

Elite Airborne Troops and Special Forces: OMI Honors for General Sganga and Posthumously for General Zanelli

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On **3 November 2026**, in the Salone dei Corazzieri at the Palazzo del Quirinale, President of the Republic **Sergio Mattarella** presided over the ceremony for the presentation of decorations of the **Ordine Militare d'Italia**, awarded on the occasion of National Unity and Armed Forces Day.

Defense Minister **Guido Crosetto**, Senate President Ignazio La Russa, President of the Constitutional Court Giovanni Amoroso, Chief of the Defense Staff General Luciano Antonio Portolano, and numerous civilian and military authorities attended the ceremony.

Among the nine officers honored were two figures particularly representative of the Italian Army's Special Forces and Airborne Troops: **Lieutenant General Nicola Zanelli**, who was posthumously awarded the **Croce di Ufficiale dell'Ordine Militare d'Italia**, and **Lieutenant**

General Rodolfo Sganga, who received the **Croce di Cavaliere**.

Two distinct professional careers, united by extensive operational experience in international theaters, the assumption of major command responsibilities, and contributions to the development of the Army’s operational capabilities.

General Nicola Zanelli: the Croce di Ufficiale in memory of a commando

The posthumous recognition awarded to **Lieutenant General Nicola Zanelli** pays tribute to one of the most representative figures of the Italian Army’s Airborne Troops and Special Forces.

Trained in the ranks of the **9° Battaglione d’Assalto Paracadutisti “Col Moschin”**, Zanelli also gained significant experience in the Airborne Troops, serving as **Company Commander with the 187° Reggimento Paracadutisti “Folgore”** in 1993, during Operation IBIS in Somalia. His career enabled him to acquire an in-depth knowledge of both airborne units and Special Forces, subsequently taking on command positions of increasing responsibility in both components.

During his service, he operated in some of the most complex international theaters, from Somalia to Bosnia-Herzegovina, and from Iraq to Afghanistan, distinguishing himself through his operational and command capabilities in high-risk environments.

His career took him to the highest levels of the Army’s and Defense’s Special Forces, from command of the **9º Reggimento d'Assalto Paracadutisti "Col Moschin" (2006-2008)** to that of **COMFOSE (Comando delle Forze Speciali dell’Esercito 2013-2016) e del COFS (Comando Forze Speciali 2016-2019)**, before subsequently holding major positions within NATO multinational command structures.

His service was also distinguished by his commitment to modernizing equipment and operational capabilities, strengthening international cooperation, and enhancing the Army’s elite units.

The official citation for the decoration recalls his courage, dedication, and strong sense of responsibility, emphasizing that Lieutenant General Zanelli left **«an indelible mark on the units and men who had the honor of serving alongside him»**.

The recognition concerns service in overseas operational theaters between **1991 and 2021**.

The posthumous award of the **Croce di Ufficiale dell'Ordine Militare d'Italia** is a tribute to his professional and personal legacy.

Lieutenant General Nicola Zanelli - Croce di "Ufficiale – alla memoria" dell'Ordine Militare d'Italia

> *A highly distinguished raider General Officer, he served his country with courage and dedication, standing out from the outset with the 9° Battaglione d'Assalto Paracadutisti "Col Moschin" and subsequently rising to important command posts in the Aviotruppe and Forze Speciali. With the utmost skill, he operated in extremely high-risk environments, including Iraq, Somalia, and Bosnia, through to the complex Afghan theater, consistently demonstrating bold foresight and the highest sense of responsibility. Driven by uncommon passion and exceptional determination, he promoted the modernization of equipment, international cooperation, and the growth of the Army's elite units, leaving an indelible mark on the units and men who had the honor of serving alongside him. Overseas Operational Theaters, 1991 - 2021*

Lieutenant General Rodolfo Sganga: the Croce di Cavaliere for the all-round commander

The **Croce di Cavaliere dell'Ordine Militare d'Italia** awarded to **Paratrooper Lieutenant General Rodolfo Sganga** recognizes a career marked by significant operational and command responsibilities, both at home and on international missions.

Deeply tied to the paratrooper branch, Sganga served with the **183° Reggimento Paracadutisti "Nembo"**, reaching the rank of Captain. He later took command in Livorno of the **2° Battaglione Paracadutisti "Tarquinia"** and subsequently of the **187° Reggimento Paracadutisti "Folgore"**, before assuming command of the **Brigata Paracadutisti "Folgore"**, holding the prestigious post of **"Aquila 1"**.

His operational experience includes numerous overseas missions, including Afghanistan and Lebanon, where he held command and coordination positions in particularly sensitive multinational environments.

In Afghanistan, his clear-sighted and authoritative leadership was decisive in ensuring the effectiveness of operations in extremely high-risk situations. On **25 July 2009, in Bala Baluk**, while commanding the 2º Battaglione Paracadutisti "Tarqunia" during an operation to locate an explosives cache, he faced a fierce attack by hostile forces that lasted more than five hours. **Personally exposing himself to danger, he led his men's response and ensured the rescue and evacuation of a wounded servicemember.**

For the courage and command abilities he demonstrated on that occasion, he was awarded the **Medaglia d'Argento al Valore dell'Esercito on 29 July 2011**.

In Lebanon, his ability to coordinate multinational components helped consolidate stability in the area, balancing operational requirements with the management of complex international dynamics.

Particular emphasis is placed on the attention he devoted to the safety of the servicemembers under his command.

The citation for the decoration notes that **«his constant attention to the protection of personnel was the cornerstone of his work»**, recognizing his command abilities, moral integrity, and sense of responsibility.

The decoration refers to activities conducted in overseas operational theaters between **2002 and 2018**.

Following assignments in the airborne forces, Sganga continued his professional career in positions of the highest importance within national and international defense organizations.

Since 31 January 2025, he has served as Chief of Staff of Allied Joint Force Command Naples (JFC Naples), one of the Atlantic Alliance's principal operational commands. He is also **Head of the European Union Coordination Element in Naples** for the EUFOR Althea operation in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The awarding of the Croce di Cavaliere dell'Ordine Militare d'Italia is therefore also a tribute to the command tradition of Folgore, of which Sganga has been one of the most authoritative representatives.

Generale di Corpo d'Armata Rodolfo Sganga - Croce di "Cavaliere" dell'Ordine Militare d'Italia

> *A General Officer of extraordinary merit, he has served the Nation with moral integrity and masterful command ability. Called upon to operate in highly complex international environments, he demonstrated indomitable courage and exceptional expertise, resolutely facing every operational challenge. In Afghanistan, his clear-sighted and authoritative leadership proved decisive in ensuring the effectiveness of operations in situations of extreme risk. The outstanding qualities he displayed found natural and consistent confirmation in the Lebanese theater, where, with keen insight and the highest sense of responsibility, he coordinated delicate multinational dynamics, making a significant contribution to consolidating stability in the area. His constant attention to safeguarding personnel was the cornerstone of his work, which helped enhance the standing and prestige of Italy and its Armed Forces internationally. Overseas operational theaters, 2002 – 2018*

The other seven decorations of the Ordine Militare d’Italia

In addition to Generals Zanelli and Sganga, the President of the Republic awarded the **Croce di Cavaliere dell’Ordine Militare d’Italia** to seven other officers from different branches of the Armed Forces, in recognition of their valor and the results achieved during national and international operations.

- **Lieutenant General Claudio Mora, Italian Army** – For the command and coordination capabilities demonstrated while leading the Brigata Multinazionale Sud-Ovest in Kosovo and, subsequently, during the ISAF mission in Afghanistan, between 2005 and 2010.
- **Rear Admiral Massimo Bonu, Italian Navy** – For his service as Force Commander of the European operation EUNAVFOR ASPIDES in the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden and Arabian Sea, ensuring the protection of more than 200 merchant vessels and also coordinating rescue operations for the tanker *Sounion*, between August 2024 and March 2025.
- **Rear Admiral Gianguido Manganaro, Italian Navy** – For the tactical command of Operazione Mediterraneo Sicuro, escorting Nave Vespucci during its transit through high-risk areas, and activities to protect critical maritime infrastructure as part of Operazione Fondali Sicuri, between 2024 and 2025.
- **Colonel Michele Nasto, Italian Air Force** – For his service in command of the Task Force Air of the 36° Stormo during Operation Baltic Thunder II in Lithuania, distinguishing himself

in the interception and identification of Russian military aircraft on September 11, 2024.

- **Lieutenant Colonel Giuseppe Paradiso, Italian Air Force** – For the courage demonstrated during evacuation operations from Sudan in April 2023, when, as commander of a C-130J, he enabled the rescue of a further 24 Italian nationals in an extremely dangerous environment.
- **Brigadier General Patrizio La Spada, Italian Army** – For the command ability and courage demonstrated in national and international operations, particularly during the defense of Union III base in Baghdad against a Daesh attack, as part of Operation Inherent Resolve – Prima Parthica.
- **Colonel Giuseppe Maria Corso, Arma dei Carabinieri** – For operational activities conducted in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Afghanistan, with particular reference to the coordination of Special Forces, support units and air assets as part of Operation Sarissa.

The significance of the decorations for Airborne Troops and Special Forces

The awarding of honors to Generals Nicola Zanelli and Rodolfo Sganga carries particular significance for Italy’s airborne community.

Their careers reflect the evolution of the Army’s **Special Forces** and **Airborne Troops**, two components distinct in organization, roles and employment, yet united by a well-established military tradition and deep historical and operational ties. In both, Zanelli and Sganga have contributed, through different professional paths, to the development of operational capabilities and the assumption of increasing responsibilities in international missions and multinational command structures.

In Zanelli’s case, the posthumous recognition honors the contribution of a special operations officer who dedicated his career to developing Special Forces capabilities and preparing personnel called upon to operate in the most challenging environments.

For Sganga, the decoration recognizes leadership developed through direct command of paratrooper units and strengthened during overseas missions, where operational capabilities are matched by responsibility for safeguarding personnel and coordinating multinational contingents.

Two figures who, through different professional paths, have helped represent the Italian Army at the highest operational and international levels.

Their example is a benchmark for new generations of military personnel, reflecting shared values, professional excellence, and a tradition of service that continues in the challenges of the present and the future.

The path forged by General Zanelli continues to represent a legacy of experience, lessons, and values for the entire Defense establishment.

The work of General Sganga, now serving in a senior role within the Atlantic Alliance, demonstrates the continuity of a professional career that has brought the experience and command capabilities developed in the Armed Force to the highest levels of international military cooperation.