

# HANNES THE MIGHTY

AND THE NATIONAL GUARD

**By Stephen L. Harris**

*Editor's Note:* While researching his latest book on New York City's National Guard regiments in World War I, the Journal's Associate Editor, Stephen L. Harris, uncovered the following story about the Finnish Olympic champion, Hannes Kolehmainen, during his salad days in Brooklyn.

**When the great Finnish runner, Hannes Kolehmainen, joined the Fourteenth New York Regiment of the United States National Guard on 10 January 1916, he declared at the outset that he had enlisted to run not to go to war. Although war was raging throughout Europe at the time, America had thus far avoided being dragged into the conflict. For the moment, Kolehmainen felt safe.**

In those days, the U. S. National Guard, local militias of volunteer citizen-soldiers, recruited outstanding athletes for the sporting teams they each sponsored. These athletes fought for glory, not on the battlefield but inside their regiment's spacious armories. Among the National Guardsmen, track and field contests were one of the most popular events. In New York City, where there were more than a dozen regiments, competition was hot, heavy and furious. In Manhattan, the dandy Seventh Regiment that protected the posh Upper East Side boasted Paul Pilgrim on its team, the winner of the 400- and 800-meter runs at the 1906 Olympic Games in Athens. The Fighting Sixth-ninth Regiment, made up mostly of Irish residents, had signed Mel Sheppard who succeeded Pilgrim in 1908 as 800-meter champion and then won the 1500. And across the East River in Brooklyn, the Fourteenth Regiment, coached by Lawson Robertson, later an Olympic coach, claimed Kolehmainen, the long-distance running star of the 1912 Games, whose Olympic glory days were far from over.

In the United States, National Guard regiments had been formed as home-defense units. As adjuncts to the professional army, they were ready to repel

attacks from foreign enemies. At least on paper. In actuality, the National Guard was there to protect neighborhoods from union strikers or to quell riots. They were, for all intents and purposes, the strong-arm of American business.

In 1916, the year when Kolehmainen enlisted in the Fourteenth Regiment, the United States was at peace with a warring world. In Europe, Britain and France desperately wanted America in the war, on their side against Germany. President Wilson had so far been able to keep his country on the sidelines even though many citizens were agitating to join the Allies in defeating the Hun. As far as strikes and riots were concerned, at least in New York, there hadn't been any since the turn of the century.

But on America's southern border, civil unrest threatened to tear apart Mexico (a menace that back in New York would soon threaten the tranquility of all of the Empire State's National Guard regiments.)

Still, when Kolehmainen agonized over whether to enlist in an American regiment just so he could run, he feared he would be called on to do more than be a track star. And so he stalled. Even so, most of the Brooklyn regiments had been after him for some time. It seemed that wherever he went, enlistment papers were thrust in front of his nose. In December of 1915, he had finally promised Robertson, a long-time friend, that he would join the Fourteenth. The regiment's armory was conveniently located across the street from his home, where he and his bride of a few weeks had recently moved.

On 10 January 1916, Kolehmainen innocently crossed the street and entered the armory. He was there simply to train. But company commanders quickly circled him like vultures, each pestering him to be a part of their outfit. They went as far as to promise that he could be the regiment's official dancer. Kolehmainen loved to tango. Lt. Hardy from L Company at last won out. The Finn reluctantly agreed to enlist and signed the necessary papers. Before the ink had dried, the lieutenant

triumphantly waved the papers in front of his fellow officers. Now all Kolehmainen had to do was pass the physical, and the Fourteenth had got its man.

Because he was in such marvelous shape, the physical did not loom as a problem. He breezed through the exam. Then the regimental doctor pulled out a needle and told him he had to be inoculated against typhoid. "Hannes the Mighty," as he was known, blanched. He said he had already been vaccinated fifteen years earlier, back in Finland. For the next hour, the doctor cajoled the great runner and finally talked him into receiving the shot. With that ordeal over, he was brought before Maj. T. F. Donovan to be sworn into the Fourteenth Regiment.

Kolehmainen raised his right hand and repeated the oath as Maj. Donovan delivered it. Midway through the ritual he heard for the first time the words that he would have to serve for three years.

Kolehmainen dropped his hand. "Can't I get out and go back to Finland whenever I want?" he asked.

He was informed that he would have to serve his full three years.

Kolehmainen took off. He ran out of the armory and dashed across the street to his apartment. Chasing him were Lawson Robertson, Maj. Donovan, Lt. Hardy and another officer. Inside the apartment they went to work on Kolehmainen. They almost got him to change his mind when he blurted out that he had

heard that national guardsmen actually "go out and shoot strikers."

Donovan joked that in twenty-five years he had killed only ten strikers.

"What! You kill ten strikers?" Kolehmainen was aghast. "Nothing doing. No regiment for me!"

The joke almost backfired. But in the end, Kolehmainen finished his oath and became an

official member of the Fourteenth Regiment. That meant that every Wednesday afternoon he had to show up at the armory for military drill, toting a rifle. In fact, he never missed a day of drill and often arrived at the armory on Sunday mornings for rifle practice.

Almost two months to the day that Kolehmainen enlisted in the National Guard, Pancho Villa, the Mexican revolutionary and bandit, led 1,500 guerrillas across the border and attacked Columbus, New Mexico. They slaughtered seventeen



"Hannes the Mighty" Hannes Kolehmainen

Americans. President Wilson ordered Gen. John J. Pershing to Mexico to bring back Villa and his gang dead or alive. By the time Pershing's army crossed the Rio Grande River, the War Department had decided to use National Guardsmen to patrol the border.

And so in June, 1916, New York State's militia was called to duty. Nine New York City regiments numbering 15,000 citizen-soldiers were put on

alert. The seriousness of the Mexican crisis was underscored when the state's top military officer, Adjutant General Louis W. Stotesbury, declared that "members of the organized militia must respond to the call or be tried by court-martial ..." A few days later he had a young private arrested at the home of the soldier's mother, where he, the private, had been hiding out rather than report to his regiment. The charge against the soldier was desertion, and it carried a jail sentence of eight months.

In Brooklyn, Hannes Kolehmainen refused to assemble with fellow soldiers in the Fourteenth Regiment armory across the street from his apartment. He said he had no intention of going off to camp or to war, that his place was at home with his wife and one-week-old baby. He claimed that by marching off with his regiment he would be in financial trouble. Enlisted men's base pay had been set at \$15 a month. At that salary, Kolehmainen, a bricklayer by profession, just couldn't afford to be a soldier. Then he added that the only reason he joined the regiment in the first place was that he had been pressured by its officers to enlist because of his "athletic prowess." Since he could not read English, he had no idea what he had signed up for - what his military obligations were to the United States. In hindsight, he wished an interpreter had been with him that fateful night back in January.

Although sympathizing with Kolehmainen about his financial fears, Colonel John H. Foote, the regimental commander, seethed when he had heard the story of the enlistment. He avowed that there was no truth to the Finn's story.

Upon hearing the story, The New York Times in an editorial called for an investigation. "For Kolehmainen to compete as a Guardsman when he was not one in any proper sense of the word was a fraud from the standpoint of sport, and that he should be allowed to do so could only happen under a complete and dangerous misunderstanding of the purposes for which the National Guard exists. It is not supported to supply young men with clubs, either social or athletic, and though a certain

number and quality of social features may be innocently attractive for getting and keeping members, and though the cultivation of athletic prowess among them can be commended, yet both should be strictly incidental to the more serious business of soldiering."

Kolehmainen was eventually allowed to stay home and not go with the regiment to the Mexican border. As a reporter for The Brooklyn Daily Eagle put it: "Hannes Kolehmainen, champion Olympic runner and one of the best known athletes in the country, will probably be allowed to run as far as he wants from service with his regiment . . . The Fighting Fourteenth doesn't want him."

Col. Foote's criticism of the Finn was harsh. "He isn't the sort for us," the Daily Eagle quoted Foote. "He's got a bad case of cold feet and the regiment ought to buy him a pair of heavy woolen socks. We won't worry about him."

---

### In 1920, Kolehmainen returned to the Olympic Games and won the marathon with a world-best time of two hours thirty-two minutes and 35.8 seconds

---

In time, the Kolehmainen incident was forgotten. In 1920, he returned to the Olympic Games and won the marathon with a world-best time of two hours thirty-two minutes and 35.8 seconds.

But in the midst of the brouhaha over his refusal to march off to the Mexican border with his regiment, another Olympic track star, perhaps taking a cue from Kolehmainen, also disobeyed orders. Mel Sheppard said he, too, would stay home with his family. He had two young sons to worry about, and so he quit the Sixty-ninth Regiment.

Said his wife, "Just now Mel's country does not need him and we do."

#### Sources:

Brooklyn Daily Eagle, 11 January 1916  
 Brooklyn Daily Eagle, 22 June 1916  
 Brooklyn Daily Eagle, 25 June 1916  
 Brooklyn Star, 30 June 1916  
 The New York Times, 18 January 1916  
 The New York Times 19 January 1916  
 The New York Times 21 June 1916  
 The New York Times, 22 June 1916  
 Overlook Press, New York, NY.