

**The Winterline Museum of Venafro**

**A journey through places and facts of the Second World War in Venafro and its surroundings**

**Winterline Venafro APS Association**



**Photo by Daniele Vettese and Juri Gianfrancesco  
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## **Preface:**

Dr. Luciano Bucci,

President of the Winterline Venafro APS Association

### **A museum born from Passion and Friendship:**

The history of the association and of the Winterline Venafro museum, whose founding members are Luciano Bucci, Renato Dolcigno, and Donato Pasquale, has distant and deep roots in the friendship of its members who, since teenagers, have shared a unique and original passion, which led them to collect objects and memories of the Second World War concerning the war events that affected the municipality of Venafro and the neighboring lands, to the point of creating the first historical-military exhibition in Molise called Winterline.

Over the years, in collaboration with the other members of the association (Domenico Vecchiarino, Rosario Malfatti, Stefano Iuliani, Andrea Ottaviano, Pasquale Cocozza Fernando Pirolli, Juri Gianfrancesco e Alessandro Vallone ), they have managed to complete a collection, worthy of an international museum, made up of unique and original finds, all recovered along the Bernhardt Line, or Winterline. Particularly, the area that goes from Venafro to the nearby Mainarde. The creation of the museum was assisted by the Istituto Autonomo Case Popolari and the then Director Arch. Franco Valente, for the Winterline Venafro Museum inside Palazzo De Utris.

In the Museum the exhibited material, owned by the Winterline Venafro APS Association members who, in addition to the recovery, have taken care of the

restoration, cataloging, and maintenance, catapults the visitor in time and in the places protagonists of the harsh war events.

The Museum, which has an area of about 400 square meters, goes beyond the simple "collection of objects", its layout is a real journey through time and the places of the Second World War in Venafro and its surroundings.

Without neglecting the possibility of seeing all the original objects recovered by the members of the association, some of which are rare and valuable, in over thirty years of activity, the installations are created to show, in an educational and experiential way, the various phases of the Allied advance along the German Bernhardt line, renamed by the Allies Winterline for its fighting during the winter between 1943 and 1944, which was centered in Venafro.



Photo 1: The central mountains of the Winterline

Each scene follows a precise chronological and geographical order that tells the story and the territory, starting from November 1943 on the Volturno River up to

the breakthrough of the Mainarde line in February 1944; every section is enriched by photos and films of the time that portray the places involved and tell the story of the events.

The visitor, therefore, can appreciate both the collectible value of the exhibition, the explanatory dioramas are in fact made with numerous fully equipped mannequins and rare objects of historical and collectible relevance, as well as the faithful historical narration of the facts that arise from the guided tour inside of the Museum, without neglecting particular anecdotes that the members of the Association have learned directly from the stories of local elders and veterans and which they gladly share with visitors. Therefore this museum, suitable for all ages and all types of visitors, is strongly recommended for those who want a first-hand understanding of the facts, places, and even the people who have characterized the territory of the Bernhardt or Winterline between November 1943 and February 1944.

### **A Multimedia Museum:**

The Winterline Museum in Venafro is not only rich in its exhibition but also in numerous documents, photos, and videos that can be viewed and consulted. Before starting the visit visitors can take advantage of the multimedia room on the first floor which allows them to better understand the topics by watching documentaries, PowerPoint presentations, or consulting thematic publications. This fills any of the didactic, experiential, and

learning processes gaps regarding the history of the Winterline, too often mistreated and incorporated into the macro area of Cassino and Gustav Line.

### **Ground floor - Italy before the armistice and the approach to the line:**

The experiential educational path of the Winterline Venafro Museum begins with a photographic room that collects about 200 original images, taken in and around Venafro allowing the visitor to understand the situation and the real conditions that existed in those places and in that period.



Photo 2: the introductory room

The next step is to show the Italian-German alliance before the signing of the Armistice, a necessary step above all for the new generations who often find themselves poorly informed about the chronology of events and the reasons why we were at war with a new allied advance front right in Italy.



Photo 3: The pre-armistice period

There are also local references to fascist culture and propaganda, in particular the presence of a rare banner of the Fascist Youth of Venafro, stolen during the war by Allied troops and recovered by the Winterline Venafro Association.



Photo 4: The Fascist era in Venafro

The museum continues with a tribute to the hard work of transporting the wounded from the battlefields to the hospitals downstream.

A corner dedicated to the difficult mountainous terrain which required an enormous effort on the part of the men and animals engaged in transporting supplies, food, and the wounded up and down impervious paths, particularly highlighting the rare French packable stretcher used right on the Winterline to carry the wounded.



Photo 5: Carriage of the wounded

The next step is a thematic map that indicates the places of the main battles fought along the Winterline by means of visual markers.





Photo 6: the thematic map

The exhibition then continues with the allied troops' approach to the line, an approach which coincided with the arrival of the same troops along the southern bank of the Volturno River, a natural border between the regions of Molise and Campania - back then, a complex obstacle to overcome - which forced the allies to a period of reorganization in the first days of November 1943.

The phase of the approach to the line is presented through two distinct dioramas which, like all the others present in the museum, are on a natural scale and made with original material; these dioramas show the troops waiting to advance on the Volturno and the rear line activity which instead began to be organized with camps and kitchen areas where the soldiers were refreshed and looked after by female volunteer personnel.





Photo. 7: Allied position on the Volturno river



Photo 8: Allied patrols in a camp

In this first path, there are also unique and personal objects which, in addition to characterizing the exhibition, create an emotional connection aimed at keeping the concept of "humanity" alive, a concept which is often lost in many

exhibitions. These objects serve as a comparison between the harshness of the situation and the social and human aspects of the lives of the young boys involved. Among these objects, the ones that best express this sense of humanity are the letters, also recovered by the members of the Winterline Venafro Association, written by American mothers and fiancées to their loved ones at the front.

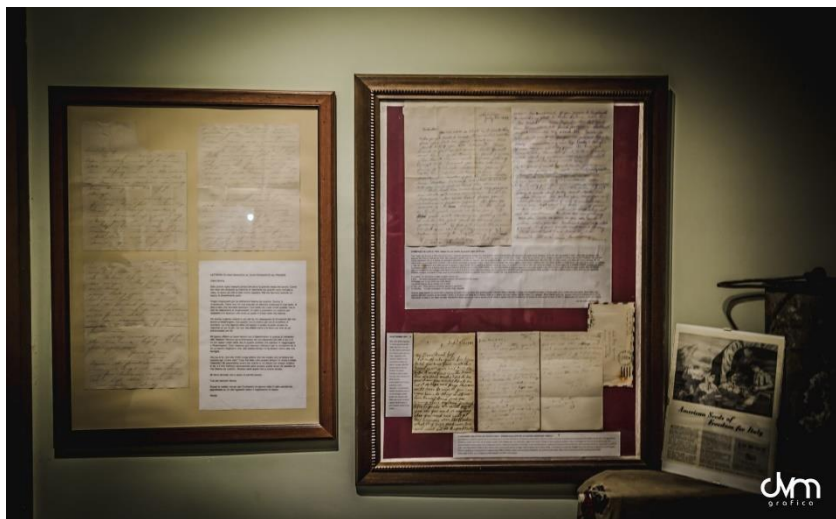


Photo 9: Personal letters sent to soldiers

### **Basement from November 1943 to February 1944:**

The exhibition continues in the basement of Palazzo de Utris, in what were the cellars of the building and shelter during the war. There lies the largest part of the collection. In the continuation of the historical-geographical narration of the events, the visitor starts again from the Volturno River but, this time, at a time when the Allied Military Engineers were organizing the safety of the fords of the Volturno River for the passage of the bulk of the troops and supplies.



Photo 10: Soldier of the American Engineers

In front of the soldier, it is possible to appreciate the difficult moment of the first advance on the mountains and how difficult it was to transport supplies to the front line; transport was entrusted to mules and to Alpine troops who, on the Winterline and together with other Italian soldiers, began to actively cooperate with the Allied troops; the transport of supplies, and of the wounded back to the valley, for the allies was, in fact, the first cooperation that will lead to the reconstitution of the Italian Army under the name of Primo Raggruppamento Motorizzato, first, Italian Liberation Corps after the battle of Monte Marrone.





Photo 11: Italian Alpine troops cooperating with the Allies

We then continue with the subsequent scenes which intend to show the technical and emotional dualism between the quiet of the rear camps on the plains and the difficulties of the front line, exposed to the enemy and to the elements, on the cold peaks of our mountains.



Photo 12: Allied rear camp



Photo 13: Allied post on the front line

The narration of the events arrives in December 1943, in particular at the first official operational use of Italian troops alongside the Allies in the battle of Montelungo di Mignano, a significant moment for the redemption and rebirth of the Italian Army but also a first episode of the civil war between the two different alignments created following the Armistice among the Italian ranks, soldiers against Nazi-fascism and soldiers in favor of Nazi-fascism; few know, in fact, that in the Montelungo area, in addition to the Italians alongside the Allies, a group of volunteers from the Social Republic led by Lieutenant Rino Cozzarini resisted alongside the Germans.



Photo 14: Official cooperation between the Italians and the Allies



Photo 15: Italian soldiers cooperating with the Germans



December 1943 is also the most significant period of the historical events of the territory, there are fierce battles on the highest and toughest altitudes of the Winterline such as the Camino massif and La Defensa, Sammucro, Monte Pantano and the Mainarde chain, the latter fortified with bunkers dug into the rock and held by mountain troops, accustomed to harsh climates, such as the 5th Gebirgs Jager Division which proved to be a tenacious enemy for the advancing allied troops, to arrive right up to the actual breakthrough of the line in the area of San Pietro Infine, with the first serious use, on both sides, of armored and mechanized troops on the front.



Photo 16: German Bunker on the Mainarde



Photo 17: Allied Armored Troops at San Pietro Infine

The conquest of San Pietro Infine connected to the conquest of the Casilina road, marking the first real result of the allied war effort carried out up to this point - so much so that it also became the protagonist of a documentary of the time narrating the deeds of the soldiers engaged at the front and filmed by famed director John Huston.

In the Museum there are all the units that have been protagonists of the events in the territory among these, to add social aspects to the narration of the facts, there are the French Colonial troops, protagonists of hard battles, in inaccessible areas and particularly difficult to conquer, but also sadly famous for the acts of violence carried out against the civilian population, a civilian population which, too, finds its rightful representation in museum dioramas in order to never lose contact with the reality and harshness of the war it brings, especially to helpless civilians, danger, hunger and destruction.



Photo 18: French Colonial Troops



Photo 19: Tribute to civilians

There are the Commonwealth troops who were the first, as early as the end of October 1943, to try to break through the German defense line from the south, clashing against the massif of Monte Camino-Monte la Defensa.





Photo 20: Commonwealth troops

This massif was conquered only at the beginning of December 1943 with the conquest, through a very difficult mission of infiltration behind enemy lines and considered by many to be impossible, of Monte la Defensa by the First Special Service Force. The First Special Service Force was a special unit, created specifically for mountain combat and commando jobs behind enemy lines was, in fact, the first special operations unit created in the world.

Among the other peculiarities of the First Special Service Force there was also that of being the first joint unit ever created, it was, in fact, made up of half Americans and half Canadians.

In the Winterline Museum there is a large section dedicated to this particular unit, also testifying to the emotional bond created between its veterans and the members of the Winterline Venafro association.



Photo 21: Soldiers of the First Special Service Force



The narration of the events then moves to January 1944, when the allies, having conquered the mountains north of San Pietro Infine and the Mainarde, begin to look out over the plain of Cassino and Atina and begin to see the next obstacle to the advance: the Gustav line. This situation forced the Allies to a new stop to regroup.



Photo 22: Allied Command Post north of Venafro

The itinerary has its "ideal" conclusion in February 1944 with two dioramas which show, on the one hand, the contrasting situation between the area of Venafro, by now liberated and represented, by taking up a period photo, from a country house in which some American soldiers warm up in relaxation and in the company of an elderly lady, on the other still a combat scene between an American and a German sniper in the town of Cervaro, at the gates of the Gustav, to indicate how, although the Winterline had been overcome, other lines of defense and

fighting awaited the soldiers deployed in Italy on both fronts.



Photo 23: Conviviality between civilians and Allied soldiers in Venafrò



Photo 24: The capture of a German sniper in Cervaro

### **No aspect is overlooked:**

Precisely because of its nature as a "narrative museum", the installations of the Winterline Venafrò Museum explore every aspect of the difficult months in which the front passed through that territory.

Among its rooms, the vicissitudes surrounding the Allied advance also take shape and come to life, such as, for example, the difficult situation of transporting and caring for the wounded in combat. Some dioramas, in fact, also with the help of rare and particular objects, show the harsh experience of war sanity, both on the Allied side and on the German side, represented during the phase of occupation of the town of Venafrò which, first for the Germans and, subsequently, for the allies, it was the headquarters of commands and hospitals serving the combat area.



Photo 25: German field hospital



Photo 26: Allied field hospital

Another side aspect of the Allied advance, also represented with a special diorama, is the difficult operation of searching for and removing enemy mines, a very risky operation which, even after the war, caused deaths and injuries in the already battered territory of the front.





Photo 27: American deminer in action

Last but not least, a corner of the Winterline Museum in Venafro is dedicated to the Polish soldiers and their mascot: Wojtek the bear.

An almost fairytale story that characterized the rebirth of Polish national pride. A bear who, found and bought as a cub in a market in Persia where the Polish army was reorganizing itself, soon became a mascot and a real "fellow soldier", so much so that he accompanied the troops in the rear operations and in loading ammunition and so much so that it became the official symbol of the 22nd Polish subsistence company and symbol of the final Polish victory in the battle of Monte Cassino; he faithful companion of all the Polish advance in Italy, he survived the war and, today, many monuments throughout Italy have been dedicated to him.



Photo 28: Wojtek the Bear and the Poles

### **Rare and special items:**

To enrich the museum exhibition, rare objects, sometimes unique, peep out inside the numerous showcases, such as for example a Filotecnica Milano optic for an Italian 91/38 musket. An object produced in very few specimens and used by Italian snipers during the First World War; this optic, complete with its case, was recovered by the Winterline Venafro Association from a farmer who lived close to the battlefields and it is still a real mystery today as to how it got there.

Another rare item, actually two, are two V42 combat knives supplied to the First Special Service Force; produced in only 1200 specimens, the V42 is an iconic knife and representative of the unit to which it was assigned.

It was designed and created exclusively for them after the design and testing by Colonel Frederick himself, commander of the First Special Service Force. Currently,



those of the Winterline Venafro Museum are the only ones in Italy on public display.



Photo 29: Italian scope for 91 musket



Photo 30: One of the two V42 knives exhibited at the Winterline Museum

One last object worthy of mention, which adds an ironic and mysterious tone to a visit to the Museum, is a fake gold ingot, donated to the Association by a man who, not without bitterness, told of its origin.

It was a scam, perpetrated against unsuspecting farmers, widespread in many municipalities along the Winterline and lasting from the immediate post-war period until the 1960s, in which a fake veteran, accompanied by a cronie, pretended to find a treasure, made of fake ingots and fake jewels, to then extort money from the victims of the scam in exchange for a part of this treasure. The ingot in question cost the father of the person who donated it to the Museum a sufficient amount, at the time, to buy a car; when the victim realized that the ingot was nothing more than a piece of a brass alloy, the two crooks were already far away.



Fig. 29: The fake gold bar used for the scam

### **The "ITALY WAR ROUTE" project:**

It is a project whose objective, through a network founded by the major associations and museums operating in Italy in historical research and dissemination, is to promote places of memory in the regions affected by the Second World War in order to expand the cultural offer and tourism and the dissemination of the historical memory of the universal values of peace, freedom and democracy in the

new generations. The first concrete act is the creation and dissemination of the Italy War Route map guide which directs the visitor to discover the permanent museum exhibitions, which recount the vicissitudes of soldiers and civilians protagonists in war events, while excursions in the territories pertaining to the museums allow an in-depth study thanks to the guidance of people motivated by a passion for history. A large section of the map guide is dedicated to the main feats of war and the cemeteries left in memory of the enormous blood toll.

### **The promoters and creators are**

War Museum Winterline Venafro – Venafro (IS)

Museum of Operation Avalanche – Eboli (SA)

War Museum Gustav Line Garigliano Front – Castelforte (LT)

Associazione Battaglia di Cassino Centro Studi e Ricerche – Cassino (FR)

Museo del Corpo Italiano di Liberazione – Scapoli (IS)

Museo Gotica Toscana – Scarperia (FI)

Centro di Ricerca e Documentazione Winter Line – Livergnano di Pianoro (BO)

Museo Memoriale della Libertà – Bologna (BO)

Museo della Seconda Guerra Mondiale del fiume Po – Sermide e Felonica (MN)

Museo Rover Joe – Fidenza (PR)

### **Contacts and useful information:**

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