



The “Palio di Siena”

by LTC (USAF) Robert Epstein



As we’ve all experienced, throughout the year we receive emails notifying us of upcoming concerts or events which Moral and Welfare has acquired tickets for and will be conducting a lottery to distribute them to the headquarters personnel. I, as most, pick and choose which events sound interesting, apply by walking my application form down to the G1 hallway and never hear anything about the event again. Well as luck had it, I put in for tickets and finally received an email back informing me that I needed to stop by and pick up my tickets...I had won tickets to Il Palio.

About 400 kilometers South of NRDC-ITA and Solbiate Olona lies the beautiful medieval Tuscan city of Siena, famous around the world for its biannual horse races, known as Il Palio. As a matter of fact, the first time

I became aware of Il Palio was from the open scenes of the 2008 James Bond thriller, “Quantum of Solace,” which had Bond chasing an assassin through the middle of the race.

Now, I have been to horse races before, but none since stationed in Italy. Where I call home in the United States, Cincinnati, Ohio is only about an hours drive from the famous Kentucky Derby. This long running race, by American standards, has been run since 1875 and is all about enjoying the beautifully groomed race track and rolling hills of Kentucky, speed, and sipping on Mint Juleps, a cocktail consisting of Kentucky bourbon, mint leaves and sugar syrup served over lots of ice.

This is what I expected to some extent when I won the tickets for Il Palio, another horse race with parties to follow. This was not the case! Il Palio di Siena is more than a simple horse race. It is the culmination of ongoing rivalry and competition between the contrade (neighborhoods) and has been running in the same location, the beautiful shell shaped Piazza del Campo since 1310, or 182 years before Christopher Columbus (or Cristoforo Colombo for my Italian friends) discovered America. I quickly realized I was not just attending a horse race, but rather taking a trip back in time.

The city of Siena is made up of 17 contrade or neighborhoods. These neighborhoods were defined in the middle ages as administrative districts aiding the military companies hired to defend Siena from their enemy Firenze to the North. These contrade each have their own colors and are now defined by a tight family bond under a single flag. Every part of life in Siena is based around the contrada, to include baptisms, deaths, marriages, church holidays, festivals and of course, victory at Il Palio.

Each contrada has to pull together the finances to purchase a horse to compete in Il Palio, but not all 17 get to compete. Before each race, a lottery is held to determine which 10 of the 17 contrada are able to enter a horse to compete. Then the Captain of the contrada needs to determine the contrada’s strategy, either to attempt to win the race or use the neighborhood’s financial resources to make their enemy contrada lose the race. Il Palio is all about bragging rights, but winning is a very expensive undertaking. Some contrade have gone decades without winning as they save for generations to give their contrada the political and financial strength for a victory.

July 2nd, race day, was full of pageantry and excitement. At about 17:00, Piazza del Campo had about 50,000 people gathered inside the piazza and another few thousand in the grandstands or balconies overlooking the track. The entire piazza was shut down to outside traffic by the Carabinieri, and the only way out before the race was over was to be carried out by medical personnel on a stretcher, which we saw a number of times due to the July heat. Each contrada marched through the piazza on



the race track in their traditional medieval costume. They paraded their horse to the crowd while demonstrating their skill at flag-waving. Flag-waving comes from the military tradition, where the flag was the reference point for soldiers and the loss of it could mean defeat. For this reason, the art of flag-waving was a required military skill and each contrada is still "graded" today as they parade through the crowd to see which is best.

After three hours of parades, it was now nearing time for the race. There was a noticeable feeling of exhilaration in the air, as the crowd anticipated how the politics of the contrada would change the outcome of the race. The horses are required to make three circuits of Piazza del Campo to win Il Palio. The horse can win the race without having a jockey on board. Since the jockey rides bareback and the course is very narrow with sharp turns, it is not uncommon for crashes and jockeys to come off their horse. This day would be no different. Multiple crashes occurred and I saw at least two jockeys come off their horses.

The race lasted only 90 seconds but was full of drama as the lead was surrendered by Contrada dell Onda in the last lap to Contrada della Selva. As the horse and jockey crossed the line for the third time, canon fire marked their victory as did a roaring cheer from the Selva fans. This sparked an evening of endless partying and celebrations, which lasted well into the next day as flag wavers and drum corps traversed the streets of Siena. Locals and tourists alike dined in the streets, drank chianti and celebrated another year of this ongoing festival.

For my wife and I, we are very grateful to the Headquarters for providing the opportunity for us to attend this amazing cultural event. I thoroughly think these programs need to continue as they offer insight into our host country's rich history and culture. I would also highly encourage each member of NRDC-ITA to apply for the opportunities the Moral and Welfare office make available for us.

