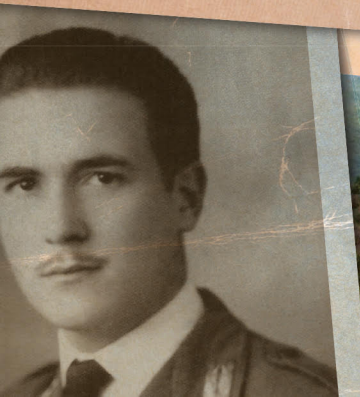
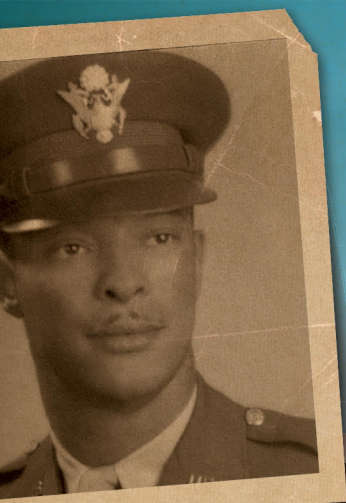


BRAIDED *in* FIRE

Black GIs and
Tuscan Villagers on
the Gothic Line

SOLACE WALES



EXCERPT NOT FOR RESALE

Knox Press is an imprint of:
Pike and Powder Publishing Group LLC

Pike and Powder Publishing Group LLC All rights reserved
Printed in the United States.
For more information on Pike and Powder Publishing Group, LLC,
1 Carven Lane Box 66066, Lawrenceville, NJ 08648
www.PikeandPowder.com
facebook: @PikeandPowder
twitter: @pike_powder
email: info@pikeandpowder.com

Braided in Fire Copyright © 2020 Solace Wales
Library of Congress information to come

1. History/Military/ WWII

ISBN 9781948496032 (hardcover)

Cover Design: Ann Weinstock
Book Design: K. M. Weber, I Libri Book Design

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition, including this condition, being imposed on the subsequent purchaser. The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book online or via any other means without the permission of the publisher is illegal and punishable by law. Please purchase only authorized electronic editions, and do not participate in or encourage electronic piracy of copyrighted materials. Your support of the author's and publisher's rights is appreciated.

Prologue

The Biondi family had been sleeping in a Sommocolonian neighbor's basement for two months. Straw mattresses covered the dirt floor. Twenty-six people slept in a ten-by-twenty-eight-foot room, with barely enough space to inch by the mattresses. Two people shared each mattress, though the four littlest Biondi brothers slept on one. A rectangular slit five inches by fifteen inches, cut into the stone wall two-foot-thick, let in a sliver of light. The lack of air made for stale odors in the dank room, even though they left the door open during the day.

Irma had been told that this basement was safer than the one in their house. But wouldn't the three stories of stone and bricks above crash down on top of them if bombs arrived on its roof? Yet her father insisted that it was the safest spot. German mortar shrapnel had hit the exterior of the Biondi house several times but had never struck this one. This house was protected by an adjacent taller building on its northern side.

"Besides, with American soldiers upstairs at our house, their mortar cannon planted right in front, and a million telephone wires coming into our place from all directions, you aren't safe at home if the Germans arrive!" he argued.

Irma hated sleeping in the basement, and she especially hated making the beds in the morning. It pained her to see the hemp sheets her mother had taken so much trouble to make—from planting the hemp to combing it, weaving the fabric and then finishing it with beautiful embroidery—so grimy and spotted with dirt. They could not wash and dry the sheets. She never dreamt she would long for the village's public laundry with its freezing cold spring water. She used

to complain bitterly about her many hours there, chilled to the bone, her hands red and wrinkled, knuckles raw. Now that they could hardly go outside, that exhausting chore seemed like a privilege.

Two of Irma's six brothers were missing from the basement—Berto and Mario. Seventeen-year-old Mario slept in the basement of the family he worked for as a handyman. Berto's situation was more worrisome. Irma knew that as a partisan fighter he was now involved in all sorts of dangerous missions.

Though only the tiniest thread of light entered the room, Irma was suddenly wide awake. "What was that?" she asked, poking Anna.

"It's too early, go back to sleep," Anna said. Then she added, "It's the GIs, can't you hear them marching?"

"No," Irma objected, "American boots don't make that noise!"

All the villagers coveted the silent rubber-soled American boots. This was a sharp sound of metal hitting stone as many heels made contact with the street. Irma whirled around to see her brother, Adelmo sitting bolt upright in his bed too. Soon everyone whispered in alarm. Only the normally rowdy, wide-eyed children remained quiet. Adelmo leapt across the mattresses, stepping on someone's shin and someone else's arm in the process. He positioned himself like a sentry at the window with its minimal view of the house to the south, just across the narrow alleyway.

It was a long minute before he whispered, "I see an Austrian hat!"

"With all the Americans in this village, that cannot be!" someone objected.

"There's no doubt," Adelmo confirmed. "He's gone now, but he was wearing the Alpine beret with an edelweiss."

"Get out of that window!" ordered his mother. "They might see you!"

"No, Mamma, they can't see anything looking into this dark hole."

But he moved away from the opening. The past months had taught him to be invisible. He often hid to avoid risking being taken by the Germans for slave labor.

Irma's great aunt was wailing in a raspy, throaty way. "What's going to happen? What's going to happen!" she cried over and over. No one answered. Everyone knew that with so many enemy soldiers in the same village, there could be only one result.

Irma's mother, Irene, began to say Hail Marys. Her low voice had a soothing effect on Irma who knew her mother's unwavering focus when involved in prayer. Irma remained silent, concentrating

on slowing her own racing heartbeat. A few other women's voices joined Irene's. This did not stop the old woman's unnerving wailing, but it provided a counter to her desperation.

A knock came at the basement door, three quick raps followed by a strong bang. Someone opened the door for Vittorio Biondi, the father of the Biondi clan. He was returning from his night watch at the Vincenti's. He had witnessed Marina Vincenti and her mother, Dina, walk the few doors down the street to join their relatives' basement hideout. At least twelve other gatherings of villagers were crammed into basements.

"Are they exchanging fire yet?" someone asked.

"You'll know when it starts," Vittorio Biondi answered. Then he turned to Irma's wailing great aunt and roared, "Quiet!" Irma knew he would also like Irene to stop praying, but he could not ask that of his wife. The great aunt did stop for a few moments. When she started again, her plaintive voice joined jarringly in the Hail Marys.

"Looks like we are going to be stuck in this hellhole for some time," said Vittorio. "Let's not make it even more unpleasant with a lot of screeching." He glared again at the offending aunt, but there was no pause in her wailing prayer.

"I have to pee" said Bruno, pounding his big sister's arm.

Irma turned to the child. "I have to pee too," she said. Normally, when morning came, they went home to use their own chamber pots.

If someone had to pee at night, he or she just slipped outside the basement for a moment. But though the marching boots had passed, no one was going outside this morning.

"What shall we do?" Irma asked of no one in particular.

"We'll have to use the leaves in the back corner," answered her father. "At least they're clean."

Nearly all the village houses had such a pile of leaves in the basement, located directly under the commode seat above. When leaves became saturated, they were shoveled into a wheelbarrow and taken down to fertilize crops. Like many things, this chore became more difficult to accomplish while living on the front. And with the occupying soldiers, many more people were using the commodes, making for dubious hygiene and unpleasant smells. Because their basement was being used as sleeping quarters, this household had not been using the commode above it and the leaves were clean. Today that would change. But before anyone could move, they heard the jarring noise of

a machine gun. The very walls around them seemed to be reverberating. The gun was answered by two rifle shots.

“We’re all going to die,” said Anna, Adelmo’s fiancé, in a strangely calm voice.

“No, no, shhh,” said Adelmo. “We just need to stay quietly hidden, and we’ll be okay.”

It was not long before several machine guns fired simultaneously. Then came a nearly continuous sound of rifles. Bullets bouncing off walls created echoes in the narrow alleyway. The fire seemed to be coming from every direction, as if their hiding place were at the very fulcrum of the action.

Then came the scream of someone hit, followed by a long, low moan that sickened all who heard it. Lt. John Fox was less than seventy-five yards away from the Biondi family and the others sharing the basement, but at a very different elevation. His outpost was on the third and top floor of Sommocolonia’s enormous tenth century tower. The Romanesque tower had been built at one end of the elevated oval of the La Rocca castle field which was supported all the way around by twenty-foot stone walls. This meant that Fox’s location was approximately twenty-five yards higher up than that basement.

Fox saw the enemy troops shortly after they infiltrated the village. Hearing a few distant rifle shots, he peeked behind the black-out cloth covering the tower east-facing window to look in the direction the sound came from. It was unmistakable—there were Germans on Sommocolonia’s eastern path. As the forward observer for this Apennine mountain garrison, Fox exclaimed in frustration to his radio operator, “We can’t call in artillery fire onto *that* position!” They both knew it would not only endanger villagers in the houses nearby, but also fellow soldiers of their all-black 366th Infantry Regiment, some of whom were occupying those houses.

Earlier, well before it was light (around 5:00 am), Fox had been effective in directing artillery fire to the north of the village and had succeeded in scaring off German soldiers who had attacked the Italian partisans defending Sommocolonia from that end. He knew that his artillery fire alone would not have accomplished that mission because some of the enemy were too close to the village for him to fire on. His binoculars had helped him see the few partisans guarding the village’s northernmost little hillock, scrambling about, firing nonstop at the intruders. He was happy to have those effective gate keepers in that critical spot.

Along with the other GIs stationed in the village, Fox had been told that the enemy would never enter from the east, only from the north. Looking behind the curtain on the south-facing window, he saw that not only had they entered from the east, but in less than two minutes a few German soldiers had advanced to the street directly below his tower! Though the street was far below, he said quietly “We’re in for trouble now.”

His alarmed radio operator said, “Maybe Jenkins’ gunners will spot ’em and fire directly down on ’em.” Fox shook his head. He figured no one in Jenkins platoon knew Germans were anywhere nearby.

A machine gun sounded on a parallel street. Immediately, answering shots echoed loudly. That put an end to the unnerving silence as all hell broke loose, the firing occurring in several areas near the tower, the sound amplified by the narrow stone streets and buildings. Fox noticed that the Germans on the street below had dispersed, clearly looking for more protected positions. The GIs of the 366th inside the buildings were firing out of windows and doors hiding behind the frames of the openings in order to expose themselves as little as possible. But many on both sides were hit and the cries of the wounded were heart-wrenching.

Required to stay in his forward observing outpost and unable to enter in the battle, Fox felt impotent just standing there, paralyzed. He could see his friend, Lt. Graham Hervey Jenkins, in the field below preparing his platoon for battle, but all other action was now hidden by adjacent buildings. Only his ears registered what was happening. Finally, at just after 8:30 am, he had a chance to contribute. He spotted a train of thirty mules approaching Sommocolonia from the north, clearly attempting to resupply the Germans engaged in the battle with ammunition. He flew into action. He did quick calculations and called the battery in the valley below with his coordinates. Shortly, after the boom of the cannons, it was reassuring to hear his buddy’s voice over the crackly phone line: “Good hit! We can see heavy casualties, and most of the animals are down.”

But the German forces did not appear to lack ammunition and the battle raged on.

Later in the morning, the inevitable happened—pairs of enemy machine gunners raced up La Rocca’s narrow southern steps, two soldiers at a time, while many other German soldiers managed to scale the twenty-foot wall from the northern side, a seemingly impossible feat. Feeling suddenly faint, Fox said under his breath, “Oh my God!

There are swarms of them!” He saw that his friend’s platoon holding La Rocca field was surrounded and far outnumbered.

At the time the Sommocolonia battle raged on December 26, 1944, I had just turned six and was asleep with my Christmas rag doll in a comfortable house in Washington, DC. I shared no war-related traumas with the protagonists in this book. But in the mid-1970s, my husband and I bought a house in the little medieval village and our neighbors began telling us snippets of their daunting war experiences. Over the years, my interest in the events grew until I became obsessed with the agonizing village battle that irrevocably changed the lives of everyone involved. I needed to learn about what the lives of the villagers, the Italian partisans and the African American soldiers had been like in the years leading up to the compelling moment when they found themselves the brunt of one of the last attacks of the Wehrmacht. I was privileged to hear first-hand about the agony and the heroism from people of all three groups who lived through the events. I learned of extraordinary bravery among the young black GIs who were defending the little garrison against far superior numbers of German troops. I discovered what happened to the people present for the fateful battle who became forever braided in fire. This is their story.