

# Cannon Company

by Robert W. Jones, Jr.

A unique unit of Army Special Operations Forces during World War II was the “Cannon Company” that served with both the Rangers and the First Special Service Force. While Special Operations Forces are not normally associated with armored forces, legendary Colonel William O. Darby formed the provisional “Cannon Company” of half-track mounted 75mm guns to add firepower to the 1st Ranger Battalion during the Italian campaign.<sup>1</sup>

After combat experience in North Africa and Sicily, then Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Darby determined that the Rangers needed additional firepower, especially against armored forces. On 1 September 1943, LTC Darby organized a provisional anti-tank platoon under the command of Captain Charles M. Shunstrom. Former artillerymen and volunteers were transferred from within the 1st Ranger Battalion, which soon became known as the “Cannon Company.”

LTC Darby was able to secure the equipment while in Sicily and the Cannon Company’s first action was during the invasion of Italy (Operation AVALANCHE) in September 1943. The equipment consisted of four M-3 half-tracks mounted with 75mm guns. Later .30 caliber and .50 caliber machine guns were added for extra fire support. Soon the Cannon Company became known as Darby’s “Ace in the Hole” and the Rangers’ gun trucks were dubbed “Ace of Diamonds,” “Ace of Hearts,” “Ace of Spades,” and “Ace of Clubs.”<sup>2</sup>

The Cannon Company fought with the Rangers throughout the Italian campaign. The Cannon Company left 1st Ranger Battalion and became part of the 6615th Ranger Force (Provisional) when now Colonel Darby formed that headquarters on 16 January 1944. The 6615th consisted

of the force headquarters, the Cannon Company, and the 1st, 3rd, and 4th Ranger Battalions. The Cannon Company was part of the 6615th Ranger Force when it landed at Anzio (Operation SHINGLE).

On 30 January 1944, the 6615th Ranger Force launched an infiltration attack toward the town of Cisterna (sometimes called Cisterna de Littoria) to the southeast of the Anzio beachhead. The resulting battle was the worse defeat in Ranger history, leading to the annihilation of the 1st and 3rd Ranger Battalions (resulting in 12 killed, 36 wounded, and 743 captured from the two battalions). Only six Rangers who had infiltrated to Cisterna were able to make their way back to friendly lines.<sup>3</sup> The 4th Ranger Battalion, supported by the Cannon Company and some attached tank destroyers, attempted to break through to its surrounded comrades, sustaining 30 killed and 58 wounded in a brave, yet futile relief attempt.<sup>4</sup>

After the disaster at Cisterna, the 6615th Ranger Force was disbanded. While some of the veteran Rangers returned to the United States, many transferred to the First Special Service Force (FSSF), including the Cannon Company, and continued serving throughout the campaign in southern France until the FSSF was disbanded on 5 December 1944. 📌

## Endnotes

- 1 Robert W. Black, *Rangers in World War II* (New York: Random House, 1992), 113.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 113.
- 3 Michael J. King, *Rangers: Selected Combat Operations in World War II* (Fort Leavenworth: Leavenworth Papers, Combat Studies Institute, June 1985), 39; William O. Darby, *Darby's Rangers, We Led the Way* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1993), 167.
- 4 Black, 171–72.