

# 200,000 HEROES

American O.S.S. and  
Italian Partisans in WW II

Leon Weckstein



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*Italian partisans worked with increasing boldness behind German lines. Armed with weapons captured from Germans or dropped by Allied aircraft, they were often trained and organized by Allied officers who penetrated enemy lines or parachuted behind them. Sensing that the time was ripe for action, partisan bands stepped up their activity, cutting telephone wires, ambushing troops and dynamiting culverts, bridges, roads and railroad tracks.*

*And all across northern Italy the partisans rose up. On a signal, railway workers sabotaged track in a number of provinces to prevent the movement of German troops and supplies. In Genoa partisan groups cut off water and electricity service to German barracks and established roadblocks to prevent enemy troops from escaping, or being reinforced. In a pitched battle they thwarted German demolition squads bent on destroying the city's port installations. Their ranks swelled with overnight volunteers...guerilla brigades in dozens of other Italian cities, including Milan and Turin...forced the surrender of German garrisons and were firmly in control by the time the Allied troops arrived.*

(Excerpted from the renowned Time-Life World War II book titled, *The Italian Campaign*, written by Robert Wallace and editors of that series.)



A Bill Mauldin cartoon from 1944 depicting three German soldiers desperately trying to evade any Partisans that might be near. Though in France at the time, Mauldin humorously illustrates the fear the enemy had developed regarding the Italian Partisans. Leon Weckstein visited the two-time Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoonist two weeks before he passed away in 2003 to present him with a Medalion for Excellence from the 91st Infantry's General Balough.

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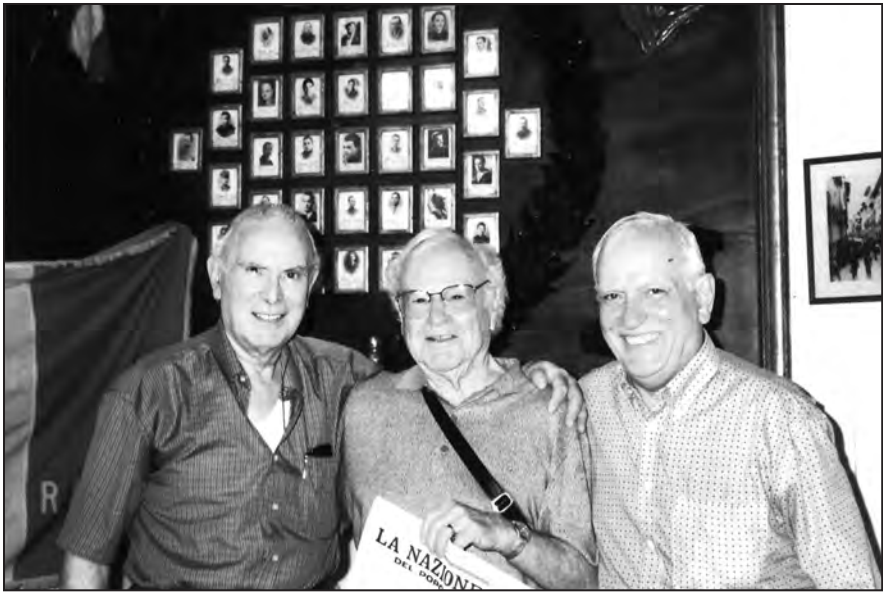
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The author (*center*) with Partisans Emmio Sardelli (*left*) and Riccardo Barchielli (*right*). Florence, Italy, 2000.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Epic actions of the Italian and American heroes that follow are not fiction. Their truth resides in historic files, biographical field reports and Partisan recollections that remain vividly galvanized within their aging, yet canny minds.

With such helpful details and with Partisan urging, their soul-stirring stories ached to be revived into a compact chronology for all to see and commemorate.

The need to share my own excitement with an appreciative audience came to fruition after a visit to Partisan headquarters at their Tuscany headquarters in Florence, twelve years ago. We had been loading up on Chianti and schmoozing about the old days when Partisan Ennio Sardelli pressed me to write about his brigade's stormy past. Somewhat blotto from the heady Italian vino and feeling no pain, I hadn't comprehended that our convivial get-together would soon lead to a bonanza of reading material that ultimately overwhelmed my mailbox in California; yellowing records and journals that had hibernated in their dusty Partisan files for half a century.

Intermixing those historic documents with sparkling anecdotes I had gleaned from my unforgettable crony, Partisan Alberto Secchi, during the rich hours we shared off the line, it seemed that not proceeding would have been sinful.

More of their glorious history evolved as I began to write, aided with generous historic contributions donated by Italian war historian Claudio Biscarini and others who were insufficiently extolled in the acknowledgements that follow.



Map of Italy outlining its major provinces.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book would never have been realized without the assistance of American/Italian tutor Frank Fedeli, who assisted me by interpreting the many noteworthy documents received from Italian Partisan sources. He, along with World War II historian Claudio Biscarini, were my saviors when I needed to provide the reader with authoritatively correct information. Claudio is a collector and author of Italy's military history at the prestigious Cento Di Documentazione Internazionale Storia Militare in Tuscany. His informative tracts and photos kept arriving to complete the details needed to shed factual light on much of the data within these pages. They, along with the magnificent Partisan heroes who fought so gallantly in Italy, France and Yugoslavia, provided their gracious knowledge without expectation.

I will never forget Partisans Ennio Sardelli and Riccardo Barchielli, heroes who I had the pleasure of visiting at their headquarters in Florence. Their important contribution of archives were more than generous, and their encouragement led to the first of the promises I made to help in re-activating the waning image of their former glory days.

The warm friendship I shared with my Partisan buddy, Alberto Secchi, continues to flourish in my consciousness and haunts every page I've written.

I'm enormously indebted to David Honeck, a dear friend and retired English professor who mentored at Bentley College in Waltham, Massachusetts. He enjoyed reconstructing and correcting my crude phrasings, misplaced commas and other slips of the pen.

Famed author and screenwriter Harold Livingston enlightened me where to drop the adjectives and pal Jerry Epstein hovered apprehensively over my shoulder as I worked, offering inspirational nudges whenever I needed support.

Former comrade-in-arms and 91st Infantry Division historian Roy Livengood was most gracious with his exceptional memory and offered long-forgotten details of the grim war we shared.

And when my brains became too fuzzy to remember the elusive word or phrase I lacked, I knew that my astute confidante and inamorata, Bunny (Bernice Skolnick) would to speed me over those vexing writer's blocks.

Last, but certainly not least, I will never find words enough to express my feeling for Italy's remarkably sweet people. I was extremely fortunate to have experienced their surprising warmth and ingratiating qualities during our infantry's rocky road. Rare pleasures I had never expected in what could have been hell.

I thank all of you much more than this brief outline of appreciation could ever reveal!

## CHAPTER ONE

# In the Beginning

*The Time: July 1944.*

*The Location: Italy's hilly terrain near the village of Chianni, sixty miles north of Rome. The rustic Tuscan expanse was a blend of surprisingly steep and thickly forested highlands separated by lush, orchard-filled valleys. All in all, a commodious defensive shelter for the concealed enemy.*

*The Situation: The American 34th Division had been there ahead of us and had completed their part of the mission. In need of rest, they were pulled off the line, leaving the battle-zone for our as-yet-untried 91st Infantry Division to finish the Chianni attack.*

**A**ll hell broke loose on July 4, 1944 when the green troops of my battalion went on the offensive. The Germans, to our front, had known we were coming and had set their cunning traps for us with artillery zeroed in, machine gun nests and sinister minefields spread helter-skelter across our entire line of attack.

It soon became clear that the enemy owned the high ground and would be ready to slug it out with us on every peak and lush valley that had become Italy's killing fields. Ignoring the famed panorama that was Tuscany, our personnel vans and their drivers were long gone after ridding themselves of our foot-soldiers. "Get the bastards!" they shouted above the roar of their motors as they left for a less dangerous area, their en-

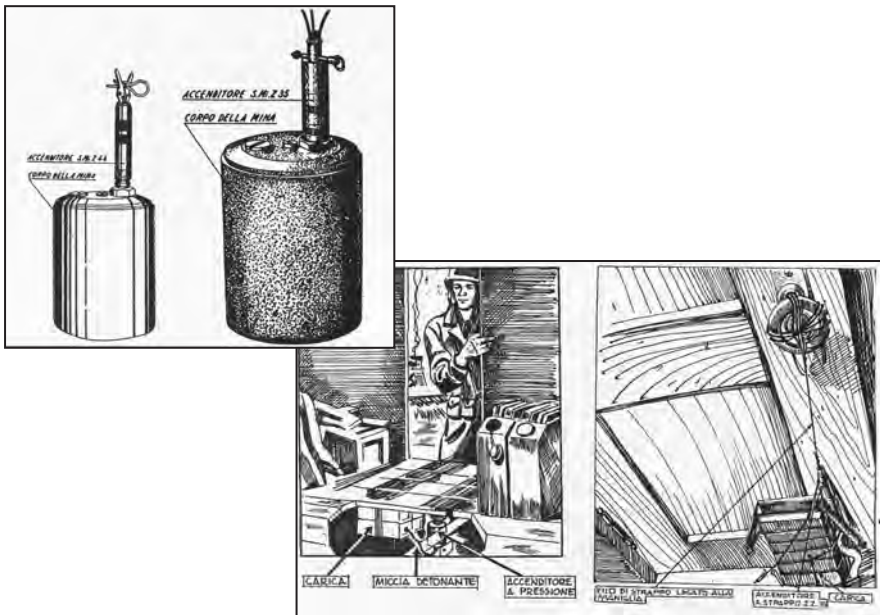


The first group of Partisans from the area of San Gimignano to join the fight against oppression.

couragement of no importance as we began the climb toward the crest.

The field around us was filled with battle debris and jagged-edged shell holes that bore witness to the previous hard-fought struggle, a sight that quickly aged us into fuller maturity as we passed the remains of fly covered, blood-soaked cadavers.

Aware of ever-present mines hidden just below the surface, we carefully followed in each other's footsteps. If the guy in front of you didn't "get it," the odds were a lot better that you'd both make it to the forward firing line positions and take your chances at "the front." In typical military fashion, company commanders had merely mentioned that our main push would be to capture the small village called Chianni, offering little detail about the battalion's first objective, Hill 634, that was also known as Mount Vaso. But that was the Army. Orders were orders and each of



Left: German “S” mines were strategically placed to kill Partisans and Allied soldiers. Right: Two examples of German booby traps set for Partisans.

us had been trained to follow them without questioning.

First to advance were our scouting patrols. Those ballsy soldiers proceeded with masked fear about thirty yards to the front of riflemen, machine gunners and mortar men—infantrymen who were ready for the trouble that almost always occurred. Once the scouts made contact, generally by receiving enemy fire, each platoon of soldiers that followed took up the fight in their predetermined positions. The sly Germans often waited for the scouts to pass before opening fire, aiming for officers and lead elements that had been caught off-guard before letting loose with everything in their arsenal.

The weather was stiflingly hot and clear during that Tuscan July. Definitely an advantage for enemy observers at higher elevations who waited to pick and choose their targets at will. At that critical point, every man of

us had been obliged to earn a master's degree in the art of war the hard way, quickly learning to hate and curse with an all-consuming passion.

It would take thirteen days to capture Chianni, but not without the division suffering over a thousand killed or wounded.

Several weeks had passed before I would come to know of an extraordinary force of heroes the title of this book extols; the Italian Partisans. Their covert cells had recently begun to be known and appreciated by inhabitants of Naples and Rome as they plagued the German and Fascist tyrants with bold acts of sabotage and selective assassinations.

As valiant as our own infantrymen had been, the heroism of the untrained Italian Partisans was becoming apparent and had begun to be equally significant in their desperate battle to rid themselves of the hated Germans. But their battlefields were different. Their unconventional procedure was to suddenly arise from unsuspected locations beyond our lines where their veiled presence wasn't likely to have been anticipated by the enemy.

At that time, I had yet to meet these special warriors on a more personal level.

In their primitive beginnings, teams of Partisan freedom fighters were trickling forth from residential neighborhoods in every part of southern Italy. Anticipating an early linkup with approaching Allied forces, small Partisan splinter groups of raiding parties had been escalating their clandestine activities, all the while taking larger and larger nibbles out of the flanks of Hitler's army of occupation. But their intermittent bites lacked several important elements, among them a need for a greater variety of arms and organization.

At first, most Partisan efforts had been limited to distributing anti-fascist propaganda that meant little more than fleabites to Mussolini and Hitler's legions of occupation. But with the revitalizing Allied invasion of Sicily and new underground resistance groups confronting the Germans in Naples, new life had been infused into the Partisan upstarts. As the Allied invasion progressed, separate small Partisan resistance movements were beginning to form in the southern cities from among religious and political factions.

Those fraternal bands would ultimately coalesce to become one massive secular army of undaunted men and women. A stealthy freedom fighting force that, in the end, saved many American and British lives at a high, sacrificial cost of their own.

To this day, I still feel privileged to have participated in the last few acts of that wartime drama and to have befriended several of those magnificent Partisans who star in this narrative. Having enjoyed the fruits of their hard-won success, I've been amply rewarded to present this salient smattering of overlooked historic actions before their cherished memory passes into oblivion.

One young Partisan in particular had honored me on several occasions when I was given a five-day furlough to Florence. He had invited me to his home to break bread with his family during my battalion's winter stalemate and I took advantage of his offer, often visiting his home again on later leaves.

Alberto and I first met on an Apennine foothill prior to my regiment's attack against the mountainous German Gothic Line, and we quickly formed a mutual respect for each other that would turn into an unusually warm friendship. He, a roving Partisan fighter, and I, the 1st Battalion's Intelligence Sergeant. By then, I had gleaned enough of his language to converse with him, and he, like many other Italian students, had previously taken English courses in school. Along with others in his resistance group, Alberto had been sent to assist our infantry with the knowledge of the mountains we lacked, the steep and often treacherous zone that he and his comrades were more familiar with.

During the nine chaotic months I knew him, and as time allowed, we delighted in yakking about trivialities. We never spoke of it openly but I'm certain we both knew that both our lives rested on each other's abilities in the killing field.

While on a visit to Florence a half century later, I indulged my desire to visit the headquarters of any remaining Partisans, hoping to discover any records they might have had of my old friend. I wasn't sure if his group still existed and had lost touch with Alberto after VE day when we all went our separate ways, a customary disconnect among many war

veterans anxious to return to our lives at home. Hopeful that there would be some kind of record keeping association in Florence, I left that task to my hotel concierge with enough of a tip to question the city's phone company's operator. Listening, I stood by, hanging on every word. Ten minutes later, we found that, yes, such an organization existed, but known then as A.N.P.I., unfamiliar initials that identified the Association of National Partisans of Italy. Fortunately, their office was only half-a-mile away, just beyond the southern bank of the Arno River.

I made haste for the address given, delighted that the once vital organization could still have existed. It was a pleasant twenty-minute walk from my hotel, but my spirits dampened when I found their office was located in a dingy, two-story stucco building. A tarnished brass sign near the entryway indicated what I might find inside. My apprehension proved to be justified when I entered the dismal fifteen-by-twenty office and saw the remnants of their illustrious past.

But that pretentious mindset vanished with the thrill of introducing myself to the two pleasant occupants, Partisans Ennio Sardelli and Riccardo Barchielli, former Partisan brigade commanders who appeared to be manning the office.

I explained the purpose of my visit and their timeworn, wrinkled faces brightened up at the idea that this American visitor might be someone who could throw some sorely needed light on their former unsung glory. The two men jabbered among themselves, talking too fast for my knowledge of the language, something about the old times.

What they did make clear was that there weren't many of their group left, but that they were elated to see an American, someone who seemed to know and remember a lot about their past. With an inherent emotional wave of Riccardo's arms as he spoke, I was advised that their organization still functioned, but barely. They had been a gargantuan force for liberty in the bad old days, but what remained of their current membership had assumed a much less glorious role. Now it was limited to occasional meetings, record maintenance, with feeble attempts to rectify their former image of having once been a communist fraternity. At that exciting moment, I didn't really give a damn what their politics were. Noticing my reticence to discuss



politics, the two made haste to reassure me that “In the beginning, most of us had been members, but soon there were many more that weren’t so politically inclined.” Obviously, their public relations record had suffered grievously in recent years, damaged to an extent that caused them much concern.

I don’t recall that my friend Alberto had ever brought politics into our discussions or had any special axe to grind beyond despising Mussolini’s Fascists and the Germans. I feel certain that, like mine, his single-minded creed had been limited to an ardent hatred for the despots we fought, none beyond anything involved with theological or political dogma.

I studied the drab, office walls in the light of one sixty-watt bulb and one narrow, lofty window. Crimson and green velvet banners were draped around glass covered news clippings and hundreds of framed photos exhibited their revered dead.

The last shook me, rattling my composure as I studied them and battled the mountain-sized lump pervading my throat. Maybe I had turned soft over the years, but those revered soldiers had once been our brothers in arms. They, much more often than I, had probably taken on the worst of the war in the killing fields of Italy, battlegrounds that remain impossible to describe to anyone who hadn’t been there, done that.

Ennio asked me to join them that evening, and on that note, we shook hands and warmly embraced in a typically emotional, Mediterranean goodbye. Of course I’d be there!

Unfortunately, nothing could be found in their official records regarding Alberto.

Rarely noted in the narratives that follow, it must be remembered that simply by being an active Partisan, or even an evident sympathizer, the consequence of one’s actions could place his or her family in harm’s way.

Assumed to be guilty by association, the entire family would often be tortured, destined to suffer the same cruel fate as the culpable Partisan. As a result, innocent kinsmen retained a love-hate relationship with their heroes, and although highly appreciated, their nobleness was diminished with an ever-constant cloud of fearfulness. Although plagued with that double-edged sword that accompanied their heroism, the determined Partisans would find it a cold day in hell if ever they slowed their fight against

the Germans, even if their families had to become casualties in the process.

Considering the formidable situation of the times, only a miniscule amount of fragmented Partisan history follows in the pages allotted since volumes of their stories have remained lost or incomplete. After searching for and uncovering bits and pieces of timeworn anecdotes, there remained more than enough of their fascinating adventures to be explored here. First of the many loose-ended Partisan chronicles commenced after the Allies had invaded Sicily and were headed for the Italian mainland.

“Husky,” the code name for the amphibious Allied invasion of Sicily, had concluded with the capitulation of the king’s royal forces. Chaos and confusion followed as loyalist units of Italy’s former militia were in the process of disbanding and many of those estranged soldiers and sailors headed for the port city of nearby Naples. Wherever they’d travel, they’d be enraged to see how Hitler’s troops had overrun their country.

In groups of two or three, the demobilized Italian military returned to familiar territory and linked up with friends who had become members of the newly organized Partisan underground. Battle-trained soldiers augmented the tyro resistance groups with new and important knowledge in the use of weapons and martial arts, and not surprisingly, those bantam teams of insurgents became restless in their hunger to rebel against their German occupiers. Even as they yearned for more action, their pent-up desire had to pause long enough to be fulfilled shortly afterward in 1943, when Allied Army soldiers neared the approaches to German occupied Naples.

Spent from having battled their way through hard-fought engagements against Hitler’s militia in North Africa, Allied forces were ready to welcome any outside support, even when offered by the rag-tag, inexperienced Partisans. Any and all liberators were sure to be greeted as saviors in the war-torn city of Naples.

Although crippled by the lengthy German occupation, and devastating Allied air raids that had destroyed their invaluable seaport, Neapolitan residents had somehow restrained their mercurial temperament and anxiously waited for a chance to rebel.

For several months, an underground British Intelligence radio in Rome had maintained contact with the approaching Allied troops, and among

other matters, kept them informed regarding the Partisan eagerness to contribute with acts of sabotage and mayhem.

Meanwhile, in an effort geared to maintain the upper-hand as Italy's clear-cut leader, ambitious dictator Mussolini had by then joined forces with the hated despotic German führer, Adolf Hitler. That amalgamation of ruthless tyrants had the effect of splitting the Italian populace into two opposing camps: Fascist, or anti-Fascist—with a minority of freedom-loving Partisan helmsmen covertly guiding the latter. Soon, there would be more—thousands more!

As a stand-alone fighting force, Mussolini's army of "Black Shirts" had become repugnant to the peace-loving Italians. The darkness of their tunics tended to convey their tactics and would become despised by a majority of their countrymen throughout the balance of the war.

With German cooperation and support, the Fascists segued into the image of a secondary army of occupation in Italy and quickly became known as enemies of the working class, jailing or killing any commoner they had a mind to. Their spies were everywhere, creating an aura of fear and distrust among the citizenry, let alone the threat of horrible torture and certain death when without trial, suspected Partisans were taken into custody. A virtual state of secrecy had become a cogent part of every Italian's life. Yet, a sizeable section of the population remained loyal to their Fascist dictator, and too often, would seize on any reason to apprehend the poor soul that uttered the slightest hint of anti-fascist sentiment.

Through the magic of secret radio, Partisan operators in Naples had begun to work in sync with the approaching Allies and were being strengthened with armaments and supplies parachuted to them by low-flying aircraft. Growing in confidence with each airdrop, freedom fighters were finding new vigor even as they witnessed the rape of their fair city.

German occupation forces had been planning to retreat with the arrival of fresh Allied troops, confiscating nearly everything of value in Naples and carting it back to Berlin. Something drastic had to be done, but waiting for the Allies to close in on the city wasn't enough for the Partisans. With patience nearly exhausted, bands of Partisans quickly organized a widespread uprising that was designed to catch the Germans off guard.

On September 26, 1943, an unarmed crowd of the populace streamed onto the streets of the city. To the bewildered Nazis, it appeared as if the entire city was participating. Masses of Neapolitans noisily protested in the streets wherever German garrisons were ensconced.

The following day, September 27, the Nazis retaliated with a heavy-handed roundup up of about 8,000 civilians, while in other areas of the city, hundreds of rioters took to the streets and began a series of armed counterattacks against the German troops. In the Vomero quarter of the city, one group of rebels initiated the onset of widespread revolt when they stopped a German Volkswagen and killed its driver. Fierce fighting followed in another section of the city as a former Italian Army lieutenant, Enzo Stimolo, led a charge of two hundred armed Partisan insurgents who raided a large weapons depot that was closeted in Castel Sant'Elmo, an ancient military fort at the high point near the harbor.

After the Germans called in reinforcements, the bloody battle continued, but Enzo's scrappy fighters weathered the enemy's return fire and ultimately captured the fort.

Later that first day of armed revolt, a wandering crew of Italian sailors prevented German engineers from carrying out their orders to place mines at the Ponte della Sanita. The enemy had hoped to cut off or slow down any Allied attempt to reach that important part of the city.

In the evening, a band of resistance fighters made an assault on another German supply dump and plundered the weapons store they would need for the historic days that followed.

On September 28, skirmishes around the city increased noticeably with the addition of more rioters who took part in selective massacres and street fights that had broken out around the docks and important public areas.

In the Materdei district, one group attacked a German patrol that had sought the safety of a large municipal building. The structure was soon surrounded by a horde of ungovernable rebels who kept it under siege for hours until the Germans sent in reinforcements and killed three of the rioters before they were forced to disperse.

Swelling Partisan squads continued to attack German garrisons and

their patrols during which a group of forty armed freedom fighters set up a road block at Porta Capuana. Well-armed with rifles and machine-guns, they killed six Nazi soldiers and captured four.

The Germans retaliated as they harassed innocent elderly men, women and teen-aged children, adding them to various German round-up sites that, by then, had resulted in an extensive accumulation of guiltless prisoners. The large mix of Neapolitan innocents and captured militants were assembled in a fenced-in, outdoor sports arena, but the German forces that still occupied Naples had been stretched to the limit with a minimal number of armed guards placed in and around the crowded soccer field.

Tempted to release the prisoners, heroic Lieutenant Stimolo reacted once more by surrounding the fence with an impressive assemblage of armed men when a white flagged truce was called. Oddly, he had been invited to meet with the chief of German operations in Naples, Colonel Hans Scholl, to negotiate the release of all Italian prisoners in exchange for an unfettered German retreat from Naples, free of all hostilities. The meeting, brought on by the unexpected strength of the Neapolitan rioters and their Partisan leaders, was readily agreed to and the prisoners were to be set free soon afterward. Until then, sporadic clashes continued to fill the streets on what was intended to be the last day of the riots.

With reports that the Partisan leader had participated in a pact that would allow the Germans to leave their city without unnecessary bloodshed, the desperate battle for Naples slowed to a standstill as the populace waited impatiently, hoping to see the long-awaited white-starred American tanks arrive.

Overnight, the German leader had brought in his own platoon of tanks, and in one of the city's most important piazzas, had attacked an assembly of fifty rebels, killing twelve and wounding seventeen. Obviously, any trust in the colonel's intentions no longer existed. A final show of German strength had been ordered.

During the early morning of September 30, the quiet neighborhood of Ponticelli awakened to thundering explosions generated by German artillery fusillades meant to be a warning for the workers to remain home

and not participate in riotous actions. A warning intended to be observed from other parts of the city as well.

Those that dared leave the area were massacred by rifle or machinegun fire. As one of Scholl's last acts of defiance, his troops began their evacuation, almost as Allied forces entered the gates of the city. Fighting between the attacking army and retreating Nazi troops extended throughout the day as German artillery from the city's Capodimonte Heights continued to shell Naples.

Not far from the Port of Naples, along the coastal zone, other battles raged as the fleeing enemy left a trail of smoking ruins that included the burning of the city's important Historical Archives, which caused a grave loss of treasured documents.

At 9:30 a.m., October 1, the first Allied tanks entered the city, and by day's end, the commander of the German Army in Italy, Field Marshal Albert Kesselring, announced to the world that the German retreat from Naples had been successfully concluded.

As they left, the Germans let it be known that they had concealed long-delay time bombs in unsuspected, highly populated areas of the city. That alarming news had been corroborated by a captured German officer, who upon questioning admitted to having seen explosives wired into Naples' as yet unserviceable electrical system that had been put out of commission by previous Allied air raids. He also implied that they were set to detonate as soon as the power supply was turned on.

Word spread and the population of Naples was shaken once again. The first Allied infantry troops had begun their march into joyful Naples after the German withdrawal, but the enemy's reputation allowed for the fact that Hitler's army had been capable of committing needless butchery in the past. Anything was possible. With the probability of many civilian casualties, American general officers felt obligated to order a speedy evacuation of as many of the city's population as possible near the time the power would be returned. Their departure would include well over a million Neapolitans, including the sick and elderly.

Hospitals on the outskirts of Naples were already filled with infirmed civilians and newly arriving Allied wounded. Those who could manage to do so, walked toward the city's heights, while others were carried or

driven as far away from the potential danger as possible. The tension grew as everyone waited for the power switches to be turned on. When it occurred, nothing out of the ordinary transpired.

Had the threat been a ruse? It wasn't too likely that there had been a miscalculation by German demolition experts since they were known to be masterful in the use of explosives. Yet, several had been set to detonate unexpectedly and did so weeks later when one fiendishly large antipersonnel bomb did explode, rocking the city's Central Post Office and causing seventy-two killed and wounded casualties.

It would take many days afterward for Naples to rest easier, hopefully free of the German villains at last.

Bold, unrecorded Partisan actions had taken place in and around Naples with an augmentation of sabotage the modern world had never known before. The badly battered metropolis had become the Partisan's first important training ground, but more action would follow. Much more!

Almost overnight, a significant number of heroic civilians—leaders to be in nameless battles yet to come—would take up new heroic roles throughout Italy.

News of their victory had spread through the country like wildfire, and would go down in the country's history books as "The Four Days of Naples." With that success, potential Partisan agents from every corner of the country revived their pent up vigor with anticipation. Aware of their newly gained repute, resistance groups converged into larger, more formidable brigades. Partisan leaders from Italy's south streamed northward into enemy occupied hills, dales and mountains as a cleverly concealed army of contention feared by their enemies.

With so much autonomous moxie ready to back them, the Allies and the newly-sprung American Office of Strategic Services (OSS) could now initiate deadlier stratagems their enemy hadn't counted on.

By the time Hitler's troops surrendered two years later, the disorganized Partisan cadres that evolved from Naples had grown into an impressive force of over 200,000 strong. What follows is an array of anecdotal reports, spiced with remembrances of their daring unconventional actions under fire.



A group of proud Partisans posing near Siena and the Casa Del Popolo, which they re-captured from the Germans.



## CHAPTER TWO

# Creation of a Hero

*The Location: Across the foothills leading to Italy's Apennine Mountain Range and villages outside of Rome.*

*The Situation: Casualties had been mounting steadily for the Allied armies since the invasion of Sicily. Partisan involvement had become more noticeable with the added assistance of the newly arrived American OSS. My close friend, Alberto, would be among that group of Italian Partisans who put their lives on the line early in the battle.*

**S**leep was a rare luxury allowed the infantryman while his company was on the offensive. If not on patrol, guard duty or launching a night attack, he'd still find it extremely difficult to scrounge up the time and place to flake out.

Any hour of hibernation a man could seize after nightfall would seem heaven sent, but more often than not, the bone-tired soldier would be limited to a custom sized slit trench he had personally excavated out of the crusty, summer-dry soil.

As our battalion's Intelligence Sergeant, I assumed the right to abandon my forward observation post long after dark. Only then would I get my platoon back to headquarters. Observing at that late hour was an unconventional stint in which I hoped to catch the flash of a rare headlight in the distance that suggested a favorite artillery target—an enemy convoy. The few times this opportunity presented itself seemed well worth waiting for, but I could never know the full extent of damage I had hoped for.

Upon returning to our battalion headquarters a new set of chores began. The first was always the same, selecting a few men of my platoon to stand guard around the perimeter of our outpost. Those of us not on duty would guide food and ammunition mule trains to our scattered forward companies that were sprawled throughout our mountainous zone. With that out of the way, I'd see to it that Colonel Woods' maps and battle orders were ready for officers that would lead the coming attack.

Somewhere between those wee hours of the morning we were able to catch a few winks. It was there that I awoke about four o'clock one morning to find my Partisan friend, Alberto, kneeling in genuflection and crossing himself. As I attempted to envision the perilous mission he was about to undertake, he disappeared into the predawn blackness.

Hopefully, he'd return safely in a few days from wherever he and his group of freedom fighters had gone to harass the German Army. No doubt it was, as always, somewhere behind enemy lines.

Two weeks ago, he and several other Partisans had joined our infantry battalion as we readied an attack against the well-defended German Gothic Line. Already battle experienced and familiar with the area, Alberto's Partisan attachment had come to the aid of our infantry on several occasions in that unknown and easily misjudged territory.

Before joining us, our men had no knowledge that such a group of clandestine Italian combatants existed, but it wasn't long before I'd learn of their significance, and in the process, gain a companion I would never forget.

For whatever his reasons, Alberto lingered close to my side until the end of the war, disappearing at dusk or before dawn when he'd be off to some secretive sabotage mission. Operating on the edge of danger, he and his Partisans had survived with great difficulty as they tested and teased Hitler's extensive army of occupation; but too often, the enemy's reprisals took a weighty toll on those outnumbered freedom fighters. We could only wish these courageous men good luck and pray for success in their secretive assignments.

During the weeks and months we were together, Alberto would often reveal highlights of a sprinkling of Partisan raids that occasionally in-

cluded names and locations of their hair-raising actions, allowing me to collect a smattering of those episodes chosen to be revived for this chronicle.

One of Alberto's earliest revelations occurred late one quiet evening after we had finished most of the *grappa* he had brought back from a previous mission. Somewhat inebriated, he offered me an inkling of his own initiation into the realm of Partisan activity that, oddly enough, began with his first bout of the shakes.

His initial acceptance into a cadre of freedom fighters included men of varying ages when twenty-one-year-old Alberto had dutifully followed instructions to meet them at 2:00 p.m. in a riverside bar near Rome's famous Castello de San Angelo.

Battle seasoned and wary, the five men had meandered into the saloon singly or in couples and sat drinking at the busy bar. Alberto had arrived early, warned by the leader not to attract undue attention. Fifteen minutes later, as Alberto searched for signs of the unfamiliar group, two of the men at the bar arose and moved to a table near the farthest corner, set down their drinks, shuffled and dealt a deck of cards that one of them had in his pocket. Another two who had arrived separately during those few minutes, sat at the main counter where the first two had left, and ordered beers. When their brews arrived, they too moved to the card game being played by the first two, stood behind the players and casually kibitzed.

Soon, the leader, who was the only one familiar to Alberto, also arrived. He, too, left his stool and casually sauntered across the room to where the men at the card game sat, stopping first at where Alberto sat alone, teasingly inviting him to test his luck at the game as well. As the next hand was dealt, four were at that table, with two, including Alberto and the leader, hovering nearby.

The Partisan leader bantered facetiously with the cardholders before whispering quick instructions for them to leave the bar slowly, just as they had come, and meet at his nearby flat in forty minutes. The leader's reason for the contrived meeting at the bar had been a precautionary move to ascertain that Fascist eyes and ears had not been drawn to Alberto and their upcoming mission.

Night found Alberto part of a team whose assignment was to derail a train. Partisan intelligence agents had reported that when it left the station in Rome, it would only be carrying a limited number of important German officers and Fascist chieftains to an urgent meeting in Bologna. The enemy's hurry-up trip had been ordered to discuss delaying actions designed to block Allied troops from advancing through several important mountain passes. Success of the high-priority German "Gothic Line" plan would permit sorely needed German troops and supplies in southern Italy to leave for the more urgently needed transfer to the Russian and Western fronts. The report also stated that the unannounced time of the train's departure would probably be between midnight and 1:30 a.m., which was not unusual since the Germans used every means possible to avoid being strafed by Allied aircraft that controlled the skies over Italy.

Faced with that tempting but urgent opportunity to quash the Nazi tour de force, the Partisan leader arranged for his men to arrive at a strategic location about thirty miles north of Vatican City.

After dark, most of the city's civilians preferred the safety of their homes since the road traffic would be minimal.

Motorcars and vans could often be stopped for inspection by German patrols at any hour of the night, but the shrewd leader knew of a local garage in Rome that harbored an outdated ambulance. In many ways it still resembled its former, more serviceable state. Intending to use it as a van, its present owner had previously painted out the large red-cross insignia it once displayed but never got around to removing the flashing lights or outdated medical paraphernalia within it.

Within an hour and still partially equipped, the old vehicle received a bogus red cross painted on its sides along with a borrowed gurney. It was now ready to carry the six men to their assignment—one to sit alongside the driver and three inside with a pretend patient laid out on the gurney—to their assignment. Hospital uniforms had been supplied to all but the patient. If stopped, an inspector would see the wet-looking bloodstain on the khaki blanket covering him as well as a massive, red stained bandage on the chest area of his partially exposed torso. No siren or disconnected warning lights would be used.

If intercepted at enemy road blocks, they'd appear to be medics and male nurses, and if necessary, make known that there was no need to use the siren and lights since the patient's neck and face would be made pale enough for him to appear at death's door. Alberto was chosen for that role, revealing later that he was sure the others had prayed as arduously he had done that the ruse would work. Every precarious gamble during those times had been a life or death risk to the desperate Partisans and sabotaging such an important target seemed well worth the very chancy effort.

Shivering in the back of the faux ambulance, Alberto couldn't help but feel panicky under his oversized hospital tunic. Even the warm night air wasn't enough to satisfy his nerves that were stressed to the limit.

Eleven p.m. Twenty-eight miles north of the Vatican, the group arrived at an advantageous site and covered the van completely with a camouflaged tarp. Well off the road in a clump of trees, yet near enough to make a quick getaway, it waited hidden until needed. After daubing their hands and faces with charcoal they took up positions along the track they intended to reposition.

Armed with heavy crowbars, four of the stronger young men took turns plying away at the rail near a point where it had been joined to a separating crossbar. The fifth man assisted the group leader who was more experienced in handling explosives, and completed the task by placing a large timed explosive charge alongside the track, seventy yards to the north of where the first four men worked to derail the train. Seconds after the train left the rails that blast would add deadly damage to the personnel cars behind the engine, crippling as many of their passengers as possible. After placing the explosive, the two men would act as look-outs for any roving witnesses that might interfere with the project in progress.

By a little after 1:00 a.m. their tension increased to a crescendo when they saw their leader lift his ear from the pulsating track to signal that their target was approaching. At its rate of travel it should arrive within eighty seconds.

After estimating the train's arrival time and double-checking a final

touch to the bomb that would be primed to go off in pre-timed seconds, the six Partisans packed their gear and rushed to the hidden ambulance that would carry them to the nearby road and comparative safety.

Less than a minute had passed when the train's iron wheels hit the broken rail. Attempting to stabilize itself, the engine vainly teetered for a few seconds before leaving the tracks, soon to be followed by the smoky chaos that surrounded the personnel carriages when the delayed charge exploded. By the time of that terminating blast, Alberto and his Partisans were well on their way back to safety.

The sky above the tree line lit up for a moment like a quickly fading fireworks display, followed by the blast that was barely heard over the noise of the van's old motor from a mile away.

The Partisans had no time to observe the pandemonium that had gifted them the minutes needed to spread a comfortable distance between themselves and the smoldering coach cars. Alberto could only surmise the confusion that reigned towards the rear of the train as hostile squads of enemy soldiers rushed off to search the area. No one could have seen or reported seeing the fleeing ambulance as it took to unfrequented side roads towards the safety of an alerted Partisan hideaway five miles to the north.

The six men were effusively congratulated by the paint crew that had been waiting for them in nearby Narni, ready to spray out the van's temporary red crosses in the semi-darkness of their obscure garage.

Alberto's first mission could have been a completely satisfying success except for one exception; the elated Partisans couldn't have waited around long enough to enjoy seeing the damage they had caused their enemy. When he finished telling me of his adventure, he admitted to having been amazed by his leader's ability to pull off the sabotage so perfectly, and that he had been profoundly impressed with the importance of precise timing and organization. A valuable, life-preserving lesson that would put him in good stead later.

Compared to Alberto's frightful war, mine was almost always straightforward. If captured, American G.I.'s would usually be questioned before being taken to a prison camp till war's end. But no gray area existed for