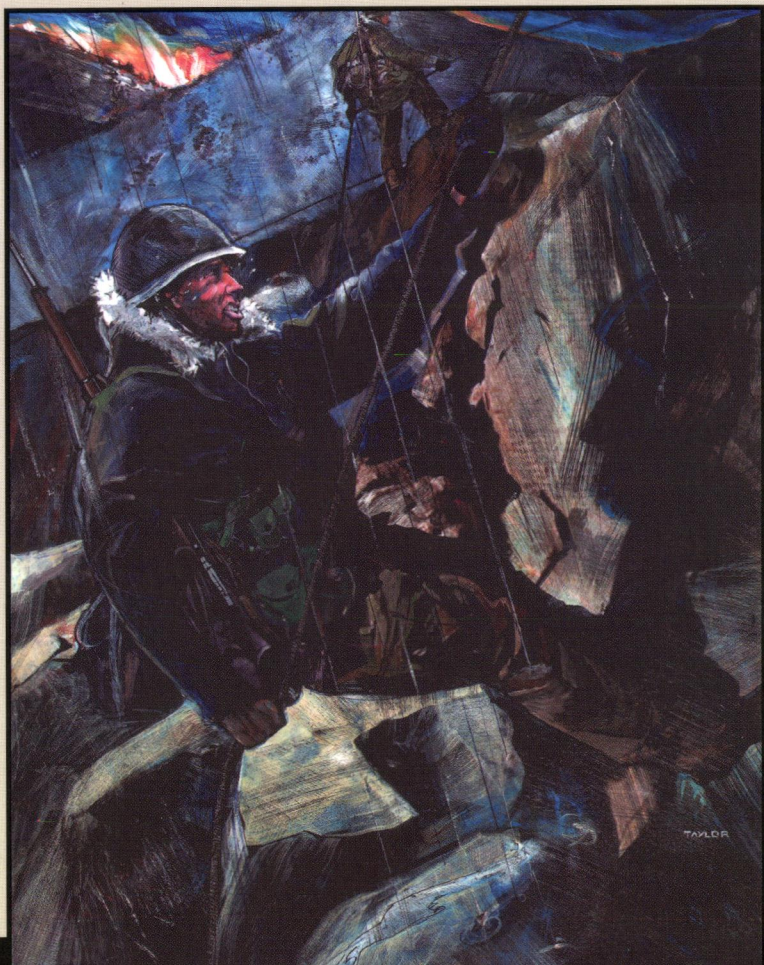


CANSOFCOM PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT CENTRE

AMONGST THE EAGLES

THE BATTLE OF MOUNT LA DIFENSA

COLONEL BERND HORN



THE CANSOFCOM PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT CENTRE

MISSION

The mission of the Canadian Forces Special Operations Forces Command (CANSOFCOM) Professional Development Centre (PDC) is to enable professional development within the Command in order to continually develop and enhance the cognitive capacity of CANSOFCOM personnel.

VISION

The vision of the CANSOFCOM PDC is to be a key enabler to CANSOFCOM headquarters, units and Special Operations Task Forces (SOTFs) as an intellectual centre of excellence for special operations forces (SOF) professional development (PD).

ROLE

The CANSOFCOM PDC is designed to provide additional capacity to:

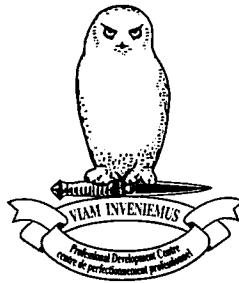
1. develop the cognitive capacity of CANSOFCOM personnel;
2. access subject matter advice on diverse subjects from the widest possible network of scholars, researchers, subject matter experts (SMEs), institutions and organizations;
3. provide additional research capacity;
4. develop educational opportunities and SOF specific courses and professional development materials;
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6. develop CANSOF publications that provide both PD and educational materials to CANSOF personnel and external audiences;
7. maintain a website that provides up-to-date information on PD opportunities and research materials; and
8. assist with the research of SOF best practices and concepts to ensure that CANSOFCOM remains relevant and progressive so that it maintains its position as the domestic force of last resort and the international force of choice for the Government of Canada.

**AMONGST
THE EAGLES**

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THE BATTLE OF MOUNT LA DIFENSA

Colonel Bernd Horn



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FOREWORD

I am delighted to introduce the thirteenth monograph created by the Canadian Special Operations Forces Command (CANSOFCOM) Professional Development Centre (PDC). This series remains an important tool to expand the growing body of literature on Special Operations Forces (SOF) in general and Canadian Special Operations Forces (CANSOF) in particular. In this manner, those in the Command, as well as those external to it, can continue to learn more about SOF, particularly our contribution to the Canadian Armed Forces and the Government of Canada.

Amongst the Eagles: The Battle of Mount La Difensa, is particularly significant as it has a direct linkage to our CANSOF heritage, namely the 1st Canadian Special Service Battalion, the Canadian component of the First Special Service Force (FSSF). In fact, the Canadian Special Operations Regiment (CSOR) perpetuates the FSSF and carries on its Battle Honours, including La Difensa. This battle, which occurred on the night of 2/3 December 1943, carried all the hallmarks of a SOF approach: daring; cunning; and tenacity. Where a conventional approach repeatedly failed at great loss of life, the unexpected, asymmetric methodology applied by the FSSF achieved an unmitigated victory. In fact, La Difensa created the FSSF legend. As such, the Battle of La Difensa provides not only a window on the CANSOF legacy, it also furnishes a record of SOF courage, tenacity and effectiveness.

As always, I believe this volume is an important addition to the body of SOF literature as it provides a significant case study of a victory that was a direct result of SOF's adherence to hard training, careful planning and implacable commitment to mission accomplishment. I hope you find this publication informative. In addition, I hope that

it sparks discussion and reflection. Please do not hesitate to contact the PDC should you have comments or topics that you would like to see addressed as part of the CANSOFCOM monograph series.

Dr. Emily Spencer
Series Editor and Director of Education and Research
CANSOFCOM PDC

AMONGST THE EAGLES: THE BATTLE OF MOUNT LA DIFENSA

The jagged rock cut into fingernails with the intensity of a red hot poker. Although his fingers and hands were numb with cold and his brain fatigued by lack of sleep and exertion, the pain cut through his consciousness creating a vicious explosion of sensation. Nonetheless, the climber stifled his instinctive reaction to cry out. With the enemy defensive position only hundreds of metres above him on the summit of the mountain, any noise could prove fatal.

The wall face was jagged and treacherous with loose rocks. Deep ravines cut through the rock providing scant improvement for foot or hand holds. Days of rain had turned the vegetation and earth to soggy, slippery plants and mud. The December cold only added to the misery making every effort that much more difficult. And, the darkness and fog proved blinding.

But then, the shadows are exactly what the Forcemen sought. Their objective was the top of a 963 metre mountain feature. Conventional forces had tried to assault it several times using the predicable, more accessible southern approach. They failed on each attempt with heavy casualties. Not surprisingly, the enemy had focused their defensive strongholds on exactly that access point.

When the Commander 5th Army gave the task to the First Special Service Force (FSSF) the FSSF Commander quickly discounted the obvious, “easy” approach. Rather, he opted for a more cunning, bold and risky attack plan. He decided that the Forcemen would

scale terrain the Germans had assessed as impassible and take the northern approach up a 70 degree slope that emptied onto the back of the German positions. The risk was high but capturing the objective was imperative.

The First Special Service Force

The genesis of the FSSF was in England with Lord Mountbatten's Combined Operations Headquarters (COHQ) and Prime Minister Churchill's personal support. The original concept, code named Operation Plough, entailed a guerrilla force capable of operations in Norway to attack the hydro-electric and heavy water plants in that country in order to disrupt the German war industry and the NAZI atomic weapons program. Some thought was also put to using the force to destroy the Ploesti oil fields in Romania and/or to destroy hydro-electric facilities in Italy. In all, the planners reasoned that in any of these targets a hard hitting raiding force would not only damage Germany's vital war industry but it would also tie up German forces required to protect facilities and chase down the guerrilla force.

The Americans accepted the project and Prime Minister Churchill and Lord Mountbatten very quickly convinced the Canadians to participate as well. As a result, a US/Canadian brigade-sized formation was created with Americans and Canadians serving side by side, wearing the same American uniforms, in a military command that was completely integrated. At any given moment it was impossible to differentiate Canadian from American and vice versa. Each had officers commanding troops of the other nation. At inception, the Canadians contributed 697 all ranks to the formation, representing approximately a quarter of the total number of troops.¹

The Canadian War Cabinet authorized the Canadian component of the FSSF in July 1942, at the same time as 1 Canadian Parachute

Battalion. Initially, the Canadian component was given the designation 2nd Canadian Parachute Battalion (2 Cdn Para Bn). The name of this unit, however, was misleading. It was not a parachute battalion at all, but rather a commando unit. The designation was assigned for security reasons to cover the true nature of its operational mandate.² On 25 May 1943, the name was changed to reflect its real nature. It was re-designated the 1st Canadian Special Service Battalion and it represented the Canadian element of the joint US/Canadian First Special Service Force (FSSF).³

From the start, the Canadian Army took their commitment seriously and attempted to pick the best soldiers possible for this unique endeavour. Colonel Robert T. Frederick, the American commander of the FSSF, made it clear that he preferred that Canadian volunteers be chosen in the “lower ranks between 18 and 45 [years old], physically rugged and mentally agile, physically able and willing to take parachute training.”⁴ It became obvious to everyone concerned that superior physical fitness, experience, maturity, and youth were the cornerstones on which the FSSF would be forged.⁵ In addition, Frederick also stressed that it was imperative that each man be able to work efficiently independently or in small groups, regardless of the tactical situation or operational theatre. Ross Munro, the renowned Canadian war reporter, noted that the First Special Service Force “will be a continental edition of commandos of the British Army.” He added, “In selecting the men to make it up, emphasis will be placed on ‘youth, hardness and fitness.’”⁶

As the initial focus of the FSSF was to be sabotage, raiding and guerrilla type warfare, the Forcemen were trained in a wide spectrum of skills including parachuting, demolitions, unarmed combat, extensive weapons handling, mountaineering and arctic warfare. Physical fitness very quickly became the decisive selection tool. Only the hardest of men could persevere the training.

For instance, members of the FSSF were “capable of marching 35 miles a day across rough country or 90 miles without rest.”⁷

Notably, the Force was to be ready to deploy to Norway on 15 December 1942 for an arduous and very dangerous mission. As such, even as the FSSF was in the process of establishing itself, its training regime and tempo were in over-drive. Upon arrival members undertook their jump training, which in some cases, was all of 48 hours as opposed to the more standard three week course. In August 1942, journalist Don Mason captured the contemporary image of the force that was being created in Helena Montana where they were based. “The cream of Canada’s hard-fighting army youth,” he described, “is training in the United States today for ‘aerial commando’ raiding which one day soon will make the German and the Jap think cyclones have struck where they thought they were safe and secure.”⁸

However, by late 1942 it became clear that Operation Plough was not going to happen. There were three major impediments. First, Frederick’s request for the temporary diversion of 750 Lancaster bombers forecast for the middle of January 1943 to insert his formation hit an immediate wall. The intractable architect of Britain’s strategic bombing campaign Air Chief Marshal Charles Portal of the Royal Air Force (RAF) responded, “That is our best bomber.” He continued, “if you can show us where Plough can accomplish more in its operation than one thousand Lancasters could do on the bombing runs we shall consider the plane for your uses.”⁹

Frederick’s next dose of reality occurred when the Combined Operations Command planners briefed him on the Commando raiding program and, more importantly, the work of Brigadier Colin Gubbins’ Special Operations Executive (SOE) and their Norwegian sabotage campaign. Although the SOE had never even heard of the Plough Project, or the FSSF for that matter, they too had plans for sabotaging most of the targets that the FSSF was theoretically

earmarked to destroy. Significantly, Gubbins' plan required very few aircraft and only two or three Norwegian soldiers for each target.¹⁰

The final nail in the coffin resulted from Colonel Frederick's discussion with Major-General Hansteen, the Commander-in-Chief of the Norwegian Armed Forces. Hansteen bluntly informed Frederick that the King and Prime Minister of Norway opposed the concept of the Plough Project. They were concerned that the large-scale destruction of power would create a greater hardship on the Norwegian people than it would on the Germans. Notably, although they welcomed any assistance in ousting the occupying German forces, they did not wish to do so by destroying the vital industrial infrastructure that was key to Norway's economic well-being.¹¹

And so, with no apparent aircraft, no host country support and a competing organization that appeared to have a more efficient, more precise and less resource-intensive means of achieving the same goal, Colonel Frederick quickly realized that the Plough Project was doomed. Any doubt he may have harboured was quickly dashed when he returned to London to meet with Lord Mountbatten prior to his flight to Washington DC. The Chief of Combined Operations candidly explained to Frederick that the Plough Project was no longer a pressing issue. By this time Combined Operations and the whole raiding concept was under siege by the War Office. The Allied effort, particularly as a result of American might and industrial capacity, was slowly beginning to turn the tide of the war. Raiding and subversive activities, never fully supported by the mainstream military, were further marginalized as large scale conventional operations, such as the invasion of Northern Africa, took shape.

Moreover, Mountbatten had no means of influencing the release of aircraft and he conceded that SOE provided a more economical means of achieving the desired result, not to mention at a more

politically acceptable price for the Norwegian government in exile in London. As such, both men agreed to let Plough die. Frederick quickly sent a message to his formation in Helena, Montana. True to Frederick's character – it was short and to the point:

Suspend effort on present line...New plan may be radically different and not concerned with hydroelectric or other industrial installations...Cease training on hydroelectric installations and...stress general tactical training, to include attack of fortifications, pill boxes, barracks and troop concentrations. Change in weapons may be necessary to provide greater firepower, so suspend further small arms training pending a decision.¹²

On his return to North America, Colonel Frederick briefed General George Marshall, the American Army Chief of Staff. He then left for Montana unsure whether the FSSF would be continued or scrapped. That decision was now left with the General Staff to get a political decision. By 8 October 1942, the Canadian Chief of the General Staff forwarded a telegram to Lieutenant-General Andrew McNaughton, Canada's overseas commander, informing him of the latest turn of events. The Canadians were now waiting for the Americans to make known their intentions prior to articulating their continuing support.

However, Major-General J.C. Murchie's missive provided some telling clues. The alternatives considered were:

- A. Continue with Special Service Force if Americans so desire.
- B. Amalgamate with 1st Parachute Battalion.
- C. Disband and Disperse Personnel.
- D. Retain as an Ordinary Parachute Battalion For Service and Abroad.¹³

Importantly, Murchie highlighted the negative effects of options B, C and D. He stated each has the “disadvantage of unwelcome publicity over cancellation of highly publicized Special Service Forces as have B and C over apparent curtailment of our plans for Cdn [Canadian] Parachute Troops.”¹⁴

In due course the Americans decided to proceed with the FSSF. On 17 October, General Marshall informed Major-General Maurice Pope, the Chairman of the Canadian Joint Staff in Washington, DC that a decision was reached to retain the FSSF as a special unit.¹⁵ It was now up to the Canadians to confirm their continued participation. Although militarily a will to continue seemed to be present, the ultimate decision was the purview of the politicians.¹⁶ As such, the War Cabinet Committee discussed the issue on 28 October 1942. From a Canadian perspective the existence of the “elite” First Special Service Force was considered by the government to be of marginal operational value after its original mission was cancelled. The Minutes of the War Cabinet Committee noted, “Though the future employment of the unit was doubtful, beyond its existence as a ‘stand-by’ force, acceptance of the U.S. proposal [continue unit’s existence for special operations] was recommended as a token of intimate co-operation between the two countries.”¹⁷

As such, the FSSF became in many ways highly specialized infantry capable of a wide range of operations in virtually any terrain. In August 1943, the FSSF participated in the assault on Kiska Island. As the Japanese had already withdrawn from the Aleutians, the FSSF was quickly returned to the mainland and prepared for operations in Italy. Here the Force would make a name for itself.

Mount La Difensa

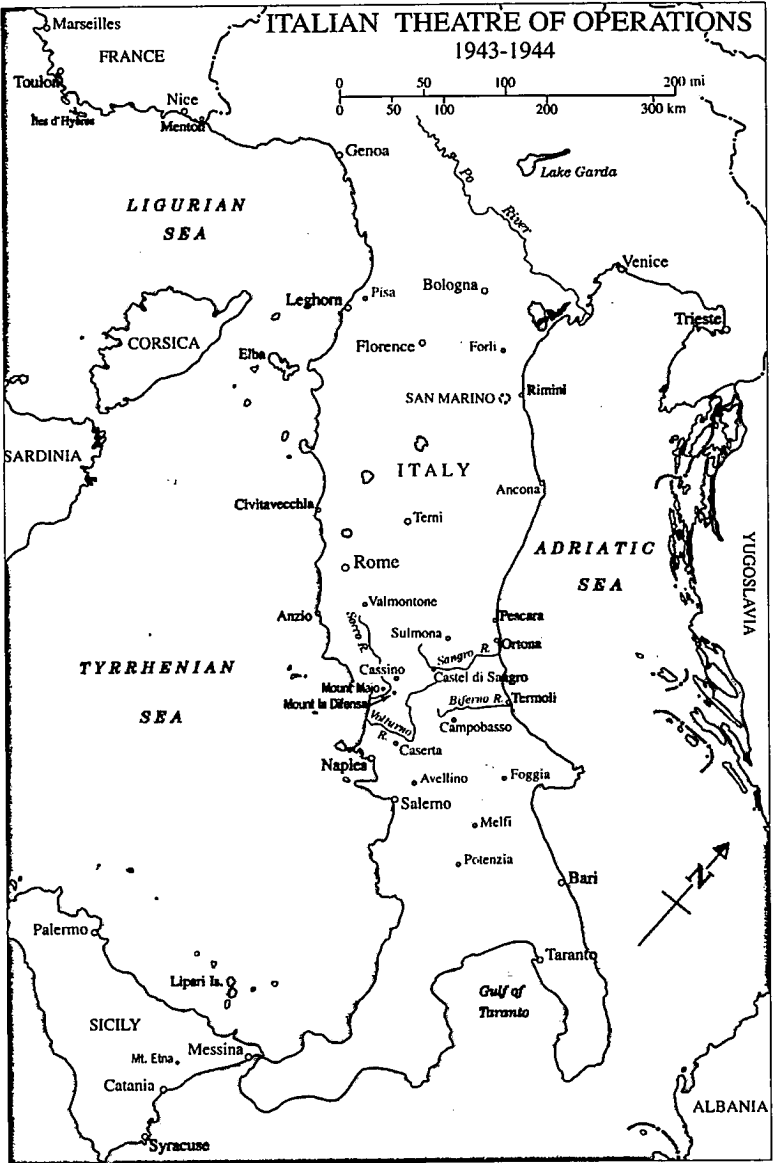
On 28 October 1943, the FSSF was finally deployed for overseas duty, specifically in the Mediterranean Area under the command

of General Dwight D. "Ike" Eisenhower.¹⁸ The Americans had begun planning for this eventuality shortly after the Plough Project was formally cancelled.¹⁹ Although the operation in Kiska provided a momentary distraction, US planners had all along determined that "military developments indicate a very profitable possible use for the Force in the Mediterranean area. Special training in demolitions and in ranger operations especially qualifies the First Special Service Force for such an enterprise. Planning is now proceeding with a view to using the Force for early action in Italy, Sardinia or Sicily."²⁰ As a result, the Canadian government had already given its approval for the American employment of the FSSF in the Mediterranean theatre two weeks previously.²¹

The Force arrived in Italy on 19 November 1943 and moved into a former German artillery barracks at Santa Maria Capua Vetere where they awaited their orders. Originally Eisenhower had earmarked the FSSF "as strong reconnaissance units for flank protection in the Apennines and for raids behind enemy lines and later possibly in the French Alps," as well as "for independent guerrilla and sabotage activities in Balkans and for support of groups."²² But on 22 November he assigned the FSSF to II Corps, US Fifth Army, under Major-General Geoffrey Keyes, who in turn reassigned the Force under operational command of the 36th Division under Major-General Fred L. Walker.

The Fifth Army, commanded by Lieutenant-General Mark Clark, was presently stuck. It had landed at Salerno, Italy on 9 September and managed to claw its way through a series of German defensive lines pushing the retreating German forces northwards up the Italian peninsula driving them up the Volturno River valley and into the mountainous interior. But progress began to grind to a halt in October as the autumn rains swelled streams and rivers, flooding the countryside and turning the terrain into mud. Bridges were washed out, roads, where they existed, deteriorated, trails turned to slop, and movement of any sort became difficult at best.

Map by William Constable



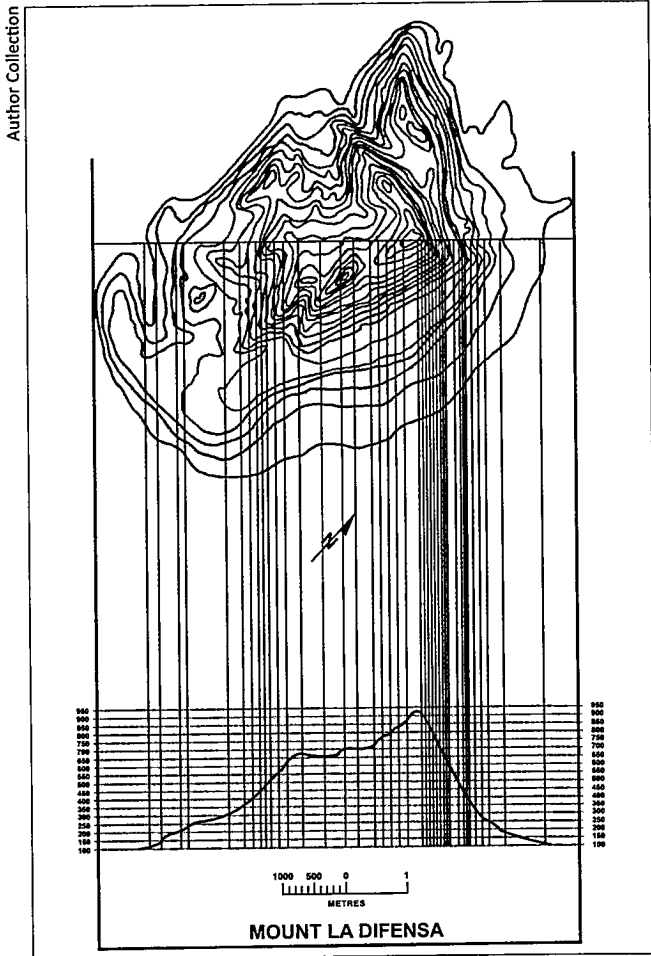
Moreover, the Germans now dug-in behind the Winter Line, which was a network of fortifications/defensive lines that were anchored by natural obstacles. The primary defensive line within

the defensive system was the "Gustav Line," which ran across Italy from the point just north of where the Garigliano River flows into the Tyrrhenian Sea in the West, through the formidable Apennine Mountains, to the Sangro River, where it empties into the Adriatic Sea in the East. There were also a number of secondary defensive lines that in total made up the "Winter Line."

By mid-November the Fifth Army was abruptly blocked at the southern end of this defensive network, specifically at the Mignano Gap, a natural choke-point leading to the Liri Valley and Rome. At Mignano, this component of the German Winter Line was anchored on Mount Sammucro to the north and the mountain chain mass of Mount Camino-Mount La Difensa-Mount Maggiore to the South. From this formidable mountain redoubt the Germans were able to dominate the approaches with a commanding view of the surrounding area. They combined this observation with artillery fire and as a result were able to rain a storm of steel on anything that moved on the approaches to their positions. Repeated Allied attempts at attacking the mountain strongholds in November resulted in failure and heavy casualties. In fact, the ground was so exposed to enemy fire that many of the American and British dead were left on the battlefield as it was impossible to collect them.²³

And so, with the arrival of the FSSF, generals Clark, Keyes and Walker had already made plans for the employment of the formation. On 24 November 1943, Keyes issued his orders for Operation Raincoat. The FSSF was soon to go into its first combat. The renewed Fifth Army offensive was based on a simultaneous two corps attack against Mount Camino and Mount La Difensa. On the left, British 56th Division was responsible for assaulting Mount Camino, while Keyes gave the task of seizing Mount La Difensa to the FSSF.²⁴ The simultaneous assault was paramount as the failure to take one would jeopardize the other as the German positions on either mountain dominated the approaches to the other.

As well, for the Allies, punching through the mountains was of the greatest importance to rejuvenate the offensive and drive towards Rome.



Mount La Difensa topographical profile.

Clearly, their first mission was not an easy one. Mount La Difensa stood out as an unassailable wall against the Allied advance up the Italian peninsula. The 2nd Regiment was given the task of lead

assaulting regiment. Colonel D.D. Williamson gathered some of his key staff and conducted an initial reconnaissance of the mountain on 24 November 1943. What they saw was disconcerting. "It is very high and rugged and promises real difficulties in getting up even without German opposition," the war diarist noted.²⁵

Their dismay is not hard to understand. Mount La Difensa was a formidable terrain feature. The only accessible path to its summit was the southern slope that formed a natural ramp to the top. This ramp emptied out onto a high altitude depression shaped like a saucer.

Initial forays seemed to reinforce the conventional wisdom, namely the only approach was the southern ramp. However, key to the process was the continuing efforts of Lieutenant-Colonel Tom MacWilliam, the Commanding Officer (CO) of the 1st Battalion, 2nd Regiment who Williamson tasked as responsible for spear-heading the attack. He assigned a small team consisting of his Deputy Commanding Officer (DCO), Major Ed Thomas, and 1st Company Officer Commanding (OC), Captain Bill Rothlin, as well as two scouts Sergeants Tommy Fenton and Howard Van Ausdale, to conduct a more detailed assessment.

At first they made little progress in the thick bush and bramble at the foot of the mountain. But Van Ausdale, a North American Native possessing an uncanny eye for ground and totally at home in the wilderness, seemed to find a possible solution. He was attracted to the large 60-metre cliffs on the north side of the mountain and the obscure little trail leading to their base. The northern route had its appeal. The approach was considered impassable, therefore, the enemy would most likely not bother to defend it. Moreover, the Forcemen all had mountaineering training so they should be able to scale the cliffs. It was risky but offered to greatly surprise the enemy if they succeeded.

Williamson bought off on the approach and proposed it to Colonel Frederick. Before agreeing to the plan the Commander of the FSSF arranged for a piper cub aircraft to fly him over the objective to get a better look at the terrain. Seeing the ground from a bird's eye view he quickly realized the northern approach was the only viable solution to seizing the mountain without decimating his ranks.

The plan was now set. On the evening of 1 December, the Force departed Santa Maria at approximately 1600 hours and moved forward to a bivouac area at the base of the mountain. The ride to the front line was nerve wracking. "The sky lit up sporadically with great flashes of light as darkness fell," Donald Mackinnon recalled, continuing "Guns, big guns deemed to be firing all around us." He remembered, "The noise was deafening and as the sky was illuminated we could see the surrounding mountains and lower clouds." What always stuck with him was the fact that "There was a menacing feeling about it."²⁶ He was not far off the mark.

Courtesy JFK Special Warfare Museum.



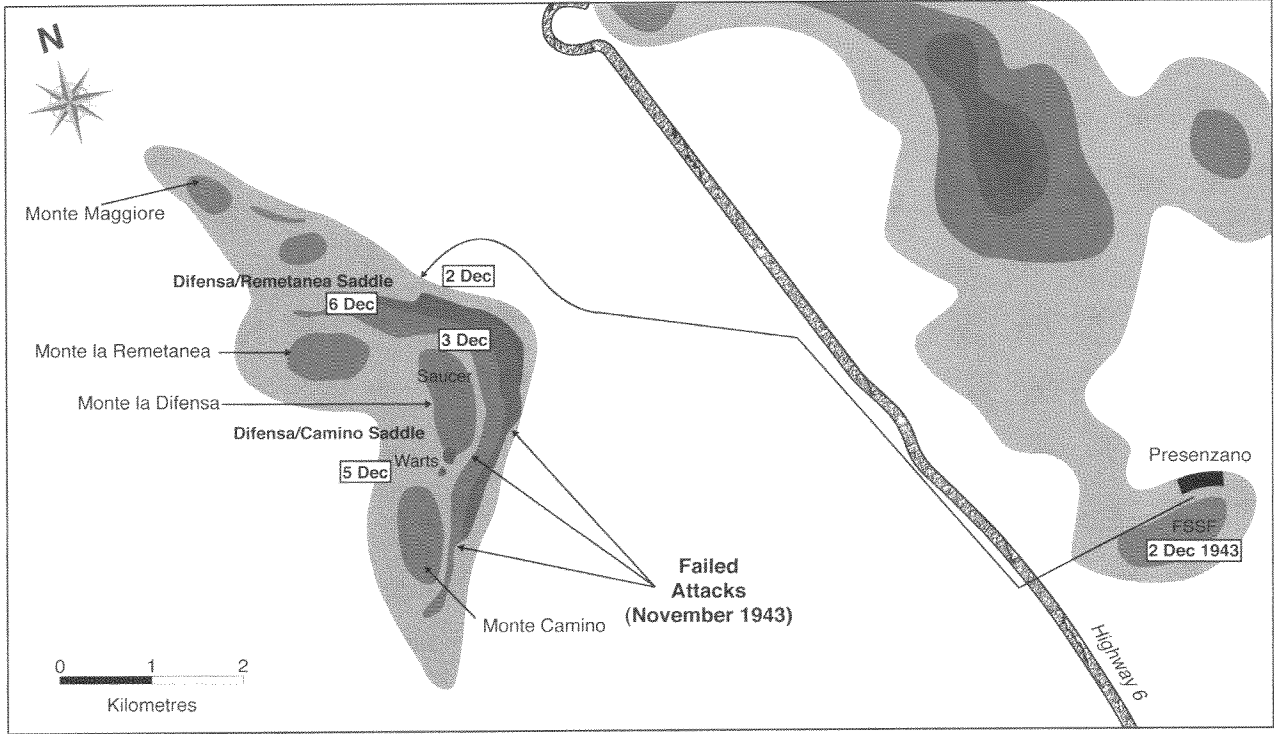
Colonel A.C. Marshall and his 1st Regiment on the mountain.

Once they off-loaded from the trucks at Presenzano, they had a 16 kilometer march through the mud to their bivouac area. The 1st Regiment, which was the divisional reserve, and the 3rd Regiment remained at the base of the mountain ready to support the attack on La Difensa. Frederick also tasked them with providing stretcher bearers and transporting supplies up the mountain once it was secured. "Once we arrived at the base of the mountain," remembered Private Eugene Forward, "we were told to make ourselves as comfortable as possible and wait for further developments." He continued:

During this time 2nd Regiment was making its way up the mountain. This waiting period was terrible. We were soaking wet. Our cigarettes, our Life Savers candies, and our tooth powder turned into mush. Everything we had was wet. We checked our weapons and we were told to make sure that our .45s were not stuck in the holsters.²⁷

Another veteran had a similar recollection. He explained, "The base of the mountain was slop, reminiscent of a World War I battlefield."²⁸

For the 2nd Regiment, however, the march was not over. They now moved further on foot to a bivouac area on the eastern slope of Mount La Difensa. The march was slow and tedious in the heavy mud and the 2nd Regiment did not reach its destination until 0600 hours on 2 December 1943. Fortuitously, the day opened up with clear skies and a bright sun. This weather allowed the Forcemen to attempt to dry their equipment, cook a warm meal on a mountain stove and clean their weapons. The enemy, however, remained active and the Forcemen had to exercise caution as the mountain approaches were under constant enemy observation and fire.



Mount La Difensa operations 2-6 December 1943

Finally, at 1830 hours, 2nd Regiment commenced its move into the assembly area. Not surprisingly, it proved to be a challenge in itself. Heavy fog, pouring rain and deep mud made the move to the forward jumping off position an ordeal. Lieutenant Adna H. Underhill recalled:

Second Regiment continued to slog forward. The rain also continued, and the only light was the flash of artillery shells exploding above them on the mountain. Otherwise, it was pitch black. With every man carrying from 75 to 100 pounds and with footing varying from slippery rocks to six inches of mud, thoughts of personal injury faded from mind and were replaced with a dull determination to reach whatever objective was planned for the night.²⁹

At approximately 2200 hours the 2nd Regiment reached the base of the cliffs and were in position to begin the ascent. At about the 610 metre level the mountain abruptly transformed into a sheer cliff. To the Forcemen it appeared as if the mountain rose "straight up in solid gray walls."³⁰ Lieutenant Mitchell recalled, "The mountain loomed over us and the echo of artillery through the mountains gave an eerie feeling. When our artillery shells exploded on the top, the smoke would drool down the face of the mountain and gave a spooky appearance."³¹

To soften up the enemy fortifications and cover the approach, a diversionary bombardment blanketed the German positions on the summit of La Difensa and Mount Camino. The bombardment was impressive by any standard. Approximately 925 guns from US II Corps and British X Corps hammered the objective areas. The quantity of ordnance dropped on Mount La Difensa, also known as Hill 960, prompted many of the Forcemen to call it "the million dollar mountain."

With the thunder of artillery in the background the 2nd Regiment now stood in front of their last obstacle prior to engaging the

enemy. The moment of truth had arrived - was there a passable route to the top? Scouts Van Ausdale and Fenton clambered off into the night followed by men carrying coils of ropes to string out and create two fixed lines that others could use to assist with the ascent. The scouts clawed their way up, their arm and leg muscles straining as they desperately sought hand-holds in the dark and forced their hands and toes into crevices and cracks in the wall face. Luckily in places the sheer cliffs softened into steep grades that made the climb a bit easier. Van Ausdale also found a natural chimney in the rock formation that created a steep but climbable channel to the summit. After what seemed like an eternity the two scouts reached the top. They had found a route that they believed would support the assault. Importantly, they had installed fixed lines to help others make the ascent.

The scouts now returned to report their success to Lieutenant-Colonel T.C. MacWilliam, the CO of the 1st Battalion, 2nd Regiment. Then at around 0100 hours, Frederick gave the 2nd Regiment the go-ahead. The scouts gathered up their weapons and equipment and proceeded to make their way up the mountain for the second time. This trip, however, the remainder of the 1st Battalion followed. The lead assaulting battalion went in relatively light with only weapons, ammunition and small packs. Their plan was to get all three companies up the cliff and then for all to shake out into extended line (1st Coy left, 2nd Coy in the centre and 3rd Coy right) for the actual attack on the German positions. The 2nd Battalion, in reserve, followed. They were less fortunate as they climbed with packs weighing anywhere from 35-50 kilograms consisting of additional weapons, ammunition and equipment to consolidate the position once captured.³²

At the bottom of the cliff, on a narrow ledge, Frederick had set-up his forward formation command post (CP) and anxiously awaited to hear reports on progress. Meanwhile, with the Allied

bombardment blanketing the summit, the Germans quickly realized something was afoot and began to drop their own mortar and artillery fire on the approaches to the mountain hoping to catch the advancing troops. Their fire, however, was far from the cliffs on the north side of the mountain.

Despite the weather and terrain, the assault was apparently progressing well. The scouts, particularly Van Ausdale, had chosen the route well. In the words of his peers "[Van Ausdale] got us to the top that night."³³ Major Edward H. Thomas, a key proponent of the northern approach plan, described:

The difficulty of the climb with combat loads was compounded by the dark night and the wet, treacherous terrain. Scrambling in the dark up the rocky trail with every foot and handhold doubtful demanded superhuman effort by men loaded with weapons, ammunition, radios and litters. To our ears, every rock displaced clattered downhill with sound magnified a thousand times and raised the question in our minds, 'did the enemy hear this?', a not very comforting thought.³⁴

Sergeant Bert Hopkins captured it more succinctly. He remembered:

We climbed the back of the mountain. It was quite a cliff. We had ropes, we went up. It went well. It was raining, and it covered the noise. Sometimes rocks became loose and fell, but we got to the top unimpeded.³⁵

The Force intelligence officer was another who captured the feat of the 2nd Regiment assault element when he explained:

The difficulty involved in this move comes into sharp focus when it is remembered the cliff face of La Difensa

begins at 2,000 foot level and extends upwards at a pitch of 60 or 70 degrees for approximately another 1,000 feet. This was the cleft that 600 riflemen, carrying packs which would have forced lesser men to the ground, negotiated without a sound. They groped for crevices with frozen hands while stretching their muscles to the aching point to keep from sliding backwards. Like so many snakes, the sections crawled over the cliff face and, singly, broke over the rim.³⁶

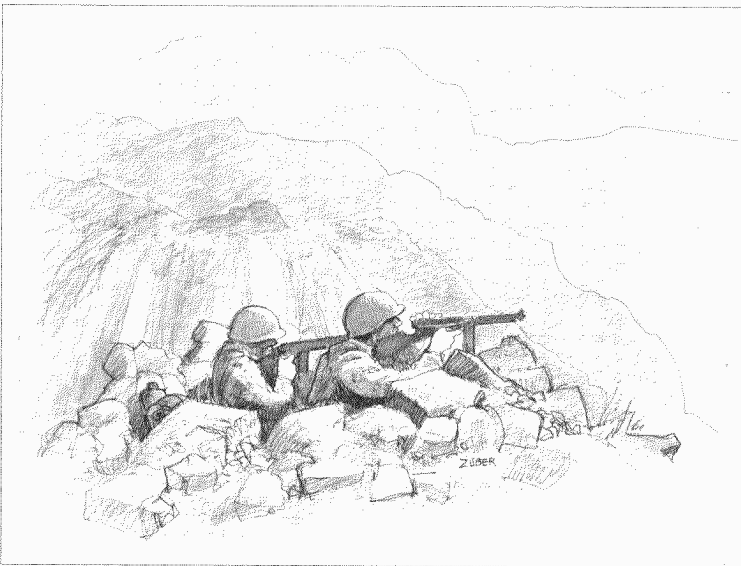
The progress made was laudable. After all, the difficulty of the terrain was only one of the challenges. The conditions were extreme. Rain and fog made everything difficult. One company commander gave simple final instructions. "In this damned fog," he declared, "we may miscalculate, but Jerry can't see any more than we can, and once the shooting starts, we'll know where he is. Lay down fire and move in with bayonet, grenades and Tommy guns."³⁷

Once they reached the top of the cliff, they still had approximately 100 metres of rocky ground to cover, which was buried under two to six inches of snow, before they reached their objective. 1st Company cleared the rim at 0300 hours and spread out into skirmish line and slowly crept forward. By 0430 hours, although having lost contact with the 1st Company, the 2nd Company was in position and radioed its headquarters to let them know the crest of the mountain was just ahead.

Moments later Colonel Williamson, who with his regimental CP party had fallen in behind the 2nd Battalion to work his way to the top of the summit, passed on the message to Frederick at his forward CP. The importance of the message stemmed from the fact that the 142nd Regiment was waiting for word that the FSSF had seized the peak of La Difensa so that they could begin their assault on Mount Maggiore. As Williamson and his team were approximately 75 metres from the crest word filtered back that the

1st Battalion had lost contact with its 1st Company in the gloomy pre-dawn darkness. At the same time a German machine pistol fired into the night in the distance. Williamson apparently fearing that the plan was unravelling quickly decided to return down the mountain to report the turn of events to Frederick personally since he was unsure if the radios were working properly.³⁸

Despite the absence of the regimental Commander, the plan continued to play out. Only 3rd Company was still to reach its assault position. Then suddenly, at approximately 0530 hours, as the lead battalion had reached the summit in entirety and was preparing to position itself for the assault, in the foggy pitch darkness, the tranquility of the mountain top exploded as the Germans suddenly realized they were no longer alone. Beginning slowly with the crack of gunfire, it soon turned into a roar as a torrent of steel blanketed the mountain top as mortars, machine guns and rifle fire swept the summit of La Difensa.³⁹



Artwork by Ted Zuber.

FSSF fighting position on the top of La Difensa.

Sergeant Hopkins asserted, "When we reached the top we regrouped in our platoons and sections. One of our recce teams went forward and came across some Germans. That got things going." He noted, "After the initial contact they [Germans] fought hard. They were entrenched in foxholes."⁴⁰ Don Mackinnon's recollection was similar:

We [3rd pl, 1st Coy] reached the top without challenge. The Germans had not set up defensive positions above the cliffs assuming that this approach was unassailable. I don't recall great difficulty in the rope climb but it had to have been a very difficult task with the weapons and gear we were carrying. Knuckles, shins and knees took a terrific beating but fear and urgency gave us the adrenalin and strength necessary to keep moving up. Once on the top we started along a narrow rough and rocky path toward the German positions concentrated in a saucer-like area ahead of us. It seemed quieter now as we tried to make as little noise as possible. Second and third platoons were close behind us on the path. The whole company had reached the top without detection. We had got further than any earlier assaults and had achieved the element of surprise so necessary to the success that followed. Suddenly the sound of rocks falling, a German voice challenging our two scouts. All hell broke loose! 5th Section dove behind a small ridge of rocks immediately in front of them. 6th Section sprawled to the left in a more exposed position. German machine gun fire was withering, hitting the rocks in front of us and spraying shale all around us.⁴¹

The CO of the 2nd Regiment, Lieutenant-Colonel T.C. MacWilliam, adhering to Frederick's dictum of commanding from the front, accompanied the advance platoon of 1st Company. When the firing began he was already near the rim of the saucer. Despite heavy

fire and a desperate, savage struggle against a tenacious foe, MacWilliam and his lead company seized the peak of the mountain. From a shell hole at the summit, at the forward most position of the assault, he now directed the attack against the remaining enemy positions. The situation was tenuous. The lead company had taken severe casualties in the chaotic struggle to take the summit. Adding to the confusion, MacWilliam had temporarily lost contact with 2nd and 3rd Companies during the arduous climb up the cliff. And, to make matters worse, the newly taken position was subjected to heavy mortar fire and incessant sniper fire.

Sergeant Chauffeur, a platoon sergeant remembered, "We were green. When we hit the first hedge above the cliff some mortars came in. The blast scared us and we froze. Then they really began to work us over. We crouched there and guys began going down on all sides of me."⁴² Alan Blackwell remembered the visual effect of the battlefield as they prepared to assault. "I can honestly say," he wrote, "it was like walking into hell."⁴³

The initial assault allowed the 2nd Regiment to gain a solid foothold around the north rim of the saucer. The fighting was confused and savage in the early morning murkiness. "Visibility continued to be close to zero," recalled Lieutenant Underhill, "Unless a breeze scattered the fog, it was almost impossible to distinguish objects more than ten feet away."⁴⁴

Individuals and small groups slowly clawed their way through the German positions. One veteran recalled, "As Lieutenant Karl D. Kaash led his platoon into the gloom, two more enemy machine-guns were rattling to the front with such volume that he ordered the platoon into a firing line for support. Taking two men he advanced on the guns. Caught on the flank, the first machine-gun crew surrendered intact, similar tactics caught the second crew still firing when a hand-grenade silenced the gun. Few enemy were found alive."⁴⁵

The 3rd Platoon, 1st Company now confronted what seemed like the highest point of the mountain plateau. Here the Germans had built a complex of fortifications in caves and pillboxes that seemingly were left untouched by the Allied bombardment. From here six enemy machine guns protected the northern approach. Sheets of flame indicated there were at least three machine gun positions busy firing out into the early morning murkiness. As the 3rd Platoon lay down a wall of fire, the remaining two platoons of 1st Company, as well as 2nd Company in its entirety, moved quickly into positions on the flank of 3rd Platoon and lent weight to their firepower. This effort forced the Germans out of their positions and they withdrew across the saddle to Mount Remetanea, which was also known as Hill 907.

Private Loring Waling explained, "It was a vicious battle for a short time, and after the battle there were a lot of counter attacks, the enemy used mortars terrifically."⁴⁶ It was not long before Frederick himself scrambled up the cliff and made his way to the summit where a pitched battle for the saucer-like top of the mountain was still raging. The bitter battle for control of the summit was waged by all ranks. Corporal Gordon H. Baker noted, "senior officers fought as savagely and unrelentingly as the enlisted men alongside of them."⁴⁷

During the bitter struggle came a defining moment for the FSSF. As the popular legend goes, Captain Bill Rothlin and his troops had trapped a group of Germans in a gun emplacement. A German emerged carrying a white flag of surrender. As Captain Rothlin moved forward one of the other Germans in the group shot Rothlin in the face, killing him instantly. "Our group machine-gunned the rest of the enemy with all the fire-power they had," acknowledged one veteran who was apparently present. It was from that moment, that many veterans insist that the FSSF adopted a "take no prisoners" policy.⁴⁸

Yet, Joe Glass, who was reportedly beside Captain Rothlin when he was shot provides a different account. Glass insists that Captain Rothlin and Syd Gath crawled up to his position. Glass promptly told them that there were white flags going up everywhere but one German, who had pinned Glass down, was not surrendering. Before Glass could warn them to keep their heads down, both peered up over the rock and were instantly shot by the German who refused to capitulate.⁴⁹

By 0700 hours, the summit belonged to the FSSF. Despite the chaos, MacWilliam calmly moved about consolidating his newly won position against the inevitable counterattack. Once he gained sufficient control of his unit he quickly organized an assault on Mount Remetanea. He wanted to strike out while the Germans were disorganized before they could consolidate in a new defensive position. However, as he stood up to lead the way a sudden mortar barrage seemingly targeted his command group killing him and wounding others in his party. Major Thomas, the DCO, assumed command and cancelled the follow-on attack. He was concerned about the shortage of ammunition, the weakened state of the 2nd Regiment and the uncertainty of the enemy strength. Colonel Frederick, who had left his forward CP when his radios failed, agreed with the decision and passed a message through his CP to higher headquarters that the attack would be delayed until the arrival of ammunition, reinforcements and resupply.⁵⁰

This state of affairs did not mean, however, that Frederick was content to sit idle. He ensured the 2nd Regiment consolidated their position and sent out patrols to determine the enemy's whereabouts.

On the mountain top, Frederick began to spawn the legend of his courage. Private Pat O'Neill described, "With bullets raking the air, Frederick moved from unit to unit, sending out patrols and placing men in outposts, to gradually widen the piece of territory

we held.”⁵¹ Sergeant Gray, a Force scout remembered, “I always thought I got as far in front of the fighting lines as anybody. But, no matter how far ahead I got, the Colonel was always farther. He was always closer to being shot than anybody.”⁵²

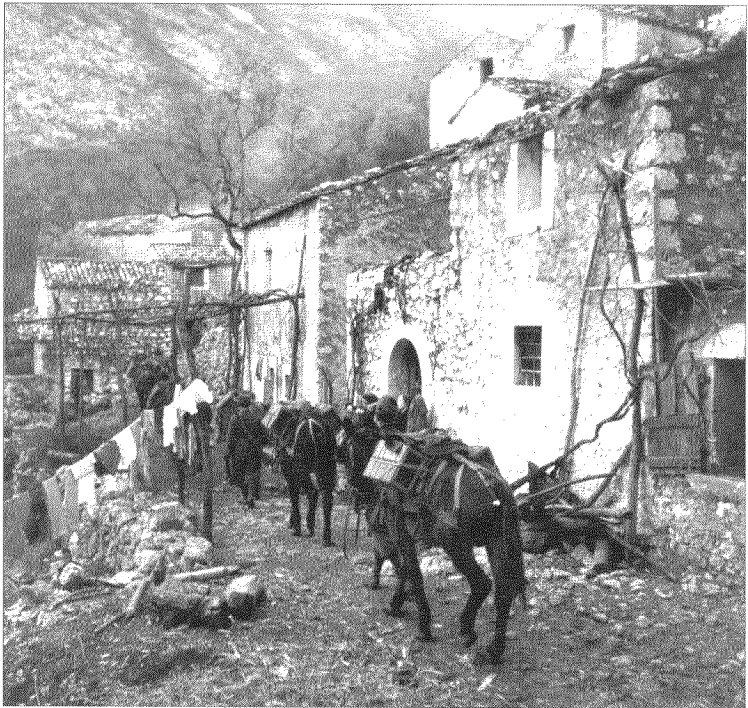
Although the day had started well for the Allies, they were not out of the woods yet. The FSSF held the top of Mount La Difensa. The British had managed to seize a portion of Mount Camino and the 142nd Regiment had eventually captured Mount Maggiore. However, all was tenuous as the Germans still held the saddle between La Difensa and Camino, as well as Mount Remetanea and were using their positions to pulverize the Allies who occupied the recently won mountain tops. By end of the day the Germans had also pushed the British off the Camino heights and had retaken the monastery.

The 2nd Regiment continued to send out patrols to probe both approaches and defences around Hill 907, as well as to clear out pockets of German marksmen who were sniping and causing increasing casualties among the Forcemen on the summit. The patrols reported strong enemy dispositions south of the Remetanea Ridge. In light of the continuing shortage of men and ammunition, Williamson, who had made his way back up the mountain, proposed to postpone the attack on Hill 907 until the following dawn.

Frederick approved the delay. However, he was also taking pressure from his immediate boss, the Commander of the 36th Division. The failure to take Hill 907 meant that the Germans could continue to fire on Mount Maggiore and endanger the 142nd Regiment’s continued occupation of that objective. Moreover, the enemy could use Hill 907 as a jumping off base to launch counterattacks against La Difensa as well. Despite the heavy casualties the Germans suffered, Frederick and his commanders fully realized that there were still a large number of German forces assembled close by. As such, he directed Williamson to ensure strong patrols were dispatched

to keep the enemy pinned down and to use maximum artillery fire to both prepare the objective for the upcoming assault, as well as to disrupt their ability to fire on friendly forces.

By 1700 hours, the first of the ammunition resupply arrived. The effort to keep the troops at the summit of La Difensa resupplied for continuing combat became a battle within a battle. Sergeant R. E. Blake noted, "We just carried packs no weapons, just food, water and ammo. It was a very difficult trail." He lamented, "We couldn't use mules because it was too steep for them. We became the mules."⁵³ Lieutenant J.D. Mitchell recalled, "We had our packboards loaded with supplies and we could hear the fireworks at the top. It was solely an infantry action - man to man and no one could do anything for support."⁵⁴



Photographer Fredrick G. Whitcombe, DND/LAC, PA 115709.

Mule team carrying supplies to Forcemen on the top of the mountain, 1944.

But if the steep, wet, narrow trails and heavy loads were not enough of an obstacle, the remaining German positions still had complete observation over sections of the resupply trails. Not surprisingly they used their mortars and artillery to good effect to continually hammer the resupply effort. Mitchell wrote with some understatement, "We had to climb that mountain every night to keep them supplied...the dash across that zeroed area [by German artillery] with a load on your back, was tiring to say the least."⁵⁵ Sergeant George Wright explained, "The Germans were applying a sweeping fire from one end of the trail and then swept back. As they were pounding that trail and they were also bombing both ends of it to cut off the escape routes. Their shell and bombs were being guided by snipers who were firing tracers to direct their fire."⁵⁶

Follow-On Operations

By the morning of 4 December 1943, the Allied situation was under control but still tenuous. The night had brought pouring rain and a bone chilling fog. For the exhausted troops manning the perimeter, under constant mortar and shell fire, and with insufficient clothing and blankets, it was a long miserable night. Major-Gerald McFadden recalled, "Dawn broke on a horrible scene. First light came through a dripping fog, which was a God-send for us. I tried to get in touch with other officers of the company, and rally their platoons. They were scattered all over."⁵⁷

That morning the 2nd Regiment was reinforced by the 1st Coy, 3rd Regiment. Colonel Frederick sent the remainder of the 3rd Regiment back down the hill to assist with the transport of supplies to the top of the mountain. In addition, since Colonel A.C. Marshall's 1st Regiment was still idle in divisional reserve, the 36th Division commander had released its 1st Battalion, led by Lieutenant-Colonel Bill Becket, the previous afternoon to reinforce the

2nd Regiment prior to the attack on Hill 907. However, by the morning of 4 December, Becket had still not arrived. It appeared they lost their way on the mountain in the dark.

As dawn broke Frederick postponed the 0400 hours attack on Mount Remetanea. Interrogation of German prisoners the previous day revealed an enemy counterattack was planned for the morning of the 4th. FSSF patrols seemed to corroborate the information when they discovered strong pockets of Germans massing just south of the Remetanea Ridge. Lieutenant-Colonel Robert Moore, CO of the 2nd Battalion (2nd Regiment), recalled, "In the process of moving, the rumor spread that a counterattack was being made by the enemy. On the basis of this, the attack was called off and the entire regiment remained alert until daylight."⁵⁸

The plan was now to wait out the counterattack and then assault Hill 907 on the morning of the 5th. Strong patrols were sent out in the rain in attempt to work their way through the cloud bank that had settled on the top of the mountain and scour the entire area to locate the enemy. Throughout the day the Germans pounded the summit with mortar and shell fire.

Patrols had captured German prisoners who were promptly questioned on the enemy's intent to counterattack. It became evident that the Germans too were suffering from the heavy casualties and difficulties in resupply in the mountain. Nonetheless, they reported that a battalion level attack was to occur at 0300 hours on the morning of 5 December. A report by an Allied artillery observer who saw approximately 400 enemy troops massing to the southwest of Hill 907 lent credence to the prisoners' statements. Moore recounted, "On the basis of this, artillery covering fire was called to our front to break up any possible assembly of force on the part of the enemy, and the regiment again maintained on the alert throughout the night. The planned attack [on Hill 907] was called off."⁵⁹

The morning of 5 December showed some promise. The previous night several cases of whiskey accompanied the resupply run allowing each soldier several ounces of spirits. Moreover, Lieutenant-Colonel Becket and his 1st Battalion (1st Regiment) arrived. Frederick ordered them to relieve 2nd Regiment and take up their defensive positions so that Williamson's troops could prepare for a daylight assault that afternoon. The British seemed on the verge of finally clinching the Camino monastery and Allied patrols throughout the area reported an apparent thinning out of German forces. As such, Frederick felt confident that he could finally push the Germans from the adjacent mountain.

Courtesy Canadian Airborne Forces Museum (CAFM).



German fighting position in the mountains.

At approximately 1300 hours, Major Walter Gray, who replaced Major Thomas, who was wounded the day before, as the CO of the 1st Battalion (2nd Regiment) led a four company strong battalion on the attack.⁶⁰ Halfway to Hill 907, the enemy poured a withering fire into the advancing troops forcing them to dig-in a

hasty defensive position on a knoll while they sent out patrols to determine the exact enemy positions.

With the 1st Battalion pinned down, Williamson deployed his 2nd Battalion, reinforced with 2nd Company (1st Regiment), to the southeast to clear the saddle of known German positions. They too quickly came under heavy fire and, in a desperate, savage battle that was pressed from the flanks with bayonet and grenades, the Forcemen captured a series of “knobs” in the saddle that had been held by the Germans. As night fell, the FSSF was perched to drive home the attack the following day. Throughout the night there were no signs of a German counterattack and it even appeared as if the enemy was in the process of a general withdrawal.

The morning of 6 December broke clear and sunny. The 1st Battalion launched its attack and advanced down the ridge to Hill 907. Its only resistance was long range harassing machine gun fire from Mount Camino. By noon Mount Remetanea was seized with no opposition. Gray exploited by sending two companies down the valley towards Rocca d’Evandro. Frederick captured the moment with a situation report to his higher headquarters:

Situation at present [6 December - 1200 hours]: We have troops down to our left boundary at [the saddle] and have consolidated for defense of the area south of la Difensa. Our attack to the west against Hill 907 has progressed beyond the crest of 907. We are receiving much machine-gun and mortar fire from several directions, principally from the draw running southwest from la Difensa, from west foothills of Maggiore and from north slopes of Camino. We are endeavoring to place artillery support fire on the troublesome areas but it is difficult due to very low visibility and the British restrictions on our artillery fire.

I shall push the attack to the west on past Hill 907 as far as condition of men will permit. Men are getting in bad shape from fatigue, exposure and cold.

German snipers are giving us hell and it is extremely difficult to catch them. They are hidden all through the area and shoot burst at any target.

Please press relief of troops from this position as every additional day here will mean two more days necessary for recuperation before next mission. They are willing and eager, but are becoming exhausted.

Communication are heart-breaking. Mortar fire (and travel on trail) knock out lines faster than we can repair them. Every time we transmit by radio enemy drops mortar on location.

German reinforcements approach up draw southwest of Camino, but I am unable to tell whether they are reinforcing or attempting to organize

In my opinion, unless British take Camino before dark today it should be promptly attacked by us from the north. The locations we hold are going to be uncomfortable as long as enemy holds north slopes of Camino.⁶¹

That night the FSSF consolidated its gains and sent patrols out to ensure they maintained dominance over the area. For their part, the British pounded the monastery at Camino and the next morning stormed it. By the morning of 7 December British patrols linked up with the FSSF on the saddle. Although the German withdrawal became clearly evident, they had left behind a small rear guard that continued to snipe and harass with mortars. As such, the remainder of the day and night were spent tying in with the

British and other 36th Division elements on the Camino - La Difensa - Maggiore mountain mass and clearing the last pockets of German resistance. Finally, on the afternoon of 8 December, the 142nd Regiment began to arrive to relieve the exhausted FSSF.

Although the summit of La Difensa was seized after only two hours of fighting, the struggle to capture the entire mountain mass dragged on. In the end, the Force remained on the top of the mountain summit for six days. Throughout they fought a tenacious enemy as well as the harsh environment. Battered by cold, wind, fog, ice and rain and surviving off of limited rations and often muddy water, the FSSF soldiers appeared as apparitions as they descended the mountain on 9 December. One American soldier remarked, "they all looked alike." He observed, "Their faces were gray, expressionless, and their clothes caked with mud and blood."⁶² One of the veterans explained, "The impact of hell can only be felt by those who face it. Its description is only words."⁶³

Colonel Williamson noted, "In the attack on Difensa everything was sacrificed to carry ammunition and supplies." He explained, "The men carried no blankets only ground sheets."⁶⁴ By 9 December 1943 the survivors of the battle returned to their base camp at Santa Maria. The cost had been horrific. The Canadian contingent lost two officers and 25 other ranks (OR) killed or missing and two officers and 84 ORs wounded. The Force in total lost nine officers and 71 ORs killed or missing, with another 11 officers and 339 ORs wounded. These numbers amounted to a casualty rate of approximately 23 per cent.⁶⁵

Outcome

And so, the Force had demonstrated in its first combat that it consisted of courage and determination. Lieutenant-General Mark Clark praised the actions of the Force and awarded them a Commander's Commendation:

The Special Service Force was given the task of capturing La Difensa, an extremely difficult piece of high ground in the Mt. Maggiore hill mass, the position of which was vital to our further advance in that sector. The mission was carried out at night in spite of adverse weather conditions and heavy enemy rifle, machine gun, mortar and artillery fire on the precipitous slopes over which it was necessary to attack. Furthermore, the position was maintained despite counter-attacks and difficulties of communication and supply. The fact that you have acquitted yourself well in your first action under open fire is a tribute to fine leadership and a splendid reward for time spent in arduous training.⁶⁶

Clark was not alone in his praise. Major-General Geoffrey Keyes sent a note to Colonel Frederick that stated, "I am fully cognizant of the stubbornness of the enemy and the difficulties of weather and terrain encountered in this seizure of Mt. Difensa and Hill 907 [Mount Remetanea], and of the bravery, fortitude, and resourcefulness with which your command overcame them."⁶⁷ Nonetheless, perhaps the greatest praise came from the British prime minister, Winston Churchill, who stated after the battle of La Difensa, "If we'd had a dozen like him [Frederick], we would have smashed Hitler in 1942. He's the greatest general of all time."⁶⁸ Without doubt, the FSSF amazing accomplishment earned itself a name in military legend.

Epilogue

After a short rest period the Force was sent back into the mountains to seize Mount Sammacro, Hill 720 and Mount Majo. Then on 1 February 1944, it was sent to the Anzio beachhead to assist in thwarting the Germans from pushing the Allied salient back into the sea. Here the FSSF reinforced its reputation for

aggressiveness and tenacity. Despite their light armament and only approximately 1,200 all ranks, they held 13 kilometres of frontline along the Mussolini Canal. Through aggressive night raiding they struck fear into the enemy who believed they were facing up to a small division. The German soldiers were so terrified by the FSSF raids that they nick-named the Forcemen the “Black Devils.” In the subsequent break-out phase the FSSF advanced on Rome and became the first Allied troops to enter the Eternal City. Upon its capture and a brief period of rest and recuperation the Force seized two of the Hyères Islands in the Mediterranean Sea to protect the left flank of the landings on the French Riviera in August 1944. The FSSF then joined the Sixth Army Group in the advance through Southern France.

The Canadian component of the FSSF, however, proved to be problematic for the Canadian government. Facing a manning shortage and, as a result, a conscription crisis, the continuing demands to provide reinforcements for the FSSF, which was difficult to administer and in the context of the dying days of the war was also arguably redundant, prompted the Canadian government to make a simple decision. The time had come to pull the Canadians from the Force. As such, the FSSF was disbanded at Villeneuve-Loubet, France, on 5 December 1944.

Colonel Bernd Horn, OMM, MSM, CD, PhD is a retired experienced Regular Force infantry officer who has held key command and staff appointments in the Canadian Armed Forces, including Deputy Commander of CANSOFCOM, Commanding Officer of the 1st Battalion, The Royal Canadian Regiment and Officer Commanding 3 Commando, the Canadian Airborne Regiment. He is currently the Director of the CANSOFCOM Professional Development Centre. Dr. Horn is also an adjunct professor of history at the Royal Military College of Canada and Norwich University. He has authored, co-authored, edited or co-edited 35 books and over a hundred chapters/articles on military history, leadership and military affairs.

B. Horn



FSSF shoulder patch.



Mount La Difensa as seen from Hill 720.



Mount La Difensa's imposing position astride the gateway to the Liri Valley.



The southern approach to the summit of Mount La Difensa.

B. Horn



The North face, which was scaled by the Forcemen.
The narrow ledge where Colonel Frederick made his temporary HQ can be seen at the bottom of the cliff.



Once a top the cliff, the Forcemen had to navigate across approximately 100 metres of uneven ground strewn by large boulders before they could assault the rear of the German positions.

B. Horn



The bowl at the top of La Difensa.



The dominating position of Mount Camino seen from the bowl.

B. Horn



FSSF fighting position facing in the direction of Mount Remetanea.

B. Horn



Fog cloaking the top of Mount La Difensa.

NOTES

1 The actual breakdown of the 697 was: *Colonel (2i/c) - 1; Lieutenant-Colonels or Majors - 4; Majors or Captains - 6; Lieutenants - 36; Other Ranks - 650*. Message from Canadian Military Attaché to Defensor, Washington, 16 July 1942. LAC, RG 24, file HQS 20-4-32, Mobilization and Organization, (Vol. 1), Plough Project, (1 CSSBN). Microfilm reel C-5436.

2 2 Cdn Para Bn was the higher priority of the two units. National Defence Headquarters (NDHQ) directed the commanding officer of 1 Cdn Para Bn to transfer all jump qualified personnel who volunteered to 2 Cdn Para Bn. The rumour that 1 Cdn Para Bn's supposed sister unit would see action before they would quickly circulated through the ranks of 1 Cdn Para Bn. Predictably, many of the aggressive and action-seeking paratroopers transferred to 2 Cdn Para Bn.

3 See Colonel Bernd Horn and Michel Wyczynski, *Of Courage and Determination: The First Special Service Force 1942-1944* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2013) for the definitive history on the FSSF. See also Major J.W. Ostiguy, Army Historical Section, "The First Special Service Force," 14 March 1951, 1, DND, Directorate of History and Heritage (Hereafter DHH), file 145.3003 (D1).

4 Letter from Lieutenant-Colonel C.M. Drury, Assistant Military Attaché, Canadian Legation, Washington to the Directorate of Military Operations & Intelligence, NDHQ, Washington, 7 July 1942. LAC, RG 24, Vol. 15301, 1st Canadian Special Service Battalion, [Hereafter 1 CSSBN] War Diary, August 1942.

5 The average age of the Forcemen between July 1942 and December 1943 was 26 years old. This was considerably higher than other US Army units. Lieutenant-Colonel Paul Adams, the Force's executive officer, later pointed out that this was a very important factor in the Force's cohesion and maturity. Major Scott R. McMichael, "The First

Special Service Force," in *A Historical Perspective on Light Infantry*, (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, Research Survey No. 6, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1987), 172.

6 Ross Munro, "Albertan Second in Command Of Allies' Super-Commandos," Unidentified Canadian newspaper clipping, 6 August 1942, LAC, RG 24, Vol 15301, August 1942. 1st Canadian Special Service Battalion, [Hereafter 1 CSSBN] War Diary, Serial 1354, August 1942.

7 Memorandum, CCO to CCHQ, "Plough Scheme," 19 January 1943. PRO, DEFE 2/6, COC War Diary.

8 Don Mason, "'Air Commandos' Will Strike Hard at Axis," newspaper clipping, unknown publication, 2nd Canadian Parachute Battalion War Diary, LAC, RG 24, Vol. 15301, August 1942.

9 Quoted in Lieutenant-Colonel Robert D. Burhans, *The First Special Service Force. A War History of the North Americans 1942-1944* (Nashville: The Battery Press, 1996), 35. See also: Memorandum, McQueen to CGS, 8 October 1942. LAC, RG 24, HQS 20-4-32, "Mobilization Organization (1 Special Service Battalion), Reel C-5436; Message, Canmilitary to Defensor (Stuart to Murchie), GSD 2088, 8 October 1942. LAC, RG 24, CMHQ, Vol. 12,305, File 3/Plough/1 "Organization and Operation of Proposed Plough Project."

10 Memorandum, McQueen to CGS, 8 October 1942. LAC, RG 24, HQS 20-4-32, "Mobilization Organization (1 Special Service Battalion), Reel C-5436. See also Message, Canmilitary to Defensor (Stuart to Murchie), GSD 2088, 8 October 1942. LAC, RG 24, CMHQ, Vol. 12,305, File 3/Plough/1 "Organization and Operation of Proposed Plough Project." James Wood, "Matters Canadian" and the Problem with Being Special. Robert T. Frederick on the First Special Service Force," *Canadian Military History*, Vol. 12, No. 4, Autumn 2003, 21.

11 See Message, Military Attache to DEFENSOR, Ottawa, MA1286 16/7, 12 July 1942. LAC, RG 24, HQS 20-4-32, Mobilization Organization Plough Project (1st SS Bn), Reel C-5436; "Minutes of Meeting Held at

C.O.H.Q. On 4.1.43 To Discuss Long – and Short – Term Policy Regarding Norwegian Operations,” para 4., “Cobblestone Operations.” PRO, DEFE 2/6, COC War Diary; Peter Layton Cottingham, *Once Upon A Wartime. A Canadian Who Survived the Devil’s Brigade* (Private Printing, 1996), 49; and Burhans, 36.

12 Letter, Marshall to Pope, “Second Canadian Parachute Battalion,” 17 October 1942. LAC, RG 24, HQS-2-32, Employment and Movement Operations, 1st Special Service Battalion, Reel C-5489.

13 Telegram DEFENSOR to CANMILITRY, No. G.S.D. 2088, 8 October 1942. LAC, RG 24, HQS-2-32, Employment and Movement Operations, 1st Special Service Bn.

14 Ibid.

15 Letter, Marshall to Pope, “Second Canadian Parachute Battalion,” 17 October 1942. LAC, RG 24, HQS-2-32, Employment and Movement Operations, 1st Special Service Battalion, Reel C-5489.

16 Letter, Pope to CGS, “Second Canadian Parachute Battalion,” 20 October 1942. LAC, RG 24, HQS-2-32, Employment and Movement Operations, 1st Special Service Battalion, Reel C-5489. See also Telegram DEFENSOR to CANMILITRY, No. G.S.D. 2088, 8 October 1942. LAC, RG 24, HQS-2-32, Employment and Movement Operations, 1st Special Service Bn.

17 *Minutes of the War Cabinet Committee*, 28 October 1942. LAC, RG 2, Series A-5-B Cabinet War Committee, Minutes and Documents of the Cabinet War Committee, Vol. 11, Meeting no. 201, 28 October 1942, Reel C-4874.

18 The Canadian War Committee of Cabinet approved the assignment of the 1st Canadian Special Service Battalion as part of the FSSF under General Eisenhower’s command for special service in Italy or the Balkans on 14 October 1943. See Memorandum, MND to CGS, “Re: Employment of First Special Service Battalion,” 14 October 1943.; and

Letter, CGS to Williamson, 15 October 1943. LAC, RG 24, Series C-1, File HQS-2-32, Employment and movement operation 1st Special Service Battalion. Microfilm reel C-5489.

19 Letter, Lieutenant-General Joseph T. McNarney, Deputy COS War Department to Major-General Pope, Canadian Joint Staff, Washington D.C., 20 November 1942. LAC, RG 24, Series C-1, File HQS-2-32, Employment and movement operation 1st Special Service Battalion. Microfilm reel C-5489.

20 Memorandum, CGS to MND, 3 June 1943. LAC, RG 24, Series C-1, File HQS-2-32, Employment and movement operation 1st Special Service Battalion. Microfilm reel C-5489.

21 Briefing Note for Canadian War Committee of Cabinet, "Dispatch of First Canadian Special Service Battalion to United Kingdom, and its Employment in the European Theatre as an Integral Part of the First Special Service Force." LAC, RG 24, Series C-1, File HQS-2-32, Employment and movement operation 1st Special Service Battalion. Microfilm reel C-5489.

22 Telegram, From Stuart to Pope, 7 October 1943. LAC, RG 24, Series C-1, File HQS-2-32, Employment and movement operation 1st Special Service Battalion. Microfilm reel C-5489.

23 After the summit had been seized and resupply columns worked their way to the top the cost of the previous assaults became evident. Private Eugene Forward recalled:

The footing was quite bad. This trail was no more than 16 inches wide. Every time it rained the soil washed away. This exposed little stones. They were loose and uneven. It was terrible to walk on these. At certain places it was quite steep. At the beginning of the trail there was an open area on both sides. As we got higher, maybe a little more than half way, we came upon the bodies of American soldiers from previous attacks. The Americans and British had made several attempts to capture the mountain. All had failed. A lot of the bodies had

been stuffed into mattress covers. They had done this to drag the bodies down the mountain. But I guess those who were dragging these bodies were forced to abandon their dead comrades due to the continuous shelling. There were hundreds of bodies. As we made our way to the top there were more and more bodies. I came across this small trench. There were two American soldiers sitting in the slit trench as if they were asleep. But they were dead. The helmets had fallen off. The rain had been beating on them for days and days. Their hair was flattened across their foreheads. It was terrible. It was then that reality of war had revealed itself to me.

Private Eugene Forward (3rd Coy, 3rd Regt) interview, 9 October 2003.

24 Clark assigned the British 46th Division a diversionary role. They were to launch an assault against Hill 360 in an attempt to draw off German forces.

25 War Diary entry, 24 November 1943, 2nd Cdn Para Bn/1CSSBN, November 1943. LAC, RG 24, Vol. 15301.

26 "Memories of the Battle of Mount La Difensa, By Donald Mackinnon, 1st Co. 2nd Regt, FSSF. CAFM, FSSF First Hand Accounts and Memoirs (Sims Fonds).

27 Private Eugene Forward (3rd Coy, 3rd Regt) interview, 16 October 2003.

28 Staff-Sergeant Gordon Sims (FHQ) interview.

29 Colonel Adna H. Underhill, *The Force* (Tucson: Arizona Monographs, 1994), 120.

30 Clark Lee, "American-Canadian Troops Are Crack Mountain Fighters," *The Independent Record*, 13 February 1944, 16. CAFM, Alastair Neely Fonds, AB 22, 1 FSSF, Vol. 1, File 3., 9 December 1943-4 April 1944.

31 J.D. Mitchell, Unpublished Memoir, "The War As I Saw It From My Foxhole. My Days With The First Special Service Force," No Date, 45-46.

32 "Narrative History of Events, Period 1-9 December 1943," 2nd Cdn Para Bn / ICSSBN War Diary, HQ 2nd Regt, FSSF, Appx G. LAC, RG 24, Vol. 15301. .

33 Ed Thomas, "First Special Service Force," personal memoir. CAFM, FSSF First Hand Accounts And Memoirs (Sims Fonds).

34 Ibid.

35 Sergeant Bert Hopkins (2nd Coy, 2nd Regt). Interviewed by author, 20 October 2003. Staff Sergeant Bill Story recalled, "Then we started up carrying our weapons, hoisting our ammunition up until we had the whole of 1st Coy, 2nd Regt on the top of the mountain." SSgt Bill Story (HQ Detachment, 2nd Regt). Greg Hancock and Wayne Abbott, *Daring to Die: The Story of the Black Devils*, Canada's History Television and National Geographic Channel, Video documentary, Northern Sky Entertainment, 2003.

36 With regard to the use of ropes, one veteran explained, "It was on a slant, could always use your feet - had to have something to hang on to though." "Force History - notes, 2d Bn CP, Barnesville, 22 February 1945." Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University, Palo Alto, California [hereafter HIA], R. D. Burhans Fonds, Box 18, File: Narrative Notes Force History.

37 Underhill, *The Force*, 125.

38 See affidavits of Captain Eino O. Olson, Lieutenant W.S. Story, Technician Grade 4, C.F. Rigg, Lieutenant-Colonel Robert S. Moore, Major Walter S. Gray, Staff Sergeant K.R. S. Meiklejohn, all dated 29 December 1943. Robert D. Burhans Papers, Box 19, File British and Canadian Correspondence, HIA.

39 The actual time that the battle began is unclear. Various publications place it anywhere between 0400 hours to 0530 hours.

40 Sergeant Bert Hopkins (2nd Coy, 2nd Regt) interview, 20 October 2003.

41 "Memories of the Battle of Mount La Difensa, By Donald Mackinnon, 1st Co. 2nd Regt, FSSF." [Hereafter Mackinnon Memoir] CAFM, FSSF First Hand Accounts And Memoirs (Sims Fonds).

42 "Interesting Tale of First Special Service Force Tells About Trip to Farmhouse Held by Krauts," Helena News, 8 April 1945, 1. CAFM, Neely Fonds, AB 22, 26 June 1944 - 10 August 1947, Vol. 1, File 5.

43 Alan Blackwell, *70 Years Next to Paradise* (Burns Lake, BC: Private Printing, 1998), 45. Peter Cottingham insisted, "It is impossible to describe the terror which the sound of even one incoming artillery shell can instill in a person." Peter L. Cottingham, *Once Upon a Wartime. A Canadian Who Survived the Devil's Brigade* (Winnipeg: Prairie Mountain Publishers, 1996), 103.

44 Underhill, *The Force*, 136.

45 Cited in Corporal Gordon Harold Baker, unpublished memoir, "First Special Service Force Aug. 1942-Dec. 1944," [hereafter Baker Memoir], 20. CAFM, AB 28, Charlie Mann Fonds.

46 Private Lorin Waling (2nd Regt, 1st Coy). Hancock and Abbott, *Daring to Die*.

47 Cited in Baker memoir, 20.

48 This story is widely told. For example see Baker Memoir, 21; Allen Cowperthwaite, "Maybe Difensa, Maggiore, Cassino, Are A Jumble Of Words To You, But They Represent Real Heroism," *The Independent Record*, 7 August 1955, Section 2, B-1; and Burhans, 106.

49 See John Nadler, *A Perfect Hell* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2005), 118. Nadler's book is an excellent source of first person accounts of the battle. This incident is a great example of how "second hand" stories can take on a life of their own with serious consequences. Many

German PoWs were killed based on the justification that Rothlin was killed through treachery.

50 "Narrative History of Events, Period 1-9 December 1943," War Diary, HQ 2nd Regt, FSSF, Appx G. LAC, RG 24, Vol. 15301, 2nd Cdn Para Bn/1 CSSBN War Diary. Some accounts would arguably place some of weight of the decision not to attack on Colonel Williamson, the Commander of 2nd Regiment, who showed extreme nervousness, fear and lack of decisiveness.

51 Cited in Anne Hicks, *The Last Fighting General. The Biography of Robert Tryon Frederick* (Atglen, PA: Shiffer Military History, 2006), 101.

52 Lieutenant-Commander Maxwell Hamilton, "The Greatest Fighting General of all Time," *The Retired Officer*, October 1981, 26.

53 Sergeant R.E. Blake (3rd Coy, 3rd Regt) interview.

54 Mitchell, 47.

55 Ibid. Mitchell noted that it took all night to reach the summit. They would drop the supplies and then bring down the wounded. He also stated, "We didn't carry weapons and that in itself gave us a naked feeling."

56 Sergeant George Wright (1st Coy, 1st Regt). Interviewed by authors, 16 October 2003. To avoid confusion, on 4 December Frederick ordered the 3rd Regiment to be solely responsible for resupplying the troops on the summit. In the Santa Maria barracks a member of the 3rd Regiment had drawn a picture in charcoal on the wall of a Forceman with a large packboard laden with rations and ammunition that towered over the soldier. Above it he wrote "Freddy's Freighters Difensa or Bust." The name stuck and the Force was often referred to by this nickname. Burhans, 98.

57 Major Gerald McFadden, Written account. CAFM, AB Fonds 31, Eugene Forward.

58 Affidavit, Lieutenant-Colonel Robert S. Moore, 29 December 1943. HIA, Robert D. Burhans Papers, Box 19, File British and Canadian Correspondence.

59 Ibid.

60 He was reinforced with 1st Company, 3rd Regiment.

61 Cited in Burhans,119.

62 Cited Hicks, 100.

63 Mackinnon Memoir .

64 "Notes on interview with Col DD Williamson re historical sketch on force activities, 1942/December 1943. DHH, File 145.3011 (D1) 1 Cdn SS Bn.

65 The percentage is based on a combat echelon of approximately 1,800 men. DHH, Army Headquarters Report No. 5, 1st Canadian Special Service Battalion, 22 February 1946, 35. The evacuation of wounded was a very deliberate, difficult endeavour. It took six men to carry a litter with a seventh, holding a rope in the rear, acting as a brake. The trip from the summit to the bottom of the mountain took eight to ten hours. Gord Baker recalled, "It was no easy chore packing a wounded suffering man down a rough mountain trail while the patient screamed at every jolt of the stretcher, especially at night when it was too dark for the bearer to where he was walking half the time." Gord H. Baker, "First Special Service Force," unpublished memoirs, 1998, 26.

66 DHH Army Headquarters Report No. 5, 1st Canadian Special Service Battalion, 22 February 1946, 36.

67 Ibid., 36.

68 Hamilton, 24.

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