

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

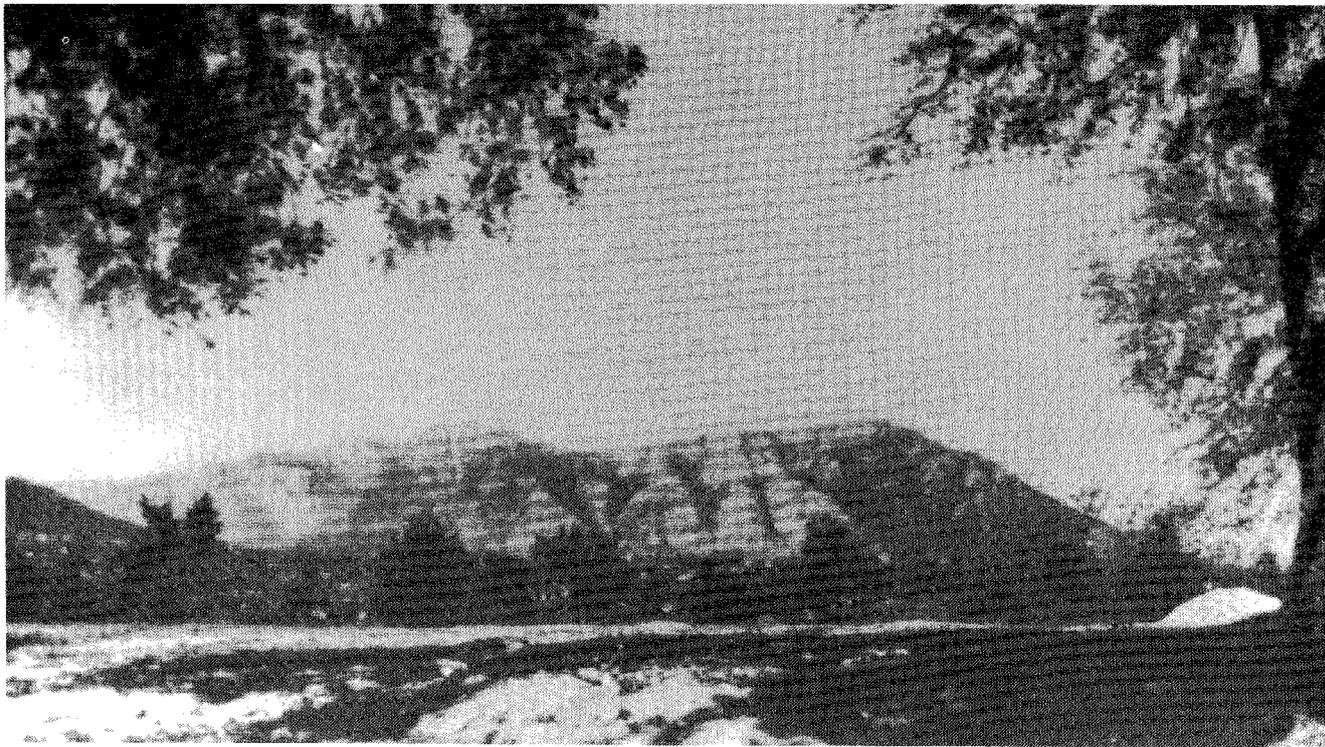
Map 15. FSSF movement to attack positions, 2 December

keep warm. Perhaps their main comfort was the sound of the increased intensity of the friendly artillery bombardment that pounded and illuminated the summit.

The units began to move again at 0100. The 1st, 2d, and 3d Companies, 1st Battalion, clawed their way up the rope ladders in two hours. From the top of the cliff, it was 350 more yards of steep, rocky slope to the actual peak. So far, the Germans had not detected the presence of the Force, even though several enemy artillery rounds landed sporadically farther down the mountain where the 2d Battalion was following. The difficulty of the climb is described vividly in *The Devil's Brigade*:

The difficulty involved in this move comes into sharp focus when it is remembered the cliff face of Difensa begins at the 2,000 foot level and extends upwards at a pitch of 60 or 70 degrees for approximately another 1,000 feet. The peasants of the nearby villages never used anything but the well-cut trails on the opposite side when they took their flocks to the summit to graze. Since the winter of 1943, only two persons have tried to get to the top by means of the northeast face. These were two young men from Northern Italy, and the peasants who extricated them from the cleft in the rock wall where they had become stranded, cursed them for fools.

This was the cleft that 600 riflemen, carrying packs which would have forced lesser men to the ground, negotiated without a sound. They groped for crevices with frozen hands while stretching their muscles to the aching point to keep from sliding backwards.²⁶



The Camino hill mass

One by one, the companies inched over the cliff and maneuvered into line for the final assault. Occupying the left side of the assault line was 1st Company, with 2d Company in the center. As 3d Company moved up to take its position on the right of 2d Company around 0430 (with 2d Battalion on the rope ladders), a rockfall alerted the Germans. Suddenly, the sky was full of flares, and German mortar bombs and machine-gun fire began to rake the men of the Force. At this point, the battle quickly deteriorated into a fight by platoon and section leaders. Yet sufficient surprise had been achieved to heighten the Force's chances for success. Moreover, the small-unit leaders in the Force had been fully briefed on the overall plan. As the battle fell into their hands, they knew exactly what to do. The Germans were hampered in their resistance by weapons oriented on the wrong lines of fire.

The 1st Company attacked first, supported by its own light mortars and light machine guns. As the sun came up, the company was well within the German defensive position with 2d and 3d Companies beginning to close with the enemy from their sectors. The men of the Force conducted fire and maneuver against each German strongpoint, suppressing it with fire, while other FSSF elements closed in on the enemy's flanks and rear. The unit leaders, including Colonel Frederick, were in the midst of the fight, leading, directing, and dying. As bits of fog blew away, elements of the Force found themselves suddenly exposed to snipers or enemy fighting positions. By 0700, the entire battalion was on the summit, and some Germans began to surrender, while their comrades streamed away to the west towards Remetanea. In under three hours, the 1st Battalion, 2d Regiment, had taken an objective that had kept the 3d Infantry Division at bay for ten days.

Low ammunition stocks prevented the regiment from continuing the attack to Remetanea. In addition, the men were exhausted. The 2d Battalion moved up to join the 1st Battalion, but Colonel Frederick held up any further advance

until ammunition, water, rations, blankets, and litters could be packed up the mountain—a six-hour exercise at best. In the interim, the battalions on Difensa reorganized and consolidated their positions for an expected counterattack, prepared the wounded for evacuation, cleared out the remaining snipers, established outposts, and pushed a few patrols out to determine the disposition of the enemy defenses along the western ridgeline.

The next five days resembled an exercise in survival. As the trickle of resupply flowed in by packboard and the prisoners of war and the wounded moved downhill, the weather turned worse. Heavy rain fell steadily, day after day, with few breaks. Wet, cold, exhausted, and beginning to suffer from exposure, the Force confirmed Napoleon's maxim that "the first quality of the soldier is enduring fatigue and privations; valor is only the second."

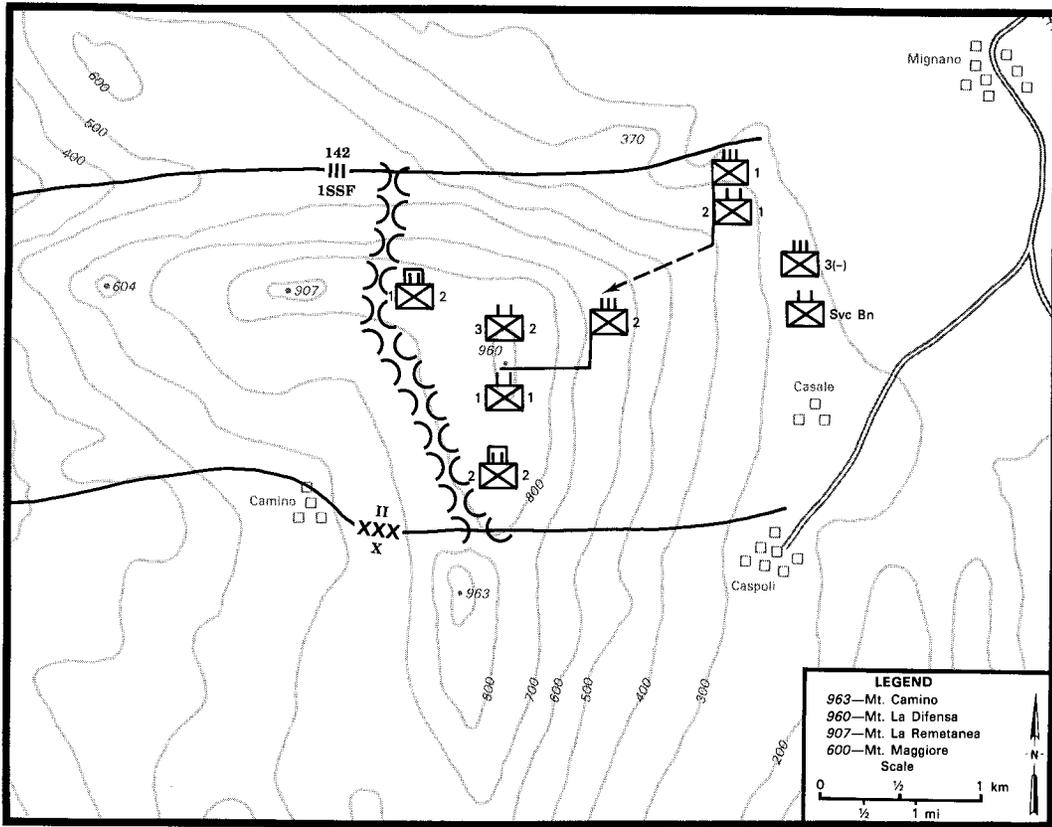
To make matters worse, the British 56th Division, though attacking valiantly, had not taken the Camino peak and would not do so until the evening of 6 December. As a result, the FSSF had to endure intense mortar and long-range machine-gun fire from Camino as well as Remetanea.

At the bottom of the hill, Colonel Adams coordinated the steady but slow stream of supplies to the top. Mules could not handle the grade or the footing. Every can of water, every ration, every round of ammunition had to be wearily carried up by hand. The entire 3d Regiment, less one company, was dedicated to assist the Service Battalion in this effort.

Recognizing the limits these conditions imposed on his operation, Frederick decided to postpone his attack against Remetanea until 5 December. When Walker released the 1st Regiment, Frederick called up one of its battalions to Difensa to hold the summit so that the 2d Regiment could attack. On its way over, the 2d was delayed twenty-four hours and suffered 50 percent casualties in an attack by German artillery that might have been entirely accidental.²⁷

From 3 to 5 December, the small forces on the summit continued to feel their way toward Remetanea. Because of the fog and the broken terrain, the fighting assumed no fixed pattern. A temporary break in the fog often found both German and U.S. forces helplessly exposed while they felt their way about the hill mass. At one point, 400 German reinforcements were discovered moving forward for a counterattack. Hastily arranged artillery fires foiled their attempt.

Finally, on 5 December, the 2d Regiment sent two reinforced battalions down the ridge toward Remetanea in a daylight attack (see map 16). They were stopped about halfway to the objective by bitter, desperate resistance. The German defense, however, dissolved during the night so that the regiment was able to occupy the peak against light opposition by noon on the 6th. Over the next two days, the FSSF cleared the area they held of isolated German snipers and outposts and tied in on the left with the British and on the right with the 142d Infantry. Relieved on 9 December, the Force wearily climbed back down the mountain to recuperate. It had suffered 511 casualties: 73 killed, 9 missing, 313 wounded or injured, and 116 incapacitated from exhaustion and exposure.²⁸



Source: CSI Battlebook 14-A, *Monte la Difensa*, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Ft. Leavenworth, KS, May 1984.
 Map 16. Clearing Mount de la Remetanea, 1943

Assessment of the Battle

The participation of the FSSF in the battle for the Camino high ground from November to December was crucial to the Allied success. Newly arrived in the theater in November, the over 100 percent strength of the Force enhanced its fighting power. The assaulting units of the 3d Infantry Division, at the approaches to Camino, had been exhausted and depleted from weeks of fighting. The special training, elite character, and high confidence of the Force gave it a further advantage over the 3d. What the FSSF accomplished in two to three hours at Camino is in sharp contrast to the failure of the 3d Infantry Division and is remarkable testimony to the capabilities of the Force. The Force's success in capturing Difensa's peak, moreover, contributed significantly to the conquest of the Camino and Maggiore peaks. (But even with this support, the 56th Division required five days to take Camino despite its use of excellent techniques of night attacks and multiple approaches.) Once Difensa fell, Camino, Maggiore, and Remetanea followed like dominos. Thus, the Force was the key used to unlock the entire bastion. Finally, the capture of the Camino mass, as the southern stopper in the Mignano Gap, led directly to the capture of Mount Sammucro, on the northern side of the mountain mass, in the last half of December.

The mission against Difensa was fully suited to the FSSF. It took advantage of the Force's special training in night fighting, mountain climbing,



Technician Fourth Grade Garbedian, radioman, on Difensa

cold weather, and lightning assault. No conventional unit, without special training, could have accomplished the mission.

Surprise and shock were the essential ingredients in the success of the Force. The risk taken in sending such a small assault element against the strong German positions was mitigated by the choice of the time and place of the attack. Furthermore, even though the Germans were not outnumbered by the attackers, they were overly dispersed and incorrectly oriented. The shock of the attack by the Force, achieved through speed and the volume of fire from its light weapons, overwhelmed the enemy and forced him to withdraw.

The Force attained surprise and shock only because of its specialized training and extraordinary fitness, which permitted it to climb the toughest part of the mountain; to mount a violent, rapid attack even though exhausted; and to endure debilitating extremes of weather and increasing exhaustion while continuing to hold, then expand, its position on the high ground. The superb fitness of the Force also allowed it to supply itself by man pack in the operation.

The Force's use of the cover of darkness and technical mountain-climbing skills permitted it to achieve surprise against a wary and experienced foe. Knowing the disposition and inclinations of the enemy, the FSSF turned the terrain to its advantage.

The leadership of the Force excelled in this, their first, live action. Frederick's plan was sound, its execution almost flawless. Once discovered, the junior leaders of the Force took charge of the battle and prevailed. Company commanders and their seniors led from the front. In this regard, a comment by a British officer who visited the FSSF at Difensa on 7 December is revealing. He remarked to a member of the Force his surprise at the number of majors and colonels present in the combat zone. The Force officer replied that both U.S. and Canadian members of the FSSF held the principle that leaders should lead.²⁹ On the other hand, Captain Pat O'Neill, the FSSF's expert in hand-to-hand combat suggested, "Perhaps we lost more officers than we should, as they needlessly exposed themselves."³⁰

Frederick set an exacting example for the rest of his officers on Difensa. He was everywhere: carrying wounded men to the aid station or down the mountain, sharing a cigarette or a foxhole with his men, and going forward on personal reconnaissance. He was even seen praying beside a man wounded along the trail up the mountain. By the end of the war, Frederick would be wounded on nine different occasions, a record for general officers. It is also recorded that Frederick occasionally infiltrated an enemy position prior to an attack by his command. He was then able to observe from a covered position which of his subordinates were actively leading the attack.³¹

The victory at Difensa established the reputation of the Force as an extremely capable and hard-hitting raiding force for mountain operations. It demonstrated that it was a unique organization with unusual capabilities not matched by regular units. Ideally, the Army should have used the Force judiciously for special missions that required its distinctive capabilities. Unfortunately, Frederick's superiors do not appear to have properly evaluated the uniqueness of the Force. After two weeks of rest and recuperation, the FSSF was sent back into line, this time not as a raiding force but as a separate brigade, fighting along conventional divisions in a sustained role.

Mount Sammucro and Mount Majo

Following the battle for the Camino mass, the U.S. 36th Division shifted to the north and assaulted Mount Sammucro (1,205 meters), the northern shoulder of the Mignano Gap. After taking the peak with heavy casualties, the 36th Division still faced the prospect of clearing several miles of lower slopes on the western and southwestern sides of the peak. On 22 December, Major General Keyes, II Corps' commander, ordered the FSSF into the line against these positions. Keyes also directed the 141st Infantry and the 504th Parachute Infantry Battalion to support the FSSF, and he placed the 6th Armored Field Artillery Group and three airborne artillery battalions in direct support. The 36th Division Artillery was available in general support. On their part, the Germans defended from their usual well-fortified, mutually supporting positions, and they, too, held strong artillery forces in support.

Following a one-hour FSSF artillery preparation, Frederick planned to conduct a coordinated night assault against the Germans, but a German counter-preparation caught the assault battalion in its start positions, completely disorganizing it. As a result, the Force's attack did not begin until dawn. Because of the nature of the terrain and the enemy's dispositions, the attack took the



Major General Keyes

form of a frontal assault through enemy fire. For two days, from 24 to 25 December, the Force doggedly pressed forward, the 1st Regiment bearing the brunt of the fight. Again, the speed of its attack surprised and overwhelmed the Germans, but the cost to the Force was high; several companies were reduced to 20 to 30 percent strength. Nonetheless, the 1st Regiment took its objectives on 25 December and was relieved in place by other elements of the 36th Division. Except for the exceptional perseverance of the Force in the face of the stiff German resistance, nothing distinguished this battle from a hundred other bloody contests for Italian terrain.

After three short days of rest, the men of the Force hoisted their packs anew for their next operation. Having secured the Mignano Gap, General Keyes now intended to push his II Corps down the valley toward Cassino, with the 34th Division making the main attack. Because a vast area of high ground on the right threatened this advance, Keyes ordered the FSSF into the mountains to protect his flank. The Force retained the 456th Parachute Artillery Battalion in attachment and received an engineer company in support to clear mines and improve trails. A Sardinian pack mule company was also attached for logistic support. The 142d Infantry followed to occupy the ground cleared by the Force.

Essentially, this operation called for a wide end run through a sparsely settled and thinly held maze of barren hills and ridges. German opposition consisted of scattered outposts leading back to a main line of resistance occupied by about three battalions.

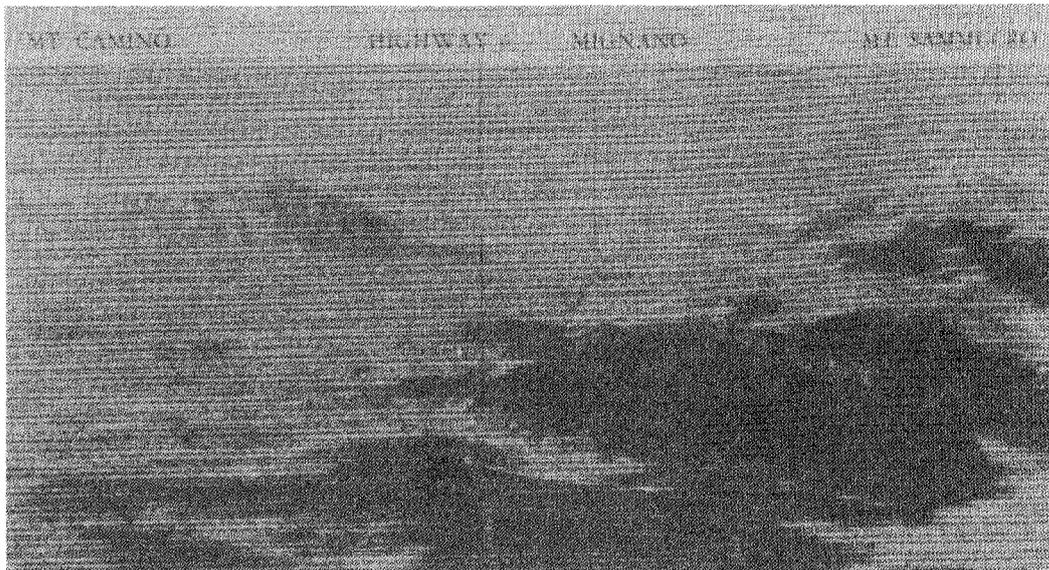
Frederick recognized that the large area required a broad advance during which his men would attack, occupy, and then be relieved from a succession of peaks and ridges. Accordingly, he organized the Force into two columns (see map 17). On the right, at about two-thirds strength, the 3d Regiment was ordered to sweep northward, then eastward toward Mount Majo (1,259 meters). On the left, Frederick directed the 1st and 2d Regiments (each at 50 percent strength) to work in tandem as they advanced parallel with the 3d Regiment toward Hill 1109. Frederick orchestrated the movements of the separate columns so that they would normally be able to support each other from over-watching positions. The 2d Regiment also detailed three of its companies to assist the Service Battalion.

By this time, winter had descended on the area in full fury. Ground above 600 meters was covered by five inches of snow or more. Temperatures remained below freezing, and high winds caused the chill factor to plummet.

Force scouts moved out on 1 January 1944. (Commanders typically preceded each movement with their own reconnaissance.) The 2d Regiment entered the defended area on the night of 3 January. The first objective, Hill 724, fell to the attackers after a short fight. The defenders had been completely surprised by the stealthy approach of the attackers.³² On the evening of the 4th, the 1st Regiment duplicated the feat on Hill 675. Said one amazed German, "We were standing alertly at our machine guns when a voice said, 'Hands up!' The attack was very excellently accomplished."³³ Surprised by the speed of the Force's advance, the Germans in this zone fell back to Hill 1109.

If anything, the 3d Regiment moved even faster, also capitalizing on its stealth and night-fighting abilities to secure a string of nameless hills. On one hill, an FSSF company of 59 men crept to within hand-grenade range of a company of Germans about 100 men strong. Attacking at 0500, the outnumbered men of the Force annihilated the surprised Germans.³⁴

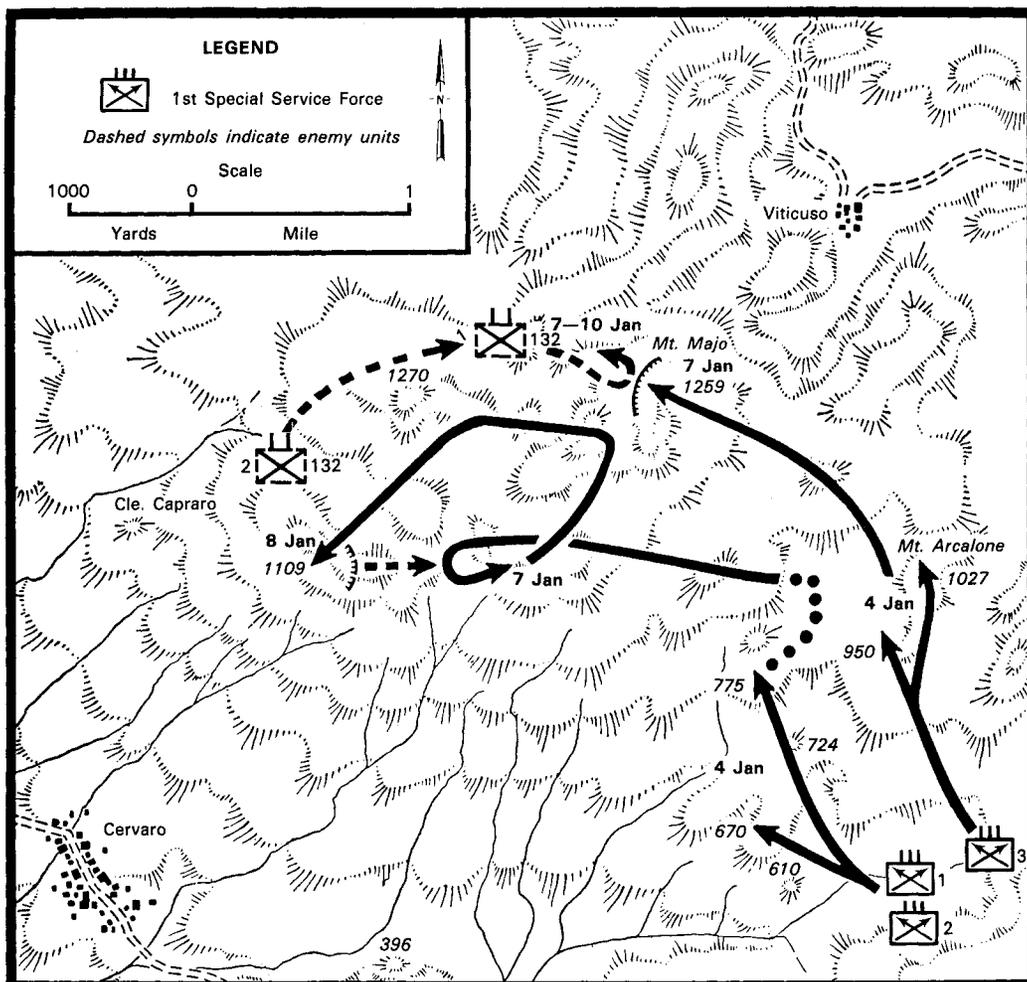
The Mignano Gap



Patrolling by day and attacking by night, the FSSF rapidly closed on their final objectives. Lieutenant Adna Underhill explained the reason for the shock of the Force attacks:

We like to attack because we don't get too many casualties then. We go straight into the Jerries until we get close enough to use grenades. We never let machine guns stop us or pin us down because we know that once we are stopped, we'll be murdered by their mortars. As long as we can keep going forward, there is less chance of getting hurt.³⁵

The effects of the weather and German fire, however, were sapping the Force's strength. Keyes realized that the FSSF could not continue to advance on such a broad front without some help. Thus, on 6 January, Frederick received two battalions of the 133d Infantry and another engineer company in attachment. The next day, the entire 36th Division Artillery was placed in direct support. Combined with the FSSF, these reinforcements formed Task Force B, under Frederick's command.



Source: U.S. War Department, General Staff, *Fifth Army at the Winter Line (15 November 1943-15 January 1944)*, American Forces in Action Series (Washington, DC: Military Intelligence Division, U.S. War Department, June 1945).

Map 17. The capture of Mount Majo and Hill 1109, showing the II Corps' right flank, 4-10 January 1944

Colonel Frederick decided to conduct separate but simultaneous attacks on the night of 6—7 January to secure both Mount Majo and Hill 1109 (see map 17). Colonel Walker, 3d Regiment commander, organized a two-pronged attack against Mount Majo. One battalion drove directly for the peak, while the other circled to the far side and attacked from the west. Approaching with their usual stealth, these elements executed the coordinated fire and maneuver so characteristic of the Force. They quickly closed to within tens of meters of the flanks of the German positions and pinched them off one by one. By 0520, Walker's men had occupied the summit; by 0900, they took the neighboring high ground.³⁶ This feat was especially remarkable in that the force ratio between attackers and defenders was approximately 1:1.

For the next three days, the 3d Regiment held Mount Majo against twenty-seven separate counterattacks. In this defense, the FSSF made good use of a number of German machine guns that had been left behind with a large stock of ammunition. The better part of a German regiment was crippled by fires from its own weapons and the 8,500 rounds fired from 7 to 10 January by the 36th Division Artillery.³⁷

The 1st Regiment had less success against Hill 1109. Strong counterattacks forced it off the slopes on the morning of 7 January. Colonel Marshall, the regimental commander, decided to plan an easier attack, using the indirect approach. That night, he moved his regiment to the vicinity of Mount Majo, now held by the 3d Regiment. From there, Marshall attacked westward against Hill 1270, seizing it by 0200, 8 January. Marshall now held the higher ridge to the northeast of Hill 1109. His men attacked down the ridge in the early morning. Resistance was light; the enemy had pulled out during the night.

Over the next several days, the 1st and 3d Regiments assisted the advance of Task Force B all the way into Cervaro, with the 133d Infantry carrying the brunt of the load. Task Force B was dissolved on the 13th, and the remnants of the FSSF limped back to rest areas to recuperate.

Like the conquest of Difensa, the clearing of the hills between Mount Sammucro and Mount Majo had a major bearing on the outcome of the II Corps offensive. In particular, the occupation of Majo collapsed that part of the German line guarding the southeastern approach to Cassino. Certainly, the main forces in the valley could not have advanced so rapidly had not their right flank been secure.

The Force's mission at Majo was more in line with its capabilities than with a conventional infantry unit. The mission capitalized, again, on the Force's mountain skills and on its experience in cold weather. But the operation had more of a meat-grinder character to it than the earlier experiences at Difensa (although not as much so as the operation on Mount Sammucro). The Majo operation clearly was well suited for light mountain infantry, but one must remember that the FSSF had training and skills beyond those of normal light infantry. Each casualty experienced by the Force represented not only the loss of a cold-weather mountain expert, but it also represented the loss of a skier, paratrooper, demolitions expert, and amphibious raider. So

even though the FSSF performed its tasks in these Italian hills better than any conventional unit could have hoped to, the operation remains to some degree a waste of the special capabilities of the Force.

The Force's casualties were very high. On 8 January, combat strength in the Force stood at 53 officers and 450 enlisted men, with the 1st Regiment down to 7 officers and 82 men. By 14 January, the Force had experienced 1,400 casualties out of the 1,800 men in its combat echelon. Moreover, Service Battalion strength had decreased to 50 percent from fatigue, wounds, and deaths. Many of these casualties resulted from the extreme weather. The Canadian war diary tells the grim story:

SANTA MARIA: 2 January. A bright cold day. Parkas are being sent forward as there is about 5 inches of snow in the hills and quite cold.

7 January. Bright and cool. Casualty returns from the front include a number of frost-bitten feet.

8 January. Continues bright and cold. Today's casualty return from the R.A.P. lists nearly 100 names, half of them frost bite and exposure, the rest battle casualties. The weather in the hills is very cold, high wind and snow. German resistance is quite severe, artillery and mortar fire still taking its toll.

9 January. Today's Force casualty return has 122 names. Again nearly half are frost bite and exposure. There won't be much left of the Force if casualties keep at this rate.

10 January. Mild and damp. News from the Front is bad. The Force is being thrown into one action after another with only a handful of able-bodied men left and no sign of their being relieved; 73 names on today's casualty report, 40 frost-bitten feet. Those returning to camp on light duty say it is really rugged and they are all played out. Three weeks tomorrow since they left here.³⁸

The number of casualties attributed to frostbite seems unusually high. It may well be that the élan and bravado of the Force kept it from taking reasonable precautions against injuries of this nature. Frostbite can almost always be prevented through proper care, buddy checks, and supervision. An after-action report from the Force admits to a certain laxness in this regard. This report recommended the "constant daily care of body and feet whenever and wherever the opportunity offers." It went on to describe a situation where two companies were fighting on the same high ground in bad weather: "One company commander made it a personal task to see that every man removed his boots and rubbed his feet at least once per day no matter how intense the action; another company commander did not take the same precaution. The cases of 'trench foot' in the former were negligible; in the latter company high casualties from this cause resulted."³⁹ Obviously, close supervision by first-line leaders and junior officers is a must in the prevention of such injuries.

During the combat from Mount Sammucro to Mount Majo, the FSSF exhibited many of the same tactical techniques as they had at Difensa. Shock and surprise based on speed, stealth, silence, and violence (when contact was finally made) stand as the hallmark of the Force. Their attacks were almost exclusively at night, usually without preparatory artillery fires. Despite the disadvantage of unfavorable force ratios—less than 3:1, sometimes less than 1:1—the Force overwhelmed the enemy through shock. In attacks, it relied primarily on its individual and crew-served infantry weapons and hand grenades. When defending against German counterattacks, it wisely let the artillery do most of the work.

Because of the large area to be covered and the nature of the terrain, the Force was involved frequently in decentralized company operations against separate objectives. Frederick, to maintain his forward momentum and secure his rear in such operations, often needed combat support from the engineers and artillery and reinforcement from other infantry. However, no tank or anti-tank support was yet required, since he had come up against no enemy armor in the very restrictive terrain.

In their operations, the FSSF captured prisoners almost at will for the specific purpose of immediate tactical intelligence. This technique is a testimony to its confidence, daring, and superior field craft. The Force also exhibited endurance, fortitude, and esprit, which kept the unit moving forward even after its casualty figures exceeded the normal ceiling for combat effectiveness.

The Anzio Beachhead

On 30 January 1944, General Clark ordered the FSSF into the Anzio beachhead, where it quickly moved into the right-hand sector of the defensive perimeter. The right-hand portion of the beachhead was the quietest sector. The Germans maintained only a holding force there, while they violently attacked the center and west side of the beachhead. Thus, in one sense, the defense of the eastern part of the perimeter can be considered an economy-of-force opera-

Mount Sammucro, with San Pietro on the right

