

# THE FIRST SPECIAL SERVICE FORCE ASSAULT ON MOUNT LA DIFENSA

By Dave Cole, Mt. Military Museum Volunteer

## Introduction

Travelers driving on Interstate 15 north of Helena will pass a red highway sign in the shape of an Indian arrow-head labeled the "First Special Service Force Memorial Highway." Few people probably have any idea what the sign is referring to. It represents the shoulder insignia worn by members of the First Special Service Force.

The FSSF, also known as "The Devil's Brigade" or "The Black Devils," operated as a joint World War II American-Canadian commando unit. The Force was formed at Fort William Henry Harrison, west of Helena, in the spring of 1942 and trained there for a year. Gen. Eisenhower assigned a member of his staff, Lt. Col. Robert T. Frederick, to form, train, and lead the unit, which he did through most of its combat missions. The Force consisted of roughly 1,800 servicemen who were trained in stealth tactics, hand-to-hand combat, skiing, mountain climbing, and cross-trained in a variety of American and German standard and non-standard or limited-issue weapons.

As originally conceived of by Winston Churchill and Lord Mountbatten, the chief of British commando units, the Force was to be parachuted into Norway to blow up hydroelectric dams and generally create confusion and chaos, while tying down as many German troops as possible. Fortunately, cooler heads prevailed, and Allied planners concluded that the plan would be a monumental waste of unique and superbly trained commando troops for what was essentially a suicide mission. Eisenhower decided that the mountaineering skills of the Force were just what was needed for the tough fighting in the Italian Apennine Mountains, which run the length of the Italian Peninsula, where tough German troops were stubbornly resisting American and British efforts to advance north toward Rome.

## Background

From the time Allied troops landed on the Italian mainland at Salerno on Sept. 1, 1943, the two-year Italian Campaign in World War II was an unforgiving and brutal effort. The fighting took place in rugged mountains that gave the terrain and elevation advantage to the German defenders. The Allied gains were often measured in yards and casualties. In November 1943, the Allied advance had ground to a halt at Field Marshal Albert Kesselring's Winter Line which crossed the breadth of Italy from coast to coast about 70 miles south of Rome. Tough German panzergrenadiers and paratroops, some of the best in Europe, fought a defensive battle against Allied efforts to move up the Italian peninsula.

Lt. Gen. Mark Clark, commander of the American 5th Army, knew he had to break through the German line of defense to push the ancient Highway 6 route to Rome, before winter set in. Clark also knew that the Italian geography offered him few alternatives. They had to break through the Mignano Gap to the east of Mount Camino and Mount la Difensa to move up the Liri Valley toward Rome. Clark's plan to break through the German lines was dubbed "Operation Raincoat" which appeared appropriate given the rainy, cold days before and during the attack.



## Mount la Difensa

Looking from north to south, the mountain tops formed a 6-mile-long and 4-mile-wide "L" with Mount Camino the top of the "L," Mount la Difensa the apex of the "L," and Mount la Remetanea the right end of the "L." The steep ridgelines and peaks averaged about 3,000 vertical feet in height. The formidable defenses included interlocking machine gun and mortar positions dug into the rock or in bunkers which made them nearly impervious to artillery fire. The narrow trails and natural approaches through draws were mined and covered by well camouflaged snipers armed with scoped 8 mm Mausers. The German forward observers could call down accurate artillery and mortar fire on attacking forces. If attacked, the panzergrenadiers on one peak or ridge could call for supporting fire from other units on nearby peaks and ridges.

## The German Forces

Battle-hardened German panzergrenadier troops held the high ground referred to as the Camino Hill Mass that commanded the valley floor with artillery from fortified positions. About 400 Germans defended the heights, including troops from the 3rd Battalion, 104th Panzergrenadier Regiment and elements of the 3rd Battalion, 129th Panzergrenadier Regiment. The Germans held the 115th Reconnaissance Battalion in reserve.

The U.S. 3rd Infantry Division attacked la Difensa on Nov. 5, 1943. Already exhausted from months of tough mountain fighting, the 3rd Division troops battled for 10 days to gain ground on the steep slopes and cliffs against fierce German opposition; finally, after sustaining many casualties, they were forced to withdraw. Two other Allied divisions, the U.S. 36th and the British 56th, were thrown at the Camino Hill Mass with similar costly and disappointing results.

## Planning the Attack

The First Special Service Force arrived in Naples on Nov. 19 and was transported north to the staging area. On Nov. 21 the Force moved to the Italian Artillery School barracks previously occupied by the Hermann Goering Panzer Division. Col. Frederick was told that the FSSF, attached to the 36th Division, would be assigned to break the stalemate and take la Difensa on Dec. 3. When that objective was taken, the FSSF would



then push on to drive the Germans off Monte la Remetanea. The X Corps and the 36th Division would assault Mount Camino and Mount Maggiore, respectively. The attacks had to be linked; if only one peak was taken, German gunners on the remaining peaks would rain down artillery and mortar fire on the Allied troops. The Germans had 114 artillery pieces that were capable of covering the objectives of the British troops and the FSSF, not including their highly accurate mortars and the new and deadly Nebelwerfers, the rockets referred to by G.I.'s as "Screaming Meemies."

The FSSF units prepared for battle by unloading their weapons hauled from the freighters and conducting strenuous physical training and target practice to prepare for combat. Troops also received special training on a weapon in common use on the Italian Front: mines. To complicate preparations, the last week of November had almost constant, cold rain. Every man was busy with his own assigned tasks getting ready for the attack.

Meanwhile, Frederick and his commanders conducted their own reconnaissance of Mount la Difensa, including flights in a Piper Cub. Three previous attacks on la Difensa involving much larger forces over 12 days had resulted in many dead and wounded. Frederick knew the Force would have to try a different approach. He came up with an attack plan that required stealth, surprise, and swift, brutal assault to overcome the fortified German positions. La Difensa, as its name suggests, was well designed for defense. Its north face overlooked Highway 6 to Rome; near the top was a cliff 200 feet high with a 70 percent slope. Above the cliff was a series of six ledges that stair-stepped to the summit, each about 30 feet in height. The only weakness in la Difensa's defenses was the very steep slopes on the northeast side; the Germans considered the approach impassable, and it was lightly guarded. This was the route Frederick selected for the Force's attack: a cleft on the north side – if his men could get ropes to the top up the cold, wet rock face.

### Assembling for the Assault

On the afternoon of Dec. 1, all three FSSF regiments, the entire combat echelon, were trucked to the base of the mountain. Mud was knee deep on the approach routes through olive orchards. The 2nd Regiment of the FSSF, some 600 men, was assigned to lead the assault under the command of Canadian Lt. Col. D.D. Williamson. At 4:30 p.m. the

Forcemen of the 2nd Regiment began a difficult 10-mile forced march through mud and driving rain to their jump-off positions until 3:30 a.m. The men settled into the scrub pine cover midway up the slope of la Difensa. The 3rd Regiment under Lt. Col. Edwin Walker was assigned to support Williamson with the 1st Regiment held in reserve. Lower down on the mountain, below the 2nd Regiment, the Forcemen of the 3rd Regiment took cover in a ravine and soon fell asleep.

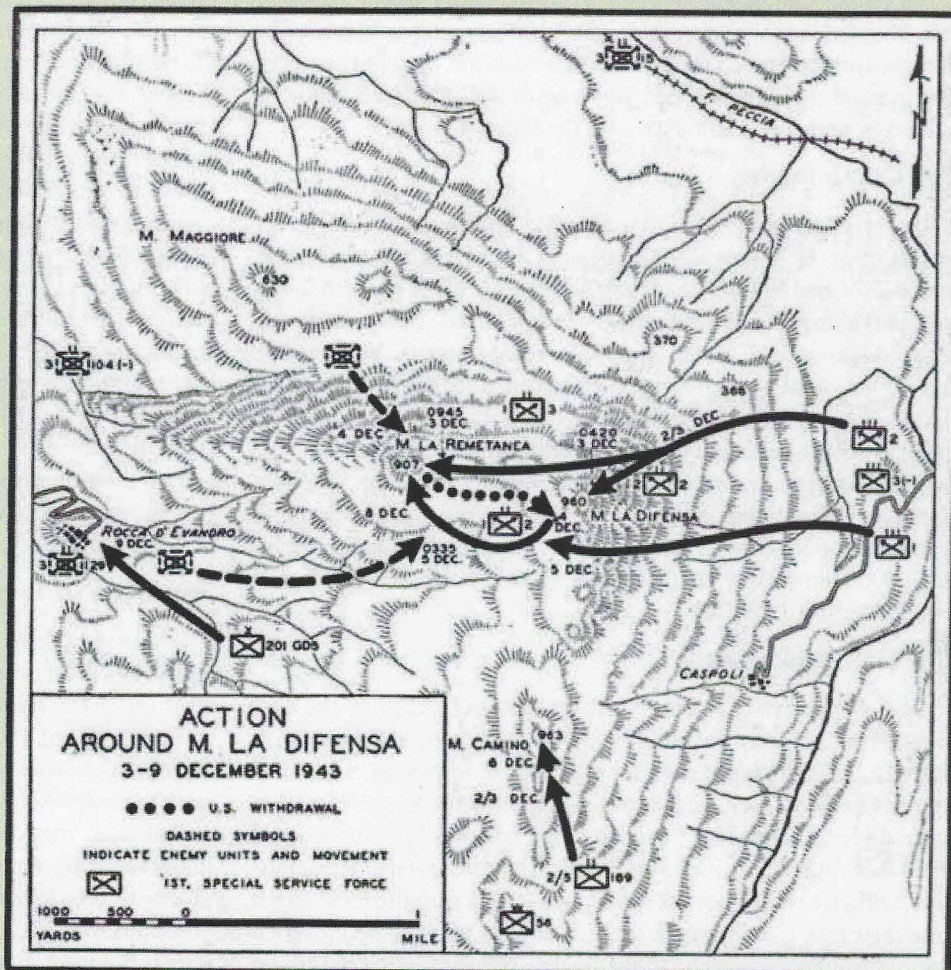
Throughout the day the men were in bright sunlight and minimized their movement as they cooked breakfast on their mountain stoves and tried to find a dry spot to erect their shelter halves. Allied fighter-bombers hit the tops of la Difensa, Camino, Maggiore, and the rear approaches to the peaks with 500 tons of bombs with the heaviest attacks towards Cassino to divert the enemy's attention and disrupt German supply lines. Later the men did last-minute tasks to prepare for combat: sharpening their V-42 combat knives, taping grenades, checking ammunition and weapons. The men ate cold K rations about 4 p.m.

and were told to get ready to move out. Few of the officers had gotten any sleep at all since the day before.

### The Force Moves Out

The 3rd Regiment, designated as reserve, began to move up the ravine from the base of the mountain. The men of the 2nd Regiment initial attack force were told not to fire their weapons before 6 a.m. unless pinned down by enemy fire. If Germans were encountered before then, they were to use their V-42 knives or grenades only. (Automatic weapons fire could mean only one thing to the Germans: the enemy was behind them.) Cloud cover moved in before sunset on Dec. 2.

Air and artillery attacks began about 10 p.m. in an effort to pummel the dug-in enemy positions. Some 900 guns fired high explosive, white phosphorous and smoke shells in the largest artillery barrage delivered to date in the Italian campaign. About 325 artillery pieces targeted la Difensa alone. The batteries were firing four to six guns simultaneously. Allied guns fired 64,000 rounds total at the



Disposition of forces on Mounts la Difensa, la Remetanea, and Camino





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mountain complex; in one hour alone, 22,000 rounds hammered the Camino Hill Mass. This was the heaviest concentration of artillery in the Italian Campaign. Participants in the battle said it appeared that “the whole mountain was on fire.” Unfortunately, although GIs thought that no one could live through such fire they learned later that most of the Germans had survived in well protected bunkers, pill boxes, and even natural caves in the limestone rock.

### The Climb Begins

Under cover of the artillery fire, the 2nd Regiment began its assault at about 6 p.m. By 10:30 p.m. the regiment had reached the base of the la Difensa crown, when fog began to form along with darkening clouds. The artillery fire began to slack off, and the night was now pitch black. Two of unit's best scouts, Van Ausdale and Tom Fenton, both former prospectors and miners as well as skilled mountaineers, made the initial climb up the rain-slicked face to the top using hand and foot holds only. After reaching the summit they each dropped a rope to the Forcemen waiting below. The men climbed in double file in order of company: 1, 2, and 3. Carrying at least 100-pound loads of equipment, weapons, and ammunition each, 600 men silently climbed to the top of the ropes. After that, it was 350 yards to the crest.

### “All Hell Broke Loose”

By 3 a.m., three companies were on top, undetected by the Germans. First Company was to be on the left with Second Company on the right. As they prepared their final skirmish formation, some men tripped over loose rock, which alerted the Germans. As one Forcemen said, “All hell broke loose.” Instantly the night was lit up by red and green flares and automatic weapons fire. The panzergrenadiers frantically worked to reposition their weapons to deal with the FSSF attack from their rear. Clearly, the element of surprise planned by Frederick was critical. Poor visibility added to the confusion – it was still an hour before sunrise combined with low clouds and fog.



Forceman firing an M-19 Johnson light machine gun on Mount la Difensa

The Forcemen advanced in small units through fog and clouds to conduct fire and maneuver assaults on the German emplacements, one after another. Light machine guns moved in short jumps to provide cover for the riflemen. Mortar crews set up in gullies or behind rocks. As light broke, First Company had moved within 100 meters

of la Difensa's peak, which proved to be the main German bastion: a complex of caves and pillboxes built to provide mutually supporting fire positions. By using ropes to advance on the northeast quadrant of the peak, the Forcemen overcame the fixed German positions facing the northeast and east faces of the mountain.

By 7 a.m., after two hours of tough, hand-to-hand fighting, the FSSF controlled the summit of la Difensa. The Germans fell back toward Difensa's northern saddle, which connects with Mount Remetanea, and to the southwest saddle, which connects Difensa with Camino. With the top of Difensa secure and under FSSF control, the panzergrenadiers rained accurate mortar fire onto Force positions. Now recovered from their initial surprise, the Germans were determined to take advantage of their pre-established positions and fortifications to push the Americans off the mountain. German snipers used tracer rounds to pinpoint targets for machine gun and mortar fire.

During their training in Montana, the FSSF had cross-trained on German small arms. This was time well spent. As they used up the ammunition they had carried up the steep slopes of la Difensa, the Forcemen were often able to use captured German arms and ammunition to carry on the fight.

### Two Days of Tough Fighting

The original plan called for the Force to promptly exploit the successful attack on la Difensa by moving on to assault the German positions on la Remetanea. But a combination of exhaustion, a lack of ammunition, and the fact that it would take at least several hours to resupply the attacking forces with needed supplies prompted Frederick to postpone that part of the assault until Dec. 5. The Forcemen consolidated their defensive positions in anticipation of the typical tough German counterattack. The British X Corps, 56th Division, was unable to take Mount Camino as had been planned. As a result, the Forcemen were battered by long-range machine gun and sniper fire as well as bombardment by mortars and nebelwerfer six-barrel rockets. (The British did not take la Camino until Dec. 6.)





The following two days were a confusing back and forth fight for ground under terrible weather conditions. On Dec. 5, the Force attacked the panzergrenadiers on la Remetanea with two reinforced FSSF battalions. The assault was slowed half way by the tough German defense. However, the next FSSF assault encountered lighter opposition and, by noon, the mountain was theirs. During the following two days the Forcemen focused on mopping up operations to secure the la Remetanea mountain top.

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Weather brought freezing rain during the day and snow at night that ponchos and wool blankets were never designed to deal with. This added to the imperative for re-supplying the Forcemen on la Difensa, a monumental challenge in itself. The grades were too steep, and the trails too narrow and uneven for mules to handle. As a result, all supplies had to be packed up the steep, wet slopes by already tired men. Half of the total manpower of the Force was occupied in packing supplies up the mountain to men in combat and carrying wounded back to aid stations.

### **The Force is Pulled Out**

On Dec. 8, cold, wet, hungry, and showing signs of exposure and exhaustion, after six days of continuous fighting, the 142nd Regiment began to relieve the FSSF men on Difensa and Remetanea. With the arrival of the 142nd and the British in control of Mounts Camino and Maggiore, the Camino Hill Mass was finally secure. Weary Force survivors began their long walk down Difensa's narrow, steep trails, glad

to have survived a tough battle where no quarter was given by either side and where so many of their brothers in arms had died.

Fighting conditions in the Italian mountains were brutal: extremely rugged terrain with little cover. Hard, rocky ground made it very difficult to provide cover by digging in. Where possible, Forcemen stacked rocks to provide shelter from snipers and mortar fire.

### **Aftermath**

The final tally revealed a costly baptism of fire for the First Special Service Force: a total of more than 30 percent casualties with 73 Forcemen killed, 9 missing, 313 wounded or injured during combat, and 116 incapacitated from exposure to the cold and wet or just plain

physical exhaustion. Unfortunately, the condition of many casualties was worsened by the difficulty of extracting and evacuating wounded under fire, their long exposure to cold and wet weather, and the time and effort required carrying them on stretchers down the long, treacherous trails back to FSSF aid stations for medical attention.

However, the extraordinary physical condition and morale of the Forcemen as well as the mountaineering and combat training they had received at Fort Harrison in Montana had paid off by achieving a crucial victory for the Allied forces in Italy. The road to Rome through the Mignano Gap was now open.

On June 4, 1944, members of an FSSF unit led by Capt. Mark Radcliffe were the first Allied troops to enter Rome. Their accomplishment was overshadowed by the invasion of Normandy two days later and received little public notice. 🐮

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