

A Story of Service

Francesco Di Cresce

(November 25, 1894 - June 22, 1918)



Sora Coat of Arms



Province of Frosinone

Francesco Di Cresce was born in the small hill town of Sora Italy located in the commune of Lazio and the province of Frosinone. Francesco was the 3rd child and oldest boy of seven(7) children of parents Pietro and Lucia Di Cresce (Matacchione). Older sisters Vincenza (1) , Restitutta (2) and younger brothers Antonio (4) , Giulio/Julius (5), Innocenco (6) and Sante (7). They were considered “contadini”. People who made their living farming. Francesco and Restitutta were close and when young would go to the market in town to sell the tomatoes and zucchini grown by the family. Being called a “contadino” in Italy was not an insult. But in America, the new way of thinking was like this. The moment an Italian peasant sets foot on Ellis Island, he becomes a “Signore”. A gentleman.



Born on November 25, 1894 Francesco was born under the Zodiac sign of the Archer Sagittarius. This sign symbolizes someone who aims high, has a positive outlook on life and has great charisma. Those traits surely helped Francesco who at the young age of 18 years traveled to the United States in search of opportunity and a better life for his family. Francesco Di Cresce was the first of his family on U.S. soil. Four (4) of the boys, Restitutta and their mother eventually emigrated and made new lives in the United States. Antonio made his home in Canada. All siblings had families and prospered.

It should be noted that Italians who stayed in the U.S. usually remained in close contact with their families in Italy and worked hard to send money back home. In 1896, a government commission on Italian immigration estimated that Italian immigrants sent or took home between \$4 million and \$30 million each year, and that “the marked increase in the wealth of certain sections of Italy can be traced directly to the money earned in the United States.”



Francesco arrived at Ellis Island on November 8, 1912. He sailed across the Atlantic Ocean on the passenger ship the S.S. CANADA. Francesco's voyage from Naples to New York would have taken about 7-10 days.



Antonio (Left) & Francesco (Right)



Francesco made his way from New York to the Pittsburg Pennsylvania area. He worked and resided in that area for the 4.5 years that he lived in the U.S. before enlisting to be a soldier. Information on his work history is sparse. The SS Canada Passenger List shows his occupation as "laborer" as were most Italians at that time. It was believed that Francesco worked in the coal mines and steel mills in the area. It was said that Francesco was particular about his appearance and dressed well.

In 1913 younger brother Antonio arrived in the U.S. and they lived together for a short time before the war. Antonio was about 3 years younger, and as the hand in hand photo suggests, the two were very close. "Fratelli per sempre".... Brothers forever.



WWI started on July 28, 1914. The U.S. initially wanted to avoid conflict and tried to be a peace broker. But the United States would not tolerate unrestricted submarine warfare which was a violation of international law. In January 1917, Germany resumed unrestricted submarine warfare. The U.S. had no choice and officially declared war on Germany on April 6, 1917. The War ended on November 11, 1918. So the U.S. involvement was somewhat limited at about one and a half years. The U.S. lost 116,516 soldiers to combat and disease. WWI was the worst war in world history. 10 million soldiers killed and 10 million civilians died from disease and starvation.

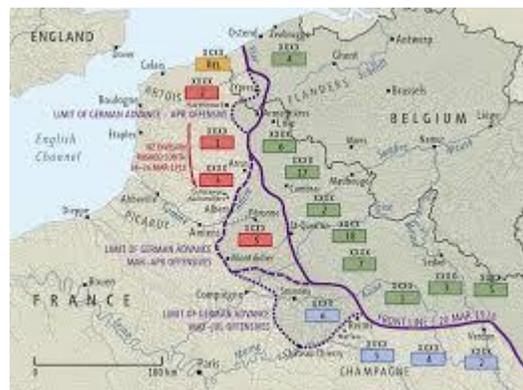
The Selective Service Act (draft) was authorized on May 18, 1917. Francesco enlisted in the U.S. Army in Gettysburg Pennsylvania on July 3, 1917. The time duration on his enlistment papers were hand written and noted "the emergency unless sooner discharge". The usual options of "3 years Active Enlistment" & "4 Years Army Reserve" were crossed out. The enlistment records also show that he was not yet a U.S. citizen. A line was drawn through those words as well. Francesco showed bravery and selflessness by enlisting to serve in the U.S. Army at a time of crisis. And he must have been proud to serve as he had a photo taken of himself in uniform before being deployed.

Antonio was too young to serve in the U.S. Army so he went to Canada and tried to enlist. He had similar results in Canada and was rejected again due to his young age. Determined to serve, he went back to Italy and joined the Italian armed services in March 1917. That was a month before the U.S. officially declared war and a couple months before Francesco enlisted. Antonio was much luckier than his brother and survived the conflict of WWI. However he, his mother Lucia and the other siblings had to live with the pain and loss of Francesco for the rest of their lives. In 1968 The Italian Government awarded Antonio with the honor of knighthood ("*Cavaliere dell'Ordine di Vittorio Veneto*") for his service in the WWI conflict.

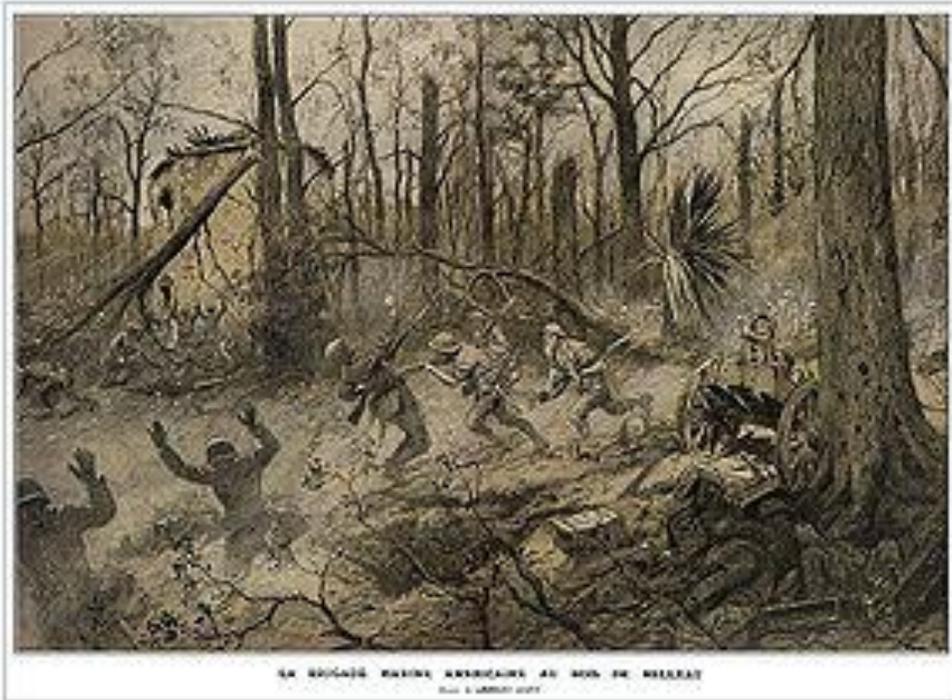


Francesco was a Private in the U.S. Army, 4th Machine Gun Battalion, 2nd Division, Company B. Serial Number 107043. The 2nd Division organized on October 2nd, 1917 in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania into four company Provisional Machine Gun Battalions. The Second Infantry Division (Indianhead Emblem) is one of the most recognized unit emblems in the U. S. Army because of its distinctive design and 80 years of proud service by its Warriors.

Transport records note that Francesco's unit sailed from Portland, Maine December 24th, 1917 bound for England. They arrived in Liverpool on January 7th, 1918. Then land transport to Southampton where his Unit would be shipped across the English Channel to LeHavre, France. Then some more land transport to finally arrive in Bourmont, France on January 14th. In total, a long and grueling 3 week trip getting Francesco's unit to Northern France and ready for battle.



Francesco Di Cresce was a machine gunner and would have been part of the trench warfare of WWI on the Western Front in Europe. Both the Allied troops and the Germans were dug in along a meandering line of fortified trenches stretching from the North Sea to the Swiss frontier with France. The area between opposing trench lines was known as "no man's land". This area was fully exposed to artillery fire from both sides. Even with successful attacks there were severe casualties. Trench warfare has become a powerful symbol of the futility of war.



Battle of Belleau Woods

Battle records indicate Francesco was part of the historic battle of Belleau Woods which occurred in France June 1-26 1918. The fighting around Belleau Woods pitted German troops against the U.S. Army's 2nd Division of the A.E.F. (American Expeditionary Forces) and the 4th Marine Brigade. This was a fierce battle that was often reduced to the use of bayonets or fists in hand to hand combat. Medical services were fairly primitive at this time and antibiotics had not yet been discovered. Sometimes relatively minor injuries could prove fatal through the onset of infection.

In trench warfare one might think that being shorter in stature would be an asset. But it wasn't for Francesco who stood at 5' 3". Francesco received a severe G.S.W (gunshot wound) with compound fracture to his right arm and perished on June 22, 1918. That was four (4) days before the final victory at Belleau Woods. Records indicate he was sent to Field Hospital 23. His noted personal effects were a cigarette lighter, a leather case and "letters & postal". Francesco was only 23 years old.

The American forces suffered heavy losses but ultimately defeated the Germans. On June 26, the 4th Machine Gun Battalion in which Francesco served was part of a major attack on Belleau Woods. That attack finally cleared that forest of Germans. On that day, Major Shearer submitted a report simply stating, "Woods now U.S. Marine Corps entirely", ending one of the bloodiest and most ferocious battles that U.S. forces would fight in the war.

For his sacrifice and service Francesco received the Purple Heart and the WWI Victory Medal. The Purple Heart is the oldest military award still given to U.S. military members. He would have also been entitled to any official battle clasp for any conflict in which he participated. Although a historic battle, the Army did not authorize an official battle clasp for Belleau Woods . Records indicate the U.S. Army issued a battle clasp for the Aisne conflict May 27 - June 5, 1918 in which Francesco's Unit fought. The Aisne conflict preceded and then transitioned to the historic battle of Belleau Woods.



Francesco Di Cresce is buried at the Aisne-Marne American Cemetery in Belleau, France.

Plot B Row 3 Grave 16



For his sacrifice and service Francesco's mother Lucia Di Cresce became an American Gold Star Mother. The AGSM is a private non profit organization originally formed in 1928 for mothers of those lost in WWI. The "Gold Star" name came from the custom of families of servicemen hanging a banner called a "Service Flag" in the windows of their homes. The flag had a star for each family member in the Armed Forces. Living servicemen were represented by a blue star, and those who had lost their lives in combat were represented by a gold star.

The WWI Compensation Act or "Bonus Act" was passed on May 19, 1924. Lucia started receiving a monthly benefit for Francesco's service on March 15, 1933. Roughly 15 years after his passing. Francesco served in the U.S. Army for almost a year before his death. He served from July 5 to December 23, 1917 for 112 days of "Home" service and from December 24 to June 22, 1918 for 181 days of "Overseas" service. The monthly compensation was \$1.00/day for "Home" and \$1.25/day for "Overseas". Financial help for mother Lucia, yet a constant reminder of Francesco's loss and his sacrifice for country and family.

IN MEMORY OF
★★★★★
FRANCESCO DI CRESCE

RANK
PRIVATE, U.S. ARMY

UNIT
4TH MACHINE GUN BATTALION, 2ND DIVISION

DATE OF DEATH
JUNE 22, 1918

COMMEMORATED IN PERPETUITY AT
AISNE-MARNE AMERICAN CEMETERY
BELLEAU, FRANCE



"Time will not dim the glory of their deeds."
— GENERAL JOHN J. PERSHING

God Bless Francesco Di Cresce

Francesco Di Cresce was my Great Grand Uncle and brother of maternal Grand Father Giulio Di Cresce. Francesco paid the ultimate price and helped paved the way for his family and future generations of Di Cresces. He truly sacrificed for our freedom and we all have a better life as a result. I'm honored to have written Francesco's "Story of Service", and proud to be his nephew.

Thank you to Francesco's niece Mary LaPorte (daughter of sister Restitutta) for providing valuable photos and documents related to Francesco's life.

Frank M. Seleno

November 11, 2018

Centennial of the WWI Armistice and Veterans Day