

WORDS FROM ITALY

ABOUT INFANTRY WITH FP 3 AND ML 6

In 1990, after perusing my copy of *HOLLOW LEGIONS*, I typewrote a letter to The Avalon Hill Game Company. I never got answer, maybe the postal sail ship got lost at sea...

After twenty years I resort to new technologies to express the same concepts of then: Italian MMCs – and generally all troops with 3 of FP – are too weak to suit in the ASL game system.

You could think that this article has a chauvinistic interest or, worst, ideological: I state that Advanced Squad Leader has no power to amend, avenge or excuse anything. It's just a cardboard game and these words are just about that: gaming, enjoying the game. And the ItASLIans are not funny to play. My aim here is to demonstrate how the organization of values on the Italian counters is damaging the gaming experience.

In case you forgot, take your Italian counters from the ASL counter mix, look the values: Italian Elite infantry is a 4-4-7 (smoke exponent 1) – like a 1st line Russian infantry, seldom smoking... – there are two kinds of 1st line infantry, both with 3 factors of firepower, the 3-4-7 and the 3-4-6. Conscripts, native infantry, rear line units and ELR failed units are all represented by the 3-3-6. On broken side non-Elite Italians' ML is lower by one – 5, usually. The 3-4-7 is intended for the Bersaglieri and Carabinieri units, while the bulk of line infantry in scenarios should be represented by the 3-4-6, so Italian 1st line infantry sports both the weakest factors of their gaming system, only 3 of FP and only 6 of ML – after the publication of *Armies of oblivion* they hold firmly the banner of the weakest infantry in the game. Moreover, these units are accompanied by rare leaders and support weapons prone to breakdown. If you fight with the Italians you find that bringing them forward in face of moderate opposition could be a disappointing experience; in a firefight against enemy infantry with 4 FP the Italian fires on a “1-column left disadvantage,” if you try to form FGs, stacking or grouping ADJACENT, this exacerbates your ML disadvantage or make you feel your lack for good leaders. Your MGs break down, your artillery fails to fall... There is nothing strange in reports of some gamers shunning the scenarios with Italian counters; they are too weak to normally contend against any enemy.

The reason for this *leitmotif* is intended to depend from the strategic weakness and unpreparation of Mussolini's Italy for WWII. None can overestimate how much “imperial” Italy was not ready for a war when it declared in 1940, anyway this is not a reason for making the ten soldier group so weak at tactical level; Eisenhower is commonly quoted that four weapons had won the World War, A-bomb, Dakota, Jeep and bazooka, so: who would exchange his bazookas for unarmed jeeps in a ASL scenario? The strategic level reflects on the tactical level through complex steps and you never got an explanation about the fact that a Greek squad is always absolutely stronger (not with better morale: stronger in firepower) of an Italian squad.

ASL Annual 89 contains an article about the Italian army, titled *8 MILLIONS BAYONETS*. The article encompasses some part of modern Italian history, military analysis as for the early '40 and ASL reading of the Italian counters. Besides some minor imprecision, it describes how things are with the ItASLIans, not why they are this way, nor examines the effects of making a fighting structure in ASL with ineffective infantry as bones.

Turning all around the point of discussion to search for the causes of Italian feebleness at lower tactical level you could blame individual weapons; the rifleman ordnance was from the Mannlicher Carcano model 1891's family of bolt action, 6,5 mm or 7,7 mm rifles and carbines. These weapons have a bullet with low stopping power – even firing squads complained about it's inability to stun the victims when hitting non vital flesh – anyway it is able to kill like other rifles, moreover in our discussion is a fact that the Japanese also used a 6,5 mm bolt action Arisaka – and a 7,7 with a weak ammunition – and they had been granted a 4 FP for 1st Line infantry. So, it's not an individual weapons problem.

The lighter pain is the ML, it can be easily accepted that infantry has a 6 as ML, they may always rally and Italians have the same GO “Morale profile” of the Americans, an effective army delightful to play.

Italian SWs suffer also, by an hasty transformation in ASL counters: at that time there were yet the amount of details you find today on little gems like the Japanese 50* MRT and it seems that not much study was made on these systems. A foible, not the real weak point of Italian OOB.

The main weakness is in the firepower: a 3 of FP, coupled with the low morale, dwarves the normal Italian in front of any enemy on the ASL board. It seems that reflects how the Italian infantryman is not taking part in the fight like a Russian, a Belgian, a Pole does, how the *soldato* keeps the head down ignoring the efforts of the squad NCO – with ridiculous results. With the “1-column left” disadvantage against a 4 FP army you must hope that the scenario’s designer had given you overwhelming numbers to win a firefight. A 3 FP squad is not even able to harm somebody sat in a stone building, in the same hex, at upper level; +3 DRM and the single Italian squad without a leader is unable to obtain a MC.

Italian weakness defies war rules; if there are a few, one is that partisans are unable to resist against formed infantry without a tactical advantage. Not in ASL. Pit ten partisan squads against ten Italian 1st line infantry in any terrain in ASL, with a 7 in ML against a 6 the partisan will win almost everywhere. Maybe they’ll lose in the open desert, where the one hex advantage of Italian infantry in NRange could tell... Ah, yes, the infamous desert partisan.

Farce is hit in CC, with half squads. The Italian is reduced to 1 in FP, so falls victim to all enemies with a 2. A Yugoslav gun crew or four Britons stepped out of a Bren Carrier, attack an Italian infantry HS 2 to 1, and are attacked 1 to 2. Somebody could say that this reflects the morale weakness, but the Ancient Holy Book said that morale has no effect in CC.

In D&D terms, the HS generated by 3 FP squads are the Kobolds of ASL. *Untermenschen*, underdogs, weaklings.

The 3 FP limping affects also the Axis Minors, that at least enjoy a ML 7 for 1st Line squads – nobody is as soft as the Italians – and the absurdity of that grading is touchable in several scenario. The worst is scenario J48 *BLOOD ENEMIES*, by historicity and logic of counter mixes; it depicts internecine fighting between Serb and Croatian soldiers of the Yugoslav army, so the sides had the same rifles, same training and same doctrine, and anyway for the infantry the Serb use 4-5-7 counters, the Croat 3-4-7. This can be explained only with racist reasoning if not with the gaming fact that you have a bad counter mix.

EXERCISES IN IMAGINATION

All summed up, Italians in ASL induce a close combat frenzy in any enemy, players look with contempt to their OOB when setting up and designers have a harder time to make a suitable force for their ideas. There are combat situations that happened in the real war that you cannot reenact in the ASL system because the counters do not suite to reality, with the *Regio esercito*’s battles this happens often.

If you got convinced that the Italian infantry – and in general the line infantry with 3 FP – should be depicted in a different way, we could imagine a “house rule” solution.

I read that somebody proposed Italian counters with higher values for new scenarios, I would prefer to imagine a solution that does not create a dichotomy between “Old Italians” and “New Italians” and would allow to play all scenarios with the same counters, correcting the worst absurdities of the Italian line infantry without altering the balance – mainly in FP – on the map.

Thus, I envisaged some solutions to the 3 FP comedy.

A simple one could be to consider the Italian 3-4-6 and 3-4-7 like having 4 FP (and their HS 2 FP) when firing in Defensive Fire with PBF or TPBF, and in CC.



Another could be to make a full parallelism with the German counters: if the Italian elite squad is a 4-4-7, like the German 2nd line infantry, the Italian 1st line infantry, one step under, should be depicted by the equivalent of the German Conscript squad, the 4-3-6. 4-3-6 for the infantry, 4-3-7 for the bersaglieri, without conscript drawbacks. Both these ideas slightly alter the quantity of firepower casted in the scenarios.



Daring to produce new counters a third option I envisaged was to substitute each pair of 3-4-6s with two pieces, one each of different squads, a 4-4-6 and a 4-2-6, in the effort to maintain the balance of firepower and pursue what was the historical organization of Italian infantry at tactical level, at



least on paper; in doctrine the Italian line infantry was organized in twenty men teams with two LMGs that was intended to split in two groups, a firebase element with nine men and the MGs and a “maneuver” 11-men all rifle element. Bersaglieri squads would be represented with non-Elite 4-4-7s and 4-2-7s.



An ulterior option would be to make a counter to represent the 1 FP missing from action, the soldiers keeping under cover and not taking part in the fight until it becomes absolutely necessary. A 1 FP SMC firing on enemy only when the enemy is very close and when keeping the head down would become suicidal more than taking part in the fight. This 1 FP “soldier” counters should be stacked with all 3 FP Italian S at the moment this fires PBF or when CC combat is declared. It could be a 1-2-6 SMC that does not disappear. Use the Vehicle crew considering it a SMC, like a Hero, (taking note of the real vehicle crews appearing), that disappears if fails a MC, or is Wounded, remains alone in a hex, or is HOBEd in a normal Hero.

A complicated option would be to have the Italians in ASL “disaggregate” in face of close range combat: before firing PBF or in CC an Italian 1st Line S is substituted by a 2-2-7 E HS, an HS of the type usually generated by the S (an 1-2-6 or a 1-2-7) and a 1 FP “soldier” SMC. Under this options Italian non-Elite may not recombine.

Or as last idea, the 3 FP non Elite S is composed not of two HS, but by four "teams." 1-2-6 or 1-2-7 represents not a HS but half of it. When a 3 FP 1st line or lower S suffer a K combat result or fails morale while broken they appear two teams in place of the HS.

A team is worth half of an HS for purposes of VP value, portage capacity, stacking, PP as passenger. Two teams may combine their portage capacity in a combined effort of 3 PP.

A team has the Size, the ability to fire a SW and recombine like a HS; its CCV is 2 and one team may combine with another unit to give a "+1" to CCV like a SMC.

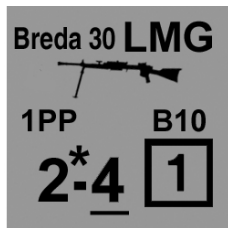
All these are just hypothesis, all to escape 3 FP factor's ridicule.

If you believe that the 6 ML (5 broken) for 1st line saps your superior command ability with infantry, a rule leveraging on the collective and imitative behavior of armed men under command could be that a non-DM broken 6 or lower ML MMC enjoys a -1 DRM to Rally when stacked with a GO leader and GO MMC.

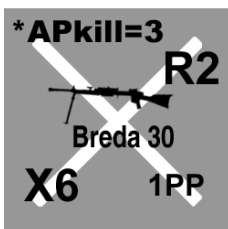
These rules would make the Italians slip from the absurd effects of the 3 FP situation on the exchange for a more complicated way of playing with a short ranged army; enemies may play on NR advantage, it's true, but I think that a game of outmaneuvering and outranging will be more funny for both the players than one of outfiring and overmatching by printed factors.

OTHER TRANSLATIONS FROM ITALIAN TO ASL

I take the chance to further discuss other characteristics of the Italian army in WWII in ASL terms. About SWs I'd modify three weapons.



Breda 30 LMG. It was an advanced and fine weapon – on the design table. Engineers were not aware of the practical problems of weapon deployment, so the problems rising obscured the design advantaged – if any survived the reality of combat. The advantages of a long barrel and the usage of the same cartridge of the infantry rifle were eclipsed by the facts that the Breda 30 was unstable, impossible to fire accurately without a rest, the rapid change barrel lacked an handle and the lubrication system needed continuous cleaning. Moreover its rifle bullet had a low energy and a rounded nose, making the Breda 30 a reduced threat even to the slightest armour.



Reports of combat use I remember were all critical about this design. I'd reduce NR to 4, AP to Kill to "3" and give the same breakdown profile of the PIAT: B10, R2, X6.

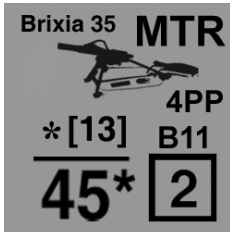


Breda 37 HMG. This sturdy system had a very low rate of fire and was fed with clips, anyway it was a successful design. Besides the detail that it was dubbed by designers as an "assault weapon" its heavy, long barrel, the 8mm bullet, a low rate of fire, a lubrication system easier to maintain than the Breda 30's all allowed this machinegun to service long in action before overheating. It was an accurate weapon, with long range, reliable and the soldiers learned how to feed clip after clip for continuous fire. The commanders deployed the defense around these systems and the soldiers made all efforts to keep the HMGs with them. Range should be raised to 14 and B to 12.



The lightened "assault" version should be a counter FP5, NR12, ROF 2, B11, 4PP, R2, X5 and would be generated simply exchanging a HMG Breda 37 for it in a Rally Phase.





Brixia Light Mrt. This weapon also was an “assault weapon” and reported to be effective in Yugoslavia against partisan’s caves – both things do not realize in ASL, where light mortars are a quite ineffective against caves and a second choice in assaults.

This is because the Brixia 45mm was a grenade launcher, a kind of weapon quite misunderstood in ASL.

These systems were specific because trigger fired and elevable at angles lower than 45°: at long range launched their ammunition in an high trajectory to bombard like a mortar, at short ranges they were able to lob the grenade on a flat curve into enemy’s positions to hit soldiers defiled just behind a protection. All “grenade launchers” should be allowed to execute Direct fire against Infantry Target Type at ranges from 1 to 4 hexes like a upperscored GUN, with ROF 1. According to statistics they were grenade launchers also the following Lt Mrt: US 60mm M19, British O.M.L. 2-in and Japanese type 89 heavy



grenade launcher.

The Brixia was able to reach the same range both with flat and with curve trajectory, it was supplied with HE and SMOKE bombs, but in the ASL the capability to lay smokescreens had been ignored. It might be allowed by SSR.

SIBERIA CONSCIOSNESS AND UNPREPARATION

It’s known how the Italians were sent in out-of-area operation with the same shoe from Libya to Russia. If this was a nuisance in the desert, it was lethal in Russian winter for the common infantryman. Alpini had a mountain boot and some units received *valenki* felt boots; the rest of the soldiers on foot risked to lose it and life in very frigid weather.

So: Conscript Italian MMC suffer extreme winter penalty on a Original DR double 5 also.

On the other side the Italians sent to fight in Russia had received indoctrination about the dangers of being taken prisoners by the Russians and sent to Siberia. Those informations didn’t anticipated reality bad enough, of the men sent to prison camps they survived in a proportion that ranged from 25 to 10 per cent only, depending from sources; the Italians tried to avoid capture by Russians and in several instances fled captivity when close to the front. In Russia HOB modifier for non-conscript Italian MMC is +2 and surrender on HOB Final DR 10 or 11 is NA.

ITALIAN SPECIAL TROOPS

Ascari: Italian colonial troops were formed in Africa since the start of colonization that was made from Rome more by money and local leadership than by colonist. Trusted commanders created a personal connection with their soldiers that fought bravely for their leader, often led against ethnic enemies. Until the war under fascist banners appeared as a fair bet, in Libya and Eritrea they sided for their masters; ascari were good for light fighting and guerrilla, easily demoralized by artillery shelling. Their fervor plunged with the first invasion of Cyrenaica and the conquest of the A.O.I.; the most of personnel was dismissed or deserted and only a veterans remained under service showing a loyalty that defied defeat.

From 1950 the Italian government is paying retirement fees to the surviving ascari, in 2006 there were still 260 of them in Eritrea.

Askari are allowed by SSR and are used for indigenous infantry commanded by Italian leaders in Libya and in Ethiopia. Use Axis Minor counters.

Askari vehicular crews are represented by 2-2-7 infantry crews. Askari are Stealthy. Askari suffer a malus of +1 DRM when checking Morale in a hex under effect of a FFE counter.

Camicie nere: Black shirts were organized in combat units taken from the ranks of the MVSN (Milizia Volontaria per la Sicurezza dello Stato, volunteer militia for the State's security), an armed militia own and originating from the Partito Nazionale Fascista of Mussolini. After their first good results against rebels in Libya in the late '20s they were more and more integrated in the Regio Esercito. They took part in the war against Ethiopia, Spanish Civil War, in all campaigns in the Second World War. After the Armistice the Black shirts in the South, after disbandment of the MVSN, were absorbed in the Italian army under Allied-backed Badoglio government of the Regno d'Italia while the units in the North formed the backbone of the army of R.S.I., the republic lead by Mussolini in the territory under Axis control. These last units got different levels of support from the Germans – some unit being re-trained in Germany and armed to some extent with German weapons.

Black shirts were composed by nationalist volunteers, political fanatics, as much as patriots, people hoping in civil career advancements thanks to military service under Fascist party and people that hoped in avoiding the worst of the war by staying out of the regular army: until armistice, their results were amply different. The most of unit being under armed and badly commanded, and lightly equipped, this units where considered of little utility by the Regio esercito. Some Legion got forged by combat, the most failed the trial of combat, often when trampled by combined warfare or left stranded in lost battles; somehow usable in counterinsurgency the units easily broke discipline and behaved like an armed mob, looting and mistreating the civil population of invaded countries, being perpetrators of atrocities more frequently that the regular army. For that and for their political alignment Black shirts were an hated target of partisan activity and when employed in counterinsurgency showed no mercy with partisan or "suspects".

In the last part of the war, after absorbing former prisoners of the Germans, teenagers and die-hard veterans of Mussolini's wars they were involved in the fits of civil war in Northern Italy and in ethnic cleansing in Yugoslavia. Some of Black Shirts units fought with fanatic determination and got a grim reputation with the partisans and even facing regular Allied armies.

"Black shirts" will not surrender to Partisan via the RtPh method (20.21). Partisan may Massacre "Black Shirts" and vice versa. In 1944 or later "Black shirts" may be granted by SSR Assault fire and Panzerfaust usage, as much as no captured use penalty if using German or British SWs, and treat Germans as Allied nationality. For most combactive units consider using directly German SS.

Arditi: these units root their origins in First World War, when Italian infantry regiments had a component of *arditi esploratori* (roughly translated as "bold scouts") intended by Italian doctrine for aggressive reconnaissance. With trench warfare the most of these men were squandered in actions in no man's land. The survivors formed "death companies" that received volunteers as replacements and were officially formed in 1916. From them, small groups of hand picked soldiers were formed in groups to raid the Austro-Hungarian trenches and undertake infiltration and *coup de main* missions; Arditi relied on pistols, daggers and hand grenades for combat and excelled in night or fog-masked stealthy attacks. A kind of commandos, they obtained spectacular results as much as utter failures with total loss of the unit. At first the Italian High Command encouraged the idea of single soldiers specializing as arditi commandos, but banned the institution of special units: only in 1917 the Italian Army formed official "Arditi" battalions at Army level to be used for special missions, with inherent flamethrowers platoons and sections sporting the world first combat proved submachineguns, the Villar Perosa 9mm MGs.

After the Great War Arditi veterans got involved in political turmoil. Arditism was one of the ingredients of the early "Fascismo" recipe, while communist and socialist soldiers formed "arditi del popolo" units to defend lower classes suburbs from violence of Italian *freikorps*.

After WWII that involvement made Special Forces suspicious to the Republican institutions until the '90s.

The experience of Arditism influenced the Regio Esercito in WWII because most of the officers had fought during the First World War and Arditi detachments were commonly formed in operative

units; Arditi platoons' presence is recorded in Russia, Libya, Greece. On one side the battalion commander had platoons to be trusted for the more dangerous missions, on the other pooling the best soldiers together sapped the strength of the other squads, spoiling the chance for experienced soldiers to teach the recruits at informal level.

Arditi usage is an option to the Italian player and is possible if in the Scenario is used rule A.16 (Battlefield integrity), the date is before April '43, and there are at least 10 Italian Squad equivalents in play.

The Italian player gets a number of "Arditi rolls" equal to one fourth (FRU) of the overall total of Italian Squad equivalents in play. He may spend a roll for "Arditi" on a MMC in a RPh and an individual Squad or HS can be "Arditi rolled" only once a turn and the results secretly recorded and displayed a game end or when the ability is used.

The "Arditi roll" is successful on a dr lower than the ELR of unit rolled for. There is no damage for a failed "Arditi roll".

A successful "Arditi roll" Battle Hardens the rolling unit.

A successful "Arditi roll" lower by two than the ELR of unit rolled for bestows also -1 CC/CCV DRM bonus.

A successful "Arditi roll" lower by three than the ELR of unit rolled for bestows also Stealthy bonus.

All bonuses are cumulative. Arditi Alpini are Commandos.

An eliminated Arditi unit BPV value is counted three times for ELR calculations.

M. "Oxpinguin" Lombardi