

A Buffalo Soldier Returns

by Norma Jean Bishop

The Black Americans who came to Italy to fight in World War II were called "Buffalo Soldiers" by the Native Americans who saw them training out west, before the First World War. In *Miracle of St. Anna* (2008) they were immortalized in a fictional portrayal written by James McBride and filmed by Spike Lee, dramatizing the German massacre at Stazzema, above Pietrasanta.

Last month, Staff Sergeant Ivan J. Houston, now 87 years old, returned to Tuscany with his family to commemorate those days. At a breakfast buffet organized by Borgo degli Artisti in the park at Ponte a Serraglio (Bagni di Lucca), he was warmly welcomed by the Mayor (1), local arts associations, international residents (including Vietnam veteran Candido Martinelli and other Americans – 2), English and Australians, and the Italians (3) who drove up from Lucca in their American combat vehicles, dressed in American uniforms, to re-enact the events of World War II and to honor this gentleman. The Italians accompanied Johnson on a ride to some of the former battle sites and to a showing of *Inside*



Buffalo, a documentary film made in 2008 with the help of the Fondazione Banca del Monte by Ghanese Fred Kuwornu, based on interviews with Italian partisans, surviving Buffalo Soldiers, James McBride and Spike Lee.

In September 1944, the "Buffalos" – 370th Infantry Regiment of the 92nd Division – were fighting the Germans along the Gothic Line, in the Garfagnana and along the Versilia coastline, up into the mountains between La Spezia and Parma. Johnson, who hadn't been back to Italy since 1944, commented, while looking up at the surrounding hills:

Yes, I recognize them. We were up here. The Germans were blowing the roads and the bridges up in our faces. So yes, I do recognize it. We moved all over the front. The longest we stayed was in Barga for almost a month, and we were north of Pietrasanta in a little place for a while. We were north of Pistoia along highway 64 in the winter. It was very cold, very snowy. We were chasing the Germans.

We arrived on September 1st and we finally ended up in Pontremoli in April of 1945. Nothing happened during the winter; we were stopped. Everything stopped about October and it didn't start up until spring. Then the war ended on May 2nd 1945.

We never ate Italian food. Only Army rations, canned food. The Italian civilians were really hungry, so we would try to feed them.

Two years ago, Houston wrote *Black Warriors, the Buffalo Soldiers of World War II*, a memoir of his experiences and a tribute to his comrades, many of whom did not survive the war. The book can be ordered on-line at the website www.blackwarriorsbook.com.

Photos by Candido Martinelli and by the author

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