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# The catastrophe in the mountains

## One of the disasters for the Swedish army during the Great Nordic War

By MONICA FOGELQVIST

### A background:

During the Great Nordic War that started in 1701 several surrounding states (Denmark, Russia, Poland) attacked Sweden. Sweden defended itself, and at first was victorious, but as time went on the fortunes of war changed. In an effort to conquer Moscow in 1709 the Swedish army was defeated at Poltava in what is now the Ukraine, and thousands of soldiers spent several years in prison camps in Siberia.

In June 1715, Prussia declared war on Sweden, attacked Pomerania and besieged Stralsund. The attacking Prussian army counted 50,000 soldiers.

King Karl XII had at this time left Bender<sup>1</sup> in Turkey, where he had stayed for several years after Poltava. He was now in Stralsund,<sup>2</sup> but left the city for Sweden just before the city capitulated. In October 1715, Hanover also declared war on Sweden. Back in Sweden, Karl XII planned countermoves. One move was to attack Danish Norway.<sup>3</sup> The attack on Norway was launched on 18 February 1716. The attack was difficult due to very bad snowstorms and in April the campaign was terminated. During 1716, the last of the Swedish possessions in Northern Germany fell to enemy hands.

During 1717 Karl XII planned for another attack on Norway. One of the purposes of the attack was to obtain a hold on Denmark in the coming peace negotiations.

In August 1718 the attack was launched on two fronts. One attack went from the Swedish provinces Värmland/Dalsland into Norway, and one went from Jämtland into Trondheim County in more northern Norway. Swedish General Carl Gustaf Armfeldt was in charge of the northern attack, the one from Jämtland.

The neighboring peoples – *Jämtar* (people from Jämtland, Sweden) and *Trønder* (people from Trøndelag, Norway)

– were forced into armed conflicts with one another almost exactly 300 years ago because of great power politics: King Karl XII would once again bring war against Norway.

In August 1718, Armfeldt was ordered to attack Trondheim, while Karl XII attacked Fredriksten's fortress in Halden in southern Norway. Armfeldt entered Trondheim, thus diverting attention from the king's own action in the south.

The army that had gathered in Duved in Jämtland consisted of 6,000 men, mostly soldiers from Finnish regiments, but also by soldiers from Hälsingland, Jämtland's cavalry company, and Jämtland's regiment with approximately 1,300 men.

The march to Norway and Trondheim took much longer and required much more effort than expected during the reconnaissance, as the snow melting in 1718 was late and it had been raining heavily.

These circumstances caused the rivers to flood and made the land almost impossible to walk on, and to drag the heavy cannons and the carriages over the moun-

tains was an almost insurmountable project. The soldiers were forced to fetch tree trunks down in the valleys, drag them up the mountain to build bridges in order to pull the heavy carts and cannons forward.

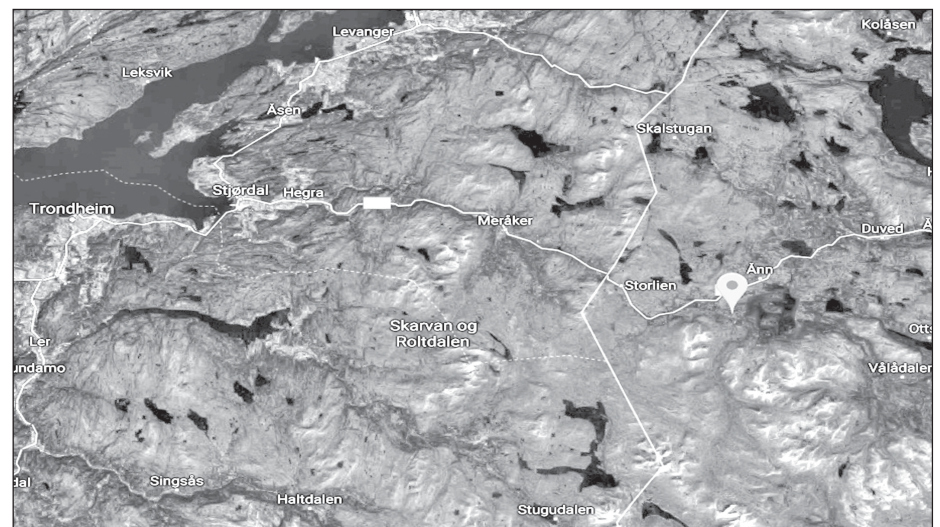
Even today, parts of these bridges are visible.

A result of the 180 kilometer journey across the mountains to Trondheim taking much longer than the estimated 30 days was that the supplies were not enough.

To provide the whole army with food during the four months in the area around Trondheim, and while awaiting an order to attack the city, the soldiers robbed the Norwegian peasants. The natives own supplies became completely depleted so that some died of starvation.

In addition, large parts of the army were not equipped with clothes and shoes suitable for winter conditions. This meant that the soldiers desperately plundered farms and stole clothes where they could.

It was a tired and hungry group of soldiers who, in late 1718, received the news that the king had been shot dead.



The straight line shows the border between Norway and Sweden. Trondheim to the left and Handöl (the mark) and Duved to the right. (Google maps)



Lieutenant General Carl Gustaf Armfelt, b. 1666 in Ingria, died 1736 in Pernå, Finland (then part of the Swedish realm).

King Karl XII was killed in action on 30 November 1718, at Fredrikssten fortress, near Halden in southern Norway, and the whole Norwegian campaign was terminated.

The northern Swedish army outside Trondheim now had to leave Norway as quickly as possible.

## Go back to Sweden!

On New Year's Day 1719, Armfeldt and his men broke away from Tydalen to take the fastest way across the mountains to Handöl on the Swedish side, a distance of 55 kilometers that in good weather could be done in two days.

Unfortunately, a violent storm broke out the same afternoon. Armfeldt took Nor-

wegian women as hostages in order to induce Norwegian guides to show the way over the mountains. They were forced to camp at Lake Essand, where they burned gunpowder and sleds to try to keep warm. On the first night, about 200 men died from the cold.

The storm continued the next day with ice and heavy snowfall, and also the following day. There was chaos and horror when men and horses died in their attempt to reach Handöl, a village that consisted of only three farms at that time. All equipment was left on the mountain, and it was said that men and horses died standing up as they fought against the storm.

A Norwegian major, Emahusen, testified that in Tydalen he saw up to 40 dead Swedish soldiers who were in full accoutrement with knapsacks on their backs wherever he looked. Along the way, dead horses and men lay everywhere, the sledges stood loaded but both horses and drivers were dead.

On 4 and 5 January, the majority of the survivors reached Handöl, and in the mountain there were about 3,000 dead soldiers. At the accommodations in Duved, a bit from Handöl, another 700 people died. Of the original 6,000 *Karoliner*<sup>4</sup> that began the march against Trondheim, a little more than 2,000 survived, amongst whom 600 were injured and handicapped for the rest of their lives. The field doctor had a hard job amputating the limbs of the frost-bitten men under difficult conditions.

In 1889, the farmer Henrik Olausson found a soapstone board in a field in Handöl with the inscription: "Anno 1719

on 20 January, 600 people were buried here." In 1936 the mass grave was found.

Even today you can find remains of the soldiers who died on the mountain, as well as the remnants of their belongings.

It was said that the year after this disaster, the amount of wolves and foxes in the mountain area increased due to the fact that they had much access to horse and human meat.

The memory of this terrible event lived in the county for a long time, and memorials are found in several places in Jämtland, for example in Hallen (where only 6 men returned from the company) and in Duved.

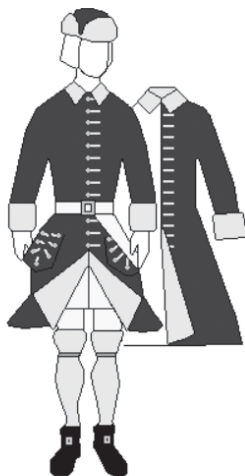
## The Armfelt retreat

The disastrous return from Norway on New Year's Day 1719 was something that probably affects all of us who have roots in Jämtland, and was a tragedy that affected all the families who had sons, brothers, fathers, and spouses who were soldiers in Karl XII's army.

I think most of the families in Jämtland had someone involved. I myself have several ancestors who lost their lives, and as many that returned and lived the rest of their lives as amputees.

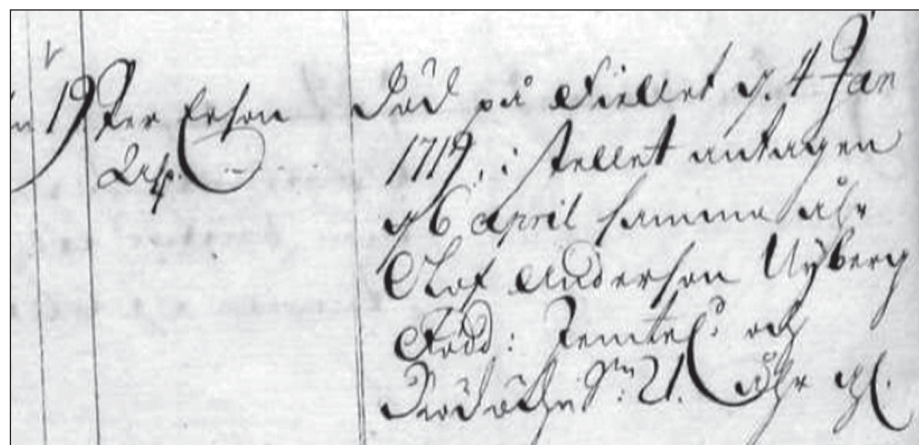


An early Jämtland regimental flag.



Jämtland (1700-1721)

A Jämtland soldier from around 1720. The coat was dark blue, and the other parts of the uniform were yellow.



Part of the information about soldier #19 Per Ersson Asp, who died on the mountain 4 January 1719; in his place was enlisted on 6 April of the same year Olof Andersson Nyberg, born in Jämtland and Rödön, 21 years old. (Generalmönsterrullor - Jämtlands fältjägerregemente (Z) 715 (1720-1721) Bild 130 / sid 10. [Arkiv Digital]).

## My soldier in the retreat

My ancestor Per Olofsson was born in 1682 as the third of seven siblings, the son of the farmer Olof Jönsson and his wife Kerstin Persdotter in Valla on Frösön in Jämtland.

The first time I encountered Per was in the court minutes of Sunne *Tingslag* (Jämt.), during the winter court meeting in February 1711. He had been a dragoon named Wallberg (after his farm Valla) in the Jämtland Dragoon Regiment since 1708. He was sued at the court meeting by the county bailiff at Frösön, Johan Lund, after he had slandered and threatened the bailiff at a military training camp in Diger-näs.

According to witnesses, Per Olofsson Wallberg had been a little drunk and in a cabin had attacked a wooden post with his sword. He had said in *Jämska* (local dialect) that the bailiff had persecuted his father ever since Per had shot a wolf and received compensation for it instead of the bailiff. Per threatened to harm the bailiff. That time Per was only fined because he could blame the threats and rudeness on the drunkenness.

Later that year Per was one of the soldiers from Frösön who, on September 28, was sent to the Norwegian border as a guard.

In December, 1715, Peter was promoted to corporal and – at the time of the catastrophic incident in 1718 – was a sergeant.

On March 3, 1720, the general muster roll notes that he has been transferred to *Livkompaniet* from *Oviken's kompani*. He had been frostbitten on the mountain in January, 1718, and discharged from the army on 12 June 1719. He was also granted a small pension upon his discharge (*gratial*). Wallberg was discharged and recommended for continued support because he had served eleven years and both his feet had been completely frozen during the last Norwegian campaign.

## Marriage and family

Luckily for me, Per did not become completely discouraged by the fact that both his legs were amputated below the knee and thereafter he had to use prosthetic wooden legs. In November, 1721, he married a girl from the neighboring village of Vagled named Lucia Andersdotter.



*This scene from the mountains was found in the Swedish section of a site called "Total War Center" (<http://www.twcenter.net>).*

In the following years, Per and Lucia lived their lives as any peasant family in Jämtland did at that time. They appeared a couple of times in the court minutes; for example, they inherited from Lucia's grandmother. Another time their sheep were killed by a neighbor's dog.

What was a little different in their case was that Per could read and write and once was accused of lampooning the commissar Lars Bergman.

Per and Lucia had ten children during the period of 1722 to 1743, of which the youngest daughter Karin Persdotter became my grandmother's grandmother's grandmother's mother.

## Domestic problems

However, in the court minutes of 1735 it appears that they lived not a wholly harmonious life. Per Wallberg and his wife Lucia shared the farm Valla with Per's brother's son Per and his family. At the court meeting the nephew and his wife testified that there were terrible brawls between Per Wallberg and Lucia, that Per would swear and shout and pull Lucia's hair, and even hit her. She sometimes had to flee to the neighbors to escape her husband's anger.

The pastor Wargentin testified that he had been to the farm several times to try to persuade Per to behave properly, but the turmoil continued.

Per fell on his knees and begged forgiveness, promising to never hurt his wife again. Even Lucia asked, while crying, that her husband not be punished. Per had to pay a fine for his swearing and because he had hit his wife.

Although Per seemed to have trouble with alcohol, he had been the teacher of the daughter of the bailiff Olof Klockhoff and had taught her to read in the ABC book. In 1739 Per had required to be paid by the student's father.

In March, 1748, Per ended up in jail. In January he had been drunk at home on his farm and hit his sister's son Erik Olofsson in Östberg. He had hit him in the head and on his back with his musket, drawing blood. For that he was punished by being put on bread and water for eight days at the Frösön jail.

In 1749 Per reached the high age (!) of 67 years and handed over the care for the farm to his eldest son Olof Persson because he was now too old to farm the land.

On July 8, 1762, Per's wife Lucia died of fever and three years later, Per passed

away on August 18.

On August 25, 1765, the dragoon Lundqvist's son Erik in Bällsta was buried, five weeks and three days old.

In the same plot, the former sergeant Petter Wallberg in Valla was buried, who died August 18, 83 years old.

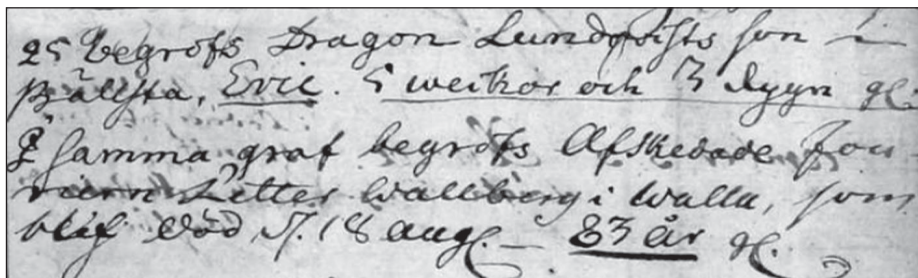
Although Per does not appear to have been the nicest person, I feel compassion for him, and knowing of his experiences, I'm impressed with what he still managed to do. Per probably had PTSD after all the terrible trauma he had suffered in his youth, and perhaps that explains why he lived the life he did.

(Even though, before the disaster on the mountain, he had shown that he could booze and threaten . . .)

He nevertheless reached an old age and even survived his wife, and cared for his farm for many years despite his amputated legs, which could not have been the easiest at that time.

#### Endnotes:

- 1) More on the Great Nordic War can be found on p. 26.
- 2) Bender is a city that belonged to the Ottoman empire in the 1700s, and now is in Romania. The Swedish king Karl XII took refuge there after the disaster at Poltava in 1709, when most of the Swedish army became prisoners of war in Russia. The king stayed in the Ottoman area until 1714 when he returned to Stralsund, and in 1715 returned to Sweden proper. During his absence Sweden was ruled by the King's Council.
- 3) Stralsund in northern Pomerania in Germany was one of the gains for Sweden from the



Death notice for Petter Wallberg. (Frösö (Z) C:1 (1692-1777) Bild 2840 / sid 557 v114423.b2840.s557 [ArkivDigital]).

Treaty of Westfalia in 1648. It was conquered by enemy forces in 1715, but was returned to Sweden during the peace negotiations in 1720.

- 4) Denmark and Norway were joined in a union since the mediaeval times. After the Napoleonic wars Norway was ceded to Sweden in the Peace Treaty of Kiel in 1814. The union was peacefully dissolved in 1905.
- 5) As all the Swedish kings since 1654 had the first name **Karl**, their soldiers in the army were called *karoliner*.

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Rullor 1620-1723 (SVAR), Frösö socken A0054754\_00018

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Frösö C:1 (ArkivDigital) 14423.b2840.s557



Karl XII (b. 1682), portrait from 1706.

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## A story from the 1860s

BY ELISABETH THORSELL

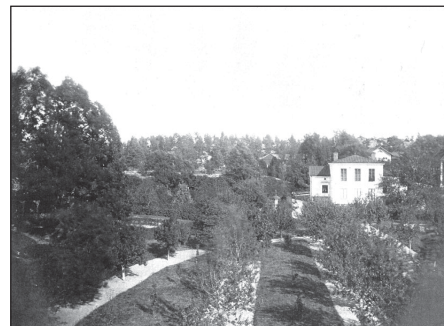
In those times, and maybe much later, it was the custom to serve coffee and something to eat when a person came to a fine mansion and delivered something to the kitchen. The housekeeper should first ask three times, before it was polite to accept the offer.

A young girl, about age 12, from a fisherman's family in the Småland archipelago delivered some fish to the mansion. Then she was asked twice if she wanted a cup of coffee, and then the girl left.

Later she was found in tears, and was asked why she was sad? She answered "the housekeeper only asked me twice!" Evidently the housekeeper did not think she needed to be extra polite to this young girl.

The word for this behaviour is "truga", maybe translated as "urge".

This story was told to me by my grandmother, who had it from her mother-in-law, who grew up in the Småland archipelago during the 1860s.



Åldersbäck manor in Gladhammar parish, (Kalm.), where this happened.