

THE BATTLE OF ORTONA

Commemorative Supplement

This Supplement has been prepared to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the Battle of Ortona in December 1943 and to honour all those Canadians who fought in the intensive and bitter battles of the Adriatic campaign. It contains a summary of the December battles as well as descriptions of the Moro River cemetery and the newly-created Battle of Ortona Museum, and relates the

story of the extraordinary reconciliation that resulted between the two warring sides.

The limited space available can not do justice to all the units and services which fought at Ortona. The battle, and the larger Italian campaign, have been covered extensively in books and on the World Wide Web, where each participating unit is given full and deserved recognition.

THE BATTLE

For the Canadian army, December 1943, culminating in the Battle of Ortona, was the bloodiest month of the Italian campaign. Measured on the scale of the Great War, this was not a big battle, but it was one of the fiercest ever fought by Canadians, and in neither war was there any more bitter and intense fighting. In the words of the war correspondent Matthew Halton, "The attacking Canadians beat two of the finest German divisions that ever marched, killing them, man by man, in a long drawn-out fury of fire and death ending in the appalling week of Ortona". After the Allied invasion of Sicily and Italy, and the surrender of Italy in September 1943, the Germans occupied Rome and determined to defend southern and central Italy. Allied strategy was to capture Rome and, eventually Northern Italy, in a pincer movement with the US 5th Army pushing north from Naples and the British 8th Army attacking up the Adriatic coast across the Sangro River and then across the peninsula from Pescara along the one good road to Rome.

In the first four days of December, the 1st Canadian Infantry Division moved fifty miles in terrible road and weather conditions from the Campobasso area to Termoli and a further twenty miles up the coast south of the Sangro. Bitter fighting occurred at the Moro River which was strongly held by the Germans but, under heavy fire, 3 Field Coy RCE was able to

bridge the river to allow tanks to operate in support of the infantry. The German 90th Panzer Grenadier Division and the 1st Parachute Division which was then relieving it, strongly supported by artillery, vigorously defended a natural tank obstacle at a ravine nicknamed the Gully. Successive frontal assaults by all three Canadian brigades were repulsed but in a flanking attack on 14 December Casa Berardi was seized by a small force of the Royal 22nd Regt. supported by a squadron of the Ontario Tanks. The bravery of Capt Paul Triquet in leading his depleted company to seize their objective earned him the Victoria Cross.

Under a close artillery barrage I Canadian Infantry Brigade attacked across the Ortona-Orsogna road where 2 Brigade's Seaforth Highlanders took their San Leonardo objective. However, the intense barrage produced by British V Corps artillery was so close to the Royal Canadian Regiment that they were delayed in attaining their crossroads objective until the following morning. The RCR suffered dreadful casualties in taking the Cider crossroads on the high ground overlooking the Gully, and the battalion was reduced to 18 officers and 159 men, At dawn on Dec. 21, two under-strength companies and a half-squadron of the Three

Rivers Regt. tanks approached Ortona and



Three Rivers Regiment tank in Ortona

moved cautiously up the main street towards the first of three large public squares. The next morning it was apparent the German resistance had stiffened and the balance of the Seaforth were committed.

The week-long battle for Ortona consisted of fierce fighting against a stubborn and vicious defence. German engineers had ringed the southern approaches to the town with mines and demolitions. In the town itself, demolitions had been cleverly contrived by the defenders to divert an attacker along the main street and into the town square, which the Germans had selected as their killing ground. All the side streets leading east and west had been blocked by blown up buildings toppled into the roadway. German troops, armed with a variety of weapons - machine guns, anti-tank guns and mortars had been carefully positioned on various floors of surviving buildings and in the piles of rubble blocking the streets creating a murderous cross-fire at every corner. Streets were frequently mined and there were anti-personnel mines in the barricades of rubble. As one obstacle was overcome, another would appear beyond it.

2CIB struggled from house to house in street fighting. The Loyal Edmonton Regiment, the Seaforth Highlanders and tanks of the Three Rivers Regiment bore the brunt of the action. The main objective of the Edmontons was the ancient castle. The Seaforth's assignment was

to protect the Edmontons' left flank and endeavour to cut the coast road at the northwestern exit of the town, to prevent the enemy from either reinforcing or withdrawing his defending troops.

There was no preliminary air bombardment because Allied naval forces wanted the harbour taken intact. The Germans, however, ignored that requirement and destroyed the port facilities. Bad weather prevented the air force from supporting the troops on the ground, but did not prevent enemy 109s from putting in an appearance. Useful aerial reconnaissance photographs of the town were, however, provided prior to the battle. The main artillery contribution was by the 6-pounder anti-tank guns of the infantry battalions and the 17-pounders of the divisional anti-tank regiment, which were used to shoot the enemy out of his upper-storey positions along the seafont. The cupola of the church of San Tomaso had been cut in half and an empty shell was all that remained of the church.



Chiesa di San Tomaso, Ortona, Italy by Charles F Comfort. (CwM, Catalogue No. 12261)

Tanks and infantry worked together. Firing over the heads of the infantry, the tanks blasted the paratroopers from the upper floors of houses and gave covering fire, but the rubble-strewn streets became impassable for tanks, whose losses were light. The greater part of the fighting, however, took place inside houses where the Edmontons and the Seaforth would blow down successive partition walls as they made their way from street to street. Using a technique known as "mouseholing" troops

would clear the ground floor and work their way upstairs, and when the upper floor was clear they would blow through to the next house, this time from top to bottom as they made their way from street to street without exposing themselves to enemy fire.

The enemy used the Church of Santa Maria delle Grazie and the adjacent hospital as defensive positions and both had to be destroyed. Finally on 28th December, the enemy withdrew hastily from the town leaving

behind some 100 of their own dead on the battlefield.

At the conclusion of the battle the town had been destroyed house-by-house, building by building. Ortona was in ruins. Exhaustion was evident everywhere but the 1st Canadian Infantry Division with supporting arms and services went on to fight with great distinction in Italy and, later, in Northwest Europe.

THE BATTLE OF ORTONA MUSEUM

The Battle of Ortona and the capture of that Italian town by Canadian soldiers sixty years ago, in December of 1943, are commemorated today in the newly created Battle of Ortona Museum (Museo Della Battaglia DI Ortona).

The Museum is located in the the Sant'Anna Convent, former home to the Poor Claire Order of nuns, made available by the Mayor and Council of the Municipality of Ortona. The premises, overlooking the Adriatic Sea, are attractively laid out surrounding a spacious inner courtyard, with large galleries, and with meeting rooms and a small auditorium shared with other municipal cultural activities, placing the Museum at the centre of the town's dynamic culture programme.

The prime impact of the Museum is conveyed by murals consisting of ten-foot high black and white photograph blow-ups. These show the devastated town and the plight of the surviving citizens; battle-worn Canadian troops in intense fighting in the rubble; and the visit of (then) General Montgomery and other senior generals who came to congratulate the Canadians on their victory over the stubborn German defenders. Against this background are arrayed artifacts recovered from the battleground - of both German and Canadian provenance; and weapons, equipment and uniforms, including the battledress blouse of former Prime Minister Kim Campbell's father. Some items were presented by regimental associations and veterans, and some by the Canadian War Museum, who also donated reproductions of pictures of the campaign painted by Canadian war artists. Much material

was brought by the local civilian population of Ortona, mementoes jealously hidden in private homes during the many decades that it took for the Museum to become a reality. The intention is to carry visitors back in time, plunging them into the nightmare of the destroyed town and corpse-strewn streets - an effective way of conveying the harsh realities of war. Students, in particular, feel the impact of what their town had been reduced to after just a few weeks of fierce fighting.



Artifacts and Background Murals

Funding for the Museum was provided by the Municipality of Ortona, in spite of other heavy demands on their limited finances, and this has been supplemented by the generosity of Canadian regimental associations and individuals. Volunteers also played a large part in establishing the Museum and one of their prime-movers, Angela Arnone, has now been

appointed Coordinator for Battle of Ortona Affairs. Perfectly bilingual, she has been the main contact between the Municipality of Ortona and the group of Canadian veterans under the leadership of Ted Griffiths who organized the reconciliation Christmas dinner held on the 55th anniversary of the battle, attended by both German and Canadian combatants.

The Museum's success has been rewarded recently with a grant from the Region Abruzzo

to complete infrastructures and multimedia equipment.

To mark the 60th anniversary of the battle, the Friends of the Canadian War Museum has presented an inscribed plaque to the Battle of Ortona Museum. The plaque, depicting the front facade of the Canadian War Museum, carries the inscription "PRESENTATA DAGLI AMICI DEL MUSEO CANADESE DELLA GUERRA, DICEMBRE 2003,

THE MORO RIVER CANADIAN WAR CEMETERY, ORTONA

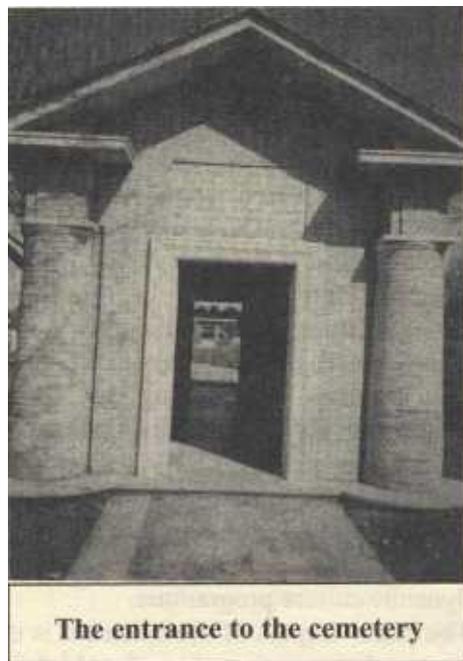
Five kilometres south of Ortona on the coast road overlooking the Adriatic Sea, 1,375 Canadians lie buried in a peaceful, well-tended cemetery. "The land on which the cemetery stands is the gift of the Italian people for the perpetual resting place of the sailors, soldiers and airmen who are honoured there." So says the inscription over the portal leading onto the cemetery.

The graves are of those who died during the fighting at the Moro River and Ortona and in the weeks that preceded and followed it. In December 1943 alone the 1st Canadian Infantry Division suffered over 500 fatal battle casualties.

While the headstone of every soldier buried there tells a tragic story, one of the most poignant of all is that of Private Gordon Ott of Brantford, Ontario. He was killed on 30 January, 1944 while serving with the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment. Age 16. This says it all.

RECONCILIATION

On Christmas Eve, 1998, warriors of the Battle of Ortona, Canadian and German, met once again, this time as friends. They sat together in the Church of Santa Maria di Constantinopoli where, in 1943, Canadians, platoon after platoon, had dinner before returning to the battle. To say the dinner in 1998 was emotional for all participants is an understatement. To sit, break bread and converse with those who you were trying to kill and who, in turn, were trying to kill you, stirred the very soul of those at the table.



Some Canadians approached this dinner with justified reserve, but soon found their fears were groundless when both parties recognised each other for what they were - soldiers fighting for their country. There was no recrimination and no animosity as old soldiers slapped each other on the back - and ten minutes later were seated together drinking beer and swapping war stories.

From this dinner there developed a true feeling of brotherhood in arms, and the respect each party held for the other during the Italian campaign was reinforced with words of praise each expressed for the professionalism of their opponent. On rising from the table, many said they felt enriched by the experience, as resentment and hatred rots the soul.