

GoticaToscana

The Column of Liberation



Andrea Gatti - Italy

WWII Historical Military Vehicles and Re-enactors Events in Italy Our experience as the GoticaToscana nonprofit Association

Since our experience in the organization of the 2001 MV rally in the Tuscan Chianti hills ("La Strada del Cuore, see the article by Dick and Diane Deren from the MVPA Florida chapter, published in Supply Line, September / October 2001 issue) we always hoped to get the chance to set up an even larger event, without sacrificing the key elements of enjoyment and a friendly atmosphere.

After a few years, which provided little excitement to Italian MV collectors, acting as the "GoticaToscana" nonprofit association, we organized another event, confident of the positive attitude from Italian collectors.

The GoticaToscana is a non-profit, non political, Italian military history association; our base is in Scarperia, 30 km north from Florence. Our goal is to record the History and the Memory of events during WWII. Our area is crossed by the famous Gothic Line, it is here that the Allied Army lost so many lives, a significant amount of their equipment, vehicles and a great deal of time. From the historic point of view, the Italian Campaign after June, 1944, was a secondary front but for the Italian people and the soldiers involved the campaign was a tough and bitter struggle. Even today there are a considerable number of German, US and British positions and bunkers still to be seen.



Florence, the HMV at the Piazzale Michelangelo

The 2006 event was named the "Twin Cities Rally": an occasion of common enjoyment which lasted throughout the four days-long event from the 22nd to the 25th of April. The name came from the two cities, Scarperia and Florence that are represented by the same insignia: the Florentine red "Fleur de Lys" of the Medici family. The Twin Cities Rally crossed the Apennines mountain range and entered Florence following the route taken by the liberating Armies in 1944.

Numbers tell a story: overall, 102 vehicles, all of WWII vintage (with the exception of a Guzzi motorbike, and the DKW Munga owned by one of the organizers) participated, alongside about 320 collectors and re-enactors. These are, still today, record figures for WWII MV events in Italy. We also had the absolute first – for Italy – of having three M4 tanks in our mid. Not to mention all the other armored vehicles, motorbikes, Kubelwagens and other German and Italian Army vehicles, 2-½ ton trucks, Dodge ¾ and 1-½ tonners, and the ubiquitous ¼-ton Willys Jeeps. We leave the pictures to telling the story.

heart of Florence. It was also a road which cost a lot to conquer, seeing some of the fiercest battles on the way to the north of Rome and to the Arno river Line. Those were the battles that set the stage for the next phase of the Italian Campaign – the breaching of the Gothic Line along the Northern Apennines - something 361st veterans know too well.



Starting from the left: 1st Lieutenant Mel Buschman (formerly of Company K, 361st Infantry), Master Sergeant Carl "Dutch" Snyder (formerly of Company L and HQ Company, 133rd Infantry) and Peter Davies from UK



Florence, the entrance at Porta Romana

The event took place on April 20-22, 2007, in the beautiful Chianti region of Tuscany touching Monteriggioni and Siena, where our historical column rode along the medieval downtown area, including the world famous Piazza del Campo, where the traditional "Palio" horse race takes place every year.



Siena Crossing Piazza del Campo.

Both the "Twin Cities Rally" and "The Route of the Heart" received very positive feedback. We recognize a strong and collaborative feeling between our association and the other participating to both these events. Thus, we set our minds to organizing an even larger HVM event in 2008: "The Column of liberation".

The idea of "The Column of Liberation", was a large-scale on-the-road HVM event crossing Italy for about 650 miles from Rome to the Po – an unprecedented undertaking in Italy. It was clear from the beginning this new venture presented a very difficult task, necessitating the collaboration of many people, both associations and individuals. We would not be working from scratch, though, since we had learned a lot from our successful events of the previous years, and had established a good network of relations with individuals, private concerns, and public administrations, both national and local.



Florence, Crossing the Arno River, in the background the Ponte Vecchio

In 2007 we organized "La strada del cuore" - The Route of the Heart – that was the name the Allied troops gave Highway 2 in 1944, as it was the road which pointed straight to the

heart of Florence. It was also a road which cost a lot to conquer, seeing some of the fiercest battles on the way to the north of Rome and to the Arno river Line. Those were the battles that set the stage for the next phase of the Italian Campaign – the breaching of the Gothic Line along the Northern Apennines - something 361st veterans know too well.



Picture Manifesto Nazionale — the poster of the event

As was the case with our past events of this type, we thought of “The Column of Liberation” not only as an exciting occasion for HMV collectors and re-enactors, but also as an opportunity to further public awareness of our hobby and its educational value. The 2008 event, organized on the occasion of the Italian 63rd WWII Liberation Day celebrations, had the further aim of collecting money for charity purposes. To this end, we sought and obtained the full partnership of the Italian Red Cross, and elected the Giuseppe e Margherita Colletta Charity Association as the beneficiary.

Thus, thanks to the joint effort by many, and the relentless activism of the GoticaToscana executive secretary (whose enthusiasm proved to be founded on outstanding organizational skills), the idea progressed from the project stage to reality.

On Friday 18th April 2008 we watched our HMVs being unloaded altogether near the southern outskirts of Rome. When the transport trucks left we realized we’d have to go home up to the Po and back. At this meeting point fellow travelers from all over Italy congregated. Tomorrow we would all be traveling the paved roads of our national capital, an unprecedented fact for a privately organized HMV event. Next morning, an early sun burnt off the scattered clouds of the previous day. The column formed along the Ardeatina Highway its traffic heavy even on this early Saturday morning, with the balance of participants joining us here before we set off.

“Move up!” – The impatiently shouted command fills the air, amplified by our loudspeaker for all to hear. An exhortation which, often repeated over the following weekends, will become familiar to everybody, to the point of jokingly becoming a semi official motto for the event, with a fair share of bitingly humorous remarks at our expense. We heartily accept this of course, as becomes a Tuscan.

Off we go, the long snake of our column uncoiling along the highway. The first destination is the Cecchignola military base, home of the Italian Historical Museum of Military Motorization. The museum, directed by Col. Matteace, is a veritable paradise for HMV collectors; its top-class exhibits include some extremely rare vehicles. However, we have arranged for the stop at the base primarily as a final assembly point for our column before its entry into Rome, unfortunately we cannot devote the museum the time it deserves. With the promise of coming back on another occasion for a proper visit, we get ready for the next leg of our trip to the Eternal City and the beginning of a big adventure.

The Column of Liberation, starting from Rome, reached Viterbo, Castiglion Fiorentino, Florence, Ferrara and ended at the Po river in Felonica near Mantua after 650 miles. It touched five Regions, 15 Counties and 65 Communities. There were more than 140 vehicles involved with nearly 400 re-enactors, and the “Drag-em-oot”, a historic C-47 aircraft based in the UK, that carried our two airborne contingents, the Herring Italian Jumping Team and the American “Airborne Demonstration Team” to the drop zone near Sermide, executing two jumps, each with 20-21 parachutists.

Roma – The Fori Imperiali in arriving to Piazza Venezia





Ariostea Square in Ferrara



The Herring Italian Jumping Team



The American Airborne Demonstration Team

The jumps were related to "Operation Herring 1", the last World War II airborne combat drop in Europe: On the night between April 19 and 20, 1945, the Italian paras (plus at least one British paratrooper who had joined them) jumped from fourteen C-47 aircraft of the U.S. 64th Troop Carrier Group and on to their drop zones. The mission would entail eight battle drops on as many areas south of the river Po, southeast of Ferrara, the Mirandola area, and Poggio Rusco and the Modena-Mantua highway. Our next event is now scheduled for 2010. This next edition of the "Column of Liberation" will take place in Tuscany on the Liberation day weekend (April 22-25, 2010), and will include stops in Florence and other historic cities. All information about past and future events is available on the website www.goticatoscana.eu.



Po River at Felonica near Ferrara, the Dukw in action



The "Drag-em-oot"
A historic C-47 aircraft based in the UK



Bondeno near the Po River

An event by / The manifestation de
Gotica Toscana Chiusi
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