

Operation Muskox: America was preparing to fight the Soviet Union in the Arctic

Despite the fact that geographically, with cold, snow and ice, natural conditions were very favorable for Canada in protecting the country's northern border, Ottawa was always insecure about this issue.

The enemy comes from the North

It is not surprising that the Canadian government was concerned because in 1941 the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, in 1945 the Soviet Union won the war, and in the following years, military relations and political tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States is still maintained. General Henry Harley Arnold, head of the US Air Force during World War II, believed that the next world confrontation would take place in the Arctic.



American and Canadian forces in Operation Muskox. Photo: russian7.ru

Operation Muskox

In 1946 Canadian, British, and American troops, observers, and advisors began testing the latest technological advances in vehicles and equipment in harsh winter weather. The three-month journey across the tundra tested whether mechanized equipment needed to be adapted to survive in the Arctic. The American and Canadian troops were prepared to fight in these difficult conditions.

Their joint military exercise dubbed Operation Muskox took place, lasting 81 days. The soldiers participating in the operation traversed a 5,000 km route through the uninhabited territories of Northern Canada. They tested the new Penguin "Penguin" military snowmobile, adapted for special use in the Far North, as well as various weapons and uniforms.

Moving and surviving in the harsh climate of the Arctic is very difficult. Snowmobiles frequently break down and consume large amounts of fuel; people suffered from the cold and the discomfort it caused and suffered frostbite. Cooking and spending the night in these conditions is also not easy. But in theory, you also need to be ready to fight.

Operation Muskox involved 48 Army members driving 11 Canadian-designed 4.5-ton Penguin snowmobiles, along with three American observers on a smaller snowmobile called the "Weasel " produced by the United States, as well as an observer from the Royal Canadian Navy and several scientists. The Royal Canadian Air Force assembled a fleet of aircraft and stockpiled food, fuel, and spare parts at air bases along the route.

The main expedition, led by Patrick Douglas Baird, covered 5,000 km, starting from Churchill, Manitoba, first reaching Baker Lake, Northwest Territories, where the number of vehicles was reduced to 10. From there, the group went to Denmark Bay on Victoria Island, then south to Kugluktuk, Port Radium, Norman Wells, Fort Simpson, Fort Nelson and Grande Prairie, then by rail to Edmonton.

Result

Although information about this operation was kept secret, something was still leaked, especially about the deaths of five people, not from the cold. Two soldiers were killed in an accidental fire in Churchill while trying to keep warm in the wooden hut where they were staying overnight, shortly before the main party departed. Many of the expedition suffered carbon monoxide poisoning because the wind blew the exhaust inside the sleds.

On April 4, a Port Radium local drowned while trying to rescue one of the Penguin snowmobiles that had fallen through the ice of Great Bear Lake; two soldiers drowned. The route, chosen by planes flying overhead, was strewn with pebbles, causing damage to vehicles. With temperatures above freezing, the winter tractor road quickly degrades into a very long mud hole where every mile gained is a battle.

This operation confirms the incredible challenge of maintaining military operations in northern latitudes. Despite the deaths, mechanical failures, and environmental challenges, Operation Muskox was considered over. However, there were also positives: unknown rivers were discovered, previously unexplored territories were discovered, new methods of survival in harsh climatic conditions has been developed.

In addition, both the Americans and Canadians later realized that it was practically impossible to fight with conventional means in the Arctic, and therefore they no longer feared a Soviet invasion, although The Soviet Union seemed to have no intention of doing so. And the Operation demonstrated that it was highly unlikely that Soviet forces would attempt to attack North America overland through the Arctic.

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