“Wars should be fought in better country than this”

The First Special Service Force in the Italian Mountains

by Kenneth Finlayson
Heavy fighting raged across the summit of Monte La Defensa. The First Special Service Force (FSSF) was decisively engaged with the German defenders on the mountain. LTC Ralph W. Becket, commanding 1st Battalion of the First Regiment, witnessed the assault of a Second Regiment platoon against a German machine gun position. ILT Maurice Le Bon led his men to a concealed position 30 yards from the flank of the enemy. “I watched all this develop, not missing a thing. When our machine guns and mortars opened fire from the right, the enemy replied with strong machine gun and Schmeisser pistol fire,” said Becket. “Suddenly our fire stopped and for the first and only time I heard the order – in Le Bon’s strong French-Canadian accent– ‘Fix bayonets!’ A moment later Le Bon emerged into the clearing with his section and the men, with bayonets fixed, charged the enemy position from above. It was a fantastic sight to see, of courage and determination.”

The section routed the Germans. Close, intense combat like this became the hallmark of the First Special Service Force during the Italian campaign in World War II.

Today’s Army Special Forces Groups take their official lineage from the First Special Service Force, a unique Canadian-American infantry unit of World War II. Activated on 20 July 1942 at Fort William Henry Harrison, near Helena, Montana, the FSSF was originally intended for a special mission in Norway. Operation PLOUGH was designed to destroy the Norwegian hydroelectric dam at Vermork that was producing deuterium, the “heavy water” vital to the German nuclear program. The cancellation of PLOUGH resulted in the FSSF being sent first to the Aleutians and then to the Mediterranean.

It was in southern Italy that the Force first saw combat. The Force’s reputation as an elite unit was made during the U.S. Fifth Army’s grueling campaign to break through the German Winter Line south of Rome. This article will look at the two phases of this operation and show how the bloody fighting in the mountains of Italy had a deep and lasting impact on the unit.

The First Special Service Force was composed of roughly an equal mix of American and Canadian volunteers. For the purposes of pay and promotion, the Canadian contingent was called the 1st Canadian Special Service Battalion. The 3,000-man FSSF was divided into two elements, the Combat Echelon and the Service Echelon. The Combat Echelon consisted of three regiments of two battalions each. Each battalion had three companies of three platoons. The regiments were less than half the size of a normal 870-man U.S. infantry battalion, averaging 32 officers and 327 enlisted men.

The small size of the regiments was due in large part to the absence of any organic support personnel. They were all assigned to the Service Echelon in the Force Support Battalion. With this unique organization, the combat elements were relieved of support details and could focus entirely on training and operations.

The original PLOUGH mission envisioned the Force conducting a winter crossing of Norway’s high central
The “dry run” at Kiska was a validation of the Force training program for these First Regiment men on Blue Beach, 9 August 1943. Within three months they would be fighting in the mountains of Italy.

The rugged terrain and inclement weather coupled with stiff German resistance slowed the Fifth Army’s advance toward Rome. Fighting was often at the squad level as the Allies slowly pushed northward.

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The FSSF sailed back to San Francisco and following a short period of leave, boarded trains for Camp Ethan Allen for additional training. On 28 October 1943, the Force sailed for North Africa aboard the Canadian Pacific’s Empress of Scotland. Arriving in Casablanca, Morocco on 5 November 1943, the unit moved by train to Oran, Algiers, and sailed in increments to Naples, Italy, arriving between 17 and 19 November. Their new mission was to help crack the tough German defenses south of Rome. The German Winter Line had stymied the Fifth Army since October 1943.

The FSSF left Helena on 13 April 1943 and traveled to Camp Bradford, Virginia for amphibious operations training. In May the Force was tested by the Army Ground Forces staff at Fort Ethan Allen, Vermont, to validate their infantry training prior to overseas deployment. After PLOUGH was cancelled, Colonel (COL) Robert T. Frederick, the Force commander, saved the Force from being disbanded by volunteering to lead the amphibious landings in the Aleutian Islands during Operation COTTAGE. At the end of June the Force moved to San Francisco and embarked for the Aleutian Islands. The 1st and 3rd Regiments landed in rubber assault boats on Kiska, on 15 and 16 August, only to find the Japanese had evacuated earlier. Though no fighting occurred, the “dry run” at Kiska proved to be a valuable test for the Force, validating their physical conditioning and combat procedures. Then new orders directed them to Europe.

plateau to destroy the Vermork facility. Consequently, the training at Fort Harrison stressed rigorous physical training, parachute qualification, demolitions, infantry small unit tactics, skiing, and mountaineering. Lengthy cross-country foot marches in all types of weather conditioned the Forcemen to move rapidly and carry heavy loads in the mountains. This training proved to be the ideal preparation for Italy.

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As the Fifth Army approached the Bernhardt Line in November 1943, the British 56th Division attacked the Monte Camino/La Defensa hillmass. The U.S. 3rd Infantry, 34th Infantry, and the 82nd Airborne Divisions were arrayed from south to north. Rugged terrain, bad weather, and too few Allied troops slowed the Fifth Army's progress to a crawl. The mountain ranges south of Rome were the highest along the west coast of Italy, rising to over 3,000 feet. Narrow valleys hindered off-road deployment of forces and limited the use of armored units. Winter brought drenching rains and penetrating cold that slowed movement on the few roads and exposed the troops to frostbite and hypothermia. The few divisions dedicated to the Mediterranean Theater were insufficient to crack the stiff German defenses.

Lieutenant General (LTG) Mark W. Clark's Fifth Army had been fighting north since landing at Salerno on 9 September 1943. As the Italian campaign began to bog down, Allied planners were stockpiling troops and resources for the cross-channel attack into France, the centerpiece of the Allied Grand Strategy. Everything LTG Clark needed to maintain momentum, manpower, equipment, landing craft, aircraft, and logistics was constrained. With his freedom of maneuver hampered, he was forced to grind his way north towards Rome through the teeth of the German defenses.

When the FSSF landed at Naples in November, Fifth Army had two light corps, two American and one British. The U.S. VI Corps led by Major General (MG) John P. Lucas contained the 34th and 45th Infantry Divisions and the lead elements of the 1st Armored Division. The U.S. II Corps (MG Geoffrey T. Keyes) had the veteran 3rd and 36th Infantry Divisions. The British 10th Corps (Lieutenant General Sir Richard L. McCreery) had the 46th and 56th Infantry Divisions. The 1st, 3rd, and 4th Ranger Battalions, commanded by LTC William O. Darby, and the Force, were the “fire brigades” to be directed against the toughest objectives. Advancing slowly northward after the successful landings at Salerno, the Fifth Army became stalemated by the Germans in mid-November.

The Fifth Army’s primary objective was to capture Rome. It was believed that whoever held the “Eternal City” would control southern Italy. Though Italy had surrendered on 8 September and joined the Allies, the Italian Army would not be ready to fight against their former German allies until December. Their absence did not materially weaken the German defenses.

From the south, the wide Liri Valley and Highway 6 ran directly to Rome. Access to the Liri was blocked by ranges of mountains running laterally across the Fifth Army’s line of advance. The German defenses incorporated these massifs to form three defensive belts that the Allies called the Winter Line. The Germans called the first line the Barbara Line. This was a series of fortified outposts running from the west coast eastward through the foothills. Behind this came the much stronger Bernhardt Line, a wide belt of defensive

The First Special Service Force arrived at Naples, Italy on three ships, the USS Jefferson, USS Dickman, and USS Barnett during the period 17-19 November 1943. After going to temporary bivouac in Naples, the Force moved on 20 November 1943 to a permanent bivouac area in the Italian Artillery School barracks approximately one-half mile west of Santa Maria, Italy – FSSF Historical Report.
Lieutenant General Mark W. Clark aboard the Amphibious Force Command ship USS Ancon, his headquarters for the landing at Salerno in September 1943. The Fifth Army commander, Clark employed the First Special Service Force as one of his “fire brigades” during the fierce fighting in Italy.

Generalfeldmarschall Albert Kesselring (C) commanded German forces in Italy. A master of defensive warfare, he used the mountainous terrain to establish a series of defensive belts that stymied the Allied advance on Rome.

fortifications from the mouth of the Garigliano River up and over the forbidding summits of Monte Camino, Monte La Defensa, Monte Majo, and Monte Sammucro. The third and most formidable was the Gustav Line. It was anchored on the Garigliano and Rapido Rivers and incorporated the natural fortress of Monte Casino. The German commander in Italy was the brilliant Generalfeldmarschall Albert Kesselring, whose forces outnumbered the attacking Allies.

As the Commander-in-Chief Southwest, Kesselring had been given control of all German forces in Italy, a total of fifteen divisions. Opposing the LTG Clark’s Fifth Army in southern Italy was the German Tenth Army, a force with more than seven divisions.

In the XIV Panzer Corps were the 94th Infantry Division, the 3rd and 15th Panzer Grenadier Divisions and a battle group from the Hermann Goering Panzer Division. The LXXVI Panzer Corps consisted of the 26th Panzer Division, the 1st Parachute Division, and the 65th and 305th Infantry Divisions. Manpower shortages in the German Army forced reorganization in October 1943 that reduced each infantry regiment to two battalions. The German infantry division strength was 13,500 men, 1,200 riflemen less than the larger (14,253) American infantry division. But the Germans fielded more divisions.

While most German units had Eastern Front or North African combat experience, the “new formations were put together in Sicily. The 15th Panzer Grenadier Division and the Hermann Goering Panzer Division were reconstituted after being destroyed in Tunisia,” recalled Kesselring after the war. Manpower and equipment shortages were offset by the advantages accrued by defending the mountains that blocked entry to the Liri Valley. LTG Clark never achieved the desired 4-to-1 superiority needed to overcome the German defenses. Beginning in early November, the Fifth Army began Operation RAINCOAT, the assault on the Bernhardt Line to punch into the Liri Valley towards Rome.

The Allied offensive began on 5 November 1943 when two brigades of the British 56th Infantry Division assaulted the 3,150 ft Monte Camino from the southwest. The troops struggled to fight their way up the bare, rocky, booby-trapped slopes that were raked by German machine guns. In weather that grew progressively colder and wetter, the British fought doggedly up Camino. On the 8th, the 15th Panzer Grenadiers launched a series of counter-attacks that nearly pushed the 56th off the mountain. Finally on 12 November, LTG Clark ordered the division to withdraw from Monte Camino. A similar scenario took place on neighboring Monte la Defensa.

Less than two miles to the northeast of Monte Camino and connected by a bare ridgeline, the steep slopes of Monte La Defensa (3,140 ft) presented an even more formidable obstacle to the U.S. 3rd Infantry Division. The 7th Infantry Regiment initiated the attack. Success would not only rupture the Bernhardt Line, but it would assist the British with Monte Camino. With a lineage stretching back to the Battle of New Orleans in the War of 1812, the 7th Infantry “Cottonbalers,” veterans of North Africa and Sicily, struggled for ten days. The 3rd Division main attack

"Wars should be fought in better country than this."—MG John P. Lucas, II Corps.
The II Corps attack on Monte La Defensa supported the attempt by the British 56th Division to take Monte Camino. After the U.S. 142nd Infantry Regiment was turned back on La Defensa, LTG Clark sent in the First Special Service Force. The lull would last for two weeks, giving the First Special Service Force time to prepare and the Germans to regroup.

After arriving in Naples, the Force based at Santa Maria just north of the city. The unit spent ten days redistributing equipment as it arrived from the port, range firing, and conducting cross-country marches “to recondition them for immediate action.” The FSSF was attached to II Corps’ 36th Division on 22 November, prepared for the attack on La Defensa.

Numerous scouting parties were sent up to the area of operations to survey the terrain. During one reconnaissance, a faint trail up the steep cliffs on the north side of the mountain was discovered. Properly strung with ropes to assist the heavily laden troops climb the cliff, the trail could get the Forcemen up the peak behind the German positions. This would be their best option.
On the night of 1 December 1943, the Second Regiment loaded 6x6 trucks in Santa Maria to move the 20 miles to their drop-off point prior to marching up the mountain in an assembly area. The over-burdened Forcemen faced a march of more than five miles in a steady, soaking rain that turned the roads to mud. Private First Class (PFC) Robert M. Davis of 1st Company, Second Regiment recalled that night march up the mountain: “The road was very muddy. It was a real ordeal just to get one foot out of the mud. We moved for about 12 hours to get to our bivouac up on the mountainside and it was very hard.”

“The approach march took a good part of the night,” said First Lieutenant (1LT) William S. Story of 4th Company, Second Regiment. “We went up the mountain until we were concealed from the top by the bushes and trees. Then we pulled our tail up so there was no visible evidence that we had come up in the dark of the night.”

Two 1st Company scouts, Sergeants (SGTs) Thomas E. Fenton and Howard C. Van Ausdale, prepared the trail to the crest of the mountain by anchoring ropes as a handrail to assist the men on the ascent. SGT William B. Walter and Private (PVT) Joseph J. Dauphinais helped in the rope placement. “Both of the scouts happened to be hard rock miners in civilian life and could really read terrain,” said 1LT Story. “They found what they thought was the best and relatively easy route where you could anchor your ropes without hammering in pitons. They got up close enough to hear the Germans.”

The preparation for the attack on La Defensa began late in the afternoon of 2 December with a heavy barrage from the II Corps artillery. More than 925 artillery pieces...
of all calibers hammered the Monte Camino-La Defensa Massif. The Allies concentrated their fires on the crests and the southern and western approaches used before. 75,000 rounds were fired in support of the attack. The Force came in from the east side and climbed onto the northern shoulder of the mountain as the artillery pounded the hill masses.

“I never saw another barrage like that during the war,” recalled Robert M. Davis. “That was a lulu.” I thought that there shouldn’t be one left up there after that barrage,” said SGT Joe Glass. “After that bombardment, we called La Defensa the ‘Million-Dollar Mountain’.”

The order of march was 1st, 2nd, and 3rd companies, the Regimental headquarters, and then the 4th, 5th, and 6th companies. The last 500 feet was up the steep cliffs. The ropes proved invaluable and were key to getting machine guns, mortars, and supplies up quickly.

Climbing in the darkness, the lead elements of 1st Company reached the crest of the mountain shortly before dawn. PFC Kenneth W. Betts, 1st Section, 1st Platoon, 1st Company of Second Regiment, was one of the first to reach the top. “We came up the back way,” said Betts. “We caught them by surprise, but it didn’t last long. [It was] only enough to get over the edge.” PFC Robert M. Davis remembered “coming up single file. Every sound made you think people in Rome could hear us coming.”

The 1st Company crested the hill and spread out to the left as 2nd Company behind them extended the line to the right among the rocks on the summit. The battle commenced when an alerted German sentry began firing. “We were virtually on top of the German positions when someone kicked a stone loose and a German challenged the two scouts,” said SGT Donald MacKinnon. “Someone shot, and that’s when machine gun fire opened up all around us.” A fierce firefight erupted along the crest. The Germans had their machine guns pointed to the southwest and had to work feverishly to turn their weapons around to meet the assault. The action quickly became a close-quarters shoot-out.

“It was really a series of individual firefights,” said ILT Bill Story. “We were dealing with individuals or small groups of Germans.” A marksman with a Schmeisser machine pistol pinned down PFC Robert Davis. “That guy was an artist with that burp gun,” said Davis. “It finally took [PFC Dennis] George hitting his position with a rifle grenade to allow us to move.”

As the Force rushed across the top of the mountain, the German defenders abandoned their positions to escape down the mountain to Monte Camino or across the northwest saddle towards Monte Remetana. “We had the top cleared in about two hours,” said SGT Joseph M. Glass. The unexpected appearance of the Force along the cliff tops had proven too much for the German defenders. “They had expected the assault to come up the forward slope,” said Bob Davis. “Once we got rid of the guys along the forward area, the rest folded up.” With the crest in their hands, the Forcemen quickly began to prepare defensive positions to meet the expected German counterattack.

The next three days were constant rain, snow, and freezing temperatures punctuated with German shelling and counter-attacks. The miserable conditions hindered the resupply and evacuation of the heavy casualties suffered from the German artillery. PFC Kenneth P. Thelen: “I had 18 different holes in me, two broken arms and two broken legs. I lay there for almost a day and a
The attack of Monte La Defensa took the Forcem en around the east side of the mountain and up the steep cliffs on the north side. They quickly pushed the surprised German defenders off the summit.

Once reinforced by the First Regiment, the Second Regiment moved to clear the saddle running northwest to the summit of Monte Remetana. A series of attacks on 6 and 7 December dislodged the Germans. Simultaneously, the British succeeded in capturing Monte Camino, eliminating the remaining sniper and artillery threat to the Force’s west flank. The FSSF linked up with the British and by the evening of 7 December, had control of Monte Remetana. The next night the Force was relieved by the 142nd Infantry, 36th Division, and returned to Santa Maria. The first phase of the mountain campaign for the FSSF had ended. The Force had pushed the Germans off Monte La Defensa in a matter of hours despite the Fifth Army planners’ predictions that it would take two or three days. However, success was very costly. The 3,000-man Force suffered 511 casualties on Monte La Defensa: 73 killed; 313 wounded; and 9 missing in action; and 116 evacuated with frostbite, trenchfoot, and exhaustion. Eight wounded later died. One battalion
commander (LTC Thomas C. MacWilliam), one company commander (CPT William T. Rothlin), and several platoon leaders, platoon sergeants, and section sergeants had been killed. The Force rested in Santa Maria for the next eleven days and reshuffled leaders.

While the FSSF had been fighting for Monte la Defensa, II Corps attacked the Monte Lungo-Monte Sammucro complex further north. The 36th Division, with the 3rd Ranger Battalion attached, suffered heavy casualties but failed to capture the two hills and the village of San Pietro. The Force was called upon to lead the second attempt.

For the attack on Monte Sammucro, the depleted Force had the U.S. 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment and the 1st Battalion, 141st Infantry attached. Fire support came from the 6th Armored Field Artillery Group and the 376th and 456th Parachute Field Artillery battalions. The reinforcements were badly needed because the three Force regiments were down to less than 200 men each.

The troops left the Ceppagna bivouac site on 22 December 1943 for an assault the next night. Insufficient coordination and communications among the task force elements caused COL Frederick to delay the attack until

Orders were issued on 22 December to have the First Special Service Force attack to capture MT SAMMUCRO, HILL 730. The First Regiment, First Special Service Force, assisted by fire from the First Battalion, 141st Infantry, accomplished this mission of the night 24-25 December. They were relieved by First Battalion, 141st Infantry, on 26 December, withdrawing to bivouac at CEPPAGNA - FSSF Historical Report 3.

Men of Second Regiment carrying supplies in support of the First Regiment’s assault on Monte La Defensa. The steep rugged terrain dictated that everything be man-packed or hauled on mules. Casualties from artillery and snipers were high among the supporters. In the lead is Private Harlan S. Morgan, a medic in 3-2.
Christmas Eve. The assault on Monte Sammucro would launch a three-week concentrated effort to push the Germans off the Bernhardt Line and position Fifth Army for the Gustav Line and Monte Cassino.

The troops sat in cold fog and rain for two days waiting for the attack to begin. The plan called for the First Regiment to hit Monte Sammucro while 1st Battalion, 141st Infantry assaulted nearby Hill 630, and the 504th, Hill 580. The attack began at 5:00 am on Christmas. In deadly, close-quarters fighting, the First Regiment ejected the Germans from their positions and fended off several counterattacks. The 504th captured Hill 580 and the 141st Hill 630. On the night of the 26th, the 141st relieved the Force on Monte Sammucro. The Force casualties were 77 dead and wounded in the fight. Following a respite of three days, the Force rejoined the offensive as Fifth Army continued to push to the north and west.

The first week of January 1944 was spent in fierce fighting in the hills surrounding the village of Radicosa. This was the precursor to facing the formidable mountains in the Gustav Line, Monte Majo, Hill 1270, and Monte Vischiataro. These high, rocky peaks would be the German’s final defense on the Bernhardt Line. The continual fighting and debilitating weather brought the Force to the brink of exhaustion. The final push began on 6 January to conquer Monte Majo.

Now reorganized as Task Force B, Frederick commanded the 133rd Infantry Regiment, Company A of the 19th Engineer Regiment, and Company A, 109th Medical Battalion. The 36th Division Artillery provided direct support. The largest Force regiment, the Third at roughly two-thirds strength, would lead the attack on the evening of 6 January 1944. The battle lasted through the night.

CPT T. Mark Radcliffe, 3rd Company commander, 1st Battalion, Third Regiment said: “We were one of the companies ordered to attack Monte Majo. There was no cover, just a bald hill. I sent scouts forward to take out the German machine gun positions. The Germans didn’t even know we were on them; the attack was that well executed.”

Forcemen receive coffee and doughnuts from the Red Cross at Santa Maria after the battle on La Defensa. The Forceman in the left center is wearing the wooden clogs issued as hospital shoes to those suffering trenchfoot or frostbite.
Colonel Robert T. Frederick leads the FSSF command section out of the village of Radicosa. Controlling operations in the mountains was difficult because mountain fighting was often conducted by squads and sections acting independently.

CPT Radcliffe. “Don McKinnon and Herbie Forester and I dove into this foxhole when we got a barrage right after we had taken the top of the hill,” recalled SGT Joe Glass. “A dud landed right in our hole, right in back of our legs. So we just leaped out, but it never exploded.” Then the German infantry came.

“Those were the worst counterattacks I have ever been involved in,” said Mark Radcliffe. “There were at least twenty-six and they came real close to pushing us off the hill.” Over the next two days, the Forcemen endured more than 40 counterattacks on Majo. Low on ammunition, the troops used abandoned German MG-42 machine guns and ammunition to beat back the determined assaults. The Force held firm.

After capturing Monte Majo, Task Force B was reinforced with Algerian troops, the battalion-sized Bonjour Groupement from the 3rd Algerian Division of the French Expeditionary Corps on 10 January.

“[I] had some contact with the Algerians,” said SGT Joe Glass. “We traded some of our rations for their canned meat, which turned out to be horsemeat.” The Algerians were attached to the Task Force for two days, when the FSSF captured their second major objective, Monte Vischiataro.

During the final phases of the mountain campaign, high casualty rates required major force restructuring. The 1st Battalion, Second Regiment was so depleted that the six line companies were merged into two; the new A Company under CPT Mark Radcliffe had men from 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Companies; and B Company with
4th, 5th, and 6th company soldiers led by CPT Daniel P. Gallagher. Task Force B was dissolved on order of II Corps on 13 January. The Third Regiment captured Hills 780 and 1030 on 14 January and held them for the next three days. This proved to be the last fighting the Force would do in the southern Italian mountains.

The mountain campaign had decimated the Force. Of the 1800 men in the Combat Echelon, 1400 had been killed, wounded, or hospitalized. The brutal, dangerous job of resupplying the combat forces had reduced the Service Echelon to 50% combat effectives. Though the Force broke the Bernhardt Line and opened the way to the Gustav Line and Monte Cassino, it was no longer combat effective. Those bloody campaigns would fall to other units of Fifth Army. Cassino would not fall until May.

"We were exhausted, we couldn't have taken the next outhouse. You could always say 'if we kept going,' but we couldn't keep going. There wasn't that much pressure left in the tank."
—Technician 4th Class John R. Dawson

"We got darn close to Cassino before withdrawing. In fact, I think I saw guys on patrols that were halfway up Monte Cassino. If there had been a nice, fresh American division, it could have gone up and saved all that fuss later on," surmised Technician 4th Class John R. Dawson. "We were exhausted; we couldn't have taken the next outhouse. You could always say 'if we..."
A Force combat patrol clears a ruined village near Radicosa. Private Charles N. Russell, (L) covers the advance of the patrol.

Captain T. Mark Radcliffe, the company commander of 3rd Company, 3rd Regiment, would later command a composite A company formed from the consolidation of three 3rd Regiment companies. In the battle on Monte Majo, his men would fight off 26 German counterattacks.

On 29 January 1944 the First Special Service Force received orders to prepare for movement to ANZIO BEACHEAD area. The Force moved to concentration Area No. 3 near Naples on 30 January and sailed aboard LST’s and LCI’s for Pozzuli on the evening of 31 January. The unit debarked at ANZIO at 1000, 1 February.

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kept going, but we couldn’t keep going. There wasn’t that much pressure left in the tank. The FSSF returned to Santa Maria to rest and refit. 250 American volunteers joined the unit and were put through an intensive training program. The Canadian Army did not replace all of their contingent’s losses, leaving only 300 men fit for duty. Some volunteers came from the 1st Canadian Division, British 8th Army, over the next year. But Canada never filled their element to full strength again. In fact, LTC Thomas P. Gilday, the ranking FSSF Canadian after the mountain campaign, recommended that all of the Canadians be reassigned to the Canadian Parachute Battalion in England. Fortunately, this did not happen because the Force still had battles to fight at Anzio, into Rome, and in southern France.

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Endnotes


3 Deuterium is a naturally occurring isotope of hydrogen with one proton and one neutron in the nucleus. Deuterium was used extensively in the early development of nuclear reactors. The Vermork facility in Norway was supplying deuterium for the German nuclear research program.


7 Burhans, The First Special Service Force: A Canadian/American Wartime Alliance, The Devil’s Brigade, X.

8 Burhans, The First Special Service Force: A Canadian/American Wartime Alliance, The Devil’s Brigade, 82; Ross, The Supercommandos, 70.

9 Narrative Report: First Special Service Force, 17 November 1943 – 1 February 1944, 28 November 1944, Department of the Army, Adjutant General’s Office, Washington DC, Historical Records Section, copy in the USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, 1. (Hereafter referred to as Narrative Report, First Special Service Force).


17 Narrative Report, First Special Service Force, 1.

18 Narrative Report, First Special Service Force, 1.

19 Narrative Report, First Special Service Force, 1.

20 Robert M. Davis, 1-2 First Special Service Force, taped narrative, subject: Operations on La Defensa, date unknown, tape in the First Special Service Force Collection, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.

21 William S. Story, 4-2 First Special Service Force, interview by Dr. Joseph Fischer, 10 August 1995, St. Andrews, New Brunswick, Canada, transcript, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, 77-79.

22 Story interview, 79.


24 Davis interview.


26 Kenneth W. Betts, 1-2 First Special Service Force, taped narrative, subject: Operations on La Defensa, date unknown, tape in the First Special Service Force Collection, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.

27 Davis interview.
The ruins of the village of San Pietro typifies the destruction that occurred during the Fifth Army’s campaign in Italy.