

B-24 bomber crewman, I found myself flying out of war torn Italy to bomb cities in Europe such as Milan, Munich and Vienna which, not long before, I had been studying in high school classes. Casualties were frighteningly high, and none of us had much confidence that we would survive the 35 missions required before we could go home. The terror to which airmen of both sides were introduced in the skies over Europe during World War II has been described by hundreds of talented writers over the years. My preference here is to contrast that terror with my most wonderful memory of Italy.

In the midst of the terror, there was a time of tenderness when my crew was briefly snatched from the jaws of war and sent to rest camp on the beautiful Isle of Capri. This came 10 days before my 19th birthday and was a marvelous birthday present. There are those who believe we must suffer on earth so we can enjoy heaven more fully. Our experience with war similarly enhanced our delightful few days on Capri. All we knew about Capri came from the famous song about it that topped the charts in the 1930s. It described Capri as having blue skies, flowers and romance. I was ready for all of that and was not disappointed.

We made a 17 mile boat trip to the tiny island in the Bay of Naples, leaving behind the filth and cold of the city. Capri, with its unaccountably mild climate, is recorded in Greek mythology as being the home of the Sirens, the lovely maidens whose music enchanted Ulysses. The scenery is magnificent with varied flora, flocks of migratory birds and fine bathing beaches. On landing, we rode a quaint funicular, which glided up over steep cliffs to the village of Capri, dominated by a piazza or village square. Here local people congregated at all hours. These Capriotes, industrious, religious, happy-go lucky were quite different from mainland Italians. Most spoke English learned from U.S. and British tourists over the years. Their speech was now peppered with slang picked up from U.S. airmen whom they loved instantly as rescuers of their tourist trade, which had been almost destroyed during the war.

Our stay on Capri included sumptuous food and drink, served early and late, lively entertainment, and tours by carriage all over the historic island including the mountain tips, like the Leap of Tiberius from where it was said the cruel and powerful emperor had tossed his victims into the sea. Totally captivated by the island, Tiberius had abandoned Rome to rule from Capri, making this tiny bit of paradise the center of the Roman Empire and of the entire Western World, including Judea where Christ was preaching at that time and where he was put to death by Roman soldiers.

Now it was American soldiers who fell under the spell of the Blue Grotto, the famous cave known for the eerie, deep blue reflections of the sunlight inside. It was American soldiers pausing on the village terrace, hypnotized by breathtaking views of the Bay of Naples with the city of Naples and infamous Mount Vesuvius in the background.

And, yes, I did meet a girl to help me enjoy all of this. Diana was a year or so younger than me. She waited on me in a gift shop run on the square by her family. She spoke perfect English. Always smiling, she referred to the shop as her "clip joint." I fell for her immediately and was pleased that she seemed to like me, too. In Italy proper, any respect-

able young lady would always be chaperoned, but on Capri things were more relaxed. Diana was allowed long afternoons off to spend with me during which her two sisters tended the shop.

Hand in hand, we explored the labyrinth of narrow, picturesque alleys of the village she knew so well. Seeing that I was often lost, she demanded that I lead the way and filled the alleys with her laughter at my confusion.

One of the lines of the Capri song is, "She whispered softly, it's best not to linger." We did not. Knowing how brief my stay would be, we filled every minute with a joy that is associated with the discovery of adulthood and is never quite repeated in later years.

Diana was attractive. She was full of life, cheer and song. It was impossible to be sad or worried in her company. She knew all the popular American songs, which she sang and, sometimes, we sang together. That was a different time, and the kisses and embraces were romantic, but proper. Sister Rosario, my eighth grade teacher, would have been proud of me.

The tenderness Diana showed me was unique and a sweet tonic which renewed my courage. It elevated my self-esteem and touched my soul in a way that nothing else at that time could have. The memory of our week together helped carry me through the terror to which I had to return.

After I left Capri, I never saw Diana again. She accompanied me to the Grande Marina where I nearly missed my ship back and had to be pulled aboard by my buddies as it was underway. As the song says, "Though I sailed with the tide in the morning, I left my heart on the Isle of Capri."

Diana and I corresponded briefly while I was still in Italy, sending messages back and forth by way of other soldiers going to the week of rest. I still have her first letter. She sent me some Capri dates and wrote, "I remember you liked them very much, but I cannot feed them to you because we are so far apart. Too bad. I am sorry you could not spend your Christmas here in Capri. When you come back to Capri, I will sing for you again, and this time I will remember the words to "Goodnight, Wherever You Are". Happy New Year to you with wishes that you finish your missions soon and become a B T O (Military slang for Big Time Operator) back in the States. O.K.? So long, Joe, and Roger."

Arrivederci, Diana. Thanks!

