

Uniform plates - Askaris from Eritrea, 1935-1936

Introduction

The book *Ascari d'Eritrea 1889-1941* reproduces a series of very interesting uniform plates - *Regio Corpo Truppe Coloniali d'Eritrea* (The Royal Corps of Native Troops from Eritrea), drawn by the Italian Alpine hunter and engineer officer Paulo Caccia Dominioni. When I recently saw these boards for sale on eBay, I couldn't resist the temptation to get them.

The plates were drawn in 1936 and the collection presented here was published in 1966 together with the first 1,000 copies of Paulo Caccia Dominioni's book *Ascari K7*, published by the publisher Longanesi, Milan.

The book appears to have been republished in 1995 and 2007, though without accompanying plates.

Paulo Caccia Dominioni



Paulo Caccia Dominioni.

From Compagnia Genio
Pionieri Tridentina
(Arma del Genio).

Paulo Caccia Dominioni (1896-1992), Baron of Sillavengo, enlisted in the army during the First World War and became a lieutenant in the Engineers in May 1917, and at one point was a platoon leader in a special flamethrower unit. In 1918 he came to Libya, where he was when the war ended.

After the war, he completed his engineering education and in 1924 traveled to Egypt, where he worked for a number of years as an engineer and architect. In 1931 he was recalled for a period, from 1932 with the rank of captain, and attached to the troops in Libya.

In the spring of 1935 he was recalled and served during the 1935-36 campaign against Ethiopia with native units from Eritrea.

Source 2 mentions i.a. three of the captain's duties:

- An intelligence assignment where, due to his knowledge of Arabic, he led a number

- askaris (*Agente K2* 1) who carried out intelligence tasks on the border between Sudan and Eritrea.
- A reconnaissance mission, where he and a number of askari (*Pattuglia Astrale*) advanced ahead of the attacking forces in order to create relations with the civilian population.
- An actual combat task, where he was part of a force of 3,500 men (*Colonna Starace*) was to conquer the city of Gondar (north of Lake Tana). Captain Sillavengo (the noble title) was probably the commander of the engineering element of the column, which in 10 days laid 275 km of road near Lake Tana. See also *Postscript - Colonna Starace*.

During the Second World War, Paulo Caccia Dominioni, now with the rank of major, i.a. service in the Italian Military Intelligence Service (*Servizio Informazioni Militari*) and then as commander of an engineer battalion. See further in Source 2.

The planks

front page The cover (on the cover in which the plates were supplied) indicates which units are illustrated

Planche 1 A private, with a perforated mail sack, possibly from the supply troops (*Deposito*)
 A corporal from a brigade staff 2) (*Commando Brigata*) with his wife and children.
 A cavalryman (*Banda a Cavallo*), possibly from *the Banda a Cavallo del Bassopiano Occidentale*.

Planche 2 NCOs and privates from battalions 6, 1, 16, 11, 3 and 23 as well as 5, 10, 19, 9, 12 and 17.

Planche 3 NCOs and privates from battalions 7, 15, 18, 2, 13, and 24 as well as 4, 22, 19, 20, 8 and 25.

Planche 4 Non-commissioned officers and privates from battalions 14, 26, 27 and 28 and the engineer troops, the cavalry (*Penne di Falco*), the artillery and various irregular infantry units, both uniformed and non-uniformed.

The plans are drawn in a very special style, which is both humorous and realistic, including several patched uniform trousers, something you don't often see on uniform plans.



XXI Battaglione Eritreo della Cyrenaica, approx. 1930.
From a simultaneous postcard.

The plates show 27 of the 28 infantry battalions from Eritrea; for unknown reasons the 21st Battalion is missing.

In addition, the mountain artillery (yellow sashes and black tassels) as well as the sanitary and catering units are not reproduced.

Reference is made to the mention of the book *Ascari d'Eritrea 1889-1941*, for a detailed description of uniforms etc.

From the back of the card it appears that the battalion distinguished itself during battles in Libya in 1925-26, where it i.a. participated in skirmishes at:

- Caserma Turca August 5, 1925
- Uadi Gantar November 6, 1925
- Uadi Aisilan May 25, 1926
- Uadi El Cuf Gereira July 7, 1926.

It is given from here that the battalion from Eritrea was nicknamed *Cyrenaica*, after one of the Libyan provinces Cyrenaica.

The fighting took place as part of Italian attempts to pacify the Senussi 3), which only succeeded in the early 1930s.

Planche 4's rendering of the mountain cannon - manned by field artillerymen (yellow tassels) - shows a Skoda mountain cannon Model 1915. Thus, when the plan shows a mountain cannon manned by field artillerymen, it may be a motorized unit rather than a mule-borne one.

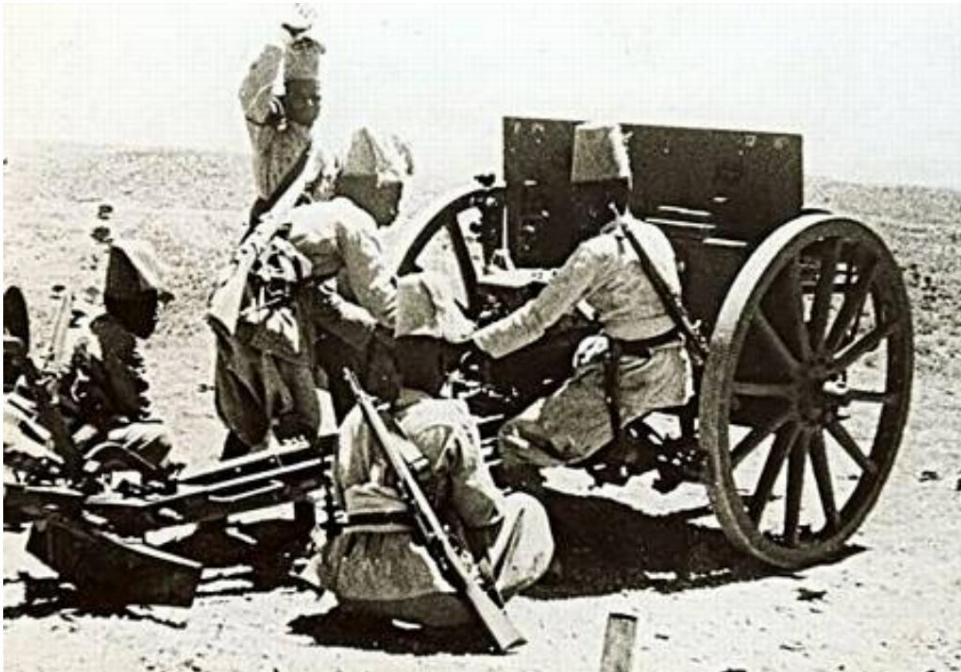
The artillery



*Skoda mountain cannon Model 1915,
photographed at Adi-Ugri in Eritrea, 16 October 1935.
From Campagne d'Ethiopie 1935-36 (Forum Italie 1935-45).*

The photograph shows almost the same exercise arrangement of the crew as the planchette, although the pamphlet is equipped with split tails.

The crew's black tassels identify it as belonging to a mountain artillery detachment. See also Source 3, there reproduces two postcards with *T* respectively *Ivo Gruppo Artiglieria da Montagna Eritreo* as motif.



*77 mm field gun, manned by native artillerymen from Eritrea, approx. 1935.
From Campagne d'Ethiopie 1935-36 (Forum Italie 1935-45).
The pamphlet is probably of the type *Cannone da 77/28 Mod. 5*,
produced by the Skoda factories in 19174).*

The yellow tassels (and the pamphlet) identify the soldiers as belonging to the field artillery.

Banda a Cavallo

Planche 1 shows a drawing of a cavalryman, called *Banda a Cavallo*, but without specifying unit affiliation.

The word *banda* is a unit designation used in connection with local native units of the cavalry and irregular infantry units 5). In the cavalry, *banda* seems to denote a half-squadron-sized unit that can act independently or together with other similar units, gathered in a division/regiment (*gruppo*).



Banda del Seraé.

From a postcard seen for sale on the Internet [6](#)).

Irregular infantry units are also referred to as *banda* (e.g. shown on Planche 4). Here the designation appears to cover units from company size up to battalion size; the infantry units can also appear in divisions/battalions (*gruppi*).

In the mid-1930s, a number of native half-squadrons existed. During the campaign in Ethiopia, it included the following cavalry units in the three corps which operated from Eritrea [7](#)):

- *Banda dello Scimezana* (1st Corps)
- *Gruppo Bande Altopiano*, consisting *Banda di Cheren*, *Banda del Seraé* and *Banda di Hamasien* (2nd Corps)
- *Banda dell'Hassamò* (The Eritrean Corps).

The drawing is assumed to represent one of these units.

Banda a Cavallo dell'Amhara



Banda a Cavallo dell'Amhara, approx. 1937.

Drawn by Paulo Caccia Dominioni.

From Source 7.

The drawing of the native cavalrman also exists in another version - the same basic figure, but with a different coloring of the sash and turban.

This unit later became *the Banda a Cavallo dell'Amhara*.

The unit's language of choice "... e la morte a paro a paro..." can be translated to something like "We are prepared for death.". In Source 6 there is a representation of the unit's mark - a death's head, over two crossed sables.

The unit was established in December 1934, under the name *Banda a Cavallo del Bassopiano Occidentale*, native to the western part of Eritrea. The boss was Major Antonio Ajmone Cat.

After the conquest of Ethiopia in 1936, when Amhara became a province in Italian East Africa in line with e.g. Eritrea and Italian Somaliland (both expanded with parts of Ethiopia), the *Banda a Cavallo del Bassopiano Occidentale* per 5 May 1937 to *Banda a Cavallo dell'Amhara*.

In the reorganization of the colonial troops in 1938, the unit formed the core from 1 January 1939 of the newly created *XIV° Gruppo Squadroni Cavalleria Coloniale Cavalieri dell'Amhara*, which came to consist of: Staff and staff squadron as well as two squadrons. At the end of 1939, another squadron was created. During the Second World War, Colonel Giulio De Sivo was the commander of the unit. The new regiment apparently continues the uniforms of the original unit.



Banda a Cavallo dell'Amhara during the fighting in Ethiopia, autumn 1941.
From Source 7.

The unit distinguished itself especially in the autumn of 1941 during the defense of the area around the city of Gondar, where the regiment perished; the last battle takes place during the defense of the city of Azozo (Azezo) on November 27, 1941. Some survivors subsequently fight as partisans against the Allied units in Ethiopia.

The original strength figure is not known, but the regiment's losses are calculated in Source 5 as follows:

- Officers: 5 killed and 8 wounded
- Italian NCOs: 1 dead and 2 wounded Native NCOs: all
- dead or wounded Native Privates: 168 killed and 282
- wounded.

Sources

If you - like me - do not know Italian, you can orientate yourself in the Italian-language sources via a translation tool such as e.g. Babelfish.

1. Paolo Caccia Dominioni (Wikipedia).
2. Paolo Caccia Dominioni di Sillavengo (Centro Studi Militari).
3. Le cartoline degli Ascari (La biblioteca africana di Gian Carlo Stella).
4. *Taschenbuch der Heere* by Kurt Passow, JF Lehman Verlag, Munich / Berlin, 1939.
5. "... e la morte, a paro a paro ..." (Cavalleria Italiana).
6. XIV° Gruppo Squadroni Cavalleria Coloniale Cavalieri dell'Amhara (Cavalleria Italiana)
7. Penne di Falco (MILES - Forum Italiano dei Collezionisti di Militaria). The information about *Banda a Cavallo dell'Amhara* can be found on page 6.
8. Colonna Starace (Il museo delle divise fasciste).
9. La Milizia Volontaria Sicurezza Nazionale - Territorial Organization (Regio Esercito).
10. CCNN, Italian Black Shirts (Flames of War).
11. *Uniforms of the Italian Army in Africa* by Eiorgio Cantelli, Campaigns No. 27, Volume 5, March/April 1980.
12. *Die Eroberung Abyssiniens 1935-36* by Rudolf Ritter and Eder von Xylander, Verlag von ES Mittler & Sohn, Berlin 1937. (On loan from the Royal Garrison Library in the mid-1970s; may still be in the collections.)



Italian and native units, i.a. Penne di Falco, during the campaign in Ethiopia.

Source unknown [8](#)).

Per Finsted

Postscript - Colonna Starace



Major General (MVSN) Achille Starace.
From Source 8.

The force that Paulo Caccia Dominioni and his engineer soldiers were part of was under the command of Major General (MVSN) Achille Starace [9](#)), who thus named the unit. The force consisted of 160 officers as well as 3,177 non-commissioned officers and privates; the force had over 450 motor vehicles.

Organization

- Staff
- 82nd Militia Battalion "Mussolini"
- 3rd Bersaglieri Regiment (20th, 25th, and 28th Battalion)
- 8. Artillery section, equipped with 77 mm field guns Engineer
- element Sanitation
- element, incl. field hospital Transport
- element Supply and
- catering element

On 30 March 1936, the force was reinforced with IIIa Brigata Eritrea (General Cubeddu), consisting of the 3rd, 11th and 43rd native battalions, three cavalry units (*banda*) and two 65mm mountain gun batteries (each 4 pamphlets), including the 5th Battery .

About Black Shirt Units

Units in MVSN Corresponds to

Zone	Division
Gruppo di Legioni	Brigade
Legion	Regiment
Cohort	Battalion
Centuria	Company
Manipolo	Sharing
Teams	Group

The Italian Fascist Party's militia was officially called Milizia Volontaria per la Sicurezza Nazionale (MVSN), but was better known as "Camice Nere" (CC.NN.), i.e. Black Shirts.

The forces were organized into units that were referred to by designations inspired by the ancient Roman army; a corresponding inspiration can be found in the rank designations of the militia.

Officer ranks in MVSN Corresponds to

First Caporale d'honore (Benito Mussolini)

Caporale d'onore General

Comandante Generale Lieutenant General

Luogotenente Generale Major General

Console General Brigadier General

Console Colonel

Primo Seniors Lieutenant Colonel

Seniors Major

Centurions Captain

Capo Manipolo First Lieutenant

Sotto Capo Manipolo Lieutenant

During the invasion of Ethiopia, 7 militia divisions (1st - 7th) [10](#)) participated, each consisting of 3 regiments (each with 2 battalions, each with 3 companies), as well as 2 militia groups (1st and 6th), each with 4 battalions.

The 82nd Militia Battalion was based in the town of Forlì, a suburb of Bologna. The main unit was *the 82° Legione Camicie Nere "Mussolini"*, which - in line with the other legions - provided a battalion for active war service. The battalion was mobilized at the beginning of May 1935 and departed for East Africa in July 1935.

82. Militia Battalion was part of 6. Militia Group [11](#)), which was under the command of Brigadier General Renzo Montagna (MVSN).

The militia soldiers were primarily from the Italian mainland, but also Italians residing in the colonies were recruited into local militia units, e.g. *1° Gruppo Battaglioni CC.NN. dell'Eritrea*, which was part of the Eritrean Corps during the invasion of Ethiopia.

Uniforms



Capo Manipolo (first lieutenant) from the 114th Militia Regiment "Garibaldina" [12](#)), approx. 1935. From Source 11.

The banner (*labaro*) bore the number and name of the legion (= regiment) on the front; the back is shaped like the Italian flag. On the beam below the eagle of the "flag spear" the MSVN is worn on the front and the legion's number on the back.

The militia wore the same kind of uniforms as the army, however distinctions etc. special.



Capo Squadre (squad leader) from a unit of MVSN, approx. 1935. From Source 11.

The black shirt units were field equipped with both khaki and black shirts; some units preferred one, others the other.. On the khaki colored shirt, black shoulder pads could be worn.

The team leader's white bar on the left side of the shirt is the degree sign. The troop helmet bears the militia's insignia, including the legion/battalion number.



Soldiers from the 82nd Militia Battalion "Mussolini".
From Source 8.

The militiamen's shirts show that khaki colored shoulder pads were also used.

/ Per Finsted

Notes:

1) Whether there is a connection between this K2 abbreviation and the K7 designation that appears in the title of the plates is not known. The Eritrean Army Corps was called *Corpo d'Armata Indigeni* and later *Corpo d'Armata Eritreo*, but whether this was perhaps abbreviated as K7 is only a guess. You probably have to read the book to get the answer...

2) A larger collection of postcards with Italian askaris - see *Le cartoline degli Ascari* (Source 3) - contains e.g. reproductions of maps from brigades (*I, V and XII Brigata Coloniale*) and here you can see the same red and yellow sashes as shown on the askari and his family (Planche 1).

3) See e.g. *Glimpses of the Egyptian Army during the First World War, Part 3 - The Senussi Uprising (1915-1917)*.

4) The cannon is of the same type as the Field Cannon 18.M that was part of the Hungarian army See *Hungarian Field Artillery - Part 1*. The cannon's data can be seen in *Cannone da 77/28 Mod. 5 (Regio Esercito)*.

5) See *Bande coloniali (MILES - Forum Italiano dei Collezionisti di Militaria)*, which brings a perhaps complete overview of these native units.

6) A perhaps slightly clearer rendering can be found in Source 3.

7) See Italian Order-of-Battle Second Italo-Abyssinian War (Wikipedia).

8) The image appears to be from an Italian book about the campaign in Ethiopia, and I believe I got hold of it at a figurine exchange in Chakoten several years ago.

9) Achille Starace published in 1936 the book *La marcia su Gondar della colonna celere AO e le successive operazioni nella Etiopia occidentale* at the publisher Arnoldo Mondadori, Milan. The images in Source 8 may originate from here.

10) See La Milizia nella Campagna d'Africa 1935-1936 - Ordine di Battaglia (Regio Esercito), from which the Italian strength overview for the campaign appears. See also Italian Order of Battle Second Italo Abyssinian War (Wikipedia) as well as Guerra italo-Etiopica (MILES - Forum Italiano dei Collezionisti di Militaria).

11) See La Milizia Volontaria Sicurezza Nazionale - 6° Gruppo Battaglioni CC.NN. d'Eritrea (Regio Esercito), from which the organization of the group appears.

12) *114a Legione "Garibaldina"* was part of *Ila Divisione CC.NN. "28 Ottobre"* (named after the date of —

Mussolini's appointment as Prime Minister). See La Milizia Volontaria Sicurezza Nazionale - Ila Divisione CC.NN. "28 Ottobre" (Regio Esercito), from which the organization of the division appears.