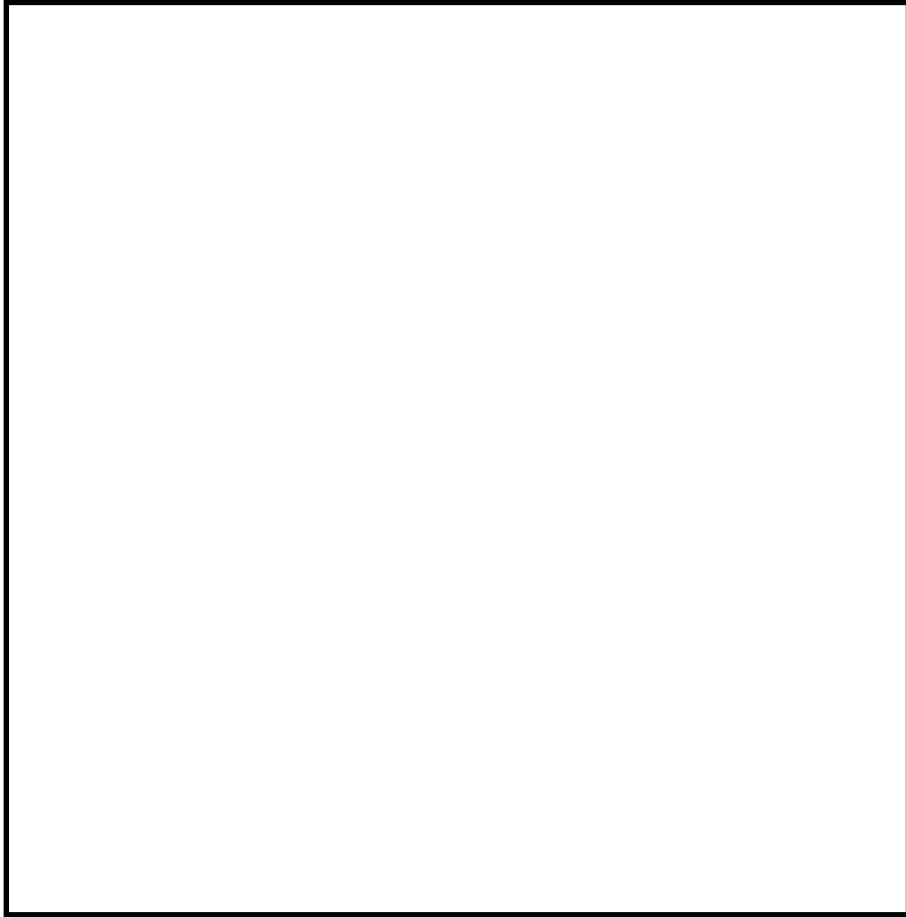


Sisu

The Battles for Suursaari Island



1942 & 1944

Commentary

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Background

The island of Suursaari lies roughly in the middle of the Gulf of Finland, 40 Km from the Finnish port of Kotka and 45 Km from the Estonian coast. Whoever owned the island could interdict traffic into and out of the Finnish port of Kotka, or, conversely, limit the range of operation of naval forces sailing from or acting against the Russian naval base at Kronstadt, at the head of the gulf. The island also served as a useful early warning post.

In Finnish, the island's name means 'large island'. Its other names, Gogland (Russian) and Högländ (Swedish) mean 'high land'. Unlike most of the other islands in the gulf it is composed of a high ridge of rocky hills running north-south — hence its name. The island is 11 Km long, between 1-3 Km wide, and has a shoreline of 30 Km. Its hills are steep and rocky, separated by ravines, bogs, and small lakes, with a number of streams. The western shore is higher than the eastern, forming cliffs in many spots, most of them studded with caves. There are very few places suitable for landing troops on either side of the island.

In the 1940s, the whole of Suursaari was covered by woodland, except where the locals had carved out patches of farmland, and along the coasts, especially at the northern and southern tips, where the woods degraded into scrub.

A network of tracks and bad roads connected the two main villages: Suurkylä in the North (78 houses) and Kiiskinkylä in the South (62 houses). Roads also led to logging sites and the island's three lighthouses. Both villages lie on the eastern shore. Suurkylä has a good natural harbour and at that time featured the island's only pier and breakwater. The church and casino (!) were located here. Kiiskinkylä was a fishing port without a dock, exposed to the elements. Various structures also surrounded the lighthouses. One each of these devices sat at either tip of the island while the third was atop Pohjoiskorkia Hill.

This hill, the most northerly, is, at 106 meters, one of the three highest on the island. Mäkiinpäällys Hill, west of Suurkylä village, is holds second place at 118 meters. Largest of all, Haukkavuori Hill towers over the landscape at 158 meters. Mäkiinpäällys and Haukkavuori are two halves of the same massif, with the former north of the latter. All three occupy the northern half of the island. Lesser hills form the southern half.



[Suursaari skyline]

The island had a permanent population of about 800 people who lived by logging, fishing, and seal hunting, and, from the 1930s, tourism. The few beaches the island possessed were worth a visit, hence the construction of a casino. In 1937 the island had 5,000 visitors.

When the Soviets annexed the Baltic States they made inquiries about obtaining Suursaari and several of the other islands in the Gulf. Finland refused to deal. Fearing the worst, however, they demilitarised the island, evacuating the permanent residents.

A garrison of 45 coastguardsmen, mostly volunteers, led by 6 NCOs and 1 Second Lieutenant, remained. The party established 8-man OPs at either end of the island for naval reconnaissance. 16 men also garrisoned Suurkylä and 12 men Kiiskinkylä. Heavy weapons comprised exactly one (1) AAMG.

No contingency plans were in place should Finland be attacked, but shortly before the Winter War broke out a Lieutenant Commander and a couple of aides arrived from Naval Intelligence to monitor things.

The civilian evacuation was completed on October 10, 1939. On November 30 the Red Airforce conducted several sorties against the island, dropping 2,000 bombs and destroying the radio station. Later that day 10 Soviet destroyers conducted a bombardment and by evening a

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small party of Soviet troops had landed at Kiiskinkylä.

The Finns withdrew without fighting to the northern end of the island. On December 1 most of them left aboard a motorboat and a rowboat, heading NNW for Kaunissaari Island, a distance of about 16 nautical miles (30 Km). The remainder scattered from the scene aboard other rowboats. The Intelligence party was the last to leave, on December 2, via another motorboat they had previously concealed.

The Soviets never noticed any of these movements and continued to shoot up the island until the main invasion force of 1,500 men landed on December 3. Moscow made a big deal of the occupation, issuing a statement that their troops “faced great difficulties during the invasion” and lauding the “Courageous Marines of the Red Banner Baltic Fleet who overcame all difficulties while suffering only minor losses.” They even made a movie about it.

The Soviet garrison remained in possession until the end of 1941, the island being formally handed over to them by the treaty that ended the Winter War. Initially the Finns seemed uninterested in recovering the island, now home to about 5,000 Russian troops.

[Suursaari did not have the largest island garrison. Lavansaari (Moshchny) Island, 46 Km to the East, had the largest concentration of forces. It guarded the approaches to Kronstadt — and in the distant past had

served as a stepping stone for armies crossing the winter ice between Estonia and Finland.]

But, in December 1941 the Soviet garrison of Hanko (Hango) was evacuated, and in something of a panic the garrison of Suursaari was also removed. The Finns decided to reoccupy the island. The Germans had been pressing them to do so for some time.

This First Conquering by the Finns took place between 12 December 1941 and 2 January 1942. In the planning stages, it was viewed as a joint operation between the Finns and the Germans, but the latter backed out. They did promise air support, which in the event never appeared.

So, the operation only involved minor elements of the Finnish 2nd Coastal Brigade (2.RPr). An engineer platoon from Haapasaari Island (about halfway between the Finnish port of Kotka and Suursaari, east of Kaunissaari) was sent to clear mines. On the island they received intelligence from a party of Estonian engineers who had escaped from the Soviet convoy fleeing Hanko. Apparently the enemy had entirely deserted the western part of the Gulf.

The Finns had difficulty building up their new base. The early ice was too thin to support motor convoys, so the island had to be supplied by air.

(In case the reader is not aware, the Gulf of Finland routinely freezes over completely, but the



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ice is of course thickest at the *end* of winter, when it has had time to properly set.)

Most of the new garrison arrived on skis. They included a rifle platoon, followed by 13 NCOs and 21 men, led by a Lieutenant Sipilä, who became the OC on 1 January 1942. In all, he commanded about 70 men. (The force was nonetheless called *Osasto* — Detachment — Pennanen after the commander of that first rifle platoon.)

The morning after Sipilä took over, the Soviets invaded. Their force was small, but adequate, a volunteer company of 170 men led by a Colonel Barinov. The Finns were completely surprised and after a short, disorganised fight fled on foot to Luppi (or Lupi), a rocky islet 16 Km to the north, abandoning most of their equipment and ammunition. Soviet propaganda claimed the killing of 180 Finns. True casualties were 1 NCO and 2 men, plus 6 local fishermen. One of the men, a medic named Fredriksson, defended a house by himself armed only with a pistol, until he ran out of ammunition.

This debacle forced the Finns to undertake a more serious, though still risky, operation, known as the Second Conquering, at the end of March 1942.

Preparing for the Battle

Finnish preparations to retake the island began almost immediately after its loss. 2.RPr was made responsible for the operation. The first step was the formation of a new Coastal Battalion (2.RP — without the small 'r') under Captain V. Vuorela. Major Å. Sokajärvi took over on 27 January. His battalion trained at Kirkonmaa Island as part of 1st Coastal Artillery Battalion/2nd Coastal Brigade (I Lsto/2.RPr). (Kirkonmaa is another one of the islands in the archipelago lying off Kotka.)

On 10 March 1942 the 2.RPr was renamed Eastern Gulf of Finland Coastal Brigade: *Itä-Suomenlahden Rannikkoprikaati*, or Suom. RPr., for short.

On 2 March 2.RP, now about 1,090 men, was moved to Haapasaari Island. The battalion comprised a HQ company, two 'strike' companies, a heavy weapons company, and a mortar company equipped with nine 81mm mortars.

From 25 January to 27 March the 1st Strike Company of 2.RP under Lt. K. Vakkuri conducted nightly reconnaissance of Suursaari, amounting to a total of 136 ski patrols, averaging a travelling

distance of 50 Km per patrol. Two cardboard-and-snow hides were built out on the ice to conceal the observation parties during the day.

[By the handbook, recon patrols typically consist of either three or eight men; since two hides were constructed, the patrols were probably of eight men, because such patrols divide into two observation teams and a base comprising the leader and a radio operator.]

Occasionally, the Finns sent out combat patrols to capture enemy soldiers; the largest of these consisted of 85 men.

Intensive preparations started on 10 March, when Major General Aaro Pajari of 2.RPr (now Suom. RPr) was ordered to form a battle group (*Taisteluosasto*) to retake Suursaari. Pajari, formerly commander of the 18th Division, was hand picked by Marshal Mannerheim for his expertise. Pajari's plans were completed by 12 March and by 20 March his men were ready.

By now the ice in the gulf was thick enough for vehicle convoys, and a Ploughing Detachment — five cars and a tractor — bulldozed something like 10,000 Km of roadways across it. The Finns hoped to conceal their movements under a series of heavy snowfalls as successive weather fronts swept across the gulf, but while the weather cooperated, this meant the ploughs had to be kept in continuous motion — roads could disappear within 20 minutes. The detachment worked nonstop for 408 hours.



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To aid in concealment, not only were the vehicles and guns painted white and the men issued with snowsuits, even the horses, all 738 of them, were draped with white sheets.

Between 23 March and 25 March the troops were moved into camouflaged advance camps between 10-15 Km from the island. White-tented aid posts and rest areas were set up every 10 Km along the approach routes. Bridging sections were brought along in case the ice cracked.

On the evening of 26 March the Finns moved to their assault positions by truck, wagon, and on skis (some men being towed behind the trucks, just like in the newsreels). At that time the weather was excellent, with a temperature of only -5°C or -6°C, and a mild wind.

The Finnish Airforce was on standby. Their job would be to provide air cover should the clouds break, to resupply the attackers, and to evacuate the wounded. At the end of the operation they were to pursue any Soviet troops retreating across the ice. During the waiting period, aggressive sortieing prevented Soviet aircraft from observing the troop concentrations.

Despite all the activity — the ice roads were packed with vehicles carrying nearly 3,500 men — and the activity of the combat patrols by 1st Strike Company, it seems that the Soviet garrison remained completely unaware of their impending fate until the last minute.



(During the approach march, the Finns removed the light bulbs from their truck headlights, but forgot to remove the red taillights. The first time the convoy stopped a long red line glowed across the ice! The Soviets never noticed.)

At 21:30 on March 26 the Finns intercepted the following radio message from Suursaari:

“About a battalion-strength enemy force seen staging around Haapsaari Island before darkness fell. Special patrols have been sent to observe.”

No patrols appear to have been sent. There was not much the Soviets could do about it in any case. Lavansaari, their nearest base, was 40 Km away. It possessed an airfield, but it was socked in by the weather. A counterattack by the garrison there would be slow and difficult.

The Soviet Garrison in March 1942

Historical information about the Russians is scanty. The garrison consisted of a reinforced battalion of 496 men, 12 officers, 8 commissars, and Colonel Barinov, OC. Suursaari and the other Soviet occupied islands were part of the Leningrad Military District. Actual responsibility for the various garrisons lay with the Baltic Fleet. It appears the garrison's parent unit was the 1st Extraordinary Marine Brigade. This formation had 4 battalions; by process of elimination the garrison was probably the 1st battalion, or most of its combat elements, because the others are accounted for. Barinov answered to the garrison commander on Lavansaari.

His men were organised in 3 rifle companies of 3 platoons each. At this time in the war the TO&E for Soviet rifle companies called for 4 sections (squads) per platoon but in practice there were usually only 3. Given the garrison's numerical strength, however, the 4th sections may actually have been present. The individual sections were probably full strength, too, since the battle took place before the mid-1942 reforms that lowered section strength to 9 men.

Additional forces were a MG company and mortar company. The mortar company consisted of twelve 50mm mortars, which were merely glorified grenade launchers. The MG company <probably> had twelve Maxim machine-guns. (This is suggested by comparison with the *Finnish* organisational structure for machine-gun companies, which was based on the Soviet model.) Soviet heavy weapons companies were

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only administrative units. In the field, weapon teams were distributed equally among the rifle companies.

The Soviets were firmly dug in, but only with the usual log-and-earth bunkers. There were too few of these to cover the entire shoreline. However, Suursaari's hills gave a good view of the surrounding ice and could prove tough to capture. The Soviets sowed the island liberally with mines (18,000 of them are reported remaining at the time the Germans tried to invade in 1944) and beach obstacles. They even set up rows of stakes in the open fields against possible air landings.

The garrison received 'spotty' air cover during the operation — the usual Ratas and Chakas (I-15 and variants, and I-16s).

On the eve of the attack Barinov stood his command to, but sent no patrols out. His men spent the night shivering in their trenches.

The Finns — Battle Group P

The Finnish OOB is well documented as Battle Group (*Taisteluosasto*) P, consisting of 3,500 men under Major General Aaro Pajari. The force was broken down as follows:

Detachment (Osasto) S: LtCol Lauri Sotisaari

I Battalion (*Pataljoona*) 27th Infantry Regiment (*Jalkaväkirykmentti*) under Maj. Lauri Toivianien

II Battalion 6th Infantry Regiment under Capt Veikko Elovaara (less 1st cy)

Platoon/Gun Company (*Joukke/Tykkikomppania*) of IR 6 under 2LT Hirvonen

Mortar Company (*Kranaatinheitinkomppania*) of IR 6 under LT Jaakkola (sans the heavy mortar platoon)

A platoon from AAMG Company (*Joukke/Ilmatorjuntakonekiväärikomppania*) No. 121

A platoon of combat engineers from 3. Komppania Pion.P 23 under LT Pesonen

Det O: Capt. U. Oksanen

1. Company II Battalion IR 6 (-)

Det M: Maj. Martti Miettinen

HQ Company (*Esikuntakomppania*)

HQ squad (*Komentoelin*)

Signals Platoon, Engineer Half-Platoon, Supply Platoon, Smoke Launcher Platoon, Motor Sledge Detachment

Company (Komppania) Uski: Capt. L. Uski

3x Rifle Platoon of the East Gulf of Finland Coastal Brigade

1x Platoon of the Gun Company from Infantry Regiment 6

1x Platoon of the Mortar Company from Coastal Battalion 2

1x Platoon of the MG Company from Coastal Battalion 2

1x Light AA Platoon from East Gulf of Finland Coastal Brigade

Company Vuorela: Capt. V. Vuorela

1st Company / Coastal Battalion 2

1x Platoon of the Gun Company from Infantry Regiment 6

1x Platoon of the Mortar Company from Coastal Battalion 2

1x Platoon of the MG Company from Coastal Battalion 2

1x Light AA Platoon from East Gulf of Finland Coastal Brigade

Company Laaksonen: Capt. E. Laaksonen

3x Rifle Platoon of 2.RP/2.RPr (Coastal Battalion 2 of the East Gulf of Finland Coastal Brigade)

121. AAMG Company (-)
(*Ilmatorjuntakonekiväärikomppania*)

[Major Åke Sokajärvi was CO of the coastal battalion]

Reserve

1x unspecified infantry battalion

Artillery Units of Combat Detachment P

Heavy Mortar Company (*Raskas kranaatinheitinkomppania*) to support Det. S

The HMC consisted of 3x Heavy Mortar Platoons of 3x 120mm mortars each, operating separately

1. Battery Field Artillery Regiment (*Patteri/Kenttätukirykmentti*) 19 to support Detachment M [4x - 76 K/36 cannon]

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4. Motorized Heavy Artillery Battery (*Moottoroitu raskas patteri*) based at Lupinsaari (Luppi Island) to support Det S & Det M] [4?x 122 K/31 cannon]

Plus 4x 75 K/17 cannon, 4x 45 K/? cannon of 4.MRP operating closer to Suursaari.

2 flight regiments totalling 67 planes (apparently 1 of fighters and 1 of bombers or mixed fighters/bombers). These included the Curtiss Hawk 75A & Blenheim bombers

Supply Units of Combat Detachment P

21. Truck Platoon (Autojoukkue) 30x Truck

Transport Column Company
(*Kuormastokomppania*)

Ammunition Depot Platoon
(*Ampumatarvikevarastojoukkue*)

Household Platoon/33rd Household Company
(*Talousjoukkue 33.Talouskomppania*)

A. Detachment 2nd Field Hospital
(*A-Osasto 2.Kenttäsairaala*)

Surgery detachment

I Platoon / 39th Medical Company
(*I Joukkue 39.Lääkintäkomppania*)

Veterinary Platoon
(*Eläinlääkintäjoukkue*)

Finnish Formation Structure

Rifle Regiment

HQ including an engineer platoon & jaeger (recce) platoon

1x mortar company with 1 heavy platoon of 3x 120mm & 1 light platoon of 3x 81/82mm mortars (82mm being captured Soviet ordnance). At some point during 1942 the companies were restructured to 9x 120mm but this seems to have been after the battle.

1x AT company of 3 platoons of 2 guns each, usually captured Russian 45mm.

3x infantry battalions (later, it could be 2-3 battalions)

Rifle Battalion

HQ including jaeger platoon

3x rifle companies

1x mortar platoon of 3x 81/82mm mortars

1x MG company of 12x MMG/HMG

Rifle Company

HQ

1x AT squad with 20mm Lahti AT rifles

3x platoons of 4 squads each, mostly rifles with 1 LMG & 1 SMG

The Battle

The Finns planned to attack the island from both east and west. The primary attack would come from the West, with three diversionary parties probing from the East.

At 04:00 on 27 March (03:00 in some accounts) Detachment (*Osasto*) S, with II/IR 6 to the North and I/IR 27 to the South, left its start line and marched east. Fortified by a hot meal and 100ml of cognac and vodka, their job was to reach the island, split north and south and clear the hills, then descend on the two villages of Kiiskinkylä and Suurkylä. In reserve were elements of 2.RP coastal battalion.

A company of mortars, both 81mm and 120mm, provided supporting fire. The heavies were emplaced 1,500m from the shoreline and the mediums 500m.

I/IR 27's first objective was Ratassomerikonlahti Bay. The Soviets were strongly dug in here and alert. Fortunately, a storm had come up from the West in the night and what with the darkness and blowing snow the men could barely see anything.

Despite the poor visibility, however, the Soviets succeeded in pinning most of the Finnish battalion



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with cross fire from the promontory of Selkäapajanniemi. A few Finns made it ashore but the bulk of the unit was pulled back to act as a follow-on wave for II/IR 6. This battalion was sent against Suurensomerikonlahti Bay.

By the time I/IR 27 caught up with it, II/IR 6, initially meeting only light opposition, had begun to advance inland. Progress was slow. As mentioned before, the western side of the island was rocky and jutted up from the sea. The men had the choice of climbing cliffs or wading through snow-filled ravines.

Following behind II/IR 6, I/IR 27 swung south instead, assaulting the hills west of Kiiskinkylä village and linking up with elements that had made it ashore earlier. The fighting here was stiff. Nevertheless, the middle and south of the island, including Kiiskinkylä, were secured first. Most of the Soviet fortifications were concentrated on the northern half of the island.

Meanwhile, Detachment M, divided into three companies, had launched a simultaneous assault from the East. The detachment's primary tasks

were to conduct diversionary attacks and to prevent the Soviets from escaping. On the Finnish Left was Company Uski, probing toward Kiiskinkylä; Company Vuorela did the same against Suurkylä on the right. Company Laaksonen was held back as a reserve behind Company Vuorela. Once the Soviets had been forced to concentrate against the heavier attacks from the West, Detachment M would attack the two villages, supported by light field guns and captured Russian 45mm AT guns (these were capable of firing HE rounds in an indirect role). In the event, Company Uski's hyper-aggressive commander pushed his men into Kiiskinkylä ahead of schedule.

Suurkylä village and all the high ground on the island were in Finnish hands by 15:00 on 27 March, but pockets of Soviet resistance remained and heavy fighting continued until 22:00.

As the day progressed the storm lifted, and at dusk, six Soviet fighters made an appearance. They were quickly chased off by twelve Curtiss



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Hawk 75s, who shot down four of them. Finnish anti-aircraft gunners accounted for a fifth plane.

During the night, the Finns consolidated their hold on the island and prepared to eradicate the remaining Soviet positions. The key moment came when the Finns discovered an unguarded approach to Barinov's HQ. With the Soviet CO's capture, all organised resistance ceased. By 01:00 on March 28 only a few scattered Soviet positions of no more than squad size remained.

The northern tip of the island, Pohjoisrivi, did not fall until 06:20 on 28 March. But, the toughest fight was on the Selkäapajanniemi promontory, where the defenders had integrated log bunkers with natural caves among the rocks. The Finns had spent most of the preceding day trying to winkle the Soviets out; at 17:30 four bombers dropped 2,000 kg of bombs on the peninsula. Most of the defenders fled out across the ice under cover of darkness but were hotly pursued. With the dawn, the Finns quickly reduced the remaining three bunkers.

A small '*motti*' (encirclement) at the Lounatrivi lighthouse, on the southern tip of the island, had also been formed during 27 March. Here, Detachment Oksane was able to contain the defenders, but not to reduce the pocket. On the morning of 28 March, therefore, a couple of pioneer sections and a field gun were sent down. The gunners positioned their piece atop a pile of ice and began to destroy the lighthouse where most of the defenders were holed up. Floor by floor the tower was rubble. The Soviets refused to surrender and had to be gunned down as they charged out of the front door.

Two more *mottis* remained on the East coast south of Kiiskinkylä. The promontory of Purjeniemi was taken at 11:30. That of Kipparniemi, which was not a tenable position, was no threat and was left for the morning of 29 March. It was eradicated at 06:00 that day.

Major General Pajari decided to hold his victory parade before the fighting stopped, at 14:30 on 28 March. The inspection and speech was made on the ice in front of Suurkylä village; the men conducted a 'ski past'. (See the picture on the previous page.) Two flights of Curtiss Hawk 75A fighters from Flying Squadron 32 (LLv.32) provided air cover. The Finns even flew in a marching band all the way from Helsinki. What no one knew at the time was that the area chosen for

the podium was in the middle of a minefield! Fortunately the snow was so deep that the mines could not activate.

Even more shocking, immediately after the last speech, a Soviet machine-gun section stood up in the brush only 100m from the parade ground and came in to surrender! Presumably, they did not want to interrupt the show.

Then, right at the end of the parade, which included a flyby, word was received that a Soviet sortie of twenty-nine planes was approaching (arrayed in three formations of eight, eleven, and ten). One of the Curtiss flights was already out of the immediate area but the other immediately engaged. The second flight, which had been over Lavansaari, returned and attacked the rear of the Soviet formations. In all, seventeen or eighteen Soviet planes were shot down with no Finnish losses (one source lists ten I-153s and seven I-16s).

In other air actions nearby, a flight of Brewsters had five confirmed kills and a flight of Fokkers downed four more, marking the highest toll yet inflicted by the Finnish Airforce in a single day's combat.

Once the sun came up on March 28, the Soviet forces which managed to breakout from the island during the night were strafed mercilessly by Finnish aircraft all the way to Lavansaari.

The Finnish pilots flew a total of 643 sorties and dropped over 5,000kg of bombs during the mission, dosing themselves liberally with 'speed' to keep flying.

Overall losses for the Soviets are given as 213 KIA and 36 POWs; 265 escaped. (This leaves 3 men unaccounted for; perhaps they were on leave.) Losses for the Finns were 61 KIA, 109 WIA, and 2 MIA.



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Interim: 1942-1944

After the battle, Suom. RPr and the Kriegsmarine set about developing Suursaari as a forward listening post and the lynchpin of an elaborate system of sea mines.

In the immediate aftermath, the Finns were told that the Germans would not be occupying the islands of Seiskari (Seskar), Lavansaari, and Tytäsaari as original planned. For the Finns to occupy these islands as well would stretch their resources very thin. No attempt would be made to retake Lavansaari or Seiskari, which lay to its east, nor any of the other islands east of Suursaari.

It proved necessary, however, to occupy Tytäsaari (Tyuters), because it was key to a planned minefield barrier. Tytäsaari is an islet 20 Km southeast of Suursaari. The Finns occupied it after only light opposition on 30 March. Upon which the Germans established a garrison after all: two infantry companies and two AA batteries, all Kriegsmarine troops. Because the Soviets maintained a position out on the ice, a detachment of Finnish infantry also remained.

At 06:50 on 8 April 1942 the Soviets attempted to retake Tytäsaari with a force of 1,000 men, attacking from three sides (the island is round in shape and possessed of a single hill with a lighthouse). The attackers lost 270 men including both the battalion and regimental commanders. The Finns lost 3 KIA and 2 WIA. The sources used here do not list German losses. After a quiet two days it seemed the Soviets would not be back, so the Finns were pulled out.

In July, the Soviets made an attempt on Kalliosaari Island which was similarly repulsed with a loss to them of 16 MTBs and 230 men killed or captured; the Finns lost 17 men. Obviously, any invasion attempt against an island would have to take place in the winter. The Soviets made no further effort to retake any of the islands in the gulf until 1944.

In the interim, the Germans and Finns bolstered their positions. The Finnish remained responsible for Suursaari. 12th Coastal Artillery Regiment (12.RTR), the largest element of the Eastern Finnish Gulf Coastal Brigade, provided the garrison and was also charged with protecting local waters. 12.RTR was formed around Battle



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Group M which was made the garrison immediately after the battle. Its commander was Major Martii J. Miettinen. He was promoted to Lt. Colonel when the unit was expanded to a regiment, and served as the island's OC until the very end.

A great deal of work was done in the first few months of occupation. The Germans laid sea mines — 3,000 mines in May 1942 alone — between Suursaari, Haapsaari, and Tytäsaari. In April 1943 an additional 12,268 sea mines were laid, and 9,792 more in 1944. Most of these were arranged in six fields, each with its own name (e.g., Seeigel and Rukajärvi). An antisubmarine net was stretched right across the gulf, from the Porkkala Peninsula west of Helsinki to Naissaari (Naissaare) Island on the opposite Estonian coast, and across Tallinn Bay.

On Suursaari, a significant number of coastal guns of various calibers were emplaced, along with attendant anti-aircraft defences. The fortifications of the island were beefed up, since the Finns expected the Soviets might try an invasion once the ice was thick enough in the winter of 1942-43; the garrison would probably be isolated at such a time. Three strongpoints were developed, on the hills of (from north to south) Pohjoiskorkia, Mäkipäällys, and Lounatkorkia, with provisions for a six-months siege. However, things remained quiet all through 1943.

Only in 1943 did the Finns establish a detection post on the island. In 1944 the Germans established two more as part of a larger network. These have been variously described in the sources as radio stations, radar stations, sonar stations, or sound ranging stations. Actually, there were three different types, each with a different function. The German posts were named Thor and Marder. Thor provided air-surveillance radar and Marder was a sound ranging station for detecting surface ships and aircraft. The Finnish station used hydrophones for detecting submarines and surface ships.

These measures, coupled with Axis air patrols, helped keep the bulk of the Soviet Baltic Fleet penned up in the waters around Leningrad, but the occasional submarine did make it out. Suursaari contributed to the ASW net with a pair of VMV-class gunboats based at Suurkylä. The most significant naval action for the Finns in this period was the sinking of the large Soviet gunboat (5x 130mm guns) *Krasnaya Znamya* in November

of 1942. The gunboat was lost because it strayed too far west. Attacking the Soviet fleet within its own safe zone was an impossibility.

Armistice

The circumstances surrounding implementation of the Armistice were critical for how the second battle for Suursaari developed.

Sometime in 1943 Finland decided Germany was going to lose the war and began putting out peace feelers. The Government also began speaking of Finland's war as 'separate' from Germany's. This soured their relations with Hitler considerably. By the spring of 1944 Germany had suspended all aid to Finland, including foodstuffs and oil. They re-instituted them with a vengeance, however, once the Soviet Karelian Offensive began in June. To receive the aid the Finns had to promise not to make a separate peace.

Their attempts to come to an accommodation with Stalin fell through in April of 1944 anyway, and the dictator made the decision to crush Finland militarily. The Soviets might have been more thorough than they actually were if the Finns had not thrown off their timetables by fierce resistance; much of the offensive power tied down in Finland was needed for Operation Bagration.

Stout Finnish resistance actually proved problematic for their own government. Both the Germans and the Soviets were placing heavy demands on the country. Eventually, though, the Finns, seeing their ally withdraw farther and farther away from them, agreed to an armistice with the Soviets, on very harsh terms. The formal signing took place on September 19, 1944. The second battle of Suursaari, yet to be described, had actually occurred four days before. While the battle did little to mitigate the terms it was of some benefit, since it proved the Finns were willing to fight the Germans.

It must be understood that although the Armistice was formally signed on September 19, its conditions had already been published and it was for all intents and purposes in effect from 4 September. One of the most important articles was that all German forces had to leave Finnish soil by September 15. Obviously, this was impossible up in Lapland, but Finland had no excuse for not evicting them from the islands in the Gulf.

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[Kiiskinkylä village]

For their part, the Germans were no longer concerned for their notional ally's sensibilities. Suursaari was still the lynchpin of the naval blockade in the gulf, especially crucial since many troops remained to be evacuated by sea from the Baltic States. The zone was also the last safe place for the Germans to train submarine crews.

Ironically, this viewpoint was instantly dropped when Hitler ordered the abandonment of Estonia on 17 September, but up until then, the Germans were determined that Suursaari never fall into Soviet hands.

By the start of September, the pending armistice had led to a change in the garrison's routine. Efforts to improve the fortifications ceased and many of the coastal guns were deinstalled and shipped away. The small German detachment, despite the decision to retain Axis control of the island, also removed itself on 4 September, but 26 men and a liaison officer returned the next day, with a 'request' that the corresponding Finnish liaison on Tytärsaari be withdrawn.

The slow pace of Russo-Finnish negotiations also slowed the complete demilitarisation of the island. It was believed that the garrison might in the end be forced to fight off a Soviet assault. Therefore, on 10 September, 6x 47mm coastal guns and a pioneer section were sent to the island.

Tanne Ost

Being allies of the Finns, the Germans were privy to all their dispositions and as early as 1943 had formed an accurate assessment of what it would take to secure the island against Finnish opposition. It would not be easy. Nevertheless, in the event that Finland did leave the war, the Germans would have to take control of a number

of vital installations around the Gulf. Thus was born *Case Tanne* (Operation Fir).

Tanne was first formulated in February of 1944. There were to be two elements, *Tanne Ost* and *Tanne West*. The latter was to be an occupation of the Åland Archipelago off the southeast corner of Finland, with the object of covering the naval evacuation of northern Finland — codenamed Operation Birch. Ultimately, Hitler cancelled *Tanne West* because it might upset the Swedes, who had a significant population in the archipelago; the islands are very close to Stockholm.

Preparations for *Tanne Ost* began in March 1944. The focus of this operation was the occupation of Suursaari. 2,000 men, designated Lehrbrigade Nord, under a Colonel Mäder, were involved in drills to work out the bugs of a combined air-sea-land action. On 9 April however, the Finns rejected Stalin's harsh armistice terms. Furthermore, they managed to stabilise their front lines. So, the operation was put on hold and the forces dispersed to other duties.

Both *Tanne Ost* and *Tanne West* were reactivated on June 20 when Viipuri was lost to the Soviets. Additional forces — 800 seamen and the 500th SS *fallschirmjäger* battalion — were added to the order of battle. However, the operations were again stood down on July 9 when the Karelian front temporarily regained its equilibrium.

Meanwhile, the German liaison officer on Suursaari, *Leutnant zur See* Wilhelm Müller, had been keeping his superiors informed of developments there. At the start of September he sent another report which detailed the dismantling of much of the Finnish infrastructure. He included aerial photos and navigation charts. Some sources assume Müller secretly copied or stole the information, but prior to the Armistice the Finns and Germans regularly pooled their information and worked together at all levels.

Indeed, the Finnish OC, Lt. Colonel Martii Miettinen, was reported to have said he would not order his men to fight the Germans if they decided to occupy the island. At worst he would order his men to fire a few face-saving shots over the Germans' heads. Why Müller thought Miettinen said this is unclear, given that the Finn stated exactly the opposite when the German landing party eventually turned up. Perhaps it was just friendly table talk between Miettinen and Müller —

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not something that would invoke the chains of honour.

It was supposedly due to Müller's positive reports that *Tanne Ost* was reactivated. If so, it is rather odd that the offer (spurious or not) of a peaceful handover should lead to a major naval invasion, nor why such a risky undertaking was even contemplated at this stage of the war. Once the Armistice was assured, the Finns began allowing the Soviet Navy safe passage through the minefield barrier, which was a prime reason *Tanne West* was *not* reactivated. *Tanne Ost* would be even more risky. The Soviets had air superiority over the Gulf of Finland. Furthermore, the German Army had already been pushed back from Narva, and the front line was actually *west* of the naval minefield barrier. In other words, not only would *Tanne Ost* be hazardous, it was unnecessary.

Admiral Dönitz apparently bears the responsibility for pressing ahead. He desperately needed that end of the Baltic to train his U-boat crews. Probably also for this reason the execution of the operation was handed over to the Kriegsmarine. It

is believed that Dönitz felt the risk acceptable after the Army assured him they could hold in Estonia for an indefinite period. In the Navy's mind very little planning would be needed for this new iteration of *Tanne Ost*. According to Müller, the Finns had merely requested a massive show of force to give them a justification for leaving. It would simply be a matter of disembarking a large enough German garrison.

Preparatory orders were issued on 3 September. The Germans were gambling. They had to risk severing their last ties with the Finns in order to beat the Soviets to the island. The final decision rested with Hitler. News was then received that two submarine fleets, accompanied by surface vessels, were sortieing from Leningrad. On 4 September the Führer definitively cancelled *Tanne West* but gave the green light to *Tanne Ost*.

The man in charge of the operation was Vice Admiral Theodor Burchard, based at Revel. He was required to launch the attack (or occupation) out of Tallinn at 02:00 on 15 September. Burchard requested the operation be cancelled. None of the



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forces originally earmarked and trained for the landing were available. His request was refused.

German Invasion Resources

Burchard cast about for resources. What he came up with were a mixed bag, suitable for a garrison but not an invasion.

From the Narva front he was able to acquire 650 men of Infantry Regiment 68 of the 23rd Infantry Division, and 580 men of Marine-Artillerie-Abteilung (Coastal Artillery Battalion) 531. Both these units had been on the line and had to break contact and march to Tallinn.

Füsilier-regiment 68, led by Major Metzger, was a typical infantry regiment, quite understrength and fleshed out with rear echelon types. By this point in the war, many infantry regiments had only two battalions, and the 68th was one such formation. The original Battalion II had been destroyed and replaced with Battalion III, which was renamed.

The sources are not clear whether elements of both battalions, a single reinforced battalion, or the entire regiment, much reduced, took part. German line battalions at this stage of the war consisted of three rifle companies plus combat support elements that included 120mm and 81mm mortars, but light field guns (probably sIG 75s) were also present in the invasion and those were a regimental asset, so any combination is possible.

MAA 531, in contrast, was *not* a typical coastal artillery unit. Rather, it was a *stoßtruppe* formation specifically created for special operations. Its predecessor, the *Marine-Stoßtrupp-Kompanie*, was formed in 1938 and took part in the very first battle of the war, the assault on the Westerplatte at Danzig on 1 September 1939. In 1940 it fought in Norway and in June of that year it was earmarked for an attack on the Channel Islands (a section did actually make an air landing there). But, for most of the war it had been fighting on the Narva front. Its current commander was *Korvetten-Kapitän* Hans Hossfeld. Originally consisting of 6 companies, by 1944 the unit was down to four (2 infantry, 1 motorised, and 1 heavy weapons) so for *Tanne Ost* it was augmented by a green *Marineersatzkompanie* taken from Burchard's central reserve. *Ersatzcompanies* were 'march regiments' scraped together from various sources and sent up to the front as replacements, winding up as cannon fodder more often than not.

Providing additional bodies were personnel from two 'real' coastal artillery units, the 533th, of 5 batteries, and the 629th, of 3 batteries. The term 'battery' had supplanted 'company' in 1942, whether the men fought with cannon or rifles; for the invasion they only carried the latter. Based on the overall numbers involved the batteries probably numbered around 100 men each. *Korvetten-Kapitän* Marine-Artillerie of the Reserve Curt Stellmann commanded the 533th and *Korvetten-Kapitän* Marine-Artillerie of the Reserve Ernst Kellermann the 629th.

In reserve at Tallinn were Separate Detachment *Schönherr* (215), which actually had other duties and did not take part, and two batteries of coastal guns waiting to be emplaced on the island: one of 4x 170mm and one of 3x 105mm.

The Luftwaffe promised fighter support (2 ground attack squadrons and 12 fighters) and offered to air transport some AA assets, though the actual batteries that took part were Kriegsmarine, not Luftwaffe as most sources mistakenly assume. The guns were those of *Marineflakabteilung* 239 (M.Flak.A.239) based on Tytäsaari. They numbered 1.5 light batteries and 1 heavy battery, or 19x 20mm guns (a fraction of which would have been 'quads') and 6x 88mm AA guns, plus 6x 60cm searchlights. Rough strength for the AA unit was 200 men. A company of 80 sappers was also sent from Tytäsaari.

(Other recorded equipment included a tow truck, 2 other trucks, some bicycles, a possibly armoured radio truck, and 4x 28mm AT-rifles.)

In total Burchard managed to scrape together 2,741 men, plus the 80 sappers and 200 men of the anti-aircraft detachment, or about 3,000 men in all. The invasion force would land in three waves, 1,400 men of IR 68, MAA 531, and two *leichtes sturmboot kommandos* leading, followed by the AA detachment, the HQ personnel, and elements of the 533th and 629th. The final wave included the remaining support equipment, the last 200 men of MA531 (presumably the green company), and the sappers, who are occasionally described as assault engineers.

Some sources assume the *sturmboot kommandos* were combat units. However, these formations, the 902nd and 903rd, were really engineering assets used either for operations like this, or more commonly in river crossings. They were specialists, and they were elite, but they

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were not fighting men in the strictest sense of the term. They piloted the wooden *Pioneer Stormboat* 39, with a single outboard motor and room for six passengers, and perhaps a light machine-gun. The full complement of boats has been estimated at 80 per company, or 'more accurately' 80 and 77. However, the number of boats actually taking part in the operation is reported to have been only 40.

Naval assets were many and various. The sources disagree on who actually took part. The cruiser *Prinz Eugen* is the largest naval asset named, along with 2. TB flotilla and 3 TB flotilla. However, in reality *Prinz Eugen* was in port at Gotenhafen (Gdynia, Poland) during the operation. The torpedo boat 'flotillas' were actually only the individual vessels *T23* and *T28*, which served as *Prinz Eugen's* escorts. They were destroyer escorts, not MTBs. Unlike their charge, they did participate in the operation, being attached to 6. *Zerströrer* [destroyer] *Flottille* (*Z25*, *Z28*, *Z36*). 6. *Zerströrer*, commanded by Commodore Friedrich Kothe, was the only significant naval combat element involved. It slated to provide fire support and remained west of Suursaari due to the threat of mines.

The actual landing force was carried in and escorted by the elements of the following commands:

3. *Minensuch-Flottille* (Mine Searching Flotilla). The entire flotilla comprised five or six vessels and in some sources the 25. MSF is also mentioned, yielding a total of 11 ships. However, only 3 ships appear to have taken part: *M15* (flag), *M19*, and *M30*, all from 3. MSF. These ships were large, oceangoing M-class minesweepers with a complement of 80 men. In the invasion they appear to have each carried at least a platoon of infantry, and possibly two platoons apiece.

1. *Meine Schwimmende Flottille* (Mine Sweeping Flotilla). The name is similar, but these flotillas used the smaller R-class *Raumsboot*, suitable for inshore work. The entire flotilla had 11 ships but only 4 were involved: *R-29*, *R-72*, *R-76*, and *R-119*. In some accounts *R-249* is cited as well. In the operation they were mainly used as troop transports. The Germans knew where the mines were, since they had laid them and they also had the latest plots from the Finns, but the landing was taking place at night and accidents can happen.

13, 21, and/or 24. *Ladungs Flottille* (Landing Flotilla). 21. *LF* was equipped mainly with *Marinefahrprahms* (MFPs), large (50 meter long) self-propelled landing barges armed with a turreted 75mm gun and several AA guns, and some smaller LAT-class vessels with a similar role but lighter armament and smaller capacity (one of the latter carried the radio truck). LATs were converted civilian boats. 24. *LF* had mainly SAT-class boats. Like the LATs these were originally civilian vessels, but somewhat larger. The flotilla also had some MFPs, AFPs, MLNs, and Siebel Ferries.



[An MFP]

The reader has probably heard of Siebel Ferries. These were purpose-built catamarans, about 32 meters long, with a flat deck that could be used to transport 50-100 tons of cargo, or to form bridge sections. They were armed with 88mm deck guns and 20mm AA cannon. They sailed under their own power, but were very slow, so the Germans commandeered two Estonian tugs, the *Pernau* and the *Polyp*, to tow them, presumably in a couple of lines, like regular barges.



[A Siebel Ferry (Bundesarchiv)]

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MLNs were similar to Allied LCMs but unarmoured. AFPs were *Artilleriefahrprahm*, essentially MFPs dedicated to fire support and armed with 2x 88mm deck guns instead of the 75mm turret, and 20mm AA cannon. Most of them belonged to 7. *Artillerie-Träger Flottille* (Artillery Carrier Flotilla). The flotilla was organised in five groups of three vessels each.

13. LF may not have been present at all, since it was engaged in coastal evacuation duties elsewhere. In fact, the full number transport and escort vessels can only be guessed at. The three flotillas had a great many vessels on the books. If every one took part the Germans could have transported an entire division. According to the diaries of the commanders there were exactly 30 ships, but whether this includes things like motorboats and Siebel Ferries is unclear. It probably includes the tugs, so the ferries would be lumped in with them as mere barges. And, it does seem that the destroyer flotilla, which travelled separately, is excluded from the count.

Also present with the invasion fleet were a number of motor boats of the B-class. There was also 5. *S-Boot Flottille*. This had 8x S-class MTBs. It took part in the overall operation, but not in the landings, instead laying mines at the entrance to Kotka harbour in an effort to prevent the Finns from interfering. Some accounts report the presence of S-67 with the invasion fleet.

Command of the invasion fleet went to *Korvetten-Kapitän* Emil Kieffer, aboard the minesweeper M-15. Kieffer was one of the few men who had been assigned to the original *Tanne Ost* order of battle and had at least visited the island recently. *Kapitän* Theo Sonnemann was responsible for all the landing flotillas.

Operational command was assigned to *Commodore* (or *Captain zur See*) Karl-Conrad Mecke, a highly decorated combat officer. Almost 50, Mecke was famous for his part in defending against the raid on St. Nazaire (March 1942) and was a recipient of the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross. Most recently he had been Commandant of the Anti-aircraft and Coastal Artillery School at Swinemünd.

Mecke, who only arrived at Tallinn four days before the operation was due to begin, was given a mere two days to train and organise his men. To make matters worse, Mecke had been involved with the planning of *Tanne West* but had no clue

about what *Tanne Ost* was supposed to accomplish.

Mecke envisioned three possible scenarios: either the Finns would give up the island relatively peaceably, or they would resist fanatically, or the Soviets would get there first. Because of the latter possibility the operation was rushed to an even greater degree, if that were possible. As already mentioned, there was no training or preparation, just a cobbling together of various formations in the area of Tallinn who happened to be free at the time.

Given that this would be a night operation — though summer nights at this latitude never dimmed below twilight — the landings were to concentrate at Suurkylä and the beach to its north. Secondary landings were provisionally slated for Selkäapajanniemi Cape in the southwest (where the Soviets had held out in 1942) and Vähäsomerikonlahti Bay on the western side opposite Suurkylä, but only if the weather was good. The plan also included the contingency of having to dig in to repel an immediate Soviet attack.



The Defenders

The Finnish situation had improved since *Tanne Ost* was put into motion, but not by much. Many of the defenders were new to the island. Only one company had recently been in combat, while another was completely untrained. The island's fortifications had been partially dismantled, and the barbed wire beach obstacles had been cut in numerous places to facilitate the removal of most of the coastal guns, which had already been shipped away. The Finns had even begun digging up the telephone cables connecting the various emplacements.

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What had been present was the following: 18. Heavy Artillery Battery (*Raskaspatteri*) of 152mm guns; 20. *Raskaspatteri* ditto; 21. *Raskaspatteri* of 120mm guns; 200. Light Artillery Battery (*Kevytpatteri*) equipped with 75mm guns. These batteries had been supported by searchlights, 40mm Bofors and 20mm AA guns, AT guns, and 40 medium machine-guns.

All of which were now gone, except for 24 machine-guns and a few 75/76mm guns. At the last minute some additional machine-guns, AA guns, and 6 obsolete 47mm coastal guns were shipped in, along with 2x 122mm coastal guns, only one of which was operable, and even it was missing its range finder. Some searchlights were also returned. But, one key item had not been removed, a battery of 9x 120mm mortars.

The Finns also made a last-ditch effort to improve their fortifications. Ironically, this change of policy had nothing to do with the Germans. The Finns were afraid the Soviets were going to 'pull a Romania' and renege on the terms of the Armistice.

Though much of its personnel were newcomers, Suursaari's garrison still consisted of Coastal Artillery Regiment 12 (12. RTR), still commanded by Miettinen. Miettinen was an even tougher officer than Mecke. Aged 41, he had seen combat many times, was a strict disciplinarian, stubborn, and somewhat egotistical; he could also be temperamental.

Most of his men were equipped only with light weapons. Furthermore, much of his ammunition was scattered about the island in various bunkers. The Germans assessed his men's morale and discipline as poor but Miettinen had a higher opinion of them; they were just bored. He kept up a regular training program (including live fire exercises), and most of his officers had worked with or at least known each other since prewar days.

As mentioned earlier, the Finns' defensive system had been based on the three main hill formations. However, due to the draw down of forces this had been amended to a sector defence in four zones. On the day, Miettinen would make additional alterations.

At its height, Suursaari's fortifications boasted 33+ emplacements for coastal guns, 30 more for AT and AA guns, 50 machine-gun nests, and 20 dugouts. The gun positions were a mix of

concrete or log bunkers, many of them mined into the solid rock or tied to cave networks. 4,300+ additional mines had been seeded on the island and a further 131 sea mines laid offshore.

In February of 1944 an additional 8 gun emplacements, 12 heavy mortar pits, 10 ammunition tunnels, and 13 trenches were scheduled to be constructed, but little had been done by the time of the invasion. The best Miettinen could do was have dummy guns deployed in the empty positions.

Each of the four defensive sectors (*lohko*) had a hill as the central rally point, protected by entrenchments. The plan was for any heavily pressed sector to withdraw to its rally point and bring in fire from the adjacent sectors.

Pohjoislohko (Northern Sector): 340 men under Capt Väinö Arponen

Based on Pohjoiskorkia, Arponen commanded the following:

24. Light Artillery (actually AA) Battery consisting of 6x 75 K31ss AA guns on Majakallio Hill, under Lt. Osmo Ahjopalo

1. Platoon Heavy Mortars with 3x 120mm tubes, under the company CO, Lt Mauno Rikkonen

A platoon from 10. Coastal Defence Company (Torjuntakomppania)

Vuorilohko (Mountain Sector) : 475 men plus 184 HQ under Major Åke Sokajärvi

Based on Mäkiinpäällys, Sokajärvi commanded:

5. Lt Coastal AA Battery of 6x 40mm Bofors guns commanded by Lt. Kaarlo Nummillehto and located on Kotokallio Rock, overlooking the main harbour.

9. Motorised Heavy Artillery Battery of 2x 122mm K/31 field guns under Lt. Pyysalo, sited on Mäkiinpäällys. As already noted only one gun was (barely) operational.

2. Platoon Heavy Mortars with 3x 120mm tubes.

Or or two platoons of the Coastal Engineer Company on Mäkiinpäällys.

8. Coastal Defence Company, half of which was held back as a local reserve.

10. Coastal Defence Company less 1 platoon but augmented with 2x 47/40 Obuhov 47mm quick-firing coastal guns sited at Kappelniemi Cape & 2

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more sited at Hirskallio Cape — that is, on either side of the main harbour. The German sound ranging detachment had a good laugh when they saw these pre-WWI pieces, until they started sinking ships. The 10th had no training to speak of. It was deployed along the beach with a platoon protecting the guns on either promontory and 8 smaller posts ranged up the coast.

Miettinen's HQ was also located on Mäkiinpäällys.



[Mäkiinpäällys]

Keskilohko (Middle Sector): 295 men under Captain Esko Laaksonen

Based on Haukkavuori, Laaksonen, commander of 7. Coastal Battalion, was in charge of:

7. Coastal Defence Company, augmented with the last two 47mm guns and located at Purjeniemi Cape.

9. Coastal Defence Company under Lt. Hämäläinen. This was the local reserve but shortly before the battle it moved forward to establish a position stretching between Kotokallio Rock and Majakallio.

34. Heavy AA Battery of 5x 75 ltK/97-14 Puteaux AA guns located at Selkäapajanniemi Cape, under Lt. Urho Kauppinen. These were more effective in an anti-tank role than they were as AA guns.

The Training Company under Captain Veli Autio, also in reserve. Like the 10th, this was a green unit, mainly serving as a labour force.

Etelälohko (Southern Sector): 418 (416) men under Major Jukka Soini

Based on Lounatkorkia, Soini commanded the following:

2. Company Coastal Battalion (Rannikkopataljoona) 7. This battalion was Miettinen's main 'strategic' reserve, commanded Esko Laaksonen.

3. Company Coastal Battalion 7. Soini's local reserve. This was the only Finnish unit with combat experience, having fought at the battles of Tuppura and Teikari Islands in June.

3. Platoon Heavy Mortars with 3x 120mm tubes

1. & 2. Section 201 Light Artillery Battery, with 4x 75mm K/17 Lt field guns sited on Rivinkallio Rock and Vähäkorkia Hill, under Captain Vepsäläinen. Immediately before the battle, 1. Section was redeployed north to the northeast side of Pohjoiskorkia.

Divided up among all the sectors was 3. Light Coastal AA Company, equipped with 12x 20mm lt/K Breda AA guns. Two sections of 2 guns each covered the main harbour.

Total heavy weapons were 4x field pieces, 24x AA guns, 14x coastal guns, including the 47mm ones, and the 9x heavy mortars.

The Finns also had some naval forces. At the time the battle started the VMV (*Vartiomoottorivene*) class MTBs *V-10* and *V-14* were tied up at the dock in the main harbour, along with liaison boat *Porkkala*, tugboat *Taipale*, and the cable-ships *H. Vinha* and *Kaapelialus II*. The 'work ships' had been present for some time but the liaison boat arrived on the day of the invasion and the MTBs called in at the last minute when requested to pick up the original German detachment. Most of these vessels wound up being destroyed.

Once the action got going, additional MTBs of 1. MTB Flotilla under *Komentajakapteeni* (Commander) Jouko Pirhonen out of Kotka made

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an appearance: the German-made Taisto-class *T-3 (Tyrsky)*, *T-5 (Tuisku)*, and *T-6 (Tuuli)*, plus the Soviet-made G-5 class *V-2 (Vinha)* and *V-3*.



[Vartiomoottorivene V-9]

Bluff and Call

The weather on 15 September was pleasant but not perfect, a crisp 8-12° C, wind 19 knots, and good visibility.

The first inkling that the Finns had of German intentions came on September 14. That evening, the Germans were laying mines off Kotka. They *said* it was to deter the Soviets, but... Kotka was where the nearest Finnish naval forces were based. Such an act was legal grounds for a declaration of war. A Finnish minesweeper was sunk trying to clear them, with the loss of all aboard. As soon as Miettinen received the news he immediately stood his men to. Surprise had been lost.

The big issue in Miettinen's mind for that evening and most of the following day was what to do about the German detachment on the island. There were 26 of them plus liaison officer Müller. With their equipment dismantled there was no reason for them to remain. If the Germans attacked they would have to be guarded. Almost as bad, by midnight on September 15 they would have to be handed over to the tender mercies of the Soviets.

Miettinen suggested, then requested, then demanded that the Germans get off the island as fast as possible. Eventually, he was told a boat was coming to collect them from the German garrison on Tytärsaari Island. It never showed, though *Korvetten-Käpitän* Kieffer, commander of the German invasion fleet, radioed to say it was on its way. That was at 22:00 on the 14th. Kieffer was playing games. He hoped, by putting off the

evacuation, to cover the approach of his forces to the island, which was scheduled for midnight. He was coming, but in force.

Miettinen placed his garrison on standby at 20:00, after a full Stand-To at 19:00. At 22:30 the Finns offered to transport the Germans on the two Finnish MTBs that had just arrived for the purpose. This was agreed to by Müller, but soon after, he was observed flashing signals out to sea, and the garrison commander on Tytärsaari refused to take the men anyway. It became obvious the German invasion was immanent. Miettinen sent two platoons of infantry to the harbour under a Captain Ihalainen and made other last minute changes (already noted in the OOB above).

Meanwhile, the Germans were having a nervous time after receiving false intelligence that the Soviets had been in possession of Suursaari since 13 September. (Perhaps this is why Tytärsaari refused the offer of a lift for the German detachment.) The tension mounted minute by minute thanks to the extremely tight schedule and the irritating slowness of some of their vessels.

A few minutes after midnight, M-15 (alternatively M-249 in some accounts) and M-19 entered the main harbour, and Kieffer disembarked. The Finns watched the lone figure as it strode up the wharf under the electric lights, ignoring all calls to halt. Miettinen came down to meet him. The German told Miettinen the Finns had to surrender. Although he tried to couch the matter in terms of 'allies and friends', he seems to have come off as the typical arrogant Nazi, because Miettinen's temperament got the better of him and he refused. Kieffer reminded him of his earlier supposed statement that he would not fight the Germans and Miettinen sad he only took orders from Field Marshal Mannerheim. Kieffer then suggested a mock battle to salve Finnish pride, but when this was dismissed threatened to land in overwhelming force.

The men transferred their discussion to a beach hut, and argued for a good 15 minutes, before Kieffer re-boarded his ship at 00:40 to confer with Mecke. Miettinen had told him to take his ships out of the harbour and not come back.

Either while Miettinen and Kieffer were talking, or immediately after the latter returned to his ship, a party of 40 German soldiers disembarked onto the wharf, calmly set up some machine-guns, and

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pointed their weapons at the Finnish crews aboard the various vessels, which were then all captured without resistance.

Another 15 minute pause ensued. Kieffer had asked for this so he could properly confer with his staff and Miettinen agreed so that he could properly alert all his men. Müller's detachment also embarked, warning Mecke that the Finns were ready for him. This put the ball firmly in the German commander's court. There was not much time. They had to be ashore before Soviet air assets could strike. Sunrise on 15 September 1944 was at 05:38 but nautical twilight ended at 04:02. Full darkness, such as it was, would only last until 01:00.

Accounts of the initial action are confused. It is agreed that the two Finnish MTBs were quickly put out of commission and that the Germans made an attempt to capture Miettinen. This either took place about 00:30 with the attempt led by Kieffer, or at 00:55 with the attempt by Mecke. Given the other times cited by the sources, the latter seems more probable. In both versions the raiding party rushed the beach hut but found Miettinen gone. Shortly before 00:55, Miettinen, now on his way to his HQ, ordered his platoons in the village to fire a volley over the Germans' heads. The Germans returned fire and the fight was on. At 00:55 precisely Mecke gave orders for a general attack by those troops who had time to disembark. Miettinen and his adjutant, driving through the village, paused to view the situation but sped on as bullets whizzed past them.

Having deposited their cargo, the German minesweepers sailed out of the bay to make room for the other vessels which could now be seen approaching out of the gloom. The harbour lights had been put out, either by gunfire or a thrown switch. Fitfully at first the Finnish artillery began blazing. 24. Light Artillery had two 76mm AA guns covering the harbour in a direct fire role. They fired a single warning shot at 00:55. Seeing the minesweepers leaving, they ceased firing, assumed the Germans were retreating. At 01:17 however, they received orders to open fire again.

More enemy ships had by now approached and begun shelling the harbour and the village, which was soon set ablaze. By its light the German support vessels shelled the coastline nearby and tried to take out the defender's guns by shooting at the flashes; the Finns just aimed at the harbour and shot anything that moved. Two of their heavy

mortar platoons were within range and these proved invaluable. The Finns also fired at the German gun flashes beyond the bay, with more success than the invaders.

The Finnish artillery was heavily outmatched since the M-class minesweepers were armed with a pair of 105mm guns each and the AFPs a pair of 88mm, plus AA guns. However, the Finnish guns were dug in deep while the Germans were bobbing about on the sea. The latter were eventually ordered to cease fire until daylight.

By now the Germans were making landings all around the harbour and at points farther north. The situation was chaotic; some troops had to swim ashore from a few hundred meters out. However, a bridgehead was quickly established at Suurkylä village and the Germans began pushing inland. Fighting against the inexperienced Finns of the 10th Company meant easy going at first. Thrusts were made toward Pohjoiskorkia, Majakallio, and Mäkipäällys. These were the three high points, from north to south, that dominated Suurkylä. A landing was also made on the Kappelniemi Peninsula on the south side of the harbour, with the object of cutting the coastal road that led to Kiiskinkylä village. Other, smaller landings were also attempted, with mixed success.

The Finns resisted bitterly everywhere but were already running low on ammunition. 24. Light Battery, whose ammo was stocked at the bottom of its hill, had to reduce its rate of fire to give work parties time to carry the shells up; they were also using a lot of time-fused AA shells. 5. AA Battery was sited at the top of a steep hill overlooking the harbour at close range, but their Bofors guns could not depress sufficiently; like 24. Light, much of their ammunition had to be carried up the hill by hand. In consequence the battery fought mainly with small arms.

1/201 Light Artillery found itself unable to engage many targets as the Germans appear to have been aware of its blind spots. The section only had two guns anyway. Eventually the battery was cut off, but the men continued to resist as best they could.

By about 06:00 the Germans had established a 3 Km wide beachhead from Kappelniemi Cape to Hirskallio Hill, the promontory north of Suurkylä. However, they had only pushed 1,000 metres inland at best. The Finnish defence was porous

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and German patrols penetrated it at numerous points, but could do nothing to dislodge the defenders. At one point, Captain Kai Vakkuri led an ad hoc force composed of a platoon from 8. Company and some civilian workers to set up a blocking position against patrols approaching Mäkiinpäällys Hill, where the Regimental HQ was located. This process was repeated by other defending elements as they were pushed back one by one, until a solid defensive line was formed in a ring around the HQ.

Farther south, Major Jukka Soini was ordered to bring up more troops from his sector. These included a company of 7. Coastal Infantry Battalion, 1/201. Light Artillery Battery (already mentioned), and some machine-gun teams.

The raw Finnish 10th Company, with a platoon on either side of the harbour, was in the fight from the start, along with the two platoons sent down to the harbour before the action began. The platoon and two 47mm guns on Kappelniemi became isolated. When a breakout at 06:55 failed they were forced to surrender. Those on Hirskallio, however, delayed the German advance with their 47s and a couple of machine-guns. They too were surrounded but fought on until they ran out of ammunition about 04:30. Curiously, the Germans permitted them to exit the pocket and retire to the peak of Pohjoiskorkia by way of the intervening Pitkäliuku hills. By 06:30 they had rejoined the defensive line.

The pre-dawn hours were a nightmare for the Germans, both in terms of combat and logistically. Despite owning the harbour, there were so many wrecks that the unloading of equipment had slowed to a crawl. In the excitement, Kieffer made a grave error. Supposedly, once the first wave was ashore, a flare was to be sent up signalling the need for a secondary landing at Vähäsomerikonlahti Bay. The flare was duly sent up, but Kieffer decided to land everything where the Germans already had a lodgement. For the heavy equipment, this meant the harbour.

In some sources only the first wave and half of the second managed to land. In others, most troops got ashore, though not their equipment and ammunition. In both versions, several hundred men of MAE 533 and MAE 629 (491 men in one account) could not be landed at all. There seems to be a consensus that only one field gun section and one mortar tube arrived, plus all six 88s, which, however, had no ammunition. That had

been aboard an MFP that was set on fire which, after a few hours, blew up, further choking the harbour.

Every one of the minesweepers was damaged in some way, though all managed to escape from the harbour after unloading the first wave. AFPs F-866 and F-867, leading the second wave, were unable to get into the harbour and transferred their troops to *sturmboots*. F-173 reached the harbour only to be severely pummelled. While escaping it struck a mine and sank; F-866 was damaged by the same explosion. Then, F-822 was set on fire. This was the AFP carrying the 88mm ammunition (5,000 rounds), plus the radio truck.



[Above: Lounatrivi Light (southern tip). Note the wrecked ship. Below, Pohjoiskorkia Light at the summit of Pohjoislohko.]



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The landing-flotilla commander, Sonnemann, went ashore to try and coordinate the unloading but found it very difficult to reembark. He needed to adjust the fire of the AFPs which at that time were still bombarding the harbour, but twice the *sturmbot* he was riding in was sunk and he had to swim back to shore; he remained out of contact with his command for the rest of the battle.

By the time *F-822* was set on fire the harbour was too choked with wrecked and drifting vessels to be useable and the remaining landings had to be carried out with *sturmbots*, which could only carry six men at a time.

Mecke dispatched the other secondary landing force, mainly riding on *sturmbots*, to Selkäapajanniemi Cape, on the other side of the island, roughly in line with Kiiskinkylä village. This was the site of the hydrophone station, but also gave quick access to a road leading across the island to Kiiskinkylä. The main defence here was 34. Light Artillery Battery, equipped with French 75s. They held their fire until the Germans were only 800 meters out then gave them a 'mad minute' of 100 shots. The Germans made smoke and turned away as an additional 20 shells rained down on them.

At 05:15 the Germans tried to extend their main bridgehead by taking Lipeäniemi Cape, about 1,000 metres south of Kappelniemi, with troops loaded aboard *sturmbots*. They were driven away with machine-gun fire. However, at 06:00 a party from Suurkylä climbed Kotokallio Rock and took 5. Light AA Battery's position, along with all six of its Bofors guns. As the men of 5. AA retreated south to Mäkiinpäällys, 3. AA Company's position was left exposed. However, the Germans lacked the momentum to drive on. The only functioning pair of German 75mm infantry guns, opening up at 06:30, were almost immediately destroyed by a salvo of ten Finnish 120mm mortar rounds from tubes based near the Casino.

Off the northeastern shore, the Finnish 1. MTB flotilla put in an appearance. They had sortied from Kotka at 01:22, led by Mannerheim Cross winner Jouko Pirhonen, and arrived off Suursaari two hours later. The initial attack run was made between 03:28 and 03:34. *T-3*, *T-5*, and *T-6* came in first, followed by *V-2* and *V-3*, which had become separated, an hour later. Each of the *Taisto* boats claimed to have sunk an *M*-class vessel but in reality the Finnish torpedoes were

notoriously weak and unreliable, and only the already-damaged *R-29* was sunk, along with the Estonian tug, *Pir nau*.

Meanwhile, the Germans probed down the road leading from Suurkylä to Mäkiinpäällys, soon encountering the Finnish 9. Company. These men, led by Lt. Uljas Hämäläinen, had been on the island less than a week and had no combat experience. A German recon patrol walked right into their defensive line and was annihilated. The liaison officer, Müller, who was acting as guide, was captured.

Thirty minutes later the Germans pushed forward in strength. Though the enemy were driven back by rifle fire and grenades, Hämäläinen felt his men were too exposed, so pulled them back 200 meters to a prepared defensive line. This was at 03:00. The Germans were massing for an attack at just that time. In the twilight, Hämäläinen saw the concentrations and managed to get a telephone connection to the mortar battery which fired two salvos on to a preregistered location just in front of the Finns, breaking up the attack before it started.

By a supreme effort and a lucky hit, the Germans managed to put the single Finnish 122mm gun of 9. Motorized Battery out of action. It was sited atop Haukkavuori Hill, about 2 Km south of Suurkylä, beyond Mäkiinpäällys. The 'battery' opened up fairly late, around 03:45, but kept up a regular fire for two hours until the Germans scored a direct hit on the gun pit. The battery's second gun was eventually made operational, but not until 05:30, by which time there were few targets.



[The Casino]

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The AFPs and other gunboats did not want to waste ammunition shooting at flashes and the troops could only contact them intermittently by radio. For some reason German 'comms' were down throughout most of the battle. Not only was there no coordination with the invasion flotilla, Tallinn could not be contacted either.

Worst of all, 6. *Zerstörer Flottille*, with its three destroyers armed with 4x 6 inch guns each, could not be contacted at all by the troops on shore. The flotilla was stationed 8 Km to the West, but they had strict orders to remain there until fire support was requested. Kieffer was able to radio Commodore Kothe at 04:00, but since he had no contact with the troops on the island, there was not much he could say. At 04:22 the destroyers were ordered to return to Tallinn. When radio contact was finally established an hour later (in some accounts due to elements of the third wave coming ashore with a working radio) they were well out of range and could not risk approaching the island for fear of air attack.

The Finns also suffered from comms problems, since the telephone cable system had been partially dug up and suffered further damage from shelling. Some units could not call for fire support. The remaining section of 201 Light Battery on Rivinkallio Rock was one such; it was surrounded. Worse, all of the North Sector was temporarily out of communication with Regimental HQ, but fortunately, working radios were found. Comms with the Finnish mainland was lost at 03:15 but again, a powerful radio set was able to make relay contact with nearby islands. (For the Finns, the main problem with using radios was the need to send in code, which slowed the whole process down.)

By 06:00, despite their gains, the German troops were in an unenviable position. The beachhead had been extended to Pohjoisrivi Cape in the North, and Kotokallio Hill was in their hands, but otherwise, things looked grim. At 04:50 Kieffer had ordered his fleet to concentrate at the North end of the island. He had no idea whether the invasion had succeeded or not. A renewed duel with the Finnish guns only led to more damaged ships. Kieffer ordered a withdrawal. The Minesweepers were to return to Tallinn. At 06:17, the rest of the fleet followed, minus a few *sturmbots* and some abandoned ferries. At 06:30, the 88mm ammo aboard MFP F-822 cooked off.

The Finns, with all their positions secure by 06:40, held most of the high ground and rained mortar bombs down on the invaders, though ammunition was getting low. Kotokallio was the exception, so Miettinen ordered its recapture.

At 06:45 air support was requested but denied for political reasons. Instead, the Soviets showed up. They had tried to contact Miettinen but failed, but higher authority got the message and politely refused their help. At which the Soviets decided to go ahead anyway. Their first target was Kieffer's convoy, which was strafed ten times with between 15-30 planes, starting at 07:44.

Meanwhile, Admiral Dönitz ordered the *Prinz Eugen* to the area. The remaining elements of *MAE 533* and *MAE 629*, along with *Detachment Schönherr*, which had never left Tallinn, were to load aboard Kieffer's battered fleet and return to the island. This idea was scrapped after Kieffer reported on the situation. The *Prinz Eugen* never sailed.

At 06:50 the first in a series of Finnish counterattacks began. The attacks, led by a screen of scouts, covered a front stretching from the eastern slopes of Pohjoiskorkia to those of Mäkipäällys.

The first attack was by 3. Company of 7. Coastal Infantry Battalion, in a northerly direction from the heights of Pohjoiskorkia. It was halted by German resistance, so the thrust was turned southward. Here the company succeeded in clearing the road which connected Pohjoiskorkia and Majakallio Hill, west of Suurkylä.

At 08:02 (or 08:22) a strong push was made against Kotokallio Rock, southeast of Suurkylä, by three groups of Finns. The Training Company attacked due east by way of the Ojamaa Fields. 9. Coastal Defence Company provided flanking support on the left while simultaneously driving straight for the village, and personnel from 5. Light AA, 3. AA, and 2/201 Light Artillery pushed north from Mäkipäällys. Part of Kotokallio was in Finnish hands by 09:00 but German resistance continued, in about company strength, until 12:00, when the local German commander, Major Kurt Grooke, surrendered along with 3 other officers and 80 men. The Finns found their Bofors guns were still operable and resumed firing at targets across the bay to the North. At 10:15 2/201 Light was sent north to Mäkiinpäällys. The two 75mm guns began shelling Suurkylä.

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Around this time the invaders asked for a truce. They were running low on ammunition themselves, and were short of other supplies. The Finns had put up such a vigorous defense the Germans assumed they were wallowing in ammunition. They were well aware of the large stockpiles secreted around the island and assumed the Finns had easy access to them.

Senior Lieutenant Gerhard Kähler and another officer were sent under a white flag to Miettinen's HQ. The Germans tried to persuade Miettinen of the necessity for them to hold the island. When this did not work they asked to be allowed to reembark. This was also refused and the threat of a renewed invasion was laughed off — the Germans were pinned down and their fleet was over the horizon. Miettinen gave the Germans 15 minutes to surrender unconditionally or face destruction. Though they stalled for time, he did not waver. Meanwhile, the men on both sides took this opportunity to fraternize. A few minutes later they were shooting at each other again.

The truce did not apply everywhere. While the talks were on, 9. Company continued to push into Suurkylä, reaching the beach at 12:30 and taking 108 prisoners — including Mecke himself. He was not recognised at first, and, being wounded in the neck by a piece of shrapnel, was sent to the field hospital. The hospital was only lightly guarded and Mecke was able to escape. However, what he saw on his way back to his own lines only disheartened him. He began to think of ways to get as many men as possible off the island.

3/7 Company made a new attack due east from Pohjoiskorkia at around 10:40. The Germans were then unexpectedly aided by the Red Airforce. At 10:40 the first wave of 40 IL-2s attacked Hirskallio. Though the Germans suffered most, the Finns were forced to pull back, allowing the Germans to temporarily reestablish a solid line. Finnish POWs in Suurkylä were also hit.

By 12:45, however, 3/7 had broken through the German line and at 13:20 they reached the beach north of Hirskallio. 10 Coastal Defence Company made a limited attack north of them to relieve 1/201 Light Artillery. From the latter's position the coastal track could be dominated by fire. Thus by about 13:30 the German beachhead had been sliced into four sections. Roughly 50 Germans held out at the lighthouse at the northern tip of the island. 30 more were squeezed into a zone directly under the guns of 2/201 Battery. The

biggest *motti* was centered on Hirskallio, with some 500 enemy. The most southerly pocket, of 100 men, was on Kappelnemi Cape, south of the harbour.



[The view from Hirskallio]

At 10:45 the Luftwaffe made their one and only appearance. They had had their hands full dealing with wave after wave of Soviet fighters. Two bombers managed to slip through and hit Pohjoiskorkia. One Finn was killed and 3-4 wounded. But the Germans were lashing out blindly. Tallinn had no word from the island and the pilots were making blind drops.

At 12:00, two ME109s flew over the island. Curiously, despite the fierce ground combat and a recent Soviet airstrike, they claimed to see no signs of activity. They randomly dropped a few small bombs without effect and left the area. The pilots' negative report contributed to the decision not to send reinforcements.

At 13:20 the Soviets returned, 24 LI-2s, Yak-9s, and Lagg-3s bombed the shipping in the harbour. Since all of it was already wrecked the attack was pointless. Probably, the first raid had reported the ships without pausing to check their status.

At 12:55, 6 small Finnish motor boats arrived from the Haapasaaret Islands. The Finnish high command was worried about a number of female personnel still on the island and decided to evacuate them. This was done, and a number of wounded were also removed. Enroute the Finns encountered several *sturmbots* bobbing about

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without power. The Germans in them all surrendered and were towed back to Haapasaaret.

Miettinen felt he had to eradicate the German presence before night fell and enemy ships reappeared. So a second counterattack using fresh troops was prepared at about 12:00, scheduled to begin at 16:30. There would be two battle groups, Autio and Hämäläinen:

Battle Group Autio (Captain Autio):

- 1. & 3. Platoon/Training Company
- 1. Platoon/9. Coastal Defence Company
- 2. Platoon/1. Coastal Engineer Company
- 1. Platoon/8. Coastal Defense Company
- 1. Platoon/8. Coastal Defence Company
- 2x Machine-gun Teams

Battle Group Hämäläinen (Lieutenant Hämäläinen):

- 2. & 4. Platoon/Training Company
- 2. & 3. Platoon/9. Coastal Defence Company
- 1. Platoon/Headquarters Company
- 1. Platoon/1. Coastal Engineer Company
- 1x Machine-gun Platoon
- "Detachment A"— mixed bag
- "Detachment H" — ditto
- 3. Company/7. Coastal Infantry Battalion 7 (reserve)

Artillery fire was to be coordinated by Major Sokajärvi. By 13:00 ammunition resupply had been organised and by 14:00 the stockpiles were in place. At 16:15 a pair of machine-guns from 7 Company was set up on Majakallio.

Preparations were not completed by 16:30 so Miettinen cancelled the attack. However, some elements never received the message and began the assault anyway. They made great headway, and the Germans, now almost out of ammunition, decided to surrender.

Commodore Mecke went up to Miettinen's HQ on Kotokallio under a flag of truce. Miettinen was not there, but they conversed by telephone. Mecke first asked whether he could evacuate his remaining 1,000 men aboard the MFP *F-177*, which was still more or less afloat. There were also some *sturmbots* lying about. Miettinen refused. So, a surrender was agreed at 18:45. The ceasefire was reminiscent of a peacetime tactical exercise; the two officers roamed the island shouting "cease fire! Combat has ended!". Mecke had to confirm his surrender with Tallinn.

The Finnish radio managed to raise the base and permission was given.

Meanwhile, 5 German MTBs were spotted circling the island. These were probably from 5. *S-Boot Flottille*. They flashed out some signals but received no response and sped away, assuming the worst. Nevertheless, their appearance raised German hopes. It was decided to string the surrender out until nightfall. Some Germans had yet to hand in their weapons by 21:00.

At 19:00 a pair of Soviet MTBs also appeared, signalled, and failed to receive a response from either side. At 21:50, Finnish boats from Haapasaaret brought ammunition and a fresh company of troops; the next day elements of the 3rd Battalion of Infantry Regiment 1 were also sent.

Under cover of darkness, small groups of Germans converged on the remaining *sturmbots*, boarded them, and headed out to sea. Captain Sonnemann was one of the lucky ones. His and three other boats reached Tytärsaari Island, 20 Km away. Four other boats also escaped. The rest did not. Some ran out of gas and were strafed by Soviet aircraft the next day, and some reached enemy-held Lavansaari. In all, 85 Germans successfully escaped.



[Aftermath at Suurkylä Harbour]

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Results

Operation Tanne cost the Germans 153 (or 155) KIA, 175 WIA, and 1,057 (or 1,231) POWs. The Finns lost 36-37 KIA, 67-69 WIA, 8 MIA, and 7 (or zero) POWs, plus 5 civilian workers killed out of the handful who could not be evacuated in time. It appears that the Finnish POWs (assuming the report of their existence is true) were evacuated by the Germans and died when their vessel was sunk.

Some of his men avoided capture among the rocks and caves for a few days, but Commodore Mecke almost escaped entirely. He was sent to a POW camp in Finland. The camp did not even have a barbed wire fence and he simply walked away. However, he was recaptured at Turku trying to board a ferry for Stockholm. On 19 October all German prisoners were handed over to the Soviets. Most of them died in captivity. Mecke survived and was repatriated in 1955.

Miettinen's future career was much different. Due to his defense of the island he rocketed to stardom, becoming *Kenraaliluutnantti* (Lt. General) before retiring and receiving the Mannerheim Cross. Unfortunately he was caught up in the infamous postwar Weapons Cache Case and his reputation took a severe blow. Still, he served as a military attaché in Moscow, a teacher at the Finnish Military Academy, an Inspector of Maritime Defense, and a commander of a military district.

German equipment losses vary with the source used. The most complete list is: 3 MFPs, 3 AFPs, and tugboat *Pernau* sunk, along with R-29, which was damaged in a collision with M-15 about 02:00 on 15 September and later sunk by a Finnish MTB; 3 M-class and 3 R-class minesweepers damaged. Weapons captured by the Finns included 6x 88mm guns, 4x light field guns, 2x mortars, 4x 75mm AT guns, and 3x light AA guns. 2 halftracks, a radio truck, and some other trucks were either destroyed or captured.

The Finns lost all their vessels in the harbour except the *Porkkala*. Most were destroyed by the Germans but the Soviet airforce completed the job. However, the Finns captured *MFP F-177* and the barge *B-35*, plus some *sturmbots*. The ferries remained in civilian service until the 1960s.

Finnish ammunition expenditure for the battle is also known: 960 artillery rounds (the 122mm gun

fired 27), 844 mortar rounds (only two of the platoons fired), and 53,000 bullets.

On 19 September the Soviet-Finnish Peace came into effect and the Finns evacuated Suursaari between 21 and 22 September. The Soviets arrived on 26 September and immediately demanded the custodial garrison hand over all heavy weapons. They were incensed to learn the Finns had evacuated most of it — under the terms of the treaty they were not obliged to give up weapons and equipment, but obviously, if had still been there the Russians would have taken it.

Operation Tanne was a waste of time and resources for the Germans. The Soviets entered Tallinn on 22 September. However, it was of great political significance for the Finns. First, they avoided the potential Soviet charge of breaking the terms of the armistice. Throughout this period the Russians repeatedly provoked the Finnish troops, seeking an excuse to resume fighting.

Second, though the Soviets were not mollified by the vigorous Finnish defence (there were insinuations that the battle never took place), because the Germans had indeed attacked, and so soon after the deadline for the evacuation, the Finnish government was able to persuade their own people that it was all right to fight the Germans.

In more practical terms the onset of the battle led to the recall of all Finnish merchant ships. Since most of these were under German lease, and currently evacuating materiel from northern Finland, the Germans wound up losing 13,000 tons of badly needed supplies.

The Russians still own Suursaari — pardon, Gogland.

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Websites

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The forum site feldgrau.net. There are a number of useful posts, especially by administrator Jason Pipes, on the composition of the forces involved at 2nd Suursaari.

The website *Lexicon der Wehrmacht* at <http://www.lexikon-der-wehrmacht.de> provides information about German unit structure and some unit postings.

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All photographs (except the Siebel Ferry from the Bundsarchiv) courtesy of SA-kuva (Finnish Armed Forces archives)

[Lt Col Miettinen receiving visitors]

