

Charles Crosthwaite Eyre relates how his family has rekindled a friendship with descendants of the courageous 'Aunt Matilde' who hid his father

Letters that tell a story of devotion

IT WAS the discovery of a cache of letters written by my father, John Crosthwaite Eyre (right), during the war that eventually prompted me to research his story.

Although my sister, Flops Lewis, came across the letters soon after Dad died at his home in Zimbabwe in 2000, I did not investigate them until more recently. The outcome was a heart-warming meeting last September with descendants of the courageous Italian woman who gave him sanctuary from September to December 1943. This was Matilde Franchi Moruzzi, whom Dad called Aunt Matilde, and of whom he wrote glowingly in the vivid letters he wrote to his own mother.

Dad was a mining engineer and a Captain with the Royal Engineers. In May 1941, he was recruited to the Special Operations Executive and, in January 1942, was landed on Algeria's Gulf of Hammamet by submarine to destroy a viaduct. The beach was fortified and the detachment were captured.

Transferred to Italy, Dad arrived at Camp PG49 in Fontanellato, near Parma, in June 1943. At the end of July, following Mussolini's fall and arrest, he wrote: *"The news of (Marshal) Badoglio's rise to power arrived like a thunderbolt from the blue sky this morning... It is all too wonderful; I shall wake up soon."*

Between September 8th, when he and 600 fellow officers marched out of Fontanellato a few days after the signing of the Armistice, and December 2nd, there were no more letters.

It was during this period on the run from the Germans and Fascists that he came across Aunt Matilde. Matilde lived 35 miles away from Fontanellato, in the hamlet of Case Scapini, in the mountains west of Compiano. She was born in August 1896 and died in June 1987. In 1927, she married Angelo Moruzzi, who had three children by a previous marriage. Together they had two daughters, Maria and Angelina, who is still alive and lives in Avignon. Angelina remembers Dad and the two other British soldiers sheltered by the family; one of them was a Major with a bad foot. Mathilde also hid an Italian who had escaped a firing squad.

On December 2nd, Dad wrote to say they were setting off for Switzerland. *"The Italians have treated us with wonderful kindness... Aunt Matilde has looked after us with amazing courage and devotion, and is now almost in tears because we are going. She has fought the rest of the village to keep us this last week, as others were afraid and want us to go; it would break my heart if Aunt Matilde got shot on our account which is another good reason for leaving."*

Unfortunately, Dad and his companions were recaptured near the Swiss border. He was imprisoned in Oflag 79 at Braunschweig. At the first opportunity after the war, Dad visited Case Scapini to introduce his wife Sue and express his gratitude to Matilde. Flops recalls him saying that it was a very emotional visit and that they were wined and dined by the whole village.

My own early attempts to rekindle the friendship with her family were unsuccessful but Paolo Flores, a family friend, contacted Ettore Rulli, a member of a Compiano Facebook community, who arranged a meeting. So, last September, I myself, my sister Flops, my wife Nicki and our daughter Gemma, met Mathilde's granddaughters Rita and Antonietta Milani and Gianina Sidoli (step granddaughter) in Casa Scapini, which was burnt by the Germans in 1945 and abandoned in the 1950s.

Matilde's home was a two-storey stone house. Standing on the stairs to the room where Dad slept was an extraordinary experience. Ettore arranged the same meal Mathilde made on the last night (rabbits) and each member of Matilde's family was presented with an album on his life. Paolo read Dad's letter to his mother in Italian, and everyone toasted an extraordinarily brave woman.

A real connection has been created between the families; two of Matilde's great granddaughters have been awarded MSMT bursaries this year.

There is one loose end. Seven imprisoned Majors at Fontanellato were recaptured, and two of them were in Oflag 79, which might suggest one of them was the Major with the bad foot. They were Major H.R.Haig (QOCH) and Major J. Tennant (RA). Any contact with these families would be welcome.



Charles and Flops on the steps below the room where their father slept.

Photo by Alessandra Bassoni