



From the Arditi to Modern Special Forces, an entirely Italian history - Part II: Between the two wars and World War II

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After retracing the origins of Italian special forces and the pioneering role of the Arditi and the MAS Flotillas during the Great War (1914-1918), it is now time to turn our attention to the subsequent period, marked by **profound political, social and military changes**. Between the two world wars, Italy experienced transformations that would leave an indelible mark on the way of conceiving **elite units**. The **experiences gained on the front**, the **myth of the Arditi**, the legacy of the **MAS Flotillas** and **new strategic needs** paved the way for experiments and units destined to mark history.

In this second part, we will analyze how **the legacy of the Arditi** and the **MAS Flotillas** evolved during the Fascist period and how, at the outbreak of the **Second World War**, were born **special units capable of distinguishing themselves** in innovative and often decisive

operations, contributing to outline that **tradition of excellence** that still characterizes the **Italian Special Forces**.

During Fascism

In the period between the two world wars, many former Arditi reunited in the **National Association of Arditi of Italy (ANAI)**, founded by captain *Mario Carli*, a prominent figure of the so-called “fascism of origins”. Numerous Arditi adhered to the new movement, participated in the **March on Rome** and became protagonists of the nascent regime, arriving in some cases to hold leading roles as hierarchs, including *Giuseppe Bottai* and *Italo Balbo*.

However, adherence was not unanimous: a part of the Arditi refused to align themselves with fascism and was progressively marginalized.



Mario Carli, Captain of the Arditi – Free Copyright Creative Commons Wikipedia

In 1922, *Benito Mussolini* decreed the dissolution of the ANAI, considered not entirely reliable for the new political order, and established in its place the **National Federation of Arditi of Italy (FNAI)**, into which many former members of the previous association flowed. The FNAI thus became the official point of reference for the Arditi linked to fascism, receiving prestige and recognition from the regime. Among these stands out the granting of the **Tower of the Counts** in Rome, assigned in 1937 and transformed, the following year, into a mausoleum dedicated to *Alessandro Parisi*, president of the Federation and a figure celebrated by fascist Arditi.

Second World War: Paratroopers and the El Alamein legacy in asymmetric operations

At **Tarquinia**, in July 1940, the first paratrooper units were established: the **I and II Paratrooper Infantry Battalion** and the **III Paratrooper Carabinieri Battalion** (subsequently renamed respectively II, III and I). On **April 30, 1941** the II Paratrooper Battalion carried out the first combat airdrop over the island of Cephalonia.

In the spring of 1941 the **1st Paratrooper Regiment** was formed, and in the same year the **Paratrooper Swimmers Company of the Royal Navy** experimented for the first time with sea landings. On **September 1, 1941** the **1st Paratrooper Division** was established, to which in June 1942 was given the name "**Folgore**", later evolved into the **185th Paratrooper Division "Folgore"**.

The epic of the Folgore Division culminated in the Battle of El Alamein, where Italian paratroopers, in clear numerical and equipment inferiority, were forced to fight with **asymmetric** tactics, forerunners of those that would become characteristic of future **special forces**. Thanks to rigorous training and state-of-the-art equipment, they conducted sudden and devastating actions, even coming to employ **improvised devices** against British armored vehicles.

El Alamein itself constituted a turning point:

some of the experiences gained in that context inspired, in the post-war period, the **doctrine of Italian special forces**, as we will see in the next article. The **Second Lieutenant Parachutist Edoardo Acconci**, who participated in the battle, – who became in 1953 **Captain** and **Commander of the Special Company**, later **Saboteur Company**, first nucleus of today's 9th Regiment "Col Moschin" – collected and standardized those experiences, laying the foundations for a modern **asymmetric operations**.

The Italian General Staff quickly understood that **being a parachutist** did not simply mean executing an **airdrop**, but adopting a specific **vision and operational mentality**: the ability to conduct **missions behind enemy lines** transformed **training** into procedures and actions aimed at achieving **decisive impacts** and reaching **highly strategic objectives**.

In the following years, the **parachutist certificate** thus became an essential requirement for anyone aspiring to join the raiders or be part of the special forces.



Libyan Air Infantry with Italian instructors in a photograph from 1939 restored in color by BRIGATAFOLGORE.NET

The Arditi Return

At the beginning of the Second World War, Italy recovered the tradition of the Arditi, restoring elite units adapted to the new needs of the conflict.

In **May 1942** new formations were established: the **Group "A" Formations**, composed of Italian-Arab personnel, and the **1st Special Battalion Arditi** (May 15, 1942), articulated in three companies, each specialized in a different method of infiltration into enemy territory:

- the **101st Company Arditi Parachutists**;
- the **102nd Company Arditi Swimmers** (later Landing Company);
- the **103rd Company Truck Drivers** (later Ground).

With circular no. 40900 of July 20, 1942 the **General Staff of the Royal Army** established the **Arditi Regiment**, headquartered at **Santa Severa**, near Rome. On August 1st, the 1st Special Battalion Arditi was integrated as the first operational unit. A few days later, on August 11, training began for the **2nd Battalion** and, on September 15, the unit assumed the name of **X Arditi Regiment**, placed under the command of **Colonel Renzo Gazzaniga**, decorated with the Military Order of Savoy, a silver medal and two bronze medals for military valor.



Two officers of the X Arditi Regiment at Santa Severa in 1942. Photo: Andrea Molinari Collection, in Italian Army Elite Units & Special Forces 1940–43, Osprey Publishing.

In parallel, other Arditi units operated on different fronts: the **"ski arditi"** participated in the French campaign with the **"Duke of Abruzzi" Alpine Battalion** and the **"Monte Bianco" unit**; in Africa, instead, the **Saharan companies** carried out special missions in the desert. The **10th Arditi Regiment** was employed behind enemy lines, especially in North Africa and Sicily, until its dissolution after the armistice.

The destiny of the Arditi changed radically with **September 8, 1943**. The **1st Special Battalion Arditi**, stationed in Sardinia, sided with the Kingdom of the South and, in March 1944, was transformed into the **IX Assault Detachment** of the Co-belligerent Army. Shortly after it became the **III Battalion "Col Moschin"** within the **68th Infantry Regiment "Legnano"**, continuing to fight alongside Allied forces.

The **Regia Aeronautica** also developed special units: in 1942 the **Battaglione ADRA** (*Arditi Distruttori della Regia Aeronautica*) was established, tasked with conducting sabotage and preparing the ground for future invasion operations. After the armistice, the unit continued to operate in the **Italian Social Republic** as **ADAR** (*Arditi Distruttori Aeronautica Repubblicana*), based in **Tradate**.

In 1944, for the **Aeronautica Nazionale Repubblicana**, two new airborne units were established:

- the **2nd Arditi Paracadutisti Regiment "Nembo"**, remaining operational with only two battalions.

- the **1st Arditi Paracadutisti Regiment "Folgore"** (former Paracadutisti Regiment "Folgore");



"Special" soldiers of the Battaglione ADRA (Arditi Distruttori della Regia Aeronautica)

Regia Marina: technical and strategic developments of the "MAS"

In the years following the First World War, MAS and other assault vessels were not the focus of the Navy's investments, given the peaceful arrangement established in the Mediterranean. However, the conception and design of new raiding units resumed with the Ethiopian War, starting in 1935, which rekindled tensions with Great Britain and France. It was in this context that the principles of MAS were extended to new projects, such as **explosive motorboats** and the innovative **slow-running torpedoes (SLC)**. The **SLC**, designed by **Teseo Tesei** and **Elios Toschi**, were underwater raiding vessels capable of transporting operators and explosive warheads below sea level, allowing close attacks against enemy ships anchored in ports.



SLC displayed at the Sacrario delle Bandiere in Rome.

The Second World War: the Assault Men are born

Upon Italy's entry into the Second World War, the Regia Marina had already established several **MAS flotillas**, including the famous **X Flottiglia MAS**, destined to become the very symbol of Italian naval raiding.

Initially known as the **1st MAS Flotilla**, the unit was soon strengthened with the specialty of "**assault men**", divers trained to penetrate enemy ports, swim under ship hulls and place explosive charges directly on enemy vessels. These raiders used the famous **slow-running torpedoes**, nicknamed "**pigs**", and were protagonists of operations that marked the history of naval warfare.



Members of the 1st MAS Flotilla in 1939. Among them commander Aloisi, Luigi Durand de la Penne, Teseo Tesei, Bruno Falcomatà and Gino Birindelli. – Copyright photo Ministry of Defense-Italian Navy

X Flottiglia MAS: the terror of the Mediterranean

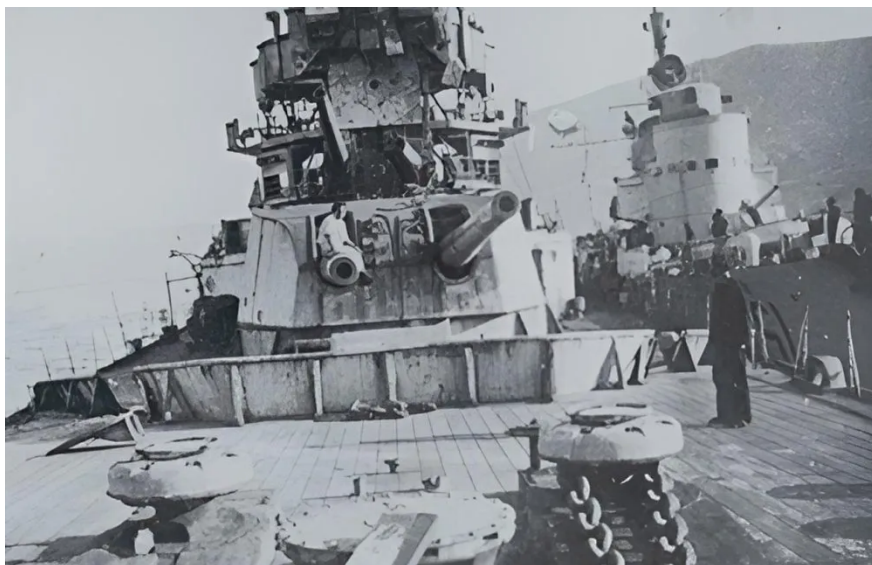
If the X MAS had been fully operational in June 1940, when the British did not yet have Ultra , nor good surveillance systems in the ports of Alexandria, Gibraltar and Valletta, the war would probably have had a very different outcome.

Jack Greene, historian and English writer in the book "The Black Prince and the Sea Devils"

The **first successful action of the X Flottiglia MAS** took place on **25 March 1941** in **Suda Bay**, in Crete. On that occasion six **MTM explosive motorboats (Modified Tourism Motor Boats)** attacked British naval units anchored in the bay, inflicting severe damage. Among the targets hit was the cruiser **HMS York**, struck directly and forced to run aground: reduced to a wreck, it was subsequently used only as a floating battery.

The operation, conducted under the command of **Lieutenant Commander Luigi Faggioni**, began with the night-time forcing of the bay's obstructions. Only at first light could the pilots distinguish the shapes of the targets and launch their attack. One explosive motorboat struck the **York** directly, while a second, piloted by **Sergeant Gunner Emilio Barberi** – who was awarded the **Gold Medal for Military Valor** for his action – hit the tanker **Pericles**, severely damaging it. A third vessel, missing its designated target, exploded against a pier.

The other three motorboats failed to complete the mission due to technical failures and operational difficulties; their pilots then decided to scuttle the vessels to prevent their capture by the enemy.



The wreck of HMS York inspected by a squad of sailors from the torpedo boat Sirio after the surrender of Crete – Free Copyright Creative Commons Wikipedia

The operational theaters of the X MAS Flotilla: not only the Mediterranean, but also the Black Sea

Among the most celebrated missions of the **X MAS Flotilla** was the **attack on the port of Alexandria**, in December 1941, when the raiders managed to sink the British battleships **Queen Elizabeth** and **Valiant**. With this action, the unit dramatically demonstrated the effectiveness of a strategy based on **small assault craft and targeted attacks**, capable of inflicting damage far superior to the forces employed.

In **1942** the X MAS Flotilla expanded its operational range, deploying a MAS squadron transferred overland to the **Black Sea**, where it engaged the Soviet fleet. In that theater Italian crews achieved significant successes, including the sinking of submarines and Soviet transport units.

In the same year, in the Mediterranean, Italian MAS units took part in the **Battle of Mid-August (Operation Pedestal)**, opposing a powerful British convoy bound for Malta and contributing to inflicting heavy losses on enemy forces.



The HMS Queen Elizabeth surrounded by anti-torpedo nets in the port of Alexandria before the attack. – Copyright ADNO 8064 Imperial War Museums

In the Italian Social Republic

After the **armistice of September 8, 1943**, the **X MAS Flotilla** split into two groups. Part of the units chose to continue the fight alongside the **Italian Social Republic (RSI)**, under the command of **Prince Junio Valerio Borghese**. This group was employed in operations against Anglo-American forces, both in open sea and along the coasts of the peninsula.

Other men, instead, joined the **Italian Co-belligerent Navy**, keeping their assault specialty active and collaborating with the Allies until the conclusion of the war.



Group of military personnel from the X MAS Flotilla – Free Copyright Creative Commons Wikipedia

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Part III: From the postwar period in the Cold War to today (August 29)

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