

# On the quays with the fishing community

San Benedetto del Tronto is the second biggest port on the Adriatic and one of the largest in Italy. The dangers of the sea characterise its present and its past. The town is still haunted by the sinking of the *Rodi*, an offshore fishing boat, 50 years ago, and the seamen it took to their deaths. Today, deep-sea fisherman Pietro Ricci continues to brave the sea for his work, a dangerous job that has put his life at risk several times.

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↓ **Pietro Ricci in his fishing boat.**  
Photo: © Angelo Ferracuti



It is cold today, and the sea is rough. No boats are putting out to sea: they are all moored up in the harbour of San Benedetto del Tronto in the south of Le Marche. The seamen are tinkering about below deck, busying themselves with small maintenance jobs or cleaning, while others are emptying buckets of water or painstakingly overhauling the engine. The air is icy, the sky dark and threatening, and outside the harbour bar, the Café Europa, the few customers sipping their take-away coffees are bundled up in their worn jackets and woolen hats. A group of cheerful, chatty mechanics appear, emerging from the repair workshops in their overalls, with masks covering their faces.

As soon as he arrives, local fisherman Pietro Ricci invites me to go with him to the area of the harbour where the boats are berthed. We walk along the quay and soon reach the spot where he has moored his little 15-metre fishing boat, the *Rapepè*. That was the nickname of his great-grandfather, also a fisherman and the forefather of a family of seafarers. Pietro, with his black hair and ruddy face, dressed in a big, dark jacket, talks very fast. We clamber onto his boat: to the stern, I see a rolled-up fishing net, to the side is the toilet, and at the front, in the bow, is the small cabin where Pietro and his brother Gabriele live while they are out at sea, where they rest and take their meals — a little refuge. "We've got everything here," he says, showing me a tiny but functional space that houses a small table with seating and, further in, a minuscule kitchenette with a stove and a microwave, storage compartments for provisions, and to the side the essential radiator to keep out the cold during the long winters. Pietro usually goes out to sea four times a week, from midnight to the following afternoon, and he resents the rules that currently limit fishing trips at the weekend, which, by the same token, mean that he has to compensate by working even when the weather conditions are very bad.

### Journey into the unknown

There are 28 million fisheries workers worldwide, 24 000 of whom lose their lives each year because they operate in one of the most dangerous human activities that exists. Pietro confirms that the work is difficult and demanding: "We're working in very unstable conditions, right out at sea — the most serious dangers are bad weather and leaks in the boat, even though we're always doing maintenance

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work on the hull; we're working on fishing boats that are more than 40 years old, and, in the past few years, there has been precious little funding to renew the fleet," he laments. "But young people who want to work in fishing should have proper resources to work with, like in the rest of Europe, with up-to-date, technologically advanced, safe vessels." He tells me that each time he goes out to sea in his boat, it is a journey into the unknown. "Will I make it home this time?" he wonders, as the *Rapepè* leaves the harbour in the dead of night at the start of its long voyage, taking him far from his town and family.

Twice he has found himself in very critical situations when he and his brother could not get back to port. He experienced moments of panic and truly believed that he was not going to make it. "We were about three miles from the coast, with me on deck and my brother Gabriele in the bow, telling me where the waves were coming from, with a 100-kilometre-per-hour wind blowing against us and a storm that suddenly descended on us: it had been forecast for the afternoon, but it started raging from the early hours of the morning," he says. "It's something you can never really forecast. That was seven years ago. We were battling against three elements: the wind, the rain and the sea," he adds, to bring home to me what that titanic struggle to prevent the boat from sinking had involved. "After struggling for almost two hours against the waves and the wind, our hearts pounding with fear, worn out with fatigue and anxiety, we managed to get to the coast. And, during that time, to keep myself from panicking, I had been binge-smoking — 20 cigarettes, one after another, almost without realising." In the days that followed, Pietro resolved to give it all up and never to go to sea again, to change his life and choose a shore-based trade. But the call of the sea was stronger.

He chose to grit his teeth and carry on. Although, since that day, whenever the weather forecast is bad, he tries to hurry back to the harbour before the storm breaks. "That event marked me for life," he admits. He has lost many friends too, who have died doing the same work as he does. He tells me about a fishing boat that was recently caught up in a storm at Giulianova: the seaman was at the mouth of the harbour when he died. "You're almost home, and then you die, just like that."

### Commemorative plaques

Pietro explains that this kind of accident happens because harbours are increasingly unsafe. There is no dredging going on any more; the nearer you are to the coast, the shallower the water is; generally, it is not very deep. More vividly, Pietro evokes "the waves that start to break then, the danger of foam when the wave breaks and it becomes hard to steer the vessel." To leave the port, the big fishing boats take up position in the harbour basin; they run the engine at full throttle to get to the mouth of the harbour where the sandbank lies, and they navigate to the side of it — that's what happens every time, whether they are sailing in or out, he explains. "We're required to ensure safety on board, but the port infrastructure doesn't provide us with an essential safety feature, and that's why small fishing boats are at risk of capsizing."

On the wall that runs along the quay, I see the commemorative plaques that remind Pietro every day of the risk that his working life poses. These plaques refer to tragedies at sea, such as that of the trawler *Pinguino*, which sank during the night of Saturday 19 February 1966 off Cap Blanc in Mauritania, causing 13 deaths; or the most dramatic case, that of the *Rodi*, 50 years ago; or the most recent, that of the *Rita*

*Evelyn* on 26 October 2006, in which three people lost their lives. Pietro adds that, in the church of Notre Dame de la Marine, there is also a book listing the names of all the victims of the sea, with the date and time of the event and the cause of death. But he repeats several times, like a refrain, that in his view what is lacking is a monument commemorating them all.

"If you don't have a boat that's in perfect working condition, you can't put out to sea. Every boat is kitted out with a self-inflating life raft that can be deployed in an emergency and a buoy that can transmit your position if the ship is wrecked. Fishermen have to cover all the trades, from electrician to refrigeration engineer. Back in the day, 15 or 20 years ago, people used to go out to sea as an adventure, sometimes to indulge in a kind of plunder, whereas now they also think about protecting and managing the sea, as well as the people who work there."

### The last voyage of the *Rodi*

In the collective memory of San Benedetto del Tronto, 23 December 1970 is a dark day: that of the biggest shipwreck in local maritime history, which happened close to the port. On that day, the offshore fishing boat *Rodi* was returning from the port of Venice, where its hull had been repaired. The boat was caught up in a storm, with double waves beating against the sides of the vessel which, after taking on water and battling ferociously against the raging sea, ultimately sank off the coast of Grottammare. The 500-tonne vessel was salvaged after the wreck. It had capsized, taking to their deaths the nine fishermen and the technician who were on board: Agostino

Di Felice, Domenico Miarelli, Silvano Falaschetti (who was only 16 years old), Giovanni Liberati, Ivo Mengoni, Marcello Ciarrocchi, Francesco Pignati, Antonio Alessandrini, Alteo Palestini and Giovanni Palumbo, who would have turned 18 on the day after the tragedy.

The men on board the *Rodi* were seamen who sailed their fishing boats to remote areas of the sea, and who had been hired at the traditional recruitment spot, the seaside promenade between the roundabout (the *Rotonda*) and the nearby Florian cinema. They were net repairers, seamen, fishing captains, deck officers, engineer officers, greasers and deckhands, or were responsible for fish processing. They had all been lured by the opportunity to make money quickly in a difficult period of unemployment and job crises.

In those days, people used to venture out to sea with nothing more than a ship's compass and a short-range radio, which often lost its signal in the ether; incapable of communicating with the mainland, they would wander the seas trying to reach Las Palmas, the Strait of Gibraltar or Morocco. Like in the novels of Robert Louis Stevenson, Joseph Conrad and Jack London, these boats still carried men who lived a dehumanised life of exploitation for months on end between the sea and the sky, in an exclusively male environment which was rough, physical, conflict-ridden and exhausting, filled with rancid cigarette-smoking and hard, never-ending work, but also with closeness and high spirits. The men on the *Rodi* were just 10 of all these invisible workers who still, on a daily basis, tackle the open seas that the townspeople of San Benedetto describe in their dialect as "*bbille e 'ngannatore*" ("terrible and treacherous").

### "We want our dead"

Between 24 and 25 December, people thought that there might still be survivors on the vessel, who might have escaped the danger by staying inside with the hatches sealed, and the worried families waited by the docks. But after a meeting at the *Rotonda* on 27 December, the situation erupted. Shouting "We want our dead!", many of the townspeople processed through the town. The contemporary black-and-white photos show a compact crowd on the station platforms, looking serious and severe, the rails blocked with logs, the shops and cinemas closed, the Adriatic Highway cut off, and barricades in the streets, like those the student movement had erected in many Italian towns at the time. The relationship between young people and fishermen, the "proletariat of the sea", had been forged: they all came together at the Café Glacial.

Nowadays, the boats no longer go out to fish in those distant seas, but work on board is still very demanding, even in Italy's ninth largest fishing port, one of the most strategic and productive on the Adriatic. "You work in the cold in winter and the heat in summer, you eat when you aren't hungry and you sleep when you're not sleepy," says Pietro as we carry on walking through the market. We are a few steps away from the building that houses the Museum of Seafaring Civilisations of Le Marche, where the relics of that distant past, the period Pietro calls "the Atlantic era", are gathered. "If you feel sleepy while you're on duty, you have to fight the fatigue, you have to stay awake." There is a higher incidence of hearing loss among mariners, because of the continuous deafening noise of the engines, but joint diseases affecting the back, the knees and the shoulders, which are a typical consequence of the tasks carried out on board, are also observed. And then there are the numerous cases of dermatitis from prolonged exposure to airborne and biological agents.

But it is also a job for free individuals, and that is why Pietro will never leave it: "You're living in the middle of the sea, alone or with your fellow workers, you're living among the beauty of nature. Even now, I feel moved by the sunrise or when I see dolphins — that gives me the strength to go on." He quotes a few verses of a poem by Beatrice Piacentini, known as Bice, a poet who wrote in the local dialect at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. "I feel this poem deep inside me, it's as though it was written specially for a fisherman," he says forcefully. It is about the seafarer's trade: a treacherous trade, there's no job more hateful, if

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you're born into it, you suffer... but you can't bring yourself to leave it. "It's true, because if you've thrown yourself into this activity, and you've been doing it for years and years, this work captivates you so that you can't leave it: you are part of the sea, part of nature." Three years ago, when he had to scrap his old fishing boat, he had decided to retire, but in the end he couldn't break away. "The pull of the job was so strong," he says, "that I bought another boat and I'm still doing it."

These days, there are no more Atlantic fishing boats like those at the time of the *Rodi*: currently, the seamen of San Benedetto fish four days a week just three miles offshore. Only a few of them fish in deeper water, heading to the international waters off Croatia, where you can also fish for prawns, Norway lobsters, cod and so on. Pietro, for his part, works in coastal fishing: "I fish for sole, mullet, cod, cuttlefish, squid and king prawn." The Adriatic is a particularly hazardous sea: it is not very deep, so it has shorter, higher waves, which suddenly increase in size and move very violently. Pietro never used to take a good luck charm with him when he went out to sea; the most he will admit to is not wearing a life jacket, like many fishermen, out of superstition. But now his young daughter, Carol, has given him one: "Nemo — it's a little plastic fish, and these days I always take it with me," he says, pleased that he possesses this little talisman. ●

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and then you die, just  
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↑ Commemorative  
plaque in honour of  
the many fishermen  
who have died at sea.  
Photo: © Angelo Ferracuti