

A Story About The Tyrrhenian Sea Pirate Pellerito

By James C. Herrinton

It is, it is a glorious thing
To be a Pirate King.

The Pirates of Penzance (1879) act 1
W. S. Gilbert (Sir William Schwenck Gilbert)
1836-1911
English writer

July - August, 1925

On a warm 86° day, chunky, dark-eyed, black-haired six-year-old Antonio Pellerito hid behind the seaward side of a very large black rock on a beach near Anzio, a resort town about 30 miles south of Rome. The comfortably warm water of the Tyrrhenian Sea was at high tide and lapped gently at Antonio's bare toes. Antonio wore a sailor suit with white bell-bottomed trousers, a sailor's tie, and a jean collar with a shade of blue similar to the rich dark blue of the sea that appeared to Antonio to be very like the blue of the ink in the jar resting atop his father's desk back in Michigan. Overhead was the more aristocratic, cloudless, lighter blue of the sky. When Antonio looked to where the blues of the sea and sky met, he saw that the blue of the sky was undisturbed whereas the sea's blue was filled with white-capped wave heads, which would appear and disappear as quickly as the small white duck targets in a carnival shooting gallery. A lanyard securing a whistle hung from Antonio's neck.

Antonio was sailing at that seashore because his mother, father, and he were spending what his father described as "six weeks off with pay" vacationing at his paternal grandparents' beach house. This was both the first and the last time that Antonio's family would vacation at Anzio. And it was the very last time that he and his parents would be in the company of his Italian grandma and grandpa.

The beach house was three stories and its exterior was painted a bright yellow with lime-green window trim and frames. A sitting room, a bathroom, and a kitchen whose windows faced the sea were located on the first floor. Three bedrooms occupied the second floor. On the third floor was an unfinished attic with a floor of unfinished boards nailed to joists. Light to the attic was provided by one window in an attic dormer that also faced the sea. Antonio never visited the attic because he could not find the access to it.

The large black rock that attracted Antonio was situated somewhat kitty-cornered from the beach house, but not so much as to prevent a good line of sight between the rock and the beach house's kitchen windows. The seaward side of the rock gave Antonio his own place. He held out on the beach for as long as he could each day of those wondrous and enchanting six weeks.

Antonio had conquered the black rock on his first day at the shore. His first act on that first day was to impress a crew of able-bodied seamen for his pirate ship. It was that pirate crew which, with Antonio to lead them, wrested control of the rock from the sea.

At every high tide the sea would try to take the rock back, but the sea's attempts always ended up short, with its waters giving up just as they were lapping at the rock's seaward side.

From his own place behind the rock, Antonio watched several rather large black chattering birds both on, and flying about, the dormer roof. Antonio saw that the birds never seemed to leave.

Antonio crafted small wooden boats from his grandmother's clothespins and carried them to the shore. The large black rock was his home island. With his hands he shoveled and scooped canals into the warm sand about the large black rock, and watched the sea wavelets ebb and flow in his canals and float his clothespin boats. He built sand castles and forts. He pretended to be the Tyrrhenian Sea Pirate Pellerito. Antonio plied his fighting brigantine ship between the islands of Corsica and Sardinia, doing good by attacking the robber barons and doling out the spoils of war to the poor. He barked aloud his orders to the deckhands on his ship. Occasionally he would sail to

Anzio, make anchorage offshore, make a spectacular high dive from his ship's captain's deck, swim to shore with his knife clenched in his teeth, wend his way from the large black rock to the Anzio defenders' quartermaster's store (i.e., his grandmother's kitchen) and plunder and pillage his grandmother's cookie jar to feed the inner pirate, all without being caught sight of by the garrison's defenders. Antonio's grandmother did her best to keep her cookie jar filled with *dolci di fichi*, which he remembered were made with figs and almonds and were crisp outside and soft and chewy inside.

During those six weeks at Anzio, the Sea Pirate had committed to his childhood memory every possible hiding place between the high-tide water line and the cookie cache. Antonio never forgot that glorious summer.

After six weeks of pirating and pillaging, Antonio and his parents bid their farewells to *nonno* and *nonna* and returned to their home in Michigan.

January 22, 1944

The bobbing LST (Landing Ship Tanks) in which 25-year-old Sgt. Antonio (now Tony) Pellerito found himself was not carrying tanks but was jammed with U.S. Third Infantry Division troops, packed so closely together that none of the soldiers could bend this way or that, much less sit down. There were the stench of war—diesel exhaust fumes, burning gunpowder and cordite, wet canvas, the smells of scared soldiers who had been sardined into this landing ship since it had embarked from Naples the day before, seasick vomit, human shit, fear, and terror. Tony and the other soldiers on board the LST knew only that they were going to invade Italy's western shore. They didn't know they would become the first wave of troops to be unloaded that day on the Anzio beach. The sun had not yet broken over Anzio's eastern horizon, but it was about to.

The air temperature that early morning was 42°. The sea was much colder.

Although the waves were not high, the sea's swells through which the invasion force had sailed over the past 24 hours had revved up vomiting by the troops on board the LST. The LST was about 328 feet in length and its beam was 50 feet. Because it was meant for beach landings, the LST had a draft of only a little over three feet. It rode high in the water and, as a result, reacted to the sea swells like a cork. The swells had their greatest effect on those troops mobbed together toward the ship's bow, and when the LST headed down from the crest of a swell to its trough, it felt to Tony that the downward plunge of the ship would leave him hanging in midair. Tony looked above him and saw that the pre-dawn light was erasing the moon and the stars from his sight.

Those on the LST with Sgt. Pellerito saw the Luftwaffe ground-strafting Messerschmitt Bf 109 fighter planes overhead and heard their drone.

Two terrified 19-year-old faces popped up in front of Tony. Each was wearing PFC stripes on his uniform sleeve. Tony shouted over the noise to them.

"How're you fellas doin'?"

"The cold don' bother me none, but I'm scared as hell, sarge. I just crapped in my pants. I dunno if I can handle this."

Tony looked the young private in the eye. "Every guy on this LST is thinkin' the same thing, private. As for shittin' in your pants, you think you're the first guy in this army to dump in his pants? By the way, what's your guys' names? We've got a little time to talk before we hit the beach."

"My name's Copeland, Al Copeland. I got shipped from the Third Infantry Replacement Depot to the Third Infantry. This is my first action, sarge."

"My name's Ernie Brown," said the other PFC. "I'm a replacement too. This is my first battle too."

Exhausted and nervous himself from lack of sleep and tension of the attack, Tony struggled to remain calm as well as to calm. He hollered above the shipboard noise, “Try to relax a little. Our cruisers and destroyers behind us are giving us a lot of fire support ... so what do you fellas want to do when this war’s over and you’re shipped home?”

“I want to get a job runnin’ heavy equipment,” Al replied first, “and get married to my girlfriend and have a family. I wanna be the best goddamn crane operator in the county.”

“I don’t have a girlfriend,” Ernie said, “I wanta be a teacher. I’m going to go to college when I get back. What’re you gonna do, sarge?”

Tony’s face brightened. “Well, fellas, I’m a lawyer from Michigan. I got my law degree in June of ’41. After that, I went into the army. I’m married and my wife, Janet, and I have a little boy. His name is Jabby Waite Pellerito and he’s three years old. And to borrow your words, Al, I’ve got this fire in my belly to someday be the best goddamn lawyer in the state of Michigan.”

“Have you been in combat before, sarge?” Al asked.

“Yeah, Al. I landed with the 3rd at Fedala in North Africa in ’42, in ’43 I landed at Sicily, and later in ’43 I landed at Salerno. So far, so good, as they say.”

“Where did you and your missus find that name ‘Jabby Waite’ for your boy, sarge?” Ernie asked.

Tony smiled and chuckled, “Heh, that’s a story we hafta save for another day, Ernie. We’re just about ready to hit the beach. Remember, guys, that the 3rd Infantry is not alone on this beach. The British 1st Infantry Division and the 46th Royal Tank Regiment, the U.S. 751st Tank Battalion, the 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment of the 82nd Airborne Division and the 509th Parachute Infantry Battalion, two British Commando battalions, and three battalions of U.S. Army Rangers are all with us. Today will be a day both of you and I will remember for the rest of our lives. Welcome to Operation Shingle!”

“I betcha you’d rather be practicin’ law than doin’ this stuff, sarge,” Al said.

“As I see it, Al, all of us here today are doin’ some law work in this goddamn war. We’re arrestin’ ... we’re putting the damn collar on ... Hitler and all of them other rats’ asses who don’t buy into the rule of international law and human decency.”

The three soldiers felt the LST’s keel scrape the beach and shudder to a stop. The LST’s two bow doors opened—one to the right and the other to the left—and the 14-foot-wide ramp deployed, giving its troops entry to the beach.

As Tony ran down the landing ramp, he knew at once where he was. No more than 20 yards to his right was the same black rock at which the Tyrrhenian Sea Pirate Pellerito had planned his derring-do 19 years before. The yellow beach house was still standing. The early morning sun was rising behind it. Tony yelled to Ernie and Al, “Follow me!”

The three soldiers ran to the rock and huddled together behind it. The rock was smaller than Tony had remembered. There was incoming rifle fire, but none of the three of them could spot its source. Tony snapped out to Al and Ernie, “We can’t hide behind this rock for more than a few minutes, guys. We’ve gotta get off this beach. Be careful, but try to spot who’s doing the shootin’ at us.”

The three of them peeked over the top of the rock. Tony scoped right off that the dormer window on the yellow house in front of them was gone and that the black birds were gone, but that’s all he could see that was any different about the place.

Tony’s thumb pointed back to the sea. “Fellas, take a look behind you. See those DUCKS dropping soldiers off at the beach and going back for more troops? Those are black soldiers who are manning those DUCKS. Those guys are open to the German shore guns as well as to the strafing by the German planes. In my book, they’re the real heroes of this goddamn invasion!”

In the attic of the yellow house, sitting on an overturned box, 19-year-old German 14th Army Corporal Abel Amsel nervously surveyed through the open window frame what was down at the beach in front of him. The sun rising behind the beach house hid the sweating and anxious squad leader. These would be his first kills. Lying across his lap was his MP40 fully automatic submachine gun. He had never before fired it in combat. The three soldiers behind the rock were easily within the MP40's effective range of 100 meters. Gefreiter Amsel's MP40 was a little over 32 inches long when its folding metal stock was extended, as it was now.

Corporal Amsel had loaded his MP40 with 30 rounds of 9 × 19 mm bullets. The weapon was designed for 32 rounds, but the corporal learned in his training that those extra two rounds could cause the magazine clip to wear out prematurely and jam. Besides, 30 rounds would be enough.

Corporal Amsel lifted his MP40 from his lap. He rose from the box on which he had been sitting, positioned it between himself and the window, and crouched down behind it, using it to steady the steel resting support under the front end of the MP 40's barrel. He pressed the metal stock to his right shoulder. He sighted the three faces looking about from behind the black rock below him, at the edge of the sea. He learned in training that his MP40 would tend to stray upward and to the right unless he held the weapon firmly. He folded his right hand about the pistol grip. He carefully avoided placing his left hand on the magazine because he knew that using the magazine as a handhold could cause the magazine lips to move out of the line of feed and cause a malfunction. He instead extended his left arm and wrapped his left hand around the front of the magazine housing. Once he began firing, the 30 rounds would be spent quickly—the MP40's rate of fire was 500 rounds per minute. He wanted to kill all three of the soldiers down on the beach, and to do that he had to wait until he could see all three faces above the rock.

He unlocked the safety by unlocking the bolt. He reminded himself that the MP40 9.9 inch barrel had no insulation, so his left hand would be burned if he didn't keep it off the barrel while firing.

“Al and Ernie, let's take one last look for the sniper. If we can't see him, then on my count of three run toward the right side of that yellow house, keep running until you're beyond the house, and from there we'll keep on moving. Okay, do you see anything?”

Corporal Amsel could see all three faces below him, peering over the rock. Before he could fire his gun, the corporal had to focus on his breathing. He was excited and thirsted for great gulps of air because of it, but he willed himself to stop breathing. He aimed his weapon toward the face to his left. He would rake from left to right. Then he made his final sighting of that face through the gun's sight. Finally, he squeezed the trigger, slowly, with his right forefinger. The spent shell casings flew out of the right side of the gun, but he neither saw nor heard them. It was over in an instant. Below him, the three soldiers were now tangled marionettes, with legs and arms seemingly tethered to strings dropped from the fingers of a drunken puppeteer. Each of the three steel helmets no longer framed a face below it. No, no more. Now each helmet was strapped to a mass of red-dyed garbage beneath it.

The 8.82 pounds of Corporal Amsel's submachine gun had become very heavy. He gently laid the MP40 on the attic floor beside him. He crept forward to the box in front of him and knelt facing the window, with his forearms resting on the box and with his hands, palms upward, side by side on top of the box. He lowered his head into his open hands.

Then Corporal Abel Amsel raised his head slightly from his open palms, whispered to himself, "Bisber nicht schlecht,"⁴ leaned forward, vomited into his hands, and sobbed.

Epilogue

For each of the 133 days that passed from the date of the Anzio Invasion on January 22, 1944, until the Allies liberated Rome on June 4, 1944, the Allies advanced an average of two-tenths of a mile each day. During that 133 days, the allied VI Corps suffered 29,200 combat casualties (4,400 killed, 18,000 wounded, and 6,800 prisoners or missing in action). Two-thirds of those losses, amounting to 17 percent of VI Corps' effective strength, were inflicted during the first 39 days following the initial landings at Anzio. Of the combat casualties, 16,200 were Americans—2,800 killed, 11,000 wounded, and 2,400 prisoners or missing in action. German combat losses, suffered wholly by the 14th Army, were estimated at 27,500 (5,500 killed, 17,500 wounded, and 4,500

prisoners or missing in action). Among all of those killed and maimed were some damn good teachers, some damn good heavy equipment operators, some damn good dreamers, some damn good poets, and some goddamn good lawyers.

¹ “So far, so good.”