

CANADA

Into a valley of death

CANADIAN FOLLOWS IN TREACHEROUS FOOTSTEPS PRINCESS PATS TOOK DURING THE ITALIAN CAMPAIGN

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Canadian soldiers and tanks in Ortona, Italy, in 1943. The Princess Pats were victorious over their German foes, but it came at a bloody cost.

I live on the Canadian battlefields of the Second World War's Italian campaign. I also drive across them every time I take my daughter to school in Ortona, a small port town on the Adriatic Sea, where in the last drawn-out days of 1943, our Canadian troops fought bitter battle with their German foe.

Now, it is late fall, 73 years later, and I am breathing in the sweet-smelling wood smoke and the musty fumes of fermenting grapes, the same that would have accompanied our boys as they warily trod the treacherous, wired vineyards and the mined olive groves of No Man's Land back in that cold, wet Italian winter.

Tonight, I am headed for Villa Rogatti, a small village just outside Ortona, where the Princess Pats in December 1943 were victorious over their German counterparts — but at bloody cost. I am going to search out a fellow who has in his possession artifacts of the fighting that took place in this town.

It is dark and stormy when I set out, and I must drive through pelting rain beating at my windshield, obscuring my vision and causing great apprehension as I descend down, down, down into the black valley of the Moro River. I press on, over the narrow, winding road that takes me across the little wooden bridge and past the brick embankment that back in 1943 served as a dressing station for the wounded. It is an eerie and unearthly descent

into a miserable, wet blackness. I am heartsick to think of those soldiers who, with only the light of the moon to guide them, tramped through these same soggy slopes with no knowledge of where their next step would take them. Who can imagine what terror they felt in that interminably tortured time?

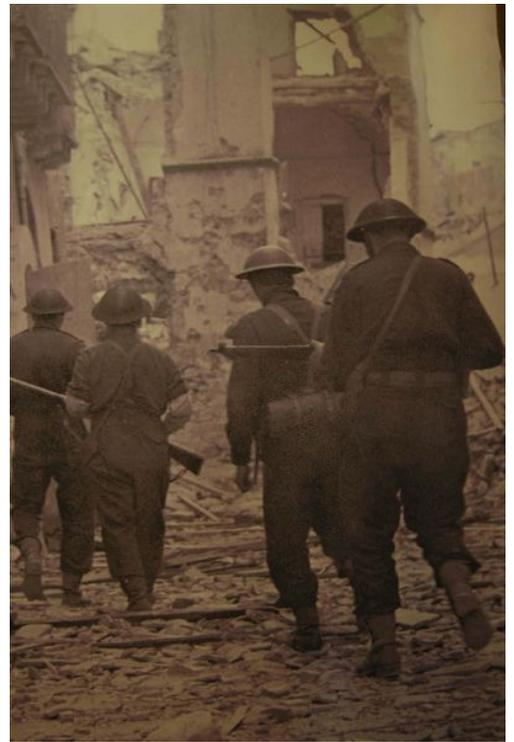
Through the wall of rain that continues to torment, I find Guido in his ramshackle and malodorous workshop where he works on his gas motors and ancient pumps. It was his father-in-law, he says, who collected war souvenirs, and if I am not in too much of a hurry he will find some of them to show me.

While he lifts a decrepit motor and an old irrigation system out of the way, my eyes are fixed on the sight of five helmets hanging on the wall, three of them German and two Canadian. On closer examination, I discover two are shot through the crown, and I cringe at the death provoked by these blistered, blackened holes.

Guido uncovers several small weapons in his jumbled search — a Canadian officer's pistol among them — and jagged masses of mortar and shrapnel.

He pulls out a perfectly preserved rectangular box that holds a military telephone, but we are unable to determine to which army it belongs. No doubt, it had been used to make a call that had meant death for someone on the other side.

I try to pick up a piece of mortar, and it is so heavy. I contemplate the heaviness of war, heaviness in the real sense. They had to cart heavy steel around with them to cause others' deaths and destruction while risking their own lives.



The Battle of Ortona Museum
Canadian troops work their way through the heavily damaged streets of Ortona during their battle to liberate the city from German occupiers in December 1943.



A German helmet with bullet holes in the crown.

With the sounds of the deluge outside eroding time and terrain, I can feel war in this rundown workshop full of its other aged equipment and rusted war souvenirs. Each relic speaks of some hideous deed or the loss of innocence for some lad who perhaps had only enlisted for the promise of adventure.

A museum of weapons, or even a stand-on-guard ceremony, brings war to you in a passive way. You are not asked to feel, only to observe. But here on this noisy, stormy night, in this town where war was once fought, I become a reluctant participant, obliged to see, hear and smell war in all its three-dimensionality, and I stand shocked amid this rusting, grey killing metal lying juxtaposed with ordinary utensils and equipment of an everyday sort.

Standing alone in thought, I come to understand the solitary nature of dying in combat and the fact that in all that heaviness, in all that steel, and in all that hard reality, there is no guarantee of protection for the individual soldier. It was, and is, every man for himself in battle despite

the closeness of comrades and the cumbersome deadly devices of doom. This is what I will remember.

Winnipeg-born Martha A. Sarmatiuk is a freelance writer and amateur historian who has lived in the Abruzzo region since 1983.