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Diary brought back to life

By EDITH DAUGHTERY and PAUL PETERS

An Italian's war diary found by a Taranaki soldier in the North African desert almost 70 years ago will be reunited with its 96-year-old owner who has been traced to a small city in his home country.

The quest to find him began when Inglewood couple Ron and Shirley Miller recently became intrigued by a diary Ron's late father, Joseph Miller, originally of York Rd, Midhirst, brought back from Egypt in World War II.

Joseph was with the New Zealand 10th Railway construction company as an engineer and arrived in Egypt in June 1943.

Mrs Miller said she phoned ACE (Adult Community Education) Taranaki which put her in touch with one of its tutors, Edith Daughtery, who teaches Italian and German, to see if the diary written by Toni Alberto could be translated.

She asked Mrs Daughtery if the Italian's family could be traced and the diary returned to them.

"My husband's father found it next to an Italian plane that was shot down by the British, so this diary probably belonged to an Italian pilot," Mrs Miller told her.

"Anyway you can't do worse than the Italian Embassy. We gave it to them about eight years ago, and all they managed to do was spill coffee on it and break it back."

Mrs Daughtery, who is also a relief school teacher in Stratford, began her search on Facebook and found a man with a similar name, as grandsons were often named after their grandfather.

"I sent him a message in Italian, but he replied to me in



On the trail: Ron and Shirley Miller, left, with the Italian soldier's diary, and Edith Daughtery who tracked down the owner. Photo: TANIA MILLER

Spanish. He said that his granddad was Italian. He had been a soldier in Egypt during the war and his name was Antoni Albert. He was, however, uncertain whether this was his granddad's diary.

"I suddenly realised that this was a strong lead and asked my colleague, a Spanish tutor, to translate a short letter which I could send with the details of Toni Alberto's birthday, which I found out while translating his diary.

Mr Alberto, an infantryman, wrote on December 16, 1941:

"Situation is not beautiful - we are surrounded by the enemy and they are shooting at us."

Later on he writes: "During the days I pray to thank God to have taken me in his hands when on the day of my birthday, December 13, I have taken a gunshot. I really don't know or understand

the reality of the miracle. I was covered in rock and stones, but came out of it without even a little scratch.

"I repeat it was a miracle, and I promised when I got back to give 500 lire to the Sacred Heart of Jesus in St. Antonio of Padua and to the Holy Rita, as well as Lucia the dearest Virgin of Peace.

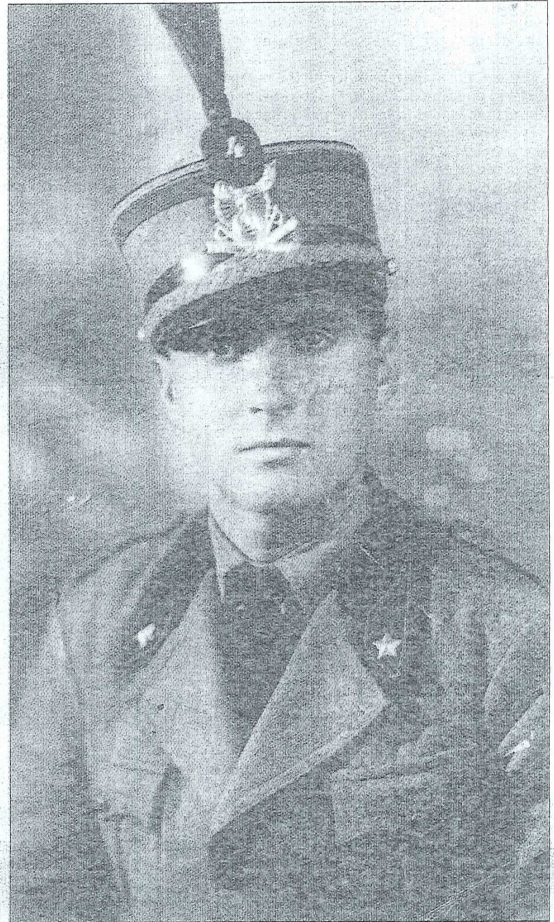
"I am still convinced that Saint Anthony will grant me my return. I shall return."

Mrs Daughtery said that unfortunately the connection led to a dead end.

"Toni Albert on Facebook did not reply and he didn't want to be my friend either."

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In uniform: Toni Alberto in 1937. Photo: SUPPLIED



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"I really don't blame him. Who wants to be pestered by a woman my age? I felt utterly disappointed but continued my research on the internet."

One day she came across a PDF file that seemed unusual because it listed all Italian service men and women who died in 1940 and 1941.

"I searched through a list of more than 49,000 but couldn't find his name. In desperation I wrote to the organisation, giving them a few details which I found in the diary.

"Twenty-four hours later a reply came back. I was given the name of Toni Alberto's father, the name of the town where he was born and the fact that some families of that name were still living there. In addition, I was also given the email address of the mayor's secretary so that I could make further inquiries.

"I made three telephone calls. Firstly I rang up a Toni Lina, but her young son answered and he didn't really feel like talking to me.

"Then I phoned Toni Manuela, who I knew would be related to him somehow. I realised in her voice that she thought that I was trying to sell her something, as she referred me on to her son.

"Finally I spoke to her son, explaining that I was translating a diary and was looking for a person called Toni Alberto, who (by then I knew) had been a prisoner of war in Egypt. "I was overjoyed by his reply."

He wrote: "It is my granddad. He was born on Decem-



Family group: Toni Alberto, fourth from left, with, from left Emiliani Matteo (27), Emiliani Diego (28), Emiliani Giovanni (57) Emiliani Claudia (21) and Toni Manuela (55). Photo: SUPPLIED



The finder: Joseph Miller found the Italian soldier's diary next to a downed aircraft. Photo: SUPPLIED

ber 13, 1915. This is not the only diary he wrote. He wrote more while he continued to be

a prisoner of war.

"The reason you didn't find him among the fallen service men and women is that he is still alive and 96 years old!"

The war veteran lives in Bagnacavallo near Ravenna. He was captured in 1941 and shipped initially to Greenock, Scotland.

In an interview posted on the internet in 2009 he recalls the great humanity of the people in Britain, not ever suffering serious abuse or beatings.

After the 1943 armistice between the Allies with Italy, and a plebiscite organised by the British, Mr Alberto joined the Pietro Badoglio government opposing Mussolini's fascists.

Mrs Daughtery said she went back to Facebook and wrote: "Eureka. l'ho trovato. I found him."

"It felt better than winning the lottery."

The diary has been given back to the Miller family and they are arranging its safe return.

■ Readers can see a full 104-minute interview with Mr Alberto, in Italian, on the internet by typing Toni Alberto+Bagnacavallo. The interview took place at the University of Bologna. A summary linked to it can be translated via Google's translating machine or, for more information, please email midweek@tnl.co.nz.

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