

# ALTRE VOICI

O T H E R V O I C E S

May / June 2005

Volume 24 no. 3

NEWSLETTER OF THE ITALIAN CULTURAL SOCIETY

## In Defense of Our Country

Italian Americans have served our country in times of peace and war. They have a proud history of military service. Countless Italian Americans have distinguished themselves by their bravery but their contributions have been overlooked by historians.

Italians have fought in every major American conflict. During the Revolutionary War, three regiments from Italy totaling 1,500 men assisted the Colonists. Hundreds of Americans of Italian descent also served in the Revolutionary War. In New York State, 49 members of the Fonda family alone served in the Revolutionary War. Of the first five warships commissioned by the Continental Congress, three were named after famous Italian seamen: Christopher Columbus, John Cabot (Giovanni Caboto) and Andrea Doria. In 1805, Thomas Jefferson recruited fourteen musicians from Italy to form the first United States Marine Band.

During the Civil War, more than 200 officers in the Union and Confederate armies were Italian American. The ranks of the Union Army included four Italian American generals, including Brigadier General Luigi Palma Di Cesnola. Civil War hero di Cesnola, an Italian immigrant who arrived at age 26, was the first Italian American to receive the Medal of Honor. He later became the first Director of the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art.

In World War I, an estimated 400,000 Italian Americans served in the war effort. While Italian Americans constituted about 4% of the United States population at the time, 10% of the casualties were Italian. Despite proving their loyalty to the United States in war, Congress passed restrictive immigration laws to limit Italian immigration three years later. They were not repealed until 1965.

Italian Americans made an enormous contribution to the winning of World War II. More than one million Italian Americans, an estimated 10% of the armed forces, comprised the largest ethnic group in the American military.

In December 1941, at the outbreak of World War II, Italians were the largest European born immigrant group in the United States. The millions of children born to this generation of immigrants and to native Italian Americans provided large numbers of Italian American men and women for the war effort. During the early days of the wartime hysteria when there was talk of interning all the Italian Americans in the United States because Italy was on the other side of the fight, President Roosevelt decided against it when he was informed that over 10% of the armed forces were Italian American.

Still, some 700,000 Italian immigrants - all legal residents of the United States - were restricted during the war on the home-front while their children and grandchildren won the war. Hundreds of others were interned. In one California town, the government saluted nine Italian mothers, each of whom had four sons in the US armed forces. Seven of these mothers were not American citizens and were restricted so they could not even visit their sons before they were sent overseas. Even Joe Di Maggio's father, who had been in the United States for 30 years but had not become a citizen, was not permitted to visit his famous sons restaurant on Fisherman's Wharf because of the wartime restrictions.

Tens of thousands of Italian Americans died for their country during the war. In Newark New Jersey, the local newspaper reported that about 65% of the soldiers from there were Italian American. In Boston's Little Italy, "the North End," hundreds of black metal memorial signs were placed above regular street signs, indicating a neighborhood son killed in action. In Occidental, California, 90 percent of those killed in action were of Italian ancestry. This loss was repeated in Italian neighborhoods across the country.

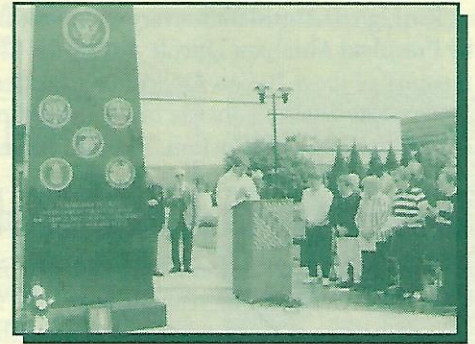
The war produced a galaxy of Italian American hero's. Rosie Bonavita became the symbol for nearly three million American women working in factories and shipyards during World War II. She is better known as "Rosie the Riveter."

In the Pacific, Marine sergeant John Basilone, the son of an Italian immigrant tailor, emerged as one of the first Italian Americans to be commended for military valor and the first enlisted man to receive the Medal of Honor during the war. Basilone was the only man in US history to win the country's two highest honors - the Navy Cross and the Medal of Honor. General Douglas MacArthur described him as "a one man army," when he took on an entire Japanese regiment with his machine gun for three days and nights on Guadalcanal in October, 1942. He returned home a hero and raised more than \$1 million in war bonds but volunteered for the Navy and returned to the Pacific theater. Basilone died during the battle of Iwo Jima in 1945 at age 29. The US Postal Service is set to issue a stamp in his honor in November 2005.

Captain Dominic Salvatore Gentile never received the Medal of Honor but he did receive 26 medals including our country's second highest award, the Distinguished Service Cross - twice. At the height of World War II, General Dwight Eisenhower referred to Captain Gentile as "a one man air force," for downing 30 enemy aircraft in 1944 which made him the highest scoring fighter pilot in American history and earned him the title "Ace of Aces."

In Chicago, the local Italian American War Veterans Post has established a museum exhibit at the Italian Cultural Center there dedicated to the Italian American war veterans of World War II. One of the only monuments to Italian American war veterans is located at the Italian Cultural Center in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The 10 foot high jet black granite monument features the emblems of each of the five branches of the military and is dedicated to the memory of Italian Americans who served our country in time of war.

The Italian American participation in American military history deserves to be hailed and known.



*Italian American War Veterans Memorial in Milwaukee, Wisconsin*