

Ninety years ago, the young men of two vast armies met above the Soca River in a campaign as bloody as

# Life and death on a forgotten front



Impregnable: the Upper Isonzo valley from the flanks of the 7,400ft peak of Kn, the highest mountain of the region

Cyclamen were glowing pink under the beech trees on Mengore Hill in the mild Slovenian autumn air. But even their beauty, and that of the Soca River seen winding in milky turquoise bends between the mountains of the Julian Alps, could not soften the chill that went through me at first sight of the gun caverns. Their naked rock mouths, opening like black wounds in the flanks of Mengore, had not healed at all in the 90 years since the horrific fighting of the First World War, when they belched smoke, flame and bullets again and again down the steep slopes of this hill.

"The Italians were up there on the Kolovrat ridge," remarked Edward Granville of Upland Escapes, pointing west to a long green mountain back. "When the fighting started in earnest in 1915 they selected their crack troops, their *bersaglieri* and *alpini* mountain fighters, to attack the Austro-Hungarians. But after a year or so they were using pretty much anyone who could be made to go over the top. There were 11 major Italian offensives on the Soca Front – the Isonzo Front, as the Italians called it – trying to break eastward into Austria, but they never did get through."

Edward gestured down the slope. "You can see why." The cause of the Italians' failure to take Mengore Hill was all too obvious.

The hill is only a pimple compared with the majestic mountains round about. But its slopes rise at an angle of 1:2 – in places, far steeper than that. A heavy-laden infantryman with a rifle to encumber him, a frightened young conscript already demoralised by one bloody repulse after another, outlined against snow or pale grass as he stumbled upwards among the decomposing corpses of previous assaults, made an easy target for an experienced machine gunner or sniper securely ensconced in a solid rock cavern high above. Mengore Hill, and the other hills and mountains around it, were like the battlefield of the Somme tilted at 45 degrees. The advantage was all with the dug-in defenders.

Upland Escapes specialises in walking holidays in carefully selected areas that other organisations don't frequent. Generally these settings lack such ferocious and poignant history. The company's Slovenian tour, however, goes right to the heart of the Alpine region contested so bitterly between the Allied forces, represented here by Italy, and the armies of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

In this 90th anniversary year of the last and greatest of the Soca Front battles, Edward had come out to Slovenia to guide me through a stunningly beautiful mountainous landscape, where over 29 months,

## GALLERY

Slovenia's forgotten front  
telegraph.co.uk/travel/galleries



and on a front less than 50 miles long, more than a million Italians and nearly 700,000 of their opponents – Austrians, Bosnians, Poles, Hungarians and Germans – died or were mutilated for life.

What these enormous armies were doing, entrenched opposite each other along the Soca River mountains only a few hundred feet apart, exactly mirrored the positions of their respective Allies 1,000 miles away on the Western Front in Flanders.

The Italian commander, the stubborn and autocratic General Luigi Cadorna, convinced himself after each catastrophic repulse that the next strong push, if determined enough, would achieve a complete and decisive eastward breakthrough – a "stroll to Vienna" – and victory. The Austro-Hungarian troops held most of the vital high ground and were determined to prevent that breakthrough, while awaiting their own chance to advance westward into the Friulian plain of northern Italy.

The stalemate produced a campaign as bloody and terrible as that on the Western Front, but one which – apart from Ernest Hemingway's classic and romantic account of it in *A Farewell to Arms* – has remained all but unknown outside Italy, Austria and Slovenia.

By another row of defensive tunnels beside the path up

Mengore Hill, Edward and I found a noticeboard with two faded black-and-white First World War photographs of this same location. The soldiers have built wooden "houses" out from the stark rock of the tunnel mouths; they have knocked up rough benches and tables where they sit amid wild flowers trained up into a tiny garden – touching efforts by lonely men separated from their families to bring a touch of the domestic and familiar into a place of filth, noise and death.

At the top of the hill we came to a chapel. From here Edward pointed out the mountain ridge where a young Erwin Rommel (later to become the famed and feared "Desert Fox" of the Second World War) won the coveted Blue Max decoration, storming the hilltop during the Austro-Hungarians' one great victorious offensive of October 1917.

Before that military triumph broke the stalemate on the Soca, General Cadorna (who never came nearer the front than Udine, nearly 50 miles away) drove and punished his troops with threats, demotions and executions to undertake 11 fruitless and fatal assaults on the impregnable Austro-Hungarian line. I saw more of these fortifications on another climb, this time up the domed hill of Humčev in the northern sector of the line. Here in the damp beech woods

More than a million Italians and 700,000 of their opponents died or were mutilated for life here

that of Flanders. In this majestic landscape, says **Christopher Somerville**, they remain a ghostly presence



## SOCA BASICS

✦ From London Stansted, Ryanair ([www.ryanair.com](http://www.ryanair.com)) flies daily to Trieste and EasyJet ([www.easyjet.com](http://www.easyjet.com)) flies to Ljubljana. Hire car and onward route instructions included in Upland Escapes package. Upland Escapes (01367 851111, [www.uplandescapes.com](http://www.uplandescapes.com)) organises flexible, independent holidays in beautiful, unfrequented upland areas. These include group or solo walks and cycle rides, guided or self-guided, from easy to challenging. In Slovenia it has a choice of 20 self-guided walks, five escorted walks and four cycle routes, several featuring Socca Front sites. Breaks cost from £165 per week, including hire car, escort/guide, local b & b accommodation, packed lunch, maps and guidebook. Three-night minimum stay.

✦ Other destinations include Italy (Abruzzo region), France (Alpes-Maritimes and Pyrenees) and the Canary Islands (Gran Canaria). Pot Miru, the Walk of Peace, is a waymarked walking trail along the Socca Front. A leaflet guide is available from Pot Miru information centre in Kobarid (0038 6 5389 0167, [www.potmiru.posoci.si](http://www.potmiru.posoci.si)).



Lest we forget: (clockwise from above) Kobarid Museum; an Italian chanel house at Kobarid; Edward finds another piece of First World War debris; a German battery position; a Mass for the soldiers on the hillside

and autumn crocuses, the black mouths of the gun caves and their connecting tunnels yawned in the impossibly steep slope of a hill where thousands died.

My three-night stay was based at the farm of Vinco and Irena Kranjc in the upland hamlet of Kosec, under the 7,400ft peak of Krm, the highest mountain of the region. Everything you eat and drink is produced by the Kranjc family from their bursting orchards and lush green pastures. Near this homely paradise two contrasting museums filled out the Socca Front picture.

In the neighbouring village of Drenica, Mirko Kurinec has spent 40 years filling his attic with items collected from the battlefields. Displayed here in profusion are helmets with bullet holes, spoons and forks, homemade snow shoes,

shell caps, diaries discovered under rocks, propaganda postcards ("Is your girl getting off with a spiv back home while you're dying on the Isonzo?"), and chest and groin protectors crudely forged of cast iron.

Very different is the immaculately organised, award-winning museum in the nearby town of Kobarid. A huge scale model of the entire region helps you appreciate the relative positions of the combatant armies. But it is the contemporary photographs that leave you stunned and silent – Italian corpses contorted by gas attack, zigzag lines of soldiers toiling up snowy slopes, a field hanging of a "coward", bodies stacked like firewood, faces blown apart and crudely reconstructed, a naked man under the knives of bloodied



surgeons while a general looks on with a smile of polite inquiry.

Kobarid is known to Italians as Caporetto, a name synonymous with disaster. The two museums furnish facts, figures and images of what happened on October 24, 1917 when the Austro-Hungarians initiated their first and final offensive on the Socca Front. A beautifully restored section of the Italian front-line trenches at Predolina just north of Kobarid gives an idea of the environment in which the young men fought and died. But I only caught the terror and futility of the battlefield when I climbed with Edward high above Predolina on to the crest of the ridge around which the Austrian advance surged towards the north Italian plain.

The October 1917 Austro-Hungarian offensive would

eventually grind to a halt in northern Italy on the Piave River, more than 100 miles to the west, a stasis that would last until the overall Allied victory in November 1918. The Italian troops high on this knife-edge ridge, however, reeling from the shattering effects of Austrian mines exploding under their trenches, hearing the shouts and screams of battle in the morning mists below, then fleeing headlong down the slopes of Mount Visiè to captivity or death in the valleys, knew nothing of the future.

Staring out across the mountains from the ridge today, it's hard to imagine a more serenely peaceful prospect. But the terrified and half-frozen young men who left behind their fish tins, their helmets, their barbed wire and their boot soles remain ghostly presences.