

Book Excerpt

SHOT DOWN OVER ITALY

*A true story of courage and survival
in Nazi-occupied Italy during World War II*

**by John W. Lanza
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Opening Remarks

On May 26, 1944, an American B-25 Mitchell bomber with a seven-man crew was shot down over Nazi-occupied Italy. Little was known about the experiences of each crew member after the plane was shot down because evaders have to certify in writing that they will remain silent, prisoners of war choose to remain silent about their wartime experiences, and the war dead can't tell tales. This all changed in 2006 when the nephew of one of the crew members became curious upon learning that his uncle and another crew member survived the war thanks to the courage of his pilot and of two Italian partisans and their families.

During the ensuing four years, the author, John Lanza, bonded with his uncle, Bill Lanza; visited the two Italian families; and connected with the only other surviving crew member as well as the families and friends of the deceased crew members. Along the way, he pieced together a captivating true story with many fascinating aspects, including a pilot who put his crew's safety above his own, airmen who trusted partisans with their lives, partisans who risked their lives to honor this trust, airmen who as prisoners of war survived inhumane conditions, and families who struggled to deal with the cruel realities of war.

This Book Excerpt is a small piece of the story told in *Shot Down Over Italy*, which was published in July 2010. The book is about 300 pages with another 45 pages of reference notes because, in addition to being a fascinating story, it is a history of those life-defining times. The Excerpt has been taken from two of the book's eleven chapters. Some sections of the two excerpted chapters that required extensive referencing have been removed to facilitate the process of translating the text into Italian.

The Excerpt begins just after the plane was hit by flak from a Nazi cannon, and two crew members, Bill Lanza and Alfred Todd, have bailed out and are descending in their parachutes in the vicinity of a farm in Vaggio, Italy, about fifteen miles southeast of Florence, Italy.

Excerpt from Chapter 6: PARTISAN HELP

Watching the action in the air from a farm in Vaggio, a small village in Tuscany, were, among others, Riccardo Becattini, a farm worker, and Amerigo Sarri, a teenage boy. Riccardo was also a partisan, and Amerigo's father, Goffredo, was a partisan leader. They saw the plane get hit and the three chutes open in their vicinity while the aircraft continued on a southeasterly course toward the mountains. Partisans helped Allied airmen who were shot down, and would soon spring into action to try to reach the airmen before the Fascists or the Germans.

High above, Bill Lanza was quietly descending into enemy-occupied territory. "When I jumped, the Germans were still shooting, but when my chute opened, the flak stopped. They had me like a clay pigeon, but I guess they wanted to capture me instead. I was thinking that it was decent of them not to blow me away. As I was descending, I could see Todd drifting away from me." Bill must have been facing north as he descended because the aircraft was headed in a southeasterly direction and he remembers seeing the aircraft and Todd to his right.

"At one point, my chute started to oscillate. I was swinging back and forth, and that's not all. About that time I noticed a fire far below on my left, and I was thinking I might be going from the frying pan into the fire. I was up pretty high, so I tried to steady the chute by pulling on the shroud lines, but this didn't seem to help so I stopped pulling. Fortunately I drifted away from the fire. It was very quiet and I felt very vulnerable. I was wondering how I was going to get out of this mess. As I got closer to the ground, I could see cliffs and was worried I might hit them, but fortunately I drifted over them. I could also hear vehicles, and then the ground seemed to come up mighty fast.

"Since I had never jumped before, I didn't know how to land. I remembered someone saying you should relax so I tried to relax but, boy, did I get a belt when I hit the ground! I landed on an incline on a farm and fell back on my buttocks and hit my head. I was surprised I didn't get knocked out. Later, I found out that Kinney got knocked unconscious when he landed. (John Kinney was another member of the crew who evaded the enemy) Before I landed, I saw another chute in the distance and learned many years later it was Denny's." (John Denny was a member of the crew who was captured and spent the rest of the war in a German prisoner of war camp.)

Bill landed about a mile north of the village of Vaggio near another small village called Montanino. "When I landed, a farmer and two kids came running toward me. The kids were yelling 'Americano,Americano!' and grabbing me. We could hear the distinctive sound of the German vehicles getting closer. Fortunately, I spoke Italian and understood the farmer when he pointed to a wooded hill and told me to run and hide."

Bill didn't waste any time. "As I was hurrying out of my chute, I noticed that the lenses were missing from my goggles. They must have popped out. I couldn't believe it. Then, I took off. I ran as fast as I could up the hill. It was more like a mountain. I ran and ran, all the way to the crest,

which ended on a steep cliff. I was totally exhausted, but put my years of infantry training to good use. I found low ground and covered my body with leaves. I was about fifteen feet from the crest of the hill. The woods were thick and there were a lot of leaves on the ground.”

Danger soon approached: “Two German soldiers went right by me to the top of the hill. I could hear them and was surprised that they sounded so young. I could also see them. They were yelling something and shooting in the air. I was twenty-seven at the time, so maybe that’s why they seemed so young to me. Eventually, they left. That was a close shave. I ended up sleeping in the leaves that night. I was so tired. I slept very well.”

Bill awoke to his first day in Nazi-occupied central Italy. He was still wearing his parachute harness and his yellow life jacket. “I noticed that a piece of leather was torn off the sole of my shoe, and figured it was the result of slamming against the bottom of the plane when I bailed out. As I was sitting there contemplating my next move, a young kid caught my eye. He was about twelve or thirteen years old and walked with a limp. He had an iron leg-brace like my brother’s and was wearing a black shirt. It looked like he was just taking a walk through the woods. He saw me and stopped in his tracks. As he was staring at me, saying nothing, I walked over to him and explained to him in Italian that I had been shot down. I also asked him not to tell anyone that he saw me. He listened and nodded, not saying a word, then continued on his way. Because he was wearing a black shirt, I didn’t trust him, so I changed my position. I knew that Fascists wore black shirts.”

Bill’s concern was well founded because young men being indoctrinated in Fascist ideology did indeed wear black shirts. The requirement to wear black shirts in these Italian youth organizations stemmed from the Blackshirts, Mussolini’s henchmen. Mussolini believed in force to achieve his means and from the start of Fascism in 1922, he had squads to carry out this doctrine that were known as Blackshirts, or the Black Militia. Many people, Bill among them, considered those who wore black shirts to be supporters of Fascism.

“Later that morning, about ten o’clock, I walked down to the farm. I saw the farmer’s sons working the field and asked them to get their father. The farmer came back with a bottle of wine and some cheese, and told me to go back in the woods and hide again. He told me he was going to contact somebody to help me.”

Partisans to the Rescue

If Bill had been shot down over Italy early in the war, the farmer probably wouldn’t have known where to go for help. The Italian Resistance was then in its formative stages. It took a while for the underground network to develop so that farmers and residents of small villages knew whom to contact for help. By 1944, the underground resistance was pretty well established, and the farmer knew who could help Bill.

“In the afternoon, about four o’clock, I was hiding in the woods and feeling pretty good

because the wine was strong and the cheese was delicious. The farmer knew my approximate location, and directed the partisan to me. He was carrying a bag of civilian clothes. I changed from my military clothes to my new white shirt and an oxford gray suit. I gave him my clothes, but kept my shoes.”

Bill was now engaged in a high-risk venture. While in uniform, if captured, he would become a prisoner of war. As such, he would be subject to humane treatment under the Geneva Convention, even though under wartime conditions existing in Italy at that time this wasn't always the case. Out of uniform, however, even though he wasn't a spy, he might be viewed a spy, and thus be subject to far different treatment, maybe even death.

Bill recalls that the partisan put his clothes in the bag, noting: “The partisan's last name was Sarri. That's all I ever called him.” Goffredo Sarri had lived and worked in Figline Valdarno. He owned a shoe factory in that town with fifteen employees until it was destroyed by Allied bombs. In December 1943, the threat of his home being bombed prompted him to move his family to a farm in Vaggio that was owned by a friend who also owned the agricultural company that sold the farm's produce. The farm was operated by a sharecropper who lived on and operated the farm, but shared the produce with the landowner.

Riccardo Becattini's father, Gosto (Costantino) was the sharecropper, and Riccardo and his brother Gigi (Luigi) worked the farm, along with many others. Riccardo, the son of a sharecropper, would risk his life for the two Americans more than once. Interestingly, the most decorated hero of World War II, Audie Murphy, was also the son of a sharecropper.

“After sundown, Sarri instructed me to follow him to his house. So, in my new civilian clothes, I followed him down a dirt road. He was walking about seventy yards ahead of me. While we were walking, two German trucks loaded with soldiers hurried past us. The road led into a village.” This was the village of Vaggio.

Over sixty years later, Sarri's son Amerigo would remember that before the Americans parachuted into the area, there were no Germans garrisoned in the village. They had occupied his hometown, Figline Valdarno, a couple of miles down the road west of Vaggio. Now, they were in the village that Bill was walking through, and they were looking for the Americans. Two months later, Bill and Todd would find themselves walking down another road, following Riccardo this time. The trip would also be tense as German soldiers would be lining the road, battle-ready and watching a couple of American airmen disguised as Italian refugees walk past them.

Bill continues: “So, here I was, about 200 miles behind enemy lines, walking through a village occupied by Germans, some fraternizing outside a pub. Sarri was taking me to a farm at the southern edge of the village. At that time, the Germans weren't harassing the Italians, as they were later when more of them were being driven north through the area by the Allies. It is mind-boggling to me that I was able to walk past German soldiers who were looking for me. You can imagine how nervous I was. I put my trust in Sarri and he never let me down. Basically, we always trusted each other. He was a real gentleman and a savior for Todd and me.”

The partisans had also helped Todd to evade the enemy. Riccardo followed his chute down to a point just east of the farm, and rushed to get to him before the Fascists or the Germans. Todd landed in a tree in an orchard near the woods. He had to abandon his chute and wrenched his ankle when he dropped from the tree. He heard Jerry fire and limped into the woods. Jerry is a slang term for Germans used by the Allies. Riccardo and other partisans caught up to him, and convinced him that they were friends.

According to Riccardo, he brought Todd to hide in a forest south of the farm and told him to stay hidden until he returned. Later, Riccardo returned with civilian clothing, then brought him to his house, where his family gave him food and bandaged his ankle. He got rid of Todd's military clothes because it was too dangerous to keep them. He also said that a farmer named Begnamino kept Todd's parachute. Later, Riccardo tried to retrieve it, but the farmer only gave him enough fabric to make a shirt that he has since lost.

Bill and Todd were very fortunate to have friends behind enemy lines. Bill notes, "I remember Colonel Smith telling us to be careful never to drop our bombs on farms because the farmers are our friends. He was so right!" They also knew that the Fascists were their enemies. Bill thought that Fascists were for the most part "educated Italians who lived in the cities." He wasn't far from wrong because the civil servants who ran the cities were typically Fascists.

Excerpt from Chapter 7: EVADING THE ENEMY

When Bill Lanza arrived at Sarri's house on the farm during the evening of May 27, 1944, he was greeted warmly by the two families who shared the house, a gathering of about fifteen men, women and children. "Some of the men were sitting around the table, curiously staring at me. Considering that I was seen being shot out of the sky the day before, I guess this was to be expected. Sarri told me they picked up Todd and that he had some cigarettes with him. I was happy to hear that he was safe. I was also happy to hear he had cigarettes because I was a smoker. I had a good night's sleep.

"The next day, I was united with Alfred Todd at Sarri's house. He was limping and his ankle was bandaged. I still couldn't believe that he bailed out with six packs of cigarettes. It was like discovering gold for me. I think he was happy to see me too because I spoke Italian. Sarri's dialect was different and unfamiliar to me, but we understood each other."

The Farm

Sarri's house was on a farm, but his family and the other family who shared the house were not farmers. They were displaced families driven from their homes by the Allied bombing. The Sarri family moved only a couple of miles from their condominium in nearby Figline Valdarno, while the other family moved over four hundred miles from their home in Sicily. The other three families on the farm lived in another housing complex. They were sharecroppers, or tenant

farmers, who worked the farm and shared their crops with the landowner. This arrangement had been a way of life in Tuscany since the thirteenth century.

The farm that Bill and Todd were on was owned by a *padrone* who owned only that one farm as well as an agricultural company whose produce came from that farm. Riccardo's father, Gosto, was the sharecropper who ran the farm and assigned the tasks to the farm workers.

The farm was located in the village of Vaggio, a *frazione*, or fraction (subdivision), of the *comune*, or municipality, of Reggello. Vaggio is about two and a half miles east of Figline Valdarno, a town on the Arno River about fifteen miles southeast of Florence. Figline is in the Arno River Valley. The town just north of Figline on the Arno River is Incisa in Val d'Arno, the site of the bridge Major Hunter's plane was trying to bomb when his plane was shot down. (William Clark Hunter was the pilot who saved his crew before he was killed in the plane crash.)

The farm is located just beyond the southeast end of Vaggio. It overlooks the village and is nestled between the village and thickly wooded hills on its southern perimeter. To reach Figline from the farm, one has to walk north through the village, cross a bridge over the Resco River to the main road, take a left and follow the road which parallels the river for a couple of miles into Matassino, a fraction of both Reggello and Figline Valdarno. In Matassino, the road bends left over another bridge across the Resco River, then bends right toward a third bridge over the Arno River into Figline.

In a couple of months, Riccardo would lead Bill and Todd down this road. The trip would seem like an eternity for the two Americans because German soldiers would be dug in under trees that lined the road, staring at them disguised as Italian refugees.

From Vaggio, the road taken in the other direction forks into two roads—one leading northeast to Reggello three miles away, and the other leading east to Pian di Scò two miles away. While Vaggio is a fraction of Reggello, it is also closely affiliated with Figline Valdarno and Pian di Scò. Montanino, a mile north of Vaggio, where Bill landed, is also a fraction of Reggello. Sixty-three years later, when the author visited Vaggio, he was greeted by the mayors of Figline Valdarno, Pian di Scò and Reggello.

From the farm, if you look east you see picturesque rolling hills interspersed with towns and villages against the background of the Pratomagno Mountains. If you look west, you see out over the Arno River Valley to the Chianti Hills which rise out of the valley. If you look north, you see the rooftops of the village, wooded hills and mountains beyond. If you look south, you see wooded hills beyond which, in about a month and a half, Bill and Todd would see the battlefield approaching Vaggio.

The housing complexes on the farm, like most of those in Tuscany, are rustic and built to last. While farmhouses in America are built primarily of wood, farmhouses in Italy are built primarily of stone or masonry. They have sturdy, thick walls, some from twelve to thirty inches thick, and were in effect natural fortresses that afforded protection against small arms fire and shell fragments from mortar or artillery. Consequently, many were used as command posts during the

war by both the German and the Allied armies. One imagines that they looked the same then as they do today.

When Bill and Todd arrived in Vaggio, Riccardo recalls that five families totaling thirty-seven people lived on the farm. The families lived in close quarters in two housing complexes. By the time the front reached the area, Riccardo said that about seventy people were on the farm. Most of them, like Bill and Todd, were being helped by the Becattini and Sarri families.

Both housing complexes on the farm were south of the village. The Sarri family lived in the one closest to the farming fields and the woods beyond. It was a large two-story structure occupied by both the Sarri family and a Sicilian family, whose last name Riccardo cannot recall.

One section of the house was occupied by the Sarri family, consisting of Goffredo, his wife Grazietta, and their six children: Anna (18), Amerigo (16), Bruno (14), Aldo (9), Grazia (5), and Alfredo (less than a year). Their seventh child, Paolo, came after the war. Despite having a large family to worry about, Goffredo was a partisan leader fighting for the liberation of his hometown from Fascist rule and Nazi occupation.

According to Bill, “Sarri was a gentleman who always remained calm and did the right thing. We were lucky to have him looking out for us. His wife, Grazietta, was a gracious lady, always with a smile on her face, and her daughter Anna was a mainstay in bringing us food. Rigo [Amerigo] visited us a lot, sometimes with his brother Bruno, and of his visits I have such fond memories.”

The other section of the house was occupied by a Sicilian family who sought shelter in Tuscany after the Allied invasion of Sicily drove them from their home. The family consisted of a father, a mother and five children. Riccardo can only recall the names of four of their five children. The three daughters were “La Lilla”, Maria, and Angiolina; and one son was Tonino. He cannot recall the name of the other son. Bill remembers that the father was always worried about his family, especially when the battlefield was approaching. Of his daughter Maria, Bill notes: “She was friends with Anna and both of them brought food to the cave regularly. In good weather and bad, they were always there on time, and we were always glad to see them.”

The other housing complex consisted of four connected buildings—three houses around a courtyard and a chapel connected to the easternmost house. The complex looked like a small fortress and was occupied by three farming families—the Papi, Becattini and Garuglieri families. It was located between the Sarri house and the village.

The Papi family consisted of Antonio, his wife Ida called “Cencina,” and five children. They had three sons, Gianni, Ezio and Angiolino, and two daughters, Gina called “Marisa,” and Angiolina. Ezio was not present when Bill and Todd were in Vaggio. He was in a work camp in Germany, but fortunately returned home alive after the war. Said Bill: “I was pleased to hear that after the war Riccardo married Marisa. I knew that they were fond of each other.”

The Becattini family consisted of Constantino called “Gosto,” his wife Natalina and their six children, one of whom had a family of his own. There were three girls, Giuseppe called “Beppa,” Nunzia, and Clementina, and three boys, Riccardo, Roberto and Luigi called “Gigi”. Gigi was

married to Crelia and they had three children, Margherita (5), Davide (1) and Lido (6 months).

Gosto was the sharecropper responsible for operating the farm. He assigned the tasks to the farm workers. Says Bill, "I never met Gosto, but the farm workers I met were all hard workers and nice people, so I respected the man. Riccardo in particular really knew his way around the farm. You should have seen him handle the oxen. He also knew his way around the woods. I wouldn't want to do battle with him in the woods. Gigi was very strong and an efficient worker who also knew what he was doing, and Beppa worked the fields like a man. However, she was very much a woman with a strong, attractive figure. The family knew its business and was so good to us."

The Garuglieri family consisted of the father, Gino, the mother, Isola, and two sons, Angiolino and Mario. Attached to the Garuglieri house was a chiesetta, a small chapel sometimes found on farms in the rural areas of Italy. Amerigo pointed out that it was deconsecrated and therefore no longer had a religious function. At one time, it may have functioned as a church. Some landowners with many farms had not only a church but a school as well.

The farm had at least ten acres of mostly vineyards, but also grew wheat, corn, potatoes, tomatoes and other fruits and vegetables. Oxen were used to pull the plows, and chickens were raised on the farm. Wheat was an important product for producing bread, pasta and other foods; and corn was important for feeding the animals. Since the wheat and corn were harvested in July when the front was moving into the area, the 1944 harvest would be a challenge. Wine was also an important product, but the grapes were picked and the wine made in the fall.

The Cave

Soon after the arrival of the two Americans, plans were made for their new home. "When Todd and I were brought together, Sarri arranged for Gigi, Riccardo's brother, to dig a cave for us on a steep hill next to the farm. It took about a week to dig the cave in hard clay. He did a great job. Much later, when a bomb landed near our cave, it withstood the concussion."

"While the cave was being dug, we kept out of sight and slept outside. I was used to sleeping outside on the ground because I did enough of it in the Infantry, but Todd hadn't been in the Infantry. He also had a terrible case of dysentery. Sometimes, when the coast was clear, we ate outside on the farm with the Sarri family."

When the cave was ready, Bill and Todd moved into their new home. Bill estimates that the cave was about fifteen feet long by ten feet wide and six feet high. It was about ten to eleven feet from the crest of the hill, and there was a ledge in front of the entrance. Caves were nothing new in Italy. Many people were hiding in caves in the hills and forests of Italy during the war.

The two Americans, who landed in enemy territory without escape kits and in no position to strike out on their own, were fortunate on a number of fronts. First, Bill grew up in a family of Italian immigrants, and spoke the language. Second, Todd grew up on a farm. Third, they had Sarri to look out for them. Bill got along with, respected, and trusted Sarri, and Sarri never let him

down.

With the help of the Becattini and Sarri families, Bill and Todd adjusted to being cave dwellers in enemy territory. “We slept on straw mattresses in our cave, but we sometimes washed ourselves and our clothes at a rain basin on the farm. They fed us, usually with soup, bread and wine, and also washed our clothes from time to time.”

While they were settling into their new home, the Allies were on the move. The ultimate objective of Operation Strangle, which began on March 19, the day of Bill’s first mission, was to wage a sustained and systematic interdiction campaign to cut off troop reinforcements, ammunition, motor fuel, and other supplies by attacking rail, road and sea supply routes to the German front lines. The purpose of air interdiction is to disrupt or destroy an enemy’s military potential before it is put to use. The ultimate objective of Strangle was to make it impossible for the enemy to maintain armies south of Rome, by cutting off its supply lines.

The success of Operation Strangle from March 19 to May 11 led to a more intensive air interdiction campaign in Operation Diadem that began on May 12, coinciding with the spring ground offensive at the Gustav Line and Anzio beachhead. Similar to Strangle, Diadem was to be carried out by medium bombers such as the B-25s and fighter bombers such as the P-47s, both of which could take a lot of punishment and keep flying.

When Bill and Todd were in Vaggio, the P-47 Thunderbolts of the 57th Fighter Group were operating in the area for the purpose of destroying railroad bridges, marshalling yards, and trains. In addition, they were flying armed reconnaissance, which amounted to attacking anything the pilots felt were targets of opportunity. The Thunderbolt was a powerful aircraft with exceptional diving capabilities that could fly low through twisting valleys and inflict a lot of damage.

The 57th Fighter Group flew several missions a day and the strafing of trains was an everyday occurrence, as documented in their history. Two months later, the two Americans would be very thankful for these armed reconnaissance flights when a couple of sweeps by a P-47 may have saved their lives.

Just before Bill’s 321st Bomb Group moved to Solenzara, Corsica, to be nearer their targets, the 57th Fighter Group had moved to Corsica for the same reason. The 57th flew out of Alto Landing Field, about forty miles north of Solenzara on the east coast of the French island.

On the morning of June 1, 1944, twelve P-47s from 57th Fighter Group flew on a mission to bomb a bridge on the Arno River. When they sighted the target bridge at 10:15 a.m., they dove to 2,000 feet to drop their bombs, cutting the tracks in three places, twice on the north approach and once on the south approach. After effectively knocking out the bridge with their bombs, the group broke up into three flights and each flight went searching for targets of opportunity to strafe with their rockets and machine guns.

One flight strafed a train with five flat cars and five box cars, and the result was one smoker. Another strafed another train with ten cars, including six gondola cars (open cars with low sides)

loaded with large wooden crates, without result. The third flight had a far different experience. As Bill and Todd watched, their attack yielded significant results. In fact, it would be one of the two most-effective attacks by that squadron for the entire month of June.

Bill recalls: “From the hill, we had a pretty good view over the valley [Arno River Valley], but were always careful not to be seen. We knew that the Germans had good glass [binoculars]. Soon after we moved in, we witnessed P-47 dive bombers attacking a train. We couldn’t see the train, but we could hear its whistle in the valley and we could see the P-47s on the attack. We could see them strafing the train, then pulling up to avoid the explosion of a direct hit. The first two missed, but the third one was on target. Oh my God! What an explosion! It was so powerful that we could actually feel the concussion!”

After the P-47s quickly left the scene, Bill and Todd watched, heard and felt the explosions for most of the day. According to Bill, “The train kept blowing up for hours! What fireworks!” Bill always thought that the train had ammunition as well because of the way it exploded throughout the day. Many years later, Amerigo said he also thought the train was loaded with ammunition.

Bill remembers another instance he thought was related to the train attack: “The next day, one of the natives brought me some tobacco. I wrapped it in some of the propaganda paper being constantly dropped from the sky. I tried to smoke it, but it was too strong. It was like smoking a stogie, only stronger. I liked to smoke, but not tobacco like that.” For most of his life, Bill thought the tobacco was blown from that train. Many years later, he learned that it was simply stolen from the Germans.

According to Bill, “The German troops and their vehicles kept off the roads during the day because if a P-47 saw them they didn’t stand a chance. One time, a P-47 strafed near us. We could hear it but couldn’t see it from our position on the hill. Later, we learned that it clobbered a German vehicle. The troops moved at night to avoid being attacked during the day.”

Life in Enemy Territory

While their bomb group was receiving kudos for a job well done in late May and early June, Bill and Todd were being hunted by Germans behind enemy lines. When the two Americans landed in the countryside near Vaggio, the Germans were drawn to Vaggio. Amerigo recalls: “Before William and Alfred arrived in Vaggio, there were no German patrols in the village. After they parachuted into the area, the patrols were looking for them. Whenever we would have a little respite from the German presence, William and Alfred would eat with the family.”

Bill recalls: “I spoke Italian and got along well with Sarri, Riccardo and Gigi, so Todd just listened to me. Todd was a quiet man, a decent man who was easy to get along with. I always thought he would be a good family man. He was very methodical and always organized. For example, he said he had been saving and had money in the bank. I never had any money in the bank. He was a planner, I wasn’t. I never got over the fact that he had the presence of mind to

bring cigarettes with him when he bailed out. He was always thinking ahead. All I could think of when I bailed out was survival. I imagine he appreciated my being able to communicate so well with the Italians because he never pulled rank on me. One thing we both had in common was that we both had fathers who were very strict. We weren't allowed to step out of line.

“When we first landed in the outskirts of Vaggio, the front lines were about 200 miles away and not too many Germans were in the area. When the coast was clear, we were able to help on the farm but not much because the Germans were looking for us. During the wheat harvest, we helped in threshing the wheat. We also helped in fumigating the grape vines.”

The threshing process followed the harvesting process. After the wheat was harvested by cutting the golden fields of wheat stalks with scythes and tying them into bundles to dry, the dry stalks were brought to the cement threshing floor where the two Americans helped to separate the grain seeds from the hay by beating the stalks. The grain seeds were subsequently ground to produce the flour used for making bread, pasta and other foods. The hay, or straw, was also used for animal feed, bedding, compost and other things.

The fumigation process consisted of spraying sulfur on the grapes. The fumes from the sulfur disinfected the vines and protected them from pests. Bill was familiar with fumigation because as a kid he delivered sulfur candles made by his family to stores in the North End of Boston that sold them to Italian immigrants to fumigate their wine barrels, essentially cleaning the barrels to protect them from fungi or bacteria.

Said Bill: “We wanted to help more, but couldn't because of our situation. Still, we were glad to chip in. Later, when the area became infested with Germans, we had to remain out of sight in the woods.”

Amerigo was a frequent visitor to the cave. “We liked Rigo and I think he liked us. He used to come up to the cave to keep us company, often sleeping over. We used to play games. One game was someone slapped your hand in the dark and you had to guess who slapped it. Sounds silly, but we tried to make the best of our circumstances, and had a good time playing games.”

Many years later, Amerigo characterized the two Americans as follows: “Alfred was blond, tall and rather shy, the classic American. William seemed more Italian than American, was very smart and spoke Italian with a Sicilian dialect.”

Bill adds: “Sometimes, Rigo's younger brother, Bruno, would come to the cave with him, but we were concerned about him after hearing that after being scolded by his father once, he threatened to tell the Germans about us. He was a youngster and we figured he might not know the consequences of doing something like that. Fortunately, he never carried out his threat. That always had us on edge.

“Sarri used to visit us regularly. When he did, he would stand on the hill and look out over the valley, careful not to be seen. Once, he asked us if we knew Clark Gable. The Italians liked the American films, especially the Westerns. He knew that Gable had joined the Army Air Forces, and wondered if we might have run across him. We also knew that he signed up, but we never ran

across him. A lot of movie stars signed up, hoping that others would follow their lead because people looked up to them.”

When Pearl Harbor was attacked, Gable’s wife, actress Carole Lombard, a strong patriot, encouraged him to enlist, and then did her part by going on a tour to sell war bonds. Her tour ended in her home state of Indiana on January 15, 1942. Anxious to return to Gable in California, she wired ahead, “You better get into this man’s army.”

The next day, her plane crashed into a mountain and she was killed. Gable was crushed, but took her advice and enlisted in the Army Air Forces. He trained as an aerial gunner and received his wings in January, 1943. Even though he was then the “King of the Movies” and a hero to many, he told reporters that his fellow airmen were the real heroes, not him.

Bill continued, “Rigo visited us more often than his father, and was good company. He helped to keep us informed. He listened to the radio and told us what was going on in the war. He also brought his books to the cave and I was surprised to see that he learned in school how to take apart and reassemble a machine gun.” Bill had mock rifles in his high school military training that were used mainly for marching drills. While the students of Boston did not handle real guns like the youth of Italy and Germany, the youngsters from rural America grew up with them.

“Riccardo and Gigi were also good company, as were Rigo’s older sister Anna and her friend Maria, who brought us food every day. Except for our concern over the threat from Bruno, we were very fortunate to be treated this well behind enemy lines.

During the month of June, life behind enemy lines wasn’t too bad for Bill and Todd, thanks to the Sarri and Becattini families. However, this situation would change dramatically during the month of July as the battlefront approached Vaggio.

Closing Remarks

When the battlefront reached Vaggio in late July, the farm was in harm’s way and the families on the farm had to worry about their own welfare as well as the welfare of the two Americans hiding in a nearby cave. In sum, the families acted courageously to help the Americans make it back to Allied territory.

While the two Americans always appreciated the humanity and courage of the Becattini and Sarri families, they had to certify in writing that they would keep their evasion experiences secret. Because they were sworn to secrecy, they never told their families or anyone else about their evasion experiences. Consequently, this story went untold for over sixty years.

In 2006, when the author became interested in the story, Alfred Todd had passed away without divulging to his family what happened to him when he was shot down. It wasn’t until the author convinced his uncle that the documents he signed were declassified that he could pay

tribute to two families that helped him and Todd evade capture during the summer of 1944. This Book Excerpt tells only a part of the story. The author hopes that someday his book can be translated into Italian so that interested Italians can read the whole story.

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