

## The Sisu Spirit

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As a proud Finnish-Canadian reflecting on the meaning of my Finnish heritage, it easily brings to mind the importance of promoting saunas in the winter, followed by a quick jump in the snow; Finnish baseball with a glove that looks more like a hockey goalie glove than one meant for baseball; and cheering for Finland in the World Hockey Championships in spite of fellow Canadians in the room. Despite the great social aspects of Finnish culture that resonate in Canada, clearly there is more to it than just friendly competition. It is a deep sense of pride and connection that is difficult to understand at first. It is difficult because it is tied to a country that you were not necessarily born, or perhaps never even visited, yet the connection is very real, very powerful, and strengthened only by *Sisu Spirit*.

For me, it started with the stories from my *mummu* Anna Valtonen, a White Rose of Finland Medal recipient and mother to six children. She spoke very stoically of their struggles during the Finnish War as if it were something they just simply had to endure in order to survive. She spoke of *sisu* as if it came naturally to all Finns and reinforced that I also possessed this remarkable characteristic. Through the years I tried to wrap my mind around what *sisu* really was or simply trying to explain it to my non-Finnish friends. I then came across a popular 1940 *Time* magazine article that recognized the challenges faced by Finns during the war:

The Finns have something they call *Sisu*. It is a compound of bravado and bravery, of ferocity and tenacity, of the ability to keep fighting after most people would have quit, and to fight with the will to win. The Finns translate *Sisu* as "the Finnish spirit" but it is a much more gutful word than that... (*Time* magazine, January 8, 1940)

A more recent definition of *Sisu* has surfaced on the internet, encapsulating a contemporary version:

Extraordinary determination, courage and resoluteness in the face of extreme adversity. An action mindset which enables individuals to see beyond their present limitations and into what might be. Taking action against the odds and reaching beyond observed capacities. An integral element of Finnish culture, and also a universal capacity for which the potential exists within all individuals. ([www.facebook.com/InspireSisu](http://www.facebook.com/InspireSisu))

I read this definition regularly and cannot help but feel a sense of pride along with an undeniable obligation to sustain this spirit. Unknowingly, I was handed that responsibility a few decades ago, as *mummu* had decided to hand down my *pappa's* medals that he had earned during the Winter War fighting at Suomussalmi and into the Continuation War. I still recall *mummu* had made it quite clear that I was now responsible for their care, to understand what they were awarded for and to ensure I kept them in the family. In hindsight, I now realize it was her own way of making sure the family in Canada remained connected with the rest of the family in Finland. It was not just about the medals; it was what the medals represented.

Since then, I have had the chance to walk the battle ground in Suomussalmi, and study the conflicts that took place. I know through family stories passed down from one generation to another that my *pappa*, *sotilasmies* Juha Valtonen was wounded twice and still returned to the frontline and had occasionally travelled kilometers into enemy territory to retrieve the fallen in order for them to be laid to rest at home. This was the *sisu* spirit in action, and this is what has resonated with me for years. It is that very personal, internal ability to recognize and harness that spirit that