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Thomson: Christmas in Ortona, Italy 1943



Christmas in Ortona Italy 1943

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

It 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

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. I later 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.

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)

A favourite practice of the enemy was to place a demolition charge beneath buildings from which they would withdraw in the face of our advance. When occupied by our troops the trap would be sprung. The Eddies lost a platoon and the Seaforths a section by this method.

It should be noted that the town was not bombed or shelled by our artillery. However battalion anti-tank guns played a small part keeping the Hun away from the windows of perimeter buildings in the early stages.

A fraction of the tremendous cost of the war was personified when we received a few reinforcements on Christmas eve. With them was Tom Middleton, brother of Fred Middleton, one of our officers. Tom came from my own small home town of Salmon Arm, B.C. Due to our low strength it was imperative to have these reinforcements immediately dispatched to their respective rifle companies. The army had nurtured Tom for several years,

transporting him back and forth across Canada and eventually to Ortona. He had been with his rifle section only two hours on Christmas Eve before being brought out severely wounded. He was brought out and taken down the line, eventually retracing his steps back to Canada.

I knew that we would be fully engaged with the enemy on Christmas day. However our most enterprising Quartermaster, Captain Bordon Cameron, was anxious to provide something special for the men at Christmas. Three companies were in the line with one in reserve, often the norm. We decided to feed the reserve company first and feed the remaining companies in relays, as one company finished it would go forward some 300 or 400 yards and relieve the next. Tables, linen, chinaware and candles were scrounged by the reserve company. The tables were set up in rows in our great church Santa Maria with four foot thick walls and my rear H.Q. What a picture, what an appropriate setting for a Christmas dinner on Dec. 25.

"Seaforth Square" - Ortona, Italy





At the entrance to a little graveyard near Ortona men of the Seaforth Highlanders scan the lists of their battalion casualties since the landing in Sicily. (National Archives of Canada)

Soup, roast pork, vegetables and Christmas pudding along with a bottle of beer for each of the tattered, scruffy, war weary soldiers was served by HQ and B echelon staff. The Q.M. boys excelled themselves, the impossible had happened. There was a spirit of good-fellowship throughout the church. The signals officer Lieutenant Wilf Gildersleeve played the organ, and our much loved padre Roy Durford led the carol singing. Pipe Major Esson played his pipes several times during the meals drowning out the odd enemy shell burst outside.

Stiff fighting on the 26th with Jerry pulling out during the night of the 27th and we, worn to a frazzle, had yet to bury our dead. Between Dec. 20 and the 28th we lost 42 officers and men killed and 78 wounded.

Christmas in Ortona, the meal, yes, but the spirit of the occasion, the look on the faces of those exhausted, gutsy men on entering the church is with me to-day and will live forever.

Colonel S.W. "Syd" Thomson, DSO, MC, CD, joined the Rocky Mountain Rangers in the 1930s transferring to the Seaforth Highlanders at the outbreak of war. Wounded in Sicily, he returned several months later to serve as Company Commander, Second-in-Command and Commanding Officer of the battalion. He is a regular contributor to *CMH*.