

HIS BRIDGE TOO FAR

THE STORY OF ANTONIO BARBARO A CANADIAN HERO OF ITALIAN ORIGIN

(Canada, July 19, 1923 – Holland, February 15, 1945)

by Raffaella Cortese de Bosis



Caterina gazes longingly at her town, S. Angelo Limosano, nestled on a snowy hilltop. An intimate, last goodbye. It is a cold January morning and the meandering road to the valley is dusted with snow. S. Angelo is now in the distance. This 21-year-old girl is on her way to Naples where she will board a ship directed to America. She is to be married to Pasquale Barbaro. It is an arranged marriage. The seaport is crowded with people in line to board the ship and those who desperately scream the name of a loved one about to leave.

Moored on the pier, waiting for her passengers is an immense ship: the Lahn. It is part of the “Rivers Class” of the Norddeutscher Lloyd fleet. The ships in the “Rivers Class” bear the names of German rivers, the Lahn, the Elbe and the Fulda.

Rivers... is that an omen?

January 15, 1903. Caterina Vorraso boards the ship. Before descending in the netherworld of the third class, she takes a deep breath and resigns to leaving Italy. All is new and unfamiliar to her. It is a long, hard voyage across the ocean. Two weeks later, on January 31, she arrives in New York and is finally on solid ground.

She meets Pasquale, Pasquale Barbaro, who had emigrated a while back from Platì and settled in Canada, in Revelstoke. After a handful of days, they get married: March 1st, 1903. The family grows rapidly. They have seven children and move to 84 Norman Street, in Ottawa. It is the heart of the Canadian Little Italy. The houses here seem to be made with a cookie cutter: all long and thin, with a few steps to get to the main door.

The church of S. Anthony of Padua is close by and is the community center. The youth can join sports and music groups, they offer tutoring, and assistance. The parish priest is Italian, Brother Aurelio Prospero OSM. He was a pillar of the Italian community for over 15 years and returned to Italy in 1930. He used Latin for the parish documents. He baptized Sam, one of Antonio’s older brothers, born in 1914, and recorded the sacrament in Latin. During the war, he was in Figline Valdarno (Italy), at the Convent of Ponterosso. He received the last words spoken by 18 partigiani (members of the Italian resistance movement) whom the Nazis would slaughter. The evening of June 20, 1944, Brother Prospero encouraged these men to offer their sacrifices to God and ask forgiveness for their sins, hoping in His infinite mercy and he granted absolution to each one.

Back to Little Italy, in Ottawa. It is filled with the sounds of a street busy with life, a melting pot of dialects, customs, traditions, and songs; laundry hanging on clothes lines, children playing. The heart of the Barbaro household is the kitchen, Caterina’s kingdom. From Italy, she brought her recipes and cooking artistry, her secrets and her specialties, along with traditions and personality. When it’s time for lunch, she wears her white apron, puts the large pasta pot on the stove and plunges her hand in a tin container nailed to the wall to scoop out an abundant handful of salt. Waiting for the water to boil, she stirs the ragout, which is almost ready. The Barbaros’ Italian heritage extends to their small backyard, turned into a vineyard. Pasquale, as other connoisseurs in the neighborhood, produces his own wine. From his native Calabria, Pasquale brought farmers’ knowledge that translated into a symphony of flavors. When his workday as a Town worker ends, he passionately devotes time to his soil.

That is the environment in which Antonio, one of Caterina and Pasquale’s children, grows up. He is a talented artist, he plays the trumpet in the local band, he draws and is a woodworker; he tries to earn some money working in various outfits, including the laundry service of Ottawa’s Civic Hospital. He loves motorcycles and swimming; his physically fit body does not go unnoticed. Girls show interest in him... including perhaps a certain Pat.

Mother Nature gave him a great physique; to that gift, Antonio added a great heart.

On July 19, 1942 he turns 19. Just a few days later, on August 3, he enlists in Ottawa.

On July 17 of the following year, he embarks. Destination: Great Britain.

He finds himself in the midst of South Yorkshire, where the luxurious compound of Wentworth Woodhouse was requisitioned, with his architectural jewels and majestic gardens. Antonio may have wondered if he was in the right place when he reported for duty! Using this site for military purposes severely damaged it. For example, the parc was transformed into a training site for motorcyclists. Which may have thrilled Antonio, with his passion for motorcycles, but destroyed the manicured lawns.

His brother Sam, who was in the UK throughout the war, joins him for a short while. In a letter to his family, he says that next time, they will take a picture together.

Antonio is now Lance Corporal in the Royal Canadian Engineers, First Canadian Army, 23rd Field Company. The Engineers' job description includes demining fields, place explosives, remove tons of debris to allow for traffic flow on the roads, digging trenches, repairing bridges and any other kind of maintenance.

Antonio arrives in France a month after D-Day. The devastation is overwhelming, and danger lurks at every turn. But his pride as a soldier and his survival instincts are stronger than fear.

He is smart and full of energy. He confides in the Company's Chaplain, Father Jean Mongeon, a young Lieutenant who shares with all the nightmare of the front line and tries to bring some comfort. On Sundays, he says Mass and Antonio always attends.

The Barbaros have two sons on the front line and their anxiety is sky high. Life goes on seemingly as usual in their neighborhood but everyone fears for their loved ones far away. A letter is cause for both joy and fear. The joy of receiving news from their son, the fear that it may be from the war office or, even worst, a telegram from Canadian Pacific Telegraphs. Each day without mail is a gift.

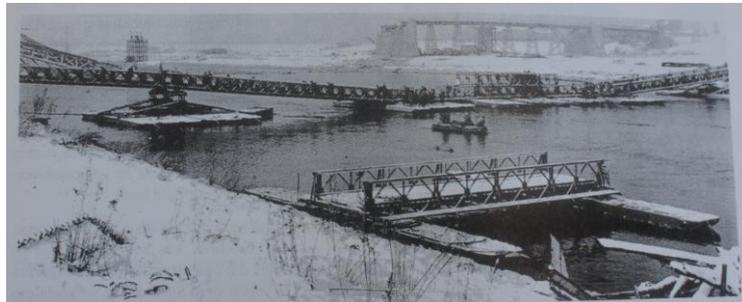
In Europe, the war rages on. From France, Antonio reaches Belgium and then Holland. Here, the Nazis' ruthless fury emerges at every corner. Hunger is rampant. Even tulip bulbs become food. But the Royal Canadian Engineers do not give in.

After Operation Market Garden failed on 25 September 1944, the Canadian and British Engineers received orders to evacuate the trapped allied military from Oosterbeek to the south bank of the River Neder-Rhine. With their motorboats, the Canadian Engineers rescued 2400 men, managing to cross the river all night long, with heavy enemy fire and disastrous weather conditions. Seven brave Canadians will be killed here. Quoted in an article of the Montreal Gazette, Maj. Tucker, who had led the operation, stated that two of his men were instrumental for the positive outcome of the operation. Those two men were Antonio Barbaro and his fellow soldier Raymond Lebouthillier. Antonio was soon awarded the CVSM with clasp and the Pioneer C. First Good Conduct Badge.

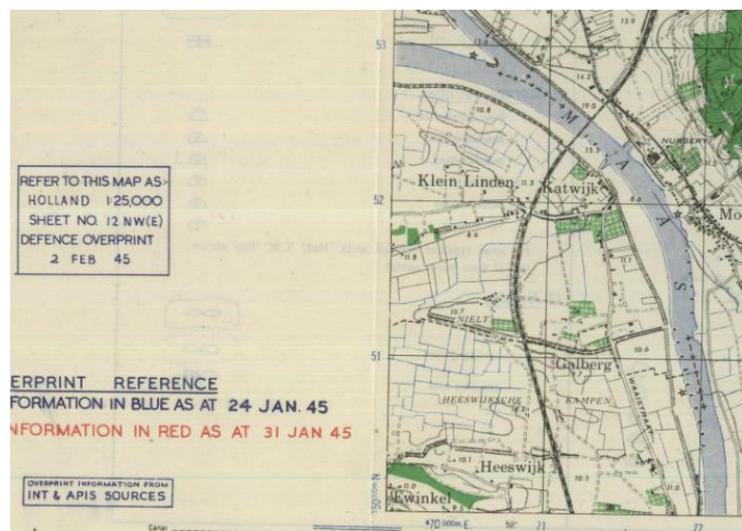
In February 1945, a few of them are repairing a bridge on the Meuse River, near the town of Mook. Spr. A. E. Sager, Spr. H. Malone and Antonio Barbaro get in a small boat to work on the parts of the bridge closest to the water. It is bitter cold. The wind whips the boat and the three youth are at the mercy of the elements. Suddenly, a sharp spear tears the boat. They are sinking. Antonio is the only one who can swim and without giving it another thought throws his life preserver to Sager and Malone. And saves their lives. But Antonio's uniform is soaked and is now very heavy. A sudden surge in the current drags Antonio away.

The Meuse, this relentless liquid serpent, draws him in and enwraps him into its coils.

On the banks the desperation of the other military grows.



The scene of the tragedy



Historical map of the area

In Ottawa, several days go by without receiving the telegram. A gift. But in mid-February those days end abruptly as a flurry of news plunges the Barbaros in desperation.

The Little Italy community surrounds and supports them. Suddenly the street sounds stop. All is quiet. Dozens of friends and neighbors pay their respects and bring a token of their love to n. 84 Norman Street. The Macrìs, their next-door neighbors, the Pantalones, the Guzzos...

The first message, dated February 19, lets them hope: "missing, perhaps drowned..."; there is hope. "Missing", perhaps they find him. And then: maybe POW.

But after a few days, all hope is wiped out. Replaced by unbearable pain. His brother, Sam, learns of Antonio's death in England. He feels faint. Their bond is extraordinarily strong. He always thought of him as "his baby brother".

Chaplain Jean Mongeon writes to the family immediately. The following is the verbatim letter:

*22 Feb 45
Mrs. Catherine Barbaro
84, Worman Street,
Ottawa, Ontario*

Dear Madam:

You have been told already by N.D.H.Q. Ottawa that your son C-90149 L/Cpl. Anthony Barbaro, attached to the 23 Fd Coy R.C.E. has drowned on the 14th February.

It is always very hard for a mother to learn that on top of the many sacrifices already made, war has brought but the disparition of one of her sons. But this supreme sacrifice will be easier for you to accept when you will know the circumstances of your son's death.

He was working on a maintenance job on one of the bridges that we had to build across a river in Holland. (I can not tell you exactly where now for security reasons) He and two of his comrades fell in the water. There was only two life belts available. Generously he gave the life belts to his companions. Because of that, they were able to swim ashore. Your son was a very good swimmer. but maybe on account of the force of the current and the weight of his clothes he has not been able to reach the shore and drowned. nobody was there to give him a hand. We did not find his body. You see, dear Madame, you have many reasons to be proud of your son. He sacrificed his life to give to his companions a better chance to live.

May I add to that that your son was very much liked by his companions. The war seems to take the best among us. As his Roman Catholic Padre I dare say that he was one of the best of my flock. The Sunday before he died he came to confession and received the Holy Communion.

My I present you with the deepest regrets and sympathies of his Unit and myself.

*Yours in Christ
J. M. Mongion H/Capt.
1 Cdn Army troops Engineers
C.A.O.*

His body was found two months after the tragedy. On May 1st, a telegram from the Canadian Pacific Telegraphs arrives with the information that he is “officially reported killed”.

For a long time nothing can alleviate such desperation, until the day the damned war is finally over. Sam Barbaro, who served in the UK for four endless years, comes home: it is a new beginning.

Antonio Barbaro’s name is inscribed on a stained glass window inside St. Anthony’s Church. In the memorial garden, just next to the Church, there is a plaque dedicated to Antonio.

In 2002, Mrs. Alice van Bekkum, a Dutch lady, began to research about the seven Soldiers who had been killed during the evacuation. She found out that another Canadian Engineer who is buried in the Groesbeek Canadian War Cemetery, had died very close to her home. His name is Antonio Barbaro. She immediately reached out to his family in Canada and promoted the building of a monument in Mook. With the participation of the Mayor and the Community, what was held on Sept 18, 2014 was far more than a ceremony

Members of the Barbaro family came all the way from Canada to Mook and could hardly believe their eyes when, in presence of Mayor Willem Gradisen, the Canadian Defence Attaché Colonel Hogan, Veterans Donald Sommerville and John Meeusen, and the entire community, the monument was unveiled.

From Win Barbaro McKenzie’s speech:

“There are not sufficient words to adequately express our gratitude to you, Mr. Mayor, the Committee members and the people of the Community of Mook (and Middelar) for all the thought and work that went into establishing this monument for our Uncle Tony. We are deeply humbled that our Uncle would be so remembered. It is unfortunate that his parents and siblings have all past on - we know that they would have shared these feelings”... “... I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the force that brought us here, Alice van Bekkum - her undeniable curiosity, energy and just plain ‘wanting to know’ led her to pursue the story of our Uncle Tony”.



The wreath with 22 roses (one for each of Antonio’s years)

In 2017 Pope Francis issued an Apostolic Letter by which he created a new category under which a Servant of God may be declared Blessed: *oblatio vitae*, or “the free offering of one’s life”. The Letter, *Maiorem hac dilectionem*, takes its title from the words of Our Lord as recorded in the Holy Gospel according to St. John, “Greater love than this no man hath, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (Jn 15:13).

The confidence that the Church will take steps into this direction fills us all with renovated spirit.

God bless you, Antonio.

(translated from Italian by Alessandra Cortese de Bosis)