

# NORSO and the Norwegian connection

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11/7/2014

**This Veterans Day we look at some Norwegian-American heroes**



Photo: Rolf Hersted  
One of the Norwegian OGs in Scotland.

Erik Brun

99th Battalion Educational Foundation

Did you know that two of the first Office of Strategic Services' Operational Groups were recruited in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado? On Highway 24, 30 miles south of I70, and five miles north of Leadville there is a monument on Tennessee Pass. The site is shared by two memorial stones, the 10th Mountain Division's and a second stone that is a memorial to the 99th Infantry Battalion (Separate) and a group called NORSO.

In the summer of 1943, a group of Office of Strategic Services (OSS) recruiters arrived at Camp Hale, Colorado, to conduct interviews for the first of their Operational Groups. Camp Hale, a brand-new city for 15,000 souls had been completed in November 1942 after seven months of feverish construction. The Cantonment, at the 9,600-foot level in a glacial valley, had been known to the Railroad as Pando, Colorado. This new Army city had been built specifically for the Mountain Training Center and Winter Warfare Board. It was the home of the new 10th Light Division (Pack, Alpine).



Photo: Rolf Herstad

From left: Odd A, Anderson (Christopher Mission 3/4 Sept. 44 and RYPE), Ka O.C. Johansen (Percy Red July 31/ Aug. 1 1944 and RYPE), Leif Eide (Percy Red and China offensive operational to Hanoi French Indochina), Arne Herstad (Percy Red-China offensive).

The Operational Groups (OGs) were the next logical step beyond the individual agent or small team of specialists. They were a uniformed force, intended to be inserted behind enemy lines and operate as a combat force or to leverage indigenous groups to field larger forces. The first of these planned Operational Groups were to be formed of Norwegians. The OSS had come to Camp Hale, because the 99th Infantry Battalion (Separate) was stationed there. (More info at [www.99battalion.org](http://www.99battalion.org)).

The 99th was one of several ethnic battalions created as a result of the War Department's "Foreign Legions" discussions after Pearl Harbor. The 99th was the first European Ethnic unit. The Battalion was activated in August of 1942 at Camp Ripley, Minnesota. It was formed of Norwegian Nationals and Norwegian Americans, gathered from across the Stateside Army, reception stations, and, by special permission, 25 volunteers from the 5th Infantry Division's troops in Greenland.

The 99th arrived at Camp Hale from Ft. Snelling, Minnesota, in mid-December 1942. They trained throughout the remainder of the winter, spring, and summer at the 9,600-foot cantonment and up to the 12,000-foot peaks surrounding the base. The unit was preparing for its deployment to the United Kingdom when the OSS arrived. Camp Hale was a harsh training ground and had provided the men with the stamina and determination to succeed in their later assignments. The recruiters found a group of mountain-hardened individuals, many native and fluent Norwegian speakers with a wide variety of backgrounds: Merchant marine officers, engineers, carpenters, students, and loggers. They selected 74 men, who departed under OSS Special Order 11 to Virginia. On July 28, 1943, the group was activated as the Norwegian Operations Groups, at the Congressional Country Club near Washington D.C.



Photo: Rolf Hersted,  
Odd A. Anderson (Christopher Mission 3/4 Sept. 44 and RYPE), Ka O.C. Johansen (Percy Red July 31/  
Aug. 1 1944 and RYPE), Leif Eide (Percy Red and China offensive operational to Hanoi French Indochina),  
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The rest of that summer and into the fall they continued training in small arms, close combat, demolitions, and covert movement in Northern Virginia. Training culminated in an exercise in Martha's Vineyard, where an unsuspecting Marine detachment defending a lighthouse was embarrassed by the Norwegians. The victors were in turn humbled by a sandbar while making the rendezvous with an LST. The operations group arrived in the United Kingdom in December 1943.

There, under the experienced wing of the British Special Operations Executive (SOE), they immediately began rigorous training in Scotland and other locations around the United Kingdom in preparation for the coming operations. The Norwegian Section (NORSO) of the OSS operations headquarters' Scandinavian Branch continued to plan a role for the OG in Norway, a predominantly British theater of operations. Various plans were put forward, but no missions appeared until all the OGs in the United Kingdom were placed under Lt. Col Serge Obolensky's Command in May of 1944.

With the beginning of the ground campaign in northern Europe after D-Day, all the Operational Groups were alerted for a series of special operations. It was the chance to prove the concept of the Operation Groups formation. These Operational Groups participated in eight operations from England in August and September of 1944. The Norwegians jumped in Operations: Percy Red, Percy Pink, Patrick, Christopher, and Adrian. The Norwegians were

combined with other OGs in England and had between five and 29 Norwegian OG members on these five missions. They jumped at night from specially modified B-24s of the 492nd Bomb Group (Heavy), the “Carpetbaggers.” They jumped at night into France at 600 feet above the ground at 125 mph.

These brave men jumped from blacked-out bombers into darkness, not knowing whether they would be met by the stalwart members of the Marquis, French Resistance Fighters, or by the readied guns of the Germans. Capture meant certain death at the hands of the Nazi secret police, the Gestapo. For Hitler had signed the Commando Order in 1942, instructing all Irregular Warfare fighters to receive a death sentence. The men of the Italian Operations Groups had lost 14 of their members to a firing squad outside of Rome, on the ill-fated Operation Ginny II.

This Veterans Day we salute all those who’ve served. This story will be continued.

*This article originally appeared in the Nov. 7, 2014, issue of the Norwegian American Weekly. To subscribe, visit [SUBSCRIBE](#) or call us at (800) 305-0271.*

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