



From the Arditi to Modern Special Forces, an All-Italian Story - Part I: The Origins and World War I (1914-1918)

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Italy was the **first country in the world** to experiment with **elite military units**, pioneers of **innovative tactics** and **assault means** never seen before: **on land with the Arditi** and **at sea with the daring MAS flotillas** of the Regia Marina. From their origins, these units embodied **courage** and the ability to anticipate new operational methods, creating a tradition destined to inspire modern **Special Forces** worldwide.

Even the **Roman army** employed special units, such as the **Exploratores** and the **Speculatores**, dedicated to exploration and reconnaissance missions. These were soldiers trained for advanced operations, somewhat akin to modern reconnaissance units.

However, to encounter true formations conceived with a strategy based on **boldness, surprise,** and **breaking conventional patterns**, one must reach the early **20th century** with the birth of the **Arditi**.

A **truly Italian story**, marking a path destined to forever transform the way conflicts are faced, introducing a **modus operandi** aimed at opening **asymmetric scenarios** and experimenting with **unconventional combat techniques**.

The first Raiders in history: the Arditi

At the beginning of the **20th century**, the military world urgently felt the need to **innovate assault tactics** to face an increasingly modern and complex war. The turning point came in **1917**, in the midst of the **First World War**, when the first **Italian special forces** were officially born: the **assault units of the Regio Esercito**.

These units, conceived for **breaking enemy lines**, represented an **absolute novelty** on the strategic level. They were not simple infantrymen, but **chosen soldiers**, characterized by **specific training** and **light equipment** that made them extremely **mobile** and particularly effective in **hand-to-hand combat**.

They were the **legendary Arditi**, a specialty of the infantry arm of the **Regio Esercito**, organized into **autonomous units** with innovative operational functions. Their **“asymmetric”** nature allowed them to influence battles with **quick and targeted interventions**, often conducted in the shadows, replacing **brute force** with **discretion, surprise, and superior training**.

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The Arditi represent the precursors of the current Italian special forces – Copyright Esercito Italiano

The Arditi were trained to penetrate enemy lines and carry out acts of sabotage with **speed and precision**. Unlike traditional infantry units, their goal was not simply to conquer positions, but to **disrupt the enemy's lines of communication and logistics**.

The first **training center** was established at **Sdricca di Manzano**, near Udine. Here the **Arditi** were prepared in **hand-to-hand combat techniques, rapid assault**, and a training path that tempered them not only **physically** but also **psychologically**, so they were ready for missions requiring **absolute courage** and **determination**.

In parallel, the **Regia Marina** also developed its own raider units, the so-called **maritime assault groups**, composed of specialists in **underwater attacks** and **sabotage actions**. These men used **light boats**, such as the **MAS (Motoscafi Armati Siluranti)**, and the famous **“pigs”**, modified torpedoes piloted by trained operators, with which they directly hit enemy

naval units. Their missions, often conducted in **total isolation**, were characterized by **extraordinary boldness** and a **very high level of risk**.

Among the **maritime raiders**, there were famous episodes involving **brave men** and **technologically innovative means**. These actions marked the debut of the first true **underwater assault missions** in Italian history and laid the foundation for the creation of future **naval special forces units** of the **Marina Militare**.

Experiments before 1917

Even before the official formation of the **Arditi**, the **Regio Esercito** had already initiated some attempts to develop **special units**. In **1914**, the **Explorers Groups** were created, soldiers trained to **operate behind enemy lines** and **sabotage their defenses**. Dressed entirely in **black** to aid camouflage, they were mainly employed in **exploratory missions** and **cutting enemy barbed wire**.

Another precursor to the **Arditi** were the so-called **Death Companies**, composed of **special infantry and engineering patrols**. These men were equipped with **armor** and **protective helmets**, often of the “**Farina**” model, and trained for **high-risk operations**, such as **demolishing obstacles** and **opening breaches in barbed wire** under enemy fire.

In 1916, the Supreme Command decided that the qualification of “bold soldier” should be

The birth of the **Arditi** was not an isolated event but the result of a **progressive evolution of tactics** and **operational needs** that developed during the Great War.

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The Arditi of the Bologna Brigade under the command of Lt. Arturo Avolio – – Free Copyright Creative Commons Wikipedia

The first deployment in the Battle of Gorizia

The first deployment of the so-called “**special platoons**” dates back to **August 1916**, during the **Battle of Gorizia**, in the clashes between the **Brigata Lambro** and the **Austro-Hungarian army** at **quota 188** and the **Dosso del Bosniaco**. However, due to the **inaccuracy of official reports** and the **difficulty of the terrain** – scattered with **barbed wire** and subjected to **intense Austrian artillery fire** – it is difficult to determine with

certainty the actual effectiveness of these units on the outcome of the battle.

It is nonetheless likely that they were used as **breakthrough units** in the indicated positions and as **reconnaissance units** once the Gorizia line was breached.

Further significant actions occurred on **February 11, 1917**, when **two platoons** recaptured the **trench of the Casa dei Pini salient**, lost two days earlier by the **206th Battalion of the Brigata Lambro**. On **February 26**, another **platoon** stormed a **trench near Belpoggio**, successfully capturing it.

The innovations of Major Giuseppe Bassi

In **1917**, based on the proposals of some **generals** aware of the need to overcome the traditional strategy of **frontal assault supported by artillery**, and thanks to the initiative of **young officers** dissatisfied with the **stalemate** and **slaughter of trench warfare**, a **special unit** was experimented with at the **48th Division of the VIII Army Corps**. This formation was entrusted to the command of **Major Giuseppe Bassi**, assisted by **Sergeant Giuseppe Longoni**.

Bassi drafted an **innovative note** on the use of **Fiat Mod. 15/OVP submachine guns (Officine Villar Perosa)**, proposing significant technical modifications: the **removal of the protective shield**, the **introduction of a light bipod**, and a **guide to facilitate magazine replacement** even in the dark and during combat. His proposal was not limited to technical aspects but included a **new employment doctrine**, optimizing **machine gun sections** and defining the **ideal equipment** for the units: **daggers** and **grenades** alongside **muskets** and **revolvers**, to increase the **aggressiveness** and **effectiveness** of soldiers in action.

The report, forwarded to **General Gaetano Giardino** in November 1916, received his approval and was then sent to **General Grazioli** for further examination. Commander of the **Brigata Lambro**, Grazioli likely adapted those notes to his own reflections on **special platoons** and on **March 7, 1917**, issued a **directive** to regiment commanders, ordering the creation of **attack units** specialized in **surprise raids**, **hand-to-hand attacks**, **sudden counterattacks**, and operations not foreseen by conventional infantry.

On **March 14, 1917**, the **Italian Supreme Command** was informed of the formation of **special units** also in the **Austro-Hungarian army**, while the **German army** had already

introduced the concept of elite troops, the **Stoßtruppen**, generally better trained than ordinary units. However, the **Italian Arditi** were not a simple **imitation** of the Germans and Austrians: unlike their counterparts, they were established as **autonomous units**, with their own **identity** and **mission**, not limited to performing support functions for the infantry. The experiments of the **Regio Esercito** in this direction, initiated **even before knowing the foreign experiences in detail**, were decisive in **accelerating the project** to officially establish the **Italian special units**.

After witnessing an exercise conducted by Major Bassi, General Luigi Cadorna understood

Thanks to this **innovative approach**, the **Arditi** were successfully employed in the **battles on the Italian front**, distinguishing themselves for their **courage** and **ability to infiltrate** deep into **enemy lines**, striking with **speed** and **effectiveness**.

The baptism of fire and Monte San Gabriele

The new **Assault Units** had their **baptism of fire** during the **Eleventh Battle of the Isonzo**, in **August 1917**, when they were employed to **break through the Austro-Hungarian positions** on the **Bainsizza plateau**. The **Arditi** distinguished themselves for their **bold actions** and ability to **infiltrate enemy lines**, managing to **break enemy defenses** and capture strategic positions like **Monte San Gabriele**.

Monte San Gabriele, fortified and considered almost **impregnable**, was the scene of one of their most famous operations. At dawn on **September 4, 1917**, the **Arditi** launched an assault on the summit, surprising an **unprepared enemy** at their arrival. With **hand grenades** and **flamethrowers**, they overwhelmed the Austro-Hungarian defenses and paved the way for the advance of the Italian troops.

This success brought them **fame** and **recognition**, firmly establishing the role of the **Arditi** as **the elite force of the Regio Esercito**.

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Arditi propaganda poster, World War I - Italian War History Museum

The conquest of Col Moschin

At the end of the **spring of 1918**, with **summer** just around the corner, the **Austro-Hungarian forces** attempted a new, desperate **assault** to break the **Italian defenses** on the **Grappa massif**. The goal was to penetrate the **Brenta and Piave valleys**, bypassing the Italian deployment along the river course. The plan involved a **strategic offensive** aimed at bypassing **Cima Grappa**, the core of the defensive setup, with a **simultaneous breakthrough** on the **western** and **eastern** sides of the mountain complex. The operation was entrusted to the **XI Army of General Scheuschenstuel**, reinforced by new troops and supported by intense **artillery fire**.

At **3 AM on June 15**, a violent **bombardment** opened the offensive. The **Italian artillery** responded promptly, partially containing the pressure on the eastern sector, but by **8 AM** the **Austrian infantry** launched the attack. The greatest successes were recorded on the **western side**, where the peaks defending the Brenta flank quickly fell: **Col del Miglio**, **Col Fenilon**, **Col Fagheron**, and **Col Moschin** itself fell. In a few hours, the **Italian defenses on Grappa** were on the verge of collapse, opening a potential direct access to the **Venetian plain** for the Austrians.

The **Austro-Hungarians**, close to a decisive victory, should have immediately renewed the offensive to consolidate their gains, but their **reserves** were almost exhausted. Meanwhile, the **Italian reaction** was swift: intense **artillery fire** hit the newly conquered positions, hindering the influx of reinforcements. In the **early afternoon**, the **IX Assault Unit**, consisting of just over **600 men** and already alerted in anticipation of the attack, launched a **counterattack**. In a few hours, they recaptured **Col Fagheron** and, by **10 PM**, also retook **Col Fenilon**, with the support of **two battalions of the 91st Infantry Regiment**.

However, the most important position remained to be retaken: **Col Moschin**.

At dawn on June 16, 1918, the IX Assault Unit launched a lightning attack and, in just

The success of the **IX Assault Unit** on **Col Moschin** was complete and with **relatively contained losses**, thanks to a maneuver conducted under favorable conditions: the **enemy**, now exhausted and weakened by the **Italian artillery fire**, was decisively overwhelmed by a **motivated** and **highly trained unit**.

A few days later, however, on **June 24, 1918**, the **IX Unit** was again called into action to recapture an **Austrian stronghold on Asolone**. On this occasion, the **preparatory artillery**

fire proved less effective, and the recapture of the height cost the **Arditi** a **very high blood toll**. The position was taken, but only temporarily: an immediate **enemy counterattack** managed to overpower the Italian forces, now exhausted. The **losses** were severe, almost **50% of the personnel: 19 officers** and **305 Arditi** fell, demonstrating how the **Italian high commands** had not yet fully understood how to best employ the **extraordinary combat capabilities** of these units.

Subsequently, between **October 24** and **November 4, 1918**, the **Arditi** were once again protagonists, contributing decisively to the **breakthrough of the Piave line**, which led to the **final victory over the Austro-Hungarian armies** and the **victorious conclusion of the conflict for Italy**.

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Lieutenant Carlo Sabatini and his Arditi of the V assault unit just decorated after the action on Monte Corno on May 13, 1918 – Copyright Ministry of Cultural Heritage, photo Luigi Marzocchi

Organization of Assault Units (First World War)

The total strength was **735 soldiers**, divided into three companies of about 200 men each, with a structure reminiscent of the organization of modern special forces detachments.

Operational structure

First Attack Platoon

- First Assault Squad: a dagger and twenty hand grenades each
- Second Attack Squad: a dagger, twenty hand grenades each + a **Villar Perosa cal. 9 Glisenti** submachine gun (“Pernacchia”) with 10,000 cartridges
- Third Attack Squad: same as the Second
- Fourth Attack Squad: a dagger and twenty hand grenades each
- Ammunition Pair: two soldiers with four bags containing 150 hand grenades each

Second Attack Platoon

- Similar structure to the First Platoon, with four attack squads (three equipped with Villar Perosa) and an ammunition pair.

Third Attack Platoon

- Identical organizational scheme as the previous ones.

Fourth Attack Platoon

- Same structure with four squads and an ammunition pair.

Fifth Specialist Platoon

- First Machine Gun Squad: two heavy machine guns with 20,000 cartridges
- Second Demolition Squad
- Third Signal Squad

Sixth Flamethrower Platoon

Complement Company

- About 135 soldiers, each armed with a dagger, four hand grenades, and a carbine with 71 cartridges.

Specialist Platoon

- First Machine Gun Squad: two heavy machine guns with 20,000 cartridges
- Second Gunner Squad: two 65/17 cannons

Internal organization of the squads

Each attack or assault squad was divided into **5-6 pairs**, with a strength of about **12 men**, a configuration surprisingly similar to that of modern special forces detachments.

The first military Paratrooper in history: Lieutenant Alessandro Tandura

A crucial moment for the Italian special forces, and more generally for world military history, was represented by **Lieutenant Alessandro Tandura**, the first paratrooper in the world to perform a jump in wartime action. The mission took place on the night between **August 8 and 9, 1918**, when Tandura jumped from a **Savoia-Pomilio SP.4** aircraft beyond enemy lines in Veneto, thanks to the support of British pilots **William George Barker** and **William Wedgwood Benn** of the Royal Air Force. The feat was a pioneering event in the use of paratroopers in military operations and laid the foundations for the development of future Italian

airborne units.

For this act, Lieutenant Tandura was awarded the **Gold Medal for Military Valor** with the following citation:

Driven by the most ardent love of country, he volunteered to undertake an extremely risky mission: from a flying airplane, he had himself launched with a parachute beyond the enemy lines in invaded Veneto, where, with keen intelligence and indomitable disregard for all danger, he gathered groups of our dispersed officers and soldiers, and, inspiring them with his own courage and faith, he established with them an intelligence service that proved invaluable to the operations. Twice arrested and twice escaped, after three months of legendary audacity, he completed his prudent and fruitful work by boldly leading his bands of rebels and with them rising in the movement that outlined the enemy retreat, thus facilitating the victorious advance of our troops. A shining example of self-sacrifice, conscious courage, and generous complete dedication of himself to the Fatherland.
(Piave – Vittorio Veneto, August – October 1918)

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Lieutenant Alessandro Tandura (on the left), the first paratrooper in the world in wartime action, and the scheme of the Savoia-Pomilio SP.4 aircraft (on the right) with the systems prepared for the launch: trapdoor seat, parachute, and observer's position.

A few days later, the second launch was also carried out by **Pier Arrigo Barnaba**, Lieutenant of the Fiamme Verdi, the Arditi of the Alpini. He was the first Alpini Paratrooper in history.

In the future, parachuting and special forces will be inseparable concepts, united by

The MAS Flotillas

The **MAS Flotillas** represented the **precursors of the Italian Navy's special forces**. Framed within the **Regia Marina**, they have an **operational history** that has its roots in **World War I** and extends to **World War II**.

These units were made up of **Armed Motor Torpedo Boats (MAS)**, designed to conduct **rapid and lightning attacks** against the enemy navy. The **MAS** began to distinguish themselves already during the **Great War**, inflicting **heavy losses** on the **Austro-Hungarian fleet**.

In the **Second World War**, their operations further expanded thanks to the support of **raider units** and, with the birth of the **Italian Social Republic**, also of **marine infantry units**.

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Pair of MAS in exercise (1918) – Copyright Italian Navy

The origins

The first **MAS** were developed during the initial phase of **World War I**, starting from the project developed by the Venetian shipyard **SVAN (Società Veneziana Automobili Navali)**, which built the prototypes **MAS 1** and **MAS 2** in **June 1915**.

The **Regia Marina** had already shown interest in **armed motorboats** since **1906**, but only with the outbreak of the war did they move from projects to **mass production**. These vessels, designed for **rapid attacks** and to exploit the **element of surprise**, were used to **launch torpedoes** against **enemy ships**.

World War I and the successes of the MAS

With the start of World War I, **the MAS were employed in surveillance and attack operations**, demonstrating their effectiveness in missions against Austro-Hungarian forces. These **motorboats, small, maneuverable, and with high speed**, represented a strategic shift for the Regia Marina, which focused more on quantity and agility than on the power of large battleships.

The assaults conducted by the MAS were crowned with spectacular successes, such as the missions of **Luigi Rizzo** and Andrea Ferrarini, **who in 1917 with MAS 9 (Rizzo) and Mas 13 (Ferrarini) sank the battleship Wien off Trieste, and in 1918 destroyed the Santo Stefano, also of the Austro-Hungarian navy**.

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Fragment of the bow of the Wien recovered after World War I and now displayed at the Naval History Museum of Venice – Free Copyright Creative Commons Wikipedia

The sinking of the Szent István and the Viribus Unitis

On **June 10, 1918**, the historic **Premuda enterprise** took place, in which **Lieutenant Luigi Rizzo** and **Midshipman Giuseppe Aonzo**, aboard **MAS 15** and **MAS 21**, dealt a **decisive**

blow to the **Austrian fleet**.

In the midst of the **First World War**, the two **MAS**, under the command of **section chief Luigi Rizzo** and respectively commanded by **Armando Gori** and **Giuseppe Aonzo**, departed from the port of **Ancona** and, with **audacity** and **precision**, managed to infiltrate among the enemy units heading to the **Otranto Channel**.

At dawn, the **MAS** managed to **torpedo and sink** the **Austrian battleship SMS Szent István (Santo Stefano)**, marking a **decisive success** for the **Royal Italian Navy**. This **heroic act** is still celebrated today every **June 10** with the **Navy Day**.

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The Austro-Hungarian battleship Szent István sinking off the island of Premuda – Free Copyright Creative Commons
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On **November 1, 1918**, during the **Pola operation**, **Major Raffaele Rossetti** and **Medical Lieutenant Raffaele Paolucci**, aboard a “**mignatta**”, managed to **sink the battleship SMS Viribus Unitis**, the pride of the **Austro-Hungarian Navy**.

On the evening of **October 31**, two **MAS** escorted by as many **torpedo boats** set sail from **Venice**, without any official act ratifying the operation by the Italian side. Upon reaching the Istrian waters, the torpedo boats withdrew, allowing one of the **MAS** to tow the **mignatta**, a **self-propelled torpedo**, to within a few hundred meters of the **breakwater of the port of Pola**.

At **10:18 PM**, Rossetti and Paolucci headed towards the port with their mignatta, while the MAS moved away to return to the recovery point. The approach proved to be **extremely risky**: the two officers dragged the mignatta with the **engine off**, overcame an **external barrier** and three orders of **nets**, managing to evade the **Austrian vigilance**. They passed unnoticed next to **sentries**, **patrol boats**, and even a **submarine at anchor**.

At **3:00 AM** they found themselves near the anchored ships and only at **4:45**, after more than six hours in the water, did they reach the **Viribus Unitis**. Rossetti detached from the mignatta and attached a **200 kg explosive charge** to the hull, set to explode at **6:30**. Discovered by a spotlight, they were captured: Paolucci still managed to activate a second charge, while Rossetti sank the mignatta near the steamer **Wien**.

Brought aboard as prisoners, the two Italians learned that during the night the **Pola fleet** had been handed over to the **Yugoslavs** and that the ship no longer flew the Austrian flag. At **6:00**, they warned **Captain Vuković** of the imminent danger, who ordered the **evacuation**.

However, seeing no explosions, the crew returned aboard. At **6:44**, the charge detonated: the **Viribus Unitis** listed and sank rapidly, causing **numerous casualties** and the death of **Vuković** himself, struck by a mast of the same ship while trying to save himself by swimming.

The **Viribus Unitis**, built in **1912 in Trieste**, was the **first battleship of the Tegetthoff class** and symbolized the **power** and **pride** of the **Austro-Hungarian Navy**. Its **sinking** represented not only a **devastating blow** to the enemy fleet but also one of the most **legendary feats of the Italian raiders**.

It was silenced forever by the **heroism** of two men: **Raffaele Rossetti** and **Raffaele Paolucci**.

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The Viribus Unitis, built in 1912 in Trieste, was the flagship of the Austrian Navy – Free Copyright Creative Commons Wikipedia

D'Annunzio and the support to the Incursori

Among the greatest supporters of the MAS was **Gabriele D'Annunzio**, who was on board the MAS during the famous **Beffa di Buccari** on the night between February 10 and 11, 1918 and who helped spread the motto “**Memento Audere Semper**” (**Remember to always dare**). Thanks also to D'Annunzio's support, the use of the MAS became a **symbol of the courage and audacity of the Italian forces**, earning the nation's esteem.

At the end of the conflict, the Regia Marina had 419 MAS units, **a sign of the success of this combat strategy based on surprise and agility**.

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The protagonists of the Beffa di Buccari: from left Luigi Rizzo, Gabriele D'Annunzio, and Costanzo Ciano, portrayed after the famous mission – Free Copyright Creative Commons Wikipedia

TO BE CONTINUED ...

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