

# Unique Support for a Unique Unit:

## The Service Battalion of the First Special Service Force

by Kenneth Finlayson

“ONE of a kind,” is a term that applies to many aspects of the First Special Service Force (FSSF), the “Black Devils” of World War II. Composed of Canadian and American soldiers, led by officers and non-commissioned officers from both nations, the Force was organized, trained, and employed as an elite infantry unit which saw action in the Aleutians, Italy, and Southern France. Disbanded on 5 December 1944, the FSSF became, in the U.S. Army’s official lineage, the unit from which today’s Special Forces groups are constituted. In the unit’s organization, equipment, and mission, the FSSF was unique among the Allied units of World War II.



First Special Service Force shoulder patch.

*quick succession . . . the Germans (would be compelled) to put into Norway more men than they have now.<sup>1</sup>*

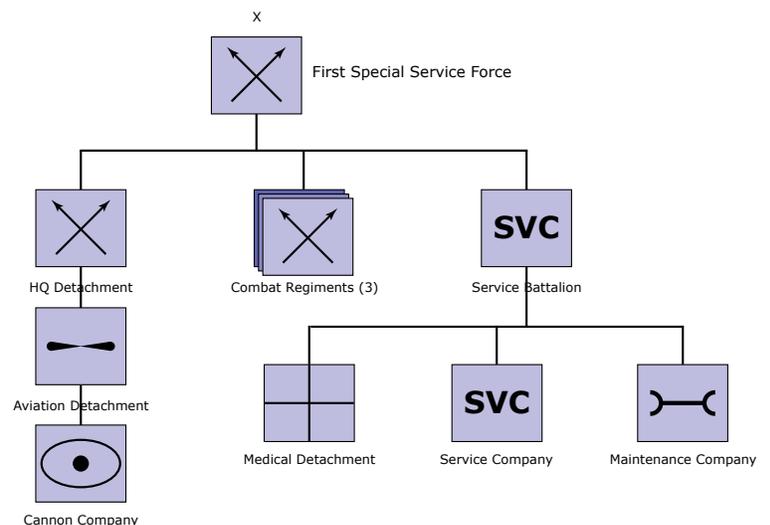
In Pyke’s estimation, a military force of 4,000 men would cause the Germans to commit half a million troops to occupation duty; troops that might be diverted from the coastal defenses of Europe. Operation PLOUGH centered on two elements: the development of a vehicle to traverse the snow-covered landscape of Norway and the formation and training of a unit to conduct raids and sabotage missions. Endorsed by Mountbatten and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, General George C. Marshall, the Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army, had a feasibility study done on the proposed operation. Lieutenant Colonel Robert T. Frederick, a staff officer in the Army General Staff G-3 Operations section, reviewed Pyke’s proposal and found PLOUGH to be deficient in several critical areas: first, the delivery means

*Englishman Geoffrey Pyke was the mastermind behind the Plough Project that resulted in the formation of the First Special Service Force.*

of Combined Operations, Pyke envisioned a unit specifically designed to conduct winter combat operations in Norway, a country under German occupation since 1940.

*If there were to be landed by parachute men with machines able to travel fast and far not through but on the snow, over and down the slopes of Norwegian mountains, able to carry arms for attacking and explosives to destroy bridges, tunnels, railway tracks, hydro-electric stations, etc., etc., equipped to maintain themselves in any part of the country, however high and desolate, to launch frequent attacks on vital objects simultaneously or in*

for the vehicles; second, the evacuation scheme for the troops after infiltration; and third, the general premise



FSSF Organization Chart.



*Men of the FSSF in the T-24 Weasel moving out of an area under mortar bombardment. Scene is from combat operations near the Rapido River in Italy, 23 January 1944.*

that it would force the Germans to increase the number of occupation forces.<sup>2</sup>

Despite Frederick's negative response, the operational concept, the political pressure, and the U.S. commitment to develop a cross-country snow vehicle caused the U.S. Army to adopt the concept and move ahead. Ironically, the Chief of War Plans, Major General Dwight D. Eisenhower, selected Frederick to take charge of Operation PLOUGH because he was the man most familiar with the project. Frederick was given *carte blanche* to organize and train the unit.<sup>3</sup>

Many of the unique aspects of the organization and

*Brigadier General Robert T. Frederick designed and led the FSSF until 23 June 1944, when he was selected to command the 1st Airborne Task Force. Here he is shown with Lieutenant Colonel Robert W. Moore, commander of the 2nd Battalion, 2nd Regiment, during combat near Ceretto Alto, Anzio, Italy.*



training of the First Special Service Force, as Frederick named the unit that was born to support PLOUGH, resulted from the extreme time pressure associated with the operation. The Studebaker Corporation was developing an over-the-snow vehicle labeled the T-24 and nicknamed the "Weasel." They were to field the first prototype in late June 1942. Frederick needed to assemble and begin training his unit by late July of that year. He selected Fort William Henry Harrison outside of Helena, Montana, as the training site and quickly assembled a staff to begin the recruitment process. Frederick developed the first Table of Organization (today's Table

of Organization and Equipment) for the FSSF, in which he established a separate Service Battalion to support the three combat regiments. This was a distinct departure from the standard organizational template for the infantry units (that traditionally placed support troops in the combat battalions). In the Force, the combat elements focused on training exclusively—with no requirements to fill work details, conduct maintenance, or perform administrative duties. In the FSSF, the service battalion handled all activities not directly connected to training.

In the view of Colonel Robert W. Moore, who rose to command the 2nd Regiment, "The Service Battalion was a great asset for us. The troops could concentrate 100 percent of the time on training with no distractions."<sup>4</sup> Within the Service Battalion were the cooks, bakers, administra-

*Major Gerald Rodehaver commanded the Service Battalion. His "Rhythm Rascals" were a fondly remembered part of the training at Fort Harrison, Montana.*





*A representative from the Studebaker Corporation gives maintenance instruction to American and Canadian Service Battalion personnel on the T-24 Weasel.*

tive and maintenance personnel, parachute riggers (the Force was an airborne unit), armorers, and a full medical section with doctors, dentists, and aidmen. A Military Police platoon, carpenters, draftsmen, electricians, mail clerks, stenographers, and photographers were all included in the Table of Organization of the Service Battalion.<sup>5</sup> Like the Force itself, the Service Battalion was a self-contained organization that proved its value in the hills outside of Helena.

The Service Battalion was composed of three companies—the Headquarters Company, the Maintenance Company, and the Service Company—as well as an Ordnance and Communications Detachment. A separate Aviation Detachment was on hand to provide transport for parachute operations and conduct reconnaissance and liaison flights as needed. The original Table of Organization called for 30 officers and 600 enlisted men in the Service Battalion.<sup>6</sup> The first commander of the Service Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel James B. Conyers, arrived in Helena in July 1942. An artillery officer near the age of retirement, Conyers returned to Fort Sill, Oklahoma, after two weeks and was replaced by Major Gerald E. Rodehaver from the Missouri National Guard.<sup>7</sup> The industrious if somewhat eccentric Rodehaver was a particular favorite with the troops. During training in Fort Harrison, his unofficial musical ensemble, “Rodehaver’s Rhythm Rascals,” serenaded the Forcemen at reveille and at Force formations.<sup>8</sup> Under his command, the men of the Service Battalion supported the training of the three Force regiments as well as training themselves.

The mission of the Force dictated a wide-ranging training regime that focused intensively on infantry skills, weapons and demolitions, mountaineering and skiing, as well as arduous physical training and road marches. In the combat units, the men were parachute qualified in an abbreviated airborne training program run at Fort Harrison. Within the Service Battalion, only the parachute riggers did airborne training, but all troops took part in the forced marches and the hand-to-



*Motion picture photographer Bernie Kassoy was a member of the Photo Detachment of the FSSF. Filming Force training was a significant mission.*

hand training as well as completing an infantry obstacle course that included crawling under machinegun fire amidst exploding dynamite sticks.<sup>9</sup> While the men of the Service Battalion were trained to a high level in infantry skills, their primary responsibility was to support the combat troops.

Private Tom Hope, drafted in 1942 into the Army Signal Corps, was assigned to the FSSF as a motion picture photographer in the Photographic Detachment. The detachment’s mission was to record the training of the unit. Hope arrived in Helena accompanied by still photographer Private Lew Merriam.<sup>10</sup> “We picked up men like Frank Lehman, Ed Gielow, Ray Short, and Bernie Kassoy. The officer was a Lieutenant Ferris P. Copper. They gave us a little building that we made into a darkroom and a place to store film with a little room so the officers had a place to review the training films.”<sup>11</sup> The Photographic Detachment also showed Army training films to the soldiers as part of the training program. In the evenings, the photographers ran the latest feature movies out of Holly-

*The men of the Photo Detachment at Fort Harrison (left to right): Irwin Cinatl, Frank Lenon, Edward Gielow, Lewis Merriam, Burton Willenzien, Ollie Stripling, and Tom Hope. Missing: Bernie Kassoy (probably taking the picture).*





*Parachute training was conducted in Helena for the combat echelons of the Force. Improved parachute landing fall techniques pioneered through the work of the Photo Detachment significantly reduced jump injuries.*

wood. They were in the field regularly filming the training of the Force. Their film records supported a change in parachute landing fall techniques by the Army.

The FSSF conducted parachute training for all members of the combat echelon at Fort Harrison. Canadian Sergeant Bill Story of 5th Company, 2nd Battalion, 2nd Regiment described the original technique of the parachute-landing fall: "Paratroopers came in from Fort Benning [Georgia], many that had been with the original test platoon. They taught us to land with our feet apart and stressed we shouldn't reach for the ground with one foot or the other in what they called pedaling."<sup>12</sup> This

technique resulted in a very high incidence of leg injuries. Nearly one jumper in four sustained a broken leg or ankle. Private Tom Hope and his two-man crew filmed the jump training in an attempt to determine the causes behind the high injury rate.

*I had a Bell and Howell 70 DA camera, a little magazine camera that would run at sixty-four frames per second, which is good for slow-motion photography. I remember having to run all over the drop zone to catch the groups as they landed. I was in the best condition of my life, like running a 100-yard dash every few minutes. We shot a lot of film and the lieutenant took it on a train to Chicago to get it developed. When he returned, the jump officer and a whole bunch of others crowded into our little building to review the film. You could see that even in a good landing, one foot would touch slightly ahead of the other which put all the stress on that leg. The jump officer decided to try a jump with the feet together, and when they did, the injuries went way down. We shot the guys landing with feet together and made a training film of it. I was later told that both [Forts] Benning and Bragg adopted that system and it became SOP [standing operating procedures] for the U.S. Army, then the Canadians.<sup>13</sup>*

In an abbreviated version of the Army's standard six-week course at Fort Benning, the Force qualified men as parachutists in as little as three days. First Lieutenant Edward Thomas, later the Executive Officer for 2nd Battalion, 2nd Regiment, recalled the training: "One of my surprises was just how very little jump training was being done at [Fort] Harrison; I was amazed because it was so different from what I'd been through. Two jumps for qualification instead of the five or six required in the parachute school at Benning, and no night jumps."<sup>14</sup>

The FSSF Air Detachment, another unique organic element, supported the parachute training. The mission of the FSSF Air Detachment was to provide aviation support for airborne operations, aerial reconnaissance in support of Force training, and transportation of personnel and equipment. One of the members of the Air Detachment, Second Lieutenant Ray Cart, recalled, "My association with the Air Detachment began on 15 September 1942 when War Department Special Order #250 assigned Second Lieutenants Jean Daly, Eben S. Lapworth, Orville B. Verdery, and myself to the First Special

*The Douglas C-47 "Skytrain" was the primary cargo and parachute training aircraft in the FSSF. Sometimes referred to as the "Dakota," the two C-47s were based at the Helena Municipal Airport with the rest of the Aviation Detachment.*

*The Cessna C-78 "Bobcat" five-passenger aircraft was used for carrying personnel and light cargo in support of FSSF training and operations.*



Service Force. At that time we were assigned to the 56th Fighter Group at Mitchell Field in New Jersey and we set out in Jean Daly's car, arriving seven or eight days later in Helena."<sup>15</sup>

After reporting in at Fort Harrison, the group was directed to the Helena Municipal Airport where the Air Detachment was headquartered. There they joined Captain James W. Bennett, the detachment commander, and three other pilots, Second Lieutenants Charles Raus, Charles B. Rimmer, and Ernest Kelly. First Lieutenant Richard V. Brittain, who was not a pilot, served as the detachment supply officer. Nineteen enlisted mechanics, radio operators, and aircraft crewmen made up rest of the detachment.<sup>16</sup> These men flew and maintained the aircraft in the Air Detachment.

In the Force Table of Equipment, the Air Detachment was authorized six airplanes: "Ln and obsvn [liaison and observation] in accordance with missions assigned the Force."<sup>17</sup> The Air Detachment fleet actually had seven: two C-47 "Skytrains" to support parachute operations and haul cargo, two Cessna C-78 "Bobcats" (five-passenger aircraft for carrying personnel and light cargo), and two Stinson L-9B "Voyagers" (a light reconnaissance aircraft).<sup>18</sup> A Fairchild C-86 "Forwarder" reconnaissance aircraft was also added to the six authorized by the Table of Equipment.<sup>19</sup> The crews flew a variety of missions in support of the training program and the pilots, holding several ratings, garnered considerable flying experience in the mountainous terrain around Helena.

On one occasion, the Governor of Montana, Sam C. Ford, requested that the FSSF Aviation Detachment support a state-run rescue effort to free miners trapped during a mine accident. The Aviation Detachment flew from Helena to Billings, picked up the rescue teams, and then ferried them to the accident site near Butte. In the end, the teams failed to rescue the trapped miners, but the presence of the Force aircraft demonstrated the close relationship that the unit had established with the people of the state.<sup>20</sup>

The high volume of flying in the rugged Montana terrain ultimately cost lives. On 21 December 1942, pilot First Lieutenant Orville Verdery and Second Lieutenant Leo B. Mansfield of the First Regiment took off in the evening on a reconnaissance flight. Their Stinson L-9B did not return on schedule, and early the next morning



*Service Battalion personnel man a field kitchen in the mountains of Italy. The round containers were used to transport hot food to the troops on the front lines. They were the predecessors to "Mermite" cans.*



*A FSSF Service Battalion 6x6 truck unloads from an LST (Landing Ship-Tank) at the Anzio beachhead.*

an aerial search was launched. Lieutenants Ray Cart and Eben Lapworth found the wreckage of the Stinson on the side of a mountain outside Fort Harrison. Verdery and Mansfield were the only training fatalities suffered by the Force.<sup>21</sup> Shortly afterward, the Force departed Fort Harrison for amphibious training at Camp Bradford, near Norfolk, Virginia, in January 1943.

The Aviation Detachment, minus the lost Stinson aircraft, followed the Force to Virginia and established operations at Langley Field. When the Force later moved to Fort Ethan Allan, Vermont, for further training in mountain warfare, the detachment conducted operations from the municipal airport in nearby Burlington. The mission of the Aviation Detachment remained unchanged, but shortly after its arrival in Burlington, the crews were ordered to prepare the aircraft and equipment for movement overseas.<sup>22</sup> However, when the Force was ordered to move to the West Coast to participate in the Aleutian Campaign, the Aviation Detachment was left behind in Burlington. In July 1943, the Aviation Detachment was disbanded and the pilots and crews were reassigned in the Army Air Corps. Only Lieutenant Charles B. Rimmer

*The Fairchild C-86 "Forwarder" provided short take-off/landing capability and was used for observation and reconnaissance.*

*The Stinson L-9B "Voyager" was a light reconnaissance aircraft. One of Aviation Detachment's two L-9s crashed into the mountains near Helena.*





*The "Ace of Spades" of the FSSF Cannon Company was an M-3 Halftrack mounting a 75mm cannon. The Cannon Company joined the FSSF at Anzio when the 6615th Ranger Force (Provisional) was disbanded in 1944.*

remained with the Force and served as Brigadier General Frederick's pilot throughout the war.<sup>23</sup> Although the Aviation Detachment remained behind when the FSSF deployed to combat, the rest of the Support Battalion moved with the Force.

Beginning with the landing at Kiska, Alaska, on 15 August 1943 until the FSSF disbanded in southern France on 5 December 1944, the "Devil's Brigade" was in almost continuous combat from Kiska to the Apennine mountains of southern Italy, then to Anzio, the liberation of Rome, and ultimately serving as the spearhead of the amphibious invasion of southern France. During the Anzio campaign, which ran from early February to the first of May 1944, the Force held a division-sized sector of thirteen kilometers despite numbering less than 1,500 men.<sup>24</sup> To help relieve pressure on the lightly held defensive line, men of the Service Battalion conducted anti-parachute patrols and rear-area security missions in addition to providing the logistical support and maintenance.<sup>25</sup> It was during the Anzio campaign that the Force gained another element unique to the organization—the Cannon Company.

The Cannon Company was part of the 1st Ranger Battalion in North Africa. Formed by Lieutenant Colonel William O. Darby to provide firepower to the Ranger forces, the Cannon Company consisted of four M-3 halftracks mounting 75mm guns.<sup>26</sup> Known as Darby's "Ace in the Hole," the four vehicles were called the "Ace of Spades," "Ace of Hearts," "Ace of Diamonds," and "Ace of Clubs." The Cannon Company came to the FSSF at Anzio fol-

lowing the disastrous 30 January 1944 attack on Cisterna that resulted in the destruction of the 1st and 3rd Ranger Battalions. In the attack, the two battalions lost 12 killed, 36 wounded, and 743 captured when the Germans encircled them.<sup>27</sup> This action resulted in the disbanding of the 6615th Ranger Force (Provisional) and the Cannon Company was assigned to the Force along with many of the Rangers from the 4th Battalion. The Cannon Company provided fire support to the Force during the breakout of Anzio toward Rome and in Operation DRAGOON, the invasion of Southern France.

The relatively few casualties incurred during the defense of Anzio

and the new personnel replacements boosted the combat regiments of the Force to 104 officers and 1,966 enlisted men when the unit led the breakout toward Rome in May 1944. On 1 May, the Service Battalion strength, in contrast, had dropped from 59 officers and 666 enlisted to 55 and 629, respectively.<sup>28</sup> Despite the reduction, the men of the Service Battalion continued to provide the same high level of support to the FSSF during the rapid advance into Rome and later in the invasion of southern France during Operation DRAGOON.

The FSSF executed an amphibious landing on the Iles D'Hyeres on 14 August 1944. Protecting the southern flank of the Seventh Army as it drove into France, the Force moved diagonally north and east up the Mediterranean coast toward the French-Italian border. Facing increasingly disorganized German resistance, the Force pushed forward to the mountainous French-Italian border, reaching it on 1 November 1944. At this point, the Force virtually ceased conducting active combat operations. On 28 November 1944, the unit was relieved in place by the 442nd Regimental Combat Team and retired to the town of Villeneuve-Loubet for deactivation. The FSSF was disbanded on 5 December 1944. The Canadians returned to the Canadian Army, most to the Parachute Brigade, and the Americans were either dispersed to other units or returned to the United States depending on the number of combat points accumulated.

In the latter stages of the FSSF operations in France, the Service Battalion kept supplies moving forward in the rugged terrain along the border. Mules were often



*In the mountains of Italy, mules were the primary means of transportation. Sergeant Lew Merriam traded his photographer role for a stint as a mule skinner.*

the primary means of transportation. As was done in Italy, “Freddy’s Freighters” loaded ammunition and supplies onto pack boards and man-carried them up the mountains. Until the very end, the Service Battalion continued to provide the logistical support to the Forcemen. Unique units within a unique unit, the Service Battalion, Photo Detachment, Aviation Detachment, and Cannon Company all contributed to the success of the organization and allowed the First Special Service Force to “punch above its weight.” An organization tailored for a special mission, few units of this size had the same impact in combat as the Force. ♣

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## Endnotes

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