

When a Girl's Tears Saved a Town

by John S. Zielinski

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Zielinski seated in the borrowed costume of a Cossack

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At Her Plea, U.S. Troopers Routed a Bandit Band That Threatened Death to Entire Village

Editor's Note: *Cossacks and cold were not the only foes conquered by the American Expeditionary Force (AEF)¹ in Siberia during the dark days of 1918-19. In this article John S. Zielinski of 474 Hertel Avenue (Buffalo, NY) tells how a detachment he led stepped over the line of official orders and trounced a marauding tribe of Manchurian bandits.*

by John S. Zielinski

I'm married now and am raising a family, and through with war forever, I hope. But on these long winter evenings I like to light my pipe and think over those days in Siberia. I enjoyed the life and although most of the fighting we did was distasteful duty that had to be done, there was one time I killed with genuine justification.

Our Regiment, the 27th Infantry, was commanded by Colonel Charles "Steel-jacket Bill" Morrow, who's at Fort Niagara now. Our headquarters was in Berezovka camp near the city of Verkhine-Udinsk (present day Ulan-Ude) along the Trans-Siberian Railroad² on the Selenga River but the regiment was strung out for hundreds of miles along the railroads, protecting American property and interests and keeping transportation open.

I was a sergeant and being Polish could read, write and speak very passable Russian. So most of my time was spent as an interpreter.

One day in the fall of 1918, I was called to regimental headquarters where John Kelly, the regimental sergeant-major, greeted me. "Johnny, I've contracted with the peasants for a lot of firewood, to be delivered at station Elka," he said. "There will be two headquarters men to check and pay for it. You will take 16 men, a cook and a man from the medical detachment and rations for 60 days and will stay at Elka until further orders. And remember, you will be the farthest outpost in this part of the country."

Soon the camp was in an uproar with everybody in the company begging to go. Life at headquarters was pretty dull. Two of those who wanted to go were Walter Zielny and Victor Paradowski, both of Buffalo. But we couldn't take everyone, so in a few hours the detachment was under way in its special train of three "tepluskas" — Russian four-wheeled boxcars — two for living purposes, and one for kitchen and supply room. Fifteen of the men I took were chosen for their ability to handle a rifle,³ and the sixteenth because of his marksmanship with a Browning automatic rifle (BAR).⁴

All night we rode and Elka was excited when it awakened next morning and found us on the side track. Sergeant Summer and Corporal Nugent from the Quartermaster Corps were there already, and glad to see us, for neither of them spoke Russian.

Life was pleasant at Elka. The natives were hospitable and the long bearded station master Petroff proved to be one of our best friends. Elka needed salt, sugar and soap, and judicious trading with these items kept our bill of fare varied. The natives opened their homes to the Amerikanski soldiers, and it was not long before each man had picked out a pretty Russian "baryshnia" as his particular sweetheart.

The wood was delivered regularly and there was little actual work to do — just guard mount, and occasional target practice, and regular hikes to keep the men in good physical condition.

So weeks passed by quietly enough, until at noon one day in January 1919 a line of sleighs pulled up at the door of our tepluskas. There were a dozen men and a half dozen women and girls, one of them unusually pretty.

The men's faces were grave, and some of the women were crying as we pulled out to see what the racket was about.

Petroff, the long-bearded station master, stepped forward. "These people are from our neighboring village, Staro-Bran," he said. "They are here to beg you, the Amerikanski soldier, to save their village from the Huns (Chinese bandits from Manchuria) who have sent a threat that unless 100,000 rubles (\$1,000 at about this time)⁵ is paid to them by 6:00 o'clock tonight, or they will pillage the town. They can't raise the money and can't expect help from the Russian authorities.

"We of Elka want to add our plea to theirs because Staro-Bran is only 18 vorsts (about 15 miles) distant and

we fear that should they overwhelm Staro-Bran they will come here, too.

"You and your men can repulse these marauders easily — they don't even know you are here. We cannot, for we are not armed."

The boys of my detachment crowded around and voted for fight. They welcomed it as a sort of holiday, something to break the pleasant monotony of our lives. But the responsibility was not theirs — it was mine.

I knew that if the bandits came on to Elka we could beat them off easily and I would be well within my orders in so doing. But my orders didn't allow for any little journeys off-side to hunt trouble and I didn't know what to do. The boys were ganging me and begging to go. Then the Russian girl — the really pretty one — dropped on her knees in the snow and spread out her arms to us. She hadn't stopped crying once, and now she launched into a passionate appeal on behalf the women and the children and the old men in her town.

How could that be answered?

In half an hour 13 of us, including the expert with the Browning, were in sleighs headed for Staro-Bran. There was great excitement as we drove into the main road of the village and stopped at the mayor's house. And all around I saw men and boys, armed with scythes and axes and pitchforks, gathering to offer hopeless battle to the Huns. There were, I learned, just four shotguns⁶ in Staro-Bran.

On the way over I learned that the pretty girl's name was Tania and that she was the mayor's daughter and was engaged to a strapping young ex-hussar named Ivan, who was in charge of the hastily organized local troops, if you could call them that.

We jumped out of our sleighs, and Tania put her arm through mine as we stepped into her father's home. She was smiling and radiant now. At the door, her father, bearded and terribly anxious and the village priest met us, while inside were all the town's prominent men. Gravely they passed around black bread⁷ and salt, which we Americans took. I didn't know what it meant, but Tania pinched off a piece of bread, dipped it in salt and handed it to me, while the others did the same for the other 12 men. I knew then we were to eat it, and we did while a great cheer went up from the town folk. This, it developed, was the customary greeting of Russians to high officials, even the Czar.

Then we were treated to a sumptuous meal, after which two corporals and I drove to the far side of the village in the direction from which the bandits might be expected.

Staro-Bran is a good sized village situated on the bank of a river and consisting of perhaps 300 homes. The villagers are fishermen, lumbermen and farmers, and as Russian villagers go, are prosperous. That is why they were chosen as prey by the bandits. But their prosperity is only comfortable living, and they seldom see any actual money.

At the edge of town we met a group of villagers armed with weapons as they could find and with the village's four shotguns. Ivan, whose weapon was a long cavalry saber, was there on horseback.

Quickly, we sized up the situation. There was a wide stretch of snow and, about 900 yards distant, a dense forest through which the road toward Manchuria was cut. The last two houses in the village faced each other across the road, with windows opening toward the forest and a few yards to each side of the roadway were several big trees.

Our plan of battle was quickly formed, so back to the mayor's house we hurried leaving instructions with Ivan to summon us if the bandits appeared. The other 10 men, we found, had been royally entertained in our absence. An accordion was going full time and a few couples were doing the Cossack dance. Soon, however, the dancing stopped and we sat down for a hot supper.

It was getting dark by now, so we fell in and marched to the edge of town. Ivan was there and reported no sign of the vandals. So, without undue haste, the riflemen were posted in the windows of the two houses and behind two or three of the trees, and the Browning operator and I took our post behind the most advanced tree. The order was explicit — no one was to fire until I signaled.

Two hours dragged by. It became dark but the moon was rising and it and the snow furnished a fair light, although the forest was only a blob of black. I remarked that maybe the bandits won't come. But Ivan, who had left his poorly armed mob at the rear, and had come to my side, knew better. And scarcely had he said it than dark spots started to appear in the road, between the forest and the village.

Minutes passed and the blots grew larger. Then they became a widening line as the Manchurians left their sleighs and organized a rather presentable skirmish formation as if to flank the village. By now they were within 200 yards of us.

Then the line stopped, and the three men on horseback came forward with a white flag. It wouldn't do for them to see us Americans so I sent the machine gunner and the outside riflemen into the darkened houses and told Ivan to dicker with them.

The three rode close, then stopped, and Ivan went forward. One of them handed him a small package wrapped in oil cloth and after a few words Ivan told them to go back and await his answer. Ivan ran into the house with the package. It was a note from the chief of the band — unless the money was paid immediately he would not be responsible for the consequences.

"Are you ready, Ivan?" I asked.

"Any time you say," he answered resolutely.

"All right then. Back to your posts everyone and wait for the signal. Let 'em come after their own answer."

The bandits waited perhaps 15 minutes for a messenger from the village and then when none arrived, began advancing again. I judged, as best as I could, there were probably 120 of them — enough to overpower Staro-Bran and Elka too, if they wished.

"They've even brought sleighs for the loot," pointed out Ivan. "They'll get a surprise though when they have to go back empty."

As the bandits started forward, they opened a ragged fire. No damage was done, however, and there was no return from us until the circular line was within 150 yards.

Then — "Ready, Burt!" I said to the Browning man, waited a second or two until his bead was drawn fine, then gave two quick blasts on a whistle.

Immediately the Browning began its deadly rat-tat-a-tat-tat, while from the windows and behind the trees came steady drumming flashes as the American riflemen poured out steel jackets.

The bandit line was thrown into confusion, with dead and wounded men lying about and with riderless or wounded horses screaming and running back and forth among them. They hadn't expected anything like this.

Burt ceased firing for a moment and readjusted his aim, then the Browning resumed its clatter. Burt was sweeping one wing first, then the other. The bandit line, broken and demoralized became a mob that was falling back, dragging such of its dead and wounded along as it could. The fire grew faster — the boys wanted to get as many of them as they could.

There was a shout behind me, and Ivan's men rushed out to the charge. They got between us and the bandits and we were forced to cease firing. The bandits soon took advantage of this — when they saw only disorganized peasants rushing on them, they reformed a line to meet the attack.

So with fixed bayonets, the 13 of us deployed into skirmish and charged. We were just in time. Half a dozen wounded peasants were running back toward the village. Others lay on the ground, dead or wounded.

Burt, on the flank, threw himself on the ground and opened up the Browning, at a range of less than 50 yards, and the bandits' wing withered. The rest of us went on, and passed through the peasant center. A Manchurian raised his sword at me, and I let him have my bayonet in his stomach. He went down with a grunt. Then I saw two men struggling on the ground. It was Ivan fighting for his life. Having no time to shoot I drove the butt of my gun against the bandit's head and he was through, the long dagger he had raised over Ivan slipping into the snow.

The Manchurians couldn't stand the steel jackets and the bayonets and fled for their sleds, disappearing into the woods. They had left behind more than 20 of their dead and wounded and probably carried away at least that many.

I went back to Ivan who was still on the ground. He was alive, but there was a great gash across his face. Only two Americans had been wounded and only slightly, but the Russians had suffered badly. Seven were dead and a dozen were badly hurt, because of their rash charge.

It was nearly midnight when we fell back into the village, after posting sentries to warn against a return of the bandits. Every house was lighted up. In some there was joy that the bandits had been driven off. In others there was loud weeping for some husband or father who would not return. And in others stricken-faced peasant women hurried back and forth tending the wounds of their men for Staro-Bran had no doctor.

In the mayor's house Ivan lay on a couch, while Tania watched over him, sobbing. Through the long night she sat there while American first aid kits were pressed into service to dress his and others' wounds.

Next day, we piled into sleighs to go back to Elka, after ordering the mayor to bury the dead bandits and care for the wounded until they could be turned over to the authorities and after promising to send our medical corps man back to attend all the wounded. All town was gathered around, the men shaking our hands gratefully and the women and girls crying and calling down blessings on us. They followed us to the edge of town, then

stood waving as long as we were in sight.

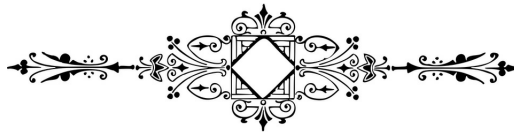
But when we got back to Elka orders to return to headquarters awaited us. The wood had all been delivered and paid for, and our outpost was no longer needed. So we sent a Russian ex-soldier, the only man in Elka who knew anything about wounds, to Staro-Bran to take care of the wounded, and away we went.

It was three months later, when we started the evacuation of Siberia, that we saw Elka again. For day after day troop trains rolled through and it was noon when ours stopped there for an hour's rest. The villagers crowded around joyously greeting the men of the erstwhile Elka detail. Suddenly, two figures burst through. They were Tania and Ivan, who had a long scar on his cheek.

"Yanuk!" (Johnny) they cried, throwing their arms around me and then around others who were in the Staro-Bran fight. "Oh, Yanuk! We're getting married in two weeks and we wanted your boys to be there!"

The engineer sounded his whistle and the men started climbing aboard. "Here," Tania said, "to remember Ivan and Tania!" And around my neck she hung a little silver medallion, while Ivan nodded vigorously and grinned to keep from crying.

A month later I was back in Buffalo, with Tania's trinket my most prized souvenir of those days.



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NOTES

1. The American Expeditionary Force (A.E.F.) was established on July 5, 1917, in France, to fill the need for troops in Europe. Under the command of Gen. John J. Pershing, the A.E.F. fought alongside French Army, British Army, Canadian Army, and Australian Army units against the Imperial German Army. When they first arrived in Europe in June 1917, the A.E.F. had a standing army of 127,500 officers and soldiers. By the end of the war, four million men have served in the Army. The American troops also known as *Doughboys* did not actively participate in battle until October 1917.

After the October 1917 Russian Revolution, part of the A.E.F. was deployed to Siberia and was involved in the Russian Civil War in Vladivostok, Russia, from 1918 to 1920. Commanded by Major General William S. Graves, it eventually totaled 7,950 officers and enlisted men which included the U.S. Army's 27th and 31st Infantry Regiments.

Although General Graves did not arrive in Siberia until September 4, 1918, the first 3,000 American troops disembarked in Vladivostok between August 15 and August 21, 1918. They were quickly assigned guard duty along segments of the railway between Vladivostok and Nikolsk-Ussuriski in the north.

According to an article by Gibson Bell-Smith (See link #1 below), once there, *"Graves would engage not in the kind of structured combat he had expected in Europe but in a wily contest of nerves, with Cossacks, Bolshevik guerrilla forces, and even Japanese army troops looking to bring Siberia into Japan's sphere of influence."*

Unlike his Allied counterparts, General Graves believed their mission in Siberia was to provide protection for American-supplied property and to help the Czechoslovak Legion evacuate Russia, and that it did not include fighting against the Bolsheviks. Repeatedly calling for restraint, Graves often clashed with commanders of British, French, and Japanese forces, who also had troops in the region and who wanted him to take a more active part in the military intervention in Siberia.

To operate the Trans-Siberian Railroad, the Russian Railway Service Corps was formed of U.S. personnel. The A.E.F. was disbanded in 1920.

Background:

1. <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2002/winter/us-army-in-russia-1.html>
2. https://military.wikia.org/wiki/American_Expeditionary_Force
3. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Expeditionary_Force,_Siberia
4. <https://www.loc.gov/collections/stars-and-stripes/articles-and-essays/a-world-at-war/american-expeditionary-forces/>

2. The Trans-Siberian Railroad was conceived by Tsar Alexander III and begun in 1891. It stretches from Moscow east 5,772 miles (9,289 km) to Vladivostok. It is now part of a rail network that reaches into Mongolia, North Korea and China. It has great importance in the economic, military and imperial history of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. The tracks are of the Russian Gauge (1,520 mm) as opposed to Standard Gauge (1,435 mm) used in the United States, Australia, China and most European countries.

The Trans-Siberian line remains the most important transport link within Russia; around 30% of Russian exports travel on this route. While it attracts many foreign tourists, it gets most of its use from domestic passengers. The route passes through some very challenging terrain over eight time zones. Typical passenger travel time from Moscow to Vladivostok is 6 days and 4 hours.

3. The standard US Army infantry weapon at the time was the reliable Springfield M1903 rifle. It had a manually operated bolt, and used .30-06 caliber cartridges stored in a five round fixed internal magazine.

4. John Browning's Automatic Rifle (BAR) M1918 was an innovation. It was light enough for one man to carry into combat at just under 16 pounds, without ammunition. It could fire single or continuous bursts of the US Army's standard .30-06 caliber rifle cartridges from removable 20 round magazines. Usually the gun operator had an assistant to carry and hand him additional pre-loaded magazines.

This rifle also gained a certain dark reputation as the gun preferred by the notorious Bonnie and Clyde - Barrow Gang - for use in bank robberies and shootouts with police.

During the inter-war period a license for its manufacture was purchased by Poland's armed forces and a version chambered to use the 7.92 x 57 mm Mauser cartridge rifle ammunition was produced by Poland's national armory. Small but important changes included a pistol grip and cooling fins along the lower part of the barrel.

5. One-thousand dollars in 1918 was equivalent to today's (2020) \$17,213.11 in purchasing power (as adjusted for inflation).

6. While shotguns could be used for hunting fowl and small game, Siberian villagers kept them mainly to drive off marauding wolves, which, during the severe winters, would come prowling into the settlements to make a quick meal out of the peasants' livestock. The hungry and wily wolf is a staple character of Russian folk tales. A great example is Sergei Prokofiev's musical story *Peter and the Wolf*.

7. An offering of bread and salt is a traditional welcome for guests, being customary to offer it before anything else, with bread having an important place in Slavic tradition, used in rituals. When important, respected, or admired persons arrive, they are given a loaf of bread placed on an embroidered towel. A salt holder or a salt cellar is placed on top of the bread loaf or secured in a hole on the top of the loaf. The traditional bread offering is a symbol of family unity and goodness, and salt—prosperity and security for the guest.