

THE INTERNATIONAL BRIGADERS

-Milton Wolff

A year ago, today, the hills and valleys, the towns and cities of Northern Italy resounded with the victorious shouts of the Italian partisans. Milano had been reconquered and Mussolini hung high by his heels in the main square.

Above the radio station, the fascist flag was hurled to the ground and the red-starred Italian flag of the partisans replaced it. People who remained indoors and those gathered in cafes and public squares cocked their ears. They were waiting for the first words of liberation to come from the Station Milan. All Italy was electrified by those first few words, "Today Milano has been liberated—tomorrow, MADRID!"

Luigi Gallo, commissar of the International Brigades, now known as Luigi Longo, top commander of all the partisan armies of Northern Italy, was speaking not only to the people of Italy but to the people of Spain, as well. And not only Gallo.

The songs of the IB, born and memorized on the battlefields of Spain were carried all around the world and were heard by men everywhere fighting the axis.

Yes, even in Burma. In a bamboo chabola outside of Myitkina a fever-ridden little man sang, "Freiheit" to a group of wounded Chinese soldiers. They understood him because he was singing in Chinese. Dr. Freudman, who eight years ago sang the same song in Spain as he healed our wounded comrades, had never stopped fighting fascism. With ten other doctors he had gone from Spain to China. These eleven doctors, Bear and Jungermann among them, had hoped to reach the Chinese Red Army then locked in a battle with the Japanese and badly in need of medical help. For three years they were kept isolated in a small village in Central China, far away from the fighting fronts. It seemed that Chiang Kaichang disliked these fighting anti-fascists... even then. But in that little village, as they bided their time, they did their work... healing the bodies and the minds of the oppressed peasants.

Later on some of them were able to join the Americans and Chinese in the fighting in Burma. [→]



M. Wolff

Milton Wolff was the last commander of the North American volunteers in Spain. Wolff was born in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, on October 7, 1915. He dropped out of high school and joined the Civilian Conservation Corps, New Deal Program for unemployed youth. After protesting poor treatment of an injured friend, Wolff left the CCC and found work in NYC's Garment District. Around that time he joined the Youth Communist League.

By the time he was 22, he was already in Spain and the ninth commander of the North American volunteers (four of his predecessors had been killed, and four wounded). While in Spain, Wolff became friends with Ernest Hemingway (Hemingway introduced him to Scotch, and Wolff, he once bragged, stole Hemingway's mistress). Robert Capa once snapped a photo of the two of them together in Spain, and that is how Wolff's mother found out he was in combat in Spain. (He had told her he was working a factory job to free up Spanish men to fight).

After returning from Spain, Wolff never gave up the struggle against social and economic injustice: he participated actively in the Civil Rights and Anti-War movements; he donated 20 ambulances to the Nicaraguan government when Reagan was supporting the rebels; helped lead the fight against the US's support of Francoist Spain; and a whole lot more.

[...] When Quisling sold his rotten soul and Norway to Hitler, a man who had fought in Spain made for the high mountains of his country. There he became one of the central figures of the resistance movement. The Nazis were never comfortable in Norway ... or safe. The partisans of Norway played a decisive role in the liberation of their country. The IB'er who played a leading role in the fight against the invaders is now a General in the Norwegian Army.

When the Japanese invaded the Philippines, thousands of men who refused to surrender found refuge and a base for operations in the jungles west of Manila. Among them were certain South Americans who had fought in Spain and had lived in the Philippines. In a very short space of time they had organized the farmers of the hill countries and some of the jungle tribes into an effective guerilla movement. The Japanese were pinned down in Manila and a heavy toll was taken of them every time they dispatched a clean-up party into guerrilla country.

The same story can be told of every country where the plague of fascism struck. The men of Spain were always there and always fighting. Tito and dozens of others in Yugoslavia. Gallo and almost a full company in Italy. A battalion of men in France plus several regiments of Spanish Republicans who fought up and down North Africa, Southern France, to the heart of Paris... and even participated in a commando raid on Norway, Greece, Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria. In Poland their story is legend. There they fought in the underground against terrific odds. Against German and fascist Pole alike. Four Generals and the Chief of Staff of the new Polish Army are men who fought in Spain.

Yes, and in Germany too, miraculously, 400 Germans who had fought in the Thaelmann Brigades managed to keep alive in spite of starvation and torture. And when the Allied Armies approached the straits

Fighting with bare hands they killed or captured their some trooper guards and liberated the prisoners of their concentration camps. When the Allies arrived they found these men— not waiting.. They found them fighting. Now they are the leaders of a free Germany.

The men who fought in Spain kept right on fighting. Sometimes the fighting overtook them as in France.. Sometimes they parachuted into the fight as in Yugoslavia and Italy... and again they went by boat or submarine as in Norway and Greece. Usually they got there by sheer guts and the use of their feet.

Most times they became the hard core around which the resistance movements were built. This was so, not because they had learned the techniques of war in Spain, but because they had learned that the people have within them unlimited resources of strength. The people of Spain had taught the men of the world who came to fight there that they were capable of fighting against all odds when their rights, their liberty and their nationhood were endangered.

Today these men of the IB's have won recognition in most of the countries of Europe. They are held in high esteem by the people and many of them fill important Governmental posts. They are working overtime purging their countries of the last remnants of fascism and at solving the problems created by the ruin of war. But they haven't forgotten Spain.

Since the liberation of Europe (with the exception of Spain) IB conventions have been held in Paris, London, Warsaw and Belgrade. These conventions have given rebirth to the slogan, "Make Madrid the tomb of Fascism". The recent storm of protest that swept Europe when Spanish patriots fell before the guns of Franco's firing squads, speaks eloquently of the work that these men are doing. The closing of the French border and the branding of Franco as a peace outlaw to be brought before the security council has been the result.

There can be no question of our IB'ers resting on their laurels while fascism still exists in Spain... or elsewhere. They and we have shared in our V-E and V-J days ... no wall together, we fight alongside the men and women of Spain for a V-Spain Day... but soon. The next convention of the IB's must take place in MADRID!