

Norwegian-Americans and the 99th Infantry Battalion (Separate)

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Unconventional War Plans for Norway

Early in World War Two, the United States recognized a need for special units with the cultural and linguistic background needed to conduct unconventional warfare operations in countries occupied by Germany or Japan.



Norway was one of those countries. It was hoped that at least four objectives could be accomplished in Norway through the use of unconventional warfare: (1) eliminate Norway as an economic asset for Germany; (2) force Germany to keep large numbers of troops on occupation duty in Norway and away from other active fronts; (3) limit the ability of German troops in Norway to attack allied convoys transporting supplies to the Russian port of Murmansk; and (4) prepare for the future occupation of Norway, and create a link through Norway to Russia.

Plans for the Norwegian operation developed under the code name "PLOUGH." Initially the primary objective would be to destroy electrical plants. Before operations could be conducted troops had to be identified and trained, and a winter operations support vehicle had to be developed.

The first unit tasked with the Norwegian mission was the 1st Special Service Force. It was activated on 2 July 1942 and was to be trained as infantry with special skills as paratroopers, skiers, and mountain climbers. The T-15 Weasel tracked vehicle was developed to support their winter operations.

Organization of the 99th at Camp Ripley

A week later, on 10 July 1942, the 99th Infantry Battalion (Separate) was ordered formed by H.Q. Army Ground Forces. The men needed to be able to blend perfectly into the local Norwegian countryside, so requests for Norwegian speaking volunteers were sent throughout the army. Native speakers were preferred but Americans of Norwegian descent who were fluent in the language were also accepted. Efforts were made to recruit Norwegians stranded in America by the war, and it was hoped that many tough Norwegian merchant seamen would enlist. All volunteers had to be citizens of the United States or must have applied for citizenship.

As might be expected, many of the men who volunteered came from Minnesota and the Dakotas. Those accepted were ordered to report to Camp Ripley, Minnesota, where the Battalion's first morning reports were filed on 15 August 1942. The unit's first commander was Captain Harold D. Hanson, and it had an authorized strength of 884. Officers were to be Norwegian-Americans until native Norwegian officers could be graduated from officer candidate schools.

At Camp Ripley the unit engaged in enhanced soldier skill training and physical conditioning.

Training went well until an unseasonal mid-September snowfall that was very wet, heavy, and deep, collapsed all the unit's tents. Realizing that the training would be hampered at Camp Ripley (Camp Ripley had been designed for summer field training), Captain Hanson moved his unit to Ft. Snelling. The battalion's motor officer, Lt. Lester Carlson from southern Minnesota, had contacts with the State Highway Patrol and was able to make special convoy arrangements for a non-stop motor march to Ft. Snelling. At Ft. Snelling the battalion continued the training started at Camp Ripley--physical conditioning, long road marches, enhanced soldier skills, and Norwegian language classes. The Twin Cities' large Scandinavian population made sure that the men were well cared for, and many social events were organized to entertain the men when off duty.

On 17 December the battalion was transferred to Camp Hale, Colorado. Getting off the train and realizing that the snow was 6 feet deep, many soldiers wondered what they had really gotten themselves into. They soon found out. Carrying equipment weighing up to 90 pounds, the unit spent much of the winter training in the mountains on skis and snowshoes, and developing winter survival skills. In the spring when the snow melted the men received extensive rock climbing training.

President Roosevelt personally reviewed the battalion on Easter Sunday, 1943.

A Revised Mission

In the spring of 1943 the feasibility of ground operations in Norway was reconsidered, and it was determined that large unit operations would not be productive. Ground troops, once deployed, could not be recovered. The Royal Air Force felt that it could carry out the missions with its bombers, and the Norwegian government worried that the damage caused would hurt the Norwegian people and economy far more than the German occupation.

The 1st Special Service Force therefore lost its Norwegian mission. As it had for other occupied countries, the OSS organized Operational Teams to infiltrate into Norway and conduct unconventional warfare operations. In June 1943 about one hundred volunteers were recruited from the 99th to form these OSS Teams.

Two months later the remainder of the 99th Battalion received orders for overseas deployment. In August they moved to Camp Shanks, NY, and on 5 September 1943 they boarded the SS *Mexico* and departed for England. Food on board the *Mexico* was horrible and many men subsisted on candy bars and pop from the ship's snack bar. They arrived in Scotland on 16 September and boarded trains for a 16-hour train ride to Perham Downs Camp, Tidworth area, Wiltshire, England,

At Perham Downs the unit received added training in infantry tactics and weapons. Many of the men also participated in a combat swimming program and a field ration evaluation.

In January 1944 the battalion moved to a new training site at Glenusk Park in Wales, where still more mountain training was given, as well as training for infantry in support of tanks. While at Glenusk Park, 52 men, all over 6 feet tall, were selected to form a special unit to guard the invasion plans at 1st Army HQ in Bristol England. These men were called the "Swedish Guards" by the HQ staff.

Fighting in Normandy

On 1 May the unit moved to Herford, England and then on 17 June departed for France, via LCI.

Due to bad weather they were unable to land on Omaha beach until 21 June. The unit spent several days behind the beach which allowed Lt. Carlson, the battalion motor officer, to improve the 99th's mobility by scrounging abandoned vehicles off the beach. It was briefly attached to the provisional ranger Group. By 30 June they were moving into Cherbourg to help secure the city. Some members of the unit found and ate still warm food prepared and abandoned by the Germans prior to their surrender. In Cherbourg the Battalion HQ section captured the vehicle that would serve them throughout the rest of the war, a brand new Ford halftrack truck, which quickly received a coat of olive drab paint and US Army insignia.

During much of July the battalion conducted rear area security operations with the 759th Light Tank Bn. In mid August the 99th was attached to 2nd Armored Division where it received high praise from the division commander as the only infantry unit the tanks had trouble keeping up with. Around the 25th of August the 99th was heavily engaged in attacks to secure the French city of Elbeuf on the Seine River. The Germans fought desperately to defend Elbeuf because it was one of two main river crossing sites for German units trying to escape from Normandy.

In September the 99th Battalion was again attached to the 2nd Armored Division and saw heavy action along the Meuse Canal, north of Maastricht, Holland. On 14 October the Battalion was attached to the 30th Infantry Division and saw some of it's heaviest fighting of the war attacking Wurselen, Germany. Its mission was to cut the German escape route out of Aachen. Throughout November and early December the 99th served as the 1st Army rear area reserve for defense against German airborne operations.

The Ardennes

Germany launched it's Ardennes Offensive on 16 December and on the 17th the 99th Battalion was ordered into defensive positions south of Malmedy, Belgium. The battalion was part of Task Force Hanson, named after the 99th's commander, and it consisted of the 99th, the 526th Armored Infantry Bn., and the 825th Tank Destroyer Bn. The unit occupied a strong defensive position 1000 meters wide, with a 500 meter field of fire from the top of a 15 foot high railroad embankment.

On the night of 21 December, at about 10:30, the 99th's position was attacked by Panzer Brigade 150 in what must have been one of the strangest looking attacks of the war. This German unit was commanded by SS Colonel Otto Skorzeny, Hitler's most daring commando leader. The brigade's initial mission was to pose as American soldiers, infiltrate American rear areas and cause as much damage and confusion as possible. Most of the soldiers were dressed in full or partial American uniforms and many of the vehicles were captured American vehicles, or were German vehicles disguised to look like American vehicles. By 20 December Skorzeny realized that his infiltration mission had failed and he requested permission to employ his brigade as a regular armor unit. On the night of December 20th he was assigned the mission of capturing Malmedy, and attacking the rear of the Americans who were preventing the advance of the 1st SS Panzer Corp at Elsenborn Ridge. Skorzeny's attacks appeared to consist of Americans attacking Americans, but thanks to the defensive efforts of the 99th Battalion and units of the 30th Infantry Division, all of Panzer Brigade 150's efforts failed with heavy losses. The Germans did, however, succeed in one effort. Because many of the 99th soldiers had Norwegian accents, they were regularly arrested or detained when mistaken for some of the German infiltrators of Skorzeny's brigade.

Mop ups

After the battle for Malmedy, the 99th occupied defensive positions between Malmedy and Stavelot, where they conducted raids and combat patrols. After 31 days on the line the battalion

was relieved and sent to Tilff, Belgium, for several days of rest and recuperation. Then on 22 January 1945 the 99th was loaded into cramped French 40 and 8 boxcars for a bone numbing 74-hour train ride to Barneville, in Normandy, where their war had started seven months earlier.

In Barneville the 99th became part of a new unit, the 474th Infantry Regiment. In addition to the 99th, the regiment was composed of elements of the 1st Special Service Force, and the survivors of the 1st, 3rd, and 4th Ranger Battalions. Augmenting the infantry units was a 105mm self propelled cannon company, and the 552nd Anti-tank company with M-8 armored cars and light tanks.

There was much speculation about the unit's new mission and anticipation of a possible invasion of Norway ranked high in the possibilities. On 22 February 1945 474th received its mission to provide rear area security in the 12 Army Group's rear area. One Battalion would support each of the 1st, 3rd, and 9th Armies. The regiment's commander did not want his unit divided into three elements and he was able to convince General Patton's staff to attach the entire regiment to the 3rd Army. Throughout the Army's area the 474th rounded up by-passed German units, ferreted out hiding Nazis, and demilitarized the civilian population.

In early April the 99th received the mission to supply guards and vehicles to transport Nazi gold and art treasures from the Kaiseroda salt mine in Merkers, Germany, to the Reichsbank in Frankfurt. The total value of the items moved was estimated to be 2.1 billion dollars. Needless to say, the movement had the highest transportation security priority. Airforce fighters provided air cover, and the convoy completely shut down the Autobahn in both directions.

To Norway at Last

The war in Europe ended on 7 May 1945. Two days later, the 474th and the 99th Battalion finally received the mission that many hoped for. The regiment would move to Norway to assist in the disarming and demobilization of Germany's 300,000 man army there. The regiment devoted a month to spit and polish preparation in LeHavre, France, before departing for Oslo via LSTs on 4 June. After a delightful cruise on a smooth sea, under a sunny sky, the regiment arrived in Oslo on 8 June.

The 99th was garrisoned in Camp Smestad, a beautiful former German log cabin camp just outside of Oslo. By late July preparations were completed for German demobilization and troop transportation back to Germany. Throughout August the battalion assisted in the processing and movement back to Germany of nearly 100,000 German military personnel. When Norway's King Haakon returned to Norway he was greeted by an honor guard from the 99th Battalion, and in turn the King honored the 99th by designating it as his personnel honor guard unit. The 99th also participated in several large parades honoring the allied victory, allied military forces, and America's Independence Day. All of these parades were greeted by huge crowds of Norwegians eager to celebrate their liberation, and eager to thank the allied liberators.

Despite an influx of many replacements for casualties received in European battles, the 99th retained a strong Norwegian element. In Norway a generous leave and pass policy was implemented which the men eagerly utilized. Many of the native Norwegian members of the 99th were reunited with families who had received no word of their loved one for five years, and had no idea if their relative was dead or alive. Many Norwegian-Americans were able to find and meet their Norwegian relatives for the first time. There were many romantic encounters with Norwegian women and a number of weddings took place or were planned. In almost every case the occupation of Norway was a joyful time for the men of the 99th Infantry Battalion.

Home

Their mission completed, the 474th Regiment and its 99th Battalion were ordered home for demobilization. On 16 October 1945, the 99th boarded the SS *Bienville* in Oslo harbor and set sail for the United States on the next day. Arriving in Boston on 1 November 1945, the battalion was sent to camp Miles Standish and demobilized on 2 November.

The battalion participated in five battle campaigns: Normandy, Northern France, Rhineland, Ardennes, and Central Europe. It had 101 days in combat, suffered the loss of 52 men killed, 207 men wounded, and 6 men missing. Fifteen unit members received the Silver Star, and 20 men were awarded the Bronze Star

The 99th Infantry Battalion with its strong Minnesota roots, remains one of the most unique units in the history of the United States Army.

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