



The White Sniper: Simo Häyhä

By Tapio Saaerlainen

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As a student of military and sniper history, I've often been disappointed by most coverage of snipers that usually takes the form of "Private Muskelunge of Bayonne, NJ, was point man for the patrol on Hill 835" or "the unit conducted extensive training in marksmanship" and so on. To me, this has always been pretty useless information for anyone wanting to actually learn something from the past that can be applied to the present day.

The good news is that *The White Sniper*, a recently re-released book about a Finnish national hero named Simo Häyhä, is just the kind of military history book I look for but so seldom find. It is a very useful and informative biography of the Finnish sniper written by Tapio Saaerlainen, who himself has served as a sniper instructor in the Finnish Army for more than 20 years and co-authored the Finnish Army sniper manual. Anyone who wants to learn more about sniping needs this book in their library.

For most Americans, World War II started at Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, but for the people of Finland, it's sometimes called the Continuation War because they had just finished fighting the Soviet Union to a standstill during the Winter War. On 30 November 1939, the Soviet Union invaded Finland, and when it signed a peace agreement with the undefeated Finns on 13 March 1940, Finland kept its independence but had to give up 10 percent of its territory to the Soviets (as well as a 30-year lease for a naval base at Hanko). During those three and a half months, the Finnish forces of approximately 340,000 men, 10 working tanks, and 114 combat aircraft faced Soviet forces of approximately a million men, 6,500 tanks, and 3,800 aircraft. The Finns suffered 21,396 dead, 1,434 missing, and 43,557 wounded.

One of the hardest defensive battles occurred during the Battle of Kollaa, and the most famous Soldier to come out of that encounter was Häyhä, who served as a Finnish sniper from the start of the war until he was wounded on 6 March 1940 (more about that later). Using an iron-sighted Mosin-Nagant rifle and a Suomi submachine gun in an environment that ranged from -4 to -40 degrees Fahrenheit, he racked up 542 kills with a personal best of 25 confirmed kills in one day on 21 December 1939.

The man that the Finns referred to as the "Magic Shooter" was born in 1905 to the life of a farmer, an occupation that he returned to after the war. At the age of 17, he joined the Civil Guard and received extensive combat marksmanship training at the hands of veterans of the 1918 Finnish Civil War. Given the shortage of ammunition in the country at that time, training was limited to the essentials of combat firing without an undue emphasis on match target shooting.

At the beginning of December 1939, Häyhä's unit was ordered to fall back eventually to the Kollaa River where the actions there became the source of a phrase still in use in Finland today: "Kollaa will hold." His company commander assigned him as a free-roving sniper rather than to a rifle squad due to his marksmanship ability.

On 6 March 1940, the Soviets tried advancing into Kollaa (a day that Häyhä later recalled with Saaerlainen that he had killed 40 enemy soldiers before the enemy began to get through). On that day, Häyhä was injured by a Soviet exploding-rifle bullet (and I don't mean hollow point, it contained explosives). As the author described the circumstances of Häyhä's injury, I'll confess I was drawn into the story even though I knew he had survived. We're talking about being left for dead after a devastating injury to his jaw; the other members of his squad searched for him and eventually found him on a pile of dead Finnish soldiers. They checked for a pulse to find that he was still alive.

Although promoted to lieutenant from sergeant six months after his wounding, the Magic Shooter's military career was over. He reentered civilian life in May of 1941 after having undergone 26 surgical operations to repair the damage from his injury. He went back to being a farmer, although the village he grew up in had been lost under the terms of the peace treaty with the Soviet Union. His last bone transplant wasn't until 1948.

This book does a very good job of telling the man's biography, but if that's all it did, I probably wouldn't even be writing a review to recommend this book. What the author of this book was fortunate enough to do was to be able to get to know and talk to Häyhä over a long period of time, no doubt asking the same questions that I would have. Now, I've corresponded with Saaerlainen over the years since the first edition of this book came out, and I find him a fellow sniper with a dedication to doing his job in the smartest way possible. I also respect the fact that rather than keeping what he learned secret, he included Häyhä's lessons in the Finnish Army sniper's manual that he helped to write.

Almost as a bonus (and worth the price of the book, in my opinion) is a series of chapters with titles like "The Secrets of Simo Häyhä's Success" and "Simo Häyhä's Experiences for the Finnish Army." In the last chapter mentioned, we learn about the course of fire for Finnish snipers named after Häyhä that's conducted in six stages from varied ranges and positions (thoughtfully translated into English by the author).

In my own case, I always liked using Häyhä as an example because he never used a rifle scope, favoring iron sights for reasons covered in the book. One time while on active duty as an instructor of a Sniper course, I was telling a younger instructor how in 1985 we had conducted moving target training on the old M21 rifle, first with iron and then telescopic sights. I still remember the look of confusion on his face when he asked how it was possible to hit a moving target without a mil dot reticle. That's tunnel vision born of a lack of smart training and ignorance about useful sniper history.

Another example is the insight that a cash-strapped and (previously mentioned) ammunition-poor Finnish Civil Guard had relied on what the U.S. Army used to refer to as the Target Box Exercise for marksmanship training. The author mentions this assuming that everyone reading the book today would be familiar with the exercise. Unfortunately, the latest revision to the Army rifle marksmanship training circular no longer includes this exercise.

Lastly, I need to point out that this book is published by a company called Casemate that's done a terrific job of presenting it with really nice, clear photographs. I also had to look pretty hard to realize that this is an English translation of a Finnish text.