

PORTRAITS: Jack Hamann opens the prison of our past

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In the mid-1980s, Seattle television reporter Jack Hamann was assigned to cover the sewage-plant extension at Discovery Park. The story was a bore, but it led him to learn about the 1944 riot between black soldiers and Italian prisoners of war at Fort Lawton on the park site. Dozens were wounded, and an Italian was lynched in the melee. Hamann produced a documentary for KING-TV on the incident and noodled with the idea of a book for a decade or so, getting serious about four years ago. This spring, North Carolina-based Algonquin Books published "On American Soil," Hamann's account of the death of Private Guglielmo Olivotto, whose murder remains unsolved, and the massive court-martial it launched.

Q: What research was most helpful?

A: The most helpful was someone who had been in touch with me over the years and hinted that there was some other report out there, and he encouraged me to ask about it. That was the biggest point of the research, finally finding out that an Army general had come here and conducted extensive interviews and issued a fairly scathing report, which changed the whole way I perceived the entire proceedings.

Q: Did you encounter any dead ends?

A: The hard and saddest part of dealing with any research around Fort Lawton is that most military installations have a very strict protocol about maintaining historical records and documents. Fort Lawton has this unfortunate history of being a white elephant. When the war ended, thousands and thousands of records were just shoved into boxes.

Q: The premise of the book is that justice was not served. For whom was justice not served, the black defendants or the Italian victim whose death went unpunished?

A: Primarily the black defendants. There are some defendants who did not get as severe a penalty as things might have warranted. But there were many others who were nothing but peacekeepers. For the three men charged with murder, none of them was responsible for Olivotto's death, in my view.

Q: You don't mention Iraq and Afghanistan in the book, but the promotional material does. What are the connections between Fort Lawton and what happened in Iraq?

A: I'm intrigued by the visceral reaction many Americans had to the allegations of American treatment of prisoners in Iraq. We ignore a lot of atrocity, but we have very strong opinions about the way prisoners are treated by American soldiers. Here (at Fort Lawton) was an example of the way Americans had treated their prisoners, and it's as good as I think we had hoped they would be treated. I didn't know how wonderfully these guys had been treated.

