



The 461st

Liberaider



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Somewhere in USA



461st BG Members surveying Group Headquarters area—1988
L-R: Group Headquarters building, briefing room building

The Italian Tour—1988

**By
Millie O'Bannon**

Tuesday, September 20

During the last two weeks my favorite phrase has been, "I'm so organized I'm hysterical". Maybe by the time we reach Milan I'll settle down.

Our trip to New York on Delta was very comfortable, and the time went quickly. We took a limo from La Guardia to the Holiday Inn near Kennedy. I would hate to have a car break down between one airport and the other. The neighborhoods aren't the fanciest! Our big dinner was mashed potatoes and meat loaf (they called these hors d'oeuvres) in their attractive bar. The hotel is new and lovely with lots of marble.

Tonight we are resting and watching the Olympics on TV.

Wednesday, September 21

One of our 461st men, Ed Chan, came to the motel and visited with Frank over breakfast. Then our N.Y. relative Catherine Elliot came to the motel for lunch. It is great to be able to see old friends and relatives en route.

We left for the airport early. The Fergusons were also staying at the hotel and went to the airport with us.

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Alitalia had a check-in sign "Obbanon Tour" so we headed for that counter. We didn't expect an Italian to know how to spell an Irish name.

As our group arrived we greeted them and led them up two floors to our private lobby. Barb and I spent our time at the ticket counter. We had no clue that the flight was "over-booked" and were shocked to learn the last six to arrive couldn't get on. I was ready to tear them apart. On boarding we learned that couples were split up in some cases. Alitalia had refused to honor our previously booked seats. Obviously we will never fly Alitalia again. Frank arranged for the six to be put on a TWA flight to Milan that left a half hour later. We never saw a smile from the time that we entered the Alitalia area in N.Y. until we were greeted by our guide in Milan. We found out later that the TWA flight was much better than ours.

Thursday, September 22

The flight passed as well as it could, and we all arrived in Milan safely. That is what counts.

Our arrival was on time. We located our lovely Mercedes bus and waited for the TWA flight to deliver our remaining six members. Only the luggage of the Coles was missing, but a wire advised them that it would be on the next day's flight.

We drove through beautiful countryside to Lake Como. This area is the foothills of the Alps. We are to spend an hour at the famous Lake Como. Como is a quaint, interesting city. After not sleeping all night, no one had the strength for a boat ride which was offered. Instead we went to the lovely cathedral and had our lunch on the square. The young Italian girls have taken to short skirts and look stylist. A few notes from our guide:

The children go to school half a day. Most of their mothers work. Drugs are a problem here also. They still teach Latin. English is taught in all schools. They consider it important to find a job. 90 percent of the Italians are Catholic, but there are also many of the protestant and Jewish faith.

After our Como stop, we drove over the border into Switzerland. It is mountainous and beautiful, with many, many trees. Everyone in Switzerland and Italy produce their own wines. We decided after a while that every land owner has his own mini vineyard. Lake Lugano is truly an overnight haven. Our guide reminded us that all Swiss men are considered part of the military and keep their arms and uniforms at home so as to respond quickly to an emergency. There were a number of large cranes in view which indicated construction of high-rise buildings.

Our Hotel Canva was nice and small. We checked in and collapsed for a nap. At 5:00 PM our bus drove us to a convenient walking area so we could look and shop. There were lots of jewelry stores, but you have to be a millionaire or think you can't live without some of it.

We had a lovely dinner at the hotel after which we didn't fight going to bed. Some of our more youthful members enjoyed the night air before retiring.

Friday, September 23

We got up at 7:00 AM and had the first of many continental breakfasts. Whatever happened to cereal? Our next

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effort was to find the Cole's luggage which hadn't made the TWA transfer. Grace Cole was a good sport and slept in something only Len knows about.

Our next stop was to see the painting of "The Last Supper". Milan is much nicer than I expected. We saw a huge castle and a galleria which was elegant. Now I know where galleria shopping malls originated. The people of Milan are good looking and well dressed.

Back onto the highway: our lunch stop was near Palazzola in a restaurant which is over the freeway. Fun! By this time we had discovered we lucked out on our guide, Lorenza, and our driver, Fabio. They were young, good looking, intelligent and really competent.

Our next stop was Verona where, of course, we would see the balcony of Romeo and Juliet. It is remarkable to think that this story started here, and the children still learn it.

It was an hour and a half bus ride to the dock where we picked up the ferry to Venice. It was a short ride and walk to the Boston Hotel near St. Mark's Square. Venice is expensive! According to the notice on the door, our room cost \$140.00 per night, and the room was small; so was the lobby! Our group couldn't all fit in it at once.

We walked to a nearby restaurant for dinner, after which most of us had a good night's sleep for a change.

Saturday, September 24

Up early for our simple breakfast in the Boston Hotel. Lorenza briefed us on our next adventure which was a long walk. The highlight of the walk was seeing the biggest church in Venice, Friars Church, containing "The Assumption" by Titian. The talent and beauty of the architecture and paintings make you realize that we, modern man, didn't come up with all the answers. Someone thought many of them through back in 1200 AD.

We next experienced a gondola ride to the Rialto Bridge and then a visit to the Venetian Glass Factory. We looked, appreciated and even bought a little. Then the conducted tour ended, and we were free for lunch. By happenstance we found a group who wanted to eat at their namesakes, "Bella's". After lunch we all found an excuse to shop on the Rialto Bridge. Then "collapse time"! A good excuse for vino in St. Mark's Square to watch the people and pigeons. St. Mark sure controls those birds! Later on we had our dinner in the same restaurant, "Bella's".

Sunday, September 25

We gained an hour's time today, so we should feel more rested. Already we are tiring of packaged toast for breakfast. We took off for a tour of the Doge's Palace. I wish I were an art student so I could appreciate these 16th century artists even more. We passed through the Bridge of Sighs and made sure we walked correctly around the two monolithic columns on the edge of the Piazzetta.

On to the Lace Factory where a few of us succumbed to their wares. It helps if you have been to a place before; you don't tend to buy as much.

Since we had a free afternoon we headed for St. Mark's Square. We took Barb into St. Mark's. It's ornateness is hard to beat. We ate a lovely lunch in the "Restaurante Madonna". A nap seemed like a good idea after that. Our



"Italy Revisited" tour leaders
Frank and Millie O'Bannon

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schedules are different on tours. You bathe and snooze when you can fit it in easiest.

We had dinner at the same nearby restaurant. Our habit had been to take a long walk after dinner. Some of the group did, but the O'Bannon's headed for bed.

Monday, September 26

Horros! We had to get up even earlier this morning so that our luggage wouldn't get left in Venice. Our next stop was Padua where the Basilica Di St. Antonio is the outstanding point of interest. There is also a lovely square in Padua with many statues.

Again our lunch stop was at one of the handy over-the-freeway restaurants. Italian highways are excellent.

On to Pisa, via the famous Aurelian Way, and the Leaning Tower which is the bell tower that was started in 1173 AD. There are 294 steps. They say the tower should fall by 2151, but seeing is believing. We also visited the St. Mary of the Assumption Cathedral and lucked out in that the King of Spain was visiting at the same time. We were the only tourist group in the church during his visit. Where else could we see him where we would also profit from the unusual amount of police protection and fewer tourists. The cathedral has a 22kt ceiling.

From Pisa we drove to Florence. We had a lovely hotel room (the quality of the rooms does vary on a tour like this). After settling in we enjoyed a very good dinner at the restaurant next door.

Tuesday, September 27

Our breakfast was in the hotel, and the rolls were great; a nice change! It is a lovely day for our bus tour of Florence. There are people all over the place, some on motor scooters. We are told the Etruscans founded Florence, which means flower. The Arno river runs through the city. They say they have the hottest and coldest weather in Italy. 1200 Jews have a green domed temple here. We drove to the side of the hill overlooking Florence. They have smog, but the view was spectacular. We had a special native tour guide who took us through the museum. It was especially interesting to see the statues Michaelangelo had started but never finished. "David" deserves to be famous. He is gorgeous! I thought a copy of David's statue would look super on our patio, but Frank didn't buy it.

We selected our own restaurants for lunch. We lucked out! Great deserts and a quiet atmosphere. Price, high. The leather factory got most of our money. They had a large selection of anything. Our bus picked us up so we wouldn't get too tired carrying everything home.

Our hotel had a lovely patio (they all don't). Some of us sat and laughed over our day.

Dinner was at the restaurant next to the hotel as usual. After 9 PM the gay blades of the group went to the Mona Lisa show a few blocks away. It turned out to be fun. The lead man was a ventriloquist. A young Italian girl and a dark curly-haired man sang to the ultimate. It was Gladys Simeroth's birthday which made it a double celebration. She won't forget this one. It was a grand way to say farewell to Florence.

Wednesday, September 28

We got an early start since we had a three hour ride to Assisi. The countryside is lovely, they grow a lot of corn. They have quaint houses with red tile roofs. We can learn from them on how to grow ground covers, vines and flowers.

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We Passed from Tuscany to Umbria. Our next stop—St. Francis of Assisi. We went through Perugia which looked like a small city I could enjoy. They have a good college that specializes in foreign students. It is very picturesque.

After a long breath-taking climb up a mountain road with many hairpin turns we reached our destination. The view was one of wonderment. A delightful Franciscan monk, who was American, took us on a tour. The tour covered the two churches that form the Basilica Di San Francesco. St. Francis's body is buried there. All the walls and ceilings have paintings of Christ's life and how St. Francis related to Christ's life experiences. We also learned a new phrase "everybody hug" which means gather closer together. I wonder if the monk learned that in America or Italy. No matter, we used it from then on.

We got to the Republic of San Marino late in the afternoon. We had a winding climb to the village on the top of the mountain. We knew we had a good driver at times like that. The younger ones (no names given) climbed to the fort and cathedral at the top. The rest enjoyed it from afar and shopped. Everything was cheaper than in Italy, no taxes. On the tour we were constantly impressed by the fact that long ago men climbed these hills and carried the materials to build these fabulous cathedrals. They certainly did not make it easy on themselves.

We found out accidentally that the Watson's had a large bedroom so those living nearby took over with their booze. That was quite a party, and we had not yet eaten our dinner. Not mentioning any names, but someone that thinks she is a party girl latched onto one of the funniest men on the tour. I hate to think a bottle of wine had anything to do with it, but we had one laugh after another. Half of the members tried to disown us. John McGarr found a tape recorder, so after dinner some danced on the Watson's balcony to the old 1940 tunes. Are we recapturing our youth?

Thursday, September 29

Morning came too early, but it was a warm day. Our sensible young bus driver guided us gently down the mountain-side to safety.

Our guide told us that no one is poor in San Marino. In fact, while in Italy we have had no feeling of poverty around us. They are much more affluent than when we visited in 1982.

Our next stop was Foggia. En route we had our first view of the Adriatic and some of the many resort homes and hotels along it's shore; looked like a Miami Beach scene at times. In California we would call this very valuable land. We ate lunch at a highway stop near Pescara. We were looking forward to our two night stay in Foggia. I hoped that the hotel bathroom wouldn't resemble the one at the lunch stop. That was an experience!! The floor was metal grating, and they cleansed everything by spraying water from above. You were not sure you would get out without a shower.

The Italian parking system is "anything goes", and Fabio earned a year's salary in one block alone. With the help of a passerby he bounced a little car up onto the sidewalk so we could get around a corner and on our way. Most cars are new two seaters. White is the favored color, and they travel with only one person in the car (California style).

Foggia was a complete surprise to even the guys who were there in war time. I expected a country town and got a little New York. There was a department store nearby and shops to meet all needs. We were bused to a restaurant and tried to enjoy the tiny fish with a lot of bones and their heads still on. You never go hungry in Italy, though, with all the pasta they serve.

The hotel was great. I don't think many tourist come this way, but a lot of business men do. The big boulevard in front of our hotel is a great place for promenading and window shopping. Ed Callahan joined us today. He came over yesterday and "cased" Foggia and Cerignola for us. All seems well.

Friday, September 30

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This day is the main event of the trip. It is "return to Cerignola day". It takes the men back instantly to their youth and the place they won a war over great odds. We were met in Cerignola by Dr. Domenico Rinaldi, the Vice Mayor, and by Alberghini Giovanni, the Chief of Police. These two gentlemen joined us on our bus, and under the able guidance of officer Difilippo Salvatore, in his squad car, we sailed through Cerignola. Between Ed Callahan and Lorenza we were able to carry off the diplomacy needed. The Italian men were charming, considerate and friendly. (It's nice to know there are some because our experiences on the street were the opposite.)

Cerignola looks well (the streets are cleaner). There is a nice square with a lovely cathedral. Due to Dr. Rinaldi's efforts, we received permission to go inside after lunch. It is still being restored after the earthquake of 1980.

The opera house is still in use and many of the men remember going to see shows there during their tour of duty. Cerignola is also building apartment houses as they are doing in all other cities. On the way out of town we also saw huge squares of stone where the Romans stored their wheat. They are now national monuments.

We then headed for the base at Torretta. There are now olive trees, vineyards and cultivated fields where tents used to be. The mayor said that the baron's fields were split up after the war and given to the people of Cerignola.

On to the Headquarters and 767th area. The old runway is now intersected by a beautiful new super highway. The permanent building in each area looked as if time had stopped and waited for the men to return. One by one we visited all of the sites. The men walked among them reminiscing. At one of the sites they met a man who said that he never forgot how they gave him caramels and chocolates when he was a small boy.

The site we will never forget is the 765th because to get there you travel a narrow, bumpy path. It was touch and go as to whether our beautiful bus would get hung up. The men reported that the road was in the exact condition it had been in during 1944-1945! All the other roads are paved beautifully. The old road to the 764th area was under water and the new road goes right up to the Squadron headquarters building. The Cerignola police chief did a wonderful job of researching our sites. It was wonderful that the wives of the men could see and experience a little of what they have heard about for the past forty some years. Many an eye managed to get a speck of dirt in it that day.

Our tour then went to a lovely new restaurant called "Four Leaf Clover" in Italian. For a tour group that carried signs proclaiming "O'Bannon's Group" on the front and back of the bus, this seemed to be an appropriate place to eat. Dr. Rinaldi gave a nice speech saying he was happy we never forgot Cerignola. Frank thanked him in return and presented both men with a framed 461st leather insignia for their offices.

Still under escort, we returned to the square after lunch. That was when we were honored by having the church opened to us. It was noted that extra police showed up for our protection as even the police chief warned us about purse snatchers, etc. Some of our men did not think much had changed inside the church since 1944-1945.

We parted company there at the church. With city officials looking on, Frank and Dr. Rinaldi exchanged hugs and kissed cheeks. Frank doesn't do that to everyone!! Ed Callahan said that in that one gesture we had been accepted as good friends. The police escorted us to the city limits and waved us on our way back to Foggia. We had dinner in the same restaurant as last night. Then more Promenading, shopping and finally sleep.



Cerignola, Italy, September 1988
 Front row: Alberghina Giovanni, Chief of Police; Dr. Domenico Rinaldi, Vice-Mayor; Frank O'Bannon, President 461st BG Inc; Bernie Presho, 765 BS; Ed Callahan, 766 BS
 Back row: Vernon Nelle, 764 BS.

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Saturday, October 1

It was up and out early as we left for Pompeii. We were in for another day of swollen feet. No matter how many times you walk through Pompeii you are always impressed. We ate lunch at the restaurant at the entrance to Pompeii and then on to one of the world's garden spots, Sorrento!

The Hotel Majestic was lovely. The rooms were large, and we had learned to appreciate that. Some of our members went to church, and others shopped in the square. Because I had an Italian cold (the worst kind), I went to bed. It felt so good to have time to wash my hair and do laundry. We had dinner in the hotel. It was very nice, and we loved the convenience. John and Gladys celebrated their wedding anniversary, a German tourist joined us in singing "Happy Anniversary".

Sunday, October 2

We had to arise early so we could drive to the pier and take the boat to Capri. The island resembles Catalina Island in California except that it is built up more. It is dramatic. Even the Italians flock there. Those of us that hadn't seen the Blue Grotto took the boat ride while others sat in an outdoor restaurant and had a drink. Then it was lunch and more shopping. A trip up the Funicular was a great experience. The wait in line was worth it. On the return boat ride we had fun listening to a salesman try to convince everyone they couldn't live without a T-shirt or scarf. He was an artist.

After such a big day, eating dinner in the hotel was a relief. That relief was short-lived for those of the group that went to the Tarantella Show at a local theatre. It was a good Italian folk dance performance, but most of us were too tired to participate. Three of our "younger members" did.

Monday, October 3

The road out of town was winding and provided wonderful views. We saw Mt. Vesuvius. It looked harmless compared to the cars darting by us on the road. With only one "pit stop", we braced ourselves for the curved ascent to Monte Cassino which is an abbey built by the Benedictine order. The present monks live in splendor because there are only nine of them. Part of the abbey is now used as a private live-in school for boys. While viewing the chapel, some of our men met a visiting American couple. The man was a member of the 301st Bomb Group that had destroyed the abbey during the war. We were reminded that the bombing of the abbey was not an American decision.

En route to Rome we were privileged to stop at the American cemetery and memorial in Nettuno. We had prearranged for a lovely wreath to be placed on the memorial. Mr. Valentine, who heads the organization there, joined us. We were impressed by the beauty of the cemetery and saddened by the number of white crosses. A list of the 461st members buried there or shown on the "Wall of Missing" was prepared by Frank and a copy given to each tour member. I think each of the graves was visited by tour members from the respective squadrons.

On to Rome and the Michaelangelo Hotel. We ate dinner in a nearby restaurant.

Tuesday, October 4

Our last full day in Rome! Our morning tour was the Vatican. Words can't describe the vast wealth of this place. Without the Vatican, Michaelangelo and Raphael would have been unemployed. I think they were brave just to balance on the scaffolding. After being awed by the beauty of the Vatican, we were back on the bus to go throw "coins in the fountain". Everyone has to do this once in their lifetime. The Coliseum was our next stop. We passed by the Circus Maximus where they made sport of killing Christians. The ladies all had their pictures taken to prove the lions

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didn't get them. We returned to the hotel for sandwiches and drinks at the sidewalk café. We rested and left for one of the garden spots of the world, the Trivoli Gardens. The place abounds with fountains, water falls and mirror pools. They even had an avenue of over 100 fountains. Beautiful!

We had dinner at the Torre S. Angelo Hotel on top of a big hill. The climb up was worth it. Lots of atmosphere! The music was so inspiring that even the quiet souls joined in with clapping. The famous Italian "Clappers" helped.

Back at our hotel we realized it was our last time together on the tour. So it was kiss and hug. We learned from before that if you survive an Italian tour you are friends for life. We had a terrific group. They were all good sports with a laugh a minute. What humor we didn't come up with, Lorenza did!

Wednesday, October 5

Some were staying over, some were going to Switzerland and others headed for the airport and home. With Lorenza's help we got through ticketing and passport check. Then on to the duty free shop. Our plane ride would have been better if some had passed up the duty free shop. Later, one lady got hit on the head by three bottles that fell from a storage rack overhead. Ouch!! The trip to L.A. was a long 14 hour flight!

Did we have a successful adventure? We had fun with a lot of good people. We saw unsurpassed beauty and history. We didn't meet up with a thief or a terrorist. The weather was good every day. What more could any 461st group ask!!

Editors note: Thanks Millie, for the story. Sorry now we missed the tour. The next issue of the Liberaider will contain some additional comments from Frank.