

“HE WAS MY BROTHER”

CPL. PAUL H. VALDEZ

United States Army, 157th Regiment, 45th Infantry Division

Dawson, New Mexico, USA – March 20, 1918

Montebuono, (Rieti, Italy) April 13, 1944



by Raffaella Cortese de Bosis

“Those poor kids, they were so young. At night, they would knock on our door, for a piece of bread... Mother, at the risk of her life, would run to the kitchen to find some food for them... Then they would go to the olive grove... One of them had a ring on his finger, it had a flower... Then they came to hide up here... What a tragic ending to their lives... How can anyone forget that day...”

A handful of memories of those who, as young children in 1944, experienced the drama of war and saw firsthand the consequences of the carnage of Montebuono: *“eight American soldiers who had taken shelter on the top of the mountain overlooking Montebuono were massacred by the agents of the I.SS-Polizei-Regiment-20. Father Antonio Piccarozzi, Montebuono’s Parish Priest, blessed the bodies, recited a prayer and with the help of a few locals, buried the bodies by the hermitage.”*

They are talking about those events softly, at the end of the ceremony for the 75th anniversary of that massacre. The ceremony took place on April 13, 2019, on the clearing around the Hermitage of S. Benedetto, on the top of that mountain in the presence of Italian, American, Canadian and British authorities. The speech delivered by the Prefect of Rieti, Mrs. Giuseppina Reggiani, was marvelous. The ceremony was also attended by Harry Shindler M.B.E., a British veteran who had participated in the Anzio landing.



Hermitage of Montebuono – The ceremony held on April 13, 2019



Hermitage of Montebuono – The stone erected to honor the fallen:

PVT Robert C Carnathan, PFC Charles Dyda, PFC Ben J Espinosa, PFC George W Kerr, PVT Clarence E Moody, PVT Robert J Rankl, PVT Woodrow W Thomas, Cpl Paul H Valdez

Nello Lucchetti, Alfredo Sabora and Tommaso Abati were kids at the time. “I was moved by what you were saying and I wanted to meet you,” I tell them. “Did the families of the victims come?” “No, no one”. “What if I looked for them...?”. Alfredo takes my hands and with tears in his eyes and concern in his voice, says: “But how would you manage? Who knows where they are... after all these years...”?

And after a long pause... “but, of course, it would be a dream come true...” .

“A dream come true...” said Alfredo. “It needs to happen,” is what pops immediately into my mind. I already have a faint lead. It’s a faint one, but it’s there.

Valdez. Paul H Valdez. The name is not unique. There are so many of them. As I sift through names, cities, census of the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, I come across a Valdez family in Colorado. On handwritten documents that are hard to decipher, I find “*Havacia Vallez*”, “*Oracio Valdez*” (*Paul is not there*). Who can they be? Finally, a Paul grabs my attention. He would be the right age. Among his siblings are Elsie and Ruben. After various attempts, hypotheses, and red herrings, I feel I have narrowed it down enough to identify the relatives of Cpl Paul H. Valdez. This may be the right family. But where are they? How do I get in touch with them?

I have several names, but no telephone numbers. I keep my hopes up. I look into all possibilities, old documents, any clue. And one night, I find a phone number located in Lakewood, Colorado.

It is the middle of the night in Rome, Italy. I cannot turn off the lamp on my desk, and neither can I turn off the yearning to find this family. It’s just the afternoon in Colorado. I can call them now. Just one phone call, I am on a budget. I am doing this on my own. Is the phone number a private residence? An office? I don’t know, but I try anyway. I dial part of the number and then hang up several times. But finally, I muster my courage and I finish dialing the number.

I have to call upon all my self-control to keep my emotions at bay. The phone is ringing. A male voice answers. He may have seen the long caller ID and cuts it short.

But that voice had made an impression on me.

I dial the number again. The same voice answers. I introduce myself and ask for Dr. Ruben Valdez. He says that there is no Dr. Valdez at that number. But before he hangs up again, I give him information that may reassure him that I am not a telemarketer or an impostor. (I was told later that he did not want to be addressed as “Doctor”, that was the issue!) I mention the memory of Montebuono. Silence on the other end. I tell him about the fallen soldiers of April 13. Still silence... He is not saying anything, but he is listening. So, I mention Cpl Paul Horatio Valdez, and I pronounce Horatio in English. Silence... but the quality of the silence is changing.

After several, long seconds, the male voice corrects my pronunciation: “Orazio (pronounced in Latino style)... he was my brother”.

He is touched that I looked for him. “How did you manage to find me?” He tells me about his brother, his family, the war. His voice grows tired. He passes the phone to his son whose name is also Ruben.

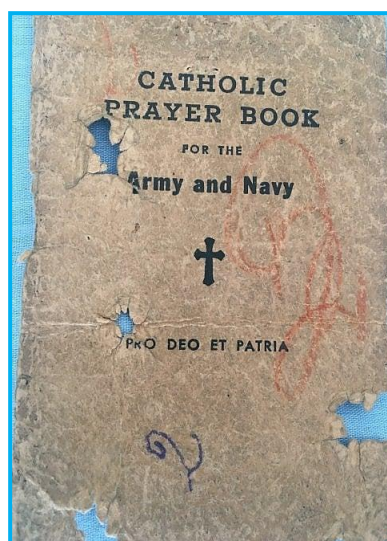
Ruben Jr tells me that his father is seriously ill and had just come home after a long stay at the hospital. I ask him if I can do anything from Rome... maybe I could bring a message to Montebuono, to the Mayor and obviously to Alfredo. "Are you serious??" Of course I am serious.

On June 8, 2019, thanks to Mayor Fausto Morganti, we set up a Skype connection from Montebuono to the living room of the Valdez household in Colorado with Mr. Valdez and his smile which lights up a room. The gentle patriarch surrounded by his family. The conversations last about an hour. Memories, questions, emotions travel at the speed of light from one end of the world to another. Small details and big questions. Mr. Valdez Sr had mailed me a thank you letter which I read during our Skype session.



Montebuono – Our conversation via Skype

Mr Valdez has a small prayer book in his hands. The cover is riddled with bullet holes. "After the massacre, it was found on my brother's poor remains." He keeps this small book in his safe.



The small prayer book with the bullet holes.

Around mid-September, his son, Ruben Jr calls me to tell me that his father's condition deteriorated. I am devastated. On October 1st, Mr Ruben Valdez Sr passes away.

Ruben Jr called me that same day.

"The efforts that you put in to find dad, finding him and assuring him that his brother had not been forgotten, gave him great comfort and filled him with hope. You gave light to the last part of his life. You are an angel."

Mr Valdez Sr had been Speaker of the Colorado House of Representatives. He had been the first Speaker of Hispanic origin. He was held in high esteem, listened to, and admired for his humanity and political skills. He had a passion for sports. On October 16, a commemoration was held at Denver's Coors Field Stadium, and the city's flags were set at half-mast.

It would be a dream... I must make it happen. And when you encourage dreams to become reality, when you believe with all your energy, sometimes, they do.

Just a few days after Ruben Valdez Sr.'s passing, Ruben Jr and his wife decided to come to Italy and visit Montebuono: "Paul and Ruben are now together, forever".



Nello Lucchetti, Ruben Valdez Jr, Tommaso Abati, and Raffaella



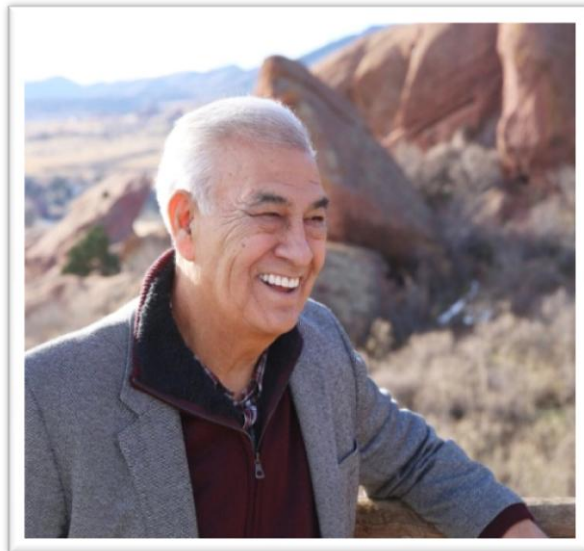
Ruben Valdez Jr, Mayor Fausto Morganti, Chanel Valdez, and Raffaella

The visit takes place in early November. The community's welcome is overwhelming. The events organized by Mayor Morganti go beyond wild imagination. In the morning, we go to the Hermitage. It is a perfect autumn day. We park and make our way up to the small monastery. Ruben finds his uncle's name, Paul H Valdez, on the stone that memorializes the victims. We walk around the Hermitage and find the bullet holes, still visible on the frescoed walls. Memories flow back. The emotion is palpable.

We go back to the village. We meet those who were kids at the time. Tears well up in everyone's eyes. They hug. They cannot believe this is happening.

The whole community attends the Mass celebrated in Montebuono. The Church was overflowing, including the children... the old ones and the young ones.

....it did become reality !



Ruben A Valdez

God bless you, Mr Valdez.

Translated from Italian by Alessandra Cortese de Bosis

A heartfelt thank you to:

Mayor of Montebuono, Fausto Morganti

Mr. John Murray, United Nations Ambassador (ret.)

US Marine and CIA Officer Mike Shanklin (ret.)

Deputy Mayor Rodolfo Sassi, Fiorenzo Francioli and the whole Montebuono community

Group Captain Scott Notman, RAF

Janet Kinrade Dethick, historian