



2024 DOCA Conference #4

Italy Trip Report

July 22-26, 2024

Rome, Naples, Venice, Italy

Prepared by Executive Vice President Bruce Burda

For this conference to Italy in July 2024, we originally had 16 attendees registered. However, travel to Rome for many began during the faulty CrowdStrike update incident that affected many institutions around the world, including most airlines. As a result, John Caccamo and Scott Glaze ultimately cancelled their flights and any plans to join us after they worked through many flight schedule changes and cancellations. As a result, on Sunday, July 21 we ended up with 14 attendees for the trip, and all gathered at the hotel restaurant to greet others, compare travel stories, and visit.

We also were introduced to three special guests from Kyiv, Ukraine who made the long trip out of Ukraine into Poland and then on to Rome. They are friends of Thomas and Cassie Kane who aided their travel and attendance at the conference for the week, and continue to provide support to their efforts in Kyiv. Their attendance, willingness to share their very personal experiences, and very insightful questions throughout the week all enhanced our conference and provided rare glimpses into the challenges and sacrifices being made every day throughout Ukraine.

Monday, July 22: U.S. Embassy, Palazzo Margherita, Rome, Italy

Presentation by Mr. Mak, Ms. Tanska-Vikulova, and Ms. Shabranska

We started our activities on Monday with an informal presentation in the hotel after breakfast by our friends from Kyiv who shared their perspectives on the Russian invasion, life and surviving in Kyiv, and overall experiences from a country waging a war and enduring constant attacks. They are all journalists in one form or another: Mr. Tim Mak, is a U.S. Army veteran living in Kyiv and produces The Counteroffensive, an online publication that he founded to provide valuable insights into the war and life in Ukraine. The other two guests were Myroslava Tanska-Vikulova and Viktoriia Shabranska who both grew up and live in Kyiv. Myroslava has been a journalist for five years and is currently working for Tim on The Counteroffensive staff. Since the beginning of Russia's invasion, she has helped to organize fundraisers for the Ukrainian army, participated in campaigns to support Prisoners of War, written volunteer articles about war heroes, and donated blood. Viktoriia has a degree in journalism and history and has worked in communications for three years. She

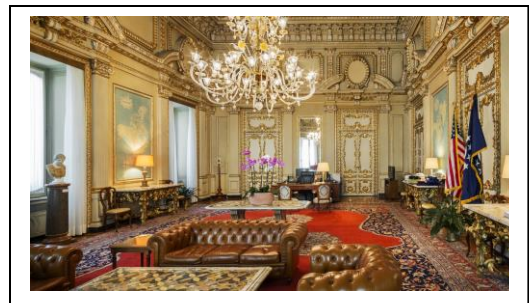
currently works in the press service for a critical infrastructure enterprise and also writes news for online media about Kyiv that covers the topic of urbanism and urban planning.

This was an emotional and insightful session in the hotel after breakfast listening to our Ukrainian friends' stories and reports on the invasion/war and its impact on the people. They were very articulate and shared incredible life experiences to add to what we read and hear in the U.S. They stressed that this is a Russian invasion and act of aggression, not a Ukraine war, hammering home the point that this started many years ago when Russia invaded Crimea and then in February 2022 with the second invasion into their country. Each one at different times expressed their gratitude to the U.S. and other countries for the support (financial, military equipment and arms, and other enablers) they were providing, but spoke of more needing to be done. Rocket attacks around the city (and country) were common, and something they had to get used to. They described a phone app they all have that provides some warning to incoming attacks in the Kyiv area so they will normally get a short advance notification to head to a shelter, most of which are in their subway tunnels.

The stress of trying to live a mostly normal life, care for family members, and perform their professional duties was hard to quantify. For them, it's a 24/7 stress knowing that attacks could happen anytime, anywhere, as is the constant worry about friends and family that are still in Russian occupied territory. This oppressive stress is something they all deal with in their own ways. This session laid the foundation for many other informal conversations throughout the week between the Ukrainians and DOCA members.

Embassy Welcome and Country Team Panel

Following a short bus ride to the U.S. Embassy, we cleared security and walked through some of the very historical buildings on the Embassy campus. We had an excellent session with our host, CAPT Jim Wenke, and other key embassy leaders in a limited Country Team forum. The other staff speakers were Mike Jason, the Acting Chief, Office of Defense Cooperation, Andrew Loomis, Political Military Officer, Matt Ruhle, Economics, Science, and Technology Officer, and David Connell, Chief Press Officer. As is normally the case, the information received here was very helpful to frame all the other briefings and experiences we had during the other visits during the week.



CAPT Wenke: As the Defense Attache, he opined that the Italian military does quite well for its size. They are leading or have been involved in naval operations in the Persian Gulf, Red Sea, and Mediterranean Sea, and for the first time ever have an Italian carrier strike

group is in the Indo-Pacific AOR. The naval group is centered on the aircraft carrier ITS Cavour and the frigate ITS Alpino, and pulled into Tokyo Bay the last week of August. This carrier strike group has taken a 13-strong air wing of AV-8B Harrier II jets and cutting-edge F-35B aircraft to Australia on its way to Japan, and the group conducted its first multi-large deck event in the region with the U.S. Navy's Abraham Lincoln carrier strike group. The Italian carrier strike group plays to the strengths of Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's foreign policy "new look," signaling the strategic importance of expanding trade connections with countries across the Gulf and Indo-Pacific regions.

CAPT Wenke also related that the Italian government has serious concerns with migration trends from North Africa, and are working with those countries to improve their defense forces. The goal is to help them improve living and work conditions in their countries to decrease the desire to leave and go to Italy and other European countries. Additionally, he mentioned that the average age in the Italian Navy is 43, reflecting the lack of interest by the younger generations to serve in the military.

Regarding budget issues, 60% of their defense budget goes to personnel costs. They are on track to invest 20% on defense spending but will not meet the NATO goal of 2% of GDP (1.49% this year). However, they are a big supporter of NATO and participate accordingly in bilateral and multi-lateral operations globally. To reduce costs, the military is trying to increase the number of multi-year contracts and to build up their supply base of items/resources only found elsewhere.

Mike Jason: He reminded all of us about the historical significance of the Embassy buildings, with most of them being built in the 1800's, survived WWII, and purchased by the U.S. afterwards at a very small cost. He also talked about their history and how in 1861 Italy became a nation-state when King Emmanuel united the regional states of the peninsula, along with Sardinia and Sicily. Currently, they are debating immigration laws and eligibility, and are finding it very difficult to determine who is really "Italian" due to the historical mixing of cultures for thousands of years.

Mr. Jason also commented on the great interoperability of their military with other forces. This is in part due to military equipment purchases from allies and also from improved professional education and development in their senior officer corps. One key issue is the Five Eyes partnership (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States) with their agreement for sharing signals intelligence. The Italians feel that despite being one of the strongest allies with these countries, they are unfairly being left out and excluded from important intel. Lastly, he highlighted how the U.S. basing and presence is very important there, with U.S. installations in the North (Army and Air Force) to the South (Navy) building relationships and providing significant economic impacts.

Andrew Loomis: He talked about the current Meloni government and described the U.S.-Italian relationship as very strong. As a “plank NATO member,” they are pushing for more NATO programs in the southern flank and continue to support Ukraine in their fight with Russia, providing numerous weapons systems.

Matt Ruhle: He provided a good economic summary of Italy’s output. They are the 9th largest economy in the world and generate \$126B in trade with the U.S. About 70% of businesses in Italy are small to medium size, providing 60% of the economic output. They currently have 6.8% unemployment, high debt loads, and high taxes—all of which hinder their economic growth. He addressed the dichotomy of the North and South regions. The southern regions are struggling economically, earning about 50% of the EU average pay. The North is thriving and growing industries and international relationships. The government has three key efforts: 1) Help to build growth and increase supply chain resiliency, 2) build better agreements with U.S./EU nations and enterprises, and 3) build to achieve energy independence. Their focus is also on building relationships in international organizations like the UN, and nurture them. They want to emulate the U.S. with its system of allies. They also are trying to deter migration through development programs in nine north African countries.

David Connell: They want to create jobs for Italians in the U.S. through continuing to build business relationships. They have the largest overseas U.S. student population in Italy and seek to leverage that. Italy gets over 1.6 million U.S. tourists so the three consulates are busy assisting them. The government is proud of its support for Ukraine—they feel what helps Ukraine helps Italy and the U.S. Lastly, they watch the U.S. elections closely and remain non-partisan observers.

After returning to the hotel, we had a nice lunch and proceeded to the Roma train station for our trip to Naples in the afternoon. The evening was open for dinner and enjoying the city sites near the hotel.

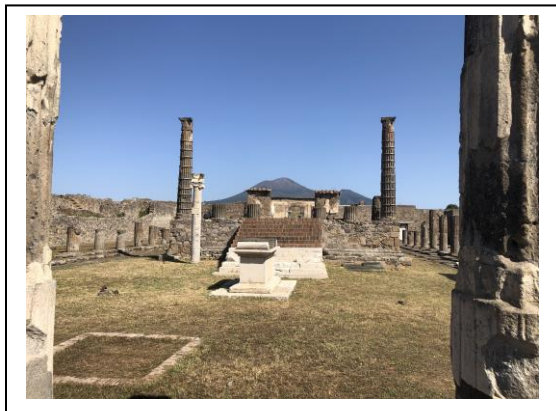
Tuesday, July 23: Naples, Italy

Historic Pompeii Tour and Vineyard

Unfortunately, we were not approved to visit the Naval Support Area Naples as planned, so we visited the amazing Pompeii Archaeological Park south of Mt. Vesuvius. Mount Vesuvius is an active volcano that destroyed the city of Pompeii in A.D. 79 in about 25 hours. The eruption showered volcanic debris over the city of Pompeii, followed the next day by clouds of blisteringly hot gases. The city was buried beneath a blanket of ash and pumice, and the site is a well-preserved snapshot of life in a Roman city.

Our tour guide was also an archaeologist working in the excavations there so he shared incredible insights and historical information. We spent a couple of hours there walking much of the grounds, and visited several special sites. We saw two of the five public bathing complexes where fires and water created steam under the flooring to provide three rooms of cool, warm, and hot temperatures. He also showed us the remains of an old mill and bakery, where bread and pizzas were made and then sold there or by street vendors. Since tomatoes came from the New World centuries later, their pizza didn't have the sauce we normally see.

We saw an ancient laundry site and one of about 80 shops once in Pompeii where drinks and hot dishes were served outside. As we walked the large site, we also toured the forum which was the heart of daily life in Pompeii and a Roman house lived in by a wealthy family.



This home had all the amenities typical of the ruling class there—entry pool to collect rainwater, large courtyard around which were many bedrooms and living rooms, an inside garden, and servants' quarters upstairs where it was much hotter in the summer and colder in the winter. Overall, despite the heat, it was a very enjoyable morning and excellent learning opportunity to understand life in ancient Roman times and how the Mt. Vesuvius eruption destroyed the city.

After the tour, we drove to Cantina del Vesuvio, a beautiful family vineyard and winery on the Southern slope of Mt. Vesuvius where we had a wonderful lunch and wine tasting—certainly an exceptional cultural opportunity and group activity we all enjoyed.

U.S. Consulate, Naples

In the afternoon, we proceeded to the U.S. Consulate in Naples for a briefing and discussion about their mission and U.S. activities in the Naples area. Upon arrival, the Consul General, Ms. Tracy Roberts-Pounds and Mr. Charles Lobdell, the Political/ Economic/Commercial Section Chief greeted us and she personally briefed us about the Consulate's mission and strategic priorities for Southern Italy.



Established in 1796, Consulate General Naples is one of the U.S.'s oldest Foreign Service posts. The district includes the regions of Campania, Basilicata, Molise, Puglia, Calabria,

and Sicily. The Consulate General in Naples (with an Agency in Palermo) engages in a full range of U.S. government activities and services within the consular district. The Consular section offers a full range of passport and emergency services to U.S. citizens. It also processes non-immigrant and immigrant visa applications. Consulate General Naples is the only immigrant visa processing post in Italy and one of the few worldwide that processes immigrant visas for Iranian nationals. The Public Affairs section is responsible for regional media relations, cultural affairs, and liaising with the Italian and American academic communities. The Political/Economic/Commercial section is responsible for following political, economic and commercial issues in southern Italy, and for assisting in the promotion of American business and trade.



Consul General Roberts-Pounds highlighted the fact that through the U.S. Navy’s headquarters presence at NAS Naples (with basing at NAS Sigonella, NAS Rota, Spain, NAS Souda Bay, and the Carrier Strike Group in the Eastern Mediterranean), the U.S. maintains an extensive U.S. reach from Iceland and the U.K. across the entire Mediterranean, and down to Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti. This leads to the Consulate’s strategic priority to ensure that successive generations of southern Italians see the

value in an enduring, evolving U.S. security presence from which the U.S. projects power across the Mediterranean, Africa, into the Black Sea, and the North Atlantic region.

She has three mission goals:

- 1) Enhance the U.S.-Italy security partnership, maintain and grow southern Italy’s position in the Mediterranean and proximity to Africa as a “hub” for U.S., bilateral, and NATO operations; protects American Citizens in Italy and the U.S.
- 2) Partner with Italian local and regional governments, Italian security and law enforcement, and cultural allies to counter authoritarianism and advance democratic principles around the world, and
- 3) Work with regional governments and U.S. investors to develop key sectors in southern Italy, namely aerospace, technology, renewable energy, and air/seaports to address decades of under development, unemployment, and economic stagnation that make southern Italy vulnerable to PRC investment.

Our session concluded with a vigorous Q&A session followed by several photographs and personal thanks to her and her staff for the outstanding and candid discussion.

Wednesday, July 24: Travel to Venice Area

After a nice group dinner and rest, we all made our way via train to Venice-Mestre where we stayed for the last two days.

Thursday, July 25: Caserme Ederle, Vicenza, Italy

Southern European Task Force, Africa (SETAF-AF)

On July 25, we drove to Caserme Ederle outside of Vicenza to visit the HQ SETAF-AF. BG Daniel Cederman, Deputy Commanding General, hosted us in the Conference Room and MAJ Gaumer briefed us on their mission. SETAF-AF is an operationally focused headquarters with an expeditionary mindset and committed to excellence and trust in all they do. The mission is to support competition, provide command and control in the land domain, strengthen partnerships, set the theater, and conduct security force assistance in order to achieve USAFRICOM and U.S. Army Campaign Plan objectives. Their core missions include synchronizing the Army's operations, activities, and investments in Africa; providing scalable contingency response options from the platoon to 2-star Joint Task Force Headquarters; and presiding as the senior responsible command for all Army personnel and facilities in Italy.



The SETAF-AF is the “South of the Alps” power projection platform for the U.S. European Command, and has Soldiers in the Vicenza military community (six different installations), Aviano Air Base (airborne rigging and point of embarkation/debarkation), and Camp Darby (Army Depot and ammunition storage).

The briefing focused on their efforts to influence African nations where 1.3 billion people currently live and will double by 2050. Its population has 60% under the age of 25, Pan-African GDP is \$3.1 trillion and projected to grow to \$29 trillion by 2050, and the African rainforest is the planet's largest carbon sink—all concerns for increasing and enhancing



the U.S. presence and partnerships there. The command is committed to help with key issues like continual political unrest, ongoing humanitarian crises, non-democratic power transfers, growing food instability, and widespread Chinese economic and infrastructure development.

They plan and conduct numerous exercises in Africa so support their priorities and theater engagement goals:

African Lion 24, enhances regional cooperation in North and West Africa to counter strategic competitors,

Justified Accord 24, advances Kenya-U.S. relationships and develops military relationships in East Africa,

Medical Readiness Exercises, strengthens African and U.S. partnerships and provides U.S. forces with the ability to conduct real world medical care in a deployed environment alongside African medical professionals

Southern Accord 24, builds partner capacity and maintains access

In addition, MAJ Gaumer highlighted the 2nd Security Force Assistance Brigade's role in supporting the theater security cooperation (TSC) mission throughout their area of responsibility. They deploy directly to partner countries and work with their militaries to train them on various tasks like basic infantry tasks, Mission Essential Task List tasks, border security, and force capability skills. Often, they are initiating TSC relationships. Currently, the Brigade has been or is planning to go to at least 13 countries in Africa.

The last mission described was SETAF-AF's crisis response mission. They have a Deployable Joint Task Force capability to manage responses in the USEUCOM and USAFRICOM areas. Their North African Response Force is provided through the 173rd Infantry Brigade based in Vicenza. Lastly, the East Africa Response Force is based at Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) at Camp Lemonnier, Djibouti and supports crisis responses in that region.

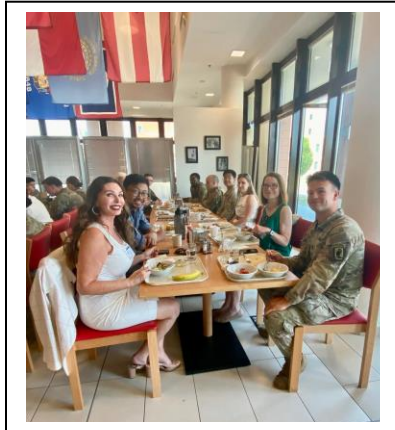
173rd Airborne Brigade

Next, MAJ Fix, provided a quick overview of the 173rd Airborne Brigade. The 173rd Airborne Brigade (Sky Soldiers) is the U.S. Army's Contingency Response Force in Europe, providing rapid forces to the United States European, Africa and Central Commands areas of responsibilities. The Brigade is comprised of about 3,300 Soldiers organized in six battalions and routinely trains alongside NATO allies and partners to build interoperability and strengthen the Alliance.

The last briefer was MAJ Green from the 207th Military Intelligence Brigade. The 207th MIB is a military intelligence brigade of the United States Army Intelligence and Security Command. It is the first theater intelligence brigade dedicated solely to Africa. The brigade conducts intelligence collection and



exploitation in support of U.S. Army Africa and U.S. Africa Command in order to set the intelligence architecture for the theater, disrupt transnational and trans-regional threats, and promote regional stability in Africa while building and maintaining intelligence readiness. It was a short but interesting presentation but due to the classification, he couldn't provide much detail.



After the briefings, we had lunch with Soldiers at the Dining Facility who shared some personal and “work” perspectives. We then had CAPT Tristan Kohlheim escort and brief us in more depth about the 173rd compound and facilities. This helped greatly to understand life in garrison and provided important information about their heritage and gallant history that goes back to 1915. We then drove to Caserme Del Din and our escort for the day, Mr. Phil Regina, provided a windshield tour of the camp and facilities, and

we stopped into the USO Vicenza to present the DOCA donation check to the Center Manager, Mr. Nick Jenkins. After a quick stop at the PX, we departed and returned to our hotel.



Friday, July 26: Aviano Air Base, Aviano, Italy

The last day of the conference was spent at Aviano AB about 50 miles north of Venice visiting the 31st Fighter Wing.

31st Fighter Wing “Wyvern Nation”

Upon arrival on base, we met up with TSgt Mickey Jordan and 2LT Hannah Malone who escorted us for the day. After a windshield tour of the base, we traveled to the Italian Air Force unit's building where Wing Historian, Dr. Mattea Sanders, gave us an in-depth overview of the history of the military base dating back to the years prior to WWII.

The Wing leadership was diverted from hosting us due to more pressing operational issues, and in particular a missing Airman who was later found in good shape in the Italian Dolomites a day or two later. In their stead, we had a young Captain Zach Jacques who briefed us on the wing vision, mission, and base.



The wing vision is to be ready and adaptive warriors, committed to Allies and Partners, who are devoted to our community and one another. This is the overarching goal for each and every member of the Wing.

Their new mission statement is to: *Secure the Base, Generate Combat Airpower, and Ready to Deploy & Fight from Home*. This was designed by the Wing Commander to clearly communicate their operational responsibilities, with its strength being its simplicity and ability to stand the test of time.

The three-pronged mission statement touches every unit within the wing, from supporting agencies to the flightline. Secure the Base is first because the airfield, base infrastructure, and Airmen and families must all be safe to conduct their jobs. These jobs collectively produce the ability to Generate Combat Airpower by launching armed F-16s and any other deployed mission aircraft. Lastly, their combat capability won't always launch from Aviano AB so the team must train to be Ready to Deploy as well as Fight from Home.

Another approach the wing leadership talks about is their ability to Deter, Evolve, and Integrate as a combat team. They must focus on the Airmen whom they Value, Develop, and Empower, and support the families to help them Love, Connect, and Thrive. The 31FW focus areas to support these goals are to conduct:

1. Flawless Execution of Strategic Deterrence
2. Defend and Improve Base Infrastructure
3. Further Agile Combat Employment (ACE) Capabilities
4. Invest in Wyvern Nation Airmen and Families

To conduct their mission, they have about 5,000 service members and civilians assigned to the installation, with an additional 3,800 family members. They operate 51 F-16s allocated to two fighter squadrons, 5 HH-60 search and rescue helicopters, and numerous unpiloted air vehicles (UAVs). In addition, they have an air control squadron to manage wartime air space. There is a \$500M economic impact from the base in the surrounding community.



The wing provides combat air power to the European Command and to other commands when forward deployed. Their rescue unit provides combat rescue capability in Northern Italy and also when deployed. In addition, they have small groups of personnel in Papua, Hungary, Camp Turzil, Romania, and at Camp Darby and Sigonella, Italy. There is also a

small contingent of 173rd Airborne Brigade personnel who are on base to provide onsite rigging and inspection expertise for equipment airdrops.

From the Wing Conference Room, we headed to the 31st Munitions Support Squadron area along the flightline. There, we looked at an F-16 static display, munitions loading systems, and different munitions employed by the F-16s. On hand to brief us were several Airmen including SrA Mina Hinman, SrA Aaron Steele, and SrA Janel-Ann Ludovico. They provided excellent information about the munitions and loading systems, and also described the loading processes that differ depending on the munitions. We also had the chance to look at the F-16 up close and examine the cockpit and airframe.

Lunch was served at the Italian Dining Facility where we enjoyed great local cuisine. In addition, we hosted members from the Aviano First Sergeants Council who received the DOCA donation to support their mission of supporting Airmen and family members when they encounter unforeseen problems needing financial or other support. These Airmen are SMSgt Jeremy Goins (31 Munitions Support Squadron First Sergeant) and SMSgt Erica McCaghren (31 Logistics Readiness Squadron First Sergeant).

Once finished, we departed the base and returned to our hotel in Venice-Mestre. That evening, we had a wonderful group dinner at a nice local restaurant to celebrate the successful week.

