

73 Years in the Making

After holding it in safekeeping since WWII, Luca resident finally able to return pilot's ring with help from VFW

Oct 11, 2016

MAROSTICA, Italy – Egidio Girardi of San Luca was about 10 years old on Christmas Eve 1943 when he and his brother saw an American airplane crash near their home in the mountains of northern Italy. The young men rushed to find the plane and found U.S. Army Air Corps Pilot 2nd Lt. Jules J. Hymel dangling by his parachute in a chestnut tree. The World War II pilot was injured.

Girardi's brother Giuseppe, about 20 years old at the time, helped get the pilot out of his parachute and carried Hymel on his shoulders to the safety of their home.

There, the family gave Hymel food and drink and tried to attend to his wounds. Because he needed more treatment than the family could provide, local partisans took the pilot to a local hospital where, despite efforts to camouflage his identity as an American, he was eventually taken by the German military, who occupied the area at the time.

Today, at age 84, Egidio shares this information with as much detail as he can remember because Hymel's story isn't quite finished. Although the San Luca resident acknowledges that story details may differ slightly because his memory is not what it used to be, he is very clear on one thing: he has been the custodian of Hymel's pilot ring for 73 years and would

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like it returned to its rightful owner.

How the ring came about is shrouded in some of those aforementioned murky details—one version is that the pilot gave the ring to the boys’ father with a request that he put it in safekeeping, and the other version is that it had fallen on the floor of the Girardi home during Hymel’s stay and found by the family after his departure.

“My father always told me that the ring should stay in the family and was to be passed along to the youngest child, which was me,” said Girardi through a translator in September.

Regardless of which version of the story is true, the ring is still in Girardi’s possession. Therein comes today’s part of the story. The ring is finally about to be returned to the Hymel family.

Michael Tougaw, a Department of the Army civilian who works for U.S. Army Garrison Italy and a Veterans of Foreign Wars life member, had no idea that he was about to become immersed in this piece of World War II history when he received a phone call a few months ago from an Italian friend.

“My friend Luca Moro explained that a gentleman had this ring and wanted to give it back to the rightful owner,” said Tougaw. “(Luca) knew I was involved with the VFW so he asked me to help.”

After speaking with Girardi, Tougaw said he was impressed by the honorable family.

“I thought, ‘Wow. Here is a family with 11 children during the war, and they went through the reconstruction of Italy and all of these hard times, and the ring was still with them.’ Egidio put it well when he said, ‘The ring wasn’t ours, we were just holding it for him.’

“Anyone who has served in the military knows the importance of personal effects of comrades and what they mean to a family,” Tougaw added. “It was my duty to see this through.”

Seeing it through is just what he’s done. Trying to track down more information and come up with a solution to return the ring, Tougaw enlisted the aid of Vicenza’s VFW Post 8862 members. Alessandro Maroso, president of the Associazione Ricercatori e Amici della Storia (Association of Researchers and Friends of History) in Marostica became involved about four years ago when researching the history of the downed plane in the area. At the time, he discovered Girardi had the pilot’s ring. Girardi asked for assistance in trying to get the ring back through official channels, suggesting that the U.S. embassy might be able to help.

After numerous attempts to find the owner, the quest took on momentum when the VFW got involved. As coincidence would have it, VFW Commander-in-Chief Brian J. Duffy was scheduled to visit Vicenza and agreed to help.

Girardi said his desire was to return the ring to Hymel face-to-face, but he learned it wasn’t possible because the pilot died at age 67, according to his son LeDaine Hymel. Instead, Duffy will return the ring to Hymel’s family in Louisiana during an upcoming visit.

On Oct. 14, Girardi will turn over the ring during a special dinner hosted by the VFW Post 8862 in the Marostica castle.

“This ring has been a reminder of war and of life,” Girardi said. “We were the caretakers, but I will be very happy to see it go back to where it belongs.”

The Girardi family would like to extend their thanks to all those involved in seeing the ring’s journey home.

So the story that began 73 years ago on a mountain in northern Italy will end in the bayou of southern United States. Perhaps now, the book can be closed.

Photo caption: Lucrezia Pivotto and Egidio Girardi stand with Ron Reynolds (left), service officer and VFW life member and VFW Life member Michael Tougaw, in Marostica, Italy. Reynolds and Tougaw are members of VFW Post 8862 in Vicenza, Italy. (Photo by Karin J. Martinez, USAG Italy Public Affairs Office)

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