

Corsicans remember Americans of World War II

Source: <http://www.iht.com/articles/2008/06/10/europe/journal.php>



A B-25 Mitchell approaching the airstrip at Serraggia, Corsica, in December 1944. (John Sutay/57th Bomb Wing Association)

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Published: June 10, 2008

SOLENZARA, Corsica: So many U.S. planes and airmen were stationed on this French Mediterranean island during World War II that they called it the USS Corsica - an unsinkable aircraft carrier. Up and down its flat eastern shore stretched a string of 14 airfields, the jumping-off points for B-25 bombers and P-47 fighters that attacked German lines throughout Italy, southern France and Austria.

More than 50,000 U.S. pilots, mechanics, nurses, doctors, cooks, truck drivers and others passed through Corsica after it was taken from its German occupiers in late 1943.

They are long gone, of course, and most of the airfields are, too, though a French air force base now sits on the site of one of them, outside this coastal town.

But six decades later, memories of them linger. Colonel Denis Charlot, who commands the 920 French Air Force personnel at Solenzara, shows a visitor a neatly folded U.S. flag that the family of Edward Mogren, a Chicago native and B-25 pilot, presented to him during a visit last year. Mogren, who served with the 57th Bomb Wing on Corsica, died in 2003 at 82, and the flag was draped over his coffin.

Charlot, 54, a former fighter pilot, keeps copies of a book, "USS Corsica," on hand to give to visitors. "For us, it's a great visiting card," he said.

The book, which was published in 2003, is the work of Dominique Taddei, a retired Air France flight attendant and amateur historian. Taddei, who lived near the bomb wing's headquarters as a child, said he took up the research to fill the vacuum that came with retirement. But the work also arose from a personal passion.

"Something drove me," said Taddei, 69. "Who were these people?"

To find out, he traveled the United States, contacting veterans' organizations. What emerged was a lavish collection of letters, diary excerpts and photos by Americans who served in Corsica during the war. A book of memories.

But local Corsicans also remember. Toussaint Cesari was a 14-year-old living in the nearby village of Solaro when the Americans arrived in early 1944, looking for wood to repair the bridges that German troops had destroyed before fleeing the island.

"It took us more than a day to load a truck with lumber," said Cesari, now 79, who later worked in a U.S. field kitchen. "With their equipment, it took less than an hour."

"The amount of work they did in three weeks was unbelievable," said Cesari, a retired customs official. "With their bulldozers, they cleared the brush and put down mats to serve as landing strips."

In the spring of 1945, they departed as hurriedly as they came, moving their bases to Italy. On their disused airfields, Cesari said, the Americans left a marvelous collection of scrap. "There were bombs and bands of bullets, GMC trucks in pieces, motors and transmissions," he said. "There were hundreds of tents, enough to cover all Corsica, parts of planes and matériel of every kind. For three days it was left there, but then the French police came and put it off limits." He added: "I loved the Americans. They were extremely polite."

But he saw other sides of them, as well - when, for instance, they occasionally visited his family's café for a glass of home-distilled eau de vie.

"Once, some got drunk and were riding on our donkeys, hollering, 'I'm a cowboy,'" he said with a laugh. "Then there was a fight, which was broken up when the MPs arrived."

Julie Raffali was in her early teens when the Americans arrived to requisition her mother's 30-room hotel, the Phoenix, as a rest home for pilots.

"My mother and aunt cooked for them," said Raffali, who now owns a hotel in nearby Bastia. "The airmen were very young; my mother and aunt treated them like their children."

Much of the food, supplied by the Americans, was new to them: powdered eggs, powdered milk, wheat flour (the Corsicans used chestnut flour), canned fruit and canned meats.

"Mother baked the airmen cakes, and they said they never tasted anything so good," she said, adding, "It was a time with moments of happiness."

But there was tragedy, too.

"The airmen would say, 'At such and such an hour we'll be passing by,'" Raffali said. "And we looked, and if there were six bombers going out and only three returned - well, you lived their life intensely. So we spoiled them. We had affection for them."

Cesari said that "the unhappiest time of day was when they flew out, twice a day, in the morning and afternoon. And when you saw the personnel that gathered their belongings and clothing on their beds, that meant they were not coming back." He paused, then added: "That is something that has remained with me. It was so sad."

Raffali, asked whether she had ever fallen in love with an airman, hesitated, then replied that girls in the 1940s matured more slowly than today.

"There was one, however, a Lieutenant Duncan, who was tall, had large blue eyes - that was very American," she said. "The day they left, I was at a window - I have this memory. I suppose I was in love."

The Americans "opened our spirits; we made a great leap forward," Raffali said. "When they left, there was a great sadness, an enormous vacuum, an emotional vacuum."