Umberto’s War

by Pacifico Cofrancesco

In the Cofrancesco family, the name Umberto is quite common, particularly in the last generation. But the Umberto Cofrancesco – son of Lorenzo, captured at Bardia and prisoner of war in Australia as cited in a “Service and Casualty Form” that Ivan found - did not match any of the known Umberto Cofrancescos, living or dead. Our research did not provide any useful results.

One day last June 2008, something “strange” happened. While Anna was waiting her turn in a beauty parlor in Cerreto Sannita (Benevento, Italy), she noticed a lady who looked “familiar” to her. The woman was one of Anna’s clients in the past, when she and her sister operated a clothing shop in the same Cerreto. “Sorry to disturb you, but are you a Cofrancesco?” Anna asked. And the woman answered, somewhat intrigued but very kindly, “Yes.” Anna, so enthusiastic about her genealogical research, was excited to find a Cofrancesco to add to the family tree, if she was not already in the tree without Anna’s knowledge. “Do you know that there is a web site of the Cofrancesco family with a lot of information going back to the 1500s? Probably your family is also there”, Anna said. Lorenzina Giuseppina, the name of the lady to whom Anna was speaking, more and more intrigued, answered: “Really?” “Yes, yes. Really. And there is a team of people all over the world doing research”, Anna answered. And she added, “And there is a professor in Pavia who administers the web site.” Giuseppina showed more and more interest and she answered Anna’s questions with pleasure. Anna tried to connect the information to what she knew. Giuseppina’s father lived in S. Lorenzello and his name was Umberto. But her grandfather Lorenzo was born in Massa di Faicchio: in fact, he was also known as the “massaiolo” (a person from Massa). Lorenzo had a sister named Santina, married to a Cappella from Massa. Now Anna started her thoughts in order. But papà Umberto? Papà Umberto was a prisoner in Australia. At the moment that information did not have any real meaning. But later, talking and thinking, prisoner in Australia? Sure! Umberto! And – as two plus two equals four – the mystery of the “Service and Casualty Form” was solved. The date of birth also matched. He was really the same Umberto!

Now that we knew who the “Australian” Umberto was, John and I started to read every single word written in the “Service and Casualty Form”. We only had this document to help us understand what happened to Umberto in Australia. And by a careful reading it disclosed
a little gold mine of information. At the beginning we had difficulty even reading the word "Murchison", a name that would soon become very familiar. We were then able to read some other names, and a map on the Internet helped us to understand that they were cities and places around Melbourne. Then we were able to read the ships name and their sailing date. But that was all we could understand.

Giuseppina was greatly pleased to invite Anna to her home. And with what was to become of great value, she opened the doors of his home – papà Umberto’s home! Giuseppina had carefully kept her father’s war papers, and more. "Maybe there is also a diary, a diary written at the time of war!" Anna was able to take pictures of all of Umberto’s documents and photographs, and most of all, his diary, found together with the other mementos. It was a little notebook on which only a few pages had been written. Glancing through it, dates and names appeared: 1940, 1941, 1943, Bardia, India, Melbourne: another confirmation that he was the same Umberto!

And so we started studying the fabulous material that Giuseppina had preserved with such great care. Umberto became alive though those pages: the war, the bombings, and the pain of captivity. Finally, his photographs gave him a face. The names of the places mentioned by Umberto were the same ones that are so well known in the official history of WWII, such as Bardia, Fort Capuzzo, Solum, etc. Umberto was there while that tragic and painful history was being written. And he had his own little "history” to write, which I have tried to assemble and narrate here.

I want to especially thank Lorenzina Giuseppina Cofrancesco, who preserved her father Umberto’s memories with such great love, and so generously gave us the opportunity to study his documents and write this history; Umberto’s War. I also want to thank Anna for the passion and dedication she put into our research, and for her photographs of Umberto’s documents and writings. Thanks to dear cousin John, who, as always, with great sensitivity and accuracy helps me in the study of the documents, gives me many very useful suggestions, and assists in the translation of the text into English. Also thanks to Peter Dunn of Brisbane (Australia), manager of an Australian POW camps web site, who very kindly helped us find information sources, documents, and photographs.

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And the story starts...

When Umberto was called to arms on 26 May 1940 he was 29 years old. He was born on 4 March 1911 in San Lorenzello, Province of Benevento, the son of Lorenzo Cofrancesco and Filomena Romanelli.

Umberto had six brothers; Vincenzo, Giuseppe, Luigi, Silvio, Antonio, and Alfonso. Several of them were destined to serve in the Italian army.

Like his father Lorenzo and his brothers, Umberto was a farmer. He had attended school until the fourth grade, and knew how to read and write rather well. It was not married and despite his young age, had already been in another war.

The war of Ethiopia

He served in the war with Ethiopia between October 1935 and May 1936, a war that created an Italian empire and gave Italy the illusion of being a great military power.

About 330,000 Italians participated in this war and among them was Umberto Cofrancesco. He was drafted, like many others, as a result of Decree Number 124 of 12 February 1935, and he reached the Military District of Benevento on 11 April 1935. That same day Umberto was assigned to Battalion Number 227. The war with Ethiopia was already in the air. On 5 December 1934 an incident at Ual Ual occurred between Somalia and Ethiopia that gave Italy the excuse to declare war on Ethiopia. On 11 October 1935 Umberto left with his
battalion for Eritrea in East Africa. That territory had been an Italian possession for fifty years, and together with Libya and Somalia, formed the little colonial Italian territory, not yet an “empire”. Eritrea was the beachhead from which the Italian Army launched the conquest of Ethiopia.

Umberto was a Corporal and a telegrapher. He had received his rank and qualifications during his Conscription carried out between 20 October 1931 and 25 October 1933. Its military State of Service mentions as DISTINCTION AND SPECIAL SERVICES: “lamp signaler and telegrapher” He embarked from port of Messina, Sicily, in the direction of Massawa, Eritrea, 13 October 1935. The war was already started in Ethiopia with the attack of 3 October 1935 and Italy was sending reinforcements.

The journey by ship lasted 10 days. Umberto landed at Massawa on 23 October 1935. At that time Italian ships could still cross the Suez Canal under the supervision of the British. In fact both the British and the French had decided to tolerate the Italian operations in Africa, considering them as possible allies in view of probable conflict against Hitler’s Germany.

The war in Africa progressed rapidly. Haile Selassie, “King of Kings of Ethiopia”, as he called himself, had a very poorly equipped army, with obsolete artillery and few tanks. The Ethiopian Air Force had only three old biplanes. No foreign army came to his aid. The outcome of the war was guaranteed. It ended on 5 May 1936, after only six months, with the entry of Italian troops, commanded by General Badoglio, into Addis Ababa. Haile Selassie had abandoned the capital and had fled abroad with the treasure of the crown.

On 9 May 1936 Mussolini announced the end of the war from the balcony of the Palazzo Venezia in Rome, and proclaimed the Birth of the Empire. Vittorio Emanuele III assumed
the title "King of Italy and Emperor of Ethiopia". The "Horn of Africa", Eritrea, Abyssinia (Ethiopia) and Somalia, was now all Italian.

Umberto Cofrancesco remained for some months in East Africa, until 1 November 1936 when he left Massawa to return home. He arrived in Messina on 14 November and on the same day received a "Discharge Allowance" of 350 lire. Finally Umberto could go back to his family in S. Lorenzello, where Mamma Filomena and Papà Lorenzo, together with his brothers, waited anxiously. For Umberto this war had ended well, and with a little money that could be of help to his family. His participation in the War of the Ethiopia also earned him a decoration, the "Commemorative Medal of East Africa Operations ".

His brother Luigi volunteered in 1936 as a soldier in the Spanish Civil War. Unfortunately
Luigi Cofrancesco never returned home. He died in Spain, where he is still buried. In the years following the Second World War Umberto made every possible attempt to return his brother’s remains to his homeland, but without success.

**The "Libbretta" of “Corporal Cofrancesco Umberto”**

Umberto was called to arms on 26 May 1940. A few weeks later, on 10 June 1940, Italy declared war on Britain and France, allying with Germany. Umberto was discharged on 12 July 1948. His State of Service devotes only a few lines and a remark to describe the seven years of his participation in the Second World War, first as a soldier and then as prisoner. But the "Libbretta" (a little notebook) of "Corporal Umberto Cofrancesco" and other documents, which has been kept with great love by his daughter Giuseppina Lorenzina tell us a different story, intense and painful, about those seven long years, since his departure for Libya in 1940 until his return in Italy in early 1947.

While the annotations in Umberto’s notebook are not verbose, the dates are precise and correspond exactly with the known events of the battle that occurred in Cyrenaica, on the border with Egypt, between the second half of 1940 and the beginning of 1941, until the fall of Bardia, between 3 and 5 January 1941. Perhaps those notes were written later, during his imprisonment. Even so his memories are clear, and the writing without hesitations.

Umberto does not write with a pencil and probably not even with a fountain pen. He seems
to write with an old-fashioned pen and ink. The ink, sometimes blue, sometimes black, sometimes red, was found who knows how in that war scenario, when the equipment of a soldier and a prisoner was reduced to the basics.

Each team-leader Corporal had a little notebook like Umberto’s, where he wrote the names of all the members of the "Team" (in the Italian Army the “Team” – “Squadra” – is the basic unit of a Platoon, and consists of about fifteen soldiers), their identification numbers and those of the weapons assigned to each of them. The first team that Umberto recorded is the eighth, formed by 13 soldiers and two Corporals. On the following pages other teams, of which Umberto was a part and had responsibility, are also recorded.

Umberto also recorded in his notebook the military addresses of people known to him as Aquilino and Lorenzo Nuzzolillo, Emilio Izzo, and Giovanni Simone, who, from their surnames, seem to be his “paesani" (i.e., persons coming from the same town or area in Italy) from S. Lorenzello, as well as other people very dear to him such as his brother Silvio:

Geniere Cofrancesco Silvio  
21º Battaglione Collegiato  
Genio di Corpo d’Armata  
8ª Comp. Telegrafisti  

That information was enough for Umberto to be able to address mail to his brother, who was also a soldier and a telegrapher. A new address for his brother Silvio appears on another page:

Geniere Silvio Cofrancesco  
Ospedale da campo N.583  
1º Reparto Chirurgia  
Derna  

It is not known when Umberto wrote this new address. But almost certainly his brother Silvio was wounded, perhaps in North Africa during the first phase of the Second World War.

Finding a “paesano” at the war front was certainly an event welcomed with particular joy. Keeping in touch and having the possibility of exchanging letters was a way to feel closer to home, and again savor that “familiar” home air, which the Libyan desert with its ghibli wind and the harshness of the war tried to cancel. But even more important was the possibility of "following" with the mind and heart the family, to be informed of what happened to them, where they were, whether they were at war, if the vineyard gave fruit, if someone died, etc. From Umberto’s letters we learned that he was always in touch with his family, even if sometimes six months went by between one letter and the following one.
Umberto in Libya

"Embarked in Naples, date 1 June, Ship Italia."

So starts the story by Umberto of his experience in the war.

"Disembarked in Tripoli in the early hours of the morning of 3 June."

Umberto arrived in Libya shortly before Italy entered the war. He remained in Tripoli until 18 June and is then moved with his column to Cirenaica at the border of Egypt.

"Stopped for several days in the surroundings of Derna at a place called Martub. Moved from Martub, 15 July to Porto Bardia."

Umberto remained in the area until 9 September

"Stopped for two days at Ponticello. At night of 11 September, we left walking to Fort Capuzzo where we arrived at dawn of 12 September.

Day 16-9-40 (16 Sept 1940) we moved from Capuzzo and the same day we walked to Solum."

Then the story is interrupted. Some blank pages follow. What was happening? Umberto does not tell of war operations but only of troop movements. The places mentioned are all near the Egyptian border, but still in the Italian Lybia.

The area of operations of war between 1940 and 1941

The Italian government's intention is clear. They are gathering troops on the border to attack Egypt, which was a British territory, and conquer it together with the very strategic
and desired Suez Canal. On 19 August, despite the contrary opinion of some of his Generals, Mussolini declared the need to move the attack in North Africa. So in mid-September, and as also told by Umberto, the Italians reached Solum and on 16 September they conquered Sidi el Barrani. But Umberto did not go that far. He stopped at the rear with his Company, at Solum, some fifty kilometers from the front line.

The surroundings of Bardia where Umberto was committed in 1940, before he was captured in Bardia on 5 January 1941

Little happened for the next three months. Italy was preparing for the conquest of Alexandria and the Nile delta. But the British General O’Connor, head of the Western Desert Force, on 9 December 1940 anticipated the expected Italian attack. He launched the so-called Compass Operation, which ended on 7 February 1941 with the temporary conquest of the Cyrenaica by the British. At the end of the Operation, the 10th Italian “Armata” no longer existed. Of its 135,000 men only about 8000 could take refuge in Tripolitania.

Umberto’s story resumes some pages later, on 7 August 1940 with the description of enemy bombings and war operations, shortly before the Italian offensive to Egypt would have been ordered.

"Day 7 August 40. Enemy plane bombing when we were taking a bath in Porto Bardia.
Day 17 August 40. Bombing from enemy ship on our sector at P. Bardia, with shells 1.67 meters long, diameter 40. Fortunately the one fallen in our midst did not explode.
Day 11 September. Plane bombing Ponticello."
Day 12 September 40. Plane bombing Capuzzo and enemy artillery on our sector. The same even on 12 at night.
Day 13 [September] 40. At dawn our artillery opened fire making 160 pieces sing, persistently directed to Solum. I remember with this action we broke through enemy lines and, immediately after, Solum was occupied by our infantry."

Umberto also recorded the Italian attack of 13 September, with 160 pieces of artillery shelling the enemy lines at Solum non-stop. This operation will lead to the conquest of Sidi el Barrani three days later on 16 September. But the British were not just watching, and Umberto remembered, among the consequences of enemy counterattack, the dead and injured people in those "days of sorrow".

"Day 14 [September] 40. Heavy enemy plane bombing on Capuzzo, causing 13 dead and many injured men. Among the dead men were three belonged to our Company.
Day 14. For me day of pain because I have seen several dead comrades.
Day 16-9-40. We moved from Fort Capuzzo to Solum.
Day 17-9-40 and night of 18. A heavy enemy plane bombing, little damage caused."

In the following months the situation comes, it is said, to a standstill.

"Day 25-10-40. Moved from Solum, encamped close to the 23rd Army Corp, in the area of Alfai.

There are no more bombings until the beginning of December 1940, when the British initiate the Compass Operation. Umberto writes:

"Day 12-12-40. Moved from Alfai, because enemy tanks were attacking us. We took four days to reach Bardia. For several days we kept to the front of Bardia. Taken prisoners on 4 January 1941 and a starving life began."

Thus in half of a little page of his diary, Umberto summarizes the first Italian withdrawn from Egypt, the fall of Bardia, and the beginning of his imprisonment with many of his comrades. In a single day, 4 January 1940, 30,000 Italian were taken prisoners at Bardia! When Umberto writes these annotations, the "starving life" had already begun from some time!
On 5 January 1941, the Corriere della Sera (the most important Italian journal) headlined on the first page "The battle of Bardia." But not even a word about the defeat. They spoke instead of "Fierce resistance of our troops", "Heavy losses inflicted to the enemy", and "Planes incessantly support the action ". After all, this was the official version given by the Army General Quarter with the war bulletin n.211, which stated:

"Yesterday in the Cyrenaica border area, the enemy has attacked with forces from the land, sea and air and it restarted the great battle that lasted from 9 December. Our troops, under the command of General Bergonzoli, resisted with great strength, inflicting significant losses to the enemy. Planes incessantly supported the action by strafing and bombing enemy naval units, bases, troops and armored vehicles. The battle is still ongoing. Three of our aircraft did not return to base."

Then they mention the Greek war front and the one in Eastern African; nothing else about Bardia. The day after the same Corriere della Sera headlines "The fierce battle on the front of Bardia." Again they report about losses inflicted to the enemy. The war bulletin n.213 speaks only of "one of our planes did not return."
On 8 January 1941 the defeat of Bardia is a fact in history and the Corriere della Sera can no longer deny the obvious. A great headline across eight columns opens the first page: "Exaltation of the untamed value of troops fighting on all fronts". The entire first page of the newspaper is occupied by an account of the furious battle from 12 December based on "enemy sources", which highlight the value of Italian soldiers. In the end, the defeat is accepted and the paper concludes:

"A world not polluted by bad faith and perfidy should consider Bardia as a page of glory of the Italian Army."

So goes the usual rhetoric of war and the regime. But, in such a tragic moment for Italy, what else could they tell those families of so many young men committed to the war effort? While they write of their value and strong resistance, the tens of thousands of Italian soldiers captured in Bardia are already marching for some days towards their destiny of a long imprisonment. Among them there is Umberto Cofrancesco.
Soldiers Italian made prisoners in Bardia

The "starving life"

Umberto writes:

"From the day 4 until January 15 in Ponticello and Capuzzo. Day 15. Embarked at the port of Solum. Ship directed to Alexandria, where we disembarked in the afternoon of 16 [January] 1941. Day 19. Left from Alexandria by train, taken to the surroundings of Port Said, where we starved more than everywhere else. Day 15-2-41. Left from Port Said, taken to Suez by train and the same day we embarked on Ship Varela Glasgow and waiting two days more at Suez. Left from Suez, day 17-2-41 directed to India."

This is how Umberto’s captivity began, and it was the same for many other Italian soldiers taken prisoner in Bardia. Umberto reached Alexandria by ship and moved to Port Said by train. Other prisoners were less "lucky" than he and walked for days and days in the North African desert before reaching the ports of departure to their final destination, as prisoners of war.

Some of the Italians prisoners of Bardia recall how the Australian and Indian soldiers, fighting together with the British Army, were "beautiful". Guido Granello in his "life story" tells that: "All the Australians soldiers seemed officers; pleasant people, tall, so clean, with that big hat. They had an alcohol stove and they prepared some tea. They ate little biscuits while drinking tea. And we were there, hands up, full of lice, watching. (C. Pavan, "Al fronte e in prigionia", "At the front and in captivity", p.27)
In the Journal of the English cadet Philip Dilworth, embarked on a ship of the British India Steam Navigation Company, Australian soldiers do not seem "beautiful". He writes of Italian prisoners carried by his ship from Egypt to India:

“They were in a sorry state, bedraggled, hungry, with ragged uniforms, and many of them were without any form of footwear. One day I got into conversation with a prisoner [...]. He could speak English quite well. He could have been a neighbour, back home - yet here he was with a uniform in tatters, having no shoes or boots, and obviously not all that well fed. I asked him why his uniform was in such a state and why he had no boots on. In his hesitant English, he told me he had been captured at Bardia by Australian troops who had recently arrived in North Africa and were keen on sending souvenirs back home. He said many of them were drunk on Italian wine they had captured at Bardia, and as a consequence many prisoners were badly treated. The Italian equipment was mostly poor compared to ours - however the Italian army boots, made of pigskin, were vastly superior, being more supple and comfortable, than those of the British or Australians. Apparently at Bardia, the Australians went round the prisoners measuring their feet against those of the prisoners and taking those boots which were of the right size.”
(http://www.merchantnavyofficers.com/dilworth3.html)

Our poor soldiers were defeated, humiliated, hungry and without shoes. And with this mood and in these miserable conditions prisoners of Bardia were moved to various parts of the world, some to India, others to Australia, others, like Guido Granello, to South Africa. India was Umberto Cofrancesco’s destination.

"Prisoner of War" in India

The trip to India on the Ship Glasgow lasted some days, including the time of a technical stopover.

"Day 23-2-41. We arrived at the port of Aden where we stopped for three or four hours to do supplies of coal. Arrived at the port of Karachi 1st March in the first hours of the afternoon. At the same time we were sent to a train and continued our long
trip for five days.

Arrived in RAMGARH, day 6-3-41. Imprisoned in camp N.4-B."

The soldier prisoners were crowded into the below deck areas of cargo ships, in cramped spaces with the possibility to go out onto the open decks for only an hour each day. There were no toilets and the little food they received was of poor quality. Many of them became ill with dysentery. The officers, however, were treated with some respect. They were assigned to cabins and their meals were fairly adequate.

From Europe to Africa, and now to Asia, Umberto had already touched three continents. At that time, India was still an integral part of the great British Empire that was to dissolve at the end of the Second World War. Umberto became a "Prisoner of War" ("POW"). In a page of his notebook he writes those words in capital letters. They would be the first English words that Umberto has learned.

As a POW, he was assigned the number "126777". Umberto had to learn that number very quickly. He had been registered as a prisoner of war before leaving Egypt, in a place called Geneïfa, in Sinai, not far from Suez where there was a place of transit for POWs.

Living conditions in the POW camp of Ramgarh were particularly harsh. Umberto tells about his suffering and diseases:

"From March 41, closed in barbed wires we had to suffer not only because we were imprisoned, but also because of the great heat of India, almost unbearable. And when later, in the month of June 41, the rains began, we, the prisoners, we had to drink dirty water, with the same color as the earth. And this was the cause of serious diseases which made several soldiers die in the RAMGARH camps."

Even Umberto got sick. Pleurisy!

"I began the day 28-6-41 to be sick with low fever, stable pain at my back (shoulder). Medical diagnosis: Pleurisy."
And together with pleurisy, many other illnesses.

"Tonsillitis, headache, tiredness, rheumatism, bone pains. During the imprisonment I was tormented by diseases, which left serious injury for life."

The physical examinations occurred very often. Umberto notes carefully the dates and diagnoses.

"Physical examination
28-6-41
7-7-41 pleurisy
24-7-41
29-7-41 pleurisy
30-7-41"
8-9-41"
16-9-41"

The year 1942 did not start any better than the previous one. Umberto’s health condition had become worse and it was requested that he be given a "complete physical examination", even in view of a possible repatriation.

"Day 7 February 1942. Passed a complete physical examination by the English at Ramgarh hospital S. P.te. Day towards the end of March 1942. Passed a complete physical examination by the International Commission at the Ramgarh hospital for Repatriation."

But obviously, it had nothing to do with the "Repatriation" (written with the first letter in capital, for its great importance. It was not just a word, but a dream, a mirage). The Commission must have decided that Umberto had not suffered enough and that his health allowed him to continue that very painful life of the POW camp.

The tension among prisoners themselves was always very high. Any little thing could be a pretext to heated discussions and quarrels. Umberto tells what happened once at the Ramgarh camp.

"Day 16 February 1942. At noon while we, "paesani", were seating at the table in the refectory and talking about our business, namely we were saying that the soldiers of the first round had left the table dirty. Instantly the soldier Maldera stands up saying incorrect words: They did well. And all angry he
approached our table, where as said we were talking. I told him:

I: no one invited you to this conversation. At that moment I was standing and I sat on the bench near the table and at the same time the soldier Maldera took the table and he put it on my head producing two wounds on my forehead. Several soldiers were present and ran to help me. I was immediately medicated at the local infirmary of the field B.1. After a short time even the master the platoon intervened and took some measures against the soldier Maldera. At evening he was brought to jail.

Day on February 17. We were called to the command office and the soldier Maldera was punished with twenty-eight days of jail. Corporal Major Lavorgna Ernesto was my witness.”

From this story we learn that, together with Umberto there were also some “paesani” at the Ramgarh camp. They were a small community of “laurentini” (originating from S. Lorenzello) or soldiers originating from the province of Benevento. Ernesto Lavorgna was one of them. He was born in Castelvenere, a neighboring town to S. Lorenzello, in 1918. His parents were Salvatore Lavorgna and Maria Antonietta Simone, and he married to Antonietta De Filippo. They lived in S. Salvatore Telesino (province of Benevento). Ernesto also returned from captivity in 1947.

The correspondence with family

Despite the difficulties of imprisonment and slowness of communication, Umberto was able to keep in touch with his family in Italy and his other brothers who, like him, were at war. Correspondence between Umberto and his family from the period of his imprisonment in India is still kept by his daughter.

The first postcard is of 4 December 1942 and is addressed to his parents.

"Dear father and dear mother, with my letter
I assure you that I have good health, and so
I would like to be ensured of you too.
I received several letters, including even one from
Alfonso, and one from Antonio. I recommend when
you write me always keep me informed of the brothers, and where
they are. Kiss to all family. Your son Umberto."

In total, seven lines. He could not write more. Under sender information, the following was clearly printed in Italian: "Only seven lines must be written below." And it took about four or five months to deliver the postcard and to receive a response from Italy.
The next postcard from Umberto to his family was sent on 3 May 1943 in response to the letter his parents sent on 23 January 1943.

"Dear father and dear mother just at this Moment I received your letter dated 23-1-43, so much desired by me. From Your letter I learn with pleasure that you all are well, and the same I assure you about me, I understood where Alfonso is, keep me informed if Antonio goes back to the same place. I kiss you all. Your son Umberto

Seven more lines; several more months before an answer; a few lines anxiously awaited by Umberto’s parents. And Umberto replied immediately, as soon as he received the much-desired letter from his parents. He did not tell them about his illnesses. He didn’t want to make his parents worry more, so he wrote that he was in good health. He wanted to be constantly kept informed about his brothers; where they were and what they did. His bond with his family was very intense.

We have found one letter by his brother Alfonso, dated 6 April 1943. He could write much more than seven lines. His love for the family is stated strongly, along with their sense of duty that leads them to try to accomplish their "task".
"Dear Brother
Days, months and years, will pass, and
we will go on with our task. All the time
we think of our brothers in the distant lands.
In our family we are all well,
but who knows about you? Our brother
Antonio is doing passably.
I’m doing all right. Often I go
to our parents and I spend some hours with them.
We go on working our land.
Our brother Silvio handle that a little,
and the newly planted vineyard has
already produced fruits."

Alfonso was probably living in Italy, not far from home if he could go and visit his parents so often. Even his brother Silvio was at home, perhaps repatriated for health reasons, and was busy with the vineyard. Despite the war, they tried to live a normal life at home. They planted a new vineyard. They went on cultivating their land. And then they kept thinking of the brothers in distant lands. They thought of Umberto, who was so far from home, but who would return sooner or later.

Australia

Umberto spent his last year in India at the Bairagarh camp, near Bopal.

"Day 10 May 1942. Moved from RAMGARH to have residence at BAIRAGARH"

There is nothing more about his stay in this camp until he is sent to Australia on 1 November 1943.

"Day 1 November 1943 embarked at the port of Bombay directed
to Australia, where I arrived the day 16 November 1943
disembarking at the port of Melbourne. Sent to a camp near Murchison."

The ship that brought Umberto from Bombay to Melbourne was the SS Lurline, owned by the Matson Line Company. During the Second World War she was assigned to the U.S. Navy and used to carry troops and prisoners.
Umberto was transferred to Australia after 8 September 1943, when Italy signed the armistice with the Allied countries. At that time Italy was divided into two parts. In the North the Italian Social Republic of Benito Mussolini was still an ally of Germany, and in the Center and South the Kingdom of Italy, which was under the control of Allied troops, and part of the Italian army who was loyal to the King. In the POW camps Italians were also divided between those who remained loyal to Mussolini and those who declared themselves to be faithful to the King of Italy. But in both cases they remained prisoners until the end of the war, and even beyond, as happened to Umberto.

We do not know very much of Umberto’s Australian captivity. In his notebook, except for Murchison which was his official POW camp, he recorded the names of other places, some of which are traceable and others are not.

"1 ° Wonthaggi
2 ° Dayliston
3 ° Ryanton
4 ° Woragull
5 ° Trafaldi
6 ° Taragon
7 ° Cuirasi"

Wonthaggi, Warragul and Traralgon are easily identifiable with some places around Melbourne. Umberto also writes the address of a person living in Wonthaggi:
"Mrs. Lg. Baù
King Street Wonthaggi
Victoria"

King Street still exists in Wonthaggi. Who knows if there are still some descendants or relatives of that person? Giuseppina says that his father Umberto was in touch with some Australians even after his return from captivity. Umberto’s "Service and Casualty Form" reports other places in the outskirts of Melbourne where he spent some time:

Leonghata
Warragul
Rowville
Broadmeadows

The existence of POW camps at Rowville and Broadmeadows is known. At Leonghata and Warragul perhaps there were some farms to which Umberto could have been temporarily assigned. Moreover Leonghata is very close to Wonthaggi, where Umberto certainly was during his imprisonment.
From what we know, imprisonment for the Italians in Australia was not harsh. A different treatment was reserved for the Japanese and Germans, because Australians did not trust them.

Many Italian prisoners liked this country so much that after the end of the war they came back as immigrants, sometimes with the help of the same people they had worked for as prisoners.

Life in Murchison was certainly not different from other camps. Even the structure of the camps was very similar. Murchison camp had a particular polygonal structure with 12 sides, roughly circular, with four separate compounds called A, B, C and D, divided by two roads crossing in the center of the camp.

Another Italian prisoner, Phil Faella from the province of Benevento, recalls that the typical activities of the prisoners were cultivating vegetables and cutting wood. Sometimes they
were used to load and unload freight cars. Every morning the prisoners who lived at the camp, and were not assigned to a farm, “were lined up in their work groups and the Captain did a head count before they were driven off in trucks to work sites”.

5 March 1945. 740 Italian prisoners from C Compound, No. 13 POW Group are engaged daily in picking tomatoes on the properties in the Shepparton district.
(Australian War Memorial - 030239-09 -- www.awm.gov.au)

The luckiest prisoners lived in barracks. Others, especially in the transit camps such as Rowville, lived in tents. The winter was a big problem. The prisoners were not given blankets so they were forced to sleep in their clothes. Phil Faella recalls that, “The huts were unheated and unlined and on frosty nights the condensation would drip down on them from the tin roof”. Certainly these conditions were not of much help for Umberto’s pleurisy. After his arrival to Australia, Umberto did not write anything more in his notebook, nor do we have any letter from this period.

Almost four long years passed between tomato pickings and the Australian frost. They probably were very boring times. Certainly there were some “paesani” at Murchison and in the surrounding area. Corporal Major Ernesto Lavorgna from Castelvenere (Benevento); that same individual who in 1942 had testified in Umberto’s favor at the Ramgarh POW
camp (India) definitely was there. He remained in Murchison from January 1944 to January 1947, as reported in his Casualty and Service Form, found in the National Archives of Australia.

The Italian prisoners remained in the POW camps well beyond the official end of the war. Italy had lost the war, and the Australians wanted to keep the low cost Italian POW labor. The prisoners received the small salary of one schilling and three pence a day for the work they did in the camp. This money could be spent at the camp emporium to buy tobacco, razors or sweets. Both in India and in Australia some special banknotes and coins were created that could be used only in the camps. The coins used in Australian camps had a circular hole at the middle to distinguish them from those normally used by the local population.

Umberto on the shoulders of one of his friends during the Australian captivity

Umberto had a cash account held by the Murchison camp administration. On 31 January 1947, the day before his final departure from the camp, he was credited with 115 pounds, 16 shillings and 2 pence. That was what remained from pay for the work he has done as a POW from 22 October 1943 to 31 January 1947.
The "statement of account" signed by Umberto as a receipt for the money earned as POW

Back home

The Service and Casualty Form records the last event: "REPATRIATED ORONTES 1/2/47".
The Ship Orontes, with Umberto Cofrancesco, set sail from the port of Melbourne on February 1, 1947, destination Italy. Ernesto Lavorgna left a few weeks earlier, on 10 January, on the Italian Ship Otranto.

The Ship Orontes which brought back Umberto to Italy in 1947

Umberto’s journey home lasted 19 days. His ship arrived in the port of Naples on 19 February 1947. On the same day he was assigned to a Housing Center of the Army and immediately received an “extraordinary license” of 60 days to finally once again embrace his beloved family. At the same time the following was noted on his State of Service (a standard notation probably used for all soldiers returning home):

"No charges can be raised about the circumstance of the capture and behavior during the imprisonment"

And of what could they charge those poor prisoners of war? Umberto had spent the best years of his youth, between 29 and 36, serving Italy. He had suffered hunger, humiliation, and embarrassment. He acquired diseases that would affect him for the rest of his life. He had already personally paid many debts that were not of his making, through his own experiences.

After several medical check-ups in different military hospitals, the authorities decided that his health condition resulting from imprisonment was sufficient to earn him a “definitive discharge”, which was granted on 12 July 1948. Umberto’s military experience was finally at an end.
Despite aches and pains caused by his wartime service, and especially by his imprisonment, Umberto resumed a normal life. He remained in Italy and in S. Lorenzello where he was born and where he was reunited with his beloved parents and his brothers. He found a job as a caretaker in a local school. He married Michela Santillo, and they had two daughters, Giuseppina Lorenzina and Angela Filomena.

In 1964, many years after the end of the war, the Italian State gave a "Croce al Merito di Guerra" ("Cross for War Merits") to Umberto for his participation in the military operations of World War II. His daughter, Giuseppina Lorenzina, still carefully keeps his award, together with the photos and memories of papà Umberto.
Umberto Cofrancesco, a gentle and patient man, died a few years ago, on 9 February 2001, almost 90, in his home in S. Lorenzello on the road to Castelvenere, not far from his parental home, among the rolling hills covered with vineyards and fruit trees. He died in the land that has always been in his mind and heart, even during the time of his "war" that caused him to travel through four continents.