

The Tombolo Affair

By Owen Brown

During the Gothic campaign in Italy, some of the troops of the 92nd Division abandoned their posts. Traumatized by fear, fatigue and stress; seeking relief from the conflict and probability of injury or death -- they fled for their lives. Among them was a group of African-American Soldiers. The story of these deserters comes alive in the memories of two black, decorated war veterans: Buffalo Soldiers Donald Spencer and Fred Lee.

Spencer and Lee recount an incredible story about an incident that occurred while the Allies were battling the German and Italian forces. The two men tell of a small group of German deserters. Fueled by anger and resentment against their respective armies, both bands hid out in the Tombolo Woods, a dense marshland that surrounded what is now Camp Darby and overwhelmed the coastal areas further north, as far as Viareggio.

Protected by umbrella pines and dense underbrush, by bogs, sandbars and quicksand, the two groups of deserters built shelters and foraged for food. In a short time, their ranks increased, with all manner of shady characters— from pimps and prostitutes to adventurers petty thieves and outlaws joining them. To support their growing numbers, the crafty, desperate men organized commando-style raids, stealing whatever they needed to survive.

In 1944 and 1945, Tombolo Woods' German deserters and their Black American cohorts pillaged the military convoys of the Germans, the Italians and the Americans, carting away equipment, food and weapons. With the help of intermediaries, the fugitives sold contraband on the black market, eluding the hapless authorities for months.

During the war, the Tombolo affair was a hot topic not only in the Italian National newspapers of the period, but also in the cinema. Some years later, two Italian films, *Paradiso in Bianco e Nero* (1947 by Incine Industria Cinematografica Italiana) and *Senza Pietra*, attempted to capture the convulsions and drama that took place in the woods of Tombolo. The later film features the screenwriting talents of young Federico Fellini, who went on to become an internationally acclaimed film director.

A 1954 fictional novel "Tombolo" by Nicholas Fersen is available in the research section of the Camp Darby Library.

There was an English release of the movie "Tombolo" in USA December 30, 1949. According to a review by Gerald DeLuca: "It stars Aldo Fabrizi as a widowed father, Andrea, whose wife had perished in a wartime bombing. Andrea works as a guard in a depot for American merchandise in the port of Livorno, in occupied Italy. One day he spots his long-lost daughter, Anna (Adriana Benetti), unseen for five years and is able to seek her out and speak to her again.

Unfortunately, he comes to realize that she is connected, through her boyfriend Renzo, to a criminal organization specializing in the theft of merchandise for the black-market, prostitution, as well as other shady activities. Renzo and his fellow gang members had also set up Andrea in such a way that they arranged a theft from the depot he was supposed to be guarding and that resulted in the death of two men.

The band of criminals which Renzo is associated with operates out of a notorious locale called Tombolo, a den of iniquity located in a pinewoods area not far from the city. One of the ranking operatives in this place is the black G.I., Sergeant Jack, played by the ubiquitous black American in films of that time, John Kitzmiller. It should be noted that there is an uncomfortable tinge of racist stereotyping in the portrayal of this soldier, something pointed out by the reviewer for the New York Times when it opened in that city.

At a certain point Renzo becomes repentant, is serious about marrying Anna, tells all to Andrea. Andrea enlists the help of the authorities who stage a successful raid on the gang, but not without Andrea becoming a victim of the gunfire interchange and dying... as his daughter and her friend sail off to a presumably better and more virtuous life.

The film has a gritty noir realism, and the backgrounds of rubble in war-damaged Livorno are very effective here as the were in Lattuada's WITHOUT PITY and Joseph Losey's much later STRANGER ON THE PROWL, both of which were shot there."