

Oswaldo Saragiotto was born May 11th, 1920 in the small town of Sierra Negra in Sao Paulo state. His parents were immigrants from Padua, Italy, and he learned to speak Italian from them. Sierra Negra was a small town, high up in the mountains. It was a mostly rural area with some commerce and a small tourism industry. Most of the people involved in the local industries were Italian and worked on coffee plantations. As a small town, it had a tiny population of around 10,000 people at most, so it was a very calm place to grow up.

Oswaldo left high school around the age of 17. After school, he worked in his father's business selling general goods in Sierra Negra. He was one of ten children—eight boys and two girls—but he is the only one left now. Life was good. They were not rich but they did not go through great difficulty or hunger. It was a good life consisting of simple things.

Before the war, Oswaldo remembers two key things: soccer, which is always present in Brazil, and the great Wall Street crash and depression of 1929. They felt the crash in Sierra Negra because of the effect on coffee production and selling, and on other goods. This happened after a time of some turbulence, a kind of dictatorship under the president Getúlio Vargas. This was an interesting period in Brazilian history because, after WW1, the part of the Brazilian population that took part in the war, and felt they were fighting to free other countries from dictatorships, then had a role in the replacing of dictatorship for democracy.

The Italians in Brazil knew about Hitler and Mussolini, and there were some groups that liked fascism. Oswaldo's father and Italians generally in Brazil had a positive vision of Mussolini. However, they only had a vague idea of fascism as information was scarce; they only had radio and letters to get information in the interior of the country. They knew about it, some families endorsed it, but it was very far from their reality and they did not get detailed information.

Oswaldo first became aware that another war was coming on reading about it in newspapers and hearing about it in radio programmes. However, it was very distant from the reality in Sierra Negra. Even after he *went* to war, he wasn't entirely aware of what was happening. There was a general sense that a war in Europe was going on, but nothing more than that. He heard about the outbreak of war in 1939 and the attack on Pearl Harbour in 1941 on the radio. Nobody from the common population of Brazil expected that the country would be involved in any way. At the beginning, they saw it as something beyond their lives, not something that they needed to worry about. People first began to feel that the war could reach Brazil when commercial ships were sunk, most probably by German U-boats, with great loss of life (a couple of hundreds of people). This is when it came to seem real to Brazilians.

Oswaldo joined the army when he was around 23 years old. He was conscripted; he did not volunteer. There were some regular Army members but most were conscripted from throughout Brazil. They had no choice as to whether they would be sent overseas with the Brazilian Expeditionary Force. In fact, low-ranking soldiers like Oswaldo were never told that they were going to be sent to Italy on an American ship. They were simply given orders—'Go here! Do this! Do that!'—and they had to guess from this that they were going to Europe. It wasn't like today where we have information in many forms. They thought they might be going to Portugal to assist there; they were only told on the ship that they would be disembarking in Naples. When they got off the

ship in Naples port, they didn't know this but their military clothing looked a little like the Germans, so the local people in the port began cursing and spitting at them! They had thought they were German prisoners of war, coming in an American ship, disembarking when they were told to in uniforms like Germans. But they could talk to the people—Oswaldo and others spoke Italian—and they went from offended to creating almost a party atmosphere!

The Germans bombed the port of Naples at the precise time of the arrival of the Brazilian forces. The belief was that the Germans knew that the Brazilian forces would be arriving and disembarking then. The Brazilian soldiers were very surprised because, they announced the plan to disembark in Naples at a certain time, but they arrived three hours earlier. However, later, they saw the port being bombed by planes at the initial announced time and understood. This was the first time Oswaldo had seen the violence of the war. They were very scared at first because it was completely out of the ordinary.

At a certain point at the beginning of the war, some Jeeps—he believes they were Americans—arrived with bodies inside body bags, and they were being thrown around in a way that seemed careless to those who were just arriving. It shocked them to see the bodies being treated in such a rush. They complained about it, but, after a few weeks, they came to understand that this was the normal rhythm of the war, that they couldn't stop and take care of each body in an appropriate way.

Oswaldo was in the First Division of the Brazilian Expeditionary Force, under the command of General Mascarenhas de Moraes. Oswaldo only met General Mascarenhas in parades and the like, never in combat situations. He was generally highly respected by soldiers; they liked him very much and he was seen as a good man.

Because the ship was American, and there were some American officers on the ship, they felt that they were under coordination or command of the Americans. It wasn't direct but the Brazilian officers talked to the American officers and gave the orders to Brazilian soldiers. It was common to see American officers in the Brazilian barracks talking to Brazilian officers. What Oswaldo and other soldiers understood is that the Americans established the missions and the objectives, but that mission would be carried out entirely by the Brazilian army.

They received one month of training, and adequate clothing from the Americans. In Brazil, the Army didn't have clothes for a harsh winter. The Americans had to provide appropriate clothes for the winter, as well as practice and training. Oswaldo was in a mortar squad so was trained in this. He had already practiced with the same mortars that the Americans used in Brazil. He felt that the real difference was in quantity. In his training in Brazil, there was not much equipment. When they got to Naples, they were impressed by the quantity of equipment that the Americans had. As with the quantity of weapons, the Brazilians were impressed with the quantity of other things they provided like food. In training in Brazil, there was a normal, limited amount of food, but during the war, the Americans provided an excess of it. Whenever he was able to, he could eat however much he wanted. The Americans supplied them with everything.

In his company, one person was to have a submachine gun while the others would have pistols; the commander determined that he should carry the machine gun, along with his pistol and the mortar

tube. It was a company of heavy equipment, 'Petrechos Pesados' as Brazilians say, so they chose the biggest guys in the army. As soon as Oswaldo was conscripted, he arrived and it was determined that he would be part of this company. So he carried the mortar tube and the submachine gun given by the Americans.

Oswaldo first saw action in the Italian campaign about one month after their arrival. They received orders to occupy city after city in a gradual advance from the south to the north of Italy, such that when the war ended they were very near to the French border. They were moving north, up along the coast, into the Piedmont region.

They worked in threes, each carrying one part of the mortar: the base, the tube and another part. Oswaldo carried the tube and was responsible for making the shot. It was heavy to carry this on his back all the time. He instructed the others on safety issues and loaded the mortar shell into the tube. He stopped counting how many he had fired after 150 shells! If he had to guess, he would say that he fired thousands of shells. They used to bring them in big boxes. They kept shooting, but so did the Germans so they had to move from place to place after a couple of shots to evade the German mortars. It was a kind of art to find the perfect place to put the mortar, depending on the inclination and condition—if there was dust or snow for instance—and he developed this art throughout the war.

Oswaldo was promoted to Corporal due to his bravery. At one point, his team received orders to keep fighting throughout the night in a particularly cold location in order to disturb the Germans, to stop them from sleeping or resting for the entire night. They worked in shifts doing this in a house that was partially destroyed. When he swapped with his partner, he had a strange feeling because he could not hear the mortar firing. So he went to check this out and his friend was having a panic attack: he was crying and trembling and unable to make any shots. He sent this friend to sleep and made shots alone for the entire night. Because of this exceptional performance, he was recognised by his commanders and promoted to corporal.

He lost a few friends during the war, and there is one particular story he used to tell. During the night in the wintertime, they came across a house on a hill. Because it was on a hill, you could enter through the first floor when coming up the hill or the second floor coming down. The Brazilians came in through the first floor, but some Germans came in through the second floor, and they both stayed there throughout the night, not knowing that the other was on the other floor! When the day came, they both realised and the Brazilians had to jump through the windows and go rolling down the hill. One captain, of whom Oswaldo was very fond, was killed. He jumped out and a machine gun got him. Oswaldo used to tell this story often.

He used to complain that there were lots of spiny plants in the Italian terrain and they would often fall onto these when going uphill. The terrain was difficult for them, especially when it snowed. They had never seen snow before, or in fact sheep! Everything was new. The weather was very hard. They wore lots of layers to keep warm but it seemed useless; nothing worked to keep the cold out, no matter how many clothes they put on!

Oswaldo was involved in Monte Castello. It was very difficult, and he keeps one thing in his mind to this day. At a certain point, he went into a bunker with another soldier to protect themselves. The whole earth was shaking around them from the bombs the Germans were firing. He keeps with him this fear of being inside a hole, a bunker, and feeling the ground shake. This fear is what he remembers most from Monte Castello. It was the most intense battle of the war. After the very intense fighting, the Germans eventually gave up and surrendered. Oswaldo particularly remembers them coming down the hill and the fact that they had sent the ones who were hurt first. He remembers all kinds of injuries, missing arms and missing legs. It was a very bloody battle.