



History of the Mangusta exercise, the Paratrooper's university: the great test of the Folgore born in the Cold War to fight behind enemy lines

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For those who have served Italy in arms within the ranks of the Paratroopers Brigade Folgore, the Mangusta exercise needs no introduction.

It is simply defined as **"the university of the Paratrooper"**.

Today we will try to recount its origins, purposes, and operational significance.

The "Mangusta" has its roots in the Cold War and the activities developed by the Paratroopers Brigade "Folgore" to train units in area interdiction and counter-interdiction.

The strategic reference was that of a possible conflict between NATO and the Warsaw Pact. In such a scenario, the paratrooper units would need to be able to infiltrate beyond enemy lines, operate autonomously for long periods, and strike the most vulnerable points of the enemy's

setup.

The Mangusta was created to verify precisely these capabilities, pitting units tasked with penetrating enemy rear lines against those assigned to locate, pursue, and neutralize them.



Mangusta 2021: "Those who do interdiction carry the backpack", one of the exercise's mantras since its inception -
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A physical, tactical, and mental test

From its origins, the exercise was not a simple endurance march.

The patrols had to move for several days, often in winter, facing cold, rain, rough terrain, lack of rest, and continuous pressure from opposing units.

Every movement could reveal the unit's position. Even a trace left on the ground, a radio connection made at the wrong time, or a stop that was too long could allow the counter-interdiction to locate the patrol.

The Mangusta tested orientation, logistical autonomy, camouflage, decision-making ability, and unit cohesion. Commanders are obliged to continuously modify their plans based on the real situation generated on the ground.



Environmental adversities, physical effort, and orientation represent the continuous challenge, always, of the Paratrooper in the Mangusta - Copyright photo Italian Army

The origins in the Seventies

The first experiences of the Folgore in the field of interdiction and counter-interdiction date back to the Seventies.

The patrols were infiltrated at great distances, even by airdrop, and were tasked with crossing territories controlled by the adversary, gathering information, conducting ambushes and raids, and reaching assigned objectives without being located.

Already in the mid-'70s, the Brigade's battalions were engaged in significant opposing force activities: some units operated as interdiction forces, while others performed counter-interdiction tasks.

From those experiences, the training model destined to become the Mangusta exercise was born.

In the Eighties, the activity became a regular appointment for the Brigade, concentrated mainly in the winter period and set in the Metalliferous Hills of Tuscany, the Apennines, in Abruzzo, and in Tuscia.

Area interdiction

Interdiction involves the use of units infiltrated within an enemy-controlled area, with the aim of limiting their freedom of movement and disrupting their setup.

The paratrooper patrols must operate far from their own lines, with reduced communications and supplies, exploiting the terrain and surprise.

Main tasks include enemy observation, information gathering, destruction of sensitive targets, interruption of communication routes, and disruption of logistical activities.

A small unit, moving discreetly and striking at the most favorable moment, can force the adversary to deploy numerous forces to protect bridges, airports, depots, commands, and road axes.



Mangusta 2024: Paratrooper about to airdrop at night into an interdiction zone - Copyright Italian Army

Counter-interdiction

Opposing the infiltrated force are the units tasked with counter-interdiction.

Their task is to protect the area of responsibility, identify enemy patrols, reconstruct their movements, and prevent their actions.

Counter-interdiction requires territory control, observation posts, patrols, information gathering, and the ability to intervene quickly. The confrontation does not take place along a defined front line but over a very extensive territory where the interdictors try to blend in with the environment and evade pursuit.

The Mangusta thus tests both parties: those who must infiltrate and strike and those who must prevent this from happening.



Mangusta 2023: artillerymen in the counter-interdiction zone, with VTLM Lince vehicles in the background.
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The comparison with the Warsaw Pact

The Mangusta was developed in the operational framework of the Cold War, when Italian military planning was part of NATO's defensive system.

The reference adversary was not just Russia, but the entire Warsaw Pact led by the Soviet Union.

In the event of war, NATO forces would have had to face large armored and mechanized formations, supported by airborne, reconnaissance, and special units capable of infiltrating Western rear areas.

Airports, bridges, communication centers, ammunition depots, and command posts would become priority targets.

The Folgore therefore had to be able to perform both roles: penetrate the rear of the Warsaw Pact to hinder its operations and protect allied territory from enemy unit infiltrations.

The Mangusta thus represented the translation of this operational need on the ground and it was during the 1980s that it became one of the main exercises of the Folgore.

In the 1980s, on some occasions, even two editions were held in the same year. Helicopters, airdrops, and ground infiltrations allowed units to be inserted in depth, while other Brigade units organized territorial control and the search for enemy elements.

The Paratroopers Brigade thus had comprehensive training, capable of involving infantry, artillery, engineers, signals, Army Aviation, and specialist units.

The Mangusta after the Cold War

The end of the confrontation between NATO and the Warsaw Pact did not eliminate the importance of interdiction and counter-interdiction.

The wars in the Balkans, Afghanistan, Iraq, and the return of high-intensity conflicts have shown that control of rear areas, logistical routes, and infrastructure remains decisive.

The Mangusta has therefore been updated by introducing new technologies, electronic warfare, drones, surveillance systems, airborne capabilities, and cooperation with foreign units.

In modern editions, generally held between November and December, the units continue to operate as opposing parties. One component must infiltrate, gather information, and strike assigned targets; the other is tasked with controlling the territory, identifying enemy units, and disrupting their setup.



Years pass, but the Mangusta does not lose its soul: in the photo, paratroopers engaged in the 2014 edition patrol a stretch of estuary aboard an inflatable boat - Copyright Esercito Italiano

From Folgore exercise to multinational event

Today the Mangusta is the main annual training event of the Paratroopers Brigade “Folgore”.

The Italian Army uses it to verify the units' ability to plan and conduct airborne operations, interdiction, counter-interdiction, control of extensive areas, and disruption of the enemy's

setup.

The events are not completely predetermined but arise from the decisions and actions of the opposing parties. This forces commanders to take responsibility, react to unforeseen events, and maintain the initiative.

The 2025 edition involved over 1,800 military personnel from seven nations, confirming the transformation of the Mangusta into a multinational and joint forces testing ground.



Mangusta 2025: the operation deployed a wide range of transport and combat air assets from various nations -
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From the Soviet threat to the modern battlefield

The Mangusta was born during the Cold War to prepare the Folgore for interdiction and counter-interdiction operations envisaged in a potential conflict between NATO and the Warsaw Pact.

It was not a simple simulation, but a concrete test of the paratroopers' ability to infiltrate beyond enemy lines, fight in isolation, survive in enemy rear areas, hit sensitive targets, and evade enemy reaction.

At the same time, it trained to control the territory, protect strategic infrastructure, and identify infiltrated units before they could complete their mission.

Since then, adversaries, technologies, and operational scenarios have changed, but the principle has remained unchanged: surprise the enemy, disrupt their rear areas, and prevent them from doing the same.

This is the essence of the Mangusta and the reason why, decades later, it continues to represent one of the most comprehensive, tough, and formative training experiences of the Paratroopers Brigade “Folgore”.

The **“paratrooper's university”**, indeed.



A moment from the pre-mission briefing during Mangusta 2024 - Copyright Esercito Italiano