



The Italian Campaign



The Italian Campaign was one of our country's most important military contributions of the entire Second World War. More than 93,000 Canadians would see action in Italy from 1943 to 1945. Our soldiers there joined forces with troops from Great Britain, the United States, Poland, France and other Allied powers to try to capture the Mediterranean country. As they fought their way north through Italy, Canadians faced many difficult battles against a skilled and determined enemy.

SETTING THE SCENE

The Second World War began in 1939. Soon, much of central and western Europe was under German control. In 1941, Germany also invaded the Soviet Union and vicious fighting broke out on the Eastern Front, as well. The Soviet leader, Joseph Stalin, asked the other Allied powers to plan a new military offensive elsewhere in Europe to help relieve some of the pressure of this major enemy assault. The Allies agreed and decided to invade Italy (which was aligned with Germany) in the summer of 1943.

The goal was to launch a large-scale ground offensive to knock Italy out of the war, while forcing the Germans to divert some of their troops and equipment from the Eastern Front where they were fighting the Soviet Union. This Allied effort became known as the Italian Campaign.

COMING ASHORE IN SICILY

The Italian Campaign began with the Allied landings on the island of Sicily in the far south of Italy. Canadian soldiers from the 1st Canadian Infantry Division and the 1st Canadian Armoured Brigade had an active and important role in this effort, codenamed "Operation Husky." It was a difficult task as even just getting soldiers and equipment to the region was dangerous. Indeed, three Allied transport ships carrying Canadian troops from Great Britain to Sicily

for the attack were sunk by enemy submarines in early July 1943. Fifty-eight Canadians drowned and 500 vehicles and a number of artillery guns were lost.

Operation Husky began in the early morning of 10 July 1943. Canadian and British troops hit the beaches along a 60-kilometre stretch of coastline near Pachino at the southern tip of Sicily. The invasion was one of the largest seaborne operations in military history, involving nearly 3,000 ships and landing craft. The Royal Canadian Navy helped bring the Allied forces ashore and keep them supplied during the fighting. Warplanes from the Royal Canadian Air Force also supported the landings and the subsequent Allied advance.

The fighting in Sicily would last more than four weeks, during which Canadians would battle through hundreds of kilometres of mountainous terrain in the scorching summer heat. More than 1,300 of our soldiers became casualties there, including almost 600 who were killed.

Taking Sicily was important. It helped secure the Mediterranean Sea for Allied shipping and contributed to the downfall of Italian dictator Benito Mussolini. The new Italian government would soon surrender to the Allies but, unfortunately, the Germans were not prepared to lose the country and quickly seized control. The fall of Sicily cleared the way for the Allies' next step—landing in mainland Italy.

Canadian soldiers riding on a Universal Carrier in Sicily in July 1943.
Photo: Library and Archives Canada PA-114511



THE FIGHT FOR ITALY

On 3 September 1943, thousands of Allied troops in Sicily crossed the Strait of Messina to come ashore in the extreme south of mainland Italy, with the Canadians landing at Reggio Calabria. Within a week, additional Allied forces also landed farther north at Salerno and Taranto. The pieces were in place for the Allies to push forward to liberate Rome and drive the enemy from Italy.

After losing Sicily, however, Germany was determined to strongly resist this new offensive. To slow the advancing Allied forces, the Germans took advantage of the mountainous landscape and turned the length of the Italian peninsula into a series of defensive positions which stretched from the Tyrrhenian Sea to the Adriatic Sea. These lines were well-protected with machine gun nests, artillery positions, land mines, barbed wire and anti-tank ditches.

Canadians joined other Allied troops in what would be a painstaking crawl up the rugged Italian mainland. They would fight in the dust and heat of summer, the snow and cold of winter, and the rain and mud of the spring and fall. One of the most difficult battles for the Canadians took place in Ortona during the Christmas of 1943. Ortona was an ancient town full of stone buildings overlooking the Adriatic Sea. Its narrow, rubble-filled streets limited the use of tanks and artillery. This meant the Canadians often had to engage in vicious street fighting. Amid these deadly conditions, our soldiers found a creative tactic to clear the enemy from the stone buildings they defended. They would use explosives to smash their way through the walls of adjoining houses and avoid the streets – a technique called “mouse-holing.” The Canadians finally liberated the town on December 28 after more than a week of bloody combat.

Further major fighting that winter would take a pause due to the harsh weather. However, the Italian Campaign would heat up again in the spring as the Allies resumed their push towards Rome through the Liri Valley in central Italy. The Germans’ Gustav Line and Hitler Line stood in their way and Canadian troops would take part in the bitter struggle to break through these defenses. Fighting near the dominating heights of Monte Cassino in May 1944, they helped the Allies throw back the enemy forces and pushed across the Melfa River. Rome would be liberated on June 4.

In August, the Canadians would be back in action along the Adriatic coast on the eastern side of Italy. Their new objective was to break through yet another set of fortified enemy positions—the Gothic Line—and capture the city of Rimini. Fighting their way across a series of challenging rivers, our soldiers were able to help the Allies smash the heavily defended German line. Finally on 21 September 1944, Rimini was taken.

In mid-October, Canadian soldiers would go on the attack again, eventually fighting their way across the Savio River in the face of fierce resistance. After being withdrawn from the front lines in November to recuperate, the Canadians were tasked with attacking Ravenna which they captured on December 4. While sharp action would continue throughout the month, there were few significant additional gains.

Allied troops would continue fighting in Italy until May 1945, when German forces there finally surrendered. Canadian soldiers, however, did not participate in the final phase of the campaign. In February 1945, our troops would begin being transferred to Northwest Europe to be reunited with the First Canadian Army. There they joined the Allied advance into the Netherlands and Germany to help finally end the Second World War in Europe.

Canadian soldiers ready to attack near Ortona, Italy in December 1943.
Photo: Library and Archives Canada PA-163411



SACRIFICE

More than 26,000 Canadians became casualties during the Italian Campaign, including almost 6,000 who lost their lives. Most of the Canadians who died in Italy are buried in the many beautiful Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemeteries found there, or are commemorated on the Cassino Memorial that is located southeast of Rome.

The brave Canadians who fought in Italy were among the more than one million Canadians who served in uniform during the Second World War. The fighting took a great toll and, by the end of the conflict, a total of more than 45,000 of our service members had given their lives.

LEGACY

Canada played an important role in defeating the enemy forces in Italy and helping the Allies to victory in the Second World War. These impressive efforts remain a point of great national pride, even many decades later. Coming from all walks of life, our service members accomplished much and sacrificed greatly in the struggle for freedom.

Canadian Nursing Sisters in Naples, Italy in November 1943.
Photo: Library and Archives Canada PA-26568

The legacy of peace given to us by the generations of Canadians who have stood up for our shared values lives on. Their great service and sacrifice will never be forgotten and we honour all those who have done so much for our country and the world.

CANADA REMEMBERS PROGRAM

The Canada Remembers Program of Veterans Affairs Canada encourages all Canadians to learn about the sacrifices and achievements made by those who have served—and continue to serve—during times of war, military conflict and peace. As well, it invites Canadians to become involved in remembrance activities that will help preserve their legacy for future generations. To learn more about the Italian Campaign, please visit the Veterans Affairs Canada website at veterans.gc.ca or call **1-866-522-2122** toll free.

This publication is available upon request in alternate formats.

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