

= Lazare Ponticelli =

Lazare Ponticelli (born Lazzaro Ponticelli , 24 December 1897 , later mistranscribed as 7 December ? 12 March 2008) , Knight of Vittorio Veneto , was at 110 , the last surviving officially recognized veteran of the First World War from France and the last poilu of its trenches to die .

Born in Italy , he travelled on his own to France at the age of eight . Aged 16 , he lied about his age in order to join the French Army at the start of the war in 1914 , before being transferred against his will to the Italian Army the following year . After the war , he and his brothers founded the piping and metal work company Ponticelli Frères (Ponticelli Brothers) , which produced supplies for the Second World War effort and as of 2009 was still in business .

Ponticelli was the oldest living man of Italian birth and the oldest man living in France at the time of his death . Every Armistice Day until 2007 he attended ceremonies honoring deceased veterans . In his later years , he criticized war , and stored his awards from the First World War in a shoe box . While he felt unworthy of the state funeral the French government offered him , he eventually accepted one . However , he asked that the procession emphasise the common soldiers who died on the battlefield . French president Nicolas Sarkozy honored his wish and dedicated a plaque to them at the procession .

= = Early life = =

Born as Lazzaro Ponticelli in Groppo Ducale , a frazione (civil parish) in Bettola , Piacenza , Emilia @-@ Romagna , in northern Italy , he was raised in the mountain hamlet of I Cordani , one of seven children born to Jean and Philomène Ponticelli . His father sold livestock on the fairgrounds and occasionally worked as a carpenter and cobbler .

His mother cultivated the family 's small plot of land and , like many women of the area , commuted three times a year to the Po Valley to work in its rice fields . Despite the Ponticelli family 's hard work , they were impoverished and the children often went to bed on an empty stomach . When Lazare was two years of age , his mother moved to France to earn a better living . After the unexpected deaths of Jean Ponticelli and his eldest son , Pierre , the rest of the family moved to Paris , leaving Lazare in the care of neighbors .

At age six , Ponticelli started several jobs , including making clogs . By 1906 , aged eight years old , he had saved enough money to buy a railway ticket to Paris , which he considered " paradise . " To travel to the capital of France , he walked 21 miles (34 km) to the nearest train station at Piacenza . He could not speak French , but found work as a chimney sweep in Nogent @-@ sur @-@ Marne and later as a paper boy in Paris . He obtained a work permit at age 13 .

= = World War I = =

In August 1914 , aged 16 , shortly after the outbreak of World War I , Ponticelli was assigned to the 4th Marching Regiment of the 1st Foreign Regiment of the French Foreign Legion . He had lied about his age to enlist . He rediscovered his older brother , Céleste Ponticelli , who had joined the same regiment . According to Ponticelli , France had done much for him , and serving was his way of showing his gratitude . He served at Soissons in Picardy , northeast France , and at Douaumont , near Verdun . Ponticelli worked at digging burial pits and trenches . In keeping a promise to Céleste to always assist others , he rescued a German and a French soldier who were wounded in the arm and leg , respectively .

Ponticelli was not a French citizen and in May 1915 , when Italy entered the war , he was conscripted into the Italian Army . Although he attempted to remain with his French regiment , he eventually enlisted in the 3rd Alpini Regiment , after being escorted to Turin by two gendarmes . Ponticelli saw service against the Austro @-@ Hungarian Army at Mount Piccolo on the Austria ? Italy border . At his new post as a machine gunner , Ponticelli was seriously wounded by a shell during an assault on an Austrian mountain position . He was returned to his post after rest and recuperation in Naples . In an undated interview , he described being injured : " Blood was running

into my eyes ... I continued firing despite my wound . "

Once , his regiment ceased fighting the Austrians for three weeks . The armies , who mostly spoke each other 's tongue , swapped loaves of bread for tobacco and photographed each other . In 1918 Ponticelli was gassed in an Austrian attack that killed hundreds of his fellow soldiers . Reflecting on war , he said : " You shoot at men who are fathers . War is completely stupid . " In one of his last interviews , Ponticelli stated he was amazed at his own survival .

= = Ponticelli Frères = =

After being demobilized in 1920 , Ponticelli founded a metal work company with Céleste and Bonfils , his youngest brother , which they called " Ponticelli Frères " (" Ponticelli Brothers ") . Located in the 13th arrondissement of Paris , it became profitable and well known in its field . It was incorporated as a private limited company in 1932 , when its primary work was with industrial chimneys .

During the Second World War , Ponticelli , who became a French citizen in 1939 , was too old for combat but supported the war effort by supplying soldiers with his products . He moved his factory into an unoccupied zone when Germany invaded and occupied France . After Vichy France was taken over by the Germans , he returned northwards and began working with the Resistance . In the aftermath of World War II , he added a piping department to his company . He continued managing the company until his retirement in 1960 . At the time of his death it was reported that the company had 4 @, @ 000 employees and its annual revenue (2005) was ? 300 million . The company now operates in several countries outside France , such as Angola .

= = Later life = =

Until his death , Ponticelli lived with his daughter in the Paris suburb of Le Kremlin @-@ Bicêtre , and every 11 November until 2007 he attended Armistice Day ceremonies . An honored citizen of his adopted town , Ponticelli voted in the 2007 presidential and legislative elections . He officially became a supercentenarian on 24 December 2007 , celebrating his official 110th birthday at the National History of Immigration Museum . He kept his war medals in a shoebox .

When originally offered a state funeral by then French President Jacques Chirac , Ponticelli asserted that he did not want one , although the death of the penultimate recognized soldier , [b] Louis de Cazenave , on 20 January 2008 caused him to reconsider . He eventually accepted a small ceremony " in the name of all those who died , men and women , " during World War I.

= = Death = =

Ponticelli died at 12 : 45 pm (11 : 45 GMT) at his home in Le Kremlin @-@ Bicêtre on 12 March 2008 , aged 110 . At the time of his death , Ponticelli was the oldest living man of Italian birth and the oldest man living in France . Nicolas Sarkozy , the French president , released a statement and said there would be a day of national remembrance for the war dead of France . Ponticelli was survived by at least one child , his then @-@ 78 @-@ year @-@ old daughter , Janine Desbaucheron .

His state funeral was held on 17 March 2008 . The mass was held at Saint @-@ Louis Cathedral in Les Invalides and was attended by government ministers , soldiers and members of Ponticelli 's family . French academic Max Gallo delivered the eulogy . At the mass , French collégien Guillaume Kaleff read a poem written by his class in Ponticelli 's honor .

Flags were ordered to be flown at half mast while Sarkozy unveiled a plaque dedicated to the veterans of World War I. Legionnaires of the 3rd Foreign Infantry Regiment , heir to the Marching Regiment of the French Foreign Legion , the same regiment that Ponticelli fought in , carried his coffin at the funeral . After the procession , he was buried in his family 's plot at the Ivry @-@ sur @-@ Seine cemetery , located in the Val @-@ de @-@ Marne .

= = Legacy = =

On 11 November 2008 , during the first Armistice Day since his death , Rue de Verdun in Le Kremlin @-@ Bicêtre was renamed Rue de Verdun @-@ Lazare @-@ Ponticelli .