



General ITALO BALBO

1896-1940

Italo Balbo who was born in Quartesana, near Ferrara in 1896, played a decisive role in developing Benito Mussolini's Air Force.

Very politically active from a young age, at only fourteen years old he joined in a revolt in Albania under the leadership of Ricciotti Garibaldi, the son of Giuseppe Garibaldi, the father of a United Italy.

As World War I broke out and Italy declared its Neutrality, Italo Balbo supported joining the war on the side of the Allies. Once Italy eventually joined the war, he served with the 8TH Alpine regiment and earned one bronze medals and two silver medals. He reached the rank of Captain due to courage and bravery under fire.

After the war, he studied in Florence and obtained a degree in Social Sciences. He then returned to his hometown of Ferrara and worked as a bank clerk.

In 1921, he joined the Fascist movement under the leadership of Benito Mussolini and became Secretary of the Ferrara Fascist Organization. He grew quickly within the ranks of the Fascist Party, gaining favor with many of its leaders. He was one of the main planners of the March on Rome in October 1922, which would ultimately bring Italy under Fascist rule.

On November 6, 1926, despite the fact that he knew nothing at the time about aviation, he was appointed Under Secretary of State for Air. He quickly learned to fly and set about reorganizing Italy's Air Force, known as La Regia Aeronautica. On August 19, 1928, he became General of Air Force and the following year he was named Minister of the Air Force. In 1933, he became Air Marshal. Also, in 1933, he led a mass formation of 24 Savoia- Marchetti SM, 55 X flying boats on a transatlantic round trip flight from Italy to Chicago, landing on Lake Michigan.

Chicago honored him by naming a street in his honor, Balbo Avenue. He then traveled to New York where a ticker-tape parade was staged in his honor and President Franklin Roosevelt invited him to lunch in Washington.

As the Colonial Governor of Libya from 1933 to 1940, Balbo transformed Libya from a backward colony to a model Italian province. To many, Italo Balbo seemed to embody a noble vision of Fascism and the new Italy.

During World War II, he called for Italy to side with Great Britain, contrary to Mussolini's plans. He remained loyal and lead air patrols over North Africa. On June 28, 1940, he was killed while landing on the Italian airfield of Tobruk, Libya, a few minutes after a British air attack. The government in Rome maintained that the incident was an accident of friendly fire, but Balbo's closest friends and Family strongly believed that it was an assassination attempt on Mussolini's orders. This idea was supported during Mussolini's next visit to Tobruk to review the Italian forces during which he refused to visit Balbo's place of death. A 1997 interview with a gunner who shot him down claimed that Balbo's plane was simply identified as an enemy target, as Balbo was flying low and coming in against the sun. It has never been proven that Balbo was assassinated. The story ended but the debate continues.

Adapted from various Internet sources.

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