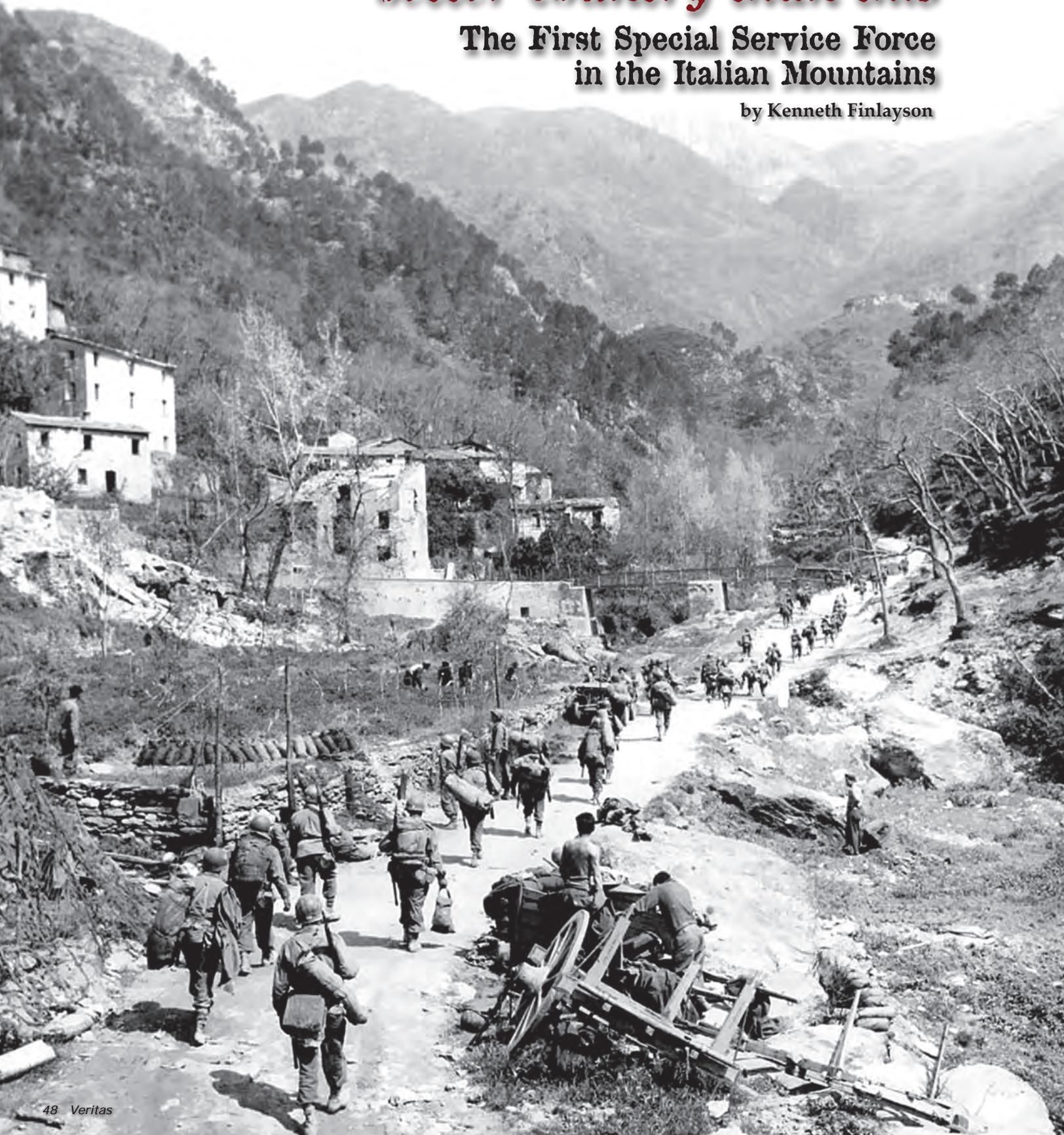


*“Wars should be fought in
better country than this”*

**The First Special Service Force
in the Italian Mountains**

by Kenneth Finlayson



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

Today's Army Special Forces Groups take their official lineage from the First Special Service Force, a unique

The 60 mega-watt Vermork hydroelectric plant near Telemark, Norway, supplied deuterium (heavy water) for Hitler's nuclear weapons program. It was the target of the original PLOUGH mission for the First Special Service Force. In 1943, Norwegian commandos destroyed the deuterium processing facility.



Rigorous mountaineering and skiing were the cornerstone of the First Special Service Force training program at Fort William Henry Harrison, Montana. The mountain training paid big dividends in the Italian campaign.



Canadian-American infantry unit of World War II. Activated on 20 July 1942 at Fort William Henry Harrison, near Helena, Montana, the FSSF was originally intended for a special mission in Norway.² Operation PLOUGH was designed to destroy the Norwegian hydroelectric dam at Vermork that was producing deuterium, the "heavy water" vital to the German nuclear program.³ The cancellation of PLOUGH resulted in the FSSF being sent first to the Aleutians and then to the Mediterranean.

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

The First Special Service Force was composed of roughly an equal mix of American and Canadian volunteers. (For the purposes of pay and promotion, the Canadian contingent was called the 1st Canadian Special Service Battalion). The 3,000-man FSSF was divided into two elements, the Combat Echelon and the Service Echelon. The Combat Echelon consisted of three regiments of two battalions each. Each battalion had three companies of three platoons. The regiments were less than half the size of a normal 870-man U.S. infantry battalion, averaging 32 officers and 327 enlisted men.⁴

The small size of the regiments was due in large part to the absence of any organic support personnel. They were all assigned to the Service Echelon in the Force Support Battalion. With this unique organization, the combat elements were relieved of support details and could focus entirely on training and operations.⁵

The original PLOUGH mission envisioned the Force conducting a winter crossing of Norway's high central



The “dry run” at Kiska was a validation of the Force training program for these First Regiment men on Blue Beach, 9 August 1943. Within three months they would be fighting in the mountains of Italy.

HIGHEST AUTHORITY DIRECTS THAT YOU RETURN SPECIAL SERVICE FORCE TO SAN FRANCISCO WITHOUT DELAY - NIMITZ⁸

Official Report

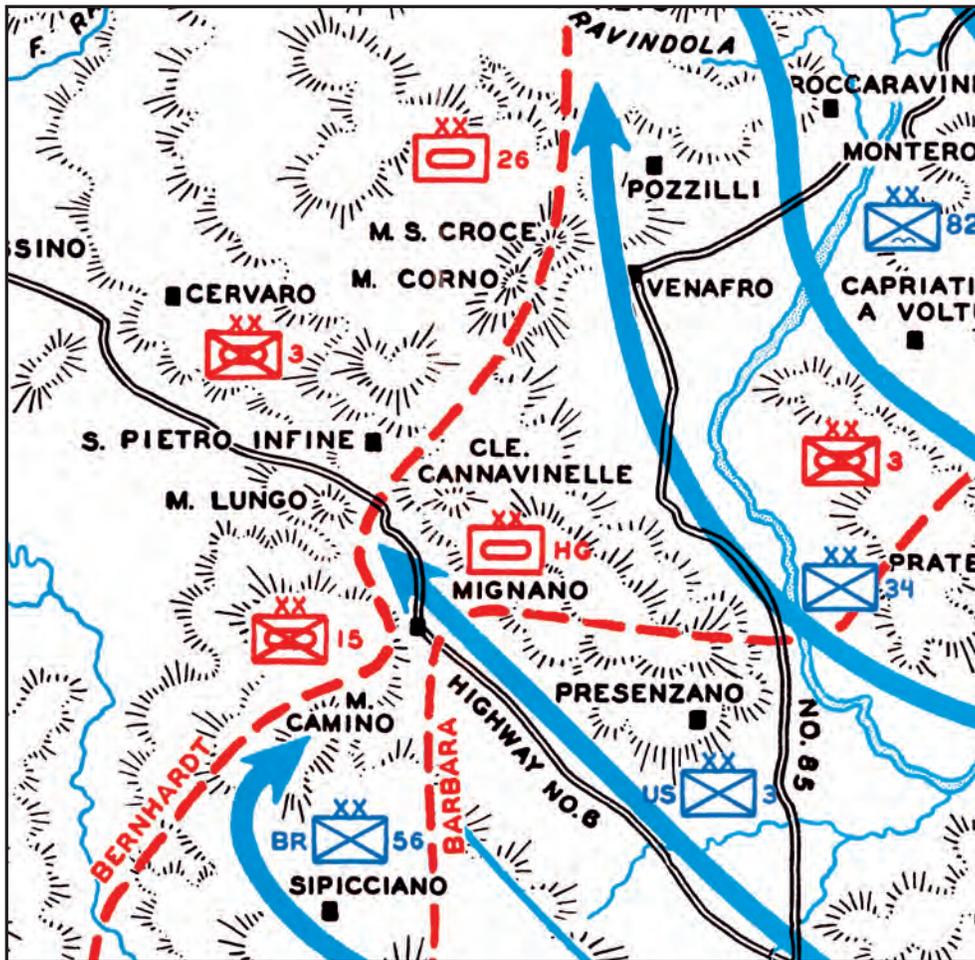
plateau to destroy the Vermork facility. Consequently, the training at Fort Harrison stressed rigorous physical training, parachute qualification, demolitions, infantry small unit tactics, skiing, and mountaineering. Lengthy cross-country foot marches in all types of weather conditioned the Forcemen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

The FSSF left Helena on 13 April 1943 and traveled to Camp Bradford, Virginia for amphibious operations training. In May the Force was tested by the Army Ground Forces staff at Fort Ethan Allen, Vermont, to validate their infantry training prior to overseas deployment. After PLOUGH was cancelled, Colonel (COL) Robert T. Frederick, the Force commander, saved the Force from being disbanded by volunteering to lead the amphibious landings in the Aleutian Islands during Operation COTTAGE.⁶ At the end of June the Force moved to San Francisco and embarked for the Aleutian Islands.⁷ The 1st and 3rd Regiments landed in rubber assault boats on Kiska, on 15 and 16 August, only to find the Japanese had evacuated earlier. Though no fighting occurred, the “dry run” at Kiska proved to be a valuable test for the Force, validating their physical conditioning and combat procedures. Then new orders directed them to Europe.

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



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



As the Fifth Army approached the Bernhardt Line in November 1943, the British 56th Division attacked the Monte Camino/La Defensa hillmass. The U.S. 3rd Infantry, 34th Infantry, and the 82nd Airborne Divisions were arrayed from south to north.

Official Report
 The First Special Service Force arrived at Naples, Italy on three ships, the USS *Jefferson*, USS *Dickman*, and USS *Barnett* during the period 17-19 November 1943. After going to temporary bivouac in Naples, the Force moved on 20 November 1943 to a permanent bivouac area in the Italian Artillery School barracks approximately one-half mile west of Santa Maria, Italy – FSSF Historical Report.⁹

Rugged terrain, bad weather, and too few Allied troops slowed the Fifth Army's progress to a crawl. The mountain ranges south of Rome were the highest along the west coast of Italy, rising to over 3,000 feet. Narrow valleys hindered off-road deployment of forces and limited the use of armored units. Winter brought drenching rains and penetrating cold that slowed movement on the few roads and exposed the troops to frostbite and hypothermia. The few divisions dedicated to the Mediterranean Theater were insufficient to crack the stiff German defenses.

Lieutenant General (LTG) Mark W. Clark's Fifth Army had been fighting north since landing at Salerno on 9 September 1943. As the Italian campaign began to bog down, Allied planners were stockpiling troops and resources for the cross-channel attack into France, the centerpiece of the Allied Grand Strategy.¹⁰ Everything LTG Clark needed to maintain momentum, manpower, equipment, landing craft, aircraft, and logistics was constrained. With his freedom of maneuver hampered, he was forced to grind his way north towards Rome through the teeth of the German defenses.

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

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

From the south, the wide Liri Valley and Highway 6 ran directly to Rome. Access to the Liri was blocked by ranges of mountains running laterally across the Fifth Army's line of advance. The German defenses incorporated these massifs to form three defensive belts that the Allies called the Winter Line.

The Germans called the first line the *Barbara Line*. This was a series of fortified outposts running from the west coast eastward through the foothills. Behind this came the much stronger *Bernhardt Line*, a wide belt of defensive

Lieutenant General Mark W. Clark aboard the Amphibious Force Command ship *USS Ancon*, his headquarters for the landing at Salerno in September 1943. The Fifth Army commander, Clark employed the First Special Service Force as one of his "fire brigades" during the fierce fighting in Italy.



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

fortifications from the mouth of the Garigliano River up and over the forbidding summits of Monte Camino, Monte La Defensa, Monte Majo, and Monte Sammucro. The third and most formidable was the *Gustav Line*. It was anchored on the Garigliano and Rapido Rivers and incorporated the natural fortress of Monte Casino.¹¹ The German commander in Italy was the brilliant *Generalfeldmarschall* Albert Kesselring, whose forces outnumbered the attacking Allies.

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

In the XIV *Panzer* Corps were the 94th Infantry Division, the 3rd and 15th *Panzer Grenadier* Divisions and a battle group from the *Hermann Goering Panzer* Division. The LXXVI *Panzer* Corps consisted of the 26th *Panzer* Division, the 1st Parachute Division, and the 65th and 305th Infantry Divisions.¹² Manpower shortages in the German Army forced reorganization in October 1943 that

reduced each infantry regiment to two battalions. The German infantry division strength was 13,500 men, 1,200 riflemen less than the larger (14,253) American infantry division.¹³ But the Germans fielded more divisions.

While most German units had Eastern Front or North African combat experience, the "new formations were put together in Sicily. The 15th *Panzer Grenadier* Division and the *Hermann Goering Panzer* Division were reconstituted after being destroyed in Tunisia," recalled Kesselring after the war.¹⁴ Manpower and equipment shortages were offset by the advantages accrued by defending the mountains that blocked entry to the Liri Valley. LTG Clark never achieved the desired 4-to-1 superiority needed to overcome the German defenses. Beginning in early November, the Fifth Army began Operation RAINCOAT, the assault on the *Bernhardt Line* to punch into the Liri Valley towards Rome.¹⁵

"Wars should be fought in better country than this."—MG John P. Lucas II Corps.¹⁶

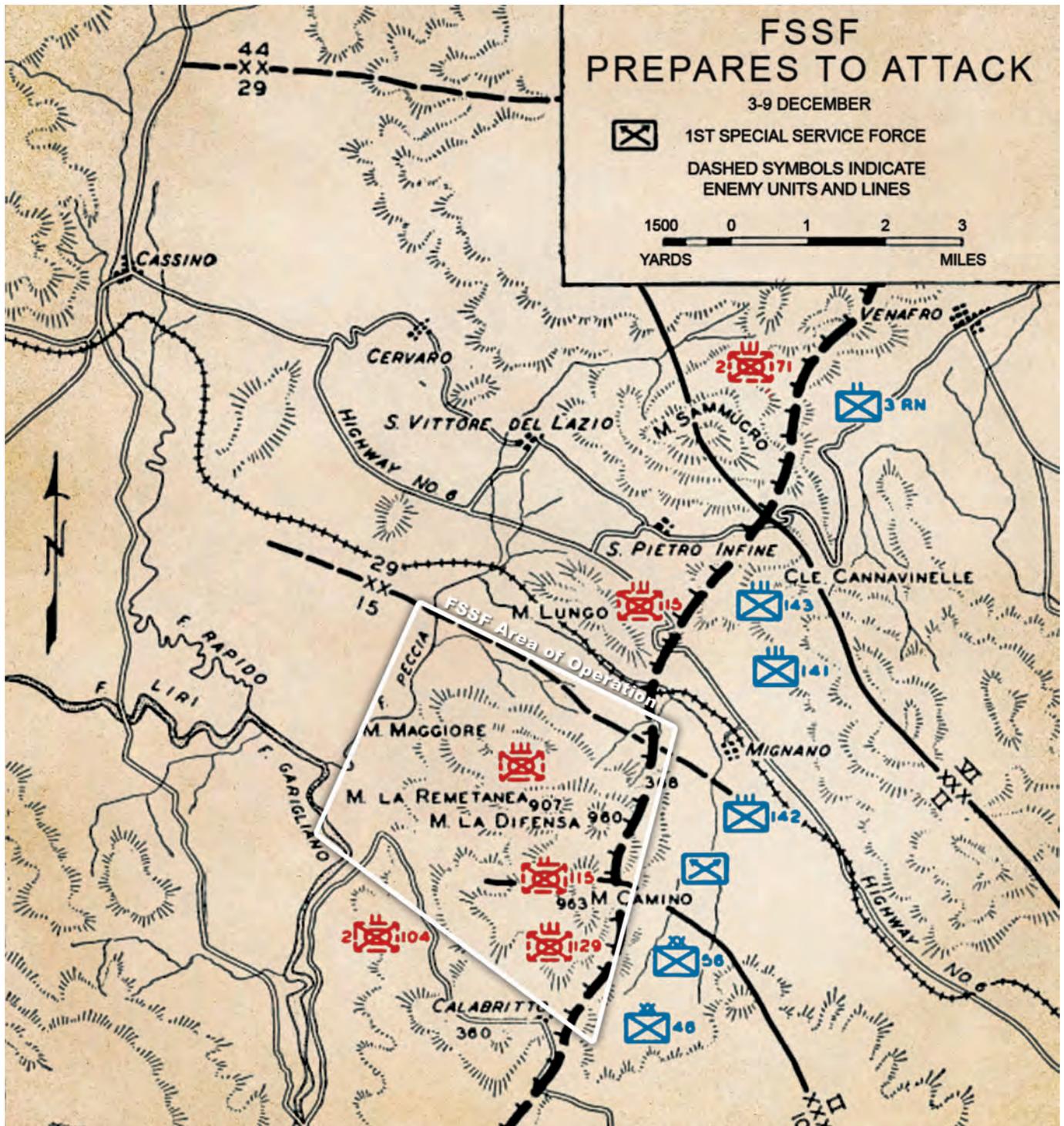
Official Report

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

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

For the operations against MOUNT LA DEFENSA and MOUNT REMETANA, the Force was attached to the 36th Division. On the night of 1 December 1943, the Combat Echelon moved forward to a bivouac near its objective in preparation for operations that were to begin on night 2-3 December - FSSF Historical Report.¹⁷

Official Report



The II Corps attack on Monte La Difensa supported the attempt by the British 56th Division to take Monte Camino. After the U.S. 142nd Infantry Regiment was turned back on La Difensa, LTG Clark sent in the First Special Service Force.

to the north of La Difensa failed as well, LTG Clark called off further offensive operations on 13 November. The lull would last for two weeks, giving the First Special Service Force time to prepare and the Germans to regroup.

After arriving in Naples, the Force based at Santa Maria just north of the city. The unit spent ten days redistributing equipment as it arrived from the port, range firing, and conducting cross-country marches "to recondition them for immediate action."¹⁸ The FSSF

was attached to II Corps' 36th Division on 22 November, prepared for the attack on La Difensa.

Numerous scouting parties were sent up to the area of operations to survey the terrain. During one reconnaissance, a faint trail up the steep cliffs on the north side of the mountain was discovered. Properly strung with ropes to assist the heavily laden troops climb the cliff, the trail could get the Forcemen up the peak behind the German positions. This would be their best option.



Troops of the British 56th Division dug into the hillside of Monte Camino. The struggle for Monte Camino would not end until the First Special Service Force took the adjacent Monte La Defensa.

On the night of 1 December 1943, the Second Regiment loaded 6x6 trucks in Santa Maria to move the 20 miles to their drop-off point prior to marching up the mountain in an assembly area. The over-burdened Forcemen faced a march of more than five miles in a steady, soaking rain that turned the roads to mud. Private First Class (PFC) Robert M. Davis of 1st Company, Second Regiment recalled that night march up the mountain: "The road was very muddy. It was a real ordeal just to get one foot out of the mud. We moved for about 12 hours to get to our bivouac up on the mountainside and it was very hard."²⁰

"The approach march took a good part of the night," said First Lieutenant (1LT) William S. Story of 4th Company, Second Regiment. "We went up the mountain until we were concealed from the top by the bushes and trees. Then we pulled our tail up so there was no visible evidence that we had come up in the dark of the night."²¹

Two 1st Company scouts, Sergeants (SGTs) Thomas E. Fenton and Howard C. Van Ausdale, prepared the trail to the crest of the mountain by anchoring ropes as a handrail to assist the men on the ascent. SGT William B. Walter and Private (PVT) Joseph J. Dauphinais helped in the rope placement. "Both of the scouts happened to be hard rock miners in civilian life and could really read terrain," said 1LT Story. "They found what they thought was the best and relatively easy route where you could anchor your ropes without hammering in pitons. They got up close enough to hear the Germans."²²

"Both of the scouts happened to be hard rock miners in civilian life and could really read terrain."
 — 1LT William S. Story

The preparation for the attack on La Defensa began late in the afternoon of 2 December with a heavy barrage from the II Corps artillery. More than 925 artillery pieces

The Second Regiment was assigned the mission of scaling Mount LA DEFENSA and launching an attack at dawn on 3 December against the defenders of this important hill mass. The First Regiment was assigned as reserve to the 36th Division. The First Battalion, Third Regiment was assigned as reserve for the First Special Service Force. The Second Battalion, Third Regiment was assigned supply and evacuation duties in support of the attack on Mount LA DEFENSA – FSSF Historical Report.¹⁹

Major General Geoffrey Keyes, II Corps commander, addresses the officers of the First Special Service Force before the attack on Monte La Defensa. Keyes used the Force to seize key terrain on the German *Bernhardt Line*.



of all calibers hammered the Monte Camino-La Defensa Massif. The Allies concentrated their fires on the crests and the southern and western approaches used before. 75,000 rounds were fired in support of the attack.²³ The Force came in from the east side and climbed onto the northern shoulder of the mountain as the artillery pounded the hill masses.

"I never saw another barrage like that during the war," recalled Robert M. Davis. "That was a lulu."²⁴ "I thought that there shouldn't be one left up there after that barrage," said SGT Joe Glass. "After that bombardment, we called La Defensa the 'Million-Dollar Mountain.'"²⁵ The order of march was 1st, 2nd, and 3rd companies, the Regimental headquarters, and then the 4th, 5th, and 6th companies. The last 500 feet was up the steep cliffs. The ropes proved invaluable and were key to getting machine guns, mortars, and supplies up quickly.

Climbing in the darkness, the lead elements of 1st Company reached the crest of the mountain shortly before dawn. PFC Kenneth W. Betts, 1st Section, 1st Platoon, 1st Company of Second Regiment, was one of the first to reach the top. "We came up the back way," said Betts. "We caught them by surprise, but it didn't last long. [It was] only enough to get over the edge."²⁶ PFC Robert M. Davis remembered "coming up single file. Every sound made you think people in Rome could hear us coming."²⁷

The 1st Company crested the hill and spread out to the left as 2nd Company behind them extended the line to the right among the rocks on the summit. The battle commenced when an alerted German sentry began firing. "We were virtually on top of the German positions when someone kicked a stone loose and a German challenged the two scouts," said SGT Donald MacKinnon. "Someone shot, and that's when machine gun fire opened up all around us."²⁸ A fierce firefight erupted along the crest. The Germans had their machine guns pointed to the southwest and had to work feverishly to turn their weapons around to meet the assault. The action quickly became a close-quarters shoot-out.

"It was really a series of individual firefights," said 1LT Bill Story. "We were dealing with individuals or small groups of Germans."²⁹ A marksman with a *Schmeisser* machine pistol pinned down PFC Robert Davis. "That guy was an artist with that burp gun," said Davis. "It finally took [PFC Dennis] George hitting his position with a rifle grenade to allow us to move."³⁰

As the Force rushed across the top of the mountain, the German defenders abandoned their positions to escape down the mountain to Monte Camino or across the northwest saddle towards Monte Remetana. "We had the top cleared in about two hours," said SGT Joseph M. Glass.³¹ The unexpected appearance of the

Force along the cliff tops had proven too much for the German defenders. "They had expected the assault to come up the forward slope," said Bob Davis. "Once we got rid of the guys along the forward area, the rest folded up."³² With the crest in their hands, the Forcemen quickly began to prepare defensive positions to meet the expected German counterattack.

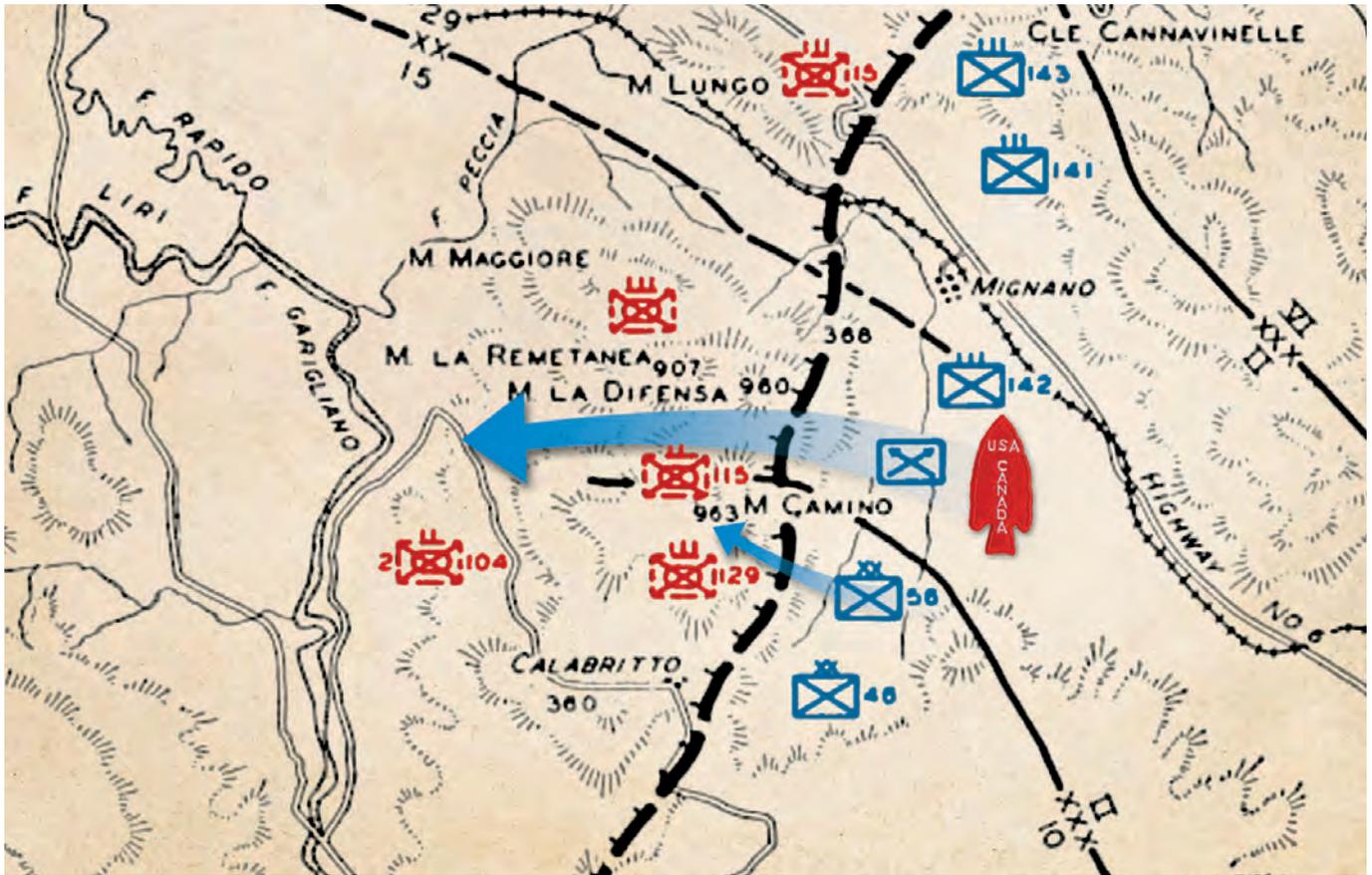
The next three days were constant rain, snow, and freezing temperatures punctuated with German shelling and counter-attacks. The miserable conditions hindered the resupply and evacuation of the heavy casualties suffered from the German artillery. PFC Kenneth P. Thelen: "I had 18 different holes in me, two broken arms and two broken legs. I lay there for almost a day and a



A model of the sand table used by the Force in the planning of the attack on Monte La Defensa. By finding a small trail (Blue Line) up the steep north side, the Forcemen were able to assault the German defenders from the rear.



This 8" (240 mm) howitzer of the Fifth Army artillery supported operations against the Winter Line in the Mignano area. A stunning artillery barrage enabled the Force to maneuver behind the German positions on La Defensa.



The attack of Monte La Defensa took the Forcemen around the east side of the mountain and up the steep cliffs on the north side. They quickly pushed the surprised German defenders off the summit.

half before I was moved. Then it took 18 hours to get me down off the mountain.”³⁴ German prisoners were put to work. “You could use up to six German prisoners to carry one stretcher off La Defensa,” said 1LT Bill Story. “It was the only way we could get our wounded troops down off the tops of those mountains.”³⁵

Once reinforced by the First Regiment, the Second Regiment moved to clear the saddle running northwest to the summit of Monte Remetana. A series of attacks on 6 and 7 December dislodged the Germans. Simultaneously, the British succeeded in capturing Monte Camino, eliminating the remaining sniper and artillery threat to the Force’s west flank. The FSSF linked up with the British and by the evening of 7 December, had control of Monte Remetana. The next night the Force was relieved by the 142nd Infantry, 36th Division, and returned to Santa Maria. The first phase of the mountain campaign for the FSSF had ended. The Force had pushed the Germans off Monte La Defensa in a matter of hours despite the Fifth Army planners’ predictions that it would take two or three days.³⁶ However, success was very costly.

The 3,000-man Force suffered 511 casualties on Monte La Defensa: 73 killed; 313 wounded; and 9 missing in action; and 116 evacuated with frostbite, trenchfoot, and exhaustion.³⁷ Eight wounded later died.³⁸ One battalion

Official Report
 The Second Regiment reached its objective at dawn on 3 December and after bitter fighting, gained a foothold on the crest of MOUNT LA DEFENSA. Fighting in this area was continuous and bitter during the next forty-eight hours – FSSF Historical Report.³³



First Special Service Force SSI



Fifth Army SSI



VI Corps SSI



II Corps SSI

The First Regiment was assigned to support the attack of the Second Regiment and arrived at the to of MOUNT LA DEFENSA on 5 December. During the period 5-9 December, the First and Second Regiments continued the operations required to clear the enemy from MOUNT LA DEFENSA – FSSF Historical Report 2.

Official Report

commander (LTC Thomas C. MacWilliam), one company commander (CPT William T. Rothlin), and several platoon leaders, platoon sergeants, and section sergeants had been killed. The Force rested in Santa Maria for the next eleven days and reshuffled leaders.

While the FSSF had been fighting for Monte la Defensa, II Corps attacked the Monte Lungo-Monte Sammucro complex further north. The 36th Division, with the 3rd Ranger Battalion attached, suffered heavy casualties but failed to capture the two hills and the village of San Pietro.³⁹ The Force was called upon to lead the second attempt.

For the attack on Monte Sammucro, the depleted Force had the U.S. 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment and the 1st Battalion, 141st Infantry attached. Fire support came from the 6th Armored Field Artillery Group and the 376th and 456th Parachute Field Artillery battalions.⁴¹ The reinforcements were badly needed because the three Force regiments were down to less than 200 men each.

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



A Forceman in his winter parka fires an M-1941 Johnson machine gun. The “Johnny gun” was the favorite of the Force, who preferred this lighter Marine Corps weapon to the Army’s Browning Automatic Rifle.

Orders were issued on 22 December to have the First Special Service Force attack to capture MT SAMMUCRO, HILL 730. The First Regiment, First Special Service Force, assisted by fire from the First Battalion, 141st Infantry, accomplished this mission of the night 24-25 December. They were relieved by First Battalion, 141st Infantry, on 26 December, withdrawing to bivouac at CEPPAGNA - FSSF Historical Report 3.⁴⁰

Official Report

Men of Second Regiment carrying supplies in support of the First Regiment’s assault on Monte La Defensa. The steep rugged terrain dictated that everything be man-packed or hauled on mules. Casualties from artillery and snipers were high among the supporters. In the lead is Private Harlan S. Morgan, a medic in 3-2.



Official Report

In the area south of ROME, December provides the most unfavorable weather conditions of the year for military operations. It is the culmination of the autumnal rainy season. . . . Conditions of temperature and humidity, though by no means severe, are such that requires extra clothing and fuel for efficient operations. – II Corps G-2 Meteorological Report, 27 November 1943.⁴²

Christmas Eve. The assault on Mont Sammucro would launch a three-week concentrated effort to push the Germans off the *Bernhardt Line* and position Fifth Army for the *Gustav Line* and Monte Cassino.

The troops sat in cold fog and rain for two days waiting for the attack to begin. The plan called for the First Regiment to hit Monte Sammucro while 1st Battalion, 141st Infantry assaulted nearby Hill 630, and the 504th, Hill 580. The attack began at 5:00 am on Christmas. In deadly, close-quarters fighting, the First Regiment ejected the Germans from their positions and fended off several counterattacks. The 504th captured Hill 580 and the 141st Hill 630. On the night of the 26th, the 141st relieved the Force on Monte Sammucro. The Force casualties were 77 dead and wounded in the fight.⁴³ Following a respite of three days, the Force rejoined the offensive as Fifth Army continued to push to the north and west.

The first week of January 1944 was spent in fierce fighting in the hills surrounding the village of Radicosa. This was the precursor to facing the formidable mountains in the *Gustav Line*, Monte Majo, Hill 1270, and Monte Vischiataro. These high, rocky peaks would

be the German's final defense on the *Bernhardt Line*. The continual fighting and debilitating weather brought the Force to the brink of exhaustion. The final push began on 6 January to conquer Monte Majo.

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

"There was no cover, just a bald hill. I sent scouts forward to take out the German machine gun positions. The Germans didn't even know we were on them; the attack was that well executed."

— CPT T. Mark Radcliffe

CPT T. Mark Radcliffe, 3rd Company commander, 1st Battalion, Third Regiment said: "We were one of the companies ordered to attack Monte Majo. There was no cover, just a bald hill. I sent scouts forward to take out the German machine gun positions. The Germans didn't even know we were on them, the attack was that well executed."⁴⁴ By 5:30 am the last enemy positions were overrun. The Forcemen prepared for the inevitable counterattacks because Monte Majo was key to the final German defenses.

As soon as their infantry abandoned the hilltop, the Germans began to shell the summit. "They would drop those mortars in so quickly, and when you're on the reverse slope of the hill, you can't hear them fire," remembered



Sergeant Lewis J. Merrim with mule hauling supplies. Merrim was the Force photographer assigned to the Regimental Headquarters.



Forcemen receive coffee and doughnuts from the Red Cross at Santa Maria after the battle on La Defensa. The Forceman in the left center is wearing the wooden clogs issued as hospital shoes to those suffering trenchfoot or frostbite.

9 January 1944. Today's Force casualty return has 122 names. Again, nearly half are frostbite and exposure. There won't be much left of the Force if casualties keep at this rate – 1st Canadian Special Service Battalion War Diary.⁴⁰

Official Report

CPT Radcliffe.⁴⁵ “Don McKinnon and Herbie Forester and I dove into this foxhole when we got a barrage right after we had taken the top of the hill,” recalled SGT Joe Glass. “A dud landed right in our hole, right in back of our legs. So we just leaped out, but it never exploded.”⁴⁶ Then the German infantry came.

“Those were the worst counterattacks I have ever been involved in,” said Mark Radcliffe. “There were at least twenty-six and they came real close to pushing us off the hill.”⁴⁷ Over the next two days, the Forcemen endured more than 40 counterattacks on Majo. Low on ammunition, the troops used abandoned German MG-42 machine guns and ammunition to beat back the determined assaults.⁴⁸ The Force held firm.

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

Colonel Robert T. Frederick leads the FSSF command section out of the village of Radicosa. Controlling operations in the mountains was difficult because mountain fighting was often conducted by squads and sections acting independently.

“I had some contact with the Algerians,” said SGT Joe Glass. “We traded some of our rations for their canned meat, which turned out to be horsemeat.”⁵⁰ The Algerians were attached to the Task Force for two days, when the FSSF captured their second major objective, Monte Vischiataro.

During the final phases of the mountain campaign, high casualty rates required major force restructuring. The 1st Battalion, Second Regiment was so depleted that the six line companies were merged into two; the new A Company under CPT Mark Radcliffe had men from 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Companies; and B Company with



Force Headquarters scouts, Private D. M. M. Hill (L) and Private Francis B. Wright disarm a German mine. Both men would later be killed; Wright on Monte Majo, and Hill at Anzio.



4th, 5th, and 6th company soldiers led by CPT Daniel P. Gallagher.⁵¹ Task Force B was dissolved on order of II Corps on 13 January. The Third Regiment captured Hills 780 and 1030 on 14 January and held them for the next three days.⁵² This proved to be the last fighting the Force would do in the southern Italian mountains.

The mountain campaign had decimated the Force. Of the 1800 men in the Combat Echelon, 1400 had been killed, wounded, or hospitalized. The brutal, dangerous

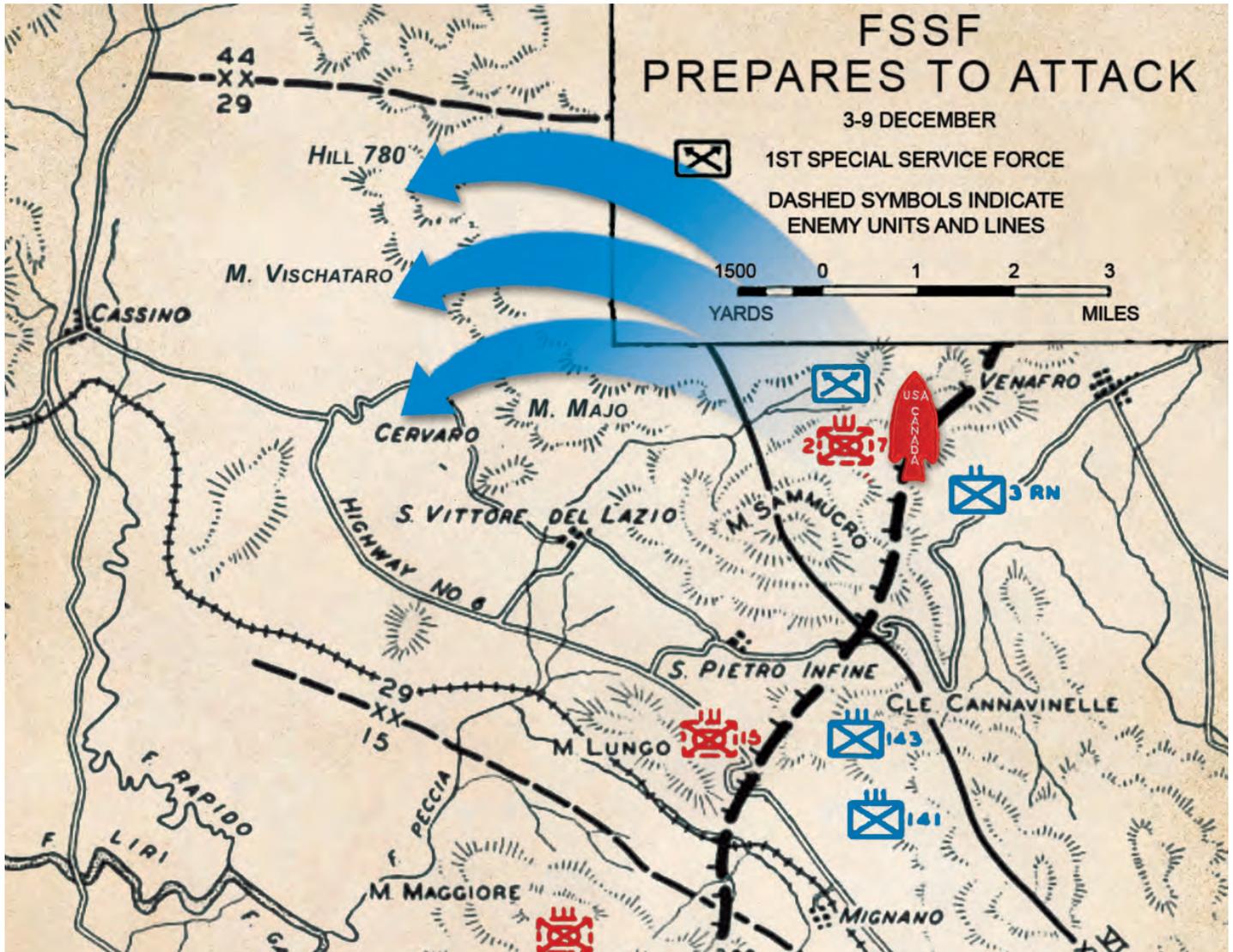
job of resupplying the combat forces had reduced the Service Echelon to 50% combat effectiveness.⁵⁴ Though the Force broke the *Bernhardt Line* and opened the way to the *Gustav Line* and Monte Cassino, it was no longer combat effective. Those bloody campaigns would fall to other units of Fifth Army. Cassino would not fall until May.

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

—Technician 4th Class John R. Dawson

"We got darn close to Cassino before withdrawing. In fact, I think I saw guys on patrols that were halfway up Monte Cassino. If there had been a nice, fresh American division, it could have gone up and saved all that fuss later on," surmised Technician 4th Class John R. Dawson. "We were exhausted; we couldn't have taken the next outhouse. You could always say 'if we

Official Report
 The First Special Service Force returned to bivouac vicinity SANTA MARIA by truck the afternoon 17 January in order First Regiment, Second Regiment, Third Regiment, Supply Personnel. Last elements of First Special Service Force closed CEPPAGNA at 172345A January - FSSF Historical Report 3.⁵³



The Force took the summit of Monte Majo and Monte Vischataro, the last German strongholds on the *Bernhardt Line*. At the end of two months of hard, exhausting mountain warfare, the Force was at the end of its effectiveness.

kept going,' but we couldn't keep going. There wasn't that much pressure left in the tank.⁵⁵

The FSSF returned to Santa Maria to rest and refit. 250 American volunteers joined the unit and were put through an intensive training program. The Canadian Army did not replace all of their contingent's losses, leaving only 300 men fit for duty. Some volunteers came from the 1st Canadian Division, British 8th Army, over the next year.⁵⁶ But Canada never filled their element to full strength again. In fact, LTC Thomas P. Gilday, the ranking FSSF Canadian after the mountain campaign, recommended that all of the Canadians be reassigned to the Canadian Parachute Battalion in England.⁵⁷ Fortunately, this did not happen because the Force still had battles to fight at Anzio, into Rome, and in southern France.⁵⁸ ▲

Kenneth Finlayson is the USASOC Deputy Command Historian. He earned his PhD from the University of Maine, and is a retired Army officer. Current research interests include Army special operations during the Korean War, special operations aviation, and World War II special operations units.

A Force combat patrol clears a ruined village near Radicosa. Private Charles N. Russell, (L) covers the advance of the patrol.



Official Report
On 29 January 1944 the First Special Service Force received orders to prepare for movement to ANZIO BEACHEAD area. The Force moved to concentration Area No. 3 near Naples on 30 January and sailed aboard LST's and LCI's for Pozzuli on the evening of 31 January. The unit debarked at ANZIO at 1000, 1 February.⁵⁹

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

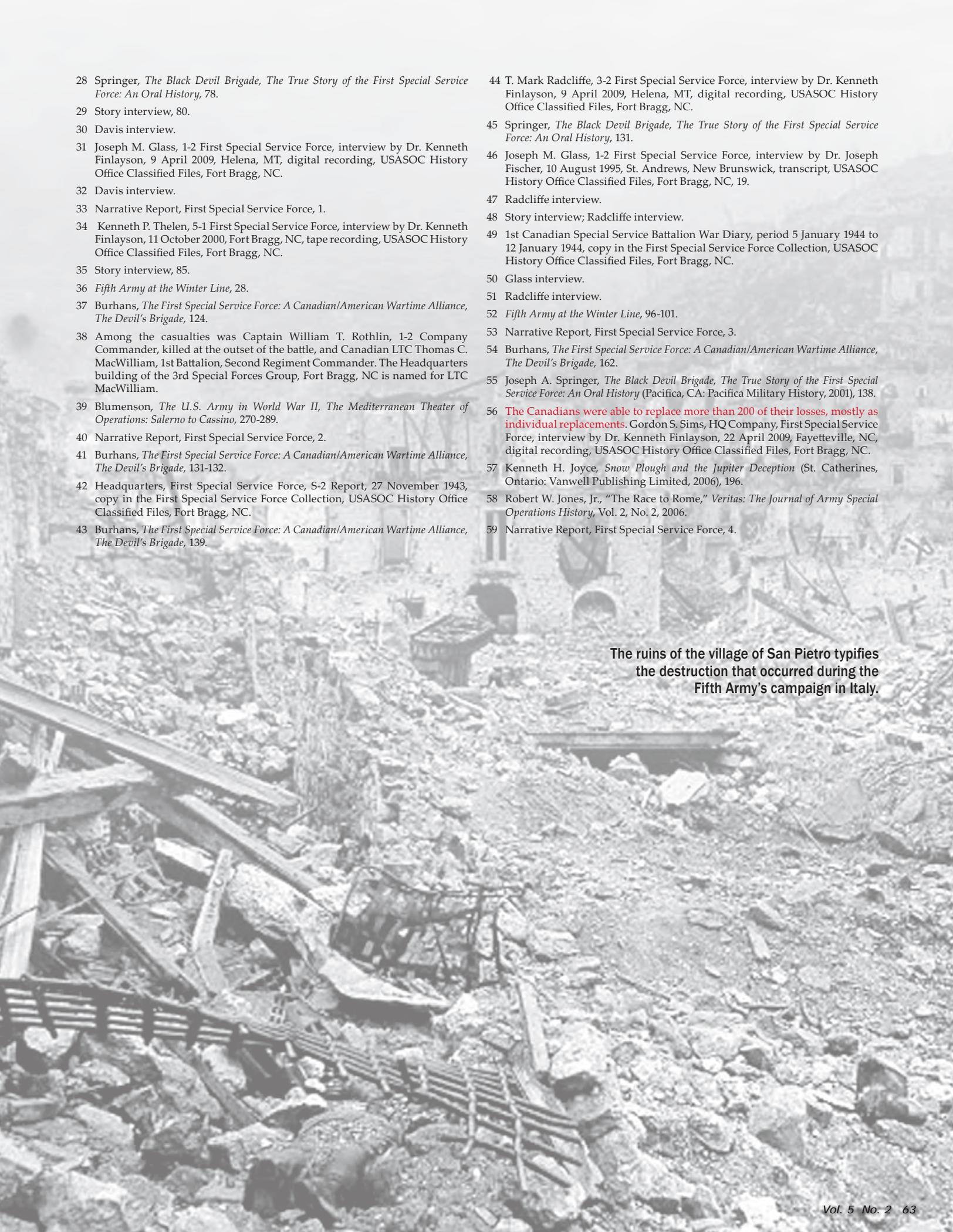




Third Regiment Forcemen observe the Rapido River valley towards Monte Cassino. The Force would be in Anzio when Fifth Army finally broke through the Gustav Line by capturing Cassino in May 1944.

Endnotes

- 1 R. William Becket, First Regiment, "The Stars and Jack," unpublished manuscript dated 1993, copy in the USASOC History Office Classified Files, 76.
- 2 **The First Special Service Force is one of the most well documented units in World War II. Numerous books have been written about the Force, including a number of recent studies. While not a complete compendium of books about the unit, the following volumes represent the majority of the most current works.** Robert H. Adleman and George Walton, *The Devil's Brigade* (Philadelphia: Chilton Books, 1966); Robert D. Burhans, *The First Special Service Force: A Canadian/American Wartime Alliance, The Devil's Brigade* (Dalton, GA: Lee Printing Company, 1947); Anne Hicks, *The Last Fighting General: The Biography of Robert Tryon Frederick* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Military History, 2006); Kenneth H. Joyce, *Snow Plough and the Jupiter Deception* (St. Catharines, Ontario: Vanwell Publishing Limited, 2006); John Nadler, *A Perfect Hell: The Forgotten Story of the Canadian Commandos of the Second World War* (Scarborough, Ontario: Doubleday Canada, 2005); Mark J. Nelson, *With the Black Devils: A Soldier's World War II Account with the First Special Service Force and the 82nd Airborne* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing Ltd., 2004); Robert Todd Ross, *The Supercommandos: First Special Service Force, 1942-1944, An Illustrated History* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing Ltd., 2000); Joseph A. Springer, *The Black Devil Brigade, The True Story of the First Special Service Force: An Oral History* (Pacifica, CA: Pacifica Military History, 2001); James A. Wood, *We Move Only Forward: Canada, The United States and the First Special Service Force, 1942-1944* (St. Catharines, Ontario, Vanwell Publishing Limited, 2006).
- 3 **Deuterium is a naturally occurring isotope of hydrogen with one proton and one neutron in the nucleus. Deuterium was used extensively in the early development of nuclear reactors. The Vermork facility in Norway was supplying deuterium for the German nuclear research program.**
- 4 Burhans, *The First Special Service Force: A Canadian/American Wartime Alliance, The Devil's Brigade*, 15; Kent Roberts Greenfield, Robert R. Palmer, and Bell I. Wiley, *The U.S. Army in World War II, The Army Ground Forces: The organization of Ground combat Troops* (Washington DC: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1947), 274-275.
- 5 Kenneth Finlayson, "Unique Support for a Unique Unit: The Service Battalion of the First Special Service Force," *Veritas: The Journal of Army Special Operations History*, Vol. 2, No. 3, 2006, 11-17.
- 6 Kenneth Finlayson, "Operation COTTAGE: First Special Service Force, Kiska Campaign," *Veritas: The Journal of Army Special Operations History*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 2008, 30-43.
- 7 Burhans, *The First Special Service Force: A Canadian/American Wartime Alliance, The Devil's Brigade*, X.
- 8 Burhans, *The First Special Service Force: A Canadian/American Wartime Alliance, The Devil's Brigade*, 82; Ross, *The Supercommandos*, 70.
- 9 Narrative Report: First Special Service Force, 17 November 1943 – 1 February 1944, 28 November 1944, Department of the Army, Adjutant General's Office, Washington DC, Historical Records Section, copy in the USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, 1. (Hereafter referred to as Narrative Report, First Special Service Force).
- 10 Martin Blumenson, *The U.S. Army in World War II, The Mediterranean Theater of Operations: Salerno to Cassino* (Washington DC: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1969), 7.
- 11 Blumenson, *The U.S. Army in World War II, The Mediterranean Theater of Operations: Salerno to Cassino*, 207-208.
- 12 Blumenson, *The U.S. Army in World War II, The Mediterranean Theater of Operations: Salerno to Cassino*, 224.
- 13 Blumenson, *The U.S. Army in World War II, The Mediterranean Theater of Operations: Salerno to Cassino*, 225.
- 14 Albrecht Kesselring, *The Memoirs of Field Marshall Kesselring* (Novato CA: Presidio Press, 1989), 161.
- 15 American Forces in Action, *Fifth Army at the Winter Line* (Washington DC: Center of Military History, 1990), 15-19.
- 16 Blumenson, *The U.S. Army in World War II, The Mediterranean Theater of Operations: Salerno to Cassino*, 234.
- 17 Narrative Report, First Special Service Force, 1.
- 18 Narrative Report, First Special Service Force, 1.
- 19 Narrative Report, First Special Service Force, 1.
- 20 Robert M. Davis, 1-2 First Special Service Force, taped narrative, subject: Operations on La Defensa, date unknown, tape in the First Special Service Force Collection, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 21 William S. Story, 4-2 First Special Service Force, interview by Dr. Joseph Fischer, 10 August 1995, St. Andrews, New Brunswick, Canada, transcript, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, 77-78.
- 22 Story interview, 79.
- 23 Blumenson, *The U.S. Army in World War II, The Mediterranean Theater of Operations: Salerno to Cassino*, 265.
- 24 Davis interview.
- 25 Joseph A. Springer, *The Black Devil Brigade, The True Story of the First Special Service Force: An Oral History* (Pacifica, CA: Pacifica Military History, 2001), 76.
- 26 Kenneth W. Betts, 1-2, First Special Service Force, taped narrative, subject: Operations on La Defensa, date unknown, tape in the First Special Service Force Collection, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 27 Davis interview.

- 
- 28 Springer, *The Black Devil Brigade, The True Story of the First Special Service Force: An Oral History*, 78.
- 29 Story interview, 80.
- 30 Davis interview.
- 31 Joseph M. Glass, 1-2 First Special Service Force, interview by Dr. Kenneth Finlayson, 9 April 2009, Helena, MT, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 32 Davis interview.
- 33 Narrative Report, First Special Service Force, 1.
- 34 Kenneth P. Thelen, 5-1 First Special Service Force, interview by Dr. Kenneth Finlayson, 11 October 2000, Fort Bragg, NC, tape recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 35 Story interview, 85.
- 36 *Fifth Army at the Winter Line*, 28.
- 37 Burhans, *The First Special Service Force: A Canadian/American Wartime Alliance, The Devil's Brigade*, 124.
- 38 Among the casualties was Captain William T. Rothlin, 1-2 Company Commander, killed at the outset of the battle, and Canadian LTC Thomas C. MacWilliam, 1st Battalion, Second Regiment Commander. The Headquarters building of the 3rd Special Forces Group, Fort Bragg, NC is named for LTC MacWilliam.
- 39 Blumenson, *The U.S. Army in World War II, The Mediterranean Theater of Operations: Salerno to Cassino*, 270-289.
- 40 Narrative Report, First Special Service Force, 2.
- 41 Burhans, *The First Special Service Force: A Canadian/American Wartime Alliance, The Devil's Brigade*, 131-132.
- 42 Headquarters, First Special Service Force, S-2 Report, 27 November 1943, copy in the First Special Service Force Collection, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 43 Burhans, *The First Special Service Force: A Canadian/American Wartime Alliance, The Devil's Brigade*, 139.
- 44 T. Mark Radcliffe, 3-2 First Special Service Force, interview by Dr. Kenneth Finlayson, 9 April 2009, Helena, MT, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 45 Springer, *The Black Devil Brigade, The True Story of the First Special Service Force: An Oral History*, 131.
- 46 Joseph M. Glass, 1-2 First Special Service Force, interview by Dr. Joseph Fischer, 10 August 1995, St. Andrews, New Brunswick, transcript, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, 19.
- 47 Radcliffe interview.
- 48 Story interview; Radcliffe interview.
- 49 1st Canadian Special Service Battalion War Diary, period 5 January 1944 to 12 January 1944, copy in the First Special Service Force Collection, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 50 Glass interview.
- 51 Radcliffe interview.
- 52 *Fifth Army at the Winter Line*, 96-101.
- 53 Narrative Report, First Special Service Force, 3.
- 54 Burhans, *The First Special Service Force: A Canadian/American Wartime Alliance, The Devil's Brigade*, 162.
- 55 Joseph A. Springer, *The Black Devil Brigade, The True Story of the First Special Service Force: An Oral History* (Pacifica, CA: Pacifica Military History, 2001), 138.
- 56 **The Canadians were able to replace more than 200 of their losses, mostly as individual replacements.** Gordon S. Sims, HQ Company, First Special Service Force, interview by Dr. Kenneth Finlayson, 22 April 2009, Fayetteville, NC, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 57 Kenneth H. Joyce, *Snow Plough and the Jupiter Deception* (St. Catharines, Ontario: Vanwell Publishing Limited, 2006), 196.
- 58 Robert W. Jones, Jr., "The Race to Rome," *Veritas: The Journal of Army Special Operations History*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 2006.
- 59 Narrative Report, First Special Service Force, 4.

The ruins of the village of San Pietro typifies the destruction that occurred during the Fifth Army's campaign in Italy.