

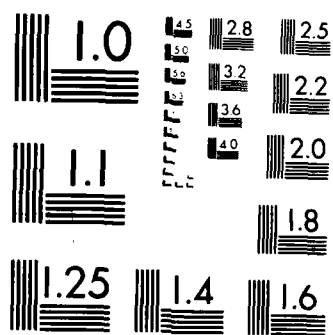
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STUDENT REPORT

56TH FIGHTER GROUP: "WOLFPACK"
OPERATIONS - AIR BATTLE FOR BERLIN

MAJOR FREDERICK L. BREITINGER JR.

REPORT # 88-0385

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AIR BATTLE FOR BERLIN



AUTHOR(S) MAJOR FREDERICK L. BREITINGER JR., USAF

FACULTY ADVISOR LT COL DAVID L. MCFARLAND, ACSC/EDCJ

SPONSOR LT COL DAVID L. MCFARLAND, ACSC/EDCJ

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Pictured above is a painting by Harley Copic inspired by the exploits of the 56th Fighter Group and in particular Maj Walker M. "Bud" Mahurin (promoted 21 March) during the Air Battle for Berlin, March 1944. Shown, is "Bud" Mahurin in his aircraft "The Spirit of Atlantic City, N.J." as he escorts bombers from the Eighth Air Force on a bombing raid to Berlin. Maj Mahurin was subsequently shot down in this aircraft on the 27th of March by return fire from his 20th kill, a Do-217 bomber. He then successfully evaded capture and with the help of the French underground returned to England on May 7th.

PREFACE

This is a history of the 56th Fighter Group (FG) during the month of March 1944. It was an Army Air Force unit in the European Theater of Operation (ETO) and flew P-47s throughout World War II. The 56th FG was one of the most successful allied fighter units of the war. It achieved more aerial victories and produced more aces than any other unit. One of the many highlights of the 56th FG came during the Air Battle for Berlin, March 1944. This paper focuses on the exploits of the 56th FG during that historic air battle.

The emphasis of this paper is on the air battles fought by the fighter pilots of the 56th FG during March 1944. Setting the scene are a series of chapters designed to give the reader a proper perspective and appreciation for the actual battles themselves. Chapter One provides a short history of the 56th FG. Chapter Two gives a background from the Allied perspective on the strategic events and decisions leading up to the Air Battle for Berlin. Chapter Three looks at the German strategic decisions and the tactics used by the Luftwaffe. Chapter Four examines the tactics used by the 56th FG in combating the Luftwaffe. In Chapter Five, a chronological accounting of the battle is provided from actual combat reports and recounts from 56th FG pilots. Finally, Chapter Six provides closing remarks and lessons worth remembering for the future.

This paper is not intended to convey the entire story of the 56th FG or the Air Battle for Berlin. The 56th FG was but one of over 20 American fighter groups in the battle. Important to remember as well, is the story of the thousands of bomber crews who flew along the flak highway over Germany. They are mentioned only in passing; however, it in no way lessens their effort or sacrifice. Lastly, the German side of the battle is sparingly told; it was beyond the scope of this paper to provide more.

The author would like to thank several individuals for their assistance in this project. Former 56th Fighter Group "Wolfpack" members Colonel Francis S. Gabreski, USAF, Ret, for the in-depth interview he gave; Colonel Walker Mahurin, USAF, Ret, for his personal letter recounting a particular battle; Colonel Hubert Zemke, USAF, Ret, for his helpful letters and phone conversation; and finally Lieutenant Colonel Robert S. Johnson, USAF, Ret, for

CONTINUED

the insight gained from his book, Thunderbolt!. A special thanks (wherever he is) to SSgt Robert K. B. Woodward, 63rd Fighter Squadron Intelligence Department, whose excellent squadron monthly reports provided much of the actual combat reports in this paper. Many thanks to Lieutenant Colonel David L. McFarland of the ACSC staff who got me in touch with the former pilots mentioned before, pointed me in the right direction, and kept me on track.

Much of the language in the combat reports is the actual jargon used by the fighter pilots in detailing their missions. Additionally, German words for flying terms are used in their accounts. To aid in catching the meanings of some of these words, a glossary has been added to this report. It is split into two sections, American/Allied and German.

Lastly, the "reference-by-number" system is used in lieu of footnotes. Following passages or paragraphs, a series of numbers will follow. The first number represents the source number from the bibliography, and the second number tells what page the reference came from. A double dashed line means the entire source was used.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Major Frederick L. Breitingger Jr. was commissioned in 1976 through the AFROTC program at the University of Colorado. He graduated with a B.S. in Business Administration and in 1986 earned his M.B.A. from Saint Martin's College, Lacey, Washington. After completing navigator training, he was assigned to Mountain Home AFB, Idaho as an F-111 Weapon System Officer. He subsequently upgraded to Instructor Weapon System Officer and in 1982 was selected to attend pilot training at Columbus AFB, Mississippi. Major Breitingger was a distinguished graduate of pilot training and also the top graduate of his F-15 training class at Luke AFB, Arizona. From 1983 to 1986 he flew the F-15 while stationed at McChord AFB, Washington. During that time, he served as Chief of Training and Flight Commander. Prior to attending Air Command and Staff College in residence, he completed a remote tour at Keflavik Naval Air Station, Iceland, where he flew F-15s. He is the son of a retired Air Force Colonel who was himself a navigator and then a command pilot. Major Breitingger and his wife Lynn have two children.

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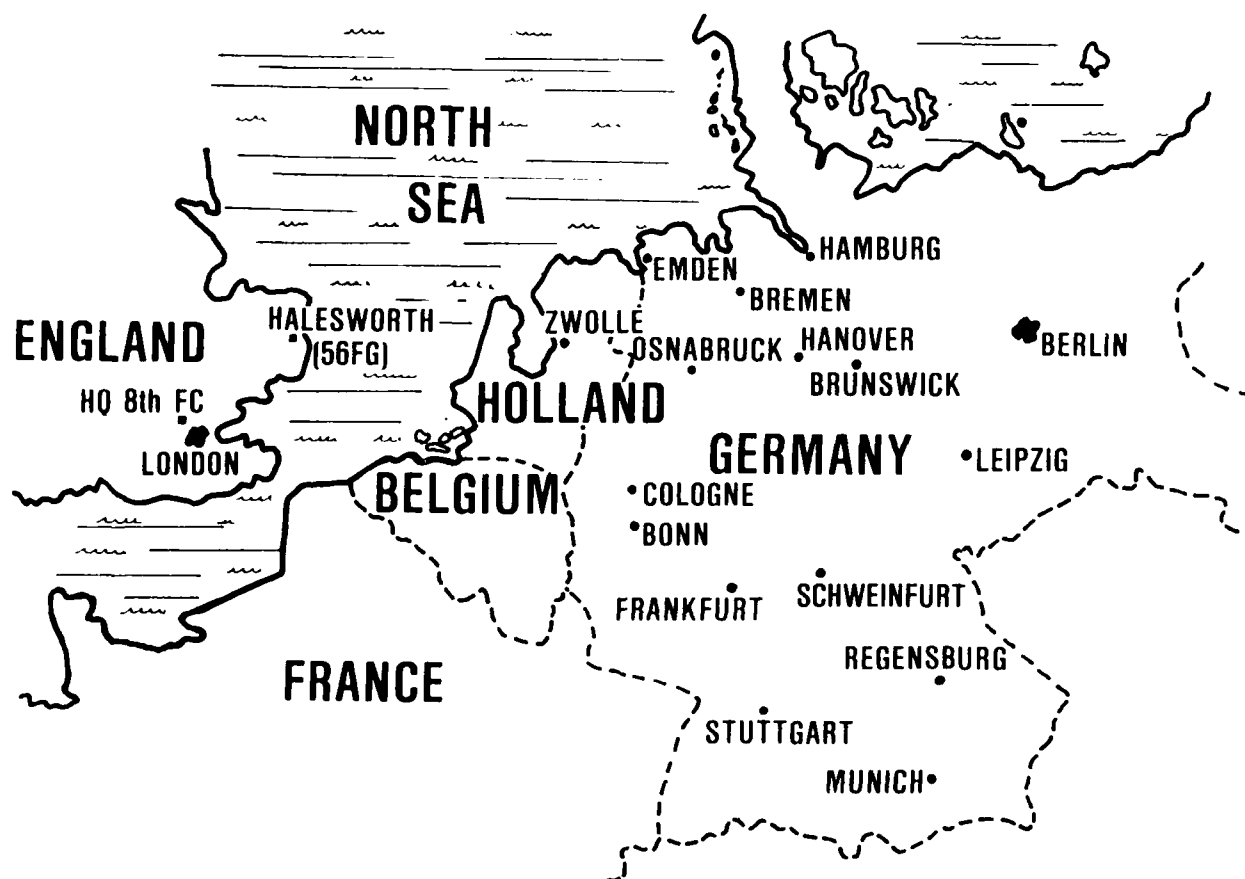
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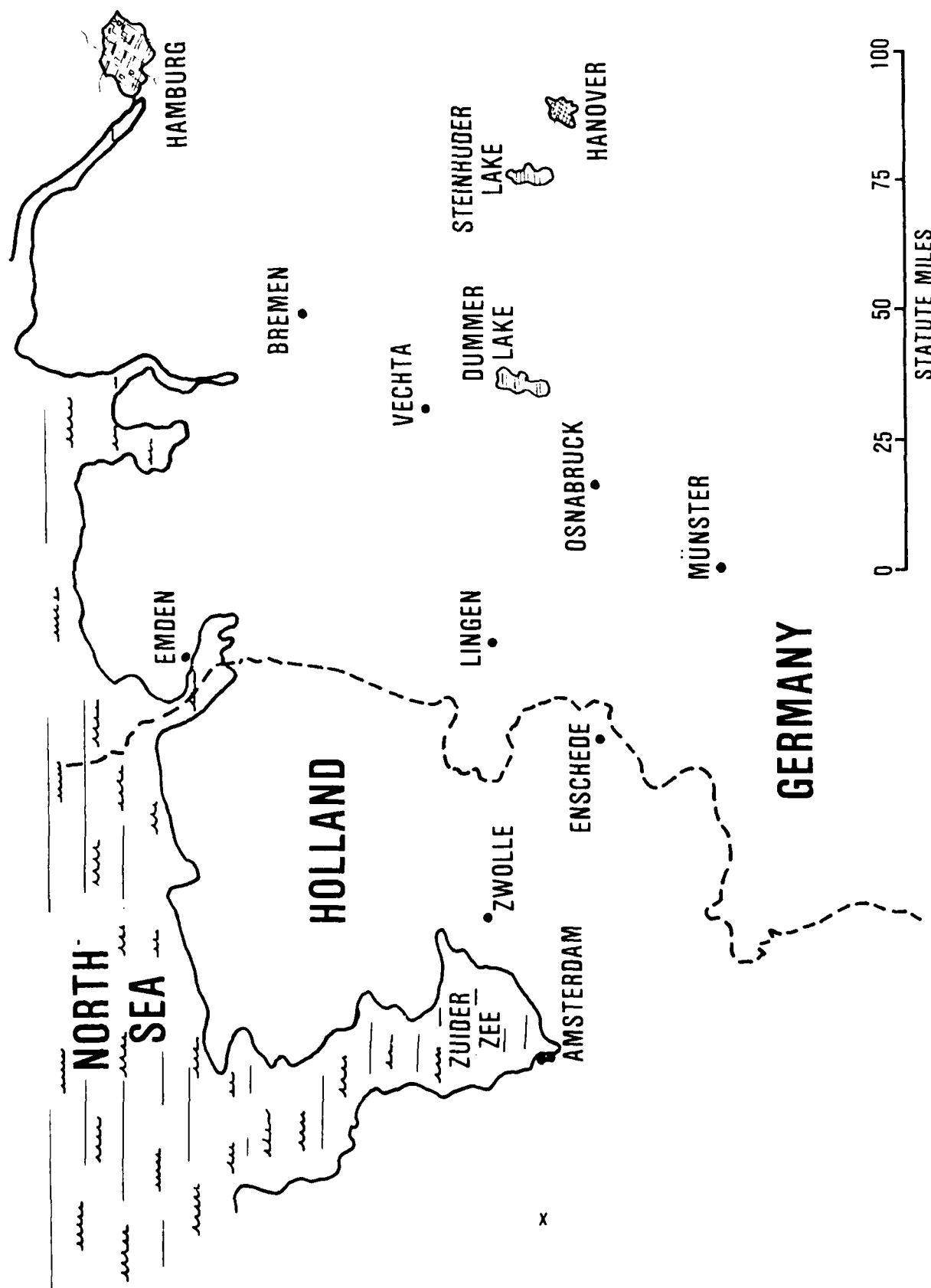
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EUROPEAN REFERENCE MAP



REFERENCE MAP FOR KEY POINTS OF ENGAGEMENT



GLOSSARY

American / Allied

Ace: pilot achieving 5 air-to-air kills

Bandits: enemy aircraft

Big Friends: friendly bombers, i.e. B-17s, B-24s

Bogies: unidentified aircraft

Contrails: visible trails of condensation made by high altitude aircraft

Deflection Shot: firing from a side angle with a high line of sight movement

Element: basic 2-ship of fighters

Flak: antiaircraft fire, also referred to as Ack-Ack

Flight: 2 elements, 4-ship of fighters

Gaggles: loose flying enemy aircraft

Group: 3 squadrons, (24-36 fighters)

Landfall In/Out: crossing the coastline of the European continent

Little Friends: friendly fighters, i.e. P-47s, P-38s

Lufberry: a circle of fighters in a tight turn trying to shoot each other down

MM: millimeters, as in 20mm

MPH: miles per hour, referenced off statue miles

O'clock: hours of clock used to note directions, i.e. 9 o'clock means the left

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Pipper: a small point of light in the center of the reticle on the aircraft gunsight

Reticle: a series of circles projected on a glass plate in front of the pilot, used to estimate the range to a target

Section: 2 flights, (8 fighters)

Split-8: rolling over on your back and pulling vertically for the earth

Squadron: 3 to 4 flights, (12-16 fighters)

German

Destroyer: twin-engine fighters, i.e. Me-110, Me-210 and Me-410

Feldwebel: flight sergeant

FW: Focke-Wulf, as in FW-190 a single-engine fighter

Geschwader: 3 Gruppen (4 later in war), (100-200 aircraft)

Gruppe: 3 to 4 Staffels plus one Staff Staffel, (30-36 aircraft)

Hauptmann: captain

JG: Jagdgeschwader, single-engine fighter group

Luftwaffe: air force

Me: Messerschmitt, as in Me-109, named after aircraft designer Willy Messerschmitt

Oberleutnant: first lieutenant

Oberstleutnant: lieutenant colonel

Schwarm: fighters in sections of 3 or 4 aircraft

Staffel: squadron, (9-12 aircraft)

ZG: Zerstörergeschwader, twin-engine fighter group

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REPORT NUMBER

88-0385

AUTHOR(S)

MAJOR FREDERICK L. BREITINGER JR., USAF

TITLE

56TH FIGHTER GROUP: "WOLFPACK" OPERATIONS - AIR
BATTLE FOR BERLIN

Activated in January 1941, the 56th Fighter Group (FG) was one of the premier units to come out of World War II. Selected to bring the P-47 on line, the 56th FG helped develop the Thunderbolt. Arriving in Scotland in January 1943 with the P-47C the 56th FG entered the war.

Flying out of England the 61st, 62d and 63rd Fighter Squadrons of the 56th FG flew their first combat sorties in April 1943. In P-47s throughout the war, the group achieved 674 aerial victories, more than any other unit. It also produced 47 aces, among them names such as Gabreski, R. Johnson, Mahurin, Zemke, Christensen, Schilling and G. Johnson.

In preparation for the D-Day invasion (code named OVERLORD), the allies had undertaken a series of operations. The Casablanca Directive in 1943 spelled out objectives for the Eighth Air Force bombers. It in turn fostered the Combined Bomber Offensive (code named POINTBLANK) conducted by British and American forces. At the request of Gen Hap Arnold, a new offensive (code named

CONTINUED

ARGUMENT) was adopted in 1944. Designed to destroy the German aircraft industry and defeat the existing Luftwaffe fighters, ARGUMENT resulted in several important battles. Maj Gen Doolittle's Eighth Air Force, along with the Ninth and Fifteenth Air Forces dealt severe blows to the Luftwaffe in operations such as Big Week (Feb 44), and the Air Battle for Berlin (Mar 44).

The Luftwaffe feeling the pressure on the Russian and Mediterranean fronts was further pressed by the increasing American and British bombing efforts against Germany. Withdrawing fighters and reorganizing their defenses, the Luftwaffe hoped to fight back the never-ending American bombers. Changing tactics and rearming their fighters, they were for a time able to hold the bombers at bay. Increasing American fighter presence slowly brought the Luftwaffe into a battle of attrition. In a desperate attempt to defend Berlin from bombing, the Luftwaffe took a terrible beating during March 1944.

The fighter pilots of the 56th FG using the P-47D with water injection, superior training, sound tactics, and excellent leadership were highly successful during the Air Battle for Berlin. Coupled with this was the decision to allow the fighters to abandon close escort tactics and range far ahead and to the sides of the bombers. The fighters aggressively sought out the Germans in the air and on their own airfields. Towards the end of March, many bomber crews never saw a German fighter.

A key to understanding the battle is the personal perspectives of the fighter pilots of the 56th FG. Actual combat reports, recollections, and narratives are explored in Chapter Five. Significant days for the 56th FG were the 6th, 8th, and 15th of March.

Although the Germans were able to keep up their aircraft production despite the allied bombing, it was the loss of pilots which cost them the war. Overwhelmed during the first half of 1944, in particular March, the Luftwaffe was unable to replace the experienced fighter pilots lost over Germany. Lack of training due to oil shortages led the Luftwaffe into an endless cycle as more and more inexperienced Luftwaffe pilots fell to the guns of the American fighters.

The Luftwaffe, now severely hurt, was unable to provide adequate air support to the German army during the allied invasion of Europe. With the dominant air superiority enjoyed by the allies, victory was assured.

Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

The 56th Fighter Group, VIII Fighter Command, Army Air Forces, United States Army, is cited for exceptional aggressiveness, outstanding performance of duty and extraordinary heroism in action over enemy occupied Europe during the period 20 February to 9 March 1944, designated by the Commanding General, Eighth Air Force, as "a decisive air battle." During this battle, the 56th Fighter Group, by its vigor, skill and daring, despite conflict necessitating hazardous journeys over water and enemy occupied territory far beyond the normal range of fighter aircraft, accounted for 98 enemy aircraft destroyed, 9 probably destroyed, and 52 damaged. The aggressiveness, determination to destroy the enemy, and extraordinary heroism of the 56th Fighter Group has been a most substantial factor in driving the German Air Force from the skies. Its record is inspiring and worthy of emulation.

By Order of the Secretary of War:

- G.C. MARSHALL, Chief of Staff
16 May 1944 (19:213)

This quote from the Distinguished Unit Citation which the 56th FG received for its participation in the Air Battle for Berlin is but one example of the tremendous success they achieved during World War II.

Prior to entering the war in Europe, the 56th FG served as an air defense unit in the United States. The unit was activated in January 1941, at Savannah Army Air Base (AAB), Georgia. After moving to Charlotte AAB, North Carolina, where they flew P-39s and P-40s, the unit was transferred in January 1942 to New York where air defense patrols were flown. The 56th FG was selected to fly and test the P-47B, and began flying them in June 1942 (13:118). As they continued to fly the P-47B, bugs were worked out, pilots came to feel comfortable in their new aircraft, and the unit began to solidify into a well trained combat group. Alerted for overseas deployment, the group arrived in Gourrock, Scotland, January 1943.

The 56th, 4th and 78th Fighter Groups were to be the nucleus of the Eighth Air Force's Fighter Command. The 56th FG consisted of the 61st, 62d (Figure 2) and 63rd Fighter Squadrons (FS). These units' elite fighter pilots were thoroughly trained and eager to make their presence felt in Europe. Eagerness aside, they were forced to wait and continue to train. Second in line for newly arriving P-47s, the 56th FG's entry into combat was delayed until its rival group the 4th was fully equipped. Newer P-47Cs were beginning to arrive, but they were still experiencing some problems. Additionally, deficiencies were noted in the pilots' air-to-air gunnery, and several sorties were flown in March to remedy this. At long last the 56th FG entered the war and flew its first combat mission on April 13th, 1943 (3:41).



Figure 2. The 62d Fighter Squadron flying P-47Ds.

Despite a slow start, by war's end, the 56th FG had compiled an impressive combat record. After 2 months of combat flying, they had no air-to-air kills, and had lost three P-47s to the Luftwaffe in the process. The group was due for a change of luck; the coincidental arrival of their P-47Ds in June marked the beginning of great achievements for the 56th FG (3:242). Its first victory came on the 12th of June, as Captain Cook of the 62d

FS shot down a FW-190. The next day, the 56th FG, led by group commander Colonel H. "Hub" Zemke, brought down three more FW-190s--things were starting to get better (3:43). In July, the group moved to Halesworth, England, where they remained until April 1944. Its greatest success to date came on 17 August 1943 during the infamous Schweinfurt bombing raid. Penetrating into Germany for the first time with the use of newly developed drop tanks, the 56th FG surprised the Luftwaffe as it attacked B-17 bombers on their homeward leg. In the ensuing battle 17 German fighters were shot down, with a loss of only one P-47. On a similar mission on October 4th, the 56th FG shot down 15 Me-110s as they prepared to launch a rocket attack on a force of B-17s. The 56th FG scored its 100th victory on the 5 November 1943, and because of its aggressive group tactics, began to become known as the "Wolfpack", a name that stuck (10:92-94). The group went on to be a key player in the allied air plan known as ARGUMENT. Taking place in early 1944, ARGUMENT was undertaken to destroy the Luftwaffe in preparation for the invasion of Europe. During ARGUMENT, the 56th FG gained much notoriety while participating in operations known as Big Week (Feb 44), and the Air Battle for Berlin (Mar 44). In January 1945, it began receiving P-47Ms and flew these until the last mission on 21 April 1945 (3:242). The 56th FG's final air-to-air kill was on April 10 1945 (20:--).

Statistics give credence to the 56th FG's claim as the most successful fighter unit in the ETO. It scored more air-to-air victories than any other unit--674. It added another 311 victories on the ground to finish second only to the 4th FG in total kills. Significantly, its combat losses were nearly half of those experienced by the 4th FG (3:230-231). Equally impressive was its 8-to-1 kill ratio, again highest of any group (19:212). Additionally, it was the only group to exclusively fly the P-47 throughout the war. The 4th FG achieved most of its kills with the P-51 (3:242).

On an individual note, the 56th FG produced more aces than any other fighting unit. Famous fighter pilots such as Francis "Gabby" Gabreski, Robert Johnson, David Schilling, Frederick "Rat-Top" Christensen, Walker "Bud" Mahurin, Hubert "Hub" Zemke, and Gerald W. Johnson were among the very best in the ETO. In all, the group had 47 aces (19:106 & 212).

The 56th FG can truly be considered one of the finest fighter groups to come out of World War II. Their statistics, combat leaders, innovations, and efforts all speak for themselves. The defeat of the Luftwaffe was due, in large part, to the dedication, sacrifice, and skill of great fighter pilots found in groups like the 56th FG. The Air Battle for Berlin marked the effective end of the Luftwaffe and paved the way for the D-Day invasion which ultimately ended the war. The 56th FG was a key player in severely crippling the Luftwaffe during the Air Battle for Berlin.



Figure 3. Generals visit the 56th Fighter Group on Brass Hat Day (14 March 1944). From left to right, Lt Col Schilling, Col Zemke, Maj Gen William Kepner, and Brig Gen Jessie Auton. Sitting are Maj Gen James Doolittle (left) and Lt Gen Carl Spaatz (right).

Chapter Two

PRELUDE TO THE AIR BATTLE FOR BERLIN

From now on that no longer holds (Eighth Fighter Command motto: *OUR MISSION IS TO BRING THE BOMBERS BACK*). Your mission is to destroy the German Air Force. Take that damned sign down!

- Maj Gen J. Doolittle (Commander 8th Air Force) to: Maj Gen W. E. Kepner (Commander 8th AF Fighter Command), March 1944 (18:267). (Figure 3)

Although the Air Battle for Berlin was 2 years away, events shaping the strategic situation began in early 1942. Brig Gen Ira Eaker arrived in England in March to set up the command components for the Eighth Bomber Command of the Eighth Air Force. By the time Maj Gen Carl Spaatz, Commander of Eighth Air Force, arrived in May, specific strategic air operations were still not fully defined. There was little if any agreement between the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Navy, Army or the Army Air Force. Additionally, strategic agreements between the U.S., England, and Russia were far from unanimous. Some wanted to attack the German industrial heartland (Spaatz and Eaker); the Russians wanted an invasion to lessen their plight on the Eastern front; the British wanted to attack the Germans in the Mediterranean; and, others wanted the German submarine threat removed as a first priority. Furthermore, the RAF Bomber Command wanted the Americans to abandon daylight bombing (7:144). While the strategic decisions continued to be debated, Brig Gen Eaker's bombers continued to build up and contribute to the war effort. The Eighth Bomber Command's first mission was on 17 August 1942. Protected by British Spitfires, 18 B-17s successfully bombed a railyard in France, and with no losses. Flying the lead aircraft of the second flight of bombers, was none other than Brig Gen Eaker himself (3:12). Raids continued throughout September and October, generally with good results. Eaker and Spaatz's desire to extend their bombing missions to Germany was squelched when new allied strategic directives were announced.

With the allied forces deadlocked in strategic debate, President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill decided upon the option to invade North Africa. Operation TORCH which began in

November 1942, took priority over all other operations. In support of Operation TORCH, five groups of B-17s from the Eighth Bomber Command were moved to North Africa (7:147). Additionally, U.S. domestic pressures forced 15 groups originally destined for the Eighth Air Force to be diverted to the Pacific Theater (3:13). With their remaining bomber forces, the Eighth was directed to concentrate on the coastline cities where German U-boat pens were located (10:62).

The Casablanca Directive was to provide the long awaited strategy for air operations. On 14 January 1943, President Roosevelt, Prime Minister Churchill and the Combined Chiefs of Staff approved the Casablanca Directive. This consensus of action produced several significant decisions. First, allied air units were to be centrally organized under Air Force command and control, rather than the previous piecemeal allocation of air assets to army ground commanders. Second, despite strong opposing arguments from the Air Force side, President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill decided to continue operations in the Mediterranean, with Sicily as the next objective. Lastly, as a result of Brig Gen Eaker's eloquent portrayal of round-the-clock bombing (RAF at night, AAF during the day), Eighth Air Force was allowed to continue daylight bombing. The primary objectives for bombing were: (1) German submarine construction yards, (2) German aircraft industry, (3) transportation, (4) oil plants, and (5) other targets of war industry. The invasion of the European Continent was still not thought feasible until the spring of 1944 (7:149-153).

With the industrial might and flying schools of the United States working at maximum effort, the Army Air Forces began to slowly build. By May 1943, Eighth Bomber Command had increased its B-17 and B-24 force to over 300 bombers. Likewise, the fighter force continued to grow as more and more P-47s and P-38s arrived in England. Matching this increase, and setting the scene for future major air battles, the Luftwaffe, during the same time period, increased its fighter force in the area by over 300 aircraft (10:70).

A refinement to the original Casablanca Directive was adopted by the Combined Chiefs of Staff on 18 May 1943. The directive added a last sentence that now read:

To conduct a joint United States-British air offensive to accomplish the progressive destruction and dislocation of the German military, industrial, and economic system, and the undermining of the morale of the German people to the point where their capacity for armed resistance is fatally weakened. This is construed as meaning so weakened as to permit initiation of final combined operations on the Continent. (7:168)

This Combined Bomber Offensive (code named POINTBLANK) was then undertaken. "To accomplish this directive, 60 targets were selected from the following principal categories:

- (1) German aircraft industry
- (2) Submarine construction yards and bases
- (3) Ball Bearings
- (4) Oil
- (5) Synthetic rubber and tires
- (6) Military transport vehicles

An intermediate objective, critical to the destruction of these targets, was the destruction of the Luftwaffe" (7:165).

The Combined Bomber Forces continued to build, gain experience, and develop tactics as they carried out operation POINTBLANK. The largest offensive to date was seen during the last week of July 1943 when, at long last, the weather cleared over Germany. Brig Gen Eaker's wide-ranging offensive became known as Blitz Week. Starting out with 330 B-17 bombers, the Eighth lost over 100 aircraft and 90 crews during the week (3:66). In August, operation STARKEY was undertaken in an effort to deceive the Germans into thinking an invasion was imminent. Bombing raids were conducted against airfields in France, Belgium and Holland. On 17 August 1943, Eighth Air Force was to truly discover the determined effort possible by the Luftwaffe. On this first anniversary of Eighth Bomber Command's entry into combat, a mission to the ball bearing factories at Schweinfurt was flown. Over 200 enemy fighters intercepted the force of 230 B-17s. Despite the determined resistance of the P-47s with their new drop tanks, 60 bombers were lost during the raid (3:67-69). On September 27th, the P-47s, for the first time, escorted the B-17s all the way to and from their target in Germany (3:83). As the end of 1943 drew near, Eighth Air Force had over 700 bombers and 550 fighters (including rapidly arriving P-51s). Opposing them was a building Luftwaffe which now had over 1500 fighters in the west and in Germany. Increasingly it became obvious that operation POINTBLANK was slowly providing the allies the air superiority desired (3:98).

As plans for the invasion of the Continent (code named OVERLORD) loomed nearer, General Dwight D. Eisenhower was named the Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force. Upon accepting the command, Eisenhower brought with him Air Marshal Tedder and Gen Spaatz as his top commanders. They in turn selected Maj Gen James Doolittle to command the Eighth Air Force (former 12th AF Commander in support of operation TORCH). Maj Gen Eaker, who had worked so long to build up the Eighth, was reassigned to command the Mediterranean Allied Air Forces. Maj Gen Doolittle inherited 25 heavy bomber groups and 15 fighter groups. Additionally, the newly formed Ninth Air Force could

supply 18 fighter groups for escort support. Over 5,000 American combat aircraft stood ready to destroy the Luftwaffe (18:255-260).

General Hap Arnold's 1944 New Year's message restated the importance of destroying the German Air Force: "...Therefore, my personal message to you-this is a MUST-is to, *Destroy the Enemy Air Force wherever you find them, in the air, on the ground and in the factories*" (18:261). Armed with this renewed emphasis on the importance of striking every facet of the German Air Force, Maj Gen Doolittle set out to destroy the Luftwaffe. He had but a few short months to reduce the threat of the Luftwaffe in preparation for the invasion of the continent. Against him was the German effort to increase their defenses and the ever-present terrible weather. Towards that effort, a new offensive called ARGUMENT was adopted. ARGUMENT was to coordinate attacks between the Eighth, Fifteenth, and British Bomber Command on key targets associated with German aircraft industry (18:269). (Figure 4)

After 6 weeks of delay due to bad weather, Operation ARGUMENT finally got under way during the last part of February. The first mass attack came on 20 February and began what was later to be known as Big Week. Coordinated efforts against the German aircraft industry continued until the 25th of February when the weather again turned sour. The Eighth, Fifteenth and RAF Bomber Command dealt a blow to the German Air Force. The Eighth and the Fifteenth flew 3800 bomber sorties and dropped the equivalent of the Eighth's total first year tonnage. Bomber Command flew an additional 2351 sorties. The 2548 fighter escort sorties flown kept the bomber losses to 137 bombers (6 percent). Bomber Command suffered a 6.6 percent loss rate to flak and Luftwaffe night fighters. Although the Allies overestimated the damage they inflicted, they nonetheless damaged 75 percent of the buildings which produced 90 percent of the German aircraft (7:180-183).

Maj Gen Doolittle sensed the beginning of the end for the Luftwaffe, and following Big Week, made two of the most controversial decisions to date. The first called for an increase of a bomber crew's tour length from 25 to 30 missions. He argued chances were now better for survival and those extra five missions kept a crew flying when they were at their best. Secondly, he unleashed the fighters from close escort and allowed them to aggressively pursue the Luftwaffe fighters. Both decisions were unpopular with the bomber crews, while quite expectedly the fighter pilots were ecstatic. No longer would they be tied to the bombers, but free to engage the enemy in all areas and altitudes (18:266,271). Previously the fighters had been prohibited from attacking below 15,000 feet, and the German fighters often rolled on their backs and dove away (28:--). Maj Gen Doolittle felt his decision on fighter support was the single most important military decision he made in World War II (18:281).



Figure 4. B-17s from the 94th Bomb Group during Operation ARGUMENT (6 March 1944).

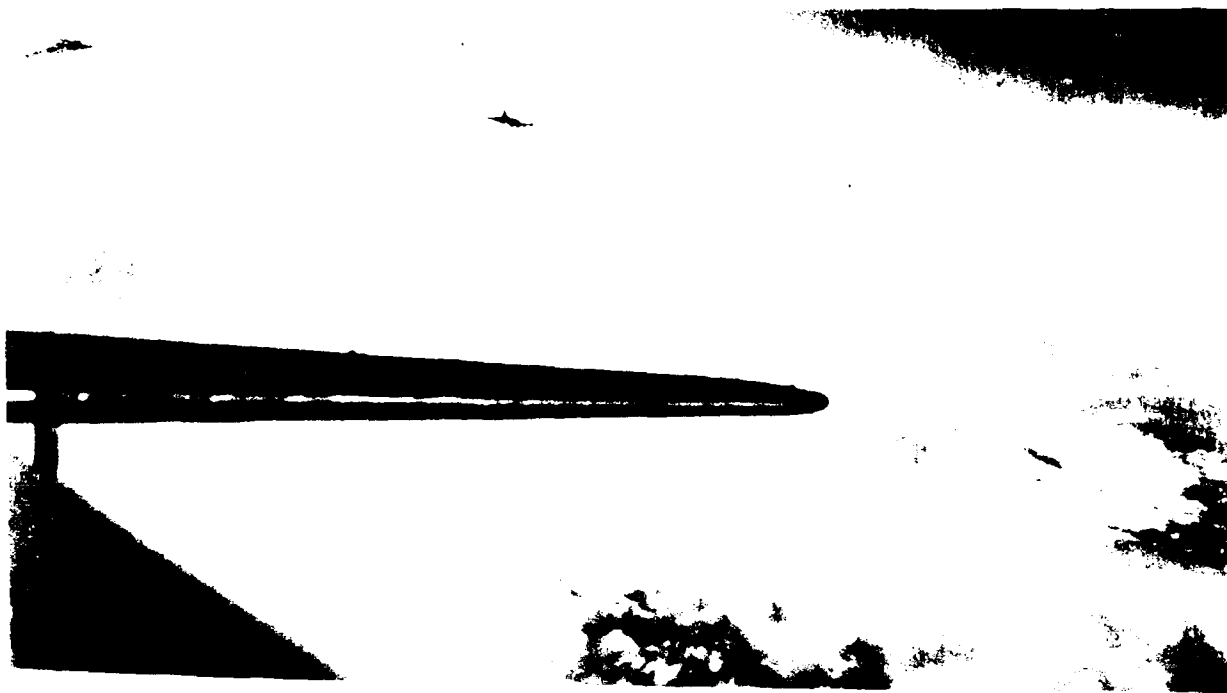


Figure 5. B-17s under attack by FW-190s.



Figure 6. B-17 going down after enemy fighter attack.

Chapter Three

LUFTWAFFE STRATEGY: DEFENSE OF THE HOMELAND

The ratio in which we fight today is about one to seven. The standard of the Americans is extraordinarily high. The day fighters have lost more than 1000 aircraft during the last four months, among them our best Staffel, Gruppe and Geschwader commanders. These gaps cannot be filled. During each enemy raid we lose about 50 fighters. Things have gone so far that the danger of a collapse of our arm exists.

- General Adolf Galland, April 1944
Report to the Reich Air Ministry
(6:250)

The Air Battle for Berlin in the spring of 1944 marked the effective end of the Luftwaffe; however it was the events of 1943 that set the stage for their final defeat in the skies over Germany.

The Luftwaffe in the beginning of 1943 was stretched to the breaking point. Retreats in North Africa and Russia placed heavy commitments upon the Luftwaffe. Meanwhile, the Luftwaffe air defense in the west had remained relatively unchanged since 1941. A force of 250 to 300 day fighters was based along the Western theater's coastline. In the past this had been sufficient to handle the American bombing raids against targets in France and Holland. The RAF's Bomber Command had continued its nighttime bombing raids, and correspondingly, the Luftwaffe continued to modify tactics and build up its night fighter force. The German air defense system was just beginning to realize the possible threat facing the Reich (14:177-181).

Gen Galland was to eventually become the most outspoken advocate of strengthening the Reich air defense; however he failed to fully see the threat facing Germany. In January 1943 he advocated the need for more fighters, but for use in the Mediterranean theater, where he predicted the main Luftwaffe requirements would be. Reichsmarschall Herman Goering also called for increased fighter production, but only to complement his fighter bomber operations (14:180).

Progressively the RAF Bomber Command's nighttime raids and American daylight raids began to swamp the German defenses. Adolf Hitler became enraged and demanded reprisals for the sake of the German people. Additionally, the Americans steadily increased the number of bombers used on each raid. By the summer of 1943, the Luftwaffe was no longer faced with a minor threat in the west.

Bomber Command's devastating Hamburg raid in July 1943 brought the problem to a crisis level. Erhard Milch of the Air Ministry outlined the serious nature of the threat Germany faced. Through Hitler, Milch announced top priority was to be placed on air defense. Day and night fighter production was to be increased dramatically. Despite this decision, increased production wouldn't be noticed until the summer of 1944. Nevertheless, the threat was now in the west, and other operations in the Mediterranean and Russia would take a back seat in production and pilot allocations (14:180).

German losses on the Eastern Front, in the Mediterranean, and in the west during July and August forced the Luftwaffe to reassess its strategic situation. The American bombing raids had increased in size and fighter protection. As a result, the German High Command increased its shifting of pilots and planes from the east to the west. The Luftwaffe cited the need to attack these large battle formations with concentrated large defensive forces. Losses were great on both sides, as a battle of attrition began over Germany (Figures 5 and 6). Typical of the situation in the fall of 1943 was the bombing raid on Schweinfurt on 17 August. The severe losses the Americans experienced came at a considerable cost to the Luftwaffe. The Germans lost 24 single engine fighters, 12 Me-110s in the air and had another 12 fighters written off from battle damage. Throughout July and August, the Luftwaffe lost 683 single-engine fighters in the west. Additionally, 86 twin-engine fighters were lost in August, prompting the recall of all Me-110 units to the relative safety of Germany proper. As perhaps a forecast of Germany's fate, Jeschonnek (Luftwaffe Chief of Staff) committed suicide on August 18th, after the Schweinfurt/Regensburg bombing raids (14:181-182).

Throughout July and August, the Luftwaffe lost over 3,000 aircraft on its three fronts. Fighter losses were 31.2 percent in July and 36 percent for August. During the same 2 months, 16 percent and 15.6 percent of the fighter pilots were lost. Therefore, faced with the increased combined allied bombing effort on the Reich, the German High Command greatly reduced its air efforts in the Mediterranean and Russia. Germany was under attack (14:183). The withdrawal of fighter units from the east and south allowed the Luftwaffe to rapidly reinforce their defenses in Germany. Fighter strength increased from 600 to 1000 by early October. An additional 200 twin-engine fighters also stood by in Germany for air defense (14:224).

A change of tactics and strategy surfaced in September to combat the advancing American flying armada. Twin-engine fighters were reequipped with rockets. These were fired at the B-17s from beyond the range of their defensive armament. Meanwhile, Me-109s and FW-190s were reequipped with heavier guns in order to bring down the durable B-17 bombers. Several bases throughout Germany were pre-stocked with fuel, ammunition and ground crews in order to facilitate quick turn arounds and increased sorties. Some aircraft were equipped with drop tanks as well. Goering however, killed the program in October, calling it a waste of resources. The Luftwaffe's use of radar for pre-warning and positioning of fighters also became more effective (14:225).

The beefed-up and reorganized defensive forces were able to win several tactical victories. Relying on limited allied fighter range (up to September 1943, P-47s could only escort the bombers to the German border between Emden and Cologne), the Luftwaffe set up its attacks outside fighter coverage. Using mass vs. mass, a combined fighter operation using Me-110s, 210s, and 410s with rockets, Me-109s, and FW-190s was employed. The twin-engine Destroyers would lob their rockets into the bomber formations in an attempt to break up the formations. The single-engine fighters would then attack the disorganized and damaged bombers. If possible, a single bomber cell was attacked, with the intent of destroying the entire unit. The Germans felt a devastating blow to one particular unit would be felt more by Eighth Air Force bomber crews than spot losses throughout the entire force. One notable success came on October 14th during the second raid on Schweinfurt. Facing a B-17 force of 291 aircraft, were 300 day fighters, 40 destroyer twin-engine fighters, and several night fighters. The Eighth Bomber Command reported 61 bombers lost over Germany. Of the surviving B-17s, only 25 were undamaged. The Luftwaffe in the effort lost 35 fighters and destroyers (6:230-231). It was the most successful defense to date, and for the time being, the Reich could be defended.

The lessons the Luftwaffe learned about the necessity of long-range fighter escort during the Battle of Britain were being relearned by the Americans (15:27). The second Schweinfurt raid pointed out the need for fighter protection and signaled a lessening of the deep bombing raids. Fighter escort ranges increased with improved drop tanks, and P-47s were now penetrating Germany, with P-38s going even farther. Although bombing activity continued throughout the year, the bombers generally penetrated only as far as fighter escort would allow. Gen Galland's report to Goering concerning American fighters over Germany was met with denials and accusations of Luftwaffe cowardice.

The Americans pressed deeper and deeper into Germany, still Goering continued his orders to disregard the fighters and concentrate on the bombers. Moreover, Goering wanted attacks upon

the bombers to take place as soon as possible after landfall-in. Despite Gen Galland's urging to pull back the fighter defense to near the limit of the escorting fighters' range, the Luftwaffe continued to attack the bombers well within the range of their escorts. Losses mounted, and Destroyers could no longer operate in the day fighter arena. They were pulled back further into Germany. Goering also ordered his pilots to fly 2-3 missions per day. Pilots often landed at the nearest suitable field, gassed up, rearmed and took off, this time only as schwarms. Although good results were achieved against stragglers, fighter pilots were overtaxed and several losses occurred on the second or third mission (6:230-235).

The beginning of shuttle bombing between England and North Africa in August 1943, combined with the formation of the Fifteenth Air Force in Italy, caused the Luftwaffe further problems. With several avenues of attack now probable, the Luftwaffe was forced to split its forces and set up fighter groups and radar installations to the south and southeast. There were large gaps in the defense, and several fighter groups were now understrength (6:242).

As the American bombers continued their onslaught, the pilots of the Luftwaffe adjusted their tactics against the formidable firepower of the B-17 defensive boxes. Oberstleutnant Egon Mayer of JG 2 had studied the B-17s on previous missions and concluded their front quadrant had less defensive firepower and was therefore vulnerable to head-on attacks. On the 23rd of November, he led a force of 30 Me-109s head-on against an understrengthened 91st Bomb Group. Although a difficult shot, with the tremendous closure rates and danger of mid-air collision ever present, two of the five bombers fell immediately and the other three were severely damaged. The attacks subjected the pilot, co-pilot, navigator and bombardier to heavy gun fire, while the B-17s could only return fire from two .30-caliber machine guns in the nose (.50-caliber twin turret added later). Additionally, the top turret couldn't be depressed enough to fire at the oncoming fighters (10:63). FW-190s and Destroyers were also incorporated into this tactic. Large formations of aircraft would assemble for attack (sometimes between 150-200 fighters). The four-cannon FW-190s would often attack from behind while the lightly armoured Me-109s would attack from the front. Additionally, if enemy fighters weren't around, the Destroyers would also attack from the sides and rear of the B-17 formations with their rockets (17:170).

Although Eighth Air Force could launch 1,000 plane raids by January 1944, the weather proved to be just as deadly to the Luftwaffe pilots. While the bombers droned over Germany above the weather using radar bombing, the Luftwaffe pilots struggled below with the weather. The German fighters were ill-equipped for weather flying. Additionally, most pilots had little, if any,

training in instrument conditions; there were no provisions made for navigation problems or safety rendezvous contingencies. As they struggled to clear the weather and join up above the clouds, they faced iced-up cockpits and mid-air collisions. The previous tactic of mass formation attacks was now difficult to orchestrate. Small groups of 20 fighters now attacked superior forces. Many pilots were sitting ducks as they popped out of the clouds, half-blinded with ice and disoriented (6:243). The Luftwaffe lost 30.3 percent of their single-engine fighters and 16.9 percent of their pilots in January 1944 (14:237). (Appendices 1 and 2)

February 1944, specifically the allied operation known as Big Week, dealt a critical blow to the Luftwaffe. Meeting the life threatening attacks upon their factories with a concerted effort, both the Allies and the Germans suffered huge losses. As devastating as the cost to the Eighth Air Force was to carry out those attacks, the men and machines could be replaced. The fighters and fighter pilots the Luftwaffe expended in repelling these attacks could not. Escorting fighters were always present, and twin-engine Destroyers took severe blows. One squadron of 13 Me-110s took off on 20 February; 6 minutes later 3 more took off to join them. By the time the last 3 arrived, 11 of the first 13 had been shot down. In February, the Luftwaffe lost 33 percent of their single-engine fighters and 17.9 percent of their pilots (14:242-243). (Appendices 1 and 2)

Although the allies overestimated the success of Big Week, and unleashed their fighters to destroy the German Air Force wherever they could find them, the Luftwaffe was not ready to surrender the skies of Germany to the Americans and British (6:263). Aircraft production would eventually rise to unprecedented levels (Appendix 4). Germany's best remaining fighter pilots and their fledgling wingman took to the air in defense of Germany. Down, but not yet out, the Luftwaffe prepared for major air battles to come in March.

<u>Speed(mph)/Alt.</u>	<u>Armament</u>
FW-190 A-8 408/20,000 ft. (Figure 7)	4-20mm cannon + 2-13mm guns (15 sec of ammunition)
Me-109 E-6 386/22,000 ft. (Figure 8)	1-20mm cannon (nose) + 2-13mm guns (some, 20mm cannon on each wing)

Table 1: Single-engine Luftwaffe fighters during the Air Battle for Berlin (1:-- , 2:11-12).

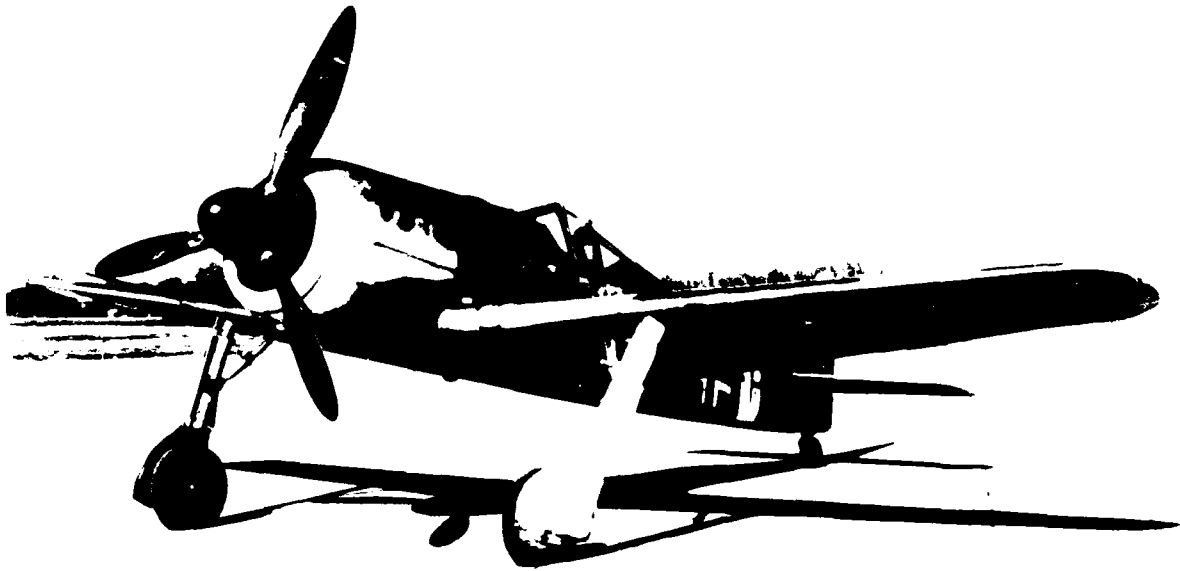


Figure 7. FW-190



Figure 8. Me-109 G

Chapter Four

FIGHTER TACTICS: 56TH FIGHTER GROUP VS. THE LUFTWAFFE

A fighter pilot must possess an inner urge to do combat. The will at all times to be offensive will develop into his own tactics. When attacked by large numbers of enemy aircraft, meet them head on. If there are twenty aircraft down below, go screaming down with full force to pick out the most logical target at the point of firing. I stay with the enemy until he is destroyed, I'm out of ammunition, he evades into the clouds, or I'm too low on gas and ammo to continue. When caught by the enemy in large force, the best policy is to fight like hell until you can decide what to do.

- Colonel Hubert A. Zemke
Wolfpack Commander - 56th Fighter Group (9:69)

The aggressiveness Col Zemke instilled in his men and the tactics he fostered, provided the nucleus for the many successes of the 56th FG. Recognized early on during his pre-war career as a brilliant pilot with an understanding of technical and tactical problems, Col Zemke's assignments afforded him valuable experience. While flying the P-40, he helped train British, Russian and Chinese pilots. He carefully observed their tactics. In September 1942 he took command of the 56th FG and began rigorous training of his men and development of the then new P-47 (3:41). Having observed the RAF fight the Luftwaffe during the Battle of Britain, Col Zemke knew the capable foe facing the 56th FG and the importance of training for the task at hand. Colonel Francis "Gabby" Gabreski noted the importance Col Zemke placed on training. In fact, he felt it was what made the difference in the success of the 56th FG (28:--). A strong motivator, Col Zemke instilled his fighting spirit in the group and formed what was to soon become the "Wolfpack".

Shortly after their arrival in England in January 1943, Col Zemke and pilots of the 56th FG had an opportunity to test the P-47C against the formidable FW-190. Previously, British pilots had warned the Americans to avoid dogfighting their heavier P-47s with the lighter and more maneuverable FW-190 and Me-109. Tests were flown in January with a captured FW-190A against the P-47C

(Figure 9). The P-47C at nearly 14,500 lbs. gross weight (no external tanks) was twice that of the Me-109 and half again as much as the FW-190. Additionally, the P-47 was built as an interceptor and its 2,000 H.P. radial engine (with turbo-supercharger) performed better at higher altitudes. During the test, the FW-190A was found to have better acceleration and a better rate of climb. The pilots of the 56th FG concluded they should never attempt to fight the Luftwaffe fighters below 15,000 feet and only rarely below 20,000 feet (3:40).

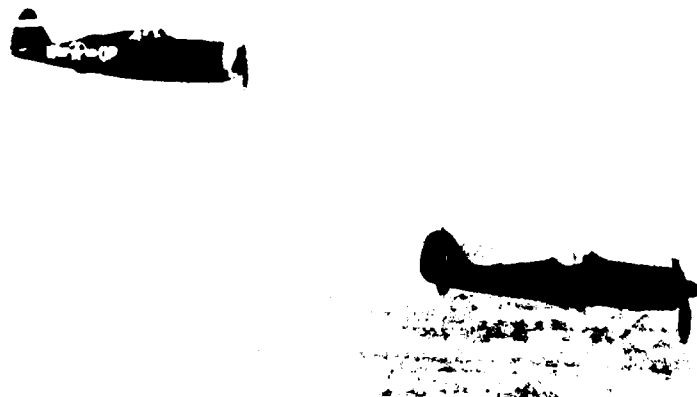


Figure 9. P-47C flying against a captured FW-190A.

When the 56th FG received P-47Ds in June, the tests with the FW-190 were repeated. With its new R-2800 air cooled radial engine (2300 H.P.), the P-47D could now take on the FW-190 at lower altitudes. The water-injection technique used on the P-47D gave the American fighter the added power needed at lower altitude. Tests showed the FW-190 would initially out accelerate, climb or dive the P-47D; however, the P-47D would quickly make up lost advantage and then outperform its opponent. The P-47D could fight with the FW-190 below 15,000 feet but only if it fought above 250 knots. Below that speed, the FW-190 enjoyed a decided turning advantage (8:46-47).

Based on these tests, Col Zemke's initial tactics against the Luftwaffe fighters involved a dive-and-zoom tactic. He instructed his pilots to attack with a height and speed advantage, dive on the enemy, fire at them, then swiftly zoom back up to altitude. Colonel Zemke felt the P-47 was superior above 20,000 feet and therefore should seek to fight the enemy with an advantage. He preached fighting on the P-47's terms and not being suckered into a turning fight below 15,000 feet (15:228).

	Gross Weight (lbs)	Engine power (h.p.)	Wing Span (ft)	Fusel. Length (ft)	Speed Max. (mph)	Tactical Radius w/tank(s)
P-47D	14,500	2300	41	36	433 at 30,000 ft	400 mi.
P-38J	21,600	1425	52	38	414 at 25,000 ft	600 mi.
P-51B	11,800	1380	37	32	440 at 30,000 ft	650 mi.

Table 2. American fighters during the Air Battle for Berlin (4:186,191,196).



Figure 10. Personal aircraft of Col Gabreski (top) and Lt R. Johnson (bottom).

Although Col Zemke advocated fighting a smart fight, one advantageous to the P-47, he also advocated aggressiveness. The group often fought below 20,000 feet out of necessity (i.e., attacked, or defending the bombers). As with any actual combat flying, the circumstances and results produced in a sterile experiment between two fighter aircraft will seldom equal the results of a dynamic unforgiving combat arena. Such was the result as the pilots of the 36th FG became more experienced and confident in their aircraft (Figure 10). They took losses, but the pilots who survived became formidable foes for the Luftwaffe fighters.

Relative to the FW-190 or Me-109, the P-47 had a tremendous firepower advantage. It could fire over 100 rounds-per-second from its eight .50-caliber machine guns...about 10 times the amount from a German fighter (10:93). In a dogfight where sometimes only a high angle deflection shot was possible, the P-47 pilot could squeeze off a barrage of bullets and heavily damage its opponent. Col Gabreski noted the eight guns were harmonized

to concentrate the firepower between 225-300 feet. He further recalled:

You could fire from outside that range (800 feet), but the harmonization angle would cause most of the bullets to miss. Early on we fired too far out and came back with only probables. After a few of those, I always got in close and opened up with a 1-2 second blast. I would wait until his wings filled the rings of my aiming reticle (sight) before firing (28:--).

First Lieutenant Robert Johnson described in his book Thunderbolt how on one early mission the P-47 could really take the punishment. Initially attacked and hit several times with 20mm cannon and 13mm machine gun fire from a FW-190, Lt Johnson helplessly hung on in his aircraft as it plunged out of control. On fire and unable to open his canopy, he struggled and managed to recover from the dive. Miraculously the fire went out and he now tried to limp home. Over France he was attacked by a second FW-190 looking to achieve an easy kill. Skidding to avoid the attacks when able, but absorbing most of the FW-190's accurate fire, Lt Johnson hunkered down behind his armour plating and hung on. Somewhere over the English Channel the FW-190 left, having expended all his ammunition, still the P-47 trudged on. After landing, 21 large 20mm holes and over 100 smaller bullet holes were counted. Nearly every control surface was damaged, as well as much of the cockpit. Three 20mm cannon shells had exploded on the armour plating protecting Lt Johnson. He had several cuts, flesh wounds, and burns, but the P-47 had safely returned him to his base in England to fight another day (11:Chap 12).

One final note on the P-47Ds of the 56th FG before moving on to the formations and group tactics. The group's fighters received wide paddle props in April 1944 (4:190). This gave the P-47 an advantage at low level with the FW-190 and Me-109, as they could now spiral up and climb away from their threat (28:--). They fought in the P-47D Razorback aircraft during the Air Battle for Berlin. The P-47D Bubble canopy aircraft did not begin arriving until May 1944 (4:190).

The formations the 56th FG used were modeled after those of the Luftwaffe. As a result of military observers like Col Zemke during the Battle for Britain, the U.S. abandoned its old pre-war 3-ship "V" formation. These observers had noted the success of the Luftwaffe with their basic 4-ship formation and the subsequent success of the British when they adopted the same 4-ship formation. Built upon the premise of a 2-ship fighting element, the two elements formed to make a 4-ship flight. Together they provided mutual protection, and at the same time allowed maneuverability. This same 4-ship formation is still used by the USAF. Using the 4-ship flight, an escort fighting force was

developed. Two flights would form to make a section of 8 aircraft, and they in turn would form with another section to form a squadron of 16 aircraft. Aircraft availability however, impacted formation sizes, and until later in 1944, most squadrons consisted of three flights or 12 aircraft. Finally, three squadrons would form up together to make a group (4:75). Typically, the 56th FG flew at 36-aircraft group strength during the Air Battle for Berlin. However, towards the middle of March, losses and mechanical problems forced them to fly at 24-aircraft group strength (23:--). Table 3 shows both squadron and group formation spacing. Although spacing between individual aircraft and squadrons started out close, the ranges were expanded to provide maximum lookout and coverage of area (4:77-78). With this formation, and based upon the basic 4-ship fighting unit, the fighters provided protection for the bombers (Figure 11).

Once a group had taken off, climbed through any weather and leveled at altitude, they spread out in anticipation of enemy attack. The group leader was then responsible for the rendezvous with the bombers. The time and location for the rendezvous was important, as there were hundreds of bombers. Navigation errors and delays often compounded the problems (4:67). Typical of a bomber stream, the 6 March raid had a bomber stream over 90 miles in length (2:28). Rejoining with the correct set of bombers also had its difficulties. Careful not to appear as an attacking FW-190 (very similar shape to P-47), the P-47s would ease in and look for the visual markings on the tails of the bombers they were assigned to protect (28:--). The best units were normally positioned to rendezvous with the bombers at a place where action was expected (i.e., the head of the bomber stream). "The 56th was always given the hot spot responsibilities" (28:--).

After the rendezvous was completed, the group leader positioned his three squadrons on the left, right, and in front of the bomber formation. This was merely a starting point, as the situation quickly changed with fighters weaving and orbiting in order to stay with their assigned bombers. Col Zemke often spread the duty of group commander among individual leaders within the 56th FG. This helped to build a strong leadership cadre. After positioning the group however, the group leader became a squadron leader (usually the squadron in front). With the three squadrons split by several miles, it was impossible for the group leader to tactically control them. Great emphasis was therefore placed on having the best tactical pilots in command of sections within those squadrons. They made the key decisions. Good squadron and section leaders made the group commander's job easier (28:--). Within each deployed squadron, the first two flights would form to make the lead section, with the remaining flight covering their rear by flying behind and above them (Table 3). With their tails covered from surprise attack, the lead section could devote full attention to looking for the enemy fighters (4:67).

TABLE 3: 56th FIGHTER GROUP FORMATION SPACING

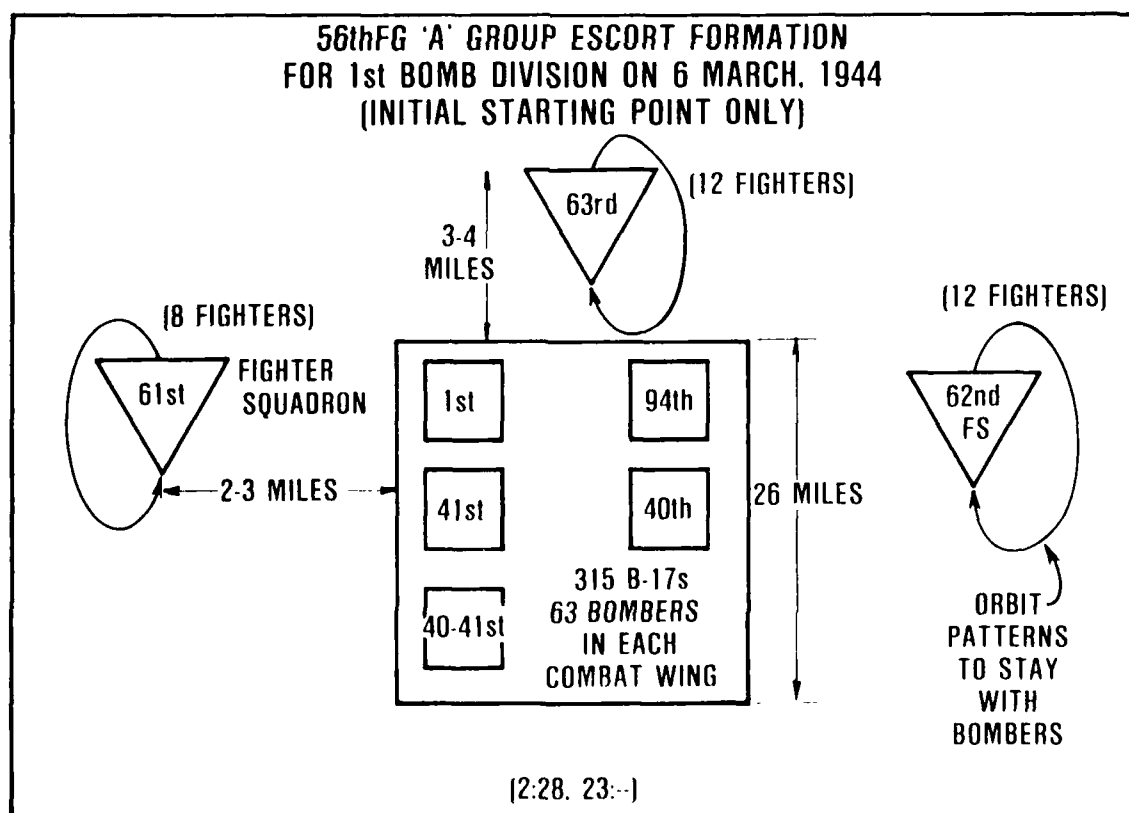
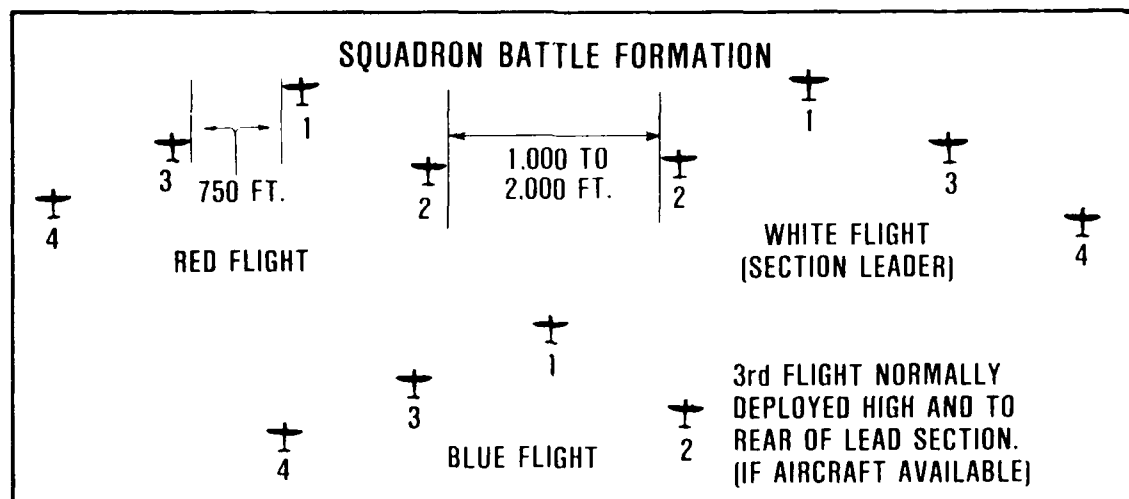




Figure 11. P-47s conning high above a formation of B-17s.

Groups of fighters would normally escort their bombers for approximately 200 miles before turning them over to another group of fighters. The 56th FG was often assigned lead escort duty. Their rendezvous normally took place over Holland, and they would escort the bombers around 150 miles into Germany. Escort duties were then passed to P-38 squadrons (later on P-51 squadrons) who would take the bombers to the target area. Other P-51s and P-38s would pick up the bombers on the return trip, then in turn, hand them off to other groups of P-47s for the final return leg. This was known as escort relay and worked well in providing fighter protection to the bombers. Still, the Luftwaffe probed weak areas and looked for unescorted bombers with their ground radar. Few German fighters, however, reached unescorted bombers (4:68).

Gen Doolittle's decision to free the fighters from close bomber escort had a dramatic impact upon the air war over Germany. Up to that point they remained within close visual range of the bombers and limited their attacks to directly threatening fighters, lest they be drawn away and expose the bombers to a separate group of enemy fighters (4:68). During the Air Battle for Berlin, the decision to engage was placed solely upon section leaders within the 56th FG. A section was free to attack and pursue the enemy until destroyed, even down to the deck. On a larger scale, the group commander often deployed a squadron to patrol far ahead of the bomber formation and the flanking squadrons were free to deploy far beyond close visual range. Thus many enemy fighters were attacked before their formations were organized. Gen Galland noted the importance of this dramatic change of tactics:

Only now did the superiority of the American fighters come into its own. They were no longer glued to the slowmoving bomber formation, but took the law of action into their own hands. Wherever our fighters appeared, the Americans hurled themselves at them. They went over to low-level attacks on our airfields. Nowhere were we safe from them; we had to skulk on our own bases. During takeoff, assembling, climbing, approaching the bombers, once in contact with bombers, on our way back, during landing, and ever after that the American fighters attacked with an overwhelming superiority. (6:264)

When a leader committed his flight, section, or squadron to an attack, ideally the element leaders would carry out the actual attack while their wingman protected them (Figure 12). During the Air Battle for Berlin however, sections of 8 P-47s found themselves attacking gaggles of 20-30 German fighters. In instances like this the section and flight leaders would call out and assign targets as they attacked. Wingman would have their

designated targets as well, and no one had a protecting wingman (17:169). Those pilots who neglected to check their own six (area behind their aircraft) were often victims themselves instead of victors. Following a whirling dogfight where everyone fought on their own, rejoining with a friendly aircraft was sometimes a problem. Col Gabreski noted erroneously rejoining on a flight of FW-190s thinking they were P-47s. Fortunately he discovered his mistake before they saw him. Conversely, he also remembered missing several kill opportunities because he held his fire until he was sure it wasn't a P-47. More than one P-47 was shot down during the war after being mistaken for a FW-190 (28:--).



Figure 12. Col Gabreski giving members of his squadron last minute instructions before a bomber escort mission.

As alluded to earlier, once relieved of fighter escort the fighters were allowed to patrol on the way home. The fighters often cruised at lower altitudes looking for airfields to strafe (Figure 13). The airfields were heavily defended by flak; surprise, low level flying, and not hanging around too long were all conducive to not getting shot down. Col Gabreski said it was a smart guideline not to strafe an airfield more than once. The one time he did return to strafe an airfield on a second pass, he flew so low avoiding the flak that he hit his prop on the ground and crash landed his plane (July 1944). After evading the Germans for several days he was finally captured and spent the remainder of the war as a P.O.W. (28:--).

Col Zemke was a dynamic leader who trained his pilots well and created a top-notch fighter group. The disciplined tactics of the 56th FG were instrumental to its success. The knowledge the pilots of the 56th FG possessed about their own capabilities, as well as those of the P-47, enabled them to succeed in air combat. With sound tactics, well trained pilots, excellent leadership, and overall superior numbers, the 56th FG played a major role in taking command of the skies during the Air Battle for Berlin.



Figure 13. Strafing attack on a German airfield.

Chapter Five

AIR BATTLE FOR BERLIN, MARCH 1944

The war was won (...in the air over Europe) between January and June of 1944.

- Colonel Francis S. Gabreski, USAF, Ret
October 1987 (28:--)

MaJ Gen Doolittle, pleased with the results of the ARGUMENT offensive during the month of February, now authorized the long awaited bombing campaign on Berlin. Knowing the Luftwaffe would be compelled to defend the capital, Doolittle hoped to finish it off in a series of large air battles during the month of March. He forced a battle of attrition knowing full well the allies would win. The plan worked, and by the middle of the month, the Luftwaffe was devastated. Although they continued until the war's end to fight for control of the skies, the Luftwaffe was never the same after the Air Battle for Berlin during March 1944.

3 MARCH

The 3rd of March saw the first attempt to bomb Berlin. The 56th FG was assigned to penetration support, however, it met the bombers as they were aborting the mission. Severe weather along the entire route forced the mission to be cancelled. Aborting near Wilhelmshaven, 54 B-17s dropped their bombs into a solid overcast on Wilhelmshaven with unknown results. No action was seen by the 56th FG (22:4).

4 MARCH

On March 4th, 238 of the 502 B-17s launched were targeted against industrial areas in the suburbs of Berlin. Weather was again a factor and a mission abort was ordered. All but one of the combat wings acknowledged the abort order and switched to targets of opportunity at Bonn, Dusseldorf, Cologne, and Frankfurt (22:5). The combat wing of 30 B-17s which continued on consisted of two 95th Group squadrons and one 100th Group squadron (3:113). They continued to Berlin and inaccurately dropped their payloads

due to the weather, but nonetheless, Berlin had been bombed by the Americans. Five B-17s were shot down in the effort (5:193).

The 36 fighters of the 56th Group A, led by Col Zemke were tasked for penetration support of the 1st Division. Rendezvous was made near Cologne at 28,000 feet. The group continued to escort the bombers as they aborted the mission and until landfall out. No enemy fighters were seen (21:1, 22:5).

Group B also consisted of 36 fighters and was led by Lt Col David Schilling. Tasked for target support, they were vectored east to escort any bombers they encountered. They ran into a solid cloud bank at 24,000 feet and went over the top. Lt Col Schilling orbited the group three times over Rotterdam while it rejoined. They continued east for 40 minutes and neither bombers or enemy aircraft were seen. Cloud conditions made formation flying difficult, and mysteriously, Lt Irvin Valenta was last seen heading downward at a 30 degree angle and reported missing in action near The Hague. They returned to base and did not encounter the enemy (21:1, 22:5).

6 MARCH

The third attempt to reach Berlin was successful. Of the 730 bombers, 504 were B-17s and 226 were B-24s. Although 672 of the bombers reached their targets in the Berlin area, bombing results were poor. Enemy fighter opposition was strong and the flak intense over the target areas. As a result, 69 bombers were lost. Bomber gunners claimed 93 kills against the Luftwaffe (5:195).

Over 800 fighters protected the bombers. These included 615 P-47s, 86 P-38s, and 100 P-51s. Eleven fighters were reported missing, including one from the 56th FG. American fighters claimed 81 kills, 8 probables, and 21 damaged Luftwaffe aircraft. Although the claims made by the bombers and fighters were exaggerated due to the confusion during air battles, the 56th FG finished the day with 11 confirmed aerial victories (5:195).

The 56th FG was tasked for penetration support and as usual divided into two groups. Group A was led by Col Zemke and consisted of 32 fighters (3 air aborted). Col Zemke was flying with the 63rd FS out in front, while the 62d FS started out on the right and the 61st FS led by Major James C. Stewart and Lt R. Johnson with eight P-47s were on the left. The group rendezvoused with the 1st Division at Lingen around 1125 hours and at 25,000 feet (23:1).

Group B was led by the 63rd FS Squadron Commander, Major Gerald Johnson. It consisted of 34 fighters and was deployed similarly to Group A. Group B was 20 minutes behind Group A and

scheduled to escort the 2d Division consisting of the B-24s who were bringing up the rear of the 94-mile bomber stream. Rendezvous with the B-24s south of Emden was at 1145 hours and at 22,000 feet (23:1).

As the bombers began to take off throughout England around 0745, the German defensive network began to react. Long lead times were required for the B-17s to climb to altitude, and assemble into the bomber stream. The German radar controllers had become quite accustomed to this aerial ballet, and both they and the Luftwaffe fighter pilots had the system down to a science. Placed on general alert at first, then on 15-minute, and then 5-minute alert, the pilots waited for sometimes 2 to 3 hours (most of it sitting in their cockpits). Finally, three green flares signaled the takeoff command. Once airborne they assembled and received bomber strength and course headings (17:192). One such pilot was Hauptmann Rolf Hermichen who led a force of 4 Me-109s and 13 FW-190s and was leader for the 1st Gruppe of JG 11. Soon other gruppes joined him as they assembled for the attack. The force of over 100 fighters was ordered to head for Lake Steinhuder and around 1145 were ordered to head west towards the American bombers (2:44-45).

Continuing on towards Berlin, the first half of the bomber stream had taken a wrong heading and was now 20 miles south of course as they passed over Osnabruck. Covering these bombers were most of the 56th FG and the 78th FG, some 60 P-47s in all. The 61st FS had somehow gotten attached to the second half of the bomber stream which continued to the target on course. Its eight P-47s were all that stood in the way of Hauptmann Hermichen's force of Luftwaffe fighters (2:45).

At about noon, and near Dummer Lake, the 61st FS orbited to the left and north of the 13th Combat Wing. Lt R. Johnson (Figure 14) then noticed a large formation of fighters heading for the bombers and called them out to his squadron. Wheeling the eight P-47s south they soon realized they would be unable to stop the attack (11:187). Following behind the Luftwaffe fighters they too were fired upon by the bomber crews, thinking they were FW-190s painted to look like P-47s. Fortunately none were hit. Ten bombers were shot down in the first 3 minutes of this attack. Emerging from the bomber formation, Maj Stewart caught up with two members of Hauptmann Hermichen's Gruppe. He reported:

I took my wingman in front of the bombers and tacked on to the last of the FW-190s making these attacks. I saw four blazing bombers as I passed under them less than 1,000 ft. About this time I lined up good on the rear FW-190 and saw a lot of hits on the wings and fuselage. The enemy rolled over and dived vertically into cloud which was at about 3,000 ft....I finally closed up to



Figure 14. Captain Robert S. Johnson (promoted in April 1944).

within 400 yards of him (second FW-190) and hit him first on the right wing, then on the fuselage and finally on the cockpit. His canopy blew off and he rolled over to the right and dived vertically down through the clouds (2:54).

The second German pilot attacked by Maj Stewart was Feldwebel Steiner who successfully bailed out and reported he never saw either his wingman go down or the plane that attacked him (2:55). Lt R. Johnson recalled going through the bomber formation in a blur and the mass of confusion, burning aircraft, and men parachuting to earth. Six times he was forced to break off attacks in order to protect his inexperienced wingman. By now the covering flight of Me-109s had come down to hit stragglers, and it was then Lt R. Johnson noticed two of them attacking a B-17 above him. He remarked:

I slammed the throttle forward and climbed quickly. The leader of the two German fighters raced straight ahead for safety while his wingman broke to the right. By now I was raging with anger; I was determined to get at least one of the two planes. The lead Messerschmitt suddenly stopped smoking. It was a complete giveaway; I knew that at this instant he'd cut power. I chopped the throttle to prevent overrunning the enemy fighter. I skidded up to my right, half rolled to my left, wings vertical. He turned sharply to the left; perfect! Now stick hard back, rudder pedals co-ordinating smoothly. The Thunderbolt whirled around, slicing inside the Messerschmitt. I saw the pilot look up behind him, gaping, as the Thunderbolt loomed inside of his turn, both wings flaming with all eight guns.

At once the Me-109 straightened out and dove. They never learned! Now I had him dead to rights; I closed rapidly as the ground rushed toward our two planes, squeezing out short bursts. White flashes leaped all over the fuselage and wings. I was scoring; good hits that were cutting up the Messerschmitt. He didn't give up easily, and racked his fighter around in a wicked left turn. I got another burst into him; some of the slugs tore into his canopy. The fighter belched forth a thick cloud of smoke and seemed almost to stop in air; then I was over shooting him. I jerked back on the stick, flashing over the smoking aircraft. I rolled and looked back; I saw a flaming mess on the ground (11:191).

Sometime during the fight 2d Lt Stauss of the 61st FS had his fighter badly shot up. He rode it down to 5,000 feet then said, "So long, you guys" and safely bailed out (11:192).

Upon hearing the 61st FS was heavily engaged, Col Zemke (Figure 15) led the 63rd FS to assist. Unable to locate the fight and the radio chatter dying off, they realized the main fight was over. They then noticed several burning aircraft and parachutes farther back. Col Zemke saw a lone FW-190 3,000 feet below his position and toward the rear of one of the center combat wings of Fortresses. He recalled:

Since the other battle was over, I launched an attack on this FW. He continued closing on the Combat Wing and even though I used water injection, my rate of closure was not enough to prevent him from closing on the rear of a Fortress and strafing the aircraft badly. He immediately turned left which allowed me to out-cross and tag on his tail. When he filled the 300 yard div. in the sight I opened up and immediately saw strikes. This burst was held for more than fifty rounds and until I broke off for fear of a mid-air collision. The 190 was last seen going down in a steep dive, trailing a mile of smoke as he burnt.

Shortly thereafter an Me-109 was identified at some distance to the south and below. I flew in its direction and then found myself able to fire at about 300 yards with 20 degrees deflection. No hits were registered at first, but then several showed up on his right wing and he began diving straight away at an angle of 30 degrees. My diving speed carried me well within good firing range and I opened up to see hits over the entire plane. Fire broke out and he fell into a downward spin.

After this engagement my flight was told to climb up to 20,000 feet in a circle...A lone Me-109 was spotted at the same altitude and some distance away...As we approached him he must have seen us for he went into a steep diving turn toward the deck, as the enemy is so often prone to do when trying to elude us. My reactions were to step up the manifold and RPM and go down into the attack. Very shortly thereafter, this enemy aircraft broke into violent flame and went tumbling in a vicious spin towards the earth. No rounds of ammunition had been expended by my flight and there had been no one in the vicinity of the enemy aircraft to cause him to burn. He was claimed by our flight as destroyed as there can be no definite claim made by any of us (22:6-7).

This last mysterious claim by Col Zemke correlates with an Me-109 flown by Feldwebel Hans-Gerd Wennekers who earlier had been damaged in a fight with P-47s from the 78th FG. With a round



Figure 15. Colonel Hubert "Hub" Zemke.



Figure 16. Luftwaffe pilot bailing out of his damaged fighter.

through his left arm, unable to control the throttle, and fearing unconsciousness from loss of blood, he unstrapped, jettisoned his canopy and bailed out. After a long free fall he pulled the rip cord of his parachute. All unseen by Col Zemke's flight (2:56). A similar situation is shown in Figure 16.

As the 63rd FS of Group B, led by Maj G. Johnson swept ahead of their B-24 bombers and passed by Bremen, they could see the B-17s up ahead being attacked. Heading in that direction Capt Mahurin leading Red flight wrote in his combat report:

At the time of the attack, we were unaware of the actual presence of the enemy aircraft. We first noticed them when we began to see the flashes of the 20mm shells bursting around the first division of bombers...by the time we got into the combat vicinity the concentrated attack had been dispersed leaving the enemy aircraft flying singly and in two's and three's down on the clouds about 7,000 ft. I noticed three of these enemy aircraft about 11 o'clock to me down low...after considerable maneuvering, I was in a position to attack one of these enemy aircraft, a single Me-109. As I came down on him, he saw me, and after one turn to the left, he headed down for the clouds. I found myself closing on his tail. I fired several short bursts, none of which hit him. He finally disappeared into the clouds.

When I pulled up from the attack, I sighted a single FW-190 at about 9 o'clock to my flight, heading down for the deck...this Jerry also saw me. As soon as the element of surprise was gone I knew I would be forced to follow him until he straightened out, before I could make a proper attack. We milled around and around in a turning circle to the left, until suddenly, the 190 straightened out and headed for one of the half-mile-in-diameter clouds which covered the area. As he did so, I closed in behind him and started to fire. By this time we were both in the cloud and it turned out to be considerably thinner than either one of us had anticipated. I could still see the Hun, and when I fired I saw many hits on both of his wings, as well as a few on his fuselage. I was close enough to him so that my hits did not converge to a point. I was forced to break off the attack as the cloud obscured him. This 190 I claim as probably destroyed, because I hit him quite heavily.

By this time the flight had worked itself down to about 3,000 feet and we were darting in and out of the clouds trying to spot more Huns. As we climbed back towards

the bombers, I looked over the side of my ship and spotted a Thunderbolt in a turning circle to the left, with an FW-190 on its tail. I immediately called on the radio to tell the 47 to break left, however, I later discovered that it was a ship from the 78th FG and on a different frequency to ours. I led the flight in to attack the 190, which was all silver and with a large black "V" painted on its side. He saw us coming, because he broke off his attack and began to turn left to save his own hide. I throttled back and closed in behind him, but held my fire until he, too, would straighten out.

In the turn itself I was only just able to stay with him. Both of us would stall a bit and then recover. However, when I added water I was able to out-turn him and also able to go around the circle faster than he did. I got within 150 yards of him, and stayed there. After we both had gone around the circle several times, he pulled up into a steep climb. I followed and was able to get in a few shots, as I closed on him in the climb. As he fell off, he rolled over in order to pull the old stand-by of the Luftwaffe - the split-S. I followed this also, gaining on him in the dive. When we pulled out of the dive he headed straight for the clouds in the same manner as the other Jerry had. I was able to pepper him soundly; seeing many hits on both wings and fuselage. The Jerry appeared to be having difficulty in flying his ship. He made a 180 degree turn to the left, and as I pulled up I saw his canopy fly off and saw him jump over the side.

We pulled up from the last engagement and climbed back out for an uneventful trip home (22:7-8).

Elsewhere, 1st Lt Frederick Christensen of the 62d FS led his flight against an Me-109 and a FW-190 attacking a lone B-17 straggler over Dummer Lake (Figure 17). Lt Christensen's flight drove off the Me-109, while he destroyed the FW-190 (Figure 18), (21:1).

8 MARCH

Two days later the mighty air armada of the Eighth Air Force again took off for the skies over Berlin. The ball-bearing plant at Erkner, on the outskirts of Berlin was the target for 623 bombers. Good bombing results were reported by the 539 bombers who made it to the plant. Enemy fighter opposition was strongest against the lead bombers which lost 17 B-17s (37 bombers total). Bomber gunners claimed 42 enemy fighters destroyed (5:196).

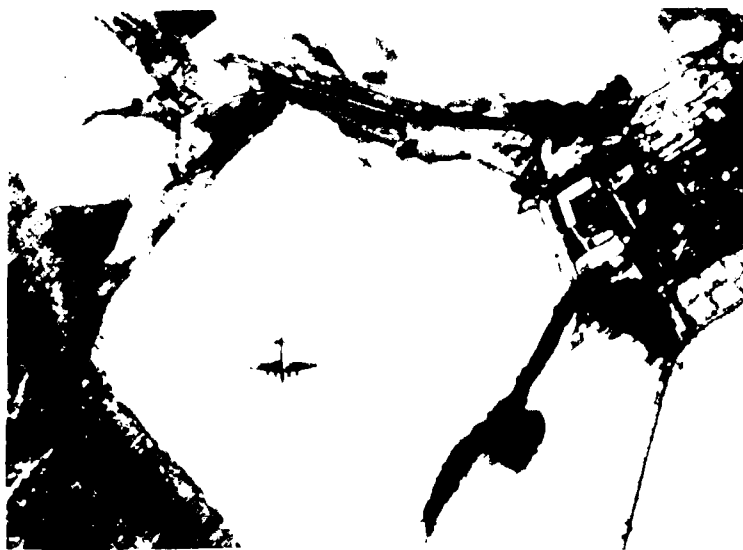


Figure 17. FW-190 attacking a lone B-17.

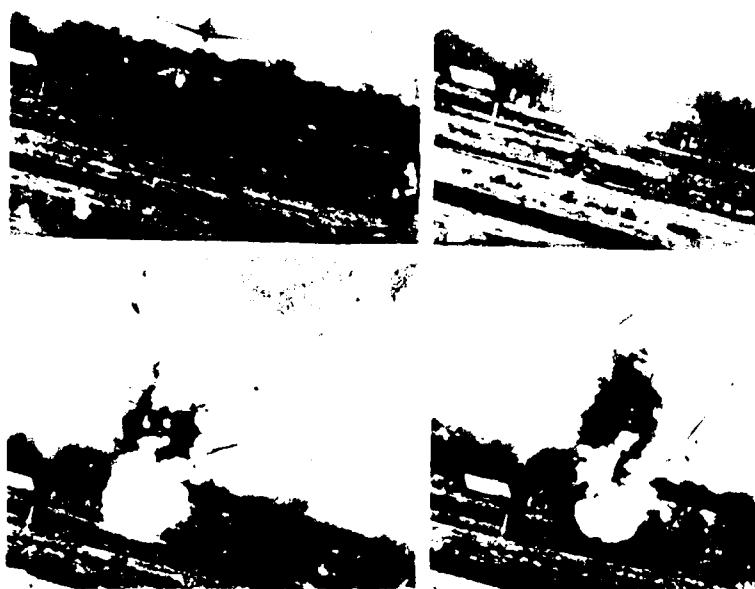


Figure 18. Death of a FW-190.

Fighter protection increased from the 6th of March, as there were now 891 escort fighters (613 P-47s, 104 P-38s, and 174 P-51s). American fighters lost 18 planes while claiming 79 kills, 8 probables and 25 damaged against the Luftwaffe. The 56th FG had their best day yet as they had 28 confirmed kills. Unfortunately they suffered one of their worst days as well; five of the Wolfpack fighters did not return to England (S:196).

The 56th FG was again tasked for penetration support. Leading Group A was Lt Col Schilling. His 32 fighters were to escort the lead bomber formation. Lt Col Schilling was out in front with the 62d FS, while the 61st FS was led by Maj Stewart on the right, and the 63rd FS led by Maj G. Johnson on the left. Rendezvous was at 1240 hours near Dummer Lake and at 24,000 feet (23:1).

Taking off 2 minutes after Group A, the 34 fighters of Group B rendezvoused with bombers towards the middle of the stream. The group was led by Col Gabreski (61st FS) out in front. To the left was the 63rd FS led by Capt Mahurin, while the 62d FS was on the right led by Captain Michael Quirk. Rendezvous was at 1242 hours near Ankum and at 24,000 feet (23:2).

As the rendezvous was made by Group A, 3 groups of 20 enemy aircraft were seen approaching from the southeast. The 61st FS broke to the right to cut off their attack and the 63rd FS followed. Seeing this opposition, the Luftwaffe fighters split into smaller groups as they broke into the defending fighters. In the ensuing battle, which lasted to Lake Steinhuder, over 100 enemy aircraft were counted. Wolfpack pilots reported seeing 12 bombers going down in flames. Group B, hearing the battle up ahead with Group A, pushed the throttle forward in an attempt to get in the action (23:1-2, 22:9, 21:2).

From the 61st FS (Group A), Captain Joseph Bennet shot down two Me-109s and one FW-190 (23:1). Maj G. Johnson of the 63rd FS who quickly brought his squadron into the battle recounted:

I then got on the tail of another Me-109 and gave him several bursts from almost dead astern. Large pieces were flying off his aircraft, and after the second burst he took no evasive action and was slowly going down. I then pulled up over him very close and saw that most of the canopy was gone - large pieces of the engine cowl and forward fuselage were also gone and the pilot was slumped over against the right side of the cockpit.

Lt Lovett, my no. 4 man, was still with me, so we started back toward the bombers. As we did so, I noticed another formation of enemy fighters coming in from the same direction as the first formation. We could not get to them in time to stop their going

through the bombers. The enemy would come through, 4/6 at a time, from above and in front, diving 5/6,000 feet below after going through the bomber formation. As they pulled up they would attack any straggler they may have knocked out of the formation.

We drove off the attacks by 190s on a straggler, but the deflection shots were so great that I don't think I hit either of them.

We then started back toward the main formation and I got on the tail of an Me-109 as he came through the bomber formation. I was indicating 450 mph and closing slowly. At about 300 yards I opened fire and saw hits on the fuselage and left wing. I soon ran out of ammunition. I didn't think I had got him since we were only about 6,000 feet and he was still going down. I did an orbit and saw him crash into a forest near Celle. We then started home and reached our base with no further incident (22:9-10).

During the battle, 56th FG fighters suffered its share of losses. On just his fourth mission, 2d Lt John Marcotte (61st FS), after successfully breaking up an attack on two other P-47s, called out over the radio he was having supercharger trouble and was bailing out west of Dummer Lake (22:10). From the 62d FS, Lts Joe Icard and Frederick Roy were missing in action. A pilot from the 63rd FS later reported seeing a yellow nosed fighter attacked and blown up by a Me-109. The 63rd FS pilot subsequently downed that Me-109 (21:2).

Group B now arriving at the scene of the air battle found only burning planes, men in parachutes, and sporadic flights of Germans. Lt R. Johnson recalled arriving on the scene:

A boy named Smith from the 63rd Squadron dove after a Kraut, and never saw two Messerschmitt Me-109s race in to his own tail. And the Krauts never saw me. I came down in a howling dive, killed the pilot of one fighter with a single burst, skidded, and exploded the tanks of the second Me-109 (11:193).

Capt Mahurin recalled arriving up toward the front box of bombers but couldn't locate any fighters to attack. His narration picks up with:

I was looking below to see if another attack could be forming when I spotted an Me-110 on the deck headed toward an airdrome near Hanover. I called my flight to follow and headed down from 30,000 feet to attack. Only again, like a fool, picking up so much speed that by the time I had reached the altitude of the Me-110, I

couldn't fire accurately. I had to pull up to avoid a collision, but my element leader who had more patience came in behind the enemy at reduced speed to shoot him down.

Pulling up from this engagement, I looked back to see still another FW-190 circling Wunsdorf in preparation for landing. Once again, I circled in behind. The pilot must have seen me for he began violent evasive maneuvering, circling as tight as he could to get on my tail. I had my throttle full forward, turning tighter and tighter myself until I fell in behind him, shooting every time I felt I could make a hit. After what seemed like an eternity, the enemy pilot pulled up in a rapid climb. As my bullets struck all over his aircraft, he bailed out. His aircraft dove into the ground.

By this time we were beginning to be fired upon by enemy anti-aircraft weapons. Puffs of black smoke from ack-ack surrounded us. Just as I yelled, 'Let's get they hell out of here', to my flight, I saw another aircraft take off from the same airfield, this time a JU-88, a twin engine light bomber. I couldn't believe we were wandering around a German airdrome being shot at from all directions without the control tower informing enemy pilots of our presence, but there was an answer.

This mission was directed at Berlin, and Berlin must be defended. We were farther into Germany than we had ever been before. The Germans just didn't expect to see us close to the ground around their airfields. A fast turn brought me around to the tail of the JU-88 as it reached an altitude of 100 feet. I fired at a very high closure rate, noticing many pieces falling from the aircraft and an explosion resulting in a fire in the right engine. I had to bank and go past its right wing about 30 feet away and 30 feet above. In so doing, I saw three men in the cabin dressed in brown leather jackets and leather flying helmets. They were not wearing oxygen masks, and I could see their faces looking up at me as I went by. A moment later they attempted to land straight ahead into what looked like a plowed field. When they did, the JU-88 blew up.

Once again we started for home and once again I saw a FW-190 heading for Wunsdorf in an apparent landing attempt. But this guy must have gotten word from the tower because he picked up speed and dropped to the deck, and headed east. I began to chase him as fast as I could, but we were going back into Germany instead of the way I wanted to go. Moreover, he was skimming along only a few feet above the tree tops. I couldn't seem to

get the nose of my aircraft pointed low enough to shoot at him without flying into the trees. I could pull up a bit, then dive down and shoot, but each time I did I seemed to lose distance on him. I kept firing though, until I ran out of ammunition and called the flight to break off and head for home. Just then I heard the number four man yell, 'Hey, Walker, you missed it. He just went in' (26:--).

With these three kills, Capt Mahurin became the leading ace in the ETO. Additionally, it was the 300th aerial victory for the 56th FG (Figure 19) (19:41).



Figure 19. Lt Johnson congratulating Capt Mahurin after his three victories.

The 62d FS (B Group) was also heavily engaged as they joined the fight. Downing four FW-190s, they paid dearly. Lt Anthony Carcione was last seen down on the deck and not heard from again. Lt Caleb Reeder's aircraft was hit by flak and he was forced to bail out (21:2). He was last heard to say, "So long you guys. Tell the rest to bite my butt" (11:194).

The following excerpt from Heinz Knoke's book I Flew for the Fuhrer, gives a German view of the activities on 8 March. On March 3rd, Oberleutnant Knoke was placed in command of an Me-109 Staffel in JG 11. Of their original 40 members, they were now down to 18 aircraft. His comments for 8 March are as follows:

Last night there were more engines droning overhead. The British attacked Berlin with more than 1,000 aircraft...At noon we are sent into action against the Americans who are heading for the same objective. Once again I am in command of the squadron.

In the first frontal attack I shoot down a Fortress just north of the airfield and leave a second one in flames. I cannot watch it crash, however, because I am fully occupied with several Thunderbolts trying to get on my tail. My Flight loses Sergeant Veit. The body was found in a cornfield just north of the airfield where he was shot down.

On our second mission I succeed in shooting down yet another Fortress. It also went down during the first frontal attack, aimed at the control cabin. Probably both pilots were killed and the controls put out of action, because the plane crashed without any signs of life.

During the ensuing dogfight with the Thunderbolts my tailplane was shot full of holes, and my engine and left wing were badly hit also. It is all I can do to limp home to our field. On coming in to land I discover that my left wheel has been shot away. The right wheel will not retract. I am forced to make a one-wheel landing.

As I touch down, there are an ambulance and a fire engine standing by at the end of the runway ready to receive me, but their services are not required. I succeed in achieving a smooth landing.

Immediately I order a reserve aircraft to be prepared for me to take off on a third mission. It is destroyed during a low-level strafing attack. Two of the mechanics are seriously wounded.

No. 4 Flight places one of its aircraft at my disposal by order of the Commanding Officer. Specht and I take off together, with Feldwebel Hauptmann and Sergeant Zambelli as our wingman.

When we attempt to attack a formation of Liberators over Luneberg Heath, we are taken surprise by approximately 40 Thunderbolts. In the ensuing dogfight our two wingman are both shot down. After a wild chase down to ground level the Commanding Officer and I finally escape with great difficulty.

After landing I receive word from Deipholz that Feldwebel Wennekers is in the hospital there after being shot down and seriously wounded (on 6 March).

In a telephone conversation with Division during the night, the Commanding Officer requests the Gruppe be withdrawn from operations temporarily. We cannot continue.

The request is refused. We are to continue flying to the last aircraft and the last pilot. Berlin, the capital city of the Reich, is ablaze from end to end. Now only Jonny Fest and I remain....(12:164-169).

The following combat report by Col Gabreski (Figure 20) recounts his arrival to help out Group A. His subsequent actions and strafing attack highlight the aggressiveness of the 56th FG.

Sure enough, at quite a distance off we picked up about 20 single engine ships passing through the bombers. The FW-190s recovered and made a 180 degree turn and started in for the second run, when we tied into them. Combat took place from about 20,000 ft. to 15,000 ft. As soon as I got into position for a kill, there were one or two 190s on my tail. So I broke up and started into a left-hand lufberry, when I ran into about eight more 190s who turned with me. We went around about two or three times. When more Thunderbolts appeared, the enemy hit the deck. With two men left with me we again proceeded toward the bombers. We picked up 2 or 3 FW-190s coming up to the bombers, so we again attacked. The enemy broke to the deck, while we broke off our attack at 15,000 ft. and proceeded toward home. A little west of Hanover, a nice sized airfield was seen with quite a bit of activity on it, so I made a quick 180 degree turn, hit the deck about eight miles from the field and hugged the ground till we approached the perimeter track. Before going down, I had my target all picked out. There were about six FW-190s refueling and

reloading, with about 12 people stooging around the aircraft. Evidently I caught the crew by surprise, as no one hit the dirt until the eight guns found their mark. It was perfect! The planes were lined up well for my angle of approach. Hits and flashes were seen on practically every aircraft down the line. There were concentrated hits on 3 aircraft, while two more were caught in the spray. Leave it up to the assessment of the film! Breaking away, I looked to see the results. One aircraft was set afire, while two appeared to be smoking. I proceeded towards home at 10,000 ft. until we hit Holland. It was a pleasant trip on the deck from the Zuider Zee to the coast of England.

I claim one FW-190 destroyed, 2 FW-190s probably destroyed, 2 FW-190s damaged (all on the ground), and casualties caused to about ten men (24:--).



Figure 20. Lt Col Francis S. Gabreski.

9 MARCH

Keeping up the battle the Eighth again launched its force of bombers and fighters. A force of 526 bombers left for targets in the Berlin area. Although B-17 pathfinder aircraft successfully found their targets, solid cloud coverage made damage assessment impossible. Enemy fighter opposition was very weak, and flak was moderate. Only eight bombers were lost. The 23 fighter groups reported uneventful missions, and only one fighter was lost (to flak). The 56th FG likewise saw no action as the severe weather kept the enemy fighters on the ground (22:11-12).

15 MARCH

Waiting patiently since the 9th of March for the weather over Germany to clear up, the Eighth resumed bombing on 15 March. Weather was still predicted to be bad over Berlin, so 344 bombers were sent to Brunswick, about 100 miles short of Berlin. Heavy undercast prevented primary targets being attacked in Brunswick, however, the secondary target of Brunswick itself was hit, with unobserved results. Enemy fighter opposition was weak, and the bombers suffered only three losses (none to enemy fighters) (5:200).

Escort protection consisted of 588 fighters (467 P-47s, and 121 P-38s). Of the 38 kills, 3 probables, and 13 damaged claimed by the American fighters, the 56th FG scored 24 of the confirmed kills. Five fighter escorts were lost, with one being from the 56th FG (5:200).

Tasked for penetration support of the 1st Task Force, Group A's 32 P-47s were led by Col Gabreski with the 62d FS. Off far to the left was Lt R. Johnson leading the 61st FS, and Capt Mahurin and the 63rd FS off to the right. Rendezvous was accomplished over the Zuider Zee around 0950 hours at 25,000 feet (23:2).

Group B's 24 fighters were led by Maj G. Johnson of the 63rd FS. Also tasked for penetration support, it provided escort for B-24s. On the right was the 62d FS consisting of flights led by Capt Quirk and Lt Christensen. On the left was the 61st FS. The group passed B-17s over the Zuider Zee, and rendezvous with the B-24s was made over Quackenbruck at 1015 hours and at 22,000 feet (23:1).

Ranging out far to the sides of the bombers in hope of breaking up any attacks before they materialized, Col Gabreski led the 62d FS against approximately 30 enemy aircraft who were down low and split into ones and twos. Before the 62d FS got there however, they were further dispersed by other P-47s and P-38s (21:2). Failing to encounter any enemy fighters, the 62d FS

searched for surface targets as they headed for home. Col Gabreski's flight reported the following damage claims: three locomotives damaged, two boats damaged, and one power plant damaged (21:2).

Captain Mahurin, hearing the enemy sighting by the 62d FS, led his flight to the area. Seeing two FW-190s down at 3,000 feet he jumped them, however, was seen, and they escaped into the clouds (22:12).

About this time Lt R. Johnson, now far out on the left, saw contrails to the north near Bremen. Appearing to be FW-190s and higher than his flight, he lined up his eight fighters and began to climb towards them. He called out the enemy formation over the radio. The action picks up with his narration:

Every time the radio channel quieted I called, as slowly and distinctly as possible, 'Forty-plus bandits, nine o'clock, high to the lead box of bombers now over Dummer Lake.'

Damn, they were high! The Focke-Wulfs rushed toward the lead bomber formation at a height of at least 38,000 ft. They had found their previous attack wedge successful, and were hopeful for a third repeat performance. Fifty fighters were at 23,000 ft., while 25 more of them flew as top cover at 38,000 ft. At 27,000 ft. I turned the squadron and we dove, racing head-on into the fifty fighters directly in front of our own eight fighters.

Our formation opened wide, the Thunderbolts spreading out, straight in as we accelerated on our downward rush. Every plane's wings flamed, eight heavy guns roaring in short bursts, bullets spilling into the midst of the German fighters. They scattered! We hurtled through the formation. The other fighters glued themselves to me, eight Thunderbolts clawing around at tremendous speed to hammer at the trailing Focke-Wulfs. The Krauts had enough; a dozen fighters snapped over and dove away.

Sucker bait! I looked up-and there they came, the top cover, eager for an easy kill. I yelled over the radio, 'Okay, pull straight up-now! The top cover's coming down.' Eight hands jerked back; eight Thunderbolts reared nose high and soared, leaping in vertical climbs. I've never been so close to so many airplanes! We zoomed straight up and the German fighters plunged straight down.

The line-drive attack worked beautifully. The tight formation of Focke-Wulfs fell apart at the seams as the

fighters flung themselves about wildly to avoid our zooming wedge.

Friendly fighters had heard my call. Hard after the diving German top cover came a dense swarm of our planes. In the time it took us to zoom upward through the German formation, some ninety of our fighters pounced joyously into the fray.

A mass of fighter planes fought savagely in a wild, screaming battle, all with their engines wide open and firing almost steadily. Not four miles to the south rumbled the gigantic train of Big Friends.

I turned and plunged directly into the swarming mass of fighters. I never knew from one moment to the next exactly what was happening. I skidded and slipped, dove, zoomed, twisted, slewed wildly, turned and rolled, anything to survive and avoid collision with the fantastic mass of twisting fighters.

A Focke-Wulf seemed to jump directly in front of me. I squeezed the trigger and he disintegrated almost at once; I nearly ran into the exploding pieces. I looked around; there-a Focke-Wulf pouring cannon shells into a P-38, diving steeply. A slight movement of stick and rudder, the proper lead, and a two-second burst. The Focke-Wulf's canopy dissolved in spray. Flame billowed from the tanks.

And then-they were gone. In a miraculous second, the battle was over. For a moment I thought of my wingman, a young pilot on his very first mission. In the melee I hadn't had the chance to look after him as I dodged other fighters. With most of the Focke-Wulfs running for their lives, I looked around me. I gasped. There was Holtmier, tacked onto my tail as if he were glued there (11:194-198)!

Later that same mission, Lt R. Johnson noticed a lone Me-109 trying to sneak up on a flight of P-47s. Diving down he quickly destroyed it for his third victory of the day. That victory made him the new leading ETO ace with 21 victories to his credit (11:198).

Red Flight of the 63rd FS led by 1st Lt John Truluck joined this huge fight and downed two FW-190s, two Me-109s and damaged two other Me-109s (22:13).

Sometime during the fight, Lt Kozey of the 61st FS was hit on the left side by 20mm. His R.P.M. and oil pressure dropped and his engine stopped. He bailed out 10 miles southwest of Quackenbruck at 11,000 feet, landed and waved (23:3).

Meanwhile Group B, only 4 minutes behind Group A, was ranging far ahead of its designated bombers since two other groups were escorting them as well. Around 20 miles west of Dummer Lake the 62d FS which was out on the right engaged approximately 30 fighters climbing up through the clouds.

In the ensuing battle, the 62d FS destroyed seven FW-190s and damaged three others. Lt Christensen was credited with two kills and two damaged claims. Capt Quirk added another (21:2).

It was then that Lt R. Johnson's call was heard, and Maj G. Johnson led the remainder of the group towards the action. Maj G. Johnson's combat report is as follows:

I got on the tail of an Me-109, opened fire at about 300 yards, but did not get any hits until I closed to about 150 yards when pieces started flying off and smoke and flame were coming out. I almost hit him as I pulled up, since I was temporarily blinded by the smoke and debris from his plane.

As we pulled up from this attack, there were dog-fights going on in every direction and, after dodging both a few friendly and enemy aircraft, I managed to get on the tail of another Me-109, holding my fire until about 250 yards away from him. He received a good solid burst over the wing roots, fuselage and canopy. As I pulled up over him, he was going down out of control, trailing a lot of smoke. A few seconds later there was a parachute open in this vicinity which I believe might have been the pilot.

We then returned to the bombers, escorted them for another 20 minutes, and started out, reaching home base with no further incident (22:13-14).

16 - 18 - 20 MARCH

With unfavorable weather patterns continuing in the North, the Eighth conducted bombing raids against aircraft factories in the south. Friedrichshafen near the Swiss border was hit on the 16th and 18th, while Frankfurt was hit on the 20th.

The last big fight for the 56th FG was on the 16th. Providing penetration support for 740 bombers the 56th FG claimed 11 kills and with no losses. Bomber losses were 23, while fighter losses were 10. American fighter groups claimed 77 kills, 7 probables, and 20 damaged Luftwaffe fighters (5:201).

Group A was led by Col Zemke (63rd FS) with 33 fighters, while Group B was led by Col Gabreski (61st FS) just a few minutes behind with 22 fighters.

Immediately after the rendezvous with the bombers, 30-plus fighters attacked from the north. Twenty came in from the side, while 10 of the fighters circled and attacked from the front. They were engaged by both Group A and Group B who also saw the fighters coming in. Col Gabreski destroyed two FW-190s, as did Lt Christensen of the 62d FS. The 62d FS was credited with 8 of the 11 kills (23:1-2, 25:--).

On the 18th and 20th, the 56th FG claimed only three kills and with zero losses. Weather was again terrible and fighter opposition almost nil (19:41).

22 - 29 MARCH

The 22d was the last bombing mission to Berlin in March. The 639 bombers dropped their bombs into a cloud obscured target area, and results were unreportable. Enemy opposition was negligible, and no claims were made by the 56th FG. (22:16) Unfortunately one flight from the 61st FS penetrated some clouds and ran into a terrible storm. The 4-ship plunged out of control, and all were lost in the North Sea (11:200).

With the exception of the 27th of March the bombing raids were bland in comparison to the first half of the month. Opposition was light and losses on both sides way down.

On the 27th, the 56th FG lost both Maj G. Johnson and Capt Mahurin from the 63rd FS. Maj G. Johnson was shot down by ground fire while strafing on the way home. He safely crashed his aircraft and was subsequently taken prisoner. Capt Mahurin was shot down by return fire from a Do-217 bomber and safely bailed out. He successfully evaded capture and returned to England around 6 weeks later. He was transferred to the Pacific Theater to protect the resistance escape operation should he again be shot down over Europe (22:1-3).

Chapter Six

CONCLUDING REMARKS

<i>Das leben gelebt,</i>	Having lived the life
<i>die sunde gekusst,</i>	having kissed the sin
<i>das Herz den Frauen gegeben</i>	having given the heart to girls
<i>und, nicht gebebt wenn</i>	and, having not trembled when
<i>der Tod uns grusst</i>	death was saying 'hello'
<i>das ist ein fleigerleben!</i>	that has been a fighter pilot's life!

- Luftwaffe Fighter Pilot saying

The results of the Air Battle for Berlin point out the success of the 56th FG and the devastation suffered by the Luftwaffe. During March, the 56th FG had confirmed claims of 81 kills, 7 probables, and 30 damaged. Of those kills, 74 came from missions on the 6th, 8th, 15th, and 16th alone. During those same 4 days, American fighters achieved 275 kills, 26 probables, and 79 damaged Luftwaffe aircraft. American fighter losses for the same period were 44 (7 from the 56th), (23:--). Overall, the Luftwaffe lost 21.7 percent (511) of its fighter pilots and 56.4 percent of its fighter aircraft during March. Both figures were the highest yet seen during the war (14:239-240). (Appendices 1 and 2)

In concluding this paper, there are a number of salient points worth pointing out. Decisions were made on both sides of the struggle which ultimately produced an allied victory. The decisions made (both good and bad), hold valuable lessons for future commanders.

The objectives of a fighting force must be clearly defined. First of all, clear and attainable objectives must be set. Next, a way to reach those objectives must be determined. Finally, these objectives must be continually evaluated in light of the strategic situation and if still valid...adhered to. Both the Allies and the Germans made mistakes in this area. The Americans were unclear in their objectives at first. Many of the people who believed "the strategic bomber will bring the enemy to its knees" were at odds with the British, politicians, and other strategists within the Army Air Force. Equally unclear in their objectives, were the Germans under Hitler's leadership. Changing objectives forced the Luftwaffe to fight on three separate fronts, something clearly unattainable with its force structure. Politicians

(Roosevelt, Churchill and Hitler) further muddled the waters. The advice of military professionals was often disregarded, forcing objectives to change. The decision to invade North Africa delayed the implementation of a full strategic bombing effort against Germany. The Allies were able to modify their objectives in light of political decisions and strategic situations, something the Germans were reluctant to do. The Americans saw strategic bombing was too costly without fighter protection. The objectives were modified until they could be adequately protected. Hitler and Goering's belief they could stop the American bombers remained static. Although forces were shifted to meet the threat, it was not enough. Lack of vision in the development and proper employment of its new jet fighters brought about the ultimate disaster to the Luftwaffe.

In reality the allies won the air war, not because they destroyed strategic targets (Americans) or crumpled the will of the people to fight (British) with their massive bomber raids, but because the Germans lost a battle of attrition. Sheer force of numbers simply overwhelmed the Luftwaffe. Fighting three fronts against superior numbers could only end in defeat. The lessons here are ones of overextension and inadequate reserves. The Germans actually increased aircraft production throughout the war (Appendix 4). They could not, however, increase the amount of qualified fighter pilots they needed to defend the Reich (Appendix 3). Severe fighter pilot attrition in 1944 left the Luftwaffe in a dire situation. Unable to adequately train new pilots due to time constraints and fuel shortages, brand new fighters sat ready to fly at many airfields as the allies overran Germany. A continual pipeline of highly qualified pilots with a surplus of staff reserves is essential to any Air Force.

Future wars will not allow effective fighting forces to be developed and built up as done in World War II. Newly developed aircraft must be continually placed in service. The pilots who fly them must be highly trained. Excellent pilots in excellent fighters will, however, probably lose in a battle of attrition against overwhelming numbers. Although quality is important, quantity must not be overlooked.

A final remark about fighter pilots. Much of the glory goes to the fighter pilot for the kills he achieved. The difference between getting a kill or getting killed yourself is skill, a little luck, and most of all being in the right place at the right time. To all the fighter pilots of World War II who weren't in the right place at the right time, *that was a Fighter Pilot's life!*

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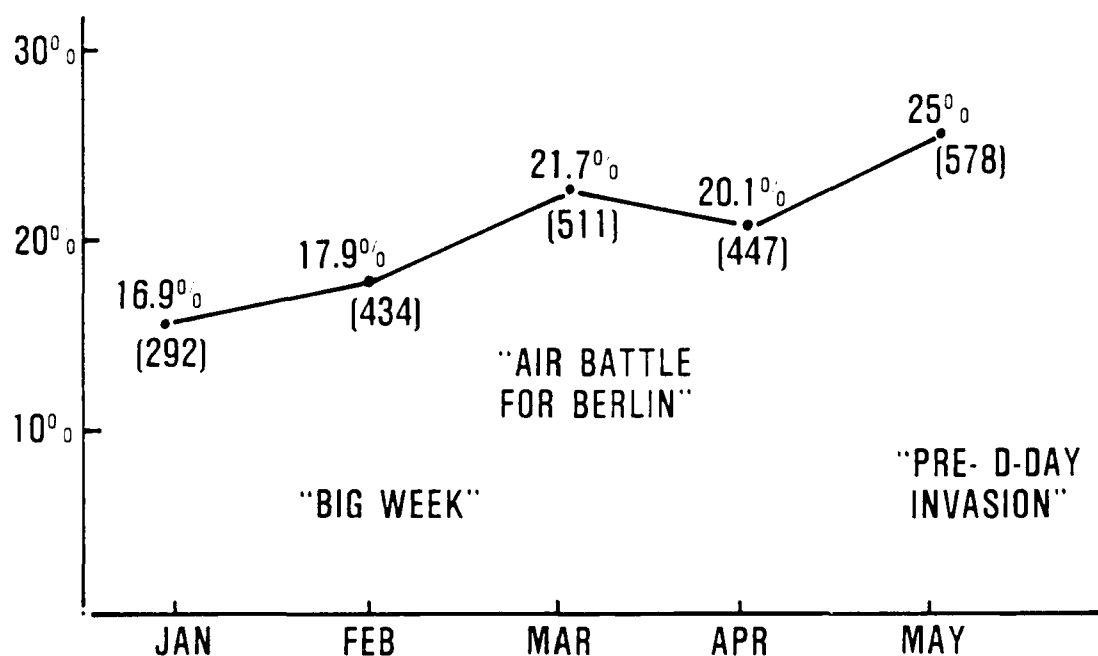
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APPENDIX 1 (14:240)

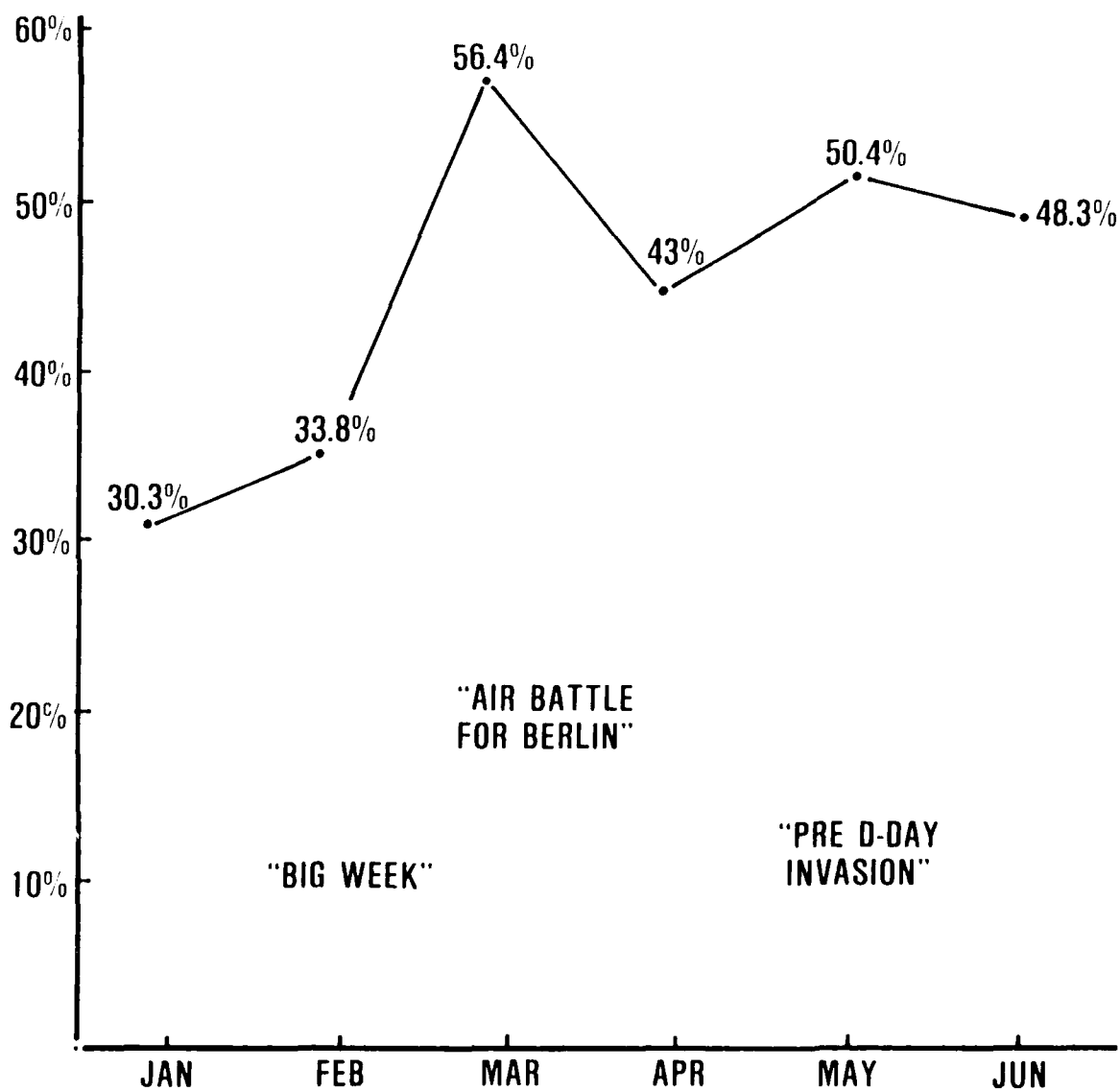
GERMAN FIGHTER PILOT LOSSES JAN-MAY 1944



% OF FIGHTER PILOTS LOST EACH MONTH _____

ACTUAL # OF FIGHTER PILOTS LOST ()

TOTAL FIGHTER PILOTS LOST FOR PERIOD = 2262

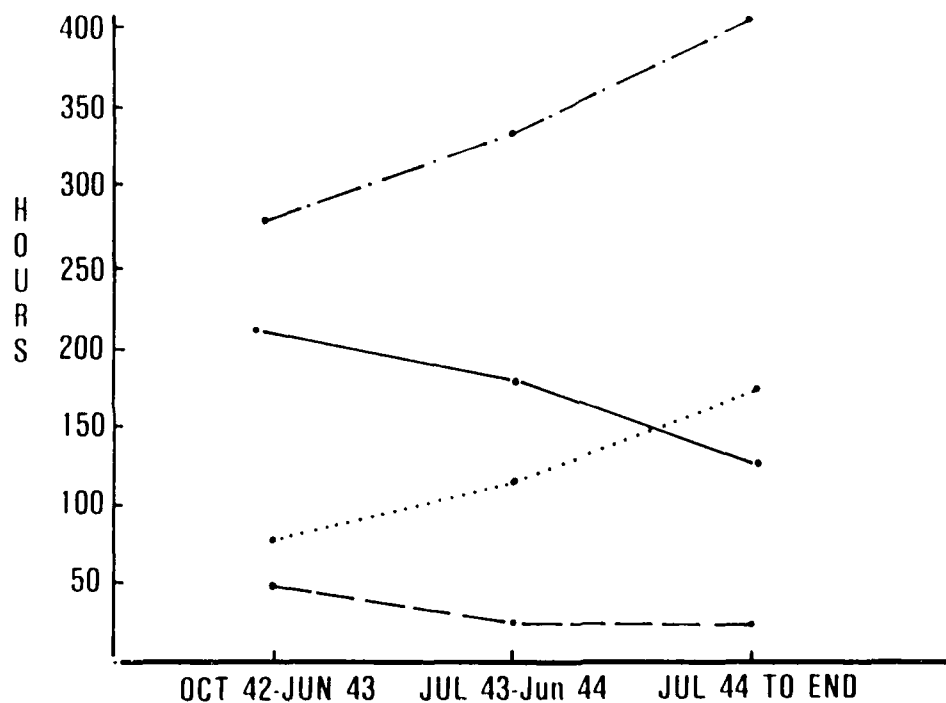


% OF FIGHTER AIRCRAFT LOST EACH MONTH _____

TOTAL FIGHTER AIRCRAFT LOST FOR PERIOD = 4200

APPENDIX 3 (14: 314)

PILOT TRAINING FLYING HOURS COMPARISON BETWEEN LUFTWAFFE AND USAAF FIGHTER PILOTS



LUFTWAFFE TOTAL FLYING TIME PER PILOT

—————

LUFTWAFFE FLYING TIME IN OPERATIONAL FIGHTER

- - - - -

USAAF TOTAL FLYING TIME PER PILOT

- . - . - .

USAAF FLYING TIME IN OPERATIONAL FIGHTER

.

APPENDIX 4 (1: 377)

LUFTWAFFE AIRCRAFT PRODUCTION

	1939	1940	1941	1942	1943	1944	1945	TOTAL
FIGHTERS	605	2746	3744	5515	10898	25285	4935	53,728
BOMBERS	737	2852	3373	4337	4649	2287	—	18,235
GROUND ATTACK	134	603	507	1249	3266	5496	1104	12,359
RECCE	163	971	1079	1067	1117	1686	216	6,299
TRAINING	588	1870	1121	1078	2274	3693	318	10,942
JET	—	—	—	—	—	1041	947	1,988
OTHERS	291	1205	2760	2163	2603	1105	19	9,963
TOTAL	2,518	10,247	12,401	15,409	24,807	40,593	7,539	

TOTAL = 113,514

FIGHTER PRODUCTION BY TYPE

FW 190	20,001
ME 109	30,480
ME 110	5,762
ME 262	1,294
HE 219	268
TA 154	8
TA 152	67
TOTAL	57,880

(NOTE: REPRESENTS SOME BOMBER AIRCRAFT MODELS, I.E., ME-262)

END

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