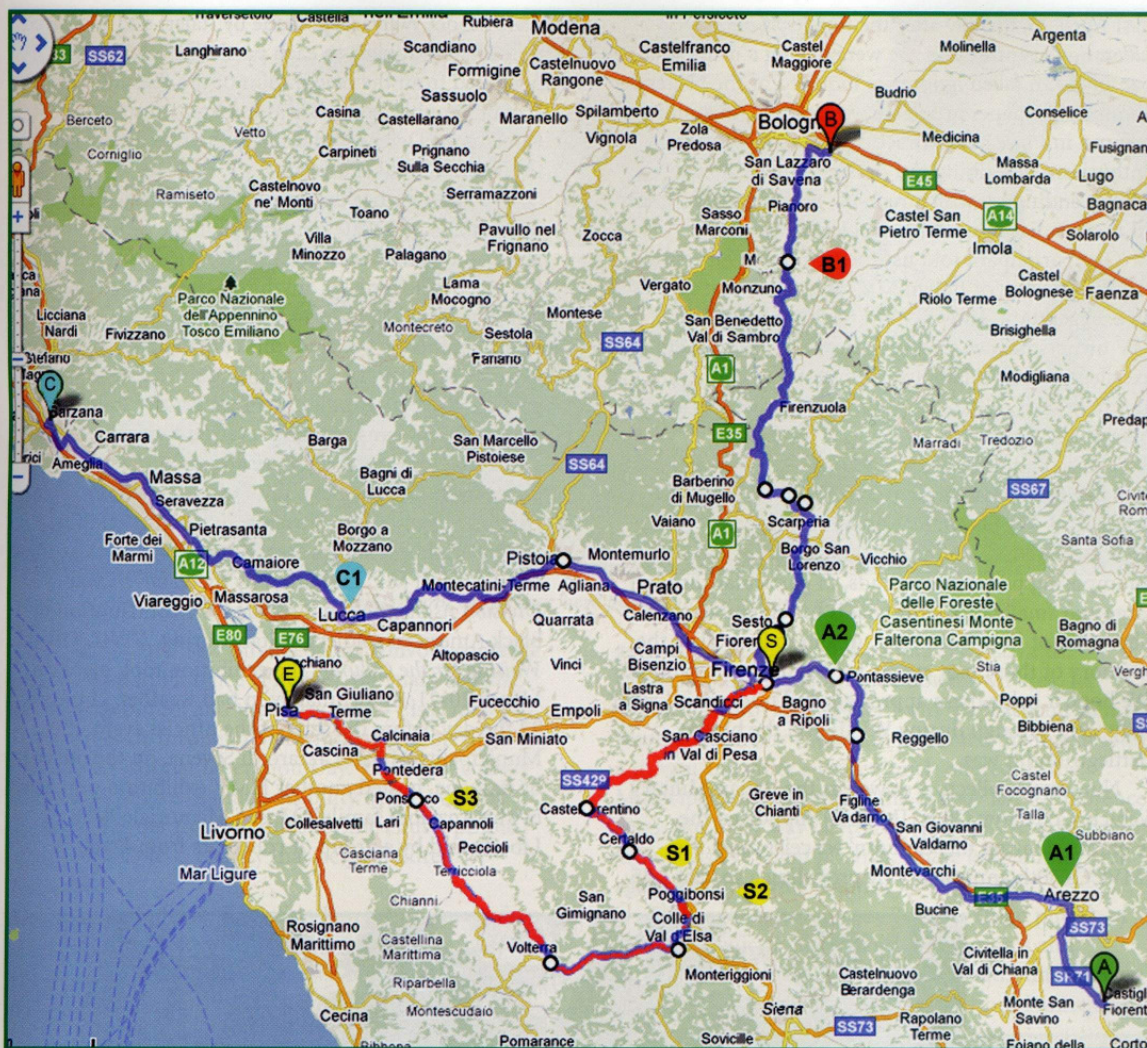


The Column of Liberation An HMMV and Reenacting Event in Italy - 2010 -

By Filippo Spadi, #24493
Scarperia, Florence, Italy



A few of the 'Column of Liberation 2010' vehicles parked on the El Alamein square inside the Italian Parachute Army Base at Pisa. Sand brought back from the Egyptian battlefield is kept inside the small chapel on the base. (E)



The lettered reference points A, B and C indicate the start point for each of the three 'Column of Liberation 2010' convoys. The map pins with numbers (A1, A2, B1, C1, S1, S2 & S3) indicate reference points in the text or photo captions. The map reference S indicates the start point for the combined convoy. Map reference E indicates the end point of the Column 2010.



Last April 26, the day after the final *Column of Liberation* event in Pisa, we were having a drink in a bar and with faked ignorance inquired of the bartender about a newspaper article he was reading on a military column in Piazza dei Miracoli. He answered with enthusiasm describing our presence there the day before, ending up with a remark "you should have seen all those ladies in uniform, a splendid show!"

One participant told us "the *Column of Liberation* is the Paris-Dakar of Italian MV rallies" but that's quite an exaggeration. However, the 'Column' – as Italian MV owners now commonly refer to it – does require excellent vehicle reliability, willingness to cooperate and help each other, and physical endurance by our members.

The 'Column,' open only to pre-1945 military vehicles and reenactors, covered about 485 km (300 miles) and was especially difficult for heavier vehicles such as 2-1/2 ton and heavier trucks etc. It presented an imposing presence on roads, in particular through large and small cities. Our goal is to remember the liberation of Italy from Fascism and to keep alive the memory of those past events for younger generations. We hope it helps them appreciate and understand what Italy went through during WWII and the bloody battleground it was.

Numerous collectors as well as the Italian Military Vehicle Collectors Club (IMVCC) supported the 'Column'. During the 'Column' we celebrated the IMVCCs 30th anniversary by providing a special 1:35

scale model Willys jeep, made by Italeri and produced in limited numbers, to each participant. We also benefited from the recognition of the President of the Italian Republic, as well as the partnership by the Ministry of Defense, who made their facilities available to us throughout the event.

We guessed that the number of vehicles and participants for 2010 would reach large proportions; about 400 people and 145 vehicles participated. That's the acceptable limit, as anything larger would cause our logistics to break down. Even simple operations such as refueling becomes difficult and requires extreme care, let alone controlling the miles-long column over the winding roads of central Italy. The logistical problems must be resolved for future events.

Among our numbers were about 20 vehicles and crews from Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Great Britain, Luxembourg, Slovenia and Switzerland.

The 'Column' was preceded by a few events, such as the historical MV exhibition by the 92nd 'Buffalo' Division Association that recalled the contribution by black American soldiers in Italy during WWII. Titled *Waiting for the Column*, the exhibition took place on March 20-21, unfortunately in bad weather. On April 22 the day before the start of the official event, the Municipality of San Lazzaro di Savena, on the outskirts of Bologna, hosted another HMV exhibition organized by the Anzalani family's Museo Memoriale della Libertà and by a group of collectors from Friuli.

An HMV exhibition on the square at San Lazzaro di Savena's. Some military vehicles came from the 'Museo Memoriale della Libertà'. (B)





Military vehicles from the south column are shown here parked in Castiglion Fiorentino's town square. (A)

'Column 2010' saw three separate convoys converge and form up in Florence (Firenze), the main starting point (map pin S), and then proceed to Pisa (map pin E) for a parade through its downtown area on April 25, the Italian National Liberation Day. The three-convoy design was to give as much visibility to the event as possible in order to raise funds for the Giuseppe and Margherita Coletta charity that helps children worldwide.

The column from Castiglion Fiorentino (map pin A) was the smallest, with eighteen vehicles mainly from the *Highway Six Club*. The staff of the Municipality of Castiglion Fiorentino, who previously supported us,

gave us the beautiful and panoramic Piazza del Municipio in the picturesque downtown area. Its arches also provided shelter from the incessant rain. Andrea Gatti, our President, presented the mayor with a plaque and, after a buffet lunch offered by the Municipal administration, the convoy left for Florence (map pin S) by way of Arezzo (map pin A1), stopping at Pontassieve (map pin A2), where local authorities again welcomed the column.

The larger column from Bologna (map pin B), of about 50 vehicles contained several groups and individual collectors, some from abroad. Among these were the *Tracce di Storia Association* from Parma and

Andrea Gatti and Roberto Cincetti with an Italian official in Pontassieve on the road to Florence. (A2)



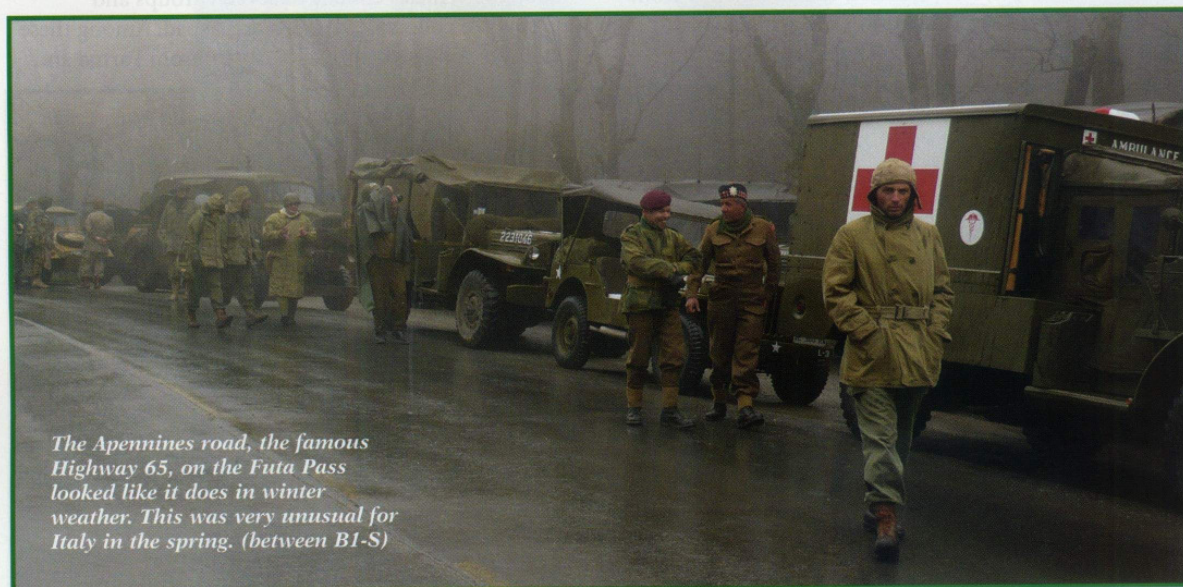


The northern column stopped in Livergnano for lunch. In this town there is the little museum featuring the German 'Winter Line' in the northern Apennines Po Valley Park. (B1)

the group from Friuli, Slovenia, the *Museo della Seconda Guerra Mondiale del Fiume Po* at Sermide and many others. We departed Bologna on schedule just as it started to rain. The group reached its midday destination at Livergnano (map pin B1) where the *Winter Line Association* and the *Friends of Livergnano* group had organized lunch. A short ceremony recalled the heavy fighting, which took place at Livergnano – Liver 'n Onions to the average GI – in October 1944. Then we left for the long trip to Florence (map pin S) via Highway 65 and the Raticosa and Futa Passes. The higher Apennines range was shrouded in heavy fog and torrential rains, with temperatures around 4°C (40°F);

appropriate weather typical of the bitter fighting in the winter of 1944-45.

The column from Sarzana (map pin C) had the most difficult route, passing through many towns along the way, particularly between Lucca (map pin C1) and Florence. The bad weather aggravated the normal heavy traffic making it impossible to keep all the forty-odd vehicles in an orderly column. We knew this would be a challenge but many members chose to start from Sarzana as this was relatively close to the final destination at Pisa (map pin E) and would ease the vehicle loading operations at the end of the event. With the large group from the 92nd 'Buffalo' Division



The Apennines road, the famous Highway 65, on the Futa Pass looked like it does in winter weather. This was very unusual for Italy in the spring. (between B1-S)



Repubblica's square in Florence (Firenze) during the night. (S)

association were people from the Swiss *White Star 44 Association*, from *Linea Gotica della Lucchesia* and other locales. Despite the problems most vehicles reached Florence in a relatively tight group, but it was necessary to return to guide a few that had to stop due to various reasons.

Late on April 23, Perotti Barracks at the southeastern outskirts of Florence, our rendezvous point for the three columns, gave the local citizens an entertaining and unusual show of our HMVs. Tired but happy vehicle crews unloaded and met friends who arrived in other columns and exchanged stories about their experience so far. Drenched in rain nobody seemed to care about the weather any more. We gathered, chatted, and waited for the military authorities to identify vehicles and individuals for entry passes to the base.

Soon the large military dining hall rapidly filled with a large noisy crowd. Then everybody returned to their vehicles for the short trip to Piazza della Repubblica, the city's historical downtown area assembly point where a band was playing music from the 'forties. Unfortunately we had to enter the busy downtown area without police escort due to an administrative foul up by the Municipality of Florence. Escort or not, the trip along the medieval Ponte Vecchio, the Palazzo Pitti, the Santa Trinita bridge and the Duomo was a highlight of our day. Fortunately the rain stopped exactly when we reached Piazza della

Repubblica and parked in the square – a sight not seen since 1945 when Florence was the seat of several Allied HQ's in Italy.

Early on Saturday morning shuttle buses carried those to the barracks who had slept in hotels. The sky was cloudy but the weather forecasts were encouraging, promising the first day of good weather after months of rain. We assembled on the Perotti barracks square for the flag rising ceremony, and everybody joined in signing our national anthem. Then the CO, Col. Pasqualoni, greeted us warmly and presented us with the regimental crest. We reciprocated with a plaque; a simple but important ceremony.

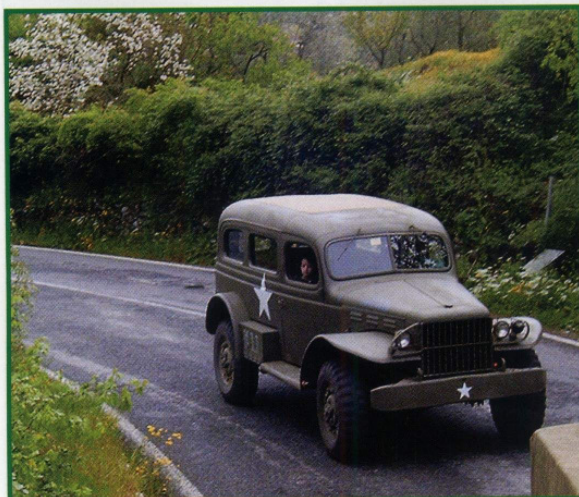
That day we had to cover about 160 km (100 miles) from Florence to Pisa (map pin E) traversing the hilly heart of Tuscany, a beautiful but difficult route. More MVs joined us outside the barracks as the long column departed. Our first stop was at Piazzale Michelangelo, where we checked that nobody had been held up or delayed. At Galluzzo we refueled; the sight of our 145 MVs brought large smiles to the faces of gas station owners! At 0945 we left for our long trip to Pisa. The snake-like column, a mile long, looked outstanding on the old Volterrana road, passing through the villages of Chiesanuova, Cerbaia, and Montespertoli. The landscape was beautiful. It was the first time this type of event traversed those areas and many people were surprised, clapping their hands or just enjoying the show.



A 1942 Ford sedan staff car following part of the HMV column in Tuscany country. (between S-S1)



Left. Vernieri's Ford GPW towing a 1/4-ton Bantam trailer followed by a Chevy 1-1/2 ton on the steep road just out of Florence. (S)



Corso Boccia and Genovesi inspected a British 'red beret' Willys jeep during a fuel stop in Florence. (S)

Cappa Bava's Dodge WC53 Carryall on the hills around Florence. (S)

At the large town of Certaldo (map pin S1) the main street was crowded with cheering and applauding spectators. They wondered why we were there and the history we were remembering. Perhaps some of those people will read a book or listen to their elders sharing memories of those events, far away in time, but not in meaning.

Leaving Certaldo we drove towards Poggibonsi (map pin S2) when suddenly a jeep at the tail end was involved in a bad accident caused by a civilian driver who ignored a stop sign at an intersection; she compounded her mistake by mishandling her car. It was a violent crash and only the fact the jeep was towing a 1/4-ton trailer prevented it from overturning, avoiding an even more serious result. Even so, the conditions of those injured were reported as quite serious and they were quickly taken to hospital by ambulances.

While the accident was no fault of our HMMV column or its driver, it reminded us of the inherent danger of driving old HMMVs in an area of heavy, fast traffic; we learned again the lesson that safety is paramount even with the most careful of drivers.

Colle Val d'Elsa hosted our column for lunch, then we headed for the second half of the day to Pisa via the Volterrana route. The succession of small hills allowed those at the head of the column to see the long winding



This GPW was involved in an accident caused by a civilian car. Although not a fault of the jeep's driver nevertheless there was a lot of concern and sadness. However in the end the injuries were minor. (S1)



34th Division marked 2-1/2 ton GMC with full equipment typical of a WWII 6x6 truck. (S2)



92nd Buffalo Association Dodge WC62 explosives marked truck en route to Colle V. Elsa. (S2)



Perucchio's Willys MB full of GIs and luggage. (S2)



Schiavetti's US Navy jeep on a beautiful country road near Volterra. The Column of Liberation at this point was 6 km (4 miles) long. (S2-S3)

Another section of Column photographed on the road to Pisa. Finally a little sun and no rain, which was appreciated after the bad weather we had experienced. (S2-S3)





Two Fiat 508 cars in Ponsacco; a really warm welcome waited us in the little town. (S3)

A couple of Italian reenactors with a Harley-Davidson WLA in Ponsacco. (S3)

Carbonieri drives a well-restored Dodge WC52 on the Volterrana road with a reenactor depicting a US Army Signal Corps PRESS photographer. (S2-S3)



column of HMVs behind, now more than six miles long. WWII military motorbikes guided the convoy along the route. At 1600 we reached Ponsacco (map pin S3) to one of the warmest receptions we have ever witnessed in several years of HMV convoying.

Our initial contact with the local municipal administration resulted in their sincere enthusiasm, not only because of the event in itself, but also because of a shared view of its purpose and educational potential. In Ponsacco's picturesque square the mayor gave a meaningful speech recalling the unity of our country



*Marelli's
2-1/2 ton
GMC
CCKW-352
on the road
to Pisa.
(S2-S3)*



*This British marked Willys MB,
painted in desert sand color,
belongs to Dura from Salerno
on the Volterrana. (S2-S3)*

and its rebirth after the liberation from Fascism in 1945.

We were sorry to leave Ponsacco when we started the final leg of our trip to Pisa (map pin E) and the Gamerra barracks, home of the Italian Armed Forces Parachute School. Tired but satisfied we entered the barracks and parked on the square named in honor of the Folgore Parachute Division's heroic stand at El Alamein in 1942. In their chow line we mixed in with the military personnel and a few members recalled



*Andrea Gatti, Gotica Toscana
President with Ponsacco's mayor
during an exchange of gifts. (S3)*

Linea Gotica della Lucchesia and passengers depicting US Women's Army Corps personnel in a 34th US Infantry Division Willys jeep. They were photographed inside the army base at Pisa. The Column had many beautiful women participate in period uniform (E)

their time in the service. Some had served in the Folgore Brigade and recalled wearing the red beret and the blue shoulder patch of the Italian parachute troops.

Sunday morning April 25, was a beautiful day. In the barracks Vice Commander Col. Chiarenza, a long-time friend and an HMV collector, presided over the flag raising ceremony with our crews standing smartly beside their neatly parked vehicles.

We were joined for a special ceremony by WWII Folgore veteran Santo Pelliccia, who survived the bloody battles at El Alamein, also by the Italian National Parachutists Association Vice President Aldo Falciglia, and by their historical unit, all in Italian WWII parachutists uniform, and by Luca Migliavacca. Luca directed the Italian part of the historic drops at Sermide two years before in celebration of 'Operation Herring.' The ceremony was simple but meaningful, with a flag raising to mark the donation to the Folgore



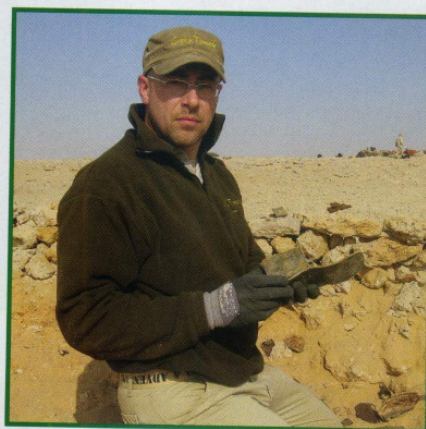
historical museum of a few battlefield relics excavated from the Italian positions at Munassib, in the El Alamein desert. The artifacts included a leather Model 1891 rifle ammo pouch and two Model 1934 pistol holsters, together with an ampoule containing some sand from the battlefield. The items were recovered during an expedition that took place in Egypt as part of the 'El Alamein Project,' supervised by the University of Padua and the SIGGMI Italian geo-historical association.

Col. Chiarenza gave a short speech explaining the circumstances of the findings and reminded us how the very same uniforms in which men fought against each other sixty-five plus years ago can become a sign of fraternity and union among former foes.

Santo Pelliccia (left), an El Alamein Italian veteran, with Col. Chiarenza.

They are holding some relics of war and sand from the North African desert found there during our last trip and now donated to the Parachute Museum. Santo is wearing a WWII model 1941

parachute uniform. His hat is the regular Italian service cap made during the battle to protect the neck from the sun. (E)



Filippo Spadi #24493 restoring an Italian machine gun position on the El-Alamein battlefield. Filippo found the Italian ammo pouch now shown in the museum. (E)

Then we started on the final trip to downtown Pisa and the parade that marked the end of our three-day event. Our column was even longer as many more vehicles had joined. When the first vehicles reached Pisa's city walls, the tail end vehicles hadn't left the Gamera barracks!

Our vehicle park was beside Piazza dei Miracoli and Pisa's famous Leaning Tower. Impeccable dressed ladies in period uniforms stole the show with their style and grace. Then we left Pisa's downtown area and its riverside boulevards filling them with our column. We proceeded downriver on the left bank with the rest of the column still going upstream on our right on the opposite side of the river; an impressive sight and one that filled everyone with pride, the more so because not a single vehicle breakdown occurred.

We returned to Gamera barracks for our final lunch and farewells; then individuals or groups of people and vehicles began their trip back home.

So ended the *Column of Liberation 2010*, which, we hope, constituted a new occasion for entertainment, friendly sharing of common interests and passions, as well as paying tribute to people and events we wish to honor and remember.



Tracce di Storia's, 7th Armoured Division Canadian Ford F60, towing a British 6 pdr. anti-tank gun with crew authentically dressed in British Guards uniform, in Pisa. (E)



Five of the many sharply dressed women who participated in the Column were photographed wearing US Army WAC uniforms near the leaning Tower of Pisa. (E)



Arcivescovado square, close to the famous leaning tower of Pisa, with a few of the Column's HMTs. (E)



Arcivescovado square in Pisa. We parked our vehicles beside Piazza dei Miracoli close to the famous leaning tower of Pisa.

AM