

Veteran Bob MacDonald recalls darkness of World War II

Resident considers documentation important despite emotional toll

David Brindle / Powell River Peak

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ESTEEMED VET: World War II veteran Bob MacDonald displays his medals. David Brindle photo

On a Saturday night in late fall of 1940, along with many of his friends, Bob MacDonald enlisted with the Canadian Armed Forces. He joined the Loyal Edmonton Regiment, also known as the Eddies, at age 18.

MacDonald was one of more than 1.1 million Canadian men and women who served in World War II.

“There are so many stories to tell about war, but not many happy ones,” said MacDonald, who has lived in Powell River for 36 years.

Now 96, MacDonald sometimes becomes emotional and breaks down when asked to talk about the war, but he said it is important to have the stories documented before his memory fades, as there are few veterans left.

The Eddies were with the 1st Canadian Division that was part of the invasion of Sicily and the long, bloody Italian campaign from 1943 to 1944.

MacDonald shipped out to England in 1941 and then spent another 14 days at sea while bound for Algiers.

“I was sicker than hell all the way; you can imagine,” he said. “We could have baths, but it had to be in saltwater pumped from the sea. I had a hammock and some fellows slept on the floor or on tables. I was dirty all those days from England to Africa. God, the smell.”

After a month in Africa, MacDonald fought in the invasion of Sicily. Once at Sicily, MacDonald became a flash spotter, a member of a 10-man observation unit that calculated enemy positions. He also carried a Bren light machine gun. As observers, they spotted enemy mortar, machine guns or artillery flashes.

“You’d get a good reading on it,” said MacDonald, “then our headquarters would phone artillery headquarters and within minutes they’d bring the fire down.”

The soldiers always worked in the dark and were surrounded by disease. Hospitals were filled with sick people.

“So many chaps came down with malaria and typhus,” he said.

MacDonald said Sicily and Italy were dusty and dirty places.

“We would miss the bath detail a number of times and you’d go on maybe a month before you had a wash or a bath,” he said.

Dusty roads from tank and truck traffic could be deadly, inching along Italy’s narrow and treacherous single-track roads.

“You wouldn’t travel during the day because the dust cloud would bring down fire,” said MacDonald. “We had a chap, a driver, who would bring our rations and mail. He came down the road to beat heck raising dust, threw our mail or food out to us and on the road

he went. No sooner had he gone by there'd be one or two shells coming down. If it wasn't for the walls of the house that were about three-feet thick of stone, we wouldn't have made it through the day."

MacDonald served on the same flash spotting troop with the man who would have become his brother-in-law, but Jack Vassar died in the Battle of Ortona.

"I was asleep at the time," said MacDonald. "We were in a camouflaged slit trench and these other chaps were being brought in by the infantry through a minefield to our location to relieve us. It was darkness; you couldn't do it in the daylight. It was a cool night in the fall and it was raining. We arrived back to headquarters and heard that Jack had died."

On some of the mail runs, care packages came from Vassar's mother, Gertrude, MacDonald's future mother-in-law. When he returned home to Edson, Alberta, after the war, he said he knocked on Gertrude's door.

"I told her who I was and she said, 'You get in here, I want to talk to you. I've heard about you,'" said MacDonald. "She had her daughter home and she said, 'This is Bob MacDonald, Francis.' Jack never told us he had a sister and she was a good looking gal; six months later we were married."

MacDonald and his wife travelled to Italy 17 times over the years to visit Vassar's grave.

Ortona resonates in Canadian military history with the same reverence as Ypres, Somme, Amiens, Dieppe, Passchendaele, Normandy and Vimy Ridge.

"Ortona was called the Stalingrad of the Italian campaign; so many died there," said MacDonald. "We were advancing into the open to overtake the Germans and all they were doing was sitting in positions, defensive positions, knocking our people out and then moving back to another line."

The battle continued for several days.

In Rick Atkinson's book *The Day of Battle: The War in Sicily and Italy, 1943-1944*, he wrote that the Italian campaign was at a stalemate and it was up to the 1st Canadian Division to break it. The author also wrote that the tactic used was a full frontal assault, with shell fire so intense it was "like a raving madhouse" and when they reached a mined and booby-trapped gully, the Canadians were held in a "filthy limbo."

According to the book, 1,000 Canadian lives were lost while taking the gully, an enemy hold still remained in the town ahead afterward, the fight went doorway to doorway and the front was measured in alleyways.

“Five rounds of artillery shells landed around us and we cowered in the corner; I remember it was darkness,” said MacDonald. “Every one of them missed but I can remember the boys were all awake. We all started just giggling and laughing; it was nerves. Some fellows became accustomed to it and said, ‘Aww, shut up, you guys, for God's sake, it's not even close.’ Some other fellows were quiet, it affected them so much.”

MacDonald said he remembers a soldier who was ready to run one night.

“A shell landed, a machine-gun burst came at us and took some chips out of a building,” said MacDonald. “He started to run and I grabbed hold of his pant leg, tripped him and got him behind me. He said, ‘Oh my God, Bob, we're gonna die,’ and I said, ‘No we're not.’”

MacDonald said he pressed up against the man on a wall and told him he was protected.”

“He was a real sweet guy,” said MacDonald. “His nerves were on edge at all times.”

After Canadians took Ortona, Atkinson wrote that a sign posted at its city limits read, “This is Ortona, a West Canadian town.”

Ortona was one of the deadliest Canadian battles of the war, and one of the proudest.

MacDonald did not return to Western Canada until after the uprising of Texel, one of the last battles of World War II.

When he arrived home, only his mother and father met him at the train station in Edmonton. All of the victory parties were over.

MacDonald entered the war as a private and came out a private. For his service he earned the gratitude of a nation and \$1,420.

Going off to war was an adventure, said MacDonald.

“We were going to be home in a year or back in six months,” he said. “I just thought, ‘my buddies are joining up. I'm not going to be left home alone.’”

MacDonald said he would do it again if his country needed him because it is his duty.