

Pellegrino Chiocchetti (1835-1892)

A Soldier's Life

In the town of Moena, Italy, province of Trent, not far from the Austrian border, there is preserved a handwritten document entitled «A Soldier's Life—the Campaign of 1859». In it are described the advance and retreat of the 6th Rhaetian (Alpine) Kaiserjaeger Battalion of the Austro-Hungarian army, terminating in the battles of Morando and Solferino and the armistice of Verona. The author, Pellegrino Chiocchetti (1835-1892),¹ took part in the campaign of 1859² as a simple soldier, conscripted to fight on the Austrian side, against the French and Italian armies. At that time, his home province in northern Italy was under Austrian domination and the official language was German.

¹ *Pellegrino Chiocchetti (1835-1892) of Moena, province of Trent, Italy, a soldier serving in the 6th Rhaetian K.u.K. Jaeger Battalion, Austro-Hungarian army: Vita di un soldato — Overo i movimenti dell'anno 1859, cioè avanzata e ritirata del sesto Bataglione Reto K.K. Jeger, che finise colla bataglia di Morando, di Solferino e col riposo in Verona.*

² The Italian campaign of 1859 was marked by a succession of battles opposing the French and Sardinian forces led by Emperor Napoleon III, who had wholeheartedly embraced the cause of Italian independence, and the Austrian armies led by the young Emperor Francis Joseph. These battles were fought at *Montebello, Palestro, Magenta and Melegnano*, but the most decisive and bloody encounter between the two armies took place on 24 June near Solferino.

For further reading on the subject we suggest, *inter alia*, Henry Dunant's main works, i.e.: *A Memory of Solferino*, The American National Red Cross, Washington, D.C., 1959, and *Mémoires*, Institut Henry-Dunant, L'Age d'Homme, Lausanne, 1971; Pierre Boissier, *Henry Dunant*, Henry Dunant Institute, 1974, and *History of the ICRC*, Vol. II, *from Solferino to Tsushima*, Henry Dunant Institute, Geneva, 1985.

See also: *Aux sources de l'idée de la Croix-Rouge*, Société Henry Dunant, Musée international de la Croix-Rouge, Geneva, 1984 (Collection Henry Dunant), particularly Roger Durand: «La bataille de Solférino» (pp. 15-31) and Félix Christ: «La défaite de Solférino» (pp. 55-61). An interesting work on the strategy and tactics employed by the two belligerents: Baron de Bazancourt, *La Campagne d'Italie de 1859 — Chroniques de la guerre*, 2^e partie, Amyot Editeur, Paris, 1890.

Following the movements of his battalion step-by-step, the author describes his experiences and impressions from 24 April 1859 to 21 March 1860.

The text, written in poor Italian and in dialect, is characterized by grammatical errors, lapses and inconsistencies. But even so, it has the ring of truth. It is a poignantly human document, full of penetrating observations, compassion and the wisdom of the people.

A certain sense of the absurdity of it all shines through. Speaking to us here through the mouth of a common soldier confronted with the brutality and suffering of war is the voice of the humble and weak.

Only three years later, in 1862, we hear a similar message from Henry Dunant in his Souvenir de Solférino.

*The Review is pleased to reproduce here the entire text by gracious permission of the Istituto Culturale Ladino of Moena, Italy.*³

1. April 1859: From Pavia to Mortara

Today is the day of the Resurrection, April 24th. We are at Pavia, famous for its university. This morning, most of the troops have gone to Mass. Upon returning to the barracks, we were told that, after lunch, we had to report for bayonet sharpening. All the town's knife and scissor grinders had been mobilized for this purpose. This took two days, and on 25 April, one of our divisions, the 11th, was alerted in the afternoon. It was told to load its weapons and ammunition and stand guard at the bridge over the river separating Piedmont from Lombardy. The order arrived after the soldiers had already assembled and been dismissed. They had to go looking for them in all directions until they were all together again. After staying at the bridge for twenty-four hours we were joined by another division, the 12th, and then, twenty-four hours later, by two companies of the *Kaiser Regiment*. We then returned to our barracks in town.

You can't requisition anything at all in just two or three days. The owners of the animals have brought them into the town, and the streets and squares are full. Just think of the confusion in town with all this going on! More like the end of the world than the Easter holiday! Confusion among the troops and confusion among the people. Everybody forgetting the holiday and prayer, and thinking only of the war coming on!

³ From *Mondo Ladino*, bulletin of the *Istituto Culturale Ladino*, Vigo di Fassa, V (1981), nos. 1-4.—All sub-titles and footnote 2 are by the editor.

On the 28th of April the inspection NCO came early in the morning to sound reveille, and we were told to prepare for general inspection. We were ready for anything, but nothing happened.

On the 29th, the inspection NCO again came to us early in the morning. He told us to get up right away and line up on the barracks grounds, with our gear at our feet, ready to leave. Meanwhile, it was time to eat. Around 10 a.m. after eating we started to give out barrels of biscuits, first by company and then by squad. No sooner had we given it out (about four or five pounds for each soldier) than we received the order to go to the parade ground, where we received our weapons. After putting our weapons down we said our prayers and then left by way of Pavia's main street, with all of us crying "hurrah, hurrah", as if we were going to a ball or to some big show. Hearing our cries, the population crowded to the windows to watch us, some laughing and mocking us and others crying because our joy was out of place.

Upon arriving at the exit of the town near the Porta Ticino, we stayed in one place for almost two hours before hearing the news that war was declared.

And then we all began once more to yell "hurrah, hurrah", waving our hats until the people were unable to keep themselves from crying and sobbing. Our officers, too, were pale and trembling, with their eyes full of tears, because they knew what could happen in time of war.

After we crossed the Ticino river, everybody said: "Now we are in Piedmont." But soon we noticed that the roads and bridges were cut and we couldn't continue. The way was soon opened and we were able to advance again, and at around 6 o'clock we arrived at the village of Carbonara. We set up camp a few miles from the village, and the sentries took off to man the advance posts. We remained on the alert all night. On the following day, the 30th of April, we continued on our way after having breakfast. After passing through two villages, we came to the village of Tromello.

The whole brigade set up camp a few miles farther on. At nightfall it began to rain and it didn't stop for twenty-four hours. We had no roof but the sky, and nothing to eat. It was an uncomfortable night in the rain and without cover and we got no rest. You can imagine how miserable we were.

At daybreak we began to make breakfast, and the rain started once again. After swallowing a bit of bouillon and meat we continued our journey, still under the pelting rain, and arrived at the city of Mortara, where we struck camp for the night.

2. May 1859: From Mortara to Sannazzaro

As usual, on the morning of the 1st of May we ate whatever we could since there was little to eat in that town and the food had already been taken by the Piedmontese troops. At 9 a.m. sharp we left Mortara and arrived at a town called Cosci, where we also failed to find any food, but luckily we had been given bread before leaving.

However, on the way, most of us had thrown away our bread and toilet articles because the burden was so heavy and it was so hot. And when we got to the village of Cosci we found nothing to eat. We set up our camp near the village where the fortress of Casale Monferrato is located, which was shaking under the impact of cannons, bombs and shells. Our superiors immediately told us to get rid of everything except our shirts, pants and ammunition, because they expected to go into action the next morning. But we stayed there, and it rained for two days without stopping.

On the morning of May 4th, when our superiors saw that we were soaked through as if we had just stepped out of a mountain stream, we set off in search of shelter, but the village was too small for that and also all the houses were shut.

After a few minutes the officers lost patience and gave the order to force in the doors. As you can imagine, the poor people, seeing themselves attacked like that began to tremble like leaves, and both young and old begged for mercy. In fact, within two or three days we had used up all the food they had left after the passage of the Piedmontese troops. They were hungry and terrorised at seeing themselves invaded by so many soldiers. You can imagine the misery of these good people. We stayed there until the 6th of the month, and on the 7th we set off again at exactly 11 a.m. When we got to the village of Rosacco, we got settled as best we could, and when night came we prepared our food, which consisted entirely of meat.

All at once, on the 8th, we heard a bugle call at 8 a.m. We had to get going right away, and at 11 o'clock we arrived in Palestro, where we stayed two hours waiting for a bridge to be improvised across the Sesia.

After crossing this stream, we started marching again and passed through a number of villages. We were greatly bothered by the dust and heat and terribly tired. Finally, around 6 p.m., we arrived at Paderno, our clothes soaked with sweat and so tired that some of us had to stay behind. As far as the others were concerned, they had to stay in the forward positions facing the enemy. We stayed there all night long, under conditions that cried to heaven.

As far as our food was concerned we had received supplies from the town, which we prepared on the spot as well as we could, and we stayed there.

The next morning we prepared our meal, but before we finished we received the order to leave immediately for the same positions as before. We spent two nights there, the whole time in the trenches and without one minute's rest. On the 10th, early in the morning, we began to prepare our meals and then at 4 in the afternoon the order came to retreat immediately. We had to throw down our meat on the spot, load the cooking pots and leave immediately for the city of Vercelli. When we got there, we thought we could rest a bit, but meanwhile the order had been given to go back to where we came from in the direction of Palestro. By the time we got halfway, most of the soldiers were lagging behind, exhausted by the march and the heat. When our Brigade Commander noticed that no one could go any further, he gave the order to halt. We rested for about one hour, with everyone taking advantage of the respite to go in search of water because we were almost dying of thirst. Then we got back as far as the town of Palestro and set up our camp at the entry to the village, where we prepared our meal. However, most of the soldiers had remained behind because they were so tired they couldn't take one step further. Before we had finished eating our Commanding Officer was already waiting for us to leave: Suddenly the bugle blew and we had to leave for Mortara. We had to march about 12 miles through various villages and towards the middle of the night all the soldiers were crying for a halt and complaining because we had to continue to advance. Only half of the battalion remained because so many soldiers had collapsed along the way, victims of hunger and disease. Our Commanding Officer, seeing that none of the troops could go any farther, gave the order to halt. Once we had stopped, you can imagine the silence there was. All the men threw themselves to the ground and fell asleep. After one hour the call for departure was sounded and we had to get going again.

On the way it really began to pour, and finally we arrived at Mortara. Nevertheless, most of the troops had remained behind and only arrived the next day after passing the whole night under the torrents of rain. On the morning of May 12th, we started to eat and one of the two divisions (the 12th) received the order to go on guard at Tromello for the Corps Commander. After settling in our quarters we remained on duty without taking the slightest break. On the morning of the 15th, the two companies that had remained behind arrived at Mortara.

These two companies set up their camp outside the village. However, two days later it began to rain again and they came into the village for shelter. We stayed there for a few days. On the 14th we set off towards the village of Sannazzaro where we thought we could stay in camp. Because of the bad weather and because the village was rather large, we were quartered in some grain lofts, where we stayed several days. On the 23rd at 8 o'clock in the evening, we received marching orders. After marching all night we arrived at Lomello, where we installed our camp in a muddy field. The next morning, after eating, we thought we could stay, but at exactly 4 in the afternoon we received the order to return to Sannazzaro. It was on that day that the battles of *Fortezza di Valenza*, *Voghera* and *Casale Monferrato* took place. We were lucky enough to be kept in reserve for these battles, which were very bloody.

While we were at Sannazzaro, one of our patrols crossed the Po river to scout the enemy's positions. After learning that the people of the village had been unfriendly, our Commanding Officer, His Excellency Lieutenant Brigadier Count Giulay, issued an order to requisition all firearms and other weapons, stating that whoever disobeyed would be shot.

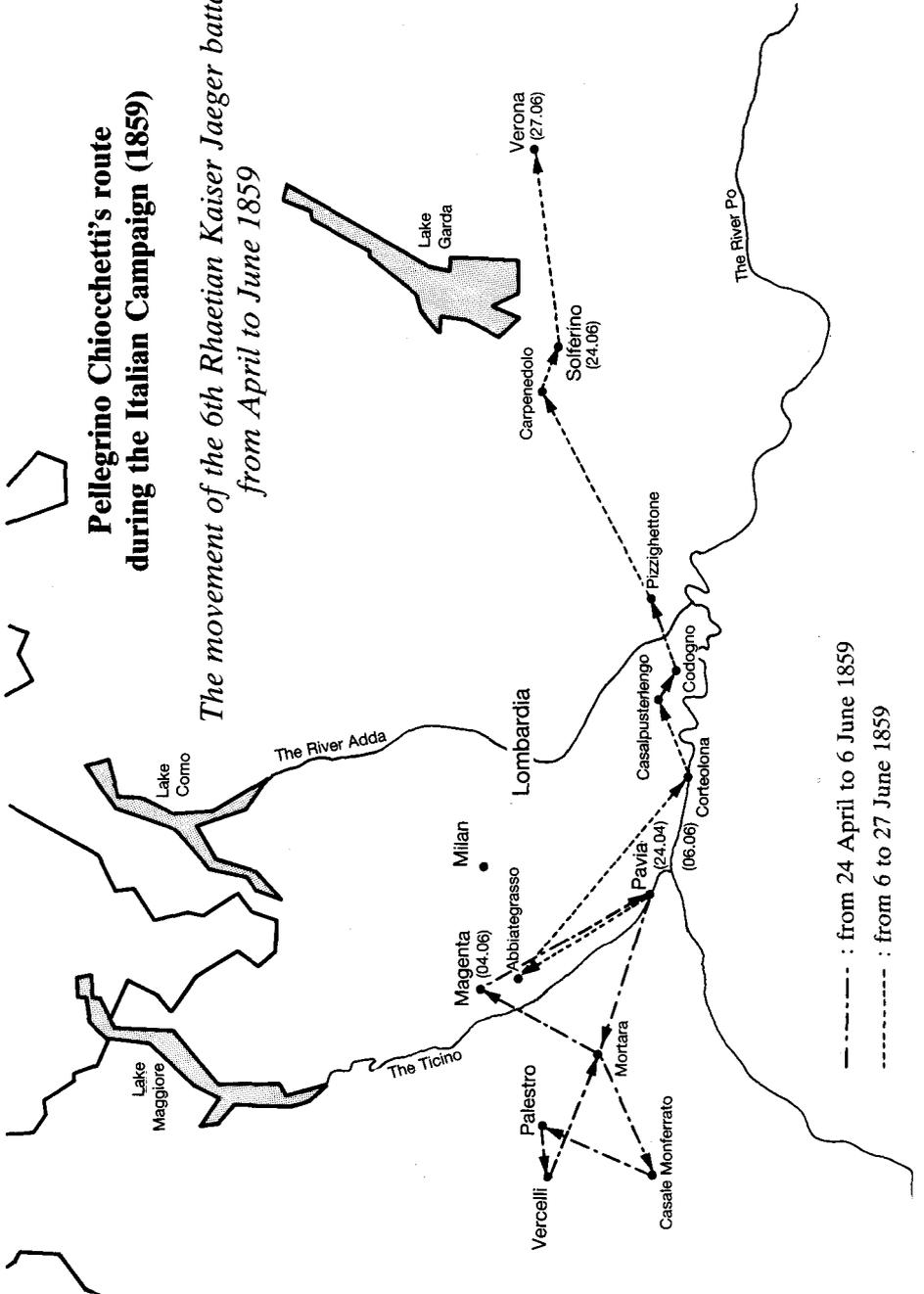
3. 1-3 June 1859: The battle of Vercelli

We stayed at Sannazzaro from the 25th of May to the 1st of June. On the 1st of June we left for Ottobiano. There, the whole battalion was quartered in two houses. Shortly after that we received the order to take our weapons and proceed quickly to Mortara. En route, we were quartered in the village of Sargualio in an open factory. We spent the whole night on the alert while our cooks prepared the meal. The next day, we left, exhausted, for Mortara. There, we witnessed the return of the troops who had fought at Vercelli. At around 6 o'clock in the evening, two *Jaeger* battalions who had participated in fighting on the Sesia river near a railway, also arrived. Of the 1,600 men who had originally made up these battalions, only 400 were left, commanded by a first lieutenant. All the others had been killed or wounded.

God, what a sight it was to see so many wounded! Upon hearing the news of the return of these poor and miserable people, all those who were at the Mortara camp and all the soldiers came to meet them, crying "long live our heroic fighters". Then they gave them something to eat and drink, and pretended to be happy. But they couldn't hold back their tears and it was the same with us. We cried out twice, but

**Pellegrino Chiochetti's route
during the Italian Campaign (1859)**

*The movement of the 6th Rhaetian Kaiser Jaeger battalion
from April to June 1859*



then our joy was turned into sorrow and once again we thought of what could happen to us. We saw the inhabitants of the town consoling and comforting the soldiers, but then we saw them crying.

After the troops who were behind us had passed, we too had to leave at exactly 8 o'clock in the evening and we marched all night along impossible roads, buffeted by the wind. It was so bad that several carts were driven into the ditches. During the night we passed through several villages, and on the morning of June 3rd we arrived at Borgo San Siro, where we set up our camp in a field.

While they were preparing the meal it began to rain in torrents. After an hour the rain finally stopped and at 11 o'clock, after mess, we left for the Ticino river. On the way, we encountered a violent storm of wind and rain which lasted two full hours. It seemed like the end of the world, but still we had to go on. Finally, we arrived at the river, where a bridge had been prepared. After a while we arrived at the town of Bereguardo. There, we thought we could stop, soaked by the rain and sweat and half dead with fatigue, but we had to continue on towards Magenta. At 11 o'clock in the evening we arrived at Besate. We set up our camp in a muddy field where we could not even stretch out and we remained there, soaked, exhausted and hungry.

4. 4 June 1859: The battle of Magenta

But poor, unhappy us, all taken up in bemoaning our fate. At daybreak we prepared our meal and after eating we began to cook the meat for the next day. But it was too late because we had to set off for Magenta. After spilling the uncooked meat on the ground, we loaded the cauldrons on the carts and hastened to take part in the battle, but it was too late. On that day, the 4th of June, the battle was raging at Magenta. On the way, before arriving at Abbiategrasso, we encountered a violent storm which forced us to stop. After the storm was over we set off again. We had thought we could stop at Abbiategrasso, but had to continue marching through the night. It wasn't long before we began meeting the wounded returning from the battle of Magenta. A veritable procession, it seemed to be. It was a heartbreaking sight: some had lost an eye, others had been wounded in a foot or a hand, an arm or leg. Those who could get away as fast as possible, but most of them were at the end of their strength and dragged themselves

miserably along in order to avoid falling into the hands of the French and for fear of being killed. Nevertheless, fleeing as they did with their open wounds they soon died by the wayside, and we saw large numbers of them. What a comfort it was for us to know that by a narrow margin we had escaped this fate.

Continuing our way, we tried to find out whether our forces were advancing or retreating. These unfortunate people replied that things were going rather badly and that the next day at this time we would be in the same state as they were. Despite this bad news we did not lose courage.

At 10 o'clock in the evening we finally arrived at the enemy lines and expected to go into combat immediately, but the firing had already ceased. We took our positions, ready to fight, but soon the order was received for the entire brigade to move to the left flank. There, we were able to rest for two short hours, while the meal was being prepared, but we had no time to eat because at dawn the fighting started again at the advance post. We pulled back as quickly as possible to escape the enemy fire.

On the following morning we again saw the wounded being removed while we were advancing. We saw dead soldiers and wounded ones in agony crying for mercy and entreating us to rescue them. However, in such moments you think only of yourself and not of anybody else; neither home, father or mother, brothers or friends. You think only of yourself and God. There were more dead and wounded on that battlefield than you could count. Before we could even fire, the French troops, who were frightened, retreated on the left flank towards Corno. And then, since we didn't see the enemy any longer we retreated in turn for fear of being surprised by a new offensive.

We returned to the village of Abbiategrasso, and during our retreat we installed four cannons on the bridge which crosses the canal flowing in the direction of Milan. After we left, the cannons went into action against the enemy. The unfortunate French, exhausted and half dead from hunger, who were also trying to take refuge in the village so that they could recover, suddenly found themselves caught in the fire from these cannons, which decimated their ranks to such an extent that the whole region seemed bathed in blood. As for us, we then withdrew to Besate, where we set up our camp as best we could, half dead from fatigue, and we succeeded in resting a bit and eating. When we finished our meal it was exactly 9 in the evening. At exactly 11 o'clock, a buglesounded and we had to break camp suddenly because the French had almost surprised us.

5. 6-23 June 1859: From Bereguardo to Valeggio

On the morning of June 6th we arrived at Bereguardo. We set up camp in a field of wheat which was almost ripe. What a delight for the eyes! We quickly prepared our meal and ate it.

Then the bugle sounded and we had to leave for Pavia. Some of us were unable to withstand this long march in the heat and dust, and we had a few dead.

Finally we arrived at Pavia, where we thought we might stop. Nevertheless, we had to continue marching for another six miles, which finished off many of our other comrades. Finally, we arrived in the neighbourhood of the village of Belgiojoso, where half of us were absent from roll call and did not arrive until later.

Our whole brigade set up camp and rested. On the morning of June 7th we retreated. Near Cortelona we stopped for two short hours before starting off again at noon in the scorching heat. Later on we struck camp in a vineyard near a village called Solarolo, but again a large portion of our unit remained behind because of the heat. However, those of us who arrived in this delightful countryside, covered with vineyards and fruit trees with the cherries ripening were able to stuff themselves before the evening meal and a night of rest.

The next day, we left before dawn for the enemy lines. When we arrived at Cortelona, we received the order to deposit our packs with all our things because they thought we would have to fight; however, nothing happened that day and we stayed the whole night in the same place. The rain was so bad that we couldn't catch a wink of sleep. On June 9th, after lunch, we took off again at around 6 a.m., marching in the direction of Codogno.

At a point halfway we stopped one moment in a field to rest and one hour later started off for Casalpusterlengo. After a long march we finally arrived at Codogno where, after having supper, we happily slept the whole night long. On that same evening, as if by the grace of God, the order was given to take away all our packs, which were loaded on carts and taken to the fortress of Mantua.

On June 10th it was still early when we prepared our breakfast, but one order soon succeeds another, and we were then told to retreat immediately. We therefore had to throw all our food on the ground because there was no time to lose, and we set off again, this time for the

small fortress of Pizzighettone. En route, we passed through the village of Maleo two miles before arriving at Pizzighettone.

Running through the village of Pizzighettone is the Adda, a small stream, which we crossed by way of a bridge. Then we saw with our own eyes a lot of soldiers who had received the order to destroy everything in the fortress: furniture, sheets, blankets and cannons. All this was thrown into the stream. But what confusion there was in that place. However, we saw them placing wood and barrels of powder under the bridge so that it could be blown up once we had left.

When we arrived at the village of Farfengo, we heard a sound like an earthquake. It was the bridge being blown up.

After eating, we tried to get some rest but couldn't because of the rain. We spent another miserable night.

On the following morning, we received the order to set off again, and passed through a large number of villages such as Casalbuttano, Robecco d'Oglio and many others whose names I have forgotten. Once over the river Oglio, we came to a fairly large village called Pontevico. We set up camp a little further on and were able to satisfy our hunger. On the following days, the 11th and 12th of June, the soldiers were able to get some rest because of the Whitsun holiday.

On the 14th we passed the island of Montichiari before arriving at Carpenedolo, where we got whatever lodging was available and ate. However, we had to stay on alert all night long. Since on that day I was assigned to guard the Corps Commander, I got no sleep.

On the morning of the 17th we set off again, passing through many villages whose names I forget and arriving at Volta Mantovana, exhausted and half dead with hunger and thirst. But it was impossible to find anything to eat and we couldn't get away from the battalion.

We remained there the following two days. Then, on the 20th, we set off for Valeggio Sul Mincio. Half a mile from the village we ate and got some rest. It was then that we received a visit from our Emperor accompanied by the entire headquarters staff and several generals. The Emperor talked with some of us, showing concern over our welfare. We stayed there until June 23rd, which was the feast of Corpus Domini. At 9 o'clock in the morning we set off again for the enemy lines with our Emperor at the head of the entire army. After about 15 miles we came to the enemy lines and immediately took up forward positions, trying the whole night long to surprise the enemy troops without becoming surprised ourselves. You can have no idea how tired we were, covered with dust, thirsty and famished, without any other alternative than to be prepared for all eventualities.

6. 24 June 1859: The battle of Solferino

On the 24th, which was the feast of Saint John, some soldiers were detailed at dawn to prepare the meal while the 1st squad of the 23rd Company left on a scouting mission. They reported that they had seen a lot of French and Piedmontese soldiers, infantry and cavalry. The hills were covered with red.

It was then that they told us that the enemy was attacking and had already opened fire. All of a sudden we heard the whistling of a shell, and after having thrown all the food on the ground, we quickly loaded the cauldrons on the carts.

Immediately after that we were deployed on the front. Seeing the enemy advancing rapidly, our General soon ordered a charge. In throwing ourselves into combat, each one of us yelled in such a manner that you would have said it was the end of the world. We were victorious in this battle and forced the enemy to retreat, taking a few prisoners but not without having suffered some losses of our own. Finally because the enemy had the advantage of numbers, we withdrew a bit, and then redeployed so as to continue the fire. Then the enemy ordered a new attack and we had heavy losses in dead, wounded and prisoners. After retreating we took up positions again, continuing our fire. Then the bugle blew again announcing the third attack. We threw ourselves into battle using our bayonets until the French retreated a bit; however our left flank was held by a regiment of Italians from Lombardy who had no desire to fight and most of whom deserted. The enemy then advanced and we were caught in fire from three sides. Then, thanks be to God, the brigade Sergeant Major arrived and gave the order to retreat, without which the entire battalion would have been taken prisoner.

And in fact we were in retreat. But the enemy bullets continued to whistle around our ears. We left many wounded, dead and prisoners behind us who begged their comrades to help them, but in vain. No one thought of stopping to help these poor devils because it was every man for himself.

The village of Solferino was filled with wounded. They were in the church, in the courtyards, in the streets and the alms house, where it looked as if a massacre had occurred on the spot. What a spectacle of suffering! The wounded were crying "help, have pity on us". No one helped them because most of the population had fled. What a desperate situation with all those bodies. Everywhere you looked there was the blood of the wounded and dead!

At 5 o'clock in the afternoon we received the order to retreat because the enemy was at the gates of the village. We left immediately and on the way there was a terrible storm which, added to the sound of the guns, gave us the impression of being hit by a big earthquake. Finally we arrived at the river Mincio. There we set up camp as well as we could. We were exhausted and extremely hungry. But there was nothing to eat. It was a miserable night.

On June 25th we stayed at our positions ready to fight again.

7. In the wake of the battle — Retreat to Verona

At midnight on the 26th we received the order to retreat silently to Verona. The following day we arrived at the great square opposite the Porta Nuova.

We stayed there for two days, during which those who had a bit of money were able to buy something to drink and eat. It was impossible to rest in the scorching heat since there was no shady place to lie down.

On the 30th we took off for Castelletto Veronese, where we set up camp and remained until July 6th.

On that day, the 3rd Company left from Pattuglia on patrol searching for deserters and combing all the neighbouring hills. In the evening, we stopped at the village of Negrar, and on the following day we reached the village of Prun. On the 8th, we went to Montechio (an outlying district of Negrar). On the following day we returned to Castelletto Veronese, where we remained for several days.

On the 15th we arrived at Pescantina, at advance posts on the Adige river. On the 16th of July, the day of the Armistice which we had so looked forward to, we left again for Quinzano, where we remained until the 4th of August. Then, on the 5th, we returned to Prun and on the 6th we went to Sant' Anna (d'Alfaedo) and remained there until the 27th of August. On the 28th we went to Grezzana, on the 29th to Verona and on the 30th to Vigasio, where we stayed until the 2nd of December. We then returned to Verona, where we remained until the 21st of March 1860.

And now we come to the end of the story of what happened in 1859 from the 2nd to the 24th of June, and God forbid that there should be another spring like this one.

Therefore, we pray to the Almighty that he will not permit it to happen again.

If this Journal finds a reader, may that person view this disordered tale with indulgence, for it has been many years since I put pen to paper!
