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Beyond the Consensus

1st Canadian Infantry Division at Agira, Sicily 24-28 July 1943

Grant N. Barry

In the dark of night on 24-25 July 1943 a platoon of Canadian infantry sits quietly on the second of three Axis-dominated ridges between the Sicilian towns of Nissoria and Agira. Engines noises break the silence of the night as three personnel transports roll up the highway between the towns. A finger tightens on the trigger of a Bren gun and bullets tear into the vehicles. Steady fire pours from the bushes and grenades splinter amongst the enemy soldiers. The night briefly returns to quiet before two more transports grind into view and again a finger tightens on the trigger of a Bren gun. These Axis troops were moving west to help stop the Canadian advance on Agira. Existing accounts assert that 2nd Battalion 104th Panzer Grenadier Regiment held these ridges and defeated 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade (1 CIB), yet this incident casts a different light on the situation. The 2nd Battalion actually formed the nucleus of a much larger force composed of many German and Italian units, all of which had to receive desperately needed reinforcements during battle, after 1 CIB hammered their lines in the first two days of the Canadian advance.

On 10 July 1943 the Allies launched Operation Husky, the invasion of Axis-held Sicily. Part of a grand strategy set at the Casablanca Conference in January, the undertaking was designed to erode German combat strength and help facilitate a cross-channel invasion of occupied France in 1944. Included in the operation was Major-

Abstract: From 24-28 July 1943, 1st Canadian Infantry Division attacked Axis forces deeply entrenched on three large ridges that stood between the Sicilian towns of Nissoria and Agira. To date, historians have suggested that 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade (1 CIB) failed in its attempt to unseat a small German delay force which guarded the ridges and Agira. However, the area was actually a formidable defensive position manned by many German and Italian units that were supported by armour and artillery, and continuously reinforced throughout the battle. By destroying enemy men and equipment and eroding morale, 1 CIB set the stage for the capture of Agira by 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade.

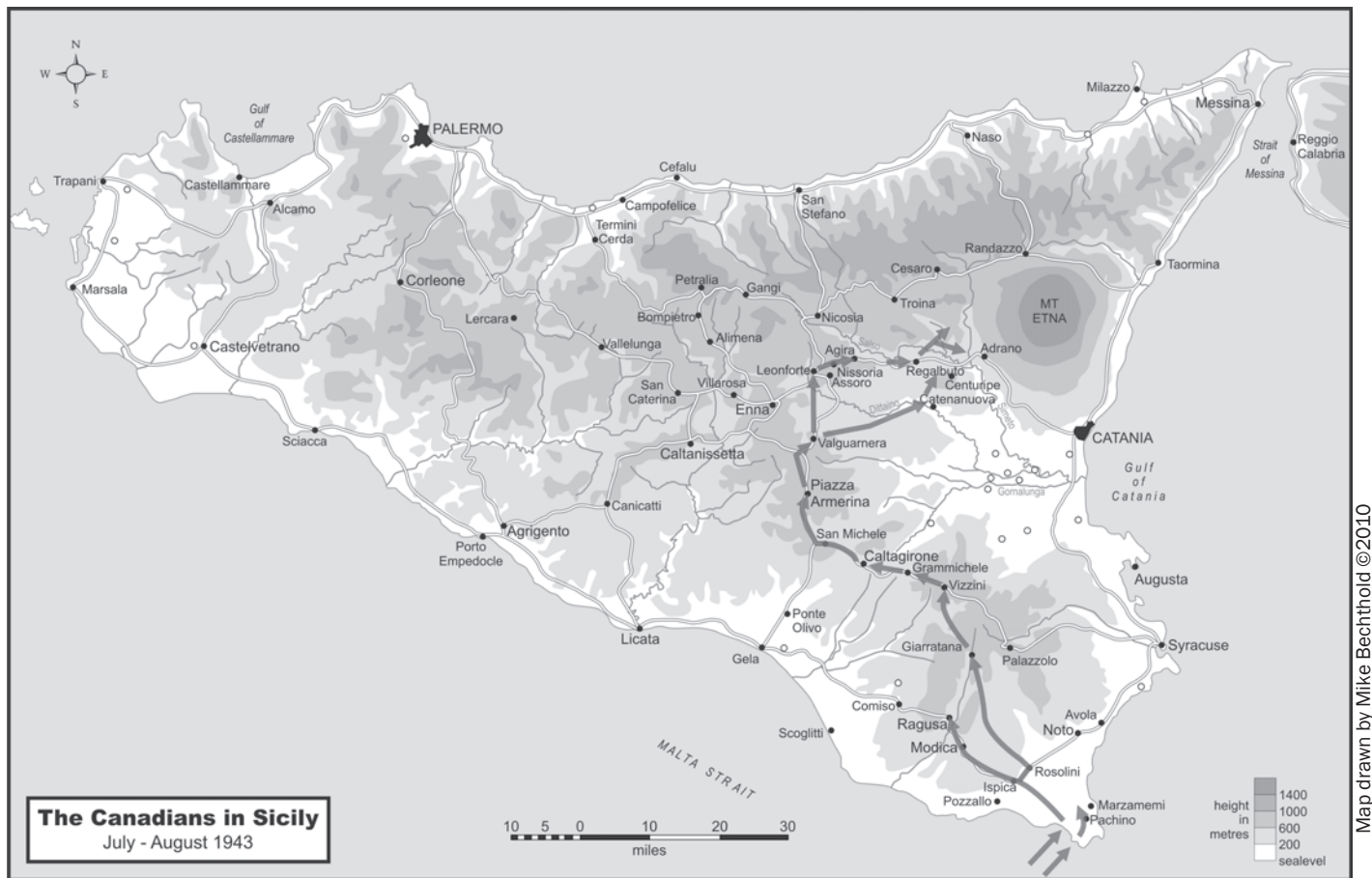
General Guy Simonds' 1st Canadian Infantry Division (1 CID) which fought through the island's rugged interior, unhinging the Axis' main line of resistance. Vital to enemy defences, the town of Agira in central Sicily controlled the roads and terrain ahead of 1 CID's eastward advance.

As the campaign began the Canadians formed the inland left flank of General Bernard Montgomery's British Eighth Army, which attacked northward along the east coast toward the city of Messina, adjacent to the straits bearing the same name.¹ The British raced north to the Catania Plains, a place historian Carlo D'Este contends quickly became "the most critical objective in Sicily." A breakthrough would leave Axis formations "vulnerable to a double envelopment from east and west."² As Germans poured into the region, British mobility waned.

Accordingly, 1 CID was ordered to penetrate the mountainous interior of central Sicily, pivot east and roll enemy defences toward the Catania Plains. Having already pushed 50 miles inland to Giarratana, on the night of 14-15 July 1 CID resumed its advance. The division moved northwest and dispatched German units attempting to hold transport junctions at Grammichele, Piazza Armerina and Valguarnera. By the evening of 22 July the Canadians consolidated on the lynchpin of Axis defences in Sicily: the Leonforte-Assoro massif. The Germans had enjoyed the luxury of fighting when and where they decided but now the enemy "dare not retire by bounds, nor could they risk manoeuvres; they were obliged to fight where they stood."³

While 1 CID captured Leonforte-Assoro Montgomery conceded that his army could not immediately penetrate the Catania Plains lest he incur tremendous casualties. On 21 July, he ordered his three British divisions to assume an aggressive defence while 1 CID continued "without restraint" toward Adrano, to break the enemy's lateral communications south of Mount Etna and hurry the collapse of the entire front. As a preliminary step, Major-General Simonds ordered 1 CID to capture Agira.⁴

Meanwhile, Brigadier Roy E. Urquhart's 231st Malta Brigade (231 MB) moved from Raddusa on 19 July to positions three miles south of Agira. On 20 July the brigade came



under Simonds' command and was ordered to hold until the Canadians consolidated Leonforte-Assoro and reached ground immediately west of Agira. On 20-21 July the Dorsetshire Regiment (Dorsets) probed 2nd Battalion 34th Italian Infantry Regiment, which guarded Agira together with elements of the Hermann Göring Division. Southwest, the Devonshire Regiment (Devons) discovered men from 15th Regiment 29th Panzer Grenadier Division.⁵ With the terrain well registered by enemy guns and the town heavily defended, the British formation needed a firm base for their operation.

On 21 July, 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade (3 CIB) arrived to support 231 MB near the Dittaino River. The next day the West Nova Scotia Regiment (WNSR) situated itself near the town of Libertinia. The Carleton and York Regiment deployed over territory from a crossing near Raddusa-Agira Station to an area three miles north of the dried watercourse and the Royal

22e Régiment dug in to the south.⁶ Meanwhile, preparations for the main attack continued.

As the crow flies, Agira is eight miles from Leonforte and it was estimated that delaying forces might resist in between. Experience showed the enemy preferred to defend mountaintop towns, and "because it was overlooked from the high ground to west and east" the small town of Nissoria positioned en route seemed unsuitable.⁷ On 22 July, Simonds ordered 1 CIB to move on Agira with one battalion up and the full weight of the Royal Canadian Artillery (RCA) in support; 231 MB would attack simultaneously from the south.⁸

The 48th Highlanders of Canada (Highlanders) marched north from Assoro on 22-23 July to the intersection of Highways 121 and 117 east of Leonforte. They unknowingly crossed the front of a German force lying to the south and several hours of intense combat ensued as the Highlanders pulled

back, reorganized, and overpowered the enemy.⁹ The melee forced the postponement of the main advance until 24 July although 231 MB captured Points 533 and 482 astride the road leading north to Agira.¹⁰ The British patiently laid low and units from 3 CIB patrolled to their south.

By late afternoon 23 July the WNSR had destroyed German observation posts and machine gun nests, taking two prisoners from the Hermann Göring Division. Later the WNSR described suspicious movement to their front, confirmed at 1923 hours by the Royal 22e Régiment who "reported guns and motorized transport going north" toward the highway.¹¹ As 3 CIB monitored the movement of Axis troops, 1 CIB readied to attack Agira from the west.

The RCA, along with British regiments and air support, would neutralize predetermined targets between Nissoria and Agira. Five field and two medium regiments were ready to lay down shells while a squadron of tanks from 12th

Canadian Armoured Regiment (Three Rivers) would add mobile firepower. The Royal Canadian Army Service Corps reported that 43 trucks were driving 25-pounder ammunition to the front for nearly 22 hours a day, which gives some indication of the intensity of the fire support planned.¹² These preparations have been well documented by historians but the composition of enemy forces has received a less thorough examination.

Existing histories name 2nd Battalion 104th Panzer Grenadier Regiment as the key enemy on the Agira battlefield, with 1st Battalion 15th Panzer Grenadier Regiment defending the town itself.¹³ However, intelligence showed significant numbers of the 104th Regiment's 1st and 3rd Battalions, those who had barely escaped Leonforte, were present too. By 23 July 3rd Battalion 33rd Italian Infantry Regiment was in the area along with 2nd Battalion 34th Regiment whom the Dorsets had already encountered. In addition to the many terrifying 88s the Germans had on hand, the Italian 28th Artillery Regiment brought 75 mm guns and 20 mm anti-aircraft guns to bear, along with several detachments from mortar and anti-tank battalions.¹⁴ The main defence nucleus was much greater than previously acknowledged and this, along with the area's harsh terrain, gave the enemy the advantage of concentrating his forces to maximum effect throughout the battle. Lieutenant-Colonel Ralph Crowe's Royal Canadian Regiment (RCR) soon realized this when they led 1 CIB toward Agira on 24 July.

The RCR was hardened after two weeks of Sicilian combat and, as evidenced by the battalion's war

diary, was confident in the divisional plan:

The feature [Agira] is deemed so important to gain that the Battalion, which is leading the Brigade will be supported by the complete Divisional Artillery, plus ninety bombers, plus more than a hundred fighter-bombers in close support. It is a set piece attack, with a timed artillery program, report lines, bells, train whistles and all the trimmings. The start line is three miles West of Nissoria...Reports have been fairly vague as to enemy dispositions, but it is felt that the support will be so overwhelming that resistance before Agira will be slight.¹⁵

At 1500 hours on 24 July Canadian and British guns targeted the ground between Leonforte and Agira. "C" and "D" Companies of the RCR marched through Nissoria behind a creeping smoke barrage. Battalion headquarters reported little resistance as the Saskatoon Light Infantry (SLI) "provided some excellent fire support during the move through town."¹⁶ However, at 1615 hours the RCR received a hostile reaction as they left the relative shelter of the town. The enemy was dug in on a ridge code-named "Lion" that crossed Highway 121 a half mile to the east.

It is important here to consider existing interpretations of this battle



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Top right: Italian wagons sit abandoned by the side of a Sicilian road.

Bottom right: A Sicilian shepherd guides his flock of goats past a knocked out German tank.

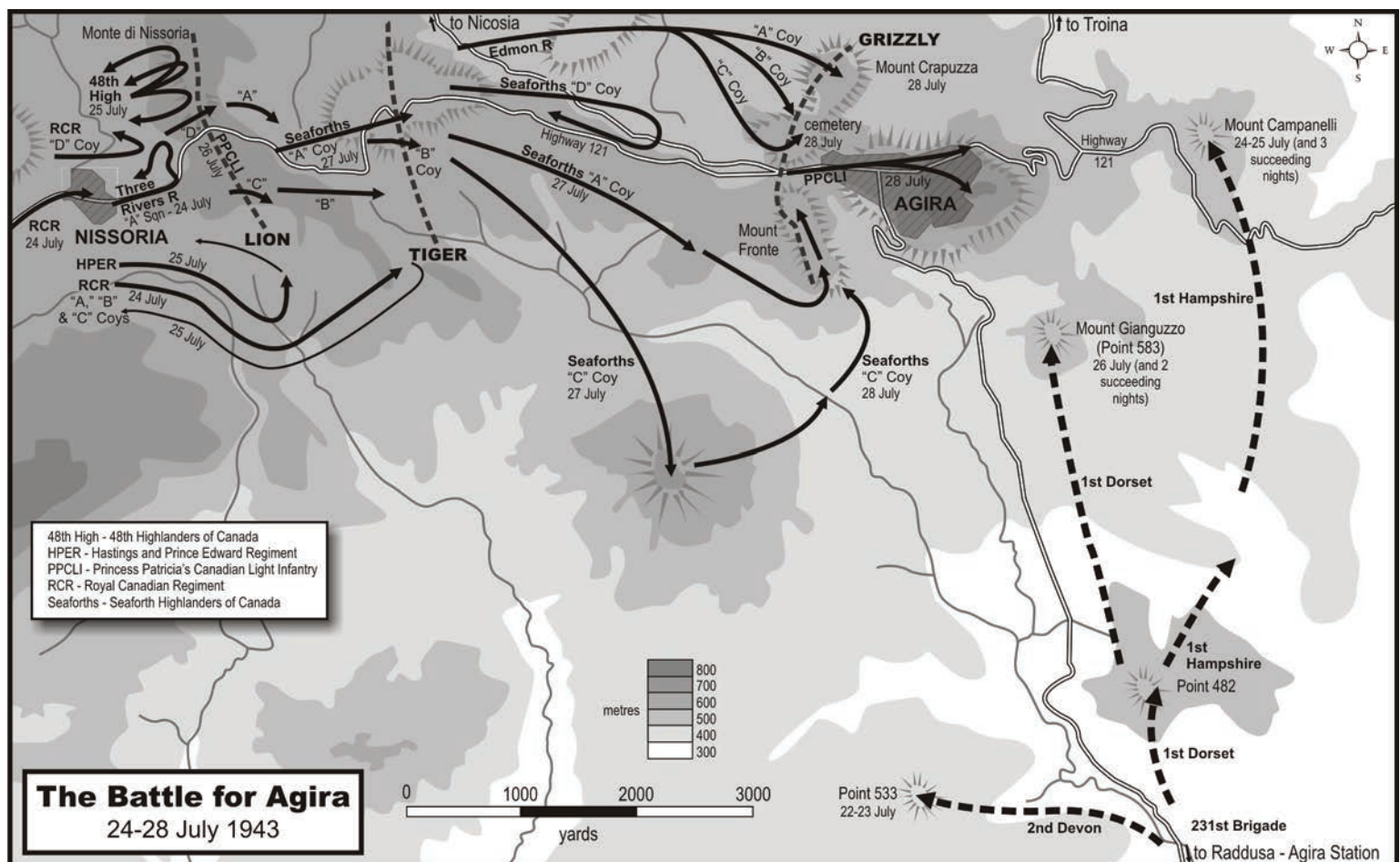
and the perception that 1 CIB failed. Historian and veteran of the battle Kim Beattie suggested that "Lion" was the brigade's "most bitter and fruitless fight in Sicily."¹⁷ The fighting was difficult but the efforts were hardly fruitless. As John Strawson indicated in *The Italian Campaign*, "grinding down the Axis strength" was the "proper strategic concept" used by the Allies in 1943.¹⁸ It was accomplished here with devastating results.

Sherman tanks from the Three Rivers supported the RCR's "C" Company near the edge of town. Rugged terrain made the tanks road bound and further advance proved impossible on the well-registered route; one Sherman was hit seven times in succession. Undaunted, the Canadian tankers returned accurate fire and knocked out a trio of Mark III tanks, destroyed three heavy guns and eliminated scores of Axis soldiers.¹⁹ The infantry continued to fight ahead.

Captain C.H. Lithgow led "D" Company of the RCR through a gully behind Nissoria and up the ridge toward a red casa 50 yards north of Highway 121. To the southeast "C" Company exchanged fire with the enemy. Confusion reigned as communications failed because the "18 sets were out of range" and malfunctioning in the hilly country.²⁰ The assault disintegrated into isolated skirmishes and Lieutenant-Colonel Crowe sent "A" and "B" Companies on a deep right flanking manoeuvre at 1700 hours, which actually brought them to the second enemy-held ridge ("Tiger") one mile further east. "C" Company escaped the gauntlet of mortar fire at "Lion" and crept southeast to join "A" and "B" Companies.²¹ Attempting to find the scattered battalion, Crowe and his tactical headquarters party clambered atop "Lion" but were cut down by German machine guns. Most were wounded, while Crowe was killed.

Covered by accurate mortar fire, a company of Grenadiers counterattacked Captain Lithgow's "D" Company at the red casa, forcing their withdrawal back to Nissoria. With the remaining elements of "A" Company they reorganized and tried attacking further north of the road but "the strength of the enemy position was unmistakable."²² Unable to contact the better part of the RCR and with darkness having fallen, Major-General Simonds ordered the offensive maintained. The Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment (Hastings) attacked later that night.

As the RCR fought, a pair of companies from the Hampshire Regiment of 231 MB occupied the Campanelli feature north of Highway 121, cutting the roads from Agira that led north to Troina and east to Regalbuto. The rest of the battalion lay in the hills to the southeast.²³ If 1 CIB did not reach Agira before first light the British would be forced to



Soldiers of the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry pass a Sherman tank of the Three Rivers Regiment in Sicily, 19 July 1943.

withdraw from their position because it was commanded by the town itself.

The Hastings crept through Nissoria and onto the front just before midnight 24-25 July. "B" Company led the battalion up "Lion" and accidentally stumbled into enemy positions but the men acted quickly by decimating forward machine gun posts, "killing a number of Germans and capturing others." The Hastings persisted as Axis artillery and mortars screamed down for hours, but at 0540 hours 1 CIB radioed divisional headquarters to report: "We are on ridge east of first town unable to get any further."²⁴

Twenty minutes later 231 MB reaffirmed their hold on Campanelli near Agira.²⁵ Moments later radio communications between Canadian units failed again as numerous machine guns stitched the Hastings and three German tanks entered the fray. The second-in-command, Major A.A. Kennedy, raced to the rear to request immediate artillery support but the now-wounded commander, Major John Tweedsmuir, ordered a withdrawal as daylight revealed his men. Behind Agira "A" and "B" Companies of the Hampshires hid amongst the scrub and brush on the Campanelli feature as the rest of the battalion retired south.

The enemy retained his grip on the hills past Nissoria but his strength was being rapidly depleted. Many historians highlight the casualties suffered by the Hastings (five officers and 75 other ranks) as apparent justification to describe the attack as abortive. Yet they neglect the Hastings' war diary assessment that "casualties to the enemy were greater than those sustained by ourselves, which considering that they were in



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a commanding position, speaks well for the determination and coolness of our own troops."²⁶ Interestingly, the attack seems to have also created a situation where the RCR, still isolated near the front, could inflict casualties on the enemy.

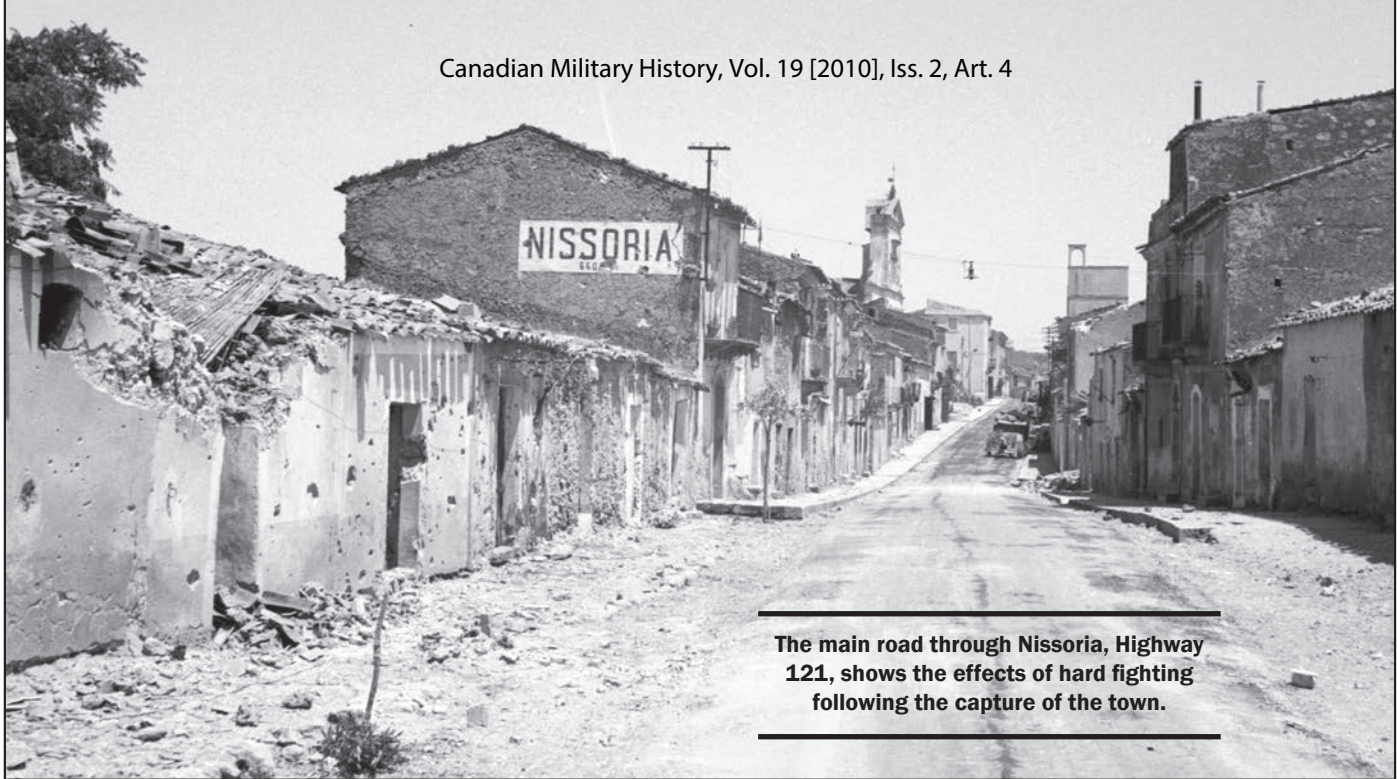
After skirting their units past "Lion" on the evening of 24 July, Captains Galloway, Hodson and Liddell of the RCR determined that "having absolutely no communication" with their commander or artillery they would hold defensive positions for the night.²⁷ Historian William McAndrew laments that "ironically, the only element lacking for a clear victory was a clear mission for the three companies behind the Germans." There was a good reason for this state of affairs. "[T]he efficiency of a command system is defined by the rapidity of the flow of information," and in this situation communications were crippled.²⁸ Instead, the RCR took advantage of an opportunity.

As the Hastings renewed pressure at "Lion" enemy reinforcements moved west from Agira. Three trucks carrying Grenadiers drove past the RCR on "Tiger" and No.13

Platoon of "C" Company opened fire, killing most of the passengers. Two more trucks soon met the same fate. Although enemy tanks eventually forced their withdrawal, it seems likely the platoon caused more damage to the enemy than the 47 casualties taken by the whole battalion during the battle. Daniel Dancocks claims when no one knew what happened to the RCR by evening it was clear their "attack had not succeeded." However, No.13 Platoon's achievement proved otherwise.²⁹

The Hastings' attack also garnered valuable intelligence. Division confirmed at 0853 hours 25 July that two prisoners captured during the assault belonged to the German 2nd Light Anti-Aircraft Battalion, elements of which were dug in on "Lion." According to later intelligence summaries, two platoons of this battalion were operating in the vicinity of Nissoria; one with its 20 mm cannons, the other as infantry.³⁰ Axis desperation was becoming clear.

With the delays at "Lion," two companies of the Hampshires remained on the Campanelli feature near Agira at dawn on 25 July. Though



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The main road through Nissoria, Highway 121, shows the effects of hard fighting following the capture of the town.

initially unnoticed, enemy patrols soon approached their positions and by mid-afternoon had launched a fierce counterattack supported by artillery. The British "held on among the vines and prickly pears until withdrawn on the evening of the 25th."³¹ Hours later they stole across Highway 121 and regained positions covering the north and east roads from Agira. To the west the Canadian assault continued.

The Canadian attack was renewed by Lieutenant-Colonel Ian Johnston's 48th Highlanders. In the late morning of 25 July daring patrols probed the highest, northernmost part of "Lion" known as Monte di Nissoria. A patrol led by Captain Ian Wallace blasted a German party ensconced behind a boulder-strewn ridge with automatic and rifle fire, "killing four and returning with valuable information." German tanks were dug in on the heights and more men of 2nd Light Anti-Aircraft Battalion were present.³²

As the 48th Highlanders patrolled, the RCR was located but recalled to Nissoria by 1100 hours to avoid suffering casualties from their own artillery in the coming attack. Some have argued that the RCR position should have been reinforced

but with some consideration this idea rings hollow. Support weapons could not be employed due to the terrain and radio blackout. Also, the men were worn out after a long day of fighting and the position grew untenable once a German force returned. As dawn broke on 25 July, the enemy "were able to overlook [the RCR] position and inflict some casualties with mortar and machine gun fire." As historian Mark Zuehlke cautions, "you can only ask so much of even the best soldiers."³³

At 1800 hours on 25 July the 48th Highlanders set off for Monte di Nissoria as the SLI hit the position with thunderous fire from their 4.2-inch heavy mortars. The support group "evidently did a good job... and inflicted a great number of casualties" on the defenders.³⁴ While the Highlanders' "A" Company provided covering fire Major Don Banton's "D" Company trailed an artillery barrage toward the rocky shelf. If Banton reached the objective Captain Bob Lyon's "B" Company would tackle a less elevated part of the ridge to the right. The companies would then overlook the enemy stronghold near the red casa.³⁵ Moving through heavy fire "D" Company reached the crest by

scaling numerous terraces shrouded in tangled vegetation. Suddenly, enfilading machine gun fire erupted to their left.

"B" Company moved to overrun the lethal machine guns but enemy mortars bracketed the exposed men. Four Mark IV tanks opened up on the Canadians and steep terrain prevented the Three Rivers from answering effectively. The 1st Canadian Anti-Tank Regiment's war diary reported that the ground beyond Nissoria was "poor country for anti-tank guns except defensively" and Axis units took full advantage.³⁶ Lieutenant-Colonel Johnston's link to 1 CIB was out, as was the artillery forward observation officer's radio connection with his 25-pounders. Incredibly, some 48th Highlanders still reached their objective.

While "B" and "D" Companies continued to struggle near the crest of Monte di Nissoria, "C" Company crashed into enemy positions closer to the highway. Attacking right of the earlier thrust, Captain Ian Wallace intended on holding the ground near the red casa. The company set out at 2300 hours on a series of meandering goat paths. Their arrival atop "Lion" was welcomed by the muzzles of two Mark IV tanks which forced the

men back below the crest. However, brigade received a brief report that men were on the objective "but having a very hard time."³⁷ Perhaps overestimating the size of Wallace's contingent, the enemy withdrew before dawn allowing "C" Company to dig in; they would only stay briefly.

By 0700 hours 25 July the 48th Highlanders were winding their way back to Nissoria. Historian

overlooking them.³⁹ East of Agira the Hampshires withdrew to positions south of Highway 121.

The opening phase of the battle for Agira is a complex and misunderstood event. Historians are critical of 1 CIB's role and often refer to this part of the assault as a defeat. Dominick Graham, Major-General Simonds' biographer, scoffed that it was a classic example of committing

"D" Company from the RCR (the only unit to return by that time) was checked along the northern edge of the highway. The Highlanders moved well north and, when blocked on the left flank, "C" Company advanced closer to the highway. Together these efforts eased the way for 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade (2 CIB).

The reconnaissance-in-force



A Canadian 25-pounder near Nissoria fires at enemy targets on the night of 27 July 1943.

Hugh Pond states that "neither Brigade nor Divisional headquarters would believe ["C" Company]," and this reflects the Highlanders' regimental history that concluded brigade "would not put credence in the report that the area of major resistance around Nissoria was clear."³⁸ The decision to pull back was likely a result of the situation along the Highlanders' *entire* front, and the enemy to the north remained resolute.

With Monte di Nissoria protected by German tanks and Axis guns, which dominated most of "Lion," the Canadians below were stalked by the enemy and forced to withdraw. "C" Company did the same lest they remain near the casa with exposed flanks and an alert enemy

troops piecemeal, while Kim Beattie suggested that "Nissoria had beaten each of the three battalions in turn." Nicholson dubbed the attack a "reverse" and Mark Zuehlke labels the first attempt to seize Agira an "abject failure."⁴⁰ To date, historians do not appreciate the formation's role in the battle, possibly because they fail to see the larger context of this effort.

Some have suggested that Brigadier Graham's three assaults were identical. Pond charges that Graham reinforced failure with "head-on war, using bludgeons; no finesse."⁴¹ However, 1 CIB actually probed several areas of the front because enemy strength and locations were unknown. The Hastings attacked south of Highway 121 after

began to reveal that the area west of Agira was the most heavily defended ground the Canadians would take in Sicily. Although 1 CIB could not hold this ground, they made vital contributions to the larger battle by destroying enemy men and equipment and eroding morale. They damaged 2nd Battalion 104th Panzer Grenadier Regiment so badly that 1st Battalion and two companies from 6th Italian Infantry Regiment (28th Aosta Division) were rushed south from Nicosia on 26 July.⁴² Axis forces were utterly ravaged and the enemy would be given no quarter.

Major-General Simonds ordered Brigadier Chris Vokes' 2 CIB to relieve 1 CIB and renew the attack. Infantry and supporting arms would be deployed in greater strength,



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Padre Stewart East of the 48th Highlanders pauses by the side of the road near Regalbuto to have a word with some of his men.

Agira. Support was provided by the 90th Anti-Tank Battery, 54th Light Anti-Aircraft Battery, and "C" Squadron of the Three Rivers.⁴⁷ As the two battalions fought, the brigade's third unit was tasked with covering the left flank.

Since 24 July the Loyal Edmonton Regiment (Loyal Eddies) was actively patrolling north of Nissoria between Highway 117 to the west and the Nicosia-Agira roadway to the east. As the US Seventh Army swung parallel with 1 CID to attack Nicosia, "active liaison was carried out between the two forces" and a number of enemy targets were engaged by the artillery. On 26 July, for example, ten enemy vehicles and a tank were destroyed on the Nicosia-Agira road and Canadian guns forced the surrender of 90 Italians whom American forces corralled.⁴⁸ Meanwhile, as 2 CIB fought past Nissoria, 231 MB cut Highway 121 east of Agira again.

As thousands of shells fell on enemy lines on the evening of 26 July, the Hampshires closed around Agira. They gained Point 583 southeast of town and the Campanelli feature to the north. Unfortunately they lost their hold at dawn and informed the Seaforths that they "had been thrown back off the road on the east side of town."⁴⁹ The enemy still enjoyed free movement about town though he scarcely clung to the ridges further west.

Before the PPCLI moved out devastating artillery fire cut a mile-wide path through the battlefield. The SLI joined the cacophony of the night by hemming "Lion" with their Vickers machine guns and blanketing the area with high explosive from their 4.2-inch heavy mortars. At 2017 hours 26 July "C" and "D" Companies attacked. Once through

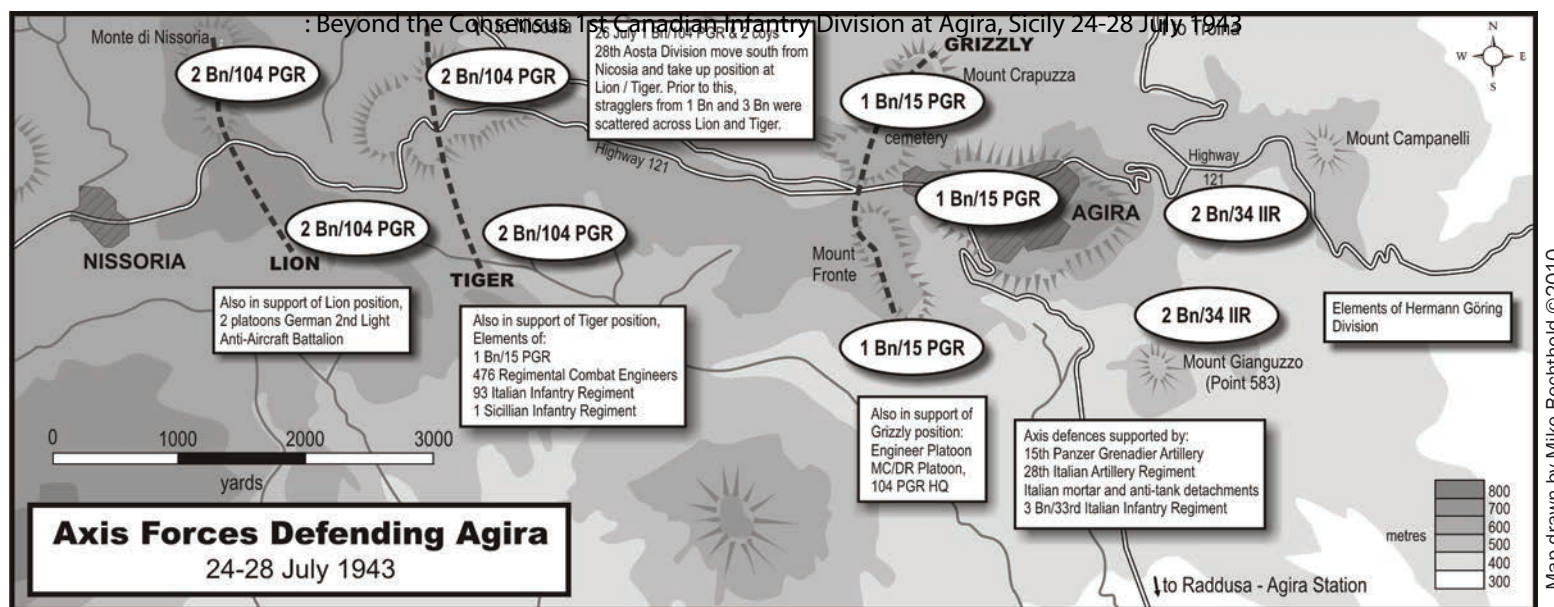
along with a more powerful and concentrated barrage that doubled the number of shells previously fired.⁴³ Brigade Major P.R. Bingham stressed that "success in the attack, depends on aggressive action, with a very quick follow-up, both of our own supporting fire and the retreating enemy." He added it was essential to "find the Hun, hit him and keep hitting him."⁴⁴ The enemy could now be located more easily and hit due to the work of 1 CIB.

On the afternoon of 26 July Brigadier Graham recounted his brigade's experience beyond Nissoria to Brigadier Vokes. The latest information from the Highlanders indicated that strong hostile positions were further east than originally thought. Graham added that artillery concentrations did not shake the defenders off the reverse slope of Monte di Nissoria and enemy machine gun posts had moved regularly. The brigadier supported Colonel Ian Johnston's suggestion that a thrust down the right flank of the battlefield where Highway 121 cut across the ridge should provide the best venue for success.⁴⁵ Though valuable, this information could not prevent the enemy from reinforcing his lines, nor could it ensure Canadian radios would work.

As the 48th Highlanders returned from the front on the morning of 25

July 30,000 shells were already being trucked to British and Canadian guns. The war diary of the 3rd Field Regiment, RCA noted: "At 1300 hours [26 July] 2 Canadian Infantry Brigade relieved 1 Canadian Infantry Brigade in and around Nissoria, and plans were made for a big attack to start at 2000 hours. Orders were received by this regiment to dump 400 rounds per gun in preparation for the biggest barrage yet attempted by Divisional Artillery." Targets were pre-selected before but now "the artillery plan was for two minutes intense fire on the start line west of Nissoria, followed by a fifteen minute concentration, followed in turn by sixteen 100 yard lifts at three minute intervals." The barrage would then stop for 20 minutes, allowing the second wave of the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (PPCLI) to pass "Lion" and advance with the next phase of the fire plan at 2130 hours. Shelling would resume as 12 100 yard lifts rumbled east to the reverse slope of "Tiger."⁴⁶ The fire plan was impressive but success depended on the infantry.

The PPCLI were ordered to secure a firm base extending 2,300 yards past Nissoria by capturing "Lion" then moving onto "Tiger." The Seaforth Highlanders of Canada (Seaforths) would then take the "Grizzly" line of defence closest to



Nissoria's streets "D" Company was hit by three machine guns along the highway. By 2040 hours one machine gun was silenced and Nos. 17 and 18 Platoons reached the ridge.⁵⁰

The barrage was "reported by the infantry to be perfect" and in front of "C" Company the claim was well supported. On the southern end of "Lion" "the enemy were so demoralized by the shelling" that 15 soldiers surrendered instantly and others were soon persuaded by bayonet. Additionally, nine light machine guns were found abandoned.⁵¹ Proper consolidation of the ridge proved taxing though.

At 2130 hours "C" and "D" Companies requested armoured support as enemy guns tested their flank. The road beyond Nissoria was not secured and the Shermans moved forward with great difficulty. The PPCLI's anti-tank platoon, along with some divisional 17-pounders, was later moved to the ridge although sighting the guns in the dark was nearly impossible. As mortars and machine guns harassed them "D" Company dug in 300 yards from the enemy. For "C" Company the onset of night led to "a spirited grenade and tommy-gun fight."⁵²

According to plan the artillery paused but "A" and "B" Companies became lost in the dark and could not close quickly. Undaunted, "B" Company moved along the southern

flank of the highway within 400 yards of "Tiger" at 2200 hours. Ten minutes later they gained another 100 yards and radioed that their assault was "proceeding well," evidently helped by the artillery. A captured German officer proclaimed that during service in Poland, France, Russia and North Africa "he had never experienced a barrage like that." Axis units on "Tiger" suffered 40 percent casualties and survivors were still groggy after the barrage ceased. Prisoners indicated the state of 1st and 2nd Battalions 104th Panzer Grenadier Regiment was growing perilous. Combat engineers from the 476th Regiment and infantry from 1st Battalion 15th Panzer Grenadier Regiment were thrown into the line, along with members of 93rd Italian and 1st Sicilian Infantry Regiments.⁵³ These forces continued to resist.

As the PPCLI's "C" and "D" Companies hunted for concealed machine guns around "Lion" trouble emerged to their rear. A company of grenadiers and a number of Italians attacked from Monte di Nissoria, attempting to unseat the PPCLI. With a high percentage of automatic weapons the enemy harassed the rear and flank of "D" Company as Italian artillery officers called down shells.⁵⁴ The PPCLI checked the bitter attack and cleared the ridge, allowing Three Rivers' tanks to take up positions north of Highway 121 on the reverse

slope of "Lion." From here the armour took "intense hostile machine gun fire" while they provided vital support to the infantry in the valley below. Some optimistic radio reports filtered back but the situation at the front remained uncertain.

Brigadier Chris Vokes and his staff were unsure of the PPCLI's exact status on either ridge but the Seaforths were ready. Eager to maintain momentum Vokes "decided to commit the second battalion for the exploitation task in the hope that aggressive action would clear up the situation in the PPCLI's area."⁵⁵ Early on 27 July Lieutenant-Colonel Bert Hoffmeister's Seaforths moved out, quickly coming upon "C" and "D" Companies of the PPCLI fighting on "Lion." The Seaforths moved past at 0340 hours, pushed through heavy machine gun fire and closed on "Tiger" one hour later.⁵⁶ When they reached the second ridge "A" Company was fiercely engaged by infantry, tanks and heavy guns.

With dawn breaking on 27 July the Seaforth's "A" Company was pinned down near the southern edge the highway, unable to destroy a trio of German tanks. They were joined on their right flank by "B" Company and anti-tank guns were soon wrestled up to eliminate the armoured threat. At 0600 hours the Seaforths reported they were on "Tiger" and in contact with the PPCLI



The smoke in the distance marks targets being attacked on GRIZZLY by the Desert Air Force during the battle for Agira. This photo, taken from TIGER, shows the flat-topped Monte Fronte to the right; the heights of Agira to the right of centre; and the lower dome of Monte Crapuzza visible through the smoke to the left.

but all units were progressing slowly due to heavy machine gun fire. Still, the battalions were grinding down the enemy.

At sunrise on 27 July the effectiveness of the assault became sharply apparent. Between "Lion" and "Tiger" enemy dead lay scattered amongst discarded weapons, ammunition belts and unopened rations. Axis armour and vehicles, smashed by artillery, were scattered like coals from a fire. When Canadian soldiers moved forward they passed a Mark IV tank with "the turret blown right off and all the rubber burnt off the tracks and bogies."⁵⁷ Groups of prisoners were escorted back to Nissoria, further confirming the success of the advance.

Brigadier Vokes did all he could to direct the attack although broken communications made battlefield management challenging. Messages were relayed to the Seaforths by "A" and "B" Companies of the PPCLI. At 0715 hours Vokes boomed over the radio: "Tell the Seaforth of Canada to get cracking and you form a firm base behind him."⁵⁸ With help from armour and artillery the battalions did exactly that. The Three Rivers' tanks, now positioned between "Lion" and "Tiger," sat quietly at dawn then stealthily destroyed "enemy anti-tank guns and machine

guns as soon as they divulged their positions by firing." Artillery was called down and the remains of Axis forces encamped on the ridge were ravaged.⁵⁹ "Tiger" was firmly in Canadian hands by 1100 hours 27 July.

The Seaforths now benefited from an excellent view of "Grizzly," the final line of resistance before Agira. Fire from small arms and the Vickers machine guns of the SLI slashed through the valley east of "Tiger." The Three Rivers quickly weighed in and disabled four German tanks and a considerable number of vehicles.⁶⁰ The Seaforth's artillery forward observation officer identified targets throughout the day and the very accurate fire scattered the enemy in the valley. Prisoners reported that 1st Battalion 104th Panzer Grenadier Regiment was wiped out and 1st Battalion 15th Panzer Grenadier Regiment would fight to the last man.⁶¹ The Canadians maintained pressure across the front including the area north of Highway 121 where the Loyal Eddies were fighting.

A platoon from the Loyal Eddies' "D" Company cut the road leading north to Nicosia on the afternoon of 26 July. By the time "Tiger" was consolidated on 27 July this force had destroyed three tanks, four vehicles and a tank conveyor. Traffic

on the road was so heavy that two platoons from "C" Company came to reinforce the position. Later, when the assault on "Grizzly" began, enemy movement on the road increased and the Loyal Eddies knocked out three more tanks at 1739 hours before another four joined the fray and forced a withdrawal.⁶²

Most of the enemy west of Agira on 27 July were positioned atop two menacing features astride Highway 121. Monte Fronte, a box-shaped plateau, 300 feet above the surrounding terrain and 900 yards in length, stretched south of the roadway creating a strong left flank for the Axis. To the north, Cemetery Hill and Monte Crapuzza commanded both the Nissoria and Nicosia roadways. Lieutenant-Colonel Hoffmeister sent "D" Company of the Seaforths against the wooded hills north of the highway while "A" Company departed for Monte Fronte.⁶³

A heavy concentration of shells rocked "Grizzly" for 15 minutes while two platoons of Vickers machine guns and a platoon of 4.2-inch mortars softened the enemy before the infantry advanced at 1415 hours.⁶⁴ South of the highway "A" Company met a wave of hostile fire but continued to press the attack. Two troops from the Three Rivers accompanied the infantry and caused

"great havoc among enemy machine gun positions."⁶⁵ However, the enemy responded with a high rate of fire, thus necessitating a flanking manoeuvre by the Seaforths.

Because of Monte Fronte's precipitous western face Major Budge Bell-Irving directed "A" Company south. Terraced vineyards and orchards were traversed by several sunken tracks which "produced excellent cover and allowed immediate and rapid progress." No.8 Platoon closed to the base of the hill and held the enemy's attention. Their shooting was so effective that several men gained the top of the cliff, destroyed a machine gun nest and took two prisoners.⁶⁶ The feint held the enemy in check and at 1500 hours the rest of "A" Company hiked southeast toward the rear of the position.

With complete tactical surprise "A" Company scaled the unguarded southern end of "Grizzly." After establishing a foothold along a rocky ridge that crossed the plateau diagonally, and around a casa that provided protective cover, Bell-Irving reported at 1547 hours that his men were directly overlooking the enemy. At 1558 hours Canadian guns roared into action and targeted the enemy at the northern end of the plateau for 30 minutes. At 1722 hours the Seaforths

reorganized on "Grizzly" and waited for reinforcements while resisting enemy attacks.⁶⁷ Dusk brought relief from enemy machine gun fire but radio communications broke and "A" Company was left isolated.

In response to "A" Company's last call for reinforcements Lieutenant-Colonel Hoffmeister ordered "B" and "C" Companies of the Seaforths to attack. At 1800 hours they threaded through orchards and vineyards on universal carriers. As the units went forward Hoffmeister ordered the withdrawal of "D" Company to the north. Meanwhile, 1 CID reported that 100 of the enemy were dead and 200 wounded; 100 Italians and 40 Germans were captured.⁶⁸

When "D" Company's attack struggled below the enemy infested hills commanding Highway 121 from the north, Hoffmeister knew not to stretch his battalion thin. "The situation became confused, but it was clear" that the Seaforths could not take all of "Grizzly" alone. Accordingly, the Loyal Eddies' "A," "B" and "D" Companies (minus one platoon) passed through Seaforth positions near the northern end of "Grizzly" at 1900 hours.⁶⁹ At 2050 hours the hills surrounding the graveyard trembled from artillery fire before the Loyal Eddies moved out at 2100 hours.⁷⁰ Shortly before,

however, the enemy on Monte Fronte counterattacked the Seaforths.

As "B" and "C" Companies of the Seaforths arrived on carriers from the west they were bracketed with mortars and forced to slip through the dark on foot toward the rocky crag. Enemy machine gun and mortar fire pinned "B" Company in the rolling terrain west of Monte Fronte at 2020 hours. No.15 Platoon of "C" Company returned fire from a small knoll southwest of "Grizzly," hoping to cover the movement of No.14 Platoon to their right.⁷¹ Machine gun fire and rough terrain slowed all advances; "A" Company remained isolated.

At midnight 27-28 July a counterattack probed the area around the casa on Monte Fronte held by "A" Company's Nos.8 and 9 Platoons. Mortar and machine gun fire came down over the Seaforths. "The company's limited supply of ammunition permitted only restricted defensive fire, but the Hun quickly shut up and went to bed."⁷² The battle along the Seaforth's front ebbed but action in the Loyal Eddies' sector exploded.

After attacking in two thrusts the Loyal Eddies became embroiled in fighting that continued relentlessly until dawn on 28 July. At the northern end of "Tiger," "A" Company

Sherman tanks of the Three Rivers Regiment raise clouds of dust as they move through the Dittaino River Valley.



snatched the undefended Monte Crapuzza. To the south "B" and "D" Companies had difficulty clearing the cemetery as the enemy replied with mortars, heavy machine guns, rifle-grenades and a wealth of small arms. Division later reported the capture of 20 mm anti-aircraft guns from the 28th Artillery Regiment which helped explain the intense fire. The Loyal Eddies braved the onslaught and some actually reached Agira's streets by 0230 hours, but the salient was eventually pushed back and the battle for the cemetery continued unabated.⁷³

By sunrise on 28 July the contest on the steep hills degenerated into savage hand to hand fighting. "It was not until the enemy were engaged with the bayonet," says the Loyal Eddies' war diary, "that the situation began to clarify itself." While "A" Company shot into the enemy flank "B" and "D" Companies surged forward between 0530 and 0600 hours.⁷⁴ The defenders were routed and the few survivors disappeared over the hills.

Just before the Loyal Eddies' final push, part of the Seaforths' "A" Company on Monte Fronte was again hit by a strong mortar barrage, heavy machine gun fire and a volley of grenades at 0500 hours. Nos. 8 and 9 Platoons led by Lieutenant Harling displayed magnificent fortitude and fire discipline, eventually breaking the assault with their own hail of grenades. Having struggled through the night to reach them, Lieutenant McLean and No. 14 Platoon of "C" Company arrived at 0545 hours, just as Harling's counterattack took shape.⁷⁵ Together they shattered the enemy's tenuous hold on "Grizzly" within 15 minutes. Motorcycle dispatch riders and engineers from 104th Panzer Grenadier Regiment's headquarters were found fighting as regular infantry. A dozen prisoners from 1st Battalion 15th Panzer Grenadier Regiment were netted, including "a medical orderly loaded down with ammunition."⁷⁶ Such desperate measures would not stop the Canadian advance.

The rest of the Seaforth's "C" and "B" Companies moved to hold Monte Fronte and the Loyal Eddies consolidated the cemetery. At 0850 hours "Grizzly" was in Canadian hands and nearly all the enemy killed. Vokes' men had collected over 215 prisoners since the evening of 26 July and it was probable that enemy wounded numbered in the hundreds. There were over 150 dead, even without figures from the Loyal Eddies' sector.⁷⁷

While the Canadians pressed the western edge of Agira, 231 MB again seized the Campanelli feature near town, cutting the roads north and east. In doing so the Devons' "C" Company noted "more Germans were killed than were taken prisoner" and "D" Company of the Dorsets also achieved effective results. Their attack was launched so quickly that 80 Italians had no choice but to surrender.⁷⁸ With the exits cut, 2 CIB was set to clear Agira.

Brigadier Vokes quickly "planned an attack supported by all available Artillery, and Mortars in the Brigade." At 1330 hours 28 July a forward observation officer from 1st Field Regiment, RCA "who had entered the town by mistake came back and reported that he had seen no Germans."⁷⁹ Patrols from the PPCLI went forward to investigate and the claim appeared accurate. "A" and "B" Companies marched in without a barrage but were caught by machine guns after 300 yards. Resistance lasted until almost 1900 hours. The majority of the battalion was committed and when the situation was rectified the enemy had lost another 160 personnel killed, wounded and captured.⁸⁰ The battle for Agira was over.

The struggle to pry the Axis from the mountain town was



LAC PA 177113

Gunners of the 7th Battery, 2nd Field Regiment, Royal Canadian Artillery, firing their 25-pounder guns at German positions, Nissoria, Italy, 23-28 July 1943.

Infantry of the PPCLI patrol down the main street of Agira following the capture of the town.

described by war correspondent Lionel Shapiro of the *Montreal Gazette* as "the most glittering victory of the Canadians in the Sicilian campaign."⁸¹ The concentration of Axis units entrenched east of Nissoria necessitated the cooperation of infantry and armour, along with an intricate and voluminous fire-plan, described in the war diary of 3rd Field Regiment:

The barrage opened at 2000 hours and was described as magnificent. The attack was a complete success and our infantry ended up in control of the high ground...Enemy prisoners captured after the attack stated that the barrage was so terrific and our infantry followed so closely behind that they had had no alternative but to lay down their arms. They were shaken and demoralized.⁸²

Friend and foe alike paid additional tribute to the artillery in particular. Brigadier A.B. Matthews, commanding officer of 1 CID's artillery, declared:

Recent employment of Field and Medium Artillery on a Divisional basis has brought forward many complimentary remarks for the "Gunners" from all quarters. I would like Commanding Officers to assure that all ranks RCA and RA know that their support has been timely and effective and is greatly appreciated by the infantry.⁸³

A captured Italian major even proclaimed his amazement that 25-pounders "wrought such damage and disaster" on his unit.⁸⁴ The attack certainly left an impression on those involved, although its effect on historians has had a less desirable result.



LAC PA 138269

Of 2 CIB's part in the attack, McAndrew wrote: "Two of its battalions mounted a frontal assault, while a third moved wide."⁸⁵ The perception that 2 CIB conquered Agira with relative ease has created a misguided historical consensus which suggests one brigade failed and another succeeded. The account presented here, by contrast, suggests that one brigade built on the success of the other.

Indeed the two brigades had similar experiences in important respects. During the whole period 24-28 July, for example, soldiers of 2 CIB and 1 CIB alike often fought localized engagements at a numerical disadvantage. At "Lion," units from 1 CIB contended with far more than 2nd Battalion 104th Panzer Grenadier Regiment, and Mark Zuehlke notes how a reduced company of 40 Loyal Eddies overpowered 150 of the enemy on Cemetery Hill.⁸⁶ Likewise, during each phase of the battle rugged terrain restricted movement and radio communications broke down. A single brigade was unlikely to overcome these challenges and reach Agira on its own, especially not as the enemy poured reinforcements into the front. Through a continuous and collective effort, however, victory was guaranteed.

The Canadian triumph at Agira, as facts have exhibited, really was a tactical success. It also met the strategic goals of the Allies by

destroying significant Axis military resources. Operationally, the fall of Agira set in motion an unstoppable advance against the western flank of enemy defences surrounding the Catania Plains. Brigadier Howard Graham stated that the fight for this town was one of the "key battles in the task of relieving the British forces, who had been attempting to drive north along the eastern coast of Sicily to Catania."⁸⁷ It is appropriate to quote the commander of 1 CIB as his formation truly played an integral role in capturing Agira.

Notes

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45. WD 2 CIB, Appendix: Letter From Brigadier Howard Graham to Brigadier Chris Vokes, 26 July 1943.
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49. Gilchrist, p.87; WD Seaforth Highlanders of Canada [SHOC], 27 July 1943.
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53. WD 2 CIB, Radio Logs, 26-27 July 1943.
54. WD 3rd Field Regiment, RCA, Appendix: Report on The Night of 26-27 July 1943, Captain Blake H.M. Tedman. Captain Blake Tedman of 3rd Field Regiment RCA was forward observation officer with PPCLI on 26 July. That evening while trying to establish an observation post near Monte di Nissoria, he accidentally wandered into the midst a company of Grenadiers and Italian artillerymen. Taken prisoner, he observed the Italians calling artillery onto *Lion*. He was rescued the next day by a patrol from the LER.
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60. WD 2 CIB, Appendix: The Battle for Agira, July 1943.
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