



“Grifone 2026”: in Sardinia, the national rescue system tests the excellence of Search and Rescue

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The exercise “**Grifone 2026**” concluded at the Tortolì-Arbatax airport in Sardinia, the main national training activity in the field of **air search and rescue (Search and Rescue - SAR)** in a complex terrestrial environment. Planned and conducted by the Italian Air Force through the Aerospace Operations Command, the exercise represented one of the most significant annual events dedicated to cooperation between **Armed Forces, State Corps, Civil Protection, and specialized rescue organizations**.

For five days, over **500 operators** worked in realistic and particularly challenging scenarios, with the aim of consolidating the interoperability and response capability of the national emergency system. Among the participants were about **180 military personnel from the Italian Air Force**, 110 from the National Alpine and Speleological Rescue Corps, and over 240 operators from numerous Italian and foreign administrations.

During the exercise, **76 operational missions** were carried out, totaling over **50 flight hours**, distributed across more than ten different training scenarios. The activity involved a particularly complex air component, with the presence of helicopters from the Italian Air Force, the Italian Army, the Carabinieri, the Coast Guard, the Guardia di Finanza, the State Police, and the National Fire Brigade, as well as an aircraft from the Spanish Air Force.

The 2026 edition confirmed that modern rescue requires a **close integration between aerial means, ground teams, and advanced technological systems**. Alongside the helicopters, remotely piloted systems used by the Alpine Rescue, the Fire Brigade, and Civil Protection were employed, demonstrating how **technological innovation** is playing an increasingly central role in search and rescue operations.

The Gennargentu as the setting for a complex and highly realistic scenario

The main scenario of “Grifone 2026” simulated the disappearance of a military aircraft in the mountainous area of **Gennargentu**, one of the most rugged areas of Sardinia. To address the emergency, a **Forward Operating Base** was activated at the Arbatax airport, from which daytime and nighttime SAR operations were coordinated.

The crews operated under particularly challenging conditions, undertaking missions of **search, location, and recovery of missing personnel** in a mountainous environment. The activities allowed for testing operational procedures, decision-making capabilities, and coordination among the various components involved, simulating situations that could occur in real emergency scenarios.



Helicopters and assets from various administrations engaged during “Grifone 2026”, symbolizing the close integration between Armed Forces, State Corps, and components of the national search and rescue system.

Source: Italian Air Force

Particularly significant was the contribution of the ground teams, jointly coordinated by the **National Alpine and Speleological Rescue Corps**, the **National Fire Brigade**, and the **Guardia di Finanza**. These were joined by operators from Civil Protection, the 118 health system, the Italian Red Cross, the Sardinian Region's Crocerossine Corps, canine units, and Air Search and Rescue Assistants.

One of the most innovative aspects of the 2026 edition was the demonstration dedicated to the **helicopter recovery of people with non-motor disabilities**. The activity, carried out in the presence of the Minister for Disabilities, **Alessandra Locatelli**, and the **Chief Inspector General Pietro Perelli**, Head of the Air Force Health Corps, marked an important step towards defining **new inclusive operational procedures**.

Currently, this particular type of intervention does not have codified protocols at the international level. The project developed by the Italian Air Force, with the involvement of the **15th Wing**, the Armed Forces Health Service, the Psychology Center, and numerous institutional and academic partners, aims to develop innovative methodologies to make rescue **increasingly accessible and effective for all citizens**.

Technology, logistics, and interoperability at the service of the community

Behind the operational success of “Grifone 2026” was also an impressive logistical and organizational effort. The Italian Air Force set up a complex **autonomous field device** at the Tortoli-Arbatax airport, capable of providing continuous support to operations.

The role of the **3rd Wing of Villafranca** was crucial, as it set up logistical infrastructures, command and control areas, advanced healthcare capabilities, fuel supply services, airport fire-fighting systems, telecommunications, and meteorological support. A true **advanced operational base** capable of sustaining continuous activities in a remote area.



The advanced command post of “Grifone 2026”, the heart of interforce and interagency coordination of search and rescue operations in Sardinia. *Source: Italian Air Force*

Also fundamental was the contribution of the **4th Telecommunications and Air Defense Assistance Brigade**, which through the 1st Technical and Communications Unit of Decimomannu ensured the creation of IT networks, satellite and radio links, and video surveillance systems necessary for the coordination of operations.

For the first time in the context of “Grifone”, the integration between the technical laboratories of the Italian Air Force and a specialist component of the Fire Brigade dedicated to **radiological risk** was also tested, with the aim of developing **shared procedures** for managing complex aeronautical incidents and environmental protection.

The final assessment, illustrated by the exercise director, **Colonel Giacomo Zanetti**, was extremely positive. “Grifone 2026” confirmed that the ability to respond to modern emergencies increasingly depends on the **synergy between different professional skills, advanced technologies, and integrated planning**. A wealth of expertise that strengthens the country's

security and ensures an increasingly effective response for the benefit of the community, once again demonstrating the strategic value of the **national search and rescue system**.

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