
Massacre at Schio

By Master Sergeant Patrick V. Garland (Retired)

As a young U.S. Army Criminal Investigation Command (USACIDC) (commonly referred to as the “CID”) agent, I often wondered about the history of the organization and the men and women who laid the groundwork. I wanted to know why the CID was considered by many to be a premier investigative organization, with a rate of solving crimes that was far superior to other agencies.

This case of the Massacre at Schio caught my attention because it is unique in our history. The crime in this case was not committed by or against members of the U.S. military, nor was it investigated by an “old hand.” Or—at least Special Agent John Valentino had no police experience prior to being drafted and did not pursue that career field after leaving the service. However, based on the thoroughness of his reports and the attention to detail in his interviews, Valentino proved to be a very capable investigator.

During World War II, Italy was aligned with Germany and was, therefore, an enemy of the Allies. However, many Italians did not support the Fascist regime of their leader, Benito Mussolini. During the latter years of World War II, there were two very different governments trying to rule Italy; pro-Allied partisan groups were actively damaging the war machines of their own country and those of Germany.

In the absence of an effective government, the Allied armies occupying Italy (namely, the British and American armies) were responsible for maintaining order. The country was filled with ex-soldiers of the previously dissolved Fascist army. However, within the Fifth U.S. Army zone of occupation in northern Italy, partisans were exceptionally active and had, in many cases, set up their own governments. At the end of the war in 1945, many of the Fascist supporters were arrested and imprisoned.

Every effort was made to restore government operations in Italy, but abuses occurred. There was sectarian violence between loyalist partisans and the Fascists, whom they felt were responsible for Italy’s dilemma. Military authorities were advised of militant activity in the mountainous areas of northern Italy. According to one memo, “It has been reported that a band of Fascists are living on Monte Enna and thereabouts. Reports have come in that they have stolen food, etc. from lonely farms in the vicinity.” The same memo indicated that “It has come to the knowledge of this office that the Office of Requisition (Italian) is alleged to have sold war materials.”¹ These materials made their way into the hands of rebellious groups. Frequent battles took

place between the partisans and their Fascist enemies, with brutality occurring on both sides.

During the evening hours of 6 July 1945, a band of masked gunmen forced their way into the Mandamentale Jail in Schio and murdered 54 inmates (including women) who were thought to be Fascists. The provost marshal of the Fifth U.S. Army Headquarters directed the CID to investigate the incident. Captain Walter J. Haley, the chief CID agent of the Fifth U.S. Army Headquarters, assigned the case to Special Agents Theron A. “Jack” Snyder and John Valentino.²

Valentino was drafted into the Army in 1943; and because of his proficiency with the Italian language, was trained as an interrogator at the Intelligence School, Fort Ritchie, Maryland. However, by the time he arrived in Italy, the war was winding down and he was assigned as an agent in the CID, Provost Marshal’s Office, Fifth U.S. Army Headquarters.

Special Agents Snyder and Valentino began their investigation on 12 July. They interviewed dozens of prisoners—some multiple times—to get to the truth. While Agent Snyder (who was dark-complected with black hair) looked like an Italian, it was the light-skinned, blond-haired Valentino who had been born in Italy and was fluent in the Italian language. This proved to be beneficial when unsuspecting prisoners who were not aware of Valentino’s background discussed matters in their native tongue while Valentino stood nearby.³ Several witnesses were actually sympathetic to the perpetrators, many of whom were performing police duties.

Hindered by a lack of cooperation from Italian authorities, the two agents went about their mission of interviewing witnesses, conducting raids to arrest suspects, and then interrogating them. The subjects of the investigation stated that they were following orders by killing the Fascists, who were detested.

Through the investigation, it was determined that the masked invaders had accosted the chief jailer; and after he was threatened with bodily harm, he surrendered the keys to the prison. Once inside, the armed intruders cut the telephone lines, brought in more men (for a total of 12), and began segregating the 85 Fascists from ordinary prisoners. The Fascists were placed in cells on the ground floor and in one cell on an upper level. The women and eight male prisoners were placed in the upper-level cell, with the men being ordered to stand in front.

After midnight on 7 July, the intruders lined the prisoners up at one end of the cells. Using a variety of firearms, including automatic weapons, the intruders gunned down the unarmed inmates. As if by some signal, the firing simultaneously started on both levels of the prison and lasted for several minutes. According to witnesses, in each case, five shooters knelt in a firing position and shot into the group of prisoners. In a couple of instances, single shots were heard when a wounded prisoner uttered a moaning sound. Shortly thereafter, the shooters left the prison. Surprisingly, several of the prisoners survived the attack and later testified against their assailants.

Prisoners who were not wounded exited the cells, which had been left unsecured by the assailants. They then released the guards and prison staff who had been locked away, and help was summoned. The scene was photographed, and the wounded were transported to hospitals. Of the 85 prisoners segregated by the attackers, 54 were killed and 8 were seriously wounded. Fifteen of those slain were women, ranging in age from 18 to 74 years.

During the 2-month investigation, 108 suspects were apprehended and interrogated. Of these, eight were charged with the shootings and seven were tried by military tribunal. Many others were identified but not apprehended; several of these fled to Yugoslavia.

During the trial, each of the defendants reiterated that they had been following orders when they attacked the prison or that they had no prior knowledge of what

was to happen. One related, "I went downstairs because I did not have the courage to shoot."⁴ After deliberations, three of the accused were sentenced to death, two received sentences of life imprisonment, and two were acquitted. The case was reviewed by Colonel John K. Weber, chief legal advisor to the chief civil affairs officer of the Allied Military Government for Occupied Territories, at which time the death sentences were commuted to life imprisonment. All other sentences were affirmed.

Rear Admiral Ellery W. Stone, chief commissioner of the Allied Commission for Italy, wrote to the Italian prime minister, stating, "I enclose herewith a copy of my opinion on the Schio Massacre case in which, for the reasons stated therein, I have commuted the three death sentences imposed to imprisonment for life. Because of the brutal and shocking nature of this crime, the Italian government is requested to grant no further general or individual amnesty to these prisoners."⁵

Special Agent Valentino was reassigned to Florence, Italy, after the investigation and trial. In November 1945, he was discharged from military service and sent home.⁶

Additional information about the Massacre at Schio can be found at <http://www.larchivio.org/xoom/schio.htm>.

Endnotes:

¹Weekly report, Allied Military Government (Schio), 18 July 1945.

²Report of Investigation 5A, CID Case 151, 30 August 1945.

³Personal communications with Mr. John Valentino, June 2009.

⁴Transcript of military tribunal, undated.

⁵Letter from Rear Admiral Stone to the president of the Council of Ministers, 21 December 1945.

⁶Personal communications with Mr. John Valentino, June 2009.

Master Sergeant Garland retired from the U.S. Army in 1974. During his military career, he served in military police units and criminal investigation detachments and laboratories. At the time of his retirement, Master Sergeant Garland was serving as a ballistics evidence specialist at the European Laboratory. He remained in this career field until retiring from civilian law enforcement in 1995.