

STORY OF THE ITALIAN SOLDIER NINNO IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR

- FRENCH FRONT RUSSIA ITALY -

From the written memories of Alfonso (Ninno) Calcagno (1915-2006) Finale Ligure, Mònie hamlet

This text belongs to the website www.ricercaetereperduto.it
Any reproduction is forbidden

INTRODUCTION

Memories of the Second World War, in particular those based on the Russian Campaign, have also been recorded by other Italian soldiers. In many cases these soldiers were Monarchic or Fascist Officers or Non-Commissioned Officers of those times.

In order to become an Officer or Non-Commissioned Officer in Italy at that time, one had to be well integrated and in line with the Monarchy, the Fascist Regime and the mind-set that then dominated Italy. In other words, it was necessary to have given own direct support, both moral and material, to that military and warmongering exaltation upheld by Fascism and the Monarchy. This movement took Italy towards catastrophe in a brief period of time. Here, we are dealing with people who were jointly responsible for what was to take place, even if in the aftermath period these individuals were bitterly repentant.

The reader may state that at that time it was a requirement to fall in line with the Fascist regime, also in civilian life, in order to find employment, start out on a career and also just to live a quiet and peaceful life each and every day. This too was most certainly a true fact of life, however to become officers it was necessary to be "committed and well-known fascists", otherwise they could only dream of military ranks.

On the contrary, I was called to arms as a simple common soldier while I was employed as a hard-working farmer. I carried out my working day duties on the hard land of Liguria, full of mountains and this type of work did not need any politician friends. What counted was reaping what was sowed.

My story is very similar to that of many other guys who were called up as I was, or who were already recruited in the armed forces. They mainly were farmers, peasants, torn away from their homes and sent out to the front to fight. For long years, we feared that we would never come back home, thinking of the members of our families who had been deprived of our support, our vineyards and abandoned orchards.

I am one of the lucky ones who have managed to return home safely. The worst finger of fate possible pointed at those poor wretched boys who died fighting, and there were so many of them. We can see their names on the tombstones, we think of them and then reflect on the absolute absurdity of war.

A comment for today's youth: why should you read a soldier's story in a war that Italy began in 1940?

The Second World War, for the number of fatalities and material destruction in the countries involved, was the most tragic event in the history of mankind. And the Russian Campaign was the most serious military defeat for Italy, made all the worse by the dramatic withdrawal on foot of our soldiers during the Russian winter.

Moreover the text also contains some notes, albeit in a brief fashion, on the war and on the conditions of life and the political climate of that time of Italy under the fascist dictatorship, without freedom of thought and expression, with the men of the regime who abused their power, with our soldiers that were practically stripped of their rights, forced to tolerate insults and abuse and sent off to die to lands far away from Italy in an absurd war of pure aggression versus other people, that was fought however with insufficient, archaic weapons and with less than mediocre commanders.

But it is also necessary to try to understand how we arrived at that completely unreasonable tragedy, which saw Italy, poor and backward, allied with Germany and the far away Japan, dragged into war against British Empire, France and its colonies, Greece, Yugoslavia, Russia, United States of America, and all the other nations allied to them.

For this reason, we now try to review, very briefly, the main steps that led Italy towards the catastrophe.

At the end of the First World War, Italy was in a very difficult moment, with the state coffers emptied by the war, with millions of unemployed, with a part of the population suffering from hunger and with the presence of strong revolutionary movements that occupied factories and lands. In that political-social context, following the March on Rome at the end of October 1922, Mussolini was appointed prime minister by the King with the task of forming a new government, and Fascism came to power.

The fascists, overbearing and violent, were immediately protagonists of serious events against the representatives of the other parties, up to the crime of the parliamentary Giacomo Matteotti in the year 1924, for which Mussolini assumed full political and moral responsibility.

In the years 1925-26 Mussolini (at that time also called “the Dux”, in Italian “il Duce”) issued the “very fascist laws” followed shortly after by the “exceptional ones” with which the Italian people were deprived of all freedom of thought and expression, even reaching prison and confiscation of property for those who were not aligned with fascism.

Moreover, fascism regime, in addition to being strongly nationalist, from the earliest years had established a climate of militaristic exaltation which had spread to a large part of the people. To reinforce this mentality, the Military Culture subject was introduced in schools. The victory of Italy in the I World War and the myth of Ancient Rome were continually re-proposed and exalted, and the illusion of reaching the greatness of the Roman Empire once again was not only in the by that time sick and delirious head of Mussolini, but also in that of many Italians.

Some slogans of the regime are very significant, almost all inspired on war, which Italians often used to declaim:

Libro e moschetto, fascista perfetto.
Book and musket, the perfect Fascist.

Spunta il sole, canta il gallo, Mussolini va a cavallo.
The sun comes out, the cock crows, Mussolini rides his horse.

E' l'aratro che traccia il solco, ma è la spada che lo difende.
The plough cuts the furrow, but sword defends it.

Se vuoi la pace, prepara la guerra.
If you want peace, get ready for war.

Se avanzo seguitemi. Se indietreggio uccidetemi.
If I advance follow me. If I back away, kill me

“E' meglio vivere un giorno da leone che cento anni da pecora.”
It is better to live one glorious day as a lion than one hundred years as a sheep.

The last aphorism is the most outlandish of all of them, and it was engraved on twenty Lire coins which at the time was an important coin.

And then the shortest slogan, more explicit and the most terrible of all of them:

Roma rivendica l' impero. Rome claims back the Empire.

which clearly evokes a war of aggression against other peoples. As, in fact, was really going to happen later on.

The tragedy of the war therefore matured over the years in that climate of strong nationalism and militaristic exaltation.

Due to our war against Ethiopia of the years 1935-36, France and England, who were our historic allies, turned their backs on us, and the Dux was forced to seek new allies. He found nothing better than to forge an alliance with Hitler's Germany, and it was the beginning of the path towards the catastrophe.

But at that time it was no longer possible to achieve a political change, and Italy proceeded straight towards the abyss of war.

The part of the Italians who did not agree added some slogans with an ironic sense to those of the fascist regime. But they could only be said in the presence of trusted friends, otherwise there was a risk of serious trouble.

The two most famous are:

Armiamoci e partite (per la guerra) We arm ourselves, and you will leave (for the war).

and Vince Romolo instead of Vincereemo

as the dux had shouted into the radio microphones from the balcony of Venice Palace in Rome, the day of the declaration of war.

The translation of the last slogan needs an explanation: Vincereemo means: We will win, but in Italian the word can be divided so: Vince Remo, which means Remo Wins. With Romolo (Romulus) and Remo (Remus) that were the two brothers of the legend of the birth of the city of Rome. And Romulus had won. The translation become:

Romulus wins instead of Remus wins.

Furthermore, the lack of freedom of expression, and of a magistracy independent of political power, had favored infiltrations of many dishonest people in various sectors of the state, especially in the closed and authoritarian environment of the armed forces, as we will see in the tale.

STORY OF THE ITALIAN SOLDIER NINNO IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR

- FRENCH FRONT RUSSIA ITALY -

FIRST PART

My tale begins on the upland area of the Mânîe, three square kilometres of almost wholly flat land, partially cultivated partially woodland. It stands at approximately three hundred metres above sea level to the North East of Finale Ligure. The sea shimmers down below it as a background feature towards the south and every so often one has the splendid chance to view the mountains of the island of Corse.

I had completed my military service conscription in 1936.

My call-up card arrived on the third, or maybe it was the fourth of September 1939.

I had to report to the army barracks of the 2nd R.A. D.C.D in Acqui. However, I was unable to leave because I had a fire burning in the charcoal burner in the area known as Lusante, and I had to bring the burning cycle to its termination. I had cut down the wood during the previous winter; the week before I had stacked it up neatly and covered it with earth so that it would burn slowly and then turn into charcoal. Nowadays wood is no longer used to make charcoal, wood itself is burned directly in ovens and stoves. However, in those days people preferred to buy wood charcoal and charcoal burners were very popular.

At around the same time my brother Arturo was called up and sent into the navy. My other older brother Domingo, nicknamed Mingo, was already outside the age limit for conscription but he had to work every day in his Milk bar in Varigotti and he was naturally too busy to come and help me.

Every day someone else was called up so it was pretty obvious that the regime was getting itself ready for a new adventure.

I was completely alone with the carbon burner going full swing, with its 400 quintals of wood; I had to keep an eye on it every day, keeping it burning at a slow rate in the right way and respecting the right time requirements.

I reported to see the Finale Carabinieri (military police) Marshal with my call-up card in my hand, and I explained that I couldn't abandon this delicate work procedure for the next few days. The Marshal replied to me that my Country couldn't care less about my charcoal burner and he pressed me to report to the barracks in Acqui on the prescribed day.

I rushed home and finally managed to find two friends willing to help me. They even busied themselves with moving the charcoal to Finale Ligure, and selling it on behalf of my family after I'd left.

After the burner had gone out I left and arrived at the barracks in Acqui two days late, but no one said anything about that to me.

After just one day I was full of lice, as were all the other soldiers, and there was no way I could get rid of them. This had already happened to me during my recruitment, five years before. Sleeping at night was a true luxury,

lying down on 10 centimetres of straw on the floor.

We were put up in former stables where once upon a time there were horses and mules. At one time there was another troop, but always with lice.

The training sessions started with cannon, mortars; I was an artilleryman. Often not even a shot was fired, but we just took aim with our weapons to strike our target, and then an NCO would check if we had aimed properly. At the beginning of 1940 the number of soldiers had increased, and for sleeping arrangements we had triple bunk beds. At least now I had a bed with a mattress and no longer had to sleep on the ground.

On the second or the third of February, we left by lorry for training in the high mountains. At the beginning, it rained heavily and I got thoroughly soaked, and I was frozen solid during the outward journey on the lorry. On arrival, we found ourselves surrounded by snow and ice. The cold was to become part of my daily routine and was also there on my return journey. The following day I started to cough, but nothing serious.

If my memory serves me well, towards the fifth of February rumours started to circulate that my leverage was to return home on the seventeenth.

Once aware of the news of our forthcoming leave, I went out with my companions for a slap-up meal in a country restaurant and of course for more than just a few drinks.

On entering the restaurant, I started to feel hot and sticky, I noticed that I wasn't well at all and that I had a high temperature, topped off with a nasty cough. I told my companions about my state and they advised me to go back to the barracks right away and get myself checked out in the infirmary. I bade my friends farewell and went out; I left the heat of the restaurant for the freezing temperatures outside, at least three degrees below zero. I got to the barracks and I asked the officer on guard if I could see the doctor, but he couldn't help me. I went to the infirmary, but at that time it was well and truly shut for service. I staggered back to my bed and lay myself down.

The morning after I still had a temperature so I got myself checked out by a doctor. He took my temperature and said, "Get some rest, and when your fever has passed you'll be as right as rain."

On the seventeenth of February, my temporary day of leave, I still had a temperature and cough.

The troop commander asked my companion to accompany me as far as the station. So, I got ready quickly. The thought of going home filled me with new found strength.

I arrived home. Here in Liguria, near the sea, the climate is completely different and when I got there the weather was glorious. For a couple of days, I seemed to be on the road to recovery; however, I was to discover that this was not the case. My high temperature came back with a bang and, when I coughed it was as if I had litres of milk squishing around inside my chest.

My brother Domingo left with his mule from the Mânie where I lived, and went to Noli to fetch Doctor Oliva, a clever specialist in chest and respiratory infections. So, he brought the doctor by mule from Noli to the Mânie. It must have been a one-way trip of around seven kilometres, first uphill and then, once on the upland area three hundred metres above the sea, a flat road.

After examining me, the doctor declared that I had pneumonia. He then asked me if I'd ever spat up any blood, and I told him that I had a lot. He immediately answered me that this was the reason why I was still alive.

He prescribed me some medicines and then added that breathing the sea air would be of great benefit for me.

He told me that if I could, I should stay for a couple of months close to the sea, down there in a warm place.

So, I went to live a while in Varigotti, right next to the sea, in the house of my sister Ines. After a couple of days, she sent me to Savona to be examined by a well-known doctor.

I went to see this doctor, an old man by now. He gave me a thorough examination and straight away he called his colleague, Doctor Grossi, and he packed me off to see him for X-rays. After a couple of hours, I went back to see the doctor armed with my X-rays.

He looked at the X-rays carefully and told me that I had bronchial pneumonia with dry pleurisy, and that I had to observe a period of absolute rest if I wanted to recover. I had to take scrupulous care of myself, and this meant intravenous injections and all kinds of other curative measures.

Back in those days, antibiotics did not exist, and often the illness that I had was a killer...

Spring came to the Riviera with its balmy, beautiful climate. Thanks to the sea air and the medicines that the doctors gave me, slowly but surely, I was on the day by day journey to recovery.

During the beginning of the month of May 1940, when I finally felt well and had recovered completely, another call-up card from the powers that be arrived.

This second time everyone was much more worried than when we received the first card. This was because of a forthcoming Italian involvement in the war which Great Britain and France had already declared against Germany.

By now, the Fascist regime had turned into a wild band of delinquents and our fear was that this would soon

drag Italy into this catastrophe. Indeed the war represented a colossal business for industry in general; ships, air-planes, cannon, arms and ammunition of all types, vehicles, clothes, and shoes etc. And most certainly, all of the above would fill the pockets of the Monarchy and those of the Fascist hierarchy who were in favour of the war. Face to face with suitcases bulging with banknotes, those criminals would never hesitate to send hundreds of thousands of youths to a guaranteed massacre and their certain deaths. This had already happened in the First World War, a little more than twenty years previously.

However, this time, “the lords of war” hadn’t predicted the involvement of the bombardiers. They thought that all of the front would be involved, as in previous wars. Instead, during the war their industries were destroyed by bombs dropped from planes.

Many other youths were also called up, among whom were my brother Arturo, my brother-in-law Gugliemo, the husband of my sister Ines. Also, my brother-in-law Ambrogio, my sister Lina’s husband was called up. They already had a young son and the wife was pregnant a second time. This fact was made apparent to the military offices, but the high-level officers just waved it off as unimportant. When one’s country called that was it, nothing could stand in its way. So, an Alpine soldier’s beret was plonked on his head and he was enrolled. He never came back!

Ambrogio and his Alpine soldier’s beret, with its black plume, became one with the ice and snow of the bitterly cold Russian winter.

I’d never had the occasion to meet him before because we were in two separate divisions.

It was published in the newspapers that Italy, under the guidance of Mussolini, wanted to conquer once again the Roman Empire, in 1940. And in those times a large part of the Italian still considered the Dux as an “eternal father” on this earth. After the war was over we were to find out that Mussolini was ill with syphilis. At the time penicillin didn’t exist, and it was highly likely that that disease had a deleterious effect on his brain in his later years.

And, it was because of that illness that he wanted to reconquer the Roman Empire in 1940!

This crazy decision caused the death of hundreds and thousands of Italians and also the destruction of Italian material possessions, not to mention its morale.

Let’s go back to our tale. I arrived at the Acqui barracks and, as I feared, after two days the lice came back to me. Food was scanty and the bread mouldy. Every evening crowds of men flooded the restaurants to eat their fill. From time to time, in the kitchens I happened to overhear this comment: - “We to those of Northern Italy break their asses,” with a clear and evident southern Italian accent. In important strategic points, they were there. However, one mustn’t generalize as I have met a good number of great guys from the south of Italy.

But here the officers and non-commissioned officers in charge of the kitchens may not be good guys. And also, they would have their backs well covered by high level mafia connexions, in such a way as to live in impunity and tranquillity in their work and home life.

As we have already written about it, the fascist Regime had degenerated and had invaded many sector of state organisations with its hoodlums, criminals who took advantage of their positions of authority to make a fast buck illegally. The complete lack of any political opposition had led to this situation. In the Army whoever was in charge could do whatever he wanted, and the others had to obey, no questions asked.

I was allocated to the 103rd group, second battalion. We left for duty towards the end of May. We travelled as far as Cuneo by train and then by Pavesi tractors with their huge tyres, upwards and upwards towards Demonte, Vinadio. We then carried on through mountainous terrain for another ten kilometres.

The declaration of war of Italy against Great Britain and France arrived on the tenth of June of 1940.

Great Britain had been our allies during the First World War, and thousands of English soldiers had lost their lives or had spilled their blood in the fighting on Italian soil side by side with Italians against Austria.

Also at sea. Moving slightly towards the east from the island of Bergeggi, on the fourth of May 1917, the Transylvania, a ship carrying 3,500 English soldiers was attacked and sunk by a German submarine. Many of the soldiers were saved by two Japanese escort torpedo boat destroyers, and then by two more Italian torpedo boat destroyers and two tug boats which had rushed to the rescue from the near port of Savona. Several row-boats intervened on the scene at the hands of fishermen from Noli, Spotorno and Bergeggi, and saved many lives. In spite of the timely rescue operations, approximately 410 English soldiers were to unfortunately lose their lives. Many of those are now at rest in the cemetery of Zinola, a suburb of Savona.

The French people had always been our allies and our brothers and sisters. They too had their blood spilled on Italian soil in combat against the Austrians in the nineteenth century; they had always welcomed our

immigrants and we always had a flourishing and intense commercial and cultural exchanges.

If that all wasn't sufficient we waited until France was defeated and then invaded in the north by the Germans, so that we could attack the country from the south. A stab in the back delivered by Italy (of Mussolini) towards France while the Germans were about to march unhindered into Paris. In other words, a period of history that Italy should be so ashamed of.

You will be saying, it didn't last long, just two weeks and then we made peace with the French and the hostilities came to an end.

And this peace shared out between France and Italy, after only fourteen days of war was maybe the only single positive aspect of all the actual conflict.

And then also you might be saying: France too had Bonapart Napoleon who brought the war to Italy, to Spain, to half of Europe, to Russia and then to Egypt.

After the tenth of June, new orders arrived for our departure. We headed back the way we'd come for a couple of kilometres and then we took the road that led to Mount Argentera.

While we were still in our marching ranks, the first cannon ball were fired by the French. Luckily, it was just a loud, surprise attack with no casualties. We immediately ran for shelter behind a hamlet of house. Then the French got serious and started their attack with their heavy artillery, long range cannon. We were armed with Howitzer 149's, as they were called. They fired ammunition that made a high parabolic trajectory, purposely created for striking beyond the mountains. The battle was on. It rained incessantly every day, we were knee-deep in mud, with every cannon-shot fired, the howitzer sank down on one side or the other, so we had to get the mechanical jacks out to get the armament back onto a parallel footing.

No more supplies arrived for us after some days; it was claimed that road that went up the mountain was narrow and that priority had to be given to the ambulances that were carrying down the wounded soldiers, in fact this was all true. Then, there was also high priority for the transportation of ammunition and also to the troop that was marching up to the slaughter, at night in the pitch blackness.

I was aghast to see several Alpine soldiers eating grass, with their faces pressed against the very ground like rabbits. It seemed so awfully strange, but after two days of forced fasting, with my stomach empty and grumbling, I soon learnt to eat like a rabbit too.

Some of my fellow soldiers maintained that the commanders who had stayed down in the valley, with the money saved from our food supply funds...I think you know what I'm trying to say. Things like this had already happened even in the previous wars.

Every night the military Alpine soldiers came down the mountainside on the backs of mules, to then return loaded with ammunition. Behind our battalion there was an area of upland plateau, and these animals were allowed a brief respite from their labours, soaked in sweat from the descent, and they would stay here all through the night until the morning. They had to endure the cold temperatures, and very often it rained; we were at an altitude of approximately two thousand metres, and the poor beasts would get ill, some of them losing their lives to pneumonia.

The State had already taken away my mule for the second Italian war in Africa; I was very fond of her, and now the thought came to me....in whose hands had she finished up?

...At that time, we small-scale farmers didn't have motorized vehicles and the help provided by mules and horses was indispensable. The first mule requisitioned from me was in 1935 (for the second Italian war of Africa). It was seven years old, docile and obedient, it understood my orders and was a good worker. I was paid two thousand Liras for her. So, after a couple of days I went to Albenga, via the road that led to Leca, where there was a man called Ferro and he always kept a couple of mules. He had one which was six months old that I liked very much, and I went straight ahead and bought him for two thousand seven hundred Liras!

At one year of age this second mule went into the pasture field with all the other cows, I had a couple of them. These cows were a bit touchy and every so often they gave my new mule a taste of their horns. The mule fought back with her heels, kicking them so much so that after a while the cows grew afraid of her temerity and decided to leave her well alone.

Then, I taught her to carry me on her back. At three years of age she learnt how to haul a cart behind herself which is the most delicate task for a mule. This is because she has to obey every word said to her, she has to move from right to left, move forwards or stop completely, all by means of the spoken word. She had to learn to pull a plough, obeying my every word in an accurate fashion.

When she was grazing in the pasture, I called her name from a distance. As soon as she heard my voice, she came bounding towards me joyfully; after I'd given her a couple of caresses on her snout I jumped up on her

back and then we were going to work very happy to a different field.

Now, instead, there I was, with plugs in my ears, shooting cannon-shot over the frontier of my country, combatting other soldiers in uniform of a different colour from mine. The irony lying in the fact that they were, on the whole, poor country peasants like myself.

This second mule had been requisitioned in 1942.

Training a mule requires years of patience and care. Once these animals had learnt to work well, the government requisitioned them, first one and then the other. Without their help one can't use a cart and everything has to be carried on one's shoulders or by hand-cart, it's impossible to plough fields and all of the land has to be hoed by hand. And what's more, one had to shout out loud, "Long Live the Dux!!"

After the war the age of the engine was to descend upon us, of small scale tractors, motorized hoes, "Vespa" scooters and the Piaggio "Api" and I didn't bother getting myself anymore mules...

Let's go back to the war and Mount Argentera.

The commander of my group was called Major Piccinino. To put it mildly, he was a nasty type of person. In fact, he didn't even bother to get hold of any supplies to feed the troops for several days, enough said.

Then there were other officers: Lieutenant Bogleione, who was said to be from Piedmont, but I wasn't too sure about that; sub-lieutenant Ruffini from Genova; sub-lieutenant Greco, Sicilian; sub-lieutenant Ragazzo from Acqui; another sub-lieutenant whose name I can't remember.

These were all good guys. They too were often pushed around and treated badly by the Major and from time to time they let loose colourful expressions about him...these I won't include here, but one may imagine just what they were.

Every so often, this major Piccinino would leap out of nowhere and shout crazily at everyone in front of him, as furious as a madman. He used to call us simple soldiers all sorts of names. He also would put the Lieutenants and sub-lieutenants in their places too, splattering everyone with his insults, in front of all of the troops. And I really believe that this was prohibited. He behaved as if he were totally in command of everything.

It was blatantly obvious that this behaviour of his was to simply create confusion and to hide something. As if no one twigged to the fact that when he cut rations for three hundred people, most definitely something mysteriously finished up in both his trouser pockets and those of his lackeys.

He preached to us on a non-stop basis, he had nothing good to say about the upland plateau farmers, and used to say, "Look at them, there are no young people there, they've all legged it to France, they've betrayed us. I'm going to round them up and make hamburgers out of them..."

I watched the farmers working on those patches of land, in that mountain climate, I wondered just how they managed to make a living out of it, never mind criticise the poor devils.

In the summer the clouds would thicken in the mountain sky and it would often rain. Summer was over in a flash and winter would be just around the corner, snow would fall thickly all around. Never mind about running off to France! Go to France and one would find many Italians at work, some were bricklayers, farmers and peasants or they did other assorted jobs. Take a trip around the length of the Italian peninsula and one would never see a Frenchman working for us.

Luckily, the war against France didn't go on for long. Just two weeks. With the state of my health and in that climate I was at a full-time risk of a relapse.

On the 24th of June, France and Italy signed a peace treaty. The French kept on shooting at us until night, whilst we had orders to not shoot any more after midday, so we put our guns away.

I was still in one piece, all my arms and legs were where they always were, but many soldiers were much less fortunate than me. These were in the main infantrymen and the Alpine soldiers.

One famous German general once said, "Trying to invade France by going through the Alps is like grabbing hold of a rifle and holding it by its bayonet."

In other words; guaranteed suicide. This was the exact strategy used by Italian generals.

Once, (but maybe more than once) the high ranking Italian officers sent out a battalion of Alpine soldiers by road, or even along the surface of a glacier in open spaces, unprotected, ordering them, "Onward!! To victory!! Go and conquer France and the French!!!"

It was as if we were back in Roman times. As if the enemy were not in possession of machine guns and mortars. The French kept their eye on our soldiers from their stake outs, and let those poor souls move forward, three hundred metres, four hundred metres, and then they opened fire with all their force. A massacre. More than half of them perished. The rest, luckier ones, managed to take shelter behinds rocks here and there, or in the deep cracks of the glacier. And they were to stay there until night fell, then stumbling and tripping around in

the dark they made an attempt to get back to our base camp.

The same absurd military strategy was applied also on the mountains between Albania and Greece, a few months later.

We Italians had occupied Albania one year before, and then we were trying to invade Greece through those rough mountains. And the Alpine was sent to the massacre at Perati, on Golico, on Tepeleni.

On the Perati bridge, under hails of machine-gun bullets and mortar shells, died innumerable Alpine soldiers, above all in the Julia division.

And to commemorate them, one of their famous songs went like this: -

“Sul ponte di Perati bandiera nera”	On Perati bridge a black flag
“E’ il lutto degli Alpini che van a la guerra”	It is the mourning for the Alpine soldiers who are going to war.
“E’ il lutto della Julia che va alla guerra”	It is the mourning of Julia who is going to war
“La meglio gioventù che va sotto terra,”	The best of youth going underground
“Quelli che son partiti non son tornati”	Those who left did not come back
“Sui monti della Grecia sono restati”	They stayed on the Greek mountains
.....	
“Sui monti della Grecia c’è la Vojussa.”	On the Greek mountains, there is the Vojussa.
“Col sangue degli Alpini s’è fatta rossa”	Made red by the blood of the Alpine soldiers.

The Vojussa is the river that flows beneath the Perati bridge.

Many soldiers also froze to death on that mountain during the winter, badly dressed for the altitude of two thousand metres.

My brother in law Guglielmo, known as Min, was in Vlora (an important port of Albania), in the navy. After the war, he told me that the crates holding the troops’ clothes had arrived in the port. These were the clothes destined for the soldiers, underwear, woollen pullovers and trousers, heavy jackets and other items of clothing that would have protected the soldiers from the freezing weather conditions up on that terrible mountain. However, a good proportion of these clothes never reached the soldiers because the crates had been forced open and the clothing sold off on the black market, right there in Vlora, above all to some of the sub-lieutenants. On those mountains in those inhuman freezing weather conditions more than ten thousand Italian soldiers were to meet their maker.

He also told me that when the British submarines sank in front of Albania the Galilea ship, which carried the Gemonia regiment, he with other sailors who were in Vlora, the following weeks collected at sea the bodies of two thousand dead Italian soldiers. To these must be added all the missing that have not been found again.

One thousand missing in action? What a joke. This was what a certain well-known book was later to tell us.

Again in the testimony of my brother-in-law Min, in front of Albania another time the British ships struck an Italian ship loaded with ammunition, which exploded immediately. This time, he with the sailors that came to the rescue no longer touched the pitiful task of collecting the dead soldiers, because on the surface of the sea they found only pieces of wood and some floating shoes.

The Italians were forced to stay on that terrible mountain for months and were also forced to retreat. On the other hand, the Germans who had travelled along the lower lying flatlands of Yugoslavia and Bulgaria, in just one month managed to conquer Yugoslavia and Greece.

Mussolini made the marvellous comment that the mortalities of the insufficiently dressed Italian soldiers, due to the sub-zero temperatures at two thousand meters that occurred during the winter, served to reinforce the notion that the weak Italian race had freed itself of the feebler ones and had strengthened the rest of the race.

Let’s not waste our time dwelling on this jewel of intelligence, shall we?

Going back to the western Alps then. Again, our well-loved Mussolini had already worked out his military

strategy for conquering the south of France as far as Rhon river. We managed to take Menton and some small town along the border.

We stayed for another couple of weeks on the Argentera mountains.

One day we moved to the lake of Maddalena to see where our cannon might arrive. We had destroyed a group of old houses, and then at the end of the war, we had to pay for new ones to be built.

Then we descended to Fossano to the Alpine artillery barracks, and we spent all of the summer here. Luckily, there had been a change of commander, so Major Piccinino had gone off to shout and scream and steal somewhere else. A few years later on down the line, it was to come to my knowledge that he too had met his end, during the Partisan years of Italian civil war.

Now, in his place had arrived commander Tallace; a Lieutenant Colonel of artillery. His arrival was heralded by the disappearance of the mouldy bread. He took care of the soldiers, checking the rations system which got progressive better.

I benefited greatly from the summer sun, it put me right again, and it was if I'd never fallen ill.

At the end of the summer we went back to Acqui, the weather changed and we found ourselves facing once again autumnal rainfalls.

In this new army base, with another commander, our food was adorned with mould and was not fit even for the pigs. So, once again a tidal wave of soldiers trooped off to eat in the local restaurants during the evenings. Commander Boglione, instructed us day in day out, in other words we were forced to march backwards and forwards all day long in the mud. Our shoes had soles made out of cardboard, and treading on mud all day long wore them out and they had to be sent to the local cobbler on a weekly basis. Great business. These commanders who were the epitome of cruelty and bad blood, were without a shadow of a doubt involved in this business.

The autumn passed, then winter and then spring, holed up in this army camp with only the occasional period of leave.

The summer of 1941 came around, and the madmen in Rome declared war against Russia.

But it transpired that madness was not only an exclusive characteristic of our Italian commanders. This was because also Hitler's Germany had declared war too against Russia, and had transferred more than four million soldiers from the western front to the eastern one against the Soviet Union.

This took place when the intervention of the United States by the side of Great Britain and France had been foreseen. In other words we did everything within our power to actually lose the war.

On the twenty second of June, after training manoeuvres, we went off to Canelli.

Here too, we had another commander from hell. More often than not he was drunk, clear as the light of day. He would call the soldiers together and order us to attention and then preach to us, words amply sprinkled with a rich assortment of insults and degradations. And then he would order us to march backwards and forwards for hours on end.

Then we found ourselves at Borgo San Dalmazzo, the neighbourhood of Beguda.

In the autumn, finally and at long last the commander was transferred. In his place lieutenant Cordiè, arrived and right away one could see he was a more Christian person. Someone told me he actually came from Borgo San Dalmazzo. However, he couldn't manage to get rid of the crooks who ran the kitchen. They were definitely under someone's protective wing.

The new commander did not insult us and did not make us march in the mud, but the bread was always moldy and the food was scarce and of poor quality. And we were in Piedmont, which at the time was probably the most advanced region of Italy.

Why were the barracks infested with lice and the ration made skiff ?

Piedmont was also the region of origin of the Reigning House: the Savoy. But perhaps this was precisely the cause of the abuses. In fact, the presence of many high-level figures in the monarchical hierarchy: dukes, marquises, counts, viscounts, barons, baronets, largely accomplices with the armed forces of the fascist regime, guaranteed a strong network of coverage that allowed to perpetuate all those prevarications. The total lack of freedom of the press and of any other form of free expression, imposed by the fascist dictatorship, supported and consolidated these criminal behaviors.

Towards the end of 1941, many of my companions had gone home for long charcoal-burner's leave. I managed to just get a couple of days. I went to The Forestry Department in Savona, armed with my reference papers for

my family's land to see if they would give me the paperwork to get more leave time. I came out empty handed, waste of time. They just laughed in my face, I should have been made of stronger stuff but that's the way I was.

I returned to the army base and I bumped into my companion, Delfino, from Albenga. Before leaving for his leave he told me, "I'm going home, and I know you have a greater need than most of us for leave time to work in your farming business. Right, I'll introduce you to Tallace's wife. He in the meantime has been promoted to Colonel. She needs olive oil, and is on holiday in Varazze. You try and get some leave, then come and see me and I'll take you to see this lady."

I returned home with a three-day leave permit and I went to Albenga by bicycle early in the morning. Delfino also had to see the lady, so we both left by bicycle and took a nice sixty-kilometer ride to reach Varazze. To these must then be added the kilometers of the return.

We went immediately to see the colonel's wife; she was a kind and gentle lady, and very compliant with both of us. She told me that she would soon return to Acqui. She gave me an address, and we made arrangements for me to take the olive oil, grown and pressed by my family, to her.

And that was how it worked out. At the time foodstuffs were rationed and it was forbidden to do business of this type. However, nothing was stolen, it was all our own production. The lady paid me for the oil at the controlled price set by the government, not a lira more.

So, with this system I managed to wangle several periods of leave, even if at that time, the lady's husband was the commander of a different army base. At any rate, on that base where I was stationed there was nothing to be done. Instead, at home I could do solid days of work, and this was really a necessity. When I'd finished, I'd jump on a train and get myself back to Acqui. Of an early morning, women laden with crates of fish got on the train at Noli station and went up to Piedmont to sell them. Every so often, I bought some fish and took them, nice and fresh, to the lady; I told her how much I'd spent and she paid me back, right down to the last single Lira.

Often it was my turn to do sentry duty at the armoury.

During my night shift I was always very attentive, because word got around that some officer had approached a sentry guard saying, "You know me," and he then made off with his rifle.

One year in prison for the guard and a prize for the officer.

As I have already said, Italy had declared war against the Soviet Union and we were awaiting our departure. The long-range cannon had not arrived yet, so Italy asked Germany to supply them. The cannon arrived, and they were delivered by German soldiers who spent several days in our army camp. Some of them spoke moderately good Italian.

They observed that we Italian soldiers picked up our rations in the open courtyard with mess tins, they also saw the mouldy bread, which was pretty much uneatable. Then they saw the officers' and sub-lieutenants' canteen that was well stocked up. They were really surprised as in their army organization the officers ate the same rations as the soldiers themselves.

The Germans said that if mouldy bread had been given to the soldiers there, then the day afterwards the responsible party or parties would be removed from the kitchens and immediately sentenced.

On the contrary, in our case in Italy, this happened in different army bases for a long time; and if any unfortunate soul had complained about his lot, then he ran the great risk of disappearing without trace.

There was an inter-weaving of high level Mafia allegiance and many got rich to the expense and even the very state of health of the soldiers.

This line of thought came out in the tales of the old people; at that time in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it was said that the wealthy members of society did exactly what they wanted; it was even permitted that the men wooed young brides and even took them home. If the poor husband complained, that was it, he was gone in a puff of smoke, vanished.

Then when the Armed Carabinieri were founded and with their arrival in the towns and cities, the situation got better and the cases of abuse diminished.

The Carabinieri didn't stick their noses into the affairs of the army base, and we, poor terrorized soldiers, had to tow the rope and put up with all sorts of humiliation and abuse.

Almost every night, some unidentified character decorated the outside walls of the base with declarations that we were under the command of a gang of thieves, that they gave airs and graces of being patriots but instead they were simply thieves and "mafiosi". The officers had us clean up that graffiti, but after a short while there it was again to tell the world of our situation.

To our good fortune there was a change of commander and once again, Tallace came back to us, this time

sporting the rank of colonel. The situation in the base changed immediately, starting with the rations. Every day he gave us all a good talking to, but it was in a constructive sense without any types of insults being thrown anyone. He shouted out loud that he was able to hit a man with his pistol at fifty metres distance. He cried that we were strong, invincible, that after we'd conquered Russia, we'd move on and conquer even Peking in China!

Maybe some readers might burst out laughing at the above lines, but let me assure you that this is exactly what he told all of us.

Naturally, I wasn't particularly convinced with these words, and I asked my friend, the lady, the wife of the colonel, if there was any way I could get out of being transferred to Russia. She said to me that she'd look into it and would give me an answer after a couple of days.

Unluckily, for me, her answer was negative. She told me that her husband too, the colonel commander, also had to go to Russia.

She advised me to be as careful as I could possibly be.

The great spaces of the Soviet Union war meant that any troops had to have at hand motorized means of transport. On the contrary, Italy had very few of these. We had few trucks and tractors, a good number of carts and cannon drawn by mules and horses; the vast majority of the troops had to perform their advances on foot. (Fascist regime had invented the definition of "transportable troops on vehicles". But there were not enough vehicles, and then they proceeded on foot.)

For these reasons, Hitler had clearly expressed his views to not consider it a wise choice to employ our forces on Russian territory. As an alternative, he asked Mussolini to strengthen up the Libyan front. However, the Dux insisted that he would take part in this strategy all the same.

Ciano, his son in law, the foreign minister, also did his best to try and dissuade Mussolini, but he was adamant and convinced that the Italian divisions were, by dint of their equipment and men, by far superior to the German ones.

As a result of this, a number of high ranking generals asked him for a greater number of motorized vehicles. Mussolini cut them short, replying, "Generals! Ask me only for medals of valour!"

The CSIR (Corps of the Italian Expedition to Russia) made up of sixty thousand men, left in July 1941, by the specific will of Mussolini. We departed from Acqui for Russia in the Spring of 1942.

Meanwhile, on 7 December of 1941, Japan, which was allied with Germany and Italy, had attacked the United States at Pearl Harbor, and on 10 December Hitler declared war on the USA.

Mussolini, perhaps exalted by the Germanic overwhelming power and convinced that the war would last a couple of months at most, declared war on the USA on 11 December '41, believing that it was just a simple formality to be completed before being able to sit at the winners' table.

At that time, the United States was already the largest industrial and economic power in the world, and by converting industry to war production, every month they could produce the equivalent of all the armament owned by Italy. And their planes, their ships and their tanks were technologically twenty years ahead of ours. Their population was about 134 million, against 41 million in Italy. These evident data clearly demonstrate that the Duce's head no longer worked so well, as already written.

Let's go back to our "adventure" in Russia.

The train was loaded up as follows: five wagons carried cannon, four wagons for tractors which were needed for hauling the cannon, numerous third class compartments for the troops, two first class ones for the group commander, colonel Tallace, the major's aid captain Del Core with a group of soldiers and their helpers.

I recall that there was frost in Brennero. In Austria I saw farmers putting their hay on raised platforms of wood in order to dry it better. The Vienna-Budapest railway line was probably completely taken up for moving supplies for the armed German forces, or maybe because we had to take arms to the Germans in Poland, we had gone the long way towards the north and we crossed through Austria, Germany and then Poland.

In the outlying area of Warsaw, we spent one full day without moving. Some of us got off the train and went to visit the city. On their return, they were visibly shocked. They said that the war had destroyed entire neighborhoods of the city, that they had never ever seen destruction of that type in their lives.

Then, the morning after we started off again on our journey, and we moved on and on for hour after hour....

Then, we were at a standstill in a station. It was the dead of night; suddenly we were given the order to get our machine guns ready and to load up the muskets. Bullets in the chambers and everyone ready for action, because in this area there had been Partisan attacks.

Immediately our eyes focused onto our commander Tallace, an epitome of strength, a true tower of power and an ace shot with his pistol. He had turned so pale and wan, and after a short while he came out with those fateful words: "I'm going home"... Those were his exact words.

The train was to set off again, and we travelled for days on end towards the south east. I saw where the sun was born and where it set, the North Star and I thought, "Now we're going there by train, and if should we go back?"

We crossed over immense plains, everywhere we looked, from one side of the train or the other, all we could see were green plains, for the duration of the day.

My father's tales came to mind, the ones he used to tell us, his children; there were six of us, plus another two who died young. One sister died in 1919 with the Spanish Flu and a younger brother who died of an unknown illness at that time.

At the beginning of the twentieth century our dad had spent some years in Argentina, that there was one of the world's most rich countries, then he was to return home with some money that he'd earned and saved up there. He used to tell us about wheat fields there which were as big as from Varigotti to Finale (about five kilometres) and of green plains as vast as the very sea. We children, living in our mountainous Liguria, could only dream of such things.

Finally I saw the green plains as big as the very sea. Only I would have liked to live there and work a few years on time in peace, as my dad had done in Argentina. Instead I crossed them quickly with that train, which was traveling towards the war front.

We had a stopover in Harkov, then we continued on towards a small town whose name I can't recall.

We ate our badly cooked rations without any salt for more than a week. Word got around that the salt wagon had been hooked up to another train and had got lost.

In the towns where we had our breaks from the never-ending train journey, Ukrainian girls came from the train, who were smiling and as beautiful as pictures, with their blonde braids rolled up on around their heads. They had silver roubles in their hands and asked us if we'd sell them some salt. In this place so far from the sea, salt must have been a very precious commodity. However, that salt wagon had well and truly vanished. At that point, I had an unsettling thought that someone had caused the wagon to disappear on purpose, taken that salt would sell at such a high price.

Of course, when we saw the girls coming towards us, we immediately thought of something else, and not of salt. But it was necessary to remain calm, also because there were strict orders that absolutely required respect for women.

Sooner than expected, probably due to the badly cooked food, we all fell foul to diarrhoea, a terrible plague that had hit us. We wandered around that land for several days, for days and nights, those roads full of pot-holes, tractors with their solid rubber tyres, always with our rifles loaded ready for action in our hands. Also, more often than not with our trousers in our hands, thanks to the diarrhoea which was to last for more than a week.

Then we established camp at Debal'tseve.

Every so often a troop of Germans passed by, and they didn't hesitate to taunt and mock us; one of them made no bones in telling me that pretty soon all the gold in Rome would be in their coffers in Berlin.

Once we were camped near to Germans and another German soldier repeated this prediction to me. I asked him if the Pope would be included in this theft too, and he answered wryly, "No, just the gold."

Our infantry platoon passed by. For days and days, heavily laden soldiers, dog-tired after the long march, naturally on foot. Onwards, onwards towards the front, a never ending snaking human column, they were so pitiful. A corporal from Gorizia called Cumar, who spoke good Russian, talked to some of the well-dressed Ukrainian women and who were anything but country peasants with the appearance of highly cultured people. They turned to us and said, "Poor soldiers, all of them on their way towards a certain death...."

Those women asked us into their houses and offered us food to eat.

They told us that the Germans treated them like slaves, as if they were an inferior race. Instead, with us Italians it was another story. When we had to leave, tears came to our eyes, thinking of the absolute absurdity of war and moreover the fact that we were the aggressors.

We had a Russian conversation manual of about forty pages and in those rare moments of quiet I would read it carefully, attempting to learn as many Russian words as possible. I wanted to talk with the girls, and also with other Russian people.

One day, when we had already entered Russia, in a village I met a beautiful girl. With as much respect as I could muster, I said a couple of things to her in Russian, and she answered me in Italian. I was very surprised and curious. I asked her why she knew my language so well, and she answered that her father was Italian. My

surprise grew and I told her it would be a great pleasure for me to meet him, so she gave me their home address. As soon as I had a free moment I went to see them.

This is his tale; during the First World War the father had fallen into the hands of the Austrians, and so as not to die of starvation in one of the prison camps, he accepted to fight against the Russians on the Eastern Front. Then at his first chance he leapt over to the other side of the barricade. He had managed to save his skin on both fronts!

When the war had finished, he stayed in Russia, he got a job, got married and had two children. He told me that there were two other Italian men in that town, both having gone through similar situations.

He added, "Here, we are loved and respected by everyone. If you need something, let me know right away so I can help you. However, don't hang around here any longer because I could get into trouble."

I apologized and thanked him very much for the hospitality, said goodbye to him and to his daughter and slipped away quickly.

At this juncture in time, we made an attempt to summarize, very briefly, the war situation.

The Germans had invaded the Soviet Union with their gigantic vehicles of war and more than four million soldiers. At the outset, in the summer and then autumn of 1941, the advance of their armed forces had been incredibly overpowering, and the Soviets suffered terrible losses: around about three million including the dead and those taken prisoner. At the end of November, the German forces together with the Italian ones (far fewer) had all arrived at a point twenty kilometres from Moscow.

However, the German armed forces had spread themselves out along a front that was far too long, extending from Leningrad (today known as Saint Petersburg) to Rostov. Too make things worse, they soon found themselves immersed in the intense cold of the Russian winter, temperatures that sometimes dropped right down to even forty degree below zero.

The Soviets managed to reorganize themselves. New military troops arrived from Siberia and from Far East of Asia, and many American-made weapons and ammunition also arrived in the port of Archangel. In January of 1942 they set about an enormous counter-attack saving Moscow and repelling the invading troops. But in the month of March the sudden spurt of activity and their means of war started to run out of steam, and they were forced to take on defensive manoeuvres.

At this turn of events, given the problems that his army found themselves up against and considering that he had already lost nearly 800,000 soldiers, Hitler didn't hesitate to accept help. And help was to arrive for the Germans in the form of Rumanian, Hungarian and Italian troops. Plus, other various mixed groups of troops. The Italian armed forces, now going under the acronym of ARMIR, (Armata Italiana Russia; Italian Armed Forces in Russia) was made up of three Alpine divisions: Cuneense, Julia and Tridentina, for a total of 57,000 Alpine soldiers, and six infantry divisions: Celere, Cosseria, Pasubio, Ravenna, Torino, Sforzesca, for a total of 173,000 infantry soldiers. ARMIR's total was therefore approximately 230,000 soldiers. I was in the Cosseria division.

Near to our infantry division there were two back-up German divisions.

We had reached the eastern part of Ukraine and were making an attempt to advance towards the east. We had to intervene with the artillery forces in various places. To drive the Russians out of a small fortress it took two days of constant battle, using cannon artillery and non-stop machine gun fire day and night.

Along a road, we observed the carcass of a Soviet tank which had been hit by a cannon shot. It was a real monster, bigger than German tanks. The "experts" said that it weighed more than forty tons. Compared to this juggernaut, the few tanks that the Italian forces had on offer looked pathetically weedy and insignificant.

On the right wing of our encampment there was a broken pipe from which was spurting out a lovely jet of water. All of us on our lunch ration break would rinse out our mess-tins and drink the cool water. Also nearby there was a battery of German anti-aircraft guns and they did the same thing as us. Behind this tube there was a wall with a door through which two underground rooms could be viewed, and I had a snoop around them, just out of interest. They were full of vacuum-sealed tins and bottles of whitish liquid which evidently the Russians had hurriedly abandoned during their last retreat. We were concerned about this, but we had orders to stay put in that place.

One day, when the newly found oasis was working full time, someone saw smoke coming out of those rooms. The soldiers who were nearby had just a few seconds to escape, and then there was an ear-splitting explosion: two anti-aircraft cannon out of service, one dead and some German wounded soldiers. Luckily, only eight Italians were wounded, and we carted them off to hospital and they were soon back in service again.

In the hospital I saw a Ukrainian woman of about fifty years of age who had lost her right arm. It was all

wrapped up with bloodied rags tight with a string. She waited to be medicated, without the slightest complaint. I also met lieutenant Buzalla there who I had known in 1939. He was a tall man, red-faced, a good guy and pleasant. He saw the wounded and immediately said, "Hurry, come with me." He accompanied us and asked us what had happened.

That evening I thanked him and said goodbye, for the last and final time. A short while later he was killed in action, hit by a machine-gun burst of a Russian tank.

We were worried about the return journey from the hospital to the encampment during the night. We thought that there might be a German patrol in that area and in the dark there was a serious risk of being strafed by machine-gun bursts. To add to the danger there was the risk of bumping into Soviet soldiers who had infiltrated into our lines. As it happened, we were kept in the hospital until the following morning.

One evening we heard German Stucca bombers flying overhead. They carrying out a blanket bombing of Vorosilovgrad, a city around about forty kilometres to the east of Debal'tseve, where we were.

We left too; after travelling for almost two hours, we arrived in this city at the dead of night.

It was in a state of semi-destruction from previous fighting and also from the latest German airborne bombing raids. Dead soldiers' bodies were strewn all over the place and they were our men, Italians.

This is what happened. The city had been under siege by the Italian troops for some days, but the Russians were holding out well. So, the Italian command together with the German one arranged that at 10 pm that the German aircraft would blanket-bomb the city.

Maybe because the Russians had intercepted the order, they retreated straight away and fled the city. The militia and other Italian groups that were at the gates of the city had not been warned of the air-raid and, seeing the Russian fleeing the city, they advanced and entered the city. A short while later however, the German planes arrived and dropped their loads of death on the city, which was crowded with Italian troops.

I still think about this after so many years. I swear to you, my readers, that more than half of the fallen Italians died for lack of coordination and organization, and also because many of the commanders were absolutely incapable of doing their jobs. They had made a career out of the army only because of the help of the Fascist party, or the Monarchy.

After other hard-fought battles, we advanced and found ourselves near to the River Don. The infantry spread themselves out near the river, we, with our cannon and large calibre machine-guns placed ourselves approximately one kilometre behind them.

There were many hills, most of the hills were covered with wheat, others with sunflowers. We had to manoeuvre the cannon by hand, downhill in the middle of a wheat field.

To the east there were some oak woods; in front of us and to the north there were small hillocks of earth that protected us from the Russian machine-guns which were positioned beyond the river. On that stretch, the Don flowed from the west towards the east, and then turning towards the south following a huge bend.

To the north of my division, the Cosseria, the three Alpine divisions set themselves up, the Cuneense, the Julia and the Tridentina. Tracing a route back upriver, there was the armed Hungarian Corps. The other Italian infantry divisions controlled all of the enormous bend in the river, which lay to the east of my position. After the bend the Don flow down towards the south. Still further south there was the armed Romanian corps.

Moscow was a great distance away from us, about seven hundred kilometres to the north.

Maybe the objective was to reach the oilfields in the Caucasus Mountains which were another six hundred kilometres to the south. And for this reason, three Alpine divisions had been sent here, to get to grips with the Caucasus mountains.

I was now in an area near the River Don which was made up of rounded hills reaching two hundred metres in height. Here the light Alpine cannon were useless. Also, the mules that these troops had with them were no good for getting along these streets. What were really needed here were lorries.

The Germans had already managed to cross over the Don near Stalingrad, three hundred kilometres south of our position. And now some of their armed forces, under the command of General Von Paulus and other generals, were at the outskirts of Stalingrad on the right hand bank of the River Volga. Here the Volga and the Don are very near to one another. There is also an important canal that connected up the two rivers, called the Lenin Canal.

There were nearly a million German soldiers deployed in Stalingrad. The Soviets had even greater numbers, desperately defending their city because it was for them a highly important industrial and communications centre. So, the battle of Stalingrad was the most dramatic and important one in all of the Second World War. It was enough just to take a quick look at a map to see immediately that all of the invading armies together, the Italians, Rumanians, Germans and Hungarians were in control of less than one quarter of the length of the Don. This river was a good one thousand eight hundred and seventy kilometres long. The overall length of the

front that stretched from Leningrad to Rostov is around one thousand six hundred kilometres as the crow flies; much longer following its effective outlay.

This, as well as the distance from Moscow and the immenseness of the territory already gave one the idea of the absurdity of this undertaking

We fired endless rounds with the cannon, beyond the river in the distance where a city could be seen. Among the advantages of being a gunner, besides not being right on the front line, is that the enemy dies away from you, often even a few kilometers; you don't see him suffer, you don't see his face. But you think about this, you imagine this, you imagine the destruction that cannon balls causes on inhabited centers, or between the lines of the enemy, the dead and the wounded. And all this weighs on you, but you try to get on by thinking about other things.

It's very hot. Water got scarce and we suffered from thirst. Of course, we couldn't just pop down to the banks of the Don to get water, because as well as the water we'd get a hailstorm of machine gun fire just to round off the day.

Finally, a quiet tranquil day. I was seated near the side of a hill, nearby there was a soldier from the province of Alessandria, his surname was Repetto. He was also a farmer, just like me.

At a certain point he said to me, "Look at those rush plants over there, at the end of this little valley. Those plants grow where water is".

I looked, thought for a moment and I answered him, "It's true, you're right."

With my experience as a farmer, I too knew something about plants and land. Also, so near the river, the ground water level should be quite high.

We got hold of a spade and pick axe and we started to dig, taking turns, near to the rush plants.

We dug a hole in the earth a little more than a meter deep. That's where the soil finished and the rock began, and the spade couldn't go any further. We widened the hole and then we started to hack away with the pick. I could feel through the blows I was giving that I was striking against a hard crust, not just compact rock. After a hundred of blows with the pick, the crust finally cracked in various places and water started to pour out. In a little while the trench filled up with flowing water that flowed over the edge of the hole, and down the slightly sloping hillside.

All of my companions arrived; it had been quite a while since we'd washed our faces and mess-tins.

After a while the sergeant major Dominone arrived with some of his soldiers. Using uprights, they cordoned off the land around the hole so that no-one would tread on it, and they set up a tube to transport the water out of the hole so that it came out nice and crystal clear.

The news spread pretty fast. Many arrived with their mess-tins and water flasks; they washed them out, filled them up and drank their fill. Everyone said that it was excellent water.

The day after colonel Tallace came by with his assistant, major Del Core, to check our placements. They too sampled the water that was gushing out of the hole.

The colonel found out that Repetto and myself had found the water source, and he praised us heartily. I thanked him for his compliments.

We started once again with the fighting with cannon shots and machine-gun fire in bursts. Many of the infantry who were in the first line, lost their lives.

Often, right over our heads flew rocket projectiles, called Katiuscie, launched from the "organs of Stalin". They made a noise that were very frightening, ferocious. They were aimed at the positions of our command, a good way from the front.

In the silence of the night, in the distance the Russian megaphones could be heard. They asked us not to get ourselves killed, and to give up the fight. They said, "Italians, by now you're in our trap, surrender or you will all die."

To give us courage, our officers claimed that the Russian losses were greater than ours, but anyway, our morale diminished day by day. At seeing so many dead soldiers, we all started thinking about our own fates. Fear is fear, and there's nothing you can do about it because the situation was really critical.

A rumour was going around that the Italian command wanted us to cross over the river. On the contrary, the Germans who were on our side with their reinforcement divisions, feared that this manoeuvre would involve too many losses. Their command knew well the Soviet defences and they also knew that they had consolidated them in the past few months.

Also, they took better care of and gave more respect to their soldiers, starting off with rations; another thing,

they weren't made to run unnecessary risks. In their army, if their cooks gave them mouldy bread (as has happened many times in our barracks in Piedmont) the day after they would be packed off to prison along with the kitchen manager.

They said that to make a good soldier it takes years, that every action must be prudent and well evaluated, and their way of fighting was more effective than ours. Their weapons were superior to ours in quantity and quality; many of their soldiers also had submachineguns, while we had few. And the losses that Germans inflicted on the Russians are at least ten times greater than those inflicted by us. And up to that time they had suffered fewer fallen men than us.

Certainly, that's the way it went, but it went that way because of that madman in Berlin, not because of the commandeurs who were on the battlefield, who were really up to the job.

Their officials used to often say in Italian: "Questo paese è così grande, troppo grande", "This country is so big, too big". In other words, they were saying that they'd been sent to achieve the impossible, an absurd undertaking.

The Italian command continued to send out orders for all of us to be ready to cross the River Don. We all knew that this would mean a bloodbath, no way out. Few days after, instead, an order arrived telling us to hook up the cannon to the tractors and to withdraw as quickly as possible, the Russians were about to attack.

We came here downhill, and now we had to leave uphill. The tractor driver was called Massoni, a good soldier. While he was driving, he looked continually from left to right because the ground was full of holes causing him to have to steer around them. Once at the top of the hill, we stopped and we got down from the tractors. By now, the Don was about two kilometre away. Also here, around us all the hills were covered with wheat and sunflower plants.

We stopped off here, positioned the cannon and then started to fire off round after round. In this new emplacement, further away from the river, we felt safer.

After a couple of hours, the attack had failed. Later on, in the dark, we went on foot to recover all of that which we'd left in our position. Nothing had happened to us, we just got scared nothing more. However, a good number of infantry who were in the first line near to the banks of the river, died or fell into the hands of the Russians.

At about three kilometres from us there was a village called Filonovo, completely surrounded by wheat. There was a windmill for grinding the grain and our group's command was located there.

We positioned my cannon on a hillock; behind it, on the side opposite the front, at about ten meters from the cannon, there was a steep drop. We dug a small cave by the side of the slope to use as a shelter in the case of an air attack. Inside it we drove in poles that we'd fashioned from trees taken from a nearby woods.

Also, from this location we fired off rounds day and night without even an hour's sleep. In those rare moments of peace, I lay down on groundsheet right next to my cannon. As soon as an order to go into action arrived I would leap up and get to my cannon without wasting a second. That was how I spent the whole month of August.

With each passing day, the Soviet attacks intensified. During the moonless nights, small groups of the Soviet attackers would cross the Don in small boats and penetrate into our lines. They caused many casualties, especially among the infantry that was in the front line, and they did this before being killed by our reactive defence, or before falling into our hands as prisoners. Only rarely did they manage to get back to the left-hand bank of the Don.

The order to dig another larger cave to store our ammunition arrived. The sub lieutenant Greco told the squadron leaders to dig the shelter beyond the hill, at about a hundred meters from the cannon and machine gun emplacements.

So, in order to get ammunition, we had to run along a lengthy open stretch under hails of grenades and rifle fire from the Russian snipers. During these attacks, they infiltrated our lines with their accurate, high-powered rifles equipped with telescopic sights. Their bullets had already grazed me some times. We had to shift around, zig zagging from side to side to make ourselves difficult targets. I tried to explain this fact to the sub-lieutenant, but he couldn't or didn't want to understand and stuck to his original plan.

I reported to colonel Tallace, asking his batman if I could express my opinion about this matter. He was to receive me and listen to me willingly.

I explained the situation and risks to him clearly, that the ammunition stockpile was too far from our emplacement. I made the proposal that we create a storage area for the ammunition somewhere else, nearer to our positions, right there in the slope near to the cannon. In this way, even when the Russian aircraft attacked us, this underground chamber would also be used as a shelter for us artillery soldiers.

He listened to my point of view, and then said to me, "You're right. Tomorrow morning it'd be a good idea to

put your plan into action." I thanked him, saluted and left.

The following morning two sergeants arrived, they were in charge of the third and fourth company, and they had a team with them to start off the digging operation.

I told them immediately that I'd spoken the previous evening with the colonel and that the storage cave would be dug out there, near to the cannon.

My companions from the artillery helped out too, and also my gun-captain, corporal major Luca, his surname escaped me, and everyone agreed with my idea.

The sergeants still had the sub lieutenant's order, but in the end, they came around to my way of thinking, and we started off this important operation right there near the slope near the cannon emplacement.

The ground was soft and we proceeded quickly with the excavation. During the digging work, sensing that the earth was so good and soft, I thought if only the soil in Liguria was like this! Instead more often than not it's hard and full of stones, especially on the terraces.

When we had already begun the excavation, the sub-lieutenant turned up and he hadn't been informed of our operation by the colonel. As soon as he saw the works being done on this other side, he blew his top.

Straight away the sergeants said it wasn't their fault. I approached the sub and I said to him calmly, "We're going to be here for a long time, winter is on its way. You can see us from here and you can give us orders from your sheltered post. And when we hear the Russian aircraft getting near, all of us will be able to hide away inside the cave. Also, in order to get ammunition, we would only have to move a short distance to get it. Just by hearing these words, a smile came to his face. After a moment's hesitation he said to me, "You're always full of contrary ideas, but what the hell, dig the hole here then!"

Here too, we laid out poles inside the cave using also planks of wood fashioned from the trees we found in the nearby woods.

So we had two caves for shelter, right next to our positions, and when the Russian planes came to machine gun we had to run like hares and to throw ourselves into the nearest one. Our anti-aircraft artillery was about hundred meters away; our weapons, instead, were not positioned to shoot upwards.

A couple of quiet days settled on us for a short while. We tried to free ourselves from the lice, we even boiled our clothes to kill off the seemingly indestructible lice.

On the hills that surrounded us groups of Russian women and men were cutting down wheat plants, then making wheat sheaves and also piles of the plants that were very substantial.

September loomed over us; one peaceful morning we were sunbathing in our underclothes. All of a sudden, an officer shouted out loud, "Attack!! Attack!!"

We leapt up, still in our tattered underpants, and fired off round after round at the Russians who were attacking from the north, all day long, nearly until the night. At the end, we hit it off. This time too, the attack was repelled. Finally, we had time to get dressed.

The battle over, the battlefield was sprinkled with the dead, dying and the wounded....

The morning after we went to gather up what was leapt: a thousand or so dead, some were ours, others were the enemy. Some dead enemies had Asiatic facial features, others had fair hair and blue eyes which were still open as if they were making vain attempts to grasp on to their withered lives. Many of them looked as if they were still teenagers, sixteen, seventeen years old. I was already twenty-seven years old, and on seeing those dead boys, so young, it brought a huge lump to my throat, even if they are enemies.

Then, there were the prisoners. We Italians had to sign them over to the Germans. These were the rules of their command to which also our generals themselves had to obey.

Very often the prisoners died of hunger and from the very conditions of the camps. And this was no longer war but barbarity.

During the battles the tractors had to keep their engines running in order to be ready to haul out the cannon in the case of a retreat. However, it had been a long time since the last supplies of fuel came through and the reserves were running dry.

The Germans often requested our trucks to make journeys to Stalingrad. Naturally, they used our fuel. This also worried us. I know well some of their soldiers, with whom I have also made friends. They are individually good and nice guys. When they are in the group, instead, they change. As if together they were obliged to think and express themselves strictly according to their ideology of "super soldiers" belonging to a superior race.

About ten percent of Germans can express themselves in Italian, some roughly, others quite well; while the Italians who know German are very few, apart those from Alto Adige (South Tyrol). For my part, I only know about twenty words in German and some strophes of the song Lili Marlene, just to sing it with them. On the other hand, I already know how to make myself understood in Russian, thanks to the conversation

manual that they gave us at the start of this adventure.

The Germans are always in shape, well-nourished and full of energy. We, on the contrary, eat half of the need, we sleep little, and our morale is low.

Seeing me so tired, my German friends sometimes gave me some rather large honey sweets that they have in abundance. You eat one and you immediately return to your strength, disappear drowsiness, feel the shiny mind and you are full of energies for many hours. In addition to honey, do you know what's really inside?

Often to support me, from the fields near me I get a sunflower head and mastic the seeds continuously; they contain many calories. I often ate them when I was on night guard duty.

Of course they are not like the "special candy" of the Germans, but they give me energy.

Now, the Russians were spreading less propaganda with their loudspeakers, but it came to our attention that they were getting stronger and stronger. And our morale was low.

Towards the tenth of September there was another raging attack by the Russians; after a short while our front lines were overwhelmed. Orders arrived to hook up the cannon onto the tractors and to retreat. After about two kilometres we encountered a line of trucks, the militia from the Savona battalion. Many of them were friends of mine.

We pulled back two or three kilometres and then stopped near Filonovo, where there was the group command. We positioned ourselves ready to shoot, but no orders were to arrive for all of the night.

At dawn, the men of militia were ready for the attack. We were at two kilometres from the hill conquered by the Russians.

We lined up the sights of the cannon with the hill along the crest where the Russians were. In the meanwhile, the militia braced themselves for the assault. Now colonel Tallace was in command of the operation.

Maybe some of our shots failed, they missed their targets. Maybe our men of the militia went for an attack too soon. It happened that when they saw the flame-outs from ours cannon, they ran over the hill, and some of them died for our cannon strikes.

However, we re-conquered the hill and we returned near the river.

... Many years later, the fifth of August 1973, Mr. Paolino who was the president of the combative artillery of Savona, came to pick me up in his Fiat 850. We went on to Bagnasco, where a monument to the fallen soldiers was being inaugurated.

Afterwards, we went to dine in a restaurant and there were many of us there, ex-soldiers, many from Russia. Our conversation slowly moved round to the war, and each of us had some particular episode to talk about. I recounted the above episode, when by mistake we had killed some of our own militia with our own cannon shots.

Immediately after my tale, a gentleman who was sitting a table with us, said, "I was in that assault battalion. Several shots landed at least fifty meters from me. I survived thanks to a miracle."

He added that the Russians had fled and that they had managed to take just a few prisoners near to the river. This gentleman told me that his name was Edoardo Pizzorno, from Savona, if my memory served me well...

After that particular battle, we managed to get back to our emplacements which we had abandoned because of the Russian attack.

A slight distance away the soldiers of the militia had set themselves up. They were a selected corps, very faithful to the Fascist regime, but in spite of which they were good kids. Many of them had made this choice out of sheer necessity, to get paid better and have better living conditions.

They set up their camp kitchen. At midday, we smelled a lovely aroma, and I went closer to this kitchen. They were cooking a casserole of stew which we could only dream about. We had been eating so little and so badly for months on end by now.

I immediately heard that they were speaking in the Ligurian dialect. At the time the mother tongue of nearly every one of us was not Italian, but the dialect of our home areas. Every region has its own dialect, and there are variations of the same from town to town.

In my Ligurian dialect I said, "If there's some left, don't throw it away, I'd like to have it." One of them answered, in dialect, "Bring me your mess-tin," and he filled it for me. This routine went on for some days afterwards.

They were of the Savona battalion, and I recognized a few of them: Boncardo, Pisano, Rustichelli, Larghero, and others, who I can now bring to mind but unfortunately now, as I write, their names escape me. All good guys.

The topic of dialects may make today's children laugh, but at that time they were all different, one for another. At times, it was difficult to understand an army companion from another region especially from the south Italy or from Sardinia when they tried to express themselves in Italian. And the veterans of the First World War recounted that, in those days, the difficulty in linguistic comprehension between soldiers from the north Italy and the south Italy, or Sardinia, was even greater.

After some days, another Russian attack. We pulled back and returned once again to Filonovo, to the same emplacement as before.

End of the first part.

The second part, of twenty-one intense pages containing dramatic episodes, describes: life in war hospitals, the retreat in the Russian-Ukrainian winter, some months in Belarus, the return to Italy, the continuation of the war until 8 September 1943 (when Italy surrendered to the Allies) and the return home. The text ends with some considerations on the tragedy we experienced and on the overall scenario of the war of Italy.

If you found interesting these pages, with a small subscription of Two Euros you will automatically receive the second part of the story, and you will support the site.

[Request the second part \(2€\)](#)