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*The magazine for those
who live in Tuscany
– or wish they did*

with the
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Sognando la Panca in Borgo al'Abate...

24.10.2013 *Kenny*

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Cover:
Sognando la Pania di Barga all'alba
(Dreaming Barga's Pania at dawn)
by Swietlan Nicholas Kraczyna

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Altri Tempi ... Anni Fa

Braided in Fire

The brutal killing of the American black man George Floyd by a white policeman sparked off international riots, provoking a deep global soul-searching about racial equality. *I can't breathe* he said, several times, and then he died. History is about us, now, not some faraway people. Martin Luther King delivered his 'I have a dream' speech to more than 250,000 people in Washington, and then got shot for his pains in Memphis, Tennessee. But dreams persist.

A grey haired white woman, Solace Wales, spent decades unearthing the story of two marginalised groups, black soldiers and white peasants, in Sommocolonia (see GV No --) who met and cooperated (and some of them died) during the German rush to take over Italy. The Germans didn't succeed, of course, but nobody knew that at the time. The villagers warmly welcomed the black soldiers as their liberators, and these two groups really helped one another in touching ways, both small and large.

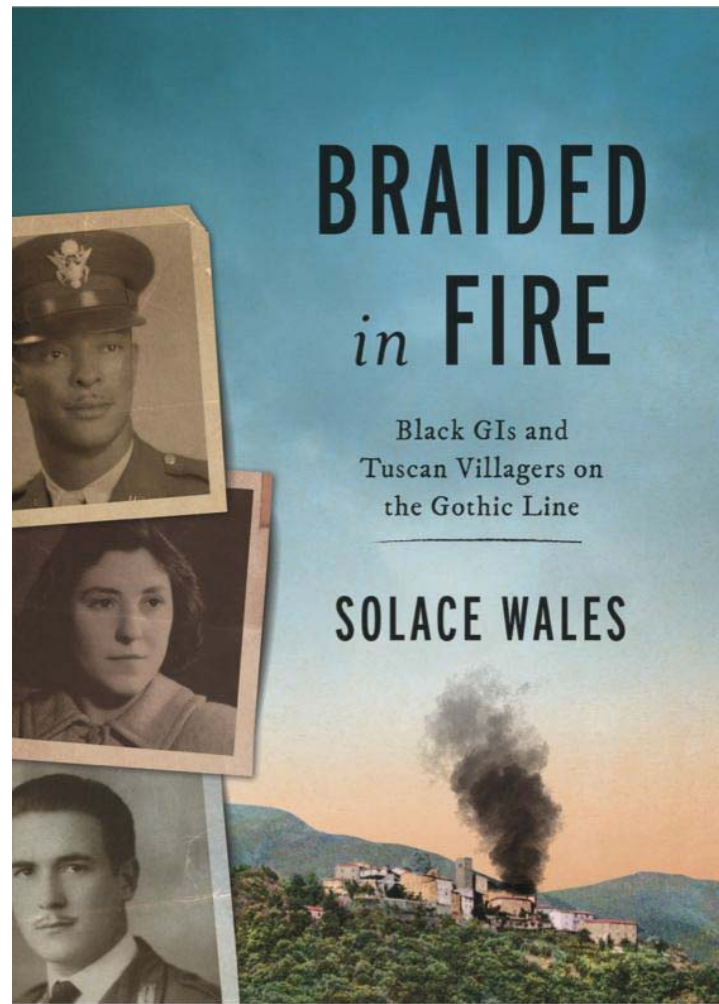
Solace Wales has recently published her book, **Braided in Fire: Black GIs and Tuscan villagers on the Gothic Line**. Solace, an artist and art educator, modest as she is, takes as her inspiration from the long line of people in the Black Lives Matter chain: Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Rosa Parks, Angela Davis, Jesse Owen, Billie Holiday.... Holiday's heart-rending song *Strange Fruit* summed up the almost unbelievably horrific treatment meted out if you were black:

*Southern Trees bear a strange fruit
Blood in the leaves and blood at the root...
Black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze ...*

A 'strange and bitter crop' indeed.

Solace was full of uncertainty at first: would these black men want to talk to a privileged white woman? She knew all the residents of Sommocolonia, so there was no barrier there. Her fears were largely unfounded and these veterans approaching the end of their lives were for the most part not only willing but eager to talk. When her research was already under way, while she was interviewing someone whose surname was Willett, Solace learned that her great grandfather, Consider Willett, (what a wonderful name) had headed a black company in the Civil War.

The impressive research in **Braided in Fire** is the result of Solace's twin passions: To celebrate the generous and warm



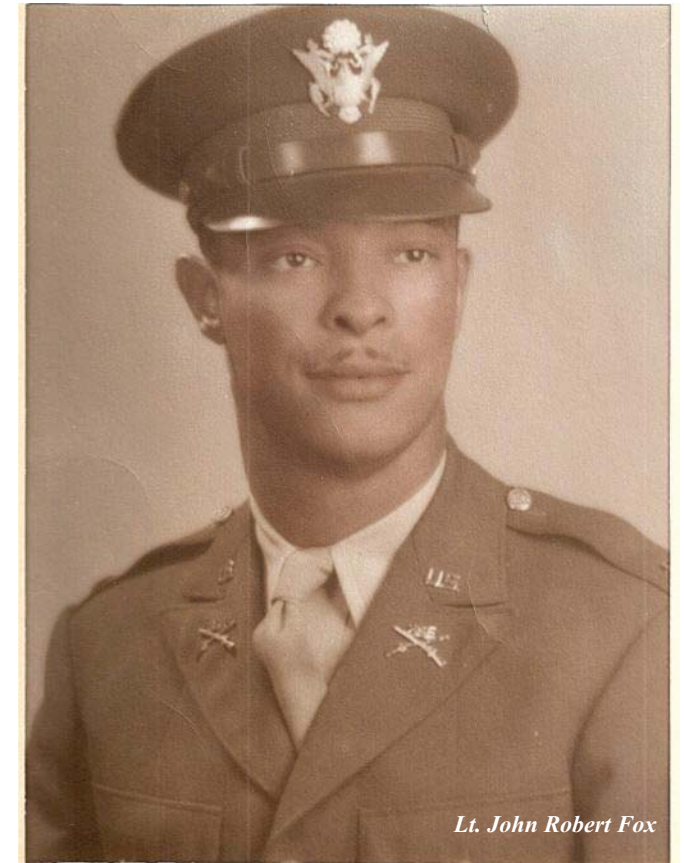
hearted Sommocolonians, among whom she and her artist husband had lived for so long, and to apologise for the racist way Americans had treated their own compatriots. She hoped in her own small way, *to right the wrongs my country has heaped on its black citizens. Wrong judgement by whites of the performance of blacks is one of the most pernicious injustices African Americans have suffered.* These soldiers who had willingly fought for the USA were told to sit in the back of the bus when they returned home, but (amazingly enough) retained their sense of optimism and hope. Probably all of them had slave ancestry. Rothacker Smith (Rock) is now 97, and Berto in Italy is 95. Time ticks on. Rock's grandfather had run away when he was only 11 because he hated his Scotch-Irish father, the slave-owner who had perhaps 'fathered' numerable children by women slaves in his power.

This is all slip-sliding away. But Solace has rescued it. **Braided in Fire** is a book to read and re-read, packed full of the kind of details which could easily have been ignored in a top-down history. Brave Lt. John Robert Fox died when he directed his compatriots to fire on his position in Sommocolonia, to stop the German advance. Countless others died along with him, and all lives matter. The book's publication at this time is so apt. As the writer Ali Smith has said, *Time, art, thought, history, language, who gets to speak and who doesn't; people real and fictional and how their stories are and aren't told.* These real stories of real people are spellbinding, moving.

I was privileged to live near Irma Biondi, one of the adolescent heroines of Solace's book, when she was an old lady, and to take her out to a meal at her favourite restaurant high up in the hills. Now sadly Irma is dead, but if Teresa and Maria (GV No) were the gossips of the piazza, she was the Duchess (as we



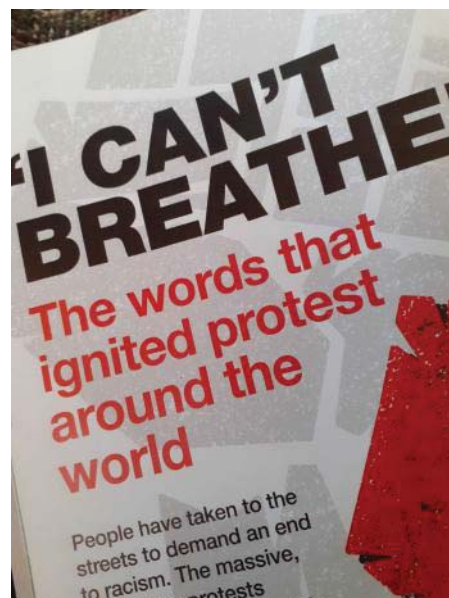
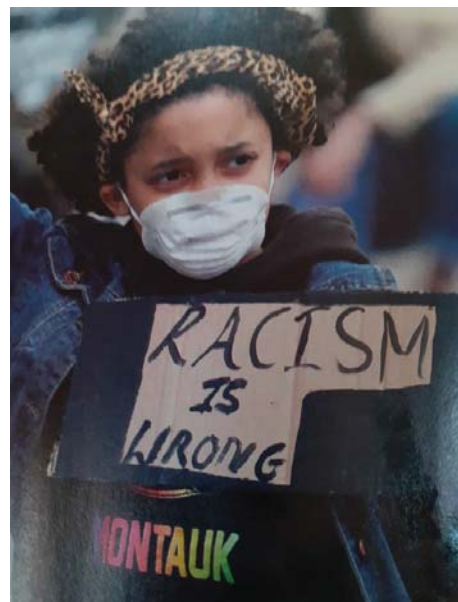
Irma Biondi in the 1940s



Lt. John Robert Fox

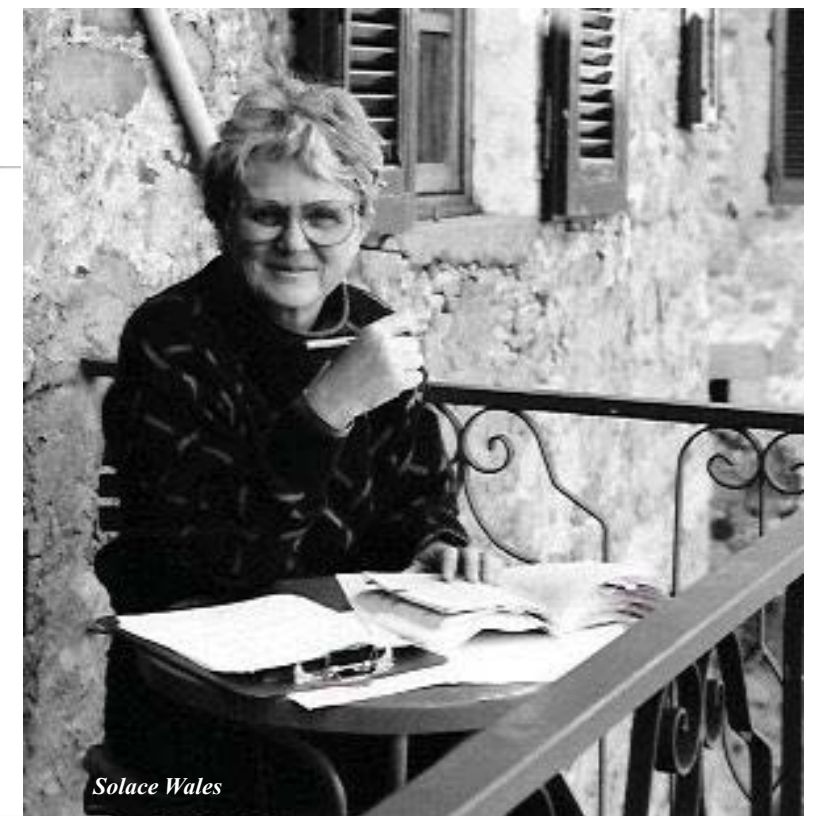
the author our thanks for her account, which so movingly records the human toll of war. During our struggle with the Covid 19 pandemic, we are thinking of how to relate better in the future. A model is provided in **Braided in Fire**. Read it, digest it, and ponder its message. The book can be ordered online.

— by Judith Edwards
www.cansurviving.com
www.judithedwards.co.uk



called her), speaking always in well-modulated tones, slowly and with much thought, tones which seemed to float and encompass the piazza in her calm presence. She had lived as a young girl in Sommocolonia, but when she was 14 found employment as a live-in servant for a better-off family in Barga. In early 1943 Irma returned to live at home in order to help care for the new baby. By then Irma was 20, and she walked down to Barga to work part time in the same household. Quite a walk. When she was fleeing the burning farm sheds around the village, she described it later *as a circle of fire, and we were on the inside* (un circolo di fuoco, e noi dentro).

History is all around us, catch it if you can, as Solace so memorably has, retelling these stories with drama and passion. Here's a new page to add to our understanding of World War Two, and a page that could so easily have dropped out of recorded history. We owe



Solace Wales