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Shermans in Sicily

The diary of a young soldier, Summer 1943

Jack Wallace

edited by David Pratt

*F*ifty-five years ago, one of the biggest news stories of the summer was the invasion of Sicily by Allied Forces. For some, the memories will never fade because they were in the front lines of the first successful Allied push into occupied Europe.

Jack Wallace of Nepean remembers Sicily the way it was 55 years ago – the stifling heat, the billowing clouds of dust and the rugged mountain terrain. At the time, Wallace was a 23-year-old lieutenant commanding a squadron of Sherman tanks with the Three Rivers Regiment. The battle for Sicily – “the soft underbelly of fascism” as Churchill called it – was the first taste of war for Wallace and many other young Canadian, American and British soldiers.

Memories of the Sicilian campaign are still sharp for Wallace. Shortly after the war, he wrote a diary chronicling his experiences in



Sicily as a favor to the parents of Mickey Dawson, a close friend. Dawson, a 24-year-old lieutenant, served alongside Wallace in Sicily and was killed in France after D-Day in 1944.

Wallace enlisted at 18 and received a commission with The Royal Canadian Dragoons. In January, 1941 he was transferred to The Three Rivers Regiment. Wallace and Dawson trained together in England and Scotland before embarking in June 1943 for the invasion of Sicily. Wallace's diary presents a soldier's -eye-view of one of the lesser known Canadian campaigns of the Second World War.

What follows are excerpts from Jack Wallace's personal war diary:

July 10, 1943

We had been on an LST (landing ship tank) for weeks en route from Scotland. Early that morning we dropped anchor about a mile and a half off the Sicilian coast. There were trucks secured by ropes and chains on deck and stowed below were most of our squadron's tanks and motorcycles. The night before, the ship's commander gave orders for the ballast to be released so the ship would rise when we beached for the landing. There were heavy swells in the evening and our vessel bobbed around like a cork. We were ordered to be ready at 6 am as part of the reserves so after reveille, I went up on deck to see what was going on. It was still quite dark, but I could make out the grey forms of ships all around us.

Lieutenant Jack Wallace in front of his Churchill tank on the South Downs, England in late 1942 or early 1943.

We expected to run into defences similar to Dieppe on the beach, but up to that point everything had been unusually quiet. By noon, we still hadn't landed and the men were getting very restless. The only news we'd received was a BBC broadcast that said the Canadians had landed. At 2 p.m. our orders finally arrived. The tanks plunged into the waves like water beetles and were soon ashore. When I arrived in the de-water-proofing area, I found our tanks, but there were no signs of my men around. After some initial inquiries, I found them in a watermelon patch feasting on the first melons they'd had since leaving home three years ago. Nearby some infantrymen were passing the time in a vegetable garden throwing tomatoes at each other.

Around 5 pm we were ordered to support the Carleton and York Regiment in an attack on a hamlet called Burgio. Zero hour arrived and the attack rumbled forward with 35 tanks and a regiment of infantry. We advanced steadily - 200, 300, 500, 800 yards, but there was no sign of the enemy. We approached the objective ready for all hell to break loose until we saw a tiny white flag at the first house. Inside it we found four very poor Sicilian peasants.

July 11, 1943

During the morning the locals inspected the damage we inflicted on their grapevines, which our tanks had chewed up pretty badly the night before attempting to find places to park. At 9 pm orders came for our squadron to move through Ispica and prepare to support the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (PPCLI) in an attack the next morning.

July 12, 1943

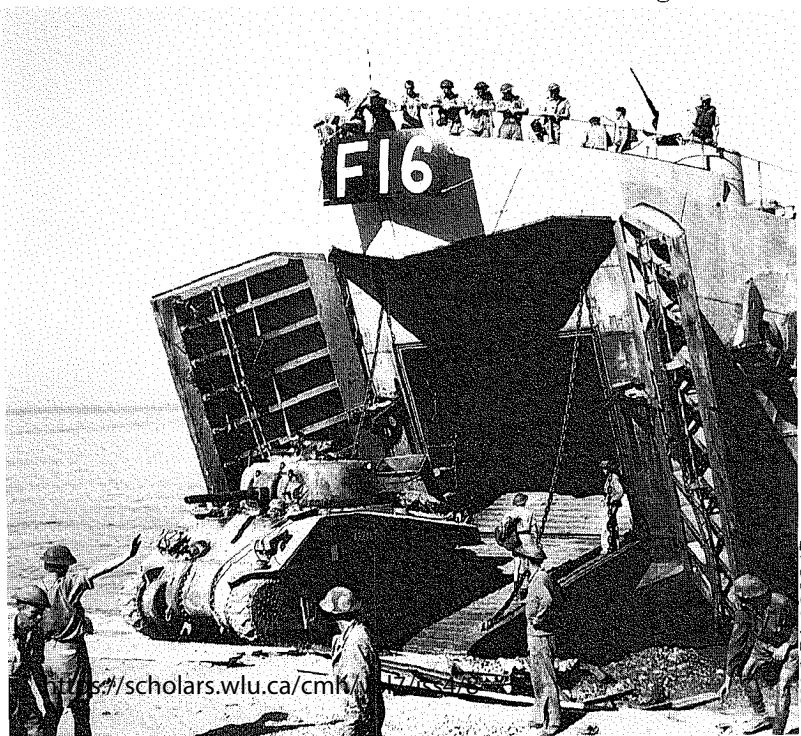
We stopped about six miles on the other side of Ispica at 3 pm. We waited for a scout from the PPCLI who was supposed to lead us the rest of the way. The fuel lorries arrived at 6:30 pm and we were on our way in 30 minutes. We had an hour to make our rendezvous with the Princess Pats. Five miles from the meeting place, we were stopped by a general who told us to get the hell off the roads and onto the fields. Through the fields we went, knocking over stone walls, plowing up farmyards and leaving bricks, boulders and rubble in our wake. It took us almost an hour to reach our destination and by the time we arrived the attack had gone ahead without us.

At the rendezvous point, we observed our first dogfight between a Spitfire and a Messerschmitt. The German plane dived with the Allied flyer on his tail. The 'Spit' let a burst go. The Messerschmitt climbed sharply, but another burst of the Spitfire's guns riddled the enemy plane. The German pilot bailed out and parachuted safely while the victorious Spitfire circled gracefully overhead.

At about noon we arrived at Modica, which was strewn with white flags made from tablecloths, sheets and pillowcases. In the centre of town, we came upon 300 Italian POWs being guarded by a lieutenant and four men from the Royal Canadian Regiment (RCR). The lieutenant didn't know what to do with his prisoners. We destroyed a pile of their captured weapons by running over them with our tank.

Later in the afternoon, the commanding officer of the Edmonton Regiment requested tank support for an attack on Ragusa. A platoon, which my tank accompanied, was also dispatched to accept the surrender of a small town called Scicli. The town had offered to surrender, but the commanding officer didn't want to take any chances so he had us lob shells over the town as a precautionary measure. When we entered the town there were no sheets or white flags about to indicate surrender. The streets were also uncomfortably quiet. Twenty minutes after we arrived, an American paratrooper approached us from another section of town and told us everything was under control. He and a

A Canadian Sherman tank exiting an LST (Landing Ship, Tank) onto a beach in Sicily, July 1943.



NAC PA 130247

few others had parachuted on the night of the invasion, but had been dropped on the wrong spot, captured and jailed. They talked themselves out of jail by telling the mayor that if he didn't surrender his town shortly, fleets of bombers would blow the place off the map.

July 13-15, 1943

While we were harbored in a suburb of Ragusa, Monty came to inspect our regiment. He arrived in a staff car with a large entourage and, after taking the salute, yelled to the men to gather around his car. He spoke to us informally, asked some of the men what part of Canada they came from. He'd had the Canadians under his command in England and said he was glad to have us back with him again. Recalling that the Edmonton Regiment had been stationed in an old brewery in England, he asked the men if they would like a beer. They answered with a deafening "Yes!" but Monty responded quietly with, "In due time."

July 16-17, 1943

At 8 pm we were ordered to push north with the Edmonton Regiment into Ragusa. I was perched on top of the turret with a platoon commander when a burst of machine-gun fire whistled across in front of us as we entered town. My driver, Ace Elliot, stopped while the infantry scurried for cover. The firing ceased momentarily, but the silence was soon shattered by another couple of bursts. The infantry told us the machine-gun fire was coming from a house on a small rise 200 yards away. Our gunner, Jim Tureman, trained his sights on the target and let go with the 75 m.m. gun. The machine-gun emplacement was destroyed but not before two of our infantrymen had been killed and six others wounded.

At 3 am we reached Chiarmonete, pushing on through the night to the road junction at Licodia. At mealtime, a few of our men bartered their food with some American troops who were across the road from us. The Yanks were glad to see our stew and tea and our men were happy to get some coffee and beans.

July 18, 1943

Our orders were to contact the main force of Canadian troops on our right in the area around Grammichele. At a distance, we could see smoke rising from the town. Near the railway track on

the outskirts, one of our tanks had been destroyed and five of our reconnaissance carriers were on fire. An intelligence officer said the carriers had walked right into an ambush by a Gennan rear-guard force. Inside the town, there were two knocked-out German Mark IV tanks.

The roads were jammed with Canadian artillery and transport moving toward Caltagirone. The town had taken an awful blasting from our bombers and artillery. There were dead horses disembowelled on the side of the road creating an unbearable stench. Before reaching San Michele, we crossed a time-bombed bridge which blew up only minutes after our last tank made it over.

July 19-21, 1943

Major Pat Mills told us to advance and guard the area directly ahead of us. One of the targets we shelled was a sandpit where the Germans were supposed to have a mortar dug in. It was about 2,500 yards range, but all our gunners hit it with their first shots. We advanced further and encountered a platoon of infantry from the RCR held up by enemy machine gun fire. Our squadron knocked out three machine gun emplacements before being called back to prepare for another attack.

July 22-23, 1943

We contacted the commanding officer of the RCRs who told us his troops needed tank support in an attack on some hills. Our approach was somewhat risky because the hills were across a dried-up riverbed which would expose us to enemy fire when we tried to cross it. I put on my tin helmet for the first time since we were getting some sporadic shelling. We crossed some railway tracks, but hadn't gone 20 yards when a mortar shell landed directly in front of us. From a standing position the concussion threw me onto the tank's floor. My helmet was knocked off and blood trickled from a gash in my forehead. The mortar shell ripped a hole in my helmet two inches long and an inch wide. Vic Harvey, the bow gunner, wrapped an oily gun cleaning rag around my head to stop the bleeding.

We'd moved only 20 yards further when another terrific blast lifted the front end of the tank off the ground. I thought we'd received a direct shell hit on the tracks, but actually we'd run into a minefield. Since we couldn't move, we

shelled the ridge as the infantry advanced on it. In the meantime, I got out of the tank through the escape hatch on the Sherman's belly to inspect the damage. Two bogie wheels and the right front drive sprocket were smashed.

July 24, 1943

Around 3 pm the squadron mechanics finally arrived with our bogie wheels and a drive sprocket. When they were finished we were still missing four bolts. I managed to steal some a few hours later from one of our tanks that had been knocked out in Leonforte.

July 25, 1943

By the time I returned to the tank with the bolts we needed it was 1 am. I woke up the crew and we had the tank running by 2 am. We met up with the rest of the squadron at 3:30 am and learned that we were to take part in an attack on the ridge near Nissoria that night. In the evening we moved down from our positions and into the town. On the other side of Nissoria, we were called back after an infantry attack failed.

July 26, 1943

At 7 pm we were told another night attack would take place on the ridge. The PPCLI were going to be the main assaulting battalion and our squadron was to support their advance. The attack started at 9:30 pm and 200 artillery pieces laid down a creeping barrage with a 500 yard frontage. About 6,000 shells fell on the ridge in 15 minutes. The ridge was taken at 10:15 pm. That night we could hear German tanks moving into position, so we slept in the Sherman.

July 27, 1943

Through the morning haze heads slowly popped up out of the turrets. All of a sudden there was a flash, then something 200 yards away exploded in flames. Ted Smith was doing all the shooting. He'd spotted a German tank through the mist and had fired with his 75 mm gun before the enemy realized what was happening. As the visibility improved, the results of the artillery barrage the night before became apparent. The badly pock-marked ridge was littered with German dead. In the afternoon we moved to some high ground outside Agira and shelled a convoy of German trucks; putting three out of action. On the wireless, Major Pat Mills told us to support the Seaforth Highlanders attack on Agira

and that Mickey Dawson's troop would eventually take over from us.

In the evening one of our men, Trooper Dion, was returned to us by the infantry. He'd been captured by the enemy in the morning and released by our troops the same afternoon.

July 28, 1943

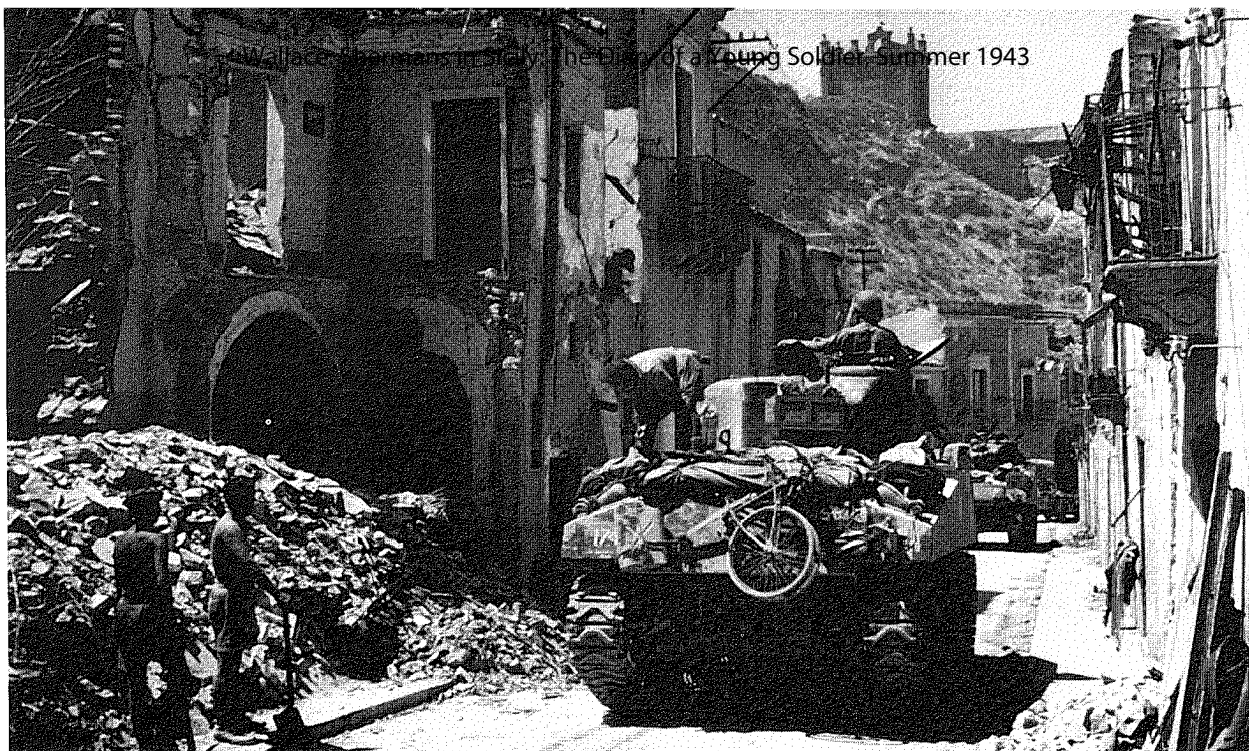
We received orders to move into Agira with the PPCLI who were fighting from house to house. Our troop followed Mickey Dawson's tanks toward Agira, but shortly after we were told to pull up into a field outside of town. Beez Gordon, whose troop of tanks were already inside Agira, was hit by sniper fire as he tried to get out of his Sherman. He spent nearly a year in hospital and was the first officer in our squadron to be hit. Agira was attacked again that night and in the darkness we could see the flashes of shells landing in the town. The 9 pm BBC Overseas Broadcast said that Agira had been taken by Canadian troops, but when we went to sleep, the infantry battle, which had been raging all day, was still in progress.

July 29, 1943

After Agira was taken, we stopped in an olive grove at the base of a hill on the other side of the town. Just as we parked our tanks, shells – "moaning minnies," as they were called – started screaming down on us like dive bombers. When one exploded, it threw around chunks of steel the size of a man's forearm. We were hit with another packet of shells just as we were getting ready to bury two of our men, Troopers Frost and Marsh. They were laid to rest without their boots because the Sicilians sometimes dug up the graves and removed pieces of clothing from the bodies.

July 30-August 2, 1943

Regalbuto was taken by a British unit, the Malta Brigade, after a costly battle. Major Pat Mills told Mickey Dawson and I that we were to go with him on a reconnaissance mission that night. When we passed Regalbuto, whole sections of the town were levelled and the place was piled high with rubble. Bulldozers had cleared little channels through the debris littering the roads. People dug through the ruins trying to find members of their families or some of their



A column of Sherman tanks from the Three Rivers Regiment (12th Canadian Armoured Regiment) roll through the devastated Sicilian town of Regalbuto.

belongings buried under heaps of masonry and brick.

On the other side of town, we met some of our troops in a rest area. They told us the forward battalions were four miles ahead so we commandeered a captured German scout car and headed for the front lines. Two miles down the road we were stopped by an officer of the Seaforths and told to abandon the scout car because it would draw shell fire. Just as we parked it, the first shell landed. By this time it was very dark and difficult to see more than a few feet ahead. As we trudged along I slipped on something and nearly lost my balance. There was blood on my boots that had come from a dead infantryman whose head had been blown off. I nearly vomited.

We continued along the road, but stopped again when we heard groans coming from a small shack. Inside we found another one of our men who'd been badly wounded. We gave the lad a cigarette and then made our way back to the PPCLI to get help for him. We scouted the dried riverbed we'd have to cross the next day and returned to where our tanks were harbored.

August 3, 1943

Brigade headquarters ordered us to move across the railway bridge on the other side of the Salso River and contact the Edmonton Regiment,

which was somewhere in the hills on the other side. I was also told that the Edmontons were likely to be anywhere in an area of 16 square miles. We crossed the bridge without incident and learned later that the Germans had improperly wired a mine on it. Our advance proceeded along the railway tracks since the fields in the area had also been mined.

We pushed forward about four miles without seeing our infantry and not knowing whether or not we were in enemy territory. From a distance, we heard a faint burst from a German machine-gun and then the slow steady staccato of Bren gun responding.

Shortly after, we met Lt. Col. Hoffmeister of the Seaforths, who told us his troops were being held up by some Germans dug-in on a nearby peak. We fired about 30 shells at the target and then climbed the hill to support an attack by Hoffmeister's troops. Mickey's squadron arrived about an hour and a half later to help out and provide moral support. He took up a position 200 yard away on a small knoll. From there, he was in a perfect position to blast away at the Germans. If they tried to escape his shell fire, they walked into mine. They couldn't move either way without catching hell. Mickey knocked out an 88 mm gun and its tractor trying to make a getaway down the road to Troina. About 11 am



Lieutenant-Governor Matthews presenting the Military Cross to Lieutenant J.F. Wallace. Photo taken at an Investiture held in Queen's Park, Toronto, on 17 June 1945.

Lt. Col. Hoffmeister came over and thanked us for our work.

It was unbearably hot in the tanks that afternoon so we wore only our undershorts. Although we had plenty of water, it was too hot to drink. Around 3 pm we saw some American bombers in action over Regalbuto giving the town a severe blasting. The smoke and dust rose a couple of hundred feet in the air. Someone somewhere was in big trouble because Regalbuto had been liberated for two days. We stopped at 10 pm after having been in the field for nearly 16 hours; most of the time under a broiling sun.

August 4, 1943

In the morning Slim Waldron congratulated us on our marksmanship the day before. He told us we'd knocked out two German mortars and their crews. I didn't have much to do that morning so I stopped two Italian soldiers passing through our lines and searched them. They had ammunition on them so I turned them over to Pat Mills who suggested we send them up on the ridge to bury the German dead. The Italians did not understand English, so when Pat told Bill Billodeau to escort them, giving them picks and shovels, they started to sob and weep and beg for mercy. They thought we were going to make them dig their own graves and then shoot them. When they reached the top of the ridge and saw all the dead bodies they were understandably relieved. They could consider themselves lucky.

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If the infantry had found that ammunition on them, they'd have been shot; no questions asked.

August 5 & 6, 1943

The Germans were now in full retreat so the going was slack. We listened to the battle for Adrano over the wireless for the better part of the day. I got a scare that night as I was dozing off to sleep. A huge lizard slithered over my leg and off into the night.

August 7, 1943

We received orders to be ready to meet the rest of the squadron. The campaign was over for us now and we were headed for a rest area.

August 8, 1943

General Simonds, the commander of the Canadian force in Sicily, arrived to inspect our regiment. In a short speech, he thanked us for the job we'd done and said if the First Canadian Division were in action again, he'd ask for us. He read to us the text of a message he was going to broadcast to Canada in which the name of our regiment was mentioned. After the parade, Pat Mills showed us the pennant presented to him by the men of the Second Canadian Infantry Brigade. We were all very proud of the pennant, which became a permanent adornment on the wireless antenna of the squadron leader's tank.

After the liberation of Sicily, Jack Wallace's unit went into action in late September 1943 on the eastern coast of Italy. On October 6, his troop of tanks supported British troops attempting to hold off a German counterattack on Tennoli. On the second day of a fierce two-day battle, Wallace's Sherman was destroyed by enemy tank fire. Severely wounded, he was pulled from the burning wreck by the only other crew member to survive. Soon after, the enemy's tanks were outmanoeuvred by the faster Shermans and forced to retreat. For his crucial role in checking this counterattack, Jack Wallace was awarded the Military Cross. After spending six months in North African and English hospitals, he was evacuated to Canada in May 1944.

David Pratt is the Member of Parliament for Nepean-Carleton.