

## Leader, Builder and Defender of the Armed Forces Jaeger General Hugo Viktor Österman (1892–1975)

### WHO WAS HUGO ÖSTERMAN?

Hugo Viktor Österman was the third Commander-in-Chief of the Finnish Defence Forces. To the present generation, the assessment of Österman's work has remained somewhat unclear if not outright unjust. To a large extent, this is due to the obscure events of the Winter War. People tend to have forgotten the brilliant military career of General Österman during the two decades between the War of Independence and the Winter War. In his central positions as the Infantry Inspector (1928 to 1932) and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces (1933 to 1939), his influence in building the army that entered the Winter War was maybe greater than that of any other person.

In the war, he was appointed to lead the defence at the main theatre of war, the Karelian Isthmus, as the Commander-in-Chief of the Isthmus Army. Serious differences of views with Supreme Commander Mannerheim made Österman's leadership difficult already during mobilisation (YH, or Extraordinary Exercises). The friction in collaboration continued during the first days of battle with protective forces and finally developed to an outright confidence crisis in February 1940. At that point, General Österman saw that his only option was to resign on the plea of personal health reasons. In addition to the friction with the Supreme Commander, Hugo Österman's leadership was hampered by the impulsive measures of Harald Öhquist, Commander-in-Chief of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army Corps. The first few chapters of the dissertation discuss the critical phases of the Winter War and the differences of opinions during times of crisis, concerning the correct defence tactics to be employed in the Karelian Isthmus.

The first part, describing the research problems and building up tension, ends on the Sunday of destruction, 18<sup>th</sup> February 1940. The Mannerheim Line had failed, and the troops were retreating in a more or less confused order to a new defence position chosen by the Supreme Commander. At the nerve-racking critical phase of the war, we will hold the situation, leave the exhausted troops at a poor intermediate line and their frontline commanders uninformed of the arrangements in the Headquarters, and return to the early stages of Lieutenant General Österman's life. Who was Hugo Österman?

Which ingredients made up the man who was responsible for commanding all the defensive measures in the direction of main effort in the Winter War? What were the reasons that denied the possibility for a General with a crucial influence on Finland's military success to make a final breakthrough as the commander of operations at the main theatre in the winter of 1940?

## THE JAEGER PERIOD AND THE WAR OF INDEPENDENCE – CIVIL WAR

Hugo Viktor Österman was born in Helsinki on the 5th of September 1892. Viktor, his Swedish-speaking father, originated in a farmer family in Inkoo, but had moved to the capital at quite a young age to join the police force. Hugo's mother, a farmer's daughter from Sysmä, died at a young age when the son was only three years old. In 1911, Hugo matriculated at Svenska normallyceum with the best marks in the Helsinki region and enrolled in history studies at the University of Helsinki. In February 1915, he interrupted his well-advanced studies. Urged by some of his daring fellow students, the young arts student decided to leave for Germany to receive military training. In the middle of the First World War, the aim was to get ready for tasks that would help the fatherland to free herself from the continuously worsening conditions brought by a tyrannical government.

Hugo Österman did not manage to reach Lockstedter Lager with the first wave, and therefore he was forced to wait for his turn when people were appointed to higher positions of leadership. However, the extraordinary abilities and versatile skills that were evident right from the beginning soon brought Österman to the top of the Finnish officers. Our volunteer was strong both mentally and physically. The top student was accustomed to hard labour in the outdoors during his summers in Inkoo, so the rough style of training and the exaggerated concept of discipline in the Prussian military could not discourage him. Besides, the men were serious when coming to Germany to learn military skills and leadership. Oberzugführer Österman was one of the strong personalities who were able to maintain an optimistic community spirit among the Pfadfinders during the most difficult times.

His bold initiativeness, apparent leadership abilities, good command of German, combat-proven courage and prudence, co-operation skills and instructor's talent guaranteed that on the "Libau list" of February 1918, as a matter of course, Österman was one of the few men promoted to the rank of major. The average age of majors was 29 years, but Österman had only turned 25. The ultimate goal that all Pfadfinders in particular, but also the whole Jaeger Battalion 27, had dreamed of attaining was freedom and independence of Finland. It finally came true through the War of

Independence – Civil War. In 1918, Finland rose to the family of independent nations. Jaeger Major Hugo Viktor Österman was commanding one of the units that led the battles of the winter 1918 to a favourable end.

After the main body of the Jaegers had arrived in Vaasa on 25<sup>th</sup> February 1918, Major Österman was assigned to Kuopio to set up the 5<sup>th</sup> Jaeger Battalion. In a short period of time, the efficient instructor turned his men into a combat-worthy unit. Sakari Simelius, one of the subsequent Commanders-in-Chief of the Defence Forces, has told about the time when he was receiving instruction in Österman's unit as a 18-year-old schoolboy: "We, then Österman's subordinates, remember our Commander with great gratitude, admiration and pride." As Commander of the 5<sup>th</sup> Jaeger Battalion, Hugo Österman participated in the takeover of Tampere as a securing unit; after that, he was assigned to the Karelian Isthmus to command the 5<sup>th</sup> Jaeger Regiment. There, among other tasks, Österman cleared Raivola of Russian naval troops while meeting strong resistance as well as commanded the siege and final captivation of the Ino fortress.

## REGIMENT COMMANDER AND INFANTRY INSPECTOR

After the War of Independence, Finland needed a Defence Force to maintain its newly acquired freedom. The Jaegers provided their priceless contribution to building the Defence Forces. Without them, it would not have been possible to build our defences to a fairly efficient state in a short period of time. Hugo Österman contributed to this pioneering work by serving as the commander of Pori Regiment from 1919 to 1925. He created the Pori spirit and Pori standards of training that made his regiment famous. The high level of skill and endurance in the regiment was noted in many inspections. For example, in an inspection carried out by the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces in 1920, the regiment was named the best military unit in the country. Österman married Baroness Marga von Troil in the autumn of 1919 in Turku. Their daughter Margaretha was born on 20<sup>th</sup> July 1921.

From the beginning of Hugo Österman's period as the commander, Pori Regiment won fame for its shooting results. The regiment won the Parola Shield, the traditional prize in shooting competitions between various military units, each and every year when Österman served as the commander. Being an unselfish man, Commander Österman gave the primary credit to the company commanders, but the whole regiment understood the importance of the Commander's participation at shooting exercises and at the actual competition grounds on the Parola moor. During his seven years as Regiment Commander in Turku, Lieutenant Colonel Österman was also building his own future. In the Defence Forces as well as elsewhere, others started to regard him as a man for the future.

Thanks to the ability that he showed in his position of Regiment Commander, Österman was appointed to a variety of positions of trust. In the autumn of 1925, while he was just 33 years old and held the rank of Colonel, he was appointed to command the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division in Mikkeli. His period of service in Mikkeli was quite short, but according to Österman himself, it was an “educating intermediate period” in his career. In 1927, he was detached to the Swedish Academy of War for a year. In the autumn of 1928, Colonel Österman returned from Stockholm with an exceptionally good certificate of graduation that leveraged him directly to the post of Infantry Inspector.

During Hugo Österman’s period as the Inspector, the foundations for Finnish infantry as well as infantry tactics were laid. Under his command, the first Finnish combat manuals were written, the main principles of combat suitable for the Finnish conditions were determined, and armament was developed. Training inspections conducted by Österman were demanding events where the Inspector’s own example shone down on the performance of his troops. His excellent level of field experience gave him lots of energy to return the prestige of the main branch of our military that had for some reason diminished earlier. Hugo Österman’s characteristics included strict military discipline, fairness, prudence and boldness as well as a good sense of humour.

## COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF OF THE ARMED FORCES

During his period as Infantry Inspector, Österman also held the post of Vice Minister of Defence in Pehr Evind Svinhufvud’s government from 1931 to 1932 and served as the Governor of the Uusimaa Province in the summer of 1932. President Lauri Kristian Relander also greatly appreciated our young military leader. While the position of Aarne Sihvo as the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces was shaken in the late 1920’s, Relander regarded Colonel Österman as Sihvo’s successor as a matter of course. In January 1933, Svinhufvud who had been elected President of the Republic, appointed Österman, now a Major General, to the post of Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces. His superiors gladly granted the talented man his new position. After a long time of internal unrest, the Defence Forces could finally operate without frictions. The personnel generally regarded Österman as an able professional who was not limited by any dependencies. Hugo Österman also had an eye for the requirements of other branches of the military besides the Army. The top officers of the Navy and the Air Force were able to negotiate with him safely, trusting on the even-handedness of their Commander-in-Chief.

In his post as the Commander-in-Chief, Österman had a great influence on the development of the Armed Forces. In addition to training, he paid attention to war-preparedness. The transition to an area-based system was a significant achievement. It increased the speed and reliability of mobilisation. The development achievements were due to the fruitful co-operation between Hugo Österman and his close Jaeger fellow Lauri Malmberg, Supreme Commander of the Civil Guards. The Österman–Malmberg line was strong and achieved good results in building a solid co-operation between the Civil Guards and the military.

In the Defence Council, Österman had to fight beside Marshal Mannerheim to improve the material situation of the Defence Forces. Österman was willing and able to take the floor at various working groups and other occasions, and in the course of time, he obtained a firm and wide grip of the whole defence administration. Österman's authority was further increased by the fact that he could not be branded as an advocate of any specific issue. At the eleventh hour, a Basic Supply Act was enacted which was able to increase material readiness to some extent, but not even close to adequately, just before the outbreak of the Winter War.

In his post as Deputy Minister of Defence from 1930 to 1931, Österman vigorously pushed Marshal Mannerheim to the positions of Chairman of the Defence Council and war-time Supreme Commander. This arrangement, born on Hugo Österman's initiative, also signified a decrease in his own powers. On 1<sup>st</sup> January 1938, The Operations Department and portions of the General Staff were transferred from the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces to the Chairman of the Defence Council, who was fastidious about his authority. The co-operation between Mannerheim and Österman was smooth, however. The Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces also had a good relationship with Minister of Defence Juho Niukkanen. In June 1939, Marshal Mannerheim threatened both the Cabinet and President Kallio with his resignation, but gave up his plan. In late November, the Field Marshal was still planning to resign as a protest against the slowness of the administration in improving the nation's defences. Mannerheim told Österman that he would transfer him to the Headquarters and yield his post as Supreme Commander to him. How would Hugo Österman's military career have looked like if there would have been enough time to carry out this plan?

## THE WINTER WAR; ADDRESSING THE MAIN RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND PROBLEMS

After the outbreak of the Winter War, by surprise or not, on 30<sup>th</sup> November 1939, there was no time to carry out the exchange plan drafted by the

Supreme Commander, and Österman quickly returned from his Headquarters practice back to Imatra to assume his assigned post of Commander of the Isthmus Army. Commanded by a long-time Infantry Inspector and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, the well-trained field army determinedly started defending our country in circumstances that seemed almost hopeless. Implementing the defence tactics chosen by its Commander Hugo Österman, the Army of the Karelian Isthmus pulled out and grouped itself in primary position at the Mannerheim line to receive the massive offensive that the enemy had planned to be the decisive step in the war.

The command system improvised for the main theatre of war, the Karelian Isthmus, never functioned smoothly during the whole war. Hugo Österman, who was in charge of defences on the Isthmus, was repeatedly under pressure from both above and below. The mechanisms of three overlapping high-ranked commanders should have matched each other without squeaking. However, this did not happen. Lieutenant General Österman thought with reason that as the commander on the Isthmus, he was in charge of implementing the defences. The major Russian offensive in February cracked the primary position at Lähde. In a biography, it is necessary to study the critical events of war quite widely to get the correct picture of the role and efforts of the Commander of the Isthmus Army in a delaying action turned desperate. How and where did he command the defences? Was he able to hold his nerves in his role as an intermediate commander? The Supreme Commander and the Commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army Corps both had their strong ambition to command the battle. They made their views and beliefs clearly audible and visible to Österman, the Commander of the Army.

After February 17<sup>th</sup>, when the troops had laboriously retreated from the Mannerheim line to a poorly equipped intermediate position, the Commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army Corps, Harald Öhquist, abandoned his idea on persistently adhering to a particular area of terrain and adopted Österman's opinion: a style of defence that would save manpower. Division commanders of the Western Isthmus also strongly demanded a retreat directly to the back position in Viipuri (Vyborg). The combined opinion of the frontline commanders was contrary to that of the Supreme Commander and the Headquarters. The Marshal suspected that the commanders were not committed to persistently defending the intermediate position according to his will and command, but on the contrary, requested instructions to prepare for continuing retreat. In the conflict situation that resulted – or was fabricated – Lieutenant General Österman decided to step down. The harmony of co-operation with the Supreme Commander had totally broken.

Undoubtedly, the decision was extremely hard for the former Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces. Österman must have anticipated that frontline co-operation under the Marshal's command would not have turned

out to be satisfactory in the future, either. At least not in the war in progress. The conflict that had developed between the two men was too strong to be forgotten from the Marshal's side. But, was Österman able to foresee that differences in opinion could prevent him from serving as a frontline commander also in possible future wars under the Marshal's supreme command? For the rest of the Winter War, Hugo Österman had to serve as the Chief Inspector of Military Education.

## THE INTERIM PEACE AND THE CONTINUATION WAR

In the autumn of 1940, Germany's relations with Finland seemed to be improving slightly. Marshal Mannerheim commissioned Major General Paavo Talvela, officially a civilian at the time, to establish relations with the top command of the German armed forces. Hugo Österman also visited Germany a few times during the autumn, on a congratulatory visit as well as in connection with shooting sports. Österman still served as the Chairman of the Finnish Shooting Association. General Österman's old reputation and his presence in functions arranged for familiarising Talvela with the Germans had significance. Of course, the Germans were aware that due to the conflict during the Winter War, the former Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces no longer had a position close to Mannerheim. Österman was not a negotiator authorised by Mannerheim. Following the traditions of the old Jaeger spirit, his activities were focused on developing the idea of recruiting a new SS Battalion. Hugo Österman was one of the initiators and supporters of the project, but officially steered clear of any memberships or leadership posts.

At the outbreak of the Continuation war, Österman was still serving as an inspector. He was actively seeking frontline duty with no success. Marshal Mannerheim demanded that in addition to having skill, ambition and a number of other characteristics that he appreciated, his frontline commanders should be successful. The Marshal's opinion was that Hugo Österman had not succeeded in getting a cushioning grip on his choleric subordinate Harald Öhquist nor been able to prevent the collapse of the Mannerheim line at Lähde in the Summa front sector. Even though the Supreme Commander did not let Österman get to the frontline, he sent him as his representative to the German Headquarters in February 1944. After returning from his assignment in Germany on 20<sup>th</sup> July, General Österman served the last weeks of the war as the Infantry Inspector and continued to hold that position at peacetime until his resignation in December 1945. His long and distinguished military career was over. He had to move on to assume civilian duties.

## TO THE CIVILIAN LIFE AND ECONOMIC MANAGEMENT

In the winter of 1946, at an age of more than fifty years, the retired Lieutenant General invested all his enthusiasm to pursue totally new opportunities in the economy. Already in 1937, Österman had been invited to take up a business management position in Turku, but at that time, he could not accept the idea of quitting the military. Times had changed. Giving up the tasks and position of a General and starting a civilian career in the economy is not generally regarded to be easy. In this case, the branch in question was quite difficult – labour market policy with its troublesome compensation negotiations. However, the General was able to succeed. His constructive approach to co-operation as well as the knowledge of human nature and honest outlook that he had learned in the military helped Hugo Österman to deal openly with different kinds of people. Österman served almost fifteen years as the Managing Director of Electrical and Power Plant Employers before retiring in the autumn of 1960.

When studying the most significant merits in Lieutenant General Hugo Viktor Österman's life – Summa-sum – the 1930's, up until the successful defensive battles of the Winter War in February 1940, can be regarded as the most important period. Under his leadership, a national army with a strong spirit and good standards of education was built and trained, and this army stood up to its crucial test in the Winter War. The Österman–Malmberg line had been successful during the pre-war years. Without doubt, the unselfish Jaeger General was the most significant builder of the Finnish defence forces. Being a modest man, he always wanted to step back and deny his own achievements when stating that “the man who, from the turn of the century, has been able to follow Finland's struggle for her freedom, must be thankful to Destiny for the opportunity to take part in achieving and defending the freedom of his country to the best of the abilities given to him”. Following the traditions of Hugo Viktor Österman's contemporaries, the biographer crystallises his character and activities in three or four words: “viel leisten, wenig hervortreten, mehr sein als scheinen”.