



From the Arditi to Modern Special Forces, an all-Italian history - Part III: From the post-war period in the Cold War to today

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With this third and final chapter we close the journey that began with the origins of Italian special forces (*Arditi and MAS Flotillas*) and continued in the period between the two wars and World War II.

Here we recount the **postwar rebirth**, the development during the **Cold War**, the **professionalization** from the '70s-'80s, the **inter-service integration** at the beginning of the **new millennium** and the **current structure**, with a red thread running from the **Great War** to **contemporary theaters of operations**.

The postwar period: rebuilding doctrine and units (1946-'60s)

The defeat of 1945 not only wiped out resources and structures: it made necessary a **complete rethinking of operational culture**. The restrictions of the **Treaty of Paris** slowed down for several years the reconstitution of “special” units, but did not erase the **intangible heritage: experience, method, intuitions**.

Many of the veterans of the **Folgore Division**, the **Arditi Units** and the **X MAS Flotilla** were able to transform the lessons of war into rules of peace: **strict selection, realistic training, small agile units, freedom of initiative** in the field, **multi-specialist synchronization** (land–air–sea), **essential logistics**.



The Paris Peace Treaty of 1947 imposed significant restrictions on the Italian armed forces, including limitations on artillery range (30 km), a maximum number of tanks (200), a strength for the Army (250,000 men including Carabinieri and Guardia di Finanza) and the prohibition of training personnel not part of the army.

Army: the Parachutist Saboteurs are born

On April 20, 1953 the **Army General Staff** established at the **Infantry School of Cesano** the **Special Company**, an experimental unit composed of two platoons of paratroopers (conscripts and re-enlisted) and a carabinieri platoon.

The Company—under the **operational** command of the Army General Staff Operations Office and the **administrative** command of the Infantry School—was entrusted to **Capt. Edoardo Acconci**. Previously, in **1952**, some former **Arditi** officers had begun discreetly, at the **Military Parachutism Center of Viterbo**, the reconstruction of a nucleus of specialized fighters which, in **September** of that year, became the **Special Platoon** of the **1st Parachutist Company**, under the command of **Lt. Franco Falcone**.

Trained on the Arditi model, with additional training in **water jumps** and **swimming**, that nucleus gave credibility to the project among Defense leadership, laying the foundation for the future **Parachutist Saboteurs** unit.

The innovation was twofold: the Company was **organized outside** the schemes of traditional airborne units and shaped for **specific training**, aimed at missions of **offensive operations behind enemy lines**. The Army General Staff's orientation provided for **strategic employment in every environment, natural and operational**—a distinctive feature that, even then, qualified it as a true **Special Force**.



Captain Edoardo Acconci commanding the Paratrooper Saboteurs Company – Copyright Italian Army

The man of El Alamein, heart of the project

The key figure in this transition was **Edoardo Acconci**, a veteran of the **185th Folgore Division** and survivor of the **Battle of El Alamein (1942)**, who carried with him a rare wealth of experience. A polyglot, infantry officer and later **Paratrooper** (certificate no. **1211**), he fought in North Africa leading **deep reconnaissance patrols, close combat** and **capture/destruction operations** of vehicles.

Captured by the British on **November 6, 1942 at 18:00**, he returned to Italy on **September 23, 1946** – after **seven escape attempts** – and was assigned to **minefield clearance operations (B.C.M.)**, an extremely high-risk activity that further expanded his technical and human expertise.

At **El Alamein**, the Paratroopers of the **Folgore** found themselves, despite their wishes, operating in an **asymmetric** manner; practices and expedients matured in that context were

later "put on record" by **Edoardo Acconci** and harmonized with the doctrine and operational canon experimented by the **Arditi Units** of **World War II**, themselves heirs to the victorious experiences of the **Great War (1915-18)**.

Retained in permanent service for war merits in **1951** and transferred to the **Military Parachuting Center** in **1952**, between May and July of that same year Captain Acconci attended the **Ranger** course in the United States, further expanding his doctrinal and technical knowledge. In **1953** he assumed command of the **Paratrooper Saboteurs Company** at Cesano, transforming into method what in war had often been "excellence craftsmanship": **aptitude selection, progressive training, reconnaissance and deception techniques, fire and maneuver synchronization, rigorous mission planning** and **debriefing** as a lever for doctrinal growth. In this sense, Acconci was the **bridge** between the daring tradition – filtered and strengthened by the El Alamein experience – and a modern conception of **asymmetric operations**.

The **training path** for aspiring Saboteurs was modeled for strategic employment in any environment: **sabotage techniques; rock climbing and mountain movement; skiing and mobility in snowy environments; hand-to-hand combat; familiarization** with a wide range of **weapons and vehicles** (including **armored vehicles**); **networks** and **radio "bridges"** with management of related **"meshes"**; **cartography** and **land navigation**.

For candidates judged suitable from a psycho-physical perspective, the deepening of **amphibious modules** was planned at the **Varignano Arditi Incursori Group** (then **MariSubArdIn**, today **COMSUBIN**), confirming an early **land-sea integration** that would make the future **9th Assault Paratrooper Regiment "Col Moschin"** one of the most **prepared** and **capable** units within NATO.

From the seed planted in **1953** with the **Special Company** to maturation into **Unit** and then **Saboteurs Battalion**, an Italian model of **special forces** takes shape that unites **selection, doctrine, multi-domain** and **discipline of action**—a direct legacy of the Arditi, translated into modern method.

With the transformation of the Company into **Paratrooper Saboteurs Unit (June 1, 1957)**, Captain Acconci was **confirmed in command** until **June 30, 1959**.

He returned to the helm of the Unit on **17 February 1963**, which had meanwhile become the **Parachute Saboteurs Battalion**, and left command on **15 August 1964**, bidding farewell to his men with an order of the day that went down in the unit's history:

To my Men whom I have seen grow and establish themselves within this family that I founded 12 years ago, my paternal embrace and wishes, the most affectionate, for ever greater achievements in the name of the Parachute Saboteurs in service of our beloved Homeland. Long live Italy, Folgore

Italian Navy: at Varignano the heirs of the MAS flotillas

On the naval front, in **1952** Admiral **Corso Pecori Giraldi** entrusts Lieutenant Commander **Aldo Massarini** with the task of studying the reconstitution of a unit of underwater raiders, integrating the experiences of combat divers and paratroopers.

With the progressive revocation of the Paris constraints, the **Arditi Incursori Group** is born at **Varignano**, formalized by **Order Sheet No. 44 of 30 May 1952** and placed under the command of **Maricentrosub La Spezia**. At the initiative of Admiral **Gino Birindelli**, commander of Maricentrosub, the unit is reorganized and in **1956** assumes the name **MariSubArdIn**. From **1962** training extends to **airborne operations and mountain combat**, marking the land-sea-air hybridization that will become the mantra of raiders of any Armed Force.

In **1964** the **Light Aircraft Section (S.A.L.)** is established at **Alghero-Fertilia**, under the command of the **Special Units Grouping (R.U.S.)**: a piece that shows how early the aerial dimension is perceived as a *force multiplier* for small, fast, clandestine units.



A unit of Naval Arditi Incursori in the 1950s – Copyright Italian Navy

Between Cold War and domestic terrorism: specialization and countermeasures (1970s-1980s)

The **East/West competition** and, in Italy, the long period of **terrorist threat** impose a **qualitative leap**. General-purpose raiders are no longer enough: **cells dedicated to counterterrorism** and **inter-force capabilities** are needed to operate **at night, from a distance, with surgical precision**.

Already in **1967**, the **Cima Vallona massacre** — in which **three parachute saboteurs**, a **parachute carabinieri** and an **alpine** fell — showed the employment of **saboteurs** also in a **counterterrorism function on national territory**.

In **1975** the **Saboteurs Battalion** followed the fate of the reborn **Parachute Brigade** **"Folgore"** in which it was incorporated, assuming the name **9th Assault Parachute Battalion "Col Moschin"**; in **October 1976** it was awarded the **War Flag of the X Regiment Arditi**.

Following the **sharp escalation of attacks** during the **Years of Lead**, in **June 1977** the **Trevi Plan** was signed in Rome to counter national and international terrorism. The government decides to establish **specific units** within the most trained units of the Armed Forces: the **saboteurs of "Col Moschin"** and the **raiders of COMSUBIN**. This **24/7 rapid deployment personnel** in a **counterterrorism** function is trained for operations in **civil contexts** (possible **hostage rescue** from buildings, aircraft, ships, trains, buses), with training support from the **British SAS** already employed with German and Israeli special units. These units, however, **would never be deployed operationally**, except for an **alert** the day after the **abduction of**

Aldo Moro (March 1978), later **cancelled** when UNIS was already aboard the vehicles.

On **October 24, 1977** Interior Minister **Francesco Cossiga** signs the decree establishing the **U.N.I.S. - Special Intervention Units**, to support investigations with “**commando**” operations. Simultaneously, the **GIS** of the **Carabinieri** (selected from the **1st Parachute Carabinieri Battalion**, operational from **February 1978**) and the **NOCS** of the **Police** are created. These **two units** will be deployed in the main **counter-terrorism and hostage liberation operations on national territory**: from **December 1980** (riot at **Trani prison**) to **January 1982** with the **liberation of US General James Lee Dozier**.

On **December 30, 1985**, by order of Defense Minister **Giovanni Spadolini**, the **Special Operations Groups (GOS)** are officially established. This is an important change: selected elements from the **9th “Col Moschin”** and from **COMSUBIN** are integrated to **support SISMI intelligence operations**. Italy equips itself with a **coordinated clandestine capability** typical of the final phase of the Cold War and indirect confrontation in third-party theaters.

Peacekeeping and “entry force”: the role of Special Forces

With the rise of **peace/peacekeeping missions** from the 1980s onwards, Italian **Special Forces** become **entry forces**: **they open** access corridors, **conduct** special reconnaissance, **secure** key points (ports, airports, road junctions), **establish** forward bases and, when the situation deteriorates, **execute** surgical operations to restore freedom of movement and protect civilians and military personnel.

In **Lebanon (1983)**, within the Multinational Force, Italian forces **employ** typical SOF capabilities for **area assessment**, advanced **force protection** and **liaison** with allied units and local authorities: a model that **anticipates** modern peacekeeping, in which **tactical intelligence, discretion** and **operational readiness** are as valuable as armored vehicles.

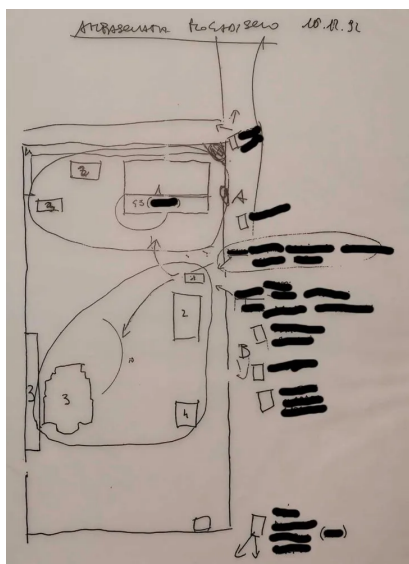
In **Somalia**, Operation **IBIS** launched in late **1992** culminates in the famous “**Pasta Factory**” battle (**July 2, 1993**): the context shows how, even in UN missions, **rapid intervention** is decisive in protecting logistics convoys, checkpoints and sensitive areas in a hostile urban environment.

On the Balkans front, with **IFOR/SFOR** in **Bosnia** (from 1995–1996 to the late 1990s), Italy fully enters the **NATO-led** cycle: Special Forces operate in **interoperability** with allied partners,

integrating **joint C2, JTAC/terminal guidance** and **precision targeting** in support of stabilization, control of critical areas and security of movements.

In parallel, in the mid-1990s, the **9th "Col Moschin"** conducts **"Seahorse" operations**: an **exfiltration/NEO package** (Non-combatant Evacuation Operations) for the **recovery of nationals** in suddenly turbulent areas. These are **rapid, discreet and high-risk interventions** that require modular planning and **extractions within very tight time windows** in close coordination with **diplomacy, intelligence and aviation**. This line of work consolidates the role of special forces as a **tool of national and international readiness**, capable of protecting citizens and Italian interests well beyond borders, even outside the spotlight.

Special operations live on **mobility** and **timing**. In **1992** the **39th Squadron Group "Drago"** introduces **NVG systems** and advanced night procedures: understanding, penetrating and striking in darkness becomes routine. In the same period the **26th Squadron Group "Giove"**, part of the **Parachute Brigade "Folgore"**, specializes in operations with paratroopers and raiders, then transforms into the **26th Special Operations Helicopter Unit (REOS)**: an air unit *designed* for special operations needs, with trained crews, low-altitude infiltrations, complex extractions and resupply "under threat".



Assault plan on the Embassy of Mogadishu on December 16, 1992 by raiders of the 9th Col Moschin – Copyright photo Book "The Flight of the Ibis"

The new millennium, (2000-today): joint forces and NATO projection

September 11, 2001 and cascading crises change the landscape: **hybrid conflicts, areas with weak governance** and **widespread technologies**. Italian special forces **expand, integrate** and **project** alongside allies in increasingly complex asymmetric scenarios.

In **March 2003** the **RIAM (Air Force Raiders Unit)** is born from the Air Force, destined to evolve into the **17th Raider Wing** (2008): **sabotage of critical infrastructure, personnel recovery, target identification and designation** and **support to air operations (fixed and rotary wing)**, with a marked **joint forces** character.

The joint forces brain: C.O.F.S. (2004)

2004 marks the organizational turning point: the **C.O.F.S. - Joint Command for Special Forces Operations** is established, the central command for planning, coordination and employment of special forces. In the same year the **GIS** is formally recognized as a **special force** in full standing within the joint forces framework.

From **December 1st, 2004**, with **Parachutist Raider General Marco Bertolini** at the helm, COFS consolidates procedures, interoperability, joint planning and NATO relations.

In **2008** it achieves the status of **planning command**; in **2021** NATO **validates it as SOCC (Deployable component command for Special Operations)** for the NATO Response Force: a substantial recognition of capability.

Operational theaters: everywhere

Italian Special Forces have operated and operate in **the most turbulent areas** to protect the **national interest: protection of citizens and critical infrastructure, NEO (Non-combatant Evacuation Operations), HR (Hostage Recovery), security of energy and maritime routes, capacity building** and **military assistance** to partner forces, as well as contribution to **UN/NATO/EU** missions as a **high-readiness** force.

From the **Balkans** to the **Middle East**, Italian special forces **open corridors, anticipate** the tactical situation through **ISR (Intelligence, Surveillance & Reconnaissance)** and **special reconnaissance (SR)**, **execute targeted direct actions (DA)** and **enable** local forces through **military assistance (MA)**, integrating **joint forces** and **inter-agency** capabilities.

A specific mention deserves the deployment in **Afghanistan**: in **2006**, as part of the **ISAF** operation, the **Task Force 45 (TF-45)** is established, the largest Italian **special forces**

deployment of the post-war period.

Under exclusive operational command of the **9th Assault Regiment "Col Moschin"**, integrated by **COMSUBIN/GOI**, **17th Incursors Wing** and **Carabinieri (GIS)**, as well as **ISR** assets and **Army Aviation**, TF-45 conducts **counterterrorism (CT)**, **counterinsurgency (COIN)** and **special reconnaissance (SR)** operations of high complexity, including **night infiltrations/exfiltrations**, **target identification and designation** and **precision support** in close coordination with allies.

An experience that has consolidated and strengthened **standards, interoperability and doctrine** across the entire sector.



Task Force 45 operators bring a wounded comrade to safety in a firefight – Copyright photo COLMOSCHIN.IT

The "Special Forces Brigade" is born, the COMFOSE

In **2013**, in **Pisa**, the **COMFOSE - Command of Army Special Forces** is established, a brigade-level unit, to coordinate **Special Forces (FS)**, **Special Operations Forces (FOS)** and **support units** destined for OS. It is a strategic choice consistent with the **2012 Military Instrument Reform**: to standardize standards, training, selection, logistics, career paths and personnel management.

The **COMFOSE** coordinates:

- **9th Assault Parachute Regiment "Col Moschin"** – (Livorno);
- **185th Reconnaissance Acquisition Target Parachute Regiment "Folgore"** – (Livorno);

- **4th Alpine Parachute Regiment "Ranger"** – (Verona);
- **CE.ADD.OS. – Special Operations Training Center;**
- **Special Operations Support Unit.**

In parallel, on the "rotary wing" side, the Army structures a dedicated unit, the **3rd REOS "Aldebaran"**, trained in flight profiles typical of special operations, coordinated with COFS in inter-force operations.



War flags of dependent units during the COMFOSE commissioning ceremony – Copyright photo Italian Army

The legal framework is updated (2015)

With **art. 7-bis of law December 11, 2015, no. 198**, it is established that **intelligence services** (in particular **AISE**) can **avail themselves of special forces** for specific missions **abroad**. This thus fills a regulatory gap, aligning Italy with Euro-Atlantic models and strengthening the **intelligence-FS** cooperation architecture to address transnational threats.

System maturity: validations, tiering and interoperability (2017-today)

The growing NATO employment of Italian special forces leads in **2017** to a **strengthening** of the structure: the number of units qualified as **Tier 1** is expanded. In **October 2018**, during the **"Dark Night 2018"** exercise, the **Tier 1** is **validated** for:

- **4th Alpine Parachute Regiment "Ranger";**
- **185th RAO Parachute Regiment "Folgore".**

Together with the **9th "Col Moschin"**, the **GOI/COMSUBIN**, the **17th Incursors Wing** and the **GIS**, the hard core of the **Italian FS** at high readiness is thus defined, fully interoperable within **NATO SOF**. In **2024**, **Tier 2** is formalized for the **1st Parachute Carabinieri Regiment "Tuscania"**, which remains the privileged selection pool for the GIS and a key piece in *stability policing* and *advanced force protection* missions.



Operator of the 185° RAO "Folgore". The Regiment is validated as tier 1 special force in October 2018 together with the 4° Reggimento Alpini Paracadutisti Monte Cervino – Copyright Ministry of Defence

Who does what: units and support

Special Forces (FS) units

- **9° Reggimento d'Assalto Paracadutisti "Col Moschin" (Army – Tier 1)**: terrestrial raids, special reconnaissance, MOUT, infiltration with HAHO/HALO drops, *direct action*, *special reconnaissance*, *military assistance*.
- **4° Reggimento Alpini Paracadutisti "Ranger" (Army – Tier 1)**: operations in mountainous/hostile environments, prolonged duration, deep reconnaissance, counter-insurgency in extreme climates.
- **185° RAO "Folgore" (Army – Tier 1)**: target acquisition, target designation, liaison with joint units.
- **GOI – Gruppo Operativo Incursori (Navy – Tier 1)**: special naval warfare, VBSS, port/offshore sabotage, ship liberation, amphibious and underwater capabilities.

- **17° Stormo Incursori (Air Force – Tier 1)**: *air-centric SOF*, personnel recovery, *terminal guidance*, sabotage of aeronautical infrastructure, complex air insertions.
- **GIS – Gruppo Intervento Speciale (Carabinieri – Tier 1)**: counter-terrorism, hostage rescue, high-risk operations in civilian/hybrid contexts, overseas projection.
- **1° Reggimento Carabinieri Paracadutisti "Tuscania"** (Carabinieri – Tier 2): advanced *force protection*, security in hostile environments, GIS selection pool, *stability policing*.

Operational support for Special Operations (SOOS)

Special forces rely on **dedicated support**:

- **3° REOS "Aldebaran"** (Army): rotary wing for special operations, NVG profiles, special infiltrations/extractions;
- **21° Gruppo Volo of the 9° Stormo "F. Baracca"** (AF): tactical transport and *air-to-SOF* support;
- **Helicopter Assault Unit of the 1° Gruppo Elicotteri** (Navy): amphibious capability and assault from naval platforms;
- **11° Reggimento Trasmissioni** (Army) and **28° Reggimento Comunicazioni "Pavia"** (Army): **C4ISR**, cyber security, defensive/offensive electronic warfare, "last mile" links and *reach-back*.

The "crown jewel" units

The **COFS** can deploy, depending on the theater, crown jewel units that expand the range of capabilities:

- **Reconnaissance platoons paratroopers** of the **183°, 186°, 187° "Folgore"**;
- **1° Squadrone Esploratori paracadutisti "Savoia Cavalleria (3°)"**;
- **Amphibious reconnaissance platoon "Serenissima"** (lagunari);
- **Combat support company** of the **1° Reggimento "San Marco"**;
- **Fucilieri dell'Aria** of the **9° Stormo** and **STOS** of the **16° Stormo "Force Protection"**.

This "pyramid" architecture allows **scaling** operational effort: Tier 1 FS nuclei, dedicated support, and a crown of reconnaissance/enabling assets that expand **persistence**, **coverage** and **interdiction**.



Incursori del COMSUBIN/GOI aboard a rubber boat – Copyright US Navy ID: 100528-N-3136P-204

The operators: selection, courses, certifications, specializations

In the Army, training is divided into a **common phase** and a **specialist phase**:

Common Phase (COMFOSE/CE.ADD.OS.)

- **Physical selection** (progressive tests);
- **Aptitude selection** (2 weeks, psychophysical and motivational stress tests);
- **Military parachuting** (CAPAR Pisa, automatic opening) for those not from airborne units;
- **OBOS – Basic Special Operations Operator** (≈ 12 weeks), tactical fundamentals, advanced marksmanship, topography, communications, TCCC, planning.
- **SERE level C**: Survival, Evasion, Resistance, Extraction.

Specialist Phase

- **Incursore** ($\approx 50+$ weeks at 9° "Col Moschin");
- **Acquisitore** ($\approx 50+$ weeks at 185° RAO);
- **Ranger** ($\approx 40+$ weeks at 4°);

Special Operations Support Roles

- **Special Operations Machine Gunner** (crew-served weapons);

- **STOS Operator** (Special Operations Tactical Support), with expertise in protection, communications, mobility.

The "Incursores" Certification (DM 2 May 1984)

The **military "Incursores" certification** entails a **personnel record change** and a specific **benefits package** (including the **Incursori supplement** equal to **180%** of the base operational allowance under Law 78/1983, plus Special Forces allowances). Courses are organized by:

- **Army** (via COMFOSE/CE.ADD.OS.);
- **Navy** (Varignano Incursori School, ≈ 1 year in three phases + final phase);
- **Air Force** (BIAM at Furbara ≈ 4 months + PC-FS ≈ 6 months);
- **Carabinieri** (for GIS, candidates from "**Tuscania**", ≈ 1 year in two phases).

What Italian Special Forces Do

"Core" Tasks

- **Direct action**: sabotage, raids on high-value objectives, surgical strikes;
- **Special reconnaissance**: deep observation, battlefield shaping, target designation;
- **Military assistance**: training, mentoring, partner force enablement.

"Plus" Tasks

- **Counter-terrorism** and **hostage rescue** (GIS primarily, but also joint task forces in theater);
- **Non-combatant evacuation operations (NEO)** from unstable areas;
- **CBRN Counter-proliferation** (chemical, nuclear, biological, radiological).

The **value** of Special Forces is not merely "tactical." It is **strategic**: small formations with **high expertise** solve problems that large conventional units cannot address without escalation. They are **political** as well as military tools: they enable **sending signals, creating deterrence, negotiating from a position of strength**.

The "Four Pillars" of Organization: COFS, 2nd Mobile Brigade, 1st Aero Special Operations Brigade, COMFOSE

- **COFS** (2004): joint brain for special operations planning and execution, NATO-validated as **SOCC**;
- **2nd Mobile Brigade Carabinieri** (2001): commands forces deployed abroad, including **GIS** and **Tuscania**;
- **1st Aero Brigade "Special Operations"** (Air Force, 2007): governance umbrella for air special operations/special task force units;
- **COMFOSE** (Army, 2013): harmonizes standards, methods, and training for the land special forces sector.

All special forces units, while reporting to their respective Armed Forces, are under **COFS** during operations, which in turn reports to the **Joint Chiefs of Staff**. This ensures that **doctrine, chain of command, and logistics** speak the same language, from the political order to the last operator on the ground.



Continuity and discontinuity: from the Arditi to the inter-service network

Looking back, the path appears coherent:

- **Continuity:** small units, strict selection, initiative on the ground, integration of means, calculated audacity;
- **Discontinuity:** technology (NVG, *ISR* platforms, cyber), legal framework, inter-service planning, NATO interoperability, culture of *precision engagement*.

The figure of **Edoardo Acconci** offers a powerful symbol: from the "artisan" action in the African desert to doctrinal formalization at Cesano, to the current Italian **SOF ecosystem** – where every action is codified, trained, validated, measured.

Conclusions: a sharp and concrete spearhead

Today's **Italian Special Forces** are **professional, integrated, deployable**. They have learned to **strike little and well**, to **see first and farther**, to **support partners** in fragile theaters, to **operate in the shadows** when needed. The **NATO validation** of the **COFS** as a deployable SOCC confirms one fact: Italy is not a minor player in the SOF world, but a **credible and reliable actor**.

And yet, their greatest strength remains the same as the Arditi's: **the man**.

Selected, trained, accountable.

From the Battle of the Solstice to the skies of Pisa, from training fjords to Afghan dust, from the docks of Varignano to the night bridges of the REOS: it is the **quality of the operator** – mind and character – that makes the difference.

The history that began a century ago is not an album of exploits: it is a **method**. Italian special forces have transformed that intuition into a **system**.

And for this reason, today, when policy seeks solutions in ambiguous and highly sensitive scenarios, Italy can respond with a **spearhead** that unites tradition and innovation, prudence and decision, discretion and concreteness.

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