

## Chapter 4

# *The First Special Service Force*

## *Introduction*

The proliferation of specially organized and trained units among the Allied armies in World War II assumed astounding proportions. Airborne divisions, commando units, Ranger battalions, Special Operations Executive and Office of Strategic Services detachments, Marine raiders: special units of all sorts abounded. This study has already examined one of those specialty forces, the Chindits. This chapter will introduce another force, a unique Canadian-American brigade called the First Special Service Force (FSSF, also called the Force). Raised, manned, and trained as a light infantry raiding force to be used in cold, high mountains, the FSSF established a well-deserved record as one of the toughest and most effective combat units in Europe. Because of its uniqueness, however, the Force should not be considered a prototype for modern light infantry forces. While its training, tactical techniques, and operational record merit study, the relevant lessons are both positive and negative in nature; there is much to be emulated and much to be avoided in its example.

Geoffrey Pyke, an eccentric British scientist, originated the idea that led to the creation of the FSSF. Pyke convinced Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Chief of Combined Operations Lord Mountbatten that the Allies needed to develop a light over-snow vehicle that could then be used as the primary transport for mobile raiding forces sent on strategic missions of sabotage in remote areas. In particular, such a vehicle and force could be used to knock out the important hydroelectric stations in German-occupied Norway. Through Churchill's influence, the United States agreed to build the vehicles, while the United States and Canada jointly agreed to supply the men for the Force. For various reasons, Operation Plough, as it came to be known, never was mounted, although the vehicle (the M-24 Weasel) was developed and used by the 10th Mountain Division and other units in northern Italy.<sup>1</sup> The Canadian-American force established for Operation Plough narrowly survived the cancellation of the Norwegian operation, and for some time, no one could decide where to use it.<sup>2</sup> Throughout the early period of its formation, the FSSF retained its intended missions of raiding, sabotage, or spearhead operations in cold, mountainous regions.

## *Selection and Organization*

Once the decision to establish the FSSF was made, both sponsoring nations issued a call for volunteers. American Lieutenant Colonel Robert T. Frederick, named as the Force commander, requested the assignment to his unit of "single

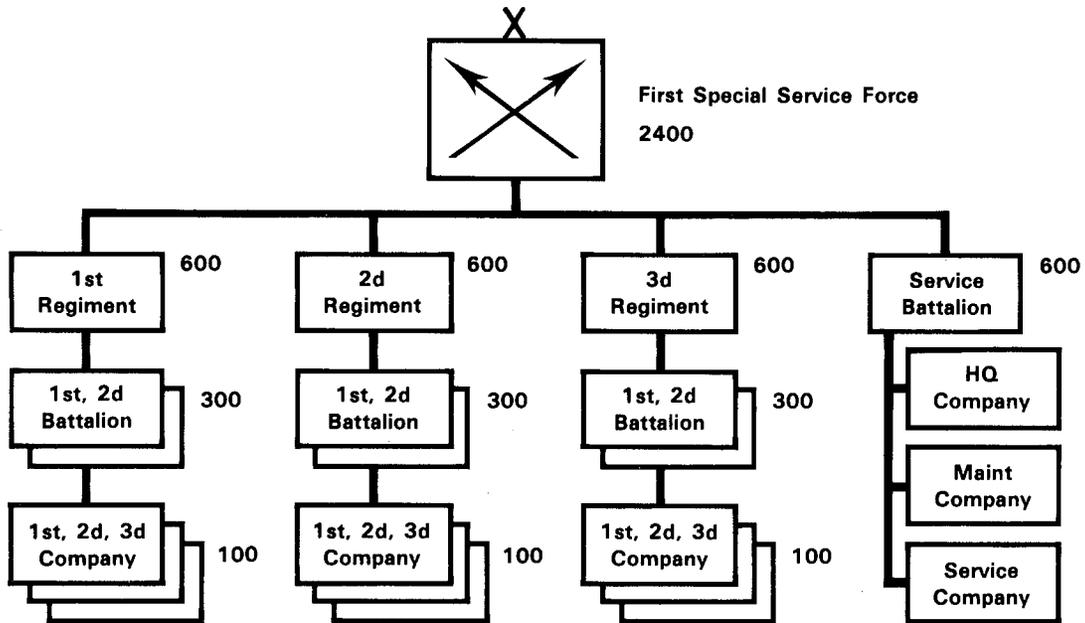
men between ages of 21 and 35 who had completed three years or more grammar school within the occupational range of Lumberjacks, Forest Rangers, Hunters, North woodsmen, Game Wardens, Prospectors, and Explorers.”<sup>3</sup> The Canadian Army established more exacting standards. It said its volunteers must:

1. Be willing to undergo airborne training.
2. Be physically fit.
3. Be already fully trained as infantrymen.
4. Possess a knowledge of internal combustion engines (in anticipation of driving and maintaining the Weasel).
5. Be NCO (noncommissioned officer) material, since the standard enlisted rank in the Force was to be sergeant.
6. Have experience as mountaineers, skiers, or woodsmen, or have had winter training.<sup>4</sup>

From the start, the Canadian cohort comprised soldiers of higher quality and motivation than the average soldier. However, the initial American component included a large percentage of jailbirds, ne'er-do-wells, and other culls—as unit and post commanders in the United States took advantage of the call for volunteers to rid themselves of their troublemakers. Although a great many of these doubtful recruits were turned away, a substantial “disreputable” element remained. Those that were accepted into the unit possessed the rugged and somewhat reckless character sought by Frederick. Eventually Frederick assembled a force of individualistic, tough soldiers who were ready to be molded into a fighting arm, steadied by the influence of their more disciplined and initially better-trained Canadian comrades. Interestingly, the average age of the men of the Force during its first year of organization and training was twenty-six—an age considerably higher than that of men in regular units. The Force’s executive officer, Lieutenant Colonel Paul Adams, attributed the strong unit cohesion and maturity of the Force to this older average age.<sup>5</sup>

The original concept for the employment of the FSSF in Norway called for 18 companies of 100 men each. As a result, Frederick organized the unit into 3 small regiments of approximately 600 men each. Each regiment was composed of two battalions, each with three companies (see figure 13). The companies included three platoons, each with two twelve-man sections led by staff sergeants. The three regiments comprised the combat echelon of the Force. All support functions were performed by the separate 600-man, all-American Service Battalion.

The Service Battalion was an experiment of sorts. It was created to relieve the combat echelon of any noncombat duties that might detract from its training or operations. The Service Battalion was divided into three companies. The headquarters company included the Force headquarters, clerks, air detachment, communications detachment, and a military police platoon. The maintenance company performed all vehicle and weapons maintenance. The service company provided cooks, bakers, riggers, barbers, supply sergeants, and porters to support the Force. Finally, the medical detachment, headed by the Force’s surgeon, provided medics and operated the unit aid stations.<sup>6</sup> Frederick appeared to be satisfied with this initial organization of the FSSF into discrete combat and service echelons. The unit retained this basic form throughout its history.



Note: Figures above are approximate manpower. Companies included three platoons, each with two 12–16 man sections.

Figure 13. FSSF organization

The official U.S. Army history of World War II states that the FSSF was authorized 1,190 trucks and cars and 600 T-24 Weasels.<sup>7</sup> It did not, however, receive vehicles in such numbers. For instance, it received only small numbers of Weasels, and these on a temporary basis. Throughout its operations in Italy, the Force periodically scrounged its needed transport.

Initially only lightly armed, the Force's table of organization and equipment (TOE) was changed when the Norway operation was canceled. This move was based on the correct assumption that the FSSF would be used in more conventional operations. To ensure that his regiments would conduct sustained operations, Frederick supplied each section with one Browning automatic rifle (BAR), one Johnson light machine gun (a Marine weapon that the men of the Force liked better than the BAR because it was lighter and could be operated by one man), and a bazooka or a 60-mm mortar. Most infantrymen carried M-1 rifles. Officers carried carbines or pistols. Section leaders carried Thompson submachine guns. The Force lacked organic artillery, heavy mortars, medium-heavy machine guns, and armor of any sort. The Johnson light machine guns were not authorized: Frederick traded 2 tons of a new explosive (RS) to the Marines Corps in exchange for 125 of the weapons.<sup>8</sup> Some sections also possessed flamethrowers.

Except for the Service Battalion, Canadians and Americans were mixed evenly throughout the Force. Although the Canadians only numbered about 600, or one-third of the combat echelon, they occupied about one-half of the leadership positions. The Canadian soldiers were generally older and more

experienced than the Americans, so most of the battalion commanders and senior sergeants were Canadians, while most of the junior officers were Americans.

## *Training*

Frederick selected Fort William Henry Harrison, an unused training site in the Montana mountains near Helena, as the base for the FSSF. As the many Canadian and American contingents arrived in July 1942 from all over North America, they began a training program that, in terms of intensity, difficulty, variety, and scope, far surpassed that experienced by any other regiment or division in the U.S. Army during the war.

The intensity and composition of the Force's training program were influenced by a number of factors. One of these was the target date given to Frederick for the execution of the Norway mission, December 1942. Having much to do and only a few short months in which to do it, Frederick compressed the time of the training wherever feasible, and he insisted on using every available minute for training short of exhausting and demoralizing his command. Thus, Force troopers underwent airborne training in six days as opposed to the normal three weeks. The daily training day normally extended from 0430 to 1700. However, during four evenings a week, lectures on various subjects were presented from 1900 to 2100. Generally, the men of the Force enjoyed only Saturday nights and Sundays off.

The Force's training was tailored to prepare the men for operations in cold weather and mountainous regions. To ready themselves for this environment, members of the Force developed special skills such as skiing with pack and rifle, rock climbing, mountain walking, use of ropes, survival, and the operation and maintenance of snow carriers. The Force spent many days and nights in the Montana mountains learning how to cope, move, and fight under frigid conditions in very rugged ground. The Norwegian experts that Frederick imported to train his command were amazed at how rapidly and proficiently his soldiers learned their needed mountain skills.<sup>9</sup> As part of the training, conditions were made austere. The men, for example, lived in railroad boxcars while participating in ski training near Blossburg, Montana.<sup>10</sup>

Frederick established two baseline goals for individual training: each soldier was to reach an unusually high level of physical fitness and stamina, and each soldier was to be a consummate infantryman. These two requirements formed the foundation upon which unit capability was built.

The physical-training program was extraordinarily difficult for its time. An official Canadian report described the physical training in this manner:

The programme of physical training was designed to produce a standard of general fitness and stamina capable of meeting the severest demands made upon it by fatigue of combat, unfavorable terrain or adverse weather.

This physical training has been built up to such a pitch that an ordinary person would drop from sheer exhaustion in its early stages. This course includes crawling, rope-climbing, boxing, push-ups, games, much doubling and running.<sup>11</sup>

The men routinely double-timed from one training site to the next, and they ran the 1 1/2-mile obstacle course as a daily requirement. Long marches at exaggerated paces with heavier-than-normal loads occurred frequently. At

one point, the S3 laid out a sixty-mile course to see which regiment could complete it most rapidly. The 1st Regiment came in after twenty hours of dogged marching with full packs.<sup>12</sup> A strong spirit of rivalry characterized such events. All men of the Force, including officers, had to meet the standard, an impossible task for the aged and unfit. Those men failing to measure up received little mercy or compassion. They were dropped from the rolls and returned to their original units. Later, when the Force was committed to operations, its commanders realized that this high level of fitness deteriorated gradually in combat. Consequently, units always used their rest periods out of the line to renew physical strength and stamina through exercise.

Frederick was just as insistent that soldiers master a wide range of infantry skills. Foremost among these were marksmanship. Regiments constantly had groups at work qualifying on all the unit's small arms, including automatic weapons, bazookas, mortars, and flamethrowers. Training was also conducted on captured German weapons.<sup>13</sup>

Training also emphasized demolitions because of the intended use of the Force for raids and sabotage. Experts, again, were brought in to train the men, and some of the officers attended a two-week course in demolitions that qualified them as trainers. Men of the Force seemed to take to demolitions naturally, and they showed great delight in the training. Occasionally, an overexuberant flair led the men to use too much explosive material on targets, which blew out windows in nearby towns. Paul Adams explained this penchant: "We decided we wanted to be sure to never have to go back and try it again."<sup>14</sup>

Parachute training and hand-to-hand combat served to cement an attitude of recklessness, daring, and aggressiveness within the Force. Anyone refusing to don a parachute and jump out of an airplane got a train ticket home the next day. Frederick obtained an expert, Irishman Pat O'Neill, to teach his men a mixture of karate, jujitsu, and trick fighting. Again, the soldiers turned to this training with a certain élan, trying out their new skills on each other, local miners, lumberjacks, or MPs. Bayonet training proceeded with bare blades and included the officers. Adams, the Force executive officer, recalls how he was nicked in the neck by Frederick, an extraordinarily fit and agile man, when the two were paired for bayonet drills.<sup>15</sup>

Infantry training also included the standard subjects of first-aid, camouflage, scouting and patrolling, map reading, and unit tactics. Some attention was also given to irregular tactics. This training was not significantly different from regular infantry training except for its adaptation to mountain terrain and its emphasis on raiding.<sup>16</sup>

As the FSSF became proficient in its training, more and more of it was conducted at night. For example, the unit conducted only two lessons on land navigation in daylight; the rest of the training took place at night.<sup>17</sup> The Force leadership was fully convinced that investment in night operations in training would pay big dividends in combat.

These ingredients formed the recipe for Force training from July to December 1942. The intensity, difficulty, and stressful nature of the training produced a strong bond of cohesion and esprit within the Force and a powerful

sense of confidence and derring-do among those who were not eliminated. In such an environment, the Force quickly jelled into an effective elite unit. National distinctions disappeared as the men found their identity as members of the Force.

The command peaked in its training in early December, but by then, it had nowhere to go. To avoid staleness, Frederick put everyone on leave who wanted to go—in staggered increments. January and part of February were then given over to regimental maneuvers that stressed sabotage operations behind enemy lines against specific objectives, such as tunnels, bridges, and dams. The Force then turned to company and battalion exercises during the remainder of February and March.

In April, the FSSF moved to Camp Bradford near Norfolk, Virginia, for amphibious training. The Force still had no stated area for deployment, although its use in the invasion force being raised to retake the Aleutians from the Japanese had been discussed. At Camp Bradford, the Force raced through the amphibious training, completing the basic instruction a week ahead of schedule. Simulated combat landings followed for another seven to ten days. The report filed by the Amphibious School staff highly praised the FSSF and stated that it was fully qualified for any amphibious operations.<sup>18</sup>

Next, the FSSF arrived at Fort Ethan Allen in Vermont, where it conducted additional training in landings by rubber boat, scouting, patrolling, raiding, and demolitions. Finally, the War Department directed that the Force be used in the North Pacific against Kiska Island. Shortly thereafter, Army Ground Forces sent out an inspection team to certify the Force's readiness:

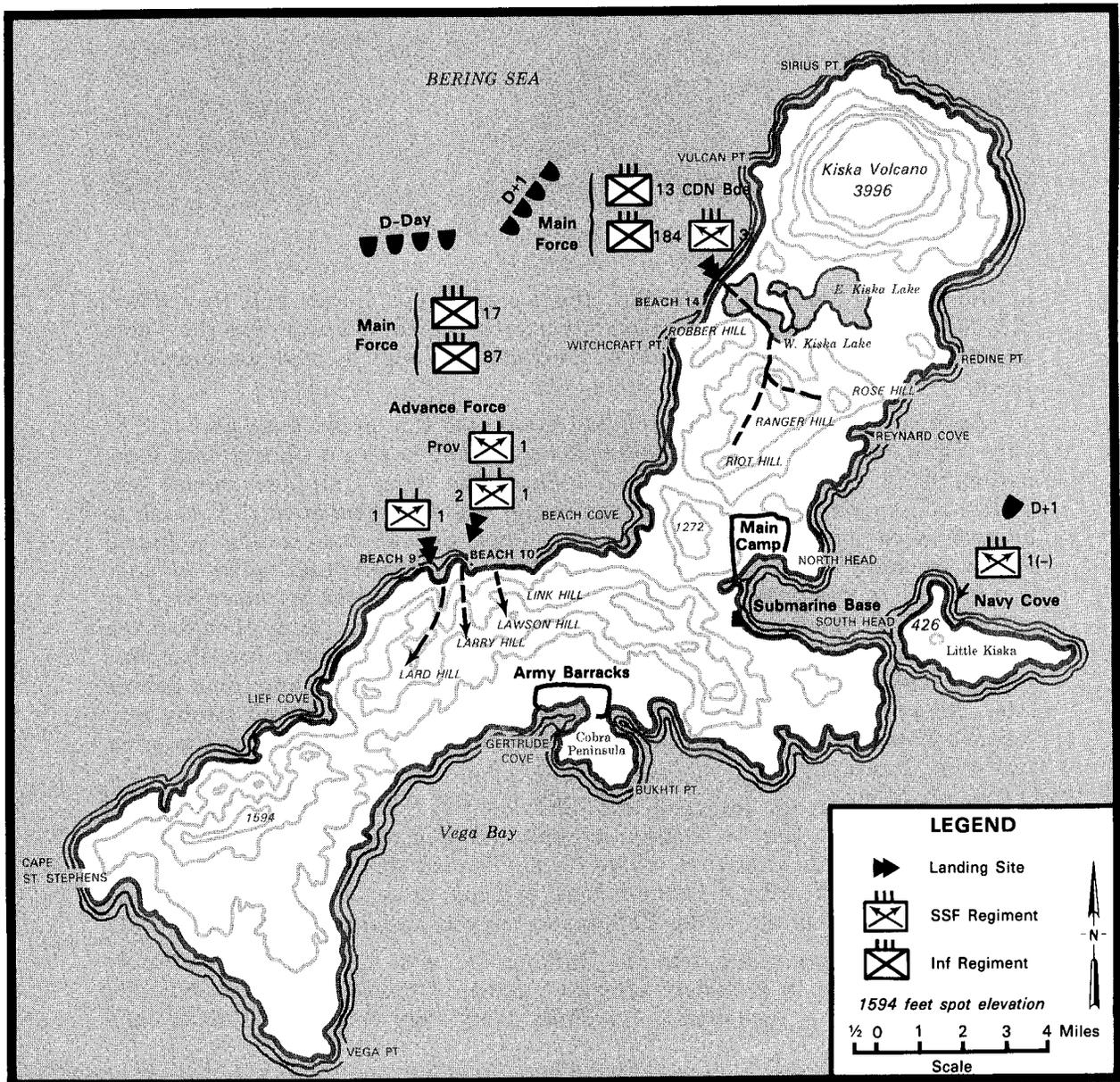
A score of Corps inspectors hit Fort Ethan Allen on June 15, armed with the latest Ground Forces standards of training, equipment, and physical fitness for troops bound for the fighting fronts. All Force units were to undertake the various tests and be rated. Perfection was one hundred percent on the rated test but a unit could pass with a seventy-five percent average. In the first test, each company had to cover a four-mile march route under rifle and pack in one hour's time, points to be deducted for overtime and stragglers on the march. Other tests covered proficiency in map reading, maintenance of weapons, the usual military subjects by oral quizzes, and still other examinations covered physical fitness, calisthenics and foot races. At no point did the established standards adequately rate the Force units, who scored on an average about 125 percent (on some tests, 200 percent), and drew the inspectors' admissions that the standard tests structure could not be applied to a unit as well trained as the First Special Service Force. They expressed amazement several times at the loads and quantities of ammunition the men carried easily. Another thing that greatly impressed the inspectors was the absolute and thorough coordination within the elements of the Force, and the complete confidence each man had in himself and his comrades. They expressed great satisfaction in the realism injected into Force training.

The Corps group also watched the company demolition problems, took a look at the live-firing range—the battle orientation course—and sailed out on Lake Champlain to view the intelligence scouts in rubber-boat and cliff-scaling exercises. Then Army Ground Forces was notified: Yes, the First Special Service Force was ready for any job that had to be done.<sup>19</sup>

## Operations

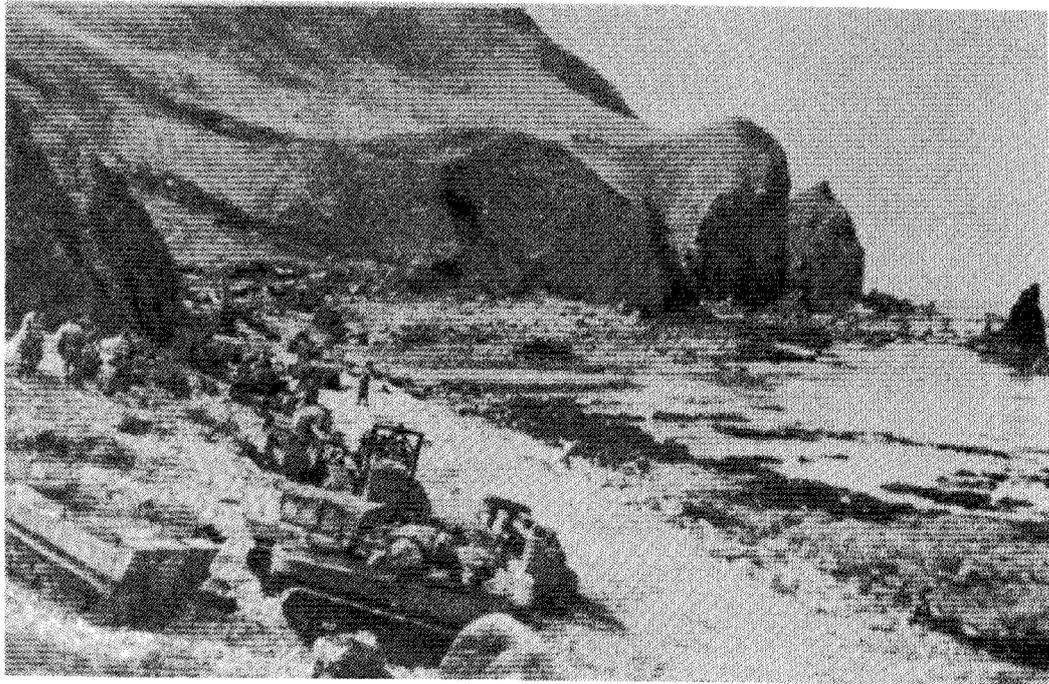
The operational history of the FSSF began on the early morning of 15 August 1943, when the 1st and 2d Regiments silently waded ashore on Kiska Island in the Aleutian chain under cover of darkness. This operation had been carefully planned and practiced. Furthermore, the FSSF had been assigned a mission appropriate to its capability, that of securing two separate beachheads on the island in advance of the landing of the invasion's main forces. The 3d Regiment was held in airborne reserve (see map 12).

The mission was fraught with danger. It demanded endurance and great skill in the handling and control of small rubber boats, which would be paddled ashore in the dark, in very cold water. The mission also required exceptional stealth and silence to achieve surprise, which would be followed by the likelihood of a fierce, close-in battle against a tough enemy that would initially



Source: Burhans, *The First Special Service Force*, 73.

Map 12. Landings on Kiska Island, 15-16 August 1943



Courtesy of Colonel Robert D. Burhans

Weasels, bulldozers, and Athey trailers on Lilly Beach, Kiska Island

outnumber the Force. In addition, the weather was harsh and the terrain difficult. In short, this was a mission perfectly suited to a unit like the Force, and Commanding General Simon B. Buckner was wise to have assigned it to them.

As it turned out, the Japanese had evacuated the island days earlier. The hard fight anticipated by the planners turned out to be an uncontested occupation. Even so, the operation had great value as a training exercise and permitted the Force to display a number of the characteristics that came to be associated with it. For instance, the Force showed outstanding technical ability in controlling the amphibious landing and in coordinating its advance in the dark to positions overlooking the beaches. Moreover, no straggling occurred during the move inland across the rough tundra, even though each man carried an average load of 90 to 100 pounds. In addition, fire discipline was very good compared with that exhibited by the troops that came ashore later. All tasks had been accomplished on schedule with elan and steady confidence. These strengths were cited in a letter of commendation from the army task force commander.<sup>20</sup>

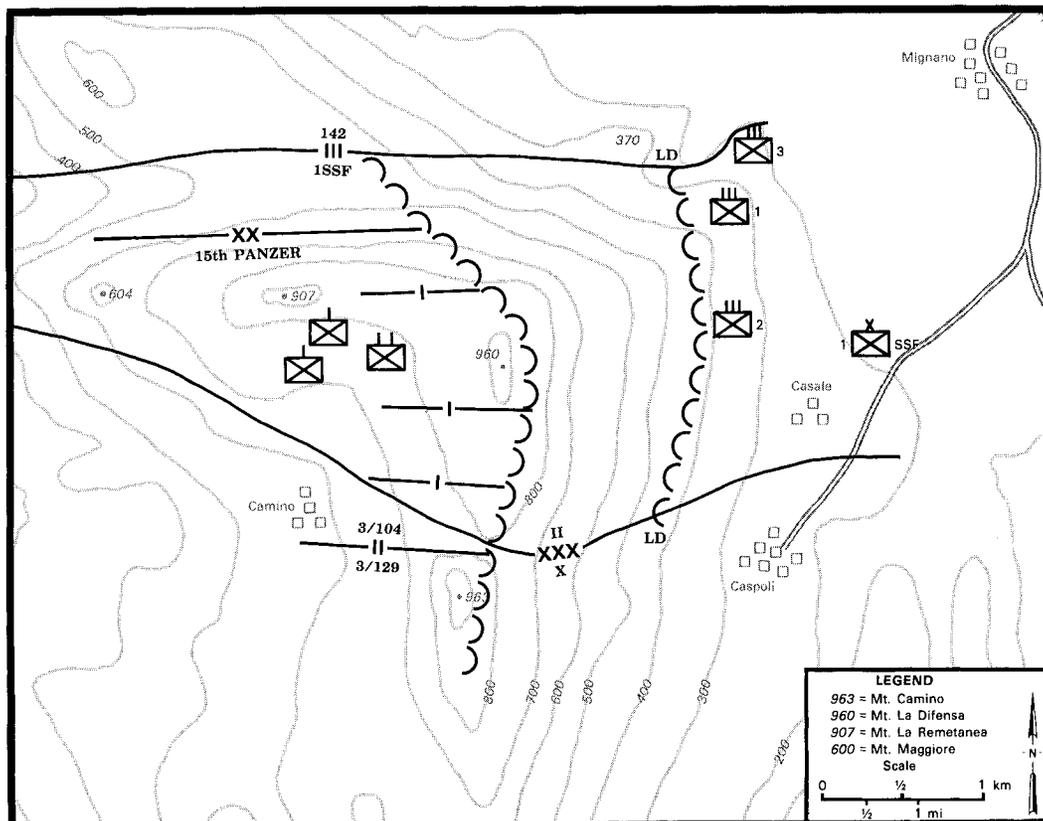
Unblooded but not untested, the FSSF left the North Pacific promptly, en route eventually to Europe. General Eisenhower had requisitioned the unit for service in the Mediterranean, where he envisioned its use for special reconnaissance, for raids behind German lines in Italy, or for independent guerrilla operations and sabotage in the Balkans to support resistance groups.

The Force never made it to the Balkans but was destined to spend quite some time in Italy in a variety of roles, several of them inconsistent with its design and training. Assigned to the Fifth Army from November 1943 to June

1944, the FSSF was immediately committed to the assault of a seemingly impregnable German stronghold atop Mount de la Difensa. Thereafter, it found itself employed in succession as a standard, separate infantry brigade in the line; as a unit employed in flank protection in the high mountains that paralleled the route of advance of main forces; as a beachhead force at Anzio, holding the line against the Germans for over three months; as a spearhead force used to break out of the beachhead; again as flank protection; and finally as the infantry component of the tank-infantry spearhead leading the Fifth Army into Rome. Each of these operations will be discussed in turn, but only the attack against Difensa and activities at Anzio will be covered in detail, since they are the most instructive.

### Operation Raincoat

Mount de la Difensa was part of a large, high complex of peaks and ridgelines known as the Camino hill mass. Considered to be vital terrain by both sides, the mountains rose precipitously on the south side of the Mignano Gap, a narrow valley that opened into the large Liri Valley, the "Gateway to Rome." Running roughly six miles long by four miles wide, the Camino hill mass averaged about 3,000 feet in height (see map 13). The slopes facing the



Source: CSI Battlebook 14-A, *Monte la Difensa*, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Ft. Leavenworth, KS, May 1984.  
 Map 13. The Mount de la Difensa area

Allied forces were very steep, rough, jagged, and mostly bare of cover and concealment, except for ravines or gullies that traversed them and the scrub pines that dotted the lower elevations.

The only approaches into this inhospitable wall of rock and stone were primitive trails that were covered by German fires. Mount de la Difensa (960 meters high) formed the protruding corner of the hill mass, with Mount Camino (963 meters) to the south and Mount de la Remetanea (907 meters) to the west. Difensa's slope progressively ascended, finally terminating in perpendicular cliffs 200 feet high. Previous attempts to take the mountain had avoided these cliffs. Even the local villagers had deemed them impassable.

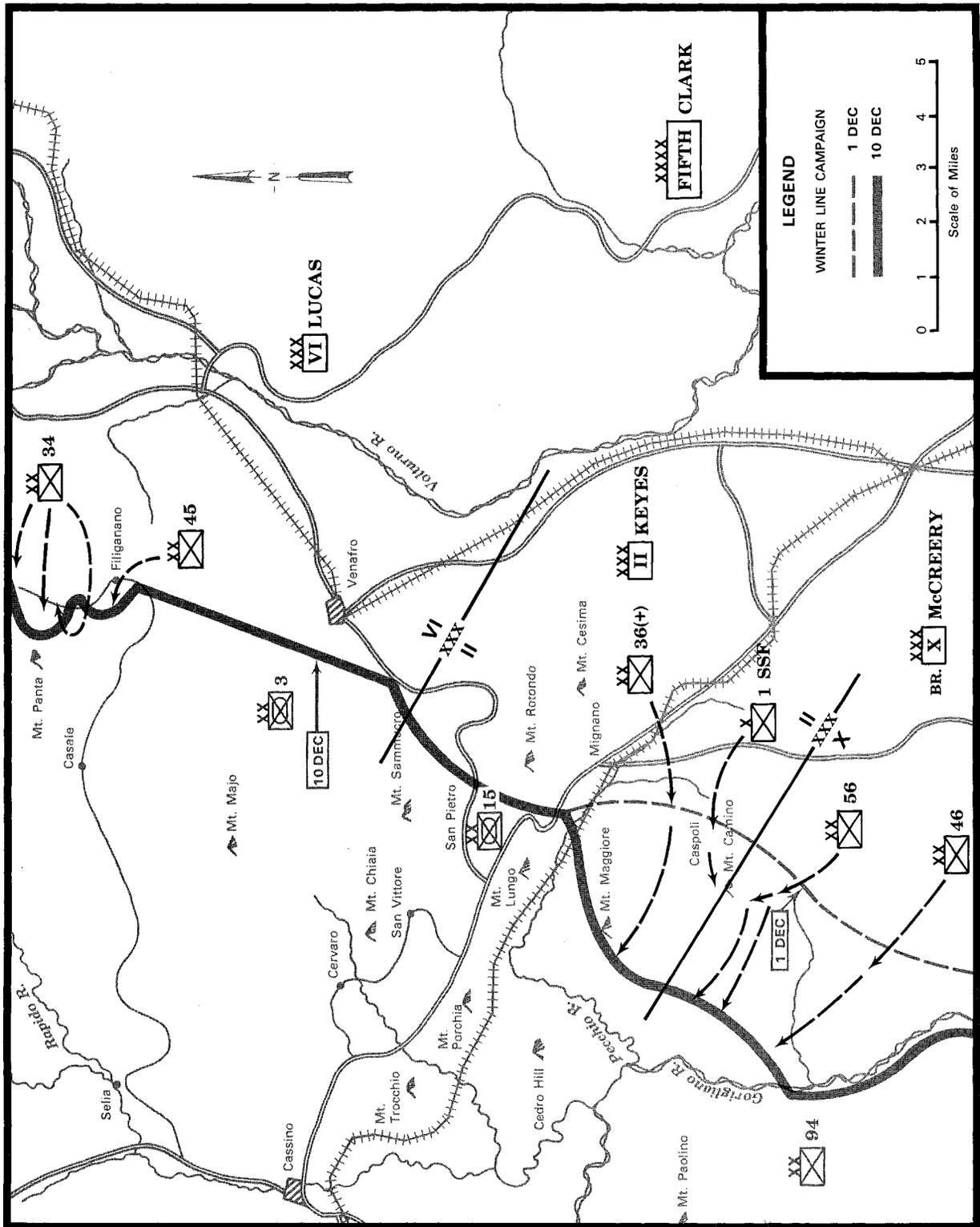
In November 1943, after ten or twelve days of rigorous, constant attacks on the enemy, the U.S. Fifth Army's advance ground to a halt against these formidable, barren bulwarks. The 7th Infantry, 3d Infantry Division, was thwarted in its assaults by the narrow approaches to the mountain, which severely limited the size of the point of attack. Even small footholds on the mountain could not be held because of German snipers, machine gunners, and grenadiers, who dislodged every advance. The 7th Infantry was forced to withdraw with heavy casualties.<sup>21</sup>

The Germans had profited from strong fortifications, which were skillfully combined with natural obstacles. Their machine guns and mortars were dug several feet into the rock, making them almost invulnerable to artillery fires. Their positions, moreover, were well supplied, well camouflaged, and mutually supporting. Dispersed German snipers occupied hideouts from which they often held up unit movement for hours. The Germans also laid mines on all trails and natural approaches. Forward observers, moreover, called on the considerable amounts of German artillery available to fire accurately on anything seen moving below. In addition, German forces on one hill could easily support their neighbors so that an attacking unit might receive murderous fires from several directions. There was no easy way to break into this kind of fortified, interlocking defense.<sup>22</sup>

On Difensa proper, the Germans disposed the 3d Battalion, 104th *Panzer-grenadier* Regiment, and half of the 3d Battalion, 129th *Panzer-grenadier* Regiment (a total of about 400 men), with the 115th Reconnaissance Battalion in reserve. These veteran units had good reputations and could be depended on to defend staunchly.

The new Fifth Army plan to take the Mount Camino mass had three components (see map 14). General Mark Clark directed the X Corps to attack Camino in the south and directed the II Corps, with the FSSF attached, to capture Mount de la Difensa and Mount Maggiore in separate, but simultaneous, attacks. The II Corps commander ordered Frederick against Difensa and assigned Maggiore to the 36th Division. All attacks would be preceded by several days of heavy air and artillery bombardments.

The plan caught the Germans off guard. Not expecting the Fifth Army to try to storm the heights a second time, they anticipated a push by armor-heavy forces through the Mignano Gap, and they had positioned their reserves accordingly. Later, the Germans complimented the creators of the new plan for its cleverness.<sup>23</sup>



Source: CSI Battlebook 14-A, *Monte Is Difense*, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Ft. Leavenworth, KS, May 1984.  
 Map 14. The clearing of Mount Camino, 1-10 December 1943

The FSSF was attached to the 36th Division from II Corps for the attack. The Force's mission was to attack and seize Difensa on the morning of 3 December and to continue the attack, on order, to seize Remetanea. Major General Walker, the 36th Division commander, retained the 1st Regiment as division reserve. Frederick assigned the assault mission to the 2d Regiment and ordered the 3d Regiment to position its 1st Battalion at the 600-foot level on the mountain to be the FSSF reserve. The 2d and 3d Battalions, 3d Regiment, were ordered to assist the Service Battalion in the resupply of the assault units.

Frederick also decided to attack the mountain at night from the northeast side, straight up its sheer face. He knew from the experiences of the 7th Infantry that the enemy had the other approaches from the north and southeast well covered by observation, fires, and mines. He felt confident in the abilities of his men to negotiate the difficult climb, and he believed that the approach at night, in a direction assumed impossible, would achieve surprise both in location and time. Surprise was essential to his plan. He also counted on heavy air and artillery bombardments to keep the Germans' heads down and focus their attention on the conventional approaches to the summit. This plan, if executed properly, promised the capture of the peak by shock, rather than by a long, drawn-out battle of several days' length.

On the evening of 1 December, the regiments moved out by truck in a light rain from their rearward assembly areas. Dismounting from the trucks, the men of the 2d Regiment trudged a hard ten miles through cold rain and mud to their preassault position about halfway up the mountain. Concealing themselves in ravines and scrub pines, the men waited during the next day, trying to stay warm and dry and to rest. Most officers were too busy to sleep, as they sorted out details concerning reconnaissance and supply. Simultaneously, the 1st and 3d Regiments moved into their designated holding areas (see map 15).

During the day and night of 2 December, Allied bombers and artillery delivered the heaviest concentration of indirect fires yet seen in the western war. Eight hundred twenty pieces of all calibers fired round after round of high explosive, white phosphorus, and smoke on the Camino mass. In a one-hour "serenade," 22,000 rounds from 346 pieces exploded atop Difensa.<sup>24</sup> While the preparation did not cause a great many casualties, it disrupted the German lines of supply to the front, destroyed wire communications, prevented the movement of reserves or shuffling of frontline troops, and limited the fires of German artillery.<sup>25</sup> These strong supporting fires continued from 2 until 10 December and severely hampered the efforts of the Germans to counterattack against the Allied ground forces.

At approximately 1800 on 2 December, the 2d Regiment began its ascent of Difensa for the assault, with 1st Battalion leading, the 2d Battalion in trail. As these units moved out, the 1st Battalion, 3d Regiment, also began its climb to its reserve position at the 600-meter level.

By 2230, the 2d Regiment reached the base of the Difensa crown. While the bulk of the regiment paused, scouts and rope teams continued up the final 100 to 200 meters to emplace rope ladders. The fog, wind, and freezing rain made for a bitterly cold night. Men huddled together in the darkness to