San Marino TO THE RESCUE!

by Robert Allegrini

History is replete with occasions when the great and famous were rescued by the humble and obscure. At Valley Forge, for example, George Washington and the Continental Army were kept alive thanks to a small cadre of devoted bakers and farmers. At Dunkirk, the entire British Expeditionary Force was spirited to safety by a flotilla of fishermen and private yachtsmen. And on Italy's Piave River during World War I, Ernest Hemingway was one of more than 3,000 soldiers and civilians treated at a war hospital operated by a handful of volunteers from the Republic of San Marino, the 23-square-mile Apennine enclave that constituted Europe's smallest country.

Just how Hemingway made his way to the hospital is a compelling story that combines international intrigue and diplomacy with adventure, valor, patriotism and a healthy dose of humanity. It must surely rank among the First World War's most colorful episodes.

During the spring of 1915, as the conflict raged, calls intensified for neutral Italy to declare war on the Central Powers of Austria-Hungary and Germany. In this tense atmosphere, San Marino was looked upon with suspicion by both sides. Encompassing Mt. Titano and overlooking the Adriatic Sea, the tiny country had the potential to be either a thorn in Italy's side or a small but strategically placed foe of the Austrians.

Hemingway (left) recuperates from his wounds.

▲ **ERNEST HEMINGWAY**

Like a character in his own novel, he convalesced in a field hospital on Italian soil during World War I, but this one was staffed by patriotic souls from the world's oldest republic.

For Italy, San Marino was a likely refuge for draft dodgers and deserters as well as a potential base for Austro-Hungarian spies on the Italian peninsula. For these reasons, in the weeks leading up to Italy's participation in the war, mail going in and out of San Marino was censored by worried Italian authorities. The resulting delays in postal correspondence were protested by the San Marino government to no avail. Once war was declared, the Italian authorities took their fears of espionage to the next level by cutting all of San Marino's phone lines to the outside world.

The Central Powers proved equally paranoid. This was demonstrated by the bemusing story of Professor Borbiconi and his radio tower. Borbiconi was a physics teacher at a San Marino high school who, for study purposes, built a crude radio station in 1914 by running an

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antenna of copper cable between two towers. Word of this development spread far and wide, causing consternation not only in Rome but also in Vienna and Berlin, where it was believed this radio station was being used to pick up signals from the Austrian fleet in the Adriatic and transmit them to the French navy. Newspapers of the day reported on official inquiries and protests by the Central Powers. Then, according to local history, two mysterious strangers turned up one day in San Marino. The pair spent the evening at the Hotel Titano and by morning had already disappeared. During the night, the antenna of Professor Borbiconi's radio station had been cut.

As it turned out, the Central Powers had much more to fear from San Marino than did the Italians. Sentiment across San Marino was widely pro Italian, and most Sammarinesi yearned for the Italian liberation of the Austrian-controlled isle of Rab in the northern Adriatic. Rab was the original home of Marinus, the Christian stone mason turned saint who is venerated as having founded San Marino in 301 A.D. A few days after Italy's entry into the war, a manifesto signed by several bellicose young men appeared in San Marino urging the country to march alongside Italy in its war against "the barbarian." While not enough to force the country to officially abandon its neutrality, the manifesto and its appeal for combat volunteers was enough for Austria-Hungary to assume the presence of a hostile San Marino. The Austro-Hungarian Empire promptly severed diplomatic relations with the republic and interned all male citizens of San Marino residing in Austria-Hungary for the duration of the war.

The die had been cast, and the 11,000-plus citizens of the world's oldest republic were now active, if not quite official, supporters of the Entente's war effort against the Central Powers. The country was put on a war footing. Rationing was instituted, and to further evince a sense of high seriousness, all dances were banned for as long as the conflict endured.

A committee called the Pro Fratelli Italiani Combattenti (Pro Italian Fighting Brothers) was created to coordinate war assistance. The brotherhood was soon engaged in various avenues of direct and indirect aid. First, they encouraged volunteers to join the Italian army. In this, they had some success, with records showing that 10 Sammarinese went off to join the Italians at the front. There, two of them died heroic deaths and were made national martyrs. The committee also encouraged the production of much-needed supplies, and soon women in every town in the republic were busy knitting gloves and socks as well as producing shirts, blankets and even gas masks.

In September 1916, a Sammarinese physician by the name of Amadeo Kraus, motivated by the recent deaths of the two volunteers, presented an idea to the Pro Fratelli to establish a war hospital as near as possible to Trieste. The proposed location was purposeful since the Austrians had scornfully burned the coat of arms on the facade of the Sammarinese consulate there. The war hospital would be staffed entirely by volunteers of the San Marino Red Cross, and it would fly the country's ancient blue and white banner alongside those of Italy and the Red Cross. The suggestion was immediately approved by the committee as well as the government.

The call for volunteers to operate the hospital was answered by some of the republic's most dedicated and talented physicians. In addition to Kraus, the field hospital housed three more medical officers and a pharmaceutical officer, motor pool officer, chaplain and hospital administrator. The team immediately went about sourcing supplies and equipment as well as finding a location for the hospital. In a scant six months, everything was in place, and on April 15, 1917, a 50-bed hospital was opened in the former elementary school of San Lorenzo di Fiumicello just behind the front lines. The hospital was well-equipped with operating theaters, a radiological ward, a pharmacy, bathrooms, supply depots and an ambulance. Demand for the hospital's services soon forced an increase in its capacity to 120 beds.

That same month, the United States joined the fray, and in Oak Park, Illinois, an 18-year-old Ernest Hemingway began multiple unsuccessful efforts to join the American war effort. Much to his displeasure, the young adrenaline junkie was rejected by the Army, Navy and Marines because of his poor eyesight.

Still anxious to see action in Europe, Hemingway learned of an opportunity that the Italian Red Cross was offering for volunteers to join the American Red Cross Ambulance Corps in Italy. He was accepted and set sail for Europe in May 1918.

By the time Hemingway arrived in Italy, the war was going badly for the Italians and consequently for the Hospital of San Marino. In the immediate aftermath of the Italian defeat at Caporetto in October 1917, the hospital was ordered to abandon its location and transfer all patients and medical equipment. The patients were fortunate to be removed by the few available ambulances. But to transport the supplies and equipment, Kraus had to scurry to secure a caravan of eight carts and wagons pulled by horses and oxen. In that long and arduous retreat from Caporetto, which figured so prominently in Hemingway's novel "A Farewell to Arms," the caravan of Sammarinesi endured days and nights of pouring rain and mud on roads choked with desolate refugees and their few possessions. One by one, the heavily packed Sammarinese wagons met unfortunate fates. One overturned in a ditch along the road, a second simply broke and the oxen pulling a third could go on no longer. To speed up the retreat of the remaining carts, many of the medical supplies were removed and given to the Italian Red Cross. By the end of the journey, when the caravan crossed the Piave River to the safety of its west bank, only three wagons survived.

Given the terrible condition of the Sammarinese medical mission, the hospital's director felt compelled to announce the immediate dissolution of the enterprise. But Kraus refused to accept this outcome. He appealed to both the Italian 3rd army and its Red Cross delegate to revoke the decision. He also launched an appeal to the Pro Fratelli Italiani Combattenti Committee in San Marino to begin raising funds to support a new Hospital of San Marino. The appeals proved successful, and in a little more than three months, the hospital was back in business. This time, it was located in a graceful former mansion near Treviso more than 100 kilometers west of its original location.

The new hospital had been open for only 101 days when tragedy struck. On

June 15, 1918, the Austrians launched another major offensive that came to be known as the Battle of the Piave River. This time, the Italians heroically stood their ground, and the Austrians were soundly defeated. But one of the first casualties of the battle was the hospital itself, which took several direct hits from Austrian shells, causing the roof to collapse. Miraculously, all of the patients and staff members survived despite multiple injuries. Once more, the hospital was forced to relocate, this time to a field camp. However, the Italians worked quickly to reconstruct the building for the Sammarinesi, and 10 days after its abandonment, it was in working order again.

The day before the hospital reopened, Ernest Hemingway requested a transfer from ambulance driver duties in a relatively quiet sector near the Dolomites to a position as a volunteer in the Red Cross Rolling Canteen Service on the banks of the Piave River, just 20 kilometers from the Hospital of San Marino. There, he hoped to see more action since this Red Cross service operated along the front lines. He did not have to wait long.


Hemingway's passport photo

On the night of July 8, he was passing out cigarettes and chocolates to Italian troops when an Austrian mortar shell exploded next to him, knocking him unconscious and filling his body with nearly 200 pieces of shrapnel. When he regained consciousness, he immediately went to the rescue of a wounded Italian and was hit again, this time by a machine gun bullet below his left knee.

In excruciating pain and bleeding profusely, Hemingway still managed to explicitly instruct the attending Italian corpsmen to take him to the San Marino Hospital, since it had garnered the reputation of being the best in the area. Once at the hospital, he underwent an operation to remove the bullet and extensive shrapnel. In a subsequent report, Kraus noted, "In this regard, I would like to report that recovered in our hospital in the month of July was the first American wounded on our front, a volunteer of the American Red Cross, Second Lieutenant Fraest Hemmeriguey (sic) hit by shrapnel

at Fossalta di Piave while he was distributing gifts to soldiers of the 69th regiment."

Hemingway spent nearly a week recovering in the care of the San Marino Hospital before being put on a train to recuperate for another six months at the Red Cross hospital in Milan. There, he fell in love with the nurse Agnes von Kurowsky, who inspired the central character of Catherine in "A Farewell to Arms."

For his heroism on the night of July 8, the Italian army conferred its Silver Medal of Valor upon Hemingway. His citation read: "Gravely wounded by numerous pieces of shrapnel from an enemy shell, with an admirable spirit of brotherhood, before taking care of himself, he rendered generous assistance to the Italian soldiers more seriously wounded by the same explosion and did not allow himself to be carried elsewhere until after they had been evacuated."

The fate of the Hospital of San Marino followed the rising fortunes of the Italian army. The hospital team crossed the Piave River after the epic battle of Vittorio Veneto, which saw the Austro-Hungarians permanently defeated. The hospital's final location was in the town of Aidussina in present day Slovenia. Here, the Sammarinese physicians tended to many wounded Austrian soldiers and civilians in addition to Italians. The hospital operated there until December 1918 and was decommissioned in January 1919.

During almost 20 months of service, the hospital enabled San Marino to make a contribution to the war effort that was out of proportion to the country's size but not to its imagination and determination. In a solemn ceremony attended by Prince Emanuele Filiberto, Duke of Aosta and commander of the Italian 3rd army, the flag of San Marino that flew over the hospital at its numerous locations was consigned to the first Italian mayor of liberated Trieste.

Ernest Hemingway never forgot the debt he owed to San Marino. In 1927, while visiting Italy with his friend Guy Hickok, he made a point of driving to San Marino to visit the chaplain, Don Giuseppe Guidi, who had attended to him at the hospital. According to Richard Owen, author of the book "Hemingway in Italy," he also wished to express his gratitude to the doctor who operated on him. This was most likely Amadeo Kraus himself. While they were able to see Don Giuseppe, Kraus had moved away, which disappointed Hemingway greatly. After all, according to Hickok's account, Hemingway went to San Marino to visit the doctor who picked "180-odd pieces of shell out of his body." With understated humor, Hickok noted these were obviously the sort of "little attentions that make for lasting acquaintances."