

# Prisoner for a Day:

## A First Special Service Force Soldier's Short-lived POW Experience



by Robert W. Jones Jr.



*First Lieutenant  
T. Mark Radcliffe  
of The First Special  
Service Force.*

**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.<sup>1</sup> 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 1LT Radcliffe to take mental note of various German positions and troop locations, something that he hoped would help him at some future point.

1LT 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 Ulrich, who claimed to have been a stockbroker in Philadelphia before the war, which accounted for his proficiency in English. Per his training, 1LT Radcliffe offered only his name, rank, and service number in answer to all of Captain Ulrich's questions. The interrogation continued unabated for about twenty minutes, at which point, apparently frustrated from his lack of success, Captain Ulrich 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



Photo courtesy of CMH.



By now, 1LT Radcliffe had been missing for three days, but his comrades in the Force had not given up on him. Several patrols from 3rd Company had been continuously searching for their company commander. Finally, the patrol led by Sergeant “Big Swede” Erickson, an original member of Radcliffe’s patrol, chanced upon the wounded officer. He was alive, though weak with blood loss. A noted character within the Force, Sergeant Erickson lived up to his reputation once again. Instead of greeting his wounded commander in relief, Erickson grabbed Radcliffe by the ears and excitedly started to pound his head into the ground, yelling “You little son of a bitch! Where ya been?”<sup>2</sup> No one knows how long the enthusiastic greeting would have continued, because a group of Germans soon spotted the patrol and opened fire. The rescuers grabbed Radcliffe and returned across the Mussolini Canal to the safety of their own lines.

At the 3rd Regiment command post, 1LT Radcliffe was given a preliminary debriefing by the Regimental Intelligence Officer, 1LT Bill Story. This was a somewhat difficult undertaking for Radcliffe, since he was still in rough shape. He was weak from his three-day evasion and blood loss, and he still could not speak above a low whisper because of the blow to his throat. Radcliffe and Story overcame the challenge by passing notes for the few minutes they had before Lieutenant Colonel Walker, the 3rd Regiment commanding officer, arrived at the command post to welcome Radcliffe back and to take him to the field hospital. In spite of his poor condition, Radcliffe was able to convey to 1LT Story the intelligence that he had gathered during his journey to the interrogation in Littoria.<sup>3</sup> This information was used to target the areas with artillery, resulting in the destruction of several ammunition dumps and enemy positions.<sup>4</sup>

In need of medical care, Radcliffe journeyed to the aid station and then to the field hospital in the Anzio beachhead. It was determined that the shrapnel wound to his foot had to

be operated on at the 36th Combat Hospital near Naples, so he was transported there for further care. After the operation, Radcliffe had recuperated for twenty-two days when he heard that soldiers at the hospital were being sent to the replacement depot for reassignment. For many soldiers, especially those assigned to special units like the FSSF and the Rangers, being reassigned was not only considered a demotion, but they also lost the camaraderie and friendship forged through training and the early campaigns in Southern Italy. Rather than run the risk of being assigned out of the FSSF, Radcliffe left the hospital without orders. Intent on rejoining his unit, he began his second escape and evasion in less than a month—this time from American forces.

While the “escape” from the hospital was relatively simple, getting from Naples to Anzio posed a bigger problem, since Radcliffe had no official access to transportation. As befitted a resourceful first lieutenant, Radcliffe solved the problem of the return to Anzio with unconventional thinking and ingenuity. By chance, he ran into a friend from Salt Lake City who was flying an L-19 spotter plane in and out of Anzio as a courier service. Radcliffe was able to convince the friend to take him along on his next flight to Anzio, but the friend feared being court-martialed for taking an unauthorized passenger. So they worked out a compromise: Once the L-19 landed and was taxiing toward the parking area, Radcliffe would roll out of the plane undetected and make his way back to FSSF headquarters. The plan was executed successfully and with efficiency. In less than thirty days, 1LT Radcliffe had successfully conducted two escapes and evasions (through both enemy and “enemy” territory), and had reunited with his unit. He had little time to rest from his exploits, however. He was soon summoned to BG Frederick’s headquarters for a special mission: he was to lead the first U.S. patrol into Rome. ▲

*To be continued in a forthcoming issue of Veritas . . .*

*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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## Endnotes

- 1 Robert D. Burhans, *The First Special Service Force* (Dalton, GA: Lee Printing, 1947), 173.
- 2 T. Mark Radcliffe, *First Special Service Force*, interview by Robert W. Jones Jr., 28 April 2004, Fort Bragg, NC, digital recording, USASOC History Office Files, Fort Bragg, NC; Joseph A. Springer, *The Black Devil Brigade. The True Story of the First Special Service Force* (Pacifica, CA: Pacifica Military History, 2001), 189.
- 3 William Story, *First Special Service Force*, conversation with Robert W. Jones Jr., 27 April 2004, Fort Bragg, NC, transcript, USASOC History Office Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 4 Burhans, 191; Story conversation.

## 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.



*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.*



Photo courtesy of Col(R) T. Mark Radcliffe.