Legends & Traditions of the Great War

Monte Grappa

Italy's Thermopylae

By Rich Galli

Monte Grappa at the Summit Today

Di qui non si passa - From here none shall pass

-The motto of the Italian mountain troops, the Alpini, since 1888.

A few years ago I read an article about a soldier of the Great War turning one hundred years old. This Alpino fought on Monte Grappa in 1918 and surviving the war, emigrated to Australia. Despite a long eventful life he considers the battles on Monte Grappa over eighty years ago a key point in his life. Does he curse the mountain or does he salute it? This fact is not known. For a man enduring a century, the fact that a solitary mountain in distant Italy would continue to be recalled makes this article notable, a story worth hearing.

No battle defines Italy's struggle in la Grande Guerra better than Monte Grappa. Not only is it a tactical, political and morale watershed for the Italian military and people, the combat on the Grappa massif is also one of the greatest, unsung battles of World War One. Finding a history that mentions this

battle is rare. The preliminary phase of what finished at Monte Grappa, the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo or Caporetto, usually involves a paragraph in average history texts but the incredible conclusion, Italy's vindication if not survival, does not seem to fit in with the commonly told story. It is not history alone however, that tells the greatest story of Monte Grappa. The physical reality of this great mountain, viewed from the plains below or atop the summit, intensifies the story of the Italian Army's desperate courage and last stand in late 1917 and how incredibly close the combined Austrian and German armies came to total victory. The tomb of 25,000 Italian and Austrian warriors on its very summit bear mute witness to the armed struggle atop Monte Grappa--often called "Italy's Thermopylae."

The Grappa massif is an enormous group of connecting ridges and lesser peaks culminating with Monte Grappa, at 1776 meters/5825 feet, not high by alpine standards. Geographically this range is described as only "pre-Alps." But when viewed from the Venetian Plains only a few kilometers from its summit, it is a towering centerpiece of a mountain front that heralds endless mountain ranges beyond. Poetically speaking, it could be said that only a peak the stature of Monte Grappa is suitable to separate the rivers Brenta and Piave, or the rugged Altipiano [Trentino Plateau] from the Dolomiti Mountains. [See map]It has none of the rich soils of the plains below or the deep forests and wide meadows of the Altipiano. Nature has made this massif a natural fortress of barren and windswept slopes interspersed with steep rock faces. The many deep ravines are dangerous year round--in summer with rock fall and rushing torrents of streams or choked with deep snow and avalanche in winter. A peacetime existence on this mountain is marginal. In war it is hell.

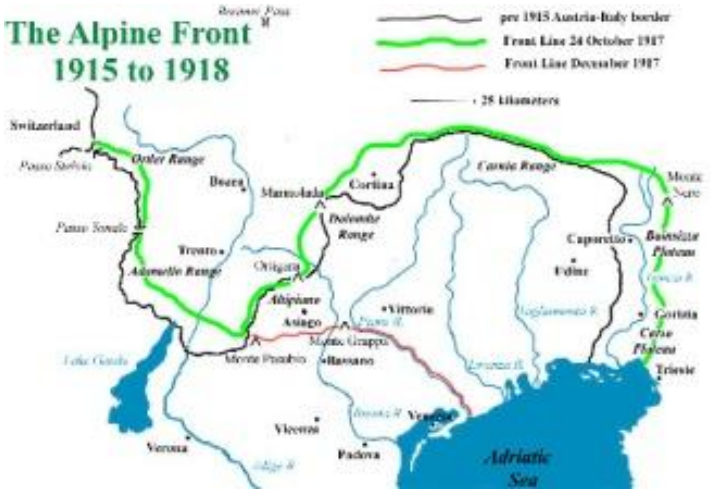
The strategic position of Monte Grappa did not go unnoticed by either side. The Italians built a later-day fort north of the summit, a formidable labyrinth of cannon and machinegun positions dug into solid rock--learning from the experience of their French brethren at Verdun. In 1917 and 1918 the Austrians and Germans saw the capture of Grappa as the key to flanking the entire Italian Piave River defensive line and to victory. The Italian forces would be cut in half, if not completely cut off from retreat. What unfolded on Monte Grappa was not one but three crucial battles in the year following Caporetto. They are described as La battaglia d'arresto in November and December of 1917; La battaglia del Solstizo starting 15 June 1918; and La battaglia conclusiva or Vittorio Veneto starting 24 October 1918. All three would center on this great mountain.

Italian Prisoners After Caporetto

At Caporetto an army of 350,000 Italians had ceased to exist. Fifty thousand men were killed or wounded, the others captured or missing. The Italian Second Army's scant remnants had retreated one hundred kilometers to the Piave River. By the 10th of November 1917, the front's 53 Austro-German divisions had destroyed 19 of Italy's 50 divisions. There remained for the Austro-German forces only one or two kilometers on Monte Grappa, a flanking move, the end of battle and total victory. Most histories mention "Allied support," in the form of eleven divisions, "halting" the Austro-German offensive on the Piave River in late 1917. All but one of these Allied divisions would be held in reserve. The one French division of Chasseurs des Alpes that fought on Monte Grappa's slopes is noted later in this article.

Like all armies in World War One, the Italians had adhered to one military principle--attack. Defense was simply preparation for another attack. Italy was not alone in high commands obsessed with attack and counterattack. In tactical doctrine the Italian Army was similar to all belligerents during the first three years of the Great War, mass infantry formations attacking along a wide front, with similarly dispersed artillery support versus concentration on weak areas. The results were likewise similar- a terrible attrition of men with negligible gain of territory. Italian advances during the eleven battles of the Isonzo [or elsewhere] were at best, little more than ten miles past the old frontier. Before Caporetto, the Austrians had launched only one offensive against the Italians, in the spring of 1916. The "Strafexpedition" or "Battle of Asiago" failed to break out of the Altipiano highlands due to rugged terrain and determined Italian resistance. As this Austrian offensive ground to a halt, the Russian Brusilov offensive was started to take pressure off the Italians and the great French struggle around the forts of Verdun. Several Austrian divisions were removed to Russia.

Caporetto [starting 24th October, 1917] was brilliant in that it caught the Italian Second Army with most of their forces on the front line preparing for their own new offensive. The Austro-German Sturmtruppen units infiltrated weak avenues to rear areas- enemy strong points were bypassed and cut off. The other three Italian armies fell back to avoid similar entrapment. Italian gasmasks were hopelessly obsolete to the new German gasses. Both sides on this front had for the most part abstained from using lethal gas in combat. The venerable Emperor Franz-Josef considered poison gas unacceptable and forbade his army to use it. After his death, Austria eventually used gas only twice--once on the Isonzo in 1916, and on Ortigara [in the Altipiano] in 1917. The Austrian practice of finishing off suffocating, dying Italians with clubs only compounded the viciousness and no quarter on this front, with the Italians rarely taking prisoners in areas the Austrians had used poison gas. Italy had never used gas, and would not until 1918, with Allied encouragement and indeed, out of revenge. German flamethrowers were also devastating in trenches where clubs and knives had previously decided the victor.



Location of Monte Grappa on the Italian Front

Some Italian divisions withdrew in an orderly manner. Some did not. There was a race for one river and bridgehead after another, with valuable delaying actions by Alpini withdrawn from their mountain heights and previously unused cavalry raiders. By the 7th of November, three out of four Italian armies had managed to escape across the distant Piave River, which was promptly flooded to hinder Austro-German assault boats and bridging. On the 15th of November a Hungarian division crossed the lower Piave, only 25 kilometers from Venice. The same night, four German battalions crossing the Piave were driven back by the Italians, who took over 600 prisoners. With a raging Piave in front of them, another method of attack was necessary for the Austrian advance. Heavy snowfall and 7,000 Austrians falling ill with influenza crippled the offensive on the nearby Altipiano. Here no further action was possible. All Austro-German efforts would have to focus on Monte Grappa, the only section of the front line actually behind the Piave River--before Italy regained her footing or the winter snows arrived.

Austrian strategy on Monte Grappa would involve capturing the eastern and western flanks of the mountain. A central attack was out of the question due to the Italian fortress dug into living rock underneath the summit. No weapon existed until 1945 capable of destroying Caserma Milano. In 1917 this would mean bypassing the fort and containing it. The western objective of the Austrian and German forces would be Monte Asolone. Here was the final southwestern ridge of Monte Grappa. From Asolone the vital supply road to the central peak could be observed and cut off. Logistical support on the massif also came from the elevated teleferica essential to the logistics of mountain warfare across this entire front. The most vital supplies came up and the seriously wounded were taken down in these cable cars. Other cargo was carried on the backs of men and mules. The great southeastern objective would be the aptly named Monte Tomba. From this great ridge, the Piave River and its trenches were in full sight. Atop Monte Tomba forward observers could direct artillery in support of Austrian river crossings, or to thwart Italian counterattacks. On the 16th of November 1917, the northern edge of the Grappa massif became the front line, with Austrian troops capturing Monte Tomacito and Monte Roncone. In the following days the Austro-German juggernaut captured one peak or ridge after another. By the 20th of November Col della Beretta and Monte Fontanasecca fell after savage battles. Two days later Monte

Tomba was overtaken, although by days end the Italians had a slight advantage on ridge and summit. That same day [22nd November] only two kilometers from the summit of Monte Grappa, the trenches on Monte Pertica changed hands seven times in 24 hours. The Austrians eventually held this natural fortress. On the day Russia surrendered at Brest-Litovsk [15th December, 1917] and guns from the Baltic to Black Sea fell silent, Austro-German forces on the Grappa massif secured the two key peaks of Tomba and Asolone. When the clouds cleared from their summits, Venice could be seen. There was nothing between the Austrians and the sea save a few foothills and the Venitian plains. The view must have been incredible after one hundred miles of mountain warfare and trench fighting. The generals of the Germanic armies told their troops they would celebrate Christmas in Venice. The Austrians were so confident of success that campaign medals were already being struck to commemorate the capture of Venice. In their frozen stone trenches the Italians faced their two ancient enemies from the north--one spoke German and the other was winter's natural fury. The first desired destroy their nation; the latter might help preserve Italy.

In snowstorm or cloudbank, close quarters combat was both unavoidable and instantaneous. Thrashed, often hastily regrouped Italian units faced continued attacks by the best units of the German and Austrian army. On Monte Grappa the Italian Army did not breakdown. Outnumbered, outgunned, with their backs to the abyss and their faces to onrushing enemy and winter weather, they found a renewed spirit that would carry on until victory the following year. They opposed German flamethrower and gas with rifle and bayonet counterattacks. Against torrents of artillery and trench mortars, these soldati hurled hand grenades and finally without ammunition, the mountain's stones. Over two thousand enemy artillery pieces surrounded this great mountain. The Germans considered this concentration "of a depth equal to the Western Front." Focused barrages destroyed one Italian stronghold after another…. yet a handful survived to fight on. The effects of artillery bursts in the mountains are greatly multiplied by barren rock. There is no soft Flanders mud to absorb the fragments. In alpine warfare, ricochet and stone splinters make trenches as deadly as open terrain. In late 1917 it was not only the troops on the front line who rallied to fight on. The entire nation held its breath, and as with the army, a new spirit gripped the Italian people. In a nation of endless mountain ranges, the survival of one peak would decide Italy's fate.

Austrian Troops at Monte Grappa

The 14th to 17th of December 1917 witnessed the supreme attack of the German Alpenkorps--to take the central Valle de Mure and control the summit of Monte Grappa. The Italian Ravenna, Umbria and Campania regiments, as well as several Alpini battalions and their man-packed light artillery pieces

did battle with three German Jager regiments and their famed mountain brigade. The Italian defenses were finally wearing the Austro-German onslaught down. On the 23rd of December Italy's greatest ally, winter, arrived one month late. Warfare in deep snow cost the attacking Germans dearly. In the Wurttemberg Mountain Brigade, many companies, including that of First Lieutenant Erwin Rommel, were reduced to twenty-five men. On the 28th of December Monte Asolone and Col della Beretta were recaptured by the troops of Abruzzi Brigade and Alpini of the Monte Rosa, Susa and Pinerolo Battalions. The end of combat on Monte Grappa, and the conclusion of this "arresting" battle, was the recapture of Monte Tomba on the 30th of December by the French 47th division of Chasseurs Alpins. In half an hour over 500 Austrians were killed, with three times as many captured. The Allied dead numbered 47 French and 4 Italians. German and Austrian forces now retreated to the immediate ridgelines north of Asolone, Pertica and Tomba for the duration of the winter.

Monument at Bassano to "The Boys of 99"

Italy had survived, virtually alone. Winter locked up the highlands, but around Monte Grappa a race for recovery would take place as each side vied for deeper defenses, building up supplies and manpower for the spring offensive everyone knew would come. Italian killed, missing and wounded from la battaglia d'arresto, the exact number will never be known, were around 50,000. Austro-German casualty figures are similarly vague. The Class of 1899, il ragazzi del '99, was called up and after rudimentary training, were placed into the hollow divisions destroyed at Caporetto. Italian casualties from this battle had totaled over 300,000 and these mobilized youth, numbering 260,000, could not have arrived at a better time.

On the 8th of November 1917, Italian commander-in-chief Cadorna, as much a political creature as general, was replaced by General Armando Diaz, whose leadership included applying new tactics and a flexible strategy while ignoring the political intrigues in Rome. He better utilized artillery according to its range and replaced the once vulnerable [indeed solitary] Italian frontline with a system of multiple, interlocking trenches and defensive fires. Cadorna's leadership had featured over-control by an isolated, rigid command. Italian commanders at all levels wasted precious time waiting for direct permission to attack, then halting or retreating could result in summary execution for officers, sergeants and soldiers alike. In contrast, Diaz unified Italy's tactical doctrine, granted subordinate commanders needed flexibility and initiative, and improved dialogue with the Allies. Leaves were greatly increased, a morale building luxury almost unknown under Cadorna. New units of Italian shock troops, the Arditi or "bold

ones," were also placed on line. Conceived in mid-1917, by a Captain Barri, their use was not fully understood by the high command. Now it was.

Events elsewhere in Europe affected the situation in Italy. Most of the German units that had been so decisive at Caporetto [and so decimated on Grappa] were withdrawn for "Operation Michael," Field Marshall Ludendorff's first Spring Offensive of 1918. Its rapid success caused six of the British and French divisions in Italy to be withdrawn immediately to help counter this dire threat to the entire Western Front. Two Italian divisions and 60,000 Italian laborers were also sent to France--the infantry going to the frontline immediately, the laborers releasing a similar number of Frenchmen for combat duty. Over ten thousand of these Italian fanti that went to France would never return. They fell in the great summer offensives of 1918, including the Second Battle of the Marne; along side the French, British and now formidable American Army.

Map of Monte Grappa Sector

On the Grappa massif, with the Austrian ability to fight in wintry mountains, Italy's position began worsening again by March of 1918. Regular Kaiserjager and reservist Kaiserschutzen, mountain troops of the Austro-Hungarian army, once again captured Monte Fontanasecca, Monte Pertica and eventually the northwestern slopes of Monte Tomba. The Austrians considered the next few months as preparation for the final deathblow to Italy, who Field-Marshall Conrad compared to a shipwrecked sailor clinging to wreckage. One more hatchet stroke would sever his fingers and Italy would sink to the

depths. Germany encouraged Austria to initiate this concluding offensive. With the Italian Front closed, Austrian troops would occupy quiet sectors in France while Germany completed its war. Italian intelligence caught wind of the imposing Austrian plans in late May and instead of pursuing their own offensive operation, prepared for a defense in depth. Although the Austrians were in high spirits, a promise from their high command of "an abundance of booty and good food" in this spring offensive was revealing. Austria was feeling the Allied naval blockade as much as Germany, and troops were being promised food as well as victory. (During the Battle of Caporetto, German units abandoned the attack to raid Italian food/supply depots. Similar events occurred during the great spring offensive of 1918 in France.)

On the 15th of June 1918, Austria's final offensive began on three areas of the Italian Front- "Operation Avalanche" at Passo Tonale in the mighty northwestern Alps [actually a diversion], "Operation Radetzky" on the Asiago Altipiano and "Operation Albrecht," centering on the Grappa-Piave area. 100,000 Austrian gas shells, accompanied ten times as many high explosive rounds rained on the Grappa-Piave line in the opening barrage alone. Italy's troops were now equipped with the new "box-type respirator" gas masks, the same used by British and American forces. These masks withstood the gas barrage. Where the Italians caught hell was in their shallow trenches. The fate of Allied troops on the Western Front would befall their Latin brothers. British, French and Italian commanders believed that "deep trenches produced cowards." Austrians and Germans generals held opposite views; some Austrian dugouts had three meters of solid rock overhead. On the Asiago plateau, the Austrian attack focused on British and French forces, considering them the true threat, not "inferior" Italian troops elsewhere along the front line. Austrian success on these highlands would flank the Grappa/ Piave line. A breakthrough onto the lowlands would split the entire front and once again jeopardize Italy's survival. In the spring of 1916 the Italian Army had held the line on the Altipiano, invariably on the last ridge of mountains, holding out until the Russian Brusilov Offensive drew away Austria's attacking forces. In 1918 there would be no Russian threat, but what did occur was a repeat of 1916. The Austrians were once more halted on the very rim of the plateau. This time by an Allied conglomeration of the British 48th and French 23rd divisions, a new Italian sponsored Czech [nationalist] regiment and seven divisions of Bersaglieri, Alpini and regular infantry from across Italy. Although the key town of Asiago was destroyed and captured, the Italian counteroffensive dealt the 24 Austrian divisions a terrible defeat with over 30,000 casualties. The Allies suffered 8,000 killed, wounded and missing--75 percent being Italian.

Austrian Assault Troops, Spring 1918

On the same morning as the Altipiano, the heights of Monte Grappa rang with Austrian gunfire. Three divisions of Austrian storm troops captured the western slopes of the massif and soon occupied the weather-bound heights of Monte Asolone. The two Italian divisions on this flank, men from Bari and Calabria, were no match for the gas, flame and trench mortars the Austrian infantry possessed. These new troops, all 18 years of age save their NCOs and officers, opposed these terrifying new weapons with repeated counter-attacks of cold steel and what little artillery they could muster. It seemed as if their army had forgotten them, as all directives, supplies and communications stopped. The actual cause of the silence was an enormous attack of 25 Austrian Sturm divisions, the true thrust of the "Solstice" offensive, smashing into the Piave line far below. Once again the severe mountain weather of constant fog and driving rain were to the advantage of the Austrian attackers--weather in the Alps generally comes from the northwest. The Abruzzi Division, the only Italian reserve, was thrown into this now downhill struggle. It was on these final southern slopes of Monte Grappa that the Italians unleashed their new weapon--the Arditi. These Italian assault troops were as heavily armed as the Austrian or German Sturmtruppen. They carried numerous light machineguns, dual barrel Villar Perosa sub-machineguns and a few flamethrowers. Their true spirit and success however, was not with their advanced weaponry, but a tactical ferocity with grenade and dagger at close quarters. Their counterattack collapsed the Austrian line, killing nearly half of the now retreating Austrians, halting only because of the dire circumstances on the Piave River far below. [No resupply or reserves could be sent up to Monte Grappa.] The Arditi's sheer fearlessness and extreme brutality made an Italian high command officer who witnessed the attack wonder what would become of these young men after the war, "these people who no longer know the value of human life." Of course we know the answer to this officer's question, in the brutal foundations of Fascism and Nazism. As their military tasks and mission were recognized, the size of the Arditi formations grew. In 1917 these shock troop battalions were attached to regiment and division- by mid-1918 the Arditi were found in their own assault divisions, with attached assets of mortars, combat engineers and trucks for rapid resupply/transport.

Young American Red Cross volunteer Ernest Hemingway also witnessed these battles on Monte Grappa and the Piave. Wounded while carrying rations to Italian troops, he wrote home of the battle's ferocity, plush hospitals and the ground being "black with dead Austrians." The Battle of the Solstice was "a great victory and showed the world what wonderful fighters the Italians are." The battle along the Piave River, the primary effort of the Austrian attack, was a disaster. Despite being outnumbered two to one, the Italian line held. Intercepted radio messages revealed the coming attack and Italian artillery pounded the Austro-Hungarian assembly areas. On the 17th of June 1918, a bridgehead across the Piave seven kilometers deep and twenty wide was lost as the river flooded due to heavy rains in the mountains. In this area alone, 24,000 Austrians were cut off from retreat and captured. The storms that had led to initial Austro-Hungarian success on Monte Grappa were concluding with catastrophe on the floodplains below. Italian and Canadian aircraft destroyed enemy pontoon bridges attempting a rescue. After hearing of Austria's Solstice disaster, the German foreign secretary told his government not to expect an end to the war by military means alone. The Germans had placed great faith in this offensive. Victory in the Alps might broker a better peace treaty with the Allies, an option being seriously considered in Berlin and Vienna. Austrian losses were close to 180,000 including over 35,000 atop Grappa. Italian casualties totaled nearly 85,000 with 14,000 on the mountain. The one French and two

British divisions that participated on the Piave suffered over 3,000 killed, missing or wounded. The Allied commander Foch urged Diaz to exploit his victory with a counteroffensive. Diaz refused, replying an Italian counterattack would be as costly as the Austrians had just suffered. In late 1917 Italy had survived one of the greatest offensives of the war and now held the line during a second onslaught, both battles centering on the Grappa massif. The mighty peak would now witness Italy's greatest victory.

Vittorio Veneto, the concluding battle of this front and war, began on Monte Grappa. The mountain phase of this Italian attack became a sacrificial diversion for the main Italian push on the upper Piave River, the offensive that would eliminate the armies of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In the early morning of the 24th of October 1918, exactly one year after the battle of Caporetto began, 1600 cannons, 500 trench mortars and nine Italian infantry divisions attacked into the clouds and Austrians trenches atop the Grappa massif. Within two days Austrian forces grew from nine divisions to fifteen, including the elite Edelweiss [mountain] Division. Again the battle was insane within the perpetual fog and storm. As positions shifted, artillery became for the most part useless. Trench warfare's terrible tactics would prevail atop this rock bound cluster of peaks and ridges. The Austrian command considered the attack at Grappa the key movement of the Italian Army. Indeed many of Italy's best units were in combat atop the peak: the King's Own Regiment, the highly decorated Aosta Brigade, an entire division of Alpini and several battalions of Arditi. The effects of Austrian counter-attacks on the Italians are described in Italian histories as "a heavy sacrifice of human life." The Aosta, Udine, Firenze and Abruzzi brigades suffered over fifty percent casualties, but held their new line on the peaks of Asolone, Pertica and Tomba.

Italian Trench, Monte Grappa

Far below Monte Grappa on the 27th of October 1918, the main Italian offensive began with bridgeheads established by Ardti units and the Sassari Brigade. Thirty-one Italian, two British and one French division crossed the Piave River. The American 332nd regiment accompanied them, the United States Army's lone unit on the Italian Front. This combined Allied effort was supported by over 6000 pieces of artillery, including 450 Anglo-French guns. At first the Austrian resistance was formidable. Their defensive belts were well constructed and deep, taking into account nearly a year of continuous preparation and constant improvement. Austrian engineers had moved the Isonzo's deadly wire, trenches and bunkers forward. Every Italian veteran understood the serious implications of the renewed offensive. At first the Piave was a battle of attrition, despite three bridgeheads and massive Italian air support. The Battle of Vittorio Veneto was witness to what must be considered the first successful resupply by air of four Italian divisions cut off by flooding and lost pontoon bridges. Critically short of

ammunition and food, Italian aircraft supplied tons of material via parachute and airdrop to the beleaguered troops.

What accelerated the collapse of the Austrian defenses occurred to the rear of the Piave line on the 28th of October. On the Grappa massif's eastern hills, regrouped Italian forces [assumed destroyed by both sides] broke out into the lowlands. This move transformed the battle into a complete Italian rout. It was not until this final week of the war that the Emperor's army fell apart, when Austrian troops could not rely on the Empire's "other" races. Along the entire front, the Empire's once loyal subjects of Czechs, Hungarians, Croatians and Poles now realized their people back home were setting up provisional or independent governments and laid down their arms, often motivated by Italian pleas via propaganda leaflets. Loyal Austrian units fearing entrapment began a full retreat. The battle soon turned into a pursuit. From Passo Tonale to the Adriatic similar events took place as the Piave line collapsed. It was now up to Italian cavalry units to cut off the retreating Austrian armies. The attack from Monte Grappa had succeeded at a high cost, especially to the Class of 1899. 24,000 Italians were killed, missing or wounded atop Monte Grappa, two thirds of Italy's losses in the war's final battle. Over 4,000 Anglo-French troops were casualties. One hundred thousand Austrian were killed, missing or wounded during the battle and retreat. Four hundred thousand Austrians were captured before their nation surrendered on November 4th, as well as massive amounts of arms and stores.

As much as Verdun or Gallipoli, the attrition on Monte Grappa embodies the Great War. But this rarely mentioned battlefield has another quality that makes its story additionally dramatic. Imagine the Somme with a two thousand foot elevation gain for every mile. Or imagine Ypres having forty-degree rock slopes with trenches chiseled out of solid stone. Extreme effort and high casualties were always expected during First World War attacks. Imagine, however, advancing up mountain slopes, over barren rock, in dense cloud and howling wind or in a horizontal blizzard of sleet or snow. The incredible resiliency and tactical effectiveness of the Italian infantryman and his stalwart enemy, the troops of the crumbling Austro-Hungarian Empirestands out amongst the fighters of the Great War.

Italian Dead, Monte Grappa

Italy as a nation, survived the dire situation on these wild Alpine slopes and found vindication. It was the Italy's Army that prevailed at Monte Grappa. An army whose officers and troops transcended the restrictions of an underdeveloped economy with limited resources and a government in turmoil, aloof to their suffering. Considering the horrendous conditions of logistics and survival in an alpine environment and battlefield, the performance of soldato in these battles reflects Italians at their best.

Monte Grappa was a rallying point and watershed for the Italian army and population, who had once considered the war a hopeless stalemate or a provincial, far away, almost foreign battle. Along the entire 650-kilometer Alpine frontier the Austrians had held the high ground of mountain peak and ridge, yet in the end Italy was victorious.

For the Italian Class of 1899 [and 1900] there would be no divine intervention in their government's Abraham-like sacrifice at this modern Thermopylae. Across Italy there are statues to the men lost in la Grande Guerra, and il ragazzi del '99--the nation's tragic metaphor of the Great War. The "Boys of '99" would be Italy's contribution to this war's "Lost Generation." Nowhere is it more poignant than outside the town of Bassano, where a single bronze soldier implores the passersby to remember them and the peak so obvious behind him. Atop Monte Grappa is the frozen stone crypt of thousands of mountain warriors and a view that still defies description, of how critical the situation was for Italy in late 1917 and how fierce men are when faced with a nation's survival and the ends of the earth.

Monte Grappa Today

I found four books indispensable to the writing of this article. After reviewing close to twenty atlases and general histories of the Great War, I found three that actually mentioned Monte Grappa ["Monte Graspa" in one text]. Martin Gilbert's The First World War, published in 1994, not only mentions this great battle, but also includes Italy's participation in the war in unusual depth for histories in the English language. The same can be said for coverage of all fronts and nations. The text enhances well-written military history with excerpts of personal accounts, poetry and documents.

In Italian, two books stand out- L'Invasione Del Grappa a cooperative effort by Heinz von Lichem, Alessandro Massignami, Marcello Maltauro and Enrico Acerbi. Its accounts of the battles in November and December of 1917 utilize oral history and diary as well as aerial photographs and maps to enhance each author's account of the battle. Carlo Meregalli's Grande Guerra-Tappe della Vittoria covers Italy's major battles in WW1 with map, photograph and precise descriptions. The statistical information is nothing short of amazing. For anyone studying the Italian Army's efforts in the war this book is a must.

The three-volume history Gebirgskrieg by Heinz von Lichem is perhaps the essential study of World War One in the Alps. From the soaring northwestern frontier to the traumatic Isonzo Front, this book documents all aspects of the war. Although I am slow in German [and Italian] von Lichem's use of

battle dispatches, oral histories, art and statistics are all worth the effort. The emphasis is Austro-Hungarian, but well done and complete.