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Oltre il Colle valley surrounded by mountain peaks in northern Italy. Courtesy Deb Otto



THE SECRET OF OLTRE IL COLLE

CONSTANCE R. CHERBA VISITS THE LOCATION AND RECOUNTS THE CRASH OF A US B-24 LIBERATOR, LADY IRENE, NEAR THE SUMMIT OF MOUNT MENNA IN THE ITALIAN ALPS IN WWII

The tiny village of Oltre il Colle nestles in a lush valley surrounded by four Alpine mountain peaks in northern Italy, just 43 miles (70 km) northeast of Milan. The village, which traces its history to ancient times, is actually a municipality of some 1,040 inhabitants who live in the hamlets of Zambala Alta, Zambala Bassa, and Zorzone. These people had a secret — one they kept for more than 60 years.

First, a little background. In 1936, Oltre il Colle boasted a population of 1,726. Many labored in the zinc and lead mines they cut into the hard rock on the slopes of the mountains. Others farmed and raised animals and crops to feed the townspeople.

During WWII, some of the folks of northern Italy became partisans who resisted the Nazi and Fascist regimes. On the evening of 4 October 1944, the partisans lit signal fires when the roar of a B-24 bomber echoed throughout the Oltre il Colle valley.

THE LADY IRENE

The plane that approached the basin of Oltre il Colle was the *Lady Irene*. The B-24 Liberator was piloted by a 24-year-old airman from Dubuque, Iowa, my hometown. In a letter his family received on 27 September 1944, Capt. Charles Robert Sloan reported he had already completed 15 missions. He had packed his bags for home when he received orders to fly one more mission.

Capt. Sloan, his crew of nine, and three Italian agents with the OSS (Office of Strategic Services)

left the southern Italian base in Brindisi at 1845 hours on a "secret operational mission" into northern Italy. The *Lady Irene* and her crew were attached to the 885th Bombardment Squadron, assigned to the Fifteenth Air Force stationed in Italy. The squadron engaged in special operation missions flying into Occupied France, Fascist Italy, Yugoslavia, and other parts of Occupied Europe. They supported partisans and parachuted Allied Agents into enemy territory.

On that October evening back in 1944, the weather report said "medium low clouds". Although flying was always dangerous, no one expected Capt. Sloan's mission to northern Italy to drop supplies and the Italian agents to be anything but routine.

Capt. Sloan flew the *Lady Irene* out over the Adriatic Sea and then swung back into northern Italy. As the plane reached the drop site, the bomb bay doors were opened. However, the weather closed in, the crew was unable to make the drop, and the doors were closed.

The Italian partisans rekindled their fires and waited. The *Lady Irene* circled and circled, but they were unable to make the drop. Finally, the pilot gave up and headed toward Mount Menna and out of the valley. Capt. Sloan was unable to coax the needed altitude from the *Lady Irene*. The plane hit the mountain a few meters below the summit and exploded in a fireball.

All thirteen men on board were killed. The residents of Oltre il Colle buried the airmen on the

mountain top near the wreckage of the *Lady Irene*, where they remained until after the war. At that time, the United States government offered to fly family members to Italy for a memorial service, but the families insisted that their loved ones be returned to their homeland. So, the government retrieved the bodies, flew them home, and reburied the remains of the crew of the *Lady Irene* in a common grave at Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery in St. Louis, Missouri.

The plane wreckage remained on Mount Menna. According to the Italians, "For years, the imposing metal mass is [sic] served as a source of raw materials for the locals." Many villagers visited the site of the wreckage and many helped themselves to the drop



Oxygen tanks salvaged from the wreckage of the *Lady Irene* - note one has been made into a bucket. Courtesy Deb Otto



LEFT: Metal fragments from wreckage of *Lady Irene* including a "Flap Down" sign. Courtesy Deb Otto RIGHT: Metal salvaged from the wreckage of the *Lady Irene*. Courtesy Deb Otto

canisters, sub-machine guns, pistols, ammunition, canned beef, Italian lire, parachutes, and pieces of the plane itself, but this was something they didn't talk about – especially not to outsiders. Some 60 years later, after all fear of reprisal had vanished, they began to talk and their secret was a secret no longer.

In May 2014, nearly 70 years after the disaster, my sister and I visited Oltre il Colle. We wanted to see the site of the crash of the *Lady Irene*, to talk to those who still remembered that awful evening in October, and to view some of the artifacts from the plane that the villagers had kept.

As we rode up the winding road to Oltre il Colle from Milan, Donatella, an email friend and translator, told us the villagers were eager to meet with us. In fact, she believed that we were the first Americans to visit the village.

EYEWITNESS TESTIMONIES:

— Gaspare Valle —

Many of the Italians who witnessed the crash of the *Lady Irene* have died. This is true of Gaspare Valle, a miner who died of a work-related lung disease in 2008. However, we were able to meet with two of his sons at their bar,

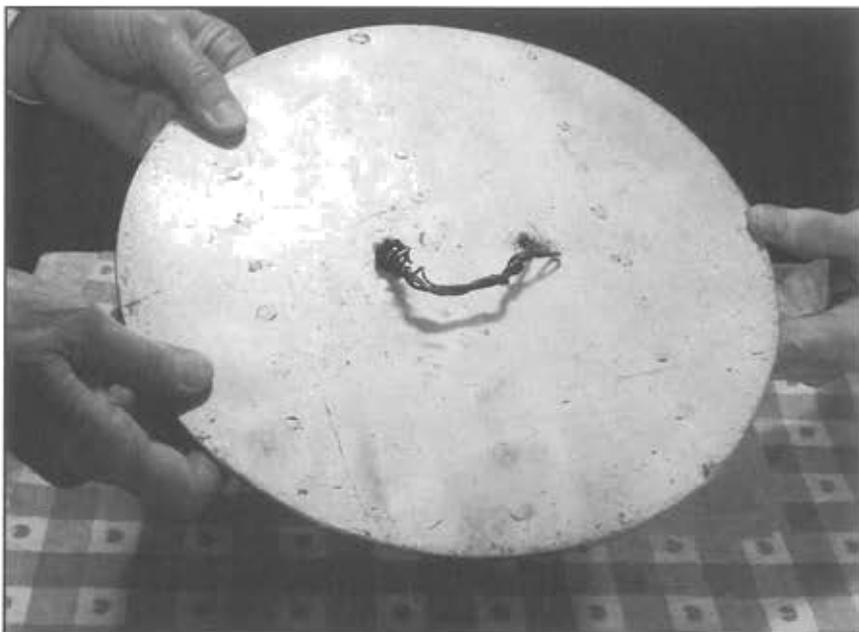
the Centro Sportivo Valle, located near the Zambla Pass.

Although these men were too young to remember the crash, their father's memories have been preserved in a 2007 video as well as a 2011 book, *Le montagne di Oltre il Colle teatro della Resistenza (The Mountain Theater of Resistance of Oltre il Colle)*, written by Serena Pesenti Gritti Palazzi.

Gaspare and his friend were some of the first to investigate the wreckage. He recalled, "I remember the plane crash on Menna.

Throughout the basin of Oltre il Colle, we heard a tremendous roar. In the morning, when I met a friend, we decided to desert work to climb the mountain to see for ourselves what happened. We arrived almost at the top and saw a wheel rolling down the mountain. Up there we saw materials scattered everywhere and also charred human remains. Everywhere was smoke and burning smell."

He continued, "I put aside revolvers and a box of ammo. I gave a kick to an empty bin that rolled



Pot lid with visible rivet holes made from metal of the *Lady Irene* by father of Vigilia Epis. Courtesy Deb Otto

— Gianfranco Ferrari —

And finally, we hear the testimony of Gianfranco Ferrari who was a member of the Italian military and served in a brigade of Alpine skiers. “We heard a thud followed by a glow. I went to the site the day after the crash. We saw the poor burned bodies and already some were willing to provide burial. I saw some of the material that was to be dropped — also some bills. I saw with my own eyes two rings that had been removed from the fallen. The rings were in the hands of a partisan. Using machine guns on board, a small memorial was set up, and a team of partisans presented arms. I returned on 20 October with my dad who shot some photos.”

And so, following the October crash, many of the villagers, driven by hunger and need, began to systematically dismantle the huge bomber. Immediately after the crash, the partisans attempted to recover the money on board, but they only found fragments of it. The bulk of the money had disappeared — as the villagers say, “taken away by everybody and by nobody”. A year or so after the crash, mules from nearby Zorzone brought scrap dealers pieces of aluminum and iron that were said to be from the plane.

AN ENTHUSIASTIC COLLECTOR

Some ten years ago, Luigi, a local plumber and WWII collector, started on a quest to recover artifacts from of the *Lady Irene* — purchasing some items from the townspeople and recovering other pieces of the wreckage by metal detecting on Mount Menna with his son Giulio. Luigi has an extraordinary collection that fills a large part of his two-story warehouse in the village of Gorno, near Oltre il Colle.

down the mountain that I could recover and use. About twenty meters below the summit, we found the fuselage of the airplane. We cut a hole to enter. In a corner, we saw three bodies, piled up one above the other, and also bundles of charred money. My friend took money because he wanted to buy a goat to make milk for his children.”

Gaspare helped himself to the revolvers, ammunition, scorched lire, a parachute, and five dog tags he removed from the dead airmen. He gave some of the money to his brother, who he said was not associated with the partisans, so his brother could buy the supplies necessary to resume his work as a cobbler. Gaspare then sent his sister to the hardware store with some of the money so she could pay off his debt. The scorched money came to the attention of the partisans.

Five or six partisans arranged a meeting with Gaspare, pushed him against a wall, and interrogated him. Later, the partisans went to his home while he was at work in the mines and took the revolvers, ammunition, and dog tags. Eventually, they were also able to recover some of the money Gaspare had taken from the wreckage.

— Vigilia Epis —

We met with Vigilia Epis at the Antico Ristorante Drago where we were treated to a delicious, multi-course meal that included Stracotto di Asino con Polenta or donkey stew. Vigilia was nineteen years old in 1944. She recalled that on the night of the crash, she was in bed. She said, “I heard the plane circle and circle. Then I heard a loud bang. I looked out the window and saw a big blaze of red, and I thought it was a fire.”

Vigilia proudly displayed a much used skimmer and pot lid.



Vigilia Epis, eyewitness to the crash of the *Lady Irene*, with a strainer and pot lid her father made from metal of the plane. Courtesy Deb Otto

She explained, “My father worked at the mine. People carried off pieces from the wings of the plane and turned them into utensils and implements. My father made this lid and this skimmer. All the other workers also made things for themselves.”

— Olga Palazzi —

Olga Palazzi was a young lady in 1944. She recalled the night of the crash. “I was going to look for our cows when I heard a roar, and beyond the fog, I saw a great light on Mount Menna. I was seized with unspeakable dread, so much that I had to sit on a step of the path. Only after a few minutes, I recovered and I began to climb. It was dark. I knew that all my family had seen the strange light and made assumptions about what could have happened. None of the family went to the top. My father did not want to because he wanted to respect the property of others.”



Giulio Borlini, son of collector Luigi Borlini, on Mount Menna near the crash site of the *Lady Irene*. The 1944 grave site of the crew is pictured in the foreground and marked with a cross made of plane parts".
 Photo courtesy Borlini family

Over the years, Luigi has collected sheets of aluminum from the skin of the *Lady Irene* as well as several of the plane's huge oxygen tanks – including one that has been made into a bucket. He identifies engine pieces he has collected from the wreckage of the *Lady Irene* by comparing them to an actual B-24 engine he has mounted on one side of his garage.

Not all of Luigi's artifacts are pieces of the aircraft. Some are way more personal. By using his metal detector, he has uncovered a cigarette lighter, uniform buttons, zippers, belt buckles, and rings. He carefully sorts and displays the items he has discovered with a reverence due the disaster and keeps separate bins for fabric, metal, and glass. He saves all the dirt attached to the recovered items in a canister as if the very soil associated with these artifacts has special significance.

As our visit reached an end, Luigi brought out an American flag and proudly displayed it with the help of his son. He offered us a small piece of the *Lady Irene* to take home to the pilot's sister and a fossil from the site of the wreckage to give to the navigator's niece.

My sister and I spent two weeks in Italy. We explored Milan and Rome and hiked the trails between the five picturesque villages of the Cinque Terre. However, the high point of our Italian adventure was the day we spent in Oltre il Colle, reliving the night the *Lady Irene* crashed into Mount Menna and the days that followed — listening to the accounts of those who were there, viewing pieces of the plane, and touching personal items that once belonged to the 13 men who lost their lives on a mission to aid the Italians in their struggle for freedom. *LCM*



Piece of the *Lady Irene* brought home to Iowa for the sister of Capt. Charles Sloan, pilot of the *Lady Irene*.
 Courtesy Deb Otto

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