

The journey back to say “Thank You”

A Soldier’s story about finding the family that protected his platoon

By James T. Suzuki
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It was a remarkable series of unlikely events that permitted me to personally thank and shake the hand of a man who 57 years earlier, July, 1944, had risked his life by sheltering those of us on a reconnaissance patrol into enemy held territory during World War II.

This man, an Italian farmer on the outskirts of Pisa, had risked not only his own life but those of his wife and two young children by allowing us to hide in his home. We were American soldiers, from another country, not his, and he surely could have said, "I can't take the risk", but for reasons of his own, he allowed us to hide in his home out of sight from the German troops around us.



Over the years after the war, from time to time, I would think about that farmer and wondered what had become of him and his family. I didn't know his name and there seemed little I could do to make contact with him. In 1971, 27 years after our patrol to Pisa, my wife Yuri and I had saved enough money to make our first trip together to Europe. We were traveling with a couple who had been our friends and neighbors for many years. Our motor trip through Europe included Italy and a chance to see the historic Leaning Tower of Pisa.

Going to Pisa allowed me a day with the car to search the surrounding area for that certain "farmhouse" guided only by vague details from a past memory. With only a feeling and sense of where it ought to be, without the name of that Italian family or the designation of that farming community, it was strictly a long shot that we might stumble onto something. It was no real surprise that we came up empty, but were disappointed anyway.

On another trip to Europe in 1990, Yuri and I were traveling alone this time, free of any specific schedule or agenda of group travel, and had a car rented for two weeks with unlimited mileage. On the spur of the moment, we decided to give another try at finding that "farmhouse"; heck, we were within 225 miles or so from Pisa anyway. We had no additional information or specifics than we had before but again we held the hope that we might spot something familiar in the landscape that could lead us to the right place. As with most dreams, we were disappointed once again.

Sometime after that 1990 trip to Italy, perhaps around 1996 someone sent us an old news article that had reported "Japanese American Patrol First to Reach City of Pisa"; by golly, it was about our patrol! This article named points along the patrol's route like Vicarello, Antifesseto, Highway 67, Podo Ermada, none of which I remembered, and finally it reported that we had reached a farmhouse at *Podo Garzella*.

A-ha! ---- A connection that I could relate to; I felt then that we had a fix for certain. Our next opportunity to return to Italy came in June of year 2000 during a planned Mediterranean Cruise with 14 friends. Several days prior to the start of our cruise, three couples rented a seven passenger van to tour areas around Florence and Pisa and to specifically search for what had, by then, become "Jim's farmhouse". We were confident that we would find it reinforced with the specifics from that news article.

In Pisa, a helpful young English-speaking girl at the Tourist Service said that she was not familiar with *Podo Garzella* and sought help from others. She telephoned her father, the older generation who was more familiar with the farming communities around Pisa. With information from him, this nice young Miss sent us to an area that had a Via Garzella but it turned out not to be the Podo Garzellawe we were seeking. Even the local map we were given did not show Podo Garzella. A full day of driving, searching and inquiring in and around the area suggested by the Travel Service agent produced nothing and again we came up empty.

The six months following our return from that trip and cruise proved to be very eventful towards our quest to locate the "farmhouse" and farmer. A mutual friend in Seattle provided us with the e-mail address of an American Army retiree, married to an Italian girl, living in Livorno (Leghorn) and working for the U.S. Army at Camp Darby located on the southern outskirts of Pisa. His name is George Watanabe, a Hawaii born Nisei, who like many from "The Islands", would do almost anything to help a fellow American.

Via e-mail, we sought his help and sent him as much of my recollection of the farmhouse and the surrounding area as I could, including the freehand sketch of it. Of course, I also sent him the news clipping that cited the various local points along the

patrol's route. With this information, in February of this year, 2001, George sent us the exciting news that the "farmhouse" had been located and more incredibly, found the farmer himself, Mr. Marino Bardelli, still alive at 91 years of age.

Mr. Bardelli was reported to be of clear mind and although hobbled with a fractured hip, was remarkably vigorous and mending nicely. Yuri and I felt compelled and eager to make another trip to Italy just as soon as practical to meet Mr. Bardelli and to thank him personally.

As incredible as it was that the "farmer" was found still living after all these years, an interesting story coincident to finding Mr. Bardelli unfolded. George Watanabe had a young Italian friend named Mario Monaci who worked with George as a civilian employee at Camp Darby. Mario, I was told, was the one who actually located the "farmhouse" and Mr. Bardelli. Of course, George had told his friend Mario the story of our patrol and our several attempts to find that certain "farmhouse" and hopefully even the farmer.

When Mario and George thought they had found the right place, it turned out that although the farmhouse was now unoccupied, it had belonged to a family who was a friend of Mario's own family. Thereupon, Mario paid a visit to see Mr. Bardelli, who had lost his wife some time ago and was living with his son's family only a short distance from their original home on the farm. When Mario related to the elderly Mr. Bardelli that someone from the patrol had been searching for years to find him, the "farmer", who had sheltered those Americans on that patrol from the German soldier Mr. Bardelli, with remarkable clarity, remembered the specific incident and became teary-eyed.

His recollection included an impression that we GIs were kind and remembered our having given his young children chocolate bars. He did not mention the fact that he and his wife had offered us some of their meager allocation of bread. There was no way that we could have accepted their generous offer; wartime ration of bread was incredibly precious.

Upon hearing about Mario's conversation with Mr. Bardelli, there was little doubt in my mind that our exceptional "farmer" had indeed been found, still alive yet! It was truly exciting news.

For our May 2001 trip to Italy and to meet Mr. Bardelli, we informed our contact George Watanabe that our group of six would like to meet with the Bardelli family on Friday, May 25, 2001. George, working through Mario, arranged for a 4:30 to 5:00, late afternoon meeting at the Bardelli home.

I had been uncertain as to the proper way in which I should greet Mr. Bardelli upon our meeting; should we hug, shake hands or what? When we met George Watanabe for the first time earlier on May 25th, he greeted us as he said "in the Italian way" by hugging each of us left cheek then right cheek with an air kiss on each. My concern on how to greet Mr. Bardelli was dispelled; yes, I would do it the "Italian Way", appropriate in every sense.

We met George at Camp Darby around 2:00 and after having a late lunch at a nearby place selected for us by George (he had already eaten but the six of us were famished), he guided us to the "farmhouse". It was totally unoccupied, seemingly abandoned and in a state of disrepair. Almost everything; the structure, the barn area under the family quarters, the stairway leading up to the second floor, the upstairs' kitchen area, rooms, walls, windows etc., all fit the picture I had carried in my mind for over 50 years.

The water well, the view of it from the upstairs window where I had been stationed, the cultivated field that I remembered as a vineyard, the dirt path along side it, the relatively deep ditch on the right of it, the path and ditch curving to the left (southerly) were just as I remembered and had sketched for George earlier. The substantial house with verandah to the right where I remembered seeing German soldiers (I guessed to be officers) looking through binoculars scanning the flat land to the South (towards the American lines) was also still there.

The only aspect of the house with verandah that did not fit my recollection was that now it seemed to be standing no higher than the Bardelli house. I had recalled that it was up on a hillside higher than the "farmhouse". It must have been an illusion I had somehow erroneously clung to over the years. Oh-well, there were too many details that were "right on" and left little doubt that this was indeed it; it just felt right.



We met young Mario Monaci at the gate to Camp Darby around 4:00 PM as scheduled so he could guide us to where Marino Bardelli now lived. Young Mario was broad shouldered and muscular; looked remarkably like the actor Sylvester Stalone, the Italian stallion. Mario led our party of six, George Watanabe and two young U.S. Army captains, who were George's friends, to the Bardelli's residence.

We were greeted first by Mr. Marino Bardelli's daughter in-law, Graziella; then by his daughter, Milia, now in her late fifties. We were, all cordially invited to their back yard patio by the two ladies. It was there that Yuri said to me, "Turk, there he is- our farmer". He was standing there in the back wearing a narrow brimmed felt hat, a vest type jacket and a cane in hand. It wasn't that I recognized him from any recollection of my own; it just had to be him.



We had learned from George that Mr. Bardelli had fractured his hip in a fall from his bicycle several months earlier and used a cane for support. I went to him, greeted him in the "Italian way", shook his hand saying "*Mille Grazie, Senor Bardelli, Mille Grazie*". Our smiles notwithstanding, both of us had some difficulty with eyes misting, sentimental old men.

There were many questions from all sides but the difficulties of understanding Italian for me and English for them did create some problems in communicating easily, but

there was never any misunderstanding of their very generous hospitality with food, drinks and warm smiles. We presented Mr. Bardelli with a plaque, which recited in English and in Italian our appreciation for his courage and human kindness in sheltering the members of our patrol fifty-seven years ago. The names of the nine "L" Company boys were inscribed below.

US Army Captain Gerard Dolan, who accompanied us visiting the Bardellis being versatile in Italian, read aloud the Italian translation inscribed on the plaque, for the benefit of the Bardellis. The Bardelli family presented me with a beautiful sterling silver key-chain with fob, which my family and I will always cherish. Again, Mille Grazie, Senor Bardelli and family!

Senor Giorgio Ferrati, local community representative, spoke excellent English and Captain Gerard Dolan understood and spoke Italian; they both helped in much of the translation but it was the internationally understood gestures, body language and facial expressions that carried that day. Giorgio said, in observing Marino and I that "they don't need to talk to understand everything each might say, they understand in their hearts". How true it was.

I did learn through a translation by Giorgio Ferrati that the partisan guide, who had led us through the German lines that night, 57 years ago, happened to be Marino Bardelli's own brother. This connection, after all these many years, explained to some degree why we were led to that particular farmhouse for our sanctuary.

At one point, Marino Bardelli removed his hat and rubbed his head with the other hand and looking directly at me fired off something in rapid Italian. I did not know the words he spoke but I would swear that what he said was, "Hey, I've got more hair than you do!" He surely did.

No one knows what the future may hold for any of us but I thank the Lord for the opportunity given me to have personally thanked him and to have shaken the hand of this exceptional man. Someday, some place, we may meet again. For now, *arrivedecchi* Senor Bardelli, grand old man of Pisa.

