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Canadian Battle of Normandy Foundation 2003 Study Tour: Sicily and Italy

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Canadian Battle of Normandy Foundation 2003 Study Tour Sicily and Italy

May 2003 marked a turning point in the Canadian Battle of Normandy Foundation's history. Since 1995 the highly successful Study Tour program has focussed each year on the Battle for Normandy and one other campaign of significance to Canadians. On previous tours, those rotating campaigns have included the 1944/45 advance into Belgium, Holland and western Germany, the Combined Bomber Offensive, the Italian mainland, and Canada's First World War battlefields.

To honour the 60th anniversary of Canada's role in the invasion of Sicily, and the battles for the Moro River and Ortona, this year's tour concentrated entirely on the Italian campaign. This focus reflects the Foundation's broadening role in commemorating not just the Battle of Normandy, but important Canadian First and Second World War sites across Europe.

Being the first CBNF tour not to go to Normandy gave the students their own sense of what it was to be a "D-Day Dodger in Sunny Italy!" David Patterson, from the Canadian Land Forces Command and Staff College led the tour, assisted by Michael Boire from the Royal Military College and Lee Windsor from the University of New Brunswick. They took with them ten remarkable, intelligent, and enthusiastic young Canadians. Also along for the ride to observe the CBNF Study Tour formula first hand was Legion Magazine Editor Mac Johnston and Jim Johnston from Veteran's Affairs Canada.

After landing at Catania, Sicily, the group started their journey on the Canadian landing beaches south of Pachino. For the next two days they advanced into the mountainous interior taking time to look at the battles for Valguarnera, Assoro, and Agira to name a few. The column

The group on the steps of Mussolini's infamous Great War Memorial in Rome. Standing left to right: Peter Batt, Kelly-Anne Campbell, Peter Wright, David Patterson, Kimberly Kaimen, Adrianna Poulette, Lee Windsor, Doug Delaney, Jim Johnston. Kneeling: Kate Betts-Wilmott, Michelle McCann, Brandy Barton, Christian Wakelam, Mac Johnston. Missing: Mike Boire.



then crossed the Straights of Messina in a ferry looking remarkably similar to a Landing Ship, Tank. After a quick stop at Salerno, the group spent the next six days studying the battles for the Moro, Ortona, Monte Cassino and the Liri Valley. They also took time for a one-day whirlwind tour of Rome's most famous sights under the guidance of Professor Peter Kent, based in the Eternal City for the University of New Brunswick's summer intersession program.

The last phase of the tour was spent exploring the breakthrough of the Gothic and Rimini Lines into the flat, sodden "polder" country of the Romagna Plain. The group concluded their

adventure by participating, as part of the official Canadian Veteran's Affairs contingent, in an intimate local ceremony in the north-western Apennine town of Bardi. The event honoured the Commonwealth crew, which included two Canadians, of a 37 RAF Squadron Wellington Bomber that crashed nearby sixty years earlier. As a predominately anti-Fascist community largely missed by the war, the ceremony was a way for the people of Bardi to honour their liberators.

As the following student accounts suggest, this year's tour was another great success and will hopefully be repeated in a few year's time.

Selected Student Journal Entries

Kingston, Ontario - 9 May 2003

Christian Wakelam, Queen's University

The Italian theatre is where my grandfather served during the Second World War. He was a member of Second Platoon of the First Field Company Royal Canadian Engineers. He was wounded in Sicily and again at Ortona. A mortar round ripped open the left side of his stomach on Christmas Eve. He was found on Christmas Day, and was lucky to survive his wounds. Unfortunately, he passed away last Christmas. I found out about the trip a short time later, and decided that there must be at least a small element of fate in play, beckoning me to apply. I'll be the first in my family to see the ground where my grandfather lay bleeding for 24 hours.

Kelly-Anne Campbell, Carleton University

I have just returned from our reception at the Sheraton Hotel in Toronto. At the reception

we had the opportunity to meet several veterans which is always fascinating. Mr. Cal Peppler was an RCAF Spitfire pilot. He was shot down over Italy by a 40 mm Bofors gun. What I found most interesting was his philosophy about life. Mr. Peppler believes that life is meant to be experienced, and he is a vehement proponent of journals, having kept one himself all his life. In fact, he was such a fan of keeping a journal that he brought a blank one for each tour member. I really feel lucky to have met this man; he made me look at life from a different perspective.

Pachino Beach, Sicily - 11 May 2003

Kimberly Kaimen, Carleton University

I was surprised at how easy it was for me to picture the sea dark with ships, shadowed figures moving across the beach in the cover of fading night, their hearts racing. This is the first time the war seems real. Before I came here I didn't question the way I felt about the Second World War, now I feel naive. Looking back, my perception of the War seems hollow, like I

was watching a movie. I know that I can never fully understand the experience but I think this is the beginning of a greater appreciation of our history.

The Road to

First touring day at 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade's "Roger" Beach in Sicily. Mike Boire is second from the left.



Grammichele, Sicily - 11 May 2003

Peter Wright, McGill University

After the scrub-brush wasteland of the plains around the beaches, the scenery as we climbed into the hills of Sicily was almost indescribably fantastic! We climbed on roads that hugged every contour of the hill-sides, curved enough to break a snakes back (and apparently, some of our stomachs). The green hillsides were stunning, lush with fresh crops sowed in steeply-angled plots. As we drove we could hardly wait to discover the views that lay around every "next" corner, and each new view seemed to outdo its predecessor- a truly stunning panorama to say the least. But unsaid amongst the beauty of the steeply winding roads was the realization that it was over these same roads that the exhausted Canadians trudged during the parched summer of 1943, desperately trying to catch a retreating army in the face of thirst and exhaustion. By the time of our arrival at Grammichele I think we all had a good sense of the sore feet endured by those men.

Kelly Anne Campbell

We continued on through Sicily moving inland on the route that the Canadians took. The scenery is breathtaking. Massive hills and rocks are covered with beautifully green grass. I cannot tell you how glad I was to be taking this route by car. The men who walked this route must have been walking zombies by the time they finished it. I remember Colonel Galloway saying that the men were so covered in this white dust that they looked like they had been dipped in chalk. I can believe it. Those men had unbelievable strength, endurance and determination.

Leonforte - 12 May 2003

Kimberly Kaimen

Like many Sicilian towns, Leonforte is built on a mountaintop. The main piece of this fight is the bridge that leads into the town. Without a bridge there can be no vehicles or tank support. I have read before about blowing out bridges to halt the enemy. I never really understood the concept until now. I always just thought, "why don't they just go around?" Actually seeing the bridge,

the impassable terrain and that there really is only one road that leads into Leonforte; I finally understand the obstacles they faced. There are so many factors to consider in an advance that it is never as simple as just going around the problem. If you tried it you would probably get killed. It is easy to be judgemental in looking back on the decision made by commanders 60 years ago. We have a clear retrospective view of the situation. However, if you put yourself into their shoes and think about the information that was available to them at the time, they made decisions that they believe to be best for their men.

Doug Delaney, Royal Military College

We crossed the span where the 3rd Field Company erected a bailey bridge on 21-22 July, and moved into Leonforte proper. This was the route a "combat team" of one Patricia Company and a troop of Three Rivers tanks followed to link up with the Edmonton Regiment, which had fought its way into the town twelve hours earlier. Apparently, the Three Rivers Shermans knocked out several German tanks near the town square. We went to that square – talk about point blank range! It couldn't have been more than 150 yards from one end of the square to the other. I tried to imagine how the tank crews, looking through those little vision ports, were able to get anything done.

Assoro - 12 May 2003

Kelly Anne Campbell

Assoro is even more impressive than I imagined it would be. Climbing up a goat trail to try and get a better view, the cars and vans can barely make it. Imagine what it would have been like on foot. At the next stand we are at the base of the cliff. This is where the CO, Lord Tweedsmuir, made his final decision to send three companies to take the hill. I don't think I could ever make a decision like that. How is it possible to make a clear-headed decision when you know that any decision you make might mean the lives of so many men? Looking down from Assoro was unbelievable! No wonder the Germans were caught by surprise. It looks even more impossible to climb from the top than it does from the bottom!



The infamous cliffs of Assoro up which the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment made their epic climb to outflank the strong German defences blocking any advance northwards.

Agira Canadian War Cemetery - 13 May 2003

Doug Delaney

The day ended with a visit, our first of many, to a Commonwealth War Cemetery. The experience overwhelms me. The tears well up in my eyes the minute I enter the place and they don't go away until I leave. I think it's because I know how badly somebody misses each one of these young men. Their pain might have remained something distant to me had it not been for the epitaphs that they left on the stones to mark the resting places of their loved ones. One that I remember said, "HE DID NOT COME BACK TO US BUT WE WILL GO ON REMEMBERING HIM." It was so simple and so perfect – "back to us" in the sense that "with us" is where he belongs, where he knows the people, where he knows the place. And he gave all that up. When I went to Visitor's Register, I could only think of writing, "Thank You", because I really am grateful – grateful not only for what these soldiers did for us as Canadians, but also for the reminder of how great and giving human beings can be.

Adrianna Poulette, University of Victoria

Today we visited Leonforte, Assoro, and Agira. What stuck out most today was our visit to the Cemetery. It was our first cemetery. I thought I was tougher than I acted today. I did not expect that to get to me as much as it did. I didn't know any of the men lying there but I still couldn't contain myself. Peter presented today. A.W. Eatman. It was a great presentation. It's weird. I can't remember any of the details of his presentation yet I still remember it. I was so wrapped up in imagining his family and what he went through that I really didn't pay attention. Today was an emotional day. It did, however, bring me closer to one of my tour mates....even though it was sad, today was good.

Salerno - 14 May 2003

Brandy Barton, Wilfrid Laurier University

It was absolutely amazing to be able to see the challenges & the terrain the Allies had to face. Actually being there gave me such an appreciation for what they accomplished. I have one very good example of how it helps to see the terrain to truly understand what took place. I did my presentation on Operation Avalanche, the Salerno landings. While reading up on the landings, I had the impression that the surrounding hills were relatively close to the landing beaches. I was shocked to see just how far away those hills actually were when we got there!! Immediately, I had a better understanding the problem that Italian terrain posed.

Monte Cassino - 16 May 2003

Kelly Anne Campbell

What struck me most at the mouth of the Liri Valley was the fact that no matter where you go that monastery is watching you. Before coming to Italy, I was leaning towards idea that the bombing the monastery was unnecessary. After standing in the Liri Valley and feeling it watch me I've changed my mind. If I was an average soldier I would be positive that the Germans were watching me. Bombing it, regardless of whether it was militarily necessary must have given them at least a small amount of peace of mind.

**Kate Betts-Wilmott,
University of New Brunswick**

In an history class back at UNB Pete Batt submitted a paper on the bombing of the Abbey. He had defended it despite the dubious intelligence in support of the bombing at the time. I'm not sure that I was his harshest critic but I hadn't given him an easy time at it. He argued that the simple presence of the Abbey was daunting to the point of destructive for the Allied troops trying to take it, and only when it was rubble could they finally take it. I hadn't believed Pete, until standing in the Cassino War cemetery I

Adrianna Poulette delivers an emotional presentation and Mik' Maq ceremony at the grave of her Grandfather killed in the Battle for the Hitler Line, all under the shadow of the Abbey of Monte Cassino.

looked up and saw the Abbey staring down from the clouds. God knows who looking down on us.

Cassino War Cemetery - 16 May 2003

Adrianna Poulette

Today I presented on my grandfather, Louis Peter Brooks. I was nervous all day today, not because I had to present but because I wasn't sure exactly how I was going to react. Its weird that he died at 23 and I'm visiting his grave at 23. I almost made it though the entire presentation, but when I got to the sacred medicines and lost it. I knew what I had to do but it was really hard, first because it was emotional but secondly because I had to do it in front of everyone.

Its important to Natives to have those medicines. I was told by an elder that it was especially important that my grandfather have them because he is not buried on his land. I'm so proud of myself today. My Dad is going to be so pleased that I did this. I would not have kept my cool had it not been for some of my tour mates who comforted me.

Doug Delaney

The highlight of the day occurred at the Cassino War Cemetery. It was there that one of our little group, Addy Poulette found her grandfather, Louis Brooks, an RCR soldier killed in action at the HITLER Line. I know it's not for me to be proud of her, but I am. She did such a beautiful job of honouring him and telling his story. At the end of her tribute, she explained some of her Micmac traditions, leaving on his grave several special items. I can't remember what they all meant, but the one that stuck in my mind was the last one: a tobacco leaf. She told us how native peoples burn tobacco after harvesting animals or plants from the earth as a way of saying thanks for the sacrifice, which is what she wanted to do for him. That was as far as she got before finally breaking down. I'm



pretty sure the rest of us joined her; at least, I know I did. It was a very powerful and moving moment. Even though she'd never met him, you could tell her affection for him ran deep. That's family, I guess.

Peter Batt, University of New Brunswick

I think that our visits to the numerous war cemeteries throughout Italy will have the greatest impact on me, an impact that will—and indeed *has* changed my outlook on life. Walking through the grave-sites of the thousands of men who died for the preservation of our freedom and values really does change your outlook on things. Particularly striking to me were the headstones of the brave men who fought and died in the ranks of the Carleton and York Regiment. Not only were these men near my own age at the time of their deaths, they grew up playing in the same fields and towns that I've grown up in today. Seeing their graves really hit home their sacrifice. It was one of the most moving experiences that I have ever known.

Michelle McCann, University of Calgary

We played some cards that night after dinner, myself, Kim, Pete Wright and Kate. We had just finished our second Euchre tournament when we heard some Brits talking on the next couch over. It became clear that one of the men was a veteran who had fought at Cassino. At one point he started talking about the Canadians. "They always had it rough," the old man said in a cracked voice. "The Canadians. They always sent the Canadians in for the tough stuff." We four smiled at each other, and I don't think I've felt or seen such pride anywhere else.

Near Cassino - 18 May 2003

Kimberly Kaimen

The information building for the German cemetery was interesting. It was interesting in not so much in what was said, but what was not said. The write up about the cemetery is very vague. It is a cemetery for the thousands of Germans who died at Monte Cassino and in the Liri Valley, yet the Second World War is not even mentioned once. What they omit speaks volumes. Germany in a lot of ways is ashamed of its history. But to ignore the undeniable atrocities cheapens the loss of life.

Near Venafro - 18 May 2003

Brandy Barton

The next one we visited was a French cemetery just outside of Casino. Again, what an interesting experience this cemetery was. The French have yet another completely different way of burying their dead. This cemetery had two sections to it, the Catholic & the Muslim. This was particularly interesting, especially since the Muslim graves all faced towards Mecca. One thing that intrigued me was that every stone said "Morts Pour La France", Died For France.

Ortona - 19 May 2003

Kate Betts-Wilmott

When we arrived in Ortona, I half expected to see holes in the wall and the town still in ruins, despite the assurances of the guide book that it is a tourist town. It's very strange to have to change mental gears. I have finally gotten accustomed to looking at the way hills roll and water moves at river crossings and the way mountain top positions support each other with artillery fire. Now we are looking at house to house fighting in the town, and mines and booby traps in toilets, door ways, and stairwells. Would soldiers have been relieved to get into shelter after fighting in bitter winter weather in the Moro river valley or were they aware of the new evil to be dealt with in the town?

Kelly Anne Campbell

I love the memorial to the Canadians that the people of Ortona erected. I learned later on in the tour that the fresh flowers that were left on the statue came from two elderly ladies. During the war they did washing for Canadian soldiers. Now, they bring fresh flowers every day. I must admit it's one of the first signs that I've seen that the Italian people remember the sacrifice that was made here. I suppose this is partly because the people of Ortona would also have suffered greatly.

Michelle McCann

So much in Ortona seemed to be left over from the war – including some of the people. The old Italian guy that followed us around for a while was really funny and really interesting, talking about the sounds and sights while the city was being destroyed. He was living history, he was there when all those people I read about fought house to house and died. He saw it. His eyes kind of clouded over when he talked about it.

Moro River Canadian War Cemetery - 20 May 2003

Kelly Anne Campbell

Today is my soldier presentation on Major Alex Campbell. Not long after I had chosen him, I realized he was the man who had led his company of Hasty P's up the cliff at Assoro. I read all I could about him and most of this information came from Farley Mowat's accounts. However, I also looked at Major Campbell's service records. Bit by bit, I was able to put together a picture of who this man was. The more I learned of his exploits, in the militia with the Lanark and Renfrew Scottish, in civilian life as the owner and operator of a sign company and as an assistant candy-maker, and as an officer in the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment, the more I grew to like and respect this man. As I travelled through Sicily, I kept track of where he had been and what he would have seen. Crossing the Moro I thought of him, and tried to picture what it was he would have experienced as he moved towards Christmas Day 1943, the day he died. Throughout the trip I tried to see the terrain as he would have seen it. However, as I walked into the Moro River Cemetery I knew that this was the end of this

man's journey. From this point onward, I would no longer have him accompanying me on the rest of my trip. As I walked towards his grave, all I felt was overwhelming sadness. Chris had also chosen to speak of Major Campbell and I was glad to have help for the presentation. It was difficult to get through, but I have to admit that throughout the presentation I couldn't help but think Major Campbell would be very disappointed to have some woman blubbering at his grave when she should be getting on with her presentation and getting the job done. This is, I think, why I have so much respect for Major Campbell. Despite overwhelming odds, miserable conditions, and great fear, Major Campbell, through grit and determination, got the job done, and inspired others to do the same. Remarkably, his poem seems to suggest that he was in fact more afraid of letting down his men, than he was of German bullets. If I can be half the leader, and show half the grit and determination that he did, I will be very well served in my life. I am very lucky to have been able to get a glimpse into his life.

Christian Wakelam

When my grandfather died in December, his Minister read us a Psalm (Psalm 91) that had apparently appealed to his memories of the war. There are two lines that stuck in my mind while we were in the cemetery:

"A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you."

"For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways."

Alex Campbell and others weren't so lucky as my grandpa. I think Ortona must have been so terrible that there was a shortage of angels. But I'm sure it didn't take long for Major Campbell to return to the battlefield to act as an angel for others.

My grandfather very probably should have died from the wounds he took on Christmas Eve. The men from his section didn't expect him to live after having lain undiscovered for 24 hours. Something saved him from death.

Christian Wakelam and Kelly-Anne Campbell make a joint presentation on the life and death of Major Alex Campbell, Farley Mowatt's renowned company commander, at the Moro River War Cemetery near Ortona.

Metauro Valley - 21 May 2003

Doug Delaney

For any two-week trip, you have to figure that the weather will be uncooperative on at least one day. This was *our* foul weather day. This morning, through the rain, mist and fog, we looked over the Metauro from Montemaggiore. We discussed how the 15 km space between the Metauro and the Foglia formed a "security zone" in which the Germans hoped to impose delay and gain information on our advance before the main defensive positions of the GOTHIC Line. Later, we moved to the area of Mont della Mattered, where 2 CIB bashed quickly forward to collapse the "security zone." Using fire and movement, they pinned and destroyed the enemy that had hoped to delay the attackers then sneak away. It didn't work out the way the Germans wanted; most of them died in place.





The group poses in front of the Great War memorial in Bardi on which a new plaque was just unveiled honouring the Commonwealth crew of a Wellington Bomber shot down nearby. The crew included two Canadians.

Point 111 - Gothic Line - 22 May 2003

Kelly Anne Campbell

Montecchio cemetery was very moving. The men, some of them, are lying only metres from where they were killed. For example, the rows of Cape Breton Highlanders are lying almost in the shadow of the hill they vainly tried to capture. I am sad to learn that Alphonse Hickey, a CBH who died on Hill 120, does not even have an epitaph on his grave stone. From the regimental history, I learned that Hickey volunteered to stay behind with the Bren gun, in order to cover the other men as they retreated down the hill. Hickey must have known that he would never make it down the hill himself, and yet he sacrificed himself for his fellow soldiers. Since I had spoken about him in my presentation I left the notes concerning his deeds in the cemetery register.

Point 204 - Gothic Line

Christian Wakelam

Point 204 was taken thanks to the ambitious movement of the British Columbia Dragoons. As the infantry took control of Point 111, the BCDs moved through and proceeded to 204 without support. In making their advance, the tankers suffered a great deal. Many were angry that they hadn't waited for the infantry, but

their quick attack saved the Canadian Corps a major battle. I can only hope that that is some consolation to the men who died and the men who watched their friends die. The fight for Point 204 was a very bloody battle, especially for the Germans. They hadn't expected the quick penetration into their line and suffered trying to take back this important hill. Throughout our tour we talked about the overall Allied objective in Italy. The objective of the Allies was to take ground from the Germans and then fight off the counter attacks. Although the capture of Point 204 did not go as planned, the Canadians were successful in getting the Germans to commit to retaking the hill.

Monte Peloso - 22 May 2003

Peter Wright

We then pushed onto Monte Peloso, one of the most incredible lookouts seen to date. From here we could see the true strategic picture on a large scale- the last defensive hills before the plains, the Coriano ridge and even San Martino in the distance. It was here that I finally understood the true necessity of pushing through and over all these hills we'd seen in the previous 2 days, and it was here that I could truly understand the overall relevance of the brutal fighting occurring here. The view from the hills in this area let me glimpse the macro-facet of these battles. Here I could see the Adriatic, with the roads running

up the coast over which the German Forces were surely running madly when the Canadians seized these hills. Off in the distance were the plains, though the rivers to the open plains beyond. If I could not understand the ordeal underwent by these Canadian troops on these last few hills, I could at least understand the importance of this ordeal, and this too was a lesson much needed. Context proved to be one of the greatest aspects of this trip.

San Fortunato Ridge - 23 May 2003

Kelly Anne Campbell

Today we visited San Fortunato Ridge. Overlooking the flat ground beyond it, and looking East towards Rimini I can't help but think what an accomplishment it was to reach this ridge. I look back on all of the ground we've covered and I am proud not only of the Canadian soldiers who made it this far, but also proud of ourselves for retracing their journey. And yet, I know that for the Canadians who stood on this ridge, there would still have been the battle for the rivers, Smokey Smith was still to win his VC on the Savio, and for many there were still months of fighting in Holland.

Peter Batt

To anyone who asserts that the Italian Campaign was not a vital contribution to victory in Europe, I say this: Go to Italy. See the lay of the land. Feel how the sun drains you of energy. Visit the Agira War Cemetery, the Moro River War Cemetery, the Cassino War Cemetery, the Coriano War Cemetery. Stop and read the graves of the brave and courageous men who died nearby, and then try and tell me that the efforts put forth by these professionals was all for not. I would be disgusted if you could.

Bardi - 24 May 2003

Kimberly Kaimen

Today we attend a ceremony in Bardi to commemorate the lives of six airmen crashed near the small mountain top town on November 24, 1943. This is the first commemorative ceremony I have attended and I am extremely

privileged to play a small part in it. Two of the six airmen were Canadians and I decided to do my soldier presentation on them. I wanted to know about them, especially because we were in Bardi to represent Canada's youth.

Bardi is much smaller than I imagined. It is basically a one road town. Yet, out of this small village came a compassionate and selfless act. When the Wellington Bomber crashed into the hillsides of Bardi the townspeople did not even hesitate for a moment to treat the killed airmen with the same dignity and respect that they would have treated their own. They did this at a time when many Fascist and Hitler supporters will still patrolling the area. Compromising their own safety, the six airmen were given a burial with honors for those who fought and died for their country. The community did not know the names, nationality or religion of the men but made them a part of their village and treated them as such.

Kelly Anne Campbell

The people of Bardi risked their lives to save an aircrew that they didn't even know. When they realized that the crew had been killed in the crash they brought the airmen back to their town and treated them as their own despite the risk to themselves. After speaking with Albino Rossi, who was ten years old when he witnessed the crash site and attended the funeral, my impression of the Italian people changed completely. The Canadians in Italy are remembered. They are remembered more quietly and perhaps less extravagantly than the Canadians who were in France and Holland, but they are in the hearts and minds of a significant number of Italians who will not forget and who will pass along their story. Perhaps this is fitting. The D-Day Dodgers in the Second World War were largely overshadowed by the Canadians in North-West Europe. The media chose not to bestow upon them the same attention that was given to the men in Western Europe and this continues to this day. Regardless, there is a quiet pride emanating from every veteran of the Italian Campaign. I feel incredibly honoured to have been admitted into the group that understands the experience of the D-Day Dodgers. They will forever be in my heart and mind.