

Italian Army Elite Units & Special Forces 1940–43



P. CROCIANI & P. P. BATTISTELLI

ILLUSTRATED BY J. SHUMATE

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Series editor Martin Windrow

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ITALIAN ARMY ELITE UNITS & SPECIAL FORCES 1940–43

INTRODUCTION

The origins of the Italian Army's elite and special forces date back to World War I, when the Arditi assault troops were formed, and foreign volunteer units were raised from former prisoners of war from the national minorities of the Austrian-Hungarian empire – Czechs, Poles and Romanians. In their different ways both these types of unit provided a nucleus of elite and special forces to the Italian Army, but their unique experiences of combat were lost to the army after the end of the war.¹

Foreign volunteer units were disbanded, mostly returning to their homelands to provide a core for their new national forces. The Arditi were also disbanded, but their veterans evolved into a kind of political movement; eventually they would provide the core of the Fascist organization, and its armed wing, the *Milizia Volontaria Sicurezza Nazionale* (MVSN – commonly called the *Camicie Nere*, 'Blackshirts') claimed to continue their traditions. During the inter-war years, when financial constraints limited technical and organizational innovations, none of the Italian armed forces would develop any elite units or special forces. This was partly due to unease over the political path taken by the Arditi veterans, but mainly because of the Italian high command's traditional distaste for any units that might enjoy a degree of special status, independence or operational freedom. The command doctrine was firmly 'top-down', and would not countenance any initiatives from the lower echelons.

Even the Army's existing 'elite' units enjoyed that status only to a distinctly limited extent. The Alpini mountain troops were set apart in two respects – by their recruitment, limited to the Alpine region and part of the Appennines; and by their specific training for mountain warfare – but they were not allowed any freedom to develop independent initiatives. Even the Bersaglieri ('sharpshooters' or light infantry), which were intended to create the bulk of the Italian motorized infantry, lacked both the equipment and the specific training necessary to turn them into a real elite. In most armies except the German *Heer*, the armoured branches that emerged in the 1920s and 1930s long remained subordinate to the traditional arms of service before

1 See Osprey Men-at-Arms 387, *The Italian Army of World War I*; MAA 447, *The Czech Legion 1914–20*; and Warrior 87, *Italian Arditi – Elite Assault Troops 1917–20*

achieving any degree of organizational independence, and in the Italian army this branch was formed as a specialized wing of the infantry.

It was only after Italy's entry into World War II in June 1940 that any significant changes took place. In Italy's main theatre of war, North Africa, some Army units emerged from the crucible of the early battles as a genuine elite that proved themselves capable of fighting like comparable German or British Commonwealth units. The term 'elite' as used here must be understood in that context: it refers to formations and units whose mission and performance set them apart from the mass of the Italian Army. Some elite and special units were newly created, following either foreign models – as in the case of the *Paracadutisti* paratroopers and the *Guastatori* assault engineers – or that of the World War I *Arditi*, as in the case of the *Alpini* ski battalion. Units of foreign volunteers were also raised, following the more familiar path explored in the Great War. Lack of suitable equipment, and in many cases of proper training and of specific skills (if not of willingness), produced mixed results; but in every case these initiatives and combat experiences deserve to be recalled.

ELITE FORMATIONS & UNITS: ARMoured & Motorized Divisions

OVERVIEW

The birth of the Italian armoured and motorized force as a separate entity took place only in the first months of 1939, following the creation – either by transforming existing divisions, or by expanding existing armoured brigades – of the first *divisioni corazzate* (armoured divisions) and *divisioni motorizzate* (motorized infantry divisions). The first one whose formation was announced was the 132^a *Divisione Corazzata Ariete* ('Ram'), on 1 February 1939, followed on 20 April 1939 by the 131^a *Divisione Corazzata Centauro* ('Centaur'). The third armoured division, the 133^a *Divisione Corazzata Littorio*, was initially intended to be an infantry division, and was only formed in November 1939 (the title referred to the lictors of ancient Rome, who carried the *fascio* – the bundled rods and axe that was the symbol of the Fascist Party). The creation of the first motorized formation, the 102^a *Divisione Motorizzata Trento*, was announced on 2 January 1939, followed on 4 April by the 101^a *Divisione Motorizzata Trieste* (both named after cities in northern Italy annexed after the end of World War I).

Both the armoured and the motorized divisions were grouped together into the short-lived *Corpo d'Armata Corazzato* (armoured army corps).



Major Paolo Caccia Dominioni, the commanding officer of the XXXI Battaglione Guastatori (31st Assault Engineer Bn), photographed in Egypt in 1942. This unit distinguished itself at heavy cost, fighting in both battles of Tobruk and, alongside the paratroopers of the Folgore Division, at El Alamein. Note the *Alpini* hat of this officer's parent corps, the *Sahariana* jacket with distinctive shoulder boards, and the dagger characteristic of Italian elite and special forces – see Plate E1. Caccia Dominioni would return to El Alamein after the war, to collect the bodies of the fallen of all armies, and eventually to build the Italian memorial. (Piero Crociani Collection)



A Bersagliere motorcyclist in the Western Desert. From January 1940 one motorcycle and two motorized infantry battalions of 8th Bersaglieri Regt served in North Africa with the Ariete Armoured Division, and that summer the three battalions of the 9th Bersaglieri arrived in theatre with the Trieste Motorized Infantry Division. This soldier wears standard M40 European grey-green woollen uniform, with the Royal Italian Army's national star of Savoy set on the crimson 'two-flame' collar patches of the Bersaglieri, and an M33 steel helmet with the Bersaglieri plume of cockerel feathers fixed to the right side. His slung weapon is the folding-bayonet 6.5mm Model 1891 Mannlicher-Carcano carbine. (Piero Crociani Collection)

This was intended to form, alongside the Corpo d'Armata Celere ('fast corps', i.e. cavalry), and the Corpo d'Armata Autotrasportabile ('truck-borne corps' – although its units in fact lacked the necessary motor transport), the main strategic reserve, under control of the 6^a Armata or Armata Po. The fate of these commands and formations, and the subsequent raising of other armoured and motorized units during the war, revealed a piecemeal, fragmented and badly managed employment of the Italian Army's mechanized assets, such as they were. The 6^a Armata was transferred to southern Italy in February 1941,

losing its supposed status as a '*masse de manoeuvre*', and all its units. (Its HQ was eventually used to defend Sicily in July 1943 against the Allied invasion, before retiring to the Italian mainland after surrendering battlefield command to the Germans.) The Corpo d'Armata Corazzato was never deployed on the battlefield as such, and on 1 March 1941 became the XVII Corpo d'Armata, eventually redeployed to Albania as an infantry command. Both the Corpo d'Armata Celere and the Corpo d'Armata Autotrasportabile took part in the invasion of Yugoslavia in April 1941; the former was subsequently redeployed to the Eastern Front and transformed into the Corpo di Spedizione in Russia (Expeditionary Corps in Russia) in July 1941, and the latter, deployed in northern Italy and southern France, was renamed XXII Corpo d'Armata on 10 May 1942.

The 131^a Divisione Centauro was deployed to Albania before June 1940, and on 28 October 1940 was part of the Italian force that attacked Greece. In June 1941, at the end of the Greek campaign, the division returned to Italy for reorganization, a process lasting until October 1942. It was then transferred to Tripoli in North Africa; subsequently it fought in Tunisia, finally being disbanded on 18 April 1943. The 133^a Divisione Corazzata Littorio took part in the invasion of Yugoslavia in April 1941, and was back in Italy for reorganization in May. Moved to North Africa in January 1942, it was sent to the front line only that July; deployed at El Alamein, it was destroyed in October–November 1942, and subsequently disbanded.

It was intended to create two more armoured divisions during the war, but these existed only on paper: the 134^a Divisione Corazzata (to be formed from the 2^a Divisione Celere, cavalry), and the 136^a Divisione Corazzata 'Giovani Fascisti' ('Young Fascists' – see below). In fact only one further armoured division was actually formed, the 135^a Divisione Corazzata Ariete II; created in April 1943, it saw action only against the Germans during the defence of Rome in September 1943 following the Italian capitulation to the Allies. The so-called 136^a Divisione Corazzata Legionaria ('Legionary Armoured Division') Centauro II was created on 15 August 1943 by renaming the existing 1^a Divisione Corazzata 'M' of the Blackshirts militia



(see below). Deployed in the area of Rome in September 1943, it did not fight against the Germans.

The same pattern was repeated with the motorized infantry divisions. On 15 July 1941 the 10^a Divisione Motorizzata Piave was formed from the existing infantry division of that name. It was only active in November 1942, during the occupation of southern France, and in September 1943 in Rome. The 16^a Divisione Motorizzata Pistoia, formed on 10 October 1941 from the existing infantry division, was deployed to Libya in August–September 1942 and eventually fought in Tunisia, where it was destroyed in May 1943.

The same fragmentary employment also affected both the Ariete and Trieste divisions in the early stages of the war.

Tank crews in Libya receive mail from home; the early version of the blue tank-crew overall is clearly visible, as are the grey-green *bustina* field cap of European uniform and the peaked version, which were widely used in North Africa – see Plate A1. (Private collection)

132^a DIVISIONE CORAZZATA ARIETE, 1940–41

Together with the usual headquarters and service elements, the division's major units on formation were as follows:

32° Reggimento Carristi (tank regiment – I, II & III Battalions)

8° Reggimento Bersaglieri (motorized infantry – III Motorcycle Bn; V & XII Motorized Bns; plus 132^a Compagnia Controcarri anti-tank company – 47/32 guns)

132° Reggimento Artiglieria (I & II battalion-sized Gruppi – 75/27 guns)

132^a Compagnia Mista Genio (mixed sapper & signals company)

The 32° Reggimento Carristi, whose first two battalions were amongst the first to be equipped with the new M11/39 medium tanks in the summer of 1939, completed its organization in July 1940 when its III Battalion was equipped with the new M13/40 tanks. However, in the same period both the I and II Battalions were detached and sent to Libya, followed by III Bn in September, and the 32° Reggimento was then reorganized anew with three battalions of L3/35 'fast tanks' – in fact, two-man tankettes armed only with 2x 8mm machine guns. The medium tank battalions, now part of the Babini Armoured Brigade (named after its commander), were subsequently destroyed in February 1941 at Beda Fomm, where many of their 112 medium