

Angus Henderson and Quinton Moss, 1,000km on mountain bikes: August/September 2018

Angus, who is from New Zealand, is the grandson of Major George Norman Girling, of the Green Howards, 50 Division. George escaped from Fontanellato's PG49 along with three companions and reached the Allied Lines on foot in November 1943 after 53 days. He travelled with: Rex Smith, Highland Division, Artillery; Lt Col Dennis Gibbs, Queens 44 Division; and Sergeant Turner, 50 Division Recce Battalion.

Angus and Quinton Moss, whose uncle, Private Charles Moss, was killed at Faenza, decided to mark the 75th anniversary of the Armistice with Italy and the escape of prisoners into the countryside by retracing the quartet's remarkable journey, with the help of George Girling's diary. They were commemorating not only them but the brave Italians who sheltered them on the way. Angus's wife, Penny, had intended to join them but stayed behind in New Zealand to look after their son who was ill.

Here Angus tells the story of a serendipitous encounter on the 27th day of his 28-day adventure:

"Day 27 - Basilio Conflitti

Last night in Pescosolido, I posted a picture of a letter written by Basilio Conflitti to my grandfather's family dated 28th August 1944, enquiring as to whether they made it back through the front lines and to freedom.

Today I had hoped to track down some of Basilio's descendants, or find some connection to the past as we passed by Campoli Appenino hot on grandad's trail.

At breakfast this morning, on hearing of our Appenine Adventure back-story, our most wonderful host Rosella Lucci fell in love with us and rang around her network. She tracked down Isabella, Basilio's great niece who still lives in Campoli. 'How do I find her' I asked. 'Just roll into town and ask someone' was the obvious reply. So, a bit dubious, that's what we planned to do.

We rolled into Campoli Appenino and headed for the main square. As we got off the bikes, an older gent with no English engaged us in conversation to try and ask about the crazy mountain bike adventure we are on. A passer-by from Rome, Francesco Ciaffone, who is in Campolini for the festival, stopped with his young son to assist with translation.

After a couple of minutes of banter I thought I'd see if he knew anything about the Conflitti family. 'Are you a Conflitti' I asked. 'Si' came the reply with a proud smile. 'Are you related to Isabella'#, I asked. 'Si, Si, she is my cousin,' came a surprised reply with a now bemused look. I am incredulous. Finally, after a pause, 'Was Basilio Conflitti your Grandfather?' I ask. A look of astonishment. Some random Scottish stranger from New Zealand on a mountain bike in a remote mountain village, deep in the heart of Italy who has heard of Basilio. After what seemed like an incredibly long pause, 'Si, Si, he was my grandfather, I am his grandson', came the reply.

I explain how Basilio, at great peril to himself and his family, sheltered my grandfather in 1943 from the Germans during his trek to freedom. When I pull up the picture of Basilio's letter, we are both lost for words. A very special moment, shared by two strangers from parallel lives, a world apart, connected by the incredibly selfless action of his grandfather to mine in my grandad's time of need. Truly remarkable.

We discussed the life and times of Basilio. He pointed out the house where he lived, showed me some old family photos. We connect on Facebook. How surreal.

After some time, I track down the street of Basilio's house. More strangers take an interest. A group forms to hear the story. They point out the house. Then as I once again explain the back-story, I pull up the Basilio letter. A lady of about my age who has joined the group looks a bit shell-shocked. 'I am Basilio's granddaughter,' she whispers. Unbelievable. We just stare at each other.

Another older gentleman, explains how he was one of Basilio's students. Basilio was the schoolteacher and taught him in primary 3. We share the stories and then we pose in front of the house where, 75 years ago, Basilio Conflitti sheltered my grandfather and his travelling companions from the might of the German army. A truly remarkable day in Campoli Appenino."