

# *The Battle, Phase Three, 23 October—1 November 1944*

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The German withdrawal on two axes, north to Kirkenes and south toward Ivalo, forced the Soviet Front commander to split his force likewise. General Meretskov ordered pursuit in both directions but left the 14th Army commander, Lieutenant General Shcherbakov, to organize it.<sup>1</sup> He and his staff elected to attack northward with three corps and pursue southward with two (see map 9).

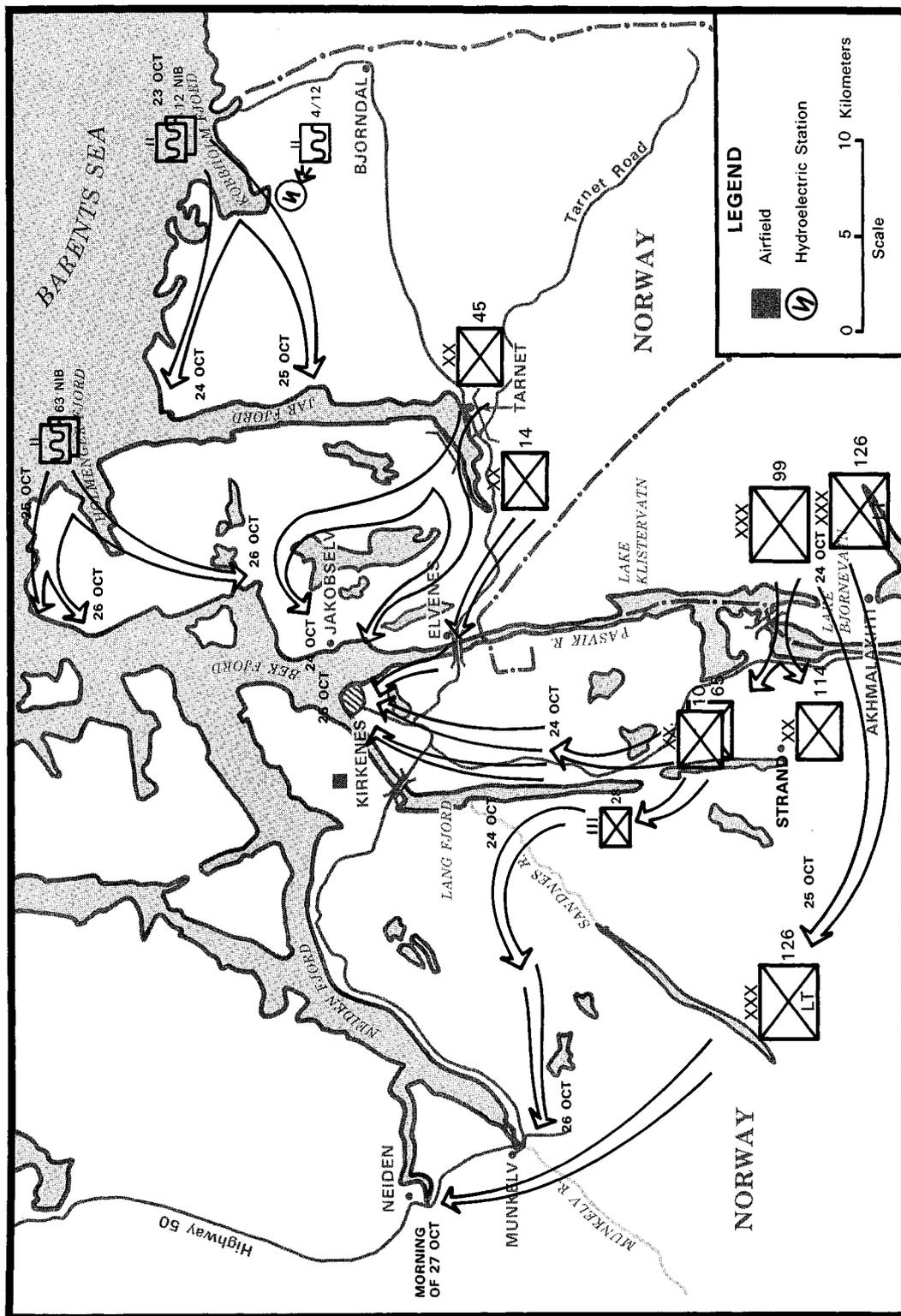
The 14th Army planned a coordinated assault on the 6th Mountain Division that was defending the Kirkenes area. Shcherbakov ordered the 131st Rifle Corps to push toward Kirkenes from the east, force a crossing on Bek Fjord, and, in cooperation with the 99th Rifle Corps to its left (south), seize Kirkenes. He ordered the 99th Rifle Corps to screen its left (west) flank with one division and, with the remainder of its forces, attack and seize Kirkenes from the south. The 126th Light Rifle Corps was to march cross-country west and north to Munkelv and, there, cut Highway 50, which was the German main supply route and the sole land escape route from Kirkenes.

On the northern flank, Admiral Golovko's Northern Fleet would continue to conduct operations at sea to deny the Germans escape or relief from that direction. In addition, the fleet continued to support the land battle with amphibious landings. The first one came ashore in Kobbholm Fjord early on 23 October. A portion of this landing force cleared the coastline to the west; the remainder marched inland and arrived at Jar Fjord on 25 October (see map 10).

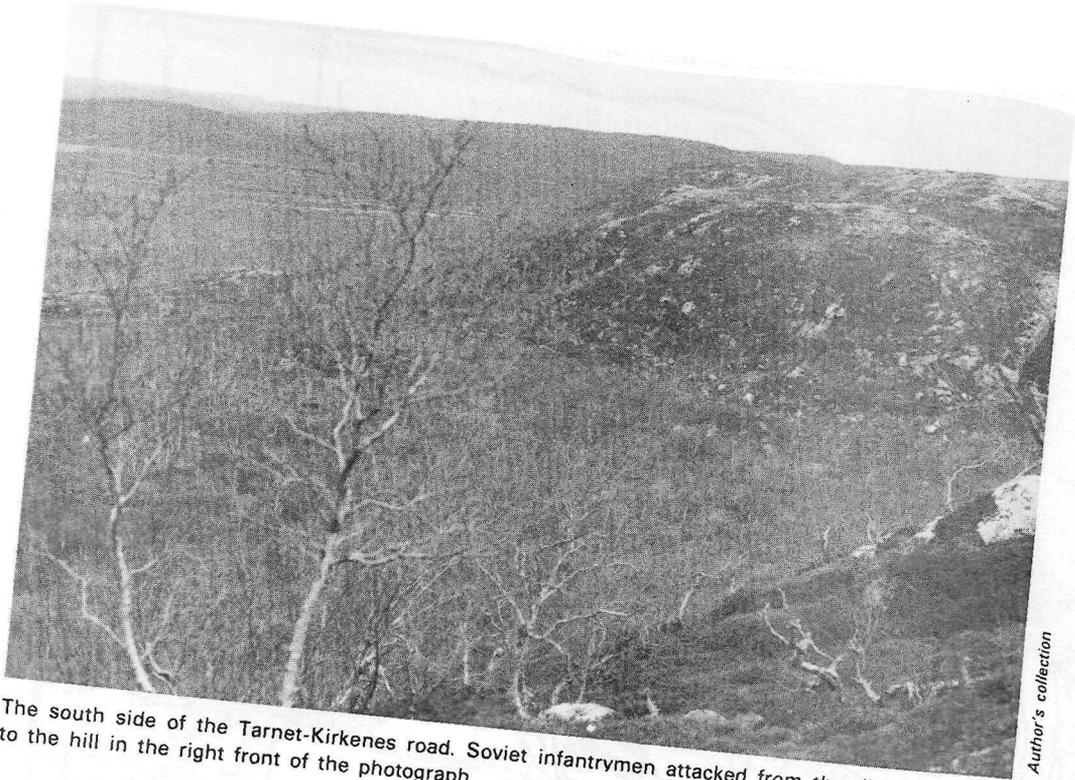
## *Attack on Kirkenes*

On 23 October, in the 131st Rifle Corps sector, the 14th Rifle Division defeated several German counterattacks along the road from Tarnet to Kirkenes, which were supported by naval gunfire and shore batteries from Kirkenes. The division moved forward only two kilometers during the day. That night, the 45th Rifle Division crossed Jar Fjord in their American-made amphibious trucks and locally procured fishing boats. On 24 October, this division met little resistance as it advanced cross-country to the area of Jakobselv, across the fjord from Kirkenes. Its tanks and multiple rocket



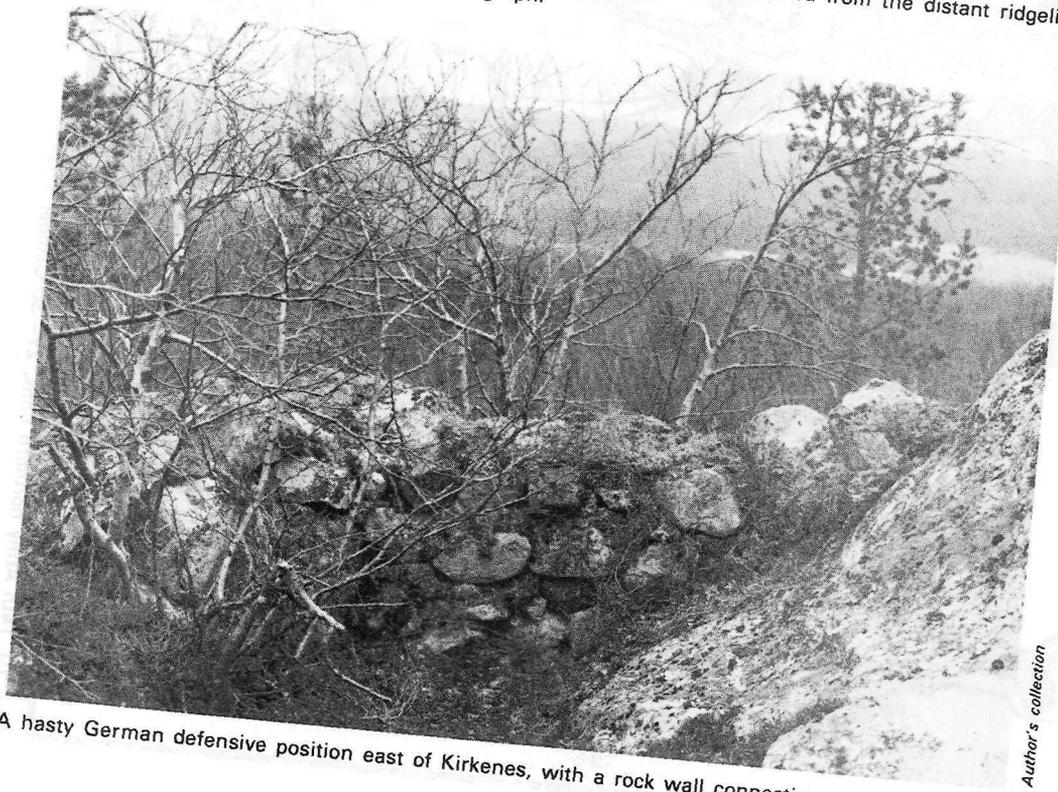


Map 10. 14th Army northern flank, 22—30 October 1944



*Author's collection*

The south side of the Tarnet-Kirkenes road. Soviet infantrymen attacked from the distant ridgeline to the hill in the right front of the photograph.



*Author's collection*

A hasty German defensive position east of Kirkenes, with a rock wall connecting two boulders



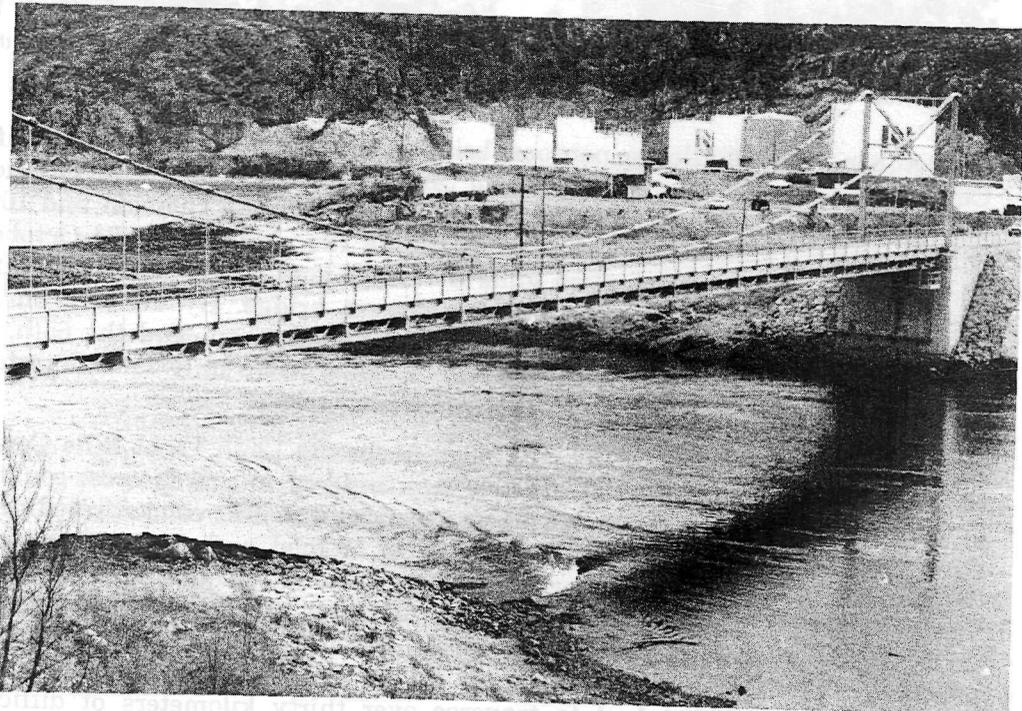
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Debris from battle. German rifle shell casings as they were found at a position overlooking the road between Tarnet and Elvenes.

22 October and installed a pontoon bridge at Holmfoss. All the 99th Rifle Corps divisions crossed into Norway in rapid order. The 114th Rifle Division set up a screen line south of Strand, while the 65th Rifle Division and 10th Guards Rifle Division attacked northward. On the night of 23–24 October, the KV tanks and self-propelled guns accompanying the 10th Guards Rifle Division crossed into Norway on the pontoon bridge. By evening on 24 October, the 10th Guards attacking along the main road, and the 65th, to the right between the road and the Pasvik River, were only ten kilometers south of Kirkenes, fighting through the iron ore mines.

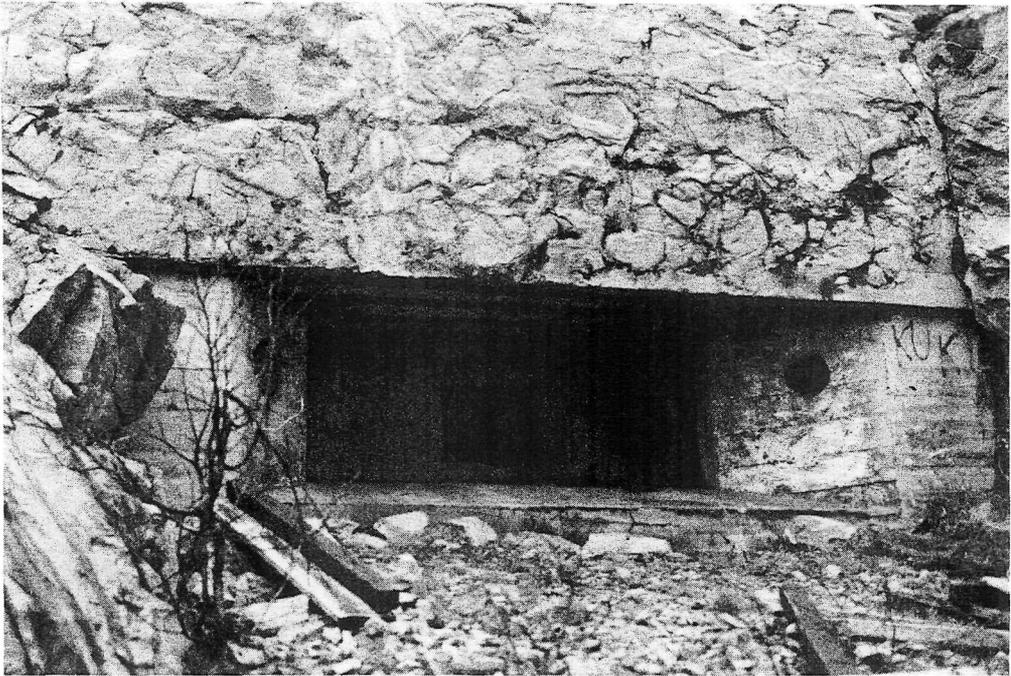
Meanwhile, a minor crisis had developed for the 126th Light Rifle Corps. On 23 October, this corps, which had been ordered to march cross-country to Munkelv to cut off the German escape route, was still concentrated near Akhmalakhti. It had exhausted its supplies of food and ammunition and could not move. On the afternoon of 24 October, Lieutenant General Shcherbakov, the 14th Army commander, reacting to this situation, ordered the 10th Guards Rifle Division commander, Major General Kh. A. Khudalov, to detach his 28th Rifle Regiment to fulfill the 126th Light Rifle Corps' mission.<sup>3</sup> The regiment had to traverse over thirty kilometers of difficult terrain laced with streams and rocks and then engage withdrawing German

Photo not available



The bridge at Elvenes today

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A German firing position dug into the rock, guarding the southwest approach to Kirkenes

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Photo not available

**Photo not available**

units. At midnight on 24 October, when the regiment reached the high ground west of Lang Fjord, all communications with it were lost.

That same evening, Soviet air reconnaissance detected German columns leaving Kirkenes going west toward Neiden. In Kirkenes itself, the Soviets could see large explosions and fires, indicating destruction of the city and the supplies stockpiled there. Khudalov's 10th Guards Rifle Division troops were fighting in the southern outskirts of Kirkenes by 0300 on 25 October.<sup>4</sup>

At 0500 on 25 October, units of the 131st Rifle Corps attempted to cross Bek Fjord along a two-kilometer front at Elvenes. The German defenders withstood a twenty-minute Soviet artillery preparation and drove the Soviet troops back with strong direct and indirect fires. Forty minutes later, after a second barrage, Soviet units surged forward again and, this time, secured a small foothold. By 0900, the bulk of the corps had crossed the fjord either on amphibious vehicles or on makeshift rafts and logs and was approaching the southeast outskirts of Kirkenes.

Supported by tanks and self-propelled artillery, the 99th Rifle Corps units fought their way into Kirkenes from the south, as the 131st Rifle Corps closed in on Kirkenes from the southeast. Three Soviet rifle divisions, the 65th, 10th Guards, and 14th, supported by KV tanks, fought German rear guards in the streets of Kirkenes on 25 October and, by 1200, defeated the

last organized resistance of the composite German force.<sup>5</sup> On 26 October, the 10th Guards Rifle Division captured the airfield fifteen kilometers west of Kirkenes.

While the 14th Army ground forces were conducting their final assaults on the city of Kirkenes, naval infantry of the Northern Fleet landed unopposed in Holmenger Fjord before dawn on 25 October. These units swept the coastline westward and southward of German shore batteries and auxiliary units. On 27 October, this force reached the Jakobselv settlement, across the fjord east of Kirkenes. But by this time, the battle for Kirkenes was essentially over, and thus, the naval infantry had virtually no impact on its outcome.

By the morning of 26 October, the 28th Rifle Regiment of the 10th Guards Rifle Division reached Highway 50 at Munkelv.<sup>6</sup> German units were still passing through the area moving westward. After a brief firefight, the Soviet troops blocked the road, thus forcing the Germans to exfiltrate northward to the fjord, where they escaped in boats.

After a 24-hour delay for logistic resupply, the 126th Light Rifle Corps marched cross-country from the Svanvik area toward Munkelv and Neiden



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A German rock-lined trench in a hill overlooking Kirkenes



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The last tactical engagement along Highway 50, the route of German withdrawal, was for this ridgeline. The Soviet infantry fought its way across the river and up the slope. The village of Neiden lies at the top.

on 25 and 26 October. Troops of the 3d Naval Rifle Brigade, 126th LRC, helped the 28th Rifle Regiment secure the Munkelv area by the evening of 26 October.<sup>7</sup> On 27 October, the entire corps moved up to the Neiden River, where German rear guards were preparing a hasty defense from the village of Neiden on the ridgeline north of the river on the opposite bank.

With the help of local fishermen, the corps crossed the river and captured Neiden. According to interviews with local Norwegian civilians who lived there in 1944, the Germans resisted strongly and, before withdrawing northward, burned or blew up every building except the wood-frame church.<sup>8</sup>

General Meretskov met with his military council to consider further pursuit. In light of the rugged terrain ahead and the approaching polar night, General Meretskov ordered the 14th Army troops in this sector to go over to the defensive on 29 October 1944.<sup>9</sup> Only a reconnaissance element of unspecified size from the 114th Rifle Division moved forward of Neiden, and on 13 November, it reached the Tana settlement 116 road kilometers northwest of Neiden and then halted.<sup>10</sup>



Author's collection

This church, built in 1902, was the only structure in Neiden not destroyed by the Germans during their withdrawal

### *Southward Pursuit*

Having captured the village and mineworks at Nikel, units of the 127th Light Rifle Corps and 31st Rifle Corps awaited orders at the southern and

eastern shores of Lake Kuetsiarvi on the night of 22—23 October. At 0520 on 23 October, the 31st Rifle Corps headquarters received a partial combat order to seize the airfield, attack and occupy a series of hills straddling Arctic Ocean Highway southwest of Lake Porojarvi, and continue the attack southward along the road (see map 11).<sup>11</sup> The 127th Light Rifle Corps was to attack due westward, capture the two small settlements Menikko and Stenbakk, and then continue the attack in a southwestward direction on the Norwegian side of the Pasvik River.

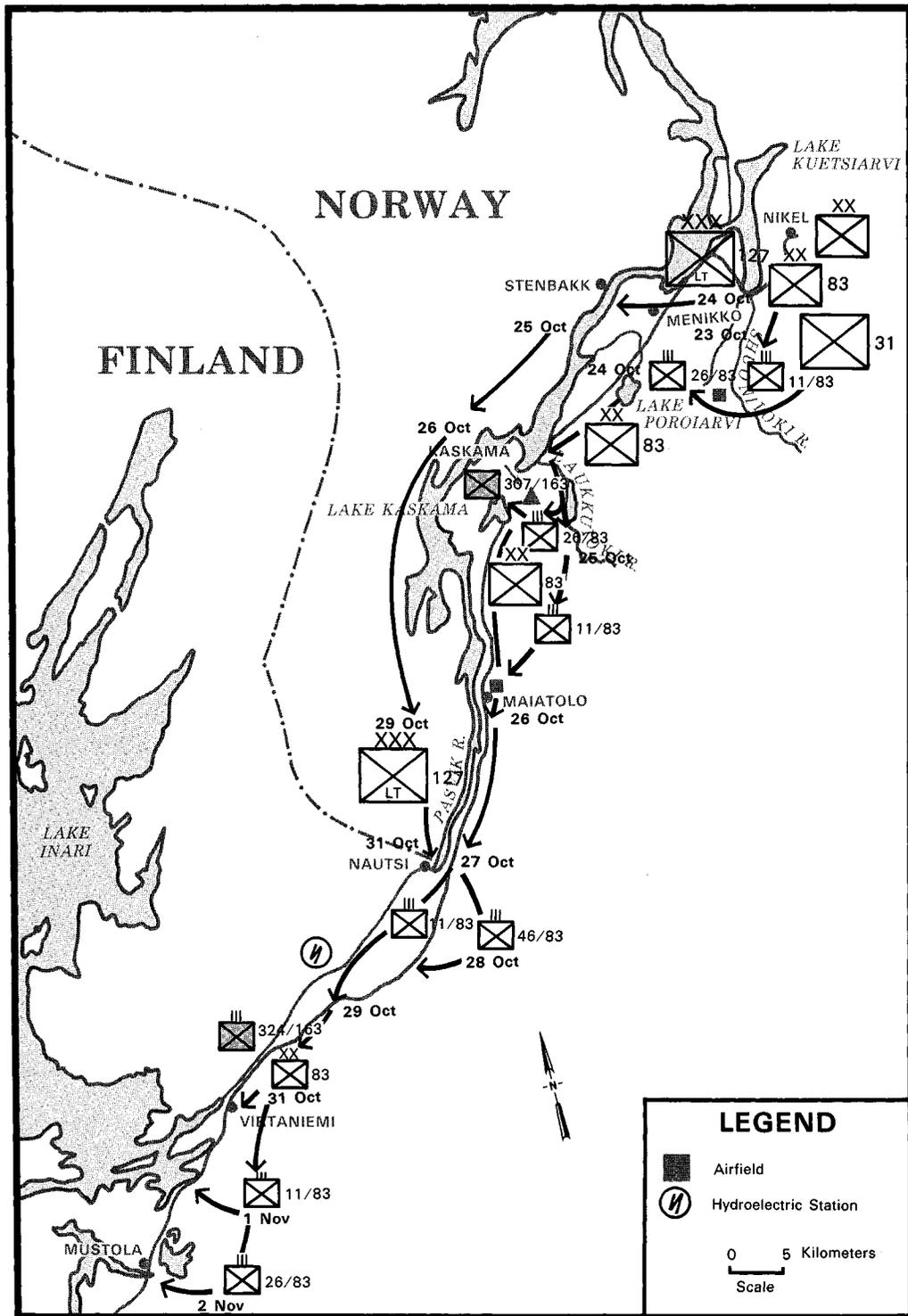
On the assumption that the retreating Germans would demolish the road and employ a strong rear guard, the 31st Rifle Corps commander organized an aggressive pursuit along the road to deny the enemy time to establish an organized defense.<sup>12</sup> Major General Absaliamov planned to defeat the enemy by frontal attacks on the road in conjunction with flank and rear attacks by regiment- and battalion-size infantry detachments moving cross-country. Immediately behind the attacking troops, the engineers were to repair the road so that artillery could be brought up to support the pursuit. Combat units not required for the pursuit were to assist the engineers. Artillery with the greatest range was to engage in counterbattery fire, and if necessary, this artillery would be towed forward by tracked vehicles. Because of the severe mobility problems experienced with his armored vehicles in the previous days, Absaliamov parked his tanks and self-propelled guns, turning them back over to 14th Army control.<sup>13</sup> Finally, the corps commander asked Lieutenant General Shcherbakov, the 14th Army commander, to provide air support and air cover for the attacking force.

To implement this plan, Absaliamov gave the corps engineer control of all troops and vehicles in the corps second-echelon and reserve units that did not have a specific combat mission. An engineer reconnaissance team was formed to move with forward combat elements, assess the road damage, and communicate to the corps engineer the type and amount of support needed to push forward.

Absaliamov ordered the first-echelon 83d Rifle Division to detail one rifle regiment as the flanking detachment. At a moment's notice, it could maneuver off the road to the flank or rear of an enemy force attempting to defend from a delaying or intermediate position. As soon as this regiment was thus committed, another was to be prepared for commitment.

For better command and control, the division commander and key staff personnel were with the lead regiment. The deputy corps commander for logistics ensured that the flanking detachments had ration packets and reindeer to move bulk ammunition. Finally, the corps chief of staff and deputy commander for logistics established a control group to regulate traffic on the road.

As extensive as this planning might appear, it was not enough. The logistic support for the maneuver forces was poor. When large-scale combat operations resumed on 25 October, the 83d Rifle Division units experienced significant shortages in artillery and mortar ammunition and some food and forage commodities (see table 6). The 127th Light Rifle Corps had



Map 11. 14th Army southern flank, 23 October—2 November 1944

**TABLE 6**  
**Supply Status of Rifle Divisions of the 31st Rifle Corps**

<b>Ammunition (Units of Fire)</b>	<b>On 20 Oct</b>		<b>On 25 Oct</b>		<b>On 31 Oct</b>	
	<b>83d</b>	<b>367th</b>	<b>83d</b>	<b>367th</b>	<b>83d</b>	<b>367th</b>
Rifle ammunition	1.1	1.4	1.1	1.4	1.4	1.5
Submachine gun ammunition	1.3	0.7	1.3	1.4	1.6	1.3
Antitank rifle shells	0.4	0.3	0.5	0.3	0.4	0.2
Hand grenades	0.7	0.6	0.6	0.5	0.7	0.5
82-mm mortar rounds	0.0	0.3	0.4	0.3	0.9	0.2
120-mm mortar rounds	1.0	0.4	0.2	0.4	0.6	0.7
45-mm antitank gun shells	0.6	0.5	0.2	0.5	0.4	0.4
76-mm (regimental artillery)	1.0	0.7	0.3	0.6	0.6	0.2
76-mm (divisional artillery)	0.7	0.1	0.2	0.2	0.3	0.16
122-mm howitzer shells	0.1	0.4	0.3	0.7	0.4	0.7
<b>Provisions (Day's Supply)</b>						
Rations for men	3.0	2.0				
Forage for animals	2.0	1.0				
Bread, flour			0.0	0.0	5.0	7.6
Biscuits			1.7	1.3	1.6	0.0
Canned meat			2.2	2.4	8.5	9.0
Groats			1.5	4.3	17.9	8.5
Potatoes, vegetables			0.0	0.0	0.5	0.9
Fat			11.0	24.0	6.0	18.0
Sugar			10.0	0.4	0.0	0.0
Salt			0.0	1.6	2.5	2.0
Tobacco			0.0	0.0	9.0	4.0
Forage			0.0	0.0	0.0	1.0
Petroleum, oils, and lubricants (in refuels)			0.5	0.5	2.0	1.1
Vodka (in liters)			200	500	2,095	1,630

NOTE: From 18 to 22 October 1944, the 367th Rifle Division was the first echelon of the 31st Rifle Corps, while the 83d Rifle Division repaired roads. On 23 October, these roles were reversed.

Source: Mikulskii and Absaliyev, *Nastupatel'nye boi*, 158.

received food supplies on 23 October from a German supply depot in Nikel, but only sufficient to last a few days.<sup>14</sup> These logistic shortcomings contributed to weakening the fighting strength of the combat units.

No amount of planning, however, could have prevented the retreating Germans' continued destruction of the road and bridges. By the evening of 23 October, the 127th Light Rifle Corps had crossed the two rivers at the

southern end of Lake Kuetsiarvi. However, the main body of the 83d Rifle Division, moving along the road, was halted by the destroyed bridge and the absence of fording sites or bypasses. The rebuilding of the bridge was complicated because both approaches were in a swamp. Furthermore, the 14th Army's pontoon bridges and amphibious vehicles were deployed on the Kirkenes axis. Eventually, engineer battalions of both the 83d and 367th Rifle Divisions, a battalion of the 1st Motorized Combat Engineer Brigade, and two rifle battalions from a regiment of the 83d Rifle Division were dedicated to repairing this bridge and its approaches.<sup>15</sup> Even with all this effort, vehicular traffic did not pass this point until the morning of 25 October.

On the morning of 23 October, the 31st Rifle Corps commander brought forward troops of the 367th Rifle Division, and they crossed the Shuonnioki River on a foot bridge. Their task was to repair the road with hand tools. When traffic was finally able to move on the road, divisional and then reinforcing artillery had priority. One rifle regiment of the lead 83d Rifle Division was parceled out along the artillery column to assist in its movement. In sum, all on account of terrain and road conditions, four of the six rifle regiments of the 31st Rifle Corps now had engineer mobility tasks, and the corps had lost its armor support.

Meanwhile, the remaining two regiments moved cross-country without their artillery and support units. The 11th Rifle Regiment captured the airfield south of Nikel on 23 October, where the Germans had abandoned eight airplanes, numerous weapons, and large quantities of parts and supplies. The 26th Rifle Regiment, moving westward but south of the airfield, reached Arctic Ocean Highway by the evening of 23 October and engaged German rear guards. On the morning of 24 October, this regiment renewed the pursuit along the road.

By midafternoon, the 26th Rifle Regiment had advanced to the Laukuiki River, beyond which lay Mount Kaskama and a strong German defensive position. The Soviet force brushed aside a small German outpost, but the Germans' strong, well-coordinated fires from prepared positions on the northern and northeastern slopes halted any further Soviet advance.<sup>16</sup> During the night of 24–25 October, on orders from the corps commander, the 83d Rifle Division commander went forward to the 26th Rifle Regiment command post and organized that unit for a bypass maneuver on the next day.

On the morning of 25 October, heavy vehicles were finally able to cross the Shuonnioki River southwest of Nikel. While additional infantry units and artillery moved up, the 26th Rifle Regiment, minus a battalion left in contact, began to maneuver around the German right flank. By 1530, the flanking detachment had infiltrated between two German positions and lodged itself on the road between Mount Kaskama and Lake Kaskama. If the Soviet forces north of Mount Kaskama had conducted a frontal attack, with the flanking detachment blocking the Germans' retreat, the German position would have collapsed. But the Soviets delayed, choosing instead to continue to prepare for an attack the next day.

**Photo not available**



VAAP

A Soviet 120-mm mortar crew

The Germans took advantage of this delay. They massed forces on the blocking position, counterattacked it several times, and finally, at around 1800, broke through. When Soviet troops swept over the top of the hill on the night of 25–26 October, the German defenders were gone. Many of them, according to Major General Absaliamov, escaped across the river to the west, where the 127th Light Rifle Corps should have engaged them.<sup>17</sup> But the 127th LRC had fallen behind some fifteen to twenty kilometers and was not able to block the 31st Rifle Corps right flank. Although the 127th LRC was supposed to be engaging the retreating Germans on the Norwegian side of the Pasvik River,<sup>18</sup> it had, in fact, stopped to replenish its extremely low food supply.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the 127th LRC did not influence the action at Kaskama.

The next morning, 26 October, the 83d Rifle Division, with two regiments on the road and one in the tundra to the east, continued to move southward pursuing the withdrawing Germans. These units pressed forward to Nautsi, their next objective, and, along the way, overran another airfield at Maiatolo. Here, the Germans had abandoned large quantities of petroleum products, munitions, and spare parts for airplanes and automotive equipment. The division halted south of the airfield on 26 October. That night, the 14th Army commander, Lieutenant General Shcherbakov, ordered the 31st Rifle Corps to seize Nautsi by the next morning. At 0600 on 27 October, he further ordered the corps to capture intact the hydroelectric station on the Pasvik River some twelve to thirteen kilometers southwest of Nautsi.

At midday, fire from German positions halted the 83d Rifle Division units just east of Nautsi. Through reconnaissance and observation, the



Author's collection

On 25 October 1944, Soviet troops crossed the Pasvik River at this site southwest of Nikel on scores of log rafts

Soviets determined that the Germans had established strong defensive positions along the road to the south and west. Therefore, the division commander spent the remainder of 27 October preparing for an attack the next morning. A portion of his artillery arrived on the scene that evening, having come forward thirty-five to forty kilometers that day over an extremely bad road. The remainder did not arrive until the morning of 28 October.

On the morning of 28 October, the 83d Rifle Division executed a frontal and flank attack against the German defenders, which drove the Germans back to a subsequent position. The Soviets spent another half-day reconnoitering this position and, at the same time, brought up more artillery. On 29 October, the 83d Rifle Division attacked and seized the hydroelectric station, which by now the Germans had demolished.<sup>20</sup>

On 30 October, the 14th Army commander ordered the 31st Rifle Corps to occupy defensive positions east of Lake Inari, with forward positions southeast of the lake at Mustola. On occupation of Mustola, a specially created detachment was to drive southward and make contact with the Finnish Army at Ivalo.<sup>21</sup> One attacking regiment fixed the German rear guards positioned astride the road at Virtaniemi, while two other regiments maneuvered cross-country over terrain the Germans believed impassable.<sup>22</sup> Understandably, the Soviet and German accounts differ as to who fought more skillfully, but the net outcome was the same. The German rear guards were driven out of their positions by nightfall on 31 October. Similar actions occurred on 1 and 2 November, resulting in the 83d Rifle Division seizing Mustola by midday on 2 November.

The main forces of the 31st Rifle Corps went over to the defense in positions specified in the 30 October order. A forward reconnaissance detachment pursued the withdrawing Germans as far as Ivalo where, on 5 November, it made contact with Finnish troops. The German forces then withdrew northwestward through Finnish territory back into Norway. In ten days of active pursuit operations (23 October—2 November), the 31st Rifle Corps had advanced approximately 150 kilometers.

Moscow saluted the men and units of the Karelian Front and Northern Fleet three times: on 15 October after the capture of Petsamo, on 25 October after the liberation of Kirkenes, and on 1 November after Pechenga (Petsamo) Oblast had been cleared of German troops.<sup>23</sup> Aided by Northern Fleet units, the Karelian Front had successfully concluded a joint and combined arms operation of unprecedented size on arctic terrain.

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