

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Correspondent Eric Reguly writes on life and business in Europe and the United Kingdom.

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Remembering a bloody Christmas in Ortona

Eric Reguly

Many Canadians know about Dieppe, the D-Day landings at Juno Beach and Hong Kong. They were the famous Canadian battles of the Second World War. But mention "Ortona" and you are likely to be met with a blank stare. Yet it was one of the bloodiest – and perhaps one of the least necessary – Canadian battles of the war.

Ortona is a medieval town on Italy's Adriatic coast, about halfway up the Italian boot. By the time the 1st Canadian Infantry Division cleared it of the elite German fighters of the 1st Parachute Division shortly after Christmas of 1943, the total estimated Canadian casualties – dead, wounded, missing – were 2,605. The military cemetery near Ortona holds the graves of 1,375 Canadians (though not all were killed in Ortona itself). It is the biggest Canadian war cemetery in Italy. More than 1,000 Italian civilians died in the battle.

The Ortona slaughter was largely forgotten soon after the battle, perhaps because it, unlike D-Day, did not change the course of the war. Or maybe it was because the Canadians who fought there didn't want to talk about the incredibly heavy casualty rate for a victory they could have done without. Even General Bernard Montgomery, leader of the Allied troops in the Italian campaign, failed to mention Ortona in his memoirs despite Ortona's status as the first urban battle fought by the Allies in the war.

On its 65th anniversary, Ortona is coming back to life. Thursday, the Canadian embassy in Rome hosted the European debut of *Un Natale di Sangue – Ortona 1943*, a documentary whose English translation is *A Bloody Christmas*. It was shown in Canada on the Telelatino cable channel on Remembrance Day and will appear at some point on Italy's Rete 4 TV channel.

Directed by Fabio Toncelli, it is based on Marco Patricelli's 2002 book *La Stalingrado d'Italia , or Italy's Stalingrad* . (The book wasn't the first on Ortona. In 1999, Canadian military historian Mark Zuehlke published a meticulously researched account in his *Ortona – Canada's Epic World War II Battle*).

The embassy usually has trouble filling its halls for cultural events – pancake breakfasts have limited appeal in Italy. Not this time. It was standing room only and both Toncelli and Patricelli were there to take questions. The crowd, including a few tough-looking military officials, was generally enthusiastic about the 52-minute film. The story was elegantly and imaginatively told. Toncelli took library footage and restored it to high-definition standards. He used German photos that had not been seen before. The reenactments were (mercifully) used sparingly.

The best parts were the eyewitness accounts from Ortona residents and the soldiers on both sides who fought there. Ted Griffiths, a Canadian tank commander, is obviously still haunted by the battle. His hardest task, he remembers, was pounding Ortona's church and hospital to rubble on Christmas day because they were defended by the Germans.

The battle was so horrific it took on a medieval flavour. The expert German snipers turned the streets into annihilation zones. Territory was taken one house at time, with the Canadians blowing holes through the inner walls to avoid the streets, a technique know as "mouse holing." There was hand to hand combat.

Griffiths gives us this account: "I heard footsteps approaching, but I couldn't use my pistol because the shot would have drawn other Germans. I took my knife and stabbed him before he could utter a sound. It was the first time I'd killed someone like that. My war was rather impersonal; I was sitting in a tank turret and I used to shoot people at a distance. Two or three days later I saw this body still lying where I had left it. I took out his field service book, and I found he was 17. It was very hard to live with the memory of that."

The documentary tries hard to explain why the Canadians, under Montgomery, were so intent on taking Ortona, and why the German were under Hitler's orders to defend the town to the death (the German paratroopers suffered

fewer casualties and boasted they left the town undefeated). Ortona appeared to have little strategic value. When you watch the film, you wonder why the Canadians simply didn't bypass the town. But in the end, the film offers more questions than answers.

It did come up with one intriguing bit of information. Stalin had a lot of interest in Ortona and sent observers. The film shows a picture of Soviet officers at Ortona. The suggestion is that the battle had political value; it showed Stalin that the Allies were fighting hard in Europe, and not just drinking beer in Britain while the Soviets took horrendous losses on the Eastern front. Remember, this was six months before D-Day.

Still, *A Bloody Christmas* is a fine documentary about a tragic Canadian victory. It deserves a wide Canadian audience.