

THE BATTLE FOR ORTONA

'By December 20 the Canadians had reached the outskirts of Ortona, but it was not until three days after Christmas, after very severe fighting, that the town was cleared of the enemy. This was the first big street-fighting battle, and from it many lessons were learned.'

— Winston Churchill,
The Second World War, Vol. V, Closing the Ring

'Everything before Ortona was a nursery tale'

— Maj Gen Chris Vokes, Divisional Commander,
1st Canadian Infantry Division

The battle for the small town of Ortona in December 1943 was the culminating event of a six-month campaign undertaken by the 1st Canadian Infantry Division and the 1st Canadian Armoured Brigade through Sicily and Italy.

It was a battle that the Canadians did not expect to fight, in a town of no real strategic value and one that would see them pitted against 1. Fallschirmjägerdivision, one of the strongest, most motivated, and elite German units in the Mediterranean Theatre of Operations. The epic action would become known by the western Allies as 'Little Stalingrad'.

THE COMBATANTS AND SETTING

THE CANADIANS IN ITALY

As part of Montgomery's famous Eighth Army, supported by the Desert Air Force, the Canadians had participated in both the landings on Sicily (10 July 1943) and on the Italian mainland (3 September 1943).

In the vanguard, the Canadians advanced 75 miles in the first week of the mainland campaign, despite bad weather, poor roads and harassment from German rearguard actions.

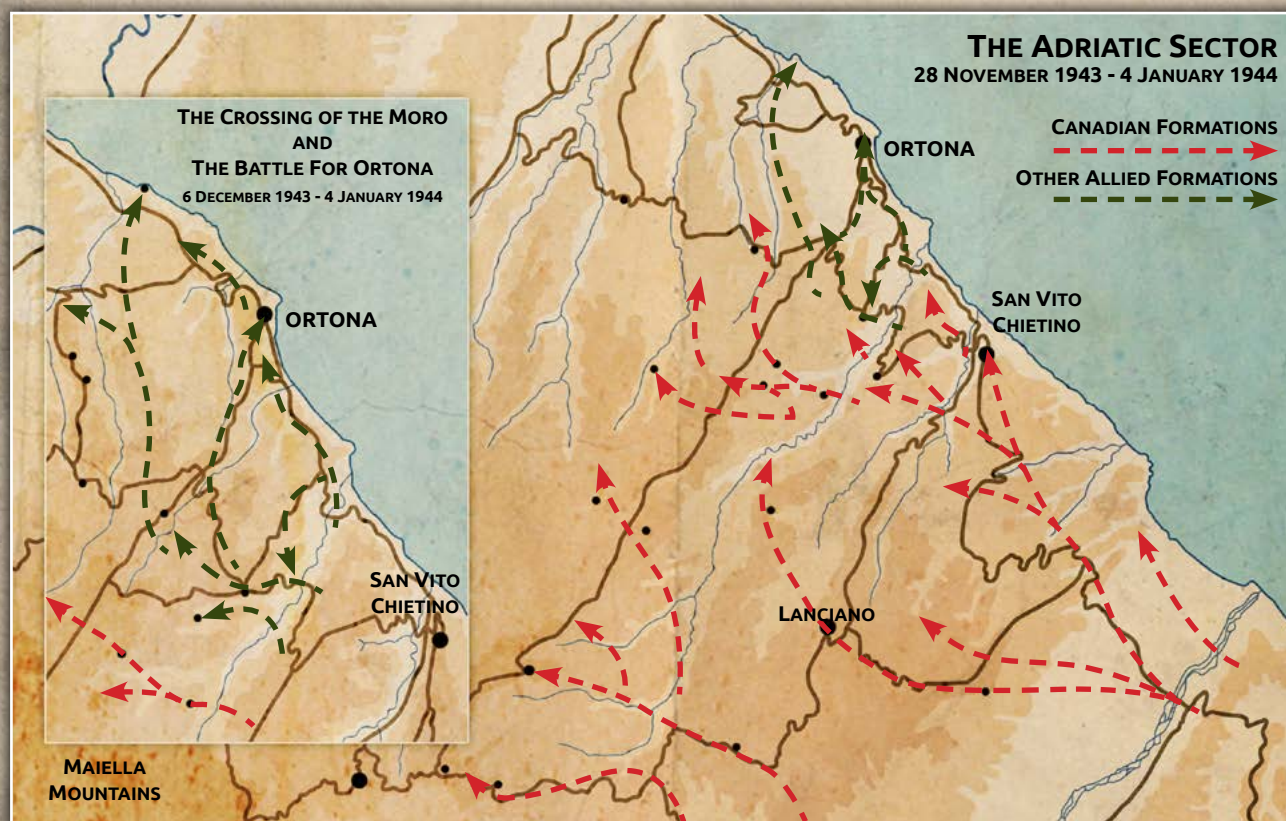
By the end of their first month on Italian soil, with the Allies now controlling most of southern Italy including the vital Foggia airfields, plans were formulated for the advance on the most important objective in the country — Rome. The US Fifth Army would drive north from Naples, up the west coast of the country.

On the east coast, separated by the near impenetrable Apennine Mountains, the Eighth Army would keep pace with the Fifth Army forcing the Germans to deploy forces and defend against both axes of attack.

In November 1943, the Allies had reached the German Gustav and Bernhard lines, a series of well-prepared, heavily fortified defensive positions blocking the roads to Rome and were prepared to stand and fight. The Allies dubbed these positions 'The Winter Line' and began to undertake a major offensive operation to penetrate it.

The plan, developed by Field Marshal Alexander, called for the Eighth Army to throw the first punch in a one-two combination. By crossing the wide Sangro River and seizing the heights beyond, the Commonwealth forces would have a foundation to rapidly advance against a disorganised enemy, drive up the coast to take the city of Pescara, and then turn westwards through the Avezzano Valley to seize Rome.

Faced with this inexorable onslaught the Germans would be forced to move divisions facing off against the Fifth Army on the Gustav Line to stop Montgomery's advance on Rome.



With his opposition weakened, General Mark Clark's forces would throw the knockout punch of the combination, smashing though the Germans holding Cassino and linking up with a planned amphibious invasion behind the Axis lines at Anzio.

Montgomery stated, 'The Germans are in fact in the very condition in which we want them. We will now hit the Germans a colossal crack!'

But by now, normally sunny Italy was anything but. Freezing rain had turned the landscape into a sea of mud and had swollen the rivers, such as the Sangro, into raging torrents. The "soft underbelly" of Europe really had truly become a "rough old gut". Alexander, and the other Allied commanders had also underestimated the Germans who were by now almost equal in strength to the allies, and had the advantage of defending terrain seemingly purpose-built to that end.

The attack across the Sangro was carried out on 28 November by the British 78th Division, the 8th Indian Division and the 2nd New Zealand Division, supported by the tanks of the British 4th Armoured Brigade. Although initially successful, leading Monty to boast, 'The road to Rome is open,' German troops and tanks from 26. *Panzerdivision* and 90. *Panzergrenadierdivision* swiftly counterattacked, blunting the advance. They then slowly gave ground until the next river, the Moro, seven miles to the north. The cost of this small accomplishment was the loss of the better part of the offensive strength of attacking divisions.

As he had no reserves left, Montgomery was forced to shift the 1st Canadian Infantry Division over to the coastal flank to replace the 78th Division, with orders to continue the attack. It must have been clear that the operation to take Rome had already failed, but Montgomery was determined to bleed the German army through a battle of attrition.

Perhaps in this way the Allies could still force the Germans to shift divisions from the west to the east of Italy.

On 6 December 1943 the Canadians, without a preliminary artillery bombardment in order to gain surprise, stormed across the Moro. A diversionary force, from the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment (the Hasty P's), was the only battalion able to hold their bridgehead. From this bridgehead the Canadians slowly pushed the German forces back to their next defensive line, a seemingly insignificant furrow in the land, which hardly showed on any maps. The feature was actually a three mile long, two hundred yard wide ravine, this small valley would soon become known as 'The Gully'.

Canadian troops advanced on Ortona in conditions similar to those their fathers had fought in during the dark days of the First World War. The 1st Canadian Infantry Division would hurl a series of brutal head-on attacks against the dug-in troops of 90. *Panzergrenadierdivision* and then 1. *Fallschirmjägerdivision*. The battle at 'The Gully' would rage for eight days before the *Fallschirmjäger* skilfully withdrew to the small town of Ortona, just over a mile away. Here the battle would continue with brutal house-to-house fighting until 28 December 1943. It would not be finished until, exhausted, both sides settled down for a brief winter respite on 4 January 1944. Stirred by the western press and the ego of Adolf Hitler, the battle for Ortona would take on epic proportions becoming known as 'Little Stalingrad'.

1ST CANADIAN INFANTRY DIVISION

Canadian Infantry Corps

- The Saskatoon Light Infantry Regiment (The SLI) - brigade support group

1st Canadian Infantry Brigade

- The Royal Canadian Regiment (The RCR)
- The Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment (The Hasty P's)
- 48th Highlanders of Canada Regiment (48th Highlanders or the Glamour Boys)

2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade

- Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry Regiment (The PPCI or Patricias)
- The Seaforth Highlanders of Canada Regiment (The Seaforths)
- The Loyal Edmonton Regiment (The Loyal Eddies)

3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade

- Le Royal 22^e Regiment (The Van Doos)
- The Carleton and York Regiment
- The West Nova Scotia Regiment (The West Novas)

1st Canadian Armoured Brigade

- 11th Canadian Armoured Regiment (The Ontario Tanks)
- 12th Canadian Armoured Regiment (The Three Rivers Tanks)
- 14th Canadian Armoured Regiment (The Calgary Tanks)

The Royal Canadian Artillery

- 1st Field Regiment (The Royal Canadian Horse Artillery)
- 2nd Field Regiment
- 3rd Field Regiment
- 1st Anti-tank Regiment
- 2nd Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment

90. PANZERGRENAДИERDIVISION

90. *Panzergrenadierdivision* began life as *Divisions-Kommando z.b.V. Afrika*, then retitled *Division z.b.V. Afrika*, then 90. *leichte-Infanteriedivision*, and finally (in this particular incarnation) the famous 90. *leichte-Afrika Division*. This was considered by the Allies to be one of the finest of Rommel's *Deutsche Afrika Korps* units. After campaigning throughout North Africa, it retreated to Tunisia with the rest of the Axis forces before its eventual surrender on 12 May 1943.

The division was reconstituted on Sardinia, Corsica and Elba from various service units that had not been sent to Africa, as well as cadres and convalescents evacuated from Africa and replacements. In July 1943, it was renamed *Division-Sardinia* and was then evacuated to the Italian mainland in late September 1943 where it continued to absorb replacements and to train. It was finally retitled 90. *Panzergrenadierdivision* at this time.

Its first commitment in Italy as a division was 5/6 December 1943. After the Ortona battles it would need to be reconstituted again and would go on to fight at Anzio, the Caesar and Gothic Lines and the Po River. It was finally destroyed near Bologna, Italy in April 1945.

At the time of these particular events *90. Panzergrenadierdivision* was composed of:

- 200. and 361. *Panzergrenadier* Regiments - each composed of 3 battalions of motorised infantry. Each battalion had a generous supply of light machineguns (59) and heavy machine-guns (12), three 7.5cm PaK 40 anti-tank guns, six 8cm and four 12cm mortars.
- 190. *Panzer Abteilung* (battalion) - made up at this time of two companies of Panzer IV tanks (17 tanks each)
- 190. *Artillerie-Regiment*
- 190. *Panzerjäger Abteilung* (Anti-tank)
- 190. *Pionier Bataillon*

At the beginning of the clash *90. Panzergrenadierdivision* was commanded by *Generalleutnant* Karl Hans Lungerhausen, but he was replaced during the battle (20 December 1943) by *Generalleutnant* Ernst-Gunter Baade. One possible reason for this was the near total destruction of *90. Panzergrenadierdivision* by this time. Using the common German tactic of immediate and frequent counterattack against any Canadian advance the panzergrenadiers had taken extremely heavy losses, particularly from the strong Allied artillery support.

1. FALLSCHIRMJÄGERDIVISION

1. Fallschirmjägerdivision was formally created in April 1943 in the South of France, the direct descendant of *7. Flieger-Division*. Together with *2. Fallschirmjägerdivision* they made up *11. Fliegerkorps*, the *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* (OKW - the German High Command) strategic reserve for the Mediterranean theatre of operations, recuperating after a long period of bitter fighting on the Eastern Front.

In July 1943, as the invasion of Sicily proceeded, *14. Panzerkorps* sought reinforcements to counter the

attack. *1. Fallschirmjägerdivision* was alerted for action. *3. Fallschirmjäger-Regiment*, 1st and 3rd battalions of *4. Fallschirmjäger-Regiment*, the *Fallschirmjäger* machine-gun battalion, and other detachments were flown directly from France and parachuted or air-landed at Catania. Other units were flown to Rome and then air-transported to Sicily.

Interestingly, the *Fallschirmjäger* landed in the some of the same drop zones and at similar times to the invading British paratroopers. Due to the similarities in uniform, particularly their helmets, cases of mistaken identity at night were common. Stubbornly fighting alongside their *Luftwaffe* comrades in the *Hermann Göring Division*, *1. Fallschirm-jägerdivision* formed the rearguard, enabling the other German units to escape from Sicily, before successfully withdrawing themselves on the night of 16/17 August.

Units of *1. Fallschirmjägerdivision* were next in action following the British landing at Calabria on 9 September. As the Eighth Army advanced *Fallschirmjäger* troops were committed piecemeal into actions devised to slow down the Allied advance while work commenced on the 'Winter Line'. Some units from the 1st were committed to the task of building the Gustav Line while others, subordinated to *29. Panzergrenadierdivision*, continued to slowly give ground, all the while trying to bleed the Allies for every step forward they took.

The *Fallschirmjäger* were then withdrawn to central mountainous sector of the line to build fortifications.

It was from this rest area that Kesselring required *1. Fallschirm-jägerdivision* to take over from the beleaguered *90. Panzergrenadierdivision*.

1. Fallschirmjägerdivision, commanded by General Richard Heidrich (known as 'Papa Heidrich' to his troops, and who Canadian officers thought looked very similar to Winston Churchill) is made up of the following units:

1. FJR - 1. Fallschirmjäger-Regiment (*Oberst* Karl Schultz)

1st Battalion (*Major* Wolf Werner Graf von der Schulenburg)





2nd Battalion (Major Kurt Groschke)

3rd Battalion (Major Karl Heinz Becker)

3. FJR - 3. Fallschirmjäger-Regiment (Oberst Sebastian Ludwig Heilman)

1st Battalion (Major Rudolf Bohmer)

2nd Battalion (Hauptmann Ferdinand Foltin)

3rd Battalion (Major Rudolf Kratzert)

4. FJR - 4. Fallschirmjäger-Regiment (Oberst Erich Walther)

1st Battalion (Hauptmann Herbert Christoph Karl Beyer)

2nd Battalion (Hauptmann Eduard Georg Hubner)

3rd Battalion (Major Franz Grassmehl)

I./Fallschirm-Machinegewehr-Bataillon (Machine-gun Battalion) – Hauptmann Werner Herbert Schmidt

I./Fallschirm-Panzerjäger-Bataillon (Major Bruckner)

1. Fallschirm-Artillerie-Regiment (Major Schramm)

1. Fallschirm-Pioneer-Bataillon (Hauptmann Ernst Fromming)

1. Fallschirm-Flak-Abteilung

Canadian Intelligence reports said the following about the Fallschirmjäger:

'From the manner in which they are employed, it is evident that the Germans consider their 'Fallschirmjäger' as specialist infantry. They have nearly always been used to hold and delay until a suitable defensive position further back can be organised and manned by infantry or panzergrenadiers. Often, they are thrown in to help restore a critical situation. This manner of employment has largely governed the organisation and equipment of the paratroops: they tend to be well supplied with MGs, mortars and anti-tank guns, but generally operate without their own artillery. Armour support must come from elsewhere and they have no mobile recce element. The fact that these "specialists" have appeared

on our front to relieve the exhausted 90 PG Division gives us a clue to the enemy's intentions and fears.

The most noteworthy characteristics of paratroop defensive tactics are: dogged tenacity, extreme economy in manpower (evidenced by their reluctance to counter-attack), skill in timing a withdrawal, and skill in concealment.'

In interrogations of prisoners reported on 22 December 1943, the Canadians reported the following:

'Since 16 Dec, some 50 parachutists have been interrogated, among which were representatives from 1, 3 and 4 Para Rgts. These troops were the toughest we have had to face yet and, of course, the most security minded. In spite of that, moreover one could very clearly distinguish between the good type and the better type. The first were those young men who in their keenness and eagerness for an adventurous military career, volunteered to join this hazardous branch of the GAF but who have not been in the service long enough to be instilled with that fanatic discipline and sense of security. A few months with a Parachute Training Bn, in FRANCE, training which did not even incl jumping, and they were rushed to the front. The reality of war and capture must have been a rather sudden revelation to them, and they were quite willing to impart their limited knowledge.

The latter type were the older veterans who were in SICILY, CRETE, and who, at some time or other, had seen service on the RUSSIAN front. Those men knew what the score was and their discipline, morale and security are excellent. It is no wonder that they are the 'picked troops' and sent to whichever sector of the front needs strengthening. It is also interesting to note the condescending way in which the parachutists talk about the inf, 'they always mess things up, and we, the parachutists have to straighten them out again.' This, then, is the better type and the type which does not talk – irrespective of their knowledge. And they too are the troops which have been put into the line to stem the adv of our Div."