

RIGHTING HISTORY

A new book revisits a riot and lynching at Seattle's Fort Lawton

BY JOHN MARSHALL

P-I book critic

Abu Ghraib. Guantanamo Bay. And Fort Lawton in Seattle.

Abuse of prisoners of war in American custody at all three locations produced outrage with international implications. One died at Fort Lawton.

There in the nighttime darkness of Aug. 14, 1944, scores of rioting black soldiers attacked the nearby barracks of Italian POWs, leaving more than a dozen seriously injured. And the next morning, a two-man military police patrol discovered the body of Italian Pvt. Guglielmo Olivotto hanging from a rope attached to a G.I. obstacle-course wire strung between two maple trees.

What followed the riot and the hanging was the largest Army court-martial in World War II, with 43 black soldiers tried on a variety of charges, including three charged with the murder of Olivotto. What followed was also an important boost in the meteoric career of the Army's prosecutor, Lt. Col. Leon Jaworski, who later would become a legendary figure in many prominent American cases, including his role as the special prosecutor investigating President Richard Nixon and Watergate.

The riot and hanging at Fort Lawton were a front-page embarrassment for Seattle at the time, but they have faded into obscurity in the passing decades after the closure of Fort Lawton and its conversion into Discovery Park. But a new book published in the time of other American POW abuse scandals is bringing new attention to what went terribly wrong that hot August night at the Army base in Seattle's Magnolia neighborhood.

"On American Soil" (Algonquin Books, 305 pages, \$24.95) is a riveting, revisionist look at the riot, the hanging and the court-martial written by one of the Northwest's most respected television journalists. Jack Hamann, a onetime attorney who went from reporting on Seattle's KING/5 to producing globe-trotting documentaries for CNN, has crafted an impressive debut book that is painstakingly researched and documented but also manages to be an enthralling read.

Hamann's chronological account reflects his roots in objective journalism, presenting a scrupulously fair examination of the Fort Lawton case. In an interview, he detailed his approach, saying, "As a reader of a lot

of non-fiction, I find myself most involved in work where I feel I'm given enough information to connect the dots. I also really dislike what TV does -- telling people this is what you've got to conclude."

But the 50-year-old journalist has drawn his own startling conclusions after 17 years of research and reflection on the notorious events that occurred just a five-minute drive from his longtime home on Queen Anne.

Among Hamann's conclusions: What happened at Fort Lawton was not a "race riot," as it has always been

described. Jaworski's conduct of the prosecution was, in the writer's view, "a huge black mark on his stellar career." And Olivotto's murder, which has never been solved, most likely was committed by a racist member of the military police (Clyde Lomax, now deceased) who "happened" to discover the Italian's body the next morning far from the riot site.

Hamann's conclusions are based on interviews with more than 60 people and voluminous evidence and records uncovered on treks around the country with his research partner, Leslie Hamann, his wife of almost three decades. What Leslie Hamann did for their joint project could easily have resulted in her designation as the

Jack Hamann has crafted an impressive debut book that is painstakingly researched and documented but also manages to be an enthralling read.



PAUL JOSEPH BROWN / P-I

"On American Soil" author Jack Hamann stands amid remaining barracks at Fort Lawton.

book's co-author, but she demurred.

Still, Jack Hamann insists, "This book would not be the book it is in a million ways if I had not had a collaborator who read every page of every document and was willing to tell me, 'You didn't connect this dot or that dot.' And having Leslie with me also made it a lot less likely that I would cut some corner."

It was Leslie Hamann who made the crucial discovery that provides the revisionist underpinnings for "On American Soil." The two Seattleites were in the National Archives in College Park, Md., sifting through undisturbed boxes of World War II materials categorized only as "Miscellaneous."

"We were sitting side-by-side,"

Jack Hamann recalls, "and Leslie grabbed my arm and said, 'Jack, look at this!'"

She had come upon the first of three boxes containing the scathing, once-classified report of the Fort Lawton incidents and thousands of pages of interviews compiled by Brig. Gen. Elliot D. Cooke, chief of the Overseas Inspection Division in the Army's investigative agency, the Office of the Inspector General.

Cooke's report castigated the lax conditions, inept leadership and botched crime-scene investigation at Fort Lawton. The general's report, based on the sworn testimony of 164 witnesses, set forth a detailed account of the tragic events that contradicted much of what was reported by the

newspapers then and what was revealed during the court-martial later -- a mistaken story line that has persisted in historical accounts for almost six decades.

Cooke traced the riot to an evening of too much beer drinking at the fort and a brief scuffle between a black soldier and one of three Italian POWs returning on a pass from a night in downtown Seattle. The 11 p.m. fistfight left the black soldier lying on the ground, leading his fellow transportation troops to avenge their fallen comrade, much as they had been instructed to do in recent training films preparing them for their imminent departure to the South Pacific war zone.

As Hamann summarizes, "It was not a 'race riot.' It was two things. It started between two intoxicated soldiers, one African American, one Italian, who called out to each other. There was nothing pre-planned. And the decision of blacks to retaliate was a function of their intensive training over the last two weeks that had called upon them to respond to attacks.

"The blacks had no particular hatred of the Italians. There is no evidence of that, although white soldiers at the fort did have animosity toward the Italians because of their privileges; they had been in arguments and fights with them. The black soldiers had hardly ever been together with the Italians. The blacks just saw one of their own bloody and lying on the ground and they reacted with 'let's defend ourselves.' The Italians to them were just a faceless enemy."

Cooke also compiled evidence showing it was unlikely that blacks hanged Olivotto in the frenzy of rioting. There were no scars or bruises on his body, as there were on the bodies of all the Italians who had fled from their barracks into the prickly underbrush. And the hanging scene at the base of Magnolia bluff was so distant from the rioting above that it was unlikely to have been traversed in the darkness on foot. It seemed far more likely the shy, deeply religious soldier was strangled elsewhere, then transported to the obstacle course where his death was made to look like a lynching.

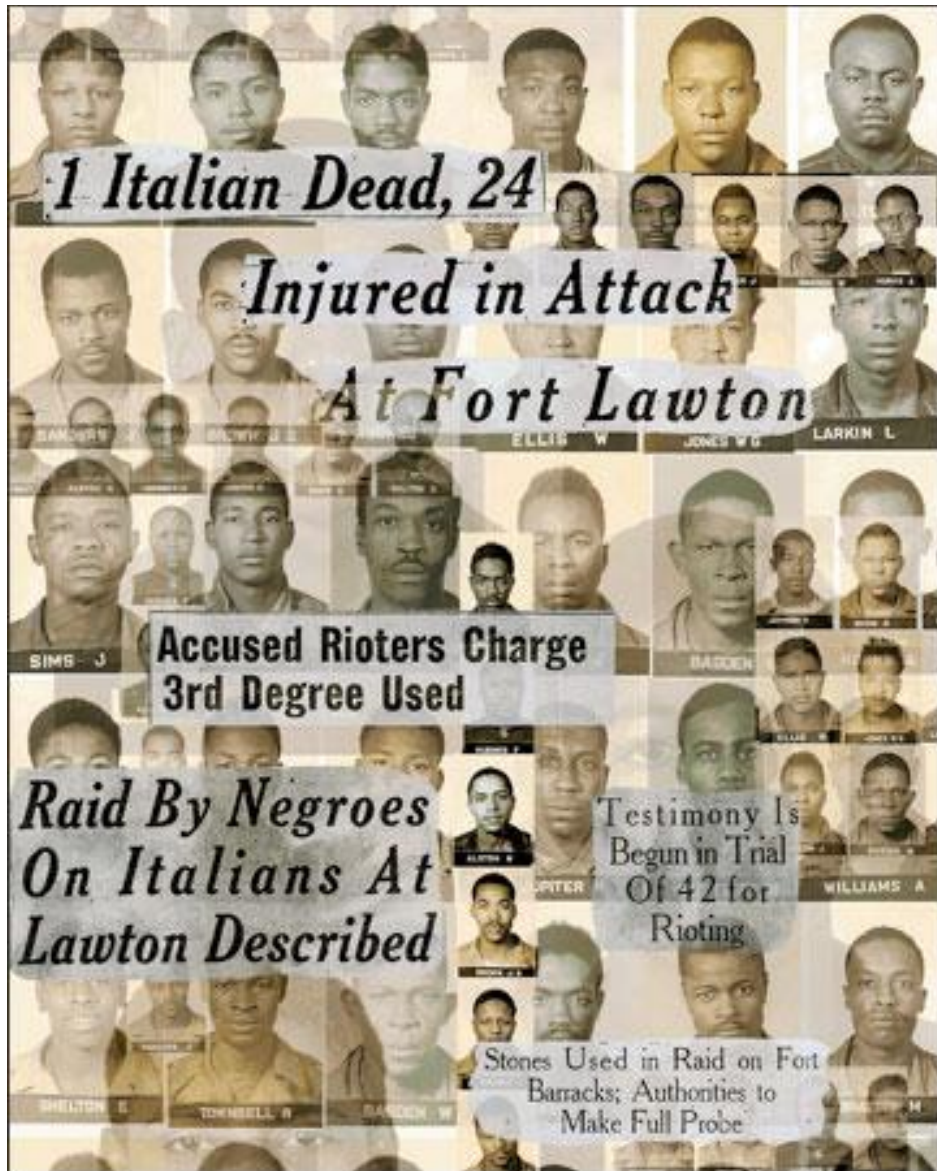
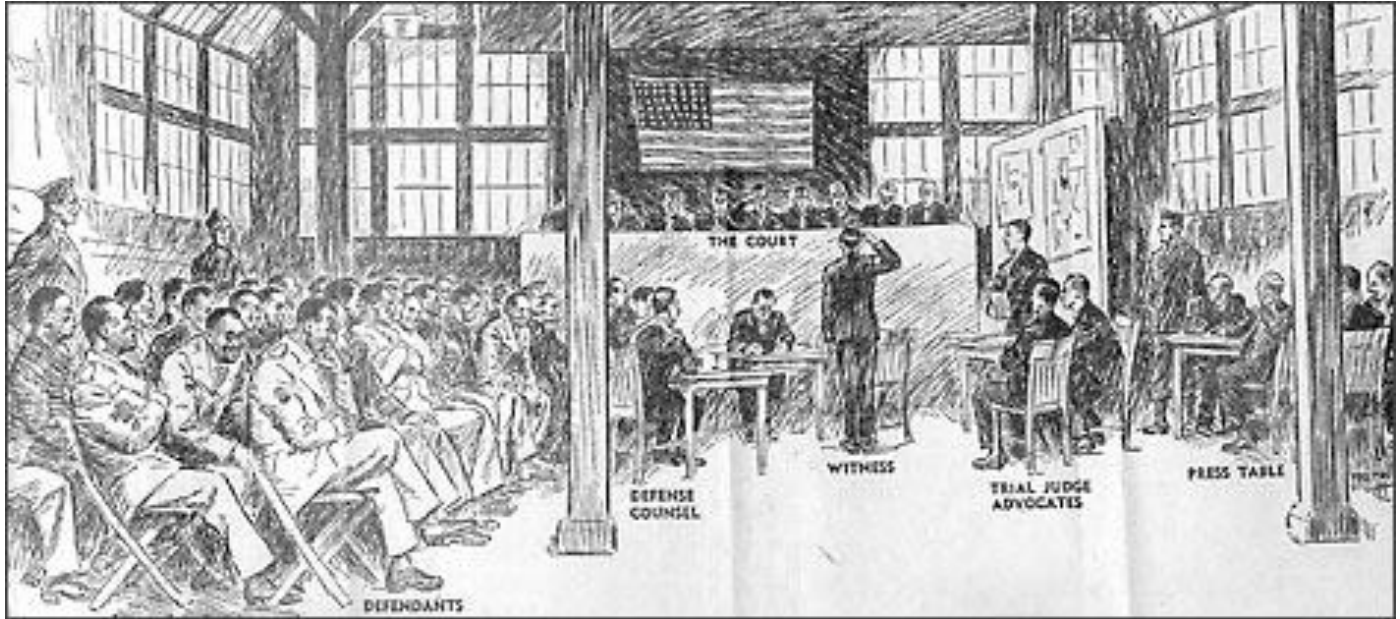


PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY JEN MYSTKOWSKI/PHOTOS COURTESY OF U.S. ARMY JUDICIARY



This sketch of the Fort Lawton soldiers' courts-martial ran on Nov. 28, 1944, in the Seattle Post-Intelligencer. Forty-three black soldiers were to stand trial but charges against one were dismissed at the outset of the proceedings.

Lastly, as Hamann writes, “Did it make sense that black men -- the traditional victims of vigilante hangings -- would, for the first time in American history, be the perpetrators of a mob lynching?”

None of Cooke’s findings deterred prosecutor Jaworski. The Army had suffered an international black eye at Fort Lawton and bringing perpetrators to “justice” was imperative as quickly as possible. Nor did Jaworski allow the two defense attorneys representing the accused black soldiers to have access to Cooke’s classified report, in effect crippling their harried efforts to understand what had happened and defend their clients.

The court-martial became even more of a miscarriage of justice since the case was being decided by a panel of nine white officers who had the right to ask important questions throughout the proceedings, but seldom did. Under such circumstances, the defense attorneys considered it a victory of sorts that none of three murder defendants was given the death penalty. Two of the three were found guilty of manslaughter, with their lengthy sentences of years at “hard time” later commuted by a now-unknown party.

Hamann’s own review of the evidence led him to believe that the

three charged with murder should all have been acquitted since there was absolutely no testimony or physical evidence linking them to Olivotto’s hanging (the murder scene had been trampled and the rope itself had been lost). And Hamann became convinced that, of the 28 men convicted of various charges in the case, at least 12 should not have been convicted at all.

“It was a scapegoat verdict made easier by the fact that the scapegoats didn’t have a constituency to back them,” Hamann says. “The Army was really desperate to show the world it could get a verdict and it was easier when the defendants were black. These guys could not fight back.”

Hamann’s diligent research had its obsessive moments, perhaps in part because he came to realize his award-winning, one-hour documentary on the case for KING in 1987 had hewed to the official story line, despite convincing face-to-face interviews with some of the black defendants that left him troubled.

For the book, the journalist was not able to prove who killed Olivotto, as he had hoped to do, but his strong belief is that the racist Lomax killed the POW, perhaps after offering him refuge from the rioting in his Jeep. Lomax, Hamann believes, correctly

figured that the rioting blacks would be blamed for the murder.

Solving Olivotto’s murder appears to be one of the few research goals that eluded Hamann and his wife.

Hamann even spent the entire nighttime hours on two successive Aug. 14th’s at the site of now-removed Italian barracks, just to be absolutely certain that he captured the look and feel of the place, from the flora and fauna to the interplay of the darkness and the moonlight.

“It was very creepy,” Hamann remembers. “When I was out there, I tried to imagine falling asleep on that night in August and being awakened by all the noise. So I tried to do that, too, imagined being an Italian falling asleep there amid the weird sounds of the night.

“And the next morning, at 4 a.m. when you can hear every footstep, when there is a deep silence, I could feel something whoosh right past my head within arm’s length. It was an owl and every hair on my neck rose. Everything came alive then, just as it must have for those Italians.”

P-I book critic John Marshall can be reached at 206-448-8170 or johnmarshall@seattlepi.com.