
The Lost Battalion

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At the age of eighteen, just before the outbreak of the second world war, my father left his village home in the Ukraine to study agronomy at a Moscow agricultural institute. He was doing well and spoke with pride about his achievements, about his hopes and dreams for the future he might have had. But it was not to be. Despite the non-aggression pact signed by Hitler and Stalin in 1939 a nervous Soviet military knew full well war was coming; On June 22 1941 the Germans launched operation Barbarossa against the Soviet Union with 4,500,000 axis soldiers on a front from the Baltic to the Black Sea. Twenty million souls were to be torn from their bodies by the time the Nazis were beaten back, kilometre by bloody kilometre, and defeated. Father and thousands like him were conscripted from universities and colleges, he was trained as a junior officer then sent to fight on the north west front. Starvation and survival were to become his two constant companions in the midst of a savage, brutal, inhuman war.

One story he told shook me, as he intended it should. I was nineteen or twenty years old when I told him I was thinking of joining the British army; his face became pale then his eyes narrowed. He described how he came to be captured by the Germans and what he saw. He wanted me to have nothing to do with armies, any army. He could only see a young man struggling for his life, confronted with imminent death.

In just three months of fighting Barbarossa made it's bloody, barbarous way north to the outskirts of Leningrad and the southern banks of the river Neva. The Neva is a small river by length at just 75 Kilometres, flowing from lake Ladoga to the Baltic, yet it is Europe's third largest river by volume, a formidable natural defensive barrier to the advancing Germans. It was here the Soviets decided to make a stand and it was here one million inhabitants of Leningrad frantically constructed defence lines against the invaders; many civilians then stood in those same lines with a rifle and a prayer alongside my father's unit looking south over the river as the German army forced the Soviets to retreat toward Moscow and the east. By September 8th 1941 the 900 day siege had started; Leningrad was cut off from the Soviet armies, from food, and for one and a half million soldiers and civilians who were to die in the seige, from life itself.

As the German attack on the city developed it's Soviet commanders could not know they were surrounded and were desperate to make contact with any red army units remaining on the southern side of the river. They ordered patrols all along the Neva front to find out. My father was ordered to command one such patrol, a reconnaissance detail comprising himself and two other soldiers. They were to prepare themselves to row across the river and make contact with a red army battalion thought to be on the opposite bank but with whom contact had been lost. They received their orders in silence. They knew what it meant, it was suicide.

The ashen faces of the soldiers spoke for them as my father put together a plan to get them across the river and hopefully back again. They knew there had been heavy fighting

opposite them and resistance had ended, there was no hope of friendly forces opposite but orders were orders and this was their death warrant. My father set the time and place they would rendezvous and start their crossing under darkness in the rowing boat; the two soldiers nodded their assent then went their separate ways, the condemned.

Several hours later after dusk, father made his way to the rendezvous at the rivers edge, keeping his head down as he waited for the other two to appear. He had told them clearly where to meet, and knew they knew, but was not surprised when they didn't show up, they had probably deserted or been killed. I asked father how he felt when nobody showed. He said he could not blame them as their was little chance of success or remaining alive. Of his own life he said he had seen so many of his comrades shot, bombed and killed already it was a matter of luck he had survived so far, "what was to be had to be", if he refused he would have been found and shot in anycase. The bitter Russian winter was on its way, freezing, numbing, turning the river icy cold. He felt it's chill seep into his boots as he stepped aboard the small skiff in silence, took hold of the oars, and under the meagre cover of a moonless sky, went into the night.

Stopping every now and then to listen for any indication of who or what was on the opposite bank, he made a nervewracking crossing; every noise made by every oar stroke seemed to be magnified a hundredfold each sound inviting a bullet and his fate. Eventually and incredibly he found himself only thirty meters away from the far side, he knew it couldn't last, almost as soon as the thought crossed his mind the German sentries opened up on him with a hail of rifle and machine gun fire. The skiff was shot away from under him in an instant; he did not know how he survived.

I remember the look on his face as he was transported back in time to that terrible place, looking all about the floor of the room as he described the bullets making the water boil around him; feeling the life being frozen out of his arms and legs by the rivers merciless cold. There were no options; it was too far to swim back and a German bullet to finish him off ahead. He knew he was finished floating down the river to his death when, to his amazement, the German firing stopped and a voice called to him to surrender and swim to the bank. With his remaining strength he reached the shore but could no longer use his legs, they were literally starting to freeze. Two Germans grabbed him, dragging him up the bank, he had been spared for interrogation. The Germans were as short of intelligence as the Soviets.

It was dark and he could only remember being taken to a hut of some sort just behind the German front line. He was given a cup of something warm to drink to help him thaw. Later after he had regained the use of his legs and the power of speech a German officer came to question him about the Soviet forces opposite. The officer made it clear, co-operation meant life, refusal meant death. My father knew very little about Leningrad's defences and said so. What little he did know about the purpose of his own operation, the German officer accepted, and spared his life.

It was daylight when he was collected together with other prisoners, to be marched in a line to the German rear, eventually on to a concentration camp in Poland. It was then he found the soldiers of the Soviet battalion he was sent over the river to make contact with, and many others besides.

They were stacked, frozen body upon frozen body, thousands of them in a wall of death, being used as cover by German soldiers unable to dig into the frozen soil. The face of my father as he told me this had taken on the hue of a survivor, there was no emotion, just endurance. Then came relief when he realised by the look on my face he had made his point.

That he had done his duty as only a father can.

Stalin's famine in the 1930's had taught him what he needed to do to survive the camps; somehow he managed to wangle a job in a bakery and then another as a fireman, putting out fires started by relentless allied bombing. At the end of, or just after the war, POW's were being transferred back to the Soviet union. Word got back to the camps that the Russians were executing prisoners who's mere existence alive proved they had been collaborators. His trips outside the wire as a fireman gave him the opportunity to make a run for it. He took his life in his hands, along with a bag of food and scarpered, trekking by foot and train to Austria. At that time Austria was under Russian occupation so it wasn't completely safe, nevertheless he worked as a farm labourer in the mountains far away from trouble and the aftermath of war. Or so he thought.

Eventually word got to the Russians in the area that there was a Russian speaker working somewhere nearby and they organised a manhunt for him. My father had made friends and he received a tip off that the Soviets were on their way. Once again he grabbed his coat this time heading over the mountains to Italy. He described how, in order to avoid roads and checkpoints, he would ascend and descend cliffs many times along a perilous lonely route to freedom. He succeeded.

Making his way to Britain via Paris, he arrived in 1950 a stateless refugee.

Alive.

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