



Roma Marquez Santo.
6th November 1916-29th December 2010

On the morning of Wednesday 29th December 2010, Roma Marquez Santo, miliciano of the Columna Lenin and teniente of the Ejército Popular passed away peacefully in a Barcelona Hospital at the age of 94.

Many IBMT members will have met Roma in the past few years at various events in the United Kingdom, Ireland and in Spain in connection with the International Brigade Memorial Trust, especially at the London Eye in July 2007 and 2008. He also visited Manchester and ultimately in July 2009 to Dublin where he was a guest speaker at Trinity College, as a speaker at the Cervantes Institute with International Brigader Jack Edwards and guest of the Teachers' Club.

Roma was one of six children born to Josep Maria Márquez Gaya & Conception Santos Seguí., Born in Barcelona he began work in a Renault garage in Carre Córsega in 1935, being paid 12 pesetas a week. The family read a wide variety of books whenever they could find them including many Russian authors and were active in political life.

On the 19th July 1936, at the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in Barcelona, as a member of the UGT, Roma first went with his brother, Sergi, to the Sant Agustí Barracks in Carrer Comerc where the First Regiment of Mountain Artillery was based and was given a Mauser model 1925 with a package of 50 cartridges. He then went home and his older brother, "Tete", took the same identification card (without a photograph) and received another rifle!

On the 22nd July the three brothers went to the Palace Theatre in the Ramblas, which belonged to the POUM, to enlist in one of the militia columns. His youngest brother Raúl stayed at home, very annoyed, because he also wanted to come, but was only fourteen years old. He subsequently went to the Jaume I barracks. Raúl was very tall and told the recruiters that he was sixteen years old. He was enrolled and was sent to Madrid. He was in the battle of Madrid from November 7th 1936.

On the 24th July the three brothers assembled at the Arc de Triomf in Barcelona with 1.600 men. This was the Lenin Column. Though Roma was not a member of the POUM, the leaders suggested that if they wanted to make something of themselves that they should join, which they did after a few days. When Roma was at the front his eldest sister, Angels, was part of the invasion of Mallorca as a miliciana with the Bayo column.

The first village that the Column entered in combat was Leciñena. Then the Column was sent to Huesca. Here the three brothers volunteered to man four 50mm mortars, each with a crew of five men. The column went to cut the road near

the castle of Montearagón in September 1936. Wounded in the leg during this fighting Roma was evacuated to Barcelona and whilst recovering from the infected wound he attended the funeral of Durruti on 23rd November 1936. He returned to the Aragon Front over Christmas 1936.

The column now had five 81 millímetre mortars. They were called “Valero” mortars each with a crew of ten men and were under the command of Josep Pla. The Column was militarized in late April 1937 and subsequently formed the 29 Division with the 128 and the 129 Brigades. After the May Revolution in Barcelona, the 29 Division collapsed in bad way, being accused of being Fascists. Subsequently Roma and one of his brothers transferred to the 28th “Red & Black” Division on 25th August 1937. After attending officer training both brothers were gazetted in the official newspaper of the Republic on February of 17th 1938. Roma was appointed as a lieutenant in the Army of the South at Baza in the 147 Brigada Mixta.

The end of the war saw Roma still serving on the Andalusian Front near Santiago de Calatrava at Espumadera de Sal. When the order came to surrender he went to his dugout and cried for all his friends and comrades who had been killed.

He was imprisoned in Jaen and then in July 1940 Roma was tried by a military court. The prosecution asked for twenty years and a day as he was "a dangerous Marxist and follower of (Lluís) Companys". After a delay he was eventually sentenced to twelve years and a day. He was released from Teruel prison in the winter of 1943. He served three years, seven months and fourteen days in prison.

Returning to his mother in Barcelona he found employment as a builder at a weekly wage of 80 pesetas whilst constantly having to report to the Guardia Civil.

Roma never married but he stated that he “did not live the life of a monk”. At the farmhouse in Andalusia, which was used as the officers’ mess, there was a Catalan girl working there. Roma often used to sit and talk with her in Catalan during his moments off duty to try and assuage their mutual homesickness. However, his fellow officers believed that he had less innocent intentions!

In March 2009 Roma returned to Huesca to visit the places where he fought. He was welcomed by the President of the Comarcal of Los Monegros and interviewed by the director of the Ruta Orwell Museum in nearby Alcubierre. Roma stayed for the weekend with friends in the monastery of Magallon overlooking Lecinena where he first fought in the Lenin Column over seventy years ago. A newspaper report of his visit mentioned Josep Pla, the commander of his mortar battery and a couple of months later, Josep Pla’s son, who had by chance read the article, especially came from Santander to Barcelona in May last year to meet Roma in order for the son to discover more about his father (Josep Pla had been executed after the war when his son was just a baby). The son also brought his aunt, Amparu, who was 14 years old in 1936. It transpired that Roma had helped Josep Pla evacuate his family from their farmhouse whilst under heavy enemy fire near Huseca in September 1936. He had carried Amparu over his shoulder to safety whilst she was screaming to go back home as bullets flew past them scrambling across a river. Roma mentioned confidentially after their meeting that at the time she was quite a “big” girl and very difficult to carry! However, Amparu was able to thank her saviour and her nephew to find out more about his father that he never knew from Roma after over seventy years.



Amparu & Roma. 13th May 2009.

Whilst outside Huesca in 1936 and 1937, Roma remembers his men laughing at Georges Kopp riding on a white horse plastered with mud. His mortars also provided the “artillery” support for George Orwell’s attack on Torre Fabian near La Granja on April 13th 1937.

It was only in the last years of his life that Roma was able to freely talk about his experiences during the Spanish Civil War. Over the past two years of his life he was interviewed from as far away as the United States and often gave talks to schools in the Barcelona area. He was due to be interviewed this week by Aragon Television for a forthcoming six part series on the Spanish Civil War in Aragon. His memory was a marvel to behold and his attitude was an inspiration to those who met him. Luckily his autobiography has been recently completed and will be available in Catalan shortly. He will be sorely missed by his many friends who he made through the International Brigade Memorial Trust and by those who knew him in Spain.

A friend,

Alan Warren
hill705@gmail.com



Roma and a Russian T26 tank.



Roma having coffee in Huesca, 21st March 2009

Postscript:

As is the Spanish tradition, Roma's funeral was held the following day. His cloth Republican teniente's badge that he always carried with him was pinned to his jacket the day before as he lay in the tanatori for friends to pay their respects. Over 90 people attended the funeral (standing room only) with addresses given by friends and family. A quartet provided musical interludes during the humanistic service and the final piece of music was The Internationale, to which some of the audience sang quietly but distinctly whilst also holding their clenched fists above their heads. A friend of Roma and a survivor from the Quinta de Biberons (The "baby bottle troops"), Joan Guasch, shouted at the end "Viva las Brigadas Internacionales!" to which the greater majority of the people responded with "Viva!"

The ceremony ended with Roma being wheeled out of the room to applause. The group then dispersed to remember Roma in their own ways.

In the near future Roma's ashes will be deposited in Sant Just cemetery where those who were unable to attend his funeral will have the opportunity to pay their final respects to Roma.

Alan Warren
hill705@gmail.com