

THE AMERICAN:

THE LIFE TIMES AND WAR OF BASIL ANTONELLI

by Dan Roberts



1st Lt. Basil Antonelli

About two months ago Wilson History and Research Center Founder, Robby Wilson came to me with a story. The story was that of 1st Lieutenant Basil Antonelli, a young man, who grew up in Italy near the town of Cassino, moved to the United States with his parents, and then served in the United States Army in World War II. Coincidentally, Basil was killed in action on February 6, 1944 near his family's Italian village, days after sleeping in his Grandmothers home. Robby learned the story from Basil's nephew, Bob Caruso, and was enamored with the poetry of the tale. He believed, "It would make a great movie!" Unfortunately neither Robby, nor I, are filmmakers, (although I did have an excellent grade in my High School Video Production class, but that hardly counts). However, we are both endowed with the requisite skills required to tell the story in the literary medium; and so, we decided, let's write a biography.

I can imagine that reading up to this point you are probably thinking, "Ok, you're writing a book, so why not just go write it? What are you waiting for?

Why am I even reading this?" Well, the fact of the matter is, this will be the first full-length biography ever published by the Wilson History and Research Center. It is also my first full-length book project. Furthermore the Wilson History and Research Center is committed to providing our patrons with a multifaceted understanding of history, how it is discovered, and how it is written. So throughout the research, writing and publishing process, I will be presenting regular blog posts about the journey to tell Basil's story.

So now you are saying to your self, "Some journey, this guy is going to talk about going to a couple of libraries and pouring through dusty newspapers." Well you are almost certainly right about that, I would be a poor historian if I failed to scour libraries and archives, reading books filled to the brim with anecdotes completely irrelevant to the task at hand. For instance: Did you know that when the Morocco bound divisions of the Torch invasion departed the United States in November of 1942 they carried over 750,000 bottles of insect repellent![1]

With 750,000 bottles of insect repellent you could distribute one bottle to every human being living in the Baltimore Metro area in 2010 and still have enough left for all the people at the Baltimore Airport! That is a lot of insect repellent!

Now if all I had to offer was pictures of libraries and facts like the one above I can envision most people losing interest rather quickly. But the Wilson History and Research Center and I, do not believe that history begins and ends with books, as you can almost certainly tell from the more than 2,750 artifacts featured on our site. While many fine histories have been written from libraries and archives, to understand Basil's experience requires one to see the places he lived and to take the roads he traveled. And, while I hate to spoil the surprise, Basil Antonelli's did not find himself in Italy on February 6, 1944 without a few detours.

From preliminary research, (collected by mail, family interview, Freedom of Information Act requests and the Internet) we know that Basile Antonelli was born on December 16, 1920, and grew up in San Andrea on the Garigliano River, in central Italy, about 10 kilometers west of Monte Cassino. He was the son of Angelou Antonelli and Lucia Di Fanti. Angelou Antonelli, an Italian WWI veteran, left for the United States shortly after Basil's birth to join his relatives currently living in Landisville, New Jersey. Basil and his mother left Italy 9 years later and rejoined Angelou. In the ensuing 11 years Basil grew up in Southern New Jersey in a predominantly Italian immigrant community. He went to high school in Vineland, New Jersey where he was a prominent track star, and held a job on the New Jersey-Pennsylvania rail road lines (His named is featured on a memorial in the 30th Street Station to railroad workers killed in WWII).

In 1940 he enlisted in the 157th Field Artillery, Battery F, of the New Jersey National Guard. After Pearl Harbor he was transferred to the 3rd Infantry Division, 41st Field Artillery Battalion on the west coast of the United States. There he trained for amphibious landings in Puget Sound and off the Southern California Coast. There he was promoted to 2nd Lieutenant. The 3rd Infantry Division and Basil were assigned the invasion of French Morocco, at the time controlled by the collaborationist Vichy regime. During the amphibious operation Basil was wounded and received a purple heart, but returned to action serving as a member of the occupying army in Morocco.[2]

In late February of 1943, Basil was transferred to the 805th Tank Destroyer Battalion, at the time serving in Tunisia. He crossed Algeria and arrived in Tunisia in time to join his new company, Company A, and fight in the Battle of El Guettar in March of 1942. The 805th Tank Destroyers then moved to Italy, landing in Naples in November of 1943 (from the very port Basil embarked to the United states 14 years before). The 805th fought with the 34th Infantry Division up Italian Route 6, through the Apennine Mountains, where they were halted by German defenses in January of 1944.[3] Basil would visit his grandmothers home that month in San Andrea and write to his parents in New Jersey about his triumphant return to the land of his birth.

His joyous return to his family in Italy was short lived and he returned to the front, only mere miles down the road. And it was at the front, on February 6, 1944, while in A Companies Command Post, 1st Lieutenant Basil Antonelli was killed by a German artillery round, along with one, Private John Kelly. He was 23 years old. The army listed the condition of his remains as "blown to bits." His parents would receive one last letter from him before receiving notice of his death on March 2, 1944. Basil was buried in the Marzannello Nuovo Cemetery, plot #0, row #5, grave #60.

Basil remained interred until 1948, when his father requested that his remains be returned to the United States, the country for which he had fought and died. For the third time, Basil traveled through the port of Naples, this time aboard the USS Carrol Victory. He was handed over to the family, which held a service and buried him in St. Mary's Cemetery in Landisville, New Jersey.

I hope you find this cursory outline of Basil's life fascinating, touching, and quintessentially American. But this synopsis only scratches the surface of Basil's experience, and the world changing events, (Italian immigration, the Great Depression, the Second world War), to which he was a part. To tell Basil's story as it was meant to be told, will require me to take on considerable archival research from the Landisville and Vineland Historical Society Archives in New Jersey, to the National Archives in Washington DC. But, to tell the Basil's story without seeing at least a portion of what he saw would be empty. And for this reason I cannot see writing such a book without traveling to the places where Basil, lived, worked, walked, ran, rode and fought.

It is with great excitement that I invite you on my journey to discover the story of a great American, 1st Lt. Basil Antonelli.

[1] Rick Atkinson, *An Army at Dawn: The War In North Africa, 1942-1943* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2002), 33.

[2] Donald G. Taggart, ed., *History of the Third Infantry Division in World War II* (Nashville: The Battery Press, 1987), 3-41.

[3] Harry Yeide, *The Tank Killers: A History of America's World War II Tank Destroyer Force* (Philadelphia: Casemate, 2007), 275-276.

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