

OPERATION ORANGE BLOSSOM

18 DECEMBER 1943

With farmstead and manor house of Casa Berardi now firmly in Canadian hands, General Vokes hoped that the Germans would see that their flank had at least begun to be turned and would relinquish their hold on 'The Gully'.

He therefore initiated a final frontal attack on the *Fallschirmjäger* with the depleted West Nova Scotia Regiment. Like all the actions against the main German line in 'The Gully' this attack was beaten off and resulted in the near-complete destruction of the West Novas.

It was obvious that 'The Gully' was still heavily defended and the only possible way of breaking this defensive position was to reinforce the Van Doos' success and continue the outflanking manoeuvre. Preparations for this operation had already begun and it would involve a large, complex set-piece combined, arms attack made by two battalions.

The first stage of the plan, involving the 48th Highlanders, would be code-named 'Morning Glory'; while the second 'Orange Blossom' would be the concern of the Royal Canadian Regiment (RCA). Each regiment was to be supported by a squadron from the Three Rivers Tank Regiment and an extensive artillery bombardment.

The plan called for the 48th Highlanders to start west of Casa Berardi and advance to the north before swinging back towards the coast and cutting the road from the 'Cider Crossroads' to the small hamlet of Villa Grande. Once they had achieved this, the RCR would follow, advancing along a railway line running parallel to the road from the north, taking the 'Cider Crossroads' from the rear.

Central to the success of the plan was the overwhelming artillery support. 250 guns were available to support the attack and over the 16 and 17 December observers carefully registered their targets with seemingly random harassment fire.

Unfortunately the area of the 'Orange Blossom' operation was not observable so the artillery firing plan had to be developed using old, inaccurate Italian maps.

At 0800 on 18 December 1943 the 'Morning Glory' artillery barrage opened "...with a deafening roar, filling the air with the screams and sighing of passing shells and laying down a wall of bursting HE 1000 yards long and 300 yards deep."

After twenty minutes of fire the 48th Highlanders advanced behind the barrage 'with the precision of a well-rehearsed exercise'.

The 48th Highlander's after-action report reads:

Forward companies advanced close to the barrage well dispersed in varying formations. Ground was difficult, covered with orchards and wired vineyards. The smoke from the barrage cut visibility down to about 200 yards or less and necessitated the use of compass. Tanks were ordered to fire only on targets indicated which was every building or haystack. There was a deal of small arms fire but in the din of the barrage it couldn't be distinguished as enemy or our

own. Troops were keen and easy to control since the rate of advance was only 100 yards every five minutes.

The German defenders began to bring down mortar and light artillery fire behind the barrage, but the paratroopers in the trenches under bombardment were effectively suppressed and by 1030 the Highlanders were on their objective. The first phase was over with four 48th Highlanders killed and twenty wounded, most of which came from artillery fire — German and inaccurate friendly fire.

Two tanks had been lost, one to a mine and another to anti-tank gun fire, while several others had to be left behind after the track they were following became too boggy. As one of the remaining five tanks advanced on the objective it mistook Canadian infantry for Germans and opened fire, before the situation was made clear. One tanker tried to explain the error to an irate Highlander sergeant by saying, 'One of your muddled goofs looks exactly like those other muddled goofs'.

Whereas 'Morning Glory' could be marked as completely successful both in achieving the objective and in economy of manpower, within the next few minutes 'Orange Blossom' would meet misfortune and heavy casualties.

'Orange Blossom' began at 1145 and immediately ran into problems. Once the supporting 250 guns opened fire, rounds began to fall amongst the Carlton & York Regiment, who were 300 yards back from the edge of 'The Gully' and amongst the companies of the 48th Highlanders. Obviously the plots drawn up from the Italian maps were wrong.

As the Royal Canadian Regiment and Three Rivers Tanks began their advance, the understandable complaints from the Carlton & Yorks led to the barrage being prematurely lifted 400 yards before reaching the enemy positions, and the right hand wall of protective fire being cancelled all together.

The effect of this was immediate. The right flank of the RCR was exposed to fire from the paratroopers and one unit of *Fallschirmjäger* completely escaped the barrage, which lifted before landing on them. The two leading companies of the RCR, 'C' and 'D' were smashed by intense machine-gun, mortar, and shell fire, resulting in all their officers becoming casualties. Whole platoons were killed and neither company had more than 15 effectives left after the first hour of the confusing battle.

At this point the battalion commander ordered a retreat to a line of buildings 100 yards beyond their initial start line where the Canadians could shelter. As this was being effected he too was shot (in the arm) by a sniper. The battalion was reduced to 19 Officers and 159 Other Ranks.

OPERATION ORANGE BLOSSOM SCENARIO

The Canadians are attacking and the German forces are defending.

Looking at the map below, the road from Villa Grande to the 'Cider Crossroads' is on the left with a small railway running to the right of the table's vertical centre line. The rail-line is slightly raised giving cover to those teams immediately adjacent to it.

A small indentation on the right side of the table represents the beginning of 'The Gully' and provides additional cover to those teams in it. The buildings on the table are generally in ruins because of the heavy artillery that has pounded the vicinity for days now and the barrage that just walked through the area.

A small track lies parallel to the rail line and branches off along the edge of 'The Gully' and towards the main road.

The ongoing artillery along with the weather, has turned all the ground on the table into thick mud. Use the 'Soft Sand, Snow, and Mud' Terrain Rules found on Page 43 of the *Flames Of War* rulebook. The Canadian tanks will therefore should remain on the road and tracks if they want to avoid bogging down, as they tended to historically.

Open terrain on the table is made up of scattered Olive Groves and Vineyards, as the players desire, and should provide a reasonable amount of cover to both attacker and defender. Terrain Rules for Olive Groves and Vineyards are also found on Page 43 of the *Flames Of War* rulebook. Burnt-out and abandoned vehicles and tanks can also be placed on the table as Wrecks.



The Operation Orange Blossom Scenario uses the **Ambush** (page 103 of the rulebook), **Immediate Reserves** (page 104 of the rulebook), and **Light Preliminary Bombardment** (see below).

YOUR ORDERS

CANADIAN

As you advance you face a vicious onslaught by the Germans and must repel them before continuing your advance.

GERMAN

The Canadians are moving on Ortona, you must stop them before they break through your line!

PREPARING FOR BATTLE

Set up terrain using the map as your guide.

Place the objectives at **A** and **B**.

The German player must start the game with a Fallschirmjäger Platoon, the Fallschirmjäger sMG43 Machine-gun Platoon and the Fallschirmjäger 7.5cm Tank-hunter Platoon in their half of the table. One of these Units may be in Ambush. No German vehicles can deploy on the table. The remainder of their Units are held in Immediate Reserves.

The Canadians deploy in their half of the table excluding the area within 16\"/>

BEGINNING THE BATTLE

The Canadian player has the first turn.

All Infantry and Gun Teams start the game in Foxholes, giving them Concealment and Bulletproof Cover. All Teams start the game Gone to Ground.

DECIDING WHO WON

The Canadian player wins if they end their turn Holding an Objective.

The German player wins if they end their turn on or after the sixth turn with no Canadian Tank, Infantry or Gun within 8\"/>



SCENARIO SPECIAL RULES

PRELIMINARY BOMBARDMENT

Due to miscalculations in the artillery plan, the preliminary barrage was not as successful as anticipated.

At the start of the game, the Attacking Canadian player rolls a die for each Defending German Team (except any Formation Commanders and Fortifications) deployed on the table, including Teams that are held in Ambush.

On a result of 5+ the Team is hit by a weapon with an Anti-tank rating of 5 and Firepower of AUTO, and the Defender must roll a Save for that Team. Armoured Tank Teams are hit on their Top armour.

AFTERMATH

With the attack stalled the brigade commander, Lieutenant Colonel Spry (who had previously been the Royal Canadian Regiment's battalion commander) was forced to make a terrible decision. He stated:

I knew that as a battalion, the RCR would be worthless from the point of view of morale unless they got on their objective... For morale and tactical reasons therefore it was vital for the RCR to return to the attack.

The RCR's 'C' and 'D' companies were formed into one company and the plan was made to renew the advance at 1000 hours on 19 December. Just before the barrage commenced the accompanying tanks reported that they had neither the ammunition nor fuel to assist in the attack, and in order to make these assets available the start time was pushed back.

Finally, after a delay which "...caused considerable mental agony to the waiting troops" the intense artillery bombardment began and the attack got underway at 1415 hours.

The action was completely successful, from the Canadian point-of-view, with near-perfect artillery and tank support. By nightfall the 'Cider Crossroads', the 1st Canadian Division's objective during the last ten days of near continuous fighting, had been taken. 1. Fallschirmjägerdivision now accepted that "The Gully" had been flanked and therefore was lost as a tactical feature. The Germans began moving out of these positions during the night of 18/19 December.

Allied intelligence, attempting to deduce the intentions of the German Fallschirmjäger stated:

Having lost control of the crossroads, the enemy is likely to fall back under pressure in the Northern sector, abandoning Ortona, and making his next stand on the line of the Arielli River... This is difficult country, well suited to delaying tactics and should provide a firm hinge for an eventual withdrawal in the northern sector.

The advancing Canadians would soon see whether this intelligence was accurate or not.



THE ROYAL CANADIAN REGIMENT, 1ST CANADIAN INFANTRY BRIGADE

Canadian Units use the *Canadian Division Relentless* British *Liberation of Italy* command card with Italy Rifle Company

C Company HQ, The Royal Canadian Regiment	Canadian Italy Rifle Company HQ 2x Sten SMG team.
13 Platoon (Assault), C Company	Canadian Rifle Platoon 7x Bren & SMLE rifle team, 1x PIAT anti-tank team, 1x 2-inch mortar.
14 Platoon, C Company	As Above.
15 Platoon, C Company	As Above.
16 Platoon, D Company	As Above.
Mortar Platoon, C Company	Canadian 3-inch Mortar Platoon 4x 3-inch mortars.
A Squadron, The Three Rivers Tanks, 11th Canadian Armoured Regiment	Italy Armoured Troop & Canadian Division Determination command card 3x Sherman (75mm).
Field Battery, Royal Canadian Horse Artillery	25 pdr Field Troop 4x 25 pdr guns.
Machine-gun Platoon, The Saskatoon Light Infantry Regiment	Canadian Vickers Machine-gun Platoon 4x Vickers HMG teams

III BATALION, 3. FALLSCHIRMJÄGER-REGIMENT

German Fallschirmjäger Units as found in *Liberation of Italy*

Kompanie HQ, III Battalion, 3. Fallschirmjäger-Regiment	Italy Fallschirmjäger Company HQ 2x MP40 SMG teams.
Zug, III Battalion	Fallschirmjäger Platoon 10x MG42 & K98 rifle team, 1x Panzerschreck anti-tank team.
Zug, III Battalion	Fallschirmjäger Platoon 10x MG42 & K98 rifle team, 1x Panzerschreck anti-tank team.
Maschinengewehr Zug, III Battalion	Fallschirmjäger sMG42 Machine-gun Platoon 4x sMG42 HMG teams.
Mortar Zug, III Battalion	Fallschirmjäger Mortar Platoon 8x 8cm Stummel mortar.
Panzerabwehrkanone Zug, III Battalion	Fallschirmjäger 7.5cm Tank-hunter Platoon 2x 7.5cm guns.
Fortifications	2x Machine-gun Nests, four Minefields, four Barbed Wire Entanglements. (See pages 239 to 241 of <i>Liberaton of Italy</i>)
SUPPORT UNITS	
Attached Elements of 90. Panzergrenadierdivision:	
Artillerie Zug, 190. Artillerie	10.5cm Artillery Battery 4x 10.5cm howitzers.

All forces used in this scenario can be found in *Liberation of Italy and its command cards*.

ALTERNATIVE FORCES

You may like to play this Scenario using different forces, perhaps fighting a similar battle in with different force, such as in on the Eastern Front or elsewhere in Italy.

The points value for the Attacking (Canadian) Force is 83 points.

The points value for the Defending (German) Force is 57 points, with only three Infantry or Gun Units being deployed on the table at the start of the game, one of which can be in Ambush. The remainder of the Defending Force is held in Immediate Reserves.