

THE ITALIAN MERIT & REMEMBRANCE MEDAL FOR THE MARSICA EARTHQUAKE 1915

Marsica is a geographical region in the Abruzzo of central Italy. It is situated between the plain of the former Fucine Lake, the National Park of Abruzzo, Lazio, Molise, the Carsoli Plain and the valley of Sulmona. The Fucine Lake, once the third largest in Italy was drained in the late 19th century. It is now surrounded by parks and nature reserves. The highest peak in the region is Mount Velino (2,487-metres) and Avezzano, in the Province of L'Aquila, is the largest city in the region.

The region derives its name from the ancient Osco-Umbrian people of the Marsi, dating back to the first millennium BC. After the collapse of the Roman Empire the Italian peninsula



and the Marsi region became part of the Ostrogothic kingdom established by the Germanic Ostrogoths in Italy (493 to 553). Subsequently, they were overcome by the Byzantines and later the Lombards who founded the Duchy of Spoleto.

On the 13th January, 1915 at 0752 hours, local time, an earthquake of a magnitude of 7, lasting for one minute occurred in central Italy. Its epicentre was at Avezzano, which was virtually destroyed. Then a small town, 95% of its population of 12,000 were killed. The death toll in the Marsica region totalled 30,000. A further 3,000 died later over the following months from disease and hardship.

Only one tall building in the town, constructed of reinforced concrete withstood the shock wave. The majority, of the buildings were poorly constructed of rocky drystone walling. There was no enforcement by civic authorities concerning building regulations and the structurally weak buildings fell down as the earthquake shook them to pieces. Destruction was widespread across central Italy and tremors reached Rome where there was minor structural damage. Survivors were rescued from among the ruins in the earthquake zone. One man survived beneath the rubble and debris for twenty-five days before being pulled out. The rescue operation was

uncoordinated and disorganised. A significant problem the rescuers faced was how to clear and dispose of the rubble and debris from the vast area of devastation. Roads were blocked or non-existent, communication links and power distribution had been severed, and lack of equipment caused some of the rescuers to cease their rescue efforts. Many town officials, police and emergency service personnel were dead who would have taken responsibility to organise rescue and relief. Early reports from the affected areas failed to mention the seriousness of the situation. It was not until the late evening of the 13th and early hours of the 14th that a clearer understanding of what had happened and the scale of the disaster, particularly at Avezzano became apparent to the authorities in Rome. The government in Rome initially assumed that the information they had received from survivors had obscured factual details being unaware that many local officials had been killed and telegraphic communication severely disrupted. The first reports were sent by traumatised survivors who were unable to send coherent information. In the days following the earthquake there was a steady stream of refugees from Avezzano and the surrounding area into other Italian cities seeking shelter and sustenance.

The earthquake caused a paralysis of the economic and social life in the Marsica region. Without any law enforcement looting was widespread. Breakdown in the ability to communicate effectively throughout the region delayed help especially to those in remote areas. Although the rescuers had brought with them basic equipment, the essentials of food, water, medicines, blankets, warm clothing for the survivors who had to endure the adverse effects of the winter weather had been overlooked.

It became clear to many that the Italian state was unprepared for such a disaster and this generated considerable opposition towards the government in the national press. With the shadow of the First World War falling across Italy, the government rejected international help. They were concerned that their political image abroad would be harmed in asking for assistance which would undermine Italy's perception of its global strength and status, especially in time of



Marsica Earthquake Remembrance Medal 1915

war. Italy declared war on the 23rd May, 1915 on Austro-Hungary, siding with the Triple Entente. The declaration of war was not popular amongst the Italian populace and divided the nation.

Gradually relief committees were established in the devastated areas to coordinate relief and re-establish control. As the war progressed and the casualties mounted there was widespread disenchantment and demoralisation not only in the Marsica region but throughout Italy. When soldiers began to return at the end of the war, they faced unemployment which was not helped by the significant increase in the prices for raw materials for reconstruction. This and the long-term effects of the earthquake delayed the recovery within the Marsica region, which was predominantly agricultural.

King Vittorio Emanuele III (1869-1947) instituted a Merit Medal for the Marsica Earthquake. The 35·33mm diameter medal was issued in silver and bronze with an integral bar for ribbon suspension. On the obverse is the profile head of King Vittorio Emanuele III facing right and circumscribed with the wording ‘VITTORIO EMANUELE III’. Beneath the neckline are the initials



‘S.J.’ for the Italian medallist Stefano Johnson. Marsica Earthquake Remembrance Medal 1915
The reverse is inscribed in three lines ‘TERREMOTO 13 GENNAIO 1915’ – Earthquake 13th January 1915 – surrounded by an oak wreath. The 37mm wide ribbon has a broad red stripe, edged with narrower black stripes.

The Merit Medal was awarded to individuals who had provided humanitarian aid and donations to the victims of the Marsica earthquake. Eligible recipients had to have distributed aid and donations between the 13th January 1915 and June 1915. There are two versions of this medal with a left facing profile head and a right facing profile head.

There were variants of this Italian medal, including the example shown, the King Vittorio Emanuele III Ricordo¹ Medal In Memory Of The Marsica Earthquake Of 1915. The bronze-gilt

medal has a laterally pierced ball and ring for ribbon suspension. On the obverse is the left facing profile of King Vittorio Emanuele III circumscribed ‘VITTORIO EMANUELE III RE D’ITALIA’ – Vittorio Emanuele III King of Italy. Beneath the neckline towards the right are the initials ‘S.J.’ for Stefano Johnson. On the reverse, inscribed in three lines are the words ‘TERREMOTO 15 GENNAIO 1915’, surrounded by an oak wreath. Why the 15th January, 1915 and not the 13th on this medal is puzzling. The ribbon is the same as that of the Merit Medal.

¹ Ricordo ~ I Remember

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Sources

Wikipedia Web-Site ~ www.wikipedia.org – Marsica; 1915 Avezzano Earthquake;

Emedal Web-Site ~ www.emedals.com

Catalogue Of Strong Earthquakes Web-Site ~ www.storing.ingv.it/cfti/cfti4/quakes

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