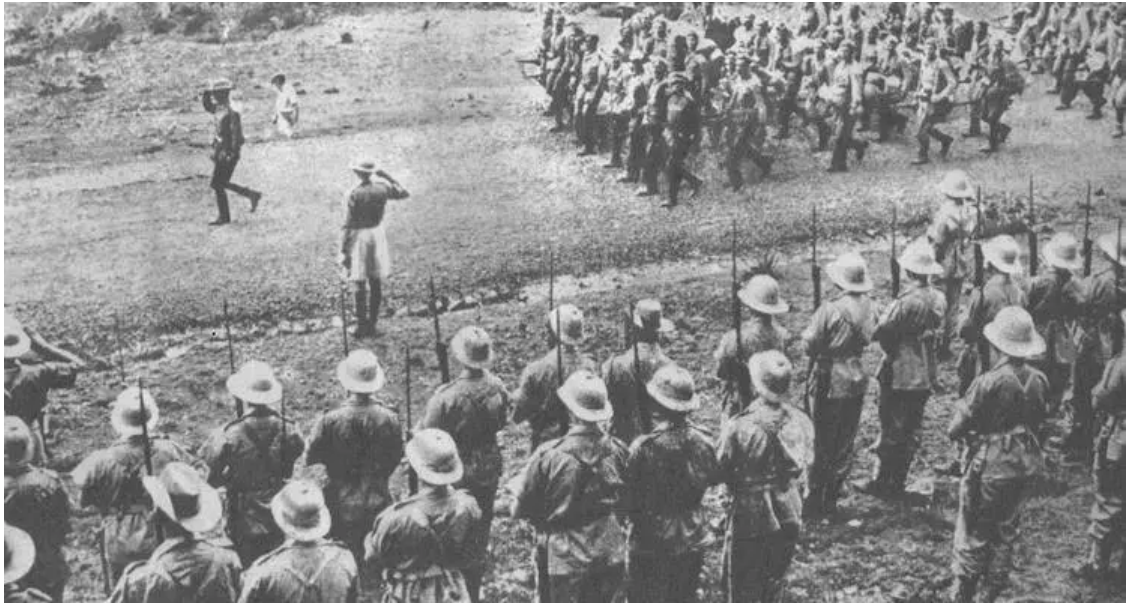




The chivalrous gesture of rendering honors: a battle may be lost, but not the enemy's respect

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There is a military distinction that is not awarded by one's own country, entails neither medals nor decorations and, precisely for that reason, carries extraordinary significance: the honors of war. It is the tribute paid by a victorious army to a defeated adversary, recognizing the courage, tenacity and dignity displayed on the battlefield. A gesture rooted in ancient military and chivalric traditions, when respect for an adversary's valor could survive even the brutality of war.

In military history, **the honors of war represent one of the highest moral distinctions a combatant can receive from an enemy.** They do not erase defeat or alter the outcome of a battle, but they grant those who fought a recognition that transcends sides and national allegiance.

Its origins can be traced to the military customs of antiquity, later developed through medieval chivalric traditions and the surrender rules of European armies. Under certain circumstances, defeated troops were allowed to march past the victors while retaining their weapons, flags or other symbols of military identity, as the enemy rendered them honors.

The meaning was unmistakable: you have lost the battle, but not our respect.

During the Second World War, this principle was also expressed in several episodes involving Italian units. Among them, the resistance of the **185^a Divisione Paracadutisti "Folgore" nella seconda battaglia di El Alamein** stands as one of the best-known and most remembered chapters in Italy's military history.

El Alamein, when the enemy paid tribute to Folgore

When the seconda battaglia di El Alamein began on October 23, 1942, Folgore units put up fierce resistance against enemy attacks, managing to hold their positions despite the enemy's numerical and material superiority.

By the morning of November 6, the remnants of the Folgore units were at the end of their strength.

The Divisione was not overrun in its initially assigned positions. The enemy had encountered unexpected and tremendously tenacious resistance.

The fate of the Italian Paracadutisti was sealed during the subsequent withdrawal, when the surviving units, by then without adequate supplies, transport, water or ammunition, continued to march and fight in the desert.

The young men of Folgore had fought for nearly two weeks, endured the withdrawal through the desert and consumed much of their remaining resources.

Paracadutista Carlo Murelli, a 21-year-old from Monza, fired the last twenty-round magazine from his Breda.

A detail that restores the individual dimension of a battle remembered above all through its large numbers, units and commanders.

Behind the story of Folgore **were young men barely out of their teens**, many of whom had left Italy only a few months earlier.

When even the last opportunities to fight had vanished, **Colonel Luigi Camosso, commander of the surviving group**, ordered the weapons rendered unusable and the men formed up.

On **6 November 1942, at 14:35**, one of the last organized groups of the Folgore, rallied around the 187° Reggimento Paracadutisti, ceased resistance.

According to Colonel Paolo Caccia Dominioni's account, **32 officers and 272 enlisted men remained under command**—just 304 troops from a formation that had once numbered thousands.

The Paracadutisti, by then without ammunition, water, or supplies, were therefore forced to cease resistance. Even at the moment of surrender, they maintained the order, discipline, and military dignity that had distinguished their conduct throughout the battle: **the British soldiers rendered them military honors.**

Murelli later recalled that, during the capture, a British serviceman picked up the dagger an Italian officer had thrown into the sand and returned it to him as a mark of respect.

A simple gesture, yet one with profound meaning: **recognition of an opponent's military dignity, even in defeat.**



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El Alamein, Egypt, July 1942. Italian servicemen taken prisoner by troops of the 24^a Brigata di Fanteria australiana during fighting in the Egyptian desert. © Australian War Memorial.

Amba Alagi and Culqualber, the respect earned by Italian soldiers

The Folgore was not the only example of Italian military valor recognized by its adversaries during the Second World War.

A particularly significant precedent dates back to May 1941, during the siege of **Amba Alagi, in East Africa**, where the Duke Amedeo d'Aosta commanded Italian forces that had been surrounded by British and Commonwealth troops.

After a long resistance, with resources exhausted and unable to continue the defense effectively, the Italian garrison was forced to capitulate.

On 19 May 1941, thousands of Italian servicemen left their positions and marched past enemy units, which presented arms as a mark of respect. Under the terms of the capitulation, officers were permitted to retain their pistols.

It was a tribute to the defenders' conduct, despite their ultimate military defeat.

Equally significant was the resistance at **Culqualber, in Ethiopia**, where in November 1941 the Carabinieri of the 1° Gruppo Mobilitato, together with other Italian and colonial units, mounted a determined defense against enemy forces.

Recognizing their opponents' valor, the British offered honorable terms of surrender. The Italians refused, choosing to continue fighting.

On 21 November, at the end of a bloody battle, the strongpoint fell.

In recognition of the Carabinieri's sacrifice, the Corps Flag was awarded the Gold Medal of Military Valor. November 21 was subsequently chosen as the feast day of the *Virgo Fidelis*, Patroness of the Corps.

Three different stories united by one element: **the ability of the combatants to earn respect even from those called upon to face them on the battlefield.**



Depiction of the Battle of Cualqualber - Historical painting - Copyright Ministry of Defence

Honor that survives defeat

The honor of arms still offers a lesson today that extends beyond the strictly military sphere.

Victory does not automatically confer moral superiority on the victor, just as defeat does not erase the courage and dignity of the defeated.

In war, where two armies confront one another with the aim of defeating each other, recognizing an adversary's valor is an act of respect that, at least for a moment, rises above the clash of arms.

That is what makes this ancient chivalric recognition so meaningful.

Folgore fought at El Alamein and was defeated, like the army to which it belonged. Yet the valor displayed by its Paracadutisti outlived the battle and became an integral part of the history of the Speciality.

Because there are battles lost on the field, yet in which the combatants' courage earns something victory itself cannot guarantee: the enemy's respect.