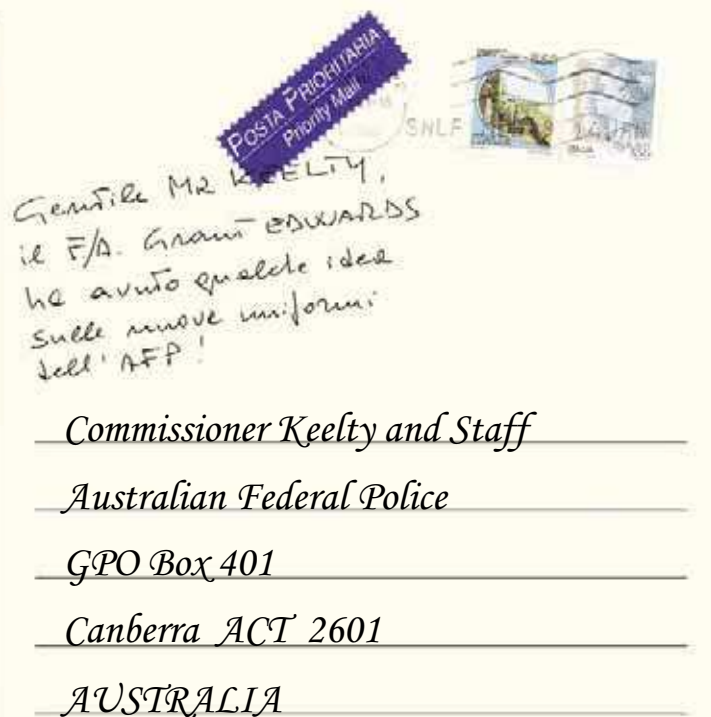




Post Card from ...

Italy

By Douglas Ranmuthugala



On a recent visit to Rome, I had the privilege of visiting the headquarters of the Regiment of the Cuirassiers, a very colourful section of the Italian Carabinieri. I was in the company of Federal Agents Grant Edwards and Robert Wilson who were, at the time, in Rome on duty. The visit was made possible through the good offices of Lt-Col Francesco Zaccaria, the very popular Italian Liaison Officer with the AFP in Canberra.

It was an extremely interesting visit, one that sometimes took me back several centuries in European history.

The headquarters of the Reggimento Corazzieri – as the Regiment of Cuirassiers is called in Italian – is located on via XX Settembre in central Rome. The complex is named after Major Negri di Santfront, commander of a Carabinieri squadron that charged, with drawn sabres, to save King Victor Emmanuel of Savoy at the Battle of Pastrengo during the Fourth War of Independence in 1848 – fought by Italy (at that time called the Kingdom of Piedmont) against the Austrian Empire. It is located close the Quirinale,

the palace of the President. One of the main tasks of the Cuirassiers is to protect the President and provide him with ceremonial escorts.

The Cuirassiers are big men on big horses.

To join this elite corps, one has to be a trained member of the Carabinieri with a minimum service of six months, with excellent rating, and be at least 1.9 metres tall.

The horses are more than 17 hands in height and surprisingly, come all the way from Ireland. In fact, when we visited the headquarters, a heavy vehicle capable of transporting six horses was ready for departure to Ireland, with its crew of Cuirassiers.

After being selected for service in the regiment, troopers undergo a period of rigorous training that turns them into accomplished horsemen, capable of handling any problem that may occur in their task of maintaining public order and providing close protection to VIPs. Only then can they don the burnished cuirasses and plumed helmets so familiar to Italians.

In working gear, Cuirassiers are armed with the latest weaponry and their trusty steeds are replaced by police motorcycles.

Sabres and Beretta M/12s: Cuirassiers of the Italian Carabinieri



The roots of the Regiment date back to 1383, when King Amedeo VII of Savoy formed a special group of archers as, what one may call, the Royal Life Guards. The unit was named the Guardia del Corpo (body guard) by King Victor Emmanuel of Savoy.

When the Carabinieri took over all national policing tasks, the Cuirassiers became part of it.

To mark its longer history, the Reggimento Corazzieri has a double escutcheon – one with the insignia of the Carabinieri and the other depicting the black eagle of the house of Savoy. The regimental motto is VIRTUS IN PERICULIS FERMIOR – very roughly translated means, “More the danger, greater the valour”.

In a quaint footnote to its history, apparently after World War II, following the referendum that formulated the new form of republican government, the former head of state, King Umberto II of Savoy, released the Cuirassiers from their oath of fidelity to the crown and the house of Savoy. Only then were the Cuirassiers free to pledge their loyalty to the president and the people of Italy.

Today, the regiment is commanded by a general and consists of two mounted squadrons and a close protection unit with a logistics unit and administrative unit that includes medical, veterinary and farrier services, in support. The administrative unit is capable of providing all the services necessary to maintain equipment and horses in perfect condition.

Training is done in a well-appointed training area within the complex.

On our visit, we were met at the headquarters by the affable Lt-Col Marco Gervasi who gave us a brief account of the regiment before handing us over to Capt Vitaliano Buti, Commander of the 2nd Squadron. Capt Buti, an impressive officer, escorted us round the complex.

Federal Agent Edwards is an exceptionally big man, as those who know him will confirm, but Capt Buti and his men easily matched him in height – if not in physique. Capt Buti’s cook’s tour enabled us to see the facilities available to the regiment to make it an efficient and effective unit. We could see how the men are trained, the horses provided with necessary equipment and attention, and even how horse shoes were turned out by the smithy.

All the Cuirassiers share the same mess, in contrast to practises in most European services where the officers and men have separate messing facilities. The mess for the officers is located on top of some old Roman ruins which were only disclosed when excavations were done for renovations. Today, the dining room opens out to sections of old Roman walls and well preserved mosaics. Murals done by former members adorn some of the walls, while trophies and mementos of the Regiment line the corridors. It is indeed a fitting living area for such a prestigious regiment.

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