



## "WAR AT THE BOOT" THE ITALIAN CAMPAIGN, 1943-1945



*"Canadian Armour Passing Through Ortona" by Charles Comfort, CWM 12245*

The Second World War was fought between two groups of countries. On one side were the Axis Powers, including Germany, Italy and Japan. On the other side were the Allies. They included Canada, Britain, France, Australia, New Zealand, India, China, the United States of America, and later the Soviet Union.

Germany was ruled by Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party. Hitler wanted Germany to control Europe. In 1939 Germany invaded Poland and this is how the Second World War began. By the summer of 1940 the Germans had also conquered much of Western Europe including Holland, Belgium, France, Denmark and Norway.

In 1941, Germany invaded the Soviet Union and vicious fighting broke out. By 1943, the Soviet leader, Joseph Stalin, asked Allied leaders for help. They agreed to attack enemy territory in Italy (which was aligned with Germany) as it was considered to be the weakest link of the enemy defences in Europe. This effort became known as the Italian Campaign.

The Campaign began with the Allied landings on the island of Sicily in the south of Italy. Canadians had an active role in this effort, codenamed Operation Husky. The attack began July 10, 1943, when Canadians came ashore near Pachino. The assault was one of the largest seaborne operations in military history, involving nearly 3,000 Allied ships. Canada's fighting in Sicily lasted more than four weeks and helped result in the taking of Sicily. This was important, as the fall of Sicily cleared the way for the Allies' next step—landing in mainland Italy.

Canadians, along with their allies, pushed from the south to the north of Italy over a 20-month period. Mainland Italy is shaped like a boot. Canadian troops found very little resistance at the "toe" of Italy, but soon encountered German troops further up the "boot." The Germans organized several lines of defence using the rugged terrain and mountains to their advantage. Canadians faced difficult battles against some of the German army's best troops. However, fighting continued as the Allies made their way north along the boot through the many German defensive positions. Three crucial vicious battles stand out for the Canadians: the Battle of Ortona, the breach of the Hitler Line in the Liri Valley, and the breach of the Gothic Line.

The Battle of Ortona over the Christmas of 1943 was difficult, but successful. Ortona, a town along the east coast, was surrounded by high ridges and acted as a natural fortress. Canadians were forced to take Ortona street by street, and house by house. They developed a technique called "mouseholing," where they smashed their way through walls and buildings to avoid the streets that were blocked with rubble and swept by enemy fire. The process was slow, but successful. After one week of hard fighting, Ortona was in Canadian hands.

Also notable for Canada was the Battle in the Liri Valley. In May 1944, the Canadians broke the 'Hitler Line' defences south of Rome. Later that year, the heavily-defended 'Gothic Line' fortifications further north were attacked and breached.

Canadian forces remained in Italy until early 1945 when they were transferred to join the First Canadian Army in Northwest Europe. Fighting between the Allies and Germans continued in Italy until the spring of 1945, however, when Germans finally surrendered and the Second World War in Europe finally came to an end.

More than 93,000 Canadians served in the Italian Campaign. Our casualties totaled more than 26,000, and nearly 6,000 were fatal. Most of the Canadians who died in Italy are buried in the many Commonwealth war cemeteries there.