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Husky's Price

A Window on 21 Lives Lost in Sicily

Matthew Douglass, Alexander Fitzgerald-Black and Maryanne Lewell

This article is a collection of short biographies of Canadian servicemen killed in action during the Allied invasion of Sicily in July and August 1943. Together they constitute a series of snapshots representing the Canadian experience during Operation Husky. The campaign lasted 38 days and resulted in 562 Canadian deaths, an average of 15 per day. Certainly, some days saw much higher totals than others but at no point were Canada's soldiers, sailors, and aircrew free from danger. The stories of these 21 men are intended to represent all Canadians killed in Sicily, one for each day commemorated during this year's Operation Husky 2013 march between 10 and 30 July. The men featured in this article represent each Canadian military unit and corps that suffered fatal losses in Sicily, including those lesser-known branches of the Canadian Armed Forces. The dead commemorated originate from across Canada and are reflective of Canada's population; much as it is now the Canada of 1943 contained a rich mixture of new immigrants and established families.

These biographies illustrate an important aspect of the Canadian

Abstract: The 38-day campaign in Sicily resulted in 562 Canadian deaths: an average of 15 per day. This article considers the cost of the campaign by examining a cross section of those who died while fighting to liberate the island. The sample of 21 mini-biographies represents soldiers from across Canada lost by each military unit and corps that suffered fatal casualties in Sicily. These biographies animate the names depicted on a small number of the stones found in the Agira cemetery in Sicily, Italy. Although only a sample of the men who sacrificed everything in Operation Husky, these portraits acknowledge the sacrifice made by all.

campaign in Sicily: the impact of the island's rugged terrain on the soldier. Rocky hilltops were transformed into enemy fortresses linked by difficult roads and mule tracks. The indiscriminate nature of artillery and mortar fire in those hills sometimes resulted in so-called friendly fire injury and death. Summer time heat could likewise be deadly to exhausted men without sufficient water or cover from the sun. Sicily's mountainous interior frequently interfered with radio communication, increasing the fog of war and the cost in lives.

Preparing these soldier biographies was not a new task for us. We have each previously researched the stories of Canadian

soldiers killed during the First and Second World Wars. The exercise reveals much about the human life reflected in each white headstone in Commonwealth War Graves Cemeteries. These biographies offer a glimpse into the lives of men who volunteered to go to war and of the cost of their choice to friends, family, and to Canada. The men described here all have unique stories. For example, Private Wilbert Boulton died on 23 July 1943. His father asked that his son's pay be deposited into an account for Wilbert's younger sister, to whom he was strongly attached. The personal lives of average soldiers are not typically part of the story of Canada's historic battles and campaigns in the Second World War. In some cases, the evidence available in published accounts and military records enabled us to identify the time, place and cause of death with certainty. In all other cases we explain probable causes based on where the man and his unit were on the day he died. This research was assisted by undergraduate history students at the University of New Brunswick participating in the Lest-We-Forget program sponsored by Library and Archives Canada and first founded by Blake Seward, an Ontario high school teacher. We hope these profiles will encourage a discussion of the benefits and costs of Canada's battle for Sicily.

Left: Agira Canadian War Cemetery.

In the early morning hours of 10 July 1943 Canadian troops landed on the southwest shore of the Pachino peninsula in the southeastern corner of Sicily. The assault troops of 1st Canadian Infantry Division were assigned several key missions that day, beyond getting ashore and clearing the beach defences. First, they were to capture Italian coastal defence artillery batteries within range of the landing beach to protect the invasion fleet. Royal Navy warships bombarded and temporarily suppressed enemy heavy guns during the assault, but it was up to the infantry to capture or destroy those gun batteries. The second task was to secure enemy airfields in the invasion area to deny their use to the enemy and free them for Allied aircraft. Finally, the assault troops needed to consolidate their positions ashore in order to meet expected Axis counterattacks. The

thin screen of Italian coastal defence units the Canadians met on D-Day were meant to delay and disorganize the invasion force as it came ashore and warn counterattack forces of the landing location.

The Canadians accomplished their D-Day mission at a cost of seven killed and 25 wounded. One of the first men killed was Private Roland William Thoms. He was one of three members of the Royal Canadian Regiment killed during their attack on a pair of Italian shore batteries and Pachino airfield.¹ The airfield was surrounded by a defensive pillbox and bunker network. Private Roland William Thoms was killed when the Royal Canadian Regiment mopped up pillboxes on the high ground beyond the airfield.

Roland hailed from a family of seven. He left behind two brothers, one of whom also served overseas, two sisters and his mother and father,

Alvin and Elizabeth. The family hailed from St. Jacobs, Ontario. Roland was also survived by his wife, Mrs. Edith Thoms, who he married only three days prior to enlisting. Roland was born in 1915, and by 1940, he had established himself as a shoemaker in St. Jacobs. He practiced this profession for just over a decade before enlisting on 2 July 1940 in Kitchener, Ontario. Private Thoms completed infantry training at Camp Borden, and proceeded overseas to join the RCR in the fall of 1941. He embarked for Sicily with the Royal Canadian Regiment in mid-June 1943 and lays there still.²

The fighting troops were not the only ones in harm's way as the example of Corporal Thomas McEwan of the Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps reminds us. Thomas McEwan was born on 23 September 1901 in Hamilton, Scotland to Jessie and John McEwan. By 1939 Thomas

Canadian troops land in Sicily, 19 July 1943.



Library and Archives Canada PA 141664

Canadian casualties evacuated in Sicily.

moved to Ontario while his mother and two sisters remained in Scotland. For 24 years McEwan made his living in horticulture. On 12 September 1939, just days after Canada's declaration of war, Thomas enlisted in Hamilton, Ontario with No.5 Field Ambulance, Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps. At the time he was working as a private gardener for Beverly Robinson in Toronto and hoped to return to his job after the war. His first order of military business before being shipped overseas in December was to request permission to marry. In November, Edith McEwan became his wife and his next of kin.³

Private McEwan and No.5 Field Ambulance joined the Canadian force which crossed the English Channel to Brest in mid-June 1940 and was hurriedly recalled before the French capitulated on 22 June. In 1941 he attended an advanced medical training course. In January 1943, he was transferred to No.1 Canadian Field Dressing Station and appointed acting lance corporal shortly thereafter. In April, he was promoted to acting corporal after completing a junior leadership course. He returned to No.1 Canadian Field Dressing Station as it trained in Scotland for the coming invasion.⁴ According to the official history of the Medical Corps:

The training included practice landings from assault craft, a demonstration of operating-room technique by one of the field surgical units, lectures on combined operations, the packing of unit equipment on assault scales, and, for drivers, a course in water-proofing vehicles. The methods of setting up an advanced surgical centre and a beach dressing station, using full tentage and equipment, were also studied. The culmination was a small



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exercise to rehearse the roles of field dressing stations and field surgical units in the type of operation in prospect.⁵

Corporal McEwan and No.1 Canadian Field Dressing Station landed in Sicily around noon on 10 July 1943. Other field ambulance units landed earlier and were attached to the assaulting brigades in order to facilitate the removal of the wounded from the battlefield. McEwan's field dressing station and British surgical and transfusion units established themselves in a farm building in the 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade sector a kilometre from the beach. From here No.1 Canadian Field Dressing Station "continued throughout D-Day to form the nucleus of an advanced surgical centre."⁶ The next day the unit moved to a more suitable site at the large manor farm complex at Maucini, liberated the previous day by the Royal Canadian Regiment. There it was joined by the Canadian divisional medical units including No.1 Field Surgical Unit and No.1 Field Transfusion Unit. Corporal Thomas McEwan's unit was responsible for treating the wounded which began to trickle back to the beach. As of 1800 hours on 11 July, 57 soldiers were evacuated from the dressing station to a hospital

ship anchored offshore including Canadian, British, American soldiers as well as Italian nationals.⁷ Thomas McEwan was reported as killed in action that same day, possibly during one of the enemy air raids that struck the landing areas in the early days of the invasion.⁸

Axis air forces inflicted a steady toll of Canadian casualties behind the front lines throughout Operation Husky, including Theodorus Benedictus Bonifacius Hendrickus Kroon. "Ted," as he was widely known, was born on 1 December 1905 in Hillegon, Netherlands to Johanna and George Peter Kroon. Prior to immigrating to Canada, Kroon served as a signaller in the Royal Netherlands Navy. In Canada he worked in construction and then as a farm labourer in Granton, Ontario. Kroon volunteered to join the Canadian Army on 6 September 1939, three days after Germany invaded Poland. While in Canada, Ted Kroon found a home with Mr. George Ward in London, Ontario. Upon leaving Canada, Ted left instructions for Mr. Ward to be informed in the event of his death so that he might contact the Kroon family still living in Europe. This turned out to be a sensible decision when German invaded and occupied the Netherlands in 1940.⁹



Canadian troops en route to Sicily.

and supply depots near the beaches at Pachino.¹⁰

The Estates Branch of the Department of National Defence informed George Ward of Ted Kroon's death. On the form returned to the Estates Branch, Ward indicated that Ted's mother had passed away in Holland. He included these additional remarks:

Addresses of deceased[s] relatives given in form were such when I last heard of them in year of 1939 [sic]. I am trying to get in touch with them through the Canadian Red Cross. Sgt Kroon has made his home with me, G. Ward, for the past 10 years and has been treated like a son. Leaving me with power of attorney for his affairs here [sic]. All I want to do is see that his parents get what he left for them.¹¹

It is not known if Mr. Ward was ever able to get into contact with Ted's relatives in Holland.

Three days into the campaign, 1st Canadian Infantry Division was given a rest: "on 13 July General Montgomery called a halt on the extreme left flank, directing that the Canadians should rest in the Giarrantana area for a day and a half."¹² In the meantime Royal Canadian Air Force squadrons continued to take the fight to the enemy over Sicily. In May 1943, Nos. 420, 424, and 425 Squadrons were sent from England to assist in the Allied air offensive as No. 331 Wing. Based in Tunisia, the wing joined American and British aircrews in operations designed to achieve air superiority over Sicily as the invasion drew near. Following the landings, aerodromes remained a prime target while interdiction strikes on Axis logistical centres such as harbours and rail yards rated a close second.¹³ On 13 July, Messina's railroad and

The Army recognized the value of Kroon's prior naval communications signals training and immediately assigned him to No. 1 Company, 1st Canadian Infantry Divisional Signals. He accompanied the division to Aldershot, England in December 1939. In April 1940, he completed training as an army signals operator after which his maturity and experience brought rapid promotion. The Canadian Army made use of those, like Kroon, who had prior military experience enabling them to grow rapidly in the early years of the war. By June 1942, Kroon was appointed acting sergeant. That summer he attended a non-

commissioned officers' course and was confirmed in the rank of sergeant in September. He returned to 1st Division's Signals Company and embarked for the Mediterranean in June 1943. The unit landed in Sicily on 10 July and helped establish Major-General Guy Simonds' divisional headquarters. Kroon's Signals Company was especially important in coordinating the Canadian inland advance as the division's forward units pressed units 20 kilometres inland within the first two days of the invasion. Sergeant Kroon was killed on 12 July 1943, most likely during the series of German air raid back at 1st Canadian Division's base

dock yards, vital for the movement of Axis forces to and from Sicily, were struck in an attack described as "concentrated and accurate." The Straits of Messina were heavily defended by anti-aircraft guns. Out of the two dozen Canadian aircraft participating in that raid one Wellington bomber from No.424 Squadron failed to return.¹⁴

Flying Officer William Cameron Davidson was the navigator and one of five crewmen aboard his Wellington Mark X when it was hit by enemy anti-aircraft fire and crashed into the mountainous region two miles north of Messina. Identification was difficult at first because the aircraft's bomb load exploded in the crash, scattering the aircraft and its crew. However, investigators later found a piece of the plane marked HE 963, the identifier for Davidson's Wellington. Other crew members included the pilot, Pilot Officer R.F. Mang, wireless operator/air gunner Sergeant J.P.M. Garland, bombardier Sergeant D. Campbell and air gunner Fight Sergeant R.E. Vanderbeck.

Flying Officer Davidson was the ranking member of his crew.¹⁵

Born on 28 March 1917, William Davidson worked a number of seasonal jobs between his hometown of High Bluff, Manitoba and Winnipeg. On 13 February 1941, he volunteered at the Royal Canadian Air Force recruiting station in Winnipeg. William joined in the hope that his wartime training would result in a permanent air force career or employment in commercial aviation. His files also suggest that he hoped and was recommended to be trained as a pilot but was sent to navigation school instead after he received some flying instruction. In January 1942 he was awarded his air observer badge and was commissioned as a pilot officer a month later. By spring 1943, Flying Officer Davidson completed his advanced and operational training and joined No.424 Squadron, which was soon to be sent to the Mediterranean. William Cameron Davidson left behind his parents, Lucy Mary Metcalf and William Lewis Davidson.¹⁶

Not all Canadian aircrew flew in Canadian Squadrons. James Jonathan Kunz was one among the over 60 percent of RCAF personnel who served in the mixed Commonwealth crews that formed most RAF squadrons. Like many other rural Canadians, James left a small town in the early 1940s to join the military, most likely hoping to have a thrilling experience. Kunz was born in Molewood, Saskatchewan on 6 April 1920, to Russian immigrants. Upon graduating high school, he worked on his father's farm for two years before moving to Sandwith, where he began work as a clerk in 1939. After a year, he "left [his] position to support the British struggle for freedom against dictatorship and for that reason only." On 11 July 1941, he became a member of the RCAF. Kunz was not selected to be a pilot as he would have liked, which was made exceedingly obvious on his application.¹⁷

After 13 months of training in Canada, Kunz embarked for Britain. He became a member of No.296

A 331 Wing Wellington departs from its Tunisian base for a mission over Sicily.



Canadian Forces Joint Imagery Centre PL 18308



The Cross of Sacrifice in Agira Canadian War Cemetery.

was born in Winnipeg, Manitoba on 20 January 1921. At the time of his enlistment, his family had moved to Vancouver, BC. Sabblut remained in Winnipeg where he worked as a shipper for a film distributor. His younger brother, Wilfred Sabblut also served in the Canadian Army Overseas. His personnel files state that Sabblut completed Grade 9 and was fluent in both English and "Jewish." On 3 June 1942, he enlisted with the Winnipeg Light Infantry before being transferred to the Saskatoon Light Infantry. Despite its name his unit was chosen to become a heavy weapons support group equipped with medium machine guns, mortars and light anti-aircraft guns. By 12 February 1943, Private Sabblut was in the United Kingdom and a few months later, was aboard the ship *Arundel Castle*, bound for Sicily.¹⁹

Private Sabblut was killed 15 July at Grammichele. The Saskatoon Light Infantry's history, compiled by Lieutenant-Colonel D.E. Walker, DSO, ED, describes that day as the first day of action for the No.1 Infantry Support Group (SLI), where "the MMG's [Medium Machine Guns] went in. Casualties were one killed, four wounded and three carriers knocked out."²⁰ The Saskatoon machine gun detachment was operating in support of the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment.

Farley Mowat immortalized the small battle at Grammichele in his history of the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment (Hasty Ps) and his memoirs of the Italian campaign *And No Birds Sang*. Mowat vividly describes a successful Canadian attack against a German delaying force covering the enemy's withdrawal. The Germans opened fire with heavy guns and mortars first. Once the

Squadron RAF attached to the British 1st Airborne Division after five months of further training. Kunz served as the navigator aboard a tug aircraft that towed engine-less gliders carrying air assault troops, supplies and heavy weapons to reinforce paratroopers.¹⁸

During the invasion of Sicily, British 1st Airborne Division's glider troops were delivered to the battlefield by Nos.295 and 296 Squadrons RAF and the 51st Troop Carrier Wing of the US Army Air Forces. Operation Husky, which included US 82nd Airborne Division to the west, marked the first large-scale Allied use of airborne forces during the Second World War. On the night of 9-10 July elements of 1st Airborne Division were tasked with securing the Ponte Grande

Bridge. Few of the men dropped made their landing zones and there were many casualties, yet they were able to capture the bridge. Three days later 1st Airborne was ordered to capture the Primosole Bridge. On the night of 13-14 July 1st Parachute Brigade dropped on to the battlefield accompanied by 1st (Airlanding) Anti-Tank Battery, Royal Artillery, arriving by glider. The bridge was captured but again at a high cost. Eleven planes were shot down; including Kunz's glider tug. While the cost was regrettable, early Allied airborne experiments in the Mediterranean provided a number of lessons put to use in Normandy in June 1944.

On 14-15 July, 1st Canadian Division resumed its drive inland, always at a price. Aaron Sabblut

shooting began, the Hasty Ps quickly converged on Grammichele; 'A' Company provided cover fire, while 'B' Company attacked the German 20 mm and 88 mm guns and then followed the Three Rivers Regiment Sherman tanks into the village and threatened the only avenue of escape for the Germans.²¹ The action at Grammichele lasted about three hours, and was over by noon. Private Aaron Sabblut's carrier was struck by a German shell in the first minutes of battle. He was 22 years old when he died and one of three Canadians killed that morning.²² The Canadian drive inland continued that afternoon.

Andrew Huff was born on 1 January 1919 in Altario, Alberta to his parents Louis and Mary Huff. As one of ten children, Andrew left school at age 15 after completing Grade 6 to devote his time to working the 160-acre family farm in Hazeldine, Alberta. He was employed regularly after finishing school. He laboured for eight years, working at the farm and at a lumber camp in Hinton, Alberta. As an unmarried man, Andrew was called up for one month of militia training with the Saskatchewan Light Horse in June 1940 as part of the National Resources Mobilization Act (NRMA), passed that year to provide manpower for home defence.²³ On 7 January 1942, Andrew volunteered for overseas service at Edmonton in hopes that his tractor and truck driving experience would land him a job with the Royal Canadian Army Service Corps. He had ambitions to become a machinist after the war. He also hoped that his brother Albert, who was serving with the infantry, could be transferred to the Royal Canadian Army Service Corps so that they could serve together.²⁴

This was not to be. In February 1942 Private Huff attended the Canadian Infantry Training Centre

in Calgary before joining the Loyal Edmonton Regiment in March. He was transferred overseas and disembarked in England on 11 June, and spent a couple of months with the 1st Canadian Infantry Reinforcement Unit, before rejoining the Loyal Eddies overseas battalion in August 1942.²⁵ After training with his new regimental family for nearly a year, Huff and his battalion embarked for the Mediterranean and landed in Sicily on 10 July as part of 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade. By 15 July, 1st Canadian Division began a northwesterly drive towards the centre of the island to cut off enemy forces in western Sicily.²⁶ The Loyal Edmonton Regiment teamed up with a squadron of Three Rivers Regiment tanks to form the divisional vanguard advancing towards Piazza Armerina and Enna on 16 July. Three miles south of Piazza Armerina, the battalion encountered its first Germans – a battalion of 15th Panzer Grenadier Division – at around mid-day.²⁷ The enemy fired machine guns, mortars and artillery down onto the Canadian positions from

the heights overlooking the road. Due to the nature of the terrain, the Three Rivers Regiment tanks could not raise their guns to target German positions and thus the battle was fought mainly by three companies of infantry with mortars in support until self-propelled guns arrived to shell German positions later in the day. In spite of these difficulties the Edmonton Regiment managed to secure the high ground overlooking Piazza Armerina at a cost of 27 casualties, six of whom, including Private Andrew Huff, were killed.²⁸ The Germans abandoned Piazza Armerina that night and fell back to another natural defensive position south of Valguarnera. Meanwhile, the Germans continued attempting to slow the Allied advance with air attacks along the coast on base areas and supply dumps.

Edward John Lawlor was born to Rose and James Lawlor on 17 September 1913. The family was rather large as Edward had two brothers and three sisters. Three additional siblings passed away as children. Like so many Canadians of



Canadian soldiers in Sicily.

that era he left school after Grade 7 to seek employment. He worked as a garage mechanic in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island before the war. Edward's enrollment papers indicate that he hoped to return to work as a mechanic in the postwar period. Since his father died in 1940 Edward had been supporting his mother with \$40 per month and he continued this support after he enlisted on 11 April 1942 in Charlottetown. By the time of his death his mother had passed away. Edward's sister, Priscilla Lawlor was left to look after his affairs after his death.²⁹

The Royal Canadian Ordnance Corps³⁰ was responsible for procuring supplies and maintaining the equipment necessary to keep the Canadian army in the field. Ordnance Corps soldiers worked closely with the Royal Canadian Army Service Corps that delivered stores and men to the front, although their roles often overlapped. Edward's skill and experience as a mechanic was regarded as useful for equipment maintenance. In August 1942, he embarked at Halifax for the United Kingdom where he joined the No.1 Canadian Base Ordnance Depot. By October, Edward completed the storeman technician course and in December he was posted to the 32nd Light Aid Detachment, a unit responsible for minor repairs to vehicles and weapons in the field. In March 1943 Edward was transferred to the 2nd Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment workshops. Workshop detachments with each fighting unit were responsible for spare parts and more major repairs. Lawlor's unit serviced the 40 mm anti-aircraft guns and trucks of the divisional anti-aircraft artillery regiment. He was wounded on 14 July, probably in a German air attack on the divisional headquarters area near Pachino which batteries from 2nd Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment, Royal Canadian Artillery were tasked to protect and where the regiment's workshop was

based.³¹ Edward Lawlor succumbed to his wounds on 17 July 1943 at 1st Canadian Field Dressing Station. Base and support troops were never out of harm's way even as the advance pressed deeper into central Sicily.

During their advance towards Valguarnera, the Carleton and York Regiment of the 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade came under mortar and machine gun fire from several hills surrounding the Portello Grottaacalda crossroad. The fight for the southernmost hill was the first for the Carleton and Yorks from New Brunswick earning it the name "Beginner's Hill." That night 1st Canadian Division prepared a major encircling attack on the crossroads and Valguarnera supported by artillery. The battle continued through the night and into the morning. On 18 July the Carleton and Yorks captured their final objective on Hill 276.³²

When it was over the regiment controlled the high ground along the road that leads north eastward from Highway No.117 to Valguarnera. Around the same time the West Nova Scotia Regiment moved to trap the Germans from the west. As a result the Germans were forced to abandon their positions on Monte Della Forma opening the Canadian path deeper into Sicily. During the action the Carleton and York Regiment captured 45 prisoners. They lost eleven officers and men killed with a further 35 all ranks wounded.³³ Among the dead was Walter Gordon MacDonald.

Walter was born 20 November 1920. He hailed from Sunnybrae, New Brunswick, just outside of Moncton. Walter was the second of five children. He had an older sister, Mrs. H. Wallace, who had moved from the family homestead, Mrs. Ruby MacPherson, Eleanor, Margaret, and Roy lived with their mother, Ruby in Moncton. Wallace left school at the age of ten, after he finished grade three. For the following nine years he worked as a labourer on

his father's farm with some ambitions to become a mechanic, presumably to better assist the needs of the farm upon his discharge following the war. Just after the fall of France, on 22 June 1940, Walter volunteered for service with the Carleton and York Regiment. Through the early winter of 1941, Private MacDonald was in and out of military hospitals with an unspecified illness. This was not uncommon in improvised training camps established during the first years of the war. On 2 April 1941, his father passed away while Walter was still training in Canada. Not long after he travelled overseas and was posted to his regiment in Great Britain. In July, he travelled with them to Sicily. Walter was wounded at Beginners Hill and evacuated to the 2nd Field Dressing Station. He succumbed to his wounds the next day on 18 July 1943.³⁴

Much of 1st Canadian Division took part in the battle for Valguarnera on 17-18 July as the Canadians continued their drive through the centre of Sicily. The Germans took up a strong natural defensive position six miles southwest of the town. During the night 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade attacked those defences. At the same time the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment and the rest of 1st Canadian Brigade struck off in a bold night-time cross-country march towards Valguarnera and encircled the enemy from the east. Farley Mowat described the action: "Without prior reconnaissance, and in complete darkness, the Regiment was to cross ten miles of trackless mountain terrain, debouch upon a strongly defended town and force the enemy's withdrawal from his positions to the south." Due to distance, timing, and terrain, 1st Brigade operated without tank or artillery support.³⁵

During the difficult night march across rugged countryside radios failed and some of the troops became separated from their companies.

Nevertheless the Hasty Ps and the rest of 1st Brigade managed to cut the road between the main German positions and Valguarnera forcing the Germans to abandon their natural defences after leaving many dead and wounded behind them. The Hasty Ps suffered four killed, 15 wounded, and three captured.³⁶ On 19 July, the regiment returned to the valley to recover its dead and wounded.³⁷ Among those found was Corporal Frederick Ernest Punchard. Although he was officially reported killed in action on 19 July, it is not clear whether he died during the battle the day before or during the early morning afterwards, alone in the rocky hills south of Valguarnera.

Frederick Punchard was born in England on 22 June 1918 to Agnes Alice and Herbert Punchard prior to migrating to Eastern Ontario. It is possible this move was related to the death of Herbert in 1930. Frederick worked as a farmer before the war. At age 21 he volunteered

for service at Picton, Ontario on 24 September 1939. Frederick sailed for Glasgow, Scotland in January 1940 with the Hasty Ps and the rest of 1st Division. Punchard was a member of the unit when it was sent across the English Channel to Brest, France on 12-13 June before being ordered to re-embark for England late on 14 June.³⁸ By September 1942, Punchard was appointed acting lance-corporal. By December, he was an acting corporal. In February, he briefly reverted to lance-corporal at his own request before being re-appointed acting corporal in May. Such requests were frequent among men reluctant to leave their friends because promotion often meant reassignment to another platoon. Eventually he accepted promotion. When he was killed he was serving as a rifle section commander. Corporal Frederick Punchard left behind ten siblings, including six sisters and four brothers (two of whom also served overseas) as well as his mother, Agnes.³⁹

While the Three Rivers Regiment landed with the Canadian assault troops and advanced into the centre of Sicily with 1st Canadian Infantry Division, the remainder of 1st Canadian Army Tank Brigade, including the Ontario Regiment and the Calgary Regiment, disembarked Syracuse on 13 July. They spent the next week near Cassibile before they moved into reserve behind British 13th Corps on the Catania plain. Like every soldier on the island, the tankers "experienced the worst of the torrid Sicilian summer...there was no escape from the intense sun, and the steel of the tank turrets and hills became so hot that it was painful to touch."⁴⁰ Since the unit had not yet been given a task they did have a short respite from the oppressive sunshine: a Mediterranean swim. Unfortunately, on 19 July, the day before the brigade was to be sent north towards Catania, Trooper Maurice Stoleson Fitch of the Calgary Tank Regiment was caught by an

Soldiers of the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry march through the streets of Valguarnera, Sicily.



Library and Archives Canada PA 163671

undertow 25 to 30 yards from the shore and he drowned. His body was recovered the next day. The Calgary Tank Regiment suffered its first casualty before officially coming into action.⁴¹ Wartime creates deep bonds with regiments as well as great pressures and fears. Accidental deaths remained an ever present threat in war as in peace, although the loss of a brother in arms is always keenly felt.

Maurice Stoleson Fitch was born on 22 May 1923 in Central Butte, Saskatchewan to Inga and Earl W. Fitch. He left school after Grade 10 to work on a family farm in Quill Lake, Saskatchewan. On 13 November 1941, Maurice travelled to Saskatoon and enrolled in the Royal Canadian Armoured Corps. His father also enlisted during the war and served in London, Ontario as a lance-corporal with the Royal Canadian Engineers. He completed his basic army and armoured training in Canada and qualified as a class III

(wheeled) driver before proceeding overseas. Trooper Fitch arrived in the United Kingdom in late July 1942. In August, he was taken on strength with the 14th Army Tank (Calgary) Regiment. In October, he qualified as a driver operator class "c" and in May as a gunner operator "c" indicating that he was now qualified as a tanker. On 23 June 1943 Trooper Fitch embarked from the UK for Sicily with his companions in the Calgary Regiment.⁴²

By the time the Canadian spearhead drove on to Leonforte and Assoro deep in the centre of Sicily, the Royal Canadian Army Service Corps strained men and machines to keep the supply lines open. Between 14 and 22 July, the campaign combined "furious action with rapid movement when transport was at a premium. The RCASC units were continually on the move, keeping their Supply, Ammunition, and Petrol Points close up to the fighting troops."⁴³ By 21 July the round-trip distance from the front

to the beach stretched in excess of 250 kilometres in nightmarish driving conditions up harrowingly steep hill sides cut by countless switchback bends and blind corners. Infernally hot days and dusty roads resulted in visibility measured in meters, traffic congestion which left the convoys highly vulnerable to enemy air attack, and sharply winding roads on mountainous terrain meant that it could take up to 12 hours to travel 30 kilometres. Canadian Service Corps troops developed a system of "continuous running" where relief drivers were stationed along the route to take over from men finishing a 12-hour run. Ordnance Corps maintenance crews freed up drivers who normally performed their own routine maintenance so that vehicles were refuelled, cleaned, patched if necessary, and back on the road within an hour. The precious small number of trucks remained on the road 23 hours a day. Royal Canadian Army Service Corps endurance was

Left: Lance Corporal Howard Blinn of the West Nova Scotia Regiment was killed on 22 July 1943.

Right: Maryanne Lewell participated in the 2012 version of the Can-Am tour and presented on her great uncle, J. Howard Blinn.



Photos supplied by Maryanne Lewell



Photo by Norm Betts

The best time to visit the Agira cemetery is in the long light of the late afternoon.

nothing short of impressive: the intense pace and conditions resulted in only two accidents by 21 July.⁴⁴

Private William Klein of 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade Company, Royal Canadian Army Service Corps was listed as "killed about" 21 July 1943. William Klein died during the advance across the Dittaino Valley, overlooked by the towering mountaintop towns of Leonforte and Assoro. From there German observers called down shellfire on anything that moved in the valley below. RCASC drivers were just as exposed as infantry or armour in the Dittaino Valley illustrating how supply lines and battlefields sometimes become intertwined.

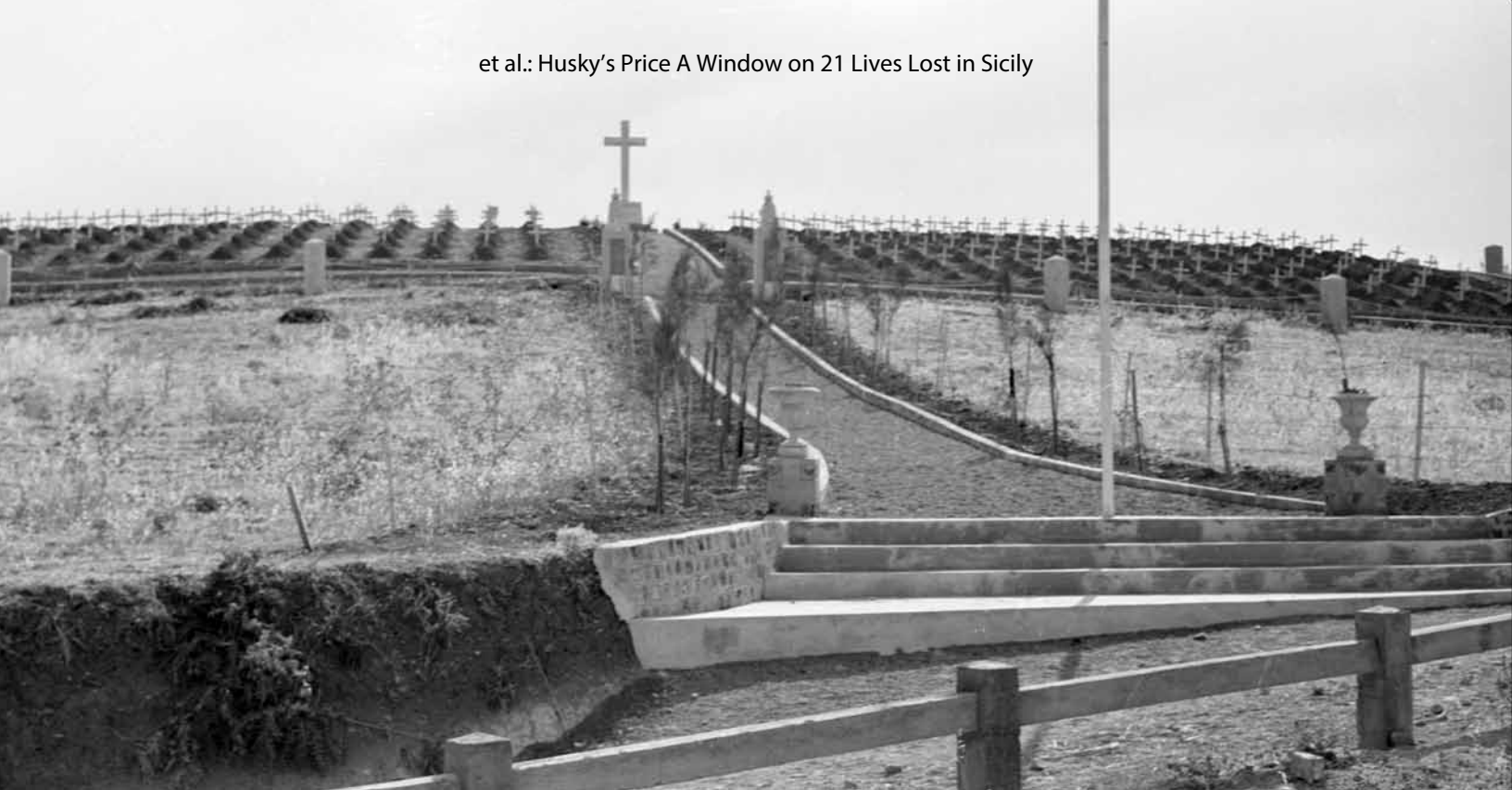
William was born 18 July 1918 in Champion, Alberta to Jacob and Anna Marie Klein. He left school after Grade 5 to work as a farm labourer in Cluny, Alberta. In the years before the war he learned to drive trucks and tractors. He came from a large family with two brothers and three sisters. Private Klein's military life began on 22 November 1940 when he was called up for one month of training with 22nd Battery, Royal Canadian Artillery as part of the National Resources Mobilization Act. On 19

February 1942, he volunteered for overseas service in Camrose, Alberta. He was assigned to Service Corps reinforcement pool no doubt due to his driving experience. After his initial training Private Klein qualified as a Class III Driver (wheeled) and then made his way overseas in June 1942. In the UK he served with 1st Canadian Infantry Division's Ammunition Company. In 1943, the Service Corps re-organized to form one mixed ammunition, fuel and supply transport company for each infantry brigade. William was transferred to 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade Company, RCASC and embarked with them bound for Sicily in June 1943. Throughout his time overseas he sent his wages back to Alberta to support his family. William was driving ammunition forward in preparation for 1st Brigade's famous attack on the heights at Assoro when he was killed on or about 21 July 1943.⁴⁵

The exposed Dittaino Valley floor was a dangerous place in the summer of 1943. On 21-22 July, most of 1st Canadian Infantry Division penetrated across to the north side of the valley and was locked in difficult battles for Assoro and Leonforte.

The daring push left a ten kilometre long right flank, exposed to powerful enemy forces facing British troops on the Catania Plain. It fell to the eastern Canadian units of 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade to protect the open flank and locate enemy units lurking in the open and rolling grain fields south of Agira. On the night of 21 July, the West Nova Scotia Regiment marched under cover of darkness to the tiny hamlet of Libertina, occupying it before dawn on 22 July. The regiment dug in on the hill south of town from which they commanded the Dittaino River and the east-west road that runs along it. The next day German artillery observers contested West Nova ownership of the town with a heavy barrage. Their long range 170 mm heavy guns threw shells so large that "their blast dug holes three feet deep in the hard-baked earth." Most of the regiment was well dug in when the shelling began but seven were caught in the open. Four men were killed including Lance-Corporal Joseph Howard Blinn.⁴⁶

Howard Blinn was born on 4 July 1914 in Grosses Coques, Clare Township in Digby County along Nova Scotia's Bay of Fundy coast.



Above: Agira Canadian War Cemetery as it appeared just after the war.

Left: Agira cemetery today – it is one of the most spectacular commonwealth cemeteries. Mount Etna stands watch in the background.

Photo by Norm Betts



Howard's father, Omer, was a sea captain and shipbuilder: his mother, Marguerite, died in childbirth in 1919. Howard was one of nine children from Omer and Marguerite's marriage; large families were very common in Clare. Omer had a second marriage, and three more children followed. Howard married Dorathée Thibault in 1935, when he was 21 and she was 18. They had three boys: Omer, Melburn, and William. Sadly baby William did not survive infancy.

Howard worked in a lumber mill before the war. He volunteered with the West Nova Scotia Regiment in January 1940. He was promoted to lance corporal while the unit trained in Scotland in 1942. Howard was 29 years old when he was killed.

On 21 July, the Loyal Edmonton Regiment attacked the major highway junction town of Leonforte which controlled Highway 121 from Enna in the west to Adrano and Catania in the east. Its capture was central to

the Canadian mission of preventing German forces in western Sicily from moving east and facilitated a left hook against the strong German positions on the Catania Plain in the east. The next morning they were reinforced by the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry.

By early on 22 July Leonforte was the scene of bitter fighting as the Germans clung tenaciously to the commanding road junction there. That morning, the Patricia's reinforced their Loyal Edmonton Regiment comrades cut off and fighting desperately in the houses and streets of Leonforte. The Patricia's came to the rescue with a troop of Sherman tanks from the Three Rivers Regiment and a troop of New Brunswick anti-tank guns, reaching the separated Loyal Eddie battalion headquarters in the town centre by

0945 hours.⁴⁷ From there the battle for the town and its adjacent heights continued all day and into the night.⁴⁸ The fighting for control of Leonforte and the high ground around it cost the Patricias 64 casualties. One of the dead was Wilbert Roy Boulton from Morden, Manitoba. He was killed in the early morning of 23 July 1943.

Roy, as he was called by his family, was born 20 December 1917. He attended school until he was 14, leaving after he completed Grade 8. He spent ten years working on his father's farm. In late 1940, he registered with the National Resources Mobilization Act and spent his 30 days training with the 101 (B) Training Camp at Brandon, Manitoba from 20 November to 18 December. However, it was not until 20 February 1942 that Roy enlisted and eventually found his way to the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry in May 1942. On 31 July 1942, Private Boulton arrived in the UK where he trained until it was time to sail to Sicily. He left behind his father Albert, mother Cora, brothers Albert and Gordon and sister Mavis. His father wrote to the Department of National Defence that he wished to have his son's money turned over to his seven year old sister as "Roy thought a great deal of her."⁴⁹ Boulton hoped to return to his family farm following his service but he now rests at the Canadian Military Cemetery at Agira.⁵⁰

Martin Joseph Davis was born 10 November 1920 in North Onslow, Quebec on the north bank of the Ottawa River. Martin left school after Grade 6 and at the age 14, he became a clerk for the Great Atlantic & Pacific Tea Company in Ottawa. In July 1940, he volunteered to join the 4th Princess Louise Dragoon Guards a militia cavalry regiment from Carleton Place, Ontario just across the river from Martin's home in west Quebec. The unit mobilized for overseas service in February 1941

and was organized as an armoured reconnaissance regiment. After he joined the army Martin supported his mother and father with \$45 a month to help them cope with his father's disability. Martin's father passed away before he was sent to Sicily in 1943, but he remained in close contact with his mother Lucinda, brothers Leo and Richard, and sisters Sadie, Mary, Beatrice and Rita.⁵¹

On 23 July, 1st Canadian Division prepared to advance from Leonforte and Assoro eastwards towards Nissoria and Agira. That day, 'A' Squadron of the Princess Louise Dragoon Guards was ordered to patrol ahead of the main force on the road to Nissoria and locate the enemy. The role of reconnaissance troops is to seek out information that can impose order on the chaos of battle. Their mission required them to operate far out in front or on the flanks, dangerously isolated from the rest of the division. Dragoon Guards patrols travelled only a few kilometres before the enemy opened fire on them from the eastern heights above Nissoria. The Guards backed up their armoured scout cars to good observation posts west of town. They remained there through the night gathering information about the enemy.⁵² The next day the battle for Nissoria Ridge began. Trooper Davis was killed by a burst of friendly machine gun fire on the fringe of the battle sometime during 24 July. His death offers a glimpse into the unique daily risks taken by the divisional reconnaissance regiment.⁵³

Morley Gordon was born 17 September 1920 in Toronto, Ontario to William and Unity Gordon. He had two older half siblings, a sister Margaret and a brother Jack. After completing the Grade 10, Morley left school at the age of 15. His first job was as a landscaper but by the time he joined the Canadian Army he was working as a drill machinist for the Canadian Laundry Company.

His enrollment papers expressed no desire to return to that job. Before the war, Morley served with Toronto's Royal Regiment of Canada. Morley volunteered for overseas service on 21 November 1939 with the 48th Highlanders of Canada and travelled with them to the United Kingdom in January 1940.

While posted in southeast England Morley met his bride-to-be. Morley married Violet Rose Gordon in June 1942 at Epsom in Surrey. Later that year in September Private Gordon was promoted to corporal after four months of serving as acting corporal. On 14 June 1943 Corporal Gordon sailed with the rest of the 48th Highlanders, bound for Sicily.⁵⁴

Two weeks after landing in Sicily, Corporal Gordon and his regiment joined in the battle for Nissoria Ridge. On 25 July, Toronto's famous Highlanders were ordered to capture the terraced cliffs of Monte Nissoria that dominated the commanding ridge where strong German positions barred Highway 121 towards Agira. A patrol to the cliffs confirmed that Monte Nissoria was in German hands and heavily defended by entrenched machine gun and mortar posts.⁵⁵ That afternoon, the 48th Highlanders made note of the enemy positions before attacking up the ridge behind an artillery barrage.⁵⁶ Highlander companies reached the crest to discover that Nissoria Ridge was even more heavily defended than expected. After hours of vicious close-quarter action, the battalion withdrew under cover of darkness.⁵⁷ The survivors had to abandon their dead in order to carry back their wounded back to safety. In total, 11 members of the 48th Highlanders were killed and 40 were wounded. Their sacrifice was not made in vain as they brought back detailed information about enemy defences on the ridge that was used in the successful attack carried out the following day. One of the eleven



A Canadian 25-pounder crew firing on Nissoria, Sicily.

killed on 25 July was Violet Rose's new husband Morley.

On 25 July 1943, the 25-pounder guns of 3rd Field Regiment, Royal Canadian Artillery were hitched up to gun tractors and towed forward to support the furious battle developing around Nissoria Ridge.⁵⁸ Their new gun positions came under counter-battery fire from heavy German 170 mm guns. The commanding officer's carrier was shelled by observed fire from the time he left a planning the conference in Assoro to his return to the regimental headquarters. Shortly after his arrival, around 1515 hours, "literal hell broke out in the Regt'l [Regimental] gun area..."⁵⁹ One shell landed in the centre of the headquarters, followed by many other shells in the surrounding area. This shellfire killed two and wounded eleven others.⁶⁰

One of the wounded was Gunner Ernest Patrick Glidden from

Millbank, New Brunswick, a village that has since been incorporated into the City of Miramichi. Ernest was born on 17 March 1920 to Lewis and Bridget Glidden. Ernest grew up with five brothers, Elmer, Lewis, Charles, William and John, and three sisters, Mary, Clara and Frances. At 16 years of age, Ernest left school, having completed Grade 7. He worked on the family farm and fishing boat for five years until he volunteered for overseas service on 5 March 1941. His enrollment papers list that he had no desire to return to the family business after the war and wished to pursue an education in motor mechanics following his discharge.⁶¹

Ernest was assigned to 3rd Field Artillery Regiment.⁶² In March 1942, he joined the regiment in the United Kingdom as a replacement. Gunner Glidden trained with his new regiment for over a year and sailed with them in mid-June 1943

to the central Mediterranean. Ernest Glidden was evacuated to a Field Dressing Station after being badly wounded on 25 July 25 and died the next day. He was initially buried in an olive orchard south of Leonforte, but was later reinterred in the Canadian Military Cemetery at Agira.⁶³

Adrien Dumesnil of Rivière des Prairies, Quebec was born on 7 January 1912 to Henri and Emma Dumesnil. Adrien worked as a chauffeur and a carpenter, and was married to Marie Anna. They had no children. He volunteered for the Canadian Army at the nearby Royal Montreal Regiment Armouries and within days was transferred to the famous Royal 22e Régiment ("Van Doos"). He was quickly identified as leadership material. In October 1941, Adrien was appointed acting corporal and then acting sergeant in February 1942. In April he was temporarily assigned to the Fusiliers

du St. Laurent. In September 1942 he was called back to the Royal 22e Régiment reinforcement pool and dispatched overseas. Somehow he reverted back to the rank of private, possibly in an effort to find an opening with the active service battalion. He joined the Royal 22e Régiment on 15 April 1943 in time to participate in assault training for Operation Husky.⁶⁴

Private Dumesnil landed in Sicily with the "Van Doos" and fought with them at Valguarnera. In late July the Royal 22e Régiment and the rest of 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade was aggressively patrolling in the Dittaino River valley supporting the rest of the Canadian Division in the Battle for Agira. On 27 July the regiment was ordered to send strong patrols to the high ground commanding potential crossing sites over the Dittaino River at Catenanuova where a major Allied offensive was scheduled to commence at the end of the month.⁶⁵

That evening the Royal 22e Régiment discovered that Catenanuova was heavily fortified.⁶⁶ The regiment succeeded in capturing Monte Santa Maria on the north bank of the river as well as the towering Monte Scalpello commanding the southern bank. The Germans desperately counterattacked to regain the high ground. "A" Company, exposed on Monte Santa Maria, was forced to withdraw back across the river but not before inflicting serious losses on enemy. The rest of the regiment, along with the West Nova Scotia Regiment, held on at Monte Scalpello. Three days later this high ground served as the base for Eighth Army's great offensive that broke the back of Axis defences in Sicily.⁶⁷

Some of "A" Company's dead could not be carried back from Monte Santa Maria. Adrien Dumesnil was listed as missing and presumed dead on 27 July. He was 34 years old. His body was never found. No marker or memorial on Sicily bears

his name. Instead, it is carved on the great marble Cassino Memorial to Canadian and Commonwealth war dead from the Italian Campaign who have no known grave.⁶⁸

By the night of 27 July, 1st Canadian Division had defeated a powerful German and Italian force barring the western approaches to Agira. The enemy rushed reinforcements to stop the Canadians on the last hills west of the ancient mountaintop town. In the early hours of 28 July, Vancouver's Seaforth Highlanders of Canada fought their way onto those hills, code-named Grizzly, after a daring climb up the precipitous southern end, which broke the back of Axis defences at Agira.⁶⁹ Most enemy survivors surrendered or retreated to the north and east, although a few isolated pockets held out for the rest of the day. The Battle for Agira was expensive in lives on both sides; 438 Canadians were killed or wounded in five days of fighting.⁷⁰ Among the dead was Private Allan Archibald Livingstone.

Allan Livingstone was born on 10 February 1918 in Vancouver, BC to Archibald and Maude Livingstone. He had one full sister, Phyllis. Allan's mother remarried after his father died young and bore three more children. A brother, Charles and two sisters, Joyce and Beverly, were added to the family.⁷¹ At age 19 Allan moved to Penticton, on Okanagan Lake, to take a job as a locomotive fireman with the Canadian Pacific Railway. In March 1940 he volunteered for the Canadian Army overseas. His enrollment papers record that he wished to return to the railway after the war. Allan was assigned to the Seaforth Highlanders of Canada. He was killed on the morning of 28 July on the mountain codenamed Grizzly, overlooking Agira. He was 26 years old. His final resting place is now on the other side of town at the Agira Canadian War Cemetery.

William Charles Davies of the Royal Canadian Engineers was born 23 May 1913 in Winnipeg, Manitoba. He left school at age 15 after completing Grade 10 to work as a mechanic and transport driver. From 1931-32, he served with the militia artillery in Manitoba. He moved to Toronto and qualified as a 4th Class Stationery Engineer. He worked as a Steam Engineer for Canadian Breweries in Toronto for the next 11 years until he volunteered for the Canadian Army, four days after Canada declared war on Germany. He hoped to return to his job when the war was over.⁷² The Army sought to make use of William's skills; he was assigned to the Royal Canadian Engineers 2nd Field Park Company which was responsible for engineer heavy equipment and stores including bulldozers and bridging. William's age and experience quickly earned him promotion to lance corporal in January 1940. He and his company travelled overseas to the United Kingdom in May 1940. Not long after arriving William was promoted to corporal and then lance-sergeant. He was appointed to acting sergeant on 5 June 1943 in time to depart for Sicily.⁷³

In the pre-dawn hours of 28 July 1943, sappers from 4th Field Company, Royal Canadian Engineers cleared mines from the approaches to the dry Dittaino River and the widened the mule path south of the Scalpello in preparation for a major offensive at Catenanuova.⁷⁴ They were supported by bulldozers and road graders from Sergeant Davies' 2nd Field Park Company.⁷⁵ The Germans tried to stop the Canadian engineers' work with artillery fire and secondary booby-traps attached to the mines. That morning, William Davies was killed by an explosion. He was 30 years old. He left behind his wife Jean Elizabeth, parents George and Elizabeth, one brother and five sisters.⁷⁶



A Canadian Sherman in Regalbuto, Sicily.

Catenanuova. The squadron's initial position came under a heavy enemy mortar and artillery barrage. As the squadron shifted to a better position an 88 millimetre shell hit the cupola ring on Corporal Willoughby's tank. He was killed instantly. The crew was able to manoeuvre the tank to cover and pull Willoughby's body from the turret. Moments later they then came under intense mortar fire and took shelter alongside the road. Their now empty tank was hit by a mortar bomb that fell through an open hatch and exploded inside setting off the ammunition and blowing the turret completely off. None of the remaining crew was injured, and with the rest of their troop, they made their way to safety.⁷⁸

Charles Willoughby was 26 when he died. He left behind his father, Thomas, his sister Lily and three brothers Thomas Jr., Alfred, George, and Albert. The latter two brothers also served during the war in the Canadian Army overseas. Corporal Charles Willoughby is now buried in the Canadian Military Cemetery at Agira.⁷⁹

The Sicily campaign raged on for two more weeks. Centuripe, Regalbuto, Adrano, the Troina and Salso rivers as well as Mount Revisotto and Mount Seggio all became names familiar to Canadian veterans. Unfortunately this collection of short biographies includes no examples from the 170 some Canadians killed after 30 July 1943. By no means does this indicate that these men are less worthy of remembrance. Our purpose here is to use the occasion of the Operation Husky 2013 commemorative march to cast a spotlight on a single life lived and lost during each of the 21 march days. These were men who lived, felt dawn, loved and were loved, and

Charles Willoughby was born 4 October 1916 in Oshawa, Ontario. After completing school Charles moved to Beamsville, Ontario and worked as a chipper. In the 1930s, he joined the militia, first with the Lincoln and Welland Regiment and later the Niagara region's 2nd Dragoons. Like many Canadians, Charles volunteered for overseas service in the week after the fall of France in June 1940. He was first assigned to the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment as a signaller before being picked up by 12th Canadian Army Tank Regiment (The Three Rivers Regiment). At the time Canada's fledgling armoured corps needed recruits to fill out the new tank force readying to take on Hitler's

panzers. Charles was promoted to acting corporal on 1 December 1942 after the regiment arrived in England. He was confirmed in that rank on 2 March. Charles served as a Sherman tank crew commander in the regiment's "B" Squadron.⁷⁷

Corporal Charles Willoughby landed at Pachino on 10 July and survived a number of deadly engagements throughout July 1943 while serving in the Three Rivers Regiment. On 30 July 1943, during the battle at Catenanuova, his squadron covered a company of Royal Canadian Engineers building a crossing over the heavily-mined Dittaino River bed to open a route through to 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade fighting north of the river in and around

now, for the most part lie on foreign soil, in Sicily. We hope that these brief sketches of 21 ordinary men might help Canadians understand what it cost to liberate Europe and build a better world.

Notes

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28. Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, pp.93-94.
29. LAC, RG 24, Vol.26328, Edward John Lawlor's service file.
30. An account of the RCOC's overall role in Operation Husky may be found in William F. Rennie, ed., *To the Thunderer His Arms: The Royal Canadian Ordnance Corps* (Lincoln, Ontario: W.F. Rennie, Publisher, 1984).
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34. LAC, RG 24, Vol.26450, Walter Gordon MacDonald's personnel file.
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58. LAC, RG 24, Vol.14434, 3rd Field Regiment war diary, 25 July 1943.
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60. Ibid.
61. LAC, RG 24, Vol.25969, Ernest Patrick Glidden's service file.
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