

Sicilian traces father's steps on Tablelands

WORLD WAR III David Anthony

SICILIAN Antonino "Nino" Cipolla was on the Tablelands recently tracing the footprints of his prisoner-of-war father.

In fact, he is keen to find the family of a woman who maintained a friendship via correspondence with his father from the end of World War II up until her death sometime* in the 1970s.

Mr Cipolla's interest in his father's experiences in Australia has helped uncover little known history of prisoners of war in North Queensland.

With the help of a Townsville friend Christine Morriss, he has visited the Burdekin where his father was put to work at a prisoner-of-war seed farm and then the Tablelands where Francesco worked on a local maize farm.

INFORMATION PLEASE

TOWNSVILLE historian Joanne Tapiolas is conducting research of the prison-of-war camps in North Queensland, in particular, those in the Burdekin and Tablelands districts.

She would love to talk to Tablelanders with information about prisoners of war working on farms in the district.

Ms Tapiolas can be contacted at 64 River Park Drive, Annadale, 4814; email joannetapioly@gmail.com; phone 0417 764 585.

She has a website entitled "Footprints of Italian Prisoners of War in Queensland, Australia 1943-1946". Go to italianprisonersofwar.com

NSW, then to Cowra, leaving there at the start of 1944, six months before the notorious breakout in August 1944.

He was one of 115 Italians destined for the Q6 Home Hill POW camp, but as cyclonic conditions and wet weather had held up construction of the hostel, the Italians were accommodated at Gaythorne POW and Internment Camp in Brisbane.

Finally arriving in Home Hill on April 28, Francesco was among the first to be put in detention, probably because of the poor living conditions.

The Home Hill was established as a vegetable farm under the Commonwealth Department of Commerce and Agriculture to grow produce for armed services in the North.

"The Commonwealth Veg-



Nino Cipolla of Sicily enjoyed a visit to Rocky Creek War Memorial Park on his recent visit to the Tablelands tracing the footsteps of his prisoner-of-war father, Francesco Cipolla. Francesco had spent four days in the Rocky Creek Hospital during the war. Picture: Christine Morriss

in Taormina, Sicily, in 1920, where he grew up to become a carabinieri (a national police officer).

When World War II broke out, the first of the young Italian men to be called up were the Carabinieri and Francesco was one of them.

He was trained in Rome and sent to fight in North Africa.

The Italians and the Germans fought together for the first time in the first major battle of the war at Bardia in Libya.

Bardia was part of the first military operation planned and commanded by Austrians and the first in which an Australian army formation took part.

"The Germans and Italians were divided and underpre-

group.

"When they were captured, Nino had two grenades left and he found himself faced with a choice of either using them or not.

"He did not want to be captured by the English and was ready to use the grenades when he noticed the insignia on the hats of the enemy and he knew they were not English."

What Francesco saw was the Rising Sun and he dropped the grenades and was officially captured on January 4, 1941.

Italian POWs were sent to Australia, New Zealand, India and Canada and Francesco was put aboard the Queen Mary and sent to Australia, arriving in Sydney on May 27.

Francesco was initially sent to the POW camp at Hay,

of strategic importance," Ms Morris said.

The presence and history of the POW farm is little known today, even by locals and Townsville historian Joanne Tapiolas has been researching this chapter of NO history.

Francesco learned a lot about seed cultivation, during his time at Home Hill and developed expertise as a vegetable producer.

In July 1945, as the tide of war was turning with the dropping of the atom bombs on Japan and the Italians changing sides, life became much easier for Francesco, though technically the Italians remained POWs.

He was one of 53 Italian POWs at Home Hill sent to Atherton where they were billeted out to local farms.



Tablelands maize farmers had lobbied the Federal Government for Italian farmers to be sent to work on the Tablelands because of an anticipated record crop.

Ms Tapiolas during her research found a handwritten letter sent from Tolga farmer Vincent Quilter of Box 19, Tolga, to the Director-General of Manpower in Canberra, dated July 15, 1944, and received on July 27.

The author asked for 1000 Italian POWs to help harvest the maize crop on the Tablelands and for information on

the process of securing the services of Italian POWs.

"Unless we get 1000 men for two months, we will not be able to harvest all our crop and will lose some thousands of tons of maize which will have to rot," Mr Quilter wrote.

"There will be also a big reduction in acreage for 1945 unless the maize is harvested by the end of September.

"This would leave farmers with one month to prepare the land for the next crop.

"As it rains in November nearly every year, you see we have only one month to pre-

pare the land."

The Tablelands had to make do with 53 POWs, including Francesco Cipolla.

Franco fell sick in August and spent five days in the Rocky Creek Hospital, on the site where only the entertainment igloo remained and which was undergoing restoration today.

Ms Morris and Nino said he was interned initially at the "Temporary Prisoner of War Control Centre" without guard.

They think this might have been based at the Kairi State

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OUR POW HISTORY

North Qld farming know-how goes to Italy

David Anthony

FRANCESCO Cipolla's time as a prisoner of war in North Queensland stood him and his home town of Taormina in good stead.

The skills he learned in cultivating seeds and farming vegetables at Home Hill and Atherton were put to good use.

After settling down upon his return from Australia where he spent four years as a prisoner of war, Francesco bought a block of land on the fertile volcanic foothills of the active volcano, Mount Etna, outside the walled town of Taormina.

When he wasn't working at his job with the council, he was working his block, growing vegetables such as tomatoes and grew wheat and made flour. He would drive his Vesper motorcycle to and from the block.

Son Antonino, known as Nino, said his father was fabled about seeds and planted thousands of them on his land.



Nino Cipolla of Taormina, Sicily, was in Atherton recently following the footsteps of his father Francesco who was a prisoner of war in Australia during World War II and worked on maize farms on the Tablelands during his internship. He read with interest our story about the Kairi silos and wondered if his father had worked there.

Picture: David Anthony





Farm and they wonder if Francesco had worked at the Kairi silos.

Nino was especially interested in the *Tablelander's* story on Terry Stratton's restoration of the silos in the edition published during the week they visited Atherton.

His father was to spend most of his time working on farm for a family who treated him kindly and they became friends.

When Franco was finally repatriated to Italy after the war, the farmer's wife quite illegally gifted him some money

and tea towels. In return for her kindness, Franco gave her his guitar.

He and the woman kept up a regular correspondence for decades.

"One day in the 1970s I saw my father reading a letter and he was crying," Nino said.

"The letter was from her children telling him that she had died."

Unfortunately, Nino does not recall her name and the letters have not survived (though the tea towels are in his possession to this day). He hopes this article will

help him find the family who had cared for his family.

"He is piecing together his father's history and this appears to be the last mystery," Ms Morriss said.

NOTE: THIS ARTICLE DREW ON THE HISTORICAL RESEARCH OF JOANNE TAPIOLAS AND INTERVIEWS WITH NINO CIPOLLA AND CHRISTINE MORRIS.

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Francesco Cipolla, April 1939.

for harvest, he would come to town with lots of food which he gave away to the people in the town. "All this was because of the passion for seed cultivation which he developed in North Queensland while he was a POW," Nino said.



Francesco Cipolla in the 1990s.

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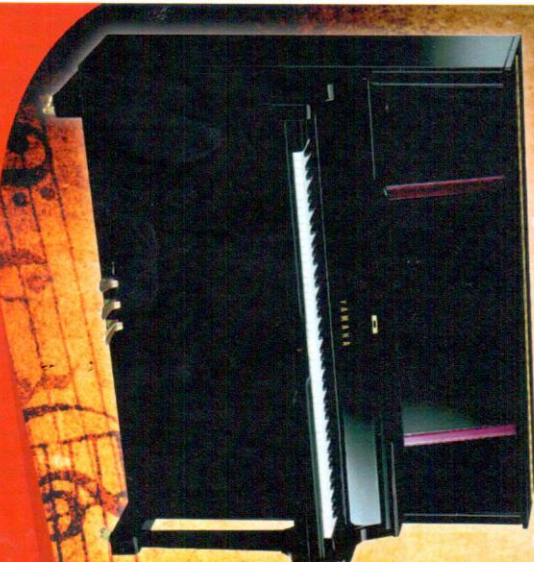
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