



Eerie Happenstance, Part II (from <http://www.timminstimes.com>)

By Diane Armstrong

As a child in Canada, I was removed from the real horrors of war. WWII meant food rationing, many single-parent homes because, "daddy is in the war", and of the six-o'clock national news bringing word of the allied offensives. Living with my aunt at the time, she had a map on the wall and I watched as she moved coloured pins following each of her brothers' units through France, Belgium and Italy. That was likely where I first heard the word, "Villanova".

Moving forward nearly 70 years, I recently met Tina Pecore Bagordo, who told me of her upcoming trip to Italy. It would include the town of Villanova, where her uncle, Fred Tokar, was buried with 206 other Canadians who died in December and January, 1944-45.

I had known my uncle, Arnold Belanger, was a Lieutenant in the Royal Canadian Engineers. He led a unit which had built a Bailey bridge over the Lamone River at Villanova, but other than that, I knew very little about how important the Canadian forces were, in liberating Italy from the hands of the Germans. I was not aware of the impact our troops had on the people of that village.

Villanova had been captured by the enemy. The original bridge over the Lamone River was used to intimidate the villagers, by first killing, then hanging three members of the Italian Resistance from it. A four-year-old Rosalia Fantoni lived next to the bridge and saw her father, an uncle and a neighbour hang there for days before any villager was able to retrieve the bodies. They were too frightened. The bridge was destroyed shortly after.

At the time, the allies were mounting an offensive, determined to push the enemy back into the mountains to the north. Canadian regiments included the Lanark and Renfrew Scottish, 4th Princess Louise Dragoon Guards, the Perth Regiment and the Irish Regiment of Canada. Twenty-year old Fred Tokar, a Dispatch Rider, was with the Lanark Regiment. But first, a new bridge was needed to cross the Lamone, and the Royal Canadian Engineers were called upon to establish the bridgehead.

For five days between December 10 and 15, there was heavy fighting between these regiments and the enemy, resulting in many casualties. It was Fred Tokar's job as dispatcher, to carry messages between the regiments. While riding his motorcycle, Fred was killed near Osteria, west of Villanova.

Tina Pecore Bagordo visited the Villanova Canadian War Cemetery in May of this year. Land for the cemetery was donated by the Italian government and has been designated as Canadian soil. Throughout her life, Rosalia Fantoni has been determined that the brave Canadians will never be forgotten. She has written a book "Casa lontano da casa – Home Away from Home", a collection of military history, personal diaries and remembrances of that horrific time. She also lists the names of every Canadian soldier buried in the cemetery.

Tina was met by Rosalia Fantoni and participated in a Remembrance Day ceremony there. Due to age, the Bailey bridge built so long ago, had to be torn down, but part of it, now called "Rosalia's Bridge", stands at the entrance to the well-kept cemetery. The people of Villanova welcomed her group with tanti ingratamente (deep gratitude), provided them with personal interpreters and they were thanked over and over by veterans, townspeople and school children. The group moved on to the cemetery where an official Remembrance Day service was held. Prayers were said, an honour guard formed, Tina spoke on behalf of the group and then Tina was taken to the grave of her uncle for a time of quiet reflection. Afterwards, the group were entertained and thanked again, at a luncheon in their honour.

I asked Tina how she felt about the experience, now that she was back in Canada. She said, "I am so proud to be a Canadian. I went to Italy and found the Heart of Canada." My uncle came home, but Tina's uncle, 20-year-old Fred Tokar, was killed by a sniper's bullet on December 13, 1944 – the same day as the bridge over the Lamone River was completed. Fred was too young to die.

That's my view from Over the Hill.