



HONORING AN ARSOF LEGEND

Major General
Robert T. Frederick

By Robert D. Seals

In a small ceremony held on 3 December 2021, the U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) History Office dedicated its building (E-1930) on Desert Storm Drive, Fort Bragg, North Carolina, to Major General (MG) Robert T. Frederick, legendary commander of the World War II American-Canadian First Special Service Force. The newly minted MG Robert T. Frederick USASOC History Building is the hub of USASOC's historical program, and houses personnel workspaces, a conference room, a reference library, and repositories of historical assets.¹ This article summarizes the life and career of the building's namesake, MG Frederick, dubbed "The Last Fighting General" by one author.² His timeless example of leadership and historic connection to U.S. Army Special Forces made him an ideal candidate for this dedication.

Born to an eye, ear, nose and throat doctor and a nurse in San Francisco, California, on 14 March 1907, Robert Tryon Frederick was the oldest of two children. In 1921, he began his military career at age 14 as a private in Company I, 159th Infantry, California National Guard, adding two years to his age to enable him to enlist. Additional service in the Enlisted Reserve Corps and Citizens' Military Training Camps, and a promotion to corporal, followed. In 1924, Frederick graduated from the Staunton Military Academy in Virginia and was accepted as a cadet in the U.S. Military Academy, Class of 1928.³ At West Point, he was considered a "military ringer" (experienced cadet) due to his prior Army service.

Frederick graduated from the Military Academy (and got married) on 9 June 1928, earning a commission as a second lieutenant in the Coast Artillery Corps (CAC). He was thereafter stationed at Fort Winfield Scott, Presidio of San Francisco, California. He began primary flight school at Brooks Field, San Antonio, Texas, in



(Image credit: Bradford F. Hicks)

Left: From a young age, Robert T. Frederick showed a proclivity toward military service. **Right:** Robert T. Frederick, U.S. Military Academy, Class of 1928.

1930, but did not complete the program. Frederick then served in a variety of CAC troop assignments before duty with the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) in Oregon, in 1933. While with the CCC, he won praise for his resourcefulness and initiative. On 1 July 1934, Frederick was promoted to first lieutenant and selected as Aide-de-Camp for the Commanding General, Ninth Coast Artillery District, Presidio of San Francisco.⁴

Then-Captain Frederick graduated from the Coast Artillery School at Fort Monroe, Virginia, in 1938, and the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, in 1939. He then served at Fort Shafter, Territory of Hawaii, in a CAC anti-aircraft assignment. In February 1941, Major Frederick authored a six-page staff study, in which he made an ominous prediction of a surprise "initial attack by Japan [on] the ships in Pearl Harbor, and airdromes on Oahu," without a declaration of war.⁵ In August 1941, just four months before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and American entry into World War II, he joined the War Department General Staff in Washington, DC, for service in the War Plans Division under MG Dwight D. Eisenhower.⁶

Shortly after his promotion to lieutenant colonel on 1 February 1942, Frederick authored a critical fourteen-page analysis of British eccentric Geoffrey N. Pyke's "Mastery of the Snows" proposal for Operation PLOUGH. In this paper, Pyke had advocated using a commando force, trained in winter mountain warfare, to conduct raids against strategic targets in Nazi-occupied areas in Europe using a specialized tracked vehicle, not yet developed.⁷ Frederick considered PLOUGH



The MG Robert T. Frederick USASOC History Office sign outside of Building E-1930, along Desert Storm Drive, Fort Bragg, North Carolina.



(Image credit: Dwight D. Eisenhower President Library, Museum, and Boyhood Home)

Brigadier General (BG) Dwight D. Eisenhower (center) confers with War Plans Division colleagues BGs Robert W. Crawford (left) and Leonard Gerow (right), in Washington, DC, January, 1942. Promoted to MG in March, Eisenhower thereafter selected Frederick to organize, command, and train the First Special Service Force.



The guest of honor at the USASOC History Office building dedication, Bradford F. Hicks, MG Frederick's grandson, brought his grandfather's original FSSF crossed arrows, worn during World War II.

operationally unfeasible. In spite of his criticisms, Eisenhower viewed him as an authority on winter mountain warfare, and hand-selected him to organize, train, and command the combined American-Canadian First Special Service Force (FSSF).⁸

Frederick was promoted to colonel (COL) when the FSSF was activated at Fort William Henry Harrison, Montana, on 9 July 1942. Given six months to prepare the unit for combat, Frederick wasted no time. He led from the front at every step.⁹ He was the first man out of the aircraft door in the unit's initial parachute jump, wearing low-quarter shoes since his jump boots had not yet arrived. Frederick was instrumental in procuring nonstandard equipment for the force. This included the lightweight, highly reliable M-41 Johnson light machine gun ("Johnny Gun"), the tracked M-29 Cargo Carrier ("Weasel"), and the distinctive Case V-42 Fighting Knife, which he helped design and made standard issue for the Force.¹⁰ Frederick also championed the wear of crossed arrows (first worn by the U.S. Army Indian Scouts) as a collar device, as well as a unique Shoulder Sleeve Insignia (SSI), a red arrowhead patch with USA and CANADA embroidered in white. Both were approved and worn by the Force.¹¹

After months of training, the Force was bound for war, and it was COL Frederick's subsequent combat record that later earned him the reputation as an aggressive and inspiring leader. For its first assignment, the FSSF was selected to spearhead the liberation of the Aleutian Islands (Operation COTTAGE) from the Japanese, starting with Kiska, on 15 August 1943. In

rubber assault boats, the Force fought strong currents and heavy winds to secure the beachhead for the main amphibious landing. Frederick himself paddled five hours to get to shore and, like his men, arrived exhausted. Fortunately, Japanese forces had withdrawn before the landing, but this dry run had provided an invaluable learning experience for him and the unit.¹²

After Kiska, COL Frederick successfully lobbied for the FSSF to have a combat role in Europe. Following additional training, the FSSF deployed to Italy where the Fifth U.S. Army, commanded by Lieutenant General (LTG) Mark W. Clark, was stymied by the Germans' strong mountain defenses. Arriving in Naples, Italy, on 19 November 1943, the Force was tasked to break through the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division defenses on the German Winter Line. Frederick and a hand-picked team of scouts reconnoitered the approach routes and key terrain objectives, with a goal of minimizing casualties and preserving the element of surprise. He then led his soldiers in an overnight assault on 2-3 December 1943 that resulted in the successful capture of both Monte La Difensa and nearby Monte La Remetanea. Frederick was wounded in action three times by January 1944. His leadership and intrepidity in combat also merited promotion to brigadier general (BG) on 18 January.¹³

On 1 February 1944, the FSSF began their aggressive night patrols outside Anzio, Italy, earning the nickname "The Devil's Brigade." The Force then spearheaded the drive to Rome in June by securing key bridges for the



A weary COL Frederick rests after the laborious amphibious assault on Kiska. Although the Japanese had departed prior to the attack, Operation COTTAGE provided an invaluable learning experience for the Force.

Allied armor advance. During the fighting, BG Frederick was wounded another four times in the neck, arm, and leg.¹⁴ On 4 June 1944, Rome became the first Axis capital to be liberated by the Allies. By then, Frederick had become a favorite of LTG Clark, who described him as an "outstanding, courageous leader," clearly capable

Left: The First Special Service Force Shoulder Sleeve Insignia (SSI) arrowhead provided the symbolism for the Special Forces and USASOC SSIs. **Right:** BG Frederick (right), LTG Mark W. Clark (second from right), and other Fifth U.S. Army officers review a map on the morning of 4 June 1944, the day of Rome's liberation.





Always commanding from the front, Frederick leads the FSSF command section out of the village of Radicosa during combat operations in Italy.

of higher command.¹⁵

BG Frederick relinquished command of the Force on 23 June to lead the 1st Allied Airborne Task Force in Operation DRAGOON, the Allied invasion of Southern France. Promoted to major general on 1 August 1944, he soon thereafter parachuted into France. This jump aggravated the unhealed wounds on his right leg and led to the eighth and final award of the Purple Heart.¹⁶ On 3 December 1944, at age thirty-seven, MG Frederick took command of the 45th Infantry Division (ID), “Thunderbird,” a seasoned division that had been in combat since July 1943, with Operation HUSKY in Sicily. Despite being one of the youngest division commanders in the U.S. Army, he successfully led the 45th during the Rhineland and Central Europe campaigns. The division helped stop the German NORDWIND offensive in January 1945, liberated the Nazi death camp at Dachau, and occupied Munich, Germany, prior to Victory in Europe Day on 8 May 1945.¹⁷

When MG Frederick redeployed to the U.S. in August 1945, he returned to the Coast Artillery. He commanded the Harbor Defenses and CAC School, and oversaw the relocation of the school to Fort Winfield Scott, Presidio, in 1946. A tour at the Air University at Maxwell Air Force Base, in Montgomery, Alabama, followed, before he again went overseas in 1947 to command U.S. forces occupying Austria. From there, he returned stateside, soon becoming the Commanding General, 4th ID, later reflagged as the 6th ID. In May 1951, Frederick became the Chief, Joint U.S. Military Aid Group to Greece, but his tour was cut short due to declining health, which led to his medical retirement on 31 March 1952 at the age of forty-four.¹⁸

Frederick settled in California, remaining involved in



The FSSF crossed arrows and V-42 knife figure prominently in the Special Forces DUI.



(Image credit: Bradford F. Hicks)

Top: Two ARSOF icons after the war: MG Frederick (left) and then-BG Robert A. McClure (second from right). Considered the Father of U.S. Army Special Warfare, McClure is the namesake of the USASOC headquarters building, dedicated in his honor in January 2001. **Bottom:** At a 7 October 1960 ceremony on Fort Bragg, retired MG Frederick (left) presented the original FSSF colors to the 7th Special Forces Group (SFG) to commemorate the activation of the 1st Special Forces Regiment. To Frederick's left is COL Irwin A. Edwards, 7th SFG Commander.

veterans' groups and farming. In 1955, he was almost killed in a severe automobile accident and spent weeks in a coma. He rallied and, in October 1960, presented the original FSSF colors to the U.S. Army Special Warfare Center and School at Fort Bragg, at the activation of the honorary 1st Special Forces Regiment. This event crystallized the connection between the FSSF and U.S. Army Special Forces (SF), which remains strong to this day. Not only do all SF Groups trace their lineage and honors to the FSSF, but their heraldic items are rich with Force symbolism. For example, both the V-42 knife and crossed arrows were incorporated into the SF Distinctive Unit Insignia (DUI), which was approved on 8 July 1960.¹⁹

Having spent his life serving the nation and paving the way for future Army Special Operations Forces (ARSOFF), Frederick died on 29 November 1970 and was interred in the National Cemetery at the Presidio of San Francisco. Although a recipient of over thirty U.S. and foreign awards during his career (including the Silver Star, two Distinguished Service Crosses, and eight Purple Hearts), Frederick had always remained humble.²⁰ "There isn't much to say about me," he remarked after the war. "And these decorations I wear, well, they represent the work of my men [who] carried impossible loads, successfully completed impossible tasks, and won impossible fights."²¹

MG Robert T. Frederick received numerous posthumous honors in recognition of his initiative, innovation, aggression, leadership from the front, and concern for his men. In 2007, he was named a Distinguished Member of the SF Regiment. Five years later, he was inducted into the U.S. Special Operations Command

Commando Hall of Honor. Now, the USASOC History Office also stands as a monument to MG Frederick. It is in his honor that this office will continue to preserve ARSOFF history and serve ARSOFF soldiers who are, like their FSSF forebears, "Without Equal."

Endnotes

- 1 Major General Robert T. Frederick USASOC History Office Building Dedication Ceremony Program, 3 December 2021.
- 2 Anne Hicks, *The Last Fighting General; The Biography of Robert Tryon Frederick* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Military History, 2006). Anne Frederick Hicks was Frederick's youngest daughter.
- 3 Hicks, *The Last Fighting General*, 12-15; MG Robert T. Frederick, Official Military Personnel File (OMPF), National Personnel Records Center, St. Louis, MO, hereafter Frederick OMPF.
- 4 Frederick OMPF. At West Point, Frederick graduated 124 of 261 in his class.
- 5 Memorandum for Chairman, Joint Anti-Aircraft Committee, Fort Shafter, Territory of Hawaii, 24 February 1941, copy in USASOC History Office, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 6 Frederick OMPF. Eisenhower commented in a 1942 efficiency report, "Highly intelligent-thorough-hard working-superior team worker. Exercises sound judgement to a superior degree. A superior organizer. In comparing this officer with all officers, I would place him in the upper third. General officer material."
- 7 For more on what this vehicle became (the M29 "Weasel"), visit <https://arsof-history.org/weasel/index.html>.
- 8 Robert Todd Ross, *The Super Commandos, First Special Service Force, 1942-1944* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Military History, 2006), 10-12, 26-28; Anne Frederick Hicks, "The War Made Him, Peacetime Broke Him," *Army* (September 1982): 50.
- 9 One of the training standards was the ability to traverse 45 miles on skis, carrying 60 pounds, in twelve hours, an early indicator of ARSOFF's reliance and emphasis upon strength and endurance.
- 10 Headquarters, First Special Service Force, "SUBJECT: Planning," 21 September 1942, copy in USASOC History Office, Fort Bragg, NC; Frederick OMPF; Ross, *The Super Commandos*, 258-261. For the V-42 knife, V stood for Victory and 42 for the year of design (1942).
- 11 Memorandum for the Director of Military Personnel, SOS, "SUBJECT: Request for authorization of Insignia," 26 July 1942, copy in USASOC History Office, Fort Bragg, NC; War Department, Army Regulation 600-35: *Personnel, Prescribed Service Uniform* (Washington, DC, 31 March 1944), 49, 51.
- 12 Kenneth Finlayson, "Operation Cottage: First Special Service Force, Kiska Campaign," *Veritas: Journal of Army Special Operations History* 4:2 (2007): 30-43. After COTTAGE, Frederick was recommended for the Distinguished Service Medal, but Alaska Defense Command argued that the award was not merited.
- 13 Kenneth Finlayson, "Wars Should be Fought in Better Country than This," *Veritas: Journal of Army Special Operations History* 5:2 (2007): 48-63. The FSSF casualties were immense. Frederick himself was wounded four times in the mountain fighting.
- 14 Ross, *The Super Commandos*, 186-187, 226-231; Hicks, "The War," 54.
- 15 Frederick OMPF.
- 16 Hicks, *The Last Fighting General*, 148-155; Frederick OMPF.
- 17 Frederick OMPF; Headquarters, Seventh Army, Memorandum, "SUBJECT: Special Rating of General Officers," 21 May 1945, copy in USASOC History Office, Fort Bragg, NC. Lieutenant General Alexander M. Patch described Frederick as "One of the most promising officers of his age in the Army...an outstanding leader of combat forces," and ranked him in the top third of all his generals in the report.
- 18 Frederick OMPF.
- 19 Frederick OMPF; Headquarters, 7th Special Forces Group, Letter to MG Robert T. Frederick, 21 October 1960, copy in USASOC History



Gravestone for MG Robert T. Frederick at the National Cemetery at the Presidio of San Francisco.

Office, Fort Bragg, NC; email from Tom Davies, Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge, to Robert D. Seals, "SUBJECT: RE: WSC Quote Request, Follow Up," 27 November 2019, USASOC History Office, Fort Bragg, NC; The Institute of Heraldry, U.S. Army Branch Insignia, Special Forces, online at: <https://ttoh.army.mil/Catalog/Heraldry.aspx?HeraldryId=15361&CategoryId=9362&grp=2&menu=Uniformed%20Services&from=search>. When it comes to MG Frederick, separating fact from fiction can be challenging. After 1945, men's adventure magazines took his career for pulp fodder. For example, the January 1960 edition of *Action for Men* is seemingly the source of the oft repeated but unverified

Churchill quote claiming Frederick as "the greatest fighting general of all time."

- 20 Memorandum, Headquarters, U.S. Army Special Operations Command, "SUBJECT: Request Approval to Dedicate the Command History E-1930 Building as the Major General Robert T. Frederick Building," Enclosure 4, Biographical Sketch, 19 June 2020, USASOC History Office, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 21 "Most Wounded General in War Visits S.F. Home," *San Francisco Examiner*, 24 September 1945.



The author (left) with Bradford F. Hicks, grandson of MG Robert T. Frederick, at the building dedication on 3 December 2021.