

HARDER, FASTER...

On the northern tip of the Lido, past the Jewish Cemetery and near the Caserma Pepe barracks, stands the Aeroporto Nicelli, the Art Deco home of the flying club²⁶ and named after the Venetian air ace Giovanni Nicelli, who claimed eight kills in the First World War. The first, very simple, airstrip was laid down as early as 1909 when the Italian army began to operate an internal postal service. 1912 saw the first glimmers of characteristic Venetian showmanship when crowds gathered in San Marco to watch the pilot Umberto Cagno make the first ever flight over Venice. The airport came into its own in the First World War when there was a serious danger that the city would be bombed by Austria.

The threat of aerial bombardment had darkened the skies of Venice in the past, during the Venetian uprising against Austria under Daniele Manin. In those days there had been a frightening but ultimately shambolic attempt at bombardment using balloons, mastermind-

ed by a Lieutenant Paulizza of the Austrian army, in peacetime an admirer of Effie Ruskin. Now, the prospects were much more serious and Venice prepared to defend herself from air attack.

Since there was only a skeleton air squadron available on the nearby island of Le Vignole, an arrangement was quickly made to station French reinforcements on the Lido. The resulting allied air initiative has taken its place in Venetian history, thanks in large measure to one of the leading participants, Gabriele d'Annunzio.

D'Annunzio was a poet, an unusually resourceful one, cast in the Byronic mould of cultivated *machismo*. Upon the outbreak of the First World War he was 51, and by then a revered if somewhat louche literary figure with a string of novels, poems, plays and mistresses to his credit. As such, he proved a tremendous asset to the newly-formed Italian airforce and cast himself energetically in the role of fearless airman. He moved from the Casa Rossetta, his lair on the Grand Canal, to comparatively spartan lodgings on the Lido at No. 24 Via Lepanto. A routine cockpit accident had left him with a dashing eye-patch and he wisely made no effort to correct the widespread assumption that this was a battle scar won in some dangerous exploit. The small deception was overlooked in the face of his unlimited energy and charisma, especially by the French allies. Already a literary hero in France, he was tremendously popular with the French officers, who in turn were warmly wel-

26 More adventurous visitors can indulge in parachuting (*paracadutismo*) by arrangement with the Aeroclub. The Nicelli website provides an interesting overview of the airport's history (www.aeroportonnicelli.it). As the result of a collaboration between the Italian engineer Renato Morandi and Hugo Junkers, the German aeronautical designer and manufacturer, the Lido was for a time the Italian home of Transadriatica, a joint venture that ran commercial flights, the first of their kind, from Venice (departing from Nicelli) to Vienna.

