

Movie-like story of Maurizio Sarri's grandfather: The heroic rescue of American pilots during World War II

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Maurizio Sarri (©Gallo Images)

For more than two months, Gofredo Sari hid two Americans 100 meters from the main German headquarters, knowing what fate awaits him if he gets caught

Maurizio Sarri has coached a large number of Italian clubs. In most of them he did not gain the status of a hero, but he can brag that there is a true hero in his family, although there are few attributes that could describe the heroism of his grandfather. **Gofredo Sarri** risked his life during World War II to save two American pilots whose planes were shot down by the Germans during the occupation of Italy. He hid them for two months, then organized a plan for their escape and took them to safety, and with his heroism wrote a story that has the potential to become a film one day.

In 1944, Italy was under German occupation after the overthrow and arrest of fascist dictator **Benito Mussolini**. Allied forces invaded from the south, but the German army found itself in the mountains around Florence. **Bill Lanza** from Revere, Massachusetts, was the shooter in the seven-member crew of the B-25 bomber, which had a mission to destroy

one strategically important bridge. However, the German anti-aircraft forces shot down the plane from which **Lanza** miraculously managed to get out. Jumping from the burning plane, he landed onto one the field, and was immediately approached by two Italian boys.

One of them was **Amerigo Sarri**, **Maurizio**'s father.

The pilot crashed and died when he directed the plane into a mountain, thus buying time for the rest of the crew so they could get out. Two were captured, while four, including **Lanza**, managed to escape the Germans. **Lanza** ended up with another crew member in the village of Val D'Arno, 200 miles behind enemy lines. **Lanza** and one of his crew-colleagues **Todd** followed the advice of a local farmer and hid in the woods, covering themselves with leaves. It was the farmer who brought **Gofredo Sarri**. **Amerigo**'s father was a partisan, which means that he was against the German occupation. Without introducing himself, **Gofredo** immediately brought **Lanza** a bottle of wine and cheese and told his new friends to go back to the forest and hide. After sunset, **Gofredo** went again to the place where **Lanza** was hiding and took him to the farm in civilian clothes.

The incredible story was later told by **John Lanza**, **Bill Lanza**'s nephew in the 2010 book '*Shot Down Over Italy*'.

"In the afternoon, around four o'clock, I hid in the woods and felt pretty good because the wine was strong and the cheese delicious. He (Gofredo Sarri) was carrying a bag of civilian clothes. I changed my military clothes to a white T-shirt and an oxford gray suit. I gave him my clothes but kept my shoes. Partisan's name was Sarri. That's the only name I ever called him", Bill Lanza told his daughter and his nephew, who eventually made sure the story sees the light of day.

If he had been caught, **Lanza** would have been characterized as a spy and certainly tortured and killed. **Sarri**'s grandfather risked being killed as a helper to the enemies.

"After sunset, Sarri instructed me to follow him home. In new clothes, I followed him along a muddy road. He was walking about sixty meters in front of me. As we walked, two German trucks full of soldiers passed us", Lanza recalled.

Sarri took him and **Todd** to a cave on their land where they lived for the next 65 days, while the Italian family brought them pasta, soup and bread. The Germans knew that the surviving members of the American crew were being helped by the Italians, and they flooded the area with military troops. It is hard to believe, but the cave in which **Todd** and **Lanza** temporarily lived was only 100 meters away from the main headquarters of the German army.

"They never knew we were here, but I certainly knew they were there. I was out of the cave every morning I could see them doing gymnastics. I listened to their machine guns all night. They had machine guns sound much faster than American ones and that sound drove me crazy. We slept on straw mattresses in the cave, but sometimes we bathed and washed clothes on the farm."

Lanza was aware of how much risk **Sarri** was taking.

"When people were caught helping Americans, no questions were asked,"
Lanza said. **"There were many brutal killings. There were at least 200 that I heard of."**

Young **Amerigo** (**Maurizio Sarri's** father) would often stop by to check on two pilots.

"Amerigo was a regular visitor to the cave. One of the games was that someone slapped you on the arm in the dark, and you had to guess who it was. It sounds silly, but we tried to get the best out of the circumstances we were in."

Two months passed since the pilots jumped out of the burning plane, and the Germans were slowly giving up the search and pulling soldiers out of the Italian village.

Then **Gofredo** prepared **Lanza** and **Todd's** escape plan. He wrote a letter to the German commander in which he announced that he would follow some miners through the city. Of course, they were not miners. The most difficult task on the way to freedom was to cross the bridge outside the village, which was well guarded by the Nazis.

"The Germans were in fox holes and they were shooting at planes bombing the area. They must have thought we were crazy because bombs and bullets were flying everywhere we passed. They didn't have time to fool around with civilians, we were in normal clothes and we looked like refugees. We passed Nazi trucks again. I'm amazed that I managed to get past the German soldiers who were looking for me. You can imagine how nervous I was. I trusted Sarri and he never let me down. In fact, we trusted each other."

Gofredo did his duty and took **Lanza** and **Todd** as far as he could. After staying in the basement of a Silesian church with hidden Jewish families, the pilots managed to find refuge with English soldiers. Their rescue was possible only thanks to the grandfather of the current Lazio manager, who in the meantime received a letter from American General **Joseph T. McNarney**, in which he thanked **Godfredo** for his courage.

Six years ago, **Maurizio Sarri** was asked by a *La Repubblica* journalist to comment on his grandfather's incredible heroism.

"His name was Gofredo, he was very proud of the recognition he received from the White House memorandum ... As a partisan, he found the pilots of an American plane

shot down in Val D'Arno and hid them, and then you could get shot for doing much less. One of the pilots was called Bill Lanza, I know because his daughter and nephew wrote a book about it", said Maurizio Sarri.

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