THE URBAN BATTLE OF ORTONA

by

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Abstract

This thesis closely examines 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade's day-by-day decisions and combat actions during the urban battle for Ortona in December 1943. Ortona stands among the most famous historical cases of urban warfare that have been harvested for lessons and doctrinal formulas for modern armies. Existing histories reveal how the story is often simplified into glimpses of its most dramatic moments that are seldom cross-referenced or connected chronologically. This study links the tangled nest of dramatic stories in time and space to reveal the chain of historical cause and consequence. Additionally, this study considers how geography, force composition, weapons systems, and the presence of substantial numbers of Italian civilians all factored in the outcome. The thesis follows 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade's day-to-day struggle through Ortona's streets to understand how they attempted to impose order on what has historically been labelled as chaos.

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Although it had been almost twenty-five years since I had walked Wilfrid Laurier University's history department's hallways my two former military history professors there, Professor Terry Copp and Dr. Barry Gough, immediately reacted to my request for their support in my pursuit of a Masters degree, a speed of reply that would have made most militaries around the world envious.

Three family members were very influential in initiating my interest in military history and the military at a young age. Both of my grandfathers, Sergeant Jack Gilchrist of the United States Marine Corps, and Naval Firefighter Edward Geroux Sr of the Royal Canadian Navy, participated in the Second World War (1939-1945) which began the initial interest. My uncle Martin Wakeford, also a passionate military history student, also contributed to my interest in the subject in my developing years.

There are countless other family members, friends, UNB professors and graduate students, Canadian Armed Force officers and senior non-commissioned officers who I could list here, but their names would take up numerous pages. Please know that you were all important to the creation of this work and although you may not be named, you are certainly remembered by me.

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List of Abbreviations, Acronyms and Definitions

2 CIB: 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade. At its core were three infantry battalions from three regiments: the Loyal Edmonton Regiment (the "Loyal Eddies" or "the Edmontons"), the Seaforths Highlanders of Canada (the "Seaforths") and Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (the "Patricia's" or "PPCLI").
2 PPCLI: 2nd battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry.
3 PPCLI: 3rd battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry.

AD: Air defence.
AMGOT: Allied Military Government of the Occupied Territories. A mixed branch of Allied officers and soldiers whose task it was to reinstall a temporary government and financial structure in an area just after the removal of the Germans or Italian fascists from that area. They were to also provide supplies, relief and maintenance for destitute civilians.
AT: Anti-tank.
Battalion: an infantry unit made up of approximately 500 to 1,200 soldiers at any given time. The numbers fluctuate based on the number of casualties incurred, reinforcements coming into the unit, soldiers departing for courses and tasks etc. An infantry battalion has three to four companies within it.
Battery: an artillery unit made up of two to three Troops.
Brigade: a combined arms unit made up of many combat arms, combat service units and combat service & support units, numbers fluctuating from 2,500 to 5,000 soldiers. A brigade may have several infantry battalions and several armoured, artillery and engineer regiments within it.
CBC: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.
CFB: Canadian Forces Base.
CMHQ: Canadian Military Headquarters.
CO: Commanding Officer.
Company: An infantry unit made up of approximately 100 to 120 soldiers. An infantry company is composed of a headquarters and three platoons.
Coy: Short form for the word “Company.”
CTCC: Combat Team Commanders Course.
DHH: Directorate of History and Heritage. The DHH is a sub-department within the DND.
Division: A combined arms unit made up of many combat arms, combat service units and combat service & support units, numbers fluctuating from 15,000 to 20,000 soldiers.
DND: Department of National Defence.
DSO: Distinguished Service Order.
FIBUA: Fighting In Built-Up Areas.
Gunner: The Artillery’s equivalent of a Private.
HQ: Headquarters.
IDCCC: Infantry Dismounted Company Commanders Course.
KIA: Killed in Action.
LAC: Library and Archives Canada.
LER: Loyal Edmonton Regiment.

MIA: Missing in Action.
MG: Machine Gun (English) or *Maschinengewehr* (German).
MP (German): *Maschinenpistole*.
PAK: *Panzerabwehrkanone*, a type of German anti-tank gun.
PIAT: Projector, Infantry, Anti-Tank. An anti-tank weapon used by British and Commonwealth forces during the Second World War (1939-1945).
Pioneer(s): Infantry soldiers who have been taught basic engineering skills such as basic construction, the use of tools and the use of demolitions.
Platoon: An infantry unit made up of approximately 30 to 35 soldiers. A platoon is made up of a headquarters and three sections.
PPCLI: Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry.
Private: In an infantry unit, the lowest ranking soldier.
PzG: *Panzer-Grenadier*.
QM: Quartermaster.
RCA: Royal Canadian Artillery.
Regiment: In an infantry context, a regiment is composed of three infantry battalions. In an armoured or engineer context, a regiment is composed of three to four squadrons. In an artillery context, a regiment is composed of three to four batteries. The numbers vary according to the contexts.
Sapper: The lowest enlisted rank of an engineer, the equivalent of an infantry Private.
Saskatoon Light Infantry (SLI): a machine gun battalion that supported 1st Canadian Infantry Divison.
Section: In an infantry or engineer unit, a section is composed of eight to ten soldiers.
SHC: Seaforth Highlanders of Canada.
SITREP: Situation Report. A report passed through the chain-of-command discussing any given situation in general.
Squadron: In an armoured or engineer context, a squadron consists of a headquarters and four troops.
TNT: Trinitrotoluene, a type of explosive.
Troop(s): In an armoured context, a Troop consists of four tanks, with each (Sherman) tank having a crew of five personnel. In an artillery context, a Troop consists of two to three artillery guns, each gun having its own crew of four to five artillery soldiers. In an engineer context, a Troop consists of three sections.
Trooper: The Armoured equivalent of a Private.
Troops: Slang for "soldiers."
TRR: Three Rivers Regiment.
WD: War Diary.
WIA: Wounded in Action.

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Introduction

Canadian Forces Base Wainwright, Alberta, November 2017

"A military unprepared for urban operations across a broad spectrum
is unprepared for tomorrow."

– Major Ralph Peters, "Our Soldiers, Their Cities."[1]

The commanding officer (CO) of 3rd Battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (3 PPCLI) directed his Bravo and Charlie companies, numbering about 100 soldiers each, to move out at 0430 hours to rendezvous with a sub-unit from the battalion's reconnaissance ("recce") platoon unit before he would join them at "Rocky Ford" urban operations training village by 0730 hours. Once close to the village the two companies would join a mechanized company from 2 PPCLI, including Light Armoured Vehicle armoured personnel carriers and a squadron of nineteen "Leopard" main battle tanks from Lord Strathcona's Horse (Royal Canadians). Together they were to conduct a training attack on the village itself. Despite the bitter cold, deep snow, heavy rucksacks, layers of clothing, headlamps, helmets, and baring the weight of weapons, ammunition and water, the two companies worked their way through the open countryside of the Canadian Forces Base (CFB) Wainwright training area and along the Battle River towards Rocky Ford quite well. Both companies were led by captains who were students on the Infantry Dismounted Company Commanders Course (IDCCC) being assessed in their respective roles. Another student company commander led the mechanized company as part of the Combat Team Commanders Course (CTCC).

[1] Major Ralph Peters, "Our Soldiers, Their Cities," *Parameters: U.S. Army War College Quarterly, Spring 1996* (Carlisle: United States Army War College, 1996), p. 43.

About a kilometre north of the village, the recce patrolmen linked up with the two acting company commanders and their junior leaders and took them to a piece of high ground where they could see the village – a "leaders recce." Two instructors tagged along, assessing each student. Once on the high ground, one of the recce patrolmen pointed off in the distance to the rooftops of Rocky Ford village, barely visible above the forest in front of it. The student company commanders asked good questions to acquire more information about the urban operation they were about to conduct, but were always met with "I don't really know" or "You'll have to ask the CO." At the end of the meeting the recce soldier stated "You'll need to move over to the southeast part of the village and link up with the CO there," pointing off somewhere in the distance, and offering the most information that he could provide that morning. When asked by one of the student company commanders if the recce patrolmen would guide the assault companies forward to the link up point, the bewildered soldier replied "no." It was the least effective backbrief that I, as a long time IDCCC instructor and professional soldier, had ever witnessed from a reconnaissance unit. My fellow instructor, Major Jeff Gill, looked at me quizzically as our small command group returned to link up with their companies and commented, "There wasn't much info there." I replied sternly "Why did we need the leaders recce? What good is it to look at the tops of buildings a kilometre away, and then be told to walk around to the other side of the village on our own? There was nothing that recce soldier said that will help set up these student commanders for success."

An hour later, the two companies linked up with the CO about one-hundred metres south of Rocky Ford. The sound of gunfire and explosions announced C Company's entry into the village. Other Canadian soldiers playing the enemy force had

been waiting for their attacking force to enter it. Once C Company was safely entrenched in the first set of buildings, B Company's troops were directed into a building on the south side of the village and from that point on, all I witnessed was mass chaos.

Troops bunched up both inside and outside buildings. If the building had been cleared of the enemy previously, the company squeezed every soldier into that building, filling it solid, 10 to 20 troops to a room. In some hallways the troops stood shoulder-to-shoulder, perhaps thinking themselves safe indoors. If the enemy had prepared explosive devices to blow on command or if they opened fire with rocket propelled grenades or other heavy weapons, the results would be catastrophic.

The next group of soldiers assembled outside the newly cleared building but due to no room inside, they gathered in the street behind. Some 40 to 50 troops stood shoulder-to-shoulder, six uneven ranks deep and sandwiched between two buildings, waiting to be told what to do. At one point, I counted over 20 radio antennas in one group of troops outside a building. One rocket propelled grenade round or burst of machine gun fire would have dropped dozens of bodies.

The CO of 3 PPCLI stood in the centre of that large street mob, chatting up the soldiers and occasionally giving directions over the radio. What was he doing there? He wanted to be in on the action, instead of controlling the battle from a command post (CP) further away. Yes, certainly, a commander must be seen by the troops, but the fluidity of an urban battle where the enemy can suddenly appear anywhere makes that risky for commanders. Leaders must be close up enough to direct the battle, but back far enough to avoid getting shot. However, the CO of 3 PPCLI appeared too busy trying to look warrior-like, swaggering in front of his troops.

His Regimental Sergeant-Major performed no better, repeatedly moving the battalion casualty collection point as the battle progressed through the village. All he had to do was pick a suitable building and stay there. There was no need for him to be moving his casualty collection point. Apparently, he too wanted to be in on and see the action. As a result, his company sergeant-majors continually ran frustratedly around the entire town looking for the Regimental Sergeant-Major's battalion casualty collection point, not knowing where to bring their mock "casualties."

Human beings are inherently lazy, and there was no exception with regards to professional troops. As a course instructor I walked freely around the village and I could tell every building that was occupied by friendly troops because of the rifle and machine gun barrels resting on window sills, clearly visible to the training "enemy" in neighbouring buildings. The assault troops also often stood dead-centre in window frames, making themselves easily visible from the outside. My friend and fellow instructor Major Larry Sandford decided to grip the mess and began teaching lessons the hard way. He approached a soldier making himself an obvious target and branded him "wounded" in action, creating a casualty for his company to evacuate. That first "wounded" soldier operated a large "C6" General Purpose Machine Gun, perched with the barrel sticking out of the window, while the young lad had also forgotten to turn his headlamp off, marking a bright shiny white light right on his forehead. He was the perfect target because he could be clearly seen. After being "wounded" the soldier laid down on the floor of the building. One of his mates recognized the importance of the machine gun as a key weapon system in the platoon, dutifully took it over and promptly returned it to the same windowsill and kneeled dead-centre of the window frame, this time at least without a lit headlamp. Larry made him a casualty too, and then the third

soldier who took the same weapon in the same post. Larry kept "dropping" guys until, finally, I pointed out what was happening to my student company commander. He immediately ran to tell his company sergeant-major, who promptly told all the troops to move back from the windows and adopt proper fire positions back far enough so that they could see enemy personnel in other buildings but were not making themselves targets.

Throughout the battle the infantry armoured personnel carriers and Leopard tanks advanced into the village without infantry support, parking in the middle of streets, or beside buildings they understood had been cleared of the enemy. However, other buildings across the street had not been cleared, offering the enemy clear shots at the armoured vehicles. Other armoured vehicles parked two-to-three right beside each other, so close you could just step across from one hull to another. "Russians in Grozny, anyone?" I asked myself. Canadians never did anything so foolish in Ortona in 1943.[2] The vehicles must move like the troops, behind cover. Sure, there was some infantry protection – all the troops in the buildings providing overwatch – the same troops (read: targets) standing in the middle of the window frames, sticking their barrels out the windows. The Americans in Aachen, October 1944, ensured their tanks used sidestreets after their infantry cleared the surrounding structures and they parked the vehicles at the corners of buildings, rolling out just enough to use their cannons, then pulling back, all the while ensuring good communication with the dismounted troops regarding enemy

[2] The Russians had done this during the 1st battle of Grozny in December 1995 and paid for it dearly when Chechen rebels fired large amounts of rocket propelled grenades at the large grouping of vehicles out in the open. Lieutenant-Colonel (Retired) Louis A. DiMarco, *Concrete Hell: Urban Warfare from Stalingrad to Iraq* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2012), p. 166; Department of National Defence (Canada), *B-GL-322-007/FP-001 Unique Operations - Urban* (Kingston: Army Publishing Office, 2006), p. 19.

locations to minimize how much time the vehicle was exposed.[3] The Canadians in Ortona likewise always ensured their supporting tanks had infantry and engineer protection as they fought through the town's deadly streets.

I saw no snipers being employed during this exercise. Not because they were so clever as to be hidden, but because nobody had thought about employing them in the first place. History has made famous how snipers are critical in an urban operations battle. Nobody had a plan to deal with enemy snipers either, a sure-fire way to kill the momentum of clearing an urban area. Once friendly troops start dropping dead from an unseen shooter amongst them, it takes a lot of courage and persuasion for soldiers to continue moving forward.

After the training exercise had completed, I had a mixed reaction as to how these Canadian soldiers had performed, and was not entirely surprised by the day's events. I had long been concerned that Canadian troops today have poor urban operations skills, but I did not realize until that day that we were absolutely *atrocious*. For years I had been studying and teaching urban operations at the Tactics School at CFB Gagetown and understood that most Canadian soldiers had not been taught and did not understand the complexities of this unique type of operation. However, the level of amateurishness I had just witnessed was appalling. Every soldier, from the lowest rank of Private up to the high rank of Lieutenant-Colonel, had demonstrated a horrendous ignorance of the basics of urban warfare. Although Canadians had become international subject matter experts in urban fighting during the 1943 battle of Ortona during the Second World War (1939-1945), that knowledge and interest has long since evaporated.

[3] DiMarco, *Concrete Hell*, p. 60.

This thesis closely examines 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade's day-by-day decisions and combat actions that characterized the Ortona urban battle in December 1943. Existing historical literature reveals how this complex story has been simplified into a set of often repeated glimpses of dramatic parts of the battle that are seldom cross-referenced or connected chronologically. This study untangles the nest of dramatic stories of individual heroism and tragedy and links them in time and space to better understand the chain of cause and consequence and to the routine patterns of modern combined-arms warfare in late 1943. That last element resulted in shedding some light on the intricacies, the questions of how, when and why this battle unfolded as it did in a military context. Additionally, this study investigates key factors that influenced choices made mainly by the Canadian Army and their German opponents, albeit to a lesser extent for the latter given the balance of resources available. These include geography, the force composition and weapons systems employed by both sides, and the presence of substantial numbers of Italian civilians in nearly every corner of the urban battlefield. These factors were important to the participants before, during and after the battle, and hence are just as important to recall when reflecting on the historical significance of this action over 75 years later. Thus, this thesis closely follows 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade's day-to-day struggle through Ortona's streets, to better understand how they made choices to impose some order on what appeared to be chaos and ultimately to highlight how this Canadian force systematically solved the problem of waging the Canadian Army's most famous close-quarter urban battle. The study carefully re-examines available primary evidence in the form of war diaries and after-action reports recorded in 1943 by participating Canadian units, including the coordinating 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade headquarters and supporting arms. These were then cross-

checked against eyewitness testimonies collected by historians in the years afterwards. This painstaking effort revealed several anomalies and conflicts between accounts, some of which have been resolved in the chapters below and others flagged. The resolution of solving these anomalies helps to clarify the course of decision, action and consequence on the battlefield establishing some degree of clarity where chaos reigned.

The actions of both forces involved at Ortona sometimes demonstrated key characteristics of modern urban operations doctrine, making this re-examination of events there valuable for today's professional military forces. Conventional warfare tactics against a near-peer enemy in open countryside has remained largely constant since the end of the Second World War (1939-1945). Urban operations, however, adds a complexity due to the number and density of buildings which create a three-dimensional environment that necessitate employing different planning and tactics to ensure success. Ortona therefore stands among other famous historical cases that have been harvested for lessons and answers that shaped urban warfare doctrinal formulas for modern armies. In December 1943, 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade learned firsthand at Ortona that urban warfare takes more than infantry to win. In the end they won the day with a combined arms approach that made use of every type of combat arm and all the supporting



Photo: Tanks from the Three Rivers Regiment and dismounted Canadian infantry, Ortona.[4]

[4] *Canada At War*, www.canadaatwar.ca (website).

services. Success in urban operations is a team effort and winning teams must understand its complexities, challenges and appropriate tactics. Today approximately 75% of the world's population currently live in urban environments – a figured projected to increase to approximately 84% in a generation.[5] This modern reality and the increased uses of urban spaces by insurgent forces make it highly likely that future military forces will be ordered to wage war in urban areas, thus highlighting the value of seeking wisdom from the past. During the battle of Ortona the Canadians demonstrated a capacity to learn swiftly to synchronize their people and available equipment and to apply and innovate sensible tactics that ultimately defeated a powerful opponent defending a strategically important urban space. The Canadian 1943 learning and innovation culture is worth looking back to in today's Canadian Army and indeed for any student of history interested in understanding how human organizations collectively met and overcame the challenges of their time.

[5] *Operations in the Urban Environment*, AFM Volume 2, Part 5 (Britain: British Army doctrinal publication, 2016), p. 1.

Chapter 1 – Battle of Ortona: A Historiography

Much ink has been spilled in the English language about the Battle of Ortona in December 1943. From the 1940s to the 1960s, some extremely capable historians, many of them veterans, Canadian Armed Forces official historians or eyewitnesses to the dramatic action established a strong foundation of knowledge, evidence and key questions about the battle that became the core upon which later generations built on. That initial body of work was followed from the 1970s until the end of the century by a second and widely varied wave of research and writing, and lastly by the most recent wave of largely popular work, feeding off interest in Canada's Second World War touched off by the major 50th and 60th anniversary commemorative activities. The work that followed in the late 20th/early 21st centuries rejuvenated interest in Ortona. Most if not all historians include the early and mid-December battles for the *Moro* River and "The Gully," together with the late December fighting within the town itself as part of a month long uniquely Canadian campaign along the Adriatic coast of Italy. This thesis and thus this historiography strictly focus on sources that discussed combat operations within Ortona 20-27 December 1943.

Building the Foundation (1943-1969): War Diaries, Official and Regimental Histories

Historians were fortunate that by 1943 the Canadian Army had established a thorough historical and lessons learned data capture process, building from The Great War (1914-1918) experience. Formations and units were ordered to keep war diaries capturing key details, figures, locations, times, dates, and people. The war diaries of 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade and the regiments involved in the Ortona battle were particularly well kept and provide the main evidence basis for all historical writing about

it. The level of detail within each unit diary varies, but taken together they constitute an invaluable source about the day-to-day flow of the battle.[1]

The war diary program generated much of the primary evidence needed by the Canadian Army Historical Section to prepare Official Histories in the first decade after the war. These thorough, collaborative histories set the standard in the field and defined the key questions others would consider in the decades afterwards. The first iteration came from the 1st Canadian Infantry Division Historical Officer who was present at Ortona. Captain J.A. Porter used unit and formation war diaries, intelligence summaries, media reports and interviews gathered during or just after the war to prepare *Canadian Military Headquarters Report #165 Operations of 1 Cdn Inf Div and 1 Cdn Armd Bde in Italy, 25 Nov 43 - 4 Jan 44.*[7] Porter effectively wrote the first substantial historical account of the event as part of the Canadian Army's official history program that was to become the basis for the Historical Section's published accounts, the first of which was *The Canadian Army 1939-1945: An Official Historical Summary* by Colonel C.P. Stacey published in 1948. This preliminary volume of the official series included the entire campaign and thus could not spend much space on every single event. Stacey's discussion of the fighting in-and-around Ortona takes up only two-and-a-half pages total.[8] Stacey's preliminary volume was followed over the next decade by the far

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[6] Headquarters 2 Canadian Infantry Brigade, Active Service Force War Diaries, December 1943, Library and Archives Canada (hereafter abbreviated as HQ 2 CIB WD); Loyal Edmonton Regiment, Active Service Force War Diaries 1943/09-1944/06, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15114, 28 December 1943, Library and Archives Canada (LAC) (hereafter abbreviated as LER WD); Seaforth Highlanders of Canada, Active Service Force War Diaries 1943/01-31 December, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15256, Library and Archives Canada (LAC) (hereafter abbreviated as SHC WD). Three Rivers Regiment, Active Service Force War Diaries, 1943/01-31 December, Library and Archives Canada (LAC) (hereafter abbreviated as TRR WD).

[7] Captain J.A. Porter, *Department of National Defence, Directorate of History and Heritage, Canadian Military Headquarters reports 1940-1948, issue #165 "Operations of 1 Cdn Inf Div and 1 Cdn Armd Bde in Italy, 25 Nov 43 - 4 Jan 44.*" http://www.cmp-cpm.forces.gc.ca/dhh-dhp/his/rep-rap/doc/cmhq/CMHQ-165.pdf., 27 November 1946., pp. 84-93. This will be referred to as "*DND DHH CMHQ reports 1940-1948*" throughout the thesis.

[8] Colonel C.P. Stacey, *The Canadian Army 1939-1945: An Official Historical Summary* (Ottawa: The King's Printer, 1948), pp. 121-124.

reaching multi-volume *Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War*. The entire *Volume 2: The Canadians in Italy*, authored by Lieutenant-Colonel G.W.L. Nicholson covers the Canadian experience from Sicily in 1943 through to the last actions in the Po Valley in 1945. This volume builds on the CMHQ reports, including #165 produced by Porter and other historical officers attached to units in the field. Nicholson therefore wrote at the head of a large team that made extensive use of both German and Canadian unit war diaries, Allied documents, individual accounts from personnel involved in the battle, historical reports, intelligence summaries, newspaper reports and lessons learned documents. More importantly, Nicholson's work refined and compressed the CMHQ report drafts. Nicholson's finished product added significantly to Porter's preliminary research on events in-and-around Ortona in December 1943.[9] As a result Porter and Nicholson's ground breaking research became central references for the majority of follow-on historians' contributions to the history of Ortona. Another component to the Official History project was Fred Whitcombe and Blair Gilmour's *The Pictorial History of Canada's Army Overseas 1939-1945*, including photos shot by official photographers travelling with units during the war. The volume included fourteen pages of dramatic photos on Ortona itself, some of which became famous and often reused in latter histories, while others that have rarely been published since.[10]

Three more resources that helped solidify the foundational history of Ortona were the regimental histories of the two infantry units and the corps history for the Royal Canadian Engineers that participated in the fight, all commissioned by unit and branch

[9] Lieutenant-Colonel G.W.L. Nicholson, *Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War - Volume 2: The Canadians in Italy* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer and Controller of Stationary, 1956), pp. 324-333.

[10] Fred Whitcombe and Blair Gilmour, *The Pictorial History of Canada's Army Overseas 1939-1945* (Montreal: Whitcombe, Gilmour and Co., 1947), pp. 102-115. I ensured to include the rarely seen photos in this thesis.

veterans associations. *A City at War: The Loyal Edmonton Regiment (3 PPCLI)* written by Lieutenant-Colonel (Retired) G.R. Stevens also followed a similar line of inquiry established by Porter and Nicholson, but focused especially on the "Loyal Eddies," their weapons tactics and their soldiers' individual accomplishments in the day-to-day fight. Regimental histories have mandates to record the unique experience of their surviving members and to promote knowledge and pride within those who serve in those units after the war. Stevens blends individual company accomplishments along with those individual, daring actions that allowed for the Loyal Eddies to defeat the Germans.[11] Reginald Roy's *The Seaforth Highlanders of Canada, 1919-1965* achieves the same intent, blending individual companies/platoons and their actions/perseverance with stories of individual soldiers and their accomplishments, extensively using records from "the Seaforths'" archives and personal interviews with personnel who participated in the battle. Roy candidly admits that the remainder of the chapter is a descriptive montage in which actions are taken out of sequence due to the urban fighting being confusing, complex and relatively new for the Seaforths.[12] The most important contribution for both is the inclusion of more veterans voices and perspectives based on interview testimony and letters about those two infantry battalions. *The History of the Corps of Royal Canadian Engineers, Volume 2* discusses this branch just before, during and just after the Second World War, with the majority of the details obviously focused on the

[11] G.R. Stevens, *A City at War: The Loyal Edmonton Regiment (3 PPCLI)* (Edmonton: Edmonton Regiment Associates/Charters Publishing Company, 1964), pp. 270-282.

[12] Reginald H. Roy, *The Seaforth Highlanders of Canada, 1919-1965* (Vancouver: Evergreen Press, 1969), pp. 257-278.

war itself. The engineers' efforts in Ortona-proper are only discussed in two paragraphs.[13]

Overall, the official and commissioned unit studies published shortly after the war built a foundation of understanding about the urban battle in Ortona. The war diaries, official histories, and the regimental histories introduced specific issues and questions that shaped how later historians would add to the discussion. In the latter part of the 20th century the story of Ortona grew as other contributions from a number of different sources deepened historical knowledge of the event. Each new contributor added a unique perspective and/or analysis and broadened the range of inquiry into the subject.

Building the Structure (1946-1999): Eyewitness Accounts, Individual Research Projects, General Histories

The body of historical writing about Ortona was especially enriched by soldiers, journalists and a well-known Canadian war artist who were immersed in or close to the action and added their eyewitness observations to the records.[14] Canadian Press correspondent Robert Ross Munro was one of the first to publish a book on his experiences covering the war in *Gauntlet to Overlord: The Story of the Canadian Army*. His three pages on Ortona capture highlights of the battle much like a newspaper article.[15] Canadian war artist Major Charles Comfort's experiences in recording the war through painting and sketches is detailed in his own book *Artist at War*. Comfort was not only a visual artist but a talented creative writer as well. After overhearing the battle from south of the town and discussing it with survivors, he wrote almost poetic

[13] Colonel A.J. Kerry and Major W.A. McDill, *The History of The Corps of Royal Canadian Engineers* (Ottawa/Toronto: Thorn Press, 1966), pp. 169-170.

[14] In keeping with the format of this historiography, the resources are discussed in chronological order.

[15] Ross Munro, *Gauntlet to Overlord: The Story of the Canadian Army* (Toronto: The MacMillian Company of Canada Limited, 1946), pp. 466-469.

descriptions of the violence which are vivid and moving. Comfort's main occupation as an official war artist resulted in several Ortona-specific paintings contained in the official history and his own book. These images constitute a visually striking representative record of the Canadian urban combat experience and the destruction within the town.[16]

The Loyal Eddies and Seaforths conducted the main infantry fight in Ortona, however the 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade to which they belonged contained a third infantry battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry. "The Patricias" were heavily engaged during the fighting at the *Moro* river and The Gully earlier in the month and thus deployed as the brigade's firm base and flanking link to the neighbouring 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade operating to the west during most of Ortona's urban battle. They were not dispatched to take over the urban fight until 28 December 1943 after the Germans had withdrawn.[17] Personal accounts of what the Patricias were doing during that time are not very well known. However, T.J. Allen recounts his experiences at Ortona in a *Maclean's* magazine article entitled "The Guns of Christmas" when he joined the Patricias as a platoon commander the day before Christmas 1943, and to have a Patricia at Ortona during the fight provides a unique perspective.[18] In addition to the soldiers' voices captured in unit histories, the Reader's Digest published a substantial two-volume compilation based on Second World War articles and post-war journalism. The series includes a chapter entitled "Ortona: little Stalingrad" in *The Canadians at War 1939/45, Volume 2,* using the existing narrative but relied on multiple, lengthy

[16] Charles Comfort, *Artist at War* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1956)). The striking paintings that are Ortona-specific and a couple of Comfort's brilliant creative writing pieces are included throughout this thesis.

[17] Porter, *DND DHH CMHQ reports 1940-1948,* p. 90, para. 259.

[18] T.J. Allen, "The Guns of Christmas," *MacLean's* magazine, 14 December 1964, pp. 24-25 and 49-51. http://archive.macleans.ca/article/1964/12/14/the-guns-of-christmas

eyewitness statements from soldiers and journalists who participated in several key events of the battle, making it a valued work on the fighting within the town.[19]

After the first wave of official, regimental and eyewitness accounts in the 1950s and 1960s not much new was produced about the battle for several decades. Then, in the 1990s, a number of historians, participants, authors and educators came forward in a new wave of interest, some of which was tied to the 1993 50th anniversary. In the early 1990s the British Defence Film Library produced a three-part series on urban operations as part of their professional development program. *Fighting in Built Up Areas 1939-1945, Part 2, Ortona* is a 30-minute video discussing and re-enacting Second World War basic infantry tactics in the urban environment. The documentary features the urban battle of Ortona through interviews with several veteran Canadian officers.[20] The film includes colour shots of Ortona in the early 1990s to illustrate its urban geography, and also uses graphics and maps to trace the complex movement of Canadian units through Ortona. The documentary is particularly valuable for the interviews with the Canadian participants.[21]

Around the same time, Colonel Syd Thomson contributed a short four-page article (two of which are photos) entitled "Christmas in Ortona Italy 1943" in *Canadian Military History* discussing various aspects of the battle from his personal point of view as the commanding officer of the Seaforths. His eyewitness testimony reinforced the

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[19] Reader's Digest, *The Canadians at War 1939/45, Volume 2* (Markham: The Reader's Digest Association (Canada) Ltd. 1969), pp. 360-373.

[20] Major James Stone, Lieutenant James Dougan, and Lieutenant Alon M. Johnson from the Loyal Eddies; Lieutenant-Colonel Syd Thomson and Lieutenant S. Lynch from the Seaforths.

[21] British Defence Film Library. *Fighting in Built Up Areas 1939-1945, Part 2, Ortona* (Britain: Ministry of Defence, 1991). Hereafter referred to in the footnotes as "BDFL." If one is inclined, there are also video news reels and documentary films that feature interviews with Canadian and German veterans and civilians involved at Ortona and excellent combat footage from the battle located on the "Youtube" website. The thesis author recommends the Canadian Army Newsreel "Battle of Ortona," the British Pathé Gazette's "Battle of Ortona" and Edoardo di Pierro's "The Battle of Ortona."

existing narrative discussed in very short paragraphs throughout.[22] Thomson was not the only veteran officer to write about his experience at Ortona in the 1990s. It is difficult and therefore rare to see military history written from the enemy's point of view. However, German combat engineer Carl Bayerlein's account of his participation in the battle was acquired by the Canadian War Museum, translated and published, thus adding a critical German voice to the historical discussion. "Parachute Engineers in Combat, Ortona 1943: A German Perspective" in *Canadian Military History* consists of a day-by-day diary account and a longer reflective summary compiled in the 1990s. Bayerlein discussed the initial German defence preparation engineering tasks and the follow-on observations about the Canadian reaction to overcome prepared obstacles, explosive traps, and demolitions. Bayerlein also wrote of the trials his comrades faced throughout the fight.[23] Although few in number, these participant accounts are invaluable to understanding this complex historical event from multiple perspectives.

Shaun Brown's article "The Rock of Accomplishment: The Loyal Edmonton Regiment at Ortona" in *Canadian Military History* was based on his MA thesis about this regiment in the last three years of the war. Brown revealed how Nicholson, Stevens and Roy's works are essential for study. While some of the essay reinforces the existing narrative, he also introduced new interviews with soldiers from the Loyal Eddies conducted for the 40th anniversary in 1983, making this a valuable contribution.[24]

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[22] Colonel S.W. Thomson, "Christmas in Ortona Italy 1943," *Canadian Military History*, Volume 2, Number 2 (Waterloo: Laurier Centre for Military, Strategic and Disarmament Studies, 1993), pp 24-27.

[23] Carl Bayerlein, "Parachute Engineers in Combat, Ortona 1943: A German Perspective," trans. by Alex MacQuarrie, edited by Dean F. Oliver. *Canadian Military History*, Volume 8, Number 4 (Waterloo: Laurier Centre for Military Strategic and Disarmament Studies, 1999), pp. 47-50. Bayerlein is interviewed extensively in Edoardo di Pierro's "The Battle of Ortona" documentary which can be found on the "Youtube" website.

[24] Shaun R.G. Brown, "The Rock of Accomplishment: The Loyal Edmonton Regiment at Ortona." *Canadian Military History*, Volume 2, Number 2 (Waterloo: Laurier Centre for Military Strategic and Disarmament Studies, 1993), pp. 10-23.

The question of Ortona's civilians was first addressed by the Canadian official history team and is discussed in following works. However, one of the earliest projects to focus on the plight of Ortona's civilians and translated into English came from Saverio Di Tullio, an architect, artist and high school teacher in Ortona in the 1980s. He employed the existing Canadian histories alongside Italian secondary sources and extensive interviews with Ortona's civilian survivors. These came together in a graphic novel that details the horrifying events that Ortona's civilians were subjected to because of the battle. His *1943: The Road to Ortona* is by no means a children's comic book, as Di Tullio's artistry and narrative convey how the violence touched the lives of thousands of Italian citizens - most of whom and their families are named in the work - who remained in-and-around Ortona as the battle passed through.[25]

The 1990s also saw a broader wave of historical writing about Canada's Second World War experience in Europe, as well as on the Italian campaign. One of the most important and influential of those is Daniel Dancock's *The D-Day Dodgers: The Canadians in Italy, 1943-1945,* the first one-volume Canadian participation history of the Italian campaign since Nicholson. He relies on the established narrative established by the participants and official histories described above but added a large number of other sources including books written by participants and articles from *The Maple Leaf,* the official Canadian Army's newspaper. It is especially valuable due to the number of personal interviews Dancocks conducted with Ortona veterans.[26]

[25] Saverio Di Tullio, *1943: The Road to Ortona* (Ottawa: Legas Publishing, 1998), pp. 28-42.

[26] Daniel Dancocks, *The D-Day Dodgers: The Canadians in Italy, 1943-1945* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Inc, 1991), pp. 154-186. Dancocks' statement "A day-by-day discussion on the battle is impossible to write…" was the "challenge accepted" by Dr. Windsor and myself when we were discussing on where to focus my efforts with this thesis.

One of the recurring questions surrounding the battle of Ortona concerns the leadership of Canadian officers. A chapter in Granatstein's *The Generals: The Canadian Army's Senior Commanders in the Second World War* used an extensive interview between Dr. W.J. McAndrew and Brereton Greenhous with General Bertram Hoffmeister, General Chris Vokes' papers and a separate Greenhous article. The work included a chapter assessing 1st Canadian Infantry Division's commander Major-General Vokes and 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade's commander Brigadier Hoffmeister, particularly during the Ortona fighting.[27] David J. Bercuson's *Maple Leaf Against The Axis: Canada's Second World War* represents a string of popular general histories of Canada's whole Second World War experience, produced in response to popular interest, again kindled by 50th anniversary commemorations. It mixed the timeline between Ortona and earlier events, and recycled the same sources and ideas sited above. The one noteworthy addition is the debatable point that the battle should not have been fought at all, and when it was fought it was done so for the wrong reason.[28] Terry Copp with Richard Nielsen's book *No Price Too High: Canadians and the Second World War* had two quick pages of narrative on Ortona borrowed principally from Nicholson and, countering Greenhous and Bercuson, regarded why Ortona had to be taken.[29] Bill McAndrew and Art Global's *Canadians and the Italian Campaign* used the existing

[27] J.L. Granatstein, *The Generals: The Canadian Army's Senior Commanders in the Second World War* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing, 1993), p. 196.

[28] David J. Bercuson, *Maple Leaf Against The Axis: Canada's Second World War* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing, 1995), pp. 172-177. Bercuson's argument was not an original idea, as Brereton Greenhous had originally brought up the subject in an earlier article which will be discussed later in this historiography.

[29] Terry Copp with Richard Nielsen, *No Price Too High: Canadians and the Second World War* (Whitby: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Limited, 1996), pp. 132-137.

narrative, but added a number of eyewitness accounts not seen in other works that made the book valuable.[30]

Strengthening the Structure (1988-2008)

The Canadian War Museum's "Canadian Battle Series" had writer Fred Gaffen produce *Ortona: Christmas 1943*. The book's value is the number of personal eyewitness testimonies from Major James Stone and Brigadier Bertram Hoffmeister and photos provided within. Gaffen is one of the very few writers who also discussed the events and operations that occurred in the town after the battle from January to March 1944.[31] In 1989 Brereton Greenhous added one of the most influential new perspectives on the subject and a sharp critique on the decision to fight in Ortona with his article "'Would It Not Have Been Better to Bypass Ortona Completely...?' A Canadian Christmas," in *Canadian Defence Quarterly*, Volume 18, Issue 5. As expected from the article's title, Greenhous discussed the tremendous sacrifices of Canadian troops in-and-around Ortona and argued that given the circumstances the town should have been bypassed completely. He explicitly laid the fault for not bypassing Ortona, and for the unimaginative, costly and continuous "battering ram" operations that 1st Canadian Infantry Division performed against the German defenders throughout December 1943 at the feet of the division's commander, Major-General Chris Vokes.[32] Greenhous' critique did not consider the wider Allied decisions that committed 1st Canadian Infantry Division to operations in-and-around Ortona.

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[30] Bill McAndrew and Art Global, *Canadians and the Italian Campaign* (Montreal: Editions Art Global Inc., 1996), pp. 59-84.

[31] Fred Gaffen, *Canadian Battle Series: Ortona Christmas 1943* (Ottawa: Balmuir Book Publishing Ltd, 1988), pp. 7-64.

[32] Brerton Greenhous, "'Would It Not Have Been Better to Bypass Ortona Completely...?' A Canadian Christmas, 1943," *Canadian Defence Quarterly*, Volume 18, Issue 5, April 1989, pp. 51-55.

This broad foundation of historical writing made it near inevitable that a historian would gather and synthesize these resources from across the decades and produce one of the most detailed accounts of the battle. Mark Zuehlke's *Ortona: Canada's Epic World War II Battle* employs almost all of the resources discussed above and more, including dozens of new interviews with veterans and correspondence. What makes Zuehlke's work stand out is that his is the only full monograph devoted solely to Canada's December 1943 story of the actions at the *Moro* river, The Gully and in Ortona itself. It is therefore the richest detailed work on the subject, despite the minor challenges with some of the details and the analysis.[33]

One of the most recent scholarly treatments of the subject is Ian Gooderson's article "Assimilating Urban Battle Experience - The Canadians at Ortona" in *Canadian Military Journal*, *Winter 2007-2008*. Gooderson reviews familiar ground introduced by past historians and official sources. Gooderson's work is noteworthy because of the way he repackages the story for an audience of modern soldiers, centred on twenty-three lessons learned by the Canadians at Ortona that remain relevant to the profession of arms today.[34]

New Additions Since 1999

Several works that have been published since Zuehlke have added new elements to historical knowledge of the battle. While previous works focused on the infantry and armoured troops in Ortona, other supporting elements including combat engineers and artillery which were central to the outcome. Mike Calnan and Doug Knight as editors

[33] Mark Zuehlke, *Ortona: Canada's Epic World War II Battle* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1999), pp. 249-348.

[34] Ian Gooderson, "Assimilating Urban Battle Experience - The Canadians at Ortona," *Canadian Military Journal*, Winter 2007-2008 (Kingston: Canadian Defence Academy, 2008), pp. 64-73.

of the regimental history of *The History of 1st Anti-Tank Regiment, Royal Canadian Artillery, From 5 September 1939 to 31 July 1945, World War II* introduced "K" and "L" troops of the 90th anti-tank battery in Ortona. These two troops were engaged in close support of the infantry using 6-pounder and 17-pounder guns to take on occupied houses and enemy strongpoints.[35]

J.L. Granatstein and Norman Hillmer's article "There Are No Trenches: At Ortona, December 1943, Gregory Clark" in *Battle Lines: Eyewitness Accounts from Canada's Military History,* had both selecting a 10 January 1944 newspaper article of this *Toronto Star* journalist. He interviewed Capt John Heller, the medical officer for The Royal Canadian Regiment in the Sicily and Italian campaign, as well as other veterans during the battle. His main theme concerned human endurance and how soldiers were treated for the effects of battle. It does not feel "Ortona-specific" even though the personnel interviewed are discussing the human endurance needed to fight in Ortona. Given the topic it is a unique addition to the history of the battle.[36]

Brigadier Bertram Hoffmeister's leadership as the commander of 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade are discussed by Douglas Delaney in two books. *The Soldiers' General: Bert Hoffmeister at War* uses a many interviews with “Hoffy” and a number of other personnel involved in the fighting, war diaries, intelligence summaries, official documents and Zuehlke to discuss Hoffmeister's activities during the battle, the challenges he and the units faced, his frequent visits to the frontlines, visit to a field hospital and discussions that Hoffmeister had with various personnel on various issues

[35] Mike Calnan and Doug Knight, eds. *The History of 1st Anti-Tank Regiment, Royal Canadian Artillery, From 5 September 1939 to 31 July 1945, World War II* (revised edition, 2004), pp. 18-19.

[36] J.L. Granatstein, and Norman Hillmer, *Battle Lines: Eyewitness Accounts from Canada's Military History*. (Toronto: Thomas Allen Publishers, 2004), pp. 312-315.

during the fight.[37] A slightly amended version of this narrative which focused on Hoffmeister's leadership during Ortona and using many of the same resources was Delaney's essay "When Leadership Really Mattered: Bert Hoffmeister and Morale During the Battle of Ortona, December 1943," in Colonel Bernd Horn's *Intrepid Warriors: Perspectives on Canadian Military Leaders*.[38]

The modern Canadian Armed Forces doctrinal manual *Unique Operations - Urban* is dedicated to understanding all aspects of the urban battlespace, including principles, fundamentals and planning for offensive, defensive, stability and sustainment operations in urban areas. It included a number of urban historical case studies from Ortona, Grozny, Fallujah, Hué, Beirut, Suez and Belfast to reinforce urban operations doctrine and lessons learned. Like Gooderson's work, the chapter on Ortona used the established narrative but repackaged the ideas for a modern professional military audience, including reviewing the urban lessons learned.[39]

One of the most important works on new questions is Zachary David Cavasin's *Hai visto i Canadesi?: A study of the Social Interactions between Canadian Soldiers and Italian Civilians before, during, and after the Battle of Ortona*. Thoroughly detailed, Cavasin discussed the battle from both sides, but focused particularly on the post-battle events and relationships the Canadians developed with the townspeople in the weeks afterwards. Cavasin travelled to Ortona to interview elderly Italian citizens who

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[37] Douglas E. Delaney, *The Soldiers' General: Bert Hoffmeister at War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2005), pp. 100-105.

[38] Colonel Bernd Horn, editor, *Intrepid Warriors: Perspectives on Canadian Military Leaders* (Toronto: Canadian Defence Academy Press and The Dundurn Group, 2007), Douglas E. Delaney, "When Leadership Really Mattered: Bert Hoffmeister and Morale During the Battle of Ortona, December 1943," pp. 139-154.

[39] Department of National Defence (Canada), *B-GL-322-007/FP-001 Unique Operations - Urban* (Kingston: Army Publishing Office, 2006), pp. 5-9. Hereafter referred to as DND (Canada) *Unique Operations – Urban*.

survived the battle and integrated their firsthand knowledge of what it was like to endure the fighting that raged around them and above their heads.[40]

G.C. (Christopher) Case's article "Trial by Fire: Major-General Christopher Vokes at the Battles of the *Moro* River and Ortona, December 1943" in *Canadian Military History* made the argument that Vokes has been too easily criticized by historians for his handling of 1st Canadian Infantry Division at the battles of the *Moro* river, The Gully and Ortona. This essay attempted to prove that while Vokes did make errors in judgement he nevertheless performed admirably as the division commander due to constraints imposed by external factors. Case challenged Greenhous, Bercuson and Zuehlke in their attempts at blaming Vokes for his handling of the division in-and-around Ortona, thus the essay added to this debate about Vokes in particular.[41]

Tim Cook's two volume series on Canada in the Second World War was the most recent synthesis and included a discussion on Ortona in *The Necessary War: Canadians Fighting the Second World War 1939-1943, Volume 1*. Cook added important new quotations from Canadian and German soldiers who fought in Ortona. He added contributions from the Canadian Army Film and Photo unit tasked with recording the fighting in Ortona, and the effects of battle exhaustion as a result of the intensity of combat, demonstrating the intensity of the fighting by ending with Colonel Strome Galloway's experiences in The Royal Canadian Regiment.[42]

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[40] Zachary David Cavasin, *Hai visto i Canadesi?: A study of the Social Interactions between Canadian Soldiers and Italian Civilians before, during, and after the Battle of Ortona* (Ottawa: Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies, Department of History, Faculty of Arts, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, 2010), pp. 1-125.

[41] G.C (Christopher) Case, "Trial by Fire: Major-General Christopher Vokes at the Battles of the Moro River and Ortona, December 1943," *Canadian Military History*, Volume 16, Issue 3 (Waterloo: Laurier Centre for Military Strategic and Disarmament Studies, 2012), pp. 13-28.

[42] Tim Cook, *The Necessary War: Canadians Fighting the Second World War 1939-1943, Volume 1* (Toronto: Allen Lane Publishing, 2014), pp. 405-417.

David Halton's *Dispatches from the Front: Matthew Halton, Canada's Voice at War* discussed the work of David's father Canadian war correspondent Matthew Halton. Very much in the same situation as Charles Comfort, the intensity of the violence kept Halton out of the town for the initial days of the battle. When he moved into the town safely just before Christmas he filed a number of reports for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation which David discussed. Halton included personal letters from his father Matthew to his mother Jean that revealed what he witnessed and endured in Ortona and they were both candid and emotional. Following in his father's footsteps, David had the opportunity to interview both Canadian and German veterans of Ortona and he included their statements in the narrative.[43]

Adding to Calnan and Knight's work on the importance of the anti-tank guns at Ortona, Lee Windsor, Roger Sarty and Marc Milner's *Loyal Gunners: 3rd Field Artillery Regiment (The Loyal Company) and the History of New Brunswick's Artillery, 1893 to 2012* added even more valuable information on K, L and J Troops and their support to the infantry and tank units in Ortona. Using artillery unit war diaries and gunner interviews there were new details provided on how the anti-tank guns were used. As well as discussing which troops supported which manoeuvre units, anti-tank gun tactics and their positive effects in Ortona's urban fight were brought to light along with soldiers who distinguished themselves during the battle.[44]

[43] David Halton, *Dispatches from the Front: Matthew Halton, Canada's Voice at War* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2014), pp. 199-202.

[44] Lee Windsor, Roger Sarty and Mark Milner, *Loyal Gunners: 3rd Field Artillery Regiment (The Loyal Company) and the History of New Brunswick's Artillery, 1893 to 2012* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2016), pp. 308-312.

Filling in the Cracks: Smaller Contributions on Ortona

Canada's national story at Ortona, however tiny in the context of the global Second World War, earned an honourable mention in a pair of key internationally recognized works on the war in Italy, even if briefly. Dominick Graham and Shelford Bidwell's book *Tug of War - The Battle for Italy: 1943-1945* stands as one of the most influential international volumes on the Italian campaign as a whole. Ortona and the Canadian effort there featured in a brief, complimentary sentence.[45] Fred Majdalany's *Cassino: Portrait of a Battle* also mentioned the battle's challenges briefly with a complimentary sentence about the Canadians at the other end of the *Gustav* Line in December 1943.[46]

Conclusion

From the 1940s to the 1960s, capable historians established a dominant narrative about the battle of Ortona based on primary evidence. During that time and in the latter decades of the 20th century and early years of the 21st century eyewitnesses to the battle, individual research projects and general histories reinforced the structure and added new questions and findings that further contributed knowledge about Ortona. For all the work reviewed here, questions remain unanswered about the way the late December urban battle in Ortona was conducted. Indeed, the late December urban portion of the larger Moro river campaign has always been the tired last section of works about Ortona. Also, urban warfare studies of Ortona to date have been superficial and anecdotal. There is more to discover about the practical complexities, challenges, and tactics of this

[45] Dominick Graham and Shelford Bidwell, *Tug of War - The Battle for Italy: 1943-1945* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986) p. 119.

[46] Fred Majdalany, *Cassino: Portrait of a Battle* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1957), pp. 29-30.

type of warfare. That story lies buried in the all-arms 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade Group's effort to impose logic and cohesion on what historians have up to now labelled as pure chaos.

Chapter 2 – Setting the Stage

Before embarking on any operation military commanders and their staff must gather information and conduct a thorough analysis of the operating environment to produce sound plans for success without undo loss. Those factors include enemy and friendly force size, activity, location, composition, tactics, equipment, habits, intent and morale. They also include terrain, meteorology, time and space realities, and the prospects for achieving surprise while ensuring security. This assessment must be completed while also considering the multitude of civilians, non-government agencies and media that will also be present. Historical inquiry into the late December Ortona pre-battle analysis is scant, perhaps because historians assume their readers are more interested in "getting into the fight."[1] However, the evidence from the time suggests that Canadian commanders did not carefully consider the problem of where and what kind of enemy they would next meet at or beyond Ortona before advancing towards the commanding road junction town on the Adriatic coast. That assessment was influenced by the previous two hard weeks of combat for all of 1st Canadian Infantry Division in-and-around the *Moro* river and The Gully. Because those phases of the battle are recounted well elsewhere they will not feature extensively here except to demonstrate how those events shaped what came next at Ortona. The German opponent, the geographic and urban terrain at Ortona, and the Italian civilian situation were some of the factors that military leaders and future historians neglected to analyze thoroughly when considering the looming struggle in Ortona's streets.

[1]A majority of the resources do this unfortunately. Beginning with the foundational histories of the battle, such as Porter's *DND DHH CMHQ Reports* up-to-and including the latest popular histories such as Cook's *The Necessary War*, a majority of the resources consulted and discussed in Chapter 1's Historiography discussed in particular the enemy, geographic factors and Ortona's civilians with extreme brevity.

The Green Devils: The German *Fallschirmjager*

As 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade took over the Allied advance up the Adriatic coast in late December 1943, German paratroopers from General Richard Heidrich's 1st German Parachute Division moved into the Ortona area earlier in the month to reinforce the shattered 90th Panzer Grenadier Division and to prepare the town as a defensive stronghold.

German paratroopers, or *Fallschirmjager*, established a reputation for dedication to Hitler's Germany, good soldiering, a willingness to endure sacrifice, and the capacity for ruthlessness during the Second World War.[2] A 1st Canadian Infantry Division interrogation report placed German paratroopers in two categories: the "good type and the better type." The former were the young men who had joined for adventure. The latter were combat veterans from the various campaigns they had participated in throughout the war:

> "Those men knew what the score was and their discipline, morale and 'security' are excellent. It is no wonder that they are the 'picked tps (troops)' and sent to whichever sector of the front needs strengthening. It is also interesting to hear the condescending way in which the parachutists talk about the inf (infantry), 'they always mess things up, and we, the parachutists have to straighten them out again.' This, then is the better type and the type which does not talk - irrespective of their knowledge. And they too are the tps which have been put into the line to stem the adv (advance) of our Div (Division)."[3]

The invasions of Poland, Norway, France, the Netherlands, Greece, Crete, the Soviet Union; and the campaigns in North Africa, Italy and Northwest Europe all

[2] The *Fallschirmjager* were not without their faults. There were times throughout the war when they behaved like the *SS* and the *Waffen-SS*, murdering innocent civilians or prisoners of war. Nicholson notes in the *Official History* on pp. 231-232 that the *Fallschirmjager* had executed 17 male civilians before retreating from the village of Rionero in the Upper Sangro, this event being discovered by the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry when they entered the village 26 September 1943.

[3] Porter, *DND DHH CMHQ reports*, Appendix D, as quoted in McAndrew and Global, *Canadians and The Italian Campaign*, pp. 78-79.

involved *Fallschirmjager* soldiers.[4] Their reputation as hard fighters throughout those daring and costly operations earned them the nickname "the Green Devils."[5]

The 1st *Fallschirmjager* Division formed in the early spring of 1943 from survivors of the veteran 7th Division and new young recruits. The Division included the 1st, 3rd and 4th Parachute Regiments with three battalions each, supported by an artillery regiment, an anti-aircraft artillery battalion, a machine gun battalion, a *Fallschirm-Pionier* (engineer) battalion, signals, and anti-tank units.[6] The division deployed to the Mediterranean area in July 1943 as part of the German response to the Allied assault first on Sicily and then on the Italian mainland. They remained an important part of the German defence in Italy at the critical point in the campaign during the winter of 1943. If Rome fell to the Allies there would be severe political, military, economic, social and psychological ramifications that would give an obvious enormous advantage to the Allies and a blow to the Germans. To prevent their enemies from taking this all-important city, the Germans took advantage of Italy's geography that favoured the defender. Italy's central Apennine mountain spine throws numerous spurs east and west towards the Adriatic and Mediterranean. Between those spurs, rivers cut deep valleys out to the sea. Rivers, spurs and mountain spines together offer a succession of defensible lines at close intervals. The main highways follow the more populated coastal strip which is dominated by the spurs above.[7] The Germans created a continuous series of defensive lines and battle positions in south-central Italy intended to delay and

[4] Many of the German paratroopers that fought at Ortona were veterans of the Crete and Sicily campaigns in particular. With regards to the Sicily campaign they had been brought in as a reserve to bolster the existing axis formations after the Allies had invaded the island and pushed northwards towards Catania in July of 1943. Cook, *The Necessary War*, p. 406; D'Este, *Bitter Victory*, p. 312.

[5] According to German historian Helmut Wilhelmsmeyer, himself a veteran paratrooper, this nickname was given to the German paratroopers by Sir Winston Churchill. D'Este, *Bitter Victory*, p. 356.

[6] D'Este, *Bitter Victory*, p. 353 and p. 382.

[7] John Keegan, *The Second World War* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 352.

grind away at the Allies as they fought their way northwards towards Rome from October to December 1943. In October Hitler instructed Field Marshal Albert Kesselring, German commander of all Axis forces in the Mediterranean,[8] to establish the *Gustav* Line as a cross-country defensive position across the narrowest part of Italy from Gaeta on the Tyrrhenian Sea to Ortona on the Adriatic.[9] The other defensive lines in the south were only meant to delay the Allies and buy time so that the *Gustav* Line could be constructed by combining natural terrain with manmade obstacles. This defensive line would hold the Allies south of Rome and prevent its capture. Ortona and the ground around it became the eastern anchor of the *Gustav* Line and would prevent the Allies from getting to Pescara, with its connecting mountain passes to Rome which would allow the Allies to flank the city.

The 1st *Fallschirmjager* Division's commander Lieutenant-General Richard Heidrich[10] assumed responsibility of the far eastern coastal section of the *Gustav* Line and to begin its defence of Ortona in particular on 19 December 1943.[11] German troops had actually occupied Ortona since Italy's surrender in September 1943. They destroyed the town's harbour facilities and prosecuted or evicted most of the town's civilians at the end of November 1943 after British, Indian and Canadian forces breached the initial *Gustav* Line defensive zone along the *Sangro* river. German troops rounded up male civilians who remained behind for forced labour, and began converting the town into a

[8] *Oberbefehlshaber Sud*, abbreviated to *OB South*. D'Este, *Bitter Victory*, p. 192.

[9] Graham and Bidwell, *Tug of War*, p. 104.

[10] Heidrich was a veteran parachutist who had been a paratrooper since 1936. He had parachuted into Crete as a regimental commander and had fought at Leningrad. Short, large-faced, blunt-jawed, soft-spoken and a cigar smoker, his able leadership of the 1st *Fallschirmjager* Division had the Allies recognizing the unit as one of the very best divisions in the *Wehrmacht*. D'Este, *Bitter Victory*, p. 353.

[11] The division was rushed to the location after the German defeats at the *Sangro* River, *Moro* river and The Gully that destroyed both the 65th Infantry Division and the 90th Panzer Grenadier Divison. Nicholson, *Official History*, pp. 116 and 320.

defensive stronghold and *Gustav* Line strongpoint by the time the paratroopers arrived in early December.[12]

The 2nd Battalion of the 3rd Parachute Regiment initially deployed into Ortona first.[13] As the month wore on and the 90th *Panzer-Grenadier* Division lost control of the *Moro* river and The Gully, more units from the 1st *Fallschirmjager* Division were committed to stabilize the *Gustav* Line in the Ortona area. The remainder of the division's units were in position between the coast and Tollo, covering San Tommaso, San Nicola and Villa Grande, and the divisional reserve was reduced to a single infantry company at Tollo itself.[14]

The German concept of operations had as its intent to halt the Canadian advance up the coastal Highway 16 by making a carefully planned defensive stand in Ortona. West of the town prepared defences were also created or retained as part of the *Gustav* Line which barred any Canadian attempt to isolate or bypass the town. The German scheme of manoeuvre inside Ortona was to hold a line of forward positions to delay the Canadian approach into the southern outskirts, after which the defenders would withdraw into the heart of the town. Once the Canadians were committed, they would be lured into the central part of Ortona - the German main defensive area. To that end the Germans blocked the smaller narrower streets in the south end with obstacles, hoping to canalize the Canadians down the main highway via a misleading path of least resistance towards the downtown *piazze* (squares) and vital intersections. The German

[12] Zuehlke, *Ortona*, pp. 44-47; Cavasin, *Hai visto i Canadesi?*, p. 22.

[13] The 2nd Battalion of the 3rd Parachute Regiment was commanded by a Captain Liebschev. *Operations in the Urban Environment*, AFM Volume 2, Part 5, p. B-C-5. As discussed later in this thesis, the 2nd Battalion of the 4th Parachute Regiment eventually conducted a relief-in-place on 24 December 1943 in order to continue the fighting against the Canadians within Ortona.

[14] Nicholson, *Official History*, p. 328.

main effort would be to destroy as many Canadians as possible in order to stop the advance towards the north end of the town, with the endstate having achieved the halting of the overall advance in-and-around Ortona, thus assisting in a small part the overall German strategic and operational intent of stopping the Allies before Rome and preventing the Allies from getting to Pescara, with its connecting mountain passes leading to the city.[15]

The Germans turned the five main *piazze* in Ortona into killing zones, three of which controlled the main highway route through town.[16] The Germans deployed a myriad of weapons in-and-around the surrounding buildings to cut down anyone who dared traverse the open space of the *piazze*. The Germans planned to use the *piazza* killing zones integrated with strongly-constructed defended buildings, plenty of demolitions, a wealth of weaponry, and tactics specific to paratrooper doctrine to halt the Canadian advance. The German mission was to destroy as many Canadians as possible

[15] Porter, *DND DHH CMHQ reports*, p. 86, para. 246. Modern urban operations doctrine was not created in the Second World War, but was developed through decades of urban operations experiences throughout the mid-to-late 20th Century and early 21st Century. While both the Germans and the Canadians were obviously not using modern urban operations doctrine at Ortona, they were nevertheless "ahead of their time." In the case of the German defence, they planned to conduct a perimeter force battle on the edge of its area of responsibility. The goal of this perimeter force is to identify the enemy axis of advance, its strengths, its intentions and main effort, destroy enemy reconnaissance and investment forces, destroy assault forces in assembly areas and forming up points, cover obstacles and destroy opportune command targets. The next stage is the disruption force battle, where a military force purposely withdraws through a series of buildings and positions through its area of responsibility, causing enemy attrition, delaying and disrupting the enemy assault, drawing the enemy into the main defensive area (MDA) kill zone (KZ), and confusing the enemy by disguising the layout of the defence. The main defensive area has a military force defending localities with mutually supporting strong points focused around a main killing area. This is where the military force wants to stop the advancing enemy and ensure the most amount of destruction of that enemy force. All of the urban operations planning and tactics that are discussed in this thesis are derived from two sources: Department of National Defence (Canada), B-GL-322-008/FP-001 *A Tactical Guide to Urban Operations* (Kingston: Army Publishing Office, 2010) pp. 4-1 to 4-5 (offensive) and 6-2 to 6-6 (defensive); and *NATO Standard, ATP-99, Urban Tactics* (Brussells: NATO Standardization Office, 2016), pp. 4-5 to 4-13 (offensive) and 4-17 to 4-19 (defensive). Both of these documents go into great detail with regards to the stages and schemes of manoeuvre, including more thorough definitions, planning considerations and tasks, making it easier for commanders to plan offensive and/or defensive urban operations.

[16] Nicholson, *Official History*, p. 325; Gooderson, "Assimilating Urban Battle Experience," p. 65. The highway was critical as it was the main axis of advance, operational and logistical route for the entirety of 1st Canadian Infantry Division, meaning the road had to be controlled by the Canadians if they wanted to advance north. Ortona had to be taken in order for the division to advance northwards.

to stop the advance in-and-around Ortona, thus achieving the larger German strategy of stopping the Allies before Rome along the *Gustav* Line.[17]

German *Wehrmacht* engineer units that had been in Ortona for several weeks before the *Fallschirmjager* arrived had already laid anti-tank and anti-personnel mines on the roads and open areas between the harbour and the town. These minefields combined with the high cliffs and the waterfront on the east side of the town protected the approaches from that direction.[18] The *Fallschirm-Pionier* expanded the defensive preparations with demolitions, much rubble, booby-trapping and more mine-laying. That included blocking narrower, ox cart-width streets to force the Canadians down the main roads. To block those streets, the *Fallschirm-Pionier* blew down corners of houses, entire houses, or even lines of houses with explosives, creating heaps of rubble.[19] Most of the rubble piles were 12-to-15 feet high and made it impossible for tanks to climb over or manoeuvre around the jagged piles of concrete and masonry.[20] The rubble itself was liberally sown with Teller anti-tank mines, anti-personnel "S" mines, Italian wooden box mines and booby traps concealed in the dust and bricks, waiting for any Canadian troops that might try to move or climb over the rubble.[21] The Teller mines within the rubble piles were attached to remote cords enabling a concealed paratrooper to blow the charge from a safe distance when their attackers approached. Seven seconds later a devastating explosion could be amplified by the sympathetic detonation of other Teller mines.[22] The high piles of rubble also blocked Canadian

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[17] DND (Canada), *Unique Operations - Urban*, pp. 5-6.

[18] Carl Bayerlein, "Parachute Engineers in Combat, Ortona 1943," *Canadian Military History*, p. 49; Gooderson, "Assimilating Urban Battle Experience," *Canadian Military Journal*, p. 66.

[19] Bayerlein, "Parachute Engineers in Combat, Ortona 1943," *Canadian Military History*, p. 47.

[20] Roy, *The Seaforth Highlanders*, p. 263.

[21] DND (Canada), *Unique Operations - Urban*, p. 6.; Porter, *DND DHH CMHQ reports*, p. 87, para. 250; Zuehlke, *Ortona*, p. 258.

[22] Gooderson, "Assimilating Urban Battle Experience," p. 66; Zuehlke, *Ortona*, p. 258.

observation down the narrow lanes. Anyone who attempted to climb the piles to see over them would either initiate the booby traps and/or be exposed to German small arms fire.[23] Many buildings which would allow the Canadians to overlook the German defences or which might offer cover for the attacker were also destroyed, or had the front walls demolished to expose their interiors to fire from across the street.[24]

The *Fallschirm-Pionier* placed delayed charges in unoccupied houses with timed fuses, set to explode when the Canadians moved inside. "Booby traps," or explosive traps were also emplaced frequently. The simplest was a tripwire attached to the standard German *stielhandgranate 24* "stick" grenade, set at closed doors, darkened doorway entrances or stairways, the wire low enough not to be seen but high enough to be triggered by an opening door or pulled by a boot. The Canadians would soon become wary of breaking into buildings by entering or smashing in exterior doors with rifle butts or by kicking them in, and it soon became clear that the one way *not* to enter a building was through the obvious door.[25] Mines, discarded German weapons, map/document cases, and full wine bottles were similarly rigged with trip wires and explosives targeting anyone attempting to disarm the mines or hunting for souvenirs.[26] The Germans also recognized that indoor plumbing would be attractive to Canadian soldiers who had been without such facilities for weeks:

> "The preferred device was the toilet flush chain, which when pulled set off the igniter whereupon the well-concealed and placed charge exploded. Consequently,

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[23] Gooderson, "Assimilating Urban Battle Experience," p. 65.

[24] DND (Canada), *Unique Operations - Urban*, p. 5.

[25] The *stielhandgranate 24* is more commonly known as the "potato masher" due to its design. Reader's Digest, *The Tools of War 1939/45* (The Reader's Digest Association (Canada) Ltd., 1969), p. 32; Gooderson, "Assimilating Urban Battle Experience," p. 66.

[26] Gooderson, "Assimilating Urban Battle Experience - The Canadians at Ortona," p. 66. In one case, a soldier from the Seaforths thought he had been given a gift on Christmas Day when upon entering a house he saw a German knife in a jar with grains of loose wheat sitting in plain view on a windowsill. When he went to reach for it he was stopped by his commander, Private Ernest "Smoky" Smith - a future Victoria Cross winner - who after receiving a look of disgust from his subordinate promptly pushed the jar out of the window. It exploded outside due to a grenade being hidden inside of it. Zuehlke, *Ortona*, p. 323.

> there were several detonations which we ourselves did not directly set off, in houses that had been entered either by the enemy or by Italian civilians, who found their deaths in this way."[27]

A.J. Rudd, a platoon commander with the Loyal Eddies, recalled "They (the Germans) set up some first-class booby traps. You might see a nice bible or piece of stain glass lying about a house. Items like these were usually connected to at least a pound of explosive. This certainly discouraged looting."[28]

As the *Fallschirm-Pionier* completed their tasks, *Fallschirmjager* worked concurrently to compliment the work done by the engineers. Ortona's narrow yet strongly-built stone, brick and masonry buildings were sometimes several hundred years old and often stood shoulder-to-shoulder in the central and northern portion of the town, creating a readymade chain of fortified strongpoints. Inside these stout houses the Germans positioned troops and small arms to fire along the streets and into the *piazze*. The general arrangements included *Maschinenpistolen 38s* (*MP 38*, a submachine gun), rifles and potato masher grenades on the main floor; *MP 38s*, light and medium machine guns and grenades on the second floor; and an assortment of small arms and grenades on upper floors.[29] Normally a *MG 42* machine gun position was supported by two to three riflemen for local protection.[30] Other marksmen or snipers were positioned on the top floors or rooftops of buildings.[31] German demolitions and later battle damage in the tightly-packed urban space offered marksmen and snipers a myriad of good positions to conceal themselves.[32] Positions on the main, second and some of the upper floors were

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[27] Bayerlein, "Parachute Engineers in Combat, Ortona 1943," *Canadian Military History*, p. 49.
[28] Brown, "The Rock of Accomplishment," p. 16.
[29] DND (Canada), *Unique Operations - Urban*, pp. 5-6.
[30] Roy, *The Seaforth Highlanders*, p. 264.
[31] DND (Canada), *Unique Operations - Urban*, p. 6.
[32] Gooderson, "Assimilating Urban Battle Experience," p. 67.

located in such a way that allowed for multiple *Fallschirmjager* teams to engage the Canadians with a heavy degree of small arms fire, and all positions had interlocking arcs of fire with each other. German machine gun crews and riflemen were issued plenty of grenades and were directed to fight stubbornly. The Germans also prepared tunnels, underground passages, or small mouseholes between walls and houses, cleverly hidden by debris, rubble or furniture, as covered advance and withdrawal routes throughout the town. The Germans were prepared to position their weapons at the back of a room covering the doors and windows or at the tops of stairs, ready for close quarter combat. Their intent was to hold fire discipline until the Canadians entered the room or the top of a stairwell before firing, again to inflict the maximum possible loss on the attacking Canadians. Showers of grenades were to follow the bursts of small arms fire.[33] Lieutenant K. McBride, a platoon commander with the Seaforth's B company reported:

> "The enemy were very skillfully concealed...He...employed any substantial building that offered a good field of fire. Every time we located an enemy position we usually lost a man and, in most cases, our casualty received an entire burst of machine-gun fire. It was 'dirty' fighting because every man was well aware that before we found the next nest we would have another serious casualty...In the larger buildings the enemy had large numbers of men but in the normal position there would be a (machine-gun) supported by two or three rifle snipers. The enemy fought magnificently even when their position was hopeless."[34]

The rubble piles created by the *Fallschirm-Pionier* were always covered by the multiple *Fallschirmjager* small arms fire positions from above, the front, and even the rear, to fire on Canadian engineer soldiers attempting to remove the mines or booby traps within them, and to also prevent Canadian infantry troops or tanks from going over

[33] Gooderson, "Assimilating Urban Battle Experience," pp. 66-67.

[34] Seaforth Archives, File December, 1943 Operations Accounts, "Comments on Ortona by Lt. K.M. McBride, 4 January 1944," as quoted in Roy, *The Seaforth Highlanders*, p. 264.

the rubble piles themselves.[35] Windowsills or shelves in many rooms contained meticulously lined-up rows of ammunition magazines for the rifles and submachine guns, and in the rooms' corners were stacks of cans containing loose ammunition, additional potato masher grenades, or additional mines. If the Germans ran low on ammunition during a firefight, they withdrew to the next building where replenishment munitions were staged.[36] If the Canadians could clear the mines out of a rubble pile to allow the tanks to drive over them, the Germans were prepared to hurl more mines into the street ahead of them so as to prevent tank movement down that street.[37]

The German defence was layered with a number of anti-tank weapons. The latest man-portable ones were simply engineered, mass-produced and as a result were becoming more prevalent amongst German troops. The *Panzerfaust* fired a hollow-charge grenade and was capable of knocking out an Allied Sherman tank.[38] The *hoft hohlladung* hollow charge magnetic grenade and glass chemical-filled grenades were also introduced into this battle.[39] Larger anti-tank guns, most being 50mm *Pak* 38s or 75mm *Pak* from 90th Panzer-Grenadier Division, were attached to the *Fallschirmjager*.[40] Given that the overall demolition plan forced Canadian tanks to use the streets, some German anti-tank guns were sited to fire down the main thoroughfares. They were usually grouped in sections of two-to-three guns to support each other. Others were kept mobile so they could be rapidly shifted from street-to-street. A few were cunningly sited down narrow alleys which crossed the main road to catch a Sherman tank in enfilade.

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[35] DND (Canada), *Unique Operations - Urban*, p. 6.
[36] Zuehlke, *Ortona*, p. 331.
[37] Gooderson, "Assimilating Urban Battle Experience," p. 67.
[38] Ibid., p. 67.
[39] DND (Canada), *Unique Operations - Urban*, pp. 6; Porter, *DND DHH CMHQ reports*, p. 262, para 91.
[40] A 28/20mm *Gerlick* AT gun and a 3.7mm *Pak* were also captured during the fighting. DND (Canada), *Unique Operations - Urban*, pp. 6.

Some were sited close behind rubble piles to catch a tank's exposed underside if it attempted to climb over the pile, and in two instances anti-tank guns were dismantled and reassembled in upper floors to fire over the rubble piles to strike Canadian Shermans at a distance.[41]

All these careful German defence preparations utilized the 3-dimensional aspect of the urban battlefield. Attacking soldiers would have to worry about what lay in front of them as well as above or below. In Ortona many of the buildings contained strongly-built basements, cellars and tunnels that connected some buildings. Those structures would take time and resources to clear but also served as safe places for German rest and recuperation without fear of being struck by direct fire or by artillery and mortar fire. The Germans also employed the particularly large underground railway tunnel that ran east-to-west at the northern end of the town as part of the Sangro railway line that surrounded Ortona on its western, northern and eastern sides.[42] The tunnel was used frequently as shelter by both the Germans and Ortona's civilians who daringly chose to remain close to their homes during the battle.[43] The Germans used it as a base area for reinforcements, sustainment purposes and as a staging area before going into action. It was also a shelter and as a rest area for their troops and allowed them to move about unmolested from the northwestern to the northeastern portions of the town. Thus the tunnel played a critical part in the fight because it gave the Germans a place to recuperate from the fighting.[44] However, the Canadian attackers would have to place their forward troops in destroyed or partially-destroyed buildings without that same

[41] DND (Canada), *Unique Operations - Urban*, p. 6; Gooderson, "Assimilating Urban Battle Experience," p. 66.

[42] Zuehlke, *Ortona*, p. XX, map 4.

[43] Zuehlke, *Ortona*, p. 268.

shelter from the danger, as to withdraw their entire unit to safer areas south would invite the Germans to infiltrate back into previously cleared buildings. Thus, if the Canadians remained in-place they became vulnerable to those infiltration tactics or German sniper fire. Therefore, the railway tunnel gave an advantage to the Germans in the battle of Ortona that the Canadians did not have.

The Canadians had met German paratroopers before, in Sicily and southern Italy. The coming clash between 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade and the German *Fallschirmjager* in Ortona undoubtedly proved bitter. Lieutenant R.L. McDougall of the Seaforths wrote in the winter of 1944 during a lull in the fighting, "We saw a war movie depicting the Germans as barbaric fools, brutal and stupid. The boys who fought in Ortona don't take kindly to that sort of nonsense."[45] A number of Canadians came to respect the *Fallschirmjager* for their soldiering abilities and their professionalism, especially during and as a result of the violent clashes in Ortona's streets.

Lieutenant-Colonel Hugh Pike was the Commanding Officer of the Third Parachute Battalion (3 Para), British Army during the Falklands Islands War in 1982 and stated “I was confident that we were reasonably well prepared. There is enormous residual self-confidence in a parachute battalion. People don’t wonder if they can do things.”[46] Although Lieutenant-Colonel Pike was British and was discussing the attitude of paratroopers from his country, it is entirely reasonable to state that any personnel who have served in a military parachute unit would confidently feel the same way. The Colonel's remark, not meant as arrogance but as a matter-of-fact, applies to paratroopers

[44] As discussed in Chapter 6, "27-28 December 1943," by the time the Canadians had fought their way into the northern end of Ortona where the railway tunnel was located the Germans had withdrawn completely from the town.

[45] Reader's Digest, *The Canadians at War 1939/45, Volume 2*, p. 365.

[46] Max Hastings and Simon Jenkins, *The Battle for the Falklands* (London: Pan Books, 1983), p. 114.

the world over regardless of what nation's military they serve. Soldiers who jump out of aircraft with helmet, weapon and an (insanely) heavy load of equipment strapped to their bodies – and do so knowing that they will be jumping into territory that is more than likely behind enemy lines – have been told and wholeheartedly believe that due to those very circumstances they are part of an *élite* group with much initiative who can overcome any type of challenge set before them.[47] It was impressive that the German paratroopers – utilizing that "...enormous residual self-confidence" where "...people don't wonder if they can do things..." – had thoroughly prepared for urban battle and for the first two-to-three days therefore largely controlled the flow of events. However, it is equally impressive that the Canadians not only learned the urban operations lessons - the hard way for the first two-to-three days - but that they quickly put these lessons into practice to defeat the German in one intense week. Despite the good fighting abilities of the "Green Devils," they no doubt met their match with the "Red Patch Devils" in Ortona.

Geographic Factors[48]

It appears that the German paratroopers realized that in order to halt the Canadian advance into their portion of the *Gustav* Line and to force the Canadians to attack the town frontally, Ortona had two geographic features to the Germans' advantage, giving them what only very few defensive forces have had in history. First, the steep sided plateau that Ortona stood perched on reduced German worries about an attack on either flank and allowed them to concentrate their forces to face the only viable southern

[47] That includes the author of this thesis, who served as the Parachute Company second-in-command for a brief period while serving with 3rd Battalion, The Royal Canadian Regiment.

[48] For a visual breakdown of Ortona's urban geography please see Appendix I, pp. 205-213.

approach. Second, the inherent complexities of the urban geography itself gave the Germans the advantages of an interconnected network of well-protected 3-dimensional mini-fortresses with sub-and-super surface capabilities. Both geographic factors made the Germans believe that Ortona was the place to stop the Canadian drive northwards towards Pescara and the high mountain passes leading to Rome.

Ortona was reportedly founded by the Trojans after the fall of Troy.[49] It was typical of the many towns along the Adriatic coast which were built on high promontories rather than on a vulnerable beach, a method that became popular in the Middle Ages.[50] The maritime power of Venice dominated Mediterranean commerce throughout the medieval period, hence it was important to have communities located near the Adriatic but at the same time, it was logical to build those communities on higher ground.[51] The higher ground afforded a degree of protection against attackers, winter storms and spring flooding.

Ortona rests on a plateau approximately 500 metres wide from west to east and 1,500 metres long from north to south.[52] On the eastern edge of the town the ground drops dramatically down steeply-graded and vegetation-covered cliffs down to a narrow strip of land between the cliff base and the edge of the Adriatic's waters. The eastern cliffs average 50 to 75 metres in height and run north to south along the entire eastern side of town.

[49] Cook, *The Necessary War*, p. 405.
[50] Porter, *DND DHH CMHQ reports*, p. 86, para 245.
[51] Nicholson, *Official History*, p. 324.
[52] To obtain these measurements I referenced Zuehlke's, *Ortona*, p. XX, Map 4 and used the scale included with the map.



Photo: This photo of Canadian soldiers shows Ortona in the distance, looking at the south and east side where the cliffs and the Adriatic Sea are located. Note how the town rests on the obvious high ground and gives its defenders the ability to observe a considerable distance to the south and southeast. [53]

To its immediate west, Ortona's drops off equally sharply into a deep ravine that runs along most of the town's western edge. Although not the same height as the eastern cliffs this ravine is still approximately 30 to 50 metres deep, and serves the same purpose militarily of easy observation and defence from the town's heights while forcing the attacker to fight upwards.[54] Also, like the southeastern side of the town, the area immediately southwest and west of the ravine is largely flat, so defenders can observe attackers approaching from a distance, giving the defenders the ability to rain direct and artillery and mortar fire on the attackers as they move towards Ortona. When combined with the other German units defending the ridges and villages on the inland side, these factors protected Ortona's defenders from any threat from the west. Much like the town's eastern side, buildings on the west side extend to the ravine's edge, giving defenders covered and well-protected positions to observe and fire on attackers down below. These factors effectively worked against any attack on the town from the west also.

[53] Christie, *Hard-Won Victory*, p. 33.
[54] How the measurements for the cliffs and the ravine were obtained are discussed on p. 44, footnote 55.



These two satellite photos with accompanying elevation profiles demonstrate the geography in-and-around modern-day Ortona, little changed due to the surrounding ground.
Photo (left): Note at the northern portion of the town two red arrows and a thin blue line running between them. The varying height of the ground between these two points along the line are reflected left-to-right in the elevation profile on the left. The red X on the blue line is also transferred over to the elevation profile. In this photo and elevation profile the red X rests on the location of the castle (*Castello*). The *Fosso Ciavocco* is to the immediate west of the *Castello*, the ravine to Ortona's west is 33 metres in depth while the cliffs to Ortona's east are 53 metres in height.
Photo (right): The elevation profile rests near the southern end of Ortona. The red X right rests on the *Corso Vittorio Emmanuele*. The ravine to Ortona's west in this cross-section is 42 metres in depth while the cliffs to Ortona's east are 72 metres in height.[55]

Ortona's ravine, cliffs and *Fosso* at the north end of the town become critical when considering options for the Canadian attacking force. When conducting an urban battle the very first essential stage that the attacker must employ is the complete isolation of the urban area itself with firepower and/or physical occupation of the ground.[56] An attacker can end an urban battle much sooner if they can cut the defenders off from supply and reinforcements until the defender runs out of troops, ammunition, water, rations and the will to fight. However, if the attacker cannot isolate the urban area, the resulting battle draws heavily on the attacking force instead, taking more time and effort, more troops, and the risk of higher casualties and eroding morale.[57]

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[55] Both satellite shots are from the Department of National Defence (Canada) Mapping and Charting Establishment, https://geo-dw.defgeo.ottawa-hull.mil.ca/maps/TAM/. One can also use Google Maps, zoom over Ortona, and then use the "3D" tool to observe the cliffs to the immediate east and the ravine / flat ground to the southwest / west of Ortona.

[56] *NATO Standard, ATP-99, Urban Tactics*, pp. 4-5.

[57] There are numerous examples that prove this theory. The battles of Stalingrad in 1942-1943, Hué in 1968 (before the Americans isolated the city), Grozny in 1995 and Mosul in 2017 were lengthy battles that caused high amounts of casualties for the attackers, used more resources and elongated the time of the battle due to the failure in isolating the urban area. However, the battles of Aachen in 1944, Hué in 1968 (after the Americans isolated the city),

The Canadians approached Ortona in December 1943 then at a geographical disadvantage before the fighting began, like many other of the German held hills and villages they had fought through since July. The challenge facing them at Ortona, however, stood out among them. The commanding plateau, with the Adriatic Sea and sheer cliffs to the east and a deep ravine to the west, a flat southern approach, a powerful and prepared German defending force linked firmly into the *Gustav* Line, denied 1st Canadian Infantry Division the ability to surround and isolate the town.[58] These geographic features allowed the Germans in Ortona to focus their defensive strength on the only possible Canadians approach from the south.

These geographic features in-and-of themselves made the Ortona plateau a defender's choice battlefield. However, the town's densely packed, multi-storied row houses with deep basements and narrow streets when combined with the plateau became a logical place for a concerted stand. The stage was now set for a prolonged struggle using vast amounts of destructive firepower in the town's killing zones. The German use of the ground and the urban geography around Ortona gave them an advantage that

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Mogadishu in 1991 and the Second Battle of Fallujah in 2004 are battles that demonstrated that isolating the enemy in the urban area shortened the fight for the attackers, used fewer resources and caused fewer casualties. For sources that discuss these particular battles please see: 1. Stalingrad, Aachen, Hué, Mogadishu and Grozny: DiMarco, *Concrete Hell*; 2. Stalingrad: Antony Beevor, *Stalingrad – The Fateful Siege: 1942-1943 (*London: Penguin Books, 1998); 3. Grozny: Colonel (Retired) Lester Grau and Lieutenant-Colonel (Retired) Timothy L. Thomas. "*'Soft Log' and Concrete Canyons: Russian Urban Combat Logistics in Grozny*" (Fort Leavenworth: Foreign Military Studies Office, October 1999); Edward Lengel, "Taming Chechnya," *Military History*, Volume 31, Number 4 (Leesburg: Weider History Group, November 2014); 4. Hué: Mark Bowden, *Hué 1968: A Turning Point of the American War in Vietnam* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2017); 5. Mogadishu: Mark Bowden, *Blackhawk Down: A Story of Modern War* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999); 6. Fallujah: Staff-Sergeant David Bellavia, with John Bruning. *House to House: An Epic Memoir of War* (New York: Pocket Star, 2008); Joseph Miranda, "Fallujah 2004: Urban Assault in Iraq," *Modern War* Issue #23 (Bakersfield: Decision Games, May-June 2016); 7. Mosul: Steven Eden, "Battle of Mosul," *Modern War* Issue #26 (Bakersfield: Decision Games, July-August 2018).

[58] As discussed in Chapter 6, p. 148, footnote 2 of this thesis, the Canadians found the Germans stubbornly difficult to dislodge in the areas immediately west of Ortona so as to prevent the Canadian isolation north of the town. Stevens, *The Royal Canadian Regiment*, pp. 116-118.

very few defensive forces have had in history. Yet the geographical power of the Ortona position seldom rates more than passing mention in history.[59]

The *Ortonesi*: Ortona's Civilians

One of the added challenges in conducting urban operations is that a large number of civilians will invariably occupy that battlespace. Professional militaries that are conducting urban operations then must have a plan for the safeguarding and/or the safe evacuation of civilians in order to avoid not only civilian deaths, but to also avoid the public scrutiny and justified criticism of a country's military that has killed innocent men, women and children, which in today's age will be quickly broadcast in the news that civilians have died due to military operations. At Ortona it turned out that even if many *Ortonesi* knew that a battle was coming to their town many deliberately chose to remain in their homes instead of leave. While it might be assumed that people would naturally want to run from an area that is about to see violent combat, the reality is that many had nowhere else to go, nor did they want to lose all of their property and possessions. Urban battles in history are replete with examples of civilian populations remaining in their homes and hoping that the worst will pass them by; instead, civilians dangerously placed themselves into the crossfire.[60]

Ortona's civilian population numbered around 10,000 people before the battle. However, in the early weeks of December 1943 the Germans had conscripted many of the young and middle-aged males who could work and sent them away for slave labour.

[59] As the 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade and the reader progresses through this thesis the changing urban geography of the town will be discussed in greater detail.

[60] The urban operations battles of Stalingrad (1942), Aachen (1944), Seoul (1950), Hué (1968) and 1st and 2nd Grozny (1995/1999) are some of the most obvious examples where civilians chose to stay in the city and hide from the fighting rather than flee. DiMarco discusses the civilian population factor and the challenges they bring to these above-mentioned urban operations in several chapters in *Concrete Hell*.

Families discovered in hiding were forced to leave the town by a German garrison that feared that the *Ortonesi* would interfere with their defensive preparations and/or act as spies. The Germans posted notices directing all civilians to leave within 12 hours; where the civilians went was up to them. Those who did not leave and were caught after the 12-hour time limit were forced to assist the Germans with defensive preparations. Any males that refused to help would see their families held hostage for ransom. After some families left some German soldiers entered homes to steal valuables, especially if the building was marked to be demolished. Once the Germans started demolishing buildings in order to put rubble onto the streets and create obstacles some *Ortonesi* voluntarily fled.[61] Unfortunately, the Germans sometimes unknowingly – and sometimes knowingly – demolished buildings with entire families and their friends – men, women and children – inside the basements or cellars of the structures. Some died immediately after being crushed to death, while others took days to die and suffered a slow, painful demise.[62]

Fortunately for some *Ortonesi*, the Germans did not destroy every building, leaving some basements intact and unoccupied as hiding spaces for survivors. Others carved out caves in the hills or *fossos* that surrounded Ortona. Others daringly hid themselves in the railway tunnel at the north end of the town, which while providing a good level of safety, also put them in close proximity to German paratroopers who used

[61] Reader's Digest, *The Canadians at War 1939/45, Volume 2*, p. 368; Di Tullio, *1943: The Road to Ortona*, p. 74; Cavasin, *Hai visto i Canadesi?*, p. 17.

[62] Di Tullio, *1943: The Road to Ortona*, p. 78. Di Tullio actually names a number of specific families that met their fate this way and realistically shows their deaths in his graphic novel. The Primavera, Colucci, Gallo, Marino and Monaco families, 34 people in all, had hidden in the *Villa Primavera* when it was brought down by the Germans. Only one man survived, and after freeing himself from the rubble he enlisted some help from other civilians. Unfortunately, the consistent artillery fire landing around them made it impossible to rescue any of the other men, women and children who were entombed.

the tunnel as a base area.[63] Sometimes they were ignored by the Germans, sometimes they were directed to leave the tunnel immediately, depending on which paratrooper companies were occupying the tunnel at the time. Regardless of where they were located, many *Ortonesi* decided to remain within the town in the hopes that the violent storm that was about to descend upon them would pass them by without incident. Their stories are intertwined, and in this case especially with the Canadians about to enter the city, and yet the people of Ortona seldom form part of English-languages histories of the battle.[64]

The Red Patch Devils: The 1st Canadian Infantry Division

The soldiers of 1st Canadian Infantry Division about to meet the German *Fallschirmjager* and the *Ortonesi* wore a small red rectangle on their shoulders to identify their formation. They had earned the nickname "The Red Patch Devils" during the Battle for Sicily in July-August 1943. A German prisoner of war captured there near Agira told his Canadian captors the above, stating "We see the Red Devils coming and we fire our mortars hard. But the Red Patches just keep running through the fire. I can't understand it. Other troops we fought lay down and took shelter when the mortars fired right on top of them. The Red Patches are devils. They keep on coming."[65] The nickname stuck. CBC war correspondent Matthew Halton wrote to his wife Jean about

[63] Cavasin, *Hai visto i Canadesi?*, p. 18.

[64] Although there were few resources that discussed the involvement of the *Ortonesi* in the battle, one of the challenges during the research process was that most of these resources were not specific as to the day when certain incidents involving the *Ortonesi* occurred. To demonstrate the importance of including them in the history of the battle, I have chosen to insert certain incidents when they were clearly identified by date in the resources. For the remaining incidents that have no specific date, I have included those in Chapter 7 as a "missing voices" / consequence piece.

[65] Zuehlke, *Operation Husky: The Canadian Invasion of Sicily, July 10-August 7, 1943*, page 326. The fact that the Red Patch Devils were now facing the Green Devils in Ortona gives historians a delicious ironic note to capture readers' interests.

how the Green Devils and the Red Patch Devils would live up to their nicknames in Ortona as the Germans and Canadians "...seem beyond exhaustion and fear. They've become bloodthirsty...There is something dark and apocalyptic there, something fearful."[66]

Having fought the Germans throughout Sicily and southern Italy for several months since 10 July 1943, 1st Canadian Infantry Division was Canada's only division in action and thus had become the country's most experienced. It consisted of three infantry brigades at its core and its various supporting arms. 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade was ultimately assigned to capture Ortona and press northward. The Loyal Edmonton Regiment from Alberta's capital and the Seaforth Highlanders of Canada from Vancouver, B.C. in particular were to take most of that burden. The brigade's third battalion, the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (PPCLI), served as the brigade reserve and provide a critical guard to its left flank.[67]

Before being ordered to capture Ortona the division had endured an exhausting fight throughout mid-December 1943 on the river lines south of the town at the *Moro* river and The Gully. The final capture of "Cider" crossroads marked an end to that struggle, which resulted in high casualties for 1st and 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigades in particular, and criticism for the division's commander, Major-General Christopher Vokes. When the division was ordered on to Ortona, 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade was given the task. After a few days of reconstitution, 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade

[66] Halton, *Dispatches from the Front*, p. 201.

[67] Porter, *DND's DHH CMHQ reports*, page 90, paragraph 259. For the most part the PPCLI would conduct standing patrols just southwest of the town in order to protect the brigade's left flank and to ensure they remained ready for future combat operations, thus they did not do any fighting within Ortona. My being an officer and soldier in The Royal Canadian Regiment notwithstanding, this means I will not discuss the Patricias in detail as this thesis is focused on the day-to-day urban fight within the town.

followed by 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade were directed to follow along and advance northwards and just west of Ortona, to break the *Gustav* Line and cut off the town's northern end. The fateful climax at Ortona was set into motion.

2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade Situation Report: Sunday 19 December 1943

Late on 18 December and into the early morning hours of 19 December, The Royal Canadian Regiment (The RCR) won control of "Cider" crossroads. The Carlton and York Regiment secured the north side of the steep ravine at its edge, bringing an end two weeks of intense combat. The *Moro* river and the deep ravine cut by the *Saraceni* stream that became forever remembered as "The Gully" had formed natural barriers on which the German Army sited its initial main *Gustav* Line of defence, at least until control of The Gully was lost.

2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade was less heavily involved in the most recent action at "Cider" crossroads. Its troops had suffered somewhat fewer losses and had had more days to recover from the *Moro* action. The brigade's infantry battalions conducted standing patrols within their respective areas of operation from the north side of the *Moro* river south of Ortona.[68] 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade's commander Brigadier Bertram Hoffmeister held an orders group 19 December at 0800 hours where he announced that Major-General Vokes had directed that the brigade would relieve 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade that day and advance to Ortona. Hoffmeister planned to create a triangle-of-sorts, positioning the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry on the high ground north of The Gully as the firm base for the attack. The Seaforth

[68] Porter, *DND DHH CMHQ* reports, p. 84, para. 238; HQ 2 CIB WD, Dec 1943, LAC; LER WD 1943/09-1944/06, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15114, 28 Dec 1943, LAC; SHC WD 1943/01-31 December, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15256, LAC.

Highlanders of Canada were to take over from the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment (the "Hasty Ps") and advance to Ortona on a two-company front on the eastern flank hugging the Adriatic Sea. D Company was assigned to win a spur of ground jutting towards the sea that would allow them to support C Company attacking towards the church of *Santa Maria di Constantinopoli*. To the west, the Loyal Edmonton Regiment were ordered to pass through The Royal Canadian Regiment and advance on a two-company front along the main coastal Highway 16 up to the buildings on Ortona's southwestern outskirts, objective "Crocus."[69] H-Hour was set for 1200 hours on 20 December. That afternoon and evening the Loyal Edmonton Regiment and the Seaforth Highlanders of Canada passed through the forward lines and relieved the exhausted RCR and Hasty Ps.[70]

Ironically, while the 3rd Regiment's 2nd Battalion *Fallschirmjager* prepared their defences in Ortona, initial Allied intelligence staff assessed that the Germans would not conduct a defence in the town at all:

> "Having lost control of the x-roads (crossroads), the enemy is likely to fall back under pressure in the Northern sector, abandoning Ortona, and making his next stand on the line of the *Arielli* (river)...This is difficult country, well suited to delaying tactics and should provide a firm hinge for an eventual withdrawal in the Northern sector."[71]

In retrospect this error may be overlooked. It was not unusual for Allied intelligence staff to estimate that the Germans might withdraw to the next major water barrier. Since October, German standard operating procedure was to stand on high ground screened by a river valley which favoured a defence. After defending that ground long enough to

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[69] Roy, *The Seaforth Highlanders*, p. 257.

[70] HQ 2 CIB WD, Dec 1943, LAC; SHC WD 1943/01-31 December, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15256, LAC.

[71] 1st Canadian Army Tank Brigade Headquarters War Diary, December 1943, appendix 47, 5 Corps intelligence summary 257, 19 December 1943, as quoted in Porter, *DND DHH CMHQ reports 1940-1948*, p. 84, para. 239.

inflict losses upon the Allies and when German casualties mounted they typically withdrew back to the next suitable river to repeat the process. Given this established procedure it was natural for Allied military intelligence to conclude that the Germans would do the same around the Ortona area, and that the *Arielli* river was more than likely the far eastern portion of the *Gustav* Line.[72] However, in retrospect, given the fact that German paratroopers were largely dismounted with fewer enablers attached to their units, combined with the strategic and operational objectives of halting the Allies along the *Gustav* Line, it is understandable why the *Fallschirmjager* chose an urban area, in this case Ortona, as the place to make the harder stand because it was the actual eastern anchor of the *Gustav* Line.

Within Ortona the Green Devils were fresh, motivated and had established strong defences on good high ground that had the added benefit of being in a complex urban environment in which to fight. They were determined to play their small but important role as part of the overall *Gustav* Line defence in order to stop the Canadians. Within the town the *Ortonesi* that had remained behind stayed hidden as best they could, hoping that they would survive the violent storm that was about to descend upon the town. The Red Patch Devils were tired due to the recent operations in-and-around the *Moro* river, but they were an experienced unit that had been somewhat reconstituted and were now sending 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade in an advance north. The stage was set.

[72] Nicholson, *Official History*, pp. 321-322.

Chapter 3 – 20-22 December 1943

Day 1 – Monday 20 December 1943: The Approach

Weather: Cloudy and cold in the morning, some sunshine in the afternoon, overcast towards last light.[1]

Approximate Fighting Strength as of 0600 hours 20 December 1943				
Unit	Strength (Officers / ORs)	KIA (Officers / ORs)	WIA (Officers / ORs)	MIA (Officers / ORs)
HQ 2 CIB	15 / 48	-	-	-
PPCLI	32 / 598	-	0 / 4	-
LER	39 / 630	-	-	-
SHC	29 / 609	-	-	-
RCA 90th AT Bty	7 / 130	-	-	-

Bertram Hoffmeister was known as an intelligent, perceptive, aggressive but caring leader regardless of rank and position throughout the Second World War due to



Photos: Bertram Hoffmeister as the Commanding Officer of the Seaforth Highlanders of Canada (left) and when he was the commander of the 5th Canadian Armoured Division (right).[2]

[1] Meteorology Report and Fighting Strength Table from HQ 2 CIB WD, Dec 1943, LAC. "Strength" is read as of 0600 hours that day, while the casualty numbers are from the past 24 hours; thus, the PPCLI as an example had 4 x Other Ranks Wounded in Action on 19 December 1943. Also, while other sub-units of the brigade included their casualty numbers in the war diaries, I have chosen to focus strictly on the units that were specifically fighting in Ortona. As the Three Rivers Regiment belonged to the division and had its squadrons supporting all three brigades, their numbers are not included in the 2 CIB war diary. However, using the Three Rivers' war diary I will include their casualty numbers when appropriate, including the casualty numbers from the squadrons who were supporting 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade and 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade.

[2] Delaney, "When Leadership Really Mattered: Bert Hoffmeister and Morale During the Battle of Ortona, December 1943," from Horn's *Intrepid Warriors*, p. 140 (left photo and narrative); and Delaney, *The Soldiers' General*, p. 107 (right photo and narrative).

his demonstrably effective personality and leadership traits. 1st Canadian Infantry Division's commander, Major-General Chris Vokes, had commanded 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade throughout Sicily and had seen Hoffmeister's performance as a company commander with the Seaforth Highlanders of Canada. "There is no such thing as a born soldier," Vokes was told, "but he is the next best thing to it. He takes to soldiering like a duck to water."[3] It was Vokes who had arranged for Hoffmeister to take over as the commanding officer of the Seaforths and whip it back into shape as the battalion had performed poorly throughout Sicily. Hoffmeister always led by positive example and made good operational and tactical decisions which achieved the mission while limiting casualties. He got to know his subordinates personally, ensured effective communication throughout his organization, and was humorous when needed. He got close to or even into the front lines of combat in order to encourage his subordinates and/or to fully understand the situation, all the while being calm under fire. This not only turned the Seaforths around but were characteristics that were done at every position and every level of command throughout his time in the military.[4] Ortona would put those characteristics to the extreme test.

When 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade was originally given the task of taking the town, it was believed that the Germans would conduct that withdrawal to the *Arielli*

[3] Granatstein, *The Generals*, pp. 195-196 (quote and accompanying text). Granatstein notes that there was an apocryphal story that because Hoffmeister very often visited the frontlines frequently and was just as repeatedly shot at with both enemy direct and artillery fire that Hoffmeister's batman was recommended for a Victoria Cross simply for following Hoffmeister around.

[4] Ibid., pp. 195-196.

river to establish a stronger defensive position there due to it being believed that it was part of the *Gustav* Line.[5] Hoffmeister recalled:

> "At the time I was given my orders for Ortona, it was represented to me as being a vital spot that would play a most important role in Eighth Army communications and supply, in that there was a rail center and a port where ships could operate, and that it was the most important in the administrative scheme of things. I never questioned it at any time. I was given my orders and we got on with it."[6]

Hoffmeister had stated at his orders group 19 December that H-Hour for the forthcoming advance was to be 1200 hours on 20 December, but he decided to hold another orders group just a few hours before that timing, at 0930 hours on 20 December at the Seaforth's battalion headquarters. Here he passed on directions just in case there was a fight within Ortona itself, as the Germans had throughout the Italian campaign traditionally established temporary defensive positions to delay Allied forces while they constructed stronger defensive lines further north, and Ortona could have been one of those delaying positions if the Germans were indeed establishing something stronger at the *Arielli* river.[7] If the Germans were indeed doing this, Hoffmeister only needed to commit one of his battalions to the fight while the other two protected the brigade's flanks. The Loyal Eddies were to be the brigade's main effort and advance up the main road – Highway 16. This road was the principle highway and the only two-way paved highway capable of all-weather military traffic in the Canadian area of operations that not only passed through Ortona but also served as the division's axis of advance. More importantly, it was Eighth Army's principle logistical service along the Adriatic side of

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[5] Porter, DND DHH CMHQ reports 1940-1948, p. 84, para. 239. As discussed in Chapter 2, pp. 51-52, footnotes 71 and 72.

[6] Delaney, *The Soldiers' General*, p. 100. In a discussion with Dr. Windsor, he noted that the Museum of the Battle of Ortona now located in the town has a hyper-realistic 3-dimensional model of the city which includes the port. Its small size combined with the Germans' destruction of the facilities made it almost useless to the Allies after the battle.

[7] Roy, *The Seaforth Highlanders*, p. 258. Again, this is also discussed in greater depth in Chapter 2, pp. 51-52, footnotes 71 and 72.

the Italian peninsula. The Seaforths were to protect the brigade's right flank, while the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry remained as the brigade's reserve and firm base south of Ortona, guarding the left flank.[8] Given that Allied intelligence had assessed that the Germans would more than likely withdraw to the *Arielli* river Hoffmeister only committed the Loyal Eddies to the fight initially because he rightly felt that only one infantry battalion from his brigade would be needed should German forces be present, and directed the Seaforths to only cover the right flank along the Adriatic.

On 20 December at 1200 hours, the Royal Canadian Artillery's 3rd Canadian Field Regiment opened a creeping barrage behind which advanced two troops of tanks from the Three Rivers Regiment's C Squadron, the Loyal Eddies' B and D Companies, the Seaforths C and D Companies and 4th Field Company engineers along to help clear obstacles.[9] Hoffmeister had moved his tactical headquarters up close in order to observe, influence and control the battle.[10] As the Loyal Eddies and Seaforths conducted the above actions, Hoffmeister located himself about 2,000 yards south, a position from which he had a "marvelous view" of the fighting. He could see the Edmontons and the Seaforths converging on the town; at one point, he would intervene to prevent the units from firing on each other as they simultaneously reached southern approaches.[11]

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[8] SHC WD 1943/01-31 December, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15256, LAC; Delaney, *The Soldiers' General*, p. 101.

[9] Porter, *DND DHH CMHQ reports*, p. 84, para. 241; LER WD 1943/09-1944/06, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15114, 28 Dec 1943, LAC; SHC WD 1943/01-31 Dec, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15256, LAC.

[10] For clarity, a tactical headquarters consists of a commander and a very small selection of his/her staff accompanying that commander close to the frontlines of combat. A "Tac HQ" can move around the battlefield more quickly due to the lesser amount of personnel and transport needs, thus allowing a commander to get a sense of the battle and how his/her troops are doing. Hoffmeister's brigade HQ, consisting of a large number of his staff officers and senior NCOs, would remain much further to the rear so as to be removed from close danger so they can coordinate the finer details of service and support to the frontline units. The key to both headquarters being successful is good communication between the two, so that the commander and his/her HQ can consistently be informed as to what is occurring in order to have a favourable amount of good decision-making occur. It also means that if communication does break down between the two due to extenuating circumstances, that the headquarters staff have enough knowledge of their commander's intent and mindset to make good decisions in his/her absence.

[11] Delaney, *The Soldiers' General*, p. 101.



Photo: A well-known photo from the fighting around Ortona, soldiers from B Company, the Seaforth Highlanders of Canada, approach the town which can be seen far off in the distance in the middle-right of the picture.[12]

All of the brigade's units encountered delays due to the mud, landmines, German rifle, machine gun, mortar and artillery fire as they moved forward. The mud slowed the C Squadron tanks down, convincing one troop commander, Lieutenant T.E. Melvin, to request use of the main road. However, as soon as his tanks were on it Melvin's own Sherman tank and its crew met a very large explosive anti-tank trap buried in the road itself. Two-hundred pounds of TNT blew the tank 20 feet into the air and flipped it over onto its hull, killing Melvin and the other four of his crew. When the remaining three tanks in in his troop drove to avoid the smoking crater to the right, they discovered that the original demolition was intended to force the Canadian tanks into a prepared minefield where the tracks of the remaining tanks were destroyed.[13] The Loyal Eddies and the remaining C Squadron tanks pressed against Germans popping up from a series of zigzagging trenches, firing short bursts and then withdrawing towards Ortona. The Eddies reached objective "Crocus" at 1426 hours, capturing a number of Germans from

[12] *Canada at War*, www.canadaatwar.ca (website). Brief video footage of these soldiers advancing on Ortona can be viewed in Edoardo di Pierro's documentary "The Battle of Ortona" at minutes 22:42 to 22:46 on the "Youtube" website.

[13] TRR WD, 1943/01-31 December, LAC.

the 2nd Battalion, 3rd Regiment of the parachute division as prisoners of war during the process.[14]

The Seaforths encountered a little more resistance to the east where D Company drew enemy fire which allowed C Company to descend down a slope and pass their troops through an anti-tank minefield littered with dead Germans who had been caught in the earlier artillery barrage. Upon realizing that C Company was now approaching their positions, the Germans opened fire from four machinegun posts on the crest of a cliff, lobbing grenades down into the low ground. The C Company troops went up and over the precipice and destroyed all four posts. The Germans promptly counterattacked to regain the crest but were repelled. Afterwards C Company pressed on towards the church, but by the end of the day they were 300 metres short, facing hot fire emanating from the church and enemy mortar bombs and shells.[15]

As nightfall approached, Hoffmeister had the brigade consolidate its positions at the southern fringe of Ortona and reinforced it with a troop of eight 6-pounder anti-tank guns from the Royal Canadian Artillery's 90th Anti-Tank Battery, a platoon of Saskatoon Light Infantry medium machineguns and C Squadron's twelve remaining Sherman tanks.[16]

Back near the main road, the Loyal Eddies D Company commander, Major Jim Stone, accompanied by engineer officer Peter Harris, did an evening recce of the southern outskirts of the town by cautiously moving up the main road and entering

[14] There is a discrepancy between the Nicholson's official history and the LER war diary, which the former stated as 14 PWs taken whereas the latter stated 17. Nicholson, *Official History*, p. 323; LER WD 1943/09-1944/06, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15114, 28 Dec 1943, LAC.

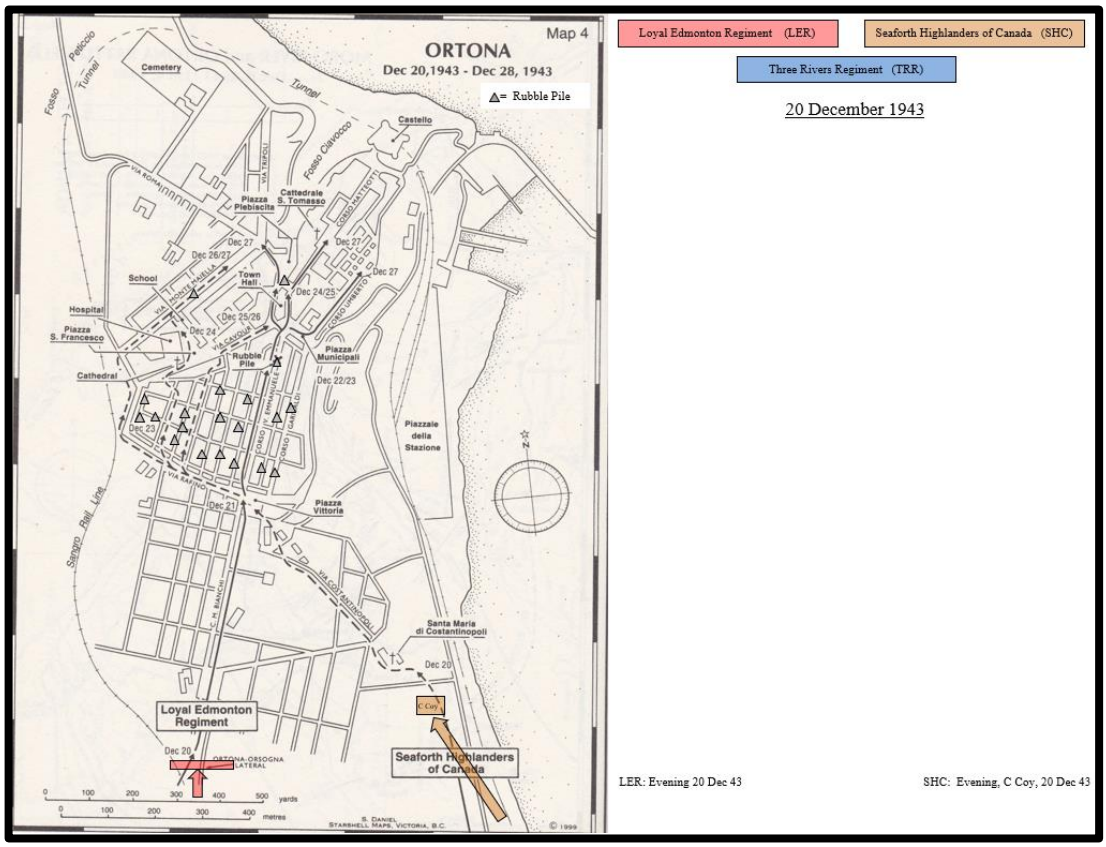
[15] Porter, *DND DHH CMHQ reports*, p. 84, para. 241; Roy, *The Seaforth Highlanders*, pp. 258-259; Nicholson, *Official History*, p. 323; SHC WD 1943/01-31 Dec, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15256, LAC.

[16] LER WD 1943/09-1944/06, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15114, 28 Dec 1943, LAC; Nicholson, *Official History*, p. 323.

Ortona via the *Corso Bianchi,* in knowing that his unit had to carry on into the town the next morning. Stone and Harris could not locate any German positions and retired back to the Loyal Eddies' position without incident.[17]

If Allied intelligence had originally assessed that the Germans would likely withdraw to the *Arielli* river, the fighting that had occurred on this day must have surprised most of 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade's troops. The combat actions were probably viewed as somewhat startling as they were heavier than expected, thus the reason why Hoffmeister had moved up the anti-tank guns, the medium machineguns and more tanks to support at the end of the day to ensure the Germans could not knock his soldiers back to the south. The day's fighting was a mere taste of what was to come when the Canadians entered the southern portion of the town the following day.

[17] Zuehlke, *Ortona*, pp. 251-252.



Map (above): The progression of the Loyal Edmonton Regiment (in red) and the Seaforth Highlanders of Canada (in beige) with their supporting engineers and artillery anti-tank personnel on 20 December 1943. As 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade progresses northwards through the town the Three Rivers Regiment (in blue) will also be highlighted.

All of the "progression maps" throughout this thesis are a copy of Map 4, p. XX in Zuehlke, *Ortona* and have been modified by the thesis author using Microsoft PowerPoint.

Day 2 – Tuesday 21 December 1943: The Break-In into New Town

Weather: Cloudy, cold, fair visibility.[18]

Approximate Fighting Strength as of 0600 hours 21 December 1943				
Unit	Strength (Officers / ORs)	KIA (Officers / ORs)	WIA (Officers / ORs)	MIA (Officers / ORs)
HQ 2 CIB	15 / 48	-	-	-
PPCLI	32 / 592	-	0 / 4	-
LER	39 / 623	0 / 1	-	-
SHC	29 / 596	-	1 / 11	0 / 1
RCA 90th AT Bty	7 / 130	-	-	-
TRR	Unknown	1 / 5	0 / 3	-

Although the fighting was ferocious the day before, Hoffmeister remained with his original plan of having the Loyal Eddies advancing up Highway 16 into Ortona's southern outskirts while the Seaforths and Patricias protected the brigade's right and left flanks respectively. Given the previous day's violence Hoffmeister kept the extra brigade resources available to the Eddies and Seaforths should they need them when breaking into Ortona's southern limits.

Ortona's more modern southern half or "New Town" fanned out east and west over the southern part of the plateau.[19] The buildings were up to four stories high and close together, with homes, warehouses, and some small apartment buildings arranged in large rectangular blocks.[20] Two main streets in New Town accommodated vehicle traffic. Highway 16 entered from the south and became the north-south running *Corso M. Bianchi* ending at the *Piazza Vittoria*.[21] *Via Costantinopoli* entered from the southeast

[18] HQ 2 CIB WD, Dec 1943, LAC.
[19] Reader's Digest, *The Canadians at War 1939/45, Volume 2*, p. 368.
[20] Zuehlke, *Ortona*, p. 37; Gooderson, "Assimilating Urban Battle Experience - The Canadians at Ortona," p. 65.
[21] After the *Piazza Vittoria* Highway 16 became the *Corso Vittorio Emmanuele,* continued northwards to the *Via Tripoli* and out of the town to resume its original name.

and also ended at this *piazza*. The Germans intended only to defend New Town sparingly to draw the Canadians into Old Town where more elaborate defences were established.[22]

As the Loyal Eddies stepped off at 0700 hours at New Town's southern edge, a large explosion shattered the early morning from deep inside the Old Town on the northern end of the Ortona plateau. The Germans had just destroyed the *Cattedrale San Tomasso* to add to their defensive rubble plan. The cathedral was the most revered in the town. It purportedly housed the tomb of the Christian apostle Saint Thomas, and its frescoed dome and adjacent watchtower rose high into the town's skyline. The destruction occurred on 21 December 1943, the Feast Day of Saint Thomas, an annual event that Ortona's civilians had celebrated for centuries to commemorate the apostle's entombment in the cathedral. After the explosives had done their work, the watchtower had disappeared and the cathedral's supporting walls and dome appeared as though cut in half by a giant cleaver. Its frescoes were half-destroyed, the southern portion reduced to masonry fragments lying in a giant pile below the undamaged half of the cupola, and other works of art inside the building were destroyed due to the weight of the rubble.[23] The building now spilled out into the *Piazza San Tomasso*. Its destruction foretold the coming days.

Nonetheless, the Edmontons pressed on northwards once again on a two-company front along Highway 16 as the axis of advance leading into town, D Company on the left supported by the Three Rivers' 1 Troop and B Company on the right with 5 Troop, with

[22] Porter, *DND DHH CMHQ reports*, p. 86, para. 246. See Chapter 2, pp. 32-33, footnote 15. It is recommended that the reader please see Appendix I, Maps 4,5 and 6 for the geographic features discussed above.

[23] Zuehlke, *Ortona*, pp. 246-247. If the reader wishes to view the destroyed cathedral, a photo and painting of it are located in Chapter 5, p. 138, footnotes 36 to 38.

the engineers' 4th Field Company supporting both infantry units. B Company and 5 Troop had better luck that morning, moving quickly through the vineyards, groves and gardens to the southern outskirts of the town. D Company had no such luck however and came under fire from a position fronting a large *pensione*, where they took a number of casualties after two attempts to cross the largely open field from south to north.[24] Major Jim Stone recalled that he had started the day with approximately 95 troops under his command, but after these two attacks he was down to about 30 soldiers.[25] Stone recommended to the Loyal Eddies' commanding officer Lieutenant-Colonel Jim Jefferson that D Company withdraw and follow B Company's route, but Jefferson denied the request. Given what had occurred the day before when the Three Rivers tanks were blocked by mud and minefields, Jefferson chose to keep the tanks on the road in order to support the attack, thus both sides of the road needed to be cleared by his riflemen.[26] Stone was not happy about this direction:

> "The morning of 21 December we moved forward, 'A' company on the east side of *Corso Vittorio Emanuele*, my company 'D' on the west. We ran into fierce opposition in attempting to cross the open ground ahead of us. At about 1000 hrs (hours) my commanding officer (CO) came on the 'Blower' (radio) and said, 'You must push on; other 'baby' (company) on objective.' My company, now reduced from some ninety men to about thirty, had pushed hard but unsuccessfully since first light. I felt that the CO was insinuating that we had not been aggressive and I was as furious as Hotspur in Shakespeare's *Henry IV* when confronted after the battle by a certain Lord. The CO was a mile back in a safe dugout and I had been shot at from close range for over two hours. I yelled back over the 'phone, 'Then reinforce success.' I slammed down the receiver. I promptly organized three suicide squads of my remaining men, fired three 2-inch mortar smoke bombs (all we had) and charged across the open ground."[27]

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[24] LER WD, Dec 1943/09-1944/06, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15114, LAC; TRR WD, Dec 1943, LAC; Zuehlke, *Ortona*, p. 252.

[25] BDFL, minutes 8:03 to 8:27.

[26] Zuehlke, *Ortona*, pp. 252-253.

[27] Gaffen, *Ortona: Christmas 1943*, p. 37. Also, Stone is incorrect in that both companies were on either side of the *Corso M. Bianchi*, not the *Corso Vittorio Emmanuele*, and it was B company, and not A company, on the east side of the *corso*.

Stone had a quick conference with his surviving platoon commander Lieutenant James Dougan and his company sergeant-major to discuss options. He decided to divide what was left of D Company into three even groups, each being led by the three men. Instead of charging across the open field again as per Stone's original direction, Dougan requested to take his men down a small ditch that was off to the west in order to infiltrate up to the *pensione*, being assisted by the company mortarman who would drop smoke bombs amongst the Germans. If his assault group reached the *pensione* Dougan would call up the rest of the company, surprise the Germans and destroy them. Stone approved the idea. Fortunately, everything went according to plan, the Canadians being able to conduct an urban operations infiltration down the trench and into the *pensione*'s top floors, poking their weapons out of the windows and firing into the German positions from up-and-behind.[28] Once this was completed, Stone took his troops and begin clearing the buildings to the immediate east so that they could link up with B Company. Both 1 and 5 tank Troops moved up to the edge of Ortona to provide further direct fire support into the town itself, although advancing into the town was challenging due to the rubble piles and anti-tank minefields in the streets. 5 Troop only travelled 200 yards.[29]

The initiative from the Royal Canadian Artillery's 90th Anti-Tank Battery was appreciated at this point. Newspapers and historians write about the "Western Canada troops" who fought at Ortona but Major Tiger Welsh's 90th Battery of the RCA's 1st

[28] In modern urban operations doctrine there are four types of tactics that a military unit can employ while on the offence. The infiltration tactic allows a military force to sneak into an urban area without being detected by an enemy force. This can be most effectively done by using buildings, alleyways, sewers and/or subways. DND (Canada), *A Tactical Guide to Urban Operations*, pp. 4-1 to 4-5; NATO Standard, ATP-99, *Urban Tactics*, pp. 4-5 to 4-13.

[29] Zuehlke, *Ortona*, pp. 253-254; BDFL, minutes 8:27 to 9:09. Dougan would survive the war and retire at the rank of Major. He is interviewed extensively in the BDFL documentary and Edoardo di Pierro's "The Battle of Ortona" documentary, both of which can be found on the "Youtube" website.

Anti-Tank Regiment came from New Brunswick. The Seaforths were supported by Lieutenant R.B. Ferguson's "K" Troop of 6-pounders, and the Loyal Eddies supported by a Captain Evans' "L" Troop and its 6-pounders. Thankfully the *Fallschirmjager* never had tanks in support, however the Canadians soon found a way to use their anti-tank guns for other purposes. Major Welsh, who had won the Distinguished Service Order in Sicily for his superb work with these weapons, had no qualms about using them for other things besides tanks. "There were no enemy tanks to shoot up in Ortona, but why remain idle when you can save lives?" he later reported. Major Welsh had L Troop's 6-pounder anti-tank guns brought up to the edge of the town where they could effectively, round-after-round, blow the rubble piles down low enough for tanks to observe and fire over.[30]

Jefferson directed the Loyal Eddies' scout platoon commander Lieutenant Alon Johnson to find the location of D Company. After linking up with Stone, Johnson escorted some 15 German prisoners of war back to battalion headquarters, and radioed Jefferson that the *pensione*, now dubbed "Johnson's house" by Stone, was now occupied by the company.[31] At that point D Company could go no further, and B Company was directed to continue the advance up the *Corso Bianchi*.

[30] Windsor, Sarty, Milner, *Loyal Gunners*, p. 309; Dancocks, *The D-Day Dodgers*, p. 178.
[31] Zuehlke, *Ortona*, pp. 254-255; TRR WD, Dec 1943, LAC.



Photo: On the outskirts of Ortona soldiers from the Loyal Edmonton Regiment engage German troops crouching in a slit trench approximately 100 yards distant.[32]

That day the Loyal Eddies met their first Ortona resident or refugee. A woman who would be later nicknamed "the Front Line Lady" presented herself and an elderly Jewish man to the Loyal Eddies. The unit's chaplain E.J. Bailey later wrote about her:

> "Claiming Dutch citizenship, she came under suspicion because she spoke German fluently and was obviously both clever and attractive, a dangerous combination. She was placed in the Regimental Aid Post under the joint charge of the Padre and the doctor. She offered to help with the wounded and allotted the civilian cases. She had been arrested by the Gestapo in Yugoslavia and after much hardship managed to reach Italy where, once she had established her bonafides, she virtually became a member of the Regiment."[33]

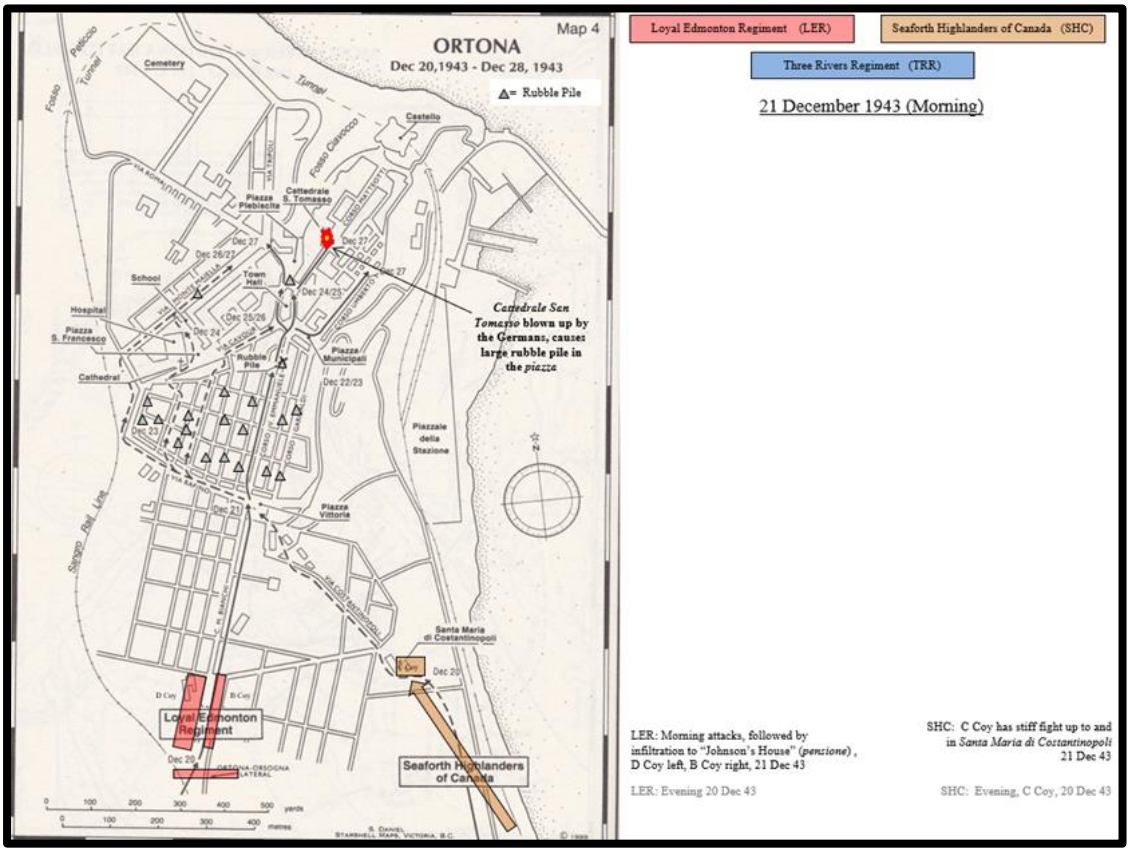
While the Loyal Eddies struggled through New Town's southern outskirts, the Seaforths' C Company continued its advance up the brigade's right flank to take the objective it had been given the day before, the church of *Santa Maria di Constantinopoli* at the edge of the cliffs leading down to the Adriatic Sea. It was believed to have been founded by Saint Mary Magdalene herself and the current structure begun in the fourth or fifth century AD, making the church grounds among the most consecrated in Italy. It

[32] *Canada At War*, www.canadaatwar.ca (website) (photo); Zuehlke, *Ortona*, group of photos after p. 124 (narrative). Brief video footage of these soldiers engaged in combat can be viewed in the Canadian Army Newsreel's "Battle of Ortona" at minutes 6:18 to 6:20, minutes 6:23 to 6:26 and the British Pathé Gazette's "Battle of Ortona" documentary at minutes 1:00 to 1:05. Both of these documentaries can be found on the "Youtube" website.

[33] Stevens, *A City at War*, pp. 277-278.

was narrowly built with a simple stone exterior, a relatively plain interior, and overlain with medieval construction.[34] Throughout the morning as the company's platoons advanced towards the church they became involved in a series of back and forth attacks, small but sharp German counterattacks, snipers, and artillery and mortar fire, inflicting casualties for both Canadians and Germans alike. C Company's commander Captain Harley organized the defence against these German counterattacks and, according to the citation on his Military Cross, cheered his soldiers on while visiting the platoon positions, inspiring his men to fight with a spirit that could not be beaten.[35] C Company took the morning and a majority of the afternoon to advance the 300 metres up to and eventual clearing of the church, but at the cost of seven killed in action. The amount of violence required to root out the German defenders inside the church provided yet another indication of what was coming.

[34] Zuehlke, *Ortona*, p. 39. Readers can view the exact location of the church in Appendix I, p. 212, Map 7.
[35] Roy, *The Seaforth Highlanders*, p. 261.



Above map is Map 4, p. XX in Zuehlke, *Ortona* and has been modified by the thesis author using Microsoft PowerPoint.

Hoffmeister realized by the late morning that the Germans were still quite determined in their resistance and that he might have to commit more brigade resources to the battle. He directed the Seaforths' commanding officer Major Syd Thomson to bring the entire battalion closer to the fight, to attach a company to the Loyal Eddies to support their advance up the *Corso Bianchi* and for the remainder of the battalion to move up to the church area. Accordingly, Thomson moved his headquarters up to the church on the cliffside by 1600 hours.[36] Once the area in-and-around the church was occupied by the remainder of the battalion C Company accompanied by one tank from C Squadron conducted a short advance northwest of the church along the *Via*

[36] Roy, *The Seaforth Highlanders*, pp. 259-262; SHC WD, Dec 1943/01-31, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15256, LAC.

Constantinopoli in order to clear the Germans from the area and protect the remaining Seaforths gathering behind them. As the Canadians advanced, the tank, *Coburg II*, fired shell after shell at enemy targets which allowed C Company to press on and seize positions just southeast of the *Piazza Vittoria*.[37]

Over to the left, Lieutenant-Colonel Jefferson had recognized the invaluable assistance of the tanks and engineers from the day before, and now with a company of Seaforths in support, he decided to continue the Edmontons' advance through New Town on *Corso Bianchi*. Jefferson ordered his infantry to clear the buildings on both sides of the *corso* to protect the tanks and ensure they could stay close in support.[38] The Seaforths' D Company was directed to advance north up the smaller road just west and beside the *Corso Bianchi* to protect the Loyal Eddies' left flank. The Loyal Eddies spent the afternoon slowly clearing the buildings on both sides of the *corso* for 350 metres as far as the *Piazza Vittoria,* the number of German-defended buildings to be cleared from the bottom-up taking time.[39] The Loyal Eddies' D Company took the west side and B Company took the east side of the *corso*. C Squadron's 1 Troop relieved 5 Troop so the former could withdraw and replenish their ammunition. Engineers also followed the advance up the street, clearing mines and booby traps. Infantry cleared houses with small arms fire and grenades by entering through the bottom floor doors and/or windows – casualties occurred due to booby traps and German positions close to these obvious entrances – and both the infantry and tanks provided direct fire on German machine gun

[37] Zuehlke, *Ortona*, pp. 255-256.
[38] Stevens, *A City at War*, p. 272.
[39] In modern urban operations doctrine the Loyal Eddies conducted what is termed an urban operation "thrust," which occurs when a military force travels from one point to a second point / objective but clears the buildings on both sides of the street while doing so. Although this means a slower advance as it takes time to clear buildings of enemy personnel, it allows for a greater degree of safety as friendly forces know they will not be fired upon from the sides or rear. DND (Canada), *A Tactical Guide to Urban Operations*, pp. 4-1 to 4-5; and NATO Standard, ATP-99, *Urban Tactics*, pp. 4-5 to 4-13.

and sniper positions, usually located in second or third storey windows, allowing engineers to clear the anti-tank mines on the streets so that the tanks could advance. It was slow work but it meant steady progress despite the casualty numbers. 1 Troop's commander Lieutenant F. Simard had advanced just 100 yards short of the *piazza*






Photo (top left): Loyal Eddies from B Company advance into Ortona through a sidestreet, 21 December 1943.

Photos (top centre and top right): Soldiers from the Loyal Eddies escort three German prisoners of war back through the same sidestreet, 23 December 1943. Note the destruction that has now occurred.

Photo (bottom left): The same three German prisoners pass by the crew of *Coburg*, a tank from the Three Rivers Regiment.[40]

when his tank lost a track due to an anti-tank mine, and despite working under fire the crew were able to have it towed to safety by another tank.

Hoffmeister had tried his best throughout the day to keep a close eye on the fighting in front of him, but faced challenges following the close-packed ebb and flow of battle:

> Shortly after the battalions poured into the town and out of sight, Hoffmeister moved his tactical headquarters to the outskirts of Ortona. Because the buildings and the rubble of the town limited fields of observation to a hundred yards or less, no single

[40] Zuehlke, *Ortona*, group of photos after p. 124 (top left and top centre photos); Zuehlke, *Battle of Ortona* (Kanata, Canvet Publications Ltd., 2019), p. 94 (bottom left photo); Whitcombe and Gilmour, *The Pictorial History of Canada's Army Overseas 1939-1945*, p. 105 (top right photo). Brief video footage of the soldiers in the top left photo advancing in Ortona can be viewed in Edoardo di Pierro's documentary "The Battle of Ortona" at minutes 38:50 to 38:57 on the "Youtube" website.

> position could give Hoffmeister the view he needed to get an adequate feel for the battle. That made it necessary to keep moving about. One member of the tactical headquarters described Hoffmeister's routine: 'During the morning the Brigadier breezed into town, right up to the forward troops and very nearly got hit. He did this every morning during the ORTONA fighting.' A dangerous way of doing business, but it suited the tactical situation."[41]

Hoffmeister realized that he could not really influence the battle the same way he could control operations in open country. An urban fight like Ortona prevented the use of mass firepower, flanking manoeuvres to swiftly isolate and cut off enemy positions, or centralized control. Therefore, that day Hoffmeister established a new standard operating procedure that continued every day of the Ortona fight. He visited the town at least once or twice daily to understand what was occurring, allowed officers and troops to see him in the thick of the fight and appreciate what they were going through, talked with them to see how they were doing and what they needed and to cheer them on, rather than micro-manage his battalion and company commanders.[42] It gave Hoffmeister at least a little control, a little situational awareness and boosted morale. As one subordinate recalled "He knew instinctively…that his presence would inspire confidence in the troops. And he wanted to know what the hell was going on!" while another stated "You just felt…he's there. I should be too."[43] The "dangerous way of doing business" became apparent though: on his frequent trips into Ortona Hoffmeister was almost killed at least three times in this week of fighting.

By the end of the day the Loyal Eddies reached the *Piazza Vittoria* and captured two German anti-tank guns, an 81mm mortar and three prisoners. The tanks then withdrew for the night to guard against German anti-tank infiltration parties and to

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[41] Delaney, *The Soldiers' General*, p. 101.

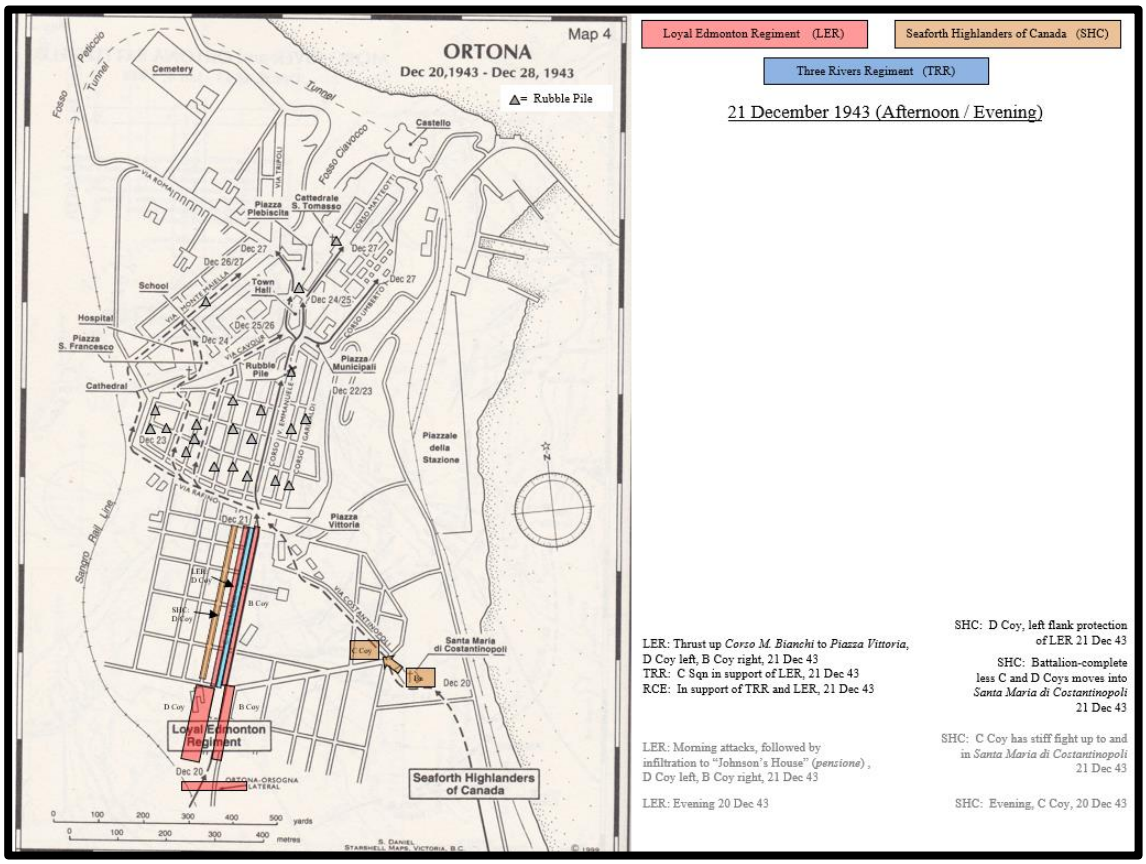
[42] Delaney, *The Soldiers' General*, p. 102; Delaney, "When Leadership Really Mattered," *Intrepid Warriors,* p. 145.

[43] Delaney, "When Leadership Really Mattered," *Intrepid Warriors,* p. 145.

replenish ammunition and fuel. The Loyal Eddies companies and the Seaforths' D Company remained to set a hasty defense and prepare for a German counterattack that never materialized, and conducted patrols around the south side of the *piazza*. This also allowed for the replenishment of ammunition, rations and water, to give the physically exhausted troops a time to rest and to receive orders on what was to occur the next day. At the Loyal Eddies headquarters 2130 hours direction for the next day's actions were dictated to the brigade's senior leadership.[44]

Throughout the night leaders checked on their troops as both Canadian and German artillery and mortar fire rained down on the town. When a rare silence occurred, the Canadians overheard Germans talking softly to each other, demonstrating an uncomfortable closeness between the two sides.[45]

[44] LER WD, Dec 1943/09-1944/06, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15114, LAC; Zuehlke, *Ortona*, p. 257.
[45] Stevens, *A City at War*, p. 272; LER WD, Dec 1943/09-1944/06, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15114, LAC; Zuehlke, *Ortona*, pp. 257-258.



Above map is Map 4, p. XX in Zuehlke, *Ortona* and has been modified by the thesis author using Microsoft PowerPoint.

Day 3 – Wednesday 22 December 1943: Advance into Old Town

Weather: A fine day. Warmer. Good visibility.[46]

Approximate Fighting Strength as of 0600 hours 22 December 1943				
Unit	Strength (Officers / ORs)	KIA (Officers / ORs)	WIA (Officers / ORs)	MIA (Officers / ORs)
HQ 2 CIB	15 / 48	-	-	-
PPCLI	32 / 585	-	0 / 3	-
LER	39 / 623	0 / 3	1 / 19	-
SHC	38 / 608	1 / 6	1 / 9	0 / 1
RCA 90th AT Bty	7 / 131	-	-	-

Hoffmeister had dictated to his subordinate commanders at the Loyal Eddies headquarters the evening before that this day's actions were to have the Loyal Eddies with the engineers, tanks and artillery anti-tank guns in support force the *Piazza Vittoria* and then continue their advance up Highway 16 / *Corso Vittorio Emmanuele* into the heart of the town.[47] The Seaforths' D Company would remain attached to the Loyal Eddies with the continued task of protecting the latter's left flank.[48] The remainder of the Seaforths were to remain just east of the *Piazza Vittoria*; given they were as an entire battalion not fully committed to the fighting just yet, Hoffmeister more than likely wanted to see how the day's events played out. If the Loyal Eddies could make good progress in their advance north, fine. If not, he could commit a full second infantry battalion to the fight. The Patricias were to remain just southwest of the town with one company out to protect the brigade's left flank.[49]

[46] HQ 2 CIB WD, Dec 1943, LAC.
[47] TRR WD, Dec 1943, LAC.
[48] SHC WD, Dec 1943, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15256, LAC.
[49] HQ 2 CIB WD, Dec 1943, LAC.

Once the Canadians passed through the *Piazza Vittoria* they would be into Ortona's central and northern sections called "Old Town." Its effective geographic crown was the *Castello* ("Castle"), built in the 15th century and a reminder of the days when danger came from the seas rather than from the narrow strip of plateau to the southwest.[50] Although the castle's walls were thick, it had long been abandoned. Northeastern sections were collapsing slowly down the cliff and the walls had been weakened by earthquakes and railway tunnelling.[51] As a result it was not used as a keystone in the German defence.[52] From the *Castello* densely packed, strongly-built stone and brick rowhouses extended southwest to the *Via Rapino* and *Piazza Vittoria*.[53] The first storey was often just a single large windowless room, restricting entry to one solid wooden door with the room itself serving traditionally as a shop for a craftsman, grocer or shopkeeper or as a home for Ortona's poorest residents.[54] The second to fourth stories were mostly residential apartments with a few stark rooms, shuttered windows and iron rail balconies.[55] In those row houses German paratroopers made ready their defence.

The *Corso M. Bianchi* ended at the south side of the *Piazza Vittoria*, but Highway 16 carried onto the road directly opposite running northward along the *Corso Vittorio Emmanuele*. Two blocks east of the *Corso V. Emmanuele* the *Corso Garibaldi* ran parallel along the cliffs. When the *Corso V. Emmanuele* reached the *Piazza Municipali* it split into three main streets, the *Corso Umberto I* running northeast along the cliffs,

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[50] Nicholson, *Official History*, p. 324.

[51] Porter, *DND DHH CMHQ reports*, p. 86, para 245.; Reader's Digest, *The Canadians at War 1939/45, Volume 2*, p. 368; Zuehlke, *Ortona*, p. 37

[52] Ian Gooderson, "Assimilating Urban Battle Experience - The Canadians at Ortona," p. 65.

[53] Cook, *The Necessary War*, p. 405. It is recommended that the reader see Appendix I, Maps 4 and 7.

[54] Gooderson, "Assimilating Urban Battle Experience - The Canadians at Ortona," p. 65; Zuehlke, *Ortona*, p. 37.

[55] Zuehlke, *Ortona*, p. 37.

the *Corso Matteotti* running north towards the *Castello*, and the *Via Tripoli* that allowed vehicles to exit the town through the north end. On the town's west side the east-west *Via Rapino* turned into the *Via Donmarco*, which then turned north and split near the *Piazza San Francesco* to the *Via Cavour* and *Via Monte Maiella*, both streets running northeast towards the *Via Tripoli*.[56] All of these major roads were linked by secondary streets built in irregular blocks running north-south and east-west. The main streets were wide enough for tanks, but the combination of Old Town's very narrow streets with the German rubble plan now made any advance up those streets extremely challenging.[57]



Left: "*Via Dolorosa*, Ortona" by Charles Comfort.[58] With the destroyed *Cattedrale San Tomasso* far in the background, Comfort achieves the visual effect here for the narrowness of Ortona's secondary streets in Old Town. The painting also emphasizes how effective the Germans' rubble program was with regards to making already narrow secondary streets even more challenging to advance through. The Canadian soldier who is taking cover behind the green shutter door on the left gives a sense of the narrowness of the secondary streets.

Pre-dawn reconnaissance patrols by the Loyal Eddies before first light on 22 December revealed how the narrow side streets of Old Town were blocked with rubble

[56] It is recommended that the reader review Appendix I, p. 210, Map 5 to review the location of the main roads.

[57] Bayerlein, "Parachute Engineers in Combat, Ortona 1943," *Canadian Military History*, p. 47. As discussed in Chapter 2, p. 32, footnotes 18-24.

[58] Canadian War Museum, "Painting, *Via Dolorosa*, Ortona," by Charles Comfort. https://www.warmuseum.ca/collections/artifact/1014496/?q=paint+brush&page_num=1&item_num=3&media_irn=5400304

but the *Corso Vittorio Emmanuele* was free and clear for several hundred metres, with a large rubble pile just 25 yards short of the *Piazza Municipali*. It was clear to the Canadians that the Germans hoped their enemy would opt for the easier route up the *Corso Vittorio Emmanuele* so that they could be brought into the *Piazza Municipali*. The large rubble pile just before it would then bar the tanks from entering the *piazza* and thus force the dismounted infantry into the Germans' principle killing zone.[59]

Lieutenant-Colonel Jefferson directed that the Loyal Eddies clear the *Piazza Vittoria* first, then advance up the c*orso* so that Three Rivers' Captain F.W. Johnson's 5 Troop could continue supporting the advance. He also re-organized the battalion for the day due to the past two days losses so they could advance along both main roads: A Company would advance and clear the buildings on the left side of the *Corso Vittorio Emmanuele*, D Company would advance to clear the right side. The next side street to the east *Via Sapienza* was choked with rubble, so B Company would move to the next street over and advance up the *Corso Garibaldi*.[60] C Company was stripped down and its troops reassigned to the other three bringing them up to about 60 soldiers each.[61] Engineer sections remained co-located with the infantry platoons. Additionally, the Loyal Eddies brought up their own internal 6-pounder anti-tank guns which could be manoeuvred by two-to-three dismounted troops to add extra direct firepower. They were reinforced by eight more 6-pounders from the Royal Canadian Artillery's 90th Anti-Tank Battery. Together the Loyal Eddies and the gunners could commence

[59] Nicholson, *Official History*, p. 325.
[60] Nicholson, *Official History*, pp. 325-326; TRR WD, Dec 1943, LAC.
[61] Zuehlke, *Ortona*, p. 263.

blowing down the rubble piles and fire on any German positions that revealed themselves.

Clearing of the *Piazza Vittoria* was the Loyal Eddies, engineers, Three Rivers' and artillerymen's first task of the day. 5 Troop moved into the square and positioned their four tanks to fire down all the streets that branched off the *piazza*. When the Loyal Eddies moved into, across or around the edges of the square and began taking fire, the Three Rivers' tank crews identified German machine gun and sniper positions in the buildings surrounding the *piazza* and methodically fired their tanks main guns into windows and doors. The tank fire was effective, but that did not stop 5 Troop's Sergeant Johnny Marchand becoming wounded in action when a sniper shot him in the neck.[62] Once it was determined that the buildings surrounding the *piazza* were clear of the enemy, the Loyal Eddies moved across to begin their advance up the *Corso Vittorio Emmanuele.*

[62] TRR WD, Dec 1943, LAC.







Photos: A Canadian Army film and photography unit was in Ortona on 22 December 1943, and as a result a number of photos of Sgt Marchand's post-wound triage were captured.

Top photo: Taken from the northeast corner of the *Piazza Vittoria* looking west towards the *Via Rapino*, a photographer not only captures personnel providing medical assistance to Sgt Marchand (right side of photo), but also other medical and armour personnel in the square. On the left a medic tends to a Three Rivers regiment walking wounded soldier while a second medic observes. Another soldier ducks and runs across the opening to the *Corso Vittorio Emmanuele* to avoid possible German sniper fire from up that street. Three Rivers Regiment tanks are in the background.

Lower photos: Other shots taken of the personnel conducting the medical triage of Sgt Marchand.[63]



Photo: With the *Piazza Vittoria* now cleared, two Three Rivers Regiment M-4 Medium "Sherman" tanks provide support to the dismounted soldiers in the square. The tank on the left observes west down the *Via Rapino,* while the tank in the centre of the photo has its main armament looking north up the *Corso Vittorio Emmanuele.*[64]

Now that the Loyal Eddies had cleared the *Piazza Vittoria*, the next task was to continue advancing up the *Corso Vittorio Emmanuele* using the same tactics as the day before as directed by Lieutenant-Colonel Jefferson, clearing each house on both sides of the street along the way. However, Eddies' D Company's Major Jim Stone was

[63] TRR WD, Dec 1943, LAC; Reader's Digest, *The Canadians at War, Volume 2*, pp. 366-367 (top photo); *Canada At War*, www.canadaatwar.ca (website) (bottom photos). Some sources write the incorrect date of Sgt Marchand's wounding, as both 21 December and 23 December are sometimes sited. However, the Three Rivers war diary clearly states that the incident occurred 22 December. Also, video footage of Sgt Marchand's triage can be found on the British Pathé Gazette's "Battle of Ortona" documentary at minutes 1:10 to 1:13 and Edoardo di Pierro's "The Battle of Ortona" documentary at minutes 35:36 to 35:47.

[64] *Canada at War*, www.canadaatwar.ca (website) (photo). Video footage of these tanks engaging German positions from the *Piazza Vittoria* can be found on the British Pathé Gazette's "Battle of Ortona" documentary at minutes 0:12 to 0:18, 1:14 to 1:20 and 1:25 to 1:34 on the "Youtube" website.

uncomfortable conducting these same tactics, so he devised a bold plan that still met Jefferson's intent to reach the *Piazza Municipali*, but instead he asked to make a surprise charge down the *corso*.[65] It meant not clearing the houses on either side of the street, but it just might bypass any small German positions which they could either mop up afterwards or force the Germans to abandon their positions for fear of being trapped behind the Canadian lines. Stone felt that the change in tactics was worth the risk:

> "…I talked to my commanding officer, and I suggested to him that the Germans use noise to create an effect, diving *Stukas* and 'Moaning Minnie' mortars, that perhaps we could try the same thing. And so the squadron of tanks came up, one troop with my company, started through the town in low gear, with sirens screaming, and the main armament firing forward down the road into houses on each side, and other armaments shooting sideways while we travelled under that fire forward.[66]

The Three Rivers' Troop had taken casualties and expended their ammo so 2 Troop was brought up to support Stone's change of tactics which Jefferson had approved. The tanks lined up in single file and advanced, sirens blaring, along the *Corso Vittorio Emmanuele*, well-spaced between each other while the Edmonton infantry advanced alongside. If there were any Germans in the houses on each side of the street, they were either incapable of knowing what to do about the Canadian advance or they were withdrawing due to the swifter movement of the Canadians down the street. With the Germans wanting their enemy to advance down this *corso*, it meant that the Canadians would only arrive at their main defensive area that much sooner.

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[65] In modern urban operations doctrine, Stone wanted to conduct an urban operation "penetration." This occurs when a military force travels from one point to a second point or objective but does not clear buildings on either side of the street when doing so. Although this allows for a swifter advance, there is a great risk that the military unit will be fired upon by enemy soldiers who are in the buildings that they are bypassing. DND (Canada), *A Tactical Guide to Urban Operations*, pp. 4-1 to 4-5; and NATO Standard, ATP-99, *Urban Tactics*, pp. 4-5 to 4-13.

[66] BDFL, minutes 11:29 to 12:14.



Photo: Soldiers from the Loyal Edmonton Regiment, engineers and a Sherman tank from the Three Rivers Regiment move along *Corso Vittorio Emmanuele* in Ortona's "Old Town" 22 or 23 December 1943. Note the height and construction of the buildings, and how they stand shoulder-to-shoulder with each other. "Stone's penetration" was conducted down this street.[67]

The rush worked well until it stopped just a couple of dozen yards before the large rubble pile just south of the *Piazza Municipali*. Stone commented:

> "I must say we made remarkable progress for about a hundred yards until we got to the first square when unfortunately, the lead tank stopped. And I ran to the tank and with my rifle butt I made enough noise that I got the tank commander to put his head out and I said 'Why are you stopped?' And he said 'Looks like mines on the road and tanks are very vulnerable in towns.' I won't repeat my profanity at the time, but there was no more tank support and I must say the whole momentum of the attack died right then."[68]

The tanks stopped their forward movement and had also stopped firing, causing the infantry to follow suit. Stone was extremely upset that the tank commander hesitated at one particular piece of sheet metal that he worried was covering an anti-tank mine. Stone recalled how the tank commander stated "Don't you realize that a tank is worth $20,000? I can't risk it." Stone replied that each of his infantrymen were not armoured at all and they were worth a million dollars apiece. At that point, the Germans appeared to have quickly regrouped after realizing that the Canadians had stopped on the main *corso*. Small arms fire and a 57mm *PAK* anti-tank gun began shooting from the *piazza*. Stone directed a lone PIAT gunner to take out the anti-tank gun but the round failed to

[67] Legion Magazine, *Into Ortona Then and Now*, https://legionmagazine.com/en/2009/03/into-ortona-then-and-now/. There are discrepancies within the resources as to the exact date of when the photo was taken. Also, video footage of the tanks and the soldiers advancing down this *corso* can be seen in the British Pathé Gazette's "Battle of Ortona" documentary at minutes 0:20 to 0:27 and minutes 1:34 to 1:37 found on the "Youtube" website.

[68] BDFL, minutes 12:14 to 12:56.

hit the target, forcing Stone to take out the gun himself using a smoke grenade as cover and then throwing a grenade as he charged the gun, killing the crew. Two infantrymen managed to get past the large rubble pile and into the *Piazza Municipali* but one was almost immediately killed in action. Knowing that they could go no further, the infantrymen from both A and D Companies quickly went into the houses on either side of the *corso* and around the south side of the *piazza* to begin clearing them, for to remain here with no forward movement would be a grave tactical error.[69]

As it turned out, Stone was faulty for becoming angry at the tank commander, as a group of mines were soon discovered near the north end of the *corso* close to the large rubble pile, which prevented 2 Troop's tanks from advancing forward. The Canadian engineers and pioneers could not remove the mines as the German machine guns kept them at bay. Corporal George Campion took a handful of smoke grenades, ran out into the open street about 30 yards in front of the mines and threw the grenades to create a smoke screen. The engineers ran out into the street – it is strongly suggested that even with the smoke screen they demonstrated as much courage as Campion – verified the mines were safe to handle and began carrying them away, while Campion returned to grab more smoke grenades. Once the smoke had cleared the Germans drove the engineers off with small arms fire, so Campion once again ran out into the open, threw more smoke grenades so that the engineers could return to their work, cleared the remaining mines off of the street, and allowed the tanks to move forward to the large

[69] Stone would later return to the area and pick up the piece of sheet metal that had so concerned the tank commander. There was nothing underneath of it, which only fuelled his anger. Zuehlke, *Ortona*, pp. 263-265.

rubble pile at the south entrance to the *Piazza Municipali*. Campion later received the Military Medal for his actions.[70]

Meanwhile, a short distance to the east, B Company kept pace on the Eddies' right flank along the *Corso Garibaldi,* clearing buildings en route and coming just short of the *piazza*. All three of the companies with their engineers, anti-tank guns and tanks took the remainder of the day to clear the buildings on their respective streets. Major (retired) A.J. Rudd, a sergeant and acting platoon commander with the Eddies' A Company during the battle, discussed the tactics that had been used up to this point in the fighting, that of clearing houses from the main floor upwards (the "bottom-up" technique):

> "The battalion advanced into Ortona with two companies up, A and B, on the left and right of the main street. Covered by Bren gunners, the lead sections closed up to the door, the section commander would toss in a '36' or '69' hand grenade and then the section would rush in to clear the bottom floor. We tried to gain the upstairs as soon as possible."[71]

By the end of the day the Loyal Eddies had achieved a strong toehold into Old Town. As per the evening before there had been no German counterattack, so the Eddies established hasty defensive positions on the south side of the *piazza* to allow them the opportunity to rest, remove casualties, be resupplied and await the next day's orders. The supporting tanks, which had not only provided direct fire throughout the day against German positions in all of the buildings main and upper floors, also brought up supplies to the infantry and engineers. When they withdrew for the evening at 1700 hours to replenish their ammunition and fuel, they also evacuated infantry and engineer casualties.[72] At 2010 hours a German patrol of ten soldiers with three MG 42s

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[70] Stevens, *A City at War*, p. 274. Sadly, after being promoted to the rank of Sergeant, Campion would be killed in action at the Hitler Line near *Monte Cassino* in the Spring of 1944. Mount Campion in Jasper National Park is named after him.

[71] Brown, "The Rock of Accomplishment," *Canadian Military History*, p. 15. To clarify, the Eddies were actually advancing three companies up, as discussed on p.77, footnote 60.

[72] Nicholson, *Official History*, p. 326.

supported by anti-tank guns was engaged by B Company who successfully drove away the infiltrators.[73]

That day, the Seaforths' D Company did not advance with the Edmontons. Instead early in the day Lieutenant-Colonel Jefferson shifted them to the west side of the *Piazza Vittoria* to protect the Loyal Eddies' left flank by clearing down the *Via Rapino* to the *Via Donmarco* towards the west side of town. When the Loyal Eddies, engineers and the Three Rivers tanks cleared the *Piazza Vittoria* and began their advance up the *Corso Vittorio Emmanuele* the Seaforths' D Company, engineers and supporting tanks advanced down the *Via Rapino*, thus pressing the German defenders in two directions. The Seaforth company encountered German positions as they slowly advanced west along the *via* but they faced a number of challenges. They were already well-understrength, counting only 42 soldiers in total when they joined the



Photo (above): Two Three Rivers Regiment Sherman tanks in the *Piazza Vittoria*, Ortona. The tank on the left points its armament north up the *Corso Vittorio Emmanuele* to support the Loyal Eddies' advance. The tank in the far distant centre points its armament west down the *Via Rapino* to support the Seaforths' D Company.[74]

[73] HQ 2 CIB WD, Dec 1943, LAC. Interestingly, this event is not mentioned in the Loyal Edmonton's war diary at all.

[74] Photo from *Canada At War*, www.canadaatwar.ca (website). Interestingly, both Nicholson in the *Official History* and Zuehlke in *Ortona* have this photo in their publications, and the text in both states that these tanks are moving north up the *Corso Vittorio Emmanuele* towards the *Piazza Municipali* and the Rubble Pile on 23 December 1943. However, when one looks at Google Maps in its street view mode, one can see that the building on the left remains standing in the *Piazza Vittoria* to this day, and that the above photo was taken from the northeast corner of the *Piazza Vittoria* looking west down the *Via Rapino*. Also, given the very little amount of damage to the street in the photo above compared to the photos on p. 79, it is more than likely the early morning of 22 December 1943.

battle at Ortona on 20 December.[75] There was also no possibility of a swift advance westwards due to "…heavy enemy opposition all the way, the enemy being well entrenched in demolished buildings…" and they were only tasked to protect the Edmontons' left flank.[76]

The remainder of the battalion remained around *Santa Maria di Constantinopoli* church throughout the day resting and then conducting battle procedure should they be committed by Hoffmeister to battle the next day. They came under German mortar fire as a result around 1030 hours. The church, with its heavy brick walls and lead-tiled roof provided good protection against the fire and shrapnel. However, one mortar round struck the anti-tank platoon's ammunition truck. The explosion destroyed the battalion Intelligence Officer's jeep. Also, with great risk the Seaforths Commanding Officer Major Thomson drove his own jeep out of the danger area before it could be destroyed by the exploding ammunition. This mortar fire fell on the Seaforths throughout the afternoon until A



Photo (below): The Seaforths' anti-tank platoon's ammunition truck and the Intelligence Officer's jeep burns after the former was struck by German mortar fire outside the church of *Santa Maria di Constantinopoli*.[77]

[75] Roy, *The Seaforth Highlanders*, p. 265.
[76] SHC WD, Dec 1943, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15256, LAC.
[77] Nicholson, *Official History*, p. 336 (photo). In the accompanying narrative Nicholson in the *Official History* states that this event occurred 23 December, but that is incorrect. The Seaforths war diary's description of the event states 22 December; Whitcombe and Gilmour, *The Pictorial History of Canada's Army Overseas 1939-1945*, p. 109 (narrative). Also, video footage of these burning vehicles can be found in the British Pathé Gazette's "Battle of Ortona" documentary at minutes 1:08 to 1:10 on the "Youtube" website.

Company observation posts finally spotted the enemy mortars around 1500 hours and employed their anti-tank guns and mortars to destroy or scuttle the Germans.[78]

Canadian anti-tank gun tactics evolved swiftly enough that by the end of the day there was a standard procedure that would be used over the following days. First a high-explosive round was fired through the windows and/or doors, destroying any German soldiers and their weapons systems inside. If windows and doors were not present, they initially punched a hole through a building's wall with an armour-piercing round, then followed it up with the high-explosive round through the same hole.[79] When German troops or sharpshooters were being particularly stubborn while holding out in a building, the anti-tank gunners went to work on them too:

> "All of them learned how to cave-in clay-tile roofs onto German snipers with a single well-placed 6-pounder shell. When it was discovered that the 6-pounder's solid shot could not penetrate the thick stone and masonry of Italian row houses, they fired high-explosive rounds through windows and doors to burst inside in their own version of room-clearing tactics."[80]

As one soldier later recalled "We used the anti-tank guns in a unique way. The shells could not penetrate the granite walls, sometimes 4 feet thick. So we just put them (the shells) through the windows and they bounced around inside much like they would in an enemy tank doing horrible damage."[81] If Three Rivers Regiment tanks could not elevate their guns high enough to fire at enemy soldiers in the upper stories of houses, the 6-pounders were rolled up rubble ramps.[82] In the later days of the fight, the 6-pounders were used to topple buildings by blowing out their corners, and it did not take a lot of shells or time to do so. This allowed the Canadians to "clear" the buildings

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[78] Roy, *The Seaforth Highlanders*, p. 266.
[79] Windsor, Sarty, Milner, *Loyal Gunners*, p. 310; Stevens, *A City at War*, p. 276.
[80] Windsor, Sarty, Milner, *Loyal Gunners*, p. 310.
[81] Dancocks, *The D-Day Dodgers*, pp. 220-221; Copp with Nielsen, *No Price Too High*, p. 132.
[82] Windsor, Sarty, Milner, *Loyal Gunners*, p. 310.

without having to send infantry soldiers into harm's way. Two large blocks of Ortona were destroyed with this method.[83] Seeing as how the range of these weapons is 1000 yards and meant to destroy tanks, one does not have to guess how violent the effects of this weapon are at such a short range when used against piles of rubble, houses, and German bodies.[84]

The results of using the 6-pounders in particular as "anti-rubble," anti-sniper" and "anti-house" weapons were fantastic. "I can't remember how many bloody barrels we went through. Eventually, instead of us going back to pick up ammunition at the ammunition park, they sent up the big trucks loaded with ammunition. We were firing it as fast as we could. That's where I lost my hearing," commented Lieutenant George Brown, who commanded the Loyal Eddies anti-tank platoon.[85] Lieutenant-Colonel Jefferson thought the anti-tank guns were "marvellous stuff," and Welsh's after-action report described "the effect of 6-pounder high explosive in buildings" as "devastating." The Germans seemed to agree with that assessment, as the war diary recorded "from the evidence of enemy prisoners interrogated, the effect on the enemy was most detrimental."[86]

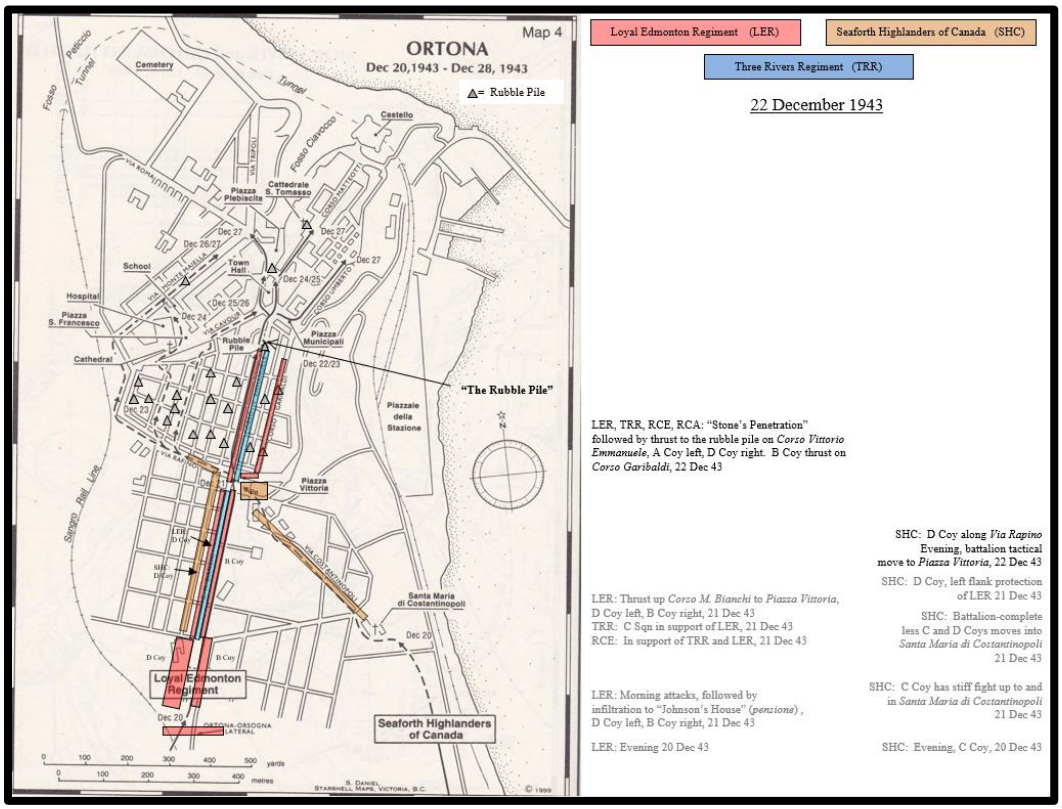
In the early evening Hoffmeister went forward to the Seaforths' headquarters to announce Thomson's promotion to Acting Lieutenant-Colonel, and briefed him that the brigade plan had changed.[87] With the stubborn defence being employed by the Germans – it is remembered that the *Piazza Municipali* was the eastern section of their main defensive area, and it is here that the German paratroopers had to halt the Canadian

[83] Ibid., p. 310.
[84] Reader's Digest, *The Tools of War*, p. 40.
[85] Dancocks, *The D-Day Dodgers*, p. 178.
[86] Porter, *DND DHH CMHQ reports*, p. 91, para. 260; Windsor, Sarty, Milner, *Loyal Gunners*, p. 310.
[87] SHC WD, Dec 1943, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15256, LAC.

advance as part of their effort along the *Gustav* Line – Hoffmeister had made the decision to commit the Seaforths entirely to the fight. The Loyal Eddies were to destroy the Germans in the *Piazza Municipali* and continue their advance through Old Town towards the *Via Tripoli*. With the *Corso Vittorio Emmanuele* now cleared it was now the boundary between the Eddies and the Seaforths. Thomson was directed to move his battalion to the *Piazza Vittoria* that evening and the following morning would advance west up the *Via Rapino* and *Via Donmarco* so that they could then turn north and clear the western side of Ortona. Hoffmeister hoped the Seaforths could press through *Piazza San Francesco*, advance up *Via Cavour* and flank the German position at the *Piazza Municipali*.[88] The PPCLI was to remain in reserve.[89] The Seaforths moved to the *Piazza Vittoria* that evening to link up with D Company and establish hasty defensive positions until the advance the next morning.

Three days of determined fighting by the German defenders had made the Canadians realize that Ortona and not the *Arielli* river was the eastern anchor of the *Gustav* Line, and the Loyal Eddies would not be able to win this fight alone. Hoffmeister had made the decision to make this a full-brigade fight in order to win the town and open up Highway 16.

[88] Zuehlke, *Ortona*, p. 266.
[89] Delaney, *The Soldiers' General*, pp. 101-102.



Above map is Map 4, p. XX in Zuehlke, *Ortona* and has been modified by the thesis author using Microsoft PowerPoint.

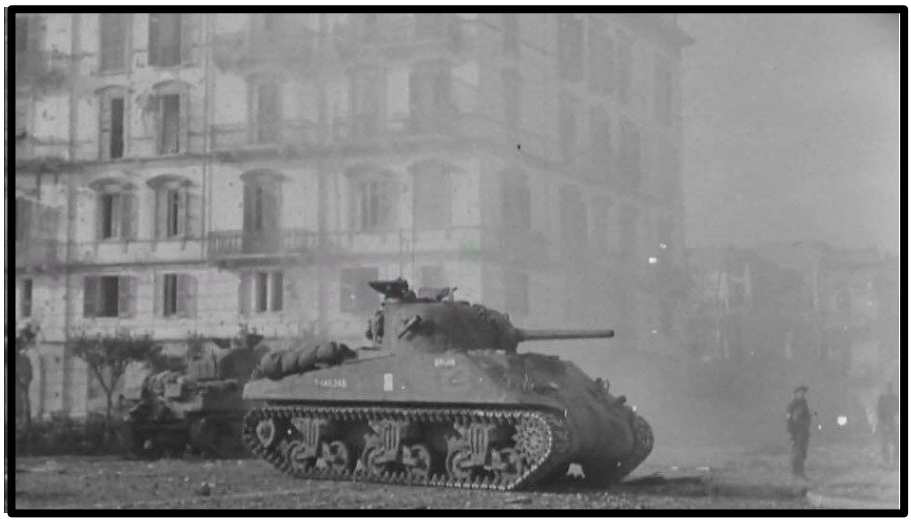


Photo: Three Rivers Regiment M-4 Medium Sherman Tanks in the *Piazza Vittoria*.[90]

[90] *Canada At War*, www.canadaatwar.ca (website).

Chapter 4 – 23-24 December 1943

Day 4 – Thursday 23 December 1943: The Slow Advance Through Old Town

"In Memory of a Dear Son. Time So Far Has Only Proved
How Much We Miss You."

- The statement written by the family of Private Donald Roderick McDonald, Loyal Edmonton Regiment, killed in action 23 December 1943 (age 22). Private McDonald is buried at Moro River Commonwealth War Cemetery, Italy.[1]

Weather: Foggy, damp, intermittent showers, visibility generally poor.[2]

Approximate Fighting Strength as of 0600 hours 23 December 1943				
Unit	Strength (Officers / ORs)	KIA (Officers / ORs)	WIA (Officers / ORs)	MIA (Officers / ORs)
HQ 2 CIB	15 / 46	-	-	-
PPCLI	30 / 576	0 / 3	0 / 7	0 / 1
LER	35 / 572	-	-	-
SHC	26 / 584	1 / 6	1 / 9	0 / 1
RCA 90th AT Bty	7 / 131	-	-	-
TRR	Unknown	0 / 1	0 / 2	

With the realization that Ortona was the eastern anchor of the *Gustav* Line 1st Canadian Infantry Divison's commander Major-General Chris Vokes directed 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade to advance northwards just to the west of Ortona to reach the coast road at the northwestern end of the town in order to cut off and isolate Ortona's German defenders completely. 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade would begin that advance today and have challenging days ahead.[3] Inside the town the Loyal Eddies were now at the *Piazza Municipali*, the eastern portion of the German principle kill zone of their main defensive area. Here the enemy's defence would harden, supported by the larger, stronger buildings surrounding the *piazza* and a number of weapons systems. An anti-

[1] Eric McGeer, *Words of Valediction and Remembrance: Canadian Epitaphs of the Second World War* (St. Catharines: Vanwell Publishing Limited, 2008), p. 162.
[2] HQ 2 CIB WD, Dec 1943, LAC.
[3] Stevens, *The Royal Canadian Regiment*, p. 116.

tank gun hidden on the street and no less than five machine gun emplacements with supporting riflemen in the buildings' second floors anchored the *piazza*'s defence; riflemen, submachine gunners and grenadiers waited to welcome the Canadians on the main and third floors, with snipers and marksmen on the top floors.[4]

Lieutenant-Colonel Jefferson directed the Edmontons to continue advancing north towards the *Via Tripoli* to isolate and cut off the northeastern portion of Old Town.[5] A and D Companies were to clear the buildings around *Piazza Municipali* while B Company would simultaneously clear the buildings east to secure the south end of *Corso Umberto I* and then move northeastwards. With the precedent already set from the previous two days, Hoffmeister directed Thomson to give Jefferson a Seaforth company to protect the Loyal Eddies' left flank so that Jefferson did not have to worry about a German attack driving into the Edmontons from the west side of the town; the Seaforths' B Company received the task. The company commander Captain Buchanan went forward at first light to conduct a reconnaissance on the streets directly west of the *Corso Vittorio Emmanuele* to determine where his company would advance exactly. B Company would eventually be dispatched at 1100 hours to conduct this task.[6]

The high level of violence that had been expended to get 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade's troops just to the middle of the town had Hoffmeister deciding to commit even more brigade resources to the fight to give his sub-units more of an advantage. First, he directed the Three Rivers' Lieutenant-Colonel E.L. Booth to give one more additional

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[4] Stevens, *A City at War*, p. 274. DND (Canada), *Unique Operations - Urban*, p. 6. Please also review Chapter 2, p. 36, footnotes 29 to 31.

[5] Nicholson, *Official History*, p. 326.

[6] SHC WD 1943/01-31 December, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15256, LAC. Interestingly, Nicholson in the *Official History* states that D Company received this task, which as a result has many other sources stating the same thing. The source of the confusion is more than likely because D Company had received the task of protecting the Eddies' left flank on 21-22 December.

troop of tanks to each infantry battalion. A Squadron sent Lieutenant R.H. Heggie's 3 Troop, and C Squadron sent Captain R.C. Yelland's 4 Troop to the Loyal Eddies with Lieutenant Bier's 2 Troop to the Seaforths. Secondly, in additional support to the Edmontons the RCA's 90th Anti-Tank Battery, J Troop, would position two 17-pounder anti-tank guns on a headland southeast of the town which had a direct line of sight into the area just northeast of the *Piazza Municipali* and along *Corso Umberto I*. The 17-pounder guns were too large and too heavy to manhandle the weapons down Ortona's streets, but the Canadians wanted to use them in an "anti-house" role. J Troop's commander Captain H. Burnett placed the guns approximately 1,500 metres southeast of Ortona; the view had direct line of sight which gave the gunners excellent firing opportunities against the houses along the cliffs. The 17-pounders were directed to fire armour-piercing rounds into the buildings containing the stubborn *Fallschirmjager*, with the Loyal Eddies observing where the rounds struck so they could call back corrections via radio. From this position they were tasked to batter the buildings and German defences all day.[7]

In the morning's early hours of darkness 4th Field Company's engineers with the Eddies' supporting and acting as security verified and removed any obstacles on the *Corso Vittorio Emmanuele* to allow Yelland's 4 Troop to move up in support.[8] However, there was still the matter of the large rubble pile at the south end of the *Piazza Municipali*. Once the engineers completed their task, the Loyal Eddies' Captain E.L Boyd brought up his 6-pounder anti-tank guns and at 0500 hours demonstrated their

[7] Windsor, Sarty, Milner, *Loyal Gunners*, pp. 310-311. Very brief video footage of the 17-pounder anti-tank gun firing at German positions 1,500 yards from Ortona's southeast can be found in Edoardo di Pierro's "The Battle of Ortona" documentary at minutes 33:45 to 33:46 on the "Youtube" website.

[8] HQ 2 CIB WD, Dec 1943, LAC; TRR WD, Dec 1943, LAC.

value as violent alarm clocks. The anti-tank guns fired repeatedly at the rubble pile methodically lowering it and blowing concrete, steel, and brick into the *piazza*. Once enough of the rubble was reduced, the anti-tank guns began firing at other obstacles and suspected German positions around the square.[9]

Three of the five German machine gun posts located in one building on the left side of the *piazza* engaged D Company's troops as soon as they entered it. Despite this heavy volume of small arms fire and grenades Private C.G. Rattray with two friends wormed their way over the reduced rubble pile and entered the building. Rattray left his two comrades to deal with the Germans on the main floor, moved upstairs and captured the three machine guns, the five enemy soldiers manning them and an assortment of weapons.[10] With the Edmontons' two companies now engaged in full combat in the *piazza*, 4 Troop's tanks arrived at 0800 hours, crawled over what was left of the rubble pile and fired into the remaining German positions, but could go no further due to a hidden German 75mm anti-tank gun.[11] The laborious, time-consuming fight was now on as the Loyal Eddies D and A Companies, supported by the engineers, tanks and the anti-tank guns slowly worked their way around the *piazza* by clearing each room, each floor, and each building from the ground floor upwards. The anti-tank guns were assisted by the mortars in killing or keeping German snipers and marksmen at bay, the rounds striking the top floors and rooftops of the buildings on the other side of the *piazza*.[12] The violence was intense, incredibly high and the building clearing process

[9] HQ 2 CIB WD, Dec 1943, LAC; LER WD 1943/09-1944/06, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15114, 28 Dec 1943, LAC; Stevens, *A City at War*, p. 274.

[10] Stevens, *A City at War*, pp. 274-275. Interestingly, Zuehlke includes the same story in *Ortona* on pp. 265-266, using Stevens as the resource, but writes the event as if it had occurred on 22 December. Stevens clearly indicates that the event occurred 23 December.

[11] TRR WD, Dec 1943, LAC.

[12] DND *Unique Operations – Urban*, p. 8.

took all morning.[13] While D and A Companies, the engineers, the tanks, and artillery kept the Germans busy in the *Piazza Municipali*, B Company began working their way along the south end of *Corso Umberto I*.

Moving through the streets and entering buildings on the main floor proved to be dangerous – casualties were beginning to add up. The Germans expected that the Canadians were fighting into buildings from the bottom-up as they had done for the first two days of the battle. As a result, the Germans held the initiative and could plan their defence accordingly – siting their small arms to shoot at, or placing booby traps at the entrances of, doors and windows where they knew the Canadians had to enter – and thus inflict more casualties. One Canadian who recognized that to conduct this same bottom-up tactic repeatedly was reinforcing failure believed there was a better way to fight that would give the Canadians the initiative. In the afternoon the Loyal Eddies A Company commander, Captain Wilmot George (Bill) Longhurst, called up two of the battalion's pioneers to the top floor of a rowhouse the Edmontons had captured.[15] He directed them to create an



Photo:
Captain Wilmot George (Bill) Longhurst, Officer Commanding A Company, Loyal Edmonton Regiment is often credited with being the first to use the "mouseholing" technique.[14]

[13] As an example, during the Battle of Second Fallujah in November 2004 it took American forces approximately 45 minutes to clear a single two-storey house with fire support, and approximately 90 minutes to clear the same-sized house without fire support. Given that the buildings are the same size or larger in Ortona it would take the Canadians the same amount of time to clear each building as they advanced. Russell Glenn, "A Tale of Free Cities (Fallujah, Iraq 2004)," *Operations in the Urban Environment*, p. B-A-1-10. Given the size of the buildings around the *Piazza Municipali*, taking one-to-two hours to clear one building would be normal.

[14] Sadly, Longhurst was killed in action 21 October 1944 when the Loyal Eddies' A Company assaulted across the *Savio* River, Italy. He was 33 years old. Zuehlke, *Battle of Ortona*, pp. 74-75.

[15] Pioneers are infantry soldiers that have been given basic engineer training with regards to demolitions, obstacle construction and destruction, and building revetments and supports for structures. I have worked with infantry Pioneers frequently and they are invaluable for their skills.

improvised demolition from plastic explosive so that they could blow a hole in the wall that butted up against the building next door. They placed the explosive device on a chair to create the hole at the right height for entry, lit the fuse and all withdrew to the lower floors. The explosion created the hole, only due to the construction of the buildings being side-by-side, Longhurst discovered another wall. The process was repeated and another hole created which led into the next building. With the "mousehole" created, sections of troops swiftly moved up the stairs from the lower floor and went through the holes. After quickly clearing the top floor they began moving the building from the top-down, throwing grenades down the stairs first to shower the surprised Germans. The concussions from the grenades would momentarily daze the defenders, allowing the Canadians to swiftly move down the stairs and kill the enemy.[16]

This "mousehole" technique had actually been established beforehand as it was published in a British "Fighting in Built Up Areas" doctrinal publication, although within that document it was called "the vertical technique:" cut a hole in the roof of the house with an axe or explosive charge, throw in a number of grenades and enter the house while firing small arms. However, given the rare instances of sustained urban operations up to this point in the war, it was little known, in particular amongst the Canadians.[17] Regardless, with the success of it occurring here, Longhurst quickly directed his subordinates to employ it again, beginning a long afternoon of clearing

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[16] Zuehlke, *Ortona*, pp. 285-286; Porter, *DND DHH CMHQ reports*, p.89, para. 255.

[17] Although Major Jim Stone had taught in British training schools, he had never heard of the vertical technique. After Longhurst had reported his success, Stone recalled in two separate interviews "I was most intrigued; it was quite new to me," and "I'd been to battle drill schools, and I'd never heard of it." BDFL, minutes 21:50 to 21:54 and Dancocks, *The D-Day Dodgers*, p. 177, respectively.

buildings from the top-down instead of from the bottom-up. The word spread fast about the success of mouseholing amongst both the Loyal Eddies and the Seaforths battalions, and the Canadians soon began using it and refining the technique. Some realized that if the explosive charge was large enough, it could injure or kill Germans who were immediately on the other side of the wall due to the concussion and flying pieces of mortar, brick and wood. Once the mousehole was created, the Canadians learned to throw grenades through it to burst and daze or kill the enemy. Then they rushed through the newly blown entrance and finished off survivors with small arms fire. The Seaforths and their engineers used PIAT projectiles and abandoned German Teller anti-tank mines as well in order to mousehole:[18]

> "Sergeant Harry Rankin of the Seaforths' Pioneer Company argued that it was simply the logical thing to do, once the hazard of moving in the street was realized. Rankin's platoon was recovering hordes of Teller anti-tank mines, which were perfect for the task of mouse-holing. He would jam a bayonet into the wall, hang a Teller on it, slip a short time fuse to the built-in detonator, light it, and run like hell. Usually the result would be a nice hole in the wall through which the infantry could move. Sometimes the charge would fail to open a hole; other times it would bring the entire house crashing down. 'We aren't exactly practicing scientific demolitions here,' Rankin would say, when an officer complained that the house he was planning to capture had instead been demolished."[19]

Canadian engineers got creative with their explosive devices and demolition charges. The standard "beehive" charges were common and due to their manufacture could be safely handled. Its cone-shaped plastic explosive charge was placed on a chair

[18] Seaforths' commanding officer Lieutenant-Colonel Syd Thomson recalled that Teller mines were used to create holes through walls in his interview on the BDFL's "Fighting in Built Up Areas 1939-1945, Part 2, Ortona," minutes 22:34 - 23:30; Cook also mentions the Canadian use of Teller anti-tank mines in his book, *The Necessary War*, p. 411.

[19] Zuehlke, *Ortona*, pp. 286-287. It must be noted that the Seaforths only had a platoon, and not a company, of pioneer soldiers. By doctrinal standards infantry battalions only have one Pioneer platoon, although most if not all battalion commanders and their subordinate company commanders I know would love to have a company's worth of Pioneers given their skills!

or tied to a pole that was leaned against the wall so that the hole created would be high enough off the floor that troops could enter the adjoining room by ducking through the hole and not have to crawl on all fours to move through the entrance created. Attaching the explosive to a pole in order to lean it against the wall also allowed it to be placed from a covered position.[20] If beehives were not available, the engineers prepared improvised demolition charges unusual in design but effective in result. One method was to put approximately thirty pounds of explosive in a four-gallon gasoline can.[21] If the Canadians had to enter a building at street-level with the Germans above them, the engineers would put approximately thirty pounds of fused "808" plastic high-explosive on a chair in the centre of a room, ignite the fuse, and retire from the building; once it exploded there were rarely any upper rooms left to search.[22]

Throughout the day the Loyal Eddies D and A Companies with their supporting engineers, tanks, artillery, and mortars continued fighting through and around the *Piazza Municipali*, using the mouseholing technique and the top-down method as their main house clearing tactic. Both troops of tanks from A and C Squadrons were initially delayed when they entered the *Piazza Municipali* at 0800 hours by the German 75mm anti-tank gun but Sergeant R. Huard's tank crew destroyed it at 1100 hours. Afterwards all eight tanks advanced into and around the *piazza* to fire on at German positions on the

[20] Bercuson, *The Fighting Canadians*, p. 220.

[21] Porter, *DND DHH CMHQ reports*, p. 91, para. 260.

[22] Kerry and McDill, *The History of the Corps of Royal Canadian Engineers*, p. 170. It is okay to chuckle at that statement. I certainly did when I first read it.

Staff-Sergeant David Bellavia fought with the U.S. First Infantry Division (the "Big Red One") and was a veteran of the urban battle of Second Fallujah, Iraq in November-December 2004. He stated "Engineers usually get abused by the infantry, but the truth is they (Engineers) are the intellectuals of the combat arms branches. They have a million crafty solutions to problems that would make us knuckle-dragging infantry types scratch our heads and pause." After serving in the Canadian Armed Forces for 25 years as an infantry officer, I am inclined to agree with SSgt Bellavia's assessment of military engineers. Staff-Sergeant David Bellavia with John Bruning, *House to House: An Epic Memoir of War* (New York: Pocket Star, 2008), p. 78.

top floors of the buildings and down the streets. With eight tanks now engaged the enemy the level of violence must have been astounding and quite pleasing to the Canadian infantry, engineers and artillerymen. By last light the Canadians had cleared the buildings surrounding the *piazza* and established a hasty defence on its north side just short of the *Piazza San Tomasso*. The tanks withdrew at 1630 hours to avoid being destroyed by infiltrating German soldiers, and to refuel, rearm and refit.[23] Concurrently, the Eddies B Company and their engineers had cleared eastwards up to and established a hasty defence at the south entrance of *Corso Umberto I*.[24] To strengthen that defence the Eddies brought up more of the battalion's 6-pounder anti-tank guns and positioned them to observe and fire down the *corso*, out into the port area and into the entrance of the railway tunnel at the north end of the town.[25] Eight Germans, including two Company Sergeant-Majors and two Sergeants had been taken as prisoners of war.[26]

Lieutenant-Colonel Thomson established his headquarters in a tall building in the *Piazza Vittoria* at 0900 hours so that he could observe and remain close to his forward troops. The height of the building gave Thomson a fantastic view of the urban battlefield, but he must have been spotted by the Germans – at 1100 hours mortar fire struck his position. It was also at this time that the Seaforths' B Company, still attached to the Loyal Eddies, moved down the *Via Rapino* and then north onto the *Via Della Pace* to protect the Edmontons' left flank.[27] German defences were challenging here also as it took the company from 1100 to 1300 hours to advance 50 yards down the

[23] HQ 2 CIB WD, Dec 1943, LAC.; LER WD 1943/09-1944/06, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15114, 28 Dec 1943, LAC; TRR WD, Dec 1943, LAC; Porter, *DND, DHH, CMHQ reports*, p. 88, para. 253.

[24] Nicholson, *Official History*, p. 326.

[25] Porter, *DND DHH CMHQ reports*, p. 88, para. 252.

[26] HQ 2 CIB WD, Dec 1943, LAC; LER WD 1943/09-1944/06, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15114, 28 Dec 1943, LAC.

[27] SHC WD 1943/01-31 December, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15256, LAC; Zuehlke, *Ortona*, p. XX, map 4.

street, even with support from Lieutenant Bier's 2 Troop of tanks. As a result, Thomson gave A Company a "be prepared to" task to support B Company in its advance while also alerting D Company that they would be thrown into the fight shortly. B and A Companies linked up at approximately 1730 hours on *Via Della Pace* and *Via Amena* respectively while D Company moved down the *Via Rapino* to *Via Donmarco* and turned north. All three companies established hasty defensive positions at 1800 hours in the narrow secondary streets between *Corso Vittorio Emmanuele* and *Via Donmarco* while C Company remained in its location between the church of *Santa Maria di Constantinopoli* and *Piazza Vittoria.* The Germans remained busy and kept the





Photos: A Three Rivers Regiment tank positions itself just west of the northwest corner of the *Piazza Vittoria* and points its armament west down the *Via Rapino* in order to protect the Seaforths' and engineers' challenging advance down that street.[28]

Canadians awake throughout the night – using the buildings as cover to infiltrate behind the Seaforths. When caught, small but sharp firefights broke out. The sounds of explosions also rocked the night as the Germans continued demolishing houses to create

[28] SHC WD 1943/01-31 December, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15256, LAC; Zuehlke, *Ortona*, p. XX, map 4. Sources consulted for this thesis state that this tank is "rumbling into the main square," the *Piazza Vittoria*. However, when one looks at Google Maps in its street view mode, one can see that the building on the left remains standing in the *Piazza Vittoria* to this day, and that the above photo was taken from the northwest corner of the *Piazza Vittoria* looking west down the *Via Rapino*. Thus, the tank is actually rumbling *out* of the square, not into it. Also, video footage of this and a second tank on the *Via Rapino* can be found in the British Pathé Gazette's "Battle of Ortona" documentary at minutes 0:18 to 0:20 and in Edoardo di Pierro's "The Battle of Ortona" documentary at minutes 27:24 to 27:26 and minutes 38:57 to 39:02, both on the "Youtube" website.

rubble and obstacles and as German artillery and mortar fire fell on all of the Seaforths' positions.[29]

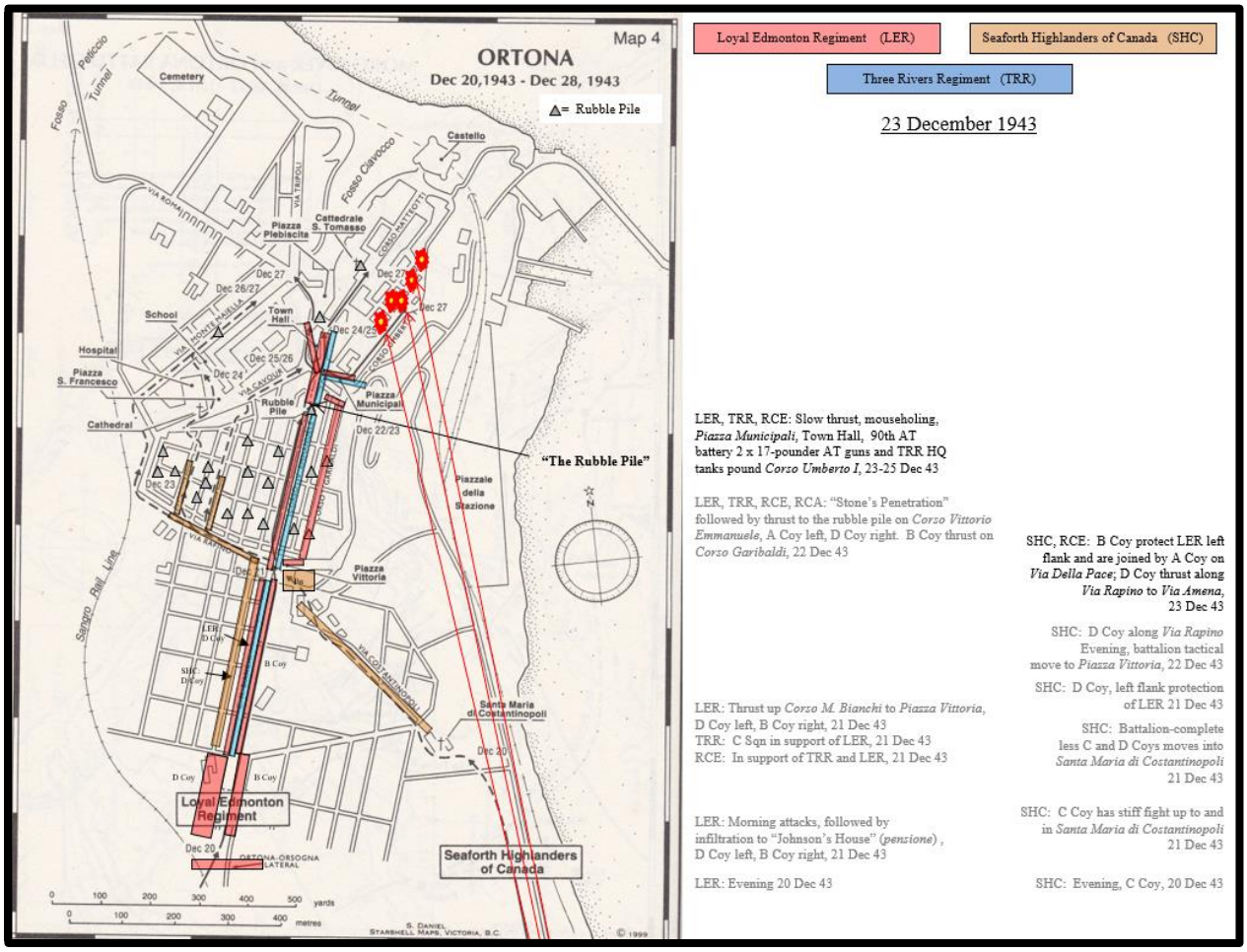
Hoffmeister was busy that day too. Effective leaders must demonstrate that they care for their soldiers' welfare. While the Ortona battle raged that day Hoffmeister slipped out and visited the temporary medical hospital located in a school at *San Vito Chietino*. The number of wounded that were present was overwhelming with soldiers crowding the rooms and hallways, some on cots but many just stretched out on blankets on the floor. Hoffmeister noticed that most still had the original blood from their wounds on their faces and hands because the two surgeons along with too few medics were working non-stop trying to save the very critically injured. Even those who had been treated looked saddened, placed to the side to recover with nobody following up to see if they needed any further assistance. German artillery fell around the building and had struck a truck that was being used as a temporary wall after part of the original wall was destroyed. Hoffmeister – worried that the wounded soldiers' physical and psychological stamina were weakening as they lay waiting, and concerned that other soldiers would soon learn that the wounded may not be properly taken care of – spoke to Dr. Frank Mills, one of the surgeons. Both agreed about the challenging conditions and Hoffmeister suggested that through their respective chains-of-command they both request nursing sisters to come assist. Officially women were not allowed that close to the frontlines, but given the circumstances – and the fact that Hoffmeister was a Brigadier – the requests were submitted to the hospital south of the *Sangro* river and volunteers were sought. The nursing sisters, demonstrating their usual high dedication

[29] SHC WD 1943/01-31 December, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15256, LAC.

to the soldiers, all volunteered immediately. The next day, Christmas Eve, the contingent of nursing sisters arrived at *San Vito Chietino* and worked under the shellfire where they provided the essential medical aid and comfort that Hoffmeister knew had been missing.[30]

The day's gains had been slight as the Loyal Eddies were engulfed with the German main defensive area at the *Piazza Municipali* and while the Seaforths were still moving into position to support them by reaching *Piazza San Francesco* on the town's west side. For the next day, both infantry battalions were directed to continue the advance – there was more than likely hope that with the development of the mouseholing technique combined with the extra troops and firepower that Hoffmeister had provided that the Canadians could crack open the Germans' defence. Either the Loyal Eddies could fight through to the *Piazza Plebiscita* and cut the enemy in half or the Seaforths could move around the western side of town and flank the enemy holding out against the Loyal Eddies, or perhaps both. However, by the end of this day's fighting the Germans realized that the Canadians had substantially reinforced their efforts. Thus, the *Fallschirmjager* too had to react accordingly if they wanted to hold this part of the *Gustav* Line.

[30] Delaney, *The Soldiers' General*, pp. 103-104; Delaney, "When Leadership Really Mattered," *Intrepid Warriors*, p. 147-148; Zuehlke, *Ortona*, pp. 290-291.



Above map is Map 4, p. XX in Zuehlke, *Ortona* and has been modified by the thesis author using Microsoft PowerPoint.



Photo: A Three Rivers Regiment M-4 Medium "Sherman" tank in Ortona.[31]

[31] *Canada at War*, www.canadaatwar.ca (website)

Day 5 – Friday 24 December 1943:

Hard Fighting Around *Piazza Municipali* and "Dead Horse Square"

"If it wasn't hell, it was the courtyard of hell. It was a maelstrom of noise and hot splitting steel. Perhaps thirty or forty Canadian machine guns were brrppping at once. It sounded like hundreds. High explosive shells from our tanks in the square seemed to be ripping the town to pieces…And the enemy's anti-tank shells and mortars were crashing into the buildings everywhere…Their air-bursting shells were splitting themselves apart in black smoke over our heads."

- The CBC's Matthew Halton, reporting from Ortona.[32]

Weather: Cloudy, cold, raining with poor visibility.[33]

Approximate Fighting Strength as of 0600 hours 24 December 1943				
Unit	Strength (Officers / ORs)	KIA (Officers / ORs)	WIA (Officers / ORs)	MIA (Officers / ORs)
HQ 2 CIB	15 / 47	-	-	-
PPCLI	38 / 680	-	-	-
LER	33 / 642	0 / 6	4 / 24	-
SHC	34 / 679	0 / 2	0 / 17	-
RCA 90th AT Bty	7 / 131	-	1 / 1	-
TRR	Unknown	-	0 / 2	-

The advance deeper into Ortona grew more difficult from Christmas Eve onward for three reasons. Until then 1st Parachute Division deployed only the 2nd Battalion of the 3rd Regiment with its supporting engineer and artillery attachments to Ortona. That was sufficient to block the understrength Loyal Eddies on a fairly narrow axis of advance. The Germans could focus their defence on a narrow front and rotate their companies in and out of the fight using the tunnel at the north end of the town as well as basements and cellars to rest and recuperate.[34] However, when the Loyal Eddies reached the *Piazza Municipali,* and the Seaforths expanded the battle front to the

[32] Halton, *Dispatches from the Front*, p. 200. It is unknown if Halton's reference to the "courtyard of hell" was meant to be ironic given the "Green Devils" and "Red Patch Devils" description of the two fighting forces.
[33] HQ 2 CIB WD, Dec 1943, LAC.
[34] Zuehlke, *Ortona*, p. 268. See also Chapter 2, pp. 39-40, footnotes 42 to 44.

western side of the town, 2nd Battalion paratroops had already suffered substantial losses. The Germans reacted to this increased Canadian commitment by reinforcing the now understrength 2nd Battalion, 3rd Regiment with the divisional reserve, the 2nd Battalion, 4th Regiment, so that the former could eventually withdraw. Now the fatigued Canadians faced an entirely fresh unit:[35]

> "Apart from defensive tactics and weaponry, another significant characteristic of the German defences was the number of troops deployed to fight in Ortona, and their ability to move and to be supplied. The Canadians were first engaged by the 2nd Battalion of the...3rd Parachute Regiment. This battalion bore the brunt of the defence until 24 December, by which time losses and exhaustion, added to the increasing weight of the Canadian attack, convinced General Heidrich, then commanding the 1st Parachute Division, to commit the divisional reserve, the 2nd Battalion of the 4th Parachute Regiment. The close-in nature of street fighting meant that the battle could not be controlled much above the section or squad level, and references to battalions or even companies are misleading. It is reckoned that little more than 100 paratroopers were in action in the town at any given time, with others resting in the town's cellars, and, particularly, its railway tunnels, or they were redeploying. The Canadians found it difficult to track German movement and to determine accurately German strength."[36]

Secondly, Hitler directed that Ortona was now to be held at all costs, a message no doubt communicated to the newly assigned 4th Regiment's paratroopers. Whether the 1st *Fallschirmjager* Division's commander Lieutenant-General Richard Heidrich actually followed Hitler's order is debatable, but from that day forward there was marked increase in the number of German demolitions employed and in the intensity of the violence.[37]

Thirdly, the Canadians had reached the main defensive area across a continuous urban line of obstacles, booby traps and interlocking weapons positions. Both the *Piazza Municipali* and the *Piazza San Francesco* were the southern limits and anchor

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[35] Gooderson, "Assimilating Urban Battle Experience," p. 67; Canadian Army Headquarters Historical Section (G.S.), *Report No. 18, The Campaign in Southern Italy (September – December 1943)*, p. 64, para. 157.

[36] Gooderson, "Assimilating Urban Battle Experience," p. 67;

[37] Zuehlke, *Ortona*, p. 313.

points of the main defensive area within the town. The Loyal Eddies first bumped it in the *Piazza Municipali* on 23 December while the Seaforths were approaching the edge of *Piazza San Francesco*.[38]

By first light 24 December 1943 the brigade delivered much needed reinforcements to the depleted Loyal Eddies and the Seaforths.[39] While these soldiers were desperately needed, the new troops faced a steep urban warfare learning curve for their baptism of fire. This was illustrated when a group of twenty reinforcements walked up the centre of an Ortona street searching for the Loyal Eddies. Lieutenant James Dougan tried warning them, carefully scampering back 100 yards to wave them off the street and into cover. However, he could not stop a well-placed German mortar round from bursting among them and killing or wounding 17.[40] Lieutenant-Colonel Syd Thomson had a particular tough day when it came to the replacements becoming victims. Another Seaforths soldier, Tom Middleton, who hailed from Thomson's hometown of Salmon Arm, B.C., went into the fight and two hours later was brought out severely wounded.[41] Major Thomas C.B. Vance, having just returned from being wounded in action during the fighting around the *Moro* river, was only one day into the fight when he was mortally wounded by a sniper's bullet; his commanding officer and good friend Thomson was holding his right wrist on the operating table when he

[38] See Chapter 2, pp. 32-33, footnote 15 in order to review the German concept of operations. Porter, *DND DHH CMHQ reports*, p. 86, para. 246.

[39] HQ 2 CIB WD, Dec 1943, LAC; Brown, "The Rock of Accomplishment," *Canadian Military History*, p. 18.

[40] Dougan, also wounded as a result of the incident, assisted the medics in triaging the casualties and literally limped back to D Company headquarters. Stone brought attention to the piece of shrapnel that had pierced Dougan's left knee, and after it was cared for by a medic Dougan was directed, against his will, to retire to the battalion's aid station. Zuehlke, *Ortona*, pp. 302-303. Dougan also discusses this incident in the BDFL's minutes 20:00 to 20:56.

[41] Thomson, "Christmas in Ortona Italy 1943." *Canadian Military History*, p. 26.

died.[42] Altogether that day 75 reinforcements went to the Loyal Eddies and were split up between A, B and D Companies. The Seaforths initially received nine soldiers at 0800 hours and another 91 by 1530 hours.[43]

The Royal Canadian Engineers' 4th Field Company, now well-practiced at blowing mouseholes and disarming booby traps and mines in close cooperation with the infantry remained at the front, co-located with the infantry companies. The Three Rivers Regiment's C Squadron had been involved in the town battle since the beginning, thus it was pulled out of the fight and relieved by A Squadron's tank troops so that the former could conduct much needed vehicle maintenance. A Squadron's Lieutenant R.H. Heggie's 3 Troop, which had already been in the fight the day before with the Loyal Eddies, went forward to support B Company, with the other troops of the squadron ready to support when needed. Additionally, the Three Rivers Regimental headquarters became involved in the battle when the unit's commanding officer Lieutenant-Colonel E.L. Booth directed that his, the Adjutant's and the Intelligence Officer's tanks join the 90th Anti-Tank Battery's J Troop 17-pounder guns at their fire position 1,500 yards southeast of Ortona. The Three Rivers' three Headquarters Squadron tanks added their main guns to the fire base to support the Canadian fight in the northeast corner of Old Town.[44]

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[42] Roy, *The Seaforth Highlanders*, p. 265; Zuehlke, *Ortona*, pp. 307-308. Vance's family had the inscription "Lighten Our Darkness, We Beseech Thee, O Lord," written on his tombstone. He was 30 years old. McGeer, *Words of Valediction and Remembrance*, p. 162.

[43] LER WD 1943/09-1944/06, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15114, 28 Dec 1943, LAC; SHC WD 1943/01-31 December, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15256, LAC.

[44] TRR WD, Dec 1943, LAC.



Photos: In two frequently seen photos from the Ortona battle, a 6-pounder anti-tank gun is manhandled down a street (left),[45] and a few minutes later is put into action (centre).[46] Note the considerably larger size of the 17-pounder gun these British troops are attempting to manhandle (right).[47]

With the Loyal Eddies now on the north and eastern sides of the *Piazza Municipali*, pressing out of several streets branching north and northwest out of the *piazza* meant that the battalion had widened its front. While A and D Companies would fight north and northeast towards the *Piazza Plebiscita* and the *Cattedrale San Tomasso* respectively, B Company would advance northeast along *Corso Umberto I*. This expansion created several opportunities. B Company could possibly outflank the Germans fighting the other two companies, hit them from the side or cut them off and support A and D Companies in the destruction of the enemy;[48] or if A and D Companies could make it to the *Via Tripoli*, and backed the enemy up to the *Fosso Ciavocco* they

[45] *Canada at War*, www.canadaatwar.ca (website)

[46] Ibid. Video footage of this 6-pounder firing at German positions can be found in the Canadian Army Newsreel "Battle of Ortona" at minutes 6:27 to 6:37, minutes 6:40 to 6:44 and the British Pathé Gazette's "Battle of Ortona" documentary at minutes 0:46 to 1:00 and minutes 1:05 to 1:08. Very brief video footage of the 17-pounder anti-tank gun firing at German positions 1,500 yards from Ortona's southeast can be found in Edoardo di Pierro's "The Battle of Ortona" documentary at minutes 33:45 to 33:46. All three of these videos can be found on the "Youtube" website.

[47] https://www.pinterest.ca/pin/459859811929886478/

[48] Porter, *DND DHH CMHQ reports*, p. 88, para. 252.

might isolate the Germans in the northeastern corner or force them to withdraw through the ravine and/or the railway tunnel.[49]

Unfortunately, neither of these courses of action occurred. The newly arrived paratroopers from 2nd Battalion, 4th Regiment, combined with Hitler's direction and this part of the town being the main defensive area, evened up the odds and prevented any rapid Loyal Eddie actions forward. With the battalion and its sub-units needing time to recover, re-arm and absorb their own newly replacement troops, the Edmontons' not surprisingly made slow progress. One platoon cleared a building but met a strong defence from an adjacent building. The Germans must have seen them withdraw to target the adjacent building for a mortar barrage, for they quickly re-took possession of the building the Eddies had just vacated. The platoon had to clear the building for a second time.[50] At 1425 hours the Eddies' B Company along *Corso Umberto I* encountered a German armed with a man-pack flamethrower co-located with other small arms positions. The thought of being burned alive had a detrimental effect on morale. The position of the flamethrower was relayed to J Troop, who along with the Three Rivers headquarters tanks methodically slammed the building with multiple high velocity 17-pounder gun and tank shells.[51] Concurrently, one of B Company's platoon commanders, Sergeant J.E.W. Dick, crossed an exposed alley and found a building that offered the ability to bring flanking fire on the German position. Climbing a long, exposed pipe attached to the building, Dick ordered his troops upwards to the second

[49] Zuehlke, *Ortona*, p. 304. It is recommended the reader review Appendix I, Maps 1, 5, 6, 7 and 8 for the location of all of these geographic features.

[50] Porter, *DND DHH CMHQ reports*, p. 88, para. 253.

[51] HQ 2 CIB WD, Dec 1943, LAC; LER WD 1943/09-1944/06, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15114, 28 Dec 1943, LAC; Porter, *DND DHH CMHQ reports*, p. 91, para. 262.

storey and from a room they were able to engage the German positions. For the remainder of the day the flamethrower was not seen.[52]

Despite all of the challenges, by Christmas Eve A and D Companies, backed by the engineers and all available 6-pounder anti-tank guns, cleared the Town Hall and arrived at the southern end of the *Piazza Plebiscita* and *Corso Matteotti*, which led north to the *Piazza San Tomasso* and its cathedral. They captured 10 prisoners of war in the process, but it was not as much progress as they would have liked.[53] They also noticed a sizeable rubble pile at the south end of the *Piazza Plebiscita* which they would have to tackle the next day. B Company, its engineers and its supporting tanks from Lieutenant Heggie's 3 Troop had not advanced far up *Corso Umberto I* at all due to the German positions in the upper floors of the buildings and rubble piles on the *corso*, thus the attempt to outflank the Germans blocking A and D Companies had not been successful either.[54] However, given the level of German resistance the Canadians here were content to slather the German defenders with direct anti-tank and tank fire and artillery and mortar fire. Heggie's 3 Troop, the Eddies' internal co-located 6-pounder guns, as well as J Troop's 17-pounder guns and the Three Rivers headquarters' tanks plastered the buildings all day and into the evening to the point that buildings either crumbled outright or had large holes throughout. The 17-pounder ammunition punched through the walls of the buildings quite easily but with little effect, unless it struck structural steel. If it did so, the building collapsed.[55] The 17-pounders continued to spend the following days

[52] Nicholson, *Official History*, p. 332; Zuehlke, *Ortona*, pp. 324-325. Dick would be awarded the Military Medal for his initiative this day. Interestingly, Zuehlke states that this event occurred on 25 December, however the 2 CIB HQ and Loyal Eddies' war diaries specifically state that this event occurred 24 December.

[53] LER WD 1943/09-1944/06, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15114, 28 Dec 1943, LAC.

[54] Porter, *DND DHH CMHQ reports*, p. 88, para. 253.

[55] Ibid., p. 310.

literally ripping buildings apart in front of the advancing infantry, engineers and Heggie's 3 Troop.[56] On this Christmas Eve the 17-pounders shattered the iron girders of one particularly larger building containing some German defenders and the building collapsed on top of them, a nice pre-Christmas present which was more than likely appreciated by the Eddies, engineers and 3 Troop at the time. J Troop's Burnett later directed the other two 17-pounders to join "L" Troop downtown once it was safe enough to move these weapons into Ortona itself.[57] The RCA also pummelled the lower road that ran along the coast at the bottom of the cliffs, the *Via Del Porto*, the *Castello* and other buildings in the northeast corner of the town.[58] Once 3 Troop's tanks had expended all of their ammunition they withdrew at the end of the day, and the squadron had 4 Troop move up and remain overnight in the *Piazza Municipali* should the infantry need direct fire support in the evening hours.[59] The Loyal Eddies settled into their hasty defensive positions and awaited the inevitable challenges that would continue throughout the night: German infiltration parties, enemy artillery fire missions, and houses exploding due to demolition charges.

To the west, the Seaforths had begun the day moving north through the narrow streets of the western side of the town towards *Piazza San Francesco*, B Company up the *Via Della Pace,* A Company up the *Via Amena* and D Company up the *Via Donmarco*. The streets in this portion of the town were very narrow, made even more so by the buildings being rubbled. Lieutenant Bier's 2 Troop tanks from A Squadron

[56] DND (Canada), *Unique Operations - Urban*, p. 7.

[57] Windsor, Sarty, Milner, *Loyal Gunners*, p. 310. For his initiative and contribution to the success of the Ortona fight Burnett would be awarded the Military Cross, as discussed in Calnan and Knight, eds. *The History of 1st Anti-Tank Regiment, Royal Canadian Artillery*, p. 18.

[58] LER WD 1943/09-1944/06, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15114, 28 Dec 1943, LAC.

[59] TRR WD, Dec 1943, LAC.

which had already supported the Seaforths the day before remained with them, but their choice of routes there were extremely limited due to the ruins.[60] The 6-pounder anti-tank guns found it impossible to support the Seaforths and their engineers also, thus the Seaforth's Lieutenant W.R. Hyndman's anti-tank platoon was directed to support the Loyal Eddies for the day.[61]

Lieutenant-Colonel Thomson had directed the taking of three objectives: the *piazza* itself, the church of *Santa Maria Della Grazie* and a large school immediately to the east and across the street from the church within the *piazza*.[62] Once these were taken the Seaforths could then turn northeast and drive up the *Via Monte Maiella* and the *Via Cavour* in order to meet Hoffmeister's intent.[63] When the Germans realized they were being squeezed in-between the Seaforths advancing from *Piazza San Francesco* and the Edmontons at *Piazza Plebiscita*, they would either have to withdraw or be destroyed between the two Canadian battalions.[64]

A Company commanded by Captain June Thomas reached the edge of *Piazza San Francesco* and established positions on the *piazza*'s edge to observe into it. In front of the church laid the corpse of a horse, thus a message was sent back to Lieutenant-Colonel Thomson at battalion headquarters that the company had reached "Dead Horse Square," a nickname that endured for the remainder of the battle.[65] Thomas recalled how A Company conducted the break-in into the *piazza*:[66]

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[60] Bayerlein, "Parachute Engineers in Combat, Ortona 1943," *Canadian Military History*, p. 47; Roy, *The Seaforth Highlanders*, p. 263. See Chapter 2, p. 34, footnotes 19 and 20.

[61] SHC WD 1943/01-31 December, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15256, LAC.

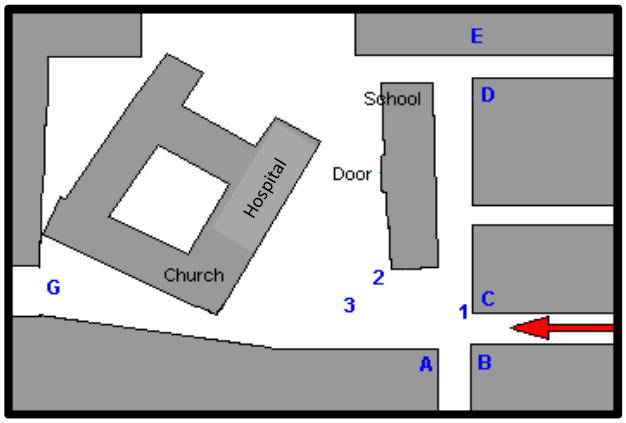
[62] Ibid.

[63] Zuehlke, *Ortona*, p. 266. See Chapter 3, p. 88, footnote 88.

[64] Zuehlke, *Ortona*, pp. 304-305.

[65] Ibid., pp. 308-309.

[66] In modern urban operations doctrine the "break-in" (sometimes referred to as "gaining lodgement") to the urban area achieves the initial foothold and allows for more troops to pass through it in order to widen the area of



"We had worked forward until, at about 1000 hours, we held the houses marked A and B on the diagram. Here we could observe the *piazza*…and exchange fire with German paratroopers in the church and school and the blocks marked D and E. The end of the school facing us was solid. So was the corner of block C. They offered no easy entrance. Our objective was the school.

I had a plan that showed the only entrances to the school were the main door facing the church and a small door at the far end. We could not get through the main door without coming under murderous fire from the church and the school itself. The alley toward E was a deathtrap, its entire length being swept by fire from both D and E. Our anti-tank guns could have knocked a hole in the end wall of the school large enough for a man to squeeze through, but it was essential to obtain fire superiority, to win the fire fight, before any movement took place.

This was going to be tricky; the enemy knew all our likely positions and completely dominated the square.

We decided to make a direct assault on the school, supported by tanks, with smoke if necessary. A troop of three Three Rivers tanks was made available and between us we worked out a plan to cope with the enemy machine guns. One of our problems was the block of rubble obstructing the entrance to the square between A and B. This was overcome by the tanks discovering a satisfactory bypass. Zero hour was set for noon.

The first tank came rumbling up the street (indicated by the red arrow) to position 1. At a range of 30 yards, it blasted down the side of the school with its 75-mm. gun. This tank then moved to position 2, a second tank to position 3 and a third to position 1. The tanks at 2 and 3 covered the church with machine-gun and 75-mm. fire, while the tank in position 1 covered the street leading to B. The fire fight was won and the stage set for my platoon. So much dust had been kicked up by the gunfire and falling masonry that smoke was unnecessary and, without further preliminaries, the first section dashed across the street, struggling over rubble, entered the school and started clearing the building. The tanks knocked down part of the front wall of the church and silenced the machine-gun post there.

After what seemed an interminable time, although it probably was no more than a half hour, the section leader signaled all was well. I ordered a second section to move to the house at C to control the back of the school and bring fire down the street toward G. I hoped, in this way, to maintain fire superiority once the tanks withdrew.

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operations. DND (Canada), *A Tactical Guide to Urban Operations*, pp. 4-1 to 4-5; and NATO Standard, *ATP-99 Urban Tactics*, pp. 4-5 to 4-13.

> With the remaining sections, I dashed across to the school. Everything was under control. The section leader had his men at the windows, and though he had not as yet searched the cellars, the main floor was clear. There was no upper story. The section leader said he'd had little difficulty in clearing out the few Germans left in the school. We had caught them by surprise and the tank shells had driven them from the exposed end of the building. Once the section had gained a footing it moved rapidly forward, using grenades and tommy guns, clearing each room as it advanced. The enemy put up little opposition and succeeded in evacuating the building from the rear exit, taking most of their casualties. We searched the cellars rather gingerly and found no Germans. The sun was beginning to set by the time the building was cleared and I therefore ordered the tanks, which were running out of ammunition, to withdraw.
>
> In this action my platoon sustained only one casualty. Success could not have been obtained without the invaluable assistance of the tanks."[67]

Upon entering the school, the Seaforths took fire from the German positions in the hospital and a public bath building across the street. Located closely beside these two buildings was a woodshed. The Three Rivers tanks reacted quickly and fired into all the buildings. Unbeknownst to the Canadians, several civilians were hiding in the woodshed itself. Canadian tank fire killed a dozen men, women and children, and forced the others to flee into the courtyard behind the hospital.[68]

What occurred next revealed to the Seaforths how intense the fighting would become even though it was Christmas Eve. The section of Canadian infantrymen had had little difficulty clearing out the school, but it was not because they had caught the Germans by surprise or driven the enemy out by fire. It had been almost *too* easy for the Seaforth section to take the school, and it made the section leader and one of the section's veteran soldiers Private Gordon Currie-Smith uncomfortable. The latter

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[67] Reader's Digest, *The Canadians at War 1939/45, Volume 2*, pp. 370-371 (diagram and narrative). Interestingly, the book states that this battle occurred at the *Piazza Municipali* with a Loyal Eddie platoon commander at the rank of Lieutenant. However, when looking at the diagram provided and comparing it with both the building and street layouts of *Piazza Municipali* and *Piazza San Francesco* / Dead Horse Square, it is quite clear that this is Thomas describing the break-in at the latter. The *Piazza Municipali* had the Town Hall and other buildings within it, while *Piazza San Francesco* had the church and school within it. The confusion may have occurred because Thomas calls Dead Horse Square "*piazza municipale*" (removed from the text above to avoid confusion for the reader), an obvious error or perhaps an assumption on his part.

[68] Di Tullio, *1943: The Road to Ortona*, pp. 89-90.

thought that the Germans were luring the Canadians into the building for some reason, but they had been directed to enter and clear it, so they did. Once they were told to remain in the building, Currie-Smith became even more uneasy.

Within an hour, a huge blast ripped through the school sending chunks of masonry, wood and metal into the air, and collapsing the building, it falling onto itself and burying all inside. The Germans had placed delayed charges in the building with timed fuses. As Thomas had been re-organizing his company he did not witness the explosion, although his Company Sergeant-Major, W.C. Smith, did. The latter daringly ran out to the demolished building to look for survivors, but they were impossible to find. A German marksman narrowly shot Smith as he withdrew under cover. Out of the six soldiers in the section, Currie-Smith was the only one alive and remained buried under the rubble for three days.[69]

It took several hours before the Seaforths could gain the church, largely because at this time the paratroopers did something they had not done up to this point in the battle – they openly counterattacked. Throughout The Great War (1914-1918) and the Second World War (1939-1945) German defensive doctrine was based on mounting immediate infantry and armoured counterattacks with artillery support as soon as possible after they had lost a position while their opponent was off balance, low on ammunition and in the process of reorganizing. Launching a counterattack at that optimum moment often allowed the Germans to re-take positions and inflict casualties. However, 1st *Fallschirmjager* Division recognized that such tactics usually could not work for them in Italy. Counterattacks were costly in manpower and resources, especially for airborne

[69] SHC WD 1943/01-31 December, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15256, LAC; Roy, *The Seaforth Highlanders*, p. 268; Zuehlke, *Ortona*, pp. 309-310; DND (Canada), *Unique Operations – Urban*, p. 6.

units without armour and where there was a need to conserve people and supplies carefully within the Ortona urban area.[70] Up to then the paratroopers counterattacked only by small scale infiltrations. In daylight, after they were driven from a strongpoint they sometimes reoccupied them by infiltrating back into the location due to it not being closely guarded or occupied by Canadian attackers. The Canadians then had to expend time, energy, and lives driving the Germans out of the same location again, and in clearing and defending more space to block German infiltration through gaps.[71] The Canadians learned to occupy every building as soon as it was captured and hold it until the whole immediate area had been cleared.[72] However, on this particular day the Germans attempted their first-and-only large scale surprise counterattack in the Ortona urban battle. A German machinegun position that had remained hidden high in the church bell tower with a commanding field of observation and fire around Dead Horse Square opened fire in support, as the paratroopers surged into the open to throw the Seaforths out of the *piazza*. With the front being so narrow and the enemy being in such close contact it was impossible for the Seaforths to call in artillery or mortar fire to help in their defence as per their usual doctrine. Nonetheless, Lieutenant-Colonel Thomson's leadership mixed with effective Seaforth skill-at-arms defeated the counter-attack with Canadian infantry small arms fire:

> "On the morning of the 24th paratroopers launched a heavy attack on the Seaforths front which, if successful, would have disastrous effects on the brigade's position.

[70] 1st *Fallschirmjager* Division would only conduct two counterattacks during the battle of Ortona, one outside of the town against 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade to the west and this one against the Seaforths on 24 December. DND (Canada), *Unique Operations - Urban*, pp. 6-7.

[71] DND (Canada), *Unique Operations - Urban*, pp. 6.

[72] Gooderson, "Assimilating Urban Battle Experience," p. 67; Porter, *DND DHH CMHQ reports*, p. 91, para. 262. Major Jim Stone, officer commanding the Loyal Eddies' D Company learned this experience personally at some point during the battle: "I was dozing off and was awakened by a yell that they (his soldiers) had just taken two Germans moving through carrying a machinegun which they were going to set up in our rear and...had they done so of course it would have made it most uncomfortable for us, so the lesson I learned right there was, double-sentry everything at night to make sure there is no infiltration." BDFL, minutes 18:43-19:11.

> As usual the front was so narrow (about 300 yards) and the enemy in such close contact that supporting artillery could not be called on, and even the battalion's mortars were ineffective in such close quarters. The threat was such that Acting/Lt-Col. Thomson made his way to the company positions and, although constantly exposed to sniper, machine gun and mortar fire, remained with the forward troops, directing and co-ordinating the defence, and showing a cheerfulness and coolness under fire which did much for the men beating off the attack. To see the commanding officer of the battalion at such a time somehow gave confidence to the private soldier, and Thomson's unruffled calm and big smile acted like a tonic. His tactical skill, gained under fire as a platoon and company commander, was evident as he went from post to post making sure that his men, more accustomed to the attack than the defence, had their weapons and fields of fire placed to the best advantage. The counterattack was beaten off, and the slow, dangerous process of 'mouseholing' from building to building continued without let-up."[73]

Although the Seaforths could now return to the offence again, the infantrymen and their engineers could still not cross the *piazza* without taking serious casualties from the machinegun position in the church tower. Thomas asked for Three Rivers tank support and one lone tank was able to force its way back up to the *piazza*. Although initially reluctant to put 75mm rounds into a church on Christmas Eve, Corporal Gord Turnbull realized that the infantrymen and engineers would not be able to win the square if his crew did not destroy the machinegun post. One round was all it took to obliterate the top of the bell tower. Thomson's Seaforths immediately rushed and entered the church where a sharp fight occurred inside. The Germans dug into the pulpit at one end and the Canadians at the other, both sides throwing grenades and firing machine-pistols and rifles at each other for several hours. While the enemy was engaged at the church a cursory search of the school was done but the Seaforth rescue party soon withdrew after deciding it would take too much time to remove the rubble under the threat from snipers or infiltrators.[74]

[73] Roy, *The Seaforth Highlanders*, pp. 269-270.
[74] Zuehlke, *Ortona*, pp. 311-312.

Although the Seaforths' A Company had achieved two parts of Lieutenant-Colonel Thomson's mission this day – occupying the church of *Santa Maria Della Grazie* and "control" of the now-destroyed school – pockets of German resistance remained in a few buildings in-and-around Dead Horse Square. At the end of the day, D Company settled in on the *piazza*'s west side, A Company within the southern portion, and B Company on the southeast corner of it. As some of the buildings were occupied by both Canadians and German troops, there was little sleep to be had as small arms fire and grenades were exchanged all night long.[75]

That day Hoffmeister had his first of three brushes with death in the Ortona battle as he went forward to stay in touch with the battle's rhythm and to let his troops to see their commander in the fight. Seaforth Company Sergeant-Major "Jock" Gibson was directing his soldiers while moving an ammunition cache out of a building and away from the threatening German artillery fire. He heard voices coming from upstairs and ventured up to find his former commanding officer and now brigade commander accompanied by a junior officer, both looking out a window at the German positions.[76] "I just couldn't believe my eyes, seeing a Brigadier in the middle of a battle," recounted Gibson afterwards:[77]

> "Gibson never even saluted. He just said 'You better get out of this building because they've got it spotted.' Hoffmeister looked at Gibson with a mockingly stern expression. 'You didn't shave this morning, eh, Jock?" Gibson laughed. "No, sir. I've been a bit busy.' He warned Hoffmeister again that the building was likely to be hit by artillery any minute. Gibson then went back to moving ammunition. A few minutes later, as heavily laden as he could manage, he fled the apartment building with the last of the ammunition boxes.
>
> About the time Gibson entered the room, Hoffmeister had come to the same conclusion as the company sergeant-major. The window he and the scout officer were looking out of had been blown apart by a shell, so it now formed a gaping hole.

[75] SHC WD 1943/01-31 December, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15256, LAC.
[76] Zuehlke, *Ortona*, pp. 300-301.
[77] Delaney, *The Soldiers' General*, p. 103.

> His view of the nearby enemy positions was excellent. So excellent that after Gibson left he turned to the other officer and said, 'If I can see them, then they sure as hell can see me.' The two men ducked into the hallway and not a second later a German shell exploded directly in the spot where they had been standing. Hoffmeister and the officer ran down the stairs and out of the building. A heavy salvo of shells rained down, blowing the structure to pieces."[78]

Historian Douglas Delaney noted in his biography on Hoffmeister and the conversation between him and Gibson in particular:

> "It was soldier's sarcasm, a bit of humour between two individuals in the middle of much death and destruction; but it perked up Gibson's morale. Gibson has recounted this story many times, but never has he failed to mention that the brigadier addressed him not by his rank, but by his nickname – something that Hoffmeister rarely did. As a time when Gibson needed it, Hoffmeister connected with him on a personal level and demonstrated that they were in it together."[79]

That evening Canadian war artist Charles Comfort and his friends were in a tent south of the town where some of the men discussed the nature of that day's fighting:

> "We discussed the nature of the battle. Textbook street fighting had been abandoned, had given way to the most desperately cunning and fanatically resourceful tactics. They were fighting with the technique of hard-rock miners. Dynamite, plastic explosive, stick grenades, piats. These were the drastic weapons which were so arduously and slowly reducing the town and the forces engaged. If such procedures were necessary to liberate every town on the peninsula, we were surely to spend many such dolorous Christmases together, if any survived."[80]

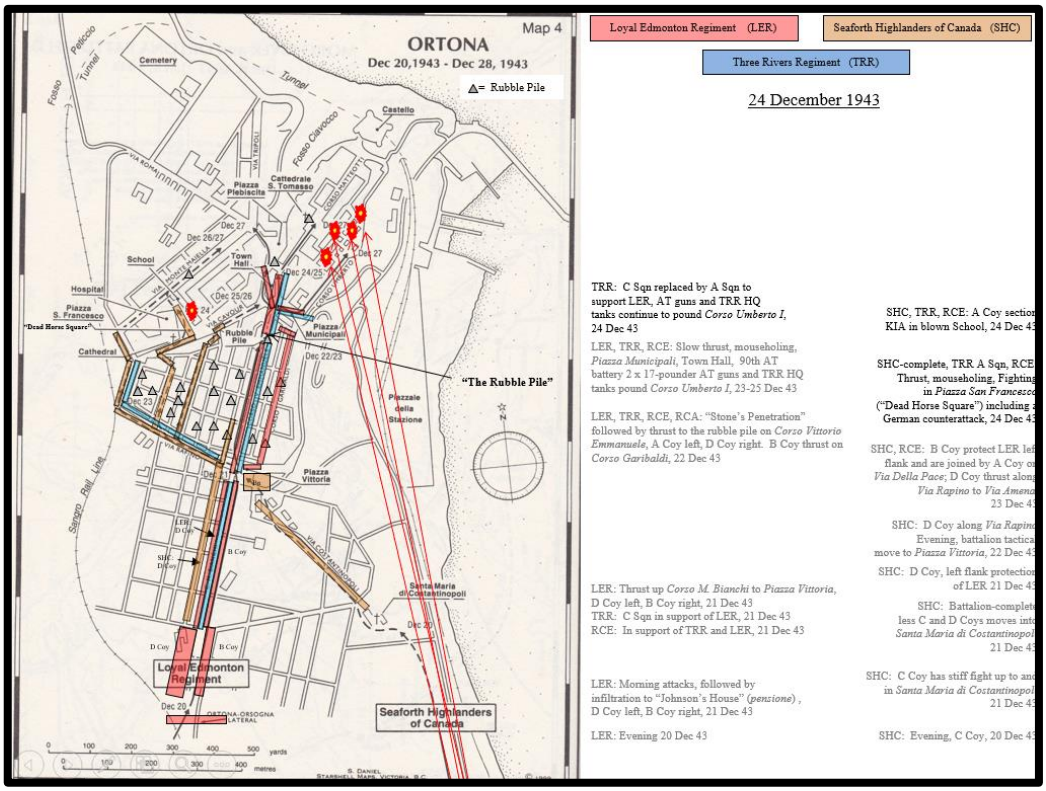
Although the Loyal Eddies had won the *Piazza Municipali* and stood poised to advance into the *Piazza Plebiscita* and on towards *Piazza San Tomasso*, and the Seaforths had fought hard to gain a foothold in *Piazza San Francesco* / Dead Horse Square, the day must have been disappointing to the Canadians. Even with the extra brigade resources that Hoffmeister applied and the rapid evolution of effective urban

[78] Zuehlke, *Ortona*, p. 301. Hoffmeister's second and third brushes with death in Ortona occurred when he was moving across a street and looked down just in time to see the two prongs of a German "S" mine sticking out of the ground where his foot was about to land. The third time he was walking across a *piazza* to talk to a tank commander when a sniper shot the Lieutenant instead of Hoffmeister. The German could have taken down a Brigadier instead of a junior officer but the tank obviously posed more of a threat, in a certain context. Zuehlke, *Ortona*, pp. 313-314.

[79] Delaney, *The Soldiers' General*, p. 103.

[80] Comfort, *Artist at War*, p. 103.

tactics the advance had once again been hard fought, extremely violent, and thus slow. None of them imagined that the Germans would also double the size of their force in Ortona and counterattack on Christmas Eve. However, the tenacious Germans understood that the Canadians threatened both anchor points of their main defensive area. They chose to make their enemy pay dearly for every street, hallway, room and building on their urban front line. There was no doubt now that the battle must rage on through Christmas Day.



Above map is Map 4, p. XX in Zuehlke, *Ortona* and has been modified by the thesis author using Microsoft PowerPoint.



Photo: In front of the destroyed church of *Santa Maria Della Grazie* in *Piazza San Francesco* lied the deceased animal that gave "Dead Horse Square" its nickname.[81]

[81] BDFL, minutes 23:16 to 23:23.

Chapter 5 – 25-26 December 1943

Day 6 – Saturday 25 December 1943: Christmas Day

"Edmund Griffiths, a tank officer, said he is still haunted by the ghosts of Ortona. He confessed that he went into an Ortona church for a quick Christmas dinner, sang 'Silent Night' with the Seaforths, then knifed and killed a German paratrooper as he returned to his tank. Fifty years after the event, a German stretcher-bearer whom I interviewed for a CBC documentary wept as he recalled the dead and broken bodies. He said he had never been able to celebrate Christmas again. 'It's like I am dead on those days.'"

- David Halton, *Dispatches from the Front: Matthew Halton, Canada's Voice at War.*[1]

Weather: Somewhat cloudy and cold with fair to good visibility.[2]

Approximate Fighting Strength as of 0600 hours 25 December 1943				
Unit	Strength (Officers / ORs)	KIA (Officers / ORs)	WIA (Officers / ORs)	MIA (Officers / ORs)
HQ 2 CIB	15 / 46	-	-	-
PPCLI	36 / 683	-	-	-
LER	32 / 622	0 / 2	1 / 6	-
SHC	33 / 630	1 / 2	0 / 5	-
RCA 90th AT Bty	6 / 129	-	1 / 1	-
TRR	Unknown	0 / 2	2 / 1	

At sunrise it appeared to Canadian and German troops that Christmas Day was just going to be another day of grinding, violent urban combat, pushing many to the limits of human endurance. It also marked a moment when the battle expanded, evolved, and shuddered towards a decision point for the Germans in particular. The day's violence began before dawn. The first entry in the Three Rivers Regiment's war diary at 0430 hours recorded that "Area 320139 heavily mortared. (Nice people these

[1] Halton, *Dispatches from the Front*, p. 201.
[2] HQ 2 CIB WD, Dec 1943, LAC.

Germans)."[3] However, the quartermasters and their subordinates for all of the Canadian infantry units inside Ortona were already labouring to brighten the day.

The Loyal Eddies' were to continue their advance however the urban geography at this location split into three ways. Lieutenant-Colonel Jefferson directed that A and D Companies, now at the south end of *Piazza Plebiscita*, were to move in two directions. D Company was directed north to take the *piazza*, while A Company was to advance northeast towards *Piazza San Tomasso* and what was left of the *cattedrale*. B Company would attempt to advance northeast along *Corso Umberto I*. These three drives were all close in proximity and would prevent the Germans from being able to infiltrate and strike at a flank of any of the companies. It also allowed the Loyal Eddies to strike multiple blows and prevent the Germans from focusing their defensive efforts in any one area; reinforcements sent to support one defensive position would naturally not allow any reinforcements to go to the other, now weakening, positions. The engineers remained co-located with the infantry companies. The Three Rivers' A Squadron's 4 Troop withdrew to rest and replenish and were replaced with Lieutenant R.H. Heggie's 3 Troop.[4]

A large rubble pile created a substantial tank obstacle at the south end of *Piazza Plebiscita*. Canadian anti-tank gunners had reduced rubble piles earlier in the battle, but the best fire positions to hit this one around the *piazza* were under heavy German mortar, machine gun and sniper fire making it difficult to get the guns into position. As the infantry and engineers readied themselves to move forward, Heggie brought his own tank up to the rubble pile into a hull-down position, exposing only the tank's turret while

[3] TRR WD, Dec 1943, LAC.
[4] TRR WD, Dec 1943, LAC.

the main hull remained hidden behind the mound. This allowed Heggie to protect most of his tank from German anti-tank guns but also allowed his crew to fire on some, but not all, of the German positions around the *piazza*.[5]

One machinegun position could not be engaged by Heggie's tank crew at all so it continued to hold up D Company's advance forward. Bombardier William Doucette of the RCAs 90th Anti-Tank Battery had his 6-pounder gun crew manhandle their weapon up to the rubble pile despite the intense German fire. His Military Medal recommendation describes the result.

> "On December 25 1943, during the street fighting in Ortona, the advance of 'D' Company of an infantry regiment was held up by intense fire coming from a house dominating the axis of advance. Tanks were unable to bring fire to bear on the house because of a pile of rubble which blocked the street. Bdr Doucette was in charge of an anti-tank gun supporting the advance of the infantry. Seeing the difficulty he, with his crew, man-handled the gun up to the pile of rubble and although under heavy fire from machine guns and mortars, destroyed the house, and thus enabled the infantry to move forward. This NCO's courage, determination and initiative were of the highest order and made a valuable contribution to the final success of the operation."[6]

D Company and their engineers could now move forward into the houses at the *piazza's* south end with Heggie's tank providing covering fire. The mouseholing and house clearing began in earnest again, but slowly due to the large, well-equipped German force apparently determined to hold the *piazza*. Snipers and grenades were a particular problem. Unable to crack the German defence there, Stone withdrew the 30 odd men left in his company to the south side of the *piazza* by the end of the day.[7]

To the east, A Company had the same difficulties, and made only slight gains against the stubborn German defence of the southwest corner of the *Piazza San*

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[5] TRR WD, Dec 1943, LAC; Zuehlke, *Ortona*, p. 324.

[6] Windsor, Sarty, Milner, *Loyal Gunners*, pp. 310-311. This citation for New Brunswick's Doucette's Military Medal offers a very good glimpse of both the effectiveness of this weapon and the danger to the anti-tank gun crews in this urban fight.

[7] LER WD 1943/09-1944/06, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15114, 28 Dec 1943, LAC.; Zuehlke, *Ortona*, p. 324.

Tomasso. B Company hardly advanced at all, still content on letting 90th Anti-Tank Battery's J Troop's 17-pounder guns and the Three Rivers' three headquarters tanks pound away at the German-occupied buildings along *Corso Umberto I*, the railway tunnel entrance and the *Castello*.[8]

After five days of intense urban fighting it is more than likely that cumulative exhaustion may have been a factor effecting the slow advance; the fact that it was also Christmas Day meant that there was probably very little interest from senior leadership to have their subordinates and understrength companies conduct yet another hard day of urban fighting and increased casualties, something the troops more than likely appreciated as being killed on Christmas is almost akin to being killed on the last day of a war. Thus, justifiably, the Loyal Eddies did not make much of an advance on this day.

On the west side of town, the Seaforths remained locked in close combat with an equally strong German force stubbornly holding Dead Horse Square. At first light, D Company on the west side of the *piazza*, A Company in the centre of it, B Company on the east side, and C Company in reserve just to the south. 4th Field Company's engineers remained in support. Lieutenant Bier's 2 Troop provided intimate support throughout the day, but was joined by C Squadron's Lieutenant F.W. Simard's 1 Troop, the latter moving up to *Piazza Municipali* and then turning left to advance southwest down *Via Cavour* to *Piazza San Francesco* in order to bypass all of the rubble on the side streets and get up to where they were needed. Both tank troops together then committed a most un-Christmas-like act by opening fire at both the

[8] TRR WD, Dec 1943, LAC.

church and hospital in order to destroy German positions and enable the infantry and engineers to move forward.[9] When 1 Troop ran out of ammunition around 1230, Lieutenant H.S. Bigelow's 2 Troop replaced them. Fighting became particularly intense inside the church of *Santa Maria Della Grazie*, where the Canadians decided to withdraw from it completely and let both tank troops, eight tanks in all, fire round after round into the church itself to destroy the Germans defenders. By the time the tanks had finished firing their ammunition the church collapsed onto itself. Nonetheless at morning's end the Seaforths remained in their original positions in-and-around Dead Horse Square.[10]



Left: "*Piazza San Francesco di Assisi*. Wrecked Church of *Santa Maria Della Grazie*, Ortona," by Charles Comfort.

Comfort conveys the destruction that the church in Dead Horse Square endured due to the combat.[11]

The intensity and duration of close-quarter urban combat was appreciated by unit support troops who sought ways to keep spirits up. In the Edmonton's zone the battalion quartermaster Captain J. McBride and his staff had worked hard since the day before preparing a Christmas meal to change up the cold canned rations, hard tack and ersatz coffee the troops had been surviving on for days.[12] The lucky ones enjoyed roast pork,

[9] TRR WD, Dec 1943, LAC.
[10] SHC WD 1943/01-31 December, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15256, LAC; TRR WD, Dec 1943, LAC.
[11] Comfort, *Artist at War*, p. 110.
[12] LER WD 1943/09-1944/06, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15114, 28 Dec 1943, LAC; Stevens, *A City at War*, p. 277.

trimmings and Christmas pudding if they were back far enough from the fighting.[13] While some of the troops did eat cold rations on the front lines, others rotated back a few dozen yards so that they could have a better meal, but then they went right back into the fight shortly afterwards. George Brown, a Lieutenant with the Eddies' anti-tank gun platoon, remembered:

> "I was in a battered old house which was our H.Q. a few blocks from the enemy. We rotated in sections back a few hundred yards for Christmas dinner. We set a table with liberated china and tablecloths and even nameplates for seating. Pork chops on our plate, canned carrot pudding, nuts, candy, wine; we tried to encrust it with some of the ideals from home. Whether it worked or not, I'm not quite sure. The fighting went on, we had to change the barrel three times on one of the six-pounders."[14]

Sgt A.J. Rudd, a platoon commander with A Company, recalled:

> "We were just down from *St. Tomasso* Square. We rotated back to the dinner. We were out for about half-an-hour and then it was back to the fight. You must remember a soldier has very little appetite when in the middle of battle."[15]

For some, the dinner was brought up to them. Major Jim Stone only received a cold pork chop brought forward in a Bren gun carrier to add to his normal rations. Three of his troops had been killed in action that Christmas morning, so the extra bit of protein did not boost his morale greatly.[16] Some quartermaster staff moved up close to the fighting to bring troops some cold pork slices, chocolate, cigarettes and a couple of bottles of beer for each soldier, a satisfactory surprise given the harsh circumstances.[17] Further behind the Loyal Eddie lines, the Three Rivers Regiment's headquarters troops also celebrated Christmas with some extra fare, and although they were also able to

[13] LER WD 1943/09-1944/06, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15114, 28 Dec 1943, LAC.
[14] Brown, "The Rock of Accomplishment," p. 19.
[15] Ibid., p. 19.
[16] Brown, "The Rock of Accomplishment," p. 19; Zuehlke, *Ortona*, p. 324.
[17] LER WD 1943/09-1944/06, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15114, 28 Dec 1943, LAC; Zuehlke, *Ortona*, p. 325.

acquire some fruits and sweets for their dinner, they were not able to find any turkey. They did supplement their meal with seven chickens and two pigeons.[18]

The Seaforth Christmas dinner effort that day has become part of Ortona's legend. Their quartermaster, Captain D. B (Borden) Cameron, had recommended to Lieutenant-Colonel Thomson the day before Christmas that they put on a special meal for the troops at *Santa Maria di Constantinopoli* church, and Thomson – knowing his men were going though a vindictive, violent urban fight, and assessing the risk correctly – authorized the event enthusiastically, knowing it would boost his soldiers' morale. It was a risky move, pulling an entire company out of the line one at a time to have a good meal, but Thomson knew it was the right thing to do. Cameron and his quartermaster Sergeant Stanley Wellburn immediately went to work, dispatching troops to the southern end of Ortona to "borrow" chinaware, silverware, candles, and tablecloths while Wellburn drove around the countryside begging, borrowing and "borrowing" food from local farmers and other divisional sub-unit quartermasters and messes. The final grocery list was impressive, considering it was a war zone: soup, roast pork with applesauce, cauliflower, mashed potatoes, gravy, Christmas pudding, mince pies, chocolate, nuts, oranges and apples and – most importantly – cigarettes and beer, had been acquired. The battalion's cooks set up a field kitchen behind the church's altar.[19] When the battalion's chaplain Captain Roy Durnford arrived at the church mid-afternoon of 24 December to see the troops setting up planks, tables, chairs and all of the accoutrements he jokingly stated "Well, at least I've got you all in church." He then went to work

[18] TRR WD, Dec 1943, LAC. Given that pigeons are still a source of fresh albeit limited protein, I will suggest that these soldiers pretended the pigeons were just "small chickens."

[19] Cameron, demonstrating the leadership quality of caring for the soldiers, would be awarded the Member of the British Empire (MBE) for this Christmas dinner initiative at *Santa Maria di Constantinopoli*. Roy, *The Seaforth Highlanders*, p. 268.

assisting the troops with the set-up which went well into Christmas Eve and continued Christmas morning.[20]

Although the Seaforth dinner has become a famous episode in the Ortona story their own war diary offers the best description:

> "0900: The setting for the dinner was complete, long rows of tables with white table cloths, and a bottle of beer per man, candies, cigarettes, nuts, oranges and apples and chocolate bars providing the extras.
>
> The C.O. Lt.-Col S.W. Thomson, laid on that the Companies would eat in relays in the order of C-A-B-D, as each company finished their dinner, they would then go forward and relieve the next company. The first company was to be in at 1100 hrs. 2 hours was to be allowed for each company for dinner. The menu for the dinner being: Soup, Pork with apple sauce, cauliflower mixed vegetables, mashed potatoes, gravy. Christmas pudding and mince pie.
>
> 1100: C Company was the first Coy to eat Dinner in the church, a dinner that no/one had felt possible under such conditions, but no one had truly tested the ingenuity and resourcefulness before of the Q.M. Capt. D.B. Cameron and staff. From 1100 hrs to 1900 hrs, when the last man of the Battalion reluctantly left the table to return to the grim realities of the day, there was an atmosphere of cheer and good fellowship in the church. A true Christmas spirit. The impossible had happened. No one had looked for a celebration this day, December 25th was to be another day of hardship, discomfort, fear and danger, another day of war. The expression of the faces of the dirty bearded men as they entered the building, was a reward that those responsible are never likely to forget.
>
> When C Company had finished their dinner, they relieved A company so that they might come back the 300 or 400 yards for the same, and so A coy relieved B Coy and B, D Coy.
>
> …Christmas day was no less quiet than the preceding ones, but it is one that this Regiment will never forget. Pipe Major Essen played his Pipes several times throughout the meals.
>
> During the dinner, the Signals Officer, Lieut. W. Gildersleeve played the church organ, and, with the aid of an improvised choir, organized by the Padre, Carols rang out throughout the church."[21]

[20] SHC WD 1943/01-31 December, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15256, LAC; Reader's Digest, *The Canadians at War, 1939-1945, Volume 2*, p. 371; Zuehlke, *Ortona*, p. 312.

[21] SHC WD 1943/01-31 December, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15256, LAC.

Padre Durnford's personal diary excerpts, included in the regimental history, are rarely included in accounts of the battle, yet they reveal much about the day's events and the continuing level of violence surrounding the dinner.[22]

> "25th – Sat. Xmas Day. Red Cross Jeep to Ortona with Tom Mercer and Paddy (Leo) Hawkins. Jerry (the Germans) sending shells over. Deathly chatter of machine guns. Rumbling of falling buildings, roar of guns (ours). Church. The tables set for Coys. Cards and talk and prayers in Cloisters. Roses, violets. Tom Vance.* Col. Locket and the R.A.P. Shells whine and explode. 'Holy Night.' The meal for 'C' Coy. Brigadier and Colonel cheered.** The faces of new recruits. Fine speech by Don Harley. Orders to leave for front – a few hundred yards forward. 'A' Coy. returns from front. Weary, strained, dirty…I collect them for carols in Cloister (careful to make all voluntary). They cheer and come and join me. Gildersleeve (Wilfred) on harmonium and I singing. Soon have about 35-40.
>
> Dinner. Medals for Indian (Webster, M.M.) and his Tommy gun. Sitting with patience waiting for Parachuter sniper to move first…The order to return to front. Faces of boys new to warfare! The reluctance, the faraway look, the nervous strain, the slight inebriation in few cases. The excited talk. The news representatives. Sinclair & the 'Highland Gentleman' from Siberia and Hongkong. Daily Express & Guardian Reporters. I dine with them & Syd.
>
> 'B' Coy. comes in from front. News of Seller's death. Germans mining houses & blowing them after our boys get in. Mjr. Buchanan greets me enthusiastically. Carols from Pipe Organ loft. Postie, Gowan, & other officers & men are pumpers. Cooking goes on behind high Alter, men eat in main body of church. Piled up plates cover the alter; fruit & tins of provisions cover side altars. Carols, guns, vibration of near explosions, laughter, news of deaths. Wine, vaults, mail from home; signals bell with urgent ringing, yelling conversations over sets. Reunion of cronies. Farewell to return, as darkness begins to fall.
>
> Don Coy comes in at 5 PM (about). We organize singing in candle light by harmonium near high altar. I sang solo for a while with Gildersleeve at organ. Anxious time with lights. In flickering light & shadows I meet the men at the tables. (John) McLean Capt.
>
> The type of fighting in Ortona 'We share same house, exchange grenades & shoot at his head if out of window & he at ours. Throwing grenades at each end of a long hall in dark behind sacks & boxes. Paddy & Jerry (a German) caught in same 'storm'

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[22] Roy, *The Seaforth Highlanders*, p. 269.

* Roy, *The Seaforth Highlanders*, p. 265; Zuehlke, *Ortona*, pp. 307-308. See Chapter 4, pp. 105-106, footnote 42.

** When Brigadier Hoffmeister and Lieutenant-Colonel Thomson entered the church, the lads from C Company erupted into cheers. As Delaney points out "At the fever pitch of the battle, and after having endured so much, they cheered the two men who had led them into that little urban hell. That says something." I must agree. Delaney, "When Leadership Really Mattered," *Intrepid Warriors*, p. 151.

share room. Paddy's conversation takes highly critical course.*** I return with Pay to 'F' Esch. in pitch dark."[23]



Photo: This well-known shot is often reproduced in many resources and most state that it is the Seaforths in *Santa Maria di Constantinopoli* church on Christmas Day. However, debate after the war had some believing that this was instead a photo of a brigade headquarters Christmas dinner or that of a 1st Canadian Infantry Division headquarters Christmas dinner at San Vito Chientino held on 26 December 1943. Karen Storwick of the Military Museums of Calgary conducted an investigation in 2013, showing the photos to Seaforths' family members and local Ortona civilians, including those who work at the church, and came to the conclusion that the photo was taken of Seaforths *outside* of the church in an Oratory.[24]

When each company finished supper they returned to Dead Horse Square and relieved the next one for the meal and rest at *Santa Maria di Constantinopoli*. By 1900 hours the dinners were complete and B Company was back on the west side of the *piazza*, C Company in the centre, A Company on the east side, and D Company in reserve just to the south. An evening Seaforth patrol overheard a group of enemy paratroopers singing Christmas carols in the basement of one building.[25]

*** On this day a German paratrooper and "Paddy," a Seaforth medical orderly, coincidentally ran into the same building when they both sought shelter from the shrapnel ricocheting in the street. The paratrooper spoke English and respected Paddy's non-combatant status, but that did not stop both of them getting into a heated argument about the war. Paddy was determined to give him a piece of his mind before going their separate ways. Roy, *The Seaforth Highlanders*, p. 272; Dancocks, *The D-Day Dodgers*, p. 179.

[23] Roy, *The Seaforth Highlanders*, p. 269. Durnford would take these diary entries and rewrite them more formally into a shorter but straightforward narrative, which can be read in Reader's Digest, *The Canadians at War, 1939-1945, Volume 2*, pp. 371-372.

[24] Reader's Digest, *The Canadians at War, 1939-1945, Volume 2*, pp. 372-373 (photo and statement that it is a brigade dinner); Zuehlke in *Ortona* states that it is the divisional headquarters dinner (group of photos after p. 124). Storwick's investigation and its details can be read in her article "The Mystery of the Christmas Day Photo Revealed" on the Seaforths' website: https://www.seaforthhighlanders.ca/stories/472. Also, video footage of the Seaforths enjoying their dinner can be found in the British Pathé Gazette's "Battle of Ortona" documentary at minutes 31:52 to 32:20 on the "Youtube" website.

[25] Roy, *The Seaforth Highlanders*, p. 272.

The third battalion in 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade, the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, began Christmas day manning slit trenches southwest of Ortona, but two hours later, after it was clear that no German counterattack would materialize, the battalion stood down. Then donkeys and trucks brought up the same fare that the Seaforths had enjoyed, and some Patricias went into southern Ortona to scrounge for furniture, candles and trinkets for improvised tables. There members of D Company bumped into German troops while scrounging. Being Christmas Day, some avoided the enemy while others gave the gift of grenades before scampering off. When 12 Platoon's commander T.J. Allen stood with his men to eat – they could only find two chairs, and the ground was wet and cold – they had only just started the meal when the Germans returned the gift-giving kindness by lobbing mortar rounds onto their position. Finishing the meal and returning to their slit trenches closed the day.[26]

In retrospect there were ironies to this day. First, both sides challenged each other in the field of human endurance. The violence committed by both Canadian and German alike was close-quarter combat at its ugliest, and more than likely soldiers on both sides wondered how much more they and the other side could take. Second, being Christmas the Canadians had in most instances been able to take a mental and physical break from the fighting, even if it was only for a few minutes, to enjoy better food, perhaps a beer and a perchance a laugh with their friends. However, they also persistently pressured the Germans by continuing combat operations despite the fact that it was Christmas day. Third, the Canadian advances forward on this day had been slight but the increased application of violence and particularly heavy firepower allowed

[26] Allen, "The Guns of Christmas," *MacLean's*, pp. 49-50.

incremental Canadian successes – the Loyal Eddies were poised to attack the Germans in three directions at *Piazza Plebiscita*, *Piazza San Tomasso* and on *Corso Umberto I*; the RCAs J Troop and Three Rivers tanks safely ensconced and thus untouchable 1,500 yards to the town's southeast had for the third day in a row fired round-after-continuous-round into crumbling German positions in northeastern corner of town. The Seaforths and Three Rivers' tank heavy fire at *Piazza San Francesco*; the RCAs continued fire from field artillery and anti-tank guns, infantry heavy mortars, along with the engineers' clever use of demolitions; the commitment of so much of the brigade's resources all eroded the overall German defence and killed defenders. To top it off 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade's hard fighting around Ortona to the west threatened to isolate the town from the rest of the *Gustav* Line. Canadian determination to break the *Fallschirmjager's* hold on Ortona and fracture this anchor of the *Gustav* Line, even on this culturally sacred day, finally broken German willpower and initiated the planning process to begin the withdrawal from Ortona. That morning Field Marshal Albert Kesselring rang his 10th Army commander, General Joachim Lemelsen via telephone.

> "Kesselring: It is clear that we do not want to defend Ortona decisively but the English have made it appear as important as Rome.
> Lemelsen: It costs so much blood that it cannot be justified.
> Kesselring: No, but then you can do nothing when things develop in this manner; it is only too bad that Montgomery was right for once and the world press makes so much of it."[27]

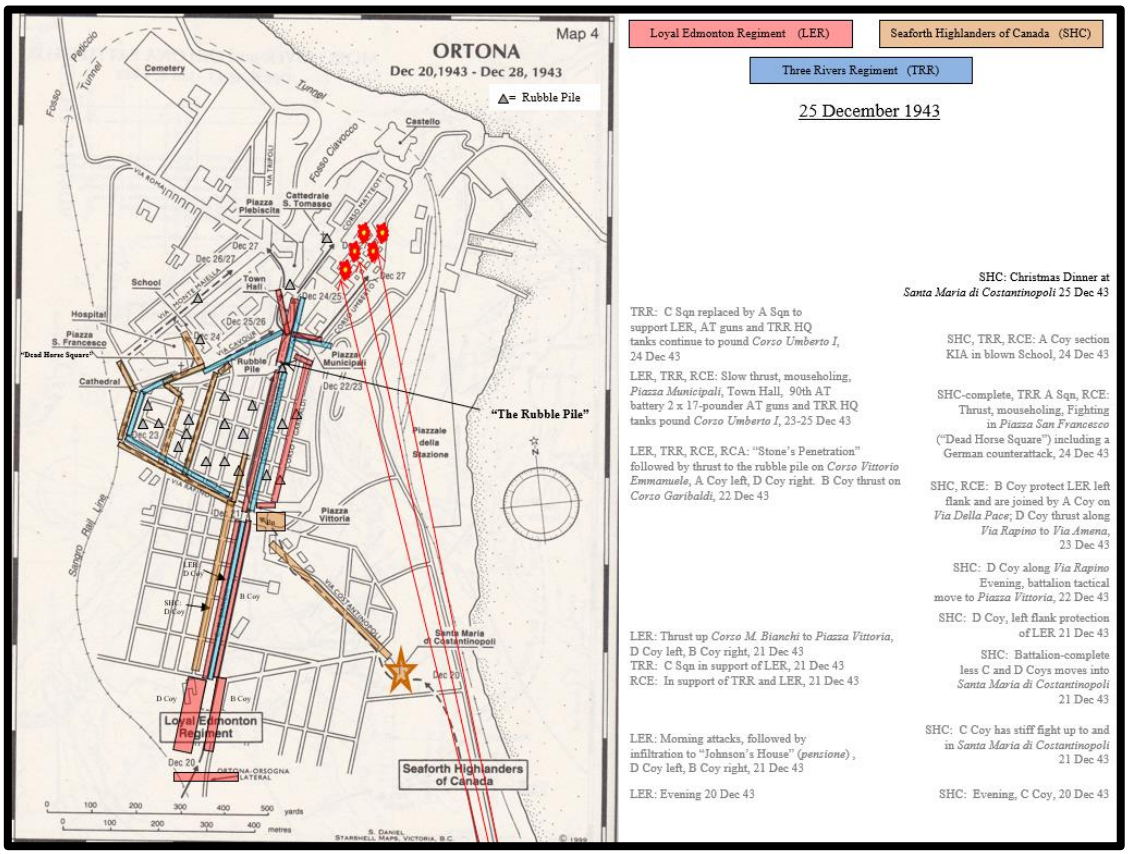
By this point of the battle the CBC's Matthew Halton's popular radio broadcasts on the intensity of the fighting had brought other journalists to the area who began calling

[27] Canadian Army Headquarters Historical Section (G.S.), *Report No. 18, The Campaign in Southern Italy (September – December 1943*, p. 65, paragraph 161.

Ortona "Little Stalingrad" in comparison to that famous urban battle on the Eastern Front a year before. The Germans could not really ignore such headlines.[28]

Nevertheless, the telephone conversation was the starting point for the Germans to begin organizing a deception plan to cover their withdrawal from the battered ruins. For the Canadians the darkening hours meant that Christmas day would soon be over. But the war was to soon resume with all of its violent fury so that 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade could finish the job. The Loyal Eddies and supporting units were to begin their three-pronged advance and the Seaforths with their attached troops prepared to eject the Germans from Dead Horse Square and drive for the *Piazza Plebiscita* to complete their western flanking manoeuvre and link up with the Edmontons.

[28] Bishop, *True Canadian Battles That Forged Our Nation*, pp. 248-249; Reader's Digest, *The Canadians at War 1939/45, Volume 2*, p. 360. Humorously, the person responsible for the Seaforths' war diary accidentally wrote in the 28 December, 1000 hours entry that the battle "…was likened to by the Press as a miniature siege of Leningrad." Perhaps it is forgivable that the war diarist was confusing his Russian communist dictators. SHC WD 1943/01-31 December, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15256, LAC.



Above map is Map 4, p. XX in Zuehlke, *Ortona* and has been modified by the thesis author using Microsoft PowerPoint.

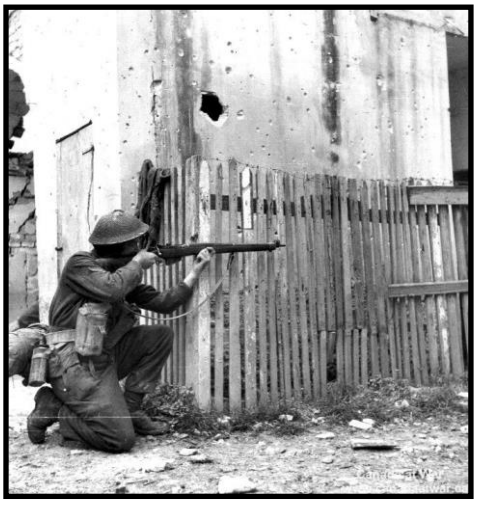


Photo: In this well-known photo from the battle of Ortona, the Loyal Edmonton Regiment's Lance-Corporal E.H. Harris takes up a fire position.[29]

[29] *Canada At War*, www.canadaatwar.ca (website) (photo); Zuehlke, *Ortona*, group of photos after p. 124 (narrative).

Day 7 – Sunday 26 December 1943: A Glimmer of Hope

"As night fell on that first evening at Marino, the Sitreps confirmed what we were all too conscious of, the clawing, tearing brutality of the fighting in the town. The Seaforths and the Edmontons were at the throats of the Paratroopers; it was a mediaeval battle in its close-quarter violence, groping through suffocating dust and smoke, stumbling over upturned furniture and debris, struggling breathlessly in nightmare darkness, felling, clubbing, blasting shooting it out. 'They are above us…They are in the next room…He is firing from that upper window…Where is the Corporal?...Hand me that Piat….Look out! It's booby-trapped…Where? You're sure? Stand back! I'm going to let them have it! Flame jets rip through the splintering door. The screams are lost as an earthquake blast rocks the neighbourhood. Tons of masonry, debris and household effects rush into the street like grain from a hopper. The Jerry (German) sappers are systematically dynamiting buildings into the street in a desperate delaying action. The barriers of rubble are quickly sown with mines and covered by raking fire. Dust and lead and fragmentation fill the flaming night."[30]

- Charles Comfort.

Weather: Rain during the night and morning, cloudy and cold with poor to good visibility.[31]

Approximate Fighting Strength as of 0600 hours 26 December 1943				
Unit	Strength (Officers / ORs)	KIA (Officers / ORs)	WIA (Officers / ORs)	MIA (Officers / ORs)
HQ 2 CIB	15 / 47	-	-	-
PPCLI	36 / 682	-	-	-
LER	32 / 608	0 / 2	0 / 11	-
SHC	34 / 619	0 / 1	1 / 10	-
RCA 90th AT Bty	6 / 128	-	-	-
TRR	Unknown	-	0 / 1	-

After the partial Christmas Day reprieve, the vindictive urban combat resumed with climatic intensity. Throughout the early hours the Edmonton Pioneer platoon and supporting engineers used the darkness to lower the rubble pile blocking the south entrance to *Piazza Plebiscita*, By 0805 hours D "Company" – now down to a small platoon of 18 soldiers– and Lieutenant R.H. Heggie's 3 Troop moved into the east side

[30] Comfort, *Artist at War*, pp. 98-99.
[31] HQ 2 CIB WD, Dec 1943, LAC.

of the square under cover of smoke. The infantry began clearing the buildings while Heggie's tanks directed their fire on German positions on the west side.[32]

At 0845 hours a German 50mm anti-tank gun that had been dismantled and reassembled in a second storey room on the east side of the square in a building that D Company's soldiers had not yet reached fired and hit one of Heggie's tanks.[33] The tank's driver Trooper J. Morrison and the co-driver Trooper J. Gallagher were wounded. Unable to go forward the remainder of the tank crew reversed back to the rubble pile. Once they realized that the damage to the tank would not allow them to go over the rubble pile to safety, they returned to their weapons and continued blasting away at German positions with the main cannon and the machine guns until all ammunition was expended. The crew then evacuated the two wounded troopers and tried to tow the damaged vehicle out of the danger area. Again, the rubble pile foiled their effort, convincing them to abandoning the tank. Heggie's remaining three tanks continued firing at German positions all around the *piazza* until their ammunition was expended. To maintain that critical tank direct fire support Lieutenant D.O. Knipfel's 4 Troop quickly relieved the retiring 3 Troop. Knipfel's four tanks continued firing away at German positions around the square to blast the Eddies and their engineers forward.[34]

Thirty minutes later two of Knipfel's tanks were hit by the same *Pak* 38 anti-tank gun in the second storey window. A second anti-tank gun also opened fire hitting one of the stricken tanks again, knocking it out completely and forcing the crew to bail out.

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[32] TRR WD, Dec 1943, LAC; Stevens, *A City at War*, p. 278.

[33] TRR WD, Dec 1943, LAC; DND (Canada), *Unique Operations - Urban*, p. 6; Gooderson, "Assimilating Urban Battle Experience," p. 66. See also Chapter 2, p. 39, footnote 41. Interestingly, Zuehlke in *Ortona*, p. 331, states that this tank was taken out by a German utilizing a "sticky bomb," which contradicts what is discussed in the Three Rivers' war diary. The "sticky bomb," identified as a beehive charge, would actually destroy a C Squadron tank later in the day which will be discussed on p. 139, footnote 42 below.

[34] TRR WD, Dec 1943, LAC.

Now down to only two tanks in support, D Company's Major Jim Stone again withdrew his infantry and attached engineers while Knipfel also withdrew his two remaining Shermans from the east side of the square. The Germans continued firing anti-tank rounds at the disabled tank until it was destroyed. Thus, the German paratroopers retained control of this vital *piazza* in the centre of their urban main defence line, at least for a few more hours. 3 Troop returned to the *piazza* with full fuel tanks and ammunition bins at 1500 hours. The earlier punishment inflicted on the German defenders by tank gun fire may have had an impact this time, for when the tanks, Loyal Eddies and engineers went back into the fight they were able to push in and clear a sizeable section of *Piazza Plebiscita* and finally capture the troublesome *Pak* 38 anti-tank gun.[35]

Not far to the east, the Loyal Eddies' A Company, an engineer detachment and two C Squadron tanks continued pressing along *Corso Matteotti* and towards the *Cattedrale San Tomasso*, where the cathedral's rubble pile housed German machineguns and anti-tank weapons. Here the Germans fought equally hard to retain the east end of their urban line.

[35] TRR WD, Dec 1943, LAC; Stevens, *A City at War*, p. 278.





As the Loyal Eddies fought their way towards the *Cattedrale San Tomasso* this is what they saw ahead of them. It is recalled that the Germans had destroyed the cathedral 21 December 1943 as part of their demolitions plan. Both the painting and the photo contain personnel standing in the rubble, demonstrating the cathedral's large size.[36]
Left: "Painting, *Chiesa di San Tomasso*, Ortona, Italy," by Charles Comfort.[37]
Right: a photo taken of the *Cattedrale* shortly after the battle.[38]

Once again, the courageous German with the flamethrower who had made his appearance two days before returned to attempt to incinerate Canadian infantry and engineers. Once again, the Loyal Eddies manhandled one of their 6-pounder anti-tank guns up to blast the house concealing the weapon until the building fell into the alley. The flamethrower was not seen again.[39]

It was on this climactic day that A Company soldiers discovered how enemy paratroopers were employing subterranean tunnels connecting buildings to change or reinforce other fighting positions and to infiltrate behind the Canadians. Infantry

[36] Zuehlke, *Ortona*, pp. 246-247. See Chapter 3, p. 62, footnote 22 to review the full details of the cathedral's destruction.

[37] Canadian War Museum, "Painting, *Chiesa di San Tomasso*, Ortona, Italy," by Charles Comfort. https://www.warmuseum.ca/collections/artifact/1014467/?q=paint+brush&page_num=1&item_num=160&media_irn=1725

[38] Juno Beach Centre, *Canada in the Second World War: The Destruction of Historical Heritage*, https://www.junobeach.org/canada-in-wwii/articles/the-italian-campaign/the-destruction-of-historical-heritage/, accessed 2019.

[39] See Chapter 4, pp. 108-109, footnotes 51 to 52; SHC WD 1943/01-31 December, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15256, LAC; LER WD 1943/09-1944/06, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15114, 28 Dec 1943, LAC.); Zuehlke, *Ortona*, p. 330.

pioneers were immediately tasked to destroy the tunnel entrances/exits with explosives to put a stop to the underground threat.[40]

Sergeant J.W. Chapman's tank fired high explosive ammunition into buildings on the *piazza's* west side alongside C Squadron's command tank led by Captain F.W. Johnson. The infantry and engineers were using Chapman's tank as cover when something exploded on top of the tank, stopping the vehicle. A German paratrooper had boldly moved to an upper storey window to drop a "beehive" explosive device down on the top of the tank. Chapman, Corporal W.J. Steep and Trooper C. Stowe were all wounded by the blast. In the midst of an intense infantry firefight, the crew could not bail out, so Johnson moved his tank up close to Chapman's stricken vehicle. Trooper R.D. Gareau used Johnson's tank as a shield and under infantry and engineer covering fire, moved up to Chapman's tank and attached a tow cable. Johnson's Sherman then towed the damaged vehicle and wounded crew back to a more protective spot. Despite this setback, by the end of the day A Company's soldiers had pushed ahead enough to effectively control the southwestern entrance of *Piazza San Tomasso*.[42]



Photo:
Captain F.W. Johnson,
C Squadron,
Three Rivers Regiment.[41]

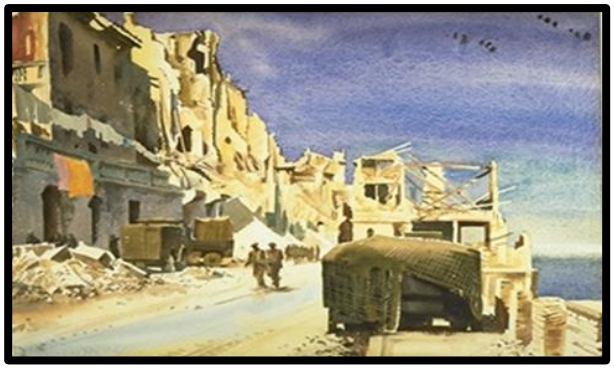
On the right side of the square, B Company still inched its way forward on *Corso Umberto I*, aided still by the direct gunfire from J Troop's two 17-pounder anti-tank

[40] LER WD 1943/09-1944/06, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15114, 28 Dec 1943, LAC; Stevens, *A City at War*, p. 278.

[41] Zuehlke, *Battle of Ortona*, p. 65 (photo and narrative).

[42] LER WD 1943/09-1944/06, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15114, 28 Dec 1943, LAC.

guns and the Three Rivers' three tanks southeast of the town. Although the Loyal Eddies and their engineers had a Number 18 radio set, they had challenges determining the effectiveness of those high velocity shells on German occupied buildings and in communicating fire corrections to the tanks and anti-tank guns via the radio to prevent the anti-tank guns and tanks from accidentally firing on their fellow Canadians. This prompted the Three Rivers' Commanding Officer Lieutenant-Colonel E.L. Booth to move forward and link up with the company commander in the early afternoon to coordinate their efforts. At 1420 hours the infantry soldiers would throw smoke grenades in front of their position and wait five minutes for the smoke to billow high enough into the air after which they would launch a flare. That would signal to the anti-tank guns and the tanks to blast away at all of the buildings to the right or north of the smoke.[43] Booth returned to the anti-tank gun and tank position, and at 1425 hours and for the remainder of the afternoon the anti-tank guns and tanks pounded the buildings just to the northeast of B Company, enabling them to win control of the southeast entrance to *Piazza San Tomasso*.[44]



Left: "*Corso Umberto I*" by Charles Comfort.[45]

Comfort conveys the destruction that occurred on the *corso* after the Loyal Eddies' B Company, the supporting engineers, the RCA J Troop's 17-pounder guns and the Three Rivers tanks pummelled it with direct fire for several days.

[43] With regards to those of us in the military, for a Lieutenant-Colonel and a commanding officer to move so close to the front lines of combat is both a sign of good leadership and something that can be considered extremely foolish!

[44] TRR WD, Dec 1943, LAC; LER WD 1943/09-1944/06, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15114, 28 Dec 1943, LAC.

[45] Canadian War Museum, "Painting, *Corso Umberto I*" by Charles Comfort. https://www.warmuseum.ca/collections/artifact/1019238/?q=paint+brush&page_num=1&item_num=100&media_irn=2082

When the Edmontons halted their advance at the end of the day, one hundred long awaited reinforcements finally arrived at the front lines to restore C Company's fighting strength and bring the Loyal Eddies back up to four companies, albeit still understrength. Most of the reinforcements had come from the Cape Breton Highlanders replacement pool and thus C Company was dubbed "Bluenose" company.[46]

That same day the intense struggle also raged on the west end of the German urban line in Ortona. There the day began with the Seaforths' B Company on the west side of the *Piazza San Francesco,* C Company in the centre, A Company on the east side, and D Company in reserve just to the south. There had been little action before dawn save for sporadic German artillery and mortar fire. Unlike the Loyal Eddies, a group of Seaforth reinforcements thankfully arrived early in the day and were integrated into the depleted companies to bolster their numbers at 0900 hours.[47] Some of the new arrivals were inexperienced. According to an interview with Mark Zuelkhe, Seaforth Company Sergeant-Major Jock Gibson was shocked to learn that many of them had never even *seen* a grenade, much less actually thrown one in training. Others were clueless on how to clean their rifles or fire a Bren machinegun. After handing out the grenades Gibson had to give them a quick lesson on how to use them.[48] Despite the inexperience the new soldiers were sorely needed; during the night the enemy paratroopers had infiltrated

[46] Stevens, *A City at War*, pp. 278-279; LER WD 1943/09-1944/06, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15114, 28 Dec 1943, LAC. One will recall that on 22 December C Company had been split up and its soldiers given to the other three companies in order to bolster their fighting strength. See Chapter 3, p. 77, footnote 61.

[47] SHC WD 1943/01-31 December, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15256, LAC.

[48] Zuehlke, *Ortona*, pp. 331-332. The matter of just how many of the newly arrived replacement soldiers were not fully trained on infantry weapons remains a matter of debate. See Andrew Brown, "New Men in the Line: An Assessment of Reinforcements to the 48th Highlanders in Italy, January-October 1944," *Canadian Military History*, Volume 21, Issue 3, Article 4, 16 April 2015.

back into both the ruins of the church of *Santa Maria Della Grazie* and the hospital beside it, establishing firing positions in the rubble.[49]

The fighting became extremely violent and fluid shortly after the reinforcements arrived. By 0930 hours two sections from C Company had been completely cut off from the remainder of the unit and captured when German soldiers squeezed between the sections and the remainder of the company. The need to rescue their fellow Seaforths became an increasingly swift concern and Lieutenant-Colonel Thomson moved up at 1000 hours, getting right in with the companies to direct the fight and rescue his captured sections. He ordered the 6-pounder anti-tank guns and the Sherman tanks from C Squadron's Lieutenant N.H. Bier's 2 Troop and Lieutenant F.W. Simard's 1 Troop to fire into the German positions all around Dead Horse Square. They pounded the ruins of the church, the hospital and other buildings around the *piazza* for over two hours, eradicating all of the German positions by 1200 hours and also allowing the two captured sections to be freed around 1300 hours. The Germans, needing every soldier in the fight due to the violent volume of fire being thrown at them, let the Canadians go when the Seaforths stormed the house that the Germans and their Canadian prisoners of war had occupied. After killing most of the enemy paratroopers, the remaining 16 surrendered.[50]

One of the Seaforths who had been taken prisoner recounted:

> "…Something went wrong. I don't know what, and the next thing we knew the place was full of German paratroopers, *Schmeisers* in our faces, and that was that. But it wasn't to be the end in the way we expected. For some reason they kept us in the house. It was like going backstage, seeing them like that, young fellows, lean-faced, going about their business. Come dawn, Captain Harley I guess came to check our position, got fired on, put in an attack with the rest of the company, and we came surplus to the Germans, who needed every man to fight back. So they did a deal with

[49] TRR WD, Dec 1943, LAC.
[50] SHC WD 1943/01-31 December, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15256, LAC; TRR WD, Dec 1943, LAC.

> Sergeant Elaschuk, there's hardly a section in the company doesn't have at least one man can speak German – said they would let us go if we promised not to fight again. Johnny promised, and we went. I don't know whether that kind of promise is covered in the rules of war, but while they're figuring it out we're going back (out of the line). Suits me. I reckon Johnny and I and some of the others are about saturated anyway."[51]

At one point during the above fighting an incident that demonstrated the term "collateral damage" in its most extreme, awful form occurred in Dead Horse Square. Lieutenant-Colonel Thomson remembered that:

> "…an old woman was in a square in front of one of the company positions, and she had gone off her head, I suppose, and was wandering about with her hair down, yelling and screaming. Then she was shot, and we couldn't get to her, and when the tanks came up later they ran back and forth right over her. It was terrible, though she certainly didn't care by then."[52]

While the struggle raged at Dead Horse Square, B Company began a push northeastwards from the southwest intersection of the *Via Monte Maiella* while A Company began clearing the houses northeastwards up the *Via Cavour*. Lieutenant-Colonel Thomson wanted to keep the momentum going, so he quickly established his battalion headquarters in the centre of the *piazza* at 1400 hours and directed C Company to push out of the square to link up with B Company and continue the advance northeast along *Via Monte Maiella*. C Squadron's two troops of tanks took turns moving up and blasting away at German positions within the houses on the street while the Seaforths and their supporting engineers once again began mouseholing through the buildings, meeting strong opposition from the Germans who must have realized that the right anchor of their main defensive area within the town was collapsing. Concurrently, D Company's soldiers and the two Three Rivers' troops remained in Dead Horse Square mopping up Germans who had been left behind and to ensure the enemy did not try to

[51] McAndrew and Global, *Canadians and the Italian Campaign*, p. 80.
[52] McAndrew and Global, *Canadians and the Italian Campaign*, p. 80; Zuehlke,*Ortona*, p. 330.

infiltrate back into the *piazza* and attack the Canadians from behind. By 1700 hours, Lieutenant-Colonel Thomson stopped the advance for B and C Companies about 100 metres southwest of the intersection of *Via Monte Maiella* and *Via Roma*, A Company at the end of the *Via Cavour* and the southwest corner of the *Piazza Municipali* and directed the companies to establish their hasty defensive positions.[53] Thus, the Seaforths had begun to apply converging pressure on the critical centre of the German urban defensive line.

At day's end as per the German standard operating procedure, artillery and mortar fire rained down on the Canadian positions throughout the night, accompanied by enemy paratrooper infiltration patrols through and behind the Canadian lines. Small arms and hand grenades were exchanged throughout the hours of darkness.[54] To meet fire with fire, and given the earlier precedent set by both Jefferson and Booth in directing both artillery, mortar and direct fire down on the northern end of the town, the Royal Canadian Artillery opened up a heavy barrage to fall on the German defenders. German combat engineer Carl Bayerlein recalled:

> "Then on 26 December the enemy artillery began firing, and the northern part of the town, still in our hands, came under continuous shellfire; enemy guns fired on the town incessantly, many houses collapsed as if they had been hit by a giant's fist. Yellow and black clouds of smoke darkened the sky. Luckily for us, the enemy shells had a very sensitive impact fuze, most of them exploding as soon as they struck a roof tile."[55]

Soldiers are psychologically trained to become mission-oriented, with the thought of failure being almost abhorrent. Morale can plummet if the mission fails, even more so when lives have been lost. Sometime during the day 1st Canadian Infantry Division's

[53] SHC WD 1943/01-31 December, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15256, LAC; TRR WD, Dec 1943, LAC; Zuehlke, *Ortona*, map on p. XX.
[54] SHC WD 1943/01-31 December, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15256, LAC.
[55] Bayerlein, "Parachute Engineers in Combat, Ortona 1943," *Canadian Military History*, p. 50.

commander Major-General Chris Vokes, who had become concerned with the rising casualties throughout the division, visited Brigadier Bertram Hoffmeister at 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade's headquarters.[56] In typical Vokes' fashion he got straight to the point, asking Hoffmeister if he would like to withdraw the brigade from the urban fight. Hoffmeister's response was immediate:

> "I began to see a glimmer of hope; I could see light at the end of the tunnel. Chris Vokes asked me if I would like to quit, and I said 'absolutely not, to quit at this time would be letting the brigade down and the effect on the morale of the brigade would be such that it would just be shocking.' Furthermore, the objective was represented to me as being extremely important, one that Eighth Army just must have, and I said nothing has changed as 2nd Brigade is concerned; we'll see it through, which we did."[57]

It was a tough decision knowing that more casualties were likely, but for Hoffmeister the brigade's troops and their supporting units had to see it through. Admitting defeat, withdrawing from the town and making it appear that the lives lost had been for nothing would have more than likely sapped the combat will of the brigade's soldiers. Hoffmeister believed that Vokes would have accepted either decision – to continue fighting or to withdraw – but his adamant stance to continue the fight is the type of decision that senior military commanders are required to consider and ultimately make.[58]

At some point during the day, and in keeping with his standard operating procedure, Hoffmeister went forward to visit his subordinate leaders and gauge how the fighting was going. Thomson recalled his meeting with Hoffmeister that day:

> "…After nine days of fighting we had lost an awful lot of men. I was just about exhausted, practically living on rum, no sleep. Bert came up, he was good at that, he was a commander who would come to the front…Bert never showed fear. During a

[56] Vokes had a right to be concerned. Urban operations are inherently manpower intensive and inherently close-combat intensive with fighting occurring within extremely tight quarters, thus producing three-to-six times the amount of casualties when compared to fighting in rural areas. DND, *Unique Operations - Urban*, p. 259.

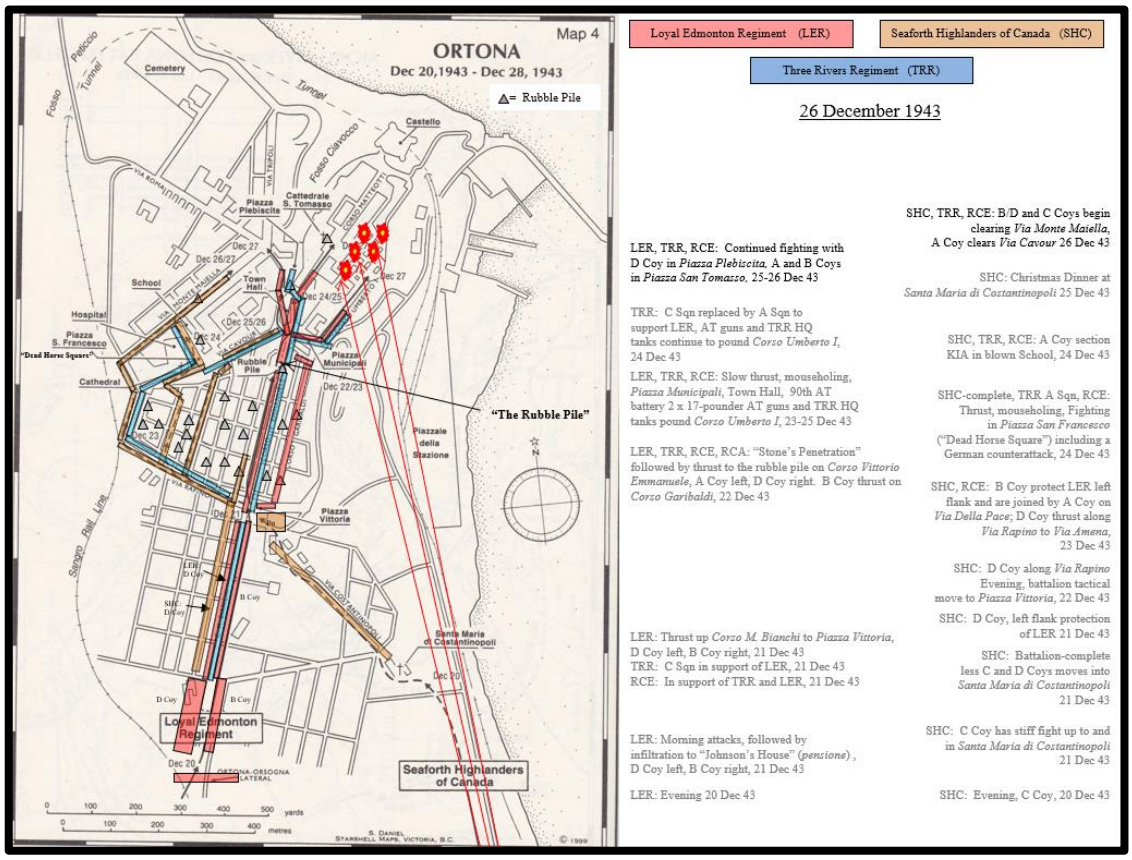
[57] Delaney, *The Soldiers' General*, p. 104.

[58] Zuehlke, *Ortona*, p. 333.

> sticky battle morale is as important as if not more important than good tactics. On the scale of one to ten morale will go from four to nine just by the appearance of a senior commander in the line when and where the bullets are flying. Bert understood this. On this particular day Bert came into Ortona and said, 'Great show Sid, terrific show, you are doing great.' He patted me on the back when all I wanted to say was 'For Christ's sake Bert, can't I have a rest?' There was no way I could say that to him. He was so great that way…I was so impressed with the way he inspired and put so much spirit into people. You couldn't say no to him."[59]

For 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade, the light indeed shined at the end of the tunnel. 26 December saw much Canadian hard work clearing houses and blasting their way ahead. The Loyal Eddies and their supporting units had made gains in *Piazza Plebiscita* and both sides of *Piazza San Tomasso,* and they were just a few buildings away and around the corner from the Seaforths. They and their support troops had halted just short of *Piazza Plebiscita* on *Via Monte Maiella* after a substantial advance along the *Via Cavour* towards the *Piazza Municipali*. With the Loyal Eddies pressing hard in the town's northeastern section and the Seaforths pushing steadily northeastward from Dead Horse Square to link up with the Eddies, the Germans had gone beyond the decision point to withdraw. They had initiated a deception plan to make it appear as if they would continue their stand until the last man when in reality, they were preparing to pull out of Ortona. However, they would do so only after another day of making the Canadians pay in blood.

[59] McAndrew and Global, *Canadians and the Italian Campaign*, p. 84; Delaney, *The Soldiers' General*, p. 103.



Above map is Map 4, p. XX in Zuehlke, *Ortona* and has been modified by the thesis author using Microsoft PowerPoint.



Painting: Charles Comfort, "Canadian Field Guns Near Ortona" showing a 25-pounder artillery piece.[60]

[60] Comfort, *Artist at War*, p. 78.

Chapter 6 – 27-28 December 1943

Day 8 – Monday 27 December 1943: The Violent Climax

Weather: A clear, cold day with fair visibility.[1]

Approximate Fighting Strength as of 0600 hours 27 December 1943				
Unit	Strength (Officers / ORs)	KIA (Officers / ORs)	WIA (Officers / ORs)	MIA (Officers / ORs)
HQ 2 CIB	15 / 46	-	-	-
PPCLI	36 / 680	-	-	-
LER	38 / 592	0 / 6	0 / 8	-
SHC	35 / 723	0 / 5	2 / 8	-
RCA 90th AT Bty	6 / 126	-	0 / 2	-
TRR	Unknown	-	0 / 3	-

Unbeknownst to the Canadians at this time 27 December would be the final day of close quarter combat in Ortona. The enemy had had enough. The British and Commonwealth divisions had kept the pressure up on the entirety of the *Gustav* Line and by 27 December 1st Canadian Infantry Division's 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade appeared to be close in meeting Vokes' intent of isolating Ortona with its drive northwards in the area just west of the town. The Germans had recognized this threat early and had made 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade pay for every yard they had advanced over the previous days; they knew that if the Canadians isolated Ortona not only would the town completely cease to be the eastern anchor of the *Gustav* Line, but it would also doom the 1st *Fallschirmjager* Division overall to destruction. Thus, the fighting was incredibly violent and extremely challenging for that brigade in particular.[2] Ironically, despite the ferocity of the violence in-and-around Ortona the 1st *Fallschirmjager* Division's commander Lieutenant-General Richard Heidrich went on leave

[1] HQ 2 CIB WD, Dec 1943, LAC.
[2] Stevens, *The Royal Canadian Regiment*, pp. 116-118.

26 December 1943 – he told Allied intelligence officers after the war that he believed the front had more-or-less been stabilized. The German high command decided the withdrawal would occur at the end of 27 December not only for the reasons above but also because they believed that due to a majority of their reserves being committed to the fighting, they would have no flexibility in plugging any gaps in the line that the Allies could create if the latter mounted a large attack. Also, to continue combat operations would continue assisting in the paratroopers' destruction. The order to initiate a deception plan that would camouflage the withdrawal was authorized by Lemelsen at approximately 1100 hours on 27 December.[3] As that order made its way down the chain of command, the Green Devils and the Red Patch Devils would continue vindictive fighting throughout the day, with the Loyal Eddies now on the receiving end of the malicious trap that the Seaforths had experienced just three days before.

Sergeant Sandy McLaren was an acting platoon commander in A Company, and on the evening of 26 December he placed his exhausted soldiers into a building close to the *Cattedrale San Tomasso*:

> "By this time the men were all very tired as they had very little sleep. I got my men into a large house right across the street from the enemy so we had to be on guard all the time. That night I was called to company headquarters where I met Lieutenant E.B. Allan and Company Sergeant-Major L. Paquette. I was told that I was being promoted to Company Sergeant-Major of B Company and Allan and Paquette were taking over my platoon. I explained the situation to Lieutenant Allan and told him the men were dead tired. I also told him the guard would have to be kept awake because there were tunnels from house to house. They then went to the house and I stayed at headquarters."[4]

In a twist of fate that is almost cliché, McLaren's promotion would come at the most opportune time for him:

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[3] Canadian Army Headquarters Historical Section (G.S.), *Report No. 18, The Campaign in Southern Italy (September – December 1943*, pp. 66-67, paragraph 165; Nicholson, *Official History*, pp. 332-333.

[4] Brown, "The Rock of Accomplishment," *Canadian Military History*, p. 20.

> "At 0500 the next morning we heard a blast and went to the house where my men were stationed. The house had been levelled and my men buried in the rubble."[5]

Much like what they had done to the section of Seaforths at the school in Dead Horse Square on 24 December, the Germans had placed demolition charges in a building and then withdrew from the building itself, allowing McLaren's and now Lieutenant Edward "Bunny" Allan's men to occupy it.[6] Once a small patrol from the Germans verified that the Canadians had entered the building they fired the explosives in the very early morning of 27 December, destroying the house and having it implode upon itself and the platoon inside of it.[7]

The explosion woke up A Company, who upon realizing what had just occurred, had its infantry pioneers and supporting engineers rush towards the house to see if they could dig out the survivors. Upon swiftly approaching the rubble the Germans from an adjacent building saw the opportunity unfolding before them and began showering the area with multiple hand grenades in a double attempt to drive off the would-be rescuers and cause more casualties. This brought the reaction from both the pioneers and engineers on the ground and the remainder of the company sheltered in the adjacent buildings to open an overwhelming amount of small arms fire on the Germans to keep them at bay so that the pioneers and engineers could begin the laborious task of picking up by hand the huge chunks of rubble and throw them away. An infuriated Corporal G.E. O'Neil single-handedly rushed the building occupied by the Germans and furiously

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[5] Ibid., p. 20.

[6] SHC WD 1943/01-31 December, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15256, LAC; Roy, *The Seaforth Highlanders*, p. 268; Zuehlke, *Ortona*, pp. 309-310; DND (Canada), *Unique Operations – Urban*, p. 6. See Chapter 4, p. 114, footnote 69.

[7] LER WD 1943/09-1944/06, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15114, 28 Dec 1943, LAC. Interestingly, many sources, including Stevens' regimental history *A City at War*, state that this incident occurred on 26 December. However, it is clear from the war diary and McLaren's witness statement in Brown's "The Rock of Accomplishment" that it occurred on 27 December. The confusion may lie with the fact that the platoon occupied the house on the evening of 26 December.

attacked the grenade throwers, who either fell down dead or withdrew from the building altogether.[8] With the threat now removed the pioneers and engineers continued to remove the rubble to try and rescue any potential survivors.

The news of the event, its scope and the consequences of it flashed through the entire brigade quickly, and A Company's soldiers, angered that they had lost so many of their friends in such a vindictive and violent act, immediately began planning a retaliation strike led by no other than their company commander. The CBC's Halton described what occurred next:

> "I came to the ruins of a three-storey building where the battle ended last night in a pitch of heroism and ferocity. A Company under command of Capt. Bill Longhurst fought its way into one building and to the top, stair by stair, room by room. The Regimental interpreter crawled along to a window to hear the Germans talking. In the next building he heard an officer upbraiding his men for having let the Canadians reach the top floor. A runner was despatched to find sappers.* In a half-hour the engineers had placed charges under the other building. After the Canadians had withdrawn it was blown up and the forty or fifty Germans in it were killed or crushed."[9]

Longhurst and his soldiers repeated their success by destroying a second building with demolitions while there were Germans inside of it.[10] In this case, revenge was a dish best served hot with destruction from high explosive.

D Company with its supporting engineers fought through the *Piazza Plebiscita* throughout the day and continued their mouseholing advance house-by-house northwestwards so that they could attempt to link up with the Seaforths' B and C companies who were making their way forward along *Via Monte Maiella*; D Company eventually reached the southern end of the *Via Tripoli* by the end of the day.[11]

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[8] LER WD 1943/09-1944/06, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15114, 28 Dec 1943, LAC.; Brown, "The Rock of Accomplishment," *Canadian Military History*, p. 20.

* A Sapper is the lowest enlisted rank of the combat engineers, the equivalent of an infantry Private.

[9] Stevens, *A City at War*, p. 278.

[10] LER WD 1943/09-1944/06, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15114, 28 Dec 1943, LAC; Zuehlke, *Ortona*, p. 343.

[11] Zuehlke, *Ortona*, p. 345.



Left: "*Piazza Plebiscito*" by Charles Comfort.[12]

Comfort conveys the destruction that occurred in the *piazza* after the Loyal Eddies' D Company, the supporting engineers and the Three Rivers tanks fought through it.

B Company on the other side of *Piazza San Tomasso* mouseholed their way up *Corso Umberto I* until they were opposite the *Cattedrale San Tomasso*.[13] Although A and B Companies were not occupying every building in *Piazza San Tomasso*, they were now in positions where they could control the entire square with fire. The Loyal Eddies' Lieutenant-Colonel Jefferson ordered a mortar fire shoot to occur ahead of the two companies to ensure the remaining Germans did not attack, remained where they were or withdraw. Three-inch mortars showered the northeastern portion of *Piazza San Tomasso* with approximately 1,100 rounds.[14] Concurrently, the Three Rivers' Lieutenant-Colonel Booth directed his headquarters tanks that had parked 1,500 metres southeast of the town to continue firing into the railway tunnel, as rumours had surfaced that the Germans may have had a large calibre gun in the tunnel itself. Once enough

[12] Comfort, *Artist at War*, p. 79. Interestingly this painting in other sources is often titled "Canadian Armour Passing Through Ortona," yet Comfort titles it as "*Piazza Plebiscito*" in his book.

[13] HQ 2 CIB WD, Dec 1943, LAC.

[14] LER WD 1943/09-1944/06, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15114, 28 Dec 1943, LAC. When one reviews the Eddies war diary and notes the ammunition expenditure for just the battle within Ortona, the numbers are impressive and demonstrate why urban operations consume four times the normal amount of ammunition compared to rural operations: Anti-tank shells: 918 rounds; Three-inch mortars: 4,050 bombs; Two-inch mortars: 2,000 bombs; .303 small arms ammunition: 57,000 rounds; Thomson sub-machine gun ammunition: 4,800 rounds; No. 36 "Mills bomb" hand grenades: 600; and No. 77 smoke grenades: 700.

ammunition had been expanded on the tunnel, the same tanks were then directed to fire a mixture of approximately 100 high explosive and armour-piercing rounds into the *Castello* as rumours were now circulating that the Germans had a large force hiding in that structure.[15] The reports of both the large calibre weapon in the tunnel and the large German force in the castle turned out to be false, but at this point the destruction of the town had been so overwhelming, the loss of Canadian life so regretful, and the Canadians sufficiently angry enough at what they had been put through over the past few days that they were willing to let overwhelming firepower decide the battle once and for all. The Edmontons and their supporting engineers, now more focused on digging Allen's platoon of 23 soldiers out of the rubble, did not advance any further, set up hasty defensive positions, and let the mortars and tanks do the work ahead of them to the northeast. By nightfall the Eddies and their engineers had rescued four soldiers still alive and recovered one dead from Allen's platoon.[16] Once it was confirmed that the fighting had ended, they would return for the remainder of the dead. Unknown to them on this day, Lance-Corporal Roy Boyd from Wembley, Alberta was still alive underneath the rubble.[17]

The Seaforths with their supporting engineers met determined enemy resistance right from the start of the day's advance. German artillery and mortar fire had been raining down on them all evening right up until 0800 hours. Lieutenant-Colonel Thomson had directed D Company to conduct a relief-in-place with B Company, so that both D Company on the north side of the street and C Company on the south side of the

[15] TRR WD, Dec 1943, LAC.
[16] LER WD 1943/09-1944/06, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15114, 28 Dec 1943, LAC.
[17] Dancocks, *The D-Day Dodgers*, p. 179.

street now advanced along *Via Monte Maiella*. The Three Rivers' C Squadron's 2 Troop had its tanks back by Dead Horse Square; the Germans had demolished so many of the buildings along *Via Monte Maiella* that tanks could not advance up the road to support the Seaforths and their engineers, so they provided covering fire when required from the *piazza*. D Company at first reported that they were making favourable progress as they mouseholed through the buildings while C Company reported the opposite, moving slowly. At approximately 1000 hours there was a small tactical pause when reinforcements arrived at battalion headquarters and they were rushed forward to the companies. At 1100 hours, 2 Troop was surprised to see approximately 100 dazed and starving civilians make their way out of Dead Horse Square's hospital basement; for the past three days the artillery and tanks had been putting dozens if not hundreds of rounds into the hospital to destroy the German positions within it, with these civilians more than likely in the basement and cowering in great fear the entire time as the walls above them were violently ripped apart.[18]

At 1115 hours C Company came upon a large factory/mill on their side of the street, but attempting to enter it through the main floor was met with considerable small arms fire from the German defenders. A platoon was resourceful enough to enter the building through the basement, however the Germans made moving up to the main floor through the interior of the building impossible. Both sides were stalemated for several hours as small arms and grenades were exchanged between the two, although four Germans were taken as prisoners of war. As C Company was no longer advancing on the south side of the street, it meant that D Company could no longer advance on the

[18] SHC WD 1943/01-31 December, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15256, LAC; TRR WD, Dec 1943, LAC.

north side of the street either. In order to gain the momentum again Lieutenant-Colonel Thomson held a meeting at 1500 hours with his subordinate commanders and changed the battalion's scheme of manoeuvre that would reflect the now established vindictive German standard operating procedure: A Company would conduct a relief-in-place with C Company so that the latter could withdraw its platoon from the basement of the factory. The engineers and infantry pioneers that were working with A Company would bring with them a number of 4-to-25 pound demolition charges, emplace them in the building's basement, and withdraw so they could destroy it with the Germans still inside. Once the building imploded, D Company would be free to move as quickly as possible to the south side of *Via Monte Maiella* and clear out any remaining Germans up to *Via Tripoli*. Once there they were to link up with the Loyal Eddies' D Company that was just fighting its way through *Piazza Plebiscita*. Once the link-up was completed a hasty defence would be established and held overnight.[19]

While all of the above was occurring and going to plan, Private Gordon Currie-Smith, who had remained under the rubble of the now-destroyed school in Dead Horse Square for three days, was rescued. Having been entombed and unable to move the entire time he had come to the belief that he would die where he lay, but upon hearing English-speaking voices nearby he was able to muster up the ability to yell for help. His fellow Seaforths overheard him and all moved swiftly to find equipment to remove the chunks and slabs of concrete, brick and wood. After challenging work Currie-Smith

[19] SHC WD 1943/01-31 December, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15256, LAC; TRR WD, Dec 1943, LAC; HQ 2 CIB WD, Dec 1943, LAC.

was found, released from his tomb and gently carted away on a stretcher, spending the remaining months of the war recovering from his wounds.[20]

By midday the German deception plan had been initiated to camouflage their future withdrawal from the town. The plan itself was simple: increase the violence to make the Canadians think the Germans were staying. As the Canadians slowly but steadily advanced, the continued intensity of the fighting appeared to demonstrate that the paratroopers were not only being supplied, reinforced and rotating their soldiers through the frontline on a daily basis, but that they were going to fight tooth-and-nail for every building right up to the *Castello*.[21] German artillery and mortar fire continued to rain down on the town. Enemy engineers were using their remaining explosives to demolish buildings and even blowing up tramcars to create more rubble and obstacles in the vicinity of *Via Tripoli.*[22] At approximately 1540 hours twelve German ME-109 fighter-bombers swept in low over Ortona and dropped their ordnance before being chased away by anti-aircraft fire.[23] In addition, an intercepted enemy wireless message referred to an "Operation Ortona" and its details implied that the Germans were planning a counter-attack.[24]

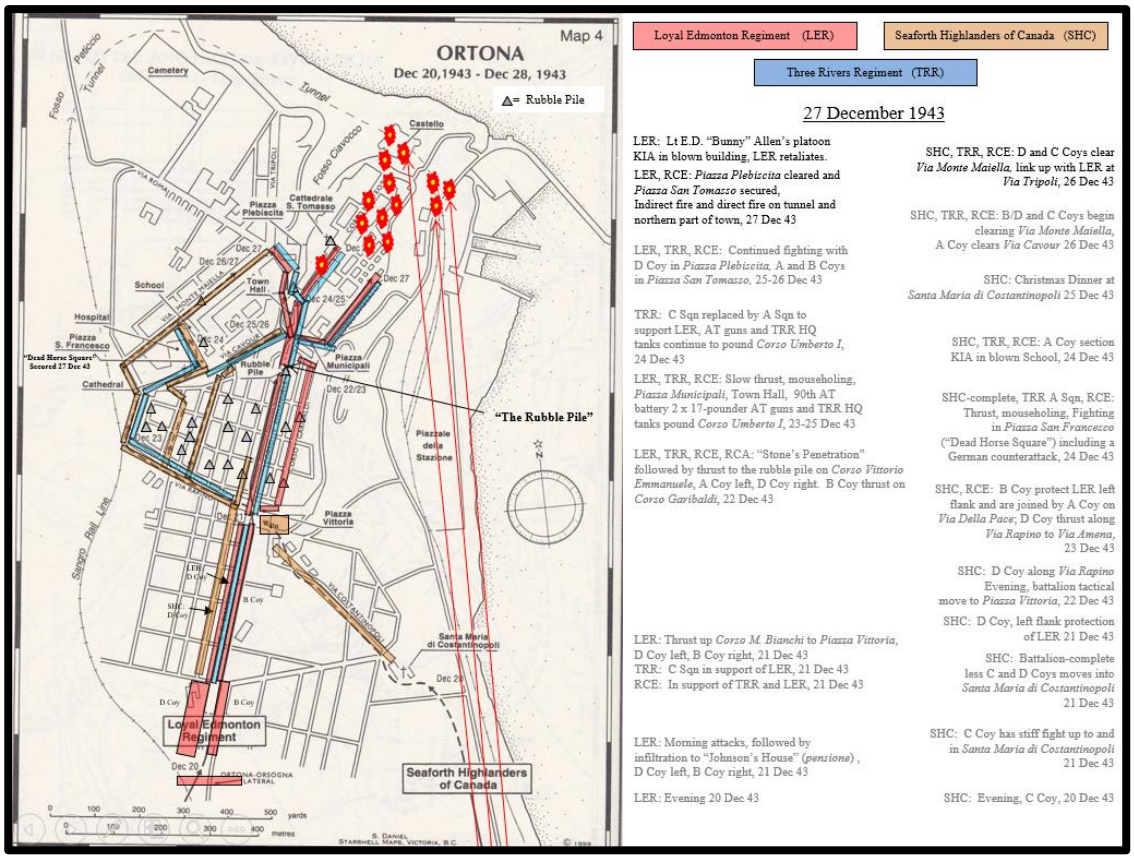
All of this information combined made the brigade commander, Hoffmeister, realize that the exhausted and depleted Eddies and Seaforths would not be able to finish the task of taking Ortona-complete. In order to either continue destroying the Germans at the north end of the town or to repel the alleged German counterattack, Hoffmeister

[20] Zuehlke, *Ortona*, pp. 344-345. See Chapter 4, p. 114, footnote 69.
[21] Porter, *DND DHH CMHQ reports*, p.90, para. 259; Nicholson, *Official History*, p. 332.
[22] Bayerlein, "Parachute Engineers in Combat, Ortona 1943," *Canadian Military History*, p. 50.
[23] TRR WD, Dec 1943, LAC.
[24] Porter, *DND DHH CMHQ reports*, p. 90, para. 259; HQ 2 CIB WD, Dec 1943, LAC; Zuehlke, *Ortona*, pp. 345-346.

directed that the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry with a Three Rivers Regiment squadron of tanks would conduct a forward passage of lines through the two battalions to continue the fighting into the north end of the town beginning at 0800 hours the next day, 28 December 1943.[25]

By the end of the day the Seaforths had linked up with the Loyal Eddies at the southern end of *Via Tripoli* while the remainder of the Edmontons were around the *Piazza San Tomasso*. In the early evening, the Germans had received direction to gather up all of the weapons and equipment that they could carry and prepare to depart their fighting positions. At approximately 2230 hours and with all best silence they withdrew from Ortona, marching for several hours until they conducted a link-up with trucks on the coast road northwest of the town which would in turn drive them back to a safe area free from Canadian shellfire.[26]

[25] HQ 2 CIB WD, Dec 1943, LAC;
[26] Bayerlein, "Parachute Engineers in Combat, Ortona 1943," *Canadian Military History*, p. 50; Zuehlke, *Ortona*, pp. 347-348.



Above map is Map 4, p. XX in Zuehlke, *Ortona* and has been modified by the thesis author using Microsoft PowerPoint.

Tuesday 28 December 1943: *"Tedesci" Had "Avanti'd"*

"I was there with a small scout patrol and I heard something strange…people yelling and cheering. And, well, having had some experience in scouting I had a pretty good idea what the situation was so I advanced at first with considerable caution but within half a block or thereabouts I began to find civilians. I was certainly surprised to find them there and I still don't know whether they were simple householders or refugees from our part of town or where they came from. But they announced jubilantly to me that '*Tedesci*' had '*avanti'd*' during the night. And they were apparently quite surprised to find him gone in daylight. They cautioned me about booby traps. Oh, and another wry sidelight on the advantage of a well-organized defender in street fighting…one of the first people I met was an English-speaking Italian who said 'I don't know what took you so long, there weren't many Germans here.'"[27]

- Lieutenant Alon Johnson, Scout Platoon Commander, Loyal Edmonton Regiment.

Weather: A clear, cold day, strong wind from the sea. Good visibility.[28]

Approximate Fighting Strength as of 0600 hours 28 December 1943				
Unit	Strength (Officers / ORs)	KIA (Officers / ORs)	WIA (Officers / ORs)	MIA (Officers / ORs)
HQ 2 CIB	15 / 47	-	-	-
PPCLI	37 / 679	-	-	-
LER	32 / 690	0 / 1	6 / 11	-
SHC	37 / 706	0 / 1	0 / 16	-
RCA 90th AT Bty	6 / 128	-	0 / 2	-
TRR	Unknown	-	0 / 1	-

At 0700 hours two Italian civilians reported to the Seaforths' battalion headquarters that the Germans had left Ortona. Lieutenant-Colonel Thomson reported the news to 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade's headquarters, and then directed A and B Companies to feel their way forward slowly beginning at 0800 hours to determine if the civilians were correct. The Eddies' Lieutenant-Colonel Jefferson, suspicious also that there appeared to be no enemy in front of his troops, had sent out Lieutenant Johnson's patrol to the *Castello* before the Patricias had passed through. With the CBCs Matthew

[27] BDFL, minutes 26:06 to 27:13. "*Tedesco*" is the Italian word for "German," while "*avanti*" means "forward" or "ahead," although in this context Johnson thinks it means "exited" or "gone."

[28] HQ 2 CIB WD, Dec 1943, LAC.

Halton in attendance at Jefferson's headquarters, Corporal Bill Clover who was listening to the radio received a message, took his headphones off and told Jefferson "Sir, the Jerries are gone or else they're all dead."[29] The patrol returned around 0945 hours to confirm that there was no enemy located in the castle.[30] Shortly after Jefferson and Halton had been given the radio message, the Patricias with the Three Rivers' B Squadron began moving at 0830 hours in order to pass through both the Loyal Eddies and the Seaforths.[31] Hoffmeister arrived at Thomson's headquarters at 0900 hours in order to command the brigade from a position where he could be close to the action if it indeed occurred, and directed anti-aircraft defences to move into the town; they had to be prepared should enemy aircraft, now knowing that the paratroopers had left Ortona, arrive to strafe and/or bomb the Canadians.[32] The Seaforths' A and B Companies passed word to Thomson at approximately 1000 hours that they too had no contact with the enemy.[33] Now having had both the Eddies and the Seaforths confirm that the enemy had departed, Hoffmeister tasked the Patricias and the Three Rivers to pass through the Eddies and Seaforths and exploit as far forward as possible.[34]

Hoffmeister's prediction about enemy aircraft became correct when at 1045 hours three German Focke-Wolfe fighter-bombers descended upon Ortona from the direction of the sea but they were met with the RCAs extremely strong and effective anti-aircraft fire. The German pilots were able to strafe the Seaforths' area of the town but no casualties occurred, and the aircraft released their bombs to the west of Ortona where

[29] Halton, *Dispatches from the Front*, p. 202; Zuehlke, *Ortona*, p. 349. "Jerry" or "Jerries" was the Allies' nickname for the Germans, named as such due to their invention of jerry cans for gasoline.
[30] LER WD 1943/09-1944/06, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15114, 28 Dec 1943, LAC.
[31] HQ 2 CIB WD, Dec 1943, LAC.
[32] SHC WD 1943/01-31 December, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15256, LAC; TRR WD, Dec 1943, LAC; HQ 2 CIB WD, Dec 1943, LAC.
[33] SHC WD 1943/01-31 December, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15256, LAC.
[34] HQ 2 CIB WD, Dec 1943, LAC.

they had no effect.[35] This aircraft attack had not delayed the Patricias and B Squadron, and they advanced through and forward. Reports came back from both the Eddies and Seaforths around 1100 hours that while the Germans had apparently withdrawn, they had left behind a great deal of mines and booby-traps on the roads and in the buildings respectively. The supporting engineers were tasked with the laborious, time-consuming task of removing these explosive devices safely.[36] The Loyal Eddies from A Company immediately returned to the site of the destroyed building where Lieutenant Edward "Bunny" Allen's platoon lay entombed and began removing more of the rubble, but by the end of the day they would find no survivors.[37] At 1140 hours the Patricias and B Squadron were as far north as the cemetery and the coast road having had no contact with the enemy. A little less than an hour later the Patricias were approximately a kilometre northwest of the cemetery and were still out-of-contact with the Germans.[38] At 1210 the Seaforths' A Company requested a call-for-fire, believing that the Germans were infiltrating a fighting patrol into the *Fosso Ciavocco* when the Canadians saw a group of people just on the other side of the gully. The battalion's 3-inch mortars were preparing the shoot when A Company cancelled the request as they had confirmed that the group were actually Italian civilians making their way into Ortona.[39]

The Patricias and B squadron had advanced as far as the *Riccio* river about two kilometres northwest of the town, however due to the Germans having blown all four bridges across the waterway there was little hope of crossing. The Patricias established

[35] HQ 2 CIB WD, Dec 1943, LAC.; LER WD 1943/09-1944/06, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15114, 28 Dec 1943, LAC.
[36] SHC WD 1943/01-31 December, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15256, LAC.
[37] Brown, "The Rock of Accomplishment," *Canadian Military History*, p. 20.
[38] HQ 2 CIB WD, Dec 1943, LAC.
[39] SHC WD 1943/01-31 December, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15256, LAC.

a hasty defence with Lieutenant R.H. Johnston's troop of four tanks in support while the remainder of the squadron returned to link up with its armoured regiment for rest, refit and maintenance.[40] Engineers were tasked to repair one of the bridges to allow a future crossing, and while they were working they were surprised by a lone German armoured car appearing suddenly down the road. Although the engineers engaged it with small arms fire, the armoured car did not return fire and abruptly wheeled about and withdrew. Later that evening the Patricias sent out a patrol and bumped into two enemy machine gun positions. The short battle had the Canadians capture one German prisoner of war who it was later confirmed came from the 1st Battalion of the 1st Parachute Regiment, proving that the 2nd Battalions of the 3rd and 4th Regiments had completely withdrawn from the area. Some artillery shelling on the Patricias' position wounded three soldiers from B Squadron's tanks, that being the troop commander Lieutenant Johnston, Sergeant A. Abbott and Trooper R.J. Watt.[41]

At approximately 1800 hours six German fighter-bomber aircraft returned again to strafe and bomb the Canadians, and while two bombs were dropped no casualties were incurred with the exception of one of the German airplanes, shot out of the air by one of the RCA's anti-aircraft guns. The Germans also shelled the town with indirect fire occasionally however for the most part the evening was quiet.[42]

[40] TRR WD, Dec 1943, LAC; Zuehlke, *Ortona*, p. 351.
[41] HQ 2 CIB WD, Dec 1943, LAC; TRR WD, Dec 1943, LAC.
[42] HQ 2 CIB WD, Dec 1943, LAC; SHC WD 1943/01-31 December, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15256, LAC.



Photo: Royal Canadian Artillery Gunner Howard Potter takes some time to conduct some personal hygiene while his anti-aircraft comrades watch the sky above Ortona for enemy airplanes, January 1944. This photo was taken from the town's north end, looking south along the western side of Ortona.[43]

Although the fighting within Ortona had ended, continued combat actions occurred just north of the town as 1st Canadian Infantry Division finished its final operations in the closing days of December 1943. With the onset of the new year the division would take some time to rest and recuperate in-and-around Ortona while concurrently putting in a strong effort to helping the town's civilian population, making the town safe to live in and rebuilding it physically, politically, socially and economically. The ending of the battle would also allow for historians in the decades following to turn their critical, analytical eye on those who had led the Canadians throughout the fighting within the town.

[43] Zuehlke, *Battle of Ortona,* p. 82.

Chapter 7: Making Sense of the Aftermath

Earlier chapters noted gaps in historical writing on the Battle of Ortona regarding pre-battle factors that shaped the outcome. There are even greater gaps in understanding how the battle ended or its consequences, although a few historians have raised some questions in that area.[1] To fully appreciate this urban battle and its legacy it is important to include Ortona's civilians who lived through the battle itself and then endured a long winter in the ruins of their community. The evidence suggests that during the battle encounters between Canadian fighting troops and Italian citizens were commonplace. Then after the battle they lived alongside the Canadian garrison force who used Ortona as a base for the new front line a few kilometres to the north. Strong relationships were eventually formed between the Canadians and the *Ortonesi*, and there is a need to analyze Canadian military leadership and how it has been discussed by historians. Only then will one be able to fully appreciate all aspects of the Ortona battle.

The *Ortonesi*

Saverio di Tullio and Zachary Cavasin's work contribute much to our understanding of how the civilians who had remained in Ortona suffered horribly throughout and after the battle. Their work is only just beginning to inform Canadian military historical understanding of what happened there. What follows is an effort to integrate their findings in the familiar military story. Regardless of where the *Ortonesi* had hidden when it began, their main challenge was finding food and water. Not knowing how long the battle might go on, many *Ortonesi* ran out of both within a day or

[1] From all of the resources, Cavasin in *Hai visto i Canadesi?* is one of the very few who discuss post-battle Ortona and the *Ortonesi* in great detail as that was the focus of his thesis. Zuehlke and Gaffen also briefly discussed post-battle events and the challenges faced by Ortona's civilians in their respective works. One of the more curious post-battle analysis discussion points, that being whether the battle should have been fought in the first place, is discussed in this thesis' conclusion.

so and were on the brink of starvation by the time the battle ended.[2] Some wisely or unwisely moved to the ground floors of their buildings to scrounge food and water, or dared to take to the streets searching from house-to-house to find anything to eat or drink.[3] Those who were lucky made it back alive with or without meagre scraps. Many others were severely wounded or killed, either by Germans who discovered them and executed them as spies or by being caught in the indiscriminate crossfire and steady mortar and shell fire emanating from both sides. Examples of the latter were too frequent. The Tiberio family were struck by an air burst artillery round that landed in front of their cave just as they were having a meal, killing mother Cristina, 8-year old Maria, 6-year old Vincenzo and 4-year old Antonio, leaving father Francesco and 3-month old baby Mario to survive. Another family that had ventured up to the ground floor of their home near the church of *Santa Maria di Constantinopoli* lost their 9-year old son and 6-year old daughter killed when artillery shrapnel pierced the front window and killed them where they sat and stood respectively. Their parents covered the bodies and took their two other children to safety, returning several days later to put the mutilated bodies of the two killed children into a crude coffin and gave them burial.[4] A soldier from the Saskatoon Light Infantry stumbled upon an Italian family in a house, where he found two of the children killed in their high chairs who had been dead for some time. The mother was with them, wailing, while the father and other men were

[2] Cavasin, *Hai visto i Canadesi?*, p. 19.

[3] "Anarchy and disruption are only five missed meals away" is a brilliant quotation from the British Army's doctrinal publication "*Operations in the Urban Environment*," p. 53. It no doubt occurred in Ortona when civilians on the brink of starvation would risk their lives in search of food and water.

[4] Di Tullio, *1943: The Road to Ortona*, p. 80. Sadly, baby Mario Tiberio would pass away two years later from illness, leaving father Francesco with no family whatsoever.

huddled around doing little.[5] In Ortona moving above ground or out onto the streets to find food and water was more-than-less likely met with overwhelming tragedy.

When Canadian soldiers encountered the *Ortonesi* in the buildings, basements, and cellars there was usually an initial surprise for both parties that usually passed once the civilians realized that the Canadians meant no harm. Most of the Canadians appreciated the hardships the civilians were going through and, if they could help them in some way, they did by giving them whatever rations, water or medical supplies that they had on their person.[6] Some Canadians provided direct medical aid to wounded civilians. Ten-year old Tommaso Cespa remembered Canadian soldiers helped his father who was wounded by shrapnel.[7] The CBC's Matthew Halton recalled Loyal Eddie and Seaforth soldiers discovering a pregnant woman in labour under a pile of rubble after a heavy German artillery bombardment. A Seaforth sergeant helped deliver the baby, and mercifully both mother and child survived.[8] Near the port one Canadian soldier discovered a father with both legs completely severed from his body, his two sons crying beside him; the soldier gave the dying man morphine and then carried him to an aid station where he was transported to a hospital and died during surgery.

Given that they had very little, some *Ortonesi* still offered the Canadians whatever they could. The Seaforths' Captain June Thomas was in a building when an elderly woman popped her head out of a cellar, beckoned him to follow her down the stairs, and Thomas carefully descended into a candle-lit room where he was given a very hot cup of tea while a small group of saucer-eyed children watched. Thomas appreciated the

[5] Cook, *The Necessary War*, pp. 411-412.
[6] Di Tullio, *1943: The Road to Ortona,* p. 82.
[7] Cavasin, *Hai visto i Canadesi?*, p. 37.
[8] Zuehlke, *Ortona,* p. 350. The mother allegedly told her rescuers that the middle name of her son would be *Canadese*, the Italian word for "Canadian."

quietness for a moment, but then hurriedly drank the tea, returned upstairs, closed the cellar door and returned to the war.[9] British war correspondent Christopher Buckley had made his way into Ortona to observe and write about the battle and composed a lengthy passage about encounters between the Canadians and the *Ortonesi* in between the fire of battle in his post-war book *Road to Rome*:

> "…From the town came intermittent small-arms fire, but now and then the battle would fall strangely silent for no immediately obvious reason. I am not sure that this sudden and inhuman hush is not the most awe-inspiring thing about a battlefield. It is like the passing of the angel of death.
>
> I accompanied a Canadian patrol into the town, stealthily, in the careful precision of some macabre ballet, in single file and at well-spaced intervals down the street, taking full advantage of the cover afforded by the doorways of the houses. At each transverse road we quickened our step and darted rapidly across.
>
> One doorway would conceal a Canadian soldier; from the next an old man or a child would tentatively emerge; then another soldier; and so on. At one point where a ruined house left a clear field of fire for an enemy sniper, I noted how the Canadians, lithe as panthers, darted past this spot.
>
> An old woman emerged from a house. On some business of her own – heaven knows what! – she elected to follow us down the street. One could see her imitating, almost parodying, the motions of the soldiers. Then at the gap she gathered up her skirts and scuttled across the tumbled masonry. In less tragic circumstances her ungainly motions might have tempted laughter, but in shattered Ortona, among the corpses and the machine guns, their very grotesquerie suggested the horror of a dance of death.
>
> Outside a church lay a German soldier, sprawled in the horrible convulsion of death. A packet of postcards had fallen from the pocket of his tunic and lay scattered in the roadway. Each card was smeared and dabbed with fresh blood. The portrait on every card was Hitler's.
>
> What strikes one so forcibly about the entry of troops into a hostile town is the extraordinarily melodramatic character of the scene. The steel-helmeted Canadians, bayonets fixed, looked much more like the Hollywood version of war than the real thing. As for the bloodstained postcards of the Fuhrer – would any novelist dare indulge in symbolism so ponderous?
>
> We learned a great deal about street-fighting in Ortona. We learned that the attackers, even when they possess considerably superiority of firepower, are likely to suffer losses more severe than those of the defenders. Every house may be a deathtrap, every street corner an ambush. As the Germans withdrew, they left each building mined. The mine was touched off with a connecting wire when troops of our leading sections were estimated to have entered the building. This refinement of war serves a double purpose. It renders the occupation of each separate house a hazardous and probably costly business. And the collapse of more and more buildings renders the whole town a ghastly inferno of rubble that, when the defenders

[9] Zuehlke, *Ortona,* pp. 288-289.

> are finally driven out, inevitably delays the vehicles which might be employed to speed the pursuit.
>
> A quick, undignified scuttle across a street brought me to our most forward position. I dived through a doorway and down a couple of steps and found myself in a strange clutter of humanity: five or six Canadian soldiers, old men and women and children innumerable. A painter of genius – Goya, perhaps – might have done justice to the scene. No verbal description could. In the half-darkened room the pasta for the midday meal was simmering over the fire. Haggard and prematurely-aged women kept emerging shyly one after another from some inner chamber where an old man, the grandfather of the numerous children, was dying; he had been hit by a shell splinter.
>
> Another old man uttered maledictions against Mussolini while his wife produced Marsala and half a dozen glasses and moved among the soldiers, filling and refilling the glasses. Marsala in the front line; how crazy it all was! (Good Marsala, too). The children clambered around the soldiers and clutched at them convulsively every time one of our anti-tank guns fired. Soon each of us had a terrified child in his arms. And the old lady went on distributing Marsala.
>
> Out of that medley of human beings, flung together for a half hour, there developed a singular sense of fellowship. If you want to find Christianity and human brotherhood, take a jeep and drive as far as you can toward the front line of any war (you will always find a war somewhere).
>
> In the houses of Ortona, which they had been shelling for days, our soldiers were as welcome as if each was a new Messiah, bringing peace and security. And the soldiers, when they had a few minutes' relaxation, were entirely occupied in distributing their rations among the civilians and in comforting the children.
>
> The firing increased in intensity, as though each side sought a final decision before the gray winter evening closed down. The smell of cordite penetrated ever more strongly into the homely little room where onions hung from the ceiling and a vividly imaginative picture on the wall showed Italian soldiers galloping into battle, brandishing sabres and mounted on snow-white chargers.
>
> That was Ortona. It might be any town through which troops must fight their way. The details may change, but that crowded little room is the reality…"[10]

The stories are too numerous to tell in this study, yet it is important to include some as they characterize the Canadian urban battle experience. Another woman and her son were wounded by small arms fire in a bakery when they were forced to make bread for the Germans. A man was wounded by artillery shrapnel while he carried a bucket of wine that he had found in a ruined cellar. A woman was shot and lost her arm while she carried her baby down the street. A pregnant woman due to give birth had to be restrained by her family and friends in a subterranean room when she went mad and

[10] Reader's Digest, *The Canadians at War 1939/45, Volume 2,* pp. 369-370.

wanted to return above-ground to go home to have her baby. Another woman did give birth in a warehouse by the tunnel / port facilities, where a few hours later an artillery round flung the baby into the tunnel where he was found hours later, amazingly alive. German and Canadian small arms, tank, anti-tank and artillery shellfire killed dozens, if not hundreds of *Ortonesi*. On the last day of the fighting, the Germans forced a group of Italian men to carry out their wounded soldiers on stretchers.[11]

After the battle ended and the clean-up of the town began, hundreds of civilian corpses were uncovered over several months. The exact number of civilian deaths and their dates is challenging to clarify. A final list of 1,314 names was produced, however this may include deaths that occurred from *Ortonesi* accidentally triggering unexploded ordnance or becoming victims of German artillery fire weeks or even months after the battle and well into the late Spring of 1944 when the Allies finally pushed north far enough to have Ortona out of German artillery fire range.[12] Taken together, these stories reveal how the story of the Canadian and German street fighting in Ortona did not occur in a vacuum. Italians were almost invariably nearby in every encounter.

The Canadians Take Stock

On 29 December 1943 the Loyal Eddies and the Seaforths held muster parades to verify numbers, reorganize the rifle companies and integrate reinforcements to rebuild companies.[13] For the fighting from 20-27 December 1943 the Edmontons lost 109 members wounded and 63 killed. The Seaforths lost 62 wounded and 41 killed.[14] The

[11] Di Tullio, *1943: The Road to Ortona*, pp. 90-103; Roy, *The Seaforth Highlanders*, p. 272.
[12] Zuehlke, *Ortona*, p. 375. Also, video footage of the *Ortonesi* returning to the town post-battle, including an elderly gentleman slowly walking down the destroyed *Via Rapino* from minutes 6:50 to 7:13 can be found in the Canadian Army Newsreel's "Battle of Ortona" located on the "Youtube" website.
[13] LER WD 1943/09-1944/06, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15114, 28 Dec 1943, LAC.
[14] Brown, "The Rock of Accomplishment," *Canadian Military History*, p. 20.

Three Rivers Regiment lost another four men killed and 20 wounded. They had lost only three Sherman tanks in total, which given the ferocity of the battle demonstrated impressive infantry-tank cooperation.[15]

Although German records in particular for the 1st *Fallschirmjager* Division were never recovered, daily casualty reports of 10th Army's LXXVI Corps reported that for the nine days of fighting in-and-around Ortona from 20-28 December 1943 the paratrooper division lost 68 killed, 159 wounded, 205 missing, and 23 sick for a total of 455 casualties.[16] This figure was for the entire division though, which included the fighting not only within Ortona against 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade but also against 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade west of the town. It is also worth noting that German casualty records do not include lightly wounded soldiers who can recover in forward dressing stations which skews the casualty comparisons. Like any professional army the Germans tried to recover their dead, but as the frontlines in urban warfare place combatants frequently on the other side of a wall, and given the high level of close-quarter violence it was sometimes impossible for them to bring their comrades back to the rear echelon areas. The Canadians counted over 100 unburied German dead in the buildings and streets, confirming that many of the missing Germans were killed. In a telephone conversation on 29 December 1943 the German 10th Army's chief of staff General Fritz Wentzell mentioned to a subordinate that all of the 1st *Fallschirmjager* Division's battalions were down to company-strength (120-150 soldiers).[17] Considering

[15] TRR WD, Dec 1943, LAC.

[16] Canadian Army Headquarters Historical Section (G.S.), *Report No. 18, The Campaign in Southern Italy (September – December 1943)*, p. 69, para. 170.

[17] Ibid., p. 69, para. 170.

the fact that a battalion can be anywhere from 500 to 1,200 personnel, those loss numbers were very substantial.

The War Goes On

Battles with definitive end dates do not reflect Second World War reality. 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade's war continued after the Germans quit Ortona and shifted to new positions northward. On 29 December Hoffmeister directed the Patricias to aggressively patrol and press northwest of the town. By 0900 hours the engineers finished building a bridge across the *Riccio* river so that the Three Rivers Regiment's B Squadron could cross in support. Patricia patrols encountered two enemy machinegun nests in the late morning, and a two-company attack was put in at 1400 hours alongside an attack about an hour earlier by 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade's Carleton and York Regiment towards Point 59 along the coast. While the Patricias had found no enemy the Carleton and Yorks had a difficult time of it. At 2000 hours Hoffmeister told the Patricias that they would be relieved by 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade's West Nova Scotia Regiment the next day, 30 December 1943, at 1000 hours so that they could return to Ortona, joining the Loyal Eddies and Seaforths in order to establish a brigade-sized defensive position in the town.[18]

On 30 December the Loyal Eddies, those in particular from A Company, and their supporting infantry pioneers and engineers removed chunks and slabs of rubble from the building close to the *Cattedrale San Tomasso* that had been dropped on Lieutenant Edward "Bunny" Allan's platoon three days before, in hopes of finding the 19 men still entombed. As bodies were found they were dug out and carefully placed to the side for

[18] HQ 2 CIB WD, Dec 1943, LAC.

repatriation. There Corporal J.H. Johnman and Private R.J. Williams heard sounds coming from the rubble. They discovered Lance-Corporal Roy Boyd had survived the explosion and building collapse and had remained underneath for three days.[19] After driving a pipe into the rubble in order to give Boyd fresh air, a small group of Loyal Eddies with their medics began frantically but carefully digging Boyd out. He was then carefully placed on a stretcher and carried to the battalion aid station. He was the only one of the 19 to survive; when asked later what the experience of being saved was like, Boyd replied "It is like coming back from the dead."[20] The recovery was captured in some dramatic photographs from the battle.



Photos: The rescue of Lance-Corporal Roy Boyd.[21]

On 31 December 1943 Hoffmeister held a brigade orders group where he passed the word that the brigade would use Ortona as a rest area for about a month. There they

[19] Dancocks, *The D-Day Dodgers*, p. 179. See Chapter 6, p. 153, footnote 17.
[20] Christie, *Hard-Won Victory*, p. 39.
[21] Whitcombe and Gilmour, *The Pictorial History of Canada's Army Overseas 1939-1945*, p. 111; Zuehlke, *Ortona*, p. 351 (narrative); Whitcombe and Gilmour, *The Pictorial History of Canada's Army Overseas 1939-1945*, pp. 110-111 (photos top left and bottom right); *Canada At War*, www.canadaatwar.ca (website) (photos top centre, top right and bottom left).

would have time to re-group, re-equip, resupply, train with and integrate new reinforcements and assist in cleaning up the town.[22] With the weather worsening, all of the troops began looking for shelter and to improve their living conditions. The benefits of sleeping in partially intact buildings protected from inclement weather and enemy artillery outweighed sleeping in slit trenches where both rain/sleet/snow and artillery fire have a depressing effect on morale. Some buildings in Ortona had survived so the troops made the best of it. Most acquired furniture from other buildings in order to make living conditions more comfortable.[23] Unfortunately, that also included some taking advantage of the empty homes to loot and steal valuables from the previous homeowners. While some soldiers respected private property, others believed that food, liquor and clothing were fair game and the spoils of war. Others took high value items and sent them home in mail packages.[24] This pilfering undoubtedly contributed to the hard winter for the *Ortonesi* even as the Canadians helped in other ways.

During the first two weeks of January 1944 the three battalions and their supporting engineers conducted patrols to ensure the town was free of any enemy and explosive devices. They also began clearing the streets of the tremendous amount of rubble, searching for survivors and to remove the many corpses buried underneath all of the destruction for the sake of public and military health. Ortona thus began its return to a semblance of order while the war continued a short distance to the north.[25]

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[22] HQ 2 CIB WD, Dec 1943, LAC.

[23] Cavasin, *Hai visto i Canadesi?*, p. 53.

[24] Cavasin, *Hai visto i Canadesi?*, p. 36; Zuehlke, *Ortona*, pp. 350-351.

[25] During the cleanup some Seaforths ventured into the railway tunnel at the north end of the town, where they found a small Christmas tree left behind by the Germans with a note attached in English stating "Sorry we can't stay to put mistletoe on for you but we'll make it hot for you in the hills." Roy, *The Seaforth Highlanders*, p. 272.



Photo: Canadian soldiers and Italian civilians walk through an Ortona street choked with rubble after the battle.[26]

The Loyal Eddies medical officer, Captain T.H. Grainer, was particularly active as he supervised the cleaning of billets, the pumping out of polluted water wells, the clearance of the streets and inoculations against disease and other sanitary precautions. 1st Canadian Infantry Division's Auxiliary Services had established an Officers Mess in a building on *Corso Umberto I*. Bath/shower parades and films became a daily feature.[27] So were the burial parties. Although the Canadians always took care of their own and civilian dead by ensuring that the bodies were treated carefully and returned to the rear echelon areas for repatriation, the bitter fighting and the loss of so many good friends in such a short, violent period of time had jaded some. A Seaforth's NCO wrote later:

> "When it was all over I was detailed to clean up the mess in our area. We collected all our own dead all right but when it came to the Jerries (Germans) we made a half-hearted attempt to dig graves. But the weather was cold and the ground was 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."[28]

[26] Laurier Centre for Military, Strategic and Disarmament Studies, "*Battle of Ortona Blog - 25 December, Part III of III*," http://canadianmilitaryhistory.ca/battleofortona-blog-25-december-part-iii-of-iii/, accessed 25 December 2011.

[27] Stevens, *A City at War*, p. 282.

[28] Roy, *The Seaforth Highlanders*, p. 271.

Canadian dead were put in temporary graves until the harsh weather subsided, and then they were buried in larger, more official cemeteries with the various units conducting more formal memorial services during the warmer months.

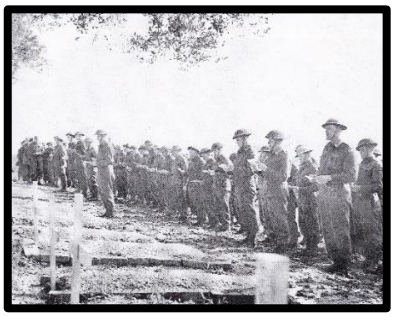



Photo (left): Soldiers from the Loyal Edmonton Regiment conduct a memorial service to honour their comrades killed in action in-and-around Ortona at a cemetery near the town, 13 February 1944.[29]
Photo (right): The ceremony dedicating the Canadian Memorial Cemetery at Ortona, 16 April 1944.[30]

When the Seaforths had laid their friends to rest, an officer from the Canadian Scottish Regiment, which like the Seaforths also hailed from British Columbia, attended the ceremony and afterwards stated "I can still remember the overwhelming sense of sadness at the burial service…It was held on a small level patch of high ground above the Adriatic and the lament fading slowly over the water emphasized the finality of it all."[31]

The dead and the physically wounded were not the only casualties. Battle exhaustion – now referred to as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder – was extremely high for 1st Canadian Infantry Division throughout December 1943. The previous September the division had counted 178 casualties and 1,500 sick; in October 800 casualties and 2,600 sick. December losses came to an astonishing 2,400 casualties and 1,800 sick.[32] 587 Canadians were diagnosed with battle exhaustion during and after the Ortona

[29] Brown, "The Rock of Accomplishment," *Canadian Military History*, p. 23.
[30] Whitcombe and Gilmour, *The Pictorial History of Canada's Army Overseas 1939-1945*, p. 120.
[31] Roy, *The Seaforth Highlanders*, pp. 271-272.
[32] McAndrew and Global, *The Italian Campaign*, p. 83.

campaign.[33] The intensity of the violence, the continued tension of not knowing where the enemy was, the unremitting artillery and mortar fire, lack of sleep, poor food and little access to water, the horribly cold and wet weather, not only in Ortona but all around it – the *Moro* river and The Gully fighting to the southeast, the continued pressure to isolate Ortona by moving up its west side, involving all three brigades of the division took a psychological toll on Canadian soldiers. Major Doyle, the division's military psychiatrist, treated 350 cases of battle exhaustion in one two-week period in December, another 237 the following week.[34] Fortunately, medical personnel were much more aware of battle exhaustion's existence and were able to treat soldiers accordingly. Medical Officer Captain John Heller, from Toronto, had been with The Royal Canadian Regiment since Sicily all the way up to Ortona and he had found that a long, uninterrupted sleep in safer conditions with warm food and drink afterwards usually put most men back in the mood to rejoin their comrades at the front, some of them anxiously. He found it remarkable that most men recovered and only a scant few would need further treatment far in the rear areas.[35] Whether or not they fully recovered is a matter of debate.

[33] Terry Copp and Bill McAndrew, *Battle Exhaustion: Soldiers and Psychiatrists in the Canadian Army, 1939-1945* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990), p. 56.
[34] McAndrew and Global, *The Italian Campaign*, p. 83.
[35] Granatstein and Hillmer, *Battle Lines*, pp. 312-313.

Despite the lull in action along the Adriatic section of the Gustav Line after Ortona, in early January 1944 the Germans occasionally reminded the Canadians that they were still at war by shelling the town with long-range heavy artillery.[36] Mother Nature also provided high winds, heavy rain and snowfall.[37] 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade laid out its defensive positions within Ortona as a defensive base behind the winter front line near the *Riccio* river. The Loyal Eddies held Ortona's New Town: C Company at the far south end, A Company west and D Company east of the *Corso M. Bianchi*, and B Company in-and-around the eastern side of the *Piazza Vittoria*. The Seaforths held the west side: D Company in-and-around Dead Horse Square, and A, C and B Companies

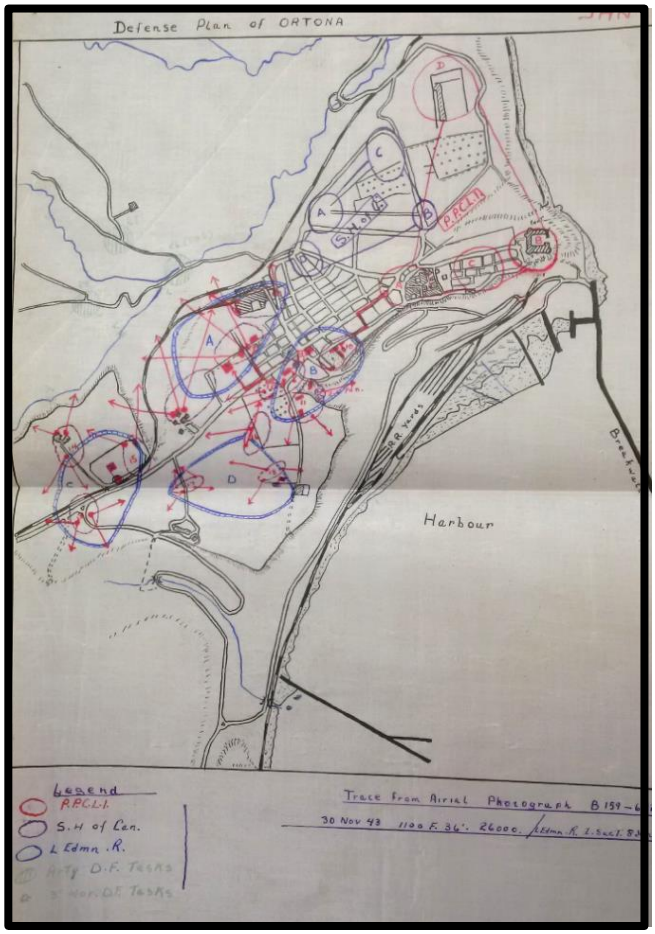

Photo: A hand-drawn sketch of the 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade's battalions and their locations in Ortona post-battle.[38]

[36] It was noticed that the Germans would definitely and without fail shell the town with artillery fire whenever the Seaforths practiced playing their bagpipes in the streets or during unit parades. Cavasin, *Hai visto i Canadesi?*, p. 49.

[37] Stevens, *A City at War*, p. 282.

[38] This particularly accurate and very good hand-drawn sketch was located in the Loyal Edmonton Regiment's war diary folder at Library and Archives Canada, and was a pleasant surprise to discover as I had not seen it in any of the resources I used for the writing of this thesis. North is at the top-right corner of the sketch. If you look carefully at the Loyal Eddies' company positions in particular, you will see that each company has placed its respective numbered platoons within each company location and has also marked the left and right arcs of observation and fire for each platoon with red arrows. Photo of the sketch by thesis author. LER WD 1943/09-1944/06, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15114, 28 Dec 1943, LAC.

clockwise in a triangle formation northwest of *Via Monte Maiella* and southwest of *Via Roma*. The Patricias spread out in the northeastern part of Old Town: A Company in-and-around *Piazza Municipali*, C Company in *Piazza San Tomasso*, B Company in the *Castello*, and D Company at the cemetery. Each of the infantry battalions took responsibility for a certain portion of the clean-up in response to British 8th Army directions that the Canadians turn Ortona into a leave centre for British and Commonwealth soldiers.[39] With all Commonwealth divisions now settling into a Great War-style of static trench warfare along the *Gustav* Line, soldiers needed routine opportunities for warm billets, hot meals, a movie or a canteen visit. Unfortunately, the rest and recuperation period only lasted until 19 January 1944, when 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade took its first turn back on the line to support a small diversion assault by the newly arrived 11th Canadian Infantry Brigade against 1st *Fallschirmjager* Division again.[40] For the next three months until April 1944 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade units rotated between the front line and the dryer, warmer rear base at Ortona.

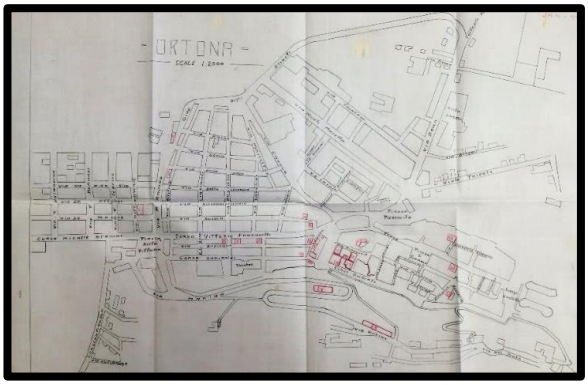

Photo: Another very accurate and well-drawn sketch which was located in the Loyal Eddies' war diary folder at LAC and another pleasant surprise to discover as I had not seen it in any of the resources I used for the writing of this thesis either. North is at the right side of the sketch. A hand-written note on the back of the sketch states "Coy Posns The Loyal Edmonton Regt Ortona Jan 44." It appears at some point during the rest and recuperation period that the Loyal Eddies had rotated into the area of the *Piazza San Tomasso*, as the companies' platoon numbers are seen as red squares in various buildings.[41]

[39] Cavasin, *Hai visto i Canadesi?*, p. 43.
[40] Stevens, *A City at War*, p. 282.
[41] LER WD 1943/09-1944/06, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15114, 28 Dec 1943, LAC.

Although the Canadians had inflicted much civilian deaths and property destruction in December, they redeemed themselves to the *Ortonesi* during the remaining winter months. From January to April 1944 Canadian troops provided food, water, shelter, livestock and medical aid to locals in greater quantities.[42] They provided physical assistance to the elderly in walking through the rubbled streets.[43] Allied Civil Affairs officers arranged to pay the *Ortonesi* to remove the rubble both assisting with the clean up and jump-starting the economy.[44] Engineers from 10th Field Squadron and the Loyal Eddies' pioneers helped dispose of unexploded ordnance, explosive devices, bombs and booby-traps so they would not initiate. Engineers also inspected buildings to ensure that they were sturdy enough for civilians to inhabit – too many civilians had died already from collapsing buildings during and immediately after the battle and both the Canadians and the Italians wanted that to stop.[45] Medical personnel from 5th Field Ambulance set up a special aid station for civilians, and No. 2 Canadian Field Hygiene Section and senior officers carried out inoculations, provided clean water and inspected buildings for health hazards to prevent disease.[46] *Ortonesi* were compensated financially for any damage done to their homes if a Canadian unit's commanding officer agreed that the damage was done by his troops.[47] Cases of charity and exchange are well recorded. For example, Antonio di Cesare helped the armoured soldiers from the Three Rivers Regiment remove the mud off of the tracks of the Shermans in exchange for food which kept his family, forced to live in another family's ruined house, alive through the

[42] Cavasin, *Hai visto i Canadesi?*, pp. 82-85. For several weeks Canadian troops were directed not to purchase or take local foods from Italians so that the latter had enough to eat for themselves and would prevent the Allied Military Government of the Occupied Territories (AMGOT) from having to import more food.
[43] Ibid., pp. 45-46.
[44] Ibid., p. 86. See also the photo on p. 159, footnote 26.
[45] Ibid., pp. 53-54 and pp. 60-65.
[46] Ibid., p. 56 and pp. 67-68.
[47] Ibid., p. 56.

winter.[48] Soldiers willingly gave chocolate and candy to children, volunteered to cut down trees for firewood and helped rebuild schools.[49] An Allied Military Government of the Occupied Territories (AMGOT) team arrived to install a temporary governmental structure in order to ensure the removal of Fascist law and install a semblance of political, financial and social order, and provide supplies, relief and maintenance for destitute civilians.[50] 1st Canadian Provost Company's military police officers eventually took over traffic control, enforced curfews, verified travel passes, arrested both Canadians and Italians for looting, detained Fascists and, inevitably when it comes to Canadians, policed drunken Canadian soldiers. The *Castello* became a good detention centre for the unruly.[51]

All these non-combat activities fostered an amicable friendship between the Canadians and the Italians of the town from January to April 1944. Soon Canadians avoided military rations and ate home-cooked meals provided by grateful *Ortonesi*. Many learned the Italian language from the locals and attended social events and religious services and/or playing games such as chess and bingo with the townspeople.[52] *Ortonesi* were also paid for tailoring, shoe shining, barbering, laundry services, and as waiters at military dinners, further adding to economic activity and the civil-military relationship.[53] Although the Germans had destroyed the *Cattedrale San Tomasso*, the

[48] Zuehlke, *Ortona*, p. 358.
[49] Cavasin, *Hai visto i Canadesi?*, pp. 93-97.
[50] Apparently the AMGOT officers had aerial photos of Ortona that were of higher quality than what the fighting troops had been issued, which in turn upset the Seaforths Lieutenant-Colonel Thomson in particular. Roy, *The Seaforth Highlanders*, p. 271. For an extremely well-written article on the AMGOT unit and its importance, see Cindy Brown's "To Bury The Dead and To Feed The Living," *Canadian Military History*, Volume 22, Number 3 (Waterloo: Laurier Centre for Military Strategic and Disarmament Studies, 2013), pp. 35-48.
[51] Cavasin, *Hai visto i Canadesi?*, pp. 72-82.
[52] Ibid., pp. 98-99.
[53] Ibid., pp. 109-113.

parish priest allowed Canadian soldiers to see its relics that were not usually viewed by the public.[54]

By the time 1st Canadian Division departed the sector in April of 1944, Ortona had become more than just the infamous December urban battlefield. The rebuilding effort there and the friendships created between the Canadians and the *Ortonesi* created a lasting impression that would endure for several decades afterwards. Regular, locally attended memorial services at the nearby *Moro* River Commonwealth War Cemetery, the installation of a dozen commemorative sites at critical locations of the battle, the opening of the Museum of the Battle of Ortona and the 2019 renaming of the square which holds the Price of Peace monument to *Piazza* Canada indicate how a positive memory of the Canadian presence prevails stronger than anger over wartime destruction and loss.[56]



Photo: With the destroyed *Cattedrale San Tomasso* as the setting, the cathedral's parish priest Don Pietro di Filvio meets with and presents Public Affairs Officer Major C.W. Gilchrist and chaplain Captain A.J. Barker a piece of symbolic wood in order to demonstrate the strong relationship between the Canadians and the *Ortonesi*.[55]

Reflecting on Leadership Amid Chaos

As Canadian troops and Ortona's citizens worked together to put the town together, it also came time to take stock of how the battle was managed from a leadership perspective. Senior military leaders find it difficult to understand the battle rhythm of urban combat. The 3-dimensional battlefield amid dense blocks of buildings

[54] Ibid., p. 105.

[55] Cavasin, *Hai visto i Canadesi?*, p. 105 (narrative); Zuehlke, *Battle of Ortona*, p. 73 (photo). The reader may wish to review the destroyed cathedral in the painting and photo in Chapter 5, p. 138, footnotes 36 to 38.

[56] Zuehlke, *Battle of Ortona*, p. 90.

reduce effective radio and voice communications leaving military leaders often in partial darkness about the progress of operations. Ortona revealed how urban operations required specific standard operating procedures to maintain enough situational awareness to make sound decisions and exercise positive influence on the battle's outcome. Also, senior military leaders will have to locate themselves forward enough to have an influence on the battle while not being so far forward that they will become casualties. While this is true for any battle in all environments, it becomes particularly and considerably more risky in urban operations when commanders position themselves in places where the enemy can infiltrate into and appear out of nowhere, and/or remain relatively well-hidden and within weapons range of friendly forces. That balance of "being forward enough but not that far forward" must be achieved by military commanders but in urban operations the challenge is greater.

There is a debate among historians over Canadian military leadership effectiveness and forward command at Ortona. As this thesis focuses on 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade's battle a review of 1st Canadian Infantry Division's commander Major-General Chris Vokes is beyond the purview of this work, although historical views on Vokes' leadership and his decision-making throughout the Ortona campaign abound.[57] More importantly, 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade's commander, Brigadier Bertram Hoffmeister, shows up frequently in this thesis in his mid-battle trips into town and his

[57] Upon reviewing the evidence some historians are inclined to condemn Vokes and how he handled the division throughout the Italian campaign generally and the Ortona campaign in particular. Chapter 1, p. 20, footnote 32 discusses Brereton Greenhous' article "'Would It Not Have Been Better to Bypass Ortona Completely...?' A Canadian Christmas, 1943" and his very negative view on Vokes. Zuehlke in *Ortona* is very critical of Vokes also, and Bercuson in *Maple Leaf Against the Axis* subtly sides with Greenhous. Granatstein's *The Generals* does not discuss Vokes in a specific chapter but does mention him, his personality traits, and who liked and disliked him frequently throughout the work. One of the very few who has come to Vokes' defence is Case in his essay "Trial by Fire: Major-General Christopher Vokes at the Battles of the Moro River and Ortona, December 1943," with a summary of Case's discussion points in Chapter 1, p. 24, footnote 41.

discussions with superior and subordinate leaders. According to his biographer, Hoffmeister was the right commander for this job:

> "It is difficult to imagine the Battle of Ortona without Hoffmeister. It is impossible to say whether it would have ground to a successful conclusion without him, but it is clear that he thought hard about the morale of his troops and he did everything he could to keep them fighting. Mostly, that meant being seen and sharing risks. There was not a whole lot else he could do for them. With the broken terrain of the town, with the room-to-room nature of the battle, with his ability to mass firepower rendered almost useless, with the Desert Air Force grounded because of bad weather; he could not do much to help them – except be seen. When soldiers see the boss, they can at least feel they are not alone or unappreciated or dying for nothing. And Hoffmeister's soldiers kept fighting."[58]

* * * * *

> "Col. Jefferson (commanding the Edmontons) held his Orders Group regularly every day. At the first Orders Group he laid out plans to get to Pescara. The next day the objective was to take Ortona. The third day we had to reach a line midway through Ortona. After that for more than a week he would start off the Orders Group by saying, 'Well, we will see what we can do today.'"
>
> - Howard Mitchell, Saskatoon Light Infantry (Machine Gun).[59]

The case of Loyal Edmonton Regiment leadership is more contentious. Lieutenant-Colonel James (Jim) Jefferson remains an enigma largely because he is only rarely and briefly mentioned. Those occasional references demonstrate routine command functions such as the example above. Jefferson later rose to the rank of Brigadier and led 10th Canadian Infantry Brigade in the Northwestern European theatre of the war. He won the Distinguished Service Order for the Loyal Eddies' determined stand at Leonforte in Sicily, but reportedly came across as shy and reserved.[60] He later won the respect of 4th

[58] Delaney, "When Leadership Really Mattered," *Intrepid Warriors*, p. 151.

[59] Howard Mitchell, *My War: With the Saskatoon Light Infantry (M.G.), 1939-1945* (Rosetown Publishing, n.d.), p. 89, as quoted in McAndrew and Global, *Canadians and the Italian Campaign*, p. 79.

[60] Zuehlke, *Ortona*, p. 167.



Photo:
LCol James Curry Jefferson,
Commanding Officer,
Loyal Edmonton Regiment.[62]

Canadian Armoured Division's well-known commander Major-General Harry Foster, who stated "I was a bit envious of Jefferson. A steady, plodding, fearless sort of militia officer without much sense of humour or imagination, Jeff had had one hell of a war in Italy and experienced the thrill of commanding his own regiment in battle. Something that I would never know."[61] Historian Shaun Brown very briefly mentioned that Jefferson insisted that the companies take their time planning platoon-size operations against one or two houses in order to avoid being sucked down the *Corso Vittorio Emmanuele* and into the *Piazza Municipali*, subtly stating that Jefferson, like any good commander, did not want to rush the attack and lose his soldiers in the Germans' main killing zone.[63] Other than these short compliments, Jefferson remains, as it is often stated of a soldier who blends into the background and quietly does his/her job, the quintessential "grey man" in Canadian military history.

In contrast Jefferson's subordinate Major James ("Big Jim") Stone who commanded D Company throughout Ortona stood out amongst both his subordinates and historians. His nickname was a result of a number of factors. He was physically

[61] Tony Foster, *Meeting of Generals* (Toronto: Methuen Publishing, 1986), p. 384.

[62] When searching to include a photo of Lieutenant-Colonel Jefferson in this thesis, I could not unfortunately find a photo of him in any of the resources used. Naturally, I went to the internet and typed his name into the various search engines, and found no photos of him whatsoever, not even in "Google." The closest thing I could find were photos of the Brigadier James Curry Jefferson *Armoury* in Edmonton, Alberta, the building the Loyal Eddies call home. Even the LER website does not have a photo of him. After close to thirty minutes of internet searching I finally found the somewhat blurry photo above on an obscure website about General Officers from the Second World War: http://www.generals.dk/general/Jefferson/James_Curry/Canada.html

[63] Brown, "The Rock of Accomplishment," *Canadian Military History*, p. 16.



Photo:
Major James "Big Jim" Stone, Officer Commanding D Company, Loyal Edmonton Regiment. This photo of Stone was taken when he was a Lieutenant-Colonel and the commanding officer of 2nd Battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, during the Korean War (1950-1953) where he commanded that battalion during the battle of Kap'yong 24-25 April 1951.[66]

imposing, quite tall at 6-foot-5-inches and well-built in stature. He was also, by many accounts, an effective leader as well as outspoken and opinionated. He joined the Loyal Eddies as a Private in 1939 and within five years became the battalion's commanding officer in October 1944. He had commanded D Company since the battalion's landing in Sicily, and repeatedly demonstrated the ability to lead men under fire.[64] He won the Military Cross for his actions in Ortona and later earned two Distinguished Service Orders (DSO) in Italy and the Netherlands. As his second DSO citation stated:

> "There were many instances throughout the actions in Italy and Holland where Lieutenant-Colonel Stone's personal leadership was the contributing factor in the success of battle. His initiative and courage are unsurpassed. He was highly regarded throughout the whole of the 1st Canadian Division as a keen, capable and courageous commander."[65]

Major-General George Brown, a Lieutenant in the Eddies' anti-tank platoon during the battle, commented:

> "Stone was an exceptional leader. He took his time to carefully survey the battlefield. He controlled his men in battle by his voice or by radio when possible, but most often by voice. He watched them, directed them, getting them on. He was a tremendous example of how a good leader with good control could inspire the confidence of his men."[67]

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[64] William Johnston, *A War of Patrols: Canadian Army Operations in Korea* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003), p. 30; Zuehlke makes many references to "Big Jim" Stone's personality in *Ortona* on pp. 167, 242 and 252-253.

[65] William Johnston, *A War of Patrols: Canadian Army Operations in Korea* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003), p. 30.

[66] Johnston, *A War of Patrols*, p. 97-107 (narrative); Granatstein and Hillmer, *Battle Lines*, group of photos after p. 314 (photo).

[67] Brown, "The Rock of Accomplishment," *Canadian Military History*, p. 22.

However, "Big Jim" also earned his nickname due to his willingness to offer blunt opinions, sometimes regardless of rank. This included negative opinions and rather undiplomatic comments towards Lieutenant-Colonel Jefferson both during and after the war. Stone's own testimony indicates that Jefferson and Stone did not work together very well, or that Stone just did not like Jefferson and the decisions he made. Stone gave multiple examples of his dislike for Jefferson in an interview with Fred Gaffen, the first occurring during the initial break-in into New Town.[68] However, Stone also commented about his superior's communication skills throughout the battle and Jefferson's indirect fire shoot on 27 December 1943:[69]

> "As I was a company commander constantly in battle, I had no knowledge of the town defences being outflanked by 1st Brigade. I seldom heard of the progress of the Seaforths, being separated from them by a block of buildings. No briefings came from battalion headquarters and we fought our daily battles quite unsupported except for a tremendous 3-inch mortar shoot on the town cemetery which wreaked havoc among the dead of the past centuries but had little effect on the very much alive enemy."[70]

In giving his recommendations about what he learned from the Ortona battle, Stone commented:

> "The foregoing observations are of a rifle company commander, battling in the streets with no supporting instructions from higher authority. I knew what the troops of my regiment were doing to my front; I knew nothing of what was going on at battalion, brigade or divisional level. I learned and never forgot the requirement to hold 'O' (orders) groups regularly if only to keep junior commanders informed and let them know their places in the overall fighting plan. Perhaps if I had known the extent of the whole action I would not have felt that I and the other forward company commanders were ceaselessly battering our heads against an apparently immoveable object and that we were alone."[71]

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[68] Gaffen, *Ortona: Christmas 1943*, p. 37. See Chapter 3, p. 63, footnote 27.

[69] LER WD 1943/09-1944/06, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15114, 28 Dec 1943, LAC. See Chapter 6, p. 152, footnote 14.

[70] Gaffen, *Ortona: Christmas 1943*, pp. 41-42.

[71] Ibid., p. 44.

These rather stinging critiques has led to the perceived conflict between Jefferson and Stone which in turn has skewed some historians and their opinions about both of them. Some historians state that Jefferson was largely ineffective as the Loyal Eddies' commanding officer during the Ortona battle, and that Stone was the one making decisions. Commenting on Stone's daring advance up the *Corso Vittorio Emmanuele* from the *Piazza Vittoria* to the rubble pile located at the south end of *Piazza Municipali*, Zuehlke wrote:[72]

> "That Stone was developing the tactics for the Edmontons' December 22 attack reflected a shift in the regiment's lines of command. Lieutenant Colonel Jefferson had established his battalion headquarters on Ortona's outskirts. This was unlike Seaforth Highlanders of Canada battalion commander Lieutenant Colonel Syd Thomson, who had set up shop right on the town's edge in *Santa Maria di Constantinopoli*. In fact, Jefferson's headquarters was almost as far back as 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade commander Brigadier Bert Hoffmeister's. In a battle where troops were facing each other across distances of mere feet, trying to exercise effective control or to dictate strategy from such a distance to the rear was difficult, if not impossible.
>
> Because of the distance between Jefferson's headquarters and the rifle companies in Ortona, command of the Edmonton Regiment effectively shifted to the senior commander on the immediate scene. That was Major Jim Stone."[73]

Jefferson never replied to any of Stone's negative comments for the record either during or after the war or, if he did, they have been lost to history. Perhaps Jefferson felt that as he was the commanding officer of the Loyal Eddies, he did not have to respond to his temperamental subordinate. It says something that Jefferson was promoted to Brigadier and brigade command in the Northwest European theatre of the war, while Stone never got above the rank of Colonel by the time the latter retired. Perhaps Stone's negative comments never bothered Jefferson in the first place due to his rather stoic personality. However, by not challenging Stone's comments about his leadership,

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[72] BDFL, minutes 11:29 to 12:56. See Chapter 4, pp. 79-81, footnotes 65 to 68.

[73] Zuehlke, *Ortona*, pp. 262-263. Bercuson repeats Zuehlke's opinion on Jefferson's ineffectiveness in *The Fighting Canadians,* p. 221.

Jefferson set himself up for critical review by historians. It is also easy to suggest that given his passive personality, Jefferson never had a chance of demonstrating his more positive leadership abilities due to his being surrounded by such personable and larger-than-life officers such as Hoffmeister, Stone, and the commanding officer of the Seaforths, Lieutenant-Colonel Syd Thomson. In the end, analysis on this issue is limited by the available evidence.

* * * * *

Unlike Jefferson, Lieutenant-Colonel Sydney ("Syd") Wilford Thomson's leadership and actions during Ortona were better documented in the resources. Although initially wounded in Sicily, he recovered and rejoined the Seaforths where he served as a platoon commander, company second-in-command, company commander and the battalion's second-in-command in the span of a few short months. On 10 December 1943 the Seaforths' Commanding Officer Lieutenant-Colonel Doug Forin was wounded in action due to German artillery fire outside of San Leonardo, so Hoffmeister ordered Thomson to take over as acting commanding officer, just in time for Ortona.[74] He was mentioned in almost every page of the war diary that spanned the Ortona battle in a number of contexts. Frequently the diary notes his headquarters locations close to the frontlines so that he could control and influence the



Photo:
Lieutenant-Colonel Syd Thomson,
Commanding Officer,
The Seaforth Highlanders of Canada[75]

[74] Zuehlke, *Ortona*, p. 171.
[75] Tom Hawthorn, http://tomhawthorn.blogspot.com/2009/01/syd-thomson-soldier-1914-2008.html.

battle, the directions he issued to his subordinate commanders and how he himself dangerously moved his own personal vehicle away from the church of *Santa Maria di Constantinopoli* under fire.[76] Thomson's leadership under fire was particularly evident when the Germans counterattacked on 24 December 1943.[77] Thomson's authorization of the Christmas dinner at *Santa Maria di Constantinopoli* was also a good decision for his exhausted troops.[78] Unlike Jefferson, historians judge that Thomson was much involved in this battle and influenced it in a positive way.

* * * * *

> "I think one other thing is that in Ortona where perhaps my presence was useful, that I demonstrated a certain lack of concern for the enemy shots that were flying around. And it made people, everybody start to wonder, 'what am I hanging back for when he'll go? And that, I think, is the point of why you need – it sounds a bit egotistical – but let me say ***bold*** leaders when you are in towns…Street fighting is won by the men and not by the weapons, and the men actually in contact with the enemy are mostly commanded by junior NCOs and people have to be really well trained if you are going to be successful in street fighting. These junior NCOs could take five or six men, go into the dangerous places to keep up the momentum of the big attack you're making."
>
> - Major James Stone.[79]

Of course, leadership during the battle of Ortona was not only required at the senior officer levels. There were many instances of leadership, courage, initiative and teamwork that occurred at all ranks. Corporal Campion's actions on *Corso Vittorio Emmanuele,* Captain Harley at the church of *Santa Maria di Constantinopoli*, Private C.G. Rattray at the *Piazza Municipali*, Lieutenant James Dougan's attempt to save new reinforcements, Sergeant J.E.W. Dick's initiative against the flamethrower and other

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[76] Roy, *The Seaforth Highlanders*, p. 266. See Chapter 4, pp. 85-86, footnotes 77 and 78. Unlike the Loyal Eddies' war diary which summarized each day's events in a long paragraph, the Seaforths' war diary breaks each day down with specific timings and a sentence or very short paragraph to describe what occurred at that time. Therefore, it is a lot easier to follow the progress and read Thomson's direction at specific times during the day.

[77] Roy, *The Seaforth Highlanders*, pp. 269-270. See Chapter 4, pp. 115-116, footnote 73.

[78] SHC WD 1943/01-31 December, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15256, LAC; Reader's Digest, *The Canadians at War, 1939-1945, Volume 2*, p. 371; Zuehlke, *Ortona*, p. 312. See Chapter 5, p. 127, footnote 19.

[79] BDFL, minutes 17:55 to 18:26 and minutes 28:14 to 28:41.

German positions on *Corso Umberto I*, and Corporal G.E. O'Neil's rush to save the buried platoon all offer examples of thoughtful leadership in the face of danger. The Seaforths' signals officer, Lieutenant Wilf Gildersleeve, commented:

> "I will never forget the sort of men we had in the Sigs. Platoon, from Sgt. Meade, M.M., to Sgt. Hicks, both experts at handling men and communication equipment down to the newest arrivals. With an ever compelling urge to 'get through' no matter what the cost, these men kept the command and information channels of the unit open, and usually with complete disregard for their own safety. Walking close to their Company Commanders with an overhead antenna waving from their backs they were obvious targets to enemy snipers; and wearing earphones in the midst of battle they were deprived of the usual warning of whistling preceding enemy bombardment.[80]

Leadership, courage and initiative was also demonstrated by the Royal Canadian Engineers, who were co-located right with the infantry and often exposed themselves to German direct and artillery / mortar fire while mine clearing or putting explosives against walls, sometimes with enemy paratroopers right on the other side. The Three Rivers Regiment's armoured soldiers who took their Sherman tanks – huge and attractive targets for the enemy – into Ortona's deadly streets to provide heavy armoured firepower, bring up supplies and take back the wounded. The artillery gun detachment leaders who manhandled their heavy 6-pounder anti-tank guns through the rubble to provide the extra firepower also shone. In Ortona leadership, courage, initiative and teamwork was demonstrated daily.

* * * * *

The majority of accounts of the Battle of Ortona that struggle with making sense of the urban chaos by featuring a few select examples of tactical innovation or courageous action cannot capture the entirely and complexity of this event or its

[80] Roy, *The Seaforth Highlanders*, p. 267. Gildersleeve is interviewed extensively in Edoardo di Pierro's "The Battle of Ortona" documentary found on the "Youtube" website.

consequences. Studying the layers of urban warfare necessitates an appreciation of what the *Ortonesi* endured during and after the fighting, as well as the relationships built when they and their new Canadian neighbours emerged from cover to rebuild and to forge new relations. Likewise, taking stock of Canadian military leadership at all levels at Ortona helps to reveal how 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade and its supporting arms solved this unique new kind of Second World War problem of urban combat in a comparatively short time in late December 1943.

Chapter 8 – Conclusion – Why Ortona Matters: Past, Present and Future



Photo: A photographer from the Canadian Army Film and Photo Unit was able to take this photo from the top floor of a villa south of Ortona during the battle.
Above the "X" is the tower of the church located in *Piazza San Francesco* / Dead Horse Square;
Above the "XX" is the large apartment complex, its top floors somewhat obscured by smoke, on the west side of the *Piazza Vittoria*; and
Above the "XXX" is the *Corso Vittorio Emmanuele*.[1]

"Nearer the coast the Canadians cleared the enemy from another key area of the defence near the village of S(an) Leonardo after eight consecutive attacks, and they were faced with a German parachute battalion determined to defend the coast town of Ortona. The resourceful Canadians worked out the tactics of street fighting as they went along, and their clearance of the town still remains a model for anyone who is forced to engage in that peculiarly unpleasant form of warfare."

- Dominick Graham and Shelford Bidwell,
Tug of War – The Battle for Italy: 1939-45.[2]

"In addition to the succession of rivers there was also Ortona, a small port for which the 1st Canadian Division had to fight street by street, house by house, and even floor by floor. It took them a week, and they spent Christmas Day doing it, and in the end they took it…After Ortona the Canadians became the acknowledged experts in street-fighting. For the rest of the war officers who had been at Ortona toured the Allied military schools lecturing on the subject. Ortona is a small piece of Canadian history."

- Fred Majdalany, *Cassino: Portrait of a Battle*.[3]

Long after the battle was over, two historians questioned whether the fighting in Ortona should have occurred in the first place. In 1989 Brereton Greenhous argued that tremendous sacrifices of Canadian troops in-and-around Ortona were unnecessary and that the town should have been bypassed completely instead. The article highlights selective events and testimonies that emphasize Canadian challenges at Ortona to

[1] Whitcombe and Gilmour, *The Pictorial History of Canada's Army Overseas 1939-1945*, pp. 106-107.
[2] Graham and Bidwell, *Tug of War*, p. 119.
[3] Majdalay, *Cassino*, pp. 29-30.

validate the argument.[4] Later, David Bercuson echoed Greenhous, arguing that the battle should not have been fought at all because the key road junction three kilometres to the southwest could have been captured thus masking the town and bypassing it. They both argue that the battle was fought for the wrong reasons. The Canadian Army was trapped by its own publicity mongers after Ortona was compared to Stalingrad, committing both sides to the bitter end. Bercuson compared the case to a later example after the Allies broke out of Normandy eight months later and raced towards the Low Countries and Germany, they bypassed Dunkirk, and left it masked until the very end of the war.[5]

This retrospective analysis simplifies the situation and the evidence from 1943. The Germans had never fought an extensive urban battle before in the Mediterranean theatre. Their pattern had so far been to draw Allied forces to the edge of a town and then, after taking casualties – the defender almost always does[6] – they withdrew to the next river, valley, high ground or some combination of the three suitable for the defence. In December 1943 British and Canadian commanders assumed that Ortona would be no different. This was the reason they thought the Germans would only delay in Ortona

[4] Greenhous, "'Would It Not Have Been Better to Bypass Ortona Completely...?' A Canadian Christmas, 1943," *Canadian Defence Quarterly*, pp. 51-55.

[5] Bercuson, *Maple Leaf Against The Axis*, pp. 172-173.

[6] This point is quite convincingly argued in Major J.P. Storr's article "FIBUA – The Tactics of Mistake," *British Army Review*, Number 128, Winter 2001-2002 (Great Britain: British Army Periodical, 2002). When researching many urban operations battles throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, I can only find one when the defenders were able to achieve victory, that of Suez City 24 October 1973 during the Yom Kippur War (06-26 October 1973). The Israeli attack into the city was so unprofessional and marred by such glaring tactical urban operations errors that they were soundly defeated. Otherwise, a majority of all other urban operations battles, even the debacle of the 1st Battle of Grozny in December 1994 – March 1995, ended with victories for the forces that were on the offence. DND (Canada), *Unique Operations – Urban*, pp. 239-241 (Suez City) and pp. 11-25 (1st Grozny).

and withdraw to the *Arielli* river and why Hoffmeister had only initially committed a single battalion to capture the town.[7]

However, the Allies did not know that Ortona had become the eastern anchor of the *Gustav* Line, the point at which the Germans needed to stop the Allies on the approach to Pescara and therefore the back door to Rome. Once the Canadians understood the *Fallschirmjager*'s intent – to fight a major defensive battle inside the town rather than further north, Hoffmeister had little choice but to bring up the rest of his brigade in response. This was also the reason why he wanted to see the fight through to the end – not because of the media exaggerating the town's importance in comparing it to Stalingrad – but because pulling out and failing to achieve the mission would have dealt a tremendous psychological blow to his brigade.

Highway 16 was the 1st Canadian Infantry Division's main axis of advance and logistical supply route for Eighth Army's advance northwards along the Adriatic coast to the strategic goal of Pescara. Ortona commanded that highway from three directions. The enemy there simply had to be destroyed to open the highway northward.[8] Also, bypassing Ortona was a thought that crossed nobody's mind; this was the Second World War, and the prevailing mindset was always: when the Germans chose to stand in a particular spot, the Allies had to go to that location and destroy them. If anybody had actually thought differently by suggesting a bypass and isolation of the town, it would have been one of the very few times on the southern front that the Allies would have allowed two battalions of motivated, dedicated paratroopers to fester in their rear area,

[7] As discussed in Chapter 2, p. 51, footnote 71 and Chapter 3, p. 56, top paragraph. *DND DHH CMHQ reports 1940-1948*, p. 84, para. 239; Roy, *The Seaforth Highlanders*, p. 258; SHC WD 1943/01-31 December, RG-24-C-3, Volume 15256, LAC; Delaney, *The Soldiers' General*, p. 101.

[8] It will be recalled that Highway 16 became the *Corso M. Bianchi*, the *Corso Vittoria Emmanuele* and *Via Tripoli* within Ortona.

threatening the most important road on the east side of the Italian peninsula. Months later in France, the Allies were willing to risk the containment of Dunkirk because by August of 1944 that port city had its significance minimized, and a myriad of other major highways served their logistics needs. The Germans there could be allowed to wither on the vine, and the Allies instead focused on clearing the *Scheldt* Estuary to open access Antwerp and press on to Berlin.[9]

Also, the point was largely moot – the battle of Ortona happened, and it is important to note that the Canadians, while initially unprepared for an urban battle, ended up soundly defeating an enemy force essentially equal in numbers through good leadership, courage, initiative, teamwork, evolving tactics and the effective employment of a wide range of weapons. It was hardly a matter of a small delaying force holding off a much larger attacker. In any case, the geography immediately surrounding Ortona did not allow it to be isolated or flanked which gave an advantage to the *Fallschirmjager*, prolonging the battle and seriously handicapping the Canadians initially. Also, the Green Devils were a motivated and skillful enemy who defended the *Gustav* Line west of Ortona strongly as to also prevent its isolation. The urban geography gave them additional advantages when paired with their use of their effective weapon systems. They successfully forced the Canadians into a tough urban combat operation.

However, the Red Patch Devils were also veterans of difficult fighting throughout Italy, despite including some new reinforcements to replace losses after the *Moro* river

[9] Colonel C.P. Stacey, *Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War, Volume III: The Victory Campaign – The Operations in North-West Europe 1944-1945* (Ottawa: The Queen's Printer and Controller of Stationary, 1960), p. 360. Although Dunkirk had been an original objective given to 1st Canadian Army, it was realized that the need to have access to the important port city of Antwerp by clearing the *Scheldt* Estuary was more important. In order to save resources, the Dunkirk task was amended to merely contain the city to prevent the Germans in escaping from it.

and The Gully battles. Although they could not isolate the town, once 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade broke into Ortona and gained lodgement, the day-by-day battle slowly progressed northwards as the Canadians evolved their urban tactics. They innovatively maximized the technology of all their small arms to tanks, anti-tank guns, and engineer explosives to support their mouseholing technique to slowly, steadily, violently defeat their German opponents. Once the Canadians had broken through the German main defensive area that stretched through Old Town's *piazze*, German commanders at several levels knew that their part in holding the *Gustav* Line in this town had failed.

Both the Canadians and the Germans pushed themselves to the limits of human endurance and it resulted in a high cost in blood for both military forces as well as for Ortona's inhabitants, along with extensive collateral damage – the logical consequence of urban fighting – but it ultimately became a Canadian victory nonetheless. Afterwards, the Canadians helped the *Ortonesi* rebuild the town and their lives, establishing an enduring Canadian-Italian friendship that still exists today. The Canadians also created a lasting legacy and example for how to overcome the challenge of modern urban warfare.

The Canadians were not the only urban operations experts by the time the Second World War ended. The Russians won the most infamous battle at Stalingrad between August 1942 and February 1943. The efforts of 1st United States Infantry Division (the "Big Red One") at Aachen in October of 1944 is also regarded as an important example of urban operations planning and tactics.[10] The battle of Manila in the Philippines between the Americans and the Japanese in February-March 1945 was particularly

[10] For a very good review on the urban battles of both Stalingrad and Aachen please see the respective chapters in DiMarco's *Concrete Hell*.

destructive, as was the battle of Berlin between the Russians and Germans in April of 1945.[11] The Allied forces on the offensive in all those battles demonstrated an ability to conduct urban operations against stubborn Axis defenders. Although all these battles were considerably larger in size and number of units participating, involving entire regiments, divisions, corps or even entire armies – it does not lessen the fact that the Canadians stood out as equals among these modern western land forces.

Given the worldwide trend towards increasing urbanization, and the recognition by modern anti-western insurgent forces that urban operations help to equalize their chances against powerful Western military forces, and the small size, capabilities and equipment limitations of the Canadian Army today, Canadian soldiers may be despatched to fight another urban operation in the near future. Therefore, understanding and drawing wisdom from the Ortona experience remains relevant. It will be unacceptable to fill up body bags with Canadian soldiers' corpses because of the glaringly obvious tactical mistakes witnessed by this author during that urban training exercise in Wainwright. Most importantly, it is hoped that this work offers a clearer historical understanding of Ortona's brutal day-to-day logic by laying out the available evidence chronologically and geographically, thereby bringing a little more historical order to the chaos, including the integration of new research and questions about its consequences.

[11] For a very good review on the urban battle of Manila please see the respective chapter written by Thomas. M. Huber in William G. Robertson, *Block by Block: The Challenges of Urban Operations* (Fort Leavenworth: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College Press), n.d., pp. 91-122; Corneilius Ryan's *The Last Battle* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1966) is a good resource on the battle of Berlin.

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---. "Painting, *Corso Umberto I*" by Charles Comfort. https://www.warmuseum.ca/collections/artifact/1019238/?q=paint+brush&page_num=1&item_num=100&media_irn=2082

---. "Painting, *Via Dolorosa*, Ortona," by Charles Comfort. https://www.warmuseum.ca/collections/artifact/1014496/?q=paint+brush&page_num=1&item_num=3&media_irn=5400304

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Appendix I: Ortona's Urban Geography



X

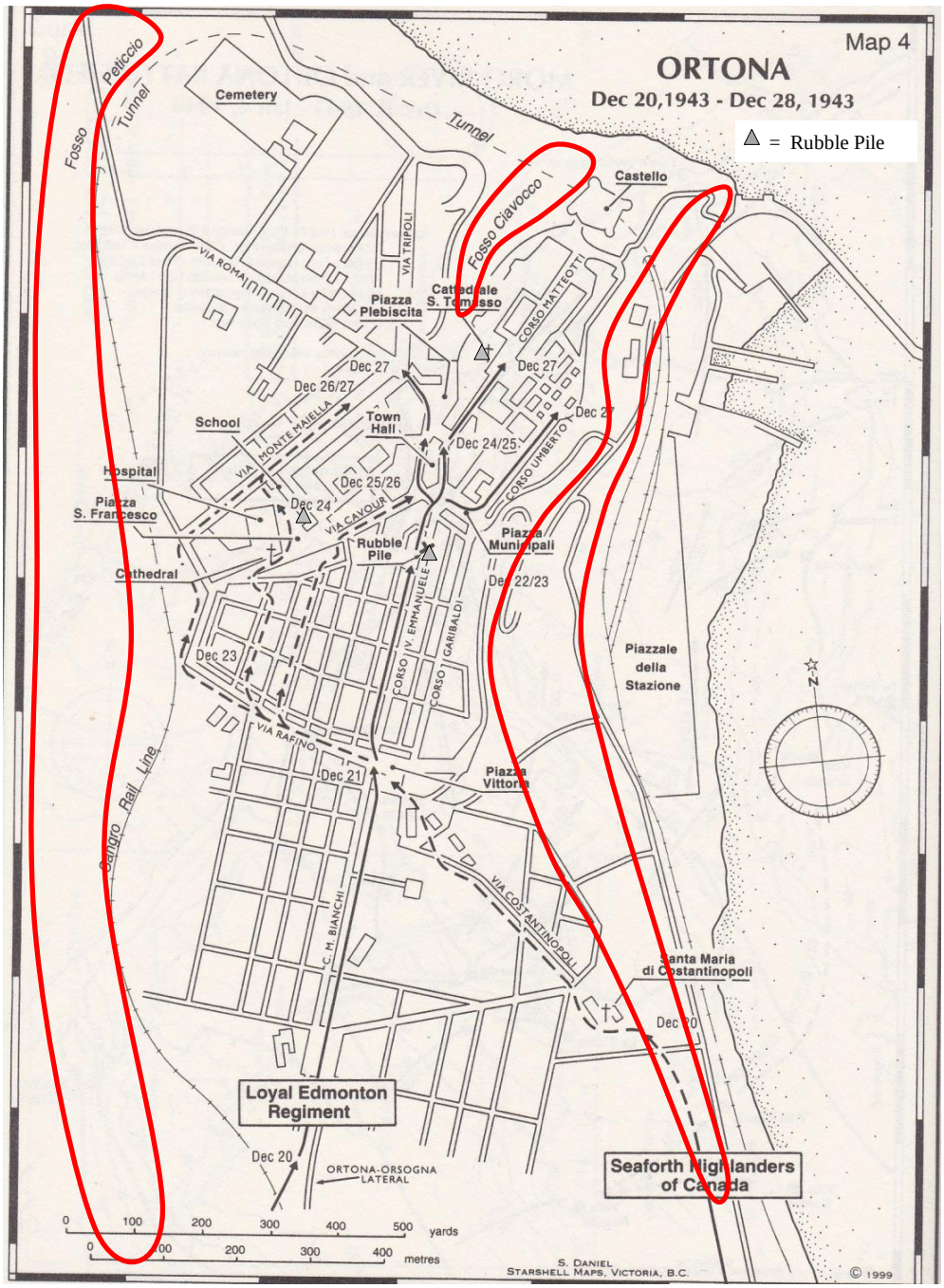
An aerial reconnaissance photo of Ortona taken just before the battle.[1] This photo allows for an understanding of the layout and size of the town just before the fighting occurred. The photo is not oriented properly, so the "X" indicates north.

All of the geography maps on pages 206-215 are a copy of Map 4, p. XX in Zuehlke, *Ortona* and have been modified by the thesis author using Microsoft PowerPoint.

[1] Nicholson, *Official History*, p. 304.

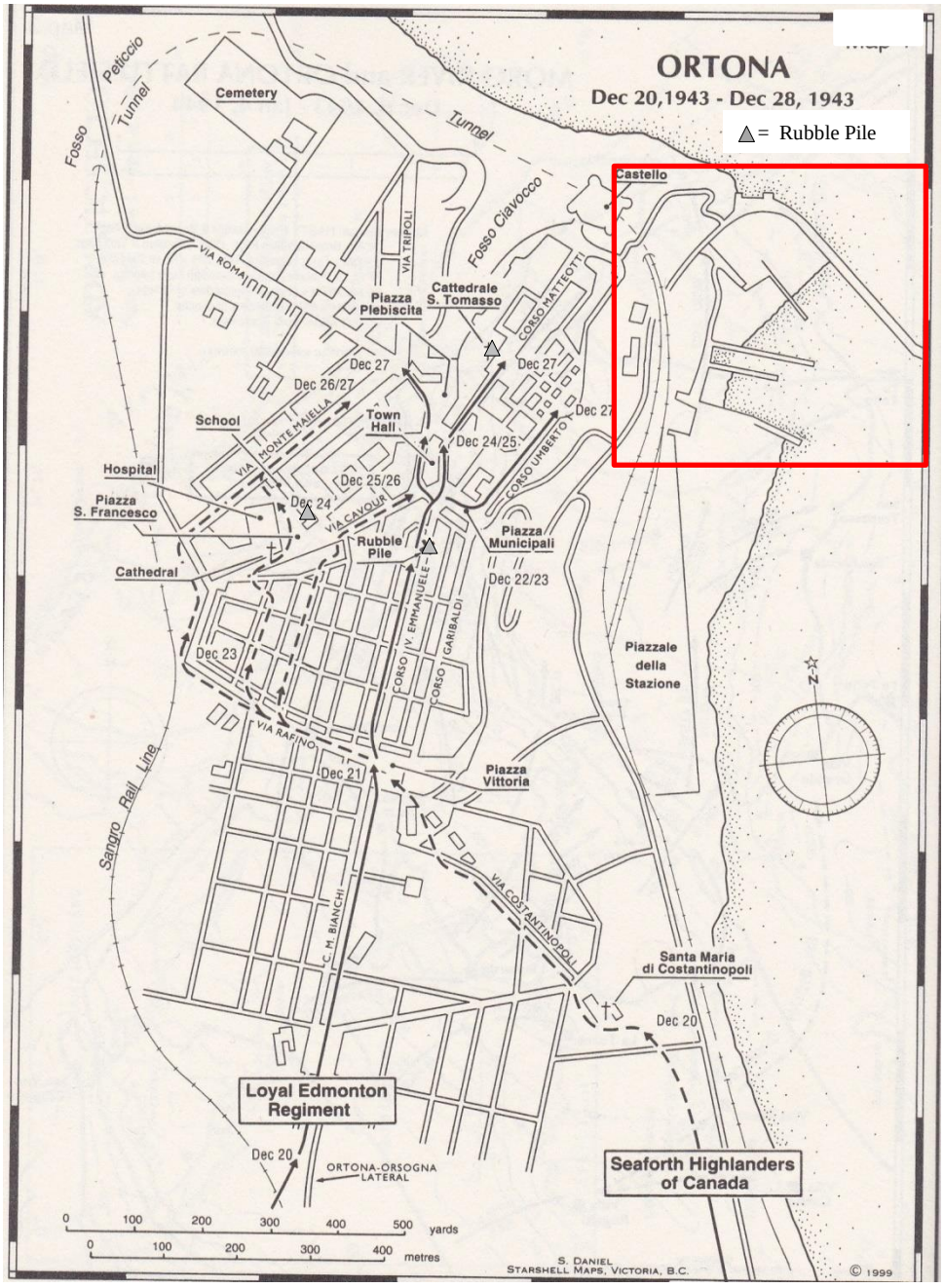
Urban Map 1

Steep Contours / Ravines / Cliffs



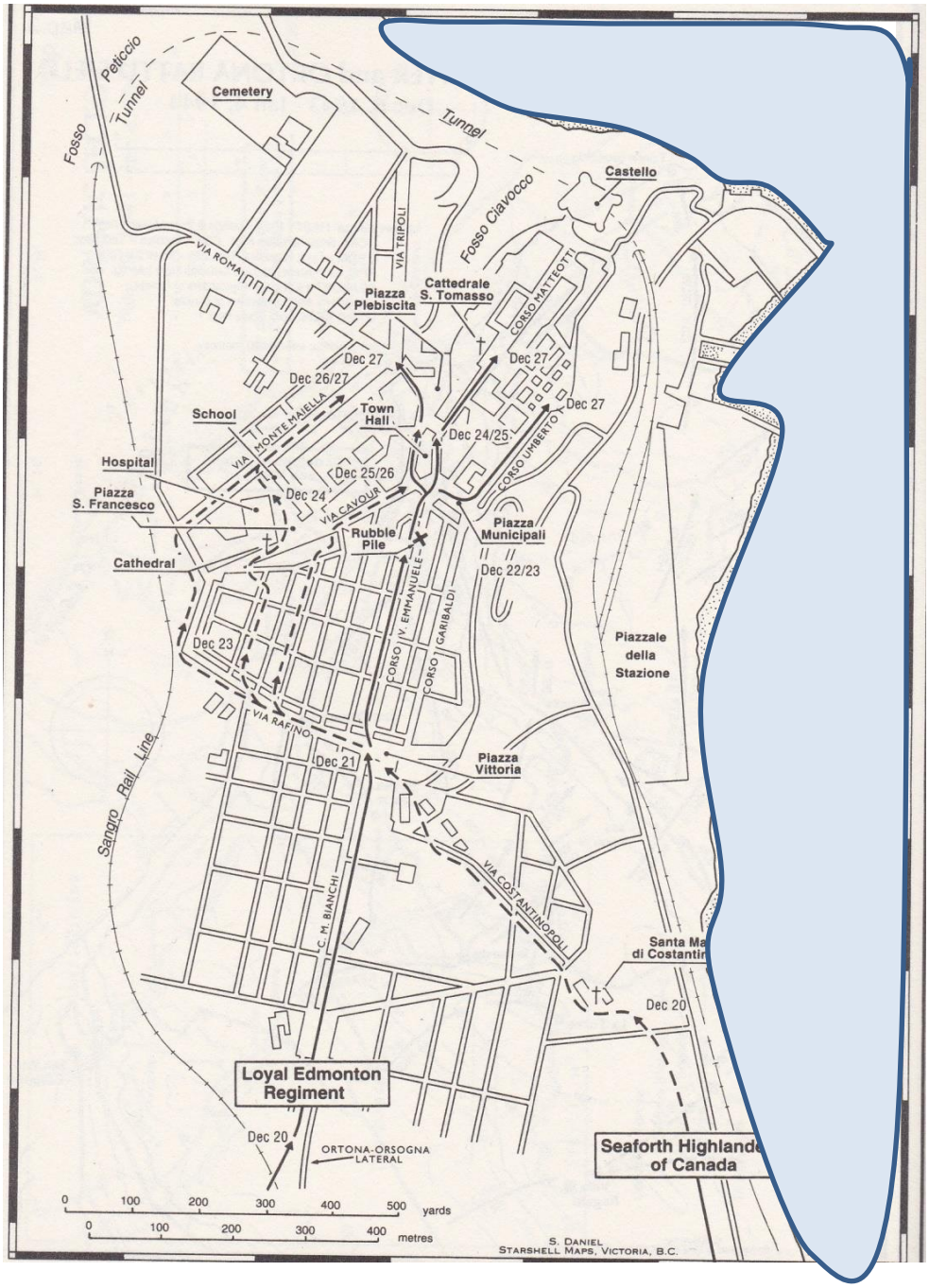
Urban Map 2

Port Facilities

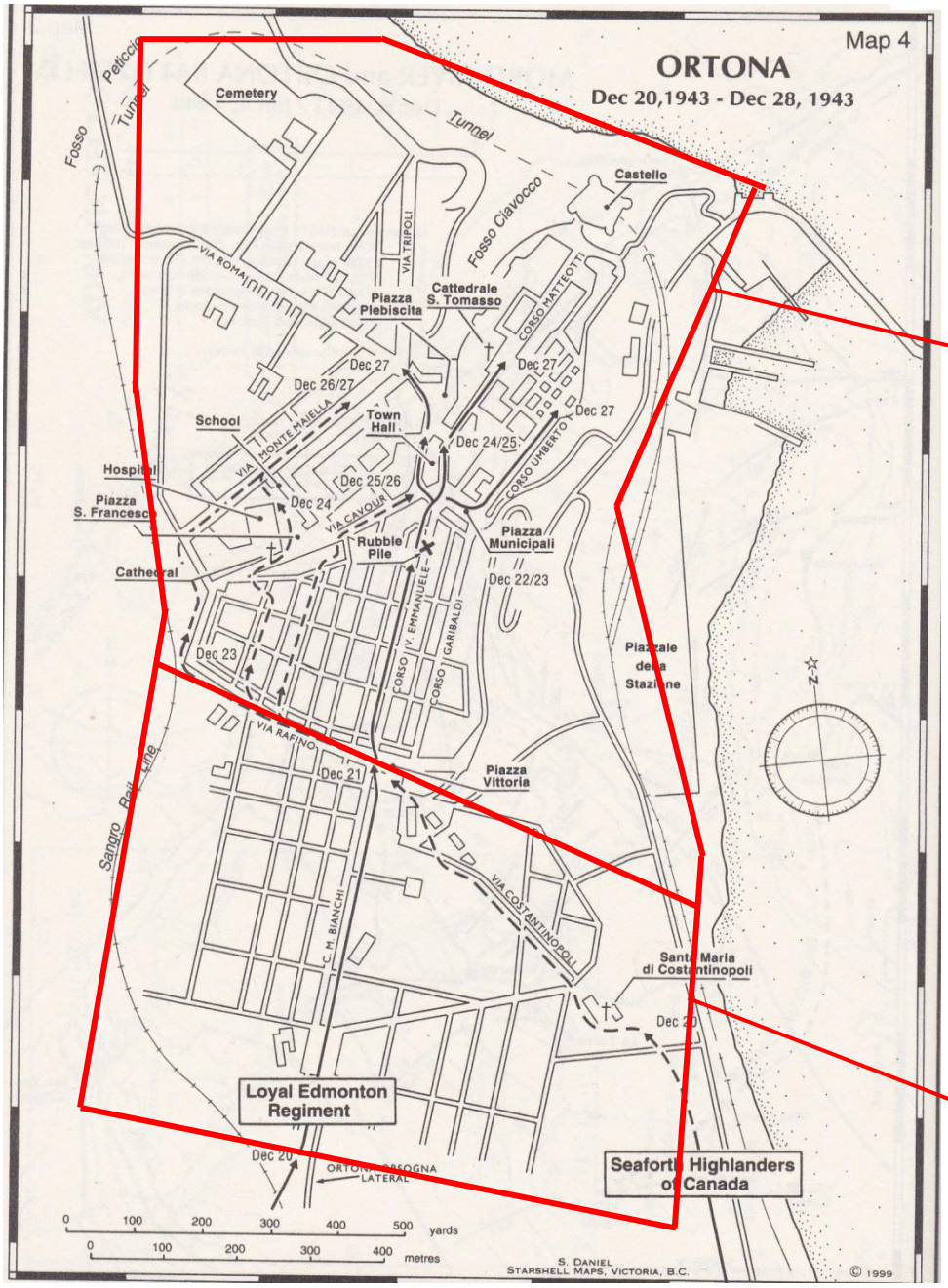


Urban Map 3

Water Features:
Adriatic Sea to EAST and NORTH



Urban Map 4

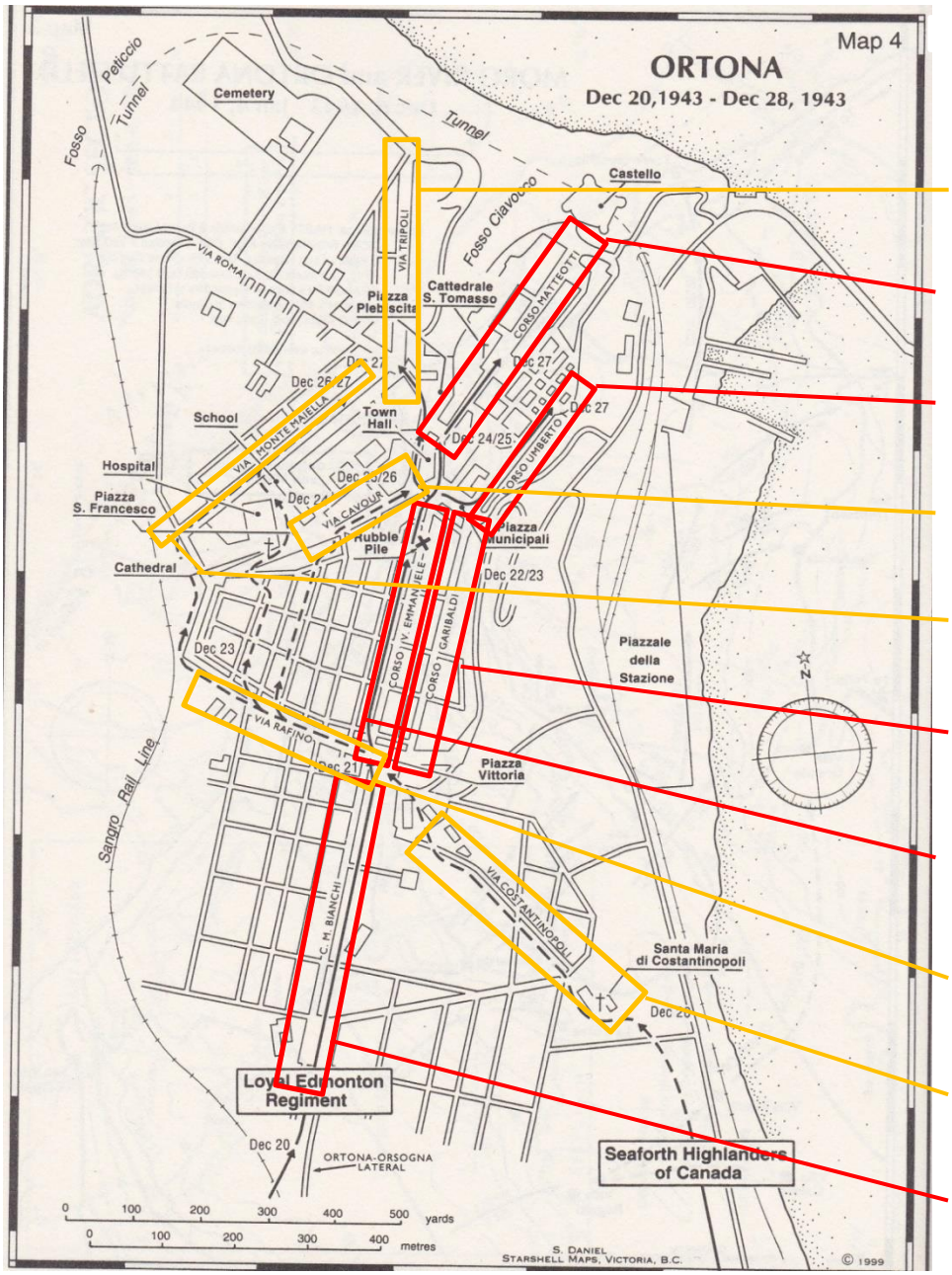


"Old Town"

"New Town"

Urban Map 5

Main Roads:
(Red: Loyal Eddies; Orange: Seaforths)



Via Tripoli

Corso Matteotti

Corso Umberto I

Via Cavour

Via Monte Maiella

Corso Garibaldi

Corso Vittorio Emmanuele

Via Rapino

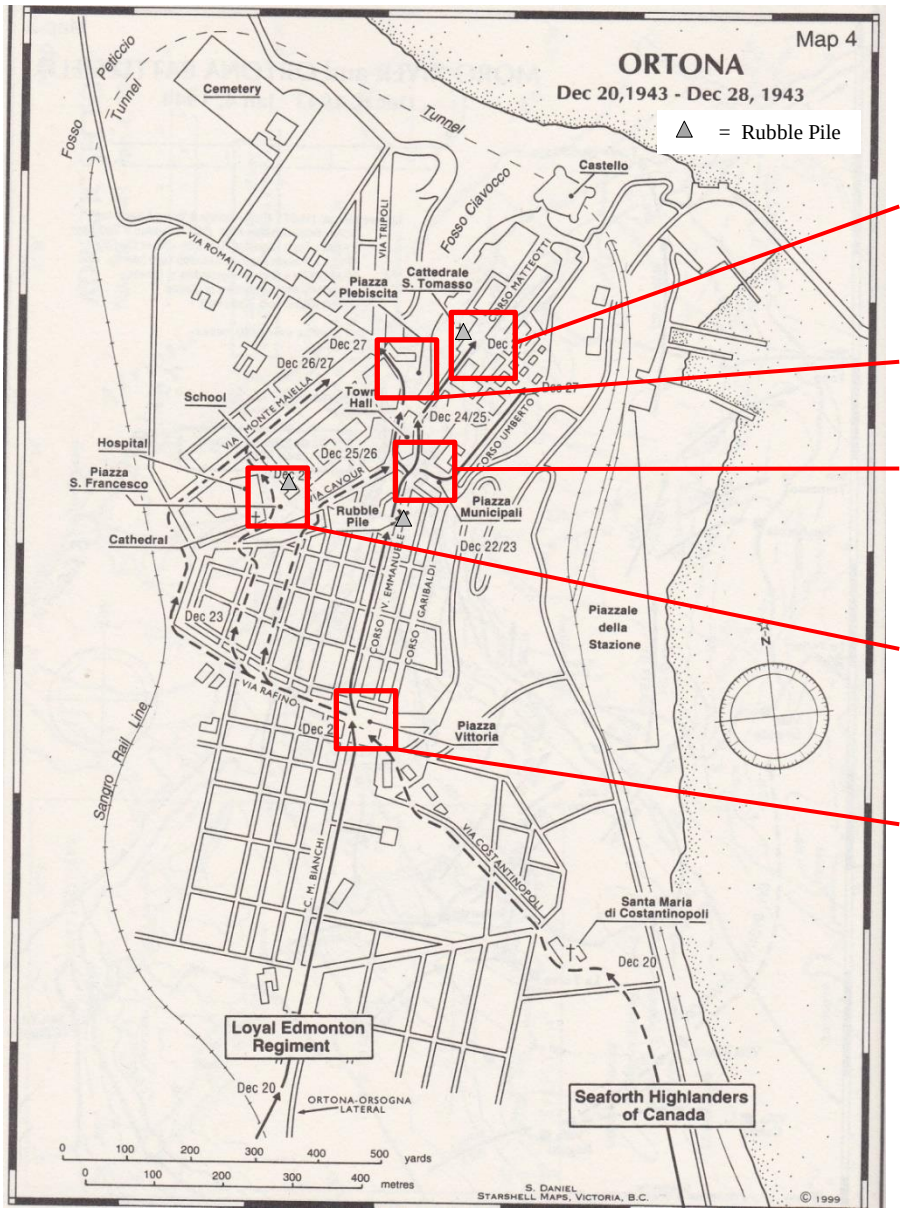
Via Costantinopoli

Corso M. Bianchi

Urban Map 6

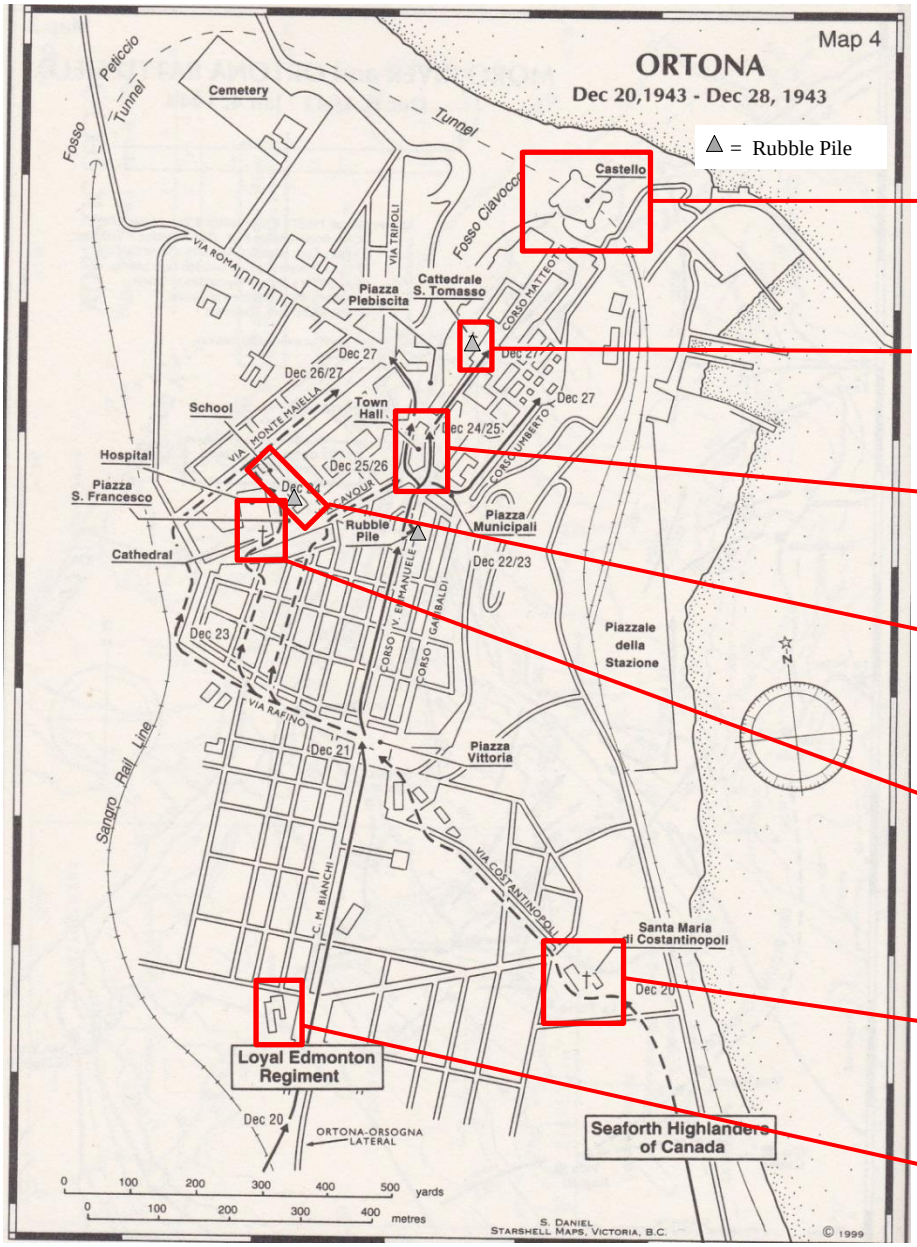
The *Piazze*:

Some historians and writers spell the names of the *piazze* with a different vowel at the end i.e. "*Vittorio*" instead of "*Vittoria*," "*Plebiscito*" instead of "*Plebiscita*," "*Municipale*" instead of "*Municipali*." To avoid confusion, I will reference the names from Zuehlke's map.



Urban Map 7

Prominent Buildings:



The *Castello* (the Castle)

Cattedrale San Tomasso (San Tomasso Cathedral)

Town Hall

The School in *Piazza San Francesco* ("Dead Horse Square")

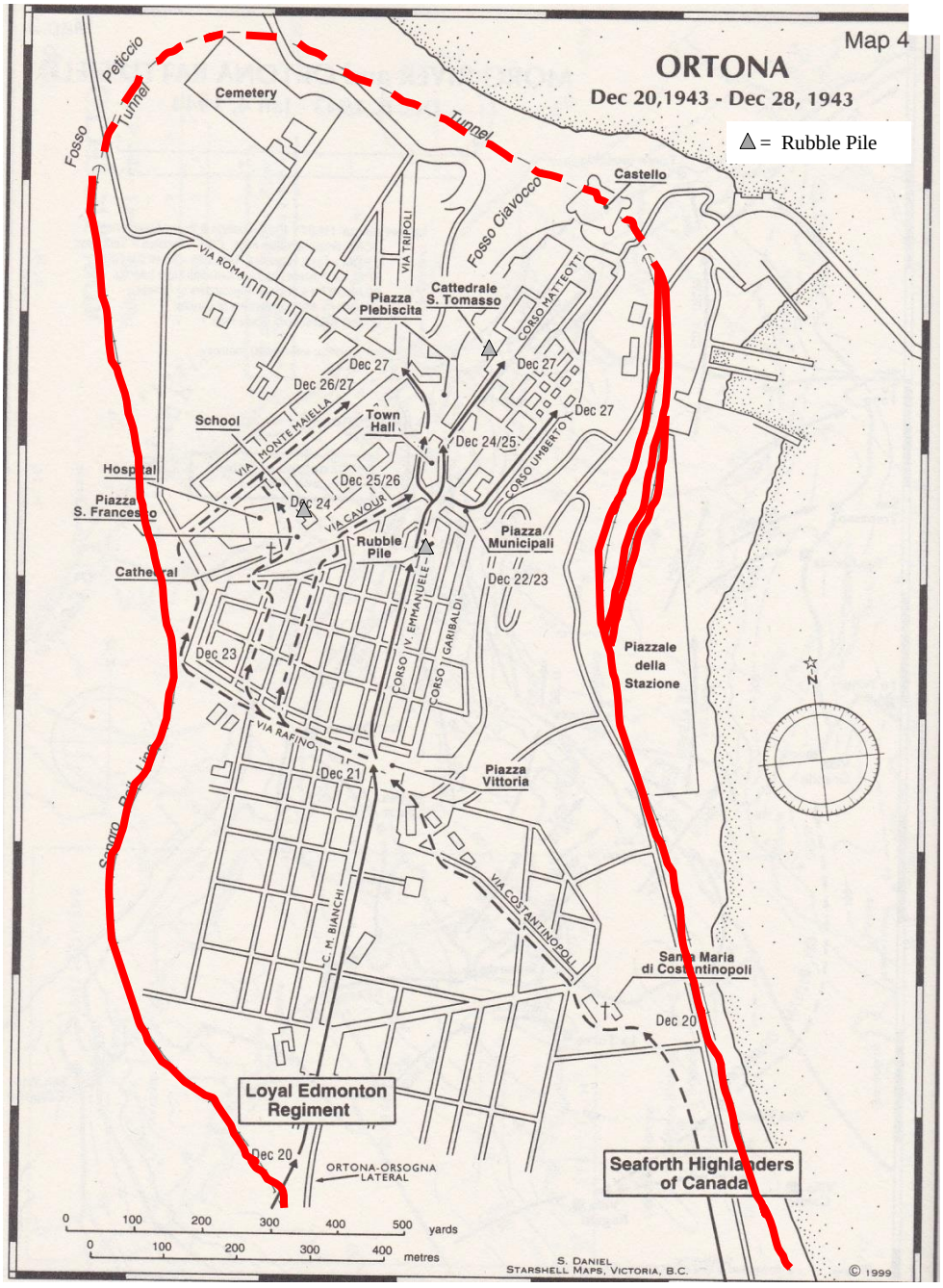
The Hospital and the Cathedral of *Piazza San Francesco*

The Church of *Santa Maria di Costantinopoli*

The *Pensione* ("Johnson's House")

Urban Map 8

Railways (Solid Line) and Railway Tunnel (Dashed Line)



APPENDIX II

CURRICULUM VITAE or *CV*

Candidate's full name: Jayson Robert Jack Geroux

Universities attended (with dates and degrees obtained): Wilfrid Laurier University, Class of 1993, Bachelor of Arts (Honours History)

Publications: None

Conference Presentations: None