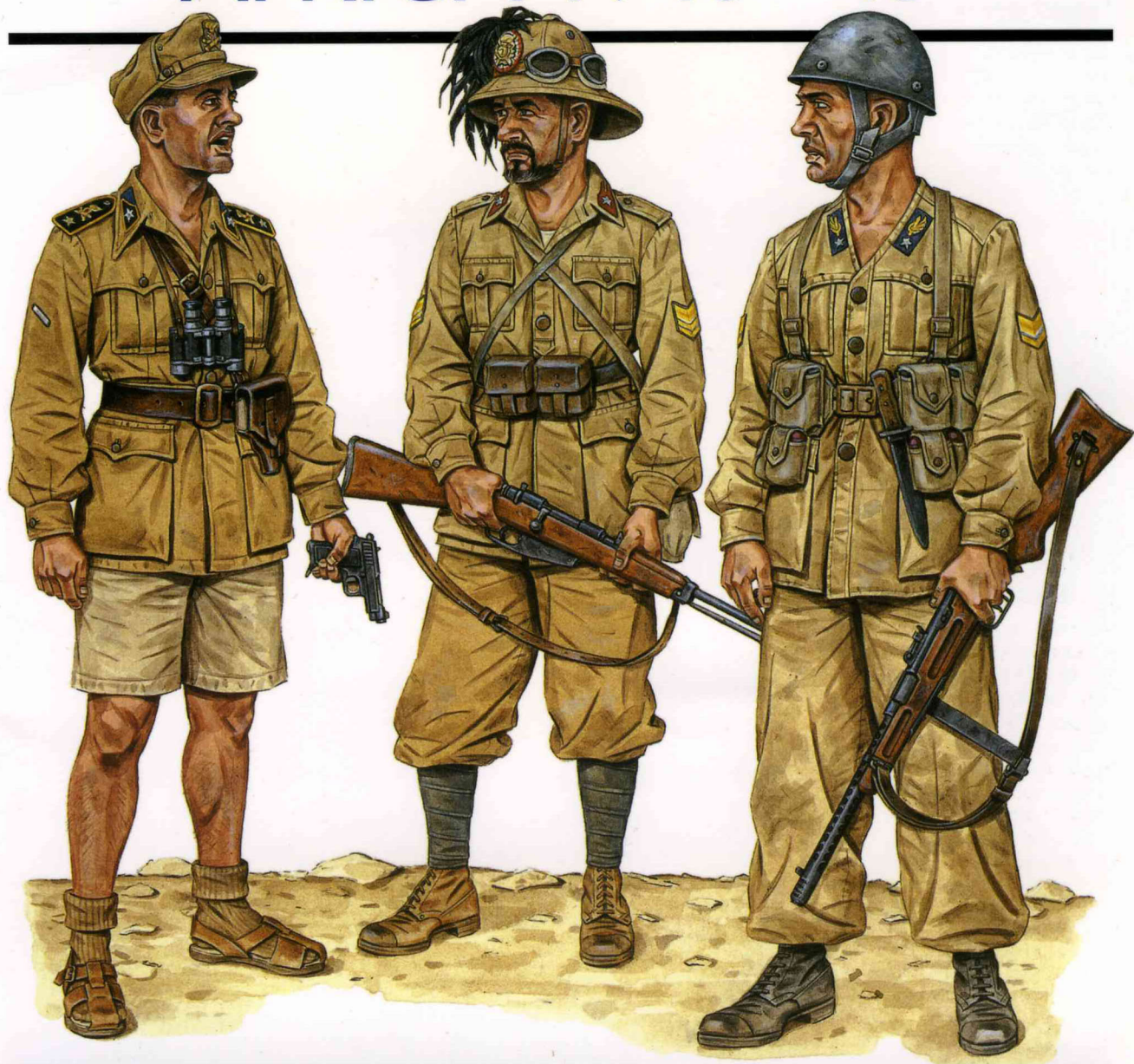


THE ITALIAN ARMY 1940–45 (2) AFRICA 1940–43



PHILIP S. JOWETT STEPHEN ANDREW

CONTENTS

ITALY'S 'PARALLEL WAR' 3

- Mussolini's strategic vision

ITALIAN EAST AFRICA, 1940-41 3

- The Italian colonial garrisons
- The invasion of British Somaliland

THE EAST AFRICAN CAMPAIGN, 1941 6

- Campaign summary

THE LIBYAN CAMPAIGN, 1940-41 7

- Graziani's forces • Campaign summary

THE ITALIAN ARMY IN NORTH AFRICA, 1941-43 10

- Relationship with German forces
- equipment and morale • performance of elite units
- armour and anti-tank weapons • Campaign summary

UNIFORMS 18

- East Africa • North Africa • tropical tunics
- the *Sahariana* & *camiciotto Sahariano*
- cold weather clothing • headgear • legwear & footwear
- rank & insignia • chart of rank & branch insignia
- 'Giovani Fascisti' Division • captured uniforms
- table of divisional insignia & service • parachute units
- Polizia dell'Africa Italiana

COLONIAL TROOPS, 1940-43 36

- Troop types • headgear • tunics, legwear & footwear
- table of unit sash colours • insignia
- chart of rank & service insignia • personal equipment
- Red Arrows Group

THE PLATES 43

INDEX 48



PHILIP S. JOWETT was born in Leeds in 1961, and has been interested in military history for as long as he can remember. Before beginning his series on the Italian Army of World War II he was the author of the much praised *Men-at-Arms 306: Chinese Civil War Armies 1911-49*. A rugby league enthusiast and amateur genealogist, he is married and lives in Leeds.



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SERIES EDITOR: MARTIN WINDROW

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THE ITALIAN ARMY 1940-45

(2) AFRICA 1940-43



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Dedication

With love to Sophie and Benjamin

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Author's note

To avoid repetition, a good deal of material of general application to the subject of this book will be found in the first volume in this series – MAA 340, *The Italian Army 1940-43 (1): Europe 1940-43*, which describes and illustrates the Royal Army's 'continental' uniform and personal equipment. It includes charts of Army and MVSN rank insignia; basic organisation tables for Infantry, Alpine, and Celere divisions; and a chart showing the main component units, war service and collar patches of the infantry divisions which served in Europe, including Russia.

A short bibliography for the whole series will appear in the third volume.

Artist's note

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TITLE PAGE **A casually dressed Italian officer poses with a sentry of the *Meharisti* camel corps at Fort Capuzzo in Libya before the outbreak of war. The officer wears a white Sahariana jacket with black shoulder boards, and a tropical peaked cap. The *meharisto* is turned out in immaculate white full dress turban, coat and *sirual* trousers, with the brown leather bandolier of the pattern used only by Colonial soldiers. (G.Forty)**

THE ITALIAN ARMY 1940-45

(2) AFRICA 1940-43

ITALY'S 'PARALLEL WAR'



Lieutenant-Colonel Janari, commander of the 2nd Spahis Colonial Cavalry Regiment, who led the successful Italian attack on the British Sudanese town of Kassala in July 1940. He wears a *Sahariana* with the black shoulder boards which carry his rank and the badge of the 2nd Spahis – the 'Hawk's Feathers' Regiment. His tropical helmet is a privately purchased 'Aden' pattern – cf Plate C2; the badge of the regiment is mounted on the tricolour national cockade. (Marcello Ravaoli)

BY THE TIME of its entry into the Second World War the Italian Army had been fighting in Africa for over 40 years, establishing an empire by the conquest of Eritrea, Libya, Italian Somaliland and finally, in 1936, Ethiopia (Abyssinia). By the late 1930s Italy had her empire, and the Fascist regime of Benito Mussolini could now claim to have the 'Living Space' which he claimed his nation needed. The empire had taken a lot of effort to build; but the declaration of war on Britain and France on 10 June 1940, at a time when the German Wehrmacht was apparently invincible, seemed to offer Italy the opportunity to expand it further. In reality the Italian Army was soon to be on the defensive in all its African possessions, and by the end of 1941 much of the empire would already be lost forever. The imperial age would in fact come to an end over the next 20 years for all the colonial powers; but Italy, the last European power to gain an overseas empire, would be the first to lose it.

To defend these African possessions Italy certainly appeared to have the manpower available, with 15 divisions in Libya and over 250,000 men in Italian East Africa. This large army was backed up – on paper – with powerful armoured and air forces, and posed a serious threat to the British position in the Middle East, where the Persian oil fields and the Suez Canal were of vital strategic importance.

Italy's main war effort was to be expended in the Mediterranean and North African region in a 'parallel war'. This meant that while the Germans built their empire in Northern and Eastern Europe the Italians would conquer theirs in Southern Europe and Africa. Mussolini regarded this theatre as his responsibility within the Axis and the Mediterranean as '*Mare Nostrum*' – 'Our Sea'. The plan was for his forces to take on the British Empire in the Middle East, first capturing Egypt and the Suez Canal, and thus seriously compromising Britain's communications with her Asian empire and allies; and then to sweep on eastwards to conquer the oilfields of the Middle East. Mussolini intended to drive the Royal Navy out of the Mediterranean by a combination of light, fast naval vessels and land-based torpedo bombers. Unfortunately for the Axis, Italy was almost immediately to face defeats in late 1940 in both Greece and Libya, and Germany was to be drawn into this 'parallel war' to retrieve her ally's position.

ITALIAN EAST AFRICA, 1940-41

Italy's empire in East Africa consisted of Eritrea (since 1896), Ethiopia (since 1936), and Somaliland (since 1925). These territories, which were

termed 'Africa Orientale Italiana' (AOI), were under the control of the Viceroy of Ethiopia, the Duke of Aosta – who had ruled the Italian African empire with common sense and a great deal more humanity than his predecessor. The Duke realised that as soon as war was declared his forces would be isolated, and that it would be only a matter of time before they were defeated.

Aosta's forces in 1940 totalled 256,000 men, of whom 182,000 were native troops (the Italian term was 'Indigenous'; in this text we use 'Colonial'). Native units varied greatly in quality, from well-trained battalions, battle-hardened in previous campaigns, to poorly-trained levies formed into irregular units called *'bande'*. Even the better African troops had been fighting for five years since the conquest of Ethiopia in 1936, and were war-weary, while the units of less experience and quality were almost certain to disintegrate as soon as they came under pressure.

European units in AOI included the elite 'Granatieri di Savoia' Division (Grenadiers of Savoy), which was one of the premier formations of the Italian Army. Another division was cobbled together from units already in the region and was given the title 'Africa'. Most of the component units of the 'Africa' division were MVSN Blackshirt Legions recruited from the white colonists of the empire. The remainder of Aosta's European troops were drawn from support organisations such as the Carabinieri, Finance Guards, Polizia dell'Africa Italiana (PAI) and naval forces. Aosta had very little modern equipment, although 22 medium tanks were rushed to the region at the outbreak of war. Tactically the Italians were unprepared for the modern war that they would soon have to fight. One British officer who observed an Italian force as it crossed the Juba river into the British territory of Sudan in 1940 commented that 'these Italians haven't changed their tactics in a hundred years'.

The first offensive moves led to the Italian capture of a number of small British posts. On 4 July 1940 an Italian force of about 8,000 men took the Sudanese town of Kassala, for the loss of about 500 men. The force consisted of two Colonial brigades, four cavalry regiments, 18 tanks and a large number of light guns. At the same time the smaller British border posts of Gallabat in the Sudan and Moyale in Kenya were taken, but no further advances were planned – the Italians lost a golden opportunity to advance into the largely undefended Sudan, which would have given them a southern route to the Suez Canal. Overestimating the size of the forces facing them, they abandoned Kassala and pulled back into Eritrea in January 1941 following news of the disaster in Libya (see below).



Blackshirts and native troops celebrate the capture of a fort in British Somaliland in August 1940. Looking more like a scene from 'Beau Geste' than an episode from a modern military operation, it does typify the nature of this brief campaign. The native *ascaris* wear a basic uniform of baggy shorts and tunic with coloured turbans as headgear. The invading force must have made a colourful impression; it was an exotic mixture including camel-mounted native troops and hordes of *dubat* irregulars mixed in with a handful of tanks, armoured cars and motorcycle-mounted police. (Rex Tyre)

The Invasion of British Somaliland

On 4 August 1940 the Italians launched an invasion of British Somaliland from Ethiopia, which was one of the few successful actions by the Italian Army in Africa during the Second World War. This barren and empty British territory was taken by a combined force of almost 35,000 men, of whom 30,000 were native troops and 4,800 'Metropolitan' (European) personnel. White troops included a single battalion from the 'Granatieri di Savoia' Division, two MVSN units, a company of M11/39 medium tanks, a squadron of light tanks and two squadrons of elderly armoured cars. The infantry were also supported by large numbers of small calibre field guns.

The Italians overwhelmed the tiny Commonwealth forces in the colony, but these were safely evacuated from Berbera before the invaders arrived in force. This small-scale campaign nevertheless proved costly for the Italians, who lost 2,052 killed or missing against British losses of only 250 men.

ORDER OF BATTLE

INVASION OF BRITISH SOMALILAND, AUGUST 1940

General Bertoldi's Column

2 MVSN battalions

1 bn from 'Granatieri di Savoia' Division

42nd, 58th, 66th, 62nd, 140th & 143rd Colonial Bns

4th Somali Bn

2 irregular native *bande*

General De Simone's Column

20th, 39th, 49th, 37th, 64th, 83rd,

38th, 40th & 142nd Colonial Bns

1st Dubat Group

Gruppo Bande of PAI + PAI motorcycle company

General Bertello's Column

1st & 2nd Camel Dubat; 2nd, 3rd, 4th & 6th Dubat Groups

101st & 102nd Colonial Bns, 3rd Coastal Bn

Reserve

4th, 3rd, 9th & 10th Colonial Bns

9 camel-mounted batteries Colonial Artillery

Armour

1 company M tanks, 1 squadron L tanks

2 squadrons armoured cars



A group of black motorcyclists of the Polizia dell'Africa Italiana, pictured after taking part in the invasion of British Somaliland. All wear brown leather crash helmets and coats and the special belt and pouches of the PAI – cf Plate D1. This well-armed trio all carry the model of the popular Beretta M1938A sub-machine gun with a folding integral bayonet. The Germans were so impressed by this efficient mixed-race organisation that they even sent personnel to the PAI training centre in anticipation of having to fulfil the same role when Germany gained her own hoped-for African conquests. (Raffaele Girlando)

1940 MVSN Militia Division Establishment

2 MVSN Legions
of 3 bns
+ Mortar Coy & Arty Bty
Artillery Regt
Engineer Bn
MG Bn
A/T Coy

8,000 all ranks

THE EAST AFRICAN CAMPAIGN, 1941

The Duke of Aosta, commander-in-chief of Italian forces in their East African empire, awards a decoration to one of his men in 1940. Aosta earned the ungrudging respect of the British for his conduct of the 1941 East African campaign, and for his personal leadership at the battle of Amba Alagi in May. After his final surrender he insisted that his own troops clear their minefields before passing into captivity – a gesture typical of the chivalry which distinguished what could have been an ugly campaign. Here he wears the uniform of a general of the Italian air force; above the rank insignia on his sleeve are two badges showing promotion for meritorious service. The soldier receiving the award is wearing an 'Aden' pattern helmet. (James Burd)



The garrison of Italian East Africa posed a strategic threat to the Red Sea; and as this was now Britain's main sea route to the Middle East (with the virtual closure of the Mediterranean to cargo shipping by the Italian naval and air threat) it was vitally important that this threat be removed. The invasion of AOI was to be launched on two fronts: firstly from the Sudan eastwards into Eritrea, by Gen Platt's northern force – 4th and 5th Indian Divisions and Sudan Defence Force; and secondly from Kenya northward into Italian Somaliland by Gen Cunningham's southern force – 11th and 12th African Divisions (made up of East and West African soldiers) and 1st South African Division. They would be aided by other small forces – British from Aden, and Free French landed at Port Sudan. In the meantime the exiled Emperor Haile Sellassie would be infiltrated to rouse Ethiopian patriots to resistance.

Campaign summary

19 January 1941 Gen Platt's force advances from Kassala and Gallabat into Eritrea.

24 January Gen Cunningham's force advances from Garissa and Bura and crosses into Italian Somaliland on the 29th. 12th African Div swings north along line of Juba river into Ethiopia, towards Addis Ababa; 11th African Div continues north-east along coast towards the capital of Italian Somaliland, Mogadishu.

1 February Platt's 5th Indian Div defeats Gen Frusci's force at Agordat after two days' fighting. Most Italian units retreat to Keren, a mountain fortress commanding the eastern approaches to the strategic port of Massawa.

3 February – 27 March Battle of Keren. The Italian garrison totals nearly 30,000 men with 144 guns. The bulk of the infantry are Colonial battalions, but it also includes the elite 'Granatieri di Savoia' Division and the 'Uork Amba' Battalion of Alpini. The defenders, holding strong mountain positions, put up a particularly brave and stubborn resistance to a series of attacks by 4th & 5th Indian Divs between 3–12 February and 15–27 March, losing about 3,000 casualties. The attacking Commonwealth troops suffer 500 dead and 3,229 wounded.

25 February Cunningham's 11th African Div occupies Mogadishu, then swings north into Ethiopia.

1 – 17 March 11th African Div advances to Jijiga – 774 miles in 17 days.

16 March British forces from Aden land at Berbera.

27 March 11th African Div occupies Harar.

1 April Fall of Asmara, capital of Eritrea, to Platt's northern force.

5 April Italians evacuate Addis Ababa, capital of Ethiopia, which is declared an 'open city'.



Italian Somaliland, summer 1940: an NCO of the Somalian *dubat* or 'White Turbans', native light infantry who earned a good reputation as skirmishers. He is wearing a light khaki tunic and *futa* skirt with a light khaki dyed turban; the coloured whistle cord around his neck is a mark of rank. His ex-Austro-Hungarian Army belt with four pouches is 1918 Italian war booty; he is probably armed with a Mannlicher M1995 rifle – cf Plate A2. (Marco Novarese)

Remaining Italians disperse to a few mountain strongholds.

6 April 12th African Div enters Addis Ababa, at the end of a 1,700-mile advance which had been achieved without having to fight a serious battle and at a cost of only 500 casualties.

8 April Platt captures the port of Massawa, lifting any threat to Allied sea lanes. His northern force has captured a total of 40,000 prisoners, 300 guns and much matériel. His 4th Indian Div is now ordered to return to the Western Desert.

3 – 17 May Battle of Amba Alagi. After 18 days' hard fighting against a pincer attack by 5th Indian Div from Asmara and 1st South African Div from Addis Ababa, the fortress falls with the surrender of 7,000 men. The Duke of Aosta, in personal command, is the last man to leave; he is granted the 'honours of war' by the British.

By this stage in the campaign the Commonwealth forces had captured 230,000 prisoners, but there were still 80,000 Italians under arms in two separate forces of 40,000 each: Gen Gazzera's force in the south-west of Ethiopia and Gen Nasi's in the north-west. Both would continue to resist stoutly.

22 May Soddu in the south-west falls to a pincer advance by 11th & 12th African Divs.

21 June 15,000 Italian troops surrender at Jimma, Gazzera's headquarters, but the general retreats with a small force.

3 July Gen Gazzera surrenders his remaining 7,000 men. This leaves just Gen Nasi's force, cut off in a mountain stronghold at Gondar north of Lake Tana surrounded by hostile Ethiopian guerrillas.

28 September After three months' resistance the garrison of Wolcheft Pass surrenders; 3,000 Italian troops including 1,500 native soldiers are accorded the honours of war by the victorious King's African Rifles.

27 November Gen Nasi and his 23,500 men lay down their arms at Gondar; British Commonwealth casualties are 500 men. This marks the end of Italian resistance in East Africa, and of the short-lived Italian East African empire.

THE LIBYAN CAMPAIGN, 1940-41

Within weeks of the declaration of war against Britain and France in June 1940 the Italian forces in Libya suffered a setback when Marshal Italo Balbo, the dynamic governor and commander-in-chief of the colony, was shot down and killed by Italian anti-aircraft guns over the port of Tobruk on 28 June. Balbo was popular not only with his own men, but also to some extent with the indigenous population. He was replaced by Marshal Graziani, who had earned the loathing of the Libyan population by his brutal methods when crushing rebellion in the early 1930s. Graziani had been fairly successful when fighting against tribesmen, but his credentials for commanding an army in a modern war were doubtful.

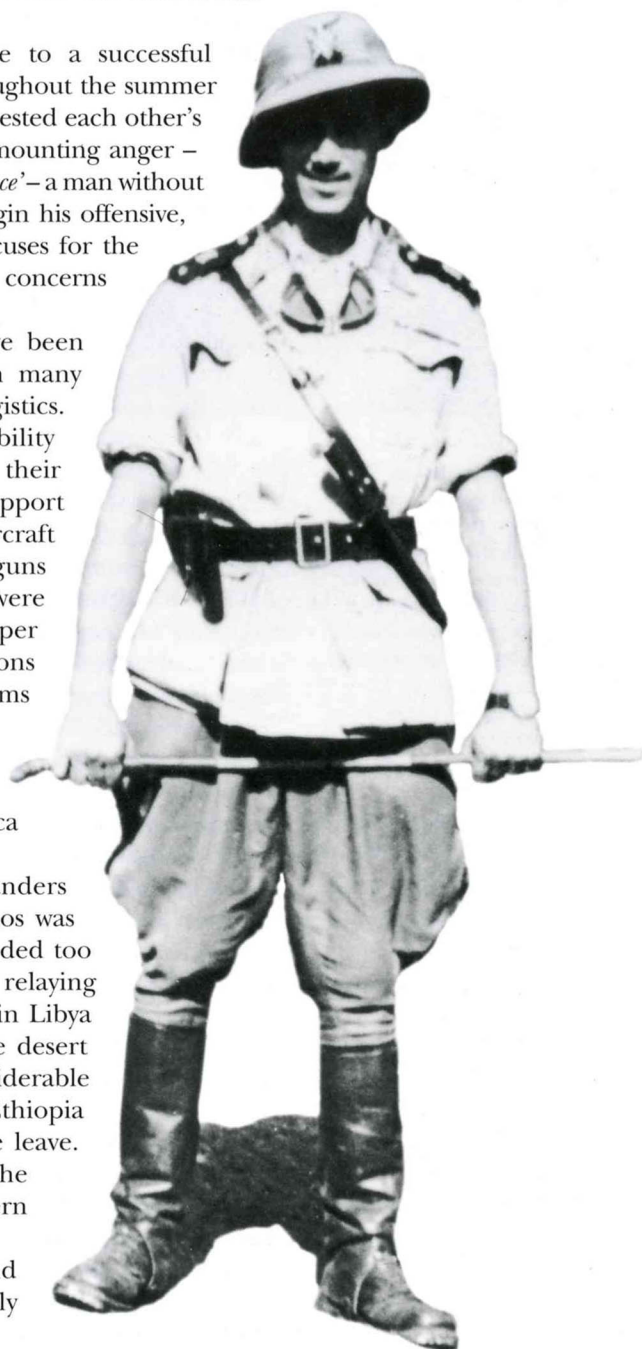
Large Italian forces were in place in North Africa at the time of Italy's entry into the war: some 236,000 men, 1,811 guns, 339 tanks and 151 combat aircraft. With the surrender of France the 5th Army could soon be switched eastwards from the border of Tripolitania (the western province of Libya) with French-ruled Tunisia, to reinforce the 10th Army confronting the British on the frontier of Marmarica (eastern Libya) with Egypt. By contrast Gen Wavell, British C-in-C Middle East Forces, with responsibility for Egypt, Palestine, Iraq and watching the borders of Vichy Syria, had available in Egypt only Gen O'Connor's Western Desert Force of some 31,000 men, mostly from the 4th Indian and 7th Armoured Divisions.

Mussolini looked forward with confidence to a successful invasion. Small-scale encounters took place throughout the summer between Italian and British patrols as both sides tested each other's strengths and weaknesses, and – to Mussolini's mounting anger – these cost the Italians about 3,000 casualties. *Il Duce* – a man without military understanding – goaded Graziani to begin his offensive, refusing to accept what he considered lame excuses for the marshal's inaction; but Graziani had genuine concerns about his armies' preparedness.

The Italian 5th and 10th Armies may have been formidable on paper, but they suffered from many problems of infrastructure, equipment and logistics. The Italians had severe transport and mobility problems caused by a lack of vehicles, and their essentially infantry army was weak in modern support weapons. Shortages of anti-tank and anti-aircraft guns, the elderly vintage of the artillery's field guns and the technical shortcomings of Italian tanks were all profound weaknesses. Moreover, no proper reserve stockpiles of fuel, ammunition and rations had been built up. Mobility and supply problems were not helped by the low serviceability rates of the trucks which they did have; in November 1940, for instance, nearly 2,000 of the 5,140 Italian motor vehicles in North Africa were unserviceable.

There was no culture of senior commanders 'leading from the front'; the provision of radios was inadequate, so control of units in battle depended too much on the ancient system of liaison officers relaying orders in person. Despite their long presence in Libya the army command had little expertise in true desert operations. It should also be stressed that considerable numbers of the troops had been fighting – in Ethiopia or Spain – for years, and with very little home leave. They were weary, and under no illusions about the weaknesses of their army when judged by modern European standards.

Eventually, after many postponements and false starts, the Italian command tentatively moved forward on 13 September 1940.



1940 Libyan Division Establishment

2 Infantry Regts
of 3 bns + AT Coy
Artillery Regt
Engineer Bn

7,400 all ranks
(inc.900 European)
24 x 65mm, 12 x 75mm,
12 x 100mm,
8 x 47mm AT

LIBYAN UNITS, 1940-41

1st Libyan Division (Gen Sibille)

1st Raggruppamento
8th, 9th & 10th Libyan Inf Bns
2nd Raggruppamento
11th, 12th & 13th Libyan Inf Bns

2nd Libyan Div (Gen Pescatori)

3rd Raggruppamento
2nd, 6th & 7th Libyan Inf Bns
4th Raggruppamento
3rd, 15th & 16th Libyan Inf Bns

(plus in each division):
Colonial Arty Regt
Colonial Engineer Bn

Raggruppamento Maletti

1st, 2nd, 4th, 5th, 18th
& 19th Libyan Inf Bns
Colonial Arty element
1 medium &
1 light armoured car coys

Campaign summary

1940

13 – 20 September Italian invasion of Egypt by four-plus divisions with 200 tanks begins. 5th & 10th Armies advance slowly some 65 miles into Egypt against little resistance, and '23 Marzo' Div takes small town of Sidi Barrani (where, according to their propaganda, 'the trams were running as usual'). Graziani refuses to advance any further until he receives reinforcements and supplies; these do not arrive, since priority has to be given to the armies bogged down in the disastrous Greek campaign¹. 'Temporary' camps across a 40-mile front are strengthened into fortresses. *9 December 1940 – 9 February 1941* Operation 'Compass'. Gen Wavell, obliged to send troops to Crete, nevertheless receives 150 tanks from UK in late September. He plans a limited strike at the Italian camps around Sidi Barrani; the goals of this 'five-day raid' are to be flexible, so that any success can be exploited.

9 – 10 December 4th Indian Div storms the fortified camps of Nibeiwa and Tummar and the town of Sidi Barrani while 7th Armoured hooks south through the desert. In this spectacularly successful attack the isolated Italian camps are knocked out one by one – although well prepared, garrisoned with about 60,000 men, and protected by extensive minefields against just this kind of attack. Unfortunately for the Italians, an officer had been captured while carrying plans of the minefields. Soon after the attack begins it becomes obvious that the strongholds are sited too far apart to support one another, thus allowing mobile British forces to concentrate for each separate attack. An important British asset is the Matilda Mk II tank equipping 7th Royal Tank Regiment – slow, under-gunned, but protected by 78mm frontal armour which makes it virtually invulnerable. Even though Italian field gun crews often fight to the death it is usually in vain. (The Maletti Group of Libyan units behave impressively at Nibeiwa, a member of 7th RTR commenting that 'The Italians may have been a pushover afterwards, but at Nibeiwa they fought like hell.') In the first three days of fighting the British capture 38,000 men, 237 field guns and 73 tanks.

11 December Gen Wavell orders 4th Indian Div to East Africa; it is soon replaced by 6th Australian Div. Wavell extends his 'raid' into a full-scale offensive.

20 December Last Italian troops driven out of Egypt.

1941

1 January – 9 February Western Desert Force (now 13 Corps) continues to advance both along the coast – taking Bardia, Tobruk, Derna and Benghazi – and (7th Armoured Div) south-west across the 'bulge' of Cyrenaica (the central Libyan province) to Beda Fomm on 5 February, cutting off retreating Italians following the Via Balbia round the coast. By the time the British halt at El Agheila on 9 February they have advanced 500 miles, taking 130,000 prisoners (including 22 generals), 845 field guns and 380 tanks. British casualties during the whole campaign are some 500 dead, 1,373 wounded and 56 missing. About 8,000 demoralised Italian troops escape to safety in Tripolitania, where they are soon reinforced. Graziani is relieved of his command and censured by a board of enquiry; he is replaced by Gen Gariboldi.

OPPOSITE **Posing outside his tent in Ethiopia in 1941, this MVSN officer wears a white or very light khaki linen Sahariana with black cloth shoulder boards. Under magnification the badge on the front of his 'India' pattern tropical helmet can be seen to have the crossed swords behind the fasces, indicating that he belongs to a MVSN Legion raised among the white colonists of Italian East Africa. (Vitetti Archive)**

¹ See MAA 340, *The Italian Army 1940-45 (1): Europe 1940-43.*

ORDER OF BATTLE ITALIAN ARMY IN LIBYA, DECEMBER 1940

5th Army (Gen Gariboldi)

X Corps

'Bologna', 'Savona', 'Sabratha' Infantry Divisions¹

XX Corps

'Pavia', 'Brescia', 'Sirte' Inf Divs

Raggruppamento Maletti

XXIII Corps

'23 Marzo', '28 Ottobre' MVSN Divs

2nd Libyan Inf Div

10th Army (Gen Berti)

XXI Corps

'Marmarica', 'Cirene' Inf Divs

XXII Corps

'Catanzaro' Inf Div, '3 Gennaio' MVSN Div

1st Libyan Inf Div

THE ITALIAN ARMY IN NORTH AFRICA, 1941-43

Elite Bersaglieri man a 47mm anti-tank gun as they await a British attack in a very exposed position. The crew all wear the grey-green wool uniform with tropical helmets, one of them adorned with the famous cockerel feathers of this corps. All of them appear to wear leather leggings, suggesting that they are from a motorcycle unit. (IWM RML627)



After the entry of General (later Field Marshal) Erwin Rommel's *Deutsches Afrika Korps* into the campaign from February 1941 the role of the Italian Army in the fighting in North Africa was to change. Although officially subordinate to the Italian High Command before December 1941, from their arrival until the final Axis defeat in Tunisia in May 1943 the Germans were to be the dominant partner, even though the Italians still provided the bulk of the manpower. Rommel was increasingly given direct command over the Italian divisions – at first just the mobile

units of XX Corps, later the entire army. Apart from the obvious excellence, in scale and quality, of German equipment, there was an unspoken acknowledgement of the DAK's superiority in staff work.

As in all other theatres of war in which the Italian Army fought, they were to suffer particularly from their lack of mobility and inadequate system of

¹ For details of infantry unit organisation see Men-at-Arms 340, *The Italian Army 1940-45 (1): Europe 1940-43*

1940 Motorised Infantry Division Establishment

2 Infantry Regts
of 2 bns
Bersaglieri Regt
of 2 bns
+ Support Coy &
M'cycle Coy
Artillery Regt
MG Bn
Engineer Bn

10,500 all ranks
168 x LMG, 90 x HMG
56 x 45mm mortars
12 x 81mm mortars
12 x 47mm AT
24 x 75mm, 12 x 100mm
531 cars, 1,170 trucks
48 tractors

A sergeant-major (foreground) and soldiers of the 5th Bersaglieri Regiment from the 'Centauro' Armoured Division man a 20mm Solothurn anti-tank gun in a position scraped out of the rocky terrain of Libya. They look as if they have been recently issued with new uniforms. On the M1935 tropical helmets they all have the brass corps badge on the large national tricolour cockade, and the cockerel feathers fixed into a small pocket on the right side. Goggles of this type were issued from the Ethiopian campaign onwards. (Marco Novarese)



command and control. Shortage of motor transport meant that Italian infantry units were virtually static formations which could not be deployed with the flexibility which was so important in desert warfare. The Italian High Command (Commando Supremo) was obsessed with having large numbers of troops on the ground even when it was obvious that large, immobile units were of little use in North Africa. As late as July 1942 the Commando Supremo planned to send a further 67,000 infantry to add to the 150,000 already in theatre.

(On the other hand, the High Command was entirely correct in 1942 to press the Germans – repeatedly, but in vain – for an all-out attack to eliminate Malta, whose airfields and naval base were the key to the vital supply line across the Mediterranean. British interdiction of these sea lanes would have a crippling effect on both German and Italian armies that autumn.)

The Italian Army suffered a severe shock from their catastrophic defeat in Libya at the hands of a much smaller but better trained, better equipped and better led force. As in Greece, they had believed the propaganda fed to them about the pre-ordained Fascist victory. Now, faced with the reality of their situation, many Italian soldiers felt totally disillusioned, and a sense of inferiority compared with both their enemies and their German allies affected them for the rest of the campaign. A letter home from one individual explains how many felt: 'We are trying to fight this war as though it is a colonial war in Africa. But it is a European war in Africa fought with European weapons against a European enemy. We take too little account of this in building our stone forts and equipping ourselves with such luxury. We are not fighting the Ethiopians now!'

Obviously, individual courage knows no boundaries, and there were many recorded examples of great heroism by Italian soldiers, often facing much better armed enemies. But, as in all armies, the quality of a unit depended to a great degree on the quality of its leadership; and in some units the officers did not enjoy the trust of their men, which comes only with comradeship in shared danger and hardship. (The DAK were astonished, for instance, that the Italians had separate ration scales, with officers eating better than their men and enjoying priority of distribution.) If well led, Italian units often fought well, and their performance during the campaign was to improve markedly; but they were generally distrusted as second class troops by the DAK command, and were usually given secondary and static missions – with discouraging consequences for both morale and effectiveness.

As in other theatres, the performance in battle of elite units such as the Bersaglieri, armoured and paratroop units impressed their foes and allies alike,



The crew of a 75mm 75/46 M1934 anti-aircraft gun during the fighting in Libya, wearing a mixture of tropical and continental uniforms. The loader has tropical breeches and shirt with a grey-green wool *bustina*; the others wear tropical helmets. On the right the gun layer has a grey-green shirt; the man left of him is wearing a brown leather M1891 bandolier. The Italians made some attempt to employ this gun in the ground anti-tank role, like the deadly German 88mm, but without any particular success. (Tank Museum 2972/A4)

although the mainstream infantry units were seldom up to this standard. When some smaller units went into action – e.g. the 31st Battalion of Guastatori or assault engineers – they were second to none. These smaller units, with dedicated officers, could be provided with better training and equipment than was available to the vast majority of Italian infantry.

Armour and anti-tank weapons

Throughout the fighting in North Africa the Italian Army had to make do with largely sub-standard equipment; and as that of the British and Germans improved the Italians' stayed much the same – and thus became relatively worse. In the desert campaign tanks and anti-tank guns were to be the decisive weapons. The Italian tanks were never the equal of even the early British equivalents, let alone the American M3 Grants and M4 Shermans which arrived during 1942. The three main Italian AFVs were the CV33 tankette, and the M11/39 and M13/40 'medium' tanks. In the early fighting in Libya the tankette and the M11/39 proved themselves virtually useless, and most were soon knocked out in combat. The M13/40 was a considerable improvement but still had many weaknesses, one of which was its mechanical unreliability. (On one occasion Rommel organised a shooting contest between four German PzKwIIIs and four M13/40s, but only one Italian tank turned up – the other three broke down on the way.) The 47mm main armament and 25mm/42mm (hull/ turret front) armour were adequate against British light and 'Cruiser' types in 1941, but even when evenly matched the lack of radios in all but company commanders' vehicles led to many control problems. Once engaged, there was little chance to adapt to changing circumstances; even when an objective was successfully reached the company would have to wait for further orders passed by signal flags from their commander's tank before they could exploit forward. This, and generally inadequate training in fire-and-movement tactics, put the Italian tank crews – who often displayed great gallantry – at a critical disadvantage.

Throughout the two and a half years of the North African campaign the Italians were to receive little in the way of new equipment. One exception was the *semovente* 75/18 self-propelled gun, an excellent weapon which arrived in North Africa from early 1942. However, too few were received to make a difference, and the M13/40 and its slightly improved M14/41 version were to remain the backbone of the Italian armoured division.

The Italian 47mm 47/32 anti-tank gun was a pre-war design. Capable of penetrating only 43mm (1.7ins) of armour at 500m, it was ineffective against the 78mm (3.1ins) frontal armour of the Matilda in 1940/41 and the 65mm (2.6ins) of the Valentine in 1942. The British light and

1942 'North Africa' Type Motorised Infantry Division Establishment

2 Mot Inf Regts
of 2 bns
Armoured Bn
Mot Arty Regt
Mot Engineer Bn
Mot Supply Regt

5,932 all ranks
74 x LMG, 74 x HMG
18 x 81mm mortars
36 x 47mm AT
12 x 88mm AA/AT
54 x 20mm AA
24 x 75mm, 24 x 100mm
52 x M tanks

'Cruiser' tanks were vulnerable, with their maximum protection of 40mm; but the new American M3 Grants and M4 Shermans which arrived for the British tank units in 1942 had armour of 65mm, and 50mm/75mm (hull/turret) respectively. Nevertheless the Italians had to make do with this gun throughout the war. A handful of German 88mm dual purpose anti-aircraft/anti-tank guns were supplied by their allies (e.g. to one of the four groups of the 1st Motorised Artillery with the 'Brescia' Div), and the Italians followed suit by using a few of their 75mm anti-aircraft guns in the ground role, but there were only a handful of both types in service.

Campaign summary, 1941-43

1941

Mussolini now accepts Hitler's offer of a German armoured force to aid the Italian defence of the remainder of Libya. The intention is that this highly mobile German force, small in numbers but strong in armour and artillery, will form a hard core of the Axis forces in North Africa. Italian forces are still to provide the majority of Axis manpower, and will be reinforced as soon as circumstances permit. The Luftwaffe's Fliegerkorps X is also committed to the Mediterranean theatre, including the protection of Axis supply convoys.

The British, meanwhile, are greatly weakened by the transfer of nearly three divisions to Greece, and the withdrawal of 7th Armoured's worn-out tanks to rear bases.

12 - 14 February Gen Rommel and first units of Deutsches Afrika Korps arrive in Libya - 5th Light Division (later retitled 21st Panzer Div), to be followed during April/June by 15th Panzer Div. Italian formations available are the shaken and weakened 'Savona' & 'Sabratha' Inf Divs and 'Brescia', 'Bologna' & 'Pavia' Motorised Divs (the term 'motorised' being largely theoretical). The 'Ariete' Armoured Div soon arrives, equipped with M13/40s, and Gen Gariboldi places it under Rommel's command.

31 March - 4 April With only 5th Light Div, Rommel attacks a small British advanced force, driving it back to Agedabia; on the 4th he enters Benghazi. 'Ariete' & 'Brescia' Divs come up in support.

11 April - 4 May Rommel's continuing unauthorised advance isolates a strong Australian garrison in Tobruk; but his assaults fail with heavy loss. Tobruk garrison will be supplied and rotated by sea. British plan defensive line at Mersa Matruh.

The crew of an M13/40 medium tank of the 'Ariete' Armoured Division relax for a photographer; note the company (colour), platoon (number of stripes) and vehicle (number) tactical marking on the side of the turret. The man leaning on the 47/32 main armament has - like General Rommel - acquired a pair of British anti-gas eye protectors as light goggles. Both men have the black leather crash helmet and coat worn over blue tanker's overalls - cf Plate C1. On the glacis plate of their tank the crew have stowed some of their gear, including what looks like a rucksack of the type normally issued to the Alpini. (Marco Novarese)



A mixed group of mostly Armoured personnel and Bersaglieri pose around a M13/40 medium tank. The four officers in the left foreground are from the Bersaglieri regiment attached to the armoured division. They wear *Sahariana* jackets, two displaying their ranks on black shoulder boards while at least one of the others (sitting left) correctly but unusually shows his on the cuffs. Apart from the medical officer (right foreground) and two Bersaglieri standing on the tank, the others all seem to be tank crewmen. The one standing beside the doctor has overalls with a coloured chest patch resembling the tactical markings usually seen on Italian tank turrets. The others wear a mixture of jackets including M1937 tunics and black leather coats; two have *sottotenente* or *aspirante* cuff ranking; and everyone in the photograph is wearing a *bustina* in various shades of khaki. (Marco Novarese)

15 – 17 June Operation 'Battleaxe': British attack Halfaya/Capuzzo positions to relieve Tobruk, but after initial success have to fall back before Rommel's counter-attack around the desert flank, with loss of many tanks to German 88mm guns.

Wavell is replaced as C-in-C Middle East by Gen Auchinleck. British Commonwealth forces – now designated 8th Army, commanded by Gen Cunningham – build up strength during summer, while British air and naval units from Malta harass Axis supply convoys across the Mediterranean.

2 December The German Field Marshal Kesselring is appointed Supreme Commander South, with command of all German and Italian forces in theatre.

18 November – 15 December Operation 'Crusader': major British offensive to draw Rommel's armour into battle and relieve Tobruk. 'Ariete' (forming, with 'Trieste', Gen Gambarà's XX Mobile Corps) successfully defend Bir el Gubi against 7th Armoured Div, destroying some 50 tanks. British 30 Corps take Sidi Rezegh, but are repulsed with heavy loss on 23 November by DAK's 15th & 21st Panzer, 90th Light, and 'Savona' Divs; and Gen Navarrini's XXI Corps ('Pavia', 'Brescia', 'Trento' & 'Bologna'). Tobruk is relieved on 7 December when, after confused and costly fighting, Rommel is finally forced to withdraw to Gazala line. He leaves 'Brescia' to buy time in Sollum-Halfaya area (where it holds out until 17 January). Axis army is forced back from Gazala position on 15 December.

1942

6 January The Axis army has been driven back to Tripolitania, with some 9,000 Germans and 23,000 Italians taken prisoner. However, Axis naval



and air successes allow reinforcement (including Italian *semoventi* SP guns) while putting pressure on Allied supply lines; and Japan's entry into war forces transfer of Commonwealth troops to Far East.

22 January Rommel's command redesignated Panzerarmee Afrika, with three German and seven Italian divisions. The same day 15th & 21st Panzer, with XX Mobile Corps ('Ariete', 'Trieste' & 'Sabratha') attack at Agedabia and drive British back with heavy losses. Italian command insists on halting; Rommel makes unauthorised further advance.

4 February Rommel reaches Gazala/Bir Hacheim line. Italian X & XXI Corps join XX Corps under his direct command, and are brought forward.

26 May Rommel strikes the Gazala line. In the north XXI & X Corps attack 1st South African & British 50th Divs, while 'Ariete' & 'Trieste' from XX Corps attack around Bir Hacheim. Rommel's units are counter-attacked in confused fighting in the minefields; 'Trieste' & 'Pavia' fight at 'Knightsbridge' position. Eventually British pull back with heavy losses, isolating Tobruk once more.

21 June 2nd South African Div surrenders Tobruk. 'Littorio' Armoured Div joins XX Corps, handing its two 75/18 *semoventi* groups to 'Ariete'.

30 June Auchinleck emplaces 8th Army on El Alamein line, only 60 miles west of Alexandria.

July Although over-extended, short of supplies, men and tanks, and with his rear lines ravaged by Allied aircraft, Rommel launches several attacks on El Alamein line without success. British make local counter-attacks.

August Auchinleck replaced as C-in-C by Gen Alexander, and Gen Montgomery takes over 8th Army.

30 August – 2 September Rommel attacks strongly held Alam el Halfa ridge at southern end of El Alamein line. XXI & X Corps make feint attacks in north; 15th & 21st Panzer hook round southern flank, while XX Corps ('Ariete', 'Littorio', 'Trieste', and the newly arrived 'Folgore' Parachute Div – which gains a good reputation in its combat debut) attack 7th Armoured Division. All attacks fail; 'Littorio' suffers heavy losses.

23 October – 4 November Battle of El Alamein: 104,000 Axis troops (the majority Italian), with 489 tanks (259 Italian) and 1,219 guns (521 Italian), are attacked and crumbled in a long battle of attrition by Montgomery's 195,000 men with 1,029 tanks and 2,311 guns. 'Trento' & 'Littorio' Divs, between Kidney Ridge and Miteiriya Ridge, face 30 Corps (9th Australian, 51st Highland, 2nd New Zealand Divs); 'Bologna', north of Ruweisat Ridge, faces 1st South African & 4th Indian Divs; 'Brescia', 'Folgore' & 'Pavia' face 13 Corps at the south of the line; 'Ariete' & 'Trieste' form part of Axis mobile reserve. When Rommel is

15 August 1942 Armoured Division 'Ariete'

(BrigGen Arena)

Armd Gp 'Ariete'

52nd Tank Bn

3rd 'Nizza' Armd Gp*

(*armd Bersaglieri bn

+ AA & AT btys)

132nd Armoured Regt

8th, 9th & 10th Tank Bns

8th Bersaglieri Regt

2nd M'cycle Bn

5th & 12th Mot Bns

132nd Armd Arty Regt

I & II Gps – 75mm

III Gp – 100mm

V & VI Gps – 75/18 *semoventi*

2 AA btys – 20mm

4th Anti-Tank Bn 'Granatieri di

Sardegna'

Engineer Bn

6,500 all ranks

165 x M tanks

Artillerymen manoeuvre a captured British 25-pounder field gun into a new defensive position. The 25-pounder was highly regarded by the Axis forces, and was used against its former owners whenever possible. The gun crew wear an assortment of *bustinas*, light khaki and grey-green, with and without visors. (Robert Stedman Collection)



forced to order withdrawal most of the Italian infantry, without transport, are left to their fate. 'Pavia', 'Bologna', 'Brescia', 'Trento' and the majority of 'Folgore' are destroyed; 'Ariete' is wiped out, fighting with great courage; elements of 'Trieste' & 'Littorio' manage to escape.

ORDER OF BATTLE ITALIAN ARMY AT EL ALAMEIN, OCTOBER 1942

X Corps (Gen Gioda)

'Pavia', 'Brescia' Inf Divs

'Folgore' Para Div

Corps units: 9th Bersaglieri Regt,

16th Corps Artillery Group, part 8th Army Arty Gp

XXI Corps (Gen Navarrini)

'Trento' Mot Inf Div, 'Bologna' Inf Div

Corps units: 7th Bersaglieri Regt,

24th Corps Arty Gp, part 8th Army Arty Gp

XX Corps (Gen de Stefanis)

'Ariete', 'Littorio' Armd Divs

'Trieste' Mot Inf Div

Corps units: part 8th Army Arty Gp,

90th Engineer Company

Army Reserve

'Giovani Fascisti' Inf Div, 'Pistoia' Mot Inf Div



Relaxing around their AB41 armoured car while out on a reconnaissance patrol, this cavalry crew show a motley collection of uniforms. The sergeant-major (standing left) wears goggles on his *bustina*, a *Sahariana* and shorts. The two sitting men nearest the camera appear to wear German first-pattern desert ankle boots with green canvas uppers. (Private collection)

8 – 10 November Operation 'Torch': 100,000 British and US troops land on Algerian and Moroccan coasts, leading to surrender of Vichy French forces and opening new western front against the Axis in Libya. Allied advance on Tunisia delayed by bad weather.

13 December British 8th Army pursuing Axis forces westwards becomes over-extended after covering 700 miles in five weeks.

Rommel recognises that eventual defeat in Africa is now inevitable but is determined to tie the Allies down for as long as possible. His surviving forces retreating westwards towards Tunisia will be reinforced and resupplied there for a holding action; when no meaningful resistance is any longer possible he hopes that his command can be evacuated to Sicily. By the beginning of 1943 Von Arnim's 5 Panzerarmee has 65,000 men in Tunisia, of whom 18,000 are Italians:

ORDER OF BATTLE ITALIAN ARMY IN TUNISIA, JANUARY 1943

XX Corps

'Pistoia', 'Spezia' Inf Divs

'Trieste' Mot Inf Div

XXI Corps

'Centauero' Armd Div (inc. some 'Ariete' remnants)

'Giovani Fascisti' Inf Div

XXX Corps

'Superga' Inf Div

50th Special Bde 'Imperiali'*

(*assembled from remnant and reinforcement units – MVSN, Bersaglieri, 'Lodi' armd recce group, 15th Tank Bn, *semoventi* & artillery from 'Centauro' and 'Superga' Divs, etc.)

Late January Rommel holds Mareth line against pursuing 8th Army with remnants of DAK (15th & 21st Panzer, 90th & 164th Light Divs), elements of 'Pistoia' & 'Trieste', and new 'Spezia', 'Giovani Fascisti' and 'Centauro' Divs. *23 February*, whole force redesignated 1st Italian Army (Gen Messe); Rommel takes command of all Axis forces in theatre as Heeresgruppe Afrika.

14 – 25 February Battle of Kasserine: Von Arnim and Rommel attack US II Corps with 10th & 21st Panzer Divs and achieve temporary break-through, inflicting 7,000 casualties and destroying 345 AFVs. Allied reserves rally and block Axis advance; Gen Patton takes command of II Corps.

6 March While Italians and 90th & 164th Light Divs face Montgomery at Mareth line, Rommel swings his remaining tanks round south to Medenine, aiming to cut 8th Army off against coast. 2nd New Zealand Div with heavy artillery support smash the attack.

9 March Rommel, in poor health, leaves Africa for the last time.

20 March 8th Army attack on Mareth line begins, main weight falling on 'Pistoia', 'Trieste', 'Spezia' & 'Giovani Fascisti' Divs (other smaller Italian units include a 'Gruppo Sahariano' of seven desert-trained frontier battalions). By the 27th the line is broken.

April In a stubborn fighting retreat 1st Italian Army hold successive positions at Wadi Akarit and Enfidaville as Axis forces are gradually pushed into a shrinking pocket in north-east Tunisia.

7 May Bizerte and Tunis fall.

13 May Surrender of all Axis forces in Tunisia, nearly 250,000 falling into Allied hands.

With the end of the North African campaign the way is now open for the Allies to prepare for the invasion of the Italian island of Sicily.

A group of Italians and a German look over a captured British Valentine tank in a dug-in position; there is no evident damage, and this is probably a tank of 7th or 4th RTR lost in the South African surrender of Tobruk in June 1942. The Italians wear a typical mixture of uniforms and headgear, including (left) an 'India' pattern solar topi and a grey-green shirt with light khaki breeches. (Robert Stedman Collection)



UNIFORMS

East Africa

Almost from the outbreak of war Italian East Africa was cut off from Italy and thus from any new supplies of arms, equipment or uniforms; once old uniforms were worn out there was little chance of being issued with replacements. Some units, for instance the 'Granatieri di Savoia' Division, nevertheless strove to present a smart turn-out.

The crew of an 8mm M1935 Fiat Revelli medium machine gun fire at a distant target, supposedly at El Alamein on 29 October 1942. They belong to the Carabinieri Parachute Battalion which was sent to North Africa in July 1941. Both wear light khaki cotton uniforms, with the loader in rolled-up shorts. The gunner wears a M1942 visored *bustina*, and a holstered Beretta M1934 pistol. (Robert Stedman Collection)

By the outbreak of the war all officers and NCOs in AOI were supposedly kitted out with the latest 'Sahariana' jacket, but less than 50 per cent of the enlisted men had been issued with them. Older items of uniform continued to be worn, including the tropical peaked cap, and the white linen version of the *Sahariana*, which continued to be seen occasionally right up until the end of the fighting. The tropical tunic was also still widely worn during the 1941 campaign, especially by the MVSN Blackshirt units which made up a large part of the Metropolitan Italian forces. Baggy tropical long trousers left over from the Ethiopian campaign of 1935-36 were also mentioned as still being worn until the end in East Africa.

In the mountainous regions of East Africa, where the weather can be extremely cold, heavier duty uniform items were worn, as they had been during the 1935-36 campaign. These included breeches made of wool, heavier duty cotton and olive/khaki corduroy. Photographs taken as the last Italian garrisons to surrender in September 1941 marched out of



their fortresses past British guards of honour show a real mixture of uniforms. No two soldiers are dressed exactly alike, and each man has adapted what he has to turn himself out as smartly as possible.

North Africa

The Italian soldier began the fighting in North Africa dressed in a mixture of 'tropical' and 'continental' uniforms. Units already stationed in Libya at the outbreak of the war usually wore tropical uniform, while those brought over from Italy as reinforcements in the summer of 1940 generally wore grey-green continental uniform with the M1935 tropical helmet.

THE TROPICAL UNIFORM OF THE ITALIAN ARMY 1940-43

The Italian Army had been fighting in Africa since the late 19th century, and during the first four decades of the 20th century it had fought many colonial campaigns in North and East Africa. Like all other European colonial powers the Italians had developed tropical uniforms for the African climate. The experience gained during the Ethiopian campaign 1935-1936 and fighting in Libya in the 1920s-1930s had led to further developments; the Italian soldier stationed in Libya and AOI at the outbreak of war was reasonably well kitted out. Units which arrived as reinforcements after June 1940 were not always so lucky.

Tropical tunics

The issue tropical tunic was basically of the same design as the 'continental' or European grey-green wool tunic (see first title in this series, MAA 340) but was made out of a light khaki linen. First seen in widespread service in Ethiopia in 1935-36, it had an open notched collar, four pleated pockets with buttoned flaps, shoulder straps, and a plain cuff with a false turn-up. Photographs show variations in minor details such as pocket flap and cuff shapes. Officers' versions of the tropical tunic were

of the same design but better tailored from a superior grade of cloth.

The Sahariana

A popular item of clothing was the loose-fitting linen tunic or bush jacket known as the *Sahariana*, developed from the M1929 'colonial' tunic through experience gained in policing the deserts of Libya. The *Sahariana* had pairs of pleated breast pockets and skirt pockets, the latter of expanding type, and an integral cloth belt fastened

OPPOSITE, BELOW Italian Infantry advance at the double during the desert fighting in 1942. All wear the now archaic-looking M1935 tropical helmet with a mixture of tropical jackets, breeches and shorts, boots and sandals. The officer in the centre with a slung carbine is wearing a distinctly lighter-coloured *Sahariana* with black shoulder boards. Their weapons are also a mixed bag of Carcano rifles and carbines, with Breda M1930 light machine guns.

BELOW Stripped to the waist and probably wearing shorts, this crew man a Breda 20/65 anti-aircraft gun in a fixed position reinforced with sandbags. Layers of rock were often to be found just under the sand surface, making digging-in exhaustingly difficult. All the crew wear the M1933 steel helmet painted sand-colour. (Robert Stedman Collection)





In the region of Enfidaville, Tunisia, where the remaining Italian divisions made one of their last stands early in 1943, the crew of an SPA43 desert reconnaissance vehicle prepare for a patrol. The officer wears a visored M1942 *bustina* and a light-coloured *Sahariana*. His crew sport a mixture of visored and unvisored caps. (Ufficio Storico Dello Stato Maggiore Esercito)

An infantry officer distributes uniforms in Tunisia in January 1943 as Axis forces are built up in their Tunisian bridgehead. He is wearing an M1934 grey-green wool greatcoat with an M1942 tropical *bustina* showing the infantry branch badge on the front. (Rex Trye)



with either a buckle or two buttons. Its most noticeable feature was the deep shoulder cape which incorporated the buttoned flaps of the breast pockets. A long-pointed shirt-type collar could be worn open or buttoned, and there was a buttoned cuff band. The colour varied widely, from very light khaki to mustard or greenish olive-khaki; they appear to have bleached quite quickly in the sun and with frequent washing, so lighter shades were the more common.

Officers' *Saharianas* came in two versions – the pre-1940 and the M1940 – but both were worn concurrently. The pre-1940 type was distinguished by the triple-pointed rear of the cape, while the M1940 was single-pointed. Shoulder boards worn on the pre-1940 *Sahariana* had a black base and were piped in branch colours, e.g. red for infantry, yellow for artillery, or – in the case of officers of Colonial battalions – in the colours or stripes of their unit sashes. Rank was worn on the shoulder boards of the pre-1940 jacket in the usual system of stars and crowns, etc (see chart on page 22). The M1940 was officially supposed to carry the rank on the cuffs instead, but in practice many officers continued to wear the shoulder boards – this was more practical, since the cuff bands were fastened with buttons or tabs.

The enlisted men's version of the *Sahariana* was basically the same as the officers' M1940 but of poorer manufacture from lower grade material. Although it was quite widely worn it was not issued in the same quantities as the *camiciotto Sahariano* (see below). The *Sahariana* was a very practical, stylish and popular garment, which was even adopted at times by the Italians' German allies in North Africa.

The *camiciotto Sahariano*

Another version of the *Sahariana* was the very popular enlisted men's heavy shirt/tunic, the *camiciotto Sahariano*. There were two types: the pre-1940 first model was a pullover garment, with a three-button opening at the top of the chest, while the M1940 second type also had three buttons but opened all the way down the front. It had a shirt-type collar and buttoned cuff bands like the *Sahariana*, but not the caped shoulder effect. Because it was unlined and loose-fitting this garment was comfortable and very popular. Although worn by all branches of the Italian Army it was seen in most use by elite units such as the Bersaglieri and Guastatori.

Cold weather clothing

It should not be forgotten that night-time temperatures drop sharply in the desert, which can be extremely cold. A khaki or brown wool version

of the grey-green wool M1934 greatcoat was issued in limited numbers, but the majority of greatcoats in use were the grey-green model normally worn as part of the continental uniform. Other items of the continental uniform were also worn at night when available, including the grey-green wool pullover and knitted cap.

HEADGEAR

General Messe (left) took command of Panzerarmee Afrika, redesignated 1st Italian Army, on 23 February 1943; he thus became the first Italian officer to have field command of both Italian and German units. Messe wears a light grey *cordellino* officers' tunic and breeches with two black stripes. His M1942 visored *bustina* has the general officers' gold eagle cap badge, and a rank bar on the left. The staff lieutenant is wearing a darker grey tunic and breeches with a M1934 cap. (Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, NZ)



The *bustina*

Headgear for enlisted ranks usually consisted of the *bustina* of various patterns, a cork tropical helmet or the M1933 steel helmet. The tropical *bustina* came in several models, the first being a light khaki cotton or linen version of the standard grey-green wool headgear of the continental uniform. Another unofficial version, available to officers from the late 1930s and popular at the start of the African campaign, had a stiffened cloth front flap/visor; this was also privately purchased by enlisted men.

The next type to be recognised was officially designated the M1942, although it had been introduced a few years earlier. This model had a soft visor, and came in a variety of shades of khaki. It also showed slight variations in style although conforming to the basic standard. The M1942 *bustina* came with a cloth neck cover which seems in most cases to have been removed.

All models of the *bustina* bore badges on the front identifying the arm of service and unit, embroidered on either khaki or grey-green backgrounds. Officers wore their ranks on the front left side, as on the grey-green model.

Tropical helmets

The enlisted ranks' tropical helmet was made of cork and covered in light khaki canvas material. It had a fairly high crown with a metal ventilator at the apex, and small air vents on either side of the helmet helped to keep the head cool. On the right hand side of the helmet there was a small socket to fasten the cockerel feathers of the Bersaglieri. Badges of arm and unit were worn on the front, in most cases made of brass and mounted on a tri-colour cockade in the Italian colours. In a few cases the badge was stencilled on, or even hand-drawn by the soldiers. Troops were also known to write graffiti on the sides of their tropical helmets, e.g. their names and lists of actions in which they had fought. Another habit among the pious was to fasten religious tokens to the helmet. Bizarrely, some soldiers even attached captured Allied badges, covering their headgear with these various 'talismans'. All of these unofficial decorations were, of course, frowned upon by their officers, but seem to have been tolerated to a degree.

Rank & Branch Insignia, Royal Army & Royal Colonial Troops, 25 July 1940–12 May 1943

These insignia are illustrated as worn on the shoulder boards of the Sahariana, and on the upper sleeves. Officers' branch badges on the shoulder boards were embroidered in gold wire. **Colours:** (1-7) General officers (*ufficiali generali*): Silver braid boards piped brick red; gold insignia embroidered on brick red backing; silver eagles (6, 7). (8-13) Field officers (*ufficiali superiori*): Black cloth boards piped in branch colours, gold braid inner edging, gold insignia embroidered on brick red backing (8, 9, 11); silver eagle (8). (14-19) Subaltern officers (*ufficiali inferiori*): Black cloth boards piped in branch colours, gold embroidered insignia, gold braid bar (14, 16), black star edged gold (19). (20-23) Senior NCOs (*marescialli*): Black cloth boards piped in branch colours, gold braid with black silk centre stripes. (24-27) Junior NCOs (*sergenti*): Black cloth boards piped in branch colours; gold braid chevrons separated on grey-green cloth backing on both upper sleeves. (28-30) Other ranks: Plain khaki shoulder straps. Senior other ranks (*graduati*): Red wool chevrons on grey-green cloth backing on both upper sleeves. Privates (*truppa*) had no insignia. Since there were more separate grades than in the British Army the equivalent non-commissioned ranks shown in brackets are very approximate.



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30

1. *Primo Maresciallo dell'Impero* (Field Marshal)
2. *Maresciallo d'Italia* (Field Marshal)
3. *Generale d'armata* (General)
4. *Generale designato d'armata* (Acting Gen)
5. *Generale di corpo d'armata* (Lt Gen)
6. *Generale di divisione* (Maj Gen)
7. *Generale di brigata* (Brigadier)
8. *Colonnello igs* (Colonel)
9. *Colonnello titolare* (Colonel)
10. *Colonello* (Colonel)
11. *Tenente colonnello igs* (Lt Col)
12. *Tenente colonnello* (Lt Col)
13. *Maggiore* (Major)
14. *Primo capitano* (Senior Captain)
15. *Capitano* (Captain)
16. *Primo tenente* (Senior Lieutenant)
17. *Tenente* (Lieutenant)
18. *Sottotenente* (2nd Lt)
19. *Aspirante ufficiale* (Acting 2nd Lt)
20. *Aiutante di battaglia* (WOI)
21. *Maresciallo maggiore* (WOII)
22. *Maresciallo capo* (Staff Sgt)
23. *Maresciallo ordinario* (Sergeant)
24. *Sergente maggiore* (Lance Sgt)
25. *Sergente maggiore* (Lance Sgt)
26. *Sergente* (Corporal)
27. *Caporale maggiore* (Senior Lance Cpl)
28. *Caporale* (Lance Cpl)
29. *Soldato scelto* (Senior Private)
30. *Soldato* (Private)

Notes:

1. Rank created 1938 for King Vittorio Emanuele III & Mussolini.
8. 'igs' = *incaricato con grado superiore* – appointed to a higher command; here a Colonel commanding a brigade.
9. Lieutenant-Colonel commanding a regiment.
29. In cavalry, *Appuntato*.



A captain of the Transport Corps studying a map in his headquarters wears a *Sahariana* with black shoulder boards; this angle gives a good view of the blue branch-colour piping and the three rank stars below the Transport branch badge. He is wearing straight khaki linen trousers with turn-ups instead of the more common breeches. (Tank Museum 5840/B4)

OPPOSITE

Branch badges (numbered as illustrated opposite), with piping colours:

General staff – crowned eagle (2-7), golden yellow. *Infantry* (9), scarlet. *Bersaglieri* (10), crimson. *Armour* (19), scarlet. *Armoured Cavalry*, not illustrated (crown, crossed guns, buglehorn with tank in centre), white. *Field Artillery* (18), orange yellow. *Engineers* (14), crimson. *Medical Corps* (12), light crimson.

Royal Colonial Troops: *Colonial Infantry* (15, 17), scarlet. *Savoy Grenadiers* (11), blue. *Libyan Infantry, Somali Arab & Italian East African Colonial battalions* (13), one- or two-colour battalion pipings – see page 39. *Libyan Artillery* (16), orange.

Officers' tropical helmets came in three basic types, the first being of the same pattern as the other ranks' but probably of superior manufacture; the other two models were privately purchased. The so-called 'India' pattern was a more compact type of solar topee as often seen worn by British colonial officials in India, and was mainly worn during the early stages of the war in North and East Africa. That known as the 'Aden' pattern was a pith helmet with a much thicker brim; its flatter crown had a metal ventilator at the apex. 'Aden' helmets came in various shades and were seen in light brown, light khaki and an off-white colour. Both 'India' and 'Aden' types had a many-folded false *paggri* of matching colour around the base. (See plates C2 & C3 for 'Aden' & 'India' helmets.)

Steel helmets

The M1933 steel helmet was widely worn in North Africa and came either in the original grey-green finish or painted sand-colour. In Tunisia, where the terrain is more fertile and wooded, there is evidence that some soldiers wore their helmets with camouflaged covers. These seem to have been made both from sacking, and from either the camouflaged or sand-coloured M1929 tent material.

Officers' peaked service caps

Like the continental model, the tropical version of the peaked (visored) service cap was worn by officers when out of the front line. It was usually made of light khaki material and had a brown leather visor and chinstrap. The gold braid rank 'tapes' around the band were the same as on the continental cap, with khaki material showing between each stripe. Italian officers of the Colonial Army might wear the peaked cap with either a red or green centre to the badge: red for support branches or headquarters, and green for Colonial (Indigenous) battalions. Confusingly, regulations governing these colours had been changed several times since 1927; at one time red signified officers serving in Italian East Africa and green those serving in Libya.

Legwear

Trousers worn in Africa were usually of the breeches pattern in light khaki linen, confined by grey-green woollen puttees. Light khaki calf-length pantaloon trousers of the same style as those for the continental grey-green wool uniform were worn, but were less common. Officers wore khaki linen breeches, without stripes down the side; some also wore the continental uniform *cordellino* breeches in light grey-green gabardine, with side-stripes, in conjunction with tropical tunics and caps. Practical light khaki linen shorts were widely worn, and although an official model was issued many were made from cut-down pantaloons. Shortages of tropical gear led to the wearing of large quantities of British uniform after stores fell into Italian hands at the fall of Tobruk, and British khaki drill tropical shorts seem to have been widely adopted by Italian troops.

Brown leather leggings were worn in Africa and, like the continental black leather types, came in a few different models. One type unique to Africa were worn by the *Polizia Dell'Africa Italiana* (see below).

Footwear

Footwear for the ordinary soldier was usually a brown leather version of

the black M1912 hobnailed boot worn with continental uniform. The higher boot worn during the Ethiopian campaign, 1935-36, would almost certainly have been used by soldiers in AOI, where supply shortages led to widespread use of obsolete items. Officers' brown leather knee boots also came in different versions: the standard slip-on type and a model with a lace-up foot section – a version with a zip fastening up the back is also mentioned. Brown leather sandals similar to those worn by Colonial troops were also worn, either with or without socks. Canvas gym shoes, issued as part of the PT kit, were also worn in Africa for the sake of comfort by some officers and men.

Ranks and insignia on tropical uniform

Basic rank insignia are illustrated and explained in MAA 340, *The Italian Army 1940-43 (1): Europe 1940-43*. NCOs wore their ranks on the upper sleeves of the tropical tunic and various *Sahariana* jackets as on the continental uniform. Officers wore their ranks on the cuffs of the tropical uniform tunic. Before 1940 officers' ranks on the *Sahariana* were worn on black cloth shoulder boards (see chart on page 22); after 1940 rank insignia were officially moved to the cuffs of the *Sahariana* too, but in practice many officers continued to wear shoulder boards. The other insignia on the tropical uniform were basically the same as worn on the continental uniform, with the *mostrine* divisional patches worn on the collar (see page 33). Early in the war divisional shields were worn on the left sleeve, as on the continental uniform (see Plate B3).

Tropical equipment

There were only a few items of tropical equipment issued specially for service in Africa. These included desert goggles in a number of versions. A sand-coloured version of the M1929 tent quarter existed but was not in common use, the camouflaged version normally being seen in the desert. Other personal equipment was of standard continental issue types.

'Giovani Fascisti'- Young Fascists Division'

This was a unique formation raised for the campaign in North Africa from members of the Fascist Youth Organisation. Volunteers were drawn from the GIL or 'Gioventu Italiana del Littoria', and were aged between 17 and 21 years. Because of the extreme youth of the soldiers of the division it was known affectionately as 'Mussolini's Boys'. The GGFF Division fought hard from its arrival in North Africa in 1941 until the end in Tunisia in 1943, earning a reputation for bravery. The division wore standard tropical gear with the black felt fez of the MVSN or the tropical helmet; no steel helmets were ever issued. On 27 May 1942 it



ABOVE Lieutenant-Colonel Fiechter, commander of the Department of Topo-Cartography of the Italian Army in North Africa, poses for the camera in 1941. This mapping expert came to this appointment from the Divisional Artillery School, as shown by the badge on his 'India' pattern tropical helmet and on his yellow-piped black cloth shoulder boards. It is interesting that he wears these, rather than cuff rank, on this tropical tunic – note that it is not a *Sahariana*. (Franco Festa Archives)

INVASION OF BRITISH SOMALILAND, 1940

1: Jusbaschi, 66th (Eritrean) Colonial Bn, 17th Colonial Bde

2: 'Dubat' chief-commander

3: Camicia nera, MVSN 11th Blackshirt Legion



LIBYA, 1940-41

1: Soldato, 64th Artillery Regt, 'Catanzaro' Inf Div

2: Muntaz, 3rd Bn 'Nalut', 4th Group, 2nd Libyan Div

3: Primo capo squadra, 231st Legion, '28 Ottobre' MVSN Div

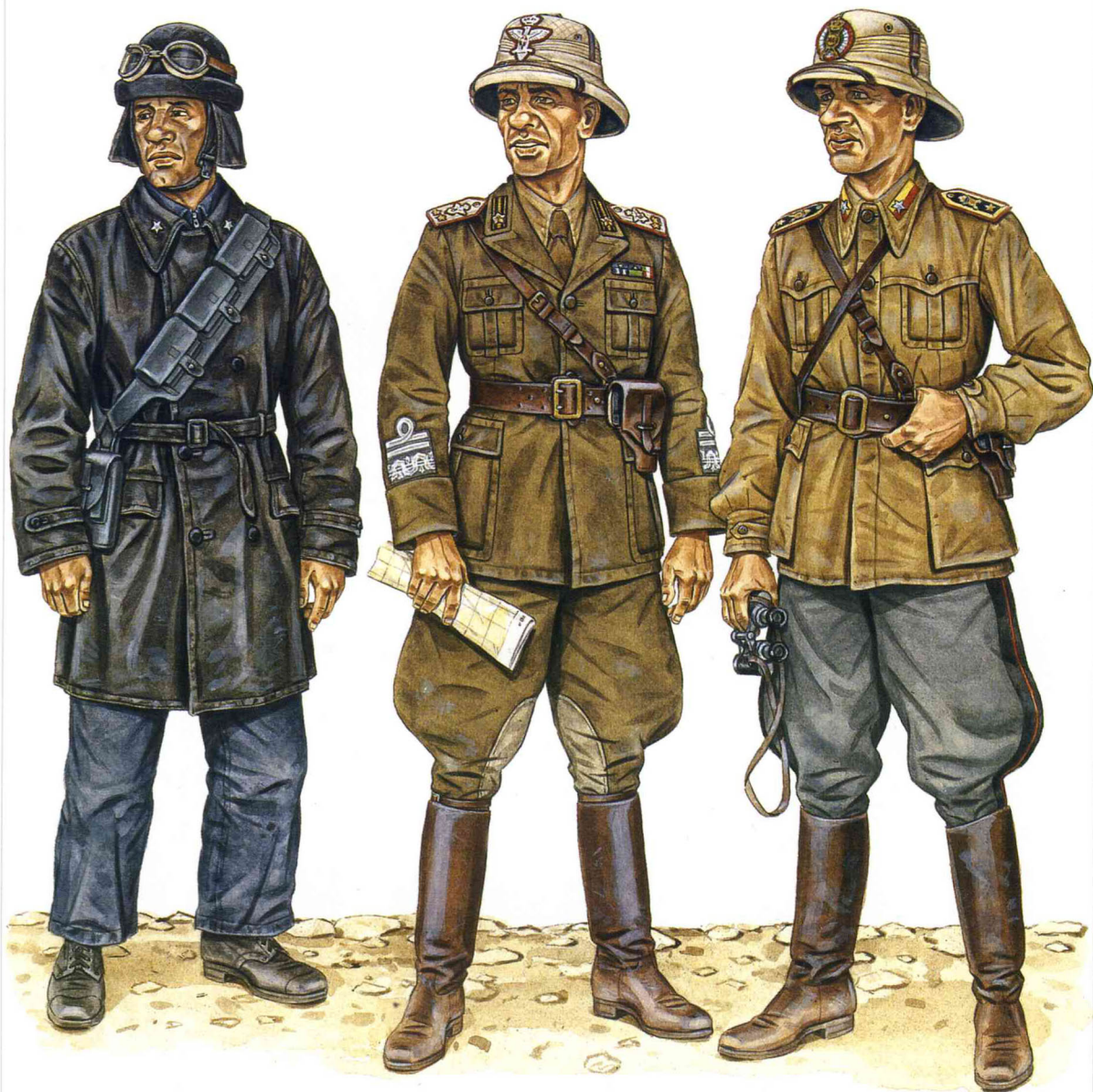


LIBYA 1941

1: Tank crewman, 132nd Armd Regt, 'Ariete' Armd Div

2: Generale di divisione, 'Sirte' Inf Div

3: Maggiore, 116th Inf Regt, 'Marmarica' Inf Div



1

2

3

ITALIAN EAST AFRICA, 1941

1: Guardia di polizia, Polizia dell'Africa Italiana; Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

2: Capitano, 10th (Eritrean) Colonial Bn

3: Centurione, MVSN 10th Blackshirt Legion, 'Africa' Inf Div; Addis Ababa, Ethiopia



BATTLE OF KEREN, FEBRUARY/MARCH 1941

1: Soldato, 11th Regt, 'Granatieri di Savoia' Div

2: Bulucbaschi, 5th (Eritrean) Colonial Bn

3: Caporale, 'Uork Amba' Alpini Bn



NORTH AFRICA, 1942

1: Marine, 'San Marco' Marine Bn

2: Caporale maggiore, 27th Inf Regt, 'Pavia' Inf Div

3: Soldato, 31st Guastatori Bn



1

2

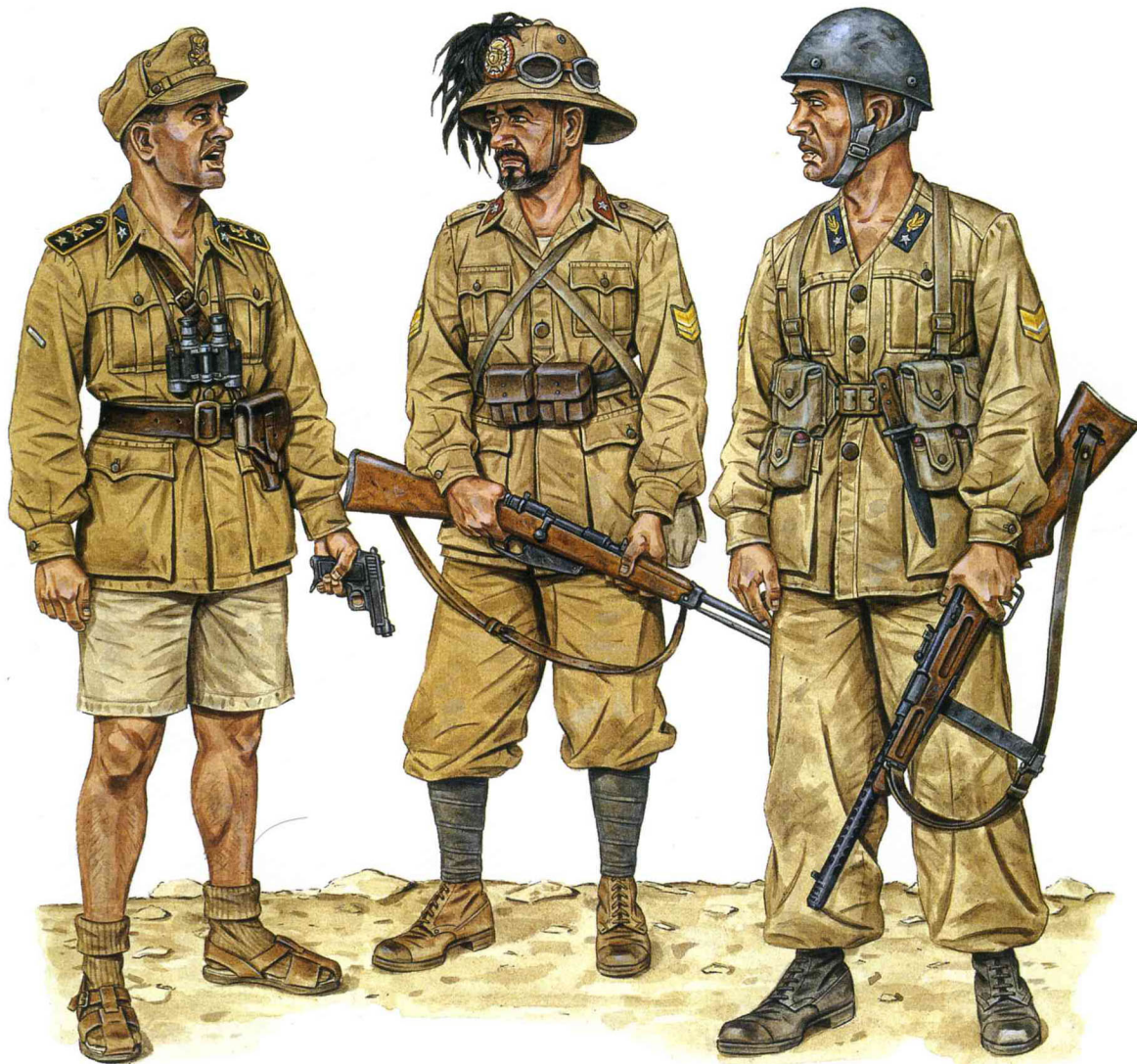
3

BATTLE OF EL ALAMEIN, OCTOBER/NOVEMBER 1942

1: Sottotenente, 21st Mot Arty Regt, 'Trieste' Mot Div

2: Sergente maggiore, 7th Bersaglieri Regt, 'Trento' Mot Div

3: Sergente, 'Folgore' Parachute Div



1

2

3

TUNISIA, 1942-43

1: Soldato, 91st Inf Regt, 'Superga' Assault Landing Div

2: Camicia nera scelta, 'Giovani Fascisti' Inf Div

3: Tenente, X° Arditi, 'Camionettisti' unit



1

2

3

**Table A:
Infantry Divisions serving in North Africa 1940-43**

Key

Nominal divisional roles:

* = Semi-motorised

** = Motorised

> = Assault landing

~ = Air landing

Units:

7,8,9B = 7th, 8th, 9th

Bersaglieri Regts

GGFF = Young
















Fascisti Regt

Service in theatre:

Lib = Libyan campaign 1940-41

NAf = North African
campaign 1941-42

Tun = Tunisian campaign 1942-43

<i>Division Name</i>	<i>Division No.</i>	<i>Inf Regt. Nos.</i>	<i>Arty. Regt. Nos</i>	<i>War service (see key)</i>	<i>Collar patch</i>	
Bologna	25	39, 40	10, 205	Lib, NAF	White/red stripe	
Brescia	27	19, 20	55	Lib, NAF	Maroon/black stripe	
Catanzaro	64	141, 142	203	Lib	Red over black	
Cirene	63	157, 158	45	Lib	Red over blue	
Giovani Fascisti	136	1 GGFF, 8B	136	NAf, Tun	Red flames edged yellow	
Marmarica	62	115, 116	44	Lib	Yellow over red	
Pavia*	17	27, 28	26	Lib, NAF	Green/red stripe	
Pistoia**	16	35, 36	3	NAf, Tun	Red/black stripe	
Sabratha	60	85, 86	42	Lib, NAF	Blue/yellow stripes	
Savona	55	15, 16	12	Lib, NAF	White/black stripe	
Sirte	61	69, 70	43	Lib, NAF	Black/yellow stripes	
La Spezia~	80	125, 126	80	NAf, Tun	Black over blue	
Superga>	1	91, 92	5	Tun	Maroon/white stripe	
Trento**	102	61, 62, 7B	46	NAf	Red/green stripes	
Trieste**	101	65, 66, 9B	21	NAf	Black/white stripes	

was officially redesignated as an armoured division (*divisione corazzata*), though this status was wholly fictitious. The main units at that date were: 'Giovani Fascisti' Regt (I & II Bns, incorporating the former III Bn including the AA and AT companies)

136th Artillery Regt (one group each of truck-borne 65/17, 75/27 and 100/17 guns)

Armoured Car Platoon 'Nizza Cavalleria'

Captured uniforms

Shortages of tropical uniform were to be a major problem for both the Italians and the Germans in the desert campaign. The Italian Army's main uniform stores in Benghazi fell to the British in February 1941; and in mid-1942 British air and naval superiority severely limited all kinds of supplies reaching the Axis forces in North Africa. The tables were turned

with the fall of Tobruk in June 1942 when huge stores of Commonwealth uniforms were captured. These were eagerly distributed, and even though the Germans took the lion's share the Italians received enough shirts, shorts and boots to kit out a large number of soldiers. One veteran of the battle of El Alamein remarked that, seen from the air, it would have appeared as if 'one British Army was chasing another British Army across the desert'. On another occasion an Italian officer said to his British officer prisoner that before the war he used to like to wear English clothes; looking him up and down, his captive remarked that this still seemed to be the case.

1942 Parachute Division 'Folgore'

(MajGen Frattini)

186th & 187th Parachute Inf Regts
of 3 bns each
185th Parachute Arty Regt
8th Assault Eng Bn

Paratroopers of the 'Folgore' Division emerge from a dugout wearing only shorts and tropical helmets. They are identifiable by their high jump boots, and special paratroopers' ammunition pouch set, with grenade pockets below cartridge pockets – see Plate G3. Most are armed with Carcano M1891 or 91/38 carbines with folding bayonets, one (left) with a Beretta M1938A sub-machine gun. (Private collection)

PARACHUTE UNITS

Italy's first experiments with airborne troops began in Libya when the then governor, the air power theorist Italo Balbo, formed a small unit from Colonial troops. This Libyan Parachute Battalion – 'Infantrymen of the Air' – was raised in 1938, and suffered heavy losses in training due to the poor design of the D37 parachute then in use. A new type of parachute was introduced in 1940, and for the first time the Italians were able to consider employing the unit in combat.

A second unit, the 1st National Parachute Battalion of Libya, was formed in 1940. In January 1941 both units, with a combined total of 850 men, were deployed in the ground role as the 'Gruppo Mobile Tonino' in the defence of Derna, Libya. An expansion of the airborne arm took place throughout 1940, with the first three battalions of Italians being raised from the ranks of the Carabinieri. One battalion of Carabinieri Paratroopers was sent to fight as ground troops in North Africa in July 1941 and performed well. Further battalions were raised from other units, with the intention of using them in

the projected invasion of Malta.

The 'Folgore' – 'Lightning' – Parachute Division was raised specifically for this invasion, and reached a strength of about 5,000 men including services. With the cancellation of the invasion plans the division was sent to North Africa in the light infantry role. Although morale was low due to the cancellation of the spearhead mission for which they had been created and trained, this small division performed very well in the battle of Alam el Halfa



in August–September 1942 and gained a good reputation. The paratroopers employed unconventional tactics in defence, and their daring counter-attacks proved very successful, if costly. After several other smaller engagements the ‘Folgore’ was to see its last major action in the battle of El Alamein, where it again fought superbly while suffering heavy losses – 1,100 dead, wounded or missing. After El Alamein the division virtually ceased to exist, although a 285th ‘Folgore’ Bn was formed from among the survivors. This continued to serve throughout the Axis retreat across Libya and, although reduced to a shadow of its former self, it fought on until the end in Tunisia in May 1943.

A second parachute division, the ‘Nembo’ – ‘Rain Cloud’ – was formed, but never reached the standard of training of the ‘Folgore’ and was employed mainly in anti-partisan operations in the Balkans. Plans for a third division – the ‘Ciclone’ – never materialised as the 1943 armistice intervened.

Paratroopers’ tropical uniform

The ‘Folgore’ Division’s basic uniform consisted of a collarless M1941 khaki *Sahariana* adapted from the standard type; loose-fitting trousers adapted from the long tropical khaki type worn in Ethiopia, 1935-36; and high-ankle jump boots with rubber soles (see Plate G3). Special steel helmets were designed for paratroopers, with much-reduced rims, added padding and Y-shaped chinstraps: the M38, and the M1941 which had a padded nose guard. In North Africa the ‘Folgore’ wore this uniform mixed with items of general tropical issue such as the cork helmet.

Polizia dell’Africa Italiana

The Polizia dell’Africa Italiana (PAI) were a special force formed to police all Italy’s African colonies. Established in 1937 as an integral part of the Army, this elite corps was given the best equipment and training, and was to prove to be one of the most reliable Italian military organisations. Many of the PAI soldiers were mounted on motorcycles, and a high proportion of them were armed with the M1938A sub-machine gun. Both Italian nationals and natives were recruited into the PAI, the black soldiers making up the majority of the force. At the



An officer and men of the renowned 31st Battalion of Guastatori – Assault Engineers – examine abandoned South African trenches at Tobruk; they were the first unit into the fortress in June 1942. The officer, holding a flare pistol, wears a *Sahariana* faded almost white by the sun; his black shoulder boards are piped in crimson for the Engineer Corps. Just visible on his left sleeve is the special badge of the Guastatori, with a sword and flaming mine on a green background – see Plate F3. All the men including the officer wear khaki shorts, the enlisted ranks with matching short-sleeved shirts, grey-green puttees and steel helmets. (Vitetti Archive)

outbreak of the war the PAI had a strength of 6,345 men in Italian East Africa, of whom 4,414 were indigenous; in Libya there were 1,327 men, of whom 732 were Libyans.

The PAI were to remain a well-disciplined force throughout the collapse of Italian East Africa, and were responsible for keeping the peace in the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa as the Allied forces took over.

PAI ranks

<i>PAI rank</i>	<i>Equivalent Army rank</i>
Allievo guardia	Soldato
Guardia di polizia	Caporale
Guardia scelta	Caporale maggiore
Vice brigadiere	Sergente
Brigadiere	Sergente maggiore
Aspirante ispettore	Aspirante
Ispettore aggiunto	Sottotenente
Ispettore	Tenente
Primo ispettore	Capitano
Ispettore capo	Maggiore
Vice questore	Tenente colonnello
Questore	Colonnello
Ispettore generale	Generale di brigata
Capo della polizia dell'AI	Generale di divisione

A Breda M1930 light machine gun crew in North Africa. The No.1 has fixed the Wehrmacht shield badge from a DAK tropical helmet to the left side of his headgear; many Italian soldiers adorned their tropical helmets, with graffiti and even with captured Commonwealth cap badges. All three men wear grey-green cotton shirts with light khaki pantaloons and, probably, grey-green puttees. (Alexei Ivanov)



COLONIAL TROOPS, 1940-43

The Italian Army had always raised native troops in all their African colonies, and soldiers from Eritrea and Libya had been heavily involved in the Ethiopian War, 1935-36. At the outbreak of the Second World War native soldiers made up a large part of the forces available to the Italians in both North and East Africa. Out of a total of 256,000 men available in Italian East Africa at the outbreak of war, 182,000 were black troops. In Libya locally recruited troops provided two divisions with a strength of over 7,000 men each, a Libyan Mobile Group, and various units of the

Saharan Command responsible for the defence of the desert regions. Most of the Colonial soldiers were lost in the fighting in Libya in 1940-41 and in Italian East Africa in 1941. Some Libyan troops continued to serve in North Africa, however, patrolling the southern desert until nearly the end of the campaign.

Types of Colonial troops

The Italian Colonial Army was an exotic mix of troop types from Libya, Eritrea, Italian Somaliland and newly conquered Ethiopia. Libyan troops were divided into infantry; *meharisti* (camel troops); *savaris* (regular cavalry); *spahis* (irregular cavalry); and *gruppi Sahariani* – motorised desert infantry. Troops recruited in Italian East Africa

1940 Colonial (Indigenous) Brigade Establishment

4 infantry battalions
4 artillery batteries

2,778 all ranks
72 x LMG, 26 HMG
16 x 65mm mountain guns
9 motor vehicles
527 horses/mules

Lieutenant of Motorised Artillery leaning on an 8mm Breda M1938 tank machine gun mounted on his vehicle while he scans the skyline. He is wearing a *Sahariana* with black shoulder boards piped in the orange-yellow of the Artillery, light khaki shorts and *bustina*, and brown leather sandals – a practical uniform well adapted to desert conditions.



included Eritrean, Ethiopian and Arab-Somali infantry; Somali tribal infantry called *dubati*; semi-irregular coastal companies; and irregular infantry recruited in small units called '*bande*'. Up to 16 cavalry units or squadrons were also recruited in Eritrea, and some of these troops made suicidal charges against Commonwealth troops during the fighting in AOI in 1941. In both Libyan and East African units the officers and a proportion of the NCOs were provided by the Italian Colonial Infantry.

Uniforms of Colonial troops, 1940-43

The Italian Colonial Army began the war dressed in exotic and colourful uniforms which seem at first sight more suited to the parade ground than the battlefield. Many of the more colourful and impractical aspects soon disappeared, and the indigenous soldiers of the later war period were usually dressed in dull khaki shirts and shorts. As the war progressed new recruits would have been fortunate to receive any uniform at all, and photographs of hastily recruited *bande* irregulars in AOI in 1941 show many wearing their own cotton tunics or *shammas*.

Headgear

The headgear worn by Colonial soldiers at the outbreak of war varied depending on nationality and religion. Libyan units generally started the war wearing the national headgear – the *takia*, a dark red felt fez with a long blue tassel. During the desert fighting Libyan soldiers were usually seen wearing a cloth headscarf over the top of the *takia*, and some reports say that they even used their brightly coloured unit sashes as headscarves when nothing else was available. Libyan desert troops such as the *meharisti* and truck-mounted infantry wore turbans of varying styles, originally white and later light khaki. Native soldiers from Eritrea, Somalia and Ethiopia usually wore the high fez known as the *tabusc*, made of red felt with tassels in the battalions' colours fixed to the crown. Khaki covers were often worn over the *tabusc*, but even after the outbreak of war some native troops continued to wear it uncovered. The *tabusc* was a mark of prestige for the native soldier, and carried badges and insignia which showed his length of service, rank, and any recognised skills such as marksmanship. When the Italian *bustina* was introduced to replace the *tabusc* it was very unpopular; although more practical, it was not seen by the men as a proper status symbol for a soldier.

Troops raised from among the Moslem tribes of Somaliland, such as the *dubati* ('White Turbans'), wore, as their name suggests, turbans, which were originally white but were later dyed khaki.

Tunics

Three main types of jacket were used by Italian Colonial troops during the war. These were the

M1929 *giubba*, and the pre-1940 and M1940 *camiciotto Sahariano per Coloniali*. The Model 1929 tunic had a low standing collar, while the two types of *camiciotto Sahariano* followed the style of those worn by Metropolitan troops. Although none of these tunics bore collar insignia before 1939, after April of that year Libyan troops were allowed to wear the national star of Savoy in recognition of their newly-granted Italian citizenship (see chart on page 40).

Legwear & footwear

The type of trousers worn by Colonial troops varied according to their nationality, the usual rule being that Libyans and Eritreans wore baggy trousers while Somalis wore baggy shorts. This rule, like most others, was not always followed; and by the later stages of the East African campaign most native troops were seen in shorts. Trousers and shorts were usually worn with khaki wool puttees. Brown leather leggings were worn by some mounted units, as by European troops.

The favoured footwear among Colonial troops was the brown leather sandal, which was worn by both Libyan and East African soldiers. Libyan soldiers wore either sandals or brown leather shoes which do not seem to have conformed to any official regulations. Many soldiers in the AOI went barefoot, as had always been their practice – the skin on their feet was as hard as leather. Even when barefoot, however, the *ascari* usually wore puttees to protect his legs from thorn bushes.

Battalion sashes

Each Colonial Battalion had its own distinctively coloured waist sash. These were either in plain colours or striped horizontally or vertically (see Table B). As well as sash colours for combatant units there were identifying colours for the support branches: Sanitary Corps, white; Artillery, yellow; Engineers, amaranth; Marines, blue; Automobile Troops, brown; and Supply Corps, white and light blue horizontal stripes.

Insignia

All Colonial soldiers from Libya, Eritrea and Somaliland had the same system of ranks before 1941, and these were carried on large detachable chevrons on the upper sleeve. As well as the rank the chevron also bore insignia marking the

Soldiers of an unidentified Italian infantry unit line up for inspection in Tunisia in February 1943. All wear grey-green M1940 tunics and M1933 helmets with the grey-green leather belt and ammunition pouches. The wearing of army issue blankets rolled over their shoulders is unusual and may be in lieu of haversacks to carry personal belongings. These men belong to one of the divisions brought over from Italy in a last ditch effort to reinforce the shrinking Axis 'bridgehead' in Tunisia. (Robert Hunt Library)



Happy Italian prisoners of war of the 20th Infantry Regiment from the 'Trento' Motorised Division smile for the camera from their barbed wire enclosure. All wear the light khaki linen *bustina* – note the infantry arm-of-service badge, and the applied metal numerals '20' just visible. All seem to wear the *camiciotto Sahariano*, much faded in use. Two have red cross brassards and may be stretcher bearers. (IWM E13027)



Table B: Colonial Unit Sash Colours, 1940

Key: V = vertical stripes, H = horizontal stripes.

Units are infantry battalions unless otherwise noted.

Scarlet	1st Eritrean, 4th Arabo-Somali	Orange/crimson	V = 93rd Eritrean
Yellow	Eritrean Artillery, 5th Savari Cavalry, 6th Meharisti 'Tripolitania'	Orange/amaranth	V = 85th Eritrean
Green	6th Eritrean, 2nd Arabo-Somali, 4th Savari Cav, 2nd Meharisti 'Tripolitania',	Orange/purple	V = 86th Eritrean
Black	4th Eritrean, 1st Libyan, 1st Savari Cav, 3rd Meharisti 'Tripolitania'	Orange/blue	V = 52nd Eritrean, H = 55th Eritrean
Blue	2nd Eritrean, 2nd Libyan, 2nd Savari Cav, 4th Meharisti 'Tripolitania'	Orange/light blue	V = 60th Eritrean
Crimson	3rd Eritrean, 1st Arabo-Somali, 4th Libyan, 3rd Savari Cav, 5th Meharisti 'Tripolitania'	Orange/green	V = 46th Eritrean, H = 47th Eritrean
Red	3rd Libyan, 1st Meharisti 'Tripolitania'	Orange/brown	V = 63rd Eritrean
Tartan	5th Eritrean, 3rd Arabo-Somali, 5th Libyan, 7th Meharisti 'Tripolitania'	Orange/tartan	V = 5th Eritrean Cav
White/yellow	V = 10th Arabo-Somali, H = 18th Eritrean	Scarlet/crimson	V = 87th Eritrean
White/orange	V = 36th Eritrean, H = 33rd Eritrean	Scarlet/amaranth	V = 88th Eritrean
White/scarlet	V = 9th Eritrean, H = 27th Eritrean	Scarlet/purple	V = 64th Eritrean
White/red	V = 7th Savari Cav, H = 15th Libyan, 3rd Spahi Cav	Scarlet/blue	V = 89th Eritrean
White/crimson	V = 5th Arabo-Somali, H = 50th Eritrean	Scarlet/light blue	V = 65th Eritrean
White/amaranth	V = 51st Eritrean, H = 53rd Eritrean	Scarlet/green	V = 9th Arabo-Somali
White/purple	V = 35th Eritrean, H = 23rd Eritrean	Scarlet/brown	V = 66th Eritrean
White/blue	V = 10th Eritrean, H = 40th Eritrean	Scarlet/tartan	V = 9th Eritrean Cav, H = 13th Eritrean Cav
White/light blue	V = 91st Eritrean	Crimson/purple	V = 67th Eritrean
White/green	V = 12th Arabo-Somali, H = 16th Eritrean	Crimson/blue	V = 88th Eritrean, H = 39th Eritrean, 2nd Spahi Cav
White/tartan	V = 1st Eritrean Cav, H = 16th Eritrean Cav	Crimson/light blue	V = 11th Arabo-Somali
Black/green	V = 12th Eritrean, 9th Libyan, H = 21st Eritrean	Crimson/green	V = 42nd Eritrean, H = 20th Eritrean
Black/white	V = 17th Eritrean, H = 28th Eritrean, 14th Libyan, 6th Savari Cav	Crimson/brown	V = 68th Eritrean
Black/crimson	V = 29th Eritrean, 8th Libyan, H = 48th Eritrean	Crimson/tartan	V = 4th Eritrean Cav
Black/orange	V = 30th Eritrean, H = 15th Eritrean	Amaranth/purple	V = 69th Eritrean
Black/scarlet	V = 7th Eritrean, H = 26th Eritrean	Amaranth/blue	V = 70th Eritrean
Black/blue	V = 11th Eritrean, H = 1st Spahis Cav	Amaranth/light blue	V = 59th Eritrean
Black/light blue	V = 49th Eritrean	Amaranth/green	V = 45th Eritrean, H = 34th Eritrean
Black/amaranth	V = 6th Arabo-Somali, H = 59th Eritrean	Amaranth/brown	V = 71st Eritrean
Black/purple	V = 76th Eritrean, H = 77th Eritrean	Amaranth/tartan	V = 7th Eritrean Cav
Black/tartan	V = 12th Eritrean Cav	Purple/blue	V = 72nd Eritrean
Yellow/orange	V = 54th Eritrean, H = 31st Eritrean	Purple/light blue	V = 73rd Eritrean
Yellow/scarlet	V = 32nd Eritrean, H = 13th Eritrean	Purple/green	V = 74th Eritrean, H = 24th Eritrean
Yellow/crimson	V = 82nd Eritrean	Purple/brown	V = 75th Eritrean
Yellow/amaranth	V = 7th Arabo-Somali, H = 62nd Eritrean	Purple/tartan	V = 10th Eritrean Cav
Yellow/purple	V = 56th Eritrean, H = 44th Eritrean	Blue/light blue	V = 78th Eritrean
Yellow/blue	V = 14th Eritrean, H = 38th Eritrean	Blue/green	V = 43rd Eritrean, H = 19th Eritrean
Yellow/light blue	V = 83rd Eritrean, H = 92nd Eritrean	Blue/brown	V = 79th Eritrean
Yellow/green	V = 37th Eritrean, H = 22nd Eritrean	Light blue/green	V = 80th Eritrean
Yellow/brown	V = 41st Eritrean	Light blue/brown	V = 81st Eritrean
Yellow/tartan	V = 8th Eritrean Cav	Green/brown	V = 58th Eritrean
Orange/scarlet	V = 84th Eritrean	Green/tartan	V = 2nd Eritrean Cav, H = 15th Eritrean Cav
		Brown/tartan	V = 11th Eritrean Cav
		Deep blue/crimson	H = 11th Libyan
		Black/red border	6th Libyan
		Red/green	H = 4th Spahi Cav
		Blue/green centre stripe	= 13th Libyan
		Black/white H/crimson border	= 16th Libyan
		Black/green H/crimson border	= 17th Libyan
		Tartan/white centre stripe	= 18th Libyan
		Tartan/green centre stripe	= 19th Libyan
		Blue/crimson H/white centre stripe	= 10th Libyan

wearer's years of service, and specialist skills such as sharpshooter or trumpeter. Rank insignia for Libyan troops were changed in December 1941 to smaller chevrons worn on the sleeve itself. Rank stars were also worn on the Libyan soldier's *takia* and the Eritrean soldier's *tabusc*, above the cap badge. Years of service were indicated by the number and colour of stars worn on the chevron. (For all these details, see chart on page 40.)

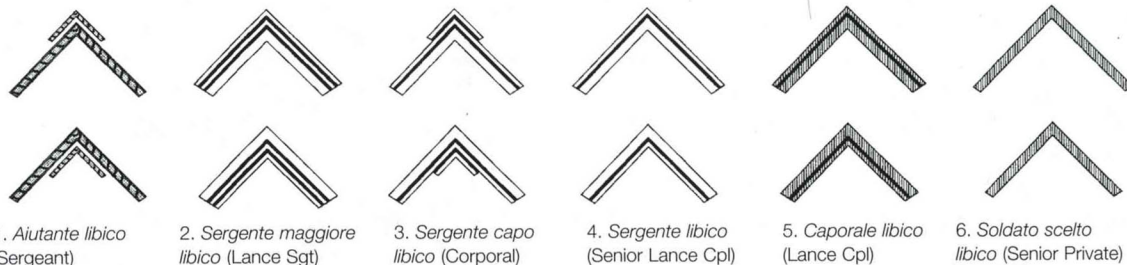
Personal equipment

The personal equipment of the Colonial soldier consisted of a belt with

Rank Insignia, Royal Corps of Libyan Troops (Regio Corpo truppe libiche), 21 April 1939–4 February 1943

These insignia were worn on both upper sleeves of the M1929 standing-collar tunic and the pre-1940 and M1940 *camiciotto Sahariano* by Libyan native troops. The upper row shows the insignia introduced on 21 April 1939, the lower row the modified insignia introduced 24 December 1941.

Colours: (1-4) Senior NCOs (*sottufficiali*): Gold braid chevrons with black centre stripes (1); junior NCOs (*sottufficiali*): Silver braid chevrons separated by narrow black chevrons (2-4). **(5-6)** Senior other ranks (*graduati*): Red cloth chevrons separated by narrow black chevrons. The private (*soldato libico*) had no insignia. Since there were more separate grades than in the British Army the equivalent ranks shown in brackets are very approximate.



Rank Insignia, Royal Corps of Colonial Troops (Regio Corpo truppe coloniale), 9 May 1936–3 July 1941

These insignia were worn by native troops from Italian East Africa. The upper row shows the insignia worn on the fez, the lower row the insignia worn on both upper sleeves.

Colours – cap badges: Silver metal stars, gold metal chevron or bar, silver metal marksman's badge on battalion-colour cloth backing.

Colours – sleeve badges (1-4) Senior & junior NCOs (*sottufficiali* & *sergenti*): Brick red cloth medium chevrons on black cloth triangle; thin gold upper chevron (1, 3); gold braid wound, promotion & specialty badges; service stars in gold & silver metal & brick red cloth. **(5-6)** Senior other ranks (*graduati*): Brick red cloth medium chevrons on black cloth triangle; brick red wound & specialty badges; service stars in gold & silver metal & brick red cloth (5), gold metal star on brick red triangle (6). The private (*ascari*) had no insignia.

Wound badges One bar per wound (1). **Promotion badge** Crown for a field promotion (2). **Specialty badges:** Machine gun marksman – MG on tripod (3); armoured car MG marksman – MG & wheel; bandsman – lyre (4); bugler – bugle (5). **Service stars** Red: 1 = 2 years, 2 = 6 years, 3 = 10 years. Silver: 1 = 12, 2 = 14, 3 = 16 years. Gold: 1 = 20, 2 = 24, 3 = 28 years.



Notes:

1. Rank introduced 29 October 1936. Somali troops called this rank *Jusbasci capo*.
2. Somali troops called this rank *Jusbasci*.
3. Rank introduced 29 October 1936.
6. Rank frequently abolished and reinstated.

pouches or a bandolier, both made of natural brown leather. Regulations of 1929 called for the belt and pouches to be the same as Metropolitan issue but of brown instead of grey-green leather. One common but unofficial practice was the wearing of four pouches on the belt instead of two. Bandoliers were of several patterns, the most common being the M1891 two-pocket model. Ex-Austrian brown leather belts with four pouches were in widespread use by irregular troops such as the *dubati* and carried ammunition for the Austrian Mannlicher M95 rifle. These had been handed over as war reparations in 1918 and, although an elderly weapon, were the best available to arm these troops. The *meharisti* had a different kind of brown leather cartridge belt with large pockets, worn loosely around the waist. The rest of the equipment consisted of a canvas bag or haversack for personal effects, but the latter were rarely worn by Eritrean or Somali troops – it was considered as beneath their status as warriors to carry their own baggage. (Their ancestors would have had a servant to carry equipment and spare weapons into battle for them.)

Other weapons in use by Colonial troops included the standard Carcano rifle, and the even more antiquated Vetterli M1870 rechambered in 1914 to take 6.5mm ammunition. Machine guns were the standard Italian Army Breda light and Austrian Schwarzlose heavy types, the latter also handed over to the Italians in large numbers in 1918 as war booty. Personal weapons included native daggers called *billao* used by *dubati*, and curved swords *guarade* sometimes carried by Ethiopian troops. Colonial cavalry of the 14th Group carried large curved sabres in decorative scabbards.

Red Arrows Group

The Italian Army decided in 1942 to raise a unit of foreign volunteers from Arab and Indian nationals who were opposed to the British. On 10 May they formed the 'Raggruppamento Centri Militari', with 'T Centro' made up of Tunisians, 'I Centro' of Indians – mostly ex-POWs – and 'A Centro' of Arabs and Sudanese POWs. The three units were filled out with Italians who had lived in any of these areas. The Raggruppamento reached a combined strength of 1,200 Italians, but only 400 Indians and 200 Arabs. In August 1942 it was retitled 'Raggruppamento Frece Rosse' – 'Red Arrows Group', the name being suggested by the Italian CO's experience in the Spanish Civil War when he served in the Italian Volunteer Corps 'Black Arrows' Division. The Group was divided into commando-style units of various types, and a small number of Tunisians and a platoon of Indians were given parachute training in Italy. After the Axis defeat at El Alamein the Indian contingent lost any interest in fighting for the Italians; and the only group which saw any action was the so-called 'assault battalion' of Tunisians, which was attached to the 'Superga' Division during the final fighting in 1942/43.



Libyan motorised troops of the 'Gruppo Sahariano' man a Breda 20mm anti-aircraft gun while their Italian officer watches the sky. These mobile units operated to protect the desert flanks of the Italian Army, and were among the best of their native soldiers. They are all wearing light khaki turbans, loose-fitting jackets and trousers; and note the unit-coloured sash (left). The man in the foreground has the rank chevrons introduced in 1939 when Libyans became Italian citizens, together with the collar star of Savoy. (IWM HU28380)

A standard bearer of the Colonial 14th Cavalry Group – ‘Gruppo Squadroni a Cavallo’ – at Gondar in Italian East Africa in 1941; this was to be the last Italian base to hold out against the British. He wears a light khaki turban and a M1929 Colonial tunic with a low standing collar; it would be worn with loose-fitting trousers. Native troop standards were not in the Italian national colours; this one would have been in the squadron colours. Note the skull and crossed scimitars design; the motto below it reads ‘E La Morte A Paro A Paro’ – ‘Death Makes All Things Equal’. (Marco Novarese)



The volunteers wore Italian tropical uniforms, with *mostrine* collar patches in their national colours: the Indian volunteers had yellow–white–green patches, the Tunisians red–white–green, and the Arabs black–white–red. While serving under the original title of ‘Centri Militari’ the Indian and Arab volunteers also had shield-shaped arm badges in their national colours. When the name was changed to ‘Frecce Rosse’ a single form of cap and arm badge for all volunteers was introduced. This showed three red arrows piercing a red circle with a black or khaki centre surrounded by a laurel wreath. Headgear for the unit was the M42 *bustina* for the Tunisians and Arabs; as the Indians were all Sikhs they wore khaki turbans.

Italian personnel attached to the Red Arrows wore their former collar patches with the special unit insignia on the jacket sleeve and on the front of either an M42 *bustina* or stencilled on a sand-coloured M1933 steel helmet. The Tunisian Parachute Bn which saw some action in North Africa wore parachute insignia superimposed over their national tricolour *mostrine*.

In Tunisia an officer of the ‘San Marco’ Marines gives the enemy’s range to one of his men. He wears an M1934 greatcoat and the Marines’ grey-green wool beret. The foreground figure gives a good view of the Marines’ uniform: an M1933 helmet painted grey-green, grey-green naval jumper complete with sailor’s collar, matching trousers, and the special Marine gaiters – see Plate F3. His ammunition pouches are the type peculiar to the Marines, originally made for the Italians by a British company. (Robert Hunt Library)



THE PLATES

A: INVASION OF BRITISH SOMALILAND, 1940

A1: Jusbasci, 66th (Eritrean) Colonial Battalion, 17th Colonial Brigade

This veteran of the Ethiopian War, 1935–36, is dressed in typical Colonial soldier's uniform which had changed little since that date. The khaki linen M1929 *giubba* tunic is worn with breeches, puttees and brown leather sandals. His tall red felt *tabusc* has a tassel in the battalion colours, also shown in the sash around his waist and the flag. The *tabusc* was often worn with a khaki cover, and its chinstrap was usually worn at the back of the head instead of under the chin. On the front he has the silver rifle badge of a sharpshooter, and three silver stars denoting his rank of *jusbasci* – sergeant. His rank is also shown by the stiff cotton chevrons which are tied to the upper sleeves. As the battalion standard bearer he is holding the unit flag or 'burgee' in the battalion colours with the sewn-on white Roman numerals 'LXVI' for 66th Battalion. His rifle is the standard 6.5mm Carcano M1891, which he is lucky to have – many Colonial soldiers were issued with even older weapons.

A2: 'Dubat' chief-commander

These so-called 'White Turbans' were effective light infantry recruited from the border tribes of Somalia. Their uniform consisted of a khaki-dyed garment called a *futa*, and their rank was denoted by different coloured whistling cords: green, as here, was for a 'chief-commander', red for a 'chief' and black for a 'vice-chief'. Colonial troops and particularly irregulars were generally issued with elderly or captured arms and equipment. This warrior's rifle is an Austrian Mannlicher M95 taken in war booty, as was the cartridge belt. These rifles always had 'AOI' for 'Africa Orientale Italiana' burnt into their butts.

A3: Camicia nera, MVSN 11th Blackshirt Legion

This Blackshirt private serving with the invasion force wears the enlisted ranks' tropical helmet with the brass badge of the Colonial Blackshirt Militia of East Africa. In the severe heat of the desert he has taken off his tropical tunic exposing the black cotton shirt worn by all members of the MVSN, with his light khaki pantaloons and grey-green puttees. The rest of his equipment is standard Army issue, and includes the waterbottle used during the Ethiopian War, 1935–36. His carbine is the 7.35mm Carcano M1938TS; the simultaneous use of a number of rifles and carbines in two different calibres bedevilled Italian Army logistics throughout the war.

B: LIBYA, 1940-41

B1: Soldato, 64th Artillery Regiment, 'Catanzaro' Infantry Division

During the first desert campaign against the British, Italian artillery crews earned a reputation for bravery by manning their guns in exposed positions and often fighting to the death. After the 'Catanzaro' had been badly mauled between Buqbuq and Sollum on 9-11 December 1940 the rest of the division was cut off in Bardia until its surrender on 5 January. This gunner of divisional artillery is wearing the tropical tunic introduced in the mid-1930s. Of light khaki linen, it follows the basic design of the continental wool tunic but without the lining. On the open collar he displays the red and black *mostrine* or patch of this division, overlaid with the single

An *ascari* of the 17th (Eritrean) Battalion in Italian East Africa, 1940. He is wearing the tall fez or *tabusc* with a khaki cover; the battalion's colours are shown by the black and white tassel falling from the crown. His waist sash is in black and white vertical stripes. Note the belt with four brown leather ammunition pouches, and a blanket and tent sheet worn in a shoulder roll. See also Plate A1. (Marco Novarese)



black, yellow-edged flame of the artillery branch, bearing the universal silver star of the House of Savoy. The tropical breeches are worn with a brown leather version of the strapped leggings worn by the artillery in black with continental uniform. His tropical helmet bears the national tricolour cockade behind the brass badge of the artillery with the cut-out regimental number '64'. The leather bandolier was standard issue for artillery and mounted soldiers; his M1938TS Carcano carbine is also a type issued particularly to the artillery.

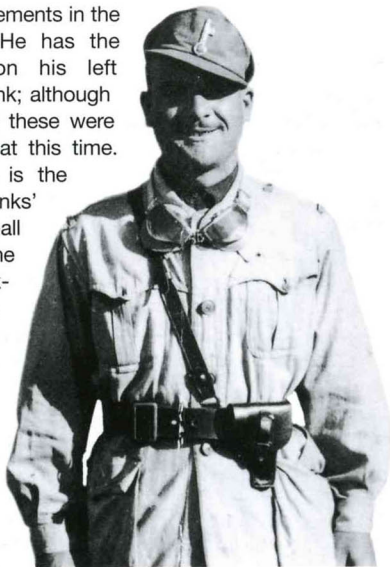
B2: Muntaz, 3rd Battalion 'Nalut', 4th Raggruppamento, 2nd Libyan Division

This *muntaz* or lance-corporal serves with the Libyan division which was destroyed on 7-10 December 1940 after fighting briefly against 4th Indian Division and the Matildas of 7th RTR in defence of the Tummar camp complex. On his khaki cotton *camiciotto Sahariano per Coloniali* jacket he displays the large detachable rank chevrons worn by all Colonial troops, with the red star marking two years' service. His plain red sash colour shows that he belongs to the 3rd (Libyan) Battalion. The *takia* cap – worn in combination with the white skullcap characteristic of Libyan male costume – has the blue tassel of all Libyan units. It bears the star denoting his rank above the cap badge of Colonial Infantry. The standard issue grey-green leather belt and brace supports four ammunition pouches instead of the normal two – a habit widespread among Libyan troops.

B3: Primo capo squadra, 231st Legion, '28 Ottobre' MVSN Division

This Blackshirt junior grade sergeant has the M1937 grey-green wool tunic and pantaloons worn during the Libyan campaign by a large number of troops brought over

from Italy as reinforcements in the summer of 1940. He has the divisional shield on his left sleeve, above his rank; although officially out of date these were still worn by many at this time. His tropical helmet is the standard enlisted ranks' M1935 with the small fasces badge of the Italian-based Black-shirts on the front. His personal equipment is standard Army issue, including the grey-green leather belt with twin ammunition pouches. He is armed with the old 6.5mm Carcano M1891 rifle, and wears on his belt an MVSN combat dagger.



C: LIBYA 1941

C1: Tank crewman, 132nd Armoured Regiment, 'Ariete' Armoured Division

This M13/40 tank crewman wears the distinctive protective clothing of Italian armoured troops in both Europe and North Africa: a black leather crash helmet, goggles, a black leather double-breasted coat with the Army's universal white metal stars on the collar, and underneath this blue linen overalls. The later model M1941 overalls differed from the earlier type in having more pockets, and added elbow and knee pads. His equipment consists of the archaic grey-green M1874/89 three-pocket leather bandolier with his 9mm Beretta M1934 semi-automatic pistol in its holster attached to the end.

C2: Generale di divisione, 'Sirte' Infantry Division

This is an officers' private purchase version of the tropical tunic, which because of his rank is well tailored from high quality material. On the collar he displays the divisional patches of the 'Sirte' Division; this formation was defeated at Tobruk by the 6th Australian Division on 21 January 1941. As on the continental uniform, the major-general's rank is carried

An officer of the MVSN in North Africa at the outbreak of war wears a light khaki *Sahariana* over his black cotton shirt. He is wearing a privately purchased mid-brown cotton *bustina* similar to the issue M1942 pattern, but in service from the late 1930s; this came with a detachable peak. On the front is the gold fasces badge of the 138th Battalion, which belonged to the '28th of October' MVSN Division destroyed in the early fighting in Libya. (Vitetti Archive)

on the forearms of the tunic and the shoulder boards – the latter being of silver lace, edged with brick red and bearing the eagle and two stars. His breeches are made of the same khaki material as the tunic; they have no stripes down the side. His pith helmet is a privately purchased 'Aden' pattern, and bears the embroidered silver eagle badge for divisional general and upward, on a brick red backing. Such tropical helmets were usually khaki but were also seen in much lighter shades, sometimes an off-white colour.

C3: Maggiore, 116th Infantry Regiment, 'Marmarica' Infantry Division

This division, effectively destroyed in January 1941, had been stationed in Libya at the outbreak of war. The major is wearing the privately purchased 'India' pattern cork tropical helmet. The very popular *Sahariana* jacket of pre-1940 pattern has the black shoulder boards which carry his rank insignia of one gold star below the infantry badge; they are edged in gold lace for a field officer, and piped in red for the infantry. The use of mixed tropical and continental uniform items is shown by the *cordellino* grey gabardine breeches, which have two black stripes flanking the red piping of the infantry. His elegant outfit is completed by a pair of officers' high brown leather boots; and he is holding a pair of Italian officers' binoculars.

D: ITALIAN EAST AFRICA, 1941

D1: Guardia di polizia, Polizia dell'Africa Italiana; Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

This corporal motorcyclist wears a brown leather visored crash helmet with the small gold badge of the PAI on the front. His enlisted man's *Sahariana* has brass fasces pinned directly to the collar, and his rank chevrons in red on both sleeves. The blue aiguillette fixed to his button and his shoulder strap marks his service. The light khaki breeches are worn with brown leather leggings to protect the lower leg when on his motorcycle. The PAI were well equipped, nearly

Field Marshal Ettore Bastico (right), governor of Libya 1941-43 and C-in-C Italian forces in North Africa, on his arrival at Castel Benito air base. Marshal Bastico wears a *bustina* and tropical tunic both made of the same good quality gabardine. His rank is shown by the four stars on his cap and the four bars above a *greca* on his sleeve. On his upper arm note the gold wreathed sword badge of the Arditi; and above his medal ribbons, the eagle badge of the Military Academy. The officers to his right and left both wear *Sahariana* jackets of differing shades, the former with a M1942 visored *bustina* and the latter with a tropical cap with his rank of colonel indicated by the lines of braiding around the band. Note the back of his jacket, showing the three-point cape effect typical of the *Sahariana* made before 1940, after which a single central point became the norm. (Franco Festa Archives)



all personnel being armed with the highly regarded 9mm M1938A Beretta sub-machine gun. His ammunition belt with pouches for the short 20-round magazines was a piece of kit issued only to the PAI; magazines were made with 10-, 20-, 30- and 40-round capacity.

D2: Capitano, 10th (Eritrean) Colonial Battalion

An Italian officer of one of the native battalions which made up the vast majority of troops available to defend the Italian East African empire. He is wearing a tropical peaked cap, which strictly speaking should not have been worn in the front line, but in East Africa rules rarely applied. The green centre to his cap badge shows that he is a permanent officer of this battalion and not from a support branch or assigned from Headquarters. Over his light khaki linen pre-1940 *Sahariana* he wears the coloured sash of his battalion, as was often the habit among European officers of Colonial units. He also has the same colours as piping around the edge of his black shoulder boards, which display his branch badge and rank insignia of three stars. His breeches, a tropical version of the continental pattern, are worn with high brown leather field boots with lacing at the foot – a feature not seen in the black continental type. He is armed with a Model 10 semi-automatic pistol, one of the lesser known sidearms used by the Italian Army.

D3: Centurione, MVSN 10th Blackshirt Legion, 'Africa' Infantry Division; Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

The 'Africa' Infantry Division was an improvised formation assembled in Italian East Africa mainly from locally raised Blackshirt Legions. This *centurione* or captain of the MVSN is wearing a tropical tunic, breeches and *bustina* made from slightly differing shades of khaki cloth. Italian East Africa was cut off from the mother country almost from the first day of the war; everything was in short supply and a great deal of improvisation took place. His rank insignia are worn on the cuffs: a gold braid diamond and three bars. The collar insignia are the usual MVSN gold fasces on black cloth double 'flames'. He is armed with the elderly Glisenti 1889 revolver – a weapon normally issued to Colonial soldiers but pressed into service by this officer due to equipment shortages.

E: BATTLE OF KEREN, FEBRUARY/MARCH 1941

E1: Soldato, 11th Regiment, 'Granatieri di Savoia' Division

The Savoy Grenadiers Division was one of only two divisional-size formations to fight in Italian East Africa. This private is wearing a tropical tunic with the Grenadiers' larger than normal collar patches – blue, with double white lace bars – and the by now officially obsolete divisional arm shield, on blue backing. He wears a light khaki cotton shirt with the distinctive black necktie of the Savoy Grenadiers.

A Polizia dell'Africa Italiana (PAI) motorcyclist poses proudly by his Moto-Guzzi in Italian East Africa. He is wearing a light khaki *Sahariana* jacket with the red chevrons of his rank of corporal on the sleeves, and has a blue aiguilette hanging from his right shoulder. The distinctive crash helmet has a small brass PAI badge on the front and is made of the same brown leather as his leggings and boots. He has a Beretta M1938A sub-machine gun slung over his shoulder. See Plate D1. (Vitetti Archive)

His trousers are light khaki linen pantaloons worn with puttees and brown leather M1912 ankle boots. The M1935 pattern tropical helmet has the flaming grenade badge of the Grenadiers set on the tricolour cockade. His unit is noticeably well equipped by the standards of this isolated theatre of war.

E2: Bulucbasci, 5th (Eritrean) Colonial Battalion

This sergeant still proudly wears the 5th Battalion's identifying tartan sash, though many would have discarded it as surplus to requirements. His uniform is a simplified version of that worn at the outbreak of war. The *tabusc* has been replaced by the less prestigious and therefore unpopular *bustina*. He is wearing the pre-1940 *camiciotto Sahariano* for Colonial troops of three-button pullover construction, with his rank shown on detachable chevrons, and baggy shorts; he is barefoot – as he has been all his life. His very basic equipment consists of an old M1891 bandolier carrying ammunition for his ex-Austrian Mannlicher M95 rifle.

E3: Caporale, 'Uork Amba' Alpini Battalion

The 'Uork Amba' Alpini Battalion was the only unit of these specialist mountain troops in Italian East Africa. This is surprising considering the terrain, and the fact that large numbers of Alpini had been employed in the conquest of Ethiopia five years before. This unit was named after the site of an Italian victory during that campaign. He wears a tropical tunic and breeches – note minor detail differences from E1 – and his helmet has the green pom-pom and crow's feather of this arm of service. His equipment includes a special Alpini waterbottle with a larger capacity than the infantry type. The carbine with folding bayonet is the original 6.5mm Carcano M1891 with adjustable backsight, not the 7.35mm 91/38 modification.





Sergeant of paratroopers wearing the M1941 light khaki tropical collarless tunic with a matching beret and trousers. Note the paratroopers' cap badge, the distinctive trouser patches, and rank chevrons on his upper sleeves. Above his left breast pocket he wears the unofficial parachutist's brevet in gold-coloured metal. See Plate G3. (Franco Mesturini Archives)

F: NORTH AFRICA, 1942

F1: Marine, 'San Marco' Marine Battalion

One battalion of the 'San Marco' Marine Division formed part of the garrison of Tobruk after its capture in June 1942, and gained a good reputation as a hard-fighting unit. This marine is wearing the special uniform issued to the battalion during its service in North Africa. It consists of the M1933 steel helmet with the stencilled anchor-and-crown badge of the Marine Corps; and a sand-coloured tropical jumper (complete with sailor's collar) and shorts, worn with long canvas gaiters. The webbing equipment, too, was special to the Marines; it was originally made in Britain and was modelled on the M1908 British pattern, later copied by the Italians. The excellent Beretta M1938A sub-machine gun seems to have been issued in quite large numbers to this elite unit.

F2: Caporale maggiore, 27th Infantry Regiment, 'Pavia' Infantry Division

Large amounts of British and Commonwealth kit were captured with the fall of Tobruk in June, and many Italian soldiers were grateful for the chance to make up for their own shortages. (DAK soldiers, too, are on record as finding British tropical uniforms more comfortable than their own olive-

green issue.) This soldier of a veteran desert division wears a British 'aertex' shirt with Italian insignia, British 'khaki drill' shorts and hobnailed black leather 'ammunition boots' – his only Italian items are the *bustina*, puttees, bandolier and waterbottle. On his left sleeve is the 'tank killer' badge with the number '1' in the centre, showing that he has helped destroy an enemy tank. His rifle is the 6.5mm Carcano M1941; and he holds a Breda M1935 grenade. All three types of Italian grenade were painted red and were nicknamed 'Red Devils' – they had a reputation for unreliability and lacked explosive force. The 'Pavia' Division, isolated at the far southern end of the Axis line with little transport, had no chance to retreat after El Alamein.

F3: Soldato, 31st Guastatori Battalion

The 31st Guastatori – Assault Engineers – were an elite unit specially trained in the laying and removal of landmines under fire. This soldier wears the M1933 steel helmet painted sand colour with the Guastatori badge stencilled in black. On the left sleeve of his first-type pullover *camiciotto Sahariano* he displays the Guastatori badge – a sword over a flaming mine on a green backing – and on the collar the flame of the Engineer branch. Light khaki linen pantaloons are worn with the usual puttees and boots. His small kit is carried in a redundant M1933 gas mask bag; a 7.35mm Carcano M1938 rifle is slung over his shoulder, and he has drawn his combat dagger to help in probing for mines during the assault on Tobruk.

G: BATTLE OF EL ALAMEIN, OCTOBER/NOVEMBER 1942

G1: Sottotenente, 21st Motorised Artillery Regiment, 'Trieste' Motorised Division

This second lieutenant is dressed in the comfortable and practical uniform worn by many Italian officers in North Africa. His *bustina* is the M1942 model with cloth visor, which came in several variations and was in widespread use during the latter part of the desert war. The M1940 officer's *Sahariana* carries his black-backed shoulder boards edged in the yellow of the artillery, bearing the artillery badge and his rank. On the right sleeve of the jacket he displays a single silver wound bar. There were three grades: gold = war wounded; silver = wounded in service; and red = 'wounded for the national cause'. On his collar he has the blue patch of a motorised division overlaid with the artillery's single yellow-edged flame. Many Italian soldiers found leather sandals, with or without socks, far more comfortable than boots. He is armed with the Italian officer's favoured sidearm, the reliable 9mm Beretta M1934 semi-automatic pistol. Forming part of the Axis mobile reserve at the northern end of the El Alamein line, elements of 'Trieste' managed to withdraw after the battle; they were still fighting on the Mareth line in Tunisia in March 1943.

G2: Sergente maggiore, 7th Bersaglieri Regiment, 'Trento' Motorised Division

A sergeant-major of this famous light infantry corps sports their flamboyant cockerel feathers on his tropical helmet; these were also seen attached to the steel helmet. The popular second-type *camiciotto Sahariano* bears here the double crimson collar flames of the Bersaglieri, and his yellow rank chevrons on both upper sleeves. The rest of his outfit is conventional, apart from the brown leather twin cartridge pouches – a special model peculiar to the

Bersaglieri, and more compact than the standard type. The normal weapon of these mobile troops was this 7.35mm Carcano M1891/38 carbine with folding bayonet and fixed backsight. At El Alamein the 'Trento' fought south of Kidney Ridge, facing the infantry attacks of British 30 Corps; it was effectively destroyed.

G3: Sergente, 'Folgore' Parachute Division

The small but elite 'Folgore' Division, shipped to North Africa in July 1942 when the planned invasion of Malta was cancelled, fought with great courage in the infantry role at El Alamein, where they were largely destroyed facing British 13 Corps south of the Munassib Depression. This figure shows the special uniform worn by paratroops in North Africa, including the M1938 helmet and the collarless M1941 *Sahariana*-style jacket. Note the paratroops' bright blue collar patches bearing a sword and stylised wing above the star. The baggy trousers hide the tops of the high black leather jump boots with rubber soles. The ammunition pouches, also unique to the paratroops, were made of light khaki canvas; note the differences between the upper and lower (grenade) pockets. (Some 'Folgore' paratroopers carried their kit in draw-string bags when nothing else was available.) He is armed with the excellent 9mm Beretta M1938A sub-machine gun; this late model, with multi-slot muzzle compensator and without provision for a bayonet, was the most common version.



H: TUNISIA, 1942-43

H1: Soldato, 91st Infantry Regiment, 'Superga' Assault Landing Division

The 'Superga' was designated an 'assault landing' division when training to take part in the planned invasion of Malta. Instead it was sent to North Africa as a badly-needed reinforcement, and fought in the conventional infantry role. Like most reinforcements brought over from Italy he is wearing the standard continental uniform; by the late stages of the campaign few soldiers had much in the way of tropical uniform, but most would have been grateful for the extra warmth of woollen clothing in the winter hills of Tunisia. The only notable point is the use of a sacking cover on his helmet; these were also made from camouflaged material cut from tent quarters. As the gunner in the crew of an 8mm Breda M1937 heavy machine gun he has a M1934 pistol for self-defence, holstered on his grey-green leather belt. The gas-operated M1937, fed with trays on the Hotchkiss principle, had some eccentric features but was by far the most reliable of the Italian Army's motley range of machine guns.

H2: Camicia nera scelta, 'Giovani Fascisti' Division

A lance-corporal in the 'Young Fascists' Division, which fought with some distinction in North Africa and Tunisia, including the defence of the Mareth line against British 8th Army in March 1943. The tasseled black felt fez was the Blackshirts' distinctive headgear; the 'GGFF' wore this or the tropical helmet in action – the division was never issued steel helmets. The collar insignia worn on this second-type *camiciotto Sahariano* were unique to the 'Giovani Fascisti': a red double flame edged with yellow. His equipment is conventional; he carries his personal gear in a light canvas 'tactical bag', and is armed with the 7.35mm M1938 rifle.

H3: Tenente, X° Arditi, 'Camionettisti' unit

The 10th Arditi Regiment was formed in 1942 as a special paratroop unit trained for commando-type operations behind Allied lines. After extensive training elements of the unit were sent to Tunisia. Equipped with SPA43 *Sahariana* desert trucks mounting 20mm cannon and several machine guns, this 'Camionettisti' ('light truck') unit performed similar missions to the British Long Range Desert Group and SAS, and appear to have been successful in this role. A wide variety of uniforms were worn, but this lieutenant has the grey-green beret, collarless *Sahariana*-style jacket and baggy trousers of the paratroops. The distinctive blue double flames of the X° Arditi are worn on the upper chest, and the Arditi badge and paratrooper brevet on the left sleeve; his rank is worn on the cuffs in the regulation manner. He is well armed with a Beretta M1938A, M1934 pistol and a combat dagger, and has acquired a pair of German binoculars.

An 81mm mortar crew of the 'Giovani Fascisti' Division prepare to fire from a trench. Two are wearing the black felt fez with their grey-green uniform while the other, unusually, has an 'India' pattern solar topi. Wearing the fez in combat became the trademark of these units, and added to their reputation for reckless courage. The chevrons on the sleeve of his grey-green wool M1940 tunic identify the left man as a sergeant-major. See also Plate H2. (Robert Stedman Collection)

INDEX

Figures in **bold** refer to illustrations

- Addis Ababa 6-7, 36
Africa division, the 4
Africa Orientale Italiana (Italian East Africa) **D**, 3-4, 18, 36, 37, 44-43
Alpini **E3**, 45
Amba Alagi, battle of, 3-17 May 1941 7
anti-aircraft guns 8, **12**, **19**
anti-tank guns 8, **10**, **11**, 12-13
Aosta, Amadeus of Savoy, Duke d', Viceroy of Ethiopia (1898-1942) 4, 6, 7
appearance **16**, **17**, 18, 18-19, 34, **37**
armoured cars **16**
Armoured Division 'Ariete' **CI**, **13**, **14**, 15(table), 44
artillery **B1**, **15**, 43
assault engineers **F3**, **35**, 46
Balbo, Marshal Italo (1896-1940) 7, 34
Bastico, Field Marshal Ettore (1876-1972) **44**
 Bersaglieri **G2**, **10**, **11**, **14**, 20, 21, 46-47
branch badges **22**
British and Commonwealth forces 5, 6, 8, 9, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 17
British Somaliland, invasion of **A**, 4, 5, 43
captured uniforms **F2**, 33-34, 46
casualties 4, 5, 6, 8, 35
cold weather clothing 18, 20-21
colonial troops **D2**, 4, 4, 5, **22**, 36-37, **40**, **41**, **42**, 45
 equipment 39, 41
 uniforms **A**, **E2**, 7, 37-39, 39(table), 43, **43**, 45
command control 8, 12
East Africa campaign, 1941 6-7
Egypt, Italian invasion of 9
El Alamein, battle of, 23rd October-4th November 1942 **G**, 15-16, 35, 46-47
equipment 24, 39, 41
footwear **16**, 23-24, 35, 38, 46
foreign volunteers 41-42
Gazzera, General 7
German forces 10, 13, 16, 20
Germany 3
'Giovani Fascisti' (Young Fascists Division) **H2**, 24, 33, 47, 47
Granatieri di Savoia Division (Grenadiers of Savoy) **E1**, 4, 5, 18, 45
Graziani, Marshal Rodolfo (1882-1955) 7, 8, 9
Great Britain 3
Haile Sellassie, Emperor of Abyssinia (1892-1975) 6
headgear 23, 24, 47
 the *bustina* **G1**, **14**, **15**, **18**, **20**, 21, 37, **37**, **38**, **44**, 46
 colonial troops **A1**, **B2**, **E2**, 37, 43, 45
 steel helmets **F**, **19**, 23, 35, **38**, 46
 tropical helmets **A3**, **B**, **C2**, **3**, **8**, **10**, **11**, **18**, **21**, **22**, **24**, **36**, 43, 44
infantry divisions 33(table)
Italian empire, the 3, 3-4, 7, 19
jackets
 colonial troops **A1**, 37-38, 43
 the *sahariana* **G**, **3**, **8**, **14**, 18, 19-20, 23, 24, 35, **35**, **37**, **38**, **38**, **44**, 46
 the tropical tunic **B1**, **C2**, 18, 19, **24**, 43, 44
Janari, Lieutenant-Colonel 3
Kassala 4
Kasserine, battle of, 14th-25th February 1943 17
Keren, battle of, 3rd February-27th March 1941 **E**, 6, 45
Kesselring, Field Marshal Albert (1885-1960) 14
leadership 11
Libya **B**, **C**, 7-10, 12, 19, 36, 43-44, 44
Libyan troops **B2**, 9(table), 34, 36, 37, 38, 39, **40**, 43
Malta 11, 14
Mareth line, the 17
Marines **F1**, **42**, 46
Mediterranean, the 3
Messe, General Giovanni (1883-1968) **21**
Montgomery, General Bernard Law (1887-1976) 15, 17
morale 11-12
Mussolini, Benito (1883-1945) 3, 8, 13
MVSN militia **A3**, **B3**, **D3**, 4, 4, 5(table), 8, 18, 24, 43, 44, 43-44, 45
officers **C**, **G1**, **H3**, **3**, **8**, 11, 18, **18**, 19, 20, **20**, 23, **23**, 24, 35, 44, **44**, 46, 47
 colonial units **D2**, 37, 45
 headgear **C2**, **20**, 21, 22, 44
Operation 'Battleaxe' 14
Operation 'Crusader' 14
Operation 'Torch' 16
order of battle
 British Somaliland 5
 El Alamein 16
 Libya 10
 Tunisia 16-17
organisation
 Armoured Division 'Ariete' 15(table)
 Libyan units 9(table)
 Motorised Infantry Division 11(table), 12(table)
 MVSN Militia Division 5(table)
 parachute division 34(table)
parachute units **G3**, **H3**, **18**, **34**, 34-35, 34(table), 41, 42, 46, 47
parallel war 3
Polizia Dell'Africa Italiana (PAI) **D1**, 5, 23, 35-36, 44-45, 45
ranks 20, **22**, 24, 36, 38-39, **40**
 ratings 11
 Red Arrows Group 41-42
 Red Sea, the 6
 Rommel, General Erwin (1891-1944) 10, 13, 14, 14-15, 15, 16, 17
shorts 23, **37**
Sidi Barrani 9
Sudan 4
Suez Canal 3, 4
supplies 8
tactics 4, 12
tanks 4, 8, 12, **13**, **14**
Tobruk 13-14, 15
transport 8, 11
trousers 18, 23, **23**, 35, 38
Tunisia **H**, 16-17, **20**, **38**, 47
Wavell, General Archibald Percival (1883-1950) 8, 9, 14

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