



In the Line of Fire

Fixated on a “return to combat,” Mussolini and his collaborators hoped for the best from the RSI’s newly forged army on the field of battle. With the GNR and BN in disarray, Graziani’s troops represented the RSI’s last chance for military glory.

RSI military detachments returned to the front in January 1944 when a battalion of *Nembo* parachutists and the *Barbarigo* unit of the X Mas deployed at Anzio. Some units of the *Folgore* Division, who swore allegiance “for the honor of Italy” to the Third Reich, were placed in coastal defenses along the Laziale littoral against the Allies at Salerno. In various bloody actions they suffered heavy losses. The last regiment surrendered on 5 May 1945 on the front in the Western Alps.

Mussolini hoped that the legions placed under Graziani’s command would be stationed on the Gothic Line or on the Anzio Front, ideal places to showcase the RSI military by giving them the opportunity to take the measure of the Anglo-Americans.¹ The trenches on the Tosco-Emiliano in the Apennines offered a fitting place for the Italian troops to “redeem the honor” of Italy by fighting a “pure” war on the side of the Axis ally against the strong Allied forces arrayed against them. On Mussolini’s intervention in early July 1944, Italian divisions were to be sent to areas free of partisan activity and held in reserve to counter any Allied landing along the coastlines.

¹ At Anzio fought a small unit of the X Mas *Il Barbarigo* and a parachute unit of the *Nembo*.

However, disagreements with the Germans ensued. The Wehrmacht generals wanted to break up the Italian divisions by sending Mussolini's troops to man German anti-aircraft units on the Eastern Front, while Göring demanded another twenty-four thousand Italians to form auxiliary units for German anti-aircraft service. When the Germans issued the proclamation "*Richtofen*" that required the *Regia Aeronautica*'s personnel to choose either between enlistment in a Luftwaffe detachment or service in anti-aircraft units, the *Folgore* parachutists, infuriated by such high-handedness, encircled SS units in the vicinity. In the following stare-down, the Germans backed off but retaliated by eventually destroying or requisitioning RSI planes and equipment, which practically eliminated the *Aeronautica* as a fighting force.²

Mussolini, refusing to take this episode lying down, wrote Hitler on 26 August: "On the morning of the 25th, completely without my knowledge, all the airports, barracks, and aviation offices were surrounded by German armed forces, which cut telephone lines and confined officers and troops to barracks under threat of death ... I urgently ask you, Führer, to give orders aimed at putting an end to this painful episode as quickly as possible."³

Further insult was to come when Keitel informed the Italians that the *Littorio* and *Italia* would be dissolved and the men used for German anti-aircraft units on the Russian front. A dismayed Mussolini on 29 September pointed out to Hitler that such orders constituted grave blows to the Italian government's prestige.⁴

Mussolini pursued his case by exhorting Göring on 9 October to refrain from scattering his men simply to suit German needs. The Italian workforce had already been seriously drained by eighty thousand men assigned to German anti-aircraft units, manpower employed to supply important war goods and materials for Germany, Todt organization demands, men employed on fortifications and repair of railways, roads, and bridges.⁵ Mussolini and Graziani both fought hard to keep their soldiers intact for warfare against the Allies. Hitler was the man in the middle, caught between the pressures of his own military and his desire to keep the Duce on board.

² Gasparini and Razeto, *1944*, p. 350.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 350–51.

⁴ Lamb, *War in Italy*, p. 112.

⁵ Deakin, *The Six Hundred Days of Mussolini*, pp. 215–16.

Hitler finally yielded, up to a point. The Wehrmacht was facing a serious threat. On 17 July the Allies attacked Ancona and on 10 August liberated Florence. The retreating Germans on their way to new battle stations in the North destroyed all bridges over the Arno River, except the Ponte Vecchio. In spite of these setbacks, Hitler ordered the *Monte Rosa* and *San Marco* to be posted along the Green Line, far from the combat zones, where, possibly, they would be deployed for coastal defense and anti-partisan operations.

Mussolini sent repeated requests to Kesselring demanding that his new divisions be used in combat against the Allies for a large Axis counter-attack to drive the enemy out of Florence and beyond the Arno.⁶ On 14 November he wrote Hitler that the Axis should “mass a force of eighty to a hundred thousand men to attack in the winter, when the enemy’s superiority in armored vehicles and planes cannot be exploited to the full ... This would turn the situation upside down and constitute the first longed-for day of sunshine after so many months of fog.”⁷

In October the Germans gave Graziani command of the new army group *Liguria* (*AOK Ligurien*), which consisted of the *Monte Rosa* and *San Marco* reinforced by German divisions to defend the Ligurian coast west and east of Genoa and the French frontier against a possible Allied landing. As things turned out, Wehrmacht generals mainly controlled the army group Liguria.

On 15 July the Alpine Division, which had been trained and reasonably provided with weapons in Münsingen Germany, was placed under the command of General Mario Carloni, who had served on the Greek, Albanian, and Russian fronts. On paper the *Monte Rosa* appeared formidable—about 20,000 men organized in three regiments.

At the end of July the *Monte Rosa* arrived in Italy in questionable fighting mood. More than a few had enlisted simply as a means of getting back home where they intended to desert. Expecting a warm homecoming, they heard, instead, angry shouts: “Traitors, wastrels, sellouts!” Provoked by this shower of insults, the soldiers of the *Monte Rosa Alpini* often reacted immediately and energetically by shooting people randomly and

⁶ On 4 October Mussolini wrote Kesselring: “From 26 August your tireless and incomparable troops fought to prevent the Anglo-Saxons from taking possession of the Padana Valley. From this day the Italian people have waited in vain the announcement that Italian troops have been engaged in the decisive battle.” Cited in Gasparini and Razeto, *1944*, pp. 390–91.

⁷ Cited in Deakin, *The Six Hundred Days of Mussolini*, pp. 218–20.

yelling: “at the end of the war they’ll be the ones to sort out the Italians who ‘need to be purged.’”⁸ Another observer wrote: “You say that the *Alpini* haven’t yet arrived, but I have to tell you that they have all managed to flee.”⁹

First deployed in mid-October on a quiet part of the west end of the Gothic Line between Pontremoli and Lucca to defend transportation arteries and the coast against eventual Anglo-American landings, the *Monte Rosa* was immediately diverted to secure the rearguard areas from partisan attacks. Dug in along the Val di Taro to the Cento Croci pass and along the Val di Vara, the troops participated in a large-scale *rastrellamento* in the Trebbia and Taro valleys at the end of August. Rocked on their heels by fierce partisan counterattacks, the *Monte Rosa* suffered bloody losses. The troops, who had expected to take on the Allies, had no stomach for hunting down fellow countrymen in a fratricidal war. Their morale having been severely shaken by this changed mission, soldiers deserted, and by September the division had lost 6 percent of its original force.¹⁰

The severity of the conflict, exacerbated by winter’s punishment—temperatures falling to twenty degrees below zero—further sapped morale. With hardly a moment to catch their breath, and deprived of home leave, the troops were compelled to undertake long and grueling marches by foot, and they had to hit ditches without letup to dodge constant Allied strafing attacks. Soldiers experienced contradictory orders from officers who had no talent for maintaining discipline. Notwithstanding all of this, they initially held their own. During one *rastrellamento*, for example: “They obeyed orders by burning houses and shooting all captured partisans.”¹¹ However, the hostile attitude of the population generated by pillaging soldiers—coupled with propaganda spread by Communist partisans—induced three companies of the *Vestone* Battalion to pass over to the partisans during November.¹² Imagine the anger of both Germans and Graziani over this mass defection!

In October 1944 some *Monte Rosa* battalions, which were transferred to the Gothic Line in the vicinity of Garfagnana and placed at the disposal of the XIV German Army, finally had the chance to test their mettle in

⁸ Cited in Pavone, *A Civil War*, p. 133.

⁹ ACS, SPD, RSI, carteggio riservato, b. 9, found in Pavone, *A Civil War*, p. 133, n. 76.

¹⁰ Battistelli and Molinari, *Le forze armate della Rsi*, p. 28.

¹¹ ACS, SPD, RSI, Carteggio riservato, b. 69.

¹² Giorgio Gimelli, *La Resistenza in Liguria. Cronache militari e documenti*. Vol. 1: *Dall’8 settembre alla stagione dei grandi rastrellamenti* (Rome: Carocci, 2005), p. 400.

combat against Allied units of the *Força Expedicionária Brasileira* facing them.¹³ On the 28th the Brazilians, aided by partisans, launched an attack against the *Alpini*, who immediately fell into a disorderly retreat. Only when a German battalion intervened to help them recover lost ground were they saved further embarrassment.

Since the *Monte Rosa* had suffered fragmentation by the dispatch of key units to other fronts, the major core lacked coherence, which led to confusion in the command structure. Inferior equipment further deepened military morale. The division hardly had any heavy artillery at its disposal, almost no anti-aircraft guns, and only a handful of 20-millimeter caliber machine-guns. Notwithstanding all the difficulties, the *Monte Rosa*, on 17 November, though sustaining heavy losses, was able to fend off an attack launched by the 92th American Buffalo Division. Immediately after the battle, the *Monte Rosa* was united with the 148th German infantry to form an autonomous group under the command of the Wehrmacht General Fretter-Pico, who was the major protagonist in the offensive of 25–26 December 1944, denominated *Operation Wintergewitter*.

To Mussolini's satisfaction, his troops were slated to be seriously tested under the command of Wehrmacht General Kurt von Tippelskirch, who believed that an assault against the Buffalo Division opposing him would be a cakewalk. The *Brescia* Battalion spearheaded the attack, which emanated from Perpoli along the Valley of Serchio in the direction of Gallicano. Under the heavy pounding of the combined Italo-German troops, the Americans fell back on the night of the 26th. The next day, advancing eight kilometers, the *Alpini* reached Gallicano on a twenty kilometer front. On the 28th the offensive was resumed. Deprived of reserves and lacking air support, however, the Axis forces were constrained to fall back to their original positions. The Allies, undisturbed by anti-aircraft fire, closed up the gap by use of armor and aviation that strafed the Italian and German forces. Allied fighter-bombers flew around 400 sorties in a sky clear of Axis pursuit planes. A study of *Operation Wintergewitter* reveals that the initial success, due to surprise, was not exploited, thanks to a lack of troop reinforcements, transport vehicles, and air support. The Italian soldiers were

¹³ On the *Força Expedicionária Brasileira*, see Mariano Gabriele, "La Força Expedicionária Brasileira (FEB) sulla Linea Gotica (1944–1945)," in Giorgio Rochat, Enzo Santarelli, Paolo Sorcinelli, eds., *Linea Gotica 1944. Eserciti, popolazioni, partigiano* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1986).

literally cut to pieces by American aviation and Indian divisions, which pushed them back to their original jumping-off positions.

If there was no strategic gain from this brief Axis breakthrough, the Italian and German forces did succeed in capturing around a hundred prisoners and much materiel consisting of arms, munitions, and equipment. It was the last hurrah of the *Monte Rosa* in Garfagnana, for almost all units were soon transferred out of the region. The few *Alpini* soldiers who remained in the zone surrendered to the Brazilians near Parma on 29 April.¹⁴

On 21 August the *Littorio* was sent for training at the camp at Sennelager and on 1 September transferred to Münsingen in Germany. It appeared on paper to be a rather formidable force consisting of approximately 14,930 men organized in two regiments (one *Granatieri* and one *Alpine*) and a regiment of artillery divided into four groups and placed under the command of General Agosti. Returning to Italy in October 1944, the division was deployed on the shoulder of the Gothic Line in the zone of Oltrepò Pavese, where, after a brief lull, it experienced strong partisan attacks. On 6 November, attacked on all sides, units of the *Littorio* found themselves imperiled. Unable to fend for themselves, the troops were transferred at the beginning of December to a less dangerous front in the Western Alps. Concentrated to face eventual Anglo-American attacks that never materialized, they had time on their hands for search-and-destroy missions against the partisans.

The *San Marco* Division consisted of two infantry regiments and one artillery unit. General Amilcare Farina, who was attached to the CARS, a winner of three *Medaglia d'Argento* awards in the Spanish Civil War, and a friend of the Germans, was appointed commander on 5 September. The nucleus was made up of a naval infantry unit that was stationed on the Aegean islands as well as Blackshirts surprised by the armistice in the Balkans. Having arrived in Italy during summer 1944, the division was placed in Graziani's *Liguria* army group deployed to defend the coastal regions. But since this front remained quiet in the absence of an Allied landing, the *San Marco* was utilized in a series of *rastrellamenti* in a zone west of Savona and Acqui. Having little heart for such undertakings, the men of the *San Marco* moved lazily and ineffectually against the partisan enemy. A Wehrmacht colonel describes units of the *San Marco* engaged in the struggle against the partisans in the area of La Spezia as a "band" whose combat efficiency was "practically zero."¹⁵

¹⁴ Battistelli and Molinari, *Le forze armate della Rsi*, pp. 38–41.

¹⁵ Cited in Gentile, *I criminali di guerra tedeschi in Italia*, p. 116.

Like the other divisions, the *San Marco* was shredded by desertions, which from the middle of September numbered 41 officers, 104 non-commissioned officers, and 2,287 infantry.¹⁶ An order of the day on 1 October 1944, issued by General Amilcare Farina, clearly documents the demoralization and lack of preparation of the unit: “*Officers*: They exhibit deplorable behavior, lack respect, esteem, and affection. They have no sense of authority. They understand only one impulse: cowardice. They contemplate only one idea: idleness. They do nothing but ink proposals and kill time: sabotage ... Toward the public they radiate disrespect and defiance (toward women they act like fools). As for the soldiers: weakness. With their superiors, hangdog embarrassment for habitual absences from their posts. On orders delivered to their posts: indecisiveness. When engaged in combat with the partisan enemy, they ought to know how to die. Cleaning of arms: shameful, faulty. Use of arms: no effective instruction. Arms available: defective. Battalion commanders: no coordination between infantry and artillery. I declare that all infantry and men manning the artillery, if they are not at their battle stations, are in dereliction of duty. This goes too for those responsible for breakdowns in communications between infantry and artillery and vice-versa. There should be strict collaboration between the division and German infantry as well as between infantry and aviation and navy. Look out for one another, know one another, trust one another. Rebels: maximum shame! Nothing is ever done! Commanders bed down at 9:00! No: The night is full of surprises and danger lurks everywhere. There must be a network of vigilance that is enforced daily. Every battalion must be watchful. Same goes for auxiliary units. There must be drills night and day! But everyone sleeps, and no one gives a damn.”¹⁷

Deployed along the Via Aurelia to guard against possible Allied landings, the *San Marco* at the same time took up positions deep in the hinterlands to defend the roads and Apennine passes from partisan attacks. Two battalions, the 11/6 and 111/5, were deployed in autumn 1944 between Castelnuovo of Garfagnana and Fiumalbo on the Gothic Line next to the comrades of the *Monte Rosa*. Aligned against the Buffalo Division in mid-November, it was subjected to an American offensive. One battalion, the 11/d, which made up a part of *Operation Wintergevitte*, covered the

¹⁶ Alberto Leoni, *Il paradiso devastato. Storia militare della Campagna d'Italia 1943–1945* (Milan: Ares, 2012), p. 354.

¹⁷ Pansa, *Il gladio e l'alloro*, pp. 210–11.

flank of the *Monte Rosa*. The two battalions remained in the line until 20 March 1945, when they were replaced by units of the *Italia* Division.

Made up of *Bersaglieri*, who had been trained in Padeborn Germany, the *Italia* Division also included two infantry regiments and one artillery regiment. The *Italia* was the most poorly trained and equipped of the four and the last to leave Germany. At the beginning of December 1944 the division reentered Italy and was deployed in the Parmense to defend the Cisa Pass. As soon as it arrived, the men were brought under heavy partisan fire and suffered calamitous defeats. The number of desertions immediately shot up. Graziani told the Duce in November that he had to buy clothes for the troops on the black market. Worse still, there were serious weapon deficiencies, especially in sub-machine guns.¹⁸ In April 1945 an officer sent Pavolini the following report: "The vicissitudes visited on the *Italia* Division are well known, and it is superfluous to repeat this information. Such vicissitudes have materially and morally humiliated the units and have profoundly impaired the compactness of the division, which has witnessed the sad spectacle of a very high percentage of desertions."¹⁹ At Santa Margherita Parmense, an entire battery was taken prisoner by the partisans on 26 December 1944. The division's first operation, during which it was to be joined by an anti-partisan unit denominated *Totila*, whose commander, General Fretter Pico, amalgamated to his force Turkmen of the SS division *Turkestan* in the Taro valley, turned out to be a fiasco.

In mid-January 1945 a regiment of the *Italia*, replacing a unit of the *Monte Rosa*, was deployed on the Gothic Line in the valley of the Magra River between Pontremoli and Aulla. Another battalion was deployed on the left bank of the Serchio. Having shoddy equipment severely depressed morale. Equally discouraging, the men suffered from a scarcity of supply trucks and gasoline and endured partisan ambushes. They enjoyed only a trickle of reinforcements. Mussolini was so perturbed by the deficiencies of the *Italia* that, bypassing both the Italian and German High Commands, he ordered the immediate requisitioning of vehicles to send decent clothing to the *Italia*'s divisional headquarters.²⁰

Immediately after the ill-prepared units of the *Italia* entered the lines after the New Year, they were brought under fire in early February by a fierce American and British attack that imperiled the entire division.

¹⁸ Lamb, *War in Italy*, p. 120.

¹⁹ AUSSME, H8, b. 9.

²⁰ Lamb, *War in Italy*, p. 121.

The Germans arrived to stiffen the Italian lines and, after the removal of “disloyal” elements, the men of the *Italia* acquitted themselves better. Thereafter, the *Italia* held together but not for combat duty against the Allies, for Kesselring in March 1945 removed both the *Italia* and *Monte Rosa* from the line in favor of anti-partisan warfare in the rearguard areas. In mid-April 1945, after the *Italia*’s remnants retreated toward Pontremoli, they surrendered to the Brazilians on the 28th.

The reasons behind the failings of Graziani’s divisions are legion. The personnel making up his army was mixed. Some of his soldiers consisted of interned military who had agreed to enlist as a means of getting out of the hated German camps for a return to the homeland.²¹ Others, recruited in Italy against their will, naturally had little will to fight.²²

Next to these forcibly drafted soldiers were youths convinced that they would be fighting a war of national liberation aimed at chasing the foreigner from the country’s “sacred” soil. War with the long-standing German comrade would continue to be fought in the same trenches against a common enemy as had been done since June 1940. Once having arrived in training camps in Germany, the men comprising the four divisions were inundated with patriotic propaganda that repeated the norms of military honor and brotherhood-in-arms preached by the regime: the *patria* must be freed of the foreign hordes. But those soldiers who had bought into this propaganda were in for a rude awakening. On their return home, they found themselves subjected to scorn and coldness by the civil population whom they aspired to defend. Moreover, they were hustled away without any home leave and immediately thrown into a civil war that was reaching barbaric dimensions.

Unprepared psychologically, and having had no training for counterinsurgency maneuvers, the soldiers turned out to be easy pickings for Italian partisans who had been seasoned by guerrilla warfare in the Apennines and who profited from the know-how of English officers and old-hand ex-Yugoslav prisoners. Mediocre and insufficient military equipment either for counterinsurgency or for traditional means of war against a well-armed standing army caused Graziani’s men in all four divisions to

²¹ According to a German report, sixty percent of the recruits taken in the camp at Münsingen were not Fascist and waited for the first opportune moment to desert. Bundesarchiv, Berlin, NS 19, Band 1881, rapporto da Münsingen of 19 October 1943.

²² In a meeting of the commanders of the various regional military commands held in April 1944, the number of draft dodgers came to 15,000. AUSSME, H8, b. 2, “Riunione della riunione del 18 aprile 1944 a Parma.”

perform shoddily and live hand-to-mouth. They suffered from endemic lack of transport, an absence of armored equipment, archaic means of communication inherited from the old *Regio Esercito*, scarce heavy weapons, decidedly obsolete artillery, practically non-existent anti-aircraft guns, and no air cover. The units that reached the Gothic Front got there by forced marches, mules dragging along wagons and heavy equipment under the usual heavy autumn rains in the Apennines, which had disastrous effects on morale.

To determine the motives for desertion, one needs only to read the memoirs of army officers who note that the public's taunting and scorn frequently convinced the troops of the utter uselessness of fighting on. "We're sick of being soldiers," wrote one disgruntled warrior speaking for many of his comrades.²³ Fascist sources are unsparing in their observations of the low morale and scant fighting spirit of the new republican army.

Just as depressing to Italian morale, the German commanders were loath to rely on their allies to defend any part of the front on their own. To instill discipline, the Wehrmacht frequently broke up Italian units and scattered them among their own. Obviously, this impinged on the formation of any *esprit de corps*, which rendered the Italian units less compact, less efficient, and less combative. Finally, the Germans resisted giving their Italian comrades adequate supplies and arms owing to persistent distrust in their will to fight and predisposition to desert at the first angry shot. Graziani retorted to Rahn and Wolff in January 1945 that the Wehrmacht preferred to engage Italians as workers rather than as soldiers.²⁴ By the end of March 1945, all four of Mussolini's divisions, with the exception of some mild fighting between French patrols and the Littorio in the Mediterranean Alps, were engaged in counterinsurgency.

Considering all the problems and shortcomings, it is surprising that some battalions were able to maintain a modicum of cohesion and will to fight until the end in April 1945. Ironically, the desertions served as a weeding-out process that rendered the men who stayed in the ranks more resolute, compact, and faithful to the regime.

Women were not absent in the police forces of the RSI, organizations undertaking campaigns against the partisans, and in Graziani's military legions, which contained 6,000 female auxiliaries who did not bear arms. Pavolini formed a woman's auxiliary corps, which was placed under the

²³ Cited in Pavoni, *A Civil War*, p. 137.

²⁴ Bocca, *Storia dell'Italia partigiana*, p. 471.

command of Piera Gatteschi Fondelli. An RSI decree issued on 18 April 1944 invited women to enlist in the GNR and in other units involved in the national defense. Women also formed auxiliary units of the X Mas, the BB, and SS Italian, participating in execution squads and *rastrellamenti* against partisans and civilians. Besides wearing the uniform, women served as spies and informers.²⁵

Mussolini declined to visit his troops until the Wehrmacht had provided them adequately with arms: "I intend to visit a division, not a sporting club of gymnasts."²⁶ On the rare occasions that the Duce did review his troops, he invariably was greeted by blaring trumpets in a salute to Italian grandeur. The soldiers experienced a "vibrant excitement" (*tutto in orgasmo*) at his very appearance, which greatly lifted their leader, who had always been happiest mingling with his military. The Fascist Pino Romualdi reports that the Duce's chest swelled with the feeling of "superiority" of the Italian warrior over the German: "These units are magnificent. They absolutely have nothing to envy in the best Wehrmacht soldiers. They are more ready than the Germans; our soldiers learn more rapidly the new training techniques and the use of the most recent weapons. Every man has a profound belief. There are a few small deficiencies among the officers and in other command circles that Graziani is rapidly eliminating."²⁷ On 16 July 1944 Mussolini told the *Monte Rosa*: "No one can escape the clash between Fascism and Bolshevism . . . The war in progress has the character of a religious war, a war of ideas." Three days later, he addressed the Alpini of the Littorio: "You must profit to the maximum from this school, because you have been instructed, one can surely say clearly, by the top masters of the military trade."²⁸

But Mussolini's elocution fell flat, particularly when he broke his promise that they would not be deployed against fellow Italians in the resistance. On the other hand, when the soldiers were sent to fight the Allies, Fascist propaganda worked, for they saw themselves descending into combat against the "Negroid people of Africa, Asia, and America, whose presence besmirched the homeland paradise."²⁹ Once again the racist chord had been sounded, and many listened.

²⁵ Avagliano and Palmieri, *L'Italia di Salò*, pp. 237–52.

²⁶ Cited in Pietra, *Guerriglia e contro guerriglia*, p. 57.

²⁷ Cited in Romualdi, *Fascismo repubblicano*, p. 111.

²⁸ OO, XXXII: 96–98.

²⁹ Lepre, *La storia della Repubblica di Mussolini*, p. 242.