

Partial translation from the book:

Air Force Participation in Finnish War of Independence in Year 1918

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Chapter III. Red Air Activity in Finland y. 1918 (pages 203-226)

General (page 203)

During the revolt also the Reds had aircraft at their disposal, but very little information on their activities and on the organisation of flight detachments has been preserved. They, like the Whites, had no Finnish pilots and they also had to rely on foreign pilots, namely Russian. Almost all pilots in Russian air bases in Finland left in the beginning of the revolt. However some of them remained in red service. Usually they did not fight for the ideology but to earn a good sum of money, the Reds learn to have paid 500 Finnmarks for each flight hour. Therefore their front line action was not effective, but their main issue was the promised sum after flight hours.

In general the Reds fairly strongly overestimated the importance and the results of their aircraft...

For instance (*Tuomas*) Hyrskymurto, one of the well-known leaders of the Reds, had the following telephone discussion: "We send Rahja to St. Petersburg to acquire 50 aircraft, with them we turn whole Ostrobothnia (*province on west coast*) and butchers (*whites*) to ashes, this is our only chance. They are attacking like hell and we can't lose or we are doomed. We must try even if it would take all the state funds."

The red commander at Tampere, "comrade" (*Hugo*) Salmela, proposed on March 17th that 20 aircraft would be ordered, with which bridges and towns could be destroyed behind lines. "We must visit with our aircraft at Mikkeli, Joensuu, Jyväskylä, Seinäjoki and Vaasa." After that they would have no distress any more.

Flight Detachments (page 204)

The Reds had four working flight detachments, namely in Helsinki, Tampere, Kouvola and Viipuri. The flight detachments had no common command, but they acted independently most likely under each front commander. The Reds divided their front in three parts, "Northern Front" consisted of the red troops between the Gulf of Bothnia and Lake Päijänne, "Central Front" was between the lakes Päijänne and Saimaa and "Eastern Front" between Lake Saimaa and the national border. The flight detachment located in Tampere acted as the flight detachment of the northern front, the flight detachment of central front was located in Kouvola and that of eastern front in Viipuri. A flight school was located in Helsinki and it was called "flight detachment school".

The Reds may also have had observing balloons in use on the eastern front, because the Karelian main headquarters (*white*) informed on March 24th the general staff that near Hannila two enemy observing balloons appeared...

Flight Detachment School (page 205)

To give red guardsmen military training, an order was issued in March to establish several arms schools in Helsinki, including "Flight Detachment School".

Photo on page 205: Eero Haapalainen (*commander in chief*), August Wesley (*chief of general staff*)

The flight school was located at Hermann air base, where it had four Russian Farman (*Shtetinin M-16*) seaplanes. Teachers were Russian pilots and pupils Finnish members of the Red Guards. There is no information on the number of pupils. Flying activity was not very vivid and it was terminated after the invasion of Helsinki on April 13th, when the air base was occupied by the Whites. It is not known if any of

the red guardsmen received pilot training. *(5 complete a/c were captured by the Whites, later one more was assembled of spare parts.)*

Flight Detachment of Northern Front (page 206)

Already in February 1918 the General Staff of Finnish Red Guards began to recruit Russian pilots for the red service. The main headquarters of eastern front was located in Viipuri and their task was to direct aircraft from St. Petersburg to Tampere and Kouvola...

Photo on page 207: Red aircraft at Naistenlahti air base in Tampere.

On February 24th five aircraft in a Russian military train from St. Petersburg were sent from Viipuri and they arrived to Riihimäki next day. From there two aircraft were sent to Tampere and the remaining three were returned to Kouvola. The former were Nieuport planes, one of them was a reconnaissance aircraft and the other a fighter. In Tampere they were located at Naistenlahti bay *(on ice)*, where a hangar was built.

By the last day of February the aircraft were assembled and on March 1st first flights were made...

There were seven pilots *(airmen?)*. As one of them was a Finn *(Rahja?)*, there were rumours that he was actually a white, maybe *(Väinö)* Mikkola himself.

On March 3rd at 12.30 hours a red aircraft was flying over Vilppula and cast leaflets...

...On March 4th a red aircraft operated at night for two hours near Vilppula, thus the Russian pilots may have sometimes made also night flights.

Around March 10th the Reds made a general attack on all fronts. As the location of their aircraft (Tampere) was too far from the front (about 70 km to Vilppula), they were moved for the duration of the attack to lake Lylyjärvi. The commander of the pilots was Eino Rahja. Before the revolt he had served at the Lanskaja aircraft factory *(Lebedev?)* near St. Petersburg. *(Eino Rahja, 1885-1936, joined the Bolsheviks as a teenager in St. Petersburg. He was a locomotive engineer before the war. During the Russian revolution he was Lenin's personal bodyguard. He became one of the leading figures of the red war effort in Finland and played an important role in acquiring arms for the Reds. After the Independence War he fled to Russia, where he became Lieutenant General of the Red Army and was twice awarded the Order of Red Flag. He was buried with military honours in the Alexander Nevski Monastery.)*

On March 10th the Reds made a reconnaissance flight to Vilppula. Same time they dropped two bombs, which caused no damage.

Photo on page 211: Vilppula railway station.

On March 11th they made several front line flights... Bombs were dropped at Vilppula and Mänttä...

On March 13th at least a reconnaissance flight was made to Ruovesi-Vaskivesi direction.

On March 15th the Reds made both reconnaissance and bombing flights. Of them they have made the following report: "On activities of airmen on Northern Front, 15 March 1918. At 11 o'clock a pilot took off and made a reconnaissance flight to Seppälä, he would have cast bombs but couldn't as our own men were too near. At 4.50 p.m. the pilot took off for second time, this time they took two bombs, one of them weighted one pud and 32 funt (=29,5 kg, 1 pud = 40 funt = 16,38 kg) and it was thrown at Mänttä. It didn't explode immediately and he descended lower, but at the same time the bomb exploded and stunned the pilot so that he could hear only half an hour after the bomb was thrown. He could not notice the damage it caused. The bomb thrown in Vilppula was aimed at a train consisting of red carriages, the pilot claims it hit the target. Signed A. Dufva."

In the White communiqué is however mentioned, that enemy aircraft dropped that day at least four bombs at Vilppula, one of them exploded very near a 15 cm gun and another one very near a staff train, but without causing any damage.

On March 18th the Reds dropped some more bombs at Vilppula, but without damage.

Just before the capture of Lyly by the Whites, that took place on March 18th, the Reds lost one of their planes to the Whites. The aircraft flew at 300 m height over white troops, who started to shoot at it and it made a forced landing on the ice of lake Lylyjärvi east of Lyly. The pilots fled, but the aircraft (*Nieuport 10*) was captured by the Whites, who found several bullet holes in it.

The book "Revolt history of Tampere region" by K.V. Kaukovalta tells of an occasion when an aircraft was forced to land at Korkeakoski railway station, because the engine seized due to sabotage. It is not sure if this was the same aircraft as mentioned earlier or another aircraft. If it was another aircraft, the Reds must have had at least three aircraft at Tampere, because on March 19th a flight was made to Kankaanpää and Ikaalinen and also bombs were dropped but without damage.

On March 31st and April 6th leaflets were dropped to the retreating red troops at Tampere, these flights were probably made from Helsinki. The remaining aircraft of northern front, a single seated Nieuport (16) fighter, was captured at Naistenlahti by white troops during the invasion of Tampere, thus ending the activities of the flight detachment.

Flight Detachment of Central Front (page 214)

As mentioned earlier, the Headquarters of Central Front at Kouvola received three aircraft on March 25th. A field was cleared of fences etc. to serve as an airfield and a shed for all three aircraft was set up. There was only one Russian pilot, his name was Jefimow, and 3-4 mechanics. As their commander (commissar) and as observer acted comrade Roine, who had served in Russian army. (*Roine was a former metal worker from Karhula near Kotka.*)

Photo on page 215: Red airfield at Kouvola 1918 1. Aircraft shed made of lumber. 2. Sihvonen house.

The first front line flight was made on March 2nd, when some bombs were dropped on Mäntyharju front, but without damage.

On March 3rd the Reds dropped a couple of bombs at Mäntyharju, of which they made the following report: "Kouvola, 3 March 1918. Our flyers are in action today and have thrown a couple of bombs to Mäntyharju railway station, where butchers opened fierce rifle and machine gun fire. They only wasted they bullets without achieving anything. Of the effect of our bombs we have not yet received any information."

On March 4th the Reds made a reconnaissance flight among others to Mouhu region, where they may have observed white artillery positions.

On March 5th red flyers together with red artillery bombarded the Mäntyharju railway station and two white trains. Of which they reported the following: "On March 5th have flyers and artillery destroyed two butchers' trains, including the engines and the Mäntyharju railway station". This success reported by the Reds must be taken up reservedly, as nothing of this incident is mentioned even in the book "Finnish Independence War 1918" (*of 6 volumes and 3000 pages*).

After this the red air activity was very weak. However now and then some flights were made. Among others, on March 18th a reconnaissance flight was made to Heinola region.

By that time the flight detachment had received a fourth aircraft, that was not assembled but crated in a box. All the aircraft were of Nieuport type.

By the end of March snow started to melt on fields revealing ditches, which made starts and landings difficult. Therefore a new airfield was established at Utti (*on former race track*). On April 1st or 2nd two aircraft were flown from Kouvola to Utti.

Photo on page 217: Utti airfield in summer 1918.

Very few flights were made from Utti. The aircraft were constantly out of order and Jefimow had explained that it was dangerous to fly them to the front. The aircraft probably had engine trouble and the gasoline available was of poor quality. Also the airfield was suffering of the melting frost.

After Tampere was invaded by the Whites, one Russian pilot and two mechanics escaped from there to Utti.

On April 8th a red aircraft dropped two bombs at Lempäälä railway station, but without result. If this aircraft came from Utti or Helsinki is not known, but the latter is more likely.

In order to get a better aircraft, Jefimow travelled to St. Petersburg and acquired a brand new plane, which was assembled at Utti. He made few flights with it, among others two flights to Riihimäki.

Photo on page 218: Kullervo Manner (*commander in chief*)

On April 23rd and 24th messages were dropped to red commanders at Riihimäki, without knowing that Riihimäki was captured already on 22nd by the Germans and the messages fell into German hands.

Some reconnaissance flights were also made to Loviisa and Lahti. Also leaflets were dropped and some flights were made at dusk or night.

Photo on page 219: X Place at Utti railway station, where the Reds burned their aircraft before leaving. XX Havukkasuo, where they dumped their aircraft bombs.

At this time the Whites were advancing on the Karelian Isthmus and threatened to close the connection to St. Petersburg and the pilots started to plan the return to Russia. First they aimed to fly two aircraft from Utti to Russia, but as the aircraft proved to be too unreliable for such a trip and the gasoline available was bad, they gave up that plan. Instead the aircraft were disassembled by the end of April and loaded on a railway carriage. By this time the railway connection was closed at Viipuri by the Whites. The aircraft were now unloaded and burned with gasoline and hand grenades.

Photo on page 220: The remainings of red aircraft at Utti.

After this bombs, two different sizes, were dumped in a swamp. Later two boxes, 29 kg' s in all, of darts were found at airfield. As one of the boxes was partly empty, most likely some have been dropped in flights.

In the last days of April the pilots drove to Kotka and continued to Russia on the Russian boat "Roksána".

Flight Detachment of Eastern Front (page 220)

The flight detachment of eastern front, that was located at Viipuri, had first two aircraft but later only one. At the end of February they were on the ice of Pantsarlahti bay. Later a canvas hangar was built there. Pilots were Russian, according to one source there were three of them. Aircraft may have been flying boats.

The first front line flight was made on February 17th, when they dropped propaganda literature.

On February 19th a flight was made to the Antrea and Imatra region, when they spread propaganda literature and observed white movements. Same day 25 boxes of aircraft bombs arrived to the Reds at Viipuri. More flights were made on the 20th and 22nd.

The following report by the Reds on the activity of their flyers is of February 23rd: "Report. Eastern Front. The actions of airmen has continued. This time it has been maintained by two smaller aircraft and they have worked fairly hard. On Saturday they cast four bombs, one of them missed and fell very near our positions. The other three hit their targets, namely Hannila railway station region, where again on Saturday new troops on move were seen. Viipuri, 23 February 1918. Front Staff of Red Guards of Viipuri District. Signed J. E. Latukka."

Leaflets were cast on February 26th.

On March 2nd a reconnaissance and bombing flight was made, of which the front staff reported the following: "Eastern Front. Informations of airmen: Our flyers were today Saturday at Hannila on a reconnaissance trip and noted, that the train that has usually stood for weeks at Hannila railway station has now left, presumably the White Guardsmen are preparing to leave Hannila. Same time they cast one bomb, that hit a house near the station. Viipuri Front Staff, 2 March 1918. Signed J. E. Latukka."

On March 5th two enemy aircraft flew in Valkjärvi region, it is not known if they were aircraft of eastern front, it is also possible that they came from Russia. On March 8th some bombs were dropped at Antrea without result. Next day leaflets were spread.

In the afternoon of March 17th, a red aircraft dropped two bombs in Imatra, they fell near the power station. On the same day two enemy aircraft observed white positions at Ahvola in Antrea and at Hannila. On March 24th two red aircraft made a reconnaissance flight to the front, including Antrea. On March 28th a plane made flights at Rautu and Valkjärvi, if it was a red aircraft from Viipuri or a Russian aircraft is not known. On March 31st a red aircraft made a reconnaissance flight to the Hannila region.

As we remember, the Whites received these days their first aircraft at Antrea, namely two D.F.W. planes. The Reds may have known that, as they made no flights at all after that. There are namely no records of flights in April. On April 7th two enemy planes dropped 12 bombs at Metsäpirtti and several bombs at Rautu. It is supposed that these planes came from the Russian side of the border.

In the beginning of April German troops were advancing towards Helsinki and the highest red command was moved to Viipuri. There the following pilots belonged in April to the "Staff of Commander in Chief of Finnish Red Guards, department of (operative) warfare":

Brjantsev, Boris	pilot officer
Šiskov, Mihail	pilot soldier
Kiseljev, Teodor	pilot soldier

At the end of April Eino Rahja was in St. Petersburg to acquire pilots and aircraft for the Reds. On April 17th he sent to the red commander in chief in Viipuri, Kullervo Manner, the following message: "I send two pilots, make use of them".

On April 20th Kullervo Manner authorised the pilots Brjantsev and Šiskov to travel to St. Petersburg to bring aircraft with equipment.

Even after these actions the flight activity was halted as the Russian pilots were not willing to fly.

Near Viipuri may the other red aircraft have been shot down in April. War Archives has namely the following description of the incident: "The enemy flyers, who couldn' t achieve much, experienced on Antrea front the only casualty during the whole war. After a well aimed shot of our artillery was the other pilot forced to descend and, as the reliable information received later shows, it crashed at Nuoraa bridge, the aircraft was broken up and one of the pilots was crushed to death, the other died of wounds few days later."

Nuoraa is located 6 km south of Viipuri. This would explain why the Reds had in the end only one aircraft in use. About a week before the invasion of Viipuri (*April 29th*) the pilots fled with the remaining aircraft to Russia, this meant the end of red aviation in Finland in 1918.

Short Overview of Red Air Activity (page 225)

As can be seen of the earlier described, the red air activity was on all fronts very scattered and ineffective. This was due to several reason. Firstly they had no uniform and goal-directed command. Same was true with the flight detachments, if you now can call them such. Secondly the aircraft were partly old, which had because of lack of maintenance often all kinds of defects. Additionally also the fuel was many times bad. Thirdly the pilots were badly trained. Pilots and mechanics were Russian and observers were usually Finnish members of the red guard. The pilots were, especially in the end, usually not willing to fly and those flights made, may have been made because of money, it is told that the Reds paid them 500 mk for each flight hour. The members of the red guard acting as observers had no aviation training and therefore their action, for instance in dropping of bombs and reconnaissance, was not effective at all.

Types of operation were dropping of bombs, reconnaissance, spreading of propaganda literature and connection flights.

If the red pilots would have had a systematic and trained leadership and at least the observers had been trained, could their operations have been successful.

For verification and *additional information* the following sources have been used:

Rahja brothers (in Finnish), (<http://www.uta.fi/suomi80/art19.htm>).
Suomen itsenäistymisen kronikka (Chronicle of Finnish Independence), Gummerus, 1992.
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Hannula J.O., Suomen vapaussodan historia (History of Finnish Independence War), WSOY, 1933.