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Pippo: An Italian Folklore Mystery of World War II

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Pippo: An Italian Folklore Mystery of World War II

Abstract

During the German occupation of Northern Italy (1943-45), the Italian populace lived under the grip of fear as Allied bombardments pummeled towns, Nazifascists raided villages looking for partisans, and food grew ever more scarce. When night fell many Italians had to contend with another menace, a mysterious aircraft that they were sure was specifically after them and their loved ones. So real and yet mysterious was this aircraft that they gave it a name: Pippo. No one was quite sure if it was German or Allied, single-engine or double-engine, if it dropped bombs, or what its primary mission was, but Pippo loomed as a nocturnal specter, instilling order and terror in the Italian towns below. Scant official documentation exists on Pippo, and references in literature are even scarcer. But Pippo lives in the popular memory of the World War II generation. In 1990 RAI Tre sponsored a television series called *La mia guerra* [My war] and invited Italians to send in letters documenting their memories; in these testimonials Pippo comes to life. Perry's essay integrates oral histories of both Italian civilians and former American night fighter pilots, an analysis of over a hundred letters sent to the RAI Tre commission sponsoring *La mia guerra*, and a study of German propaganda. Finally, it weaves official U.S. Army Air Corps documents into the inquiry. All venues of analysis shed light on how Pippo served many Italians as a means to concretize their fears.

Keywords

Pippo, World War II, Italian folklore

Disciplines

Italian Language and Literature

Pippo: An Italian Folklore Mystery of World War II

In 1990, the Italian national television station RAI Tre hosted a program entitled *La mia guerra* [*My war*]. Its primary focus aimed to give thousands of ordinary citizens an opportunity to voice their recollections of World War II. Several months before the program began to air, RAI ran television commercials that invited the masses to send their letters. More than 10,000 responses arrived.¹ The shows were an impressive success: hosts read excerpts of letters and interviewed people who had submitted their memories. Later, the letters were archived at the Istituto Storico della Resistenza in Bergamo [Resistance Historical Institute of Bergamo].

Woven with the pains of hunger, sheer terror of bombings, stories of love, and fear of Germans, partisans and Fascists, one widely shared memory particularly stands out as complex, mysterious and elusive: that concerning the airplane widely known as “Pippo.” In popular lore, even today it continues to haunt the collective imagination and conjure lively debate. Rarely has it found voice in official histories,² and yet among all the experiences of the war, Pippo looms, in the words of historian Giovanni De Luna, as “la voce più inquietante prodotta dall’Italia in guerra” [the most unsettling aspect of Italy at war] (De Luna 1993:123).³ Flavia Tosi, who resided in Novara during the war, describes it:

Il ‘Pippo’ era un aereo che ogni tanto te lo trovavi lì. E questo aereo era chiamato ‘Pippo’. Nessuno ha mai capito se era un aereo nemico o un aereo che andava in ricognizione, se era un aereo tedesco o americano o italiano. Era ‘Pippo’. Non lo si vedeva perché era di notte, ma lo si sentiva. Però, non ha mai fatto disastri ‘Pippo’, mai bombardato o mitragliato. Il ‘Pippo’ passava, viaggiava. E si sentiva sovente. Magari uno

dormiva e l'altro non dormiva e allora diceva "Senti il 'Pippo'." Allora ti svegliavi e lo sentivi. Però questo 'Pippo' non si è mai saputo chi fosse. (Bermani 1996:161)

["Pippo" was an airplane that every now and then would just be there. And this plane was called "Pippo." No one ever understood if it was an enemy or friendly plane that was on reconnaissance, if it was German, American or Italian. It was "Pippo." You didn't see it because it was night, but you heard it. But, "Pippo" never caused any damage, never bombed, never machine gunned. "Pippo" just passed and traveled along. And it was heard often. Maybe you were asleep and another person was too and said, "Listen, it's Pippo". Well, you'd wake up and you'd hear it. But we never knew who this "Pippo" was.]

Many recall Pippo along these lines, but others experienced the airplane in more sinister ways. It strafed and bombed homes, and in some parts of Italy, dropped mines and explosives. As a whole, however, and regardless of slight variations, the Pippo narrative reads remarkably the same.

During the war, factual evidence of Pippo remained extremely elusive, and in retrospect the legend has continued to vex the popular imagination.⁴ As a journalist recently expressed for the Parma daily: “. . . la questione di Pippo . . . non è a tutt'oggi chiusa e rimane indagata in Italia, in America e in Germania. Fanno fede di ciò anche le polemiche che, di quando in quando, compaiono sulla *Gazzetta*" [. . . the Pippo question . . . is not resolved and is still investigated in Italy, America, and Germany. Attesting to this are the debates which from time to time appear in the *Gazzetta*] (Mezzadri 2000:5). Interest to discover the identity of the pilot and learn why he disturbed people at night

increases, though the numbers of Italy's World War II generation grow smaller. Until now, however, no single study has examined how the Pippo legend best expresses the toll that war had upon the collective imagination of the Italian common folk.⁵ In order to comprehend this oral narrative, we must first turn our attention to the study of why and how rumors spread in war.

I. A framework for understanding Italian wartime psyche: Rumors of war

Several historians and folklorists note how the horror of war conditions soldiers to be much more receptive to believing what they would never believe in normal times. If news seems ordinary, soldiers are more likely to discount it. Rumors spread like wild fire in war because the collective conscience receives them so readily, the more unbelievable the better. (Bloch, 1953: 99; Fussel, 1989:36) As Tamostu Shibusutani documents in *Improvised News*:

Whenever life becomes subject to the vicissitude of events over which individuals have little control, the events compel attention; unrelated matters are temporarily thrust aside. The victims become preoccupied with efforts to cope with the calamity. Should they run or remain where they are? What escape routes are available? What else needs to be done? Something must be done quickly, but intelligent decisions cannot be made without some understanding of what happened. Although information is needed badly for adjusting to the rapidly changing situation, institutional channels are frequently destroyed or impaired. The queries are answered by rumor. Sometimes survivors act on the basis of rumors, not because they believe them but because they cannot afford to ignore them. (1965:35)

As a whole, because masses of soldiers gossip among themselves, unsubstantiated hearsay provides an excellent interpretive key to understand the collective conscience of those who fought and died in the trenches and on the battlefields (Bloch, 1980:259).

In combat, the plain and simple lose ground to the fantastic and sublime. Folk narrative blossoms, and soldiers and civilians alike concoct all sorts of tall tales to explain circumstances —otherwise merely accidental — that they cannot simply accept or describe in ordinary terms (Fussel, 1989:36). Lies, fables, superstitions and legends replace rational reports and explanations. “In this line there seems to be no limit to what can be believed, so long as intriguing narrative emerges” (Fussel, 1989:39).

During the two World Wars, soldiers on both sides heard constant talk that they were going to be rotated to the rear or sent home on leave. Many also believed that the enemy used corpses to manufacture candles, lubricants and polishing agents (Fussel, 1975:120).⁶ Other rumors purported that the enemy was actually quite friendly. For example, during the 1940 German blitzkrieg in France, enemies supposedly met at wells and drew water together, asked each other directions to get back to their own lines, and warned each other of imminent attacks (Bonaparte 1947:70). Other more elaborate narratives heard on both sides told how civilians caught behind the lines crashed their cars into enemy tanks that amazingly shattered into pieces.⁷ These stories reveal how people seek to control anxiety through the “plain denial of the enemy’s menace” (Bonaparte 1947:65). By negating the enemy’s power, people aim to master their fears.

Understanding how war fosters rumors helps us to comprehend what fears plagued the Northern Italian masses that faced a distinctly ambiguous experience of war, and here a general overview of Italy’s experience in World War II will prove helpful.⁸ Italy entered World War II in June 1940 allied with Germany, and almost immediately

Britain's Royal Air Force (RAF) began to bomb Italian cities. Blackouts and curfews became common place as did rationing of food, and unlike the experience on other European home fronts, the bombing campaign did not unify civilians against the common Allied enemy. Many Italians, in fact, openly wished that the bombers would unload on government leaders in Rome (Abse 43).

As for the Italian military, it was woefully unprepared for war. Defeat followed defeat in Greece and North Africa. By the summer of 1943, the Allies had invaded and liberated Sicily, and Mussolini was arrested and deposed. On 8 September of that year, Italian officials signed an Armistice with the U.S. and Britain, opting to get out of the war. At this point, therefore, Italy shifted her wartime allegiance, becoming a co-belligerent with the Allies. Hitler felt betrayed, and Italy's greatest travails soon followed. German troops poured over the Brenner Pass, occupied the Italian homeland, and ferociously counter-attacked the advancing Allied armies south of Rome. Martial law became the order of the day north of the front as a budding Resistance movement fought by partisans began to harry German supply lines, garrisons, and depots.

All the while, Allied air forces continued to strike Italian cities, wreaking untold material and psychological damage. For twenty months until April 1945, confusion reigned as civilians tried to take stock of various enemies. Nazis, who occupied Italy, along with their Fascist counterparts razed entire towns and tortured civilians; many of these soldiers were the same Germans with whom Italians had once fought side by side. Partisans robbed innocent civilians and ambushed Mussolini loyalists; these were supposedly freedom fighters who aimed to liberate the country and install a new order. To make matters worse, the Allies, supposedly their liberators, piloted bombers that destroyed their cities. Finally, Italian civilians rationed food and experienced chronic

hunger.⁹ Never before had Italy experienced a war of this nature. For civilians, the enemy — Nazifascist, partisan, or Ally — was always present, if not physically, then in thought.

Out of this reality, and at some point after the Armistice of 1943, people began to spread fear of a plane they personified as Pippo. But even earlier, after the Allies had first brought the war to the Italian populace, bizarre and fantastic accounts of Allied fighter-bombers began to circulate among soldiers and civilians. During the invasion of Sicily, for example, Italian soldiers swore that nude women with long, blonde hair flew American fighter planes (Corona 1957:141-142). Furthermore, on several occasions after Allied air bombardments, Fascist controlled newspapers spread wildly false claims that the bombers had dropped explosive pens (Bonacina 1970:184).¹⁰ Unfortunately the ordinary Italian civilian, caught up in the threat of bombardments and surreal reality of war, could take little rational inventory of rumors and hearsay manipulated by propaganda. The collective conscience was primed for Pippo, and in the confusion of the Italian experience of war — replete with a bloody civil war, shifting allegiances, a slow moving front, and the presence of a huge German army that occupied the country — the legend grew to far-reaching proportions.

II. Sources that document Pippo's pervasive legend

Three primary research sources allow us to plumb the heart of the myth: oral histories, diaries and letters. Personal interviews provide the most enthralling and extensive references. Through tone and inflection of voice, still tinged with awe and fear, the legend comes fully alive, and listeners glimpse the wonder and terror Pippo engendered. Invariably memories of Pippo launch other personal recollections of war: hunger, bombardments, blackouts, partisan raids, and German reprisals.

People often wonder why the plane was called Pippo. It might have an onomatopoeic source. Some people remember the plane had a stutter that they heard as “pipp-pipp, pipp-pipp.” But, something more rooted in popular culture, such as the “Pippo” [Goofy] in Disney’s comic strips, might account for the name. Uncoordinated and harmless, Disney’s Pippo first appeared in Italian daily comics in 1933 (Bono 1990:6). A more likely explanation for the name can be found in the popularity of a 1930s song, “Pippo non lo sa” [Pippo doesn’t know]. It describes a dandy who struts through town believing himself to be handsome and sophisticated, but people laugh at him behind his back because in reality he appears ridiculous: “. . .ma Pippo, Pippo non lo sa, che quando passa ride tutta la città, si crede bello come un Apollo e saltella come un pollo . . .” [. . .but Pippo, Pippo doesn’t know, that when he goes by the entire city laughs; he thinks he’s beautiful like Apollo, and he skips like a chicken . . .]. In the spirit of the song, perhaps people exorcised their fear of a single night fighter by conceiving of the threat as little more than a laughing matter; they would have tried to prove to themselves that Pippo did not pose a great danger.¹¹

To best appreciate how Pippo struck the popular imagination, we do well to read ample portions of transcripts from oral interviews¹²:

Pippo costituiva in pratica un incubo per le truppe tedesche e per molti italiani perché alla sera incominciava con l'imbrunire un aeroplano monoposto che volava molto basso e lanciava ogni tanto dei bengala per illuminare certe zone e non si sapeva se fotografava o meno oppure lanciava ogni tanto delle bombe. (Angelo Ghini)

[Pippo comprised in effect a nightmare for German troops and for many Italians because in the evening, when it grew dark, a one-man airplane flew very low and dropped flares now and then to illuminate certain areas. And we didn't know if he photographed or not or if he dropped small bombs now and then.]

Era il terrore della notte. Il giorno eravamo quasi sempre sotto bombardamenti ma allora c'era il sirene dell'allarme ma questo viaggiava, perlustrava la notte solo basso basso. Sentivamo quel rumore e dovevamo tappare bene tutte le finestre perché non filtrasse luce perché se si vedeva la luce spazzava giù qualcosa . . . C'era questo terrore perché le case non si chiudevano bene ed era necessario chiudere tutto e noi abitavamo vicino al ponte. Forse qualcuno è stato abbattuto. Mi ricordo quando andavo a letto e lo sentivo di lontano, mi mettevo le mani sotto le coperte per non sentire il rumore a pregare pregare. Si sentiva tutta la notte dopo le dieci fino alla mattina. Io, noi insomma, pensavamo che fosse inglese, un apparecchio piccolo . . . mitragliava e seminava delle penne esplosive. Durante la guerra era proprio lo spauracchio. (Maria Bonzata)

[It was the terror of the night. By day we were almost always being bombed but then there was the alarm, but this thing kept traveling, searching the night alone very low. We would hear its noise and we had to close all the windows really well so that no light would filter through because if the light was seen something was going to be dropped on you . . . There was this terror because you couldn't close your house that well and you had to close everything and we lived near the bridge. Maybe one was shot down. I remember that when I went to bed and I'd hear him far away, I'd put my hands under the covers to not hear the noise and pray, pray. It was heard all night long, from after ten until the

morning. I, us really, thought that it was English, a small plane . . .it machine gunned and dropped explosive pens. During the war it really was our boogie man.]

Era un terrore. Pippo di sera se vedeva una piccola luce fuori, buttava giù la bomba. C'era un agricola a Busseto e ricordo una sera ha centrato una sera una casa dove è rimasta una famiglia, marito, moglie e una figlia e a questa figlia è stato troncato un braccio. Quel giorno, il giorno di Pasqua, gli americani avevano mitragliato la caserma dei tedeschi e c'era un fuoco e alla sera Pippo passa e vede la luce e boom! Era un apparecchio americano. Si chiamava Pippo in tutta l'Italia. Viaggiava in alto. Si sentiva il rumore. Era solo Pippo che volava di notte perché c'erano pochi apparecchi nel '44 -'45. Non è mai stato abbattuto. Non c'era il contraereo che c'è oggi. Ma passava tutte le sere. Buttava la bomba che noi chiamavamo lo spezzone e tutti avevamo paura di Pippo. Ogni sera coprivamo le finestre con la tela e uno usciva fuori al buio per controllare se si vedeva la luce. (Franco Rastelli)

[It was a terror. If during the evening Pippo saw a small light outside, he unleashed a small bomb. There was a farm near Busseto, and I remember a night when he hit a home on this farm where the family was staying —husband, wife and a girl — and this girl lost her arm. That day, Easter day, the Americans had machine gunned the German barracks and there was a fire. At night Pippo was flying around, saw the light, and “boom!” It was an American airplane. He was called Pippo throughout Italy. He traveled high. You could hear his noise. It was only Pippo that flew at night because there were only a few airplanes in '44 and '45. He was never brought down. You didn't have the antiaircraft fire that you have today. But he flew over each evening. He'd let loose a bomb that we

called ‘incendiary’ and everyone was afraid of Pippo. Each night we covered the window with fabric and someone went outside to check if you could see light.]

Many wartime diaries also remember Pippo.¹³ For example, Antonio Mambelli, the city librarian in Forlì, wrote in one entry:

È sera: soffia il vento e molti lampi barbagliano fra le nubi. Qualche bengala è caduto qua e là, mentre ronza l’apparecchio di “Pippo,” come la gente lo chiama, solito a girovolare a lungo nella notte. Passa basso, talora, rapidissimo, compie larghi giri e sgancia una qualche bomba; v’è chi afferma che codesto “Pippo” è un Romagnolo, un forlivese addirittura, comunque la presenza sua, non ostante la denominazione confidenziale impedisce di coricarsi in tranquillità. (10)

[It’s evening: the wind is blowing and lightning is flashing among the clouds. Some flares have fallen here and there as Pippo, as people call him, is buzzing around alone as he usually does for a long time at night. He comes in low, at times, and very fast, does a few large circles and unleashes a few bombs. There are those who swear this “Pippo” is a man from Romagna, precisely Forlì, but his presence, in spite of his friendly name keeps us from easily falling to sleep.]

Mambelli’s entry reflects a striking aspect of the Pippo mystery: the thought that Pippo was actually a person they knew. This familiarity removes the Allies or the Germans as the culprit and suggests a more specific and identifiable entity—the enemy within.

The third source of information comes in the form of the recollections elicited in 1990 by RAI Tre.¹⁴ Among the testimonials in letters archived at the Istituto are these two:

D'un tratto si sente un ronzio. È "Pippo" cioè il ricognitore alleato che tutti i giorni, all'imbrunire, sorvola la nostra zona. Normalmente si limita a guardare, ma qualche volta, benché raramente, sgancia delle piccole bombe che la gente chiama "spezzoni". Questa sera è in ritardo e, anziché proseguire, si mette a girare in cerchio sulla casa. La gente comincia ad avere paura. Perché si ferma qui? Inaspettatamente lancia un "bengala" e si allontana per ritornare quando la luminosità sarà massima. È come un segnale. . . . "Pippo" gira e rigira sulle nostre teste . . . Finalmente la luce si spegne e "Pippo" se ne va. (Alberto Zignani)

[All of a sudden you can hear the propeller engine. It's "Pippo", that is the Allied reconnaissance plane that each day at dusk passes over our area. Usually he just observes, but sometimes, although rarely, he lets a small bomb fall that people call "incendiaries." Tonight he is late, and instead of going along, he stayed to circle around our home. People start to be afraid. Why is he stopping here? Unexpectedly, he shoots a flare and goes away in order to return when the flare is at its brightest. It's like a signal . . . "Pippo" circles and re-circles above our heads . . . Finally the light dies and "Pippo" takes off.]

E poi! "Pippo" un ricognitore aereo alleato che movimentava tutte le notti, durante le quali piccoli drappelli di persone uscivano dalle loro case e cercavano protezione in campagna sotto gli alberi. Noi avevamo l'orto davanti a casa e cercavamo scampo sotto

un grande noce o sotto i peri (mi viene da ridere ora!) e mio fratello che diceva: “Mamma, coprimi gli occhi.” Non voleva vedere i razzi che gli aerei buttavano di notte prima di bombardare la città distante 10 km. Paure che penalizzavano e elettrizzavano contemporaneamente tutti. Tutti preoccupati costantemente di soddisfare il bisogno primario: la sopravvivenza dalla fame, dai bombardamenti, dalle fucilate tra partigiani e Tedeschi o repubblicani, dalle rappresaglie, dalle fucilazioni degli ostaggi. (Teresa Odilla)

[And then! “Pippo”, an Allied reconnaissance plane that made all of our nights come alive, sometimes when small groups of people would leave their homes and sought protection in the fields underneath the trees. We had a garden in front of our home and we sought cover under a large nut tree or under the pear trees (I almost have to laugh now!) and my brother would say: “Mom, cover my eyes.” He did not want to see the flares that the planes dropped before bombing about ten kilometers away. Fears that debilitated and electrified everyone at the same time. Everyone was constantly worried about satisfying their biggest need: surviving hunger, bombings, shoot outs among partisans and Germans or Fascist soldiers, reprisals, and executions of prisoners.]

When studied as a whole, the letters, diaries and oral histories reveal the Pippo mystery as a narrative shared among thousands of people who lived north of the battle front, one that still today inhabits the Italian imagination.

III. Friendly Enemy and Loathsome Terror

As we try to come to a more complete understanding of the legend, the complexity of Pippo’s identity has rich importance. In popular lore, Pippo is at once both

harmless and terrifying. As we have seen, many dreaded his arrival. He came as an unstable peril capable of gratuitously machine gunning and bombing innocent non-combatants:

Era il nostro spavento. Non girava di giorno ma di sera si sentiva che Pippo girava. Era lento e volava per farsi sentire. Finestra niente acceso. Guai la luce. Buttava giù la bomba per fare spavento. Era un aereo tedesco. . . Tutti erano spaventati perché mollava le bombe. Era all'oscuro. (Irene Gheller)

[He was our fear. He did not fly by day, but at night you would hear that Pippo was flying around. He was slow and flew so that he could be heard. Nothing lit in the window. Heaven forbid light. He would bomb to spread fear. He was a German plane . . . Everyone was afraid because he'd drop bombs. It was during the blackout.]

Di questo Pippo non potevamo dormire per la paura delle bombe che poteva buttare. Dovevamo rimanere sempre al buio. Non l' ho mai visto. Avevo paura e restavo dentro. Andavamo nella cantina con un'umidità. Avevamo messi lì dei letti provvisori e si dormiva lì per paura di questo Pippo che faceva boom, boom, boom . . . Passava sempre sempre, noi in cantina senza luce con un'umidità. Avevamo delle candele di chiesa che spegnevamo. Non so chi fosse questo Pippo o perché si facesse chiamare Pippo. (Eugenia Giardinia)

[Because of this Pippo we couldn't sleep because of the fear of the bombs that he could drop. We always had to remain in the dark. I never saw him. I was afraid and kept inside.

We would head down to the cellar where it was really humid. We had put some beds there and that's where you slept because you were afraid of Pippo who caused these "boom! boom! boom!" . . . He always flew around, always, and we were in the cellar without light and wet with humidity. We had some votive candles that we would douse. I don't know who this Pippo might have been or why he was called Pippo.]

Thus, this Pippo was a terror: he flew in darkness during a traditional time when humans throughout history have had to most often face fears of shadows, predators, witches and enemies (Oliverio Ferraris 1980:144).¹⁵ Others, however, experienced him as a friendly enemy and a fanciful part of war:

Lo ricordo volare e lo guardavamo di sera quasi che non faceva paura. Non mitragliava dove eravamo noi. Ci sentivamo un po' lontani dalla guerra. Ricordo solo quest'immagine. Si vedeva della luce e si capiva anche dal ronzio. Non incuteva paura. Quando si avvicinava si aveva un po' di paura ma non tanto. (Mariangela Cimati)

[I remember him flying and watching him at night almost as if he didn't frighten me. He did not machinegun where we were. We felt we were pretty far away from the war. I remember only this image. You could tell who he was by his lights and from his drone. He did not instill fear. When he got near you'd be a little afraid, but not too much.]

Pippo faceva paura perché non si vedeva l'ora che spuntasse il sole la mattina dopo per veder cosa aveva seminato. Ecco, sotto questo profilo qua faceva paura ma le persone

finché passava sopra non è che temessero qualcosa perché bastava spegnere le luci, essere tranquilli e spegnere le luci. (Franco Rigoni)

[Pippo made you afraid because you couldn't wait for the sun to come up in the morning to see what he had dropped. So, in these respects he made you afraid but unless he passed directly over, people were not really shook up because all you had to do was turn out the lights, keep calm and turn out the lights.]

Ricordo anche che la sera, più o meno all'ora di cena, si sentiva il rumore di un aereo. La mamma però ci diceva: "State tranquilli, è PIPPO." Credo che Pippo fosse l'aereo più amato da noi bambini. (Rosy Viganò Orsi, in Valtulina 1997:165)

[I remember that even in the evenings, more or less about supper time, you heard an airplane noise. But Mom used to say: "Stay calm, it's PIPPO." I think that Pippo was the plane we kids loved the most.]

Even a historical reference depicts the aircraft as a nuisance at most:

Il terribile 1943 finì con una nota quasi umoristica. Nel Nord Italia divenne famoso *Pippo*. *Pippo* era l'aeroplano isolato che ogni notte, puntualissimo, compariva su questa e quella città tenendo svegli gli abitanti con il rombo dei suoi motori, talvolta sganciava un paio di bombe, poi spariva. In realtà c'erano tanti *Pippo*, e agivano da intruder non per disturbare il sonno degli italiani, ma per tenere sulla corda i tedeschi. Erano, di solito, i velocissimi, inafferrabili *Mosquito*. Non diedero pace fino alla fine della guerra, ma

abbiamo parlato di nota quasi umoristica sia per il nome che fu loro affibbiato (chissà chi lo inventò), sia perché originario persino un fatto di costume. Molti genitori erano infatti abituati a dire ai bambini: “Lasciamo che passi *Pippo*, poi andrete a dormire.” *Pippo* fu insomma un personaggio popolare, qualcuno lo chiamava addirittura “il simpatico scocciatore”. (Bonacina 1970:257)

[The terrible year of 1943 ended on an almost humorous note. In Northern Italy Pippo became famous. Pippo was a solitary plane that each night, right on the button, appeared over this and that city, keeping the inhabitants awake with the sound of its motors. Sometimes it dropped a pair of bombs, and then disappeared. In reality, there were many Pippos, and they acted as intruders not to disturb the Italians at sleep, but to keep the Germans on the alert. They were, usually, the incredibly speedy and untouchable Mosquitos. They didn't stop until the end of the war. But we were speaking about a humorous note in light of the name it took (who knows who came up with it), and because it became such a way of life. In fact, many parents were accustomed to telling their kids: “Let Pippo fly over, then you'll have to get to bed.” In the end, Pippo was a famous person, somebody that you could even call “the friendly nuisance.”]

Thus, in lore, sometimes Pippo was positive, sometimes negative, sometimes friend, sometimes foe. Sometimes he was American, sometimes he was German. And even sometimes he was Italian. These competing identities of Pippo in no way entangle the legend: all the various understandings flow together into one core belief that a mysterious, solitary airplane flew at night.¹⁶

The confusion concerning the national emblem under which Pippo flew reflects, in part, a historical reality: aircraft of both Axis and Allied powers had night fighter aircraft. More importantly, the perplexity also mirrors how in German occupied Italy, the understanding of the enemy shifted according to personal allegiance. For those who opposed the Germans, Pippo could be friendly and Allied, or if identified as German, he could be a menacing foe. Likewise, for those loyal to Mussolini or unhappy about Italy's betrayal of a former German ally, Pippo could be a sinister American. Thus, the variable identities reflect the fluid understanding of the enemy.

Intriguingly, the struggle to pin-point a nationality might also result from the challenge to understand how the Allies, seen as liberators, could have wreaked such havoc upon them.¹⁷ In other words, the confusion might address the psychological weight of having to come to terms with friendly fire and collateral damage. As a train station master in Vicenza during the war recalls: “Perché gli americani ci hanno bombardati? Noi civili eravamo innocenti. Non dovevano essere i nostri amici? (Adelino Busata) [Why did the Americans bomb us? We civilians were innocent. Weren't they supposed to be our friends?]. Perhaps many of Pippo's victims knew he was American but could not bring themselves to admit it.

On still another level, Pippo at times had fairy-tale like connotations as evidenced in how children used to recite short rhymes or “filastrocche” about him:

Pippo era per me un aereo americano che passava tutte le sere dopo le sette di sera. Per noi bambini Pippo era quasi un gioco perché dicevano in casa, ‘Chiudete tutte le finestre perché passa Pippo e se non camini dritto butta giù un confetto.’ Cammina dritto:

bisognava filare, chiudere le finestre, esser buoni perché se non si facevano queste cose, Pippo buttava giù un confetto, una bomba. (Francesca Gheller)

[For me Pippo was an American airplane that flew every evening after seven. For us children Pippo was almost like a game because at home they said, “Close all the windows because Pippo is flying over and if you don’t walk straight he’ll throw down a candy.” Walk straight: you had to hurry, close the windows, be good because if you didn’t do these things, Pippo threw down a candy, a bomb.]

. . .in di più aveva lasciato venire giù anche dei manifestini dove diceva, “Io son Pippo veronese, di giorno faccio il pasticciere e di notte il bombardiere. Quando vedo un lumicino, lascio cader un biscottino”. (Carlo Antonioli)

[. . . moreover he had also dropped some leaflets that said, “I am Pippo from Verona, by day I am a doughnut baker and by night a bomber. When I see a small light, I drop a small cookie.”]

Here the genre takes on an educational function.¹⁸ Frightened children exorcised their fear of a real danger of war by making sport of it: Pippo emerged as less of a bogeyman.

Whether experienced as friend or foe, the sound of Pippo’s engine had an unnerveing quality, and many recall that it had a certain whine that distinguished it from other planes:

A tenerci svegli durante la notte c'era anche "Pippo", era un solo aereo che volava di basso facendo molti giri sulla città, penso fosse un ricognitore, lo riconoscevamo dal rumore del motore e nonostante non avesse mai bombardato, la paura era ormai dentro di noi; così dormivamo vestiti per poter essere pronti a metterci in salvo in tutta fretta e con la piccola avvolta in una coperta aspettavamo nel portone che l'aereo finisse di fare i giri di perlustrazione sulla città, solo dopo ritornavamo a letto. (Giovanna Candido)

[Pippo was another thing that kept us awake at night, a solitary airplane that flew low making many circular passes over the city. I think he was a reconnaissance plane. We knew him from the sound of his motor and although he never bombed, fear was already in us. So, we slept dressed in order to be ready to save ourselves in a hurry, and with the youngest all wrapped in a blanket, we waited in the door for the plane to finish its work over the city, and only later did we get back to bed.]

Quest'apparecchio d'inverno arrivava alle otto le nove, d'estate alle dieci le undici quando che l'oscurità era buona. Non si è mai visto. Si sentiva il rumore e allora c'era tranquillità e si sentiva questo rumore anche di lontano e incuteva quasi timore perché faceva waaaah, waaah, quest'aereo. . . . sicuro che tutta la gente sempre aveva paura perché quest'aereo di notte aveva questo ronzio. Pippo aveva un ronzio più veloce dalle Fortezze Volanti. Pippo era bimotore. Si sentiva dal ronzio. Il P-38 invece aveva tutto un altro rombo. Era un rombo proprio forte e unico mentre un bimotore aveva tutto il suo suono. (Gianni Pozzato)

[In the winter this airplane came at eight or nine, in the summer around ten or eleven when everything was dark. He was never seen. You heard his noise and then everything was calm. And we heard this noise even when it was a long ways away almost out of fear because the sound of the plane went waaah, waaah. Sure people were afraid because at night this plane had this particular sound. Pippo had a buzz that was faster than the Flying Fortresses. Pippo had two motors. You could hear him by his buzz. The P-38 had all together another sound. Pippo's was a really strong and unique roar while the P-38 had its own sound.]

Because they could not see him, sound alerted them to the danger.

Around Vicenza many still believe he dropped special "butterfly bombs:"

...quello che ricordo è che buttava giù le bombe a farfalla e poi lanciava delle penne stilografiche che magari non prendevamo la penna perché invece era un piccolo esplosivo. Lui faceva questa mansione, queste ricerche di notte. Bisognava stare attento come abitazione di non lasciare vedere una luce. Non vedeva se era una casa se era un mezzo che camminava per cui cercava dei movimenti notturni di un nemico che si spostava e poi mitragliava. (Francesco Fabbiasco)

[...what I remember is that he dropped butterfly bombs and also writing pens that we didn't really think were pens but instead a small explosive. He had this mission, these night searches. You had to be very careful that your home did not let light come out of it. He didn't see if it was a home or if it was a car going slowly because he was looking out for enemy, night time movement, and when it moved he would then shoot.]

Durante la Resistenza avevo 12 anni. Abitavo a Bressanvido, provincia di Vicenza. Il fatto di Pippo lo ricordo molto bene soprattutto per un fatto particolare. Nel '44 noi Pippo lo sentivamo passare tutte le notti. Pippo cos'era? Era un aereo che passava tutte le notti e mandava giù delle bombe un po' qui un po' lì ma tutte le bombe piccole "farfalla" così dette a quei tempi. Io avevo un cugino che aveva diciassette anni. Una mattina si alza e va nei campi. Vede qualcosa in terra e lo prende in mano e scoppia questa bomba, un gegino piccolo lasciato cadere da Pippo. È stato portato all'ospedale ed è stato subito troncato la mano ma il giorno dopo è morto. Per cui nella zona nostra si è saputo allora che queste bombe a farfalla in terra che trovavano interna erano bombe perché prima allora non sapevano i ragazzi. Non lo sapevano. Questo era un ragazzo di diciassette anni. Era un uomo ed è morto per una bomba del genere. Se era americano o inglese non lo so ma hanno sempre detto che Pippo era un americano. Passava sempre con il buio e lo ricordo come se fosse adesso. (Antonia Borella)

[During the Resistance I was twelve years old. I lived in Bressanvido of the Vicenza province. I remember the facts about Pippo very well above all for a particular incident. In '44 we heard Pippo pass over every night. Who was Pippo? He was a plane that flew every night and would drop a few bombs here and there, but at the time they were the so-called "butterfly bombs." I had a cousin who was seventeen. One morning he gets up and goes into the fields. He sees something on the ground and he picks it up, and this bomb explodes, a small mechanism left by Pippo. He was brought to the hospital and right away his arm was amputated. But the next day he died. So, where we lived we came to know then about these butterfly bombs on the ground that you'd find intact. They were

bombs, but before then children did not know about them. They didn't know. This was a boy of seventeen. He was a man, and he died because of this kind of bomb. I don't know if the plane was American or English, but they always said the Pippo was American. He always flew around when it was dark, and I remember it as if it was now.]

Other regions in northern Italy do not necessarily share this memory of Pippo, and propaganda accounts for this variation.

During the last two years of the war, the local fascist-controlled newspaper in Vicenza, *Il popolo vicentino*, ran several short announcements reminding people of their duty to obey the blackout, usually accompanied by reports of people in the outlying areas who had been killed or wounded by night intruder aircraft. As the months passed, several other articles, such as this one that appeared in February 1945, reported a new and highly dangerous ordinance used by the Allies:

Velivoli anglo-americano hanno l'altra sera sorvolato una zona della nostra città, seminando sull'abitato e sulle strade centinaia di bombe-farfalla. Non si lamentano vittime: una casa è stata leggermente danneggiata.

Una apparecchio nemico, colpito dalla contraerea, è precipitato in fiamme nei pressi di Santa Maria di Camisano.

ATTENZIONE ALLE BOMBE INESPLOSE

Si sono verificati di recente in città in nella nostra provincia molti casi di bombe che sono esplose non solo dopo alcune ore ma anche dopo alcuni giorni dalla loro caduta.

Si ricorda ancora una volta alla popolazione che è vietato in via assoluta di avvicinarsi ai luoghi nei quali si è accertata o si presume probabile la esistenza di bombe

inesplose perché possono essere, e molte di esse lo sono, a scoppio ritardato. Alla rimozione ed al brillamento delle bombe inesplose provvede apposito personale militare specializzato. Nel frattempo, a cura dei Comuni, devono essere collocati ben visibili dei cartelli con la scritta “Bomba inesplosa–Pericolo di morte” e devono essere sbarrate con mezzi idonei e con un servizio di guardia, le vie di accesso ai posti di pericolo. (Il popolo Vicentino 1945a:2)

[Anglo-american aircraft the other evening surveyed the area of our city, seeding homes and streets with hundreds of butterfly bombs. No victims have yet been reported: a house was slightly damaged.

An enemy plane, hit by flak, went down in flames near Santa Maria of Camisano.

PAY CAREFUL ATTENTION TO UNEXPLODED BOMBS.

It has been verified that in many towns of our province, many cases of bombs exploding not only after a few hours but after a few days after having fallen.

You are reminded again that it is absolutely prohibited to come near places where the existence of unexploded bombs is known or presumed because they may be, and many of them are, mean to explode later. The removal and detonation of unexploded bombs is taken care of by specifically specialized military personel. In the meantime, local town governments must place posters in visible areas that say “Unexploded Bombs–Risk of Death.” These areas and access to them must be blocked off and watched over by a guard.]

Then four days later a warning entitled “Pippo” appeared, accompanied by a sketch of a butterfly bomb. It gives full voice to the abiding force of manipulated fear.

Note how the tone and rhetoric helped shape Pippo as a sinister hoodlum, stalking innocent Italians:

Passa, come un malaugurato uccello notturno, sulla città e sulla campagna, e i vetri tremano al suo rombo sinistro, e gli uomini chiusi nelle case o nelle fattorie lo seguono con il pensiero mentre si avvicina, vola sopra la casa, si allontana. Passa sulla città e sui villaggi, passa e sgancia bombe, rovina qualche abitazione, provoca qualche morto o qualche ferito. Ma soltanto dopo che è passato i cittadini si accorgono dei doni che il vigliacco nemico ha seminato per loro. Sono le bombe a scoppio ritardato, le micidiali, insidiose, “bombe-farfalla”. E le esplosioni si confondono con le urla dei feriti e con le imprecazioni e le maledizioni alla criminale ferocia del nemico. È “Pippo”, l’apparecchio di disturbo, l’aeroplano che ogni sera ci arreca visita, il velivolo molestatore che semina insidie sulle strade, sulle campagne, dove passa la gente, dove passano donne, bambini, vecchi, lavoratori, dove passa il nostro popolo, contro il quale vuole sfogarsi la perfidia nemica.

“Pippo”: Il simbolo della cosiddetta “guerra dei nervi” e della “guerra totale”, il vile mezzo adoperato da un nemico che troppi ancora credono forte e che — se ciò fosse vero — non avrebbe bisogno, per vincere, di ricorrere al proditorio attacco, all’insidia, alla caccia all’uomo, all’assassino, organizzato, alle bombe a scoppio ritardato.

Ma non basta odiarlo, questo nemico, non basta imprecare a lui e maledirlo. Bisogna anche difendersi dai suoi vili attacchi, rendere nulli i suoi malefici disegni, ostacolare in qualsiasi modo i suoi piani. Bisogna — ma è assurdo che si debba tanto insistere su questo argomento — bisogna difendere se stessi. Nemmeno il più esile spiraglio di luce dovrà trapelare all’esterno, essere visibile dall’alto. I portoni dovranno

rimanere sempre aperti, allo scopo di permettere di ripararsi a quei cittadini che fossero colti per la strada dall'imprevisto attacco nemico.

Con sinistro ronzo "Pippo" sorvola la città e la campagna, gira irrequieto in cerca di preda.. Sì, malediciamolo, imprechiamo alla sua criminalità; ma ricordiamoci che, se non difenderemo noi stessi, non saremo più i suoi nemici, bensì i suoi complici. (*Il popolo Vicentino* 1945b:3)

[He passes over our city and fields like a bird of evil omen, and windows shutter from his sinister roar. People barred up in their homes or factories follow him in thought as he approaches, flies above homes, and then goes away. He flies over cities and towns, goes by and drops bombs, ruining a few homes, causing a few deaths and casualties. But only after he has left do the townfolk realize the damage that this cowardly enemy has planted for them. These are time delayed bombs, the insidious "butterfly" bombs. And their explosions are mixed up with the cries, invectives, and denouncing by the wounded for the ferocious criminal nature of the enemy. It is "Pippo", the bothersome airplane, the plane that each evening comes to us, this aircraft that molests and plants terror on streets and fields. And where ever you find our people — women, children, old folk, workers — the evil enemy wants to unleash his evil.

"Pippo": the symbol of the so-called "war of nerves" and of "total war". He is the vile means used by the enemy that too many of us still believe to be strong and — if it were true —in order to win shouldn't need to use a treacherous attack given to hidden dangers, the hunt for humans, and be a methodical assassin by using time delayed bombs.

It is not enough to hate him, this enemy, not enough to insult and damn him. We must defend ourselves against his vile attacks. We must render his dastardly designs void,

obstruct his plans in all possible ways. We must — and its almost absurd to insist once again —we must defend ourselves. Not even the slightest glimmer of light should leak to the outside and be visible from the sky. Doors must always remain unlocked in order to allow people caught unawares on the streets to take refuge from the enemy attack.

With sinister noise “Pippo” flies over our fields and city, restlessly circling in search of prey. Yes, let us curse him, rail against his criminal nature; but, let us remember that if we do not defend ourselves, we will be his accomplices and no longer his enemy.]

Here we have several prime elements of the Pippo narrative: the necessity of total darkness, the disturbing buzz of the engine, and the gratuitous, unpredictable dropping of a bomb. More specifically we have a Fascist newspaper exegizing the tale to support its recollections of the war. Whenever a friend picked up an unusual object in the fields, perhaps an abandoned shell, or a dud or piece of a fuse that came from who knows where, and it exploded and death ensued: Pippo was the available culprit, an explanation for the tragedy.

As we have seen, the Pippo narrative provides insight to how civilians tried to exorcise their fear and how propaganda played off the same fear. But it also reveals another fascinating aspect of the wartime collective conscience in Northern Italy. Violence visited the Italian citizens as never before in living memory. Caught in both a civil war and a siege for eighteen months, they were imprisoned both psychologically and physically. The Pippo narrative provides a unique key to comprehend this captivity.

IV. Pippo as Panacusticon

As Michael Foucault documents in *Surveiller et punir; Naissance de la prison* [*Survey and Punish: Birth of the Prison*] in the late eighteenth century English architect Jeremy Bentham devised an ingenious prison system of jail cells organized and controlled by a centrally placed guard tower. The design signified a revolution in prison architecture, for no longer did guards keep prisoners below ground and out of sight. Now they would be constantly under surveillance by guards behind shaded windows, and thus never knowing if they were actually being watched. What counted was the mysterious, central, omnipresent, towering Panopticon that — man or unmanned — governed thought and action. Thus, according to Foucault, “. . . Bentham laid down the principle that power should be visible and unverifiable. Visible: the inmate will constantly have before his eyes the tall outline of the central tower from which he is spied upon. Unverifiable: the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at at any one moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so” (201).

Pippo functioned as an audible Panopticon—a Panacusticon — droning omnipresent above the blackout. Very few people claim ever to have seen Pippo, but they swear they heard his drone each evening. Like a prison guard, Pippo surveyed the Italian inmates gripped by fear as they lived under the conditions of German occupation, civil war and Allied bombardment. He made his presence known audibly as he passed over, and visibly with any damage ascribed to him. But he remained unverifiable, for people thought that he was always present. As one man remembers: “Una sera ero in campagna e son uscito. Non ho visto e non ho sentito niente. Eppure giuro che quasi quasi se avessi voluto, avrei potuto sentire qualcosa” (Carlo Mingardi). [One night I was in the country and went outside. I did not see or hear a thing. And yet, I swear that if I had really really wanted, I could have heard something].

Perhaps this audible aspect of Pippo, more than any other, stoked the flames of the legend in terms of belief, providing millions of Italians a tangible (albeit illusive) reference point for their fears and how they dealt with them. People believed in Pippo, in other words, because they had ample proof via his drone. As folklorists Dégh and Vazsonyi state: “Although objective truth and the presence, in quality, and quantity of subjective belief are irrelevant, it is all the more relevant that any legend, no matter how fragmentary or corrupt, makes its case. It takes a stand and calls for the expression of opinion in the question of truth and belief” (1971: 301). In light of this concept therefore, belief itself in the legend was constantly reinforced, and Italians could express what they thought of him. The drone allowed the Pippo legend to make its case; as a Panacusticon, Pippo permitted Italians to project their fears of an ambiguous enemy and burden of psychological imprisonment in a coherent narrative voice.

Did the Allies or Germans specifically set out to terrorize Italians as a tactic of psychological warfare? U.S. and British historical sources do report the bombing runs that tragically killed non-combatant men, women and children, and some pilots did strafe people, homes and horse-drawn carts.¹⁹ Sometimes it probably did happen as sport, but it also occurred because, flying under the cover of darkness and more than 300 miles per hour, pilots had a hard time distinguishing what was a legitimate military target from what was not. At times, pilots made errors they regretted. For example, an American pilot who flew nocturnal intruder missions remembers:

It was my first intruder mission. We were going up near the Brenner Pass, and all of a sudden down below I saw a convoy. “Holy Smokes!” I said to myself, “I’m finally going to get this thing into the fight!” Well, I dove down and opened up but unfortunately I

misjudged my shot and hit an Italian farm house. I've always wondered what happened to that family and have felt bad about it all these years. (Carl Morrison)

The Allies did wage psychological warfare in northern Italy. The primary mechanisms, however, were through British Broadcast Corporation (BBC) transmissions of "Radio Londra" and leaflets dropped from the air (Mercuri 1983:246-247).²⁰ Some people do link Pippo with circulars left for the populace to read, and in reality at least two U.S. night-fighter squadrons did drop propaganda leaflets referred to as "nickel." (*War Diary*, 416th NFS 1947:n.p.; *War Diary*, 414th NFS 1947: n.p.) But, neither Fifteenth Air Force nor Mediterranean Air Force documentation reveals that night fighters flew missions as part of a programmatic psychological campaign specifically meant to unnerve the Italian people.²¹ Tactical directives of night fighter squadrons had pilots go after targets of opportunity, lead bombers on pathfinder operations and undertake intruder sorties to destroy enemy airfields and aircraft on the ground, railroad lines, marshalling yards, bridges and enemy convoys (Craven and Cate 1951:373-383; McFarland 1998:25; Rawlings 1969:359, 361, 469).

Allied pilots, especially those of the RAF who since the Battle of Britain had learned intruder techniques, began to undertake tactical night missions to the north once the Allies won a foothold on the peninsula in September 1943. Six months later, night intruder missions became an integral part of Operation Strangle, an effort to destroy German attempts to reinforce ground troops located at the Gustav front (Craven and Cate 1951: 373-383). Daylight operations began in March 1944, and because they proved so successful, the Germans opted to move troops at night. Thus, night fighter squadrons of both the RAF and the United States Army Air Force (USAAF) gained a larger role in

interdicting the flow of German supplies and forces. Allied officials “divided northern Italy into fifty-mile squares, with an aircraft orbiting each square, to be relieved by other aircraft throughout the night. This night effort included . . . the three [USAAF] night fighter squadrons in Italy, the 414th, 416th and 417th, flying the venerable British Beaufighters” (McFarland 1998:25). Primarily three RAF squadrons, the 255th, the 256th and the 600th had specific night fighter capability and used the famed De Havilland Mosquito (Rawlings 1969:359, 361, 469). Made of wood, extremely fast and evasive, this aircraft had no equal as a night fighter-bomber, and some Italian historians identify it as “Pippo” (Arena 1995:477; Evangelisti 1995:304).

Histories of Royal Air Force and United States Army Air Force night-fighter squadrons also clearly delineate how intruder missions became an integral part of the effort to destroy German logistical reinforcements to the front. At no point is reference made to a systematic plan meant to wreak physical, moral, and psychological damage upon the average Italian.²² Oral histories of former night squadron members especially bear out this point. As a former American pilot and a radar operator recall:

When we flew our missions, we went after military targets. We did our best to hit convoys and depots. I personally did not know that we were frightening the Italian people so much. After the war, I went up to the town to see where they had killed Mussolini. Well, my friend was wearing his flight jacket that had a picture of his P-61 Black Widow airplane on it. An Italian stopped him. We did not know how to speak Italian. But I understood that he pointed to the back of my friend’s jacket and said, “Pippo, Pippo.” I guessed that’s what they referred to us night fighters as.

(Joe Jenkins)

We were in the war to hit the Germans and Fascists. We did not go after Italian civilians. Why should we? When we flew, we were told that any target that was lit up was an enemy target because the Italians knew about the curfew. [. . .] any type of light sighted would be shot out, regardless of where they were — church steeples for sure since that was where the Germans first went. (Talmadge “Red” Simpson)

As indicated by these observations, most pilots had no hard, tangible evidence that they wielded such psychological fear upon Italians, and if they had known, it probably would not have mattered since they were at war, and they needed to defeat the enemy.

In line with the first pilot’s testimony, another reference indicates how immediately after the war at least a few American pilots came to know of the lore surrounding their missions. The 416th Night Fighter Squadron’s war diary entry for 8 May 1945 reports this fascinating encounter:

VE-Day and Hangover Day. A holiday, but very quiet. A baseball game at San Frediano – we beat 414th Squadron, 13-4. Lts. Ellis and King came back from Naples, without the new P-61’s. It seems all new Black Widows will be sent elsewhere now, none used for training purposes in this theater. Lt. Atwell came back from Villafranca. He made some arrangements and staked some claims for us on the airdrome, in the event we move there. He also had a good time playing around with the Partisans. By day, a pilot of a nightfighter was a curiosity in North Italy – night fighters and bombers had been greatly feared and commonly known all over as “Peepo” or the Italian equivalent of bogeyman. Major Urso was awarded the Purple Heart on orders of the 70th General Hospital. A

movie at the villa, preceded by our first Recognition Film of Japanese Aircraft – boos and hisses. (*War Diary*, 416th NFS 1947: n.p.)

As for the Italians, they naturally could not have imagined that the Pippo who flew above them was in principle trying to destroy military targets. And if they had known, they most likely would not have found any more solace because the danger inherent was so real and unnerving. Even today, very few people who remember Pippo reflect on the improbability of a single aircraft passing overhead at the close to the same time almost every night of the year. Even fewer ponder that he might not have been directly interested in harassing them.

This lack of reflection is understandable, for in essence they lived a very personal war.²³ Furthermore, and again as Degh and Vazsonyi stress in terms of the belief in legends, absurd qualities of the narrative matter little (1971: 301-302). Belief itself in the legend helps us understand that terror held millions of Italians hostage, and as an audible Panopticon, Pippo did not need to appear. Intriguingly, even though many Allied pilots could not have understood their role as a Panacusticon on a psychological level, pilots in the 416th Night Fighter Squadron referred to themselves with the nickname “the blackout wardens of the Po.”²⁴ Thus, these pilots must have had some inkling that their missions helped to enforce the curfew and curtail enemy movement at night. But of course, they themselves had absolutely no intention of breathing life into a legend — as stated previously, all they wanted to do was destroy enemy targets and survive the war.

VI. Conclusion: The narrative of the Italian World War II generation

During World War II, fear fiercely subjugated the Northern Italian masses caught in a no-man's land behind the retreating Nazi front. Just as they did during the Great War throughout Europe, “nouvelles fausses”, superstitions, hearsay, and lies — fostered both by propaganda and the sheer surreality of war — once again ran rampant. Pippo, however, was not simply a rumor, “un aereo fantasma,” a product manufactured by the creative power of the collective imagination. Enough airplanes droned above and bombed and machine gunned at night to convince the collective psyche that their destructive power was real. The legend is thus objectively true.²⁵

Something about an intrepid, solitary night intruder struck the collective imagination, and people gave voice to their fears.²⁶ The narrative provided a cathartic outlet for communal sharing of intense anxiety,²⁷ and the ambiguity and confusion of wartime reality in Northern Italy are wonderfully mirrored in the tale at three intersecting levels. First, the drone always underlined the presence of danger and sense of psychological imprisonment through fear. Second, Pippo's multi-leveled and at times contrasting attributes reflect contending interpretations of the enemy. Finally, Fascist propaganda disseminated misinformation about Pippo, adding all the more to the scope of mystery inherent in the legend.²⁸

The embers of Pippo lore have remained stoked, for the narrative has come down to us more than fifty-five years after the war. Recently, for example, the *Gazzetta di Parma* carried several articles about the bombing of the San Giovanni monastery. Most documents attribute the destruction of the church to an Allied raid that occurred on 13 May 1944. Father Martino Marinosci, a Benedictine monk who lived at the monastery during the war, contests the date and attributes the destruction to Pippo:

Circa le responsabilità del bombardamento padre Martino sembra non avere dubbi. “Fu opera di Pippo” dice categoricamente. E per “Pippo” il benedettino intende non un aereo anglo-americano ma un apparecchio tedesco, insomma un aereo “provocatore” (una tesi questa già adombrata anche da alcuni storici e studiosi).

“Quella notte del 24 agosto ‘44—ricorda sempre il religioso—lo vidi alzarsi in volo dal campo di fortuna che i tedeschi avevano allestito nei pressi di Corcagnano e puntare dritto sulla città. Quando fu sopra il vecchio stabilimento Barilla si diresse su San Giovanni e sganciò. I tedeschi volevano colpire la nostra chiesa (o magari anche il Duomo), per poi addossare le responsabilità agli anglo-americani.” (Gazzetta di Parma 2000:25)

[Concerning the responsibility of the bombing, Father Martino does not seem to have any doubt. “It was the work of Pippo” he says categorically. And by “Pippo” the Benedictine does not intend an Anglo-american aircraft but a German one, that is, an “agitator” plane (a hypothesis that some historians have already posited).

“That night of 24 August ’44 — remembers the cleric — I saw him go up from the rogue field the Germans had put together near Corcagnano, and he headed toward the city. When he was above the Barilla factory he vectored toward San Giovanni and let loose. The Germans wanted to hit our church (or maybe even the cathedral), in order thus to put the blame on the Anglo-americans.”]

Father Marinosci provides an interesting twist to the tale. The element of fancy here is not that he attributes the bombing to the Germans, but that he says the Germans did so in part so that the Allies would be blamed. If this were the case, the Germans would not

only have used propaganda to manipulate Pippo's grip on the Italian collective conscience; they would have used actual material means. In attempting to fix the blame with this sophisticated reasoning, however, Marinosci diminishes the tragedy itself of the church's destruction.

The Pippo legend with its rich narrative provides folklorists, historians, and literary scholars alike the opportunity to arrive at a more complete understanding of the social and psychological mechanisms ordinary people employed in facing the strains, horrors and fears of World War II.²⁹ Still today, countless thousands who remember Pippo continue to believe apocryphal notions about him: he was one plane that operated alone each and every night to instill fear and make sure that they doused the lights. Even if we debunk these elements of the tale, it matters little, for the narrative embodies the meaning of war for survivors and continues to sustain it. The legend belongs to a specific generation that later shared its lore with children who did not experience the same perils, and with the passage of time, succeeding generations may not perpetuate the Pippo story. But an amazing link with this legend to a reality of modern warfare occurred recently after the tragic terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001.

In a report for the daily "Il Giornale," Italian correspondent Fausto Biloslavo, who covered the U.S. led bombing of Afganistan, referred to the automated drone that reconnoiters the battlefield as "Pippo":

Lo schema dei raid è sempre lo stesso: prima dell'attacco un aereo con ali normali, non a delta come i caccia, vola in circolo e ad alta quota, sopra gli obiettivi. Si tratta di un velivolo di ricognizione o di un gioiello elettronico che disturba le comunicazioni del nemico ed eventuali sistemi di difesa avanzati. Difatti ci è capitato che, durante il

sorvolo di Pippo, come l'abbiamo soprannominato, non ci sia verso di fare funzionare i telefoni satellitari. Poco dopo arrivano i bombardieri, che in coppia volteggiando sugli obiettivi. (3)

[The scheme for the raids is always the same: before the attack an airplane with normal wings, not delta shaped like the fighters, circles very high above the targets. It's either a reconnoitering aircraft or an electronic jewel that interrupts enemy communications and eventual advanced defense weapon systems. In fact, we've noticed that during the flight of Pippo, as we've nicked named him, there is no way to use the satellite phones. Soon after, the bombers come in pairs of two and dive upon their targets.]

Thus, it seems that the myth transcends the limits of time, space, and technological invention.³⁰ The mere fact that Biloslavo —consciously or not — identified the craft as Pippo hints that for an Italian, when in the context of war, a solitary reconnaissance plane triggers the association with the lore. Perhaps Pippo has shown his potential to transcend the common folk experience of World War II and will not be lost to the ages.

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¹ Anna Amendola (1990) documents the history of the transmission and comments upon several of the letters. Giovanni De Luna of the Università di Torino served as the program's chief historical consultant. In his essay "La televisione e la 'nazionalizzazione' della memoria storica" (1993:98) he states: "Per cinque mesi persone di ogni ceto sociale e soprattutto donne offrono alla trasmissione la propria memoria, lasciando affiorare un groviglio di emozioni, un immenso serbatoio a cui attingere per delineare uno spaccato del tutto inedito della storia del nostro paese nell'orrore della Seconda Guerra Mondiale" [For five months, people of every social class —women especially — offered the show their personal memories, letting blossom a tangle of emotions, and creating an immense source from which to sketch a slice of the untold stories of the horror of World War II].

² I have not been able to find references to Pippo in official histories covering the Italian Resistance or the military and political experiences of Italy in World War II. I have, however, found reference to the airplane in histories covering the air war and in works that bring the civilian experience of war to life, especially in relation to bombardments. These sources tend to be regional in scope and make ample use of both newspaper reports and oral histories. A few include: Vittorio Barbieri (1975), Carlo Brizzolari (1978), and Dino Guerrino Molesì (1974). The lack of scholarly attention also reflects the ongoing apprehension the Italian academy has for oral history and what Italian folklorist Alessandro Portelli describes as institutional leeringness of "descriptions 'from below'." He states: "A specter is haunting the halls of the academy: the specter of oral history. The Italian intellectual community, always suspicious of new from outside . . . hastened to cut oral history down to size before even trying to understand what it is and how to use it. The method used has been that of charging oral history with pretensions it does not have, in order to set everybody's mind at ease by refuting them" (1991:46).

³ Unless otherwise stated, all translations in the text and in the notes are my own.

⁴ A common motif in oral histories runs like this: "Dalla fine della guerra non ho mai capito chi fosse e come mai ci sorvegliasse e qui si tratta di quasi più di sessant'anni" [Since the end of the war I've never understood who he was and why he kept an eye on us, and we're talking about almost more than sixty years] (Francesca Gheller). People still seek answers to the phenomenon.

⁵ In his essay, "Four Functions of Folklore," William Bascom (1954:333-349) outlines the roles folklore occupies in culture: it may be a mirror of culture, validate aspects of culture, serve as a means to educate, and help maintain conformity of acceptable patterns of behavior. The Pippo legend as folk literature fulfills all these functions to various degrees.

⁶ Giulio Mele (1937:81) provides a brief catalogue of several rumors spread along the Italian front in World War I. As in France and Belgium, Italian troops in the trenches also heard the same legend of how Germans sent dead bodies to the rear for the extraction of fats. Tamotsu Shibutani in *Improvised News* (1965) documents many rumors spread by American soldiers and sailors in World War II. For a psychological study of hearsay in war, see *The Psychology of Rumor* by Gordon Allport and Leo Postman (1947).

⁷ Evelyn Waugh (1945:293) also mentions the myth.

⁸ A few important studies in English of Italy's predicament in World War II include: Knox MacGreggor's *Mussolini Unleashed* (1982); Richard Lamb's *War in Italy, 1943-1945: A Brutal Story* (1994); F.W. Deakin's *The Brutal Friendship: Mussolini, Hitler, and the Fall of Italian Fascism* (1962) and D. Graham and S. Bidwell's *Tug of War: The Battle for Italy 1943-45*, (1986). Dante Puzzo provides a solid appraisal of the civil war with *The Partisans and the War in Italy* (1993). An indispensable text in Italian is Claudio Pavone's *Una guerra civile. Saggio storico sulla moralità nella Resistenza* (1991).

⁹ Claudio Rosati (1986) provides an excellent study of how Allied bombardments shaped the collective memory of the war.

¹⁰ In April 1944, for example, the Fascist-controlled *Il popolo Vicentino* warned: "Risulta che aerei nemici lasciano cadere in aperta campagna oggetti che ciascuno è invogliato a raccogliere. Si tratta di penne stilografiche, di matite e di altri simili gingilli in forma di giocattoli, e dolciumi, che rappresentano invece un grave pericolo trattandosi di ordigni esplosivi. Si raccomanda la massima attenzione specie per i bambini. Astenersi dal toccare tali oggetti e denunciare la presenza alle autorità locali" [It seems that enemy aircraft dropped on open ground in the country objects that attract everyone's attention to pick them up. It involves writing pens, pencils, and other trinkets in the shape of toys and sweets. But they actually are a grave risk since they are explosives. We and especially children must give the greatest care around

them. Keep from touching such objects and indicate their presence to the local authorities] (“Il popolo Vicentino 1944:2). As Cesare Bermanni (1996:159) documents, fear of explosive pens had a strong voice in popular lore: “In Italia si diceva che gli aeroplani angloamericani lanciassero — oltre alle immancabili caramelle avvelenate, una leggenda già della prima guerra mondiale, ma allora concernente i tedeschi — delle matite o penne esplosive. A Novara, noi bambini ne parlavamo spesso e del resto esisteva al proposito materiale di propaganda fascista e tedesca, per esempio un manifesto tedesco del gennaio 1944 che riproduceva delle penne esplosive. . . . Né eravamo solo noi bambini a soggiacere alla propaganda nazifascista. Al Museo di Storia Contemporanea è ancor oggi esposta come ‘penna esplosiva’ un oggetto non identificato, ma che certamente non è una penna esplosiva” [In Italy it was said that Anglo-american airplanes dropped — besides the often referred to poisoned candy, a legend that harks back to the First World War, but at the time leveled against the Germans — explosive pens and pencils. In Novara, we children used to talk often about them, and moreover Fascist and German propaganda had published material pertaining to them. For example, a Germann poster from January 1944 showed a few explosive pens. . . . And it just wasn’t us children that fell prey to Nazifascist propaganda. Even today at the Contemporary History Museum there is an unidentified object displayed as an “explosive pen,” but it certainly is not an explosive pen].

¹¹ Franco Clivio (1997) makes the link between the song, the plane and Mickey Mouse’s friend. According to historian Nicola Gallerano (1986:493), many Italian soldiers exorcised their fear and awe of Allied superiority by making their enemy seem fantastic. He states: “. . . immagini elaborate dai soldati italiani non segnalano forse tanto l’estraneità e l’irrealtà della guerra . . . quanto la sua inutilità di fronte alla schiacciante superiorità del nemico. Un nemico che perde quasi ogni connotato ostile conservando solo la sua diversità, fatta di potenza, anzi di onnipotenza: divinizzandolo, la cultura contadina dei soldati ne esorcizza gli effetti distruttivi, di morte; e lo riduce alla misura di un meraviglioso lungamente elaborato e conosciuto” [. . . images embellished by Italian soldiers do not indicate perhaps the strangeness and irreality of war . . . as much as the incapacity to describe war in light of the crushing superiority of the enemy, and at that, an enemy that comes to lose all hostile connotations and conserves only its diversity forged by power and not unbeatable power. By making a myth of the enemy’s power, the peasant culture of soldiers exorcises the enemy’s destructive nature capable of death. It reduces it to the measure of something wonderful that can be fully elaborated and understood].

¹² I conducted and recorded oral interviews in Italy during the summers of 1994, 1999, 2000, and 2001 in Florence, Forlì, Vicenza, Bussetto (Parma), and Mathì (Torino). In the United States, I interviewed former night fighter pilots both over the telephone and at the 416th Night Fighter Squadron Reunion in September 2001 held in Tuscon, Arizona. All the oral histories are on cassette tape and in my personal archive.

¹³ Many diaries have found their way to “Il Fondo Diaristico Nazionale,” a special archive in Pieve Santo Stefano, a town near Arezzo. I found the following excerpt from Mambelli’s diary in the Biblioteca Comunale di Forlì.

¹⁴ Since 1990, several students have written theses covering the documentation archived from the television broadcast of *La mia guerra*, and references to Pippo as a frightening threat abound. Among those collected at the Istituto Storico della Resistenza in Bergamo, one unpublished thesis by Francesca Valtulina (1997), proved especially helpful in this present study.

¹⁵ In Psicologia della paura, Anna Oliverio Ferraris (1980:144) further explains: “La notte rientra nella più vasta paura della novità o dell’ignoto ed è un indizio naturale dell’auumento di rischio. Questa paura che oggi, con gli ausili della tecnica — in particolar modo con la luce elettrica — è alquanto contenuta, in passato poteva assumere vaste proporzioni” [Fear of the unknown and unforeseen has always been multiplied at night as a natural result of perceived risk. Today, because of technology — especially electric light — this fear is pretty much manageable, but in the past it could reach incredible levels].

¹⁶ Linda Dégh’s observation about core belief bears insight here: “. . . the complete story or any of its fragments might exist side by side in the well-rounded form of a *Fabulat*, a *Memorat*, a story of one’s own experience, a description of a ritual act, information about a belief, and so on. That is: the *form* and *extent* of the legend is *unstable, oscillating around a stable concept of belief*. All these factors must be considered in establishing the nature of the legend” (1995:233).

¹⁷ Italian folklorist Alessandro Portelli provides a fascinating insight into how Italians are still divided in their understanding of the enemy in terms of the partisan – Fascist struggle inherent in the civil war. On 29 June 1944, German occupying troops in the Tuscan town of Civitella Val di Chiana massacred 115 civilians in retaliation for three German soldiers shot dead by Resistance fighters. Many blame the

Germans for their wanton act of violence. But many other townsfolk blame the partisans for the massacre since their murders that led to the retaliation are seen as irresponsible and reprehensible (1997:140-160). Portelli also addresses the intricate and involved interpretation of Allied destruction in an unpublished essay entitled, “Friendly Fire and Collateral Damage: The Complex Memory of World War II Air Raids in Italy.”

¹⁸In *Ambarabà. Un’antologia di filastroche popolari*, Lella Gandini (1979:15) relates how filastrocche, games and poems “sono impregnate di umorismo, ironia, gaiezza e insegnano, oltre al resto, che queste sono acquisizioni indispensabili per permettere al bambino di dominare i suoi stati d’ansia e avere fiducia nella vita” [are richly imprinted with humor, irony, joy, and they teach, among other things, that these traits are indispensable for children to learn in order that they dominate their fears and have confidence in life] (15). Similarly, in *I canti popolari italiani*, Roberto Leydi (1973:38) also stresses: “Ninne nanne, rime infantili, giochi, sono, cioè, strumenti primari ed essenziali di incultrazione, in una società tradizionale e in un’economia contadina” [Lullabies, children’s rhymes, and games, are, that is, primary and essential instruments of incultration in both traditional and peasant society]. Rhymes recited to master fear of Pippo reflect how even today children often sing songs and jingles to overcome fear of the *Uomo Nero* [Boogie Man], or *Orca* [Monster]. As Danilo Airona (1994:27-28) mentions how adults often threaten children that they will be kidnapped and eaten by these monsters if they misbehave. The parallels should not go overlooked, for they indicate how at one time Pippo, as a *Uomo Nero* weighed on the conscience and governed behavior of both children and adults.

¹⁹We can find a good visual representation of an Allied pilot strafing civilians in Vittorio De Sica’s 1960 film *Two women*. Furthermore, in her autobiographical short story *Arriva la cicogna* (1954) Renata Viganò describes having to take cover because an Allied aircraft had her and her son in its sights.

²⁰Robert Jackson (1983:123-142) discusses clandestine and special operations in the Mediterranean Theater of Operations, many of which included dropping leaflets.

²¹In his introduction to Mercuri’s *Guerra psicologica* (1983:vii-viii), Ennio Di Nolfo further stresses that more than any psychological warfare campaign, the military events of war, in and of themselves, were enough to frighten the collective imagination.

²²Unit histories of night fighter squadrons provide fascinating documentation. The U.S. Airforce keeps such information at both Maxwell Airforce Base in Montgomery, Alabama, and Bowling Airforce base in Maryland.

²³As Bloch says in his *Riflessioni* (1980:246): “grandi stati d’animo collettivi hanno il potere di trasformare una cattiva percezione in una leggenda” [great states of collective spirit have the power to transform and bad perception into a legend]. Furthermore, Roberto Battaglia (1964:39-40) states how the war was, “un fatto individuale . . . subito o imposto dall’esterno . . . una tragedia familiare, da viverci nell’ambito della propria cerchia ristretta d’interessi e d’affetti, senza sollevare il capo al di là di questo angusto e doloroso orizzonte” [an individual matter . . . exposed or imposed by the external world . . . a familiar tragedy that has to be lived in the confines of one’s own little circle of interests and friends, where the individual cannot raise his or her head from this narrow and painful reality].

²⁴Mr. Carl Morrison, a former member of the squadron relayed this information to me in a telephone interview on 5 October 2001.

²⁵Again, as Dégh and Vazsonyi state in their study “The Crack on the Red Goblet or Truth and the Modern Legend,” a legend does not cease to exist simply because it is true: “What was born as a legend, within the ‘legend climate,’ what was transmitted as legend and received as legend, or, in other words, what traveled through the legend conduit in society, stays a legend even if its content turns out to be true” (1978:262).

²⁶The naming of solitary night intruders took place elsewhere in the war. For example, members of the 416th Night Fighter Squadron referred to the German aircraft JU-88 that did reconnaissance at night as “Reccie Joe” Migliorini (1963:222), Italian soldiers interned at Frankfurt Am Main referred to a solitary airplane that disturbed them at night as “Martino”. Furthermore, a few Marines that fought on Guadalcanal in the Pacific have told me about a small Japanese reconnaissance plane they called “Washing Machine Charlie”. Finally, countless GI’s in Africa and Italy referred to the German equivalent of Pippo, an unaccompanied night fighter that passed above them, as “Bed-Check Charlie.”

²⁷As Fine and Turner state in considering how rumor works in their study *Whispers on the Color Line*: “. . . some rumors promote solidarity and shared concern. At times rumor can permit a community to discuss ongoing anxieties and events. By focusing on a common issue, people engage in collective problem solving” (2000:59).

²⁸ In accounting for perception's of Pippo we should never diminish the role of Fascist propaganda. Newspaper articles depicted Allied airmen as villains and wartime broadsides stated that bombers aimed their explosives at mothers and children. One such announcement entitled "Dieci comandamenti" is reproduced in *Milano in Guerra* (1979:37). Among the claims, it lists: "...i gerrafondai angloamericani . . .sono ricorsi al terrorismo contro la popolazione enermè: essi bombardano sistematicamente i quartieri d'abitazione, e di questa attività hanno fatto una vera e propria scienza, applicando sempre nuove e diaboliche trovate . . . I gangster dell'aria non risparmiano né ospedali, né autoambulanze . . .Il terrorismo aereo è una guerra contro le donne e i bambini" [. . . American warmongers . . . have taken to terrorism against the defenseless population. They methodically bomb neighborhoods, and it has become an exact science for them in the way that they come up with new and diabolical measures . . . The air gangsters do not spare neither hospitals nor ambulances . . . The terrorism of the air is war against women and children] (37). These propaganda claims made their impact when Italians experienced untold fear, and in memory, they are hard to dislodge.

²⁹ I have found no trace of Pippo in the cannon of Resistance literature, and only two references in memorial literature by civilians who lived during the war. Wanda Newby (1991:166), a Slovenian emigrant to Italy who lived in the Parma region and after the war married an English serviceman, describes Pippo in one paragraph as an airplane that people grew to accept as a part of war. She relates: "The Allies seemed to be drawn as if by magnet to our local villages. Perhaps they suffered from insomnia, because every night, just when everybody was settled in bed, a slow noisy plane — we called it Pippo — came buzzing around. Here and there Pippo dropped a bomb, but hardly ever on a village; he came out of sheer perversity, we felt, just to rob us of our sleep. During the first few days people left their houses for fear of being bombed by Pippo, but quite soon he became part of our lives and we didn't bother about him any more" . Giampaolo Pansa (1994:84) incorporates Pippo to the greatest degree in a literary work. In the novel, Giovanni often lays awake at night and listens for *Pippo l'Aviatore*: "Arrivava o no? Eccolo, Pippo. Uno spillo d'argento, altissimo contro l'azzurro. Ronzava sicuro verso nord. A volte, più che un falco, gli ricordava un calabrone pazzo che si fosse spinto ai confini dell'aria" [Was he coming or not? Here he is, Pippo, silver pen-like high above against the blue sky. Surely buzzing toward the north. At times, more than a hawk, it reminded him of a huge, crazy hornet that was going full speed to the ends of the air].

³⁰ As Dégh states in *Legend and Belief*: "Some folklore genres go out of fashion because they are too attached to the particular historical and social conditions that created them; others, in order to survive, must undergo considerable adjustments and compromises to stay functional" (2001:399).