

PIERINO BEGGI (Italy)

CLIP 1

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 before we left, 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. So we were ordered to withdraw towards Turin and reached the city walking in the countryside for 100 km. But in Turin, we were already surrounded by the Germans, because 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 just a short time before and the straw was still there. So we were there, waiting to leave, and they told us that we would be going to Germany.

The train had to stop in Codoglio 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 and there wasn't enough ventilation. Some passed out, so the Germans opened the sliding doors slightly, just two hand's breadths, in order to let some air in. At that point there were four Germans there, while we were four thousand. They were walking back and forth outside the train, with big guns slung over their shoulders. Before we left we had grabbed a small bag of things, and I had the mess tin we used to eat in, so I asked the German if I could go fill my tin with water at the fountain in the station, since 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", so 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. Then I threw away the tin and started to run as fast as I could. I was skinny then and 23 years old. As I ran away the soldier took out his gun and started shooting at me. But, when I started running, a friend of mine who was also in the Engineer Corps with me tried to come along. He was hit in the thigh and fell over the tracks.

CLIP 2

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, Tina from Cavriago or Rosellina, so 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 would be meeting and carrying out joint actions. GAPs weren't all the same. They weren't all communist, although my small group and I were.

CLIP 3

Looking back to the first engagement I took part in, we have to go way back. We disarmed two German soldiers who were by the railway tracks, on the Via Emilia railway bridge. They were really young, just two kids. 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 by bicycle, pointed our guns at their neck and got them to raise their hands, so we could take 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 sort of hideaway: they welcomed a lot of people, maybe even too many. They also welcomed fleeing foreign soldiers they didn't know, and 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 their house, and we all know what happened afterwards.

CLIP 4

Another of our great engagements was capturing Major Battaglia at Villa Bresci in San Bartolomeo, if you remember him. He was a young commander of the GNR and used to sleep there, since they had seized the villa. After they captured Muso during a mop-up in San Polo, we had to consider what we could do to 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 by a firing squad, 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 was there, together with Eros, Cocconi and everyone else. We sent a dispatch to the Podestà Rabotti, offering to swap our prisoner with Muso, since we had captured Major Battaglia the day before. 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, who was the commander of the Cavriago GAP, told us about a SS captain who used to ride his Moto Guzzi motorbike in the evening to go visit a woman in Cavriago. I told the others we had to take him in order to change the situation. So we hid behind a bush on the side of the street 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 and threw the gun on the ground. 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 with bricks, and then put snow in them, in order to use the ice in the cheese factories. We didn't have ice otherwise. We took him there at first, then at night headed for the mountains carrying with us this blindfolded SS captain, who was obviously unarmed. We sent a dispatch to the Podestà again, telling him to inform the German headquarters that we had captured captain "whatever his name was" - we even had his ID card - and on the same day the prisoner exchange was done.

CLIP 5

Then 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 involved in the Resistance attacked during the night and took one hundred and ten head of cattle into the mountains together with two cattlemen. It was something great, especially because of the effort it took. The Rubbianino road had two hawthorn hedges that were three meters tall, so that it was absolutely dark. We proceeded rashly, and 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, those that had already born the yoke, and therefore had a big neck, then to put them in front of the group and set off, leaving the others free. So we made it to Cerredolo dei Coppi with all the cattle.

We knew the so-called partisan trails better than normal roads, so we made it to Cerredolo dei Coppi with all the cattle, although 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, and then decided to take two or three to each farm. Farmers actually made great use of them, using them to plough the land, since 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.

CLIP 6

The Germans had moved the whole crew of test pilots and the Caproni factory itself from Milan to the airfield in Reggio Emilia. Reggio at the time had become an aviation centre, and the school in Codemondo were hosting 400 Caproni airmen, as well as soldiers and pilots. At that point we weren't organized yet: we were sending people to the mountains, we had partisans there, but we didn't have many weapons, as the Allied hadn't started airdrops yet. Still we devised a plan, and wanted to take the sentinel by surprise, while he stood guard walking around the school day and night. The sentinel was a soldier, and we did not want to harm him, only had to keep him silent. Then four or five of us

went inside the dormitories with their guns at hand, 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, however, we had four or five SAP teams who had to help us carry away everything, boots and the like, as there was a lot of stuff. We also got the safe open, taking some important documents that we later handed to those of us competent enough knowing a little German. There was a little bit of everything there.

CLIP 7

One time we figured out that the Germans had put a lot of ammunition under some mulberry-trees. They even had the Italian sub-machine gun ammunition we had been looking for everywhere, since we had the weapons but no ammunition. There were also machine guns, a bazooka and other weapons. What was good about us is that we never caused any retaliation by the Germans, who would then burn down civilian houses. We would open the trunks with a screwdriver, take out the ammunition and weigh it, fill the trunk with an equivalent load of earth and then leave. In the end the Germans took off with trunks full of earth.

CLIP 8

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 with us. The central headquarters then took care of the rest, talking with the three Russian officers, one of whom 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, so he began to point out the houses he had been in to the Black Brigades, who set them on fire. Later, since he would come to the headquarters in Reggio, two of our women dispatch riders convinced him to go out one night by promising him "a very good time" and then, to make it short, he was killed.

CLIP 9

The Germans could not use armoured vehicles and tanks around the mountains anymore, since we had blown up all the bridges. That's the reason they didn't succeed when they repeatedly tried to surround the mountains. Then they set up a cavalry unit. We called it the Mongolian cavalry, as it was mainly made up of soldiers who came from the Southern areas of the Soviet Union. We heard that they were moving uphill from the lowlands to try and surround the area. We knew they would come by the road that begins by the church of Rivalta, so we mined the whole road. Well, you probably know how antitank mines work. We saw horses blown up in the air...

CLIP 10

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

CLIP 11

The Black Brigade, together with some Germans, was going through the Ghiardo. A twenty-year-old boy who was walking on the same road started running away as soon as he saw the Black Brigade and the armoured vehicles turned towards him. He jumped over a hedge and ran through the fields, into a small road towards the house and the barn we were lying in ambush in. 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, and that's where the battle took place. They lined up behind the hedge near the road 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 soon as the truck came in the courtyard. His name was Francia. Instead of coming inside the barn with us, he ran towards the fields

and was shot dead as well. They had shot one of our men while he was running away, and that's why we had to shoot back. We ended up killing all those who were inside the truck. Then at night we went back there to collect Fiorello's body, since 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.

CLIP 12

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, who was very good in mechanical work, since he had worked at Bagni's in Via Toschi, manufacturing and repairing scales, built the tripods himself. One time he was stopped by the Black Brigade near the cemetery of Via Cecati while he was taking one home, so they asked him what that thing was. He replied that he was taking that tripod to the dairy in San Bartolomeo: it was to be used with a skimmer, to pour off the whey after they had worked the cheese. Fortunately they let him go, since he had two guns on him. As I saw him I told him what would have happened if he was searched, and his reply was: "I would have done like Tomix (a famous movie hero fast with his guns)". That's how we always joked around.

CLIP 13

The theatre curtain. That's something that went well and was really a great moment for us. We've always been proud of it. At the time we had a comrade who was employed as a technician at the Timo offices and was also our informer. When the Germans arrived in Reggio Emilia they took hold of a part of the building and set their offices there. Italians took care of normal Italian work, while they had to decode messages in cipher coming from Germany. By and by, after they were spending the whole day working side by side, our informers and another employee developed a sort of friendship with the Germans. They would have coffee together and sometimes the Germans would even talk about the orders they were receiving. So our informer found out about an order that was sent from the central headquarters in Berlin. They were supposed to go and take away Reggio Emilia's theatre curtain, which had been crafted by the great painter Chierici, and take it to Bologna, where it would have been sent out to Berlin. It was a specific order, to be carried out urgently. Our informer came to my house, since he knew I was involved in the Resistance, and told me about this: "I'm telling you they received an official order to take away Reggio Emilia's curtain, take it to Bologna and then send it to Berlin". Fiorello and I decided we had to do something about it.

We got together and devised our plan. We had to carry the curtain away. We were told that it was more than 20 meters long, so we couldn't transport it with a car or even with a small truck. We had to find a suitable vehicle. One of us then found a truck in Rubiera, where he also came from, I think. We figured that we had to wrap the curtain somehow once we had rolled it, in order to be able to hide it somewhere. So we thought about putting the curtain into one of those large pipes that were used for water. One of us was an expert in that field and found a large copper pipe. Then we had to lower the curtain, since half of it was still hanging. Five of us went inside, together with two other blindfolded men, one of whom we doubted being a theatre employee. We had to use the wooden pulleys one can still see in the theatre museum today, while they now use automatic ones. Anyway, we lowered the curtain and slowly managed to move it. However another problem emerged. In order not to be fined by the police for bringing such a large truck behind the theatre through the gardens, one had to ask for permission. They wanted to know what we were doing, so I told them we had to bring out some odds and ends, some paper stuff that had to be burned down, and that we needed the truck to load everything on it. We were given permission and we finally managed to load the curtain on the truck, although a small piece still fell out. Then we had to think about where to bring it. We opted for the area of Biasola, where Fiorello and I, as well as a group of GAPs, lived, so that we could keep an eye on it every once in a while, finally hiding the curtain inside Villa Levi.

CLIP 14

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 got up and obeyed as they saw the machine gun pointed at them, telling us not to kill them, for they'd show us where the others were. "Alright", we said, "where are they?". "Come with us and we'll show you". They told us there was a platoon, that's how they called it, 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 stairs of the church. I asked what was going on, so 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, who knew a few words, had to translate for him. He got out of the car too, pointed the Thompson gun he had around his shoulder 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.

It wasn't a happy day. We were free, but there were too many things we had to sort out and too many had died. Fiorello died right next to me. We had been friends since we were kids.

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