

CONTEXT FROM AN ITALIAN WARFRONT

THE ASIAGO OFFENSIVE: 1916

The Asiago Offensive encompassed a series of Alpine battles fought between Italian forces, led by Generale Cardona, and Austro-Hungarian forces, led by General von Hötendorff.¹ The campaign was launched by Austria-Hungary on 15 May 1916.² Since Italy entered the war on 23 May 1915, the region had experienced, and would continue to experience, the Great War à la the Battles of the Isonzo. Territory in southern Austria-Hungary (see Trento on the map) was considered *Italia Irredenta* by many Italians who were unhappy with the borders that had been drawn in 1870. The recovery of this territory had been a major push factor for Italy to sign the Treaty of London and join the Allied Powers.³ At the onset of the offensive, Italian forces were battled back from Mount Fior, north of Asiago, to Mount Pasubio, south of Asiago. In an effort to keep the Austro-Hungarians from capturing Vicenza, a major supply depot for the Italian military, Italian battalions were ordered to dig in and keep the enemy from advancing farther into Italy.⁴ The outnumbered and undersupplied Italians did just that, forcing an eventual Austro-Hungarian retreat. This defensive victory came at the cost of some 147,000 Italian lives.⁵

EMILIO LUSSU AND A SOLDIER ON THE SOUTHERN FRONT

Emilio Lussu served with the Sassari Brigade of the Italian Army from 1915-1918, rising as a *Sottotenente* to lead a battalion, and nearly achieving the rank of *Generale*.⁶ *A Soldier on the Southern Front* is based on Lussu's experiences fighting in the Asiago Offensive. Written in 1936-1937, but blocked from publication until 1945, Lussu described the book as neither a memoir nor a novel. Instead, the book is a condensation of his memories of the war into a narrative meant to convey the emotion of war rather than obsess over factual details.⁷ While some events and characters are fabricated, exaggerated, or simplified, Lussu's story remains an important eyewitness account of the spirit embodied by soldiers on the Southern Front.

A Soldier on the Southern Front begins as Lussu's battalion marched into the mountains near Asiago. Esprit de corps was high as he stated, "Now they had told us we would be counterattacking, maneuvering. And in the mountains. Finally!"⁸ Alas, morale would soon be crushed by the reality of Alpine warfare. Fighting in the mountains presented struggles not only against the enemy, but against nature. Soldiers reconnoitered steep slopes, weathered snowstorms and avalanches, and suffered constant supply blockages, even before encountering the enemy. One third of casualties on the Southern Front were a consequence of conditions.⁹ Italy's *Alpini* troops were trained for mountain warfare, often outfitted with such equipment as skis,¹⁰ but extensive fighting along the mountainous Italian-Austro-Hungarian border required many ordinary soldiers to take on intense mountain warfare. An Alpini colonel asked Lussu, "Is your battalion tough?" to which Lussu replied, "Tough as hell!" The Alpini colonel asked, "Ready for anything?" and Lussu replied, "Anything."¹¹ The outward confidence of the battalion was a stark contrast to the condition of the troops preparing for battle. Still in their tattered summer uniforms and drunk on brandy and chocolate, the Italian battalion was anything but the image of tough and ready. Artillery and resupply had been delayed in the effort to hold territory; the Italians were content to occupy less strategic positions in order to prevent even a small advance of enemy troops. Despite their disadvantages, the Italian army often called the sorties. Contrasted with Lussu's sober assurance that, "We all have to die. All of us have to die. That's our duty."¹² are war cries of "Hurrah!",¹³ "Avanti!", and "Viva L'Italia!"¹⁴ from troops rushing to their deaths. Lussu blamed incompetent leadership for many Italian casualties. During one battle, Lussu returned to the trench to announce, "General, sir, we're just going from one blunder to another out there." A colonel, drunk, pointed a pistol at Lussu as the general told him, "Son, that's our profession."¹⁵ Lookouts became an important feature of the Italian frontline. Through one such lookout, Lussu had an Austro-Hungarian officer in his sights, but could not bring himself to fire. Attempting to retain his humanity, Lussu declared, "Fighting a war is one thing, killing a man is something else."¹⁶

¹ Craig Wilson, II, "Asiago – 1916: Two Views," La Grande Guerra, The Great War Society, 1923, <http://www.worldwar1.com/itafront/asiago1916.htm>.

² John Shea, "Austro-Hungarian Asiago Offensive," World War I Today, 2014, <http://wwitoday.com/wwiScEventDetail.php?id=126>.

³ Matthew Stibbe, "Italian Irredentism," 1914-1918 Online, 19 October 2018, https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/italian_irredentism.

⁴ Wilson, II, "Asiago – 1916: Two Views."

⁵ Michael Duffy, "The Battle of Asiago, 1916," FirstWorldWar.com, 22 August 2009, <https://www.firstworldwar.com/battles/asiago.htm>.

⁶ Mark Thompson, afterword to *A Soldier on the Southern Front*, Emilio Lussu (New York: Rizzoli Ex Libris, 2014), eBook.

⁷ Thompson, afterword to *A Soldier on the Southern Front*.

⁸ Emilio Lussu, *A Soldier on the Southern Front* (New York: Rizzoli Ex Libris, 2014), eBook, Chapter II.

⁹ Richard Galli, "Avalanche!" La Grande Guerra, The Great War Society, 2000, <http://www.worldwar1.com/itafront/avalan.htm>.

¹⁰ Galli, "Avalanche!"

¹¹ Lussu, *A Soldier on the Southern Front*, Chapter IV.

¹² Lussu, *A Soldier on the Southern Front*, Chapter IV.

¹³ Lussu, *A Soldier on the Southern Front*, Chapter VI.

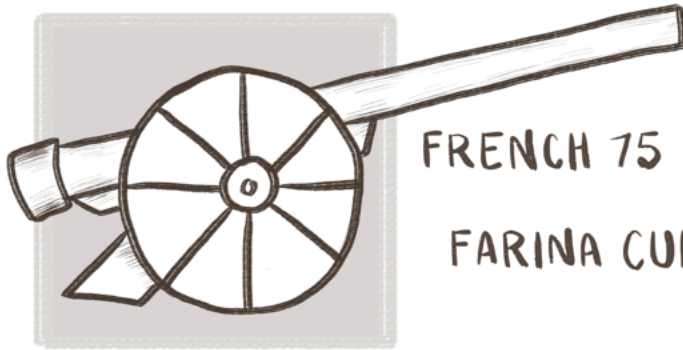
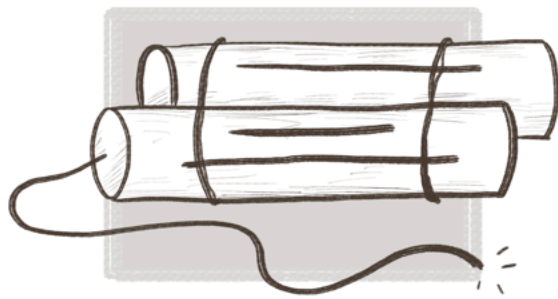
¹⁴ Lussu, *A Soldier on the Southern Front*, Chapter XV.

¹⁵ Lussu, *A Soldier on the Southern Front*, Chapter XXVIII.

¹⁶ Lussu, *A Soldier on the Southern Front*, Chapter XIX.

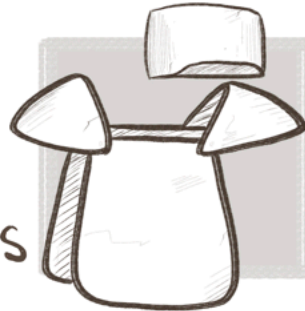


GELIGNITE



FRENCH 75

FARINA CUIRASS



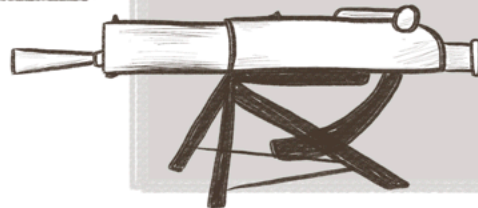
CARCANO M1981



SIPE GRENADE

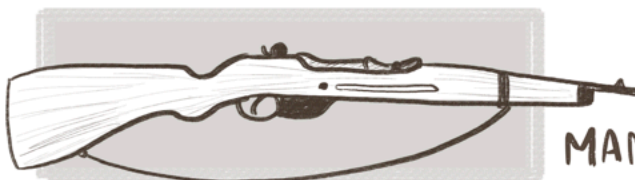
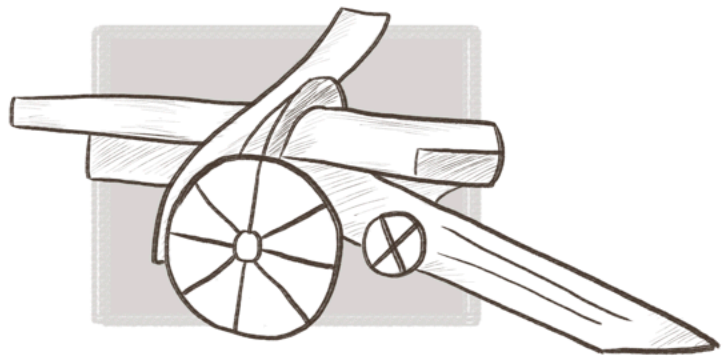


SCHWARZLOSE MG



CHEVAUX DE FRISE

15CM AUTOKANONE

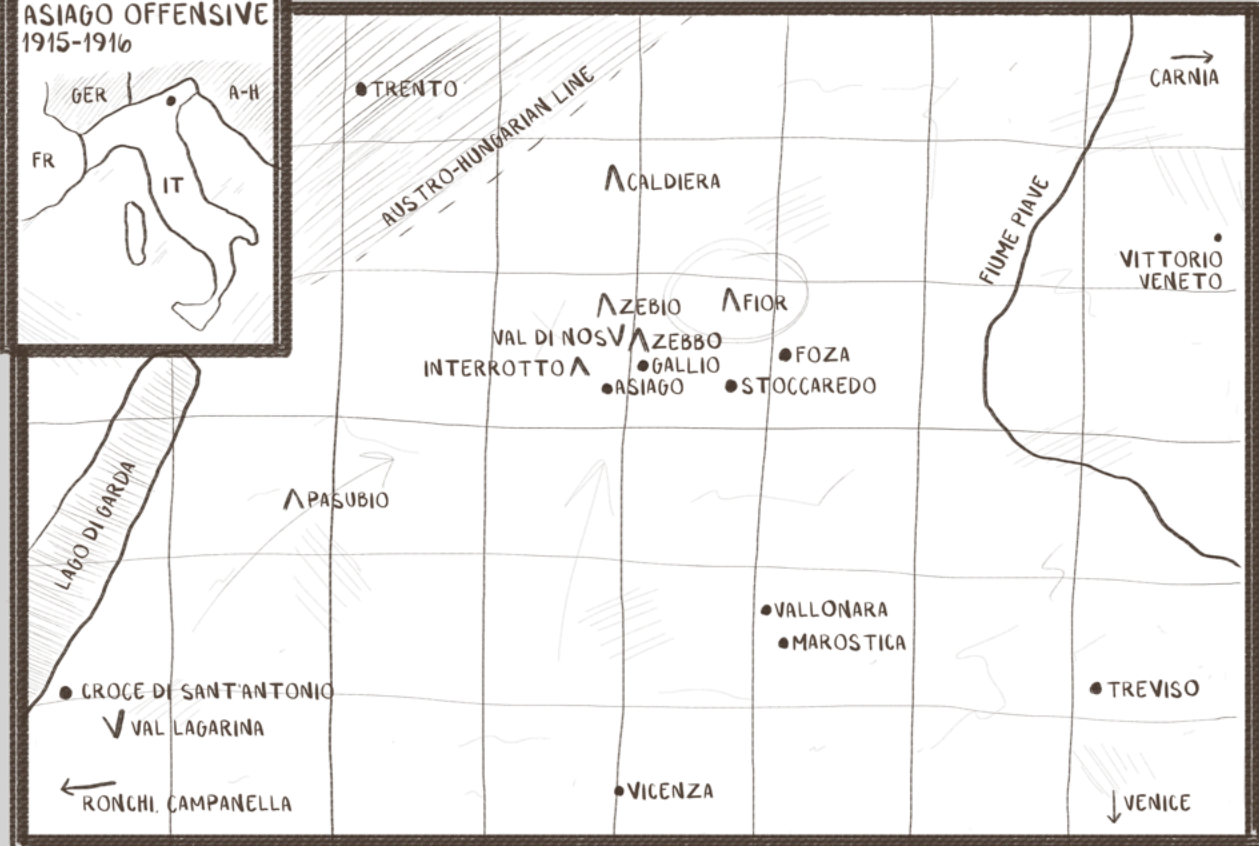
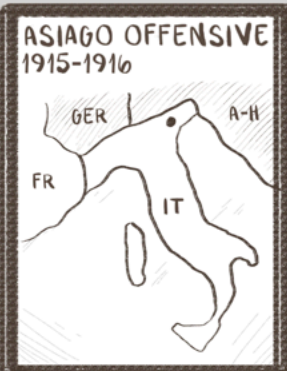


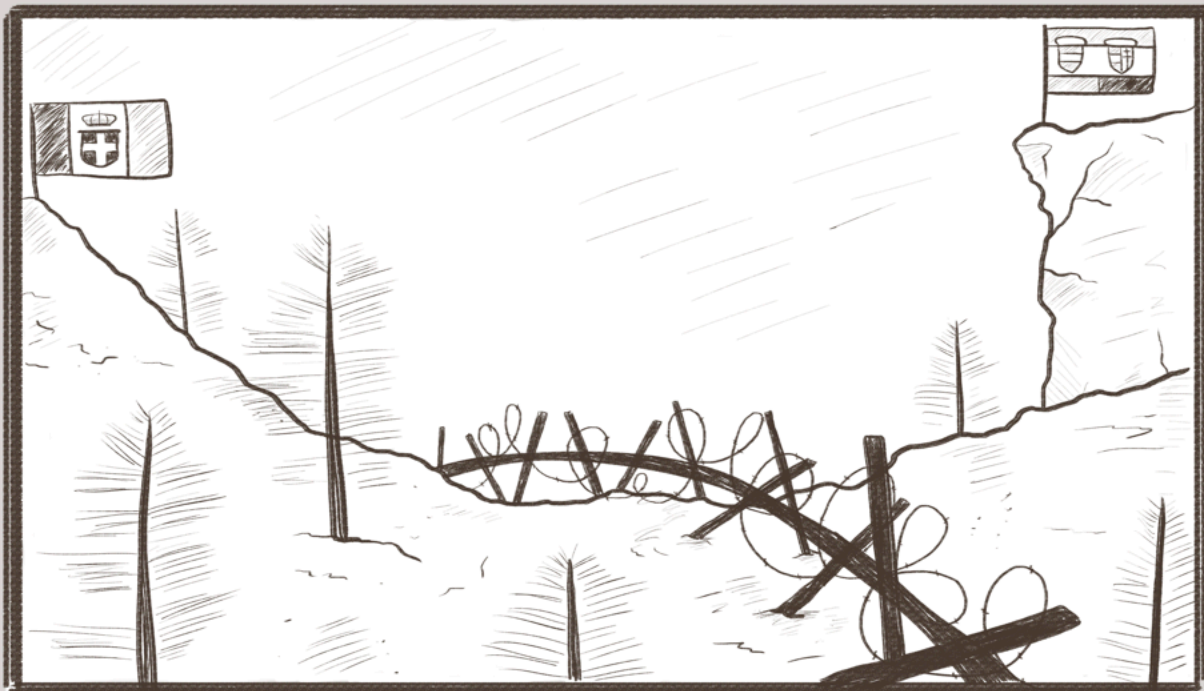
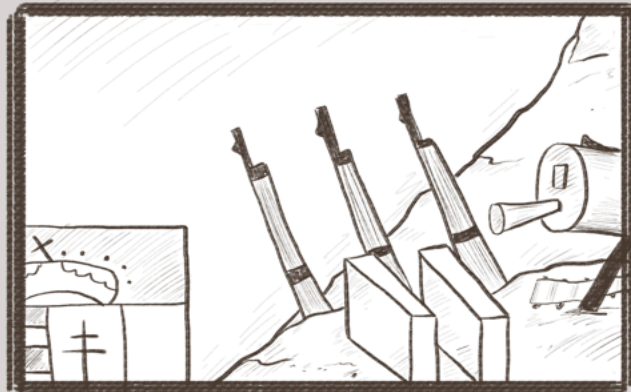
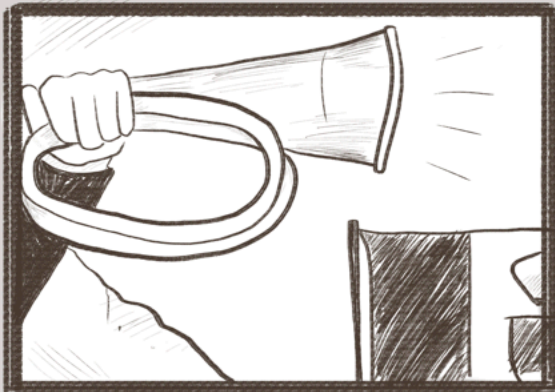
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SCENES FROM AN ITALIAN WARFRONT

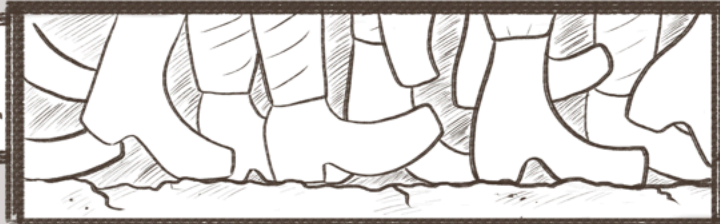
A GRAPHIC JOURNEY THROUGH EMILIO LUSSU'S
A SOLDIER ON THE SOUTHERN FRONT

MELINA TESTIN ©2021





"WE ALL
HAVE
TO DIE."



"HURRAH!"

"ALL OF
US HAVE
TO DIE."

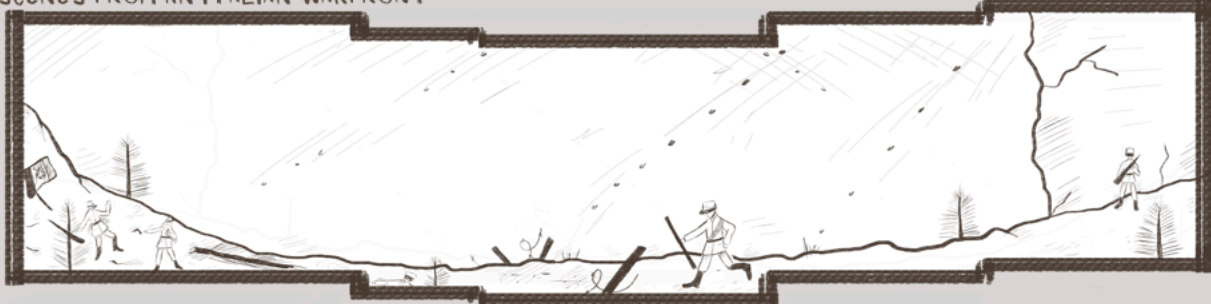


"AVANTI!"

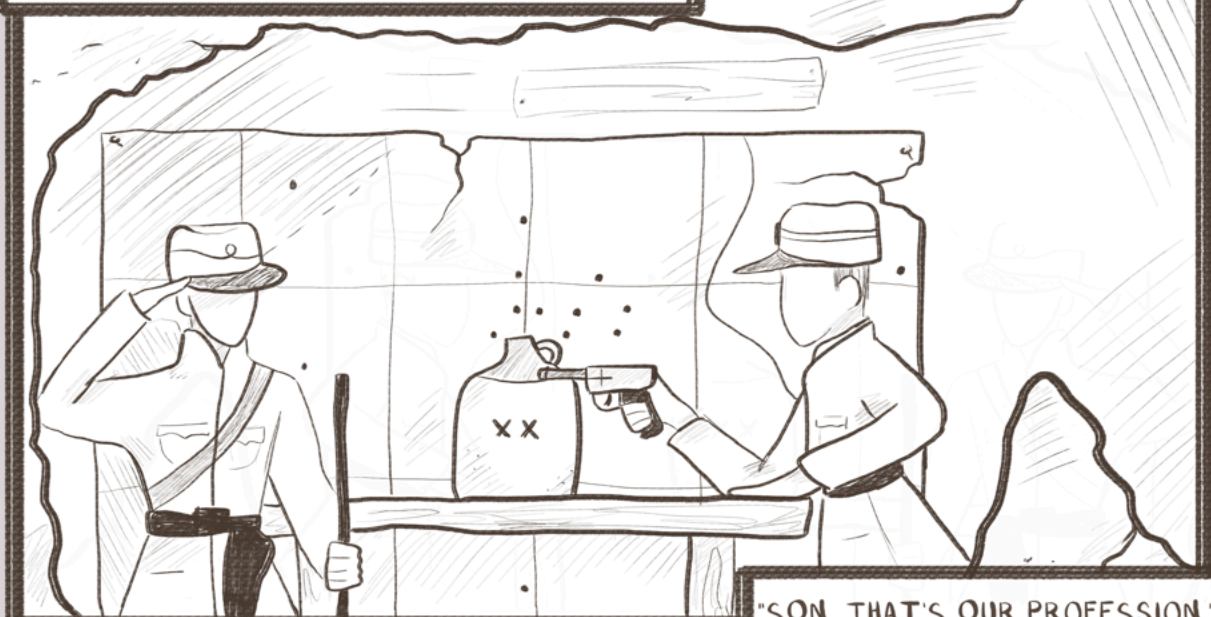
"THAT'S
OUR
DUTY."



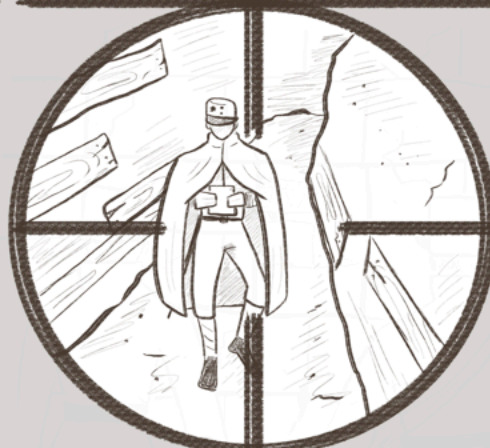
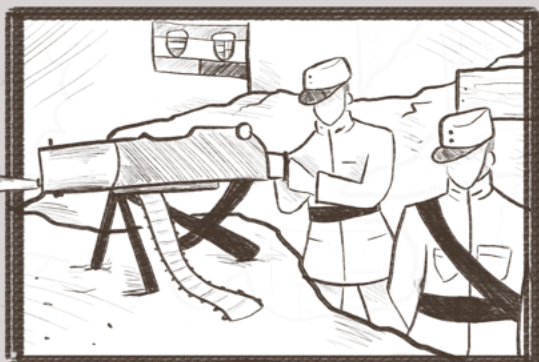
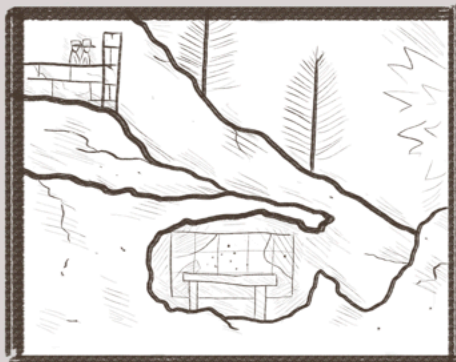
"VIVA L'ITALIA!"



"GENERAL, SIR, WE'RE JUST GOING FROM ONE BLUNDER TO ANOTHER OUT THERE."



"SON, THAT'S OUR PROFESSION."



"FIGHTING A WAR IS ONE THING
KILLING A MAN IS SOMETHING ELSE."

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