

MONTE SAN MARTINO TRUST

January 2017

Dear MSMT Supporter,

Best wishes for 2017! This three-page bulletin reports briefly on recent developments and links to fuller accounts on www.msmtrust.org.uk. The annual newsletter will be sent out by post and email in September together with invitations to the annual luncheon, to be held in London on November 9th.

Medal for Dora

Dora Pieruccini, who was known as “the Mother of Prisoners of War” for sheltering escaping PoWs at the family’s home near Lucca, was one of those brave Italians who were awarded the King’s Medal for Courage in the Cause of Freedom.

The medal, however, was never presented due to an embargo placed on the award of medals to Italian nationals by the British Government in 1948.

Brian Lett, former chairman of MSMT, has researched the awarding of the medals and intends to put pressure on the current Government to lift the embargo. On December 12th, at a ceremony in the majestic Hall of Mirrors in Lucca’s Palazzo Orsetti, Brian (**pictured second left**), presented a modern reproduction of the King’s Medal to the sister of the late Dora Pieruccini.

To read Brian’s speech and a report of the event written by MSMT Trustee Omar Bucchioni (**pictured left**), go to <http://www.msmtrust.org.uk/news/a-medal-for-dora-pieruccini/>



MSMT WORK GROUPS

Good progress is being made by the three working groups set up to implement the Trust’s five-year Strategy Plan, drawing partly on funds raised by the successful £1 million Appeal.

Raising our profile within Italy: We have formed a partnership with the highly-regarded Istituto Storico. Subject to receiving funding, three of its branches in the centre-north region of Emilia-Romagna (Forlì-Cesena, Modena and Bologna) will lay on a course in 2017 for students entitled *Road Map of Freedom*, telling the PoW story and comprising lectures and historical site visits. Three of the students, who will be recruited through the Institute’s branches, will be awarded one-month study bursaries in the UK by MSMT. A connection with the Institute will help spread the word about our work, and the project may be extended in future years to all the Institute’s branches in Emilia-Romagna. The three bursaries, each costing the Trust about £2,000, will be in addition to the 25 bursaries offered every year.

The Trust’s Archive: Since Nicola Waddington joined the Trust as our Archivist, work to update the catalogue and place the archive of escape stories on the MSMT website has gained momentum. We aim to make the documents easily accessible to researchers and to supporters who wish to learn more about their family members and the Italians who helped them while they were on the run. We aim to make the content of the archive easy to search and view online. Technical discussions will take place in February, with a view to posting this valuable information in the spring.

Commemoration: A senior Archivist at the National Archives in Washington DC is developing a finding tool for the Allied Screening Commission files, which contain precious information about Italian helpers and claims made to the Commission at the end of the war. Anne Copley, one of our Trustees, will be visiting him to view the archive in a few months’ time. Following this, we will be able to get a quote for the digitisation of the entire archive. We are also continuing to research the idea of an award for Moral Courage in Italy and it is possible that a small-scale pilot project will be run in one Italian region this year. Finally, talks are taking place with the Italian Ambassador and Westminster City Council about situating a commemorative plaque or statue in or near the Italian Embassy in Grosvenor Square.

OBITUARIES

It is with great regret that we report the deaths of two stalwart supporters, both of them former PoWs in Italy – Major Michael Lacey and Major Michael Wagner, MBE. They will both be sorely missed. Full obituaries will be published in the annual newsletter.

Mike Lacey (pictured right), who died on December 19th, aged 96, was commissioned into the Royal Artillery and assigned to 60th Field Regiment in 1939. As part of the BEF in France in 1939-40, the regiment escaped from the Dunkirk beaches after surviving a terrifying encounter with some Stukas.

Subsequent service took Michael through Syria and Iraq to tank warfare in North Africa. Shortly after the battle of Sidi Razegh, he was captured in November 1941. From his first internment camp at Benghazi, Michael was taken to Montalbo, Italy, until the spring of 1943, when he was transferred to Fontanellato, near Parma.

Following the mass escape from Fontanellato in September 1943, Michael set off south with two companions, later to be joined by a deserter from the German army. After six months on the run, while trudging through snow in the Maiella mountains, he was ambushed and captured. After incarceration in Germany he returned to England in 1945 and continued to serve in the army for several years, in both Australia and Germany.

Mike did not sever his connections with Fontanellato. In 2013, he was among 80 Trust supporters who celebrated the 70th anniversary of the Armistice at the town. While there, he was given the notebook he had left behind at the camp and which had been picked up by a camp guard. He also met the grandchildren of the Ferrari family who had sheltered him.



Mick Wagner, who died on January 2nd, aged 99, was captured between Benghazi and Agebadia when his B Company of the 1st Battalion, the Welch Regiment, was overrun by German forces. He was interrogated at a German field headquarters where Field Marshal Erwin Rommel told him (mistakenly): “For you, the war is over.” Later, in 1945, he met Rommel’s widow in Stuttgart.

After incarceration at Padula, Italy, he was transferred to PG19 Bologna. Following Italy’s capitulation, the Germans planned to move the PoWs to Germany, but Mick managed to escape while the camp was being evacuated by hiding in a roof space for two nights. On the 250-mile journey south to rejoin the Allies, he and two others only survived with the help of Italian *contadini*. Acquiring arms, they harassed the enemy on the way and briefly joined a group of Yugoslav partisans. After joining up with a large group of escapees, in May 1944 about 130 of them were evacuated from the coast just south of the Tenna River in a landing craft sent from Termoli to rescue them.

After the war, at the age of 30, Mick joined the Colonial Service and was posted to Northern Rhodesia. After Northern Rhodesia became independent in 1964 he stayed on, serving the Zambian Government. While on leave in 1953, he and his wife Nan made their first visit back to Italy to seek out and thank the Italians who had helped him.

On retirement from Zambia in 1968, he and Nan lived first in Suffolk and then for nearly 50 years in Somerset in North Cheriton and Holton. Nan died in 1993.

A debt to Damiani

A NEWSPAPER STORY has miraculously linked up a Scottish family with the descendants of an Italian who rescued their grandfather from the Germans and the Fascists.

In 1944, Modesto Damiani hid sixteen Allied soldiers in the village of Lucignana, north Tuscany, after they had escaped from prisoner of war camps. The Damiani family were betrayed, however, and Modesto only just managed to warn the soldiers in time, pulling on his coat over his nightclothes as he dashed out in the early morning to warn them. Modesto, who spoke English as he had spent some pre-war years in Australia, himself also escaped. His family were put under pressure to reveal his whereabouts but he was not discovered.

The bravery of Modesto, and documents testifying to his courage and the successful escape of the soldiers, recently came to the attention of the Trust. On behalf of Modesto’s son, also called Modesto, who was aged 11 at the time, Andrew Adams, one of our working group members, set out to trace relatives of the soldiers who were rescued. After placing news stories about individual soldiers in different British newspapers, he struck lucky after an article naming James (Jimmy) Devaney, of Possilpark, Glasgow, was published in Scotland’s *Daily Record*.

Devaney’s grandson, Mark Logan, immediately contacted the Trust. He said: “I had grown up hearing this incredible story from my mother and grandmother, how he escaped during a march from the camp and was aided by the locals of an Italian village who sheltered him from the Nazis until his return to the Allies. It is incredible to hear this story again after all these years.”

For the full story, including an account in Modesto Senior’s own words, go to <http://www.msmtrust.org.uk/escape-stories/prisoners-saviour-modesto-damiani/>



TWO young soldiers hiding in a barn.... they are in fact actors in a film that student film director Zak Jarvis has made entitled *Across Frontiers*. It tells the story of two prisoners of war who escape from their Italian camp and are sheltered by *contadini*. The 30-minute film was shot in the Peak District and Middleton Railway, Leeds. Its premiere is planned for late-March once the sound design and visual effects are in place.

Zak was inspired to make the film by the experiences of his grandfather, who was a PoW at Gavi and lived on a family farm after he jumped off a train during transit to Germany. Zak says: "I made it to pay tribute to the *contadini* who bravely risked everything." Last year, Zak, who studies at the Northern Film School in Leeds, launched a crowd-funding campaign to raise the £5,000 needed to make the film. He says: "Much of it came from MSMT members and I couldn't have funded it without their help. Thank you!"

<http://www.msmtrust.org.uk/news/behind-the-lens/>

THE avalanche that engulfed a hotel in Abruzzo on January 18th following an earthquake is just the latest in a string of tragedies in mountainous central Italy. The disasters have saddened all of us at the Monte San Martino Trust, which has such strong connections with the area.

Help for earthquake victims

Although the Trust's statute does not permit it to donate to rebuilding funds for the earthquake villages, many individuals have done so, following the example of Eric Batteson, a 97-year-old former prisoner at Sforzacosta camp in the Marche.

Claire Driver, Eric's daughter, contacted the Trust to say that her father, who lives in Cheshire, had donated to the village of Colleregnone, in the province of Ascoli Piceno. After his escape, Eric was sheltered there by the Buratti family from September 1943 to May 1944. He has frequently returned to the village and has stayed closely in touch with descendants of the Burattis. The house where he was given refuge and the church where he worshipped on Christmas Day were damaged in the October earthquake. The story of Eric's generosity brought a lot of media interest, within both Italy and the UK.

At New Year, we also received an email from the town of Monte San Martino, written by Giuseppe Millozzi, son of Antonio, the Trust's representative in Italy. He says: "At the B&B where I work we have three homeless families from Monte San Martino plus an Englishman, who, like the others, has no longer a place to live. Truthfully the majority of our homes locally have withstood the nearly 20,000 shakes remarkably well. The epicentres of the quakes were never closer than 50 km. There are, however, some exceptions. Villages like Gualdo, Sarnano and Amandola were more affected than others. Indeed Amandola no longer has a hospital."

FREEDOM TRAILS

- The Tenna Valley Freedom Trail in the Marche runs from May 18-21. We hope as many Trust members as possible will be able to join the Trail, which is based at Servigliano and is co-hosted with the Escape Lines Memorial Society. Contact **Roger Stanton, Director of ELMS, at rogerstanton.elms@tpiz.co.uk**.
- Chris Robillard is planning a trek in north-east Italy from June 3-9 on behalf of the Trust, to commemorate his PoW father, David, and the Italians who helped him while on the run. Chris is looking for a sponsor and is keen to hear from people who might like to join him. <http://www.msmtrust.org.uk/news/a-trek-in-tribute/>

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