

PATHFINDER

AIR POWER DEVELOPMENT CENTRE BULLETIN



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THE EXPERIENCE OF AIR POWER IN LIBYA

History doesn't repeat itself but it rhymes.

Mark Twain

Events in Libya in the first months of 2011 have a remarkable resonance with events in this same region exactly 100 years ago. Following an uprising against the government of Muammar Qaddafi, an international coalition of powers decided to act to prevent a civilian bloodbath as the Libyan regime moved to crush the rebellion. Eschewing all suggestions of invasion, the coalition turned to air power as its chosen means of intervention—with the limited goal of establishing a no-fly zone to prevent the indiscriminate use of government force against the Libyan population. It is ironic, then, that the bases used by many of the aircraft enforcing the coalition's mandate from the United Nations lie just across the Mediterranean, in Italy.

In September 1911 the Kingdom of Italy launched its own military action against Libyan territory, which was then part of the Ottoman Empire. Italian nationalists longing for a North African empire put the government in Rome under such pressure that the decision was taken to conquer the Ottoman provinces of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica (now known as Libya). Little opposition was expected from the politically unstable Ottoman Empire, and the public was led to believe that the war would be quick, with few casualties to the Italian forces which were equipped with the latest technology, including warships, armoured cars and aircraft. The Italian Navy, the Regia Marina, already dominated the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Italian Army was thought to be more than a match for the relatively small garrison of 4000 Turkish regulars supplemented by Arab and Bedouin troops.

In fact, while Tripoli was captured easily within days of war being declared on 29 September, the Italians

soon found themselves involved in an irregular conflict, which quickly degenerated into a hybrid war of attrition. The Italian force of 20 000 originally committed to the operation had to be surged to about 100 000 in order to maintain control over the territory occupied. While the war officially ended on 18 October 1912 with the two provinces ceded to Italy, Italian control over Libyan territory was ineffective due to a long and determined guerrilla war that went on for another 20 years.



Italian airships bomb Turkish positions in Libya, 1912

When Italy invaded Libya, the Turks had no aircraft in North Africa. The Ottomans did attempt to purchase aircraft from France and send them to the battlefield via Algeria, but nothing materialised from these plans. As a result, Italian aviators were able to test their latest aeronautical equipment in wartime conditions without opposition. Nine aircraft—two Blériot XIs, three Nieuport monoplanes, two Farman biplanes, and two Etrich Taube monoplanes—were dispatched by boat to Libya, along with 10 officers and 29 soldiers.

Captain Carlo Piazza flew the first military reconnaissance mission in wartime over Turkish lines on 23 October 1911. The flight, from Tripoli to Azzizia in a Blériot XI monoplane, took about an hour. Subsequently, on 25 October a

reconnaissance patrol flown by Captain Ricardo Moizo and Piazza discovered advancing Turkish troops and their reports enabled the Italian Command to defeat a major counter-attack. The value of aerial reconnaissance had been proven decisively. On 26 October, during the Battle of Sciara-Sciat, Lieutenant Giulio Gavotti flew above the Turks and delivered messages to the Italian Navy battleship *Sardegna* to guide the ship's guns. As there was no wireless in aircraft at that time, Gavotti was forced to scribble notes on paper, place them in small metal tins, and carefully drop the tins onto the *Sardegna's* deck. This was the first of a number of naval gunfire direction flights conducted by the Italians.

On 1 November the first ever aerial bombs were dropped by Gavotti, on Turkish positions at Ain Zara and Taguira, from an early model Etrich Taube monoplane. While flying at 600 ft (185 m), he took four small 4.5 lb (2 kg) bombs from a leather pouch, screwed in the detonators, and threw each bomb over the side by hand. No one was injured and little damage was done. The Turks launched an official diplomatic protest, pointing out that one of the buildings damaged at Ain Zara was a military hospital, but this did not deter the Italians from making more such attacks. After Captain Moizo again bombed an enemy gun battery located at Ain Zara on 6 November, the Italian General Staff issued the first official communiqué boasting of their aerial bombing operations.



An artist's depiction of Italian aircraft dropping small bombs on Turkish irregulars. Air enthusiasts agreed that the moral effect far outweighed the physical effect.

On 11 December five Italian aircraft conducted the first ever direct fire support mission when they assisted their infantry in an assault on Ain Zara. Turkish troops at Azzizia opened fire with a 90mm Krupps gun on a high-elevation carriage against an Italian aircraft on 15 December, which became the first anti-aircraft artillery effort in military history. The earliest recorded instance of psychological warfare from the air occurred on 15 January 1912 when leaflets were dropped into an Arab encampment. Later, on 24 February, Captain Piazza made the first photo-reconnaissance flight in history using a 'Baby' Zeiss camera. The first night reconnaissance flight was undertaken on 2 May, and the first night bombing mission was conducted by Captain Alberto Marengi on 11 June. The first aircraft to be brought down in a war was that of Lieutenant Piero Manzini, who was shot down on 25 August, and the first aircraft captured was that of Captain Moizo on 10 September. Italian aircraft were also utilised to transport military equipment to the troops at the front in what were the first airlift operations.

Two Italian airships were also deployed to Libya, although they were not used in operations until 5 March 1912. In what was to be a successful deployment, these made 127 ascents before they returned to Italy in January

1913—86 of these missions involved attacks on Turkish positions in which some 330 bombs were dropped. On one occasion an airship succeeded in thwarting a Turkish surprise attack by discovering and bombing an enemy cavalry ambush. One of the airships also conducted nine missions after it was deployed to Benghazi on 29 May 1912, including one where it dropped incendiary bombs and another where it made a night bombing raid.

The British War Office estimated that between March and June 1912 Turkish losses from air attack were 26 killed and 70 wounded—not devastating results but, added to the value gained from air reconnaissance, sufficient to justify the use of the new arm. The experiences of Italian aviators during the Italian-Turkish War of 1911-12

not only confirmed the practical viability of military aircraft, they helped establish many of the roles that we associate with air power today. Libya was heavily fought over—from the air as well as on the ground—in World War II, and later also felt the striking power of USAF F-111s and naval aircraft during Operation *Eldorado Canyon* (in retaliation for a Libyan sponsored terror attack in April 1986), but these episodes have none of the symbolic associations with 1911 that are invoked by the current NATO intervention in Libya's civil war.

- *The Italians conducted the first air reconnaissance, the first naval gunfire direction, and the first aerial bombing operations in wartime.*
- *Air power has been used in irregular and hybrid warfare since the Italian-Turkish War of 1911-12.*
- *Even though technology changes rapidly and history does not repeat itself, much of the human experience of the past continues to inform—history does indeed rhyme.*



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