly along the VKT-line, close to the border during the Interim Peace period, and with the assistance of the newly acquired weaponry and the help of German forces, managed to halt the advance of the Soviet forces and prevent their progress to the interior of Finland and toward Helsinki. The main battle on the isthmus which finally stopped the advancement of the Russian forces took place between June 25 and July 9, 1944, in the vicinity of the villages of Tali and Ihantala - the largest battle

ever fought in the Nordic region (of the Tali-Ihantala battle more below). This battle finally managed to stabilize the front-line and the Finnish forces largely succeeded in holding their defensive positions and repel further Soviet advances in spite of the overwhelming Russian numerical superiority. The Soviet amphibious attacks across the Viipuri Bay were also repelled.

The Finnish military successes, combined with huge Soviet (as well as Finnish) losses, and the extension of the Russian supply lines, led to a halt in the advance of the Soviet forces, and a realization on their part that the planned quick and decisive military victory was not attainable. The Soviets decided to begin a withdrawal of some of their army units to strengthen the East European front where Operation Bagration had begun – the Russian offensive that finally succeeded in pushing the German army out of the western parts of the Soviet Union and eastern Poland. On the other hand, the Finns had largely depleted their resources and realized they would not be able to withstand another massive Soviet attack. At this point, Finland decided to sue for peace. President Ryti resigned on August 1 thus formally freeing Finland from his "personal" commitments to the Germans, and on August 4, by a special act of the Parliament, was replaced by Field Marshal Mannerheim. The Soviet Union had informed Finland via Sweden that it was willing to abandon its initial demands for a complete and unconditional surrender if Finland agreed to sever all ties with Germany and expel all German forces from its territory. Finland accepted the conditions and ended all military action on September 4; the Soviets one day later.

The interim armistice agreement was signed in Moscow on September 19, 1944 though the final peace treaty was not to be signed until 1947 in Paris. The terms were harsh: Finland had to return to the post-Winter War (1940) borders and cede most of Karelia, parts of Salla in the north, and a number of islands in the Gulf of Finland. All of the Petsamo district in Lapland, an area of some 10,000 km², Finland's outlet to the Arctic Ocean, including the important Liinahamari (today Russian Liinakhamari) ice-free sea port, and Europe's largest nickel quarries. The Porkkala peninsula in the Gulf of Finland, some 50 km south-west of Helsinki, was rented to the Russians for fifty years¹⁵, for use as a military base (replacing the Hanko area controlled by the Soviets during the Interim Peace period), with free access for Russian military via Finnish territory.

Finland also had to pay heavy compensations amounting to some \$300 million (\$4 billion in today's prices) over six years, legalize the activity of the Communist Party, ban organizations regarded as fascist or anti-Soviet, and prosecute and try Finnish political leaders considered responsible for actions leading to the war (among those sentenced to prison terms were former president Ryti, as well two prime ministers and several members of the wartime cabinets). Finally, Finland had to disarm and expel all German troops remaining in Finland.

The last stipulation led to yet another war, usually named "the Lapland War", fought during seven months, from September 1944 to the early spring of 1945, with Finland fighting against the German forces that were retreating to northern Finland and Lapland. In the beginning the German evacuation proceeded smoothly with both sides cooperating, but as the movement of German forces was delayed, and the pressure by the Russians increased, the situation soon developed into open hostilities. The German army, retreating through Finnish territory towards northern Norway (then still occupied by Germany), reverted to scorched-earth tactics, systematically burning down villages, mining roads, and blowing up bridges, communication networks and railway lines. Some 1,000

¹⁵ The Soviets later agreed to hand back the Porkkala peninsula to Finland in January 1956.

Finnish soldiers (and about the same number of Germans) died or were reported missing in action, and some 3,000 were wounded, in this war. It is estimated that some 45% of all buildings in Lapland were destroyed.



Areas ceded by Finland to the Soviet Union at end of the Continuation War

The Continuation War had lasted three years and three months, and the following Lapland War another seven months. In the end Finland succeeded in maintaining its independence and avoiding Soviet occupation but the price had been high. Some 65,000 Finnish soldiers, and abt. 1,000 civilians, had been killed in the Continuation War, and the number of wounded was estimated at 160,000 – this out of a total population of some 3.7 million. The Soviet casualties have been estimated to amount to some 265,000 dead and nearly 400,000 wounded. In addition, some 260,000 Karelians had to be evacuated and re-settled - for a second time within 4-5 years. All this in addition to severe damage to the country's economy and infrastructure, and the hard terms of the peace agreement.

Let me now return to P.B. whom I left in the spring of 1944 on the Jandeba river in East Karelia, having been located there with all of the 13th Regiment for some 30 consecutive months. On May 17, the order finally came for the regiment to get ready for transportation to a new location – yet unknown to the soldiers and most of their officers. They were to be replaced at the Svir front by other army units.

The Regiment withdrew over the Svir river and marched some 40 km SW to a location near Mäkriä, a small Karelian village located near the eastern shore of Lake Ladoga, not far from the town of Olonets (Aunus). The following month P.B. spent here, for the moment far from any immediate Russian army units and threats. The soldiers were mainly kept busy building defence positions and participating in re-training exercises and classes. On June 11 news started reaching the soldiers of the Russian attack and breakthrough at the Karelian Isthmus, on the opposite side of Lake Ladoga, and remote sounds of heavy artillery fire could be heard across the lake. Two days later, on June 13, the regiment received an order to prepare for immediate relocation. Although the target was not officially announced, and

the real threat of the Russian advance on the Karelian Isthmus was probably not yet fully understood, it must have been clear to every one of the soldiers that it meant joining the battle fields somewhere on the Karelian Isthmus. On June 16 the Regiment was loaded into freight wagons and a 30-hour long trip, with occasional stops and alighting of the men when Russian bomber planes were sighted. The end station was Tali, a village and railway station located some 10 km NE of Viipuri. Here the groups alighted and marched some 10 km further north, finally camping near the village of Ihantala on June 18.

The troops had hardly had time to settle at their new location when the order came for them to turn back south and join in the battles to try and halt the progress of the quickly advancing Russian army. On their way to the front lines they encountered individual soldiers and remains of Finnish army units, fleeing from the approaching Russian forces.

Viipuri had fallen the same day and the Finns were desperately trying to re-organize their Karelian Isthmus Army and transport additional troops from Eastern Karelia, to prevent a final collapse of the defences. The 13th Regiment's battalions were split from the Regiment and temporarily united with other army units (I will here try and follow the regiment's 2nd Battalion to which P.B. and his machine gun company belonged). The 2nd Battalion was ordered to take up defence positions in the village of Lyykylä, some 15 km east of Viipuri, and try to hold on to the hilly region just east of Lake Näävälä (Näävälänjärvi), where it was to replace units of the 4th Division – by then completely exhausted from several days of continuous hard battles. The battles at Näävälä lasted for three days and finally the Finnish forces had to give in to the superior manpower and armament of the Russians and retreat to an area south of Lake Ihantala. The 2nd Battalion had lost 41 men, 227 were wounded.

The next day, June 25, the battalion, still trying to recuperate from the previous days' hard battles, was ordered back to the frontline. The Soviets had concentrated most of their armed forces on the Isthmus into this narrow area, some 10 km² in size, and had already succeeded in breaking the Finnish defences in the area near the Tali railway station and mill and were advancing towards Ihantala. From there they were threatening to push forwards toward the Saimaa Canal¹⁶ north of Viipuri – and from there around the Bay of Viipuri towards southern and central Finland. The Finnish troops were desperately trying to hold on to the existing, although in many cases weak and unfinished, "third defence line" (the VKT-line). What ensued was a battle which in military history (not only in Finland) has become something of a legend – the Battle of Tali-Ihantala. It lasted from June 25 to July 9 and is the largest battle ever fought in the history of the Nordic countries. Several books have been written about this battle and in 2007 a Finnish full length "docudrama" film, directed by Åke Lindman and Sakari Kirjavainen, was made, based on a reconstruction of this battle. The 50,000 Finnish soldiers putting up defence along the mostly non-existent defence lines, many of them just arrived from East Karelia, were faced by a Russians concentration of some 150,000 soldiers with a continuous supply of new soldiers to replace the fallen and those units requiring rest. The ratio in material was even more in favour of the attacking Soviet army.

In the end the Finnish army and its highly efficient Finnish artillery – with assistance from German warplanes - won a strategic defensive victory and succeeded in halting, and in some places even pushing back, the repeated Soviet attacks. Most of the VTK-line could be maintained, and an immediate Russian advance to the Finnish heartland was prevented.

The 2nd Battalion of Infantry Regiment 13 participated in these battles, fighting in difficult, hilly terrain and forests, where they were ordered to try and breach a gap which had developed in the Finnish defence line, and prevent a Russian breakthrough. The battalion succeeded in holding its positions for three days and nights, with hardly a break in the fighting and almost no

¹⁶ The Saimaa Canal connects Lake Saimaa, near the Finnish city of Lappeenranta, to the Gulf of Finland near Viipuri, along a 43 km long system of natural waterways and artificial canals. It was built in the 19th century when Finland was still a part of the Russian Empire, and inaugurated in 1856. After the war the canal passed through Soviet territory and was not in use. In 1963 the Soviet Union agreed to lease the Soviet part of the canal to Finland for 50 years, and in 2008 the lease was renewed for another 50 years, beginning in 2013.

[illegible]

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What remained of the battalion was transferred to Kilpeenjoki, north of Tali, near the outlet of the Saimaa Canal to the Gulf of Finland – the westernmost part of the new defence line – a line held by the Finns till the end of the war.

Of a total of the some 1,000 officers and soldiers in the 2nd Battalion of the 13th Infantry Regiment, 75 had died or were missing in action, and 415 had been wounded during the seven weeks of fighting on the Karelian Isthmus. The number of dead and missing during the preceding stages of the war were 68 during the Finnish offensive of 1941, and 79 during the time on the Jandeba river. P.B.'s 2nd Machine Gun Company (known also as the 8th Company of the Regiment) had lost 43 men of a total of some 150 during the Continuation War. Of these, 11 were killed (and 49 wounded) during the 9 days of battles in Näävälä and Tali.

In the beginning of July what was left of the battalions of the 13th Regiment was once again united, newly recruited officers and soldiers were added, and many of the soldiers who had deserted or left their units under the seemingly hopeless Soviet onslaught in the forests, returned to the regiment. After a short period of rest and re-organization, the 2nd battalion was ordered to hold defensive positions, first in Hornavaara on the west side of the Canal, and then in Isoniitty on its east side. A month of nearly static warfare followed, apparently not very different from P.B.'s time at the Jandeba river, with patrols, sniper fire and occasional efforts to take enemy prisoners. Finally, on August 4, the day Mannerheim was appointed President to replace Ryti, the 13th Infantry Regiment was ordered to draw back and take up positions as army reserve in the Hanhijoki area, some 10 km north of Viipuri, along the Viipuri-Lappeenranta highway. Here they received the news of the liberation of Paris on August 25.

Although the formal end of hostilities was still a month away, it can be safely said that for P.B. the war ended here, in Hanhijoki - ironically only some 10 -15 km from the place where he had been wounded on the last day of the Winter War, nearly four and a half years ago.

On September 4, 1944, at 4 am, the headquarters of the 13th Regiment received an official wired announcement of the cease-fire agreement and an order for immediate cessation of all hostilities. P.B., together with the other soldiers in his unit, received the news a few hours later. The war had ended.

The 13th Regiment with all its companies withdrew to the Finnish side of the new-old border, and after a few temporary camps, was finally stationed near the Luumäki area – some 45 km NW of the border. The war had indeed ended but the soldiers in the 13th Regiment would still have to wait for another two months till demobilization. On November 2, the company diaries make note of the first snow of the approaching winter. On the same day P.B. was transferred once more, to a new army unit, the 27th Detached Battalion ("Erillinen pataljoona 27" or "Er.P 27") – another Swedish-speaking unit also attached to the 17th Division. This time the transfer was part of a major reshuffling of the units – and the individual soldiers serving in them – in preparation for the approaching demobilization and return home of all the army reserves. On November 5th his army records note that P.B.'s medical fitness was once again re-assessed - and once more his medical fitness category was classified as B1 based on his thigh wound from the Winter War. On November 8 the men in the 27th Detached Battalion, consisting mainly of men from Southern Finland and the Helsinki area, were marched to the train station and transported to Loviisa, a small town on the Gulf of Finland, some 90 km east of Helsinki. And finally, on November 14, P.B.'s army passport and register card carry the short last line: 14.11.1944 – released from army service (although officially he still belonged to the army reserve till close to his 45th birthday in 1963).

At the age of 26, after a total of some 4 years and 10 months in the army (2 months in the Winter War, 15 months during the Interim Peace period, and 41 months in the Continuation War), P.B. could now return home to his parents, sister, and four brothers who by

then had probably also been released from army service. Now he could start planning ahead for a new life, look for a job, return to his hobbies (football, table tennis and bridge), and finally begin what probably must have been a difficult period of recuperation from the wounds inflicted by the war – at this stage perhaps more mental than physical. Some nine months later, in August 1945, he got engaged to my mother, on January 6, 1946, they got married - and exactly to the day four years after his final return home from the army I was born.

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Joel Blankett – September 2014

Pictures appended below:

Medals P.B. was decorated with during and after the wars of 1939 – 1944

Medal commendation letters signed by Field Marshal Mannerheim

Photos of Blankett family in bomb shelter during Winter War

Photo of the four Blankett brothers in uniform

Page from P.B.'s army passport

Page from P.B.'s army record card

P.B.'s letter to his brother Simon on 1.8.1941

Sources

Medals P.B. was decorated with during and after the wars of 1939 – 1944



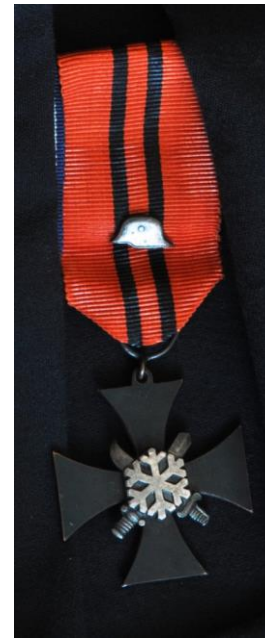
Order of the Cross of Liberty, Medal of Liberty, 2nd Class.
front: "For Bravery"
back: "from the Finnish people, 1941".



Winter War Memorial Medal with crossed swords.
front: "Honour-Fatherland"
back: 1939-1940



Continuation War Memorial Medal
front: " Fatherland – 1941-1945"



Winter War Memorial Cross - Mid-Isthmus ("Keski-Kannas").
Attached helmet for members of 1st Division.
back :1939 - 1940



Memorial Cross of 17th "Oak" Division.
1941 - 1944
Attached bars indicate fronts where fought:
Hanko, Syväri, Isthmus

FÖR ÄRA OCH



FÄDERNESLAND

Soldater av Finlands armé!

Ni ville ej kriget, Ni älskade freden, arbetet och framtidskridandet, men kampen blev Er påtvingad och i den har Ni utträttat storverk, som för sekler framåt skola stråla på hävdens blad.

Jag har kämpat på många slagfält, men jag har ännu ej sett Er lika som krigsmän. Jag är stolt över Er som om Ni vore mina egna barn, lika stolt över mannen från tundrorna i norr som över sönerna från Österbottens vida slätter, Karels skogar, Savolax leende bygder, Tavastlands och Satakundas rika gårdar, Nylands och Egentliga Finlands björkomsade hagar. Jag är lika stolt över fabriksarbetarens och den fattiga stugans son som över riksmannens insats av liv och lem.

Jag tackar Finlands ärorika armé med alla dess vapenslag, som i ädel tävlan utfört hjältebragder från krigets första dag. Jag tackar för den djärvhet med vilken de gått till anfall mot en mångfalt överlägsen, delvis med okända vapen väpnad fiende, och för den seghet med vilken de hakat sig fast vid varje bit av fosterjorden.

Med glädje och stolthet tänker jag på Finlands lotter och deras insats i kriget, deras offervilja och oförtrutna arbete på olika områden, vilket frigjort tusentals män till stridolinjerna. Jag minnes även alla andra kvinnor, vilka gjort fosterlandets sak till sin egen.

En hederspost ha de tusentals arbetare beklätt, vilka under krigets blistra tid troget och ofta som frivilliga under flyganfall stått vid sina maskiner, förfärdigande material för arméns behov, samt de vilka oförtrutet utfört befästningsarbeten. Med glädje märkte jag att vårt eniga folk på allt sätt ville stöda armén i dess kamp.

Medan våra tappra soldater försvarade våra gränser, gällde det att med övermänskliga ansträngningar anskaffa det som brast, att bygga upp de försvarslinjer som ej funnos, att söka den hjälp som ej kom. Det gällde att skaffa vapen och utrustning, och detta i en tid då vart land med febril iver rustade sig mot den storm som nu sveper över världen. Edra bragder hava väckt beundran utöver världen, men efter tre och en halv månads krig stodo vi fortfarande så gott som ensamma. Våra mäningo under striden, dag och natt, utan möjlighet till avlösning taga emot ständigt nya fiendeformationers angrepp, spännande sina krafter till långt över den fysiska och psykiska ibristsningsgränsen; trots allt stod vår armé vid krigets slut obesegrad mot en fiende, som de enorma förlusterna till trots, endast vuxit i antal. Ej heller har vår hemmafront, där otaliga flygangrepp spritt död och fasa bland kvinnor och barn, ens för ett ögonblick sviktat. Vårt folk bestod sin prövning med järnhård vilja.

Jag tackar de stupade hjältarnas mödrar och fäder, jag tackar varje frontkämpe och varje på hemmafronten verkande.

I Fosterlandets namn och som Överbefälhavare för Försvarsmakten, förlämnar jag Eder

Soldat Beisach Blankett

f. 16. 8. 1918 Helsingfors

1939-1940 års krigsminnesmedalj med svärd och spänne:

=Karelan kannas=

I Högkvarteret 1940

Fältmarskalk

Mannerheim



I FOSTERLANDETS NAMN

och i egenskap av

ÖVERBEFÄLHAVARE FÖR FINLANDS
FÖRSVARSMAKT

har jag

för edra förtjänster i kriget 1941

tilldelat EDER

Korpral Peisach Blankett

f. 16. 8. 1918

II klass FRIHETSMEDALJ

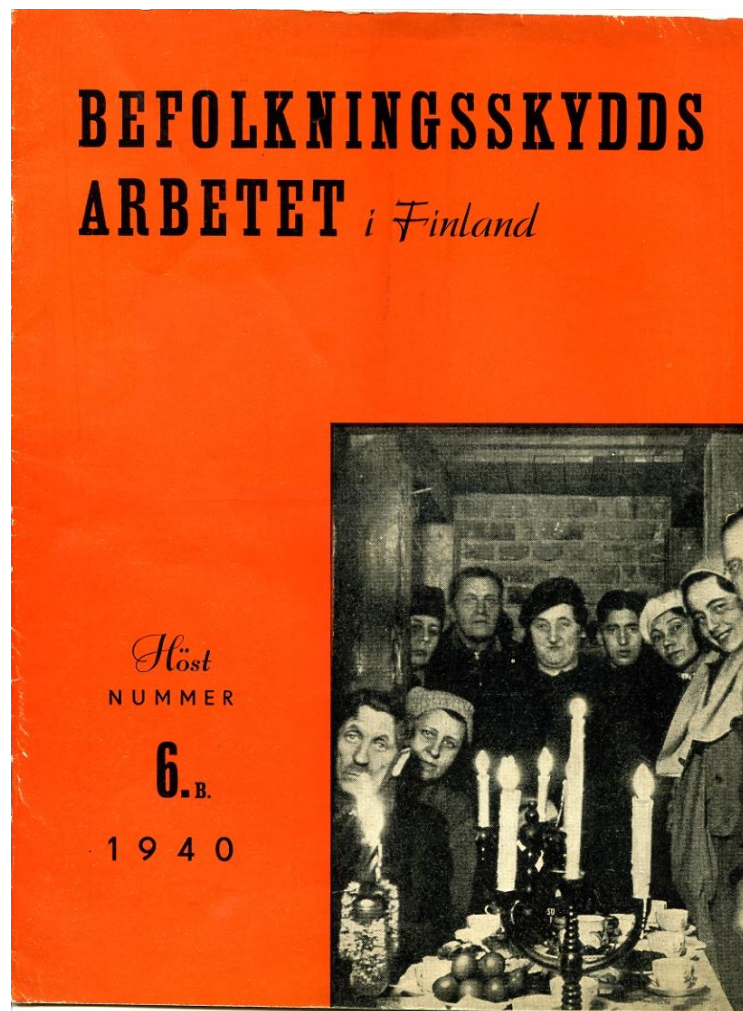
Fältmarskalk Mannerheim

Högkvarteret
År 1941

Two medal commendation letters, both signed by Field Marshal Mannerheim.

left: Winter War Memorial Medal with swords and "Karelian Isthmus" bar. Issued at Army Headquarters, 1940.

right: Medal, 2nd class, Order of the Cross of Liberty. Issued at Army Headquarters, 1941



Cover page, "Civil Defence in Finland", Autumn issue, no.6.B / 1940. Photo from a communal bomb shelter, probably in the apartment building in Helsinki where P.B.'s family lived. Sitting furthest to left, P.B.'s father Abraham Blankett; standing in middle his mother, Hasche Blankett, and behind her on right P.B.



Photo probably from same location as at right. On right side of photo, standing with helmet, P.B.'s father; standing behind him with gas mask in hand, P.B.'s sister, Liebe(le) Blankett. On left side of photo, sitting in front, P.B.'s mother; standing in back, second from right, P.B.'s older brother, Simon Blankett; fourth from right, P.B.'s youngest brother Ruben "Frade" Blankett.



The four Blankett brothers (date unknown, prob. 1940),
Sitting in front, P.B.; standing, l. to r.: Herman ("Haimele"), Simon,
Ruben ("Frade").

MILITÄRPASS

Uppbådsnummer 118/9/38 Hel

1. Tillnamn: Blankett
2. Förnamn: Persach
3. Född 16.8 / 1918, Höglax
Tilltalsnamnet understrykes. Födelseort.
4. Kyrkoskriven: H. förs. mosaiska förs.
5. I civilregister: _____
6. Trosbekännelse: Mosaisk
7. Tjänst eller yrke: Lagerbiträde
8. Skolbildning: 6/6 kl. Hördomsb
9. Språkkunskap: Finska svenska
Moderns namnet understrykes.
10. Faderns namn: Abraham
Om utom äktenskap, moderns namn.

Pl. M:n kaava: Asev. 472 R.

First page of P.B.'s Army Passport.

*Two pages from P.B.'s Army Service Records.
Left, from the older, right from the newer record card.*

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1.8.41

B. B.

Tack för brevet. Fler
det idag. Du ser att breven
bindelsen har blivit fördöj
med hela två veckor. Mycket
har hänt sedan dess.

Någon kontakt med Hai
och Ruben har jag inte
mera, för jag är nämligen
nu i Ryssland. Du må ha
det kändes kinnat, då ma
marscherade in på ett u
län dikt om nån dep. utan
behöva förenisa något
pass för tullmyndighet.
Märk väl jag är nu i grän
så som du, kan hända ni tr
småt. Nu för tillfället h
ni det jädrans lepat. Gör

nu ingenting annat än rita
mig. Men det behövs också,
för ni ha tillryggalagt ganska
länga marscher om dagarna.

Jag undrar varför pojkar
na inte skriver åt mig någon
ting, men de har säkert inte
reda på min adress. Du kan
ju skriva och förtälja dem
den. Jag vet inte heller deras
adress. Ja, men har jag
inte att berätta om denna
gång. Må nu bra, och försök
vara aktsam. Ta "ma" kan bara
om det börjar vissla.

Hoppas det här brevet kom
mer fortare fram, än ditt.

Hälsningar

Pusa

Min adress KPK 4
7625

Letter sent by P.B. to his eldest brother, Simon, on August 1, 1941, from somewhere in East Karelia



Photo I found on the Web, taken at Jandeba in 1942. P.B. is 4th from left. The building in the middle is most probably a "korsu" of the 2nd machine gun company of JR 13. The number "7625" on the wall of the building was the official "cover number" of this company. The leftmost soldier has been identified as Leo Lind, the company's driver and tailor, so this may well be part of the company's supply platoon.

Source:

<http://www.freewebs.com/valsberg/apps/photos/album?albumid=4252820>



Found among old family photos. No text or date on photo but seems to have been taken at the same location (Jandeba) as the one above.

P.B. is second from right.

Sources used

The only sources I had which related directly to my father's wartime experiences – in addition to the little I recall hearing directly from him – are his Military Passport (Sw.: Militärpass), and two Army Service Record Cards (Sw.: militärstamkort, Finn.: sotilaskantakortti). The originals of the latter are kept in the Finnish National Archives in Helsinki.

I received much valuable help in deciphering the "army shorthand" of these documents from people replying to my questions on the following two Web-based discussion groups:

The Axis History Forum (section on Winter and Continuation War):

<http://forum.axishistory.com/viewforum.php?f=59&sid=989c925ce9de8e9804d0ec4af854b829>

Suomi24 discussion group (section: History): <http://keskustelu.suomi24.fi/debate/3642>

I also learnt from the Swedish-language group Krigsforum (section on WW II):

<http://www.krigsforum.se/forum/viewforum.php?f=19&sid=78473d0bd0174259cb1a194e871494e3>

This webpage provided info on the military units of the Finnish army during the Winter war: <http://propatria.fi/talvisodan-rykmentit/>

Two books were invaluable in trying to trace my father's experiences, especially during the Continuation War:

1. "Tre Bataljoner", by Jarl Gallen (Söderström, Helsinki, 2. ed.1950). The book describes in great detail the history of the 13th Infantry Regiment and its three battalions, especially during the summer of 1944 on the Karelian Isthmus. J.G. was a military historian, and himself served as battalion commander in the above regiment.
2. "Kavas Bataljon", ed. by Kai Brunila (Ekenäs Tryckeri Aktiebolag, Ekenäs, 1991). The book is a detailed account of Infantry Regiment 13's 2nd Battalion throughout the Continuation War. In addition to an historical account, it includes sections written by some 20 persons who had served in this battalion, recounting their own personal experiences. The name of the book refers to Major Karl Gustav Kavander who was commander of the 2nd battalion.

The bilingual website "Veteraanien perintö" ("Heritage of the Veterans") is packed with information relating to many aspects of the war years. On its Swedish language pages I found reminiscences of war veterans who had served in the same Swedish-speaking army units as my father.

<http://www.veteraanienperinto.fi/>

More stories told by veterans can be found here: <http://www.sotaveteraaniliitto.fi/teemasivut/veteraanien-muistelmia>

Invaluable sources are the (partly) digitized handwritten diaries kept by the various army units during both the Winter and Continuation Wars. They can be found on the website of the Finnish National Archives:

<http://www.narc.fi:8080/VakkaWWW/Selaus.action?lista=sarijat&kuvailuTaso=A&avain=65.SARK>

For a general description of the Winter and Continuation wars of Finland, as well as the developments under the Interim Peace period, I relied heavily on the Finnish, Swedish and English-language articles of the Wikipedia relating to these events – both the main articles under these headings and the numerous sub-items linked to them. The specific links are too numerous to mention here.

Most of the maps I inserted into the text also originate from these sites.

I also gained much information on the history of the war years in Finland from the web pages of the Finnish Broadcasting Company:
<http://oppiminen.yle.fi/historia-suomi/>

A few websites where I found more detailed information on specific aspects or stages of the wars:

An English language website on the Continuation War: <http://rajajoki.com/>

And a Finnish language book (accessible on the web), also on the Continuation War:

<http://content.yudu.com/Library/A2umwp/TAISTELUTKANNAKSELLA/resources/43.htm>

<http://www.hangorintama.fi/SUOMI/Historia.html> and http://www.nortfort.ru/harparskog/index_e.html (on the Hanko front)

<http://www.tjelvar.se/varia/finland/fin-8.htm> (on the 13th Infantry Brigade at Svir river and Karelian Isthmus)

An article on the Jews of Finland during the war years (in English):

<http://www.haaretz.com/weekend/magazine/un-finnish-business-1.317886>

And more detailed information on the above subject can be found in Hannu Rautkallio's book "Suomen juutalaisten aseveljeys" ("The Jews of Finland – Comrades in Arms"), Tammi, 1989.

On the Tali-Ihantala battle of June 1944, see:

<http://aamulehdenblogit.ning.com/profiles/blogs/tali-ihantalan-torjuntavoitto-saavutettiin-70-vuotta-sitten>

In 2007 a Finnish two-hour "docudrama" film, directed by Åke Lindman and Sakari Kirjavainen, was made, based on a reconstruction of this battle (can be viewed on the web).

And on the same battle, a 6-part documentary film (with English translation) can be found here:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eD8fMrpWyHE>

Some other websites I occasionally consulted on the more general aspects of the wars:

<http://media.wfyi.org/fireandice/history/continuation40.htm> (in English)

<http://materiaalit.internetix.fi/fi/opintojaksot/9historia/suohistkaannekohdat/sisalto>

On the following websites I found maps which helped me trace the various localities in the different parts of Karelia – both in the districts that before the Winter War belonged to Finland and in the Russian districts of East Karelia:

<http://www.karjalankartat.fi/>

http://www.svajdlenka.com/travel_maps.php?country=rs®ion=28#top

Here I found a roadmap of the Karelian Isthmus published in 1940:

<http://koti.kapsi.fi/timomeriluoto/Sivut/Paasivu/KARTAT/Tiekartat/Tiekartat.html>

A good map on East (Aunus) Karelia: <http://digi.narc.fi/digi/view.ka?kuid=11896583> and the accompanying index of place names:

<http://www.genealogia.fi/hakem/itakarjala.htm>

And plenty of information on the "ceded Karelia" districts, including good maps, can be found here: <http://www.luovutettukarjala.fi/>

Finally, I should maybe mention Väinö Linna's 1954 novel "Tuntematon sotilas" ("The Unknown Soldier"), probably the most famous war novel ever written in Finland. Its "chief character" is a machinegun company – apparently very similar to the one in which P.B. served - during the Continuation War. The author based the book and its characters on his own wartime experiences in Infantry Regiment 8.

Several movie and theatre adaptations have been made (some can be viewed on the web).