

## ITALY 1943

By James Collins

Nunzio was freezing. Drafted into the Italian army at age 18, he was now marching back and forth in front of the entrance to an ancient, medieval walled town in the mountains of the north of Italy. He had on an overcoat but someone stole the nice warm sweater his mother had knitted for him out of his footlocker. At night, he had only one thin blanket because the Sgt. told him the Italian army was poor and did not have additional blankets. His Sgt. also told him he was to defend the city with his life but only gave him five bullets. The rifle worked but he had never fired it. His boots had holes in both soles and water entered them whenever he stepped in a puddle.

Today was 8 September 1943 and rumor had it that Italy had surrendered to the Americans. All the Italian soldiers were looking forward to going home. Back and forth, back and forth Nunzio walked his beat for the better part of two hours until he heard a clanking noise in the distance. He turned to look down the winding mountain road and was horrified to see a Nazi Tiger tank coming towards him at a rapid rate. Apparently, the Nazis decided to take over Italy as soon as they the Italians surrendered to the Americans. As the tank stopped about 20 yards away, its turret slowly turned and the barrel depressed until Nunzio was looking straight into the muzzle of the 88mm cannon. Nunzio threw down his rifle threw up his arms and started screaming in German, "I SURRENDER, I SURRENDER."

The hatch on the top of the turret slowly opened with a creaking noise and a large German in a black uniform leaned out and said, "Oh, that's very nice you speak German. That will come in very handy as we go to the other towns on our list." The next thing Nunzio knew he was tied to the tank immediately adjacent to the gun barrel and acted as the interpreter from the Germans to any Italian soldier they encountered as they went from town to town. Nunzio prayed that he did not find a sentry who was an Italian hero. He was very happy to have survived that day.

The next day, Nunzio stood in front of an SS Col. who commented on his fluency in German and told Nunzio that he is now his formal interpreter. The Colonel's new assignment was to inventory all of the food, clothing, ammunition and other assets that belonged to the Italian army in the northern sector and send detail lists to an SS military organization in Berlin. The Col. and Nunzio's first visit was to an armory where there was rifle ammunition by the ton. The next visit was to massive warehouse containing blankets neatly folded and stacked by the tens and hundreds of thousands. They documented several visits to other warehouses and they entered one that had 100,000 pairs of boots. The Col. allowed Nunzio to take one pair to replace his worn-out boots.

Food was in short supply in Italy people were literally starving. The next warehouse was a massive building on the outskirts of a military installation. When they went inside, they view stacks of bags as far as the eye could see. On closer observation, these were 100 pound bags of rice stacked 10 high in rows 100 feet long and 20 feet wide. The records indicated that there were 400 of these stacks around the warehouse.

The Col. told Nunzio, "I have to know how many bags are in each of these stacks."

Nunzio shrugged his shoulders and said, "How do I do that?"

"Just count how many bags are on each side, count how many are on each end, count how many are stacked up and add them up. Then multiply by 400 and we have the total number we have to send to Berlin."

Nunzio noted there were 50 along each side, 10 on each end and it was stacked 10 high. Nunzio added these numbers up to 130. When he multiplied by 400, he came up with a number of 92,000 bags of rice. The actual number was 2 million bags of rice. They filled out forms for the German army and sent them to Berlin.

A week later, following formal notification, a German freight train pulled up, on the train siding next of the warehouse. A German SS Sgt. in charge of the operation had a clipboard and a crew of Italian prisoners of war to do the heavy lifting. They filled the train with the required 92,000 bags of rice and the German Sgt. with a flourish, said, "This warehouse is empty. We have all of the required 92,000 bags of rice. We are returning to Berlin."

The warehouse looked like it had not been touched. There were still hundreds of stacks of rice on the warehouse floor. Nunzio said, "But look, we still have a warehouse full of rice."

The Sgt. put his clipboard under his arm, and said, "Berlin said there were 92,000 bags of rice in this warehouse. I have loaded 92,000 bags of rice on to my train. This warehouse is empty and I am putting a lock on this empty warehouse." He did what he said he would do and the train left for Germany.

Nunzio reported this unusual event to the Col., who asked Nunzio, "Can you get a hold of a couple of trucks for our use. We can't use German army trucks or we will be shot."

"For 10 bags of rice I can get a large covered truck. For 20 bags I can probably get two."

"Do it and get us two drivers who can be trusted tell them we will pay them in bags of rice."

Nunzio now assisted the Col. in a very prosperous business. When it came to bags of rice, the Col. was the richest man in all of Italy. He now traded rice for silverware, jewelry, gold, villas, vineyards, Swiss francs, and factories, paying for all this merchandise with precious 100-kilogram bags of rice. This went on for a few months until June of 1944 when the Allies captured Rome and advanced toward the North end of Italy. The Col. retreated with the rest of the German army and Nunzio became a free man. Nunzio, captured by the British Army, with his knack for languages, became an interpreter. To the best of anyone's knowledge, the German Col. may still be one of the richest people in Italy. The war ended, but the Col. had deeds to many major pieces of property in Italy, which he acquired by formal court transactions and had documented using Italian lawyers. It was all perfectly legal.

Nunzio, a pseudonym, told me this tale in the 1960s when we worked side-by-side in a defense plant.

THE END