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The 1907 in Rogers



*Second Lieutenant
Clarence Thomas* →





The Great Escape

On Jan. 3, 1945, 2nd Lt. Clarence Thomas' plane fell from the sky over Italy's Riglio Valley. When he finally escaped from enemy territory 43 days later, his journey came to a close—but his story was just beginning

BY EVIN DEMIREL

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
ARSHIA KHAN

July 19, 2018

RIGLIO VALLEY,
OUTSIDE THE
VILLAGE OF CASE
BASSANO

ALL THESE DECADES later, the map in Woody Thomas' hands is still intact. Fading, to be sure, but usable. Issued to servicemen by the U.S. Army in 1943, its now dulled greens and blues display the contours of the hilly, wooded land of northwestern Italy between the towns of Pisa and Piacenza. Every last marsh, lake, canal, lighthouse, chapel, aqueduct, ford and forest is marked on a roughly 200-square-mile area.



In a later addition, but hardly less old, a line made by a marker, an uneven arc of dark forest green, clearly pressed down hard, runs up the middle of the wrinkled, weathered paper to the spot where Woody now stands. Yet that line, this map, was not needed in leading the 72-year-old here today, some 5,097 miles from his home in Little Rock. Instead, Woody's journey was the work of many hands over many years. Those people stand here now—his sons, wife, daughter-in-law and Italian friends—but they're not looking at the map. They're studying the ground, they're watching Woody's face, and they're listening to a stooped man recall his own past from more than 70 years before.

Pierino Casaliggi wasn't yet 5 years old on that winter day in 1945 when he saw smoke billowing from a plane above the land near his hometown of Case Bassano in the Riglio Valley area, part of the larger Po Valley, a sprawling river basin that encompasses much of northern Italy. Pierino speaks only Italian, and Woody speaks English, but the language barrier hardly matters as the elderly Pierino rapidly recounts the details of what he witnessed in the last months of World War II.

He recalls seeing a fighter bomber falter, lurch and speed southward toward a field just a few hundred yards away. He points upward, tracing his tanned finger in the air. His eyes narrow. *There.* That's where the plane skidded across the sky.

Jan. 3, 1945

ABOUT 14 MILES
SOUTHEAST OF
PIACENZA

CLARENCE THOMAS DECIDED he wasn't going down with this damn plane. Not now, just minutes after he'd completed a bombing and strafing mission hitting the railroad bridge at Calcinato. He'd been through far too much—fighting in North Africa, the

THERE.

THAT'S
WHERE THE

PLANE

SKIDDED

ACROSS
THE SKY.

invasion of Sicily, the advance on Rome—to meet his end just yet. Especially not here, 100 feet above the snow-capped Apennine mountaintops and descending far too quickly.

By this point, Thomas' P-47 was shuddering and spewing oil. He radioed his lieutenant to relay the dire situation. They agreed: It was time to bail. Thomas unfastened his oxygen, safety belt and radio, severing his sole means of communicating with friends.

"That was the most lonesome feeling that I have ever experienced," he'd later recall.

At 2:32 p.m., he opened the canopy and went over the right side of the plane with a .45-caliber service pistol in his shoulder

holster and a trench knife tied onto his parachute. Seconds later, the plane tipped and crashed to the ground, immediately bursting into a fireball in the pasture below. For a few horrifying seconds, it seemed like Thomas would land in that fire, but the winds pushed him to a spot 200 feet away, where he crashed, miraculously unscathed.

Within minutes, as Thomas rolled his chute, a man holding a machine gun approached. Thomas asked, "Tu partisan?" and pointed to the red star on the man's cap. The Italian partisans were World War II resistance groups fighting against the German occupants of Italy, its local socialist puppet regime and the Fascist Italian government. With shared enemies, the partisans and Americans were natural allies.

In Italian, the man affirmed he was one of the good guys. Clarence slapped him on the back and said "Eo Americano" to convey he was American. The new friends then walked arm in arm to a small farmhouse—the diminutive man carrying the chute, Clarence praising the partisans to the high heavens—where they met 20 or 30 men armed to the teeth. In Italian, Clarence asked "Where are the Germans?" They pointed down the nearby valley and said "Fascists." Raising their hands, they pantomimed using binoculars.

The message was clear: Thomas had been seen.

Jan. 9, 1945

METTI; ABOUT 11
MILES SOUTH OF THE
CRASH SITE

THANK GOD FOR the priest.

Clarence and a group of Americans he'd met heading south had been on the run for a few days when one of them injured his ankle. They had to stop in Metti, a small village in the province of Parma. The local Catholic priest, a believer in their cause, allowed the group to stay in the village church. He tended the fireplace all night.

Not long afterward, word came

that the advancing Germans had descended a nearby hill. They were seen heading toward Metti.

Fortunately, the priest had a plan. It hinged on a refuge beneath the church, a hiding room accessible only by secret passageway.

One by one, each of the 18 Allies and partisans sneaked through a small opening near the bottom of the cellar wall and began cramming into a 7-by-7-foot space beneath the foundation of the church steeple. The priest, 11 partisans and six Americans, including Clarence, hunkered down. Just after some women from the village had placed sacks of potatoes on the entrance, the Germans arrived.

So began 24 straight hours of waiting, stomachs tightened as the heavy boots of eight Nazis pounded the 9-foot ceiling overhead. These German soldiers billeted in the room directly above and could have heard the smallest cough, sneeze or snore from any of the people below.

Through it all, the tense, still waiting continued. Finally, the Germans left town, allowing the Allies to emerge from the hole, wash their faces, eat and brush their teeth.

Yet the suspense was not over. The Germans returned to Metti now and then over the next two days and sporadically took up posts. So the 18 escapees kept hiding and re-emerging. Sometimes, the German patrols were as few as two men. The Americans and partisans wanted to kill them, but the priest wouldn't hear of it. If the Allies attacked, the priest said, the rest of the Germans would raze the village and possibly kill some of its inhabitants. Clarence later learned this fear wasn't unfounded: In the coming days, he saw villages that had been burned to the ground.

Members of the group had another reason to be on edge: They suspected that a local man known as "the general" was spying on behalf of the Germans. He was constantly probing, asking questions about where they had been and where they were going. The priest didn't trust him. He wanted to keep the location of "the hole" a secret.

On the evening of Jan. 11, the Allies' worst fears were nearly realized.

A Nazi patrol descended into the wine cellar and began rooting around. Just outside the hole's covered entrance, they began to question the church

workers about the whereabouts of the partisans and priest, evidently unaware of the Americans. Frustrated, they slapped one of the young women around and began moving the wine bottles on the shelves.

Inside the hole, hearts seemed to stop. Seconds dragged on forever.

At last, the Germans left. Though the Allies could exhale, they didn't yet dare emerge. When, after 15 minutes, they heard the young woman say the road was clear, they finally left. Outside, they also saw "the general," who now knew all about their secret location. He had made one of the young women working at the church show him the location of the passageway and hiding room.

It was time to flee.

Pistols drawn, ready for anything, the Americans and partisans slipped out of Metti not long after nightfall. With the help of an Italian guide, they stole down a snowy trail. The howls of trailing dogs pierced the frigid air. Clarence feared the Germans had sicced bloodhounds on them and fretted about whether the dogs could track men in snow. Finally, the howling

died down, leaving only the sounds of the escapees' ragged breath and hurried footsteps crunching the snow.

October 1956

LITTLE ROCK, ARKANSAS

"REMEMBER THOSE NIGHTS, Mr. Clarence?" the priest's letter read. "Full of fear and terror, remember when the Germans were in the cellar and we were afraid to even breathe?"

Clarence Thomas was holding the four-page note, composed in fine script, recently arrived from Italy, a response to a note he'd sent some time before. Until now, he'd rarely discussed with his family the experiences that brought him the Air Medal and Flying Boot honors upon his return stateside. At first, some of the details of his escape were classified. An April 8, 1945, *Arkansas Gazette* brief reported: "Of his 43-day hike back to safety, he is allowed only to say that 'Italian mountains are high and steep and the snow is deep.' He said it was almost impossible to obtain food."

Life in those first years after the war had gotten so busy, Clarence likely felt he was still on the run at times. He'd gotten married to his sweetheart, Emma Lou Atherton, graduated from law school, practiced accounting and become a father of three.

Finally, by 1956, things had slowed down enough for Clarence to revisit the past. That's why, one day, he sat down with his eldest son, Woody, by his side to draft a letter to the man who'd saved his life. Nine-year-old Woody painstakingly looked up each word in an Italian-English dictionary as Clarence penned the thank-you note in Italian.

The Metti priest's response, dated Oct. 14, began, "Dear Clarence Thomas, I received your letter with much joy and surprise. Only you among all I gave hospitality was kind enough to write me."

Woody was only vaguely aware of what his father had experienced



CONFIDENTIAL

WAR DEPARTMENT
HEADQUARTERS ARMY AIR FORCES
WASHINGTON

MISSING AIR CREW REPORT

IMPORTANT: This report will be compiled in triplicate by each Army Air Forces organization within 48 hours of the time an aircraft is officially reported missing.

Twelfth Air Force

1. ORGANIZATION: Location, by Name Pisa, Italy Comd or Air Force XIII TAC
Group 86th Fighter; Squadron 527th Fighter; Detachment _____
2. SPECIFY: Place of Departure Pisa, Italy Course RR bridge at Calciano F-196
Target or Intended Destination RR bridge at F-196 Type of Mission Bombing & strafing
3. WEATHER CONDITIONS AND VISIBILITY AT TIME OF CRASH OR WHEN LAST REPORTED:
Ceiling and visibility unlimited up to 4000 feet. Hazy enroute.
4. GIVE: (a) Day 3 Month Jan Year 1945; Time 1450; & Location 1 mi SW of Ponte Dell Olio, Italy P-5994 of last known whereabouts of missing aircraft.
(b) Specify whether aircraft was last sighted (); Last contacted by radio (); Forced down (); Seen to crash (X); or Information not available (),
5. AIRCRAFT WAS LOST, OR IS BELIEVED TO HAVE BEEN LOST AS A RESULT OF: (Check only one) Enemy Aircraft (); Enemy Anti-aircraft (); Other circumstances as follows: Cause Unknown
6. AIRCRAFT: Type; Model & Series P-47D 23RA AAF Serial No. 42-28036
7. NICKNAME OF AIRCRAFT, if any BY SH BOTH SIDES OF TAIL FINS, HOLES ON RIGHT SIDE.
8. ENGINES: Type, Model & Series B-2500-59 AAF Serial No. (a) FA-002269
(b) _____ (c) _____ (d) _____
9. INSTALLED WEAPONS (Furnish below Make, Type and Serial Number); .50 Cal.
(a) 1099288; (b) 1911638; (c) 1911264; (d) 1911192
(e) 1911795; (f) 1911781; (g) 1911741; (h) 1220065
10. THE PERSONS LISTED BELOW WERE REPORTED AS: (a) Battle Casualty X
or (b) Non Battle Casualty _____
11. NUMBER OF PERSONS ABOARD AIRCRAFT: Crew 1; Passengers _____; Total 1
(Starting with Pilot, furnish the following particulars: If more than 2 persons were aboard aircraft, list similar particulars on separate sheet and attach original to this form.)

Crew Position	Name in full (Last name first)	Rank	Serial Number	Current Status
1. Pilot	THOMAS, CLARENCE M. <i>W</i>	2nd Lieut.	0-710202	MIA
2.				

12. IDENTIFY BELOW THOSE PERSONS WHO ARE BELIEVED TO HAVE LAST KNOWLEDGE OF AIRCRAFT, AND CHECK APPROPRIATE COLUMN TO INDICATE BASIS FOR SAME:

Name in full (Last Name first)	Rank	Serial Number	Contacted by	Last Seen	Radio	Sighted	Crash	Saw Forced Landing
1. JUNG, EDMOND A.	1st Lieut.	0-704682					X	
2.								
3.								

13. IF PERSONNEL ARE BELIEVED TO HAVE SURVIVED, ANSWER YES TO ONE OF THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS: (a) Parachutes were used Yes; (b) Persons were seen walking away from scene of crash _____; or (c) Any other reasons (Specify) _____
14. ATTACH AERIAL PHOTOGRAPH, MAP, CHART, OR SKETCH, SHOWING APPROXIMATE LOCATION WHERE AIRCRAFT WAS LAST SEEN OR HEARD FROM.
15. ATTACH EYEWITNESS DESCRIPTION OF CRASH, FORCED LANDING, OR OTHER CIRCUMSTANCES PERTAINING TO MISSING AIRCRAFT.
16. GIVE NAME, RANK AND SERIAL NUMBER OF OFFICER IN CHARGE OF SEARCH, IF ANY, INCLUDING DESCRIPTION AND EXTENT _____

Date of Report 4 January 1945

James W. Hale
(Signature of Preparing Officer)

17. REMARKS OR EYEWITNESS STATEMENTS (Show on reverse) JAMES W. HALE
1st Lieut., Air Corps.,
Asst Operations Officer *RCA 23*

in Metti, but in later years, Woody would learn more about the episode that sent visions of an "Anne Frank type ordeal" through his mind. At the time, young Woody's chief concerns were not so much the content of the letters as the envelopes in which they arrived. He recalls paying the most attention to the foreign stamps and how "weird" they looked.

Collecting stamps was one of a few pastimes Woody and his dad shared. Clarence led Woody's Cub Scout troops, too, when he wasn't taking his kids to school, building swing sets, throwing baseballs, fishing for 6-inch brim in Lake Ouachita and leading Sunday family outings to the Little Maumelle Creek. About the most exciting thing he did in those days was drag racing and blowing up cans and bottles with a .22 rifle (though Clarence might not have even been the best shot in the bunch). "Apparently, my mother was right up there with Annie Oakley," recalls Jenny Scroggin, Woody's younger sister.

Clarence toiled around town in a navy-blue Fiat 600 he'd bought as a homage to the Italians, but by and large, his connections to the war weren't so visible. A German Luger pistol, later lost, and pieces of his parachute and ripcord, were kept in the attic. The map he'd carried through Italy, a green line marking his route from crash site to freedom, Woody didn't find till many years later. Though his family was aware of the broader strokes of Clarence's time at war, the full story wouldn't be known until after his death from colon cancer at 35.

On Christmas Day 1960, nearly 16 months after Clarence's death, Woody, Jenny and their brother, Christopher, found identical packages left for them under the tree. Unwrapping his, Woody saw a picture of his father's P-47 and a photo of his dad as a serviceman. The travelogue escape memoir, it turned out, was a project that his grandfather, Ray Atherton, and father had worked on during late-night sessions at Atherton's house in Washington, D.C.

On the first page, they found a note from their grandfather. It read:

To: Woody, Chris and Jennifer Lee

Within these covers are assembled bits of information concerning a fine young American who accomplished much during his short lifetime. Here, in his own words, is his account of one of the most revealing of his experiences.

He was your father. It is your Grandfather's earnest hope that each of you will find in your Father's story a source of pride, inspiration and incentive always to be worthy children of so fine a man.

Ray G. Atherton
August 29, 1960

It took a while for Woody and his siblings to read it all. Over the course of those 26 typewritten pages, they would learn that Clarence had slipped out of Metti just in time because the day after his escape, the Germans had set up their command post in the church. That he bloodied his hands and scuffed his knees crawling up and down icy slopes. That the escape ended near the coastal town of Massa, at the central-Italy base from which Clarence had begun his mission 43 days before.

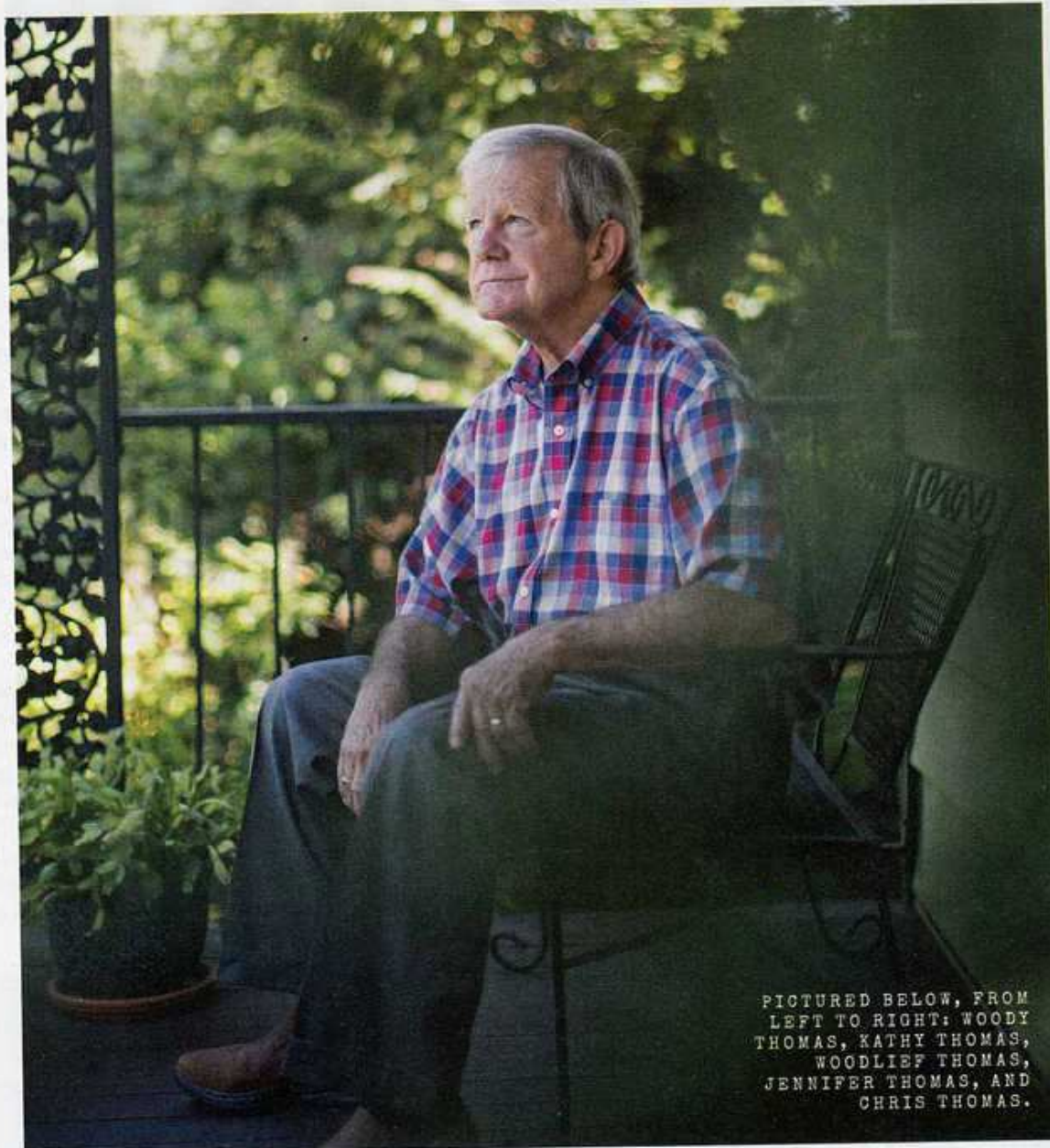
As the years rolled on, this account became a way not only for Clarence's children to better understand his experiences, but also his grandchildren, who never met him.

Decades later, they would learn something else: There was still more to the story.

March 4, 2013

SONCINO, ITALY

AN ITALIAN RESEARCHER named Augustino Alberti sat in his office drafting an email to Woodlief Thomas Sr., a man he only knew by name. For nearly a decade, Augustino had been working with a group of Italians researching about 200 crash sites in the Po Valley from the end of World War II. Augustino's 9-year-old organization, Air Crash Po, had worked in regions across northwestern Italy and communicated directly with a



PICTURED BELOW, FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: WOODY THOMAS, KATHY THOMAS, WOODLIEF THOMAS, JENNIFER THOMAS, AND CHRIS THOMAS.



dozen of the American bombers and fighter pilots who had fought in Italy.

On Augustino's screen were details about a plane that an 85-year-old man named Antonio Bergonzi had recalled going down in the winter of 1945. One day, while just off his mining shift in nearby Montechino, Antonio recalled feeling the impact of the plane hitting the ground. He saw a long flame rising to the sky. By the time he got to the site, the American pilot was gone.

Antonio passed this story down to his nephew, Pierlino Bergonzi, a helicopter pilot in the Italian army. When he retired, Pierlino and some of his comrades helped found the Fallen Air Researchers Group to investigate WWII-era crashes around that part of Italy. "We started looking for the remains of all those planes that we heard about from the very beginning in the stories told by our parents," Pierlino says.

In 2011, the group took a team out to the area where Antonio remembered the crash occurring. There, they met local Pierino Casaliggi, who took them to the exact spot where he recalled the plane crashing.

The Italian researchers trekked over the grass with metal detectors. They recovered metal pieces of the plane, although most of its remains were gone. In the aftermath of the crash, poor peasants scavenged pieces they could use at home. Wings became pot lids; engine parts became hoes. The researchers found remnants, which provided the evidence needed to connect the dots with the record of a crash that had been in a military database for years. The pilot of that plane, who had not yet been found, was Clarence Thomas.

By early 2013, there was still some cross-checking to be done to distinguish Thomas' plane from another crashed plane just a few kilometers away, but Alberti was certain enough to reach out to Woodlief to tell him that his father's crash site had likely been discovered.

Before pressing "send," Alberti titled his email "Research around Lt. Thomas."

"OUR FATHERS

FOUGHT TOGETHER TO
DESTROY NAZI FASCISM,
AND THIS IS AN INDISSOLUBLE BOND,
WHICH MAKES US FRIENDS
AND
BROTHERS FOREVER."



March 2013

GAMMACK VILLAGE, ARKANSAS

NOT LONG AFTERWARD, Woody clicked on the message that popped into his inbox. He read details about the exhaustive research the Italians had conducted in corroborating the identity of fallen pilots, then tracking down their descendants.

The email wasn't a total surprise. He already knew about the researchers through a relative who'd done family genealogy work. He wondered who these Italians were and what kinds of lives they led as they quested to recover the past. The email also awakened a dormant dream of Woody's.

He had long harbored the desire to visit Italy to walk in his father's footsteps, yet the vision was only fleeting. "It was really in the back of my mind to get over there," he recalled. "I just didn't deem it really feasible." Between family and his accounting career, there never seemed to be enough time and money to make the trip happen.

But that didn't stop him from sharing the researchers' news with his sons. They were also familiar with their grandfather through Woody's

memories and the escape account.

Woody's eldest son, Woodlief Jr., who goes by Woodlief, was especially drawn to Clarence's story.

A worldwide traveler himself, Woodlief loved the adventurous qualities of his grandfather. He got a thigh tattoo of the P-47 Thunderbolt Clarence had flown with the words "Appetite for destruction" around it and considered buying the downtown house in which Clarence had grown up when Woodlief moved back to Little Rock from New Orleans to teach English at Mills High School.

He even shared his imagined vignettes of his grandfather with his students in the form of an essay he wrote.

Woodlief knew how much a trip to Italy would mean to his father, even if Woody didn't openly pine for it. Years before, Woodlief had already convinced his whole family to go on a vacation to northeast Africa, and after hearing about the researchers, he felt like he just had to figure out a way to get his dad to Italy. "It was obvious how Pops felt a bit of a hole in his life since Clarence died," Woodlief said. "I thought maybe this [trip] would be a way to somehow fill that up."

He also knew that his dad would likely never spring for such a venture on his own. Fortunately, debt gave Woodlief the chance to hatch a plan.

Starting in summer 2017, Woodlief took a year off from teaching English to work on a novel, and his parents had lent

CONTINUED ON PAGE 142

Our doctors listen with their
Hearts not Stethoscopes



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Medical Director
Adult and Geriatric Psychiatry



Tyler Bayles, M.D.
Adult Psychiatry and
Substance Abuse Disorders



Robert Jarvis, M.D.
Adult Psychiatry



George Komin, M.D.
Adult Substance Abuse
Disorders



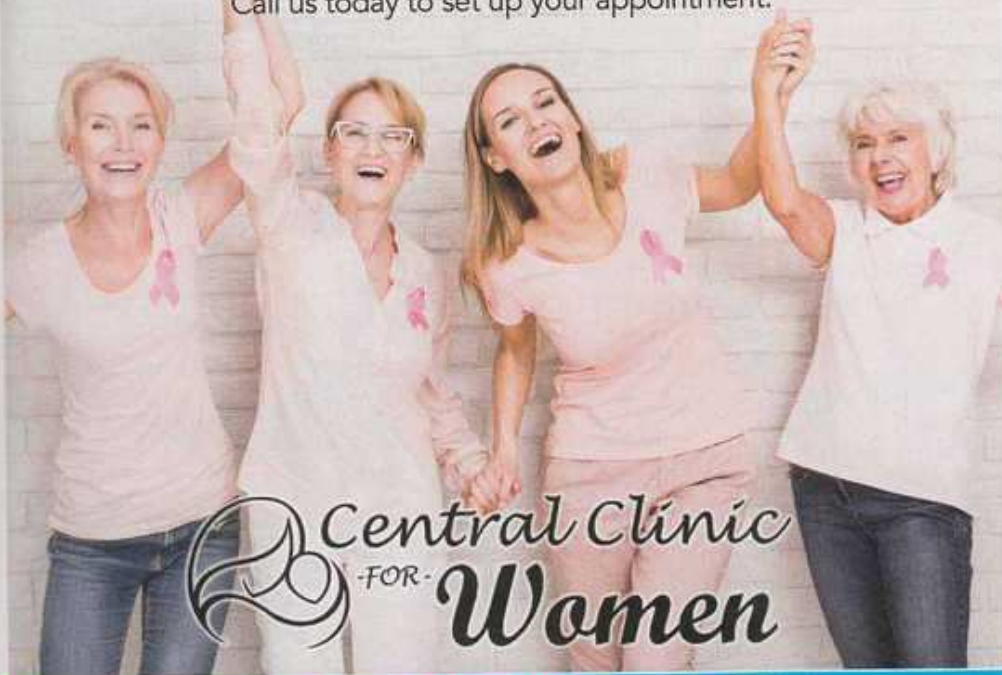
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him a few thousand dollars to help buy a truck. Instead of paying them back in cash, why not reimburse them with the trip of a lifetime?

So Woodlief made the purchases. He chose to share the news on Christmas morning 2017. As usual, the Thomases gathered at Woody and Kathy's home in Cammack Village, a municipality within Little Rock. First, Woodlief presented his mom with a travel book about Florence, Italy, and gave his dad a book about the Republic P-47 Thunderbolt fighters like Clarence flew. They had no idea what was coming next, though.

As the family finished opening presents, he took his father into the kitchen. At the table, he presented him an envelope. Woody opened it, unfolding the piece of copy paper to see his son's typed message. Woodlief had bought him and Cathy a summer package trip to Rome, Venice and Florence. Woodlief laid out the plan for his dad: "While you're in Florence, I'm going to meet y'all, and we're going to head over to the site." Woodlief's younger brother, Chris, stood nearby, watching. "The waterworks definitely came on for my dad," he recalled.

"It was an emotional moment, for sure."

July 19, 2018

RIGLIO VALLEY

THE PASSION OF Pierino Cassaligi is something to behold.

With wildly flailing hands, he indicates to Woody and his family where one of the P-47's bombs had dropped, where the plane fell to the Earth, and where Clarence had floated down in his parachute to a nearby field. Then there's the kicker: As a little boy, Pierino was actually part of the local greeting party for Clarence after he was found by the partisans, Woody recalls him saying through the translation.

The narration is deeply moving. "I felt like I was connecting back 70, 75 years prior. It was surreal," Woodlief says. "He was describing this event pertaining to this man I had heard so much about but had never actually met."

The flashbacks don't end there. On this trip, Woody learns details about the father of Pierlino Bergonzi, who serves as a de facto tour guide for the Thomases in this part of Italy. "When I shook hands with Woodlief [Sr.] for the first time, it seemed like I had always known him," Pierlino recalls. "Our fathers fought together to destroy Nazi Fascism, and this is an indissoluble bond, which makes us friends and brothers forever."

Pierlino's father had been a partisan in World War II who passed down many stories of the Americans he met. In one, he mentioned a pilot allied with the partisans that he'd briefly met in January 1945. Only later, years after his dad's death in 2002, did Pierlino realize that pilot must have been Clarence.

After Pierlino Cassaligi finishes his stories, there's work that needs to be done. The Thomases begin taking turns scanning the ground with metal detectors, looking for remains of Clarence's bomber. They sweep the detectors through the valley's grass, closer to the stream where the plane's hull smoldered.

They meet some success. Woody retrieves a deformed bullet, which he'll keep with the map and faded parachute pieces. His son Chris finds a piece of metal he'll put on the mantel of his home.

As the sun sets, the Thomases get back on the road to return to Florence. "There was almost this release," Chris says. "As we were driving back, it just felt like normal family travel." He adds: "There was an afterglow of the experience but not something we necessarily articulated."

In the following weeks, feature stories come out about the Thomases' trip in a local Italian newspaper and on TV. As much as Clarence Thomas had meticulously documented his own path through Italy, so had Italian media chronicled the visit of his descendants.

Woody doesn't go so far as to call the experience "cathartic," but his sons say they have noticed a difference in him. Before the trip, Woody was more likely to get misty-eyed and choke up within a short span of time when talking about his father. That's not so much the case anymore. Now he can make it longer talking about the man he's missed for decades.

There will be, perhaps, more chapters. Woodlief wants to return to Italy, this time with his wife and children. Chris has similar ambitions. In the summer of 2018, Chris' wife, Jennifer Thomas, was pregnant with their little girl, born this past winter. Chris imagines taking Evelyn to Metti, to walk into the church where the fate of Clarence's future family once hung in the balance. If the stars align, they may even meet relatives of the priest who protected Clarence.

Such a trip would be the perfect time to share the tale of two journeys—one starting in the Po Valley, another ending there. ♥

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