

## ***"For those who don't believe"***

Hi everyone! We are India, Caterina and Valeria. Today we will tell you about the extraordinary work of Vera Vassalle, a courageous woman who played a crucial role in the Italian Resistance during World War II. Called with battle name "Rosa", she was a "bridge" between partisans and Allied forces. That's all for now, let's go!

MUSIC.

Vera Vassalle was born in Viareggio, in Tuscany, on January 21<sup>st</sup> 1920, and grew up in a family that immediately after the Italian armistice with the Allied troops in September 8<sup>th</sup> 1943, demonstrated convinced anti-fascist positions and was collectively active in the Resistance [1][2,2bis]. Vassalle was reached by the news of the armistice while working as a clerk in a local bank. Together with some family members, including her brother-in-law Manfredo Bertini, nom de guerre "Maber", who would be an important organizer of the Liberation struggle, she formed a small group of resistance fighters in connection with other groups in the area [3].

In the hectic days of September 1943, when the first partisans were beginning to settle in the mountains, some of the problems that would later be a constant of the liberation movement emerged clearly: the lack of weapons, ammunition and basic equipment. It was therefore proved necessary to get in touch with the Anglo-American commands.

The plan designed that one person was supposed to venturing on a solo trip across the front lines to inform the Allies of this situation and to find a solution to the problems of the bands. Vera Vassalle, who from then on assumed the battle name "Rosa," was chosen to carry out the operation, because she could hardly arouse suspicion of being a resistor [4].

Therefore, on September 14<sup>th</sup> she left Tuscany for southern Italy by various makeshifts and taking numerous risks. She arrived after two weeks in the Allied camp, from where she was transferred to the headquarters of the Office of Strategic Services, the OSS, in Naples. Here the American intelligence services offered her to become an Oss agent with a mission to be carried out from Viareggio. Thus she began training in a special course, aimed at the use of radio transmitters and knowledge of information system notions. Within a few weeks, the training was perfected and Vera returned to Viareggio. She was entrusted with a briefcase that contained a radio transmitting apparatus, which would be crucial for later connections with the Allies. A briefcase that if discovered by Nazis or Fascists during the voyage, it would have meant self-accusation and a certain condemnation. She did not arrive in Viareggio until the January 19, after risking searches on several occasions. At the end of January 1944 the Radio Rosa mission was to begin for which "I was in charge of providing military information to the Allies and preparing launching camps for materials and men, in the area between Tuscany and Liguria" [5]. Now Vassalle was the officer of the 2677<sup>th</sup> Oss Regiment.

Radio Rosa was not the only Italian intelligence mission at the service of the Anglo-Americans. The commitment of those who made themselves available was dense with responsibility. On one hand, the trainings had limited and accelerated time frames, which still required a good deal of courage and technical knowledge, and on the other hand the agents had to have logistical and operational skills in order to be useful to the Resistance and to make the needs of the territories understood by the



Allies, who were not familiar with the different dynamics.

Due to some initial inconveniences given the lack of transmission plans, the equipment could only be used in March. This slowdown cost Vassalle a new trip, this time to northern Italy to request a new radio telegrapher with new radio frequencies and transmission plans.

In the meantime, Vassalle's training comrades took steps to get in touch with Domenico Azzari "Candiani", one of the very first rt parachuted by the Allies behind enemy lines, who had been operating with a radio in the area since October 22<sup>nd</sup> 1943. Thanks to Azzari's intervention, coordinates were handed over for an airdrop, with the watchword "for those who don't believe," which would supply the Versilia formations.

Radio Rosa really began to broadcast with the arrival of the rt Mario Robello "Santa" with whom Vassalle worked successfully, initiating an intense activity that allowed numerous airdrops of weapons and supplies for the formations [6]. "As soon as the transmissions with the base began, Manfredo and I took care to make contact with the local patriot formations, in order to organize safe receiving areas"

[7]. Stella Palmerini, a contributor to Radio Rosa, recalls:

"When the Red Mission moved into my house, Vera entrusted me with the radio, and from that moment on I began to realize that this was more serious than I had imagined before. As soon as the broadcasts were over, I would transport the radio, hidden inside my school bag, to another nearby house. [...] Whenever Mario was to transmit, I would go out and attach the antenna on the haystack; then when he finished transmitting I would go and take it off. I was receiving the messages that the Radio transmitted to the Allies from the various informants, who would come all the way to my house, but would not come in. They were wandering around and I, as soon as I saw them, would go to meet them. We would stop as if we were talking about futile things, and they would pass the message to me, which I would immediately take to Mario who would transmit it. During the transmission, I would mount guard outside. Mario gave me a gun and a hand grenade: "As soon as you hear a suspicious noise," he said, "be ready to shoot and throw the bomb". [...] I must say that every time we transmitted or received it was an exciting moment, as well as when we learned that the enemy's military targets we had reported had been hit [8].

After some time, out of fear of having aroused suspicion and because of recommendations given by the Allies, the radio was moved to another location near Camaiore, city of Lucca, in Tuscany. However, on July the 2<sup>nd</sup> there was a raid that interrupted Radio Rosa's activities. According to Vassalle's testimony:

"Three women, friends of German officers, denounced my rt Santa as an escaped prisoner [...] On that same morning, at about 11 a.m., while Santa was intent on broadcasting, two German SS cars, surrounded the house. [...] Santa immediately sensed the danger and, after throwing five hand grenades (with which he managed to hit the major and four other German officers), he threw himself, armed with a machine gun, down the stairs, managing to get out of the doorway unharmed and into the fields. I was an eyewitness of this scene, standing at the window of a nearby house" [9].

In a moment of such turmoil, it seems that Vassalle managed to retrieve everything that might be compromising and escape across the fields to the nearby hills:

"It was a long hard march over the mountains, but we finally reached the place where our families were displaced. In the night we all left our homes out of prudence and took shelter at a partisan formation [...]"



Robello and Vassalle would join another formation in the Apuan Alps in Tuscany to continue their activities with another radio transmitter until the liberation of Lucca. They would later take different paths, both continuing in the resistance struggle, Vassalle at Allied headquarters, while Robello would be parachuted together with Vera's brother, Carlo, to Piacenza to assist the "Balilla I and II" missions of Manfredo Bertini. During that mission, due to severe combat injuries, Manfredo Bertini decided to destroy the radio transmitter and take his own life with a hand grenade, in order not to hinder his comrades and put them in further danger. He is recognized as a fallen combatant partisan, rewarded with the Gold Medal of Military Valor in memory [11, 11a].

After the war, Vassalle and Robello, who reunited and married, were both recognized as combatant partisans with the honour of the medal for military valor, gold to her and silver to him, respectively [12]. Together they moved to a town in Liguria, where it is told that Vassalle faced discrimination for her partisan past and her membership in the Communist Party [13]. There, she worked all her life as a teacher in an elementary school that today bears her name [14].

