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LUFTWAFFE FIGHTER UNITS RUSSIA 1941-45

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LUFTWAFFE FIGHTER UNITS **RUSSIA JUNE 1941-45**

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PRELUDE

On the morning of 22 June 1941, the massive German invasion of Western Russia, *Barbarossa*, was spearheaded by deep armoured thrusts, designed to encircle and destroy large segments of the numerically strong Red Army. Overhead, providing immediate support and protection, flew the battle-hardened and highly-experienced units of the Luftwaffe, similar in composition, size and equipment to those used in western Europe and against Britain during 1940. Only amongst the *Jagdgeschwader* (fighter units) had any substantial re-equipment taken place. Late in 1940 the first example of the Messerschmitt Bf109F had become available, and by June 1941, 13 of the *Gruppen* in the east had received these superb fighters—considered by many to be the best of all the variants of the Bf109 in terms of handling and response. Certainly it was of superior general performance to any opposition it would meet over Russia for many months to come. Indeed, the older Bf109E which still equipped the remainder of the fighter force, was more than adequate to deal with the vast majority of Soviet aircraft it would meet initially—particularly when in the hands of the very high quality pilots which most of the *Jagdflieger* were.

Perhaps the greatest advantage possessed by the Luftwaffe at this time was the sheer skill and experience of its pilots, which in several respects already exceeded that of any other air force in the world—particularly insofar as its fighter leaders were concerned. Steeped in the World War I traditions of von Richthofen and Udet, commanded by a man who himself had been a fighter 'ace' of some note in that earlier conflict, the Luftwaffe laid much more importance on totals of aerial victories than did most other air forces of the period. Indeed, the award of decorations, and to perhaps a lesser extent, promotion, rested to a high degree on the

number of victories achieved by an individual. Also, it was German practice to keep most experienced pilots at the front for long periods, where they could ply their trade to best advantage, rather than remove them from combat at regular intervals to undertake training or staff functions. The result was a unique concentration of extraordinarily experienced and highly-motivated fighter pilots in action at any one time. Most pilots having 'cut their teeth' in the combats over France and the Low Countries, by mid-1940 a contest began to develop for the coveted position of top scorer. The long, hard fighting over southern England gave many opportunities for scoring, and by early autumn, three men had become pre-eminent—Werner Mölders of JG 51, Adolf Galland of JG 26 and Helmut Wick of JG 2. The latter met his death in combat during November, just after moving into top place with 56 victories. Thereafter, opportunities to engage in air fighting diminished during the winter, and although the spring brought some sharp exchanges, when most units moved to the east, only Mölders (68 victories) and Galland (69 victories) had exceeded Wick's total, neither by a very large margin. Still no one had equalled von Richthofen's World War I total of 80 in this current conflict, and speculation as to who would be the first to do so was rife. (It should be mentioned that in terms of overall aerial victories, Mölders was already in excess of the 'Red Baron's' score, as he had earlier achieved 14 victories in Spain during the civil war. These however, were only added to his total after he was withdrawn from combat, and the scores referred to here relate only to those claimed since the outbreak of war on 1 September 1939.)

As the fateful day approached, the *Jagdflieger* prepared themselves for the new challenge. The Luftwaffe was faced by a Russian air force whose

The German fighter units and their leaders ready to take part in the attack were disposed as follows:

Luftflotte 1: based in East Prussia, for the support of Army Group North

Under command of *Fliegerkorps I*

Jagdgeschwader 54

I/JG 54

II/JG 54

III/JG 54

E/JG 54

II/JG 53

— Maj Hannes Trauloff
— Hptm Hubertus von Bonin
— Hptm Dietrich Hrabak
— Hptm Arnold Lignitz
— Hptm Eggers
— Hptm Heinz Bretnütz

Equipment

Bf109E/F

Luftflotte 2: based in Poland for the support of Army Group Centre—the main attack force, whose ultimate objective was Moscow

Under command of *Luftflotte HQ*

Jagdgeschwader 53

I/JG 53

IV/JG 51

— Maj Günther von Maltzahn
— Oblt Balfanz
— Hptm Friedrich Beckh

Equipment

Bf109F

Under command of *Fliegerkorps II*

Jagdgeschwader 51

I/JG 51

II/JG 51

III/JG 51

Schnellkampfgeschwader 210

I/SKG 210

II/SKG 210

— Obstlt Werner Mölders
— Hptm Hermann-Friedrich Joppien
— Hptm Josef Fözö
— Hptm Richard Leppa
— Maj Karl-Heinz Stricker
— Hptm Wolfgang Schenk
— Unknown

Bf109F

Bf110

Under command of *Fliegerkorps VIII*

Jagdgeschwader 27

II/JG 27

III/JG 27

(I/JG 27 was in North Africa)

III/JG 53

II/JG 52

Zerstörergeschwader 26

I/ZG 26

II/ZG 26

(III/ZG 26 was in the Mediterranean area)

— Maj Wolfgang Schellmann
— Hptm Wolfgang Lippert
— Hptm Max Dobislav

Bf109E

— Hptm Wolf-Dietrich Willeke
— Hptm Erich Witke
— Oberst Johann Schalk
— Hptm Herbert Kaminski
— Hptm Ralph von Rettberg

Bf110

Luftflotte 4: based in southern Poland and Rumania for the support of Army Group South

Under command of *Luftflotte HQ*

Jagdgeschwader 52

I/JG 52

(III/JG 52 under Maj Blumensaat was in reserve at Bucharest, Rumania)

— Maj Hans Treubenbach
— Hptm Karl-Heinz Leesman

Equipment

Bf109F

Under command of *Fliegerkorps V*

Jagdgeschwader 3

I/JG 3

II/JG 3

III/JG 3

I(Jagd)/LG 2

— Maj Günther Lützwow
— Hptm Hans von Hahn
— Hptm Lothar Keller
— Hptm Walther Oesau
— Hptm Herbert Ihlefeld

Bf109F

Under command *Fliegerkorps IV*

Jagdgeschwader 77

II/JG 77

III/JG 77

E/JG 77

— Maj Gotthardt Handrick
— Hptm Anton Mader
— Hptm Alexander von Winterfeldt
— Maj Fischer

Bf109E

In direct support with *Luftflotte 5* in Norway and Denmark was I/JG 77, 13 *Staffel*/JG 77 and III/JG 1 with Bf109Es, and I/ZG 76 with Bf110s.

numerical superiority mirrored that of the land armies. Something of the order of 7,000 aircraft in 23 air divisions were available to the Soviets, 6,000 of them in Belorussia alone. Many of these were obsolete or obsolescent—Polikarpov I-15bis and I-153 biplane, and I-16 monoplane, fighters, Sukhoi Su-2 light bombers, Polikarpov R-5 reconnaissance biplanes, Tupolev SB-2 and Ilyushin DB-3 bombers—but others were of modern design and good performance. These latter included early examples of the Yak-1, MiG-3 and LaGG-3 fighters, Pe-2 light bombers, and of the heavily-armoured Il-2—the *schturmovik* ground-assault aircraft, destined to be produced in greater quantities than any other single aircraft type in the world.

The Russians had three great disadvantages, however. Firstly, recent purges of the armed forces had removed many of the better officers, including many of those air force personnel possessed of actual combat experience. This not only proved damaging in the loss of invaluable experience, but also stifled initiative amongst those remaining. Secondly, due to the rapid expansion of the Red Air Force, training had generally been hurried and incomplete, resulting in an overall rather low standard of aircrew expertise. Thirdly, although warned of the impending German attack by Britain, nothing had been done to disperse forces on the European frontier, with the result that large numbers of units, including a substantial proportion of the air force, were much too close to the front, vulnerable in the extreme to surprise air attack. So far as the air force was concerned, a high proportion of the newer aircraft available were concentrated in this forward area.

At dawn on 22 June 1941, the Luftwaffe despatched 637 bombers and 231 fighters in a pre-emptive strike on 31 located Russian airfields all along the front. Surprise was complete, and while great execution was done, only two German aircraft failed to return. More attacks followed, and when night fell, 322 Russian aircraft had been claimed shot down by fighters and flak, while no less than 1,489 more were claimed destroyed on the ground. Cost to the Luftwaffe was 35 aircraft. For the fighters, it had been a wonderful start, with



1. Ready for the fray, Messerschmitt Bf 109F fighters of II Gruppe of an unidentified Jagdgeschwader ready for action on an eastern European airfield, summer 1941.

victories for many pilots coming in multiples. Mölders himself claimed four, and was at once awarded the *Schwerten* (Swords) to his *Ritterkreuz mit Eichenlaubs* (Knights' Cross with Oak Leaves)—the first award of the new campaign to the fighter force.* Within his *Geschwader's* I Gruppe, Fw Heinrich Höfemeier had also claimed four on this first day, although it had by no means been without cost to the *Jagdflieger*. In the south, Maj Schellmann, Kommodore of JG 27, shot down an I-16 to raise his score to 25 (12 of them in Spain), but his aircraft was crippled by debris from his victim, and he was forced to bale out over Russian territory. He was captured, and shot by the NKVD two days later—a foretaste of the treatment German pilots soon came to expect should they be unlucky enough to fall into Russian hands. Hptm Heinz Bretnütz of II/JG 53 shot down one bomber—his 37th victory of the war—but was hit himself, and force-landed. He died of his wounds five days later. Bernard Woldenga was posted from JG 77 to take Schellmann's place in JG 27. Russian units could do little more than attempt to get into the air and give what cover they could to their airfields. A single

*For the sake of brevity, these awards will be referred to in the rest of the text as RK (*Ritterkreuz*), EL (*Eichenlaubs*), S (*Schwerten*) and Br (*Brillanten*).

formation of nine unescorted bombers trying to raid Army Group North concentration areas was savagely mauled by JG 54, only four managing to escape.

Activity continued unabated all along the front during the following days. In the south, *Hptm* Woitke of II/JG 52 shot down three I-16s in a single engagement on the 23rd, while *Hptm* Ihlefeld, *Kommandeur* of I(J)/LG 2, had gained some 15 victories by the 27th to raise his personal score to 40, for which he received the immediate award of the EL. On the 26th, however, *Hptm* Lothar Keller of II/JG 3 was killed in an accident in a Storch light aircraft. He had gained four victories in Russia to raise his total to 20, and would receive a post-

2. Dispersed under the trees is this Bf109F of the *Gruppenkommandeur* of II/JG 51. This unit's emblem was at this time carried (unusually) on the rear fuselage, one corner of it just being visible here. The pilot of this aircraft is believed to have been *Hptm* Josef Fözö (27 victories), who was injured in a take-off accident on 11 July 1941.

humous RK early in July. His place as *Gruppenkommandeur* was taken by *Hptm* Gordon Gollob, an ex-*Zerstörerflieger* who would soon make a big name for himself. Late in the month, *Hptm* Franz von Werra, famous for his escape from captivity in Canada, arrived at the front to take up the vacant post of *Kommandeur* of I/JG 53. Success mounted upon success, and by 29 June, in one week of combat, the incredible total of 4,990 Russian aircraft had been claimed destroyed—mostly on the ground—for the loss of 179 Luftwaffe machines. The very next day, as the pincers of Army Group Centre's armoured columns closed around a Russian army in the Minsk region, Soviet bombers were thrown in by the hundreds in an effort to prevent the disaster which was approaching. *Luftflotte 2*'s fighters cut the SB-2s and DB-3s to pieces, claiming 110 of them shot down in this one area—it was Sedan all over again! In the south on this same day, *Luftflotte 4*'s units claimed 41 shot down and 45 destroyed on the ground around Lvov.



AXIS SUPPORT

It would be wrong to think that Germany faced the formidable potential of the Soviet Union alone; from first to last the Germans enjoyed the support, in varying degrees, of a number of allies, and this held good for the fighter arm as for other units at the front. From the start, Rumania joined in the initial assault on Russia, committing her 3rd and 4th Armies to Army Group South. Support also came from the puppet regime in the recently-formed Slovakian Republic, although initially only the Rumanians despatched an aerial component to take part in the fighting. Rumania's air force, the *Comandamentul Fortelor Aeriene*, had a first-line strength of some 500 aircraft in June 1941, including 12 squadrons of fighters. Four of these, one with Heinkel He112Bs and three with PZL P-24s, accompanied a dozen bomber squadrons to operate under the control of *Luftflotte 4* over Bessarabia and the Ukraine. The remainder were retained for the defence of the homeland, including Rumania's vital oilfields, and for training. In this they were joined by the staff of a Luftwaffe training mission.

The Finns and Hungarians were well-disposed towards the Germans, although not participating in

the initial attack. However, Russian bombing raids on their territory brought the Finns into the war on 25 June, and the Hungarians next day. The Finns in the north were already combat-tested against the Russians as a result of their gallant but vain Winter War of 1939/40, and were eager to recover the territory that they had then lost. Their air force was well-trained and efficient, although equipped with a wide variety of types. Immediately available were five large fighter units—each about the size of a German *Gruppe*, together with three tactical reconnaissance units which operated a number of fighter types. These were: *LeLv 12*, 4 Fokker D.XXIs, *LeLv 14*, 6 Curtiss Hawk 75As, *LeLv 16*, Gloster Gladiators, *LeLv 24*, 40 Brewster 239s, *LeLv 26*, 25 Fiat G-50s, *LeLv 28*, 29 Morane 406s, *LeLv 30*, 5 Hurricanes, 18 D.XXIs, and *LeLv 32*, 36 Fokker D.XXIs. All these units were immediately in action, mainly in the southern part of the country, where Finnish forces advanced down the Karelian Isthmus towards Leningrad to recapture the most important section

3. Although mainly equipped with Bf109Es, JG 54 still had some earlier E versions on strength in the summer of 1941. This Bf109E-3 of the Gruppenadjutant of II/JG 54 may have been photographed previously but illustrates well the camouflage and markings still current on the unit's aircraft at the time of Operation Barbarossa. Note the Dornier Do17Z bomber in the background.



of the territory they had been forced to cede to the Russians.

The Germans followed the entry of Finland into the war with the move of units of *Luftflotte 5* from Norway into northern Finland to protect the Arctic ports of Kirkenes and Petsamo, and to support a drive on Murmansk. Initial units so deployed included 13/JG 77 with Bf109Es, and a *Schwarm* of Bf110s from ZG 76. Far to the south, Hungary was also adding fighters to the Axis strength. Like the Finns, this country possessed a small but efficient air force, comprising two fighter regiments each of two groups, two bomber regiments of similar size, and a number of reconnaissance units. While operations could still be flown from home bases, two Fiat CR.42 squadrons of the 2/II Fighter Group were involved against the Russians, but by early July the enemy was already being driven far to the east, and on the 8th, these fighters moved to bases on Russian soil. As the drive continued they were recalled, and an expeditionary air force, including 1/3 Fighter Squadron with CR.42s and a flight of six new Reggiane Re.2000 monoplanes, accompanied the Hungarian Fast Corps into the Ukraine. Other assistance—welcome and otherwise—was to follow during July, most of it reaching the southern front to operate with or alongside the units of *Luftflotte 4*. Somewhat belatedly, the Slovaks despatched six squadrons—virtually their entire air force—to Russia at the end of July, including 11, 12 and 13 Squadrons flying Avia B-534 biplane fighters, which all operated initially in the Kiev sector.

Following the massive German aid provided to the Spanish Nationalists during the civil war in that country, *Generalissimo* Franco decided to reciprocate by despatching a Spanish volunteer unit, *La Division Azul* (The Blue Division) to fight on the Eastern Front. This was accompanied by a fighter unit, the *Escuadra Azul*. Manned by volunteer pilots, many of whom had had experience in the earlier conflict, this unit left Madrid on 27 July, joining III/JG 27 to form 15/JG 27 in *Luftflotte 2* in

the centre. Equipped with Bf109Es, the unit was led by one of Spain's greatest 'aces', *Capt Angel Salas Larrazabal*. Within Yugoslavia, a new republic of Croatia had been formed by the Germans for the Croat minority, who were pro-Axis, as well as being hostile to the predominant Serbs, and to the Communists. This small emergent nation had recently formed an air force equipped mainly with German and Italian aircraft. Soon, it too had sent a legion to Russia, including two of its squadrons, one of them equipped with Fiat G-50bis fighters. Like the Rumanians and Hungarians, this contingent operated in the south.

Finally there were the Italians. Hitler's invasion



4. The great 'Vatti' (Daddy) Mölders. Oberst Werner Mölders, Kommodore of JG 51, was the first fighter pilot to reach 100 victories.

of Russia had taken Mussolini by surprise, but he was not slow in preparing forces to share in the spoils, and these were sent to the southern part of the front without the prior agreement of the Germans. The air component sent to support the relatively strong Italian army corps despatched to Russia—the *Corpo di Spedizione Italiano in Russia*—included two strengthened *gruppi*, each of four *Squadriglie*. One of these, the 22^o, was equipped with Macchi MC.200 fighters.

Initially the Germans were obstructive, not welcoming the Italian intrusion, and refused to make airfields available. As a result, a month passed before operations could begin, and not until late August were the fighters in action. It will be seen however, that by this time the Luftwaffe had been quite substantially reinforced in total by this multinational force in all the three main *Luftflotten*.

In the south, Bulgaria had been in a state of war with the British Commonwealth since the Balkan campaign of April 1941, and was a firm ally to the Germans. Although it was not the Bulgarian intention to join in the war on Russia, she could be relied upon to help bolster the southern flank against any British intervention from the area of the Eastern Mediterranean.

Already, however, the initial peak strength of the Luftwaffe's own fighter units had begun to drop, as it would continue inexorably to do over the next three years. After only ten days at the front, during which 39 victories had been claimed by its pilots, II/JG 27 left for the Reich where it was to re-equip with Bf109Fs. It would not return, subsequently joining the *Geschwader's* I Gruppe in North Africa. This event caused barely a ripple however, as the rest of the Luftwaffe continued its run of successes; record after record was broken as the victorious German armies advanced all along the front, destroying division after division of the reeling Red Army. Early in July, Army Group South opened an offensive against the Stalin Line which led to a massive encirclement battle at Uman. During the early stages of this fighting, 157 Russian aircraft were claimed shot down, one of them falling to a young pilot of II/JG 52, *Ltn* Gerhard Barkhorn, who at last claimed his first victory on his 120th

operational sortie.

On 6 July the fighters of *Fliegerkorps I's* JG 54 waded into 73 bombers attacking a bridgehead at Ostrov in the north, claiming 65 of them shot down. By the 13th this *Fliegerkorps* had claimed 487 aerial victories and 1,211 aircraft on the ground since 22 June. The Russians made a further small attempt at retaliation on 14 July when six of their bombers

5. Mölders's great rival at the start of Barbarossa was *Hptm* Walter Oesau of III/JG 3. Claiming at an even greater rate than Mölders during the opening weeks of the offensive, he would probably have become the Luftwaffe's top-scorer that summer had he not been posted back to the west to take over JG 2.



tried to attack the Rumanian oil refineries at Ploesti in the south. Defending fighters thwarted the raid and shot down four of the attackers. Next day came the electrifying news—Mölders had become the first pilot in the world to top 100 victories in this war. His 33rd victory in Russia raised his score to 101—and his overall total to 115. Awarded the *Brillanten* (Diamonds) to the RK—the first fighter pilot to receive this highest award—he was ordered to cease flying combat forthwith. Those who flew with him maintain that in fact he continued to fly over the front for several more weeks, making no



6. One of the most successful pilots of the early days was Oblt Hubert Mutherich, Staffelführer of 3/JG 54. He is seen here with his 'Black 10' in August 1941 after 37 victories, all but 10 in Russia. Within weeks he was dead, killed during a force-landing near Leningrad on 9 September with his score at 43.

official claims for the further successes he achieved, until he was recalled to Germany to become the first *Inspektor der Jagdflieger*.

Others were close behind Mölders however. Indeed, one pilot was actually scoring faster at this time, for on the very day that Mölders claimed his 100th, *Hptm* Walter Oesau, *Kommandeur* of III/JG 3, made his 44th claim in Russia to raise his own score to 80. Awarded the S., he would undoubtedly have swiftly caught Mölders had he not been simultaneously posted back to the Channel Front as *Kommodore* of JG 2. Even here, Oesau was to become the third pilot to reach 100 victories, achieving this total during October 1941. Another pilot of whom much would later be heard, *Ltn* Walter Nowotny of III/JG 54, gained his first successes on 19 July when he shot down three I-153s over the Isle of Ösel. However, his own aircraft was damaged during the combat, and he was forced to ditch in the Baltic.

Despite the continued high level of success, the sheer weight of operations was taking its toll of the Luftwaffe, and by 19 July, 1,284 aircraft had been shot down or substantially damaged—almost the total initial strength on this front. Before the month was out, the fighter pilots had celebrated the award of eight more RK. *Maj* Günther Lützow and *Maj* Günther von Maltzahn, *Kommodore* respectively of JG 3 and 53, had each reached their 42nd victories, while *Oblt* Erbo Graf von Kegenack of III/JG 27 had 37 and *Ltn* Heinz Bär, a colourful 'character' of JG 51 who had been the Luftwaffe's top-scoring NCO pilot during 1940, had 27. Even the heavy Bf 110s, so disappointing over England the previous summer, were having their share of success against both air and ground targets. Concentrating predominantly against the latter, SKG 210 had claimed 823 aircraft destroyed on the ground, plus 92 more in the air, and 16 tanks, 52 railway trains and much motor transport by 26 July. Indeed, in the far north, it was a Bf 110 pilot, *Hptm* G. Schascke of the *Schwarm*/ZG 76, who was initially the most successful pilot, having gained 20 victories by early August, when he was shot down and became a prisoner.

It was on the northern front that the first allied aid to Russia was encountered by the *Jagdflieger*, in the form of air strikes on Kirkenes and Petsamo,



7. The Staffelführer of 8/JG 54 walks away from his Bf109F, 'Red 1', to report after an October 1941 sortie.

launched on 30 July by Fulmar and Albacore aircraft of the Royal Navy from the carriers HMS *Furious* and *Victorious*. The Germans had prior warning of the presence of the British vessels, and most ships had cleared the ports when the attacks were made. Bf109Es, Bf110s and Ju87s intercepted, claiming 28 of the British aircraft shot down. Actual losses included 12 Albacores and four Fulmars, with a large percentage of those that did return having been damaged.

Slightly to the south, German and Finnish forces were now approaching Leningrad, but to the disgust of the former, the Finns halted when their original frontiers were reached, refusing to continue their advance into Russian territory—a stance they were to resolutely maintain throughout the rest of their involvement in the war. Fighting on this front was bitter, both on the ground and in the air, the fighters claiming 54 Russian aircraft on 10 August alone. One of the most successful pilots at this time was Oblt Hans Philipp of II/JG 54, whose Gruppe operated from Finnish soil, and who received the RK on 24 August for his 62nd victory, over 40 of which were achieved in the east. On the remainder of the front, Luftflotte 2's units pressed on towards Moscow, while in the south the Gruppen of Luftflotte 4 were hotly engaged. During a series of raids on Dnepropetrovsk to slow down Russian forces retreating in this area on 17 August, I and II/JG 3, joined by III/JG 52, claimed 33 victories, 29 of them bombers. By the 30th, JG 3 had claimed its 1,000th success over Russia, though it still trailed the pre-eminent JG 51. This latter Jagdgeschwader was involved during 31 August/1 September in provid-

ing cover for a large pontoon bridge which Wehrmacht engineers were throwing across the lower reaches of the River Dnieper in the Rostov area. Soviet aircraft appeared in waves to stop this work, which if completed would allow the German Panzer columns to head into Rostov and the Donets Basin. During this 48-hour period, JG 51 was to claim 77 bombers shot down, flak units accounting for an additional 13. By 30 August, *Fliegerkorps II* had claimed 1,357 Russian aircraft in the air and 1,280 on the ground, but by 10 September JG 51 alone had reached 1,357 air and 298 ground victories, raising its total for the war to over 2,000.

Out of 12 major awards made to the *Jagdflieger* during August, four went to pilots of JG 51, including both ELs. One of the recipients was Oblt Bär, whose score had risen rapidly from 27 to 60 in little more than a fortnight. The other went posthumously to Hptm Hermann-Friedrich Joppien of I/JG 51, one of the more successful pilots of the 1940 campaigns, who was killed when his aircraft slipped out of a tight turn and crashed on 25 August. He had claimed 70 victories before this, 28 of them in Russia. Joppien was not the only pilot of note lost during the month. On the 3rd, Oblt Kurt Sochatzky of III/JG 3, who had already twice been shot down behind Russian lines, went down for a third time in the Kiev area; this time he did not return, but was taken prisoner. He had just shot down one of the heavily-armoured Il-2s for his 38th victory, when the stricken aircraft hit his Bf109,



8. Servicing a Bf109G on an airfield in western Russia.



9. Local transport is pressed into use to tow an oil refuelling bowser. Note the retention of a single letter 'Q' under the port wing of the Bf109F, and the Bf108 in the background.

tearing off the wing. At the end of the month *Oblt* Erich Schmidt of III/JG 53 was lost after being seen to bale out near Dubno following a direct hit on his fighter by the accurate Russian AA fire; he had been credited with 47 victories.

JG 51 again headed the awards during September, receiving four out of ten. The only EL went to *Oblt* Karl-Gottfried Nordmann, *Kommandeur* of IV/JG 51 since July. Nordmann's score had risen from 31 to 59 in little more than six weeks. *Hptm* Gollob, new *Kommandeur* of II/JG 3, received his RK on the 18th for his 42nd victory. By this time the fighter strength of the Luftwaffe in the far north had been increased to three *Staffeln* of Bf109Es and one of Bf110s. Early in September two RAF fighter squadrons equipped with Hurricanes, and known as 151 Wing, had arrived at Murmansk to demonstrate the aircraft to the Russians, and these were first encountered by JG 77 fighters on the 12th. From then on, Hurricanes were to become ever more frequent opponents over the Arctic areas, initially flown by British pilots, but soon in the hands of Russians as large numbers of them formed the vanguard of massive supplies from the western nations under Lend Lease.

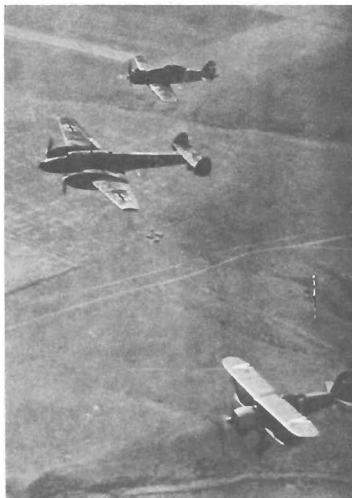
On 1 October 1941, Army Group Centre launched Operation *Taifun* on the southern sector of its front, to achieve an encirclement of a Russian army group in the Smolensk area. This major operation was supported by bombers, *Stukas*, the two *Gruppen* of

SKG 210, the whole of JG 51, and by JG 3, operating on the far left of Army Group South. On 19 October, the latter army group advanced into the Crimea, meeting severe resistance. Because of the involvement of JG 3 around Smolensk, only Handrick's JG 77 was available for fighter cover, and vastly outnumbered by I-15s and I-16s, it was unable to prevent the Russians gaining local air superiority, on occasions, for the first time. During October the beloved 'Vatti' Mölders was finally replaced at the head of JG 51 by *Maj* Friedrich Beckh. Now the race was on for the lead again, and over the central front it passed to JG 3 before the month was out. On 24 October the *Kommodore* became the second to reach the magic century. One of his pilots, *Hptm* Gollob, was coming up behind him fast; on the 18th, Gollob claimed no less than nine victories in a day, and on the 26th recorded his 85th. The month also saw the award of two RK to *Zerstörerflieger* for service in Russia, *Oblt* Günther Tonne of II/SKG 210 receiving one for 13 victories, and *Oblt* Werner Thierfelder of II/ZG 26 one for 14 in the air with 41 more on the ground.

'GENERAL WINTER'

Heavy fighting continued all along the front during November, as the autumnal rains began to fall, churning the Russian countryside into a nightmare of mud. In the Rostov area, 65 victories were claimed in 578 sorties between the 4th and 20th. Kerch fell on the 16th, leaving all the Crimea save the fortified port of Sevastopol in German hands. Before Moscow however, the Panzers finally ground to a halt, while a fanatical defence of Leningrad—although the city was cut off from the rest of the Russian forces by a German thrust to the coast to the east of the city—prevented any further eastward penetration by Army Group North.

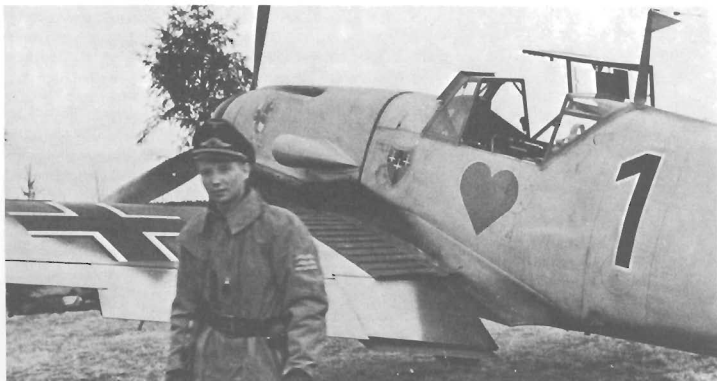
This slowing down of operations on the ground, coupled with the increasingly bad weather, now greatly limited aerial activity as invaders and defenders prepared for the rigours of the Russian winter—yet to be fully appreciated by the Ger-



10. The Axis Pact in practice: by late 1941 Army Group South was deep into the Ukraine, aiming for the Caucasus. It was supported by Luftflotte 4, truly a multi-national force. Here, representative aircraft from three of the command's units fly a propaganda formation. *Top to bottom:* a Macchi MC.200 of the Italian 22° Gruppo C.T.; a Messerschmitt Bf110, probably from I/SKG 210 and a Fiat CR.42 of the Hungarian 1/3 Fighter Squadron. (Via E. J. Creek)

mans. The enforced lessening of activity allowed the despatch of certain air elements to other areas where their presence was urgently needed. Already during October III/JG 53 had withdrawn to Germany to re-equip; it then followed II/JG 27 to the Mediterranean area, where it too was to remain for some considerable time. In November, the whole of *Fliegerkorps II* left Russia for Sicily, to undertake an assault on Malta. Fighter units accompanying this force included *Stab* (HQ Flight), I and II/JG 53, and II/JG 3. III/JG 27 also withdrew at this time, together with the *Geschwaderstab*. The *Gruppe* had claimed 220 victories in Russia, and its leading pilot, *Oblt Graf von Kageneck*, had received the EL

11. The approach of winter led to locally-improvised camouflage schemes being applied. Here 'Red 1' of 8/JG 54 has been partially re-sprayed in a lighter shade on the fuselage and upper wing surfaces.



shortly before departure for Sicily, having raised his score to 65. The Spanish *Escuadra Azul* remained behind, transferring to JG 51 as 15 *Staffel*.

As the temperature dropped far below zero it became clear that some of the older aircraft of the Luftwaffe's allies were just not up to a Russian winter; the Italians and Croats soldiered on with their open-cockpit aircraft. The Hungarians, after a very active time, found it necessary to withdraw their units during mid-November, as did the Slovaks, who had gone as early as October. While the fighter pilots of the other allies had generally performed well, the Slovaks had proved disappointing. Few of the pilots had any heart for the fight, and little effort was made at the front—indeed, the only Avia lost was one flown by a pilot who deserted to the Russians! To take their place a new unit was formed of personnel considered to be reliable, and this was sent to Germany for training and equipment with Bf109Es.

The reduction in activity was evidenced by the dearth of awards during the period; only four more RKs were awarded before the end of the year, one for *Ltn* Eduard Meyer of I/ZG 26 for 18 air and 48 ground victories, plus the destruction of two tanks. Changes were taking place at this time in the north. I/JG 77 had gradually broken up, with *Staffeln* spread all over Norway and northern Finland. New *Staffeln* were formed during the autumn, until two autonomous *Jagdgruppen* had come into being. *Jagdgruppe Stavanger* defended Norway from attack from the west—Britain—whilst the *Jagdgruppe zbV* operated on the eastern sector of the Polar Front. The latter comprised three *Staffeln* of Bf109Es and the Bf110 *Staffel*; this unit had been re-named 1(Z)/JG 77 following the disbandment of ZG 76. In January 1942, a new *Jagdgeschwader* was formed—JG 5. The *Jagdgruppe Stavanger* formed I *Gruppe*, while the Bf109E units of JGr zbV became II *Gruppe*. 1(Z)/JG 77 became an autonomous *Staffel* within the *Geschwader*, 10(Z)/JG 5. At the same time a III *Gruppe*

was formed with units from a disbanded *Gruppe* of JG 1 in Northern Germany (one of these going to bring I/JG 5 up to strength), and an operational training *Staffel*, 1/EJG 3. With this final demise of I/JG 77, I(J)/LG 2 which was operating in the south with *Luftflotte 4* as part of JG 77, became a new I/JG 77. To replace the home defence units absorbed into JG 5, I/JG 3 left *Luftflotte 4* to return to Germany, where it became II/JG 1. In March 1942, a new I/JG 3 was formed. Another redesignation to take place affected the two *Gruppen* of SKG 210. Since the duties undertaken by these units were now virtually identical with those of the remain *Zerstörergruppen*, the unit became a new ZG 1, the original *Geschwader* of this number having been disbanded partly to form night fighter units in the Reich, and partly to provide the strength of II/SKG 210.

Of equipment there was little change at this time—although the winter found the German forces as a whole grossly unprepared to cope with it. Mechanical transport became immobilized in the ice and snow, while the aircraft were often in grave trouble. Oil solidified in the intense sub-zero cold, making even the starting of engines a major operation, while guns often seized up solid. The men themselves were also without adequate warm clothing and footwear. In November 1941 a small batch of Focke-Wulf Fw190A-1 fighters was issued to II/JG 54, but the initial reaction to the *Wurger* (Butcher Bird) in the East was not good. This early version suffered frequent engine trouble, and arriving just as the bad weather set in, spent much of its time unserviceable. By January, all had been returned to maintenance units. At this stage however, the Bf109F still had little to fear from the

12. Bf109Fs of an unidentified unit on a front-line airfield. These aircraft exhibit the alternative form of III *Gruppe* marking on the rear fuselage, and are apparently 8 *Staffel* aircraft. The camouflaged mounds to left and right are in fact individual aircraft dispersal bays.





13. Early in 1942 SKG 210 was renumbered ZG 1. II Gruppe had already adopted the original ZG 1's 'Wespen' (Wasp) markings, seen here being applied to one of the Bf110s in yellow, black, red and white. Spinners were red and yellow, with white tips.

opposition. The F-1, 2 and 3 versions were superior in performance to virtually all the Russian types they encountered, particularly when the latter were coupled with the low standard of Russian aircrew training and experience of this period. Of the newer aircraft the MiG-1 and 3 were very fast at high altitude, but since most action in Russia took place at low or medium levels, this seldom proved an advantage. The Yak-1 and LaGG-3 fighters which were met in limited numbers at this time proved generally more manoeuvrable, but lacked the Bf109F's speed and climbing ability. Against them the Bf109Es were more evenly matched, but these latter were fast being replaced. JG 77 for instance, converted to the F model early in 1942.

Of other new Russian types which began to appear in greater numbers in 1942, the fast Pe-2 light bomber would give some problems, as it could virtually match the Bf109E for speed, and could give the F a good run for its money. The Il-2 *shturmovik* could be caught with ease, but was so heavily armoured that shooting it down could prove very difficult. This was particularly so with the Bf109F, which, if it had a serious fault, was its relatively light armament of only two rifle-calibre machine guns, and a single engine-mounted MG 151 cannon of the unusually-small calibre of 15mm; this gun did enjoy a very high rate of fire (950rpm), but certainly lacked 'punch'. This deficiency was to be compensated to some extent by the delivery, early in 1942, of some new F-4 models, mounting a version of the MG 151 bored out to 20mm, but slower-firing (650rpm).

Of the foreign types appearing in Russia, the Hurricane IIs provided (mainly to the Red Naval Air Force) in North Russia, and the Curtiss P-40C Tomahawk, were inferior to the Messerschmitt, and in the hands of the inexperienced Russians, both were shot down in large numbers. During 1942 however, examples of the Bell P-39 Airacobra were first encountered, and this aircraft, while disappointing on other fronts, was to enjoy some considerable success when employed under conditions in the east, for which it was well-suited. Despite the catastrophic losses of pilots suffered by the Soviet Union, some did survive to gradually



14. First to score 150 victories was Maj Gordon Gollob, who reached that figure in August 1942 when Kommodore of JG 77. He was wearing the Ritterkreuz (RK) mit Schwerte (S) und Eichenlaub (EL).



15. Although well known, this photograph most aptly depicts one of the Bf 109Es which were the main initial equipment of JG 5 formed in the far north in 1942. The aircraft is flown by Hptm Günther Scholz (32 victories) Kommandeur of III Gruppe.

gain experience, and it was to many of these potentially elite pilots that the Airacobras were issued.

In the Luftwaffe, the quest for aerial victories continued to enjoy an importance much in excess of most air forces during World War II, and nowhere more so than on the Eastern Front. The air war here was very much the province of the *Experten*—the great 'aces'—and by 1942 a definite pattern was emerging. Each *Staffel* would have amongst its dozen or so pilots perhaps two or three who gained nearly all the victories. Such men enjoyed a far lower casualty rate than the average, and those who survived their early weeks at the front soon moved into the ranks of these *Experten*. The rest provided the *Katchmareke* (wingmen)—and the bulk of the casualties. Based near the front, the *Jagdflieger* would mount several sorties in a day during offensives, and on almost every occasion could expect to meet opposition. Those who survived were involved in literally hundreds of air battles in a year. Any pilot who could fly and shoot with even a modicum of ability could expect to score and score again; only the rate of claiming differed to separate

the truly gifted from the above-average.

During the first three summers of the war the *Experten* had little to fear from the vast majority of their opponents, whom they could outfly on almost every count. Their most deadly enemy was Russian AA fire; this was quite extraordinarily efficient, and greatly impressed the Luftwaffe from the start by its accuracy and intensity. They considered it far better than their own, although the German flak steadily improved. The other great danger in the huge dogfights which occurred, was the ever-present risk of mid-air collision, which claimed a quite disproportionate number of leading pilots in the east. The Russians also exhibited an alarming propensity for the self-immolating tactic of ramming. As in North Africa, the wide open steppes of Russia allowed excellent opportunities for a crippled fighter to crash-land without undue danger, but there the similarity ended. The Russians regarded the Luftwaffe as one of their most hated foes, and pilots captured by their troops could expect little mercy. Capture became the great fear of many, and there were numerous examples of unfortunate pilots being lynched, beaten to death or shot, while those who survived to reach prison camps fared only marginally better, facing a long and arduous captivity which many failed to survive. Also, it was not unknown for Russian pilots who had succeeded in shooting down a German aircraft and seen it crash-land, to land alongside and despatch their vanquished foe with pistol, or in one case, by strangulation.

In many ways it was a very hard war indeed for pilots in Russia. Far from the centres of civilization or entertainment, alternately frozen, soaked and



16. Throughout its life JG 5 incorporated a single Zerstörerstaffel equipped with Bf 110s. Initially this was 7(Z)JG 5, subsequently renumbered 10, then 13(Z)JG 5 as the unit grew in size. This aircraft coming in to land with long-range tanks beneath the wings, has the 'Dachel' emblem on the nose (a dachshund savaging a Russian I-16 fighter) common to all three Staffeln.



mud-caked, or baked, they flew from airfields of the most rudimentary kind in all conditions. Frequently their sleep was disturbed by nightly nuisance raids by Russian light aircraft, while in the hostile occupied territory behind them roamed fanatical partisan bands of ever-growing size and audacity. In the summer—particularly in the south—the steppes frequently became so dusty that the fitting of tropical filters to the air intakes of the aircraft became necessary, while clothes, bodies, guns, food and equipment became permanently covered in an abrasive coating of powdery dust. In the north, JG 5 operated under particularly harsh conditions during the long twilight weeks of the Arctic winter. Despite all these tribulations—and a winter made doubly hideous by a successful Russian counter-offensive before Moscow, which inflicted severe casualties on the Wehrmacht, and was the more terrible for its sheer unexpectedness—the *Jagdflieger* remained in high spirits as their combat successes continued to multiply. All were deeply distressed however by the death of Werner Mölders in an aircraft accident on 22 November 1941. As *Inspektor der Jagdflieger*, Mölders was returning home from visiting units at the front, to

17. This early Bf 109G-2 features the unusual mottled nose camouflage applied to aircraft of JG 3, among others, during the summer of 1942. The machine, which has also suffered damage to the rudder, is believed to be the mount of the Gruppenadjutant of II Gruppe.

attend the funeral of Ernst Udet.

Early in the new year of 1942, the faithful Rumanians were rewarded when their squadrons at the front received 69 Bf 109Es to replace the ageing He 112Bs and P-24Es of *Flotila I vinateoare*. In March, the Spanish personnel attached to JG 51 were exchanged for a new batch of volunteers—again mainly composed of civil war veterans.

As the Wehrmacht waited for the spring thaw, and the sun which would dry out the ground and allow the Panzers to become mobile once more, activity in the air began to increase. The early months of 1942 were to prove costly to the *Zerstörerflieger*, several of the leading pilots of this arm being lost. First to go was Oblt Felix Brandis, *Staffelkapitän* of 10(Z)/JG 5, who was killed on 2 February after 14 victories, all but three of them in Russia. Next day Hptm Rolf Kaldrack, *Kommandeur* of the newly-titled II/ZG 1, and holder of the RK, was killed when his Bf 10 was rammed by a MiG-1 he had just shot down for his 21st victory. The

posthumous EL followed. Then on the first day of March, *Ltn* Eduard Meyer, a 22 victory *Experte* of I/ZG 26, was killed in a mid-air collision with another German aircraft.

JG 51 continued to maintain its position as the Luftwaffe's leading *Jagdgeschwader* at this time, gaining four of the nine major awards to fighter pilots in the east during the first quarter of the year. One of these went to *Hptm* Heinz Bär, now at the head of I Gruppe, who received the S for his 90th victory on 16 February. Two more awards went to one pilot, who was to epitomize the Luftwaffe's fears in Russia. Young *Ltn* Hans Strelow of II/JG 51 received the RK on 18 March as he was in the midst of a fantastic string of successes. He had claimed 27 victories during 1941, but now he gained a remarkable 26 in March alone. The EL followed on the 24th, at which point the 20 year-old was the youngest recipient of this coveted decoration. Less than two months later, on 22 May, he shot down a Pe-2 for his 66th victory, but then had to make a force-landing himself behind enemy lines. Reportedly, he shot himself rather than face capture. His fears were undoubtedly well-founded, for on 14 February *Hptm* Franz Eckerle, 62 victory *Kommandeur* of I/JG 54, force-landed in the Velikiye Luke area; he was never seen again, receiving the EL posthumously. JG 54 was doing well at this time,

two more decorations going to its pilots. The EL went to *Obt* Max Hellmuth Ostermann of III Gruppe on 10 March after his 62nd victory, while two days later Eckerle's successor, *Hptm* Hans Philipp, received the S for 82. On the last day of the month, he became the fourth pilot to claim 100 victories.

During the opening months of the war in Russia most of the success had gone to JG 3, 51 and 54, but now others began to make their mark. Up to this time, JG 52 had been a relatively undistinguished unit, belying the fact that it would one day become the Luftwaffe's top-scorer. Its record in the campaigns of 1940-1 had been unexceptional, and few decorations had come its way. Late in 1941, one pilot later to become famous, *Obt* Günther Rall, had already claimed 36 victories up to that time, but had been badly wounded, and as a result was off operations for many months. Now however, JG 52 began to come into its own as activity in the south flared up again. On 24 January an ex-instructor, one

18. Bf109G-2s began to reach the Eastern Front in growing numbers during summer 1942. Quantities went to JG 54 at its base at Siverskaya at this time, where they were painted in a patch-type camouflage suited to the north Russian terrain over which they operated. To the left is an aircraft of II/JG 54 from 4 Staffel; the one in the foreground appears from its fuselage markings to be flown by the Geschwaderadjutant, though it carries the crest of III Gruppe.



Ltn Hermann Graf of the *Geschwader's III Gruppe*, received the RK after 42 victories. Within a month that same pilot's wingman, *Fw Leopold Steinbatz*, had gained the same decoration for a similar score, while on 19 March *Ltn Adolf Dickfeld* of the same *Gruppe* was decorated for 47 victories.

In the same general area of the front, JG 77 was quick to make good use of its new Bf109Fs. In I *Gruppe*, *Hptm Herbert Ihlefeld*, veteran of the Spanish Civil War, claimed five victories on 26 February. In four days, 19–22 April, he claimed 17 to raise his score to 101, for which he received the S. His wingman also did well, *Ltn Fritz Geisshardt* claiming 26 victories between 1 March and 25 April, including five on 20 April and seven on the 25th. III/JG 77 celebrated one RK on 1 April for *Ltn Emil Omert* after his 40th, but lost the unit's outstanding pilot, *Ofw Rudolf Schmidt*, five days later; Schmidt had some 51 victories to his credit at the time of his death.

As the summer approached, the German plan for the 1942 offensive was put into action, being concentrated in the south. While Army Group Centre marked time, Army Group South was to launch Operation *Blau* (Blue) designed to drive into the heartlands of the Caucasus, aiming for the Russian oilfields and rich wheatlands of the area. Army Group North was again to try and annihilate the Leningrad defences and raze the city to the ground. The air phase of the planned offensive began on 30 April with operations designed to smash the Soviet air force again. On the first day, *Ltn Hermann Graf* of III/JG 52 claimed seven victories to add to his growing score. On 8 May, as a preliminary to the main offensive, XI Army advanced down the Kertsch Peninsula to complete the occupation of the strategically-important Crimea. The German/Rumanian forces achieved great success, supported by the units of *Fliegerkorps VIII*, including III/JG 3, II and III/JG 77. By 7 June, only the port of Sevastopol remained in Russian hands, and this—reputed to be the strongest fortress in the world—was reduced by 3 July following a massive bombardment by artillery, giant mortars, and *Stukas*.

Meanwhile, a Russian offensive launched on 9

May to retake Kharkov, had upset the launching of Operation *Blau*. The Russian assault was smashed however, and on 28 June the first phase of *Blau* was launched, II Army and IV *Panzer* Army advancing to take Voronezh. The second phase was begun on the 30th by VI Army, with equal success. These operations ensured that the units of *Luftflotte 4* saw the greatest bulk of the fighting during mid-1942, allowing JG 52 and JG 77 to continue their climb to prominence with JG 3. During mid-May, the *Luftflotte* was reinforced by the return of elements of *Fliegerkorps II* from Sicily, including II/JG 3 and I/JG 53. At the same time, JG 54 was involved in very hard fighting around Leningrad,



19. A rising star amongst the Experten of the Jagdflieger during late summer 1942 was Oblt Günther Rall of III/JG 52, seen here at about the time of his 100th victory in early October.



20. Another early 100-scorer in JG 52 was a long-serving pilot who had risen through the ranks, Lt. Heinz 'Johnny' Schmidt of II Gruppe. He is seen here with typical Eastern Front congratulatory wreath after his 100th success in September 1942. He was killed a year later, probably shot down in error by a Hungarian fighter, when he had reached a score of 173. (Barkhorn Collection)

while JG 51 in the centre was still active, although on a reduced scale.

The smaller Axis nations had again increased their participation for the summer offensive, and were once more providing a sizeable addition to the fighter strength. In *Luftflotte 4*, the Rumanian *Corpul I Aerien* included two squadrons of Bf109Es; another unit of these aircraft, the Slovakian 14 Squadron, was also at the front in this area, as was the Croat G-50bis *Staffel*. The Italians, having proved their worth during the winter escorting Luftwaffe aircraft, had at last been admitted to the *Luftflotte*. The 22° *Gruppo C.T.* had been relieved by the 21° *Gruppo C.T.*, but still comprised four *Squadriglie* of MC.200s. Finally, the Hungarians had returned with an independent fighter group comprising 1/1 and 2/4 Squadrons with Re.2000s. I and II/ZG 1 were also moved from *Luftflotte 2* to the south.

METEORIC VICTORIES

Now the victories came thick and fast. On 12 May, *Oblt* Ostermann of III/JG 54 on the Leningrad front, became the sixth pilot to reach 100. On the 14th Graf of III/JG 52 claimed seven victories to raise his score to 104—after 47 in 17 days! By the 19th it was 106,

the EL and S being awarded within two days of each other. His comrade, *Oblt* Dickfeld of the same unit, claimed nine on the 14th and 11 on the 18th to top the 100, the EL following. Next day on the central front, JG 51's *Hptm* Bär joined the growing '100 Club'. It received its tenth member on 20 May when *Hptm* Gollob of JG 3 reached the same total. He had 107 by the 24th when he received the S. Two RK went to pilots of JG 54 during the month, one to *Ltn* Hans Götz of I Gruppe, who claimed 25 during May alone. In the far north, a *Zerstörerflieger* of 10(Z)/JG 5, *Ltn* Theodor Weissenberger, claimed five fighters shot down in one day on 10 May; more would be heard of him before long. On 3 June, *Maj* Friedrich Beckh, who had replaced Mölders as *Kommodore* of JG 51, and who had handed over to Karl-Gottfried Nordmann in April, arrived to take over JG 52. His stay was short, for on the 21st, he crash-landed east of Kharkov whilst on a low level sortie, and was not seen again. Herbert Ihlefeld from I/JG 77 took his place, while Heinz Bär moved from I/JG 51 to take over Ihlefeld's old Gruppe.

June 1942 saw considerable fighting over Leningrad, where the moonlight period allowed the Russians to attempt air supply of the garrison and population. JG 54 responded by flying patrols by night with some considerable success, culminating on the night of 22/23 June when *Ltn* Erwin Leykauf of III Gruppe shot down six Polikarpov R-5 biplanes in a single night. His total of eight during this period was well exceeded by *Hptm* Joachim Wandel of II Gruppe however, who claimed 16.

In the far north, II/JG 5 celebrated its first RK, awarded to *Fw* Rudolf Müller for 41 victories. His best day had been 23 April, when he shot down five Hurricanes over Kola Bay during a month when 61 of these British-built aircraft were included in 85 claims submitted by *Luftflotte 5*. Literally fighting its own private war, JG 5 was much engaged against Lend Lease aircraft during the year, and of some 700 claims submitted, about 500 were against British or American types. Hurricanes made up the bulk of these, the peak month being May when they comprised 113 of the 149 claims made. From that month onwards a growing proportion of claims related to Curtiss Tomahawks however. In the

south, Operation *Blau* was going well—for the fighters as well, although not without cost. Hermann Graf's wingman *Ofw* Steinbatz, received the EL on 2 June for 83 victories; on the 15th, he made three claims to raise his total to 99, but his aircraft was hit by AA fire and he crashed to his death. He received a posthumous award of the S, the first NCO so honoured. On the credit side, JG 77 received two RK on 23 June, one to Geisshardt of I Gruppe for 79, and one to *Oblt* Heinrich Setz of II Gruppe for 76; the latter pilot claimed his 100th victory on 24 July. Geisshardt, with his score at 80, had gained his last Russian victory when on 5 July, Heinz Bär led I/JG 77 out of Russia on the way to Sicily, to join the ever-more important assault on Malta. In the last three weeks before leaving, *Oblt* Erwin Clausen of this unit had claimed 45 victories to raise his total to 101, for which the EL followed.

Meanwhile, the air fighting in the south continued to grow in intensity; on 8 July 33 victories were claimed, with 40 more next day. On the 10th, 19 out of a formation of 20 were shot down by *Fliegerkorps VIII* Bf109s, while on the 13th, 12 Russian bombers were shot down when they were caught taking off. On 1 July, two more pilots of III/JG 52 had received the RK—*Uffz* Karl Gratz for 54 since February, and *Fw* Alfred Grislawski for 40. August saw four more such decorations for the



21. Something of a mystery, this Bf109F carries normal German markings but apparently has Hungarian green/red/white bands on all tail surfaces. It is believed to be one of the first aircraft of this type handed over to I/I Fighter Squadron late in 1942, when that unit was operating under Luftwaffe command as part of Luftflotte 4.

Geschwader. On the 23rd, *Oblt* Gerhard Barkhorn (who had at last found his form and raised his score to 59) and *Ltn* Heinz Schmidt (51) of II Gruppe, with *Fw* Hans Dammers (51) of III Gruppe all received the award, while on the 31st, one of the Luftwaffe's veterans, *Hptm* Johannes Steinhoff, the *Kom-*

22. Close inspection of the fuselage *Balkenkreuz* on these Bf109Es shows the red disc of the Slovakian Air Force, a fact confirmed by the uniform of the officer on the left and the presence of the Letov S.328 biplane in the background. The Bf109s are probably aircraft of 14 Squadron, which operated with Luftflotte 4 during the winter of 1942-3.



23. Kommandeur of III/JG 3, Hptm Walter Dahl, in his 'Yellow 1'. Dahl achieved 77 of his 100 victories in the East, 25 of them over Stalingrad during the winter of 1942-3.

mandeur of II Gruppe, gained his 100th victory.

JG 3 was also doing well at this time. On 1 July, Hptm Kurt Brändle, an ex-JG 53 pilot who had taken over II/JG 3 in Sicily, received the RK for 49 kills—by 27 August his total had risen to 100! In III Gruppe, Oblt Victor Bauer claimed his 102nd on 26 July, but was then posted to a training job. An RK to Ltn Hans Fuss followed on 23 August after his 60th kill, but the real excitement came on the 29th, when the Kommodore, Maj Gollob, became the first pilot to reach 150 victories. He received the Br next day, but was posted to command JG 77. On 30 August, JG 3 lost Oblt Heinrich Graf von Einsiedel, great-grandson of the famous Prussian statesman, Bismarck. He was shot down and became a prisoner after achieving 25 victories. Gollob's moment of glory was brief however, for on 4 September, Oblt Hermann Graf of III/JG 52 equalled his score. At meteoric rate Graf's successes mounted, taking his total from 127 to 202 in just four weeks! The 200th fell on 2 October, a fortnight after he had received the greatly-coveted Br. At that stage, he too was forbidden to fly further combat. Other pilots were following, however. In Graf's own Gruppe, Oblt Günther Rall, recovered from his wounds, was back at the front, reaching his 65th on 3 September and his 100th on 22 October, RK and EL being collected in the same period. In II/JG 52, Ltn Heinz Schmidt claimed his 102nd on 16 September, while on 29 October a bright young pilot, Ltn Walter Krupinski, had reached 55. Maj Wolf-Dietrich Wilcke, leading JG 3 after Gollob's departure, had followed a very successful period during July with his 100th victory on 6 September. Ltn Wilhelm Lemke of III/JG 3 had 50 by 12 September, while Hptm Friedrich-Karl Müller of the new I/JG 3 reached his 100th before the month was out after a spell during which he achieved 50 victories in four weeks. On the same day that he received the EL, Fw Wilhelm Crinius of I/JG 53 was awarded both RK and EL, having claimed 100 victories since 9 June! In the same time-scale, Fw Heinz Golinski of this unit had



claimed 46.

On the stable central front, JG 51 continued to perform creditably. On 1 August Ofw Franz-Josef Beerenbrock of III/JG 51 claimed nine in one day, raising his score to 102 by the 3rd. Before the end of the month, Fw Anton Hafner of II Gruppe had 60, while the Geschwader welcomed a famous fighter pilot, Hptm Joachim Müncheberg, who arrived from JG 26 in France with a score of 70, to take over one of the Gruppen. He made good use of his time, claiming 33 swift victories by 9 September. He was then posted as Kommodore of JG 77 after the return of Gollob to the Reich to take up a staff position. The Leningrad front saw the signs of brilliance in the Luftwaffe's next rising star—Ltn Walter Nowotny of III/JG 54. On 4 August, Nowotny claimed seven victories to raise his total to 54. On 9 August, the Gruppe lost Oblt Max Hellmuth Ostermann, killed in combat with Russian fighters during a long-range patrol over Amossaro; he had gained 102 victories. In II/JG 54, Ltn Hans Beissenger gained his 100th on 26 September, followed on 29 October by Ofw Max Stotz. In the far north, II/JG 5 received two more RK, one going to Theodor Weissenberger, the Zerstörerflieger who had now transferred to single-seaters, and one to Ltn Heinrich Ehrler, who had 41 victories. However, great events were afoot, and the situation was about to alter radically.

With Operation Blau going so well during July, Adolf Hitler had decided to change his plans, and on the 23rd, he ordered Group 'A' to press on into the Caucasus oil region, while Group 'B' was to head east to take Stalingrad. This city on the Volga was considered of psychological importance because of



its very name, apart from its importance as a communications centre, and its capture, the Germans estimated, would greatly dishearten the Russians. In August, the successful XI Army was moved from the Crimea across the whole length of the front to join XVI Army in the non-productive assault on Leningrad. This move was subsequently to prove disastrous, Hitler's fixation with Leningrad and Stalingrad costing the Germans and their allies very dear. At the same time, Army Group Centre launched an offensive north-west of Moscow, which failed to make any progress, while on 4 September, a Russian offensive was begun against XVIII Army, which was subsequently held.

During the same month the battle for Stalingrad began, with the Russians fighting desperately for every inch of soil. German and Rumanian aircraft assaulted the city repeatedly during early September, newly-arrived Rumanian IAR 80 fighter-bombers taking part. Other new aircraft to appear at this time were Italian Macchi MC.202 fighters, a few of which had been sent to strengthen 21^o Gruppo, as the *Regia Aeronautica* pilots were finding their MC.200s outperformed by increasing numbers of

24. To combat the heavily-armed Il-2 'schturmovik' ground-attack aircraft of the Russians, Focke-Wulf Fw190A fighters began to reach the East from late 1942 onwards. JG 54 began conversion early in 1943, eventually operating three Gruppen of these aircraft on the front for the rest of the war. This Fw190A-4 of I/JG 54 is seen on a snow-covered airfield during the winter of 1943-4, featuring yellow undersides to the wingtips and engine cowling, and an off-white winter camouflage.

LaGG-3s and Yak-1s.

By September 1942 the Luftwaffe in Russia had been re-organized, *Luftflotten 1* and 2 having been combined to form *Luftflotte Ost*. Under its command, this new organization had the four *Gruppen* of JG 51, the three of JG 54, the remaining two *Gruppen* of JG 77, transferred from the south, and II/JG 3. It also retained the Spanish *Staffel*. In *Luftflotte 4* were *Stab*, I and III/JG 3, I/JG 53, *Stab*, I, II and III/JG 52, the Croat *Staffel*, and *Stab*, I and II/ZG 1. The units of ZG 26 had been withdrawn from the front. As the fighting raged from house to house in Stalingrad at a degree of ferocity unique even on this front, the Luftwaffe suddenly began to dwindle. I/JG 77 had gone to Sicily in July, but in Africa JG 27 had been terribly battered, and it was



25. A trio of Fw190A-4s of I/JG 54 during the winter of 1943-4.

decided to relieve the *Geschwader* with JG 77. Consequently during October *Stab*, II and III *Gruppen* left Russia for Libya, joined there by I *Gruppe*. To replace the latter in Sicily, I/JG 53 returned to that island during October to join the rest of the *Geschwader* once more. Then on 8 November 1942, came news of the Anglo-American landings in French North Africa, with a large air component in support. JG 53 alone could not cope, and more fighters had to be found. One *Gruppe* of Fw190s was sent from the Atlantic coast, while II/JG 51 was withdrawn from *Luftflotte Ost* and sent off to Tunisia as well. The Eastern Front had lost four irreplaceable *Jagdgruppen* within a month. The only reinforcement was in the north, where with a nucleus from III/JG 5, and some new *Staffeln*, IV/JG 5 was formed during the summer—although it was to operate mainly in the west; 10(Z)/JG 5 was renumbered as 13 *Staffel*. Something was done to try to raise the level of equipment, with a number of Bf109Fs at last reaching JG 5. In October, a third batch of Spanish volunteers joined JG 51, and also flew these aircraft at last, while a flight of the Hungarian I/1 Squadron began converting to Bf109Es, and the Croats with JG 52 started replacing their G-50bis fighters with Bf109s.

The Il-2 had always been difficult to shoot down owing to its heavy armour, and this required fighters to get in to close range from behind and stay there, pumping shells into the aircraft until it went down. Now a new version began to appear featuring

a rear gunner's position with a heavy 12.7mm B&S machine gun. Initially a number of unwary Bf109 pilots were shot down, but it was soon clear that something with a heavier armament was desirable to deal with these aircraft at greater range and with a shorter firing time. At this stage, the early versions of the Bf109G were appearing from the production lines, but these offered little or no advance in armament provision. The answer was clearly to try the Fw190 again, and during August-September it was issued to I/JG 51; III *Gruppe* followed suite in November, and IV *Gruppe* in January 1943, the Spaniards also receiving it. Even as I *Gruppe* prepared to introduce its new aircraft to action, disaster struck at Stalingrad.

On 19 November, the Red Army launched a massive offensive at the weakest point of the line, slicing through the hard-hit III and IV Rumanian Armies, and rolling up the Italian VIII Army. XI Army, having been despatched to the Leningrad front, was not available to fill the gap, and swiftly VI Army was surrounded at Stalingrad with winter approaching.

The story of the annihilation of the beleaguered VI Army, and of the Luftwaffe's unsuccessful attempts to keep it supplied during the very heart of the winter, is well known and does not require further elaboration here. Initially German, Rumanian and Hungarian fighter units continued to operate from airfields around Stalingrad, but as the Russian noose drew tighter, they were forced to withdraw to airfields behind the main Axis lines. For a month from mid-December to mid-January, a volunteer *Staffel* of pilots drawn from JG 3 operated a half dozen Bf109s from the remaining airstrip at Pitomnik, claiming 130 victories; 33 of these were credited to *Fw* Kurt Ebener, a II *Gruppe* veteran who had earlier flown over Malta. When it finally became necessary to evacuate the fighters from Pitomnik as the Russians approached, they were flown to a newly-prepared strip elsewhere in the encircled 'pocket', at Gumrak. The airfield was not complete however, and only one fighter survived the landing without major damage.

On 2 February 1943, the survivors capitulated, bringing to an end the most disastrous defeat the



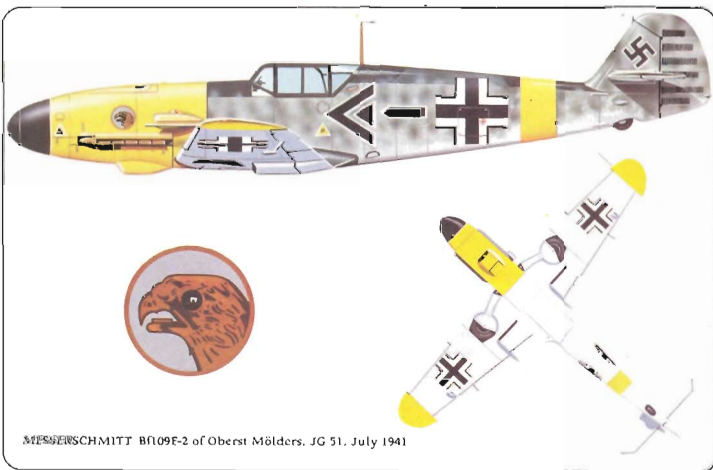
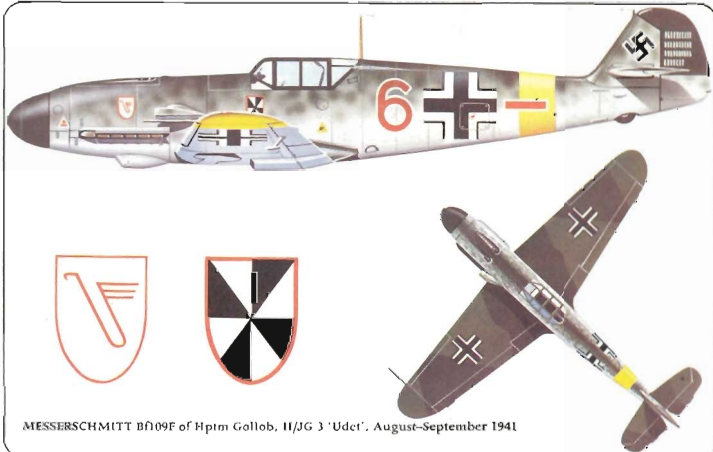
26. Hptm Günther Rall, Kommandeur of III/JG 52, receives congratulations on another victory. This photograph was probably taken in the spring of 1943 when his score was approaching 200. The Bf109G-2 carrying the JG 52 crest, also has the markings of the Gruppenadjutant.

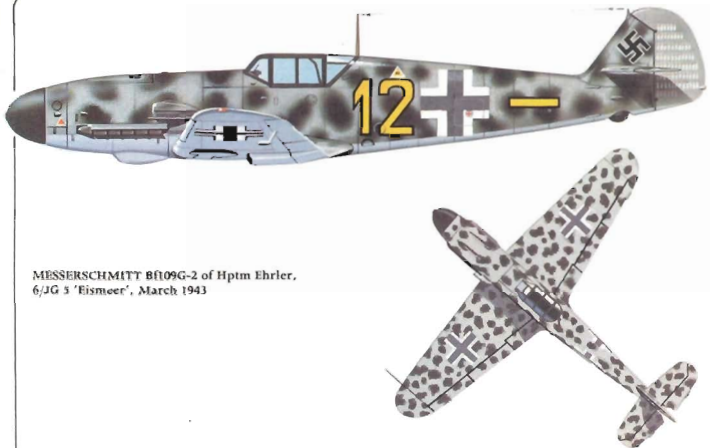
Germans had yet suffered—far worse than that inflicted at Alamein the previous October. By this time the main line was under severe pressure. Even before Stalingrad had fallen the Russians had launched strong advances down the Don towards Rostov, and to the south they advanced on Krasnodar. I Panzer Army was forced to withdraw from the Caucasus to aid in the defence of Rostov, while XVII Army drew back along the Kuban River. This allowed the Russians to reach the Sea of Azov, cutting the forces around Rostov off from those to the south. XVII Army's main purpose in defending what now became the Kuban Bridgehead, was to protect its lifeline to the Crimea from the Taman Peninsula. A Russian plan to cut XVII Army off from the peninsula by landings on the Black Sea coast west of Novorossiysk failed, and a long fighting withdrawal on the Kuban continued.

To the north of Rostov, an offensive all along the line as far as Kharkov was met by an Army Group South counter-attack on 21 February 1943. This inflicted severe losses, and by mid-March had restored the position and retaken Kharkov. These battles in the south during the winter ensured that the fighters of *Luftflotte 4* saw continued action despite the weather. During the retreat from the Caucasus, the Slovakian unit lost all its Bf109Es, and was withdrawn for re-equipment. Following the

Major, 1941–2, a highly decorated Gruppenkommandeur or Geschwader Kommodore of the Fighter Arm in the heyday of the great German successes in Russia. He wears a cream-coloured fabric 'windcheater' with grey-blue knit cuffs and waistband, and blanket lining—this garment was one of the optional flight jenkins used by fighter pilots, and was much favoured by Major Walter Oesau, for one. Rank epaulettes with the aircrew branch's yellow backing are worn, and a silver-on-blue Luftwaffe eagle is sewn to the right breast. Decorations are the Iron Cross 1st Class and the black 3rd Class Wound Badge (left breast), and the silver 8-point star of the German Cross (right breast). The Knight's Cross with Oak Leaves hangs from its throat ribbon. The breeches and kneebots of service dress are worn.







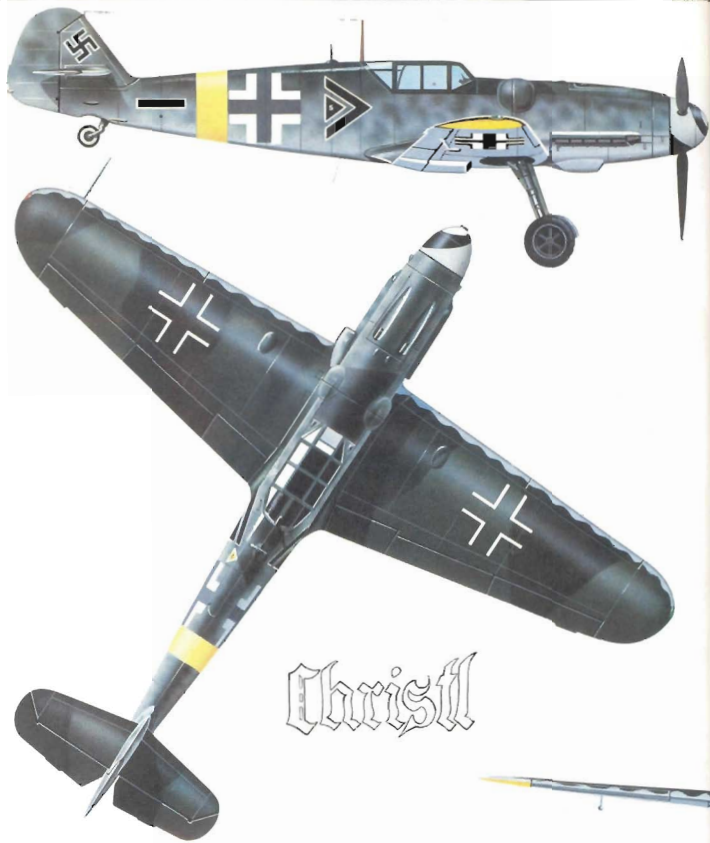
MESSERSCHMITT Bf109G-2 of Hptm Ehrler,
6/JG 5 'Eismeer', March 1943

OPPOSITE, TOP: Messerschmitt Bf109F flown by Hauptmann Gordon Gollob, commanding II Gruppe, Jagdgeschwader 3 'Udet' under Fliegerkorps V, Luftflotte 4 on the southern sector of the Russian Front, August–September 1941; the Gruppe was based at Stachanliwaja in late August when Gollob took over the command. Shortly before this, when he had 33 victories to his credit, Gollob flew an aircraft with black, pointed-top victory bars with national insignia above each; by the time he had recorded 37 victories he seems to have switched to a heavily oversprayed black-green rudder section with white bars. The camouflage scheme is conventional, a 'splinter' pattern of shades 70 and 71 on the wings and tail with a black-green spine and mottled side surfaces. The yellow undersides of the wingtips and the yellow fuselage band are normal Russian Front theatre markings. The horizontal bar behind the fuselage cross is the Gruppe symbol, and the '6' the individual aircraft number, both in the red of the Gruppe's second Staffel, 1/JG 3. The nose insignia is that of JG 3 and was normally carried on both sides; the badge beneath the windscreen is that of the Gruppe, and was sometimes carried on both sides, but more often on the port side only.

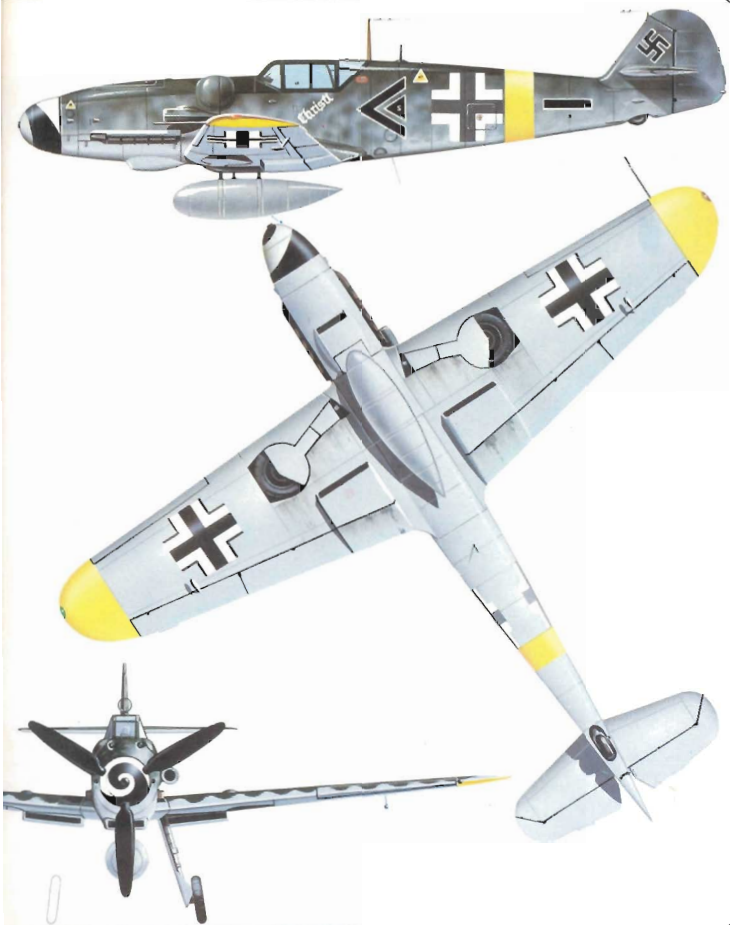
OPPOSITE, BOTTOM: Messerschmitt Bf109F-2 flown by Oberstleutnant Werner Mölders, Geschwader Kommodore of JG 31, operating under Fliegerkorps II,

Luftflotte 2 from Stary Bychow on the central sector of the Russian Front in mid-July 1941. The rudder shows Mölders's final score of 101 victories, achieved on 15 July. The camouflage scheme is conventional, in shades 70 and 71, with blue shade 65 heavily mottled on the side surfaces but with the original hard lower edge of the two-shade spine camouflage still clear. The yellow theatre markings include the whole nose back to the level of the wheel wells. The chevron-and-pointed-bar markings ahead of the fuselage cross indicate a Geschwader Kommodore—the insignia of wing commanders tended to vary widely in their exact composition, though they were all made up of the basic chevrons and bars. The insignia of JG 31 is carried on both sides of the cowlings.

ABOVE: Messerschmitt Bf109G-2 flown by Hauptmann Heinrich Ehrler, Staffelkapitän of 6/JG 5 'Eismeer', from Petsamo, Finland, in March 1943. The upper surfaces are finished in a very pale grey mottled with black-green. The rudder is unmottled, and displays Ehrler's 77 victories up to that point in the form of white bars with red stars above black dates. The spinner is black-green, and the fuselage and upper wing crosses are mid-grey instead of black. The Gruppe symbol (the horizontal bar of II Gruppe) and the individual aircraft number '12' are in the yellow of the third Staffel in each Gruppe—here, 6/JG 5. Some sources show yellow-painted under-wingtips, others do not.



MESSERSCHMITT Bf 109G-5 of Hptm Barkhorn, II/JG 52, December 1943



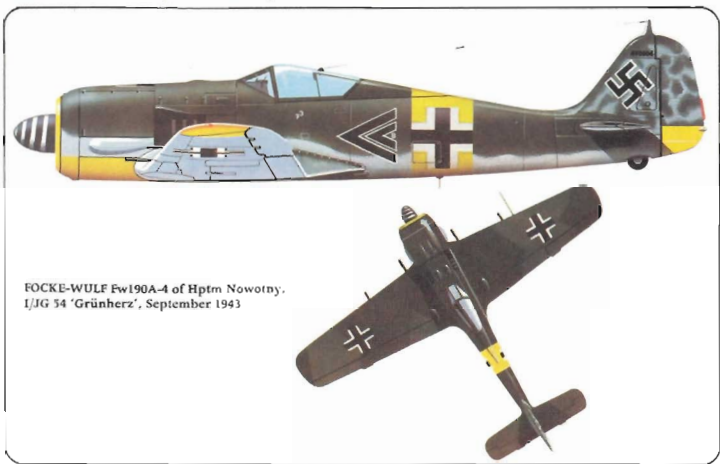
PAGES 28-9: Messerschmitt Bf109G-5 flown by Hauptmann Gerhard Barkhorn, Gruppenkommandeur of II Gruppe, JG 52, under Luftflotte 4 Headquarters on the southern sector of the Russian Front in December 1943. The machine is finished in conventional upper surface camouflage of shades 70 and 71, although by this stage the hard-edged 'splinter' was giving way to a wavier 'shadow-shading' scheme. The side surfaces, in blue shade 65, are heavily mottled: the upper surface national insignia appear in white outline only, and the fuselage crosses are in grey. Yellow theatre markings are carried, but there are no unit or victory markings (Barkhorn shot down his 227th and 228th victims on 30 December 1943). The name 'Christl' is a personal insignia, and appeared only on the port side. The command insignia are interesting—the small white '5' on the black central triangle is unexplained. Note that Barkhorn flew two very similar aircraft within a short period at this time; the other was virtually identical to this, but the command marking was in the form of two open chevrons with the white '5' in the angle of the smaller one. Photographs show that wing camouflage met the pale blue high on the leading edge in a wavy line.

BELOW: Focke-Wulf Fw190A-4, Werke Nr.470004, flown by Hauptmann Walter Nowotny, Gruppenkommandeur of I Gruppe, JG 54 'Grünherz', in the Orel/Byelgorod area of the central Russian Front in September 1943. No victory markings are carried, but he had achieved 235 'kills' by the 25th of that month. Upper wing and tail surfaces are finished in conventional 'splinter' camouflage of shades 70

and 71 but the fuselage is dark green (71) only. Yellow theatre markings are applied in a fuselage band, on the lower part of the rudder, on the cowl ring and engine undertray, and beneath the wingtips—though not extending onto the ailerons. National and command markings are conventional, although the small white '8' in the smaller chevron is unexplained, cf. pp. 28-9. Possibly it indicated that Nowotny was the eighth commander of the Gruppe. The small white '73' appeared beneath the cockpit on both sides—again, it is unexplained.

OPPOSITE, TOP: Unit insignia. (A) II/JG 51, 1943-5 (B) III/JG 51 (C) JG 52 (D) III/JG 52, from 1941 (E) II/JG 54 (F) IV/JG 54.

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM: Caravan used as operations trailer by 7 Staffel, JG 54 at Siwerskaja, Russia in June 1942. Finished in Luftwaffe blue-grey, it is decorated with a record of the squadron's victories over the various Allied air forces up to that point, when the 'Green Heart' Geschwader was heavily engaged over the Leningrad area. Beneath the word 'Luftsiege' ('air victories') appears a slightly modified version of the Staffel insignia as carried on the noses of the Bf109s. The colours of the insignia as illustrated are partly speculative, as the source is a monochrome photograph, but they seem logical when compared with the aircraft insignia. Photographs reveal that these caravans were frequently decorated in this kind of way, and many had huge rows of victory bars painted all over the sides.



FOCKE-WULF Fw190A-4 of Hptm Nowotny, I/JG 54 'Grünherz', September 1943



A



B



C



D



E



F

Operations Trailer, 7/JG 54, June 1942





Officer in winter clothing, Russia, 1943-4. The sheepskin version of the 1943 Einheitsmütze, with deep ear and neck flaps, seems to have been worn most often by officers, although not exclusively. The Luftwaffe's breast eagle insignia was generally sewn to the front above the national cockade. The heavy sheepskin coat is one of several different styles which were widely used. It is worn over old service dress trousers and the Luftwaffe's standard issue flying boots, which had leather feet and suede legs with straps at the top and the ankles. The carved walking-stick, decorated with motifs such as unit badges, Iron Crosses, oakleaves, and rings indicating victories, was a popular mascot: it was known as an Abschußstöcke.

NCO fighter pilot, Russia, 1943-4. On returning from the sortie which brought them some notable total of victories or operational flights, German pilots were normally greeted by their comrades with home-made wreaths, placards, alcohol, and ironic speeches. This NCO fighter pilot is being congratulated on 100 victories. He wears the blue-grey flying suit widely worn in the second half of the war, beneath one of many slightly varying types of leather flying jacket, usually privately purchased. His service dress peaked cap has yellow aircrew piping round the crown and both edges of the black ribbed band; the chinstrap is leather, and the badges are pressed alloy.





27. An interesting photograph of a Bf109 stated by Russian sources to have been shot down after an air action over the Kuban area in May 1943. Bullet holes are visible in the rear fuselage and it is thought that the machine force-landed, the pilot escaping before the damaged engine caught fire. Of note are the 15 victories marked on the rudder and the factory radio code letters obscured by the white fuselage band. (Novosti)

disasters around Stalingrad, the Italians withdrew their forces, to concentrate on their troubled African front nearer home. The *Regia Aeronautica* component withdrew before the end of January, its Macchi fighters having claimed 88 victories for 19 losses during 18 months in Russia. The other allies had no intention of withdrawing, however. The Hungarians managed to keep one flight of their 2/4 fighter squadron operation on Re.2000s until December, when all were finally lost in the retreat. I/1 Squadron, now fully equipped with Bf109Es and Fs, remained under German control at the front throughout the winter. Early in 1943, the 5/I Fighter Group was formed to continue the fight in Russia,

I/1 Squadron becoming 5/I Squadron, joined by a new unit, 5/2. Initially Bf109Fs were received, but the Germans soon supplied Bf109Gs, which were also being licence-produced in Hungary. The Rumanians, too, increased their air arm in Russia, although after Stalingrad they were forced to reduce the size of their army. The battered *Flotile I* was withdrawn, but four new squadrons newly-equipped with Bf109Gs (45, 46, 47 and 48 *Escadrilli*) were sent to the Ukraine in 1943, followed by four of IAR 80s (11, 12, 13 and 14 *Escadrilli*).

HARTMANN'S DEBUT

JG 52 was greatly involved in the fighting on the Kuban against the ever-growing numbers of Russian aircraft appearing over the front—mainly Yak-1s, LaGG-3s, Il-2s, P-39s and P-40s at this time. By late 1942, the *Geschwader* was fully re-equipped

with Bf109Gs, and it was in one of these that a very young pilot, new to the front with III Gruppe, claimed his first victory on 5 November. He was *Ltn* Erich 'Bubi' Hartmann, later to become the Luftwaffe's most successful fighter pilot.

It was II/JG 52 which was much to the fore at this time, however; *Oblt* Barkhorn, for instance, claimed his 100th victory on 19 December, and his 120th on 11 January 1943. During December *Ltn* Walter Krupinski pushed his score up to 66, while the *Kommandeur* of III Gruppe, *Maj* Hubertus von Bonin, another ex-Spanish Civil War pilot, received the RK for his 51st victory of the war. On 17

28. One of the greatest fighter pilots of all time. *Hptm* Walter Nowotny, *Kommandeur* of I/JG 54, pictured after becoming the first to achieve 250 victories during the summer of 1943.



December, JG 3's leader, *Maj* Wilcke, became the fourth pilot to top 150 (the third having been *Hptm* Hans-Joachim Marseille of JG 27 in Africa) and II/JG 52's *Kommandeur*, *Hptm* Steinhoff, reached a similar score on 2 February; he was the sixth to reach this score for a pilot of JG 54 in the north had already done so, as will be seen later. On 11 March, another member of JG 52 first claimed, but this newcomer was very different to the raw young Hartmann, though he was to emulate the latter's success. *Oblt* Wilhelm Batz was nearing his 27th birthday, and was a highly experienced pilot, with some 5,000 hours as an instructor. Only now was he at last having the opportunity to put theory into practice with II/JG 52. He would soon demonstrate that his age was no disadvantage, becoming one of the Geschwader's most rapid scorers.

In the north too, there was very heavy fighting, first as the Germans sought once more to take Stalingrad, and then during January as the Russians launched a fierce counter-attack to forge an overland supply route to the city, and link up with the forces cut off there. At the same time, offensives were launched at Staraya Russa, Velikiye Luki, and Rzhev to draw units of Army Group North away from Stalingrad to restore the situation on the line at these locations. Attempts were also made to isolate a narrow but deep and dangerous German salient at Demyansk, formed the previous year when German forces broke through to a surrounded pocket which had been successfully air-supplied. It proved impossible to stop a link-up by the Russians at Leningrad in mid-January, but they were prevented from exploiting, as far as they had hoped, the strategically-important Kirov railway which remained cut by the Germans. The attempt to 'nip-off' the Demyansk salient was thwarted, and the forces there withdrawn successfully during February. A larger salient at Rzhev was also withdrawn, allowing the line to be straightened and shortened. Fighting in the area throughout the winter was severe, and JG 54 was much involved. On 30 December 1942, *Ofw* Max Stotz of II Gruppe claimed ten victories in a single day near Lake Ilmen, going on by 26 January to become the fifth pilot to reach 150 victories. Not far behind him was

Oblt Beisswenger of the same *Gruppe*, but the latter was lost on 6 March over Lake Ilmen after shooting down two of ten Russian fighters to raise his total to 152. At the start of November, II/JG 54 had received a new *Kommandeur* in the person of *Maj* Hans 'Assi' Hahn. This pilot had gained 68 victories, together with the RK and EL flying with JG 2 on the tough Channel front. Hahn soon showed that the East held no terrors for him, raising his score to 100 by 26 January. On 21 February, he had to force-land with engine trouble with his score at 108, and became a prisoner; his replacement was *Hptm* Heinrich Jung (68 victories). Other pilots of JG 54 doing well at this time included *Oblt* Hans Götz and *Ltn* Horst Adameit of I *Gruppe*, and *Oblt* Günther Fink of III *Gruppe*, whose 46 victories included nine at night during the previous summer.

In the centre the line remained more static, but there was considerable fighting around Orel, where Russian advances to the south around Kharkov had caused a German salient to form. It was here that JG 51 introduced the Fw190 into action in the East with devastating effect. Before that however, the unit lost one of its leading pilots on 9 November when *Ltn* Franz-Josef Beerenbrock of IV *Gruppe* was shot down after his 117th kill, and became a prisoner. I and III *Gruppen* first used the Fw190 over the front the following month, but on 14 December, *Hptm* Heinrich Krafft, *Kommandeur* of I *Gruppe*, and victor of 78 combats, was shot down by AA fire near Bjelvi, where he was beaten to death by Russian troops.

Three days later, a III *Gruppe* pilot began a tremendous run of success in the new aircraft when he shot down five Pe-2 bombers in a single combat. *Ltn* Günther Schack had gained his first victory the previous July while flying a Bf109, but his rate of scoring had been very slow on this aircraft. On 29 January 1943, he again shot down five bombers over the Orel area, and by 11 February his score had risen to 30. In heavy fighting on 23 February, I and III/JG 54 claimed 46 victories, five of them credited to Schack; next day 43 more were claimed, seven of them by *Ltn* Josef Jennwein of I *Gruppe*, who had already claimed five in a day on 17 January. Schack's score reached 46 on 3 March, but two

weeks later his *Gruppe* converted back to Bf109Gs, the remaining Fw190s being passed to IV *Gruppe*, which had begun conversion during January. Supply of the new fighter was generally poor, and before long I *Gruppe* had also resumed flying Messerschmitts. One of the reasons for the short supply of the Fw190 was the decision to begin re-equipping JG 54, the *Stab* and I *Gruppe* receiving A-3 variants at the start of the new year. Towards the end of January however, the front was reinforced by the arrival of the Fw190-equipped I/JG 26 from the Channel Front. The departure of this unit from the west weakened the defences there just as the raids of the US 8th Air Force were making themselves felt, and consequently, in February 1943, the Bf109G-equipped III/JG 54 (less 9 *Staffel*)

29. *Hptm* Gerhard Barkhorn receives congratulations for his 1,000th operational sortie with II/JG 52. His Bf109G was named 'Christl' after his wife. (Barkhorn Collection)



was despatched westwards to make good the reduction.

The mud of the spring thaw brought a halt to all operations on the ground from March onwards, but by then the line had been stabilized, and the Germans were able to take stock. The news from the Mediterranean was bad, and reinforcements and supplies were still being directed there. At the start of May, the fall of North Africa would result in the loss of many thousands of men and much equipment, while the threat then posed to Sicily and Sardinia was self-evident. However the Bf109Gs and Fw190As continued to rule the skies in Russia, while new anti-tank aircraft were appearing, and supplies of Fw190 fighter-bombers (*Jabo*) were at last beginning to reach the front. Better tanks—Tigers and Panthers—were due to enter service in substantial numbers, so a new and decisive offensive was planned for the summer.

Originally to take place in June, Operation *Zitadel* was delayed until July by the late delivery of the important Panther tanks. It was designed to be launched in two thrusts to cut off the huge Russian salient centred around Kursk. The first blow was to come from the south, from the Kharkov area. The second would follow from the north, about Orel. The bulk of the Luftwaffe remaining in the East was gathered to support *Zitadel*, including eight *Jagdgruppen*—I and III/JG 52 and II and III/JG 3 in the south, all three *Gruppen* of JG 51 (I, III and IV) and one from JG 54 in the north. In the meantime,



30. Summer 1943 and the Battle of Kursk saw the last Eastern Front action for JG 3 before withdrawal to Reich Defence duties; this Bf109G-6 of the unit's II Gruppe is dispersed under a tree.

the fighting in the air continued at unabated ferocity over the Kuban, where I/JG 52 and II/JG 3 were particularly deeply involved. *Ltn* Wolf-Udo Ettel of the latter unit and *Hptm* Johannes Wiese of the former were much to the fore, Ettel claiming 84 victories between March and May to raise his score to 120. On 10 June, *Oblt* Rudolf Miethig of I/JG 52 gained his 101st kill by ramming a Russian fighter, but crashed to his own death with his victim.

At the start of June, I/JG 26 left the Smolensk region to return to France, having shot down 127 enemy aircraft for the loss of nine pilots. Over the front generally, aerial activity increased steadily as the weather improved. In the centre, *Ofw* Herbert Strassl of III/JG 51 enjoyed one of the most outstanding successes to date on 15 June, claiming 15 victories during four sorties that day, all in the area south of Orel. *Oblt* Walter Nowotny of 9/JG 54 meanwhile had a very good month too, claiming a total of 41 victories, including his 100th on the 15th. His best day was 24 June, with ten claims submitted. At last, on 5 July 1943, Operation *Zitadel* was launched to begin the battle of Kursk. This was beyond doubt the biggest and most important engagement of armour of World War II, and was to start with the most intensive air fighting of the whole war. The Russians were fully aware of the German plans, and had prepared defences in unprecedented depth. They also attempted to launch a massive pre-emptive air strike at dawn on the 5th against the Luftwaffe's airfields, where some 800 fighters, *Stukas* and bombers were preparing for the opening attack of the new offensive. German radar gave warning of the attack, allowing the bombers to be flown to safety, while the fighters intercepted. For minimal losses, they were able to claim 120 victories in this first clash, and by nightfall, total claims for the day stood at 432; 77 of these were credited to II/JG 3 alone (62 of them bombers), five by *Hptm* Kurt Brändle, who thereby raised his score to 151, while *Oblt* Joachim Kirschner claimed nine. In JG 52, *Hptm* Wiese of I Gruppe claimed 12 during the day, while *Oblt* Krupinski of III Gruppe claimed 11 to raise his score to 90. A further 205 claims were made on 6 July, many of them by JG 51 on the north side of the



salient. *Ofw* Hubert Strassl, who had claimed 18 victories during June, gained ten on this day alone; in four days (5th–8th) he would submit 30 claims, but on the last of these dates his aircraft was hit and he baled out at too low an altitude, dying with his score at 67. On this date also, *Hptm* Reinhard Seiler, *Kommandeur* of I/JG 54, claimed his 100th victory but was then seriously wounded. His place was taken by Walter Nowotny.

As the climax of the battle approached, 10 July brought news of the Anglo-American landings in Sicily. The main forces then clashed in a great tank battle at Prokhorovka, but even as the Germans approached a breakthrough, the Russians counter-attacked in the north at Orel, and on 13 July the decision was taken to call off the offensive and stabilize the line. The Germans had gambled all and lost. In the air the battle had seen the introduction in large numbers of improved Russian fighters—Yak-9s and La-5s—while the standard of their pilots was steadily improving. But the Luftwaffe fighters still held full sway, their relatively small numbers continuing to inflict disproportionate casualties. By 13 July, *Erich Hartmann* in III/JG 52 had gained his 34th success; two days later *Günther Schack* of III/JG 51 had his 50th, while in III/JG 3, *Obli* Emil Bitsch reached his 100th on the 21st. On the 20th however, Schack's fellow pilot in JG 51, *Ltn* *Jennewein*, now of IV *Gruppe*, was lost in combat in the Orel area with his score at 86.

Another blow struck Germany in July; on the 24th, came the first of three massive night raids which devastated Hamburg. By day US bombers added their bombs to the holocaust. Clearly the

31. Though few in numbers, Croat nationals proved amongst the most stalwart allies of the Germans during the mid-war years in Russia. Operating in the south with JG 52 as 15(Kroaten-Staffel)/JG 52, they achieved many victories. Here a Croat pilot has force-landed his Bf109G-6 at base after a sortie. Note the Staffel's Ustachi coat-of-arms.

defence of the Reich had to take precedence over all else, and while units were withdrawn from the Mediterranean, JG 3 was also pulled back from the East—but not before III *Gruppe* had lost its 78 victory *Kommandeur* to AA fire, *Maj* Wolfgang Ewald becoming a prisoner. The *Zerstörer* could also play a part in this defence, and the last of these aircraft were now withdrawn from Russia, one *Gruppe* of ZG 1 having already departed earlier in the year; only a night fighter *Staffel*, 10(NJ)/ZG 1 remained.

When the line was stabilized after the Kursk battle, Rostov too had gone. Only the Crimea and a reduced Kuban Bridgehead remained in the far south. The line then ran from Stalino, through Kharkov, Orel, Smolensk, Velikiye Luki and Novgorod to the Baltic coast just west of Leningrad. This whole massive front now relied for its fighter protection on just nine *Jagdgruppen*, 9/JG 54 forming the nucleus for a new IV *Gruppe*. The

32. Few illustrations have ever appeared of I/JG 4, formed in 1943 for the defence of the Ploesti oil refineries in Rumania. A *Staffelkapitän's* Bf109 forms the backdrop to this scene of Luftwaffe and Rumanian officers using models to determine the best angles of attack on the B-24 and B-17; the model interceptors are a pair of IAR 80s. Several of the latter are in the left background, with an He111 and Hs126 in Rumanian markings to the right.





33. Bf109Fs of I/JG 4 and Rumanian IAR 80s (of which at least 10 can be seen) on an airfield in the Ploesti area, 1943. Note that the fuselage cross on the German aircraft is a simple white outline against the camouflage.

Germans were faced by 61 Soviet armies, which began an offensive all along the front between mid-July and mid-August. Orel was the first major centre to fall. On 22 August, it was necessary to evacuate Kharkov, Army Group South fighting a long hard withdrawal throughout September. A big strategic retreat was then made across the Dnieper River, reducing a 600 mile front to one of 400 miles. Kiev was lost during November, while continued retreat in the south left the Crimea cut off other than by sea. The garrison there was to hold out until May 1944. Everywhere now it was a 'fire brigade' operation to prevent a general German collapse.

The three remaining *Jagdgeschwadern* fought on through the rest of that nightmare summer of 1943, scores rising but pilots gradually disappearing from the rosters. On 4 August, *Oblt* Hans Götz of I/JG 54 was seen to attack some Il-2s near Karatchev but crashed inverted into a wood; he had claimed 82 victories. Three days later *Ltn* Heinrich Höfemeier (96 v.) of I/JG 51 was killed by AA fire in the same area, while on the 19th, *Hptm* Max Stotz (189 v.) of II/JG 54 baled out behind the Russian lines near Vitebsk and was never seen again. On 5 September, *Hptm* Heinz Schmidt of II/JG 52 (173 v.) was lost over Marker, believed shot down in error by a Hungarian fighter while on the 26th, one of the last *Zerstörerflieger* in Russia, *Ofw* Josef Kociok of 10(NJ)/ZG 1, was also lost. After ten air and many ground claims with the old II/SKG 210, Kociok had gained 21 by night, 15 of them in 12 days. Now with

his final score at 33, he collided with a Russian aircraft and baled out, but died when his parachute failed to open.

It was not all bad news, though. On 1 August, Günther Schack gained his 60th victory; III/JG 51 then began re-converting to Fw190s once more, and on the 5th, he claimed five in three sorties. By the end of the month he had made 40 claims, and by 3 September had raised his score to 100, continuing to claim fast. By late October, with his score at 116, Schack was awarded the RK and sent on leave. In this same period, III/JG 51 had reached its 1,700th victory, including 40 on 1 September alone; on the 15th of that month, the 7,000th victory for the *Geschwader* as a whole was recorded. During August, Walter Nowotny of JG 54 and Erich Hartmann of JG 52 were each to claim 49 victories, Nowotny's claims including nine on the 13th and seven on the 21st. Hartmann, however, was shot down on the 20th and captured, though he was able to escape four hours later. He claimed 25 more in September, his 100th among them on the 20th of that month, while another 33 in October brought him close to 150. Nowotny was going at an even greater rate however, with 45 in September. Of these, seven were claimed in 17 minutes during the morning of the 1st, and three in nine minutes during the afternoon; 4 September brought his 200th, just ahead of III/JG 52's Günther Rall, who had been quietly working away to reach this total eight days later. October was to see 40 more victories for Rall, while Nowotny, after a quiet three weeks, began another run on 5 October which would net him 32 more in ten days, including eight on the 9th. On the 14th, he became the first to reach 250. His last victory in the East was to come on 15 November; with his total at 255 he saw out the year without further success, but was then posted to a training job. Rall remained close behind him, gaining his own 250th success on 28 November, while on the 30th, Gerhard Barkhorn of II/JG 52 joined the growing '200 Club'.

Other pilots continued to do well with JG 51 and JG 54 at this time. During October, JG 54's *Ofw* Otto Kittel recorded his 123rd kill since 1941, whilst on the 21st, *Ltn* Emil 'Bully' Lang claimed 12 victories

to begin a three-week run of success during which he was credited with a fantastic 72 victories, 18 of them in a single day; this was the highest total for one day ever claimed. By November, Lang's score had risen to 120.

In the Polar regions, JG 5 continued its own little war, where it too was amassing a formidable total. The unit's leading pilot, *Ofw* Rudolf Müller of II *Gruppe*, had gone missing on 19 April 1943, becoming a prisoner, but others were at hand to take his place. By the end of the year, two pilots had joined the '100 Club' and earned the EL; both were from III *Gruppe*—the *Kommandeur*, *Hptm* Heinrich Ehrler, and the ex-ZG pilot, Weissenberger.

By the latter part of 1943, all remaining elements of JG 54 in the East—*Stab*, I, II, and IV *Gruppen*—had converted to Fw190s, while JG 51, with the exception of the absent II *Gruppe*, was likewise equipped once more. Only JG 52 and one other unit

retained the Bf109G. The latter was a new *Gruppe*, I/JG 4, which had been formed early in the year for the air defence of the vital Rumanian oil complex at Ploesti. A small and unsuccessful attempt to bomb these targets by American heavy bombers newly-arrived in the Middle East during the latter part of 1942 nonetheless highlighted the latent threat of growing Allied air power in that region. Consequently, I/JG 4 was formed to augment the Rumanian home-defence squadrons, drawing for much of its experienced pilot strength on JG 51. Based at Mitzil, near Ploesti, the *Gruppe* had enjoyed its first taste of action on 1 August 1943, during the famous US 9th Air Force raid on the refineries,

34. While the new *Schlachtgruppen* were steadily replacing their *Ju88*s with Fw190 fighter bombers from 1943 onwards, the *Jagdgruppen* occasionally operated their aircraft in this role. Here an Fw190A is loaded with a 250-kilo bomb on a snow-covered airfield.



undertaken by a large force of B-24s from North Africa. While the unit enjoyed considerable success during this action, it was not to have the chance to repeat it, for in December 1943 it was posted to the Italian front, where it would be badly mauled during the Allied landings at Anzio the following month.

In November 1943, the new US 15th Air Force was formed in Southern Italy to expand the small strategic bombing force in the Mediterranean area. Newly-based on the mainland, its B-17s and B-24s, now escorted by P-38 and P-47 fighters, were soon beginning to appear over south-eastern Europe, attacking targets in Bulgaria, Rumania, Hungary, Austria and Southern Germany, as well as in the north of Italy. The Luftwaffe simply had no more available units to meet this threat, but production of fighters was now far outstripping both losses and the training of new pilots. The makeshift answer was to reinforce the air forces of the Axis, using them to form the basis of a southern 'shield'. As a consequence, instead of the obsolescent types previously handed down, quantities of the latest models of the Bf109G were now supplied to the Rumanians, Hungarians, Bulgarians, Slovaks and Italian Fascists. In the north too, these aircraft were issued to the hardy Finns, who formed a new unit of their most experienced pilots to operate them over the front. This arrangement did, how-

ever, call for the removal of much of the Axis air commitment to the Russian front. By November, the splendid Hungarian 5/1 Fighter Group had claimed over 60 victories, but now the 5/1 Squadron returned home, the remaining 5/2 Squadron becoming the 102 Independent Squadron. At home, the two existing Bf109 squadrons, plus the new arrival, were formed into the 101 Group, which in two months would be expanded into a regiment of six squadrons. Supply of Bf109s in Hungary was greatly augmented by licence-built examples and Me210 *Zerstörer* aircraft were also in production, one squadron being available for air defence at the start of 1944.

The Rumanians withdrew three of their four Bf109G units from the front to augment those on home defence, while the Slovakian 14 Squadron, after a brief return to support the Slovak Fast Division in the Crimea, also returned for this purpose. The Croat unit remained with JG 52 for a time, but during 1944 it too would go back to Yugoslavia for air defence duties, while the Spanish volunteer *escuadra* was finally withdrawn from JG 51 when it was seen that the war was obviously lost.

The situation could hardly have looked worse for the Germans at the start of the new year of 1944. During February, six and a half divisions were surrounded at Cherkassy, only a partial break-out proving possible, and by the end of March, as the thaw brought a temporary end to movement, I Panzer Army had been driven out of the Odessa area, most of *Luftflotte 4* being forced to move to airfields in Eastern Rumania. The losses in the south now left Army Groups North and Centre in a huge salient, running from the Pripet Marshes, right up to Leningrad. To cover this front of 1,800 miles, the Germans could muster an operational fighter strength of the order of 300–350 aircraft. *Luftflotte 4* in the south could put perhaps 100 into the air, including the Rumanian, Croat and Hungarian Bf109G units, and the IAR 80s of the Rumanian IX Fighter Group. In the centre, *Luftflotte Ost* could count on about an equal number from JG 51, with some 75 more to the north with JG 54. The balance was with the units of JG 5 in the wilds of Northern Finland and Norway, although in addition the Finns

35. Experten of II/JG 52 in conference, probably in March 1944 when all three of these officers were decorated. From left are: Ltn Heinrich Sturm of 4 Staffel, who received the RK after 82 victories (final score 157); Hptm Gerhard Barkhorn (centre), the 'Schwerte' for 250 (final score 301) and Oblt Wilhelm Batz (right), Staffelkapitän of 5 Staffel, awarded the RK for 75 (final score 237). (Barkhorn Collection)



had around 200 fighters available. From the numbers to hand it will be seen that virtually every other aircraft had one of the *Experten* as pilot—the only hopes for salvation that the Luftwaffe possessed. Against this puny defensive force the Russians could now concentrate with ease about 7,000 aircraft, of which probably half at any one time would be fighters—now mainly Yak-3s and 9s, and La-5s. This represented a normal fighter v fighter ratio of about ten to one, but at a given point of concentration it could often exceed double that figure. The only hope on the horizon was offered by the fact that the *Stuka* units—now renamed as *Schlachtgruppen* (ground attack units)—were steadily replacing their aged Ju87s with *Jabo* variants of the still-potent Fw190. Although their pilots were in no way trained for fighter operations, a few would show a propensity for air combat. At least the improved performance of these aircraft eased the burden of escort duties.

The period from 1 November 1943 to June 1944 saw a dozen more pilots reach 100 victories in the east, seven of them with JG 52. A further trio reached 150. It also saw 22 new major awards to fighter pilots on this front, six ELs and one S. The latter went to *Hptm* Barkhorn of II/JG 52, who claimed his 250th on 2 March. Losses amongst the *Experten* were relatively low during this period, only six being killed. One of them however, was *Maj* Hubertus von Bonin, *Kommodore* of JG 54 since the great Hannes Trautloft had left to take up the post of Inspector of East Front Fighters the previous July. Von Bonin (77 v.) was killed in combat near Vitebsk, his place being taken by *Maj* Anton Mader (86 v.), who came from Reich defence duties. It was JG 54 which also suffered both the other losses of formation leaders. After its move to Western Europe, III/JG 54 had been taken over by one of the more notable fighters on that front, *Hptm* Siegfried Schnell. During early 1944, he moved to Russia to head IV *Gruppe*, but very shortly after his arrival, with his score at 93, he was shot down and killed by Russian fighters on 25 February. *Oblt* Albin Wolf, in II/JG 54, received two of the awards granted to his unit during this time, achieving a landmark on 23 March when his own 135th victory was also JG 54's

7,000th of the war. A few days later, on 2 April, Wolf was killed by a direct AA hit. The other three losses were all the results of mid-air collisions—two of them with Russian fighters.

Among the more noteworthy events as operations increased with the arrival of spring, were some outstanding examples of multiple scoring. *Maj* Erich Rudorffer, a pilot who had flown with considerable success in Western Europe and Tunisia, had taken command of II/JG 54 during May 1943. On 6 November, he had claimed 13 victories in 17 minutes, but now others emulated his success. On 7 May, *Ltn* Peter Düttmann of II/JG 52 claimed nine, while on the 30th of this month, *Hptm* Wilhelm Batz of this same unit claimed a total of 15—but in seven sorties rather than one. On the same day, *Ltn* Walter Wolfrum of I/JG 52 claimed 11 between dawn and dusk, reaching his 100th two days later.

The next occasion for such high scoring occurred in the far north. On 17 June, a German convoy heading round the Arctic coast came under air attack by a large force of II-2s and II-4s of the Soviet Navy. While defending the ships against this onslaught, *Ltn* Walter Schuck of III/JG 5 was able to claim 12 personal successes. Ten days later, the Russians returned, this time with fighter escort, to attack the shipping in Kirkenes harbour. II and III/JG 5 again rose to the defence, *Ofw* Jacob Norz of

36. By 1944 JG 52 had become the Luftwaffe's pre-eminent fighter unit. Here *Ltn* Erich 'Bubi' Hartmann of 9 Staffel (centre) shares a joke with fellow pilots—one of them a Ritterkreuzträger. Hartmann's RK mit EL dates this picture as early summer 1944, when his score had already passed 200. He ended the war as top-scorer with 352.





37. JG 5's 5,000th victory is celebrated; note the unit's unusual winter camouflage scheme on the Bf109G in the background. The officer on the left is believed to be Hptm Franz Dörr, Kommandeur of III/JG 5 in 1944, who claimed 128 victories, including 12 in one day on 27 June.

the former unit and Hptm Franz Dörr of the latter each equalling Schuck's earlier success during the day.

Against the growing attacks of the US 15th Air Force to the south, II/JG 51 had been moved from Italy around the end of February to take up station at Nish in Yugoslavia, from whence the *Gruppe's* Bf109s could join in the defence of Ploesti and other Balkan targets. Escorted raids on Ploesti now followed, where III/JG 77, detached from the *Geschwader* in Italy during October 1943, moved to Mizil in Rumania. However, as Rome fell on 5 June, news came next morning of the full-scale invasion of Normandy. The overwhelming preponderance of Allied air power required instant and massive reinforcement of the west, but as most of the strategic bombers based in England were concentrating their attack on France instead of Germany, it was the Reich defences which were denuded most. III/JG 77 went with the rest of that *Geschwader* from Italy to France, while from the far north, II/JG 5 returned to Germany to re-equip with Bf109G-6s, and was then also thrown into the holocaust. (I/JG 5 from western Norway had already returned to Reich defence duties earlier in the year.)

38. Armourers of JG 52 load 20mm shells for the underwing cannon of one of the unit's Bf109Gs.

THE PINCERS CLOSE

No sooner were the Western Allies firmly established ashore, than the Russians launched their own huge offensive against Army Group Centre on 22 June 1944. Without adequate air cover, and weakened by withdrawals of all arms to west and south, the once-powerful army group collapsed with total and frightening rapidity. In a defeat of truly epic proportions, 28 of 38 divisions were smashed totally, with the loss of 400,000 men. In just five weeks, the Soviet armies were on the borders of East Prussia, where the shattered Germans were at last able to rally and bring the advance to a halt. A large part of Army Group North was by-passed, cut off on the Kurland Peninsula, where it would hold out for the rest of the war.

In the south, JG 52 now also found itself up against a new enemy. At the end of May III/JG 52 had evacuated the Crimea as the last German defences there crumbled, but on arrival in Rumania, it at once became involved in combat with aircraft of the US 15th Air Force—and on occasions 8th Air Force formations shuttling between England, Russia and Italy. Erich Hartmann was one of the first engaged, fighting the highly-dangerous P-51 Mustangs of the escort over Bucharest on 21 May, and Ploesti on 1 June. He was to claim seven of the American fighters shot down.

With the approach of the Russians, the Hungarians again increased their commitment at the





front from one to two fighter squadrons, but nothing would stop the massive power of the Soviet assault. During August, Russian forces poured across Rumania. On the 23rd, the Rumanians signed an armistice, and at once turned their forces upon their former allies. Although Bulgaria had never been formally at war with the Soviet Union, the Russians moved in and capitulation followed at once. To avoid the forces in the Balkans being totally cut off, a precipitate withdrawal from Greece, Albania and southern Yugoslavia followed. In the north, an equally severe attack on the Finnish defences on the Karelian Isthmus achieved success after hard and costly fighting. The Finns were also forced to agree to an armistice on 4 September, and like the Rumanians, were required to assist in driving the remaining Germans from their country. As a result JG 5's remaining units lost their bases in the Polar region, and were forced back into Norway.

The fall of the Balkans brought the remnants of the battered II/JG 51 up to reinforce *Luftflotte 4*, while after the first few terrible days in France, JG 77 was transferred in its entirety to Rumania following the opening of the Russian offensive. It did not stay long however, returning to Reich defence duties after a few weeks, when the fall of Rumania and Bulgaria turned the whole weight of the 15th Air Force westwards. IV/JG 54 was also moved to the west, but its loss was made good by the return to the Eastern Front of I/JG 53. The fighters did what they could—and it remained outstanding—but there

39. A late-model Bf109G with a long-range fuel tank under the fuselage and its wingtips marked in yellow taxis out for take off, probably during the late summer of 1944.

were just too few of them. Their efforts were mere pinpricks—albeit painful ones! They could do almost nothing to influence events. On 18 July, Hartmann became the third pilot to reach 250 victories. He then achieved 78 victories in four weeks, including eight on 23 August and eleven next day, when he became the first to exceed 300. He also became the last day fighter pilot to be awarded the *Br. Others* in the same *Geschwader* also performed brilliantly; on 16 July, *Ltn* Walter Wolftrum of I *Gruppe* claimed ten victories, although a few days later he was seriously wounded and saw no further combat. In his *Gruppe*, *Ltn* Franz Schall claimed 11 on 26 August, and 13 on the 31st, while in II *Gruppe*, *Hptm* Batz claimed his 200th on the 17th of that month. It was left to *Hptm* Adolf Borchers to confirm JG 52's position of pre-eminence however, when on 2 September he claimed his own 118th victory—and the *Geschwader's* 10,000th. At least half a dozen more *Experten* joined the '100 Club' by the end of 1944, but a greater number were killed. The losses included *Oblt* Anton Hafner of III/JG 51, the *Geschwader's* top-scorer, who flew into a tree while in combat with a Yak-9 at low level over East Prussia on 17 October; he had 204 victories at the time of his death.

The Germans, with only the Hungarians left as

their allies, were now fighting a hard delaying action as the Russians pressed slowly but surely into the Reich itself, and across Hungary. At least the fighters held together as cohesive units, and were achieving better than their comrades in the west, whose losses had been phenomenally high through-

out the second half of 1944. Fuel, too, was now becoming very scarce, though the supply of replacement aircraft never faltered.

As 1945 began, the Luftwaffe in the east had again been reorganized. *Luftflotte Ost* had been split again, with a new *Luftflotte 1* commanding the units

The end of the fighting found the following *Jagdgruppen* still on hand in the East:

Luftwaffenkommando Courland (Kurland)

| | | |
|------------|-----------------------------------|--------------|
| Stab/JG 54 | — Oberst Dietrich Hrabak (125 v.) | Fw190A-8 |
| I/JG 54 | — Hptm Franz Eisenach (129 v.) | Fw190A-8/A-9 |
| II/JG 54 | — Hptm Herbert Findeisen (67 v.) | Fw190A-8 |

Luftflotte 4

| | | |
|--|--------------------------------|----------------|
| II/JG 52 | — Maj Wilhelm Batz (237 v.) | Bf109G-10/G-14 |
| I/JG 53 | — Hptm Helmut Lipfert (203 v.) | Bf109G-10/G-14 |
| Hungarian 102 Fighter Regiment; nine squadrons | | |
| | — Col Aladar Heppes (7 v.) | Bf109G-10/G-14 |

* I/JG 51 and Stab/JG 76 were disbanded during the last two months of fighting.

Luftflotte 6

| | | |
|-----------|--------------------------------------|--------------|
| Stab/JG 3 | — Maj Werner Schroer (114 v.) | |
| II/JG 3 | — Hptm Bäker | Bf109G-10 |
| III/JG 3 | — Hptm Karl-Heinz Langer (30 v. app) | Bf109K-4 |
| IV/JG 3 | — Hptm Günther Schack (174 v.) | Fw190A-8/D-9 |

* I/JG 3 was disbanded during March.

| | | |
|-----------|------------------------------|--------------|
| Stab/JG 6 | — Maj Richard Leppla (68 v.) | |
| II/JG 6 | — Hptm Weyl | Fw190A-8/D-9 |
| III/JG 6 | — Hptm Müller | Bf109G-14 |

* I/JG 6 was disbanded during March.

| | | |
|------------|--------------------------------|----------------|
| Stab/JG 11 | — Maj Anton Hackl (192 v.) | |
| II/JG 11 | — Hptm Leonhardt | Bf109G-10/G-14 |
| III/JG 11 | — Hptm Herbert Kutscha (47 v.) | Fw190A-8 |

* I/JG 11 was disbanded during March.

| | | |
|------------|--------------------------------|---------------|
| Stab/JG 52 | — Oberst Hermann Graf (212 v.) | |
| I/JG 52 | — Maj Erich Hartmann (352 v.) | Bf109G-14/K-4 |
| III/JG 52 | — Maj Adolf Borchers (123 v.) | Bf109G-14 |
| Stab/JG 77 | — Maj Fritz Losikeit (68 v.) | |
| I/JG 77 | — Hptm Grosser | Bf109K-4 |

* II and III/JG 77 were both disbanded during March–April.

| | |
|----------------|--------|
| II(Eins)/EJG 1 | Bf109G |
| IV(Eins)/EJG 1 | Bf109G |

(These were operational training units, used actively over the front.)

Luftwaffenkommando Ost Preussen (East Prussia)

| | | |
|------------|---------------------------------|---------------|
| Stab/JG 51 | — Maj Dr Heinz Lange (70 v.) | Fw190A-8 |
| III/JG 51 | — Hptm Joachim Brendel (189 v.) | Bf109G-14 |
| IV/JG 51 | — Hptm Günther Josten (178 v.) | Bf109G-14/K-4 |

N.B. JG 1 was converting to He162 jet fighters, and JG 4 had returned to the defence of the Reich command.

in the Kurland and Gulf of Riga area; *Luftflotte 6* was responsible for East Prussia and the Carpathians, while the old *Luftflotte 4* covered the area of Hungary and Northern Yugoslavia. *Luftflotte 1* was very low on fighters, with only *Stab, I* and *II/JG 54*, and the *Geschwaderstab* of *JG 51*. *Luftflotte 6* had under its command *I, III* and *IV/JG 51*—all back on *Bf109s* again—together with *Stab, I* and *III/JG 52*. To the south, *Luftflotte 4* commanded *I/JG 53, II/JG 51* and *II/JG 52*, plus the *Geschwaderstab* of a non-existent *JG 76*. In northern Norway *Luftflotte 5 (Ost)* still had *Stab* and *III/JG 5* within range of Russian aircraft.

On 5 January, *Hptm Barkhorn* of *II/JG 52* became the second pilot to achieve 300 victories, but after his 301st was to see no further action, as he was posted back to the Reich to learn to fly the new *Me262* jet. The east was about to receive a substantial fighter reinforcement, however. The units in the west had made an all-out surprise dawn attack on Allied airfields on 1 January in an effort to seriously damage Anglo-American aerial supremacy. Results had been disappointing, while losses—particularly among the experienced for-

mation leaders—had been crippling high. Their continued inability to stop bombing raids, or significantly aid the *Wehrmacht*, now led Hitler to order a substantial part of their strength to the east, where it was hoped they might be able to achieve more. From mid-January onwards therefore, *JG 1, 3, 6, 11* and *77* were moved to the latter front, but in the event achieved little. They no longer compared with *JG 51, 52* or *54*; the losses in the west had reduced them to a level where the average pilot was inferior in training and experience to the Russians he now faced. Increasing fuel shortage kept them on the ground on many days, and when they did fly, it was mainly in the ground strafing role, in which they incurred further severe losses. The 'traditional' East Front *Jagdgeschwadern* fought on. On 1 February, *Erich Hartmann* was promoted to *Major*, and posted from *III/JG 52* to command *I Gruppe*. A fortnight later, however, *JG 54* lost its top-scorer when *Oblt Otto Kittel* of *I Gruppe*, whose total had increased in recent months to 267, was shot down

40. Where it all ended! A wrecked *Bf109G*, one of many on a Russian dump in the Minsk-Bobruisk area. (Novosti)



and killed in combat with Il-2s over Kurland. On 7 March, the recently-arrived JG 77 lost its *Kommodore* when Maj Erich Leie (118 v.) collided with a shot-down Yak-9, and was forced to bale out into captivity.

One month before the end of the war, on 8 April, *Hptm* Helmut Lipfert, recently posted from III/JG 52 to command I/JG 53, gained his 200th. On the 17th, he was the last *Jagdflieger* to receive the EL. *Fahnenjunker Ofw* Heinz Marquardt of IV/JG 51 became the last to reach 100 victories on the 14th, while on the 21st, Maj Wilhelm Batz of II/JG 52 was the last to receive an award of any kind, gaining the S.

The Luftwaffe was still in no way short of aircraft, but lack of fuel, loss of territory and shortage of pilots now led during the closing weeks of war to the disbandment of many *Gruppen*. In Italy and western Europe, the German forces began to surrender from 2 May onwards, but in the east they held on till the end. One of the Luftwaffe's very last aerial victories was claimed—fittingly—by Maj Hartmann, who shot down a Yak 11 over Brünn during the early morning of 8 May 1945—his 352nd victory. With the end of the war, most of the surviving *Jagdflieger* began what was probably their hardest test of all—a long period of imprisonment in Russian hands.

Top scoring *Jagdgeschwader* was JG 52, followed by JG 51 and JG 54. JG 5 had a total of about 2,700. Most successful ten pilots in the East were:

| | | | |
|------------------------|-----------|------------------|------------------|
| Maj Erich Hartmann | JG 52 | 352, in East | 352 in total |
| Maj Gerhard Barkhorn | JG 52 | 301 " | 301 " |
| Maj Günther Rall | JG 52 | 271 " | 275 " |
| Oblt Otto Kittel | JG 54 | 267 " | 267 " |
| Maj Walter Nowotny | JG 54 | 255 " | 258 " |
| Maj Wilhelm Batz | JG 52 | 237 " | 237 " |
| Oberst Heinrich Ehrler | JG 5 | (at least) 204 " | (at least) 209 " |
| Hptm Helmut Lipfert | JG 52, 53 | 203 " | 203 " |
| Oberst Hermann Graf | JG 52 | 202 " | 212 " |
| Oblt Walter Schuck | JG 5 | 198 " | 206 " |

The Luftwaffe kept a special note of the number of four-engined bombers pilots serving in the West or on home defence had shot down, as these were considered to be particularly difficult opponents. In the East, it was the Il-2 which proved the most testing enemy machine to bring down. Top-scorers against these were:

| | | |
|----------------------|-----------------------|---|
| Hptm Joachim Brendel | III/JG 51 | 90 + Il-2s from a score of 189 |
| Maj Johannes Wiese | I/JG 52 | 70 Il-2s from a score of 133 (including five in three minutes on one occasion) |
| Oblt Günther Josten | IV/JG 51 | 60 + Il-2s from a score of 178 |
| Oblt Kurt Dombacher | I/JG 51 | 43 Il-2s from a score of 68 |
| Hptm Helmut Lipfert | III/JG 52 and I/JG 53 | 36 Il-2s from a score of 203 |

Several leading pilots were also themselves shot down on numerous occasions, but returned to fight again. Some of the outstanding amongst these were:

| | | Times shot down | Own victories |
|---------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|---------------|
| Lin Peter Düttmann | II/JG 52 | 19 | 152 |
| Maj Erich Hartmann | I and III/JG 52 | 16 | 352 |
| Maj Erich Rudorffer | II/JG 54 | 26 (all fronts) | 222 |
| Hptm Helmut Lipfert | III/JG 52 and I/JG 53 | 15 | 203 |

Page 25: Gruppen ou Geschwaderkommodore—ayant le grade de Major et un des plus décorés parmi les équipages du groupe de chasseurs. Le blouson est en tissu avec les poignets et ceintures en tricot, il est doublé en lainage à couvertures et les épaulettes qui portent l'insigne de son grade sont doublées du jaune du groupe des équipages. Un aigle d'argent sur bleu Luftwaffe, la Croix de Fer 1^{ère} classe et l'insigne noir 3^e classe des blessés sont épinglés sur le côté gauche, sur la droite l'étoile d'argent de la Croix Allemande. La Croix de Chevalier avec feuilles de chêne est suspendue au cou par un ruban, la culotte de cheval et les bottes sont l'uniforme du service actif.

Page 26 en haut: Bf109F piloté par Hptm Gordon Gollob, commandant le II/JG 3 'Udet' en août-septembre 1941. L'appareil est vu au moment de la 37^e victoire de Gollob, ailes supérieures en vert 70/71, camouflage dessin d'esquilles. Les bandes jaunes sont les marques du front d'opération Russe, la barre horizontale celle du Groupe symbole et le nombre 6, le numéro particulier de l'avion, les deux dans la couleur du Staffel. L'insigne du JG 3 apparaît normalement de chaque côté du cône de l'avion, l'insigne sous le pare-brise étant celui du Groupe et placée d'habitude seulement à bâbord.

Page 26 en bas: Bf109F-2 piloté par Oblt Werner Mölders, Kommodore du JG 51, mi-juillet 1941. Les 101 victoires de Mölders sont peintes sur le palonnier et le camouflage est de standard vert 70/71, le fuselage largement pommelé sur bleu 65. Les bandes jaunes sont celles du front Russe, la barre et chevron indiquant le grade du pilote. Les insignes du JG 51 apparaissent de chaque côté du cône.

Page 27 ci-dessus: Bf109G-2 piloté par Hptm Heinrich Ehrler, Staffelfkapitän du 6/JG 5 'Eismeer' en Finlande mars 1943. L'appareil montre les 77 victoires du pilote à cette date et le camouflage est entièrement en vert et noir (pommelé pale gris), la barre horizontale sur le fuselage indique II Gruppe. Les numéros sont dans la couleur du Staffel.

Pages 28-29: Bf109G-5 piloté par Hptm Gerhard Barkhorn, Gruppenkommandeur du II/JG 52, décembre 1943. Surfaces supérieures en camouflage vert 70/71, croix grises sur le fuselage et croix blanches sur les ailes. Les marques en jaune indiquent le front d'opérations, et celle de 'Christl' est une marque personnelle et seulement à bâbord. Le second chevron large est exceptionnel (les deux chevrons indiquant le grade du pilote). La signification du petit 'S' en blanc n'est pas connue, bien qu'une seconde machine pilotée par Barkhorn le montre aussi.

Page 30: Fw190A-4 Werke No. 470004, piloté par Hptm Walter Nowotny, Gruppenkommandeur, I/JG 54 'Grunherz' dans l'Orel/Byelgorod, secteur du front central russe, septembre 1943. Aucune des 235 victoires du pilote n'est recordée sur cet avion qui a un camouflage en vert 70/71 avec le fuselage en vert foncé 71. Les marques jaunes du théâtre d'opérations, insignes nationaux réguliers avec le chevron double d'un Gruppenkommandeur; ce dernier a aussi un petit '8' blanc dans l'angle du second chevron. Cette fois encore ceci est inexplicable, mais il peut vouloir dire que Nowotny était le 8^e commandant du Groupe. Tout aussi intéressant est le '73' blanc sous la carlingue.

Page 31, en haut: Emblèmes de unités. (A) II/JG 51 1943-45, (B) III/JG 51, (C) JG 52, (D) III/JG 52, de 1941, (E) II/JG 54, (F) IV/JG 54.

Page 31, en bas: Poste de Commande caravane, utilisé par 7. Staffel, JG 54 à Siwerskaja, en Russie, Juin 1942. Peint

entièrement en bleu gris de la Luftwaffe, ce véhicule est décoré avec le détail des victoires du groupe sur les différentes Forces Alliées du moment. Le nom de 'Luftsiege' (victoires aériennes) est celui de l'emblème du Staffel utilisé par le Bf109, mais sous une forme modifiée. Plusieurs de ces caravanes attachées aux unités de la Luftwaffe étaient décorées de cette façon.

Page 32 à gauche: En Russie 1943-44. Officier en tenue d'hiver porte la coiffure en peau de mouton, une adaptation du 1943 'Einheitsmütze' avec pattes d'oreilles et de cou portée surtout par les officiers. L'aigle de la Luftwaffe était habituellement cousu devant au-dessus de la cocarde nationale. Le manteau est porté sur la vieille tenue de service avec des bottes d'aviation, tige en suède, courroies d'attaches de cheville et de tige de bottes, pieds en cuir. Une canne de marche, appelée 'Abschusstoke' est sculptée d'insignes, marques de l'unité, et cercles de victoires. C'était un ornement très populaire parmi les unités volantes.

Page 32 à droite: Sous-officier, pilote de chasse, Russie 1943-44. Portant un écriteau typique improvisé pour signaler un nombre remarquable de victoires ou de vols d'opérations—avec même une couronne de lauriers. Dans ce cas, le pilote vient de signer sa 100^e victoire et porte l'uniforme bleu-gris d'usage courant pendant la dernière moitié de la guerre. La jaquette en cuir n'a pas de style particulier, étant achetée usuellement par le pilote lui-même. La casquette est service régulier avec les ganses de l'équipage autour du fond et les bords de la bande bordés de noir. La jugulaire est en cuir et les insignes métalliques.

Farbtafel

Seite 25: Ein hochdekorierter Major, Jagdgruppen- oder Geschwaderkommodore, 1941-42. Die Stoffwindbluse hat gestrickte Aufschläge und Talleinband, Wolledackfütter und Schulterstücke auf gelben Unterlagen (Fliegerbräue), die auch die Dienstgradabzeichen tragen. Auf der linken Brustseite werden den Luftwaffenadler, das Eisener Kreuz 1. Klasse und das Verwundeten Abzeichen in schwarz (dritte Klasse) getragen. An der rechten Brustseite sehen wir den silbernen Stern des deutschen Kreuzes. Um den Hals hängt das Ritterkreuz mit Eichenlaub. Die Hosen und Stiefel sind vom Dienstanzug.

Seite 26 Oben: Die Bf109F, die von Hptm. Gordon Gollob, Chef II/JG 'Udet', August-September 1941 geflogen wurde. Das Flugzeug wird zur Zeit Gollob's 37. Luftsieg abgebildet. Die Oberflächen sind grün 70/71, Splittmusterarbschema. Die gelben Streifen heißen: 'Ostfront'; die waagerechte Balken hinterm Gruppensymbol und die Flugzeugerkennungsnummer, 6 sind in der Staffelfarbe. Das Abzeichen von JG3 wurde normalerweise zu beiden Rumpfspitzenseiten getragen; unterm Kanzel erscheint das Gruppenemblem (aber nur an der Backbordseite).

Seite 26 Unten: Die Bf109F-2 von Oblt Werner Mölders, Kommodore vom JG 51, Mitte Juli 1941 geflogen. Am Schwanzfloss Mölders 101 Luftsiege. Tarnfarben grün 70/71 mit starker Fleckung über blau 65 an den Rumpfsseiten. Die Maschine hat die gelben Ostfrontabzeichen und den Winkel und Balken Piloten Dienstgradabzeichen. Das JG 51-Abzeichen wurde auf beiden Rumpfspitzenseiten getragen.

Seite 27: Die Bf109G-2 von Hptm Heinrich Ehrler, Staffelfkapitän vom 6/JG 5 'Eismeer', Finnland, März 1943 geflogen. Die Maschine zeigt die 77 Luftsiege, die Ehrler damals hatte. Das Tarnfarbschema ist grün-schwarz mit hellgrauer Fleckung.

Der waagerechte Balken heisst: II Gruppe. Die Flugzeugnummer ist in der Staffelfarbe.

Seiten 28–29: Hptm. Gerhard Barkhorns Bf109G-5, Dezember 1943. Er war Gruppenkommandeur des II/JG 52. Die Oberflächen sind in grün 70/71, die Rumpfkreuze grau, Flügelskreuze weiss. Normale gelbe Ostfrontabzeichen. Die persönliche Name 'Christl' erscheint nur an der Backbordseite. Der Zweite, volle Winkel (zwei Winkel waren des Pilotendienstgradabzeichen) ist ungewöhnlich. Der Zweck der kleinen, weissen '5' ist unbekannt obwohl eine andere Maschine, auch von Barkhorn geflogen, so eine Nummer auch hatte.

Seite 30: Die Fw190A-4, Werk Nr. 470004, von Hptm. Walter Nowotny, Gruppenkommandeur I/JG54 'Grünherz', September 1943 im Orel/Byelorodischen Frontabschnitt geflogen. Nowotnys 235 Luftsiege werden nicht gezeigt. Die Tarnfarben sind grün 70/71, am Rumpf aber Dunkelgrün 71. Normale Hoheitsabzeichen, gelbe Ostfrontmarkierungen und den doppelten Winkel eines Gruppenkommandeurs. Im Zweiten Winkel eine kleine, unerklärte, weisse '8'. Vielleicht war Nowotny der achte Kommandeur dieser Gruppe. Die weisse '73' Fliegerbiese um den Oberteil und an beiden Rändern des schwarzen Kopfbandes. Der Kinnriemen ist aus Leder, die Knöpfe aus gepresster Legierung.

Seite 31 Oben: Einheitsabzeichen: (A) II/JG 51, 1943–45; (B) III/JG 51; (C) JG 52; (D) III/JG 52 ab 1941; (E) II/JG 54; (F) IV/JG 54.

Seite 31 Unten: Ein Operations-Zentrale-Anhänger wie vom 7. Staffel, JG 54, Siwerskaja, Russland, Juni 1942 benutzt. Das Fahrzeug hat einen Luftwaffen-blaugrauen Anstrich und ist mit Details der verschiedenen Siegestrophäen geschmückt. Unter 'Luftsiege' ist eine Abart des Staffelembles wie auf den Bf109s getragen. Viele solcher Luftwaffenanhänger waren in dieser Weise geschmückt.

Seite 32 Links: Offizier in der Winterbekleidung, Russland 1943–44. Er trägt die Schafpelz Verbesserung der 1943 'Einheitsmütze' mit Obren- und Nackenschutz, dass hauptsächlich von Offizieren getragen wurde. Der Luftwaffenadler wurde normalerweise über der Kokarde getragen. Der Mantel wird über alten Dienstanzughosen und vorschriftsmässigen Fliegerstiefel mit Wildledernen Schäften und Fuss- und Knie-riemen getragen. Der Spazierstock ('Abschuss-stock' genaunt) wurde mit Abzeichen, Staffelembles und Siegeskränze geschnitzt und wurde unter der Fliegerereinheiten sehr beliebt. Seite 32 Rechts: Unteroffizier jagdpilot, Russland 1943–44, ein typischem hausgemachten Luftsieg-oder Einsatz 'Denkmalanschlagzettel' samt 'Lorbeerkranz'. Hier hat der Pilot gerade seinen 100. Luftsieg hinter sich. Er trägt die blau grauer Fliegeranzug, das veil in der letzten Kriegsphase gesehen wurde. Die Lederjacken wurde fruat angeschaffen und hatten deshalb viele Ausführungen. Die vorschriftsmässige Schirmmütze zeigt die.

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