

Libya 1911: The Genesis Of Aerial Bombardment

How an Italian pilot began the air war era

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-[T]he many bombers who would come after him – those who would strike at places like Guernica, Dresden and Hiroshima – would do more damage and take more lives than the young Italian pilot could ever have imagined.

Italy recently said it was ready to join in Nato's air attacks on targets in Libya – and with the announcement came a sense of history repeating itself.

It was in Libya, almost exactly a century ago, that a young Italian pilot carried out the first ever air raid.

During fighting in November 1911 between Italy and forces loyal to the Turkish, Ottoman Empire, Lieutenant Giulio Gavotti wrote in a letter to his father: "Today I have decided to try to throw bombs from the aeroplane.

"It is the first time that we will try this and if I succeed, I will be really pleased to be the first person to do it."

And soon afterwards Lieutenant Gavotti did indeed hang out of his flimsy aircraft and fling a bomb at troops in a desert oasis below.

In that instant he introduced the world to the idea of war from the air. He had begun the age of the bomber, and opened the door to all the horrors it would bring.

The BBC World Service has obtained copies of the letters that the lieutenant wrote home from Libya. And they reveal his thoughts at the moment he carried out his historic, one-man raid.

At the time Italy was still a young country – unified less than 50 years earlier.

It was energetic and eager for conquest, and saw parts of the collapsing Ottoman Empire as ripe for the taking – including territory in Libya.

With the outbreak of war, Lieutenant Gavotti was ordered help load several aircraft aboard a ship and head for North Africa.

Bomb in pocket

He had imagined that he would only be flying reconnaissance missions there, but then realised that more was required of him.

Gavotti dropped the bombs from a Taube (Dove) monoplane, designed by Austrian Igo Etrich "Today two boxes full of bombs arrived," he wrote in a letter to his father, sent from Naples. "We are expected to throw them from our planes."

"It is very strange that none of us have been told about this, and that we haven't received any instruction from our superiors. So we are taking the bombs on board with the greatest precaution.

"It will be very interesting to try them on the Turks."

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This was only eight years after the pioneering Wright brothers in America had managed the first, short flight. Flying was still in its infancy.

"As soon as the weather is clear, I head to the camp to take my plane out," the Gavotti wrote.

"Near the seat, I have fixed a little leather case with padding inside. I have laid the bombs in it very carefully. These are small round bombs - weighing about a kilo-and-a-half each. I put three in the case and another one in the front pocket of my jacket."

Gavotti took off and headed for Ain Zara. It is now a town just east of Tripoli, but at the time he described it as a small oasis.

There he would have expected to find Arab fighters and Turkish troops that were allied in the fight against the Italian invasion.

Media praise

Gavotti's bomb at Ain Zara may not have caused any casualties In his letter, which was made available to the BBC by his grandson, Paolo de Vecchi, the Lieutenant wrote: "After a while, I notice the dark shape of the oasis. With one hand, I hold the steering wheel, with the other I take out one of the bombs and put it on my lap."

"I am ready. The oasis is about one kilometre away. I can see the Arab tents very well.

"I take the bomb with my right hand, pull off the security tag and throw the bomb out, avoiding the wing.

"I can see it falling through the sky for couple of seconds and then it disappears. And after a little while, I can see a small dark cloud in the middle of the encampment.

"I have hit the target!

"I then send two other bombs with less success. I still have one left which I decide to launch later on an oasis close to Tripoli.

“I come back really pleased with the result. I go straight to report to General Caneva. Everybody is satisfied.”

Back home in Italy, the jingoistic press soon reported the exploit with great delight.

With his small bomb, Lieutenant Gavotti may have caused very few if any casualties in his lone raid on that dusty, Libyan oasis.

But he had shown for the first time that it was possible to carry out attacks from an aircraft.

And the many bombers who would come after him – those who would strike at places like Guernica, Dresden and Hiroshima – would do more damage and take more lives than the young Italian pilot could ever have imagined.

Thanks to Stop NATO for this article.

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