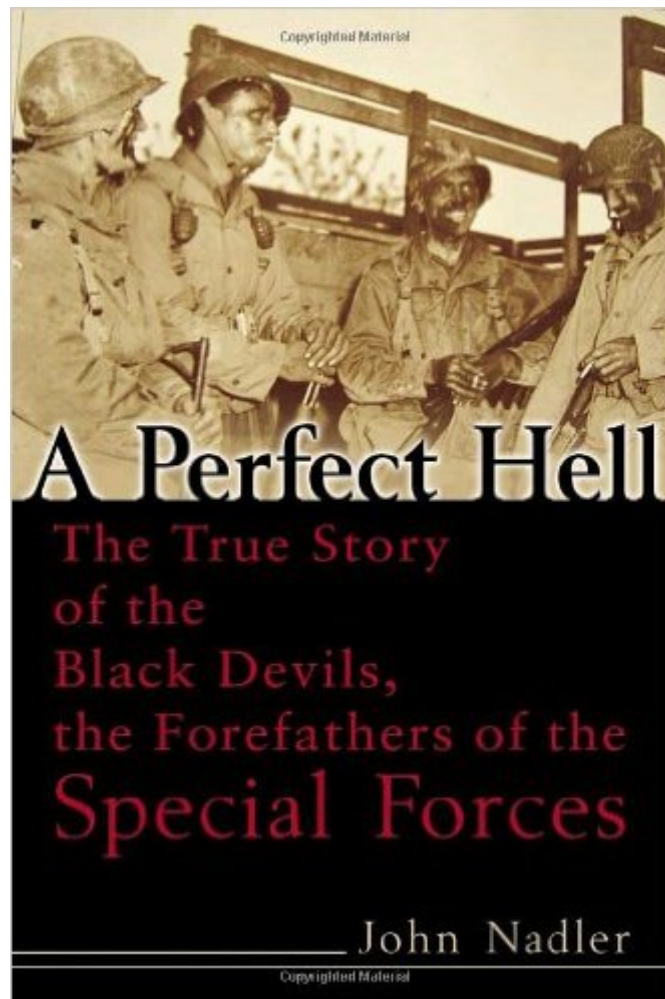


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A Perfect Hell: The True Story Of The Black Devils, The Forefathers Of The Special Forces



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.

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Customer Reviews

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 capitol, Rome. Their battles were fought before the Germans knew of their impending defeat which caused the enemy 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.

The Field Special Service Force was an American response to the British experience with the

deceptively-titled Special Air Service, Long Range Desert Group, Popski's Private Army, and similar special ops services. As such, it is recognized as a direct antecedent to the American Green Berets. Perhaps best known from a mildly accurate movie with William Holden, *The Devil's Brigade*, the group's members derived their nickname from the Germans defending their lines in Italy against the Allied onslaught. The movie makes them look like thugs which is Hollywood's predictable treatment (they did the same thing to TV's *Black Sheep Squadron*). Although a number of Army post commanders did use the opportunity to clean out their stockades, most of the people who made up the FSSF were tough guys with solid backgrounds which the organizers were after. Lumberjacks, trappers, wilderness guides, very macho. It is an axiom that the conventional army has always had trouble using unconventional units properly. That's gotten some people killed through improper use. Like most special forces units, the FSSF was misused after drawing attention for its one major accomplishment that utilized its special talents to the utmost. With their esprit, they tackled each tough mission as if it was something designed for their particular skill set. That major event was capturing a mountaintop defense position that was chewing up Allied soldiers working their way up the Italian boot. As depicted in the movie, the Black Devils climbed an unclimable cliff, went over the top and took the higher of the ridge-linked twin peaks, then moved on to take the second peak. It was a masterful accomplishment.

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