

THE *CORAZZIERI*, THE ITALIAN CORPS OF CUIRASSIERS

The Origins

The first trace of a company of Archers and Squires entrusted with task of guaranteeing the security of the residence and of the members of the House of Savoy dates back to the 15th Century. The corps was established when Emmanuel Philibert, Duke of Savoy, (1553–1580) nicknamed “Testa di Ferro” (Ironhead), created the “Guard of Honour of the Prince”, a company of about fifty men under the command of a captain who had their baptism of fire in the victorious battle of St. Quintin, on the 10th of August 1557.

After having been constantly amplified, in terms of men and tasks, in the 1630s the unit comprised at least 400 men divided into four companies, one of which was the “Company of His Highness’s Cuirasses”, whose members began to wear the monogram of the State authority on the breastplate of their armours. Despite the constant change in institutional forms, this tradition has been handed down to our days.

From Victor Amadeus II to Victor Emmanuel I

Under the long reign of Victor Amadeus II (1675–1730), the different units of the security and ceremonial guards were merged into a single corps called the “Guardie del Corpo” (“Body Guards”), which was subdivided into four companies of Body Guards, one company of the Guards of the Door and one company of the Swiss Guards.

From then and through another century, few changes were made to the uniforms or to the composition of the unit, which was deployed in normal institutional tasks as well as in frequent war campaigns, where they distinguished themselves for their excellence.

Napoleon’s two military campaigns in Italy in 1796 and 1800 disrupted the old equilibrium between Italian States. Following the occupation of Piedmont, King Charles Emmanuel IV left with only a few guards and took refuge in Spain, where he abdicated in favour of his brother Victor Emmanuel I on the 4th of June 1802. Thus, most of the unit was transferred to the service of the French government where it formed the *Squadron Carabinieri Piemontesi*, the Squadron of Piedmontese Carabineers.

1814: the birthdate of the Carabinieri

Victor Emmanuel I, who was exiled for over a decade, was only able to regain possession of his territories on the 20th of May 1814, when he re-instated the old institutions. The corps of the Body Guards was re-established with the same number of military personnel it had in the 18th Century.

On the 13th of July of that same year, a unit was created called *Corpo dei Carabinieri Reali*, the Corps of Royal Carabineers, which the Crown licenced to perform occasional tasks of “escorting royals”. From that moment on, the traditional prerogatives exclusively conferred to the Body Guards ceased while the reforms put in place by Charles Albert (1834–1849) reduced their personnel and competences, giving a greater relevance to the Carabinieri. Moreover, the Carabinieri were the ones designated to form a mounted squadron of honour to serve at the wedding of the Crown Prince Victor Emmanuel and Maria Adelaide, Archduchess of Austria, in 1842.

The Body Guards were last deployed in the task of protecting the King, alongside the Carabinieri, in Italy’s First War of Independence. On the 30th of April 1848, during the Skirmish of Pastrengo, the Carabinieri engaged in what would be the first heroic episode to be written in their collective history.

The Body Guards were formally dissolved in 1867 even if, during the previous twenty years, only one surviving company had continued to perform security services, albeit only at Turin’s Royal Palace. Their tasks and prerogatives were absorbed by the Carabinieri, which were established as a Corps on the 24th of January 1861.

The royal wedding of Florence

On the 7th of February 1868, Crown Prince Umberto married Princess Margherita of Savoy, the daughter of the Duke of Genoa. For the occasion, 80 of the most imposing Carabinieri cavalrymen were taken from the Legions of Florence, Milan and Bologna to form a ceremonial and royal escort squadron. They wore the same uniforms they donned in 1842 although this time the unit was not dismissed: it was assigned to the security of the royal apartments and to the protection of the royal family.

This marked the birth of the modern Cuirassiers, a corps that originally comprised one captain in command, 4 officers, 9 non-commissioned officers (soon after increased to 12) and 60 Cuirassiers (later increased to 88).

During the early years of operation, the unit changed name several times: "Guardie d'Onore di Sua Maestà" (His Majesty's Honour Guards), "Carabinieri Reali Guardie del Corpo di Sua Maestà" (Royal Carabineer Body Guards of His Majesty), "Drappello Guardie di Sua Maestà" (His Majesty's Guard Squad) and, until 1946, "Squadrone Carabinieri del Re" (Carabineer Squadron of the King). However the more popular name of "Cuirassiers", now designating the Regiment at the service of the President of the Republic, gradually took hold at the end of this long period of time.

The two World Wars

The Cuirassiers continued to be deployed in warfare, escorting the King in military operations, and earning individual distinctions: airplane pilots Brigadier Mocellin and Carabineer Guard Urbinati were awarded the Silver Medal of Military Valour for their enterprises. Many Cuirassiers also joined the Italian Resistance Movement after the 8th of September 1943, when they were left without orders from higher echelons.

The Mausoleo Ardeatino is the resting place of Carabineer Guard Calcedonio Giordano, Gold Medal of Military Valour, who was arrested, tortured and killed at Rome's Fosse Ardeatine in 1944.

The Republican period

On the 13th of June 1946, in the Quirinale Palace's Courtyard of Honour, King Umberto II freed the Cuirassiers from their oath to the Monarchy. The King's Guards were then transformed into the "3° Squadrone Carabinieri a Cavallo" (3rd Mounted Carabineer Squadron) and surrendered their traditional uniforms until Luigi Einaudi, the President of the Republic from 1948 to 1955, re-established the "Squadrone Carabinieri Guardie" (Squadron of Carabineer Guards) and the uniforms of 1876. In 1965, the unit was renamed "Comando Carabinieri Guardie del Presidente della Repubblica" (Carabineer Command of the Guards of the President of the Republic) and, in 1990, the "Reggimento Carabinieri Guardie della Repubblica" (Carabineer Regiment of the Guards of the President of the Republic).

On the 24th of December 1992 the old name was re-established, officially restoring the name of "Reggimento Corazzieri" (Cuirassier Regiment) to the stately guards of the President of the Republic of Italy.