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Luftwaffe *Schlachtgruppen*



John Weal

Osprey's primary Luftwaffe author/artist, JOHN WEAL has written and/or illustrated more than 20 titles in the Aircraft of the Aces, Combat Aircraft and Aviation Elite Units series since 1994. Possessing one of the largest private collections of original German-language literature from World War 2, his research is firmly based on this huge archive. Fluent in German, Weal has also spent much time establishing contact with ex-members of the Luftwaffe, from General Staff Officers of the RLM to frontline aircrew. He has often used these private sources to gain access to further archival material, including complete Luftwaffe orders of battle for the various fighting fronts and individual combat reports. A freelance airbrush artist since the days of the monthly *RAF Flying Review*, and its various successors, Weal also helps his German wife run a small technical translation and interpreting agency. But apart from the compilation of a World War 2 aircraft directory, and one or two infrequent magazine articles since, the Osprey Aircraft of the Aces, Combat Aircraft and Aviation Elite Units series are the first time John Weal has been invited to put pen to paper, and thus make use of his extensive knowledge of the Luftwaffe's organisation and operations. He is presently working on a history of *Jagdgeschwader 52* for publication in the Aviation Elite Units series in the summer of 2004.

Luftwaffe

Schlachtgruppen

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John Weal

Series editor: Tony Holmes

Front cover

By the spring of 1945 the survivors of those *Schlachtgruppen* which, only two years earlier, had been ranging far and wide over the vast tracts of Russia's forests and steppe in search of Red Army prey, were now forced to seek the enemy among the ruins of their own shattered towns and cities.

Mark Postlethwaite's cover painting captures to perfection an incident which occurred during the closing stages of the Battle for Berlin. With the unmistakable shape of the Brandenburg Gate in the background and a knocked-out Soviet T-34 tank already burning in the deserted street below, a pilot of II./SG 1 swoops low to salvo his remaining *Panzerblitz* rockets at another target.

Missions such as this, flown over the very heart of their capital city, were the swansong of the Luftwaffe's little-publicised ground attack arm which – in one form or another – had been in near continual action since the very first day of World War 2

Back cover

A smiling Hauptmann Alfred Druschel, *Gruppenkommandeur* of I./SchIG 1, portrayed wearing the Oak Leaves awarded to him on 3 September 1942 following his completion of 600+ ground attack missions

First published in Great Britain in 2003 by Osprey Publishing
Elms Court, Chapel Way, Botley, Oxford, OX2 9LP

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ISBN 1 84176 608 9

Edited by Tony Holmes

Page design by Mark Holt

Cover Artwork by Mark Postlethwaite

Aircraft Profiles by John Weal

Origination by Grasmere Digital Imaging

Printed in Singapore by Stamford Press PTE

02 03 04 05 06 07 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank the following individuals for their generous help in providing information and photographs.

In England – Thomas Bryant, Chris Goss, the late Dr Harry Law-Robertson, Michael Payne, Dr Alfred Price, Denis Roberts and Robert Simpson.

In Austria and Germany – *Herren Oberst (i.R.)* Hermann Buchner, Manfred Griehl, Rolf Hase, Walter Matthiesen, Holger Nauroth and Hans Weidemann.

In Scandinavia – Paul E Branke and Kari Stenman.

EDITORS NOTE

To make this series as authoritative as possible, the Editor would be interested in hearing from any individual who may have relevant photographs, documentation or first-hand experiences relating to the world's elite combat units, their pilots and aircraft, of the various theatres of war. Any material used will be credited to its original source. Please contact Tony Holmes via e-mail at – tony.holmes@osprey-jets.freeserve.co.uk

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IN THE BEGINNING

Germany's use of dedicated ground attack aircraft, specifically designed and operated to support her armies in the field, dated back to the latter stages of World War 1. By the time of the Armistice in November 1918, the *Luftstreitkräfte* (Air Forces) boasted no fewer than 38 ground attack *Staffeln*, controlling some 250 machines in all.

But it took just two clauses in the post-war Treaty of Versailles to bring to an end Germany's first pioneering foray into the science of aerial ground attack warfare. Article 198 expressly prohibited Germany from maintaining 'either land-based or naval air forces'. And Article 202 decreed that all existing military aircraft must be surrendered to the Allies.

Not surprisingly, the terms of the Versailles Treaty were viewed differently by the two sides involved. The victorious Allies saw them as stringent but justified. The German population, however, regarded them as harsh and repressive. This fact was seized upon by many anti-Government politicians in post-war Germany, not least among them Adolf Hitler. During his rise to power he took every opportunity to criticise the authorities for 'kowtowing to the iniquities of the Versailles *Diktat*'. Yet long before Hitler was appointed *Reichskanzler* in January 1933, the Weimar Government – the very régime he was accusing of slavish compliance with every Allied demand – was already secretly laying the foundations for the creation of a new German air force.

Initially, their plans had not extended beyond the basic triumvirate of reconnaissance, bomber and fighter aircraft. But when ex-World War 1 fighter ace turned professional stunt pilot Ernst Udet returned from a trip to the United States in 1931 with tales of the Curtiss Hawk II biplane – and, in particular, its amazing ability to dive-bomb a target with pinpoint accuracy – funds were made available for the purchase of two of these American machines. Ostensibly they were for Udet's own use during his dare-devil aerobatic displays, but before being passed over to him, both aircraft were to undergo thorough testing by the military.

Their previous luke-warm interest in the dive-bomber concept perhaps rekindled by Udet's undoubted enthusiasm, representatives of the then Ministry of Defence (*Reichswehrministerium*) also attended a demonstration of the machine produced by the Heinkel company in the summer of 1931 to a specification placed by the Imperial Japanese Navy. The He 50, a two-seat dive-bomber, was a much heavier and altogether larger aircraft than the American Hawk II.

Nevertheless, a production batch of 60 He 50As was built for the still covert *Reichsluftwaffe* during 1933. Germany's first-ever attempt at a dive-bomber was a complete failure, however, and after only a few months service with two operational units of the embryonic air arm (*Fliegergruppen* Döberitz and Schwerin), the He 50 was shunted off to the flying schools. But it would enjoy a whole new lease of life as a night ground attack aircraft on the eastern front during the latter half of World War 2.



Although unsuccessful in its intended role as the Luftwaffe's first ever dive-bomber, the Heinkel He 50 later performed well as a night ground attack aircraft. This particular example, '3W+NP/Yellow 1', saw extensive service with NSGr 11 in the winter of 1943-44

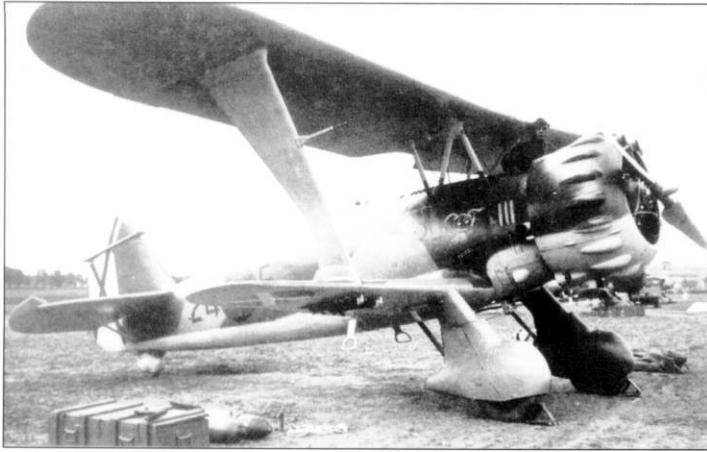
Even before the last of the He 50s had been delivered, the Defence Ministry was seeking a replacement to equip the strong dive-bomber arm it had now decided to establish. The machine chosen was the Henschel Hs 123. Although the firm of Henschel was a relative newcomer to the field of aviation, it had a long history in heavy engineering, having been a major manufacturer of steam locomotives for nearly a century, and a producer of heavy goods vehicles since the early 1900s.

Despite its makers' inexperience in matters aeronautical, the Hs 123 was a lot closer to Udet's Hawk IIs in terms of weight and size. Its performance was also directly comparable in many respects – its maximum speed, for example, was just four mph faster than the American machines, whose thorough testing at Rechlin had obviously paid dividends!

As well as being a pleasing and aesthetic design (for its day), with a fully-spatted undercarriage and single streamlined struts between the unequal-span wings, the Hs 123 also possessed another hidden 'strength' in the truest meaning of the word. Due, perhaps, to Henschel's heavy engineering background, the robust and rugged construction of the '*eins-zwei-drei*' ('one-two-three'), as it was to become popularly known in World War 2, would allow it to absorb a terrific amount of damage in action and still bring its pilot back safely.

But before embarking upon the operational role in which it was to excel, the Hs 123 would be accorded two other, lesser known, nicknames . . . and be found seriously wanting in one important respect.

First flown on 1 April 1935, the Hs 123 began to enter Luftwaffe service in the summer of the following year. By this time Adolf Hitler had combined the offices of Reich's Chancellor and President to become the self-styled *Führer*, or 'Leader', of the German nation. And rather than



One of the second trio of Henschel Hs 123s to be sent to Spain – in the spring of 1937 – ‘24.5’ displays VJ/88’s ‘Devil’s Head’ emblem below the wing centre-section struts

VJ/88 was led by Heinrich ‘Rubio’ Brücker, who is pictured here in World War 2 wearing the Knight’s Cross which he was awarded on 24 June 1941 for completing 100+ missions as a Stuka pilot



hide Germany’s growing military might, Hitler chose to flaunt it – even exaggerate it – to further his political aims and standing among his European neighbours. Unlike the army and navy, however, which had managed to remain in existence – albeit in greatly reduced strength – ever since the collapse of 1918, the air force was a completely new and untried quantity.

The outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in that same summer of 1936 afforded Hitler the ideal opportunity to test the mettle of the men and

machines of his new air arm under operational conditions. He lost little time in despatching the first units of a volunteer force, soon to evolve into the *Legion Condor*, to fight alongside the insurgent Spanish Nationalist troops commanded by General Francisco Franco.

A trio of early Hs 123s were among the first aircraft to be sent to Spain. Arriving in the autumn of 1936, they were formed into the *Stukakette* of VJ/88, the *Legion’s* then still experimental fighter component. Commanded by Leutnant Heinrich ‘Rubio’ Brücker, the three Henschels first saw action in support of the Nationalist offensive against Malaga in January 1937. They were then transferred northwards to participate in the attacks on the so-called ‘Iron Ring’ defences around Bilbao on Spain’s Biscay coast.

But it quickly became apparent that the Hs 123 left a lot to be desired as a dive-bomber, for Brücker and his pilots were unable to achieve the level of pinpoint accuracy which had so impressed Ernst Udet during the Hawk II’s demonstration in America six years earlier. The reason for this, it was now discovered, was the Henschel’s inability to maintain sufficient steadiness during the dive.

The *Legion’s* chief of staff, Oberstleutnant Wolfram *Freiherr* von Richthofen (cousin of the legendary Manfred *Freiherr* von Richthofen of World War 1 fame) therefore decided to employ Brücker’s small unit in the ground attack role. And in this they were to prove highly successful.

Three more Hs 123s arrived in Spain in the spring of 1937, and ‘Rubio’ Brücker’s now six-strong command set about the business of re-inventing and perfecting the type of low-level ground attack sorties which had last been flown against the ‘Reds’ in Latvia nearly two decades before. Brücker’s pilots were soon reporting that the ‘fearsome noise alone’ of the Henschels roaring only a matter of feet above the enemy’s columns and positions was often enough to cause panic and confusion – sometimes even flight. It was a tactic which would be repeated to great effect during the opening months of World War 2.

Despite the Henschel’s inherent ruggedness, these early ‘experimental’ missions cost the unit dearly. By the summer of 1937 it had lost four of its number to all causes, and the following year the two survivors were passed to a Spanish mixed *Grupo*. During their service with the *Legion Condor* the Hs 123s had somehow acquired the nickname ‘*Teufelsköpfe*’ (‘Devil’s

Heads'). Oddly, after transfer to the Spanish Nationalist air arm, which subsequently took delivery of a further dozen improved B-1 models, the Henschels were rechristened *Angelitos* ('Little Angels')!

More than 250 Hs 123A-1s and B-1s had been built before production was halted in April 1937. Apart from the 18 examples sent to Spain, the majority of them equipped the home-based *Stukagruppen* of the Luftwaffe's rapidly expanding dive-bomber arm. Serving in the homeland, the Hs 123's operational shortcomings were less obvious. Nevertheless, it was just as well that hard on the heels of the 'interim' Henschel there followed yet a third dive-bomber design.

This machine, the Junkers Ju 87, would become the very embodiment of German dive-bombing in the years ahead. And as more and more of the angular, cranked-wing monoplanes left Professor Junkers' production lines, so the elegant Hs 123s began to disappear from the frontline *Stukagruppen* to join the earlier Hs 50s in the ranks of the training establishments.

But the Hs 123 was not the only machine to have its operational deficiencies brought to light by service in Spain. The Heinkel He 51 was to prove an even greater disappointment to the German Command. Selected as the standard single-seat fighter of the newly emergent Luftwaffe, the Heinkel biplane had already displayed its gracefully aggressive lines to the World's press in a number of carefully-staged demonstrations and fly-pasts long before the first six examples of the type were shipped to Cadiz, in southern Spain, in August 1936.

Here, reality turned out to be very different to the image of Luftwaffe superiority fostered by the propaganda-fuelled aerial parades above the rooftops of Berlin. Despite a few initial successes, it came as a rude shock to discover that the He 51 was, in fact, dangerously *inferior* to the majority of the (mainly French) fighters flown by their Republican opposition. This was brought forcibly home by an incident in mid-September when just two Republican machines escorting a gaggle of elderly Breguet bombers were able not just to prevent six Heinkels from attacking their charges, but actually to drive the German fighters off! It was only the poor armament of the French aircraft which prevented matters from becoming even worse.

At first the Germans tried to remedy the situation by sheer weight of numbers, and by the end of November a further 72 Heinkels had been despatched to Spain (including 24 to the Spanish Nationalist air arm). But the arrival in Spain of the first Soviet I-15 and I-16 fighters that same month finally dashed any lingering hopes the German Command may still have been harbouring that in the He 51 – which now equipped all four *Staffeln* of the *Legion's* J/88 fighter Gruppe – they possessed a fighter aircraft of world-class standing.

By the close of the year the position of the German fighter force in Spain

The Heinkel He 51's shortcomings as a fighter quickly became apparent in Spain, although the exact circumstances leading up to '2.9's' present sorry state are not known



was being described as 'farcical', and the humiliation of its pilots was well nigh complete. Hopelessly outclassed as an air-superiority fighter, the He 51s could not even be gainfully employed on bomber-escort duties. It was reported that upon the approach of enemy aircraft the German fighters were often 'forced to take refuge within the bomber formations in order to gain the protection of the larger machines' defensive machine-gun fire'.

But just like the shortcomings of the Hs 123 as a dive-bomber, which soon faded from memory with the advent of the lethally effective Ju 87, so the He 51's near total inadequacy as a fighter was quickly forgotten upon the appearance of its successor – one of the true greats in the annals of fighter history, the Messerschmitt Bf 109.

In the early spring of 1937 the first Bf 109Bs were rushed to Spain, where they re-equipped 2./J/88. The question now was what to do with the *Legion's* He 51s? It was decided that the 2. *Staffel* machines replaced by the Bf 109s, plus those of the disbanding 4./J/88, would be passed to the Spanish Nationalists, while the aircraft of 1. and 3./J/88 – pending the arrival of more Messerschmitts – would be redeployed mainly in the ground attack role.

The Spaniards had already begun to use their Heinkels for such missions. Indeed, it was they who developed the *Cadena*, or 'chain', tactic, which consisted of a formation of He 51s, flying in line-ahead, diving upon an enemy trench and machine-gunning along its length one after the other. When the leader had completed his run he would pull up into a steep half-roll and rejoin the end of the queue. The result was that the occupants of the trench were pinned down by continuous fire. The onslaught would be kept up until either the Heinkels' ammunition was exhausted, or the position was captured by attacking forces.

The pilots of 1. and 3./J/88 employed similar tactics during their first ground attack sorties around Bilbao and Santander on the northern front in the spring of 1937. They also added a ventral *Elvemag* weapons rack to enable each machine to carry six 22-lb (10-kg) bombs.

The following weeks were spent in honing their skills in this (to them) new kind of warfare. 'Rubio' Brücker's Hs 123s were currently engaged in the same activity, with the only difference being that the pilots of Oberleutnant Harro Harder's 1./J/88 and Oberleutnant Douglas Pitcairn's 3./J/88 were also called upon to fly fighter missions as occasion demanded – and circumstances permitted. As far as is known, however, neither *Staffel* was credited with any aerial victories during this period.

In July 1937 the *Legion's* Heinkels were transferred to the Madrid front to participate in the Battle of Brunete. It was at this time that a certain Oberleutnant Adolf Galland was appointed to the command of 3./J/88. Recently arrived in Spain to take over as Technical Officer (TO) of J/88, Galland was a flyer whose passion for fighters bordered on the obsessive. He was, therefore, not overly pleased to be posted to the He 51-equipped 3. *Staffel* – and even less so a few weeks later when Harro Harder's 1./J/88 converted from its Heinkels to Bf 109s.

Nevertheless, Galland set about his new task with his customary thoroughness. He would later claim that during that summer in 1937, he and his *Staffel* laid the foundations for the Luftwaffe's ground attack arm of World War 2. And he was not far wrong. Flying several missions a day, often wearing only bathing trunks in the blazing heat of the sun, they would



The four *Staffelkapitäne* of J/88 are seen together in April 1938. They are, from left to right, Oberleutnants Wolfgang Schellmann (1.), Adolf Galland (3.), Joachim Schlichting (2.) and Eberhard d'Elsa (4.)

return to their base at Villa del Prado looking 'more like coalminers, dripping with sweat, smeared with oil and blackened by gunpowder smoke'.

Galland's description of his unit's duties – 'to provide air cover for infantry attacks, suppress movement behind the enemy lines, silence artillery, prevent reserves from being brought up and break up any possible counter-attacks' – could have been written in World War 1. The only item missing from the list is the dropping of supplies!

3.J/88 then began to add a few wrinkles of their own. Finding that the bombs from a single machine were having little effect on Republican troops strongly dug in among the hills around Oviedo, they tried their hand at mass bombing. Flying in close formation very low up the neighbouring valleys, the *Staffel* would approach the enemy positions from the rear and, at a given hand signal from Galland, all would release their bombs simultaneously. Half-jokingly, they christened this tactic 'poor man's carpet bombing'.

The *Staffel's* armourers also came up with what can only be described as a forerunner of the modern napalm bomb by attaching a petrol can filled with fuel and sump oil to an incendiary fragmentation bomb. It was a primitive device, but it worked.

In fact, so successful were 3.J/88's ground attack operations on the central and northern fronts during this period that 28 examples of a new model He 51, intended primarily for the Spanish Nationalists, were diverted to the *Legion*. The He 51C-1, equipped from the outset with racks to carry four 110-lb (50-kg) bombs, began to reach Spain in the early autumn of 1937. Their arrival resulted in the re-activation of 4.J/88 in October, this time under the command of Oberleutnant Eberhard d'Elsa.

Both *Staffeln* – the machines of Galland's 3.J/88 wearing the now famous 'Mickymaus' figure forward of their cockpits and those of d'Elsa's 4.J/88 displaying the equally familiar 'Ace of Spades' centred on the

Legion's black disc fuselage insignia – participated in the static warfare around Teruel during the harsh winter of 1937-38 and the subsequent drive eastwards to the Mediterranean coast.

It was on 20 February 1938 that 4. *Staffel's* Leutnant Eckehardt Priebe destroyed an enemy tank trying to escape from Teruel. Although described in a contemporary account as a 'steel colossus', the 9½-ton Russian T-26 light tank which had fallen victim to 'Eckie' Priebe's six 22-lb (10-kg) bombs was not in itself remarkable. But it warrants recording, for it is believed to be the very first enemy tank to be knocked out by a *Schlacht* aircraft. Thousands of its Soviet fellows would suffer a similar fate on the eastern front between the years 1941 and 1945.

The rapid advance through Aragon in the spring of 1938, in particular, offered the *Legion's* Heinkels the ideal conditions in which to perfect the ground attack tactics that the Luftwaffe would use to such devastating effect in the world's first *Blitzkrieg* campaign 18 months later.

A pilot – identified as Oberleutnant Keller – who joined 4.J/88 at Calamocha early in 1938, recorded his experiences. His first mission, flown against Republican positions north of Teruel, had taken place around the end of January;

"The *Staffelkapitän's* briefing didn't last long. Approach flight: echelon to starboard, keep well tucked in. Over the target: short recce to determine best direction of attack and location of 20 mm flak, if any. Method of attack: dive line-ahead, machine-guns and fragmentation bombs. Climb and regroup. Repeat manoeuvre if and as necessary. "You", he pointed at me, "will fly machine number 105 in the third slot".

"Right. Let's go!"

'It took about 20 minutes to reach the target. Our nine aircraft kept close formation as if tied together with a piece of string, each one slightly to the right rear of, and above, the one in front. Once over the target we started to circle. The circle grew tighter, and suddenly the *Staffelkapitän's* machine winged over into a steep dive. The second man followed some 160 ft (50 m) to 320 ft (100 m) behind him. Then it was my turn.

The 'Pik-As' (Ace-of-Spades) *Staffel* badge of 4.J/88, modelled by Oberleutnant d'Elsa's own '2.111'



'I could tell by the thin parallel skeins of white smoke, which angled briefly across the sky in the direction of the target, when each of the leading machines had opened fire. As soon as the number two man started to pull up and away I pressed my own gun button, but I had no idea what I was shooting at. I was more calm and collected during my next few passes, although still unable to make out anything definite on the ground below. After about 15 minutes, during which time we must have carried out some ten attacks, we returned to base.

'I flew six more missions in the Teruel area, gradually getting my eye in a little more with each one.'

After the capture of Teruel the He 51s transferred northwards to Gallur, in the Ebro valley, about 18 miles (30 km) north-west of Saragossa.

'Our job now', Oberleutnant Keller explained, 'was to drive the enemy out of his positions to the east of Saragossa and push him back towards the Mediterranean as far and as quickly as possible. It was becoming a war of movement, no longer a static campaign with the enemy protected behind thick concrete walls and in deep underground bunkers. The ensuing weeks would see the ground attack arm achieve some of its most significant successes of the entire Spanish war.

'We concentrated primarily on road convoys, and must have attacked hundreds, if not thousands, of vehicles and their crews. As there was now little evidence of the 20 mm flak which had ringed Teruel, and which we always tried to avoid like the plague, we became increasingly cheeky, usually flying just a few feet above the ground. This meant, of course, that we were hitting more targets, as could be seen by the numbers of burning vehicles we left in our wake.

'On one occasion to the south of Belchite we came across two batteries of motorised heavy artillery, some 40 vehicles in all, whose crews were dismantling their guns and preparing to join the retreat. Both *Staffeln* were ordered to engage this target, which meant that – apart from the short intervals required to fly back to base to re-arm – there was one *Staffel* constantly circling above the position while the other was attacking. About ten trucks went up in flames, and the remainder were riddled with machine gun bullets and fragmentation bombs. Not one escaped, and both batteries fell into the hands of Nationalist troops.'

A later attack on the Republican fighter airfield at Escatron was less successful. Oberleutnant Keller had his doubts about this one from the start;

'Escatron then lay about 22 miles (35 km) behind the frontlines. A tough proposition! It meant not just sticking our necks into a hornet's nest of Russian Ratas, but attacking them at low level in machines that were hopelessly outclassed. Our one consolation was that we were promised fighter protection.

'We took off punctually at 0400 hrs. Our field was still shrouded in pre-dawn darkness. It was a good 37 miles (60 km) to the front, which we crossed at a height of 8200 ft (2500 m). Our nerves were stretched to breaking point. 3. *Staffel* had taken off five minutes before us. We had seen nothing of our fighter escort, but we knew that, with their superior speed, they would soon overtake us.

'Shortly before reaching the target I noticed a number of flashes far below. I thought at first that it was enemy flak, but, in fact, it turned out to be 3. *Staffel*'s bombs exploding.

'Before I knew it we had begun our own attack. Although I dived only a split-second later, I had already lost sight of the *Staffelkapitän's* machine. Climbing back up after my first pass, I spotted several He 51s and immediately tacked on behind them. It was still too dark to see whether we had hit anything. There were no fires or any other signs of a successful strike.

'After just five minutes over the target area – we could not stay any longer because of the long distances involved – we turned back for base.'

Oberleutnant Keller also vividly recalled one of the last sorties he flew in Spain;

'It was on my 38th mission that we achieved perhaps the greatest ground attack success of the entire campaign. We had been ordered to support the attack by a Nationalist corps on the town of Lerida. In front of the town lay a line of *cementerios*, which were low flat-topped ridges or plateaus – ideal defensive positions along which the enemy was entrenched in great numbers. The main road to Lerida skirted the right-hand edge of this ridge line.

'As usual, we began by circling the target area at an altitude of some 3300 ft (1000 m). We immediately came under heavy fire from the ground. We could tell from the smoke that the troops along the entire length of the trench system were shooting at us. The *Staffelkapitän* lost no time in leading us down into the attack. Our own machine gun fire and the bombs of all nine machines were dead on target.

'Then something quite extraordinary happened. The end trenches closest to the road began to empty as the "Red" militiamen scrambled out of them and fled in panic down the side of the ridge, trying to get on to the road and back to the safety of Lerida. It just didn't stop. The whole trench system unravelled from right to left as tiny figures poured from their positions and ran blindly for the rear.

'Each of us must have made 15 or more low-level strafing runs over the fleeing mob before the Nationalist tanks and infantry stormed the ridges. But by then it was all over. An entire battalion had been driven out of a heavily fortified defence line within a matter of seconds. And it was all our own work!

The He 51 may have been a disaster as a fighter in Spain, but it excelled in the ground attack role. Here, the groundcrew of Unteroffizier Willi Meyer's '2.76' have found another use for the aircraft's bomb load – as a picket weight tied to the machine's port lower wing



‘After landing, we found that every one of our machines had been hit by machine gun and small arms fire. I discovered five bullet holes in mine – but hadn’t noticed a thing at the time.’

Actions such as those above provided the final dress rehearsal for the ground attack war that was to come. Shortly after the engagements described by Oberleutnant Kelle, the *Legion Condor* passed its last remaining He 51s to the Spanish Nationalist air arm. 3.J/88 finally got its long-awaited Bf 109s, and 4.J/88 was disbanded for a second, and final, time.

But the *Trabajaderos*, or ‘labourers’, as the Spaniards called the Heinkel He 51, had done their work well.

Adolf Galland had relinquished command of 3.J/88 late in May 1938, shortly before the *Staffel* converted to the Bf 109. The passionate fighter pilot had not managed to claim a single kill during his time in Spain. To rub salt into the wound his successor – one Werner Mölders – quickly made the most of the unit’s new Messerschmitts by downing a couple of I-15s. And these were just the first of the 14 victories which would see Mölders emerge as the *Legion Condor*’s highest scorer.

Galland hoped that a return to the Reich would also mean a return to fighters, but he was to be disappointed. With growing confidence Hitler had already marched his troops into the de-militarised zone of the Rhineland and annexed Austria – both actions specifically prohibited by the Treaty of Versailles. Now the Führer had his sights firmly set on the Sudeten territories of Czechoslovakia.

To add weight to his demands, Hitler ordered his ever-growing Luftwaffe to mount a strong aerial presence along the borders with the disputed territories. The Luftwaffe duly obliged by providing over 40 *Gruppen*, predominantly bomber, dive-bomber and fighter. Among the *Stukagruppen* included in this force was Hs 123-equipped III./StG 165, which was then the only unit of its kind not yet flying the Ju 87.

As an additional safeguard, should this show of strength prove insufficient and an actual armed invasion be required to wrest the Sudetenland from Czechoslovakia, it had further been decided that a ground attack force – similar to, but much larger than, the one which had recently been so successful in Spain – would be the ideal weapon to open up a gap in the Czechs’ frontier defences. And who better to help organise such a force than the man who had just spent ten months with the *Legion Condor* perfecting the very tactics which would be needed to do the job?

His post-tour leave suddenly cancelled, Adolf Galland thus found himself behind a desk in the new RLM (Air Ministry) building in Berlin, involved in the creation of five *ad hoc* ground attack *Gruppen*. Despite the confusion and haste – ‘of course, everything was wanted by the day before yesterday at the latest’ – the five new units, designated *Fliegergruppen*, were activated in time to participate in a large-scale exercise before taking up station along the Reich’s borders with the Sudetenland.

Three of the *Gruppen* were assigned to Lw.Gr.Kdo. 1, the command deployed in Silesia, Saxony and Thuringia to the north and north-west of Czechoslovakia. *Fliegergruppen* 10 and 50, based at Brieg and Grottkau respectively, were by now both equipped with ex-school Hs 123s, while *Fliegergruppe* 20, at Breslau, had to make do with the antiquated He 45, long ago rejected as a light bomber, but still soldiering on in the reconnaissance role.



Pictured at the time of the Munich Crisis, and obviously attracting a lot of attention from the local populace, this Hs 123 of an (unfortunately) unidentified *Fliegergruppe* clearly displays a black triangle – later to be adopted as the symbol of the ground attack arm – on its rear fuselage

The other two units, *Fliegergruppen* 30 and 40, came under the control of Lw.Gr.Kdo. 3 in Bavaria and Austria to the south-west and south of Czechoslovakia. *Fliegergruppe* 30's Hs 123s were stationed at Straubing, while the outdated He 45s of *Fliegergruppe* 40 took up residence at Regensburg.

By the latter half of September 1938, with his ground and air forces fully assembled, Hitler's 'show of strength' was in place. In the event, he was not required to unleash that strength. The British and French governments were united in their apparent desire to follow the path of appeasement at all costs. On 30 September they co-signed the Munich Agreement, ceding the Sudeten territories of Czechoslovakia to the Greater German Reich. And 24 hours later Hitler's forces marched virtually unopposed across the now defunct frontier.

Most of the Luftwaffe units gathered for *Fall 'Grün'* (Case 'Green', as the Sudetenland operation had been code-named) were quickly dispersed back to their home bases. Of the five ground attack *Gruppen*, only one, Hauptmann Siegfried von Eschwege's *Fliegergruppe* 30, was transferred into the newly occupied zone. Its stay at Marienbad was to be brief, however, and on 22 October it rejoined *Fliegergruppe* 40 at Fassberg, in Northern Germany.

Although their operational careers under the guise of *Fliegergruppen* had been short-lived, the effort expended in creating these five units did not go to waste. Three were re-equipped with the Ju 87 and redesignated as *Stukagruppen*, a fourth converted to Do 17s to become a *Kampfgruppe*, and the fifth – *Fliegergruppe* 10 – joined the ranks of the *Lehrgeschwader* in November 1938 to provide a nucleus for the sole *Gruppe* to be formed in furtherance of the science of ground attack. Some sources maintain that it was the He 45-equipped *Fliegergruppe* 20 which was selected for this role.

The Luftwaffe's *Lehrgeschwader* were mixed-formation units tasked with the operational evaluation of new machines and/or the development of new tactics. Each *Gruppe* within a *Lehrgeschwader* was equipped with a different type of aircraft. *Lehrgeschwader* 2, for example, consisted of a fighter *Gruppe* (I.(J)/LG 2), a reconnaissance *Gruppe* (III.(Aufkl)/LG 2) and *Fliegergruppe* 10's Hs 123s, which would henceforth operate as II.(Schl)/LG 2.

As such, they alone represented the Luftwaffe's entire ground attack strength during the final ten-month countdown to war.

BLITZKRIEG

It was still dark on the morning of 1 September as we climbed into our cockpits. Blue flames spurted from the exhausts of our engines as they warmed up, and at the first signs of dawn the fireworks began. The target for our unit was a Polish Army Staff HQ and barracks.'

The speaker was Oberleutnant Adolf Galland. After helping to establish the five *Fliegergruppen* at the time of the Munich Crisis, Galland had finally been permitted to return to his true love – fighters. But his tenure of office as *Staffelkapitän* of I./JG 433 (which became I./JG 52 on 1 May 1939) was to last exactly nine months. His knowledge of, and experience in, ground attack operations had not been forgotten by the upper hierarchy. And on 1 August 1939, as the war clouds gathered over Europe, he was posted to II.(Schl)/LG 2.

Since its formation (from *Fliegergruppe* 10, with selected personnel from *Fliegergruppe* 40) on 11 November 1938, II.(Schl)/LG 2 had been based at Tutow, some 15 miles (24 km) inland from the Baltic coast. It was here that Galland joined the unit as the *Kapitän* of 5. *Staffel*. A few days later the *Gruppe's* Hs 123s staged southwards, via Jüterbog and Cottbus, to take up station at Alt-Siedel, in Silesia.

They now formed part of *Generalmajor* von Richthofen's *Fliegeführer z.b.V.* This was the 'special duties' command – consisting mainly of Ju 87 Stukas – which was to provide the aerial component of the world's first *Blitzkrieg* operation: the smashing of a narrow breach in Poland's defences by 10. *Armee* and its subsequent all-out drive, spearheaded by 1. and 4. Panzer Divisions, north-eastwards to the enemy's capital, Warsaw.

But von Richthofen, who in Spain – like some field commander of old – had often watched his troops in action from the vantage point of a nearby hilltop, was aware not only of the Hs 123's capabilities, but also of its limitations;

'By the time Spielvogel and his old crates finally reach the front from Alt-Siedel', he complained, 'they will already have used up nearly half their fuel'. He therefore issued instructions that a forward landing ground be made available for Major Werner Spielvogel's 'crates' close to the Polish border.

Thus it was that in the pre-dawn darkness of 1 September 1939, the 39 pilots of II.(Schl)/LG 2 found themselves running up their engines on a small field outside the township of Alt-Rosenberg, less than nine miles (15 km) behind the arm of the River Warthe which marked Germany's frontier with Poland in this region.

As they were earmarked for retirement shortly before the outbreak of World War 2, it was not thought necessary to repaint the Hs 123s in the new toned-down camouflage scheme. They would take part in the Polish campaign wearing their original three-colour upper camouflage finish as seen here (and in colour profile three)





Still boasting pre-war codes (as are the machines in the previous photograph on page 17), an Hs 123 bumbles along high above the forests and fields of north-east Germany in the last summer of peace, as evidenced by the application of the tail swastika as first introduced in 1939

Despite the swathes of ground mist still clinging to the damp grass of the meadow, all got off safely. From his forward HQ immediately to the south of the border crossing point at Grunruh, von Richthofen could hear the approaching Hs 123s. Their shapes were just visible as they circled above the river, their engines ‘droning angrily like a swarm of disturbed hornets’.

At 0445 hrs precisely, Hauptmann Weiss, Spielvogel’s senior *Staffelkapitän*, led the Henschels in to the attack. On the far bank of the river he quickly spotted the *Gruppe*’s

objectives – Polish army installations, identified by Intelligence as being occupied by forward elements of the enemy’s 13th Division, in and around the village of Przystain.

Every one of Weiss’ 4. *Staffel* pilots placed his load of four 110-lb (50-kg) explosive-incendiary bombs with precision. Hard on their heels, Galland’s 5.(Schl)/LG 2 did the same. By the time 6. *Staffel* commenced its run, the enemy positions were shrouded in smoke and flames. Despite being taken by surprise, the Polish troops responded with light anti-aircraft and small-arms fire. But this opposition was soon suppressed as the Henschels, splitting up into individual *Ketten* (three-aircraft formations), then carried out a series of strafing runs, hedge-hopping over and around trees and other obstacles, and raking the Poles with machine gun fire.

Generalmajor von Richthofen watched the entire proceedings from the near bank of the Lisswarthe. What he was witnessing in the dawn light of 1 September 1939 was the first ground attack operation of World War 2 to be mounted by the Luftwaffe in direct support of an advancing army. And it was a complete success. At the end of that momentous day the OKW (Armed Forces High Command) issued a communiqué summarizing events. It included the phrase, ‘... in addition, several *Schlachtgeschwader* provided effective support for the army’s advance’ – for ‘several *Schlachtgeschwader*’ read ‘one *Schlachtgruppe*’, as the truth had become one of the first casualties of the war!

The successful attack on Przystain on the opening morning of hostilities set the pattern for the week ahead. Over the next seven days Major Spielvogel’s II.(Schl)/LG 2 continued to blast a path for 10. *Armee*’s Panzers as they drove hard for Warsaw. Whenever an armoured or motorised infantry unit was brought to a temporary halt by strong local enemy resistance, the call went out for the ‘one-two-threes’ to clear the obstacle. In the process, the Henschels earned a new nickname for themselves. The *Trabajaderos* (‘labourers’) of Spain became the *Schlächter* (‘butchers’) of Poland. It may have been a play on words – ‘*Schlacht*’ in the singular actually meaning ‘battle’ – but it was not inapposite.

Because of their machines’ limited range, it was not long before the *Gruppe* moved up into occupied Polish territory. A brief detour 72 hours into the campaign had seen the whole of *Fliegerführer z.b.V.* diverted to

the south-east of Czestochowa. Here, it had helped to reduce a large pocket of encircled enemy troops (the 7th Division which, after a heavy pounding by von Richthofen's units, became the first major Polish army formation in the field to lay down its arms). But soon II.(Schl)/LG 2 was back on the road to Warsaw, chasing the tail of its own armoured spearheads.

By 8 September the *Gruppe* had transferred forward to Tomaszow, little more than 62 miles (100 km) from the Polish capital. A large pasture close alongside the famous Wolborz stud-farm was singled out as a likely forward airstrip. After testing its suitability in the approved manner – 'if we could drive a car across a field with 50 kph on the clock (i.e. at approximately 30 mph) and it didn't bounce about too much, then the surface was good enough for our Hs 123s to take off and land on' – II.(Schl)/LG 2 took up residence. The field was indeed quite large enough to accommodate the Henschel's 650 ft (200 m) take-off run. What isn't on record is whether the new tenants frightened the horses!

In the early afternoon of 8 September the *Gruppe* supported a strong thrust by tanks of 4. *Panzerdivision* which took them to the outskirts of Warsaw. A heavy air bombardment of the capital's defences was ordered for the following morning.

As had become his custom, Major Spielvogel went up early in his Fieseler Storch to reconnoitre the area and search out suitable targets, before returning to brief his pilots on the coming day's missions. On this occasion, however, he did not return. Both Werner Spielvogel and his pilot were killed after the Storch was hit by anti-aircraft fire over Warsaw's southern suburbs. *Generalmajor* von Richthofen immediately appointed Hauptmann Otto Weiss to take over command of II.(Schl)/LG 2.

But even as the leading tanks were beginning to fight their way into Warsaw, a dangerous situation was developing to their rear. 10. *Armee's* rapid advance on the Polish capital – made possible in no small measure by the support of von Richthofen's Stukas and Henschels – had far outstripped that of 8. *Armee* on its immediate left. This latter army was to have protected the left flank of the armoured assault on the Polish capital. Instead, its divisions – mainly infantry – were strung back over many miles, their own flanks thinly held and dangerously exposed.

And, as chance would have it, an entire Polish army, not yet committed to battle and therefore still largely intact, was only a few miles away on the far bank of the River Bzura (which marked 8. *Armee's* left-hand boundary) and retreating parallel to the Germans' line of advance. Polish Gen Kutrzeba seized his opportunity. During the night of 10 September he pushed strong forces across the river at several points. His intention was to break through the thin crust of 8. *Armee's* flank and attack 10. *Armee* in the rear, thus severing the assault on Warsaw at its base.

Despite being of extremely poor quality, this photograph of a tight formation of Hs 123s, each with four SC 50 bombs underwing, suffices to show that II.(Schl)/LG 2 had introduced the 'L-2' code of its parent *Lehrgeschwader* prior to the outbreak of hostilities



Gen Kutrzeba's ambitious plan was to be the first, and only, major counter-offensive mounted by the Polish Army during the campaign. It provoked an immediate and overwhelming response. The attack on Warsaw was abandoned as every available German ground and air unit was redirected against the sudden and unexpected Polish threat along the Bzura. II.(Schl)/LG 2 was in the forefront of the action that ensued.

Taking off from their stud-farm meadow outside Tomaszow early on the morning of 11 September, the Henschels soon covered the 45 miles (72 km) to the river. There had been no need for a Spielvogel-type pre-op reconnaissance for there was no dearth of targets. Every road leading south-east from the river crossing points was packed with advancing Polish columns.

During the past ten days' fighting Otto Weiss' pilots had re-discovered the Henschel's built-in 'secret weapon' as first demonstrated in Spain – the unholy noise it could make! It was found that when the engine revs hit 1800, a kind of 'acoustic bow wave' was created which caused the propeller suddenly to set up a fearsome clatter 'like a dozen heavy machine guns'.

It was a brave – and rare – enemy column that could withstand the sight, and sound, of a dozen or more Hs 123s roaring along a road just 32 ft (10 m) above their heads. Men and horses bolted in panic. Drivers and crews leaped from their vehicles to seek what cover they could. Had they but known it, the more racket the Henschels were making, the safer those on the ground actually were, for at those revs, or so it has been said, the pilots were unable to fire their machine guns for fear of shooting their own propellers off!

But there were also plenty of opportunities to employ more lethal measures, strafing and dropping a whole arsenal of 110-lb (50-kg) high-explosive and incendiary bombs, as the Henschel pilots kept up the pressure, mounting one sortie after the other as long as daylight lasted. The Stuka crews were doing the same, while overhead flew the Heinkels and Dorniers of the *Kampfgeschwader*. Even the Messerschmitt fighter and *Zerstörer Gruppen* were being called upon to carry out low-level ground-strafting attacks.

Subjected to such intense bombardment, the Polish advance wavered and stalled. Just 72 hours after launching his offensive, Gen Kutrzeba was recalling his shattered forces back across the Bzura. They faced no easy task, as the General himself described;

'At about 1000 hrs a massive air assault was launched against the crossings near Witkowice. It surpassed everything that had gone before in terms of numbers of aircraft employed, the intensity of their attacks, and the acrobatic daring of their pilots. Every movement on the ground was pounced upon. Any concentration of forces and all approach roads lay under the crushing weight of fire from above. The bridges were destroyed and the fords blocked by wrecked vehicles, while those columns still waiting to cross were pounded to pieces by bombs.'

But although bloody, the Poznan Army was not yet beaten. Now in danger of being surrounded themselves, the Polish troops resumed their retreat, trying to fight their way back to the safety of the Vistula. They withstood constant harassment by von Richthofen's Henschels and Junkers throughout 16 and 17 September. The following day, however,

after a week of savaging from the air, their resistance finally began to crumble. Few would succeed in reaching the temporary sanctuary offered by the fortress of Modlin, on the Vistula. The vast majority – some 170,000 men in all – were encircled and captured.

It was the first time the Luftwaffe had played such a decisive role in a land battle. It would not be the last. Although the defeat of the Poznan Army along the Bzura effectively marked the end of organised resistance in the field (it was not long before the campaign in Poland was dubbed the ‘Eighteen-day War’ back in Germany), other units continued to hold out. Warsaw and Modlin would not surrender until 27 September.

II.(Schl)/LG 2 remained in action right up until the end. Among its last recorded operations were those flown during the heavy raids on the Polish capital just 48 hours before the capitulation. During the campaign individual pilots had racked up an impressive number of missions, Adolf Galland mentioning ‘about 50 sorties’, for which he was awarded the Iron Cross, 2nd Class, and promoted to *hauptmann* on 1 October.

The *Gruppe*’s contribution to the first *Blitzkrieg* campaign in history was recognised by the Führer, who took time off during his whistle-stop tour of the battle-fronts to visit them at their forward base at Zalesie, south of Warsaw. He sat around the field-kitchen with *Hauptmann* Weiss and his men, listening to their reports and speaking of the ‘magnificent achievements’ of his forces.

The elderly Henschels had indeed performed beyond all expectations. But success had not been bought cheaply. In addition to the loss of Major Werner Spielvogel, nine other pilots had been reported killed or missing on operations – a casualty rate of very nearly 25 percent!

THE WEST

With the cessation of hostilities in Poland, II.(Schl)/LG 2 returned to Brunswick, in Germany, for rest and refit. The winter of 1939-40, one of the most severe in living memory, was spent quietly. It was not until 1 February 1940 that two of *Hauptmann* Weiss’ *Staffeln* were moved up to München-Gladbach, just 15 miles (24 km) from the Dutch border.

The *Gruppe* still formed part of *Generalmajor* von Richthofen’s ‘special duties’ command which, by this time, had been raised to the official status of a *Fliegerkorps*. Anticipating that the aerial opposition to be faced in the forthcoming attack in the west would be much stronger than that put up by the gallant, but outclassed, Poles, the new VIII. *Fliegerkorps* was assigned its own protective fighter force of Bf 109s. A Do 17-equipped *Kampfgeschwader* was also temporarily attached to increase the range of the *Korps*’ striking power.

After being presented with its own ceremonial standard by *General der Flieger* Kesselring, GOC *Luftflotte* 2, at Gladbach on 11 February, II.(Schl)/LG 2 began a series of exercises with a special Luftwaffe airborne unit at Dedelsdorf, near Hannover.

Unlike the campaign in Poland, where advancing German troops had scarcely broken step at the many river crossings they encountered, the Reich’s borders with her western neighbours were marked by a number of major waterways, both natural and man-made. These barriers would have to be stormed, and crossings secured, before the *Blitzkrieg* proper could be unleashed into the enemy’s heartland.

The greatest obstacle on the northern flank – and the linchpin of the entire offensive – was the massive, and reputedly impregnable, Belgian frontier fortress of Eben-Emael, which overlooked three vital bridges across the Albert Canal to its immediate north. It was the task of *Sturmabteilung Koch* – ‘Storm-detachment Koch’, the glider-borne assault unit with which the Hs 123s of II.(Schl)/LG 2 were currently exercising – to neutralise Eben-Emael and capture intact the three bridges. Only then could the Panzers of 6. *Armee*, which were to spearhead the campaign in the west, begin their advance across Belgium.

Heavy rains in the Hannover region throughout mid-March brought the exercises to a halt. Although the Henschels could still operate from the waterlogged fields, the fully-laden glider-trains found it impossible. After the spring weather improved, however, the entire force, including VIII. *Fliegerkorps*’ Stukas, carried out a final round of dress-rehearsals during the third week of April. All was ready. And at 2155 hrs on 9 May a signal from *Lufiflotte 2* gave the long-awaited go-ahead – ‘Execute 0535 hrs.’

In fact, all 42 of the Ju 52/3m transports towing the DFS 230 gliders of *Sturmabteilung Koch* were safely in the air from their two Cologne airfields by 0435 hrs on the morning of 10 May 1940. The world was about to get another, even more telling, demonstration in the art of *Blitzkrieg*.

The assault force was split into four groups of ten or eleven gliders each. These groups were given code names corresponding to the construction materials of their targets – ‘Granite’, ‘Iron’, ‘Concrete’ and ‘Steel’. The 85 men of *Sturmgruppe ‘Granit’*, the smallest of the four groups, had the hardest job – the reduction of Fort Eben-Emael. This they accomplished, achieving the seemingly impossible by landing on the very roof of the fortress itself and attacking its upper cupolas with hollow-charge explosives, while von Richthofen’s Stukas bombed its outer defence works. ‘Granite’s’ *coup de main* may have gone down in military history as one of the most daring small-unit actions of World War 2, but the tasks facing the other groups – the capture and holding of the three Albert Canal bridges – were no less important. And it was these operations which Hauptmann Weiss’ Henschels were to support.

II.(Schl)/LG 2’s current complement of 49 Hs 123s made it numerically the largest *Gruppe* of all those involved in the opening day of the *Blitzkrieg* in the west. Taking off from their base at Lauffenberg, near Neuss, on the left bank of the Rhine, Otto Weiss led his pilots south-westwards as dawn started to lighten the sky at their backs. Precise timing was essential. If they arrived over the planned landing zones ahead of the glider-trains, they would alert the defenders and the critical element of surprise would be lost. If they arrived too late, they would be unable to support the airborne troops when they were at their most vulnerable – during, and immediately after, touchdown.

But those hours of combined exercises at Dedelsdorf paid off. Everything went like clockwork . . . almost. Only one of the three objectives – the iron bridge at Canne, little more than 2200 yards (2000 m) downstream from Eben-Emael, and almost within the shadow of the fortress – was blown up at the very last minute just before it was about to be taken by *Sturmgruppe ‘Eisen’*.

The two other large bridges across this deeply-embanked stretch of the Albert Canal, the concrete structure at Vroenhoven, some 3250 yards

(3000 m) north of Canne, and the steel span at Veldwezelt, less than two miles (3.2 km) beyond that, both fell intact into the hands of *Sturmgruppen* 'Beton' and 'Stahl' respectively.

II.(Schl)/LG 2's Henschels were in almost constant attendance during these airborne actions, and their subsequent rapid consolidation by armoured troops advancing by road from the German border. By day's end the *Gruppe* had flown some eight to ten ground-support missions, as indeed had most of VIII. *Fliegerkorps*' units – even its attached reconnaissance *Staffel* had been armed with 110-lb (50-kg) bombs so that it could engage 'targets of opportunity'.

By that time, too, the Panzer and motorised infantry divisions of 6. *Armee* were starting to pour in an uninterrupted stream through the town of Maastricht and out along the two exit roads leading westwards, across the Vroenhoven and Veldwezelt bridges, into Belgium. Over the next few days Allied bombers made many desperate, near suicidal, attacks on the 'Maastricht bridges' in repeated attempts to stop this flow of traffic. One of these attacks, carried out by Fairey Battles of No 12 Sqn on the morning of 12 May, was to result in the RAF's first (posthumous) Victoria Crosses of World War 2.

With the all-important bridges now securely ringed by flak batteries and covered by standing fighter patrols, Weiss's pilots were able to roam slightly further afield on day two of the campaign. This led to their first recorded brush with the expected 'strong' enemy fighter opposition. It came in the form of an RAF Hurricane of No 607 Sqn, which got 'in 'four or five bursts' at one of 5. *Staffel*'s machines as they were busy bombing Belgian positions along the River Meuse. Although claimed as a kill, the Henschel returned to base only slightly damaged.

But all this intense early activity on the northern flank of the offensive – spectacularly successful though it was proving to be – was, in reality, a gigantic feint deliberately designed to lure the Allied ground forces up into Belgium in response. The main thrust, to be delivered by the five Panzer divisions of 12. *Armee*, would then be launched through France out of the Ardennes hills to the south.

However, before this powerful force could fan out across the rolling plains of Picardy – ideal tank country which would take it all the way to the Channel coast – it too had a formidable water barrier to cross in the form of the River Meuse, near the French town of Sedan. And VIII. *Fliegerkorps*, its task along the Albert Canal completed, was called upon to assist. On 12 May von Richthofen's *Gruppen* were placed under the command of *Luftflotte* 3 and began transferring to the Sedan area in readiness to cover the crossings.

II.(Schl)/LG 2, which lost a machine to French fighters on 12 May, did not immediately follow the bulk of the *Korps* on its move south. On 13 May its Henschels were still supporting the tanks of 6. *Armee*'s 3. and 4. Panzer Divisions as they drove two French light mechanised divisions back from the Dyle Line (the forwardmost defensive line which British and French forces, newly advanced into Belgium, were trying to establish east of Brussels).

The following morning a force of some 15 Hs 123s, with a fighter escort, was despatched to attack the British-held sector of the Dyle Line near Louvain. They were intercepted by a squadron of RAF Hurricanes



Although it *is* wearing a three-tone camouflage scheme, the dark area on the forward fuselage of this Hs 123 is believed to be the shadow of the noonday sun cast by the upper wing. The circular badge just visible within the shadow identifies this as a machine of 6. *Staffel* ('L2+NP'). And the wreckage of Fairey Battle L5242, formerly of the RAF's No 142 Sqn, in the foreground pinpoints the location and date of this photograph as B erry-au-Bac post-16 May 1940

and two of the Henschels were forced down, both pilots being rescued by advancing German troops. Four Hurricanes were lost in the m el e. And although claims for all four of the RAF machines were submitted by the escorting Bf 109s, it is possible that one of the British fighters had, in fact, fallen victim to the combined returned fire from a Henschel pilot and his wingman.

A third Hs 123 crashed after being severely damaged by anti-aircraft fire over Tirlmont, to the south-east of Louvain. The pilot, Leutnant Georg D orffel of 5. *Staffel*, escaped with slight injuries. He was soon back in action, only to be wounded a second time and forced down at St Pol exactly a fortnight later (hardly an auspicious debut for someone who was to become one of the three greats of the *Schlacht* arm, winning the Oak Leaves and rising to the command of a *Geschwader* before being killed in action in Italy in 1944).

On 15 May II.(Schl)/LG 2, now operating out of Duras, again supported 6. *Armee*'s Panzers as they attacked north-west of the Gembloux Gap. This 'gap', actually a 30-mile (48-km) plateau between the Rivers Meuse and Dyle, was the historic route into and out of France which had been used by invading armies over the centuries. But the *Blitzkrieg* of 1940 was turning history on its head. The following day the *Gruppe* was ordered to rejoin the main force of VIII. *Fliegerkorps* in the Sedan-Neufchateau region to the south. The new role for the entire *Korps* was to accompany the Panzer and motorised infantry divisions of 12. *Armee* – now safely across the Meuse – as they set out on their headlong dash for the Channel coast.

Before operations got underway, it was on this same 16 May that *Generalmajor* Wolfram *Freiherr* von Richthofen and Hauptmann Otto Weiss were both awarded the Knight's Cross – a whole 13 days, it is perhaps worth pointing out, *before* Hauptmann Werner Mölders became the first fighter pilot to be so honoured!

II.(Schl)/LG 2's specific task in the days ahead was to provide constant support for the three armoured divisions, 1., 2. and 10., of General Heinz Guderian's XIX. *Panzer-Korps*, which was leading the race to the sea. As the ground advance gathered momentum, the Henschels were called upon with increasing frequency. They spent 19 and 20 May attacking large concentrations of enemy troops in the Douai and Le Cateau areas on Guderian's right flank.

In order to keep in touch with the rampaging Panzers, the *Gruppe* had long since moved up into occupied French territory. On 21 May, after strafing road columns north-west of St Pol, the *Gruppe* touched down at Cambrai. Here, with only their 'personal escort' of Bf 109s (Hauptmann Ultsch's I./JG 21) for company, they found themselves the forwardmost unit of von Richthofen's entire close-support command. But with the tanks once again already far ahead of them (the leading battalion of 2. *Panzerdivision* had reached the Channel coast near Noyelles just before nightfall on 10 May) and the infantry not yet closed up, it was a precarious situation, and their sense of isolation was palpable.

The following morning threat suddenly became reality. A reconnaissance Heinkel flew low over the field and dropped a scribbled note. 'About 40 enemy tanks and 150 truck-loads of lorried infantry advancing on Cambrai from the north'. The French had chosen this very moment, and this very spot, to launch a counter-attack.

Hauptmann Weiss' *Stabschwarm* immediately took off to assess the situation. They had not been in the air for two minutes before the danger became all too apparent. An enemy force less than four miles from Cambrai! As Otto Weiss later reported, 'South of the Sensée Canal the French tanks were forming up into groups of four to six and preparing to attack. North of the canal a long convoy of trucks was approaching'.

A gaggle of Hs 123s take a break between missions 'somewhere in France' as one of their escort fighters, a Bf 109E of I./JG 1 (III./JG 27), gets a quick check-over



After engaging the tanks with bombs and machine-guns, the *Stabschwarm* quickly headed back to base. Weiss used the intervening minutes to brief the *Gruppe* over his radio. Even as he came in to land, one *Staffel* was already taking off. A second soon followed . . . then a third. And so it would go on. The Henschels kept up a continuous round of short, but perilous, shuttle sorties. Each pilot was instructed to bore in and place his bombs as close alongside his selected target tank as possible. It was hoped that if the vehicle was not completely destroyed, this would at least damage the tracks and render it immobile. Meanwhile, the Bf 109s of I./JG 21 were sent in to strafe the column of trucks.

Before long over half the trucks were in flames. The French infantry had gone to ground, and seemed undecided whether to press the attack. They were obviously awaiting the outcome of events south of the canal. There, some half a dozen tanks were also blazing furiously. And more than twice that number had been disabled. But the rest were now advancing towards Cambrai.

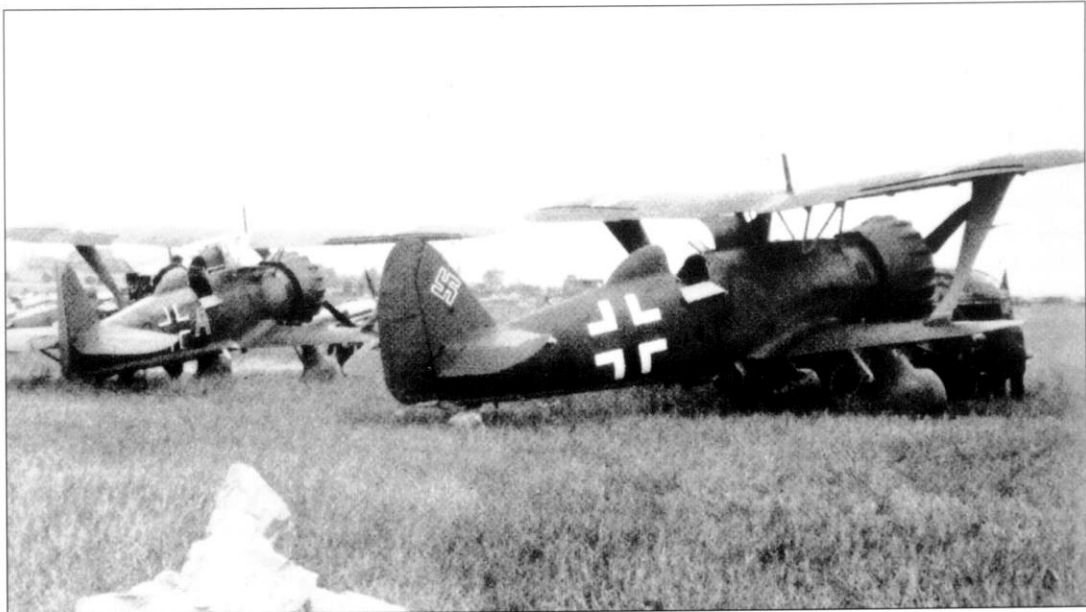
For a while it was touch and go. Only the fortuitous arrival of two batteries of heavy flak guns tipped the scales. Germany's 88 mm anti-aircraft weapon was one of the best artillery pieces of the war. It was equally deadly against both air and ground targets. Between them, the Hs 123s, Bf 109s and 88 mm guns drove the French back from Cambrai.

Elsewhere, von Richthofen's Stukas had broken up an even stronger British armoured force which was likewise attempting to cut the narrow German corridor separating the Allied troops in Belgium and north-eastern France from the main body of French armies to the south. With the failure of these counter-attacks, and their escape route southwards thus effectively blocked, those British and French formations surrounded by the advancing Germans now had little alternative but to retreat towards the Channel coast and hope for evacuation.

II.(Schl)/LG 2 were not directly involved in air operations against the Dunkirk evacuation beaches. Instead, they were employed inland around the rapidly shrinking Allied perimeter, harassing the rearguards as they fell back towards the sea. On 26 May, for example, they flew a number of sorties against troops withdrawing through Armentières and Bailleul, to the north-west of Lille, likening the retreating throng beneath their wings to the scenes they had witnessed along the Bzura the previous autumn.

The reduction of the perimeter and eventual capture of Dunkirk by the Germans on 4 June (by which time over a third of a million Allied troops had been evacuated) signalled the end of *Fall 'Gelb'* (Case 'Yellow'), the first phase of the *Blitzkrieg* in the west. *Fall 'Rot'* (Case 'Red'), the second and final phase of the plan – the destruction of the remaining French armies – was launched 24 hours later with an attack southwards across the River Somme.

5 June was to be the costliest day of the entire campaign for II.(Schl)/LG 2. To date the *Gruppe* had suffered the loss of just three Henschels, with two others severely damaged. The opening hours of *Fall 'Rot'*, which were spent supporting armoured units crossing the Somme at Amiens and Péronne, cost them three more. French fighters claimed the destruction of all three, but German records indicate that two were written off back at their Puisieux base – although these may well have sustained previous combat damage.



Unlike all the previous Hs 123s pictured, this pair – of the *Gruppenstab* – have obviously been given a coat of new, dark-green camouflage. But note the difference in their national markings. The machine on the right wears the regulation 1940 style, while that on the left still sports a narrow-bordered, pre-war fuselage cross. The latter's 'Green A', white dorsal stripe and upper-wing chevrons serve to identify it as the mount of *Gruppenkommandeur* Hauptmann Otto Weiss

Despite this somewhat shaky start, Hauptmann Weiss's pilots continued to harass an increasingly demoralised enemy as German forces pushed southwards across one major river barrier after the other. During the second week of June the *Gruppe* covered the leading units of 6. and 9. *Armeen* as they advanced over the Marne and down past Paris.

After losing one last Henschel to French fighters on 15 June, the following day saw them supporting 2. *Armee*'s crossing of the Seine. A day later and they were attacking road columns around Dijon. On that same 17 June German forces established a bridgehead across the Loire at Nevers, and France's newly-appointed Prime Minister, Marshal Pétain, announced his appeal for an armistice.

The campaign in France was virtually over and so, it seemed, was the operational career of the Hs 123. When von Richthofen's Stukas began transferring up to Normandy the following week as part of the preparations for taking the war to England's shores, II.(Schl)/LG 2 did not accompany them. The Henschels had proved themselves rugged and willing work-horses, able to operate from the most primitive of grass fields and capable of absorbing tremendous punishment. They had also provided invaluable support to ground troops at numerous water barriers.

But the next hurdle facing VIII. *Fliegerkorps* was no Polish stream, Belgian canal or French river. It was the 70-mile (112-km) width of the English Channel separating Cherbourg from the Dorset coast. And it was an obstacle the short-legged 'one-two-threes' simply could not overcome.

Otto Weiss, who was promoted to major on 1 July, therefore led his *Gruppe* back to Brunswick-Waggum for re-equipment. It was not just the Hs 123, the 'interim dive-bomber' turned ground attack aircraft, which was facing retirement. The entire *Schlacht* arm – all one *Gruppe* of it! – was in imminent danger of dissolution. The elderly biplane's intended successor, the Hs 129, a heavily armoured, twin-engined machine designed from the outset for the ground attack role, had first flown more than a year earlier. But it had proved a major disappointment.

Plans had already been mooted to convert II.(Schl)/LG 2 into a *bona fide* dive-bomber unit equipped with the Ju 87. Many felt that the dedicated ground attack machine, despite the success of the *Schlastas* above the trenches of World War 1, had no place in a modern war of movement. The new 'wonder weapon' of the *Blitzkrieg* era was the Ju 87 Stuka, which had already demonstrated its abilities – not only by carrying out pinpoint dive-bombing attacks, but also by flying low-level strafing missions. And these latter, to all intents and purposes, *were* ground attack operations.

Nevertheless, the outstanding performance of the Henschels during the recent campaigning in Belgium and France was acknowledged on 21 July by the award of the Knight's Cross to all three of Otto Weiss' *Staffelkapitäne* – Oberleutnants Horst *Freiherr* Grote, Egon Thiem and Wolf-Dietrich Peitsmeyer of 4., 5. and 6. *Staffeln* respectively. The departure of all three to staff positions shortly thereafter did little to inspire confidence in the continued well-being of the Luftwaffe's one and only ground attack unit!

In the event, Major Weiss' *Gruppe* was re-equipped not with Ju 87s, but with Bf 109 fighter-bombers. The reason for the change of policy is not known. The bursting of the Stuka bubble over southern England by RAF Fighter Command was still some weeks away. But the conversion to Messerschmitts may well have been a lucky escape for II.(Schl)/LG 2.

The advent of the fighter-bomber was a further muddying of the waters as far as the ground attack concept was concerned. Both Bf 109 fighters and Bf 110 *Zerstörer* had also flown ground-strafting sorties in Poland and the west. And an experimental *Gruppe* equipped with the two types was currently undergoing training prior to commencing cross-Channel fighter-bomber operations.

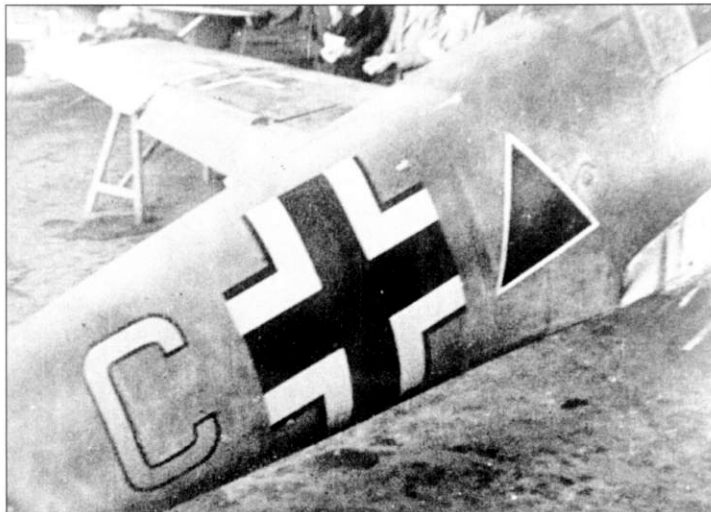
II.(Schl)/LG 2's own re-training for the fighter-bomber role, which was completed at Böblingen in southern Germany, lasted well into August. It thus missed the opening rounds of the Battle of Britain. Those early stages of the Battle had given the hitherto all-conquering Luftwaffe some nasty surprises. They had sounded the death-knell for the Ju 87 Stuka in western Europe (at least as far as daylight operations were concerned) and they had demonstrated the *Kampfgeschwader's* inability to knock out RAF airfields and other strategic targets.

By contrast, the results being achieved by the experimental *Erprobungsgruppe* 210 since the start of their low-level precision fighter-bomber attacks on southern England in mid-July were more than encouraging. The success of *Erpr.Gr.* 210's operations prompted an exasperated Göring to order that one-third of his entire Channel-based fighter force be similarly converted to carry bombs.

One of the first recorded *Jabo* (fighter-bomber) missions carried out by a *Jagdstaffel* re-equipped in accordance with the *Reichsmarschall's* instructions was that flown by 4./JG 26 on 5 September. All aircraft returned safely. II.(Schl)/LG 2 would not be so lucky 24 hours later.

By the first week of September Major Weiss had led his *Gruppe* of some 35 brand-new Bf 109E-7 fighter-bombers to St Omer, 25 miles (40 km) inland from Calais – the very territory over which his Hs 123s had harried the retreating British Expeditionary Force during the last week of May.

Late on the afternoon of 6 September Otto Weiss briefed his pilots for an attack on targets in the Thames Estuary area. This was some 80 miles



As the first Bf 109 fighter-bomber to fall into British hands, Feldwebel Werner Gottschalk's 'Yellow C' was given a thorough going-over at Royal Aircraft Establishment Farnborough. Note the unidentified III. Gruppe Bf 109 fighter (its radio hatch removed) just visible in the top left corner of this photograph beyond the trestled wing

(130 km) distant, and would be the longest mission many of his men had ever flown. But navigation would not be a problem, he assured them, as the oil tanks at Thameshaven were still blazing from a raid the previous day, and they would act as a perfect beacon.

What the *Kommandeur* perhaps failed to impress upon them was the strength of the region's anti-aircraft defences. These would cost the *Gruppe* two of their number. The first went down into the sea off the Nore after the pilot had taken to his parachute. The second, its fuel tank damaged by flak over Chatham, tried

to make it back to the Channel but was forced to put down at Hawkinge. Despite suffering further damage from the airfield's over-enthusiastic ground defences after landing, Feldwebel Gottschalk's 'Yellow C' provided British intelligence with its first (almost) intact example of a bomb-carrying Messerschmitt fighter.

In the weeks and months ahead, throughout the winter – weather permitting – and into the early spring of 1941, II.(Schl)/LG 2 kept up its sporadic attacks on southern England. Flying from St Omer and Calais-Marck, the unit's targets included RAF airfields, oil refineries, railways, docks and coastal shipping. Although usually accompanied by a fighter escort – often provided by JG 27, the unit which had been assigned to protect its Henschels in France – these operations resulted in a dozen or more combat casualties. Fortunately, some two-thirds of the pilots survived to become prisoners of war.

Among four known fatalities were two of Weiss's new *Staffelkapitäne*, both of whom went down over water. 'Black S', the mount of 5. *Staffel*'s Oberleutnant Hans-Benno von Schenk, disappeared into the sea off the Essex coast. It was one of three machines shot down by RAF Hurricanes following a low-level raid on North Weald on 29 October – the *Gruppe*'s own 'Hardest Day' over England. And it is believed that Oberleutnant Heinz Vogeler of 4. *Staffel* fell victim to patrolling Spitfires while attacking Royal Navy minesweepers in the Channel on 5 December. His 'White C' failed to return to Calais-Marck.

Of course, none of the operations flown by II.(Schl)/LG 2 during its six-month campaign against England were *Schlacht* missions in the truest sense of the word – i.e. ground attack sorties flown in direct support of the army in the field. Yet, oddly, the (Schl) abbreviation continued to be used in the unit title. Perhaps Weiss's pilots were to have reverted to their original role once the German army *had* set foot on England's shores?

In the meantime the *Gruppe* had retained both a sense of individuality, and a link with the past, by applying a unique set of markings to its Bf 109s. Each machine was identified by a letter, rather than a fighter-style numeral, and each sported a large black equilateral triangle ahead of its fuselage cross. Such triangles had first been worn by the aircraft of the

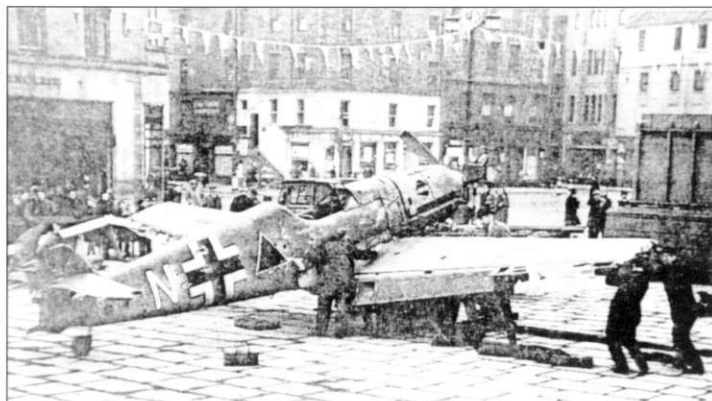


The novelty of bomb-carrying Bf 109s soon wore off, and later examples which came down over southern England were subjected to less expert scrutiny as they were put on show to raise funds (usually sixpence a time) for Britain's war effort. Here, two young ladies of Preston seem mildly interested in Feldwebel Erhardt Pankratz's 'Yellow M', which forced-landed at Peasmarsh, in Sussex, on 5 October. Note the 6. *Staffel* badge on the engine cowling and the vertical bar ahead of the black triangle

Fliegergruppen at the time of the Munich crisis. Their re-adoption may well have been at the instigation of Major Weiss himself, who had served as a *Staffelkapitän* in Werner Spielvogel's *Fliegergruppe* 40 during that period.

Between September 1940 and March 1941 these triangles – a few litres of black paint at most – were the only outward sign of what was now, in effect, an all but extinct ground attack force. But the triangle would survive to become recognised as the official symbol of the *Schlacht* arm. For a resurrection was about to take place. Less than a fortnight after its last Bf 109 had been lost over England (or, to be more precise, had been shot into the Channel off Dungeness) on 15 March 1941, II.(Schl)/LG 2 was given something far more tangible than mere markings to show that it was still very much in the ground attack business – a new intake of old Hs 123s!

Three *Jabos* of II.(Schl)/LG 2 were lost on 29 October 1940. Two crashed and the third, Oberfeldwebel Josef Harmeling's 'White N', came down on its belly south of Colchester, in Essex. Despite the poor quality of this photograph, the bullet holes riddling the fuselage – particularly in the area of the *Balkenkreuz* and black triangle – are clearly visible as the machine is assembled for display in a beflagged Dundee. A souvenir hunter has already cut out the 4. *Staffel* badge



EASTERN FRONT

1941-43

By the first week in January 1941, II.(Schl)/LG 2's strength at St Omer/Arques had sunk to just 11 serviceable Bf 109s. This was probably the lowest point in the fortunes of the Luftwaffe's ground attack arm at any time in the war. But a change of strategic policy by the Führer heralded a reversal in those fortunes and marked the beginning of the *Schlacht* force's emergence and expansion into one of the most important fighting components of the *Wehrmacht*.

The proposed invasion of England, shelved the previous autumn, was now postponed indefinitely. Hitler's attention was focused instead on Nazi Germany's traditional enemy, Communist Russia. Plans for an attack on the Soviet Union were already well advanced when a popular uprising by the people of Yugoslavia against their pro-Axis government forced the Führer into an unplanned, and unsought, campaign to stabilise his south-eastern borders.

Among the Luftwaffe units hastily assembled for a combined assault on Yugoslavia and Greece (the latter country currently locked in conflict with, and thoroughly trouncing, Germany's ally Italy) was II.(Schl)/LG 2. The *Gruppe's* paucity in numbers was soon made good. By the end of March 1941 they were fielding 30+ Bf 109s. But as the coming action in the Balkans was to be a repeat of the previous year's *Blitzkrieg* campaigns – an all-out offensive against the enemy's armies in the field – the Messerschmitts were divided between just two of the *Gruppe's* component *Staffeln*. The third was re-equipped with that trusty veteran of ground attack operations, the Henschel Hs 123, now brought out of retirement for a second time.

In addition, a completely new *Staffel*, 10.(Schl)/LG 2, was formed and likewise equipped with 'one-two-threes'. The two *Staffeln's* total complement of 32 Henschels, taken together with the others' Bf 109s, meant the *Gruppe* was again numerically the strongest of any being committed to the coming campaign. By the first week of April, operating once more as part of *General der Flieger* von Richthofen's VIII. *Fliegerkorps*, II.(Schl)/LG 2 had transferred down into Bulgaria. The main body of the *Gruppe* was based at Sofia-Vrazdebna, close to the Bulgarian capital, while 10. *Staffel* shared nearby Krainici with elements of StG 2.

Operation *Marita*, launched in the early hours of 6 April 1941, began in true *Blitzkrieg* style with heavy raids on the enemy's airfields and frontier defences. More accustomed perhaps to the lengthy approach flights which had preceded their recent cross-Channel fighter-bomber attacks on southern England, some of the *Gruppe's* Bf 109 pilots seem to have been caught off guard by the immediacy and ferocity of tactical ground-support operations. At least three of their number crashed on returning to base, although whether this was a direct result of previous



When II.(Schl)/LG 2 transferred from the Channel coast down to south-east Europe, its previous markings needed little amendment to conform with those stipulated for the Balkan theatre. Some aircraft reportedly wore a narrow yellow band around the mid-fuselage, but this has not been applied to 5. *Staffel's* 'Black H', seen here setting off with four SC 50 bombs on its ventral rack

soon proving their worth in true *Schlacht* style, clearing a path for their own advancing forces by bombing and machine-gunning any reported pockets of opposition into submission or retreat. The troops they were supporting, both Panzers and mechanised infantry, were their old comrades-in-arms of General von List's 12. *Armee*, who had erupted out of the Ardennes and raced virtually unchecked across France the previous spring. Now 12. *Armee* was repeating the same tactic, relying on the element of surprise as its armoured columns snaked through the mountain valleys along the Bulgarian-Yugoslav border before fanning out in a three-pronged drive across the enemy's hinterland.

This move, combined with 2. *Armee's* major offensive in the north, sealed Yugoslavia's fate. An armistice was signed in Belgrade on 17 April. With the threat of a counter-attack to their rear thus eliminated, the units on von List's left-hand flank were now freed to wheel southwards and begin their push down through Greece.

Fighting alongside the Greeks was a force of British and Dominion troops which had been despatched to their aid from North Africa almost as precipitately as the BEF had been rushed forward into Belgium to assist the Low Countries 11 months earlier. Predictably perhaps, the results were the same. Almost upon arrival the newcomers found themselves forced on to the defensive and then into withdrawal.

II.(Schl)/LG 2's pilots kept up a continual harassment of the retreating troops as they fell back from one hastily improvised defensive line to the next. The Allies were attempting to reach the beaches in southern Greece where, they were assured, ships would be waiting to evacuate them either to the island of Crete or back across the Mediterranean to Egypt.

On 26 April the *Gruppe's* Bf 109s strafed the approach routes to the bridge over the Corinth Canal. A regiment of paratroops had been ordered to capture this structure, high above the deep, steep cutting of the canal, which offered the sole road access to the Peloponnese – the southernmost part of Greece, and site of three of the six designated evacuation beaches.

Although the paratroops failed in their mission, the demolition of the bridge by its defenders cut the route of the Allied retreat just as effectively. Nevertheless, over 50,000 British and Dominion troops were lifted off the other beaches, many to bolster the defences of Crete.

And although a much more ambitious airborne assault would subsequently succeed in capturing Crete the following month, II.(Schl)/LG 2

damage from ground fire has not been established.

One Henschel was also lost on this opening day of *Marita*. 10. *Staffel's* Unteroffizier Hannenbergl must be considered particularly unlucky, for his sturdy little mount, renowned for its ability to absorb punishment, was brought down by a single round from a Yugoslav rifle!

Despite this less than auspicious return to ground attack warfare, the *Gruppe's* Bf 109s and Hs 123s were

was not involved in this final act of Hitler's 'Balkan sideshow'. Once again, the *Gruppe's* Henschels had been defeated not by the enemy, but by geography. The distance between the southern tip of mainland Greece and the northernmost point of Crete was almost exactly the same as that which separated Normandy from Dorset. Seventy miles (112 km) of open water had prevented II.(Schl)/LG 2 – in hindsight, perhaps fortunately – from participating in the opening phases of the Battle of Britain. Now a similar hurdle precluded its taking part in the closing stages of the Balkan campaign.

But this was the last time that a major water obstacle would hinder Luftwaffe *Schlacht* operations, for II.(Schl)/LG 2 was soon staging back northwards, via the homeland, and preparing to take part in the greatest ground attack campaign of all – that against the Soviet Union. It was over the vast land mass of the eastern front, veined by mighty, but not insuperable, rivers, that the *Schlacht* arm would grow from its present single *Gruppe* into a potent fighting force, and would score its greatest successes . . . and suffer ultimate defeat.

BARBAROSSA AND ITS AFTERMATH

On the eve of the invasion of the Soviet Union II.(Schl)/LG 2 was based at Praschnitz (Praszniki) in the far north of German-occupied Poland, just below the Lithuanian border. Its strength comprised 38 Bf 109Es, all but one of which was serviceable, plus 22 Hs 123s (17 serviceable). The Henschels, it appears, were now all operated by the attached and enlarged 10. *Staffel*.

The *Gruppe* was still part of General von Richthofen's close-support VIII. *Fliegerkorps*, the bulk of whose units had only recently arrived in the area following their successful participation in the Cretan campaign. And von Richthofen's command was itself one of the two corps which together provided the striking power of *Luftflotte 2*, the air fleet tasked with supporting land operations on the central sector of the coming eastern front campaign.

Armed with four bundles of 22-lb (ten kilogram) SC 10 bombs, a taxiing Bf 109E-7 kicks up dust as it prepares to take off from an eastern front airfield. Some sources suggest that this is 'White A', the mount of Oberleutnant Alfred Druschel, *Staffelkapitän* of 4.(Schl)/LG 2 – note the white background to the unit badge



Their charges fully fuelled, bombed-up and ready to go, groundcrew snatch a few moments relaxation as they await the arrival of their pilots. There seems to be little concern about the possibility of enemy air attacks. In place of earlier *Staffel* badges, the Hs 123s now wear a stencilled infantry assault badge on their forward fuselages



VIII. *Fliegerkorps*' specific responsibility was the aerial support of the four armoured and three mechanised divisions of *Panzergruppe 3*, whose orders were to smash all opposition in the border areas of Soviet-occupied Poland and White Russia, before advancing as quickly as possible on Smolensk, 'the last great fortress before the Soviet capital, Moscow'.

Despite its immense scale – involving three-and-a-half million German troops and their allies assaulting a front stretching some 1900 miles (3000 km) from the Baltic to the Black Sea – Operation *Barbarossa*, the invasion of the Soviet Union, relied on the same basic *Blitzkrieg* formula as before. And that meant, first and foremost, neutralisation of the enemy's air power.

II.(Schl)/LG 2's pilots played an important part in the savage and sustained strafing attacks on the 66 Soviet frontier airfields which marked the opening day of *Barbarossa*. Unfortunately, no details of their exact number of claims appear to have survived, but they must have been considerable, for by the close of that 22 June 1941, total Red Air Force losses were reported to be 1811 – 322 aircraft shot down, plus a staggering 1489 destroyed on the ground! So astonishing were these claims that the Luftwaffe High Command at first refused to accept them, only doing so after subsequent investigation on the ground had confirmed their accuracy.

Despite the enormity of its losses, the Soviet Air Force still managed to mount retaliatory bombing raids, but these were left to the *Jagdgruppen* to deal with as II.(Schl)/LG 2 now began to concentrate on its primary task – the support of *Panzergruppe 3*.

Events on the ground were unfolding exactly according to plan. Within a week four Soviet armies – some half-a-million men – had been trapped in a gigantic armoured pincer movement around the towns of Bialystok and Minsk. The reduction of this force resulted in the first great battle of the eastern front. Overhead, aircraft of *Lufflotte 2* patrolled the 220-mile (350-km) long 'Minsk cauldron', waiting to pounce on anything that moved. 10. *Staffel*'s Henschels were particularly successful during these operations, which ended in the surrender of more than 300,000 Soviet troops and the capture of Minsk itself, the capital of White Russia, on 30 June.

Minsk was at the western end of the one major highway which stretched 430 miles (690 km), via Smolensk, all the way to Moscow. German spearheads took Smolensk, roughly mid-way along this main artery, on 16 July. The mere effort of keeping abreast of the spectacular speed of the advance on the ground, let alone the depredation caused by enemy action – particularly among the ranks of the less robust Bf 109s – was having a serious effect on II.(Schl)/LG 2's strength and serviceability figures. By 26 July (on which date two more Messerschmitts were lost) the total of 54 serviceable machines which had been available to the unit at the start of *Barbarossa* had sunk to just 14!



Early in August, despite its weakened state, II.(Schl)/LG 2 was transferred to the northern sector of the front together with the other *Gruppen* of VIII. *Fliegerkorps*. Here, it was engaged in operations around Lakes Ilmen and Ladoga, and in the support of *Panzergruppe 4*'s drive to isolate Leningrad. It was while in the north, on 21 August, that all four of Major Weiss's *Staffelkapitäne* were awarded their Knight's Crosses. The decorations were presented by Generaloberst Alfred Keller, AOC *Luftflotte 1*, under whom the *Gruppe* was currently serving. Unlike the previous trio of *Staffelkapitäne*, who had been posted away shortly after being similarly honoured back in July 1940, these latest recipients – Oberleutnants Dörffel, Dörnbrack, Druschel and Meyer – would all rise to positions of prominence within the *Schlacht* arm.

Towards the end of September von Richthofen's VIII. *Fliegerkorps* was recalled to the central sector, where its units first took part in the twin 'cauldron' battles of Bryansk and Vyazma in front of Moscow, before then supporting *Panzergruppe 3*'s advance on Kalinin to the north-west of the city.

But Kalinin had also been chosen by the Soviets as the site for a major counter-offensive intended to relieve the pressure on their capital. The two forces clashed head-on, and in the bitter fighting which ensued, an entire Panzer division was surrounded and Kalinin airfield itself was threatened. By this third week of October the worsening autumn weather was already exposing the Bf 109's shortcomings as an effective ground attack machine. Otto Weiss's Hs 123s duly stepped into the breach.

In a re-run of the Cambrai action of the previous year, the 'one-two-threes' mounted a continuous round of shuttle missions against the Russian tanks and infantrymen attacking their base. With wheel spats removed to cope with the churned-up mud of the field's surface, and often flying at little more than 160 ft (50 m) in driving rain and appalling visibility,

After the official awards ceremony photograph, three of II.(Schl)/LG 2's four Knight's Cross recipients of 21 August 1941 gather round their GOC for an informal chat. They are, from left to right, *Gruppenkommandeur* Major Otto Weiss, Generaloberst Alfred Keller (GOC *Luftflotte 1*) and Oberleutnants Georg Dörffel (StaKa 5., back to camera), Werner Dörnbrack (StaKa 6.) and Bruno Meyer (StaKa 10.)

the sturdy little biplanes kept up the pressure for four long days. They inflicted bloody losses on the Red Army's men and machines before the enemy was finally driven back.

It was a signal victory. The propaganda ministry was quick to seize its opportunity, broadcasting details of the action in which 'a single *Gruppe* had saved its own airfield, and the many other units it housed, from being overrun by superior enemy forces'. Special praise was reserved for the *Kommandeur*. Much to Major Weiss's discomfiture – but no doubt to the secret amusement of his pilots – he was dubbed 'The Lion of Kalinin' in recognition of the *Gruppe*'s outstanding performance.

The sorties flown in defence of Kalinin between 21-24 October 1941 were to prove a fitting swansong for II.(Schl)/LG 2. For although the *Gruppe* resumed its support of the ground troops' push towards the outskirts of Moscow throughout November and into December, the true cost of Hitler's diversion down into the Balkans in the spring was now beginning to make itself felt.

The original plans for *Barbarossa* had envisaged the capture of Moscow well before the onset of winter, but the enforced delay in its launch, brought about by the intervening campaigns in Yugoslavia and Greece, meant that German forces were still short of the Soviet capital when the first snows fell. They were ill-prepared and ill-equipped to face the appalling severity of the winter months that followed.

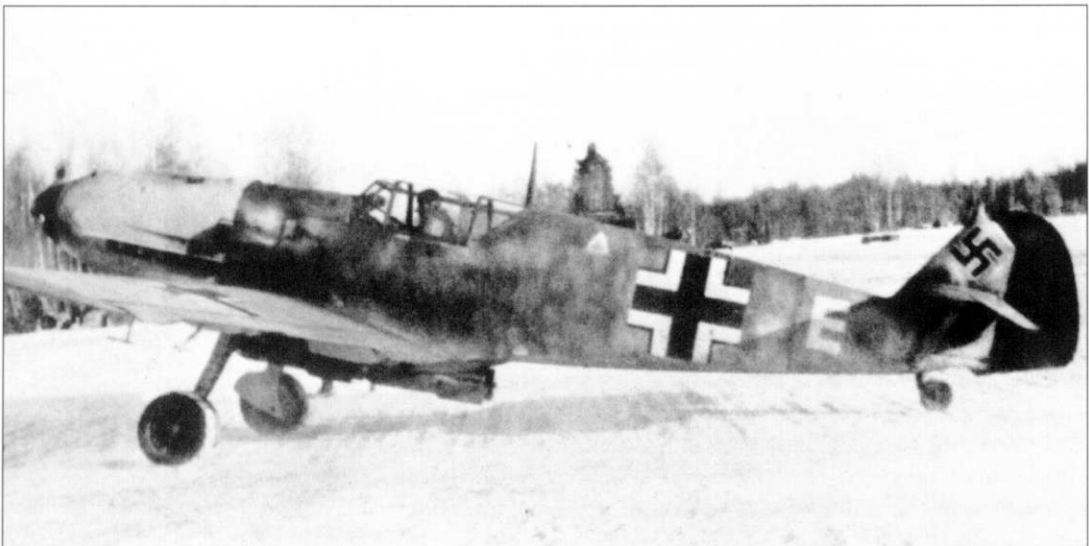
Even the hardy Henschels found it almost impossible to continue operations from their base close to the River Ruza, some 50 miles (80 km) to the west of Moscow. Blizzard conditions and temperatures plunging down to between 20 and 30 degrees below zero kept them firmly on the ground for most of the time. And when the Red Army renewed its counter-offensive around Moscow, using fresh Siberian divisions from the Far East, any last hopes of a quick conclusion to *Barbarossa* were finally dashed. German frontline troops had little option but to dig in and sit tight until the spring.

The end of 1941 also saw the end of II.(Schl)/LG 2. But the *Gruppe* which had single-handedly kept the flag of the *Schlacht* arm flying – both



'Leo meets Rover'. Major Weiss, dubbed the 'Lion of Kalinin', shakes hands with a large German shepherd dog. Otto Weiss is wearing the Oak Leaves presented to him on 31 December 1941

The first eastern front winter came as something of a rude shock to both men and machines. Here, an early Bf 109E, bearing no unit markings other than its individual letter, but with a full load of four SC 50 bombs, warms up ready for take-off





The rugged Hs 123 was better able to adapt to the vagaries of the Russian weather. Three of the four machines pictured here have dispensed with their spatted undercarriage leg fairings, which had a nasty habit of getting clogged with compacted snow and ice

figuratively and literally – for the past three years was being recalled to Germany not to disband, but to provide the nucleus for the first ever *Schlachtgeschwader*. And Major Otto Weiss, who had commanded the *Gruppe* for almost its entire operational career, and who had been the first *Schlacht* pilot to receive the Knight's Cross, now became the first to be awarded the Oak Leaves – on 31 December 1941 – before being appointed *Geschwaderkommodore* of the new unit early in January 1942.

II.(Schl)/LG 2's destination in Germany was Werl, a pre-war fighter airfield to the east of Dortmund. It was here that Weiss established the *Stab* of *Schlachtgeschwader* 1, and II.(Schl)/LG 2 was redesignated to form the basis of his first *Gruppe* – I./SchlG 1. At nearby Lippstadt (likewise a fighter field of long standing) a second *Gruppe*, II./SchlG 1, was also activated mainly from scratch.

Weiss distributed his more experienced pilots between the two *Gruppen*, Hauptmann Alfred Druschel being appointed *Kommandeur* of I./SchlG 1 and Oberleutnants Werner Dörnbrack and Georg Dörfel becoming the *Geschwader's* two senior *Staffelkapitäne* (of 1. and 5./SchlG 1 respectively). But a newcomer, ex-KG 51 bomber pilot Hauptmann Paul-Friedrich Darjes, was brought in to head II. *Gruppe*.

Although SchlG 1's main equipment was the Bf 109E, the recent demonstrations of the Hs 123's indispensable worth under the harshest of conditions resulted in both *Gruppen* receiving a number of the elderly Henschels as well. These came either from the now disbanded 10.(Schl)/LG 2 or from yet another trawl through the training establishments.

A third type was also to be added to the inventory of Weiss's new *Geschwader*. The intended twin-engined replacement for the Hs 123, which had proved such a sad disappointment when first flown early in 1939 powered by Argus 410s, had since been re-engined with French Gnome-Rhône radials. These latter were still far from ideal, and the Hs 129 was still a poor performer – it was slower than the later variants of the Ju 87 Stuka, had a much shorter range and was nowhere near as manoeuvrable.

The Hs 129 was, however, heavily armed and armoured and, as such, it was to be used to equip two new *Staffeln*: 4.(Pz) and 8.(Pz)/SchlG 1. As

No exact details of the where and when are known, but this photograph of a Red Army horse-drawn column under air attack gives a vivid impression of the sort of scenes witnessed by the pilots of II.(Schl)/LG 2 as they supported the advance towards Moscow





Above and top
Early model Hs 129s are seen on the eastern front in 1942. Note the position of the black *Schlacht* triangles, and the unit badges worn behind the cockpit of each machine. The motif on the aircraft taking off ('Blue G?') appears to be the axe-wielding bear of ex-5.(Schl)/LG 2, while the machine at rest sports what, at first glance, seems to be a variant (or an incomplete application?) of 4.(Schl)/LG 2's *Micky Maus*

the Pz (Panzer) abbreviation in their designation indicates, these two *Staffeln* were designed to operate as dedicated anti-tank units. And despite persistent powerplant problems, the Hs 129 would indeed develop into a potent tank-killer as subsequent models were fitted with ever more specialised weaponry, including large-calibre ventral anti-tank cannon and armour-penetrating hollow-charge bombs.

But severe problems plagued the early production machines, and deliveries to the Luftwaffe were so slow that initially only one *Staffel*, 4.(Pz)/SchlG 1, could be equipped with the type. And this unit was not to receive its full complement of 16 aircraft until mid-April 1942. By that time the intended 8.(Pz) *Staffel* had reportedly worked up on Bf 109Es as a 'standard' *Schlacht Staffel*, before departing for the eastern front with the rest of the *Geschwader* in the last week of April.

Operations against the Red Army in the spring of 1942 resumed where they had perforce been broken off late in 1941. But the new year brought with it a change in the strategic direction of the campaign on the eastern front. The blockade of Leningrad in the north would continue. On the central sector, however, the German army no longer had its sights set on



As well as the black triangle on the fuselage, many Hs 129s also displayed the infantry assault badge stencilled on the nose panel ahead of the external *Revi* C 12/C reflector sight

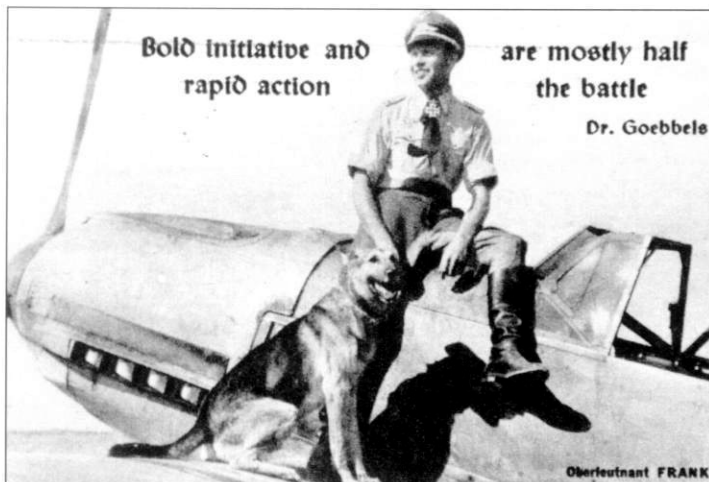
capturing Moscow. The Führer had decreed that the primary objective of the 1942 offensive was instead to be the oilfields of the Caucasus in the far south.

SchlG 1 was therefore ordered to stage the 1400 miles (2200 km) east south-east from the Ruhr to the Crimea. Unseasonably bad weather *en route* delayed its arrival, but on 6 May the unit paraded on the airfield of Grammatikovo for inspection by *General der Flieger* von Richthofen, who welcomed the *Geschwader* into his VIII. *Fliegerkorps*' fold (for many ex-LG 2 veterans it was, of course, more a case of 'back into the fold'). Von Richthofen's command was part of *Luftflotte* 4, the Air Fleet responsible for all operations on the southern sector.

Grammatikovo was situated at the base of the Kerch Peninsula. This easternmost part of the Crimea had been occupied by the Germans late in 1941, only to be retaken by the Red Army in a surprise midwinter counter-offensive. Now it had to be captured a second time.

For most of the younger pilots of II./SchlG 1 the two-week battle to clear the Kerch Peninsula was to be their introduction to eastern front operations. It was not an altogether reassuring experience. While VIII.

Oberleutnant Heinz Frank, *Staffelkapitän* of 3./SchlG 1, whose unit played an important part in the fighting around Kharkov, was later featured in an English language edition of the Luftwaffe magazine *Der Adler* (The Eagle). Frank's picture was accompanied by a stirring quote from Dr Josef Goebbels's Propaganda Ministry. Were the good *Doktor's* utterances, which at times could whip his audience into a frenzy, really that trite, or has this particular example lost something in the translation?



Fliegerkorps' Stukas bombarded the Soviet front line positions, SchlG 1 was sent deep into the enemy's rear to disrupt his lines of supply, both road and rail, and to attack any other reported signs of movement. But the Red Army was no longer the disorganised, demoralised force it had been during the opening months of *Barbarossa*. Even the veterans of I. *Gruppe* were surprised at the way the Russian soldier now stood his ground, and at just how much fire – from cannon to small-arms – was thrown up at them. By the time the town of Kerch, on the tip of the peninsula, finally fell on 21 May, both *Gruppen* had sustained a number of losses from the heavy enemy ground fire.

But no sooner had the gateway across the narrow Kerch Straits down into the Caucasus been opened than the *Geschwader* was suddenly rushed inland where a strong Soviet counter-attack, intended to pre-empt the German army's own planned offensive, was threatening the town of Kharkov. Although launched primarily as a spoiling attack, the size and speed of the Red Army's move, and the fact that the enemy was – for the first time – spearheading his drive with massed armoured formations, came as a rude shock to the German commanders.

From its new base at Kharkov-Rogan, nine miles (15 km) outside the town, SchlG 1 found themselves involved in one of the largest tank battles yet fought on the eastern front. It was at this juncture that the newly-arrived 4.(Pz)/SchlG 1 underwent its baptism of fire against Soviet armoured forces. The *Staffel's* Hs 129s were still very much an unknown (and unreliable) quantity, however, and it was the *Emils* of Oberleutnant Heinz Frank's 3./SchlG 1 which were singled out for special mention for the part they played in repulsing the enemy attack.

It had been a close run thing. At one stage Russian tanks were less than six miles (ten kilometres) from the *Geschwader's* airfield, but the blunting of the Soviets' spoiling tactics now left the way clear for the launch of *Fall Blau* (*Case Blue*), Hitler's ambitious 1942 summer offensive. *Blau's* aims were twofold – firstly, to trap and annihilate the enemy's forces in a gigantic pincer movement between the Rivers Donets and Don, and then to wheel south towards the ultimate goal, the Caucasian oilfields.

The scale of the operation was its own undoing. For the first time German units found themselves being stretched just that little bit too far,

while their opponents continued to grow in strength and confidence. The Führer may still have been dictating the overall strategy of the campaign, but the tactical initiative was beginning to slip from the grasp of his troops on the ground.

The same could also be said of the increasingly overextended Luftwaffe units in the skies above. After having taken part in the closing stages of the fighting around Kharkov – moving down to Slaviansk, in the Donets basin, and flying 'continuous and massive' low-level attacks against enemy concentrations in the Izyum



A year into the war in the east and little has changed other than the designations of the ground attack units involved. The main burden of operations in the summer of 1942 was still being shouldered by Bf 109Es . . .

. . . ably assisted by the venerable 'one-two-threes'. Here a Henschel is refueled in readiness for its next mission

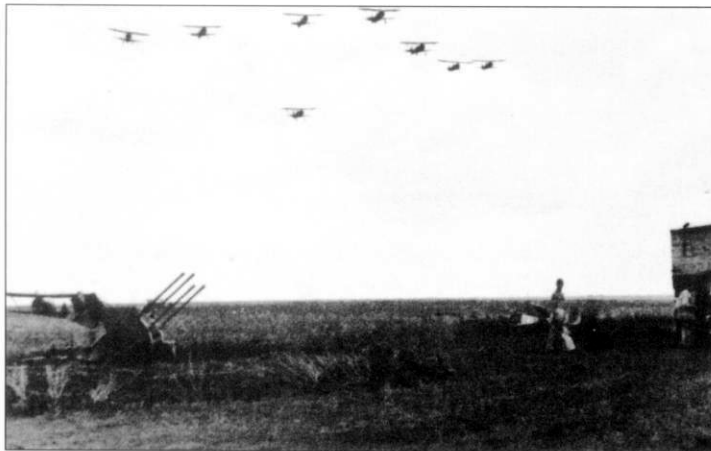
pocket to the south of the town – SchlG 1 had been transferred back to Rogan early in June to resume operations against the Soviets' rear-area lines of communication and supply.

Then, on 24 June, Major Weiss led his *Geschwader* northwards to a large grass field near Kursk. It was from here, four days later, that they supported the launch of *Fall Blau*, as 4. *Panzerarmee*, which formed the left-hand flank of the initial pincer movement, commenced its drive due east for the town of Voronezh on the upper Don. Weiss later recalled;

'In almost pitch darkness we started our machines and, one by one, taxied to our take-off positions guided by the flames clearly visible from the exhausts of the aircraft in front. Just before 0500 hrs, as dawn began to break, our entire II. *Gruppe* was in the air and heading towards Voronezh.

'Shortly after our departure the opening barrage began. We could see the fire spewing from the mouths of the cannon along the whole length of the front. From above it looked like a network of flickering street lamps in an otherwise peaceful and somnolent landscape.'

The peacefulness was deceptive. Within minutes the Bf 109Es of II./SchlG 1 were dropping their bombs on the Soviet artillery emplacements which were their designated target. They then strafed the enemy positions before heading back to base, shooting up a number of vehicles and troop columns on the way.



A gaggle of Hs 123s returns to base in a passable, if somewhat ragged, arrowhead formation which does not earn even a glance from those going about their business on the ground. Note the field's quadruple 20 mm flak defences

Oberfeldwebel Dommeratzky of 8./SchIG 1, who much preferred dogfighting with the Red Air Force than the 'boring business' of attacking ground targets, is pictured wearing the Knight's Cross he received on 5 January 1943 for 20 aerial victories (and the completion of 420 operational missions)



On the surface, *Fall Blau* appeared to be just the latest in a long line of classic *Blitzkrieg* campaigns. But by this midway point in the war the cracks were beginning to show. There were clear signs that the *Wehrmacht's* resources were being outstripped by the growing demands made upon it. For example, the pilots of SchIG 1 were now frequently required to fly their own pre-op reconnaissance sorties, as VIII. *Fliegerkorps's* sole dedicated reconnaissance *Staffel* was often engaged on more pressing duties.

Nor did the *Schlachtflieger* enjoy the luxury of automatic fighter protection any more. This was something else they often had to provide for themselves. True, the occasional enemy aircraft had been claimed by ground attack machines since the earliest days of the war, but these had usually been as a result of chance encounters. Now chance was turning into necessity as Red Air Force pilots began to specifically target the *Geschwader's* bomb-carrying ground attack Bf 109Es, the former regarding them as easier prey than the Luftwaffe's Bf 109F fighters.

Many members of SchIG 1, frustrated fighter pilots at heart, welcomed the opportunity to engage in air-to-air combat. None more so, perhaps, than 8. *Staffel's* Oberfeldwebel Otto Dommeratzky. Fellow NCO Hermann Buchner, who would himself score 46 aerial victories as a *Schlacht* pilot before converting to Me 262 jets in the closing stages of the conflict, recalls his early missions with Dommeratzky:

'I had been allowed to fly as Otto's *Katschmarek* (wingman) for some time. The boss (*Staffelkapitän* Oberleutnant Karl Dills) didn't fly all that often, and was quite happy with the arrangement. This suited me down to the ground, as I could learn a lot from Otto. He flew better than most, was much craftier, and put a lot of thought into his attacks – but he didn't worry about the welfare of his *Katschmarek*. You had to watch out, otherwise you were a goner!

'He was a craftsman. If he spotted enemy aircraft he would be after them like a shot, bombs jettisoned and straight into a favourable position for the attack. He always made sure he had a height advantage – a real fighter pilot, it was in his blood. At first I found it far from easy to anticipate his actions and follow his manoeuvres. But it was a privilege just to be there and witness Otto's first kills – my boss had never sought out the enemy in the air – kills the like of which I could only dream of while in fighter school.

'The *Kommandeur* (Major Paul-Friedrich Darjes) was none too happy that Otto was always looking for a fight and chucking his bombs away. Our main job, after all, was to attack ground targets and support our own troops in the field. But despite this, and despite the *Kommandeur's* lectures, Otto simply carried on as usual. He couldn't do otherwise. He was a born fighter pilot, with all the passion and instincts of a true hunter.'

But if a new breed of *Schlacht* pilot was coming to the fore – one who was as dangerous to opponents in the air as he was to enemy troops on the

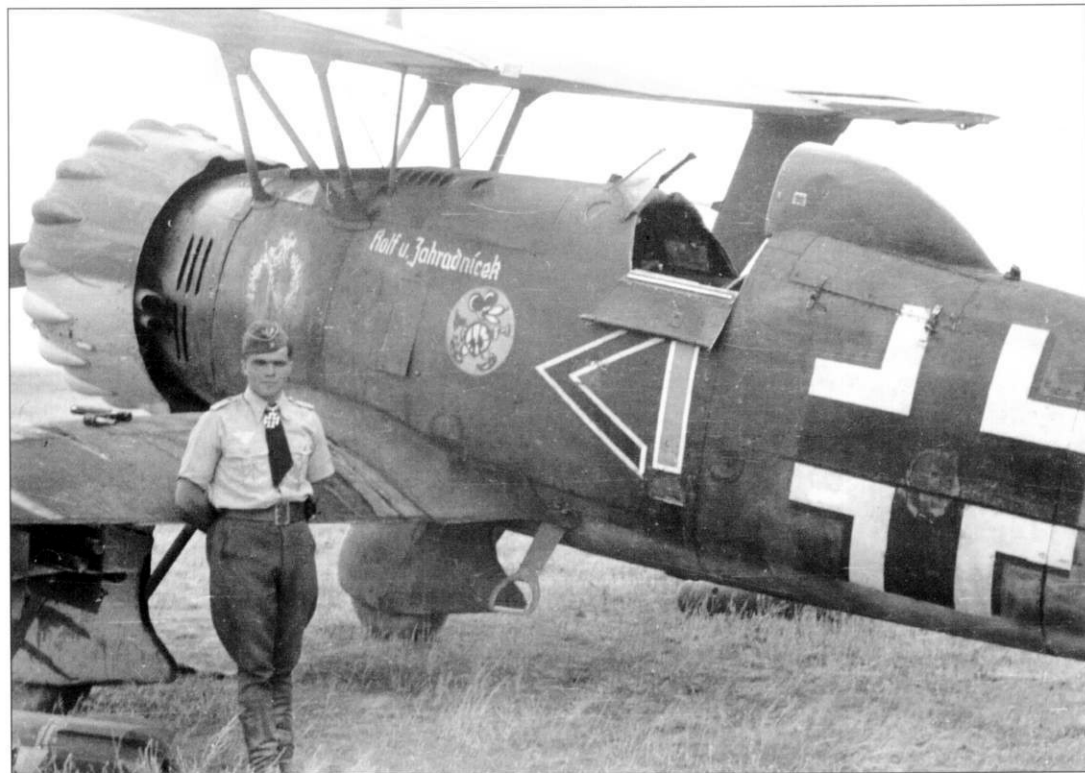
ground – then it was also a time of change for the old guard. In July Major Otto Weiss, who had in effect been the operational leader of the Luftwaffe's ground attack arm since the days of the Polish campaign, was appointed to the office of Inspectorate of Ground Attack and *Zerstörer* (*Insp.d.Schl. u. Zfl.*).

This seemingly odd juxtaposition of duties, combining the ground attack and the *Zerstörer* arms, was an indication of just how complex the growing assortment of Luftwaffe ground-support forces was becoming. *Schlacht* and Stuka units had long been engaged in essentially similar roles. To them had since been added two wartime creations – fighter-bomber (*Jabo*) and fast bomber (SKG) formations. Now twin-engined *Zerstörer*, whose original deployment as long-range fighter escorts had proved so disastrous during the Battle of Britain, were being categorised as ground attack aircraft too.

Despite the confusion of designations (and loyalties – the Stukas came under the direction of the *General der Kampflieger*, while ground attack units were controlled by the *General der Jagdflieger*!), there was one constant which had remained throughout. That archetype of ground attack aircraft, the trusty Hs 123, continued to soldier on. On the eastern front it had even earned itself a new nickname – the '*Obergefreiter*' ('Leading Aircraftman'), which was perhaps a tribute to its lowly station and length of service?

On 27 July SchlG 1's serviceability returns included just six Henschels. It was no doubt one of these machines that Leutnant Josef Menpace, *Kapitän* of 7. *Staffel*, was flying four days later when he clocked up his 600th mission on the type. The following month, on 20 August, 'Bazi'

With considerably more missions under his belt (over 650, and all flown on the Hs 123) than Dommeratzky, Leutnant Josef Menpace, *Staffelkapitän* of 7./SchlG 1, had been awarded the Knight's Cross on 20 August 1942. He is seen here beside his Henschel, whose multiplicity of markings include the name of a fallen comrade – a not infrequent practice among Stuka and *Schlacht* units. Menpace himself, by then a *Hauptmann* and *Kapitän* of 1./SchlG 1, would be killed on 6 October 1943 when his Fw 190 was brought down by anti-aircraft fire over the Pripet marshes



Menapace would become the first member of the *Geschwader* to be awarded the Knight's Cross, with his total of operational missions then standing at 650.

By that time the war on the ground had undergone some radical changes. *Fall Blau's* intended giant pincer movement had failed to materialise. The Red Army divisions had escaped the trap and were falling back towards Stalingrad, with 6. *Armee*, which was to have formed the right-hand flank of the pincers, hot on their heels. Meanwhile, Hitler had diverted 4. *Panzerarmee* due south towards Rostov – the city near the mouth of the River Don which commanded the northern shores of the Sea of Azov, and thus the main approaches down into the Caucasus – before changing his mind yet again and redirecting its tanks back north-eastwards, also in the direction of Stalingrad.

SchlG 1, commanded since Weiss's departure by Major Hubertus Hitschhold (erstwhile *Kommandeur* of I./StG 2 and latterly CO of *Stukaschule* 1), followed no less a circuitous path towards Stalin's namesake city on the Volga, which the Führer now decreed was to be the major prize. After the spearheads of the 4. *Panzerarmee* had been stopped on the western outskirts of Voronezh in mid-July, the *Geschwader* had first been transferred south-east to the Kaments-Podolsk area. From here it moved early in August to Tazinskaya, 150 miles (240 km) to the south-west of Stalingrad.

Tazinskaya was currently the HQ of VIII. *Fliegerkorps*, whose units were tasked with supporting 4. *Armee's* advance across the Don Bend. This was the vast expanse of flat open country enclosed within the giant eastward loop of the River Don which, at its furthest point, came to within 31 miles (50 km) of the Volga and Stalingrad. It was now the height of summer, and as the German troops slogged across the parched and dusty landscape, the pilots of SchlG 1 flew without respite, some clocking up as many as eight or nine sorties a day, in cockpit temperatures reaching 60° Celsius.

Despite the continuous harassment from the air, the Red Army's units had completed an almost orderly withdrawal from the Don Bend by mid-August, crossing the river at Kalach, and falling back the less than 30 miles (48 km) which then separated them from the outer suburbs of Stalingrad. Major Darje's II./Schl G 1 moved up into the Kalach area days later. After covering ground forces as they established a bridgehead over the Don, both *Gruppen* turned their attention to Stalingrad itself, which stretched some 12 miles (20 km) along the western bank of the Volga.

The Führer was growing impatient. On 19 August he had given 6. *Armee* just one week to capture Stalingrad. 'The city is to be taken by 25 August' he ordered, but Soviet dictator Josef Stalin was equally determined that it was to be held at all costs. In the face of fanatical resistance, it was not until 30 August that 24. *Panzerdivision* secured the first breach in Stalingrad's inner defensive ring. The epic battle that followed has gone down as one of the greatest disasters in military history. Having finally fought its way into the city street by street, house by house, 6. *Armee* was encircled and cut-off by no fewer than nine Soviet armies which launched concerted counter-attacks to the north and south of the city late in November. Increasingly isolated as the main German frontline was pushed steadily back from the Volga, the besieged 6. *Armee* suffered indescribable hardships throughout the winter before its quarter-of-a-million starving survivors finally surrendered on 2 February 1943.



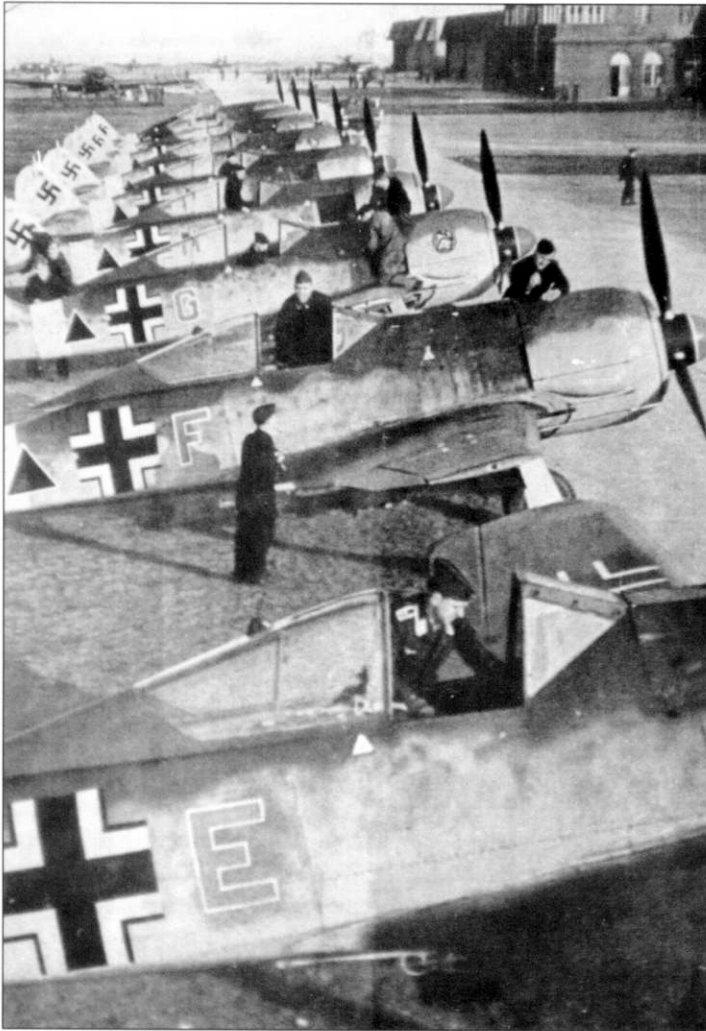
Josef Menapace is also featured in this post-September 1942 snapshot of four of SchlG 1's most successful pilots. They are, from left to right, Oberleutnant Georg Dörffel (StaKa 5.), Hauptmann Alfred Druschel (GrKdr I.), Josef Menapace and Oberleutnant Heinz Frank (StaKa 3.)

Based on two arid grass airstrips – Tusow and Frolow – to the west of Kalach, SchlG 1 was heavily involved in the opening acts of this tragedy. During the latter half of August and throughout September the *Geschwader's* pilots flew bombing missions against Stalingrad from dawn to dusk. Although their objective was more than 80 miles (128 km) distant, the pall of smoke and dust which rose some 6500 ft (2000 m) into the sky above the ruined town, was visible from afar. It also acted as a beacon for growing numbers of defending Red Air Force fighters.

In addition to the now familiar Polikarpovs and LaGGs, SchlG 1 was beginning to encounter Soviet-flown US lend-lease P-40s for the first time. This stiffening resistance in the air, coupled with the unprecedented numbers of anti-aircraft guns concentrated on the ground below, made every mission over Stalingrad perilous in the extreme. But it was circumstances beyond the *Geschwader's* control which had the greatest impact, and brought to an end the intense activity of late summer and early autumn.

The onset of the rains duly turned September's dust into October's mud, which then froze solid as temperatures plummeted and the snowstorms began. As winter tightened its grip, stocks of fuel ran dangerously low, and what little *did* reach the front was needed for transport aircraft trying desperately, but vainly, to keep Stalingrad supplied from the air. The further the main German front was forced back from Stalingrad, the longer were the distances to be flown. And in the devastated ruins of the city itself, such was the close-combat nature of the fighting – with German and Soviet troops often occupying different floors in the same wrecked building – that problems of target separation and identification made effective ground attack missions all but impossible.

With winter operations thus reduced to a minimum – between the months of November and March suitable flying weather could be expected



This famous photograph of an immaculate line-up of new Fw 190s at Deblin-Irena originally appeared in colour in the illustrated propaganda magazine *Signal*. It showed that the machines' spinner tips, individual letters and unit badge background discs were all in red. But as this was a colour not favoured on the eastern front (to avoid confusion with Soviet Air Force markings), all the above items were deleted or repainted before these aircraft (of 6./SchIG 1?) commenced operations

on average on only one day in ten – the time was used instead finally to re-equip. It had long been acknowledged that the narrow-track undercarriage of the Bf 109 made it less than ideal for use on the eastern front's uneven and unprepared grass airfields, particularly when encumbered with ventral and/or underwing racks and stores. The Focke-Wulf Fw 190, currently serving on the Channel front in the fighter-bomber role, offered the perfect replacement, its wide-set undercarriage legs being better able to cope with rough ground. The armoured ring in front of its air-cooled radial engine also provided increased protection against enemy ground fire (many a Bf 109 had met its end with a single bullet hole in its vulnerable coolant plumbing). And the Fw 190 was at its best at low to medium altitudes – the natural environment of the *Schlachtflieger*.

Commencing in late autumn, Major Hitschhold's units were therefore rotated one *Staffel* at a time back to Deblin-Irena, in Poland, to convert onto Focke-Wulfs. It was a long drawn out process, which would not be fully completed until the end of April 1943.

During that period five more members of the *Geschwader* received the Knight's Cross. The first, on 3 September 1942, had been awarded to the

No such problems with the yellow markings of these equally new Fw 190s. But, as with the earlier Hs 129 photographs in this chapter, note again the position of the black *Schlacht* triangles. Many sources maintain that the location of these symbols was not simply arbitrary, but was used as an 'in-unit' device to differentiate between *Staffeln* and/or *Gruppen*. And if the red-lettered Fw 190s belonged to II./SchlG 1 (as seems indicated by the unit badge), are these machines part of I. *Gruppe* – more, specifically, 3. *Staffel*?



Another of 8./SchlG 1's budding fighter *Experten* – and soon to become its *Staffelkapitän* – was Leutnant Hans Stollnberger, who won the Knight's Cross on 14 October 1942 for his 20 aerial victories. Stollnberger, who had begun his operational career with II.(Schl)/LG 2 during the Battle of Britain, would end the war as *Staffelkapitän* of 8./SG 10

Seen on the eastern front in the spring of 1943, Fw 190 'White B' (of I./SchlG 1?), wears a unit, or personal, badge that has so far defied identification. Close examination of the original print seems to suggest a figure astride a beast of burden – an ox, perhaps?

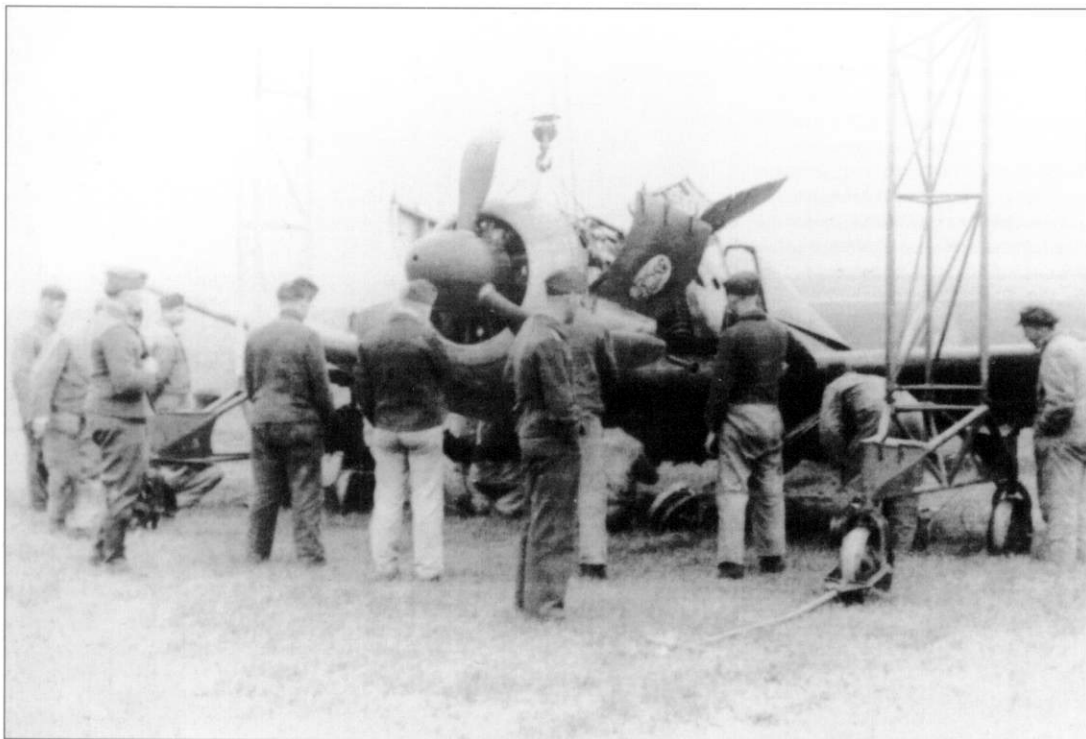


Staffelkapitän of 3./SchlG 1, Oberleutnant Heinz Frank, whose 500+ operational missions, starting with II.(Schl)/LG 2 in Poland, had included decisive roles in both the Kerch and Kharkov battles. The next two recipients, on 14 October, had been Major Paul-Friedrich Darjes, *Kommandeur* of II. *Gruppe*, and Leutnant Hans Stollnberger, soon to be appointed *Kapitän* of 8. *Staffel*. The latter's decoration was in recognition of his 460 operational missions and 20 aerial victories.

The gung-ho Otto Dommeratzky was likewise honoured on 5 January 1943 for achieving the same number of kills, but with 40 fewer missions to his credit. Finally, on 7 April – the day he assumed leadership of I./SchlG 1 – Leutnant Johannes 'Jonny' Meinicke, the long-serving TO of I. *Gruppe*, received his award for completing more than 400 missions, including many during the recent fighting around Stalingrad.

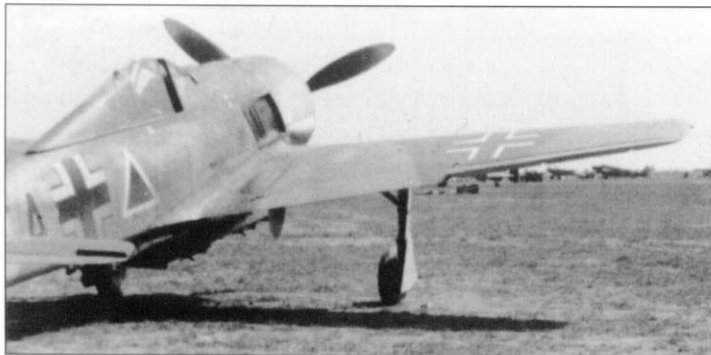
In addition, four higher decorations were bestowed. Having won his Knight's Cross in September 1942 for over 500 missions, Heinz Frank had quickly added 200 more to earn himself the Oak Leaves on 8 January 1943. Three months later, on 14 April, Hauptmann Georg Dörffel was also awarded the Oak Leaves for 600+ operational missions. Dörffel had recently been appointed *Kommandeur* of I./SchlG 1, and the officer he had replaced was to become the first ground attack pilot to wear the Swords. Hauptmann Alfred Druschel's 600th mission had won him Oak Leaves on 3 September 1942. It was the next 100 that resulted in the Swords on 19 February 1943, just one month before being promoted and taking over from Major Hitschhold as *Kommodore* of the *Geschwader*.





But there is no mistaking II. Gruppe's *Mickymaus* (on a white disc) decorating the cowling of this Fw 190, which is having its engine removed after suffering a landing mishap – as witness the collapsed port undercarriage leg and bent propeller blades

'Black A' (of 2./SchIG 17) sports no unit badge at all as it sits patiently on the forward field it is sharing with Bf 110s and transport Ju 52/3ms awaiting the next call to action. Note the empty ER 4 adapter shoe, capable of carrying four SC 50 bombs, on the ventral weapons rack

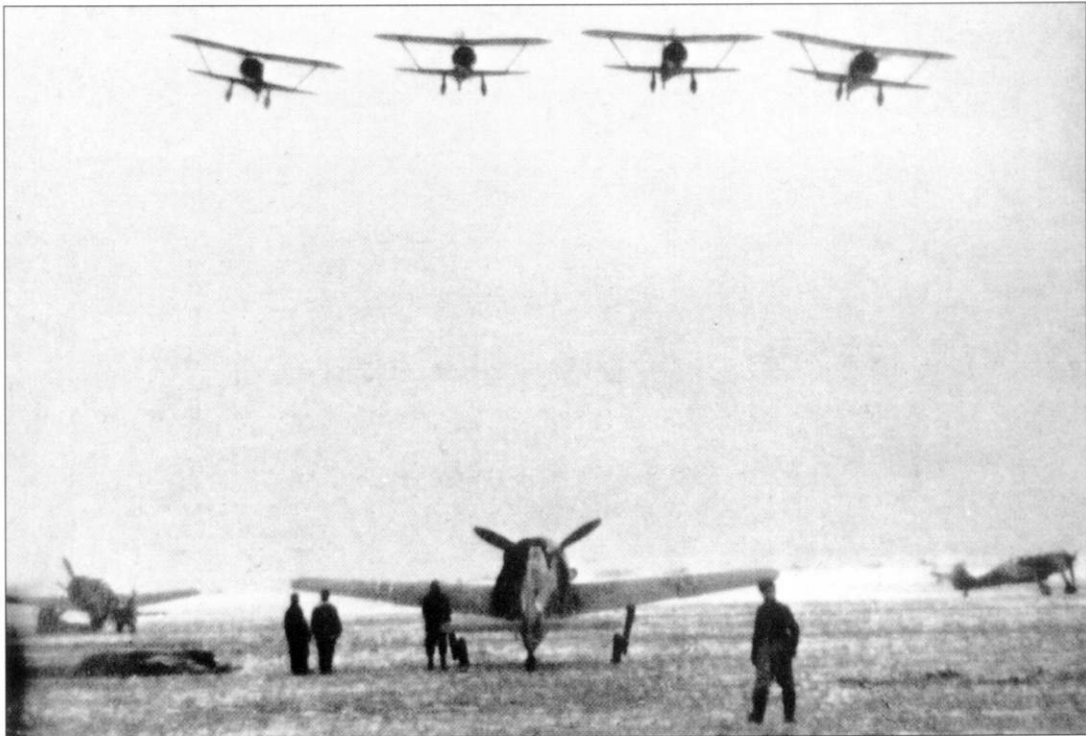


SchlG 1 did not reappear in full on *Luffflotte 4*'s order of battle until May 1943. Although still consisting of only two *Gruppen* (plus the specialised anti-tank *Staffeln*) upon its return to eastern front operations, the *Geschwader* represented a formidable fighting force well over 100 aircraft strong. Figures for mid-May indicate that Major Druschel's enlarged *Stab* flight was made up of six Fw 190s, while 67 more Focke-Wulfs, plus 32 Hs 129s, were divided almost equally between his two component *Gruppen*.

Surprisingly perhaps, II./SchIG 1 also had a dozen Hs 123s still on strength. But even more surprising was the fact that *Generalfeldmarschall* von Richthofen, who had been promoted AOC *Luffflotte 4* in July 1942, had recently submitted a proposal to the RLM that the venerable biplane be reinstated in production! Made in all seriousness by the leading expert in ground-assault operations, this suggestion shows just how indispensable the 'one-two-three' had obviously become. The proposal

was impracticable, however, for as the RLM pointed out, all the manufacturing jigs and tools for the Hs 123 had been scrapped back in 1940. Nevertheless, the remaining Henschels would continue to soldier on for several months longer.

The Hs 123 may have been nearing the end of its service career, but there was still an urgent and growing need for an aircraft capable of combating the increasing numbers of Red Army



tanks now beginning to dominate the eastern front battlefields. One answer seemed to lie in that other Henschel design, the Hs 129, which, despite its ongoing powerplant problems, had already claimed a considerable number of armoured kills. It was therefore proposed that, in addition to the established Pz. *Staffeln*, every *Jagdgeschwader* on the eastern front should have its own Hs 129 anti-tank *Staffel*. In the event, however, only one such – 10.(Pz)/JG 51 – was to be raised and see combat.

Another attempt to solve the problem had led to the activation of the *Versuchskommando für Panzerbekämpfung* at Rechlin late in 1942. This experimental unit was tasked with testing heavy anti-tank weaponry on other aircraft types. It was composed of four *Staffeln* – two of Ju 87s equipped with underwing 37 mm BF 3,7 cannon, and one each of Bf 110s and Ju 88s, the former with a single BK 3,7 in a ventral fairing, and the latter carrying a massive 75 mm PaK 40 cannon beneath the forward fuselage.

Field trials with the Bf 110s and Ju 88s, operating as Pz.J.*Staffeln* 110 and 92 respectively, proved unsatisfactory. The PaK 40-toting Ju 88s were particularly unwieldy, and one pilot still recalls the cannon's recoil regularly blowing the nose and engine panels off his machine! And although the nose (and propeller

Despite the advent of the Fw 190, the obsolescent, but rugged, Hs 123 continued to soldier on . . .

. . . albeit in brand new markings. Although the individual letter of this fully bombed-up example is hidden by the mechanic riding on the starboard wing as he helps to guide the pilot while taxiing, the fighter-style horizontal bar aft of the *Balkenkreuz* clearly proclaims it to be a machine of II. *Gruppe*





Like the Hs 123, the Ju 87 also dated back to the era of the *Legion Condor*. But unlike the Henschel, Junkers' original Stuka design had undergone considerable development since its days in Spain. And in its latest guise – as the Ju 87G, fitted with a pair of powerful 37 mm Flak 18 (BK 3,7) underwing cannon – it would prove to be one of the eastern front's most potent tank killers

Armourers insert the tray magazine of special tungsten-cored 37 mm shells into the starboard underwing cannon of a Ju 87G



blades) were subsequently strengthened, the inner nacelle panels of the armour-protected engines were thereafter always tied on with baling twine as an added precaution.

In contrast, the Ju 87's 37 mm underwing cannon were found to be highly effective against Soviet armour. In June 1943, the two experimental *Staffeln*, 1. and 2./*Vers.Kdo.f.Pz.Bek.*, were therefore officially redesignated *Panzerjägerstaffeln* (anti-tank squadrons), one each being assigned to StGs 1 and 2 as specialised frontline tank-buster units.

The then *Staffelkapitän* of 1./StG 2, who had been given the opportunity to fly one of the test machines on operations, was quick to see the possibilities of the new weapon. The BK 3,7-equipped Ju 87G would become the aircraft of choice for Hans-Ulrich Rudel – the most famous and successful Stuka pilot of all – for the remainder of the war.

The huge growth in the number of Red Army units in the field had necessitated a corresponding increase in their logistical services. Disruption of the enemy's rear-area lines of supply had been one of the roles traditionally performed by the *Schlachtflieger* since the days of World War 1. But the amount of traffic, and the distances involved on the eastern front, meant that this burden was now being shouldered more and more by the bomber arm.

Many *Kampfgeschwader* set up so-called *Eisenbahn* (railway) *Staffeln*. Those flying He 111s usually just fitted their bombers with additional nose armament to carry out low-level strafing attacks on railway targets.



A Ju 88C-6 heavy fighter wearing the lightning-flash badge of KG 3 'Blitz'. This *Geschwader's* Leutnant Udo Cordes was a highly successful 'Loco-killer'. Patrolling the Soviets' rear-area lines of supply in the spring of 1943, he would destroy anything up to six railway locomotives – sometimes with their complete rolling stock – in a single day

The Ju 88-equipped units were slightly better off in being able to employ cannon-armed Ju 88C heavy fighters for their train-busting sorties. One of the greatest exponents of this latter art was 9.(Eis)/KG 3's Leutnant Udo Cordes. Nicknamed the 'Lok-Töter' ('Loco-killer'), in one short period during the spring of 1943 Cordes succeeded in destroying not just 41 locomotives, but 19 entire trains – including two carrying fuel and three transporting ammunition. After his unit was disbanded, Cordes spent the final weeks of hostilities flying Fw 190s with a *Schlachtgruppe*.

But it was the Fw 190 which was to be *the* dominant *Schlacht* aircraft, both in terms of numbers and performance, during the last two years of the war on the eastern front. It fulfilled all expectations, meeting every demand made upon it – and more. Under different circumstances it could well have had a significant influence on the course of the campaign.

It was, however, the Fw 190's misfortune to arrive on the scene at the very moment that the balance of power in the east began to shift slowly, but irrevocably, into the hands of the Soviets. After its reversal at Stalingrad, the German army would be subjected to a succession of counter-offensives – some large, some small – which would force it out of Russia, right across the states of eastern Europe, back into the very heart of Berlin itself. The *Schlachtgruppen* would fight alongside the ground troops every foot of the way. While so doing, they would score some spectacular individual and local successes. But despite every effort, and every sacrifice, the sum

But it was the Fw 190 which would bear the brunt of the ground attack war in the east. Having quickly abandoned their distinctive black triangles (which were attracting too much attention from the Red Air Force) for fighter-style markings, these two machines of II. *Gruppe* – each loaded with a 250-kg bomb and equipped with a tropical filter against the all-pervading summer dust – warm up their engines in readiness for take-off. In keeping with tradition, the *Gruppe* standard is still flown at the start of every mission



total of their endeavours was simply to prolong the process of withdrawal. The best that can be said, perhaps, is that on many occasions it was only the direct intervention of the *Schlachtflieger* which prevented retreat from developing into a rout.

Hitler's third summer offensive in the east – his last – provided graphic proof of the fundamental changes that were taking place. This latest operation was no *Barbarossa* or *Fall 'Blau'* – no great *Blitzkrieg* campaign designed to sweep all opposition before it. Its aim, rather, was to forestall the next Soviet counter-offensive and, if possible, disrupt – or at least delay – the enemy's plans for further advances.

In the six months since Stalingrad the Russians had already recaptured vast areas of lost territory, particularly on the southern and central sectors, where the Red Army had stormed back across the Don and Donets rivers. But the rate of the Soviet advance was not uniform. And around Kursk, close to the boundary between the two sectors, a large salient had developed which thrust like a huge clenched fist some 100 miles (160 km) deep into the German frontline.

Operation *Zitadelle* was intended to eliminate this salient, together with the Red Army formations – including an estimated 14 armoured corps – massed within and around it, by launching simultaneous attacks against both its northern and southern flanks. The resulting clash of armoured might – 2700 German Panzers versus 3600 Soviet tanks – has gone down in military history as the world's greatest tank battle.

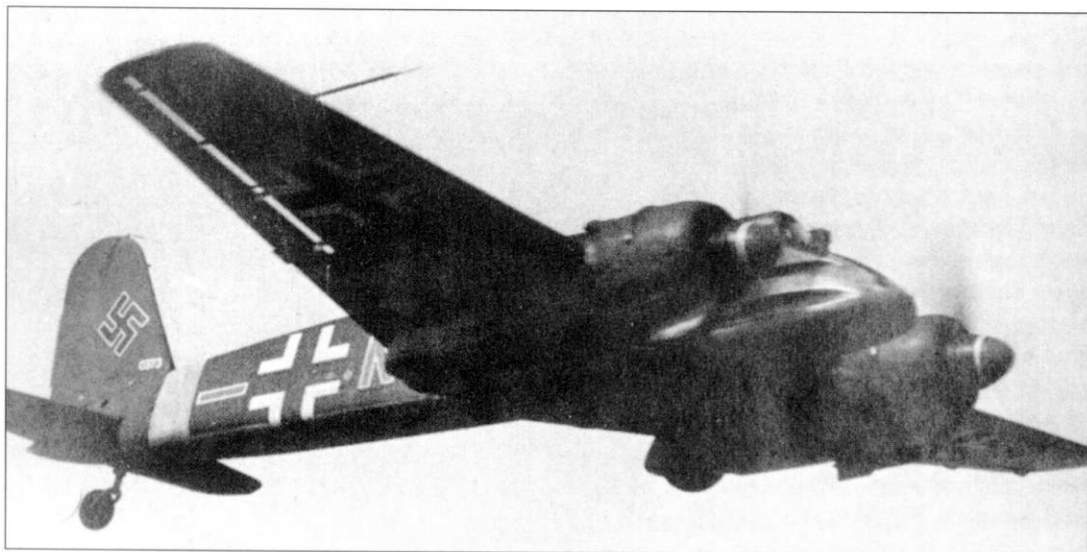
It was also the last time that the Luftwaffe would operate *en masse* against the Red Army. All other areas of the line were stripped to the bone until 70 per cent of the entire Luftwaffe strength on the eastern front – close on 2000 aircraft in all – was concentrated on either side of the Kursk salient: those to the north controlled by *Luftflotte* 6, those in the south by *Luftflotte* 4.

As part of the latter air fleet, Major Druschel led his two strengthened Fw 190 *Gruppen* up to Varvarovka, close to the lower edge of the salient, at the beginning of July. Also in this area were four Hs 129 *Staffeln* – 4. and 8.(Pz)/SchlG 1 and, newly arrived from the Mediterranean, 4.



Major Alfred Druschel chats to members of the groundcrew while perched comfortably atop the armoured seat back of his Fw 190. From the details visible it would appear that this machine wears a set of pre-war *Geschwaderkommodore* markings – a combination of chevron and horizontal bars – similar to those depicted in colour profile 17

Like the Fw 190s seen on the previous page, the Hs 129s had also dispensed with their prominent black triangles by the spring of 1943, these being replaced by II. *Gruppe* horizontal bar markings too, which helps to identify this aircraft ('Blue K?') as belonging to one of the two 8. *Staffeln* involved in Operation *Zitadelle*





The four Hs 129 *Staffeln* on the southern flank at Kursk operated under the temporary designation of *PzJKdo Weiss*. Here, Oberstleutnant Otto Weiss (left) of the *Schlacht* and *Zerstörer* Inspectorate is introduced to the pilots by the *Kommando-führer*, Hauptmann Bruno Meyer (centre)

Pilots use the tailplane of Wk-Nr. 141862 as a handy map table while working out the details of their next operation . . .

. . . while a mechanic runs up the engines of sister ship Wk-Nr. 141859 ('Blue D?'). Note the wide dispersal now forced upon the Luftwaffe by the increasingly frequent Soviet air attacks. The nearest machines are mere dots on the horizon – gone for ever is the organised chaos and congestion of the forward fields during the opening stages of *Barbarossa*

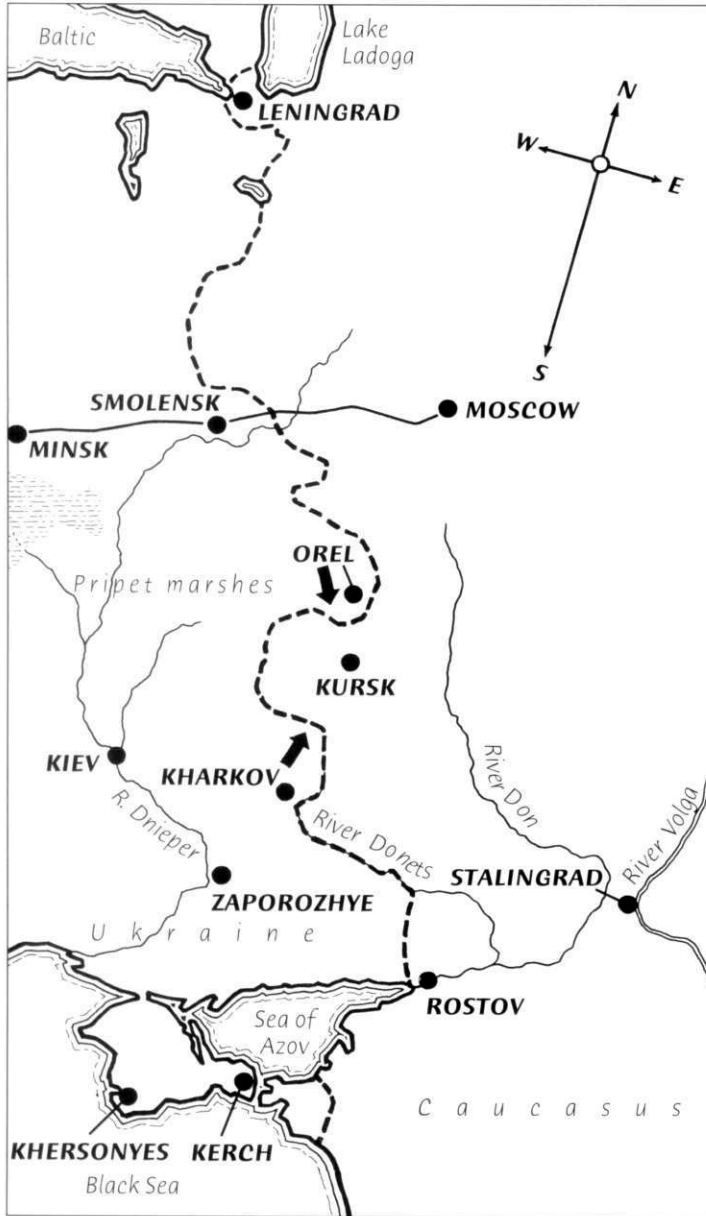
and 8.(Pz)/SchlG 2. These specialised anti-tank units were currently operating independently as the *Panzerjagdkommando Weiss* (i.e. under the direct control of Oberstleutnant Otto Weiss's *Schlacht* and *Zerstörer* Inspectorate). Lastly, StG 2, also subordinated to *Luftflotte 4*, was fielding its new (and recently experimental) *Staffel* of tank-busting Ju 87Gs under the designation *Pz.JägerSt./StG 2*.

Luftwaffe anti-tank strength on the northern shoulder of the salient was less well represented. It consisted of just three *Staffeln*: the Hs 129s of 10.(Pz)/JG 51, plus two more from the previously experimental *Vers.Kdo.f.Pz.Bek.* – *Pz.JägerSt./StG 1*, flying Ju 87Gs, and *Pz.JägerSt./ZG 1* (ex-*Pz.J.St.110*), still equipped with its Bf 110s.

Zitadelle differed from traditional *Blitzkrieg* in execution, as well as objective, by doing away with the usual dawn strikes on enemy airfields. Launched on 5 July 1943, the attack did not commence until mid-afternoon – officially at 1500 hrs, although on the southern perimeter five of *Luftflotte 4*'s *Stukagruppen* were scheduled to blast a two-mile (3.2 km) gap in the Soviets' frontline defences ten minutes before the opening artillery barrage.

Kursk was first and foremost a tank battle. But there were many more Red Army infantry divisions in the salient than there were armoured formations. The Fw 190s were therefore initially tasked with attacking enemy troop positions and artillery emplacements using SD-1 and -2





The eastern front (broken line) at the start of Operation 'Zitadelle', 5 July 1943

anti-personnel cluster bombs. It was left to the Hs 129 *Staffeln* to tackle the mass of Soviet armour. And this they did to great effect.

Three days into the battle, for example, Hauptmann Bruno Meyer, who headed the *Pz.JKdo. Weiss*, was leading a *Kette* of Hs 129s when he spotted long columns of Soviet T-34 tanks, supported by infantry, using the cover of the morning mist to advance on the exposed right flank of 4. *Panzerarmee*.

Meyer immediately radioed back to base at Mikoyanovka to report the situation, and order that the *Kommando's* four *Staffeln*, each of 16 Henschels, were to take off in rotation and keep the enemy armour under constant attack. It was a tactic which had served the Hs 123s of II.(Schl)/LG 2 well at Cambrai three years earlier, and it did not fail now. Supported by



Despite all the difficulties, operations continued unabated. A *Kette* of Hs 129s zooms low over an airfield somewhere on the southern sector of the front . . .

SchlG 1's Focke-Wulfs, the Henschels subjected the Soviet columns to an hour's sustained assault. By the time the Hs 129s departed it was all over, the armour-piercing shells from their ventral 30 mm cannon having destroyed more than 50 enemy tanks. The rest had fled.

An even more spectacular individual success was the destruction by one pilot of 12 T-34s in a single day. But then the pilot in question *was* the incomparable Hans-Ulrich Rudel, still officially the *Staffelkapitän* of 1./StG 2 'Immelmann', but already flying a Ju 87G 'borrowed' from the *Geschwader's Panzerjägerstaffel*, and expertly demonstrating the tank-busting capabilities of the machine's two 37 mm underwing cannon.

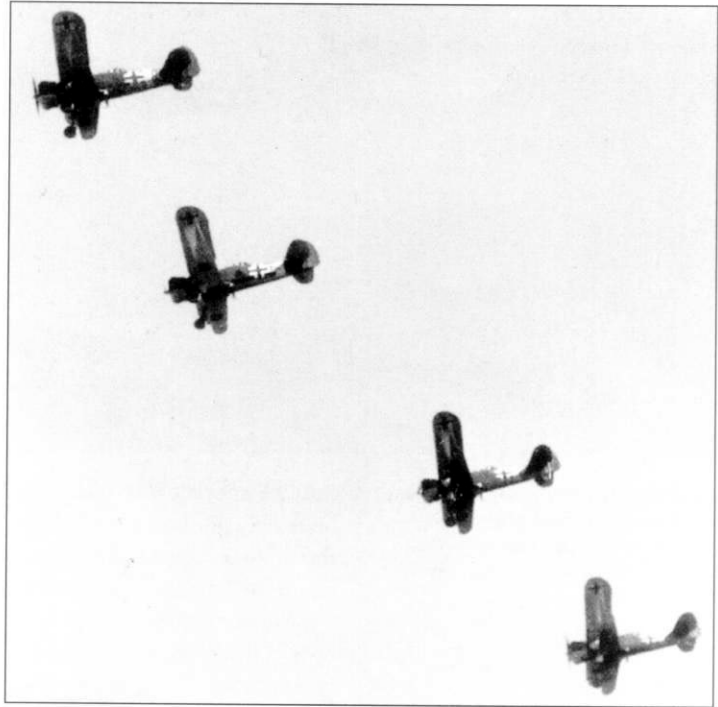
On the northern perimeter of the salient, too, the three anti-tank *Staffeln* were taking a considerable toll of the enemy's armour. One source even credits the Luftwaffe with the destruction of almost half the number of Red Army tanks engaged at Kursk. But despite this, all was not going according to schedule on the ground. The Soviets had known of the German offensive in advance and had reacted accordingly, strengthening the base of the salient exactly where the German armies intended to strike.

This base extended for some 120 miles (195 km) north to south, and the two attacking forces – 9. *Armee* from above and 4. *Panzerarmee* from below – were each expected to cover approximately half that distance and meet midway near the town of Kursk itself, thus cutting off the Soviets inside the bulge of the salient to the west. In the event, 9. *Armee* managed to advance southwards a scant ten miles (16 km), while 4. *Panzerarmee's* units were forced to a halt just 25 miles (40 km) north of their jumping-off points.

To make matters worse, Hitler's attention was temporarily diverted from the eastern front by the Allied landings on Sicily on 10 July. And when, three days later, the Red Army launched its own counter-offensive against Orel, to the rear of 9. *Armee*, the Führer lost his nerve completely and ordered the immediate abandonment of *Zitadelle*.

It was this forfeiture of the initiative, not the defeat at Stalingrad, which was the real turning-point of the war in the east. No fewer than 61(!) Soviet armies were now lined up along the eastern front, from the Baltic to the Black Sea, ready to take full advantage of their opponents' sudden switch to the defensive. Over the next six weeks ten more separate counter-offensives would be launched to follow that aimed at Orel and the encirclement of 9. *Armee*.

... while elsewhere a *Schwarm* of the seemingly indestructible Hs 123s sets out for another strike against the advancing Red Army



Soviet tanks had already severed 9. *Armee*'s lines of supply when all of *Luftflotte 4*'s serviceable ground attack machines were ordered up to the Orel area. In the immediate aftermath of *Zitadelle* their numbers were few – 34 Fw 190s of Major Druschel's SchlG 1, 27 of Bruno Meyer's twin-engined Henschels and the six remaining Hs 123s of 7./SchlG 1. Few perhaps, but sufficient to help check the tide of 'Red' armour that threatened to engulf 9. *Armee*, as this message of appreciation, sent by the Army GOC, Generaloberst Walter Model, to HQ *Luftflotte 6* clearly indicates;

'For the first time in the history of the war the Luftwaffe, without any ground support whatsoever, has succeeded in halting and destroying a complete armoured brigade'.

In the months ahead the Luftwaffe would be forced to resort to such tactics with growing frequency, rushing units from one area of looming disaster to the next as Soviet pressure increased all along the front and each new counter-offensive followed close on the heels of the last. After Orel, SchlG 1 had returned to Kharkov-Rogan. Here, it narrowly avoided being overrun when the town was encircled and then captured on 23 August during the course of the latest Soviet thrust to the south of Kursk (for details see *Osprey Aircraft of the Aces 6 - Fw 190 Aces of the Russian Front*).

Then it was further south still, to Stalino, near the shores of the Sea of Azov, where yet another major counter-offensive had by now re-taken the entire Donets Basin. Hermann Buchner again;

'All hell had broken loose along the River Mius. From dawn till dusk we flew against the enemy pouring westwards across the steppe – tanks, lorried infantry, even cavalry units. At one stage a column of *Ivan* tanks, with infantry on board, was reported heading straight for our airfield.

'Everybody turned to – cooks, clerks, the lot – to help rearm, refuel and keep us flying. We pilots hardly had time for a cup of coffee and a mouthful

of food before we were off again. We cut swathes through the infantry with our 20 mm cannon, and attacked the tanks with 110-lb (50-kg) armour-piercing bombs. Towards the end, the duration of each sortie was less than 20 minutes from take-off to landing again.

‘The last enemy tank was brought to a standstill just short of the eastern edge of the airfield. Smoke was still rising from the wreck when the sun went down.’

After this second escape, SchlG 1 withdrew to Kiev early in September for rest and refit. But the unrelenting Soviet pressure meant that the unit was soon back in action – not only against the Red Army’s spearheads closing in on the Ukrainian capital, but also mounting low-level attacks on Soviet airfields around Konotop, some 125 miles (200 km) behind the enemy’s frontline.

In mid-September 1943 the three German armies which constituted the bulk of *Heeresgruppe Süd*’s fighting strength began to pull back from the 600 miles (965 km) of front they were defending to the east of the River Dnieper. In what has been described as ‘the boldest withdrawal in military history’, about a million troops fell back across six major bridges spanning the Dnieper between Kiev and Zaporozhye to take up defensive positions on the river’s western bank.

SchlG 1 transferred down to Kirovograd, which was to the rear of, and roughly midway along, this new 400-mile (650 km) defence line (dubbed the *Ostwall*) to help protect the ground forces from Soviet harassment during their retreat to the bridges. But heavily outnumbered in the air, the Fw 190 pilots often had to jettison their bombs, leaving the troops to fend for themselves, as they became embroiled in dogfights with marauding bands of Red Air Force Lavochkin and Yak fighters – and even the occasional Russian-flown Spitfire.

It was during this period on the Dnieper front that the *Geschwader* was awarded its last two Knight’s Crosses. On 19 September Oberleutnant

The wide-legged stance of the Fw 190 is well illustrated in this shot of ‘Green L’ of the *Gruppenstab* I./SchlG 1 as it taxis out, its adapter shoe carrying a full load of 50-kg bombs, from its dispersal area close to what appears to be a sizeable town





Indicative of the fact that, for the first four years of the war, the ground attack units were controlled by the fighter arm, *General der Jagdflieger* Adolf Galland (left) is seen here in conversation with the then *Gruppenkommandeur* of I./SchIG 1, *Hauptmann* Alfred Druschel (centre) and *Major* Hubertus Hitschhold, *Geschwaderkommodore* of SchIG 1 (right, back to camera)



It was not until 1 September 1943 that the first *General der Schlachtflieger* was appointed. But when the first incumbent, *Oberstleutnant* Dr Ernst Kupfer, was killed in a flying accident after just two months, it was Hubertus Hitschhold who replaced him. Pictured here with the rank of *Oberst*, Hitschhold would remain in office until the end of the war

Karl Kennel, *Staffelkapitän* of 5./SchIG 1, had received his for some 500 operational missions, plus 28 aerial victories (a number of the latter having been claimed during his earlier service with the *Zerstörer* arm). And on 9 October the *Kapitän* of 7. *Staffel*, *Leutnant* Günther Müller, was decorated for his 600+ missions, all of them flown in the seemingly indestructible 'one-two-three' which, unlike the proverbial old soldier, was still refusing to fade away.

But one operational career which *was* apparently drawing to a close was that of *Major* Georg Dörffel, *Kommandeur* of I. *Gruppe*. In just one day at the beginning of October, Dörffel had flown no fewer than 19 sorties against Soviet forces attempting to establish a bridgehead across the Dnieper, near Kiev. On 6 October, still based at Kiev-South, he recorded his 1000th operational mission and claimed his 30th aerial victory. Twenty-four hours later, mission number 1001 was to earn Dörffel an immediate ban on further combat flying and command of the *Schlachtflieger* school at Prossnitz, where he was to impart his vast wealth of operational expertise to a new generation of ground attack pilots.

For a new era was indeed about to begin. Just as, on the ground, the German Army was attempting to stabilise and organise its forces along the *Ostwall*, so, in the air, the *Luftwaffe* was finally beginning to recognise the value of its hitherto woefully neglected *Schlacht* arm. Some sort of order had to be created of the bewildering assortment of ground-support units – *Stuka*, *Schlacht*, *Zerstörer*, *Schnellkampf*, *Jabo*, *Panzerjäger* – which had been allowed to accumulate during the first four years of the war, but which, by this present stage of the conflict, were now all performing essentially the same tasks.

The initial step – the establishment of a unified command – had already been taken. On 1 September 1943 *Oberstleutnant* Dr Ernst Kupfer had been appointed as the *Luftwaffe*'s first *General der Schlachtflieger*. A *Stuka* pilot of long standing, and latterly *Geschwaderkommodore* of StG 2 'Immelmann', Dr Kupfer had recently led the *Gefechtsverband* Kupfer, a mixed-force battle group – including the Fw 190s and Hs 129s of SchIG 1 – which had come to the rescue of 9. *Armee* at Orel after the collapse of *Zitadelle*.

On 11 October *Major* Alfred Druschel had then relinquished command of SchIG 1 to assume the post of *Inspizient der Tag-Schlachtfliegerverbände* (Inspector of Day Ground Attack Units) on Dr Kupfer's staff.

And exactly one week after that, on 18 October 1943, the confusing mix of *Luftwaffe* ground-support units, together with their many, varied, and often complicated designations, was finally done away with. For on that date all were re-organised into *Schlachtgeschwader* – henceforth to be identified by the simplified abbreviation 'SG' – and incorporated into the framework of a new and greatly enlarged *Schlacht* arm.

MEDITERRANEAN SUN, RUSSIAN MOON

After II.(Schl)/LG 2's departure from southern Greece in the spring of 1941, no other *Schlacht* unit was to appear on the Luftwaffe's Mediterranean Order of Battle for very nearly 18 months.

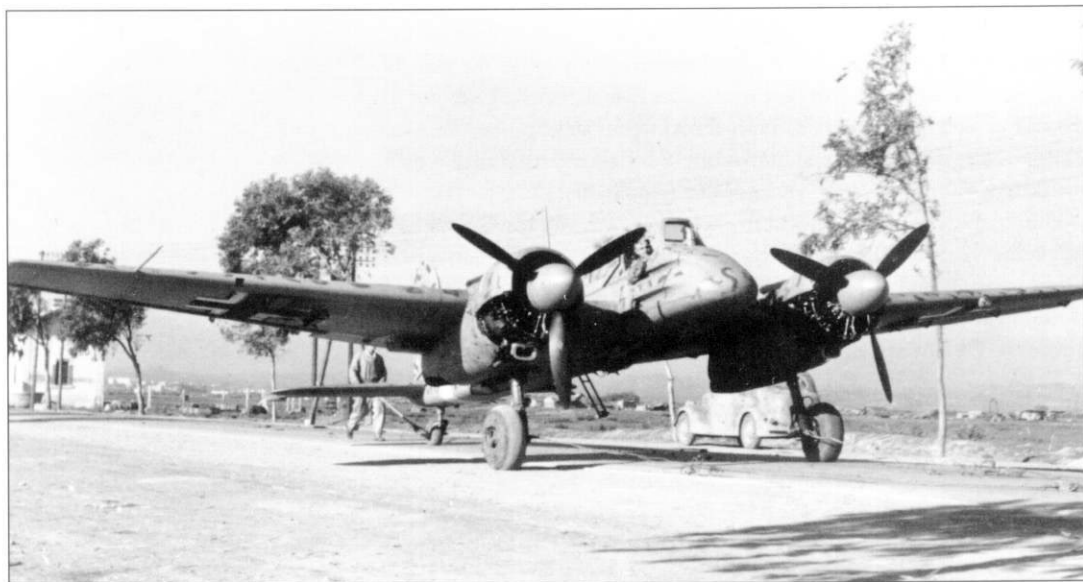
The almost featureless landscape of the North African desert in particular, scene of innumerable armoured clashes, would seem to provide near perfect conditions for specialised anti-tank operations. Yet for most of its existence, Erwin Rommel's *Afrika Korps* had to rely for support from the usual combination of *Stuka* and *Zerstörergruppen*, plus the *Jabostaffeln* of the desert's two resident *Jagdgeschwader*.

Indeed, it was not until November 1942, by which time the Battle of El Alamein had been fought and lost, and his forces were in full retreat, that Rommel was able to call upon the services of a *Schlachtgruppe*. And by then no single *Gruppe* had a hope of turning the tide of the war in North Africa.

Like its eastern front counterparts, I./SchlG 2 – the unit in question – was made up of three *Staffeln* of single-engined fighters (in this instance Bf 109Fs) and an attached *Staffel* of Hs 129 tank-busters.

The latter was the second Hs 129 *Staffel* to be formed (after 4.(Pz)/SchlG 1's activation at Lippstadt early in 1942). Set up late in September 1942 at Deblin-Irena in Poland, reportedly around a cadre of personnel supplied by the short-lived Pz.J.St. 92, 4.(Pz)/SchlG 2 was initially equipped with a dozen of the twin-engined Henschels. But by the time the *Staffel*, commanded by Hauptmann Bruno Meyer, arrived at

The obvious desert tan of this Hs 129 suggests that it is one of the original machines of 4.(Pz)/SchlG 2 sent to Libya in November 1942. With lower engine cowling panels removed, it is being towed along a road 'somewhere in North Africa'. The tow-cables, attached to lugs on each mainwheel leg, can just be made out lying on the road surface. Contrary to some captions to this oft-published photograph, the chap behind the tailwheel is *not* pushing the machine. He is simply steering it!



El Adem, south of Tobruk, on 7 November, this number had shrunk to eight, only four of which were serviceable! The Hs 129s nevertheless claimed a dozen British tanks knocked-out during their first reported action just one week later.

However, not renowned for their reliability at the best of times, the mixing of the Hs 129s' Gnome-Rhône engines with Libya's all-prevailing dust and sand was a certain recipe for disaster. After only a few more operations, during which two machines were lost when forced to land behind Allied lines, the *Staffel* was withdrawn to Tripoli. Here, attempts were made to produce a satisfactory sand filter for the recalcitrant powerplants, but without much success. And when the advancing 8th Army entered the Libyan capital on 23 January 1943, the remaining unserviceable Henschels were reportedly destroyed and the *Staffel* evacuated to Bari, in Italy, for re-equipment.

The Bf 109 *Staffeln* coped somewhat better with the rigours of North African campaigning. This was due perhaps to I./SchlG 2 being created in part from the two original desert *Jabostaffeln* (of JGs 27 and 53). After combining to form the strengthened *Jabostaffel Afrika*, this unit had subsequently moved to Sicily, where it was redesignated as the *Jabogruppe OBS*. As its title implies, the *Gruppe* now came under the direct command of the *Oberbefehlshaber Süd* (Luftwaffe C-in-C South), Generalfeldmarschall Albert Kesselring, and was engaged in fighter-bomber attacks against Malta.

Late in October 1942, redesignated yet again to become I./SchlG 2, the *Gruppe* began transferring back to Africa. By then, a new *Kommandeur* had been appointed in the form of Hauptmann Wolf-Dietrich Peitsmeyer, who was an experienced *Schlacht* pilot, and one of the trio of Knight's Cross recipients from July 1940. On 10 December 1942 he set out from Taranto, in Italy, to take over the *Gruppe*, but the Bv 222 flying boat in which he was a passenger was intercepted by an RAF Beaufighter and shot down into the Mediterranean.

By that time I./SchlG 2 had been in action in Africa for a month. After carrying out numerous low-level sorties against Allied armour and soft-skinned vehicles, initially around the Sidi Omar region on the Egyptian/Libyan frontier, the *Gruppe* became caught up in the general retreat of the Axis forces. Just four weeks after first arriving at Gambut, to the east of Tobruk, it had been pushed back to an airstrip near the Arco Philaenorum, the grandiose arch over the Via Balbia coastal road which marked the border between Cyrenaica and Tripolitania.

During the withdrawal across Libya's eastern province the *Gruppe* had lost some 12 Bf 109Fs and at least four pilots. Among the latter was Oberleutnant Wolf Zipper, *Staffelkapitän* of I./SchlG 2, who crashed close to the Arco Philaenorum after a mid-air collision with an Italian aircraft on 24 November.

The retreat into Tripolitania brought no respite. The 8th Army kept up the pressure, driving the *Afrika Korps* and its Italian allies right out of Libya as it pushed through the Gabes Gap and up into southern Tunisia. The *Gruppe*, commanded now by a Major Fischer, did what it could to slow the enemy's advance, attacking not only his armour and supply columns, but also air bases, such as the RAF's fighter airfields around Medenine, with high explosive and anti-personnel bombs.



By contrast with the Hs 129 seen on page 59, the basic green finish of this aircraft, with a tan 'scribble' over all upper surfaces, indicates that it belongs to the later 8.(Pz)/SchlG 2. 'Red G', seen here at Tunis/EI Aouina in the spring of 1943, reveals signs of a heavy landing, including bent propeller blades and a missing nose section. Note, too, the dark (replacement) starboard spinner

Greatly outnumbered in the air and facing ever increasing anti-aircraft fire from the ground, these operations proved costly. As it slowly fell back towards Tunis, I./SchlG 2 began to suffer a rising rate of attrition, and by the early spring of 1943 its serviceability returns were struggling to reach double figures.

Fortunately, pilot casualties were far fewer than the 50+ aircraft lost or written off during the *Gruppe's* final three months in Africa. Only three pilots were reportedly killed – two shot down by enemy fighters – although several were listed as missing or captured after falling victim to flak while strafing further Allied airfields. One of the luckier members of the *Gruppe* was future Knight's Cross winner Feldwebel Josef Enzensberger, who was brought down by ground fire twice in little more than a fortnight. He survived the first incident with slight wounds and returned to base on foot 48 hours after the second.

While I./SchlG 2 was supporting the *Afrika Korps's* withdrawal through southern Tunisia, a new Allied blow fell. In November 1942 Anglo-American invasion forces had landed in Algeria and were now advancing along the Mediterranean coast from the west. An already overstretched Luftwaffe sent what units it could to bolster air strength around Tunis and Biserta, which were now the last Axis toeholds on the African continent.

Despite 4.(Pz)/SchlG 2's dismal performance in Libya, a second Hs 129 anti-tank *Staffel* – 8.(Pz)/SchlG 2 – was among the units despatched. Recently activated, the ten-strong *Staffel* arrived at Tunis-Aouina towards the end of December 1942. Within days it had lost three of its number to patrolling Allied fighters while attacking troops and vehicles in the Pont du Fahs area, some 30 miles (48 km) outside Tunis.

As the Anglo-American advance in the north became bogged down by bad weather, attention was switched to the Allies' perilously long lines of communications. These operations continued into the new year, but



This dramatic photograph of a low-level attack by an Hs 129 on Allied tanks and transports was taken by a British soldier during the campaign in Tunisia

when two more of the Henschels were brought down – this time by flak – while supporting a local counter-attack to the west of Pont du Fahs on 18 January 1943, the *Staffel* was reduced to just four serviceable machines.

Replacement aircraft – plus, some reports suggest, three survivors from 4.(Pz) *Staffel* in Tripoli – had raised the unit's strength back up to a round dozen by mid-March. There was little they could do, however, to stop a renewed Allied drive from closing the ring around Tunis. At least three more Hs 129s were lost during the final weeks, the last crashing behind US lines north of Mateur on 5 May. Eight days later a quarter of a million German and Italian troops surrendered and the war in Africa was over.

I./SchlG 2's Bf 109Fs had already departed Tunisia for Bari during the latter half of April. Now it was time for 8.(Pz) *Staffel* to escape the trap as Oberleutnant Franz Oswald led his remaining Henschels northwards across the Mediterranean to Decimomannu, in Sardinia. But that was not quite the last of SchlG 2 in North Africa, for back in December 1942 a *Geschwaderstab* had also been formed. Commanded by the Oak Leaves-wearing Major Wolfgang Schenk (of later Me 262 jet bomber fame), this *Geschwader* – like SchlG 1 in the east – was to comprise just two *Gruppen*, plus the two attached anti-tank *Staffeln*.

Schenk's second *Gruppe* had been set up at the same time as his *Geschwaderstab*. It was activated on Fw 190s at Gleiwitz, in Poland, from parts of the hitherto Bf 110 and Me 210-equipped III./ZG 1. Under the command of Hauptmann Werner Dörnbrack, II./SchlG 2 transferred from Gleiwitz down to Brindisi, on the heel of Italy, for final working up early in 1943.

But SchlG 2's apparent planned deployment to North Africa had already been completely overtaken by events. The belated, piecemeal despatch of I. *Gruppe* and the two Hs 129 *Staffeln* had been of limited practical use to an *Afrika Korps* already in full retreat. II./SchlG 2's transfer to Tunis at the end of March 1943, presumably to augment the last four serviceable Fw 190 fighter-bombers of III./SKG 10, smacks of sheer desperation.

Not surprisingly, Dörnbrack's *Gruppe* could do nothing to stave off the imminent Axis collapse. With little to show in return, the unit lost several pilots, including Oberleutnant Siegfried Basse, the *Kapitän* of

7. *Staffel*, shot down near Tunis on 8 May. The next casualty, suffered 48 hours later, occurred over Sicily. And that really did mark the end of SchlG 2's brief but costly participation in the North African campaign.

The fall of Tunisia heralded a parting of the ways for SchlG 2's component units. The two anti-tank *Staffeln* were withdrawn from the Mediterranean theatre altogether. Staging via Berlin-Staaken, where their strength was increased to 16 Henschels apiece, they subsequently transferred to the eastern front to take part in *Zitadelle*.

Having survived its six-week foray into Tunisia relatively intact, II./SchlG 2 retired to central Italy, seemingly to await developments. I. *Gruppe*, meanwhile, was at Bari undergoing conversion to the Fw 190. Although no major ground operations were being fought in the Mediterranean theatre during this period, it could only be a matter of time before the Allies took their first steps towards a return to mainland Europe. And Axis intelligence believed that an invasion of either Sardinia or Sicily would be their likeliest route.

Based in central and southern Italy, SchlG 2's two *Gruppen* were right in the frontline of Europe's 'soft underbelly' – a fact forcibly driven home by the increasing ferocity of Allied bombing raids throughout the whole area. Unversed in bomber interception duties, SchlG 2 had to rely on their flak defences and neighbouring *Jagdgruppen* for protection. But as an added precaution they dispersed their own aircraft as much as possible, with part of I. *Gruppe* deploying to Brindisi to complete its working-up on Fw 190s.

Towards the end of June I./SchlG 2 transferred to Milis, in Sardinia. The move did not go unnoticed by the Allies, and the *Gruppe* was soon subjected to further bombing. A raid by waves of B-26s on 3 July resulted in the destruction of four of its new Fw 190s, plus damage to several others. Despite these depredations, the unit still had 20 serviceable

Riding on the wings of a bomb-carrying Fw 190, groundcrewmembers help guide the pilot into position for final checks and the start of his take-off run





Leutnant (later Haptmann) Johannes Lutter of SchlG 2 and SG 4 was the most successful ground attack pilot of the Tunisian and Italian campaigns. An *ex-Zerstörer* pilot, he also claimed eight aerial victories (plus another four in the east)

Fw 190s on strength (four more than II. *Gruppe*) when Anglo-American troops landed on Sicily exactly one week later.

It appears, however, that only II./SchlG 2 joined the anti-invasion forces on Sicily – flying ground attack operations out of both Gerbini and Castelvetro – for Hauptmann Josef Berlage's I. *Gruppe* spent the ensuing month shuttling back and forth between Sardinia and Italy. During the latter half of July it was based at Aquino, near Monte Cassino, before returning briefly to Sardinia in early August. Then it was back to Piacenza, in northern Italy, where orders were received directing I./SchlG 2 to Graz, in Austria, for further training.

It thus fell to II. *Gruppe*, under Hauptmann Dörnbrack, to carry out SchlG 2's final missions in the Mediterranean. These included attacks against the Salerno bridgehead to the south of Naples during the second week of September. The *Gruppe* would continue to participate in the stubborn defence of central Italy throughout the coming months, but after 18 October 1943 it would be under a new identity.

NOCTURNAL OPERATIONS IN THE EAST

At just about the same time as the new pilots of SchlG 2 had been getting to grips with desert conditions – learning, for instance, to wear gloves to avoid burning their hands on the hot metal when climbing into their aircraft – a completely different kind of ground attack operation was evolving on the eastern front.

It was the Red Air Force which had first begun to use light aircraft on night harassment sorties. Under cover of darkness they would swoop low over the German frontlines, sometime with their engines temporarily switched off to render themselves almost noiseless as well as invisible, indiscriminately dropping grenades or small bombs by hand onto the troops below. It was almost like a return to the early days of World War I. The material damage inflicted was minimal, but the psychological effect was considerable – the wear and tear on the nerves caused by the unseen assailant constantly bumbling about overhead, as well as the deprivation of sleep, not knowing when and where the next small but deadly missile would fall.

Later in the war US troops in both Europe and the Pacific would commonly refer to such enemy aircraft as 'washing machine Charlies'. To the then less domestically automated Germans, their Russian tormentors were usually known as 'coffee-grinders' or 'sewing machines', which was a reference to the ratchety sound of the aircrafts' 100 hp engines. Other terms included 'UvD', or 'Duty NCO' (a heartily disliked figure who could be guaranteed to disturb the well-earned rest of the weary soldier), and '*Rollbahn-Huren*' ('Highway whores'), the latter being a double reference to the fact that supply roads were a favourite target of the primitive Soviet biplanes, many of which were crewed by women.

Whatever the names bestowed upon the night harassment aircraft, their nuisance value was undeniable. Nevertheless, it was over a year before the Luftwaffe could bring itself to copy the Soviets' lead. And it was only upon the instigation of the *Lufflotten* involved on the eastern front that the RLM finally issued an order, dated 7 October 1942, 'for the activation in the field of *Behelfskampfstaffeln* (auxiliary bomber squadrons) to cause disruption to the enemy at night by attacks on villages close to the frontlines, areas of



occupied woodland, etc. Aircraft to be employed should be primarily of the Ar 66, Go 145 and Ju W 34 types. Number of *Staffeln* to be set up to be determined by number of aircrew (to be drawn from existing Command strength) and machines available.'

The four eastern front commands initially involved needed no second bidding. *Luftflotte 1* on the northern sector, and *Luftwaffen-Kommandos Don* and *Ost* on the central sector immediately formed a *Staffel* each along the lines laid down in the order of 7 October. In the south, however, *Luftflotte 4* appears simply to have redesignated three of its existing *Verbindungsstaffeln* (communications squadrons) to fulfil the same purpose.

The following month the term *Behelfskampfstaffeln* was dropped in favour of the equally cumbersome, but more accurate, *Störkampfstaffeln* (harassment bomber squadrons). At the same time four *Gruppenstäbe* were established, to which the growing number of *Störkampfstaffeln* would be subordinated. By early 1943 a total of 17 such squadrons had been activated. *Störkampfgruppe/Lw.Kd.Ost* consisted of three *Staffeln*,

Typical of the equipment first employed by the early night harassment *Staffeln*, this predominantly black Arado Ar 66 trainer (of the later NSGr 3) prepares for its next nocturnal sortie



Another type impressed into use for early night ground attack operations was the Fw 58 communications and light transport 'twin'. With its black-painted undersides, this particular machine – 'KU+AC' of an unidentified *Luftdienstkommando* (Air Service Unit) – may well have been one such nocturnal raider

Störkampfgruppen/Lw.Kd.Don and *1/Lfl. 1* were made up of four each, while *Störkampfgruppe/Lfl. 4*'s complement had risen to six *Staffeln*.

This near trebling of *Staffel* numbers had far outstripped the availability of the three aircraft types originally suggested for the night harassment role. In fact, there were now more than a dozen types involved, ranging from antiquated He 45s and 46s, through trainers and liaison aircraft, to war-weary Do 17s and Ju 87s. At first there was no attempt at standardisation by unit – one *Staffel*'s complement of 11 aircraft included six different types! It must have been a quartermaster's nightmare. It was certainly too much for the officials back at the RLM in Berlin compiling the monthly Order of Battle statistics. They made no attempt to break down the confusion of types equipping the eastern front's *Störkampfstaffeln*. Instead, they simply gave overall totals. The figures for 20 February 1943, for example, show that there were 236 night harassment machines in the east, 148 of which were serviceable. These totals varied remarkably little throughout the rest of the year.

The *Staffeln*'s pilots operated whenever weather conditions permitted, flying several missions in a single night during the better visibility of the full moon periods. Like their Red Air Force counterparts, they achieved no spectacular successes, but their very presence had a marked effect on enemy morale. German troops often reported that their opposite numbers were much less active at night when a *Störkampf* machine was overhead.

They were sometimes directed against specific targets such as road convoys and fuel and munitions depots, and also played a part in some of the eastern front's major battles. In the north, *Luftflotte 1*'s *Staffeln* were active around Leningrad and along the supply routes south of Lake Ladoga. In the spring of 1943 *LwKdo.Ost*'s three squadrons participated in the ultimately abortive defence of Vyazma, the town on the main Smolensk-Moscow highway which the Germans had turned into one of the strongest 'hedgehog' positions on the central sector. And after *Lw.KdoOst* was redesignated *Luftflotte 6* in May 1943, the same three *Staffeln* were present along the northern flank of *Zitadelle*.

The third category of aircraft to equip the first night ground attack units were obsolete or war-weary operational machines. Among the former was the He 46 tactical reconnaissance aircraft, nearly 500 of which had been built between 1933-36. This one, '1K+KH/White 16', served with the later NSGr 4





Arguably one of the most unusual – and certainly the oldest – machines to be used in the ground attack role on the eastern front (or anywhere else for that matter) was the 1919(!)-vintage Junkers F 13 light commercial transport. This example, one of a handful impressed into Luftwaffe service, was photographed in Czechoslovakia in 1943

police actions had attempted to flush the Moscow-supplied partisan groups from the forests, woodlands and swamps which sheltered them. Despite occasional limited air support – sometimes a single spotter aircraft was all that could be provided to assist the troops on the ground – these efforts had had little effect.

And now that the Red Army was advancing steadily westwards, pushing all before it, the partisans were posing an even greater threat. The ‘problem’ behind the Germans’ frontlines had turned into a menace as rear-area lines of supply were ambushed and security posts attacked.

One particular hotbed of partisan activity was in the huge area of the Pripet marshes to the rear of Army Group Centre. It was this which, in September 1943, led *Lufflotte* 6 to set up a special command, headed by Generalmajor Josef Punzert, to coordinate the Air Fleet’s *Störkampfstaffeln* in flying both frontline harassment raids by night and rear-area anti-partisan patrols by day.

The policing of a territory almost the size of France was a tall order for just three squadrons, and Punzert therefore established several other *ad hoc* formations specifically intended for daylight anti-guerrilla operations. By the very nature of their role these could be classed as ground attack units. They included the ‘*Sonderstaffel* Gamringer’, a mixed reconnaissance and assault squadron whose aircraft were made up of Ar 66s, Ju 87s and Bf 109s.

The larger, three-*Staffel* strong ‘*Einsatzkommando* Liedtke’ also had a number of Bf 109s on strength. But much of its equipment consisted of bombers and reconnaissance machines retired from frontline service. It even had some Hs 123s – how the mighty were falling! And, right at the bottom of the heap, came a handful of 1919-vintage Junkers F 13s, the single-engined commercial aircraft developed out of Dr Hugo Junkers’ revolutionary all-metal World War 1 designs and now pressed into service to do their bit in World War 2!

Such were the straits to which the once all-powerful Luftwaffe had been reduced by the time – one month later, on 18 October 1943 – the *Störkampfstaffeln* were also redesignated and reorganised into *Nachtschlachtgruppen* to form the nocturnal element of the brand new ground attack arm.

On the southern sector *Lufflotte* 4’s *Staffeln* took part in the Battle of Kursk from their base at Kharkov-North, before turning their attention to the Soviet’s nocturnal supply columns supporting the Red Army’s advance on the Dnieper in September.

That same month some *Störkampfstaffeln* began to operate by day as well as night. Soviet partisan activity, which had begun almost from the moment German troops had first crossed the border back in June 1941, had long been a problem. During 1942 numerous rear-area

COLOUR PLATES



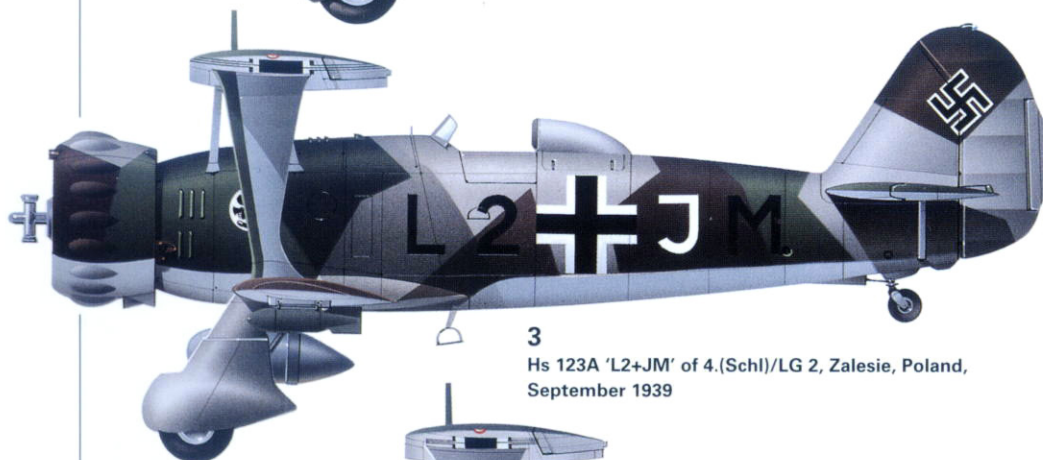
1

Hs 123A '24.2' of *Stukakette VJ/88, Legion Condor, Victoria, Spain, April 1937*



2

He 51B '2.78' of *Oberfeldwebel Adolf Galland, Staffelkapitän 3.J/88, Legion Condor, Calamocha, Spain, January 1938*



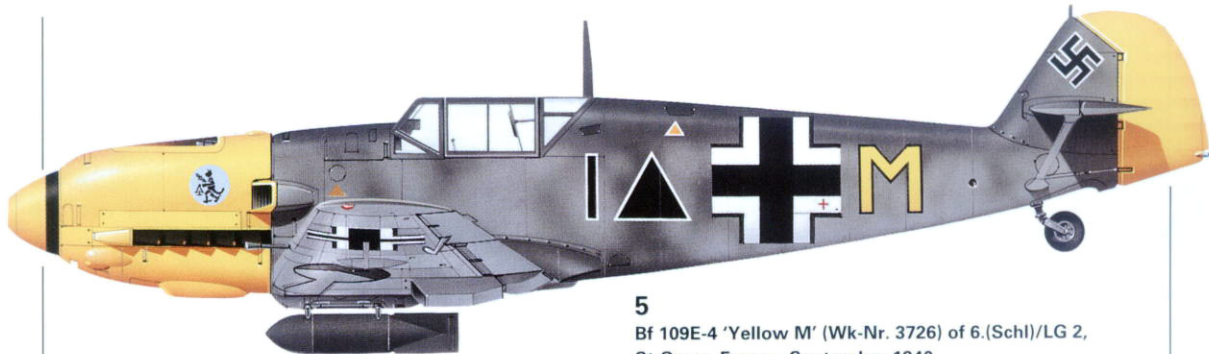
3

Hs 123A 'L2+JM' of *4.(Schl)/LG 2, Zalesie, Poland, September 1939*



4

Hs 123A 'L2+AC' of *Hauptmann Otto Weiss, Gruppenkommandeur II.(Schl)/LG 2, Cambrai, France, May 1940*



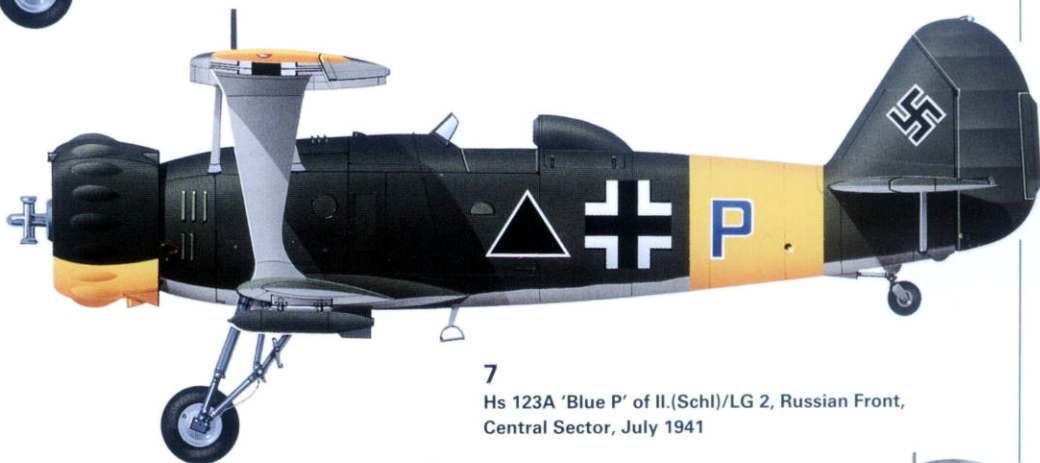
5

Bf 109E-4 'Yellow M' (Wk-Nr. 3726) of 6.(Schl)/LG 2,
St Omer, France, September 1940



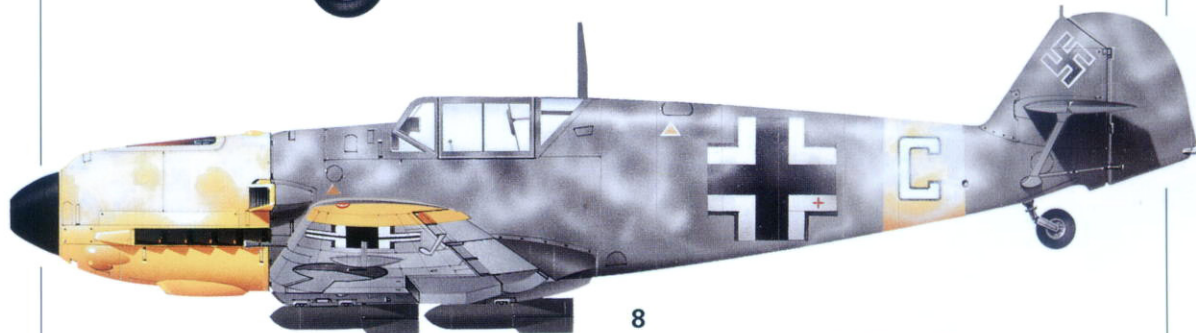
6

Hs 123A 'Blue H' of 10.(Schl)/LG 2, Krainici, Bulgaria, April 1941



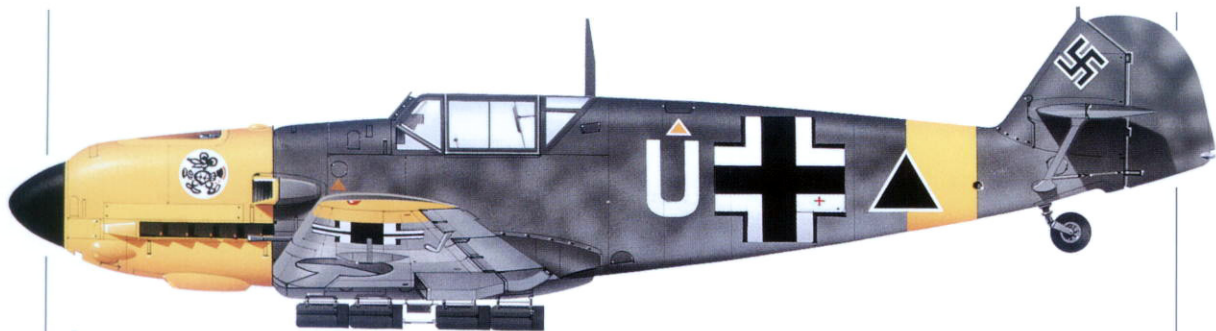
7

Hs 123A 'Blue P' of II.(Schl)/LG 2, Russian Front,
Central Sector, July 1941



8

Bf 109E 'White C' of 4.(Schl)/LG 2, Moscow Front,
Central Sector, November 1941



9

Bf 109E-7 'White U' of Hauptmann Georg Dörfel, *Staffelkapitän* 5.(Schl)/LG 1, Kerch, Southern Sector, May 1942



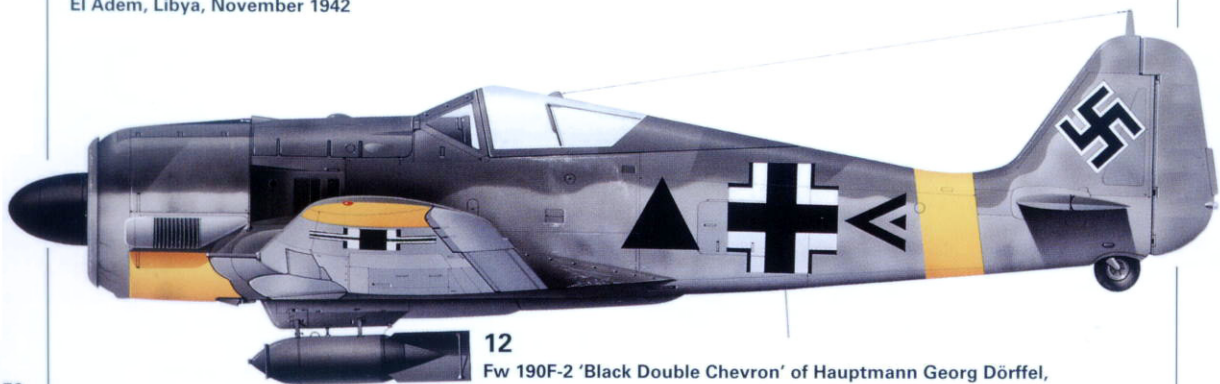
10

Bf 109E-7 'Blue K' of 8./SchIG 1, Tusow, Southern Sector, September 1942



11

Hs 129B 'White Chevron/Blue O' of Hauptmann Bruno Meyer, *Staffelkapitän* 4.(Pz)/SchIG 2, El Adem, Libya, November 1942



12

Fw 190F-2 'Black Double Chevron' of Hauptmann Georg Dörfel, *Gruppenkommandeur* of I./SchIG 1, Kharkov, Southern Sector, March 1943



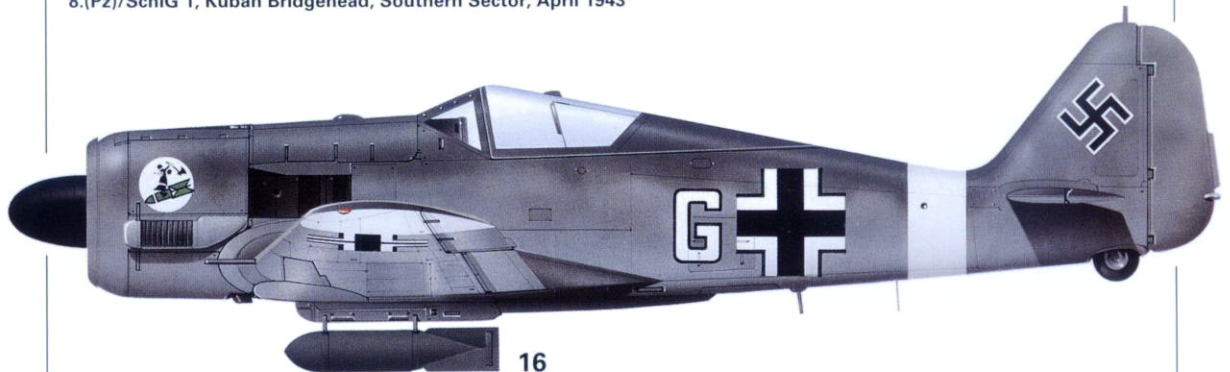
13
He 46C '1K+BH' of 3. *Störkampfstaffel*/Lfl. 4,
Russian Front, Southern Sector, circa April 1943



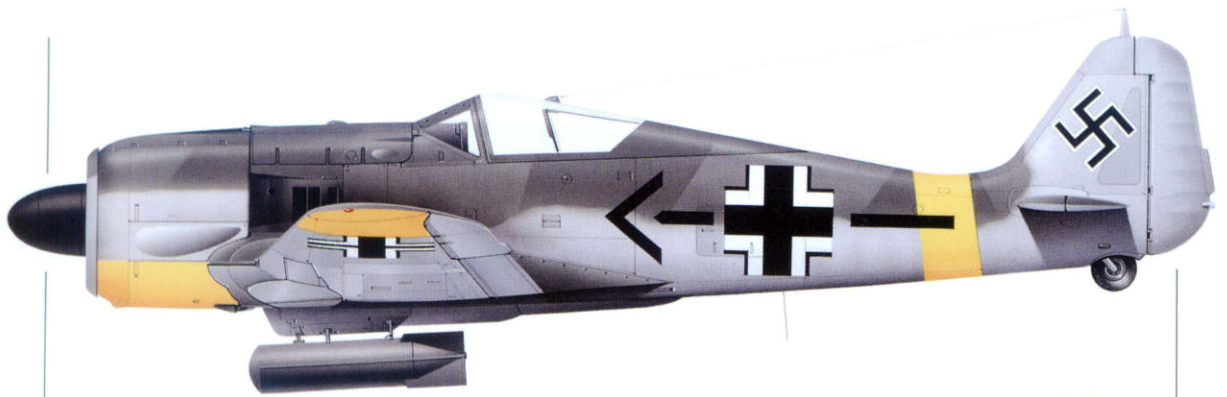
14
Hs 129B 'Red F' of 8.(Pz)/SchIG 2, Tunis, El Aouina, January 1943



15
Hs 129B-2/R3 'Red J' of Oberleutnant Rudolf-Heinz Ruffer, *Staffelkapitän* of
8.(Pz)/SchIG 1, Kuban Bridgehead, Southern Sector, April 1943



16
Fw 190A-5 'White G' of II./SchIG 2, Tunis, El Aouina, April 1943



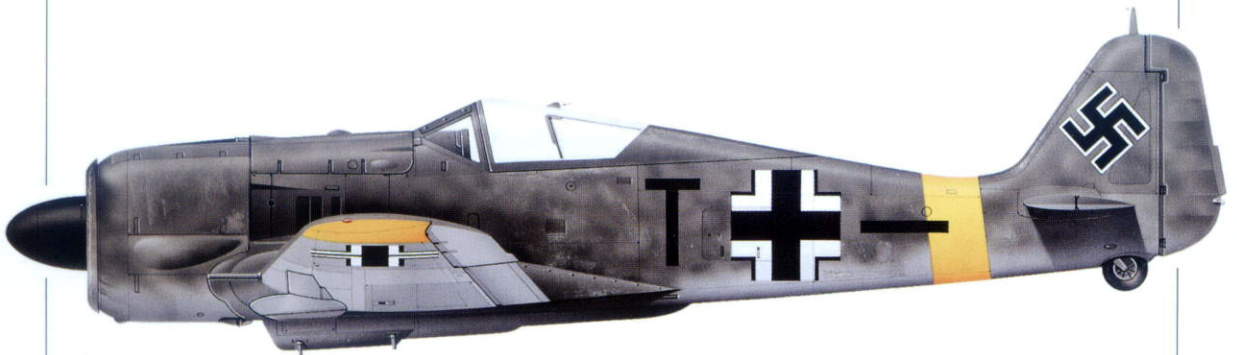
17

Fw 190F-2 'Black Chevron and Bars' of Major Alfred Druschel,
Geschwaderkommodore SchIG 1, Varvarovka, Southern Sector, summer 1943



18

Hs 129B-2 'Blue E' of 4.(Pz)/SchIG 1, Mikoyanovka, Kursk Salient, July 1943



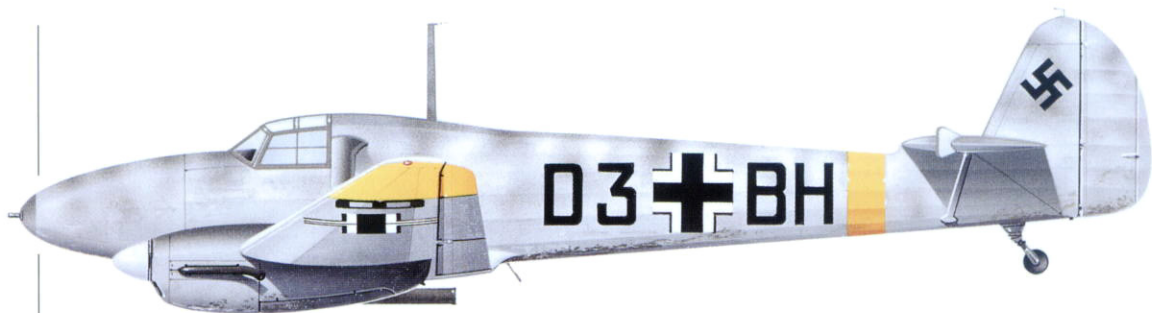
19

Fw 190F-2 'Black T' of Oberfeldwebel Otto Dommeratzky, 8./SchIG 1, Kirovograd, Southern Sector, September 1943



20

Fw 190A-5 'Black G' of Oberfeldwebel August Lambert, 5./SG 2, Kirovograd, Southern Sector, December 1943



21

Fw 58C 'D3+BH' of 1./NSGr 2, Baranovici, Central Sector, December 1943



22

Hs 129B-2 'White M' of 10.(Pz)/SG 9, Byala-Zerkov, Southern Sector, February 1944



23

Go 145A 'U9+HC' of 2./NSGr 3, Vecumi, Latvia, March 1944



24

Fw 190F-2 'Black Double Chevron' of Major Heinz Frank, Gruppenkommandeur of II./SG 2, Karankut, Crimea, April 1944



25

Hs 123A 'Black Chevron/Yellow L' of II./SG 2, Khersonyes-South, Crimea, April 1944



26

Fw 190F-8 'White 11' of I./SG 4, Piacenza, Italy, June 1944



27

Fw 190F-8 'Brown O' of 9./SG 4, Avord, France, June 1944



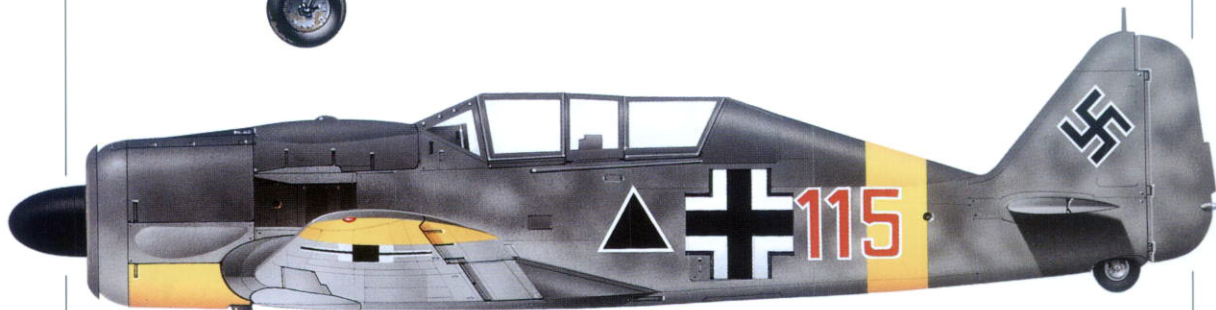
28

Ju 87D 'E8+DH' of 1./NSGr 9, Ravenna, Italy, July 1944



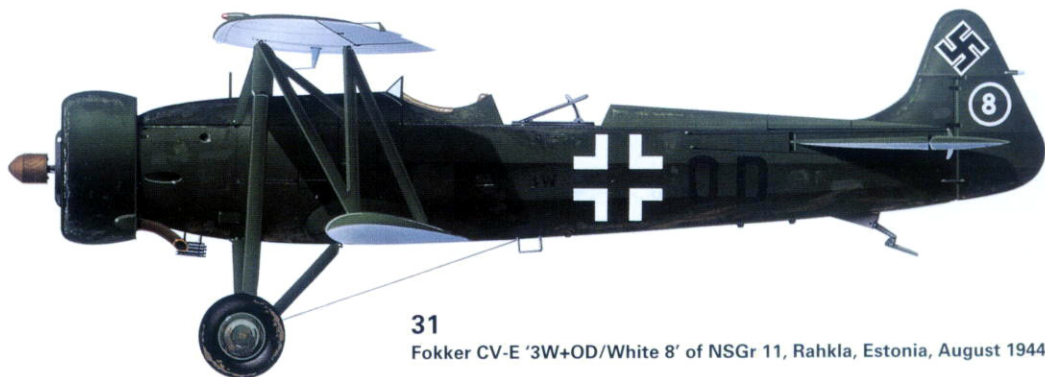
29

Fiat CR.42 'Black 58' of 3./NSGr 7, Agram (Zagreb), Croatia, July 1944



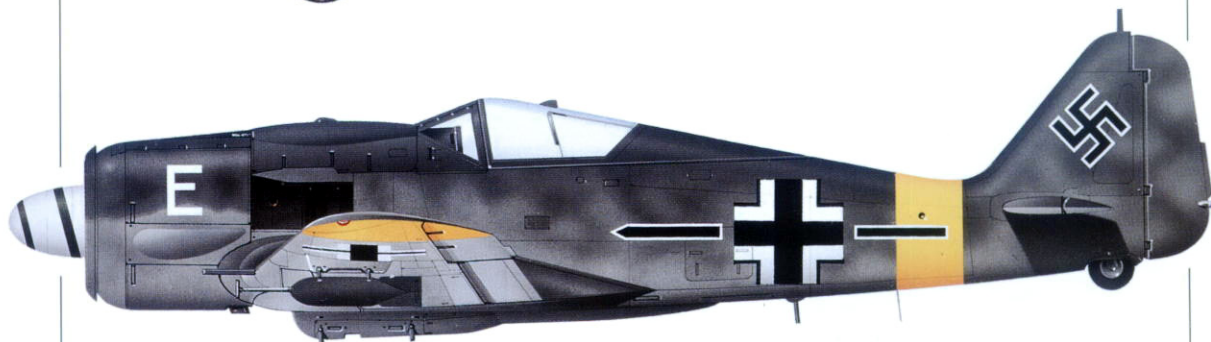
30

Fw 190A-8/U1 'Red 115' of SG 151, Agram (Zagreb), Croatia, summer 1944



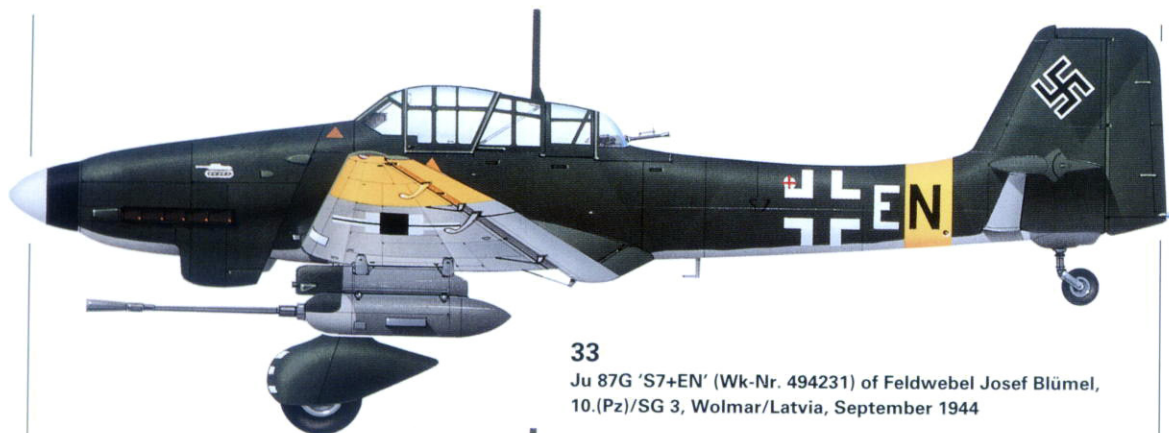
31

Fokker CV-E '3W+OD/White 8' of NSGr 11, Rakla, Estonia, August 1944



32

Fw 190F 'Black Bars/White E' of the *Geschwader-1a*, SG 77, Cracow, Poland, September 1944



33

Ju 87G 'S7+EN' (Wk-Nr. 494231) of Feldwebel Josef Blümel, 10.(Pz)/SG 3, Wolmar/Latvia, September 1944



34

Ju 87D-5 'V8+QB' of 1./NSGr 1, Köln (Cologne)-Wahn, Germany, October 1944



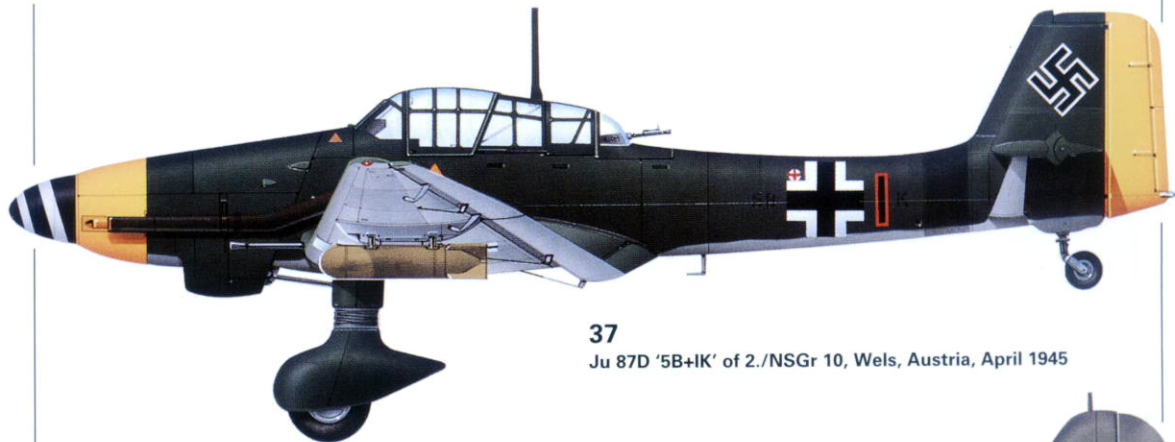
35

Fw 190F-8 'Black Chevron/Green 2' of the *Gruppen-Adjutant*, III./SG 10, Prerau (Prerov), Czechoslovakia, April 1945



36

Fw 190F-8 'Black 9' of II./SG 2, Görlitz, Silesia, April 1945



37

Ju 87D '5B+K' of 2./NSGr 10, Wels, Austria, April 1945



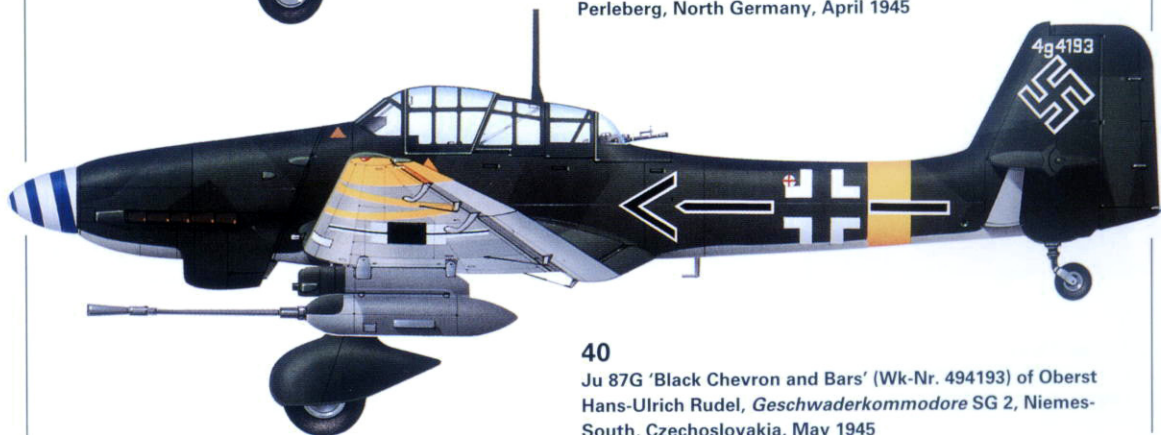
38

Fw 190D-9 'Black 6' of II./SG 10, Kapfenberg, Austria, spring 1945



39

Bü 181 'NK+KV' of Hauptmann Hubertus Jennes,
Kommandoführer Nachtschlachtkommando 9,
Perleberg, North Germany, April 1945



40

Ju 87G 'Black Chevron and Bars' (Wk-Nr. 494193) of Oberst
Hans-Ulrich Rudel, *Geschwaderkommodore SG 2*, Niemes-
South, Czechoslovakia, May 1945

UNIT HERALDRY



1
Stukakette VJ/88
worn on forward fuselage of Hs 123A



2
3.J/88
personal emblem of Oberleutnant
Adolf Galland



3
3.J/88
worn on fuselage of He 51B



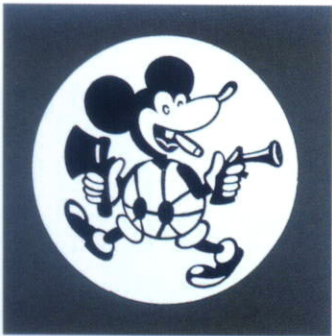
4
4.J/88
worn on forward fuselage of He 51C



5
Schlachtflieger
worn on fuselage of Hs 123, Bf 109,
Hs 129 and Fw 190



6
Schlachtflieger
worn on Hs 123, Bf 109, Hs 129 and
Fw 190 (various positions)



7
4.(Schl)/LG 2
worn on forward fuselage of Hs 123A
and cowling of Bf 109E



8
5.(Schl)/LG 2 and 2./SchIG 1
worn on forward fuselage of
Hs 123A and cowling of Bf 109E



9
6.(Schl)/LG 2
worn on forward fuselage of
Hs 123A and cowling of Bf 109E



10
 II./SchIG 1 and II./SG 2
 worn on cowling of Bf 109E and
 Fw 190A



11
 SchIG 2
 worn on cowling of Bf 109E



12
 II./SchIG 2 and I./SG 4
 worn on cowling of Fw 190A/F



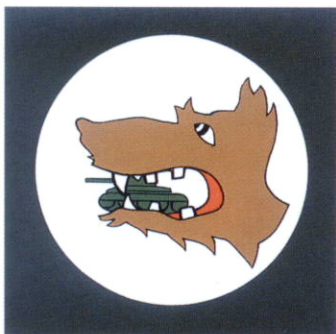
13
 Stab I./SG 1
 worn on nose of Bf 110F



14
 4.(Pz)/SG 1
 worn on fuselage of Hs 129



15
 Panzerjäger
 worn on cowling of Ju 87G



16
 10.(Pz)/SG 3
 worn on cowling(?) of Ju 87G



17
 6.StörGr/Lflkdo 4, 2./NSGr 6 and
 3./NSGr 5
 worn(?) on Ar 66, Go 145 and Ju 87D



18
 1./NSKdo 181 (NSKdo 9)
 worn on cowling of Bü 181

THE NEW ORDER

The creation of the new enlarged *Schlacht* arm on 18 October 1943 changed the underlying nature of the ground attack force at a single stroke. Prior to this time, to be a *Schlacht* pilot was almost akin to gaining membership of a rather exclusive club – something along the lines of the pre-war Royal Air Force, where everyone knew, or knew of, everyone else.

But the sudden five-fold expansion in strength, while undeniably elevating the ground attack force to a position of much greater prominence within the ranks of the Luftwaffe, at the same time introduced the unavoidable veneer of impersonality which afflicts any large organisation. And the *Schlacht* arm had just become a very large organisation indeed, with units deployed from the Arctic Circle to the Mediterranean and from the English Channel to the Black Sea. As such, its many operations during the remaining months of the war can only be portrayed by the broadest of brush strokes.

One example should suffice to indicate the rapidly changing status of the ground attack force. In the first four years of the war *Schlacht* pilots had won just 16 Knight's Crosses. In the final 18 months no fewer than 143(!) would be presented, not to mention 24 further sets of Oak Leaves (including the one and only ever to be awarded in Gold), six of Swords and one of Diamonds!

One unit not immediately affected by the major reorganisation of October 1943 was II./StG 2, whose tank-busting Ju 87Gs continued to operate as before. These are believed to be machines of the *Gruppe*, distinguished by their diagonal tail stripe – this marking was later adopted by several other Ju 87G-equipped (Pz) *Staffeln*



The bulk of the new force had been brought into being by the simple expedient of redesignating all existing *Stukagruppen* as *Schlachtgruppen*. But as this process was not entirely straightforward, and in order to be able to show how the four 'old guard' *Schlachtgruppen* (of SchlGs 1 and 2) were broken up and dispersed among the other units, the lineage of the new ground attack formations is perhaps best, and most concisely, illustrated by the following table;

I.-III./SG 1	redesignated from	I.-III./StG 1
I./SG 2	redesignated from	I./StG 2
II./SG 2	previously	II./SchlG 1
III./SG 2	redesignated from	III./StG 2
10.(Pz)/SG 2	redesignated from	Pz.J.St./StG 2
I.-III./SG 3	redesignated from	I.-III./StG 3
I./SG 4	previously	II./SchlG 2
II./SG 4	previously	II./SKG 10
III./SG 4	previously	III./SKG 10
I./SG 5	redesignated from	I./StG 5
I./SG 10	previously	I./SchlG 2
II./SG 10	previously	IV./SKG 10
III./SG 10	previously	II./StG 77
I./SG 77	redesignated from	I./StG 77
II./SG 77	previously	I./SchlG 1
III./SG 77	redesignated from	III./StG 77
10.(Pz)/SG 77	redesignated from	Pz.J.St./StG 1

As may be seen from the above, II./StG 2 had not been included among the wholesale redesignations of October 1943. This unit remained operational as a specialised anti-tank *Gruppe* within *Lufflotte 4* for the next five months as II./StG 2(Pz). Indeed, it was not until March 1944 that the unit was split up to create two new Ju 87G-equipped anti-tank *Staffeln* – 10.(Pz)/SG 3 and 10.(Pz)/SG 77. The latter then replaced the above-listed 10.(Pz)/SG 77, which in turn rejoined its original parent *Geschwader* as 10.(Pz)/SG 1.

The five eastern front Hs 129 anti-tank *Staffeln* were, however, part of the reorganisation of 18 October 1943. They were united into a single *Gruppe* – IV.(Pz)/SG 9 – as follows;

10.(Pz)/SG 9	previously	4.(Pz)/SchlG 1
11.(Pz)/SG 9	previously	8.(Pz)/SchlG 1
12.(Pz)/SG 9	previously	4.(Pz)/SchlG 2
13.(Pz)/SG 9	previously	8.(Pz)/SchlG 2
14.(Pz)/SG 9	previously	Pz.J.St./JG 51

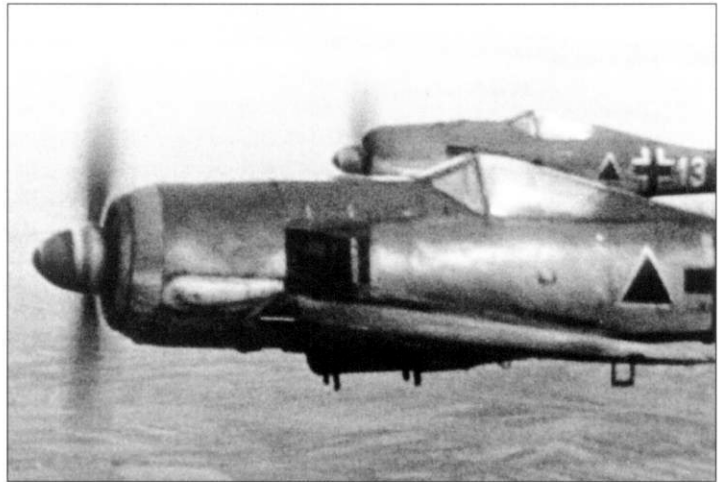
The intention to establish an entire anti-tank *Geschwader* never materialised, for the only other part of the planned SG 9 to see the light of day was its I. *Gruppe*. But this was not activated until January 1945, when it comprised two *Staffeln* of Ju 87Gs – 10.(Pz)/SG 1 and 10.(Pz)/SG 3 – plus the erstwhile 12.(Pz)/SG 9 (since converted to rocket-firing Fw 190s).

The dissolution of the Stuka arm meant that all dive-bomber training establishments had likewise to be incorporated into the new ground attack



One outcome of the October 1943 redesignations was the amalgamation of all five existing Hs 129 *Staffeln* into one *Gruppe*, IV.(Pz)/SG 9. With the onset of the third eastern front winter, the new unit's aircraft began to sport some really eye-catching disruptive winter camouflage schemes!

With as yet little to fear from the Red Air Force, the rear-area training establishments continued to employ the ground attack arm's traditional black triangle. Among the last to do so were the Fw 190s of SGs 151 and 152 – machines of the latter *Geschwader* are pictured here



organisation. This led to the creation of three new school *Geschwader*, SGs 101, 102 and 103 (a fourth would be added in December 1944), plus two advanced training units, SGs 151 and 152.

Several of these *Geschwader* subsequently set up so-called *Einsatz* (operational) formations of either *Staffel* or *Gruppe* strength. Crewed by instructors and selected pupils, they would see action on all fronts until the OKL ordered their disbandment on 13 February 1945.

The last of the units to be part of the major re-structuring of 18 October 1943 were the eastern front's night harassment squadrons. On the northern sector *Lufiflotte* 1's four *Staffeln* were paired off into *Nachtschlachtgruppen* (NSGr) 1 and 3. The three central sector squadrons of *Lufiflotte* 6 became NSGr 2, while in the south, *Lufiflotte* 4 divided its six *Staffeln* into NSGr 4, 5 and 6.

Two other *Gruppen* were activated at about the same time. NSGr 7 was formed from *Störkampfstaffel* Südost (South-east) and elements of the NASTa Kroatien (Short-range Recce Squadron Croatia), primarily for day reconnaissance and nocturnal anti-partisan operations in the northern Balkans. NSGr 11 was manned by Estonian volunteers, who had previously

been engaged on maritime patrol duties along their nation's Baltic coastline, for night ground attack duties in the same region.

A further six *Nachtschlachtgruppen*, plus two autonomous *Staffeln*, would be set up during the closing months of the war. But the final unit of all to be involved in the complex round of redesignations of October 1943 was blind flying school BFS 11, based at Stubendorf, in Upper Silesia, which as SG 111 became responsible for the training of all *Nachtschlacht* aircrew.

The changes set out above no doubt simplified the *Schlacht* arm. But on the ground – where it really mattered – they initially had little noticeable effect. It was intended that every dive-bomber unit should ultimately convert to the Fw 190, but the first two *Gruppen* to re-equip, II. and III./SG 1, did not do so until the late spring/early summer of 1944. The majority of the ex-*Stukagruppen*, in fact, continued to operate their Ju 87s very much as before, and their story is more properly told as part of the history of the Stuka arm on the eastern front.

For the next eight months, therefore, it was still 'business as usual' for the quartet of original, pre-October 1943 *Schlachtgruppen* as they soldiered on under their new guises.

One of those *Gruppen* (the ex-II./SchlG 2) was still operating in Italy, now as I. Gruppe of the new all-Fw 190 SG 4. Command of this *Geschwader* had been given to Major Heinrich Brücker – the same 'Rubio' Brücker who had led the first experimental *Kette* of Hs 123s in Spain, and who had flown some 250 missions in the *Legion Condor* developing the



3. *Staffel* of the newly-formed NSGr 7 was to be equipped with Italian Fiat CR.42 biplanes. After working up in Czechoslovakia in early 1944, 3./NSGr 7 joined the *Gruppe*'s other two *Staffeln* for operations in the Balkans

Another newcomer to the ranks of the night ground attack arm, NSGr 11 was manned by Estonian volunteers. One of the unit's winter-camouflaged He 50s ('3W+NR/20') is seen here trundling along a planked perimeter track, probably at Jöhvi, in early 1944



tactics and laying the foundations for the ground attack force to come. Having headed both *Stuka* and *Schnellkampf-Gruppen* in the interim, 'Hein' Brücker – as he was now more commonly known among his peers – quickly instilled his own brand of aggressive fighting spirit into the pilots of his new *Geschwader*.

Despite being deprived of its III. *Gruppe* – sent first to Graz, in Austria, in early November 1943 to re-equip, and thence to north-east France – SG 4's remaining 30+ serviceable Focke-Wulfs conducted a spirited defence of central Italy. Usually operating in *Schwärmen* (groups of four aircraft) they sometimes managed to mount as many as 80-90 sorties in a single day, attacking Allied road convoys, artillery positions and airfields.

But, as on every other front, it was the course of the action on the ground, not individual endeavours in the air, which was to dictate events. And the Allied landings at Anzio, just over 30 miles (48 km) south of Rome, in January 1944 were to prove the dominant factor in SG 4's remaining months in Italy. Although the invasion forces made little attempt to break out of the beachhead – Churchill likened their behaviour to that of a 'beached whale' – their very presence posed a constant threat to the German frontline stretched across the spine of Italy to the south of them.

From their bases at Rieti (I.) and Viterbo (II.), north of the Italian capital, Brücker's two *Gruppen* were thrown against the Anzio landing area time and again. Initially enjoying the benefit of fighter cover, SG 4's early losses were minimal. The reduction of the Luftwaffe's fighter presence in central Italy, however, coupled with the build-up of the beachhead's anti-aircraft defences, meant that the situation soon began to change.

The *Geschwader* was forced to abandon the usual line-astern shallow glide approach tactics it employed against specific objectives, resorting instead to almost *Stuka*-like 65° dives, before bottoming out and roaring indiscriminately across the target area at speeds approaching 500 mph (800 km/h). When this failed to achieve the desired results, Brücker's pilots next tried 'tip-and-run' *Jabo* raids against the beachhead and its offshore shipping – but to little avail. Losses continued to mount.



A bomb-carrying ground attack Fw 190 is seen in one of the *Stuka*-like 65° dives that machines of SG 4 were forced to resort to in order to survive the anti-aircraft defences of the Anzio beachhead

In central Italy SG 4's two *Gruppen* were just as vulnerable to attack on the ground as they were in the air. Here, a machine of I./SG 4 is quickly prepared for refuelling from a camouflaged bowser. Note also the camouflage netting over the trailer pumps and the straw matting in the foreground which has been pulled aside to reveal a cache of half-buried fuel drums





Compared to the dangerously exposed machine in the previous photograph, this aircraft is offered at least some semblance of protection from air attack by the surrounding trees. Note the spiral spinner marking and the I. Gruppe badge retained from the unit's days as II./SchlG 2

After the summary dismissal of Major Heinrich Brücker, command of SG 4 passed to Major Georg Dörffel. But on only his third mission in Italy Dörffel lost his life in action near Rome against US heavy bombers heading up from the heel of Italy to attack targets in the south of France



The casualties included the two *Gruppenkommandeure*, both recent Knight's Cross winners. Hauptmann Heinrich Zwipf, who had taken over I./SG 4 from Werner Dörnbrack on 1 December 1943, died while attempting an emergency landing at Rieti on 7 April after being attacked by Allied fighters. II. Gruppe's Hauptmann Gerhard Walther lost his life the following month, on 18 May, during a dogfight with a pair of Spitfires to the east of Viterbo. After claiming one of his opponents, Walther was himself forced to bale out. He was apparently knocked unconscious by the tailplane of his machine while so doing, for his parachute remained unopened.

Another May 'casualty' was *Kommodore* 'Hein' Brücker, who had reportedly been relieved of command earlier in the month after losing his temper and striking an insubordinate officer from another unit. The man brought in to replace him at the head of the *Geschwader* – his earlier ban on further operational flying now presumably lifted – was Major Georg Dörffel.

Five days after the loss of Gerhard Walther, Allied forces finally began to break out of the Anzio beachhead. By that time – save for some strafing of the frontlines near Cassino – SG 4's Fw 190s had almost completely given up on ground attack missions and were flying what were, in effect, fighter sorties. Untrained in this role, their casualties soared. On 21 May they had lost seven out of 24 pilots in combat with Spitfires. On the 25th, with the two *Gruppen*'s combined returns totalling just 20, they sustained four more casualties. Worse was to come twenty-four hours later.

On 26 May Major Georg Dörffel – on only his third operational mission in Italy – was to suffer the same fate as had overtaken Gerhard Walther eight days earlier. Attacking a formation of US heavy bombers nine miles (15 km) to the north-west of Rome, Dörffel's own Fw 190 was hit. Although he managed to extricate himself, he too is believed to have struck the tailplane of his aircraft, for he made no attempt to open his parachute. 'Orge' Dörffel was honoured with a posthumous promotion to *oberstleutnant*.

The death of the *Kommodore* marked the end of SG 4's activities in Italy. Within a month the two *Gruppen* had retired to Airasca (I.) and Levaldigi (II.), close to Turin in the north of the country, where they were brought back up to full establishment – a total of 90 machines – in readiness for transfer to the eastern front.

The other ex-Mediterranean *Schlachtgruppe* (I./SchlG 2) had been operating on the eastern front almost from the moment of its redesignation as I./SG 10 back in October 1943.

Having completed retraining in Austria, I./SG 10 had accompanied the *Geschwader*'s other Fw 190-equipped *Gruppe*, II./SG 10, to join *Luftflotte* 4 on the southern sector of the Russian front in early November. The Red Army had recaptured Kiev on 6 November and was now firmly established on the western banks of the Dnieper. The following month the Soviets launched the first of the counter-offensives which, by April 1944, would result in the liberation of the entire Ukraine.

Subordinated to I. *Fliegerkorps* on the southernmost flank of the front along the shores of the Black Sea, SG 10's two *Gruppen* were soon caught up in the thick of this fighting. They were supporting the reconstituted 6. *Armee* (formed in March 1943, one month after the annihilation of the

'White S' of an unidentified II. *Gruppe* (but almost certainly either II./SG 2 or II./SG 10) on the southern sector of the Russian front during the early winter of 1943-44



A strikingly similar photograph to that already featured on page 63, only the background has changed from the heat of the Mediterranean to the cold of a Russian winter



first at Stalingrad) as it attempted to hold the Soviet advance along the line of the lower Dnieper and then, when that failed, to slow the Red Army's progress across the southern Ukraine towards the Rumanian border.

A bomb-carrying Fw 190 lifts off from a snow-dusted field in southern Russia while, in the background, others taxi at well-spaced intervals around the perimeter to the take-off point, ready to await their turn

Little is known of SG 10's activities during this period, but the figures alone are indication enough. By 31 December 1943 the two *Gruppen* could muster just 16 serviceable Fw 190s between them. One month later Major Georg Jakob assumed command of the *Geschwader*, which had been leaderless since Major Heinz Schumann's departure (for reasons unspecified) back in November.





A highly experienced Stuka pilot, Georg Jakob had recently converted to the Fw 190 in order to be able to lead the *Geschwader* in the air as well as on the ground. But not even he could prevent SG 10's continuing withdrawal as the Soviets advanced inexorably westwards. By 1 April 1944 Major Jakob and his two *Gruppen* had been pushed back to Tiraspol, on the River Dnestr. Before the month was out they were on Rumanian soil, with *Stab* and II. *Gruppe* at Leipzig and I. *Gruppe* on the Black Sea coast at Mamaia.

On 19 June Major Georg Jakob, whose *Stab* was by then based alongside I./SG 10 at Bacau, at the foot of the Carpathian Mountains, flew his 1000th operational mission. Personal achievements such as this were, however, becoming increasingly irrelevant among the broader scheme of things. Just 72 hours later the Red Army unleashed its 1944 summer offensive. The war was entering its final phase.

In contrast to I./SG 10's fighting retreat across the southern Ukraine, another of the original *Schlachtgruppen* – Georg Dörffel's ex-I./SchlG 1, now operating as II./SG 77 – enjoyed a remarkably sedentary first half of 1944. *Luftflotte 4*'s orders of battle indicate that the *Gruppe* spent most of the time based at Lemberg (Lvov), in Poland, its recorded strength remaining a near constant 31 to 35 Fw 190s throughout.

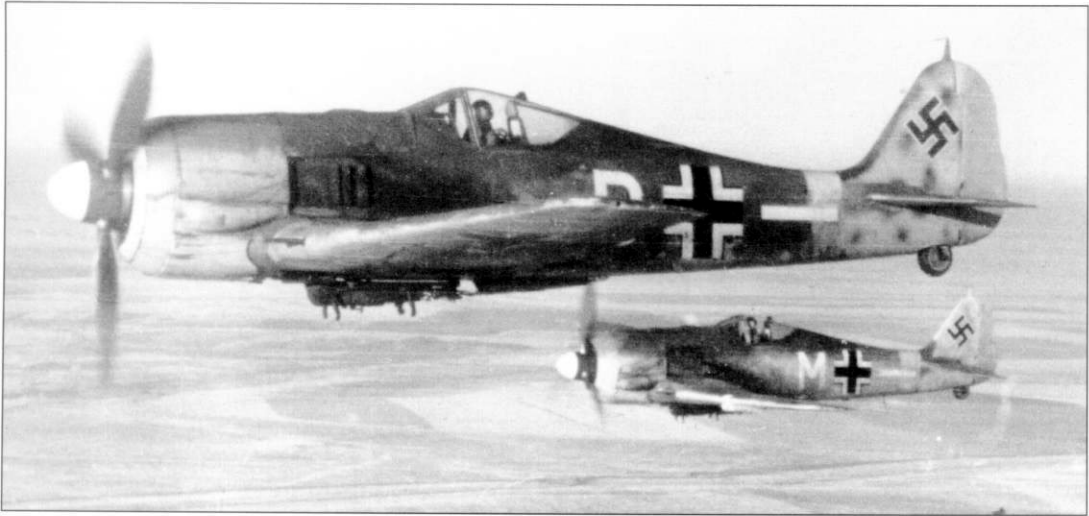
Other Ju 87-equipped elements of SG 77, including Oberstleutnant Helmut Bruck's *Geschwaderstab* and the tank-busters of 10.(Pz) *Staffel*, also occupied Lemberg for varying periods between February and June

Illustrating the close co-operation between the *Schlacht* arm and the ground units of the Army and *Waffen-SS* they were supporting, an Fw 190 of II./SG 10 undergoes maintenance in the field as a column of Panther tanks rumbles past at Coscov, in the southern sector of the eastern front, in early January 1944

As January progressed so the snow grew heavier and more frequent until Coscov's surface was an unbroken field of white. Despite their temporary white winter camouflage, II./SG 10's Fw 190s do not exactly blend into the landscape as they are readied for another mission

Oberleutnant Werner poses for a snap outside 4./SG 10's underground command bunker at Coscov. The *Staffel* badge so prominently displayed may seem familiar, if a trifle inappropriate – a fox clamping a broken merchant ship in its jaws. In fact, this emblem dates back to the unit's earliest days on the English Channel as 10.(Jabo)/JG 2 (see Osprey *Elite Units 1*) before it was first assimilated into IV./SKG 10 and then became the present 4. *Staffel* of SG 10





Back to the anonymity of an unidentified II. *Gruppe* – possibly of SG 77 – as a pair of Fw 190s, their ventral racks empty, return to base somewhere in the southern steppe in the spring of 1944

1944, but none was as seemingly permanent a fixture as II. *Gruppe*'s Fw 190s.

The last of the four original *Schlachtgruppen*, II./SchlG 1 was incorporated into what had been the most famous Luftwaffe dive-bomber unit of all, StG 2 'Immelmann'. When that *Geschwader*'s II. *Gruppe* uniquely retained its *Stuka* nomenclature, continuing to operate after 18 October 1943 as II./StG 2(Pz), it was II./SchlG 1 – under its newly-appointed *Kommandeur*, Major Heinz Frank – which filled the vacant II. *Gruppe* slot thus created in the now redesignated SG 2 'Immelmann'.

Like SG 10, Major Hans-Karl Stepp's SG 2 also formed part of I. *Fliegerkorps*, defending the Dnieper front. On a tactical level, the Fw 190s of II./SG 2 often operated in conjunction with the Ju 87s of III. *Gruppe*, the combined force frequently being provided with fighter cover (courtesy of II./JG 52). On 25 November Hauptmann Hans-Ulrich Rudel, the *Kommandeur* of III./SG 2, would be awarded the Swords for completing 1600 missions and destroying 118 Soviet tanks. And five days later II./JG 52's *Gruppenkommandeur*, Hauptmann Gerhard Barkhorn, would claim his 200th victory against the Red Air Force. But not even this wealth of experience could stem the tide about to engulf the Ukraine.

In mid-January 1944 a Soviet breakthrough near Kirovograd had nearly spelled the end for II./SG 2, Russian T-34 tanks bursting onto their airfield (see Osprey *Aircraft of the Aces 6*, page 41, for details). Surviving this scare, the *Gruppe* spent the next few days being rushed first to Uman and then back down to Krivoy-Rog as the pace of the enemy advance west of the Dnieper gathered momentum.

It was in the depth of this third eastern front winter, amidst the chaos and confusion of a general withdrawal, that II./SG 2 again began operating a handful of Hs 123s alongside their Focke-Wulfs. Quite how and why this came about is not altogether clear, but the ageing, yet indefatigable 'one-two-threes' were to remain on the *Gruppe*'s strength until the end of April 1944.

One result of the Red Army's continuing drive westwards along the Black Sea coastline had been to cut off those German troops defending the Crimea. With all landward communications severed, the obvious move

would have been to attempt the evacuation of the 17. *Armee* by sea. But Hitler, fearing that an abandoned Crimea would be used by the Soviets as an air base for attacks on the vitally important Rumanian oilfields, ordered that the peninsula be held.

Thus it was that on 23 January 1944 the pilots of II./SG 2 found themselves carefully overflying the territory of the Soviet Fourth Ukrainian Front at an unaccustomed altitude – for them – of some 15,000 ft (4500 m) as they staged southwards to the Crimea. Their destination was the airfield complex at Bagerovo, near Kerch on the easternmost tip of the peninsula.

This was the very area where II./SchlG 1 had first fought two years earlier as the German army began its push down into the Caucasus. Now the survivors of that failed venture were themselves being driven back across the Ukraine, leaving the Crimea isolated. The airfields around Kerch were already prepared for demolition, and they were subject to constant attack from the air and soon come under long-range artillery bombardment too.

Yet it was against this unpromising backdrop that the *Schlachtflieger* were to claim their greatest aerial successes of the war. While SG 2's Ju 87 units continued to attack the Red Army on the mainland (on 29 March Hans-Ulrich Rudel would receive the Diamonds for the destruction of over 200 enemy tanks, and the following month the *Geschwader* as a whole would celebrate its 100,000th sortie since the start of hostilities), the Fw 190s of II. *Gruppe* were becoming increasingly involved in the air battle for the Crimea.

Their defence of the peninsula in the face of overwhelming odds captured the public's attention and imagination. II./SG 2's exploits began to feature in the High Command's daily news bulletins. On 20 April 1944, for example – by which time the *Gruppe* had retired from Bagerovo, via Karankut, to Khersonyes-South, close to historic Sevastopol on the south-western extremity of the Crimea – it was announced that:

'North-east of Sevastopol, 36 enemy aircraft were shot down and a further 20 destroyed on the ground. In this action Oberleutnant Smola, *Staffelkapitän* in a *Schlachtgeschwader*, performed particularly well (5. *Staffel*'s Rudolf Smola had, in fact, claimed three of the aerial victories and all but six of the ground kills).'

Exactly one week later the *Gruppe* was in the news again;

'Between 12 and 26 April, a *Schlachtgruppe* led by Major Frank, and based in the Sevastopol area, has shot down a total of 106 enemy aircraft over the Crimea and destroyed another 28 on the ground.'

And then on 5 May;

'Near Sevastopol 14 enemy aircraft have been shot down by fighters, and 15 by *Schlachtflieger*. Once again Leutnant Lambert distinguished himself particularly well.'

The 'fighters' referred to above were the Bf 109s of II./JG 52, which

On 8 May 1944 General der Flieger Hans Seidemann, GOC VIII. Fliegerkorps, visited SG 77 at its Lemberg (Lvov) base in Poland to congratulate the *Geschwader* on its 100,000th sortie. Wearing an 'Afrika' cuff-title, Seidemann is pictured (right) talking to Kommodore Oberstleutnant Helmut Bruck (left)





By far the most successful *Schlacht* pilot of all in terms of enemy aircraft destroyed, 5./SG 2's Leutnant August Lambert is seen here shortly before receiving his Knight's Cross – for 90 aerial victories – on 14 May 1944. Lambert's total had risen to 116 by the time he was killed in action in the closing days of the war

had been based alongside II./SG 2 at Bagerovo, and now shared Khersonyes-South with them. And the 'Leutnant Lambert' was August Lambert, already the highest-scoring ground attack pilot in history.

After many years serving as a flying instructor, Oberfeldwebel August Lambert had joined the then II./SchlG 1 in the spring of 1943. But it was not until a year later that his remarkable career really took off. In just three weeks' fighting around Sevastopol, Lambert – now a lieutenant in Smola's 5. *Staffel* – raised his aerial victory tally from 20 to 90! He claimed many multiple kills, the highest number being 17 in a single day. Lambert alone was responsible for a third of the 247 enemy aircraft shot down by the *Gruppe* during its four months in the Crimea.

Despite these achievements – his total was already double the final end-of-war scores of his nearest rivals – and despite being mentioned by name on at least four occasions in the OKW's daily communiqués (for the destruction of enemy tanks as well as aircraft), Lambert had still not yet been honoured with the Knight's Cross. One ex-member of the *Gruppe* maintains that this was because Lambert had had a run-in with the adjutant, who arranged for him to be taken off operational flying (not to safeguard his talents, but to prevent his amassing further kills) and flown out of the peninsula back to rear-area HQ in Rumania.

Whatever the truth behind these allegations, it was not until after the evacuation of the Crimea that August Lambert was finally awarded the Knight's Cross (on 14 May). And perhaps it is significant that he did not return to operations with II./SG 2 thereafter, but was instead posted to SG 151 to resume his duties as an advanced flying instructor.

The *Gruppe's* successes in the Crimea had not been achieved without cost. Materially, its numbers had slumped from 36 to just 14 aircraft (Fw 190s and Hs 123s combined, as of 25 April). Pilot casualties had also been considerable. Among them was Oberfeldwebel Ehrenfried Lagois, another member of Rudolf Smola's 5. *Staffel*, and just one of the *Schlacht* arm's 14(!) Knight's Cross winners of March 1944. A true old stager, 'Fred' Lagois had been piloting the first Hs 123 brought down in the Battle of France. He had walked away from that one. But he didn't stand a chance when returning to Khersonyes-South after an early morning reconnaissance patrol on 15 April. His Fw 190 took a direct hit from a German navy 40 mm flak gun and plunged straight into the Black Sea.

The last machines of II./SG 2 left Khersonyes-South on 9 May, just 72 hours before the final evacuation of the Crimea. They staged via Mamaia, on the Rumanian coast, first inland to Bacau and thence to Zilistea. Here, some 45 miles (72 km) to the east of the Ploesti oilfields, they began retraining, flying simulated attacks on Ju 88s which were playing the part of US heavy bombers.

The Italy-based US Fifteenth Air Force was just beginning its offensive against Rumania's oil. And possibly on the strength of their recent successes over the Crimea, the *Gruppe* was apparently being groomed to help bolster the oilfields' local fighter defences. They, and many other ground attack pilots, would indeed be faced with US opposition in the air in ever increasing numbers over the weeks and months ahead. And not just in the Ploesti area alone, for two massive Allied offensives were about to be unleashed. And suddenly the *Schlacht* arm was to find itself under attack from all four points of the compass.

RETREAT ON ALL FRONTS

After many long years in the wilderness the *Schlacht* arm had finally been recognised and reorganised as a separate entity with a vital contribution to make to the Luftwaffe's fighting capabilities. It had replaced the once-vaunted Stukas as the primary tactical strike force., ex-Ju 87 units now returning to the front equipped with the more potent Fw 190. For the first time in its history the ground-attack arm was, at long last, in a position to mount large-scale operations. To embellish a well-known phrase, it was 'the end of a very protracted beginning'.

Yet within just days of the first of the new Fw 190 *Gruppen*'s appearing on the frontline order of battle in late May 1944, and before they even had a chance to make their presence felt, the skies literally fell in for the Germans. The two Allies, eastern and western, each launched an offensive of unprecedented magnitude. In the north and south, too, the pressure was increasing, and Axis satellites were on the verge of toppling.

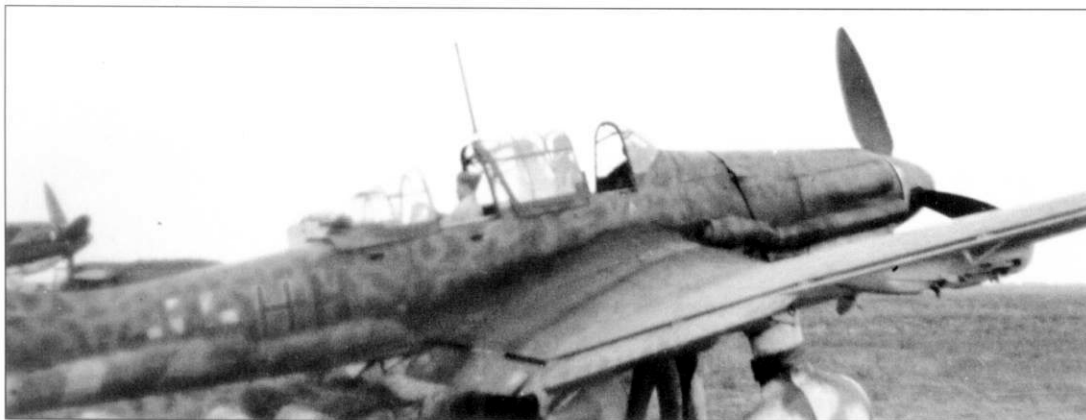
The largest and most powerful ground attack force ever assembled by the Luftwaffe was immediately thrust on to the defensive, embarking upon a ten-month-long retreat that would only end in the ruins of a shattered and divided Reich. With time scarcely to draw breath in between, the end of the beginning had suddenly been transformed into the beginning of the end!

SOUTHERN FRONTS

The withdrawal of SG 4 from central Italy shortly after US forces had entered Rome on 4 June 1944 meant that, for the remainder of the campaign, the only Luftwaffe ground attack operations to take place in Italy were carried out under cover of darkness.

NSGr 9 had first been formed in Slovakia back in late November 1943 from a cadre of personnel supplied by NSGr 3. Initially equipped with twin-engined Caproni Ca.314s, 1. *Staffel* had moved to Italy before the year was out to cut its teeth on daylight anti-partisan operations in the southern Alpine regions. It was joined by 2./NSGr 9's Fiat CR.42 biplanes, which had been specially modified for night-flying, early in 1944.

In February 1944 command of the *Gruppe*, whose 3. *Staffel* would not be set up until the following July, was assumed by Hauptmann Rupert Frost – on 25 November 1944 the then Major Frost would become the first of five *Nachtschlacht* pilots to be awarded the Knight's Cross. It had quickly become apparent that the Ca.314 was totally unsuited to nocturnal operations, and 1./NSGr 9 soon began re-equipping with Ju 87s. 2. *Staffel* followed suit when supply difficulties made retention of the otherwise satisfactory Fiats problematical (for brief details of the subsequent career of the Ju 87-equipped NSGr 9 in Italy see *Osprey Combat Aircraft* 6).



One other night ground attack unit was to put in a brief appearance over Italy during the closing weeks of 1944. The *Sonderstaffel 'Einhorn'* (Special squadron 'Unicorn') was an offshoot of a proposed volunteer 'self-sacrifice' (i.e. suicide) unit which had been set up in Germany in February 1944 for the express purpose of flying piloted glide-bombs against future Allied invasion fleets. When such weapons failed to materialise, however, the unit's 120 volunteers began training on Fw 190s, hoping to be able to carry a standard heavyweight 5500-lb (2500-kg) bomb instead. Once again reality intervened, and it was discovered that a 2200-lb (1000-kg) bomb was about the best that the Fw 190 could manage.

After being unsuccessfully employed against the Nijmegen road bridge during the Arnhem operations in September 1944, it was with 14 such Focke-Wulfs that the *Sonderstaffel* departed for Italy the following month. Commanded by a Hauptmann Schuntermann, and based mainly at Villafranca, south of Lake Garda, the unit mounted a limited number of dusk raids during November and December before its withdrawal back to the Reich and incorporation into KG 200.

In February 1945 1./NSGr 9 began exchanging some of its Ju 87s for Fw 190s. But, not surprisingly, the handful of machines delivered (as of 1 March the *Staffel* was reported to have just four serviceable examples on strength) had no impact at all on operations at this late stage of the hostilities.

While NSGr 9 had been contesting the Anglo-American armies' slow but steady advance up the leg of Italy, a very different kind of war was being waged on the other side of the Adriatic Sea. There, German troops stationed down in the Balkans – like their comrades in the Crimea before them – were facing the growing danger of being cut off by the advancing Red Army.

With the Soviets rapidly closing in – aided in no small measure by both Rumania and Bulgaria hurriedly changing sides and declaring war on their recent Axis allies – German units began to stream northwards. This was the signal for the Communist partisan forces, who had long controlled most of the Balkan highlands, to start attacking the Germans' main lines of retreat through the valleys.

It was to combat partisan activities that NSGr 7 had first been formed back in October 1943. But even before the upsurge in activity of August 1944, the *Gruppe's* motley collection of Ju 87s, He 46s, CR.42s and

After SG 4's withdrawal from Italy, the only *Schlacht* presence in the area was a nocturnal one. Ju 87D 'E8+HH' of 1./NSGr 9 has been so heavily oversprayed that its fuselage *Balkenkreuz* is all but obscured. Such a finish was typical of the Stukas which took the ground attack war to Anglo-American forces in Italy during the hours of darkness

Ca.314s (some two dozen machines in all) had been hard pressed to police the mountainous Balkan regions. In September, therefore, a new *Gruppe* (NSGr 10) was raised by redesignating the Ju 87-equipped II./LLG 1 – formerly a glider-tug unit then stationed outside Belgrade. For a while NSGr 10's machines continued to perform both roles, towing the occasional transport glider by day and flying ground attack missions by night.

The Balkans theatre even boasted its own Fw 190 presence – albeit a very small one. Based in Croatia, the five-*Gruppe* strong SG 151 – one of the *Schlacht* arm's two training *Geschwader* – was still equipped with Ju 87s from its days as StG 151. But in the summer of 1944 13./SG 151, the IV. *Gruppe*'s *Einsatzstaffel*, began converting to Focke-Wulfs. By early September this unit was based at Skoplje, where it fielded a grand total of three serviceable Fw 190s.

With such forces – and not much else – at its disposal, it was little wonder that *Luftwaffenkommando Südost* (South-east) was dissolved on 22 October 1944 and its subordinate *Fliegerführer Kroatien* retitled as *Fliegerführer Nordbalkan*. But the Luftwaffe's withdrawal from Yugoslavia did not stop at the north Balkans. By November most of its forces, including NSGr 7 and 10, and 13./SG 151, had crossed the border into southern Hungary, where they became swept up in an even greater retreat – that from the eastern front.

NORTHERN FRONT

In stark contrast to the hectic and confused activity of the Italian and Balkan theatres, above the Arctic Circle a single *Schlachtgruppe* had been fighting its war in almost complete isolation. Still equipped with Ju 87s, I./SG 5 had spent the first half of 1944 attacking land and sea targets around the Murmansk area in the far north of Russia.

In February the Fw 190 fighter-bombers of 14.(*Jabo*)/JG 5 had been incorporated into the *Gruppe* as its 4. *Staffel*. As well as continuing their own operations against shore depots and shipping convoys on the White Sea, 4./SG 5's Focke-Wulfs also provided fighter cover for the Ju 87s during both bombing raids on the enemy and supply-dropping missions to isolated German outposts.

In the Far North there was little fear of enemy strafing attacks, hence this winter-camouflaged Ju 87 of 1./SG 5 is bombed up (note the sledges used to transport the stores out to the aircraft) in the open in broad daylight. Behind it, an Fw 190 of 4. *Staffel* climbs away, a 250-kg bomb clearly visible under its belly





Above and top
Two Fw 190Fs of 1./SG 5, which completed conversion onto the type just as Finland was preparing to sign an armistice with the Russians. 'Q9+AB' of *Gruppenkommandeur* Major Fritz Schröter is seen at Utissa, and 'Q9+AL' of *Hauptmann* Erwin-Peter Diekwisch, *Staffelkapitän* of 3./SG 5, at Pori. Both shots were taken in August 1944, just days prior to the *Gruppe's* transfer to Latvia

Then, on 10 June 1944, the Red Army launched a major offensive against Finnish forces holding the Karelian Isthmus above Leningrad. Six days later the Luftwaffe hastily despatched a battle-group to the Finns' aid. All but one of the units making up the *Gefechtsverband* Kuhlmeier were drawn from the main eastern front. The sole exception was the Fw 190s of SG 5 (now redesignated as 1. *Staffel*) which were ordered down from Kandalaksha, on the White Sea, to join the *Gefechtsverband* at Immola, just behind the Finnish lines in Karelia.

Flying mainly *Jabo* missions, 1./SG 5 attacked Soviet troops as they tried to break through the Finnish frontal defences, as well as landing craft on Lake Ladoga attempting to outflank the eastern end of the line across the isthmus. In July the *Staffel* also sent elements to Turku, at the mouth of the Gulf of Bothnia, to support *Kriegsmarine* operations in the Baltic Sea before, early in August, transferring to Utti to carry out attacks on Soviet vessels in the Gulf of Finland. During these activities 1./SG 5 suffered the loss of some half-dozen machines, with as many again damaged.

While 1. *Staffel* had been thus engaged, 2. and 3./SG 5 had been busy re-equipping with Fw 190s as well. The end was already in sight for the gallant but heavily outnumbered Finns, however. They concluded hostilities with the Soviets on 4 September, and before the armistice was officially signed, on 19 September, all German forces in southern Finland had been evacuated. 1./SG 5's Fw 190s had been part of the exodus. By the end of the first week in September they had taken up residence at Schmilten, in Latvia, and were already operating under *Lufiflotte* 1.

Nocturnal ground attack operations in the far north – such as there were – had been the responsibility of NSGr 8. This unit's 1. *Staffel* had been

activated on Ar 66s at the beginning of 1944. It was not until May 1944 that a second *Staffel* was added by redesignating the original, Ju 87-equipped 1./SG 5. The following month 1./NSGr 8 also converted to the Ju 87, its cast-off Ar 66s then being used to set up a 3. *Staffel* in July.

Serious fuel shortages throughout the far northern theatre had severely curtailed NSGr 8's activities to date. Some units had suspended operations altogether by August 1944. It required a special dispensation from *Lufflotte* 5 HQ in Oslo before a 'one-off' delivery of an additional 2200 gals (10,000 l) of aviation fuel could be made to 1./NSGr 8 for 'extra duties'.

These 'extra duties' first entailed the *Staffel's* transfer from Kemi, at the head of the Gulf of Bothnia, some 190 miles (300 km) eastwards to Ponsalenjoki, close to the Murmansk railway. One of the Allies' now famous 'Arctic convoys' was reported to be approaching the Kola Inlet. The task assigned to 1./NSGr 8's 16 Ju 87s was to attack southbound traffic along the strategically vital Murmansk-Moscow railway link where it skirted the White Sea, thus disrupting the onward transport of Allied war material once unloaded from the ships.

But despite its additional allocation of fuel, the *Staffel* was able to mount only a limited number of sorties. And little, if any, of the equipment safely delivered to Murmansk and Arkhangelsk by the 33 merchantmen of convoy JW.59 between 25 and 27 July was prevented from reaching its final destinations on the main fighting fronts.

The end of hostilities between Finland and the Soviet Union in September found NSGr 8 still based in the far north – 1. *Staffel's* 16 Ju 87s back at Kemi and the 13 machines of 2. *Staffel* some 105 miles (170 km) to the north-east at Kemijärvi, just inside the Arctic Circle. From here, accompanied by the Arados of 3./NSGr 8, they therefore withdrew across Finnish Lapland into German-held northern Norway. In early 1945 the *Gruppe* was then transferred to the eastern front to participate in the forthcoming defence of Berlin.

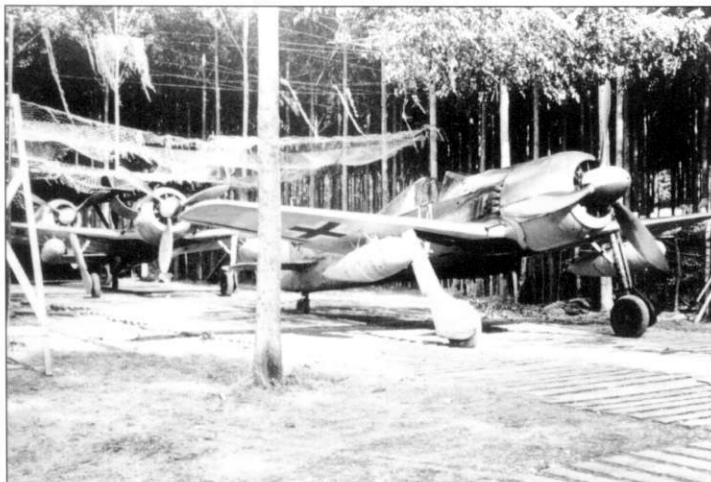
WESTERN FRONT

The last true ground attack operations to have taken place in the west were those mounted by the Hs 123s of II.(Schl)/LG 2 towards the close of the French campaign in June 1940. The *Gruppe's* subsequent role in the

Putting the Italian theatre in the shade – both figuratively and literally – in terms of camouflage measures, this photograph of a 1./SKG 10 Fw 190 at Tours-West in June 1944 shows the lengths the Luftwaffe had to go to in order to hide its aircraft from patrolling Allied fighters



Of far more practical use were dispersal bays such as this, spanned with camouflage netting and floored with planks. Although operating as I./SKG 10 during the Normandy campaign, the unit's Fw 190s flew many nocturnal missions – hence the individual exhaust flame dampers fitted to the machines, and clearly visible here



Battle of Britain had been more that of a Bf 109 fighter-bomber unit. Hit-and-run cross-Channel raids had continued in the years that followed, carried out first by semi-autonomous *Jabostaffeln* and then by a dedicated fast bomber *Geschwader* (SKG 10).

It was not until Allied forces again set foot in France in June 1944 that the west witnessed a resumption of ground attack operations. Much had changed in the intervening four summers, however. In 1940 the Luftwaffe had enjoyed air superiority, but in 1944 the Allies could boast of total air supremacy. A single example – on D-Day +2 (8 June) I./SG 101 at Clermont-Ferrand, in central southern France, was ordered to send the 12 Ju 87s of its *Einsatzstaffel* northwards to a forward landing ground in Normandy. Just one arrived!

The only *Schlachtgruppe* in France at the time of the Normandy invasion was Major Gerhard Weyert's III./SG 4. On 25 May this unit had been based at St Quentin-Clastres, with its 9. *Staffel* temporarily deployed to Le Luc in the south of France, where it was engaged in fruitless anti-submarine patrols along the Mediterranean coast.

III./SG 4 was an early victim of the Allies' overwhelming aerial might. Although its pilots claimed three enemy fighters in the first 48 hours of the campaign, 13 of its own Fw 190s were lost during the same period. Others were to follow, including four shot down by Spitfires on 12 June. Having suffered close on 25 per cent casualties, the *Gruppe* was withdrawn from the Normandy front in less than three weeks.

By 26 June III./SG 4 was sharing SG 101's training field at Clermont-Ferrand. Just under a month later they participated in a major anti-partisan sweep, supporting airborne troops landing by glider high up in the *massif central* to the south of Clermont. And by the end of July the 24 survivors of the once 52-strong *Gruppe* had retired from France altogether to join their parent *Geschwader* on the eastern front.

Back in October 1943 another unit to escape the wholesale redesignations of the *Schlacht* arm had been I./SKG 10. This was due to the fact that the *Gruppe* had been earmarked to take the place of the soon to disband III./KG 51. But although some records indicate that the unit did, in fact, officially assume the mantle of III./KG 51 late in 1943, the *Gruppe* continued to operate as I./SKG 10 until war's end.

A long-time mainstay of cross-Channel *Jabo* operations, in March 1944 the *Gruppe* had put its night- and bad-weather-flying experience to good use by indulging in a form of *helle Nachtjagd* nightfighting during the full moon period. It soon achieved a total of 20 nocturnal victories without loss.

In early June 1944 I./SKG 10 moved from Rosières-en-Santerre to Dreux. A few days later the *Gruppe* was to be credited with the Luftwaffe's first kills of the Normandy campaign. Shortly after 0500 hrs on 6 June, a *Schwarm* of 3. *Staffel*

Fw 190s flying an early morning reconnaissance patrol downed four RAF Lancasters, which were part of a force sent to bomb coastal defence batteries. Three of the bombers were claimed by 3./SKG 10's *Staffelkapitän*, Hauptmann Helmut Eberspächer, in as many minutes.

Although these appear to have been the unit's only aerial victories over Normandy, I./SKG 10 went on to regularly mount between two to five ground attack missions per day over the next two months. Flying by night as well as by day, at dusk and at



dawn, its targets included invasion shipping in the Channel, the landing beaches, troop concentrations and the roads leading inland.

On 11 June – the day *Gruppenkommandeur* Kurt Dahlmann received one of the nine Knight's Crosses to be awarded that month to members of the *Schlacht* arm – a heavy bombing raid rendered I./SKG 10's Dreux base untenable. It is reported that the *Gruppe* promptly moved to a satellite landing strip nearby, and still managed to carry out a pre-arranged nocturnal *Jabo* attack on London as planned.

By mid-August Dahlmann's pilots, operating latterly out of Tours, on the Loire, had flown some 3000 individual sorties over and around the invasion area. Their own operational losses numbered fewer than 20. It was a highly creditable performance but, as ever, it was the movements of the armies on the ground which would determine the course of future events. And with the Allied break-out from Normandy in August, I./SKG 10 was forced to retire from France. Early September found the *Gruppe* at München-Gladbach with just six serviceable Fw 190s.

It was while here that several of I./SKG 10's more experienced pilots were seconded temporarily to the *Sonderstaffel 'Einhorn'* to lend weight to that unit's ultimately abortive bombing attacks on the bridge at Nijmegen. The *Sonderstaffel* was even carried briefly on strength as Dahlmann's 4. *Staffel*, before reverting to its own more colourful 'Unicorn' designation and departing for Italy.

Having liberated much of northern France and Belgium in a lighting campaign of their own ('*blitzkrieging the blitzkriegers*', as one participant put it!), the Allied armies were nearing the German border. Overhead, the daylight skies were dominated by their own air forces, but under the cover of darkness Dahlmann's Fw 190s continued to fly their night ground attack missions. In October the *Gruppe* (now finally operating as III./KG 51 according to one official order of battle) took part in the unsuccessful defence of Aachen – the first major German town to fall to the enemy (on 21 October).

In order to relieve some of the pressure on the embattled German ground forces, *Lw.Kdo. West* set up a special *Nachtschlacht* battle-group. In addition to a single reconnaissance *Staffel*, the *Gefechtsverband Hallensleben* was composed of three night ground attack *Gruppen*. First there was Kurt Dahlmann's unit which, on 17 November, was

Aircraft of I./SKG 10 are armed and readied for their next mission over the Normandy beachhead

Major Kurt Dahlmann (right), *Gruppenkommandeur* of I./SKG 10, listens to what *Generalfeldmarschall* Hugo Sperrle, GOC *Lfl 3*, has to say. This picture was taken during Sperrle's visit to Rosières, which was the *Gruppe's* base in the days immediately prior to the Normandy landings



redesignated (from III./KG 51?) to become NSGr 20. The other two were the Ju 87-equipped NSGr 1 and 2, recently transferred in from the eastern front. By mid-November the three *Gruppen* were based along the Rhine at Bonn-Hangelar, Bönninghardt and Köln (Cologne)-Ostheim, respectively.

Despite its newly acquired nocturnal status, some of NSGr 20's first missions in early December were bad-weather daylight attacks on US armour in the Hürtgen Forest area to the south-east of Aachen. Otherwise, all three *Gruppen* concentrated on night operations, targeting Allied troop concentrations, rear-area road and rail supply lines and even individual vessels on the River Meuse (Maas) between Liège and Maastricht.

A fortnight later, in the early hours of 17 December 1944, NSGr 20's night-flying expertise was again put to the test when the *Gruppe* was tasked with guiding a force of paratroop-carrying Ju 52/3ms to a spot some seven miles (11 km) north of Malmédy, in Belgium. Delayed from the previous day, this operation was part of Hitler's last great gamble in the west – the Ardennes counter-offensive, now more commonly known as the 'Battle of the Bulge'. The paratroop drop was intended to secure an important road junction for use by the armoured spearheads of 6. *Panzerarmee* as they drove for the Meuse.

Dahlmann's pilots marked the routes and the drop-zone exactly according to plan, successfully accomplishing their part of the operation by 0330 hrs. It was hardly their fault that a combination of inaccurate weather forecasting and inexperience among the jumpmasters aboard the Ju 52/3ms resulted in just 100 of the 870 paratroopers coming to earth anywhere even remotely near the DZ!

The previous evening all three *Gruppen* of the *Gefechtsverband* Hallensleben had despatched some 50+ aircraft against the northern flank of the projected area of advance. Attacking in five separate waves, they had dropped flares and 'indiscriminately strafed' US troops positions around Monschau. They would repeat these actions on an almost nightly basis over various areas of the 'Bulge' for the remainder of the month, but rarely again in such numbers. As the US Army began to rally, the combat group's Ju 87s

Towards the end of 1944, Dahlmann's unit was officially redesignated NSGr 20. By that time it was sharing the night skies of north-west Europe with two Ju 87 night ground attack *Gruppen*. Here, carrying containers loaded with anti-personnel bombs, a Ju 87 sets out at dusk unnoticed by Allied fighters revelling in the day's last light overhead



roved even further afield, targeting reinforcements and supply columns coming to the support of those frontline troops trying to contain the German push to the Meuse, south of Liège.

Once arrived at the all-important Meuse crossing, which would give them access to the rolling plains of Belgium beyond, the attacking Panzers would have the support of an entire *Schlachtgeschwader*. Oberstleutnant Ewald Janssen's SG 4 had been withdrawn from the eastern front in November in readiness for the coming counter-offensive in the Ardennes. An extract from a Luftwaffe operational order of 14 November, detailing the parts its various units were to play, read '... SG 4 to be employed at focal points, particularly the Meuse crossings. Rocket units to be used against tanks'. Part of III. *Gruppe* was currently at Hailfingen working up on machines equipped with underwing *Panzerblitz* anti-tank rockets.

But the leading German tanks were stopped short of the Meuse, and SG 4's Fw 190s were instead directed against other targets. On 18 December, for example, they deployed their whole armoury – cannon, bombs and rockets – against US troop concentrations in the St Vith area. By the following week they were concentrating their efforts against Bastogne. Attacks were made on US positions in and around the beleaguered town on 24 and 26 December, and losses were suffered on both occasions. Numbered among the casualties on 26th were two *Staffelkapitäne*. One was 3./SG 4's Hauptmann Heinz Jungclausen, a Knight's Cross wearer and veteran ex-Stuka pilot who had flown some 1000 Ju 87 missions with StG 2. His Fw 190 was downed in a dogfight with Typhoons over the Rhine south of Koblenz as he was returning to I. *Gruppe*'s base at Kirtorf.

Twenty-four hours later another strike against the Bastogne area went disastrously wrong. Elements of all three *Gruppen* were involved. They failed to find their designated target and many released their bombs over German-held territory. There was talk of court-martial proceedings, but it was *Kommodore* Ewald Janssen who – although not having flown on the mission – paid the immediate price. He was relieved of command and appointed *Kommandant* of Cottbus air base.

It thus fell to his successor, none other than Oberst Alfred Druschel, to lead SG 4's contribution to Operation *Bodenplatte*, the Luftwaffe fighter arm's final-throw New Year's Day attack on Allied airfields in the Low Countries. One of the oldest and most experienced ground attack pilots of all, Druschel had spent the last 14 months on the staff of the *General der Schlachtflieger*. But this did not prevent his being at the head of III./SG 4's Fw 190s as they lifted off from Köln (Cologne)-Wahn early on the morning of 1 January 1945.

The *Gruppe*'s objective was St Trond, in Belgium. The plans called for Druschel's 50+ aircraft to skirt the northern flank of the Ardennes before joining the main body of the St Trond attack force – the 90 fighters of JG 2 flying up from the Frankfurt area – west of Aachen for the final 31-mile (50-km) run in to the target.

Even before making the rendezvous point, Druschel's formation came under anti-aircraft fire from the ground. Four Fw 190s went down, including that of the *Kommodore*. Oberst Alfred Druschel was never seen again, nor was the wreckage of his F-8 ever found. It remains undiscovered to this day – in some inaccessible patch of woodland or, more likely, on the bed of a lake or river somewhere to the south of Aachen.

Druschel's place was taken by another of the *Schlacht* arm's 'Old Guard', Major Werner Dörnbrack, who had commanded I. *Gruppe* ever since its formation (as II./SchLG 2) two years earlier. Recently awarded the Oak Leaves for over 1000 operational missions, Dörnbrack led SG 4 back to the eastern front in mid-January 1945, and would remain its *Kommodore* until the end.

Meanwhile, the three nocturnal *Gruppen* of the *Gefechtsverband* Hallensleben had continued to offer what support they could to the faltering Ardennes offensive. On the evening of 1 January ten Ju 87s of 3./NSG 1 added their own somewhat anti-climactic postscript to the great New Year's Day fighter strike by scattering a few bombs in the Bastogne area. But they could do nothing to prevent the Allies from launching their own counter-attacks against both flanks of the 'Bulge' shortly thereafter. By the middle of January 1945 most of those German forces participating in the battle had been pushed back to their original jumping-off positions and beyond. One month later the *Gefechtsverband* was disbanded, having flown a total of some 3100 individual sorties and losing close on 150 aircraft. For the final weeks of the war each of the three *Gruppen* would go its own way.

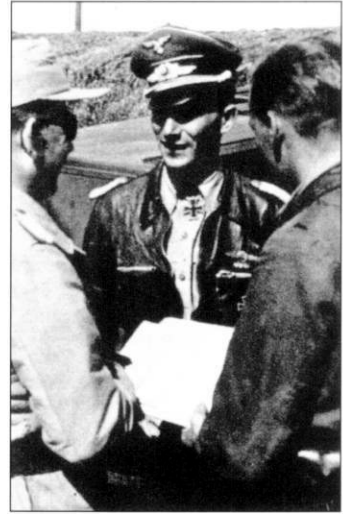
NSGr 20's Focke-Wulfs were dispersed on four separate airfields in an attempt to cover the whole of the north-west front. They continued to mount dawn and dusk raids on Allied troops and armour, as well as bad-weather daylight missions whenever there was sufficient cloud cover to offer a chance of escape from the omnipresent enemy fighter patrols. During and since the retreat from France, Dahlmann's pilots had gained something of a reputation for their attacks on the locks and bridges of north-west Europe's many waterways.

In March 1945 these attacks culminated in their attempts to destroy the mighty Ludendorff bridge spanning the Rhine at Remagen, which had fallen intact into the hands of the US Army. Although they were unsuccessful, their – and others' – many near misses so weakened the structure that the bridge finally collapsed into the river without warning on 17 March, ten days after its capture. But by then it was too late. The Americans had pontoon bridges in place, and their armour was already pouring across the last great natural barrier protecting western Germany.

A minor mystery surrounds NSGr 20's final weeks. One source states that the *Gruppe* numbered some 70 machines after disengaging from the Ardennes battle, and that this figure was more than doubled over the next two months as survivors of other scattered and disbanded units attached themselves to Dahlmann's command. Yet the *Luftflotte Reich* Order of Battle for April 1945 clearly gives NSGr 20's total complement of Fw 190s as 27 – just 11 of which were currently serviceable!

What is not in doubt is that the *Gruppe*, whatever its strength, had spent that time retreating across northern Germany, before flying its last missions from, and surrendering at, Schleswig in May.

Meanwhile, in late February 1945, Hauptmann Herbert Hilberg's 60-strong NSGr 1 had been divided in two – NSGr 1 (Nord) and NSGr 1 (Süd). The former also saw action at Remagen, losing six out of ten Ju 87s in a near suicidal attack on the bridge within hours of it being captured by US forces. Shortly afterwards NSGr 1 (Nord) likewise began to retreat northwards, constantly giving ground in the face of the



After Oberst Alfred Druschel was reported missing during *Bodenplatte*, Major Werner Dörnbrack assumed command of SG 4 for the remainder of the war. Dörnbrack (centre) is seen here as *Gruppenkommandeur* of I./SG 4 on the eastern front being congratulated on completing his 700th mission in the summer of 1944

advancing British (and being reduced at one point on the way to just one serviceable machine!) until its final surrender at Husum.

In contrast, NSGr 1 (Süd) had withdrawn southwards, via Wertheim, into Upper Bavaria. But US pressure, plus lack of fuel, kept their operations to a minimum. With most of its ground personnel then remustered as infantry late in April, the unit's few remaining Ju 87s were awaiting disbandment at Bad Aibling when Germany surrendered.

NSGr 2 were also employed against the Ludendorff bridge, mounting at least one of their attacks by day under the cover of low cloud. But when the Americans began to expand their bridgehead on the eastern side of the Rhine, and thus endanger the *Gruppe's* bases in the nearby Westerwald, NSGr 2 received orders to retire further eastwards.

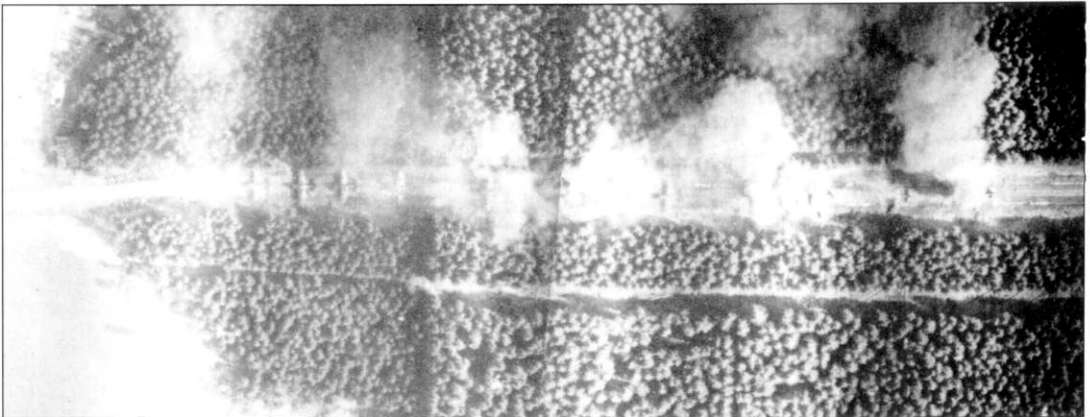
Before it could do so the unit suffered two blows. On 12 March, while reconnoitring by road for suitable alternative landing grounds, *Gruppenkommandeur* Major Robert was stopped and accidentally shot by a patrol of the Hitler Youth (rushed to hospital, he succumbed to his injuries on the day the war ended). Twenty-four hours later NSGr 2's Ju 87s were caught by US bombers as they lined up, fully loaded with bombs and ready for take-off from their base at Lippe. All but four of the machines were destroyed, together with a large part of the *Gruppe's* precious fuel stocks.

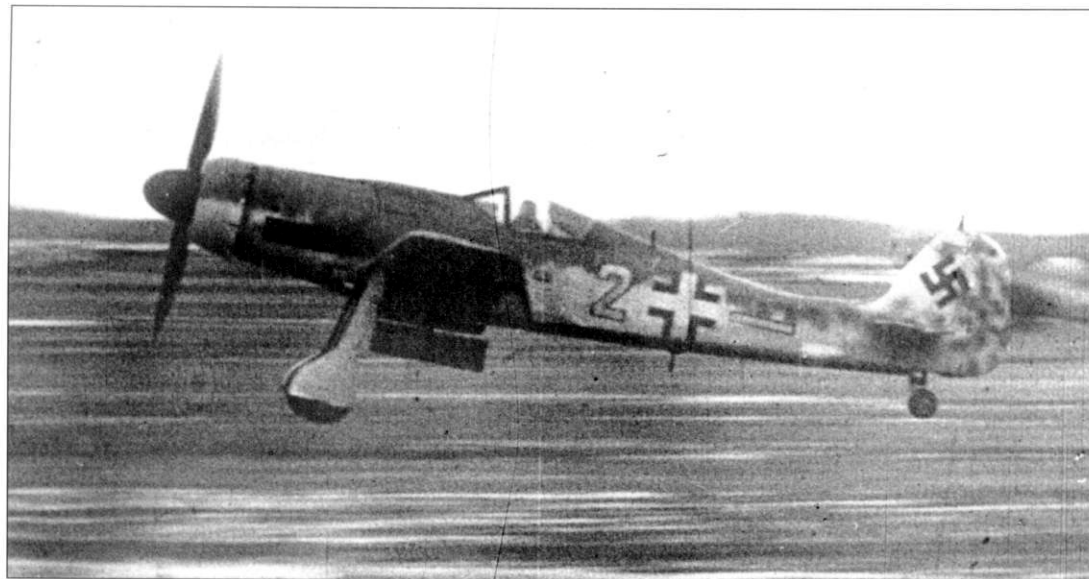
With over 50 crews on strength, but less than a dozen serviceable aircraft left, the *Gruppe* then withdrew southwards, via Bayreuth, to Straubing, on the River Danube. From here the unit flew its last missions late in April against US armour advancing along the *Autobahn* towards Regensburg. In the first week of May the remaining Ju 87s were ferried to Bad Aibling and Holzkirchen, where they were destroyed.

Somewhat incongruously, in the midst of all the chaos and confusion of these closing weeks of the war, an entirely new *Nachtschlachtgruppe* was formed. At the end of March 1945 two nightfighter *Gruppen*, III./NJG 2 and II./NJG 3, had been grounded on their north German bases for lack of fuel. These were then amalgamated into NSGr 30 and ordered to hold their 42 Ju 88s at readiness for imminent night ground attack duties. Nothing came of the scheme, however, and 'NSGr 30' disappeared from the scene the following month without ever seeing action.

If the short-lived NSGr 30 can best be described as an administrative pipe-dream, then the reality was not much better, for some of the last

NSGr 2 Ju 87s comes under attack from USAAF B-26 bombers as they line up along a fire-break in the woods bordering Lippe airfield ready for take-off. On the original print at least 15 Stukas can be seen, some already partially obscured by smoke from the exploding bombs





daylight ground attack missions on the western front were being flown by young, inexperienced fighter pilots. One such, an *unteroffizier* whose *Jagdgruppe* was attempting to stop the endless columns of Allied armour and soft-skinned vehicles rolling eastwards along the ruler-straight, tree-lined highways of the north German plain, still remembers the advice given him;

'Don't fly straight down the road when strafing these convoys. With all their flak, that's asking for trouble. Zig-zag backwards and forwards along their route, and use the protection of the trees. You can give them a burst each time you fly across the road, and that way you cut the return fire by a good half – they don't like shooting into the trees for fear of prematures and ricochets.'

Proving that ground attack pilots were still developing their skills right up until the very end of the war, this was sound advice. But at this late stage of the conflict it was not being offered with a view to improving its recipients' chances of success – it was more a recipe for self-survival!

EASTERN FRONT

Although little publicised in the west, the great Soviet offensive on the central sector of the eastern front in the summer of 1944 far outstripped the invasion of Normandy both in scale and scope. Eight Allied divisions had been involved in the initial assault phase of the D-Day landings along some 50 miles (80 km) of the French Channel coast. In contrast, no fewer than 13(!) entire Soviet armies were poised along the 300-mile (480-km) stretch of the eastern front defended by *Heeresgruppe Mitte*.

Launched on 22 June (symbolically the third anniversary of *Barbarossa*), the objectives of the offensive were threefold – to drive German forces out of Byelorussia, 'liberate' eastern Poland and take the Red Army to the borders of East Prussia. In just two weeks 25 German divisions had been completely destroyed and the *Heeresgruppe's* resistance broken.

The three Fw 190 *Schlachtgruppen* on the central sector, two of which had only just completed conversion from the Ju 87, were powerless in the

Some of the last ground attack sorties in the west were carried out by young and untrained fighter pilots. The subject of this well-known shot of a bomb-carrying Fw 190D-9 lifting off is believed to be a machine of II./JG 26



In the summer of 1944 there were only two III. *Gruppen* operating Fw 190Fs on the eastern front – III./SGs 1 and 10. Unfortunately, it has not been possible to establish to which of the two – both based in the central sector – this pair of F-8s belongs

face of such an onslaught – for the full June 1944 eastern front *Schlacht* order of battle see Appendix Three. Within the month they had been forced to retire to airfields in central Poland. Their losses had been heavy, and included a growing number of experienced unit leaders. One of the first had been Major Helmut Leicht, a veteran Stuka pilot and now *Gruppenkommandeur* of III./SG 10. He was reported missing after attacking Soviet columns south-east of Vitebsk on 26 June, and would be awarded posthumous Oak Leaves in October.

Lufflotte 6's Ju 87 units, including two tank-buster *Staffeln* and two *Nachtschlachtgruppen*, fared little better. The latter pair, NSGrs 1 and 2, were in fact still in the process of converting from their elderly biplane types. They nevertheless mounted a number of missions against the advancing Red Army before being transferred to the western front in September.

Four other night ground attack *Staffeln* were caught up in the central sector collapse. The so-called *Ostfliegerstaffel* (Eastern pilots' squadron) was composed of Russian volunteers – presumably either defectors or ex-PoWs. It had been set up in December 1943, and was equipped with a mix of German (Ar 66, Go 145) and Russian (Polikarpov U-2, Yakovlev UT-2) light aircraft. Little more than a propaganda exercise at best, the *Staffel's* strength and impact were minimal. It was disbanded in July 1944. The other three units were the *Einsatzstaffeln* of 2.*Fl.Schul.Div.* (2nd Air Training Div.) which, after seeing brief action, likewise disappeared from the scene in July.

So deep was the crisis on the eastern front by this time that even the Heinkel He 177 – the Luftwaffe's only four-engined strategic heavy bomber – was also pressed into service in the anti-tank role! The 43 machines of II./KG 1 had recently arrived at Prowehren, in East Prussia, and had already mounted several long-range bombing raids deep inside Soviet territory when *Reichsmarschall* Hermann Göring ordered that they should be switched instead to attacking the Red Army tanks approaching Germany's borders.

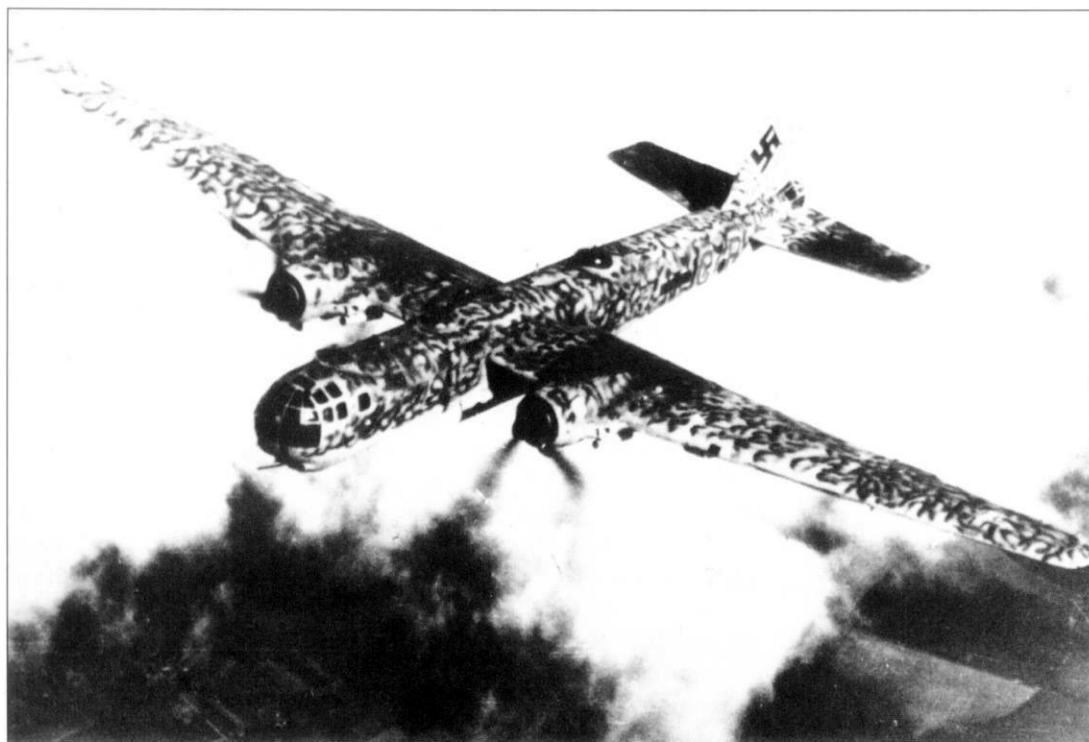
Competing with the Junkers F 13 for the title of 'unlikeliest ground attack aircraft of the war', albeit for very different reasons, the He 177 strategic heavy bombers of II./KG 1 were ordered to be used at low-level against Soviet army tanks. It is not known whether this particular machine – 6. *Staffel's* 'V4+CP' – was numbered among the heavy losses sustained in these attacks

When the unit CO attempted to point out the Heinkel's total unsuitability for such a task he was quickly overruled. Göring cited the enemy's current use of heavy bombers in the ground campaign in Normandy, but what the *Reichsmarschall* failed – or refused – to recognise was that the Allied Fortresses and Lancasters were engaged in medium to high-altitude carpet bombing. What *he* was demanding was that KG 1's Heinkels should play the part of ground attack aircraft and go in at *low level*!

The outcome of the first such mission, flown by all 24 serviceable He 177s of II./KG 1, was never in any doubt. Despite attacking in pairs in a vain attempt to provide some measure of mutual protection, half the bombers failed to return. Further attacks followed, only to result in more heavy losses as the unwieldy and unarmoured Heinkels ran the gauntlet of massed Soviet anti-aircraft and infantry ground fire. Although reinforcements were despatched to Prowehren from KG 1's other *Gruppen*, the losses could not be sustained. On 28 July the survivors of II./KG 1 were withdrawn to Germany, where shortly afterwards the whole *Geschwader* was disbanded – just one more casualty of the great summer offensive.

Although the Russian attack had been directed specifically against the central sector – this providing the most direct route to the Red Army's ultimate goal, Berlin – it had a devastating effect on the other two fronts to the north and south.

On the northern sector (numerically the weakest of the three) the units of *Lufflotte* 1 had long since been driven back from the area around Leningrad. They were now based throughout the three Baltic states, slowly giving ground under constant Soviet pressure. In mid-June 1944 the only *Schlachtgruppe* on strength was Major Theodor Nordmann's II./SG 3, which was currently in Latvia converting from Ju 87s onto Fw 190s.





The north was slightly better off in terms of *Nachtschlachtgruppen*. It deployed elements of both NSGr 1 and 3, the former's strength being divided between *Lufflotten* 1 and 6. There were now also two indigenous volunteer *Gruppen*, the Estonian-manned NSGr 11 having been joined in March by NSGr 12, which was crewed by Latvian personnel. Unfortunately, none of these night ground attack *Gruppen* were equipped with the Ju 87, but were having to make do with the usual miscellany of light biplanes.

On the left of this trio of pilots walking past their Ar 66s of NSGr 3 is Oberfeldwebel Ludwig Bellof, who was one of only seven *Nachtschlachtflieger* to be awarded the Knight's Cross (on 28 January 1945 in Courland). Bellof's aircraft, 'U9+ED', is the one immediately behind the three figures



Another *Nachtschlachtgruppe* operating Ar 66Cs was NSGr 12, manned by Latvian volunteers. Here, a pilot poses proudly in front of his '6A+TN' during working-up at Libau (Liepaja), on Latvia's Baltic coast

The neighbouring Estonians of NSGr 11 were equipped with a more unusual type – ex-Danish Air Force Fokker CV-Es. Both 1. and 2./NSGr 11 operated a handful of these Dutch-built machines alongside their He 50s during the summer of 1944





Despite the Red Army's 1944 summer offensive, some things carried on as usual – for a while at least. *Luftflotte 1* still continued to publish its own magazine, *Luftflotte NORDOST*. The second issue of August 1944 was devoted almost entirely to the command's ground attack units and, despite the quality of the paper and printing, featured some interesting illustrations . . .

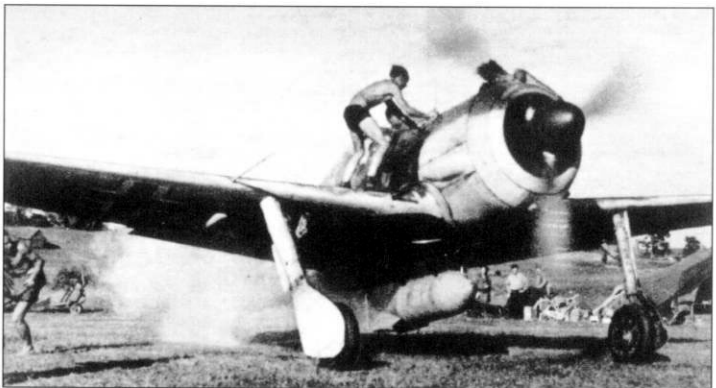
. . . including this picture of a *Schlacht Fw 190* being bombed-up. Although neither pilot or unit (SG 3 or 47) is identified, the machine is noteworthy for having its individual number(!) in the German equivalent of inverted commas – i.e. at lower left and upper right of the digit. The reason for this oddity also remains unexplained

Also taken from the pages of *Luftflotte NORDOST*, these photographs (right and page 107) capture all the immediacy of an emergency take-off as dust is thrown up by the propeller wash and two mechanics, hair flying in the slipstream, rush to make final adjustments . . .

In September the Soviet northern armies launched their own offensive aimed at clearing the Baltic States. Despite temporary *Schlacht* reinforcements (provided by SGs 3 and 4) the Germans were forced to abandon Estonia and pull back across Latvia. Within the month the Red Army had advanced through Lithuania and reached the Baltic coast above East Prussia. This meant that the bulk of *Heeresgruppe Nord*, and the supporting air units of *Luftflotte 1*, was now cut off from the main body of the eastern front. And with the central sector offensive also closing in on East Prussia, the gap would steadily widen until the northern armies' isolation became complete.

Forbidden by the Führer to evacuate by sea, *Heeresgruppe Nord* withdrew onto Latvia's Courland peninsula. In October NSGRs 11 and 12 were disbanded and many of *Luftflotte 1*'s remaining units were transferred to other fronts. But two ground attack *Gruppen* – III./SG 3 by day and NSGR 3 by night – would continue to support the troops in Courland until the end of the war as they stubbornly fought off every attempt by the Red Army to overrun them.

The position on the southern sector was far more volatile. Of *Luftflotte 4*'s two component *Fliegerkorps*, the units of VIII.FLK. were already withdrawing into south-east Poland, while the *Schlacht Fw 190*s and the anti-tank Ju 87s and Hs 129s of I.FLK. – having been driven out of the Crimea and the Ukraine – were now concentrated in Rumania. Here, they began to experience the real effect of a two-front war, the Red Army advancing from the east and US heavy bombers, with their escorting fighters, flying up from Italy to attack targets in their rear.





... all secured, the *Kette* lifts off and is on its way

Finally, although identified in the magazine simply as 'Geschwaderkommodore Major J', this can only be Major Ewald Janssen (right) accepting the congratulations of his groundcrew – presumably on his appointment as *acting Kommodore* of SG 4 on 20 July 1944. Made official on 11 September, he would be relieved of command six weeks later (see text)



It was also on 20 July 1944 that the *Schlacht* arm's later chroniclist Oberfeldwebel Hermann Buchner, *Staffelkapitän* of 4./SG 2, was awarded the Knight's Cross (for flying some 600 missions and scoring 46 aerial victories). Buchner (centre) is seen here after receiving the decoration from the hands of Oberst Alfred Druschel, while Major Heinz Frank (right), *Gruppenkommandeur* of II./SG 2, looks on. Note the *Krim Schild* (Crimea Shield) decorating Buchner's upper left sleeve



This new situation was reflected in the lengthening casualty lists, which included ever increasing numbers of highly experienced ground attack veterans. In July 1944 alone, no fewer than 14 Knight's Cross holders were lost. Among them were two recent recipients. On 16 July Hauptmann Rudolf-Heinz Ruffer, *Staffelkapitän* of 10.(Pz)/SG 9, was killed when his Hs 129 received a direct flak hit while carrying out a low-level attack on a Soviet armoured breakthrough north-east of Lemberg (Lvov), in Poland. Six days later 6./SG 2's Oberleutnant Ernst Beutelspacher lost his life in a dogfight with US fighters during one of the US Fifteenth Air Force's raids on the Ploesti oilfields in Rumania.

Threatened both by the Red Army on the ground and American bombardment from the air, Rumania changed sides the following month, declaring war on her erstwhile German ally on 23 August. This forced the withdrawal of the bulk of I. *Fliegerkorps*' ground attack units from Focsani, north-east of Ploesti, to Görgenyoroszfalu in Hungary. But wherever they were based they were confronted by the same situation – an unstoppable tide of Soviet armour flooding inexorably westwards.

The specialised anti-tank units did what they could. On 25 September the Ju 87s of 10.(Pz)/SG 3 claimed their 300th enemy tank (*Staffelkapitän* Hauptmann Andreas Kuffner would take his personal score to 50 a month

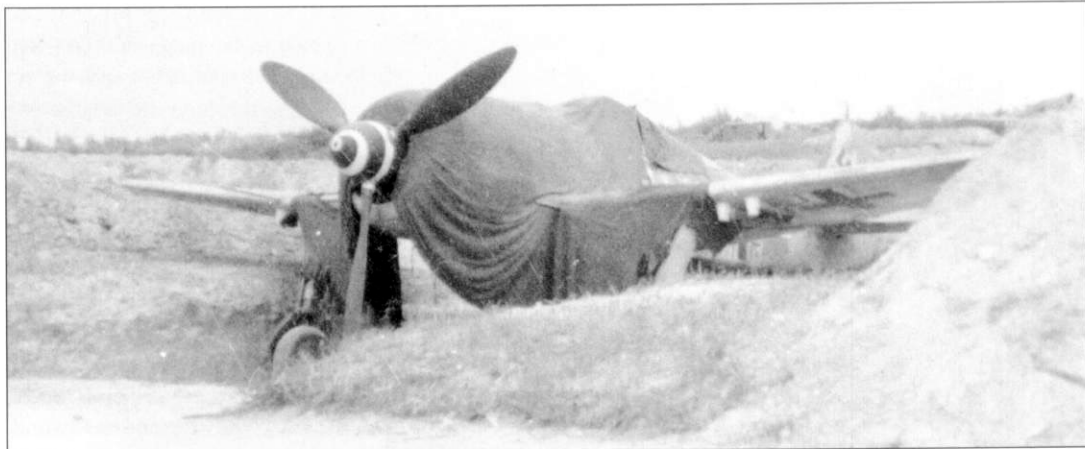
Two Knight's Cross casualties of July 1944. Hauptmann Rudolf-Heinz Ruffer, who was *Staffelkapitän* of 10.(Pz)/SG 9 . . .

. . . and Oberleutnant Ernst Beutelspacher, *Staffelkapitän* of 6./SG 2, pictured here (left) in the company of top scorer Leutnant August Lambert. Like Beutelspacher, Lambert would also later fall victim to US fighters (on 17 April 1945)



Belying the chaos raging all round, this idyllic scene – reminiscent of so many mid-war Channel front photographs – in fact shows an Fw 190 of 4./SG 10 at Lysiatycze, in Poland, in the summer of 1944





By August 1944 the Focke-Wulfs of II./SG 10 had moved back to Sochaczbow, but still there seems to be no sense of urgency surrounding the *Gruppe's* operations – one of its spiral-spinnered machines sits patiently under its protective tarpaulin

A tank-busting Ju 87G of Hauptmann Andreas Kuffner's 10.(Pz)/SG 3. This *Staffel*, which obviously also favoured spinner spirals to throw enemy gunners off aim, claimed its 300th Soviet tank on 25 September 1944



later). On the Vistula front a *Schwarm* of Hs 129s of 10.(Pz)/SG 9 brought a local Red Army thrust to a halt by knocking out 25 tanks. Eleven of them had been destroyed by *Schwarmführer* Feldwebel Otto Ritz alone, taking his personal tally of enemy tanks to 60 and earning him the Knight's Cross on 30 September.

But such individual successes, however laudable, were by now almost meaningless when measured against the Soviets' overwhelming numerical superiority. And still the casualty rates continued to rise – not all of them suffered in combat. October saw the loss of two Oak Leaves recipients. Major Heinz Frank, now *Kommandeur* of IV./SG 151, who had been the third ground attack pilot to receive the award (back in January 1943), died in hospital on 7 October after a shooting accident.

Six days later Leutnant Otto Dommeratzky of 6./SG 2 met his end during a ferry flight over Czechoslovakia when his Fw 190, minus ammunition and with his crew chief riding in the rear fuselage, was bounced by US fighters of the Fifteenth Air Force. Rather than take to his parachute, Dommeratzky elected to try an emergency landing in order to save his passenger. Neither survived, and Otto Dommeratzky's Oak Leaves were conferred posthumously.

One combat loss which *did* occur on the day of Major Frank's death was that of Oberleutnant Stephan Schmitt, *Staffelkapitän* of 5./SG 77. Schmitt's *Staffel* had been the first to be trained in the use of the potent underwing anti-tank *Panzerschreck* rocket. The missile, which had been developed from the army's weapon of the same name (itself the equivalent of the US bazooka), had a 1½-lb (630-gram) explosive warhead.

After completing training at Udetfeld, 5./SG 77 moved to Sarospatak, in Hungary, in early October, and it was during one of the unit's first rocket attacks on Soviet armour close to the Hungarian-Rumanian



Leutnant Otto Dommeratzky of 6./SG 2 was killed on 13 October 1944 when he attempted an emergency landing – rather than electing to bale out – in order to try to save his crew chief, who was riding in the rear fuselage of the machine

border that Schmitt's Fw 190 had been brought down by the Red Army's ever-present flak. His was yet one more name on the lengthening roll of ground attack pilots to be honoured posthumously (with the Knight's Cross on 29 October).

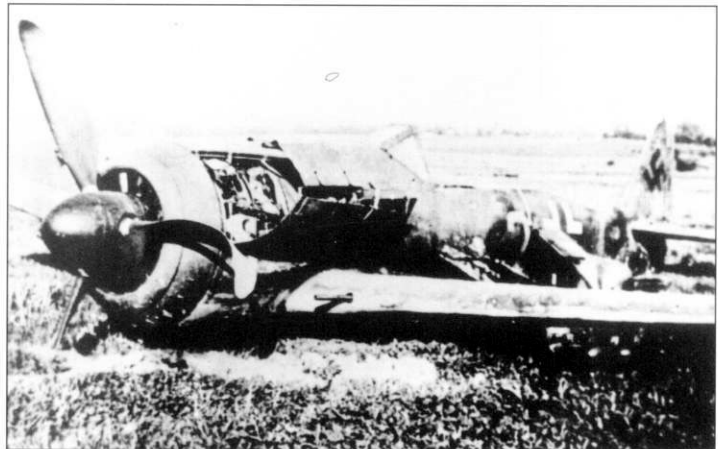
During the (relative) lull which descended on the eastern front during the closing weeks of 1944, and while the Battle of the Bulge was raging in the west, the Luftwaffe introduced another anti-tank rocket. This was the *Panzerblitz*, whose hollow-charge warhead packed a

much heavier punch than the earlier *Panzerschreck*. It came in three versions – the Pb-1, based on the army's 81 mm rocket launcher, and the Pb-2 and -3, both of which were developments of the Luftwaffe's own R4M air-to-air rocket. Although subsequently equipping several units, one source states that only a few hundred *Panzerblitz* rockets were produced. Once again, it was a case of too little too late.

On 12 January 1945 the Red Army broke out of its bridgehead on the Vistula south of Warsaw, launching a three-pronged drive into East Prussia, Silesia and towards the River Oder, the last natural barrier protecting the eastern approaches to Berlin. Despite meeting fierce resistance on the ground and in the air, Soviet forces, scenting final victory, swept all before them. By 21 January they had reached the Oder to the north and south of Breslau.

In those ten days alone the *Schlacht* arm had lost four more Knight's Cross wearers, one holder of the Oak Leaves – Oberleutnant Gustav Schubert, *Staffelkapitän* of 9./SG 1, whose Fw 190 was brought down by flak over north-west Poland – and Major Theodor Nordmann, now *Kommodore* of SG 3, who had been awarded the Swords on 17 September 1944 and who lost his life in a mid-air collision over East Prussia on 19 January.

Further heavy casualties, including another trio of Knight's Cross winners, were sustained before January was out. But it was on 8 February that



This *Panzerblitz*-armed Fw 190F-8 of SG 77 endured an emergency landing near Chrudim, in Czechoslovakia. The noses of the rockets may just be made out below the port wing at lower right

the unthinkable happened. Oberst Hans-Ulrich Rudel, *Geschwaderkommodore* of SG 2 and the most successful tank-killer of all, was shot down over Lebus, north of Frankfurt on the River Oder and less than 50 miles (80 km) from the centre of Berlin.

Rudel had been awarded the Golden Oak Leaves with Swords and Diamonds to the Knight's Cross on 29 December. The only member of the entire *Wehrmacht* to receive this, the Third Reich's highest military decoration, Rudel was presented with his award by Hitler in person at the latter's western HQ near Bad Nauheim, in the Taunus hills, on 1 January 1945. Among his many other achievements Hans-Ulrich Rudel had, at that time, flown over 2400 operational missions and destroyed 463 tanks!

Immediately rejoining his unit, which was currently fighting in Hungary, Rudel continued to add to his score before transferring up to the Oder front east of Berlin late in January. There, on that fateful 8 February, he had already knocked out a dozen Soviet tanks – taking his overall tally to 516 – and was attacking a 13th when his Ju 87 was hit by a 40 mm anti-aircraft shell. Although seriously wounded, Rudel managed to get back over German-held territory and make an emergency landing. Rushed to a nearby Waffen-SS dressing station, surgeons had to amputate his right leg below the knee before transferring him to a hospital in Berlin.

Incredibly, although still on crutches, Oberst Rudel returned to his *Geschwader* on 25 March and resumed operational flying in early April! Even more astonishing perhaps is the fact that he was not SG 2's only one-legged Ju 87 pilot. Hans Schwirblat, a regular wingman of Rudel's back in his days as *Staffelkapitän* of I./StG 2, had also been severely injured (by an enemy fighter over Rumania on 31 May 1944). Despite losing his left leg – and several fingers – Oberleutnant Schwirblat, awarded the Knight's Cross in the interim, also rejoined his old *Geschwader* in March 1945 and managed to fly several more missions, including one on 4 April during which he claimed four Soviet tanks destroyed.

Below and bottom
In January 1945 the bulged-canopy Fw 190F-9s of II./SG 2, based in Hungary, wore distinctive and individual winter camouflage schemes. On the original print of this machine seen taxiing, and armed with an AB 250 bomb container, it is just possible to make out the starboard wing's wraparound yellow chevron – the current tactical recognition marking for all Luftwaffe aircraft in the area



Oberst Rudel would continue to wage his implacable one-man war against the Red Army until the very end. But as he was officially grounded – hardly surprising, given the condition of his still open wound – most of his subsequent tank kills were credited to the *Geschwader* collectively. Only three of his estimated 30-odd ‘one-legged’ victories are included in his recognised final score of 519 enemy tanks.

But not even such extraordinary courage and tenacity as that demonstrated by Rudel and Schirblat could alter the outcome of a war now

entering its final month. Yet despite the hopelessness of their situation, the pilots of the ground attack units fought on. Seven Knight’s Crosses were awarded during April 1945, the final one of all going to Feldwebel Erich Axthammer – the long-time wingman of Oberstleutnant Georg Jakob, *Geschwaderkommodore* of SG 10 – for his 500+ operational missions (over 300 of them on the Hs 123). That 28 April also saw the last of the *Schlacht* arm’s 28 Oak Leaves conferred upon Major Karl Schrepfer, *Kommandeur* of III./SG 1.

But it was April’s casualty figures which were the true yardstick of the ground attack pilots’ total commitment to the continuing battle against the advancing Red Army, for no fewer than 19 Knight’s Cross holders were lost during the month.

On 17 April Oberleutnant August Lambert, the Crimean *Experte* recently returned to operations as *Staffelkapitän* of 8./SG 77, was at the head of his unit taking off from Kamenz, north-east of Dresden, for a bombing attack on Soviet armour when the *Staffel* was bounced by a horde of some 60-80 P-51 Mustangs. The bomb-laden Fw 190s did not stand a chance, and Lambert was shot down over Hoyerswerda after a gruelling 12-mile (20-km) running fight. Six other members of the *Staffel* were also killed, including Knight’s Cross holder Leutnant Gerhardt Bauer.

Another veteran Stuka pilot who, like Bauer, dated back to the days of the Battle of Britain and earlier was Major Bernhard Hamester. He was serving as the acting *Kommodore* of SG 3 when his Fw 190 was brought down in flames during a low-level attack on Stalin tanks near Trebbin, south of Berlin, on 22 April. The German capital had been under Soviet artillery fire for the past 48 hours, and the following day the Red Army would launch its final all-out assault on the city. By 25 April – the day US and Russian troops linked up on the River Elbe, cutting Germany in two – Soviet troops had completely encircled Berlin.

Five days later Hitler committed suicide in his underground bunker beneath the ruins of the Reich Chancellery. On that same 30 April, some 110 miles (176 km) to the north-west of the capital, the last two highly decorated ground attack pilots lost their lives when RAF fighters – reportedly Spitfires, but more likely to have been Tempests – caught a gaggle of Fw 190s coming in to land at Sülte airfield, near Schwerin.



Celebrating the award of their Knight’s Crosses on the same day – 28 February 1945 – Oberleutnant Norbert Schmitt (left), *Staffelkapitän* of 3./SG 10, and Oberfeldwebel Josef Enzensberger (right) of 1./SG 10 clown for the camera. Schmitt would be lost the following month (26 March), presumed shot down by P-51s over Hungary. Enzensberger would survive the war only to be killed in a motorcycle accident three decades later

The Focke-Wulfs were machines of I.(Pz)/SG 9 returning from a rocket attack on enemy armour (whether British or Soviet is no longer certain – both sides were closing in on Schwerin and would join up there three days later). Caught at their most vulnerable, a number of the Fw 190s were shot down. Among those killed was *Gruppenkommandeur* Hauptmann Andreas Kuffner, who had been awarded the Oak Leaves on 20 December 1944 for 60 tanks destroyed. The *Staffelkapitän* of 3.(Pz)/SG 9, Knight's Cross holder Oberleutnant Rainer Nossek, also perished. And a second Knight's Cross wearer, Oberleutnant Wilhelm Broman, *Kapitän* of 1.(Pz)/SG 9, was brought down seriously wounded – but only after claiming one of the 'Spitfires'.

By now it was almost all over. The last three ground attack schools, SGs 103, 104 and 111, were disbanded in April. Although volunteers for another so-called 'self-sacrifice' unit – the infamous *Rammkommando Elbe* – were called for, most of the trainees and a large percentage of the instructional staff were remustered as infantry. One report states that SG 103's personnel were transferred *en bloc* to a Waffen-SS brigade. Many fell in the defence of Berlin.

But the *General der Schlachtflieger* had one last trump up his sleeve. It came in the unlikely form of the Bücker Bü 181 *Bestmann*. This neat little enclosed cabin monoplane, with side-by-side seating for two, had originally been designed as a sports tourer, but it saw widespread service with the Luftwaffe's basic flying training schools. Now it was decreed that the *Bestmann* should play a more aggressive role in the closing days of the war as a night attack aircraft. The brief, 'To destroy tanks or armoured spearheads which had broken through the frontline'.

The *Nachtschlachtkommando* Bü 181 was set up at Werder, near Potsdam, in the second week of April 1945. It was to consist of five *Staffeln* (referred to either as *NSKdos* or *Pz.Jg.Staffeln*), each of 8 to 10 pilots. The Bü 181's armament was to be the *Panzerfaust*, the earliest and simplest of all the German army's hand-held (one-man) anti-tank weapons. Despite its simplicity, the *Panzerfaust's* hollow-charge explosive warhead made it a potent close-combat tank killer.

Hurried trials against dummy tanks were carried out with Bückers equipped with both two (underwing) and four (two over-/two underwing) *Panzerfaust* missiles. Each was fired by the pilot yanking on a Bowden cable run into the cockpit. It was primitive and not very effective, especially as few of the machines were fitted with any kind of sighting device, and aiming usually had to be done by eye alone.

One thing the tests did prove was the importance of breaking away immediately after firing each of the slow, short-ranged missiles – not only in order to avoid its five-foot (1.5-m) long fiery tail, but also to escape the blast of its detonation upon impact. One pilot who failed to pull away in time returned to Werden with his Bücker split open from nose to tail!

Despite these difficulties several *Staffeln* were formed and quickly dispersed to operational airfields. One of the first recorded missions – a reconnaissance by daylight on 13 April to find a formation of US tanks reported south-west of Magdeburg – resulted in both Bückers being shot down by Allied fighters. And although one source maintains that *Lw.Kdo. West* ordered the disbandment of these *Staffeln* just three days later – 'as they were blocking the airfields of southern Germany and



During the closing weeks of the war II./SG 10 re-equipped with Fw 190D-9 'Long noses'. For the *true* aircraft enthusiast, the main point of interest in this informal snapshot taken at Kapfenberg, in Austria, is the broad yellow band around the nose of the D-9 in the background . . .

. . . which is also visible in this close-up shot. This marking had replaced the earlier wing chevrons of machines operating in Hungary, the latter presumably having proven inadequate for the purposes of instant recognition. Note also the word *witrol* (vitriol) daubed on the lower cowling panel

producing no results' – it appears that some operations continued nonetheless.

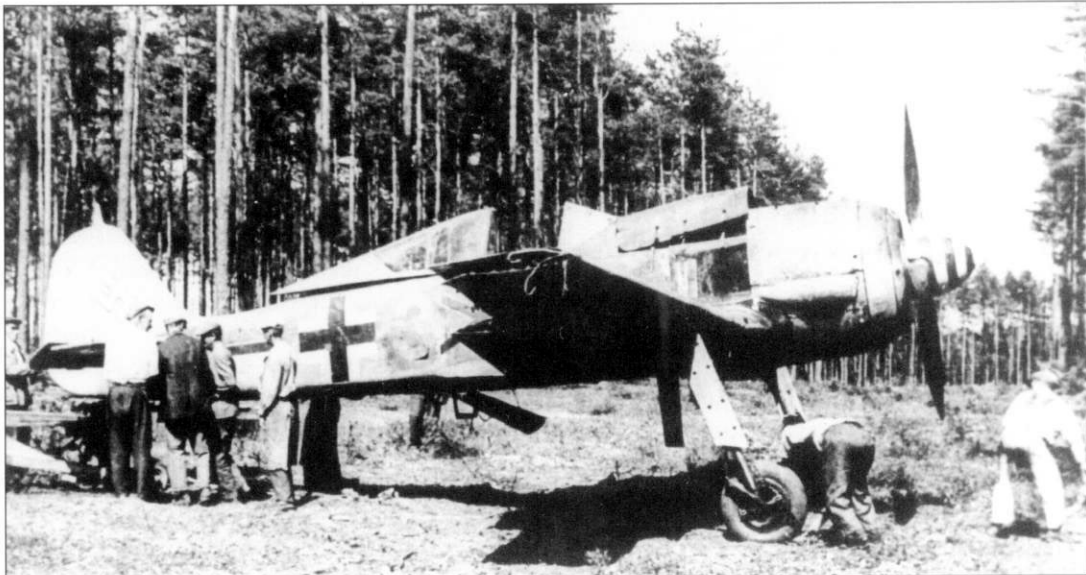
On 26 April, for example, four Bü 181s took off from Fürstenfeldbruck, west of Munich, to attack an armoured column of Gen Patton's US 3rd Army as it approached the Danube. All four returned safely and reported hits on the 'thoroughly surprised' Americans. Four more Bückers were immediately despatched, but this time the column's anti-aircraft gunners were ready and waiting. Only one of the Bü 181s made it back severely damaged and with its pilot wounded.

Now, with only days to go before the final collapse, more and more

units were being disbanded. The ultimate fate of their personnel was a geographical lottery. Those based in the northern half of the divided Reich were undeniably the more fortunate. Most were able to make their way into Schleswig-Holstein or Denmark, where they awaited the arrival of the British.

Among those taking this route were elements of Major Peter Gassmann's SG 1, whose final missions had included attacks on the Oder bridges in a fruitless attempt to halt the Soviet advance on Berlin, and then tank-hunting sorties above the streets and shattered remains of the capital itself. The ex-I./SG 5 also ended its operational career over Berlin. After a period of night- and blind-flying training, this *Gruppe* had been redesignated III./KG 200 on 10 January 1945. Commanded by





Major Helmut Viedebannt, it was subsequently employed in both day and night *Schlacht* missions over the western front, including attacks on Aachen and against the bridge at Remagen, before flying supply runs into the beleaguered capital. Even III./SG 3 managed to reach Schleswig-Holstein from far off Latvia. Equipped with long-range tanks, the *Gruppe's* Fw 190s, led by Hauptmann Erich Bunge, departed the Courland peninsula on the morning of 8 May for the safety of the west. Every pilot took his crew chief with him – some even managed to cram as many as three members of ground staff into their aircraft!

For the units stationed in the south, many of them congregated in Czechoslovakia, the future was far less certain. Those finding themselves in Austria at the end of hostilities, such as elements of IV.(Pz)/SG 9 and SG 10, were the luckiest. Having spent the final days in action against both the Americans and the Russians, there was every chance that they could surrender to – and be accepted by – the former.

But for the *Gruppen* which had fought predominantly in the east against Soviet forces, there was little option but to destroy their aircraft and try to make it to the west on foot. Not all succeeded. Many were overrun by units of the Red Army, while others fell victim to vengeful Czechs. One unit which did escape Soviet captivity was II./SG 77. Having remained in action until the very end, lastly as part of the *Gefechtsverband Weiss* (headed by the very same Otto Weiss who had commanded II.(Schl)/LG 2 in Poland nearly six years earlier, and who was now serving as *Fliegerführer Lfl. 6*, II./SG 77 was led safely out of Czechoslovakia

An Fw 190F-8 ('Black Chevron/Green(?) 2'), possibly the mount of the *Gruppen-Adjutant* SG 2, abandoned in Czechoslovakia at war's end, attracts the attention of the locals. Aircraft tailwheels were much prized for the repair of wheelbarrows!

Probably a machine of SG 77, this Fw 190F-8, its wing cannon removed but surrounded by some other no doubt still lethal stores, stands in a wooded dispersal at Pardubitz (Pardubice/Czechoslovakia), awaiting its fate





The most successful and highly-decorated of all eastern front Stuka and ground attack pilots was Hans-Ulrich Rudel. He is pictured here as a major after being awarded the Diamonds by Adolf Hitler on 29 March 1944 (for more than 1800 missions and over 200 enemy tanks destroyed) . . .

. . . and this is the aircraft (foreground) in which he flew his 2530th, and last, mission before surrendering to the Americans at Kitzingen on 8 May 1945. Despite the poor quality of the print, the fighter-style *Geschwaderkommodore* fuselage markings can be clearly seen

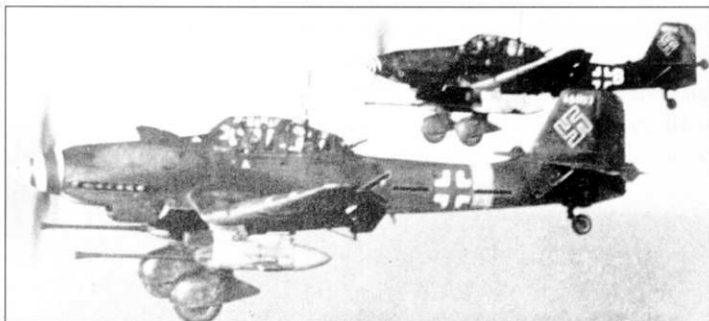
by *Gruppenkommandeur* Alexander Gläser two days after the end of hostilities.

Surrender to the Americans did not automatically guarantee safety, however, for the US Army had orders to turn all those who had fought on the eastern front over to the Russians. Such a fate befell Major Werner Dörnbrack, *Geschwaderkommodore* of SG 4, whose *Gruppen* were disbanded in Silesia and Czechoslovakia. Dörnbrack was taken into US captivity on 9 May, only to be handed over to the Russians six days later. Forty-eight hours later, the still the resourceful 'Prinzchen' ('Little prince') Dörnbrack escaped from the Russians and succeeded in making his way home!

The Americans were to make an exception in the case of their biggest catch of all, Oberst Hans-Ulrich Rudel. After one last sortie against Red Army tanks advancing through Czechoslovakia on 8 May, Rudel led the remains of his SG 2 – a trio of Ju 87s, escorted by four Fw 190s – to the US-occupied airfield at Bad Kitzingen. Upon landing, each pilot tramped hard on the brake and rudder pedals with the result that every machine except one wiped off its undercarriage. It was an understandable gesture of defiance but, at the same time, a tacit admission of defeat.

Hans-Ulrich Rudel would spend nearly a year in a US military hospital before being discharged in April 1946. And to him should perhaps go the final words on the bitter struggle waged between the *Schlachtflieger* and the Red Army in the 22 long months since Kursk;

'We were no more than a boulder, a small obstruction, but unable to stem the tide.'



But this is the picture that perhaps most graphically symbolises the end of the ground attack arm – the battered remains of the forward fuselage of an Fw 190 lying upturned in the ruins of the Tiergarten park in the middle of Berlin. The shell of the Reichstag building can be seen on the left and the columns of the Brandenburg Gate are just visible between the ripped fuselage and starboard mainwheel leg on the right

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1

COMMANDING OFFICERS

1939 – 1942

II.(Schl)/LG 2

Spielvogel, *Maj* Werner 1/9/39 to 13/9/39 (+)
Weiss, *Hptm* Otto 13/9/39 to 12/1/42

1942 – 1943

SchlG 1

Weiss, *Obstlt* Otto 13/1/42 to 15/6/42
Hitchhold, *Obstlt* Hubertus 18/6/42 to 10/6/43
Druschel, *Obstlt* Alfred 11/6/43 to 18/10/43

SchlG 2

von Malapert, *Hptm Frhr* Robert Georg 13/1/42 to 21/5/42 (+)
Darjes, *Hptm* Paul-Friedrich 21/5/42 to 1/10/43

1943 – 1945

SG 1

Pressler, *Obstlt* Gustav 18/10/43 to 30/4/44
Gassmann, *Maj* Peter 1/5/44 to 8/5/45

SG 2

Stapp, *Obstlt* Hans-Karl 18/10/43 to 31/7/44
Rudel, *Oberst* Hans-Ulrich 1/8/44 to 8/2/45 (w)
Lang, *Maj* Friedrich (acting) 8/2/45 to 13/2/45 (w)
Kuhlmei, *Obstlt* Kurt (acting) 13/2/45 to 20/4/45
Rudel, *Oberst* Hans-Ulrich 20/4/45 to 8/5/45

SG 3

Kuhlmei, *Obstlt* Kurt 18/10/43 to 15/12/44
Nordmann, *Maj* Theodor 17/12/44 to 19/1/45 (+)
Hamester, *Maj* Bernhard (acting) 15/2/45 to 22/4/45 (+)

SG 4

Dörffel, *Maj* Georg 18/10/43 to 26/5/44 (+)
Janssen, *Maj* Ewald 1/6/44 to 25/12/44
Druschel, *Oberst* Alfred 28/12/44 to 1/1/45 (+)
Dörnbrack, *Maj* Werner 3/1/45 to 8/5/45

I./SG 5

Möbus, *Maj* Martin 18/10/43 to 2/6/44 (+)

I/(Pz)/SG 9

Kuffner, *Hptm* Andreas 1/45 to 30/4/45 (+)

IV.(Pz)/SG 9

Meyer, *Hptm* Bruno 18/10/43 to 10/44
Steinkamp, *Hptm* Hans-Hermann 10/44 to 1/45
Hanschke, *Obstlt* 1/45 to 8/5/45

SG 10

Schumann, *Maj* Heinz 18/10/43 to 18/11/43
Jakob, *Obstlt* Georg 30/1/44 to 8/5/45

SG 77

Bruck, *Oberst* Helmut 18/10/43 to 15/2/45
Mässinger, *Obstlt* Manfred 16/2/45 to 8/5/45

NSGr 1

Zechiel, *Maj* Wolf 18/10/43 to 19/9/44
Hilberger, *Hptm* Herbert 19/9/44 to 8/5/45

NSGr 2

Müller, *Hptm* 18/10/43 to 21/11/44
Robert, *Maj* 22/11/44 to 12/3/45 (+)
Weber, *Hptm* (acting) 3/45 to 4/45
Denker, *Hptm* 4/45 to 8/5/45

NSGr 3

Beushausen, *Obstlt* ? to ?
Oelze, *Maj* ? to ?

NSGr 4

Gamringer, *Maj* ? to 8/5/45

NSGr 5

Böllner, *Maj* ? to 8/5/45

NSGr 6

Unknown

NSGr 7

Blaich, *Maj* Theo ? to 8/5/45

NSGr 8

Trnka, *Hptm* ? to 8/5/45

NSGr 9

Frost, *Hptm* Rupert 30/11/43 to 15/12/44

NSGr 10

Unknown

NSGr 11

Unknown

NSGr 12

Rademacher, *Hptm* (acting) 6/44 to 22/8/44
Bulmanis, *Obstlt* Nikolajs 22/8/44 to 10/10/44

NSGr 20

Dahlmann, *Maj* Kurt 17/11/44 to 8/5/45

APPENDIX 2

AWARDS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

Unlike the *Jagdwaaffe*, which based its awards system primarily on fixed numbers of enemy aircraft destroyed, the many tasks performed by the *Schlachtfieger* meant that a variety of criteria had to be considered when it came to the conferring of decorations upon ground attack pilots. These included total number of missions flown, number of tanks (or convoys, or trains) destroyed and number of aircraft shot down. Individual actions, such as the destruction of bridges,

the sinking of ships or the halting of an enemy breakthrough, were also taken into account.

As it is impossible in a book of this size to list all of the *Schlacht* arm's nearly 300 Knight's Cross winners and itemise each of their particular achievements, it is felt that the simplest way to illustrate their overall successes is by offering a representative 'top ten' from three of the above criteria.

TOP TEN TANK KILLERS

	SG(s)	Tanks Destroyed	Aircraft Shot Down	Total Number of Missions Flown ⁽¹⁾	Awards
Rudel, <i>Oberst</i> Hans-Ulrich	2	519	9	2530	KC/OL/S/D/G
Hübsch, <i>Ofw</i> Anton	2	120+	8	1060	KC
Wosnitz, <i>Ofw</i> , Alois	77/10	104	2	1217	KC
Jenster, <i>Lt</i> Jakob	2	100+	-	960	KC
Korol, <i>Lt</i> Anton	2	99	-	704	KC
Joswig, <i>Olt</i> Wilhelm	2	88	2	820	KC
Diepold, <i>Olt</i> Max	2/77	87	-	500	KC
Noller, <i>Lt</i> Wilhelm	2/10	86	2	1058	KC
Ludwig, <i>Ofw</i> Hans	2	85	-	750	KC
Edhofer, <i>Ofw</i> Heinz	2	84	1	700+	KC

TOP TEN AIR ACES

	SG(s)	Tanks Destroyed	Aircraft Shot Down	Total Number of Missions Flown ⁽¹⁾	Awards
Lambert, <i>Olt</i> August	SchIG 1/2/77	?	116	350	KC
Buchner, <i>Lt</i> Hermann	SchIG 1/2	46	58 ⁽²⁾	631	KC
Stollnberger, <i>Hptm</i> Hans	SchIG 1/4/10	?	45	c.600	KC
Dommeratzky, <i>Lt</i> Otto	SchIG 1/2	?	c.38	c.600	KC
Kennel, <i>Maj</i> Karl	SchIG 1/152/2	?	34 ⁽³⁾	957	KC
Dörffel, <i>Obstlt</i> Georg	LG 2/				
	SchIG 1/4	?	30	1004	KC/OL
Seyffardt, <i>Olt</i> Fritz	SchIG 1/2/				
	152/151	?	30	500	KC
Schmitt, <i>Olt</i> Norbert	SchIG 2/10	?	c.30	c.450	KC
Dörnbrack, <i>Maj</i> Werner	LG 2/SchIG 1/				
	SchIG 2/4	?	29	1118	KC/OL
Bleckmann, <i>Maj</i> Günther	SchIG 1/2	?	27	?	KC

TOP TEN NUMBER OF *SCHLACHT* MISSIONS FLOWN⁽⁴⁾

	SG(s)	Tanks Destroyed	Aircraft Shot Down	Total Number of Missions Flown ⁽¹⁾	Awards
Dörnbrack, <i>Maj</i> Werner	LG 2/SchlG 1/ SchlG 2/4	?	29	1118	KC/OL
Dörffel, <i>Obstlt</i> Georg	LG 2/ SchlG 1/4	?	30	1004	KC/OL
Kennel, <i>Maj</i> Karl	SchlG 1/152/2	?	34	957 ⁽³⁾	KC
Frank, <i>Maj</i> Heinz	LG 2/SchlG 1/ 2/151	?	8	900+	KC/OL
Müller, <i>Hptm</i> Günther	LG 2/ SchlG 1/2	?	?	900	KC
Bellof, <i>Ofw</i> Ludwig	NSGr 3	-	?	c.800 ⁽⁵⁾	KC
Druschel, <i>Oberst</i> Alfred	LG 2/ SchlG 1/4	?	?	c.800	KC/OL/S
von Hoffer, <i>Lt</i> Herbert	LG 2/SchlG 1/ SchlG 2/77/10	?	9	700+	KC
Menapace, <i>Hptm</i> Josef	LG 2/SchlG 1/ SchlG 2	?	2	700+	KC
Schulz, <i>Ofw</i> Bruno	SchlG 1/ 77/152	?	?	c.700	KC

(1) including Ju 87 Stuka missions

(2) including 12 Me 262 victories

(3) including *Zerstörer* service

(4) on Hs 123, Bf 109 and Fw 190

(5) majority by night

APPENDIX 3

EASTERN FRONT ORDER OF BATTLE – JUNE 1944

LUFTFLOTTE 1 (HQ Malpils/Latvia)**3. Fliegerdivision** (HQ Petseri/Estonia)

			Est/Serv
II./SG 3	Jakobstadt	(converting)	
<i>Stab</i> & 3./NSGr 1	Idriza	Go 145, He 46	28-20
1. & 2./NSGr 1	Kovno	(converting)	
<i>Stab</i> , 1. & 2./NSGr 3	Vecumi	Go 145, Ar 66	49-45
1./NSGr 12	Vecumi	Ar 66	18-4
<i>Stab</i> 1. & 2./NSGr 11	Rahkla	He 50, Fokker CV	31-15
2./NSGr 12	Libau	(forming)	
Gefechtsverband Kuhlmei (HQ Immola/Finland)			
<i>Stab</i> & I./SG 3	Immola	Ju 87D	30-17
1./SG 5	Immola	Fw 190F	12-7

Total: 168-108

LUFTFLOTTE 6 (HQ Priluki)**1. Fliegerdivision** (HQ Bobruisk)

<i>Stab</i> & III./SG 1	Pastovichi	Fw 190F	43-24
I./SG 10	Bobruisk	Fw 190F	30-20

4. Fliegerdivision (HQ Orscha)

I./SG 1	Tolochin	Ju 87D	44-36
II./SG 1	Vilna	(converting)	
10.(Pz)/SG 1	Boyari	Ju 87G	20-4
10.(Pz)/SG 3	Tolochin	Ju 87G	
<i>Stab</i> SG 10	Dokudovo	(transferring)	
III./SG 10	Dokudovo	Fw 190F	39-30

Fliegerführer 1 (HQ Minsk)

1. & 2./NSGr 1	Kovno	(converting)	
<i>Stab</i> NSGr 2	Lida	Ju 87	1-1
1./NSGr 2	Bobruisk	(working up)	
3./NSGr 2	Lida	(working up)	
4./NSGr 2	Mogilev	Ar 66, Ju 87	17-15
Ostfl.St.	Lida	Go 145, Ar 66	9-8
<i>Stab</i> , 2 & 3./Eins.Gr. 2.			
Fl.Schul.Div	Borrissov	?	23-22
1. ./Eins.Gr. 2.			
Fl.Schul.Div	Pinsk	?	10-6

Total: 236-166**LUFTFLOTTE 4** (HQ Morczyn)**I. Fliegerkorps** (HQ Focsani/Rumania)

<i>Stab</i> & I./SG 2	Husi	Ju 87D/G	29-21
II./SG 2	Zilistea	Fw 190F	27-20
III./SG 2	Husi	Ju 87D/G	43-38
10.(Pz)/SG 2	Husi	Ju 87G	16-10
II./SG 10	Culm	Fw 190F	29-18
10. & 14.(Pz)/SG 9	Trotus	Hs 129	30-30
<i>Stab</i> NSGr 5	Manzar	Go 145, Ar 66	? - ?
1./NSGr 5	Roman	Go 145, Ar 66	21-15
2. & 3./NSGr 5	Kizhinev	Go 145, Ar 66	40-26

VIII. Fliegerkorps (HQ Lubien)

<i>Stab</i> & I./SG 77	Yasionka	(converting)	
II./SG 77	Lemberg	Fw 190F	33-24
III./SG 77	Cuniov	Ju 87D	42-35
10.(Pz)/SG 77	Starzava	Ju 87G	19-12
<i>Stab</i> IV.(Pz)/SG 9	Lysiatycze	Hs 129	6-4
12. & 13.(Pz)/SG 9	Stry, Lysiatycze	Hs 129	16-15
<i>Stab</i> & 1./NSGr 4	Hordinia	Go 145	32-23

Total: 383-291**TOTAL: 787-565**

APPENDIX 4

TABLE OF ORGANISATION – MAY 1945

LUFTFLOTTE REICH (North)**14. Fliegerdivision** (HQ Husum)

Stab SG 1	Flensburg	Fw 190F
II./SG 1	Flensburg	Fw 190 <i>Panzerblitz</i>
III./SG 1	Flensburg	Fw 190F
II./SG 3	Eggebek	Fw 190F
III./SG 3	Flensburg	Fw 190F
NSGr 1 (Nord)	Husum	Ju 87D
NSGr 20	Schleswig	Fw 190
III./KG 200	Eggebek	Fw 190
NSKdo 9	Eggebek	Bü 181

15. Fliegerdivision (HQ Rygge)

1./NSGr 4	Hohn	Ju 87
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Kom.Gen.d.dtsch.Lw. in Dänemark

I./SG 151	Grove	Fw 190A/F
14./SG 151	Grove	Fw 190A/F
NSKdo 1	Falster	Bü 181

LUFTFLOTTE 6 (SOUTH)**LW.KDO. 4** (HQ Schörfling/Austria)**18. Fliegerdivision** (HQ Wels/Austria)

Stab SG 10	Budweis	Fw 190A/F
I./SG 10	Budweis	Fw 190F
II./SG 10	Budweis	Fw 190F/D
IV.(Pz)/SG 9	Wels	(converting to Fw 190 <i>Panzerblitz</i>)
13.(Pz)/SG 9	Wels	(converting to Fw 190 <i>Panzerblitz</i>)
14.(Pz)/SG 9	Wels	(disbanding)
Stab & 2./NSGr 5	Allensteig	Go 145, Ar 66

1./NSGr 5	Steinakirchen	Go 145, Ar 66
3./NSGr 5	Retz	Go 145, Ar 66
2./NSGr 10	Wels	Ju 87D

17. Fliegerdivision (HQ Bruck/Austria)

I./SG 2	Graz	Fw 190
Stab, 2. & 3./NSGr 7	Agram-Gorica	(disbanding)
1./NSGr 7	Graz	(disbanding)

LW.KDO. 8 (HQ Görlitz/Silesia)**3. Fliegerdivision** (HQ Olmütz/Czechoslovakia)

Stab & I./SG 4	Kosteletz	Fw 190F
III./SG 4	Kosteletz	Fw 190 <i>Panzerblitz</i>
III./SG 10	Prerau	Fw 190F
Stab & III./SG 77	Pardubitz	Fw 190A/F
II./SG 4	Königgrätz	Fw 190A/F
10.(Pz)/SG 77	Görlitz	Ju 87G
10.(Pz)/SG 9	Deutsch-Brod	Hs 129
Stab & 2./NSGr 4	Olmütz-South	Ju 87D

Gefechtsverband Weiss (HQ Schweidnitz/Silesia)

II./SG 77	Schweidnitz	Fw 190
3./NSGr 4	Ludwigsdorf	Ju 87D

Gefechtsverband Rudel (HQ Niemes-South/Czechoslovakia)

Stab & II./SG 2	Niemes-South	Ju 87G, Fw 190A/F/D
III./SG 2	Milowitz	(converting)
10.(Pz)/SG 2	Niemes-South	Ju 87G
I./SG 77	Niemes-East	Fw 190F

Lw.Div.Nordalpen (HQ Scheffau/Austria)

NSGr 1(Süd)	Bad Aibling	Ju 87D
NSGr 2	Bad Aibling	Ju 87D

COLOUR PLATES

1

Hs 123A '24.2' of *Stukakette* VJ/88, *Legion Condor*, Victoria, Spain, April 1937

One of the first three Henschels of Leutnant 'Rubio' Brücker's ultimately half-dozen strong ground attack command, '24.2' is finished in standard pre-war Luftwaffe three-tone uppersurface camouflage, to which have been added regulation *Legion Condor* markings of black fuselage disc and white wingtips and rudder, the latter with a black diagonal cross superimposed. Partially visible ahead of the streamlined interwing strut is the unit's 'Devil's head' badge. Note that the early Hs 123As were not fitted with a pilot's headrest fairing.

2

He 51B '2.78' of Oberfeldwebel Adolf Galland, *Staffelkapitän* 3.J/88, *Legion Condor*, Calamocha, Spain, January 1938

Wearing one of the many non-standard green and brown camouflage schemes applied 'in the field' after the He 51s had first arrived in Spain (in overall pale-grey finish), '2.78' was Adolf Galland's preferred mount for most, if not all, of his time at the head of 3.J/88. Like many of the *Legion's* fighter pilots, he personalised his machine by embellishing the black fuselage disc – in his case outlining it thinly in white and adding a large Maltese cross. Although the future *General der Jagdflieger* did not claim any aerial victories in Spain, he and his *Staffel* formulated many of the tactics employed by the Luftwaffe's ground attack arm in World War 2.

3

Hs 123A 'L2+JM' of 4.(Schl)/LG 2, Zalesie, Poland, September 1939

Because the Hs 123s were scheduled for retirement in 1939, they had not been repainted in the new black-green/dark-green camouflage scheme, but were still wearing their original three-tone finish when II.(Schl)/LG 2 went to war in September. The new four-digit fuselage codes *had* been applied, however. Note too, again just visible ahead of the wing strut, the *Staffel* badge – a 'pistol-packin, hatchet-wieldin' *Mickey Mouse*. This, it is believed, was introduced by Adolf Galland after taking over 4. *Staffel* from Otto Weiss. Galland would later display an identical *Mickey* figure on his Bf 109s when *Geschwaderkommodore* of JG 26. The same badge, on various coloured disc backgrounds, would later be adopted by II./SchIG 1 (II./SG 2) as its *Gruppe* emblem (albeit sometimes reversed, and with Galland's trademark cigar omitted).

4

Hs 123A 'L2+AC' of Hauptmann Otto Weiss, *Gruppenkommandeur* II.(Schl)/LG 2, Cambrai, France, May 1940

The 'phoney war' winter months of 1939-40 were utilised to bring the Henschels of II.(Schl)/LG into line with a coat of standard two-tone camouflage. Unlike many of the unit's machines, however, Weiss's '*Anton-Martha*' still wears early style national markings (narrow-bordered fuselage cross and a tail swastika centred on the rudder

hinge line). It is further distinguished by a white stripe along the dorsal spine between the pilot's headrest fairing and tailfin. Not visible in this side-view, the aircraft also has fighter-style *Kommandeur's* chevrons applied – point foremost – across the full chord of the uppersurface of the centre-section of the wing top.

5

Bf 109E-4 'Yellow M' (Wk-Nr. 3726) of 6.(Schl)/LG 2, St Omer, France, September 1940

After the Battle of France II.(Schl)/LG 2 was given not just new camouflage, but a completely new aircraft – the Bf 109. This is a typical example of the unit's Battle of Britain period. It wears theatre yellow spinner, cowling and rudder, and also displays the *Staffel* badge. But note too the unique *Schlacht* markings which set the unit apart from all the Bf 109-equipped *Jagdgruppen* currently operating on the Channel front – an individual aircraft letter (instead of a fighter-style numeral) and a black triangle. This latter first appeared at the time of the Munich crisis, and it would later become the recognised symbol of the ground attack arm. 'Yellow M's' operational career came to an end when Feldwebel Erhardt Pankratz forced-landed on farmland near Rye, in East Sussex, on 5 October 1940.

6

Hs 123A 'Blue H' of 10.(Schl)/LG 2, Krainici, Bulgaria, April 1941

For an aircraft that was facing retirement in 1939, the Hs 123 enjoyed remarkable longevity. After the 'hiatus' of the Battle of Britain, it was returned to frontline service for the campaign in the Balkans. 'Blue H' is resplendent in freshly applied south-east theatre markings of yellow cowling, wingtips and rudder. In addition to the black triangle it also displays a white stencilled depiction of the German infantryman's assault badge in lieu of a *Staffel* emblem. Note the removal of the Henschel's streamlined, but extremely narrow and restricting undercarriage leg fairings to facilitate operations from primitive grass fields – an increasingly common occurrence, particularly in the mud and slush of the eastern front in the months to come.

7

Hs 123A 'Blue P' of II.(Schl)/LG 2, Russian Front, Central Sector, July 1941

During the opening stages of *Barbarossa* the Henschels of II.(Schl)/LG 2 wore a disproportionately wide yellow theatre band around the rear fuselage to distinguish themselves from the many superficially similar Soviet biplane types still in operation at that time. Offering a clear indication of their identity, the bands were also intended to prevent instances of friendly fire, either in the air or from the ground (although they may not always have fulfilled their purpose, if the known number of photographs of Hs 123s bellied in behind German lines are anything to go by!).

8

Bf 109E 'White C' of 4.(Schl)/LG 2, Moscow Front, Central Sector, November 1941

Depicted towards the close of II.(Schl)/LG 2's 28-month

long operational career, 'White C's' standard eastern front finish and markings are all but obscured by a thick and irregular wash of temporary white winter paint. Oddly, this aircraft displays neither a unit badge nor the black ground attack triangle.

9

Bf 109E-7 'White U' of Hauptmann Georg Dörrfel, Staffelfkapitän 5.(Schl)/LG 1, Kerch, Southern Sector, May 1942

When SchlG1 was formed in the winter of 1941-42 it was intended that each of its two *Gruppen* should include a fourth (Hs 129) *Staffel*. 'Orge' Dörrfel's 5./SchlG 1 thus became the premier *Staffel* of the new II. *Gruppe*, hence the white background disc to the familiar unit badge (and the white individual aircraft letter). Armed with four bundles of 22-lb (10-kg) SC 10 anti-personnel bombs, this machine bears the standard finish and theatre markings of the period. Note that the black triangle is located *aft* of the fuselage cross.

10

Bf 109E-7 'Blue K' of 8./SchlG 1, Tusow, Southern Sector, September 1942

With deliveries of the Hs 129 to frontline units suffering long delays, 8./SchlG 1 was perforce initially activated as a 'standard' Bf 109 *Staffel*. Thus equipped, it accompanied the rest of the *Gruppe* in support of 6. *Armee*'s advance on Stalingrad. By this time, however, the Red Air Force was intensifying its attacks on Luftwaffe airfields. This led to a change in the unit's theatre markings, the yellow now being restricted to the underside of the cowlings only in order to make its aircraft less visible when on the ground. This machine displays the *Gruppe* badge on its usual blue disc, and is armed with a single 550-lb (150-kg) SC 250 GP bomb.

11

Hs 129B 'White Chevron/Blue O' of Hauptmann Bruno Meyer, Staffelfkapitän 4.(Pz)/SchlG 2, El Adem, Libya, November 1942

The second specialised Hs 129 anti-tank *Staffel* to be formed, 4.(Pz)/SchlG 2 was destined from the outset for the North African theatre, as witness the factory-applied camouflage finish of overall tan with disruptive green mottling. Meyer's 'Blue O' also wears the regulation Mediterranean white band around its rear fuselage and proclaims its pilot's status by both a white command chevron ahead of its individual letter and a small metal *Staffelfkapitän*'s pennant attached to the aerial mast. Bruno Meyer would later command the Hs 129-equipped IV.(Pz)/SG 9, and would survive the war having flown more than 500 ground attack and anti-tank missions.

12

Fw 190F-2 'Black Double Chevron' of Hauptmann Georg Dörrfel, Gruppenkommandeur of I./SchlG 1, Kharkov, Southern Sector, March 1943

Appointed *Kommandeur* of I. *Gruppe* in the middle of SchlG 1's protracted period of conversion onto the Fw 190 (late autumn 1942 to spring 1943), Dörrfel's brand new Focke-Wulf also displays a set of command chevrons. But they have had to be applied *aft* of the fuselage cross in deference to the black triangle displayed in the more

prominent mid-fuselage position. The Fw 190 was the fourth and final ground attack aircraft to sport the *Schlacht* arm's triangle symbol, which was now beginning to fall into disuse (Red Air Force pilots had learned to target machines so marked as they were considered 'easier meat' than the Luftwaffe's fighters – especially if still burdened by their bomb-load!). Note the air filter on this aircraft, which was of no great benefit in February's snow, but of inestimable value in the dust of a Russian summer.

13

He 46C '1K+BH' of 3. Störkampfstaffel/Lfl. 4, Russian Front, Southern Sector, circa April 1943

The He 46 tactical reconnaissance machine, first flown in 1931, was typical of the elderly types equipping the early night ground attack *Staffeln* on the eastern front. This particular example – tactical number '8' – is carrying 110-lb (50-kg) SC 50 bombs (fitted with tail screamers) on its ventral rack and wing support struts. After operating by night over critical areas of both the southern and central sectors of the front, including the Kursk salient, 3. StörSt/Lfl. 4 was redesignated 1./NSGr 4 in October 1943.

14

Hs 129B 'Red F' of 8.(Pz)/SchlG 2, Tunis, El Aouina, January 1943

When Oberleutnant Franz Oswald's *Staffel* of anti-tank Hs 129s was despatched to Tunisia at the end of 1942, the machines' camouflage finish was markedly different from that sported by the aircraft of 4.(Pz)/SchlG 2 in Libya a few weeks earlier. No longer predominantly desert tan, Oswald's Henschels retained their basic dark green finish, the only concession to their new theatre of operations being a tan 'scribble pattern' applied to their uppersurfaces. Note, too, that their individual aircraft letters were red, rather than the earlier *Staffel*'s light blue.

15

Hs 129B-2/R3 'Red J' of Oberleutnant Rudolf-Heinz Ruffer, Staffelfkapitän of 8.(Pz)/SchlG 1, Kuban Bridgehead, Southern Sector, April 1943

By the beginning of 1943 the Hs 129s of 8.(Pz)/SchlG 1 were also operational – on the southern sector of the Russian front under the command of Lw.Kdo. Don. Recently appointed *Staffelfkapitän* Rudolf-Heinz Ruffer already has eight Red Army tanks to his credit (note the victory tally on the tailfin), but one of the unit's earliest major successes was against Soviet landing craft attempting to outflank the rearguard of 17. *Armee* holding the Kuban bridgehead exit from the Caucasus. Note the fighter-style II. *Gruppe* horizontal bar *aft* of the fuselage cross and the small assault badge stencil above the cannon fairing.

16

Fw 190A-5 'White G' of II./SchlG 2, Tunis, El Aouina, April 1943

During II./SchlG 2's brief sojourn in Tunisia, its Fw 190s wore standard temperate camouflage finish with a white Mediterranean theatre band applied around the rear fuselage. The only touch of individuality was the *Gruppe* badge (yet another axe-wielding *Mickey Mouse*, this time astride a falling bomb), which would continue in use after the unit's redesignation as I./SG 4 in October 1943.

17

Fw 190F-2 'Black Chevron and Bars' of Major Alfred Druschel, *Geschwaderkommodore* SchIG 1, Varvarovka, Southern Sector, summer 1943

Back on the eastern front, the *Schlachtflieger* were also beginning to adopt a mantle of anonymity, with not even a unit badge to disclose their identity. Druschel's pristine Focke-Wulf displays a textbook set of pre-war fighter-style *Kommodore's* markings, and could easily be mistaken for a 'normal' fighter machine were it not for that tell-tale AB 250 missile container with its deadly load of 30 SD 4 anti-personnel bombs. Already wearing the Swords, and with some 750 missions to his credit, Alfred Druschel would be elevated to a staff position in October 1943, only to return to operations and disappear without trace while leading SG 4 in the New Years' Day attack on Allied airfields in the west on 1 January 1945.

18

Hs 129B-2 'Blue E' of 4.(Pz)/SchIG 1, Mikoyanovka, Kursk Salient, July 1943

Based upon a photograph purportedly taken at the time of Operation *Zitadelle* (the great tank battle of Kursk), this profile of 'Blue E' offers evidence that the Hs 129, despite its unmistakable shape and form, was also toning down its markings. The black *Schlacht* triangle was long gone, and now the bright yellow nose panels – an ideal aiming point for Soviet anti-aircraft gunners – had, perhaps quite sensibly, been dispensed with too. Even the discreet little infantry assault badge had disappeared. With the tide of the war in the east about to turn, unnecessary embellishments and unit markings which could provide intelligence information to an enemy on the advance would soon be things of the past.

19

Fw 190F-2 'Black T' of Oberfeldwebel Otto Dommeratzky, 8./SchIG 1, Kirovograd, Southern Sector, September 1943

Otto Dommeratzky's heavily-dappled 'Black T' is a typical example of the business-like anonymity adopted by (or forced upon?) the *Schlachtflieger* in the aftermath of Kursk. It is depicted here without a bomb-load, for Dommeratzky was notorious for jettisoning any stores he happened to be carrying in favour of dogfighting with the Red Air Force at every possible opportunity. It was a habit which had already earned him well over 20 kills, the Knight's Cross and numerous 'rockets' from his *Gruppenkommandeur!*

20

Fw 190A-5 'Black G' of Oberfeldwebel August Lambert, 5./SG 2, Kirovograd, Southern Sector, December 1943

The sweeping reorganisation of the *Schlacht* arm on 18 October 1943, which saw II./SchIG 1 redesignated as II./SG 2, did away with the temporary anomaly of there being two 8./SchIG 1s (although the Hs 129 unit was always assiduously referred to as 8.(Pz) *Staffel*). The Fw 190s of the new II./SG 2 – now part of the erstwhile StG 2 'Immelmann' – would find themselves increasingly employed as fighter escorts for the *Geschwader's* Ju 87s, some of which remained in service right up until war's end. Many members of II./SG 2 thus amassed respectable numbers of aerial victories, but none more than August Lambert, whose 'Black G' is depicted here in profile prior

to his meteoric rise to 'acedom' on the Crimea in the spring of 1944.

21

Fw 58C 'D3+BH' of 1./NSGr 2, Baranovici, Central Sector, December 1943

The twin-engined Fw 58 'Weihe' ('Harrier'), used in considerable numbers by the *Luftflotten* for second-line communications and light transport duties, was an obvious candidate for impressment into the early night ground attack *Staffeln*. This particular example was one of a handful still serving with NSGr 2 during the winter of 1943-44 as an 'illuminator', dropping flares along the main central sector highway in support of the *Gruppe's* Ar 66s (and, later, Ju 87s) as they attacked Red Army supply convoys. Note the ventral flare canisters and nose-mounted machine gun.

22

Hs 129B-2 'White M' of 10.(Pz)/SG 9, Byala-Zerkov, Southern Sector, February 1944

Wearing an altogether more elaborate – not to say bizarre – winter camouflage scheme than that applied to the Fw 58 above, this is a machine of Rudolf-Heinz Ruffer's 10.(Pz)/SG 9, which was heavily committed during the long and bitter retreat back across the Ukraine. IV.(Pz)/SG 9 could lay better claim than most to being the eastern front's premier 'fire brigade' unit, for its five component *Staffeln* usually operated independently over wide areas of the southern and central sectors, their tank-busting Hs 129s being in constant demand as Red Army pressure intensified and armoured breakthroughs became ever more frequent.

23

Go 145A 'U9+HC' of 2./NSGr 3, Vecumi, Latvia, March 1944

Typical of the motley collection of elderly biplanes and light aircraft with which the *Luftwaffe* attempted to halt the enemy's advance through the Baltic States, NSGr 3's nocturnal 'Heinrich-Cäsar' sports a predominantly matt-black finish with toned-down national markings. Few details have survived of the unit's precise activities, as *Luftflotte* 1's official war diary simply summarised each night's events in only the most general of terms. A typical entry for this period read, 'Night ground attack aircraft active. Focal point in the area to the south-east of Rositten'.

24

Fw 190F-2 'Black Double Chevron' of Major Heinz Frank, *Gruppenkommandeur* of II./SG 2, Karankut, Crimea, April 1944

Despite II. *Gruppe's* unofficial role as SG 2's private fighter escort force, its *Kommandeur*, Heinz 'Allan' Frank, was a *Schlachtflieger* of the old school, having started his operational career as an unteroffizier flying Hs 123s in Poland. The third ground attack pilot to be awarded the Oak Leaves, he had by now clocked up 900 missions, during the course of which he had claimed 'only' eight aerial victories. It is fitting, therefore, that his clean-looking F-2 should be shown carrying a 550-lb (250-kg) bomb – the configuration with which he was presumably most at ease.

25**Hs 123A 'Black Chevron/Yellow L' of II./SG 2, Khersonyes-South, Crimea, April 1944**

Incredibly, what must surely have been the last remaining operational examples of the venerable Hs 123 reappeared on *Luftflotte 4*'s order of battle late in April 1944.

According to that document, they were assigned to II./SG 2 and based alongside the *Gruppe*'s Fw 190s during its final days on the Crimean peninsula. This is believed to be one of these machines, wearing definitive eastern front markings. The yellow of the individual letter and II. *Gruppe* horizontal bar suggests that the Henschels may have been attached to 6. *Staffel*, and the command chevron may indicate the CO (*Schwarmführer?*) of the detachment. Note the percussion rods fitted to the 110-lb (50-kg) SC 50 bombs.

26**Fw 190F-8 'White 11' of I./SG 4, Piacenza, Italy, June 1944**

Wearing unique Italian theatre camouflage of dark tan with dark green mottling, this late-model F gives an indication of the conditions under which it was operating. The top half of the aft fuselage white Mediterranean band has been oversprayed to make the machine less conspicuous to prowling Allied fighters when on the ground. In the process, the fuselage *Balkenkreuz* has suffered slightly, but the tailfin swastika has been effectively obliterated. There is photographic evidence that other machines of the unit had their swastikas overpainted too. Was this perhaps some kind of political statement on the part of the prickly new *Gruppenkommandeur*, Major Ewald Janssen (who would be relieved of command of the *Geschwader* at the end of the year)? Note the retention of the *Gruppe* badge inherited from II./SchIG 2 (see profile 16).

27**Fw 190F-8 'Brown O' of 9./SG 4, Avord, France, June 1944**

Unlike I. *Gruppe* (above), III./SG 4 had no unit badge, and there is nothing to identify this somewhat densely mottled and heavily stained F-8 other than the vertical bar aft of the fuselage cross – plus the fact that there *was* only one ground attack unit stationed in France at the time of the Normandy invasion. But it would not stay there long. After seeing brief action against the French *maquis* to the south, the *Gruppe* was rushed eastwards to help defend the Baltic States in July 1944, its complement of 52 machines being reduced to just 24 in the process.

28**Ju 87D 'E8+DH' of 1./NSGr 9, Ravenna, Italy, July 1944**

Originally just two-*Staffeln* strong, and equipped with Italian machines (Fiat CR.42 biplanes and Caproni Ca.314 light twins), NSGr 9 converted to Ju 87s in the spring of 1944. The distinctive sand mirror-wave pattern camouflage was applied to the basic dark green finish of the Stukas at unit level. Initially coming under the control of the *Fliegerführer Italien*, the *Gruppe*'s three *Staffeln* would operate independently of each other for much of the remainder of the war in Italy, only a few machines surviving to retire into the Austrian Alps at the end of hostilities. The large underwing container shown here is the so-called *Universal-Behälter*, which could be used to carry both stores and supplies.

29**Fiat CR.42 'Black 58' of 3./NSGr 7, Agram (Zagreb), Croatia, July 1944**

Another unit to be equipped with Italian machines (together with a miscellany of other types) was NSGr 7, which was operating on the other side of the Adriatic under the control of *Fliegerführer Kroatien*. Flying both nocturnal ground attack missions and anti-partisan operations by day, 3. *Staffel*'s Fiats appear to have retained their original *Regia Aeronautica* camouflage, to which was added *Luftwaffe* theatre markings and national insignia (including an oversized swastika). The significance of the high individual aircraft number is not known, but it has been suggested that it is taken from the 'last two' of the machine's RA serial number.

30**Fw 190A-8/U1 'Red 115' of SG 151, Agram (Zagreb), Croatia, summer 1944**

By far the largest *Schlacht* presence in the Balkans was that of SG 151, the advanced training *Geschwader* (or OTU) whose *Stab* was headquartered at Agram, but whose four component *Gruppen* (and individual *Staffeln*) were deployed throughout the region. Being non-operational, SG 151's aircraft were among the last to wear the ground attack arm's black triangle, as seen here on one of the handful of Fw 190 two-seater trainer conversions held on strength.

31**Fokker CV-E '3W+OD/White 8' of NSGr 11, Rakla, Estonia, August 1944**

Dutch-built, British-powered, delivered to the Danish Air Force, requisitioned by the German *Luftwaffe* and handed over to the Estonian volunteers of NSGr 11 – the CV-E was undoubtedly the most international of all the many and varied aircraft types operated by the *Nachtschlachtflieger*. As far as is known, this particular machine – tactical number '8' (original Danish identity 'R-23') – was the only one to complete the circle. Flown across the Baltic to neutral Sweden by four Estonian defectors on 13 October 1944, it was returned to its rightful Danish owners in 1947. A second CV-E – '3W+OL (aka 'R-42') – carrying the defectors, was later sold for scrap by the Swedes.

32**Fw 190F 'Black Bars/White E' of the *Geschwader-la*, SG 77, Cracow, Poland, September 1944**

As the one-time Stuka units slowly converted to Fw 190s completely different forms of markings began to emerge. There appears to have been no attempt at conformity, and every *Geschwader* or *Gruppe* seems to have been given a free hand. When, in the summer of 1944 for example, the *Geschwaderstab* of SG 77 exchanged its Ju 87s for Focke-Wulfs at Reichshof, in Poland, it reverted to 1936-vintage fighter-style chevrons and horizontal bars to identify its *Stabskette* machines. Thus, the Operations officer (Ia) displayed the two bars seen here, plus an individual letter. Note the percussion rods (*Dinortstäbe*) on the underwing bomb load.

33**Ju 87G 'S7+EN' (Wk-Nr. 494231) of Feldwebel Josef Blümel, 10.(Pz)/SG 3, Wolmar, Latvia, September 1944**

Appropriately displaying the *Panzerjäger* badge on its cowling, this was the machine Josef Blümel was flying when he claimed his 60th Soviet tank on 19 September 1944. On a second mission later that same morning, however, the Ju 87 was damaged by anti-aircraft MG fire and Blümel was forced to land behind enemy lines south of the Latvian capital, Riga. Both he and his radio operator were executed by Red Army troops. Feldwebel Blümel was honoured with a posthumous Knight's Cross on 23 January 1945.

34

Ju 87D-5 'V8+QB' of 1./NSGr 1, Köln (Cologne)-Wahn, Germany, October 1944

Typical of the nondescript and anonymous finishes worn by NSGrs 1 and 2 in the west during the autumn of 1944, this particular Ju 87 was brought down by anti-aircraft fire during a dusk attack on Allied troop concentrations reported east of Aachen on 29 October 1944. Despite the flame damper exhaust and other nocturnal modifications made to the machine, there has been no attempt to tone down the national markings and individual letter (which is repeated on the front of both wheel spats).

35

Fw 190F-8 'Black Chevron/Green 2' of the Gruppen-Adjutant, III./SG 10, Prerau (Prerov), Czechoslovakia, April 1945

The pilot of this heavily dappled F-8 made doubly sure that his position as number two to *Gruppenkommandeur* Major Arnulf Blasig was well advertised. His machine wears not only the *Gruppen-Adjutant's* official single chevron, but also the numeral '2' in the *Stab* colour green. Early on the morning of 8 May 1945 – VE-Day – this somewhat unusual combination attracted the less than welcome attention of a hostile photo-reconnaissance P-51 Mustang of the US Ninth Air Force and the – unfortunately unknown – pilot of 'Green 2' was forced to make an emergency belly landing . . . one of the last Luftwaffe aircraft to be shot down in World War 2.

36

Fw 190F-8 'Black 9' of II./SG 2, Görlitz, Silesia, April 1945

Indicative of the chaotic state of the Luftwaffe in the closing weeks of the war, some of its aircraft were being delivered from the factory, unpainted, straight to frontline units, where their tactical markings were applied to the bare metal. The fighters of the US Eighth and Ninth Air Forces had long ago discarded camouflage paint to save weight and improve performance, but this was a luxury the hard-pressed and hugely outnumbered Luftwaffe could not afford. Machines such as 'Black 9' depicted here must have stood out like a sore thumb – both in the air and on the ground.

37

Ju 87D '5B+IK' of 2./NSGr 10, Wels, Austria, April 1945

As the war drew to a close those ground attack units stationed in Hungary began to re-apply large areas of yellow paint to their machines. During the winter of 1944-45 they had employed a narrow yellow chevron painted on both upper and lower surfaces of the port wing as a recognition aid. But this had presumably proved insufficient to deter their own nervous flak gunners for

whom – by this late stage – everything that had wings and flew was hostile. Even the nocturnal Ju 87s of NSGr 10 were given yellow nose bands and rudders, and a number also sported fighter-style spirals on their spinners.

38

Fw 190D-9 'Black 6' of II./SG 10, Kapfenberg, Austria, spring 1945

At least two *Schlachtgeschwader*, SGs 2 and 77, are known to have been operating the 'long-nose' Fw 190D-9 at the end of the war. 'Black 6' belonged to the latter's II. *Gruppe* which, from some half-dozen airfields in Austria, flew missions to the east and west against both Russian and American forces. Note that this aircraft still wears the yellow nose band from its recent service in Hungary (based at Tapolca and Lesvar).

39

Bü 181 'NK+KV' of Hauptmann Hubertus Jennes, Kommandoführer Nachtschlachtkommando 9, Perleberg, North Germany, April 1945

At the other end of the performance spectrum from the Fw 190D-9 – arguably one of the finest piston-engined fighters of World War 2 – came the diminutive Bücker Bü 181 *Bestmann*. Yet both played a part – each in its own way – in the closing chapter of the ground attack story. Confusion surrounds the exact designation of the *Panzerfaust*-armed Bücker units. The final *Lw.Führungsstab Ia* listing of 21 May 1945 clearly tables them as NSKdos (Night ground attack detachments), whereas surviving members assert that NSKdo 9 was known to them as 1./TAG Bü 181 (*Tiefangriffsgruppe* – Low-level attack wing). The unit badge – a crudely stencilled Mickey Mouse (again!) leaning on a *Panzerfaust* – seems to substantiate the latter with its 1/181 inscription. Incidentally, the Bückers carried standard four-letter fuselage codes, but the two letters ahead of the fuselage cross were covered by the steel plate which was added to protect the aircraft's skin from the flame produced when the rockets were fired.

40

Ju 87G 'Black Chevron and Bars' (Wk-Nr. 494193) of Oberst Hans-Ulrich Rudel, Geschwaderkommodore SG 2, Niemes-South, Czechoslovakia, May 1945

Although he had a Fw 190D-9 at his disposal (see *Aircraft of the Aces 6* profile 55), Hans-Ulrich Rudel remained true to the Ju 87 Stuka until the very end. Both machines wore similar command markings based on those of the pre-war biplane fighter era, but only the Ju 87 had the yellow wing chevrons from its earlier service in Hungary. And it was in the Stuka that Rudel chose to fly his last mission on 8 May 1945, and then lead the seven aircraft of his HQ flight (3 Ju 87s and four Fw 190 escorts) to Kitzingen and surrender to US forces. Wiping off their undercarriages in deliberately heavy landings, the careering machines even reportedly managed to damage several P-47 Thunderbolts of the field's resident 405th FG – a Pyrrhic victory that marked the end of the Luftwaffe's ground attack arm.

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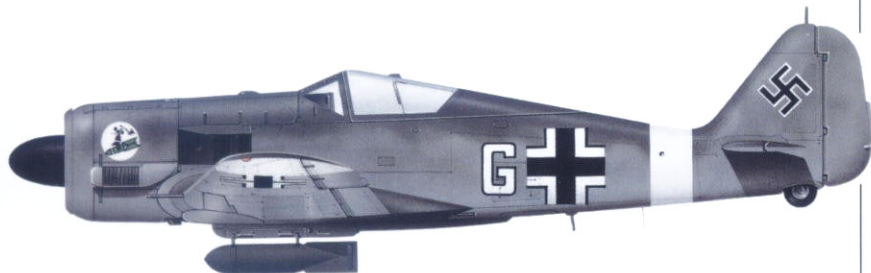
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