

I AM CANADA

**SNIPER
FIRE**

The Fight for Ortona

Jonathan Webb

Scholastic Canada Ltd.

Toronto New York London Auckland Sydney
Mexico City New Delhi Hong Kong Buenos Aires

While the events described and some of the characters in this book may be based on actual historical events and real people, Paul Baldassara is a fictional character created by the author, and his story is a work of fiction.

Copyright © 2016 by Jonathan Webb. All rights reserved.

A Dear Canada Book. Published by Scholastic Canada Ltd. SCHOLASTIC and I AM CANADA and logos are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Scholastic Inc.

www.scholastic.ca

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Webb, Jonathan, 1950-, author

Sniper fire : the fight for Ortona / Jonathan Webb.

(I am Canada)

Issued in print and electronic formats.

ISBN 978-1-4431-2861-2 (hardcover).--ISBN 978-1-4431-4681-4 (html)

1. Ortona, Battle of, Ortona, Italy, 1943--Juvenile fiction.

I. Title. II. Series: I am Canada

PS8595.E22S65 2016

jC813'.54

C2016-900930-0

C2016-900931-9

No part of this publication may be reproduced or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording, or otherwise, without written permission of the publisher,

Scholastic Canada Ltd., 604 King Street West, Toronto, Ontario M5V 1E1, Canada. In the case of photocopying or other reprographic copying, a licence must be obtained from Access Copyright (Canadian Copyright Licensing Agency), 56 Wellesley Street West, Suite 320, Toronto, Ontario M5S 2S3 (1-800-893-5777).

6 5 4 3 2 1 Printed in Canada 114 16 17 18 19 20

The display type was set in Happy Daze.

The text was set in Minion.

First printing September 2016



Chapter 5

The Road to Ortona

Monday, December 20, 1943

On Sunday evening, Lieutenant Gold tells us the Germans are pulling out of Ortona. This is the word coming from Division HQ. The Germans haven't fought to hold onto any other city in Italy, so why would they fight to hold this one? That's what headquarters thought. Turns out they're wrong and the Germans are staying put. We will be fighting them in the streets.

Captain Trehan stopped by and spoke to the lieutenant. The lieutenant passes on the news. "The 1st and 3rd brigades have seen heavier fighting than we have up to now," he says. "That's about to change."

No one is surprised. Just about every other unit had taken more casualties than we have in recent days. The army likes us to suffer equally. It's our turn.

"There's only one way into Ortona," he tells us. "The town is bounded by the sea on the north and on its eastern sides, and by a deep ravine on the west. That leaves only the road we've been fighting

for over the past week. This road enters the town from the south.

“We’re obviously not going to surprise them. What’s more, they’re battle-hardened and they’ve had a few days to prepare for us. Some of them have seen action in Africa and on the Russian Front. They’ll make us pay for every inch we take.”

He stops to take a breath.

“Why don’t we go around them?” asks Specs. “Can’t we cut the town off?”

“The 1st Brigade will be moving up on our left flank. And the Indian Division is beyond them, on the other side. They should be able to cut off the German supply line north of Ortona eventually, but in the meantime, we’ve got our assignment. We’re going for the enemy’s throat.”

A figure of speech. What the lieutenant means is that we’ll try for the quick kill. Stop the enemy in his tracks. That’s one way of looking at it. Of course, it could also mean that the enemy’s about to swallow us up.

* * *

The forming-up position is about a thousand yards past Cider Crossroads. From there to Ortona is less than 2 miles. This ground has been the scene of fighting for two weeks. The Desert Air Force has bombed and strafed it. Our arty and the

Germans' have blasted it. Even the Royal Navy's guns have had a go at it. Add the damage done by tanks, mortars and heavy machine guns and the battlefield looks like a scene from the Great War. This is No Man's Land. Trees stripped of their leaves and branches. Buildings reduced to a few burnt beams and broken stones. An occasional chimney where once there was a fireplace and a family gathered around it. Now there's nothing, no sign of life. The carcasses of mules and horses are strewn at random on ground pocked by explosives and churned up by tanks. The slippery earth reeks of garbage and rotten flesh. And this is what it looks like before we begin our advance.

At 1200 hours we start moving behind another barrage. D Company is on one side of the road, B Company on the other. C Company has linked up with the Seaforths who are coming up the coast. We start out with Battalion HQ. Two troops of Three Rivers Tanks and a company of Saskatoon Light Infantry machine gunners come with us, together with a company of sappers. We're feeling pretty good. Glad not to be stuck on the wrong side of the Gully anymore. Glad to be on the move. This isn't a recce patrol or a probe into the enemy's defences. This is an advance in strength.

For a while, it's easy, a walk in the park. The

arty puts down a billowing black curtain ahead of us. The tanks groan and crunch the earth beside us. The sappers scan the ground for mines in front. Everything is moving the way it's meant to, until one of our tanks hits a mine. The explosion blows the Sherman 20 feet into the air.

We plod on for more than an hour. Then, as we get closer to Ortona, the barrage eases up. The idea is to keep the town more or less intact. The lieutenant says Monty wants the harbour for shipping and he wants the town as a base for the winter. He doesn't want it flattened. So our big guns stop shooting as we get closer and the smoke starts to clear.

Now we can hear shouted commands.

“More mines ahead!”

“Don't bunch up!”

Our route is mainly flat. The mines the sappers have missed are barely camouflaged under little heaps of earth and grass. You can spot them as long as you pay attention. We keep our heads down as we trudge ahead. Our packs are heavy with rations and ammunition. Our tin hats are secured by chin-straps that graze our cheeks. Our weapons are at the ready. We come under sniper fire and then, as we get closer to the built-up area, German machine guns open up somewhere to the right.

I can see bits of the town: a grey stone mass piled onto the promontory. Beyond it, I catch a salty whiff of the Adriatic Sea. Between us and the town there's a narrow road criss-crossed by dirt tracks leading to farms and cottages. Suddenly we're caught in a crossfire. The *zip* and *pop* of sniper fire and the rattle of a machine gun push us onto the ground.

The Gaffer calls out, "Check the man on your right!"

I glance at Doug.

"Anyone hit?" yells the Gaffer.

Half a dozen voices, one after the other, answer, "No!"

A minute later the Gaffer crawls up beside us. Loon and Specs are just behind him. "Where's it coming from?"

"There's a house," I say. "At about 2 o'clock. On the right."

"How far?"

"Thirty or forty yards."

"What do you reckon they've got?"

"At a guess, an M-34 Mauser."

"And the other?"

"Can't tell where he is," says Doug. "He's got us in his sights, though."

"Loon!" says the Gaffer. "What now? What's our move?"

Loon looks stunned for a moment. He's used to asking questions, not answering them. He stutters and then stops and thinks.

"A flanking movement, Sergeant?"

"On what? The sniper?"

"The machine gun."

We're hugging the dirt, all five of us. There's not much cover. I lift my head slowly, glance around and then duck again as a bullet kicks the mucky earth in front of me. There's a flat field in front of us. On the far side, a low stone wall and beyond it, an orchard.

"The sniper's behind the wall," I say. "The trees at the back of him make it hard to pick him out."

"Smoke won't cover us," says the Gaffer. "The breeze is too strong. We'll have to work our way around."

He glances our way. Doug and I nod.

The Gaffer and the new boys start crawling towards the machine-gun nest. Doug and I head the other way, towards the sniper.

It takes time to reach the edge of the field. The Germans keep banging away. Sometimes it seems like they're firing at random, but then a volley comes too close and you know they've seen something: a blade of grass move, or the crown of a helmet.

I keep elbowing my way forward. There's a half-buried pie plate inches in front of me. "What the . . . ?" And then the penny drops: it's a Teller landmine and I damn near banged my chin on it.

We make it finally to a dip in the field and a broken-down cart in the corner. Doug pulls himself up into a kneeling position behind the cart. I wriggle under it.

"What have you got?" I ask Doug.

"I can see the Gaffer," he says. "Or his pack and helmet. He's close to the German position."

"And the sniper?"

As if in answer, I see the flash from the muzzle of a rifle just above the low stone wall.

"Did you see — ?"

"Got it," I say before Doug finishes the sentence.

We hold our fire, but not for long. There's a sudden movement on our right. It's Loon, rising up, lurching forward. At that instant, I glimpse the sniper as he pokes his head above the fence. I let loose one round and then another in his direction. Doug fires a series of bursts at the enemy emplacement. Loon is weaving his way on a zigzag path towards the farmhouse. Someone has to tell him you can't dodge bullets. Doug keeps on firing in bursts from his Sten gun. I shift to a kneeling position and squeeze off another round. Loon is closing in on his objective.

“Now, Loon!” mutters Doug. “Throw it *now!*”

The Germans are shooting back. Some of their fire is coming our way.

Loon’s very close. From where I’m crouched, I can see him silhouetted against the building.

“Now, Loon, now!”

I’m on my feet. The damned German behind the wall is still shooting. Now everything happens at once.

I fire another round at the sniper.

Doug runs towards the house.

Loon’s grenade explodes inside it.

“Got him,” I mutter. The sniper is motionless on the ground. Doug, loping towards the others, reaches into his webbing for a spare magazine and reloads. The German machine gun is silent.

Somewhere on our left I hear one of the others shout, “Let’s go!”

“You okay?” says Doug. “It doesn’t usually take you three shots.”

“How many bullets did *you* use?” I ask.

He blinks and smiles.

* * *

We’re on the edge of the town. On either side of the main road there are small fields, big and small houses separated by stone walls, olive groves, grape vines and narrow dirt tracks. Civilians pop into

view from time to time. An old woman dressed in black looks out fearfully from the window of a tiny house. A shoeless boy in a ragged shirt flits from a garden to a doorway and back. A baby cries.

Loon has a different look about him. There's a swagger in his step and, at the same time, a sober set to his mouth. He threw a fragmentation grenade and then saw the result, the mutilated bodies of the German defenders. The Gaffer, striding beside him, seems satisfied with a job well done.

I reckon, however, that the day is far from over.

The company on our left is getting blasted by artillery that seems to be coming from the middle of Ortona. The noise from that side is getting louder as we draw closer. The Seaforths, on our right, are taking fire from a church tower. We've been forced by enemy fire to stay off the road. We climb fences and clear houses one by one. In a couple of hours we advance, at the most, a couple of hundred yards. Our line is getting ragged. We can hear other sections on either side of us, but it's hard to locate them. There's a danger we'll get cut off or lost.

In late afternoon we stop and regroup. Captain Trehan comes by for a visit. Later the Gaffer tells us what's up.

"Things are not going according to plan.

There's an enemy strongpoint over there," he says, indicating our right flank. "The Church of San Costantinopoli. The Seaforths are dealing with it. It may take them a while.

"Over there," he continues, now pointing to our left, "things are getting hot. Machine guns, sniper fire. The enemy is bringing medium machine guns to bear.

"We need to pull our line together, to consolidate. We've got the Saskatoons behind us, along with the tanks. The colonel has established his CP in a villa and is calling an O Group for later. He wants to get our firepower, the tanks and machine guns, properly involved in the fight.

"So this evening," says the Gaffer, "we dig in."

We brew tea and sample our rations. Then the Gaffer sends us out on patrol. "Keep your heads down," he says. "Watch out for booby traps. We'll report back here in an hour."

In this part of town, there are walls around every little property. Every cottage has its garden, small orchard or grape vines. With visibility so limited, it's easy to see why the Gaffer's worried about us losing touch. Doug and I make our way into the yard behind a house with Strong John and Jimmy. The Gaffer, Loon, Specs and the O'Connors are checking out the place next door.

We wave at them and keep going.

We barge through doors and peer through windows. It's strange to tramp through a town like this. Mostly we've fought in the open. Now in abandoned kitchens we find dishes on the table, food on the counter — all signs of interrupted lives. Outside, there's smoke and dust swirling on the horizon, the sound of small-arms fire and shells exploding. In another garden, we peer cautiously over the wall before climbing it.

"After you." says Doug softly.

"No, no," I reply. "After you, I insist."

Doug hauls himself over the top and I follow.

"Can you see Strong John?" he asks.

"Over there." I nod in the direction of another wall, another house.

We're guided by the noise, the staccato of small arms from the church on our right, the rumble of artillery ahead and to the left. We haven't seen the Gaffer for some time.

"Where's Strong John?" says Doug. Strong John and Jimmy were a house away from us moments earlier.

We call out their names, neither whispering or shouting, not knowing who's within earshot. There's no reply.

There's a sudden crash, straight ahead, and the

sound of glass and stone exploding. And then another in the yard next door. We dive for cover.

Mortars!

“It’s coming from the church,” I yell. “Where the Seaforths are.”

The church of Santa Maria di Costantinopoli looms over us. Somehow we have edged over to the right.

“Hey, Strong John!” I yell again. “Jimmy!” No one answers.

Another mortar bomb blows up behind us.

“Move it!” shouts Doug.

We scramble to the left, scale a wall, crouch in its shelter and look around. I expect to find the Gaffer’s group, but the garden is empty.

“Specs! Derrick! Paddy!”

Another explosion. This one’s close. A fiery wind washes over my face. And then another. The enemy is mortaring the area on a grid. We climb yet another wall.

Another explosion. This one is followed by screams.

We’re looking at a house — or half a house. Where the front was, there’s now an enormous hole. Figures emerge from a storm of dust. A child wails. A woman writhes in pain on the floor. Another woman stands over them. Her face and

hands are bloody. Her dress is torn. She screams when she sees us.

Without thinking, I run forward, put down my rifle and kneel by the wounded woman's side.

"We need bandages," I say to Doug. "And morphine." I unhitch my pack and toss it in his direction. "See what you can find."

The woman is bleeding. Already there is a crimson pool spreading around her on the floor. An artery has been severed. I push my hand down on the wound, trying to gauge its size. I reckon I can stanch the bleeding, but soon she's going to need more help than I can provide.

Doug fumbles through my pack and tosses the first-aid kit my way.

The other woman has stopped screaming, thank God, and has gathered up the child.

"Is she wounded too?" I ask Doug.

"No."

"We could use a blanket," I say. "A coat. Something to keep her warm."

I stick the hypodermic in the wounded woman's arm and push down the plunger. Doug disappears into the house. He comes back with blankets and a bottle.

"Wine?"

"Some kind of liquor."

"Good," I say. "I can use that."

I splash it on the wound, place a pressure pack on it and then wrap bandages around the woman to hold the pack in place. She's quieter now as the morphine takes effect. I grasp one of the blankets.

"Help me with this," I say. Before Doug moves, however, the other woman kneels down and together we bundle up the casualty.

"Come si chiama?" I ask her. "Mi chiamo Paolo." *My name is Paolo.*

She stares blankly at me for a moment and then answers, "Teresa. Mi chiamo Teresa."

"Teresa," I say. "Good." Her sister's name, I learn, is Claudia. The child, Tomas, is Claudia's son. He's almost five. Teresa takes Tomas into her arms.

The sound of exploding bombs punctuates our conversation. Some are near at hand, others farther away, but they aren't stopping.

"With luck," I say to Doug, "she'll be stable until we can get help."

I turn to Teresa. "Dove possiamo trovare un medico?" *Where can we find a doctor?*

She answers immediately. She can lead us to him.

"We're taking this woman to a doctor," I tell Doug.

"You're not serious."

"What do you think?"

I hoist my rifle and backpack and then lift Claudia. I nod to Teresa and she wraps the boy in

the other blanket. And then we start walking, not to rejoin the section somewhere behind us, but straight ahead. Teresa leads the way. I fall in behind her with Claudia, now barely conscious, cradled in my arms. Doug, his weapon at the ready, brings up the rear. He makes his reluctance obvious. We're disobeying orders. And worse, we're headed straight for the Germans. He says nothing; he just scowls.

* * *

It's getting dark as Teresa takes us down narrow paths and across cobblestone streets. We duck into doorways to survey the way ahead, and then plunge onwards again. Claudia moans and mutters words that make no sense. The child, either exhausted or terrified, is silent.

It seems a long journey, though we don't go far as the crow flies. At any moment I expect to hear the crack of a rifle, or to see Paras charging our way. We hear German voices on two occasions and freeze each time. Teresa and I, bent and burdened, might just be mistaken for civilians in the fading light. The same can't be said of Doug and his Sten gun. More than once I hear him muttering.

"This is nuts." And then, "What the hell was that?"

A *bang* like the closing of a car door. Or something, I don't know what. We keep going.

Whether because of Teresa's guidance or through sheer luck, we make it to our destination. She finds and opens a wooden door. Stone steps take us down to the basement. I see a lit lamp and a mass of people. I hear a gasp, a moment of silence and then a dozen voices speak at once.

A few come forward, their faces shocked and questioning. In the dim light behind them, there are others, old and worn. There are children too, babies and toddlers with wide-open eyes. I set down Claudia on a table and an old, white-haired man bends over her. Teresa releases the boy. Then she places a hand on my shoulder and explains to the others what happened. She says Canadian soldiers are entering the town.

I glance at Doug. He's exhausted. My own hands are shaking. I have blood on my tunic. I find a space and slump to the floor, my back against the wall. A woman offers me a stool to sit on, but I can't be bothered. She offers me something to eat. I close my eyes. For some time, I listen to the hum of nattering children, adult chatter and the scratch and clatter of dishes and furniture shifting in the crowded space. It's strangely soothing. It sounds almost like normal life, the life I left behind when I left Canada. And then I'm dead to the world.