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November  
1995

# Romance of the Italian U-Boat

BY COLIN W. SARGENT

In 1943, the *Vortice*, an Italian copy of a German Type VII U-boat, was one of three assigned to Portland Harbor for secret maneuvers with the North Atlantic Fleet. Ten Italian crewmembers from the three submarines fell in love with local Portland girls, married them on the same day, and settled here.

Portland's most romantic secret has been hidden for 50 years within this city's Italian community.

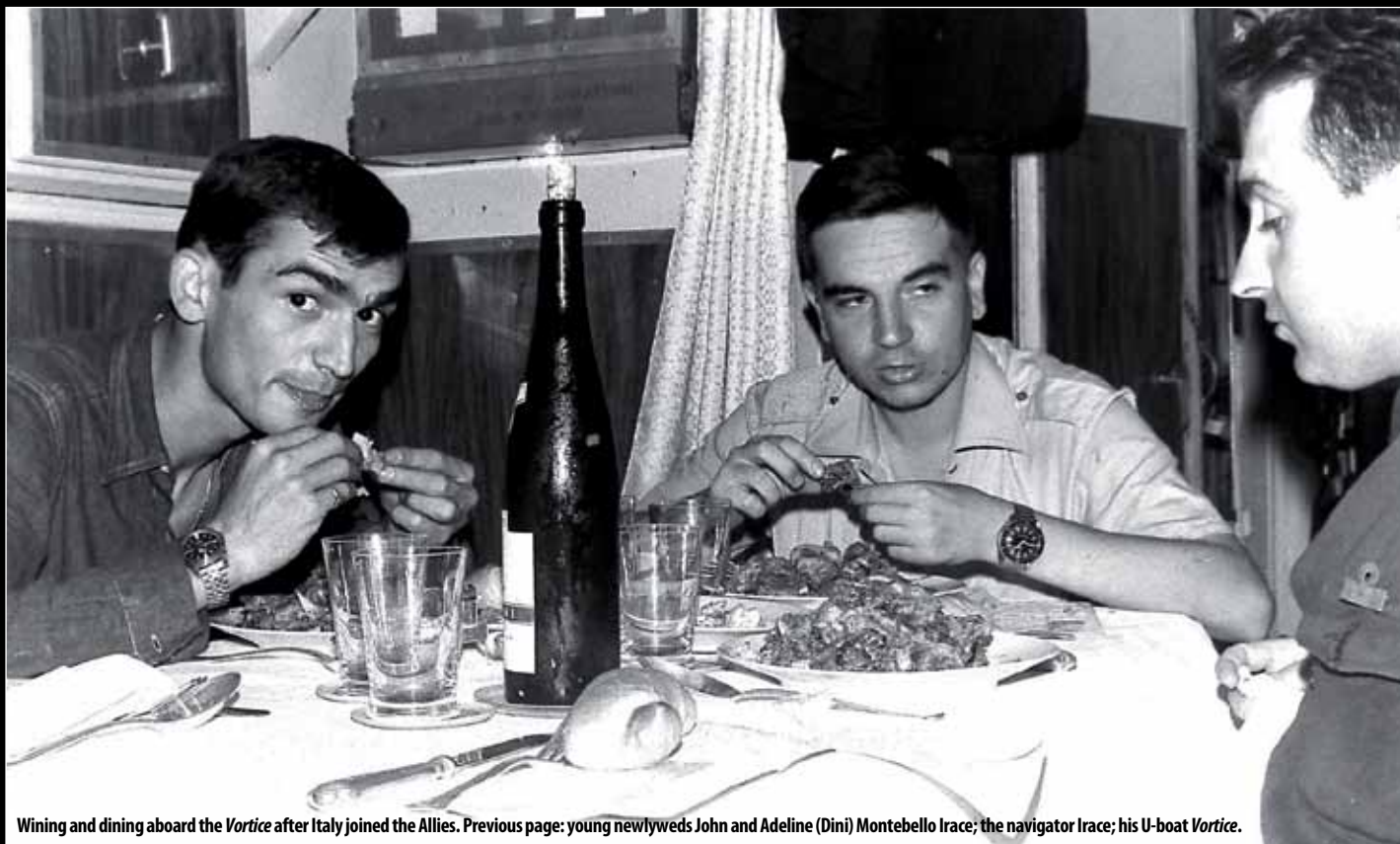
I heard about it when Joel Eastman, chairman of the history department at the University of Southern Maine, offhandedly mentioned Italian U-boat crews being stationed with their subs in Portland during World War II.

"Just exactly what was an Italian U-boat?" I asked, intrigued.

"After the armistice with the Allies in September, 1943, all of Italy's naval forces went over to our side," he said. "An Italian U-boat is a German U-boat built in Italy to German plans with German parts. Eight U-boats came over to our side, and three of them were sent to Portland via Bermuda to train with the North Atlantic Fleet, which was anchored here in Long Island Sound. With the Italian crews in command, the U-boats would play cat-and-mouse during training drills with our Navy destroyers, destroyer escorts, and Coast Guard cutters," he said. "It was the only opportunity we ever had to polish our anti-submarine warfare techniques against actual Type VII U-boats. Imagine how valuable it was to have their crews debrief us! It helped us win the war. But that's not the real story," he said. "The real story is that many



## INTERLUDES



Wining and dining aboard the *Vortice* after Italy joined the Allies. Previous page: young newlyweds John and Adeline (Dini) Montebello Irace; the navigator Irace; his U-boat *Vortice*.

crewmembers of the Italian boats fell in love with local Portland girls and live right in the area to this day..."

Approaching a low, modern home made of wood and brick with immaculate gardens and a swimming pool off Foreside Road in Falmouth, I am greeted at the door by a very tall, distinguished gentleman with a moustache, the former Ensign Giovanni Irace, and his wife, energetic Portland native Dini Montebello Irace.

We've all known him as John Irace, who ran Montebello Seafood, a large wholesale firm on Commercial Street, for 40 years. The brick building, torn down a few years ago to make room for the new bridge to South Portland, was across the street from the International Terminal.

"How do you do?" I ask. Then a lightbulb goes off. "You aren't related to Tony Irace, are you? He was Cheverus's best high jumper in the seventies."

"My son," John says, guiding me over to a picture of Tony and his family. "He's an attorney with Lowry and Associates now."

I'm at an absolute loss for what to say next. I'll tell you what an Italian U-boat officer looks like—he looks like a regular Greater Portlander, just like everyone else. How

could this have been kept under wraps for so long? "Nothing's ever been written about you in the newspapers here, has it?"

"No," he says. "Our privacy's very important to us, and it's not as if we've gone out looking for publicity. But three other members of our crew still live in Portland, and we see each other once in a while at the Italian Heritage Center. Our boat was named the *Vortice*, which is Italian for *Vortex*, but the U.S. Navy code-named her *Ice*,



using the last three letters of her name. I was her navigator."

When he rolls the "r" in *Vortice*, John makes her sound like the most beautiful boat in the world.

"Let me tell you how we met," Dini says. "My father, Enrico Montebello, who came through Ellis Island in 1921, was driving his truck, a broken-down Ford, down Commercial Street from his wholesale fish business, a very small outfit he'd started himself, when he saw a tall, handsome Italian naval officer walking down the street. Immediately my father, who spoke only Italian, pulled over and brought him home to dinner at our house on 162 Eastern Prom so he could ask him what was going on in Italy," she says.

"The whole Italian community made us welcome right away," John says. "When I got to the house, there she was," he says, looking at Dini. "She was a good-looking girl, and she spoke Italian, so we got along fine."

"I thought he was too old," Dini says mischievously, "but after a while we fell in love." What was it like falling in love in Portland then? And how did the rest of the people treat the Italian crewmembers in uniform?

"Portland was very nice," Dini says.

(Continued on page 70)

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## INTERLUDES

*Romance (continued from page 46)*

"There were 50 crewmembers on the *Vortice*, and everybody found a family who took him in. Besides, the fleet was in Long Island Sound, and wave after wave after wave of sailors came in on liberty from all the ships. Everybody was in uniform, so John and the others didn't stick out, except that some sailors gave him extra snappy salutes because with his two stars they thought he was a rear admiral. Some of these young kids decided to play it on the safe side. You didn't see any men out of uniform."

Where did John take Dini on dates?"

"Congress Street was the only place," she says. "We walked a lot, and we went to the movies. We ate at the Pilgrim, which turned into the Splendid, and I knew John was smart because, on a salary of only \$75 a month, he took me to restaurants like the one at the Columbia Hotel, which was later the Portlander, and night clubs like the Morocco and the Greymore on Preble Street—and I never paid once! Wave after wave—Congress Street was lit up with soldiers. Everyone was friendly—there were no brawls or anything like that. We could walk home in the dark at 11 p.m. Try doing that now."

"Later on we went to the Roma, because John met Dominic Marino in 1944... It was expensive!"

"Another girl from Portland High School's class of 1940 married another of the crewmen from the U-boat, Settimo Trivilin, who was a torpedoman and a chief

petty officer. Carmen Pirone and Anthony Palestini married two other Portland girls. In all, 10 girls from Portland married 10 of the Italian U-boat sailors on the same day, but those are the ones still alive and living in the Portland area."

Ten Portland girls, on the same day?

"Yes! The *Vortice* and her crew were



transferred first to New London and then to Key West, and we all took a train down and married them there."

"That's so romantic! Were you married by the same priest?"

"Heaven forbid, no! We weren't even allowed to be married in church. Our priest in Portland was very conservative."

"What sort of operations did the *Vortice* conduct in Casco Bay?"

"We went out every day but Sunday," says John Irace, who as navigator was often executing the maneuvers on the bridge. "We split the crew in half—half went out one day,

another half another day."

And it was exactly like a German U-boat?

"Yes, but Italian-built. The only thing we had that was German-built was the torpedo launching system. It was almost computer-like. The machine gun was made in Switzerland. Everything else was Italian. She was launched in June 1943, at Monfalcone, which is 20 miles northeast of Venice."

"John was an undergraduate at the University of Naples and already selected as a member of the Italian national crew team for the 1940 Olympics when he was drafted, commissioned, and assigned to submarine training," Dini says.

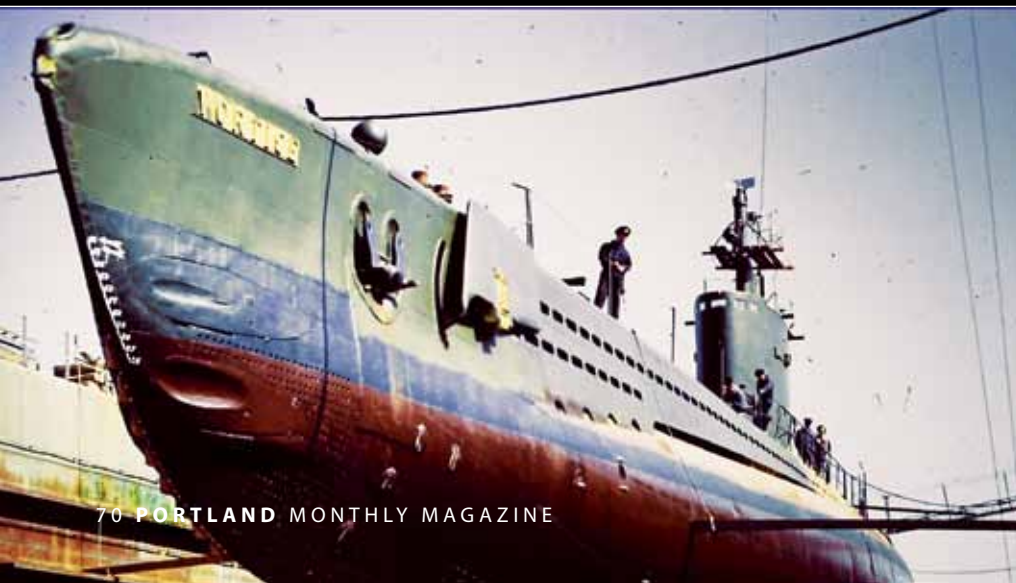
Once aboard the *Vortice*, John says, "We never fired a shot at an Allied ship before the Armistice. Our last mission on the German side came with these orders: Don't sink anything but a battleship in the Mediterranean. We all knew there were no battleships in the

Mediterranean at the time! That was our first clue that Italy was pulling out." Now gratefully an Allied U-boat, the *Vortice* was assigned to go to Naples after the invasion. The Germans had cut all the power and electricity to Naples on the way out, so the city was plunged in darkness. "Four submarines, ours among them, gave electricity to Naples Harbor for two to three weeks," from their batteries, says John, a native of the island of Ischia near Naples.

Next, eight of the Italian U-boats were assigned to the United States, three of them to Portland Harbor. A Nazi U-boat fired on the fully escorted convoy as it headed out of Gibraltar for Bermuda, but the torpedo missed, passing just in front of *Vortice's* bow.

"It took a couple weeks to cross, in some very rough weather," John says. "Once we were in Portland, we were billeted on Great Diamond Island. Our crew slept in a wooden building. Every morning, we'd go 30 miles out, carry a buoy with a red flag on top, and submerge. The destroyers would try to find us. It was cold here!" he laughs. "The spray from the bow was ice by the time it reached the bridge on the conning tower. We had to duck!"

Once submerged, could you see anything out of the periscope in Casco Bay?



"Nothing but black. One day we went out and started diving. Anyway, the depth gauge stayed at zero in spite of our diving. Zero, zero, zero! We kept diving, putting ballast on until we suspected the gauge and checked another depth gauge in the torpedo room. Seventy to 80 meters! Any deeper," he says cheerily, "and we might have been crushed." He puts his hands elegantly together and smiles while Dini shows me a smoky photo of John rowing with the 1940 Olympic team.

"We got friendly with the U.S. Navy submarine docked at the State Pier. Their crew stayed at the Falmouth Hotel. We used to greet each other with jokes on the way out to sea."

The other two Italian U-boats assigned to Portland were the *Marea* and *Funino*. Each had a crew of 50, weighed in at 970 tons, and was a near copy of the German Type VII U-boat.

"It seems like another life to me," John says, looking at the pictures.

"Me, too," Dini laughs. ■

## SINCE THEN

*Montebello Ice*, a screenplay by Colin W. Sargent about the *Vortice's* adventures in Portland Harbor, is under option by Gideon Films of Austin, Texas. The romantic comedy is a Maine International Film Festival prizewinner for full-length-feature screenplays.

John Irace passed away on November 9, 2013, at 93. He's survived by his wife and four children and their families.

Since we wrote this story, new information has surfaced about the *Vortice*. Portlanders will be pleased to learn she became a legend in the Italian Navy after she returned home, according to harpoondatabases.com:

"Because the Treaty Of Paris (which ended WWII between Italy and the Allies) banned Italy from having submarines, *Vortice* was redesignated a 'mobile diesel-electric generating barge' and assigned the hull number PV-2. In reality, she was fully manned pier-side and received a slight upgrade including a snorkel and radar, deletion of all guns, and hull refurbishment. During the day, she recharged the batteries of visiting British, French, and American subs docked alongside, while her crewmen discretely visited and familiarized themselves with the tactics and techniques of Italy's new allies. At night, *Vortice* would sometimes make short proficiency 'cruises,' leaving Taranto late at night (sometimes with canvas over the conning tower and false lighting to make her appear as a fishing trawler) to conduct training dives in the Mediterranean, always returning again before sunrise.

"In 1952, the naval restrictions of the Treaty Of Paris expired and there was no longer any need to hide *Vortice's* activities. She assumed a submarine hull number and was the first Italian submarine to participate in NATO exercises."

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