



The Winter Fortress: The Epic Mission to Sabotage Hitler's Atomic Bomb

By Neil Bascomb

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Reviewed by

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It is sometimes the case that non-fiction is more thrilling and unbelievable than the fiction it inspires. This is certainly the case for the new book *The Winter Fortress: The Epic Mission to Sabotage Hitler's Atomic Bomb*. Neal Bascomb, author of several historical narratives including *Hunting Eichmann* and *The Perfect Mile*, conducted unprecedented research into the joint Norwegian and British commando offensive against German atomic research during World War II.

Movies like “The Dirty Dozen” or “Inglorious Basterds” involved suicide missions against the Nazi war machine, but the ragtag unit at the center of this book undertook many missions where escape seemed impossible from the outset; their exploits would be unbelievable if they were not well documented. The story Bascomb explores is undeniably cinematic, so much so that a film has already been made about it — the (highly adapted) 1965 Kirk Douglas film “The Heroes of Telemark.” About 150 Norwegian expatriates, former soldiers, backwoodsmen, and scientists trained in the mountains of Scotland for weeks learning commando assassination, demolition, and radio techniques. Known as the Norwegian Independent Company No. 1 (or *Kompani Linge* by its members), these Scandinavian warriors conducted raids, attacks, and covert operations all over Norway, but one specific campaign is the focus of *The Winter Fortress*.

In 1942, Germany and the United States were briefly at the same point in developing the atomic bomb. The source of “heavy water,” an essential part of Nazi nuclear experimentation, was the cutting-edge Vemork dam in rural Rjukan, Norway. Luckily for the Allies, two Norwegian physicists, Leif Tronstad and Jomar Brun, who were essential to the design and construction of the power plant built deep into the dam, contacted British operatives once the Nazis took over production. With Tronstad guiding the Norwegian commando unit training in Scotland and the undercover assistance of Brun actively managing the Nazi-controlled heavy water facility, a mission was mounted to destroy the plant.

The Winter Fortress breathtakingly chronicles the preparation and hardship of the men involved. Bascomb manages to capture in propulsive detail men like Jens-Anton Poulsson, a 23-year-old Norwegian soldier who was driven from Norway by the Nazi invasion and traveled almost around the world in order to join *Kompani Linge*, or Einar Skinnarland, a Rjukan local with valuable knowledge of the Vemork power plant who refused anesthetic for excruciating knee surgery because it would delay the ship hijacking that took him to England and his calling as a commando and spy. These men, plus two more trained commandos and a local resistance operative, became the pathfinder element known as Operation Grouse, parachuting into the remorseless, broken terrain around the factory during a harsh Norwegian winter to collect intelligence and guide a glider assault onto target. Their struggle began immediately as they fought to survive in the barren snowscape around Rjukan. The Norwegian team bore setbacks with equipment, months-long delays, a disastrous failed infiltration attempt by British sappers, and ruthless German commanders.

Eventually the Operation Grouse team received reinforcements from Kompani Linge and mounted a mission to destroy the plant with explosives from within.

Their final attack, against a heavily armed German garrison which knew Vemork was a target, began with the ascent of an ice-strewn cliff and ended with the Norwegian operators splitting up to variously escape the country by rail, trek to Sweden on skis, or return to the mountains to enable further resistance in the country. The author could have stopped here with a riveting narrative and a spellbinding conclusion, but thankfully he continues the story of the Norwegian Independent Company. The Nazi ordnance corps was determined to harness the atomic energy that the Vemork dam could unlock, and it fell to the British-trained Norwegian commandos to continuously thwart Nazi efforts to rebuild the facility. This book is a must-read for WWII history buffs, students of special forces or commando tactics, and a captivating option for anyone who might not usually enjoy military history or non-fiction.