General Portolano: in Afghanistan Italian Soldiers Operated on the Front Line

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When Donald Trump reignited the controversy by claiming that NATO's European military in Afghanistan “were not on the front lines,” the strongest reply could not be a catchy phrase. It had to be a fact. The **Chief of Defense Staff, Luciano Portolano responded like this: with the memory of someone who was truly there**, and with indisputable numbers. “When I read those statements… a reaction of surprise,” he said, recalling that the Italian commitment has always been full, recognized by allies, and paid at a very high price.

And above all: **in Afghanistan, under his command, he lost nine men**. Nine faces, nine families, nine absences that a commander never files away.

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Afghanistan: Portolano in command of the “Sassari” Brigade, Italy's warrior heart

There is a detail that weighs more than a thousand comments: during that period, Portolano **was the commander of the “Sassari” Brigade**, and simultaneously led the **Regional Command West** of the ISAF mission, based in Herat.
The “Sassari” is not a label: it is identity, cohesion, hard discipline, Esprit de Corps. It is the kind of unit that, when the situation becomes dangerous, does not ask for shortcuts: it becomes a **Paris Force**.

And in that area, “safe” was nothing. Portolano states it clearly: attacks, ambushes, bombings. He also recalls the attack on November 3, 2011, on the Hesco logistics compound, citing it as clear evidence that it was not at all a sector far from clashes.

“We were not in the rear”: the reality of Herat

During his tenure, he explains, about **14,000 soldiers** from various international contingents operated in the Regional Command West, with about **4,500 Italians**. And Italy was not just watching: it was within the responsibility, within the complexity, within the risk.
In an emblematic passage of those days, a journalistic report portrays Portolano as the one who reconstructs the attack on Herat, as commander of the “Sassari” Brigade and RC-West: not an external witness, but the commander on the spot, in the decision-making chain, with real pressure on him.

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Portolano recalls that in the twenty years of the mission in Afghanistan (2001–2021) Italy counted **53 fallen** and about **700 wounded**, many with permanent disabilities.
But the figure that makes everything more human — and harder — is the one he pronounces as a commander: the **nine** of his period. “It was a great pain… boys with whom I had a very close relationship and always open dialogue.”

This is where you see the difference between a “desk” General and a True General. In the fact that for him the word “fallen” is not a chapter of military history: it is a reality lived on his own skin.

A True General, because he carried the front line on him

Portolano does not respond to controversies with abstract pride. He responds with substance: missions, responsibilities, men, losses. And with a firm point that needs no emphasis: **Afghanistan was not a comfortable tale**, and those who reduce it to a caricature betray the reality of those who operated in extreme conditions.

From the Balkans to Afghanistan, passing through Lebanon, Portolano embodies a rare type of command: one that does not just represent, but **fully assumes the hardest part of the job**. In Afghanistan, with the “Sassari”, that command had the face of the front line. And the voice, today, has the severe and necessary tone of truth.

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