“AFTER FIGHTING ALONGSIDE THEM, THE SLAVS INTERNED ME FOR TWO YEARS”

Fausto Chiffoni finally returned home on 30th November, 1946

Fausto Chiaffoni potè ritornare a casa solamente il 30 novembre del 1946 ormai ridotto allo stremo

«Dopo aver combattuto al loro fianco gli slavi mi internarono per due anni»

«Ero ridotto ormai ad uno scheletro - ricorda - pieno di pidocchi e torturato dai reumatismi; e da mangiare sempre e solo carote; di notte dormivamo in una stalla su un'asse di legno senza nemmeno un filo di paglia»

Fausto Chiaffoni (a sinistra nella foto)

“I was now reduced to a skeleton - he recalls - full of lice and tortured by rheumatism; and to eat always and only carrots; at night we slept in a stable on a wooden board without even a blade of straw”

After having fought alongside them in the "25th Dalmatian partisan division", he was, after peace, interned in a concentration camp for almost two years. No Yugoslav ever told him why. He returned home on November 30, 1946: he weighed 35 kilograms, he had lost 40 thanks to the diet based only on carrots that the Slavs imposed on him. If he sees a carrot today, he feels nauseous and loses his

Fausto hard at work in the Signal School La Spezia - 1941

appetite. Chiaffoni was a sailor radio operator, with the rank of petty officer, embarked in the early years of the war on the escort ship Convolgi <<Rovigno>>. He made more than 300 missions from Italy to Albania and Greece, until September 12, 1943, when the Germans captured him and sent him to a prison camp in Vallona, Albania.

"I stayed there — says Chiaffoni — about fifteen days. The Germans treated me well; to us prisoners, they even gave a truck full of cheese! But then, the music changed. They transferred us to Cataro, a place near Ragusa in Yugoslavia and there, one day, no one knows why, perhaps they feared that we would escape en masse, as someone had done it, they shot at us and killed 18 of us and wounded about a hundred. One died in my arms, hit by a mortar splinter. Then I changed camp: I was taken to Ragusa, where I stayed for a little more than a month. The Germans starved us to death. In order not to die of starvation, we dug up a horse that had been buried for four days and ate it half raw. Then — continues Chiaffoni — another transfer to Zitomislici, in Herzegovina, to work in the bauxite mines. From that period, I remember two German officers who woke us up at dawn with gunshots fired into the air and yelled like madmen "go Italians, work, work". Every time they came to the mines they shot like crazy. We nicknamed them: Tomix and Buffalo Bill. They came to a bad end and I'll tell you why. Since food was always scarce, at night, we stole chickens from the Germans. They never caught us, but the camp commander was sure that we were the thieves. One evening I saw Tomix and Buffalo Bill quickly cross the camp with some of the chickens coming out of their coats. I ran to the commander to report: he surprised them while they were cooking them. The two gunmen were immediately sent to the Russian front".

Chiaffoni's Military Medals

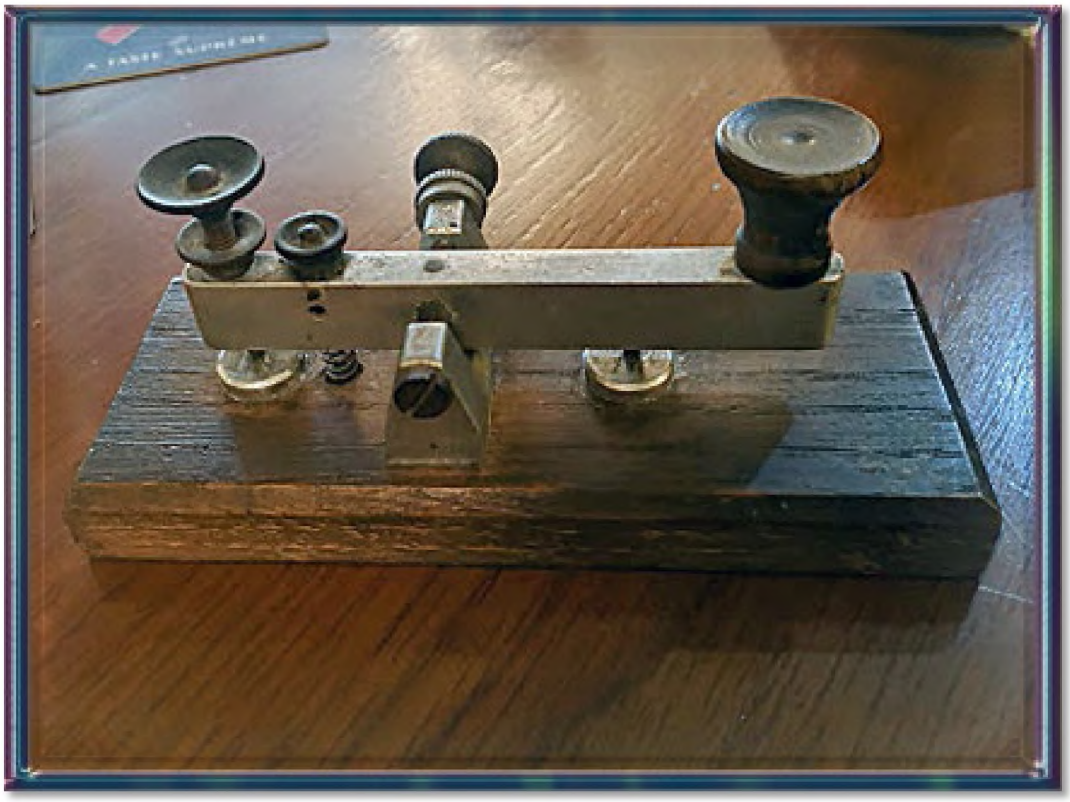
Chiaffoni was then taken to Dalmatia to build military posts in the countryside. “In that place - the former sailor recalls - we didn't have a bad time; there were always two Austrian sentries who allowed us not to work or to work slowly. When officers came to inspect the work, they shouted at us: "it's raining" and we took up the pickaxe again. I have never found two such good soldiers in the entire war! The drama, however, was always the food: always and only carrots and turnips. To survive, we exchanged our miserable uniforms for food, with Yugoslavian civilians>>.

Chiaffoni was again moved to another camp: to Ston, in Dalmatia to work in the salt mines and later to Maliston to work as a driver. It is here that our sailor decided to escape; he had had enough of the Germans. And he joined Tito's partisans.

<<We had to transport foodstuffs with trucks to various German barracks - Chiaffoni says - with us, there were also Yugoslavians and we were escorted by the Germans. But especially at night, we managed to steal a lot of food that we took partly to our fellow prisoners and partly to the people of a nearby village who subsequently sent them to the partisans. Until, one day, while the convoy was resting, some friends and I slipped into the forest and reached the village where we usually took food. We asked a woman to take us to the partisans, in the mountains. She immediately granted our wish. We found ourselves enrolled, with the red star on our cap, in the "25th Dalmatian division".

“I never took part in combat directly, — he continues — because I was the assistant of an Italian doctor, who also became a partisan. At the end of the war, I had a nasty surprise. I handed over my rifle to the command of a barracks and asked when they would ship me to Italy. Let me leave soon, I begged them, because I suffer terribly from rheumatism. They replied that I would leave soon, but that first they would treat me properly in a hospital. I never saw any hospitals. First, they locked me in a barracks, next to which there was a concentration camp for German and Italian prisoners. I spent five days with the Slavic soldiers, until their commander arrived. He looked at me with a ferocious face and tore off, in a rage, the red star that I had sewn on my cap. Without anyone to explain the reason to me, I was sent to the prison camp and from there, I came out after almost two years. I was now reduced to a skeleton, full of lice and tortured by rheumatism. And to eat only carrots, raw or boiled in water; they gave them to us at 5 in the morning and at 10 in the evening. The rest of the day, I spent loading and unloading the goods of the ships, in the port of Ragusa. At night, I slept in a horse stable, on a wooden plank without even a blade of straw. This was the thanks of the Yugoslavs, for my contribution to their war of liberation”.

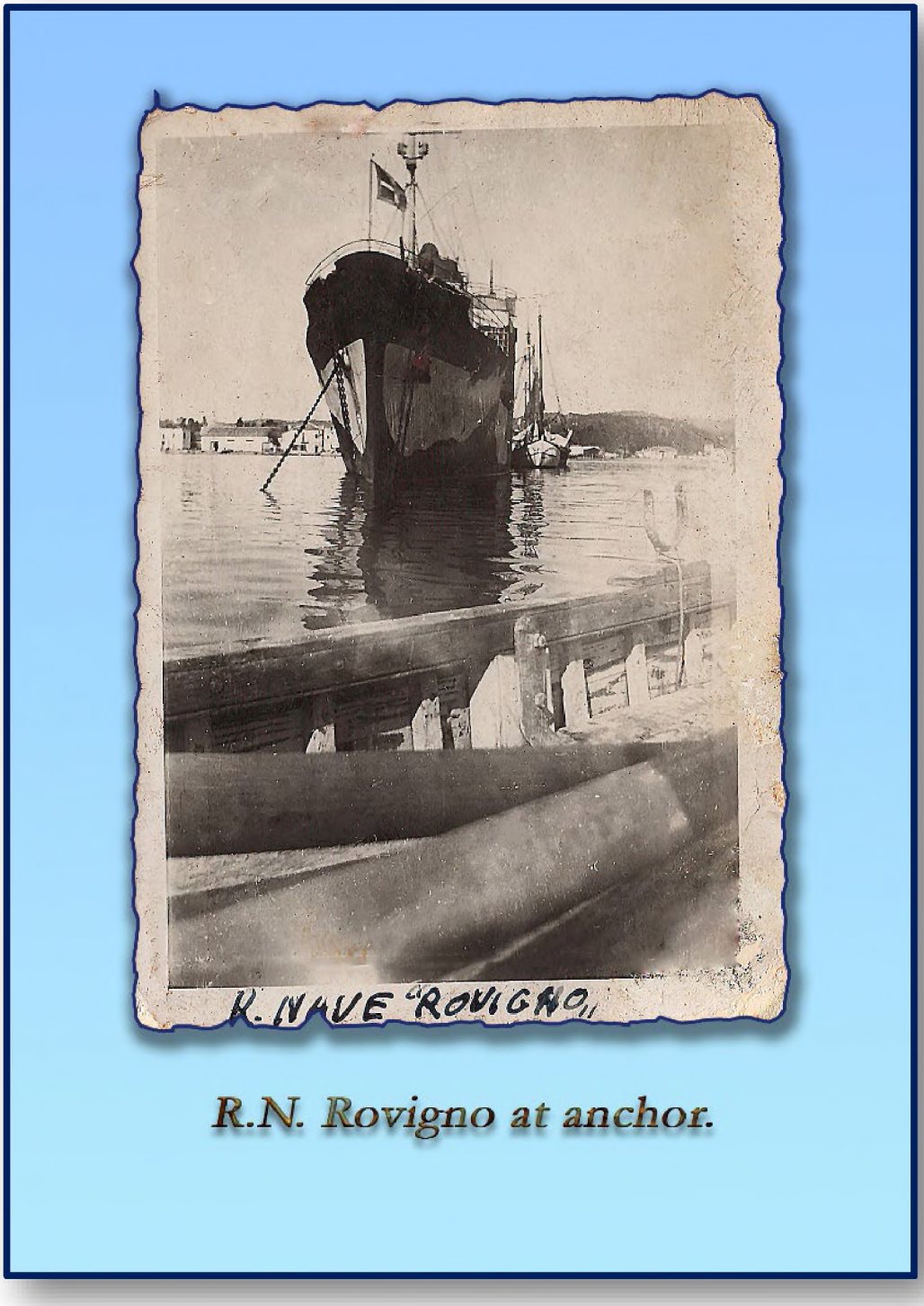
Fastinau's Morse Key from Comms academy La Spezia, 1938 (etched on underside)



The following photographs were taken during Fausto's time in the Italian Navy before being captured.

1st Naval Squadron of Naples

1941 - RT Comms Class - Signal School - La Spezia



R.N. Rovigno at anchor.

Mine transports were built for Austrian fleet but completed after WW1. They were sold to Italian navy in 1920 as minesweepers of RD type. All three were captured by Germans in september 1943 and commissioned by German navy as netlayers/minelayers and mine tenders.

Lorenzo Marcello being escorted by R.N. Rovigna.

[The Lorenzo Marcello was subsequently sunk by a mine on 16th June 1943].

S.C. Lorenzo Marcello - sunk by mine 16 June 1943

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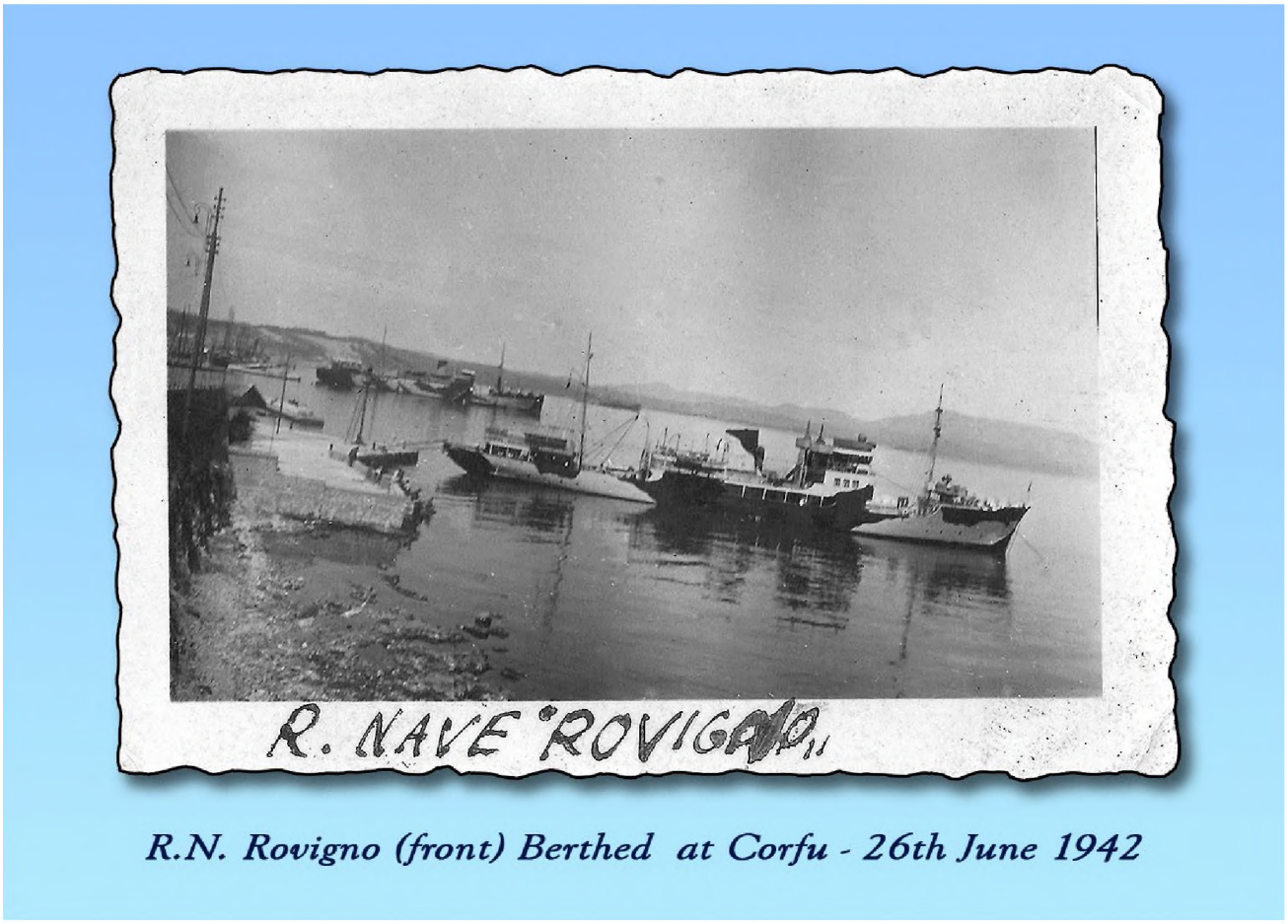

R.N. Rovigno (front) Berthed at Corfu - 26th June 1942

Footnote: The morse key and the photographs etc were given to me by Fausto's son, Ivano.

I became friendly with Ivano during visits to the Woodbridge British Legion. His son had shown no interest in Fausto's memorabilia and when he realised that I was an ex "sparker" he donated Fausto's morse key to me.

I refurbished the key and wired it to a modulator then took to the Legion to show him it working!

He then brought the photos and other items which I have put together in this small document and hope it will be a good memory for him.

I advised him that I would be taking the key and document to our Communications Museum when I attend this year's RNCCA 55th reunion in Portsmouth.

Nick Lee 2024

Ex Chief Radio Supervisor, Royal Navy.