



Meloria, November 9, 1971 - November 9, 2025: 54 years ago the tragedy of "Gesso 4"

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Fifty-four years ago, at dawn on November 9, 1971, the sea of Meloria claimed fifty-two lives: 46 paratroopers of the Folgore and 6 aviators of the Royal Air Force. They were flying to Sardinia for the NATO exercise **Cold Stream**, when the **C-130 Hercules XV216 "Gesso 4"** disappeared into the darkness, a few miles off the coast of Livorno.

It was one of the most painful pages in the history of Italian airborne troops, a trauma that forever marked the **Paratrooper Brigade "Folgore"** and the city of Livorno. Today, November 9, 2025, that tragedy remains a living memory, etched in ceremonies, monuments, and the composed silence of the units.

The context: Cold Stream and the "tactical flight"

We are in 1971, in the midst of the **Cold War**. Italy's role in the NATO chessboard is crucial: in case of conflict against the Soviet Union, the Folgore is called to be the advanced spearhead of reaction.

Cold Stream was created to perfect **mass airdrops** with modern criteria: the **CARP (Calculated Air Release Point)** allowed for the selection of smaller landing zones, boarding paratroopers in planes by their respective units, and reducing reorganization times on the ground. The tactic involves a **tight formation**: ten planes spaced **15 seconds apart, very low altitude** to evade radar, a short **climb** near the drop zone, and a **rapid dive** after the airdrop to return under cover.

From the **experience gained during World War II**, it emerged that mass airdrops presented critical issues during the drop phase and the subsequent reorganization of paratroopers on the ground.

At dawn, **nine C-130 Hercules of the Royal Air Force and an Andover** take off from **Pisa San Giusto** with **396 paratroopers** headed to **Villacidro** (Cagliari).

It is an operation never attempted before, in terms of size and complexity, in the history of Italian airborne troops.

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Illustration of the CARP (Calculated Air Release Point) system

The incident: “Gesso 4” does not respond

The ten military aircraft were each marked with a **chalk number on the side of the aircraft**.

At **04:55**, the **Andover “Gesso 1”** takes off, leading the formation with the equipment for the CARP and dropping ten paratroopers of the **Sappers Battalion**.

At **05:41**, the first **C-130 “Gesso 2”** takes off, carrying the Commander of the Folgore, the **MOVIM of El Alamein “Aquila 1” General Ferruccio Brandi**, who was celebrating his 51st birthday that day.

Takeoffs follow every **15 seconds** from the runway; **“Gesso 9”** and **“Gesso 10”** are delayed and will not depart with the first group.

In the stretch between Pisa and Livorno, **the crew of “Gesso 5”**—following at a distance **“Gesso 4”**—notices **a sudden flash** over the sea. **Lt. Col. Scott**, commander of the formation, calls all aircraft: **six respond, “Gesso 4” is missing.**

Scott turns with **“Gesso 8”** towards the estimated impact point; the rest of the formation continues towards Sardinia. In Pisa, **Maj. Antonio Milani, head of operations for the Folgore**, takes off in an **AB-205 helicopter** towards the **Secche della Meloria.**

At sea, an oil slick, **backpacks, a landing gear**, empty lifeboats: the first, tragic clues.

General Brandi, informed just after landing by parachute in Sardinia, immediately returns to Livorno.

Meanwhile, the Folgore **continues the exercise**: a harsh but consistent gesture with the operational logic of the time.

The causes of the incident

A **commission of inquiry** is established, but it can only operate fully after the wreck is found.

No emergency call was made from “Gesso 4”. Despite the recovery of large sections of the aircraft, **the cause was never determined with certainty.**

From the arrangement of the wreckage, investigators **hypothesized a flight at too low an altitude** and an **attempt to pull up**: the **tail** would have **hit the water**, causing the **aircraft to break apart.**

A reconstruction consistent with the **tactical flight profile** and the complexity of a mission conducted **in the dark, skimming the sea**, in tight formation.

The recovery: months of searches

The searches begin immediately, directed by the **Maritime Military Department “Alto Tirreno”**: naval units, air assets, but **rough seas** and **uncertain coordinates** render the initial effort futile. By cross-referencing observations from land and lighthouse references, Majors **Orrù** and **Milani** delimit a new area: on **November 15**, the minesweeper **Ontano** locates the wreck of **“Gesso 4”** at a depth of **about 50 meters.**

From **November 17**, operations intensify: the **Italian Navy** coordinates with the support ship **Pietro Cavezzale**, supported by **Carabinieri**, **State Police**, and **Paratrooper Sappers Battalion**. The British counterpart **Layburn** also arrives. **The bodies** are **recovered**, **identified** thanks to the **serial numbers of parachutes** and **individual weapons**.

On **November 18, 1971**, during operations, **Sgt. Maj. Giannino Caria** frees himself from the safety line to explore the wreck more deeply: **he will not resurface**. An Air Force officer dives in and brings him back to the surface, lifeless: for that act, **Caria** will receive the **Gold Medal for Civil Valor**, with a citation that is already a story of **dedication** and **brotherhood in arms**.

Ship Cavezzale remains in Livorno until **February 10, 1972**, when the searches are suspended: **35 paratroopers and 3 aviators are found**. New reports will lead to further recoveries in the following months, but **ten bodies will never be found**.

On **January 9, 1972**, in the **Cathedral of Livorno**, **President of the Republic Giovanni Leone** attends the funerals: the funeral processions will be repeated several times, as the sea returns its sons.

The Fallen

Folgore Paratroopers

S.Ten. P.M. **Magnaghi** · S.Ten. E. **Borghesan** · Mar. Ca. G. **Augello** · Serg. Magg. C. **Celozzi** · C.le Magg. C. **Colombini** · C.le M. **Benericetti** · C.le S. **Bolzoni** · C.le A. **Fiumara** · C.le G. **Ianni** · C.le P. **Interrante** · C.le S. **Licori** · C.le F. **Vantaggiato** · Par. L. **Angelini** · Par. E. **Carta** · Par. A. **Ciappellano** · Par. M. **Carasi** · Par. A. **Deiana** · Par. V. **De Marco** · Par. L. **Dal Lago** · Par. U. **De Mitri** · Par. P. **Dessi** · Par. P. **Donnarumma** · Par. D. **Dal Zotto** · Par. A. **De Vito** · Par. A. **D'Alessandro** · Par. G. **D'Alessandro** · Par. G. **Di Natale** · Par. F. **Dall'Asta** · Par. M. **Ferrari** · Par. G. **Facchetti** · Par. C. **Frasson** · Par. S. **Fumosa** · Par. W. **Furgeri** · Par. R. **Fracassetti** · Par. R. **Giannattasio** · Par. G. **Giannini** · Par. B. **Guidorzi** · Par. G. **Guarnieri** · Par. A. **Ginex** · Par. A. **Gilioli** · Par. R. **Liuzzi** · Par. D. **Matelli** · Par. R. **Morganti** · Par. E. **Quarti** · Par. S. **Sabatini** · Par. L. **Torsello**

RAF Crew

FLT./LT. C.G. **Harrison** · FG.OFF. R. **Swann Proce** · FG.OFF M. **Fawcett** · F./SGT. B.D. **King** ·

The commemorations

Every year the **Folgore** remembers the **Fallen of Meloria** with a ceremony attended by the **military and civil authorities** of the city of Livorno, along with associations and citizens.

This year's edition was however **marred by a vile act: unknown individuals, during the night** between November 6 and 7, damaged the wreath and part of the tributes laid at the foot of the monument, deliberately targeting a symbolic place of **collective memory** and **sacrifice**.

The monument, located in **via Dino Provenzal (Banditella)**, was erected on the initiative of **Paratrooper Assault Marshal Paolo Frediani** (who passed away in **2019**) and has become over the years a reference point for those who, in Livorno and beyond, preserve the history and values linked to the tragedy of **Meloria** and the paratrooper community.

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The monument to the fallen of Meloria in via Dino Provenzal, Livorno, erected on the initiative of Paratrooper Assault Marshal Paolo Frediani