

“We extinguished the fire with adrenaline”

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He coordinated his men and women for 10 days, from inside the wood of the “Campo dei Fiori” Park, for whole days, from dawn to sunset. **Alberto Gaggioni, 57, is the coordinator of the inter-group of the Valtinella Civil Defence Corps**, which includes the villages of Barasso, Casciago, Comerio and Luvinate.

During the days of the fire, Gaggioni was the symbol of the volunteer forest firefighters, who worked from the first outbreak of fire until the last fire had been put out. **When he and his men returned to base camp, when it was already dark, they could barely stand because of the distance they had covered in the wood**, where they had worked with spades and blowers, in an attempt to stop the fire front, which was moving forward at various points, also far from each other.

Gaggioni, a surveyor in normal life, who has been a member of the Civil Defence Corps for 20 years, explained, “In the first two days, we were high up, where the fire began. Then we moved towards Velate, Poggio, Zambella, Resinose, in the villages of Luvinate and Barasso, in particular. **We put out the points where the fire broke out, working on the hot land. The “apocalypse” was on Friday night, the first hard day, when the situation worsened overnight, with the wind, and the tension. Saturday was also a hard day; we worked all day, trying to extinguish the fronts that broke out, creating fire barriers. We ran from one point to another, chasing the fire, from 6.30 a.m. until late at night: I calculated I covered about 15 kilometres a day in the wood, on those days. On Saturday, we covered the Velate/Poggio journey at least six times. I’d now be able to do it with my eyes closed, I know it like the back of my hand ...**”

“I’d never seen anything like it, not even during the operations in Liguria. It was long and complicated; when the fire appeared to be out, it started again from the underwood, the leaves, caused by the wind. It’s undoubtedly the hardest experience I’ve ever had. For some of my men, it was a real baptism of fire; they had to apply what until that moment had only been theory. **This experience has left me with so many sensations, so many tired, exhausted, but united faces. Everyone collaborated as much as they could**, they participated intensely, never grumbling, never protesting. There were about ten of us from the Valtinella group. On Wednesday, 1 November, I led about 40 volunteers from various groups, from the Ticino Park to the Groane Park (in Milan), Pavia and Varese. We were tested by everything, all round,” Gaggioni explained.

Since the fire, we look at the mountain differently. “Before, I took Campo dei Fiori for granted, but I don’t anymore,” Gaggioni explained. “I call it ‘mountain’, something I’d never done before; I respect and fear it. **One of the things that surprised me most was the power of adrenaline: we went to bed exhausted, but we got up with no problems, no aches and pains, and full of energy.** Then there’s the solidarity and closeness of the people, which is very rewarding; now, **a lot of people noticed how important the Civil Defence Corps is: 3 or 4 people have asked us how to join the group,**” Gaggioni explained.

di Translated by Crespi & Elia (Reviewed by Prof. Rolf Cook)