

MESSINA EARTHQUAKE - 1908
AMERICAN AND OTHER NON-BRITISH RECIPIENTS OF THE
ITALIAN COMMEMORATIVE MEDAL

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The fine book Angels in Blue Jackets-The Navy at Messina by Wilson and Perkins (published by Picton Publishing 'Chippenham' Ltd.) gives an in-depth story on the Messina Earthquake disaster and a full roll of the Royal Navy, British Merchant Navy, and associated recipients.

This article will attempt to expand on the work by Wilson and Perkins and discuss other possible recipients from the United States and other countries of the Italian Messina Earthquake Commemorative Medal.

After the disastrous earthquake at Messina, in the north-eastern corner of Sicily, on the 28th December 1908, relief response took many different forms.

King Vittorio Emanuele III issued the following General Order to the Army and Navy, dated Rome, January 4, 1909.

In the terrible calamity which has struck a great region in our Italy, destroying two great cities and many districts in Calabria and Sicily, I have once more been able to note in person the noble élan of the army and navy, which, joining their efforts to those of the brave officers and men of the foreign ships, have accomplished a work of sublime pity in recovering from the crumbling ruins, often by deeds of true heroism, the unfortunates buried beneath them, in tending the injured, and sheltering and providing for the survivors. Among the recent memories of the pitiable scenes which have profoundly moved me there stands out in my mind and remains deeply engraven there the feeling of admiration for the army and navy.

My grateful thought also turns spontaneously to the admirals, officers, and men of the Russian, British, German, and French warships, who, setting an admirable example of human solidarity, have contributed to the work of rescue in a spirit as generous as it was fruitful in thought and action.

His Majesty was not slow in authorizing tangible recognition of the assistance rendered and in Article No. 180, Royal Decree No. 338 of "Giornale Militare per la Marina" dated 15 August 1909, decreed that:

Article 1

There will be instituted a medal for the persons and corporate bodies which in an outstanding way on the occasion of the earthquake, which happened in Calabria and Sicily on 28th December 1908 have gained noteworthy prominence and are deserving of recognition of

the aid they gave to the survivors, or by way of assistance they did in salvage operations and worthy administrative assistance or any physical and mental aid to the survivors of the disaster...

This was followed by Article No. 44, Royal Decree No. 79 dated 20 February 1910 which decreed:

Article 4

The persons who will have the right to apply for, and wear, the medal, will be all persons both national and foreign, who in the places devastated by the earthquake during the period 28 December 1908 to the end of March 1909, helped in the aid operations...

Article 6

The period within the demand for a medal must be made...is up to and including 31 May 1910. The certificates herein described, if accepted will give a person right to a diploma authorizing the wearing of the Commemorative Medal, and this Diploma after approval will be given to (a) citizens residing in the Kingdom by the Minister of Internal Affairs, (b) to Italian citizens and foreigners residing outside of Italy by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, (c) for those who are employed and part of various administrations of the State, including the Military corps, by the various Ministers to which they are responsible....

Before discussing the scope of the various non-British recipients it is well to note that it was not necessary to have actually been at the earthquake site to have received one of the commemorative medals. Instances of fund raising or the dispatch of supplies, etc. in some instances merited the award. An example of this is the then Provost of the Town of Paisley, Scotland, William Muir MacKean who was awarded the medal for initiating a fund raising campaign in Paisley and forwarding the proceeds to Italy.

Whilst it is readily acknowledged that British naval groups containing a Messina Earthquake Medal are not uncommon, attributed foreign groups are rare indeed. I have seen only two--a German group of four medals and a French group of six medals. Perhaps the following information may be of some use in researching other groups.

AUSTRO-HUNGARY

At the time of the earthquake, the torpedo boat *Andrassy* was in Messina harbour. Although the *Andrassy* was severely damaged, her surviving crew members participated in rescue operations.

During the first days of 1909, the Vienna Volunteer Lifesaving Society announced its intention of providing three mobile camp kitchens and teams of rescue workers. These Austrians travelled by rail and road to the devastated areas to perform their good work.

FRANCE

The French naval division consisting of the cruiser *Justice*, the light cruiser *Verite*, and the destroyers *Fanfare* and *Carquois* left Toulon on 30 December 1908 for Messina.

The division rendezvoused with the destroyer *Dunois* which had been dispatched earlier to take off the Governor of Tunisia, who was in Sicily at the time of the earthquake.

After participating in rescue work, the ships left Messina on 6 January 1909.

GERMANY

The State Archives in Hamburg, West Germany, confirms that the newspaper *Hamburger Fremdenblatt* carried details of the German ships in attendance at Messina. They were the German warships *Hertha* and *Victoria Louise*; the steam ships *Bayern*, *Bremen*, *Carrara*, *Genoa*, *Hamburg*, *Illyria*, *Salvatore*, and *Therapia*.

One may then assume a sizeable German contingent.

The yacht *Emma* was also in attendance carrying Dr. Gravelitz of the Geological Institute of Jena.

ITALY

Naturally the Messina Earthquake Medal was awarded widely to Italians.

The Royal Decree of 20 February 1910 identifies members of the Army and Navy, Royal Customs Officers, Civil Guards and members of the Italian Red Cross. The quickest way to reach the core of the devastated area was, of course, by sea, and the resources of the Royal Italian Navy were extensively used in this task.

The Ministry of Marine Order Sheet No. 77 dated 18 March 1910 gives the names of the ships in attendance:

R. Elana, *V. Emanuele*, *Napoli*, *R. Margherita*, *Re Umberto*, *Sicilia*, *Dandolo*, *Garibaldi*, *Marco Polo*, *Piedmonte*, *Lombardia*, *Calabria*, *Agordat*, *Coatit*, *Artigliere*, *Bersagliere*, *Borea*, *Granatiere*, *Lanciere*, *Astore*, *Arpia*, *Alcione*, *Clio*, *Canopo*, *Centauro*, *Orfeo*, *Olimpia*, *Procione*, *Spica*, *Scorpione*, *Serpente*, *Sagittario*, *Saffo*, *Sparviero*, torped. 31, 36, 43, 48, 51, 63, 68, 75, 82, 84, 90, 95, 101, 106, 108, 113, 113, 115, 117, 120, 125, 131, 136, 138, 140, 147, 148, 149, 150, 151, *Bronte*, *Volta*, *Staffetta*, *C di Milano*, *Governolo*, *Atlante*, *Ercole*, *Ciclope*, *Tevere*, *Pagano*, *Verde*, *Velino*, rimorch. *Maddalena*, rimorch. 30, betta 5.

The Italian Red Cross also created a medal in bronze suspended from a white ribbon with a red cross embroidered thereon.

RUSSIA

The Royal Russian Naval ship *Admiral Makaroff* was one of the first two vessels to land crewmen on shore (this honour being shared with *H.M.S. Sutlej*).