



Spring 2011

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(Ed. Note: this is part 2 of a 3 part series which began in the February issue of the Banner)

FIRST SPECIAL SERVICE FORCE – PART II

By
Don Simpson

In mid-June, 1943, the Force was alerted for movement to San Francisco to embark for the Aleutian Islands to participate in the landings on Kiska Island. They departed Vermont by train on June 26, 1943 and departed San Francisco on two liberty ships on 11 July for a staging area on Adak Island. The Force boarded with 169 officers, 8 warrant officers and 2,283 enlisted men. When Colonel Frederick got to Adak and saw that the bivouac area was already crowded with five other regiments he requested and was granted permission to land at Amchitka Island 70 miles away. Once debarked, the Force immediately began preparing for operations on Kiska.

The Japanese had seized both Attu and Kiska in June 1942 as part of the overall operation to draw the US Pacific Fleet into battle. The resulting Battle of Midway was a resounding US victory. However, the enemy forces on these small islands remained as the only Japanese presence on US soil. Attu was retaken in May 1943 after a three week battle. D-Day for the attack on Kiska was set for 15 August 1943.

Kiska is a long, narrow island that runs generally

southwest to northeast. The landings were to be made in two places on the western side. A Force regiment would lead each landing by five hours to seize and secure the beachhead for the main body. 1st Regiment would lead the southern sector landings on D-Day and 3rd Regiment would lead the northern sector landings on D plus One. 2nd Regiment was in reserve and remained at Amchitka on strip alert, prepared to parachute in where needed.

Intelligence during the build up was very weak. There was believed to be 11,000 Japanese on Kiska. However, a week before the landings, aircraft on bombing raids received no anti-aircraft fire. Colonel Frederick requested permission to land reconnaissance elements to assess the enemy situation. This request was denied by the Navy who was in overall command.

At thirty minutes after midnight on the 15th, 1st Regiment hit the nets to load rubber boats. The first boat hit the beach at 0120. No fire was received. The Forcemen fanned out from the beach searching for the enemy, but to no avail. No Japanese were found. 3rd Regiment and the northern landings proceeded on schedule the following day, but no enemy resistance was encountered. As it turned out, the Japanese had evacuated on 28 July, two and a half weeks prior.

Search operations continued until the 18th when Colonel Frederick was notified that the

Cont. on p. 3

President's Report-Ian Larson



It is a beautiful, sunny day as I write this. Perhaps the wet spring that we have had so far is now changing to warmer, sunnier days that we have been waiting for!

Weather has not had a significant impact on the work at the Museum. Work is progressing well,

and the project continues to be on schedule. Myles Grant and the Museum staff continue to plan for the reestablishment of the galleries, movement of the artifacts from storage, and the myriad other details connected with preparing the Museum for reopening. Myles has more details in his column.

Although the Museum reopening is still months away, planning for reopening of the Cannon Shop has also begun. Cannon Shop volunteers have been planning for the configuration of the merchandise display and storage areas, reconnecting with the Cannon Shop suppliers, as well as inventory and restocking of the merchandise as it returns from storage. Meetings have also begun with the contractor to coordinate the location of electrical outlets, phone jacks and other needs.

It is still early, but when the Cannon Shop reopens, we will need additional volunteers to help operate the gift shop. At present, we have three volunteers who will be available to cover the 5 days a week that the shop is open (Wed-Sun, 12-4 PM). The work is not difficult, and the opportunity to interact with Museum visitors is a great experience! We will provide training on operation of the cash register. If you or someone you know would be willing to volunteer for one or more afternoons a month, please call Pat Powers (360-456-3644) or me (360-866-7952) so we can start identifying potential volunteers.

Our next membership brunch meeting is on 5 June at Patriot's Landing, one day before the anniversary of D-Day. Our program will feature Lieutenant Colonel David Hodne, Commander of the 2d Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment (Airborne). LTC Hodne will provide a presentation about the Rangers at Normandy. Please mark your calendars and plan to join us in remembering and looking back at that historic day 67 years ago.

Ian Larson

Director's Report-Myles Grant



Dear Friends,

Spring is upon us and the renovation of the museum and planning for our re-opening continue to progress. During the winter, the museum staff has been engaged in projects regarding the building's renovation, planning new galleries and exhibits, supporting historical programs and requests, organizing, conserving and cataloging the backlog of archival materials and identifying and turning in excess equipment.

The museum staff said goodbye to borrowed military staff members SSG Mike Brase, who medically retired on 21 Jan 11, and to SGT Andrew Moxon who returned to his assigned unit on 13 Feb 11. SSG(R) Mike Brase plans to return to the museum as a volunteer. The museum welcomed SPC Phillip Haun in February and SGT Ryan Cope in March. Both have tremendous talent and energy and both have already made significant contributions to the museum team.

The most significant staff activity since last newsletter was overseeing the relocation of the museum's collection of over 6,000 artifacts. The artifacts are being stored as a component of the renovation contract, but had to be relocated due to the bankruptcy of the company owning the facility where the collection was stored. From 15-18 February, the museum staff over watched the transfer of the museum's collection to another off-post storage location. The move was conducted by Morgan Transfer Moving and Storage Company and was well orchestrated.

The building renovation continues to progress well with the primary contractor, Wade Perrow Construction, doing a professional job. Legal completion date for the project is still 23 Sep 11 with our goal of re-opening on 6 Dec 11 – in concert with the 92nd anniversary of the building's initial opening as the Salvation Army operated Red Shield Inn in 1919. In order to support the renovation, the museum staff is assisting with identifying room fixtures for three historic rooms which pay homage to our building's past – two to be outfitted as Red Shield Inn rooms from 1919 and one to reflect a Fort Lewis Inn room circa 1953. Additionally, the museum staff is working with the Friends of the

Force was to load out immediately and return to the States. The Quebec Conference had just convened and Lord Mountbatten had requested that the Force be utilized in the Mediterranean.

They departed the Aleutians on 24 August and arrived in San Francisco eight days later. One-half of the men were granted leave and the other half returned to Fort Ethan Allen, Vermont.

After a month of training, the Force loaded transports at Hampton Roads, Virginia on 28 October and departed for Casablanca, French Morocco, arriving there on 5 November. They entrained for Oran, Algeria and then traveled by ship to Naples, Italy, arriving there on 19 November for assignment with Fifth US Army under Lt. General Mark W. Clark. They went into barracks at Santa Maria, the Italian Artillery School, twenty-one miles north of Naples.

across the boot of Italy. This was known as the Gustav Line. Forward of the Gustav Line was another series of German-held mountains known as the Winter Line. The Winter Line protected the Liri Valley that ran north-south towards Rome. The entrance to the Liri Valley was known as the Mignano Gap. The gap was protected by high ground to the left that included the Monte Camino-Monte Maggiori hill mass and on the right Monte Sammucro. Through this narrow valley entrance ran Highway 6. Tucked against the base of Monte Sammucro was the ancient farming village of San Pietro.

A key terrain feature in the Camino-Maggiori hill mass was a 3100-foot volcanic mountain known as Monte la Difensa. The 3rd US Infantry Division, the 36th US Infantry Division and the British 56th Division had tried unsuccessfully for two weeks in November to take it.

Now attached to the 36th Infantry Division, the Force was given the mission of taking la Difensa. The British 56th Division would attack on the left to seize Monte Camino and the 142nd Regiment of the 36th Division would attack on the right to seize the series of mountains that made up the Monte Maggiori hill mass.



Fifth Army had landed at Salerno in September and since then had been bogged down north of Naples. The Germans had anchored their defense in the mountains that ran east to west



Monte la Difensa (as it is today)

La Difensa was the linchpin in the German defenses. From its heights, artillery observers could place fire on almost any point in the valley below. At the two thousand foot level was

the base of a rock crown that rose nearly vertically for another one thousand feet to the top. Colonel Frederick recognized that a frontal attack would not work. It hadn't worked for three divisions. Instead, his plan was to attack with the 2nd Regiment up a difficult rocky cliff on the north side that would be lightly defended. Movement would be done at night. 3rd Regiment and the Services Battalion had the mission of providing logistical support for the 2nd. 1st Regiment would be the 36th Division reserve.

On the afternoon of 1 December, the Force loaded trucks for movement to a forward staging area. At 1630 hours, 2nd Regiment began a ten-mile forced march through mud and driving rain to the base of the la Difensa crown. They arrived there at 0330 the next morning and remained hidden during the day of 2 December. That evening, under the cover of a 64,000 round artillery bombardment, the Forcemen began the climb up the steep, craggy face to the top.

1 Company of 1st Battalion led the way, followed by 2 and 3 Companies. Four expert climbers and scouts led the way and affixed two ropes near the top so the men could climb faster and more easily. The initial elements arrived at the top just before daylight. Surprise had been achieved. By first light, all three companies of 1st Battalion were heavily engaged with the enemy defenses, which were organized in a series of caves and pillboxes built for mutual defense.

By 0700, 2nd Battalion was at the top in a supporting role. In another hour, the top was secure and mopping up of the remaining enemy was taking place. A little over two hours of fighting was all it took to seize la Difensa. Ammunition resupply and evacuation of the wounded now became a high priority. Patrols were sent out to capture prisoners, continue to clean out resistance and to assess the German strength on the second objective, Monte la Remetanea, to the west, which was to be at-

tacked the following morning. Forcemen on the top began digging in and preparing for any counterattack that might come.



Resupply by pack board

The night was cold, windy and rainy. Resupply activities continued with supplies being carried on pack boards by the men of 3rd Regiment and Service Battalion. The ground was too steep for mules. The Germans continued to place mortar and artillery fire on the top of the mountain. Patrols that night, found two concentrations of Germans in the draw forward of la Remetanea.

The attack on Monte la Remetanea was delayed because of the heavy casualties, the difficulty in resupply and because the British still had not secured the Monte Camino hill mass to the left. On the morning of the 6th, the attack was made and by noon the objective had been seized and patrols were moving towards the valley town of Rocco d'Evandro to the west.

Finally, on the evening of 8 December the Force was relieved by the 142nd Regiment, 36th Division after six days of continuous fighting. Casualties were 73 dead, 313 wounded, 9 missing and 116 hospitalized for exhaustion. This was one third of the fighting strength of the Force.

The Force returned to Santa Maria for rest and refitting until 21 December at which time they moved to Venafro, a town north and east of la Difensa. Fifth Army was now concentrating on seizing the mountains on the north side of the

Magnano Gap. The next mission was to seize the western knob of Monte Sammucro just north of San Pietro and continue to attack north and west onto the Monte Majo complex. Attached to the Force would be the 141st Regiment, 36th Division and the 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment. The 504th was part of the 82nd Airborne Division, but remained in Italy when the 82nd was pulled out to return to England to prepare for D-Day.

The Force attacked at 0500 on 22 December with 1st Regiment in the lead. The 504th PIR attacked a series of hill masses to the north. By 0700 both regiments had cleared their objectives.

On 5 January, the final phase of the Winter Line campaign began. The Force was given the mission of attacking the Monte Majo hill complex, a series of hills to the north of San Pietro. The capture of this hill mass would allow Fifth Army to move up to the Rapido River and the Gustav Line. Colonel Frederick took command of a hodge-podge of units that included the 133rd Infantry Regiment, 34th Division, and a French-Algerian unit called the Bonjour Group after its commander, a Colonel Bonjour. This ad hoc outfit was designated as Task Force B.

For the next twelve days, the Force and its attached units attacked and cleared the hill masses in the Monte Majo complex. On 17 January, the Force returned to Santa Maria. Of the combat strength of 1800, 1400 were either dead or wounded. Service battalion was reduced by 50% from fatigue and wounds.

For the next week, the Force rested, refitted and received 250 volunteer replacements. Returning men from the hospital also improved the manpower strength. On the 29th, the Force was alerted for movement to Anzio. On 22 January, the US VI Corps landed at Anzio, to the rear of the Gustav Line. The hope was that the Germans would meet this threat to their rear by pulling units off the Gustav Line. Instead, they moved 40,000 troops from the Bal-

kans and France, leaving the Gustav Line intact and heavily defended. The Allied forces became penned in along a fifty-two kilometer half moon defensive perimeter around the towns of Anzio and Nettuno. The Germans controlled the high ground to the east and constantly placed artillery fire on the defensive line.



Patrol at Anzio

The Force arrived at Anzio on 1 February and immediately moved into defensive positions along the Mussolini Canal on the right most portion of the line. They were tied in with the 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment on the left. Their sector was a stretch of 13 kilometers or one-fourth of the line. Needless to say, they were stretched extremely thin. Both 1st and 2nd Regiments stood at about 50% strength. 3rd Regiment had received all the replacements and was near full strength. Frederick, who was now a brigadier general, decided that the only way they could hold this extended defensive line was by aggressive patrolling. By 7 February, the Force's patrols had pushed the German outpost line back by 1500 meters. During the day, the Forcemen would rest and improve their defensive positions. At night, they would



blacken their faces and move across the canal into German territory. They cratered roads and blew up culverts to prevent movement of tanks; they destroyed buildings that provided observation posts for artillery spotters; they ambushed wandering groups of Germans and gathered intelligence on German key facilities. Patrols ranged in size from section to company strength. Because of the aggressive nature of their patrolling, the Germans thought they were up against a division rather than what amounted to an under strength regiment.

It was at Anzio that the Force became known as the Black Devils or the Devil's Brigade. Interestingly, it was also at Anzio that the 504th PIR became known as Those Devils in Baggy Pants. Both references were from diaries of dead German officers. One wonders if it might have been the same officer since both the Force and the 504th were next to each other on the line.

On 9 May, the Force was relieved along the Mussolini Canal by the 36th Combat Engineer Regiment. The long awaited breakout from the Anzio beachhead was at hand. The Force continued to send patrols through the Engineer's lines to deceive the Germans as to who was actually manning the defenses in that sector. They also spent time training and getting back in shape. The ninety-six days in defensive positions had softened them up and physical training became a priority.

(series concludes in the next issue of The Banner)

SOURCES

Adleman, Robert H., and Walton, George. The Devil's Brigade. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1966.

Burhans, Robert D. The First Special Service Force: A War History of the North Americans 1942-1944. 2nd ED. Nashville: The Battery Press, 2005. (1st Edition published in 1947 by the Infantry Journal).

Ross, Robert Todd. The Super Commandos: The First Special Service Force: 1942-1944. Atglen, PA: Schiffer Military History, 2000.

Map of Italy by Alan Archambault.

Director's Report, Cont.

Museum board on the reconstitution of the museum's gift store and with garrison leadership in order to design and fund the security system needed for the museum prior to reopening. Obtaining funding to reconstitute the museum's security system remains the current biggest challenge facing the museum renovation project.

Outside of the renovation project, the museum staff developed scale renderings of all planned gallery layouts in order to facilitate more rapid development of displays and galleries once we reoccupy the building. The museum has also improved the static displays in the museum's vehicle park and on post. The museum staff coordinated with the DOL artillery shop to repair two WWI French 75mm guns displayed by Bldg 2027 and the Spanish cannons at main gate. Also, with help from the staff at Gray AAF, the museum is acquiring the parts to refurbish the museum's UH-1 helicopter.

The museum continues work on projects to organize and conserve the backlog of archival materials in order to determine relevance, preserve the material and make the material available for historic research. Current focus is screening and organizing the 10,000+ slides and 500+ video tapes in the museum's collection. The museum staff also conducted several housekeeping chores in order to make the move back into the museum more efficient – to include turning in two truckloads of unserviceable computers, monitors, scanners and printers and identifying several hundred excess books from the research libraries. Lastly, the museum staff responded to approximately 150 historical queries this quarter and supported nine unit historical events and ceremonies.

Myles Grant

**FRIENDS OF THE FORT LEWIS MILITARY MUSEUM
GENERAL MEMBERSHIP MEETING
SUNDAY, June 5, 2011**

Place: Patriots Landing
Time: 1200-1230 Social Hour
1230-1330 Brunch
1330-1415 Program

Program: LTC David Hodne, Commander of the 2nd Ranger Battalion here at JBLM, will present the program featuring the battalion's participation in the D-Day landings at Normandy, where they secured a critical cliff promontory Pointe du Hoc, and their follow-on activities.



Please return your reservation form and check by Tuesday, 1 June 2011. Last minute reservations may be made by calling Paul Knoop at (253) 279-2598.

Return this form to LTC (Ret) Donald A Simpson, 6615 79th Street W
Lakewood WA 98499. Make checks payable to "The Friends".
Cost of Brunch for members and Guests: \$16.00 each.

Number of Reservations: _____ Total Amount Enclosed: _____

Name of Member: _____ Telephone Number: _____

Names of Guests: _____

Residents of Patriot's Landing do not need to make payment for the meal, but please make reservations for seating.

Check your mailing label to see if your dues for 2011 need to be paid

**The Friends of the Fort Lewis Military Museum
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Editor.....Paul Knoop
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