

THOMAS D. PRAINO

**A Memorandum for Theater:
Northern Italy, 25 July 1944**

“...In labor, rest,
In heat, temperance,
In tears, solace. . .”
—*Veni Sancte Spiritus*

In memory of my dear distinguished colleague,
Dottor Alberto Silvestri, Italian government
veterinarian and naturalist. Our conversations were
fewer than the fingers of my right hand and just as
precious. Addio Dottore.

SYNOPSIS: A brief drama about two soldiers from different armies who find
death and duty at the crossroads of war and life, and life responds in a robin's call.

Approximate run time: 20-30 minutes

Set: Minimal

CHARACTER LIST:

Oberleutnant, (First Lieutenant), Gunter Deutch: (mid 20s) A German Army infantry officer. Dressed in a worn, long sleeved, grey, field tunic with green collar, grey eagle on right breast. He wears an officer's cap, and a brown leather pistol belt. He has the rank of a First Lieutenant.

Maresciallo Giuseppe Azzurro: (45-50) A Carabinieri, an Italian military policeman, wearing his Khaki summer uniform with a black Sam Brown pistol belt, and hat. He has the rank of a senior non-commissioned officer in charge of his station.

Abbreviations:

C.S. Center Stage
S.R. Stage Right
S.L. Stage Left
O.S. Off stage
/ interrupts.

SETTING: On a mountain road, outside a village in northern Italy.

TIME: 25 July 1944, Morning

At Rise: O.S. The rumble of a motorcycle on a road, the crackle of small arms fire, and a crash. (Pause) From the village, Matins chant: *Te Deum*. (Pause) The sound of a truck stopping, vehicle doors open and close. Lights up: (C.S.) The rear of a canvas covered, German Army truck on a clay dirt road, boarded by white kilometer road markers, and Cypress tress. The sun casts short shadows. A robin's alarm call is heard from the tree.

(Enter GUNTER, S.R., looking at a clipboard.)

OBERLEUTNANT

(To his squad, O.S.) Set up the machine gun in that clearing.

(Enter MARESCIALLO, S.L., He salutes the German. GUNTER returns the salute.)

MARESCIALLO

Buon giorno, Sir Maresciallo Giuseppe Azzurro.

OBERLEUTNANT

Buon giorno, Maresciallo Oberleutnant Gunter Deutch.

(The MARESCIALLO opens the canvas, looks in, and gives a salute.)

OBERLEUTNANT

(To hostages) Buon giorno, signori, coraggio. (To Gunter) I heard these twenty townspeople were arrested. What are you going to do with them?

OBERLEUTNANT

Execute them.

MARESCIALLO

Why?

OBERLEUTNANT

This morning near San Piero rebels ambushed two of our Wehrmacht soldiers.

MARESCIALLO

But they're innocent.

OBERLEUTNANT

Our Command had you post bills in all the villages warning them not to give aid to the rebels. We warned them if one German were killed, on the same day, we'd execute ten men from that village.

MARESCIALLO

Release them.

OBERLEUTNANT

I can't do that.

MARESCIALLO

You can't murder twenty innocent people.

OBERLEUTNANT

Carabiniere, you and your partner should be out looking for the rebels who murdered our soldiers.

MARESCIALLO

I order you to release them.

OBERLEUTNANT

I out rank you, Maresciallo. I order you to leave.

MARESCIALLO

I'm the civil and military authority in charge here. These people are under my jurisdiction.

OBERLEUTNANT

Not today.

MARESCIALLO

By what right do you take them as prisoners?

OBERLEUTNANT

By the authority of that machine gun. Would you like to argue with it?

MARESCIALLO

Your Goering Division is capturing partisans from the hills. Let these civilians go.

OBERLEUTNANT

I know. How old is your son?

MARESCIALLO

Twenty, why?

OBERLEUTNANT

Most of the captured rebels are 18 and 20 year olds. It would be sad if your son were involved with them.

OBERLEUTNANT

He condemns the violence of both fascists and communists.

OBERLEUTNANT

Good. Where is he now?

MARESCIALLO

Studying at the university.

OBERLEUTNANT

Where?

MARESCIALLO

My congratulations, you speak Italian very well.

OBERLEUTNANT

Grazie, I studied in Florence.

MARESCIALLO

What did you study?

OBERLEUTNANT

Architecture, I'm an architect.

MARESCIALLO

Why are you in the infantry? Are you a replacement?

OBERLEUTNANT

The wisdom of the army. The day is hot. My squad is waiting.

MARESCIALLO

A minute, please—let me see the roster. I know these people. If one of them is suspected to be involved with the partisans my Intelligence Section will know.

OBERLEUTNANT

We don't need Intelligence for reprisals.

MARESCIALLO

I may discover something that may lead to the assassins.

(GUNTER gives him the roster.)

—Albertini, Marco; Belloni, Gianni? You can't execute them.

OBERLEUTNANT

Why not?

MARESCIALLO

You said you'd execute ten from the same village. They're not from San Piero they're from Bagno di Romangna.

OBERLEUTNANT

They were taken in San Piero.

(GUNTER moves to lower the truck door)

MARESCIALLO

They were visiting.

OBERLEUTNANT

I don't know where either town is, but their names are on this list.

MARESCIALLO

Please, I haven't finished browsing the roster.—

(The shadows shortened. Aroused by the heat, the cicadas hum. They stand in the sun; sweat drips from their faces, the backs of their shirts wet. GUNTER opens the truck canopy.)

—Did you like the architecture in Florence? Did you walk the old bridge—the Ponte Vecchio?

OBERLEUTNANT

Yes. It's strange you ask. I was reminiscing this morning while shaving. These hills—we're so close to Florence.

MARESCIALLO

What did you think? (Pause)—

(The MARESCIALLO lights a cigarette.)

MARESCIALLO

—Sorry, last one.

(MARESCIALLO tosses the cigarette package under the Cypress. He takes a drag, offers the cigarette to GUNTER, they alternate smoking it. The MARESCIALLO closes the canopy. They move to the shade of the Cypress tree. The robin yeeps an alarm call.)

OBERLEUTNANT

I was a student standing on the Ponte Vecchio, admiring the dome of the cathedral with its russet cupola on the canvas of a sapphire sky, just like this one. Oh! Look, a hawk!

MARESCIALLO

The robin must have heard her.—

(Pointing above in the tree then to the eagle.)

—Look at her circle the currents over the valley. It's an Aquila Reale.

OBERLEUTNANT

Ah—a Golden Eagle. How graceful.

MARESCIALLO (nodding)

Searching for prey.

OBERLEUTNANT

What kind?

MARESCIALLO

A rabbit—a marmot.

OBERLEUTNANT

Such an elegant creature. This hillside is magnificent.

MARESCIALLO

Grazie.

OBERLEUTNANT

What is this place called?

MARESCIALLO

Del Carnaio. You were saying—you were on the old bridge.

OBERLEUTNANT

This is a beautiful place. Yes—I was studying the huge dome over the church adorned in green and pink marble. I saw the Renaissance before my eyes. All the beauty man can design. Then, no one could find a solution to building a dome that spanned so large a space. But Brunelleschi, the architect, found the answer. You've been there, yes?

MARESCIALLO

Of course, but not with your knowledge of art. I didn't attend the university.

OBERLEUTNANT

When I'm old, I want to sit on the Ponte Vecchio over the river, with a glass of wine, gaze at the cathedral against a blue sky and with that sight take my last breath.

MARESCIALLO

That would be an enviable death.

OBERLEUTNANT

But they're before me.

(GUNTER steps toward the truck. MARESCIALLO steps in front of him.)

MARESCIALLO

How can you do this?

OBERLEUTNANT

The Major had a good relationship with your villagers. Why did they ambush our men?

MARESCIALLO

Foreigners are joining the partisans in these hills.

OBERLEUTNANT

The High Command's new policy thinks these executions will sour the villagers taste for partisans.

MARESCIALLO

Let them go.

OBERLEUTNANT

I am just a junior officer. I have orders.

MARESCIALLO

But its slaughter.

OBERLEUTNANT

Only twenty—in another country every village man of military age would be killed.

MARESCIALLO

The partisans will use it as propaganda.

OBERLEUTNANT

Our men are fighting the enemy nearby. We use this road to deliver equipment and replacements. They ambush us. My comrades die because of their sabotage. These executions are the only way to persuade your people not to support them. We can't even trust your carabinieri. (Pause) And where does your loyalty lie?

MARESCIALLO

Here—with you. (Pause) You're committing an act of barbarism.

OBERLEUTNANT

The rebels are responsible for their deaths, not us. (To hostages) Get out.

MARESCIALLO

(To hostages in truck) Wait. (To Gunter) Let me finish checking the roster before you do this. Signor Rossi shouldn't be on your list.

OBERLEUTNANT

Why not?

MARESCIALLO

He—he's one of your patriots.

OBERLEUTNANT (laughing)

How is *he* a patriot?

MARESCIALLO

He—uh—was in the Italian infantry. He fought on the Russian Front, along side your Wehrmacht soldiers. You hear the reports about the brutal Russian campaign. He fought bravely against the Red Army. He was medically discharged. The severe winter gave him a bad heart. He's an invalid——but from combat.

OBERLEUTNANT

The Russian winter is not as ruthless as the gluttony for revenge in a Bolshevik's stomach.

MARESCIALLO

He could have ended up in one of Stalin's lagers. Is this how you'd reward this veteran?

OBERLEUTNANT

If he has a bad heart, I'll give him a blindfold.

MARESCIALLO

Oberleutnant, I see you like it here, when the war is over and you come back to visit, please stay at my house.

OBERLEUTNANT (sarcastic)

And drink a bottle of San Giovese.

MARESCIALLO

Better, I have a superb Chianti. You won't forget my invitation?

(Gunter pulls out his pistol, points it at him.)

OBERLEUTNANT

Step aside.

MARESCIALLO

There is only one problem.

OBERLEUTNANT

Is one of them the cousin of Field Marshall Goering?

MARESCIALLO (smiling)

No. (Pause) I'm old enough to be your father—so, forgive me if I talk to you as if you were my son. When you come back to Italy and visit as an architect, you said you want to, true?

OBERLEUTNANT (irritated)

Yes.

(MARESCIALLO takes out a handkerchief, wipes the sweat from his forehead. A brief, thunder of distant bombardment from the south. The MARESCIALLO then GUNTER glances in that direction.)

MARESCIALLO

After this madness is over, do you think you'll still feel the same when you stand on the bridge of the Ponte Vecchio?

OBERLEUTNANT

Move.

(Gunter chambers a round.)

MARESCIALLO

Imagine that you're in Florence now—looking at the cupola—before you close your eyes to see The Great Architect of that sapphire sky. Imagine, how happy you'll feel, when you sit at the café' in Piazza Della Signoria, near the Cathedral, by your Ponte Vecchio, and order an ice cream, and the barista goes in the back and whispers to all the workers, and the customers in the bar that the man he just served—was the man who released twenty hostages to the Carabinieri (Pause) and not that he whispers (Pause) he just served—the butcher of Del Carnaio.

(MARESCIALLO offers the handkerchief to GUNTER. Gunter still aiming at the Carabinieri's chest. GUNTER glances up.)

OBERLEUTNANT

(Long pause) Look, the eagle is gone. I wonder what her prey was today.

MARESCIALLO

Maybe none.

OBERLEUTNANT

(Long pause) You can stop your circling too. (Pause) Have your carabinieri take the prisoners. Tell him to have your Intelligence interrogate them, and send the report to the Major.

MARESCIALLO

Grazie mille. We'll drive them to the station.

OBERLEUTNANT

Let them walk. We need the petrol—the enemy is advancing.

MARESCIALLO

(To hostages) Signori, a carabinieri will take you to our police station for questioning. (To Gunter) I believe this deserves that bottle of Chianti to celebrate.

OBERLEUTNANT

What?

MARESCIALLO

Your future retirement in Italy. I know an *osteria*—

OBERLEUTNANT

The war is not over.

MARESCIALLO

But we still can enjoy a glass of good wine.

OBERLEUTNANT

No, thank you. (Pause) Sorry, I must ask you to surrender your pistol.

MARESCIALLO

Why?

OBERLEUTNANT

You're under arrest.

MARESCIALLO

What have I done?

OBERLEUTNANT

I had an order. I have to return to my superior—a man doesn't enter the den of a dangerous animal without a morsel to offer. Your weapon.

MARESCIALLO

No.

OBERLEUTNANT

If I call my squad to disarm you, I'll bring you both in as traitors. You'd be hanged and your bodies would dangle for days from a street lamp in your piazza. Isn't that what your partisans do?

MARESCIALLO

The communists hate the fascists for what they did to them. And the fascists hate the communists. The villagers can't control the atrocities.

OBERLEUTNANT

And I can't control the Nazis. (Pause) If you surrender quietly to me, I'd bring you in as my prisoner. I'll remind the Major you're a soldier—a brave one. I hope that will dissuade him from shooting you. You'd spend the rest of the war in a prison camp. Which do you chose?

(MARESCIALLO hesitates then he surrenders his pistol)

OBERLEUTNANT

You think I'm sarcastic when I say I envy you.

MARESCIALLO

Yes.

OBERLEUTNANT

This will mean my transfer to the Russian Front. (Pause)—

(MARESCIALLO is silent, he looks at him in the eyes, waiting.)

—Tonight another group will be executed in their place—but you and I will be somewhere else.

MARESCIALLO

They'll be questioned.

(The thunder of distant artillery, but nearer than before. GUNTER glances south)

OBERLEUTNANT

Maresciallo, if we're alive after we win this war—and have the opportunity to talk, on this road, in the future, past hatred, if not with fondness at least with the mutual respect of two soldiers, would you do me a favor?

MARESCIALLO

Of course, what?

(A robin calls from above.)

OBERLEUTNANT

May we talk under the shade of that Cypress, instead of under a nailing sun?

(GUNTER hands him back the handkerchief)

MARESCIALLO

God willing. And with the robin's call.

(They both look up at the robin. They exit. Shadows lengthen, lights dim. O.S. A church bell tolls for Vespers. The sound of an Army truck approaching the dirt road, it stops, the doors open and close, the metal creak of the bolt lowering the back of the truck, the bark of short imperatives in a foreign language--orders, the patter of many feet rushing off the road. A Gregorian chant, *Veni Sancte Spiritus*, from the town. Mid song, the burst of a machine-gun firing. Stage lights blacken then lights up: the next day, the mountain road striped with morning shadows. A robin whistles a dawn call from the cypress above the empty cigarette package.)

END

TOM PRAINO is a veteran of the U.S. Army Medical Department and a retired Army Reservist. Drama was based on a conversation with Dr Alberto Silvestri.