

The 1789 battle of Svensksund

Two separate naval battles took place at Svensksund, just outside the modern city of Kotka, during the war of Gustavus III. The first battle of Svensksund took place on the 24th of August 1798 (the 13th of August according to the Russian Julian calendar), a year before the more known second battle of Svensksund. In both battles, the Russian Army Fleet outnumbered the Swedish Army Fleet.

The Russian fleet was more superior in men and vessels, but both fleets were considerably smaller in the first battle of 1789 than in the latter battle of 1790. In the 1789 battle, the Swedish fleet consisted of 5000 men dispersed over one light frigate, six turuma-class, one hemmema-class, three udeema-class and one pojoma-class archipelago frigate. In addition, the fleet had also 20 gun sloops, four mortar longboats, four cannon longboats and five galleys.

On the opposing side the Russian fleet consisted of a total of 12 000 men and a frigate, eight chebecs, five brigs, three bomb vessels, 18 galleys, 29 half-galleys, 12 gun sloops and three cutters plus the auxiliaries. The open sea fleet commanded by Ivan Balle, which consisted of a squadron of three frigates, seven chebecs and a few dozen of smaller ships, provided support to the Russian army fleet. The Russian fleet numbered 107 vessels whereas the Swedish fleet had 44 vessels.



The duel at Korkeasaari. The fleet commander Ehrensward and his officers are observing the battle from Majansaari. J.T. Schoultz. O 03939, The Maritime Museum of Sweden.

Prelude of the battle

The Swedish Army Fleet arrived at Svensksund in late June and began to clear the area of Russian forces with support from the army. A detachment of gun sloops proceeded to attack the Russian post at the Kymi River on the 26th of June. Russian fire and ensuing heavy rainfall repelled the attack. The Swedes lost one soldier and seven soldiers were wounded, but they managed to capture four Russian sailing vessels loaded with flour and grain. The Swedish fleet proceeded to establish themselves at Svensksund due to the strategic importance it had in preparation for renewed attack at Fredrikshamn (Fin. *Hamina*). During the previous year of 1788, Swedes had attempted to capture Fredrikshamn, but they were not able to finalize the plan. There was a need for more intelligence on the Swedish side regarding the condition of the Russian army and fleet at Fredrikshamn. Therefore on separate order by the king Gustavus III, a detachment of 23 gun sloops set sail towards the Summa river mouth on 15th of August. The detachment sailed in the cover of a night and by dawn, Russian sentries discovered the Swedes.



Swedish gun sloop. The Maritime Museum of Sweden.

The whole Russian fleet present at Fredrikshamn proceeded to attack the Swedes. A battle ensued a few kilometres east of Svensksund, halfway to Fredrikshamn at Korkiansaari island. The Swedish detachment was up against two frigates, three chebecs, 19 galleys and 37 smaller vessels. Carl Gustav Kraemer led the Swedish fleet during the fight and the Swedes held their ground for a three-hour long gun battle before they were forced to withdraw. The Swedish gun sloops were difficult targets for Russian guns due to their low profile, therefore Swedish casualties were limited to one dead and ten wounded. Russian casualties of the fight are unknown.

Russian attack at Svensksund

After the duel at Korkiansaari the Russian fleet prepared to attack the Swedish fleet at Svensksund. Prince Nassau-Siegen led the counter-attack, which was initiated on 24th of August. He divided his forces and sent a detachment of twenty smaller vessels, led by Balle, in wide circle to the south to attack the Swedes from the direction of the open sea. The rest of the fleet sailed west towards the narrow of Svensksund. The Swedes had sunk three civilian ships into the narrows of Svensksund the night before the attack. This was to hinder the Russians from attacking the west flank of the Swedish line. The sounds of the defensive work carried all the way to Siegen-Nassau, who wrongly concluded that the Swedes were building fortifications on land by the narrow, on the small-sandy peninsula of the island of Kuutsalo.



Detail of a Russian Map of the Battle of Svensksund 1789. Kenraali A.V. Tutskov – kartta-albumi vuosien 1788-1790 sotatoimista.

For this reason, Nassau-Siegen gave a separate order to brigadier Buxhoevden to take 400 men and three 24-pound guns on land to Kuutsalo to attack a possible fortification and provide added fire support to the fleet. The battle ensued on the morning of the 24th around 10 am as the fleet lead by Balle attacked from the south. The Swedish line formed an arch reaching across the southern opening of the bay between from Tiutinen and Kotkansaari. The largest Swedish vessels were to the east, facing the larger half of the Russian fleet under the command of Nassau-Siegen. During the first stage of the battle, the Swedish fleet was able to repel and even capture several vessels among the Balle squadron, which had had to fight alone for several hours, before the other part of the fleet reached the Svensksund narrow.

The Swedes failed to block the other narrow, the small and rocky straight between the islands of Tiutinen and Majansaari and the Russian fleet made use of it. Navigating the rocky narrow under constant Swedish gunfire proved difficult, the first Russian sloop to attempt to push through the Majansaari narrows ran aground and temporarily hindered the passages of other Russian vessels. At this point, a Swedish shell hit the Russian galley *Zivelen*, behind the sloop at the narrow. The galley exploded and the explosion also damaged another nearby galley, *Hitraja* and they both sank at Majansaari. Any survivors swam to the nearby island. Eventually several boats made their way through the narrow and attack the Swedish line. The Russians also attacked the barrier of scuttled ships at the Svensksund narrow with increasing vigor. The barrier proved to be less sturdy than intended and Russian axes and shovels picked it apart, making it possible for galleys to force their way through while gunboats stuck on rocks next to the narrow fired upon the Swedes.

The king and the count

Count Carl August Ehrensvärd commanded the Swedish fleet on board the flagship *Björn Järnsida*, a turuma-class frigate. The Swedish fleet had a very limited supply of ammunition, which was a concern, as they could not endure a long fight. The king Gustavus III was also present at Svensksund, observing the battle from a high point on Kotka Island. Ehrensvärd was not able to fulfil his original plan to block the narrows as the king objected to it. Gustavus III wanted to launch another attack on Fredrikshamn and any obstacles in the narrows would also hinder the Swedes. The king finally gave in to Ehrensvärd, but there was not enough time left to blockade both narrows, a mistake which proved fatal for the Swedes.



Part of the Swedish Map of the Battle at Svenskund 1789, the Swedish fleet is marked in blue. Swedish National Archives. SE/KrA/0426/018/1789:07

During late afternoon, more Russian gunboats were able to push their way through the narrows and guns were carried ashore and directed against the Swedish frontline ships. Around 6 pm in the evening the Russian gunfire crippled the turuma *Ivar benlös* and the ship was taken. By 7 pm, the Swedish fleet had exhausted almost all of their ammunition and the galley *Cedercreutz* and the

hememma *Oden* struck their colours. At this moment, the Count Ehrensvärd along with two other officers, debarked from the turuma *Järnsida* and gave the order for the fleet to retreat. Upon seeing the Swedish retreat, many of the small Russian vessels from the Balle squadron that had surrendered to the Swedes hoisted their flags again and began to fire on the retreating Swedes vessels.

Two more Swedish ships capitulated and all fire was directed on the flagship *Järnsida*. There was an attempt to tow the damaged turuma-class frigate to safety, but it ran on more rocks, was unable to move, and struck its colours. The frigate *af Trolle*, turuma *Ragvald* and a gun sloop were also captured by the Russians. Some 30-transport vessels, trapped north of island of Kotka, were burned by the Swedes to prevent their capture. In the darkness, 32 vessels from the Swedish fleet were able to escape westward to Lovisa. The battle was over by midnight. The turuma *Järnsida* was on fire and the flames reflected from the dark waters of the Svensksund narrows.



*The Battle of Svensksund 1789 by J.T. Schoultz. Fo207422DIA.
The Maritime Museum of Sweden.*

Casualties

According to the official report by Nassau-Siegen the Russians captured nine Swedish vessels, 37 officers and 1100 soldiers. The Russians lost 39 officers and 368 soldiers. The wounded Russians amounted to 589. The Swedes managed to capture two officers and 22 men from the Balle squadron. The Swedish reported a loss of 1500 men and 500 patients left behind in the infirmary camp on Tiutinen.



*View of Svensksund from the island of Tiutinen.
Marcus Lepola 2018.*

There is some discrepancy in the sources regarding Swedish casualties. As Nassau-Siegens report does not account for any enemy casualties and Swedish sources only account for the total amount of men missing from the ships rolls, which is problematic. The fate of the Swedish infirmary camp is not

mentioned in Russian reports and Nassau-Siegen does not include an estimate on wounded or ill captives. A Swedish priest in the army fleet returned to Svensksund the following year and found burned bodies among the charred remains of the infirmary camp. The Swedes believed that the Russians set the camp ablaze during the battle. It is not known how many bodies were at the site. It seems that 2000 men were left behind at Svensksund, which suggests that the Swedish casualties at Svensksund were 900 men.

The first naval battle of Svensksund was a Russian victory, but it also set the stage for the next battle. In this second battle of Svensksund, Sweden proved to be more successful. Part of this success were the lessons learned during the first battle, especially regarding the improved knowledge of the area. This was a great tactical advantage in the battle to come.

Text by Marcus Lepola

Sources:

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