

Welcome to Finland

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I am not big on dioramas, they usually come under the category of too much like hard work. Back in the Seventies companies sold “diorama” kits. These contained a couple of models, a base, and sundry items like trees and bags of green powder that I am sure some people tried to smoke or snort. The sets made by Nitto had particularly good injection molded bases, unlike the flimsy vac formed ones by everyone else. There were 12 Nitto sets, and the edges of one base would match the edges of others, the idea being buy the lot and you would have an entire battlefield, assuming that WW2 tank battles took place at ranges of 40 feet. More on Nitto later. Sometimes I find a kit of an artillery piece with a crew, and this just says “put me on a base”. I have since discovered that cases for Boy Band CDs make excellent bases for this.



Anyway, on to the Winter War. In 1939 Stalin decided that the USSR wasn't big enough, and wanted a bit of Finland, by diplomacy first of all, and after the Finns had a think about this and declined the offer; by force. On 30 November the Soviets

invaded. This was not a minor border skirmish, the Red Army sent in 450,000 men, more than the Allies landed on D-Day in Normandy. Well that was the end of Finland, except that the Finns had not read the



script. They managed to keep the Soviets at bay for 105 days and inflict serious losses. The Winter War is almost unheard of here. The books I read in my teenage years mentioned all the usual battles and theatres, but ignored the Winter War. If the Winter War had not happened, Germany would have defeated the Soviet Union. While the Red Army's inability to defeat Finland confirmed Hitler's view that the Soviet Union would be a pushover, he would have gone ahead with Barbarossa anyway. However the Winter War showed the Reds how unprepared they were to fight in winter, but they were by the winter of 1941-42.

The Finns were outnumbered, and short of everything especially heavy weapons. Petrol bombs had first appeared in the Spanish Civil War, but the Finns made them into an art form. Initially a cottage industry, the demand for petrol bombs was such that the state distillery Alko (I kid you not) was brought in, and made thousand a day. These used a mix of petrol, oil for heat, and pine tar for stickyness. When the Red Air Force bombed Helsinki on the opening day of the war, Soviet foreign minister Vyacheslav Molotov told the world they were just dropping food because they were such nice guys. Molotov must have been the predecessor of Iraq's Comical Ali. The Finns referred to the cluster bombs as Molotov's bread baskets. To continue the honor, Finnish petrol bombs were henceforth known as Molotov Cocktails, a name that has stuck like pine tar ever since.

In the 1930s the Red Army had trained for

tank warfare on open country, but in the forests and logging trails of Finland their columns had all the mobility of the South Eastern Arterial in peak hour. One tactic I had read about was the tank hunter teams. This was also in a Finnish movie called, unsurprisingly, The Winter War. Or Talvisota, in Finn. One man would ram a log between the tank's sprocket and track, stopping the tank. Having done this he would scarp. The next two men would hurl their Molotovs, and the fourth man would be waiting with a submachine gun to deal with the tank crew. Not much point in letting the crew get away and be issued with another tank. For many years I had an idea in my brain to do a diorama of this.



So I had a cunning plan for my Soumen hanke (Finnprojekt), all I needed were some hardware. I had a Nitto base that could be used as a bit of a forest trail. For a tank a T26 was the choice, because the T26 was the most common tank used by the Red Army in Finland, and they were particularly vulnerable to Molotovs. Conveniently the T26 had a vent on the engine deck, and an engine that usually leaked fuel and oil even when it was working properly. S-Model make a suitable T26 kit. That duly got built in no time, and I left it plain green as the Soviets initially did not even think of whitewashing their tanks. One thing Finland is not short of is pine trees, so that was the next item on the list. At Harpers I found a kit of Woodland Scenics pine trees. This had 24 flat-molded trunks in four sizes and a bag of green fluff. The method was to twist the trunks, so that the branches stuck out in all directions, and then with some stupid-glue on the ends of branches, dip them in the fluff. Instant tree. Now came the hard bit: finding Finn infantry figures. I found some by Strelets, but these guys were in 1944 summer kit, and totally wrong for the Winter War. Fortunately Zvezda made some Germans in winter uniform. This is a set of 5 figures, in four poses, including one lying, and one with an MP44 SMG throwing a potato masher.

Finn infantry wore greatcoats too, and they used all sorts of gear, including the German 1916 helmet (stahlhelm). The Zvezda figures had the WW2 helmet, but as my high school physics teacher used to say, close enough's good enough. The best thing about Zvezda figures is that they are polystyrene, so I was able to do an arm transplant, and the submachine gunner gave his throwing arm to his comrade, who became one of the Molotov throwers. The prone man lost his rifle and gained a log instead.



Despite having all the components for several months I finally realized I needed to extract the digit. I actually started assembling this on the Tuesday before the show, and began by making trees. I made 10 and then worked out their position on the base, and drilled some holes for them. Another bit of trial and error involved positioning the T26, and the 4 soldiers. The base got a coat of white paint, followed by some Woodland Scenics gravel, and more white paint. I stuck the T26 on with PVA, positioned the log man, and as the other 3 had pins on their feet, drilled some holes in the base to locate them. It was completed on Friday and taken to the show. Like the Winter War, about two people read the blurb and understood the significance. The rest just saw a green tank in some trees. That's to be expected.