

# 99TH INFANTRY BATTALION (SEPARATE)

*By Joshua Cline*

In the role of Acting Assistant Chief of Staff, G-2, Brigadier General Raymond E. Lee put pen to paper to write down a proposal, shortly after spending two years as military attaché in London. On 1 January 1942, he delivered the finished memorandum to Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall. Inspired by the many units and governments-in-exile fighting with British forces in the name of their occupied homelands, Lee proposed rescinding the ironclad rules that prohibited foreign aliens from serving in the U.S. Army. He envisioned homogenous units of highly motivated men who wanted to liberate their homelands. Lee asserted that such units would provide immense propaganda value; excellent advance guards in possible landing operations in occupied territories; and easily available men for clandestine operations. It was initially perceived as un-American, politically perilous, and impractical, with none other than—among others—then-Brigadier General Dwight Eisenhower opposing it.



Soldiers of the 99th Infantry Battalion (Separate) train at Fort Snelling, Minnesota, in the fall of 1942. (Courtesy of the 99th Infantry Battalion Educational Foundation)

In favor of the idea were many of the estimated 380,000 foreign aliens of occupied Allied nations living in the United States, potential soldiers that could not be ignored by a nation at war. Lee's

memorandum eventually led to the creation of five independent, ethnically based infantry battalions, including one unit that essentially became a Norwegian-American Foreign Legion.

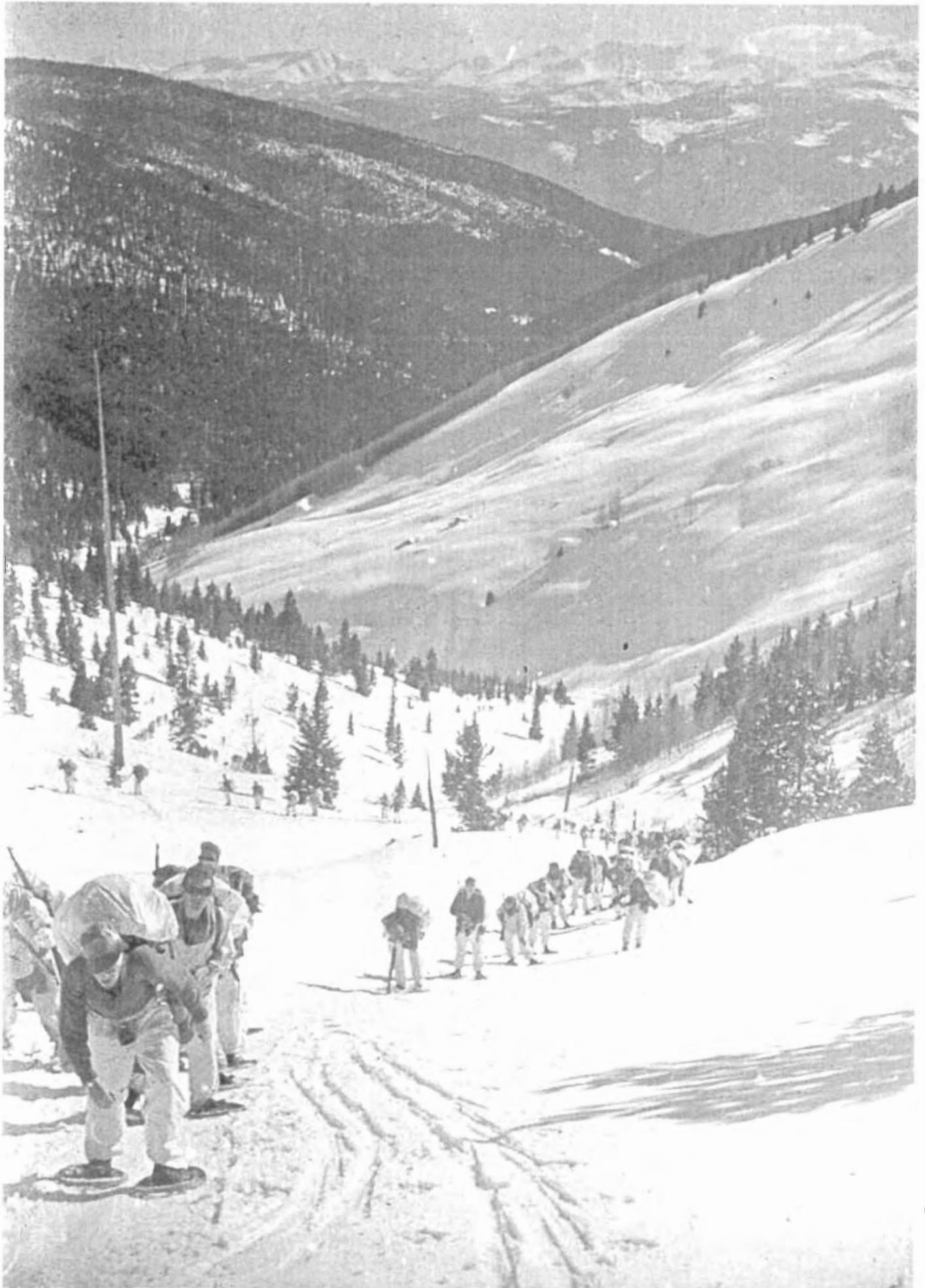
Only eighteen of the over 900 infantry battalions the Army fielded during World War II were organized independently of a regiment. Five of these units were organized along ethnic lines that Brigadier General Lee had proposed, including the 100th (Japanese-American) and the 122d (Greek-American). Another was the 99th Infantry Battalion (Separate), a unit comprised of Norwegian-Americans and Norwegian citizens who had volunteered or been drafted into the U.S. Army. A creature of politics and propaganda, the 99th was created to appeal to the people of an occupied country and the expatriate and immigrant communities within the United States, and to give the Germans the false impression that the United States intended to invade German-occupied Norway. Many of the 99th's soldiers were ex-Norwegian Merchant Marine sailors. The 99th went on to train or fight alongside famous units like the 10th Mountain Division, the First Special Service Force, and Ranger battalions. The 99th's missions included securing Cherbourg, France; combat in the Battle of the Bulge; supporting the "Monuments Men"; the liberation of concentration camps; and last, but certainly not least, the liberation and security of Norway.



Sivart Windh of Company C takes part in a Scandinavian dance at Fort Snelling. Windh would be wounded in Belgium in 1944, then recruited into the Office of Strategic Services for Operation RYPE in Norway in 1945. (Courtesy of the 99th Infantry Battalion Educational Foundation)

The 99th Infantry Battalion (Separate) was activated on 10 July 1942 at Camp Ripley, Minnesota. The original War Department order that created the 99th gave priority to Norwegian aliens for service in the 99th. Norwegian-speaking American soldiers "may, with their consent, be transferred to the battalion." Private First Class Yngvar Stensby later wrote, "There wasn't a red-blooded American Norskie who wouldn't have given his most prized possession to be transferred to the 99th!" Because of its organization as a separate battalion, the 99th had to be self-sufficient in ways that almost every other battalion was not, so the 99th had over a hundred extra men and their requisite equipment. While the 99th had an authorized strength of 1,000 men, it was usually understrength.

By the end of September 1942, the 99th had been reassigned to Fort Snelling, Minnesota; midway through December, the battalion was redeployed to the Mountain Training Center at Camp Hale, Colorado, where it trained to fight on skis alongside the 10th Mountain Division. Here the 99th was called the 10th's little brother. Training continued at Camp Hale until August 1943.



Week-long, fifty-mile hikes were a staple of the 99th's grueling training at Camp Hale, Colorado, as the battalion's soldiers ascended nearby mountains like Mount Elbert (14,440 feet) and Mount Massive (14,430 feet). (Courtesy of the 99th Infantry Battalion Educational Foundation)

In April 1943, President Franklin D. Roosevelt traveled to Fort Carson, Colorado, to inspect the 99th and 122d Infantry Battalions, with the inspection being visibly publicized for the Allies. In June, twelve officers and eighty men were transferred to the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) for what was thought to be an inevitable invasion of Norway. As Brigadier General Lee predicted, volunteers of the 99th and 122d would go on to form half of the OSS's Operational Groups in 1943, deploying in covert missions in Greece, Yugoslavia, France, Norway, and China. In preparation for deployment to the European Theater in the buildup to the invasion of France, the 99th was ordered to Camp Shanks, New York, on 27 August 1943. One week later the battalion boarded the SS *Mexico* on 5 September and soon departed New York, arriving in Scotland on 16 September. Left behind was Captain Gustav Svendsen, the 99th's dentist. Since dentists were a regimental attachment and not assigned to infantry battalions, Svendsen was not allowed to board the *Mexico*. After intervention by two senators and a congressman from Minnesota, Captain Svendsen was authorized for assignment to the 99th, and he flew to join the unit weeks after they reached the United Kingdom.

The 99th moved to Glanusk Park, Wales, to continue their specialized mountain training. After April 1944, fifty-two members of the 99th guarded First U.S. Army Headquarters in Bristol during the planning of the D-Day invasion, where they were commonly mislabeled the "Swiss Guard." These men continued their work into Normandy and beyond until mid-January 1945. The rest of the 99th moved to Ludlow near Hereford on 1 May 1944 during D-Day preparations, and the battalion embarked to cross the English Channel on 17 June 1944.



Company C riflemen cautiously approach a disabled Jagdpanzer IV in Würselen, Germany, in October 1944. (Courtesy of the 99th Infantry Battalion Educational Foundation)

The 99th came ashore on Omaha Beach on 22 June. The battalion entered Cherbourg on 30 June and helped secure the city over the next nine days, gaining experience in identifying and capturing hidden enemy troops. Their next notable assignment was on 24 July, when the 99th was briefly attached to the Provisional Ranger Group alongside the 2d and 5th Ranger Battalions, an experience that would pay off later. Then the 99th was attached to the 2d Armored Division. On 11 August, the 99th suffered its first casualty when Private First Class Daniel Holm was wounded in a *Luftwaffe* air raid. Ten days later, three soldiers from the 99th were killed and another six wounded when the truck they were riding in struck an American-planted mine. On 23 August, while attached to 2d Armored's

Combat Command B (CCB), the 99th helped capture the town of Le Faily, taking over 150 prisoners. On 25 August the 99th prepared to take the town of Elbeuf. During this battle, the battalion destroyed four enemy tanks before tank destroyer support arrived. The morning of 26 August saw the battalion's command post destroyed by German artillery, causing multiple officer casualties, including the 99th's commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel R.G. Turner, who was replaced by Major Harold Hansen. Elbeuf was secured with the help of Canadian troops and eighty-six prisoners were captured, at the cost of seven killed and fifty wounded. In the following four days, while attached to 2d Armored's CCA, the 99th took seven objectives before being relieved.

The next test of the unit came on 14 September. Companies A and B were attached to CCA, 2d Armored Division, again; Company C was attached to 2d Battalion, 66th Armored Regiment. The units attacked together, with Company C moving to secure Reckheim, Belgium. Resistance was tough, but so were the Norwegians. An officer of the 66th remarked, "This is the only damned infantry outfit in the world that tanks have to worry about keeping up with." Between 14-18 September the 99th had two officers killed and three wounded; among the enlisted, nine were killed and 105 wounded. During this period, the 99th took 551 prisoners. For the next ten days, 18-28 September, the 99th worked in conjunction with 300 Belgian Resistance fighters who served as scouts. A German counterattack on 20 September was foiled almost before it began due to accurate fires from the battalion's own 81mm mortars, in conjunction with supporting Allied artillery.



Company D, 99th Infantry Battalion, assembles in Malmedy, Belgium, after the battalion arrived to reinforce the 291st Engineer Combat Battalion, 17 December 1944. (Courtesy of the 99th Infantry Battalion Educational Foundation)

On 12 October, the 99th was attached to XIX Corps as it advanced into Germany near Marienberg. Attached to the 30th Infantry Division, the 99th attacked the town of Würselen on 16 October alongside elements of the 1st, 29th, and 30th Infantry Divisions. The objective was to close the Aachen-Cologne Highway and cut off retreating German units. For nine straight days, the 99th faced savage fighting as the Germans and Norwegians fought with all they had. The mission was accomplished by 24 October with the capture of Aachen. The 99th suffered two officers killed and five wounded, as well as twenty-six enlisted killed, forty wounded, and four missing. While guarding First Army Headquarters near Liège, the 99th was alerted for combat duty shortly after the Germans launched their counterattack in the Ardennes on 16 December.

The 99th formed the core of Task Force Hansen, which proceeded to the town of Malmedy in Belgium, near where Waffen SS troops had massacred American prisoners. Task Force Hansen, named for the 99th's commanding officer, consisted of the 99th, the 526th Armored Infantry Battalion, and Company B, 825th Tank Destroyer Battalion. Prior to Task Force Hansen's arrival, Malmedy's only defense consisted of sixty engineers of the 291st Engineer Combat Battalion, who had chosen to stay and try to hold the enemy off, felling trees and laying mines. The German attack began early on 18 December with the enemy using newly captured American vehicles. Three German soldiers, with two American prisoners from the ill-fated 106th Infantry Division, approached the 99th's roadblocks, believing that Malmedy had already fallen. During the ensuing firefight, one German soldier was killed and the other two taken prisoner; all three were from the 1st SS Panzer Division. In addition, the two GIs were liberated from their German captors. Later on 18 December, the 30th Infantry Division's 117th Infantry Regiment arrived as reinforcements. That night, another regiment of the 30th—the 120th Infantry Regiment—bolstered the 99th's defensive line.



The 99th Infantry Battalion's shoulder sleeve insignia (SSI) (left), consisting of a Viking ship in the blue and red of Norway's national colors, was approved by the Army on 8 September 1943. The SSI for the 474th Infantry Regiment (right) combined the First Special Service Force's arrowhead SSI, the Ranger scroll, and the ship from the 99th's SSI; it was approved by the Army on 3 February 1945. (Courtesy of Dave Kaufman)

On 19 December all but Company B withdrew half a mile northwest of Malmedy, with Company B remaining in fighting positions until the next day when it switched with Company B of the 120th. The 99th's Company B dug into the top of a railway embankment and prepared for an enemy attack that began at dawn on 21 December. A vicious battle ensued against elements of the 11th *Fallschirmjäger* Division and the 1st SS Panzer Division. Task Force Hansen held fast. On 21

December, Company B also defended the Warche River against Otto Skorzeny's 150th SS Panzer Brigade, which attempted to break through the 99th's roadblock. Devastatingly, during the following days and nights of defending Malmedy, American bombers attacked the town on two separate occasions, killing a number of American soldiers and razing the town. From 27-29 December, elements of the 99th aided the towns of Hedamont and Otaimont. The 99th continued to defend Malmedy until relieved by the 30th Infantry Division on 6 January 1945.

The 99th moved to Stavelot, taking up a thin line within shouting distance of German units. The first offensive action here took place on 10 January. The next day, one platoon of Company A was nearly surrounded, but managed to turn a hand-to-hand action into a successful fighting retreat. **Also on that day, the 474th Infantry Regiment was activated in France, to which the 99th would be assigned permanently;** the 99th would not report to duty until the Battle of the Bulge was over. On 12 January, the 99th attacked Chevofosse, and 13 January saw the 99th supporting the 119th Infantry Regiment's attack across their left front. On 15 January, the 119th and the 517th Parachute Infantry Regiment attacked along both sides of the 99th, pushing the Germans back and creating a new front line ahead of the 99th's defensive positions. What followed for the 99th were patrols to find and eliminate bypassed enemy units and to rescue missing American soldiers. Finally on 18 January, after thirty-one continuous days of fighting, the 99th was formally relieved. Many losses had been suffered, but its sterling record remained true. Sixteen men of the 99th were killed during the Battle of the Bulge and dozens more wounded.

**Withdrawing from the frontline to join their new regiment, the 99th was sent to Barneville, France, arriving on 22 January. The newly activated 474th consisted of former members of the First Special Service Force, 1st, 3d, and 4th Ranger Battalions, the 552d Antitank Company, and the 99th Infantry Battalion. The former Forcemen and Rangers formed the 1st and 2d Battalions, while the 99th formed the 3d Battalion. The 99th's companies were redesignated accordingly, but the battalion itself kept its number, albeit losing the Separate designation. Only four units in the Army were allowed to keep their designation like this, another being the 100th Infantry Battalion.**

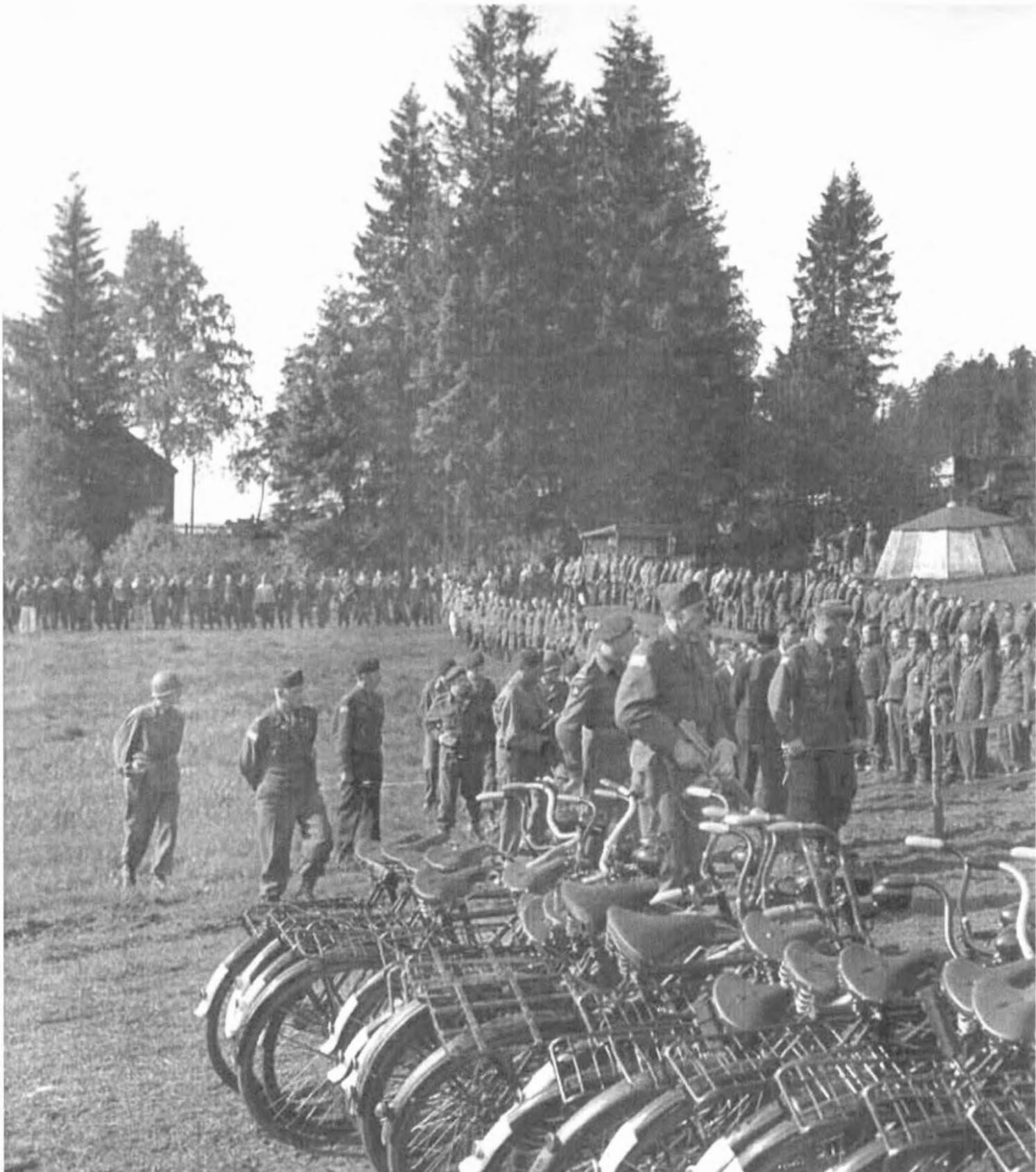


Soldiers from the 99th and Norway's Kompanie Linge provide security along King Haakon VII's motorcade route in Oslo, 7 June 1945. (Courtesy of the 99th Infantry Battalion Educational Foundation)

The 474th's mission was to counter Operation WEREWOLF, an insurgency planned by Nazi officials to perpetuate the war even after formal surrender. Accordingly, the regiment's motor pool tripled in size, and each battalion received sixty additional radios. On 2 April 1945, the 474th left Barneville and embarked on a 500-mile truck-and-train trip to Aachen. The 99th was temporarily detached to patrol in the region of the town of Hersfeld behind Third Army lines, under the command of Third Army's G-3, mopping up bypassed enemy troops.

During this time, the 99th discovered the horrors of the Holocaust and the slave labor that fueled the German war economy. On 15 April 1945, four days after the first units liberated Buchenwald, elements of the 474th, including the 99th's medical personnel, were sent to visit the camp, as well as the nearby sub-camps. "It was a real eye opener," Dr. Raymond Minge, battalion surgeon, wrote to his wife. "Any doubt I ever had as to the justification for sending American soldiers overseas was completely banished." The same day, the 99th and the rest of the 474th supported two Monuments Men missions, which moved a horde of liberated gold and art from the Kaiserode salt mines before the Soviets occupied the area.

By 21 April, the 99th had moved on to Heroldsbach, just fifteen miles north of Nuremberg. Mop-up work continued until after V-E Day. The 99th was in Regenstauf when it began withdrawing from Germany. On 29 May, the 99th arrived at Le Havre, France, and soon headed to Norway with the 474th in Operation NIGHTLIGHT. For many, it was a homecoming, and the reason that they had joined the U.S. Army; for others, it was the first time to see the homeland of their now-American families. Many of their comrades did not live to see this moment. In 101 days of combat, the 99th Infantry Battalion suffered fifty-two killed in action, 207 wounded, and six missing.



Brigadier General Owen Summers, commander of Task Force A, and officers of the 474th Infantry Regiment screen German prisoners for Gestapo personnel and suspected war criminals in Oslo, 10 June 1945. (National Archives)

The 99th earned five campaign streamers: Normandy, Northern France, Rhineland, Ardennes, and Central Europe. Fifteen soldiers of the 99th received the Silver Star, twenty received the Bronze Star; and 305 were awarded the Purple Heart. In addition, volunteers of the 99th deployed in multiple secret missions with the OSS. One such OSS unit, made up of 99th volunteers, was led by Major William Colby, future Director of Central Intelligence. Colby's team repeatedly attacked Norway's Nordland Railroad in March-May 1945 in Operation RYPE, the only combined ski-parachute operation ever mounted by the Army which aimed to prevent 150,000 German troops from reinforcing the *Wehrmacht* following the Battle of the Bulge.

In Norway, the 474th was the combat arm of Task Force A, sent to enforce the replacement of the regime of Vidkun Quisling, disarm the 400,000 German troops in the nation, repatriate 85,000 Soviet prisoners of war, as well as finding and arresting suspected war criminals. On 4 June 1945, elements of the 99th were the first ashore at Drammen; the rest of the 99th disembarked at Oslo the next day. The 99th had the honor of being the Guard of Honor as King Haakon VII formally returned to Norway three days later. The 474th went on to parade in Oslo on the 4th of July and on 17 July's Allied Forces Day; in October, the regiment presented its colors to the King Haakon VII. Once their mission was completed, the 474th prepared to return home. The 99th boarded SS *Bienville* on 16 October 1945 and sailed back to the United States. On 1 November 1945, the Viking Battalion made landfall in Boston, Massachusetts. It was inactivated the next day at nearby Camp Myles Standish. In October 1954, the 474th was redesignated as the 74th Infantry Regimental Combat Team and reactivated at Fort Devens, Massachusetts, with the 99th as its 3d Battalion once more. The 99th was stationed in Iceland on 8 October 1954, though the 99th returned to the United States on 1 July 1955, in part due to Iceland's hostility at a reminder of Norway's subjugation. The 74th was inactivated on 26 September 1956, less the 99th. The 99th reverted to a separate unit and had its own tank, artillery, and engineer augments, serving as the 99th Battalion Combat Team at the U.S. Army Aviation Center at Fort Rucker, Alabama. The 99th continued in this role until 24 March 1958, when the 99th was inactivated upon adoption of the Pentomic organization, and 2d Battle Group, 31st Infantry Regiment, took over its duties. The 99th remains inactivated to this day.

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