

■ REMEMBRANCE DAY: The late Merton Massey was instrumental in saving a young, Italian boy

Story of a true hero

MICHAEL PURVIS
The Sault Star

Growing up, the stories Maureen Mousseau's father told her about the Second World War had seemed almost unreal.

Particularly so, the tale of how her father and his Canadian platoon happened upon a starving Italian orphan named Gino - and decided to keep him.

It was June of 1944, and her father, Merton Massey, was part of a platoon ferrying supplies to the fighting troops in the area. They had stopped near a gravel pit to light a small fire for tea when they heard a sound.

"They thought it was a dog and it was this little boy," said Mousseau.

The boy was five years old, dirty and hungry. The Canadians discerned that the lad's father had been killed and that his mother was ill and unable to care for him.

They could find no relatives and the people of the nearby village were too destitute themselves to take the boy in, so the Canadians decided he would be better off staying with them.

Massey, a mechanic with the platoon, and Red Oliver had the biggest tent, so Gino moved in.

"They made clothes for him. He had his own uniform," said Mousseau.

The men declared him a corporal, taught him English, and gave him a bible to read.

"He had a good life with the Canadians, they were very kind to him," she said.

In September, Mousseau, 59, and her son David went to Italy to see a plaque erected in Gino's village for her father and his comrades.

As a group of Italian professors who had researched Gino's story led her through the area where he was found, Mousseau said it was incredible to see the places her father had described to her as a child.

Bullet holes still marred a cross in front of the church in the nearby town, and Mousseau was able to see with her own eyes the knoll and the quarry where her father and his fellow soldiers had stopped for tea.

"Suddenly, it became real. You hear the stories and you really wonder how much is true and everything my dad had told me - everything I had grown up with - was exactly true," she said.

Gino travelled with the soldiers until February of 1945, when they were called to Western Europe. The Canadians tried



Maureen Mousseau (left) and her son, David, recently visited Italy and the little village where Maureen's father, the late Merton Massey, helped save a five-year-old orphaned Italian boy. The boy, Gino (inset picture), spent a lot of time with Maureen's dad's platoon and is currently still living in Italy.

to take him with them.

"My dad's sister was going to adopt him," said Mousseau.

But a superior officer saw Gino as the platoon was about to leave Italy and dashed their plans. Gino ended up with an Italian resistance soldier who was travelling with the Americans, and the boy eventually became part of the soldier's family.

Massey never saw Gino again. He moved back to Canada and settled in Sault Ste. Marie, though Mousseau said her father didn't forget about Gino, including him in the poems he often wrote.

"It was part of growing up as a little girl. He often talked about the war," said Mousseau.

Gino was eventually adopted by the soldier and his wife, Antonio and Rina Farneti, though it wasn't until just last year that he was able to visit his home town

of Torrice with the help of an Italian scholar who helped him track down his roots and his family name - Bragaglia.

Some years ago, Gino came to Canada to see Red Oliver, but Mousseau's father, who died in 1989, was no longer living.

Mousseau had hoped to meet Gino this year during her visit to Italy, but on the day they were supposed to meet she learned that Rita Farneti, Gino's adopted mother, had died the day earlier, and that he would not be able to come.

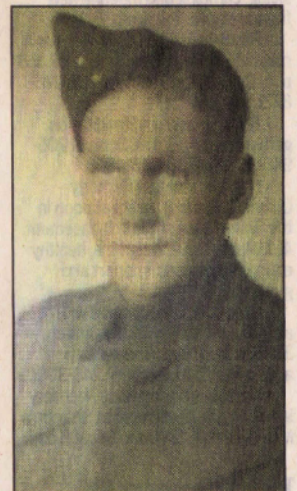
"I did send a picture of David and I and I thanked him," she said. "He said maybe we'll meet each other some day, so I hope to."

Mousseau said she was struck by what her father did for Gino.

"I wasn't surprised. He was very kind. I could see him doing it. He was a very, very gentle man," she said.



Gino, 5, was rescued during World War II by a Canadian platoon that included the late Merton Massey from Sault Ste. Marie.



Hanging from a wall is a framed picture of Merton Massey.