

Canadian WW II vets to visit Italy to commemorate the Italian Campaign

Edmond Arsenault, 97, visiting Italy for the first time since WW II

[Taylor Simmons](#) · CBC News · Posted: Nov 23, 2019 6:00 AM ET | Last Updated: November 23



Edmond Arsenault, 97, is one of 15 Second World War veterans travelling to Italy Wednesday as part of a Veterans Affairs Canada delegation. They will participate in several ceremonies commemorating the Italian Campaign. (Taylor Simmons/CBC)

When the shell landed, Edmond Arsenault was launched off his feet.

It was December 1943, and he'd just arrived in Italy — one of 93,000 Canadians playing a role in the Italian Campaign, a 20-month Allied operation in the Second World War aimed at weakening German forces.

Arsenault, then 22, had been walking in line with about nine men when the shell landed just up ahead, killing several of his fellow soldiers and propelling him and others into a ditch.

When he got up, he thought he'd been hit.

"My nose was bleeding. It was just from the blast, I guess, the concussion. I was deaf for a few days," he said.

"It came back, but never the same. Just like I got a bunch of bees in my ears."

Now 97, Arsenault can still readily recall that day, along with countless other close calls, bombings and casualties over his 15-month stint on the front lines.



Private Edmond Arsenault of The West Nova Scotia Regiment aiming a PIAT anti-tank weapon from a slit trench near Ortona, Italy, Jan. 10, 1944. (Library and Archives Canada/Department of National Defence fonds/a153181)

Next week, he and 14 others will fly to Italy as part of an official Canadian delegation to participate in several ceremonies marking the 75th anniversary of the Italian Campaign.

It will be Arsenault's first time back to that country since he left following the war.

"It's hard to believe. You think of it once in a while," he said.

"I'm just one of the lucky ones."

'Unbelievable'

Today Arsenault lives in an apartment in Etobicoke with his wife of 70 years.

The first thing you see when entering his apartment — his war medals, almost a dozen of them, and a large crest for the West Nova Scotia Regiment, which he was a part of. Books recounting the Second World War, newspaper clippings and pictures of his family are scattered throughout.

He sits in the main room as he details his journey leaving his home in P.E.I. to fight against the Nazis.

"There's a lot of times I never thought I would be coming back," he said.



Arsenault's war medals are displayed near the entrance of his apartment, where he lives with his wife of 70 years. (Taylor Simmons/CBC)

The Italian Campaign began in July 1943 with the Canadians and their allies using Italy "as a platform to attack the enemy territory in Europe and help divert German resources from the Eastern Front," according to Veteran Affairs Canada's website.

For almost two years, the allies moved from the south to the north of Italy, facing punishing terrain, terrible weather, and numerous brutal battles against some of Germany's best-trained soldiers . The Canadians suffered 26,000 casualties, 6,000 of them fatal.

"You had to keep your ears and eyes open at all times," Arsenault said.

"There was a good friend of mine. He was in the same regiment. He was from P.E.I as well. So we just happened to meet one morning, face-to-face and ... 10 minutes after he was dead."



Edmond Arsenault, right, and his friend Hermas Gallant, who was later killed in a minefield in Italy during the war. (Edmond Arsenault/The Memory Project/Historica Canada)

Arsenault will have a chance to honour his fallen comrades in the next two weeks, as some of the Italian ceremonies will be held at cemeteries where hundreds of Canadian soldiers are buried.

"It'll be a lot of memories once you're in there," he said. "I won't find my footprints anymore."

On marking 75 years since his service ended, he has one word: "Unbelievable."

Canadian ceremony

A ceremony will also take place in Ottawa to mark the anniversary at 1 p.m. on Nov. 26 at the Horticulture Building on Princess Patricia Way.

According to the government's website, the ceremonies are being held in November to mark the entire campaign, not the date of the campaign's start or a particular battle.