
First Special Service Force

World War II Prototype For Today's Utopians

by Carl Osgood

The unique qualities of the First Special Service Force, of World War II fame, have captured the imaginations of the wild-eyed Utopians in and around the Bush Administration who seek to create a multinational security force that is loyal to no national government. These qualities emerged more from its conceptual design and organization, however, than from the practical realities that dictated how it was actually employed.

The First Special Service Force (FSSF) was a joint U.S.-Canadian commando brigade and the only unit of its kind in World War II. Its story was first told by Robert D. Burhans, the FSSF's intelligence officer, in a book, *The First Special Service Force: A War History of the North Americans, 1942-1944*, published in 1947. Burhans' account demonstrates that the conceptual birth of the FSSF was entirely the result of British geopolitics, the result of a theory propounded by the eccentric British inventor Geoffrey Pyke, who theorized, in a sort of cartoon version of Halford Mackinder's geopolitics, that since the European continent was covered with snow anywhere from 60 to 250 days of the year, a military force designed to operate in snow conditions, could dominate Europe.

Pyke's vision was codified by Lord Louis Mountbatten and Prime Minister Winston Churchill as a plan for sabotage of hydroelectric generating stations in Nazi-occupied Norway, in order to cut off production of materials vital to the Nazi war machine. The operation, dubbed Project Plough, was also to have included attacks on hydroelectric plants in northern Italy, and the oil fields and refineries of Romania, but those two parts of the plan were quickly dropped as unfeasible. Mountbatten sold the idea to U.S. Army Chief of Staff Gen. George C. Marshall, who ordered his assistant, Maj. Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, to study it. Churchill suggested that Canadian troops also be recruited for the operation, apparently believing that the involvement of Canada would give the British leverage.

Thus was born the FSSF, which immediately began recruitment throughout the United States and Canada. The recruitment notice asked for men with experience as lumberjacks, forest rangers, hunters, northwoodsmen, game wardens, prospectors and explorers. The Canadians added hard-rock miners to that list. Training began at Fort William

Henry Harrison, Montana, in July 1942. The training regimen emphasized airborne and mountain operations in the full range of weather. Sixty-mile marches, with full combat loads, in snow, became the norm for the soldiers of the FSSF.

In any event, the Norway sabotage operation was never carried out, the Norwegian government-in-exile objecting that it would result in as much hardship for the Norwegian population as for the occupying Germans. As a result, the FSSF was converted into a light assault force and employed in the campaigns in the Aleutian Islands in Summer 1943, and the Italian campaign beginning in January 1944, and then in the campaign in southern France which opened in August 1944, and it amassed a very impressive battle record. Its rugged training and small unit organization made it especially effective against fortified German positions in mountainous terrain that more conventional infantry units had been unable to defeat. It was disbanded in December 1944, when the progress of the war made such a small, specialized unit superfluous.

'Prototype of a World Police'

What Burhans emphasizes, and what attracts the attention of the Utopians, is the disappearance of national identity in the FSSF. American and Canadian officers were dispersed throughout. "It was a solid intermixture where no one country dominated," Burhans wrote, "where no national cliques formed and where a man could rise according to his comparative ability." Strengthening the "intermixture" was the very rigorous and physically demanding training regimen. "Through the generation of day-to-day habits in the training program," wrote Burhans, "the Force had become in itself, an individuality, a separate entity that was neither Canadian, nor U.S. but just the plain Special Service Force." Properly led, Burhans added, "these men went any place."

Nor were the implications for the future lost on Burhans. The spirit within the Force was so solid that "Never a breach formed between American and Canadian in the two and-one-half years of cooperative work together. They dressed and marched and talked and lived as one patriot in a fight for ideals that their flags represented. It was never 'Canucks' and 'Yanks.' The pervading thought that tied the men together was the *esprit* of the Force itself."

Burhans concluded with a quote from Canadian journalist Sholto Watt, writing in the *Montreal Standard*, at the time that the FSSF was disbanded: "The importance of the FSSF in world history, and their influence on the future, are much greater than even their outstanding military merit would deserve. The significance of this Force is that it was the first joint force of its kind, drawn from two neighbors' democracies, and that it was a brilliant success throughout. It is by no means fanciful to see in it the prototype of the world police of that world community which has for so long been the dream of men of good will. . . ."