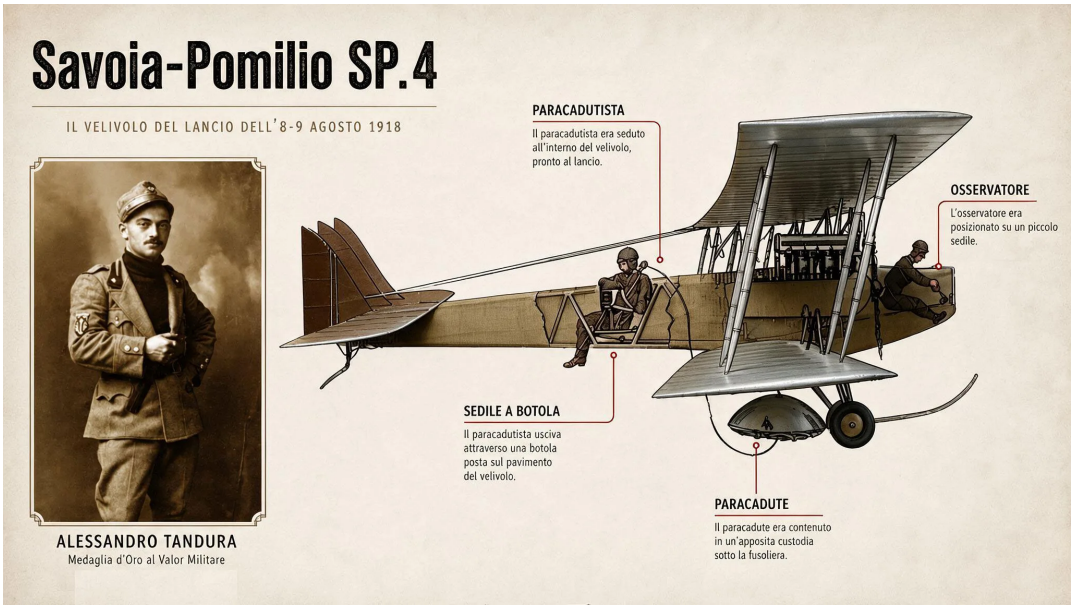

108 years ago the daring Italian Alessandro Tandura, the first paratrooper in history in a war action

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On the night between August 8 and 9, 1918, while the Great War still raged over Europe, a young Italian officer was dropped into the darkness beyond the Austro-Hungarian lines. That night he entered the history of military parachuting.

There were no military parachuting schools as we know them today. There were no established doctrines for infiltrating men from the sky behind enemy lines, typical today of airborne troops and special forces.

There were only an airplane, a rudimentary parachute, an almost desperate mission, and a volunteer willing to attempt it.

That volunteer was **Alessandro Tandura**.

August 1918: beyond the Piave

It is the summer of 1918.

After Caporetto and after the Battle of the Solstice, part of Veneto is still under Austro-Hungarian occupation. On the Piave front, the Italian Army is preparing the decisive phase of the war, which in the autumn will lead to the Battle of Vittorio Veneto.

Information is needed to plan operations.

Troop movements. Deployment of units. Connections. Strength of enemy forces. Everything that can be gathered beyond enemy lines is of enormous value.

The VIII Army is therefore looking for volunteers to infiltrate the occupied territory.

The solution is very daring for the time: **to transport them by plane beyond the front and have them descend by parachute**.

Among the volunteers are **Alessandro Tandura, Pier Arrigo Barnaba, and Ferruccio Nicoloso**.

The Ministry of Defense recalls that they had not received real parachute training. Available was an **English Calthrop parachute**, fragile and non-reusable.

On the night of August 8, 1918, it is Alessandro Tandura's turn.

A man suspended in the dark

Alessandro Tandura is an officer who has already harshly experienced the war.

Volunteer, fighter, wounded on Podgora, later passed through various units and finally in the Arditi, in the summer of 1918 he is assigned to the intelligence activity of the VIII Army.

But nothing he has faced up to that moment can really prepare him for what is about to happen.

He boards a **Savoia-Pomilio SP.4**.

He is not placed inside a modern military fuselage designed for paratrooper drops. According to the Defense reconstruction, Tandura takes a seat on an improvised chair, with his feet in the void, waiting for the moment of the jump.

Below him is occupied Veneto.

It is night.

A storm rages.

The plane loses its course.

Then the moment arrives.

Tandura falls into the darkness.

It is the jump that will consign him to history.

A man who, without ever having flown before and without ever having seen a parachute, is launched beyond enemy lines to carry out an intelligence mission.

The jump is just the beginning

The most extraordinary part of Tandura's story, however, begins after he touches the ground.

The jump does not occur exactly at the planned point.

Tandura buries the parachute, retrieves the material he can carry with him, and begins to move in the territory controlled by the Austro-Hungarians.

His mission is to gather information and transmit it to the Italian command, even through **carrier pigeons**.

He is alone, behind enemy lines, in a region he knows well but transformed by war and occupation.

He must avoid patrols, controls, and betrayals.

He must find reliable people.

He must observe the enemy without being discovered.

And above all, he must create a network.

Tandura progressively manages to gather around him dispersed Italian officers and soldiers, organizing a real clandestine intelligence service.

The official motivation for the **Gold Medal for Military Valor** awarded to him in 1919 recalls how his intelligence service managed to provide a very precious contribution to Italian operations.

Arrested twice. Escaped twice.

His activity does not go unnoticed.

Tandura is arrested.

He manages to escape.

He is arrested a second time.

And escapes again.

On the page dedicated to the honors of Alessandro Tandura, the Quirinale reports in the motivation for the Gold Medal for Military Valor an expression that well conveys the scope of his enterprise: **«three months of legendary audacity»**.

It is not a celebratory formula born a century later, but words contained in the official motivation for the highest Italian decoration for military valor.

Between August and October 1918, Tandura indeed continued his clandestine activity beyond the Austro-Hungarian lines, maintaining informational connections and helping to organize men remaining in the occupied territory.

When the Austro-Hungarian Army finally began to retreat, Tandura did not remain hidden: he moved from clandestine activity to direct action, participating in the events that accompanied the liberation of the Vittoriese.

The motivation for the Gold Medal recalls that he placed himself at the head of the men gathered around him, participating in the uprising and thus helping to facilitate the advance of the Italian troops:

> *Animated by the most ardent love of the Fatherland, he offered to carry out an extremely risky mission: from a flying airplane, he had himself launched with a parachute beyond the enemy lines in invaded Veneto, where, with diligent intelligence and indomitable disdain for*

> *any danger, he gathered nuclei of our dispersed officers and soldiers, and, animating them with his own courage and faith, he constituted with them an intelligence service that proved to be of invaluable aid to the operations. Twice arrested and twice escaped, after three months of legendary audacity, he completed his prudent and fruitful work, boldly placing himself at the head of his bands of rebels and with them rising at the moment when the enemy retreat was outlined, thus facilitating the victorious advance of our troops. A shining example of self-denial, conscious courage, and generous, total dedication of himself to the Fatherland.*
>
> *Piave - Vittorio Veneto, August - October 1918.*

From intelligence to the Battle of Vittorio Veneto

At the end of October, the offensive arrives.

On October 24, 1918, the Battle of Vittorio Veneto begins.

The Austro-Hungarian front progressively collapses.

For Tandura, that name has a particular meaning: Vittorio Veneto is his land.

It is the territory where he was parachuted.

It is the territory where he lived clandestinely.

And it is the territory where he fought an almost invisible war made of information, connections, escapes, and organization of resistance.

A few days later, Austria-Hungary will ask for an armistice.

The Italian war is ending.

But that August night has already opened a new path.

Before the airborne divisions

It is important to understand the historical significance of the enterprise.

Tandura's jump was not an assault drop in the modern sense of the term.

An organic unit destined to conquer an airport, a bridge, or a bridgehead was not launched.

That would come many years later, when in the 1930s several nations would begin to experiment with the systematic use of large parachute units.

Tandura's was instead an **individual infiltration behind enemy lines for a real operational mission**.

And it is precisely this that makes his jump extraordinary.

The parachute, until then considered mainly a rescue tool or aeronautical experiment, became a means to deliberately bring a fighter into enemy-controlled territory.

One of the fundamental concepts that still characterize airborne troops today was born: **arriving from the sky where the enemy does not expect to find men**.

A night that anticipated the future

In 1918, no one could yet imagine the great airborne operations of the Second World War.

Paratrooper divisions did not yet exist.

Large fleets of transport aircraft did not yet exist.

Mass drop techniques did not yet exist.

Yet the principle was already there.

An airplane crosses the front.

A man jumps into the void.

He lands in enemy territory.

And continues the war behind their lines.

It is difficult to find a more powerful image to tell the birth of operational military parachuting.