

## INTRODUCTION TO THE HISTORY



When the Austrian-Hungarian war was declared on May 24, 1915, the Italian armed forces had assigned the Dolomite sector to the IV brigade in order to reach Dobbiaco and Brunico in an attempt to isolate Trentino.

For a series of unfortunate circumstances - lack of organization, poor coordination in the chain of command, supply delays - Italy missed the

moment of opportunity when the enemy was unprepared, giving them time to reinforce their defences.

The first phase of the conflict saw attacks by Italian troops in the sectors of Costabella, Marmolada, Col di Lana, Val Parola - Lagazuoi – Tofane, as well as in the area of Monte Piana and the three peaks called Tre Cime di Lavaredo; it should be noted that, in contrast with other points that were considered strategic, in which attacks were carried out by smaller formations, on the Col di Lana the adopted strategy consisted of continuous waves of frontal attacks which sent thousands of men to their deaths with limited results.

In the winter of 1915-16 conditions became even more dire because, in the conviction that the conflict would have lasted just a few weeks, the soldiers had not been properly equipped to confront the weather conditions in a war fought at extreme altitudes in a place where it was difficult to deliver essential supplies and provide adequate food and shelter, resulting in thousands of men freezing to death. In an attempt to address these shortages cableways were built, which allowed for further enforcements and more appropriate barracks and shelters throughout the entire sector.

The fundamental aspect of this conflict is that for the first time in the history of mankind opposing armies were led to confront one another at very high altitudes, in a strange and hostile environment where the risk of a fire fight was compounded by constant dangers imposed by a difficult, complex natural environment. Thus the two sides were in a stand off and the static conflict ended up as a "war for position". The need for solutions that could change the situation led to the building of outposts, tunnels, trails or walkways blasted out of the rock which today are not only testimonials of a terrible life under inhuman working conditions, but authentic works of art worthy of interest and admiration.

Some operations brought good results, like the capturing of the peak at Costabella and the Punta Serauta and the V-shaped Forcella on the Marmolada; this last sector on the Marmolada presented a new challenge: the Austrians' built a network of underground passages, tunnels, barracks, cells, rooms and warehouses carved deep in the ice to constitute a veritable "city of ice" (no longer existent today) which kept their soldiers hidden and helped keep them sheltered from the mountain asperities and in decidedly better conditions, protected from the rigid external temperatures and snowstorms.

Another consequence of this war for position was the need to transform the battles into a "war of mines" by digging underground tunnels, filling them with explosives and blowing them up in order to destroy the outposts built above them. This method was used repeatedly on the Marmolada and had its most deciding impact on April 17, 1916, when 5500 kg of dynamite was used to blow up the peak called Cima del Col di Lana, which was immediately captured.

The next winter in 1916-17 brought new hardship and tragedies: heavy snowfall caused enormous avalanches that covered outposts and barracks resulting in serious human casualties on both sides all along the Dolomite front; one example is the huge avalanche that fell off of Punta Penia, on the Marmolada, burying an entire Austrian division and killing 300 soldiers.

The "war for position" and the need to continue to find new strategic positions that would decide the conflict forced the soldiers to scale walls that had never been climbed before in order to reach new peaks, turning military operations in to veritable Alpine enterprises like the action on October 3, 1917, when a small squadron of 8 Alpine soldiers from the Agordino made it all the way up to the altitude of 3153 metres on the Marmolada, succeeding in one of the major Alpine-military enterprises in history.

The great Austrian-Hungarian offensive on October 24, 1917, broke up the front at Caporetto and forced the IV regiment to abandon our mountains when they were recalled to regroup on the plains with the rest of the troops withdrawing from Friuli so they could rebuild a new, effective defensive line from which to operate and go on to a great, new, victorious offensive.

