

Tactical Structure in World War II

Italy

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MVSN

MVSN

The *Milizia Volontaria per la Sicurezza Nazionale* was formed officially on 1 February 1923 as a paramilitary arm of the Fascist Party sanctioned by the government. Also known as the Blackshirts (*Camicie Nere*, or *cc.nn.*) they initially used ancient Roman unit designations such as cohort and maniple, but gradually shifted over to more conventional military terms for their field units during the 1930s. There were several branches of the MVSN, including the ordinary militia, the anti-aircraft and maritime artillery militia, the border militia, forestry militia and colonial militia.

The basic organizational building block of the MVSN in peacetime was the legion, a regionally-based organization, of which varied between 120 and 133 existed during the 1930s. Generally, each numbered legion consisted of a blackshirt battalion (with the same numbered designation as the legion), a territorial cohort (equal to a battalion), and a varying number of lesser units including complementary or replacement units, machine gun companies, etc.

The campaign in Ethiopia in 1935/36 was generally popular in Italy and 30 legions (eventually 36) were able to raise active duty battalions from volunteers, these bearing the number of the legion plus 100.¹ These active-duty battalions were dispatched to Africa under the command of new legion headquarters distinct from those previously mentioned and raised specifically for duty as tactical units in East Africa. These, in turn, were organized into five (later six) Militia divisions, each of which had a strength of 10,900 men with three legions (each of two blackshirt battalions, one machine gun company, and one 65mm battery), a machine gun battalion, two complementary battalions, and a detachment from the army of one battalion of 65mm howitzers and one company of engineers.

With the end of the Ethiopian campaign, the bulk of the MVSN returned home and the Militia reverted to its normal peacetime organization with the permanent legions under territorial headquarters. By this time there were 14 zones controlling 133 legions (plus one motorized legion). With the implementation of the Pariani order reorganizing the infantry divisions the MVSN was charged with providing a regimental equivalent to each of the 41 infantry divisions to make up for the lost third infantry regiments. To this end 41 of the legions were designated divisional legions and made responsible for providing the HQ, the

¹Thus, the 92nd Legion in Firenze held the 92nd Blackshirt Battalion at home and supported the 192nd Blackshirt Battalion in Ethiopia.

machine gun company, and one of the two battalions for each divisional contribution. Forty-one other legions were each designated to provide their active blackshirt battalion to fill out the divisional legions. Of the remaining MVSN legions, 24 were designated depot legions as their active blackshirt battalions were to be sent to North Africa, 22 sent their active battalions to become corps assets as "mountain" or "covering" elements for the land borders, and 4 provided the MVSN reserve.

The twenty-four battalions located in North Africa arrived in September 1939 and were grouped into four militia divisions: "23 Marzo" and "28 Ottobre" in Tripolitania, and "21 Aprile" and "3 Gennaio" in Cirenaica. In late May and early June of 1940, however, the "21 Aprile" division was broken up, most of its blackshirt elements used to bring the other MVSN divisions there up to full strength, and the remainder (mainly army personnel) used as a cadre to form the new "Catanzaro" army infantry division. The MVSN divisions had considerably more supporting arms than their predecessors in Ethiopia, and consisted of two MVSN legions (again, these were field units, not to be confused with the depot legions in Italy), a machine gun battalion, a 47mm anti-tank company, a mixed engineer battalion with signal and construction responsibility, and an artillery regiment. In June 1940 the MVSN had a strength of 900 officers, 1,000 NCOs, and 16,000 other ranks in Libya in the three divisions and four covering battalions.

The Libya-type legions each consisted of a headquarters and three battalions, each of these in turn consisting of three rifle companies and a machine gun company. Setting them apart from their metropolitan counterparts (and the army's infantry) was the triangular structure of the rifle platoons, with each platoon being made up of three rifle squads. In late 1940 an 81mm mortar company and a 65mm howitzer battery were added to each legion, probably using army personnel.

Fire support for an MVSN Libya division was provided by an artillery regiment raised by the army and identical to the army's Libya-type infantry division artillery regiment, with two battalions of 75/27 Model 906 field guns, one battalion of 100/17 Model 914 howitzers, and two batteries of 20mm Model 35 AA guns. The mixed engineer/signal battalion was also provided by the army, and was probably also identical to those furnished to army infantry divisions in Libya.

	Officers	NCOs	Other Ranks	Light Machine Guns	Medium Machine Guns	45mm Mortars	Organization
42 Divisional (Assault) Legions							
Legion Headquarters	11	9	84	0	0	0	HQ, cmd sec, radio sec, wire sec, service sec
Two Assault Battalions, each							
Battalion Headquarters	6	8	96	0	0	0	HQ plt (cmd, signal & service secs), scout plt (3 sqds)
Three Rifle Companies, each	4	7	126	8	0	3	HQ plt, 2 rifle plts (@ 2 secs)
Machine Gun Company	5	9	198	0	12	0	HQ plt (cmd, signal, resupply & trains secs), 3 MG plts
30 Mountain (Covering) Battalions							
Battalion Headquarters	6	8	100	0	0	0	HQ plt (cmd, signal & service secs), scout plt (3 sqds)
Three Rifle Companies, each	4	7	126	8	0	3	HQ plt, 2 rifle plts (@ 2 secs)
Machine Gun Company	4	7	143	0	8	0	HQ plt (cmd, signal, resupply & trains secs), 2 MG plts
6 Libya Legions							
Legion Headquarters	7	3	59	0	0	0	HQ, cmd/services sec, signal sec
Three Libya Battalions, each							
Battalion Headquarters	8	10	121	0	0	9	HQ plt, scout plt, mortar plt
Three Rifle Companies, each	5	4	140	9	0	0	HQ plt, 3 rifle plts (@ 3 sqds)
Machine Gun Company	6	5	137	0	12	0	HQ plt (cmd, signal & resupply secs), 4 MG plts
1 Independent Battalion (Elba)							
Battalion Headquarters	2	1	21	0	0	0	HQ, cmd sec, signal sec
Two Rifle Companies, each	3	7	107	6	0	0	HQ sec, 2 rifle plts (@ 3 sqds)
1 Aegean Legion							
Legion Headquarters	11	9	84	0	0	0	HQ, cmd sec, radio sec, wire sec, service sec
Infantry (Assault) Battalion							
Battalion Headquarters	6	8	96	0	0	0	HQ plt (cmd, signal & service secs), scout plt (3 sqds)
Three Rifle Companies, each	4	7	126	8	0	0	HQ plt, 2 rifle plts (@ 2 secs)
Machine Gun Battalion							
Battalion Headquarters	6	8	96	0	0	0	HQ plt (cmd, signal & service secs), scout plt (3 sqds)
Five Machine Gun Companies, ea	5	9	110	0	12	0	HQ, 3 MG plts
78 Territorial Cohorts							
Cohort Headquarters	4	3	21	0	0	0	HQ plt (cmd & service secs)
Three Rifle Centuries, each	5	13	145	0	0	0	HQ, 4 rifle plts (@ 3 sqds)
54 Mobile Territorial Cohorts							
Cohort Headquarters	4	3	27	0	0	0	HQ plt (cmd & service secs)
Three Rifle Centuries, each	5	12	138	9	2	0	HQ, 3 rifle plts (@ 3 sqds), MG plt (2 sqds)
Other Units							
1 Special Machine Gun Company	6	14	228	0	12	0	HQ plt (HQ, signal, pion, resupply & trans secs), 4 MG plts
23 Coastal Defense Centuries	3	9	63	0	8	0	HQ, 2 MG plts (@ 2 secs)
note: also 3 independent assault battalions (identical to divisional battalions), 4 Libya covering battalions (no set organization), and 30 East Africa (Colonial) battalions (organization unknown)							
MVSN Organization, October 1940							

All three blackshirt divisions were committed to the initial advance into Egypt in late 1940 and they caught the full brunt of the British counteroffensive. They suffered from the same defects as the army's divisions there and were quickly

destroyed. By the end of January 1941 there was not a single blackshirt field battalion left in North Africa. Although a small number of territorial and coast/AA artillery units served in later campaigns, no further MVSN field units participated in the North African theater until January 1943 when a token contingent of one legion arrived in time to be destroyed in Tunisia.

There were also 26,642 blackshirts in Italian East Africa in June 1940. They were formed into one 2-battalion Legion (the 11th) and 28 independent battalions, supervised administratively by seven territorial legion HQs. The organization of the MVSN battalion in East Africa is unknown but probably approximated that of the blackshirt battalion in Libya.²

The bulk of the ordinary militia active battalions were assigned to round out the army's binary infantry divisions. Each infantry division (not including autotransportable, motorized, or North Africa type) was to receive a militia legion. The army, however, was not appreciative of the militia's efforts and delayed the incorporation of the legions into their divisions as long as possible. An order by Mussolini in the autumn of 1940 directing the army to stop their stalling finally led to the inclusion of the legions in army formations, although it was 1941 before the process was completed. Thus, during the invasion of Greece, few divisions actually had militia elements, most MVSN legions being incorporated into ad-hoc *raggruppamenti* of 2-3 legions each.

The basic building block of the divisional militia battalion was, as in the army infantry, the rifle section consisting of a sergeant, a junior sergeant, three

²The South African official history of the campaign provides some detail on MVSN organization in East Africa, but their source is unknown:

A Blackshirt Battalion consisted of a Headquarters Company, plus four Rifle Companies, each of a Headquarters platoon and three rifle platoons. Headquarters Company carried 12 mortars. Establishment was 30 officers, 910 other ranks, with 48 light machine guns, 12 mortars, and 69 pack animals.

A Blackshirt "Africa" Battalion differed considerably from the above, and had a Headquarters Company, two Machine-Gun Companies, a Light Tank Company and an Armored Car Company. Establishment was 19 officers, 690 other ranks, with 16 machine guns, 36 (47mm)[sic] mortars, 15 CV3 light tanks, 16 armored cars, 4 motorcycles, 55 light vehicles and 12 heavy vehicles.

Orpen, Neil; *East African and Abyssinian Campaigns* (Purnell, Cape Town)

MVSN records make no distinction between regular and "Africa" battalions. Vehicles available to the MVSN in East Africa comprised 15 L tanks and 126 armored cars of various models (including Lancia 1Z, Fiat 611 and extemporized types).

corporals, and thirteen privates. The section was divided tactically into two groups, one with two of the corporals and two light machine guns with their crews acting as the fire support element, and the other consisting of the rest of the personnel acting as the maneuver element. Two such sections plus a platoon leader made up the blackshirt platoon, there being no additional platoon HQ personnel such as runners or signallers.

Two blackshirt rifle platoons plus a company HQ platoon made up the blackshirt rifle company. The

main elements of the company HQ platoon included an HQ section (with two semaphore signallers, four medics, and four runners), a mortar section (three 2-man teams and a 7-man ammunition detail), and a pack section with 20 mules together with their handlers (8 to carry the light MGs and 48 300-round ammo boxes, 1 for hand grenades, three carrying mortars, three carrying 570 rounds of mortar ammunition, and five carrying food, kitchen equipment, and general supplies). Transport assets were thus centralized within

	Officers	NCOs	Other Ranks	Light Machine Guns	Medium Machine Guns	45mm Mortars	Motorcycles	Field Cars	Light Trucks	Horses	Carts	Bicycles
Legion Headquarters	9	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	0
Headquarters Platoon												
Headquarters Section	1	3	12	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	2
Radio Section	0	1	15	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Wire/Optical Section	0	1	24	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Service Section	0	3	32	0	0	0	0	1	1	9	0	0
Two Battalions, each												
Battalion Headquarters	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Headquarters Platoon												
Headquarters Section	1	2	8	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
Signal Section	0	1	18	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Service Section	0	2	33	0	0	0	0	0	2	15	5	0
Reconnaissance Platoon												
Platoon Headquarters	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Three Reconnaissance Squads, each	0	1	12	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Three Rifle Companies, each												
Company Headquarters	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Headquarters Platoon												
HQ Section	1	1	18	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Mortar Section	0	1	13	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0
Supply Squad	0	0	7	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Pack Section	0	1	20	0	0	0	0	0	0	20	0	0
Two Rifle Platoons, each												
Platoon HQ	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Two Rifle Sections, each	0	1	17	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Machine Gun Company												
Company Headquarters	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Headquarters Platoon												
Headquarters Section	1	1	22	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Signal Section	0	1	13	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Supply Squad	0	0	13	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Pack Section	0	1	43	0	0	0	0	0	0	41	4	0
Three Machine Gun Platoons, each												
Platoon HQ	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Two MG Sections, each	0	1	17	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Divisional MVSN Legion, from April 1940

the company although for tactical moves, of course, the animals and their

handlers would be parcelled out. Thus a 45mm mortar squad would consist of the two-man mortar team, one or two ammunition bearers from the mortar section ammunition detail, a handler with a mule carrying the mortar and two 30-round ammo boxes, and another handler and mule carrying three ammo boxes. Similarly, each rifle section would be supplemented with two handlers with their animals, each carrying a light machine gun and five 300-round ammo boxes.

The basis of the blackshirt battalion was three rifle companies, the only level at which the MVSN legion was not binary. In addition to the rifle companies, the battalion had a scout or reconnaissance platoon (on foot) and a headquarters platoon providing limited signal and service support. The signal section had three 2-man telephone teams and 18 km of wire, two optical stations, two semaphore stations, and one ground-air signal detachment with marker panels. Presumably, the telephone teams were to be attached to the rifle companies, with battalion signals provided by attachments from the legion signal platoon. The battalion service section provided five pack horses and five horse-drawn carts to carry slim reserves of ammunition and food.

The MVSN legion was made up of two such battalions plus a machine gun company and a large headquarters platoon. The machine gun company followed standard Italian practice in assigning the transport animals to a centralized company pack and wagon section which provided two horses or mules to each machine gun crew with other horses or mules and four two-horse wagons for company reserves and equipment.

The legion HQ included two signal sections, one with radio equipment and one with telephone and optical gear. The radio section provided four RF.1 radios and one receiver with teams, so that each battalion and the machine gun company could be provided with a radio, leaving the legion HQ with a transceiver and a receiver to operate on one net and monitor another. The other signal section operated four telephones (each with 4 km of wire), probably distributed identically with the RF.1 radios, two infantry-model optical stations, an air-ground signal team, and two semaphore teams. The service squad of the platoon provided pack horses for the radios and kitchen supplies and services such as cooks and medics for the HQ platoon.

The MVSN legion of 1940 was considerably weaker in firepower than the army's infantry regiment, making the infantry divisions unbalanced formations, even before accounting for the limited training received by the blackshirt officers. The legion had a much-reduced scale of issue for the 45mm mortars and lacked

completely the 81mm mortars and 65mm howitzers or 47mm AT guns that the infantry regiment had. The basic load of ammunition in rounds per weapon was the same as the infantry regiment, although with some minor differences in distribution. In October 1940 the divisional legions were redesignated "Assault Blackshirt Legions" but the organization of the divisional legions did not change except for the addition of one officer and one NCO to the legion HQ. Indeed, the organization of the divisional legions does not appear to have changed significantly during the entire war, thus accentuating the difference in capabilities between the blackshirts and the army infantry as the latter reorganized into more powerful units.

The vast majority of the divisional MVSN legions retained this weak organization through the rest of the war. An exception were the divisions serving in occupied Greece. The Casale Division's 23rd Legion was removed to corps control and reorganized and redesignated as the *Gruppo cc.nn. "Po"*, while the Piemonte Division's 166th Legion became the *"Etna"* and one battalion each was withdrawn from the Pinerolo and Forlì Divisions to create the *"L'Aquila"*. Each of these Blackshirt groups consisted of two regular battalions and a new heavy weapons battalion. The detachment of these forces, combined with the loss of four other Blackshirt battalions, meant that only two of the divisions in Greece retained any Blackshirt component, and those only a battalion apiece. These two became mobile divisional reserves, with the 28th Battalion ("Cagliari" division) and the 36th Battalion ("Modena" division), being ordered by SMRE to convert to a bicycle configuration in September 1942. The main changes then were the provision of bicycles for all troops and the substitution of 12 motor tricycles and five light trucks for all the horses and mules in the battalion. The loss of the animal handlers resulted in a drop of 58 other ranks in the battalion strength, but no loss in line weapons strength.

The second-largest group of MVSN field units were raised in the north of Italy and assigned to the border regions as "covering" formations directly under the control of the corps HQs there. Also known as mountain battalions, due to the nature of the terrain around Italy's land borders, their rifle companies were identical to those in the divisional battalions and the battalion HQ differed only in having an extra 2-man telephone team and two additional linemen assigned to the signal section, but the battalion was strengthened by the addition of a machine gun company. This machine gun company was similar to that in the divisional legion but had only two MG platoons instead of three and had a slightly reduced HQ platoon with the horses and other assets dedicated to the third platoon being deleted from the TO&E. With the fall of France, many of the

mountain battalions were sent to the Yugoslav border and during 1941/42 some 14 of them were assigned to occupation duty in the Balkans. Others were diverted to form new divisional legions, to replace units lost in combat, and to raise new MVSN units, and by March 1943 only two covering battalions remained on the order of battle.

Following the Greek campaign of 1941 the MVSN started the practice of picking the units that had performed best during a particular campaign and giving them additional intensive training and adding the letter M to their title (e.g., the 12th Blackshirt M Battalion) giving them a kind of elite status, but no additional weapons or equipment over and above that specified in the 1940 TO&E were provided.

Blackshirts for the Eastern Front

The Italian Expeditionary Corps that was dispatched to the eastern front in 1941 included no infantry divisions, and consequently, no MVSN units could be expected to show up in its composition. Feeling somewhat slighted, the MVSN command created a special unit to contribute a blackshirt presence. The 63rd "Tagliamento" legion was detached from the Pistoia infantry division, a second machine gun company and an army heavy weapons battalion added, and trucks and drivers from the army motor service attached, and the 63rd Motorized Blackshirt Legion was dispatched to the eastern front in August of 1941.

The basic components of the Tagliamento Legion differed little from its regular divisional counterparts, but at battalion and legion level the unit mix was considerably heavier in terms of supporting weapons. The rifle platoon, supply squad, and mortar squad of the rifle company were identical to the divisional blackshirt company described earlier, but the company pack section with its animals was deleted in favor of nine army drivers with light trucks assigned to the company HQ. These trucks were used to provide motor transport for the personnel as well as for the equipment and weapons previously carried by the pack animals, although it must have been a tight fit and some vehicles must have had to do double duty.

The battalion HQ was similar to that in the divisional legion, but again the animals were replaced by trucks for transport of material. Like the covering battalions, the motorized battalion included its own machine gun company, although in this case consisting of the full three platoons.

The army heavy weapons battalion assigned to the Legion was made up of a mortar company and a gun company. The mortar company had three platoons, each with two mortars, and twelve light trucks, three per platoon for men and hardware, 2 for the personnel of the company HQ, and one for signal equipment, papers, etc. The gun company had 19 light trucks, 12 for the guns and gun crews, 4 for ammunition, and 3 for signal equipment, papers, etc. Signal facilities were very weak in the heavy weapons battalion, as they were throughout the organization, with the battalion HQ having no signal unit at all, and each of the companies only two telephones. The other signal assets in the legion consisted of three telephones and two optical stations in each infantry battalion HQ, and five RF.1 transceivers and an RA.1 receiver in the legion radio section, along with a switchboard, four telephones and two optical stations in the legion's telephone section.

This organization apparently proved moderately successful and in early 1942 it was decided to expand the formation to battle group size. On 30 March 1942 a new TO&E for the *Raggruppamento cc.nn. Autocarrato "3 Gennaio"* was published. This battlegroup was to consist of the Tagliamento Legion, now redesignated *Gruppo*

	Officers	NCOs	Other Ranks	Light Machine Guns	Medium Machine Guns	45mm Mortars	81mm Mortars	47mm Guns	Motorcycles	Field Cars	Light Trucks
Legion Headquarters	9	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Headquarters Platoon											
Platoon Headquarters	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Headquarters Squad	0	3	8	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0
Radio Section	0	1	18	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Telephone Section	0	1	26	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Trains Section	0	3	35	0	0	0	0	0	4	1	8
Two Infantry Battalions, each											
Battalion Headquarters & Platoon											
Headquarters & Squad	5	2	6	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	0
Signal Section	0	1	18	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Trains Section	0	2	23	0	0	0	0	0	2	1	5
Reconnaissance Platoon											
Platoon Headquarters	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Three Recon Squads, each	0	1	12	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Three Rifle Companies, each											
Company Headquarters	2	1	24	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	9
Mortar Section	0	1	13	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0
Supply Squad	0	0	7	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Two Rifle Platoons, each											
Platoon HQ	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Two Rifle Sections, each	0	1	17	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Machine Gun Company											
Company Headquarters & Platoon	1	1	34	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	9
Three MG Platoons, each	1	2	26	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
Heavy Weapons Battalion											
Battalion Headquarters	4	1	9	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	0
Service Section	0	1	18	0	0	0	0	0	2	1	3
Mortar Company											
Company Headquarters	2	1	30	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	12
Signal Squad	0	1	9	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Supply Squad	0	0	8	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Three Mortar Platoons, each											
Platoon Headquarters	1	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Two Mortar Squads, each	0	1	7	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Anti-Tank Company											
Company Headquarters	2	1	43	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	19
Signal/FDC Section	0	0	23	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Four AT Platoons, each											
Platoon Headquarters	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Two Gun Squads, each	0	1	10	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0

Motorized Blackshirt Legion, from July 1941

Battaglioni M Tagliamento, a second identical group (denominated "Montebello"), and a battle group HQ. Except for the redesignation as M units in recognition of their service on the eastern front, the organization of the Tagliamento was unchanged from the prior TO&E. Battlegroup HQ consisted of five officers, five NCOs, and 58 other ranks. The main components were a 17-man radio section with four RF.2 transceivers and an RA.2 receiver, a telephone section of 18 men with four telephones and a central switchboard, and a service section with two field cars and two light trucks. The battlegroup became operational in August of 1942 and fought on the eastern front until early 1943 when it was dissolved and its personnel brought home.



A Blackshirt 45mm mortar team on the eastern front in early 1942

The shortage of motor vehicles meant that not all the separate MVSN units could be motorized, so on 16 August 1941 a TO&E was published for a non-motorized cc.nn. battlegroup. Lacking the divisional heavy weapons at least nominally available to support the divisional blackshirt legions these formations integrated infantry heavy weapons into their organization on a scale previously unheard of by the MVSN. The battlegroup was made up of a 68-

man HQ identical to that of the motorized battlegroup described above and two blackshirt legions. Each legion consisted of two battalions, a 47mm gun company, and an 81mm mortar company. Each battalion was made up of a headquarters, three rifle companies, and a machine gun company, all having the same organization as in the divisional legion, giving the battalion a strength of 23 officers, 38 NCOs, and 662 other ranks. The 47mm company was organized using the army TO&E, although with blackshirt personnel, and the mortar company had 199 men split into three 3-mortar platoons, using eleven L.39 trucks and 47 horses for transport. This gave the legion a strength of 1,989 men and the battlegroup a strength of 4,048. Despite this additional infusion of heavy weapons the battlegroup was not well supported for a brigade-size formation, having no artillery at all.

Two units were organized under this TO&E. The first was the 30th Blackshirt Battlegroup on 21 August 1941 (from the 55th and 195th divisional legions) and

the second the *Raggruppamento cc.nn. "23 Marzo"* (with groups "Valle Scrivia" and "Leonessa") on 20 March 1942. The former was used to garrison Sardinia and the latter was sent to the eastern front in 1942, although on a slightly modified TO&E.

Under this modified organization the legions were redesignated *Gruppi Battaglioni* as in the case of the motorized blackshirt battlegroup and a third battalion HQ was added in each group to control the 47mm and 81mm companies. Other changes included the reduction of the machine gun companies to 2-platoon formations with a company total of six medium machine guns, and the provision of trucks to replace animals in the 47mm and 81mm companies. This gave each of the infantry groups a total strength of 74 officers, 112 NCOs, and 1606 other ranks, a reduction of 197 men from the original TO&E. The two battlegroups on the eastern front were brought home in early 1943 and their four groups were reconstituted as *gruppi cc.nn. di btg. "M"*, but it is not known what TO&E they used in this second incarnation.

The New Type Battalions

On 7 May 1943 a TO&E for a "new type" MVSN legion was published, which introduced heavy weapons at the battalion level. An effort to keep up with the army infantry's new organization, this new format does not appear to have been widely applied, the only orders still extant order only the 176th Legion of the Sabauda division and the 30th Raggruppamento, both in Sardinia, to conform in anticipation of the Allied invasion. Under this new organization, the machine guns were decentralized to the company level, and the medium machine gun company was replaced by a heavy weapons company with two 3-gun 81mm mortar platoons and two 3-gun 20mm Solothurn anti-tank rifle platoons, although the usefulness of the latter weapon by 1943 was extremely limited. The decentralization meant that ten more pack animals had to be assigned to the rifle companies: two to carry machine guns, one for machine gun accessories, six for machine gun ammunition, and one for food and equipment. The heavy weapons company was unusual in that it did not have any horses, but relied instead on 13 light trucks: 1 for food, 2 for personnel, 6 for the mortars, and 4 for the anti-tank rifles. Signal facilities were not, however, improved, consisting of four telephones in the legion HQ and two more in the weapons company HQ.

Other blackshirt battlegroups were formed for use in the Balkans, but these do not appear to have been organized under special TO&Es, but rather simply as tactical groupings of the various independent MVSN legions and battalions present on occupation duty. Three semi-permanent groups were formed for the

occupation of Greece, "L'Aquila", "Etna" and "Po", each with two regular battalions and a heavy weapons battalion.

One permanent group was the *Raggruppamento Milizia Forestali*, a motorized battlegroup raised from the ranks of the Forestry Police. This was a very lightly armed formation with limited service support that accompanied the Italian forces invading Yugoslavia in 1941, presumably as an internal security unit to guard lines of communication.

The TO&E for the forestry militia battlegroup is dated 3 March 1941 and retains the ancient Roman designation system that had been abandoned for other field units of the MVSN. The basic unit was the manipolo, which was identical to the rifle platoon of the regular MVSN but each of the component rifle sections had only one instead of two light MGs. Two manipoli with a very small HQ (an officer and a runner) made up a century. Two rifle centuries plus a 35-man headquarters manipolo formed a cohort for a total strength of 9 officers, 20

NCOs, and 170 other ranks. The forestry legion was made up of two such cohorts, a machine gun manipolo, a service section, and a HQ century for a strength of 29 officers, 63 NCOs, and 467 other ranks. The MG manipolo had 26 men with two medium MGs while the service section 63 men with 2 field cars, 27 light trucks, 1 ambulance, 1 van, 1 tank trucks, and 4 motorcycles. This latter group provided all the motor transport for the legion. The legion HQ had 72 men including a radio squad. Two such legions and a reserve rifle century together with a 62-man HQ made up the battlegroup, giving a final strength of 76

officers, 144 NCOs, and 1043 other ranks. The only heavy weapons in the battlegroup were the light machine guns of the rifle manipoli and the four medium MGs of the machine gun manipoli.

	Officers	NCOs	Other Ranks	Light Machine Guns	Medium Machine Guns	45mm Mortars	81mm Mortars	20mm AT Rifles	Motorcycles	Light Trucks	Horses & Mules	Wagons	Bicycles
Battalion Headquarters	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Headquarters Platoon													
Platoon Headquarters	1	2	8	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
Signal Section	0	1	25	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Service Section	0	2	35	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	17	6	0
Reconnaissance Platoon													
Platoon Headquarters	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Three Squads, each	0	1	12	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Three Rifle Companies, each													
Company Headquarters													
HQ Section	2	1	22	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Patrol Section	0	1	12	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Resupply Section	0	0	9	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Pack Section	0	1	30	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	30	0	0
Two Rifle Platoons, each													
Platoon HQ	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Two Rifle Sections, each	0	1	17	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Weapons Platoon													
Platoon HQ	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Machine Gun Section	0	1	17	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mortar Section	0	1	13	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Heavy Weapons Company													
Company Headquarters	2	3	51	0	0	0	0	0	2	13	0	0	0
Two Mortar Platoons, each	1	3	23	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0
Two Anti-Tank Platoons, each	1	3	22	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0

"New Type" MVSN Battalion, from 7 May 1943

Blackshirt Landing Units

Yet another type of formation to be formed was the 1st Blackshirt Landing Regiment (*gruppo di battaglioni cc.nn. da sbarco*). This was ordered activated in mid-March 1942 in anticipation of an invasion of Malta and was formed from four independent covering battalions plus an anti-tank company contributed by the army. With the cancellation of this operation, the regiment was moved to Sardinia with its four "M" landing battalions and then took part in the occupation of Corsica in November 1942. In January 1943 two of the battalions were moved to Toulon in occupied France, while the bulk of the regiment remained in Corsica until the armistice.

The rifle company of the landing regiment differed from its normal counterparts in having a triangular rifle platoon and an organic machine gun platoon with three weapons. The battalion headquarters featured a small scout section armed with rifles and a signal section with four optical stations, two semaphore teams, and an air-ground signal team with marker panels. The battalion signal net thus relied on an optical signal unit attached to each rifle company and the two semaphore signallers in each company HQ and the battalion HQ.

The regiment HQ had a much

	Officers	NCOs	Other Ranks	Light Machine Guns	Medium Machine Guns	45mm Mortars	47mm Guns	Motorcycles	Motor Carts*	Bicycles
Regiment Headquarters	12	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Headquarters Platoon										
Platoon Headquarters	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Command Section	0	2	25	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Signal Section										
Radio Group	0	1	37	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Optical Group	0	1	6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Messenger Group	0	0	8	0	0	0	0	3	0	2
Carrier Pigeon Group	0	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Four Infantry Battalions, each										
Battalion Headquarters	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Headquarters Platoon										
Platoon Headquarters	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Command Section	0	2	11	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
Signal Section	0	1	15	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Scout Section	0	1	12	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Trains Section	0	2	12	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Three Rifle Companies, each										
Company Headquarters	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Headquarters Platoon										
Command Section	1	1	25	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Mortar Section	0	1	13	0	0	3	0	0	0	0
Resupply Section	0	1	15	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Three Rifle Platoons, each										
Platoon HQ	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Three Rifle Squads, each	0	1	12	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Machine Gun Platoon										
Platoon HQ	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Three MG Squads, each	0	1	9	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Anti-Tank Company**										
Company Headquarters	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Headquarters Platoon										
Platoon HQ & Command Section	1	1	22	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
FDC/Signal Section	0	0	23	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Four Anti-Tank Platoons, each										
Platoon HQ	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Two AT Squads, each	0	1	10	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Service Company										
Company HQ & Platoon										
Command Section	2	4	34	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
Anti-Aircraft MG Section	0	1	12	0	6	0	0	0	0	0
Motor Transport Section	0	1	23	0	0	0	0	0	20	0
Four Resupply Platoons, each	1	2	48	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

* or motortricycles

** personnel provided by Army

MVSN Landing Regiment, from 16 March 1942

larger signal element that manned eleven RF.2 radio transceivers and one RA.2 receiver (three men per radio), as well as two optical stations and an air-ground team with marker panels. Also included in the signal section were three motorcycle messengers (one with a sidecar motorcycle) and a small carrier pigeon group with 24 birds.

Fire support for the regiment was provided by a 47mm gun company using personnel supplied by the army. Its headquarters included 2 men for FDC duties to provide a nominal indirect-fire capability for the guns, and 20 men in a signal group that manned four telephones with four km of wire, two optical stations, and two semaphore teams. The regimental service company provided all the transport for the regiment. Its headquarters platoon included a 24-man motor transport section with 20 motor carts or motortricycles and an anti-aircraft section of 13 men with six medium MGs on high-angle mounts. The rest of the company consisted of four resupply platoons, one to support each battalion, assigned the thankless task of carrying ammunition and supplies forward on their backs.

The landing regiment was fortunate in never being committed to an assault operation. It was ludicrously weak in HE firepower, having only 45mm mortars (with the marginal assistance of 47mm guns) for that role. Such weapons as were available were served only by such ammunition as the troops could physically carry forward with them. In addition, the unit was practically immobile once ashore for lack of transport. Clearly, the MVSN anticipated a very brief assault against a weak enemy requiring no maneuver. Under any other circumstances the landing regiment would have had a very difficult time.

Apparently, some notice was taken of at least one of these weaknesses, for by September 1943 the army's contribution had increased to a small heavy weapons battalion, with one company of 47mm guns and one of 81mm mortars.

An Armored Division for the MVSN

Following the destruction of the MVSN divisions in North Africa in 1941 the battlegroups and regiments were the largest unit of the Militia until June of 1943 when the formation of a blackshirt armored division was ordered. For this formation, the best of the M battalions of the MVSN were drawn together and reorganized. Most of the equipment was provided by Germans, to whom the political loyalty of a blackshirt armored division presumably outweighed its questionable tactical competence.

For the creation of this division the Germans contributed its full complement of tanks (36), medium machine guns (46 MG.42), heavy dual-purpose guns (24 88mm Flak), and flamethrowers (24), along with a large number of tractors, trucks, field cars and motorcycles. There is conflicting information about what

Division Headquarters (301)
 Two Blackshirt Groups, each (1,291)
 Group Headquarters (106)
 Two Blackshirt Battalions, each (434)
 Battalion Headquarters (52)
 Two Rifle Companies, each (122) [8 LMG, 3 45mm Mort]
 Machine Gun Company (92) [8 MG]
 Heavy Weapons Battalion (313)
 Battalion Headquarters (33)
 Mortar Company (111) [6 81mm Mort]
 Anti-Tank Company (169) [8 47mm AT]
 Tank Group (511)
 Reconnaissance Platoon (20)
 Combat Echelon (204)
 Headquarters (36) [6 tanks]
 Three Tank Companies, each (56) [10 tanks]
 Support Echelon (287)
 Anti-Aircraft/Anti-Tank Artillery Regiment (1,217)
 Regiment Headquarters (121)
 Two Battalions, each (548)
 Battalion Headquarters (79)
 Three Batteries, each (137) [2 MG, 4 90mm AA/AT]
 Service Battery (77)
 Assault Pioneer Battalion (621)
 Battalion Headquarters (45)
 Two Pioneer Companies, each (238) [6 LMG, 9 45mm Mort, 6 FT]
 Weapons Company (113) [4 81mm Mort, 4 47mm AT]
 Mixed Engineer Unit (221)
 Medical Unit (77)
 Quartermaster Group (102)

Total Division

262 officers + 374 NCOs + 4,988 other ranks = 5,624

"M" ARMORED DIVISION, FROM 22 JUNE 1943

begun before the publication of the TO&E, because by 10 July the division was nearly operational and participated in a combined arms live fire exercise that apparently impressed the visiting German and Italian brass highly. The division consisted of two motorized blackshirt groups, a tank group, an AA/AT artillery regiment, an assault pioneer battalion, and service units.

types of armored vehicles were supplied by Germany for the division, but it seems likely that an initial batch of twelve each of PzKw IVG, PzKw IIIN, and StuG III were delivered and then replaced by a full complement of 36 PzKw V Panthers.

It would seem that the organization of the division had

The armored component of the division was the tank group (= battalion), which consisted of a reconnaissance platoon, a combat echelon, and a support echelon. There was no group HQ, the group commander also functioning as the combat echelon commander. The reconnaissance platoon consisted of eighteen men on two-man motorcycles and the officer and a driver in a field car. The combat echelon was a tank battalion less the normal service support elements. The 36-man HQ had six tanks (2 for command purposes and 4 for reconnaissance) and six liaison motorcycles for the remaining men in the HQ. Each tank company was made up simply of crews for ten tanks, with the company commander and three platoon leaders acting as

	Officers	NCOs	Other Ranks	Light Machine Guns	Medium Machine Guns	45mm Mortars	81mm Mortars	47mm Guns	Motorcycles	Field Cars	Light Trucks
Group Headquarters	9	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Headquarters Platoon											
Headquarters Section	1	3	8	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0
Radio Section	0	1	18	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Wire Section	0	1	26	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Service Section	0	3	35	0	0	0	0	0	4	1	8
Two Blackshirt Battalions, each											
Battalion Headquarters	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Headquarters Platoon											
Headquarters Section	1	2	5	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0
Signal Section	0	1	18	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Service Section	0	2	23	0	0	0	0	0	5	1	5
Two Rifle Companies, each											
Headquarters Platoon											
HQ Section	2	1	24	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	9
Mortar Section	0	1	13	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0
Resupply Squad	0	0	7	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Two Rifle Platoons, each											
Platoon HQ	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Two Rifle Sections, each											
Machine Gun Company											
Headquarters Platoon	1	1	32	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	7
Two Machine Gun Platoons, each											
Platoon HQ	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Two MG Sections, each											
Machine Gun Company											
Headquarters Platoon	2	2	47	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	12
Three Mortar Platoons, each											
Platoon HQ	1	2	17	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0
Anti-Tank Company											
Headquarters Platoon	2	1	66	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	19
Four Anti-Tank Platoons, each											
Platoon HQ	1	2	22	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0

Blackshirt Group of M Division, from 22 June 1943

tank commanders as well, and six motorcycles for liaison and scouting. All the services were concentrated in the 287-man support echelon. This formation was divided into a HQ support group and a tank company support group. The HQ support group had 104 men and 5 motorcycles, 3 tractors, 2 field cars, and 15 medium trucks, and provided maintenance support as well. The tank company support group was actually three detachments with no overall commander, each detachment consisting of 7 NCOs and 54 other ranks with 12 medium trucks (1 ammunition, 1 food, 2 fuel, 1 personnel, 2 reserve equipment, 1 baggage, and 1 spare parts).

The motorized blackshirt groups each consisted of two rifle battalions and a heavy weapons battalion. Radio facilities for the group consisted of five RF.1 transceivers and 1 receiver in the group HQ radio section. Telephone facilities were five telephones and a switchboard in the group HQ telephone section, three telephones in each rifle battalion HQ, two in the mortar company HQ and four in the 47mm gun company HQ. The rifle and machine gun companies were assigned only semaphore signallers and the heavy weapons battalion HQ had no signal assets at all. Since Italian communications doctrine called for the distribution of assets downward, each of the rifle and MG companies would receive a telephone team from battalion HQ, while the battalion HQs would each receive a telephone and a transceiver from group HQ.

Transportation for the group was provided by light trucks. Each rifle company had nine such trucks, one for food and equipment, one for ammunition, and seven for personnel and weapons. the MG company also had seven, one for food and equipment, two for ammunition and HQ personnel, and two for each MG platoon. The mortar company received 12 trucks (1 for food and signal equipment, 2 for HQ personnel, and 3 per mortar platoon) and the gun company 19 (3 for food and equipment, 4 for ammunition, and 12 for the guns and their crews).

The artillery regiment, which had two battalions each of three batteries, was initially, according to the TO&E, supposed to be equipped with 90/53 dual-purpose guns on Lancia 3/RO truck chassis with another such truck per gun carrying 210 rounds of ammunition. In fact, the regiment seems to have been equipped instead with 88mm Flak guns of German manufacture.

The assault pioneer battalion was a heavily-armed crack formation made up of two assault companies and a heavy weapons company. Each assault company was made up of three 55-man platoons, each of which consisted of two assault sections and a support section. An assault section had 13 men with four submachine guns and a flamethrower, the support section 25 men with two light machine guns and three 45mm mortars. In addition to the light truck held by each platoon HQ, the company had 17 trucks in the company HQ to transport equipment, weapons and personnel, a ladder and a foot-bridge.

Among the support elements of the division was the engineer unit, which was composed of a 25-man HQ, a 53-man engineer platoon, a 45-man telegraph platoon, and a 98-man radio platoon, the latter manning nine radios: one A.350, two RA.4A, five RF.3C and one RA.2.

Although the Italian General Staff was highly impressed by the division's performance during maneuvers, this was probably due more to the enthusiasm of the troops and the fact that the rest of the Italian divisions were even more poorly equipped, than to any real attributes of the organization of the division. In few other armies would a 5600-man unit with 36 tanks and no other armored vehicles be called an armored division. The infantry that was to accompany the tanks was carried on trucks and the division lacked entirely any indirect-fire weapon larger than the 81mm mortar. Low-unit-level communications still relied on telephones and the 47mm guns of the blackshirt groups were next to useless against modern armor. Set against this, however, it should be noted that the 88mm guns did provide a very potent anti-tank capability, and the division could thus be said to be more of a mobile anti-tank formation, for which its organization was fairly well suited than an armored division in the tradition of the German panzer divisions. In the anti-tank role the infantry would not need to ride into combat but could set up screening positions in front of the 88s with their mortars and machine guns providing the covering fire to strip oncoming tanks of their infantry support while the 88s dealt with the enemy armor. Seen in this light the telephones become less of a hindrance to operations, although the role of the assault pioneer battalion in such a scenario is unknown. On the 25th of July 1943 the Fascist government fell calling into question the political reliability of the division to the new regime. To quell this uneasiness the division was removed from the MVSN and integrated into the army as the "Centauro II" division, further details of which are found in the armor section.

In addition to the above units a few specialized field units were also formed by the Militia. Two battalions were stationed in the Dodecanese Islands in the Aegean pre-war, and on 1 August 1940 they were consolidated to form the 201st Legion with a special organization of one infantry battalion (201st) and one machine gun battalion (301st). In December 1941 the machine gun battalion was broken up into three independent companies (401-403), while a second infantry battalion (301st) was formed. A special, small, battalion was authorized for the island of Elba, while the 107th Special Machine Gun Company was based in Zara.

Also authorized at the start of the war were 23 coastal defense centuries (*centurie cc.nn. per la difesa costiera*), all from legions located in Sicily for the defense of that island. It is not known what happened to these units, but they were probably disbanded to provide replacements for the rest of the Militia, for none still existed by February 1943.

Territorial Units

The territorial blackshirt units were ordered activated on 7 June 1940 and were used for internal security tasks within Italy. They retained the old-style ancient

	Officers	NCOs	Other Ranks	Light Machine Guns	Medium Machine Guns	Light Trucks	Horses & Mules	Carts	Bicycles
Territorial Cohort									
Cohort Headquarters	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Headquarters Manipolo									
Command Section	1	2	12	0	0	0	0	0	4
Service Section	0	1	9	0	0	3	0	0	0
Three Centuries, each									
Century Headquarters	1	1	17	0	0	0	6	3	3
Four Manipoli, each									
Manipolo HQ	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
Three Rifle Squads, each	0	1	10	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mobile Territorial Cohort									
Cohort Headquarters	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Headquarters Manipolo									
Command Section	1	2	12	0	0	0	0	0	4
Service Section	0	1	15	0	0	3	0	0	0
Three Centuries, each									
Century Headquarters	1	1	20	0	0	0	6	3	3
Three Rifle Manipoli, each									
Manipolo HQ	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
Three Rifle Squads, each	0	1	10	1	0	0	0	0	0
Machine Gun Manipolo									
Manipolo HQ	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
Two MG Squads, each	0	1	10	0	1	0	0	0	0

MVSN Territorial Units, from June 1940

Roman system of unit designation and were lightly armed and equipped. Seventy-eight territorial cohorts (battalions) were raised (carrying the parent legion numerical designation plus 200), along with fifty-four mobile territorial cohorts (using the parent legion designation plus 400).

Communications within the territorial and mobile territorial cohorts were based entirely on semaphore flags, there being one signaller in each manipolo (platoon) HQ, one in each century (company) HQ, and four in the cohort HQ. Transport was similarly primitive, consisting of three requisitioned 2-horse carts in each century HQ and three requisitioned light van trucks in

each cohort HQ. The only real difference between the two types of territorial cohorts was the assignment of a light machine gun to each rifle squad and the conversion of the fourth platoon to a medium MG platoon with Fiat 35 or St. Etienne machine guns in the mobile battalion.

In 1943 a new wave of second-line battalions was activated by the MVSN, consisting of 81 coastal battalions and 51 territorial battalions (all designated by the parent legion number plus 300). This, however, was the last gasp of the Militia and had no effect on subsequent events.