



# The Italian Campaign

By the spring of 1940, much of Western 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 soldiers from Great Britain, the United States and other Allied countries, 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.

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 Tank Brigade had an active and important role in this effort, codenamed Operation *Husky*. 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. 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.

Fighting in Sicily would last more than four weeks, during which Canadians would battle through hundreds of kilometres of difficult mountainous country. More than 2,300 Canadians became casualties in Sicily, including almost 600 who lost their lives.

Taking the island 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 soon surrendered to the Allies; however, the Germans were not prepared to lose all of Italy and seized control. The fall of Sicily cleared the way for the Allies' next step: landing in mainland Italy.

The Allies came ashore in mainland Italy on September 3, 1943. After being pushed from Sicily, however, Germany was determined to hold the Italian mainland. To slow the Allied advance, the enemy forces 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 actions 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 – “mouse-holing”, as it was called – to clear the town of enemy troops. The Canadians officially liberated the town on December 28 after more than a week of bloody 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. The fighting in Italy 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 begun being 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 Second World War in Europe.

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.