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# The Sergeant In The Snow



## Synopsis

Mario Rigoni Stern was barely twenty-one and already a battle veteran at the time of the World War II disaster he describes in *The Sergeant in the Snow*. In July 1942 three divisions of Italian Alpini troops, specially trained for winter warfare, began retreating--entirely on foot, with no supplies, at temperatures of 30-40 degrees below zero. By the end of the march, 90,000 men were missing or dead and 45,000 frostbitten and wounded.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

It is not commonly known that Mussolini sent a large army to support Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union in WWII. By the summer of 1942, about 230,000 Italian troops were in Russia. Most of them were part of the Italian Eighth Army, which advanced to the Don, north of Stalingrad. In December 1942 and January 1943, the Russian counter-offensive overwhelmed and surrounded the poorly equipped Italians. The only way "out of the bag" (to escape the Russian encirclement) was to slog westwards for over 300 miles, by foot and without supplies, through winter conditions with temperatures as low as minus 40 degrees Centigrade, all the while having to engage in periodic attacks on Russian villages, participate in rear guard actions, and endure strafing from Russian planes. About 45,000 Italian soldiers managed to escape. Mario Rigoni Stern was one of them, and *THE SERGEANT IN THE SNOW* is his memoir of that harrowing episode. At the time, Rigoni Stern was 21 years old. He was a sergeant, and whenever the lieutenants in command of his platoon were wounded or cracked up, command fell to him. His love of his men and their love of him

are palpable. In the first third of this short book (104 pages), Rigoni Stern tells of his company's defense of their stronghold along the Don against the initial phases of the Russian counter-attack. His story is one of bravery, fortitude, and resourcefulness, completely at odds with the myth of the inept Italian soldier (primarily propagated by the British in North Africa). The last two-thirds of the book is about the march west. "Another day of walking over the snow. My burnt boots are falling to pieces and I've tied them to my feet with bits of wire and rags. The hard leather had broken the skin underneath and formed an open wound. My knees ache; they go crick-crack at every step I take. Dysentery's also coming over me. I walk on for miles and miles without saying a word to anyone." The trek is punctuated with numerous memorable scenes --bizarre, apocalyptic, or surreal in nature. For example, near the end of the retreat, Rigoni Stern keeps overhearing quarrels between Italian artillerymen and German soldiers. What about? Mules - the mules that once hauled the Italian artillery but were now being used to carry their wounded. The Germans would try to commandeer them, inasmuch as they were operational whereas the German vehicles were not, and the Italians would rebuff the attempt. *THE SERGEANT IN THE SNOW* belongs in the first rank of WWII memoirs. Like many others, it contains its Dantean portrayals of the hell of war, but it also displays a humanism that is rare for the genre. Plus, it is highly literate.

Great book covering a very different aspect of the war on the eastern front. Books about the Italian Army during that time period are few and far between.

The words in the title are those of one of the author's close comrades-in-arms in the Tridentina Division, which had been attached to the Italian 8th Army on the western bank of the Don in 1942. In December of that year, the Romanians on the left flank of the Tridentines buckled under a strong Soviet offensive, and the Italians found themselves suddenly enveloped. Ordered to withdraw on 19 December, the Italians, along with Romanian and Hungarian remnants and remnants of the German 298th Infantry Division, marched west through icy wind, snowstorms and heavy drifts in an attempt to break out of the pocket. *Sergeant in the Snow* is a vivid first-person account of the story of this macabre odyssey up to the climactic Battle of Nikolajewka on 26 January 1943 and its aftermath. Rigoni's memoir is at once urgent, tragic, heroic and poetic. He relays the essence of the Italian spirit, so different from that of the stern and disciplined Germans, and recounts in flowing narrative and earthy dialogue exactly what it was like to march, hungry and exhausted, over 300 miles in the Russian winter. Rigoni divides his memoir into two parts: (1) the Strongpoint, wherein he tells the story of his division's struggle to repulse Soviet thrusts on the Don, and (2) the Bag,

wherein he tells the story of the breakout from the pocket (the bag). As mentioned above, the climax of the action, and there is plenty of that here, takes place on the memorable 26th of January when the Italians and Germans defeat, at terrible cost, three Soviet divisions at Nikolajewka and finally break out of the encirclement: "My men hesitate, hold back, one or two of them are already wounded, and I shout: 'Come on.' I too hesitate a bit, but we're in it now, whatever happens." In the midst of battle chaos and the fog of war at Nikolajewka, one of those inexplicable and mysterious episodes occurs when the famished Rigoni enters an isba only to find a group of Russian soldiers there: "They're armed. With the red stars on their caps. My rifle's in my hand. I look at them, turned to stone. They're eating round a table, taking the food with a wooden spoon from a common bowl. And they look at me with their spoons held in mid-air.... There are also some women. One takes a plate, fills it with milk and meal and offers it to me with a spoon from the common bowl.... No one breathes a word. The only sound is of the spoon in my plate; and of each of my mouthfuls.... The Russian soldiers watch me go out, without moving." Kudos to Northwestern University Press for bringing this remarkable book to light again. Unfortunately, the book is small and the print small, too. The translator's grammar and mechanics are somewhat archaic, and there is the glaring, almost unforgivable, absence of any maps. Dialogue should be rendered in alternating paragraphs as each character speaks, thus reducing the possibility of the reader's being confused. Although there are some footnotes along the way, this excellent memoir would certainly benefit from a thorough re-edit to include many more. In spite of these publishing flaws, *The Sergeant in the Snow* is a far better memoir than Guy Sajer's *The Forgotten Soldier* and as good as Bidermann's *In Deadly Combat*. Highly recommended.

If you have an interest in the Italian army in WW2 . this is a good book to read. I recommend it because it gives an insight into the small unit action in the retreat from Russia . It shows the lives of the individual soldier and they tell about their lives and struggles during this times. And it also talks of the weapons they choose to keep and other personal struggles they face.

The sergeant leaves out a lot of events that happened to him which would make a more complete story.

Interesting to get an Italian point of view. Good detail and interesting. Nothing to get excited about.

This book was in great condition, and arrived quickly, which of course was great because my sons

didn't say he needed it until the last minute. THanks!

A slightly different perspective makes this novella unique. The thread of a soldier on the eastern front in the cold Russian winter is a common one but this time it is based on the memoirs of an Italian. A good and quick read.

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