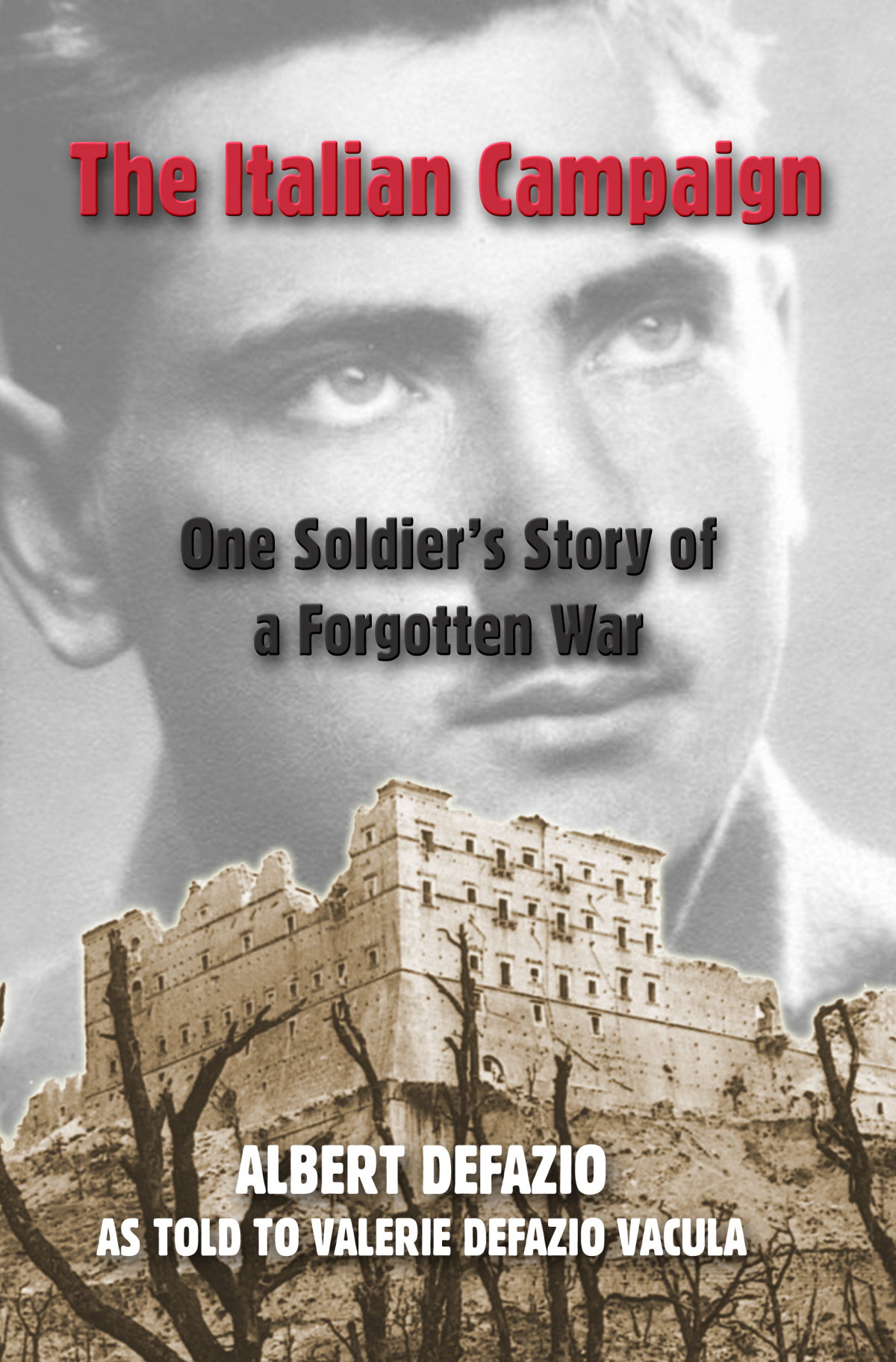

The Italian Campaign

One Soldier's Story of a Forgotten War

ALBERT DEFAZIO
AS TOLD TO VALERIE DEFAZIO VACULA

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Dedication

THE 36th "Texas" Infantry Division, the 143rd Infantry Regiment, Company A, and all companies in the regiment who fought the campaign in Italy.

I would like to thank all veterans, past and present, who fought and continue to fight today for the freedom of this great country.

To Todd DePastino and the Veterans Breakfast Club, where veterans share their war stories after many years of trying to forget. I thank Todd for putting this club together. I feel being able to talk about the war has made a difference for many of us.

To my family, including my son Albert and especially my daughter Valerie, who made this book possible.

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Foreword

I was a young teen when I found out my dad had been at war, but it wasn't until I was in my late forties that I learned, through his writings, about his time in the Italian campaign. I cried while reading his memoir and couldn't believe that my dad had seen and gone through all that he had. I thank God that He kept him safe and brought him home to his family. My dad endured the pain of shrapnel embedded in his back, a concussion, and years of nightmares. But all in all, he turned out to be a good husband and father.

When I was eleven years old I went to my dad and told him that I wanted to be a majorette and march in a drum and baton corps. Excited about my interest, he said we would talk to a friend of his who was the director of one of the top corps in our area. I told him I didn't want to be in that one because I didn't like the military-looking uniforms they wore. I preferred the uniforms of the other corps in our area because they were all frilly and cute. He said, "Well, how about we go to both of their rehearsals and see which we like better."

It turned out that my dad's friend wanted to put me in their color guard, but my dad told him I had my heart set on being a majorette, so we went to see the other corps. Although we were impressed with them, my dad had a different idea. He started his own drum and baton corps. That's when I learned that my dad had been a drummer himself and marched in the Vern Acklin Cavaliers after the war.

It didn't take him long to come up with a name, and soon the "Stars and Stripes" were born. We started out practicing in the basement of a local church, and our first parade was in Sharpsburg, Pennsylvania. Since we were still raising money for uniforms, we wore navy blue shorts, white blouses, and tennis shoes with red pom-poms. It took only a year before we had real uniforms and, although they were red, white and blue, they were not military-looking and I was happy with that.

The Stars and Stripes became an award-winning corps, winning trophies and prize money through the years. We even beat the two more established corps in our area. I could always tell by my dad's face

whether we won or not. He would try to hide his excitement and may have fooled the other kids, but not me.

My dad was proud of his accomplishment and loved every one of the kids that marched in the corps. They truly loved him as well. They affectionately called him "Mr. D," a name that stuck with him for his entire life of the Stars and Stripes, and still today whenever he runs into a former member. There were times when a child had to leave the corps that they loved so much because of financial reasons. My dad would step in and tell the parents not to worry — the corps would pay their dues. But what people didn't know is that my dad actually paid for them out of his own pocket.

As a corps we had fundraisers that kept us running for twenty-seven years. We did hoagie sales and sold candy bars. Every Christmas we would make hard tack candy in the kitchen of our church. We would make two thousand pounds and sell every bag we made.

As the corps began to grow in size, we needed more space to practice, so we moved to the local elementary school and practiced indoors in the winter and in the parking lot outside in the summer. The drummers practiced in the hallway, majorettes in the gym, and the color guard in the cafeteria, which was separated only by a curtain and stage. It was loud but got even louder when, for the last half hour of practice, we were brought together and did our routine as a corps. My dad stood there every rehearsal inside that gym.

My dad missed only one parade in all those years, and we sometimes had two to three parades per week. He didn't ride in the equipment truck either — he walked alongside of us every step of the way. We not only marched in parades around Pittsburgh, but also traveled to other states and even Canada.

We were only a junior corps, so there was an age limit on who could participate. When I aged out, I became the majorette instructor and later taught the color guard. I was able to do both because I'd had years of private lessons in baton twirling, then later I marched in the Vern Acklin Cavaliers, the same corps my dad marched in as a drummer. Later I joined the Pittsburgh Rockets who years later became the Steel City Ambassadors. My brother Albert took after my dad and became a snare drummer.

Year after year the Stars and Stripes had a routine that was accompanied by a patriotic song, whether it was "Stars and Stripes Forever" or "You're a Grand Old Flag" or "National Emblem March." My dad never strayed from incorporating patriotic songs, though I never understood why it was so important to him.

After all those years in the corps, I read my dad's memoirs. It finally hit me why we were called Stars and Stripes and why we performed so many patriotic songs. He had fought for the freedom of his country, and, after all he had gone through, this country meant so much to him. Then I thought of all those loud practices in the gym and how he hid the fact that he had post-traumatic stress disorder and loud noises startled him easily. Of course we didn't know this at the time, but once I found out I could remember sometimes seeing something in his face that wasn't right. Nonetheless, our time in the corps was, I believe, the happiest time in my dad's life. It made him forget what he had gone through and got him out and about. Before that, he never liked to travel or go anywhere; he was happy simply being at home. He loved that corps as he loved his country. He may not like to take credit or to hear that he was a hero for what he did, but he'll always be my hero.

After hours of research and months of reading, I learned so much about the Italian campaign. I was shocked to realize that my dad had lived to tell about World War II, the largest, most violent armed conflict in the history of mankind.

Preface

ONE day I was in my bedroom cleaning out drawers when my then teenage daughter, Valerie, walked in. There was a medal lying on the bed, so she asked, "Dad, where did you get this medal? Did you win it?" I said, "Kind of." I started to tell her how I had gotten it while in the war.

"You were in the war? Which war?" she asked, a surprised look on her face.

My wife, who could be funny at times, said from the other room, "He was in the Civil War."

I explained to Valerie that it was a Purple Heart that I received in World War II when I was wounded. Valerie stood there for a moment staring at it and said, "I never knew you were in the war — where were you shot?" "In my back." I explained that a bomb had exploded not far from me and I was struck with shrapnel. "Well, did you ever kill anyone?" She asked as she looked at the medal.

I looked away. "I don't know. I hope not." It was a long time before we spoke of it again.

Years later I had gone to a picnic held for our local state representative, Tony DeLuca. While there, I had a chance to speak with Mr. DeLuca, and he told me about a gentleman that wanted to talk to World War II veterans. He gave his name and said he works for Congressman Mike Doyle. I went to see him, and he explained to me that there were two thousand World War II vets dying each day. The gentleman asked if I wouldn't mind writing my own story so it could be placed in their archives. I went home and thought about it for a few days. At the time I was in my late seventies. I was retired and had nothing else to do, so I sat down and started to handwrite my war story. I gave it to the gentleman to send in, he made a copy of it and handed me the original back. It sat in my drawer for years.

A couple of years ago a neighbor and good friend of mine, Bill Mansfield, took me to a veteran's breakfast where I met a young man named Todd DePastino. Todd is in charge of a club called The Veteran's Breakfast Club, which hold a breakfast every couple months in different areas around Pittsburgh. This breakfast was in Penn Hills,

which is where I live. The club draws many veterans — mostly from World War II, but any veteran can attend. One of these mornings I had a chance to sit down and tell Todd about my time in the war. He tried for months to get me to stand up and tell my story at breakfast, but I always turned him down. I would listen to other vets talk and listen to Todd talk about different battles of World War II. Never was the campaign in Italy talked about. Finally, at one breakfast I gave in and told Todd I would speak, which made him very happy. I'm not one for speaking in front of big crowds, but I did it so people would understand that the Italian campaign was just as important as the rest of the war.

When people speak of the war, the first things they think of are D-Day, storming the beaches at Normandy, war in the Pacific, or the Battle of the Bulge (where my older brother Pat had been injured with a bullet in the neck). You never hear about Monte Cassino and the Italian campaign — it's as if it has been forgotten. The Italian campaign involved some of the hardest fighting in the war and cost the United States forces some 114,000 casualties. The campaign played an important part in determining the eventual outcome of the war.

At the age of 89 I pulled my story from the drawer, and now I want to share it with all.

Chapter 2

Basic Training

I was eighteen and received my draft notice. I was told to go downtown and get my physical. Weeks later I was sent to the training grounds in Aberdeen, Maryland. It was there they interviewed me asking all kinds of questions. The interviewer asked, "Did you graduate?" I said, "No, I quit school at sixteen." He asked about my mother and father. I was also asked, since I was of Italian descent and might end up fighting in Italy, would I have a problem shooting at an Italian. I found it to be an odd question but understood it could happen since America was not yet allies with Italy. I answered, "If someone is shooting at me, I'm shooting back no matter who they are." Finally they ask what branch of the service do I want to serve in. I tell them I'd like to try the Marines and they replied no. "Well then the Navy," I said. "No." Then I was told, "We're going to put you in the Infantry because you don't have a high school education or diploma." "Why did you even ask me?" I asked. "We have to," he answered.

Later they sent me to the quartermasters where they gave us all our uniforms. Shoes, they just take a look at you and guess your size then tell you to put them on. I said, "Hey, these are too big." He said, "Well, exchange them wherever you go." I understood because all those men coming through, they couldn't take the time to measure.

I was shipped to Camp Shelby, Mississippi, and placed in the 69th Division that was one of the divisions in World War I, The Fighting 69th. I was then ready for my thirteen weeks of Army training. It was tough and rigorous, but it didn't hurt you. If anything it made you a man. At first they wanted to make me a bugle boy. They handed me a bugle and told me to report to the lieutenant in charge. I knew that I didn't want to be a bugle boy, so when I got there I told the lieutenant, "They handed me this

thing and I have no idea what it is or what I'm supposed to do with it." He grabbed it from my hand and told me to go back to the base. That ended me becoming a bugle boy. Of course I knew what it was all along, I had no desire to play the bugle. Later we went on twenty mile hiking trips and exercised hard daily. Every muscle in my body ached and I could barely walk. As days passed, my body no longer hurt and training began to feel really good. I remember a guy in basic training who was a wise guy and hard to get along with. One day our staff sergeant, who happened to be an American Indian, had had enough of this wise guy. He took him out behind the latrine and beat the crap out of him. It straightened the guy out and he was never any trouble again.

When basic training was over, I was sent home for two weeks. Other than my family, there was no one else around because my friends had all been drafted like me. Before I knew it, two weeks had passed and I was glad to be back at Camp Shelby.

When I returned I was told that the paymaster had wanted to see me. I went to see him and he told me to sign the payroll book and take my $21.50 in cash for my monthly pay. I said, "I already got my pay." He said, "No, you were not paid." I said again that I was already paid. He said, "Sign the book and take your money and leave." So I did. Wouldn't you know it, one year later while I was in Italy, I received a letter from the paymaster's office. They had overpaid me in the amount of $21.50 and deducted it from my pay check. I guess there are times you just can't get anything over on the Army.

One day at Camp Shelby we were called together and they started reading names off a list. "These are the people going overseas," they announced. They called the list in alphabetical order, and my name was missing. When they were finished, they said there was another list called the "supernumerary list." I found out that my name was on that list. When they were done reading that list I asked, "What is this super list that you got me on?" "In case somebody on the first list cannot go, they'll pick someone from the super list," I was told.

That didn't sit well with me. I went to the company commander and told him, "I want to go overseas with my friends. I know these guys and trust them." The commander told me, "This came down from headquarters, and there's nothing I can do about it." I tried to plead my case, but nothing I said seemed to help. When I left he could tell how upset I was. The next day the lieutenant came to see me and said, "DeFazio, I don't know what you did or said, but you're on the list to go now." I would be shipping out with my friends and believe me I was elated.

Chapter 4

Front Lines

IT was now late December of 1943. After we landed in the port of Naples, they gave us our divisional badges and told us to sew them on. We were told we would be in the 36th Infantry Division, which is in the Fifth Army under General Mark Clark, otherwise known as the T-patchers. Later that night we were shipped out again. We couldn't travel during the day — it was too dangerous because we were so close to the front lines, near the abbey at Monte Cassino and the Rapido River. At the time, I knew nothing of what was in store for me at the River of Hell. A name I gave it after my experience there.

We were taken to Mussolini's race track to make camp. We finally were given something to eat — a stew of some sort. I didn't care, I was so hungry I could have eaten a horse — and I found out later I did. The meat looked different, it was red and stringy but not bad, sweet tasting. I later asked the cook what kind of meat it was, he answered, "You're at a horse track aren't you?" I couldn't believe the Army would feed us horse meat, after that I took off back to camp. I was moving at a pretty good trot. They could have been joking ... I was never sure.

We were the replacements for the 36th (Texas) Infantry Division. I was placed in A Company of the 143rd Regiment. After a week we were loaded on trucks to join our new outfit, which was at the front lines at the bottom of a mountain. When we got there you could hear shooting going on, big stuff, not small stuff. We stayed there overnight, by this time it was January 1944 and it was cold. We dug our fox hole, lay in there, and slept if you could. Next morning we line up, just waiting. Three of us started to climb a mountain that was near. Finally they blew a whistle, yelling come on back down and get together, we're ready. A lieutenant not from our outfit said, "The three guys that climbed that mountain there, part-way, who were you, raise your hands."

I'm thinking why to myself, why does he want to know why we climbed that mountain. Two of the guys raised their hands. I remembered my Sergeant from boot camp, Sergeant Feathercheck was his name. For some reason he liked me and taught me a lot. He said, "Son, never volunteer for anything." I'm glad I remembered so I didn't raise my hand. I just put my head down. He said, "There's one more guy, who is it?" Again I said nothing. I turned my head away from the other two guys hoping they wouldn't rat me out. They didn't. The lieutenant told the two guys to go with him. After they left I asked around as to why he took those two guys away. One of the guys said, "They're going to make mule skinners out of them." I said, "What are you talking about, mule skinners?" There are a lot of mountains to climb and they need men to guide the mules with ammunition and food to the top. I was happy to get out of that detail.

The trucks took us as far as they could, and then we had to walk on foot to the top of Mount Trocchio, about a quarter mile from Monte Cassino. Once we reached the top, we were told to setup our pup tents. That night I heard mail call, and we all gathered around the mailman to see if any letters had arrived from back home. They always made sure that we always got our mail, no matter where we were. It was good for morale. I had heard the captain tell the mailman when he came back from the mountain to our base camp, "Tell the cook to send up hot coffee and donuts for the men." Word came back that it was too late and too dangerous. The captain sent word back down to tell that cook to either send the coffee and donuts or to come himself. Later that day we were all enjoying hot coffee and donuts.

The next day the captain asked me to go down the mountain to the camp below and bring up a burner so we could make hot chocolate. The Army had given us chocolate bars so they could be melted down and made into hot chocolate. At the time there was gunfire over our heads and all I could think of was that I was going to die trying to bring a burner up for hot chocolate. I looked at the captain and said, "Captain, if you want hot chocolate you can go down the mountain and get the burner yourself."

I thought, O*h my God, what did I just do*? I thought for sure I would be in big trouble. After telling the guys what I said, I was told that no officer should ask you to do something he would not do himself. So nothing ever came of it.