

2022**Antonio Mariani, 'The 36th Strategic Interdiction
Brigade: An Italian Contribution to the Cold War'
(Excerpts)****Citation:**

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Summary:

These excerpts from the memoirs of a former member of Italy's 36th Air Brigade, published by the Italian Air Force, provides fascinating perspective on the shock felt by officers when they received the dismantling instructions and then how they planned and carried out their tasks. The following sentences convey the emotional reactions: "The dismantling, for those who experienced it, was a real demolition. A frenetic destructive activity pervaded the military community which, almost with anger and a certain sadism, destroyed and reduced to useless remains everything on which it had studied, worked and operated." As the excerpts makes clear, not everything was destroyed and junked. Consistent with the Joint Staff's original proposals, sensitive components, such as the warheads were returned to the U.S., while other parts of the missiles were salvaged and made available to other organizations. Some equipment went to Italy's "San Marco" space research program, just as Prime Minister Fanfani had proposed to President Kennedy during their meeting in January 1963.

To what extent the dismantling procedure in Turkey paralleled the one in Italy remains unclear, at least on the basis of available documentation.

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The dismantling of the Jupiter intermediate range ballistic missile bases in Italy, operation "Pot Pie I", was implemented from 1 to 23 April, while "Pot Pie II", which began on 26 July [sic], concerned missiles based in Turkey.

[...]

The dismantling order suddenly arrived at the bases of the 36th Air brigade: almost no one expected such an end, above all in consideration of the fact that the unit had only recently become operational.

Then lieutenant Fiorentino Efaicchio who performed the function of LCO [LAUNCH CONTROL OFFICER] at the Gravina di Puglia launch site, recalls those days:

"On April 1, 1963 I was performing LCO service at the Gravina launch base, and I was right in the LCT [LAUNCH CONTROL TRAILER] when I received the usual coded message from the Operations Room of Gioia del Colle which this time - the only one in the whole period - told me to break the terracotta capsule which I always wore during the 24 hours of service (as strictly prescribed) threaded onto a chain with white metal dots hanging around the neck together with the launch key, and read the instructions contained in a leaflet. This was the 'key' word that allowed the message to be read and to take measures of what was ordered to be done. From the order, decoded together with the USAF LCO (authenticator), came the immediate cessation of the operational activity of the weapon system. Despite the surprise and bewilderment, what was ordered was activated. Demilitarization began with the immediate interruption of operational activity and continued in the following days with the dismantling of missiles and all support equipment. This is how I lived the entire disposal operation from minute to minute. Almost with disbelief and like a sad dream it comes back to me: having lived in contact with such a deadly weapon, taking care of it with extreme attention, following every control and maintenance action to always maintain maximum operational readiness, living in expectation of a message that could have required the real launch, feel the responsibility for the eventual insertion of the key, having lived the terrible days of the 'Cuba crisis' in anxiety. Then suddenly, that April 1st, the end of everything. And so it was that after a few months I found myself at the 1st Remote-controlled Interceptor Air Brigade and then at the Central School of Flight Instructors in Grottaglie (Taranto), where I resumed my activity as a pilot as an acrobatic and instrumental flight instructor and of Jupiter never I heard no more".

General Oreste Genta, the last Commander of the 36th Air brigade, had the task of organizing the dismantling and transfer of personnel. The order to deactivate the weapon system arrived at all bases in the night between 30 March and 1 April 1963. The first action, almost immediate and following the order, was the dismantling of the initiator (Squib) placed at the top inside the combustion chamber of the main engine. General Genta recalls the event as follows:

"The plan had to be prepared by the Command of the 3rd Bari Air Region: the Commander, General Bavassano, commissioned a group of his General Staff to carry it out. Since things lasted beyond a certain period, I detailed the project in a very short time (a few days) and presented it to the Commander of the 3rd Air Region, who, after a brief examination, not only approved, but praised the timeliness of the realization of the project, the perfect synthesis of the problem and the prospect of the immediate realization of the demilitarization and recovery project. The project was completed flawlessly on schedule. No closing ceremony took place; I only organized a modest reception to greet the few civil and military authorities, since I was about to go to command the Sardinian Air Force."

After the 1st of April, the Autotrasporti Group of the aerobrigade carried out the transport to Gioia del Colle of the missiles and all the support equipment, trailers, and tanks, from the launch areas of the ten groups. All material was shelved pending scrapping, shipping to the United States, or re-employment in Italy. In one location all the cables were cut to a length of about two meters, and after having hooked them to the jeep they were removed from the channels: the cut was performed with ax blows and the cables were piled up along the internal streets of the base and then transported to the base of Gioia del Colle. But the order was cancelled for the other groups, which sent the cables complete and intact. At the airport the dismantling was carried out using the blowtorch to cut the thruster units into pieces which were transported to the foundries with Air Force vehicles. Personnel and trucks with trailers were sent from the 1st Air Brigade of Padua to collect the material and scrap metal: the latter were taken to an industry near Milan. Some wagons and generators were made available for the needs of other departments. A few years after these events, the empty tanks of the PDT [Production and distribution trailers] and the Herman Nelson heaters were assigned to the various groups of the 1st Padua Air brigade. Some parts were used for the San Marco project, others were shipped to the United States with the large Globemaster aircraft, such as warheads, jet engines and guidance system equipment.

What was not recovered was destroyed, including the documentation: it seems that after the dismantling had taken place everything that was left was burned. Until a few decades ago, in an abandoned section of the Gioia del Colle airport, the Launching Pads lay abandoned. The only remaining testimonies were the portraits of the three commanders and the crest donated by the ATC of Sheppard AFB in 1962, which were exhibited in the Command Office of the 36th Wing [36mo Stormo].

On 21 June 1963, the General Staff, with the signature of the sub-chief, general of the air division Gastone Valentini, ordered the transition of the 36th Air Brigade to the "cadre" position - which in aeronautical jargon means disbandment - starting from 1 July 1963: under the same date the Gioia del Colle Air Base Command was established. Finally, on 1 August 1966, the 36th Wing, still operational, would be reconstituted.

The dismantling, for those who experienced it, was a real demolition. A frenetic destructive activity pervaded the military community which, almost with anger and a certain sadism, destroyed and reduced to useless remains everything on which it had studied, worked and operated. We worked quickly to make it quick, to finish this story, to physically erase it, so that everything would disappear. The sooner it was done and the sooner we left for the new locations: break, leave and forget, with the hope of obtaining the requested location. It was a real diaspora. A homogeneous group under the technical- operational profile was disintegrated and scattered, starting from 30 June 1963 when the first transfers to new destinations began.

Not everyone was able to take advantage of the acquired technical baggage and few used it to the fullest in the new jobs. Personnel with cutting-edge technical baggage were dispersed to revive those departments that had remained understaffed precisely because of the needs of the 36th Air Brigade. Those who would work on the San Marco project and those who would be transferred to the 1st Air Brigade had an advantage, including those who returned to the flight units to specialize in navigation systems, control towers, radio rooms, maintenance centers, electronic aiming, and inertial platforms for the F-104 Starfighter interceptors, in addition to those who remained at the Gioia del Colle airport for the expected reconstitution of the Wing. Obviously satisfied were also the pilot officers who returned to fly, but they did not forget the experience gained at the Air Brigade.

[...]

Part of the staff went to work on the San Marco project [NB: the Italian Space project], conceived by

General of Aeronautical Engineering Luigi Broglio and implemented by the Aerospace Research Center of the University of Rome in collaboration with the Air Force and the CNR [Italian National Research Center]. In fact, the end of the Jupiter experience coincided with the beginning of the Italian space program. With the means recovered by the GSE [GROUND SUPPORT EQUIPMENT] of the Jupiter missile, the personnel coming from the dissolved 36th Air Brigade gave new life to the project itself.

[...]

The personnel of the 36th Air Brigade assigned to the San Marco project recovered the decommissioned material of the Jupiter system at the Gioia del Colle airport to then send it to Kenya, including some Herman Nelson heaters, EET [Electrical Equipment Trailer] and LCT [Launch Control Trailer] wagons emptied and used as command wagons, telemetry stations, FIT [Fault Isolation Trailer] wagons emptied of their contents (in addition to two full ones), generators of 30 and 100 Kw., a crane, chariots and tanks for water and fuel, short and long range theodolites, toolboxes and various other equipment.