



**Thord
in the uniform of
senior officer in the
White Russian
Army.**

CHAPTER VIII – RUSSIAN CIVIL WAR

To the fall of Ekaterinburg, October 1918 to July 1919

SIBERIA 1918

AFTER A SERIES of stunning German victories over the Russian Imperial Army in 1914 and 1915, the Western Allies were faced with the disastrous prospect of losing the Eastern Front in the war against the Central Powers and having the full might of their enemy concentrated on the Western Front.

Czarist Russia fell into decline and eventually collapsed under the weight of civil unrest and a mutiny of the armed forces in 1917.

The emerging Provisional Government under Alexander Kerensky tried to continue the war effort, but the Bolsheviks under Lenin took control of the government, ousted Kerensky, and sued for peace in order to concentrate their forces on consolidating the revolution within Russia.

The result was the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918, which imposed harsh terms on Russia in exchange for peace.

For the Allies it was the end of the Triple Entente and the two-front war.

The German spring offensive on the Western Front was aimed optimistically at achieving a decisive breakthrough before the full effect of the US's joining the Allied cause could be felt on the battlefield. But this offensive petered out in July 1918. The Allied counter-offensive was in full motion in early autumn. The success of this offensive, however, was far from assured. Therefore the Allies wanted, among other things, to open a new front in the east that would tie down the Central Powers' available forces and prevent their being moved to the Western Front. They also sought to prevent thousands of German and Austrian prisoners of war (who could be re-deployed to provide reinforcements) from being sent home in accordance with the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk.

Finally they wished to protect their own interests in the large caches of war material that had been stockpiled during the war in Vladivostok in Siberia and in

the northern ports of Murmansk and Archangel. After the signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, the Allies dispatched forces to occupy Murmansk, Archangel, and Vladivostok.

On 28 October 1918, Thord disembarked in Vladivostok as a member of the Canadian Expeditionary Force under General Elmsley. Expeditions from Great Britain, France, the United States, and Japan had arrived earlier. Thord was ‘Assistant Director of Information’ with Colonel Dennis as his immediate superior. The enormity of the task that lay ahead of a newly arrived intelligence officer in this situation can easily be imagined. The whole Siberian subcontinent lay before him.

The first objective was to understand its structure: the nature and distribution of population, industry, and communications. It was also imperative to respond to the current state of affairs – political and military – above all in the immediate vicinity but also, of course, on other fronts where ongoing developments were affecting the situation in Siberia.

Thord knew no Russian, but from his notes we can conclude that he struggled courageously to learn it, as this was vital in getting to know people who could provide the necessary intelligence.

To a certain extent the respective Allied intelligence authorities co-operated well, but their interests did not always coincide.

Apparently Thord profited from contacts with Swedes in the area, including those from the Swedish legation as well as the two Ahlbom brothers. They were approximately the same age as he, childhood friends from Söder in Stockholm, who managed a large business in Vladivostok.

He also acquired detailed information about prevailing conditions among the numerous prisoners of wars in Siberia from the Swedish Red Cross delegate Gösta Cedergren, who was working at that time in Vladivostok.

A general overview of the powers that were active and influential in Siberia is necessary here as background to Thord’s experience.

One year after the October Revolution a bitter civil war was being fought between the Red Army of the Bolshevik Government and the various factions that made up the White opposition. The competing regional forces in the Far-Eastern Front were operating from three centres. The Reds, who had complied to a certain extent with the Brest-Litovsk Treaty in returning prisoners of war to the Central Powers, controlled the Eastern Siberian railroad and the Amur basin between Nerchinsk and Chabarovsk. They had also advanced along the Ussuri valley towards Vladivostok. During the month of September, however, they had been forced back northwards by the British and Japanese expeditionary forces assisted by the Czech Legion.

The Lipovan Whites under General Horvath ‘vegetated’ in Harbin awaiting their great hope, Admiral Kolchak, who had been summoned to the area but would not appear as a leader until a few weeks later.

The Cossack Ataman (General) Semenov had been active among the White forces for a long time. At first he was supported by the British and later on

primarily by the Japanese, who clearly wanted to secure a long-term influence in the area. Semenov had taken the important railroad intersection Chita and thereby controlled the traffic in the Manchurian passageway, the only route from Vladivostok to western Siberia.

The situation west of Lake Baikal and ongoing developments were difficult to follow from a lookout station in Vladivostok.

The Czech Legion had played an essential role since the front against the Reds had opened in eastern Russia. Before the First World War there had been colonies of Czechs in both towns and rural areas of Russia. Already in August 1914 volunteer troops had been organised by Czechs in Kiev. Gradually these were strengthened by Czech deserters and prisoners of war from the Austrian Imperial Army who were willing to fight for the Czech homeland's liberation from the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

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After the 1917 revolution, which was welcomed by the Czechs as a victory for Russian democracy, all obstacles to forming a strong and independent Czech army were removed.

When the Eastern Front collapsed, the prospect arose of sending the Czechs to France to carry on fighting on the Western Front. Around one thousand men were sent to Archangel. The Brest-Litovsk Treaty pushed the Czechs into the arms of the counter-revolutionaries, as they were determined to continue the war against the Central Powers.

On 26 March 1918 the Czechs entered into an agreement with the Bolsheviks to evacuate their troops by the Trans-Siberian railway via Kursk, Penza, and Chelyabinsk to Vladivostok. Initially numbering 42 000, the force swelled rapidly to between 60 000 and 70 000 men. One hundred and ninety trains, each transporting about six hundred and fifty men, were planned for the evacuation. Initially they did not meet any difficulties. The soldiers of the first echelon arrived in Vladivostok in May. But antagonism to the Reds was growing and it intensified when the communists tried to stop the evacuation of military equipment. Alarmed by a Japanese landing and the expected arrival of the Americans, Moscow wanted to re-direct the evacuation to Archangel but the Czechs refused. They decided to resist the Bolsheviks to secure freedom of action. Following an order by Trotsky, Commander of the Red Army, to stop the Czech evacuation, open war broke out between the Reds and the Czechs. For several months the Czechs were the vanguard of the anti-Bolshevik forces.

A series of Bolshevik attacks gave the Czechs an excuse to take control of the Tran-Siberian railway all the way from Omsk to Vladivostok. Even though the distance separating their main force from their echelon in Siberia was great, it was an important advantage to control the only artery through the country. Foreign observers admired the Czechs, but they became unpopular among both the Reds and Whites as well as the local population in areas where they were forced to carry out heavy requisitioning.

The representatives of the Western powers apparently decided not to expedite the Czech evacuation. They would, it was believed, help to form a front in the

east, defeat the Reds, and stop hundreds of thousands of Germans, Austrians, and Hungarians from returning home. Keen on gaining favour with the Western powers, the Czechs remained willingly. In early autumn of 1918 the eastward-bound echelon moved back westwards along the Trans-Siberian railroad, driving the Reds before them.

They took the railroad intersection Ekaterinburg some time after the murder of the Tsar's family there, and they occupied Kazan with its abundant military supplies and the Russian state bank's gold reserves as well as Simbirsk (nowadays Uljanovsk). But the Red forces were reinforced: four Red armies under Trotsky's command eventually succeeded in recapturing Kazan and Simbirsk. To prevent their force from dispersing, the Czechs evacuated Samara on the Volga as well, thereby abandoning the Volga front.



By the end of October the front extended from Verkhoturje via Kinovsky Zavod to Buguruslan and Buzuluk in the south where there was a Cossack army under Alexander Dutov. The anti-Bolshevik forces, however, numbered only 55 000 men pitted against an enemy of double that strength.

A characteristic of the Czechs was that their discipline was built on friendship. Soldiers' councils had been introduced. On the whole they had democratic inclinations and did not sympathise with the reactionary forces that were now coming to the fore in the anti-Bolshevik cause. They were also disappointed with the lack of enthusiasm and the lack of fighting ability among the White troops.

Foreign observers were impressed by their determination and discipline, even though the democratic camaraderie between officers and men was something new and ran counter to Western ideas about military command.

For the Tsarist Russian officers it was a disgusting taboo and they found it impossible to accept. This attitude contributed to the failure of any cooperation between the Czechs and the Whites.

When the First World War effectively ended with the ceasefire on 11 November 1918, the immediate effect was a rise in Czech morale. The situation had changed psychologically for them. They were now citizens of a soon-to-be-free state and no longer had to suffer the ignominy of being 'deserters'. For both the Reds and the Whites in Siberia the ceasefire meant little. Admiral Kolchak, who was appointed Supreme Ruler of the White Siberian Regional Government on 17 November, was surrounded by reactionary officers. The Czechs' liberal attitude worried him and he was anxious to get rid of them. But he knew that they were among the most reliable troops in battle on his anti-Bolshevik front, and the only troops capable of defending the railroad from the Baikal westwards to the front. The Reds would have been only too pleased by their departure. The Czechs began to suspect that the Allies were more afraid of the Bolsheviks than they were interested in helping the Czechs. But the civil war in Siberia had not come to an end and they were to see a lot of bloodshed during the coming months. In the aftermath of the Bolshevik assumption of power in Moscow and Petrograd in October 1917, there had been

a series of Red uprisings from the European front all the way to Vladivostok. The social environment in Siberia, with its strong inclination for independence, was favourable for the creation of an autonomous government.

A Siberian regional *duma* (parliament) gathered in Tomsk in February 1918, but the majority of the delegates were imprisoned by the Reds.

Members of the Socialist Revolutionary Party, a moderate socialist party opposed to the Bolsheviks, met in Omsk in June 1918 when the town was in Czech hands and formed a government of temporary autonomy for Siberia until a new Russia could be created free from communism.

A compromise was reached on 8 September in Chelyabinsk – with a rival government that had been set up in Samara – and the Siberian Regional Government came into being.

Admiral Kolchak was appointed Minister of War in the new government. He soon found to his dismay that high-ranking officers that had been fighting the Bolsheviks had established autonomous military districts and set themselves up as virtual dictators.

A visit to the front convinced him of the good morale among the troops, who were nevertheless badly equipped and lacked almost everything.

An internal struggle was in progress in the unpopular regional government, which culminated in the arrest and expulsion of the Socialist Revolutionary members by Cossacks. The remainder of the cabinet met and appointed Kolchak as supreme ruler with dictatorial powers to govern and direct the war.

The Soviet state was waging war on three other fronts. In the northwest an opposition movement commanded by General Nikolai Yudenich threatened Petrograd. The northern harbours Archangel and Murmansk were in Allied hands. A local government had been created on their instructions and the British General, Ironside, was in command. Southern Russia was held by several White armies, of which General Anton Denikin's was the most powerful. There were attempts to achieve military co-operation among all of the forces and leaders of these fronts. However personal ambition and conflicting ideologies and aims doomed these attempts to failure.

THE ALLIES

THE ALLIES' policies towards Russia were affected to a great extent by the domestic situations within these countries. Years of war and great sacrifice had ravaged France and Great Britain and rocked the social and political foundations. Communist uprisings in Russia and in Germany after the armistice had raised the fear of political radicalism spreading to the West.

It was not surprising, therefore, that Britain and France were the foreign powers most active in instigating efforts against the Reds. The French were also motivated by a strong commitment to assisting the Czech Legion to return home. Most moderate were the Americans, who received such mixed instructions from their

government that they were often accused by the others of sabotaging the Whites and helping the Reds. A key American concern was to make sure that the Japanese did not gain too much influence. The Japanese in turn aimed at securing economic influence in eastern Siberia and consolidating their territory and interests in Korea and Manchuria, and had dispatched a large force of about 70 000 men to the region. Both Americans and Japanese in general limited their activity to the area east of Lake Baikal.

But why did the Allies remain in Siberia at all after the ceasefire? The answer lies partly in their difficulty deciding on a consistent policy. The British Foreign Minister, Lord Milner, expressed his views on the subject in a report that Thord received from Shanghai on 20 December. The Allied intervention had been successful. The Czechs were saved. Siberia and southeast Russia's reserves had been withheld from the enemy. European Russia's harbours in the north had been prevented from becoming German submarine bases. These important results had contributed to Germany's defeat. During the Allied intervention, thousands of Russians had fought alongside the Allies and it would have been a disgusting betrayal to leave them to surrender unconditionally to their mutual enemies, just because the Allies' own purposes had been fulfilled.

The British Government did not wish to leave troops behind in Russia one day more than necessary to fulfill this moral obligation, which was believed to be the main principle among all the Allies. Milner personally did not think that an early withdrawal would happen without fatal consequences.

If the Allies left Russia immediately, the barbarism that was prevalent in only one part of the country would almost certainly spread. The consequences of such a disaster could not be foreseen, but surely it would impose a far greater strain on the British Empire's resources.

INTELLIGENCE OFFICER WITH THE CANADIANS

OF COURSE it took time to form a general overview and understanding of this complex situation. There are only two written sources available to provide information about Thord's activity during the first months. One of them consists of notes on military and geographical conditions in Siberia. The other comprises drafts of telegrams, press clippings, and similar documents relating to ongoing events that he collected for his own purposes. Presumably there were other documents, but most of them would have ended up in the staff archives. On 1 January 1919 he began to make notes sporadically in a diary. Later he wrote letters of substantial interest to his family and to his old friend from Africa, Midgely, in which he referred to the events of autumn 1918.

Kolchak's assumption of power and its implications were the dominant interest for the Canadians during the initial months of Thord's service. Of special importance was how the relationship between Kolchak and Semenov would develop. The latter played a decisive role in maintaining the railroad traffic east

of Baikal. With time the flow of information increased from the Samara and Ural fronts. Sporadic information also came from Archangel, Krim and Estland. From Constantinople came information about the Bolshevik forces, their arms, organisation, and probable operative intentions, but also about their difficulties, not least of supply and maintenance.

The Samara front saw some of the few notable occasions during the Civil War when Allied troops participated in combat. Britons had participated in fighting on the side of the Whites. The Whites had some successes but the fighting came to a standstill in time owing to the harsh winter climate.

Arrangements were worked out for the utilisation of the Allied military stocks in Vladivostok. In this context the Allies denied any intention of involving themselves in Russia's internal affairs but paradoxically were willing to supply the Whites with war materiel.

Rumours that the Allies would withdraw their forces from Russian soil were especially worrying for the White Russians. The Europeans showed an increased tendency in this direction and the American Democrats demanded it. This attitude meant in practice abandoning the entire anti-Bolshevik element in Russian society to extermination, as the Bolsheviks would not hesitate to do this the moment they got the chance. Those that supported withdrawal discounted the fact that these people had taken up the fight against the Bolsheviks again under the umbrella of the Allied powers. To abandon them now would be to betray the confidence of these Russians.

One contingent, however, that quickly found it unwarranted to stay were the Canadians. In *The White Armies of Russia* George Stewart states that they were sent home because of their liberal opinions. Thord, however, claimed that they were conscripts (not professional soldiers or volunteers) and therefore had to be demobilised, given that the war had ended. One battalion was left behind, however, and participated in the protection of the Trans-Siberian railroad in the summer of 1919.



WITH THE WHITE RUSSIAN ARMY

IT IS UNDERSTANDABLE that Thord had ‘itchy feet’ to get away from staff work and join in the serious action.

Concerning his oft-expressed reason for participation in war – that in time of need, his knowledge would be put at the disposal of his native country – it was especially urgent to use this occasion to learn something of the Russian art of war and Russian troops.

How it came about is not clear but it seems that the Russian Ataman (General) Ivanoff-Renoff (whom Kolchak had appointed to supreme command of the White Russian forces in the Russian Far East and made responsible for recruiting) somehow got hold of Thord’s service record and requested of General Elmsley that Thord should be transferred to the Russian Army. Thord got leave from his Canadian mission on 15 February 1919, having served in the Canadian contingent for only three and a half months. On that same day Ivanoff-Renoff was informed that Thord was at his disposal. On 17 February he received this letter of thanks from Colonel Dennis:

Dear Colonel Gray

I understand that you have accepted the position that has been offered to you in the Russian Army and the interrupted connection with the Canadian Army.

My staff and I send you this note to wish you all success in your new position.

I wish to express my personal appreciation of the services that you rendered under my command. I am absolutely sure that your long active military service and your thorough knowledge of all branches of military activity will render your services very valuable to the Russian authorities in the case of recruiting, equipment and education of their new army.

Thord now embarked on a great new adventure. On 18 February he visited Ivanoff-Renoff’s train, which was stationed alongside that of General Dmitri Horvath in Vladivostok. On 12 March he had lunch with Ivanoff-Renoff and they discussed the political situation.

According to Thord, Ivanoff-Renoff ‘was worried’.

On 15 March Colonel Dennis travelled back to Canada. Two days later Thord had talks about the Russian situation with other leaders, including Admiral Rogers and Commander Edwards of the US Navy, and later with General Graves, US Army. Edwards was supportive, recognising the Kolchak Government. Rogers did not show his cards and Graves did not take a stand.

On 10 March Thord began the journey to the front in Omsk. He travelled in General Romanovsky’s train. He was carrying letters of introduction to seven high-ranking Russian officers. The trip of 4 000 miles lasted sixteen days, making an average of 250 miles covered per day.

On 19 March an American battalion tried to board the train. When they were refused because the train was full (and in addition it was a special train) some tried

to board by force. A cadet from Reunion Island was pushed back by one of them onto the platform. The Americans unwisely ran for their guns. It looked bad, but the train left the station to avoid more trouble. The Americans were totally at fault. On 24 March American infantrymen removed the Russian flag from the train. It was hanging next to the British flag. The action made a bad impression. Telegrams of complaint were sent to Graves.



On 25 March the train arrived in Chita. A conference was held on the train between General Dietrich and four of Semenov's generals. On 30 March Thord got a chance to interview General Dietrich on the train.

The area traversed that day was controlled by the Reds. An armoured train went ahead of the passenger train and a military train followed behind. The previous night a train had been derailed, and there had been deaths on both sides in the ensuing action. Among his fellow passengers Thord mentioned the British Consul Hudson and Gösta Cedergren.

According to Ivanoff-Renoff's orders for the trip, Thord was given the task (with the consent of Kolchak's Chief of Staff) of inspecting units at the rear and at the front to 'gain knowledge of current customs and habits and the fighting technique of the Russian army in a campaign'. On his return he was to report on his impressions to the respective chiefs. It seemed that this 'consent' was not entirely clearcut. It took about a month to get through the bureaucratic procedures in Omsk before Thord got papers for even one inspection at the front. The diary contains no complete account of how this month was spent but some basic facts can be reconstituted.

On 6 April 1919 he finally met Kolchak. It was General Romanovsky who introduced Thord and took care of him at all times. The talk with Kolchak became a lengthy one about 'politics and other things concerning the Far East'. Kolchak wanted Thord to work under General Sacharoff to organise and train the Russian Army. According to Thord, Kolchak was 'a strong-faced man' of the eagle type with a rather dark complexion; he was around 5ft 8" or 5ft 9", strongly built, and clean-shaven. For anyone who did not know the type, it might seem that he was of Jewish origin, but he was not. In a letter to Midgely, Thord added that Kolchak, then 45 years old, was Russia's strongest man, and he hoped that the man would not be taken out by intrigues before he had put Russia back on her feet.

On 12 April, Thord visited Foreign Minister Soukine. The following day he met the Minister of War, General Stepanov. The latter wanted Thord to join up with General Rudolf Gaida. As an alternative he offered service in the Naval Brigade that was soon to go to the front. On 22 April Thord met General Sacharoff – now chief of organisation for the entire Russian army: 'Wants me to go with him,' said Thord. Two days later he had an interview with General Stepanov again, and Kolchak's chief-of-staff, General Lebedev, who later announced that Thord's papers were in order and that a pass and written order to serve under General Gaida would be forwarded to Thord within two days. The same day Thord visited

the chief of the British mission, General Knox, who energetically opposed Thord serving in the Russian Army. He gave no reason other than the fact that the matter should have gone through him. Thord considered this to be a silly way of looking at it when all other arrangements had been done through General Elmsley, as he was Thord's chief at the War Office in Ottawa. Knox also opposed the fact that Thord wore a British uniform. At a second audience with Kolchak the following day, Thord spoke of this to the admiral who simply laughed and brushed it off.

While awaiting a final reply, Thord wrote (among other things) a 26-page letter to his friend Midgely in Australia, in which he looked back at what he had experienced since his time in Mexico.

TO THE FRONT WITH THE SIBERIAN ARMY

ON 12 MAY 1919 the general staff handed over the papers for Thord to join General Gaida. The following day he boarded the Allied Railroad Commission's train bound for Ekaterinburg (by then Sverdlovsk), where he arrived on the morning of 15 May 1919. That same day he reported to Gaida to present his letters of recommendation and was appointed second-in-command of the 1st Assault Division.

During the hard winter not much had been happening on the front. It had not been possible to operate outside the roads with anything other than ski patrols. It was difficult enough to defend those and it had been done with limited forces. When spring and the melting of the snow began, it became evident that the front had been enormously extended.

Early in March Kolchak's offensive had begun. It had a string of successes. The plan was for the right wing to push to the north in the direction of Vyatka to join up with Ironside's forces. Meanwhile the left wing should push towards Samara with the aim of cutting off the Red forces in Turkistan and joining up with General Denikin, who was operating in the Don basin. The centre should attack Ufa and Sterlitamak in the direction of Kazan. The entire front was actually in a precarious situation because the advance had taken place too quickly for the creaking logistical and intelligence services. Kolchak's army slowed down and started to retreat.

The White front was divided into two armies.

In the north with responsibility for the areas extending northwest and west from Ekaterinburg was the Siberian Army under the command of General Gaida. In the south was the Western Army under the command of General Khanzkin, which was responsible for the areas extending west and south westwards from Chelyabinsk.

The instruction that the 1st Assault Division got from Gaida on 16 May was that the Red Army had begun an offensive from the direction of Kazan towards Izhevsk. South of the River Kama the Whites were being pushed back over the River Uk. The 1st and 2nd Assault Divisions should move quickly by train to

Perm and from there be transported by river to the mouth of the River Belaya where it flowed into the Kama in order to halt the Red advance.

Thord wrote an over-dramatised account of this transfer in which he named his alter-ego Colonel Green.

‘He wore a uniform that showed that he was a colonel in the Russian Army but on the tunic one could see a row of British war decorations. The general impression was that of a British officer but on closer inspection one could see that he was Swedish and very proud of that. He was over 6 feet tall, slim but well built, around 40 years old and sported a rather short-cut British type moustache.’

He also described the Chief of Division, Colonel Labuntsov, and his interpreter, the cavalryman Fagan. The former was lively, sinewy, with a very military look. All he said touched on essentials. He never spared any effort and ran his command with an iron fist, but he had a heart of gold.

The departure by boat from Perm on 21 May took place amidst shouts and cheers and wild enthusiasm. The soldiers sang as only Russian soldiers can. A crowd of men that looked grander and more powerful would be hard to find anywhere else.

All personnel in the division wore on their left arms a skull and crossbones in silver mounted on a black shield. It was the renowned insignia for this division that had been created (together with the 2nd Assault Division) to constitute a terrifying army corps with the special task of stopping Bolshevik Army attacks.

The command was not altogether enthusiastic. The intelligence received was anything but positive. ‘We have not received a tenth of the men that are needed to perform our task successfully,’ said the chief of division. ‘It is absolute murder to attempt this operation without reserve troops and anything that even resembles support troops,’ he continued. It was obvious that he did not like the present situation.

His attitude to life was not pessimistic, but he had participated since the beginning of the war in Europe and knew through bitter experience that the chances of success were not good.

On 22 May, the day after departure from Perm, they arrived in Sarapul, where the Chief of Army Corps, Major-General Tomashevsky, had his temporary quarters. Thord described him as a jovial man with a calm and pleasant appearance, around forty years old. Before this new position, he had been inspector general for the army’s artillery in the field.

The general and his staff arrived on board for a four-hour conference.

Thord, who had spotted the open terrain all around, raised the question of why there were only fifty-five horsemen in the division. He received the same answer as he had heard earlier in Omsk and Ekaterinburg from other generals: General Knox in the British military mission had refused to equip the Russian army with saddles and sabres because ‘cavalry was not needed in modern warfare’. The Russian Army under Kolchak had many older officers with great field experience and they knew just how necessary cavalry was in a mobile war. Kolchak had needed to organise and train several armies in great haste in Siberia and east Russia to stop the Bolshevik

assault. Great Britain had sent enormous amounts of materiel and ammunition to equip these armies. There were innumerable older officers with vast experience of this kind of work and yet, for some inexplicable reason, General Knox had sent some kind of ‘salon soldier’ (who did not have a clue about the practical aspects of war) to guide the Russian authorities in this extremely difficult task.

General Tomashevsky emphasised that the general plan for the operations of the two Assault Divisions was for them to continue further southwards along the River Kama by boat to the mouth of the River Belaya. There they should change course and go up the Belaya for about thirty miles and try to land on its west bank with the intention of attacking southwards.

The latest intelligence report that arrived during this conference announced that the enemy attacks had been blocked and forced back everywhere with the exception of one or two places. However Kolchak’s Western Army had been badly beaten and had given a lot of terrain to the Reds. The military situation was serious but not desperate. The troops’ morale was good and counter-attacks were being made along the entire front. The conference was informed that the Siberian Army had not given up one inch so far. A great summer offensive was soon to begin along its entire front.

Thord was told not to worry about his flanks beyond the division’s range. Other units would follow up on both flanks and additional units would follow behind the division to occupy captured terrain. ‘Do not look to the right or left or behind once the offensive has begun. We take responsibility for the rest,’ he was ordered. ‘Your task is to push forward southwards behind the enemy, force him to interrupt his march toward Ufa and defeat him.’ This would give the Western Army breathing space and a chance to recover.

Alongside the jetty where the staff division’s steamers were docked lay two hospital ships. In a cabin sat three Russian Red Cross nurses eagerly sewing a somewhat piratical banner. It was the 1st Assault Division’s renowned banner of white cloth with a black skull and crossbones in the middle. When Labuntsov and Thord entered the cabin later in the evening after the conference, they saw the beautiful and charming Princess Lavinia, a Red Cross nurse, putting the last stitches to the work. Tears ran down her cheeks onto the banner, a sight the two veterans would retain in their memories. When she finished the banner, she raised it to the cross on the wall. She knelt in prayer and it seemed natural for the others to follow suit. She uttered a passionate plea to God for protection for those that carried and followed the banner. The noble creature asked God to forgive those that were trying to ruin her country by continuing this terrible civil war and murdering thousands of innocent people. She prayed for forgiveness for those who had killed her mother and father and had scattered and systematically annihilated her family. After kissing the banner and the cross, she turned to the two officers, handed over the banner and made them promise to protect it with their lives if necessary: ‘Lead your men into battle,’ she said, ‘with the banner always carried high; fill your soldiers with enthusiasm through your personal bravery and sacrifice. That will give them inspiration and perseverance and bravery. Lead them to honour

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and glory for the noble cause you fight for.’ As if in a dream, carried away by her fervour, she came forward and kissed both men. At that same moment the evening calm was interrupted by the sound of heavy artillery fire in the distance. Almost supernaturally transfigured in her excited state, she fell to the floor in a faint. Labuntsov and Thord left the princess in the hands of the other nurses and hurried back to their own boat. They were quite thoughtful and did not say much. Only an hour earlier they had been informed that the enemy was a hundred miles away and now firing was clearly heard from regular field guns less than twenty miles away. They decided to go into town to find out for themselves what people knew about the front.

The river trip from Sarapul continued on 23 May to the mouth of the River Belaya and then upstream for thirty miles, where landings took place on the south bank after some fierce skirmishes. (Thord was in command of part of the division.) From there the division made a quick attack southwards and during incessant battles by night and day captured forty two towns and villages from 23 May to 27 May 1919.

RETREAT

EITHER the intelligence of units on the flanks was false or else they did not turn up. Thord could not decide if the chief of 2nd Division got ‘cold feet’ or simply ‘held back his troops without informing us’.

The Western Army was now in disarray, retreating towards Ufa. The 1st Division should therefore, as previously ordered, try to stop the enemy by attacking southwards behind them, forcing them to break off their march towards Ufa and in that way give the army in the south some respite.

In this situation, just when they were trying to surprise the main body of the opposing Red division, the units behind got to hear of the situation and conditions in the Western Army.

The flank units within the Siberian Army left out of sheer nervousness and retreated without saying a word to the 1st Division.

After some time had passed, Thord discovered that something had gone wrong. Extensive scouting was launched to map out the situation. All patrols came back with the same message. Their own troops were nowhere to be found but the enemy was behind the division and was advancing in battle formation on all sides. The fateful day was 27 May 1919. In a report to Gaida on 1 June, Thord listed his personal observations from the battlefield. He was among the last to return in the retreat. The report illustrates the disadvantage of being in command of unfamiliar troops that spoke only Russian, even though he had an interpreter. This was especially the case for a person like Thord, who was used to staying in the frontline and taking direct command of his men.

The report commenced with interpretations of the division’s strength, the general plan, and the tactical circumstances. The division’s three infantry regiments had only 3 941 soldiers with 3 413 rifles. Of these rifles 352 were Japanese and the

rest Russian. The ammunition for one rifle could not be used for the other. With this number of rifles, the regiments were seriously under strength. The 2nd and 3rd Regiments had been sent into the field without any training whatsoever, and more than half of the men had never before handled a rifle. The infantry suffered greatly from a lack of officers. There were enough officers for only two complete battalions. Young and bold (but inexperienced) lieutenants led the battalions.

Thord arrived in Usi and found the 2nd Regiment did not have a single outpost, guard, or patrol on duty – even though the enemy was only one mile away.

On 26 May a message had arrived from the corps staff that Red units had been seen between themselves and the 1st Division. To clear the area, two battalions from the 1st Division reserve had been sent northwards with a field gun, and only a weak battalion of around 130 men had been left as division reserves.

At noon on 27 May Thord arrived in Usi and found the 2nd Regiment's staff and one battalion scattered around in the village houses. Even though they were only a mile away from the enemy, there was not one single outpost, guard or patrol of any kind on duty.

The 2nd Regiment had placed one battery in such a position that it was exposed on all sides for 400 yards in open terrain. It was positioned at the start of a sloping hill, in full view and in range of both enemy artillery and infantry from three directions. There was not one single man to protect the guns, neither between the guns and the enemy, nor behind them.

A quarter of a mile away to the rear, invisible over the Usi hill, a battalion from the 2nd Regiment lay more or less asleep and without guards. A couple of good enemy snipers could easily have put the battery out of action. When Thord discovered this chaos, he immediately ordered the commander of the 2nd Regiment to send out two companies as outposts on the hills and ridges between the regiment and the enemy.

At Kachkinova, a village southwest of Usi, the 2nd Regiment had two battalions. It was a very dangerous and stupid deployment, exposed to enemy fire from the east, south, and west and with a marshy watercourse and hills in the north. On this location there was only one post, and the duty guard walked around in full view in a field southwest of the village. The enemy was only half a mile away. There was a hill near Usi, around half a mile away. It offered a view of both the village and the field and it was not occupied at all. Thord ordered the commander of the unit to occupy this hill immediately with at least one company. He later found out that this was not done.

Because of the nature of its topography, Kachkinova should never have been occupied with the enemy only a half a mile away. But the hill itself behind the village would have been an excellent place for an outpost from Usi. From Usi Thord moved westwards on horseback at around one o'clock and inspected the 3rd Regiment, 3rd Battalion at the village of Sobairova. The chief of the battalion was a young lieutenant who had deployed his people in trenches in a semi-circle around the village. The deployment was good and he was just about to attack the enemy southwards when Thord arrived.

The attack failed and the enemy counter-attacked with greatly superior strength. The enemy troops were well led and came closer and closer on two sides. Heavy

fire from field guns, rifles and machine guns was heard from the west where the rest of the 3rd Regiment was attacking the enemy.

The young chief of the 3rd Battalion offered boldly to counter-attack, although the prospects were gloomy, but Thord advised him to wait for the 2nd Regiment, which had been ordered to occupy the hill to the left behind this battalion. Time passed and the enemy was getting closer by the minute without any sign of the company from the 2nd regiment that Thord had ordered to occupy the hill in question. Thord therefore galloped back to Usi where he arrived at two-thirty and to his horror found that he had not been obeyed by the commander of the 2nd Regiment. The excuse proffered was that he had received orders from the division staff to move eastwards and that the outpost line was not needed. All attempts at communicating with the division staff had been unsuccessful.

As the Usi position was threatened and the position at Sobairova was desperate Thord repeated his order that the 2nd Regiment send companies immediately to occupy the hill at Usi.

The commander of the 2nd Regiment was apparently a man with no experience of commanding troops and lacking in common sense. He laughed at the idea of posts and patrols and said that he thought they were unnecessary, as the enemy was already defeated.

While the 2nd Regiment slowly responded to the repeated order, Thord set off back to Sobairova to order the battalion to go back to a ridge behind the village to provide flank protection to Usi. The village would be in a terrible position if it was attacked in prevailing circumstances.

As Thord rode out of Usi, he met a battalion from the Gaida regiment coming into the village from the northeast. Thord talked to the chief of the battalion and explained the difficult situation. The latter realised that something had to be done and promised to send a company to the heights behind Sobairova. He left Thord two horsemen to dispatch instructions concerning the place.

With great difficulty Thord managed to make his way back to Sobairova at around three o'clock. Enemy snipers had already reached the area and were positioned up on a ridge to the left behind the village. He found that the enemy had advanced on all sides. At around three-thirty, the enemy opened heavy rifle and machine-gun fire from the direction of Usi and shortly after, enemy field guns on the ridges west of Usi began firing at Sobairova. Heavy fire also commenced from the west. A general attack on three sides was under way. It was too late to retreat and Thord ordered the battalion to make a stand and defend the position for as long as possible. If they could not hold out, they were to try to occupy the hill behind them or withdraw backwards along the waterway westwards to unite with their regiment.

Their situation was hopeless and Thord could see that they did not have the slightest chance, but if they were to retreat at that time, the entire division would be lost. Thord told the chief of battalion so. Their position was crucial, as it lay on the shortest route that the enemy could use to cut the division off and divide their forces in two.

Thord then started back towards Usi to see what could be done. As he left the village, one of their own batteries came galloping up in disorganised retreat along the ridge behind Sobairova that was exposed to enemy artillery fire. When he reached the strategically important hill overlooking Usi, he was shot at by enemy infantry who were holding the southern end of the hill. The firing forced him to go northeast along the ridge where he found the rest of his troops in a terrible panic, fleeing in disorder towards the north. Not the slightest attempt was made to stay and fight and the men were throwing away their rifles, equipment and shoes to run faster.

Thord found his troops in a terrible panic, fleeing in disorder, throwing away their rifles, equipment and shoes to run faster.

The commander of the 2nd Regiment had failed to carry out Thord's (repeated) orders and therefore the regiment at Usi had been exposed to fire from two directions while they were resting in the village. The result was that the whole crowd ran in panic. The 2nd Regiment was in such a state that they did not fire even a couple of hundred rounds against the enemy.

When Thord looked back on Sobairova he could see that the enemy was now directing flank fire from the hills behind the village as well. At that moment one of the most glorious actions that Thord had ever witnessed took place.

The 3rd Regiment, 3rd Battalion, with less than a third of the enemy's strength, surrounded on all sides and exposed to terrible machine-gun fire, went forward to attack while the rest of the front had collapsed in panic.

Never had there been stronger determination or a bolder mind than that of the chief of this battalion and every man in it. The battalion went forward and pushed the enemy back southwards. In this way they made it possible for the two battalions of the 2nd Regiment that were caught like rats in a trap at Kashkinova to withdraw to the north. They escaped along the riverbanks through Sobairova under the protection of the brave 3rd Battalion, who sacrificed themselves in their selfless attempt to save the day. Of the 300 in the battalion, 251 men were lost. Thord was pleased that the young commander of battalion, Lieutenant P Kolbin, was one of the few who escaped in the end.

'For his contribution in this battle, I have promoted him to captain with the temporary battlefield rank of lieutenant-colonel. I strongly recommend that you acknowledge this appointment. I also ask for him to be awarded the Sacred Order of St Anna, Class 2 with sword, for his extraordinarily brave and distinguished contribution at Sobairova.'

The enemy troops were well led by officers that knew their work and followed up on their success assiduously. They made extensive and skilful use of machine guns. Some of the enemy troops advanced fast along the ridges and tried to cut off the 3rd Regiment. The two battalions that only an hour earlier had attacked the enemy panicked when they saw the enemy in great numbers on the hills on their flanks, where they had expected their own troops to be positioned. Thord arrived in Ataseva (around two miles north of Usi) with a few of the last retreating

men. Several times he had tried to stop the panic but only a handful had been persuaded to stay and hold the enemy cavalry at a distance by sniping. In some places the grass was rather tall and it dampened their courage considerably when they found that the enemy machine-gunners could move their pieces forward to a range of a few hundred yards and sometimes less. The hilly terrain allowed the enemy to approach really close undetected. As the Whites were in a state of panic and unable to exploit the many excellent defensive positions, these were given up to the enemy without a fight. The men fell in great numbers under the Red machine-gun fire but Thord also saw that many fell without being hit. They were fed up with fighting and preferred to be taken prisoner.

At Ataseva Thord found the commander of the 1st Division, with all available personnel and division staff, busy deploying two machine guns in field fortifications on the spot so as to try to stop the enemy's assault and give stability to their own position. Nevertheless, owing to the poor morale of the troops and the enemy's encircling movements, it was necessary to retreat further to Chorjeva, where another halt was called for several hours. But the troops' appetite for battle had disappeared. The only guilty party and the cause of the disaster paid the ultimate price for his insubordination, criminal negligence, and complete ignorance of defensive measures to protect troops during rest. This man was the commander of the 2nd Regiment, who had been killed when he tried boldly to rally his men during the first attack.



The fact that the division reserve had been sent north the day before the disaster did not make any difference to the outcome, according to Thord. This small reserve might have enabled them to hold Chatava for a day or two instead of being forced to retreat over the River Belaya. But the enemy outnumbered them three to one and also had many more machine guns, and the whole battle ended very quickly. Their defeat was already assured before they reached Ataseva, where the reserves would have been. Furthermore, had the division reserves not been sent north, and the enemy had pushed eastwards, then it was likely that the entire army corps would have been cut off from retreat, attacked from all directions, and lost down to the very last man.

The enemy had succeeded by splitting the Assault Division into three parts and skillfully dealing with each one in turn. This terrible lesson should be given prominence at the various military schools in Siberia and eastern Russia, Thord reported. In his report Thord did not mention what he had noted in his diary about his own situation when he was fired upon on the ridge. 'I had not gone ten yards when the enemy infantry came fully into view, 300 yards straight ahead. I turned eastwards and encountered twenty Reds only some 40 to 60 yards away. I thought my last day had come and turned in despair to the left. Here I met the flank of a long firing line of Red Army. Why they did not shoot at me is surprising. The only explanation I can give is that I was mounted and so near that they took me for one of their own. I turned northwards and galloped away together with my

three orderlies. We found ourselves on the inside of a horseshoe and had to get out through the opening where there was only 150 yards between those on the right and those on the left of us. Not until we were about 400 yards in front of their line did they realise that we did not belong to them and they opened fire dreadfully.

‘One of my reins was cut close to the bridle. I had to dismount and tie it. I felt really uncomfortable. When I finished fixing the rein, I witnessed the most terrible sight – panic.’

Thord’s diary notes on the following sequence of events do not completely agree with rough notes that he wrote a few days later. It became clear when the 1st Division returned to Belaya that the bulk of the 2nd Division had already crossed the river. The crossing could only be effected with considerable losses due to enemy rifle and machine-gun fire and a heavy artillery bombardment. Thord was afraid at times that the men would run away into the forest.

‘We came to a pitch-black forest. It was a wonderful ride that I shall never forget. My orderly was agitated... complaining that somebody was following us.’

Some did but not that many.

The corps was deployed defensively north of Belaya (‘a flat land with birch groves and open grain fields’) with the 2nd Division in the west closest to the Kama River and the 1st Division in the east, but apparently at a considerable distance from the marshy terrain on the north bank. The 1st Division formed the Siberian Army’s left flank. There was a large gap between it and the Western Army in the region of Ufa.

The Whites had a combined a force of 3 086 men with only 1 755 rifles. The terrain might be held with 10 000 men, although the ideal would be 20 000 according to Thord. But with these scattered, beaten and nervous divisions, with insufficient weapons and equipment, it was hopeless.

On the morning of 6 June the enemy crossed the River Belaya on the 2nd Division’s front and advanced north. In the afternoon they also crossed over on rafts at many places opposite and east of 1st Division’s front, which was around thirty miles wide.

The retreat was once more a reality.

When Thord heard the heavy artillery in the west in the morning he rode towards it, but turned back around three miles from the Kama, as it was getting late. When he returned he found his own positions deserted and had to go after the retreating unit.

‘After about four miles we came to a pitch-black forest. It was a wonderful ride that I shall never forget. My orderly was agitated and nervous and constantly complaining that somebody was following us. As we travelled as fast as the horses could run, I doubted this, but stopped suddenly a couple of times. There was no doubt now. We were indeed being followed by two horsemen, but they must have been good scouts and they had their wits about them, because they always stopped whenever we did. I tried to get into position to aim but they knew their task. We could not see a yard in front of us and sometimes we got into deep, swampy areas that caused the horses to sink down to their stomachs.’

Some time after midnight they reached the division staff and got half an hour's rest before the retreat continued. Their own units had been pushed back everywhere. The enemy had captured Sarapul.

'As I have tried to get these people to understand the whole time, this is a bloody stupid business. If only we could get ammunition and machine guns.... If only I could get the bloody idiots of chiefs to see what we have lost... the mobility, the spirit of offensive. With permission to attack we might still defeat the Reds. If this army corps was united and worked as a unit, it would be able to generate something instead of being scattered about like a Sunday school outing. The enemy punishes us all the time and we do not inflict any punishment on him. What it is I cannot see or say but it seems as if our main task is to move as far and as fast as possible away from the enemy without resistance. I do hope it is not a game of politics. We have managed to hold some wonderful positions and then received orders to abandon them. It makes me sick, and if it were not for the soldiers I would throw it all to the winds immediately. I hate to leave them in the hands of these incompetent officers.'

That day, 7 June 1919, when Thord spent twenty-two hours in the saddle, intelligence came that the Western Army had retreated, leaving the 1st Assault Division's left flank open over a stretch of 45 miles.

'On 9 June at 8 o'clock in the morning there was a wild rush because reports were coming in stating that the Reds were only a few miles from the division staff.... I had asked them to be vigilant in that direction but they just laughed at me. I took two mounted orderlies and set off in the enemy's direction to look around.... I ordered the 3rd Regiment to take a stand behind the village, which they did, but very slowly. The men were shaken and very nervous. The officers seemed reluctant to risk a battle with these men. I ordered the chief of a battalion to capture a hill. He told me that the Reds were there and that his men were refusing to move. As I had just ridden over the hill a while earlier, I thought it was worth the risk and asked for volunteers. More than half the battalion stepped forward. Of them I chose the first ten men and rode in front of them up the hill. The men sang and were really happy.... I placed them on top of the hill and told them not to leave it before the last wagon of their own unit had passed the next hill behind them.

'These soldiers stayed for six hours and did a good job. The enemy did not force them to leave. All they needed was for someone to lead them and they would follow. Without this important position the enemy could have retaken all our terrain. Some of the officers are hopeless.

'It is ridiculous how our officers speak with contempt of the Red Army. I can only say that the Reds are infinitely superior to us in strategy, tactics and in the art of fighting.'

The direction of the retreat was towards Krasnofimsk. On several occasions White units ended up firing on each other in the confusion. One such incident occurred on 8 July when the 3rd Division reported that the Red Army was close behind them 'in vastly superior numbers' and asked for help.

The 1st Assault Division was ordered to advance towards the northeast to support the 3rd Division at Atchitsko north of Krasnofimsk. The 2nd Assault Regiment from 1st Division reported at the same time that they had met with heavy machine-gun fire during their retreat towards Atchitsko and asked for orders as their situation would be serious if the enemy were allowed to hold this area along their retreat route.

The orders coming from the army staff about the 3rd Division's difficulties and the 2nd Regiment's report, suggested that it would be easy to deal with the enemy as they were positioned between the two forces.

The stupidity became obvious.

The 3rd Division in its nervous

state had opened fire on the

2nd Assault Regiment in the

belief it was the enemy.

'I then gave order to the 2nd Assault Regiment to attack the enemy at Atchitsko and the 1st Assault Regiment was sent in double quick to their assistance. Later in the evening a more detailed account of the army's deployment arrived from army staff and I found that the 3rd Division was still in Atchitsko and that the superior "Red Army" was supposedly in the position that my 2nd Assault Regiment had occupied. Fearing the worst, I immediately sent an order to abandon the attack but it had begun long before the order arrived. At six o'clock a report came from the commander of the 2nd Assault Regiment that he had taken Atchitsko and driven the enemy from their positions, taken almost all the terrain and a number of prisoners. He said it was remarkable, or possibly strange, that they all belonged to the 3rd Division but had apparently become Bolsheviks.... Together with this report came a furious order from army staff that without a second to lose I should attack the enemy in the newly-captured Atchitsko and not spare a single man in the attempt to recapture the town due to its strategic importance; the enemy was very dominant and at least 15 000 men strong.

'The stupidity became obvious. The 3rd Division in its nervous state had opened fire on the 2nd Assault Regiment in the belief it was the enemy. The 2nd Assault Regiment naturally mistook the division for the enemy. If the 3rd Division had not opened fire on the 2nd Assault Regiment, it would never have happened. The 3rd Division's nervous state can be demonstrated by the fact that the 2nd Assault Regiment had used only two battalions in the attack and, I am proud to say, drove the whole 3rd Division from its position, took all their terrain and hundreds of prisoners. When the 2nd Assault Regiment's advance guard reached the outskirts of Atchitsko, they were targeted by heavy machine-gun fire, which they of course returned. The 3rd Division reported immediately that the enemy had attacked with superior force of at least 15 000 men. This is only one example of the awful mismanagement and appallingly nervous mood of the officers and men.'

When the Czech Legion had seriously taken up the fight against the Reds, General Syrový had been chief of the entire force of two divisions, with General Cherek as chief of the first and General Gaida of the second division.

No Czech commander aroused more admiration or criticism than Gaida. His career in Siberia revealed him to be a man of extreme bravery and willpower.

He found it difficult to accept delays or accommodate other people's wishes. He worked well alone but was blind to his superiors' needs. His weakness was a domineering temperament and a somewhat eccentric nature, according to Stewart. As already mentioned, Kolchak's assumption of power was an unpleasant surprise for the Czechs. Gaida alone among the higher ranking Czech officers liked the dictatorship. He resigned from the Czech Legion and joined Kolchak's army. As a reward for his loyalty and proven capability, Kolchak gave him command of the forces around Ekaterinburg and finally over the whole Northern Army.

At the turn of the year 1918–1919 they decided not to wait for spring but immediately to attack Perm. Gaida initiated this advance and ordered the 5th Czech Regiment to participate, but they refused. Syrový ordered all the Czechs to hold back. Initially, however, Gaida still managed to succeed in capturing Perm. The so-called spring offensive quickly developed into the retreat described above.

A showdown was looming between Gaida and Kolchak.

Thord's visit to Omsk lasted until 1 July 1919, when he departed for Ekaterinburg with thirteen carriages of supplies. It had not been an easy task to convince the central staff and the government's different departments of the need for supplies for the troops. Relief organisations like the Red Cross were easier to negotiate with. He had received an open letter from Gaida authorising him to requisition all artillery, engineering and other materials that he could get his hands on for the Siberian Army.

When Gaida returned to Ekaterinburg he was informed that General Dietrich had been appointed chief for the whole front while Gaida remained as chief of the Siberian Army.

Gaida considered this to be an insult and was eager to resign but promised not to leave his post as commander of the Siberian Army before the Reds had been stopped or until Thord returned to Ekaterinburg.

'I had more or less to beg the chief of the general staff to get machine guns and ammunition to the army,' wrote Thord. He did not know if the man was being fooled by his own staff, but he had the nerve to say that the troops at the front had plenty of weapons and ammunition and at the moment he could do nothing further. While he was saying this, Thord knew for a fact that his troops and the troops on his flanks did not have thirty cartridges left per man. 'There was nothing else left for me to do,' wrote Thord, 'other than to make my way by bluff.' That is why he began to make a nuisance of himself with some of the higher ranking officers in the general staff. To get rid of Thord, they gave him a lot of materiel to take back with him, though no machine guns and ammunition, apart from a personal gift from the chief of general staff of 30 machine guns and 150 000 cartridges. The chief of general staff claimed that he had already sent 500 machine guns and 20 million cartridges only one week earlier. Thord hardly believed this could be true, and he saw the gift as a ploy 'to keep him quiet'.

There is good reason to question how the central authority could think that the troops were well-equipped with supplies while reality showed catastrophic shortages. Stewart states that on 30 May, Gaida's army was believed to consist of

120 000 men and on 9 June of 100 000 men (it is likely that these estimates ought to be halved), whereas they drew rations from Omsk for 275 000.

Members of Gaida's staff were suspected of being involved in fraud on a huge scale. The amount of supplies that never reached the front was frightening. Gaida had taken measures to combat the disparity, but still failed to get the supplies he needed. That is why Thord had been sent to Omsk. The discrepancy was confirmed to Thord during later battles in and around Ekaterinburg, when they found large stockpiles of supplies that had not been sent to the front.



On the morning of 4 July Thord was back in Ekaterinburg. Gaida had gone to the front earlier at dawn. During the morning Admiral Kolchak arrived. No-one was allowed to set foot in the station. Thord thought that it was badly handled. 'The Tsar or the King of England would not have had such an exhibition.'

The Reds continued their advance and pushed back the Whites. The 1st Assault Division was northwest of Krasnofimsk, which was now in the hands of the Reds.

Thord met Gaida and they had a lengthy conversation on 6 June 1919 around twenty miles southwest of Ekaterinburg. Gaida was concerned and believed that he would be forced to take leave of his post. The following day they were back in Ekaterinburg. Kolchak was still in town. Gaida was given six months 'leave' to visit Europe. 'We usually call it getting the sack. Gaida is a good man but has been somewhat pig-headed and that caused his downfall.'

In a letter home on 13 July Thord brought up the subject again:

'General Gaida got into a fight with Kolchak, the usual envy and intrigue among the high command. Gaida was forced to withdraw in the end, and whether or not it was good for the army is still hard to tell. He is a dynamic man but without education or experience as a leader. He might have been a better chief of division or even better chief of a regiment. The circumstances that supposedly caused his resignation or dismissal by Kolchak are rather interesting. Kolchak's treatment of Gaida meant that he had lost his best and most forthright friend. Gaida was generally inclined to a greater extent to favour a more democratic rule than that practised by Kolchak. That was what provoked the argument. Gaida wanted the people to have a voice in the administration and held several conferences with the *Zemstvos* (local assemblies) in Ekaterinburg and in other places to hear their points of view. Gaida was appointed as commander in chief for all the armies in the field ten days before he was relieved of his command on 7 July.

'The meeting he held with the *Zemstvos* was seen to clash with government policy. After a lot of intrigues and lies the opposition managed to get Kolchak to mistrust him and a few days later he got his "unlimited permission to visit European countries". Gaida did more than any of the other high command, even more than Kolchak, to create concord between people and get them to feel a bit like human beings instead of dogs.'

(Compare this to Thord's account and explanation of Gaida's fall in his article in Leslie's *Illustrated Weekly Newspaper* on 24 April 1929.)

Thord submitted three reports suggesting how to save Sarapul, Perm, and Ufa, but regretted that little attention was paid to these – nor were they acted upon. ‘In reality they laughed at me at one point because I was pessimistic. But when one town after the other fell into enemy hands, they sent for me to plan how to save Ekaterinburg. General Gaida promised changes in accordance with the earlier plans that I had sent in at his request.’

**‘Our front is long
and our men too
few to be able
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hold a line against
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Reds carry out.’**

Thord’s first message was that army tactics had to change from defensive to offensive (shock) tactics, which required the organisation of two or three hand-picked and complete divisions with 200 machine guns, a cavalry regiment, and six artillery batteries each. These divisions would operate as an assault force with other units that would follow up behind them to occupy strategic positions and protect the rear.

‘Our front is long and our men too few,’ said Thord, ‘to be able permanently to hold a line against such concentrated attacks as the Reds carry out.’ For this reason he had suggested that they had to beat the enemy at his own game by attacking him with the three proposed divisions.

The Siberian Army’s 1st Assault Division had held a 40–45 mile-wide front after having lost half of their men to a constantly attacking enemy. This had been done without a foot of telephone line. It took one whole day to send a dispatch with orders from staff headquarters or from one flank to the other. There was never any kind of reserve, and as the force was spread out over a very wide area it was never possible to resist a concerted attack in one area, and so they were always forced to retreat.

They had only three machine guns in the division and suffered a crippling shortage of ammunition.

They had only fifty officers. From the youngest to the eldest officers there was great ignorance of how to lead troops. From the start Thord found that the officers never posted guards when the troops moved into a populated area. They simply marched into the settlement and went off to sleep without any protection against surprise attack. The battalions were not given orders for action to be taken if they were attacked. As a result, when rumours started that the Reds were nearby there was a scramble – a mad rush and sometimes even panic – to get away instead of getting into position to fight.

Thord had been riding day and night and had had two horses shot out from under him during his efforts to make the officers post guards and patrols. Many officers had been killed; new ones would have to be trained.

There might not be time to start officer schools at the front, but it was essential to write out simple, clear instructions to guide them when they were on the march, on attack, in defence, in retreat, in camp, or in populated areas. Every officer ought to have a copy of these instructions. There was a need to start officer-training units. Candidates enrolled in these should be chosen from among the fighting troops.

More cavalry had to be organised, regardless of the opinion of General Knox. All along they had been forced to fight without mounted scouting or protection, and that was hopeless against an enemy that was well equipped with cavalry. The enemy had approximately one machine gun for every twenty men, making it necessary for the Whites to get additional weapons as well, not simply one or two extra per regiment but fifty or more. The division and regiment staff were deployed too far away from the frontline. The same applied to battalion staff.

The enemy's ability to keep the attack going without interruption depended on their ability (thanks to their superiority in numbers) always to deploy thoroughly rested troops.

In marked contrast to the Reds, Thord noted on 12 July that the original 1st Assault Division with its 12 infantry battalions and division artillery had only 1 010 men left. The men were so tired that they sometimes collapsed on the roadside and not even a whip could awaken them.

'I have tried the whip on the advice of those who believe they know their own people and to make absolutely sure myself. I have given orders for it to be stopped.

**'If I were a
Russian farmer I
would have been
a Bolshevik....
The more I see of
the enemy the
more I like him.'**

How little the Russian upper class knows of the physical or psychological character of their peasant class. No wonder that this revolution has turned into what it is.

'If I were a Russian farmer I would have been a Bolshevik.'

When he returned to Ekaterinburg, as the town was about to fall on 13 July 1919, Thord found that there were no fewer than a thousand train carriages with supplies and many storehouses with materials that would be lost. The previous day there had been two thousand carriages at the station and yet nothing could be sent off:

'Why in the name of everything that is holy have such vital supplies for the troops not been sent out?' The reason was that people had been walking around Ekaterinburg doing nothing and they did not believe that the Reds would be able to capture the town. Some counted on the army retreating at a speed of only six to eight miles per day. But when Thord informed them (including the British mission) that the frontline was moving eastwards more than twenty miles a day they nearly laughed at the thought.

'The front is here now, and supplies worth millions and millions of dollars are stocked at the station and in storage depots in the town. It seems as if they have given up all hope, and I am sick of this treachery.

'The more I see of the enemy the more I like him: He is at least loyal to his cause and fights like a man.'

The leadership of this spectacle had, in Thord's opinion, neither the guts nor the ability to change anything and therefore they had in practice already lost. He had told them so three times. It was only when Perm was lost that they first started to pay attention to his repeated warnings of what was taking place at the front and in the general staff.

‘All the troops will become Reds if no one pays heed. Some officers have already been killed by their own men, but in general this was the officers’ own fault. Some of them seem to have forgotten that the days of the Tsar are gone. The Tsar’s system was rotten.

‘As a general rule it is normal for White officers to go before their men during a retreat and give them an example of everything that is rotten. They are intolerant and inconsiderate towards their men. To give one example: a chief of battalion that had marched twenty six miles with his unit left his troop standing in the village street while he and his fellow officers went into a house and shamed themselves – the pigs – with food and drink. Then they slept for several hours while the troop was still waiting for them in the street. The officers then came out and ordered their men to continue the march for another 13 miles without food or even permission to remove their kit to rest.’

**‘It is not surprising
... the people of
Russia tended to
become Bolsheviks.
The whole idea of
the war was... to
fight against such
Prussian methods.’**

Thord happened to pass at that moment and noticed the expression of more-than-usual discontentment that the men showed. A lot of grumbling was going on. While he was talking to a non-commissioned officer, a soldier and a sergeant stepped forward and asked for permission to stand down and make some tea, as they had been in the village for almost five hours and had not had food.

‘Never in my life have I felt as rotten and ashamed on behalf of the officer class. The battalion was on forced march but that did not stop the chief from eating and drinking and sleeping without the slightest thought for his men. What I did not do to that chief of battalion is not worth mentioning. He was sent for and demoted to orderly in front of the whole battalion. The men were close to mutiny and with every justification. It was imperative to show them that the higher command did not tolerate such behavior.

‘The military regulations with a formal trial had to be put aside because of the urgency of the situation. I informed the troop of its task and the reason for the forced march.

‘The men got orders to hurry up with their tea. They could not have more than one hour because of the time already wasted. When they heard this they did not want to take the hour but asked for the privilege of continuing and eating after the battle. Of course I could not allow this as they were half-starved and a serious battle was waiting within a few hours. We had our tea and formed a rather pleasant company. Thirty minutes later we began the march forward.

‘The battalion had to make a long detour so as to attack the enemy flank in the rear, to delay him for some time and lighten the pressure on our maintenance and supply troops. We succeeded in performing the task, but many brave lads were left on the field. Although we were stopped by their cavalry, we were able to salvage the damaged leftovers of the Army Service Corps (British), the American maintenance and supply troops, and the artillery. I have experienced hundreds of such incidents, so it is not surprising if after such treatment the people of Russia

tended to become Bolsheviks. The whole idea of the war was more or less to fight against such Prussian methods. We have been fighting for five years for people's rights and if this regime continues to exist at the expense of the oppression of the people, then I would be the first to raise the revolution's standard against such a government.

‘There are some truly great men and officers in Russia, but they are few, and they are aware that there is no hope for them without the aid of the people. Not even the best of them are willing to contemplate the future without considering their own selfish interests. They leave their country (just like the upper class in Mexico) in the hands of other willing lower-class elements that dare to fight for their country. London, Paris, New York, and Japan are filled with Russian upper class; men who have been trained for the military but who do not want to return to their country to fight for freedom and independence because they suffer from a peculiar disease.

‘In the USA they have given it the evocative name of “cold feet”. These gentlemen will say that they are exiled and are unable to return – they are liars. I know that we can find place for each and every one of them that is willing to fight for us; and the same goes for the Bolsheviks. Let them come here and choose sides. They must belong to one or the other. I do not care which side they choose but do not give them too much protection or pamper them too much, as they have a tendency to get spoiled.

‘I do like a certain type of Russian very much and the upper class are very charming, but I am saturated with lies and more lies to such an extent that I have almost lost faith. This retreat has shown me that the classes that are now represented in the government are not able to rule the country. In my opinion the person who does not have the moral or the physical bravery to fight for his country and its basic values is not fit to rule over it.

‘The exceptions... who can and do it are so few – and really very rare – that it does not make any difference.

‘The present government will almost surely fall when confronted by the overwhelming strength of the Reds.

‘The only thing that can save the situation from a military point of view is to do what I said that they should have done before Perm fell – and that is to go back 150 or 200 miles with the new troops and reserves and occupy sure positions behind some great river and other natural obstacles. Let the front retreat behind this new position and reorganise at a safe distance behind, so as to control the men's nerves once again and give them something decent to eat for a few weeks. Another measure would be to get us some Japanese divisions from Manchuria, but no power in the world can stop the fall of Ekaterinburg.

‘I seriously tried to believe in the sincerity of these people, but I have given up where it concerns the upper class. They all sit on the fence waiting to jump to the most favourable side. It seems as if there is nothing permanent or stable in their opinions, if one disregards the extreme right wing and its members, who are not inclined to fight, only to talk a lot.

‘The former proud royalist figure with the clattering sabre, jingling spurs, and willingness to fight whenever needed seems to have disappeared in Russia. The sabre and spurs still exist, but not the will to fight.’

Thord also gave vent to his feelings about other participants in the Siberian adventure. During his visits to Omsk and Ekaterinburg he had a lot to do with the British. The British military mission had a great number of officers in Siberia and did a good job of organising the new Russian army and running the officer training schools. Everything that the Russians got for their army came from Britain. It seemed as if the whole Russian nation was backed by materials and credits from Britain, which Thord thought to be wise.

He was less than satisfied, though, with some of their other efforts.

The 9th battalion Hampshire Regiment and the 11th battalion Hants Regiment had been sent to Ekaterinburg in April and May with the intention of giving support to the Russian troops and boosting their morale by showing their allies a good example.

They did this in an astonishing way from the Russian point of view.

‘Whenever a Russian asks me about these battalions I feel ashamed to even look the man in the face. As soon as the rumour started that the Reds were close to Ekaterinburg, the whole bunch began to evacuate and the last train departed to Omsk on 7 July. The British Government’s policy was not to participate actively, but at the same time it should have considered what the Russian people would think about such an evacuation, when help was so greatly needed. The British troops’ departure had a great effect on people here and the Russian Army could not help looking on the British troops with a certain amount of contempt. Why in the world had they come here if not to fight or at least do so in self-defence when under attack? By this idiotic transfer General Knox has done the fine British Army great damage. The pro-German party has made the best out of this general feeling towards the British and there has been a lot of agitation.

‘The only British unit that participated in any battle was the few marines under Captain Wolf-Murray with his six-inch ship’s guns from *HMS Suffolk* and *HMS Kent*. The marine detachment operated on the River Kama south of Perm and did an excellent job. They often found themselves abandoned by their Russian escort and miles behind the Russian lines on the river. Just before Perm was captured by the Reds these units scuttled their armoured boats but managed to save the guns and returned with them to their ships in Vladivostok.’

Thord was of the opinion that General Knox was useless as a military man and just as incompetent as a diplomat. He believed that the English-speaking nations should be closer to each other. The USA and Great Britain should stand united for the sake of freedom. General Knox had on many occasions in word and deed shown open contempt for the American people, but Thord was convinced that he did not express the opinion of the British Government or the general public when he did so. His methods of using Russians to spy on Americans troops and staff activity were an insult and did not promote good relations between the officers of the two nations in Siberia.

This relationship was not as good as it should be, partly because of German propaganda, but bad relations had often also been caused by haughty snobs of the Knox variety. The latter left for Britain in December 1919 but ought to have been sent home far earlier than that.

Brigadier-General Blair, deputy in the British mission, was a fine soldier with great experience and foresight and was well liked by all. This officer was not given the chance to achieve much owing to Knox's legacy. He was appointed to take command over the military mission after Knox, and he went on to Japan after the Reds had taken Vladivostok.

The British-Russian brigade was also part of the British contribution. This unit had been created on 17 May 1919 when more than one thousand Russian recruits were handed over to Lieutenant-Colonel Johnston from the 9th Battalion of the Hampshire Regiment in Ekaterinburg. These men were the surplus from the 1st Siberian Assault Division on the day the departure for the front took place.

The idea was to have only British officers and to use British commands and drills. Because of this policy, the brigade was already a failure from the start. It is unbelievable that General Knox could ever have dreamt of something as idiotic. Even if he had known something of the character of the Russian people, he proved his absolute ignorance about the race in general.

To train natives within the British Empire in British army drill using English was quite fair enough because they were under the British flag and would remain so for the rest of their lives with the methods they started with.

In Russia or any other foreign country, it was of course totally different. It was impractical and meaningless for thousands of Russian peasants to learn English just to spare a hundred British officers the trouble of learning a few Russian words of command.

When these poor, unhappy soldiers did their best to salute the British way as they had been taught, they were constantly reprimanded and beaten up by Russian officers they encountered in the street, because they did not salute in the prescribed Russian way. In the beginning this caused great discontent among the men. The British officers did their best, but they never got a chance to make something good out of it.



The training programme was too long considering the urgent situation. The Red Army stood outside the gates of Ekaterinburg and yet this brigade was playing football instead of being trained in how to use a rifle and confront the enemy. The method used was suitable for young Britons but psychologically the Russian character is very different and that ought to have been considered. Moreover, the brigade should have been organised and trained far behind the front.

The pro-German party used everything they could against the British, and this was of course a wonderful opportunity. They let it be known that the British were trying to Anglicise the Russian people. They asked why the British did not send their own units to fight instead of sending British officers to train Russian

soldiers to kill other Russians. Britain, they said, wanted the Russians to have a civil war and was encouraging this so that the country would remain weakened. The Russians absorbed this propaganda like a swamp sucking up water.

Talks with the Siberian Government eventually resulted in the cancellation of the British-Russian brigade's training by the British mission. The Brigade was taken over by the Russian Army at the end of June.

On the morning of 13 July 1919, the day before the fall of Ekaterinburg, Thord received a telegram from the supreme commander, General Dietrich, ordering him to take command of the British-Russian brigade, which was still deployed and in training in the town. The brigade's name had been changed to 7th Assault Regiment. Thord arrived at the regiment's staff headquarters at two o'clock in the afternoon. Never in his life had he seen such a mess, such a collapse of morale. A steady stream of men were leaving the base in total disarray and moving eastwards. Some had weapons and equipment. Others were without anything. When he went in, he was met by some disheartened officers who informed him that rumours had been circulating just an hour before his arrival that the regiment was to be attached to 1st Assault Division. The officer of the day took him to the main barracks. Several hundred soldiers stood in front of different icons praying not to be sent to the front because they did not know how to fight and did not want to be transferred to 1st Assault Division, which for them signified a sure death.

This officer was without doubt very strongly pro-German and did his best to convince Thord about the difficulties of sending this regiment to the division. He stated that more than half of the men had already deserted due to the news of being sent to the front with a fighting unit. The men had received their rifles only two days earlier. Hardly any of them knew how to load, with the exception of some non-commissioned officers. There was none who knew how to shoot. He hinted to Thord several times that the British had only taught them how to play football, not how to fight, and now that the enemy was advancing, the British had departed for Vladivostok leaving these poor people to be killed by the Reds. He made it clear that the troop had been trained with English words of command and British drill for five weeks and then for the following three weeks with Russian commands. The soldiers did not know what was expected of them. The German agitation against the British was provoking the hypersensitive imagination of the peasants and causing the worst kind of confusion imaginable. The Russian soldiers could hardly be blamed for this. When Thord inspected this demoralised regiment he decided that nothing in the world could persuade him to take over this unit with the intention of using them in battle.

On his return he reported his decision to the chief of general staff.

'It was good that I did just that because by the evening all that remained in the barracks was only about two hundred men. The rest of them, including some officers, had deserted and moved eastwards away from the frontline.'



THE FALL OF EKATERINBURG

THORD sat down and wrote to his mother from his camp near Ekaterinburg on 13 July 1919: He told of how men were streaming by from the battlefield. Some officers were among them. They all knew that the town could not be saved and that within a few hours it was likely to be surrounded.

Thord had asked for volunteers and the majority of his men had stayed with him. Those that wanted to leave with the rest of the army were allowed to do so. He did not even try to stop them – as it would be pure murder without hope or meaning to defend the town without support or reserves when the rest of the army had departed.

That evening at the 2nd Station in Ekaterinburg Thord had a long talk with Lieutenant-Colonel Loubigniac from the French mission. The conversation centred on the strong German influence in the Russian Army on both the White and Red sides. The Frenchman wanted Thord to accompany him in his car and let the Russians go to hell, as they did not appreciate what Thord was doing for them anyway. ‘It is unnecessary for me to say that he had to go on alone with his secretary.’ Thord had earlier sent away the American consul Palmer with his family as well as the Danish consul. ‘All are leaving – or rather have left – the burning ship without one single attempt being made to put out the fire.’

General Dietrich, the new supreme commander, travelled that same evening to Ishim where the new army headquarters were to be set up. The last train with women and children left as well. Thord organised redeployment southwards to positions that were more favourable and would give the troops a better chance to get water and retreat when the time came.

‘I wish that I could describe my impressions in the right way and with feeling. A crowd of men has passed by yet again and most of them are so downhearted and in rags – officers in the lead. How on earth shall we... hold this position until tomorrow? It has to be done with a bluff – but I have been bluffing the Reds so many times that they know my tactics. That’s why I have to change them from time to time. As soon as we are absolutely sure where they will attack, I shall try to be there with hand-picked men and maybe ten or more machine guns, which will make them hesitate for a few days more. The Reds are becoming wise to us. That is the reason they will not attack this position. Consequently they are working themselves around our flanks. As the situation is, they could take me at any time but they do not know that. For the first time today my position has been hit by artillery fire.... An enemy aeroplane flew over us.... All security measures have been taken and we can only stay in position at present. The men have become worried and some are leaving the position. There are two brigades in Ekaterinburg behind us but they will probably run for their lives as soon as the enemy begins to attack my troops. The whole thing has become a tragedy and a farce. If it were not for the men that seem to trust me, I would leave this instant. I will go back to Ekaterinburg tomorrow if it is necessary and if the rear units leave us in the lurch

again by retreating before time, I cannot hold this position with a clear conscience. It is not right and not fair to the troops. I have asked that a brigade should be sent a distance south of the town to protect my left flank and back – as well as to defend station two. I know that the first request has not been acted upon. They do not seem eager to leave.

‘The sun is setting and the town behind us looks peaceful and beautiful.

‘It is heating up around here with the concentrated fire. I am afraid that most of us will be lost. I shall try to withdraw the unit a bit closer to the edge of the town tonight. One or two storage depots were plundered by our troops today. The officers helped out. It was the British that started the panic by leaving. Many if not most of our officers left at the same time. The rumour that all was lost spread like wildfire. Tens of thousands of wagons, horses, cattle, women, and children are on the move. They have left the town and are blocking the road for the military and thus making the situation worse.

‘Our propaganda against the Red has been very thorough. Consequently everybody is afraid of the Bolsheviks. Instead of talking about the terrible things the Red would do to them if they were taken prisoners, we should have encouraged the will to fight and keep order in the country. It is a boomerang against ourselves that we cannot escape. If the Russian Army had only been given half as much interest as the propaganda department was given we might have had a chance of winning. Although England, France, Italy, and Japan stand behind us we have been totally crushed.’

On 15 July Thord continued to write home to his mother from a place 17 miles east of Ekaterinburg: ‘I have not been able to send this letter because we are more or less in battle all the time. The main enemy attack began on 14 July at around ten o’clock in the evening, and since then he has forced us, step by step, halfway into Ekaterinburg. Around six o’clock in the evening I inspected the positions at station two held by rear units that should protect our transfer through the town against an important and very likely attempt by the enemy to move around and cut off our retreat. I found one brigade of unknown size in position but no unit had been sent out south along the railroad to Chelyabinsk to control the enemy’s advance as I had asked. To cut a long story short, the brigade left station two and their position and retreated as soon as I left. The enemy that advanced and did not find any resistance of course captured the strong position close to station two that controlled the whole town. Ridiculously inferior in number, we were hopelessly forced back and went towards station two in the belief that we were protected by the troop there. During a desperate battle through the town I waited every moment to hear this troop protecting our retreat but nothing was ever heard. At eleven o’clock in the evening the enemy attacked us furiously and we withdrew back towards the hill at station two where we were met by sweeping machine-gun fire from the rear down every street.

‘The enemy behaved skilfully and I take my hat off to them.

‘My troop broke down of course when it was caught in the streets between machine-gun fire from front and rear and disappeared north and south into the

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smaller streets. One of our battalions was hit badly and I do not understand how we got out. I had inspected them in the evening when they were four hundred men. Now there are only 46 left. The rest had been mown down like grass in a few seconds. The most hopeless thing of all was the pitch-dark night that was lit only by the showers of fire from what seemed like millions of machine guns against us. Just before midnight, Ekaterinburg was cleared of our troops and totally in enemy hands. The last I saw was a great fire at or close to the station. I have heard that one Cossack squadron was surrounded there and suffered severe losses. One reason that these poor devils had not left – when “the fun” began – was that their horses were without saddles and they themselves were asleep.

‘Such is the luck of war. This is the sixth time we have been encircled and have had severe losses because we cannot trust our friends, and because they do not dare to do their duty. My old luck still seems to be holding. I did not get hit even though my water flask, canvas field bag, and sabre were hit by bullets. One more horse was killed under me. I was within a hair’s breadth of being taken prisoner, but when all seemed to be lost a saddled horse came towards me and almost knocked me down in its panic as it was trying to get away from this hell. It did not take me long to get into the saddle. We recovered and got away, but there was not much of a fight on our part. We did not stand a chance from the very beginning owing to the combined enemy machine-gun fire. The darkness largely saved us. It was a small but desperate group that worked its way forward through the enemy lines that night. Several times we ran into enemy patrols, and many of them we got rid of. Others we avoided, as we did not know how strong they were. I am afraid that my people are almost as useless as the rest of the army.

‘It is interesting to note that many of my men have come back here tonight after having been captured by the Reds, among them an officer. The Reds removed their shoulder straps and told them to go back to Admiral Kolchak with the message that they were such bad soldiers that the Reds did not want to keep or feed them.

‘We are now two days behind the retreating army.... This is only a temporary halt to collect my scattered, ragged troops. The enemy is all around us except for straight east... but we leave now and I hope to be able to get through with my unit before the enemy has surrounded us totally.’

