

Eemil Pirhonen, JR 69 and the Battle of Kollaa

An Englishman searching for his Finnish past asks for readers' help

For the family of Eemil Pirhonen 11 March 1940 was notable for two reasons.

First, it was the day that Eemil died, killed by the Soviets at Kollaa during the Winter War whilst he was serving with 3./JR 69.

Second, it was the birthday of Eemil's son Raimo who was born just a year earlier.

For the rest of his relatively short life (he died in his 30s) Raimo was eaten up by the loss of a father he never knew. Raimo viewed the anniversary of his birth not with excitement but immense sadness. How could he celebrate his arrival in the world when it coincided with the loss of his dad?

What further tormented the surviving members of the Pirhonen family – which included Raimo's elder sister Raini, my mother – was uncertainty about what became of Eemil's body.

After Eemil was killed his commanding officer wrote to his widow Josefina to say that “unfortunately, the body was left on the Russian side.” The commander expressed hope that the body could be retrieved but Eemil's wife, son and daughter went to their own graves with the belief that it never was.

Now the search for a definitive answer about Eemil's fate has fallen to me, his grandson. Eighty years after his death, I am trying to find information that his immediate family could not.

Despite being a non-Finnish-speaking Englishman who lives more than 1,000 miles away I have been helped by technology: a vast number of official records are now available online and a lot of research can be found on the internet.

Social media allows for connections to be made which once would have been impossible. I have been helped enormously by several Finns who are united in their passion for this period of their history and have a willingness to share their knowledge. Then there are organisations like Sotaveteraanit.Fi. I am indebted to one and all.

Yet, there are also challenges. The war diary of 3./JR 69 does not seem to have survived and the passing of time has meant the loss of almost everyone who had personal experience of that era.

According to SotaSampo Eemil's body was actually “evacuated” and buried at the Heroes' Cemetery in Sortavala (his home village of Helyla is just a few kilometres north of the town).

There is even a grave number: 20406. Yet on the plans of the cemetery that I have seen his name does not appear.

Another book – *Sortavalan Sankervainajat - in Memorium* from 1953 – tells a slightly different story. It says that there is a grave but suggests it is empty, Eemil being remembered as someone who was left on the battlefield.

Whilst I carry on with research into my own family, inevitably I am also discovering more about JR69, more about Kollaa and more about the Winter War, a conflict that few in the United Kingdom have been aware of, though the terrible events in Ukraine have allowed me the chance to do something to correct that.

I was invited to write [a story for the Daily Express](#), a national newspaper in the UK, in which I identified some similarities between Putin's invasion of Ukraine and Stalin's invasion of Finland. Who would have thought that many decades after the Finns used it so effectively, and gave it its name, the Molotov cocktail would still be used as a weapon to fight the tanks of a mighty aggressor? Of course, I mentioned Eemil in the article and now my grandfather has a permanent online presence. 'Eemil Pirhonen' comes up on Google.

My aim now is to write more about Eemil, JR 69 and Kollaa.

And that is where I ask for your help.

If you had a relative who fought at Kollaa – particularly if they left letters or diaries or personal accounts of the battle that you would be prepared to share – then I would be delighted to hear from you. Or maybe you have family to Sortavala or even Helyla. Perhaps you can shed more light on what might have happened to Eemil and his colleagues. Or maybe you would just like to chat to someone else also fascinated by this piece of history.

I would like to think that in time my own work will help keep alive the memory of those from Sortavala, Karelia and beyond, who fought the Russians. Hopefully it will explain to an English audience why 'Kollaa held'.

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