

The Naval Academy of Livorno: a seafaring tradition

Ancient tradition and modern technologies merge in the name of respect for the sea and for man.

Lucia Maffei

The relationship between man and the sea in a country surrounded by water like Italy is undoubtedly strong. It is not by chance that those who, over 500 years ago, made the most significant geographical discoveries were Italian. Christopher Columbus, Antonio Pigafetta, Amerigo Vespucci, John and Sebastian Cabot and many other nameless sailors contributed, through their navigations, to "drawing" the exact and complete geography of the earth.

LIVORNO, A TUSCAN CITY THAT HAS ALWAYS BEEN CONSIDERED ONE OF THE MAIN PORTS OF THE MEDITERRANEAN, hosts the Naval Academy, the prestigious training school for officers of the Italian Navy, an institution that still today passes down and safeguards ancient Italian maritime traditions. The Academy, founded in 1881, just a few years after the Unification of Italy, extends for over 2 kilometers along Livorno's Lungomare, its seafront promenade, right in the heart of the city not far from the ancient Medici-era harbor.

EACH YEAR, FOLLOWING A VERY STRICT SELECTION PROCESS, ABOUT 120 CADETS ARE ACCEPTED INTO THE ACADEMY FOR A FIVE-YEAR COURSE. Training is complex and articulated. Each minute of the day is planned and rigorously organized for the trainees. They follow courses for a university degree in Maritime and Naval Science, Naval Engineering, Telecommunications Engineering, Law, Medicine and Surgery, for example, but also daily study to become expert sailors, trained for both physical and technical perfection.

For the trainees, preparation for life at sea begins with sail training and the maneuvers to be performed on the complete rigging of an ancient brigantine interred in the Academy's central courtyard.

"THE SEA REQUIRES A VERY PARTICULAR TRAINING," explains Captain Flavio Biaggi, Director of the midshipmen courses, "a training where not only physical preparation and technical knowledge are important, but also and above all, the acquisition of ethics and values that today may sometimes seem out of fashion or forgotten. Living at sea requires courage, responsibility, loyalty, decision-making capability, sense of belonging and team spirit. In the Academy, each cadet not only obtains a degree but acquires, in the course of the five years, a stock of ethical-professional values that will guide them in their future professional and personal life."

AT THE LIVORNO ACADEMY, IN 130 YEARS OF ACTIVITY, OVER 38,000 OFFICERS AND NON-COMMISSIONED OFFICERS HAVE BEEN TRAINED. If the relationship with the sea is the pivot on which every action and activity of the Naval Academy rotates, then it is also a true that the most important and difficult test for every cadet is the three-month cruise called "campaign", on the Amerigo Vespucci Training Ship. During this period, total isolation from the "civilized" world intensifies an unforgettable professional experience that supplies a permanent imprinting in the preparation of each Officer. The Amerigo Vespucci, known the world over, is one of the strongest symbols of Italian pride and style: for the timeless elegance of its forms, the title of "most beautiful ship in the world" was bestowed on it in 1976.

THIS SPLENDID TALL SHIP WHICH FOR OVER EIGHTY YEARS HAS SAILED THE SEAS THE WORLD OVER, was designed, built and launched in 1931 in Castellammare di Stabia and was immediately earmarked as the training ship of the Italian Navy. Today, in an era where instrumentation and technology have attained extremely high levels, a training "campaign" on a ship so far removed from our times may seem paradoxical. But all the same, for every midshipman,

the three months of navigation on the Vespucci remain a unique and irreplaceable life and training experience. On board, sailing sensations are strong, time-honored. The relationship with the sea is tough, direct, with no filters or compromises.

KNOWING HOW TO SAIL FIRST AND FOREMOST MEANS KNOWING HOW TO FACE THE SEA WITH THE KNOWLEDGE AND SKILL OF ANCIENT SAILORS. Reading the coordinates using the sextant, performing the maneuvers to unfurl and strike the over 2,500 square meters of heavy sailcloth and handle the over 20 kilometers of ropes, cables and mooring lines, but also polishing every single piece of brass and wood on the ship make for a training experience that goes well beyond mere notions. It is not by chance that the Vespucci's motto is "non chi comincia, ma quel che perservera" ("not who begins but who perseveres"), a motto which has always inspired life on board. For the cadets, the three-month navigation period on the Vespucci is crowned by the choice of the name for their course. This is perhaps the most moving and exciting moment of the entire campaign, and best describes the sense of belonging that is created on board.

AFTER BEING ISOLATED FOR THREE DAYS BELOW DECK IN A SORT OF CONCLAVE and chosen the name that will henceforth identify them, the 120 cadets climb on the mainmast all together and shout the chosen name out in unison to the sea and to their comrades. Aboard the Vespucci, which still today ideally perpetuates the spirit of seamanship of the great Italian explorer and navigator it is named after, tackling the sea, putting oneself to the test and relating with one another turns the whole crew into a perfect mechanism that moves in tune with the ship. •