

SEEING ⊕FF THE ENEMY

The numbers of the Pecheneg encampment below the Eastern wall were so depleted they were now using only one guard at night. To confirm that he had a routine, my two agents watched and noted his every movement.

The guard's routine duly noted, our plan was activated. We waited patiently until the early hours before taking action. When the guard was farthest from the fort, a gate swung silently open just enough to let one person out. A bowman dressed in black and brown, his face and hands smeared with the soot and mud mix, slipped out and took up a position in the shadows. The gate closed as silently as it had opened.

We spent a nerve wracking five minutes or so waiting for the guard to complete his loop hoping and praying the bowman would not be spotted. When the guard's route brought him nearest the gate the bowman rose up and on the run drew, notched and fired his arrow dropping the guard silently with a single arrow through his neck. Never had I seen such marksmanship done on the run. Never mind that it was done in the dark.

The guard silenced, again the gate swung open and balance of our meagre forces rushed out. We had a heart stopping moment when one of the hinges began to creak but someone was quick to slap on a handful of grease which silenced it.

Each had their own task. Bodhan's men, boots wrapped in cloth, ran silently through the Pecheneg encampment and secured the road to the main Pecheneg camp. In groups of two and three and as silently as possible the remainder went directly to the tents and bivouacs assigned to them and swiftly put the thirty or so Pechenegs to the sword. A few light sleepers started to wake but fortunately were dealt with before they could raise any alarm. Under strict instructions not to pillage, they returned to the safety of the fort as swiftly and silently as they had left.

The guard, with the arrow still through his neck, was dragged inside the fort. The gates closed just as silently as they opened.

The dead Pecheneg guard was carried up to the Western rampart and tossed over the side. We watched as he flipped and flopped down the steep hill in a most undignified manner. Someone had forgotten to remove the arrow and at one stage it seemed as if the arrow would stop his descent. Fortunately momentum won the day and he eventually slipped into the river with a quiet splash.

Maintaining our silence I had the men scrub the soot off their faces. Those who had not had to dye their clothes had a quick meal and went straight onto guard duty.

As I exited the kitchen I could see the false dawn was over and the sun was just breaking the Eastern horizon.

Not long after dawn the massacre was discovered and all hell broke loose below our walls. Runners and riders ran and galloped back and forth from the main Pecheneg camp until eventually in mid-morning a quorum of leaders milled about the camp scratching their heads, shrugging their shoulders and standing dejectedly with their hands on their hips. A number of us stood nonchalantly on the battlements surveying the scene before us. One of the leaders turned and shouted at me,

“Uspakson! Is this your doing?”

“Is what my doing?” I called back.

“This, this, this.....slaughter!” the Pecheneg called back.

“Slaughter hey? No. Not ours. We wouldn’t have stopped here. We would have gone right through your camp as well. Maybe it was the Angel of Death.”

“The what?”

“Don’t you know? God’s Angel of Death. From the Christian bible in the book of 2 Kings.”

Opening the bible I had brought with me, I translated from the Latin, ad-libbing as I read,

“It says, That night the angel of the LORD went out to the enemy’s camp and killed 185,000 troops. When the surviving soldiers woke up the next morning, they found corpses everywhere. Then the King broke camp and returned to his own land. He went home to his capital and stayed there.”

Maybe this was a warning and you should all go home before Angel of the Lord does for you all.

We have been doing a lot of praying in here you know. There’s really not much else to do.”

“Ha. Ha. Bloody ha” came the sarcastic reply.

“As you well know”, I continued. “To victor the spoils. If it were us we would have at least helped ourselves to the spoils. Not that you lot have much to take that is. By the way, just how much has been plundered?”

The point taken. They conducted a quick search and then spent some time in a circle discussing it amongst themselves. There was a great deal of gesticulation peppered with looks and glances in my direction. Then they mounted their horses and galloped away without bothering to proffer a reply to my question. I sighed, another round in our favour. Rather optimistically I hoped it would be the last.

Before noon a small detachment of Pechenegs arrived and started digging graves to bury their dead. I had the men shout jibes from the battlements with the sole purpose of demoralising the

Pechenegs even further. In the end they found it too arduous to dig individual graves so they dug a large hole and unceremoniously dumped the bodies in a mass grave.

Later another force came to replace the dead and buried besiegers. What for, I'm not too sure. There certainly weren't enough of them to hold us in the fort.

During the night I added superstition to the mix and had a few men make merry by whitening their faces and dressing in white. I had them go up to the Eastern rampart overlooking the Pecheneg encampment and stand on small carts which were pushed by a few boys crawling behind so as not to be seen. The spectacle of an all white image seeming to move while standing at attention was a bit too much for some of the Pechenegs. By morning their numbers had more than halved. Low morale added by a big dose of superstition had had its effect.

Not long after noon on the fifth day after Ultinčur's first parade, the guard commander reported that a cloud of dust could be seen on the Western horizon. After checking it out I went over to the Eastern battlement and called down to the Pechenegs,

"Ahoy Pechenegs."

A few turned and looked at me.

"I think you should know that the end is nigh. We have just spotted a large cloud of dust on the Western horizon. In other words the relief column from Kyiv is on its way. I think maybe you should tell your commanders before it gets here. That's all."

I walked back inside making a point of not looking back.

My two agents later reported that while one messenger was despatched to the main camp a number of sudden disappearances had occurred leaving a mere handful of Pechenegs to prevent our breakout.

An air of excitement, relief and, dare I say it, Victory, spread throughout the Kremianets. Upon discussion we thought it best to have a mini-feast. The cooks were ordered to prepare a suitable meal.

That night after the meal I was going to send a group of seven or eight men under Sven's leadership to rain fire arrows into the main Pecheneg camp, if only to cause mayhem and disruption. Instead I despatched two soldiers over the Western wall with Barijk's seal to make contact with the column. If indeed it was a relief column, they needed to be appraised of the situation before they arrived for the last thing we wanted was for them to be ambushed on arrival.

Well fed and watered I retired to bed with a feeling of satisfaction.

In the morning I was woken by a highly excited guard commander.

"Sire, sire! Wake up! Come quickly! They've gone! They've gone!"

Still groggy I raised my hands to slow the man down.

“Whoa. Whoa. Hold it. Slow down. I’ve just woken up.”

He quietened down and gathered his posture.

“Sire. It’s the Pechies. They’ve packed up and gone!”

“Ah. That is good news. Very well. I’ll be out in a moment. Thank you I would now like to get dressed.”

Obviously feeling a little deflated the guard commander said

“Uh? Oh! Yes sir. Of course sir,”

I washed my face and dressed and walked out to be met by Ibn, Barjik, Sven, Bodhan and Andriy.

“I believe we have good news?”

“Indeed we do” said Barjik.

“Barjik! Its good to see you up. Andriy who do you have shadowing the Pechies?”

“I.....”

“Better put two good men, on horses, on it straight away. We don’t want them doubling back now. Do we?”

“I’ll put someone on it straight away”.

“Before you go. I think you had also better send two groups of two riders North and South just to make sure they haven’t already started a doubling back manoeuvre. Well, that’s that settled. Now let’s get the gates open and start clearing up some of this mess. Barjik have two men up high watching for any signs of a Pechie return.”

“Right away Ulf. Sergeant!”

“Sir!”

“You heard the man.”

“Yessir!”

The mood in the fort was noticeably lighter. The open gates signifying the literal and figurative freedom to what must have seemed a hopeless situation to most.

It did not take long for the word to get out, for by mid-morning people could be seen moving about down in the town. Andriy arranged for a troop to go down into the town to make an assessment of the damage.

Sven and Rat borrowed a horse each and went off in search of our steeds which had been left in the care of two of Barjik’s men across the river. A few hours later they arrived back with the herd in tow.

Likewise Bodhan had despatched two of his men to retrieve their horses which were being cared for beyond the town to the West.

JOHN HALSTED

Just before noon the lookouts called down that a body of men was approaching. The gates were closed in anticipation but our fears were proved groundless when it turned out to be a small advance guard for the main force.

I spoke to the troop captain and said rather than waiting for the main column to arrive his time would be better served harrying the rear of the retreating Pechenegs. Something he was all too keen to do. However, I had to insist that he first rest and feed his men and horses before he took up the pursuit. Before they left we were able to add six riders and steeds to the troop swelling his numbers to a round dozen.

Late that afternoon the main relief force arrived, tired, thirsty and weary. They had made double time all the way from Ltava. A larger force from Kyiv was also expected. The Commander of the troop was pleasantly surprised to find the situation resolved and immediately despatched a further twelve riders to assist with the harrying of the Pecheneg rear. In the morning his soldiers would start helping in the town.

The fort now in safe hands I advised Barjik and the two commanders that we would be pushing on in the morning for Kyiv. While they wanted us to stay I was insistent and in the end they saw reason and relented.

NEXT WEEK

CHAPTER 45 - HOMEWARD BOUND

JOHN HALSTED