

**Mark Zuehlke. *The River Battles: Canada's Final Campaign in World War II Italy*. Madeira Park, BC: Douglas & McIntyre, 2021. 470 pp., illustrations, maps, appendices, notes, bibliography, indices. CDN \$37.95, cloth; ISBN: 978-1-77162-312-4.**

The war in Italy has often gotten the rough side of history. Let's face it, this was a part of the war that was never the central focus of our efforts. Fought as an extension really of the operations in North Africa and overshadowed by the fighting in France and Northwest Europe that started in 1944, Italy has always felt like a side show. An honourable mention, but that is all. It does not help that those fighting for Italy found themselves often on the low priority list for men and material after Normandy. Add the nickname the D-Day Dodgers and the historical feeling given is that this was not just a less important theatre of operations but that those that served there avoided the "real" fighting. This is certainly far from the truth. A long running campaign the fighting for Sicily and Italy exhibited some of the most ferocious fighting of the Second World War as certainly the Canadians can attest to. One needs only to think of the close quarters fighting in Ortona to find the proof.

Yet the fighting that ended the Italian campaign, starting in late September 1944 and continuing for the next five to six months, was some of the hardest fighting the Canadians undertook. The Emilia-Romagna plain looked like a promising and straightforward operational area, but it proved to be far from that. Broken by a series of rivers and ditches, it proved to be some of the nastiest fighting conditions the Canadians faced with exceptionally good defensive ground for the Germans to exploit. Yet few Canadians have really heard of it and fewer still understand it. Mark Zuehlke has taken steps to rectify that. In *The River Battles* (2021), Mark has explored the challenges the Canadians faced while trying to push out the Germans from Northern Italy. In this his fifth book on the fighting in Italy, Mark exposes the reader to this long-forgotten chapter of Canadian military history. In 470 pages, broken up in to twenty-four chapters supported by appendices, he details the incredible hurdles that the Canadians overcame to end the fighting in Italy.

Operating at multiple levels, *The River Battles* explores the multi-faceted issues surrounding the fighting in Italy. Terrain and strategic realities faced by the Canadians ranging from the failure to truly grasp the problems of the ground being fought over and the weather through the manpower crisis that plagued the allies throughout the war, set the backdrop for the campaign itself. To this background Zuehlke examines the problems of leadership that hindered operations as well as the attempts to rectify these issues. This includes not just the fact that Canadians operated as part of the coalition of forces in Italy, but personality clashes among the upper Canadian command echelon. This

directly impacted performance. But on top of this is also a complex history of a wide number of Canadian units that carried the fighting. Canada, like the rest of the British Commonwealth, has a military that was shaped by the regimental system used by the British. As such the Canadian army in Italy was really a complex tapestry of rather unique regiments rather than a homogenous whole. This unique nature of the Canadian Army really reflects Canada in a great many ways. Zuehlke weaves a masterful understanding of the units experience and the people that composed them, merging them into the overall story of the fighting. From the British Columbia Dragoons and the Cape Breton Highlanders through the Hasty P's and PPCLI to the West Nova Scotia Highlanders, Zuehlke manages to bring the people at the very front back into the history by telling their story and relating their perceptions of the war in Italy back to the greater narrative of the final river battles. The result is a masterful merging of histories into a gripping tale.

The complexity of the fighting in Italy is magnified by the incredible ferocity of it. The river battles makes this perfectly clear to the reader. This is a campaign of driving the Germans from one position to another while trying to maintain pressure on them as they fell back. The result was a series of operations that at the front had the Canadians patrolling forward to find the Germans. The discovery of these new enemy positions often came about via an ambush of rearguard forces. The ensuing fighting was viscous and exhibits intensity levels on par with Normandy. The deteriorating weather and wet ground increased the problems faced by the infantry as it often limited the support that they could get. This made the fighting into a particularly difficult infantry campaign of sudden contact and ferocious fighting. The fighting to cross the Savio river is perhaps a perfect example of this. With Major General Chris Vokes pushing hard to get the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade across the river, it fell to the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry to cross the river and establish a bridgehead for the Seaforth Highlanders to expand. This was essential to allow the engineers to build vital bridges to allow follow on units, and supplies to expand the bridgehead. The terrible weather conditions and the inability to get a bridge across fast meant that it was not possible to get tanks across the river. Without armoured support, this made the fighting into a very difficult infantry assault into the teeth of a German panzer grenadier regiment's defences. The assault was a disaster for the infantry struggling through mines, mud, and extremely heavy German fire.

The greatest strength of Zuehlke's work has always been his ability to merge the operational/command issues with a narrative of those individuals involved in the fighting. The result is the inclusion of the lowest levels of the Canadian forces and their experience in a historical narrative that provides detailed information and a deeper understanding of the combat experience

from the perspective of the man in the foxhole. It produces a moving and often terrifying glimpse of the private's war that few people ever see. It has made all his books incredibly readable and relatable to readers and *The River Battles* is no exception. As a history the text provides an incredible narrative that sets the stage for further analytical work relating to combat performance, manpower limitations, operational research, etc. that really needs to be done. Thus, *The River Battles* represents an important stepping stone to further research and an opportunity for future scholars to build on. This text is thus highly recommended to all levels of interest in the Canadian Armed Forces or World War II.

Robert Dienesch  
Belle River, Ont.