

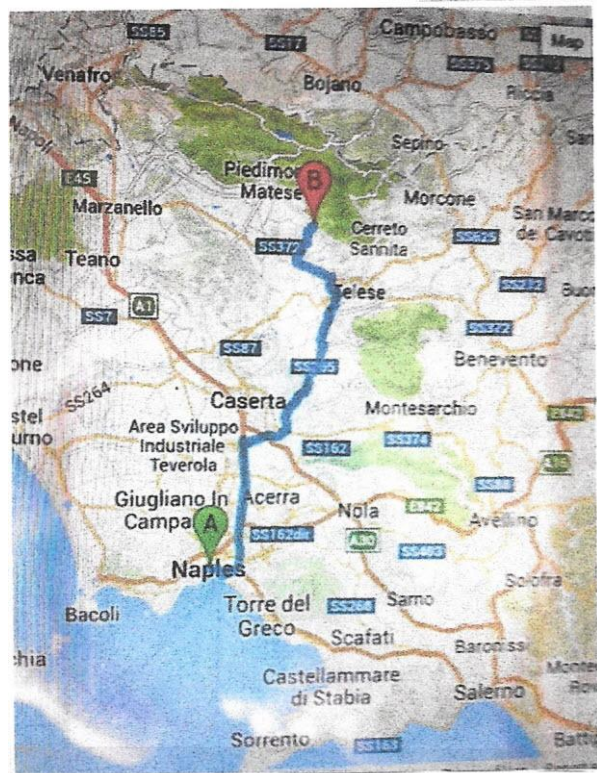
## The Funeral at Gioia Sannitica, Italy

After less than three weeks as Commanding Officer of the Marine Barracks in Naples, Italy in June 1969, I received word from Headquarters Marine Corps that an Italian American Marine had been killed in Vietnam and was being returned to Italy for burial in his family's hometown. To the best of my knowledge, this was the first time the Marine Corps had ever had a Marine with dual citizenship killed in action and then returned to his home country for burial. He was a young infantry lance corporal killed by an enemy booby trap in Northern I Corps during a routine patrol. The cryptic message from Headquarters Marine Corps confirming his death included a projected arrival date of his remains in Naples from the Military Mortuary at Dover AFB, Delaware with further instructions that he be buried in his hometown.

This was not the type of news I needed given the unpopularity of the Vietnam War with our European allies, especially the Italians. Along with their apparent lack of empathy or understanding for our engagement with the Communist forces in Vietnam, there also was a certain simmering dislike for our military presence in their country. This dislike triggered a number of strikes and demonstrations throughout the year outside the main gate at the Naval Support Activity compound where our Barracks was located, and at the bases in Livorno and Vicenza where the U.S. Army had units. Most of these demonstrations were fomented by the Italian Communist Party involving unhappy labor unions out for short duration strikes. Fortunately, they were small in terms of numbers of protestors and mostly non-violent in nature. On the other hand, they always presented an opportunity for what were often referred to as an "International Incident," something to be avoided at all costs. Now with the death of a young Italian American Marine in Vietnam, we were going to be faced with a potentially difficult series of events in the coming days which were already cause for worry with our Embassy in Rome and the U.S. Consulate in Naples.

The U.S. Consulate in Naples was tasked with receiving and signing for the casket when it arrived at the airport at Capodichino, and then coordinating all funeral arrangements with the Barracks. Funeral services were to be held in a small town about 50 miles to the northeast of Naples called Gioia Sannitica (see map).

Because this town lay in the heart of what was considered a predominantly Communist area of influence, there was a great deal of concern on the part of the U.S. Embassy in Rome, and the U.S. Consulate in Naples that no incidents occur as a result of the Barracks carrying out this funeral. While easy for the diplomats in Rome and Naples to say, given we were U.S. Marines about to bury a fellow Marine on foreign soil, this was not exactly a low key or transparent event for us.



*In spite of preconceived U.S. Embassy Rome and Naples Consulate concerns, and in an attempt to allay these concerns, a quick review of what the Communist Party in Italy meant to the average Italian in the late 60's is probably in order. At the time U.S. military forces (all Services) served at U.S. and NATO bases in Italy, there were as many as 10-20 political parties in the country and the Communist Party was probably #3 in total strength. Interestingly enough, the majority of top Communist Party members were also major land holders in their respective villages and provinces throughout the country, and the adjoining Italian islands of Sardinia and Sicily. For those true die-hard Eastern Block Communists, this proved to be a rather diabolical anachronism worthy of much cynicism, criticism and derision on the part of their East European and Russian counterparts. To Americans living in Italy at the time, the Communists posed no major threat that we were aware of, other than chest beating and rabble rousing for the newspapers to report on during times of local and countrywide elections. In fact the Party members provided a humorous relief to what otherwise would have been pork barrel politics as we know them in the States. From my observations during the local elections, the Italians really never took the Party all that seriously and as a result they never garnered a majority of elected candidates in their push for seats in their Congress comprised of the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies. So, for our Embassy, and in turn our Consulate, to start stroking the worry beads over the upcoming funeral created a nervous edge for everybody but the Communists who were in a mild state of confusion as to whether or not to interject themselves into this event. In the end they took their place in the crowd among the curious spectators as the funeral events unfolded, not seeing any propaganda value in this solemn occasion.*

The requirement of informing the parents of his death in Vietnam fell to me as the Barracks CO. After locating the small town on the map, I gathered a small staff group consisting of the sergeant major, myself, and one of the Barracks corporals who spoke fluent Italian, and we jumped in the staff car and headed up country to the farming village of Gioia Sannitica. We had called ahead to the local Carabinieri Station to inform the commander of the nature of our business there and to request his assistance in locating the family.

To the best of my knowledge, the **Carabinieri** have no military equivalent in the militaries of the world and enjoy a sort of special law enforcement position as the National Police Force in Italy. Depending on which of the 20 regions they are assigned, some act as small-town sheriffs, some as part of special operations units for riots and disaster preparedness operations, others as special sentries at National government and NATO facilities, and the rest are assigned to ceremonial duties in several major cities throughout the country. The Carabinieri commander in Gioia Sannitica was what I considered a town sheriff equivalent. He met us upon our arrival and soon proved to be most helpful on the ride with us to the family farm about five miles outside of town. He had alerted them to our coming, but not to the nature of our visit.

We arrived at what might best be called a rustic but typical three-bedroom farm house with a rural character native to the area. The Carabinieri commander had filled us in on our way there

on the background of the family and the fact that they had all gone to the U.S. and settled in the Pittsburgh PA area several years before. When the father realized his Social Security pension back in Italy was going to be greater than what he would eventually qualify for in the U.S., he packed up the family and returned to Italy resettling in his native village of Gioia Sannitica. That was all of the family except the oldest son. He said he didn't want to go back, and since he was 18 at the time, he enlisted in the Marines. The father was greatly upset by this, but nothing he could say would make the son change his mind. So with this family history as a background we pulled up in front of the house and made our way to the front door.

The father met us at the door with his wife and a daughter right behind him. From the looks on their faces they knew we were not there bearing any good news. They spoke very little English but between myself, the Carabinieri commander, and the corporal translator we got the bad news of the son's death across. Then the wailing started and the father became very incensed and was extremely mad at the Marine Corps whom he blamed for his son's death. There was nothing we could say to calm him, so we just let him vent until he too broke down and wept in the living room with the rest of the family.

As the gravity of the moment finally sank in, and the tears had subsided, we tried to work with the family to establish acceptable arrangements for the upcoming funeral. We had already decided that it was best we provide a detail to accompany the casket from Naples, and then to stand a vigil watch over it the night before the funeral for two reasons. The first and the most important reason was that he was a fallen Marine being buried outside the U.S. and we owed him the honor of carrying out his burial with all the dignity and respect we could muster as fellow Marines on foreign soil. Secondly, when the body had been received at the Military Mortuary in Dover AFB, Delaware from Vietnam, because of the nature of the wounds to the upper body and head he had received from the booby trap, the casket had been hermetically sealed, with strict orders it was not to be opened under any circumstances. This was probably the hardest thing to convey to the family since they would never be sure in their minds that that was really their son and brother in the casket if they couldn't have an open casket for the normal Italian wake.

After conveying the bad news to the family and setting up all upcoming arrangements for the funeral, we returned to the Barracks in Naples. A few days later the casket arrived in Naples. The U.S. Consulate representative went to the air cargo section at the airport at Capodichino to sign the paperwork for it and load it in the awaiting hearse, but this was not to be. Italian Customs did not want to release the casket because it was not a standard Italian casket and because it could not be opened. They refused to accept the term "hermetically sealed" as it just wasn't in their vocabulary. The Head of Customs wanted the body transferred to an Italian casket or they wouldn't release it. After several phone calls to the Embassy in Rome, and more Customs Officers with greater clout finally entering the picture, they released it. The U.S. Consulate representative then had it loaded in the black Italian hearse that had been standing by during all of the negotiations and dispatched it to the Barracks where it arrived in the early afternoon.

Once the funeral watch detail was mustered, they climbed into two Navy carryalls and set out in a caravan of vehicles for Gioia Sannitica and the night ahead. The sergeant major and I went along once more to ensure that the arrangements for the all-night vigil watch would happen as agreed to with the family.

The Marines who stood the vigil watch that night were subjected to a barrage of questions, insults, and taunts. They had their chests soundly punched by irate villagers, their medals flipped by numerous young and old women, and yet to a man they never flinched, never retorted, and never lost their composure. Fortunately, we brought along enough Marines to relieve the watch standers every two hours, and once we had enough who had stood their watch to fill a carryall, we sent them back to the Barracks for the remainder of the night. The detail that was left was the detail that accompanied the casket the next morning as it was loaded back into the hearse and taken to the local Catholic Church in town for the funeral. There they acted as pallbearers for the remainder of the funeral service.

A full guard platoon of 28 Marines from the Barracks, along with a Navy bugler and drummer from the Allied Forces Southern Europe (AFSOUTH) Band, left early the next morning to accompany the body and provide a formal escort to the cemetery at the conclusion of the church service. Because it was a time of mourning for the local citizenry, the concerns of the American Embassy in Rome and our Consulate in Naples over the possibility of an international incident never materialized. The townspeople actually were in awe of the way the Barracks Marines conducted themselves and the respect and dignity with which they performed their duties for their fallen comrade. In spite of Rome's concerns, the local Communist Party members also remained mute not wanting to protest or disrupt such a solemn occasion.

At the conclusion of the funeral service, the Marines brought the casket out of the church smartly to what they thought would be an awaiting hearse. Unfortunately, this was not to be the case. There was no waiting hearse. In Italy when the cemetery is within close proximity to the church, the men carry the casket on their shoulders to the cemetery. Just another wrinkle in what had already been a very trying night for the Barracks Marines. Now, in 90-degree heat, the Marines were expected to heft a sizeable U.S. metal casket to the cemetery about a mile and half away. Given that an Italian casket is usually a wooden box probably less than 20% of the weight of a U.S. metal casket, this was going to be no easy fete. Fortunately, we had a sizeable detail of Marines so they could alternately trade off carrying the casket or marching behind it from the church along the winding country road to the cemetery.

As the funeral procession departed the church, the sergeant major, the corporal and I proceeded directly to the cemetery to ensure things at the gravesite were in order. Once there, we identified the lone gravedigger in charge of digging the grave and quickly realized that the old man with the shovel had dug the grave for a typical Italian wooden casket. This meant the U.S. issue casket with its sidebars for the pall bearers was never going to fit into the narrow, shallow hole he was busily working on. In addition, he had planned on lowering it into the ground with frayed ½" clothesline, which, given the weight of the U.S. Government casket, would have been a disaster

of major consequences had the line snapped lowering the casket and further adding to the family's grief graveside.

Through our Marine corporal translator, we conveyed our concerns to the gravedigger. He, in turn, tried to allay our fears by saying it was "*non importante*" since this cemetery was going to be closed and the casket moved to the new cemetery down the road within a few days after the funeral. If the grave he had dug couldn't accommodate the casket that was all right, since they hadn't planned on covering the casket with dirt anyway due to the pending move to the new cemetery. Unfortunately, the U.S. Consulate representative from Naples was quick to remind us that unless the casket was covered with dirt, the government would not pay the family the Service members Group Life Insurance (SGLI) policy benefit since there was insufficient proof of burial. This was not something we wanted to hear, at least not then, after the gravedigger's news that we were already dealing with at an apparently temporary burial site.

With the drummer on loan from the AFSOUTH Band pacing the funeral procession winding its way down the old country road now less than a mile away from the cemetery, the sergeant major, the corporal and I, began taking turns enlarging the gravesite to fit the casket. Working feverishly with two shovels, not much bigger than standard infantry entrenching tools, and with the stutter step drum beat of the Navy drummer and funeral procession getting ever closer, we were able to enlarge the grave to barely accommodate the casket just in time.

Once the funeral procession and the family arrived they took their places around the gravesite, and the firing detail moved into position. The local priest then said a few words and at the conclusion of his homily, the firing detail rendered a final rifle salute to the deceased Marine and we presented the American Flag to the family on behalf of the Commandant of the Marine Corps.

We were able to get the U.S. Consulate representative to agree that we wouldn't totally cover the entire casket with dirt, but rather just shovel enough dirt in to barely cover the top and thus satisfy the government's burial requirement for paying the family the SGLI. This way it also could be moved to the new cemetery without having to go through a partial exhumation process.

Once the funeral was over, the U.S. flag delivered to the family, and the SGLI paperwork signed, we boarded the bus back to the town. There we were treated to what might best be described as a daytime Italian equivalent of a traditional Marine Corps Mess Night put on by the local Carabinieri commander and the town's mayor in a small banquet hall above the police station. The Carabinieri commander told me he was very relieved to have the funeral behind him now. It had been a rather stressful week for him and the mayor as they attempted to defuse the anger and frustration of the local townspeople over the death of one of their own sons in a war on the other side of the world they could not begin to comprehend. While they too had some concerns on how the Communists in the village would receive what could best be termed a U.S. military event, they were most happy that nothing to disrupt the proceedings had occurred.

We exchanged a few more awkward pleasantries with my stunted Italian and his broken English and then the platters of food arrived. As the main pasta course was served, out came huge jugs

of local wine randomly placed down the length of the banquet table. The Carabinieri commander wanted to propose a toast to the Marines, but before he did he sampled a glass of wine from the first jug on his end of the table and his face grimaced. He immediately grabbed the jug by its neck and threw it over his shoulder and out the window behind him to the street below where the crash of breaking glass on the street could be heard by all in the room above.

First there was a stunned silence, a bit of disbelief at what we had just witnessed, and then a feeling of concern hoping that nobody had been passing below when the jug had sailed over his shoulder and out the window. Apparently, this was an Old Italian custom which for most of us was our first initiation into the finer art of Italian country dining. Then, with his glass recharged from a new jug of wine, the Carabinieri commander rose again and offered a toast, somewhat satisfied that the second jug of wine he had just sampled was of better quality than the first. Everybody stood and saluted his toast and then proceeded to enjoy what was a fabulous Italian feast that could best be described in Marine dining hall terms of the day, as "Excellent in quality and quantity."

Less than two months after the funeral at Gioia Sannitica, a package arrived on the Barracks Quarterdeck from Headquarters Marine Corps with a Bronze Star Medal for the former deceased lance corporal with instructions to deliver it to his family at an appropriate ceremony at a place of their choosing. So once more, it was back again to the village of Gioia Sannitica.

After a fitting ceremony atop the town police station, where we read the award citation in Italian and presented the Bronze Star medal to the family, we returned to Naples. Prior to leaving this time, we agreed to join the mayor, our Carabinieri commander, and the friends we had made in Gioia Sannitica a few months later at the Castle del Faichio, a small 14th century castle that had been turned into a restaurant.

Chartering a bus through the Morale Welfare and Recreation office at Naval Support Activity Naples, we were able to take the majority of the Marines who had participated in the funeral back for a special day with our new Italian friends that included lunch in the former banquet hall and a tour of the castle and the dungeon below. In looking back, this indeed had been a most memorable event in the history of Marine Barracks Naples, and most likely a first in the storied history of the U.S. Marine Corps.

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