

# The Italian Campaign

## INTRODUCTION

The Second World War began in 1939. Soon, most of Europe was under German control. In 1941, Germany invaded the Soviet Union and vicious fighting broke out on the Eastern Front. By 1943 the Soviet leader, Joseph Stalin, asked for help from the other Allied leaders to ease the pressure of this attack. The Allies agreed to help and decided to use Italy (which was aligned with Germany) as a platform to attack enemy territory in Europe and help divert German resources from the Eastern Front. This effort became known as the Italian Campaign.

The Italian Campaign was an important military effort for Canada during the war. More than 93,000 Canadians, along with their allies from Great Britain, France and the United States, played a vital role. As they pushed from the south to the north of Italy over a 20-month period, Canadians faced difficult battles against some of the German army's best troops. They fought in the dust and heat of summer, the snow and cold of winter, and the rain and mud of the spring and fall.



## COMING ASHORE IN SICILY

The Italian Campaign began with the Allied landings on the island of Sicily in the south of Italy. Canadian soldiers from the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Infantry Division and the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Armoured Brigade had an active and important role in this effort, codenamed “Operation Husky.”

It was a difficult task. Just getting men and equipment to the region was dangerous. Three ships carrying Canadian troops from Great Britain to Sicily for the attack were sunk by enemy submarines in late June 1943. Fifty-eight Canadians drowned and 500 vehicles and a number of guns were lost.

The operation began in the early morning of July 10, 1943 when Canadian and British troops came ashore along a 60-kilometre stretch of coastline near Pachino at the southern tip of Sicily. The Americans who also attacked that morning covered another 60 kilometres of the Sicilian coast. The assault was one of the largest seaborne operations in military history, involving nearly 3,000 Allied ships and landing craft.

The fighting in Sicily would last more than four weeks, during which Canadians would battle through hundreds of kilometres of difficult mountainous country. More than 1,300 Canadians became casualties, almost 600 of which were fatal.

Taking Sicily was important. It helped secure the Mediterranean Sea for Allied shipping and contributed to the downfall of Italian dictator Benito Mussolini. The new Italian government surrendered to the Allies; however, the Germans were not prepared to

lose Italy and seized control. The fall of Sicily cleared the way for the Allies’ next step: landing in mainland Italy.

## LIBERATING MAINLAND ITALY

The Allies came ashore in mainland Italy on September 3, 1943. After losing Sicily, however, Germany was determined to hold the Italian mainland. To slow the Allied advance, the Germans took advantage of the mountainous landscape and turned the length of the Italian peninsula into a series of defensive positions which stretched from the Tyrrhenian Sea to the Adriatic Sea. These defensive lines were well protected with machine gun nests, barbed wire, land mines, and artillery positions.

Canadians joined other Allied troops in what amounted to a painstaking crawl up the Italian mainland over poor roads and through challenging weather. One of the most difficult battles for the Canadian troops was the Battle of Ortona during the Christmas of 1943. Ortona was an ancient town of castles and stone buildings located on a ledge overlooking the Adriatic Sea. Its narrow, rubble-filled streets limited the use of tanks and artillery. This meant the Canadians had to engage in vicious street fighting and smash their way through walls and buildings “mouseholing”, as it was called. The Canadians liberated the town on December 28 after more than a week of struggle.

Fighting in the Italian Campaign continued as the Allies made their way north through many German defensive positions. Notable for Canada was the Battle in the Liri Valley, with the ensuing liberation of Rome by the American army on June 4, 1944. In the fall of 1944, the



Allies broke through Germany’s “Gothic Line” in the north. Fighting continued into the spring of 1945 when the Germans finally surrendered. Canadian troops, however, did not participate in the final victory of the campaign. By February 1945, they had been transferred to Northwest Europe to be reunited with the First Canadian Army. There they joined the Allied advance into the Netherlands and Germany to help finally end the war in Europe.

## SACRIFICE

Canadian casualties in the Italian Campaign totalled more than 26,000, nearly 6,000 of which were fatal. Most of the Canadians who died in Italy are buried in the many Commonwealth war cemeteries there, or are commemorated on the Cassino Memorial, located in the Cassino War Cemetery south of Rome.

The brave Canadians who fought in Italy were among the more than one million Canadians who served during the Second World War. Coming from all walks of life, these Canadians accomplished much and sacrificed greatly in the fight for the rights and freedoms of others.

## LEGACY

For many Canadians, war is something that happens somewhere else, far away, and most of us have had no personal experiences of war. Today, however, the belief in freedom and fundamental human rights for all people is a part of our everyday life. We can be proud that Canadians continue to help defend these rights, at home and around the world. We honour Veterans when we learn about Canadians, past and present, who have served in the cause of peace and freedom.

## CANADA REMEMBERS PROGRAM

The Canada Remembers Program of Veterans Affairs Canada encourages all Canadians to learn about the sacrifices and achievements made by those who have served—and continue to serve— during times of war and peace. As well, it invites Canadians to become involved in remembrance activities that will help preserve their legacy for future generations.

To learn more about Canada’s role in the Second World War, please visit the Veterans Affairs Canada website at [veterans.gc.ca](http://veterans.gc.ca) or call **1-866-522-2122** toll free.

