

OSS Operations in Norway: Skis and Daggers

William E. Colby

Editor's Note: Recently, while researching some old CIA files, a CIA historian chanced upon the following account by Maj. William E. Colby of behind-the-lines OSS sabotage operations in Norway during World War II. In November 1945, the War Department's Bureau of Public Relations posed no objection to the article's publication. There is no record, however, that the article was ever published. The first page of the memoir is missing. As Major Colby begins his story, he and his team are being flown to their drop site in Norway.

The eight planes continued north, across the North Sea, over the stark fjords and the white mountains, then up the Norway-Sweden coast past Trondheim, Namsos--almost to the Arctic Circle. By now, night had fallen and the moon was coming up. Below, a faint mist was spreading, taking the sharpness off the rocks, but meaning trouble later.

Then it was midnight, and the pilot called to say that we were 25 miles off course over neutral Sweden. I told the men, and they began to buckle on their white equipment. The pilot veered left and angled earthward.

Now I could see the swath of shaved forest demarcating the two countries. "This is it," I told the pilot. Paulsen and Aanonsen pulled up the trap door, and I went through into the awful quiet that closes in when the engines recede. Then there was the cold and the wonder if there are friends below--and above. Dimly, I counted the others slipping into the air--one, two, three-- formation perfect, five seconds apart.

Then my chute opened, now the others'.

At 500 feet, the underground's landing fires pierced the haze, and with them came the sure knowledge we were at the rendezvous. Step one had come off according to plan; but it was the last thing to go right until we blew up the Nordland railway.

Such was the beginning of "Operation Rype" of the Norwegian Special Operations Group, 35 men working out of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) that had trained them for three years for cutthroat missions behind German lines in Norway. Ours was the first and only combined ski-parachute operation ever mounted by the US Army.

Toward the end of 1944, the Red Army had swarmed over most of Finland, killing and capturing and herding into Norway an estimated 150,000 crack German ski and mountain troops.

At about this time, the Battle of the Bulge had been liquidated, but there was fear on our side that another last gasp by the great beast was in the making. These 150,000 undefeated and still-haughty soldiers were streaming toward the Fatherland. The sea route was well taken care of by the British fleet. The roads were clogged by the wondrous snow that falls nine months of the year around the Arctic Circle.

That left the railroad--the Nordland--a single-track affair between Narvik and Trondheim carrying thousands of troops Reichward each day and daily gaining in capacity. Like Carthage, this had to be destroyed.

Norway 1945

Large-scale operations were eminently possible south of Trondheim by this time, but SHAEF [Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force] had been warned that such landings would risk utter extermination of the trigger-fingered Norse underground. As a result, sabotage was to keep the descending armies bottled up until the heart of Germany stopped.

That is why, in March of this year, 35 tight-lipped, white-clad, tall, somber men climbed into eight converted B-24s at Harrington, southern England, and flew off into the clear mid-afternoon sky, their giant craft pointed north.

Inside the Liberators' spacious but uncomfortable cabins, they said nothing, revealed no excitement. They simply sat still and waited with the patience of men matured by long, bitter winters or by the quiet sea.

These men made up an unusual group of Americans, and a casual observer would have picked almost any other nation to describe their origin. Yet when they removed the great white packs and parkas they wore, underneath was the traditional khaki of the American fighting man.

However, their names read like heroes from some Norse saga-- Paulsen, Johansen, Iversen, Eliassen, Oistad--as indeed they were, for the bulk of them had been stranded off Norwegian ships in the early war days and one way or another found their way into the US Army.

Lieutenant Langeland had been a ship's radio man. Sergeant Listeid had been a seaman. Raivio, a Lapp, had fought the Russians in Finland and escaped to America as a ship's crew member. Sergeant Andreassen had been a first mate and talked of nothing but the sea. Myrland was a former ship engineer--all mature men, competent, born skiers, violently anti-German, yet lovers of another foreign country, that whose uniform they wore.

Among this group were men who could do anything from butchering a cow to fixing a motor with a piece of wire or operating on a casualty with a jackknife. All these skills were used in the cold, hard work they were doing, and the success of our operation can be attributed almost solely to their high caliber and devotion to the mission.

Through the years they had been combed from the millions in the Army and had volunteered to be dropped from a plane to sever the railway. They had been training and waiting since late in 1943, but, on their way at last, there was no excitement, no griping. They looked ahead reflectively--or blankly.

This was my first "business trip" with the so-called Norso Group, and, when the giant plane peeled off for our first landing for fuel at Bleak Kindloss Airfield on the northern tip of Scotland, I was truly amazed to find that no one but myself thought enough about it even to look out the fogging windows.

At the briefing, I reminded the men that General Eisenhower had proclaimed the German armies in Norway had to be held back, that he had his eye on us. And, when the last of these destined to get through dropped on frozen Jaevsjo Lake, I wished he had.

Of the eight planes that set out, only four were able to make their drops. One ship, named Lief for S/Sgt. Lief Oistad (aboard in charge of four

corporals), wound up 50 miles inside Sweden, scattering personnel and equipment over an unidentified lake. The men were interned after barely escaping a full-dress skirmish with the local gendarmes. We were heavily armed.

The transports that succeeded in dropping at Jaevsjö also succeeded in spreading the party and materiel over a 36-square-mile area, some of the stuff kilometers into the surrounding woods. Many packages had no static cords attached and plummeted to Earth without chutes, burying themselves in the snow.

Then there was the underground, whose discipline was as wrong as its heart was right. The receptionists had forgotten the password, or had never learned it, and they simply laughed when we asked them, as per the book, whether there was good fishing on the lake.

Foolish question, they muttered, wanting to fish at this time of year. Fortunately, we had with us for contact purposes Lt. Herbert Helgeson of the Norwegian Resistance Army. He knew the men by the great fires on the ice, and we put away our revolvers.

That first bitter cold night (it was 20 below there, 1,950 miles south of the Circle) was spent gathering up the packages with their colored chutes and hiding them under trees and under snow. This was vital for the arrival of eight four-motored planes in a normally inactive sector and, even without dropping any explosive, they were certain to bring out German observation planes, followed by possible loss of security--or worse.

As usual, the men worked silently, efficiently. I heard only one comment that night. It was by Lt. Glen Farnsworth, and he was needling Lt. Tom Sather. He was always needling Sather, a Norwegian seaman soon to become an Army captain.

"There are two ways to do a thing, lieutenant," Farnsworth drawled as together they tugged on a massive rucksack, "the wrong way and the Army way."

"Yah," came Sather's thick reply. He never could understand American humor despite his years in Brooklyn and North Hollywood.

They were 150,000--maybe more. We were 20 in American uniform plus four from the Norse underground, old colleagues of Lieutenant Helgeson. We needed at least 35 men to blast the great bridge at Grana, our primary

objective, and our orders were to avoid unequal contact with the enemy. Also, Easter was nearing, a time when Norwegians, Quislings included, traditionally appear in the hills for winter sports.

We slunk into the woods, gathered firewood by day, hugged fires by night when smoke was invisible, waiting to hear that the others were coming.

This lasted six days, then three planes were heard. Minutes before, the weather had been perfect, but this was the great north, cradle of tempests, and in seconds a mist out of *Hamlet* shrouded the lake. The planes pulled out of their descent, headed for base, two getting back after dumping cargoes, the other to crash on the Orkney Islands leaving 13 dead. Six of our group were aboard.

Six days later, they tried again with four planes, and the Arctic fought them with everything it had. One of the craft, named Jones for Lt. Blain Jones in charge of three noncoms, came in low, hit a cliff within earshot, and exploded. The other three limped back to Kindloss. We found the bodies one month later and buried the men with military honors. It was the last time headquarters tried to reach us, except with an occasional air-supply carrier.

Meanwhile, 12 days--wasted days-- had gone by, and with each one, more Germans had seeped out of the trap. The men felt it keenly, and they looked to me and Helgeson to supply an answer. Neither of us could stand it any longer. We decided to scrap first plans and fight our own war.

The report I sent back that day said simply that something had to be done. Actually, the few Americans in the bunch felt, and each day with growing intensity, that the entire reputation of America and its future in the Baltic area depended on pulling this thing out of the ice--like Jesse James might have.

Our plan was lifted bodily from the history of the West. We would seize a train, board it, throw her into reverse and blow up every tunnel and bridge we could until ammunition had run out; then drive the train into a ditch. We hoped to succeed by sheer bravado. Farnsworth, the demolition expert, was in seventh heaven. The others smiled again--this was the kind of direct American action they'd heard about, read about, knew went on all the time.

Easter had passed by now, and we were living in the farmhouse of an underground worker who had evacuated his family to Sweden so that we

might have a warm, dry base. As a side job, we were running his fully equipped dairy farm. One of the group, S/Sgt. Paulsen, who had farmed in the Dakotas, took charge eagerly. He was a man who could handle anything. Like most of us, he was over 30.

The day we moved in, the owner, his wife, two children, his 70-year-old mother and 75-year-old father strapped on their light Norwegian skis and sped off on their 40-mile hike. In that country, everybody skis--and even the horses wear snowshoes.

We followed before their tracks had been covered, headed for the Nordland Railway's series of bridges between Steinkjer (visible on large maps) and Grong.

Our usual luck was with us, and three hours after setting out we were plodding into a sleet storm, carried by the strong west wind and turning our clothing, equipment, and the snow into a sheet of ice, making it almost impossible for the skis to take hold. We scraped along for 15 miles, then took cover in one of the unoccupied summer huts (a *seter*) that dot the Norwegian mountains.

The next day, we got 25 miles farther, stopping this time in the *seter* of a Nazi sympathizer who, therefore, was well off. It took us three hours to find his liquor cached behind the baseboard of his piano.

Finally, we got to the peaks overlooking the Tangen bridge, somewhere north of Tangen, where the railroad skirts Oiingen Lake. The terrain was the most difficult I had ever seen.

Picture the Hudson River, visualizing the Palisades three times their true height. Place a railroad snug against the foot of the cliffs, and then crust the whole thing with four feet of snow and six inches of wet ice. Now, place 23 skiers atop the mountain, and they are carrying revolvers, tommyguns, Garandes, Brens, and 180 pounds of TNT plus other equipment on a massive sled.

Helgeson said it would be impossible to get down. Men would break their legs, their skis. But I was a novice at skiing and knew motion is possible in positions other than upright. One patrol found an ice-logged waterfall that rambled in fairly easy stages in a deep, rock-lined gorge. It ended in the lake. Perfect, I thought. Mad, thought Helgeson. We would sleep on it--and did, in a crevice in the rock. Next morning, we started, the men having been instructed to sit whenever they felt themselves losing control.

Our only casualty was Helgeson's skis. He did not think much of the sitting idea. He was re-rigged and sent into the foothills beyond.

The Norwegian lieutenant was a national hero, known to everyone, even in this bleak area. He headed for hunters' cabins, where every move of the Germans was recorded. From these, he could learn what the enemy was doing, then pick us up later by flagging the train.

Sather and four men went north, snipping wires and smashing telephones. The remainder of the group took up battle stations as we waited for the locomotive--until patrols told us we were right [words missing] had been for 48 hours.

Once again plans went out the window, and quickly Farnsworth, Sergeant Myrland, Cpl. Kai Johansen, and Sgt. Odd Andersen set the charges under the long, I-girdered bridge. They planted all we had, enough for four bridges that size.

It is difficult to blow up steel--most often it simply bends out of shape. But the second Farnsworth touched the wires and the TNT went off, the structure vanished. The noise was awful, rocking back and forth between the hills. Even the softening lake seemed to jump, and it did crack with a boom like distant thunder. The happy men stood around with smiles on their grimy, weary faces. At last they had done something, and the Nordland railway was stopped.

Our base was 30 miles away, and we reached it skiing from tree to tree, stopping only for rest. Overhead, German spotters were looking for us, and I promised the men we would lie low, keep out of sight, and sleep. But Helgeson was waiting for us. He was excited. "Nazis," he blurted. "Fifty following you. We must leave."

The men said nothing. Those who had unbuckled their skis quietly put them on again. In an hour, we slogged ahead, directly into territory heavily patrolled by Germans. There were Germans behind us, more overhead. Our destination was Sweden, 40 miles ahead. We made it without stop, shaking off the enemy 56 hours later at "Benzedrine Hill," where the terrain and land mines broke both the legs and the spirits of the pursuers.

This hill, called Sugartop on the map, got its new name from the amount of white tablets we consumed to scale its sheer height. It went up at 45 degrees, requiring human chains to pull up the sled. Farnsworth and I split

a tablet at the start, and the others began changing their minds after about 100 feet. Sather, however, refused to the end. White-parkaed, snorting, he went up like a Missouri mule. It was to his credit we got our stuff up at all.

Operational report VI of Norso Group, Mission Rype (code name of operation) to OSS HQ Scand. Sec. 18 April says: We reached underground headquarters, where the men rested and were fed elk.

That is all the Army needs to know. Other information falls into the category of personal problems that "we are not interested in, Major." Let it suffice, then, to say the men were exhausted, stumbled half-frozen into the hut, and caved in.

Helgeson sat propped against the wall, legs high, skis V-ing roofward at a crazy tilt. Sather sat next to him. The others sprawled in awkward ways, trying to remove their skis without effort. The CO sat down, too. At that moment, we were almost irregulars. We had not slept or eaten warm food for three days.

The Norwegian officer was the first to speak.

"I would like a dish of pineapple," he said from the depths of his beard.

"Easy," mumbled Sather. "Just ask for it. It will be on the next plane. The Army can do anything." He was not fooling.

Helgeson laughed. I suspect there was polite rivalry between these two so similar in background yet owing allegiance to different lands. Both came from wealthy families. Both had had early contact with the Nazi movement, having been guests at the 1936 Berlin Olympics. And both had become violent patriots when the Wehrmacht invaded their native country.

At any rate, a wild session of horseplay broke out--one of those things that happen often on solemn occasions--and Farnsworth, who learned the ropes in Baltimore service stations, led the pack.

"Order me up a banana split, lootenant," he shouted and a chorus of approval filled the tiny hut. "And a hamburger and a cherry coke, Lieutenant Liverlip." He paused for applause. "Then a T-bone steak with onions, lootenant."

The hut became a bedlam, everyone shouting for Yankee food and voicing

his gripe with everything he did not like at the moment--the Army, the Air Forces, skis, Norway, snow, fjords. Farnsworth got off a classic: "Watch the fjords go by," he said. We all felt drunk.

"Shut up, Farnsworth," I yelled.

"Go ahead, go ahead, shut me up," Farnsworth said gaily, "you old Trojan Norse."

How could anyone dislike a guy like that?

The discourse ended, I think, with everyone falling asleep--everyone but the iron man, that is, for from somewhere Sather got an elk and cooked it with Norwegian gravy. We ate, feeling wonderful--and terrible.

Then, four days later, a lone Liberator swung low over Jaevsjo and dropped the supplies we needed: food, K-rations, cigarettes, soap, one-pound rail bombs, noncom's outfits for five, lieutenant's bars--and a case of canned Hawaiian pineapple.

All security had vanished. The Germans had every reason to know we were in their backyard. We had destroyed their bridge, injured their men. Also, word was spreading among the inhabitants. Many wanted to join us, but some--very few--were sure to tell the enemy where we were. We hoped that after the snow had melted we would be able to organize an army among the people. Discussions on this had begun on a "very high level."

This "very high level" stuff sometimes is wonderful, doing more things than an army in the field. For instance, when we returned from the Tangen bridge operation, whom should we find dressed as Norwegian hunters, grinning happily yet shyly because of the way they looked, but our five men who had landed in Sweden the night of our takeoff. It was for them we needed the new uniforms because they could be shot legally as spies if the enemy caught us. The remainder would have been shot illegally.

But to say our morale was high would have been a gross understatement. Lonely men will dream of home. Inactive men will gripe over trifles. Tired men will argue over pineapples, but nothing can depress soldiers who have carried out a successful operation.

We rested, ate local food bought with Swedish kroner sent by courier from our "authority," and stood heavy 24-hour guard duty. Even when twice-daily railway service resumed, it failed to lessen our satisfaction.

Heightened it, in fact, as it confirmed our calculations of the high priority the enemy placed on the road. It made the men all the more eager to act again.

On 22 April, a man called Drama came, like Mohammed, into the mountains. He was a go-between for our group and our "very high authority," a man called Jupiter. Drama and the Norso Group--the entire group--went over future plans.

Chief among these was the Lierne scheme, which consisted of our seizing the county of Lierne and forming guerrilla units of the men there and among the men already infiltrating into the valley below. We were to establish liaison with elements inside Lierne and, naturally, to strengthen our own forces before the attack with recruits we presently were avoiding.

This had been the OSS method generally throughout Europe, especially in France, where all the Norsos had prior experience in the Jedbergs or Operational Units jumping behind the front and setting up maquis groups. In those days, the enlisted men plus Lieutenant Sather were under Lt. Col. Serge Obolensky, the socialite, who taught them to jump from planes and one time went in with them to show what he had learned in Sardinia.

Oftentimes, it is not easy to organize guerrillas, principally because these hunted, perhaps beaten, ill-armed, poorly fed patriots are unwilling to place themselves in your hands until you have proved your military efficiency. In Norway, we already were overcoming such obstacles; our presence had spread far and wide, and Nazi-despising Norwegians were being drawn into our area to get in on the sport.

At the moment, we had to do without them. We had no extra arms, and our assignment was a highly specialized one. In two weeks, however, with the fast-melting snow gone, we would have to form our "army," cut off a wide area to stem the enemy's withdrawal, and save our own skins. The Germans certainly would have found us once the roads were open, and Nazis have little use for the OSS.

Drama applauded our ideas, and both of us agreed to plump for approval of them--he through his channels, I through headquarters in London. We parted friends.

Meanwhile, skis were still useful.

On Monday, 23 April, the unit left Jaevsjo Farm and pushed through soft

snow to Seisjoen Lake, going via Lillefjeldet and Seisjoen. There, we broke into a hut and passed the night. Tuesday, we moved north via Andorsjoen Lake and Goas Lake and broke into a hut at Skjorsjohaugen. These places are uninhabited and not on any map. They lie about three-quarters the way up the Norse peninsula, near the Swedish border.

Next morning, a reconnaissance party of myself, Technical Sergeant Langeland (now a lieutenant) and our excellent local guide, Hans Lierma, skied six hours until we met our old acquaintance, the Nordland railway, where it snakes through Snasa.

It was vastly quiet as we three reached the area. Nothing moved, except the shimmer of sunlight on virgin snow, but Helgeson's spies had told us there were 112 Germans guarding the 5-mile strip under observation. So, standing like that famous print of an Indian on a bill, we counted off the spots we would attack and slipped quietly back to our rendezvous--a hut at Skartnes that the main body had broken into and where it now was waiting.

At moonrise, we quit the shack, 24 men divided up into eight teams, each carrying 30 pounds of rail demolition. As was our custom, it was midnight when we deployed along the right of way after a hard drive into the omnipresent west wind that sank below zero with nightfall, crusting the snow.

Where the Germans were warming themselves, we would never know, but they gave no inkling there had been anyone here since the Flood. We moved silently, talking in whispers, inching along on our scraping skis.

The men fanned out for 2.5 kilometers and set the bombs. The plan was to detonate at 0005 on a green signal flare from me or, failing that, five minutes later. The nearness of an unsuspected German guardhouse prevented the flare plan and, at 0010, one tremendous crescendo rocked the valley.

It was not one explosion here, one there, but the whole works right on the nose. Frightening coordination. Farnsworth had taught the men well.

Then came the Germans like violated bees, shooting aimlessly into the air, setting off hundreds of flares. We ran. Someone fired at my team, but we ignored him. In the distance, a Garand rattled. It was Sather, hoping to get one of the hated enemy.

The unit assembled at the hut, fresh, joking, exuberant as freshmen despite 18 hours of solid going. There was no rest time, only 50 miles of fairly decent terrain to cover. We were at Javesjo Farm in 16 hours, retreating without a break.

The Germans forced Russian slaves to patch up the ruined railway, but it never was much use to them after that. As it worked out, we had completed the mission.

An extremely difficult week of heavy guard duty ensued for the unit, which had been cut to 20 men by a London order directing all Norwegians except Helgeson elsewhere. Those who left and those who stayed behind were unhappy about this. By this time, strong bonds had been formed among us.

Other strange things happened. We practically lost contact with headquarters, and our food ran out. My frantic pleas brought only orders to remain in hiding. Then the Germans hunting us came perilously close. One five-man enemy patrol stumbled on the camp. They were armed with machine pistols. We almost talked them into surrender, but characteristically one started shouting as soon as we lowered our guns.

We eliminated the entire detail with tommyguns, but one Norwegian courier was wounded in the stomach. We dressed him in hunter's clothing and dragged him 50 miles into Sweden on a sled, wondering about the consternation that would be caused by the sign T/3 Fred Johansen pinned on his jacket: "This man had been treated with penicillin. Take note." The wounded man survived.

It was feared the enemy would continue resistance in Norway and, in such event, we were to be the advance guard of major operations. We lived on *grunt*--Norwegian oatmeal--and recruited guerrillas like mad, principally for our own protection, for it would be a matter of days before follow-up patrols would find us.

On 4 May, a party arrived from Snasa. These men wished to fight along with us. They informed us that a 30-man patrol was looking for our base as a result of the rail-bomb operation, but we had enough to handle them now. Two days later, a group arrived in flight from the Gestapo. The German terror organization had a way of singling out the best elements of a people and herding them our way--to our satisfaction, and we began to map the Lierne operation.

But what happened now is history. The war ended suddenly.

However, we were kept intact until 12 May, just in case. Then we skied to Snasa, where we were treated like heroes, the mayor proclaiming our virtues. All the way to Trondheim we proceeded to the cheers of the people who were reading glowing accounts in the press. Everywhere we appeared, bands gave out with the Star Spangled Banner. It was thrilling to hear the national anthem under those circumstances.

But the rest of this story is routine. We supervised the surrender and policed 10,000 Germans at Namsos, and we acted as honor guard for Crown Prince Olaf on his return to Trondheim and accompanied him in the parade in his honor on 10 June.

We got to Oslo eight days later, and the men were given furloughs to visit their old homes. They were highly acclaimed.

Then there was the parting with Helgeson, the trip back to England, and the slow journey home to the States. We talked a lot of what we had done, whether we had shortened the war, even by a few minutes, or at all. The men thought so.

Once home, the group was decorated with Bronze and Silver Stars.

And the Norsos? All but one, they are here in the States, and those who neglected to do so before are busy becoming citizens.

And Captain Farnsworth still is needling Captain Sather.

William E. Colby was a former Director of Central Intelligence.

The views, opinions and findings of the author expressed in this article should not be construed as asserting or implying US government endorsement of its factual statements and interpretations or representing the official positions of any component of the United States government.