

July 29, 1917: The Birth of the Arditi, the Assault Troops of the Royal Army

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July 29, 1917 is considered the official birth date of the **Arditi**, the assault units created by the Italian Royal Army during World War I to overcome the stalemate and devastating logic of trench warfare.

Their cradle was the training camp at **Sdricca di Manzano**, on the hills of the province of Udine, where the first volunteers destined for the new units were gathered and prepared. The camp was organized under the guidance of Major **Giuseppe Alberto Bassi**, one of the main architects of the formation and development of the new specialty.

An entirely Italian story that revolutionized the way of fighting, introducing unconventional techniques and new forms of asymmetric warfare, effectively creating the model from which modern Special Forces would be born.

A Response to Trench Warfare

After more than two years of fighting on the Italian front, it became evident how difficult it was to break through enemy lines with traditional frontal infantry assaults.

Barbed wire, machine guns, artillery, and fortified trenches made every advance extremely costly. Therefore, specially selected and trained men were needed to quickly penetrate enemy defenses, capture the most important points, and open a breach for the main forces.

The Arditi were not meant to replace the infantry but to precede it. Their task was to intervene at the decisive moment of the attack, exploiting surprise, speed, and the violence of action.



The Arditi of the Bologna Brigade under the command of Lt. Arturo Avolio

The Baptism of Sdricca

On **July 29, 1917**, at the Sdricca camp, a demonstration of the new assault techniques took place in the presence of **Vittorio Emanuele III**, Supreme Commander General **Luigi Cadorna**, and other military authorities.

That day is traditionally remembered as the official baptism of the Italian assault units. The Italian Army indeed marks July 29, 1917, as the date of the formation of the Arditi commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Bassi.

The first unit was composed of volunteers mainly from the infantry. The selection favored men with courage, physical endurance, personal initiative, and the ability to maintain control during close combat.

> *After witnessing an exercise conducted by Major Bassi, General Luigi Cadorna understood the potential of the new tactics and gave the green light to the creation of the Arditi, issuing a circular with precise guidelines for the establishment of special units. On July 29, 1917, King Vittorio Emanuele III officially sanctioned the birth of the Assault Units, marking Italy's entry into the modern era of special forces.*

Hard and Realistic Training

At Sdricca, the men underwent particularly intense preparation. The training included overcoming barbed wire, throwing hand grenades, using automatic weapons, hand-to-hand combat, and trench assaults.

The exercises were conducted on terrains organized to reproduce Austro-Hungarian defenses. The goal was to accustom the soldiers to advance immediately after the artillery fire, taking advantage of the few moments when the enemy was still disoriented.

The Arditi operated with lighter equipment than ordinary infantry. Among their characteristic weapons were hand grenades, daggers, pistols, rifles, flamethrowers, and **Villar Perosa** submachine guns.

The dagger became one of the most recognizable symbols of the specialty, linked to close combat in trenches and passageways.

Black Flames and Esprit de Corps

Members of the assault units also stood out for their own uniform and a strong esprit de corps. On their insignia, they bore flames, the color of which varied according to their originating weapon. The most famous were the **Black Flames**, associated with the Arditi from the infantry.

The discipline of the units was accompanied by the enhancement of individual initiative and aggressiveness in combat. It was a new concept compared to the rigid uniformity that had characterized many of the assaults in the early years of the war.

The Arditi had to act in small groups, move quickly, identify weak points in the defense, and neutralize machine guns, command posts, and resistance centers.



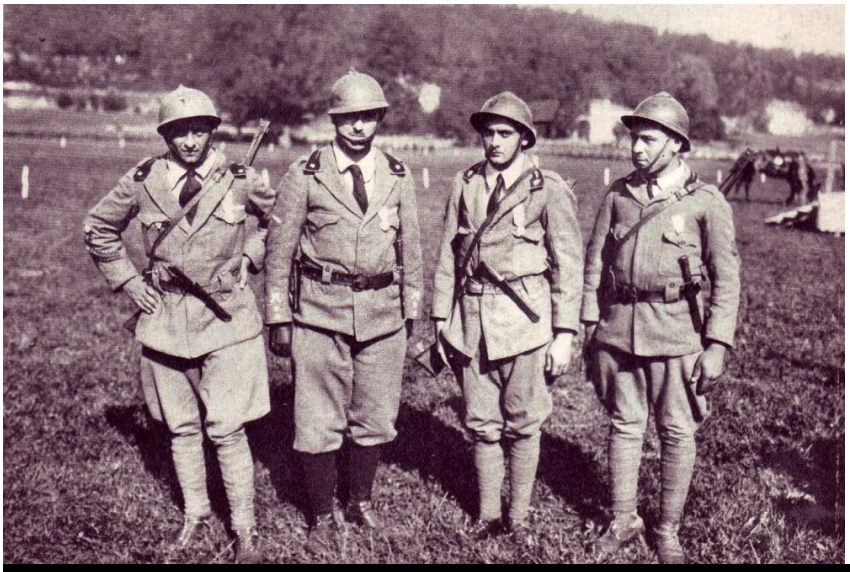
Propaganda poster of the Arditi, World War I – Italian Historical War Museum

From the Isonzo to the Piave: The Conquest of Col Moschin

The assault units were employed in numerous operations on the Italian front, distinguishing themselves on the Isonzo, the Grappa massif, and along the Piave. After the retreat of Caporetto, they were reorganized and progressively strengthened, leading to the formation, in 1918, of two Assault Divisions later united into an Assault Army Corps.

One of their most famous feats occurred during the Battle of the Solstice. On June 15, 1918, Austro-Hungarian forces captured several positions on the Grappa, including Col Moschin, opening a dangerous breach in the Italian defenses. The reaction was entrusted to the IX Assault Unit, which first recaptured Col Fagheron and Col Fenilon and, at dawn on June 16, reconquered Col Moschin with a lightning attack lasting just ten minutes. The Arditi captured about 300 prisoners, including 17 officers, and 25 machine guns, neutralizing the enemy offensive in less than twenty-four hours. From that feat, the IX Assault Unit derived the name destined to enter history: **“Col Moschin”**.

The Arditi were again protagonists during the final offensive of Vittorio Veneto, contributing to the breakthrough of the Austro-Hungarian lines. At the end of the conflict, the Royal Army had numerous assault units, framed both in large specialized units and under the direct command of armies and army corps.



Lieutenant Carlo Sabatini and his Arditi of the V Assault Unit just decorated after the action on Monte Corno on May 13, 1918 – Copyright Ministry of Cultural Heritage, photo Luigi Marzocchi

The Legacy of the Arditi

The specialty was dissolved in the early postwar period, but the experience gained between 1917 and 1918 left a deep mark on Italian military history.

The Arditi introduced a new concept of assault, based on personnel selection, specialized preparation, the autonomy of small units, and the concentration of force against decisive objectives.

Their military tradition is today preserved by the **9th Paratroopers Assault Regiment "Col Moschin"**, which recognizes in the Arditi of the Great War its historical roots.

At Sdricca di Manzano, a plaque placed on the ancient headquarters of the unit still commemorates the place where, on **July 29, 1917**, the first units of the Arditi of Italy were created.

A page born in the trenches of the Great War, destined to become part of the history and tradition of Italian assault units.



The commemorative plaque at Sdricca di Manzano, where on July 29, 1917, the first units of the Arditi of Italy were officially constituted.