

The battle of Narva

In the 1st of October 1700 he sailed from Karlskrona to Pernau in the northern part of the Riga bay. He was determined first to turn against the Russians and then try to free Narva, the strongly fortified Swedish frontier fortress by the Narova River. The crossing was stormy. From Pernau he marched with parts of the Swedish and Finnish troupes to Reval on wet autumn roads and then to Wesenberg ten Swedish miles west of Narva.

After a while a small army of 10 thousand soldiers were gathered in Wesenberg. More troupes were approaching but the king considered the time too short to wait for them. There was a severe shortage of food in the Swedish camp. The Russian had wasted the land around Wesenberg – and it had come to a battle before the troupes starved to death. Narva also was strongly troubled by the enemy, and every saved hour was important relieving the fort.

The king intended to attack “patrasket” (the pack) and force “kanljen” (the villain) to turn back. The entire luggage was left behind and the troupes moved forward in the wasted land fully prepared. The condition of the roads was miserable and the access of food was poor. Some night one had to sleep outside “upp till lorten under knäs” (in knee-high mud). No wonder that the soldiers longed for close combat with the enemy “och göra ändskap på allt besvär” (and make an end of the troubles).

In the 17th of November the Swedes forced the Russian troupes, who tried to stop the advance in a narrow passage, away. They fled “med ett gräsligt skri” (with a horrible scream), tells Johan Stiernhöök, a soldier of the king. The day after, which was a Sunday, there was a sermon before the Swedes moved through the passage.

In the 19th of November they reached – led by an Estonian farmer threw marsh land and on narrow forest paths – the burnt down and wrecked manor house Lagena, one and a half Swedish mile outside Narva. Here they sent signals with two rockets to the fort and with delight they got the answer that the besieged with their commandant Henning Rudolf still held the fort.

In the forenoon of the 20th November the Swedes formed to an attack on the Hermansberg hill, in front of the Russian siege troupes. Karl XII had during this time reconnoitred the Russian positions, and they were stationed in a fortified camp which in a curved line reached about six kilometres along the Narova River. According to the usual habit they had strengthened their lines both outwards and inwards towards the enclosed fortification with water moats, “spanska ryttare” (an obstacle consisting of two or more crossed and pointed logs) and artillery placed in parapets.

In the north some Russian elite regiments in charge of German officers were placed, the main part of the Russian troupes were unpractised and had never participated in combat. Tsar Peter had left the army a few days earlier to hurry up the reinforcement. The commander of the Russian army was a foreigner, Duke Charles Eugene de Croy. He was an old acquaintance to the Swedes – he had formerly served the Danish army and had been the commandant in Helsingborg after Karl XII's Scanian war, where the Danish army invaded the fortress.



Karl XII and his next in command, General Carl Gustaf Rehnskiöld decided to attack immediately although the Russians stayed in the camp since they didn't want to combat in the open field. Rehnskiöld had planned the attack which was very simple. Instead of attacking all along the line the soldiers and the artillery were concentrated in to spots. They should make a breakthrough and then roll up the enemy line. The Swedish army formed into line during a Russian cannonade, tells Stiernhöök.

All was made clear for the attack, coats and knapsacks were taken off. Then the Swedes fired a double parole and two rockets were sent up, it was the start signal for the attack. “Därpå I Jesu namn marscherade vi åstad” (Then we marched on in the name of Jesus). The Swedish soldier's hadn't eaten bread in four days, so it was a miracle that they could combat.

The attack started at about two o'clock in the afternoon. At the same time, our Lord, sent a snowstorm, tells Stiernhöök, a dense snowstorm with hail that blew against the Russians and

made it hard for them to see the Swedes before they were very close. In the training moors the Swedes had learned to shoot only once from the distance of ten meters. "vilken Gud vare ära gjorde god effekt, emedan de föllo som gräs" (Which, Bless God, made a great effect, they fell like grass).

Then the soldiers went to attack with the swords in their hands, tearing down the "spanska ryttarna" and at last went into the camp. "Och massakrerade vi allt vad för oss kom och var det en alltför terrible massaker. De sköto starkt på oss igen och sköto ihjäl mycket vackert folk för oss" (And massacred everything in our way and it was a terrible slaughter. They fired heavily at us and many of our soldiers were killed). The Russian front was split in three peaces and the Swedish attack colonnades in the Russian camp were soon able to roll up their right wing. A great confusion occurred among the compressed Russians, and soon they all tried to escape. Thousands of riders in panic tried to wade over the Narova River, but many of them were draged down by the whirls in the water and many were crushed towards the cliffs.

Many Russian infantry soldiers tried to make it down to a floating bridge which went from the Kamperholm Island to the other side of the river. But the river couldn't stand the weight and collapsed and the soldiers with their heavy arms and packing fell into the river.

"Förvirringen var våldsamt och alla sprang i bestörtning liksom får som inte har någon herde" (The confusion was total and everybody ran like sheep's without their shepherd) told a Russian who participated. It was impossible to keep the regiments together. There wasn't a single officer giving orders and no soldiers were listening. There was a severe opposition between the Russian and German officers, and during these hours of panic several of the foreigners were killed by the common soldiers. After the Swedes had crossed the centre and right wing Duke de Croy decided to surrender. He went to the swish side with his staff. He met colonel Stenbock and handed over his sword.

The battle was over by five o'clock in the afternoon and it had started to get dark. But the Russian left wing with all of the elite regiments hadn't yet capitulated. They strengthened their forces to keep on making resistance behind barricades and turned over carriages. The king hurried there followed by his bodyguard lieutenant Axel Hård to encourage his exhausted troupes. During the riding he and his horse went down in a mud hole. He was saved in the last minute by some Finnish soldiers, but he had to leave one of his boots in the hole. But there were no combat and the Russian left wing was left alone during the night. It seems there was some disorder in the Swedish army.

The soldiers couldn't resist the temptations in the Russian camp. They were allured by the food and the drinks. Many of them got intoxicated by the spirits and started to fire their weapons against their own thinking they were enemies. During the night the Dal regiment happened to battle with the guardian troupes. Unfortunately the mistake caused a big loss of men on both sides.

The situation was critical, but during the night the commander of the left wing started to negotiate to make an agreement with the Swedes. The negotiation started in the early night and two o'clock it was reported to the king that the rest of the Russian army had surrendered. He was then resting on his coat on the bare ground.

The guardian Patrick Thomson tells that he early in the morning got the king's knight service. He had the order from his boss to send away all of the soldiers who were looting the Russian camp. Thomson made a circuitous movement and then met a Russian company that hadn't participated in the combat and didn't know what had happened. They stopped confounded by his sight and he then fetched courage and signed to them to take the rifles from their shoulders and leave them on the ground. Then he also made them lay down their swords and muskets and finally to march bare headed to his commander.

Next morning the Russian troupes started to depart to the Kamperholm Island over the repaired floating bridge. They marched passing the king, who stood on a height, with bare heads and laid their weapons and banners down. "Och var det ett alltför stort Guds underverk att 30,000 gav sig åt oss på nåd och onåd, som inte var fler än 9,000" (And was it a to great Gods miracle that 30,000 surrendered to us in grace and disgrace, who weren't more than 9,000), says Stiernhöök. The Russian commanders became – against the rules of capitulation – war prisoners, but the

troupes were free to leave, and the defile in front of the king continued the whole day. More than 230 banners and 180 cannons fell in the hands of the Swedes.

In the 22 of November the king and the troupes arrived to Narva, "varest han blev med ogemen glädje av alla emottagen" (and he was received with a genuine delight by all). A sermon was held and a hymn was sung, "Dig Gud lovprisa vi" (We praise the Lord). The cannons that were placed on the walls of Narva thundered in a salute of victory. The brave commander of Narva, colonel Holm, was appointed to general. The victory had immediately consequences for the Russians, they left Ingermanland, and the Swedes now could turn against the third enemy, Sachsen-Poland, with protected back.

The crossing of Duna

In a letter from Narva, dated the 18th of November 1700, Magnus Stenbock tells his "Högvälborna Generalmajorska, allra käraste lilla hustru" (Highly honorable wife of major-general, dearest little wife) about the great victory the army of king Karl XII have won. He writes: "Jag hoppas ryssen ej kommer så snart igen, varandes denna gången genom Guds försyn tämligen bränder" (I hope the Russians won't be back soon, because the providence of God this time made me quite exhausted). He had lost a great deal of his of his soldiers and he also had been wounded himself, though not badly. He had captured Duke de Croy, two more generals and five colonels and also taken 28 banners. The king had conquered 120 nice cannons, 24 mortars, 60,000 "daler" and lots of grain, tobacco and liquor. Anyhow it was "en fin viktoria så stor att man aldrig noggsamt kan tacka Gud" (a great victory and you can't bless God enough).

Some of the rich war booty went to Stenbock, and he now hurried to send home to his "ängel" (angel) a beautiful marten skin cover with lining, two silver cans, two cups with covers, two salt cellar – that you could make something else with – and ten money bags with good Russian money, and she could spend it as she pleased. But the winter quarters had its victims. "alla mina drängar sjuknar och hästarna kreperar av de svåra, utståndna strapatserna" (All of my men are ill and my horses break down because of the severe hardship) he tells his wife. It was the camp disease that flourished. "jag har ej mer än 200 män tjänstbara i mitt regemente" (I don't have more than 200 men in my regiment who are able to serve). He was just as worried in a letter to his father in law: "Vi står här för att refrachera våra trupper, men vet Gud hurudan mager julhelg de lär hålla. Här är goda råd nödiga" (Here we are to rest our troupes, but God knows how poor Christmas going to be. Good advices are necessary. Certainly there was a lot of courage. "Hjärta har vi alla till överflöd" (We all have a lot of heart). But it was food and forage that was needed, but it was a great lack of it.

New recruits from Sweden came by and by and filled the gaps, and food was taken by force from the peasant villages.

Stenbock became a popular person of the king's quarter and got the task to arrange a party for Karl's name day in the 28th of January. The high officers were invited for dinner with music performed by The "Dal" regiment hautboy-players during the meal, and view an opera composed by Stenbock himself. In the opera Turkish musicians, a Russian "knäs" (probable with a Russian coat) with six streilitzer, three unarmed scribblers, drunken Swiss and eight "dal"men participated. The "knäsens" song was specially liked: "En mot en men tio ryssar / slås omkull och drivas bort / utan vapen, svärd och byssor / av en svensk är allt för hårt. (One against but ten Russians / were knocked over and driven away / without weapons, swords and rifles / of a Swede is far too hard).



Another day Stenbock went moose hunting with the king, and in a letter to his sister Ulrika Eleonora the king tells about a practical joke they made when they returned to the camp: "Vi kom sent hem och gjorde tocke larm, så att somma mente, att ryssen var där. Somma begynte ropa efter pistolerna, och herr Nils tog till stekspettet, efter hans puffertar, som han förde i slaget var borta och lagas. Här går allt lustigt till." (We returned home late and made a terrible noise, some thought, the Russians had arrived. Some began to shout for there pistols, and sir Nils took a spit because the pistols he used in the battle were sent out to be mended. Everything here is very jolly.)

In the beginning of Mars Stenbock built a snow fort with six bastions and outer work. There was also a citadel with four bastions, which he named "Bullersborg" (clatter fort). 350 men were defending the fort, while 1,600 men on horses or foot were in force of attack. The meaning was teaching the men how to occupy a fort. Everything went very well, although dangles were distributed on both sides. Afterwards Stenbock gave a dinner in a barrack he had made of spruce twigs.

Realistic battle preparations

There was diligently training in manual exercise and turnings at the camp. Everyone – officers and common soldiers – were prepared for a short battle. There was a great optimism in the army. Soon the war would be over. You can read about this sentiment in a unique soldier's letter from springtime 1701. The letter is written by a rider, Lars Rask, of the king's own regiment to his wife Brita Johansdotter in Flista in the district of Östergötland. It tells:

"Högtärade k(ära) Hustru och Högtärade K Föräldrar. Gud med oss. Såsom tiden medgiver kan jag icke förbigå, utan jag måste skriva min K. Hustru och H.K. Föräldrar och mina Husbönder till och låta eder veta att jag är vid god hälsa Gud ske lov, och häst och mundering är vid makt ännu, Gud vare lov, och jag haver varit illa sjuk men nu Gud vare lov är jag helt frisk, och många äro sjuka och många äro döda, men ingen i vårt gäll (vår församling) mer än Jöns Travare blev död på första partiet och Arvas ryttare i Valby blev sotdöd. 11 ryttare äro skottdöda i vårt kompani. Men jag haver skrivit 2 gånger och aldrig fått någon bokstav, men jag tror att Gud den allra högste han hjälper oss hem till eder i sommar med Jesu hjälp, och jag menar att innan midsommar skall jag och mina kamrater vara i Sverige. Hälsa min broder och hans H.K. hustru och barn och Lars Håkansson och hustru och barn och Jon och hans kära hustru. Alla ryttare hava fått brev så när som jag och Erik. Gud give oss fred.

Dorpat den 29 mars 1701. Lars Rask".

(Highly Honorable Dear Wife and Highly Honorable Dear Parents. May God be with us. The time allows me and I would like to write o my D wife and H.H. Parents and Masters and let you know that I'm well, Bless God, and that my horse and equipment are in good shape, Bless God, and I have been very ill but now, Bless God, have revered, and many men are ill and many are dead, but no one in our parish except Jöns Travare who died in the first combat and Arvas the rider in Valby who died in the plague. 11 riders in our company have been shot to death. I have written twice but haven't received any answers, but I believe in the great God that he will send us home to you next summer and with a little help from Jesus me and my friends even before midsummer. My best regards to my brother and his H.K. wife and children and Lars Håkansson and his wife and children and Jon and his dear wife. All of the riders have received letters except me and Erik.

May God give us peace.

Dorpat, the 29th of Mars 1701. Lars Rask).

The expectation that they all would be home in midsummer 1701 was not redeemed. In April 1705 Lars was dismissed, but all of his comrades had a long way to march before they could return home.

The government back in Sweden had proposed to the king, after his great victory, should start negotiations with the third enemy, Sachsen-Poland. But the king refused. August ii was a deeply unreliable person who must be defeated in the field, he thought. Any other settlement with August but with the sword was useless.

According to the marching plan of 1701 the king should go south with the main force, cross the River Duna and occupy Kurland. A small number of men should be left at the Russian boarder, and when the Sachsen's were driven out of Kurland the king once again would concentrate the

main force towards the Russians and conquer the fort of Pskov by the south side of Lake Pejpus. This was the combat plans of this year.

Magnus Stenbock was very worried for the young king. He was so occupied by the war that he wouldn't do anything else, Stenbock was complaining to his father in law. It was impossible to discuss the matter with him. His words: "här går underligen till. Ingen galler något mer I råd eller angivande. Det synes som Gud allena giver konungen in vad han skall entrepenera" (things are done in a strange way. No one is listened to when it comes to advices or facts. It seems that God alone tells him what to do).

In the 17th of June 1701, the king's birthday, the army broke up the winter camp. "Om morgonen klockan 4 gick Hans Maj:ts arme över Dunaströmmen och blev brukat 195 farkoster, nämligen 74 stora översätterebåtar, 89 småbåtar, 20 stora strusor och 12 pråmar som blev brukade med kanoner." (Four o'clock in the morning his majesty's army crossed the stream f Duna and 195 vessels were used, 74 big landing boats, 89 small boats, 20 big shallow draught boats and 12 barges with cannons. This is the brief story of Karl XII crossing of the River Duna in the 9th of July told by the captain Henrik Spåre.

Just as short is the story of the lieutenant colonel Jon Stålhammar, when he in a letter from Riga dated the 20th of July is writing to his wife in Salsta, "Högtärade allra käraste mitt lilla hjärta och utvaldaste vän här uti världen" (Highly honorable my dear little hart and chosen friend f this world). The king himself crossed the river with some thousands of men, he writes, and battled down 2,000 Saxons and Russians here in the town and got a big booty consisting of various food and equipments for many thousands of men.

Also a third Caroline warrior, Captain Ludvig Visocki-Hochmuth, tells about the Duna operation. He participated in the crossing as an engineer officer, and therefore his story is of special importance. It was between 6,000 and 7,000 men who were transported cross the river, he tells. The men disembarked where ever they could in spite of all the shooting with gunpowder and bullets from the enemy battery.

We started to build landing stages over the river, tells Visocki-Hochmuth. That was one of the decisive moments in the battle. While the infantry defended the terrain the cavalierly should use the landing stages and then determine the combat. The king pushed hardly the building of the landing stages. In the meantime the royal bodyguards and the infantry had to stand five hard attacks. At last the landing stages were completed. The cavalierly went over to the other shore, and by six o'clock in the morning the enemy left their positions. The line along Narva was gained. Karl XII directly participated in the combat. For once he battled with the infantry and he commanded them in the first line. In this way he also is shown in a contemporary painting I belonging to the Nordic Museum. The king's conclusive contribution in the combat is underlined by the words: "Med Guds hjälp har kung Karls makt Fienden alldeles under sig bragt" (With the help of God all the power of king Karl has destroyed the enemy).

The army of King Augustus was drawn back to Preussen and the Swedes could occupy the whole of Kurland. But there had been no decisive in the Mina combat. The Saxon army had escaped and the losses were quite small and they still were a threat against the Swedish dominion in the Baltic area. Therefore the king decided to give up the original plan for the battle. He cancelled the attack of Russian Pskov and continued the war against king August in polish ground. Magnus Stenbock was worried about the development. "Gud give att freden vore sluten, ty på det sätt vi föra krig är det långt ifrån angenämt" (God give that peace soon will be made, the way we are pursuing war is far from pleasant), he wrote to his wife short after the crossing. Towards the winter there was a shortage of food in Kurland. "Vi sakna allt och få inga penningar. På 15 månader har jag inte lyft ett öre av min lön", (We are lacking everything and get no money. I haven't got paid a single "öre" in 15 months), he is complaining in December. Above all he was worried about the new plans of the king. "Vi ligga här sysslösa, och det tycks som om vi ej visste vad vi skall göra. Vi går in i ett krig, ur vilket vi inte skall komma ut utan den gode Gudens underbara bistånd", (We are laying here doing nothing, and it seems we don't know what to do. We get into a war we can't get out of without miraculous support from our great God).

In September a small Swedish army corps entered polish ground. And at the end of January the rest of the army got order of decamping. The march was headed south into Poland. "Nu är kriget

med republiken förklarat”, (Now war is declared against the republic), Stenbock verified during decamp. “Hur vi skall komma där ur vet endast Gud”, (How we are going to get out of it only God knows).



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