

Sommocolonia

How manna passes from hand to hand

Quando arrivarono gli Americani per noi fu una manna (when the Americans arrived for us it was manna), said the people of Sommocolonia in 1944. They never forgot the kindness and courage of the Black GIs, the Buffalo Soldiers, who fed them that terrible winter during the Second World War, and died defending their small village. *I remember we used to go to their kitchens with empty saucepans and we never came back empty-handed.... In exchange for the food they gave us we did their washing: their clothes were made of good quality wool, not like our poor rags!* On the day after Christmas, 26 December, the battle raged. Out of 75 black GIs present, 43 lost their lives. In the year 2000, 56 years later, the villagers honoured those 'forgotten' black soldiers. Lieutenant John Fox had been awarded a posthumous Medal of Honour in



Il tenente John Fox (AAI)

marks of the German jackboots on the floor. As Bonafede recounts, three deaf old villagers partial to 'a drop or two' drank their way through the destruction: *Che sbornia che si era fatto! Tremavano anche le case!* (What a skinful they had! Even the houses were shaking!)

There have been films made about this event (but located elsewhere) and books written. But this story of one of the Wehrmacht's last attacks is fully told both from the locals' and the GIs' points of view, their own oral accounts, in Solace Wales' soon to be published book **BRAIDED IN FIRE: Buffalo Soldiers and Tuscan villagers on the Gothic Line**. Meanwhile, if you pay a visit to the Garfagnana, you can visit the existing small museum and walk the narrow cobbled streets which saw so much death and destruction over 70 years ago. Even now, it's a humbling experience.

A new Agriturismo has opened this year. *Al Palazzo* serves excellent pork from their own pigs, and can even rustle up a vegan feast if warned in advance. They deserve to thrive. They represent the present and the future of this little village, which has such a powerful if little-known past in the history of the 20th century.

– by Judith Edwards
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Al Palazzo is currently open on Saturdays for dinner from 7.30 to 9.30 pm & Sundays for lunch 12.30 to 2pm (other days are possible with advance reservation), with longer hours in the summer season.
Tel. 342 9920615, agriturismoalpalazzo@virgilio.it,
www.agriturismoalpalazzo.com

The new web site where we can learn about Sommocolonia's past is <http://www.associazionericreativasommocolonia.it> Click on "Museum" & "Story/Personalities" for more details about John Fox & the Fortress to Peace.



1997. He was the man who asked his own colleagues down below in the valley (one of whom was his best friend Otis Zachary) to fire on the very place where he stood, the Rocca fortress, which was surrounded by enemy soldiers. It lies within an oval field, given to the community by a local family. Manna is passed on.

Memories still survive on both sides, where two marginalised groups – Italian country people and black GIs – came together at one of the fulcrum points in the history of the Western world. Along with the 43 American deaths, 42 Axis soldiers, 7 partisans and 7 villagers died. They are all still remembered locally. Now a new museum project is under way. Here you will be able to have a coffee and a sandwich at the Cafe Bar, while revisiting this part of WW II history, so small and yet so powerful. And for a child's eye view of the event, when this tiny village becomes the front line during the German retreat from Italy, you can read Bernard (Bonafede) Moscardini's *La Vacanza*, an account of the event and its aftermath, when he and his small friends romped in the rubble (published by Spiderwize and available on Amazon). In his cousin's house next door, you can still see the



i sitting on the ruins of San



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