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# Honour and Care

The Perley and Rideau Veterans' Health Centre Foundation ♦ OTTAWA, ONTARIO

## Ted Griffiths' Journey of Reconciliation

By Peter McKinnon

**M**ajor (ret'd) Edmund (Ted) Griffiths, CD, now spends much of his time reading, chatting with fellow Veterans and other residents of the Perley and Rideau Veterans' Health Centre, and visiting with his family: a daughter, eight grandchildren and eight great-grandchildren. After a lifetime of service to Canada, including horrific hand-to-hand combat during the Second World War, he is finally at peace.

Ted was born in 1922 in London, Ontario. His father, a Veteran of World War I, decided to immigrate to England, leading to separation and divorce. Ted's mother raised him, making ends meet through a combination of cleaning, dressmaking and teaching piano. At the age of 14, Ted joined the Non-Permanent Militia – also known as the Saturday night soldiers. Shortly after Canada declared war on Germany, he enlisted in the Royal Canadian Regiment.

Ted went on to achieve considerable success: he served in the Second World War and Korean War, retiring as a major in the 1960s. He married, raised a daughter and published his memoirs. As a civilian, Ted was executive assistant to Justice Minister John Turner, who



Ted Griffiths

later became Canada's 17th Prime Minister. Despite these accomplishments, however, Ted struggled for years with the trauma he had experienced during the Battle of Ortona. As a tank gunner, Ted contributed to a key Allied victory and fought through some of the most horrendous conditions in Canada's military history.

In December 1943, the Allied advance through Italy encountered ferocious resistance at the ancient town of Ortona. The 1st Parachute Division – comprised of some of Germany's most experienced soldiers – fiercely defended the town against the 1st Canadian



Sterling Green

Infantry Division. The Germans created nearly impregnable obstacles; they destroyed buildings and arranged the rubble so that invaders would have to advance through narrowed streets lined with snipers and countless mined booby-traps. So intense were the eight days of house-to-house fighting that Ortona was dubbed "Little Stalingrad," for its resemblance to the definitive battle of the Eastern Front. The Canadians would eventually chase the Germans from the city at tremendous cost: more than 500 Canadians killed and 1,800 injured (including casualties from the

initial fight across the Moro River to reach Ortona).

As the battle raged, the Seaforth Highlanders of Canada organized a makeshift Christmas dinner in a partially destroyed church. A soldier played hymns on the church organ as one company at a time enjoyed a brief dinner service. After dinner, an officer ordered Ted to report to the commander of the platoon his tank crew would support the following morning. As Ted notes wryly in his memoirs: "Had I known what the next hour would bring, I would have stayed for a second helping of dinner."

Ted picked his way cautiously through the rubble-strewn streets in pitch darkness – the two sides avoided fighting after sunset because it was impossible to tell friend from foe. Hearing the sound of approaching footsteps, he ducked behind a wall: it was a Nazi soldier – Ted had somehow wandered behind German lines. Instantly, Ted understood that firing his pistol would alert other Germans to his presence and he would almost certainly be killed. So he drew his commando knife and used it to silently kill the soldier. The killing haunted him – and his Christmas spirit – for decades.

After Ortona, Ted was sent to England for additional training. At a dance, he met the woman he would marry: a Nursing Sister by the name of Sterling Green, who was haunted by the abuse she

had suffered in foster homes. They eventually had one child – a daughter – and became a military family, moving every few years.

"Growing up, Christmas was often difficult for me," recalls daughter Amanda Mellway. "Dad would brood and mom would go over the top trying to make sure that I had a wonderful time."

Sterling Griffiths passed away from breast cancer in her 60s. Ted soldiered on and found some solace in the company of members of his regiment, fellow survivors of Ortona. During one meeting, the Three Rivers Regiment's former padre – Joseph L. Wilhelm, later Archbishop of Kingston – described his hopes that Canadian and German Veterans would one day hold a reconciliation dinner at Ortona. When Archbishop Wilhelm passed away in 1995, Ted became determined to see the dream become reality. [See sidebar article.]

"We had tremendous respect for one another," he says simply. "On both sides, we were just good soldiers fighting for our countries."

In 1998, a group of former adversaries – 24 Canadians and eight Germans – shared Christmas



Ted Griffiths (right) with Joseph "Jupp" Klein, a German paratrooper who fought at Ortona, during the 1998 Dinner of Reconciliation. The two men became good friends and met frequently. When Joseph's health failed in 2014, Ted paid him one last visit before his death.

dinner in the same Ortona church that had hosted the bittersweet event of 55 years earlier. For participants on both sides, the Dinner of Reconciliation helped put to rest the ghosts that had haunted them for decades. Ted describes the scene in his 2000 memoirs, *Dare to be True*:

"It was a blending together of human beings who had faced each other as foes, and now with age and the greater understanding that goes with it, recognized that forgiveness and reconciliation is the only true path to follow."

After the Dinner of Reconciliation, daughter Amanda noted a significant change in her father, particularly around Christmas. "It obviously helped him to come to peace with what he saw and had to do in Ortona," she says.

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The Perley and Rideau Veterans' Health Centre is home of 450 residents, including 250 Canadian Veterans, most of whom served in either the Second World War or the Korean War. The Government of Canada provides additional funding for the care of Veterans, but donations to the Perley Rideau Foundation improve their quality of life in direct and significant ways. In May 2017, Veterans Affairs Canada, the province of Ontario, and the Perley and Rideau Veterans' Health Centre celebrated the announcement of 25 Specialized Veterans beds for Veterans who served in Canada for a minimum of 365 days and are income qualified, as well as to Canadian Armed Forces and Allied Veterans.

**We appreciate your support in making a donation at [www.perleyrideaufoundation.ca](http://www.perleyrideaufoundation.ca).**

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