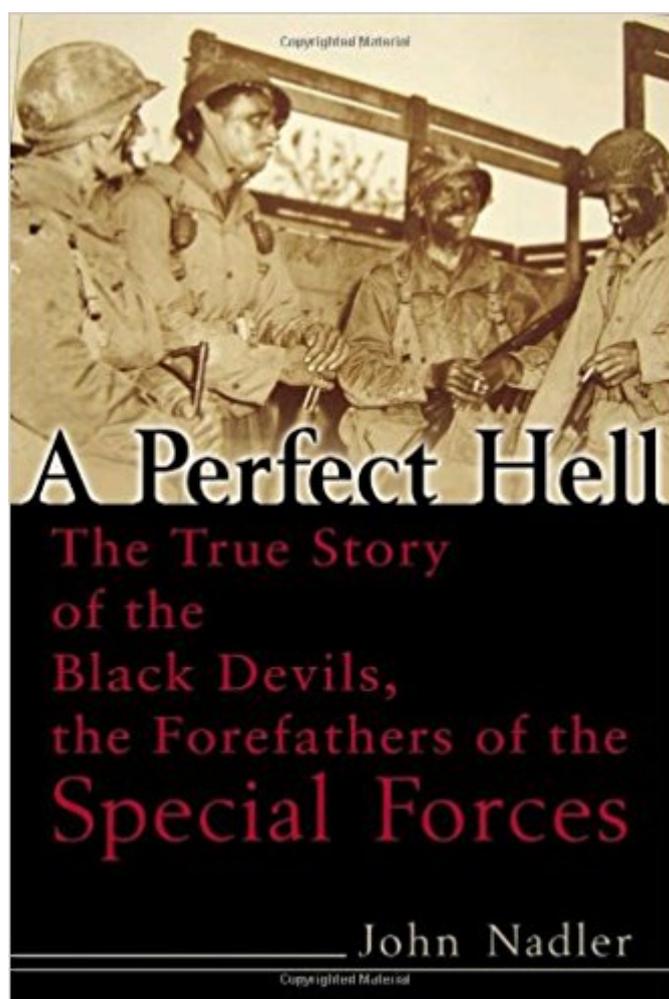


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# A Perfect Hell: The True Story Of The Black Devils, The Forefathers Of The Special Forces



## Synopsis

It's 1942 and Hitler's armies stand astride Europe like a colossus. Germany is winning on every front. This is the story of how one of the world's first commando units, put together for the invasion of Norway, helped turn the tide in Italy. 1942. When the British generals recommend an audacious plan to parachute a small elite commando unit into Norway in a bid to put Nazi Germany on the defensive, Winston Churchill is intrigued. But Britain, fighting for its life, can't spare the manpower to participate. So William Lyon MacKenzie King is contacted and asked to commit Canadian troops to the bold plan. King, determined to join Roosevelt and Churchill as an equal leader in the Allied war effort, agrees. One of the world's first commando units, the First Special Service Force, or FSSF, is assembled from hand-picked soldiers from Canadian and American regiments. Any troops sent into Norway will have to be rugged, self-sufficient, brave, and weather-hardened. Canada has such men in ample supply. The all-volunteer FSSF comprises outdoorsmen — trappers, rangers, prospectors, miners, loggers. Assembled at an isolated base in Helena, Montana, and given only five months to train before the invasion, they are schooled in parachuting, mountain climbing, cross-country skiing, and cold-weather survival. They are taught how to handle explosives, how to operate nearly every field weapon in the American and German arsenals, and how to kill with their bare hands. After the Norway plan is scrapped, the FSSF is dispatched to Italy and given its first test — to seize a key German mountain-top position which had repelled the brunt of the Allied armies for over a month. In a reprise of the audacity and careful planning that won Vimy Ridge for the Canadians in WWI, the FSSF takes the twin peaks Monte la Difensa and Monte la Remetanea by storming the supposedly unscalable rock face at the rear of the German position, and opens the way through the mountains. Later, the FSSF will hold one-quarter of the Anzio beachhead against a vastly superior German force for ninety-nine days; a force of only 1,200 commandos does the work of a full division of over 17,000 troops. Though badly outnumbered, the FSSF takes the fight to the Germans, sending nighttime patrols behind enemy lines and taking prisoners. It is here that they come to be known among the dispirited Germans as Schwartzer Teufel (the Black Devils) for their black camouflage face-paint and their terrifying tactic of appearing out of the darkness. John Nadler vividly captures the savagery of the Italian campaign, fought as it was at close quarters and with desperate resolve, and the deeply human experiences of the individual men called upon to fight it. Based on extensive archival research and interviews with veterans, *A Perfect Hell* is an important contribution to Canadian military history and an indispensable account of the lives and battlefield exploits of the men who turned the tide of the Second World War. From the Hardcover edition.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The central role played by special forces in the global war on terror has generated renewed interest in the WWII-era predecessors of today's elite special warriors, from the ski troops of the Tenth Mountain Division to the legendary Jedburghs. Writer and war correspondent Nadler (*Searching for Sofia*) resurrects the "largely forgotten" First Special Service Force (FSSF) in this superb popular history. Made up of volunteers from the U.S. and Canadian armies, the FSSF was considered a "suicide outfit." Following months of arduous training at Ft. Harrison near Helena, Mont., that included parachute training, alpine skiing and demolition training—a range of specialized skills that was virtually unprecedented—the unit participated in the deadly assault against the German winter line in southern Italy, the defense of the Anzio beachhead, the liberation of Rome and the invasion of southern France. Their fierce resistance against a much larger enemy force at Anzio won them their nickname, the Black Devils, from their German foes. Nadler flavors his narrative with accounts of individual Black Devils like FSSF commander Robert Frederick, the "war's premier fighting general" with eight Purple Hearts, two Silver Stars and two Distinguished Service Crosses. This solidly researched and smartly written volume is a fitting tribute to a unique group of warriors. (Mar. 28) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Organized in 1942, the First Special Service Force, aka the Black Devils and also the Devil's Brigade, under Colonel (later General) Robert Frederick consisted of American and Canadian soldiers selected to operate defensively in the Canadian Arctic and offensively in Nazi-held Norway.

In fact, it operated in the Mediterranean, in France, and in Germany from 1943 to 1945, in the process developing many of the concepts, doctrines, and training techniques later used by the Special Forces, including cooperating with local resistance forces. Many founding members of Special Forces were veterans of the First Special Service Force, and they created a large oral-history archive, on which seasoned journalist Nadler has effectively drawn for this readable, informative, and entertaining history. Roland Green Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved

"A Perfect Hell" provides a worthwhile look at one of the first U.S. Army Special Operations units in World War II with a special emphasis on the personal stories of some of the Canadian and American members of the First Special Services Force, popularly known as the "Devils Brigade" or "Black Devils" by its German enemies in Italy. Accounts of the unit's rugged training in Montana, its leadership and stealthy, hard-fighting tactics. It is a particularly faithful history of the brigade's contributions to the frustrating Allied campaign in the mountains of Italy on the exceedingly difficult road to Rome. The Black Devils' effectiveness at battling the tough German attacks on the Anzio front was among the few bright spots in that initially promising, but bungled attempt to flank the German lines in the mountains in front of Rome. It provides a sober, truthful antidote to the silly, largely apocryphal 1960s movie starring William Holden and Cliff Robertson about the unit. The intimate portraits of the tough North American soldiers and their ties to each other and the family ties they formed, especially with their home training community of Helena, Mont., come across as particularly real and upbeat.

An incredible book, well-written by an inspired story-teller with solid historical research and an unbeatable story. The First Special Services Force is character-driven, as well as an important piece of military history. Even more important to me was the quality of the writing and the skill and wisdom of the writer to employ literary devices to keep the reader engaged with 5-7 main characters, and untroubled by having to flip back and forth to figure out references to soldiers already mentioned. I finished it in two days (would have been one sitting, but had to go to work!), and would recommend to anybody, not just WWII or Special Forces buffs. An enthralling, enlightening and engaging story, told with rare empathy and a deeply moving insight into the irrevocable and unremitting sadness of war.

Amazing historical book. Having been turned on to this book by a niece of one of the members, who

is quite prominent in the book, I had to read it. I know two people who have known members of the FSSF and have been told how much they disliked the way the force was portrayed in the movie, *The Devil's Brigade*. After reading this book, I can understand why. If you love history, especially military history, this book is a must read.

A very insightful visit to my father's experiences in WW II. A terrifying time faced by well trained and brave men.

I'm a WW2 buff and was tired of only reading American accounts of the war and really wanted some Canadian history. This book did not disappoint! I had no idea that the first Special Forces unit was comprised of US and Canadian forces. It was a great story. Fact is always better than fiction. I highly recommend it.

I didn't know this outfit existed, as the author said, once it was disbanded, it was forgotten; overshadowed by D-Day. In fact I really haven't read too much on the Italian Campaign at all. But I read of a local (Washington, IN) veteran who was part of the FSSF unit. His daughter was going to DC to accept an honor being presented to the unit. That piqued my interest. Good read about WWII.

This is an amazing story of heroism, tragedy, and family. The author John Nadler does an excellent job portraying the soldiers as they really were. "A Perfect Hell" tells the story of the First Special Services Force or FSSF. The FSSF is the forefather of our modern Special Forces teams; however, they are not accurately remembered this way. This is a paratrooper force that went through months of training in Helena, Montana before battle. The force was an idea of a British Colonel and British Scientist. The FSSF almost never found a way to the battlefield because the Armed Services fighting the War did not have a place for a small force that carried out "special missions". The tales of their battles are lifelike and excellently narrated by John Nadler. Nadler places the reader right in the midst of the battle for the mountain, the beach, and the city. This group never received as much recognition as other groups from WWII. The Black Devils fought through Italy into its capital, Rome. Their battles were fought before the Germans knew of their impending defeat which caused the enemy to fight with all its might. The Black Devils were dropped behind the lines in Italy before D-Day in Normandy. The friendships that were made throughout the training and war are nothing short of "Band of Brothers". One could argue that the FSSF was the first "Band of Brothers" because they trained and fought before the 82nd Airborne stormed Normandy. The FSSF was comprised of

Canadian and American troops. There were Native Americans and Native Canadians that were in each group also. The brotherhood of the FSSF was shaken each time a casualty took place. Nadler brings the soldiers to life by his in-depth description of their life before training; he also continues to describe their growth as a unit throughout his book. The FSSF also contained the first Ranger group known as Darby's Rangers. The Rangers were mixed into the group after their demise at Cassino. The FSSF is one of the most important factors to winning WWII. Read this book so the Black Devils will begin to earn the credit that they so rightfully deserve. I enjoyed this book as much as I did "Band of Brothers". This book does the same thing that Ambrose did with his. The characters in the book are excellently detailed and portrayed. This book should be required reading to understand the Italian campaign in WWII. John Nadler does an excellent job discussing the battles without using four letter words. This is not too realistic, yet it is still nice to read a war story without expletives in every other sentence. I would highly recommend this book if you want to know how special the "Fathers of the Special Forces". The only way to understand why they were so important to the outcome of WWII is to read "A Perfect Hell".

Besides the facts of the battles of the Force, this book shares personal experiences of the men who fought the battles. At times it is humorous and other times, tragic. However, it is real. I have read many books regarding the FSSF but this book was hard to put down.

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