

In search of Hemingway's great war



Ernest Hemingway possessions, his dogtags, WW II war correspondents credential, hunting bullets and compass. At JFK Library. Photo by Tom Herde/The Boston Globe via Getty Images

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“I’m an old Veneto boy...”

—Ernest Hemingway

Around midnight of July 8, 1918, a Red Cross volunteer from the American Midwest was badly injured on the Italian front, just a few yards from the Piave River. Despite multiple shrapnel wounds, the young man still managed to hoist an

Italian soldier on his shoulders and carry him to safety before being hit in the knee by machine-gun fire and collapsing. Ernest Hemingway was two weeks short of his 19th birthday.

That night changed Hemingway’s life, launched his literary career, and may have contributed to his eventual suicide. It also prompted a lifelong love affair with the Veneto region of Italy. As he wrote to his sister Marceline after returning to the United States, “Sometimes I think we only half live over here. The Italians live all the way.”¹

Itching to get in the game

Hemingway arrived in Italy in June 1918. Athletic and gifted with words, he played sports in high school, edited the school paper, and worked as a cub reporter for *The Kansas City Star*. But he was itching for action, and had come to see the war in Europe as “something like a football game,”² where he could get to play for the home team.



Ernest Hemingway in Milan 1918.
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He tried to enlist but was rejected because of poor eyesight. He didn't give up, and told his sister, "I can't let a show like this go on without getting in on it. There hasn't been a real war to go to since Grandfather Hemingway's shooting at the battle of Bull Run."³

He eventually resigned himself to joining the American Red Cross and was deployed to the Italian front. His war would last only a month.

Hemingway's first assignment was as an ambulance driver in Schio, but after only two weeks he found it boring. Wishing to get even closer to the front he wrote a friend, "I'm going to get out of this ambulance section and see if I can't find out where the war is."⁴ He then volunteered for the Red Cross Bicycling Canteen Service, which delivered cigarettes, chocolate and coffee to Italian troops at the frontline. That's how he found himself in Fossalta di Piave during the aftermath of the Battle of the Solstice. It was there, on the shores of the Piave River, that Hemingway was hit by a mortar shell and knocked unconscious. As he later described it, he felt his soul leave his body, "like you'd pull a silk handkerchief out of a pocket by one corner. It flew all around and then came back and went in again and I wasn't dead anymore."⁵

That brush with death shattered Hemingway's "illusion of immortality,"⁶ but also earned him the Italian Silver Medal of Bravery for "...rendering generous assistance to the Italian soldiers more seriously wounded by the same explosion, and not allowing himself to be carried to safety until they had all been evacuated."²

His injury also led him to meet Agnes von Kurowsky, a 26-year-old American nurse who became Hemingway's first great love. It also provided him with material for "A Farewell to Arms," whose success not only made him financially independent, but also launched a wandering career in journalism that took him to Paris, the Spanish Civil War, World War II, Africa, Cuba, Key West, and ultimately the Nobel Prize.

Through it all, Hemingway never forgot Italy. As he wrote in 1920, "the Wopland gets in the blood and kind of ruins you for anything else."⁷

Retracing Hemingway's footsteps in Italy

Fossalta is a small town of 4,000 people, half-an-hour from Venice Marco Polo Airport. The road follows a 15th century canal that once served as both a commercial route and waterway to divert silt from Venice's lagoon. A hardware store at the edge of town sits on a street named Via Kennedy, with photographs of the devastations inflicted by the war.

We parked alongside the village green on the main road, (Strada Provinciale 48, Noventa-Roncade), where North African immigrants sat alongside elderly Italian women in the heat of the morning. We stopped briefly for a *granita di limone* in the café across the street. When asked about Hemingway's wounding the waitress seemed befuddled, but two local customers were eager to step in and gave us detailed instructions of where to go.

The town has created a self-guided and well-marked 11 km looping tour of the various sites surrounding the events of July 8, 1918. It includes 19 signposts, with pictures from the war, plus detailed descriptions in four languages. A website provides downloadable maps and MP3 commentaries, but only in Italian (<http://www.laguerradihemingway.it/percorso.html>).

To complete the loop you can drive or rent a bicycle at Cicli Punto Bike (Via XXIII Giugno, 65). Roads are minimally trafficked, and some are not even paved. Nonetheless, the best way to reach Hemingway's wounding site is on foot.

From the Fossalta church (Stop 1), walk toward the river following Via Ragazzi del '99—a reference to the Italian kids who like Hemingway were born in 1899 and fought bravely along



Retracing Hemingway's footsteps on the night of July 8, 1918. (modified from Google Maps)



Commemorative steel plaque on the Piave embankment. (Photo by the authors)

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the Piave. After 400 yards, there is a small memorial chapel (Stop 2). At its front stands a dark steel plaque inscribed with words Hemingway wrote in 1950, "*Sono un ragazzo del Basso Piave*" (I'm a Lower Piave boy).⁸

From this vantage point, the Piave river is below. On the riverbank, to the right, there is a green pontoon bridge. Walk to the left, and in 200 yards, there is a bend in the river called, "*El Buso del Buratto*" the butt of the mario-nette (Stop 3). This marks the site of Hemingway's wounding. It seems serene, but in 1918 it separated Austrian and Italian lines.

Overlooking the bend sits "the yellow house" that Hemingway saw the night of the attack (Stop 4), and that returned to haunt him in multiple flashbacks.⁹ It is not yellow, and never was, but appeared so under Austrian flares.

On the night of his wounding Hemingway had biked to the river from Casa Botter, the 15th century villa that served as headquarters for the American Red Cross Bicycling Canteen Service. The building still stands four miles west of Fossalta (Via Castelletto 16, Botter di Treviso). Hemingway probably abandoned his bicycle just before the Piave, walking the 200 yards to the forward post where he started to distribute provisions while unwisely standing upright. Then the Austrian shell exploded.

As he wrote later, "There was a flash, as a blast-furnace door is swung open, and a roar that started white and went red and on and on in a rushing wind. I tried to breathe but my breath would not come and I felt myself rush bodily out of myself and out and out and out and all the time bodily in the wind...I knew I was dead..."¹⁰

Hemingway had been lucky enough to be shielded by two Italian soldiers who succumbed to the blast. Without them he would have died at 19 and we would have missed one of the greatest writers of the century.

Hemingway was brought by stretcher to a first aid post a mile away, in the mayor's house near the small cemetery of Fossalta.

The Fossalta cemetery

In the Fossalta cemetery there is the tombstone of a family that lost six sons in WWI, but whose mother appeared to have lived to the venerable age of 99. Yet, there were no soldiers' tombs.

In the 1930s, the remains of all the Italians killed on the Lower Piave were moved to the military shrine of *Fagarè della Battaglia*, six miles northwest along the river. Road signs admonish respect for those who "made the ultimate sacrifice." Inside lie more than 5,000 unknown Italian soldiers, and a beehive of carved marble vaults marks the

resting place of the 5,191 identified Italian dead. Among them is one American, the first U.S. casualty on the Italian front.

Edward McKey was a 40-year-old portrait artist from the Midwest, who was killed in Fossalta three weeks before Hemingway got wounded. His last words were, "How splendidly the Italians are fighting!"¹¹ He had actually hoped to retire to Florence. Instead, he rests in Fagarè, near this poem by Hemingway, his fellow Red Cross volunteer:

Killed, Piave, June 18
Desire and
All the sweet pulsing aches
And gentle hurtings
That were you,
Are gone into the sullen dark.
Now in the night you come unsmiling
To lie with me
A dull, cold, rigid bayonet
On my hot-swollen, throbbing soul.

Nearby there is some famous 1917 graffiti, once attributed to Italian villagers but then found to have been written by an Italian army propaganda agent during the Battle of the Solstice: "*Tutti eroi! O il Piave o tutti accoppati*" ("We are all either heroes on the Piave or we are all dead.")

A long road to travel

After receiving first aid in Fossalta, Hemingway was carried under Austrian fire to a roofless cowshed two miles away. It was called Casa Gorghetto, and served as a dressing station. Today it's a winery named Cantina de



Casa Gorghetto in Fossalta where Hemingway spent the night when he was wounded. Today it's a winery named *Cantina de Stefani*, which displays a commemorative plaque. (Photo by the authors)

Stefani, that offers Hemingway tours and displays a commemorative plaque (Via Cadorna 92, Fossalta).

Moribund and given up for dead, Hemingway spent the night there, soaked in his own blood and tormented by 200 pieces of shrapnel. He even considered shooting himself. As he wrote later, there were so many dead and dying that death seemed a more natural state than life. “Dying,” he commented to his parents, “is a very simple thing.”⁷

The following morning he was taken four miles further to a conscripted schoolhouse in Fornaci, which no longer stands. There, he finally received morphine and anti-tetanus injections, but no antibiotics as they had not yet been discovered. Surgeons were able to remove 28 pieces of shrapnel, and a young Italian priest administered last rites. He may even have baptized Hemingway as a Catholic.

The day after, with doctors still debating whether to amputate his leg, Hemingway was moved by FIAT ambulance to a larger field hospital 10 miles away in Casier, in a conscripted villa near the river Sile. It was a tough ride and Hemingway vomited, yet Villa Toso was the best hospital in the area. It was run by volunteers from the tiny republic of San Marino, and doctors were able to remove more shrapnel. Hemingway spent five days there. As he wrote later, “The doctors were working with their sleeves up to their shoulders and were as red as butchers...there were not enough stretchers.”¹⁰

Today, the building is still beautifully maintained and privately owned (Via Giuseppe Verdi 1, Casier). Except for the addition of a central tower it appears unchanged since 1918, with open gates, a well-tended drive, and not a soul in sight. On the nearby river swans float over the copper-green water and a bike trail follows the riverside.

Finally, a week after being wounded, Hemingway was taken by train to the newly established American Red Cross Hospital of Milan, 180 miles away. The trip took two days.

In Milan, Hemingway underwent more surgery, received physiotherapy, and met von Kurowsky, the young nurse who became the inspiration for Catherine Barkley in “A Farewell to Arms.” The elegant *fin-de-siècle* building that housed the American hospital on its upper floors still stands between Via Armorari and Via Cantu.

Hemingway’s lengthy ordeal was unusual for this war. When Italy entered WWI in 1915 its armed forces relied on 126 dressing stations of 50 beds each; 84 small field hospital of 100 beds; and 42 larger field hospitals of 200 beds each. The Italians also had 28 base hospitals near the front, plus a fleet of 108 motorized ambulances.¹² Conversely, by



The former American Red Cross Hospital of Milan where Hemingway recovered. The plaque says, “In the summer of 1918, this building housed the American Red Cross Hospital where Ernest Hemingway, wounded on the Piave front, was welcomed and treated. And so it was born the true tale of ‘A Farewell to Arms.’” (Photo by the authors)

1915 the British Expeditionary Force in France alone had 44 large casualty clearing stations (CCS) of around 500 beds each; 13 British Red Cross Society hospitals; plus 64 general and stationary hospitals that served as base in the rear and could easily accommodate 1,000 beds.¹³

A typical path to treatment in Flanders took less than a day. A good example is William Osler’s son, Revere, who was wounded at his artillery post in Hindenburg Farm, near Ypres, around 5 p.m., August 29, 1917. He was quickly brought to the advanced dressing station of Essex Farm (the same post where John McCrae had written “In Flanders Fields”), and by 7 p.m. he had already reached the CCS of Dozinghem. Three hours later, Harvey Cushing was awakened in the nearby CCS of Mendighem, and drove through a storm to be part of the surgical team. George Washington Crile, who later founded the Cleveland Clinic, was called at his CCS of Remy Sidings and also drove to Dozinghem to help with transfusions. Surgery started at midnight, only seven hours after Revere’s wounding.¹⁴

In comparison, Hemingway’s transit took two full days to reach the CCS of Villa Toso, and a total of 10 days to reach the base hospital in Milan.

Yet, Hemingway survived while Osler did not. In fact, Hemingway became a celebrity: the first wounded American on the Italian front.

Back in the U.S.A.

During the ensuing months Hemingway slowly recovered, fell in love and was rejected, and ultimately emerged from the experience a different man. He had arrived in Italy as a boy, and returned to the U.S. a traumatized war survivor—full of flashbacks and stories to tell, but also riveted by the country that defined his adult character. His love



Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961) american novelist here during his convalescence in Milan, Italy (American Red Cross Hospital) in 1918. (Photo by Apic/Getty Images)

for Italy lasted a lifetime. As he wrote to a friend in March 1919, "I'm so homesick for Italy that when I write about it, it has that something ...that you only get in a love letter."⁷ Thirty years later he added, "[Italy is] like having died and gone to Heaven, a place you'd figured never to see."¹⁵

Italy colored Hemingway's romantic life too. In 1922 he brought his first wife, Hadley, to Fossalta, and then returned with her in 1923 on a skiing trip. The two had originally planned to move to Italy, but ultimately settled for Paris. Hemingway went back to Italy in 1927, visiting shrines as repentance for divorcing Hadley, but also looking for the priest who had allegedly baptized him in Fossalta, so that he and his second wife, Pauline, could get married in a Catholic ceremony.

Martha Gellhorn, Hemingway's third wife and famous war correspondent, wrote him before their split, "I wish we could stop it all now, the prestige, the possessions, the position, the knowledge, the victory. And by a miracle, return together under the arch at Milan, you so brash in your motorcycle sidecar and I, badly dressed, fierce, loving..."¹⁶

In 1948-1949 Hemingway went back to Venice with his fourth wife, Mary. He found the city "absolutely god-damned wonderful."² He contemplated retiring there and later wrote, "No one is ever old in Venice, but they grow up very fast. I grew up very rapidly in the Veneto myself, and I was never old as I was at twenty-one."⁸

He revisited the Piave shore where he had been wounded 30 years before, dug a hole in the sand and planted a 1,000 lire note to signify that he had left blood and money on Italian soil.² He also became infatuated with a 19-year-old Venetian aristocrat, who provided the inspiration for his last major novel, "Across the River and into the Trees"; and whom he called his "last and true and only love."⁸

Hemingway returned to Venice in 1950, and again in 1954, after a plane crash in Africa had fractured his skull and impaired his vision. It was his last visit.

Yet, the night before he died, his thoughts returned to the Veneto region of his youth. He and his wife sang a tune Hemingway had learned during the war.⁷ The following morning, six days short of the anniversary of his WWI wounding, Ernest Hemingway killed himself.

Steady decline

Scholars have postulated a bipolar disorder, but it may have actually been chronic traumatic encephalopathy.¹⁸ Following the 1918 concussion in Fossalta, Hemingway suffered at least eight more head traumas. Particularly devastating was the plane crash of 1954, which gave Hemingway a skull fracture, transient loss of vision and hearing on the left, and a persistent cerebrospinal fluid leak that soaked his pillow. His son Patrick and various friends commented that after that accident he was never the same.

Hemingway became painfully aware of his decline. In a letter to Bernard Berenson he wrote, "...due to the cerebral thing I say terrible things and hear myself say them. It is no good."¹⁹

He underwent multiple hospitalizations and two rounds of electroconvulsive therapy, but gained little benefit. Eventually, totally unable to write and pained by the thought of what might have come next, Hemingway decided to act upon it. Many saw his suicide as an act of defeat, but it might have been the last expression of his own definition of courage: grace under pressure.

Nearly 100 years ago—on December 22, 1921—Hemingway went back to Europe for what would be a seven-year stint in Paris that established his literary reputation. Yet, it was the earlier time in Italy that really formed him. Twelve years before taking his life he wrote, "I'm an old Veneto boy myself,"⁷ and there is no doubt that being a boy of the Lower Piave was an experience that stayed with him until the end. It defined him as a person, a writer, and possibly as a posthumous casualty of WWI.

When visiting Italy

Don't forget to visit other favorite Hemingway sites of the Veneto. Schio and Bassano are two small mountain



Marionette of Ernest Hemingway. As created by Roberto Comin, Venice, Italy, for Dr. Salvatore Mangione. Photo by author

towns that housed American Red Cross volunteers during WWI. Schio, which Hemingway called “one of the finest places on Earth,”²⁰ had a fleet of 23 ambulances, including six small Fords inscribed with the words, “Donated by the American Poets.”²¹ There, Hemingway met fellow ambulance driver John Dos Passos.⁴ Cortina d’Ampezzo, “The Queen of the Dolomites,” would become Hemingway’s favorite skiing resort during the 1948-1950 trips.

Then there is Venice, which Hemingway described as, “...an excellent game. It is a sort of solitaire ambulante, and what you win is the happiness of your eye and heart.”⁸

Make sure to visit the Rialto market, which Hemingway loved; Hotel Gritti, that still offers a Hemingway Suite and a Hemingway menu; Harry’s Bar in San Marco popularized by Hemingway and home of the Bellini and Carpaccio; and Locanda Cipriani, on the ancient island of Torcello, where Hemingway worked on his last novel, drank Amarone wine, and shot ducks in the lagoon.^{2,15}

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