

 RAPID READS

MARK ZUEHLKE

ORTONA STREET FIGHT



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*For Major John Dougan, brave soldier,
post-war Rhodes scholar and fine Canadian.*

CHAPTER ONE

DECEMBER 21, 1943

They had numbered about sixty at dawn. Now just seventeen still stood. The others had been killed or wounded. The survivors faced the hundred yards of open ground where the company had been butchered. Twice they had tried to cross it. Twice they had stumbled through the mud, firing from their hips, screaming defiance. Twice they were forced back by the same drenching German fire that had cut down their comrades.

Beyond that open stretch of land stood the outskirts of Ortona. Between lay abandoned vegetable gardens and olive trees so

torn by shellfire that they looked like twisted fenceposts. A tight row of two- to three-story buildings faced the open ground. Explosions had shattered all the windows. Enemy paratroopers were using the openings to snipe at the Canadians. More snipers were on the rooftops or dug in at the base of the buildings. Still more paratroopers hunched behind machine guns, MG42s, whose rate of fire was so fast each long burst sounded like someone ripping a sheet in half.

The Canadian dead lay scattered in the open, broken toy soldiers in wool khaki uniforms. Most lay facedown, arms stretched ahead of them. They had died running toward the buildings. The survivors hated leaving the dead where they had fallen. But it had taken all of them just to bring out the wounded.

In a few minutes Lieutenant John Dougan expected to join the dead, for he was about to lead the men in another charge. Dougan thought it madness. His company commander agreed.

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Major Jim Stone had said as much into the radio handset. But the battalion commander on the other end had told him to get on with it.

Stone, Dougan and the company sergeant major had then huddled in a ditch running with muddy rainwater. Stone decided only a third of them would attack. The others would fire everything they had from the ditch. They would try to make the Germans duck from their guns. Stone was a fair man and brave as a lion. He broke a match into three lengths, dropped them into a helmet, and each man drew a piece. Dougan never won gambles. His was the short one.

* * *

“Can you lay down some smoke to cover us?” he asked. Private Elwyn Springsteel said he could see the German machine-gun positions. He and his loader would blind the enemy with smoke bombs from the company’s two-inch mortar.

That would help. But Dougan still thought he and the six men going with him would die. He desperately searched for a way to reach the buildings that did not require crossing that open ground. *Then he saw the ditch.* Narrow. Barely three feet deep. From the deep ditch where they huddled, it ran across the open ground to a large apartment building. If they hunched over and ran up it single file, maybe the Germans wouldn't see them. Unless they had a machine gun aimed up the ditch.

Dougan had been fighting Germans for six months. He and the rest of 1st Canadian Infantry Division had landed in Sicily on July 10, 1943. They had fought their way across the island as part of the British Eighth Army. Then they had crossed onto the toe of mainland Italy and marched up its craggy boot. Now it was December. They found themselves in this muddy hellhole on the Adriatic coast. Ortona stood roughly parallel to and east of Rome. Italy's capital was the prize they marched toward.

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Dougan had noticed earlier that the Germans expected the Allied troops to be logical. And logic said a rifle company should advance across open ground in sections spread out over a wide front. This was supposed to create too many targets for the defender to deal with. Some were bound to survive to overrun the defensive positions. Stone's 'D' Company had tried to do this twice already. Going up a ditch in a bunched-up line was illogical. So Dougan was going to gamble that the Germans would not be prepared for it. Or so he hoped. "Hell, we're all going to die anyway. Might as well give it a go," he said.

* * *

As Springsteel fired his mortar for all it was worth, Dougan dashed up the ditch with six men hot on his heels. He expected to hear the horrible ripping sound of the machine gun and to die. But not a shot was fired. He and his men piled out of the ditch. Pressed against

the hard brick wall of the apartment building, they gasped for air. They were both sweating and shivering from the cold. And dripping wet from the icy drizzle falling. Dougan turned to signal Stone to bring the rest of the company forward. But the big major was already coming out of the ditch with the others right behind.

Seventeen men were now behind the German positions. They looked at the paratroopers huddling in their gun pits. The men in coal-bucket helmets still peered out at the open field, calmly waiting for the Canadians to appear like ducks in their shooting gallery. Stone grinned fiercely. "Nobody but a bunch of madmen would have attempted that dash," he said.

But the madmen had dashed and now they could win. Dougan wrenched a door open and the company filtered quickly and quietly through the empty building. They looked down upon the Germans from upstairs windows. Rifles, Bren guns and Thompson

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submachine guns fired as one. The Germans died where they were.

There were other Germans, however, in Ortona. In fact, Ortona was lousy with troops of the 1st Parachute Division. 'D' Company of the Loyal Edmonton Regiment had only won a toehold inside the place. Now, on December 21, the true battle for Ortona began.