



July 20, 1942, the order that brought the Folgore to Africa: from the shattered dream of the drop on Malta to the desert of El Alamein

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On July 20, 1942, in the sun-drenched fields of Puglia, a sudden order changed, forever, the destiny and history of the Italian Paratroopers. The men who had been preparing for weeks to jump onto Malta would never reach the island. Instead, they were awaited by the Egyptian desert, the tanks of the Eighth Army, and the line of El Alamein.

That afternoon, the Paratroopers of Italy, stationed between Ceglie Messapica, Villa Castelli, Ostuni, and Francavilla Fontana, in the province of Brindisi, received the order to depart for North Africa.

It was the beginning of a journey that, within a few weeks, would lead the young Paratrooper Division from the fields of Puglia to the southernmost positions of the African front.

On July 20, 1942, around 4 PM, the men were completing preparations for what still appeared to be an imminent operation to drop onto Malta. At that moment, however, the sudden order for transfer to North Africa arrived.

The departure by train took place the following day, July 21.

The Paratroopers in the fields of Puglia

The Paratrooper Division had been transferred to Puglia to prepare for Operation C3, the complex Italian plan for the occupation of Malta, coordinated with the corresponding German operation called “Herkules.”

For about fifty days, the paratroopers trained in the fields of Brindisi. The Puglian territory offered suitable spaces for exercises, while the relative proximity to the airports of southern Italy would have allowed the concentration of transport planes necessary for the air landing.

The objective was ambitious. Malta was a strategically fundamental position in the center of the Mediterranean, from which British forces could strike convoys heading to Libya and hinder supplies destined for the Axis armies in Africa.

The plan included preparatory bombings, paratrooper drops, the use of gliders, and subsequent landings from the sea. The Italian Paratrooper Division would have been one of the main components of the assault force.

The men were thus preparing to fight as airborne troops: drop behind enemy lines, capture assigned objectives, isolate defenses, and hold out until the arrival of forces landed from the sea.

But the operation never took place.

From Malta to the African emergency

In the summer of 1942, the strategic situation in North Africa took priority.

After the fall of Tobruk and the advance of the Italo-German forces into Egypt, the front had stalled in front of the British positions at El Alamein. The Axis was just over a hundred kilometers from Alexandria but had exhausted much of its offensive capability.

The units were worn out, the vehicles needed maintenance, and fuel and ammunition continued to be scarce. At the same time, the British Eighth Army was receiving new men, tanks, guns, and supplies.

The Italian command therefore decided to assign the Paratrooper Division, the pride of the Royal Army, to the African front. The units trained to conquer Malta would be employed as ground infantry in the desert.

On July 20, the order reached the Paratroopers in Puglia. From the men's perspective, it meant abandoning the mission for which they had prepared and facing a completely different operational theater.

There would be no drop. The parachutes would remain in the depots. The units would fight on the ground, in an environment lacking natural cover, water, and vegetation, where enemy movement could be observed for kilometers.

The path that led the Folgore to El Alamein, delivering it to legend, began on a summer afternoon in the fields of Puglia.

It was 4 PM on July 20, 1942.