

BERSAGLIERI INFANTRY

Heroes in Italian History

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During the first half of the XIX century the Army of the Sardinian Kingdom, like the French, British and Prussian armies, started to revise and modernise tactics on the battlefield, opening the way for a different kind of troops employment on the ground. On the 18th June 1836, Royal Grenadiers Captain Alessandro Ferrero De La Marmora proposed to King Carlo Alberto of Savoy the creation of a new Infantry Corps, called Bersaglieri.

The French Army already had special troops called Voltigeurs, with the task to attack the enemy on its sides with succession of strikes in order to create confusion and deceive the enemy as to their real intention. La Marmora took his inspiration from these troops. His idea was to have a quick and easy-to-manoeuvre Infantry force able to strike the enemy, specifically targeting commanders and other high value or sensitive targets. In addition to this Bersaglieri were used in deep strike operations, and reconnaissance to find routes or enemy formations in close cooperation with Dragoons (Cavalry troops that moved on horse but could dismount and fight as Infantry). Bersaglieri were able to picket choke points, high ground or other terrain that the Cavalry or other troops were unable to reach.

Bersaglieri were early pioneers and masters of camouflage. Their uniforms were one of the first to be designed with vegetation and background being taken into consideration. This integration of camouflage and tactics was very new in an



age where Armies still fought with bright colours, pomp and impractical uniforms. They were equipped with a dark blue uniform with dark blue gloves. The most useful and singular item of the uniform was a black hat with an internal iron cap and a large brim (to protect the head by the downward strokes with sabres) and decorated with wood grouse feathers (at the very beginning the officers were distinguished by their ostrich feathers).

The hat is called “cappello piumato” (“feathered hat”), or, more commonly it is known as a “Vajra”, from the name of the first Bersagliero soldier, Sergeant Vajra. There is a story too as to the reason why Bersaglieri wear their Vajras at a slanting angle. Whilst Captain La Marmora was issuing Sergeant Vajra the items of Bersaglieri uniform, he launched the hat at



him, but the Sergeant was so quick that with a jump directly caught the hat with his head. The hat remained across on his head, standing obliquely on the right side. Captain La Marmora was impressed by Sergeant Vajra and the way the hat landed on his head, so he told Vajra to keep it like that “to demonstrate boldness and disregard of danger”. The tradition of the quickness of Bersaglieri is still represented by the running march, always practiced by Bersaglieri units when parading.

Since 1836 Bersaglieri participated almost to every important Italian military campaign. In 1855 they were deployed abroad for the first time to the Crimea, to fight against the Russian empire. After this campaign they inherited from the French-Algerian Zouaves the typical field hat, the Islamic “fez”, still used today in place of the beret by the soldiers. Since the Crimean campaign, the officers’ and NCOs’ sword hilt displays the lion, symbol of Sebastopol, strongly defended by Bersaglieri together with the Zouaves.

The “fiamme cremisi” (“crimson flames”), how Bersaglieri are also known by the colour of their jacket collar badges, were largely employed between 1848 and 1866, during the three Italian independence wars. It is worth mentioning the battle of Magenta (4th June 1859): on this occasion the Sardinian and the French Army fought off the Austro-Hungarian Army and opened the way to free Milan and the north of Italy. The Kingdom of Italy was finally founded in 1861. But only on the 20th September 1870, after the 1st Bersaglieri Regiment entered the Vatican through a breach opened in the boundary



walls of Rome (Porta Pia breach), Rome was annexed to Italy to become its capital.

After that Bersaglieri have been involved in the African adventure of Italy in Eritrea and Ethiopia (last two decades of the XIX century and 1935) and again in China during the “Boxer rebellion” (1900 - 1905). Then in the Italian-Turkish war in Libya (1911 - 1913) and in the 1st and the 2nd World Wars.

To enhance their original tactical reason of employment, in 1898 it was decided to create Bersaglieri units equipped with bicycles, the so-called “carriole” (“wheelbarrows”, rustic and solid, not inflatable, wheel bicycles), under a Captain Natali’s proposal. After the 1st WW Bersaglieri units were assigned motorcycles.

During the second half of the XX century Bersaglieri were involved in the progressive reconstruction of the Italian

Army, and since 1982, with the UN-led operation in Lebanon they have been deployed to almost every operation of the last twenty years involving Italian military personnel: Albania, BiH, FYROM, Kosovo, Iraq, Afghanistan.

The Italian Army has the Bersaglieri Brigade “Garibaldi”, currently commanded by Bde Gen. Giuseppenicola TOTA. It is stationed in Caserta and based on two Bersaglieri Regiments as combat-manoeuve units: the 1st and the 8th Bersaglieri Regiment, each of them on AIFV “Dardo” OTO-MELARA. These two Regiments, with the 11th Bersaglieri Regiment of the Armoured Brigade “Ariete” are the core of the modern heavy Italian Armoured Infantry.

It is worth noting that the 1st Bersaglieri Regiment stationed in Cosenza is the most decorated unit of the Italian Armed Forces. On the 4th May 2009 it received its last decoration, “The Military Order of Italy”, the top Italian military decoration, for the conduct of the operations during the last mission in Iraq in 2006.

Anyway, Bersaglieri have always distinguished themselves not only for their value in battle, but also for their proud spirit of light heartedness, impudence and love for life. They penetrated the Italian culture, in a manner that their name, their uniform and their running march are normally associated to courage, boldness and Italian unselfishness. An old adage says: “Bersaglieri wear the colours of the death but they are the most beautiful expression of the life”. ■