

OPERATION RYPE: A World War II OSS Railway Sabotage Mission in Norway

Frode Lindgjerdet (Casemate Publishers, 2023), 242 pages, photos, map.

Reviewed by J.R. Seeger

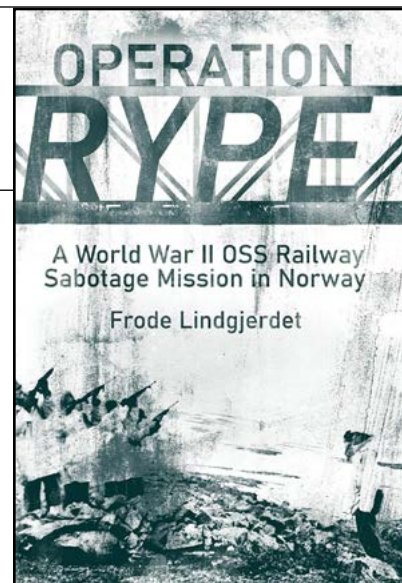
In this recent English translation of Frode Lindgjerdet's *OPERATION RYPE*, readers are offered an excellent fusion of a well-researched history coupled with just enough operational detail to make even the most jaded expert in World War II resistance operations keep turning the pages to find out what will happen to the OSS team in Norway. Often reviewers say a book reads like a fictional thriller. While Lindgjerdet never attempts to "fictionalize" this tale, the actual events coupled with his detailed research make this far better than any fictional tale of special operations during the war.

Allied intelligence and special operations in occupied Norway began almost as soon as the Germans occupied the country in 1940. Early operations included commando raids on the coastline, infiltration of Norwegian coast watchers supporting British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) and Royal Navy intelligence, and infiltration of Norwegian special operations teams created and trained by members of the Norwegian resistance (Milorg) and the British Special Operations Executive (SOE). These special operations teams were supported by an SOE clandestine small-boat program based in Scotland and known colloquially as the Shetland "Bus."^a

By the time the United States entered the war and the Office of Strategic Services had a special operations capability, the British considered Norway along with the Yugoslavia their exclusive area of responsibility. OSS started Scandinavian operations slowly by opening an office in Stockholm in 1943 to conduct intelligence collection as well as to support future ground infiltration into Norway. It wasn't until after the liberation of France, however, that OSS special operations personnel were available for operations in Norway. This is where Lindgjerdet begins his story.

After a detailed scenesetter in the first two chapters, the author outlines the complicated origin story of NORSO—the Norwegian Special Operations element of OSS/Special Operations. NORSO was made up of US soldiers with Scandinavian backgrounds who were also comfortable on skis and living in rough conditions. NORSO was activated in July 1943 with 80 enlisted men and 12 officers divided into 16-man teams with the understanding that each might further be split into two 8-man sections. NORSO was also one of several OSS/SO experiments in "operational groups." Lindgjerdet describes OGs having three missions: raids supporting allied strategic missions, enhanced support to resistance efforts, and combat operations designed to prevent retreating German forces from conducting scorched-earth destruction inside occupied territory. They wore US Army uniforms and were expected to live off the land, receiving resupply by air from the US Army Air Force special operations squadrons known as the Carpetbaggers.

Operation Rype was a creation of the allied Special Forces Headquarters (SFHQ), a unified command created inside Allied headquarters in May 1944. It was designed to integrate various US and UK special operations as the Allies began the campaign to liberate Europe. By fall 1944, a main concern was that the hundreds of thousands of German troops occupying Norway might be recalled



a. In late 1945, then Maj. William E. Colby, future director of CIA, wrote his own account of sabotage operations in Norway. See "Skis and Daggers: OSS Operations in Norway," *Studies* 42, no. 3 (Fall 1998). See also David Howarth, *The Shetland Bus: A WWII Epic of Courage, Endurance, and Survival* (Lyons Press, 2018) and Stephen Wynn, *The Shetland "Bus": Transporting Secret Agents Across the North Sea in WW2* (Pen & Sword, 2021). A review by Hayden Peake of Tony Insall's *Secret Alliances: Special Operations and Intelligence in Norway 1940–1945* (Biteback Publishing, 2021) appeared in *Studies* 67, no. 2 (June 2023).

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Secret Alliances

Tony Insall's *Secret Alliances* (Biteback Publishing, 2021) provides a clear, concise, and very readable understanding of the entire resistance effort in Norway. While stories of successes—some familiar, like Operation Gunnerside to disable the heavy-water plant in Vermok, others less well known—are valuable, the book shines in its focus on the partnership between the British government and exiled Norwegian leadership, including the resistance organization Milorg, and the complex web of British entities that wanted to use the resistance. That web included the SIS, SOE, and the Director of Naval Intelligence (DNI). Milorg had the human resources on the ground as well as Norwegian soldiers undergoing special operations training at British commando school and SOE schools. The British elements had very specific requirements that needed to be filled by these resources. More often than not, the parties could not agree on whether an operation should be conducted. Risk versus gain became a highly sophisticated game of three-dimensional chess as Norwegians wanted successful operations that would bolster morale while minimizing Nazi reprisals, SIS and DNI wanted no paramilitary operations at all because of a fear that the operations might compromise their intelligence collection operations, and SOE wanted to conduct operations that fulfilled their informal charter from Winston Churchill to “set Europe ablaze.”

Insall's account stands out for his precision based on scrupulous research. He describes in detail the level of legalistic negotiation among the British players. He concludes, “the rules to which both sides consented were more advantageous to SIS than they were to SOE, and sowed the seeds of future disputes.” (56) Unfortunately, these tensions resulted in the capture of some of the SIS coast watchers. SOE operatives and their resistance counterparts were aware of the German successes in radio direction finding equipment used in Norway. Both because of compartmentation in the field and hostility in the UK, that information was not shared with the coast watchers.

American readers will find it hard to accept the dismissive tone that Insall takes with OSS operations in Norway later in the war. In part, it would appear that Insall relied on William Mackenzie's *The Secret History of the SOE* (St. Ermin's Press, 2000). Mackenzie's work is central to understanding SOE, but he has a strong bias against OSS efforts in any part of the European Theater, whether partnered with or independent of SOE. In the case of Norway, Mackenzie dedicated only two sentences to Operation Rype. Insall seems unimpressed that the team conducted multiple sabotage operations in northern Norway, cutting rail lines and destroying a large rail bridge before skiing to safety into neutral Sweden. In part, we have to assume this view reflects Rype was the only OSS operation in Norway and that it took place in March–April 1945, when such missions were receding in importance. Still, as Lindgjerdet's *OPERATION RYPE* demonstrates, it certainly is part of the larger history of resistance operations in Norway.

to Germany for the final defense. One way to prevent that withdrawal would be to destroy the Norwegian railroads that headed south to port facilities on the North Sea. *Rype* (Norwegian for ptarmigan), commanded by Maj. William Colby, was the OSS/SO team tasked with sabotage of one set of rail lines.

The tale of Colby's team is filled with evidence of the travails any future special forces or CIA paramilitary teams might face in the arctic environment. Colby's team conducted a parachute jump onto a frozen lake, recovered whatever supplies survived the parachute drop, and traveled by skis to a safe site. Weather consistently limited both the resupply of men and equipment as well

as creating a harsh reality as they moved toward their targets. Aerial resupply was inconsistent at best and, in the end, resulted in the loss of men and aircraft crashing into mountains either in Norway or in Scotland. The fact that Colby and his small team were able eventually to conduct sabotage operations at all is a wonder. They did complete their mission of disrupting their targeted rail line and then serving as a stabilization force preventing any scorched earth activities of German troops trapped in Norway after the German surrender.

In sum, *OPERATION RYPE* belongs on the shelf of anyone interested in World War II special operations. All of this is packed into just over two hundred pages.



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