

LOUISE FERRARO DERETCHIN

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## Two Armies, One Family

*When we stood guard, we stood with our backs together because the Japanese dug tunnels under the ground. They came up behind you and slit your throat. This way, they couldn't get behind you.*

Only one picture hung on a wall in the living room of Apartment 7A in the Fort Greene Projects. It was a photograph of my mothers' brothers. The two brothers were in uniforms from opposing armies though not out of choice.

The single photograph was made from two photos taken during World War II in two different countries, at two different times. The skillful hand of a photographer merged the pictures so artfully into one that it was hard to see they were ever separate. A shared painterly background completed the deception.

My uncles were in dress uniform—Uncle Johnny in the United States Army, Uncle Tony in the Italian Army. Just their heads and chests were visible in the picture. It made both brothers look the same size even though Uncle Tony was thinner and taller than his smaller, more powerfully built, younger brother.

As I looked at the picture on the wall, my mother standing by my side, said, "The Italians were the enemy in WWII."

I wondered how this could be. To me Italy and the Italians were the center of the earth, they were all that was best in the world from its people to its food

She continued, "The Army knew your Uncle Johnny had a brother in the Italian Army. Because of that, they thought he was a spy. They gave him the most dangerous job on the battlefield. They hoped he would get killed."

Long after my mother was gone, and I was an adult with grown children of my own, I visited Uncle Johnny and he told me more. His slight Italian accent came out in his softened consonants and choice of words. The hushed, almost raspy, undertone to his voice conveyed strength and compassion.

The young Uncle Johnny, short but trim, and full of the devil, was now eighty-seven years old, over two hundred pounds, and bald except for a border of gray hair around the edges of what used to be a head of wavy light brown hair. He was still full of the devil; it peeked out from behind his hazel eyes. He couldn't resist telling one more story before getting on with the one about the war.

He told me he went hunting with one of his sons, a grown man, and that the son shot and injured a deer.

"My son said, 'What happened?' I looked at him and said, 'What happened? You shot the deer! That's what happened. But you didn't kill it.'"

Shaking his head, a smile on his lips, picking up the pace of the story, Uncle Johnny continued, "I ran after the deer. It was stumbling, trying to run away. One antler was hanging from his head. I jumped on its back and slit its throat."

I gasped and then asked, "How long ago was this?"

"Oh, three, maybe four years."

"What! You were eighty-three!" flew out of my mouth as my eyes stared in disbelief.

He smiled, let out a chuckle and then nodded his head, "I was eighty-three. I could run then. Now I'm too old."

I found out from his children, my cousins, that at another time he spotted a bear in a national forest and chased after it. He wanted to test the theory that if you tickle a bear's stomach, it will lie down like a puppy. The bear was too fast for him and got away.

A forest ranger standing nearby asked, "What's the matter with your father?" My cousins smiled, and with a knowing glance toward each other, shrugged their shoulders.

His children called him, "The man from another planet." He survived typhoons, bombs, bullets, near-drowning, and sharks. At age eighty-seven, he still had 20/20 vision; he had never had a headache, but would like to have one so that he could know what it feels like; he had all his teeth; and when his dentist told him he needed a root canal, he replied, "Nah! My teeth are just old like I am." With his broad hands spread and resting on the table, Uncle Johnny settled in and began his story starting in Tornolo, Italy at the beginning of 1940, a year and a half before Pearl Harbor was bombed.

“I was eighteen years old in Tornolo where your grandfather brought us to live after your grandmother died and we left Brooklyn. Tornolo was where your grandfather grew up. I was trying to get back to the United States to join the Army. If I had to fight for a country, I wanted to fight for *my* country, the place I was born. I was only two when I left the United States, but it was still my country.

“Your Uncle Tony was already in the Italian Army. He wrote me a letter. He said, ‘Don’t let them take you into the Italian Army. They treat you like animals. There’s no food. They give you rice.’ He hated rice. He wasn’t tough like me. He was easy to scare.

“The official at the office in Borgo Val Di Taro, Mr. Caprelli, was doing nothing to help me get back to the United States—he was trying to keep me in Italy. He kept telling me to come back tomorrow, then tomorrow, then tomorrow. I was running out of time. I was tired of going back and forth to Borgo for nothing.”

Uncle Johnny opened and closed his fists as they rested on the kitchen table, pushed back from the table and continued.

“I got on a train and went to the American Consulate in Genoa. They did the paperwork right away and told me, ‘You want to fight for America? Good. The last boat for American citizens to leave Italy departs the day after tomorrow. Go home. Pack your bags.’

“I left my father and my sister Ida—they were the only ones in my family still in Tornolo. My father was sad. But what could you do? I had to get out. I was on the SS Washington the next morning headed for the United States. I went to live with your parents. They had nothing, but they took me in. Your mother brought me to the draft board. I had to sign up—I was an American citizen. They spelled my last name, ‘Bernie’ instead of ‘Berni.’”

With a question and a slight sadness in his eyes he said, “I don’t know why your mother didn’t say something.”

I knew why. My mother hated her maiden name, Berni. She said, “It sounds like burning. Burn. Kids at school in Brooklyn used to tease me, ‘Berni burning.’”

As he sat at the kitchen table and told his story, he glanced now and then at a picture of his father that hung on the wall to the right of the bay window that looked out onto his garden. His love for his parents was sweet and deep. Even at age eighty-seven, he slept with a picture of his mother, who died when he was two, on the nightstand by the side of his bed.

After a pause, he went on. “I lived with your parents for almost two years before I got drafted. Pearl Harbor got bombed in December 1941. I was called up in 1942. After Basic Training in West Virginia, I was sent to Fort Benning, Georgia. I

became friends with a German guy, Ed Baker. I hung out with him, just having fun. I didn't know the FBI was watching.

"Baker talked about going over the hill. I joked along with him about deserting, but I didn't think Baker was serious. One day he said to me, 'We're going over the hill. We'll take off tomorrow morning. Are you coming with us?'"

"I said, 'What? Are you kidding? No, not me.'"

Uncle Johnny stirred more Coffee-mate into his cup of coffee, exhaled through his nose, tightened his lips, and went on.

"Baker got caught. They found him in Brooklyn. He was a German spy. They knew he was my friend. They thought I was a spy, too. I found that out the next day.

"My unit was supposed to go on a hike. The sergeant said, 'You! Come with me. You may be happy you don't have to hike, but I wouldn't want to be in your pants.'"

"We went downtown to Columbus, Georgia. They put me in a room in some building. Two guys were there. They took out their badges from the War Department of Intelligence and started questioning me. When one stopped, the other started. They kept at it, one after the other, hour after hour."

During the questioning, Uncle Johnny told the Federal Agents that he had a brother in the Italian Army. They asked, "Would you shoot your brother if you saw him?"

"I said to them, 'What! Are you crazy? It's my brother. I would never shoot him.'"

The questions kept flying at him. An agent, with his reddened face a foot away from Uncle Johnny's, spat out, "You goddamn Wop, why didn't you go into the Italian Army instead?"

With his head up and turned toward me, his eyes penetrating, and his voice all strength, Uncle Johnny continued, "I got burned up. I started cursing him.

"He said to me, 'You are attacking a Federal agent. I'll lock you up.'"

"I said, 'You can't. You're the one who called me a name.'"

"The agent's eyes got small like a snake's. He said, 'We are locking you in the room for ten minutes. When we come back, if you don't tell the truth, you'll go where your friend is. Do you know where your friend is?'"

"I told them, 'Of course I do—in the guardhouse. Half the unit knows that.'"

"They came back and started questioning me again. I said, 'Whatever I had to say, I told you. Now, I'm ready to go to the guardhouse. You said you were going to put me in the guardhouse? Put me in the guardhouse!'"

"The agent told me, 'Go back to your outfit. Don't say anything to anyone.'"

"I looked him straight in the eye and said, 'Why? Because you know you have a dirty conscience?'"

Uncle Johnny's unit was sent to Italy, but he was kept at Fort Benning to act as an interpreter for the first 150 Italian prisoners of war brought there. At first, the Italian prisoners were kept in barracks with one hundred German prisoners. The Italians and Germans hated each other. Uncle Johnny explained, "In the war, the Germans sent the Italians to the front of the lines to fight while they stayed back and ate our food. They had to put the Germans and Italians in separate quarters. They were killing each other."

A smile started to form behind Uncle Johnny's eyes. He began with feigned indignation and moved to pride, and then satisfaction.

"The Army cooks served the Italians spaghetti with ketchup on it. It was disgusting. The Italians asked if they can cook their own meals, they had good cooks with them. The Army said, 'You want to cook your own food? Go ahead.' The Italians put bed sheets on the tables for tablecloths. The food was so good the officers came there to eat. Pretty soon, the Italians became the cooks for everyone at Fort Benning."

He continued, "I hated being the interpreter. I was embarrassed to ask the prisoners questions. I was just a kid—nineteen years old. Some of the men were fifty, sixty years old. I never addressed older people like that. I had to get out of there. It was driving me nuts. I signed up for the paratroopers. They didn't take me. They still thought I was a spy."

While Uncle Johnny was at Fort Benning, the United States, stung by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, spent months trying to regain even limited capacity to retaliate against the crippling effect of the bombing. By late 1942, the U.S. was ready. Uncle Johnny found himself headed to the South Pacific where the United States began its war against Japan.

He spent weeks at sea as his troop transport ship dodged mines and submarines. He was in the first wave, one of the first troops to arrive in the South Pacific islands that made up the scattered battleground where much of the war was fought against Japan. For Uncle Johnny, New Caledonia was the first stop of many in the islands of the South Pacific. The sweltering heat, mosquitoes, and poisonous snakes were the least of his worries.

When he and the other troops got off the transport ship, they were assembled and told by an officer, "Here there are no corporals, sergeants, or privates. We are all equal. When your number is called, you go up the hill and fight."

"By then, we had no names. We just had numbers."

The Army did not give up thinking he was a spy. They made him a medic. His job was to retrieve the dead and wounded from the battlefield—the U.S. Army’s way of trying to get rid of him, just as my mother had explained to me years ago.

I asked what it was like to go onto the battlefield to bring back men that had been shot. He paused, looked questioningly at me, and went back to looking out the window. His hands were together, still resting on the table. He said nothing more than, “We couldn’t even use our medics insignia. The Japanese would shoot a medic man before they would shoot anyone else. The Japanese, they say, ‘When you kill a medic, you kill other soldiers—the sick and the wounded.’”

He and his fellow troops moved from island to island, battle to battle through New Guinea on to Okinawa, part of the Army’s plan to use strategic island-hopping to defeat the Japanese. There, in Okinawa just off the mainland of Japan, the bloodiest battle of the war in the Pacific raged for eighty-two days from March until June of 1945. There were lots of American bodies for medics to retrieve. There was also guard duty to pull.

“When we stood guard, we stood with our backs together because the Japanese dug tunnels under the ground. They came up behind you and slit your throat. This way, they couldn’t get behind you.

“Sometimes I would think about when I return to the U.S. Then I’d say to myself, ‘What am I talking about. Maybe I won’t see the U.S. again.’ You don’t know one day to another.”

On July 16, 1945, the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. On August 9<sup>th</sup>, a second bomb was dropped, this time on Nagasaki.

“We went through Hiroshima. It was all ashes. Everything was burned. They said nothing would grow there for twenty years.”

In October of 1945, one month after Japan surrendered, the South Pacific was still anything but a tropical paradise for my Uncle Johnny. He wrote to my mother:

Maji. Oct. 30 – 1945.

Dear Sister.

Rispondo alla tua più è desiderata lettera del 2 ottobre. . . [he goes on to say he will write in English because censors are suspicious of the Italian] . . . By the way, speaking of packages Marie, do you know that I haven’t received them packages that you and Tessie sent me long time ago. I do hope I receive them soon for we still eat rations here for you know we keep moving around and we have lots of work to do and no time to set up the mess [h]all so we kook our selves [sic] ration every day, we use can heat

to kook [sic]. I'm telling you Marie I can't hardly wait to come home and have a nice meal again with you and the family.

He signed the letter, "Your Love Brother Johnny," not knowing how to express in English the deep feeling of, "tuo affezionatissimo fratello Gianni"—the way he signed letters to my Mother when he wrote in Italian. The translation, "Your most affectionate brother" did not approach the intensity of love the Italian expressed so easily.

I asked, "I know you were only two when Grandpa took you to Italy to live, so how did you learn to speak and write English?"

He replied with an of-course firmness to his voice and a jerk back of his head, "I educated myself! I read the newspapers!"

I refilled his empty coffee cup. He stirred in Coffee-mate and added milk. He sighed, looked down, shook his head in a gesture of disbelief, and then told me, "I received a letter from Tornolo from your Zia Ida in 1945. I was in Japan. She told me my father was very sick. I wanted to go home to see him.

"They wouldn't let me go. They said, 'If your father was in southern Italy, you could go. But you can't go to northern Italy.'"

His father—my grandfather—died on December 15 before Uncle Johnny could say goodbye, just one more hardship he had endured so courageously during this period of his life.



New Caledonia, 1942. Uncle Johnny in the first of many Army camps set up and taken down in the hot tropics of the South Pacific as he and fellow soldiers were kept on the move from island to island fighting the Japanese.

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Uncle Johnny pushed himself away from the table and, with a smile on his face, said, “I hope you don’t have any more questions. I’m done.” He decided it was time to go for a walk in the vegetable garden he had planted by himself at the back-half of his 500-foot deep yard. He showed me the tomatoes, rosemary, garlic, red potatoes, white potatoes, zucchini, berries, and the stubborn poppies that kept coming up even though he never planted them and tried to get rid of them each year. He picked some tender lettuce leaves to have with dinner that night. I had to wait until the next morning and another pot of coffee to be brewed before Uncle Johnny continued with his stories.

Rested and refueled, he was ready to tell me about Uncle Tony in the Italian Army.

I asked, “How did Uncle Tony wind up in the Italian Army?”

“He was two years older than me. He was drafted. He hated it. He wrote to me, ‘What are you doing still in Tornolo? Get the hell out of there.’ He said he was starving, there was no food; but he was always a fussy eater. Uncle Tony didn’t talk much about the war. I don’t even know if he ever had to fight.”

Uncle Johnny's eyes met mine and then he told me something I would never have suspected my skinny, nervous-looking Uncle Tony could do.

"Your Uncle Tony was stationed in Tuscany. Then he got sent to southern Italy. When the Americans got the Germans out of southern Italy, Tony ran away from the Italian Army. He went back to Tornolo. When he got there, he found there were *rastrellamenti*! It was because of the *rastrellamenti* that I was not allowed to go back to see my father before he died."

*Rastrellamenti* were the remains of the German SS forces that conducted systematic, murderous, rampages throughout Italy leaving behind towns burned to the ground and virtually everyone dead. Italian men that were kept alive were forced to work in chemical plants in which it was deemed too dangerous to risk the lives of young Germans. When Uncle Tony returned to Tornolo, well up into the mountains of northwest Italy, the SS's work was confined to the northern part of the country where they were butchering, not capturing, any young men they could find.

Uncle Johnny went on. "The Germans, they knew they were losing the war already. But that didn't stop them from doing their dirty work in the north. The Nazis were in Tornolo. The people in the town dug holes in the ground for their men to sleep in. During the day, the men hid in the woods.

"One day, your Uncle Tony was in the fields. He saw the Germans coming. He ran for the woods. They ran after him and shot at him. Bang! The bullets passed three feet from his head. He made it to the woods. He hid there until nighttime. Even then, he was still afraid to come out."

Uncle Johnny shifted in his seat and resettled his still muscular arms on the table. He slowly nodded his head and said, "The Germans would come into your house and take anything they wanted. They came into my father-in-law's house and started taking chickens.

"My father-in-law was already an old man at the time. I wasn't married to his daughter yet. I was still fighting in Japan. The stupid thing, he calls out to his wife, 'Give them the rooster. Don't let them take the chickens.'"

Uncle Johnny shook his head and gave a chuckle, "The Germans, they heard a man's voice. They found my father-in-law hiding in the attic. They made him show them the way to the top of the mountain. There were Italian fighters at the top resisting the Germans. My father-in-law climbed for five or six hours up the mountain trail. He told me he was too tired and too afraid to even pee.

“When they got close to the top of the mountain, the Germans said, ‘Go home. We don’t need you anymore. We know the way from here.’ My father-in-law, he was lucky. The Germans, they didn’t care if you were young or old. They killed anybody.

“He said he ran down the mountain faster than a rabbit even though his legs shook so much he thought they would crack. When he got home, his wife was crying so hard that she didn’t see him come through the door. When he pulled out a kitchen chair to sit next to her, she screamed so loud it scared him more than the Germans. She thought he was a ghost. She thought he was dead.”

At the end of 1945, after almost three years in the South Pacific and Japan, Uncle Johnny began his trip back home to Brooklyn.

“That was my luck traveling. We got an old beat up boat coming home. The old junk broke down in the middle of the ocean.” He looked me in the eye and said, “I hate the ocean. I had enough of it!”

“Fifty-two days, we had nothing to eat. They used to give us a bowl of potatoes for breakfast, no lunch, and a bowl of potatoes at night. Then we got close to a small island they call Mug Island. They sent a couple of sailors with a couple of soldiers in lifeboats to the island—I was one of them.”

“Heh!” he chuckled, tossing his head back. “We asked for some food. They said, ‘We don’t have enough for ourselves. How are we going to give you any?’ They gave us some of those weenies in a little can. We were happy with that. Then we went back to the boat.” A twinkle appeared in Uncle Johnny’s eye that signaled something was coming. “I raced up to the deck—we had to climb up a rope, you know. I was the first one up,” he laughs. “My friends were happy to see a soldier beat the sailors.”

On January 26, 1946, more than a month after he was expected home, my mother glanced out the kitchen window and saw Uncle Johnny in uniform, carrying his duffle bag. He was walking down the broad concrete expanse that led to our building in a housing complex. She yelled, “Johnny! Johnny!” and ran down the stairs from our fifth floor apartment, not bothering to wait for the elevator.

My mother had kept the live Christmas tree up, as she swore she would, until Uncle Johnny came home. It was more brown than green with half its needles fallen and swept away, but it still looked beautiful to him.

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