

Nicole Brodeur Italian POW and rumors put to rest



The Italian soldiers being held at Fort Lawton in 1944 were treated well.

They were allowed to go out, drink and date. American girls used to swoon that they could dance and cook and had hair that smelled of lilacs.

But Pvt. Guglielmo Olivotto couldn't have been one of them. He was shy and slight and a devout Catholic who likely didn't stray far from base.

And yet, he was the one who died, who was lynched that night in August 1944 after an on-base riot between African-American and Italian soldiers.

His death — and the court-martial of 28 African-American soldiers accused of the murder — was the basis for 2005's "On American Soil" by Jack Hamann. The book blew open the case and showed that it wasn't the African-American soldiers who killed Olivotto, but likely a white Army policeman.

Some healing will happen this week, when the court-martialed soldiers are honored in a series of events including an honorable-discharge ceremony at Discovery Park.

And a single soul will be finally, properly put to rest Thursday when Seattle University President Stephen V. Sundborg conducts an Italian Mass in Olivotto's honor.

The Mass will be at 7:30 p.m. Thursday at the school's Chapel of St. Ignatius.

"There's something undone; Olivotto is the lost person in the story," Sundborg said.

The idea for the Mass came from Father Thomas Murphy, SU's history chair, who believes in reconciling past wrongs.

"This episode at Fort Lawton cried out for it," Murphy said.

He believes in life after death, he said, "And as a Catholic I see the Mass as a celebration of the promise of that gift, not only for [Olivotto], but for the falsely accused who lost so much of their earthly lives because of this incident."

Sundborg's parents once lived in Magnolia, and he used to walk to Discovery Park, unaware of what happened there until he read Hamann's book.

It stirred something in him. Sundborg had spent eight years in Italy as part of his Jesuit training, so he could relate to Olivotto as a young man far from home, and one who knows and loves Italy.

"My Italian is very rusty, but I have this identification," Sundborg said. "It must have been a strange experience to be dropped out of your culture."

Sundborg has spent these past few weeks refreshing his Italian, borrowing Italian missals from Our Lady of Mount Virgin Church in Rainier Valley, and reading up on Olivotto, whom Hamann described as "the runt of the litter."

He had come from a village in Northern Italy, left there as a teenager and worked in France until Hitler's forces moved in. He became an unwilling member of Mussolini's army and was shipped to North Africa, where he drove a truck. He was captured by Allied Forces in 1943 and sent to a prisoner-of-war compound in Arizona before joining a service unit in Seattle.

Olivotto was 33 when his body was found at the base of a cliff. His only living relative is a brother, Orneste, who still lives in Nervesa, Italy.

"He was one soldier in a war who suffered a tragic end," Sundborg said. "And he should not be forgotten."

Nicole Brodeur's column appears Tuesday and Friday. Reach her at 206-464-2334 or nbrodeur@seattletimes.com.

She will be sitting in the back.