

They fired until the paint curled from the red hot steel and the men reeled in the pits from exhaustion and were sick from the blast.

(History of 3rd Cdn Fd Regt, p. 48)

If for nothing else a two-day rest was necessary to replenish ammunition stocks for the great barrage. At an administration conference held on 16 Dec it was estimated that the R.C.A.S.C. would have to haul 16,000 rounds of 25-pr ammunition daily for three days. (W.D., H.Q., C.R.A.S.C. 1 Cdn Inf Div, 16 Dec 43). This work was well advanced by the following day:

There are now 500 rds of 25 pdr ammunition at each gun of all Fd Regiments on Divisional Front. Commencing at 1230 hrs 16 Dec... in addition to maintaining the Division and fulfilling all other commitments, we have brought forward 23,000 rds 25 pdr... 180 loads of ammunition salvage were taken to beach from forward area. Each round trip represented approximately 35 miles. This was made possible by the close and willing co-operation of R.C.M.P. (1 Cdn Pro Coy) and artillery personnel with our own R.C.A.S.C. drivers and loaders.

(Ibid, 17 Dec 43)

That no guns were silenced for lack of ammunition shows that in the supply of essential commodities, administration was far from broken down^x.

221. While the Canadians had been making their repeated attempts to cross the gully, 8 Ind Div and the newly arrived 5 (Brit) Div and 2 N.Z. Div under command of 13 Corps, had been gradually forcing the Winter Line defenders northwards beyond the Ortona - Orsogna lateral road. Indian patrols had, by 18 Dec, reached the hamlets of Consalvi and Crecchio, where strong enemy outposts continued to occupy the buildings (1 Cdn Inf Div Ops Message Log, loc cit, Serial 10507, 18 Dec 43). Farther inland, patrols of 5 Div had found enemy positions to the South-west of Poggiofiorito abandoned; the town itself was in British hands by the morning of 17 Dec (Ibid, Serial 10475, 17 Dec 43). Below the Maiella massif, 2 N.Z. Div had been engaged in continuous heavy fighting to gain Orsogna; 26 Pz Div had been struggling as fiercely and as recklessly to retain that town as the Grenadiers had fought in the coastal sector.

222. New Zealand armour had debouched on to the lateral road north-east of Orsogna, and by 18 Dec was driving up the narrow road to Arielli (Ibid, Serial 10502, 17 Dec 43). Strong counter-attacks to regain the lateral road had been made against the New Zealanders, but, by the morning of 18 Dec, it appeared that the enemy had appreciated the loss of this long lateral communication link, and had retired to the mass of ridges, gullies and water-courses that lay to the North. But Orsogna had yet to be captured by the New Zealanders, and the Canadians were still short of the "Cider" cross-roads. After two weeks of cruel combat over rocky slope and terrace,

^x See Para 203. That "comforts" were non-existent is true, but the relative value of "comforts" and "commodities" was obvious. A comprehensive account of how the supply units functioned during 16-18 Dec exists in W.D., H.Q. C.R.A.S.C., December, 1943)

Eighth Army's winter advance could hardly be measured in miles. Only occasionally the sun shone, but never long enough to dry wet clothes or harden the lanes of slime which the roads had become; a miserable winter was covering the unattractive Abruzzi landscape in mist and mud. Forward units depended for supplies on mule trains which slid and stumbled through gorge and stream.

223. The enemy High Command had chosen well their Winter Line; in the central Apennines the passes north to Avezzano and Sulmona were snow-bound. To the South of Eighth Army, Americans and British were, by the middle of December, battling desperately to break the Winter Line where it lay across the Capua - Rome highway south of Monte Cassino. Those enemy defending the approaches to Rome were as quick to seize advantage of terrain and weather as those holding the Adriatic sector; they employed the tactics of clinging to individual features and delivering sharp and immediate counter-attacks when forced from them. The Allied Armies were now feeling the effect of winter (C.I.G.S. Summaries 97-107, 8-18 Dec 43).

224. In the Canadian sector, the value of the R. 22e R's hold on Casa Berardi became clear before the beginning of "Morning Glory": because of the French Canadians' domination of the gully, 1 Para Div was unable to restore the flank or reinforce those Grenadiers who remained. During 17 Dec, the West N.S.R. put in a small attack to see if the enemy had begun to withdraw; it was discovered that considerable thinning out had taken place and some progress was made in the direction of the cross-roads; the Battalion, scarcely more than 150 men was, however, halted by heavy shelling* (Prince, op cit). Although no definite offensive action took place between 16-18 Dec, the Battalions along the edge of the gully suffered casualties at the rate of one officer and 24 other ranks each day (Ibid). On the left flank of 1 Cdn Inf Div, where "Lager" track joined the Ortona - Orsogna lateral road, a small sub-unit of 1 Cdn Armd Bde reported that the enemy, as he had done farther inland, had withdrawn to the north of the road, which from "Lager" track to Berardi was firmly in Canadian hands by midnight, 17 Dec. (Beyond the Sangro)

225. Although in the centre of the Adriatic coastland the enemy was retiring before the encroachment over the Ortona - Orsogna lateral road, there was no indication of a definite withdrawal along the whole line. 5 Corps Intelligence Summary, considering the new gains and the arrival of 1 Para Div, said on 16 Dec:

The habits of the enemy have noticeably altered and less movement and indiscriminate firing is reported. It has therefore been suggested that the enemy is thinning out prior to withdrawal. Thinning out he may be, for the various divisional units which had been packed into the area of the X-rds will certainly be withdrawn, and the sector entrusted to the safer hands of the Parachutists. There are however as yet not sufficient grounds for anticipating a definite withdrawal to posns further North.

(W.D., H.Q., 1 Cdn Army Tk Bde,
December 1943: Appx 47, 5 Corps
Int Summary No. 254, 16 Dec 43)

* The R. 22e R. reported numerous instances of the enemy withdrawing in small groups under cover of Red Cross flags (Prince, op cit).

By midnight it appeared that, while the enemy had lost the central stretch of the lateral road, he was not abandoning the general line on which he had fought so desperately: Ortona and Orsogna, denial of which towns meant denial of a suitable axis for an advance north, were still stubbornly defended. To 1 Cdn Inf Div, the arrival of 1 Para Div meant a reconstituted line held mainly by 3 Para Regt and remnants of 90 Gren (Mot) Div, between Berardi and Ortona* (Ibid: 5 Corps Int Summary No. 255, 17 Dec 43).

226. Lt-Col I.S. Johnston, commanding the 48 Highrs, held his "O" Group for "MORNING GLORY" at 2100 hrs, 17 Dec; that only nine of the 27 officers attending were from his own Battalion suggested the co-ordination that was necessary between the various arms to ensure successful execution:

The abnormal number of reps presented quite a tactical problem... The Bn Comd's solution was to place the Lt-Col of the Fd Regt in close support in charge of his 'Reps Platoon' and to deal with him exclusively as his 'Fire Control Officer'.

(Morning Glory, loc cit: and Hist
Sec file Italy: 1943/C/F, 1 Cdn
Inf Bde, Battle for the Ortona
Cross-Roads)

"A" and "D" Coys were detailed to lead; "C" Coy, with Battalion Headquarters, was to follow in the centre to "mop up"; "B" Coy was held in reserve (Ibid). By 0700 hrs, the following morning, the 48 Highrs had moved into the forming up places astride "Lager" track; the tanks were harboured several hundred yards ahead, immediately behind the forward defended localities. Intermittent shell-fire caused negligible interference. (Ibid)

227. At 0800 hrs, the massed artillery of 5 Corps opened fire on the start line:

The barrage opened with a deafening roar, filling the air with the screams and sighing of passing shells and laying down a wall of bursting HE 1000 yds long by over 300 yds deep.

(Morning Glory, loc cit)

Those who viewed the barrage from the Berardi positions described it as "terrifying and effective". (Ibid). The advance progressed with the precision of a well rehearsed exercise. The leading sections of both forward companies followed close behind the barrage. When it was reported that some of the medium shells were falling short amongst "D" Coy a rapid correction was sent to the medium regiment. (Ibid)

228. Accounts written by those who took part and observed this unique operation best describe it. The 48 Highrs' own report said:

Forward Coys advanced close to the barrage well dispersed in varying formations. Ground was difficult, covered with orchards and wired vineyards. The smoke of the barrage cut visibility down to about 200 yards or less and necessitated the use

* On 16 Dec a new addition to German Tenth Army, 5 Mtn Div, appeared opposite the Fifth Army sector. It was another victim of the campaign in Russia (Ibid).

of compass. Tanks were ordered to fire only on targets indicated which was every building or haystack. There was a deal of small arms fire but in the din of the barrage, it couldn't be distinguished as enemy or our own. Troops were keen and easy to control since the rate of advance was only 100 yards every five minutes.

(48 Highrs Operation Report,
loc cit)

The battle narrative of 1 Cdn Inf Bde remarked on an enemy reaction to a creeping barrage:

Enemy activity was limited at first to some very wild small arms fire but later in the advance a fair amount of mortar and light arty was brought down behind our barrage. This is obviously a well planned German manoeuvre when faced with a creeping barrage, and one calculated to destroy our own troops faith in the efficiency of our own gunners.

(Battle for the Ortona Cross-Roads,
loc cit)

Not always were tanks able to keep with their respective infantry sub-units; the ground was soft and they had to select their own routes. The lack of perfect inter-communication between tanks and infantry meant that many good targets were missed; the arrangement, however, of having an infantry liaison officer with a wireless set in the Squadron Commander's tank proved worthwhile. (Morning Glory, loc cit)

229. Those enemy who survived the barrage were too bewildered to man their machine-guns before they were overrun by the infantry and captured. From the flanks enemy self-propelled guns opened fire, but the presence of a battalion at Casa Berardi reduced the effect of enemy interference from the right; on the left across a narrow gully running parallel with the axis of the barrage, some enemy fire came from the shelter of farmhouses, but was successfully dealt with by armour. Battalion Headquarters and the two companies following up suffered most from enemy artillery. Two tanks were lost, one blew up on a mine, and another was knocked out by an anti-tank gun. (Ibid)

230. The forward companies reported at 1030 hrs that they were on the objective after having to wait until the artillery stopped firing. They had discovered that, on the ground, the objective was 300 yards north of where it had been located on the map, which meant that the protective fire was falling on the objective rather than beyond it. When the barrage lifted, however, the Battalion and tanks consolidated. Artillery forward observation officers quickly supplemented pre-arranged defensive fire tasks by selecting targets which could now be engaged by observed fire. The first phase was over. Casualties for the 48 Highrs numbered four killed and twenty wounded, half of which it was estimated were due to shorts from the supporting barrage*. (Ibid, and 48 Highrs' Operation Reports, loc cit)

* Such statement should be regarded with caution. If the enemy artillery fire was designed to destroy the confidence of the 48 Highrs in their own barrage it perhaps met with some success. See para 228. The difficulty of determining can be well imagined.

231. When the signal "Aster" came back, the Brigade Commander ordered Phase II, "ORANGE BLOSSOM" to begin at 1145 hrs. (Renison, op cit). While the 48 Highrs were advancing, the R.C.R. had moved into forming up places near the junction of "Lager" track and the lateral road. The R.C.R. were to advance on a two-company front in the same manner as had the 48 Highrs: the same precaution of "marrying up" tanks and infantry had taken place during the planning. Whereas success and economy had marked the 48 Highrs attack, that of the R.C.R., within a few minutes, met misfortune and heavy casualties.

232. "ORANGE BLOSSOM" was to have fallen parallel with the lateral road while the infantry used the railway track as an axis of advance. For the second time, the guns of 5 Corps opened fire. While the shells were still bursting on the opening line, 3 Cdn Inf Bde reported the rounds were falling short and landing on the Carlit & York R. despite the fact that the Battalion had been withdrawn 300 yards from the edge of the gully. At the same time, the 48 Highrs reported that rounds were falling on their mopping up companies. (Renison, op cit; and Hist Sec file Italy: 1943/C/D, Account by Brig D.C. Spry)

233. As the barrage began to creep, infantry and tanks reported over the wireless that everything was going well. But the urgent complaint from 3 Cdn Inf Bde could not be set aside, and the C.R.A., who was with the Brigade Commander, ordered the barrage to lift 400 yards and at the same time cancelled the right hand wall of protective fire. The effects were immediate. The right flank of the advancing R.C.R. was exposed to fire from enemy positions to the East; a strong enemy concentration north-west of Berardi completely escaped the barrage, which lifted beyond them. (Renison, op cit). The two leading Companies, "C" and "D", were smashed to pieces by the intense machine-gun, mortar and shell fire with which the unmolested parachutists met them. An hour of confused fighting followed; infantry wireless sets were knocked out, and communication with the supporting tanks broke down. R.C.R. casualties, among which were all the officers of "C" and "D" Coys, mounted rapidly; neither of the two sub-units had more than fifteen effective men when the Battalion Commander decided that, since the barrage had been lost, it was useless to commit the two remaining companies, and ordered the remnants to consolidate in the shelter of buildings some 100 yards ahead of the start line. By the time this had been effected, the Commanding Officer himself had become a casualty. (W.D., R.C.R., 18 Dec 43)

234. On the Battalion's left, a section of infantry and a troop of tanks had been able to come close to the objective; but were later forced to rejoin the main part of the Battalion (Ibid). Contact was re-established with the supporting armour, but before re-organization could take place to mount another attack darkness fell, and the Battalion was ordered to dig in for the night, while a fresh artillery programme was arranged for the following morning. The Seconds-in-Command were ordered forward from the "left out of battle" camp at S. Leonardo to replace the lost officers. (Ibid)

235. When Lt-Col Spry, the Brigade Commander, learnt of the predicament of his own Battalion, he was forced to make a decision which he himself described as "terrible";

The battalion was reduced to a strength of nineteen officers, one hundred and fifty-nine O.Rs... I knew that as a battalion, the R.C.R. would be worthless from the point of view of

morale unless they got on their objective... For morale and tactical reasons therefore it was vital for the R.C.R. to return to the attack.

(Spry, op cit)

During the night, the R.C.R. patrolled extensively towards the 48 Highrs and the R. 22e R. at Casa Berardi (W.D., R.C.R., 18 Dec 43; and Renison, op cit). Plans were made to renew the attack at 1000 hrs 19 Dec; "C" and "D" Coys and 4 Pl were formed into one company: neither of the other two companies exceeded 65 men (Ibid, 19 Dec). Just before zero hour, the tank commanders reported that they had neither ammunition nor petrol for the attack. Every effort had been made to bring these supplies forward, but vehicles became bogged down making it necessary for tanks to go back for replenishments (Spry, op cit). Zero was postponed until 1415 hrs, a delay which "caused considerable mental agony to the waiting troops." An intense creeping barrage, similar to those which had been fired the previous day was to precede the advancing companies of the R.C.R. (Ibid)

236. The attack on 19 Dec, which finally got under way at 1415 hrs, was entirely successful. Communications were perfect, and "A" and "B" Coys with their tank support moved steadily behind the barrage. Shortly before nightfall, "Cider" cross-roads, which had, since the first assault on S. Leonardo, been the objective of 1 Cdn Inf Div, were captured and consolidated by the R.C.R. Lt-Col Spry had maintained that the disintegration of the two forward companies on 18 Dec had seriously endangered the Battalion's morale which could only be preserved by getting the men on the objective. He had made a wise decision, for when the second attack took place, the artillery and tank support was faultless, and when the infantry arrived at the objective they had suffered only three casualties². (Spry, op cit)

237. Despite the fact that their troops were able almost to annihilate the two leading companies of the R.C.R. during the afternoon of 18 Dec, the staff of 1 Para Div were being forced to accept the loss of the gully as a tactical feature. The Carlt & York R., on the edge of the gully in the area of the main axis, reported that the enemy were clearing out during the night 18/19 Dec. (Sprung, op cit and Prince, op cit). When the R.C.R. had consolidated "Cider" cross-roads, the Carlt & York R. were able to sweep through the gully and up the main axis to make contact. (Prince, op cit)

238. Between the main axis and the coast road, enemy resistance had decreased by 19 Dec. (Dewar, op cit). During the morning, the Seaforth of C. relieved the Hast & P.E.R., which had been on the Division's right flank since it first crossed the Moro on 6 Dec (Ibid). The P.P.C.L.I. had remained between the coast road and the main axis, while the L. Edmn R. had been kept in an immediate reserve position

* The Narrative of 1 Cdn Inf Bde, Battle for the Ortona Cross-Roads claimed that rapid renewal of some of the fire-lines would have remedied the misfortune of the R.C.R. on 18 Dec, and contends that the 3 Cdn Inf Bde reports on being shelled were "incorrect". It concludes, "Considering the ease with which the 48 Highrs got on to their objective and the fact that their barrage worked so well; and making a direct comparison with the outcome of the R.C.R. action; the efficiency of the creeping barrages, and their weak points, are clearly shown." (Battle for the Ortona Cross-Roads, loc cit)

into which it had withdrawn on 14 Dec. 2 Cdn Inf Bde was thus in a position to exploit the capture of the cross-roads and advance on Ortona. (Ibid; and Jefferson, op cit). General Vokes' intentions at this stage were to attack Ortona with 2 Cdn Inf Bde while 1 Cdn Inf Bde extended its salient to the West of the town; 3 Cdn Inf Bde, severely under-strength after the attempts to cross the gully, was ordered to reorganize. (Crossing of the Moro).^{*}

ADVANCE TO ORTONA, 20 DEC

239. Formation intelligence staffs whose function it was to gather information about the enemy, and from it try to deduce his intentions, often saw their assertions proven wrong. On 19 Dec, 5 Corps Intelligence Summary said:

Having lost control of the x-roads, the enemy is likely to fall back under pressure in the Northern sector, abandoning Ortona, and making his next stand on the line of the Arielli... This is difficult country, well suited to delaying tactics and should provide a firm hinge for an eventual withdrawal in the Northern sector.

(W.D., H.Q. 1 Cdn Army Tk Bde, December 1943: Appx 47, 5 Corps Int Summary 257, 19 Dec 43)

Ortona, approachable only from the South-west, was admirably suited for defence. Through it passed the main coast road to the North, and the longer the town could be retained by the enemy, the longer would he delay Eighth Army's arrival at the Pescara River. The offensive which had begun with the crossing of the Sangro was now almost a month old; German delaying tactics had succeeded in reducing its momentum to a standstill. Weather and terrain had been two great factors in this defensive achievement. If denial of the Pescara River line to the Allies was worth the cost of two Divisions, and it probably was, 65 Inf Div and 90 Gren (Mot) Div had been well spent. The importance which the enemy attached to delay was emphasized when it became clear that he was prepared to commit one of his best formations in Italy to the defence of Ortona, and so hold up the advance on Pescara. From the Adriatic to the Tyrrhenian Sea, the enemy appeared determined to retard the advance up the Italian Peninsula, and, if necessary, to sacrifice his available formations to this end. His reluctance to transfer troops from France showed his fear of the Allied forces that were gathering strength in the British Isles. In the field, his only hope was to delay the inevitable: the ultimate gain to be expected from such delay only he himself could estimate. After losing the Sangro in late November, he had prolonged the winter offensive by his stand on the Moro and the Ortona - Orsogna lateral road: now he was prepared to stand in Ortona before falling back on the Arielli. Those troops of 2 Cdn Inf Bde, 12 Cdn Armd Regt and 90 A/Tk Bty, R.C.A., who advanced on 20 Dec along the flat approach from "Cider" cross-roads to the town were soon to experience street fighting in all its aspects.

240. By 1000 hrs, 20 Dec, the Engineers had completed a bridge where the main axis crossed the stream that ran through the bottom of the gully. Tanks were then able to follow the main axis as far as the "Cider" cross-roads. With the completion of this bridge, 2 Cdn Inf Bde mounted an attack which had as its objective buildings on the outskirts of Ortona.

^{*} See Map "E".

From the start line in the area of the cross-roads, the L. Edmn R. with one squadron of 12 Cdn Armd Regt were to attack behind a creeping barrage along the 3,000 yards of flat ground between the cross-roads and the town. Simultaneously, one company of the Seaforth of C. were to attack up the coast road to join up with the Edmontons. (W.D., H.Q. 2 Cdn Inf Bde, 20 Dec 43).

241. Zero was 1200 hrs (Dewar, op cit). Until 1330 hrs, the attack, which was on a two-company, two-troop front, progressed steadily with little opposition. Engineers accompanied the infantry and swept the tank routes, which were heavily sown with mines and prepared charges. At 1426 hrs, the forward companies of the L. Edmn R. signalled "Crocus", which meant that the objective had been reached. The Battalion reported that in the later stages of the attack the fighting had become more severe; fourteen prisoners were taken. (Ibid; and W.D., H.Q. 2 Cdn Inf Bde and L. Edmn R., 20 Dec 43). By nightfall "C" Coy, Seaforth of C., after a sharp engagement, had scaled the cliffs to the South-west of the town and had linked up with the Edmontons, coming temporarily under command of that Battalion. The western outskirts of Ortona were in Canadian hands. The P.P.C.L.I. in the meantime had cleared the high ground to the South of the gully over which they had been attempting so long to advance. (Ibid)

242. For three weeks the area between "Cider" cross-roads and Ortona had been a target for harassing fire, and in the last few days it had been the centre of heavy concentrations. Along it, too, when weather had permitted, the Desert Air Force had bombed and strafed. Now, the length of the lateral road which had been occupied by the Canadians presented a sombre aspect. The area of the cross-roads was littered with bodies; beyond, the depressing panorama of splintered trees and demolished houses did little to dispel the gloom. (Prince, op cit). Engineers were kept busy removing mines and booby traps, but despite their efforts "C" Sqn 12 Cdn Armd Regt had four tanks disabled in the drive to Ortona, one of which was completely blown up. (Dewar, op cit). Immediately after last light the positions outside the town were strengthened with eight anti-tank guns and a platoon of medium machine-guns; twelve tanks were with the force. (Ibid)

243. While 2 Cdn Inf Bde advanced towards Ortona, 1 Cdn Inf Bde did little other than extensive patrolling, strengthening the positions which had been overrun during "MORNING GLORY", and clearing the minefields which the enemy had laid in such profusion. The R.C.R. spent 20 Dec checking casualties which, when the count was completed, amounted to 112. (W.D., R.C.R., 20 Dec 43). Beyond the 48 Highrs positions, the road to Tollo was found to be still firmly held by the enemy (W.D., H.Q. 1 Cdn Inf Bde, 20 Dec 43). Not until two days later did 1 Cdn Inf Bde strike out towards S. Tommaso and S. Nicola in order to deepen its salient to the West of Ortona (Ibid, 22 Dec 43).

THE ORTONA EPIC, 21-28 DEC

244. Fighting in Ortona began at first light on 21 Dec^{*} and lasted until 2 Cdn Inf Bde reported the town clear on the morning of 28 Dec. When that week of close combat with

* What some gunners described as three more "shelling days" until Christmas. (W.D., 1 Cdn A/Tk Regt, R.C.A., 18 Dec 43)

the elite of the German Army ended, Canadian troops had acquired an epic reputation, and had provided a new model on which training for street fighting could be based. If 1 Para Div was expert at the particular technique of transforming a town into a strong point, neither the training nor past experience of 1 Cdn Inf Div had supplied the principles by which one could be reduced. No quarter was sought or given in the savage fighting which developed. (Jefferson, op cit; and Hist Sec file Italy: 1943/1 Cdn Inf Div/C/F, Ortona)

245. Ortona was typical of the many towns along the Adriatic coast which in the Middle Ages were built on high promontories rather than on a narrow strip of beach. All of its former impregnability had been retained with the deep gullies to the North and South. Its medieval castle was a reminder of the days when danger came from the seas rather than from the narrow strip of plateau to the South-west. In the town proper stone and brick buildings several storeys high were built one against the other; narrow straight streets divided the town into recognizable but irregular blocks. Commercial development in modern times had made the port below the town the most important between Manfredonia and Ancona (N.I.D. Handbook Italy, Vol 1, p.141). Ortona had been spared heavy bombing because the Royal Navy had planned to make use of the port facilities and long breakwater (Ortona, loc cit). South-west of Ortona, the main axis of 5 Corps rejoined the coast road and continued due north through the town as Corso Vittoria Emmanuele. This road, as street fighting began, became the axis. (Ibid)

246. Advancing along the main road on a two-company front with the road as inter-company boundary, the L. Edmn R. renewed the attack at first light on 21 Dec. The entire day was spent in clearing the scattered buildings which lay immediately before the main built-up portion of the town. By nightfall, the first square, Piazza Vittoria, had been reached, and the Edmontons were in possession of Ortona's highest building which could be used as an observation post. (Jefferson, op cit; Ortona, loc cit). In that day's fighting enemy tactics had become clear; the outlying buildings had presented him with a strong line of forward defended localities from which he could withdraw into the main part of the town. The principle of "line of least resistance" to attacker leading to selected "killing ground" of defender had developed. The Parachutists had been excellently prepared for their task; the usual inculcation of Nazi doctrine had had the desired effect of producing fanatics; they had not been wearied by long battle; their heavy allotment of automatic weapons particularly suited the close quarter fighting to which they were now committed. (Ibid)

247. "C" Sqn 12 Cdn Armd Regt had been able to give much assistance to the L. Edmn R.; up to the Piazza Vittoria, the wide street and scattered buildings enabled the tanks to give good covering fire against snipers and machine-guns which were usually located in second and third storey windows. Often armour had been held up while Engineers swept the road - a hazardous task in the continual sniping. By the time it was necessary to withdraw to harbour for the night, the tanks had destroyed two of the anti-tank guns which were as important to the enemy defence as the barricades they guarded. (Beyond the Sangro)

248. During the morning, Brigadier Hoffmeister had decided that another company of Seaforth should be put under command of the L. Edmn R., but in the afternoon had changed this

decision in favour of committing the whole Battalion to what was proving to be a major task. The Highlanders' "C" Coy had already suffered heavily in its fight for the church of Santa Maria di Costantinopoli; the Seaforth spent 21 Dec in clearing north-westwards from the church towards Piazza Vittoria. (W.D., Seaforth of C., 21 Dec 43). It had become apparent, too, that the Edmontons, protracted from the firm base at "Cider" cross-roads, were operating with a vulnerable left flank. For this reason, the P.P.C.L.I. had been ordered to take up defensive positions between the R.C.R. and Ortona. (W.D., P.P.C.L.I., 21 Dec 43)

249. By first light on 22 Dec, the effectiveness of the enemy's demolition plan was evident. Corso Vittorio Emanuele was free of barricades for some 300 yards, but the narrow streets on either sides were blocked by razed houses. Lt-Col Jefferson, commanding the Edmontons, decided, with the commander of his supporting armour, to clear either side of the main street in order that tanks might penetrate the town. (Jefferson, *op cit*). "A" Coy took the left, and "D" Coy the right, with "B" Coy as flank protection between the main road and the esplanade overlooking the harbour. Beginning with a limited objective of clearing the first two blocks on either side, the companies had, by nightfall, reached the town's main square, Piazza Municipale, but 25 yards short of it a high pile of rubble prevented further advance of armour. (*Ibid*; and W.D., 12 Cdn Armd Regt, 22 Dec 43)

250. Fighting in Ortona had become horribly bitter during the second day. Unoccupied houses were found bobby trapped or with delayed charges planted in them; the barricades of rubble had been heavily sown with Teller and "S" mines, and could be covered by fire from the rear and upper storeys of the surrounding houses. The enemy were defending houses with light automatic weapons on the ground floor and with heavier machine-guns and grenades above, while the top floors were held with an assortment of grenades and lighter weapons. (Ortona, *loc cit*). Front walls of buildings opposite those occupied by the enemy had been blown away to expose their interiors to fire from across the street. But the heavy shelling and mortaring in support of the attackers was keeping snipers from the roof tops. Progress down the main street had been necessarily slow: company objectives had been divided into platoon and section objectives, and a strict system of reporting each individual house "clear" before starting on the next had been adopted. (*Ibid*)

251. Although operating in cramped quarters, the armour support was proving invaluable. It was opposed by enemy anti-tank guns sited to cover the obvious tank approaches and often concealed fire on a tank's exposed underside when it climbed over the rubble barricades. As assault guns and individual pill-boxes, tanks were of great aid to the infantry; they were also used to take ammunition forward and to evacuate casualties over bullet swept ground. (*Ibid*). Infantry 6-prs, and 17-prs from 90 A/Tk Bty, R.C.A., were dragged into the town; they, too, fired into the houses and rubble heaps that were holding up the infantry. From positions overlooking the sea, they were able to bring fire on the houses along Corso Garibaldi and down the esplanade. (*Ibid*). During the morning of 23 Dec, "D" Coy of the Seaforth was brought around to the Edmontons' left flank to battle its way through the narrower streets west of Corso Vittorio Emanuele.

252. Having arrived at the Piazza Municipale, the Edmontons' Commander decided that his Battalion should strike out towards Via Tripoli and cut off the garrison holding the north-eastern portion of the town. At first light, 23 Dec, a troop of tanks drove out of harbour, crossed the rubble barricade before Piazza Municipale and, with the infantry, spent the day fighting the short distance to Piazza S. Tommaso. Another company of Edmontons began to clear towards Corso Umberto I, gaining control of the street by nightfall. After the heavy casualties it had suffered, the Battalion was operating on a basis of three companies of 60 men each. (Jefferson, op cit; W.Ds., L. Edmn R. and 12 Cdn Armd Regt, 23 Dec 43)

253. The strain on the L. Edmn R. had been eased by the arrival in the afternoon of 23 Dec of additional companies of Seaforth of C. The two Battalion Commanders planned to divide the town; the Seaforth would clear the western part while the Edmontons continued along Corso Umberto I to the castle, with the cemetery as the ultimate objective. (Jefferson, op cit). By securing the southern end of Corso Umberto I, the Infantry were able to call up their anti-tank guns and heavier 17-prs, which from then on were able to fire down the esplanade, control the port buildings and the entrances to the railway tunnel, and fire into the houses to the West. (Jefferson, op cit). In demolishing buildings, all available anti-tank guns were concentrated on one target after one round had been fired to mark the desired point of impact. (W.D., 1 A/Tk Regt, R.C.A., December 1943: Appx 12, Employment of A/Tk Guns Ortona Area). On Christmas Eve "B" Sqn 12 Cdn Armd Regt relieved "C" Sqn in its support of the two Battalions. (W.D., 12 Cdn Armd Regt, 24 Dec 43). Progress of the L. Edmn R. against an enemy whose persistence increased as he was forced to yield buildings, was confined to clearing two blocks to the west of Corso Umberto I. Care had to be taken against the enemy returning to houses from which he had been ejected. At one time an Edmonton platoon was withdrawn so that the group of buildings it was clearing might be mortared. After a heavy concentration the enemy were found to be in possession again, and had to be cleared out a second time. (Jefferson, op cit). Attempts to outflank the enemy by striking up Corso Umberto I failed, and the fighting resumed its former pattern of working forward house by house. (Ibid)

254. In the western part of the town, the Seaforth were confronted with having to clear the narrow back streets between Corso Vittorio Emanuele and Via Cavour. Here tank and anti-tank gun support was more difficult and the infantry were compelled to struggle through the houses and across the rubble barricades on their own (Dewar, op cit). By this time, identification had made it clear that the enemy had put at least two battalions to the defence of Ortona. (W.D., H.Q. 1 Cdn Army Tk Bde, December 1943: Appx 47, 5 Corps Int Summary No. 262, 24 Dec 43)

255. As the Canadians penetrated further into the built-up portion of the town, they found that after clearing the first house of a block, they could move to the next either through the street or by jumping across the balconies. By both methods they became exposed. "Mouse-holing", blowing through the walls of one house into the next, then became one of the chief characteristics of the fighting. One company commander afterwards recorded how this method was employed for the first time by his men:

The two pioneers went to work to prepare the first 'beehive'* on the top floor. To get the right height they placed the 'Beehive' on a chair and leaned it against the wall. While the 'Beehive' was being set I gathered all my men on the ground floor. With the fuses set the pioneers tumbled down the stairs, and as they reached the ground floor, there was a loud explosion. We all tore up the stairs in order to get through the mouse-hole before the dust subsided, but there was no hole. What we thought was one wall was actually two walls. Again we set a 'Beehive', went through the same routine as before, and this time found ourselves in the next house.

The leading section into this house was the follow up section. It immediately cleared the floor and manned all windows covering the house on the opposite side of the street. The first section then came through, cleared the next floor up, then moved down and cleared the bottom floor.

(Ortona, loc cit, Appx "B",
Company Commander's Story)

In this manner the men cleared the whole row of houses without once exposing themselves on the street: to their surprise they found that automatically the Germans vacated the houses on the opposite side.

By adopting a method, not used until then in our street fighting, I feel certain we took the Germans by surprise.

(Ibid)

256: Ortona was essentially a battle-ground where success or failure depended on the individual initiative of junior leaders. Sections, platoons and companies became separate entities isolated in small worlds inside a crumbling city; dust and smoke curtailed attacker and defender from beyond their immediate house or block. Courage and ingenuity were the essential human factors which won Ortona; for without courage, ingenious methods could never have been utilized; without ingenuity, courageous deeds lost their purpose**. Battle in no way subsided over Christmas and Boxing Day. Slowly and with increasing casualties, the Edmontons forced their way towards the castle, and the Seaforths towards Via Monte Maiella. The former were reinforced by two drafts of over 100 men each, but it took some time to absorb them. Of their preparedness for this violent introduction to battle, the Commanding Officer said, "Some had not even received advanced training." (Jefferson, op cit)

257. During the night 26/27 Dec, the Edmontons lost an officer and 23 men when the house in which they were distributing ammunition was blown up by a prepared charge. Retaliation was swift. Two enemy-occupied houses were simultaneously blown up. Suitable buildings were reconnoitred under cover of smoke, and charges, much of which was made up of captured explosive, laid during the night. It was estimated

* Demolition charge.

** It is not desirable, nor possible from records available to give a chronological or detailed account of the street fighting.

that one building harboured a German platoon, and the other slightly fewer of the enemy. (Ibid). The Edmonton pioneers, constantly harassed by German grenades, worked feverishly in the hope of extricating some of the twelve men alive; they succeeded in removing four; the remainder, with the exception of one who was rescued 72 hours later, were dead. (Ibid, and W.D., L. Edmn Regt, 26 Dec 43)

258. As the Canadians forced their way deeper into the town, their lives became strangely intermingled with those of the civilians who had not been herded northwards by the enemy. The part of the population which remained had taken to the basements: here the troops, temporarily resting, or waiting until a tank had blown down an enemy-held building which was resisting their advance, shared the underground homes of the townsfolk. Children, tired and terrified, scarcely doubted that Father Christmas had overlooked Ortona that year. One observer who found himself in one of the basement living rooms wrote:

What a strange clutter of humanity it was. There were some five or six Canadian soldiers, there were old women and there were children innumerable. A painter of genius - Goya, perhaps might have done justice to the scene. I felt no verbal description could do so. In the half-darkened room the pasta for the midday meal was simmering over the fire in the corner. Haggard, prematurely aged women kept emerging shyly one after another from some inner chamber where an old man, the grandfather of the numerous children, was dying... Another old man was uttering maledictions against Mussolini. Then his wife surprisingly produced a jeroboam of Marsala and a half dozen glasses and moved around among the soldiers, filling and re-filling their glasses... The children clambered around the Canadian soldiers and clutched at them convulsively every time one of our anti-tank guns, located only half a dozen paces from the door of the house, fired down the street in the direction of one of the remaining German machine-gun posts. Soon each one of us had a squirming, terrified child in his arms. And the old lady went on distributing Marsala.

(Christopher Buckley, Road to Rome, pp 261-262)

259. On 27 Dec, Brigade Headquarters prepared a plan by which the P.P.C.L.I., with "B" Sqn 12 Cdn Armd Regt were to pass through the Edmontons. The enemy it appeared, was each night reinforcing and supplying his garrison on a rotation basis. There was no slackening of resistance although the enemy was gradually losing his hold on the town. An intercepted enemy wireless message, asking if companies knew their orders and areas, referred to "Operation Ortona", the details of which implied a counter-attack. (Dewar, op cit: and Beyond the Sangro). The converse, however, was taking place, for at 0800 hrs 28 Dec, when the P.P.C.L.I. were concentrating in the centre of the town, the Seaforth reported that the enemy had withdrawn. (Dewar, op cit). Shortly afterwards, the Edmonton patrols discovered that the castle had been evacuated (Jefferson, op cit). Because of this sudden withdrawal of the enemy, the P.P.C.L.I. plan was changed, each company being given points to occupy in the area of the cemetery and the roads leading out of the town. All positions were taken without a shot being fired. The

battle for Ortona was at last over. (W.D., P.P.C.L.I., 28 Dec 43)

260. Throughout the battle, platoon and support weapons had been put to every conceivable use to derive the maximum from them. The PIAT, whatever its merits as an anti-tank weapon, had previously been used for blowing holes in walls; in Ortona it was employed extensively in this secondary role, but it was soon discovered to be unsafe to discharge inside houses because of the heavy back blast and the danger of the roof collapsing. (Ortona, loc cit). The Commanding Officer of the Edmontons described 6-pr anti-tank guns as "marvellous stuff" for blasting houses and shooting into the piles of rubble into which the enemy had dug himself. (Jefferson, op cit). 2-inch mortars were found extremely efficient for laying smoke screens when it was necessary to dash across open streets and squares: firing low angle, they could be shot down streets and at barriers, and were equally harassing when lobbed into courtyards and alleyways. At one time, the L. Edmn R. carried out an area "shoot" during which 1,100 rounds of 3-inch mortar ammunition was expended; but the effect had been limited and it became necessary for the infantry to clear house by house. (Ortona, loc cit). Battalion pioneers and Divisional Engineers, besides distinguishing themselves in the exacting task of removing mines and booby traps, prepared demolition charges unusual in design but effective in result*. 4,000 No. 36 grenades and 2,000 No. 77 smoke grenades had been expended during the week. (Ibid)

261. Although the nature of the fighting had not allowed an organized counter-attack, enemy infiltration became a tactic which caused delay and confusion and necessitated employment of Canadian troops that could have been otherwise engaged. "Every building had to be occupied as soon as it was captured and held until the whole immediate area had been cleared." (Ibid). So closely interlocked were assailant and defender, that artillery and air support could be provided on a limited scale only. The enemy had displayed ingenuity with his demolition programme, which cleverly arranged in the narrow streets, was designed to trap both infantry and tanks, which then would come under short range fire from anti-tank guns sited behind the rubble barricades. The numerous alleyways opening into squares and wider streets had enabled his gunners to catch tanks in enfilade. Despite these elaborate defences, no more than three of 12 Cdn Armd Regt's tanks were destroyed beyond repair. (Ibid: and Beyond the Sangro)

262. Into the battle the enemy had introduced his flame-thrower, which had a more terrifying effect on morale than a decisive effect as a lethal weapon. The one which had given so much concern to the Edmonton R. was finally eliminated by battering down, with tank and anti-tank gun fire, the buildings in which it was housed. (Dewar, op cit). Among those enemy weapons which the Canadians had not before encountered so widely employed were glass chemical-filled grenades, stick grenade booby traps, hollow magnetic grenades and Faustpatrone^{xx}. (Ortona, loc cit)

* One method of preparing charges was to put 30 pounds of explosive in a "non returnable" four gallon petrol tin. (Ibid)

xx Faustpatrone, comparable with the British PIAT, was an anti-tank projector. Ortona was the first time in which one of these weapons was captured intact. (Ibid)

263. By the time the companies of the P.P.C.L.I. had quietly occupied the cliffs to the North-west of the town, infantrymen of 2 Cdn Inf Bde had learnt much of individual conduct in prolonged periods of street fighting; and unit and formation commanders realized the absolute necessity of having an organized and detailed plan for the clearance of a town. (Ibid). Street fighting, it had been found, was an acquired art and Canadian troops had learned:

that there are only two ways to acquire it -
by careful planning or training and a high
standard of discipline or by bitter experience.

(Ibid)

Subsequently the knowledge thus gained by 1 Cdn Inf Div was studied by the Allied armies as a basis for training^x; for with the exception of Stalingrad, there was no previous instance where topographical conditions had been so favourably exploited by the defenders. In the absence of roads, a strong attempt to by-pass Ortona would have been difficult, and nothing better illustrates the difficulties than the struggle which 1 Cdn Inf Bde had had to develop its salient^{xx}. Undoubtedly, 1 Para Div also left the Adriatic much wiser, and, when called upon several months later to repeat its tactics in the shambles of Cassino, was able to discharge that task with the advantage of the experience gained in its defence of Ortona.

264. Long after the lessons of Ortona recede into the indexed pages of military text books, there will be remembered, by those whose minds were impressed with the vivid contrast, the story of how, despite their joyless surroundings, the two Battalions acknowledged Christmas Day. Nothing could have been less Christmas-like than the heavy smell of cordite around Ortona's rubble barricades; the collapsing walls and smoke-filled alleys among which men live to kill or be killed: it would be difficult to find a more graphic instance of spirit overcoming environments: Christmas Eve's objective became Christmas Day's banquet hall.

265. Echelon personnel were determined that, whatever the circumstances, their rifle companies should have a Christmas dinner. The War Diary of the Seaforth of C. is a record of contrasts. During the night 24/25 Dec, one company found itself and the enemy occupying the same building. Hand grenade sorties took place until morning:

One section of A Company gained control of the school, wiping out resistance, but the enemy blew prepared charges under the building, burying six of the men. Attempts to get the men out were unsuccessful.

The Q.M. Capt D.B. Cameron spent a busy morning fixing up details for the Christmas Dinner to be held in the church occupied by B.H.Q. The Protective Group sent parties of men around ruined houses in the town collecting chinaware.

The setting for the dinner was complete, long rows of tables with white table cloths, and a bottle of beer per man, candies, cigarettes,

* See Report No. 2 of D.H.T. Liaison Training Team -
Street Fighting. (1st Sec file Italy: 1944/THQ/2)

xx See below para 267.

nuts, oranges and apples and chocolate bars providing the extras. The C.O., Lt-Col S.W. Thompson, laid on that the Companies would eat in relays in the order C-A-B-D, as each company finished their dinner, they would then go forward and relieve the next company. The first company was to be in at 1100 hrs. 2 hours was to be allowed for each company for dinner. The menu...Soup, pork with apple sauce, cauliflour, mixed vegetables, mashed potatoes, gravy. Christmas pudding and mince pie.

C Company was the first Coy to eat Dinner at the church, a dinner that no one had felt possible under such conditions...when the last man of the Battalion reluctantly left the table to return to the grim realities of the day, there was an atmosphere of cheer and good fellowship in the church. A true Christmas spirit. The impossible had happened. No one had looked for a celebration of this day, December 25th was to be another day of hardship, discomfort, fear and danger, another day of war. The expression of the faces of the dirty bearded men as they entered the building was a reward that those responsible are never likely to forget.

When C Company had finished their dinner, they relieved A Company so that they might come back the 300 or 400 yards for the same, and so A Coy relieved B Coy and B. D. Coy.

...but the situation had grown tense with C Company on the left flank.

Capt J. McLean took his Company back into the fight. Christmas Day was no less quiet than the preceding ones, but it is one that this Regiment will never forget. Pipe Major Esson played his pipes several times throughout the meals. During the dinner, the Signal Officer, Lieut. W. Guildersleeve, played the Church Organ, and, with the aid of the improvised choir, organized by the Padre, Carols rang throughout the church.

The Church [another] had been taken, but conceded back to the enemy when the building collapsed due to the heavy pounding it had received from our supporting tanks' 75-mm guns.

(W.D., Seaforth of C., 24 and 25 Dec 43)

Nor had a sense of humour been lost when the Padre remarked, "Well, at last I've got you all in Church". (Ibid)

266. While the Edmontons had no church in which to lay out their Christmas dinner, small groups at a time were relieved from battle to share what was, for not a few, to be a last supper.

Today is our fifth Christmas on Active Service and the fiercest fighting so far encountered continued throughout the day... In the evening a very good Christmas dinner...was enjoyed.

(W.D., L. Mun R., 25 Dec 43)