

Winnipeg Free Press - PRINT EDITION

SUNDAY SPECIAL

Ortona: A soldier's story

Canadians shivered, bled and won in fierce 1943 battle

By: Martha Sarmatiuk



Canadian soldiers move into ruined Ortona, a seaport in southern Italy, 65 years ago this week. (NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF CANADA)



Michael Gayoway



War artist Lawren Harris's view of Ortona



Tory Enright, with ponytail, at Ortona cemetery

ORTONA, Italy -- The Moro River runs peacefully in its valley these days -- a lot different from the scene in December 1943 when some of the most bitter fighting of the Second World War Italian campaign was waged on this bloodstained stage.

There has been inevitable progress in this region of Italy since that time, and you can see it in the proliferation of vast wrought iron-fenced villas prominent in the Abruzzese hillsides and in the busy towns along the Adriatic coast. But perhaps most telling are the prosperous vineyards and olive groves that 65 years ago were just humble props in the moving scenography.

Fossacesia and San Vito along the coast, and the smaller inland hamlets of San Donato, San Leonardo and Villa Rogatti had been quiet and inobtrusive havens before the war. Tending grapes and olives on difficult hilly landscapes was the most common occupation. That changed in the fall of 1943.

From July of that year, the Canadian 1st Infantry Division, part of Montgomery's 8th Army, had been advancing up the Adriatic coast from their initial assaults in Sicily and Italy to reach their objectives of Ortona and Pescara. And now, at the end of November, they were ordered to take positions south of the Moro.

Part of the 1st Division was the 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade; one of the brigade's three regiments was the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry and one tiny element of the PPCLI was Pvt. Michael Gayoway, shivering in the rain on the south bank of the Moro. The Germans, in retreat to this point but then strengthened with skilled reinforcements, were well entrenched in the hills and slopes north of the river, with a nearly ideal panorama of the coming battleground.

The Canadians had little information about the area and some of what they had was incorrect. The rain was constant, sometimes in sheets and sometimes in a gloomy drizzle, but never relenting. It turned roads and fields into quagmires that in turn threw military plans into chaos.

The Patricias were ordered to position themselves across the river from Villa Rogatti. Villa Rogatti in itself was not a town of any importance -- it just happened to be a stepping-stone, full of Germans, along the route to Ortona.

To Gayoway, 23 years old, the scene was a far cry from the warm house on Redwood Avenue in Winnipeg and his mother's homey preparations for Christmas. We'll never know his thoughts. But imagination can turn the fields into mud and the sunshine into cold winter rain, and put us inside his head as he stood on that soggy ridge, looking out through the drizzle over the valley of the Moro to Villa Rogatti.

As surely as he held a rifle in his hands, battle will explode in only a few hours.

Reconnaissance has determined that gun pits have been dug all around the town and in the surrounding vineyards and olive groves.

Houses have been turned into heavily fortified bunkers by the panzer grenadiers, supported by their tanks.

The proposition afforded to the Patricias, Michael thinks, is not a promising one.

He lets his mind wander back to happier days with his brother and sister, Allen and Elsie, on Redwood Avenue, to when he was a student at Margaret Scott and Faraday schools in Winnipeg, and to the comradeship of his pals at St. John's High School. He had a lot of good friends because he was a good friend -- always thinking of others. Why, hadn't the old folks next door kept telling his mother what a good son she had? And she sure did laugh at all his stories. Not the ones from here, that's for sure. I'll paint her a better scene of that town, he promises himself, when I'm out of here.

There's no more time for wool-gathering. The sergeant is calling. Michael shoulders his rifle and makes his way over to his company commander for last-minute instructions, his boots sinking into the mucky Abruzzo clay.

"I'd just like to get out of this rain," he says, mostly to himself.

But Pvt. Michael Gayoway was as close to Ortona -- or to Rome or London or his warm and loving home in Winnipeg -- as he would ever be. He did not even make it to little Villa Rogatti across the river.

Today, he lies in the Moro River Canadian War Cemetery in Ortona. He was killed Dec. 4, 1943, on the eve of the crossing of the Moro to take Villa Rogatti. His picture never got to his mother and she mourned him till the end of her days.

As for the Patricias, they fought a gruelling, deadly battle with the enemy and despite heavy casualties took Villa Rogatti. They marched on to the larger battle, clawing their way into Ortona on Dec. 20. There, with Christmas all but forgotten, they fought some of the most horrendous and vicious combat of the war, battling face-to-face in the streets with the best soldiers Germany could field.

On Dec. 28, 1943, the Germans withdrew.

It is called the Battle for Ortona but some old soldiers swear the name doesn't really do justice to the fight that comprised not just the eight bitter days in Ortona but all the tremendous battles fought and won from the earliest days of December 1943.

If you walk into Villa Rogatti these days on any warm and mellow October afternoon, you'll come across a rumped, deflated, old fellow resting there with his head on his chest who has brought himself to the shade of this olive tree and to this bench just to sit and maybe ponder life.

If you nudge him and excuse yourself, he will explode into irrepressible animation when you ask him if by any chance he saw any Canadese in these parts during the war.

"Canadese? Canadese!! Certo!

"Certo! Of course! Of course! There were so many Canadese... and Tedeschi! Germans! Oh, there were so many and so much terrible noise. The bombs. Boom! Boom! And the guns. I was so afraid of the guns. One Canadese, oh, he was as high as that door. He wanted to adopt me. I was only 10 years old. He was so big and he wanted to adopt me. Who knows where he is now?"

For students, war graves a touching sight

ORTONA, Italy -- Canadians by the hundred marched into this Adriatic seaport again last month, but these were students, not soldiers.

For the marchers, who included 50 students and teachers from Kildonan East and Miles MacDonnell collegiates, it was a moment to reflect on war and its consequences

For Dave Robinson, the inspiring force behind the Remembering Ortona tour, it was the successful realization of his personal scholastic mandate: "We must as teachers make the teaching of Canadian history 'relevant and hands-on', an experiential learning experience that will be imprinted in students' memories."

On the heels of a triumphant tour to Vimy Ridge last year, the Port Perry history teacher generated the same positive intensity for this year's trip, timing it to coincide with events commemorating the 65th anniversary of the Battle for Ortona.

Each young person was responsible for representing one soldier who fought and died in Italy and one soldier who is now fighting in Afghanistan. At the Moro River Canadian War Cemetery where more than 1,300 Canadian soldiers of the Ortona conflict are buried, each student stood at the headstone of his or her soldier and laid a special cross to his memory.

"I was overwhelmed with emotion when I got to the gravesite and actually saw where my soldier was buried." says Tory Enright, a Grade 12 student at Kildonan East. "I felt really saddened to know that he died when he was only 20 and never really got to live his life. To think that someone was willing to risk their own lives for the lives of others really touched my heart."

Of the march into Ortona, Robinson observed: "It began to rain for our march into the city square; many remarked that the rain was a symbolic cleansing, a rebirth of memory. I found it most fitting, not too harsh but a stark reminder for the students as they followed in the footsteps of their soldier."

What impelled these students to take part in a trip to Italy, whose scope was to visit a battleground with its adjacent cemetery, a cruel reminder of war's consequences? Many of them, Robinson answers, are proud Canadians and are interested in their history. Others have a grandfather or a great uncle buried there and wanted to feel part of that something larger that these men died for.

And did these students come away more enlightened as he had hoped?

"For many it was an epiphany of sorts," Robinson said, "a defining moment of self-awareness. For many it will happen as they reflect back, perhaps in a week, a month or next Remembrance Day."

And as for Tory, there is no doubt: "I left behind a sense of growth, happiness and love towards all those who have fallen. I brought home a new way of looking at the world and magnificent memories that I will cherish forever."

Martha Sarmatiuk is a freelance writer based in southern Italy.