

Relics & Reminders

D-DAY
DODGERS

What got left behind after the Allies liberated Italy during the Second World War might surprise you

by Gail I. Carter, Ravenna, Italy

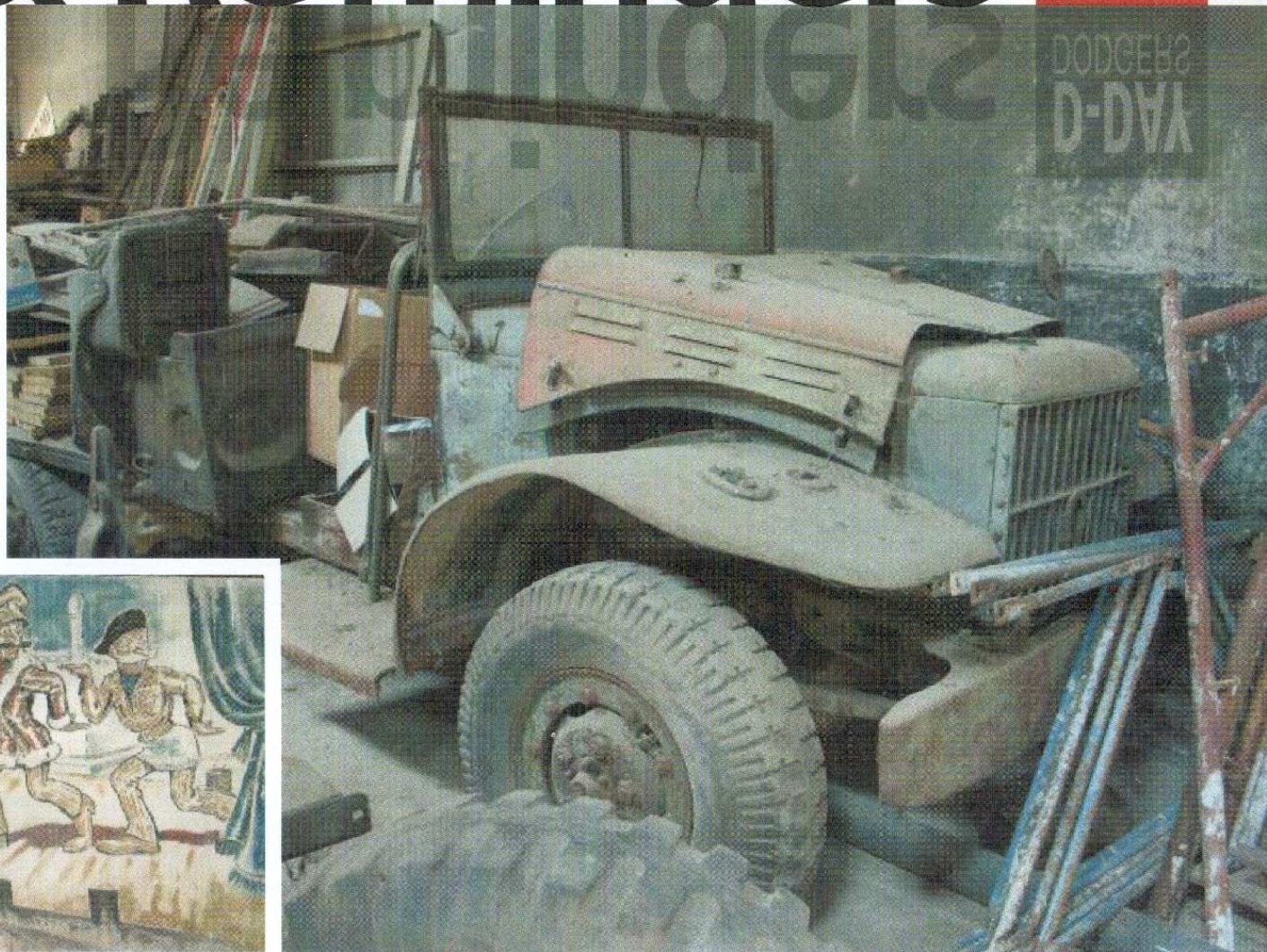
In addition to the thousands of brave soldiers who made the ultimate sacrifice and are now at rest in Italian war cemeteries, the Allied forces serving in Italy during the Second World War left behind a vast assortment of personal items and military equipment. As did the Nazis, who were in full retreat in the face of advancing Allied liberation forces, known as the D-Day Dodgers. In 1944-1945, Italy was rife with buried landmines, unexploded bombs, artillery shells, abandoned or damaged weaponry, army vehicles and hardware from both sides of the conflict. In the case of the D-Day Dodgers, three large-scale murals were also left behind in a building that once served as a wartime *cantina* for the troops.

Stan Scislowski, a D-Day Dodger with the Perth Regiment, Eleventh Infantry Brigade, Fifth Canadian Armoured Division, whom I was fortunate enough to meet when he

As the fighting ended in Italy, both sides left an enormous amount of equipment in their wake, much of which was refurbished and reused by the locals. In the town of Russi, the Allies also left behind three unique murals; artist(s), unknown.

returned to Italy to tour the war cemeteries in 1975, actually went looking for his helmet, which he lost while serving in Italy. Hating the thought that his helmet may have rusted away and disappeared into the rich soil of the Italian countryside, Stan still had hopes that someone had picked it up and kept it in safekeeping all these years.

I hope that during his stay in the Emilia Romagna region of Italy, no one told Stan about what I had seen at the *Museo della Battaglia del Senio* (the Museum of the Battle of the Senio River) in the town of



PHOTOS COURTESY OF VICKI WEINSTEIN



Alfonsine. This cultural centre has gathered all sorts of civilian and military relics from the Second World War and put them on display, including a collection of German helmets nailed to the ends of long wooden poles. These adapted helmets were commonly used after the war as dipper-scoopers to clean out cesspools. Other types of helmets were modified with fixed feet and a handle to become cooking pots!

On a more somber note, in addition to his helmet, Stan left behind 194 of his men in the Villanova War Cemetery, which is a short distance from Ravenna, where I've lived for the past 23 years. Originally from Canada, I am told many stories about the Canadian soldiers, like Stan, who were among the first to

march through Ravenna and the surrounding villages in December 1944, liberating the Italian people.

The Italians may have lacked decent living conditions and amenities when the war ended, but there was no shortage of creativity and imagination when it came to salvaging useful items. Military vehicles and hardware was refitted and adapted for civilian use in an amazing variety of ways. Many of these items were utilized until they were completely worn out; some are still in use today.

If you know where to look and what to look for, you can see just how ingeniously metal parts were recuperated and reutilised. For example, take a close look at many

Clockwise from top: Vicki Weinstein, a North American artist and scholar living in Ravenna, Italy, stands in front of a local iron gate, the bottom portion of which is made from interlocking metal grids that were originally used in the Second World War to facilitate driving over muddy terrain; the Canadian war cemetery in Villanova; an ammunition box that's found new life in Gail Carter's household; Nazi helmets that were adapted for other purposes after the war, and are now on display at the Museo della Battaglia del Senio in Alfonsine; a Player's Navy Cut cigarette tin, one of many war-era items Gail's husband, Piero, has collected.

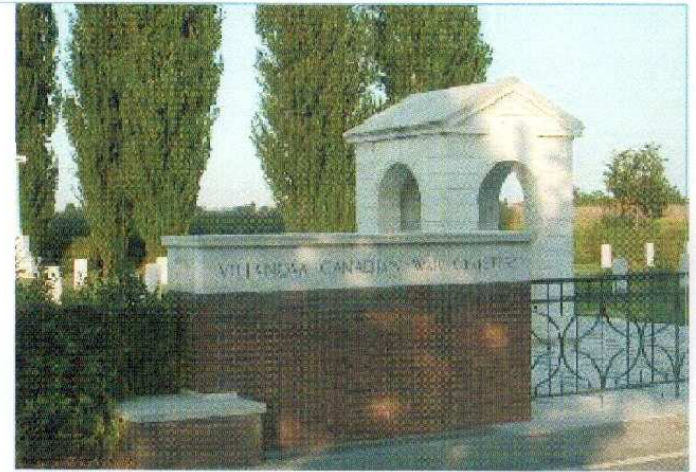
of the iron gates in service at private residences throughout the region, and you'll notice that large sections are made from the prefabricated interlocking metal grids that were originally laid down on muddy terrain to create ready-made passageways for tanks and trucks.

Even closer to home, my husband, Piero—who is a native *Romagnolo*, born in 1949 and raised in Ravenna with a decided “waste not, want not!” mentality—almost inevitably became an avid collector of salvaged artifacts. We frequent the local flea markets and junkyards, and have found many treasures over the years.

Piero recently obtained four ammunition containers which, based on wartime photos I've seen, were once stacked in long rows along the roadside by advancing troops. You can still see the stamped markings on one of the iron boxes: “1943 MPB B166.” Piero mounted a set of castor wheels on each case, and painted one eggshell white to match the kitchen. That container now houses our dog's dried food and treats, and can be conveniently rolled out of the way.

We have many other war relics around the house, including a small, round tin clearly identified as “Players Navy Cut Medium Cigarettes.” Two empty large-calibre bullet shells from an anti-aircraft or anti-tank gun can be found among the glass and china vases on top of a cabinet in my sitting room. I remember giving them a disinterested glance the day Piero brought them home. *Yet more junk*, I thought. After reading up on our Canadian heroes who fought, died and were laid to rest near my adopted hometown, I now see these objects in a different light...and I put a long-stemmed red rose in each bullet cartridge.

I have begun to research our area with great interest, and I've learned that for the entire summer of 1945,





D-DAY DODGERS

"We're the D-DAY DODGERS, out in Italy..."

When you hear the term "D-Day," the Normandy invasion of June 1944 no doubt springs to mind. But prior to that momentous event, several other "Designated Days" of attack or landing took place, including those that brought the Allies into

Sicily and Italy in a bid to roust the Nazis.

Part of what Churchill described as the "underbelly of Europe," Italy proved to be anything but soft. From the outset, the Allies were faced with rugged terrain, dramatic weather changes and a determined, well-trenched enemy who was ready to fight tooth and nail for every inch of ground. And they did: Canada alone has 5,900 identified war dead buried in Italy's 17 Commonwealth War cemeteries or commemorated on the Cassino Memorial.

So how did the Allies in Italy come to be known as the D-Day Dodgers? As the story goes, a British serviceman in Italy wrote a letter to British Member of Parliament Nancy Astor, expressing his exasperation that the hard-fought Italian campaign was being overshadowed by events at Normandy. He signed off sarcastically as "a D-Day Dodger." Lady Astor apparently assumed the moniker was a nickname with positive connotations, akin to "Desert Rat," and repeated it publicly without a second thought. When news got back to the troops in Italy that they were openly being called dodgers, they prepared a response in the form of a theme song. Sung to the tune of Lily Marlene, the scathingly satirical (and highly adaptable) lyrics poke fun at Lady Astor, while downplaying the D-Day Dodgers' courage, sacrifice and accomplishments. The name and the song went on to become rallying points for the Allied troops in Italy.

To hear a rendition of D-Day Dodgers' theme song, visit www.youtube.com/watch?v=jxL_xzqRgk. Note: Lyrics include some coarse language.

For more information, visit www.d-daydodgers.com which is maintained by the D-Day Dodgers Historical Research Group.

mechanics and experts from all over the Emilia Romagna region had swarmed to the banks of the Po River to confiscate the enormous quantities of jeeps, trucks, tanks and other vehicles that had been abandoned there by the hastily retreating Germans. The industrious Italians recuperated not only the nearly intact vehicles, tools and engines, but the farmyard animals that the Germans had "appropriated" from them as well. Getting across the Po with the Allies hot on their heels had posed a major challenge to the German soldiers—all excess baggage got left behind.

While doing research, I interviewed Lino Bond, who had been a member of the *partisan* fighters during the war and is now 86 years old. Lino's father and sister were taken prisoners by the Nazis on December 2, 1944, and were never seen or heard from again. A strong young man, Lino managed to escape just moments before their arrest. The next day the Canadian soldiers liberated Russi, his hometown.

Lino recalled that just after the war he was astounded by the sight of a huge yard full of military vehicles—tanks, trucks, jeeps—and mountains of tires. According to Lino, it all vanished in the blink of an eye: "It seemed as if the yard, so immense and so full, was picked clean overnight!"

This salvaging of war material was a big boost to the ravaged, post-war Italian economy, especially before the official American aid arrived. Military engines were recycled to power "modern" farm machinery such as tractors, replacing the traditional oxen, mules and "horse power" employed up to that time. Powerful Sherman tank motors were used to drive pumps for draining the land, which had been flooded by the enemy who destroyed river embankments and canals as they fled.

Due to exceptionally heavy rainfall in 1944, these rivers, canals and ditches were unusually high, which proved to be a major stumbling block for our Canadian soldiers and claimed many of their lives. With deep, fast-flowing water before them and a determined foe nearby, the area around Russi and Ravenna became a mud trap that kept our soldiers bogged down for four long, wintry months.

MURALS OF RUSSI

While I was doing interviews with the older folks, such as Lino, all of whom have warm memories of how kind and generous the Canadian lads were, I received a phone call from a colleague, Claudia Baruzzi. She was helping to arrange some interviews at a daycare centre for the elderly in her home town,

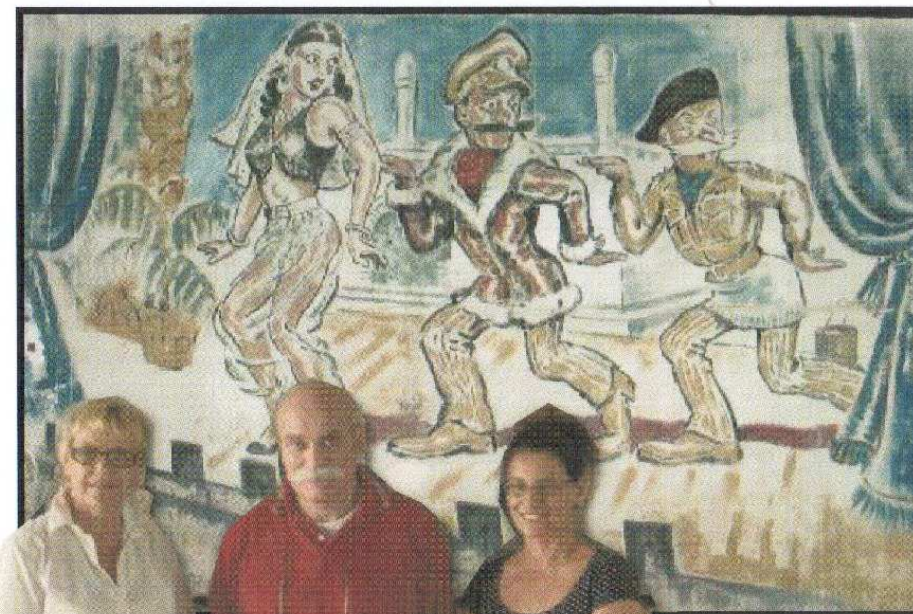
Piangipane, located between Ravenna and Russi. She asked me if I knew about the "wall paintings" from the Second World War in a privately owned building in Russi. Given the fact that Canadian troops had been bogged down there for four months, it was assumed that the paintings had been done by a Canadian soldier.

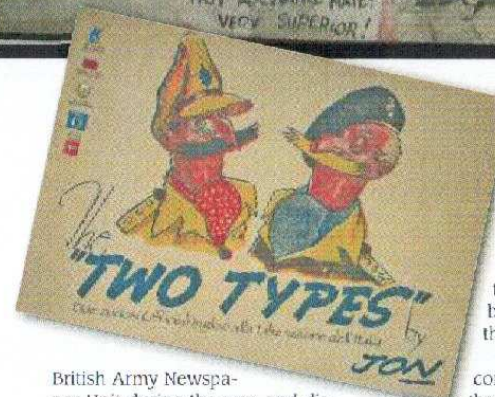
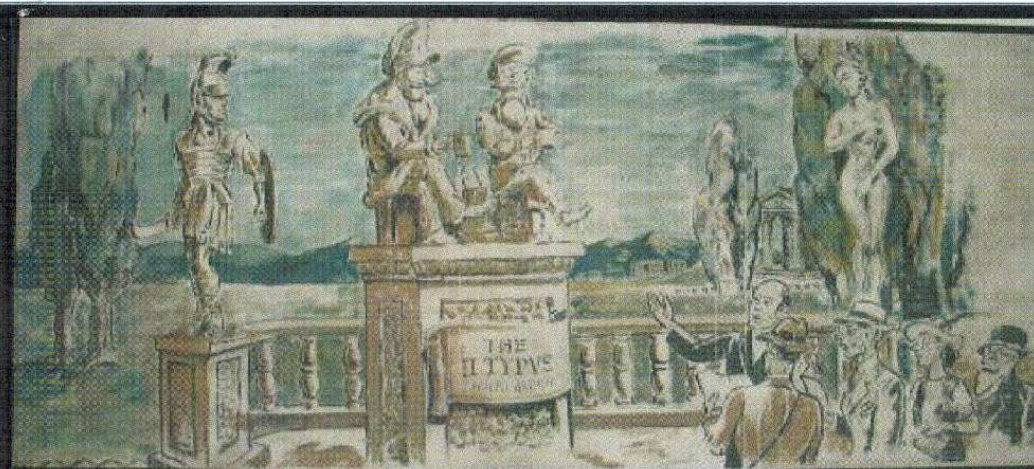
Eager to see the murals, and being an artist myself, I asked Claudia to arrange an appointment to view them. I asked an American friend of mine, Vicki Weinstein, to come along. Vickie—an artist who works in Ravenna, and who holds an undergraduate degree in fine arts from UCLA and a doctorate in art history from Cornell University—was curious about the murals, too.

We were taken to an unassuming-looking building in the centre

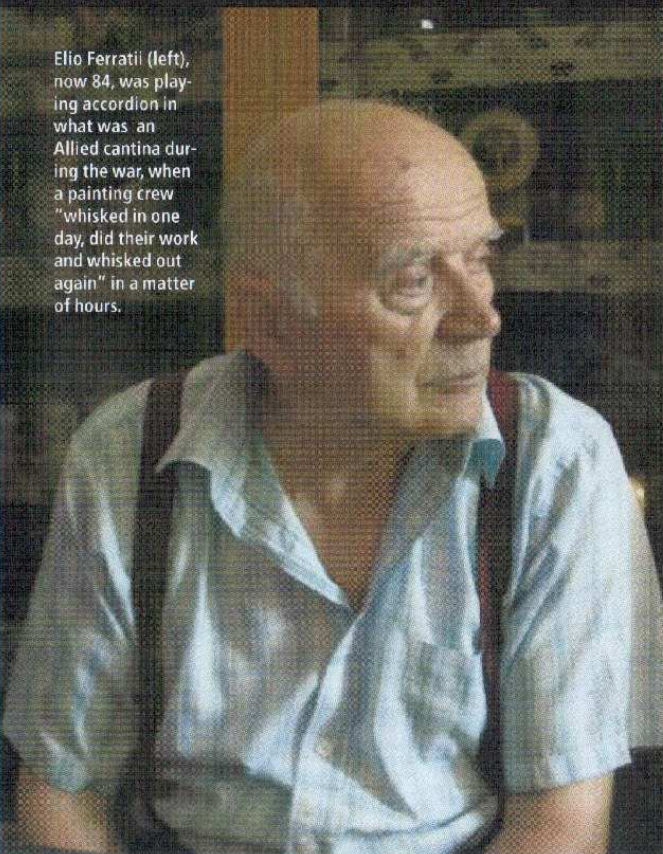
of Russi, which had been a cinema before the Second World War. After the war, the building was used as a garage, where small tanks, jeeps and other armoured vehicles were apparently repaired and adapted for civilian use. In the 1960s, it became a service garage for cars. After that, it was all but abandoned, and had been in disuse up to a few months. It was here that we viewed three large-scale "cartoon" murals for the first time. Painted in between the support pillars of this large open interior space, each mural was about 150 centimetres in height and 250 to 350 centimetres in length, and more than than 60 years after their creation, the cartoon-style wall

Claudia Baruzzi (right) introduced Gail to Enzo Bolognesi, who's passionate about history and the murals.





Elio Ferratili (left), now 84, was playing accordion in what was an Allied cantina during the war, when a painting crew "whisked in one day, did their work and whisked out again" in a matter of hours.



paintings were still remarkably intact and well preserved. Two eccentric British Eighth Army "Desert Rat" officers were the centre of attention in the first two murals, and their seemingly Canadian counterparts were the principal figures in the third. Two questions sprang to mind: Who are these oddball characters anyway, and why did anyone go to so much trouble to paint them during a war?"

Our first meeting to view the murals had been organized, through Claudia, by Enzo Bolognesi. We owe much of our knowledge to his passionate interest in these murals and local war history, as well as our gratitude for his collaboration. Enzo immediately became our mentor, enthusiastically accompanying on our research excursions. He also made us a photocopy of a rare 1944 book of cartoon vignettes he had in his possession: "The Two Types by JON." JON was the pen name of a famous Welsh cartoonist, William John Philpin Jones (1913-1992), who had served in Sicily and Anzio in 1943 and 1944. The British officers depicted in the Russi murals were similar to those in JON's book. *The Two Types by JON* and another book of his vignettes, *JON's Two Types in Italy*, were published for the Allied soldiers by the

British Army Newspaper Unit during the war, and distributed by the Directorate of Army Welfare Services. They sold about a million copies, testifying to their immense popularity with the troops. W.J.P. Jones was even awarded an MBE by Winston Churchill for the contribution *The Two Types* made to Allied morale. One of JON's cartoons—portraying the two officers heating spaghetti over a jeep's engine, somewhere between Russi and Ravenna according to the signpost that's visible in the frame—places JON in proximity to the unsigned murals. Could he have painted the murals?

After doing a detailed stylistic analysis and comparing JON's vignettes with the murals, Vicki came to the conclusion that the three paintings were neither conceived by JON nor executed by him per-

sonally. According to Vicki, the murals were painted in three completely different styles, and she didn't think that they could have been executed by the same hand. S

Support for Vicki's conclusions came in the form of an eye-witness account when Elio Ferretti, now 84, informed us that he used to play the accordion in the back of the building, when it was being used as a cantina by the Allies between December 1944 and February or March 1945. According to Elio, the paintings were done one winter afternoon in about three or four hours. The English-speaking painting crew, who were not among the "regulars," simply whisked in one day, did their job and were never seen again.

As to why the murals were painted in the first place, Vicki explains it this way: "The murals helped create a cozy, intimate atmosphere where the soldiers could relax, bond together, have a few drinks and some fun. The paintings helped make their life not only live-

able but enjoyable, in a situation where tomorrow might not arrive. We may conclude that even though the murals were not painted by JON himself, they remain important historical documents of the Canadian soldiers in the Russi area."

The murals have outlived my heart, not because they have great monetary value but because they stand proud and unscathed, clearly reflecting the times in which when they were created and allowing us to relive those times. The building has recently been renovated again, and is now a retail store. The murals are still visible, but they face an unknown destiny: a fresh coat of paint is all it would take to obliterate them from history. "JON" is deceased and most likely the artists who actually painted these murals have joined him, but, for now, their legacy lives on. Together with the relics left behind after the war, the murals of Russi speak eloquently on behalf of all D-Day Dodgers, reminding the generations that followed and are still to come: "WE WERE HERE!" ■

Do you know who painted the Russi murals? Do you have recollections of the war years to share? Visit ourcanada.ca or turn to page 64 for our address.