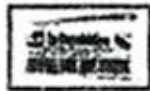


"Destroy the Tower of Pisa"



(PISA, Italia, 9 January 2000) La Repubblica Giornale
by Laura Lilli

An Autobiographic Book.

The testimony of an American sergeant in World War II.

The US army wanted to demolish the famous monument: it believed that the Germans checked the movements of the Allies from there

Sergeant Leon Weckstein was only 23 years old, but he knew the Tower of Pisa very well. It was "one of the seven wonders of the world." So when, at ten o'clock on a sultry, endless night in July '44, as they tried in vain to advance against a flurry of deadly German bullets, as well as the omnipresent mines, "Shu," the colonel, sent a call to him that, with every probability, at the dawn of the following day, the Tower would be demolished.

Indeed, he was the chosen person! "I was an audacious and vainglorious kid," he writes in his memories, "and I saw me projected to the center of the scene, protagonist of a world play not yet known. The day after I would have been famous. I would have been the one to give the signal. I would have told the marksman (I would have gone on the mission with him) to transmit the phrase: "This is the Brave George Primo. Fire"! And, on my word, a pandemonium of hits from the Days of Judgment would have destroyed one of the most far monuments of the planet."

The memories are titled "Through My Eyes/ 91st Infantry Division in the Italian Campaign 1942-1945 (Hellgate Press, 195 pages, \$14.95). Hellgate really is the name of a canyon in southern Ohio, but the publishers make no mystery that the name refers to publishing

"breathtaking books of war, of adventure and of courage in the best Yankee tradition." Provided that, of course, they are truthful.

The author is today a peaceful 80 year-old gentleman living with his wife Mimi in California. But in the Armed Forces with General Clark, (the liberator of Rome), he distinguished himself for audacity and courage. Not only in the eyes of his colonel, but also to those of the Badoglio government, who conferred on him the Cross of Military Valor on October 5 1945. Perhaps for not demolishing the Tower of Pisa.

In the book, this breathtaking history has been relived minute by minute, and it has an extraordinary taste of truth: the smothered voices of the soldiers could be heard as they curse in their slang, you can smell the odor of the sweat, the fear, the dirty oppressive heat, among flies and mosquitos, while they try to advance on all fours, looking for shelter from the barrage of deadly German bullets between the thin shade of the olive trees and the small cracks in the thirsty ground, to use as momentary trenches.

The Allies didn't expect a resistance so obstinate and astute. The Germans were extremely ferocious, hot tempered and unwilling to retreat. "The order of Kesselring must be followed "slow down the Allies at any cost," writes Weckstein. The American soldiers felt transformed into targets for an opponent with better weapons and infallible aim. It was evident that this enemy had arranged a commanding observatory, that allowed him to check the area over a vast territory between Pisa and Livorno, that until then had been almost totally occupied by the Americans. And everything made them think that the observatory was the famous tower of Piazza dei Miracoli.

" TILTIN' HILTON "

The friends of Weckstein called it "the Hilton that leans." From their hideaways, they saw it very well, at a distance of less than a mile. "In the haze that emanated from the Arno, magically above the line of trees, suspended on the horizon, it sprouted as in a surrealistic picture by Salvador Dali." If anything and anybody was visible, they could be seen from the tower. There was, in truth, this annoying, small "if." With precise orders, but not confirmed, the colonel had said that the general wanted the next day, at the first daylight, "to approach with binoculars as close as possible to the tower. Hide among the olive trees and, for the love of God, pay attention to the mines.

We think that the enemy uses the Tower as an observatory. Too many damned casualties. You pound it to the ground. Observe it well, look between the arches: and at the first suspicious movement, don't hesitate to give the signal. The cannons of the company are already aimed on ground zero for the maximum effect, with a pair of batteries of 105 and 155 mm. And if it needs more, there is also a destroyer ready to give a hand with six inch guns."

Dawn came in a hurry. Sultry and oppressive, without a breath of wind. The Marksman, sergeant Charles King, of Canton, Ohio, was a calm and reliable type, who played the guitar. He didn't give signs of particular excitement. They consumed a "K ration" (a bar of fruit) and they drank black, strong coffee. They smeared their faces with mud, they breathed deeply, and

on all fours, between the mines, they moved toward that lopsided target. "we knew that no Ally had been there before we." Under the weight of the radio, soon King began to sweat like a fountain.

After about an hour, slow as eternity, the sergeant thought that he could begin to give a "serious" look. They tried to settle in the shelter of a big fallen oak, about a kilometer from the objective. He rested an instant. The sweat misted his glasses. He tried to clean them and to adjust the telescope lens, supported "in precarious equilibrium" in the intersection between two branches. King settled his voluminous radio and he spoke low to establish contact.

"I squeezed my stomach to the ground, devoured by bugs, that burned from the itch, and I attentively pointed the scope at the top of the tower, the ample circular campanile. I saw the shade of the bells clearly. Nothing moved. With calm, I moved the binoculars in and down and horizontally along the adorned baluster, trying to perceive the least hidden shade between the arcs. For a second, I forgot all, dazzled by the beauty. Now I was hoping that I would not see anything."

At this point two things happened. The first was that under the radiation of the sun and the waves of heat the marble tower appeared as a mass of white and trembling glaze, that rippled in an absurd convulsive dance.

The second, that a young sergeant, evidently lost and ignorant of the situation, wanting to play an old joke that he made as a boy in difficult situations, for example if he wanted to attract a girl. "I imagined that I put on the clothes of my rival, trying to imagine all that he would have said and done. I became him. In this way, I shot my view inside the tower of white glaze. He was named Kurt Reinhardt. Tall, blond, 23 years old, blue eyes, a perfect representative of the Arian race who marched with the footstep of the goose. He came from Amburgo from a small two-storey cottage, with geraniums in every window.

"In the beginning, I-Kurt was not enthusiastic to depart for war, because I loved to go fishing on the wooden dock behind the house, and row under a weeping willow in the company of my love, beautiful Hilda, with whom I behaved passionately. But then, I could not ignore the sirens of the country, that called to destroy all other women - Hebrews, communist Russians, gypsies, to reestablish her in the world for the divine superiority of our race. We would have made them see it, those soft American idiots, with our Scheimesser and the"

"I began to resent Kurt, and I was close to giving the order. But, in the white glaze, I couldn't distinguish the least movement. What must I do? Complete my duty. Yes, but if nothing moved, what was really my duty? Perhaps, yes...perhaps, to give the order."

Sergeant Weckstein waited. But Kurt was faster than he. A downpour of bullets hailed all around the two Americans. The sky caught fire and became black with smoke. From the radio of sergeant King an order crackled: "Get your ass out of there, if you are still alive!"

The damned general has decided to save the tower in any case!" "Roger!" and away.

"We were able to get back. But were the Germans there or no? It was never known. To hell with you, Kurt Reinhardt!"

Translated by Gary Feuerstein, 9 January 2000 from the La Repubblica article



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