

Intelligence in Public Media

The Force: The Legendary Special Ops Unit and WWII's Impossible Mission

David Saul (Hatchette Books, 2019), 360 pp., one map

Reviewed by J. R. Seeger

After nearly 18 years of asymmetric warfare in Afghanistan and Iraq, press reporting and books detailing joint and/or coalition tactical operations are commonplace. Readers in the Intelligence Community would not think it in the least bit odd that US Special Operations Forces (SOF) and UK Special Forces (UKSF) work on raids together with a fully integrated command structure. These assault forces are supported by joint aviation units as well as a fusion of intelligence and surveillance operations that will likely include the US and UK civilian intelligence communities as well as sophisticated military intelligence operations. Barriers and bureaucratic obstacles remain, but at the tactical level, joint operations, especially joint special operations, are accepted as the norm.

This was not the case in World War II. At the strategic level, the Allies and, most especially US and UK military forces, worked together in the European Theatre of Operations (ETO), China-Burma-India (CBI) theatre, and Pacific theatre. Below the level of grand strategy, military units at army and corps level and lower were under the complete control of their own chain of command. While General Eisenhower was the overall commander of Operation Overlord, the allied forces on D-Day landing on Omaha, Utah, Sword, Gold, and Juno were commanded respectively by US, UK, and Canadian general officers.

Exceptions in World War II to this structure of single-country command and control are few. Small units of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) worked closely in both Europe and the CBI. The best example of the high degree of integration of OSS and SOE operations was in work of JEDBURGH teams, composed of one OSS officer, one SOE officer, and one Free French officer worked in Occupied France. The book reviewed here outlines another rare example of joint tactical operations: The 1st Special Service Force ("The Force" as it is called in this book). It is a superbly researched and well written story of a special operations unit that was unique in World War II.

The Force had its origins in the early days of 1942, when the US was just beginning to assemble forces to be used in the ETO while US Army soldiers and Marines fought in the Pacific. Beginning in 1940, Prime Minister Winston Churchill was determined to fight back against the Nazis occupying Europe. In those early days, when Britain and the British Commonwealth stood alone against the Nazis, the Churchill forced the UK military and civilian bureaucracy to support the creation of several unconventional military organizations: the SOE and a number of small raiding units identified as numbered "assault forces," eventually known collectively as "the Commandos." To support the assault force units inside the Imperial General Staff, Churchill created a joint forces command called simply "Combined Operations." By 1941, the commander of Combined Operations was Vice Adm. Lord Louis Mountbatten.

The idea for the Force came out of Mountbatten's offices. It focused initially on the creation of a unit that could operate successfully in the severe winter conditions common in Norway and in eastern Europe, most especially in Romania. Named "Project Snow Plough," it was the creation of an eccentric British engineer named Geoffery Pyke. All of Pyke records suggest that he was an annoying egomaniac, but he was also a well-respected inventor and engineer with access to Mountbatten. Pyke was convinced that the only way to defeat the Nazis in Norway would be to use small, tracked troop carriers carrying small commando companies. These small tracked vehicles would traverse winter snow fields, where snow and ice impaired the mobility of standard wheeled and tracked vehicles. Pyke offered both a design and an operational plan that required a new type of military unit with special skills in winter, mountain, and airborne warfare. Pyke convinced both Mountbatten and Churchill that his plan would be a significant addition to the established assault forces inside Combined Operations. In the spring of 1942, Mountbatten and Pyke briefed the chief of Army staff, Gen. George Marshall, and eventually, the Canadian Armed Forces chief, Lieutenant General Kenneth Stuart. Marshall agreed to the plan and tasked his Plans Division

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to make it happen while Stuart promised to provide a Canadian contingent of highly qualified soldiers.

Meanwhile, the War Department tasked US automobile company Studebaker to design and test Pyke's vehicle. While the created tracked vehicle eventually did arrive in Europe, the US and Canadian joint force started training immediately and used their skills well before the vehicle, known as the Weasel, reached the front.

This joint force served under the direct control of the US War Department rather than under a single combatant commander. This emphasized both that it would serve as a special missions unit and that it was in the best interest of the Army to support the program. The structure of the new unit included a headquarters detachment and three combat regiments and would be a blend of US Army and Canadian Army volunteers. The training program for this special force began on 9 July 1942 at Fort Harrison, Montana where the 1st Special Service Force was born. The goal of the training was to create a force of 133 officers and 1,821 enlisted men from the United States and Canada who would be "arctic-ski-demolition-paratroop-mountain climbing commandos" (49). The Force would be combat ready in under a year and conduct operations first in the Aleutians, followed by the Italian campaign, the invasion of southern France and the final push towards Germany. The Force was disbanded in December 1944 and the US and Canadian troops reassigned to their respective national commands.

David takes the reader through the selection, training and first two deployments of the Force. His focus is on individual soldiers and their thoughts and deeds along the way. In this format, he is returning to the style of the first history of the Force, *The Devil's Brigade* by Adleman and Walton.^a Unlike this earlier work or the post-war memoirs that preceded it, David chooses to focus almost a third of his book on a single operation: the successful capture of German positions on a pair of Italian mountain peaks, Difensa and Remetanea. The multi-day operation against

these positions required all the mountaineering and close combat skills of the Force, led by the 2nd Regiment and commanded by Canadian Lt. Col. Don Williamson. This operation was "the mission impossible" identified in the title of the book, and David gives the reader a real understanding of the courage of the Force soldiers and the horror of those three days of combat on the ridge line.

The battle of Difensa and Remetanea quickly created the Force's reputation for close combat excellence and intrepidity that continued for the rest of the Italian campaign and then into Southern France. However, David's book ends with this battle and before the other battle honors of the 1st Special Service Force begin. For those interested in "the rest of the story" and in more detail on the role of the Force as it transformed US, UK and Canadian understanding of how special operations forces could be used concurrently with conventional military units, Kenneth Joyce's book, *Snow Plough and the Jupiter Deception* follows the Force from inception to disbandment.^b Joyce is a Canadian and, not surprisingly, focuses more on the Canadian contingent inside the Force. His book should be considered an essential complement to David's work.

In World War II, special operations units were often given impossible missions in part because the soldiers, sailors, and Marines assigned to those units were trained far beyond the skills of conventional troops. They were known for exceptional courage under severe conditions and, in honesty, suffered from a larger than life reputation created by the Allied press as part of the larger propaganda effort against the Axis powers. More often than not, they accomplished these missions regardless of how impossible they might have seemed, while suffering exceptionally high casualty rates. Today's Special Operations Forces in NATO, and especially Joint Special Operations Task Forces, owe much to the legacy of these early units and their ability to complete seemingly impossible missions.

a. Robert H. Adleman and Col. George Walton, *The Devil's Brigade* (Corgi Books, 1968).

b. Kenneth H. Joyce, *Snow Plough and the Jupiter Deception* (Vanguard Publishing, 2006).



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