



DAWN PATROL

Adapted from the Novel by Bob Cerrano

GIOVANNI'S LONG ROAD

An Immigrant's Path to America A Novel

PART II: ROAD THROUGH A VALLEY OF DEATH

On the twenty-ninth of May 1916, the Wolf Brigade of Tuscany approached San Floriano del Collio, formerly the Slovenian village of Števerjan. Private Antonio Pestone rubbed his nose. Corporal Giovanni Audano sensed it also. Giovanni had smelled it before while in the breastworks on Cima Undici, but nothing like this. Pestone rushed to the side of the road and vomited. Seargent Brasi looked at the two ashen-faced soldiers.

He gave a weak smile, reached into his haversack, and handed them each a six-inch cigar that tapered slightly at both ends.

“Here, smoke a Toscano. It’ll cover the smell. It’s the decaying corpses, tangled in the barbed wire, shot or blown to pieces where we can’t get to them. It’s difficult to eat at first, with the smell of death always in your nostrils. It’s something you don’t forget, but most get used to it after a while. .”

Giovanni noticed the road they were marching on had shell holes on both sides, and shards of rock radiated from the craters. Sabotino’s white limestone loomed two thousand feet above the fields as they turned into the valley. The setting sun washed it in a reddish hue, its rocky slope dotted with brush, broken only by tell-tale signs of military constructions. The mountain rose northward from Gorizia, then dropped off almost vertically on the other side to the Isonzo River. Sabotino was an excellent

natural fortification for the Austrians, who carved artillery emplacements and a series of defensive trenches out of the rock.

From these positions, the Austrians dominated the bridges that crossed the Isonzo into Gorizia and the roads to Trieste.

Giovanni understood why previous assaults on Sabotino had failed miserably.

Pestone couldn't take his eyes off it either. "That mountain is the work of the Devil himself. I've never seen hell, Corporal Audano, but I'm sure if I did, it would look just like that mountain. Quite a sight, but then again, everything has been overwhelming me these last few months. First, I'm in my village, then in Lodi training. Sixty days later, I'm on a train headed to the front."

Giovanni looked at him. "I know how you feel. A few weeks ago, I waded in knee-deep snow in the Dolomites on the Cima

Undici with an Alpine regiment, hauling artillery up the mountain. Now I'm on the march with the 77th, sun shining, kicking up dust. I try not to think about where I'll be next. You're doing a good job of taking it in stride, one day at a time. It's not good to think too far ahead."

The muffled sound of artillery rumbling in the distance reminded them they were getting closer to the front. Things were about to get much worse for them.

Sergeant Brasi had been quietly listening. He poked Giovanni softly with his elbow and asked, "You were with an Alpine unit?"

"Yes, 3rd Regiment, Fenestrelle Battalion."

Brasi's eyes widened. "You're not pulling my leg, are you? They're one of the most decorated regiments in the army."

"Easy, Sarge, I'm no hero. I was only with the Alpini for three

weeks, getting training in mountain tactics. My sergeant told me the army was trying to expand mountain training to more of the troops. We were strengthening the positions they had taken from the Austrians against counterattacks. I have a lot of respect for those guys. Most of their fighting is straight up the mountains. Maybe the brigade will move there if there are any breakthroughs someday?”

Brasi answered quickly. “I think not! Do I look like a mountain goat to you?” Catching Giovanni’s smile, he quickly added, “Ok, Audano, better not answer that one if you know what’s good for you.”

Giovanni quickly changed the subject. “I hear you were in Libya.”

Brasi grunted an answer. “I went there in 1911. I just made it out of Benghazi with my skin, thanks to the shelling from the

big guns of the *Regina Elena* off the coast. Then they sent me to Derna till they shipped me back home in 1912.”

“I’d say that’s more impressive than my three weeks in the mountains.”

Brasi grunted again, and the men fell silent as they became lost in their thoughts. The rhythmic tramp, tramp, tramp of thousands of boots on the dirt road hypnotized them and enveloped them in a dust cloud.

The regiment reached camp at dusk. Giovanni saw artillery shells of all sizes neatly stacked in rows. Trucks and mules loaded with munitions and supplies moved in and out. The bustling activity was a distraction from the monotony of the last few days. Further on, the aid station treated injured soldiers, and bodies lined the ground covered with tarps, a chilling reminder of where they were.

The lieutenant raised his arm. “Company, fall out and head for the field kitchen. You have a half-hour.”

They walked over to a line of large iron pots full of steaming vegetable soup hanging from steel bars over a long fire pit.

Taking a ladle from the hook, Giovanni filled his mess tin, walked over to a makeshift log bench, and sat down.

Sargent Brasi and Pestone sat beside him. Brasi began wolfing down spoonfuls of the hot liquid and chunky vegetables. When he finished, he sat back, lit a half-smoked cigar he took from his pocket, and moaned. “Wish there was some meat in that soup.”

He took a draw and let the smoke drift into his nostrils. “The lieutenant told me there’s a big Austrian offensive in the Trentino sector. Our boys are getting pounded pretty hard up there. They took the Asiago a few days ago. It’s hundreds of miles away, and he doesn’t think they have enough men to open

up another offensive here, so things should be quiet for a while.”

Giovanni and Pestone were still pushing their soup around, occasionally forcing down a spoonful. They couldn't distinguish the soup's flavor from the acrid smell of death and explosives.

More soldiers soon filled the area. Two young men sat on a log across from the trio, talking excitedly about getting into combat soon.

“I've been waiting for this chance for over a year. Won't it be grand to grind the Bosch into dust and march into Gorizia to liberate our Italian brothers?”

The other one quickly nodded his head. “Yeah, and then on to Trieste. That's what my university friends in Florence think we should do.”

Knitting his brow, Giovanni looked at the two young soldiers and then at Brasi. “Back home, most of my friends and other

workers didn't worry much about *Italia Irredenta*. Feeding the family, making barrels, or tending to their farms were more important than reclaiming ancient Italian lands from the Hapsburgs. However, discussions at the barrel shop with Signori Rettori and Moretti were a different matter. Signore Rettori always waxed poetic about the reunification of Italy. He was usually vocal about his hatred of the Austrians. I'm sure some of that related to the competition they gave him in the white wine trade."

"I never thought much about it," added Pestone. Before I was called up, we didn't talk much about politics on the farm, mostly just the goings-on in the village and local gossip. Hell, I'd never ridden on a train before joining the army, let alone worry about Trieste or the Trentino. The first talk I heard about that came from our lieutenant. It was all about the destiny of greater Italy.

Never did quite understand what he was talking about, and still don't."

Brasi slapped his knee. "All I need to know is what the brass wants me to do. When someone gives me an order, I do what I'm told. Life's simpler that way."

The two young soldiers were still chattering about their glorious future and how they would return home as heroes. Brasi rolled his eyes and threw the stump of his cigar at the two young soldiers. "You two going to set everything right, are you? Gonna kill some Austrians and liberate Gorizia from the Austro-Hungarian Empire? Didn't you notice that most people in the countryside weren't Italians? I don't think they're very pleased to see us."

One of the young soldiers snapped back nervously. "Yeah, but what about the Italians living in the cities?"

Brasi gave a sly smile. “Not all your Italian brothers in Gorizia long to be liberated either. They have their own lives, and some might like things just the way they are. Not everyone is going to be happy to see your ugly faces.” His smile vanished. “Before you two heroes march through the streets of Rome, you’ll have to fight to stay alive.” He pointed toward Sabotino. “Those boys up there are a rough bunch, and you might be the next stinking body on the wire instead of marching into Gorizia.”

The two young soldiers glared back at Brasi, stood up, and left without another word.

The sergeant paused for a moment and then grinned. “There, Giovanni. It looks like I just made two new friends. If I don’t survive this damn mountain, be sure they don’t cry too long over my cold dead body.”

Giovanni looked at Brasi and smiled, “Sure thing, Sarge. I’m

always willing to help, but for now, I think I'll pack it in and get some sleep. Just in case they decide to send us up to the Trentino.”

“Don't worry too much about that. We will be here a while, digging trenches up on the mountain and moving closer to the Austrians. I heard that from the lieutenant, too. It's going to be a bitch, digging through that rock.”

The sergeant's prophecy came true. For the next six weeks, they spent their days hammering and drilling through the stone, snaking their trenches up toward the summit.

In mid-July, Lieutenant Crippa called Giovanni, Sargent Brasi, and Corporal Bondi to the forward fire trench. “Within a few weeks, we'll be a few hundred yards from the Austrians.” He pointed to one of three crude maps and continued. “Three, four-man patrols will scout this sector. We must know the makeup of

enemy trenches, gun emplacements, machine guns, and rifle positions. Brasi, you take the Western face. Bondi, you have the center, and Audano has the East face. The Austrian heavy guns are in tunnels on the western side. Brasi, see how they're protected. We'll have to knock them out when we attack. Bondi and Audano, you're scouting rifle and machine-gun positions. Here are the maps for your observations."

With darkness for cover, the three patrols left a few hours before dawn. The objective was to observe as much of the line as possible at first light and then slip back down the mountain without being detected.

Giovanni's patrol climbed out of the trench and picked their way in the dark, crawling the four hundred yards that separated them from the Austrians. They reached the barbed wire an hour later. It seemed longer to Giovanni. They were so close to the

trenches that he could hear the enemy soldiers moving above him. He motioned to his men for quiet. If he could hear the Austrians, then they would be able to hear his patrol.

The sun was beginning to climb in the sky. He marked places on his map where machine guns were in that sector and that there were loopholes every three feet. He had just finished when he heard the crack of a rifle to the West. Then another. Signaling to his men to flatten themselves, he pressed himself to the hard, rocky surface. They were right under the Austrians, not more than thirty feet from their trenches. As long as they didn't move, the Austrians couldn't see them without standing to look over the trench's sandbag parapet. Most soldiers were loath to do that because of the Italian snipers.

Another sharpshooter opened fire, then another. Soon, the sector was alive with gunfire. They spotted Bondi's patrol! The

soldier at the loophole above Giovanni began to shoot. He could hear the sound of the bolt coming back and the clear ting when the ejected brass casing hit the stone trench wall. He saw Bondi crouched low, the patrol moving from stone to stone for cover down the mountainside.

Giovanni heard the distinctive tak-tak-tak of the Austrian Schwarzlose machine gun to his left. The tapping noise of the bolt moving up and down, the ammunition belt feeding an endless supply of death to the hungry beast. *If only I had a bag of grenades.*

To his frustration, there was nothing Giovanni could do. There were too few of them, and they weren't armed for an extended fight. They watched Bondi's patrol scramble back down the mountain to their trenches. Then came the tak-tak-tak again, and one of Bondi's men had his legs shot from under him. He

stumbled forward a few feet and fell motionless.

Giovanni's patrol waited silently for darkness before attempting to return to their trenches. It was a long, hot summer day under the Carso sun for the four men. The rocky ground dug into their bodies; the sun baked them where they lay. Giovanni knew that if they moved around too much, the enemy would see them, and they'd never return alive. He looked at the men and put his finger to his lips, moving his arms to the side, calling for silence, to move sideways and tuck themselves face down under the barbed wire. That kept their hands and feet out of sight of the sentries above them.

Giovanni checked his watch. Minutes felt like hours. The longer they stayed, the greater the chance someone would spot them. Minute after agonizing minute, he waited, sweat pouring from every part of his body. His helmet felt like a cooking kettle

in the blazing sun.

Night finally came. Giovanni could hardly move after so many hours on the rocks. Motioning his men to return to the Italian trenches, he hunched low and moved westward in search of the soldier wounded that morning. Too much time had passed, and there wasn't much hope of finding him alive, but he had to try. After what seemed an eternity, crawling in front of the Austrian trenches, he could make out the shape of a body in the darkness. There was no pulse. One of the bullets hit an artery. The soldier had bled out quickly that morning. Giovanni sighed and whispered, "Come, my friend, you've been on the mountain long enough. Time for us to go home." He pulled the body over his back and slowly made his way from rock to rock, back to the Italian lines. For the last two soldiers of the patrol, the long day on Sabotino finally ended.