

PIERINO BEGGI (Italy)

01 INTRODUCTION AND FAMILY; 8TH SEPTEMBER 1943; ESCAPE FROM CAPTIVITY

My name is Pierino Beggi, battle name "Gigi". I was born in Reggio Emilia. Until I was twenty years old, I lived where the Biasola Park is today. My father was a farmer and worked on the farm that was once there. We grew up working the land with him, until we were called into the army when we were around twenty. I spent three years in Turin with the Engineer Corps and then we were transferred to Bardonecchia where we stayed another three years. On the 8th of September 1943, General Vercellino ordered us to mine the Frejus tunnel, since the Germans were coming through with tanks and army crews loaded on freight trains. We carried 14 hundred kilograms of explosives inside the tunnel and blew it up. But the Germans kept coming along the road across the mountains and were shooting at us. We were ordered to withdraw towards Turin. We reached the city walking in the countryside for 100 km. In Turin, we were already surrounded by the Germans. They had followed the road on motor vehicles. Many of us were captured there. Then we were put on freight trains, around seventy of us in each box car. They had unloaded cattle before and the straw was still there. They were told us that we would be going to Germany. The train had to stop in Codogno di Piacenza, in order to let through another train coming in the opposite direction. Trains at the time were not electric, they were powered with coal. We stopped for quite a long time. Since the wagons were full of people, it was hot inside. There wasn't enough ventilation. Some passed out, so the Germans opened the sliding doors slightly to let some air in. At that point there were four Germans, while we were four thousand. They walked back and forth outside, with big guns slung over their shoulders. Before we left we had grabbed a small bag of things. I had the mess tin we used to eat in. I asked the German if I could go to the fountain in the station. We had not drunk any water for two days. I probably wasn't thinking about escaping. I was just really thirsty and desperate. The German said "Ja, ja, ja". I got off the train and headed towards the fountain. The German joined another soldier further away and started eating a piece of watermelon with him. I threw away the tin and started to run as fast as I could. I was skinny then and 23 years old. The soldier took out his gun and started shooting at me. But, when I started running, a friend of mine tried to come along. He was hit in the thigh and fell over the tracks.

02 GAP (ARMED PARTISAN GROUPS)

GAPs were organized in groups of three. This meant that each member knew only about two others and nothing else. We all knew that those who were captured were being tortured in Villa Cucchi. Just as they did with Paolo Davoli and Tina from Cavriago or Rosellina. The GAP and Zanti, whose battle name was Maurizio, had decided to take this measure. We initially had groups of three, then with time more groups were forming and we met and carried out joint actions. GAPs weren't all the same. They weren't all communist. My small group and I were.

03 FIRST PARTISAN ACTION; CERVI BROTHERS

The first engagement I took part in, we disarmed two German soldiers. They were by the railway tracks, on the Via Emilia railway bridge. They were really young. Fiorello had a gun, since he was a Carabinieri when he had escaped from Yugoslavia. I had a fake one he had made out of wood, which looked just the same. We sneaked behind these two boys, pointed our guns at their neck and got them to raise their hands. We took away their P38 guns. From then on we felt armed. We had a meeting in the fields with the Cervi brothers. They were worried and said that they wanted to go to the mountains. Their house at the time was a hideaway. They welcomed a lot of people, maybe too many. They also welcomed fleeing foreign soldiers they didn't know. Some of them might have been spies. So they went to the mountains for a while and then came back. I guess they went on letting too many people in. We all know what happened afterwards.

04 ACTION FOR EXCHANGE OF PRISONERS

Another of our great engagements was capturing Major Battaglia at Villa Bresci in San Bartolomeo. He was a young commander of the GNR. He used to sleep there, having seized the villa. They had captured Muso during a mop-up in San Polo. We had to consider how we could save him. Some Black Brigades units had captured around twenty young men to send to Germany, while they sent Muso to the San Tommaso prison after they found a gun on him. He was in prison waiting to be executed, together with the Cervi brothers. We caught Major Battaglia and took him to central headquarters in the mountains. All the different parties were represented at the central headquarters: Professor Marconi, together with Eros, Cocconi and everyone else. We sent a dispatch to the Podestà Rabotti, offering to swap our prisoner Major Battaglia with Muso. The German headquarters however didn't consent to the exchange. They replied that the man they had caught with a gun had to be shot. We got together to discuss the situation. Since they refused to accept the exchange, we had to consider capturing a German soldier. Giorgio, the commander of the Cavriago GAP, told us about a SS captain who used to ride his motorbike in the evening to visit a woman in Cavriago. I told the others we had to catch him. We hid behind a bush during the day, in order not to be noticed by the farmers who worked nearby. When the motorbike approached we jumped in the middle of the street with our sub-machine gun pointed at him. He stopped the bike immediately and tried to take his gun. He managed to pull it out, but Fiorello hit him with the sub-machine gun. Fiorello then left with the motorbike, while we put the captain in an icehouse. At the time we had these ice-houses: people used to make holes in the ground, pave them and put snow in them, to use the ice in the cheese factories. At night we headed for the mountains with this blindfolded SS captain. We sent a dispatch to the Podestà again, telling him to inform the German headquarters that we had captured captain "whatever his name was". On the same day the prisoner exchange was done.

05 STEALING 110 HEAD OF CATTLE

We found out that the Germans wanted to round up the cattle in Cavriago and take them to Germany. SAPs, GAPs and all the partisans attacked during the night and took a cattle herd of one hundred and ten into the mountains with two cattlemen. It was great, because of the effort it took. The Rubbianino road had two hedges three meters tall; it was absolutely dark. The difficult thing was to get the cattle moving. The cattlemen taught us to tie four of them together by the horns with some rope. We put them in front of the group and set off, leaving the others free. So we made it to Cerredolo dei Coppi. We knew the partisan paths better than normal roads. So we made it to Cerredolo dei Coppi with all the cattle. Getting them there really was a problem. My brother was also there, people used to call him the tax collector because of what he ate and how he dressed. We discussed about where to put the cattle. We decided to take two or three to each farm. Farmers made great use of them, using them to plough the land. The Germans had seized petrol and farmers could not use tractors. Still, at times, a cow was butchered and we all had some meat to eat, since there were personnel who distributed it around.

06 ASSAULT ON THE BASE OF TEST PILOTS

The school in Codemondo was a base for 400 airmen, as well soldiers as pilots. The Germans had moved their test pilots and the Caproni factory itself from Milan to the airfield in Reggio Emilia. Reggio at the time had become an aviation centre. The school in Codemondo was the base for this 400 Caproni airmen. We weren't organized yet. We were sending people to the mountains. But we didn't have many weapons, as the Allied hadn't started airdrops yet. Still we devised a plan. We wanted to take the sentinel by surprise, while he stood guard. He was a soldier, and we did not want to harm him, only keep him silent. Four or five of us went inside the dormitories with their guns, telling everybody not to move: "Don't move and we won't shoot. We're partisans, we just want the weapons", the same old story. Outside four or five SAP teams helped us carry away everything, boots and the like. There was a lot of stuff. We also got the safe open, taking important documents we later handed to those knowing a little German. There was a little bit of everything there.

07 STEELING AMMUNITION

We figured out that the Germans had put a lot of ammunition under some trees. They even had the Italian sub-machine gun ammunition we had been looking for everywhere. We had the weapons but no ammunition. There were also machine guns, a bazooka and other weapons. We never caused any retaliation by the Germans, who would burn down civilian houses. We opened the trunks with a screwdriver, took out the ammunition and weigh it and filled the trunk with a load of earth. In the end the Germans took off with trunks full of earth.

08 FOSSOLI: RUSSIAN PRISONERS LIBERATED

The Germans had taken 250-300 Russian prisoners to a camp in Fossoli. Together with the GAPs and the partisans from Modena we surrounded the camp and took all the Russians to the mountains. The central headquarters then took care of the rest, talking with the three Russian officers. One of them later became a partisan choosing Modena as his battle name. Afterwards we had a major problem in the lowlands around Reggio. One of the Russians we had taken to the mountains escaped and joined the Black Brigades. He knew the lowlands, since he had spent some time working in some houses there. He began to point out the houses to the Black Brigades, who set them on fire. Since he would come to Reggio, two of our women dispatch riders convinced him to go out one night, promising him "a very good time". To make it short: he was killed.

09 MINES AGAINST THE CAVALRY

The Germans could not use armoured vehicles and tanks around the mountains, as we had blown up all the bridges. So they didn't succeed when they repeatedly tried to surround the mountains. Then they set up the Mongolian cavalry unit. It was made up of soldiers who came from the south of the Soviet Union. We heard they were moving uphill from the lowlands trying to surround the area. We knew they would come by the road that begins by the church of Rivalta. We mined the whole road. You probably know how antitank mines work. We saw horses blown up in the air...

10 USING A BAZOOKA

We also tried to use the bazooka. It was something new for us. But Fiorello was a genius regarding these matters. He looked at it and examined it, and one day he told us he wanted to try it on the road to Cavriago. I bent down and he put the bazooka on my shoulder to manoeuvre it. He fired as a truck went by. That was 6 kg of explosive. The truck went off the road... That was also part of our struggle...

11 THE DEATH OF FIORELLO

The Black Brigade, together with Germans, was going through the Ghiardo. A twenty-year-old boy was walking on the road. He started running as soon as he saw the Black Brigade and the armoured vehicles. He jumped over a hedge and ran into a small road towards the barn we were lying in in ambush. As we saw the Black Brigade truck coming in the courtyard we were forced to shoot. If they came inside they would have killed us. Then we moved out of the house and towards the hills. There the battle took place. They lined up behind a hedge and started shooting. Fiorello was shot in the heart and died there. We had started shooting because one of our comrades had run away as the truck came in the courtyard. His name was Francia. Instead of coming inside the barn, he ran towards the fields and was shot dead as well. They had shot one of our men, and that's why we had to shoot back. We ended up killing all those who were inside the truck. At night we went back there to collect Fiorello's body. They were waiting for us during the day. We wrapped him up in a piece of cloth and took him to the cemetery of Codemondo where he had his family tomb, then celebrated his funeral amongst us.

12 SABOTAGE AT THE AIRFIELD

One night we stripped the machine guns from three airplanes in the airfield. Before we set the airplanes on fire we removed their three famous 7-7 guns, which were very powerful anti-aircraft weapons. They were bolted to the bearings, in order to rotate, but we took them down and then set the aircrafts on fire, all three of them. The machine guns had no tripod though. Fiorello was very good in mechanical work. He had worked at Bagni's in Via Toschi, manufacturing and repairing scales, he built the tripods himself. Once he was stopped by a Black Brigade near the cemetery of Via Cecati while he was taking one home. They asked him what that thing was. He replied that he was taking that tripod to the dairy in San Bartolomeo. Fortunately they let him go, since he had two guns on him. I told him what would have happened if he was searched. He replied: "I would have done like Tomix (a movie hero fast with his guns)". That's how we always joked around.

13 LIBERATION OF REGGIO EMILIA

We went on the roof to see who was shooting from the Church of Madonna della Ghiara. We couldn't see anything from there, so we went back downstairs and headed for the bell-tower. We found the bell-ringer and asked him how we could climb up. He showed us the way and told us to proceed slowly. As we got on the roof there were three men of the Black Brigade with a 37 mm Breda machine gun. I told them not to move and raise their hands. They obeyed as they saw the machine gun pointed at them. They told us not to kill them. They'd show us where the others were. "Alright", we said, "where are they?" They told us there was a platoon of around thirty of them hiding in the subterranean vaults of "La Luna", a spot near Porta Castello. As we got back down, however, there was a surprise. A jeep with a big white star printed on the hood was parked by the church. I asked what was going on. The driver got out of the jeep and told me that the commander wanted to know who those three men with their hands up were. I told them that they were the ones who were shooting from the roof. The major didn't speak Italian, so the driver had to translate for him. He got out of the car too, pointed the Thompson gun and fired a spray of bullets. I had to take a piece of liver off my jacket afterwards, because he had shot them at point-blank range. I asked him why he killed them, since they had surrendered and were our prisoners. But the driver called me over and showed me there were three holes in their jeep. We were free, but there were too many things we had to sort out and too many had died. It wasn't a happy day. Fiorello died right next to me. We had been friends since we were kids.