

Italian Navy in Somalia, a Peacekeeping Operation and an Operational Test: January 1991–March 1995

W artykule przedstawiono działania włoskiej Marynarki Wojennej w ramach realizowanej na mocy mandatu ONZ operacji „Przywrócić nadzieję”. Autor przedstawia włoskie zaangażowanie w „rogu Afryki” na tle stopniowego uzyskiwania przez flotę zdolności do działań ekspedycyjnych, począwszy od pierwszych lat powojennych. W opinii Autora marynarka wojenna jest obecnie ważnym instrumentem nie polityki zagranicznej państwa, a możliwość wydzielenia sił do działań poza wodami ojczystymi determinuje w istotnym stopniu pozycję Republiki Włoskiej na arenie międzynarodowej.

Italian Navy was sent to Somalia in 1991 for UNOSOM operation. Then another naval squadron remained in Somali waters till 1994. At end the Italian Navy was asked by United States for a further intervention to help United Shield operation, covering UN forces retreat from Somalia in late winter 1995. This was the result of a long development of the Navy's projectability and sustainability and, anyway, it was not the last step. The process is still going on.

All began when, after World War II, the Navy substantially lost its blue water capability. The 1947 treaty reduced its strength to only 65,700 metric tons and no more than 25,000 men. Air carriers and submarines were forbidden.

Situation improved when Italy joined NATO in 1949. The Navy prepared a study entitled *Studio sul potenziamento della Marina italiana in relazione al Patto Atlantico*¹ – Study about the Italian Navy improvement in relation to the Atlantic Pact – which foresaw a Naval Force on two different blue waters operational groups, supported by a Naval Air Force. It was definitely too much as a financial effort for the poor and destroyed 1949 Italy. So, the plan remained in the book of the fairy tales and the Navy worked using what it had. In 1952 the Navy General Staff made a first attempt to organize a Naval Air Force. It bought 74 aircraft in the United States; but a strong opposition by the Air Force stopped the program. The planes were given the Air Force and the Navy could only have helicopters. The so called “Programma 1958” traced the path of the future development of the Navy. At the same time, the Navy began acting in peacekeeping operations in 1953 in Jonian Islands, in 1958 in UNOGIL² operation in Lebanon and in 1960 in Morocco.

¹ See COSENTINO, MICHELE – STANGLINI, RUGGERO, *La Marina Militare italiana*, Firenze, Edizioni Aeronautiche italiane, 1992.

² United Nation Observation Group in Lebanon.

The end of the 1960's marked a first turning point. France had abandoned NATO, the Royal Navy left Malta and the Soviet fleet of the Black Sea was increasing. So, NATO asked for a larger support by Italy. Now, in 1970 the Marina Militare was the fifth in the world, after United States, Soviet, British and French navies; but its ships were not the newest. The Navy General Staff asked for a new line. It was an old matter. In 1963 admiral Spigai had published a book³ about the naval problem. He had clearly underlined what the Navy was expected to do in the future and what could it happen in case of taking no measure. Now, seven years later, nothing had changed and when in 1970 the State budget assigned only 200 billions liras to the Navy that is to say only 13,24% over the 1,510 of the whole Defense budget, the Navy reacted and asked for an increasing of its budget. In 1973 the Kippur war and the Mediterranean situation offered a good opportunity. Admiral De Giorgi, the chief of Staff, presented an analysis. He supposed as highly improbable a direct conflict between United States and Soviet Union and their allies, but he foresaw an increasing rate of conflict in all the attrition zones, that is to say, for what concerned Italian interests, Mediterranean, Marmara Sea, Red Sea, Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean. This meant the Navy had to be ready and, to be ready, no less than 160,000 metric tons were necessary. In that period the Marina Militare had only 105,000 tons and it existed a concrete risk of a reduction to only 41,000 within 1984 if the budget was not improved. In fact, in the next years 1973 and 1974 the fleet would have lost 77,815 tons, receiving only 13,720, that is to say 17% of what was going to be put out of service. So, the Navy General Staff issued the so called Navy White Book.⁴ The Navy – the White book said – had to protect the supplying routes of the Country, from which Italy received at that time no less than 250 millions metric tons per year, mostly in crude oil. Then it had to defend maritime borders and, in case of war, acting as the escort for allied convoys and for United States Battle Groups in the Mediterranean Sea.

This study, as well as the global world situation, pushed the Government to the Naval Law, approved by the Chamber of Deputies on March 22nd 1975. It gave the Navy 1,000 billions lire to be expended within ten years, that is to say within 1985.

The Navy was supposed to buy 32 new ships and to increase its air composal. The idea was to have an escorting unit, able as an aircraft carrier⁵ – planes or helicopters, it was not yet clear – a couple of submarines, two guided missiles destroyers, eight guided missiles frigates, six aliscafi, a logistical ship, a bit of mionr units and a good number of helicopters and, if possible, planes too.

In late 1977 the Navy had engaged more than three quarters of the whole amount foreseen by the Naval Law⁶ and the so called “Major Unit” the main ship, needed no less than 160 billions.

³ VIRGILIO SPIGAI, *Il problema navale italiano*, Roma, Vito Bianco editore, 1963.

⁴ Stato Maggiore della Marina, *Prospettive ed orientamenti di massima della Marina Militare per il periodo 1974–1984*, Roma, 1973.

⁵ Later, Air carrier *Giuseppe Garibaldi*.

⁶ The whole amount of the Contracts signed with factories and yards at that time was roughly 765 billions liras.

In the same period the Navy was involved in some more peacekeeping operations, in Tunisia in 1973, in Lebanon in 1978 with UNIFIL⁷ and in 1979 in South Chinese Sea for rescuing the so called Boat People.

Boat People were Vietnamese refugees escaping from Communist Vietnam after the victory of the North Vietnamese army. Most of them were rejected from other countries and often it happened that their little ships or boats sunk in the Ocean. Now, just in that period the Navy had planned a world circumnavigation. So, the Staff changed the composition and the tasks of the Naval Group and an exercise became a rescuing operation. On July 1st 1979 the 8th Naval Group left Italy to go in search and rescue of the Boat People. It was composed of two cruisers and a logistical ship.⁸

The mission achieved its task with good success. The ships rescued 903 refugees, to be acrried to Italy. It was satisfying, but it was more satisfyong because for the first time after the end of World War II an Italian Naval Squadron had been sent so far. In fact, when under an operational point of view, the whole mission could be considered in a quite different way. A naval Group composed of military effective ships had been able to reach a good goal. When going, it had reached Singapore two days earlier than scheduled. The action was a success in terms of projectability. If it worked with two ships, it could work with more too. Moreover, it was obvious that a Naval Group needed an air support, but it was still unclear how was it possible to convince the governement and to overpass the obstacles by the Air Force, all based on the old 1929 law, which gave the Aeronautica Militare the control on every airplane.

The next step was Middle East and the Arabic Peninsula. As first in 1982 the Navy accepted to send light ships – three minsweepers, composing the 10th Naval Group – to Sinai peninsula, for patrolling Tiran straight and Aqaba Gulf. They were based in Sharm el Sheik (and they are still there) within the MFO⁹ operation. The same year the Navy was involved in the Lebanon peacekeeping mission. It failed, as it is well known. The land expeditionary forces of France, Italy and united States were constantly supported by their fleets, but this worked well as an additional demonstration of the need of an air support to the involved forces.

The first Gulf Operation, known in Italy as Golfo 1, was only an escorting duty of neutral ships to be protected against any possible attack of naval forces in the Persian Gulf. The Aeronautica Militare offered to send to Dahrhan a Tornado Escadrille to give, but the Governement rejected the idea because it was a neutral mission. This left the Italian 18th Naval Group with no air protection. It was not a problem, but when Golfo 2 operation began, the music changed.

Golfo 1 demonstrated that Italian Navy had a good projectability and sustainability. Eight ships – three guided missiles frigates, three minesweepers and two support ships – had remained in the Persian Gulf for a long time. The whole operation lasted some as 16 months – from September 1987 till December 31st 1988 – and the Navy had turno-

⁷ United Nation Interim Force In Lebanon.

⁸ Guided missiles cruisers *Vittorio Veneto* and *Andrea Doria* and squadron refuelling unit *Stromboli*, with some as 1200 men and 13 helicopters.

⁹ Multinational Force and Observers – MF&O, or MFO.

vered there 20 ships¹⁰ whose activity¹¹ had been equal to that of the whole fleet in normal peacetime.

By an operational point of view, the previous naval policy resulted now to have been the right one. Sustainability had been good and the modern and recently developed mine countermeasures branch resulted as good as needed. It was clear that for such an operation the Navy needed a third fueller and an air support.

The Government did not like the idea because of the expenditure. The Air Force told it was possible to support Naval Groups using land-based aircrafts and it is when Golfo 2 occurred that the limit of the ground based air support appeared. In fact, in 1991 the Air Force sent a Tornado Squadron to United Arab Emirates. But they proved to be useless or poorly useful in supporting Italian ships because of the increasing distance of the Naval Group from Abu Dhabi, where the Squadron had its base.

So, being helicopters good for reconnaissance and for search and rescue, but being them definitely useless in case of fight, the Navy knew since a lot of years it needed aircrafts. It was the public opinion which was not aware of it and it was the public opinion which needed to be convinced.

Golfo 1, had made clear that if the Government wanted to be involved in peace-keeping operations – and, because of international policy reasons, it was clearly impossible not to be involved – the naval command needed a close air-support. Golfo 2 – the Gulf War – demonstrated to the public opinion that ground based aircraft were expensive and poorly useful.

Now since 1989¹² the main obstacle to a Naval Air Force had been removed. So, when in 1991 the Somali operation began, the Navy could exploit it as an additional good opportunity to test its new systems.

The diplomatical situation is known. UNOSOM operation was made by an international coalition named UNITAF: United Nations Integrated Task Force, including 45,000 men from 23 countries. Italy sent 3,500 men, 20 tanks, 40 armoured cars, 600 cars and trucks and 20 helicopters, grouped in the IBIS force.

The Navy began planning its participation on November 29th and on December 8th 1992 the 24th Naval Group was ready to move. It was composed of a cruiser, a landing ship and two support ships, with 290 marines from the San Marco Battalion, 10 helicopters and a section of the Navy special units. On December 11th the 24th Group left Italy carrying men and materials of the Army. They landed on December 23rd and 24th and remained in Somalia for months.

By a naval point of view, it was the first time the Italian Navy projected its force so far and for so a long time since the pre World War II period. The Naval Group had to give the Army units on land a rapid logistical support, air covering, air reconnaissance and support, including medevac and operational rapid support using San Marco

¹⁰ 11 guided missile frigates of *Lupo* and *Maestrale* classes, 6 minesweepers *Lerici* and *Castagno* classes, 2 fuelers class *Stromboli* and support and rescue ship *Anteo*.

¹¹ The Naval Group steamed along 340 000 miles in some as 46 000 hours. It made 82 escorting services (37 up to the northern coast of the Gulf) whilst the minesweepers made 22 missions, finding 218 mines. Support ships had made 363 supplyings on the sea and helicopters flew more than 2 600 hours.

¹² Law number 36, issued on February 1st 1989.

marines and Navy Special Forces. It soon appeared clear that such an air support, based on ASW helicopters, had too a little fire capability and too high vulnerability, so, in case of troubles it would have been better to have some of the Mangusta attack helicopters as the Army had.

By the logistical point of view, the recently made experience in the Gulf was of no utility. In fact fuelling and supplying in a country where nothing existed no more was quite hard. *“Somalia Operation has been characterized by the impossibility, seen the terrible general situation of the Country, to buy there the goods and services necessary to assure the operational autonomy of the Force. The civil war, in fact, completely destroyed social structures, commercial activities, financial and public services as banks, communication structures transports, water and electricity distribution. The only useful ports for the Naval Group were Mombasa and Djibouti.”*¹³

Having briefly considered some little problems about foods, the Naval Command pointed out that fuel necessities had been rightly considered, so the 24th Naval Group had all it needed without looking for fuel in Mombasa and, moreover, thank to the Vesuvio, the only fueller in Mogadishu waters, it was able in fuelling other ships belonging to the US and the Indian navies.

By a general point of view, as the Naval commander, Vessel Captain Painigiani remarked: *“Somali experience....taught that words as peacekeeping and peacemaking in reality define tasks to be assigned to “peace-soldiers” who are called to operate and to fight too in war situations.*

*To speak of military intervention in peace-time may mean sending soldiers to fight, accepting casualties, may be relevant casualties, and affording high expenses. These considerations have as a consequence a progressively increasing involvement of the medium-level European Powers, including Italy, in giving units for these tasks, it is good to prepare since now the kind of forces to be used. Experience made during Operation Somalia is a remarkable reference to improve training, materials, strength and operational doctrine of our amphibious force.”*¹⁴

When Italian troops left Somalia in February 1994, after a hard diplomatical clash against United States about operational attitude to have in the theatre, a new Naval Group, the 25th,¹⁵ was sent. It included the *Garibaldi* air carrier. It was a further good and new experience, because the only time Italian troops have left a land by sea had been in Lebanon, twelve years before and in very different conditions. All went well. By the operational point of view, the lesson learned was: *“The importance of naval forces to manage crisis on a purely maritime or on a mixed sea-land theater; the necessity of having amphibious forces supported by landing units and air-carriers with a largely flexible operational range, because the air carriers are the only platform able in giving the mission a tailored capability in Command and Control and air support (by helicopter and/or by planes). Ne-*

¹³ SIRIO PIANIGIANI, *Operazione Somalia 11 dicembre 1992 – 14 aprile 1993: aspetti salienti*, in AUSSMM, „Enti e Comandi contemporanei”, Maristat, UAG, cartella 4, 1, pag. 1.

¹⁴ *“Operazione Somalia 11 dicembre...”*, pag. 19.

¹⁵ It included 1,679 men and 12 helicopters, on air carrier *Garibaldi*, frigate *Scirocco*, landing ships *San Giorgio* and *San Marco* and squadron fueller and supplier *Stromboli*.

cessity to prepare interforce-integrated mission-task-forces able in exploiting at the best the characters and powers of the involved specific specialistic composals”¹⁶.

Moreover, the whole operations had shown the importance of the amphibious forces and the Navy’s force-projection capability “on call”, that is to say in a very little time.

By the logistical point of view, it was successfully tested the possibility of having little task groups composed of a landing ship and escorting units, the landing ship could act as a squadron-fueller too, also if fuelling operations would have been a bit longer than fuelling from a fuelling ship.

Italian retreat from Somalia was followed by a third intervention. In december 1994 it was clear the UN operation completely failed. It was necessary to evacuate the 8,000 UN blue helmets, 336 containers and more than 550 cars, trucks, tanks, helicopters still in Somalia. United States were in charge of this “United Shield” Operation. Italian help was asked and the 26th Naval Group¹⁷ left Italy. This time, operation looked more a war than a peacekeeping one. In fact, American and Italian units had to cover the UN retreat in face of Somali guerrilla and warlords, who were just looking for any possible opportunity to gain something.

That’s why the Navy decided to use fighting helicopters and planes from the *Garibaldi*, as well as a strong landing composal supported by an Army tank platoon, to protect the boarding beach.¹⁸

After a joint US-Italian helicopter exercise on February 5th 1995, on February 27th in the night, Italian and United States marines landed near Mogadishu and, since February 28th in the morning till March the 1st, they protected the UN forces retreat. On March 2nd all the forces were on board and on March 22nd the 26th Naval Group was back in Italy. In his mission final report, rear-admiral Bolongaro, the Naval Group commander, later underlined as the mission major assets: the joint operability of Army and Navy land and air composals; the Naval Group full integration in the American-Italian Combined Task Force thanks to the NATO procedures and rules; the high professional level of the military personnel; the good training of the amphibious forces; the flexibility of the air composal and of the air-carrier, which enabled the Naval Group in using 4 different flying lines at the same time and from the same platform; last: the good result in using satellite-communications.

So, as a conclusion, the three operations in Somalia demonstrated that the Navy was choosing well, moving in the right way and perceiving the future in the right sense. It appeared clear that the next steps had to be an improvement of the air support and of the amphibious capability, as well as an increasing navy-army jointness.

It was made and, six years later, in 2001, ComGrupNavIt, acting as the Task Group 620.01 in Operation Enduring Freedom, demonstrated how well the lesson had been learned.

¹⁶ SIRIO PIANIGIANI, *Operazione Somalia 16 febbraio 1994 – 06 aprile 1994: aspetti salienti*, Roma, SM MM, 1994, pag. 4.

¹⁷ It was composed of air carrier *Garibaldi*, landing ships *San Giorgio* and *San Marco*, squadron fueller *Stromboli* and frigate *Libeccio*.

¹⁸ ELIO BOLONGARO, *Operazione Somalia III: 20 gennaio 1995 – 22 marzo 1995: aspetti salienti*, pag. 7.