

Giovanni Ruzzene chose to live in Australia after fascism was defeated in his homeland at the end of World War II. Here, his daughter tells his remarkable story

My father's good fight

By DIANA RUZZENE

MY FATHER, Giovanni Ruzzene, survived the war, but found it difficult to settle down on his small plot of land at Mure, 30 km north of Venice.

His homeland was ravaged and offered no future for him. So he set sail for Australia in 1951.

He landed at Station Pier with many compatriots, but without his family, who had stayed behind until he could send for them. He moved into a boarding house in Carlton and searched for work.

Even as a qualified mechanic, that was not easy. Language was a barrier, so he got by with odd jobs to pay his bills and support his family back home. Eventually, he found a permanent job on an assembly line at International Harvester in Port Melbourne.

Five years later, his wife, Maria, and their six children arrived from Italy. It was the first time he had seen his youngest child, who was born after he left.

Giovanni had spent more than half his 15 years of married life away from the family because of war and forging the way to a new life.

Sadly, my father did not live to celebrate this year's 50th anniversary of the end of the war for Italy. He was almost 80 when he died in 1993.

He often told me of his wartime experiences. He was always surprised so few Australians realised 250,000 Italian soldiers fought part of the war on the Russian front, along with other members of the Axis powers.

Giovanni was one of them, fighting a double-headed enemy — Russian soldiers and the freezing weather.

The Italian army was ill-equipped in clothing and machinery for the harsh Russian winter. Often the soldiers fought in temperatures of minus 40 deg. C, their automatic guns blocked by ice.

IT WAS not only atrocious conditions that hampered the Italian troops. After December 1942, the Russians were receiving better Allied intelligence, and Stalin's command that any Russian soldier found retreating be shot by his comrades made the battles harder.

Giovanni, a mechanic with special training in electronics, was part of a support unit with the Torino Division. He was based 200 km from the war front, fixing machinery in freezing conditions near Stalino (Donetsk). Nevertheless, he heard news from the front through the drivers' depot.

Nanno, a life-long friend of Giovanni, was one of those drivers. He would often call in with broken machinery, sometimes he would bring food, which was badly needed. Giovanni looked forward to these treats.

He recalled one occasion when "a blizzard was raging and the temperature had dropped to minus 30 degrees".

"Nanno arrived with a broken truck and a box of food — fresh meat, fruit and a bottle of vodka. We took refuge in the warmth of the mechanics' shed near a combustion stove and away from everyone. "We cooked up the meat and had a marvelous meal, washed down with swigs of vodka. The cold wind blew but we felt nothing. The vodka kept us warm. It made me mildly drunk and Nanno completely drunk. He could barely walk. Fortunately for us, the blizzard kept everyone indoors and we were able to sleep it off before any of the officers saw us."



All quiet before slaughter on the Russian front: Giovanni Ruzzene (top right) with Italian comrades in 1940.



Peace in the new world: Giovanni mending socks in Carlton in 1953 and with his granddaughter Lara in 1988.



Not all blizzards were spent in such cosy surroundings. As the weather became harsher, so did news of more lost battles and frozen soldiers. Metal snapped like ice or became stuck to flesh. To enable them to work with metal, the mechanics had to have boiling water on hand at all times.

A natural ability to improvise saw Giovanni insulate his inadequate army boots by attaching to his soles rubber tread from old tyres. This ingenious platform made him taller and his feet warmer.

However, one night he believed he was going to die from exposure. "It was mid-December, minus 35 degrees. I was on guard duty around the depot. The shifts were for only two hours because after that the soldier would start to suffer from hypothermia.

"The cold penetrated everything. After two hours I longed for my bunk, but no one came to relieve me. I continued the vigil with teeth chattering. I called out but the howling wind smothered my voice.

"I was scared I would lose a limb or freeze to death like so many casualties from the trenches.

"The third hour passed and no one came. I was desperate. If I left

my post I could be court martialled and imprisoned.

"After a further 10 minutes I fired three rifle shots into the air. This was the code for full alert.

"The commanding officer ran up to me and asked where the enemy was. I told him it was all around — the Russian winter was the enemy.

"The soldier who had been supposed to relieve me received a severe tongue lashing. This had been the only time I fired my rifle in the war, and it saved me from one enemy."

Giovanni saw many casualties returning from the front. He said those who had died were lucky. Those who returned with frozen limbs had to endure the pain and then have them amputated. On one occasion he saw a young man who had all four limbs amputated.

His account of the Italian retreat from the Russian front during the winter of 1942-43 was heartbreaking. He was part of a 30km convoy of pathetic, tattered men trying to stay alive in the freezing conditions without food, drink or direction from superiors.

Russian planes often swooped down and dropped bombs on this straggling line of men, mules and

sledges, leaving a long red band of blood on the white snow.

It was a horrendous, epic journey. Some men walked more than 1300km. Many died.

The Italian Army was totally decimated. Of the Torino Division, only 20 per cent returned to Italy.

Giovanni survived, only to be reassembled with another division to fight the advancing Allies. But no sooner did he arrive in Florence than King Umberto declared an armistice, causing total chaos.

Italy was not allowed to remain neutral and to some degree changed sides.

The Germans began attacking the troops of their former ally in their barracks and everywhere else. According to Giovanni, many Italian soldiers were shot or taken prisoners to Germany in cattle wagons. Within three months the Germans had captured 700,000 Italian soldiers.

Italy was on the brink of civil war. Besides the Germans and the Allies fighting, there were Italian supporters of Fascism, of Communism, of social democracy and of a republic. Sometimes brother fought brother. Italy had three governments — Mussolini was a puppet of Hitler, the King



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and his ministers collaborated with the Allies, and the Partisans controlled various regions.

At this stage Giovanni decided to avoid being shot or taken prisoner and so headed towards home in Mure. He discarded his uniform for what civilian clothes he could find, but kept his military papers hidden inside his newly acquired gym shoes.

He took a train to Venice, but as it was continually stopped by German soldiers, decided to jump off and walk the rest of the way through fields and back roads, avoiding towns where men were grabbed and sent to German labor camps.

Giovanni's wife and sisters were amazed to see him alive. He hid indoors from the German soldiers who were prowling, and the partisans of various ideologies who needed to recruit tradesmen. He stayed indoors during the day and only ventured out at night, sometimes sleeping in the fields where it was safer.

ONE day a group of German soldiers came to the house seeking information on local partisan activities. Maria was gripped with fear and walked out clutching three-year-old Francesco to confront these intruders.

Giovanni was in the stable, hiding under a pile of hay, when he heard the dog bark. He could hear mumbling voices and then heard a shot. He held his breath in fear. A few seconds later he was greatly relieved to hear Maria's voice again. A soldier had callously killed the dog as a form of intimidation.

This fear of being taken prisoner and sent to labor camps in Germany was real to the Ruzzene family. Giovanni's brother-in-law had been snatched and nothing heard of him until the end of the war, when he turned up unrecognisable, a skeleton of a man.

Gradually, more men like Giovanni returned home. They were disillusioned, betrayed, battle-scarred and fed up with everything. Giovanni kept a low profile, working part-time at the back of a mechanic's garage.

The war was still raging. The large cities were constantly bombed by the Allies. More than 60,000 civilians were killed, including Maria's sister in Milan.

According to statistics, more bombs were dropped in the name of liberation in Italy than by the enemy in England. Giovanni and Maria felt that the Allies were rather slow about "liberating" Italy.

My parents lived in this state of anxiety for two years, until the end of the war in 1945. Even then, in north-eastern Italy there was still unrest and the fear of Josip Broz Tito taking over.

Giovanni felt he could not settle back to a life of the past and, with Italy still ravaged by war, decided to migrate to Australia, where his brother-in-law had been living for many years.