

ONWARD: THE KING'S OWN CALGARY REGIMENT IN PEACE AND WAR, 1910-1960

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From Dieppe to Ortona

Up from the Ashes

The raid on Dieppe was a disaster, the tanks crews, like the infantry, having been defeated before they landed. Quickly rebuilding the 14th Canadian Armoured Regiment (as it would soon be renamed) was a high priority for the army, one it carried out successfully. Within a year, the 14th's officers and men would be fighting and winning on a grim, blood-soaked ridge none could have put on a map in 1942.

At Dieppe the officer contingent had suffered especially heavy losses—fourteen just from the tank crews, either killed or taken prisoner, and seventeen out of thirty-three overall.¹ Apart from Begg's elevation to commanding officer, there were changes almost across the board. Maj. R. R. Taylor (formerly commanding A Squadron) took over as second-in-command with Lt. D. H. McIndoe becoming intelligence officer, while Capt. D. F. Cameron returned from his brigade appointment to serve as adjutant. Capt. F. T. Jenner was reassigned from a staff training position to assume command of A Squadron, while Maj. R. B. Purves took over B Squadron with Capt. Debruce G. Trotter replacing him as second-in-command. Finally Maj. A. J. Miller assumed command of C Squadron with Capt I. A. Allison as second-in-command. Replacement officers and men soon filled the gaps, with the army's reinforcement system providing good men and providing them quickly.

By the beginning of September, the tank crews were at the Minehead firing range. Given the flood of replacements, this was the first time many had operated the Churchill's armament or repaired the tank in the field. Gunnery training had to proceed methodically, starting with the basics of stationary firing at fixed and then moving targets, and then from a moving tank. There was no lack of enthusiasm, and the new crews made rapid progress.² A detachment from the British 11th Armoured Division School assisted with more technical crew training, staying at Seaford for two months.³ For a time, Wyman exempted the regiment from any tactical schemes or exercises that required squadrons

to be away from camp so as not to interrupt basic instruction.⁴ Unlike human reinforcements, replacement Churchills were initially slow to arrive, and still plagued by reliability issues, the brigade commander's vigorous complaining notwithstanding.⁵ The month closed with some cheering news as Lt.-Col. Begg received confirmation of the awards for exemplary courage and leadership earned at Dieppe. These included his own DSO as well as MCs for Capt. Alexander and Eldred and MMs for L/Cpls. George Greenwell and Calvin Helmer and Tpr. Archie Anderson.⁶ As was inevitable, others equally deserving were passed over.⁷

By late October basic training and coursework had advanced to the point where the squadrons were able to commence elementary tactical manoeuvres.⁸ The battalion was also effectively at full strength—thirty-nine officers and 596 other ranks including attached personnel—and the same could be said of its vehicle strength, including fifty-seven Churchill tanks, though some were older models suitable only for training.⁹ With so many untested men on hand, and perhaps feeling he needed to establish his own distinctive style of command, Begg had been continually emphasizing the need for his soldiers to show discipline in everything they did, particularly in things that might strike some of them as the minor transgressions of citizen soldiers. For instance he launched a crackdown on bartering or selling food to civilians. Given wartime Britain's severe rationing, nothing save problems with women would tarnish the Canadians' reputation more. Carrying civilian (invariably younger female) passengers in army vehicles was also strictly prohibited. And casual or slovenly dress in public, even when off duty, now brought serious consequences. Basically no breaches of military order were deemed minor now, but "a direct reflection [on the offender's] unit" that wouldn't be tolerated.¹⁰

For reasons never explained, the brigade's three armoured regiments exchanged camps in late November, with the 14th moving to the Ontarios' former camp in Worthing, about 40 kms to the west on the other side of Brighton.¹¹ But there was no pause in training. Indeed, the excellent progress made during the previous three months meant the emphasis could shift to the "practical" work necessary to get the battalion—and hence the brigade—up to a combat-ready state. The difficulty of carrying out large-scale mechanized training in the cramped confines of rural England is underappreciated. With few official training grounds, tank squadrons had no option but to pick their way along narrow country lanes. No matter what it looked like, southern England was not an occupied country, and local farmers were quick to claim damages for demolished stone fences and gates, rutted fields, and injured livestock. And accident or not, a 36-tonne tank made short work of a bicycle or car, or in rare cases, their drivers or passengers. "It is recognized that as one cannot make omelettes

without breaking eggs, so one cannot train large bodies of troops without doing *some* damage,” the 14th’s war diary lamented.¹² Unfortunately, some of the practices adopted to spare the farmers and avoid the courts—particularly the tendency to stick to the shoulders of roads rather than venturing farther afield—led to a dangerous tendency by British and Canadian tank crews alike, which the Germans would be quick to exploit.

Irate farmers and bicyclists aside, Worthing and the surrounding area proved welcoming. There was such a good turnout for the first couple of regimental dances that the CO made them a regular Saturday evening event. Most of the associations between Canadian soldiers and the civilian population in Worthing were positive ones, but the incidence of venereal disease infection continued to be a problem. In December, the medical personnel started distributing prophylactics without asking the recipients to identify themselves, which it was hoped would encourage men to seek help. And an American Army instructional film, *Sex Hygiene*, was reshowed, with the adjutant sternly recommending that “attendance will be [as] strong as possible.”¹³ But as Brig. Wyman lamented, nearby Brighton “with its obvious distractions does not lend itself to furthering the welfare of the troops along desired lines.”¹⁴ The onset of colder weather also launched the Canadian Army’s much anticipated schedule of winter sports. Having grown up in a place where open-air rinks usually sufficed, the army managed to book skating time at the only nearby arena, saving the hockey season. The season was a sensation for the regiment’s team, capped with a 5–0 thrashing of the Three Rivers Regiment in the brigade championship. Hopes were high, then, when they played in the I Corps championship game at the Brighton arena, cheered on by 160 of their mates, but unfortunately the Alberta boys ended up on the short end of a 4–2 score.¹⁵

Christmas 1942 and Thoughts of Home

On Christmas Eve, 1942, in what had quickly become a tradition at Canadian camps, the regiment held parties for over 300 English children from the Worthing area whose fathers were either away on active service or prisoners of war. Each of the children had received a personalized invitation from Lt.-Col. Begg. Several of the responses, in laboured handwriting or carefully printed, with a hovering mother obviously helping with spelling, were included in the regiment’s war diary. Six-year-old Leila Rothstein’s sweet, if rather formal, note was typical: “Dear Sir, Thank you very much for the invitation to your party. I shall be delighted to come. Yours sincerely, Miss Leila Rothstein.” The entertainment—a mix of games played with the soldiers, a Punch & Judy show, and reels of cartoons—was a terrific hit, as was the formal tea with cookies, cakes and a gift for each child. Eyes popped when they opened the latter—two

chocolate bars donated from the soldiers' own parcels from home.¹⁶ It was an emotional time, with not a few tears among the officers and men, many of whom had either younger siblings or their own children, none of whom they'd seen for at least a year and a half.

The 25th dawned mild and clear. It was the regiment's second and, as it turned out, last Christmas in England. After the Protestant and Catholic services, the men were paraded for their Christmas dinner, the menu consisting of roast turkey and roast pork, Brussels sprouts, potatoes, dressing, plum pudding, and mince pies. Though the turkey was in short supply, every soldier got a portion. Following British Army tradition, officers and senior NCOs served the ranks beer. Brig. Wyman stopped by briefly to wish everyone a Merry Christmas.¹⁷ A somewhat delayed, but most welcome, Christmas present arrived on December 28 when Canadian Army pay rates were raised.¹⁸ The year, which had brought such tragedy, ended with a renewed sense of purpose.

Still More Training

Plans had been formulated to carry out intensive tank-infantry training throughout First Canadian Army during January and February. By its completion, all troop leaders and platoon commanders would have practised minor tactical situations of the sort they would encounter in mobile operations, as would all squadron leaders and company commanders. The 1st Army Tank Brigade would provide the armour. That the 14th was included confirms how far its own training had progressed in the four months since the Dieppe raid. The exercises began immediately after New Year's, with some of the tankers' time also spent on the Dorset coast working with landing craft.¹⁹ The latter exercises culminated in a dawn attack on a beach west of Cowes on the Isle of Wight, an eerie reminder of the preparations for Operation Rutter a mere seven months earlier. As February drew down, all the tank crews, accompanied by a dozen Churchills, spent a priceless day at the Beach Head gunnery range, their first firing practice on a proper gunnery range in five months.²⁰

Exercise Spartan

On February 22, Lt.-Col. Begg gave a briefing to his squadron leaders on the forthcoming Exercise Spartan, an unprecedented war game involving the bulk of the Canadian Army in England along with numerous British formations, altogether ten divisions plus ancillary units. It was particularly significant for the Canadians, as it marked the first time McNaughton's First Canadian Army took the field under his command. Things went fairly well at first, but soon unravelled in a cascade of command and control errors by McNaughton and his staff. By the time these problems were sorted out, Spartan had been

terminated.²¹ The British considered Spartan a poor show, and their critique of McNaughton's performance was especially harsh. Before the year was out he was ignominiously ousted by a Canadian government (and Army command) broadly in sympathy with the British assessment.²² For its part, the Calgary Regiment had ended up playing only a modest operational role in the exercise. Over eight days, commencing March 4, they had driven their Churchills a gruelling 250 kms, from the concentration area west of Portsmouth to well north of Reading, impressively losing only a single tank to mechanical breakdown. Despite preparing to launch several attacks, they were stood down every time—to the great disappointment of both officers and men.²³ In a matter of days all the men who had been involved in Spartan as well as their vehicles were back in Worthing.²⁴ By the second half of March regular training was back in full swing, and so was the post-mortem of Spartan. The battalion's contribution was a report compiled by Maj. Purves largely based on Begg's canvass of his officers. There was broad agreement on two points—the need for an adequate (that is, not road-bound) reconnaissance vehicle so the tanks wouldn't be blind half the time, and an end to planners' zeal for stand-to (prepare to attack) orders, which interfered with everything, not least the hours of daily maintenance required to keep the Churchills moving.²⁵

A Brief Ram Experiment

Shortly after the termination of Spartan, word filtered down that all three tank battalions would be re-equipping with the Canadian-built and -designed Ram tank.²⁶ Between the Churchills' demonstrated imperviousness to German anti-tank fire, and the fact that most of the mechanical bugs had now been sorted out, most crews were "pretty disgusted" at the prospect.²⁷ Unfortunately this was viewed as the usual army grumbling, and as more and more Rams arrived, crews were resigned to putting their Churchills in first-class running order and packing them off to some lucky British regiment.²⁸ For a time training had to be interrupted as everyone struggled to master their new equipment.²⁹

A New Commanding Officer

Post-Spartan training had barely resumed when the army announced that Lt.-Col. Cyril H. Neroutsos would take over as commanding officer. Begg's roots in the regiment ran deep, and he was well liked (and respected). Deservedly, he had received much of the credit for rebuilding the 14th after Dieppe, but field command was increasingly viewed as a younger man's game. Neroutsos was already quite familiar with the battalion from his time with them during Spartan when he had temporarily replaced an "injured" Begg. But the transition and his ensuing fourteen-month tenure as CO (before stepping down for medical

reasons) never went smoothly. Many of the 14th's officers viewed Neroutsos as an outsider, and more than a few thought there were perfectly qualified men in the regiment who could have been chosen, or that there should have been no change at all.³⁰ Neroutsos displayed an aggressive streak in action, and was a loner by nature, but he was a capable tank officer and never lost the support of his superiors.

To Scotland Again

On April 27 word came the regiment would shortly be moving, and five days later the squadrons marched through Worthing for the last time, bound for "somewhere in Scotland."³¹ Apart from training in a new locale, more than a few hoped they might finally be headed for action. In fact, they were commencing the final preparations for their transfer to the Mediterranean Theatre—in ten weeks less a day, their tanks would roll ashore in Sicily. The battalion's new camp was a lodge (the other ranks would make do with Nissen huts) situated in the picturesque Scottish border country, just north of the village of Langholm. Here, the officers were able to celebrate a delayed St. George's Day anniversary and in some style. As a sombre Dr. Alexander scanned the room, he counted only seven men who had been at their first dinner overseas only two years earlier.³²

The Sherman Tank

Primarily because of ready access to the American logistical chain in the Mediterranean, the 1st Army Tank Brigade was going to be equipped with the American-built Sherman M4, the basic tank they would fight in for the remainder of the war.³³ In its many versions, the Sherman was the principal (and frequently most maligned) Allied tank of World War II. Derived from the M3, its design facilitated mass production (50,000 were built) and ease of shipment by sea. As contemporary tanks went, the Sherman had much to recommend it. It was mechanically reliable and easy to repair, with a spacious interior for the five-man crew, a good turn of speed, and solid cross-country capability. But they were also slab-sided and too high, making their profile an easier target for enemy gunners. The Sherman's most infamous flaw was a supposed propensity to catch fire when hit, but this was a universal problem with tanks, and in the case of the Sherman pretty much resolved later in the war by design improvements in ammunition stowage. Well supplied with escape hatches, it was also (relatively) easy to bail out of, so survivability was high, endearing it to crews. Standard armament was a 75-mm gun with adequate armour-piercing capability, at least until 1944. Furthermore, the gun had an excellent high explosive (HE) round for bombardment purposes and general

infantry support, which is what the regiment would mostly be called upon to do. A pair of .30-calibre Browning machine guns rounded out the armament. Though it was approaching obsolescence by 1944, the M4, with some helpful improvements, continued to be deployed to the end, swamping the German Army with sheer numbers. It was the Mark V (a British designation), with a slightly more complicated power plant and extra maintenance requirements that found its way to allies via Lend-Lease.³⁴ First impressions of their new tank were positive, and it certainly helped that while some crews still pined for their Churchills, no one wanted to keep the Ram.³⁵

Mediterranean Plans

In April 1943 the chief of the imperial general staff, Field Marshall Alan Brooke, had shared with his Canadian opposite number forthcoming plans for the Mediterranean Theatre, and specifically whether a Canadian infantry division and tank brigade might be made available. Apart from Dieppe, the substantial Canadian Army stationed in Britain had seen no action. While national pride had once seemed a valid justification for keeping the overseas army together until it could strike a decisive blow, its continued absence from the battlefield had become an intolerable situation—for the officers and men, senior commanders, the government, and a majority of Canadians at home. Consequently the offer was quickly accepted, with the 1st Infantry Division and the 1st Army Tank Brigade being assigned to the Anglo-American force intending to invade Sicily.³⁶ On May 8, as his command completed their move to Scotland, Brig. Wyman confided to his unit commanders and brigade staff that their next move would involve “a long sea voyage and a tropical climate.”³⁷

Working-up in Scotland

The move to Scotland made it possible to train in much more rugged terrain, a big plus considering what was coming. New Shermans continued to arrive and with those on hand basic familiarization commenced under the direction of the 148th Battalion Royal Tank Regiment. Though the Sherman and Ram shared many similarities, there remained a lot to master and not much time to do it. Experienced hands loaned from a British unit that had already converted to the Sherman helped immeasurably.³⁸ Initially, as much time as possible was spent on the Kirkcudbright range honing firing skills and building critical crew teamwork.³⁹ Another two weeks was spent in waterproofing vehicles, all of which, tanks included, had been replaced with brand new models. It was a time-consuming, onerous process that had to be done with great care if it was going to produce the desired result.⁴⁰ Everything now pointed to a deployment though no one spoke openly about it. Reinforcing the suspicions, Lt.-Col.

Neroutsos assembled his entire command in the local cinema to watch two security movies: *Name, Rank and Number* and the rather ominously entitled *Next of Kin*.⁴¹ Save for a bit of poaching, discipline was not much of a problem in rural Scotland, the isolation from temptation being almost complete.⁴² However, maintaining a smart appearance remained a high priority—one might say, an obsession—and in the view of their commanding officer, “still far below [the] standard demanded.” Of special concern were their black berets, which were to “be worn ONE INCH ABOVE THE EYEBROWS, level on the forehead with the top pulled straight over to the right side, badge directly above the left eye.”⁴³ Violators were promptly put on report. Fortunately, the tankers would soon have something more useful to shoot at than Scottish deer or rabbits.

To War Again

By the second week of June, preparations were completed, and all personnel were granted four-day embarkation leaves. Advance parties then proceeded to the embarkation ports to assist in the complicated process of loading supplies and equipment. All personnel had been poked and prodded, endured rounds of shots, and been issued summer kit, which certainly pointed to “The Med.” Promptly at 0800 on the morning of June 20, most of the remaining personnel (some would stay behind to prepare the camp for its new occupants), formed up by squadrons and led by Lt.-Col. Neroutsos, marched to Langholm station. Accompanied by the Ontarios, they were soon steaming northward to the Clyde. As was the custom with troop trains, villagers paused to waive and shout encouragement to the Canadian soldiers as they steamed by. Upon reaching Greenock later in the afternoon, they detrained and, shouldering their kit bags, marched to temporary billets. Two days later, boarding commenced in a steady rain, until by the 25th the entirety of the 1st Brigade’s tank arm, along with fuel, ammunition and other supplies, had been safely stowed shipboard.⁴⁴ Before long, the LSTs—three of which carried the Calgary Regiment—had dropped anchor, formed up with their escort, and were slowly gliding down the Firth of Clyde toward the open sea. The rest of the battalion’s (and brigade’s) personnel sailed a few days later in a separate convoy aboard the HMT *Cameronia*. The previous day, all ranks had assembled on the main deck for a brief Dominion Day service where Wyman reminded them how proud he was to command men who “would prove, in the coming action ... that this was the best brigade in the Canadian Army.”⁴⁵

Apart from lifeboat and fire drills, and aircraft and submarine watches, there was little of a warlike nature to interrupt the daily routine aboard ship for either group as they steamed to Gibraltar and into the Mediterranean.⁴⁶ Sea sickness stalked those aboard the large American-built LSTs (Landing Ship

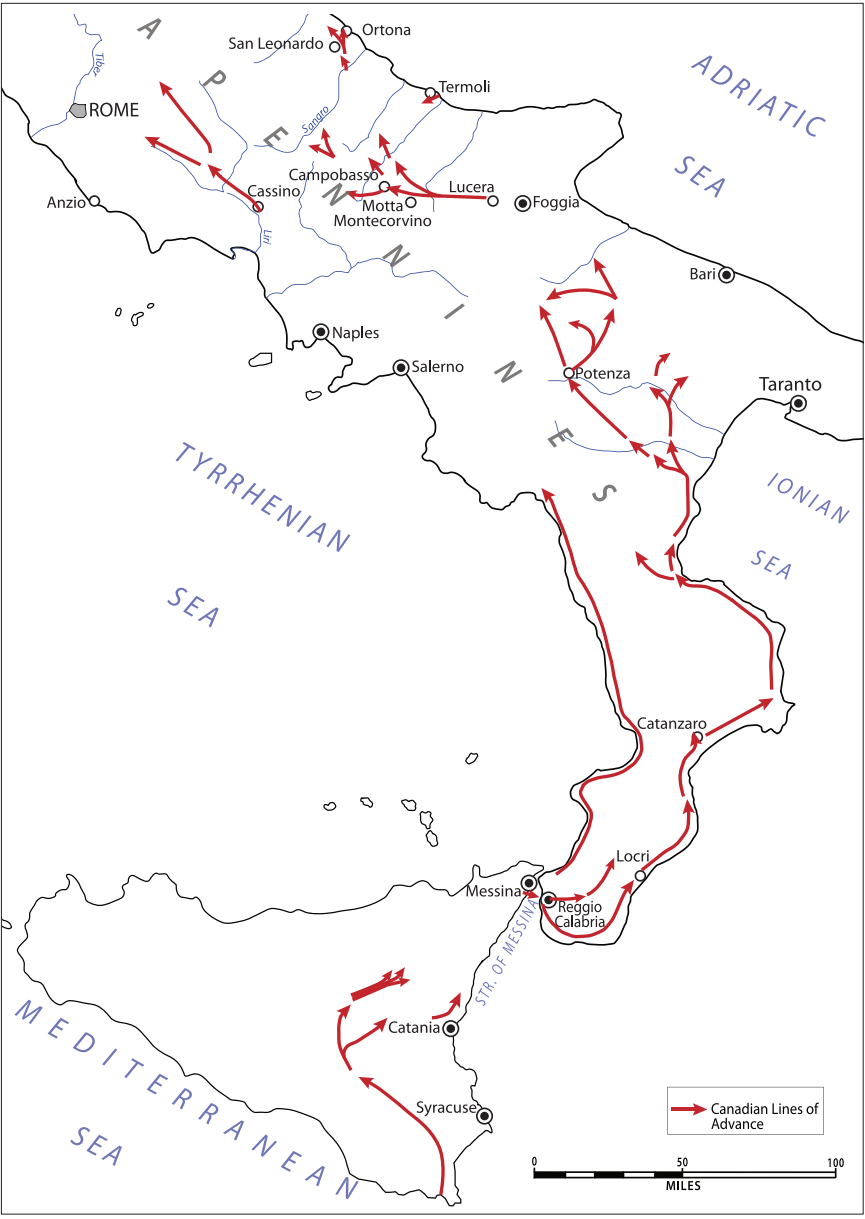
Tank), which rolled and pitched at the slightest opportunity. Such “training” as could be fit in focused on militarily useful bits of Italian, familiarizing with first aid, hygiene and tropical diseases, and of course plenty of PT.⁴⁷ After two years in blacked-out England, the men in the LSTs were enthralled by the lights of Tangier glittering in the night as they slipped by neutral Spanish Morocco.⁴⁸ Being faster, the troop ships had passed the LSTs and docked in Algiers on July 10, the day of the Sicily landings. Three days later the men aboard the LSTs put into Siracusa (Syracuse), which the British had captured two days earlier.⁴⁹ Late in the afternoon, the LSTs beached and began disgorging their cargo which, amidst inevitable chaos, formed up and headed off to their planned harbouring area at Cassibile, 20 kms to the south. Reaching it around 0200, the tired crews spent most of the few remaining hours of darkness camouflaging their vehicles and digging slit trenches.⁵⁰ On the same day the *Cameronia*, carrying the rest of Neroutsos’ command, had dropped anchor off Malta.

Operation Husky ... The Plan

Operation Husky went through several iterations before the adoption of a definitive plan in early May. Seaborne assaults by American, British and Canadian troops, supported by airborne landings, would be made along the southern and eastern coasts, stretching from Siracusa to Licata. After quickly seizing several ports to consolidate the landing area, breakouts—their exact nature to be determined by events—would overrun the remainder of the island. The British Eighth Army, which included the Canadians, made up the Allies’ right flank, and the American Seventh Army the left.⁵¹

Disappointing Times

After having gotten little if any sleep, the men were roused at 0530. After Lt.-Col. Neroutsos and his senior officers received their first briefing on the regiment’s (and brigade’s) role, the CO, accompanied by his intelligence officer (Lt. C. G. Elliott) set off to familiarize themselves with the front line.⁵² The rest of the personnel and vehicles put ashore around mid-morning on July 17, finally reuniting the battalion. It wasn’t long before they had their first encounter with the enemy when a patrol encountered eight Italian artillerymen near the camp who happily surrendered. Mostly everyone was waiting for orders to advance. In the sweltering heat, at least being close to the sea provided ample opportunity to swim. Finally, in the early morning of the 21st, the battalion set out on a twelve-hour drive replete with numberless twists and turns to Vignali where, after a brief respite, they were to continue on to an assembly area overlooking the Catania plain. Refuelling tanks was dangerous work. Possibly due to careless smoking, during such a stop one of the Shermans caught fire and



MAP 8:
Canadian Operations in Southern Italy, July 1943 – June 1944.

exploded, badly burning Maj. R. R. Taylor, the CO of B Squadron, and Capt. J. W. Singleton, his second-in-command, as well as the driver, Tpr. J. L. Monz.⁵³ The column wasn't able to set off again until midnight, and what should have been a short leg turned into a nightmare when the Ontario's tanks ahead of them nearly collapsed a bridge, necessitating an exhausting cross-country detour. The day offered the first of many lessons on the perils of manoeuvring through hilly country on poor Italian roads.⁵⁴

Generally, first impressions of Italy were not good. "Doc" Alexander, admittedly a man of strong opinions, dismissed the country and its people alike:

The heat was terrific, the dust very bad and the whole country, with the exception of [irrigated] garden plots, were dry and parched. The hills were bare and nothing of natural beauty could be seen ... The small towns ... are unbelievably filthy—row on row of dirty stone houses, in which lived people, donkeys, pigs, hens etc.—with no attempt at sanitation.

As for the Sicilians:

[They] were very swarthy, the women in particular were dirty and unkempt—the children were terrible—the men showed a certain semblance to civilized folk, but were a sly underhanded looking bunch.⁵⁵

While the Calgary and Ontario Regiments had been slowly working their way northward unopposed, British forces advancing ahead of them and along the coast toward Catania had encountered determined German (though not Italian) resistance. Meanwhile 1st Canadian Division, supported by the Three Rivers Regiment, had fought their way inland toward Enna, which they bypassed, and were now battling their way eastward, successfully evicting the enemy from Leonforte and Assoro on the same day the 14th's tanks had reached their new assembly area (Scordia). During the next few days, the 14th stayed put, though they were on alert to deal with any German armour attacking nearby British positions.⁵⁶ On July 26, Field Marshall Montgomery dropped by to give a Monty-style pep talk, reminding his audience that he had reviewed them in Sussex and how pleased he was to command Canadians again. For that he was roundly cheered, though as the tankers crowded around his staff car, pranksters discreetly lifted all four hubcaps as souvenirs.⁵⁷

Two days later, the day Canadian infantry fought their way into Agira, unhinging German defences southwest of Mt. Etna, word came down that the brigade would pass to the XIII British Corps which, as part of the ponderous

British advance toward Messina, was engaged in bitter fighting. Finally they faced the prospect of action, but it was not to be. Along with the Ontarios, their role was to block a German counterattack that never came.⁵⁸ Canadian combat operations had all but ended on August 6 when the 1st Division went into reserve. As evidenced by the start of the brigade baseball league on August 9, normalcy was returning.⁵⁹

The Luck of the Draw

The proverbial luck of the draw had denied the Calgary Regiment its chance at combat in Sicily. It had been mostly an infantry-artillery war, with reduced opportunities for tanks. Stoney Richardson later recalled that Sicily “had [been] almost a rest.”⁶⁰ And thanks to the abundance of fresh fruit and vegetables, whether bought from local peasants or “liberated” from empty orchards and fields, the fare was a noticeable improvement from England. As usual, letters home often made their way into local newspapers. The first from Sicily published by the *Herald* was from Lt. D. W. Clapperton, reassuring his parents that (on July 14) he was passing his time on “a quiet beach, sitting in the sun ...,” and not to worry.⁶¹ A report from the field penned by veteran war correspondent Ross Munro followed a little over a month later, and gave *Herald* readers their first clear account of the Sicily fighting. Under the headline “Calgary Tanks Invaded Sicily—Alberta Soldiers Disappointed At Lack of Fight in Campaign,” Munro didn’t try to hide the truth, and was presumably allowed to do so because the tone—soldiers keen to get at the enemy—would have pleased the military and was perfectly true.⁶² Still, the failure to see some real action frustrated officers and men alike, and definitely undermined morale.

At a brigade conference on August 11, everyone’s attention was focused on the presentation by the commanding officer of the 12th Army Tank Battalion, Lt.-Col. E. L. Booth, as he discussed useful lessons learned from their recent fighting.⁶³ Almost exclusively, the latter had entailed the classic “infantry tank” role of fire support for the infantry, serving as mobile artillery to suppress or obliterate defensive strongpoints, with their enemy usually being anti-tank weapons, including mines, and rarely other tanks.⁶⁴ The extensive training along these very lines they had been put through in England had obviously paid dividends.

For the Allies, Sicily had to be deemed a success. Casualties were not excessive,⁶⁵ and the embarrassing evacuation of the bulk of the German garrison along with their equipment to the mainland where they would have to be defeated a second time was merely a disappointing ending. Both American and Canadian troops acquitted themselves well, as did their British opposite numbers, who had considerably more combat experience.

Where Next?

The question of what might be done after Sicily had been overrun was hotly debated. The compromise—a landing in strength in southern Italy, with objectives rather vague beyond that—crystallized in early June. The royalist military putsch deposing Mussolini and his Fascist government in late July led to a final plan calling for British forces to land at the tip of Calabria in early September, with a follow-up landing by British and American forces at Salerno farther up the coast shortly thereafter. As part of XIII British Corps, the Canadians were to participate in the earlier operation. The great unknown was how far south in Italy would the enemy mount any serious resistance. In fact, the German Army fully intended to defend as much of Italy as it could, making the Allies bleed for every kilometre.⁶⁶ Hitler's determination that his troops hold their ground proved a godsend for Allied strategic planners, but cursed the soldiers who would have to root those troops out.

A Brief Interregnum

The 1st Army Tank Brigade would have about three weeks before being committed to battle again. The heat continued unabated, but at least movies resumed. The first screening was a Dagwood and Blondie comedy that offered pin-up queen Rita Hayworth in a supporting (but undoubtedly the most watched) role. A full program of squadron training also resumed, and the sergeants' humbling of the officers 14–7 on the ball diamond was especially well received—by the sergeants. On the evening of the 19th, the first anniversary of the Dieppe raid, memorial services honoured lost comrades. Germans weren't the only threat the liberators faced—malaria was endemic in southern Italy, and the heat combined with the shortage of potable water and the consumption of unwashed fruits and vegetables saw dysentery soar. The threat had been appreciated, and medical staffs had done their best to educate the men. If not a losing battle, it was a constant one, and by late August both illnesses were exacting a steady toll.⁶⁷ Lt.-Col. Neroutsos along with some of his headquarters staff spent the last day of the month consulting with the officers of A Squadron as well as meeting others from the 2nd and 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigades. Upon his return, he assembled all of his remaining officers and briefed them on the looming Operation Baytown.⁶⁸ On September 1, A Squadron proceeded to Augusta to be loaded onto their LST. By the next evening they were lying offshore, waiting to sail for the enemy coast. Pre-invasion rituals—and the tension that accompanied them—never became old hat.⁶⁹

Operation Baytown

Canadian troops landed just north of Reggio Calabria in the early morning of September 3, mercifully unopposed, and over the next few days managed to seize all of their initial objectives. A Squadron landed on D-Day in support, with B Squadron joining them late the following day. Meanwhile, German units were offering only token resistance as they withdrew into the interior.⁷⁰ The population of Reggio Calabria had turned out in their thousands to see the newcomers, “neither cheering nor looking very downcast.”⁷¹ As the Canadians began to advance inland into the rugged Aspromonte plateau, Lt.-Col. Neroutsos was sent to reconnoitre the suitability of the terrain for tanks. Seeing the poor state of the roads, the extensive forest, and German demolition efforts first-hand, he reported in the negative. That accomplished, he checked out the coastal road toward Locri, which he reported seemed to be open.⁷² Needing confirmation, Maj.-Gen. Guy Simmonds ordered him to seize and hold Locri. Three troops of B Squadron Shermans accompanied by two truck-borne companies of the Carleton and Yorks headed off that very afternoon. They harboured at Melito overnight, then at first light they pushed on up the coastal highway, encountering a number of road and bridge demolitions and the occasional glimpse of German rearguards melting away into the hills. The local Italians, who at first seemed merely “curious,” soon became “really overjoyed to see us.”⁷³ By nightfall on September 7, the lead part of the column had managed to reach what remained of Locri, having advanced nearly 100 kms in less than 30 hours.⁷⁴ Leaving modest numbers to consolidate, the remainder of Neroutsos’ force (which now included the entirety of B Squadron) pressed on in an attempt to thwart more demolitions, reaching Monasterace by evening, just as word reached them Italy had surrendered. The local inhabitants were beyond ecstatic at this turn of events. “Doc” Alexander described their arrival (and several days thereafter) as one long celebration, people waving British and American flags (to go with the large white flag fluttering atop the town halls), cheering and throwing the Canadians flowers and grapes. Crowds of Italian soldiers in uniform swarmed them as well, shaking their hands, shouting choruses of “bravo” and pressing bottles of wine on any who would take them.⁷⁵

The Difficulties of Liberating an Enemy

Despite the outpourings of jubilation seen during the early days, Italian civilians, particularly in the southern half of the country, rarely gave the Allies the sort of heroic welcome their comrades would consistently receive in France and the Low Countries. Apart from families grieving loved ones lost in faraway battles, impoverished rural Italy experienced the war first-hand only when the

Allies arrived. The Germans had not occupied these areas long enough to alienate the population the way they did in central and northern Italy. Destruction, whether the result of land operations or bombing, or merely from trying to squeeze lumbering tanks through narrow streets, tearing the fronts off homes and shops in the process,⁷⁶ was mostly the liberators' doing. Individual Italians could be helpful, but overall the population south of Rome struck ordinary Allied soldiers as sullen and ungrateful, "a very poor class of people" who could not be trusted, as the medical officer was soon dismissing them in his diary.⁷⁷ This only served to strengthen the troops' view that switching sides was simply opportunism, and reinforce anti-Italian prejudice, especially among British and Canadian troops. After having gazed for days at throngs of Italian soldiers drunkenly celebrating along the roadsides, Alexander's observation that "the war is over for them—but not for us" was telling.⁷⁸

Pressing On

With the weather still baking hot, turning the tanks into ovens, the pursuit continued, slowed only by the numerous demolitions. By September 10, they had reached Catanzaro, astride the neck of the Italian boot, where thanks to Montgomery pausing to give his fighting units a breather and consolidate his logistics, B and A Squadrons were finally reunited. Having advanced some 200 kms in six days, the tanks and other vehicles were badly in need of repairs, and everything, including the men, needed cleaning. At least the beaches on the Gulf of Squillace offered ample opportunity for the latter.⁷⁹

It wasn't long, however, before the Calgary Regiment was again in action. As part of the Anglo-Canadian effort to reduce pressure on the Salerno bridgehead, a mixed force under the command of Lt.-Col. M. P. Bogert (CO of the West Nova Scotia Regiment), which included A Squadron in the lead, pressed north into the Apennines to capture Potenza. Merely reaching the hilltop town was difficult enough, as the route was narrow, winding and hilly, and strewn with numerous anti-tank mines, and of course every bridge had been blown up. But reach it they did, thanks to the heroic work of their sappers. After the initial attack during the night of September 19–20 was stymied, a second, spear-headed by a troop of Maj. Trotter's Shermans, carried the day. The Potenza operation was brilliantly executed and a tribute to all participating units, not the least Trotter's armour.⁸⁰ War correspondent Ross Munro penned a story highlighting the Calgary Regiment's key role in capturing "an Italian town," and although it was held back by army censors for nine days, it became the first *Herald* account that did more than hint at what the local boys had been up to.⁸¹

Motta Montecorvino

On September 28, Lt.-Col. Neroutsos was informed that his tankers would be forming part of the vanguard of another major advance northward, this time to seize and hold Campobasso, some 85 kms northeast of Naples. By late afternoon on September 30, all three squadrons, A Squadron having worked its way cross-country from Potenza, had assembled near their jump-off line close by Foggia.⁸² At 0400 the following morning they set off, an impressive column under Neroutsos' overall command, led by its reconnaissance element, the Royal Canadian Dragoons, followed by its armoured fist—the tanks of the Calgary Regiment—and their vital infantry support (the Royal Canadian Regiment). Then came the engineers, a battery of towed anti-tank guns, field and medium artillery regiments, and two more infantry battalions. The 2nd Infantry Brigade would provide flank protection, while the 3rd would constitute a ready reserve. The Eighth Army had grown confident the Germans wouldn't make a stand before they were well north of Rome, and among the officers and men of the fighting units, the belief they had "Jerry on the run" was virtually universal.⁸³ They would soon learn otherwise.

By 0800, the main portion of the drawn-out column was edging westward along National Route 17, searching for indications of the enemy. Initially the landscape was gently rolling, the highway dotted with signs warning drivers that "Rita Hayworth has curves—so has this road!"⁸⁴ But after passing Lucera, with its dominating thirteenth-century fortress, the terrain was transformed into lines of formidable ridges, hills and low mountains across their path offering an excellent view of the advance and ideal positions from which to harry it. Atop the first of these ridges perched the village of Motta Montecorvino. As the recce screen—which included a squadron of tanks—neared, the mood became more apprehensive.⁸⁵ Initially, the plan was to organize a full-scale infantry-tank attack supported by all available artillery to seize Motta, but traffic control failures kilometres to the rear eliminated the artillery. Assembling his own and the various other commanders present, Neroutsos made it clear he favoured pressing home the attack with what they had, substituting a "shoot" from C Squadron's Shermans for the absent artillery. But effectively, the infantry and armour would have to go in alone. According to "Doc" Alexander, who was no longer part of the regiment but whose field ambulance unit was supporting his former regiment, "these orders did not meet with general approval."⁸⁶ Neroutsos had canvassed for opinions and got them. Lt.-Col. Dan Spry, CO of the Royal Canadian Regiment (RCR), was alarmed over his rifle companies having to rely on improvised fire support. And the senior artillery officer present called flat out for delay until he could get his guns up, arguing

that without their suppressing fire the Germans would easily separate the infantry from the tanks, likely a fatal development for both. Maj. R. J. R. (Bob) Donabie, commanding C Squadron, deemed his orders unclear and the task, given the tanks' guns lacked sufficient elevation to fire at targets well above them, probably beyond their capacity. Neroutsos weighed the advice, then ordered the assault to go in at 1600. In fairness, the intelligence supplied proved woefully misleading—the ridge was supposed to be defended by machine guns and mortars, not anti-tank guns. As the orders group broke up Maj. Trotter muttered to Alexander that it was “bloody suicide.”⁸⁷ Starting at 1600 meant the tanks, some of which were running low on fuel, would not be able to top up. Worse still, it would be dark within two hours, probably about the time they entered Motta.

The Shermans of A and B Squadrons rumbled past the start line right on schedule, followed by the RCR in trucks. Trotter's A Squadron was tasked with attacking the centre of Motta while also encircling it from the left, with Maj. Ritchie's B Squadron encircling it from the right. After dismounting, the RCR companies would follow immediately behind the tanks on foot. In their first major action, the troops of tanks rolled forward with great dash, but machine-gun and mortar fire quickly drove most of the infantry to ground, leaving the tankers to press on alone in the face, ominously, of sporadic anti-tank fire.⁸⁸ Spry knew his infantry would be slaughtered if they continued advancing in daylight, and no one disagreed, but calling back the armour was dismissed as well. Things started off badly when a shell hit the Sherman carrying Maj. Robert Purves, who was in overall command, severely concussing him. The two squadron leaders, along with the troop leaders and their crews, were soon plunged into a life-or-death action. The lead troop of B Squadron, commanded by Lt. A. J. Charbonneau, manoeuvred up the hairpin switchbacks leading to the crest and the village. Out of nowhere, an anti-tank round howled past just beneath his Sherman. The driver, Cpl. Ted Court, instinctively reversed behind a low hill as in quick succession two more shells screamed by. After quickly radioing he was under anti-tank fire, Charbonneau headed off cross-country, hoping to get a clear shot at his opponent. Just as *Amos* crested the ridge he caught sight of an 88 and gunner Tpr. Jack Haase quickly got a round off. Knowing their fate at such close range, the German crew spiked their gun and scrambled to safety.⁸⁹ As this excitement had been playing out, Sgt. Curly Lynch's Sherman had just slowed to pull around the same corner when it was hit, killing Lynch and badly wounding the rest of his crew. Trotter was following close behind with the rest of his troop, his head and shoulders protruding through the turret hatch so as to better see what was going on, when a mortar round stuck the roof, killing him instantly.

Capt. Don Taylor had immediately taken over command of the squadron but in the chaos its attack became more *mêlée* than organized assault. Even had it been possible to order a piecemeal withdrawal, many of the tanks would have surely been picked off as they slowly backed away.⁹⁰ Within an hour, a troop from A Squadron had reached the centre of Motta and other surviving tanks had nearly surrounded it. But without infantry to protect them from enemy tank-hunting squads, they would be sitting ducks. In the fading light, a withdrawal plan drawn up by the regiment's acting second-in-command, Maj. Stoney Richardson, was put in motion and within an hour all the "runners" had withdrawn 7 kms to the rear.⁹¹ Capt. Alexander, who with a handful of his medical staff, had braved fire to get forward and using his flashlight check each tank for wounded, patching the less serious cases up and evacuating those in bad shape. The dead were left in the tanks, to be removed later.⁹² Once darkness had fallen, a well-planned and executed operation carried Spry's infantry to the outskirts of the village at the cost of a single casualty, only to be subsequently evicted.⁹³

Ironically, in the chaos of the firefight, *Amos* regained the road and managed to make it to Motta where it was rocked by a shattering explosion, undoubtedly a mine. Mercifully, the tracks were intact and *Amos* was able to limp on toward the centre of Motta. Nearing the square, they sighted a 37-mm anti-tank gun immediately ahead of them, sprayed it with machine-gun fire, and simply ran over it, but bellied on the wreckage. Throughout this perilous adventure, *Andy* and *Archie*, the other tanks in Charbonneau's troop, had been trailing close behind. *Andy* was hit by another 37-mm, killing the co-driver, Tpr. V. T. M. Palsson, and wounding two other crewmen. Now ordered to retreat, *Andy* somehow managed to extricate itself and along with *Archie* slowly withdraw back to the start line.⁹⁴ This left Charbonneau and his crew on their own. Stuck in a narrow street, he and his four comrades fought *Amos* as a pill box for close to four hours, fending off attacks from German infantry, who repeatedly tried to destroy the Sherman with sticky bombs and mines, on occasion swarming on top of it only to be knocked off by abrupt traverses of its powered turret. During one brief lull, Capt. Taylor's tank miraculously appeared out of the gloom and following a brief discussion, managed to push *Amos* off the rubble and back onto its tracks before withdrawing. But it was a false hope—as soon as they managed to get the engine started and in forward gear, one of the tracks snapped. Their miniature war within a war resumed, only ending when one of the dozen shaped-charges their besiegers had managed to detonate on the rear deck above the fuel tanks penetrated the plating and *Amos* burst into flames. Fortunately for the crew, the fact that the fuel tanks were almost empty meant it was a fire, not an inferno, giving them all a few extra seconds to get out.

Suspecting that some of the enemy were likely lurking near the front of the tank to despatch survivors, Tpr. Duke Ross expended an entire 250-round belt from the hull machine gun to discourage them. Charbonneau, Reimer, Court and Hasse promptly bailed out through the floor hatch, with Ross right behind. Miraculously all five men managed to slip away in the darkness.⁹⁵ It had been an extraordinary fight, with Charbonneau earning an MC for his day's work. With the RCR some distance back, it was left to the 2nd Field Regiment, which had come up during the night, to "literally blow the enemy out."⁹⁶ This the gunners set about doing, dropping 240 shells into the luckless village in 10 minutes. An hour later, around 0400, Spry reported his men were in possession of what remained.

Motta had been the first full-scale attack carried out by the regiment in Italy, and really of the war. Combat casualties—the first of the campaign—were three killed and nine wounded. A trio of tanks were write-offs, with several more badly damaged but salvageable. The assault had come badly unstuck, with the lack of combat experience from top to bottom clearly on display. But men and machines had responded well in the heat of action, and Lt.-Col. Neroutsos had shown the aggression his superiors prized if not necessarily the best judgment. The most important lesson had been absorbed—underestimating your opponents was fatal.

Motta and Beyond

Some hours later, with operational command having passed to Brig. H. D. Graham of the 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade, the advance resumed, with C Squadron having replaced A and B Squadrons in the vanguard with the infantry. Struggling to see through heavy rain, the two lead troops had barely progressed beyond Motta when they came under heavy anti-tank fire. Five tanks were hit in quick succession, and the advance ground to a halt.⁹⁷ The Sherman of Sgt. Frank Underhill, who commanded the lead troop, was hit twice and caught fire. He and his radio operator/loader managed to get out, with Underhill assisting his wounded gunner. Once they had reached cover, Underhill made his way back to the tank through a maelstrom of mortar and machine-gun fire to aid the driver and co-driver but found both men dead. Desperate to get morphine for his wounded comrade, he managed to crawl to several of the other tanks, only to be driven back by the heat and flames. He finally managed to find an artillery-spotting detachment, and with his assistance, they directed a couple of salvos onto the German guns, effectively silencing them. For his heroism and initiative, Underhill was awarded the MM.⁹⁸ In a fierce assault that lasted the entire day, the rest of C Squadron and their supporting infantry, with strong artillery support, managed to push the enemy

back to the Volturara. But casualties among the tankers were heavy—another ten killed and five wounded.⁹⁹

When it came to confronting the enemy, the two days of heavy fighting around Motta set the tone for the next few months, and to all intents for the rest of the regiment's time in Italy. Orders issued to the German forces south of Rome in late September had been clear: "Within the limits of the delaying action, every opportunity is to be taken of destroying enemy forces that have pushed ahead incautiously, and of inflicting heavy losses."¹⁰⁰ Sgt. George Thring, who had reached the regiment just in time for the fighting on October 2 and was promptly thrown into action as a crew replacement, surely echoed the feelings of many of his new mates when he offered: "I knew we had a lot to learn about tank warfare ... The Germans had made us look like idiots."¹⁰¹

On October 3 the 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade pressed on without armoured support, the terrain being deemed too rugged for tanks. This allowed a party of men, including Dr. Alexander, to recover the bodies of those killed the previous day and give them a proper burial in the small cemetery the regiment had established on the outskirts of Motta.¹⁰² Clearing burned-out tanks was unpleasant work. "They are burned beyond recognition," the doctor somberly noted in his journal, "but I find eight and am able to recognize them by their [crew] positions."¹⁰³

A flanking advance by tanks the following day intended to gain some high ground was called off, Maj. Donachie having reported that the approach road itself was targeted by 88s (an 8.8 cm anti-aircraft gun also employed against armour with devastating effect), and mortar and machine-gun fire had thwarted any attempts to reconnoitre alternatives. In his assessment, proceeding would have been suicide, and his superiors agreed.¹⁰⁴ Over the next few days there was some further fighting, but it only occasionally employed armour and then mostly to buck up the morale of worn-out infantry. The overall push to Campobasso resumed on October 9, this time with B Squadron supporting the 3rd Infantry Brigade, at least when the terrain permitted, which was infrequently, while close by to the south C Squadron continued its own slow advance with the 2nd Infantry Brigade.¹⁰⁵

A Welcome Lull

Campobasso fell to Canadian infantry on October 14, the day after Italy formally declared war on Germany. Word came down that the Calgary Regiment would be replaced by the Ontarios and move into reserve at Jelsi. Most of the men had not had a hot bath in over three weeks, so personal hygiene along with cleaning and repairing kit, and vehicle maintenance would come first, and then training could resume.¹⁰⁶ There were opportunities for leave in

Campobasso—the first chance for “town leave” since Scotland. The army had done its best to provide a wholesome experience there, setting up three movie houses and opening a Beaver Club where those so inclined could read or write and have a meal. The Canadian Legion, YMCA, Salvation Army and Knights of Columbus had all established a presence. Of course, the military police were always about to ensure no one wandered.¹⁰⁷ With Italy’s co-belligerency, it had to be impressed on soldiers that civilians were no longer the enemy, and now “as far as possible we must obtain what we need for our operations through friendly cooperation”¹⁰⁸ In practice, little changed since officers generally tolerated what amounted to looting, and attitudes toward the Italian civilian population remained broadly dismissive.

Lessons Learned

It is hard to underestimate the impact of the shared experience of combat in the bonding of a unit, and in turn its impact on future combat effectiveness. They were no longer just a well-trained tank battalion, but a battle-tested one, and that made a world of difference. Attention turned to drawing lessons from what they had just come through, and how tactics and training might benefit from applying these. Neroutsos’ exchanges with his squadron commanders were frank, the only sort which served the purpose. There was agreement that the greatest problem was inadequate tank-infantry co-ordination, which the CO believed required infantry commanders to accept “that they can command much better from [inside] a Sherman tank than from a hole in the ground.”¹⁰⁹ Maj. Amy bluntly observed that “the infantry still do not understand the tank or tank men ... [and] this [is] due to only one thing—lack of co-ordination of training in England.”¹¹⁰ In keeping with his studious approach to most matters, Richardson submitted three closely-typed pages, which almost entirely focused on minimizing the threat of anti-tank defences. Whenever possible, he argued, tanks had to keep off the roads and use the available ground for cover, for it was far better to lose a tank to a mine than three or four to pre-sited anti-tank fire. Nor should tanks bunch together, but instead constantly cover one another at a distance, and when under fire, keep moving. For the tank commander, Richardson stressed, prudence and aggressiveness were both indispensable.¹¹¹ All of them agreed that these lessons needed to be front and centre in training, whether in England or Italy, and that the armoured unit’s tactical flexibility was tactical unpredictability from the enemy’s perspective and this always had to be encouraged.¹¹²

For most of November, I Canadian Corps enjoyed a well-earned reprieve from action. The hot, sunny days of summer were now a distant memory, the weather having been steadily deteriorating with frequent rain and much colder

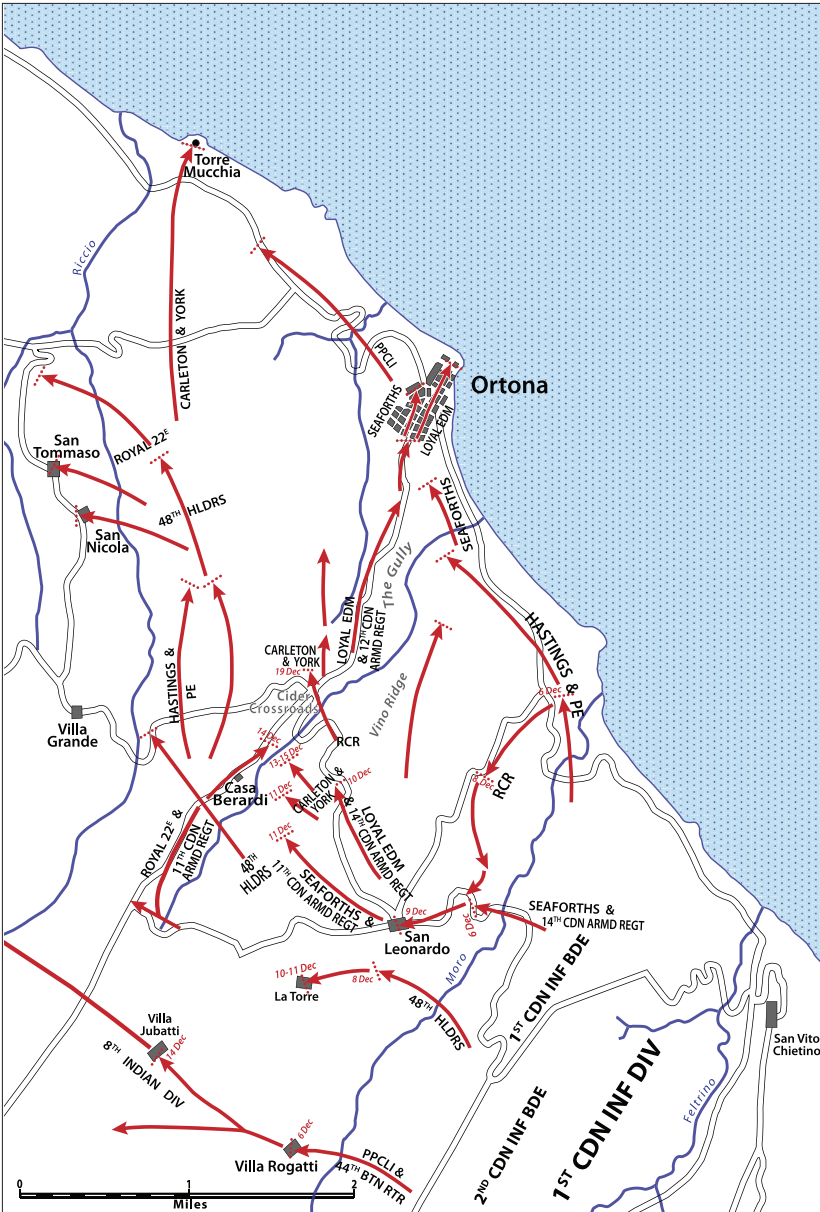
temperatures. And of course there was plenty of mud. It was hard to stay warm and dry, even out of the line, and colds were rampant. More ominously, the increased difficulty in keeping both the men and their clothing clean (and lice-free) raised the spectre of typhus, despite a thorough vaccination program. At least the malaria season was over.¹¹³

The State of the Italian Campaign

Italy's defence had to be situated within Germany's larger strategy in late 1943. Military manpower and material were stretched very thin, and priority had to be given to fending off the Red Army in the East, preserving access to Romanian oil and other Balkan resources, and building up sufficient strength to repel the expected Allied invasion in the West. As for Italy, enough of it had to be held to block any Allied intervention in the Balkans and keep Anglo-American strategic air power from bombing southern Germany and central Europe. The re-establishment of a Fascist regime in the northern half of Italy meant the Germans could employ their military resources south of Rome, where an improvised defensive line across the peninsula and grim winter weather could stall the Allied advance for months. The Anglo-American response to the Germans' decision to remain in Italy was to continually engage them. But the priority of the cross-channel invasion meant their margin of superiority would be slender. Italy would remain a secondary theatre, where except for tying the enemy down, there would be little chance (or even intention) of gaining complete victory.¹¹⁴

North of the Sangro

The 14th Armoured Regiment received relocation orders on November 21.¹¹⁵ The following morning, with their fifty-one Shermans borne on transporters to save wear and tear on their running gear (not to mention the notoriously fragile Italian roads), they set off on a two-day trek to Petacciato. On the morning of November 24, Lt.-Col. Neroutsos gathered his senior officers and informed them that the 1st Armoured Brigade, with the 14th Armoured in the lead, would be supporting the 1st Canadian Infantry Division's imminent assault north of the Sangro River.¹¹⁶ Apart from vehicle maintenance, now much complicated by chronic shortages of spares, there little to do but wait "in the mud and disagreeable weather." Despite everything, morale remained high.¹¹⁷ They didn't have long to wait, for within a matter of days Wyman's brigade received orders to move to the San Vito Chietino area abutting the Adriatic and take up positions alongside the 1st Canadian Infantry Division.¹¹⁸



MAP 9:
Crossing the Moro and the Battle for Ortona, 6–28 December 1943.

A Canadian Plan to Force the Moro River

The successful attack across the Sangro River at the end of November by Indian, British and New Zealand troops had completely unhinged the enemy, and Montgomery was determined to build on that momentum by pushing on to Ortona and then Pescara. Canadian infantry and armour would spearhead this operation under Maj.-Gen. Christopher Vokes' overall command. They faced rugged terrain riven by numerous ravines and ridges and cut by three rivers that had carved steep-sided valleys that in many locations were gorges in all but name. Much of the tillable land was covered with olive groves and vineyards, which had a nasty habit of obscuring the already restricted view from tanks. The highway serving as the Canadians' axis of advance ran northwest from San Vito and on past San Leonardo before turning northeast toward Ortona. It was decent enough by Italian standards; that is, it could cope with reasonably heavy traffic assuming the weather co-operated and engineers could make frequent repairs. But it was sinuous in the extreme—the distance from San Vito to Ortona was 8 kms as the crow flies but more than three times that to drive.

The Canadians commenced their attack during the night of December 5–6, making several successful crossings of the Moro, save near San Leonardo where the attempt was repulsed, forcing Vokes to quickly cobble together a second attempt, this time with ample tank and artillery support. On December 8, infantry of the 1st Brigade were to seize and hold the far side of the valley, with a second attack across their right flank crushing the defenders in a pincer and a third near the coast drawing off reserves. A mixed tank and infantry force would then cross over to capture San Leonardo itself. In the event the assault at the foot of San Leonardo was hemmed in at the base of the heights and had to be withdrawn, while the flanking attack was stopped well short of its objectives. Only the more distant coastal attack succeeded. Everything now depended on the last phase of the operation.¹¹⁹

San Leonardo

At first light on December 9, the enemy held San Leonardo and dominated the river valley below. It was critical that tanks be gotten across the Moro. The bridge and both approaches had suffered heavy damage, but during the night Canadian sappers had managed to complete some repairs to the structure and bulldoze alternate routes across both riverbanks. Brig. Wyman had given A Squadron's commander, Maj. E. A. C. (Ned) Amy, who would earn a MC that day, the briefest order he ever received: "They haven't secured a bridgehead—you do it now."¹²⁰ Just before 0700, the dozen tanks available rumbled past their start line to marry up with D Company of the Seaforth Highlanders of Canada

and were off.¹²¹ The start was inauspicious—two of the Shermans, failing to negotiate a sharp turn along the steep, twisting road, tumbled down a 10-m cliff.¹²² The remaining tanks, with the Seaforths clinging to the engine decks, pressed on. When the column reached the river, German mortars opened up, forcing the infantry to clamber off, but they and the tanks still managed to get across.

Advancing up the steep road exiting the valley, Lt. R. E. Hyde's lead Sherman had a track blown off, which at least alerted everyone that the road was mined.¹²³ Amy's own tank had broken down, but he commandeered Sgt. Ole Anderson's and wasted no time ordering Lt. C. A. Charbonneau's troop to work around the disabled tanks and then head off cross-country through a warren of vineyards and olive groves. Sgt. A. J. Harrison was on point, followed by Cpl. D. Morgan, with Charbonneau, as was normal practice for troop leaders trailing as "ass-end Charlie." Anderson's Sherman, with Amy squeezed into the turret, followed behind with the remaining tanks. Amy's initiative was fraught with risks, for such terrain constituted an anti-tank obstacle in its own right. One never knew what lurked behind and beneath olive thickets, and the heavy wires draped between concrete pillars that held the grape vines could bring tanks to a dead stop by snagging drive sprockets.¹²⁴ But as their infantry surged ahead, what choice was there?¹²⁵ All but the first four Shermans, plus one other, bogged down, but those five stumbled onto a side road and pressed on, with Charbonneau swinging past Harrison to take over lead. Anticipating heavy action, all crews had stowed extra machine-gun belts and cannon rounds aboard, a providential move.

Around 1000, supported by a timely artillery barrage, the remaining Seaforths—the one hundred men in an understrength company had been reduced to thirty-nine effectives—attacked German strongpoints on the outskirts of San Leonardo. Charbonneau's troop edged toward the square, having lost communication with Morgan when the latter's radio stopped working. Having apparently failed to get the message to hold back in a covering position, Harrison soon found himself about 100 m in front. Standing in his open hatch to get a better view, he was shot dead. Another German soldier planted a mine against the Sherman, which blew a hole through the side armour, severing the arm of the driver, Tpr. C. W. Moncrief. Even though also badly wounded, the co-driver, Tpr. C. A. Childress, somehow managed to extricate himself, and was lying against the front of the tank when another German darted out and shot him point-blank in the chest. Charbonneau's tank moved up, cleared the enemy with bursts of machine-gun fire, and managed to rescue the two remaining crewmen, both of whom were wounded. He then withdrew to the edge of the town, where they happened upon three tanks motionless under some tree

cover. The gunner, Tpr. M. Knodel, thought they might be Canadian and failed to fire when ordered to. But Charbonneau immediately recognized one of them was a short-barrelled Panzer IV, and sharply ordered the driver to get them out of there. Crews invariably kept an armour-piercing (AP) round in the breach, so Knodel managed to get off a kill shot over the rear deck. Fortunately, they found a location close to some buildings which offered cover. It was none too soon, either. In a matter of minutes Charbonneau caught sight of another Mark IV edging out of a side lane, perhaps 40 m away. An excruciating wait allowed the panzer to completely expose his flank, and with Tpr. J. Beaton slamming rounds into the breach, Knodel pumped five shells into the hapless German tank, which erupted in a thunderous explosion.¹²⁶

For Charbonneau and his crew, the capture and consolidation of San Leonardo and defeat of the initial counterattack pretty much unfolded as one unbroken action.¹²⁷ But for most of it they were carrying out Amy's plan to organize his handful of infantry and tanks so as to guard the most likely approaches, knowing full well that they would be hit hard and often. Given the Seaforths hadn't been able to bring up any of their 6-pounder anti-tank guns, the Shermans would have to deal with the German armour.¹²⁸ In short order, German infantry and a dozen Panzer IVs from the 90th Panzer Grenadier Division obliged, hurling themselves at the Canadians. Tank gunners destroyed two of the Mk IVs and damaged a third during a string of firefights.¹²⁹ The one knocked out at point-blank range belonged to Herb Knodel.¹³⁰

Fortunately, the worst of the crisis was over by noon as the main road had been swept for mines, allowing two troops from B Squadron and the remaining companies of the Seaforths to reinforce Amy's exhausted force. He deployed the tank reinforcements on his flanks, losing a Sherman from each troop to German tank fire as they manoeuvred into position. Shortly after, the balance of Maj. F. N. Ritchie's B Squadron plus Maj. G. F. Gray's C Squadron and the regimental headquarters reached the town. Lt.-Col. Neroutsos, who had been co-ordinating operations over the radio net, now set up his headquarters and quickly assembled his senior officers to draw up a further defensive plan.¹³¹ Weaker attacks continued throughout the afternoon, until San Leonardo was finally deemed secure by 1740. All formations then hunkered down for a fitful night, a fusillade of mortar and artillery shells from the town's recent occupants ensuring that the troops got little sleep. In a serious miscalculation, the enemy had deployed the bulk of his resources against the Hasting and Prince Edward Regiment's lodgement along the coast road and the isolated RCR position on the plateau immediately northeast of the town; even so, capturing and then holding San Leonardo had still been a close-run thing.¹³²

The fighting on December 9 had been savage, with the Seaforths' losses being especially heavy. But as their commander in situ, Lt. J. F. McLean, later argued, "[my men] would have been massacred without the tanks."¹³³ The Calgary Regiment's casualties were lighter—six killed and ten wounded, plus five tanks knocked out, all of them recoverable.¹³⁴ It is worth noting that that this was the first time the regiment had engaged German tanks.

Cider Crossroads, the Gully, and Vino Ridge

The next stage of the advance called for infantry, supported by tanks, to break out of San Leonardo, advance up the road about 3 kms to an intersection (nicknamed Cider Crossroads) from which the main road to Ortona split off. Paralleling the latter to the south lay a deep ravine, nicknamed The Gully, now the main German defence line. In miserable conditions the following morning, A and B Squadrons supported a pair of Seaforth attacks that succeeded in clearing the way for C Squadron, supporting infantry from the Edmonton Regiment, to proceed up the road to their crossroads objective. As the column advanced north on high ground along a rise overlooking The Gully from the south (soon to be nicknamed Vino Ridge), it met fierce resistance, losing three tanks in short order. They withdrew.

Sgt. George Thring commanded the point tank in the lead troop, with the other two Shermans trailing on each flank about 40 metres apart. Thring heard on the radio net that Sgt. Johnny Johnson's Sherman on the right had been struck by anti-tank fire, severing his leg. Thring closed in to help and failed to see a group of Panzer IVs creeping up behind some farm buildings. A loud crash signalled his own tank had been hit, instantly bursting into flames. "We had practised bailout drill," he noted laconically, "and it certainly worked."¹³⁵ Thring was able to lead his comrades to safety but then returned to see if he could help Johnson and his crew. Later that day his nerves went and he asked for an hour's "rest," which it was their CO's policy to grant in such situations, no questions asked.¹³⁶ Neroutsos had cobbled together a plan to have B Squadron and the PPCLI set off to reinforce the embattled C Squadron and Seaforths, but the deteriorating condition of the ground caused him to put the plan on hold.¹³⁷

On December 11, the third day of the battle, conditions had improved sufficiently to proceed with the assault. B Squadron's handful of remaining Shermans—the entire regiment had been reduced to twenty-four battle-worthy tanks—and the PPCLI pushed off at noon, sticking to the reverse slope of Vino Ridge.¹³⁸ As they slowly made their way through more tangled olive groves and vineyards, all heavily mined and booby-trapped, the infantry and tanks silenced numerous machine guns. By late afternoon, they held a position about 2 kms northeast of San Leonardo. During the night, the 90th *Panzergrenadier*

Division launched several determined but unsuccessful attacks to dislodge the Canadians. Both sides were exhausted, and December 12 proved a relatively quiet day, figuratively if not literally.¹³⁹

Determined to keep the pressure on, Maj.-Gen. Vokes drew up plans early the next morning calling for the 48th Highlanders to advance beyond C Squadron's flank, with the Carleton and Yorks then passing through the position. A single troop of C Squadron under Lt. R. W. Butler would assist the infantry if they got held up. Prior to the attack, A and C Squadrons were merged, their numbers no longer tactically justifying having two separate squadrons. In deteriorating weather, the assault went in at 0930, and almost immediately one company of the Carleton and Yorks radioed for support. Butler's three tanks crept forward, passing through the New Brunswickers, his Sherman in the lead and the others trailing at a safe distance to offer covering fire. In short order, Butler's tank was hit and promptly "brewed up." Both the driver and co-driver¹⁴⁰ had been killed instantly, but Butler and his two mates managed to exit their burning vehicle, and under withering machine-gun fire crawled through the mud the 50-odd metres back to their own lines. The two surviving Shermans then cautiously withdrew, leaving the Carleton and Yorks to dig in where they were.

December 14 proved another grim day. The German infantry counter-attacked the Carleton and York position furiously, with both sides suffering substantial losses, but the timely intervention of B Squadron helped repel each onslaught.¹⁴¹ Being continuously on call, day and night, not to mention under frequent shelling, kept the crews "buttoned up" inside their tanks, and sleep was impossible. Utterly exhausted, they finally started to be rotated.¹⁴² Still, ammunition and fuel resupply were becoming most critical. After beating off still more counterattacks on December 15, they were down to their last rounds, man-handling them from tank to tank just to keep all the guns ready to fire. And there wasn't enough fuel even to consider withdrawing. With the tracks under constant bombardment and otherwise impassable, resupply by pack mules seemed the only recourse. Maj. Schmidlin managed to get this organized for that night, the muleteers and mules being loaned by the 8th Indian Division. The task of leading the party forward fell to B Squadron's Sgt.-Maj. Charles Halstead; his bravery and initiative earned him an MM.¹⁴³ Fewer than half of the forty pack mules with their precious cargo of 75-mm ammo and jerry cans of fuel got through, but it was enough to keep the tanks fighting for another day.¹⁴⁴ Schmidlin also saw to it that an extra rum ration was included with the next resupply.¹⁴⁵

After another uneasy night, December 16 brought no lessening of the artillery and mortar bombardment. Whatever the enemy's predicament, it did not

seem he was running short on shells. On B Squadron's front, a company of the PPCLI and two troops of Shermans sortied to attack a house on the ridge top. The Germans responded by unleashing a torrent of fire, making the position untenable for the infantry and forcing both to withdraw. The Patricias' losses were heavy, and two tanks were blown up on mines, though mercifully both crews were unscathed and managed to get back to their own lines. Tank crews faced their own share of mortal risks in combat, but they all knew that inside an armoured box their chances were a lot better than those the infantry faced. Powerless to intervene, Tpr. David Ewart witnessed a heart-rending scene during that action which graphically illustrated this. A wounded Patricia had

crept within a few yards of our tank and I presumed he had a red rag tied around his waist, but realized it was his guts hanging out. He managed to get his pack off and fell into a deep track made by one of the tanks in the mud. In the coolness one could see his breath getting weaker and weaker until he died—about 8 minutes. [It] sure made me respect the ... infantry.¹⁴⁶

Since the initial push into San Leonardo and onto Vino Ridge there had been only small-scale advances intended to occupy the enemy's attention and wear him down. Finally, on the night of December 18, the Three Rivers Regiment moved up to relieve the Calgary Regiment, save its B Squadron which, because of its more exposed position, could not be extricated for another 48 hours.¹⁴⁷ A few days more of hard fighting saw Cider Crossroads and The Gully beyond Vino Ridge cleared of the enemy, finally opening the road to Ortona.¹⁴⁸

The Canadian Army had paid a terrible price, especially its infantry battalions, but the Calgary Regiment had been in the thick of the fight with its officers and men repeatedly displaying courage and tactical skill. Fifteen had been killed in action, and another fifty-eight wounded, two of whom subsequently died. Infantry-tank co-ordination continued to fall short of the ideal, as infantry commanders persisted in underestimating the teamwork required to make it work. In fact, it was not until the major attack wresting Cider Crossroads from the enemy that one saw the kind of thorough preparation armoured commanders like Neroutsos had long been advocating.¹⁴⁹

A Time for Introspection

Over the next two weeks of December, other Canadian formations, including the two other regiments in the 1st Armoured Brigade, engaged in relentless, no-quarter combat to clear the Germans out of Ortona and the surrounding area to the west and north.¹⁵⁰ The Calgary Regiment had done its share

of fighting, and welcomed a well-earned period in reserve. It was a chance to attend to the backlog of maintenance, of course, but bathing, grooming and laundry consumed much of the men's spare time, as did catching up on correspondence with family and friends back home.¹⁵¹ Realizing his men needed rest more than anything, the CO kept work to a minimum during this stint out of the line.

For an introspective commander like Lt.-Col. Neroutsos, a period out of action granted some time to reflect on what recent experience could add to the army's collective knowledge. In compiling a lengthy report of over forty pages, he focused on two major elements—the performance of his own tank crews and the recurring problems of tank-infantry co-ordination. His men had been through the most intensive, sustained fighting they had experienced thus far, and he was pleased with their overall performance. The many reinforcements had learned quickly, “action, after all [being] the ultimate teacher.”¹⁵² He emphasized that his squadron and troop officers were confident that tanks, properly employed, would get the infantry through to their objectives every time, even in Italy's difficult terrain. But this would require very close co-ordination between the two, and “[close co-ordination] only exists where a Squadron has been working and fighting for a considerable period of time with the same infantry regiment, commanded by a commander who thinks of and has a knowledge of tanks, and imbibes this spirit of co-operation and confidence into his Company Commanders.”¹⁵³ The San Leonardo operations were a reminder that in the Italian Theatre armour was usually employed in what tank zealots dismissed as piecemeal fashion, a squadron at most and usually only one or two troops, whether they were shooting the infantry onto their objective or breaking up a threatening counterattack. To Neroutsos, their actions had vindicated the *raison d'être* of the independent tank regiment—subordinating themselves to the infantry's needs rather than carrying out breakthroughs. Although often ignored in the grand sweep of a campaign, it bears remembering that the appearance of even a handful of tanks raised infantrymen's morale by orders of magnitude and carried many an operation to success that would otherwise have stalled or failed outright—the capture of San Leonardo being a prime illustration.¹⁵⁴

Another Christmas Far from Home

Being in reserve also made it possible to apply some serious thought to the matter of Christmas preparations. There were no turkeys available, but there was plenty of pork and together with acquisitions from the countryside and some extra rum, this gave promise of a “bang-up” dinner.¹⁵⁵ At least as welcome were the cigarettes sent from home by the regiment's Ladies Auxiliary and the

Calgary Brewing Company, plus the generous Christmas issue of chewing gum, candy, beer, whiskey and still more cigarettes from NAAFI.¹⁵⁶ And as the war diarist noted, rather tongue in cheek, “large supplies of local ‘vino’ have been found in vacated houses in the Regimental area!”¹⁵⁷ As December ended, word came that their second-in-command, Maj. Schmidlin, would be leaving. Although only with them for two months, he’d proven a talented administrator and was well liked. It helped that his replacement, Maj. Stoney Richardson, one of the originals from 1941 and a pre-war member of the NPAM unit, was highly regarded by everyone.

The last days of 1943 were miserably cold and wet, and mail delivery, after briefly picking up over Christmas, dropped off to a trickle with most of the cherished parcels from home long overdue. Apart from drinking up the remainder of their “liberated” vino, nothing special was planned for New Year’s. But the fate of comrades, including the twenty-five who’d lost their lives so far in Italy, was surely on many minds.¹⁵⁸

Waiting at Home

For every soldier missing his home in Canada, there were parents, siblings, wives, children and close friends who missed him every bit as much. Wartime separation, and its risks, exacted its toll from a great many people.¹⁵⁹ Writing his wife fifteen months after he had left Calgary, Sgt. Lyman Slifka expressed the sentiments of most soldiers: “God I’m home sick today ... no fooling it brings tears to your eyes when you open [parcels] up and you know who packed them. It makes you feel so darn far away.”¹⁶⁰

Just before the regiment was blooded at Motta Montecorvino, Sgt. Elly Raskin received a letter from his wife. She had used one of the special *airgraphs* set aside for the use of servicemen (and women) overseas and next of kin in Canada. Printed on it was a picture of the four-month-old son he had never seen:

My dearest. Well, honey, what do you think of this airgraph? Say I am not giving you much chance to forget us sending you all these photos. I hope you are getting them ok, sweet. Don’t you think Keith’s growing up ... he wouldn’t smile, hope you like it anyway. He was 3½ months when it was taken ... I love you darling and keep hoping it won’t be long till I see you again, sometimes I think it won’t, miss you awfully honey ... Wish you could really see him ... Mother and dad send their love ... Say hello to the boys for me. Take care of yourself, darling. God bless you. All my love and kisses, yours always, Marjorie.¹⁶¹

Life went on at home. On top of taking care of their children alone in a time of growing shortages and restrictions, a lot of wives had taken jobs, some for the first time in their lives. Many couples had been married for only a few years before their lives had been interrupted by the war. Would their partnership survive? Would two people being transformed by their separate war experiences still be in love when they were reunited? Would their husbands be faithful? And on every wife's (or fiancée's) mind, would their husband (or hoped-for husband) survive to come home? In the case of the Calgary Regiment, many couples faced more than four years of separation.

News was scarce during the war. Letters were always the principal vehicle of communication, and the army gave high priority to mail, knowing how central it was to maintaining morale. That letters from home were almost always found among the personal effects of a deceased soldier speaks volumes. Thousands of letters were travelling back and forth on any day, vulnerable to the vagaries of enemy action and logistical breakdowns. Soldiers' letters were censored by military authorities, but letters going either way were invariably self-censored, each party wishing to spare the other worry. There were odd snippets on CBC radio, where you might actually hear your son's or husband's or brother's voice. And army-produced newsreels were devoured in the hopes of simply seeing a face. A few soldiers came back to Alberta, mostly men who had been seriously wounded or those on leave after returning to take up Canadian postings. When Lt.-Col. Begg was sent back from England to become an instructor at Camp Borden in the spring of 1943, he managed to spend a few weeks in Calgary. As his train rolled into Union Station on April 19, a crowd of friends and loved ones lined the platform to greet him, but it was his ten-year-old son Billy who captured the moment with his spontaneous cry of "there's dad!"¹⁶² Later that month, when a film about the Canadian Army's activities in England was shown at St. Stephen's Anglican Church, the families and friends of Calgary soldiers packed the hall. As the 14th Canadian Tank Regiment paraded past in one segment, there were tears and smiles on many faces in the audience, and small children ran up to touch their fathers' flickering images on the screen.¹⁶³

The children's story is a particularly touching one, having to cope, as they did, without fully grasping why the separation was happening. In his diaries, Capt. Laurence Alexander, the regiment's medical officer for over two years, left a candid account of the war he experienced. He had been married since the 1920s and had four sons. Donnie (Donald) Alexander was in grade 2 when his father, feeling it was his duty despite already having seen plenty of war in the CEF after enlisting underage, joined the Calgary Regiment in 1939. And he was in grade 9 when his father returned in 1945. When the regiment paraded the short block and a half from the armoury to board their troop train for Camp

Borden, the police had kept the crowds of well-wishers well back but the youngster had slipped through and walked proudly alongside his dad, until “Doc” turned to him and said softly “go back to your mom now.” The youngster remembered breakfast being interrupted one morning by an almost unheard-of event—a long-distance telephone call—which turned out to be from his father in Halifax. It quickly dawned on them all that their father and his comrades were about to board a troop ship. Young Donnie was late for school that morning, and when his grade 4 teacher asked him why, he told her, then burst into tears. She was so upset she left the room, and none of his classmates teased him for crying. Dieppe scared all of the Alexander kids, but miraculously their father had managed to send a telegram confirming he was safe before the ominous missing-in-action telegram reached their mother. Try as she might to shield them, he could always tell his mother was worried sick about their father’s fate. She was Donnie’s hero, and the centre of his wartime life. Donnie and his father wrote to one another but it was very hard having an absent father. When the decorated Major Alexander came home at war’s end, the family followed the ritual of waiting expectantly on the platform as the train steamed in. Donnie remembered being worried he would not recognize his father, though of course he did. Within days, they were all off to Banff, their first family holiday ever, but it was a holiday, he remembered in his eighties, with a stranger. As was typical for very young children, Donnie’s younger brother clung to his mother in this strange world, taking a considerable time to get used to having his father around. Emotionally it was hard for Donnie, too; for a time, seeing everyone shake the hand of the returning hero, he tried not to feel angry, silently asking “where were you when I needed you, when we all needed you?”¹⁶⁴ Of course the Alexanders’ was a loving home, and such feelings soon passed, but they should remind us of how hard it was to grow up a soldier’s youngster during wartime, and of the sacrifices made by their fathers and mothers.

Soldiers’ wives banded together to support their husbands overseas. Communities had a way of caring in fits and starts—the crowds at the station cheering the troop trains faded away with time, literally and figuratively. Churches, neighbours, even relatives simply could not be there as much as servicemen’s families needed. Oftentimes the greatest support for soldiers’ wives came from others in the same position. The Ladies Auxiliary of the Calgary Regiment (LACR) was formed shortly after the unit left for Camp Borden. From the outset, the wives of present (and past) officers dominated the group’s leadership, though the wives of John Burns and brewer A. E. Cross were also very active, and a great asset in the work.¹⁶⁵ The Dieppe raid, with the fate of the many prisoners providing a second focus, galvanized the Auxiliary into greater action. A second group soon formed in Red Deer, where so many

from the regiment had been recruited. There was nothing surprising about the bulk of the LACR's activities—whether POWs or serving in the field, the men were all well provided with knit goods, shaving needs, candy, over-the-counter medicines, and of course cigarettes by the thousands, and news clippings and snapshots from home were stuffed in all the packets. With Cross Brewing donating all the mailing cartons, teas, dances, and bake sales raised enough funds to keep the parcels flowing. And privately members solicited donations from individuals and businesses. During the first ten months of 1943, the women raised \$1,000 for prisoners of war alone. There is no question the soldiers were quite overwhelmed by the Auxiliary's efforts. It was hard not to be grateful to people you did not know and in all likelihood would never meet, yet who worked selflessly just so you would have gifts from home.¹⁶⁶ Singly or in small groups, LACR members also regularly checked in on other soldiers' wives or parents to provide moral and practical support (such as assistance with mailing problems, which was a constant frustration for POW families). And they never failed to contact those who had recently lost someone—the most emotional visits of all. Finally, the Auxiliary held an annual Christmas party for the wives and children of all members of the regiment who had gone overseas.¹⁶⁷ While the principal beneficiaries of the work were the men overseas, one shouldn't underestimate how much these joint endeavours with other women helped these ladies cope with their own anxieties and loneliness too.

War Brides

As the months slipped by, more and more Canadian servicemen agreed that "Britain was no longer a strange and forbidding place with awful weather, deplorable living conditions, and cold people," but a second home.¹⁶⁸ And it had, to use the term of the day, "girls." The majority of the Canadian servicemen were unmarried and love, as the saying goes, is as perennial as the grass, perhaps even more so during wartime. The results were predictable—couples met and fell in love. Initially, the Canadian Army neither wanted marriages, with all their complications, nor thought the men would be in England long enough for these situations to become commonplace. However, the combination of the Canadian Army seemingly becoming a permanent fixture in places like Seaford and Worthing and the negative publicity associated with illegitimate pregnancies, led to the adoption of a more realistic marriage policy.¹⁶⁹

Mildred Clark and A/Cpl. Percy Scott of the Calgary Regiment were one such couple. Scott had left school after grade 9 so he could help out full-time on the family farm in the Kneehill Valley district. He had enlisted in Red Deer in February 1941 immediately after completing the then one-month of mandatory training under the National Resources Mobilization (home defence

conscription) Act. Mildred Clark was solidly middle class, born and raised just outside London. Having earned a degree in psychology from Cambridge, she was a sergeant in the WAAF. They had begun courting in June 1942, and it had obviously blossomed, for eight months later he formally applied for permission to marry. It usually fell to chaplains to assess matters, with the commanding officer making the final decision. Capt. (Hon.) N. E. L. Smith's report noted the twenty-five-year-old Scott was an experienced farmer and would take over his father's operation, complete with "good machinery, paid for," when the war ended. The family seemed to have ability, Smith noted approvingly—a younger son running the farm (but intending to go to university), one daughter married, another working in Calgary and a third serving as a nurse in the RCAF, with a third son serving in an RAF bomber squadron. Miss Clark was "a girl of quiet tastes [and] presumably ... equipped to recognize the type of man she would prefer to marry." Religion was not going to be a problem as they were both Anglicans, and they would have their own house on the farm, minimizing the potential for parental interference. The chaplain was pleased to hear that Scott had "told her about conditions in Canada—isolation, cold, hard work." Overall, Scott seemed "to be taking it all conscientiously."¹⁷⁰ And last, but by no means least, the couple had decided not to start a family until after the war. Lt.-Col. Neroutsos approved the request four days after he received the chaplain's report, and Philip and Mildred wed on 31 May 1943 while the regiment was completing its final training in Scotland before it set out for the Mediterranean.

Barely six months later, during the attack on San Leonardo, A/Cpl. Philip Scott lost his life when his tank was hit and burst into flames. That such tragedies were common enough in Mildred's circle will have brought sympathy but won't have made bearing the news any easier. The official condolences—Canadian and royal—reached her early in 1944. When she inquired as to when she might receive her husband's personal effects, items that would have meant the most to her, like photographs, his wedding band, and watch, she was informed that "all personal effects of your late husband were destroyed by enemy action at the time of his death."¹⁷¹ No doubt she realized exactly what such phrasing meant. Though a widow, Mildred Scott chose to come to Canada with the thousands of other war brides. She reached the farm in February 1945, but stayed only briefly, following her mother- and father-in-law to Calgary when they had decided to retire. Her plan was to stay with them for a year before setting out on her own. Like other war widows, in the midst of her grief she had to deal with all of the time-consuming bureaucratic burdens such as the disposition of her late husband's estate, his post-war reburial, and the phrase she wished to have inscribed on his permanent gravestone. In 1946, Philip Scott was reinterred in the Moro River Canadian War Cemetery with full honours, and his marker bears

the inscription she thoughtfully chose: "For Ever Dearly Remembered—Wife, Mother and Dad, Brothers and Sisters."¹⁷² In Calgary, Mildred busied herself in the Red Cross work she had done in England, her supervisor reporting that "she is very happy in her new home."¹⁷³ Like many next of kin, she wrote to the authorities in Ottawa about the possibility of visiting her husband's grave if the opportunity arose. The last correspondence that survives is a letter to the Department of Veterans Affairs written in July 1949, informing them that she had remarried and requesting that all information pertaining to her late husband and in particular the promised photograph of his grave be forwarded to her. "I will appreciate it very much if you will take note of this request."¹⁷⁴

No End in Sight

In the late summer of 1942 there had been little time to dwell on the disaster at Dieppe. Rebuilding the regiment was the only priority, and efforts to this end proceeded apace under the leadership of Lt.-Cols. Begg and Neroutsos. In this task, they were ably assisted by the cadre of officers and men of the old regiment. By the late spring of 1943, a new regiment was ready for battle. The despatch of sizable forces, including the 1st Army Tank Brigade, to the Mediterranean Theatre was meant to be a temporary separation from the rest of the Canadian Army; however, it became all but permanent, which meant the Calgary Regiment's war would be defined by the Italian Campaign. Beginning in early October, combat became the norm for the tankers as they supported the infantry in their gruelling advance northward. Early engagements at Motta Montecorvino and San Leonardo were victories but the regiment suffered a bloody nose in both operations, confirming that officers and men still had plenty to learn about fighting an experienced, determined, and at times, fanatical enemy on ground that greatly favoured defence. But these engagements also showed the Canadians had plenty of courage and determination of their own.

There was a disheartening sameness about the Italian Campaign that was readily apparent even in the early days. Save for the changing weather—it was always another ridge, another river, another strongpoint, another casualty, another pair of identity discs carefully slipped from around a comrade's neck. In the absence of any possibility of sweeping advances, most of the actions were small but brutal, and the Calgary Regiment had suffered through their share in 1943. There seemed to be no end in sight, and 1944 simply promised more of the same.



5.1 Infantry from the West Nova Scotia Regiment hitch a ride on a Calgary Regiment (A Squadron) Sherman during their joint advance from Villapiano to Potenza, 18 September 1943. (LAC, PA-177155)

5.2 British and Indian officers serving in the 6/13 Royal Frontier Force Rifles pose in a Jeep. They and their men had fought alongside the Calgary Regiment during Operation Honker. (LAC, PA-132798)



5.3 A Sherman tank of the Ontario Regiment crossing a stream near Campobasso, 26 October 1943. Obvious fords and their approaches would invariably be mined, and possibly in the sights of German anti-tank guns, so this was far from a straightforward matter. (LAC, PA-204149)





5.4 Riflemen of the 1/5 Mahratta Regiment dismount from a Calgary Regiment Sherman during a joint training exercise in late August 1944. The effectiveness of tank-infantry cooperation on the battlefield was determined by the thoroughness of such training. A month later both regiments had crossed the Arno and were pressing northward toward the Gothic Line. (LAC, PA-141747)



5.5 Canadian units attempting to advance from the Gustav to the Hitler Line, late May 1944. Such traffic snarls were the bane of the regiment as it shifted toward the Aquino sector of the front. (LAC, PA-140208)

5.6 A Sherman of the Ontario Regiment, entering the ruins of San Pancrazio on 16 July 1944, not long after B Squadron of the Calgary Regiment and its accompanying infantry from the 2/ Royal Fusiliers had cleared it of the enemy. From time to time the Germans would resist fiercely before resuming their retreat. Rooting them out devastated these unlucky Italian communities. (LAC, PA-160448)



5.7 A massed column of heavily camouflaged Sherman tanks from a Calgary or Ontario Regiment squadron wait east of the Gari River on May 10 or 11, 1944, immediately prior to the launch of Operation Honker. The danger was being detected by German artillery spotters, hence the extensive camouflage. Fortunately *Luftwaffe* reconnaissance (or activity of any kind) was almost non-existent by this stage of the Italian campaign. (Canadian War Museum, 20020045-2721)





5.8 Brig. William "Spud" Murphy (far R) briefs Lt.-Col. Neroutsos (standing, centre) and other Calgary Regiment officers during a brief lull in British operations near Aquino, 23 May 1944. (LAC, PA-204305)



5.9 Checking through parts as the Calgary Regiment re-equips with the more powerfully armed Sherman Firefly in Dottignies, 22 March 1945. (LAC, PA-144121)

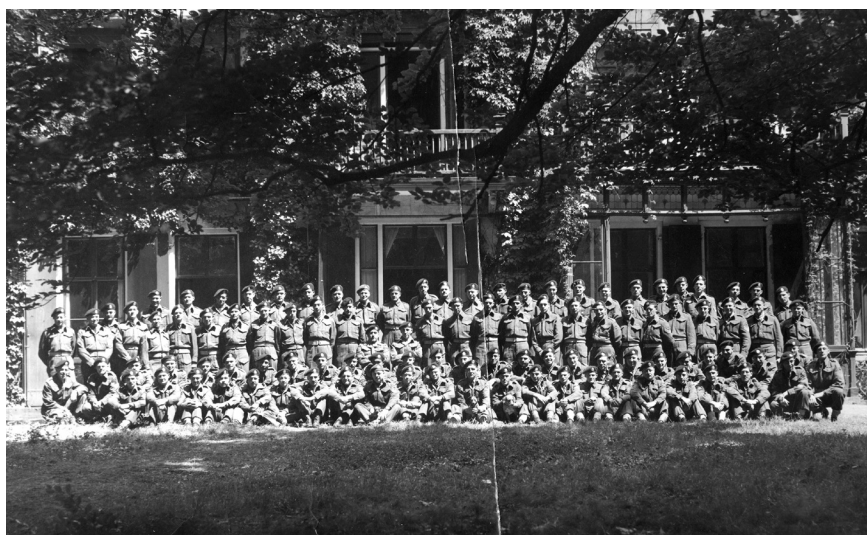
5.10 Cpts. Jim Quinn and R. D. Spittal mixing with the locals somewhere in Holland, likely after VE Day. (KOCRA, P-400-40-0075)



5.11 Citizens of Ede celebrate with their Canadian and Scottish liberators, 17 April 1945. The Ede operation was the last serious fighting for the Calgary Regiment, the war ending (in Holland) seventeen days later. None too soon for the brave young men who had made it through. (KOCRA, P-400-40-0079)



5.12 Personnel of the Reconnaissance Troop pose beside one of their M5 Stuart light tanks, June 1945. The otherwise obsolescent Stuart proved invaluable in this role, as well as in transporting fuel, ammunition and other supplies to forward areas during combat. In Italy the turrets had often been removed to lower the vehicle's profile. (KOCRA, P-400-40-0106)



5.13 Officers and men of the Calgary Regiment's A Squadron assembled in Driebergen, 18 June 1945. With almost daily departures for early repatriation or service in the expected invasion of Japan, the regiment was rapidly being dismantled. It was an emotional time, with the sadness addressed to a degree by the many good-bye parties. (KOCRA, P-400-40-0092)



5.14 Maj. Bob Taylor, then commander of A Squadron, celebrates Christmas in the sergeants' mess, San Martino in Gattara (north of Marradi), 1944. The joviality, and Taylor's presence as an officer, speak volumes about the camaraderie in a tank unit where rank distinctions certainly mattered, but nonetheless inevitably became blurred. (Glenbow Archives, pa-1599-385b-20)

5.15 Officers and men of the Calgary Regiment march through downtown Calgary in their homecoming parade, 1 December 1945. A point system instituted to make demobilization fairer than in 1919 meant many veterans had already returned. And soldiers from other units had been temporarily incorporated into their ranks simply to facilitate getting the men back to Alberta. But the core of the regiment from 1944 was there to be honoured. (Glenbow Archives, pa-1599-618-64)

