

PRISONER OF WAR 120085 - STONEY MIDDLETON

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At the beginning of WWII, I was called up for service in the Italian Army and sent to Tunisia by Benito Mussolini. Almost as soon we landed, I happened to see a map of the world for the first time, and was instantly struck by the difference in size between the allied states of Germany and Italy compared to the size of The USA, The USSR, and Great Britain combined. Italy and Germany together seemed small and insignificant and it was at that precise moment that I understood Italy would surely lose the war. Being less naïve than the Germans, we Italians knew that Mussolini was only using us to show Hitler that we were his allies and all we soldiers really wanted was to get home safe and sound.

The occasion to leave North Africa soon presented itself in Sfax, Tunisia when a colonel pointed to a road and said: "Follow that road to return to our field, stay on it because if you make a mistake, you will end up on the beach and be captured by the English!" Having heard that the English treated prisoners of war very well, it didn't take much to convince my fellow soldiers to make a mistake on purpose. We took the 'wrong' road, were captured by the British, and after a long sea voyage, found ourselves in Middleton, England where we were put to work in a stone quarry. However, not having any experience in quarry work, the most we could do was break up the waste stone into little bits that could then be used along the rail road tracks. I remember once I didn't brake a cart full of stones very well and it rolled at top speed through the quarry, almost killing someone.

Being captured by the English was not a mistake at all, because in Middleton we had food, chocolate and cigarettes, all of which we was hard to come by in wartime Italy. Having said that, I was always hungry. Once, an English guard was enjoying a delicious sandwich, when he saw that I was eating his sandwich with my eyes. He offered me his other sandwich, but I politely said no, thinking that he would insist . . . but no, my refusal, which was common courtesy in my country, where a second invitation that is accepted always followed, wasn't understood in England where NO is understood as NO. The guard did not hesitate in tossing the sandwich into the rubble, leaving me wide-eyed, with my mouth watering, and too embarrassed to salvage it. Oh, how I would have relished that sandwich.



Cesare Soldati now 88 years old
with his wife Manola

I met some local girls and I think that one called Ginger even fell in love with me while she was teaching me English. (It was many years later that I understood Ginger was probably not her real name but a nickname because of her red hair). I gave Ginger a ring that I had fashioned out of an aluminum military fork and her girlfriends found it so attractive that they all wanted one too. Another friend, Olive, even stole a silver fork from her family's cutlery and asked me to make a ring out of it, which I did; however since Olive was not my girlfriend, I asked her to pay for my handicraft or give it back. She refused both requests, saying that she didn't have any money and anyway it wouldn't come off her finger. I told her that the next time I saw her I would cut off her finger to get my ring back. I never saw her again.

When the prisoners were released, Ginger didn't want me to leave for Italy, and she cried when we said good bye. For many years after that, I enjoyed looking at six photographs of my Middleton friends, (one of the girls was smoking a cigarette!). But now 65 years later, I cannot find these photographs because my jealous wife, Manola, caused them to disappear one by one. I am 88 years old now, without a sandwich and without photographs.