

Author John Lanza brings his "Shot Down Over Italy" to AF Village West

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By Bonnie Russell
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AF Villagers had a 4th of July treat when John Lanza, the New Jersey author of "Shot Down Over Italy" interrupted his La Jolla vacation to speak to an appreciative crowd at AF Village West about Americans protected by partisans after their plane was shot down in World War II.

Bill Lanza and Alfred Todd evaded capture because Italian partisans came to their quick assistance after the two parachuted out of their crippled B25 in Central Italy.

Lanza noted the partisans first hid the airmen then exchanged their uniforms for civilian clothes. A white shirt and Oxford gray suit. This embodied the real meaning of "dress for success" - avoiding the enemy. The uniforms were quickly burned. They were far too dangerous to have around. Then the partisan leader ordered a cave be built near the top of a nearby hill for the two men.



Book signing at the resort style,
AF Village West

Lanza and Todd's new home cave was 15' long, 6' deep and 10' wide; and it seemed everyone in town knew the two airmen were there *except* German soldiers stationed near by. Not only did the partisans bring the Americans food on a daily basis, fake work papers were provided for Lanza, who spoke Italian. Once a man from the little community stayed overnight just to keep them company.

The men also watched the war advance nightly from their in-ground perch. It seemed so many people visited the airmen, in all likelihood a path might have been worn that would lead directly to them. Yet the men remained undiscovered, and the town's best kept secret.

Friendly fire

Being in enemy territory, Lanza and Todd also had to worry about friendly fire. Specifically, the British imported, Gurhka Indians who were also in the woods nearby. The Gurhka's were fierce and deadly silent. Their expertise was creeping behind enemy lines, slipping into trenches, and silently beheading sleeping German soldiers. This is why the Germans often sprayed the hill top area with gunfire.

May and June weren't so bad, but everything changed in July.

The Gustav Line fell in July and daily life became much more dangerous. German soldiers began rounding up scores of people, including women and children, then executed them in public. As sound travels up, Lanza and Todd could hear their screams.

When the screaming stopped the remaining townspeople were ordered to bury the victims in mass graves. Still, the town did not give up the airmen.

"Shot Down Over Italy" is not just an exciting read although it is that. (For a heart-stopping excerpt of what was like to jump out of a crippled B25, [click here](#)). But it is also incredibly researched.

Lanza didn't opt to contain his research his uncle, the crew, and the event. There's also a riff on the invention of parachutes and how a family cat helped the inventor. After 46 pages of "notes" prepared by Lanza, before writing, these unexpected nuggets were a delight.

Lee Russell, another pilot shot down in Italy, but who wasn't able to evade the enemy as his parachute glided down almost directly in front of a German jeep, commented after listening to Lanza,

"Shot Down is *incredibly* researched. I was on some of the marches John described in the book. We didn't know where we were going at the time, and I never checked later, but Lanza did."

For those who wonder what it would be like to live in a cave cresting the edge of danger in a beautiful part of the world, protected by a town full of thoughtful people also under siege, some who lost all during World War II; look no more. The best account is "Shot Down Over Italy."

Also, it turns out while those at AFVW appreciated Lanza dropping by, Lanza got a kick out of meeting some of the men featured in the book. He later emailed,

I cannot imagine a better place for a person to retire than AFVW. It's like visiting a resort. The facility is beautiful, as is the adjacent golf course. It's near an airport that appreciates classic warbirds, and even hosts an annual air show that features them. You know the place is special when you see the logos of the different military services over the front entrance.

A good read, and time was had by all.

<http://www.examiner.com/article/author-john-lanza-brings-his-shot-down-over-italy-to-af-village-west>
(link no longer active)