

## **BATTLE HONOUR FOR ROME**

On May 11, 1944, the Allies commenced Operation Diadem, a massive advance which involved breaking out of the established beachhead at Anzio. The initial duty assigned to the FSSF was to provide cover for the right flank as it made its advance. The commander of the operation was concentrating his forces on the liberation of Rome as its final objective.

The FSSF moved out at 6:30 a.m. on May 23, facing a series of machine gun nests and mortar positions as it made its way towards the Cisterna railway. The armour divisions, meant to support troop movement, had been stopped by minefields, and the supporting infantry was unable to keep up the pace maintained by the FSSF. The Force was left isolated once it arrived at the Cisterna railway objective at 10:00 a.m.

The weather was also working against the men of the FSSF. They found themselves in the pouring rain, low on ammunition, and cut off from re-supply. As a result, the Force temporarily withdrew from the Cisterna railway station to allow the regular infantry to catch up and provide support.

After regrouping, the Force moved on to take Monte Arrestino. During the following days, it proceeded to take the mountain villages of Cori, Rocca, Massima and Artena.

Resistance from German paratroops wasn't enough to stop the FSSF's forward advance as it pushed on with the assistance of Sherman tanks and M-10 tank destroyers. Counter attacks backed up by German armour on May 29 and 30 were defeated. By midday on June 2, the FSSF had moved further to take Colle Ferro, where it worked under heavy fire to defuse German demolition charges orchestrated to destroy much of the town's infrastructure.

By June 3 the Allies had pushed forward, and were pursuing the retreating enemy troops who were falling back towards Rome. Men from the FSSF were among the first to enter and liberate the

city on June 4. The FSSF was taken out of Italy after Rome to begin their preparations for Operation Dragoon, the landings in southern France.

### **First Special Service Force**

The Canadian Airborne Regiment also drew much inspiration from the history of the First Special Service Force. The Regiment bears the FSSF battle honours Monte Camino, Monte Majo, Monte La Difensa/Monte La Rmetanea, Anzio and Rome on its Regimental Colour. As well the unconventional nature of the First Special Service Force, similar to the [British SAS](#) and the current [U.S. Army Special Forces](#) and elsewhere, was not replicated in the more conventional role of the Canadian Airborne Regiment. Nevertheless, its accomplishments served as a model for many members of the new "Airborne".

The First Special Service Force was a unique joint formation of Canadian and American troops assigned to perform sabotage operations in Europe in World War II. Simply named "special forces" to conceal its "commando" or "ranger" purpose, this unit later gained fame as the "[Devil's Brigade](#)". The Canadians were designated the "2nd Canadian Parachute Battalion".

Members were handpicked and sent to [Helena, Montana](#), for special training. The Canadians wore American uniforms and equivalent ranks to eliminate any questions of command among the troops. Their work-up took place in three phases, with extensive physical training throughout the program. The first phase included parachute training, small unit tactics and weapons handling—all officers and ranks were required to master the full range of infantry weapons from pistols and carbines to [bazookas](#) and [flame throwers](#). Next came explosives handling and demolition techniques, then a final phase consisted of skiing, rock climbing, adapting to cold weather, and operation of the Weasel combat vehicle. Exercises in amphibious landings and beach

assaults were added later.

The first deployment of FSSF to the Aleutian island of [Kiska](#) disappointed the troops when it was found that the Japanese forces expected there had already evacuated, but the exercise was considered good experience. The force was next sent to Italy, where German forces entrenched in two mountains were inflicting heavy casualties on the 5th US Army. The first regiment, 600 men, scaled a 1,000-foot (300 m) cliff by night to surprise the enemy position. Planned as a three-to-four day assault, the battle was won in just two hours. The force remained for three days, packing in supplies for defensive positions and fighting frostbite, then moved on to the second mountain, which was soon overtaken. In the end, FSSF suffered 511 casualties including 73 dead and 116 exhaustion cases. The commander, Colonel [Robert Frederick](#), was wounded twice himself.

FSSF saw continued action throughout the Mediterranean, at [Monte Sammucro](#), [Radicosa](#), and [Anzio](#). For the final advance on [Rome](#), 1SSF was given the honour of being the lead force in the assault and became the first Allied unit to enter the "Eternal City". Their success later continued in southern France and then at the France-Italian border. Often misused as line troops, the force suffered continuously high casualties until it was finally withdrawn from combat.

On the December 5, 1944, in the town of Menton in southern France, the First Special Service Force was disbanded. Its battle honours included Monte Camino, Monte La Difensa, Monte La Remetanea, Monte Majo, Anzio, Rome, Advance to the Tiber, Italy 1943–44, Southern France and Northwest Europe. The Canadians rejoined their home units and the Americans were assigned to either Airborne units or the newly formed 474th Infantry Regiment. Frederick became the youngest Major-General ever in the American army, at the age of 37, and took command of the 45th Division.

The success, esprit and discipline of FSSF became a template for building modern special forces worldwide.