

# Christmas in Ortona Italy 1943

**Colonel S.W. Thomson, DSO, MC, CD**

**I**t was December 20th and we were in the process of clearing a gully in front of Ortona by way of flank protection for the Loyal Edmonton Regiment who had been given the task of clearing Ortona of the enemy. They were following the heaviest barrage to date on their approach to the town. My tac H.Q., The Seaforth Highlanders of Canada, provided an excellent view of this operation and we were concerned about two splendid white oxen grazing in the path of a creeping barrage. It was most disconcerting to see this tremendous firepower, or so we thought, approach, pass over and leave the oxen untouched and serene.

On the 21st, The Eddies had reached the perimeter and began to force their way into the town. The Seaforth flank companies consolidated their position around the Santa Maria church which they had captured during the night. In our approach to the church through a deep depression, the two forward companies encountered a well-placed personnel mine field and lost a number of N.C.O.s and men before coming to grips with the enemy.

It became apparent that Jerry was not going to give up Ortona without a fight. (We later discovered that the town was defended by German parachutists, the cream of the German

*Return from the dead. A platoon from the Loyal Edmonton Regiment fought its way to a house which had been mined by the Germans before retreating. When the two-story building blew up 20 men were buried alive. Lance Corporal Roy Boyd was pinned in the ruins for 3 1/2 days, unable to move even his hands. The photos at the left show the moment of rescue.*

(Photos by T.F Rowe/NAC PA 152748 & 163937)

forces.) Consequently Brigadier Hoffmeister decided to commit another battalion The Seaforths. We divided the town into two parts, with the Eddies on the right and Seaforths on the left. Unfortunately both regiments were sadly under strength with fighting platoons about half their proper complement. The Eddies had already discovered the advantages of "mouseholing" and passed their knowledge along to us. This was the art of gaining access to the next row house at the top level, sometimes starting on the roof, by blowing a hole in the wall and fighting the way down. The object of this method was to stay out of the "killing ground" street. It must be realized that we had not had any specific training in fighting in a built up area. We had to learn on the job. Hater lectured to British and American forces in England on street fighting during a tour at S.O.S. in Oxford. It is interesting to note that a few years ago The Services Sound and Vision Corporation, Military Division of the United Kingdom came here to Victoria to film and interview officers of the Seaforth and Edmonton Regiments who had fought in Ortona. Their task was to produce a training film, "Fighting in Built Up Areas," for distribution to the U.K. Forces. I have a copy of this film on file.

Initially tanks of the Three Rivers Regiment were largely responsible for helping the Eddies to get a firm foothold on the perimeter buildings. However, tanks are particularly vulnerable in a built up area and definitely not recommended for this role by exponents of tank warfare. In any event the streets soon became mined, blocked by rubble and too narrow for tanks to continue into the town.