FLOWERS HONOUR LIBERTY

Price of Peace monument in Ortona

Photo: Veterans Affairs Canada

Italy is a beautiful country in Europe, but during the Second World War, it was not like that for the Canadian soldiers who were there. They were involved in a battle called the Italian Campaign. Canadians fought there in the heat of summer and the cold of winter for almost two years.

One grim battle took place in the town of Ortona. Canadians arrived in the town just days before Christmas 1943, facing landmines set by the enemy. The central town square was turned into a war zone while the Germans occupied the town.

Italians were forced to go into hiding with their families, starving, and scared in cold barns and caves. The Canadian soldiers bravely came across the rivers and over the fields and through the towns and through the villages, fiercely fighting the enemy, while also carrying food and water to give to the people in the war torn country of Italy. The sight of the maple leaf of the Canadian military during the Second World War gave locals hope.

It was a deadly battle, but the Canadians were victorious. After a week of vicious fighting, the Germans surrendered and Ortona was free.

Today, the churches, homes and businesses have been mostly rebuilt. Aside from the few remaining permanent shell marks and bullet holes, very little is visible of the horrific war.

But the Italian people have never forgotten the war, or the Canadian soldiers who helped and fought for their freedom. Many Italians share an eternal debt of thanks to Canadians. Francesca and Maria LaSorda were two Italian sisters who held Canadians close to their hearts.

In 1943, the two young girls were hiding with their family near the town square along with 24 other Italians during the German occupation. Francesca and her sister Maria had close ties with Canadian troops during the war. To the sisters, the Canadians were not just soldiers, they were like their brothers. Hiding in the cramped, cold barn they made friends with the Canadians, and helped wash their clothes. Canadian soldiers gave them scraps of food in return. The sisters have memories of kind and polite young soldiers. They were the same age as the young Canadians who had come from so far away to liberate their country from the enemy. They didn't speak the same language and it was difficult to understand each other, but they were friendly. Cooking and cleaning were ways in which the citizens of Italy demonstrated their thanks to the Canadians.

In October 1999, Canadians built a monument named the Price of Peace in Ortona to honour the Canadian soldiers. It is built where a bomb blew up a house and killed 23 Canadian soldiers in 1943. Each piece of the monument has significance as the bricks are from the original buildings that were destroyed during the war. There is also a bronze life-sized sculpture of a wounded soldier being comforted by a soldier friend who is kneeling at his side to help him.

The monument is a lasting reminder of the terrible loss Canadians and Italians suffered during the Italian Campaign. The LaSorda sisters attended the unveiling of the new memorial. They listened to music and speeches, and they saw flowers being placed on the memorial. Later in the week, they watched those flowers wilt. This made them feel sad, so they volunteered to take on the job of clearing the wilted flowers away and replacing them with fresh flowers. Together, they performed this tenderhearted act everyday for approximately 15 years. Although the sisters are no longer living, the story of their gratitude still touches Canadians.

For many of us, it is often difficult to understand what actually happened in times of war. The LaSorda sisters, on the other hand, were there. They lived through the war, and they have thanked the Canadians who helped them have freedom for their entire lives.

The Italian Campaign is one of the hardest battles ever fought by Canadian soldiers. We should take the time to think about how the Canadian soldiers helped so many families like the LaSordas in Italy, and honour those who gave up their own dreams to fight for the freedom of those in Italy.