

## **The Resistance in Val Chisone**

With the armistice of the 8<sup>th</sup> September 1943, the whole Val Chisone was in turmoil. The Italian Royal Army, actually broken up, left many of their counterworks, both big and small, scattered between the alpine watershed and the plain of Pinerolo. The civilians took advantage of this situation, plundering any military structure left unattended, seizing everything useful : from food to blankets, from mules to hay, from weapons to ammunitions. Finally the IV Armata Alpina could come back home, even if in scattered formation, from the South-East of France. Against this background of confusion, the first groups of Resistance were born: at Sestrières, the sergeant Maggiorino Marcellin ( Bluter) of the Alpine troops started to lead his comrades; in Roure, both the mechanic Fiore Toye and the second lieutenant Eugenio Juvenal were at the head of soldiers from the cavalry school of Pinerolo, university students from Torino and valley dwellers from Inverso di Pinasca and Pomaretto in val Germanasca; in Perosa Argentina, the second lieutenant Enrico Gay, belonging to a family of local mining entrepreneurs , captained both students and workers; in Pinasca, the communist worker Rocco Galliano was a reference point for other workers ; at Gran Dubbione, a place upstream Pinasca, the second lieutenant Silvio Geuna was in charge of a group of university students mostly following Azione Cattolica. These groups were made up of people very different from each other. From a political point of view, some of them directed towards the Communist Party or Christian Democracy, others towards the Socialist Party, the “Partito d’Azione” or the Liberal Party. From a religious point of view, some were of Catholic faith, others of Evangelical- Waldensian faith. But very often these people did not demonstrate a particular interest for a political party or a religious faith. In fact what prevailed was the desire to defend their own autonomy even if it was impossible not to realize that the need for weapons , food supply and equipment united them. In order to break the deadlock, Marcellin organized several meetings among the leaders of the groups and brought into contact with the civilians of the underground antifascist committee of Pinerolo. But the only concrete result he obtained was to carry out a common action on the 13<sup>th</sup> September aimed to take weapons from the fort of Fenestrelle, that even turned out badly because of the intervention of the German soldiers. In exchange, the first repressive operations carried out by the enemy, that toward the middle of October brought about the total destruction of the antifascist committee of Pinerolo and the arrest of the leaders of the group of Roure- even if they were released after a short detention- had the effect to speed up their union. Towards the end of Autumn, the groups of Sestrières, Roure and Perosa Argentina joined the independent brigade “Val Chisone” and Marcellin was recognized by everyone as the leader. Just Marcellin was accredited with finding the solution to remove the destructive potential of diversity, preserving wide ranges of autonomy for each group and suggesting as mutual reference point the liberation of Italy from nazi-fascism and the loyalty to the institutions of the Liberal State. At the end of November, after several actions intended to gain possession of mortars, machine guns both small and heavy, hand grenades, rifles and ammunitions, the brigade became the repeated target of the Germans attacks . So Marcellin had to move the command from Sestrierès to Val Tronca, on the right orographical bank of Chisone upstream Pragelato, where the formation could be reinforced by valley-dwellers, coming from Rodoretto in Val Germanasca, led by miner Enrico Poet (Baldin)

and could also find a better cohesion with the arrival of the commanders of the group of Perosa Argentina.

At the beginning of 1944, after an allied bombing had destroyed the plant of Riv in Villar Perosa, forcing to stop and partly displace the war production of ball bearing, the Germans started to consolidate their territorial control, organizing a training centre for the Italian SS in Pinerolo, getting them to guard the urban centres and putting pressure on the inhabitants in order to deter them from supporting the partisans. Such a decision was due to the strategic importance of the valley, where there was an arterial road – highway n° 23- linking France to Italy through Monginevro and a base of mine, engineering and textile industries. In February, the brigade moved the command to the deep valley of Bourcet, on the orographic right side of the valley of Chisone near Roure. From this place, the brigade carried out acts of sabotage against the highway, the power and telephone lines and the plant of Riv, that had not been set up yet. Between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> March, the initiatives became more and more intense, causing first the capture of a captain and three soldiers of the Republican National Guard in Roure and after several attacks against Perosa Argentina arranged with the groups of Justice and Freedom of the valleys Pellice and Germanasca. The reaction of the enemy was instantaneous. On the 21<sup>st</sup> March the Italian SS soldiers, supported by Wehrmacht, burned down the hamlet Pons di Pomaretto and killed a few inhabitants; the next day they repeated the reprisal against the hamlets Chialma and Brandoneugna di Perosa Argentina. After the fusillade of the four prisoners, ordered by Marcellin, on the 23<sup>rd</sup> March, the nazi-fascists concentrated their attacks on Bourcet. The partisans were able to hold on for about a week, but finally they had to fall back to the deep valley of Massello and from there to Val Troncea across ridges and valleys almost completely covered with snow. Once again, the civilians had to endure the burden of a revenge that involved the destruction of several mountain pastures and of the whole village of Chasteiran, the most important in Bourcet. And neither the new base of the brigade was completely safe. The attacks caused by the nazi-fascists on the second half of April, although the objective to move out the partisans was not achieved, originated several fires that destroyed the hamlets of Troncea and Seytes. The enemy pressure weakened the “Val Chisone” brigade, whose ranks were, in return, strengthened from the arrival of young people coming partly from the valley of Susa and partly from the group of Gran Dubbione, criticised for their cautious behaviour. But it was just this group to be attacked by the enemy on the 10<sup>th</sup> May, as a result of the Habicht operation that put the near Val Sangone to fire and sword, and eventually destroyed with the capture and fusillade of 27 of their members. After a combing made by SS on the second half of May, the nazi-fascists left the high Val Chisone keeping permanent garrisons only in Perosa Argentina in the defence of the industrial area of Villar Perosa, and in Cesana, to preserve the practicability of Monginevro. In order to prevent new attacks, Marcellin ordered to sabotage the highway n°23; using the dynamite reclaimed in the graphite mines under the hill of Roussa, the partisans caused 82 road blockages, the most important in Fenestrelle, where they blew up a redoubt of the fort. Even if not officially declared, the “free zone” of the high valley gave the brigade the uncommon task to rule the territory. So the command picked out the civilians knowing how to handle with the official authorities, established their own ration and police services, dispensed justice and even made measures to control the wood heritage, regulating the cutting of trees. With the aim of diverting attention of the nazi-fascists, they ordered several actions of attack and sabotage in areas far from the “free zone” as well. The flood of young people, increasing the numbers up to about 1600 units - but only half of them were properly armed – very soon obliged the command to revise the

organizing structure of the brigade. The reorganization was preceded from bitter controversy that set Marcellin, accused of excessive centralization of the command, beside Enrico Gay, Toye, Juvenal and Gianni Daghero (Lupo) who even menaced the splitting. It was the major Antonio Guermani (Tonino ) who solved the dispute. He had expressly been sent by the Military Regional Command of the Committee of National Liberation CLN, and he confirmed the command to Marcellin, even if the lieutenant Ettore Serafino, the captain Giovanni Gonella (Ferrua) and the colonel Tullio Giordana ( Colonnello Delfino) were set beside him. At that point the reorganization could take place, dividing the brigade into battalions and companies, whose leaders were elected by the partisans themselves. The battalion "Monte Albergian", first assigned to the lieutenant Renzo Prete (Branco) and afterwards to Gonella and finally to Giordana, was made up of the 228<sup>th</sup> company led by Gay and lined up in Laux, of the 229<sup>th</sup> led by Poet and placed in Pourrières, and of the 230<sup>th</sup> led by Toye and placed in Prigelato. The battalion "Monte Assietta", assigned to Serafino, was on the contrary made up by the 231<sup>st</sup> company led by Ugo Enrico and placed at Sestrières, by the 232<sup>nd</sup> led first by Luciano Beltramo (Guy) and afterwards by the second lieutenant Fausto Gavazzeni ( Tenente Rossi) placed on Mount Triplex and by the 233<sup>rd</sup> captained by Ezio Musso (Robba) and placed on Mount Grand Serin. In addition, they organized the corps of Engineers in charge of Gastone Gallo Bona, the Artillery unit captained by the second lieutenant Guido Rostagno and whose posts were placed on Mount Banchetta, at Sestrières and at Laux, the Medical Service run by the captain Marco Bermond, and the "Liberi Carabinieri" put together after the stations of Sestrières and Oulx had been abandoned. The situation in the high valley alarmed the German commands, conscious of the precarious links between the transalpine region and the Po valley, and of the more hazardous prospect of an allied landing in southern France. On the 16<sup>th</sup> July, the cannonade from the partisan positions on mount Triplex introduced an attack brought from the Val Susa side by German alpine troops, but the men of Serafino were able to thwart it. The dangerous situation worried the command of the brigade, that hastened to prepare a detailed plan for the defence of the valley, structuring three flexible lines between Perosa Argentina and Fenestrelle and a rigid one in Val Troncea, and for a possible withdrawal. The fears of the command of "Val Chisone" very soon proved to be correct. On the 29<sup>th</sup> July , as a matter of fact, the operation Nachtigall was started, one of the most lethal operations ever carried out by the nazi-fascists in the occupied territories of Italy . Preceded by the bombing of the ridge between the hill of Finestre and mount Fraitève, the attack started from Perosa Argentina and, held by two armoured convoys, caused the withdrawal of the partisans to Fenestrelle. With the support of the aviation and, once more, of the artillery, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> August a second front was opened on mount Gènevèris, where a column left from Oulx engaged the brigade a long time but was not able to conquer the positions. On the 3<sup>rd</sup>, one of the convoys, supported by the aviation, went up from Dépôt to the hill of Fenestre and afterwards went down to Laux, causing a further withdrawal of the defences to Usseaux. On the 5<sup>th</sup> , an armoured train cannonaded the watershed ridge of the Val di Susa and a plane bombed Prigelato, causing five dead among the civilians. On the 9<sup>th</sup> August, the nazi-fascists, whose reinforcements were coming from the deep valley of Massello and the valleys Argentiera, Germanasca, Pellice and Susa, reached the mouth of Val Troncea, where the "Val Chisone" brigade had concentrated their men. Noting the almost complete encirclement , the command decided to divide the brigade into smaller groups in order to allow them to pass through the net of the enemy. Even if the manoeuvre enabled most partisans to rescue among Val di Susa, France and – across Val Sangone- the area of Cumiana, the death toll was awful: 20 young men fell on the battlefield; 9 died of privation on the mountains; 23 were captured and eventually executed

or deported. The consequences for the inhabitants of Val Troncea were dramatic as well, since they suffered the destruction of the hamlets of Pattermouche and Laval. The allied landing in Provence, on the 15<sup>th</sup> August, led to the displacement of the nazi-fascist search southward the Po valley and, at the same time, breathed hope to the command of the brigade, that fled to safety together with 30-40 partisans on mount Barifreddo, on the edge of Val Troncea. Supposing a forthcoming invasion of Piemonte through the alpine passes, Marcellin gathered the men on Mayt hill and from there they got down to France, and at Vallouise they met an allied command. However he became aware that his expectations did not correspond to the Anglo-American plans and the only possible thing was to turn back along the same way, coming back to Italy through the Agnello hill and Val Varaita, finally reaching Val Chisone, where he settled in Gran Dubbione. At the end of August, the subdivision of the territory of Piemonte into military zones aggregated the partisan groups of the valleys of Sangone, Chisone, Germanasca and Pellice, giving them to the command of Guermani, that had settled in the hamlet Granges of Prigelato. At the same time, the "Val Chisone" was renamed I Independent division always led by Marcellin and subdivided into the brigades "Monte Albergian" led by Serafino, and "Valdora" captained by Gonella and eventually by the officer Franco Faldella. The "Valdora" had as operations field the middle and high Val di Susa. The "Val Chisone" was divided into groups : the "Enrico Gay" was arrayed between Villar Perosa and Perosa Argentina; the "Bruno Jourdan" , led by Poet between Villar Perosa and Perosa Argentina ; the "Mario Costa", captained by Toye in the vicinity of Roure; and lastly the "Aventino Pace" assigned first to Piero Catti and after to the lieutenant Giovanni Bertolotto (Berard); the "Fratelli Caffer" assigned first to Juvenal and after to the student Rodolfo Sacco ( Rodolfo Massarano), the "Antonio Catania" led by Gavazzeni, and the "Guido Morello" captained first by Daghero and after by Nicola Avramo that operated around Cumiana. Throughout Autumn and early Winter, the activity of "Val Chisone" acquired the characteristics of guerrilla, with repeated attacks to nazi-fascists and sabotage to the railway carried out in the plain among Pinerolo, Orbassano and Torino. On the other hand, the continuous searches of the enemy inflicted on the brigade great loss of life: 9 partisans- among which Juvenal himself- at Cantalupa on the 2<sup>nd</sup> November; 12, besides three captured- among which Gavazzeni- and two them afterwards executed, in Cumiana on the 26<sup>th</sup> November : 5 - and among them Daghero- still in Cumiana on the 30<sup>th</sup> December. Unfortunately, not only the "Aventino Pace" had to be split up but also the "Bruno Jourdan" and the "Maria Costa" were so reduced to amalgamate into one group. After the fatigues conducted in France, freed during the first months of 1945, that aimed to obtain weapons, ammunitions, equipment and money, the birth of the Volunteer Corps of Freedom gave rise to a further reorganization of the partisan forces. The "Valdora" brigade was aggregated into 41<sup>st</sup> unified division to the groups "Justice and Freedom" and "Garibaldi" operating on the right orographic side of Valle di Susa. The "Monte Albergian" brigade- renamed in honour of Eugenio Juvenal- on the contrary joined the V division "Justice and Freedom" in Val Germanasca in the 44<sup>th</sup> division "Adolfo Serafino", assigned to Ettore Serafino. As for Marcellin, he received the assignment of inspector and was the person in charge of maintaining contact with the Allies and the zone command. Since the final insurrection was close, the "Enrico Juvenal" brigade was commissioned to control the German withdrawal and to maintain the public order. While the group deployed in the area of Cumiana attacked the retreating German lines, suffering two more victims on the 26<sup>th</sup> April, the one lined up in the low Val Chisone, entered Pinerolo three days later. In the same days, a contingent of transalpine soldiers went down the valley intending to take its charge and it was Marcellin who had the task to deal with

the new invaders until the allied Supreme Command decided the new border between France and Italy .