

“Mirko” Camillo Marmiroli (Italy)

Clip 1 00.02.15

Presentation

My name is Camillo Marmiroli, I was born on January 23rd, 1920 in Reggio Emilia. My father was a poor worker who already had eight children. I have lived a somewhat hard life, I went to elementary school and then started working immediately. My life started troublesome, but I'm still here and I'm happy.

My father was an old Socialist, he gave me this name, Camillo, because of Camillo Prampolini, the “father” of all the poor illiterate peasants. I was an apprentice upholsterer, an artisan, I was making sofas, armchairs and mattresses.

Fascists? I remember them as assholes more than as fascists. As a young guy, I was a member of the Young Fascists and my friend, a foreman, asked me: “Why didn't you come to the demonstration?” Since we were old friends, I told him I had stayed in bed, since I was better off there. That stupid guy went to report me to the fascists and they gave me castor oil and beat me up in 1939.

I went to the Army, I stayed away five years without talking to him, then a common friend came up to me and said “Look, that guy ... “ and I told him that I didn't even want to see that stupid guy. I didn't want to react, we even remained sort of friends, but I remember there were two or three older men with clubs, and I was weighing about 40 kilos by then, I mean, being beaten up was not funny. See, this is why I never wanted to see the fascists, I'm “glad” they gave me 42 months of war to do. I never liked them.

Clip 2 00.06.58

Army and war

I started military service on March 9th, 1940. I went to Trieste and then right off to the Yugoslavian border. I stayed there until September 8th, 1943, shooting and being shot at and so on. I have been all over Yugoslavia, I was in the 151st regiment of infantry of the Brigata Sassari. There were only a few people from Emilia and many Sardinians, many from Calabria, poor guys with little schooling, mostly illiterates. In fact I became a sergeant because I had gone to elementary school, I had some knowledge, I was able to read. I mean, I was a bit more than a poor silly guy like them.. They were having a hard time; they didn't know how to write. I wrote home for them, to their girlfriends, even though I didn't know what to say to a girlfriend, that's the truth. Then, one day, I even took a school book from a friend of mine and taught these guys how to write and count. I taught them in the moments in which we had nothing to do, were just getting bored. But in Yugoslavia we fought a lot and the partisans bombed us often, we had many casualties. I was all over Yugoslavia, from Zagreb to Croatia to Slovenia. These are difficult territories; the people there were strong enemies just like we were strong enemies to the fascists when I was a partisan later fighting them and the Germans. That's all, it was a long time and we were freezing and starving. We did have food, but when you're 20 or 22, you're always hungry. There was no fruit, the land was a desert just like here, there was nothing to eat, just the meals they gave us when something arrived, and only a few things.

A sad thing I remember took place when we were in Slovenia, just outside the capital, in a place called “the Sawmill”, in the woods. The partisans attacked us and we reacted. The fascists and the snipers came and emptied out the place, they killed more than 400 people, shot dead like dogs. That's the truth, and we were around the hills checking if the others were coming. After this disaster the fascists went away. They had carried away women and children, they brought them to Fiume, and then they committed this big massacre. It was up to us bury the bodies, and so we did. We threw them all in a hole, covered them with sawdust from the nearby sawmill and then we burned

down the village. That was a terribly sad thing we did. Years later I have travelled through Yugoslavia three or four times as a tourist, I knew a little Croatian, I could speak quite well. I was talking to a bartender, he asked me why I knew the language and I said "I have been here". He told me not to speak because the locals had no friendly attitude towards us after what we'd done.

That's the truth. And don't come tell me that if you go to war you go to help. Who goes to war goes to do their own business, to do whatever they want, to be the master. And don't come tell me that the soldier does good ... the soldier sucks: he fights the war, burns houses, rapes women, just like all of us have done. That's the sad truth, that's why I don't want to see war. And I say, if there was a real God, I'd bring some fifty world leaders to paradise and then we'd have peace.

There were the fascists and the army, that time there were the Italian fascists and snipers. When they give you an order you obey. Executing someone who is unarmed and shaking is not a nice act, it's just a shame. You are forced to do these things, to violate people, rape someone who is imploring you, destroying ... Unfortunately I have seen all these things, even when I was a partisan, but I have never touched anybody, not even the enemies. I was sending them to those who were interested in doing these kind of things but I have a clear conscience, I haven't done anything. One day they have celebrated a mass for us in the field and then they sent us to be slaughtered like animals. I haven't gone to Church ever since 1942 for this reason. I also told a priest that I know, I say no. I don't agree at all with that Pope that blessed the arms, I tell everybody, arms must be cursed, not blessed. I am a straightforward person, I do what I believe and I don't want that someone imposes to me what I have to do because I can still think. I have seen all kinds of things and I know that if you keep you live comfortably, you sleep well and you don't have evil thoughts.

Clip 3 00.04.15

September 8th, 1943

In Yugoslavia we surrendered, we went to the pier, they brought us there and we stayed there for two days and one night, with no food, nothing, no arms, without knowing what to do or where to go. Then a big boat passed by and the Yugoslavians used megaphones to call them to come and get us, they even shot at it to make the boat come to the beach. We were more than 600 and we entered the boat just like all these Moroccans do today. We went to sea through the Velebit which is what the place is called there. We went into the villages with the megaphones but the Italian Army didn't want us, no-one would take us, so we didn't know what to do. They told us that the Germans were out there and that the land was mined because they didn't want night attacks, so the Commander said to us we could go to Ancona and we all immediately agreed. Then I fell asleep on a pile of ropes, starving, and when I woke up I saw Ancona on the coast. We got off there and they brought us to an old factory that was full of people. They put sergeants there as guards, and I was a sergeant, they wouldn't let anyone pass. I had no Lira in my pocket, only Kunas, the Croatian currency. There was a greengrocer there and I wanted grapes so I went there to take a look and the lady said: "Do you want grapes?" and I said "Yes madam, but I have no money". So she gave me the grapes for free. She was like a mother, she asked me where I came from and she said that the Germans were coming up from Jesi, from Ancona, and that they were seizing the soldiers. I went back and talked to the other seven fellows from Reggio Emilia. Three came with me, we went home, we had a hard time but after eleven days we reached our homes walking and by train. We wanted to be home by September because then there would be grapes and figs, there would be something to eat, whereas there was nothing at the place we were staying. In Reggio I stayed at some poor peoples' house. The villa in front of the house where the landlord was living was full of Germans. I stayed there, hiding, with little to eat, nothing to smoke, it was hard. Connected through a friend of mine, I went to help a peasant harvesting grapes, stayed there two-three days. Then they sent me back home, they paid

me for those couple of days and then his grandfather didn't want me around anymore because I'd escaped. It was terrible. I spent some more time hiding in Reggio without money, without anything, under the curfew, it was a terrible life. I heard about the partisans and I simply went up to the mountains and joined them, that's all. I went to my family living in the Gardenia quarter in Reggio Emilia. It was a reaction, yes, i had two brothers in the army. One was in Germany and we didn't know anything about him, the other one took a different way but we didn't know anything about him, either. It was just very, very sad. They were happy that I'd come back but they kept thinking about the other two that were missing, too.

Clip 4 00.02.01

Joining the partisans

Later I went up to the mountains and gave myself this nickname, Mirko. He was a Yugoslavian partisan leader, a tough guy of whom we were very afraid. On the mountains I also got to know Frigio, the one that wrote books about the Resistance. He was a sergeant, too. He knew some people and we established some contacts this way. By then we used to ride bicycles, he was displaced to Barco di Bibbiano and so he used to give us a ride with the bike but it was risky, you could see he was a youngster in his twenties and we didn't have documents, nothing at all, so it was risky for us to be caught by the fascists. But everything went well; thanks to him we got involved and went up to Cà Roma, which was a small house near Canossa, an isolated peasant's house. That was where the partisans were staying, they were waiting to get in touch with the commanders up there. We were quite a few, though: when we started there were 45 of us and to the time we arrived at the Villa Minozzo and at some other village in the province of Modena, I can't remember the name now, there were seven more partisans. All together, we had only nine rifles and one hunting rifle ... crazy. We had to be very careful because we didn't know the people, you couldn't know if one was with you or against you, or it could be a weak guy, weakened by fear, one who might run away and tell this and that if he got arrested ...

Clip 5 00.07.15

The first airdrop and the Sparavalle battle

They did the first drop at Lama Golese and there we were expecting it. But the English made a mistake, they were supposed to do their drop in Modena but did so at our place instead: they'd set up a triangle with fires, the plane turned around and around and eventually did their drop there. They dropped four Bren machine guns and 130 other machine guns. In our group were about forty people, so we had far enough weapons. Later on a local guy came and took all the surplus weapons and brought them away. Frigio wrote right things about this episode, that the arms ... I knew the weapons because I'd served in Yugoslavia, I learned to handle them all, all kinds of weapons, I opened them, cleaned them, taught the younger ones how to use them and how to keep them in good condition.

In Lama Golese there was a non-accessible power unit and some coal miners' huts and we went there. We slaughtered a cow to eat it and I taught them to put it into the water to preserve it. The water of the river was freezing cold so it could be preserved for about twenty days, cut into pieces. There was some mud on top of it but it was good, anyway. Many people didn't know what to do because there was no fridge, no dishes. We were eating on a rock, nothing more than some polenta.

We were able to do it because we were young, if I'd do this now at my age I'd die in one week. We were dressed poorly, the wardrobes were not as full as they are today. It was freezing cold to that time, it was April 15th when we went up there and there was still snow. We were dressed very badly, there were no ... It was hard. We used to sleep in the huts of the coal miners huddled all together like pigs in order to keep ourselves warm.

Sometimes more people came up to Lama Golese, so eventually we started to form groups. We set up three units: the "Piccinini", the one I was in, whose commander was Otello Salsi from Cervarezza. Then there was the "Bedeschi" group, whose commander was Luigi, one from Rivalta, a really nice guy. And then we formed the "Camillo Prampolini" group, a socialist group, led by Valter from Cavriago, a big and bossy guy. Then we went to carry out the attack on Villa Minozzo. We went there on May 24th, the last day of war... The Italian government was telling to all the ones that had escaped from war to return, but instead of handing us in to the government we carried out the attack to the command post in Villa Minozzo. We were about fifty, but there were some who ... I was placed in front of the barracks of the fascists, it was full of people inside, I could hear them sing their songs. I was a good marksman but I was fifty meters away in a hole and couldn't get out because ... We had a hard time because a plane came to shoot at us, so we got stuck in the ditch like frogs, surrounded by nettles. Hard moments. I told my fellows that were 70-80 meters away and said: "Shoot there, you shoot and we will walk under the shooting line!" It was an operation for covering people we wanted to rescue. They weren't experts, they shot like idiots with the machine guns, they shot a lot, whereas they were supposed to fire two or three shots and then alternate them in order to keep the enemy under pressure while we were passing underneath. Instead, we turned up running with the bullets from machine guns in our back.. These moments ... The enemies were experts in war, whereas our guys were there but didn't know anything. For instance, there was Jack, a friend of mine, who died some time ago, whose machine gun got stuck one time. So I told one partisan colleague: "Drop the hand grenade!" and he dropped it without the safety catch, like a stone. Throwing a hand grenade is not such an easy thing, you must count, you have to ... You have to be prepared to drop a hand grenade, you throw it and then you have to get cover, you need protection, you can't just throw it like that because it goes up like this. And then you have to estimate the distance, the force you use, you have to throw it at least twenty or ten meters away, otherwise you get hurt yourself, too. When I was a soldier I taught the guys from 1921 and '22 the war tactics, how to shoot, how to be a sniper, how to throw hand grenades, because they were no experts. Once you pull the catch you have to throw the hand grenade, otherwise you get blown up together with it. The enemies were well prepared, the Germans were warlords, they were tremendous.

I remember one episode up here. We had a shooting one night, we were near Busana, in Cinquecerri. The guard came to me and said: "Mirko, Mirko, the Germans are here!" We were sleeping in a barn and jumped up like hares. "Where are they?" "In Busana on the Sparavalle". "Shut up, then!" They were at street number 63. We prepared without waiting for further instructions, I'd found some posts. "Go there and don't shoot. No shooting, be aware! Keep hidden and don't smoke!" They were there already, it was just two or three o'clock. At six o'clock in the morning they shot the warning fire as a sign of attack. We didn't shoot, but some other partisans did, from another side, they fired some shots and with their mortars they made the Germans run, they're still running now. And we had wanted to take them by surprise!

Clip 6 00.02.19

The colour of the unit

Our unit was red, all communist, because we were the true communists. The 144th Brigade was called "Antonio Gramsci" and the commander was Sintoni, one that had fought in the Spanish civil

war, Pattacini, the commissioner was Antonio Raisi, who'd fought in Spain, too, so all people that were political experts. That was our line. A priest, Don Guido Riva, once complained to us: "You never come to mass! What's wrong, are you afraid of the Church?"

I mean, we had no political experience but we thought that by behaving like this we would be tougher enemies, and in fact we did grow up. So our Brigade truly was the red one, so that they hardly ever dropped stuff to us, or if they did, they gave us useless stuff like shoes size 44 - you could place your two feet in one shoe! Even our commanders were saying that we were somehow different..

In fact, I wasn't into politics that much, but to be against the fascists and the Germans meant to be against the bad people that had wanted the war. When we did the Liberation it was a big relief for us because this was what we had wanted. But what did they want? They just wanted people to be killed, we've seen it many times. For example, when they did their killings at the Bettola, or in Cerrè Sologno, they did terrible retaliation acts. But we had the experience in carrying out an attack and in fact we did the action at the Sparavalle and not in Cervarezza, so that the people would remain unharmed, we didn't want to cause casualties among the population.

Clip 7 00.03.14

Military experience

When I was serving in the first unit, it was my task to assign tasks to people according to their abilities, set up teams. If there was one who had more courage than others I placed a few shy ones next to him. I told them: "Don't shoot, don't shoot, don't smoke when you're in that position and don't show the white parts of your body and your face because they can see you". That was it, but the ones that were paying less attention to these instructions or were distracted got into trouble because they took advantage of this. And when someone was to do surveillance duty: keep your eyes open and don't sleep, because during military service you do surveillance like this. But then again, you could find partisans doing surveillance and sleeping. If you're tired, ask for a change, you stupid, because I sleep quietly if you're keeping your eyes open during your shift, but if you sleep, too ... ?! And in fact these things happened, I'm not going to talk about it because they're too tragic, but it happened that the Germans came in and did a massacre because the guard wasn't paying attention. They had no experience.

Another episode happened to me near Parma. One day we crossed the river Enza and three people drowned, one from Rivalta. So we reach the other shore and I went to the partisans of Parma and asked them: "How many are you here?" and one said: "We have one team here and one there", so I said "Let's do the guard tonight". I was leading a big group, more than 50 partisans and he had a little team. So I said: "Shall we do the guard team with one of your men and one of mine?" and he replied: "No, we will do the surveillance tonight, you already crossed the river, you're tired and wet". But at night you could hear them dancing and playing, there were about ten partisans, one goes in and says: "How many partisans are you here?" "It's twelve of us". "But how many are you here?" "No, we're not doing surveillance at night". So I let them stop playing and called the team leader and told him: "Now you'll deal with me" and let him do the guard shift and in the morning I left with the Russians that were there. We went uphill, high up, and after a while the Germans came and took them. They killed one, one from Reggio, whose name was given to the street that leads to the cemetery of Reggio Emilia. They found him in bed, sleeping because no-one was doing surveillance, for God's sake! When I led my battalion it was eight toten of us and everyone had to do surveillance, in groups of two. I did my shift alone, three hours there in a hiding place, in the shadows, with eyes wide open. If you don't keep your eyes open during the surveillance shift you're in big trouble.

Clip 8 00.56.00

Liberation

I told you I was in Cervarezza with my battalion of 100-120 partisans, and then we went down the Sparavalle and got to Castelnovo Monti and there some more people joined us. All on foot. It was a beautiful moment, we were happy and quiet. Then we reached Reggio and were so proud.

Sometimes there still was some idiots shooting at us, hidden in the houses, we call them snipers.

One of our friends was killed in Cà di Rocco, next to the church of San Pellegrino. A sniper-idiot who was sitting on the roof of the church, they killed him, too, later. It was people who didn't want to surrender. As of the rest it was a big party, that's it.