

DISTINGUISHED MEMBER OF THE SPECIAL FORCES REGIMENT



1ST SPECIAL SERVICE FORCE

Inducted April 2009



The First Special Service Force evolved from Operation Plough, a plan forwarded by Geoffrey Pyke, a scientist in the employ of the British Combined Operations Command in 1942 to Lord Louis Mountbatten, Chief of Combined Operations Headquarters, to create a small, élite commando unit on small tracked vehicles capable of fighting behind enemy lines, during winter, in Norway whose heavy water plants were being used in the German atomic weapon research; in Romania, with its strategically important oil fields; and, in Italy whose Italian hydroelectric plants powered most of south German industry. Churchill and Mountbatten imposed the idea on General George Marshall, Chief of Staff of the United States Army, who, in turn, assigned the project to LTC Robert T. Frederick to review. Frederick's assessment was far from positive. His report determined the geographical expanse was too large and that, even if scaled back only to Norway, it was a suicide mission. His only positive recommendation was the creation of a small commando outfit, especially trained for winter climes.

Roosevelt, pressured by the British, compelled Marshall to proceed. LTC Frederick was made commander with carte blanche authority to create what would become the First Special Service Force, a joint World War II Canadian-American commando unit activated on 9 July 1942, at Fort William Henry Harrison, Montana.

Frederick's criteria for soldiers in his unit were that they be strong, intelligent, motivated and accustomed to working outdoors and in harsh conditions. US volunteers consisted primarily of enlisted men previously employed as lumberjacks, forest rangers, hunters, game wardens, prospectors, and explorers. Many US unit commanders, however, reluctant to let their best soldiers go, also 'volunteered' and delivered to Helena those soldiers placed in the stockades or whom did not quite fit into the conventional notion of a soldier. The Williamson-Wickham Agreement drafted and ratified by the Canadian Parliament paved the way for the assignment of 697 Canadian officers and enlisted men taken primarily from the Princess Patricia Regiment, one of Canada's finest units.

The unit's original composition included the Force as well as aviation, military police and support elements - a organization structure which would be revisited in the 1960s. Force members received extensive training in stealth tactics, hand-to-hand combat, explosives, parachuting, small water craft, mountain climbing, and ski warfare, using a variety of non-standard or limited-issue weapons, such as the M1941 Johnson light machine gun, the newly developed demolition known as plastique, and the specifically designed V-42 combat knife.

By the time they had completed their training, the range for Allied bombers had increased enough to reach Norway; consequently, the Force's focus shifted. Their first taste of fire was in the Aleutians. They then proceeded to Italy where the Allies had been stalled at the German Line for over three months. Less than 24 hours in Italy, Frederick was given a week to break the stalemate. He ordered his Force to scale the sheer face of Monte Le Defensa, and, less than 24 hours later, broke the German stranglehold. Hopscothing over the mountain chain, the Force continued to Anzio where, although composed of less than 2,000 men, were responsible for over a quarter of the beachhead. With blackened faces, formed into small teams, they overwhelmed German defenders without firing a shot, and then disappear into the night. This stealth, after a German officer's diary was discovered referring to "die schwarzen Teufeln (the Black Devils)" earned them the nickname "The Black Devils" and "The Devil's Brigade". The Force then spearheaded the push into Rome and up the Italian boot to southern France where they were inactivated 5 December 1944 in Villeneuve-Loubet near Menton, France. During its year and a half existence, the 1800-man "Devil's Brigade" accounted for over 12,000 German casualties and captured over 7,000 prisoners. This was not done without a price, sustaining an attrition rate of over 600%.

The United States Special Forces, taking its regimental affiliation from The First Special Service Force, proudly wears the First Special Service Force branch insignia of crossed arrows. The insignia was originally that used by the United States Indian Scouts (1869 - 1939). The Special Forces insignia includes the V-42 superimposed on the crossed arrows. The Force red and white spearhead shoulder patch was modified in 1984 to become the shoulder patch for the United States Army Special Operations Command.