

## D DAY DODGERS VISIT ITALY

Written by Capt Rick Dumas.

As the masses and media converged onto Normandy, other meaningful pilgrimages took place in Italy. The long ago Liri Valley battles were being commemorated after 75 years, without as much attention. Who could have possibly have forgotten the Hitler Line; a Canadian Army battle honour whereby 890 Canadians perished. It was the single worst day of fighting in the entire Italian campaign. Within the week after Liri Valley was taken, Rome fell. Two days later, the D Day invasion of Northwest Europe began on Normandy's beaches. Though the D Day Dodgers vital successes and strategic importance would fade from the Canadian media, the Italian campaign was to remain quite relevant insofar as keeping 10 German divisions from entering the Normandy theatre. The nearby Cassino War Cemetery is the second largest Second World War cemetery in Italy and is home to 4,200 Commonwealth graves. Of those are 200 who are unknown and 855 Canadian. There are 192 Canadians that have no known grave.

On 30 May 2019, after retracing its steps of 31 May 1944, throughout the Hitler Line, The Loyal Edmonton Regiment (L EDMN R) would pay homage to its wartime heritage in concert with the citizens of Frosinone. The reception was splendid from the very onset. After lunch, hosted by a prominent lawyer at his personal residence, the formal ceremony would commence by marching onto the Regimental Monument's sight to the sound of our Piper and Drummer and much applause by the citizenry.



At the monument, Honourary Lieutenant Colonel Doug Cox reads Canadian Ambassador Bugailiskis's message in her stead, amongst the mayor (adorned by the tri-colour sash), police, veterans' organizations, nursing sisters and general public. The Regiment is formed up, in line and facing the monument.

Barely dodging a rain storm, the ceremony was exceptional, following the customary format. National anthems were played by a local band, speeches though short were quite poignant and gift presentations were well received. Following the ceremony, a local merchant hosted a reception at his place of business, proudly displaying Canadian wartime memorabilia in the window.



At the actual Monument, Commanding Officer, L EDMN R – LCol J. McCully and Wreath Bearer – MCpl W. Brettner prepare to lay a wreath, in honour of the Loyal Eddies that were killed or wounded in action and taken prisoner of war during the liberation of Frosinone. Note the Regimental plaque held by the Mayor, proudly wearing her Italian tri-colour sash.

The L EDMN R's liberating Frosinone came about as the Allies were breaking out from the Hitler Line. The Regiment was to prepare for any counter-offensive and to crush resistance at Frosinone while consolidating, in anticipation of stepping off, once again. Going back to the Adriatic was soon in the cards for 1 Can Div. The Regiment would lose more of its own within the environs of Florence before heading across the Apennines, yet again.

The next ceremony was in mediaeval Ortona, 1 June 2019. Having already visited the Moro River Cemetery (1,375 Canadian grave sights of 1,615) we commenced with retracing the fight throughout the mighty and costly Moro leading up to the liberation of Ortona. We then lunched at the sight of the former 2 Cdn Inf Bde HQ before moving into Ortona but not before ringing the village bell and speaking to some of the elderly locals who survived the war. Upon entering Ortona, we were met by our guide for an excellent foot tour of the battle sights and an unveiling ceremony at the Battle of Ortona Museum. The 49<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Loyal Edmonton Regiment Association had partnered with the Museum in completing a colossal model refurbishment project. From there we took a short break at our resort, perhaps sampling grappa before heading back into town for the main event and dinner reception.



At the Museum unveiling ceremony, from left to right is Canadian Ambassador A. Bugailiskis, LGen S. Bowes - CAF Senior Advisor to VAC, CO L EDMN R – LCol J. McCully, L EDMN R Association President – Capt (Ret'd) J. Bowen (with accompanying plaque), HLCol D. Cox, MVAC – Minister L. MacAuley, Ortona Mayor L. Castiglione, unknown person, and Museum Director – A. Arnone. Missing is LGen C. Whitecross - Commandant NATO Defense College. The VIPs in attendance were identical to the ceremony that was to follow, later that evening.

On 6 December 2013, the mayors of Edmonton and Ortona simultaneously conducted Proclamation of Friendship ceremonies within their respective cities on the occasion of the Regiment's 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Battle for Ortona. Six years later, the Regiment would return, fully participating in the official historic renaming of its main piazza - Piazza Plebiscite, where the Canadian Price of Peace Monument is located. Upon completion of the unveiling ceremony, it is now known as "Piazza degli Eroi Canadesi" (Square to the memory of Canadian Heroes).



Proudly displaying the new signage is Canadian Minister Veterans' Affairs, Minister MacAuley and Ortona Mayor Castiglione (wearing mayoral sash).

The Piazza was packed with citizens and VIPs alike. Local musicians were entertaining and set the mood for the event. In the customary manner, national anthems were played, speeches and presentations were made. CO L EDMN R would read a message from Edmonton Mayor, Don Iveson, on his behalf all the while our Piper and Drummer were perched on a nearby roof top. Of course it was raining – keeping it real. Our soldiers while commemorating our forefathers, were treated like rock stars, many posing for pictures at the Canadian monument. We were treated to beverages and snacks at an on-site restaurant – just before the dinner reception and what a grand time that was.

These were but only two of the many highlights during our Italy Battlefield Tour, 24 May-6 June 2019. We retraced all of our Battle Honours with the emphasis of those emblazoned on our Regimental Colours. Of course it wasn't all business. We visited Catania and Taormina while in Sicily and played while in Rome and the Republic of San Marino, splashed around the beaches of Rimini and gondola'd our way around Venice. The integration and rapport with local Italians was especially unique and rewarding – gaining access to several bunkers and personal collections, a nobleman's palace (Palazzo de Giacomo – during the war, used as a German HQ and Cdn Field Hospital), the Monte Cassino Abbey, meeting and speaking with survivors of the

war and all the while experiencing the wonderful hospitality while dining outside the resorts. Sometimes we have to leave home to better appreciate home or Veni Vidi Vici. <wink>