

Poggiorsini

by

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Poggiorsini. Is that name tucked away somewhere in the back of your mind? It probably is if you served with the 460th Bomb Group in Italy during World War II.

On the high ground, about three quarters of a mile southeast of the Spinazzola Army Air base there was a small, rural village -- its name was Poggiorsini. It could boast of no outstanding place in history, but it was to become a tiny part of the 460th Bomb Group's memories of Italy. In 1944/45, the most recognizable features of this tiny village were the water tower on the northern edge of town, and Santa Maria Addolorata, the village church, both towering above the small homes and shops. This small community, with its friendly people was quite harmless, but it was declared "off limits" to American troops. It, like many other towns and villages, embraced communism. Even though it was "off limits," this did not prevent those with an adventurous spirit from going there for a number of reasons.

When the 460th became operational, there were several British anti-aircraft sites guarding the base, one was located near the Poggiorsini cemetery. It was a short walk from the camp area to share tea, biscuits and conversation with the "Brits." American GIs have always been known for their generous and friendly nature, and the desire to help those less fortunate. During the war years, citizens of Poggiorsini struggled to survive, and, recognizing this, some members of the 460th made an effort to improve their quality of life. Unknown quantities of clothing, food, soap and other items, including parachutes, made their way to this village in 1944/45. Many friendships were made, and it is probable that, for years after the war, a number of young Italian brides were wed wearing "Pioneer Parachute" wedding gowns!

This small and ancient village has an interesting history, its existence being documented as far back as the twelfth century. Located near the road Via Appia which carried pilgrims and crusaders on their way to the Holy Land, it may have been the first "toll road." Travelers who wished to use it were charged a fee. Some refused to pay the toll, preferring to use a road called "Trotter dei pezzenti," or "Beggars' sheep track," a name that goes back to the first crusades. On this "track," near Poggiorsini there was a farm named La Capoposta, it served as a place where weary travelers and their horses could rest and obtain food. This farm still exists, known today as Il Cardinale.

The countryside around Poggiorsini is ideal for the growth of grain, pasture for sheep, grape vineyards and olive groves. Over fifty species of orchids are to be found, along with many other varieties of wild flowers. Those of the 460th, who were there in the early months of 1944, will remember the sea of mud that had to be dealt with daily as the snow melted and the rains came. One thing, probably not remembered nor known, is that the water supply for the 460th came from an ancient well, the D'ogna Fontana, which

is located about a quarter mile east of the Group headquarters building. Its existence was recorded as far back as the early fourteenth century

The earliest recorded name for the little village of Poggiorsini was Mount Folicato," later it became Macchiavetrana, and finally Poggiorsini, which in Italian means "orsini hill." This name came into being around 1609, when the village and the area around it were purchased by the Orsini family from the Giaquinto family. Soon after the purchase, the Duca Michele Orsini constructed a country house there. This served to stimulate the building of other dwellings for laborers and sheep herders in the nearby area. The period between 1723 and 1726 saw the construction of another Orsini country home and Ducal Palace. At the same time, foundations were put down for a parochial church, Santa Maria Addolorata. It served the community for hundreds of years, but on 23 July 1930 an earthquake of 6.7 magnitude, named Vulture, severely damaged the village and the church, although the church survived. Since that time there have been various efforts to restore it, but today it is in a state of abandonment.

Poggiorsini remained the private property of the Orsini's until 1910, at which time it came under the administration of Gravina. The palace was then used to house an elementary school and the local police barracks, and it served as the residence of the municipal doctor. The 1930 Vulture earthquake so damaged the building, that it was demolished in 1934. In 1957 Poggiorsini gained its autonomy. This delightful small commune of 1500 inhabitants is located on a 460 meter high hill. It is no longer the little rural village of 1944/45; today, its tree lined main street is bordered by shops, and surrounded by multistoried apartments and individual homes. A small park, situated on the southern edge of the town, provides a panorama of the deep valley to the south.

While Poggiorsini may not be remembered by many of the 460th Bomb Group--it remembers the 460th. On each of the past 460th visits to the Lorusso farm where the Group was based, the mayor of this small village shared lunch and memories of the war years with those present. The 460th has not been forgotten.