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## IT WAS NOT A "STRAFEXPEDITION"

We receive and publish a further response to the article published on the Adige on 30 July 2011 regarding the offensive on the Zugna.

by **Volker Jeschkeit** \*, Eng. and historian, August 2011

The article is largely based on the notes that accompanied the recognition of the knight's cross of the order of Maria Theresa at the time first lieutenant Hermann Kirchner for the conquest of the Zugna Torta and some reintegration notes from the federal army of today's Austria.

Translation is from English,  the original source is English .

First of all, to start with the two wrong words out of three: The definition "**Strafexpedition**" is naturally wrong and it already gives us a first idea of the lack of professionalism on the part of the supporters of the destruction on the Zugna. The official name was «The Spring Offensive» but the "do it yourself" historians will never learn it. The second word "broken" ... the offensive? What offensive? The clear order and the objective to be achieved on the Zugna started from the command of the 8th Army Corps to some small units of the 57th Austrian infantry division was the conquest of a well-defined objective, the **Zugna Torta**, which served as an observatory both in the direction of Vallarsa and for the probable control of enemy offensive movements during the Austro-Hungarian action in the Adige Valley. In particular, an Italian action was feared on the side of the Brentonico to attack the flank of the Austrian troops.

The 8th Army Corps was made up of two infantry divisions, the 57th and the 59th. The commander of the 57th division was Lieutenant Marshal Goiginger from February to August 1916. The commander of the 59th Division **Major General von Kroupa** from April 1916 to May 1917. Of interest to us in the "Zugna case" is only the 57th division, in particular the 6th mountain brigade made up of the following infantry units: here in particular ( without mentioning all) battalions I / 6, III / 38, IV / 42 and IV / 81. We are interested in battalions III / 38 and IV / 42.

A mention on the artillery forces available to the VIII Corps: We are talking about 250 pieces, theoretical figure, for most of the pieces it was in a very short time engaged and subjected to the XX Army Corps to reinforce the artillery in the center of the offensive. The maps of the arrangement of the individual batteries of the VIII Corps sector speak for themselves.

The artillery sector under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Firbas was structured in two sub-sectors:

1) The Mori sub-sector under the command of Captain Stadlmayr and Lieutenant Colonel Grugler for the Palone-Sacco area as rear with a total of 12 batteries of guns and howitzers of the caliber from 75 to 150 mm

2) The Rovereto sub-sector under the command of Major Rosenberg with 16 batteries of guns and howitzers of the caliber from 75 to 150 mm and 2 batteries of 305mm deaths and a battery of 240mm mortars.

We're interested in Major Rosenberg's business. At the beginning of the offensive, there were about 48 artillery pieces and 6 mortars available in the Rovereto sub-sector. However, most of the artillery was made up of batteries of mountain guns with a 75mm caliber. A secondary role during the actions had the so-called fixed position artillery. This is the definition of batteries in caverns, concrete casemates or placed in other field positions commanded by auxiliary artillery support troops, the so-called Festungsartilleriebataillone (fortress artillery battalion) which with their fire helped during the preparatory

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bombardment. In total in the industry we are talking about 5-6 two-piece batteries each, often armed with older models of the caliber 90mm to 120mm.

This is the general picture at the beginning of the offensive in the Rovereto sub-sector.

It is important to remember that the action in this sub-sector was absolutely limited to protecting the right flank of the 20th army corps that made the frontal advance to break through from the plateau towards Asiago.

The VIII Corps played a shield role with precise and very limited actions. The fact is that after a few days the corps departments no longer advanced as soon as an organized and fierce enemy resistance was found and limited themselves to consolidating the positions reached for example in Vallarsa sul Zugna and in Valle dell'Adige.

**The action of first lieutenant Hermann Kirchner**

Biographical data: Name Hermann, surname Kirchner born on 6 May 1890 in Feldbach in Styria. August 18, 1909 aspiring officer (Fähnrich) in the infantry regiment Nr. 88 later transferred to Budapest, during the crisis in the Balkan 1912 transferred to the 4th battalion of the infantry regiment Nr. 42 which was part of the 3rd mountain brigade with garrison in Avtovac, part of the 18th Infantry Division of the 15th Army Corps. Appointed lieutenant on 1 May 1912. At the beginning of the war, commander of the 14th company of IV batt / reg 42. After participation in the war in Serbia and Montenegro, appointed first lieutenant on 1 January 1915.



In February 1916 in battalion IV / 42 he was transported to Tiolo and incorporated into the 6th mountain brigade. After a short time in Trento moved to Marsilli, Rovereto sector as part of the 57 infantry division. The battalion departments are under direct observation by the Italian forces placed on the Zugna Torta.

At the beginning of the action on the Zugna the order was given to take possession of the Zugna Torta quota which served as an important observatory for the Austro-Hungarian troops. The order arrives at 18.30 in command of the 6th mountain brigade on May 14, 1916. An artillery battery was given to the commander of battalion IV / 42 Lieutenant Colonel Marinus von Stärk, field 4/2 (commander first lieutenant Klein) and two platoons of mine launchers. The attack of Kirchner's 14th company begins in the morning of May 15th. Kirchner was ordered to take the western part of altitude 689 in cooperation with the 16th company (commander first lieutenant in reserve Dr. Erich Frank). At 6.00 in the morning the preparatory artillery fire begins and at 8.55 the units of the 16th company go to the attack. The Italian front lines are taken very fast making a large amount of prisoners. Despite the initial success due to the difficult Tyrrhenian Sea and with the task of protecting also the flank of the III / 38 battalion, the company's assault on the 689 level did not proceed. In this situation Kirchner alone decides not to attack the western part of the altitude but to launch a frontal attack with his 14 company with the support of a unit of machine guns and a platoon of mine launchers. Putting the 15 company as a reserve, he begins his attack at 9.35 am, quickly conquering the Italian line on the altitude, after a brief interlude of resistance on the enemy side, he also conquers the cave behind the position making prisoners 150 Italian soldiers of the infantry regiment Nr. 207 and prey of war like machine guns etc. After the arrival of the 16th company on the quota he takes position on the west side with his company as per the order received. In the evening consolidate a defensive position on this. On the morning of May 16 he received the order to conquer the western peak of Zugna Torta and to keep in contact with the III / 38 battalion which was to conquer the eastern part of Zugna Torta. During the slow advance with 600m of altitude difference and under the barrage of the Italian artillery, he temporarily lost contact with the other companies. Asking for help from the III / 38 battalion, he arrives at altitudes 1076 and 873 at a distance of 600m from the target at 11.00 pm with his company. During the night his unit is bombed by the Italian artillery. The next morning it repulses numerous Italian counterattacks from 5.00 to 11.00. In this critical situation he decides to launch a decisive counterattack with the company and its machine gun department and conquers the position of the Italian artillery at 16.30 taking another 150 prisoners. After a brief meeting with his officers and non-commissioned officers on the morning of May 18, he attacks the Zugna Torta and conquers the position at 5.00 in the

morning. It maintains its position even under the heavy bombardment of the Italian artillery. Kirchner's success allows the other units to proceed with their advancement. During his attack he inflicts casualties of 500 dead and wounded on the enemy and takes 300 prisoners. Its losses amounted to 18 dead, 49 wounded and 3 prisoners. For his courageous and daring conduct of the attack, reaching the ordered objective in a short time he received with the file No. 190 on 16 December 1922 the knight's cross of the order of Maria Theresa.

Despite numerous and bloody Italian counterattacks during the war, Zugna Torta remained in Austrian hands throughout the war. Kirchner remained commander of the 14th company for a long time and was appointed captain on January 31, 1918. In addition to the medal of the order of Maria Theresa, he won another 4 medals for military valor.

Captain Hermann Kirchner dies on 8 March 1953 in Graz in Austria.

Separate note: The volume of the Austro-Hungarian army general staff reads that in the following days some explorer patrols pushed forward, finding the "Trincerone" strongly defended by the Italians as a defense. Returning to the Zugna Torta they make their reports and here the story ends. On the Zugna the war turns into a war of position. Each belligerent side firmly defends its position but cannot advance even a meter.

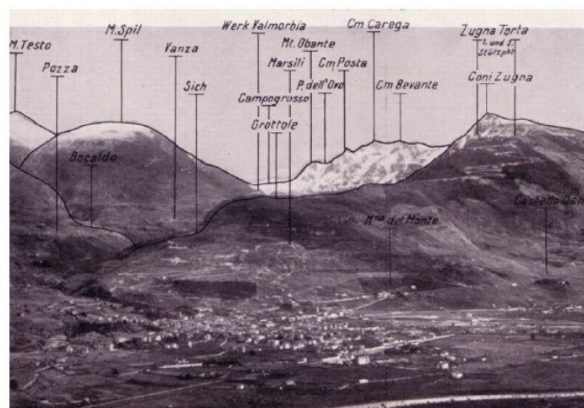
#### Final consideration The

attack on Zugno was launched by units of battalions IV / 42 and III / 38 with a power in the front line of 2 maximum 3 companies, temporarily assisted by a field battery and two platoons of mine launchers. 2 other companies were part of the reserve. They had specific orders to take the Zugna Torta share.

From this point of view, publishing words like "broke the Strafexpedition" becomes at best a bar joke not to say something worse.

The au troops simply reached their target and stopped as ordered.

The "Trincerone" project thus becomes an enormous hype and effort in the history of the First World War, due to lack of arguments, it climbs straight up the glass, according to the affirmation of the Adige on August 5, 2011 where the rifleman is wrong in the wall of concrete are justified as positions for the Italian machine guns that could only be installed in this way. It is asked: Is it a rifleman or position for machine guns in the "Trincerone", moreover with the nice clever trick declaring that the concrete wall was built on the old original base (which was not touched), law 78 of March 2001 has been circumvented, of course so receiving the authorization of the provincial bodies responsible for the protection of the historical heritage.



\* collaborator of the state archives of Vienna, Munich, Royal archive London, Sigmaringen (German Alpine Corps archival collection), Federal archive of Koblenz / Germany, State archive of Innsbruck, military archive of Budapest and military archive of Prague and other archives.

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#### Insights

📄 *Lurking in the caves*

PDF, 452kb - (from *L'Adige* of 30 July 2011)

📄 *Celva and Marzola: fortresses of Trento*

JPG, 177kb - (from *L'Adige* of 3 June 2011)

📄 The article published in *Doss Trent* referred to by Volker Jeschkeit