

"The last Medieval War was fought in Italy in 1943 and 1944. Fortress towns on great promontories which had been battled over since the eighth century had the armies of new kings flung carelessly against them. Around the outcrops of rocks were the traffic of stretchers, butchered vineyards, where, if you dug deep beneath the tank ruts, you found blood-axe and spear."

Michael Ondaatje
The English Patient
(McClelland & Stewart, 1992)



"The Rock of Accomplishment"

The Loyal Edmonton Regiment at Ortona

Shaun R.G. Brown

The struggle for Ortona is one of the best known battles fought by Canadians in the Second World War. Matthew Halton, the CBC's chief radio correspondent in Italy, made "Moro River" and "Ortona" household words in 1943 and since then veterans as well as war correspondents and historians have offered numerous accounts of that December in Abruzzi.¹

This article focuses on the role of the Loyal Edmonton Regiment in clearing the town of Ortona, but it is important to remind ourselves of the context within which the battle was fought. The Allies had invaded the Italian mainland to force Italy out of the war, to establish air bases for the strategic bombers, and to draw off the maximum number of German troops. Hitler's decision to stand south of Rome was all that sensible Allied planners could have hoped for. The Foggia plains were suitable for air bases and the Germans poured resources into Italy to meet the Allied advance and into the Balkans to replace the Italian Army.

Hitler gave Field Marshal Albert Kesselring specific orders to fight "a delaying action only as far as the line Gaeta-Ortona. This line will be held," the Fuhrer insisted. Eisenhower, though still in command of overall Allied operations in Italy, saw the theatre increasingly in terms of its significance for Operation Overlord. On October 25th he informed the British Prime Minister that:

Left: Personnel of the Loyal Edmonton Regiment during streetfighting in San Leonardo di Ortona, Italy, 10 December 1943.

(Photo by F.G. Whitcombe/NAC PA 114487)

My principal commanders and I are in complete agreement that it is essential for us to retain the initiative until the time approaches for mounting Overlord, otherwise the enemy will himself seize the initiative and may force us on the defensive prematurely, thus enabling him to withdraw divisions from our front in time to oppose Overlord. If we can keep him on his heels until early spring, then the more divisions he uses in a counter-offensive against us the better it will be for Overlord and it then makes little difference what happens to us if Overlord is a success.²

This clear and realistic appraisal of the purposes of the Italian campaign did not appeal to Churchill. The Prime Minister was still fearful of Overlord and anxious for a major victory in Italy which would allow him to argue against the withdrawal of troops and landing craft for the invasion of the south of France.

General Harold Alexander was left with the task of devising a plan which would meet Eisenhower's objectives even if it failed to fully realize Churchill's dreams. He developed a three-phased scheme which required Lieutenant-General Bernard Montgomery's Eighth Army to advance north across the Sangro River to capture Pescara and gain control of the important Rome-Pescara highway. Eighth Army was then to turn west, attacking Rome from the flank while Lieutenant-General Mark Clark's Fifth Army attacked towards Rome through the Liri valley. Finally, a seaborne landing at Anzio, south of Rome, would secure the Alban hills outflanking the Germans from the west.³ If all went well the Allies would be in Rome for Christmas or early January, but even if the terrain, the weather and the enemy denied capture of the Italian capital, the real purposes of the campaign would still be fulfilled.



Old woman on road strewn with destroyed German tanks and gwns, 13 December 1943.

(Photo by F.G. Whitcombe/NAC PA 136196)

Eighth Army began its attack on the 28th November and in less than two days British, Indian and New Zealand troops had cracked through the Bernhardt line shattering the 76th Panzer Corps and forcing Kesselring to send the 90th Panzer Grenadier Division and the Fourth Parachute Regiment to re-establish the Adriatic front north of the Moro River. Montgomery concluded that a further push to Pescara was impossible without a pause to build up supplies and work on the bridges across the Sangro which were threatened by heavy rains. He also decided to rest 78th Division and replace it with 1st Canadian Division.

The New Zealand Division led off the renewed offensive, but its objective, Orsogna, could not be captured easily.⁴ The Canadians were ordered into action early to relieve some of the pressure on the New Zealanders and on the night of 5th/6th December, 1st and 2nd Brigades attacked across the Moro. The initial battles for Villa Rozatti (The Princess Patricia's

Light Infantry [PPCLI]) and San Leonardo (Seaforth Highlanders) led the enemy to commit the 200th Panzer Grenadier Regiment to a series of sharp counterattacks. On the right flank, the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment's bridgehead, which was supposed to be a diversion, allowed the divisional commander, Major-General Chris Vokes, to renew the attack on San Leonardo with a "right hook" carried out by the Royal Canadian Regiment. This too was unsuccessful, but San Leonardo was finally taken by a battle group from the Calgary Tanks and Seaforth Highlanders.⁵

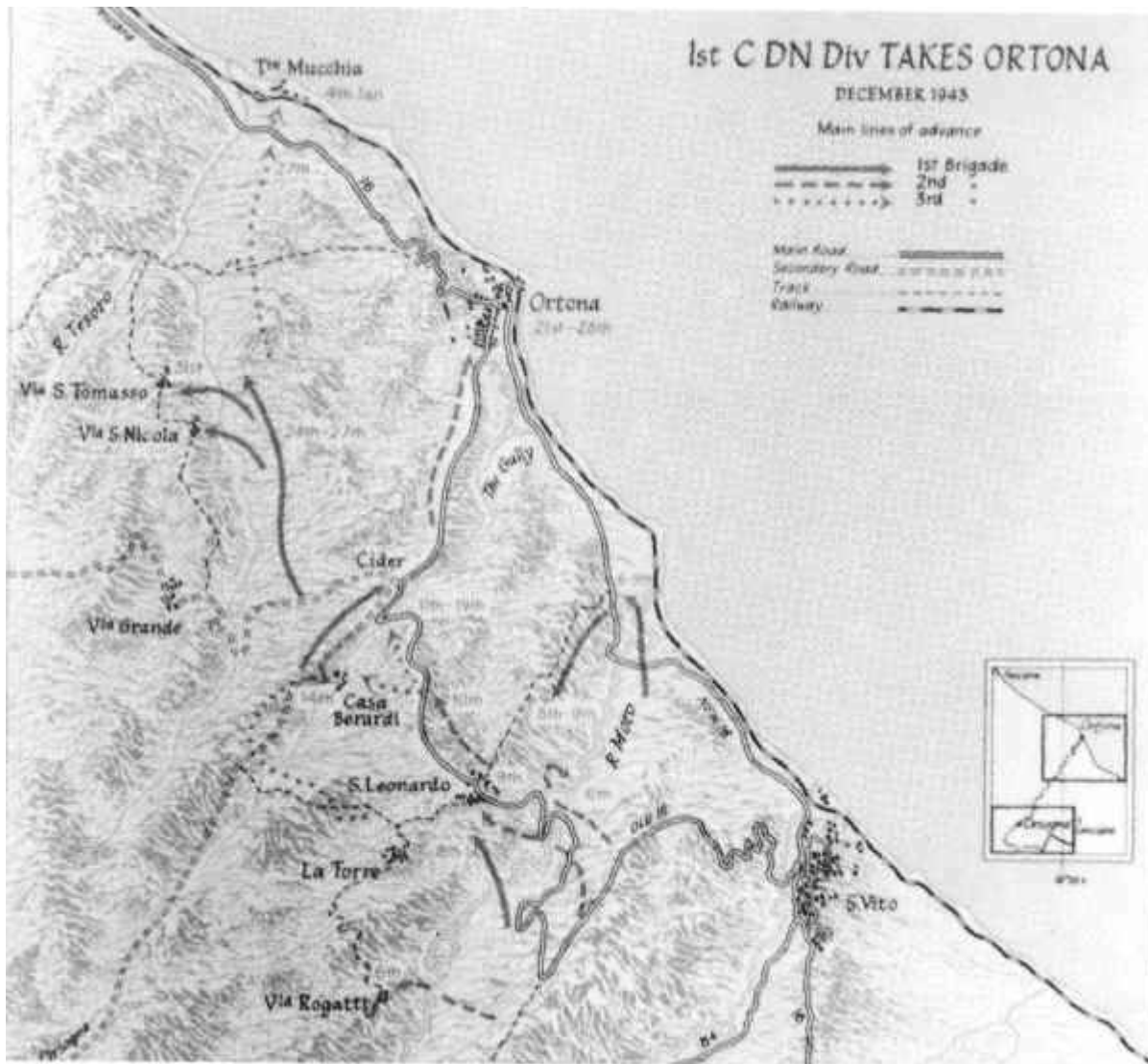
The German defence of the Moro had to this point been a skilled and successful delaying operation. But the enemy now decided to wipe out the Canadian bridgehead which controlled the coastal highway. The attack by the 90th Panzer Grenadiers' reserve battalions demonstrated the difficulties faced by the attacking force in Italy. The Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment were "behind well-

prepared defence zones which had been carefully registered for artillery and mortar fire and covered by machine-guns set up to fire on fixed lines."⁶ The German attack, preceded by an artillery and mortar barrage, was cut to pieces by observed mortar fire and disciplined small arms and machine gun fire. The loss of close to 200 men forced the German Corps Commander to order a withdrawal to the edge of Ortona behind a deep ravine the Canadians would call the "Gully." [A full description of the battle for the Gully is contained in the shaded boxes on pages 14-15.]

The collapse of the German position at the Gully ought to have led to a general withdrawal to a ridge line north of the Tesoro and Arielli rivers. This is certainly what Montgomery anticipated, but for reasons that

remain unclear, General Herr, commanding 76 Panzer Corps, decided to defend Ortona with two parachute battalions. There has been much ink spilled over the battle for Ortona and it has been suggested that the Canadians should have simply by-passed the town.⁷ In fact no such choice existed. If the Canadians had limited their advance to 1st Brigade sector the attack up the Ricco valley would have been opposed by the full weight of 1st Parachute Division. Ortona and the coastal highway were essential objectives if the advance north was to be continued and sustained logistically.

Ortona is an ancient city founded by the Trojans after the fall of Troy. The northern part, called the "Old Town," consists of



The Battle for the Gully

(from the British Official History of the Mediterranean Campaign)

"From Ortona the road to Orsogna ran along a low ridge for rather more than three miles. Below this ridge on the south side there was a narrow deep ravine. Some farm-buildings were dotted along the ridge, notably Casa Berardi which we can take as near the ridge's western end. Highway 16 crossed the ravine and ridge at their mid-point and led to Cider Cross-Roads. Ravine and ridge formed the Gully, which the Germans were determined to defend. There was no obvious way of outflanking it because the sodden ground discouraged cross-country manoeuvres, while only a bad track led from S. Leonardo to a point about a mile west of Casa Berardi. The Canadian Division spent from 11th to 19th December in forcing this position at a cost of over 1,000 casualties. The defence was conducted by Colonel Heilmann of 3rd Parachute Regiment with his own 2nd and 3rd battalions, 2nd Battalion 1st Parachute Regiment, the battered 200th Panzer Grenadier Regiment, a battalion of 361st Panzer Grenadier Regiment, 90th Engineer Battalion, and detachments of tanks from 190th Panzer Abteilung and 26th

Panzer Regiment. These troops were not all simultaneously engaged. The battle was fought in fair and foul weather, on boggy ground, in a tangle of olive trees and vineyards sprinkled with mines and booby-traps. From the 11th to 19th December 5th Corps' artillery fired about 3,000 tons of ammunition.

The details of dogged attacks by the Canadians and of the German's resolute defence and fierce counter-attacks are too many for the scale of this narrative. What follows is descriptive analysis.

On the morning of 10th December the Edmontons and a squadron of the Calgary Regiment reached the gully so quickly that at 10 a.m. Colonel Jefferson (commanding officer of the Edmontons) signalled "We are now proceeding on final objective." Slashing mortar and machine gun fire soon blew away this hope. Vokes seems early to have accepted the front of little more than two thousand yards which lay before him, and to have resolved to go straight for his objective. His reasons were the sodden ground which would hinder cross-country movement; a feeling that the objective was very close and would fall

to a quick punch and therefore a wish not to spend time in fully concentrating his division. Moreover the Canadians had a predilection for small attacks, powerfully supported, on narrow fronts, markedly shown in the fighting from Assoro to Regalbuto in Sicily.

The Canadian Division made eight main attacks on the Gully. Of these, if we set aside overlappings and diversions, five were by single battalions, two by two battalions, and the final attack was by three battalions following each other in three closely successive phases. Armour, not in great strength, took part in all attacks. All the attacks except the last failed because momentum was lost owing to the same general causes. The enemy's fire, much of it cross-fire, was very heavy and his counter-attacks were frequent, determined, and well-timed. The Canadian infantry often "lost" their artillery support because of the ordinary mischances of battle and because the artillery was fighting at a disadvantage. This was because the succession of attacks was so

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quick that often two or three fire plans were being prepared at once, largely from not altogether accurate maps. The resulting fire programs were often faulty, and frequent calls for heavy Defensive Fire to meet counter-attacks sent them further astray.

The key phase of the battle occurred probably on the 13th and 14th December. On the 13th, one of the rare occasions on which the fighter-bombers could operate in strength, a frontal attack towards Cider Cross-Roads by the Carleton and York Regiment, and attacks on its right and left by PPCLI and the West Novas failed. But meanwhile two small fighting reconnaissances produced unexpected results. On the left flank a bad track led from S. Leonardo to the Ortona road a mile west of Casa Berardi. Two small parties — "B" Squadron of the Ontarios and a platoon of West Novas, and four tanks of the Ontario's "C" Squadron with "A" Company

of the Seaforth Highlanders — independently followed this track, found "soft spots" on the German right flank, slaughtered some surprised detachments, and almost reached Casa Berardi. The press of the main battle made it impossible at once to exploit the opportunity, but Vokes turned his eye to this route. On the 14th December he launched the Royal 22e Régiment along it with "C" Squadron of the Ontario Regiment, while the PPCLI attacked frontally. The Germans were now guarding their right flank, but there followed a splendid feat of Canadian arms. Captain Paul Triquet with his "C" Company of the Royal 22e and the Ontario's tanks captured Casa Berardi by sheer, relentless fighting and a furious determination to win. In Casa Berardi, Triquet, who had only fifteen men and four tanks, gave the time-honoured order "Ils ne passeront pas." Nor did the Germans pass, for by 3 a.m. on the 15th Colonel Bernatchez had collected a larger force and had consolidated. Captain

Triquet was later awarded the Victoria Cross.

Vokes now sent another squadron of tanks to Casa Berardi and ordered another frontal attack by the Carleton and York, believing that this and the flanking threat from Casa Berardi would make the defence collapse. The attack failed. But the events of the 13th and 14th had seriously worried Heilmann and Baade; their immediate reserves were all committed, and they now blessed the two-day respite which followed the failure of the Canadian attack on the 15th. On the 18th Vokes launched a carefully staged attack from west of Casa Berardi in three phases with the support of fighter-bombers. This attack by the 48th Highlanders, the Royal Canadian Regiment, the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment, and the Three Rivers Regiment, was admirably executed, and succeeded, not without very sharp fighting. By dusk on the 19th the Gully and Cider Cross-Roads passed into Canadian hands.⁸

extremely narrow streets with most buildings connected by common walls. The town is dominated by two massive towers, a 15th century fortress perched on the promontory above the harbour, and the cathedral of St. Thomas about two hundred metres inland. In 1943 the coastal highway entered the built-up area about eight hundred metres from the centre of the city.

There are three open squares in Ortona: Piazza della Vittorio in the southern, newer portion of the town, Piazza Municipale at the junction of the old and new towns, and Piazza San Tomasso in the old town, a few metres from the castle. There was no possibility of an advance along the sea front and a deep ravine precluded attack from the west.

The Loyal Edmontons entered the operation well below strength and by the third day were

operating with just three rifle companies of 60 men each. Reinforcing drafts were on their way forward but did not reach Ortona until the 24th of December. In the words of the regimental historian, "It is perhaps fortunate that most of them did not arrive until the battle was virtually over, Ortona was no place for new hands or for men who did not know each other."⁹

Major A. J. Rudd, then a sergeant and Platoon Commander in "A" Company of the Loyal Edmontons, described his entry into the town:

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.¹⁰

The Jerry defences were very good, and obviously well-planned. Machine guns were always mutually supporting and they even had tanks hull down in bombed-out houses. Defended buildings were

Left: Infantry of the Edmonton Regiment and tanks of the Three Rivers Regiment, Ortona, 23 Dec 1943.

(Photo by T.F. Rowe/NAC PA 114030)

Right: Lance Corporal E. A. Harris, Loyal Edmonton Regiment in Ortona, 21 December 1943.

(Photo by T.F. Rowe/NAC PA 114490)

Below: A patrol from the Loyal Eddies in Ortona.

(Photo by T.F. Rowe/NAC PA 163932)

barricaded with sandbags and all kinds of household goods. The windows were screened with chicken wire to keep out grenades. They 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.¹¹

The first day's fighting had brought the Edmontons and "C" Squadron of the Three Rivers Regiment to the Piazza Vittoria at the southern edge of the old town. Here they discovered that the German engineers had blocked the side streets with rubble from demolished houses. The "paras" hoped to entice the Canadians to advance down the Corso Vittorio Emanuele to the Piazza



Municipale which would become a killing ground. Lieutenant-Colonel J.C. Jefferson had other ideas. He insisted that the companies take their time planning platoon-size operations against one or two houses. Where possible a tank would be used to blast down walls at short range. More often the Edmonton's six-pounder anti-tank guns were brought into play. A platoon commander explains their role:

We used the anti-tanks in an unique way. The shells could not penetrate the granite walls, sometimes 4 ft. thick. So we just put them through the windows and they bounced around inside much like they would in an enemy tank doing horrible damage.¹²

It was a battle of great innovation and adaption. All the hardware of the infantryman was brought to bear against his entrenched foe.

We preferred to clear houses from the upstairs down. If we couldn't get through the windows, we "mouseholed." The "Beehive" charges we used would kill any Germans in the adjacent rooms and we followed right through immediately. The "36" grenades could be dropped downstairs before we





A Sherman of the Ontario Regiment firing at German positions in a nearby house.

(Photo by T.F. Rowe/NAC PA 163933)

carried on to clear the lower rooms. This was a basic difference between our approach and the Jerry tactics. When they came into a house it was on the ground floor. Trying to return the favour of our grenades was disastrous for them. Their old "potato mashers" would rattle back down the stairs to explode at their feet.¹³

The individual rifleman took on two additional burdens in Ortona, primarily because of the uniqueness of the struggle. The first was grenades. In addition to the one hundred rounds of rifle ammunition, each man carried ten or twelve high explosive and two or three "75" anti-tank grenades. The other item that came into vogue was the steel helmet, according to Rudd: "Before arriving in Ortona, none of our chaps wore them. Then everyone was clamouring for a tin hat. A lot of lives were saved by tin hats when the bricks started to tumble."¹⁴

By now the name Ortona had captured world headlines. Matthew Halton, Ralph Allen, as well as the British war correspondent, Christopher Buckley, never hesitated to follow their stories right into the firing line. One of Buckley's stories read:

What a strange clutter of humanity it was. There were some five or six Canadian soldiers, there were old women, and there were children innumerable. A painter of genius — Goya, perhaps — might have done justice to the scene. . . . In the half-darkened room the pasta for the mid-day meal was simmering over the fire in the corner. Haggard, prematurely-aged women kept emerging shyly, one after the other from some inner chamber where an old man, the grandfather of the children, was dying. . . . Another old man was uttering maledictions against Mussolini. Then his wife surprisingly produced a Jeroboam of Marsala and a half-dozen glasses. She moved around the soldiers filling and re-filling their glasses. The children clambered over the Canadian soldiers and

clutched them convulsively every time one of our anti-tank guns, located only a half dozen paces from the door of the house, fired down the street in the direction of one of the German machine gun nests. Soon each of us had a squirming, terrified child in our arms. The old lady went on serving Marsala.¹⁵

Jefferson had been allotted "D" Company of the Seaforths on the 22nd and the next day the remainder of the battalion arrived to clear the left flank while the Edmontons concentrated on the area between the main street and the harbour.



A German soldier captured in Ortona.
(Photo by T.F. Rowe/NAC PA 107934)

On December 24th, resistance stiffened. Major-General Vokes asked Brigadier Hoffmeister if further operations should be cancelled or delayed, but Hoffmeister was confident. The German paratroopers were, he told Vokes, taking a dreadful beating and Brigade morale would suffer if they were not allowed to finish the job.¹⁶

The Loyal Edmonton War Diary noted more paratroops had been thrown into battle. In addition, the Germans brought in flame throwers to which the Edmontons answered by calling in fire from 17-pounders on the coastal road. On approaching the Piazza Municipale, "D" company under the command of Major J. R. Stone, was halted by intense fire for the entrance to the square was covered by no less than five machine guns. Private C.G. Rattray was dispatched with two comrades and crawling through the rubble, disdaining snipers and grenade throwers, managed to gain entry to the upper floors of the building housing the M.G.s. Rattray captured five paratroopers, three machine guns, four rifles and three pistols. Stone meanwhile stalked an adjacent M.G. post, destroyed its crew with grenades and silenced a heavy anti-tank gun. Ortona had become an intensely personal battle with one man pitted against the wits and daring of another.¹⁷

Late on December 24th, a draft of seventy-five reinforcements arrived mostly from the Cape Breton Highlanders. There has been much controversy over the quality of reinforcements for the 1st Canadian Division and for that matter the entire Canadian Army effort from 1939-45. In the interviews conducted with Major A.J. Rudd, Colonel J.R. Stone, and Major-General G.G. Brown, all participants in the Italian campaign, there is unequivocal agreement that the quality of reinforcements, at least in December 1943, was excellent; however, their numbers were almost always disappointing. General Brown remembers the Cape Bretoners as "tremendously good soldiers, we considered them brothers-in-arms and perhaps it was a kinship borne out of the knowledge of a mutual suffering in the depression; it is hard to say, but they were fine soldiers in every respect."¹⁸

The Cape Breton draft was welcomed by a senior N.C.O. with the cheery intimation, "Just in time to hang up your stockings."¹⁹ But this was a Christmas with neither peace nor goodwill. The battle continued and the Edmontons increased their resolve. The Edmonton War Diary notes: "this is our fifth Christmas on Active Service and the fiercest fighting so far encountered continued throughout the day" Colonel J.R. Stone recalls the day:

On Christmas Day 1943, I was on the main street of Ortona, directing a local attack ordered by my CO. Three of my men were killed on the street before 0900 hrs. My Christmas dinner was a cold pork chop brought forward on a "Bren" carrier. A most unhappy day.²⁰

Major-General G.G. Brown remembers:

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.²¹

Major A. J. Rudd recalls:

We were just down from St. Tommaso Square. We rotated back to the diner. 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.²²

After being wounded, Sergeant Johnny Marchand is being placed on a stretcher by soldiers and first-aid men of the Three Rivers Tank Regiment. Ortona, 21 December 1943.
(Photoby T.F. Rowe/NAC PA 163927)

The Padre of the Seaforths noted his Christmas observations:

The tables filled and emptied and filled again, and I saw many a tense face relax in the warmth within the walls of the battlescarred church. What a concert of noise! As relief and relaxation took hold, the talk became louder and greetings and jokes were shouted. The cookers hissed and sizzled behind the altar and the plates clattered as they were cleared from the tables and piled high on the altar itself. Desecration of the Lord's Table? It did not strike me so. Above the din one could sometimes hear machine-gun fire and shells. It was wonderful to hear so much laughter so close to so much death and suffering. I don't know how many remembered Christ that day but I feel that most of these men, whether they knew it or not, remembered the things Christ stood for — compassion, faithfulness to a cause, self-sacrifice.²³

Of the fighting in Ortona on Christmas day the war diary of the Tenth German Army reported:

In Ortona the enemy attacked all day long with about one brigade supported by 10 tanks. In very hard house to house fighting and at the cost of heavy



casualties to his own troops, the enemy advanced to the market square in the southwestern part of the town. The battle there is especially violent. Our own troops are using flame throwers, hand grenades and the new bazookas (ofenrohre).²⁴

It is interesting to note in the above quote the reference to a "brigade" (i.e. at least 3 battalions). At this point the Canadians had only the Edmontons and Seaforths, at 60 per cent strength, in Ortona. The German War Diaries consistently overestimated Allied strength, both in land forces and the weight of artillery and air bombardments. The reasons for this are numerous; the most obvious one is that it offered a creditable excuse for failure. During the Ortona engagement all evidence suggests that both sides were relatively even in ground forces. Tank, artillery and air participation was severely restricted.

Throughout December 26th the grim struggle continued with the Loyal Edmontons inching forward to their final objectives. The Piazza Tomasso, the last of the great squares, was in sight. On that day the enemy succeeded in the last of his deadly stratagems. Lieutenant E.B. Allen, with twenty-three men, occupied a building which the enemy had mined before abandoning. A heavy charge brought it down. The Pioneers who rushed forward to dig them out were harassed by grenades. Corporal G.E. O'Neil counterattacked and single-handedly drove out the grenade throwers. Sergeant Sandy McLaren recalled the incident:

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. 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.²⁵

The aftermath of battle - Refugees return to their homes in Ortona, 30 December 1943.

(Photo by T.F. Rowe/NAC PA 163938)

On December 28th, the Edmonton War Diary matter-of-factly reports the end of the battle:

At 0945 hrs. this morning our patrols reported that the area of the "Ortona Fort" had been cleared of the enemy. Shortly thereafter, our eight-day battle for the city came to an end when it was declared clear of the Hun.²⁶

The Regiment returned immediately to excavating the demolished building where Allan had disappeared with his platoon, but no additional survivors were found. Matthew Halton tells of accompanying Lieutenant Frank Whiting of Victoria, on the final patrol to secure Ortona:

We went with him, high strung as cats, through mines and dead men and appalling ruin. We heard laughter and turned and saw some Canadian soldiers talking in a basement to some Italian girls, laughter and girls there in Ortona ... I saw a Canadian lying in a marksman's position on a pile of rubble. It was five seconds before I realized he was dead. He was still aiming a rifle, a locket of hair hung freely down his neck. It was moving back and forth in the brisk cold wind. The Germans were superb — admit it freely — and when that is said, our Canadians were better. The Boche had all the cards — the prepared positions, the hundreds of booby traps and mines; we had to seek him out and kill him man by man. And so, on these fearful notes the Battle of the Moro River ends. . . .²⁷

The cost had been heavy. Loyal Edmonton Regiment casualties for the eight days numbered 172 with 63 dead. The Seaforth Highlanders lost 41 killed and 62 wounded. German casualties were 455 including 168 killed.²⁸

The advance from the Moro River had cost the 1st Division 176 officers and 2,163 other ranks killed and wounded. Sickness, including battle exhaustion, had reduced divisional strength by a further 1,617. The 8th Indian Division with 3,400 casualties and the New Zealand Division with 1,200 were in a similar state.²⁹ Every infantry battalion had suffered 50 per cent casualties in the rifle companies.³⁰ These are the cold statistics. The inevitable



roster of war. We must look beyond the grim toll to assess the Canadian infantryman's accomplishments at the Moro River.

In the battle for Ortona, every bullet did not hit its mark. The ammunition expenditure of the Loyal Edmontons for eight days attests to this fact and points out, in a rather detached way, the intensity of battle.³¹

Anti-tank shells	918
Three-Inch mortars	4,050
Two-Inch mortars	2,000
P. 303 S.A.A.	57,000
Thompson sub-machine gun rounds	4,800
No. 36 hand grenades	600
No. 77 hand grenades	700

There are often more subtle indicators of the characteristics of a battle and they are just as telling in their own right. The Edmonton's War Diary of December 28th notes:

As a rule the foe either removes his dead or buries them on the spot. Ortona has been the exception, for approximately 100 dead have been left dying due to his hasty withdrawal.³²

In reviewing the statistics of neuropsychiatric (battle exhaustion) casualties for the 1st Canadian Division's infantry brigades for the period 28 November to 12 February 1944, it becomes evident that of all infantry battalions the Loyal Edmontons enjoyed the smallest ratio of these types of casualties. Low ratios were maintained by the 2nd Brigade throughout the Italian campaign.³³ There are, of course, many factors which ultimately came to bear upon this figure. An Army psychiatrist offered one explanation: "The emotional ties among the men, and between the men and their officers, is the single most potent factor in preventing breakdown."³⁴ The factors which help to make a man a soldier in the moral sense are, according to B.H. McNeel, his sense of personal value and responsibility and the time-honoured sentiments of pride in his regiment and respect for his leaders. From the day he is inducted, the process of incorporating him as a person into the fighting forces must begin. Whatever one thinks of the thesis that mediocre men can be made effective by good leadership, the fact remains that the fewest behaviour problems arise in well-led regiments.³⁵

George Brown, who had learned so much as a lieutenant from Major Stone in Ortona, outlines the essence of good leadership:

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.³⁶

After Ortona morale was initially high. An important component of the Canadians' attitude was a sense of their exclusivity, of being members of an unique brotherhood. As Major-General Brown put it:

There emerged an aura of a no-nonsense unit that knew what it was doing. It was hard to put your finger on any single phenomenon except perhaps the great mutual confidence that seemed to abound. Great respect for one another and yet good discipline as well, no first name slap-on-the-back relationship, but a healthy one between the officers, men and N.C.O.s. A quiet confidence built upon the rock of accomplishment.³⁷

NOTES

1. The best overview of the battle is still G.W.L. Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy, 1943-1945* (Ottawa, 1966). A recent popular account is Daniel Dancocks, *The D-Day Dodgers* (Toronto, 1991). Both of the key regimental histories, R.H. Roy, *The Seaforth Highlanders of Canada* (Vancouver, 1969), and G.R. Stevens, *A City Goes to War* (Brampton, 1964), are excellent accounts.
2. C.J.C. Molony, *The Mediterranean and Middle East Volume V* (London, 1973), pp.473.
3. *Ibid.*, p.474.
4. N.C. Phillips, *Italy Vol. I The Sangro to Cassino* (Auckland, 1957).
5. Nicholson, p.298.
6. *Ibid.*, p.302.
7. See for example Brereton Greenhous. "Would Not Have Been Possible to Bypass Ortona Completely . . .?" *Canadian Defence Quarterly*. April 1989.
8. Molony, pp.503-505.
9. Stevens, p.270.
10. Interview, A.J. Rudd, January 1983.
11. A.J. Rudd, "Ortona," *Infantry Journal*, Volume 7, Spring 1978. p.10.
12. Interview, George G. Brown, January 1983.
13. Interview, A.J. Rudd, January 1983.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Christopher Buckley, *The Road to Rome* (London, 1945), pp.260-261.
16. Greenhous/McAndrew Interview with Major-General B. Hoffmeister. DHist.

17. *War Diary*, Loyal Edmonton Regiment, December 1943. NAC RG 24 Vol. 15,114
18. Interview, George C. Brown, January 1983.
19. Stevens, p.277.
20. Interview, J.R. Stone, January 1983.
21. Interview, George G. Brown, January 1983.
22. Interview, A.J. Rudd, January 1983.
23. *War Diary*, Seaforth Highlanders of Canada, 25 December 1943, PAC RG24, Vol. 15,256.
24. G. Steiger, DHist, DocumentNo. 18, (G.M.D.S. 42092/9 Appendix 1097, 1098, 25 December 1943), p.66.
25. Interview, Sandy McLaren, 5 January 1984.
26. *War Diary*, Loyal Edmonton Regiment, 28 December 1943.
27. Matthew Halton, "Transcript of Broadcast, Ortona." 4 January 1944. NAC RG 24 Vol. 15,114. p.3.
28. Nicholson, p.333.
29. Molony, p.507.
30. Nicholson, p.338.
31. Stevens, p.280.
32. *War Diary*, Loyal Edmonton Regiment, 28 December 1943.
33. Manning Doyle. "Neuropsychiatric Report 1st Canadian Corps." June 1944, NAC RG 24, Vol. 13,685.
34. B.H. McNeel, "War Psychiatry in Retrospect." *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol. 102 no.4, 4 January 1946, pp.341-342.
35. *Ibid.*
36. Interview, George G. Brown, January 1983.
37. *Ibid.*

Shaun Brown is completing his Ph.D. at the University of Western Ontario. This article is based on his MA thesis, *The Loyal Edmonton Regiment at War, 1943-1945*. (Wilfrid Laurier University, 1984).

A memorial service held by the officers and men of the Loyal Edmonton Regiment to honour their comrades who fell in the battles around Ortona. The cemetery is located on a hillside overlooking Ortona which once guarded the approaches to the town. 13 February 1944.

(National Archives of Canada)

