

Spinazzola

by

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Time plays tricks with the mind, and everyone remembers dates, places and events in different ways. During World War II, there was one small Italian town, among the many to be found in the Puglia region of southern Italy, whose name was indelibly imprinted in the memory of nearly five thousand young men of the 460th Bomb Group (H). Its name was Spinazzola.

Early in 1944, an American air base was constructed on the thousand acre farm of Commendatore Lorusso, about eight miles southeast of Spinazzola, and for the next year and a half it was "home" to those who made up the 460th. The 55th Bomb Wing Headquarters of the Fifteenth Air Force was located in Spinazzola where it shared the Scuola Elemenare Giusppe Mazzini on Corso Umberto with the 323rd Service Center and other support units.

For most members of the 460th, little thought was given to the town itself, or to its history. It was a place to visit while on pass, to enjoy the local food, and for some, to spend time at the 34th General Hospital a mile south of town. Records show that Spinazzola existed as far back as the third century B.C. It was situated along the Roman road known as the Appian Way, which extended from Rome to the port city of Brindisi on the southern Italian coast. Opened in 321 B.C., this road was built to connect Rome with the southern provinces of the peninsula, with Africa and the East. One could travel from Rome to Brindisi in 13/14 days. It is probable that most who served with the 460th Bomb Group (H) were unaware that the narrow, dusty tree lined road that ran along the north side of the 460th air base was so historically significant.

There are two thoughts with regard to how this small rural town got its name. One is that it derives from "To Pinum," or "single pine," later becoming "Espinoso," then "Spinoso," and finally "Spinazzola." Another suggests that "To Pinum" was transformed at some time to "Spinacium Castrum" and then to "Spinazzola." It sits atop the High Murgie plateau which stretches from Altamura, Spinazzola, Minervino Murge and Castel del Monte. It is bordered on the northeast side by a deep ravine, and by relatively flat farmland on the other three sides.

Spinazzola, like all of southern Italy share the cultures, cuisines, and other characteristics of many lands. Through thousands of years, this area of Italy was occupied at various times by the Greeks, Normans, Carthaginians, Vandals, Byzantines, Spaniards, the French, and by the Germans and their allies during World War II. Those living there in earlier times and today reflect this past in many ways. By the end of the fifteenth century, Spain and France were the major powers in Europe, both eager to expand their influence. They came together in 1499 to take control of the entire peninsula, but could not agree on how the captured land should be divided. This difference was resolved on 28 April 1503 about twenty miles north of Spinazzola, by what became known as the “Battle of Cerignola.” Spain was the victor, and it is possible that Spinazzola was impacted in some way by this action.

From its humble beginnings as a settlement made up of a few families, Spinazzola has grown with the times to become the vibrant, progressive city that it is today. Still small by most standards, it is a blending of the old and the new. In the central part of the city there are visible signs still of its past, mainly in its churches. Of these, the Cattedrale is believed to go back to the year 300, with major modifications throughout the centuries, mainly in 1600. This Romanesque style church is dedicated to the Apostle Saint Peter. Also, located in the heart of the city is La Chiesa Della SS Annunziata, dating to 1500. In contrast to these earlier churches is the Sanctuary Madonna Del Bosco, located on the site of a vision of the Madonna in the sixteenth century. Sanctuary Madonna Del Bosco was constructed in 1971.

As far back as there is recorded history, there was the need to protect towns and villages from barbaric invasions. It was no different for Spinazzola. In the fifth century, Spinazzola Castle was built. It served the citizens of Spinazzola well, but over time its importance diminished, and eventually the castle was abandoned and finally taken down. Unlike Altamura and other towns in the vicinity, it is not believed that Spinazzola was ever a walled city.

Perhaps Spinazzola’s main claim to fame is the fact that Antonio Pignatelli was born there, on 13 March 1615. He was the son of Fabricius Pignatelli, first Prince of Minervino, and of Porzia Caraffa, daughter of the Duke of Andria. Antonio was an astute student whose future was to be centered in the Catholic Church. From an early age he was determined to enter the order of St. John of Jerusalem in which other members of his family had distinguished themselves. After studies at the Roman College, he began a

long and extraordinary career with the Catholic Church. He was a prelate when twenty years of age and was elevated to Cardinal in 1681. He was elected pope on 12 July 1691, as Innocent XII. He died in Rome on 27 September 1700.

Spinazzola today is not the small rural town that it was in 1944, when the 460th Bomb Group moved into the area. No more is there the sound of four engine bombers overhead, or the roar of military vehicles in the streets. Walking along the Corso Umberto one has a feeling of familiarity. The same buildings are still there, but gone is the shabby appearance of the war years. Old men still gather to discuss the topic of the day, but unlike earlier times, women now play a greater role in all aspects of Spinazzola society. Cell phones can be heard ringing everywhere, and the latest fashions are to be seen. Creaky and smoky old Fiats and horse-drawn vehicles have been replaced by Alfa Romeos, BMWs and Toyotas. The friendly people are still there, but they have become much more sophisticated.

Visiting Spinazzola today is a pleasant experience. The friendly people are still there, the food is good, and there are pleasant accommodations for those wishing to spend a few days enjoying the hospitality of the city. Spinazzola is no more the poor, war ravaged town that it was in 1944/45.

Those who served with the 460th Bomb Group and the other three Groups that made up the 55th Bomb Wing of the Fifteenth Air Force will always remember Spinazzola, each in his own way -- but they will remember.

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