# HISTORY OF THE FIRST SPECIAL SERVICE FORCE:

## Norway - The Top Secret Mission That Never Was

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The original concept of a specialized winter fighting force, which led to the creation of the First Special Service Force (FSSF), came from the fertile but somewhat undisciplined mind of Geoffrey Pyke, a civilian member of the staff of Vice Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten whom British Prime Minister Churchill named Chief of Combined Operations (Commandos) during in March 1942. Churchill wanted a young and aggressive leader to create a wholly new organization to coordinate bold attacks on German forces. Mountbatten was a bright and capable former destroyer commander, a cousin of King George V, who Churchill thought was the right man for the job

Pyke was generally acknowledged to be a genius but one whose personal mannerisms wore quickly on others. Wearing horn-rimmed glasses and a goatee, typically dressed in mismatched, unkempt clothing, Pyke embodied the physical image of what many would describe as an extreme eccentric. He rarely bathed, shaved or cut his hair. He wore spats so he could avoid wearing socks. He was arrogant, impatient with military protocol, paranoid, and completely convinced of his intellectual superiority to co-workers, ranking officers, and government bureaucrats. Most people could not stand to work with him for long (if at all).

Despite all these negative attributes, Mountbatten prized his creative mind and his willingness to challenge conventional thinking regarding military and strategic issues. Pyke noted that almost 70% of the terrain in the European Theater of the war against Germany was covered by snow and ice during five months of winter. He proposed the creation of a highly trained infantry force specializing in winter warfare and the development of a machine for transporting men, equipment and supplies across these arctic expanses to stage hit and run assaults on strategic targets. As examples of possible demolition targets he cited the Ploesti oilfields in Romania that supplied the German Army, the hydroelectric plants along the Italian border with Germany and Austria that supplied power to industry in southern Germany and northern Italy, and the hydroelectric plants in the Norwegian mountains that supplied half of Norway’s power. In addition, the railroad tracks, tunnels and bridges that carried vital Norwegian iron, nickel, and zinc ore to Sweden for export to Germany’s war industries would also be important targets.

*Geoffrey Pyke*

Of these potential targets, Pyke saw Norway as the most attractive for military operations with its long nights and winter snow cover, sparse population scattered over rugged terrain, isolated coastal areas, and unoccupied tundra. Pyke argued that an aggressive commando force trained for winter warfare, mountaineering, and demolition, and if provided with tracked vehicles that could travel quickly over snowy terrain, could wreak havoc on military targets while operating behind enemy lines. Pyke cited the success of T.E. Lawrence's guerilla campaign on the Arabian Peninsula during WW I which tied down thousands of Turkish troops as an example of what could be achieved by his ski commandos in Norway.

The Vemork hydroelectric facility near Rjukan, the largest of the 14 major hydro projects in Norway, was of particular interest to the Allies. On August 2 1939, Albert Einstein had written a secret letter to President Roosevelt to inform him that Germany was in the process of developing a uranium-fueled atomic weapon, an extremely powerful bomb potentially capable of destroying an entire large city and the surrounding area. He informed the President that Germany was now actively mining uranium in Czechoslovakia in support of that goal. The Vemork plant was a critical component of the German effort because it produced a rare by-product called

deuterium or “heavy water” vital for research involving atomic fission and a possible component of an atomic bomb. The Vemork production of heavy water was now being supervised by German military authorities following its invasion of Norway in April 1940.

Pyke also argued that his concept could offer a related benefit for the overall Allied war effort by tying down large numbers of German forces with a comparatively modest investment in manpower and equipment. This aspect of the proposal was of keen interest to Churchill. On June 22 1941 Adolph Hitler had initiated Operation Barbarossa, the Wehrmacht invasion of the Soviet Union. The campaign ultimately involved a 1,800 mile front stretching from the Arctic Circle to the Black Sea and millions of German and Soviet soldiers. Stalin demanded that the Allies begin a second front against Germany to relieve pressure on his poorly trained and equipped forces which were steadily being pushed back by the German armies.

Pyke said that the force he envisioned could, at a minimum discourage the Germans from moving any of their occupation forces from Norway to the Russian Front and perhaps draw German troops to Norway to deal with this new strategic threat. Churchill also hoped that this operation could help support the establishment of an Allied base in northern Norway that could help protect the vulnerable merchant convoys sailing the dangerous North Atlantic route to Murmansk with war material to support the Soviet fight against the German invaders.

At a meeting on April 11 1942, Lord Mountbatten presented Pyke’s proposal to Churchill; Roosevelt’s top advisor, Harry Hopkins; and General George Marshall, the U.S. Army Chief of Staff. The Americans were intrigued by the idea and Marshall invited Mountbatten and Pyke to fly to the U.S. to further explore Pyke’s ideas with his staff.

Mountbatten introduced Pyke to General Marshall’s Assistant Chief of Staff, Major General Eisenhower, who assigned thirty-five year old Lt. Colonel Robert T. Frederick to study Pyke’s proposed “Plough Project”. Frederick graduated from West Point in 1928 and had served in the Coastal Artillery. He had also attended Command and General Staff School and in August 1939 was assigned to the War Plans Division of the War Department General Staff under Eisenhower.

Pyke was noted for envisioning military schemes in broad strokes but not for attention to practical details. Frederick learned to his surprise:

- No study had been made of how the assault force would be transported to Norway, whether by air (parachute or glider) or by sea.
- Pyke could provide little information regarding the proposed targets to be assaulted. For example, Pyke had assembled limited information on projected weather conditions and terrain at various potential targets, the disposition and numbers of German forces guarding the targets, or how the objectives would be attacked and destroyed and the size and composition of attacking forces required.
- Nor had Pyke addressed how these forces would be resupplied with food, ammunition and explosives, how wounded would be cared for or extracted, and, most important, how the forces could be ultimately brought out of Norway when the missions were complete.

Frederick consulted two Norwegian Army colonels stationed in the U.S. and they both considered the proposed concept infeasible. Sea landings of men and machines would be clearly be impractical given the rugged Norwegian coast and vulnerability to naval or air attack. The colonels saw no way that the commandos and their snow machines could be safely landed by air given the darkness, rugged terrain, winter weather, and the distance between reasonable drop zones and their likely targets in mountainous locations. These hazards would also preclude the use of gliders to deliver the heavy snow machines thus dictating a parachute assault with all its inherent limitations.

In sum, Fredericks concluded that Project Plough was essentially a suicide mission that was unlikely to achieve its objectives and should not be pursued as proposed. Frederick suggested, as an alternative to Pyke's plan, that the demolition targets might better be accomplished by using small teams of well-trained Norwegian saboteurs who knew the country and the language (which was ultimately the successful course that was followed for destroying the Vemork hydro plant). Pyke dismissed that alternative out of hand.

Eisenhower was not pleased by Frederick's recommendation against the project. He told Frederick that he did not understand the situation: Churchill, Mountbatten, Roosevelt, and Marshall were all behind the project and it would therefore proceed. Furthermore, since Frederick had already thoroughly studied

the project and was aware of its weaknesses, he would be in charge of implementing it.

While Frederick clearly was a “can do” officer and not faint of heart, but he had more than a few challenges to overcome, including:

- Preparation of personnel plans for necessary combat and support personnel, including distribution of the appropriate ranks and specialties needed;
- Arranging for the design and manufacture of a tracked snow machine that would meet necessary performance criteria and was capable of being parachuted from existing, available aircraft, for delivery within six to eight months;
- Locating an appropriate training base suitable for winter warfare training and constructing appropriate training facilities, with housing and support services for 1,500 to 2,000 men and providing all necessary weapons and supplies;
- Arranging for qualified personnel for instruction in parachuting, cross country skiing, mountain climbing, winter survival techniques, advanced weapons training (including enemy weapons), hand-to-hand combat, demolition and explosives, and other basic small unit combat tactics.
- Arranging for use of sufficient C-47 cargo aircraft, pilots and mechanics to train all personnel in combat parachute techniques and delivery of war material and vehicles on site at the selected training base.
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*Robert T. Frederick, after promotion to Brigadier General*

Vice Admiral Mountbatten proposed that the project would be enhanced by the inclusion of Canadian infantry forces, presumably because of their greater experience in operating in wintertime conditions. Mountbatten, Frederick, and Pyke traveled by rail to Ottawa to discuss the project and enlist Canadian military support The Canadian government agreed to provide approximately 700 officers and enlisted troops for the project. Mountbatten and Frederick had originally hoped to include several hundred Norwegian troops, as well. However, of the Norwegian government-in-exile in Britain said they could not spare the number of troops requested because of already planned commando operations in Norway. They did, however, agree to provide several experienced ski troops to act as instructors for the new unit in downhill and cross country skiing.

Frederick recruited several experienced U.S. Army officers to assist him with the planning and administrative activities to get the project underway, all of which needed to commence simultaneously. Posters were distributed at American and Canadian bases which called for:"…single men between the ages of 21 and 35 who had completed three years or more grammar school within the occupational range of lumberjacks, forest rangers, hunters, north woodsmen, game wardens, prospectors,

and explorers. These men would need to fight and operate in extreme winter conditions and be parachute qualified."

Recruiting teams toured several U.S. army posts looking for suitable candidates. Due to the secrecy of the mission, recruits were told that they had been selected for a new parachute unit. Many soldiers did not know where they were when they arrived in Helena for training, because the train windows were covered for their trip to insure secrecy.

The combat portion of the Force was to be made up of three regiments. Each regiment would be led by a lieutenant colonel and 32 officers and have a force of 385 men. The regiments were divided into two battalions with three companies in each battalion and three platoons in each company. Each platoon would be split into two sections. Canadian soldiers would be fully integrated within the unit structure rather than being separated by nationality in order to promote cohesiveness among the men. New insignia were developed for the unit and drill practices were modified to mesh U.S. and Canadian commands.

Frederick also had to turn his attention to the snow machine envisioned by Pyke to give the commando force mobility in the northern Norwegian snow country, particularly since the original plan for the force was to be inserted in Norway by mid-December 1942. The Canadian-American working group identified all the currently available snow vehicles and quickly determined a custom designed machine would need to be manufactured. The group determined that the machine would have to be tracked and amphibious which Pyke objected to. The Studebaker Company was willing to work with the project to design and build the necessary vehicle within six months.

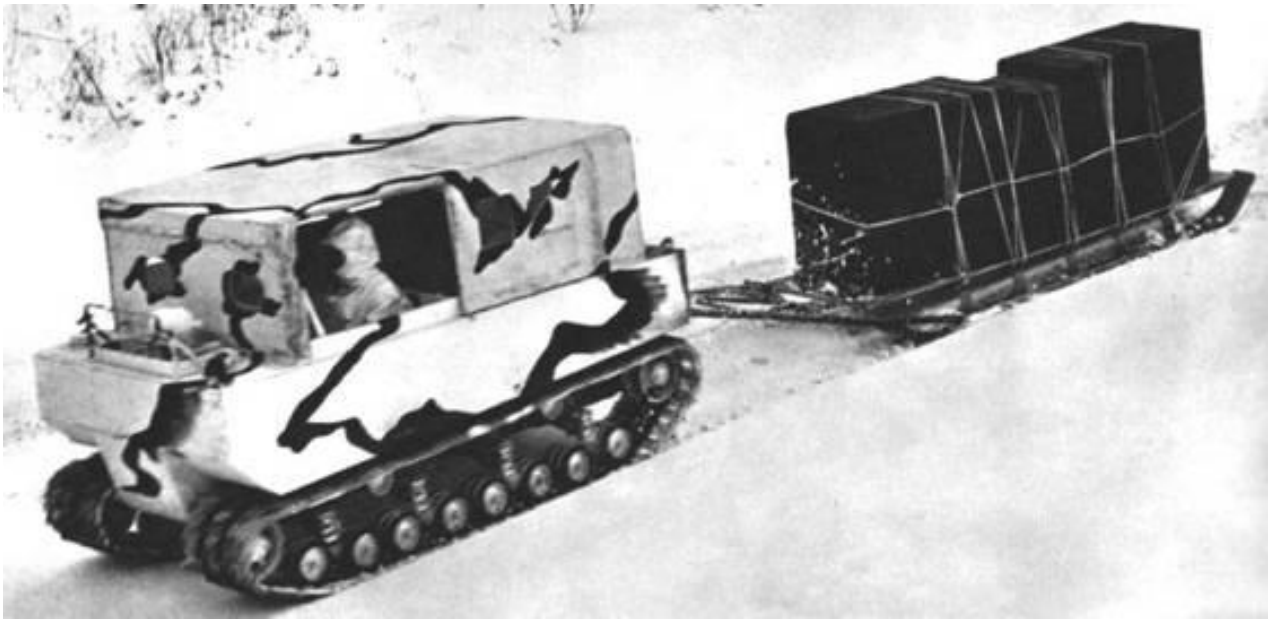
By mid-July, both the Americans and the Canadians had enough of Pyke's meddling with the design and testing of the snow vehicle. According to Saul David's *The Force,* General Marshall asked Frederick if Pyke was essential to the project. Frederick said he was not and, to everyone's relief, Marshall said he would request that he be returned to Britain. In early August Mountbatten had him recalled and taken off the project.

General Eisenhower concluded that the machine would have to be delivered by parachute. Aircraft availability was the obvious determinant for the vehicle's size and weight. Existing American gliders were too short and the only potential American aircraft available was the B-24 Liberator which would not even be manufactured until August 1942 The only other alternative American aircraft was the DC-54A, only fifteen of which would be ready by December. Frederick's staff projected that 500 aircraft

would be needed for transporting men, material and vehicles. With the means of air transport still unresolved, Frederick had to forge ahead. Eisenhower thought that whether or not the Plough Project proceeded, the vehicle would have utility for the Army and recommended ordering 860 machines.

Meanwhile, by August, Studebaker had the first models of the snow machine (the T-15 Weasel, later designated the M29) ready for field testing in the snow fields at the Columbia glaciers near Alberta's Banff and Jasper National Parks. Studebaker's goal was to have 600 machines ready by December, 1942.

Personnel planning for the new unit, dubbed the "First Special Service Force" (FSSF) by Colonel Frederick, continued full speed. It was decided that the full complement should be one-third over strength, to allow for training injuries or soldiers dismissed for failure to meet standards. Two of Frederick's staff officers went to Fort Benning, Georgia and recruited 55

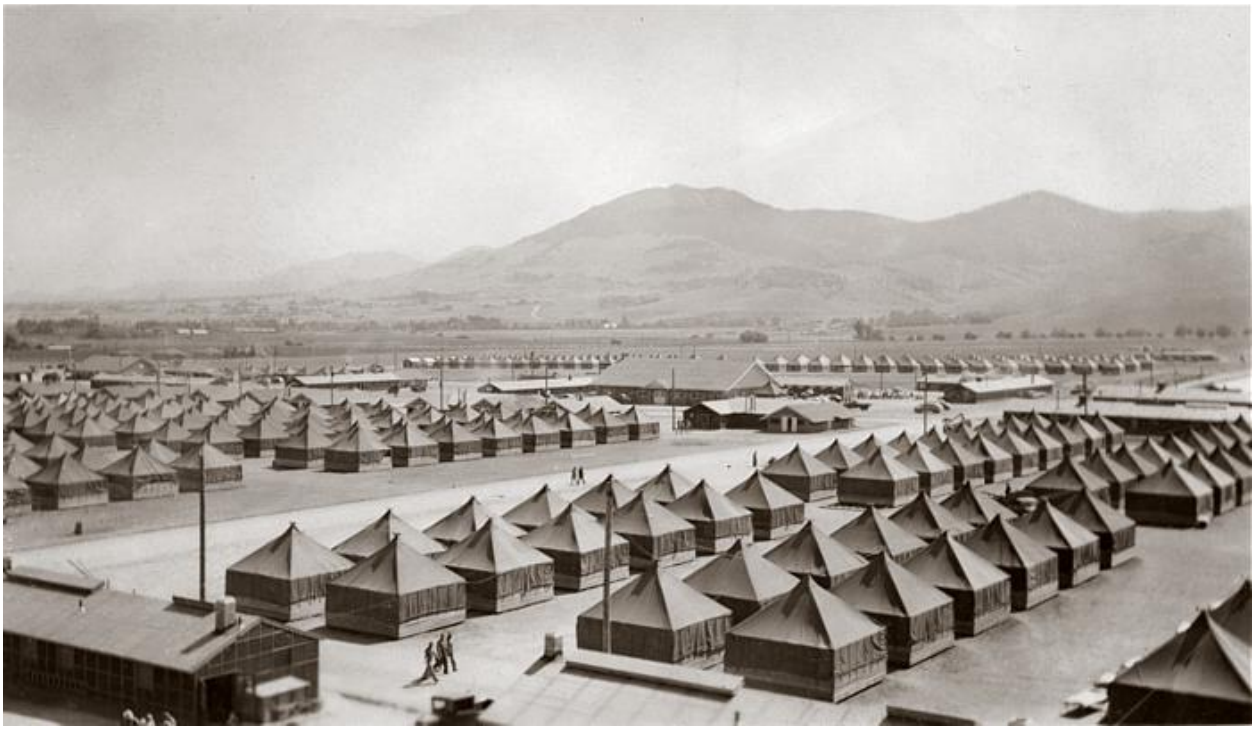


*The T-15 Weasel towing supplies on a sled during testing.*

new second lieutenants the day before they graduated from Officer Candidate School and 15 more new engineering officers from Fort Belvoir, Virginia. The FSSF was authorized a total of 180 officers and 2200 men, including the Canadian contingent and service and support staff.

After considering alternatives, on July 4 1942, Frederick decided on Fort William Henry Harrison, just west of Helena, Montana as the new base for the FSSF. Established in 1892, the 2,000 acre fort was isolated enough in rural Montana to promote secrecy; while close to forested mountains along the Continental Divide which were certain to have snow for alpine training. The Fort itself was on a level plain with ample room for housing 2,000 men, warehouses, weapons training areas, a railroad spur, a landing strip for C-47's, and open space for parachute training. Existing buildings, however, were in poor repair; the post was principally used only for summer training by the Montana National Guard.

Work to refurbish the little used post began in mid-July when roughly 250 construction workers, engineers, and equipment arrived. Soon Helena residents were remarking on the billowing clouds of dust that were rising to the west, as graders leveled areas for new barracks, mess halls, latrines, administrative buildings, the railroad spur, the landing strip for C-47 cargo planes, a warehouse building for packing parachutes with a tall tower for drying them, and even a movie theater.



*Initially, the men were housed in canvas wall tents with wooden floors while carpenters built wood barracks better suited to cold and windy Montana winters.*

The training was tough and as comprehensive as any offered in either army. Training was dawn to dusk with evening lectures. Men got a half day off on Saturdays

and Sunday was free. There was no time to waste as they were expected to go into combat during mid-December 1942, less than six months away.

At Fort Benning, the physical training and lectures for an airborne soldier cover a minimum four weeks before anyone goes out a plane door. Benning also has very tall jump towers that allow the trainees to drop in parachute harnesses to help them adjust to the experience of falling from

extreme heights, which was not available at Fort Harrison. Carpenters built the tallest for practicing jumping from planes.

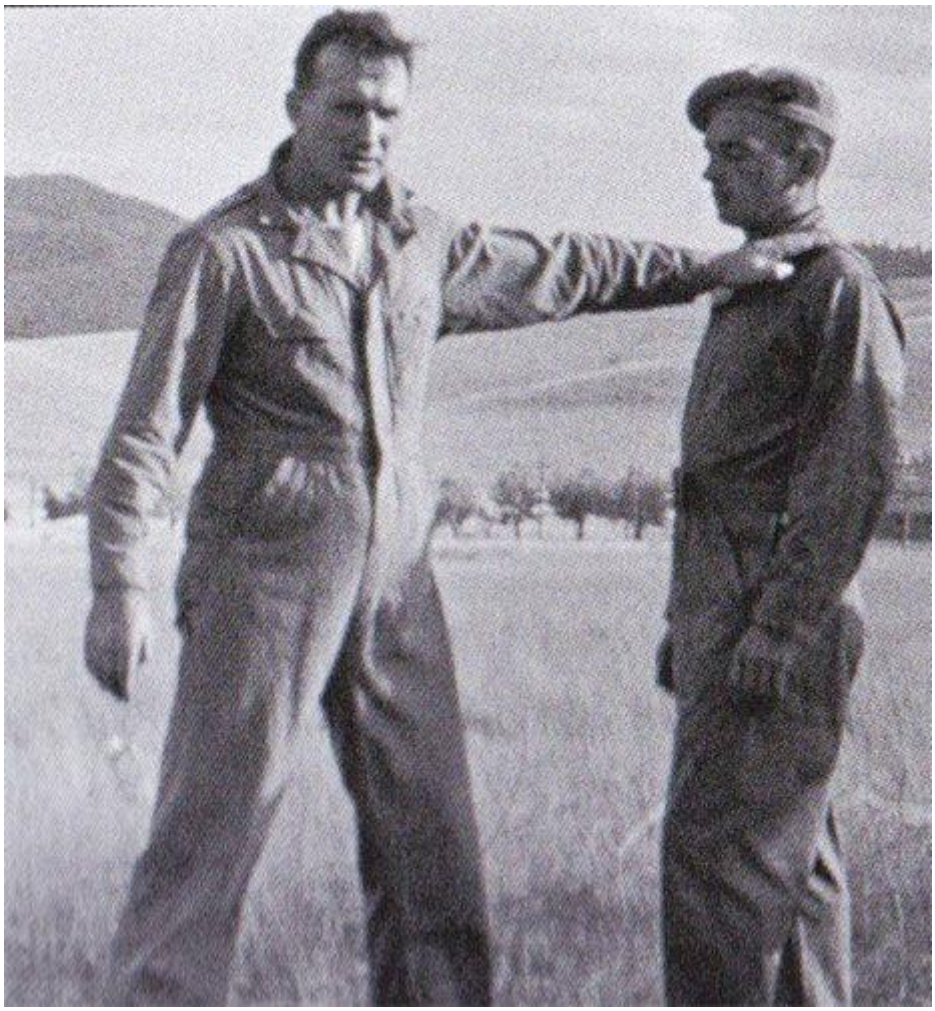
The parachute training was reflective of this compressed schedule. According to the book, *Super Commandos*, the Force photo unit filmed some of the parachute jumps to help evaluate the reason for so many injuries. The footage confirmed that the parachutist would typically land with one foot hitting the ground slightly before the other, putting all of his weight on the unsupported ankle or leg. Some of the Canadian troops had received parachute training in England where it was standard practice for British parachute troops to jump with bent knees and ankles together. Adopting this change in technique reduced the number of injuries from about 25 percent to approximately 1 percent. The new approach also increased the confidence of the men and reduced the number of refusals to jump at the airplane door. According to the book, *Snow Plough,* the Force shared what they had learned with the Fort Benning Parachute School which subsequently changed its jump technique, as well.

*FSSF doctors prepare for their first parachute jump from a C-47 cargo plane.*

The “Forcemen” of the FSSF made their first parachute jump with minimal instruction and their second jump, a few days later, was their last jump. As long as they didn’t freeze in the door they were parachute qualified. If they refused to jump, they got one more chance. If they did not go out the door, they were shipped back to their original unit. (In contrast, paratroops at Fort Benning made five jumps before they were considered parachute qualified.) The lessons learned with the initial jump training were costly for the Force: before they changed the jump technique, 175 soldiers were cut for refusing to jump and another 80 were eliminated by injuries.

The standards for their arduous physical training were equally strict: it included calisthenics, an obstacle course, timed mile runs, long distance hikes with full packs and gear, hand to hand combat training, marksmanship, and U.S. and German weapons handling – if they didn’t measure up, they were sent back to their unit. A mountain due west of Fort Harrison, was dubbed ‘Muscle Mountain” by the men, and used for uphill “torture runs” with and without full gear or sometimes carrying water-filled five gallon “Jerry” cans between two men. Frederick demanded peak physical conditioning for all his men, officers included, because he knew the Force would need it under combat conditions. During August and September he focused on weapons training, hand to hand combat, demolition and explosive use, and small unit tactics.

Frederick made sure that the soldiers had the best instructors available in every aspect of combat training. Frederick arranged for the loan of an Irish operative from the U.S. Office of Strategic Services (O.S.S.), Captain Dermot “Pat” O’Neill. O’Neill had served several years as an Inspector with the Shanghai police and as Head of Security with the British Legation in Tokyo. O’Neill had become an expert with Chinese and Japanese forms of unarmed fighting and with knives. O’Neill was a master of a lethal formof close-quarters hand-to-hand attack called “Defendu” that he had developed with William Fairbairn and Eric Sykes in China, fellow members of the Shanghai police. The abbreviated “O’Neill Method of Close Combat” taught to the Forcemen included brutal kicks to the groin, eye gouges, and punches to the throat. O’Neill told his trainees that he wasn’t there to teach them how to hurt the enemy - he was there to teach them how to kill them.



Captain Dermot “Pat” O’Neill teaching his close combat techniques.

Frederick ordered combat knives for the Force from the Case Knife Company, the V-42 Stiletto, which was based on the Fairbairn-Sykes Fighting Knife used by British Marine Commandos. Fairbairn and Sykes were hand to hand combat instructors at the commando training facility in Scotland where they also trained U.S. Army Rangers and OSS agents. The knife was designed for stealthy surprise attack with a slender seven inch blade that could penetrate through a thick wool winter German overcoat and still enter a ribcage. The FSSF V-42 was distinguished by the presence of a small, scored indentation for the soldier's thumb, to aid in orienting the knife horizontally for thrusting between the ribs (a Frederick innovation). FSSF Major Orval Baldwin designed a spike on the end of the pommel for striking the victim's temple, referred to a "skull crusher." The hilt was covered with leather washers to enhance the grip.

*The V-42 Combat Stiletto with extra-long sheath*

Every Forceman was issued the V-42, in addition to their rifle bayonet, and trained by O'Neill with the stiletto, often uncovered. Frederick ordered thigh-length reversible parkas (cotton olive drab on one side and white wool for snow conditions on the other) for his men. The V-42 horsehide sheath was extra-long to allow the soldier to reach the knife handle at the bottom of the parka. The sharp pointed end of the V-42 tended to work its way through the end of the scabbard. To protect their legs the men riveted a thin copper or tin plate to the end to prevent this.

O'Neill was so proficient as a hand-to-hand combat instructor that Frederick arranged to have him made a permanent addition to the Force as a Captain to train new recruits and to lead missions during combat

Frederick recruited two demolition experts from Fort Belvoir, Virginia to teach the explosives course including Lt. Dan Ryan, inventor of the new plastic explosive, called RS (for Ryan Special) which was essentially similar to modern C-4. Frederick had secured a large quantity of RS to train with and his men took to this new explosive with enthusiasm. Frederick wanted every Forceman to know how to use the various explosives in case they had to detonate a charge on their own. The RS could be molded and wrapped to a target with primer cord or packed in bundles of eight in a canvas bag or "satchel charge" and ignited with a pull cord.

The Force got permission to blow up abandoned mines and mining equipment, old bridges and buildings. According to the book, *We Only Move Forward*, in two cases they blew up the wrong mine and the wrong highway bridge (a 40 foot concrete bridge near Butte). According *to The Black Devil Brigad*e, they blew up a 450 foot iron truss railroad bridge over the Kootenai River near Libby (300 miles northwest of Helena); concerned that they didn't have enough explosives, they added a bit too much and broke windows in main street businesses three miles away. Many windows in Helena were also rattled during the explosives training.

Frederick made sure that the men had ample training with both American and German weapons. American firearms included John Browning's Model 1911 Colt .45 caliber semi-automatic pistol, the 20 round clip-fed .30 caliber Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR), the M-1 .30 caliber short carbine, and the Thompson .45 caliber M1A1 submachine gun. The Canadian soldiers had been using the Lee-Enfield .303 caliber bolt action rifle with a ten-shot clip, the standard British infantry rifle since WW I. They immediately fell in love with the U.S. M-1 Garand 30-06 caliber semi-automatic with its eight shot clip-fed magazine. The Garand allowed the shooter to fire repeated rounds on target without losing the sight picture, unlike the loss of the sight picture when injecting a new round with the bolt action .303. The men were also trained on the .30 caliber Browning M-1919 A4 water-cooled machine gun, the M2 60 mm mortar, M1-A1 anti-tank rocket (the "Bazooka"), and flame throwers.

The men found the BAR too heavy to carry with its ammunition, particularly for the mountain fighting the Force was training for. Frederick bartered with the U.S. Marine Corps, trading some surplus RS plastic explosive for 322 of their M-1941 Johnson Light Machine Guns. Frederick encouraged the men to shoot as often as they would

like. On their days off they could check out a rifle and head to the firing range and shoot up as much ammunition as they wanted.

They were also introduced to German weapons including the 8 mm (7.92 x 57mm) Mauser bolt-action rifle (also used in WW I), the 9 mm MP-40 "Schmeisser" submachine gun, and the 8 mm MG-42 machine gun which had a fearsome rate of fire which was twice that of the American machine guns.

In early August 1942, American and Canadian officers closely involved with the development of the FSSF were stunned to learn that newspapers in Winnipeg and Ottawa announced in front page articles *"Canada, U.S. Organize Hard-Hitting Joint Commando Unit."* It seems that Churchill and Roosevelt had decided to use the creation of the supposedly top secret Force to divert German attention from the coming invasion of French North Africa through Operation Torch. The American and Canadian press releases even described the location of the training near Helena, Montana and named its commanding officers. The articles detailed the unit's training in parachute attacks, mountain fighting, and even the unit's name, First Special Service Force. Whether intentional or not, the Canadian article was also reprinted in an army newspaper in England, assuring that German intelligence would not miss it. Apparently, Washington and London saw Project Plough as a useful ploy to create the impression with the Germans that an invasion of Norway was imminent.

The second phase of training during October and November was devoted to larger unit training involving companies and regiments in war games, often conducted at night. The three Force regiments were very competitive with one another during these exercises. A frequent conditioning hike was the 36 miles round trip to the old mining town of Marysville northwest of Fort Harrison just below the Continental Divide. The soldiers would often carry two walking sticks to get them used to the rhythm of carrying ski poles in preparation for the snow skiing training that would soon be underway. Another conditioning trek involved a two-day overnight hike to the Sieben Livestock Company Ranch 45 miles northeast of Helena which involved crossing the Missouri River at the old York iron truss bridge and hiking over the Big Belt Mountains with significant changes in elevation up and down steep mountain trails.

*A FSSF regiment on a two-day overnight hike on the Sieben Livestock Company Ranch 45 miles northeast of Helena near Adel. Pictured on the return leg back to Fort Harrison as the unit hikes west up the Middle Creek Basin.*

The original concept of the Force had been to use it for a one-time operation in Norway. Later on, after the Force was instead committed to long-term combat operations in Italy, Frederick regretted having been so strict with the training of his troops when he lost highly trained men he could not replace. He said he had gotten rid of men who would have made excellent soldiers, if he had been more flexible and given them a second chance.

In early September 1942, Frederick flew to England to finalize the final details for transporting the Force to Britain and on to Norway for Operation Plough. Winter was fast approaching and there were critical questions that needed to be resolved as soon as possible.

As is often said, timing is everything. Frederick arrived in Britain on the heels of the disastrous raid on Dieppe on August 19, 1942. The Allied amphibious attack on the German-occupied French Channel port involved over 6,000 infantry, mostly Canadian, supported by tanks. Royal Air Force (RAF) fighters provided air cover. The raid was intended to test the feasibility of an amphibious landing to destroy German coastal defenses and key facilities. The raid was supposed to boost Allied morale and demonstrate the commitment of the Allies to support the Soviet Union. A small contingent of U.S. Army Rangers accompanied the raiders.

However, the RAF and naval gun support was insufficient to enable the ground forces to achieve their objectives; the tanks were trapped on the beach by a concrete seawall and the infantry was pinned down by heavy German machine gun fire. After several hours, heavy casualties forced the surviving forces to withdraw. The operation was a major embarrassment to the British and Mountbatten, in particular, who had supervised planning for the raid.

By the end of the day, of the 6,086 men who landed, 3,623 had been killed, wounded or captured, 3,500 of them Canadian soldiers. The RAF lost 106 aircraft to a heavy Luftwaffe counter attack (at least 32 to anti-aircraft fire or accidents), against 48 German aircraft losses. The Royal Navy lost a destroyer and 33 landing craft. After the debacle at Dieppe, there was little enthusiasm for operations considered difficult and high risk, which included Operation Plough.

In the fall of 1942, it was clear that British airlift assistance was the only option for transporting the FSSF to Norway. The British Lancaster bomber was the only plane with a bomb bay large enough to drop the Weasel snow machine. Frederick estimated that it would require 750 bombers and cargo aircraft to transport the Force personnel, equipment and supplies, and their Weasels, The Royal Air Force responded that their entire force of Lancasters was only 600 planes, which were all fully committed to the strategic bombing of German industrial and military targets.

Frederick was also told that the Norwegian government-in-exile was not enthusiastic about destroying the hydroelectric plants that power half of Norway, including heating homes in winter. King Haakon VII was also concerned about the potential for reprisals against the civilian population, a frequent response by the Germans to sabotage actions. Furthermore, they told Frederick that the destroying the Vemork hydro plant was now going to be a British/Norwegian operation under Combined Operations Command. Frederick met with Mountbatten’s staff and was told that there was no longer a need for the operation. Operation Plough was effectively dead.

The Force needed a new job. Churchill still saw value in maintaining the Force to make the Germans think an invasion of Norway was a possibility. Disbanding the Force would clearly signal to the Germans that an attack on Norway was no longer planned and might free up Wehrmacht combat forces to send to the Russian Front. In addition, the American Torch landings in French North Africa were now only weeks away and the Allies wanted to keep German intelligence distracted. After their terrible losses in the Dieppe raid some in the Canadian Army were very interested in getting their now highly trained men back from the Force. They discussed the option of moving their men to Britain, as a new Canadian parachute brigade

The idea of disbanding the unit was of great concern to both Churchill and the Americans. Churchill wanted the FSSF to keep on with their winter training to preserve the option of a Norwegian invasion. He reasoned that if the unit was disbanded it would preclude the option of ever pursuing a flanking attack on the Germans in Norway. He did not want all their winter training thrown away. Further, it would be great embarrassment to eliminate this now highly publicized, uniquely North American fighting unit. General Marshall pleaded with the Canadians not to withdraw their soldiers from the Force.

The British, Canadians and Americans had to consider the options available to them These included sending them to New Guinea (quickly dismissed), combining them with the 10th Mountain Division being formed in Colorado, using them as “Ranger” troops in Sicily or Sardinia following the Torch landings, dropping them in the Caucasus Mountains, or as amphibious assault troops to drive the Japanese off Kiska Island in the Aleutians.

Because Churchill still opposed disbanding the Force in order to preserve the option for a possible Norwegian operation over the winter of 1943, the decision was made to designate the unit for a winter or mountaineering warfare specialty and to have them complete their winter training. Following that, the Force would receive amphibious landing training to prepare them for possible use in the Mediterranean for Sicily, Sardinia, or Italy.

Thirty-one M-29 Weasels were shipped to Montana from their field tests in the Banff-Jasper area of Alberta for winter training in Montana. Frederick arranged for winter and mountaineering training by an expert climber, Lt. “Link” Washburn from *National Geographic* who trained the men in mountain climbing and equipment, winter camping and clothing, and survival in extreme cold.


*Forcemen practice their mountaineering training on Montana mountains.*

Frederick also secured some experienced Norwegian ski troops to instruct the Force in cross country and downhill skiing. Units took turns receiving two weeks of ski training and were housed in boxcars with stoves at the Blossburg railroad siding on the west side of the Continental Divide west of Fort Harrison.

*By February 1943, 99 percent of the Force were trained and rated competent skiers by Norwegian Army standards.*

The Japanese had landed amphibious forces on the Aleutian islands of Attu and Kiska as a diversionary feint preceding the attack on Midway Island and the U.S. aircraft carrier fleet in June 1942. The two islands were

the westernmost of the Aleutians and the only North American territory held by the Japanese during World War II. Used principally as bases for flying boat and submarine patrols, they were of little strategic value except for offering Japan early warning of any major naval attack on the home islands from the north. However, the presence of the Japanese did alarm residents of Alaska, British Columbia, and the West Coast who feared long-range bomber attacks from the Aleutians. In August 1943, the FSSF finally had a combat assignment, becoming part of a U.S. and Canadian effort to drive the Japanese from the Aleutians.

In May 1943, the 7th U.S. Army Division made amphibious landings on Attu which was occupied by 2.500 Japanese. Despite heavy naval bombardments, the American encountered stiff resistance from the Japanese who were protected by entrenched defenses. After two weeks of heavy fighting the Americans pushed the Japanese from their initial positions. With no hope of rescue or additional support, the Japanese launched a frontal "Banzai" charge against frontline American positions over running the G.I.'s with bloody hand to hand combat. The fierce fighting continued until almost all the Japanese were killed. In 19 days of fighting, 549 Americans were killed and over 1,200 wounded. The Japanese lost 2,351; only 28 were taken prisoner.

After this experience, the Americans expected a similar costly fight at Kiska which was occupied by an estimated 6,000 Japanese, almost three times the force on Attu. In anticipation of another bloody fight with an even larger Japanese force, the U.S. Navy and Army assembled a force totaling over 34,000 soldiers, sailors and airmen for Operation Cottage, the assault on August 15, 1943. During July, in preparation for the attack, the 11th Air Force dropped 424 tons of bombs on Kiska while the Navy fired barrages totaling 330 tons of shells at the island.

The First Regiment of the Force was to lead the assault using rubber rafts before dawn five hours before the main invasion force, which included Canadian forces and elements of the 10th Mountain Division. The Forcemen paddled for shore in thick fog against two to three foot waves and a strong tide and wind. They headed for their designated objectives as best they could; for a brief period a bright moon came out from behind heavy clouds exposing the loaded rafts and unnerving the assault troops.

After the bloody fight for Attu, Force casualties were expected to be heavy, however, much to their relief they found that Japanese destroyers had hurriedly evacuated the island two weeks before under the cover of heavy fog. After the loss of Attu, the Japanese decided that their position on Kiska was untenable and retreat was

the only option. Cooked food was still on mess hall tables and military equipment and supplies were abandoned. Even though the enemy troops had deserted the island, total American and Canadian casualties were over 300 soldiers, including 32 killed by friendly fire accidents caused by confusion in thick fog, along with injuries from booby traps and mines left by the Japanese, vehicle accidents, and frostbite.

FSSF M-29 Weasels on the landing beach at Kiska in the Aleutian Islands.

There were missed clues to spotting the Japanese evacuation from Kiska. Aerial reconnaissance had encountered no anti-aircraft fire in the two weeks just prior to the assault and signal units had monitored no Japanese radio traffic from the island. In addition, aerial photography, when possible on the fog shrouded island, indicated little if any activity near the Japanese base and harbor. Although Operation Cottage was an embarrassing fiasco, there were few complaints from members of the Force who had steeled themselves to expect a very tough fight.

On August 17th, Frederick received a radiogram from Admiral Nimitiz at Pearl Harbor: "Highest authority directs that you return First Special Service Force to San Francisco without delay." Frederick finally received the orders that he had been waiting for: General Eisenhower had requested that the Force be assigned to Lt. General Mark Clark's Fifth Army in Italy.

The German commander in Italy, Field Marshal Kesselring, was conducting a brilliant delaying campaign on the Italian peninsula, holding defensive positions along the Winter Line which ran across the crest of the Apennine Mountains. The German positions, manned by tough, experienced panzer grenadiers from the Herman Goering Division were using artillery dug in on mountain tops to block the Allied advance north up the Liri Valley on the road to Rome. Repeated Allied attacks on these seemingly impregnable positions had been beaten back with heavy losses. The First Special Service Force was finally getting its chance to prove itself.

Note: The story of the Force's efforts to accomplish this challenging mission in Italy is described in a separate article on this website*, The First Special Service Force Assault on Mount La Difensa*.


*The First Special Service Force farewell parade down Main Street (Last Chance Gulch) in Helena on April 6, 1943 reviewed by the Governor and local dignitaries before departing Montana.*

# Afterword

On November 19, 1942, the British attempted a commando operation to destroy the Vemork hydro plant using two Halifax bombers, each towing a glider carrying a team of sappers (demolition specialists). One bomber crashed into mountains in heavy cloud cover in icing conditions along with its glider, lost when the tow line broke. The surviving commandos were captured, tortured, and executed by the Germans under Hitler's "Commando Decree" which required that all commandos and partisans be executed rather than treated as prisoners of war. The second bomber returned to Scotland, however, its glider and all of its commandos were lost over the North Sea when the tow line parted. A total of 46 soldiers and pilots were killed in this operation.

In February 1943, Operation 'Gunnerside' parachuted six British-trained Norwegian saboteurs into the area near Rjukan east of Vemork to join forces with four local Norwegian agents. (The alternative to Project Plough originally recommended by Robert Frederick.) They successfully attacked the Vemork hydroelectric facility, on the night of 28 February-1 March 1943, after enduring brutally cold weather conditions skiing to the target and climbing ice covered sheer cliffs to reach the electrolysis plant. The demolitions destroyed 500 kg of heavy water and the heavy-water processing section of the plant.

On 20 February 1944, explosives placed by Norwegian resistance agents sank the ferry "D/F Hydro" in a deep fjord that was taking a shipment of the remaining heavy water supplies to Germany. As a result, the Germans canceled plans to develop an atomic weapon and instead focused on V-1 rocket development to attack Britain and Allied forces.

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