

## Everybody's Uncle Monti

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When I first saw him, he was reading a newspaper. Not one I recognized.

But that's OK. Canada is not his home. English is not his first language. And we were, after all, staying at his home – the Hotel Levante, in Rimini, Italy. My wife Jayne and I had arrived there to meet the man known in those parts as “the adopted Canadian.” When he emerged from behind the newspaper and approached us, it seemed as if his entire body smiled.

“Signore Monti?” we asked in our best tourist Italian.

“Uncle Monti,” he responded. “Everybody calls me ‘Uncle’ Monti.”

We might have travelled to this city of 130,000 on the Adriatic coast for many attractions. Rimini is, we discovered, the birthplace of movie director Federico Fellini. We might well have searched it out for its incredible beaches – Rimini's 15 kilometres of unbroken seafront, lined with clubs, bars, restaurants and hotels, comprise Europe's largest beach resort. More likely, because history is our favourite pursuit, Rimini's ancient Roman bridge over the Tiber River or its cathedral – the Tempio Malatestiano – might have been the attraction. But no, in fact, Uncle Monti and his connection to Canada drew us there.

“My real name is Oviglio,” he began, “but it was too difficult for the Canadians to say, so they called me Bill.”

The members of the 1st Canadian Infantry Division, part of the Allied force liberating Italy during the Second World War, not only renamed him, they recruited him. When Canadian troops pushed the occupying Germans out of Rimini in September 1944, the 16-year-old Oviglio Monti donned a Canadian army uniform and served in the motorized brigade as a cook and later as an interpreter. Until that time, Monti had been imprisoned, beaten and starved by his German masters.

“I have never forgotten that the Canadians gave me a job, a uniform to wear and bread to eat,” he said, “because right then I had nothing.”

Perhaps symbolically, Uncle Monti made sure we had something to drink before he continued his story – some white wine for Jayne, some local beer for me. Food and drink continued to play an important role in Monti's connection with Canadians during the war too. Later that fall, as the Canadians prepared an assault across the river country (north of Rimini), Monti recalled a sergeant telling him to prepare a barbeque with plenty of red wine and tea with rum in it.

“Monti, sing an Italian song,” the sergeant requested at this last meal before the attack. “Sing, because you are a very lucky man. It's not necessary for you to come with us tomorrow.”

Private Monti admitted he couldn't sing very well, but appreciated his good fortune. Shortly afterwards, Monti's sergeant and the rest of his Canadian comrades tangled once again with well fortified German troops across the Savio and Senio rivers. It took several months, but the Canadians were victorious, while sustaining some of the highest casualty rates of the Italian campaign. Indeed, Monti's sergeant had lost an arm and a leg in the battle.

Then, 30 years later – in 1975 – when a Canadian delegation came to Rimini to recognize the anniversary of the liberation, Oviglio Monti (by that time the operator of the successful Hotel Levante) proudly welcomed the visiting Canadians. Among them was Daniel MacDonald, then the minister of veterans' affairs.

“Monti, you are a very lucky man,” Minister MacDonald told him and Monti realized that MacDonald was the very same sergeant who had left his trusty cook and interpreter behind, but then nearly died in combat. “Monti, that sergeant was me,” MacDonald admitted, as he presented his Italian host with a brand new Canadian flag for his country home outside Rimini.

Uncle Monti spent much of last Saturday regaling us with stories of his youthful innocence, his coming of age during the war, and his family given the chance to thrive because of what the Canadians did a couple of generations ago. He entertained us at his four-star seaside hotel, served us wine at his country home vineyard. We joined him as he retraced the steps of his Canadian comrades-in-arms 63 years ago. He

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ensured that we visited some of their graves at the Gradara and Coriano Ridge war cemeteries outside Rimini. He paid his respects to them and he reiterated his lifelong commitment to his liberators.

“I promised Minister MacDonald from that very first visit,” Monti said, “that any Canadian families searching this country for loved ones or for information, I would help them.”

As Canadian veterans had adopted him in 1944-45, Uncle Monti had fulfilled his promise and adopted two more visiting Canadians.

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