

A Staten Island Trombonist Breaks a 64-Year Silence About a Military Race Riot

A violent tale of justice and injustice from America's uglier racial past

BY TONY ORTEGA
The Village Voice

STATEN ISLAND— AS BARACK OBAMA POINTED OUT, matters of race in America can be complicated. He's right, and here's a prime example.

First, the easy version, the post-MLK, new-day-in-America version: A couple of years ago, a Seattle TV journalist noticed an odd monument at a place called Fort Lawton on Puget Sound. Asking around, he learned that the unusual grave was just about all that was left to mark one of the strangest, and most forgotten, episodes in World War II. The monument marked the 1944 death of an Italian POW found hanging from a noose after a night of rioting by black American soldiers at the segregated fort. It was, supposedly, the only time in American history that a black mob had lynched a white (well, Italian) man. More than 40 black soldiers were subsequently tried in the war's largest court-martial, prosecuted by a young Leon Jaworski, who went on to prosecute at Nuremberg and Watergate. Twenty-eight of the Fort Lawton black soldiers were convicted of rioting, and two of the 28 were also convicted of manslaughter in the death of the Italian POW. None served more than four years in custody, but all of the convicted were dishonorably discharged. At the time, the event was terribly embarrassing for the military and the American government. Within a few years, President Truman would integrate the armed forces. For Jaworski, the trial—notorious at the time—put him on the fast track to his later triumphs. But the Seattle journalist, Jack Hamann, suspected that there was more to the story, and he spent years digging into long-buried government documents to discover a much more troubling tale.

What was never in much dispute was that some of the black soldiers stationed at the fort, drinking heavily the night before being shipped out to a possibly very dangerous Pacific location, reacted to a fistfight between one of their own and one of the Italian POWs by swarming the Italians' barracks and beating the living hell out of many of the Italians as well as some white American MPs. Also not in dispute was that the rioters had stabbed unarmed victims with knives and used wooden clubs to break limbs, and that one black soldier drove a Jeep repeatedly over a tent that had men in it. It was probably something of a miracle that more people weren't killed. The dead man, Private Guglielmo Olivotto, was found in another part of the camp at dawn the next morning, hanging from a noose that had been tied to a wire at an obstacle course.

What Hamann uncovered, however, was that right from the start, the MPs and the officers in charge at Fort Lawton handled the case by doing just about everything wrong. Evidence was

destroyed, statements weren't taken when they should have been, and soon it was almost impossible to figure out which of the black soldiers at Fort Lawton had taken part in the beatings and which hadn't.

Hamann discovered that those were the conclusions of Brigadier General Elliot D. Cooke, who was called in after the riot to conduct a thorough (but secret) investigation of the incident. General Cooke found, to his disgust, that the white men in charge at Fort Lawton had completely screwed up the post-riot crime scene. But Cooke's investigation was never made public until Hamann unearthed it decades later. Jaworski had known Cooke's findings, but he kept the investigation secret from the officers who were brought in to defend the black men accused of rioting.

Hamann's subsequent book about the affair, *On American Soil*, thoroughly condemns Jaworski for his



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Sounding a sour note: Anthony DeCesare, in his Staten Island home.

actions: The prosecutor knowingly ignored exculpatory evidence in the secret investigation and relied instead on questionable snitches to convict men whom he should have had reason to believe were innocent.

On American Soil demonstrates that not only was the investigation of the riot botched, but that there was also good reason to suspect that a *white* MP—an unreliable man that Jaworski used as a prosecution witness—had the motive, means, and opportunity to commit the murder of Olivotto. There was no physical evidence, and almost no circumstantial evidence, to tie the two black soldiers convicted of manslaughter to Olivotto's murder.

Now, here's the feel-good payoff: Hamann's book was such a thorough debunking of Jaworski and the court-martial that the military, reacting to howls of protest from family members of the convicted soldiers (nearly all of whom are now dead), ordered last October that the convictions be overturned, and that all of the soldiers receive (mostly posthumous) honorable discharges.

The military reversing itself after more than 60 years. Amazing.

In late January, there was a touching ceremony at the Wisconsin grave of Booker Townsell, one of the men convicted of rioting. There was evidence, suppressed by Jaworski, that Townsell had never even left his barracks the night of the riot. Now, his family was able—more than 23 years after his death—to hold a new ceremony giving Townsell the official military burial that he deserved.

An Associated Press story about Townsell's ceremony, which included a mention of Hamann's book, was carried by newspapers around the country. One of them was the *Staten Island Advance*, a copy of which made its way to a modest home on Arnprior Street.

And that's when the feel-good story gets a little more complicated.

When Anthony DeCesare saw the story in the *Advance*, he says, he nearly became sick to his stomach.

DeCesare says he was at Fort Lawton the night of the riot and can still vividly remember seeing the bloody Italian POWs and American MPs being brought into the hospital where he was receiving treatment for post-concussion symptoms.

DeCesare had kept that memory mostly to himself for 64 years. But then there was the story in the *Advance*, and he says he couldn't believe what he was reading.

DeCesare, you see, is seriously pissed off.

"It's crooked. It's not the story. It's not the truth," he says. "The whole thing stinks."

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NEXT MONTH, TONY DECESARE will turn 93 years old. He lives in a small bedroom that's been turned into both a sickroom and a shrine. For years, he was confined to the second floor of the house, until he finally convinced the VA to install an elevator so he could visit his sister, who lived downstairs—both were too frail to use the stairs and could only shout to each other.

That sister is no longer living, but another, Mary Cadier, 85, has come over as DeCesare receives a visitor. He's sitting in a chair next to his bed, wearing a blue robe over pajamas. In front of him is a folding tray piled with documents of his military career. On the walls of the room are other artifacts of his military experience: the Croix de Guerre citation from a grateful France, a detailed drawing of the Panama Canal, where he served before the war, other medals and letters of gratitude. Also mounted on the wall are two trombones and a baritone horn.

DeCesare's first love was music, and it was part of the reason he joined the military to begin with: to play in a military band. He was born on Staten Island but spent much of his youth in Maine, where his father, an Italian immigrant,

was, of all things, a Protestant minister. DeCesare says that he'd started playing trombone at the age of five; he was 20 years old when he enlisted in 1935, and soon found himself on his way to the Panama Canal with the Fourth Coastal Artillery band.

There, he likes to point out, he played for the Japanese admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, who received an official military welcome to the Canal Zone. "If we had known then what was coming in a couple of years," he says, "believe me, we would have given him a different kind of welcome."

After two years in Panama, DeCesare had picked up a fungal infection that seriously damaged his lungs, permanently ruined his prospects as a trombonist, and convinced him to take an early discharge. But when war broke out in Europe, he re-enlisted and was shipped to England in 1940 on the *Queen Mary*. Again a military musician, he was with the first American troops stationed there since World War I. He still has a British newspaper clipping—yellowed, but laminated—that lauds the "crack band" for marching into town.

After Pearl Harbor, DeCesare was part of the first major American military offensive of the war, the invasion of North Africa. In November 1942, sailing on the *Queen of Bermuda*, he went over the side with the others at a beach in Algeria, climbing down ropes and loaded down with gear. The men were so weighed down with what turned out to be antiquated equipment, DeCesare remembers, that many of them simply drowned before they could get to shore. And then things got worse.

The reflections on their goggles, he says, were providing something for the enemy—both German and Vichy French—

to shoot at. “Guys were getting shot through the head and the eyes—we were greenhorns,” he says. Stuck on the beach, they hunkered down. A big shell, he recalls, landed near him but didn’t explode.

“I didn’t move, or I’d go to kingdom come,” he says.

Eventually, they had to retreat to the ship, landing later at Tunisia. There, he was promoted to technical sergeant and bandmaster—an odd distinction when you’re storming beaches, to be sure, but the title didn’t get him out of doing jobs like digging graves, he points out.

Without a chief warrant officer in his outfit, DeCesare says, disciplining the men of his unit fell on his shoulders. But the last thing he wanted was to send a soldier to a court-martial. When he had to discipline men, he says, he’d have them run around in a square. He didn’t want to be known as a pain in the ass—he didn’t brook wrongdoing, but he tried to be lenient.

Later, riding in Jeeps over mountainous terrain, DeCesare and his men found themselves in an action that became known as the Battle of Kasserine Pass. “We cornered the Germans,” he says. “We thought we had them licked. But General Rommel had his tanks dug into the Atlas Mountains.” Infantryman DeCesare and his troops followed the U.S. tanks into battle.

“We lost,” he says.

He never knew how he was wounded; he just remembers coming to in a British ambulance and being told to relax. “There was a captain with his legs blown off,” he says. DeCesare’s skull was fractured, and he’d suffered a concussion. He can only speculate what happened—a shell exploded near him, he supposes.

Shipped back to the States for a lengthy recovery, he was suffering from brain trauma—like many of the soldiers coming back from Iraq today, he points out. He was sent to a hospital at a post in Virginia and then was moved to Georgia before being sent by train all the way to Fort Lawton, near Seattle. He was only there for a few months before being moved again to a hospital in Spokane, where he was photographed receiving a Purple Heart in October 1944. Two months later, after being sent to another post in West Virginia, he was honorably discharged. He would receive the Bronze Star for his service.

But during his short time at Fort Lawton, in August 1944, one of the most significant episodes in his life occurred. The night of the riot, bloody men were brought into the hospital where he was staying.

“The men were bleeding badly. I couldn’t, you know, tell you exactly what their injuries were. But they were bleeding bad,” he says.

Some were POWs, speaking in Italian about what had happened. Others were white American MPs. And some, DeCesare insists, were Japanese.

The Italians, he says, were saying that they had been attacked in their barracks by black soldiers. Others talked about being attacked at the fort’s obstacle course.

But what struck him more than anything else, the thing that haunted him for 64 years, was what a medical officer said to the men on the ward: “You patients, you haven’t seen anything. Any of you talk, you’re going to get court-martialed.”

DeCesare repeats it again and again, trying to convey how much it struck him at the time and made him keep quiet about the event for so long.

“I swallowed that for 64 years,” he says. “Who’s going to listen to what I have to say, especially when I got a head injury?”

Then, after all that time, suddenly a news story appears in the Staten Island paper saying that it was all a mistake, that the men convicted for the crime were being exonerated. That the military apologizes for the results of the court-martial.

And an old man, who still talks about the “colored” section of the fort, who is Italian-American and couldn’t help but sympathize with the Italians injured in the riot, says about Booker Townsell, a long-dead soldier whom he never met: “He don’t deserve freedom.”

Sure, you don’t even have to say it: DeCesare is just a classic old-school racist, unhappy that “colored” soldiers are getting away with something. It’s an easy diagnosis.

Except that DeCesare’s a bit more complicated than that.

THERE’S ANOTHER YELLOWED news clipping that Tony DeCesare keeps, this one from 1965.

After he was discharged, DeCesare served as a cop for the VA and was finally declared fully disabled in 1954. He couldn’t work in law enforcement anymore, but he could still read and write music, and he was still an avid churchgoer, something he got from his dad.

He wanted, more than anything else, to help young people make music. But he hated how much young people were kept apart by their different affiliations.

In 1965, the *Staten Island Advance* reported that DeCesare had formed the Summerfield Inter-Faith Orchestra.

“What does music have to do with brotherhood?” the article asked. “Anthony DeCesare says it has a lot to do with bringing people together.”

The article describes DeCesare’s efforts to bring together young musicians from different faiths: “We Protestants have been holding back . . . We’ve been ignoring the ecumenical spirit.”

There’s a photograph showing DeCesare leading six musicians. A trombone player. A violinist. A percussionist. A sax player. A pianist. A baritone horn.

Three of the musicians are black. In 1965. In Staten Island.

“I started the Inter-Faith Orchestra in 1965 to bust up this racial, religious discrimination,” he says. Heatedly, he points out that some Catholic priests prevented their parishioners from taking part.

How does that square with his anger about the Fort Lawton decision, which surely must have something to do with the race of the men who are now being exonerated?

“This is about the incident,” he replies, “not the race of who caused it.”

To make his point, he compares the Fort Lawton situation with Abu Ghraib. He’s convinced that although low-level soldiers took the heat for what happened at the Baghdad prison, their superior officers should also have been held accountable. At Fort Lawton, he says, not all of the black soldiers took part in the beatings, but nearly the entire black barracks emptied out in response to the rallying cry for the riot, as Hamann’s book shows. “The whole unit is guilty,” says DeCesare. “There’s the problem. . . . I felt really bad. I was in that hospital and saw that. ‘Keep your mouth shut or you’ll get court-martialed.’”

As for the men who were convicted on tainted evidence, he says: “I feel sorry for what happened. If they can prove they didn’t take part, that’s fine with me. It’s not my intention to hurt anybody. It’s to tell the truth.”

JACK HAMANN SAYS that he doesn’t doubt DeCesare’s assertion that he was at Fort Lawton’s hospital, but he points out that in talking with the few other witnesses who are still alive, he’s found that their memories are often very different from what they said to investigators decades ago. Records at Fort Lawton, for example, indicate that there were never any Japanese POWs held at the Seattle fort. And there was no testimony about Italian soldiers also being attacked at the obstacle course, despite what DeCesare says he remembers the Italian POWs saying.

DeCesare’s memory, those records suggest, is simply faulty about those details. He doesn’t take kindly to that suggestion, however.

But even with those discrepancies, Hamann says it’s interesting to consider the Italian-American perspective on the Army’s about-face, even if some of it is predictable.

“I, too, have run across a couple of pissed off Italian-Americans (none of which, as far as I know, have read the book),” Hamann writes to the *Voice* in an e-mail. “Their spin: why are these damn blacks getting all the attention, when it was Italians who were beaten and lynched?”

“I’ve met several Italian-Americans who, in a we-are-all-brothers sort of way, seem glad that someone was convicted of the Fort Lawton crimes—perhaps even glad that black men were convicted.”

Of course, that perspective misses the point: Despite the convictions, justice was not served in 1944. “The truth is, Jaworski screwed both the black soldiers and the Italians,” Hamann says.

He’s right. And what his investigation has achieved is remarkable. The anger of a 92-year-old Staten Island man can’t really take away from it.

But it’s also easy to understand DeCesare’s frustration. From a 64-year remove, it’s not difficult to condemn the flawed justice meted out to black soldiers—men who were already suffering the indignities of a segregated military—for a long-forgotten criminal incident. But for the man—perhaps the only person still alive today—who saw the victims of that crime being treated for their injuries, the military’s decision to sweep the whole mess aside by overturning the court-martial verdicts en masse provides little sense of justice having been served either.

After the *Voice* first exchanged e-mails with Hamann about DeCesare, the author mentioned the Staten Island man in a lecture at Seattle University, a Jesuit institution. Hamann says that it prompted one of the professors there to approach him about conducting a public mass for Olivotto as a way to reach out to the local Italian-American community.

DeCesare, the professor pointed out, might not be the only one sensitive to the way the story of the military’s about-face was being reported. “I thought it was a great idea,” Hamann says.

In the end, the most striking thing about talking to DeCesare—even knowing that he’s messing up the program, our necessary national mea culpa after centuries of being on the wrong side of so many things—is to see how a single night’s episode can be the most passionately remembered thing in a life nearly a century long. When asked about his experiences in the decades since—what were the ‘60s like? The ‘80s?—DeCesare mostly draws a blank. It has to be drawn out of him that he was married and divorced, and has a daughter with whom he is now closer than he was in the past. His sister says Anthony spent much of his time helping older relatives. And he did continue to write music; he wrote and arranged a march in 2003 to commemorate the soldiers going to Iraq. But except for those details, which feel like asides, he comes back again and again to that night in 1944 and that portentous command: Hold your tongue or be court-martialed.

What a thing to carry around for 64 years.

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