



The EYES of VENICE

The Italian Navy over the Northern Adriatic during the Great War by Pietro Lando

WHEN THE DECISION WAS MADE for Italy's military intervention alongside the Triple Entente, thanks to the so-called 'Intesa' (Italy's agreement with the French and the English), Venice immediately became the hub of the *Regia Marina's* (Italian Navy's) efforts as far as the strategic situation was concerned. This was because, in the enemy's eyes, the so-called lagoon city was a critical target: for its both political role, as a symbol of the fights for the *Risorgimento* unification movement, and for its military *Arsenale*, and civil (railway and port) infrastructure

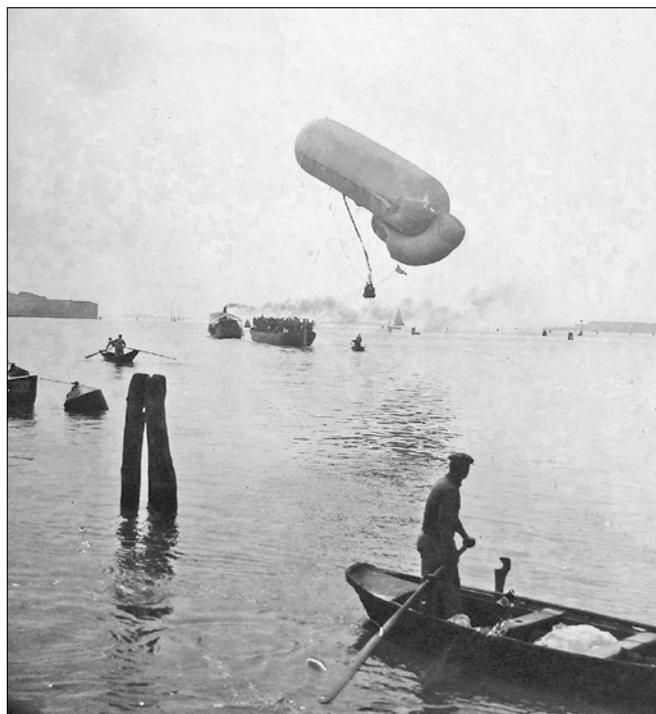
It became fundamentally important for the *Marina* to undertake scouting missions for defence purposes, to sight in time any attack from either the sea and the sky, as well as reconnaissance activities, depending on the offensive, in order to plan attacks on the enemy bases, and also the need to direct accurate fire from coastal batteries.

Therefore, balloons, airships, seaplanes and aeroplanes were deemed to be the ideal vehicles for these missions, as they were able to rise high above the sea and sight from afar any naval approaches and, being now equipped with observers and cameras, they were also able to carry out their reconnaissance tasks.¹

In reality, the strategic based demands, made 'Venice's eyes' a bit cross-eyed because, in addition to their own defensive and offensive needs, as far as the sea and the enemy naval bases were concerned, the *Marina* was also called in to support the *Regio Esercito* (the Italian Royal Army) in its offensive on the Isonzo River front. Basically, the navy had to cover the left wing of the *III Armata* (Army) with its artillery mounted

A Drachen type observation balloon being towed into the lagoon by a steamboat of Venice's Municipal Company ACNI for Inland Navigation. In the background, the San Servolo Island.

:INHMV - Italian Navy Historical Museum, Venice (Museo Storico della Marina Militare di Venezia) Photograph Archives.



on ships, on floating pontoons or on monitors. This also meant that air control was necessary, in order to observe enemy movements and direct artillery fire, therefore airships, balloons, aeroplanes and also seaplanes, belonging both to the Army as well as to the Navy were involved.

On the other hand, the need to keep the enemy fleet under close control required daily aerial surveillance over the Adriatic, as far as the Austro-Hungarian bases on the Istrian coast, notably Pola, Trieste and Fiume.

Lighter-than-air craft were the first to operate. A fleet of balloons had been available at Venice from 1894, based at Campalto, on the edge of the lagoon, and within the *Campo Trincerato di Mestre*, (Mestre Entrenched Camp). By the end of the 19th century, the use of captive balloons was practically established, for control of artillery fire as well as for observation. On 2 October 1910, the first airship also arrived; it was named P2, with a mixed crew from both the Army and the Navy.

The need to produce a photographic mosaic of Venice, initially, and of its lagoon, later, was an opportunity for the *Aerostatieri del Genio* (Army Specialist Engineer Battalion, balloon battalion, under the direction of Captain Cesare Tardivo, the commander of its Photography Section) to master the secrets of aerial photography, a truly difficult art, which, at the time (1906-1910), was in its infancy.

The *Piazzaforte di Venezia* (Venice fortified town) took on an extremely strategic role in the following years, when the evolution of the international relations brought about an ever-more probable change in the military alliances and the more likely enemy became the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In the meantime, a second hangar was built for airships at Campalto.

A curious snapshot showing an airship of the 3rd Exploration Airship Squadron moored to a 'bricola', the name given to the poles that mark the navigable canals in the Venice Lagoon: note, in fact, that the water just reaches the thighs of several of the sailors. In the background, to the right, the city of Chioggia.

:INHMV Photograph Archives

