

# Aeronautics: Masses Like Infantry

Monday, June 26, 1933



On the coast of Tuscany, 100 miles northwest of Rome, lies the tiny port of Orbetello.

The protecting shoulder of a great mountain (from which Napoleon's Elba can be seen 40 miles out to sea) guards it from high winds.

Long sand spits make the mountain look *"like a great ship moored by its three ropes of sand"*;

more important, they make smooth as a millpond the blue lagoons lying on either side of the town.

There in winter fat eels are snared for the Christmas tables of Italy.

There in summer wealthy Italian families lounge.

And there is the famed Seaplane School of the Italian Air Force.

Orbetello hotels were filled last week with females young & old, beautiful & unlovely.

They were the women folk of 100 aviators who awaited the signal to start the biggest show ever staged by Italian aviation:

the mass flight of 25 seaplanes across the ocean to Chicago and "A Century of Progress".

For a few fluttery days the women were permitted to roam the air station arm-in-arm with the flyers.

For months the men had been confined in monastic seclusion lest any of them get off mental or emotional balance.

Under the fanatical hawk-eye discipline of their Commander, Col. Aldo Pellegrini, they dined together at a severely vegetarian training table.

The hours of each day were strictly apportioned to flight practice, study, outdoor sport, sleep.

A wife who tried to see her husband at Orbetello was brusquely informed at the gate:

*"All the pilots of the Atlantic squadron are bachelors".*

Indignantly she hurried home, exhumed her marriage certificate, stormed the Air Ministry at Rome.

But she was not permitted to see her husband until the visitors' days last week.

With discipline relaxed the pilots amused themselves like college footballers on the eve of a Big Game.

One restless fellow laid hold of Marco, the squadron's donkey mascot, painted zebra stripes on him.

Others held a mock election for the recipient of an ivory plaque carved with the figure of an eagle clutching the Italian flag in its mouth.

The plaque had been sent by a girl in Rome to *"the pilot who has no sweetheart"*.

The pilots elected Lieut. Cadringeri, and all autographed a picture of one of the squadron's seaplanes to send to the girl.

The horseplay was interrupted when Col. Pellegrini mustered the men of the squadron into line on the quay, facing the 25 big seaplanes bobbing at moorings.

The stage was set.

Upon it stepped the imposing figure of General Italo Balbo, Minister of Aviation, supreme Commander of the Atlantic flight.

To General Balbo, Col. Pellegrini said:

*"I present 100 persons of flesh, and 100 hearts of steel!"*

Replied General Balbo:

*"I greet you all as a commander and a companion.*

*We are ready with tranquil spirit.*

*I am not unmindful of danger? . . .*

*But these are not inferior to our destiny"*.

Right arms extended, commander & crew recited in unison the Fascist oath:

*"We will make ourselves worthy soldiers of the King and worthy soldiers of the Italy created by our leader [nostro Duce]"*.

A priest came forward, prayed over the men, sprinkled holy water toward the seaplanes, and invoked the blessing of the Virgin of Loreto.\*

*"O God, . . . who hast destined all the elements of this world for the use of the human race, bless us, we beseech Thee, this aircraft . . .*

*that those who flying in it put themselves under the care of the Blessed Virgin, may speedily arrive at their destination and may return home unharmed . . . "*

After last farewells, the visitors were herded out, the gates were locked - with General Balbo inside, and the pilots impatiently awaited the order:

*"Decollare!"* (Take-off!).

But ice around Labrador delayed that order.

The Flight to A Century of Progress is known to Italians as "Crociera del Decennale" (Cruise of the Decennial) celebrating the tenth birthday of Fascism.

It was conceived two years ago by General Balbo when he completed his squadron flight of ten seaplanes (out of 14 starters) across the South Atlantic to Brazil.

At first he proposed to take his squadron completely around the world, but abandoned that scheme as too pretentious, if not too risky.

Even the flight to the U. S. and back, a magnificent military gesture costing upward of \$500,000, was not approved by all Italians, who feel acutely the pinch of hard times.

At one time the Italian Government even denied that it was contemplated.

However, for the past year and a half at Orbetello, and more recently along the route to Chicago, flight preparations have been intense.

The route from Orbetello lies northwest to Amsterdam (870 mi.), to Londonderry, Ireland (630 mi.), to Reykjavik, Iceland (930 mi.), southwest to Cartwright, Labrador (1,500 mi.), to Shediak, N. B. (800 mi.), to Montreal (500 mi.), to Chicago (870 mi.).

Following a three-day fete at the World's Fair the squadron will hop east to Port Washington, N. Y. on Long Island Sound.

Unlike the South Atlantic flight, on which General Balbo left his planes with the Brazilian Government in barter for coffee, he will lead this squadron home again through the sky.

The route, undetermined, may lie via the Azores.

Besides the 100 men in the planes, some 300 men on land and water are engaged in helping the squadron to cross and recross the ocean.

Every scheduled stopping point and an emergency station at Greenland will be manned by crews of meteorologists, radiomen, mechanics.

About 15 cruisers and trawlers and even two submarines (good at snaking through drift ice) patrol the course.

Last link in the preparations which held up the take-off last week was establishment of the base at Labrador.

The supply ship Alicia had not yet crashed the late icejam from the Strait of Belle Isle to Cartwright.

## **Flesh & Steel**

The Italians fly in a cavalcade of seven compact triads and one quartet.

Leading them all is Balbo's plane, identified by a large black star on the fuselage.

Each plane, with a crew of two pilots, a radioman & mechanic, is equipped with a pneumatic lifeboat.

Each man has a sort of light diving suit in which he can live for half an hour under water.

Taboo as provisions are liquor and chicken.

To Italian airmen fowl is a jinx.

The 25 ships, cream of 96 tested for the expedition, are Savoia-Marchetti S-55 hydroplanos\*\* similar to those of the South Atlantic flight, great twin-hulled affairs with the pilots' compartment housed in a bridge between the hulls.

Mounted above the bridge are two Isotta-Fraschini engines in tandem, each driving with 800 h.p. a three-bladed propeller.

Cruising speed: 137 m.p.h.

Cruising range: 2,500 mi.

How soon Balbo's squadron might reach the U. S., once it started, even he would not predict.

Given fair weather all the way it could make the seven jumps in a week or ten days.

But peasoup fogs boil up around Labrador, and General Balbo has flatly stated that he will turn back rather than foolishly risk a ship.

Yet, if he decides to go ahead, he has no patience with a crew which fails to keep its plane where it belongs.

His orders:

*"Arrive with the plane or don't arrive".*

## **L'Atlantico**

Technical commander of the flight, organizer and executive is Col. Pellegrini, 44, seasoned naval officer, whose wife is the U. S.-born daughter of Theodore Kaschmann.

Metropolitan Opera baritone of 20 years ago.

But no other man calls himself, or is called, commander from the moment Italo Balbo steps upon the scene.

Glory or blame will fall squarely upon the shoulders of that amazing man whose worshippers call him "L'Atlantico".

Famed in Italy's politics of the past five years are two blackbearded men sometimes called "the twins."

The other with the beard is Dino Grandi, onetime Minister of Foreign Affairs.

There is a story that when il Duce ousted Signor Grandi from the cabinet last year he simultaneously sent Air Minister Balbo a letter informing him that his *"resignation was accepted"*.

Minister Balbo is supposed to have marched straight in upon il Duce, handed back the letter as *"sent by mistake"*.

That tale is told by antiFascists to illustrate their belief that Premier Mussolini fears his Air Minister because of the latter's personal grip on the Air Force.

They go even further, hinting that Mussolini encourages his Minister to lead airplanes across oceans in the hope that he may arrive neither with his ship nor at all.

True or false, the fact remains that Twin Grandi is out - a mere Ambassador to Great Britain - while Twin Balbo, welcome or not, stands closer than any man to Benito Mussolini.

Italo Balbo at 23 came out of the War and the hardy Alpine corps with a bronze medal, two silver medals, a lisp and vaguely revolutionary ideas.

The last he put into a newspaper called "l'Alpino".

Back in his native Ferrara where, as a schoolboy, he had organized and led farmworkers in fights against landowners.

Balbo was among the first to enroll in the rising movement of Fascism.

Enormously ambitious, popping with energy, he made such a good job of clubbing the opposition that he was put in charge of il Duce's own territory. When the Quadrumvirate marched on Rome, one of those quadrumvirs was 26-year-old Italo Balbo, his black shirt sporting the insignia of a Lieutenant-General of Fascist Militia.

But "General" Balbo had done his job of political repression too well.

In Ferrara, a priest had died of a beating.

Balbo had to stand trial. Nothing was proved.

He was acquitted, and il Duce commended him for behaving *"like a Fascist and a gentleman"*.

But there was so much fuss that Mussolini removed Balbo from the militia, let him cool off for a year or so.

As Undersecretary of National Economy, he was a complete misfit.

Finally Mussolini hit upon a plan for diverting into a useful channel his disciple's hot-bloodedness, ambition and ability as an organizer.

He told him to learn to fly, gave him the Undersecretariat of Air.

Disgruntled were famed Italian flyers who thought they rated the job.

But Undersecretary Balbo was no swivel, chair cabinet officer.

He learned to fly ably.

He developed the Navigation School at Orbetello and a High Speed School at Lake Garda where trim Macchi seaplanes lately wrested the world's speed record (423 m.p.h.) from Great Britain.

He developed a system of six airlines on which not a single passenger has been killed in three years.

He built up Italy's military air power from fourth place to a position second only to that of France, capable of prodigious long-range bombing operations.

He proved himself probably the world's greatest organizer in aviation and, incidentally, made himself rich.

Italo Balbo expresses his theory of military aviation thus:



*"Aircraft must be used in masses like infantry in the next war, and solo flying will get us nowhere".*

Hence he concentrates his efforts on mass manoeuvres with himself in the lead.

The first, in 1928, was a western Mediterranean Cruise of 61 scout seaplanes.

Next year 36 bombers roared across the Eastern Mediterranean and Black Sea to Odessa.

Two years later the South Atlantic was hummed over according to plan.

In such a military scheme there can be no individual stars.

Nor are there any in Italo Balbo's personal scheme.

Soon after Balbo took office, famed Col. Mario de Bernardi. Schneider Trophy winner in 1926, turned up in civilian clothes.

Arturo Ferrarin (Rome-Tokyo; Rome-Brazil) landed on the reserve list.

And Col. Francesco de Pinedo awoke halfway around the world one morning to find himself exiled to Buenos Aires as military attaché.

The resentment of famed oldtime flyers at such tactics is illustrated by an incident following Flyer Balbo's triumphant return from South America in 1931.

Having been publicly lionized he presented himself at the door of Gabriele D'Annunzio.

Italy's air hero of the War, who lost his right eye in combat and was called "il Duce" before Mussolini.

D'Annunzio coldly refused to see Balbo.

Afterward his friends asked:

*"Why do you snub him?"*

*"After all he is 'The Eagle.'"*

*Snorted D'Annunzio:*

*"Eagle? . . . Peacock!"*

But if Balbo has the vanity of a peacock, no peacock has the ability or courage of a Balbo.

And if it be true that there are Italians who secretly hope that Balbo will meet disaster, it is also true that Balbo gives them every opportunity to get their wish.

\*When in 1920 Pope Benedict XV looked about for a patron saint for airmen, he had not far to seek.

At Loreto, overlooking the Adriatic, stood a Holy House which, by legend, was the onetime residence of the Virgin Mary in Nazareth.

When in 1263 the Turks threatened it with destruction, a squadron of angels is supposed to have picked up Mary's house and flown it to a place near Fiume, thence to Loreto.

By the Pope's decree the Blessed Virgin Mary of Loreto became "*special patron with God of all things aeronautic*".

\*\*Because aeroplano is not a true Italian word.

Aviator-Poet Gabriele D'Annunzio coined, tried to popularize velivolo.

It failed to take.