**The Battle of Ortona**

**F**or the Canadians, Ortona was the bloodiest battle of the Italian Campaign to date. The once pisturesque ancient village on the Adriatic coast has been reduce to rubble. Canadian and German troops clash daily, in bitter, house-to-house fighting. Snipers, booby traps and land mines were a constant threat as every building gained brought about a terrible cost in blood.

Matthew Halton of the CBC refers to Ortona as the "The courtyard of hell". The capture of Ortona, known to those who fought it as the "Italian Stalingrad", is considered among Canada's greatest victories during the war.

While both sides agreed the town was of little strategic value, the world press transformed the battle into a matter prestige between the Allies and the Germans. "For some unknown reason, the Germans are waging a miniature Stalingrad in hapless Ortona" wrote one war correspondant.

***"Soaking wet, in a morass of mud, against an enemy fighting harder than he has fought before, the Canadians attack, attack and attack ... the hillsides and farmlands and orchards are a ghastly brew of fire ...listen to the echo of those shells!"*** *- Matthew Halton.*

***"It wasn't hell. It was the courtyard of hell. It was a maelstrom of noise and hot, splitting steel...the rattling of machine guns never stops ... wounded men refuse to leave, and the men don't want to be relieved after seven days and seven nights... the battlefield is still an appalling thing to see, in its mud, ruin, dead, and its blight and desolation."****- Matthew Halton.*

**Attacking Ortona**

• [Ortona](http://archives.cbc.ca/IDCC-1-71-1471-9930/conflict_war/italian_campaign/) was an ancient port city on the Adriatic coast. The town was held by German paratroopers who had dug in carefully. Snipers watched from the clock tower; roads were mined, and almost every building had been booby trapped.

• The [Battle of Ortona](http://archives.cbc.ca/IDCC-1-71-1471-9929/conflict_war/italian_campaign/) lasted from Dec. 20 to 28, 1943. Artillery and mortars from both sides reduced the town to rubble, and troops clashed in close quarters, moving from house to house. Both sides would blow up houses to trap the enemy under the wreckage.

• Fighting was so savage and prolonged that some troops called Ortona "Little Stalingrad" after the Soviet city that battled German troops for 200 days, at a cost of over a million lives.

• The "houseclearing" tactics developed by troops in Ortona became a manual for urban warfare. "Mouseholes" were blown through walls to travel from room to room and building to building.

• Fighting continued over Christmas, but the Germans withdrew three days later.

• The people of Ortona also suffered terribly. Many stayed in homes and public buildings, hiding in cellars until the battle died down.

Timeline **December 1943**

After a successful breakthrough at the Moro, the 1st Canadian Division prepares for an assault on the port town of Ortona on Italy’s East coast. Ortona is a key command centre for the German Army and is very heavily defended.

20 Dec: 2 Canadian Infantry Brigade forces through German defences to take up positions on the outskirts of Ortona. The advance is made possible with the support of 1 Canadian Armour Brigade and a heavy artillery barrage covering the advancing Canadians’ flanks with smoke screen.

21 Dec: The Loyal Edmonton Regiment (the “Loyal Eddies”), along with the Seaforth Highlanders of Canada, supported by armour begin the bloody advance into the town of Ortona to dislodge the occupying German defenders.

22 Dec: Canadian commanders divide Ortona into sectors and assign each fighting battalion a sector to clear of enemies. In a move to reduce pressure on the Canadians in Ortona, 1 Canadian Infantry Brigade moves into position northwest of Ortona to cut of key German supply routes.

23/24 Dec: Canadian reinforcements begin to arrive at Ortona to relieve exhausted troops and shore up units still embroiled in the bitterly slow and brutal advance into the town.

24 Dec: Two days into the advance on Ortona, Canadian soldiers are fighting a yard-by-yard battle to take the town. The Loyal Eddies and the Seaforths fight vicious house-to-house battles, and even room-to-room battles against the occupying German garrison forces.

25 Dec: Christmas Day brings no relief for Canadian soldiers in their efforts to take Ortona. Soldiers are rotated back to a Church to enjoy a hot Christmas meal where possible, though many are shot down by German forces in the attempt. Some commanders order their men to hold their positions rather than risk getting killed over trying to make it to Christmas Dinner.

26 Dec: The slow and perilous advance by Canadian forces begins to pay off as Canadian commanders in the field begin to report to their superiors that two-thirds of the battered town are now under Canadian control. However the battle continues to wage with the German forces making the Canadians fight for every yard gained in Ortona.

27 Dec: With the Canadian advance seemingly unstoppable, the German forces begin their withdrawal from Ortona.

28 Dec: Canadian forces take full control of Ortona. Canadian casualties for the month of December 1943 near 2400 men, effectively taking the 1st Canadian Division out of the war for a short period in order to rest its wounds. The Battle for Ortona has been won by the Canadians.

**Invasion of Italy:**

#### Deception

To distract the Axis, and if possible divert some of their forces to other areas, the Allies engaged in several deception operations. The most famous and successful of these was [Operation *Mincemeat*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_Mincemeat). The British allowed a corpse disguised as a British officer to drift ashore in Spain, carrying a briefcase containing fake secret documents which supposedly revealed that the Allies were planning to invade Greece and Sardinia, and had no plans to invade Sicily. German intelligence accepted the authenticity of the documents with the result that the Germans diverted much of their defensive effort from Sicily to Greece. Still, there were a large number of German and Italian soldiers on Sicily when the invasion started. The Germans in particular had soldiers on Sicily that they had withdrawn from North Africa and had not yet reassigned to the Eastern Front.

 **Attacking Ortona**

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Guest(s): Donald McLellan

Reporter: Matthew Halton

Duration: 4:36

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