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Parachute Engineers in Combat, Ortona 1943 A German Perspective

Carl Bayerlein

Translated by Alex MacQuarrie; Edited by Dean F. Oliver

In late 1943, Allied forces were fighting their way up the Italian peninsula. It was tough going. Broken terrain hindered the advance and well-armed, well-led German defenders fought for nearly every river crossing, hill, and village. On 6 December, Canadian troops, operating on the far right of the Allied line, began to cross the Moro River on the Adriatic coast, battling north through a series of small towns, farms, and ravines. First Canadian Infantry Division under Major-General Chris Vokes, pushing up the coastal highway, met bitter resistance at "The Gully," a natural feature just north of the Moro. After being driven from this objective, German troops of the 76th Panzer Corps, including two elite parachute battalions, prepared to defend the ancient coastal town of Ortona, whose stout buildings provided scores of excellent defensive positions.

The Canadians attacked nevertheless and spent the Christmas season in a bloody house-to-house struggle against determined opposition. By 27 December, with German troops retreating northward, the Canadians had prevailed, though at heavy cost. The Loyal Edmonton Regiment

It was [an] old town with about 9,500 inhabitants, many of them fisherfolk. It was built on a promontory, with narrow streets and houses interlocked with one another, which made orientation difficult. Just in terms of topography alone, Ortona was far from favorable for military operations.

In the course of the [Canadian] assault they managed to penetrate into the southern part of



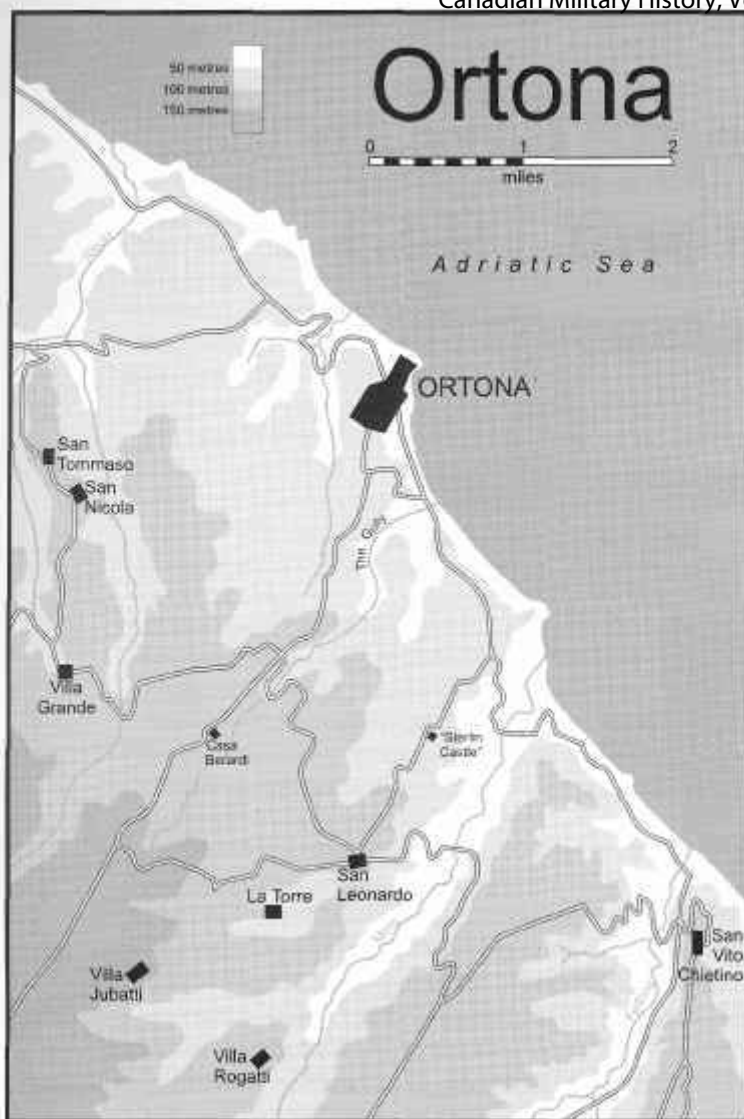
suffered 172 casualties at Ortona, the Seaforth Highlanders 103. Other units' losses in and around the town, including those of the 12th Armoured Regiment (Three Rivers Regiment), brought total Canadian casualties during the battle to 350.

While there are numerous Canadian accounts of the battle of Ortona, there are few accounts in English of the fighting from the German perspective. Recently the Canadian War Museum acquired a copy of the following memoir through the good offices of Alex MacQuarrie of HSN Linguistic Services, Ottawa. The narrative, translated by Mr. MacQuarrie, is written by Parachute Combat Engineer Carl Bayerlein (Service No. L25475), 3rd Platoon, 3rd Company, 1st Parachute Combat Engineer Battalion, 1st Parachute Infantry Division. It covers the period 10-27 December 1943 and consists of two parts: a day-by-day diary account, and a somewhat longer summary, based on the diary entries, but compiled in the early 1990s. The edited version that follows is drawn from the summary account.

Dean F. Oliver

Ortona. There began a fight without quarter for every house - almost for every room.

Using our engineers' explosives, we blew up entire lines of houses to hold up the advance of enemy tanks. In the mountains of rubble thus created, booby traps were emplaced. The plan was to funnel the enemy in a specific direction by means of systematic demolitions. The market square was the intended destination. Around it



the houses were transformed into small fortresses studded with machine guns. The enemy would have been severely mangled here, and handed an annihilating defeat. But instead he recognized our trap and avoided it.

Instead, he sought to penetrate in strength up the side streets in the direction of the town centre and to the castle. Supported by a number of tanks he managed to advance continually. On our side, anti-tank weapons were practically non-existent. Despite our intensive counterfire house after house had to be given up; we were powerless against these steel monsters and their guns.

When they came up against a nest of resistance, they slewed their turrets and took it under concentrated fire with high-explosive or armour-piercing rounds, until the house collapsed. Meanwhile the enemy batteries were firing without a pause, until almost all residential buildings had their roofs blown off or damaged. Each time a house collapsed with a crash, a yellow dust cloud rose up, mixed with the smoke from exploding shells, so that everything was obscured by sulphur-yellow smoke and fumes.

At night we were detailed as roof sentries, and occupied our posts under the roofs. And so it often happened that we were upstairs at the same time the English or Canadians were breaking into the ground floor. The only thing to



Platoon Commander Lieutenant I. Macdonald (with binoculars), 48th Highlanders, with some of his soldiers: (l. to r.) Sgt. J.T. Cooney, Ptes. A.R. Downie, O.E. Bernier, G.R. Young, Cpl. T. Fereday and Pte. S.L. Hart (with Bren gun). San Leonardo di Ortona, 10 December 1943.*

**Corporal Fereday (standing with Tommy gun) was killed outside Ortona on 18 December 1943*

do was to throw a hand grenade down below right away and move on to the next house. Many times voices were heard from below, but instead of the soldiers we expected they were Italian civilians who were holed up in the cellars. They had wrongly believed that the occupation or "liberation" of the town by the Allies would happen rapidly and peacefully. For many of them this error was a fatal one, as the extraordinarily severe fighting for their town was to attest.

[Ortona] was the first time in the course of the Second World War that the Allied forces [had] been engaged in such bitter house-to-house fighting. Some time earlier, as the battle was looming, Ortona had been mined by German Army combat engineers, and many of the cross-streets were set up as "mousetraps," while anti-personnel mines were laid from the port up to the town. We now laid mines as far in the enemy's direction as possible, mainly in relatively undamaged houses, which we assumed that the enemy would soon be occupying.

The preferred device was the toilet flush chain, which when pulled set off the igniter whereupon the well-concealed and -placed charge exploded. Consequently there were several detonations which we ourselves did not directly set off, in houses that had been entered either by the enemy or by Italian civilians, who found their deaths in this way.

It was already a dangerous business to move around at night in unknown territory with mines

or explosive charges, always expecting you would be discovered and you yourself blown sky-high or killed. You were always afraid setting off on these operations, with mortar fire often coming down without warning so that you had to throw yourself on the ground and find cover, mines and all. Many of our charges were prepared using Italian explosive which was packed in 40-kilogram boxes. You were afraid every time you were lugging one of these boxes around because just one enemy round on the box would have meant death for the entire squad. Much safer were our booby-traps, which were armed only after they had been laid and fitted with the fuze.

When you came back from an operation you threw yourself down on straw, still in full uniform and with your helmet on your head, to sleep at least a few hours in safety, despite continuous artillery fire.

The 25th of December passed somewhat more peacefully, though disruptive fire fell from time to time on the residential areas and outskirts of Ortona. Hope for a tacit understanding for a cease-fire on Christmas was to prove delusive. And yet we were to have a pleasant surprise. A motorcycle approached us, zig-zagging under shellfire, and dodging all obstacles got through to us. For the first time in days there was a hot meal: sausages, baked potatoes and vegetables, and white bread. And along with them came a bag of oranges and a small Christmas tree. It was wonderful that we had not been forgotten. Still, under these

Photo by T.F. Rouse. NAC PA 170291



A Canadian truck and jeep burning after being hit by German mortar shells, Ortona, Italy, 23 December 1943



Left: Canadian soldiers look at the body of a dead German in Ortona, 30 December 1943.

Below left: A Sherman tank of the Three Rivers Regiment rumbles into the main square of Ortona, 22 December 1943. The fury of the fighting is indicated by the wrecked buildings and the shell-perforated stand on the right.

Photo by T.F. Rourke, NAC PA 114033

infantry, could penetrate to the Piazza Municipio or Town Hall Square, and when the Seaforth Regiment took Via Tripoli we faced the prospect of being encircled. Apparently, a counterattack we had planned did not come off, the forces required to mount one being lacking.

There was also talk that there was a *Fuhrerbefehl* or personal order from Hitler that Ortona was to be held at all costs.

Slowly the stock of explosives and mines diminished because the supply line had long since stopped moving them forward. It was now clear that it would not be very long until the town, or rather what was left of it, would have to be given up. Enemy superiority in men and material was evidently inexhaustible and overwhelming. (If we had the *Panzerfaust* in 1943 it would have been [easy] to take enemy tanks under fire from the houses and destroy them.)

On 27 December, more of the same. Heavy shell fire, the ruins and rubble were once again rooted up by shells. Hardly a house was left undamaged and only walls remained standing. Towards evening in the vicinity of Via Tripoli we blew up some tramcars to create more obstacles. We now had only a few mines left.

As we were coming back again, we received the order to evacuate the town during the night. Towards 2230 hours, we noiselessly abandoned that landscape of ruins, accompanied by enemy disruptive fire.

After several hours march on foot we reached our trucks waiting for us on the coastal road. Tired, dusty and hungry, we reached our billet in the back country towards midnight. Our main desire: to sleep just for once without being shelled.



Photo by T.F. Rourke, NAC PA 114029

circumstances, there was no Christmas mood, the situation was so serious and dangerous.

Then on 26 December the enemy artillery began firing, and the northern part of the town, still in our hands, came under continuous shellfire; enemy guns fired on the town incessantly, many houses collapsed as if they had been hit by a giant's fist. Yellow and black clouds of smoke darkened the sky. Luckily for us, the enemy shells had a very sensitive impact fuze, most of them exploding as soon as they struck a roof tile.

When the enemy succeeded, in spite of the mountains of rubble, in seizing the Via Cavour, one of the main streets, the tanks, followed by