

THE MILL ON THE BORMIDA

by Fabio Vaccarezza

The Spitfire Big Shark had just shot down a German BF 109E and was preparing to return to patrol. Another small German plane silhouette would have been added on the nacelle to those of the two Stuka already shot down previously. Lieutenant Peter R., who had been flying the British attack plane for over two years, was satisfied. The 1,000 HP Merlin engine roared as usual, but the desire to return to the base was getting stronger. He was tired of this silly war, which was about to end, or so they said at headquarters during the briefings every day. Jean, his sweet fiancée, was waiting for him at home, and as they had promised, the wedding would take place as soon as the conflict ended. Peter sighed and it was at that moment that he heard a very close burst and then a strong blow to the tail part of the fighter. He had been hit. He tried to climb to gain altitude, but the plane descended and the tail rudder did not respond as it should have. He looked around. The German aircraft that hit him was fleeing chased by two Spitfire MK1s. Under the Italian plain it was flat and practically free of buildings, while further south you could see the blue line of the sea. Peter thought he was flying too low to parachute, so the only hope was to attempt a makeshift landing. On the right he saw a river whose name he remembered during the briefing before take-off: the Bormida. But the trees on its banks seemed too dense and the plane was now ungovernable. Then he saw a clearing, a widening on the left bank, not far from a cottage. He lowered the undercarriage and just before touching the ground he pulled it hard. The muzzle of the Big Shark raised as the Spitfire flattened its belly against the left bank of the Bormida until it stopped in a cloud of smoke and dust. The lieutenant fainted instantly. When he got back he noticed the blood that soaked his trousers and with fear he realized he no longer felt a leg. He desperately pushed the side door, which opened with difficulty. He dragged himself out of the cockpit and passed out again in pain. Two hundred meters farther away was the Ronco mill which was in operation even in wartime. It milled wheat and little else, even if the Germans and their collaborators often seized the sacks that Giuseppe the miller and his daughter Bice had not been able to hide. The noise of the air battle had kept the two with their eyes on the sky for many minutes. When they saw a German plane falling into flames they screamed with joy, not so when they realized that an English plane was in great difficulty and that at low altitude it was coming towards them. Then the crash. Bice wasted no time. She took off down the lane that led to the widening of the Bormida loop. Smoke guided her. The plane was folded on its side and a few meters away the pilot's blue suit stood out on the stony riverbank. She immediately realised that the pilot was badly injured and by shaking him, she realized that he had passed out, but was alive. After dragging him under a hedge with some difficulty, she ran to the mill to ask her father for help. On her own, she couldn't have done any more. So the machine gun shots that the German planes fired, shortly after, on the wreck of the English plane did not hit Peter. Two days later, the Englishman was able to speak and make himself understood. His leg had been splinted with a board, and bandages still soaked with blood indicated that the wound was deep and that it was necessary to go to the hospital. On the evening of his downing, partisans had appeared near Giuseppe with Captain Martin of the 79th Garibaldi

brigade in command. During the day they hid in a Valbrua farmhouse not far from there. After a long conversation, the captain left a man on the lookout to warn the owner of the mill of the arrival of the republicans who were almost certainly looking for the pilot. He also promised that a doctor would come to medicate the wound. The sentry partisan had helped Bice to lay a straw mattress in the cellar not far from the large grinding wheel that was used to grind the wheat. The sound of water was a continuous rumble. The days passed. The Germans had much more to think about and meanwhile the English lieutenant slowly recovered. He learned a few words of Italian from Bice and the eighteen year old daughter of the miller in turn got some phrases from the Englishman's language. Peter after a few weeks began to become restless. He wanted to go back to fighting or in some way help those Italians who had saved his life. So he found himself working in the Machetta typography, in Castelnuovo Bormida, where during the day innocent artistic labels were prepared which at night were transformed into stamps by the patriots of the Bormida Valley. The young lieutenant, with a graphic background, was given the task of preparing two stamps for **express** and **airmail**. The face values were high: 2.50 lire for the express and 3.50 for the value of air mail. In the evenings, young Bice arrived by bicycle and loaded Peter on the carrier, and took him along secondary paths to the mill. To the *Perseo*, *Teseo* and *Vittoria Alata* series, therefore, two values should have been added, illustrating one of the horses of Saint Mark's Square in Venice and the mill of Bormida. But of these stamps there remained only a few specimens that Peter took with him to England. Indeed, events had climaxed. Because of some of the many informants, the fascists had come to look for the Englishman in the press and not finding him, in a vengeful mood, they had seized all the stamps printed that day, and burnt them. The pilot was already on the run and the night before had moved to Cortemilia, in the Langhe, where a friendly plane would pick him up and take him back to England. We know from Peter R. that at the end of the conflict he married the beautiful Jean. They then delayed the honeymoon until they could afford a trip to Italy, to visit and thank the friends of the mill, those who, on the bank of the Bormida, had saved his life.
