

**L'AEROFOTOTECA  
NAZIONALE RACCONTA...  
[Italy's National Archive of  
Aerial Photography]**

by Elizabeth J. Shepherd

Italian archives of aerial photographs have rich and varied holdings, which are a valuable source for the study of the landscape and of cultural heritage, especially in the vast parts of the country that have been affected by significant transformation in the second half of the 20th century.

These archives are mostly military (Istituto Geografico Militare [www.igmi.org](http://www.igmi.org) and the Air Force historical archives <http://www.aeronautica.difesa.it/storia/ufficiostorico/>) with a single exception: the Aerofototeca Nazionale (AFN) <http://www.iccd.beniculturali.it/index.php?it/98/aerofototeca-nazionale>, the Italian national archive of aerial photography, today part of the Ministero dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali e del Turismo (Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Tourism <http://www.beniculturali.it>). AFN holds 20th century photographs over the whole of Italy. It was established in 1958 as a branch of the Gabinetto Fotografico Nazionale (National Photographic Lab & Archive) and, since 1975, has been part of the Istituto Centrale per il Catalogo e la Documentazione (ICCD- Central Institute for Catalogue and Documentation), based in Rome. AFN houses many collections produced by public and private organizations. Some of these have been purchased or donated, while others are on loan to AFN from military or civil institutions which re-



Fig. 1 – © AFN archives. August 10, 1943. Sicily, Siracusa. German Luftwaffe photo over the Great Harbour, taken one month after the Allied landing, with analysis of the enemy's naval forces.

tain ownership. Aerial photographs were produced by military bodies (Italian Air Force, Istituto Geografico Militare, Allied Forces during World War II), public organizations (research institutes, regional authorities) and private companies, most of which are no longer in existence. A few companies which are still operating have deposited their historical collections with the AFN, together with copies of recent flights, of which they hold the copyright. AFN also holds unique imagery from World War II, that are not duplicated elsewhere, despite the large numbers of photographs of Italy in UK and USA archives. These include 'post-strike' photographs taken to help assess the success of bombing raids. They highlight the potential importance of this imagery in helping to write history, recording as they do events, alongside ongoing processes and landscapes now changed in many ways.

AFN also houses a large number of maps drawn from aerial photographs, most of them accessed through the purchase of the EIRA collection (= Ente Italiano Riprese Aeree) <http://www.iccd.beniculturali.it/index.php?it/553/fondi-cartografici> and also <https://www.flickr.com/people/aerofototeca-nazionale-iccd/>. There are also a number of ae-

rial cameras, acquired with the Fotocielo collection, and an exceptional array of aerial photography-based map-making equipment, part of the Aerofoto Consult collection. They all illustrate the history of aerial-photogrammetry in Italy since World War II.

The large collection of aerial photographs of Italy taken for military reconnaissance purposes by the Allies during the Italian campaign of 1943–1945 are of course of extraordinary historical interest. They were produced by strategic photo-reconnaissance units of the Royal Air Force (RAF) and the United States Army Air Forces (USAAF), part of the Mediterranean Allied Photographic Reconnaissance Wing (MAPRW). The sheer quantity of these photographs (roughly 1 million) and their historical significance make this the most important collection of aerial photographs in Italy. This material includes unique imagery that is not duplicated in the large holdings of photographs of Italy held by NARA and TARA.

Just as large is the historical collection of the Aeronautica Militare Italiana (Italian Air Force) deposited in AFN since its foundation. The initiative of Gen. Domenico Ludovico was crucial in this regard, since he arranged for the transfer to the archive of a large number of military photographs which included areas of archaeological interest; the collection was subsequently enlarged with other photographs, taken up to the 1970s. As well as Gen. Ludovico, an important contribution to the birth of AFN was made by archaeologist Dinu Adamesteanu, who was its first director, and Gen. Giulio Schmiedt of the Istituto Geografico Militare in Florence.

A photographic analyst of international



Fig. 2 – © AFN archives. Villafranca di Verona, Base Camp of the 3rd Storm AM, May 1967. Activities of the photographers of an RF84F. Courtesy Aeronautica Militare, Historical Photo Library.

standing, Gen. Schmiedt spent the whole of 1960 organizing the AFN photographic collections into an accessible archive. In establishing a system that functions to this day ([www.iccd.beniculturali.it/aerofototeca/](http://www.iccd.beniculturali.it/aerofototeca/)), Schmiedt sought to put into practice the aims of the founders, which were, in the words of Adamesteanu, to “gather, coordinate and make available to the archaeological authorities all the aerial photographs in our possession that may be useful in streamlining surveys of the terrain”. In the sixty years since its creation, the fundamental task of AFN has been to gather aerial photographs from all available sources, provide for their conservation, cataloguing and study, thus making them available for a wide range of research and survey purposes. Over time this has become an irreplaceable resource for both historical research in various disciplines and regional planning, providing fundamental documentation for many of the activities of regional organizations in Italy.

#### WWII aerial photos in AFN

During World War II reconnaissance flights by RAF and USAAF proved decisive to the advance and victory of the Allied Forces; however in southern Italy, immediately after the Allied landing in Sicily in July 1943, there were flights by the Regia Aeronautica (Italian Royal Air Force) and the German Luftwaffe. These flights are today a powerful historical record of the appearance of the country before the great infrastructural works and urbanization that, from the early 1950s, have often deeply altered the Italian agrarian landscape.

#### *Regia Aeronautica* (Italian Royal Air Force)

Since 1923 every Italian army corps had a group for aerial observation, assigned aircraft already in use during WW I. In 1943 Guidonia (a military airport near Rome) was chosen as the base for the 310th Photographic Recognition squadron, equipped with panoramic cameras mounted on the Macchi MC 205 aircraft.

#### *German Luftwaffe (LW)*

Some of the German photographic reconnaissance flights were carried out before the beginning of World War II, and LW supplied Italy with various kinds of aircraft, so that after four years the Italian Air Force stood at 700 aircraft. War time reconnaissance was carried out over Italy by both German and Italian crews. AFN holds in its archives about 100 images in a 30 × 30cm format, generally taken after the landing in Sicily and covering various strategic areas in Southern Italy, such as



**Fig. 3 - © AFN archives. May 4, 1944. Pontedera, near Pisa: the Allied bombing of the Piaggio factory. MAPRW-RAF 683 Photographic Reconnaissance Squadron aerial photo.**

harbours and airports. Aerial coverage in the same format carried out by the Regia Aeronautica with the same equipment has also been acquired by AFN.

#### *British Royal Air Force (RAF)*

Photographic reconnaissance by the RAF over Italian territory began as early as September 1940, covering southern Italy and Sicily from Malta and went on until the end of hostilities. This included the aerial reconnaissance by Adrian Warburton on 10th November 1940 in advance of the large-scale attack on the Italian Fleet the following day – the Night of Taranto.

The MAPRW-RAF collection was transported from Puglia to Rome at the end of World War II and deposited nearly entirely in the British School at Rome, from where it was loaned to AFN in 1974. MAPRW-RAF aerial photographs in the AFN holdings cover the years 1943–44. These missions generally maintained high altitudes (c.27,000 feet) in order to avoid flak and used a 24-inch focal length camera (c.1:10,000) and a 6-inch focal length camera (c.1:50,000), generally carried by Spitfires and Mosquitoes. The MAPRW-RAF photographs are identifiable by the squadron numbers (e.g. 680, 683 and 684) and are mostly of a 7 × 8 inch format. The makeshift airports of the Tavoliere delle Puglie were used in order to photograph the effects of the earlier attacks, and these images focus on those areas where the British military missions were directed. They are a unique and irreplaceable document for the study of a historical situation of the Italian territory in a particular moment of its evolution, before the great urban and agrarian transformations.

The majority of the images taken of southern Italy and the larger islands from North Africa appear to have been taken to Britain after the war, though some of the 1943 imagery in the AFN will have

been taken by Allied units based in North Africa.

#### *United States Army Air Force (USAAF)*

USAAF started its strategic reconnaissance in Italy during the spring of 1943 when the Allies began preparing for the invasion of Sicily, following the Trident Conference in Washington. This imagery mostly covers north-east Italy, complementing MAPRW-RAF coverage which is concentrated in the south. The USAAF produced square prints at 9 × 9 inches with prefixes in the style of 23PS, 32S, 15SG, 5PRS and 12PRS indicating squadrons.

MAPRW-USAAF photos were donated by the American Academy in Rome to the AFN in March 1964, and are arguably the most important part of the collection as they fill large gaps in the holdings of NARA and TARA of photographs taken after air raids. However, they are not as accessible as might be desired, as they are stored in their original boxes making consultation difficult and conservation an absolute priority (please note that AFN is asking for financial contributions in this regard: [http://artbonus.gov.it/1070-fondo-aerofotografico-storico-united-states-army-air-force-\(usaaf,-1945\)-dell'aerofototeca-nazionale-iccd.html](http://artbonus.gov.it/1070-fondo-aerofotografico-storico-united-states-army-air-force-(usaaf,-1945)-dell'aerofototeca-nazionale-iccd.html)).

More on the subject in <http://www.iccd.beniculturali.it/index.php?it/98/aerofototeca-nazionale> and (also in English) <https://beniculturali.academia.edu/ElizabethJaneShepherd/Aerial-Photography>

#### KEYWORDS

AFN; ITALIAN ARCHIVES; AERIAL PHOTOGRAPHS; HISTORICAL COLLECTIONS; CULTURAL HERITAGE;

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