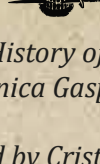


"Iron is the extreme heart of destiny"

(Gabriele D'Annunzio)



A Brief History of Daggers
by Monica Gasparotto

Translated by Cristina Carloni

"Iron doesn't talk. If it talks, it is laconic.

The short weapon has only one word: rather than a word, a flicker. Everything else is silence."

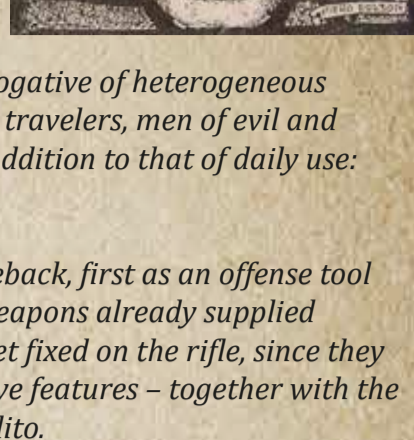
(Gabriele D'Annunzio, "L'urna inesusta", L'olandro, Rome, 1931)

On a grey-green cloth, a Roman dagger (symbol of honor and courage) is embroidered with a knob in the shape of the head of a lion (symbol of strength) or the head of an eagle (symbol of power), inscribed between a laurel tree on the left (symbol of victory) and an oak leaf on the right (symbol of loyalty and strength). A Savoy knot ties the branches to the weapon; on its guard it can be read the Savoy motto, "FERT".

The Ardito carries one of the symbols – already embroidered in the humeral badge that qualifies him as such – that distinguish the affiliation with a military elite, which has gone through a century of history and still lives and works, silent and discreet: the dagger.

It is the weapon that spread the most at every level since time immemorial. It has been more recently made famous by the renowned journalist, painter, politician and Italian senator, as well as Regimental Ardito of the 137th Infantry Regiment of the Barletta Brigade, mutilated, invalid and multi-decorated Captain Pietro (Piero) Bolzon, who illustrated a dagger clenched between the teeth of his famous skull with a laurel wreath. It became iconic also thanks to the countless boards, drawings, envelopes, postcards, and stamps – linked or not to a specific Assault Unit.

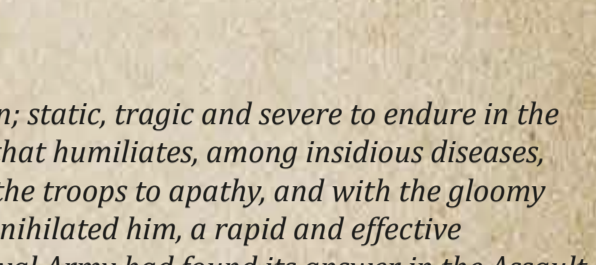
With the development of firearms that began in the seventeenth century, marking the beginning of a revolution in the military field, it almost completely lost its warfare function, thus remaining a prerogative of heterogeneous categories of ordinary people: workers, farmers, breeders, explorers, travelers, men of evil and bandits; with the dual function that has always characterized it, in addition to that of daily use: offense and defense.



It was only during the First World War that the dagger made a comeback, first as an offense tool used by soldiers who made a virtue of necessity, combining it with weapons already supplied (infantrymen, in emergency cases and exceptionally, used the bayonet fixed on the rifle, since they did not have a real cold weapon); then becoming one of the distinctive features – together with the flames applied on the lapel and the Thévenot firecracker – of the Ardito.

Iconographically and psychologically powerful, the rise of the dagger is irresistible; it is no longer a complementary object but a primary one.

During the Great War, this mostly forgotten weapon – with an ancient flavor, but not definitively faded into oblivion – finds its way alongside a whole series of innovations regarding weapons and equipment (which were about to be deployed by Assault Units as well); this thanks to – also and above all – a wide offensive use of an aggressive, agile, silent and efficient dagger by a new type of fighter, the enemy of Italy at the time, who used it on the field: the Sturmtruppen with their Grabendolche (or Faschinenmesser mod. 1916), that Italian infantrymen had learned to know at their own expense, given the great ease with which they were used.

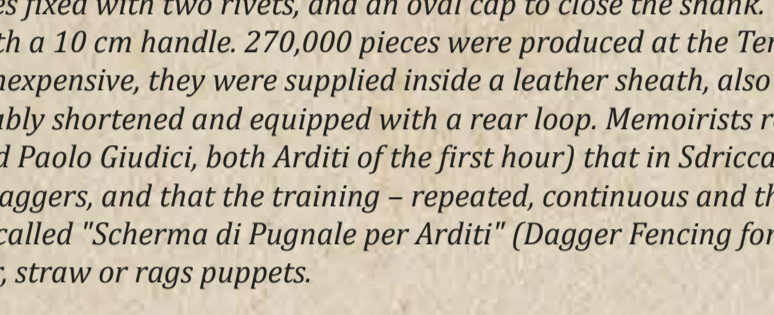


Observe, learn, act accordingly.

The First World War started as a trench war of position; static, tragic and severe to endure in the torrid heat or intolerable frost, in the mud, in the dirt that humiliates, among insidious diseases, and long standstills. This brought down the morale of the troops to apathy, and with the gloomy specter of death that obsessed the infantryman and annihilated him, a rapid and effective countermeasure was required. The Imperial Italian Royal Army had found its answer in the Assault Units.

The Italian Supreme Command established that the Italian Royal Army had to make use of its own type of "special troops" as a needed breakthrough during the conflict. Its creation was entrusted to the Lieutenant Col. Giuseppe Alberto Bassi, an expert graduate and former promoter of a series of original innovations in the military-technical field. It began on June 1917 and culminated on July 29, 1917, when the 1 Assault Unit at the 2nd Army of Gen. Capello was officially established in the training camp of Sdrizza di Manzano (Udine).

The "shoulders" tactics – which was employed by everyone, regardless of the warring army – consisted of a series of offensive assaults that were resolved, in principle, with inhuman carnage with the aim of conquering very few square kilometers of territory. This was supported, until it was definitively overcome, by a system of patrols and rapid incursions into enemy territory, surprise attacks day and night, "small war" operations reaching the melee combat in trenches, which required cold blood, determination and adequate weapons that could fit the narrow space in which these brave soldiers were operating.



It was by then that, among the standard equipment of the Assault Units and the Regimental Armies, this weapon made its appearance. From that moment, it has been iconographically traced back to these special and highly trained soldiers, feeding the warrior myth: it is the dagger.

The first specimens were made using pieces, cut from the tip, of Vetterli bayonets mod. 1870, reduced to the size of 18 cm, with a simple and narrow guard with its tips slightly facing the blade, wooden handle scales fixed with two rivets, and an oval cap to close the shank. The dagger measured 28 cm, with a 10 cm handle. 270,000 pieces were produced at the Terni Arsenal. Simple, quick to make and inexpensive, they were supplied inside a leather sheath, also coming from the same bayonets, suitably shortened and equipped with a rear loop. Memoirs recounted (first Salvatore Farina and Paolo Giudici, both Arditi of the first hour) that in Sdrizza there were crates everywhere, full of daggers, and that the training – repeated, continuous and that had been codified in a proper manual called "Scherma di Pugnale per Arditi" (Dagger Fencing for the Arditi) – took place against wicker, straw or rags puppets.

This first model (officially supplied to the Assault Units) was followed by other models and other types of different shapes and materials. Not to mention the daggers brought from home (such as hunting knives), those taken from the enemy (the famous "war prey"), customizations, prototypes, specimens made ad-hoc on private initiative (especially among officers); these were all variants accepted as an exception by the Supreme Command.

Starting from July 29, 1917, until the end of the conflict, from the Karst to the sea, there had been a succession of "furious melees, and bursts of firecrackers and rapid whaling of daggers" (Antonio Fulmini, "Dal Piave a via Cervia", Italstudio, Unione tipografica, Milan, 1938).

The Ardito is illustrated as an unscrupulous assailant who "dares the impossible" and is often depicted as he assaults holding his dagger tightly between his teeth. Perhaps it is, in part, a legend; but during the tragic days of late October, after the breakthrough in Caporetto by the German army and during the all-out defense of the city of Udine – where the Assault Units were called to arms – four daring men were seen advancing towards the enemy with a dagger between their teeth and Thévenot firecrackers in their hands.

"The dagger, a new bladed weapon, influenced the assailant by building up great self-confidence. The surprise that lies in the use of an unprecedented weapon – bringing shock to physical contact, security in the clash, and the reputation of being masters in using the dagger – constituted the suggestive elements that disturbed the enemy". (Salvatore Farina, "Le truppe d'assalto italiane")

The dagger – the same that presses on the ribs during training or while crawling towards the opposing trench – reassures and helps to maintain a high level of self-esteem; only the Arditi carried the dagger and, requiring a more personal and direct action in a mixture of strength and will, only they were able to use it in the best possible way, like a warrior caste. The entire training was aimed at preparing new exclusive fighters, not only from a tactical-military and physical point of view, but also morally above average; this was a training that considered topical – and, often, the most decisive moment of the assault – precisely the clash that leads to hand-to-hand combat. Disoriented and bewildered by the (non-lethal) burst of firecrackers, the enemy was assaulted by a warrior that was aware of having a psychological advantage – and whose attack he feared, thanks to the reputation of danger that came with him. The clash no longer took place only between two opposing soldiers, distant from each other, but between two men who could look each other in the eye; an antagonist whose smell, breathlessness, anguish, difficulty in breathing could be perceived, while the dagger became not only an extension of the Ardito's arm and movement, but an extension of his desire to win.

At the same time, even the Faschinenmesser (the most coveted prey) – taken from the enemy and flaunted at the waist – became a criterion for measuring the caliber of a fighter. Stealing the dagger from a Sturmtruppen – a soldier who was prepared, trained, very aggressive and capable of fighting as well as the Ardito – against whom the Ardito fought with equal arms and won, increased awareness of his own value and became a reason for pride.

On February 14, 1918, Major Luigi Freguglia (of the V Assault Unit, which became the XXVII on May 20, 1918) introduced what later became the official cry of the Arditi: "A noi!" (To us!) replacing the "Hurrà!" (Hooray), used until then when presenting arms. In April, Captain Anichè Pomponi (also belonging to the XXVII R.A.) suggested replacing the traditional present arms with the gesture of the unsheathed dagger, wielded in the right hand and jerked upwards. This variant was submitted, first of all, to the commander of the 2nd Army, Lieutenant Gen. Giuseppe Pennella, who forwarded it – favorably impressed – to the Supreme Command to get its endorsement. The general wrote in his own handwriting in support of this: "I have witnessed the evidence of this movement. It is impressive and expressive, as well as beautiful". The new present arms was approved, but not without some hesitation: "...the Arditi are already too much... daring" wrote Badoglio, at the time Deputy Chief of Staff; but once the authorization was given, it spread quickly among all Units.

In the first post-war period, every Ardito had brought home his own dagger. For many of them it became the tangible memory of an incredible historical period lived firsthand – and was kept as a relic; for others, what had been a "working tool" during the war became an object of civilian use, with the idea that everything could be readjusted and modified to meet the needs of returning to normal, daily life.

The dagger became once again the protagonist – and was still perceived as a symbol of courage, daring and audacity – during the Undertaking of Fiume (September 12, 1919 - January 1921), precisely at the behest of Gabriele D'Annunzio, who had lived his "consecration of daring" (although he had never been part of an assault battalion), when Captain Ettore Viola, of the VI Assault Department, had given him the dagger used in the action of Ca' Tasson (Monte Grappa) on May 18, 1918; this was a surprise action, maniacally prepared by Viola himself, that was carried out in broad daylight (against all military tactics manuals) by his company, to take an "extremely equipped salient enemy", overcoming the fences, plunging into the opposing trench and destroying the Austrian garrison with hand-bombs and stabbings. Despite the fact that the Company was forced to withdraw due to numerical inferiority after the arrival of Imperial reinforcement troops, which led to abandoning the position conquered, the action earned Viola (in addition to a rather significant injury to his left leg) a Silver Medal for Military Valor conferred on the field by Gen. Gaetano Giardino (commander of the 4th Army) – then commuted into the Knight's Cross of the Military Order of Savoy. D'Annunzio will never separate himself from "his" dagger, taking it with him in his most daring deeds, including the famous Flight over Vienna and, specifically, the Undertaking of Fiume.

"It was a qualification that would have gratified him more than any other, more than the same decorations that adorned his medal board, because he saw in it the intrinsically genuine expression of his fighting spirit..." (Luigi Emilio Longo, "Ettore Viola di Ca' Tasson: profilo di un combattente e di un medagliere eccezionali", Rome, 1993)

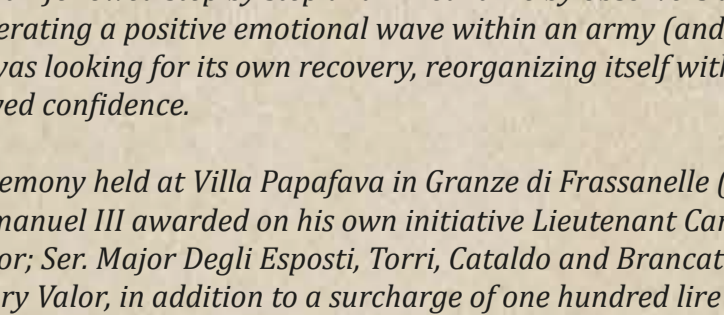
It was precisely in Fiume, in January 1920, that D'Annunzio coined the motto "Ferrum est quod amat" (It is the iron that loves) on the occasion of the awarding of the "Votive Dagger" (an object of fine material, chiseled in gold and silver) that a delegation of about 600 women of Fiume offered to the Poet as a symbol of rebellion and resistance (against the Government's decision not to annex the city to the Kingdom of Italy); the same dagger was blessed during a holy mass celebrated by Father Reginaldo Giugliani, in the church of San Vito.

The Ardito dagger has become in more recent times a weapon of great military/historical value and an element much sought after by collectors, so much so that demand far exceeds supply. Forgotten for many years in the never-open drawers of memory; what is the cause of such a spasmodic demand? Probably because, finally, the studies on the Italian Arditi movement have become more extensive, with serious and proven research, no longer based on usual concepts, preconceptions and hard-to-die clichés, but supported by reliable sources, and verified and well-documented data. The material belonging to the Arditi has thus assumed an intrinsic value linked not only to history but also to culture and allows us to preserve and study objects that tell events, soldiers' lives and the evolution of the Armed Forces.

The Arditi have risen to fame and glory in every battlefield on which they were protagonists, arousing admiration; they were awarded, in total:

- 20 Gold Medals for Military Valor
- 1510 Silver Medals
- 1560 Bronze Medals
- 535 Crosses of Medals

Among the 20 Medals for Military Valor is the Austro-Hungarian Lt. Carlo Sabatini for the epic feat in 1918, he conquered Monte Corno Battisti, an one-warded garrison. Carlo Sabatini was the first protected by tunnels, caves and loopholes from which the opponents could observe the movements of Italian troops in Vallarsa, and from which they could fire, undisturbed, with numerous machine guns strategically placed.



On the western side of the Pasubio mountain, between Monte Spil and Monte Trappola, there stands a rocky and isolated bastion: Monte Corno di Vallarsa, which had been hardly disputed by Italians and Austrians since 1916 until the end of the conflict. It was just among those spurs of rock and steep walls, a couple of years earlier, that the unredeemed Cesare Battisti and Fabio Filzi from Trentino were captured. Their capital execution, preceded by a humiliating summary trial on charges of desertion, had made the cornerstone of the mountain (renamed Corno Battisti) a point of great symbolic as well as strategic value: it allowed, in fact, to keep the frontlines that from Vallarsa went back to Pasubio under control – whose reconquest soon became one of the priorities of that sector. The action was entrusted to the III Assault Unit (renumbered V since 20 May 1918). The Arditi and infantrymen of the Murge Brigade attacked with a pincer movement, dawn on May 10, 1918, only partially succeeding at their quest: having conquered some trenches, captured some tunnels and captured a hundred Austrians, the summit remained firmly in the hands of the enemy who, dominating from above, managed to counterattack by regaining possession of the positions previously lost. It was at this juncture that Carlo Sabatini and four other Arditi fighters known as the "Heroes of Monte Corno" stepped onto the field. For Sabatini – a young lieutenant already decorated with a Silver Medal (earned during the capture of Gorizia in August 1916) and commander of the 3rd Company – there was no other way than to set up an action as simple as it was reckless and, above all, dangerous: to reach the top of Monte Corno from the side where the Austro-Hungarians felt most safe, climbing a wall of more than 40 meters, overhanging a ravine a thousand meters deep, made of unstable, crumbly rock, difficult to face and, moreover, in broad daylight. At 3 PM o'clock, on 13 May 1918, under a splendid sun, Carlo Sabatini and four other volunteers (the battle aide Serg. Major Giovanni Degli Esposti and the Arditi Edoardo Torri, Francesco Cataldo, Lorenzo Brancati) equipped with a rudimentary rope, lacking in equipment and experience, armed only with firecrackers and daggers, climbed the wall, followed by the glances of those looking from Vallarsa. It was not easy. The grips were crumbly; the stones often fell on the companions who came after and there was no certainty of finding support that guaranteed safety for the climbers. After the most difficult stretch – the one overlooking the ravine (sometimes riding on each other's shoulders forming a human ladder) – and reaching almost the top, the advance took place silently, crawling on their hands and feet, reaching the dry wall of the enemy walkway. Sabatini decided on the assault. Thanks to the surprise factor, this handful of Arditi managed to gain the upper hand over the entire garrison.

"I got to my feet throwing the other firecrackers, then I shot revolvers until I had bullets in the gun, until I finally started to stab. My companions did the same. The Austrians reacted; another dozen came out of the tunnels, the officer shouted several orders, but it was all useless". (Carlo Sabatini, "Diario di guerra 1915 – 1919")



After the surrender, the battle lasted five intermittent hours before even the last resistance was wiped out, surrendering to the reinforcements that had arrived in the meantime. The news of this exploit – followed step by step and in real time by observers armed with binoculars – had a vast echo, generating a positive emotional wave within an army (and a nation) that after the Caporetto defeat was looking for its own recovery, reorganizing itself with a new strategic approach and a renewed confidence.

During the solemn ceremony held at Villa Papafava in Granze di Frassanelle (Padua) on 21 August 1918, King Victor Emmanuel III awarded on his own initiative Lieutenant Carlo Sabatini the Gold Medal for Military Valor; Ser. Major Degli Esposti, Torri, Cataldo and Brancati were awarded the Silver Medal for Military Valor, in addition to a surcharge of one hundred lire and a prize license.

Sabatini Carlo da Alessandria, Lieutenant of the V Assault Unit "Always first to face danger, true personification of the most chosen military virtues, with a high spirit of self-sacrifice and magnificent daring, with a climb that had a prodigious effect, he was able first, as an example to the four Arditi men who followed him under the watchful eyes of the enemy lookouts, to boldly swoop down on numerous opponent garrisons with whom he engaged violently hand to hand. None of the enemies were saved, the most were killed and rolled over the cliffs in the melee. Six captured, even the commanding officer of the garrison. Made possible to reach from a strong nucleus of his own, he firmly established himself on the position. Monte Corno, 13 May 1918."

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Photo Credits:
• The famous "skull with laurel wreath", one of the most famous symbols of the Arditi, by Pietro (Piero) Bolzon (source: <https://italianinguerre.wordpress.com/>)
• Arditi group in Basso Piave after the Battle of the Solstice (source: <https://it.wikipedia.org/>)
• Arditi demonstrating training techniques with firecracker and dagger (source: <https://www.reportdfesa.it/>)
• The Lieutenant of the Arditi V Assault Unit, Carlo Sabatini (source: <https://www.mom.it/decorato/sabatini-carlo/>)
• Gabriele D'Annunzio in Fiume, October 1919, with the dagger he was donated by Ettore Viola (source: <https://www.consulpress.eu/>)