

TRIBUTE

ANGELA JACKSON . Author

# 'Where's the indignation?'

Milton Wolff, last commander of the Lincoln Battalion in the XV International Brigade, died on January 14 in California

Despite his 92 years, Milton Wolff would bellow, "Where's the indignation?" in his strong Brooklyn accent on hearing of yet another injustice in a world not renowned for fairness, still raging against society's apathy towards oppression. This same sense of indignation had caused him to become involved with left-wing causes as a young man, leading him to Spain in March 1937 where he fought for the Republicans as a volunteer in the International Brigades during the Civil War. After many battles, Wolff became the ninth and last commander of the Lincoln Battalion.

Born on October 8, 1915, Wolff was only 21 when he left New York for Spain. To avoid worrying his mother, he said he was replacing one of the workers in a Barcelona factory who would be going to fight against Franco. She learned the truth on opening a newspaper and seeing a photograph of her son with Ernest Hemingway near the front lines.

Following a terrible retreat from Aragon early in 1938, Wolff spent days wandering through enemy lines before making his escape by swimming the fast-flowing River Ebro. He and other survivors of the XV Brigade regrouped to the north of the river, spending many weeks near the village of Marçà. The dreadful losses suffered by the Brigade meant that the majority of men under his command were now raw Spanish recruits. During this time, Wolff dedicated himself to the preparation and training of the men until the time came to cross the Ebro again on July 25, 1938, beginning the final Republican offensive against the Nationalists.



Top: Milton Wolff, at left, standing behind La Pasionaria in 1938; bottom left: Wolff is thanked by young Spaniards in 2003; bottom right: Wolff with Ernest Benach, president of Catalan Parliament

In mid-September, while the desperate struggle of the Battle of the Ebro was being played out in the Pàndols Mountains, all foreign volunteers of the International Brigades were ordered by the Republican government to leave Spain. However, the hope that this would result in a similar withdrawal of foreign troops from the Nationalist side was in vain. In Barcelona, a crowd of thousands lined the streets for the final emotional farewell to the Brigaders. Wolff remembered dancing with La Pasionaria at a dinner later that day. The invitation card she

signed for him came to light recently among the few possessions he was able to take with him when he left Spain.

On his return to the US, Wolff continued to campaign on behalf of Spanish refugees being held in appalling conditions in the camps in France and joined protests against political prisoners in Franco's prisons. When the the Second World War began, he worked for British Intelligence until the bombing of Pearl Harbour brought the Americans into the war. He was among those classed as "pre-mature anti-fascists" for having taken part

in the war in Spain. Throughout his long life, he continued to fight for the causes in which he believed, helping to send ambulances to Nicaragua in the 1980s and medical aid to a children's orphanage in Cuba.

Milton Wolff has often been portrayed in the role of hero, a figure cast in the mould of Abraham Lincoln, attempting to inspire his men. This ability to bond with his audience and create a positive response was still evident when he returned to Marçà in 2003 at the invitation of the local association, No Jubilem la Memòria. After giving a talk to the packed hall, his cries of "Viva la República" brought the public to their feet for a standing ovation. He also revisited the exact spot near La Torre de Fontaubella where Robert Capa had photographed him in 1938, during the last military parade of the International Brigaders.

His last visit to Catalonia in 2005 was motivated by his wish to pay tribute to the young men who had fought and died under his command. As he stood on the banks of the Ebro during the ceremony, he recalled with great sorrow the soldiers who had lost their lives simply because they didn't know how to swim.

Milton Wolff wrote of his experiences as a soldier in Spain and his coming of age during the Great Depression in the form of two autobiographical novels, *Another Hill* (1994) and *Member of the Working Class* (2005). The third and final part of his trilogy is still to be published.

For more about Milton Wolff, see Dr. Angela Jackson's new book, *At the Margins of Mayhem: Prologue and Epilogue to the Last Great Battle of the Spanish Civil War*, soon to be published in the UK by Warren & Pell.

## FRONT PAGES FROM HISTORY

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### Nottingham Evening News (United Kingdom) Thursday, December 10, 1936

If the monarchy is not a conventional institution, is the monarch entitled to conventional behaviour, like marrying for love as opposed to marrying for duty? Can they lose their temper in a gathering of heads-of-state? Is divorce possible? Is he allowed to fall in love with a divorced foreign woman and other things that we, conventional people, are entitled to do?

These questions were relevant at the end of 1936 when the British monarchy suffered one of its seasonal serious crises. On De-

cember 10, King Edward VIII shook the country, the Empire and the world with the announcement that he would renounce the throne after only 10 months and 21 days in the job. To put it romantically, he abdicated for a love of a woman. And an American, twice divorced woman at that. A certain Mrs Wallis Simpson, "dark, petite, graceful, vivacious and witty, excellent taste in dress", as this newspaper described her.

For a monarch bound to tradition, dating, not to say falling in love with this woman was

very unconventional behaviour. The very conservative Church of England, of which he was the head, put it bluntly in its newspaper: "We feel bound to point out that this grave crisis has arisen from ignoring the widely accepted moral law which is the fundamental basis of all Christian civilization. Anything that undermines the sanctity of family life is calculated ultimately to destroy the rock upon which the structure of the nation is built. We do not hesitate to say that if Parliament and the nation agreed to the King of England



marrying a woman who has already two husbands alive, the British Empire would receive its death sentence."

No wonder the pressure was too much to bear for the King. And in a radio speech he told the nation: "I have found it impossible to carry the heavy burden of

responsibility and to discharge my duties as king as I would wish to do without the help and support of the woman I love."

A weak personality? an unprofessional monarch? a victim of a country trapped by tradition? the triumph of love? Your call.