

Italian-Americans in the Great War
by David Laskin

Starting with the American Revolution, men born in Italy have served in every U.S. war – but Italian-Americans in uniform really came into their own during the First World War. Immigration was at an all-time high when the United States entered the conflict in April, 1917, and Italians accounted for the largest number of new arrivals. When Congress authorized a draft in June, 1917, immigrants were deemed eligible for service so long as they had taken out their “first papers” declaring their intention become U.S. citizens. Tens of thousands of Italians from all over the country were swept into the armed forces and shipped out to the trenches of France.

Since Italy was also at war with Germany, Italian-Americans had the choice of returning to fight with the Italian army or staying and serving with their new country. The overwhelming majority chose the latter. They might be pick and shovel men in the subway tunnels of New York or laborers in the vineyards of California, but most Italian-Americans were proud to go to war for their adopted country. I am deeply familiar with the pride and service of Italian-American Doughboys because for the last four years I have been working on a book about the immigrant experience in World War I. *The Long Way Home: An American Journey from Ellis Island to the Great War* (Harper) includes the stories of four Italian-American heroes who fought with U.S. armed forces.

Michael Valente, the only Italian-American to win the Congressional Medal of Honor in World War I, was born in the village of Sant’Apollinare in 1895, emigrated to upstate New York in 1913 and enlisted in the New York National Guard three years later. He shipped out with the 107th Infantry in the spring of 1918. Mike became a hero on the morning of September 29, 1918 during the battle to break the supposedly impregnable Hindenburg Line north of Paris. Infuriated that his unit was pinned down by German machine-gun fire, the 23-year-old blue-eyed son of Italy took matters into his own hands. “Of course I should have asked permission of my commanding officer,” Mike admitted later; but in the heat of the battle he charged. Enlisting a buddy to cover him, Mike stormed a German machine-gun nest, shot the machine gunner through the head, and kept moving. Despite taking a bullet in his wrist, he knocked out another machine gun nest and proceeded to a trench full of cowering German infantry. By the end of the morning, he and his buddy Joe Mastine had killed five Germans and taken 21 prisoners. When Mike accepted the Medal of Honor from President Hoover in 1929, he told a reporter for an Italian-language newspaper that “I did not forget, while the president was conferring the award, that he had decorated an American of Italian origin – and that through him honor can come to all Italians who emigrated here.”

Tommaso Ottaviano, another of the Italian-born soldiers in *The Long Way Home*, never became a decorated war hero – but his courage and sacrifice have not been forgotten. Born in the village of Ciorlano between Rome and Naples, Tommaso emigrated with his widowed mother and siblings when he was seventeen years old. He was employed as a machine operator at a blanket manufacturer near Providence, Rhode Island, when his adopted country entered the war. Tommaso was technically exempt from the draft since he was the sole support of his widowed mother – but he chose to serve, and he chose the U.S. Army rather than returning to fight in the Italian army, as some of his friends did. He was a sweet, good-natured, handsome young man, and a good son too since he sent a steady stream of letters (in Italian) home to his mother.

Tommaso rarely wrote much about the “zona di guerra” since the army strictly forbade soldiers from disclosing their exact location; but in a letter sent on October 18, 1918, he referred to the “*sconvolgimento*” – devastation – all around him in the Argonne front. “Now we are at the heels of the Germans,” he wrote, “but we still need good luck and the grace of our Lord.” The handsome private’s luck ran out two weeks later. On November 1, Tommaso was shot in the final hours before a massive German retreat. He died of his wounds 11 days after the Armistice.

“Tommaso was the family hero and martyr,” his great-niece Pamela Ottaviano Rhodes told me recently. “He was the oldest son and in the family he was revered like a saint. We still talk about him when the family gets together.”

Though most of the Italians in my book lived on the East Coast, I did include a California story. Leonardo Costantino moved from the southern Italian town of Canetto near Bari to San Diego when he was sixteen and eventually opened up a pool hall. When he was drafted into the Wild West Division, Leonardo kept a diary, written in his colorful but imperfect English. It makes for entertaining reading. While the official histories discuss troop movement, strategy, battle casualties, and fire-fights, Costantino focused more on food, weather, sleeping conditions, and French girls. Here are some typical entries, from August, 1918: “Aug 9 Granade [hand grenade] practice, all day along. Private Aiello [a buddy] threw one and nearly Kill Lt. Fitts. He was nerves [nervous?]. Real action. Aug 17 There is a french girl live next to our Billett and the owner of the place. She often come to me and ask when we will move. Aug 20 I do not talk any-more with this French girl she make me sick try to get your last penny out you. Am too wise at these French people.” Not exactly *War and Peace*, but still, Costantino conveys a vivid sense of what it was really like for an Italian kid to serve in “this man’s army.”

I had assumed when I started the project that my research would be based on letters and diaries like Costantino’s and on interviews with descendants. I never dreamed that any of the veterans would still be alive – but I was wrong. In the summer of 2006, I sat down with a 110-year-old veteran of the All American Division named Antonio Pierro and chatted with him about his childhood in Italy and his experience in the Great War. Born in Basilicata in 1896, Tony emigrated with a cousin in 1913, was drafted in October, 1917, and shipped out to France the following spring. Nearly a century later, he still remembered the snakes in his family’s orchard in Italy, his anger at being called a “wop” in boot camp, the shell that nearly killed him the Argonne forest, and the French girl he fell in love with. Sadly, Tony passed away on February 8, 2007, the last Italian-American to have fought in the Great War. Tony didn’t say much about how fighting with the All-American Division changed his life or his relationship with the U.S. But the facts spoke for themselves: his pride and the pride of his family were still palpable.

My new book *The Long Way Home* includes many more stories of how Italian immigrants and men from other groups became Americans by fighting in the Great War.