

THE BATTLE BEGINS TO TURN

LEGEND OF THE LAST VIKINGS

It was clear that the fighting was at a stalemate. Because the Pechenegs were shooting from below the battlements, indeed from below the base of the Kremianets, their arrows were all but spent by the time they reached us. In fact some of the soldiers had started goading the Pechenegs into firing their arrows and then swatting back them with carpet beaters, adding to the Pecheneg level of frustration. However the reverse was true for us. The Pechenegs wouldn't come near ramparts for fear of being killed by Rus arrows.

At sunrise in full battle regalia I marched out onto the battlements escorted by two burly guards in burnished armour. The Pecheneg encampment had just started to waken and a number were coaxing their fires back into life. I bawled at the top of my voice, "Pechenegs!"

It certainly got their attention.

"I am Ulf Uspakson. Marshal to King Harald Hadraada of Norway, who under Yarolsav the Wise tamed the Pechenegs in the Novgorod area."

While I was speaking Pechenegs had exited their tents and bivouacs to see what the ruckus was all about. More had been arriving along the road in dribs and drabs from the main encampment. Most of the recent arrivals stood and listened in silence. My last comment, designed to antagonise, certainly hit its mark. Some of the more attentive Pechenegs emitted roars of disapproval.

"Bring me your leader I commanded. Its time to parley."

At this I returned along the battlements with my escort and disappeared inside.

At regular intervals the guard commander made a circuit of the walls and reported developments, or should I say the lack of them, to me.

"When Ultinčur did not appear, for a while they milled about in confusion. Then someone rode in from their camp at a gallop. Called two of the older Pechenegs, who have been sort-of in control of the encampment below the walls, had a short and heated discussion with them and then and then galloped away."

"Describe the discussion?" I asked.

"I beg yours.....?" started the guard commander.

"Describe how they spoke to each other. Was it a calm and measured discussion or was it animated?"

“Oh. Uh? Animated.”

“You sure?”

“Yes.”

“How animated?”

He thought for a moment and then said,

“I think I had better get the men who actually saw it.”

“Y-e-s” I drawled. “It may be better if you did.”

A short while later the guard commander ushered in two rather unkempt soldiers.

“Now. Tell Lord Uspakson exactly what you told me.”

One soldier looked uncomfortably at the other and shuffled slightly before starting.

“Well it was like this you see M’Lord.....”

Not taking his eyes off him I nodded. It was clear he did not feel at ease as he continued to look down and shift his weight from one foot to the other and back again. Putting on my warmest voice I said to him,

“Soldier. If we are to defeat the Pecheneg from what is an unseemingly unwinnable situation, I need you to give me an absolutely accurate account of the exchange between the Pecheneg who rode up and the two Pechenegs from the encampment below the gates. It is *VITALLY* important that this is accurate as it will allow me to ascertain the mood of the Pecheneg leadership. Do you understand me?”

“Yessir” he said.

“Now. Please start from the point when the Pecheneg rode up at a gallop. If it helps close your eyes and picture it all happening again.”

The first of the two soldiers closed his eyes, took a deep breath and started.

“Well, he gallops up you see, bawling for the two. They sort of saunter over and start talking to the Pechie on the horse.”

“Did he get off his horse?” I asked.

“Uh. No sir. He stayed on throughout.”

“Uh-huh. Carry on.”

“Oh. Uh. The conversation starts like normal but gets louder and louder and more, uh, uh.....”

“Animated?”

“Yessir. I think that’s the word. Anyway the Pechie on the horse starts shouting and waving his hands and then the two on the ground start shouting and waving their hands around as well. Then the Pechie on the horse makes a sign with both hands raised, sticks his head forward and the conversation stops. Then it’s all quite while they stare at each other. A moment or two later he wheels his horse and gallops off.”

I looked at the other soldier and asked,

“Can you add anything to this?”

"No sire" said the second soldier.

"Now I want you to both to close your eyes and picture in your mind the Pecheneg on the horse. Keep your eyes closed now. Get the whole picture in your mind. Starting at this head and working all the way down his body to his feet. Keep your eyes closed and focus..... Focus on the Pecheneg on the horse. Come down to his waist. Was he wearing a sword?"

With eyes closed both said almost simultaneously "No sir. No sword."

"Ah. Thank you men. You may open your eyes now. You have done well."

Both blinked.

"Thank you again" I said smiling. "I have a task for you two."

"Sire?"

"I need you to count the number of men, tents, bivouacs and fires. I will need this done every morning and every evening from now on."

"Yessir."

"Thanks you again. You may return to your posts now."

"Thank you sire" they said turning to exit the room.

Ibn was smiling when I turned to him.

"Exactly what happened then?" Bodhan asked.

"It's a technique for helping recall details you would not ordinarily have taken note of." said

Ibn. "You help the subject, ah, person, relax and get them to bring the image to mind and then start at the head, or top, work your way down the image recalling as much as possible."

Bodhan was clearly impressed. He nodded for a moment or two and then asked

"What was the thing about the horse and sword?"

"Well" I replied, "No sword tells me that something of such immediate importance happened to cause the messenger to ride off without putting his sword on."

"Ah" murmured Bodhan, "Something like searching for a missing leader".

"Exactly" Ibn and I said together.

"And the horse?"

"Well that he wasn't wearing a sword and didn't bother to get off his horse and had an argument tells me that they couldn't find their leader and he had ridden up to tell the two erstwhile leaders below the wall that when the time comes they would have to wing-it."

"Wing it?"

"Yes. Bluff their way through."

"Ah. Now it all makes sense to me."

"Good. A while to go till noon. Then expect all hell to break loose."

JOHN HALSTED

At noon, again in full battle regalia, I walked out onto the battlements accompanied by an honour guard also dressed in all the finery we could muster. Stopping over the gate I raised my sword high and pointed it at the heavens. In a pre-rehearsed manoeuvre the soldiers around me moved away. The Pecheneg soldiers below already having stopped to watch the procedure along the battlements also unconsciously took a step back. Good I had them exactly where I wanted them. I slowly surveyed the scene in front of me and cried out,

“Pecheneg nation. I am Ulf Uspakson. Herald of Iziaslav of Kiev, Marshall to King Harald Hadraada King of Norway, Commander of the Varangian Guard and before that Captain under Yaroslav the Great who defeated the Pechenegs from Novgorod.”

Again the jibe brought the right reaction and a number raised their clubs and swords and roared back.

“I asked for your leader to be brought to me. Where is he?”

The Pechenegs milled about in confusion for a few moments. It was clear that some knew of his disappearance while most did not. The confused ranks formed around two of the Pechenegs.

“Well?” I snarled down. “What is it to be? Your leader or you two miscreants down there?”

“You will have to do with us Uspakson. Our leader couldn’t be bothered dealing with a Has-Been” said one of the two.

“Oh ho!” I cried. “Could that be because you have lost your leader? Maybe he got scared and has run away like a coward? Or could it be that this Has-Been knows where your leader is while you do not?”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah” came back from somewhere in the milling troops while the two glanced uncertainly at each. Despite the confident answer I could see the unsure glances between the Pecheneg rank and file. Before they could answer I shot back,

“Your leader NOW! Or do I have to make a chalice out of his skull like like Khan Kurya did to Sviatoslav?”

The Pechenegs roared at the challenge and began to surge forward. I gave the prearranged signal and Ultinčur was led out onto the battlements. His head hung low and hands were bound behind his back. Serakh led him on a chain that was tied around his neck. Two boys in armour followed prodding him with spears. The surge checked and the hubbub slowly died to silence while they watched their captive leader parade.

“See!” I cried “Your leader is so strong that he is led by a woman and guarded by children. He has led you here for a mighty victory. But has it happened? No. All your efforts have not been able to defeat the fort. Go home. Go home now before the armies arrive from Kyiv and Sarkel and squeeze the life out of you like a press squeezes the juice out of grapes.”

“What armies?”

“The armies that are on their way here. See the Commander of the fortress at Sarkel is already here to assess the situation. His army follows.”

On saying this Barjik walked out as steady as he could and stood at my right hand side. Sweat was beading on his brow.

“And an emissary from Kyiv is also here.”

On saying this Sven walked out and stood on my left.

“How much time do you have left? Do you really want the full might of the Prince’s armies to bear down on you and crush you? You will never see your children again. Never feel the soft, tender arms of your women-folk nor ever ride free over the steppe again.”

Clearly the display of their leader and the two pretend emissaries had rattled the Pechenegs.

“Go back to your camp and discuss your next moves. If you decide to return home I will ride West and intercede with the Prince before his armies get here and try and reduce any retribution against you. But you will have to be gone by tomorrow. Go now and let me know by sunset what your decision is.”

“What about Ultinčur?”

“What about him? What success has he brought you? Now look at him. Do you really want him as a leader?”

A murmur followed my last statement and I turned to walk back inside followed by Barjik, Sven and Ultinčur led by Serakh followed by the two boy-soldiers. Barjik just made it through the door before collapsing. Two of his men picked up his semiconscious body and carried him to his bed.

That night the Pechenegs attacked somewhat more ferociously than what was considered usual. Defending was frenetic and our extra numbers and freshness greatly assisted with the defence of the fort. We spent until the early hours dampening down fires and ensuring that there were no smouldering embers.

In the morning the count told me that there were fewer Pecheneg fires and even fewer men. Only tomorrow would tell us if this was because they were killed in the previous night’s attack or if some had deserted.

The count of fires on the second day told me that the spectacle of Ultinčur being led along the battlements by a woman and prodded by boys was having the desired effect. That night there was no rush of the gate which led me to hope that the pervious night’s attack was an attempt by the remnants of the Pecheneg leadership to boost morale and give the appearance of continuity.

On the morning of the third day it was clear there was a marked decrease in the number of Pechenegs at the fort and at the main encampment. I asked my newly found information agents to throw a few jibes and barbed comments at the remaining Pechenegs. Not long after they reported back that they had received very little response past rude finger signs. Even then most of the Pechenegs didn’t even bother looking their way when they gave the gestures. It told me all I wanted to know.

At noon I again had Ulčinur paraded up and down the Eastern battlements. This time it was done in silence. A number of Pecheneg soldiers initially stopped what they were doing to watch. In an unspoken act of defiance all turned their backs on him.

If there was going to be relief from Kyiv or Sarkel, it should arrive in two or three days, maybe four. In the meantime we would have to be patient and wait a day or two more before starting a hit-and-run campaign. To start any earlier may just have the undesired effect of uniting the Pechenegs. No. We had to wait for their numbers to reduce further so that any incursions could not be effectively countered. The effects of a hit-and-run campaign, a half empty camp and having to bury your dead without much hope of an effective response would all add to the intended demoralising effect. In the meantime we would have to make mischief. I gave the order for the men to start sharpening their weapons and started planning how we would do this.

All afternoon I had the women scouring the fort for dark cloth. When they had gathered as much as they could, I had them cut and sew the fabric into simple tunics.

I had Sven and Tsai Ming organise the children into groups led by youths and had them collect soot and fat from the fires. The fat collected in buckets from the kitchens was applied to the gate hinges and to any other piece of moving equipment we might decide to use.

When all was done those men who did not have dark clothing, I had wash their tunics and trousers in water dosed with a few handfuls of soot and salt. Next I had them mix buckets of paste made up of soot, mud and water.

NEXT WEEK

CHAPTER 44 - SEEING OFF THE ENEMY

JOHN HALSTED