

## THROUGH THE HITLER LINE: MEMOIRS OF AN INFANTRY CHAPLAIN

by Laurence F. Wilmot, MC

Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.  
148 pages, \$29.95

Reviewed by Major Arthur Gans, ret'd

**L**aurence Wilmot's book, *Through the Hitler Line*, is destined, I believe to become a classic. In simple, straightforward language, Wilmot tells the story of his time with the West Nova Scotia Regiment in 1943-1945. It covers the battalion's campaign from just north of Ortona through to the end of the war in Europe.

It is a chaplain's view of battle – some of the heaviest fighting of the war – but it is also a picture of an infantry battalion in combat, the relationships that develop, and how a very good chaplain conducted himself and saw his duty.

Laurie Wilmot was substantially older than most other members of the West Novas. He had been a priest for several years in the Diocese of Brandon, Manitoba. He was married and had several children. During his university years, he had been part of the Canadian Officer Training Corps, and from the outbreak of the war had tried to join the Forces, but was prevented from doing so by his bishop, who refused to release him. Finally, in 1942, he overcame his bishop's objections and joined the Army. After his initial indoctrination, he was assigned to No. 2 Canadian Army Hospital, and from there was soon transferred overseas, first to Algeria, then to Naples, and on 10 February 1943, he came on strength with the West Novas, part of 3rd Brigade of the 1st Canadian Division. He joined the unit in time to see the end of the battle for Ortona.

Like many chaplains, it took some time for Wilmot to become part of the unit. The battalion had lost its previous chaplain several weeks before, so Captain Wilmot's initial work was catching up with what had happened in the interim, and in particular, catching up on the needs of the troops who had been through heavy fighting. He also had to make the acquaintance of the officers he would be working with, including the CO, who also had just assumed command. Apparently the new CO was not fond of padres, but that was to change with Wilmot. It took some time, but he became an important member of the team.

Wilmot fits the role of the perfect unit chaplain. He knows his people well. And he is able to convey to the commander the information that he needs to make

good decisions. Wilmot worked closely with the medics and stretcher-bearers, and in some of the hottest battles led them on the field to bring out the dead and wounded. Twice nominated for a Military Cross, he received his decoration for his work during the battle of Foglia.

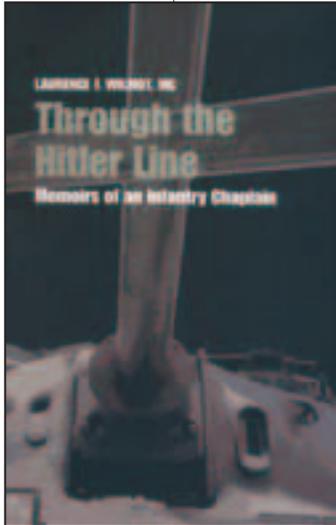
One of the more interesting things in the book was his account of the respect the German soldiers paid to the Red Cross. Wilmot carried a Red Cross flag with him at all times, and when leading the stretcher bearers, would cut a staff and hold it up so all could see. He says on page 82, "...I pulled the red cross flag from my pocket, pinned it to the willow stick, raised it high, then stood up, and waved to the men to follow. The stretcher-bearers, each of whom had a similar flag in his pocket, followed suit, and we moved forward with no direct fire from the enemy. Our flags had been recognized and the enemy observed the rules of the Geneva Convention." He continues telling us that on arrival on the battle site, all the officers had been killed or wounded, together with a substantial number of their men. The whole story of this evacuation I will leave to the reader.

Suffice it to say that in my personal pantheon of heroes, the name of Laurence Wilmot stands very tall.

This is a small book. But it is a book that I can confidently recommend to both chaplains and to troop leaders. Unlike textbooks, it puts names and faces before us, and shows what a good chaplain can contribute to the effectiveness of a unit. It is, moreover, an excellently told story of some of the roughest fighting Canadian troops participated in during the Second World War. It puts meat on the bones of war diaries and official histories. The book has good maps as well as a number of photographs. Major H. M. Eisenhower, the last wartime commander of the West Novas says this about the book: "This is a book about war and great courage, but it is, above

all, a story of great faith; of a priest who each morning put his life in to the hands of his God, willing to face without flinching the greatest dangers that might befall him. Those who read his story will grasp some measure of that faith and the protecting presence of God in all of life."

Laurie Wilmot saw the publication of the hardcover edition of this book, but died in December 2003. It sold so quickly that Wilfrid Laurier University Press has brought it out in paperback. To anyone in a leadership position as well as any chaplain, I commend it as a 'good read', and to those who might be inclined to write a memoir, I would say you could not find a better model.




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Major the Rev. Arthur Gans is a retired Army chaplain who has a special interest in military ethics.