

ORTONA: CHRISTMAS IN HELL

By James Martindale

Italy. To the average person the very name conjures up majestic scenes of vineyards, mountains, ancient towns and cities that hark back to the glory days of Rome or the Renaissance, deep rivers, and a lush fertile landscape that has bore witness to some of the most famous events in human civilization. But to a few, this is a scene they cannot envision. In the fourth year of the Second World War, Italy became a bloodbath of horrific proportions as Allied armies-Canadians among them-slogged their way up the rugged terrain of that country fighting gory, attrition-like battles against a skilled enemy who held a tremendous advantage, and of course, the elements. Some of the battles fought there were unmistakable throwbacks to the deadlock of trench warfare some 20 years earlier, and the names of some of those places where the battles were fought have passed into infamy.

Ortona is one such name. The nightmarish ferocity endured by the soldiers of the 1st Canadian division in that town and it's outskirts during the last month of 1943, is unparalleled in our country's military past, and yet despite the brutality endured there, and the fact that it was a town that did not really matter, it helped give the Canada's sons the experience needed in it's long and bloody war in what was sarcastically referred to as "Sunny Italy".

The road that would take the Canadians to Ortona started in July 1943. Over 100,000 American, British, Canadian, Indian, and New Zealanders landed on the beaches of south and south-western Sicily, an operation given the codename of "Husky". The Canadian 1st Division and 1st Armoured Brigade that took part in the landings were under the leadership of Major-General Guy Simonds, a man who although had the respect of his British equals for his knowledge on what was needed to achieve victory, he was not a well liked individual by his men. Simonds's force was attached to the British XXX Corps of the Eighth Army led by Field-Marshal Bernard Montgomery, the victor of El Alamein. Although the Canadians expected a tough fight ahead, the initial progress made was surprisingly good. There were few casualties inflicted on the Canadians (approximately 75 killed or wounded), and resistance by Italian troops was at best minimal. Many were fed up with the war and their Government's handling of it, and either abandoned their posts or surrendered en-masse. The Sicilian population welcomed the Allies as liberators. The Canadians easily took the town and airfield of Pachino, and By nightfall on July 9th, a beach head had been established. For some of the Canadians who came ashore, this seemed like a veritable cakewalk, for others it seemed like a relief that they were finally going to get into it at last after the past years of uncertainty.

For most Canadians up to this point, the struggle their country had been embroiled in since September, 1939 had not been going well. At Hong Kong in December of 1941, a force of well over nineteen hundred officers and men from two infantry regiments were

wiped out when the armies of Imperial Japan overran the city and forced its surrender. The few that managed to live endured barbaric treatment at the hands of their Japanese captors.

The next year was not any better. On August 19th 1942, the Canadian 2nd Infantry Division took part in Operation *Jubilee*, a massive amphibious raid on the French port of Dieppe. In the nine hour fiasco that followed, 907 Canadians perished, and another 2,462 were made prisoners of war. While the RCAF was helping to bomb Germany's cities and industrial centers, and the RCN was working in concert with the US and Royal Navy to keep convoy routes clear of the U-boats, the Canadian people became increasingly discouraged about the role Canada's army was playing. With Hong Kong and Dieppe being dismal failures, the army seemed to be "sitting it out", inactive despite the monotony of continuous drills and exercises conducted in England. 1943 changed all that.

Despite the gains made, resistance by the German divisions stationed on Sicily bogged down the allied troops. The hills, mountains, and valleys, together with the sweltering heat, and choking dust only exacerbated the problem. As July grinded on, Canadian troops together with the Anglo-American armies liberated town after town and continued to constantly put pressure on the Wehrmacht, whose men and vehicles began to fall back to the capital of Messina. Adolph Hitler himself faced the reality that Sicily was lost and reluctantly ordered the commanders of all Axis forces to begin an evacuation across the Straits of Messina to the Italian mainland. All the while, Axis units continued to fight desperate rearguard actions in order to buy time. A "race" of sorts soon developed between the British/Commonwealth troops under Montgomery and the American commanders, notably the hard driving General George S. Patton jr. Each disliked each other, and each wanted to be the first into Messina.

While this clash of egos raged, the Canadians steadily made their way further and further up the Sicilian countryside fighting their enemy tooth and nail for towns and villages with names like Caltagirone, Leonforte, Assorro, Adrano, and others. The assaults on these objectives were textbook, utilising manoeuvre and infiltration to outflank and exploit the weaknesses in the German defences, as opposed to massive artillery strikes and timed assaults which often met with mixed results. After 36 days of fighting, Sicily was taken. Patton had won the race to Messina. on August 16th, his seventh army entered the city to a huge welcome. Montgomery followed suit a day later. All together the Sicilian campaign had cost the Allies 19,000 casualties (Including 2,310 Canadians dead or wounded), and the Axis around 142,000 dead, wounded, or taken prisoner. On July 25th, The fascist dictator Benito Mussolini was arrested and King Victor Emmanuelle III established a new Government with Marshal Pietro Badoglio as the new Prime Minister. Whilst Badoglio promised that this coup did not mean Italy was out of the war, Hitler's trust in the Italians was non-existent by this stage. The entire country was in total chaos. He immediately ordered several German divisions diverted from other theatres to Italy to bolster the country's defence. Although Operation *Husky* was deemed a "success" by its planners, since it brought an end to Axis rule over the island, and established a firm

foothold in which to invade the Italian mainland, approximately 60,000 German and Italian troops, together with thousands more tanks and other vehicles, weapons, artillery and supplies had managed to escape impending destruction and were transported by boat or barge across the Straits of Messina and deposited on to Italian soil. The Allied forces would have no choice but to face these same troops again in combat.

Plans for invading Italy had been in the works even before the first Allied troops set foot on Sicily. Winston Churchill considered Italy to be the so-called “soft underbelly of Europe.” He perhaps hoped that an allied presence in Italy would divert *Wehrmacht* divisions from the Soviet union into the peninsula and the Balkans, open up new bases for fighters and bombers to strike deep into the heart of the Reich, and deliver the final blow that would knock the Fascist regime out of the war. Churchill’s idea was easier said than done. Just like in Sicily, Italy’s topography has always favoured the defender. The Apennine mountains that run through most of the country’s center results in rivers that flow east into the Mediterranean, and west into the Adriatic, essentially bisecting the country with one waterway to cross after another. The land in and around these rivers were either hilly or mountainous, and the few roads and highways that could handle vehicles provided the Germans with natural chokepoints in which a few hundred men with artillery or snipers could hold up units twice as big for weeks, maybe even months at a time. With the right preparations, villages could be made into nearly impenetrable fortresses. Weather was hot and dry in the summer, with, sleet, snow, and mud in the fall and winter. This apparently did not discourage the Allies during their planning. Sir Harold Alexander, commander of the 15th Army Group devised a two pronged attack into Italy. The first assault, codenamed Operation Baytown was to be made from Sicily, crossing the straits of Messina and landing troops and vehicles on the southern Italian coastline. The British 13th Army Corps would constitute the bulk of the landing force, with the 1st Canadian Division and a British division-the 5th providing the vanguard. It was hoped that Baytown would draw German forces to the south, while the US/British Fifth Army led by General Mark Clark would launch Operation Avalanche, a landing at the port of Salerno to the north. The Canadian generals, and even prime minister Mackenzie King himself had no say in the plans laid out. As author David Bercuson pointed out in his book *Maple Leaf against the Axis*:

As far as the Americans were concerned, the Canadian Army was part of larger British formations and there was no need to consult the Canadians on how their troops were to be used. The British agreed, since to agree meant that their traditional position of imperial superiority over Canada could be maintained. Canadian commanders always had the option to refuse assignments of various sorts, but the people of Canada saw their war effort as part of a great Allied venture led by the British, Americans, and the Soviet Union. The overwhelming majority of Canadians backed the war, and wanted to see Canadian soldiers fighting it...

The Germans knew that a landing by the enemy was coming, so they prepared

accordingly. Overseeing these preparations was Field-Marshal Albert Kesselring. Once commander of two *Luftwaffe* air fleets in the conquest of France and the Battle of Britain, Kesselring was now the overall commander of all Wehrmacht forces in the Italian peninsula. A very defence minded individual, Kesselring decided to move his forces out of southern Italy and to a series of defensive lines starting at the Sangro River, moving north to Rome's outskirts. These lines were dubbed the Bernhard, the Hitler, the Gustav, and the Caesar. Of these four, the Gustav Line was the linchpin and consequently, was the most fortified. Using thousands of Italian civilians as forced labour, the Germans managed to create kilometres of trenches and anti-tank ditches, laid 75,000 mines, strung up barbed wire entanglements that stretched for kilometres more, erected reinforced pits for mortars and artillery, and hundreds of bunkers or nests with machine-guns ranging from captured Italian stocks to the feared MG-34 and MG-42. Both were air-cooled and had a firing rate of 8-900 rounds per minute and 1,200 rounds per minute respectively. In addition, a "scorched earth" policy was undertaken, with German engineers applying their trade by demolishing bridges, tearing up railways, triggering landslides to block roads, driving civilians out of villages and then levelling them so that the Allies could not use them as staging grounds for attacks. With the addition of battle hardened and skilled men manning these positions, Italy would be far from the soft underbelly Churchill envisioned.

In the early morning hours of September 3rd, the first phase of invading Italy commenced when the men of the 13th Army Corps boarded landing craft that would take them across the 3 kilometre wide Straits of Messina to the toe of Italy. At 3:30am the roar of gun batteries on the Sicilian coast, coupled with those of warships lying offshore split the night air as thousands of high explosive shells of various calibers pounded the landing zones in preparation to the infantry's assault. For the 1st Canadian Division, the town of Reggio Calabria was to be their initial objective. Just before 5am, the doors to the landing craft swung down and the Canadian troops darted ashore. The landing was almost a repeat of Sicily. Little if any resistance was met, and by 8:40 the ruins of Reggio Calabria had been taken. The Canadian regiments and battalions continued to move inland at a rapid pace. No Germans were seen, and the landscape they marched into was little changed by the hand of war.

While Operation Baytown had started out well, Operation Avalanche was a different matter. Kesselring anticipated that a landing on Salerno would take place so he moved the an entire Panzer division, with 15,000 men and over 100 tanks into the area. On September 8th, the Badoglio Government announced that it had signed an armistice with the Allies. With news of the Italian surrender being broadcast over the airwaves, the German commander had ample warning. When American and British troops of the Fifth Army came ashore at Salerno at dawn on the 9th, they expected another easy victory, instead they got five days of bitter fighting which despite the assistance of air and naval support, cost the lives of 13,000 Allied soldiers. The Germans stubbornly held on, and then

withdrew to their defensive lines south of Rome. The Fifth Army then marched on with the intention of taking Naples. To the south, the Canadian 1st Division had been tasked with seizing the important road junctions in Potenza, 90 kilometres to the east of Salerno. The Canadian 3rd Brigade reached the town on September 19th, and in the chaotic firefight that ensued, Boforce took the town with the help of the Royal 22^e Regiment (The “Van Doos” of Montreal). At the end of September, the Fifth and Eighth Armies held a line stretching from a point just north of Naples to the port city of Bari on the Adriatic. To this conquered territory was added the plains in and around Foggia, which housed several strategically important airfields. This would help extend the range of tactical air cover by the RAF and the USAAF. By the time October rolled around, the weather changed drastically. Gone were the heat and sand. Mud, rain, and damp air were now as constant as the enemy, and made the job of the Canadians even more miserable. They were now entering the mountains of Italy, and the going got more difficult with the continued resistance put up by the Germans. Small indecisive skirmishes were the norm, and every kilometre gained resulted in the casualties mounting. The quagmire that clogged the roads caused logistics to break down, and every move made had to be done so as not to overstretch supply lines. Fatigue-both physical and psychological-were making their presence known. On October 14th, the Royal Canadian Regiment took Campobasso, a town of some 17,000 inhabitants. It was decided that this would be an administrative center, and an area for troops granted leave. The comforts of home life were brought in for their enjoyment and to the men of the 1st Division, Campobosso had a new name: Maple Leaf City.

Behind the scenes, a new strategy was taking shape. It had been decided that an allied push on the Italian capital of Rome was necessary, even though most Generals believed that such a task was unnecessary considering the gains they had made in southern Italy, and at worst a waste of manpower that could be used to bolster the armies gathering for the cross-channel invasion of France. To some however, Rome was looked upon as a tempting symbol and should be liberated, no matter the cost in lives. The decision was made to push for the Eternal City. To do so, The Eighth Army would make false attacks on the German’s defensive lines while moving north up the roads along the Adriatic coast, breaking through every German position along the way, head north and then attack Rome from the north-east. Any German forces in Rome would have to then retreat if they did not want to be encircled. As Montgomery put it, “We shall hit the Germans with a colossal crack.” The Fifth Army would attack directly at Rome to draw off enemy reinforcements. The 1st Canadian Division meanwhile had a change of command. Guy Simonds had been transferred in November to command the 5th Canadian Armoured Division which had just arrived in Italy. In Simonds’ place, Major-General Chris Vokes took charge of the Canadians. Vokes was an energetic commander who was not privy to using harsh and colourful language when he thought it was proper. He had earned many accolades for his handling of the 2nd Canadian Brigade on Sicily, and was quite popular. On November 29th

1943, the Canadians departed Campobosso for the Adriatic coast. Vokes's division was to occupy positions held by the British during their costly push across the Lower Sangro river. From there, the Canadians would mount an assault across the Moro river valley, and take the port of Ortona. On December 4th, the 1st Division and the 1st Armoured Brigade moved into their positions overlooking the fields, gullies, and vineyards, knowing full well that across from them, lay the formidable 78th Panzer Korps, attached to the German Tenth Army.

Vokes had his attack planned out in three main stages, the first step was to cross the Moro itself and occupy the bluffs on the far side, followed by a push across a dried up gully running parallel to the river to take the main highway linking both Ortona and the town of Orsogna, and then finally the attack and capture of Ortona itself. But first and foremost, he had find weaknesses in the lines defended by the 90th Panzer Grenadier division and strategic positions in which his soldiers and armour could use in the push. Several crossroads and small villages had to be taken, and Vokes knew that the Germans would not give ground easily. With the onset of December the constant rainfall pelting the region swelled the Moro to twice its size and turned the banks into a sticky yellow morass that clung to everything, and generally made any movement difficult for man and machine alike. Sickness and diseases were claiming soldiers just as fast as bullets and shrapnel.

Nevertheless, On the night of December 5th and 6th, the division's 1st Brigade made an attempt to cross. To maintain surprise, no artillery was employed as a softening up measure. Two of the brigade's primary infantry regiments, the Hastings and Prince Edward (Ontario), the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, together with the 2nd Brigade's Seaforth Highlanders each made assaults across the river in near total darkness. The "Hasty P's" crossed the mouth of the Moro near the coast highway and set up a bridgehead atop the bluffs on the western bank. This was nothing more than a diversion, and the regiment pulled back across the river after coming upon heavy German opposition. The real attack was made one and a half kilometres to the south by the men of the Seaforths, who worked their way up a road to San Leonardo, a tiny hamlet near the bluffs. Further south, the PPCLI crossed and took Villa Rogatti, capturing it in a swift action that took the German garrison completely off guard. So far, so good, but by dawn German tanks accompanied by Panzer Grenadiers made a counter-attack, the PPCLI held fast assisted by M4 Sherman medium tanks of the British 44th Royal Tank Regiment, which had also succeeded in getting across the river. The PPCLI was soon relieved after a few days by the Indians and was pulled back across the Moro. The Seaforths too had run into heavy opposition, but without armour support, they could not make a stand and had to withdraw. On December 6th the Hasty P's tried another crossing and succeeded in establishing a foothold where the other regiments had failed. Canadian author Farley Mowat, then serving as an intelligence officer, described the engagement years later in his book *And No Birds Sang*:

What followed was the kind of night men dream about after years, waking in a cold sweat to a surge of gratitude that it is but a dream. It was a delirium of sustained violence. Small pockets of Germans that had been cut off throughout our bridgehead fired their automatic weapons in hysterical dismay at every shadow. The grind of enemy tanks and self-propelled guns working their way along the crest was multiplied by echoes until it sounded like an entire Panzer army...When the firing died down, our sector, stretcher, and burial parties scouring the slimy slopes and tangles of shell torn debris found 170 German corpses. Our own dead and wounded amounted to a third of the 400 or so Hasty Pees who had gone into the valley of the shadow.

Now the time had come for Vokes's second phase; On December 8th, the Royal Canadian Regiment attacked to the east across the river while the 48th Highlanders of Toronto passed through the bridgehead held by the Hasty P's. Their target was the hamlet of San Leonardo, a major anchor in the Moro defences. The Torontonians made superb progress marching a kilometre and arriving at the town intact, but the RCR collided head long with a counter-attack by German tanks and Panzer Grenadiers. The Germans were held off, but the regiment was battered and had suffered huge casualties due to well aimed German artillery and mortars. A Platoon of men led by Lieutenant Mitchell Sterlin sought refuge in a small farmhouse close to San Leonardo. They stayed there throughout the night holding their positions amidst a confused and chaotic firefight. Meanwhile, engineers worked in the darkness like men possessed to assemble a bridge over the Moro to get tanks and reinforcements across to continue the advance. By dawn on the 9th, the fruits of their hard labour came to pass as the tanks of the Kings Own Calgary Regiment with the soldiers of the Seaforth Highlanders riding atop them crossed the Moro to try and

take the village. The road leading to San Leonardo was quite narrow, and two tanks were quickly lost after plunging ten metres into a ravine while taking a turn too fast. Then a wall of artillery and mortar shells slammed into the column. The lead tank was disabled by a mine while climbing the steep incline and blocked the road for the other tanks. The other tanks and infantry detoured through several muddy olive groves. In their support role, The Calgarys lost 27 tanks. There were still a dozen Panzers lurking inside the ruins, but the tankers remained undaunted. One squadron, commanded by Major E.A.C. Amy had only four tanks left when they entered the town and even though greatly outnumbered, he and his crews managed to blast several of the German tanks with their 75's and mow down hundreds of German soldiers who were in flight. Amy later said that a member of the Seaforths who had been pinned down by the enemy armour ran up to one his Shermans, patted it's hull almost like a dog and blurted out, "You big cast-iron son of a bitch, I could kiss you!" At the farmhouse, the surviving men of the RCR held against fanatical German assaults. The soldiers let loose with their rifles and machine-guns into their enemy, throwing the last of their grenades and sometimes giving the German ones back to their owners. Due to Sterlin's leadership and their courage, the Canadian soldiers prevailed, and the farmhouse was now bestowed the name of Sterlin Castle.

After a failed attack against the Hasty P's, the Germans conceded defeat and abandoned the

Moro river to the Canadians. Now the attention was on to The Gully. Use of tanks was impossible since the kilometre wide ground offered the Germans an unobstructed view of any frontal attack, and the walls were heavily fortified by the Panzer Grenadiers. With the German positions dug deep into the reverse slope above, and with the muddy terrain absorbing the effects of shelling, artillery bombardments were ineffective. Several attempts were made by the Loyal Edmonton Regiment and the PPCLI to cross the gully and capture the crossroads codenamed "Cider," but the attacks were mostly failures with over 1,000 Canadians killed, wounded or missing. As RCR Major Strome Galloway noted in his diary; "A frontal attack across these vine-clad gullies just won't work. A new strategy is needed." All was not hopeless however, since a band of about 40 Seaforths and soldiers of the West Nova Scotia regiment managed to sneak through a German position and took by surprise it's defending troops, capturing around 78 in the process. The weak link was Casa Berardi, a farm on the gully's west side some 3 kilometres from San Leonardo. Major-General Vokes sent in the Royal 22e Regiment to take it and then "Cider".

On December 14th, C company of the Van Doos, 81 men led by Captain Paul Triquet, left their lines accompanied by seven tanks of C Squadron, 11th Armoured Regiment (Ontario). Vokes believed that the 90th Panzer Grenadiers were a spent force and unable to withstand further attacks. What he did not know was that the night before Triquet's force moved out, the 90th was relieved by *Falschirmjäger*s from the crack 1st Parachute Division, an all volunteer force formed in Sicily, and commanded by General Richard Heidrich. Most of it's officers, NCO's and enlisted men were battle hardened by their previous exploits which included the airborne landings at Crete in 1940 and ground combat on the Eastern Front. The orders they were given were blunt, but clear: "Fight for every house and tree." At 7:30am C company and the tanks began their advance across a blasted ravine, but according to Triquet, "After progressing a few hundred yards we were counterattacked by four tanks and a company of Infantry. The tanks appeared from behind a group of farmhouses and opened up at 200 yards with machine guns and 88's. One of our tanks was destroyed, but we moved two anti-tank guns up to within 50 yards and knocked one German tank out of action. There was a sudden lull as both sides held their fire to allow an Italian woman and two little children to reach our lines. After this pause for humanity's sake, Major H.A. "Snuffy" Smith of the armoured squadron destroyed a second German tank, and the remaining two turned and fled." C company was now down to 50 men, and all of Triquet's subordinates were either dead or wounded, but he still pressed his men on urging them to close the distance. With artillery falling to their rear and paratroopers threatening them from the side, The Quebec native put it to his men, "We're surrounded. The enemy is in front of us, behind us, and on our flanks. The safest place for us is the objective!" with that exhortation, the Van Doos and their tank support raced desperately across the open ground to the buildings, reaching them by 2pm. After carefully clearing out each house, Triquet had his men dig in for the expected counterattack. By now, only two sergeants, 15 men and four Shermans were left; food and water were very

scarce, and was their ammunition. A well was available near the farm, but German snipers prevented its use. Furthermore, the men were exhausted to the point where it became a chore just to stay awake. Nevertheless, the Van Doos and Ontario tankers stubbornly refused to break and with artillery cover and two more companies arriving as reinforcements on December 15th and 16th, the surviving Canadians began firing every gun and mortar they had at the Germans in order to push them back. Prior to this, Triquet uttered to his men "Ils ne passeront pas!" ("They shall not pass!") a famous quote attributed to French General Robert Nivelle during the battle of Verdun. On December 18th, the 1st Canadian Brigade attacked across The Gully, and on the 19th, the Royal Canadian Regiment made contact with the beleaguered Van Doos and the Ontarians. Both regiments paid dearly for their stand; of the 81 men Paul Triquet led into the battle on the 14th, only nine were still able to bear arms. For his action at Casa Berardi, Triquet was promoted to the rank of Major and awarded the Victoria Cross, the first of three Canadians to receive such a medal in the Mediterranean theatre. Major Herschel Smith was decorated with a Military Cross for his assistance in the battle.

With the capture of Casa Berardi, the 1st division had its breakthrough it needed and could now amass troops and artillery for the final push to "Cider" crossroad. At 8am on December 18th, 1943 the 25 pounder and 4-inch field guns of the British Royal Artillery, and those of the Royal Canadian Horse Artillery unleashed over 8,800 medium and heavy calibre shells onto the German positions around "Cider". It was a two part creeping barrage-the largest yet fired in the Moro, and was called "Morning Glory" and "Orange Blossom". The 48th Highlanders and the tanks of B Squadron, 14th Armoured Regiment (The Three Rivers Tanks) pushed into the gap made by Morning Glory and caught the dazed Germans before they could fight. The Royal Canadian Regiment and took up the attack, crossing The Gully under the Orange Blossom barrage, only to have misdirected rounds land short of their targets and explode amidst the troops, causing widespread death and destruction. To prevent a tragic "Friendly fire" episode, the gunners re-adjusted their firing to 400 yards ahead of the RCR, depriving them any cover. What followed next was described in the official regimental history as a slaughter. The Germans recovered and proceeded to lay down a withering storm of machine-gun fire, cutting entire platoons of soldiers down, including one led by Mitchell Sterlin, whose holding action at the farmhouse that bore his name saved many lives. At noon on December 20th, the attack was renewed with fury, and with additional support by the Three Rivers Tanks and another creeping barrage, the RCR took the "Cider" crossroads. In ten gruelling days, the Moro was in the 1st Division's possession. The road to Ortona had been opened, but in light of how tough the Moro was, taking the town was not going to be any easier. As Chris Vokes later said; "Everything before Ortona was a nursery tale."

Sitting on a promontory overlooking the Adriatic, Ortona had thrived as a major sea port for over 3,000 years, and in the 19th century was established one of the first sea side resort towns in Italy. The town was typical of most Italian villages in that it boasted two to three story buildings (some modern, others over 500 years old), and three main squares, the largest being the Piazza Municipali, home to Ortona's municipal building and its large clock positioned below the roof. Most streets in Ortona were narrow (barely wide enough to accommodate a few people), and most tended to link up with the town's main thoroughfares, the Corso Vittorio Emmanuele and the Corso Umberto I. Another road, the Via Tripoli ran north past the town's cemetery before joining the coast highway.

Dominating the skyline was an old castle, erected in the 15th century on the cliffs overlooking the harbour, and the Cathedrals of Santa Maria di Costantinopoli, and San Tomasso, which many a devout Catholic believed housed the remains of Saint Thomas the Apostle. Legend has it that anyone who gazed upon the remains would have a safe journey to Rome. It was these sites, together with the beaches, café's and scenery that led many pre-war vacationers to call Ortona "The Pearl of The Adriatic". But now, all that was a distant memory. Since September, the Germans had brought in fresh troops and equipment by truck and train to defend the port and deny its use by their enemies (The harbour moles were dynamited and every vessel caught within scuttled), and now with their hold on the Moro loosened, elements of the 1st Parachute Division flooded into the town, and made preparations to give the Canadians a hot reception.

Entire city blocks and both cathedrals were flattened by the Division's *Fallschirmjäger* (airborne engineers) battalion in an effort to block the smaller roads and funnel the enemy infantry and armour into the Piazzas which in turn became veritable "killing zones"- the windows of intact buildings and the rubble piles bristled with deployable machine-guns, hand held automatic weapons like the MP-40 submachine gun and FG-42 automatic rifle, camouflaged emplacements featuring mortars, towed anti-tank guns, flamethrowers, and stockpiles of the new *Panzerfaust*, a disposable anti-tank rocket that could punch through over seven inches of armour. And then there were the mines and booby traps, ranging from the large *Tellermine* for use against tanks to the miniscule *Schummine* and *Schrapnellmine*, one a simple wooden design that was almost undetectable and packed with enough TNT to blast a man's foot off, the other a bounding type mine that when activated, jumped up to waist height and tore apart anything in its path with a wide swath of ball bearings. The engineers routinely wired these devices, together with explosives and grenades to everyday items littered about such as wine bottles, picture frames, doorways, and even bibles. It wasn't just the Germans who were in the town. Most of Ortona's 10,000 plus inhabitants had been forced from their homes and driven out by November, but a great many of them, filthy and suffering from starvation sneaked back in where they hid in their cellars or caves formed out of the rubble of what was once their homes. This decision would ultimately cost many their lives.

There has always existed controversy about why the Battle of Ortona was fought.

Historians who have researched the battle contest that the town's position along the Eighth Army's axis of movement would provide little hindrance. The best option to both Vokes and Montgomery would have been to bypass the town, leaving the Germans trapped and withering on the vine so to speak. The general thinking at time however dictated that since Ortona was in the way, and if Monty's offensive were to proceed as planned, the town and the coastal highway must be taken. There are also some who believe the amount of publicity the Allied and German media lauded over the battle outweighed its importance. Albert Kesselring himself supports this theory in a telephone conversation to the commander of the Tenth Army, General Joachim Lemselen: "We do not want to defend Ortona decisively, but the English have made it as important as Rome...you can do nothing when things develop in this manner...it is too bad the world press makes so much of it." In the aftermath of the battle, an order was handed down to Allied P.R. officials and Correspondents afterwards stating: "DON'T before Rome is captured claim it as a great military objective. Show that Rome as a town has no military significance."

On December 20th 1943 Brigadier-General Bert Hoffmeister's 2nd Infantry brigade, along with the Three Rivers Armoured crept along the road leading southwest into Ortona. Although engineers made an effort to clear mines from the road, four tanks were immobilized or knocked out, one having been "destroyed by a demolition charge of some 200 tons of TNT. The tank was lifted 20 feet in the air and landed on the other side of the road. All crew members were instantly killed." Hoffmeister's plan of attack was for The Loyal Edmonton regiment, known collectively as "The Loyal Eddies" and already under strength from its bloody fight on the Moro enter the town with tank support from the Three Rivers Regiment, while the Seaforth Highlanders led by Lieutenant-Colonel Syd Thomson provided cover to their left flank and moved up the coastal road to the Cemetery. Support by fighter bombers was successful at first, but the onset of poor weather put a stop to it. Fire support by artillery batteries was ruled out as well since the opposing forces would be fighting too close to each other. By dawn on the 21st the Canadians were inside the southwest end of the town. Their progress was quickly stalled by mortars, minefields and machine-gun fire from the fortified Villa D'Alessandro, adding to this predicament were snipers concealed in the steeples of Santa Maria di Costantinopoli, killing or wounding any Canadian that was caught in the open. The paratroopers were eventually dislodged from the villa through close quarters fighting, and the survivors escaped back into the old city. By this time loss rates for the Edmonton regiment were so high, that regimental commander Lieutenant-Colonel Jim Jefferson had the number of rifle companies reduced from four to three, and even then the companies could barely muster 60 able bodied men each from a total strength of 400. The problem was remedied a little by the assigning a company of Seaforths to the Regiment, but it would not be enough.

At dawn on December 22nd, the attack started again with Sherman tanks rolling into the Piazza Vittoria, sirens wailing and their gunners firing HE (High Explosive) shells into every building they passed. Their destination was the Municipal Hall which lay some

300 meters away at the end of the Corso Emanuelle. The progress made by the Loyal Eddies and the tanks was so far good. Major James Stone, commanding the lead company in the attack could not believe his luck. He had thought out the attack the night before and had succeeded in persuading the sceptical commander of the Three Rivers Regiment to assist him. If all went to plan, the Canadian force could move right along the Corso, through the Piazza Municipale, and San Tomasso Cathedral to the Castle beyond. However Stone's hope for a quick and easy breakthrough were dashed when the advance was stopped by a massive rubble pile some seven meters high. Stone believed that the tanks could climb over it without any trouble, but the lead tank was now stopped about twenty yards short of the roadblock. The attack slowed to a halt. Stone rushed up to the lead tank crew demanding an answer. The tank commander pointed to some debris in the road explaining that a mine could have been placed there. After hearing the tanker's half hearted excuse that a Sherman cost over \$20,000 dollars, Stone shot back, "You armoured sissy! I've got twenty to thirty men here with no damned armour at all and they're worth a million dollars a piece. You're just a bunch of goddamned armoured sissies!" Stone's rebuttal probably wouldn't have helped much anyway since now the Germans realised an attack was imminent and began firing back sending Canadians scurrying for any cover available. Then, an anti-tank gun joined in from an covered position near the cathedral making it impossible for the tanks to pinpoint it. At Stone's command, a soldier manning a PIAT fired a round at the gun, missing it. Frustrated, Stone threw a smoke grenade at the gun's position, and ran up to it single-handedly while priming a fragmentation grenade. He tossed the grenade over the gun's shield and pressed up against it when the grenade went off, killing the crew manning the weapon.

In spite of Major Stone's courage, his carefully planned assault fell apart. Beyond the rubble pile, the paratroopers still controlled the Piazza and their machine-gun nests fired bursts that deterred anyone brave-or foolish enough-to crawl over. At 5pm, the tanks withdrew from Ortona, and the Loyal Eddies settled themselves inside deserted buildings and waited for first light. The *Falschirmjäger*s were confident of their success and the fact that their defensive tactics were taking huge tolls on their enemies. They believed their boldness and ingenuity would see them through, and that the "Tommys" they were facing weren't up to the task at hand. The fighting continued through the night as small groups of paras, usually numbering about ten infiltrated through the basements of ruined buildings and attacked the Canadian companies from the rear. The attacks were beaten back, but they did a lot to rattle the Canadians and deprive them of sleep. The next day-December 23rd- began no differently than the day before. The Three Rivers tanks made a breakthrough of the rubble, but found all of the exits in the Piazza Municipale blocked by more rubble piles. The Loyal Eddies proceeded to fan out into the northwest portion of Ortona. This was the oldest part of the town, and was laid waste by German demolitions. The Seaforths had moved behind the Edmontons and were inching through the western half. The collapsed buildings and mines made further tank movement nearly impossible, and with the threat of snipers ever present, new techniques were established. One involved the 6 pounder anti-

tank guns each regiment was allotted. “We used the anti-tanks in a unique way,” claimed one soldier. “The shells could not penetrate the granite walls, sometimes 4 ft. thick. So we just put them through the windows [and fired], and they (the shells) bounced around inside much like they would in an enemy tank doing horrible damage.” The 75mm guns of the Sherman helped also in this regard, as did a couple of seventeen pounders from the 90th anti-tank battalion situated outside the town. Canadian soldiers would use the noise of this shelling, coupled with the smoke and dust kicked up to rush in and pick through the debris, shooting or bayoneting any German who still put up a fight. For both sides, Ortona was a place where taking prisoners was optional.

The second technique was called “mouse-holing. Virtually all of the homes in Ortona had adjoining walls that connected one dwelling to another. Using PIAT shells or a shaped explosive charge called a “beehive”, The Canadians would blast open these walls, and flush out the paratroopers from each floor using grenades and automatic firearms like the American Thompson or the Bren, a British-designed light machine-gun that was magazine fed and fired 500 rounds per minute. This method served the attackers well since they could clear entire city blocks with out the risk of exposing themselves to enemy fire. But it did however add a more terrifying dimension to the battle. The knowledge that the man a few feet away was waiting patiently to take your life must have increased the fears of the Canadian soldiers ten fold. Even with these tactics, progress was painstakingly slow and measured in couple of houses taken every hour. To make themselves less of a target for snipers, the officers who led attacks threw away their pistols and binoculars or hid them beneath their battle dress. Some even went as far as to stripping themselves of insignia, and orders were issued calmly or by subtle movements of the hand or head. Waving arms about and shouting commands meant death. Radiomen who were saddled with bulky transmitter/receivers and couldn’t hear anything while wearing headphones were another favourite prey of the paratroopers. Even though sniper rifles were available in each regiment, they were few and far between. Also Canadians and for the most part Commonwealth soldiers were not as well trained in the art of sniping, and often lacked the patience their opposites did.

Also hiding in Ortona were the civilians who had thrown caution to the wind by staying in the city. Hundreds had already been crushed or buried alive in collapsed buildings or cut down in the streets by shells and bullets. Hundreds more wandered their ruined neighbourhoods becoming innocent bystanders to the fighting. Their presence was an unhealthy hindrance to Canadian and German alike, since any attempt to help them could mean exposing oneself to the enemy. But this did not deter some from helping the civilians in any way possible. British journalist Christopher Buckley described the plight and resilience of Ortona’s people while hiding in a cellar:

“What a strange clutter of humanity it was, There were some five or six Canadian soldiers, there were old women and there were children innumerable. A painter of genius-Goya perhaps-might have done justice to the scene. I felt no verbal description could do so. In the

half-darkened room the pasta for the midday meal was simmering over the fire in the corner. Haggard, prematurely aged women kept emerging shyly one after another from some inner chamber where an old man, the grandfather of one of the numerous children was dying...

Another old man was uttering maledictions against Mussolini. Then his wife surprisingly produced a jeroboam of Marsala and a half dozen glasses and moved among the soldiers, filling and re-filling glasses... The children clambered around the Canadian soldiers and clutched at them convulsively every time one of our antitank guns, located only half a dozen paces from the door of the house, fired down the street in the direction of one of the remaining German machine-gun posts. Soon each of us had a squirming, terrified child in his arms. And the old lady went on distributing Marsala."

Outside Ortona, other Canadian regiments were attacking northwest in order to sever the 1st Parachute division's lines of supply and encircle the town. The attack, conceived by Major General Vokes and 1st brigade commander Dan Spry was kicked off by the Hastings and Prince Edward, and then carried on by the 48th Highlanders under creeping barrages and with tank support. The Hasty P's advanced up a ridgeline bordering the Riccio river valley and a ravine the comprised Ortona's western rampart, before running into what Spry called "a whole German paratroop battalion, hitting the middle company and destroying it," while the Highlanders were given the task of taking the high ground overlooking the hamlets of San Tomasso and San Nicola. What resulted was an action described in the official regimental history as "one of the most daringly conceived and executed one-battalion enterprises of the Canadian campaign—in either Italy or Normandy." at nightfall on the 23rd, the entire regiment-minus their anti-tank guns, mortars, and other supporting weapons-marched single file through a heavy downpour past the positions held by the Hasty P's. The gamble both Dan Spry and 48th commander Ian Johnston were making was both gigantic and risky. If the Highlanders succeeded, they would be that much closer to cutting the Germans off. If they failed, the possibility of almost every man in the regiment getting wiped out would be all too real. The 48th would effectively cease to exist as a fighting force. Johnston was dubious of the plan, since the darkness obscured all visible land and enemy positions making reconnaissance patrols unfeasible. Nevertheless, Spry and Vokes insisted that the attack proceed at once.

With the help of aerial photos, the Highlanders marched down a vineyard footpath for almost a mile in single file, the darkness so enveloping that each man grabbed the bayonet scabbards of one another in order to stay close. The rain soaked each of them to the bone, but it helped muffle the sounds of their movements. They had marched about 700 yards when the noise of gunfire erupted-The Hasty P's were beating off infiltration teams of paratroopers-A company, led by Major John Clarke was at the forefront of the attack and stumbled across a house. "With the quick silent reactions of raiding Mohawks, Clarke and his men soundlessly killed one man outside the house, covered all exits and then leaped into the midst of a Nazi Christmas party." Two paratroopers were knifed when they tried to scramble for their weapons. The remaining thirteen were taken prisoner and sent back to the Hasty P's under guard. Clarke and his company continued on until they came to another

house. With no guards in sight, they raced inside, catching the six paratroopers inside sleeping-literally. They too were escorted back, and the Company continued. Soon however the advance stopped. Lieutenant Colonel Johnston, along with his intelligence officer raced to the front of the infantry column. Believing the regiment was lost, the two men pored over the aerial photo and map with Clarke. The Highlanders weren't lost. They realised that their objective had been taken, and all with out a shot fired or a single casualty. Even more remarkable was that the Germans were unaware of the Canadian presence and did nothing.

By midnight on December 24th, the Highlanders were now sheltered inside hastily dug trenches. Johnston tried to capitalize on his success by sending a thirty man patrol from D company back to the regimental headquarters to gather up their artillery, heavy weapons, and rations, but a half hour into their march, the patrol returned with the news that paratroopers had their route covered. At first light, The Royal Canadian Regiment, reinforced with 152 officers and men but still under strength, set out to link up with the Highlanders, and make the final push to the coast road. Unfortunately, the push broke down due to the muddy terrain, thick vineyards and heavy resistance by the paratroopers. The 48th was surrounded and on its own.

For those stuck in Ortona, Christmas Eve seemed to be when the fighting reached its fiercest and most depraved. The rifle companies in both the Loyal Eddies and Seaforths had now been whittled down to thirty officers and men apiece, sometimes fewer. Over the day, The house to house battles and mouse-holing work continued. Once Piazza Municipali was taken, the Edmontons shifted their attentions to the narrow streets leading to another Piazza (the Plebiscita) and San Tomasso Cathedral. Behind the square was another ravine that led down to the shores of the Adriatic. Any Germans retreating through this ravine would be under total harassment from Canadian fire. To the west, the Seaforth Highlanders tried to capture Piazza San Francesco, where they could then push the paratroopers up the Via Cavour and Via Monte Maiella towards the Edmonton Regiment, and together annihilate them. Doing so required the Seaforths to take the San Francesco cathedral and a school. Both were severely damaged by shelling, but it was highly likely that both could be possible strong holds. Noticing a dead horse lying in front of the cathedral, the Seaforth officers referred to the Piazza in their messages as "Dead Horse Square." Captain June Thomas, leading A Company, sent in a six man section led by a Lieutenant Lynch to get inside the school, clear it out and hold it. While Lynch remained outside, a corporal led the other men into the vacated building, Despite their protests that it was probably booby-trapped. An hour after the men entered, a huge explosion rocked the square, and all three floors of the school collapsed in a mountain of shattered masonry. The Falschirmptioniers had indeed placed tons of explosives inside the school a few days earlier. Only one man, private Gordon Currie-Smith would survive, being pulled from the rubble a few days later, and spent the rest of the war convalescing in various hospitals. For hours the Seaforths tried and failed to take the square, pinned down by a machine gun nests in the cathedral's belfry. A Sherman tank from the Three Rivers Regiment appeared down one of the side streets and at Captain Thomas's

behest, reluctantly fired a shell into the steeple, toppling it and silencing the gun. The men of A company rushed the church and found themselves exchanging rifle fire and grenades with the paratroopers still inside. That night, the Germans launched a counter-attack-their first since the battle started-against the Seaforths, but it was held off in large part by skill and determination of the section leaders, and Lieutenant-Colonel Syd Thomson, who ran to each position directing the defence with a calm demeanour and a smile that “acted like a tonic” for the lower ranks. The counter-attack was repulsed.

As the combat intensified, so did it’s coverage in the newspapers and on the radios in Britain, and North America. According to the press the battle went from an attack against “makeshift German defences” to “A strategic road junction.” “For some unknown reason, the Germans are waging a miniature Stalingrad in hapless Ortona,” stated one report from the Associated Press. Inevitably as more and comparisons were made to the Russian city in which the Wehrmacht suffered it’s first crushing defeat, Ortona soon earned itself the sobriquet of “Little Stalingrad”. Other war correspondents like Matthew Halton of the CBC covered the fighting for his listeners at home and abroad. “It wasn’t hell,” Halton announced in one report, “It was the courtyard of hell. It was a maelstrom of noise and hot, splitting steel...the rattling of machine-guns never stops...wounded men refuse to leave, and the men don't want to be relieved after seven days and seven nights... the battlefield is still an appalling thing to see, in its mud, ruin, dead, and its blight and desolation...” Outside the town, Charles Comfort, a painter who had enlisted in the army after the outbreak of war and held the position of an official war artist observed the battle from a encampment near the hamlet of San Vito Chietino. Being a non-combatant, Comfort was prohibited from combat areas, but at Ortona one did not need to be up close to experience the horror. In his diary Comfort wrote that:

“The very smell of death and destruction reached us. A holocaust of red glowed in the sky, revealing a ragged skyline as tongues of flames leapt into the night. We peered through the trembling darkness...overlooking the awesome scene. Downwind from the action the frightful intimate sounds of battle were all too clear, bursts of automatic fire, the Bren and the Schmeisser answering one another, each with its own distinctive accent. A dozen concurrent dialogues penetrated the blunter, duller, but more profound thunder of the gunning. From the intervening vineyards rose a ghostly vapour, like a shroud winding itself around the town. The most boisterous and profane among us became silent in the face of what we witnessed. The morbid fascination of destruction held us in its grip as life and its monuments dissolved before our very eyes. Over all, the deafening voice of guns beat a massive dirge like all the unruffled drums of hell.”

General Richard Heidrich knew that the battle was rapidly turning against him and his Parachute Division, so he committed another battalion of *Falschirmjäger*s into Ortona to help take pressure of the other two that had suffered just as badly as the Canadians. With half the town lost, Heidrich and his subordinates faced a difficult choice, surrender or withdraw from the city in order to preserve the lives of his surviving men. But on the 24th, a new directive arrived from Hitler. Since the Stalingrad debacle, he had vehemently opposed the wishes of his military commanders to retreat under any circumstances. Ortona

was no exception. The Führer demanded the town be held irregardless of the cost. Heidrich would have nothing of it. If the worst came, he would order the evacuation of his men out of Ortona and leave behind a wasteland. But for now Heidrich believed the re-enforcements he had brought into Ortona would be sufficient to hold the town, and inexplicably he left the front for a long awaited leave in Germany. Chris Vokes also considered pulling the Canadian regiments out of the town owing to the casualty figures, and asked Bert Hoffmeister if any further advance should be postponed. The Brigadier answered back in the negative. The 2nd Brigade he felt, had not come this far just to pull back. In his mind, Hoffmeister believed such a move would be devastating on the morale of his men.

The battle continued well into Christmas day but abated to the extent in which both the Canadians and Germans could enjoy some semblance of peace and home. For the Seaforths, this culminated in a Christmas dinner prepared by Quartermaster Bordon Cameron and his company of cooks. At the blessing of Syd Thomson, a field kitchen was set up behind the altar of Santa Maria di Costantinopoli. Nothing was spared. Destroyed houses were raided for utensils, linens, and even candles. The companies out fighting in the town were to be rotated out of their positions for two hours at a time. The route back to the cathedral was extremely hazardous since mortars and gunfire continued to be traded back and forth between the two forces. But a great many took the trip, ignoring the risk of death or maiming. Major Roy Durnford, the Seaforth's padre helped in the preparations of the feast and described the event in his diary:

“C company came in at eleven o'clock, A company at one, and so on until seven at night. The men looked tired and drawn, as well as they might, and most who came directly from the town were dirty and unshaven. 'Well' I said, 'At last I got you all in church!' The floor had been cleared and tables set up, and it was heart warming to see tablecloths and chinaware some of the boys had scrounged, and the beer, cigarettes, chocolate, nuts, oranges and apples. There was soup, roast pork with applesauce, cauliflower, mashed potatoes, gravy, Christmas pudding and mince pies-all excellent and a credit to the cooks. Plates were heaped high with as much as any man could eat.

The tables filled and emptied and filled again, and I saw many a tense face relax in the warmth within the walls of the battle-scarred church. What a concert of noise! As relief and relaxation took hold, the talk became louder and greetings and jokes were shouted. The cookers hissed and sizzled behind the altar and the plates clattered as they were cleared from the tables and piled high on the altar itself. Desecration of the Lord's Table? It did not strike me as so. Above the din one could sometimes hear machine-gun fire and shells. It was so wonderful to hear so much laughter so close to so much death and suffering....When each company arrived, I began a little service, being careful to make it voluntary, and I was pleased to see many gathered around. We had just a few short prayers and carol singing-Wilf Gildersleeve played the harmonium we found in the church, with 'Postie' Sinclair and Major Gowan manning the bellows....My heart grieved to see these men, after their brief two-hour respite, turn their faces again to the battle...”

Both the Loyal Edmonton Regiment and the trapped 48th Highlanders did not have the luxury of a Christmas dinner on the 25th. Major Jim Stone had to settle with “A cold

pork chop brought forward on a Bren gun carrier.” Others were content with eating whatever rations they still had available. The Edmontons attack into Piazza Plebiscita had stalled partly due to heavy machine-gun fire and a well entrenched paratrooper manning a flame thrower that spouted searing jets of liquid fire at anyone trying to move. A platoon of Loyal Eddies led by outflanked the flamethrower and it’s support team causing them to run lest they be gunned down. Elsewhere, the Highlanders had gone 48 hours without any signs of relief coming. The meagre rations the men had started out were running low, as well as the bulk of their ammunition. Mud and rain had prevented tank support from arriving, the batteries of their radios were so depleted that they could only be used for a few minutes at a time, and worst of all the wounded were piling up, with little medical supplies available to treat them. The sole bright spot was a cake prepared by private John Cockford, batman to Lieutenant John Clarkson, the 48th’s intelligence officer. Made of cornmeal, powdered milk, Italian walnuts, and melted chocolate, Cockford had written ‘Merry Christmas’ in the icing. It was quickly devoured by the officers and men. Radio problems aside, the Highlanders were still able to get artillery support, instructing the gun crews to think of the Highlanders’ position as an ‘island’ and keep hitting targets around them for a full 360 degrees. This helped to thwart any paratrooper assaults.

Meanwhile, Brig Dan Spry sent in sixty men from the Saskatchewan Light Infantry led by Captain George Beal of the 48th to distribute supplies to the so-called ‘lost battalion’. Beal and the SLI moved to the position using the same footpath that had allowed Johnston’s men to take their objective so easily. At 9pm, the SLI arrived and distributed their stockpile of “rations, wireless batteries, ammunition, a few extra Brens, two or three light mortars—and rum!” Along with seven wounded men, Johnston sent Beal and the SLI men back with a message for Spry requesting tanks. After a pause, he said “Tell him to send us just one tank, and we’ll massacre them.” But with the mud still causing problems, tank support was a long way off. Starting at 10am on December 26th, More German counterattacks were launched, but the artillery cover stopped them cold. any paratroopers that made it into the perimeter faced close combat with pistols, rifle butts and knives. The night before, the temperature dropped low enough to harden the mud that had made any tank movement difficult, and as a result troop of four Shermans from the Ontario Regiment rumbled into the fray at 1pm, catching a paratrooper company off guard while getting ready for another counter-attack. “Quite a slaughter ensued” wrote the 48th’s war diarist, as the Germans fled in a panic hounded remorselessly by the tanks and fire from two companies of Highlanders. “This was the most effective use of tanks this unit has ever made.” recorded the diarist. “Total at end of day was 40 enemy killed and 20 taken prisoner. Estimate of enemy casualties for the day in battalion area 100 to 120.” So many dead bodies littered the landscape that the ground on which the killing was done became known as “Cemetery Hill.”

In Ortona, the Loyal Edmonton Regiment and the Seaforth Highlanders had by now

received one of the best presents anyone could wish for at a time like this; Replacements. For the Loyal Eddies, it was in the form of 75 officers and men from the Cape Breton Highlanders, part of the 5th Canadian Armoured Division that had newly arrived on the Italian Peninsula. Considered “Tremendously good soldiers”, the regiment began arriving on Christmas Eve and quickly got accustomed to the fighting their comrades had been enduring for seven days and nights. To delay the inevitable, more and more houses were either demolished or mined by the Falschirmptioniers, setting the stage for a tragedy. On December 27th, a platoon of twenty-four Edmontons, reinforced and led by Lieutenant E.D. Allan occupied a building near San Tomasso Cathedral. Oblivious to Allan or his men was that the building they were currently in had been one of the many wired to explosive charges. When a German demolition team detonated the charges, the building swiftly collapsed, leaving a mass of rubble from which there seemed to be no signs of life. Members of the Regiment’s engineering team raced to the scene regardless, digging frantically through the ruin with shovels, picks and bare hands, all the while dodging stick grenades being hurled by a group of paratroopers. One of the engineers, private G.E. O’Neil single-handedly forced the Germans to withdraw, leaving his comrades to continue their grisly job. Four injured men and one body were recovered immediately, but despite more digging, there appeared to be no one left to save from Lieutenant Allan’s platoon.

When news of the explosion reached the other officers and men of the Loyal Edmonton Regiment, Their anger and desire for vengeance knew no bounds. In their minds, luring over twenty men into a building and then burying them alive with explosives was both underhanded and callous. The Edmontons found their revenge by having Captain Bill Longhurst lead a company to attack and capture a three storey building in the portion of the town still in German hands. The attack was successful, and the German platoons were forced to withdraw to another building nearby. Longhurst then brought up sappers who placed large amounts of TNT beneath the building without the paratroopers ever noticing. Once the charges were placed and readied, Longhurst detonated them, bringing the walls and roof down atop two German platoons, killing between forty and fifty of them. There were no survivors.

The 27th also saw both Regiments finally take Piazza Plebiscita, San Tomasso Cathedral, Dead Horse Square, and all of the buildings surrounding them. The Germans now only had a few footholds left in the northern half of Ortona-part of the old town adjacent to the castle, the Cemetery and a garden plot near Via Tripoli, and several buildings near Via Monte Maiella. As the streets became wider again, Tanks and artillery pieces could be brought up much quicker and lay down protective shelling. The castle alone was bombarded by over a hundred shells from Sherman tanks, and 1,100 mortar rounds. The order of the day was any building even remotely suspected of harbouring the enemy were to be blasted into oblivion. The crews of the anti-tank guns and sappers obliged. During the day, *Luftwaffe* aircraft made an appearance over the town, attempting to drop bombs and conducted strafing attacks on the streets below. At his headquarters, Brigadier Hoffmeister

toyed with idea of a final knockout blow that would drive the last German defenders out of Ortona. In their current state, the Seaforths and Edmontons were not in the position to deliver such a blow, so Hoffmeister set his focus on the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, held in reserve outside of the town. He was however unsure of what the Germans were planning to do. Reports of another paratrooper battalion being sent into the town worried both him and his intelligence officers. The threat of a massed counterattack was all too real. Hoffmeister's fears were rendered moot for

on the night of the 27th/28th, General Traugott Herr, Commander of the 76th Panzer Korps had requested permission to abandon Ortona and withdraw the remnants of the 1st Parachute Division from the town. With two thirds of the town lost, and the threat of encirclement by the 1st Canadian Brigade, Herr knew that throwing away the lives of the surviving paratroopers in a final do or die counterattack would be pointless. Both General Lemselen and Generalmajor Fritz Wentzell, Chief of Staff to the Tenth Army agreed. In the middle of the night, The exhausted and shattered companies of paratroopers gathered their weapons, equipment, and their wounded and silently left their positions, marching or walking north on the Coast Highway in such a manner that they were neither seen nor heard by the Canadians. A few of them even took the time to leave behind a parting gesture: A small Christmas tree bearing the message, "Sorry we can't stay to put mistletoe on, but we'll make it hot for you in the hills." The next morning, an eerie silence hung over Ortona. The sound and fury that the Canadians had lived with for the last seven days and nights were non-existent. Taking its place was the distinctive banter of civilians who emerged from their hideouts. A cursory search of the old castle confirmed what some officers and men were already starting to believe. The Germans were gone, and Ortona was finally theirs.

The next few days in Ortona were marked by Canadian soldiers taking in the destruction that had been wrought. Men slept soundly amidst the desolation, the first good sleep many had for over a week. A few patrols rummaged through the destroyed buildings wary of mines that might be still hidden. And others took the time to loot valuables from the buildings that were still fairly intact-much to the chagrin of their officers. Correspondent Matthew Halton was taken on a guided tour of the town by a Captain from the Loyal Edmonton Regiment. At one point in the tour, Halton stopped and observed "On a pile of rubble, precariously balanced, killed by an anti-tank gun and set on fire, was perched a Canadian tank. Near the tank was the gun that killed it, its crew of two blown to pieces. There were dozens of mines lying about, and a careless step meant death... There was smoke here, there, and everywhere. And flames, and the dead." At the building in which Lieutenant Allan's platoon had been entombed, the sappers began to properly sift through the piles of brick and stone for any more trace of the nineteen men still trapped below. On December 30th, a faint groan was heard emanating from the rubble pile. The sappers set to work immediately and in a matter of minutes, another man-Lance Corporal Roy Boyd-was pulled free. In what seemed to be a miracle, the Alberta native had survived three days of

burial. "It was like coming back from the dead," Boyd admitted. The other eighteen were not as fortunate. Elsewhere the dead of both sides were gathered up. Since the Germans abandoned the town in great haste, the decaying bodies of paratroopers lay everywhere in the town. "We collected our dead alright," admitted a soldier from the Seaforth Highlanders, "But when it came to the Jerries we made a half-hearted attempt to dig graves. But the weather was cold and the ground frozen, so to hell with it. We gathered them all up and heaved them down a well and heaved a hand grenade down with them. A real Vikings' funeral."

The taking of Ortona did not see an end to the 1st Canadian division's activities on the Italian front. With orders from Sir Charles Allfrey, leading the British 5th Corps, Major-General Chris Vokes sought to push past the Riccio River, take San Nicola, San Tomasso, the crossroads connecting the village of Tollo to the coast and "Point 59", a triangular promontory situated above the coast highway and topped by an ancient tower. With it taken, the Canadians could use the tower as an artillery observation post and direct fire onto any German forces retreating up the highway. The PPCLI was already engaged there, having moved through Ortona on December 28th, but with the other two brigades worn out, The task fell to Brigadier Graeme Gibson's 3rd Canadian Brigade, recently backed up with over 400 fresh replacements. If successful, the attack would clear the Germans out of the land south of the Arielli River. Despite a unfortunate encounter with errant artillery shells that claimed 27 casualties, the 48th Highlanders took both San Nicola and San Tomasso largely unopposed On December 29th. The same day, the Royal 22e Regiment attempted a crossing of the Riccio but was twice forced back by large amounts of machine gun fire coming from the opposite shore. The next day, the Regiment secured the abandoned crossroads although German artillery quickly zeroed in on the Van Doos, wounding one officer and sixteen men. To the right of the Van Doos, the Carleton and York Regiment of New Brunswick began their attack on Point 59. Brigade intelligence indicated to Lieutenant-Colonel John Pangman that the point would not be seriously defended. However as The Carleton and York advanced to within 500 meters of the point, the two leading companies were met with a hail of artillery and mortar fire, followed by machine-guns and small-arms. One officer was killed outright, another eight were wounded. The intelligence was misleading. The paratroopers instead held on grimly to the point, forcing Pangman to order his regiment to entrench themselves into the muddy slopes and wait until the next morning to renew their attack. It was not until January 4th that Point 59 was finally taken, and by then the overall situation in the Adriatic sector had transformed into static warfare in the face of ever worsening weather. Patrols would still be made, but for the most part, Field Marshal Montgomery's "colossal crack" through the Adriatic was over, and so too was the Canadians long and bloody struggle through the Moro Valley, Ortona and beyond.

The losses the 1st Division incurred in that struggle can both shock and boggle the mind. Even as the various regiments sought to bury their dead and mourn, the numbers were tallied up. In one month, 176 officers and 2,163 other ranks had been killed, wounded, or written off as “missing (presumed dead).” Ortona itself claimed approximately 650 casualties. The Loyal Edmonton Regiment and Seaforth Highlanders, which bore the brunt of the fighting at “Little Stalingrad” suffered the most with 144 casualties (62 of which were fatal), and 172 respectively (Including 41 killed in action). The killed to wounded ratio in Ortona was believed to be two to one, a testament to the brutal fighting. Furthermore, illness and battle-exhaustion took another seventy-seven officers and 1,540 enlisted men off the lines. Only 20 to 25 percent of those suffering from battle-exhaustion were declared fit to return to the front. Just as bad was the divisional motor pool. Jeeps, trucks, Bren gun carriers were broken down. The barrels of the anti-tank guns that had done such an excellent job in the streets, were so worn out that they needed to be changed. With so many replacements arriving as the battle entered its final stages, the battle scarred vets who had hailed from all parts of Canada, and joined the same companies and platoons as their friends and siblings, distanced themselves as far as possible from the fresh new faces, wary of forging friendships with men who had a slim chance of seeing home again. It was these losses that necessitated a recommendation by Major-General Vokes to give the division an extended rest from further battle in order to regain a “Fighting Edge.” Losses aside, what the division accomplished at Ortona proved that Canada’s army could hold its own, and had the same amount of determination and fighting spirit as well as their Allied counterparts. The ingenuity Canadian regiments employed in the street fighting was not lost on Allied leaders as well. The Services and Sound Corporation (Attached to the British Military) interviewed a large number of Seaforth and Edmonton veterans in regards to the makeshift tactics employed at Ortona. The end result was a training film distributed to British units entitled *Fighting in Built-up areas*.

German casualties during the Moro campaign and the Battle of Ortona remained unclear for the remainder of the war. Vokes had rightfully claimed that “We had smashed the 90th Panzer Grenadier Division and gave the 1st German Parachute Division a mauling it will long remember.” The Panzer Grenadiers were certainly decimated, a clear indicator of their strategy to launch immediate counterattacks after having lost ground. The division would rebuild itself and see more action, but with so many of its veteran *soldaten* either dead or in enemy hands, it would never again be as formidable. As for the paratroops, their losses in Ortona between December 20th and the 28th are unknown, but in all probability they suffered just as many as the Canadians did. Unlike the Panzer Grenadiers, the *Falschirmjäger*s were not broken and like the Canadians, they too would be reformed and continue their fight against the Allies in the battles to come. The most tragic statistic is that of the civilians killed in Ortona. Estimates vary from source to source, but the general consensus is that over 1,300 Italians died in the town during the course of the battle. Many of the bodies of those who were killed were never recovered.

The campaign to liberate Italy would last another two years, ending with the

unconditional surrender of all German forces in May, 1945. In that period of time, those who survived Ortona as well as the newcomers to battle would go on to encounter more horrors and hardship at places like the Liri Valley, the Gothic Line, and the Po River. In all, 92,527 Canadians served in some capacity on the Italian peninsula. Of that number, 4,798 would not return home. Instead their bodies lie beneath the soil of Italy together with the bodies Americans, British, ANZAC's, Indians, and Poles. Rome was liberated with great fanfare on June 4th, 1944 by the Fifth Army, and two days later Operation Overlord-the long awaited invasion of Northwest Europe-began. With the eyes of the world focused on the fighting on the beaches and in the Hedgerows of Normandy, the Italian front seemed to be eclipsed, reduced to a "sideshow" as some historians have put it. As a sad result, the accomplishment the Canadians made at Ortona and on the Italian Peninsula seems to have been largely overshadowed by other battles elsewhere; the average Canadian living today knows at least something about Vimy Ridge, Dieppe, or Juno Beach, but when it comes to Ortona, they tend to just draw a blank. The veterans still alive who experienced the battle first hand certainly haven't forgotten, but are highly reluctant to discuss their time there. Ortona to them is a scar on their psyche and soul, one that they'll carry with them for the rest of their lives. In the years since however, some have begun to open up and try to heal the wounds. In 1998 for example, a delegation of veterans led by Matthew Halton's son David (Also a reporter), made a pilgrimage to Ortona to pay tribute to the men left behind.

Also present in the town were a few veterans of the 1st Parachute Division. While some vets were apprehensive about meeting their old foes from nearly sixty years ago, for some, the bitterness and apprehension faded. Ted Griffiths who served in the Three Rivers Regiment said it best: "Who the hell is going to carry hatred around all their life? I heard more or less 'No, I'm not that keen on sort of meeting with the Germans.' On occasion some of them used the word 'kraut' which I hadn't heard for many years, but as I say, a little bit of thought, they came around."

The citizens living in Ortona haven't forgotten as well. The town was rebuilt after the war, the buildings are a mix of the old and new, the cathedrals of San Tomasso and Santa Maria di Costantinopoli have been rebuilt to their pre war splendour, and tourists once again crowd the streets and cafes. But one does not need to look hard in order to find remnants of the town's bloody past. Holes gouged into the stone and concrete by shrapnel and bullets, small memorials to the liberators and those that died, and a museum filled with the mementoes of 1943. Outside the town, places like Casa Berardi, where Paul Triquet and the Van Doos won everlasting accord remains standing. The Berardi Family still owns the property and welcomes anyone who visit with open arms. Sterlin Castle still exists too, albeit with a bronze plaque detailing the holding action that occurred there.

The most poignant reminder though lies some five kilometres south of Ortona, at the Moro River Canadian War Cemetery. Situated on a high plateau near the Adriatic sea, the immaculately kept grounds of the cemetery hold the graves of 1,615 Allied soldiers, over 1,300 of them Canadian. The names chiselled into the headstones are permanent

reminders of not only a nation's sacrifice, but of time when the world went insane.

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