

# “No dal Molin” against the Military Base in Vicenza

## Analyze of the conflict

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Camp Ederle is a United States Army post located in Vicenza, Italy and functions as headquarters of the Southern European Task Force (SETAF) as well as of the 173<sup>th</sup> Airborne Brigade. The US military head plans to extend the base that currently houses 2750 troops, building barracks at the Dal Molin airport on the other side of the city to accommodate 2100 more US soldiers. As soon as people know about the secret negotiations with the Italian government they get together to manifest their protest. The representative of the committee No dal Molin, a committee of various people that was formed to fight the extension of the base, has been interviewed to learn more about the movement against the expansion of the base, to understand more about the committee and to investigate if or how this conflict can be solved.

# 1. Informational Background

## 1.1 *The Base*

Caserma Ederle (Camp Ederle) is a United States Army post located in Vicenza, named after Major Carlo Ederle, an Italian hero of World War I and recipient of the French War Cross. It became the headquarters of the South European Task Force (SETAF) in 1965.

In 1996 the existing 3-325<sup>th</sup> Infantry, an airborne battalion combat team was reflagged by reactivating the colors of 1-508<sup>th</sup>. Since June of 2000 Caserma Ederle has also been the home of the US Army's reactivated 173rd Airborne Brigade, which this past September was renamed the 173rd Airborne Combat Brigade Team (173rd ACBT). The unit conducted a combat jump into northern Iraq in March of 2003 and continued to serve throughout Iraq and Afghanistan. Since its reactivation in 2000, the 173rd ACBT has grown from one battalion to six, two of which are located at the existing Caserma Ederle, three in Bamberg, Germany, and one in Schweinfurt, Germany.

Camp Ederle (number 1 in fig.1) sits just under 2 miles southeast of the town's center and currently houses 2,750 American military personnel. Current commander is Major General Frank Helmick. The base disposes of all structures necessary for the education and drill of the soldiers, a commercial area, some deposits in the industrial zone of Marole and diverse hangars with deposits. Families of the servicemen are accommodated in a place called "Villaggio" (number 2). Close to the "torri di quartesolo" there is a center for US military vehicles (number 5) as well as an administration center for military structures (6). Under the folds of the "Colli Berici" the American military has two ammunition depots. One at "Fontega di Arcognano" (3) and the other one close to Logarne, called "Pluto" (4). "Pluto" consists of diverse galleries and bunkers and nobody knows exactly what kind of material is stored in them. There are persistent rumors that it might house nuclear weapons.

The American military top management has decided to unite its 173rd Airborne Brigade and thus relocate the troops currently stationed in Bamberg and Schweinfurt to Vicenza. This means that 2100 additional soldiers including their families need accommodation. Since Caserma Ederle is said to be already overcrowded, a new base will be constructed or, as Washington calls it, the existing base will be expanded. The existing civil airport Dal Molin, located 2-3 kilometers south from the city's center (see figure 1, number 7: Ederle is on the opposite side of the city) will serve as area for the expansion. This area counts as one of the sparse green tranquil areas close to the city. The project Dal Molin foresees the construction of dormitories, parking garages, serving stations to fix vehicles, ammunition and material depots, sports complexes, and a shopping center. Helmick presented a slide show of what the U.S. hopes is the timetable for Dal Molin: Construction would start in 2007 and finish in 2011.

With the expansion the base at Vicenza will be the most powerful combat unit outside of the USA. Directly responsible to the Pentagon it will be ready to intervene immediately in any theater of war.

## **1.2 Negotiations**

Negotiations about the extension of the base started in late 2003. According to the Americans on 12<sup>th</sup> April 2005 the then premier of Italy, Silvio Berlusconi, agreed to some sort of plan. Members of the city council and citizens of Vicenza were completely left in the dark. The announcement in a US military source, which few Italians read, led to the circulation of rumors in May 2006. In response, the council woman Francesca Equizi initiated first public motions at the city council to debate the matter (May, 18<sup>th</sup> and June, 6<sup>th</sup>). To calm down the protest arising in response to references to the Dal Molin project in the local newspapers (July, 10<sup>th</sup>), the new center left premier, Romano Prodi, assured that the government would review the matter. In early October 2006, the Americans held a press conference to counteract abounded rumors among the citizens: Major General Frank

Helmick, commander of SETF, confirmed that the plan was to bring in the 173rd Airborne Brigade but at the same time supported the base-closer rumors: if the Dal Molin project would not be approved “the national governments of both the United States and Italy will have a difficult decision to make”. October 16<sup>th</sup>, 2006 Vicenza's center-right mayor Enrico Hüllweck expresses his approval to the planned extensions and several months later also Prodi's Foreign Minister, Massimo D'Alema: "Revoking the authorization would have been a hostile act on our part against the United States." On October 26<sup>th</sup>, the city council (which was elected with a majority of Berlusconi's center-right allies before the Dal Molin issue became public) voted against a public referendum to settle the matter and then to approve the expansion with 21 "yeas" (right coalition), 17 "nays" (left coalition), 2 abstentions, and 1 missing in action. Citizens were awaiting the final word of Prodi himself who was being pressured by some in his wafer-thin coalition to reverse Berlusconi's decision. But finally, on January 16<sup>th</sup>, 2007 during a visit in Bucharest, he expressed his approval to the expansion-project of the base: "I am about to tell the U.S. ambassador that the Italian government won't oppose the decision by the previous government and the town council of Vicenza to allow the expansion of the military base". June 15<sup>th</sup>, Prodi nominates Professor Paolo Costa (Minister for Public Works and currently a member of the European Parliament) as prime-ministerial representative for questions relating to the realisation of the Dal Molin military base at Vicenza.

## **2. Protest**

### ***2.1 The Committee “No dal Molin”***

In the middle of a field close to the airport Dal Molin one sees a big white tent with banners for peace and signs that say “No dal Molin”. This is the permanent office of the committee No dal Molin. On the right hand there is a small caravan for the people who keep watch during the night, some chairs, a barbecue and a tabletop football. A small path framed with sunflowers and colorful pinwheels leads to the entrance of the tent. The inner surface of the

tent is covered with pictures, posters, drawings, illustrations, banners. There is a bar, a place with information material and the possibility to buy t-shirts. Little by little the tent fills with people of different ages and different social backgrounds. A variegated group of people, discussing vividly and greeting each other joyfully. In thirty minutes the permanent assembly will begin.

The movement “No dal Molin” came alive spontaneously one year ago when the newspapers reported that the US government had presented the town council of Vicenza a project to expand camp Ederle. Alarmed and frightened by the idea to have a new military force right in their backyards and not knowing exactly what might expect them, people went to the municipal office to demand clarification and show protest. People met each other, began to socialize, exchanged ideas and shared preoccupation. The forming of a group however was a long process. People had totally different motives: one might fear terrorist attacks, another pollution of the environment, decline of tourism or reject anything promoting war to defend peace. People that would never have had taken notice of each other now came into contact. The diversity of motives created some mistrust and distancing but through the shared objective of preventing the expansion of camp Ederle this difficulties were overcome and the committee No dal Molin formed. Considering all different motives finally led to the settlement not only to prevent the expansion of the military base at Vicenza but also to combat any war promoting action.

Once a week, members of the committee No dal Molin meet at the permanent office for an assembly. People from different committees (e.g. committee di Pilege etc.), associations like “Emergency”, from associations based on volunteer work and single citizens build a group of ca 200 individuals (the participation has been augmenting continuously) to exchange information, discuss, and decide initiatives.

Everybody is invited to express own ideas, pass on information, ask questions and criticize. Decisions have to be made together. There is no fixed leadership who decides what to do. Naturally there are some people who take more responsibility and function as representatives and contact persons for the press. But they have not been delegated.

Everybody does what he likes to do and what he is able to do.

Thus different groups have been formed who fulfill different tasks: The “gruppo boicottaggio” organizes boycotts to close the base, the team that runs the “radio no dal molin” sends out information about the project Dal Molin (social, environmental and economical impact) the “gruppo progaganda” organizes assemblies and circulates information, the “gruppo comunicazione” publishes a weekly and a monthly journal, the “gruppo patto di mutuo soccorso” makes contact with other national committees, the “gruppo biblioteca” administers books related to the theme and the “gruppo di tecnici” consisting of architects, engineers, surveyors and chemists tries to predict the impact a new military base would have on the environment and tries to reconstruct the architect's plan for the base.

All participants work as volunteers. To keep autonomy and independence No Dal Molin does not accept financial aid of any political party. Financing results from conduction a bar, organizing concerts, selling t-shirts, selling booklets, donations etc.

No dal Molin communicates with many organizations that fight for peace or protection of the environment. Their relation with the government is less positive. The mayor Enrico Hüllweck with the town counsel supports the extension of the base. People feel deceived by the fact that the negotiations with the US government have been secret and that they have not been involved in a matter that concerns their own town. For some months No dal Molin protests against and boycotts municipal manifestations demanding to have a voice in the decision making concerning the base. The relation with the government of Rome has changed. First, parties of the left wing didn't believe Prodi to support the extension plans. Only as Prodi announced his approval people were disappointed, surprised and turned against him.

## **2.2 Why “NO”: Arguments**

The main reasons to fight the expansion of the base at Vicenza are defending peace and protection of the environment. Since No dal Molin is formed of a variegated group of people there is a vast number of different arguments to object the expansion of the base which only partly can be classified into these two main arguments.

Fighting for peace demands to oppose any war promoting action. Thus the development of a main military point to control the middle east and Africa needs to be rejected. People are afraid of what could happen if existing conflicts tension or if there might be an outbreak of war. Also the belief that in international politics Europe should become more important and that Europe should mediate between contrasting positions leads to the objection of something that foresees the military solution of conflicts. The discussions about the base also allude national dignity: Vicentians need to have the courage to defend their principles and the well-being of the citizens.

According to most members of No dal Molin the expansion of Ederle would result into an incredible environmental damage: One of the last green reserves of the city, a beautiful and peaceful landscape close to a territory which is densely populated will be destroyed. The planned project demands the casting of 700.000 cm of cement over the reserves of ground water that supply the region and Padova with drinking water. Through the elevated energy consumption and production of toxic substances this water reserves might be polluted.

Furthermore a military base implies an immense noise pollution: there will be more civil and military vehicles in transit and helicopters and airplanes over their heads.

People also fear for the health of citizens: In Sardinia, in regions close to military bases a major occurrence of leukemia has been verified.

Other than one would think, the construction of the base implicates serious economical damage. Only for a few people involved it implies economical advantage. Most suffer loss and additional costs through a number of reasons:

For its numerous Palladian villas Vicenza is on UNESCO's list of World Heritage Sites and thus has always attracted great numbers of tourists. A military base not far from the town center will affect tourism negatively.

Citizens will have to face rising taxes to pay the some of the construction and maintenance costs of the base, which should better be spent in education, health and social services.

Citizens will have to pay expenses that are not covered from the USA such as VAT, taxes, the supply with energy that is to 98% free according to the contract of London 1957/58, services at cost price (e.g. water, fuel, gas etc.) and free supply of transports, fares, discounts, and services for American families.

Houses located adjacent to military bases lose 30% of their value.

Some members of No dal Molin consider the public order disturbed. In the past there have been already brawls, incidents, and even rape committed by American soldiers. A patrol of armed guardians that would prevent this kind of incidents is not welcomed in a civil and pacific context. Some also consider the social impact, that is the increase in the vicentian population of about 15000 individuals (2000 new soldiers, their families and civil dependents of the base) as a problem.

Particularly women are concerned about the well-being and the future of their children. They want to protect the land and territory to guarantee their future.

As it can be seen there is a vast number of arguments against the expansion of the base. There are moral and ethical motivations, fears, economical reasons, concern of environmental and social impacts: a combination of most different reasons that do not allow the construction of the base.

### 3. Analysis

A closer look at the configuration of the situation shows that there cannot be a compromise. America wants to unite the 173rd Airborne Combat Brigade Team to control the middle east and Africa. Since more than half of the soldiers is already stationed at Vicenza, the fact that there is a civil airport that provides the required space for an expansion and through Vicenza's position in the north east of Italy it is out of question to look for another place for the base. It is also impossible to reduce the expansion, building for example only have of the planned dormitories. For Washington exists only the expansion how it is planned and only at Vicenza. Thus the situation allows no more than two possible outcomes: the expansion of the base at Vicenza or its prevention.

As can be seen above there are various arguments against the expansion of the base. All of them are directed to an absolute objection of the base and do not allow any compromise. The defense of world peace does not only prohibit the acceptance of a military base at Vicenza but also in any other place. The same with environmental protection. The extension of a base foresees the construction of new buildings and demands the casting of cement in some place or other. The energy consumption of a base cannot be reduced under a certain level. The constructions and the maintenance of the base implies expenses that have to be covered: From the viewpoint of the citizens the only acceptable outcome of this conflict is the that the extension of the base does not take place. This can be seen also in the character of the protest: Demonstrating, disturbing the city council (gruppo boicottaggio) are activities to express a explicit no and not an attempt to negotiate for the elaboration of a compromise. Already the name of the committee clearly expresses their radical position: NO dal molin. It is simple and clear: Rejection of the expansion of the base at all costs; nothing else can be accepted. Thus, when the bulldozers arrive to start working “we will make us in front of them” says Francesco Pavin an exponent of No dal molin.

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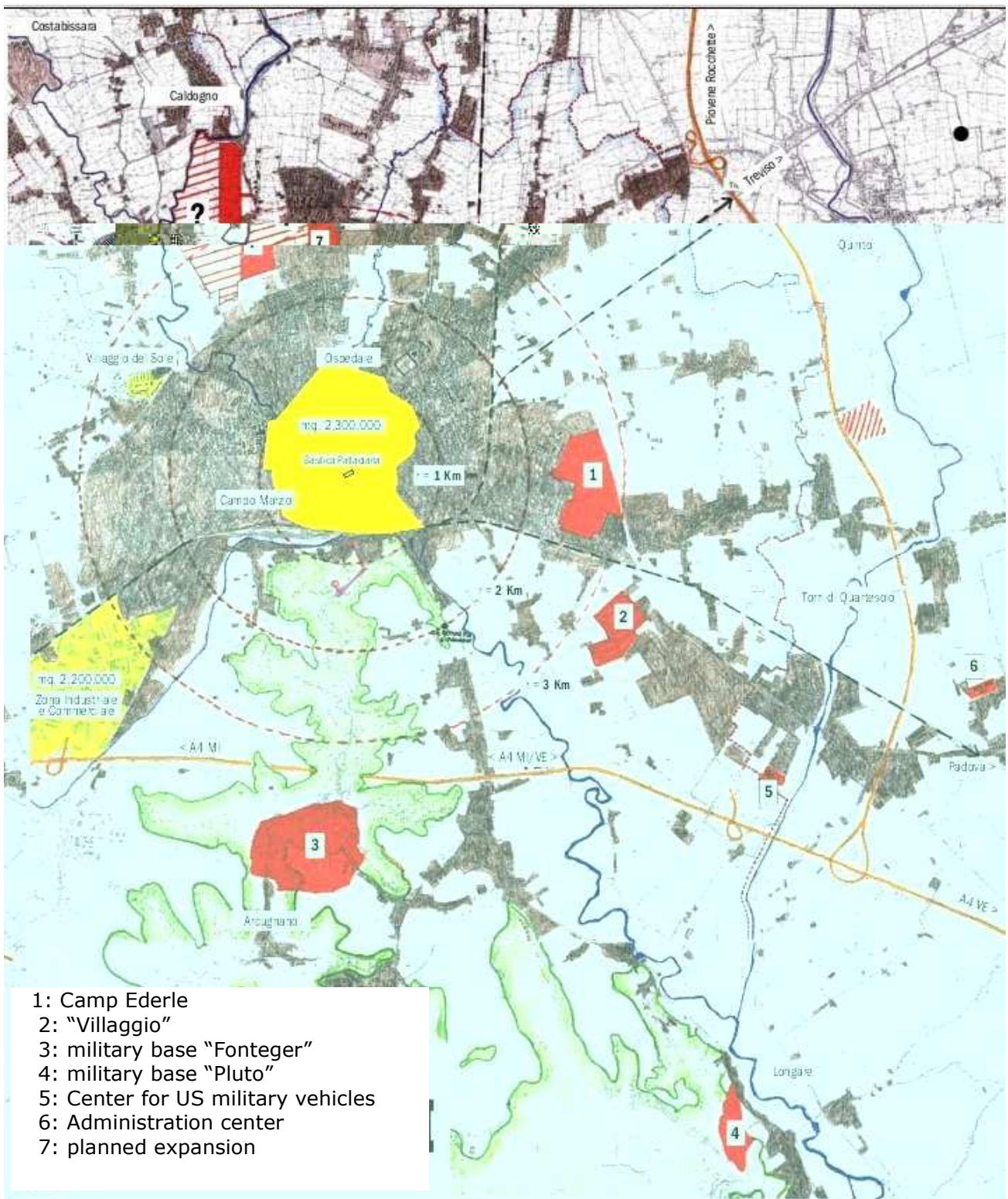
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Information about the committee No dal Molin derived from an interview (29.05.06) with Francesco Pavin, exponent of No dal Molin.



*Figure 1: Map of Vicenza with existing and planned military institutions, adopted from <http://www.altravicenza.it/index.asp>*