

IT WAS A WAR SCENE

THE COLLAPSED BRIDGE: WORK AND EMOTIONS OF ITALIAN FIRE-FIGHTERS

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"It was a war scene", thus The New York Times titled the report of the Italian Fire Service. A war scene: even the death toll was the same as in a conflict, 43 casualties, as though a bomb had exploded on August 14.

That scenario is still printed in the eyes of the first rescuers, who were used to travel daily on that route, since the Morandi road bridge was used as a city beltway in Genoa.

At first, when rescuers reached the site of the accident they could see nothing but the heavy rainfall concealing everything, bridge included... Only when they arrived under it, they realized that large sections of the bridge were no longer there, they had partly collapsed onto the riverbed, railroad tracks and factories below. Fortunately, tenement houses and all the families living there had been spared from the falling huge concrete sections.

Mr. Davide Capello, an off-duty fire-fighter of Savona, had just driven out of a tunnel and onto the bridge over Genoa, when the road disappeared into a void. Now he recollects only a few images from that tragedy: a low, dull rumble, the huge cloud of white dust rising up in the fog and rain, and the useless, desperate braking effort which could not prevent his car from plummeting nose down... He cried: *"I am dead!"*. As soon as the car stood still he tried to understand if he had been injured and then he called the fire service and his girlfriend: *"Morandi bridge has collapsed, but I am fine"* he tried to reassure her.

Mr. Sergio Olcese, a senior fire-fighter in Genoa, remembers now the truck crushed onto the road below and hundreds of water bottles spread all over *"It was like walking on bars of soap"*. Some cars were squashed under the rubbles, other vehicles were still hanging from steel cables, in his nose the smell of gasoline and in his ears a sole, desperate cry: *"Camilla! Camilla!"* A mother calling her daughter, both trapped under a heap of debris. He and his colleagues worked relentlessly for an hour and a half to free the two women.



Also **Mr. Massimo Durante** ran to the bridge. He is a scuba diver and that day he was still wearing his orange overall, which made him stand out amid the grey of the site. *"I couldn't help but go to the bridge. The river level was rising due to the rain and rescuers might need help to retrieve the*





injured". A tragedy like this in the city where he grew up was a desperate call to be answered at any cost. *"I stopped only when I saw that all teams were full-manned and that it was too dangerous for volunteers to stay there without any PPE (Personal Protective Equipment)"*.

"A war scene" remembers **Mr. Maurizio Volpara**, one of the firefighters who rescued the driver of a truck hanging from a height of 25 m. Who can forget the voice of the driver? *"Please help me! I beg you! Get me the hell out of here!"* he cried and cried, but





he was lucky: *“The truck door supporting him handled the strain and did not break”* preventing the man from falling down while the fire-fighters were rappelling from the bridge to rescue him. A thrilling rescue operation, and relevant videos were broadcast around the globe.

Mr. Bruno Guida, a member of the heli-squad of Genoa, landed with his helicopter amid the riverbed and immediately heard some cries. *“A man and a woman, they were moaning. Their car was squashed and they were hanging upside down with no possibility to move”*. In order to get them out the fire-fighters worked two hours with prying tools and wire cutters, paying special attention not to cause further collapses.

Mr. Mario Scimone, a fire-fighter from Milan, carried out his first critical intervention in Genoa since he joined the USAR (Urban Search and Rescue) team. With his team he contributed to the rescue of a young couple. He needed a long time to process his emotions: *“When my working shift was over I went back home, but I could not stop watching TV until the last missing person was found, I could really not take my eyes from the screen”*.

Mr. Massimo Mancinelli’s disbelief in front of the collapsed bridge was short. After petting Kreole, his sniffer dog, they both start searching through the rubble, but they found only dead people. **Mr. Dioniso Stacchetti** experienced again the same shock he had in Rigopiano, in front of the hotel wiped off by an avalanche.

The Fire Chief of Genoa, **Mr. Fabrizio Piccinini**, managed all rescue operations, planned support activities, ensured the timely supply of devices and heavy equipment, caring especially for safety, because his personnel had to face risks never met before... After months from the accident, he is still organizing working shifts and scheduling interventions, since Fire Service operations are not over yet. Displaced inhabitants need help to recover personal belongings from the houses that are going to be demolished together with what’s left of the bridge. Mr. Piccinini is experiencing mixed feelings: deep suffering for the tragedy but also great satisfaction for the work accomplished by fire-fighters: *“I feel deep gratitude for all my personnel, for their commitment, their competence and bravery in this challenging event. And I also thank all Genoa inhabitants who are continuing to express affection and appreciation for our work after such a long time”* 🌸