

THE RAID

LEGEND OF THE LAST VIKINGS

TAKLAQAN

We then waited until sunset and leaving the two couples we traveled due south and crossed the river. After crossing we turned due west, staying well clear of the Kremianets and the town. When we arrived at a point almost due south of the town, we closed in on it until we arrived at a point where we could clearly see the Kremianets but were as safe as we could be from any prying eyes in the town. We halted and surveyed the scene for a while.

“Cant see much activity ‘round here” I said. “Ibn, Barjik can you?”

“Nah. But it is dark” was the response I received.

“Anyone else?”

I received a chorus of no’s in acknowledgement.

“Alright Knut, Sergeant, its your turn.”

Nodding the two men dismounted and leaving the reigns of their horses with a companion they slunk off into the gloom of the early evening.

“And now we wait” I said. “It’s always the worst part”.

“You find waiting hard” asked Barjik.

“Always”.

“You the planner and schemer? You who works everything out in absolute detail, finds it hard to wait?”

“Always”.

“Why?”

“Because after I have worked out a plan and put it into action, I know what is going to happen. Or rather, I know what is meant to happen and waiting for it to happen is, to me, a waste of time.”

While we were talking the men had begin setting up a smokeless camp. It was going to be cold rations for the next twenty-four hours.

Barjik arranged a watch roster and the like most experienced soldiers we made the most of the down time by sleeping.

The sun rose like it did on any other day. Except this was not going to be just another day. All our eyes were trained on the Kremianets searching for the signal that would tell us that Knut and the Sergeant had made it into the fort.

JOHN HALSTED

We washed in the river and had a cold breakfast. A few houses were still smoldering and the acrid smell of burnt timber and thatch still hung in the air. Still there was no sign that the Sergeant and Knut had made it.

We lay around for most of the morning waiting for the sign. We watched the early morning mist rise from the ground and played games of make believe as the mist was warped and twisted by the heat of the sun and unseen air currents. Our enthusiasm for checking for the sign waned from every quarter hour to every half hour.

The sun rose to its zenith and we had our midday meal and still there was no sign that they had succeeded. In the heat of the day the group had dispersed a little to find shade. That we were spread out was not a bad thing as identification of a large group all in one place would have been easier from a distance.

I was lying on the ground propped up against a tree facing the Kremianets when Barjik joined me,

“And if they did not succeed, what is your alternative plan” asked Barjik?

Staring at the Kremianets and chewing on a piece of succulent grass I took my time in answering Barjik “I don’t have one” I eventually admitted “baring sending some of your men back to Sarkel and some to Kyiv to get reinforcements”.

“That would take forever!” exclaimed Barjik.

“Yes I know”.

The sun passed it’s zenith and the humidity caused by the heat in the valley caused us to sweat profusely. The men stripped down to their waists and lay around listlessly. Some chewing on pieces of succulent grass.

“Is that grass stem tasty?” Ibn asked one of the men.

“Tasty enough” he replied removing the stem from his mouth and looking askance at Ibn anticipating a follow up comment.

“I was just wondering how many times the cows, dogs, deer and fox has pissed and shat on that piece of grass before you picked it to chew on?”

A chorus of “Ooohs” emanated from around the camp as the guard gagged then spat the contents of his mouth out. He then swigged a mouthful of water from his skin, rinsed his mouth and spat again. The few who hadn’t chewed on any grass laughed while the others rinsed their mouths as well.

It was late in the afternoon when some activity was noted on the ramparts. We all snapped out of our lethargy, sat up and took notice. Soon a large yellow and blue banner was unfurled down the side of the Kremianets .

“Yes!” exclaimed Barjik and his men whooped.

Responding with the pre-arranged signal, we waived a flag in return.

“Alright that’s enough!” I called. “We don’t want to attract the attention of the Pechenegs. Barjik, dispatch your man to Sven & Rat”.

“Already done”.

“Good. Alright gather around”. The men fell in. Barjik’s rather more formally than the crew. I started, “You have all been briefed. Do you understand what you have to do?”

There were nods all around.

“Good. Any questions?”

There were shakes of heads and men looking expectantly around for someone to raise a question.

“Even better. Then you all know what to do. Alright, prepare to move out and may God be with us”.

I wasn’t sure why I added the blessing but it was out before I knew it.

In reality there was not much to do for the next few hours but wait for nightfall. However the more experienced men took whetstones out of their kits, sat themselves under a tree and honed their blades. The younger more inexperienced sat and watched wishing they too had brought along a whetstone. Little did they know that it was less about honing their blades and more about staying occupied in a time of waiting for in battle it did not take long for a blade to be blunted. When the experienced men had finished honing their blades, they kindly offered it to those who had not brought one with them.

When the sun began sinking towards the western horizon we set off westwards around the town in groups of two and three making sure to stay far enough away from the town’s limits. A few hours later we gathered again in the forest just off the banks of the river.

“Barjik. Are you missing anyone”?

“No. All present and accounted for. However I have sent a few men to reconnoiter the river in both directions.”

“Excellent. Ibn are we missing any?”

“No Ulf. All accounted for.”

“Good. Now we wait for our reconnaissance parties to return.” A short while later both parties had returned and both reported that they had found favorable areas to make a crossing.

“We’ll leave the horses here and will take the western crossing which is further away from the Pechenegs. It will give us time to dry out before we get too close to the Pechies camp. We don’t want a squelching boot to give us away now do we? Lead the way” I said to the soldier who had reconnoitered the western section of the river.

We made our way through the forest always keeping the river in sight, which was now a sliver of silver in the twilight. Even though the sun had almost set, the forest was still hot and humid.

Sweat poured from our bodies. Those who had put their shirts back on were soon drenched. Those of us who had not were cooler but were also whipped by branches of the bushes and trees.

“Damned if you and damned if you don’t” said Barjik, who like me was topless.

“Yes. As a boy I used to like running through the areas of low grass which would do the same to my legs. I would then run into the sea and it used to sting like hell but the sensation of the stinging and exertion was exhilarating”.

“Now I know you Vikings are mad” said Barjik.

“I’m not a boy anymore and I’m not sure if I’m enjoying this as much as I used to. I guess we’ll find out when we cross the river”.

Once or twice we had false alarms which set pulses raising and caused hands to swiftly move to grip the pommels of swords. On both occasions it fortunately turned out to be deer. Just when I thought we were going to go all the way to Kyiv the soldier pointed out the crossing he had found.

A path led through the forest to the river and could be seen leading away from the river on the far bank. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up and a shiver ran down my spine. This was the type of crossing the Pechies would, in my mind at least, have under observation.

“You dont like it?” asked Ibn.

“Not one bit. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up as soon as I saw it.”

“I didn’t quite have the same reaction but I quickly came to the same conclusion. So what do we do?”

“We send two men further up river and get them to cross and circle back to check it out. Barjik, I will need one of your men to go along. Preferably not the man who found this crossing.”

“Agreed”. Barjik turned and called out a name. I gave both their instructions and we settled down to wait.

Over the next hour or so no-one used the path, not even animals, which was more than likely as a result of the Pechenegs driving all God fearing people into hiding. Hunting parties had probably killed or chased away most of the deer. At the end of an hour we were hailed from the far bank and we all made ready to cross. We waded into the water which took us up to our middles. The coolness of the water was welcome relief even in the warm and humid evening.

The stinging around my middle was as if hot needles had been inserted but was at the same time cold and refreshing. I guess some things never change.

Emerging from the water was like reentering purgatory. The heat and humidity immediately took its merciless grip again. With these kind of temperatures I figured we would soon be dry again.

We followed the path a short way and then reentered the forest again. The last I wanted was for us to come across a group, or even one, Pecheneg while jauntily marching along the path. No. We would use the forest as cover. Remembering the battering ram, I cautioned the men against

dropping their guard or becoming overconfident as there may be Pechies still wandering about the forest seeking out shafts for arrows or staves for spears.

We could smell the camp before we saw it. Aromas of smoke, cooking food and toilets mingled into a sickening stench. The Pechenegs had clearly not been trained in the discipline of military camping and layout.

Pecheneg activity, although heard and unseen, was loud indicating preparation of some sorts, probably the impending assault with the battering ram. We crept as close as we could. When close to the encampment on my signal we went to ground. At this point a man retreated a ways and circled out to the East and took up a position where he would be able to see the hillock and us. And then we settled to waited for darkness. While we lay, we watched and noted activity in the camp. The sky slowly darkened and the stars began to appear. Fires were lit or rekindled into life.

The aromas of roasting meat drifted our way and made our mouths water. Predictably the eating gave way to drinking and singing, which is just what I was hoping for. The equivalent of their sergeants had their work cut out for them as they continuously prowled, moving in quickly to stop fights. I am sure the words “Its better to kill your enemy than your companion” or “Save your anger for the enemy” were repeated many times throughout the evening.

I was so intent on watching the enemy that I had failed to notice the night was now truly upon us. Ibn nudged me and brought this to my attention. I sent the word out for the men to prepare themselves for action.

No sooner than I'd done this and a wave of raised voices and whooping raced towards us from the far side of the encampment. Those that were able stood up and ran towards the commotion. Others simply too drunk to do anything rolled over and carried on sleeping. I calmed the men with a “Not yet. Not yet. Wait a little.”

When the camp immediately in front of us had emptied, I gave the order “Now!”

With that we rose with our swords at the ready and ran through the tents towards the centre of the campsite. The men knew that if any of the remaining Pechenegs showed any sign of challenge they were to be dealt with on the way in as one Pecheneg less would make getting out easier.

We ran through the hodgepodge of tents skipping over the guide ropes as silently as we could. More than once I heard the start of a challenge behind me which was abruptly cut short by the swishing of a sword and the slurp of a blade finding its target of soft flesh. I never looked behind, trusting my men to the job they were assigned to do.

Pausing to get our bearings, on the horizon I caught a glance of the unmistakable shapes of two female figures dancing and swaying seductively on the grass knoll that I had lain behind. Their

arms raised above their heads as they twirled and wiggled their bodies and rolling their hips as only women can do. The performance was almost perfectly backlit by firelight shining through a screen of smoke. A stream of drunken Pecheneg soldiers raced towards them whooping and cheering as they careened across the dark landscape. The thought of how many would break their legs in rabbit holes flashed across my mind?

Sooner than I expected we made it to the centre of the encampment which was now strangely quiet. The speed of our entrance made a couple of Pechenegs look up from their fires. Only one managed to half draw his sword before he was swiftly dealt with. It took another moment to identify the leader's tent. We raced across the clearing and burst in to find the leader naked and being smothered by two equally naked women. Stunned by our entrance and before they could react, two of the men dragged them off, one apiece, and held them tight with one arm around their waists and the other hand smothering their mouths to stop them screaming. It took a while longer for the leader to react which gave me time to move into position behind him. Frantically he tried to claw his way out of his bed of furs. As he began to try and shout an alarm I rapped him on the skull with the pommel of my sword. Sitting splay legged on the ground in his tent he shook his head and took another deep breath. Again I rapped him hard on the head. Ibn on watch at the door looked on shaking his head in amazement. Normally one hard knock on the head would have been enough. The Pecheneg leader squeezed his eyes closed, shook his head again and before he could take another deep breath I rapped him even harder on the head. This time he succumbed. He would have more than just an egg on his head in the morning.

The two women, released on the promise of keeping quiet, stood to one side quivering silently at the point of a sword, trying to protect their modesty.

"Knock them out" I commanded the man holding the women.

"But....." he began to exclaim.

"Yes I know they're women. But we don't have time to gag and tie them up." I said curtly.

Looking at the women I shrugged my shoulders and said "Sorry ladies", not knowing if they understood me. One started to protest but this was cut short by a rap on the back of her head.

As she collapsed one of the men caught her under her arms and gently lay her on the furs.

Before she could protest the other followed suit in short fashion.

Ibn came over and we scooped up the senseless Pecheneg. Four men, with Barjik in the lead, led the way out of the tent followed by Ibn and me dragging the hulk of the unconscious commander. Our retreat was covered by the remaining two. More than once half-drunk men stumbled across our exit path and were quickly dispatched by Barjik and his men. Despite the clear path our progress was slowed by the dead weight of the unconscious Pecheneg.

Just as we were approaching the perimeter a group of three sergeants appeared from around a tent cursing the sudden disappearance of their men. On seeing us their eyes widened in disbelief. One was very quick to get his sword out and he immediately attacked Barjik. The other two were a bit slower, but being sergeants quickly recovered. Two sergeants on three troopers is always a fair fight. I called one of the two men watching our back forward and four on two quickly swung the odds in our favour. One of the two sergeants quickly went down. With four on one the third sergeant raised his hands. One of the men made to run him through, but I countermanded with a loud “NO!”. That I managed to find the breath to give the command was miraculous.

His sword stopped at the sergeant’s midriff which was clearly being sucked in.

Leaning on my sword and panting through breaths I commanded “Knock him out”.

In a flash one of the men who had circled behind the sergeant gave his helmet an almighty whack at which the sergeant crumpled.

The first sergeant was still holding his own with Barjik a short way off.

“See to him in the same way” I commanded.

The man casually sauntered over to the fighting pair and picked up a discarded Pecheneg club along the way. Barjik seeing what was happening turned the fight so that the sergeant’s back was to us. The club swung and the sergeant joined his two colleagues in temporary oblivion.

“I never thought a club could be so effective” panted Barjik.

We all stood for a while panting and regaining our breaths.

“Phew this guy is heavy” I complained. “C’mon you two” I said to the pair who had been covering the retreat. “It’s your turn to do some hard work. Lead on Barjik.”

Barjik led us out of the camp and back into the forest while Ibn and I covered the retreat. When we were far enough into the forest not to be easily seen I turned to face forward. It did not take long to realise that Barjik was limping. On closer examination I saw he was using his sword as a makeshift walking stick. I quickly ordered the party off the path for a rest in the trees. I gave orders to bind the Pechenegs hands and feet and to gag him. I moved over to Barjik who had slumped against a tree. Ibn joined us.

“How bad is it?” I asked him.

“I won’t die but it’s enough to slow us down too much.”

“Let me see” said Ibn.

Barjik rolled onto his right side and Ibn raised his tunic. Barjik had a slash from his hip halfway down his thigh. Blood oozed from the wound and in the starlight I could see that his leather trousers were stained dark.

I pointed at two me “You and you. Cut some saplings not more than two inches in diameter. We’re going to need a stretcher.”

Not long after the two disappeared into the darkness of the forest we could hear them chopping. When the sound stopped I took off my tunic and asked someone to volunteer theirs. Four tunics were taken off and offered.

“No, no. I only need one” I said selecting the topmost off the pile. Barjik returned my smile. We both knew that men would only readily volunteer their belongings if loyalty had been earned. And we both knew that loyalty could only be earned if men were treated with fairness and honesty.

I ripped the neck on my tunic to make it the same size at the bottom and started threading a stave through the garment. Quick to learn, one of the men copied my movements. We repeated the exercise with the second stave.

In the meantime Ibn had gathered some moss and with a strip torn from Barjik’s tunic had stuffed the moss into the wound and bound it into place with the makeshift bandage.

We laid out the stretcher and I did not have to call for volunteers to lift Barjik onto it.

I considered our predicament for a moment. Carrying a lumbering Pecheneg leader and now Barjik was not going to make the next part of our journey any easier. But at least we did not have far to go.

“Alright. As we go we’ll rotate the carrying. Although I think our Pecheneg leader come to when he enters the water. If he starts to bellow you know what to do.”

The men nodded.

“Lets move out” I commanded.

The two men lifted the makeshift stretcher and Barjik winced.

“Just like old times” said Barjik through gritted teeth.

“Just like old times” I repeated unconvincingly walking alongside and patting his shoulder.

To make up for lost time first we tried trotting along the path. But that proved too strenuous for us and too painful for Barjik so we slowed to a brisk walk. Remembering an old Roman marching technique we were taught at Byzantium, I convinced the men to walk briskly for thirty paces and easy for thirty paces. It didn’t really speed us up but the counting kept the men occupied. All too soon we were at the river. I commanded the group to stop short and take cover. I then dispatched two men to scout the approach, the crossing and the far side. They returned with reports of no activity. Before we crossed I reiterated my commands to the men carrying the Pecheneg leader.

NEXT WEEK

CHAPTER 41 – THE KØZAK

JOHN HALSTED