

Italian Air Force in Italian East Africa 1919 – 1939, Part I - End of 1919 to October 3rd, 1935 (invasion of Ethiopia)

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At the end of 1919 one Voisin, eleven Farman, four SVA and some SAML planes were sent to Eritrea. These planes were first located at Massaua, then at Sembel (close to Asmara). They planes would move to Somalia a few months later, but nothing much would happen in Eritrea, except for two SIAI S.59bis seaplanes that would be sent to Massaua for contraband interception.

The planes that moved from Eritrea to Somalia in 1920 were operating from Omargegeb (close to Mogadiscio) until 1922 when the personnel was repatriated. At the end of 1925 an air presence was felt needed in Somalia for the operations to occupy Oltre Giuba (Nogal and the Sultanates of Obbia and Migiurtini –Mijjarten in the English spelling of the time -), but only in September 1926 36a Squadriglia (Fiat R.2) was sent to Mogadiscio. This Squadriglia operated in the area until November 1927, when flights ceased. In June 1928 the first four Romeo Ro.1s arrived at Mogadiscio, flying from Italy, followed later by another two. In the middle of February 1930 a Fiat AS.1 was flown from Rome and it remained at the service of the colony. In 1931 Squadriglia Somala was reduced to one Sezione (two Ro.1s) because another two moved to form a Sezione in Eritrea. In August 1931 (Pedrialli mentions these 6 planes as leaving Tripoli on September 22nd and arriving in Mogadiscio on October 24th), though, a new Squadriglia was formed with two Ca.101s and four Ro.1s from Aviazione della Tripolitania (Libya). Operations by this Squadriglia ended in October 1931.

In 1932 a Comando Aviazione Eritrea was formed (with headquarters at Asmara), when a Ro.1 Sezione was sent from Somalia.

In 1934 Comando Aviazione Eritrea had a Squadriglia Mista (equipped with four Ro.1) and four Ca.101E. The planes were based at Asmara, with secondary airfields at Otumlo and Assab (and eight emergency landing fields).

In 1934 Aviazione della Somalia had a Squadriglia Mista (renamed 1a Sq. R.T. Somala in 1935) at Mogadiscio with nine Ro.1s.

January 1935

- Somalia : Squadriglia Somala (12 Ro.1 – 11 serviceable -)
- Eritrea : Gruppo Misto (Squadriglia Mista – four Ca.101E - and Squadriglia Libica – eight Ro.1 -).

The first new unit to reach Eritrea was ‘ Squadriglia Ro.1 Libica per l’A.O.I. ’, that had been formed on January 5th, 1935 with five Ro.1 in Tripoli and four in Benghazi. It reached Asmara on January 19th. In the meantime, Raggruppamento A.O. was formed at Lonate Pozzuolo (Italy) on January 5th. XLII Gruppo was assigned to it

(made up of Squadriglie 8a and 9a of XXV Gruppo – twenty-one Ca.101bis -, 7o Stormo).

Planes totals that reinforced Aviation in Eritrea sent in January 1935 ;

- January 1st : four Ca.101E (Sq. Eritrea), four Ro.1 (Sq. Eritrea), already in Eritrea.
- January 19th : eight Ro.1 (Sq. Libica), by air.
- January 29th : eleven Ca.101bis (8a Sq.), ten Ca.101bis (9a Sq.) and nine CR.20bis (106a Sq.), by ‘ California ’.

Plane totals that reinforced Aviation in Somalia on January 1st, 1935 : thirteen Ro.1 (Sq. Somala), already existing .

On February 1st, Comando Aeronautica dell’Africa Orientale was formed, unifying the air components of the two colonies (Eritrea and Somalia). Its commander also functioned as Aviazione dell’Eritrea commander. A change with the new structure was that the administrative command of aviation in Italian East Africa passed from the Ministry of the Colonies to that of the Air Force, organizing it in units of the Air Force and for the Regio Corpo Truppe Coloniali.

The first batch of new planes from Italy arrived, by sea, on January 29th, 1935 : twenty Ca.101bis (42o Gruppo – 8a and 9a Squadriglie -, Pedrialli mentions 21 planes) and ten CR.20bis (106a Squadriglia, Pedrialli mentions 9 planes arriving). The first planes, assembled at Otumlo, Massaua’s airfield, formed XLII - XXIV ? - Gruppo (ex-42o, on February 8th, with Squadriglie 8a and 9a). The Squadriglie were renumbered 68a and 69a on February 20th, but on March 1st, the whole Gruppo and its units regained their previous designations (XXV Gruppo and 8a and 9a Squadriglia). They transferred from Eritrea to Somalia (8a in March – Pedrialli mentions March 10th - and 9a in April – Pedrialli mentions April 7th -). The ten CR.20, that formed 106a Squadriglia da Caccia Terrestre were assigned the defence of Asmara. These new planes were placed under 1o Raggruppamento A.O. (XXIV Gruppo Bombardamento – Squadriglie 8a and 9a – and 106a Squadriglia). 7o Stormo’s second Gruppo (IV) with Squadriglie 14a and 15a arrived a little later, being reformed as an A.O. unit at Otumlo on March 6th (Pedrialli mentions 2o Raggruppamento – and not 7o Stormo – as being the parent unit – and that it arrived later) . It was also equipped with twenty Ca.101D2 (equipped with Alfa Romeo D2 motors).

Plane totals that reinforced Aviation in Somalia on February 9th, 1935 : ten Ca.101bis (9a Sq.), by flight from Eritrea.

Aviazione della Somalia, March 5th, 1935 : ‘ Squadriglia Somalia ’ (10 Ro.1 serviceable - and two unserviceable -, 17 officers, 29 NCOs, 39 privates – Italians-) and 238 locals).

On March 15th and 17th, twenty Ca.101D2 (IV Gruppo B.N.), ten CR.20bis (107a Squadriglia) 2o Raggruppamento commando (Gentilli mentions 7o Stormo commando) arrived in Eritrea by ‘ California ’ and ‘ Aussa ’.

Planes totals that reinforced Aviation in Eritrea sent on March 17th, 1935 : ten Ca.101D2 (14a Sq.) and ten Ca.101D2 (15a Sq.), by ‘ California ’ – *see paragraph above for the same reinforcements* -.

Plane totals that reinforced Aviation in Somalia on March 23rd, 1935 : ten CR.20bis (107a Sq.), by ‘ California ’. – *see 2nd paragraph above for the same reinforcements* -

On April 5th, 1935 Aviazione della Somalia had thirty-eight planes, after twenty-one Ca.101bis (XXV Gruppo) were transferred from Eritrea and eight CR.20 transported by sea. With these new units 7o Stormo was formed.

Plane totals that reinforced Aviation in Somalia on April 5th, 1935 : eleven Ca.101bis (8a Sq.), by flight from Eritrea.

Planes totals that reinforced Aviation in Eritrea sent on June 9th, 1935 : one S.81, by flight.

Before July 1935 the following planes were present in Eritrea : 20 Ca.101D2 bombers, four Ca.101E, 19 CR.20 fighters and twelve Ro.1. In Somalia : 21 Ca.101bis, 10 CR.20 and 12 Ro.1

On July 1st, 1935 Reparto Tappa A.O. was formed in Napoli (Italy) to organize the transportation of planes and personnel by sea to Massaua and Mogadiscio. R.N. Miraglia (Regia Marina’s seaplane tender) transported twenty Ro.1 on July 15th (Pedrialli mentions ‘ Miraglia ’ as arriving on July 23rd with Squadriglie R.T. 34o and 41o – each of ten Ro.1 -), five Ca.111 (18a Squadriglia Bombardamento) and ten Ro.37 (103a Squadriglia) on August 15th (Pedrialli mentions August 30th), twenty Ro.1 and two Ro.37 in September and another forty Ro.37 in the three following months. All other planes sent to reinforce Eritrea arrived by air, though : eighty-four S.81, thirty-seven Ca.111 and forty-two Ca.133 by the end of 1935. All these planes were drawn from : 8o Stormo at Poggio Renatico (Gruppi XXVII – Squadriglie 17a and 18a -, XXVIII – Squadriglie 10a and 19a – and XXXI - Squadriglie 65a and 66a -) with Ca.111, 9o Stormo at Ciampino (Gruppi XXVI – Squadriglie 11a and 13a -, XXIX – Squadriglie 62a and 63a – and XXX – Squadriglie 57a and 58a) with S.81, 13o Stormo at Lonate Pozzolo (Gruppi XI - Squadriglie 1a and 4a -, XLIII – Squadriglie 3a and 5a – and L – Squadriglie 59a and 60a -) with S.81 and 14o Stormo at Ferrara (Gruppi XLIV – Squadriglie 6a and 7a -, XLV – Squadriglie 2a and 22a – and XLIX – Squadriglie 61a and 64a -) with Ca.133. By the end of May 1936 386 planes and 309 spare engines arrived in A.O.

Squadriglie da Ricognizione (equipped with OFAM Romeo Ro.1 – an Italian license-built version of the Fokker C.V -) were the most numerous sent to Italian East Africa. After ‘ Libica ’, Squadriglie 34a, 38a, 41a, 116a, 118a and 131a followed. 34a (LXI Gruppo at Parma) and 41a (LXVII Gruppo at Gorizia) arrived in Massaua on July 24th. 38a (LXXI Gruppo at Merna – Gorizia -), 116a and 118a (LXXI Gruppo at Novi Ligure), 38a (LXIX at Novi Ligure) and 131a (LXVI Gruppo at Capodichino) in September. All these Squadriglie were drawn from all three Stormi della Ricognizione (19o, 20o and 21o).

Planes totals that reinforced Aviation in Eritrea sent on July 23rd : ten Ro.1 (34a Sq.), ten Ro.1 (41a Sq.) and four MF4 (Sez. Idro), by R.N. ' Miraglia '.

On August 1st, 1935 Comando Aviazione dell'Eritrea was disbanded and Gruppo Misto remained the sole flying element. Plans were laid for Comando Aeronautica A.O. to have the following order of battle :

- I Brigata Aerea : one Ca.111 Stormo at Otumlo, one Ca.133 Stormo at Zula and one Squadriglia Caccia.
- II Brigata Aerea : two S.81 Stormi (one at Gura and the other at Assab) and one Squadriglia Caccia.
- III Brigata Aerea: four Ro.1 Squadriglie (army co-operation units), one Squadriglia Sanitaria and four Squadriglie Caccia
- IV Brigata Aerea (Aviazione della Somalia) : one Ca.101 Stormo, two Ro.1 Squadriglie, two Caccia Squadriglie and one Squadriglia Sanitaria.

There also was an S.81 assigned to the Alto Commissario available in August but it crashed on August 7th in a – still – mysterious accident.

Planes totals that reinforced Aviation in Eritrea sent in August 30th : five Ca.111 (18a Sq.) and ten Ro.37 (103a Sq.), by R.N. ' Miraglia '.

Planes totals that reinforced Aviation in Eritrea sent on September 10th (September 8th and 10th also using ' Ircania ' ?), 1935 : ten Ro.1 (38a Sq.), ten Ro.1 (116a Sq.), ten Ro.1 (118a Sq.), ten Ro.1 (131a Sq.) and five Ca.111 (17a Sq. B.N.) by ' Ircania '.

September 1935

In reality only III Brigata Aerea was formed on September 5th (with Ro.1 units and CR.20s located mainly at Mai Edaga, Asmara and Agordat). Gruppo Misto became I Gruppo Ricognizione Terrestre Eritreo on September 7th, formed, at first, by Squadriglie Libica and 34a and then by 41a and 118a. Completing the reconnaissance elements, 103a Squadriglia (equipped with Ro.37 and formed in Italy) arrived in Eritrea in September and became part of III Brigata.

As for bomber units, IV Gruppo was to be reinforced by XXVII Gruppo A.O. (Squadriglie 17a and 18a, of the 8o Stormo at Poggio Renatico) that arrived in Massaua on September 20th. For all air units transferred from metropolitan Italy to Italian East Africa, another unit was formed, designated ' bis ', to remain in Italy proper. So, for example, 8o Stormo Bis was formed at Poggio Renatico in November 1935 and XXVII Bis (pending re-equipment with S.81) was equipped with the old Ca.74a and Ca.102.

The following were the fighter units : 106a Squadriglia at Asmara (with ten CR.20bis that had arrived from Italy in the beginning of the year), 107a Squadriglia at Mogadiscio (with CR.20).

Last, the auxiliary units : Squadriglia di Stato Maggiore at Asmara (four Ca.101E, from the Gruppo Misto), Sezione Autonoma Idro at Zula (near Massaua) with four

Fiat MF.4 that had replaced the two S.59bis and the Reparto Aereo on R.N. Taranto with two fighter-reconnaissance Cant 25.

Aviazione dell'Eritrea – October 2nd/3rd, 1935

- Comando Aeronautica A.O. (Asmara, with Sezioni Operazioni ed Informazioni at Coatit)

- III Brigata Aerea (Mai Edaga) :

- I Gruppo R.T. (Mai Edaga) :

- Sq. R.T. Libica (seven Ro.1, Mai Edaga; on October 3rd : eleven Ro.1 – Sezioni of seven at Mai Edaga, two at Asmara and two at Assab)

- 34a Sq. R.T. (eight Ro.1, Mai Edaga)

- 118a Sq. R.T. (ten Ro.1, Mai Edaga ; on October 3rd at Adi Ugri)

- 41a Sq. R.T. (ten Ro.1, Agordat; on October 3rd one Ro.1 in repairs at Asmara)

- 116a Sq. R.T. (eight Ro.1, Massaua)

- Sez. 116a Sq. R.T. (two Ro.1, Assab)

- 38a Sq. R.T. (ten Ro.1, Gura)

- 131a Sq. R.T. (ten Ro.1, Gura; on October 3rd one of the ten Ro.1 unserviceable at Massaua)

- 103a Sq. (nine Ro.37, Gura; on October 3rd six Ro.37 at Gura and three at Asmara ' being prepared for fighter actions ')

- 106a Sq. C.T. (four CR.20, Massaua). On October 3rd three planes at Massaua, three at Assab and one being repaired at Asmara

- Sez. 106a Sq. (three CR.20, Assab)

- Squadriglia S.M. (four Ca.101E, Asmara)

- IV Gruppo B.T. A.O. (Asmara) :

- 14a Sq. B.T. (Ca.101D2, Asmara)

- 15a Sq. B.T. (Ca.101D2, Asmara)

- *Fifteen Ca.101D2 for both Squadriglie*

- *The Italian Official History mentions – for October 3rd – 14a Sq. as having ten Ca.101D2 – five at Asmara and five at Assab – and 15a Sq. as having ten Ca.101D2*

- Sez. 14a Sq. B.T. (five Ca.101D2, Assab)

- XXVII Gruppo B.T. A.O. (Assab)

- 17a Sq. B.T. (on October 3rd five Ca.111 being assembled at Massaua, on October 2nd mentioned as being at Assab)

- 18a Sq. B.T. (five Ca.111, Assab)

- Sezione Autonoma Idrovolanti – also mentioned as Sezione Idro-Massaua - (four MF.4, Massaua)

- Reparto Aereo Imbarcato (two Cant. 25, aboard R.N. Taranto)

Plane totals (for October 3rd) : 34 bombers (ten Ca.101, four Ca.111E and twenty Ca.101D2), seventy-three reconnaissance Ro.1, nineteen fighters (ten CR.20 and nine Ro.37) and six seaplanes (four MF.4 and two Cant 25). A grand total of 132 planes.

Planes totals that reinforced Aviation in Eritrea sent in Octobre 1935 :

- October 3rd : five Ca.111 (18a Sq.), by sea
- October 30th : fourteen Ca.111 (XXVIII Gruppo – Sq. 10a and 19a) by sea; ten Ro.37bis (105a Sq.) and four Ba.39 (Sq. S.M. Eritrea) by ‘ Ircania ’

Aviazione della Somalia – October 2nd/ 3rd, 1935

- 7o Stormo B.T. A.O. – also Bombardamento A.O. - (Mogadiscio) :

- XXV Gruppo B.T. – also Gruppo Bombardamento and Gruppo A.O. - (twenty Ca.101bis) :

- 8a Squadriglia B.T. (Ca.101bis, Mogadiscio; October 3rd : ten planes – seven at Mogadiscio and three at Belet Uen – or seven planes in total)

- 9a Squadriglia B.T. (Ca.101bis, Mogadiscio; October 3rd : ten planes)

- 107a Sq. with eight CR.20bis was under 7o Stormo on October 3rd

- Sez. 1a Sq. R.T. with one Ro.1 was under 7o Stormo on October 3rd

- Sq. R.T. Somalia (five Ro.1 at Mogadiscio, three Ro.1 at Belet Uen and two Ro.1 at Galadi)

- 107a Sq. C.T. (eight CR.20 at Mogadiscio)

Plane totals (for October 3rd) : 20 (19 ?, one had been destroyed by accident) Ca.101bis bombers, 10 reconnaissance Ro.1 and 8 fighter CR.20. Grand total 38 (37 ?) planes.

Planes and their bases on October 3rd (excluding the ones mentione above) :

- Belet Uen : Sez. 8a Sq. with three Ca.101bis and Com.do 1a Sq. R.T. with four Ro.1
- Lugh Ferrandi : Sez. 1a Sq. R.T. with two Ro.1
- Galadi : Sez. 1a Sq. R.T. with two Ro.1

On October 3rd, 1935 Italian troops crossed the Eritrea – Ethiopia border and the Italian invasion of Ethiopia started.

Note : There are discrepancies between the Gentili (mentioning October 2nd) and the Pedriali (Official History and mentioning October 3rd) sources, also on the dates reinforcements arrived; both have been accommodated.

Glossary and abbreviations:

Aeronautica : Aviation
Aereo – aerie : aerial
Alto : Higher
A.O.I. : Africa Orientale Italiana (Italian East Africa)
Autonomo (Autonoma) : Autonomous (i.e. Independent)
Aviazione : Aviation
Bombardamento : bombing
Brigata : Brigade
B.N. : Bombardamento Notturmo
B.T. : Bombardamento Terrestre
Caccia : Fighter
Comando (Com.do) : Headquarters
Commisario : Commisioner
C.T. : Caccia Terrestre
Gruppo – gruppi : Group – groups
Idrovolante – idrovolanti (Idro) : Seaplane - seaplanes
Imbarcato : embarked
Informazioni : information (also in the sense of Intelligence)
Misto (Mista) : Mixed
Notturmo : nocturnal (i.e. night)
Operazione – operazioni : Operation – operations
Raggruppamento : Group
Regio Corpo Truppe Coloniali : Royal Corps of Colonial Troops
Regia Marina : Royal – Italian – Navy
Reparto : unit
Ricognizione : Reconnaissance
R.N. : Regia Nave (Royal Ship)
R.T. : Ricognizione Terrestre
Sanitario : Medical
Sezione – sezioni (Sez.) : Section - sections
Squadriglia – Squadriglie (Sq.) : Flight – flights
Stato Maggiore (S.M.) : General Staff
Stormo : Wing
Tappa : Rear area
Terrestre : land (of the ...)

Sources :

- Roberto Gentili, ‘ Guerra aerea sull’Etiopia 1935 – 1939 ’ (Air war in Ethiopia 1935 – 1939), Firenze : EDAI, 1992
- Ferdinando Pedriali (Stato Maggiore Aeronautica – Ufficio Storico), L’aeronautica Italiana nelle guerre coloniali – Guerra Etiopica 1935 – 1936 (Italian Aviation in the

colonial wars – Ethiopian War 1935 – 1936), Roma : Stato Maggiore Aeronautica – Ufficio Storico, 1997