

THE MESSINA EARTHQUAKE MEDAL 1908

The Messina & Reggio Calabria Earthquake

On the 28th December, 1908 at 0520 hours an earthquake of 7.1 on the moment magnitude scale¹ struck Sicily and Calabria region of southern Italy. Its duration was approximately one minute. Its epicentre was in the Straits of Messina which separates Sicily and town of Reggio

Calabria situated on the 'toe' of the Italian Peninsular. The port city of Messina was practically destroyed and an estimated 75,000 people killed. Reggio Calabria and other nearby small towns and villages were severely damaged and 25,000 people lost their lives.



Sicily/Reggio Calabria ~ Straits Of Messina

The earthquake was one of the most destructive to strike the continent of Europe. The shock waves caused landslides on the eastern coast of Sicily and along the coast and inland areas from Reggio Calabria.

The majority of those killed were asleep as their homes crumbled in ruins over them. Many were trapped in the debris and sustained serious injuries which later caused their deaths.

Approximately ten minutes after the earthquake, the sea on both sides of the Straits dramatically withdrew, as a 12-metre tsunami in three successive waves flooded the coastal areas. The sea front at Reggio Calabria was destroyed, drowning many people. Further along the coast houses and a railway bridge were swept away. In Messina the tsunami caused further devastation and deaths. Residents who had survived the earthquake had gathered on the seafront seeking safety. The second and third waves overwhelmed the seafront and harbour, consuming those who had gathered there. Parts of the sea wall were breached and small boats tied up at the pier were broken up into matchwood. The sea mercilessly continued inland engulfing three city blocks. Ships, fishing boats, ferries moored or at anchor in the harbour collided with one another as the tsunami waves passed them by. It left behind a harbour covered with wreckage, bodies of people and animals that had been drowned. The enormous surge of sea water caused further deaths and

damage along the eastern coast of Sicily. The tsunami wave reached the island of Malta two hours later flooding and damaging buildings. Approximately 2,000 people were drowned by the tsunami in Messina, Reggio Calabria and coastal areas.

The earthquake reshaped the topography of Messina as sections of the coastline disappeared beneath the sea. A number of consular officials from countries around the world were killed as were members of the Italian nobility and prominent citizens. The commercial and historic areas of the city were destroyed. Fires erupted due to broken gas mains and with clouds of dust, debris and torrential rain,

compounded the already horrendous effects of the disaster. A number of after- shocks caused damaged buildings to fall down killing and injuring some of those who had survived the earthquake and rescuers.

The destruction in Messina was replicated in Reggio Calabria which had suffered a previous earthquake in 1783.



The 1908 Messina Earthquake Medal

Medical personnel both in Messina and Reggio Calabria had been killed and civilian and military hospitals destroyed. Until relief arrived there was no medical support for the survivors. Telegraphic communication had been cut. Messina's police force virtually ceased to exist and many military personnel garrisoned in the city were killed.

The Italian government became aware of the scale of the disaster from Nicotera – a coastal town north west of Reggio Calabria on the western side of mainland Italy – where the telephones lines had not been disrupted. Italian torpedo boats had brought news of earthquake to the town's authorities for them to pass on the information to the Italian government. The Prime Minister of Italy Giovanni Giolitti (1842-1928) imposed martial law and ordered that looters would be executed. Initially the Italian navy and army were deployed to undertake search and rescue operations for survivors, tending the injured, organising food supplies, water and evacuating

survivors. Two days after the earthquake King Victor Emmanuel III (1869-1947) and Queen Elena (1873-1952) visited the area and provided helpful assistance.

News of the catastrophic earthquake reached the world's press and an international response commenced to render much needed help. The Red Cross and naval personnel from Russian and British Fleets were ordered to provide all possible humanitarian aid. They helped in searching for survivors, recovering the dead and injured from the building debris. Merchant vessels which were anchored in Messina harbour conveyed survivors to areas unaffected by the earthquake. Many other nations provided ships including the French and American navies.

The task of reconstruction in Messina began in 1909 to rebuild a new city and the Italian engineer and architect Luigi Borzi (1853-1919) was invited to submit his ideas for the project. His architectural plans for the new city took him two years to complete. Another Italian engineer

Pietro De Nava (1870-1944) was asked to draw up plans for the reconstruction of Reggio Calabria by the Mayor. Historical buildings, which had withstood the earthquake and tsunami, were incorporated in the new architectural



Obverse Of The 1908 Messina Earthquake Medal

designs. In Messina only a few of its historical buildings survived and many others had to be demolished. Many of those who had been made homeless were relocated to other parts of Sicily or to the Italian mainland. Some took the opportunity to emigrate to the United States.

The assistance provided during the relief operation was recognised by the Italian Royal Family who instituted a 'merit medal' to be awarded to those who gave distinguished service 'whether by rendering assistance and medical treatment or by donating health and administrative services and meeting the material and spiritual needs to the sufferers of the disaster'. This merit medal was struck in gold, silver and bronze in two sizes – 40mm for institutions and 30mm for individuals. Approximately 300 of these medals were awarded.

A decree of the 20th February, 1910 announced that a commemorative medal was to be established to award those who came to help the Italian citizens in the disaster. This particular medal, The Messina Earthquake Medal 1908 is to be found in a number of British naval medal groups of the period. It was awarded to those who landed to give help and assistance in the relief operation.

The obverse of the 32mm diameter silver Messina Earthquake Medal 1908 has a laterally-pierced loop and ring for ribbon suspension and the bust of King Victor Emanuel III facing left. It is circumscribed with the legend 'VITTORIO EMANULE III RE D'ITALIA' (Victor Emanuel King of Italy). Inscribed beneath the neck of the king is the signature of the medal



Reverse Of The 1908 Messina Earthquake Medal

designer 'Luigi Giorgi' (1848-1912). The reverse is inscribed in six lines with the words 'MEDAGLIA / COMMEMORATIVA / TERREMOTO / CALABRO-SICULO / 28 DICEMBRE / 1908' (Commemorative Medal Calabrian-Sicilian Earthquake 28 December 1908) surrounded by an oak wreath. The 36mm wide ribbon is green with white edges and a central white stripe.

The following medals were awarded to the Royal Navy:- HMS Boxer (52), HMS Duncan (607), HMS Euryalus (640), HMS Exmouth (598), HMS Lancaster (560), HMS Minerva (355), HMS Philomel (35), HMS Sutlej (613) and the Malta Yard (3). A total of 559 medals were awarded to personnel of the British and Foreign mercantile marine.

After consideration by Italian seismologists they concluded that the earthquake was caused by vertical displacement of tectonic plates in the Straits of Messina, part of a regional tectonic feature known as the Calabrian Arc. As recently as 2008 it was proposed that the tsunami was caused by an undersea landslide and not by the earthquake.

¹Defined in 1979 by Thomas C. Hanks and Hiro Kanamori the Moment Magnitude Scale is a measure of an earthquake's magnitude based on its seismic moment. It is similar to the Richter scale and has approximately the same magnitude on both scales.

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Sources

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