



Antonio dressed in an English uniform on his way back to Italy in 1945.
Photo: P. Foresti

Antonio FORESTI was born 14 March 1915 in S. Maria Maggiore in the Piedmont region of Italy. By the time that he had become an adult, Italy had become a Fascist Dictatorship under Mussolini. Conscription (*la naja*) was normal and Antonio went into the Artillery of the Royal Italian Army, which was unusual for him as most young men from that area joined the *Alpini*.



At the outbreak of war he was called up as a driver (*Autiere*) for the anti-aircraft artillery detachments stationed in Rome. He was transferred to the transport section of the mechanized artillery in North Africa with the 10th Army. He drove high quality Fiat-SPA AS.37 Sahariani lorries, and the drivers alternated duties between transporting ammunition, food and water so that their risk of being blown-up by their load was reduced to 1-in-3.

Fig. Lorries of the "Maletti" Group, December 1940 <https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:AS37.JPG>

The Italian army, though much larger than the Allies in the area, was under mechanized and spread too sparsely to be effective. During Operation Compass, Antonio was taken as a Prisoner of War (PoW), probably in February 1941 at Beda Fomm, Cyrenaica, Libya. Initially he was held in a camp in North Africa and he was then taken to the Lodge Moor, Sheffield transit camp where his state of health was checked and any illness treated.

In June 1941, the Minister of Health, Ernest Brown M.P, was concerned that Italian PoWs would be carriers of disease, particularly of Malaria, so camps near large areas of standing water in Southern England with the mosquito *Anopheles Maculipennis atroparvus* were avoided. A list of suitable sites was drawn-up for labour camps to accommodate the first 3000 of a total of 50,000 Italian PoWs to be shipped to Britain from the North African theatres of war.



Lodge Farm Farncome Down, 1 mile to the east of Baydon, was at the top of the list of locations to take on 500 Italian PoW's who had volunteered for agricultural work. Camp 25 was a purpose built or "Standard" type and under the control of Army South Command, and this was later transferred to South Midlands Command. Labour was organised by the War Agricultural committee and was a useful supply of manpower to local farmers who paid for services of the prisoners, though some of the prisoners were to work on the railway at Lambourn, erecting concrete posts etc.

Fig. British War Office Map, Ordnance Survey, 1948 <http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/place/11524>

On Valentine's Day 1944 Alf Excell, a local man from the village was working with other farm labourers and PoWs in a field to the north of Ermin Street that borders the Swindon road (764 on the map). The weather was poor with limited ceiling and visibility. At 3.20 p.m., three P-47 'Thunderbolts' from 'D' Flight, 390th Fighter Squadron, 366th Fighter Group from Membury airfield were returning from an aborted routine navigation mission, when circled three times and then took the opportunity to simulate an attack, perhaps on the beech trees at Black Gate, (above the word Inn on the map) from the direction of Russley Park. The first two planes pulled out of the dive successfully but the third plane was so low that it passed under the telegraph wires which ran next to Ermin Street and the port wingtip cut into the hillside causing it to crash and the wreckage was strewn down to the White Pond lane (south to north, west of Baydon on the map). The workers rushed to rescue the pilot but the impact had killed him.

At another air-crash, this time to the east of the White Pond Farm, the pilot was also dead but another airman survived and Antonio was thanked by an American officer-in-charge for his prompt action in saving him, especially poignant as Antonio was still a PoW at the time.



On 26th June 1945 Lodge Farm Camp was re-classified for use by German PoWs, most of whom had been captured in the Channel Islands. A few Italians remained and were kept in a separate compound.

Fig. Prisoners had large round patches on their back and leg.

Still picture from <http://www.britishpathe.com/video/italian-prisoners>

After the war, Antonio returned to Italy and got married but there was high unemployment at the time. He wrote to Mr Pembroke who organised his work permit and the visa and he came back in December 1949 with his wife Carmella (1914-1999) and two sons of 18 months and of 2 months old. He worked on Pembroke's at White Pond, Brown's at Manor Farm Aldbourne and at the Lawrence's at North Farm before moving to Swindon as a lorry driver and then finally settling in Wroughton.



Len Ball (left), Antonio (centre), and Frank Everett (right) at work at circa 1950. Photo: P. Foresti



Fig. Membury Airfield, left, with Lodge Farm to the right and Baydon on the right edge of the picture. 1949. <http://www.britainfromabove.org.uk/image/eaw022443>



Fig. Membury Airfield, left, with Lodge Farm highlighted to the right and Baydon on the right edge of the picture. 2007. Image: Google Earth

A special thanks to Pierangelo Foresti and Beryl Belcher for their support in producing this article.

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