



Winter 2010

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## FIRST SPECIAL SERVICE FORCE

By  
Don Simpson

One of the lesser known units in World War II was an outfit known as the First Special Service Force. This unit was a combined American-Canadian organization with ties to both the Northwest and Fort Lewis. It participated in combat operations in the Aleutian Islands, Southern Italy, Anzio, the Liberation of Rome and the invasion of Southern France. Present day US Army Special Forces, including the Fort Lewis based 1st Special Forces Group, trace their lineage to the First Special Service Force.

After Pearl Harbor, the allied strategy was to concentrate on defeating the Germans first. It was the United States' desire to invade mainland Europe via the cross-channel attack as early as possible; preferably in 1942. The British were more realistic about allied capabilities and preferred an initial strategy of working the fringes of Europe while the necessary logistics and force levels were built up to allow a successful invasion.

In March 1942, Chief of Staff of the Army, General George C. Marshall visited England with Harry Hopkins, President Roosevelt's principal advisor. While there, they were briefed by a British planner named Geoffrey Pyke, a protégé

of Lord Louis Mountbatten, the Chief of Combined Operations, and Prime Minister Winston Churchill. Pyke's thesis, *Mastery of the Snow*, was that the fourth dimension of warfare was snow; the other three being air, land and sea. Because over half of Europe was covered by snow from sixty to 250 days per year, the Allies could do great damage to the Germans by being able to successfully operate on snow.

Such operations would require a self-propelled snow vehicle capable of outrunning ski troops and operated by highly trained soldiers skilled in small unit tactics, individual combat & demolitions. This unit would parachute with their equipment into the objective area, conduct hit and run attacks against hydroelectric power plants, oil facilities and other critical installations, be resupplied



First Special Service Force Paratroopers

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## President's Report-Ian Larson

The year 2010 was eventful for the Museum and *The Friends*. It was a new experience not having the Museum open this past year and not volunteering at the Cannon Shop! After some ups and downs to resolve both contract and design issues, the renovation work moved into high gear and is on schedule. Currently, reopening of the Museum is planned for late fall this year, around Veterans Day. Myles and his staff are busy working on plans for phasing the movement of the artifacts from storage and into re-designed galleries for the renovated facility. The re-opening will obviously be a BIG event. As progress of the work continues and a specific re-opening date becomes clearer, we will keep you informed through **The Banner** and *The Friends* website ([www.fortlewismuseum.com](http://www.fortlewismuseum.com)). Myles has additional details in his column.

As you know, we have gone to making **The Banner** available on-line to those who have access to the Internet, and we hope more of you will take the opportunity to receive your copy electronically. Every copy we provide electronically saves us the cost of mailing. Paul Knoop is doing a fantastic job as the editor, and we continue to receive excellent input from members of *The Friends* and others for its periodic publication. Thanks to all of you who have prepared articles for publication. If you would like to submit an article for **The Banner**, please contact Paul ([pknoop@earthlink.net](mailto:pknoop@earthlink.net), (253) 279-2598.)

I believe you will enjoy hearing from our guest speaker at our Brunch meeting on 27 February. Mr. Wade Perrow is the owner of Wade Perrow Construction, LLC, the company that is the general contractor for the Museum renovation. Based in Gig Harbor, WA, his company has much experience with work on facilities such as the Museum. Mr. Perrow will describe some of the work they have done on other projects and perhaps discuss some of the challenges they faced with our own renovation. Please mark your calendars and plan to join us! And, don't forget-reservations are requested.

We wish a truly "Happy New Year" to you and your loved ones in 2011. Thank you once again for your continued and loyal support to the Museum and to *The Friends*. Thanks also to Myles Grant and his staff for their dedication to the mission of the Museum.

Ian Larson

## Director's Report-Myles Grant

For this upcoming brunch on 27 February 2011 it will be my honor to introduce our guest speaker, Mr. Wade Perrow, founder and CEO of [Wade Perrow Construction LLC](http://WadePerrowConstructionLLC.com), which is the firm currently renovating and restoring our historic Red Shield Inn building. From humble beginnings, Wade and his wife, Beth, have built a large and well respected construction company responsible for a wide range of large scale new construction and renovation projects throughout the United States. Wade Perrow Construction (WPC) is well known on post for their excellent work performance and craftsmanship. WPC is currently putting the finishing touches on the new Lewis National Guard Readiness Center, recently completed a total overhaul of the post's Regional Confinement Facility and is the primary contractor renovating the Evergreen Chapel. WPC is also no stranger to museum construction and historic restoration projects. Some recent local examples of their restoration and renovation work can be observed in their restoration of the historic Pantages Theater in downtown Tacoma, – which won the 2007 "Build Washington" Award from the Associated General Contractors – and their top to bottom renovation of the Foss Waterway Museum, also in Tacoma. It is on the topic of historic building renovation and preservation that Wade will be addressing during the Friends' brunch.

As far as the museum renovation project itself is concerned, WPC continues to make good progress. The legal completion date for the project is still currently 23 September 2011, but we hope to possibly be in the building a bit sooner in order to start getting things set up for our grand reopening. As a side note to the renovation project, circumstances have arisen which require us to find a new storage location for the museum's collection of artifacts and I wish to thank those Friends who have volunteered their time in helping the museum staff ensure that the artifacts are safely transferred and looked after.

Lastly, the museum staff has been diligently planning the exhibits and gallery layouts for our newly remodeled museum and Center of Military History staff members Dr. James Kelly and Mr. John Pascal have generously accepted an invitation to visit us in March 2011 to help with this key task. As always, it has been a team effort and I am very appreciative of everyone's help and support.

Myles Grant

by air, and then escape to the border or sea coast for extraction. However, British industry was hard pressed to keep up with current requirements and said that it would take four years to develop the snow vehicle; hence, US involvement.

When General Marshall returned from England he gave the requirement to study what became known as Operation Plough to the War Department's Operations Division headed by then Major General Dwight D. Eisenhower. Eisenhower gave the job to a Coast Artillery lieutenant colonel named Robert T. Frederick, a 1928 graduate of the US Military Academy at West Point. Frederick had served with distinction at coast artillery posts across the country and in various staff assignments. He had a reputation of being very smart and thorough.

Geoffrey Pyke's target areas for Project Plough were Norway and Northern Italy against hydroelectric plants and Romania against oil fields and facilities. After a detailed study, Frederick recommended that the operation not go forward because he felt it would be impossible to recover the forces and it would result in being a suicide mission.

However, politics got in the way. Lord Mountbatten, and, more importantly, Churchill, were very keen on the Plough Force. When the staff recommendation went to General Marshall he ordered that the mission proceed. It was now June 1942 and the Plough Force had to be ready to go by December 1942 for winter employment. Not much time!

Eisenhower went to Army Ground Forces headquarters requesting nominations of officers to command Plough. Those interviewed were determined to be unacceptable. Eisenhower then turned to Frederick and said "Frederick, you take this Plough project! You've been over the whole thing. You're in charge now. Let me know what you need." A standard

mission type order!

Frederick immediately went into high gear! He assembled a small staff of seven officers. He determined that an idle National Guard facility outside Helena, Montana, was a potential training site. He sent his operations officer, Major John Shinberger, to check it out. When Shinberger returned he said it would fit the bill. Fort William Henry Harrison, as it was known, was located in a wide valley between two mountain ranges. The flat valley was ideal for an airfield and parachute training. Mountaineering and snow training could be conducted in the nearby mountains.

Concurrently, the Army was working to develop the snow capable vehicle. Pyke's requirements were that the vehicle have a load capacity of two tons, a speed over the snow of 20 MPH, be able to handle a 20 percent slope, be able to operate in both hard and soft snow and have a range of 250 miles. The Office of Scientific Research and Development designed a full-tracked vehicle and Studebaker Company developed four prototypes. The final model became known as the Cargo Carrier, Light, T-15 or the



**Restored T-15 Weasel**

"Weasel". The initial models were tested satisfactorily on the sand dunes north of the Studebaker plant in South Bend, Indiana. The Army Logistics Officer gave the go-ahead to produce 600 of these vehicles.

Frederick also had to come up with an organization for the Plough Force. The combat echelon would be centered on the Weasel. He wanted three subordinate units that would each operate independently in Norway, Italy and Romania. These would be small regiments of 417 officers and men. Each regiment would have two battalions of three companies each. Each company would have three platoons and each platoon would be further divided into two sections. Each section of nine men would operate four snow vehicles.

Because the training was to be short and intense and the time before deployment was short, Frederick organized a 600 man service battalion to perform all administrative and logistics functions. This freed up the combat echelon to train.

The British requested that the Canadians be part of this force. This was approved. The Canadians were recruited to be part of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Parachute Battalion. Many of the Canadian volunteers came from overseas and already had combat experience.

In the US, word went out to all Army posts requesting volunteers and three recruiting teams fanned out to interview and select the men. The call was for men between the ages 21 and 35 who had completed a minimum of three years of grammar school and were within the occupational range of lumberjacks, forest rangers, hunters, north-woodsmen, game wardens, prospectors and explorers.

What was this unit to be called? Because of the top-secret status of the unit, Frederick did not want a name that included Commando or Ranger. Instead he selected the innocuous sounding designation of "First Special Service Force". British Commandos were organized into what was known as the Special Service

Brigade and it seems probable that the name derived from that term. To the uninformed, it would seem to be an administrative or support unit. Later, when the Army formed Special Services Branch to provide recreational and morale support services for the Army, the Force would be confused with them. That was all right with Colonel Frederick, although it resulted in more than one bloody nose for the uninformed.

Once recruiting was completed and all soldiers were consolidated at Fort William Henry Harrison, the Canadians and Americans were completely integrated into the units. All Canadians went into the combat echelon. The service battalion was strictly American except for a small Canadian pay and personnel section. If a unit commander was an American, the executive officer or second in command was Canadian and vice versa. Enlisted soldiers were completely mixed. There was no such thing as a Canadian or American unit. They became known as the North Americans, or just "the Force".

Every unit needs insignia and a shoulder patch. The logical insignia might have been the crossed rifles of the Infantry. However, men were recruited from all branches of the service and there were the Canadians to consider. The previously retired crossed arrows of the Indian Scouts was suggested. The necessary approval was requested and granted and all force members would wear the crossed arrows on their collars.

Continuing with the Indian motif, the shoulder patch was shaped as a spearhead, red in color and with the name USA arrayed horizontally across the upper part of the patch and the name



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Canada arrayed vertically under the USA.

A time sensitive training program was developed. Training was to be conducted in three phases and was very intensive. Phase one was from 3 August to 3 October and included parachute training, hand-to-hand combat, training in basic subjects such as weapons, demolitions, and small-unit tactics. There was a heavy emphasis on physical fitness training. Phase two was from 5 October to 21 November and included unit tactics and exercises. Phase three was to use the remaining time before deployment for ski training, rock climbing, cold weather survival, and operation of the combat snow vehicle.

Parachute training was conducted in six days. Captain Harry "Tug" Wilson and Lt. Robert Ellis from the Jump School at Fort Benning, Georgia conducted the training. Wilson was originally from the Army Air Corp and as a warrant officer was the principal trainer of the Parachute Test Platoon in 1940.

While training continued in earnest, the intelligence staff continued to study the objective areas of Norway, Northern Italy and Rumania. It became apparent that operations in Northern Italy and Rumania were not feasible. Damage done to facilities in both these locations would have a minimal effect on the enemy and extracting the force would be virtually impossible. It would be a suicide mission and the two regiments deployed to those locations would most probably be written off. Bombing these targets from the air would be just as effective. Therefore, Northern Italy and Rumania were scrubbed from the mission list and the Force concentrated its planning for operations in Norway.

In September, Colonel Frederick traveled to England to review plans with the British and arrange for airlift and logisti-

cal support. The only aircraft capable of transporting and air dropping the snow vehicle was the British Lancaster bomber. The RAF, however, was reluctant to provide the necessary airlift to parachute the entire force with their equipment into Norway. The other problem was that the Norwegians were getting cold feet about having a group of North Americans running about their country blowing up hydroelectric plants. Both the Norwegian King and Prime Minister felt that destroying the electrical infrastructure of the country would work as much a hardship on the Norwegian people as on the Germans.

In his exit interview, Lord Mountbatten told Frederick he was not prepared to fight for Plough's continuance. Frederick sent a message to his planners in Washington, DC, to suspend planning. It looked like the Plough Project was dead. Frederick briefed General Marshall on his return and headed back to Helena to await the decision as to whether or not the Force would be disbanded. General Marshall's decision was to go ahead with the force.

In September, a detachment from the 87<sup>th</sup> Mountain Infantry Regiment at Fort Lewis, Washington, went to the Colum-



**87th Mountain Infantry training on Mt Rainier**

bia Ice Fields on the British Columbia/Alberta border to test the Weasel. The acid test was for the Weasel to be able to outrun troops on skis. The race started on a long downhill stretch, giving the skiers the fullest advantage. However, over the entire track the Weasel easily outran the skiers and actually had to go back and tow them in. Geoffrey Pyke's dream of providing the allies with mastery of the snow had reached fruition. However, it would not be realized in Operation Plough.

Now that Plough had been scrubbed, the Force Executive and Operation Officers revised the tables of organization. The section was increased to twelve men, the platoon to twenty-five men. Additional weapons such as bazookas, mortars, flame-throwers, and the Johnson machine gun were added to reflect the change in mission from sabotage to combat.

The Force continued to train in hopes of getting a mission somewhere. By November, the unit was taking on a distinct identity. It was neither American nor Canadian, just Special Service Force. The individual soldier, to a man, had resourcefulness, mental and physical toughness and initiative that surmounted all obstacles. The junior officers held their posts because of their wits and education. They were, on the whole, born leaders and if they didn't measure up they didn't last long. Frederick got rid of them.

December brought snow to the Continental Divide so that cold weather training could begin. Most of the Canadians were good skiers, much better than the Americans, some of whom had never been on skis. The instructors were Norwegians and provided the best possible training. By the end of February 1943, 99% of the Force were competent skiers.

Tactical training continued with a

heavy emphasis on the use of demolitions. Teams would infiltrate to a target, rig it with explosives and destroy it. The comment was made that the Force blew up a good portion of the State of Montana before they were through.

In April, the Force was sent to Norfolk, Virginia for amphibious training. All combat units had to undergo this training before going overseas. The training took three weeks and at the end the Force had broken all records for loading landing craft. The best Army units took one minute to load a single landing craft; Marines took fifty-two seconds. The best Force platoons did it in thirty-three seconds.

From Norfolk, they traveled to Fort Ethan Allen outside Burlington, Vermont, for more mountain training in the Green Mountains and small boat operations on Lake Champlain. During this period, they received combat validation evaluations from Army Ground Forces. The ratings averaged 125 percent with some as high as 200 percent. According to the evaluators, the Force was so much better than other units that they elected to exceed the 100 per cent standard. They were particularly impressed with each soldier's ability to carry his combat loads with ease and also in the confidence that the soldiers displayed for one another. These successful evaluations were the green light for deployment to combat.

**Article continues in the next issue with deployment and combat operations of the Force.**

#### **SOURCES**

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**FRIENDS OF THE FORT LEWIS MILITARY MUSEUM  
GENERAL MEMBERSHIP MEETING  
SUNDAY, February 27, 2011**

Place: Patriots Landing  
Time: 1145-1230 Social Hour  
1230-1330 Brunch  
1330-1412 Program

Program: Mr Wade Perrow, owner of the Wade Perrow Construction Company in Gig Harbor, will present our program. His company is responsible for the construction of many structures in the Pacific Northwest, and he will discuss the challenges regarding restoration of Historical buildings, with the focus on our Museum. Please visit his [web site](#) for many examples of his outstanding works in our area.



Please return your reservation form and check by Tuesday, 23 Feb 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 we ask that you make reservations for seating.

**Please note that if you are not a Life or Honorary member, your 2011 Dues are now payable.**

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Editor.....Paul Knoop  
 Assistant Editor.....Don Simpson

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Please Continue to be a  
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It's time to renew your  
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