

## The Italian Army in Egypt during World War II

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I had intended to begin by saying that the Italians were nearly always portrayed unfairly as having a very poor fighting reputation; but nearly all the works I have consulted indicate that this was not the case. This unfair judgment, written mainly from the Allied side during the war, survived in a lot of postwar literature and is unfair to the individual Italian soldiers who in many cases fought bravely when given the chance to do so. In the imagination of the British Army and the Allied press it was the Italian soldier who was lacking in military skill and fighting spirit. Once this reputation for military ineptitude had gained ground after the crushing defeats in 1940 from Sidi Barrani to Beda Fomm, it was perpetuated by the British as a propaganda tool.

Most of the accounts of Axis forces in the campaigns in North Africa concentrate on the German military, sometimes to the extent that one could imagine that they consisted only of the *Deutsches Afrika Korps* (DAK) commanded by Rommel. This over-simplistic view is wrong on several accounts. Although Rommel was without doubt the most important person for the Axis forces he at times had more Italian troops and tanks under his command than German, while some of his victories were due to the efforts of the Italian tank divisions. Remember also that the DAK, after the initial stages, was only one part of the total German forces in North Africa.

This article however is concerned only with the Italian Army (*Regio Esercito*), those sections of it that were in Egypt, the postmarks used by them. The Italian Navy (*Regia Marina*) and Air Force (*Regia Aeronautica*) in this case have been neglected. In the "desert shuffle" that exemplified the North African campaigns the Italians entered Egypt a total of three times from their first invasion on September 11, 1940, to finally being expelled on November 12, 1942.

The Italian Army in Libya before the war was large - well above 30,000, if the Libyan auxiliary units are included - and so was superficially a powerful force, but this was true in size only. The strategy adopted by the Italian Supreme Command was essentially a defensive one, with a string of well-defended coastal points around the main towns in Cyrenaica and a number of fortified positions in the desert. This arrangement, especially the desert forts, proved adequate for handling the troublesome desert Senussi tribes but did not anticipate the style and scope of fighting that occurred when Italy went to war with her British neighbour across the Egyptian frontier. Still, the main concern of the pre-war Italian Army seems to have been to project the image of a strong militaristic state in line with current Fascist ideology which promoted a strong brand of militaristic nationalism.

When Italy declared war on the Western Allies of France and Britain on June 10, 1940, there was a total of 167,000 men in Libya: the Fifth Army was deployed against French Tunisia, while the Tenth Army looked towards Egypt. With the rapid fall of France, the bulk of Italian Fifth Army was moved to reinforce the Tenth Army and to threaten British position in Egypt. The Italians were also able to deploy 1,400 artillery pieces, 339 light tanks, 8,500 trucks and over 300 aircraft with further transport and 70 medium tanks arriving in July.

Since Italy had been among the first European nations to re-arm during the early 1930s, most Italian equipment was well out of date by 1940 with Italian infantry equipment almost exclusively dating from the First World War, as was most of the artillery pieces. Italian tanks were even more dramatically outclassed. The main Italian tank in the 1940 campaign was the three-ton L3, armed with machine guns; the M11 and M13 were little better, with only 37mm and 47mm guns, both being unreliable, thinly armoured and very slow. It is little wonder that these tanks came to be known by their own crews as "rolling coffins". An even more critical weakness for the Italian army was its lack of suitable transport, with some 40 per cent unserviceable. Overall, the Tenth Army was still essentially a marching army. These difficulties severely restricted the mobility of the Italian Army and formed one of the many reasons why they were tied to an advance along the Via Balbia, which ran close to the coast, as it was the only good road in the entire region. Many soldiers were already war-weary as Italy had been fighting numerous wars since 1935; add to that the poor condition of Italian training, and morale was very low.

When Mussolini declared war, Marshal Italo Balbo was Governor and Commander in Chief of Italian forces in Libya. He was aware of the poor state of the army but his warnings went unheeded, and unfortunately he was shot down by his own anti-aircraft gunners over Tobruk on June 28. He was replaced by Marshal Rudolfo Graziani who, as Viceroy of Italian Abyssinia, had developed a reputation as Italy's best colonial fighting soldier as well as the epithet "Butcher of Ethiopia". He flew to Benghazi on June 30, 1940, to take over command.

Concerned that Germany might win all the glory and plunder for itself Mussolini planned to fight a "parallel war" whereby Germany would occupy itself in northern Europe, leaving Mussolini free to turn the Mediterranean into an Italian lake. Almost immediately, Mussolini began his demands that Graziani should attack so that his "parallel war" would appear to have some substance. Although Graziani did consider a minor attack, he gave warning that any major attack would meet with total disaster and refused to move until the summer heat had passed. While he hesitated, skirmishes and minor actions took place between the Italians and aggressive British patrols, particularly by the 11th Hussars, the "Cherry Pickers", who broke through the wire, capturing Italian forts and taking prisoners. In the first three months of the war the British inflicted 3,500 casualties on the Italians for the loss of just 150.

The fall of France allowed the transfer of the 5th Army divisions to the eastern frontier of the colony so that the Italians had overwhelming forces at their disposal in North Africa. Figures differ from various sources but the number of troops totalled in the region of 230,000, with 128,000 in the 5th Army and 88,000 in the 10th Army. Italian ground troops in Libya comprised not only the regular army divisions - known as "Metropolitan" divisions, but also divisions of the Royal Corps of Libyan Troops (*Regio Corpo di Truppe*), the Saharan Command (*Compagnia Sahariana*), the Fascist Militia (*Milizia Volontaria per la Sicurezza Nazionale* or *MVSN*), known as blackshirts (*Camicie Ne - CCNN*), the Frontier Guards (*Guardia all Frontiera*) and the Italian African Police (*Polizia Africana Italiana*). Opposing them, Wavell had no more than 36,000 troops in what Churchill grandiosely called the "Army of the Nile".

Eventually Mussolini lost patience with his prevaricating Marshal and ordered Graziani forward on threat of dismissal. When Graziani did move forward, on September 9, he unfortunately showed that he knew little of modern warfare: he was methodical, logical, and old-fashioned. His advance was typical of a colonial army: he marched his mass of soldiers, who found marching for long hours in the heat of North Africa exhausting. As a result the advance crawled along at a snail's pace.

After an advance of 60 miles the Italians captured Sidi Barrani and then halted. Graziani sent despatches to Mussolini claiming that the British had retired in disorder after losing more than half their armour. In fact, the British had planned to conduct a fighting withdrawal all the way to Mersa Matruh, which to their surprise was now unnecessary. However, although Graziani had been able to push his army forward to Sidi Barrani, he could go no further; it was hundreds of miles from the main supply port of Tripoli, and with extreme logistical difficulties getting the Tenth Army on the move again was going to be difficult.

Proceeding in an orderly, colonial fashion, the Italian commander in Egypt, General Mario Berti, deployed the advanced units of his Army (1st and 2nd Libyan, 3 January Blackshirt, Cirene and Catanzaro Divisions, as well as Maletti's motorised brigade group) in a ring of strong-points around Sidi Barrani, and began work on extending the Via Balbia into Egypt. However, this ring of forts was not mutually supporting, with gaps of 10km to 30km covered only by motorised patrols. Although Graziani was aware of this situation and did not approve of such methods, he also discounted any threat from the British and remained confident that they would passively await his next blow, planned for mid-December.

On October 28 Mussolini plunged Italy into a disastrous campaign in Greece. Many of the supplies, reinforcements and men which had been promised to Graziani were now committed to Greece, leaving the Tenth Army starved of the material needed to continue the advance.

This meant that the long-planned British attack, Operation Compass, when it came on December 7-9, 1940, caught Graziani and the Tenth Army completely unawares. Indeed Berti had gone on leave and did not return to his post until five days after the start of Operation Compass. The British forces, comprising the 7th Armoured and 4th Indian Divisions, as well as 45 of the all-important Matilda tanks, exploited the gaps between the Italian forts and in three days were able to destroy Maletti's brigade group, both Libyan divisions, the Blackshirt and Cirene divisions and the bulk of the Catanzaro Division. Fierce resistance was

met in a few places, particularly at Nibeiba. Sidi Barrani fell on the December 11 and Bug Bug soon after, Sollum was not defended and was taken on the 14th and with the fall of Sidi Omar on the 16th the frontier zone was again under British domination. The first period of Italian troops in Egypt had come to an end.

Operation Compass continued on January 3, 1941, under the brilliant command of Lieutenant General O'Connor, who had by February 9 cleared the Italians from Cyrenaica in what became a rout. In just two months of fighting, O'Connor had taken 115,000 prisoners, leaving Graziani with only four demoralised divisions to defend Tripoli. This is not strictly part of our story, but from this reverse British propaganda gave birth to the erroneous idea that the Italians were poor and cowardly soldiers

Mussolini's "Parallel War" had ended in humiliation. Graziani flew out of Tripoli on February 11, 1941, humiliated and disgraced yet still convinced that he had been betrayed by enemies in Rome. He was replaced by General Italo Gariboldi, previously the commander of the 5th Army in Tripolitania. The very next day a certain German general, Erwin Rommel, flew to Tripoli to reorganise the Axis defence. This German force was to be nominally under the Italian commander-in-chief in North Africa, Garibaldi, but it was to be employed operationally as a single formation under Rommel, who had right of appeal to the German Army Command (OKH) in Berlin should the name and reputation of German troops be placed in jeopardy by any "dubious" Italian orders.

Italian formations available were the weakened Savona and Sabratha infantry divisions and Brescia, Bologna and Pavia motorised divisions (the term motorised being largely theoretical). The Ariete armoured division was soon to arrive, with M13/40s, which Gariboldi places under Rommel's command. Trieste, a motorised division, would follow, but not for several months.

Rommel wanted the vital port of Tobruk, and on March 24 he began his wild gamble for it. He attacked the British screening units at El Agheila, and drove them rapidly back, and then, realising their weakness - forces had been reduced as some had been sent to Greece - continued his advance across Libya contrary to orders. By April 2 he had occupied Agedabia, and brought Ariete and Brescia up in support and began a series of assaults on Tobruk on April 10. He detached some of his units to push on to the Egyptian frontier, where they fought a series of savage actions to secure the vital frontier positions of Fort Capuzzo, Sollum and Halfaya Pass, crossing the Egyptian border on April 14. At what time Italian forces returned to Egypt is obscure but Italian troops were soon established at Sollum and Halfaya Pass.

Wavell wanted to gain control of Halfaya Pass and on May 15 he launched Operation Brevity, under the command of Brigadier General William Gott, to secure the pass and Fort Capuzzo. The garrison at Halfaya Pass was almost entirely Italian and they put up firm resistance, chiefly by the Italian gunners, with seven of the ten British Matildas being knocked out. The Italians were all made prisoners and did not realise that their courage had made Operation Brevity a partial Italian success. By May 27 the Germans had recaptured Halfaya Pass. Unable to advance any farther because of supply shortages, they dug in and fortified their positions with 88mm anti-aircraft guns.

Under continuing pressure from Churchill, Wavell launched his major offensive on June 15: Operation Battleaxe began with a frontal attack on the Sollum-Halfaya Pass axis. Skilfully using the 88mm anti-aircraft guns as anti-tank weapons, the German battery blunted the British attack, as did eight Italian guns used with great skill by the Italian artillery Major Pardi. The British troops began referring to the heavily fortified and fiercely defended Halfaya Pass as "Hellfire Pass". On July 2 Gariboldi returned to Italy to be replaced by General Ettore Bastico as Senior North African Command (*Commando Superiore Africa Settentrionale*) on July 19.

The next British attack, Operation Crusader, opened on November 18, with the British XIII Corps advancing on Halfaya Pass and XXX Corps attempting to sweep around Rommel's southern flank to reach the besieged garrison at Tobruk. With tank losses mounting, Cunningham, the operational commander, wanted to halt the operation so Auchinleck immediately relieved him and replaced him with Major General Neil Ritchie. The British continued to press the attack, and on November 29 they broke through to Tobruk. By December 7 an overwhelmed Rommel was withdrawing his dangerously depleted forces. To avoid encirclement in the Benghazi bulge, Rommel retreated back across Cyrenaica, reaching El Agheila on January 6, 1942. He leaves Brescia to buy time in the Sollum-Halfaya area, where it holds out until January 17. Operation

Crusader resulted in a clear victory for the British, but one they were unable to exploit because of a lack of reinforcements. The second period of Italian troops in Egypt had come to an end.

On January 21, without consulting higher authority, Rommel launched a counter-offensive against the British 8th Army, including the Ariete, Trieste and Sabratha divisions of the Italian Mobile Corps. On January 23 General Cavallero, C in C, Italian High Command and Field Marshal Albert Kesselring, German C in C, South, flew to Rommel's advance HQ. The Italians wanted Rommel to stop his offensive and withdraw to his start line, but Rommel rejected their demand. As a result the Italians refused to allow their troops to advance any further east, but, undeterred, Rommel pressed on with just the Afrika Korps.

With intensive fighting particularly around the Gazala in early June, in which the Italians played a significant part, the Axis forces invested Tobruk on June 20 and by June 23 German advanced elements reached the Egyptian border.

On June 25 the Axis forces captured Sidi Barrani, Sollum and the Halfaya Pass as the Eighth Army retreated to Mersa Matruh. Next day Rommel is promoted field marshal and launched his attacks against Mersa Matruh involving the Italian XXX and XXI Corps with the Ariete and Littoria divisions. The British began a withdrawal to the El Alamein defences. Shortly after the fall of Mersa Matruh on June 30, in which the Trento with the 7th Bersaglieri regiment played an important part, Mussolini flew to North Africa in preparation for his triumphal entry into Cairo on his white charger.

During the day confusion reigned in the desert between Fuqa and El Alamein, as intermingled columns of Axis and Allied troops dashed westwards. Meanwhile, signs of panic could be detected in the British rear. The Mediterranean Fleet left Alexandria to be dispersed around Haifa, Port Said and Beirut, and preparations were made to destroy the port facilities at Alexandria and block the harbour. In Cairo itself, in what became known as "Ash Wednesday", there was a wholesale burning of confidential documents, and elements of the Middle East Headquarters were moved back into Palestine.

Despite being reduced to 55 German and 70 Italian tanks, on July 1 Rommel, confident of taking the line at El Alamein, ordered a head-on assault. In what is known as the first battle of El Alamein the fighting continued until July 27. In the process the Littoria and Trieste divisions were depleted by air attacks, and on July 3 a Bersaglieri battalion of the weakened Ariete was overrun, causing them to fall back behind two battalions of the Pavia and Brescia. Auchinleck targeted the Italian formations while avoiding having his tank forces drawn on to the German anti-tank guns. Also to suffer heavy losses were the Sabratha, Trieste and Brescia divisions.

In August Auchinleck was replaced as C-in-C by General Alexander, and General Montgomery took over the 8th Army. On August 30 Rommel attacked the strongly held Alam el Halfa ridge at the southern end of the El Alamein line, the Italian XXI & X Corps made feint attacks in the north, while XX Corps (Ariete, Littorio, Trieste, and the newly arrived Folgore Parachute Division, which gained a good reputation in its combat debut), attacked the 7th Armoured Division. All attacks failed. The Littorio division suffered heavy losses and by September 2 the fighting had ceased.

On October 23 Montgomery unleashed his forces in what is normally called the Battle of El Alamein: 104,000 Axis troops (the majority Italian), with 489 tanks (259 Italian) and 1,219 guns (521 Italian), were attacked and crumbled in a long battle of attrition by Montgomery's 195,000 men with 1,029 tanks and 2,311 guns. Trento and Littorio divisions, between Kidney Ridge and Miteiriya Ridge, faced 30 Corps (9th Australian, 51st Highland, 2nd New Zealand divisions); Bologna, north of Ruweisat Ridge, faced 1st South African and 4th Indian divisions; Brescia, Folgore and Pavia faced 13 Corps at the south of the line; Ariete and Trieste formed part of the Axis mobile reserve. When Rommel was forced to order withdrawal most of the Italian infantry, without transport, were left to their fate. Pavia, Bologna, Brescia, Trento and the majority of Folgore divisions were destroyed; Ariete was wiped out, fighting with great courage while elements of Trieste and Littorio managed to escape.

Montgomery paused to regroup before launching a pursuit on November 4, the last remnants of the Axis forces crossing the Egyptian frontier on November 7, leaving only a small detachment at the Halfaya Pass which was vacated on November 11. So ended the last phase of Italian troops in Egypt during the Second World War.

At the height of Rommel's last offensive, on June 27, 1942, orders were given by the British HQ to evacuate Siwa. On July 23 Siwa saw the arrival of the biggest airlift in its history. Thirty Junkers 52s carrying Italian troops, the first wave escorted by 19 Messerschmitt Bf 110s of III/ZG 26 led by Hauptmann Herzberg, arrived overhead and proceeded to land and link up with Major Jakob Burkhard's 50-man Fallschirmjäger Kampfgruppe which had driven in from Jalo and reported the British gone.

The loss of this major oasis with its more than 3,000 inhabitants came as a severe shock to the Egyptians and there was unrest in Cairo as a result. Had the place been fought over, the inevitable casualties to Egyptian nationals might have caused a political firestorm at a time when all seemed blackest for the British in Egypt.

Siwa was occupied by elements of Generale di Brigata Commandante Ismaele Di Nisio's Divisione Corazzata Giovani Fascisti (136a), GGFF, of 423 soldiers with the airstrips at Siwa taken over by a flight of Caproni-Begamaschi Ca 310s or Ca 309s from 12th Squadriglia Aviazione Presidio Coloniale and the occasional Ju 87.

The oasis had been a staging area for raids by the Allied Long Range Desert Group into Libya, and now the Axis saw an opportunity to return the favour with the Italian planners looked longingly at the tracks leading to the Nile. Rommel visited on September 22 and reviewed the unit, bearing gifts of British tea! Officers showed him their maps and scouting reports of the deep desert, and several Egyptian clan chiefs gave their opinions that no substantial Allied forces stood between Siwa and the Nile. The Young Fascist Division, the officers claimed, could unhinge the Allied positions on the coast from Siwa if only they had the fuel.

To British relief, the oasis now relapsed into torpor. General der Flieger Otto von Waldau, the German air commander, pronounced the airstrips unsuitable for the Luftwaffe. Siwa Town landing ground they considered operable by Fiat CR 42s, but only if the runway was extended. Siwa North landing ground was noted as outside the security zone set up by the single resident Italian battalion and therefore also unusable on a permanent basis.

For Siwa, only two further events marked its passage from an active theatre of war. On the night of September 13/14, 1942, the oasis was subjected to a major British parachute operation which was to prompt Rommel's visit. The British forces consisted of eight self-destroying miniature dummy parachutists made of hessian and straw together with flares and incendiaries dropped in a pattern designed to attract maximum attention. As the result of Rommel's intervention an additional Italian battalion was flown in and used to guard the approaches to the nearby Quara oasis.

On September 13-14, Barforce, composed of the Sudan Defence Force motor battalion with support units, all from Bahariya oasis, made a simulated advance on Siwa and then retired. Apart from the occasional alarm flare, much agitated signalling and some air reconnaissance, all these activities produced little reaction.

On the afternoon of November 14 a platoon of the 1st Royal Sussex formally reoccupied Siwa, the oasis having been evacuated on the 8th, watched by an LRDG patrol and reconnaissance flights. The Italian garrison of Siwa had been a reasonable one, apparently not much interested in looking for trouble and, as a parting gesture had left some of their rations behind to help out the Siwans who were by now on very short supplies. It is reliably reported that not long, after when the Siwans held a fantasia to celebrate their change in circumstance (and the victory of the Eighth Army), the feasting included Rommel's gift of tea which was served up to the returned British Army officers!

When the Axis position at Alamein collapsed in early November 1942, the GGFF mounted its approximately 3,000 men on 290 trucks and headed directly west across the Libyan Desert where they joined the rest of Rommel's army near Mersa el Brega: they were in the best condition of any Axis units. The Young Fascists crossed into Tunisia in January 1943 and were the last Axis unit to surrender in May 1943.

Of interest to Egyptian philatelists is the existence of Egyptian stamps of the 1937 issue, overprinted "Oasi di Siwa, Occupazione Militare Italiana". These are the subject of an article in *L'Orient Philatélique* in July 1953 by Ahmed Mazloum which appears to draw on an article in May of that year in *Il*



*Collezionista*, a philatelic Magazine published in Turin. The set comprised the 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 10, 13, 15 and 20 millième values overprinted with thick ink and the article concerns itself with the legitimacy of the overprinting. One history I have found states “*While they waited, the Italians set up an Egyptian government-in-exile, complete with postage stamps, and flew the Egyptian flag alongside the Italian tricolour*”; but I have no supporting evidence. Another source states that there was no need of a postal system because the local population were cut off from the rest of Egypt, although I suspect that then, and perhaps even now, the Siwans had more kinship with the Libyan populations than those of Egypt and the little post previously coming from Siwa was not necessarily from the local population.

In general Mazloum draws the conclusion that the overprinted issue “...*qualifies as the work of a dishonest speculator... it is an issue, due to a fiery philatelist who could not resist the temptation of speculating by taking advantage of peculiar dramatic circumstances.*”

In the article a claim was made that they were the work of “...*a pilot on a tank of the «Ariete» Division who occupied the Siwa Oasis*”. However the Ariete did not occupy Siwa nor to my knowledge did any of its units. Mazloum continues “...*he learned at the time from the Commanding Officer of the tank, a Lieutenant from Bologna and a spirited philatelist, that one of his brother in arms, one of the first to enter the Post Office of the Oasis, overprinted some sheets of Egypt stamps and destroyed the seal.*” Again, no units of the Bologna division were in Siwa. In the article he quotes from a letter by General Ismaele di Nisio to *Il Collezionista* “...*that as commander of the Italian forces in Siwa he knew nothing of them.*”

General di Nisio was the commander of the Divisione Corazzata Giovani Fascisti, which did occupy the Siwa Oasis, but he goes on to say that “...*being cut off from its own national territory, and the only Post Office working was the «Posta Militare 58» of the Division and it did not accept Egyptian stamps for use.*” This is another curiosity, because PM 58 was used by the Bologna Division. The Giovani Fascisti were supposedly using PM 136, although at this time this postal unit was in Libya. From August 24, 1942, the mail went twice weekly by aerial courier between Siwa and Mersa Matruh where I suspect the mail was then franked, as PM 58 was at Mersa Matruh at that time.

The Ariete Division was allocated PM 132 which was in Egypt at this time, arriving in Sollum on June 29, Fuka in July and falling back into Libya after the Battle of Alamein. The enterprising philatelist would have had access to Egyptian stamps but I believe their connection with Siwa tenuous at best and they had no official validity, being nothing more than fantasises.

Covers and postcards of the Italian troops in Egypt are fairly easily found, but slightly rarer than from Libya, but most show signs of wear and good clean examples are very difficult to find. Each soldier was issued with four free franking military postcards (*Fig.1*), of which there are several types but nearly all are a blue-green in colour with the words CARTOLINA POSTALE PER LE FORZE ARMATE and are made of a lighter paper than a normal post card. I also have two cards similarly printed in white and of normal postcard weight.

Supposedly other correspondence was meant to be paid for at 50 cents for a letter, 100 cents for airmail and 15 cents for a normal postcard (*Fig.2*). However the troops were often unable to obtain stamps and endorsed their correspondence with “Zona sprovvista di francobolli” (Zone without postage stamps), or some similar message and more often just the initials or simply Z.O. (*Fig.3*). Postage due was to have been charged at the 50-cent rate but covers with postage dues (*Fig.4*), are much less in evidence to those that have been delivered without any charge being raised.

The cards and covers have military handstamps of the FPOs and are of simple design with the words POSTA MILITARE (PM) in the top and the FPO number at the bottom with letter N and the number (*Fig.6*). Of the other types of Italian military postmarks the only one encountered in Egypt is that with UFFICIO POSTALE DI CONCENRAMENTO assigned to Corps headquarters (*Fig.5&7*).

Perhaps one strange feature of these military posts in an active war zone is the total lack of censorship or security, with the covers and cards displaying the full unit information on the back, for letters, or on the postcard in the place allotted to it. Cards and covers can also be found with unit and regimental cachets and the return address FPO number, which nearly always echoes the cover's franking. Even the number

allocated, in most cases, refers to the unit, for instance (Fig.1) PM132 was allocated to the 132nd Ariete armoured division, which included the 132 tank regiment, 132 artillery regiment and 132nd engineering battalion among its units. Censor marks and resealing labels are occasionally encountered (Fig.2&4)

The PM numbers were allocated to units and regiments although the postal unit may not necessarily have been with the main body but somewhere to the rear. For instance PM 123 was assigned to XXIII Corpo d'Armata, which was in Egypt in mid-1940 but the postal unit was stationed at Bardia in Libya and did not enter Egypt.

Several excellent books by Giuseppe Marchese give units and locations, but alas for me they are all in Italian, of which I have little knowledge, and I have not found anything in English. I have drawn up a table in which I have tried to give the dates of the postmarks of the units inside Egypt, but as mentioned the handstamps themselves may or may not have been in the country itself. Indeed it may have been applied several days after the letter was given to the unit postal courier, so shifting the dates, for start and finish, a few days might be more accurate in thinking that the cover came from Italian troops inside Egypt.

For any Egypt military enthusiast, I hope this article may be of some help in finding covers. From the military perspective, these have as much right to be in an Egyptian collection as those from Napoleonic and British forces.

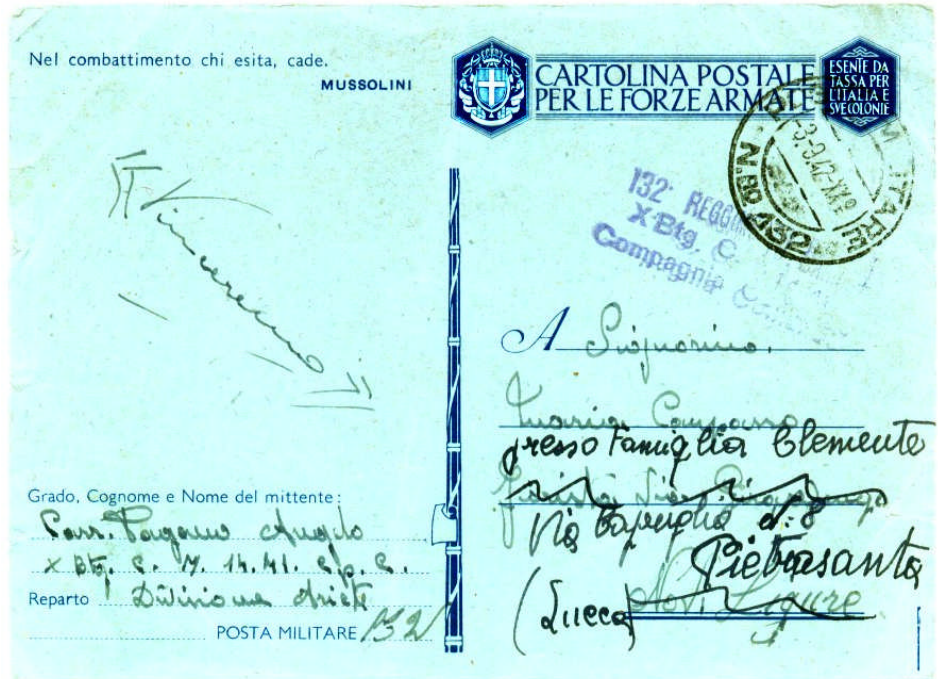


Fig.1 Free issued postcard with PM 132 of the Ariete division with unit cachet. At the date 3.9.42 it was near Fuka



Fig.2 PM 303 on a paid Libyan postcard with a clear cachet of the 141d REGGIMENTO DI FANTERIA of the Catanzaro division with censor marking. At this date 1.9.40 the division was possibly at Bug Bug

Fig.3 PM 133 of the Littorio division showing the manuscript "no stamps available".

The Littoria division at the date 18.9.42 was near Mersa Matruh



Fig.4 Letter with hand endorsement that no stamps were available but charged at the letter rate of 50c in Italy. Resealed with censor tape and the 31 censor marking

PM 56 was used by the Trieste division which at the date 1.11.42 was near Bir Achiem in Libya.

Fig.5. Letter franked 100c the air mail rate and cancelled with the XIII UFFICIO POSTALE DI CONCENRAMENTO assigned to Corps headquarters.

At the date shown it would have been at Mersa Matruh





**Posta Militare markings of Italian units while they were in Egypt**

Period	Numero P.M.	Unit	Entering	Leaving
1	13	Rgp. Lib. Maletti	14- 9-40	9-12-40
1	26	1a Libica	13- 9-40	11-12-40
3	27	2a Libica	13- 9-40	11-12-40
3	31	X Corpo d' Armata	10- 7-42	8-11-42
1	34	Intendenza A. S. (X Armata) (*)	- 9-40	- 12-40
3	34	Intendenza A. S.	6- 7-42	6-11-42
3	54	Pavia	2- 7-42	4-11-42
3	56	Trieste	26- 6-42	4-11-42
3	58	Bologna	31- 7-42	5-11-42
3	76	Pistoia	- 8-42	8-11-42
3	96	Brescia	2- 7-42	30-11-42
2	109	Trento M	18- 6-41	18-11-41
3	109	Trento	23- 6-42	4-11-42
3	123	XXIII Corpo d' Armata	13- 9-40	14-12-40
3	132	Ariete	23- 6-42	4-11-42
3	133	Littorio	6- 7-42	5-11-42
3	136	Giovani Fascisti	20- 8-42	9-11-42
1	221	XXI Corpo d' Armata	13- 9-40	13-12-40
3	221	XXI Corpo d' Armata	29- 6-42	25-11-42
3	260	Folgore - Sabratha	7- 7-42	8-11-42
1	262	Marmarica	13- 9-40	14-12-40
1	263	Cirene	13- 9-40	12-12-40
1	301	23 Marzo	13- 9-40	14-12-40
1	302	28 Ottobre	5- 11-40	14-12-40
1	303	Catanzaro	1- 12-40	14-12-40
1	304	3 Gennaio	12- 9-40	10-12-40
3	600	XX Corpo d' Armata	26- 6-42	7-11-42
3	XIII Conc. P. M	Intendenza A. S.	26- 6-42	5-11-42

(\*) Some units

**Period 1.** Sept 9 1940 to Dec 16 1940.    **2.** April 14 1941 to Jan 17 1942    **3.** June 25 1942 to Nov 11 1942

Fig.6



Fig.7

