Prisoner for a Day:
A First Special Service Force Soldier’s Short-lived POW Experience

by Robert W. Jones Jr.

The First Special Service Force (FSSF) landed at Anzio on 1 February 1944 and moved into defensive positions within twenty-four hours. Their mission was to protect the right flank of the beachhead, about thirteen kilometers of the fifty-two-kilometer salient that had become the Anzio beachhead. To the front of the FSSF position was the Mussolini Canal, a drainage project started in 1926 to drain the marshes and turn the swampy Littoria Plain into farmland.1 At its widest point, the canal was about sixty yards across and deep enough to form an effective antitank barrier. In order to keep the Germans from launching a significant attack, Brigadier General Robert T. Frederick, the FSSF commander, ordered an aggressive patrolling regimen with squads and platoons harassing the enemy every night. Sometimes these patrols simply disrupted enemy activities by cutting communications lines, while others conducted raids and sometimes prisoner snatches. For the most part, these patrols were extremely successful and caused the Germans to believe a much larger force opposed them; however, one such patrol went awry for a Forceman and led to a classic escape and evasion.

On the dark evening of 14 March 1944, the commander of 3rd Company, 3rd Regiment, FSSF, First Lieutenant (ILT) T. Mark Radcliffe, led a five-man ambush patrol across the Mussolini Canal. In the course of the patrol, Radcliffe stopped to investigate a suspicious noise and was pounced upon by four or five German soldiers, who quickly bound and gagged him. Unaware of his capture, Radcliffe’s patrol continued with its mission, only discovering their leader’s absence much later. In the morning, the Germans took their prisoner to the town of Littoria for interrogation, but failed to blindfold him, allowing ILT Radcliffe to take mental note of various German positions and troop locations, something that he hoped would help him at some future point.

ILT Radcliffe was introduced to his interrogator in the semi-basement of a damaged house with windows about four feet from the ground, maps on the wall, and full of German troops. Clad in the uniform of the elite Herman Göring Panzer Division, the interrogator was one Captain Urlich, who claimed to have been a stockbroker in Philadelphia before the war, which accounted for his proficiency in English. Per his training, ILT Radcliffe offered only his name, rank, and service number in answer to all of Captain Urlich’s questions. The interrogation continued unabated for about twenty minutes, at which point, apparently frustrated from his lack of success, Captain Urlich suddenly struck Radcliffe across the right side of his throat with a solid rubber truncheon. The blow paralyzed Radcliffe’s vocal cords, and he lost the ability to speak in anything above a whisper for four weeks.

As if by providence, the interrogation came to an abrupt halt when an Allied artillery barrage hit the area. The Germans hurried to protective shelters, leaving a lone guard on
watch. The guard was rightfully nervous and continually checked the effects of the barrage, peeking through the door and window, paying little attention to his prisoner. 1LT Radcliffe saw his chance: grabbing a piece of wood, he hit the guard on the side of the neck, knocking him out. The next few minutes were a whirlwind of frantic activity. After first grabbing a map, Radcliffe freed two other prisoners and then ran through the waning moments of the artillery barrage in search of concealment. 1LT Radcliffe knew they had only minutes before the Germans discovered their escape and began to look for them. At last, they found concealment in a large evergreen tree. Climbing up into the branches, Radcliffe and his companions stayed there all day as the Germans searched the ground nearby in vain, never looking up.

Under cover of darkness, the escapees finally descended from their hidden perch and made further plans. The two soldiers Radcliffe had freed, one British and the other French, decided to attempt to reenter Allied lines in another area, one they were more familiar with, so they parted ways with their American liberator. Radcliffe was determined to head to his former sector, where he knew the terrain, and more importantly, how to navigate through the extensive minefields. Traveling through the night and dodging German patrols, he gradually moved closer to Allied lines. Closer to safety, but not close enough, Radcliffe was spotted by a German mortar crew, which opened fire and wounded him. Losing blood and in pain from shrapnel wounds in his left foot and near his eyes, Radcliffe was barely able to find a hiding place for the next day.

Map of the Anzio beachhead on 21–27 February 1944. Radcliffe was taken prisoner on 14 March 1944.
Only a few days before Radcliffe was taken prisoner, this patrol from 4th Company, 2nd Regiment, returned from a night patrol with its own prisoners—the captured enemy fowl were of little intelligence value, but were delicious for dinner.
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First Special Service Force

In the spring of 1942, the British Chief of Combined Operations, Vice Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten, introduced General George C. Marshall, the U.S. Army Chief of Staff, to a concept entitled “Project Plough.” As envisioned by eccentric British scientist Geoffrey Pike, Project Plough entailed the development of a special force to parachute into German-occupied Norway and attack enemy installations and infrastructure critical to the German war effort, such as hydroelectric plants and railways. Using a newly created snow vehicle called the “Weasel,” the force would move over the snow to execute the attacks, and the resulting chaos would tie up large numbers of German soldiers.

The envisioned unit would be made up of North Americans, a combined force from the United States and Canadian armies. General Marshall recruited Lieutenant Colonel Robert T. Frederick to form and command the new unit, and on 20 April 1942, the First Special Service Force (FSSF) was organized at Fort William Henry Harrison, Montana. The specially selected men, of whom approximately one-third were Canadian, were organized into three 600-man regiments (each with two battalions) and a service battalion. After fifteen months of intense training in winter combat, mountaineering, airborne, demolitions, and close combat skills, the 2,300 Canadian and American soldiers were ready for combat.

Even as the Force finished their training, the Allied Command was having second thoughts about the unit’s mission into Norway. The FSSF was initially ordered to disband in order to provide infantry replacements to other units, but now-Colonel Frederick convinced the Army to keep the well trained FSSF intact. Capitalizing on their winter combat skills, the first FSSF combat mission consisted of invading and securing Kiska Island in the Aleutian chain on 15 August 1943. Shortly after the Aleutians Campaign, the unit was assigned to the 5th Army in Italy. As they fought their way through Sicily and up the Italian coast from November 1943 through June 1944, the FSSF endured sustained combat and pitched battles at such places as Monte la Difensa and Monte la Remetanea.

At Anzio, the FSSF became so feared that the Germans dubbed them “The Devil’s Brigade.” The FSSF led the breakout from the Anzio beachhead, which facilitated the capture of Rome. Soon after Rome was taken, the First Special Service Force left Italy to fight in southern France, and was finally disbanded in December 1944. The Canadians returned to their own Army, some going to their former units and a sizeable number joining the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion. About 350 Americans went to airborne units in need of experienced replacements, and the remaining FSSF soldiers formed the nucleus of the 474th Infantry Regiment (Separate) along with the 99th Infantry Battalion (made up of Norwegian-Americans) and saw service in Germany and Norway.

When the 1st Special Forces Regiment was constituted in June 1960, the First Special Service Force was recognized as an official part of the regiment’s lineage.

Endnotes
4 Burhans, 191; Story conversation.

Robert T. Frederick commanded the First Special Service Force for the majority of World War II. As he served with the Force, he advanced from the rank of lieutenant colonel to brigadier general. After the capture of Rome, Frederick became commander of the 1st Airborne Task Force and planning began for the invasion of southern France.