

SURPRISE, KILL, VANISH

American and Norwegian operatives dropped into occupied Norway on a mission of sabotage
By Steven Trent Smith



COLBY FAMILY COLLECTION / THE MAN NOBODY KNEW: IN SEARCH OF MY FATHER

Already a decorated veteran of special operations, Major William Colby (third from left) led a team on the army's first and only combined ski-parachute operation.

Nearly 200 miles south of the Arctic Circle, Jævsjø Lake neatly bisects the border between Norway and Sweden. The surrounding mountain fastness is tranquil, especially in the winter, when a deep blanket of snow covers the landscape. But at midnight on March 24, 1945, eight American B-24 bombers shattered the stillness as they circled above the frozen lake. The crews, peering through the miserable icy conditions, were searching for signal bonfires the Norwegian Resistance had lit for them.

Aboard the lead B-24, Major William E. Colby and three fellow commandos checked their parachutes and awaited the jump order. Their mission, dubbed Operation Rype, was no easy feat. Working on behalf of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), Colby would lead a 35-man team to sabotage the Nordland Railway, thereby impeding the exodus of 150,000 German troops from northern Norway. It was a task that would test Colby and his men mentally and physically, and foreshadow an accomplished and sometimes fraught high-stakes career.

When the green light came on and the jumpmaster gave the signal, Colby dropped through the open hatch into the frigid night.

THE OSS WAS CREATED on June 13, 1942, under the overall command of the joint chiefs of staff. In addition to collecting and analyzing strategic intelligence, the new agency conducted “special activities,” including clandestine actions. President Franklin D. Roosevelt picked fellow Columbia Law School classmate and World War I Medal of Honor recipient William J. “Wild Bill” Donovan to head the spy organization.

In early 1943 OSS officers paid a visit to the 99th Infantry Battalion (Separate), then training at Camp Hale in the Colorado Rockies. Made up of ethnic Norwegians, the battalion was one of several U.S. Army units created to take advantage of foreign language speakers. The OSS was seeking volunteers for “extra hazardous duty in Norway.” It chose 74 men from the 99th and transferred them to their new base at the Congressional Country Club in Bethesda, Maryland. There, as the army’s new Norwegian Special Operations Group (NORSO), the commandos underwent extensive and grueling training on fairways and greens hastily converted into firing ranges

and obstacle courses. They also learned arcane techniques such as small-unit amphibious penetrations and how to commandeer and drive a train. Demolition and field combat were taught at “Area B” in the nearby Catoctin Mountain area—today’s Camp David.

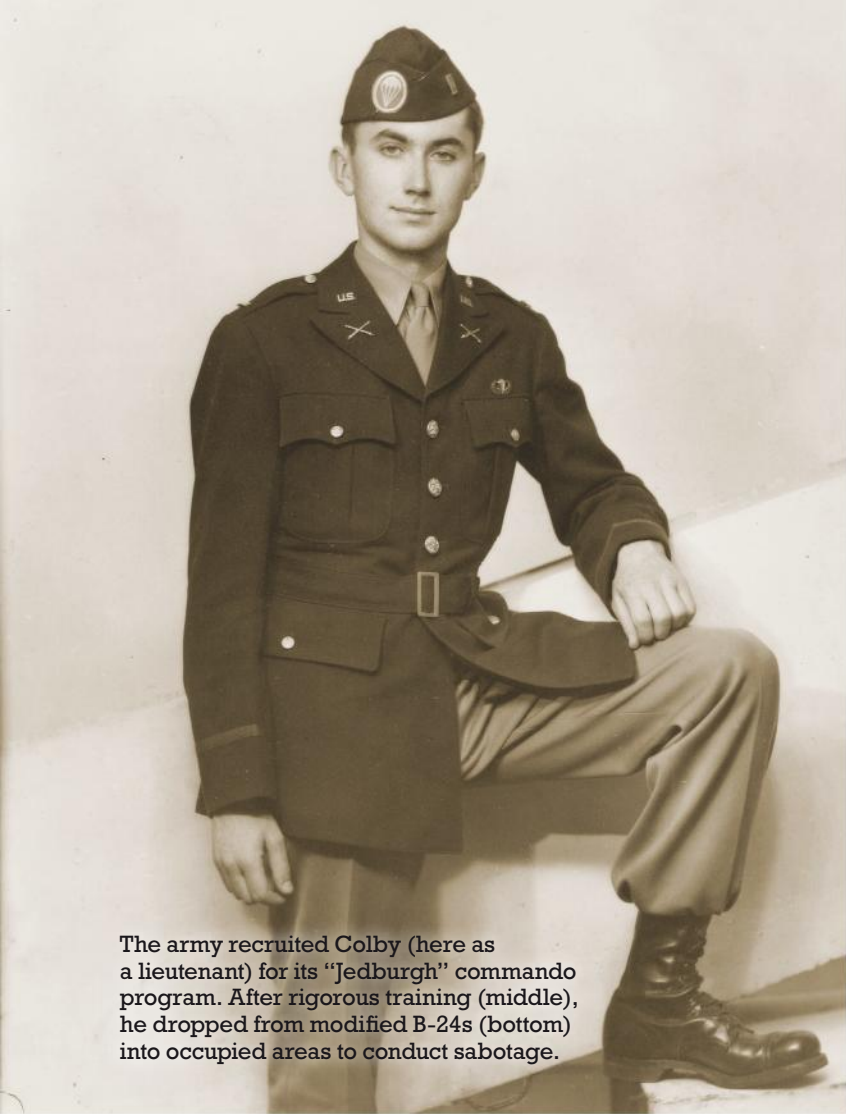
The NORSOs arrived in England in December 1943, where they quickly earned themselves a reputation as “two-fisted, power-drinking, hell-raisers,” recalled Tech Sergeant Karl Hoffman. Things got so bad, said Hoffman, that “half the boys were in the stockade every Monday.” After a drunken incident involving British Army officers, the Norwegians were relocated to isolated quarters, where they eagerly waited to engage the forces that occupied their homeland.

MINNESOTA-BORN William Egan Colby was a good choice to lead Operation Rype. The son of a career army officer, he grew up in far-flung locales like Georgia, Vermont, Panama, and China. His peripatetic childhood nurtured a lifelong curiosity about the world, and he was always longing to visit new places and experience new things. In 1936, at age 16, he seriously considered joining the Americans fighting for the Republican cause in the Spanish Civil War. He instead chose a more prosaic path, taking up a scholarship to Princeton University, where he studied political science. After graduating, like Roosevelt and Donovan, Colby attended Columbia Law School, but with war clouds brewing, he dropped out after his first year. Then, in August 1941, he joined the army, which commissioned him a second lieutenant.

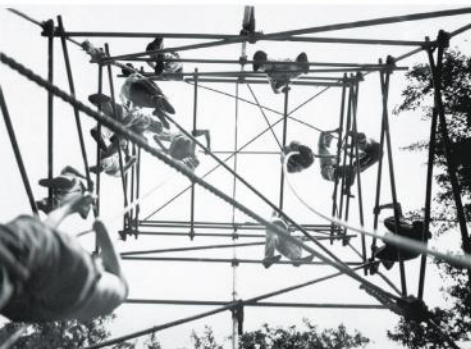
Colby’s first posting was the field artillery school at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. From there he joined an ill-conceived army attempt to develop an airborne artillery unit. Colby thought the idea “laughable,” but figured he would at least get a parachute rating out of it. He did, along with a grounding in demolition and small arms. But after completing training, Colby soon grew fed up of waiting to get into the war. In October 1943 he learned that the OSS was seeking officers who spoke French and were “looking for adventure overseas.” Naturally, he was interested.

The recruiter was impressed by the young officer’s qualifications—parachute, explosives, ordnance, and personal combat training—and noted that he was physically fit, well traveled, and spoke passable French. The OSS ordered

The pilot missed the target by 20 miles; Colby and his team landed in a German-occupied village.



The army recruited Colby (here as a lieutenant) for its “Jedburgh” commando program. After rigorous training (middle), he dropped from modified B-24s (bottom) into occupied areas to conduct sabotage.



Colby to Washington, DC, to begin intensive schooling in guerrilla tactics. The army wanted to make him a “Jedburgh”—a member of an elite group of three-man teams, comprising a British or American special operations officer, a French liaison officer, and a radioman.

The Jedburgh program’s motto, “Surprise, kill, and vanish,” neatly encapsulated its mission to organize, train, and lead French resistance groups against German targets. Their teams parachuted into France to work closely with partisans to sabotage enemy facilities.

On August 14, 1944, Colby and his team jumped from one of the “Carpetbagger” B-24 Liberators painted black and specially modified to accommodate the Jedburghs’ parachute drops. Unfortunately, their pilot miscalculated the target by 20 miles, and the team landed in the middle of a German-occupied village. They quickly scampered out to the countryside without stopping to collect their supply containers and special radio set.

The team soon got over its initial difficulties and began the chore of trying to unite disparate French factions. Their efforts were so successful that young Colby found himself commanding a 6,000-man force of irregular fighters. But not all of them were as loyal as he might have thought. One day, while riding through the city of Lyon with rebel leader Roger Bardet, Colby suddenly realized the Frenchman was taking him to Gestapo headquarters. He knew that in German hands he would be brutally interrogated and summarily executed. As the car slowed for a turn, Colby flung open the door and ran off into the city’s labyrinthine confusion of narrow streets. It was hours before he was safely back with loyal compatriots.

In the last week of August, the Jedburghs were ordered to secure Lieutenant General George S. Patton’s right flank as his Third Army pursued retreating German forces across France. Mission accomplished, Colby returned to OSS Special Forces Headquarters (SFHQ) in London. His commanders gave him high marks—six out of six “superior” ratings—and awarded him the Bronze Star and the French Croix de Guerre for his Jedburgh service. Orders were afoot to send him home for a rest, but the exigencies of war intervened. When SFHQ was casting about for someone to lead the NORSOs on a mission to their native land, a senior OSS officer suggested: “Send Colby. He won’t fuck it up.”

ON NOVEMBER 1, 1944, Major Colby took command of Unit A, 2nd Contingent (Norwegian OG) at Dalnaglar Castle in Scotland. The NORSOs themselves were fresh off a series of missions in the Yonne Valley, southeast of Paris. On August 1 a team of 17 commandos had participated in Operation Percy Red, successfully conducting ambushes against German trains and trucks. Other NORSOs took part in similar operations that summer, with assignments that flip-flopped between blowing up and preserving infrastructure.

Colby joined his men at nearby Glenshee Mountain for intensive cross-country ski training. He did not stand out in the group of burly Nordic six-footers. At five feet, eight inches on a spare 135-pound frame, what the major lacked in brawn he more than made up with deep reservoirs of strength and stamina that would power him through the fraught times ahead. “Screaming dynamite” his men liked to say.

In early 1945 SFHQ tasked the NORSOs with destroying railway facilities in Northern Norway in the effort to slow the German army’s evacuation. For Operation Rype—“grouse” in Norwegian—it chose as its primary target the 335-foot Grana Bridge, near the village of Snåsa.

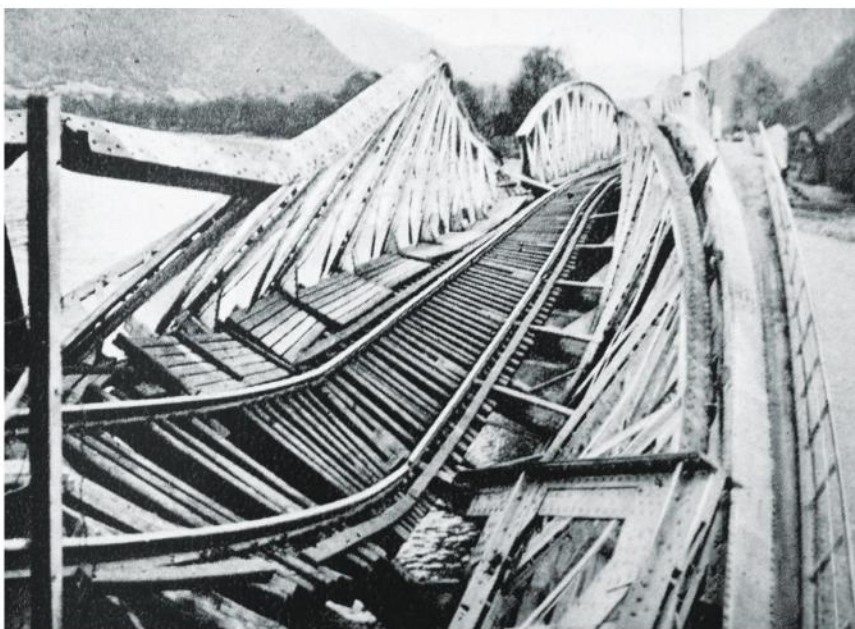
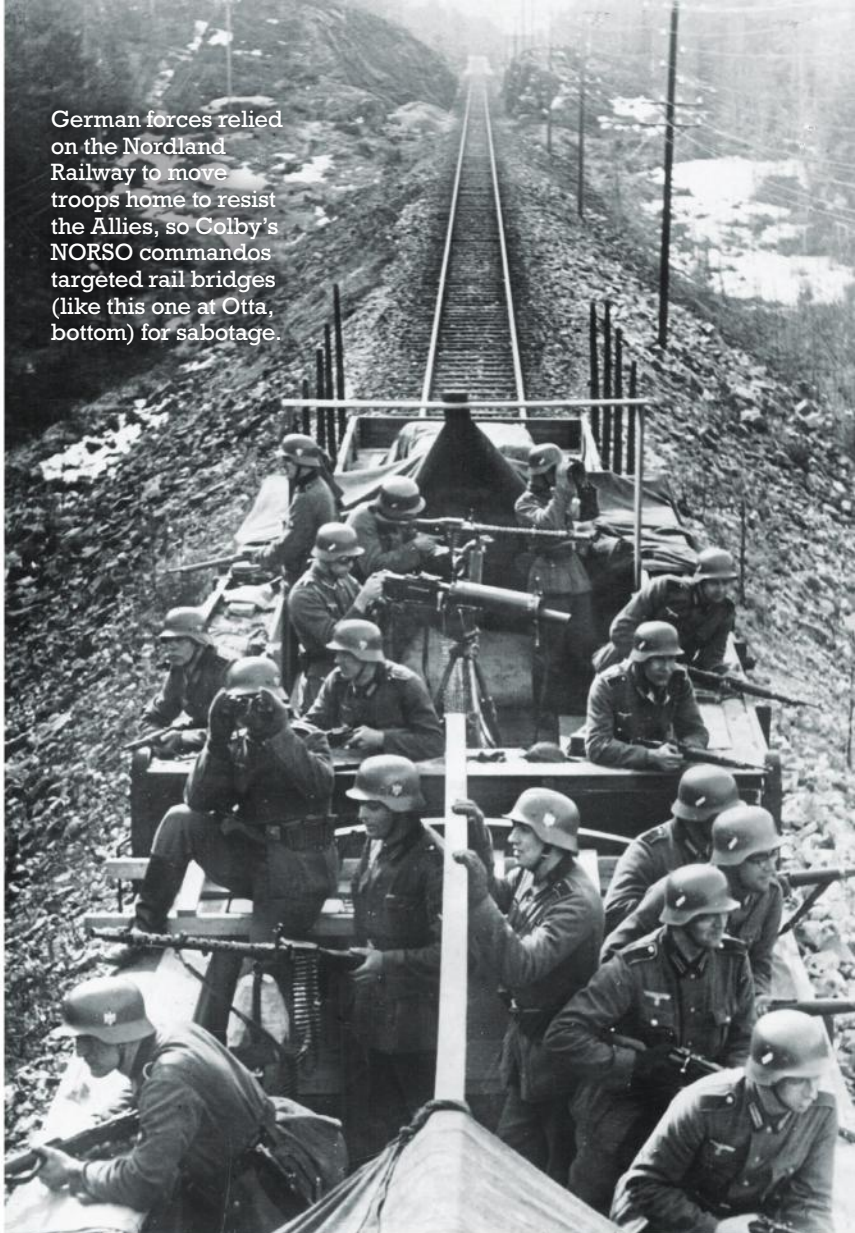
Colby and his three companions parachuted onto the ice at Jaevsjø Lake on March 24th, 1945. When the team rendezvoused with the patriots’ reception committee, Colby exchanged passwords with the leader.

“Is the fishing good in this lake?” Colby asked. The response should have been, “Yes, especially in the winter.” But the Norwegian fumbled the answer. The commandos drew their weapons—but luckily one of them recognized the local commander. Pistols were holstered and there were smiles and handshakes all around.

Over the course of the long night, 12 more OSS operatives straggled out of the forest—but the group still fell far short of the expected 31 men. Three of the B-24s had been unable to locate the lake and returned to Scotland. Another bomber unknowingly dropped its five NORSOs into neutral Sweden. The next morning, Colby’s diminished force, aided by snowshoe-clad horses, braved temperatures of -20 degrees Fahrenheit to retrieve equipment and supplies the bombers dropped.

A few days later they again heard B-24s overhead. Colby wrote, “The weather had been

German forces relied on the Nordland Railway to move troops home to resist the Allies, so Colby’s NORSO commandos targeted rail bridges (like this one at Otta, bottom) for sabotage.



perfect, but this was the great north, cradle of tempests, and in seconds a mist out of *Hamlet* shrouded the lake.” So there was no drop—and with no way to contact the aircraft, Colby could only stew in frustration as the sound of the engines grew faint. Three of the Liberators made it home, but the fourth crashed in Scotland’s Orkney Islands, killing 13 men. At dawn on April 6 a final attempt was made to fly in the rest of the team. But the cloud cover persisted and the planes turned back. As they did, the OSS men heard a muffled explosion to the north. One of the B-24s had crashed; another 12 men perished. SFHQ said they would not try another personnel drop.

Major Colby now faced a dilemma. Attacking the heavily guarded Grana Bridge, 24 miles west of his camp—as the grouse flies—would be too risky an undertaking without his whole team. “Avoid unequal contact with the enemy,” read his orders. So he shifted gears and considered his options. The NORSOs would capture a train (as they had been taught to do), steam down the line while blowing up tunnels and bridges, and then derail the engine and cars. “Our plan was lifted bodily from the history of the West,” Colby wrote, only half-jokingly. “We hoped to succeed by sheer bravado.”

From his shortlist of secondary targets, he chose the bridge at Tangen. It wasn’t much of a span: four 36-foot steel I-beams crossing a 13-foot creek. But unlike Grana Bridge, Tangen was unguarded. And its destruction would halt traffic on the railroad for at least a few days.

On April 9 Colby led the Rype unit on a circuitous 100-mile journey on skis from Jaevsjo to their objective. Each man, with 60 pounds of rations and ammunition in his pack, took turns towing a sled stacked with 180 pounds of high explosives. Shortly after leaving camp they ran headlong into a sleet storm that stymied their progress. After sheltering for the night in a mountain cabin, the NORSOs pushed on through thick forests and across barren plateaus. The next night they stayed in the vacant summer retreat of a Nazi sympathizer. The place was well stocked with liquor, which the men downed with gusto in their best “hell-raisers” fashion.

BY APRIL 14 the team reached a ridge above Tangen and got their first glimpse of the bridge, less than two miles distant. A local scout

guided the men down along a steep, rocky stream. By nightfall they were within striking distance of the objective. Hijacking a train was still Plan A, but when residents told them that none were expected soon, the NORSOs fell back on Plan B: simply blowing up the bridge.

After cutting phone and telegraph lines, Rype’s demolition expert, Lieutenant Glen Farnsworth, and three Norwegians set the charges on the span while the others kept an eye out for the enemy. At 6:30 a.m., Colby gave the order. “The second Farnsworth touched the wires and the TNT went off, the structure vanished,” he later wrote. “The happy men stood around with smiles on their grimy, weary faces. At last they had done something, and the Nordland Railway was stopped.” The thunderous noise woke up every German soldier for miles around. Wasting no time, the NORSOs pointed their ski tips eastward and dashed off toward their base. Before long, an enemy spotter plane circled overhead, searching for them.

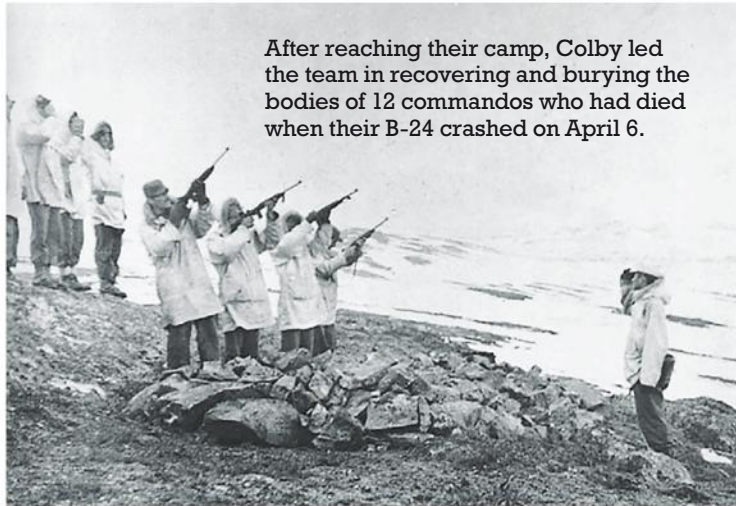
Halfway back to Jaevsjo, Colby called for a halt to give the team a breather. The men were exhausted and had been without sleep for two days. But their guerilla liaison, Herbert Helgesen, rushed up and told them that 50 German mountain troops had followed their tracks in the snow and were hot on their tail.

The NORSOs began skiing for their lives. “If you can’t outski the Germans, you will not



While traversing the frigid landscape, the commandos carried with them all the equipment and rations for their entire journey.





After reaching their camp, Colby led the team in recovering and burying the bodies of 12 commandos who had died when their B-24 crashed on April 6.

The team returned to the camp, but trouble found them. A German patrol stumbled upon the farmhouse and a tense standoff ensued.

return,” warned Sergeant Leif Oistad. The group planted land mines in the snow as they went. After 56 grueling hours, the team came to the base of a long, steep hill, which Colby’s map identified as “Sugartop.” The climb was tough—tougher than he expected—but helped them lose their pursuers. During their ascent, Colby passed around white tablets to reinvigorate the men; after reaching the summit, they renamed the place “Benzedrine Hill.”

The team entered Sweden on April 18. Just after crossing the border they entered the camp of a British commando unit, which treated them to a feast of elk and fish meatballs. Only partially sated, Helgesen said that he wanted “a dish of pineapple.” Everybody laughed. “Just ask for it,” said Lieutenant Tom Sather. “It’ll be on the next [supply] plane.” More laughter.

When the Rypes got back to Jaevsjo, they found five men waiting for them—the group who had inadvertently parachuted into Sweden. Braced by the reinforcements, Bill Colby moved forward with a second mission: to further disable the Nordland by blowing up one and a half miles of track in the mountains north of Snåsa Lake at a place called Lurudalen. As they were making preparations for the raid, a Carpetbagger B-24 dropped supplies, including rations, explosives, uniforms—and a case of tinned pineapple.

On April 23, 1945, Colby led the NORSOs toward their new target, reaching it two nights later. The major divided the unit into eight three-man demolition teams, assigning each trio 200 yards of rail to destroy. Arriving trackside at 11:30 p.m., they set about their business, working quickly while wary of a Wehrmacht guardhouse just up the line.

Once the explosives were set, the team regrouped and, at 10 past midnight, the 120 paired charges detonated almost simultaneously. “Then came the Germans like violated bees, shooting aimlessly, setting off hundreds of flares,” Colby wrote. “We ran.”

The NORSOs hastily donned their skis and hightailed it out of Lurudalen. The Germans pursued and, at times, closed to within 50 yards of them. At one point a German bullet kicked up a rock that struck Colby in the head. After climbing Benzedrine Hill one last time, the commandos reached their camp safely.

WHILE AWAITING NEW ORDERS from SFHQ, the Rypes went out in search of the B-24 they had heard crash in early April. With help from a local reindeer herder, the group found the wreckage strewn over the bleak landscape. They wrapped the 12 bodies in parachutes and placed them under a cairn of rocks. Colby led a short memorial service, ending with a rifle salute that echoed across the rocky hills.

After they returned to the lakeside camp, trouble found them. On May 2 a five-man German patrol stumbled upon the farmhouse at Jaevsjo. A tense standoff between the two armed groups ensued. The surprised and outnumbered enemy appeared willing to surrender—until a local guerrilla ran out, waving a pistol. One of the spooked Germans shot him in the stomach and in response, the NORSOs “eliminated the entire detail with Tommy guns,” Colby recalled.

Just five days later, Germany capitulated and the war in Europe was over. On May 12 the Rypes entered Steinkjer, the largest town on Snåsa Lake, for the surrender of the local German garrison. Residents went wild. A band played the “Star-Spangled Banner”—a bit off-key, but thrilling to Colby’s men. In Namsos Harbor, Colby accepted the surrender of five German navy gunboats.

In late June, after a short leave in Oslo, the NORSO group was repatriated back to the States. For his service in Norway, William Colby was awarded the Silver Star and the Norwegian Saint Olav’s Medal.

While Europe was once again at peace, war still raged in the Pacific. The OSS tapped the NORSOs for a Jedburgh-like mission to China. Colby relished the thought of returning there. While the team prepared its transportation and awaited final orders, the United States



dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and, three days later, another on Nagasaki. The China operation was scrubbed. As recompense, the army offered Colby a place at its Command and General Staff School at Fort Leavenworth, a breeding ground for the army's leaders of tomorrow. No longer interested in the regular army, he declined.

Colby returned to Columbia University to finish his law degree, got married, and started a family. He became an associate at William Donovan's New York law office and then worked as a federal attorney. But he realized that he missed the excitement of the clandestine services. In 1950 he rejoined the "old firm," now with a new acronym: CIA. For the first two decades of the Cold War, Colby ran political action programs in Europe and Southeast Asia, notably in Vietnam. In 1973 he was appointed America's chief spymaster—director of central intelligence. It was the culmination of a long, sometimes tumultuous career that began three decades earlier in French fields and Norwegian fjords. Colby's son, Carl, says that of the many things his father accomplished, he was "most proud of Operation Rype. It was a seminal experience for him. It set the tone for the rest of his life."

The OSS lauded Operation Rype as a "signal success." The NORSOs had completed their mission to block service on the Nordland Railway, but that success came at a heavy price: 25 men gave their lives without ever stepping foot on Norwegian soil. Today, at the Orkneys' Scapa Flow Museum, there is a small memorial to those aboard the Carpet-bagger B-24 that crashed there in March 1945. And near the crash site of the second B-24, on Mount Plukketjernsasen in northern Norway, is a rock pyramid with the names of the lost, who, the final line on the bronze plaque says simply, "Died for Democracy." ★



Just days after the conclusion of the operation, Colby led the NORSOs in a parade (top) celebrating the German surrender. He briefly worked as an attorney before rejoining the world of espionage, becoming the director of central intelligence at the CIA in 1973.