

October 31, 2016

Canadian youth are buried in a soil far from home, but they are not forgotten.

In October of 2016, “Liberation Tours” took my wife and I on a cultural adventure and dramatic exploration of the Canadian battlefields and war grave cemeteries of Italy. This was military history combined with the best cultural experience Italy has to offer.

This was our first experience with a tour group. Any reticence I had was unfounded as the reality was nothing short of magical. Every comfort was considered. Every day provided unique surprises and freedom of movement. Flights and bus transport, hotels, baggage handling, gratuities, entry fees to historical sites, and splendid culinary and architectural experiences, were choreographed with the precision I expected from the military, but doled out with an Esprit du Coeur.

The seventeen-day adventure took us to the usual hot spots of Italian culture in Rome, Pompeii, Florence, and Venice, where we had ample free time to explore on our own and enjoy the local cuisines. Optional side trips included the beautiful medieval town of Sienna, the ancient historical waterfront of Sicilian Syracuse, and the original Roman mosaics of the last capital of the Western Roman Empire at Ravenna. These respites were a welcome distraction from an undertone of a very serious and somber nature; the real purpose of writing this article.

There were more Canadian casualties in the Italian campaign of World War II than in the entire northwest Europe campaign. In all, 25,264 casualties and more than 5,900 were killed from 1943 to 1945. More than 4,000 are buried on Italian soil. The Canadians entered Rome first, and its liberation could have been Canada’s to claim, instead of the United States, if not for political considerations. However, this story was overshadowed the very next day by the invasion of continental Europe in Normandy. The Canadian soldiers of the Italian campaign, the “D-Day Dodgers”, have received little attention and acknowledgment at home.

Mark Zuehlke, the author of the definitive volumes on the Canadians involvement in the Second World War, the Canadian Battle Series, is trying to change public awareness about our brave soldiers. He is the recipient of the 2014 Pierre Berton Award, and was one of our guides through the battlefields. With him was Phil Craig, the co-founder and lead historian for Liberation Tours. Phil is a professional actor with numerous credits in film, television and stage, including many seasons with the Stratford Shakespeare Festival in Ontario. His narratives added the unique touch of drama required of such horrific battlefields. John Cannon, the other co-founder of Liberation Tours and the tour director, as well as Mark Gascoigne, consultant and ground specialist with Trafalgar Tours, were the magic behind the itinerary. Added to the excitement of the experience was Max Fraser, award winning Canadian filmmaker, and son to a recipient of the Military Cross for valor who served with the famous Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment. It was an exceptionally moving experience to be at the very site where Max’s father won his battlefield honour at Canale Naviglio.

To stand at the sites in Italy of such epic war dramas is breath taking. We first began the military side of the adventure with the invasion of Sicily, which struck at the soft underbelly of Hitler’s ‘thousand years’ Nazi Reich. We stood at the landing zone of the Canadians, ‘Bark West’ beach, at the most southern tip of Sicily, and moved our way inland following

the path of the 1st Canadian Division. At Pachino, we were taken completely by surprise with a warm welcome by elementary school children who sang and played “O Canada” while waving their homemade Canadian and Italian flags. The mayors of two towns felt compelled to greet us, as did so many native people throughout the trip. Many spry Italian elderly, who were ages 8 to 16 years during the war, recounted tales of the kindness, generosity, food and medical care provided to them by the Canadians. Most had lost their loved ones from the shelling coming from the Canadian lines, but all felt liberated from the oppression and starvation thrust upon them under fascism.

At every battlefield town, the Italians reciprocated the heartfelt love and respect we felt for the heroes left behind. In their own words, these young men from Canada, so far away from home and family, crossed an ocean to bring freedom to a people they did not know. The friendship shown our tour group was on a scale as though the veterans themselves came to visit. I was relieved to see that we were welcomed as the friends we are; we were representatives of liberators, not conquerors.

The list of battlefield names, along with the list of the dead, grew and grew on the itinerary; names like Assoro, Leonforte, Anzio, Cassino, the Liri Valley, the Moro Valley, Ortona. The horrors faced by men less than half my age at areas such as the Hitler Line, and the Gothic Line, were brought to life by our guides. Every spot in which a Canadian won a Victoria Cross medal, the highest honour bestowed upon a soldier of the British Empire for gallantry in the face of the enemy, still exists, and are little changed but for the silence of peace.

The cost of peace is to be found in the Canadian War Cemeteries. These tranquil memorials possess an architectural beauty that is kept in pristine condition with a passion by the Canadian War Graves Commission and local Italians. Many of these sites are seldom visited. However, this has slowly been changing. More and more Canadians are becoming aware of this little known chapter in Canadian history.

What words can express one’s emotions in the silent countryside, cleansed by the drizzle of a cold rain, while looking down on the headstone of an eighteen year old killed in combat? This soldier, barely out of childhood, who could have been me, or my son, was laid to rest in foreign soil far from the loving embrace of family. Here his grave remained unvisited for decades. Not alone, but with his brothers in arms surrounding him. And not forgotten. Here a Canadian flag, there a Canadian poppy, mark the time that fellow countrymen, more than 70 years later, came to say thank you. This is a message we repeated at war cemeteries across Italy, with names such as Gradara, Villanova, Moro River, and Cassino. We missed paying our respects at the Cesena, Ravenna, and Coriano Ridge cemeteries. I am left to wonder how often the lads in those areas are visited. There are just so many.

Liberation Tours offer a large variety of experiences around military history through time and place. This was an experience of a lifetime. Their web site is liberationtours.ca.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Mick Cebrowski". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.