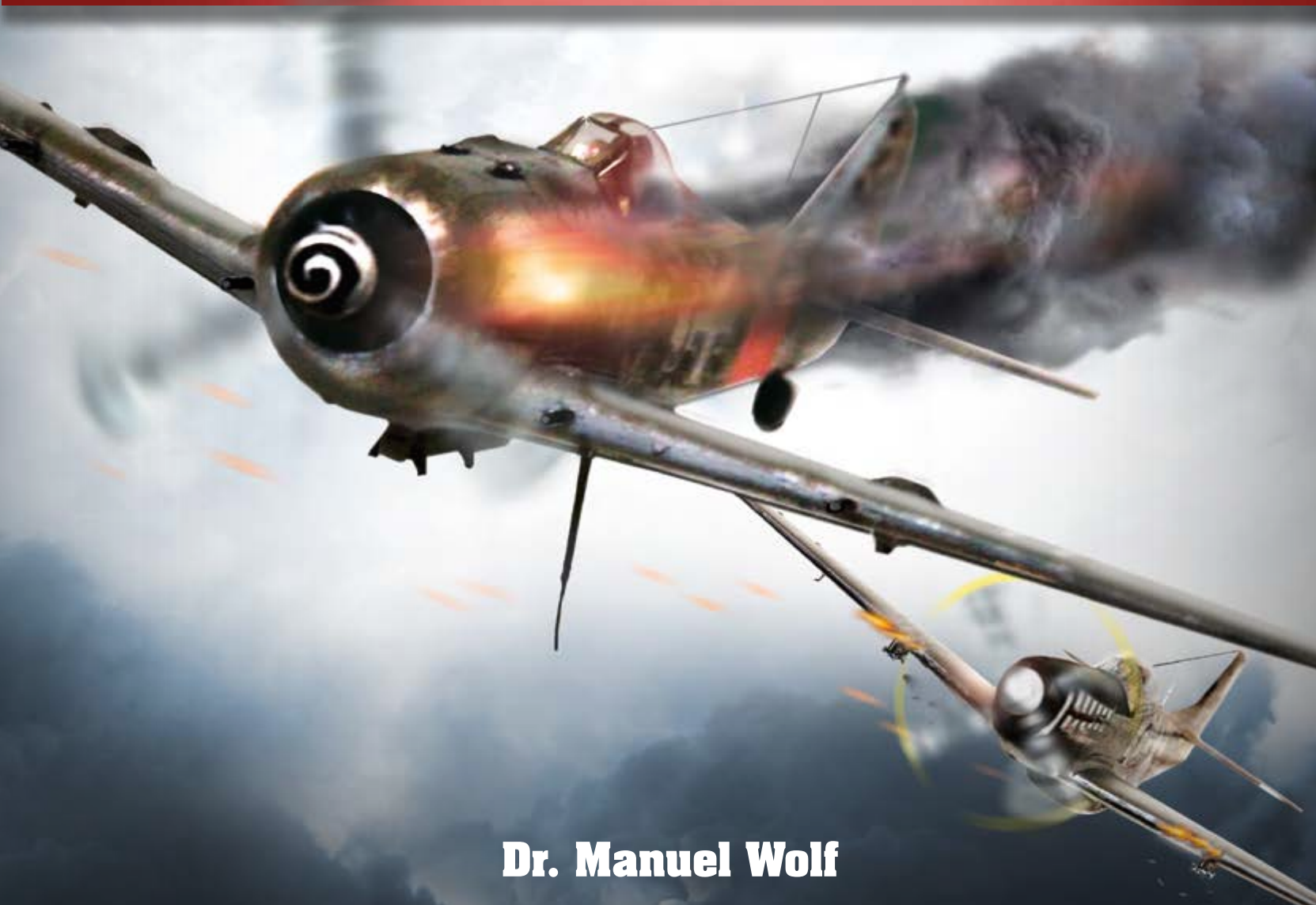
AIR WAR

over Europe 1939–1945

The Luftwaffe tested to the limit



Dr. Manuel Wolf

About the author

Dr Manuel Wolf (born 1957) carried out intensive, investigative research worldwide for twelve years. The author was given access to private archives which would otherwise be denied. He interviewed numerous surviving pilots and contemporary witnesses. He analysed countless eye witness accounts and meticulously checked them against historical facts. Aerial warfare experts from all over Europe shared with him their knowledge and their enthusiasm for this theme, which he then captures in this book. Manuel Wolf has dedicated his book "Air War over Europe 1939-1945: The Lufwaffe tested to the limit" to his father Gottfried Wolf, who saw action as a young fighter pilot during the last days of the 2nd World War.

About the book

Never before has such a comprehensive, detailed and at the same time exceptionally grippingly written book about aerial warfare over Europe been available. The author himself is now publishing a thoroughly revised, new edition of his book.

Dr. Manuel Wolf describes the aerial war which was fought over all of Europe's major theatres of war and depicts the dramatic events from an entirely new perspective. With his flowing, lively, narrative style the author explains each sequence of events in a wholly innovative way, basing his chapters on themes and life histories as well as chronological events.

The wealth of extraordinarily detailed information helps the reader to comprehend the overall military context, both on the ground and in the air. All the important types of aircraft are compared in a unique, never before published summary of the technical data. Identification markings on the aircraft involved in the incidents are illustrated and the losses on individual battle days listed in a table. The book describes pioneering, technical developments comprehensively and depicts aerial combat in a precise and exciting way. Impressive, colourful images reveal to the reader the drama of the dogfights.

From the basic principles of aerial warfare to the investigative clarification of issues controversially discussed for many years, for anyone interested this book is an absolute treasure trove. With his love of detail Dr Wolf explains not only the decisive, major air battles. The 'minor' arenas, the emotional conflict of the pilots and the constant fear breathing down their necks are also vividly and palpably depicted.

The final section provides an unparalleled summary of technical data covering all the notable types of aircraft belonging to the warring powers in Europe. They are shown in altitude increments of 1,000 m and have never before been published in such a comprehensive way, making this book unique.

No reader with an interest in military history can afford to miss this masterpiece with more than 700 photos, aircraft profiles in colour, maps and accurately detailed scenarios.

Customer Reviews on amazon.com:

"A true masterpiece of aerial warfare history !!!!! A monumental story incorporating the often tragic, but never less than heroic lives of the individuals caught up in the conflict, within the wider context of the Second World War. The book's heartbeat is powered by the detailed accounts of the actions of not only many Germans who are probably unknown to an English readership, but also include memorable portraits of Russian airmen and women as well as some of the leading historical figures on all sides of the conflict. The scope of the book is ambitious but is clearly the result of years of painstaking research; a moving, elegiac but rewarding read."

"**Not a dull and boring history book.** This book clearly is the result of extensive research. It is the best depiction of the European air war that I have found. The facts are carefully researched and documented. The human suffering is linked in such a spellbinding manner that it is hard to put the book down. The author has successfully combined a reference volume with entertainment. I will not hesitate to recommend this volume to any one interested in aviation or history."

"A true masterpiece of aerial warfare history !!!!! Chapeau Mr. Wolf ! What a masterpiece I practically devoured this non-fiction which actually reads like a top-notch thriller. The author must have put incredible efforts and greatest passion into the creation process. "Air War" is an incredible treasure chest filled with WW2 aerial history. Filled with very detailed descriptions and captivating background information gathered from former contemporary witnesses. Fascscinating narrations, views from cockpits were dragging me in as if I were one of the protagonists.I could almost share the many emotions, thoughts, dispar, anxieties, pride or hope. [...]To me this book is a "must-have" for everyone who's interested in this matter. Finally,I very much like the style and wording. No nested sentences, always clear, and easy to comprehend."

Contents

Berlin: The Soviet victors parade around the ruins of the Reichstag: it is all over…

Foreword

This book is dedicated to my father,
Gottfried Wolf.

In the Second World War my father trained as a fighter pilot and learned to fly the Messerschmitt Bf 109 G-6. When he left flying school, like all the young pilots at the time, all he wanted to do was fly and fight. His wish was to prove himself "honourable, steadfast and courageous" in the defence of his country.

My father qualified as a fighter pilot on 31st January 1945, by which time the outcome of the war was a foregone conclusion. A strafing run that very month by American P-51 Mustang fighter aircraft on the airfield used by the trainees of Training Wing 104—a grass runway at Fürth, by Buchschwabach near Nuremberg—had already provided the novice pilots with ample evidence of this. In Germany there was no longer anywhere safe above ground.

At that time appeals were being made in the flying schools to the young, still enthusiastic pilots for volunteers to undertake last-ditch missions aimed at challenging the supremacy of the allied forces. These included ramming attacks against enemy bombers ("Sonderkommando Elbe") or suicide missions against the bridges over the Oder. The young men wanted to fly, literally at any price; there were barely any who did not volunteer.

However, many of the highly motivated pilots were simply being misled. Only a minority were actually ever equipped with aeroplanes, and were then sent into an aerial battle in which they did not stand a chance, anyway. The remainder were merely to be used as cannon fodder around Nuremberg and for ground combat against the Red Army. Pointless slaughter either way; but the men had not been trained as infantrymen, they had no experience of ground combat and not the slightest chance of survival. Moreover, this was not what they had signed up for.

Thus my father and two other pilots were also facing the threat of ground combat against Soviet tanks. He knew that such a mission meant certain death. Yet they had now arrived in the vicinity of Berlin to fulfil their mission, and, with the Russian front not far away, what were they supposed to do now?

Buchschwabach, by Nuremberg.

After navigating countless hazards and detours he led his companions to an airfield, where he hoped to enlist the help of the commanding officer. In those days, however, not having marching orders could lead to summary conviction. They soon passed by a place where there was a barred window, through which a young soldier was mournfully staring. From his response to their questions the three pilots learned that he had been picked up without papers and was awaiting execution: the message was crystal clear.

They only just managed to avoid a military checkpoint when they came around a bend to find a village in front of them full of Waffen-SS troops. At the entrance to the village they saw a group of military police, but if they were to turn around it would only bring attention to themselves. At the last minute they heard the characteristic roar of high-performance engines in the sky; the village was being strafed, so everyone ran for cover. The three pilots were thus able to make their escape into the adjacent forest.

After some time the three walked around a bend straight into the hands of two officers. They identified themselves as fighter pilots on the way to an airfield, truthfully, in fact. When asked for their papers my father had no option but to answer in the negative. However, one of the officers showed them mercy and, with a knowing glance, produced valid documents.

When the three pilots arrived at the airport they were given a rapturous reception, "*Heaven must have sent you! I have got some aircraft here with material vital to the war effort which must not fall into Russian hands, but no pilots!*" So it was that my father took off in a twin-engined machine en route for Hof in Bavaria. A scheduled stop off for refuelling

had to be abandoned as the airfield had just been attacked by fighter bombers, and the runway was out of commission. If the attack had taken place only five minutes later the unarmed, lumbering, fully-laden transport planes would have been easy prey for enemy fighters. When my father finally landed in Hof he was urged to taxi at once under cover, as there was warning of enemy fighters. Yet it was not possible to get the plane away from the runway as the landing had seen off the last of the fuel and, while taxiing, the engines died. Shortly afterwards a low-flying attack did take place and the plane went up in flames. However my father who had never really flown a fighter mission was alive and well.

Declaration by the author:

In any war, anywhere in the world, there are no winners.
There are only losers.
The first, greatest and absolutely irrevocable loss
is the loss of innocence.

Thanks to God or whoever I was not there. However my imagination is sufficiently strong to allow me to appreciate the horror, at least to the extent that anyone without first-hand experience may be able to do.

The last thing I intend to do is gloss over anything, nor will I describe in heroic or glorifying terms any aspect of the lives, the events, or the facts depicted here. This specifically includes the depiction of the swastika symbols symbols which were painted on the rudders of the German aeroplanes at that time, and for which, of course, the author bears no responsibility.

Should anyone feel the urge to talk about guilt—regardless on which side—we ought to bear in mind the psychological, self-protective and suppressive mechanisms that may be activated within anyone who is confronted day in, day out with the frequently horrific death of family, friends, comrades and enemies; all of which must somehow be coped with or dissociated from.

In addition, you also have to live with that same daily threat of a violent death yourself.

The second loss is the loss of respect for the life
and right to integrity of others.

Whenever the text directly addresses the reader's feelings this is intended to make the events more immediate and is an attempt to recreate a time,

which—God willing—shall never return.

Loss of pilots and crew in the Second World War:

(The term "loss" refers to those killed in action, missing in action or captured)

German Luftwaffe:		**80,588 personnel**
British Royal Air Force (RAF):		**79,281 personnel**
US Army Air Force (USAAF):		**79,625 personnel**
Soviet Air Force (VVS):		**~39,000 personnel**

Oberst Lützow inspecting trainee pilots.
By the time of the appeals for volunteers for "Sonderkommando Elbe" Lutzow could no longer prevent what were virtually suicide missions.

The relatively low Soviet figure compared to their relatively high loss of aircraft can be attributed, amongst other things, to their high proportion of single-seater and, maximum, two-seater aircraft. Whereas the loss of a single American four-engined B-17 bomber, for example, could lead to the deaths of up to 10 (on average 9) crew members.

Loss of Luftwaffe fighter pilots only:

German Luftwaffe:		**~11,200 pilots**

Aircraft shot down by German fighter pilots in the Second World War:

Allied aircraft (RAF/USAAF):		**~25,000 aircraft**
Soviet aircraft (VVS):		**~45,000 aircraft**

shot down by German fighter pilots. Of these night fighter crews claimed 5,729 kills, although the actual figure was probably nearer 5,000, the majority of which were British bombers. The remainder were shot down by day fighter pilots. The following figures show the total numbers of aircraft lost, including, amongst others, aircraft shot down by anti-aircraft guns (flak). German gunners alone recorded ~20.000 planes shot down.

Loss of aircraft of the Luftwaffe, RAF, USAAF, VVS:

German Luftwaffe:		**~16,400 aircraft**
British Royal Air Force (RAF):		**~22,000 aircraft**
US Army Air Force (USAAF):		**~18,000 aircraft**
Soviet Air Force (VVS):		**~46,100 aircraft**

Sources:
Fliegerblatt, Gemeinschaft der Flieger deutscher Streitkräfte e.V. / Ausgabe Nr. 4/2006
Quoted (indirectly here): "Zeitgeschichte: Der Zweite Weltkrieg"
Quoted (indirectly here): " Clash of Wings" / Walter Boyne
"Deutsche Jagdflugzeuge 1939-1945 in Farbprofilen" / Bernard & Graefe Verlag 1999 / Claes Sundin and Christer Bergström.
Quoted (indirectly here): "Die Ritterkreuzträger der Luftwaffe Band 1 – Jagdflieger 1939 – 1945" / Ernst Obermeier.

In memory of Walter Oesau

11th May 1944: Oberst Walter Oesau was a highly respected man. A fighter pilot with at least 127 victories to his name, he was also the Kommodore of **Fighter Wing 1 (JG 1),** a man renowned for his bravery and his fighting spirit. Adolf Galland spoke of him admiringly as a "tough, brilliant fighter pilot".

At that time Walter Oesau was considered a hero.

In **May 1944** despite years of fighting, and suffering both physically and emotionally Walter Oesau still battled on, sad and disillusioned. One day as he was returning from a briefing he confided to a friend that he did not intend to survive the war. He had learned about certain "matters" he neither wished nor was able to share with others, or else the entire wing could lose the will to fight. Today we know what he was referring to, although the majority of the people did not know about it at the time.

Oesau was a fighter but on that day, **11th May 1944** he had a high temperature and was confined to bed with influenza.

His wing had already taken off as, not for the first time, about 1,000 heavy American bombers and a similar number of US fighter escorts were attacking French railway installations in preparation for the planned allied invasion. As the vastly outnumbered German fighters were approaching the enemy formation the telephone rang at the airfield. It was Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring, Commander-in-Chief of the Luftwaffe, who was at the end of the line, asking for an up to date assessment.

"Is the Kommodore airborne yet?"

"No, he is confined to bed with a temperature!" came back the reply.

"Yes, I get the picture", said Göring with a sneer, *"then he, too, is not only tired but a coward!"*

When Oesau heard about this the bed rest was abruptly terminated. Despite his high temperature the young Oberstleutnant climbed aboard his Messerschmitt Bf 109 G-6/AS fighter aeroplane (13 ✠, serial number 20601) and flew off in pursuit of his wing. There was no way that Oesau would let anyone call him a coward, a tired one or otherwise.

The Kommodore encountered the enemy formation near the small Belgium town of St Vith. He attempted to attack the American escort fighters of the bomber formation. Two P-51 Mustangs and at least four P-38 "Lightnings" caught the ace fighter in a pincer movement.

Oesau used every trick he knew and fought with all the skill, experience and tenacity gained from more than 300 missions. Despite being greatly outnumbered the Kommodore was able to somehow hold his own in a fight which lasted at least twenty minutes. The combat which had started at 28,000 feet ended just above the treeline in the idyllic surroundings of the wooded hills of the Ardennes.

And then it was over. Oesau had evidently been attempting a last-ditch emergency landing when the cockpit of his Messerschmitt was struck by a final hail of bullets. His body was found some distance from the wreck of the fighter plane. Walter Oesau was dead.

He had proved that he was neither tired nor a coward.
In gratitude for which his wing later bore his name.
Walter Oesau was a hero.
A tragic hero.
For what?

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Karl-Georg Genth, JG 26
Manfred Griehl
Victor Heimann, JG 300
Jean-Yves Lorant
Frank Olynyk
Karl-Heinz Ossenkopp, JG 26
Dr. Jochen Prien
Peter Rodeike
Willi Reschke, JG 301
Ernst Scheufele, JG 4
Dr. Helmut Schnatz
Ernst Schröder, JG 300
Claes Sundin
Dr. Christian Zentner

Explanatory notes

At the start of the Second World War the German **Messerschmitt fighters** were not named after their designer (Willi Messerschmitt), but their manufacturer—the Bavarian Aeroplane Company (Bayerische Flugzeugwerke). Thus we have Bf 109 or Bf 110 for example. This did not change until the arrival of the Me 210, Me 410, Me 262 and Me 163, after the Bavarian Aeroplane Company had become Messerschmitt AG. Yet even then the use of the notation Bf continued to be used in official German documents. As the term Me, thus Me 109, was far more frequently used amongst pilots at the time and today is much more common than Bf, the author will use the following notation:

- **Me** 109: used in the text in this form as the normal abbreviation.
- but: Messerschmitt **Bf** 109 : this is the correct form written in full, and from the Me 210 onwards: Messerschmitt **Me** 210.
- in tables: **Bf** 109.

Further, the different British and American types of aircraft are identified by the name of the **type**, for example Spitfire, Hurricane, Mustang or Thunderbolt. The following notation is therefore used in the text:

- Mustang (standing alone the name defines the aircraft type).
- Supermarine Spitfire Mk. IX.

With reference to the description of German units: unlike the American and British units in which standard English usage requires the use of **ordinal numbers** (for example 2nd or 5th—although RAF squadrons simply used a cardinal number, for example 331 Squadron) the standard German practice of using the cardinal number or the Roman numeral followed by a full stop (for example 2. or 5.) has been retained throughout the text.

Special note: the author would like to sincerely thank the translator of this book, Rob Fernley. All the **citations** concerning original documents which were available to the author in German were translated into English by Rob Fernley. Other documents, which as original documents were on hand in English, are citated literally according to international rules. This is the case, even when other authors had original German documents translated and therefore only an already translated version was available to the author of this book. Especially in these instances the translator, Rob Fernley, would like to point out that the original translation of these citations are **not** his doing.

As a general rule for reasons of authenticity, where the naming of **ranks is concerned, preference is given to the original rank within the specific country, for example, "**Kapitan" (Soviet) or "Captain" (American) instead of "Hauptmann" (German equivalent). The table below is intended as a point of reference. Note: the Russian rank "Mayor" (Major) therefore is not to be mistaken for a village mayor…

Comparison of German, British, American and Russian ranks:

Luftwaffe	Royal Air Force	USAAF	VVS (Soviet)
Flieger	Aircraftman 2nd Class	Private	Ryadovoi
Gefreiter	Aircraftman 1st Class	Private 1st Class	Yefreitor
Obergefreiter	Leading Aircraftman	-	-
Hauptgefreiter	-	-	-
Unteroffizier	Corporal	Corporal	Mladshii Serzhant
Unterfeldwebel	Sergeant	Sergeant	-
Feldwebel	Sergeant	Sergeant	Serzhant
Fahnenjunker-Oberfeldwebel	(Officer-Candidate)	Technical Sergeant	-
Fähnrich	(Officer-Candidate)	-	-
Oberfeldwebel	Flight Sergeant	Staff (Master) Sergeant	Starshii Serzhant
Oberfähnrich	(Senior Officer Candidate)	-	-
Stabsfeldwebel	Warrant Officer	Master Sergeant	Starshina
-	-	Flight Officer	Mladshii Leitenant
Leutnant	Pilot Officer	2nd Lieutenant	Leitenant
Oberleutnant	Flying Officer	1st Lieutenant	Starshii Leitenant
Hauptmann	Flight Lieutenant	Captain	Kapitan
Major	Squadron Leader	Major	Mayor
Oberstleutnant	Wing Commander	Lieutenant Colonel	Podpolkovnik
Oberst	Group Captain	Colonel	Polkovnik
Generalmajor	Air Commodore	Brigadier General	General Mayor
Generalleutnant	Air Vice-Marshal	Major General	General Leitenant
General der Flieger	Air Marshal	Lieutenant General	General Podpolkovnik
Generaloberst	Air Chief Marshal	General (4 Star)	General Armii
Generalfeldmarschall	Marshal of the RAF	General (5 Star) / Field Marshal	Marshal
Reichsmarschall	-	-	-

The Luftwaffe

The Luftwaffe was organised in ***Staffeln*** (squadrons) and each squadron usually had a nominal strength of **twelve** machines. At the start of the war a ***Gruppe*** (group) consisted of **three** squadrons, later (some time around early **1943**) this was often increased to **four** squadrons. A group consisted, therefore, of **36–48** aeroplanes (under optimum conditions i.e. strength in peacetime). In turn **3–4** groups formed a ***Geschwader*** (wing) which, therefore, had at their command anything from **108** aeroplanes (three groups for every three squadrons) to **192** aeroplanes (four groups to every four squadrons)—**plus** the four machines, at most, of the ***Stabsstaffel*** (HQ squadron) of both a group and the wing itself. These figures were of course rarely even approximated in reality. Thus at **the end of 1944** many a Fighter Wing (**J**agd**g**eschwader, abbreviated to **JG**) could barely manage to get **60** aeroplanes airborne.

The aircraft of each squadron were signified in **numbers** for **fighter units** and in **letters** for **bomber units**. These numbers or letters were in different colours and this identified the Squadrons within a group. The Squadrons were numbered consecutively: **5./JG…,** for example, was the second Squadron of the second Group (**II./JG…**) **of the Fighter Wing (JG)** (until **the middle of 1944** ⇨ see below). Briefly, for bomber units the following applied:

B3 HL and **B3 KL**: **B3** signified the **Bomber Wing (KG) 54**, **L** the **3. Squadron** of **I.** Group, **H** and **K** specified the individual aeroplane. The individual identification was white for 1. Squadron (4., 7., etc.), red for 2. Squadron (5., 8., etc.) and yellow for 3. Squadron (6., 9., etc.).

B3 GR is correspondingly a bomber of the **7.** [*1]**/ KG 54** (Kampfgeschwader, which is a Bomber Wing), in which **R** stands for 7. Squadron, the individual identification in 7. Squadron is the colour white.

Day Fighter Units (Night Fighters Units used a similar system to the Bombers) :

The colour of the numbers identified the first, second, third, fourth or HQ squadron within a group. These colours were then repeated in the next group of the same wing. To facilitate recognition of the groups, markings were painted behind the national insignia which identified the corresponding group. The absence of these markings signified the **first** group, a horizontal bar the **second**, a vertical bar the **third** (originally an alternative was a wavy line but this was abandoned after a fourth group was introduced) and a wave the **fourth** group. A wing was named with an Arabic numeral and a group with a Roman numeral.

Thus: **3.**/JG 27 = 3. **Squadron** of 27 Fighter Wing.
But: **III.**/JG 27 = III. (= 3.) **Group** of 27 Fighter Wing.

HQ squadrons mostly bore special markings such as chevrons or double chevrons. In this case it was normal to signify a **Group Commander** with a double chevron, the **Group Adjutant** with a single chevron and a single chevron followed by a vertical or horizontal bar signified the leader of the **Wing HQ Schwarm** (a formation of four aircraft is called "Schwarm"). For the following examples no 5 was randomly chosen:

Until **the middle/end of 1944** most groups of a fighter wing consisted of three squadrons:

1. Squadron / I. Group: 5 ✠ **in German:** 1. Staffel / I. Gruppe
2. Squadron / I. Group: 5 ✠ or 5 ✠
3. Squadron / I. Group: 5 ✠ or 5 ✠
HQ Squadron / I. Group: 5 ✠ or << ✠ <1 ✠ <o ✠

4. Squadron/ II. Group: 5 ✠ -
5. Squadron / II. Group: 5 ✠ - or 5 ✠ -
6. Squadron / II. Group: 5 ✠ - or 5 ✠ -
HQ Squadron / II. Group: 5 ✠ - or << ✠ - <1 ✠ - <o ✠ -

7. Squadron/ III. Group: 5 ✠ I
8. Squadron / III. Group: 5 ✠ I or 5 ✠ I
9. Squadron / III. Group: 5 ✠ I or 5 ✠ I
HQ Squadron / III. Group: 5 ✠ I or << ✠ I <1 ✠ I <o ✠ I

10. Squadron/ IV. Group: 5 ✠ ~
11. Squadron / IV. Group: 5 ✠ ~ or 5 ✠ ~
12. Squadron / IV. Group: 5 ✠ ~ or 5 ✠ ~
HQ Squadron / IV. Group: 5 ✠ ~ or << ✠ ~ <1 ✠ ~ <o ✠ ~

Wing Command: <- ✠ - **in German:** Geschwaderstab

From **the middle/end of 1944** most groups of the fighter wings consisted of four squadrons:

1. Squadron / I. Group: 5 ✠ **in German:** 1. Staffel / I. Gruppe
2. Squadron / I. Group: 5 ✠ or 5 ✠
3. Squadron / I. Group: 5 ✠ or 5 ✠
4. Squadron / I. Group: 5 ✠ (when present)
HQ Squadron / I. Group: 5 ✠ or << ✠ <1 ✠ <o ✠

5. Squadron/ II. Group: 5 ✠ -
6. Squadron / II. Group: 5 ✠ - or 5 ✠ -
7. Squadron / II. Group: 5 ✠ - or 5 ✠ -
8. Squadron / II. Group: 5 ✠ - (when present)
HQ Squadron / II. Group: 5 ✠ - or << ✠ - <1 ✠ - <o ✠ -

9. Squadron/ III. Group: 5 ✠ I
10. Squadron / III. Group: 5 ✠ I or 5 ✠ I
11. Squadron / III. Group: 5 ✠ I or 5 ✠ I
12. Squadron / III. Group: 5 ✠ I (when present)
HQ Squadron / III. Group: 5 ✠ I or << ✠ I <1 ✠ I <o ✠ I

13. Squadron/ IV. Group: 5 ✠ ~
14. Squadron / IV. Group: 5 ✠ ~ or 5 ✠ ~
15. Squadron / IV. Group: 5 ✠ ~ or 5 ✠ ~
16. Squadron / IV. Group: 5 ✠ ~ (when present)
HQ Squadron / IV. Group: 5 ✠ ~ or << ✠ ~ <1 ✠ ~ <o ✠ ~

Wing Command: <- ✠ - **in German:** Geschwaderstab

In the early war years the numbers had a black **borderline** but rarely after **the middle of 1944**.

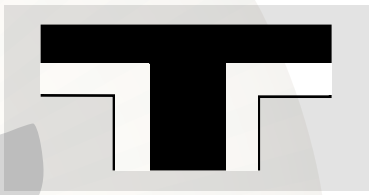
[*1] Independently of this on 6.6.1944 a loss coded B3 ✠ GR listed among 8./ KG 54 did not conform to the rules.

Although introduced with typical German thoroughness this system was by no means consistently applied in the field. As the war progressed and scenes of ever greater chaos ensued there was an increased tendency towards improvisation. Thus the following picture (on the right) of **23rd December 1944** shows that Unteroffizier Erich Keller's 20 ✠ of **5./ JG 4,** therefore **II. Group, had no horizontal bar** above the fuselage band as the system for a second group required, (20 ✠ -, on the starboard side of the fuselage visible here - ✠ 20).

The **form of the cross (known as the Balkenkreuz**) changed considerably during the course of the Second World War as the following illustrations show:

Identification: 5 ✠
(black according to the rules, 5./JG 11)

✠ - form April 1943
(white border, edge lined black)



Identification: 13 ✠ ~
(black according to the rules, 14./JG 4)

✠ - form November 1944
(white border, edge unlined)

Identification: 3 ✠
black according to the rules, 2./JG 1)

✠ - form New Year 1945
(shown only as black line)

From **the beginning of the war** until **the year 1944** the wings were distinguished from each other by sometimes very elaborate insignia which were placed either beneath the cockpit or on the cowling. Two of the most famous are the Green Heart of **JG 54** and the Africa-Emblem of **JG 27** (which, incidentally, had nothing to do with the wing's Africa campaign as the emblem already existed in **October 1939**—and therefore, predated it).

The two examples below denote the Arctic Sea emblem of fighter wing **JG 5** (left), which fought a lengthy spell in Norway, and the Lightning emblem of the bomber wing group **II./ KG 3** (right).

⇦ **JG 5**

Note: "Eismeer" means "Arctic Sea".

II./ KG 3 ⇨

From **the end of 1943,** and at first in those wings detailed to the Defence of the Reich, then in **the year 1944** in all the fighter wings of the Luftwaffe, these emblems were replaced by fuselage bands of varying colours.

The bands were originally a product of the initiative of the individual wings and were intended to facilitate recognition and regrouping and did not become official until **24.12.1944**.

However bearing emblems was prohibited with the purpose of making it harder for the enemy to identify an aircraft in an emergency landing. There were many wings however which did not want to relinquish the use of their traditional emblems so this order was not always complied with, and at times, both markings were used in conjunction. By **the end of 1944** the emblems had largely disappeared.

Fuselage bands: (NB: for a long time stood yellow for the Eastern Front and white for Mediterranean region)					
	JG 1		JG 7		JG 53
	JG 2		JG 11		JG 54
	JG 3		JG 26		JG 77
	JG 4		JG 27		JG 300 red until 12/1944
	JG 5		JG 51		JG 301
	JG 6		JG 52		←

← Flight direction of the fighter, i.e., the fuselage band is determined from the view to the left (port) side.

Royal Air Force (RAF)

Fighter Squadron = "FS", Fighter Group = "FG".

The Royal Air Force was organised in squadrons. A squadron was the smallest, separate organisational unit. A fully equipped **squadron** of Fighter Command had on average **20 (12–24)** aeroplanes at their command, including crew and ground staff. At the start of the war a squadron generally comprised **20** aeroplanes but this figure was reduced during the course of the conflict to the extent that by **the**

SA = 486 Squadron

U = W.O. O.J. Mitchell

FN = 331 Squadron

B = Captain J. Ræder

Unlike in the USAAF the designation of RAF squadrons is not **331st**, but **331** Squadron.

middle of 1940 it was down to **12**. From **August 1940** a nominal strength of **20** fighter aircraft was once again established but only achieved at a later date. This did not necessarily mean that in a given Royal Air Force squadron there were 20 pilots available; the nominal number referred to the number of aeroplanes available including reserves. Several squadrons formed a **wing**, several wings a **group**. The markings consisted of two letters, or one letter and one number in front of the British emblem. This **combination** identified the squadron. A further letter behind the insignia identified the individual aeroplane within the squadron .

HO = 487th Squadron

M = Col. J.C. Meyer

The three **Squadrons** within a group often distinguished themselves by the colour of the rudder. Blue and **HO** indicate here the 487th Fighter **Squadron** within the **352nd Fighter Group** .

PE = 328th Squadron

B = Capt. Don Bryan

Red and **PE** indicate here the 328th Fighter **Squadron** within the **352nd Fighter Group**.

G4 = 362nd Squadron

C = Capt. 'Kit' Carson

(The cowling above bears a chess-board design in contrast to the "blue noses" further above).

Whereas each **different** Fighter **Group** would always have its own distinctive colour pattern—such as here the **357th Group**. A **Group** was the smallest separate organisatonal unit. Several **Groups** constituted a **Wing**, so that the "Group – Wing"-system was not identical to that of the Royal Air Force.

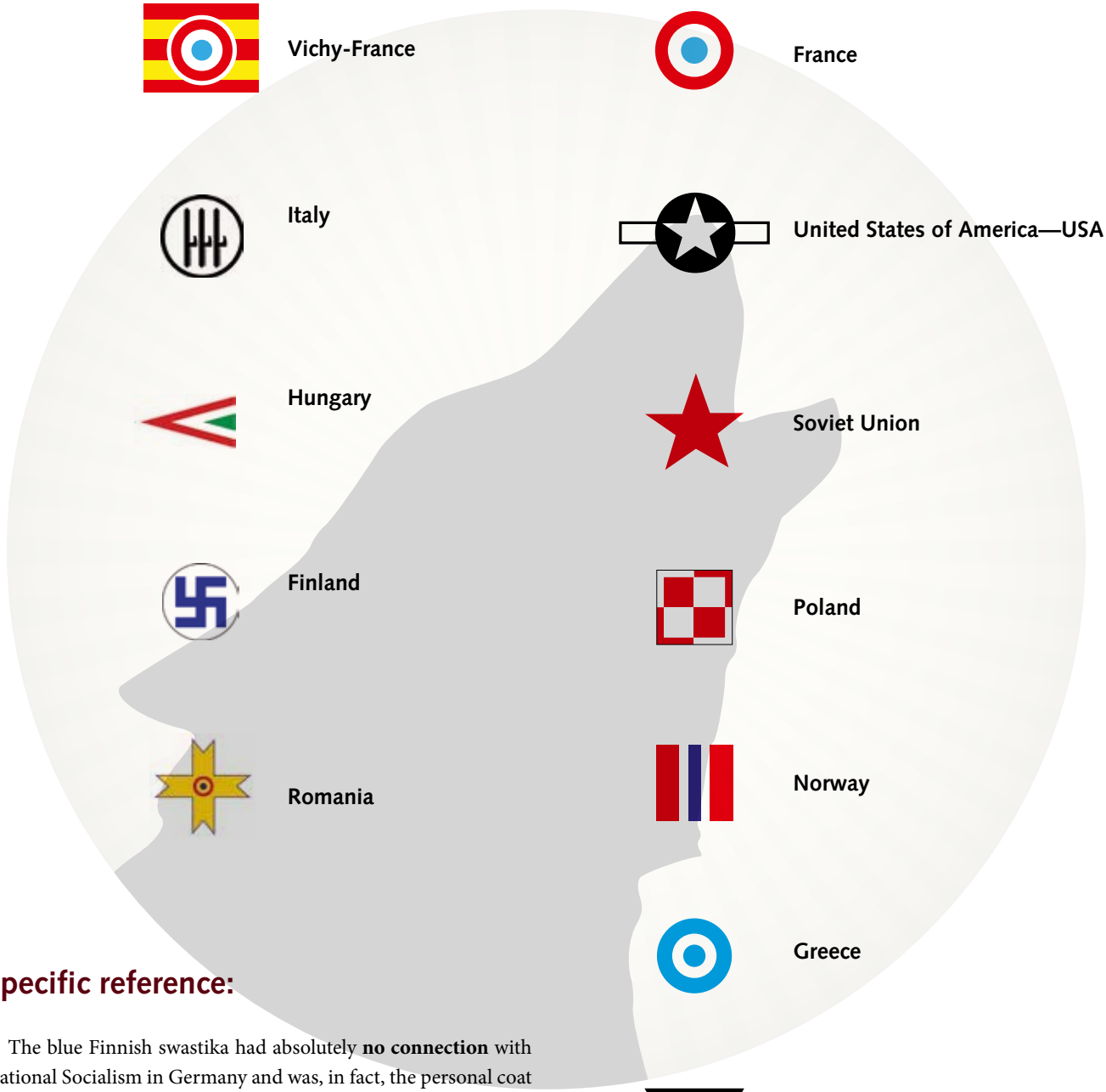
VVS (Voenno-Vozdushnye Sily – Soviet Air Force)

Soviet markings were limited to a **number**, sometimes supplemented with individual dedications of the kind common on the planes of most nations.

(left side)

(right side)

Key to the national insignia (map symbols)



Germany

Great Britain

Vichy-France

France

Italy

United States of America—USA

Hungary

Soviet Union

Finland

Poland

Romania

Norway

Greece

Holland

Belgium

Specific reference:

The blue Finnish swastika had absolutely **no connection** with National Socialism in Germany and was, in fact, the personal coat of arms of the Swede Eric von Rosen who was instrumental in the founding of the Finnish Air Force. Von Rosen donated to the Finns their first military aeroplane, a Thulin D—which is why the Finns used this insignia on their military planes from **the years 1918** to **1945**.

9. "Dr. Gustav West!"—They're coming…

5th June 1944.

German intelligence was not asleep, and nor was their radio monitoring branch. They were listening to the radio and BBC London was broadcasting poetry in French:

" Les sanglots lourds des violons de l'automne ".

Those first three lines of the first stanza of Paul Verlaine's poem, "Chanson d'Automne", had already been broadcast on **1st June 1944**, thereby placing the members of the French Résistance movement on a state of high alert. That was the whole purpose of the coded radio message. Actually it should have been literally pronounced " Les sanglots longs des violons de l'automne", but such subtleties of the French language seemed to be secondary in those days. However, there now followed on **5th June 1944** at **18.00 hours**[*1], the second part of the message. The German radio intelligence officer sat up bolt upright as the last three lines of the first stanza of the poem came out over the airwaves:

" Bercent mon cœur d'une langueur monotone. "

For that message actually signified that the long-expected invasion of France by allied troops was now imminent: it would happen within the next 48 hours. German intelligence had done their homework and learned that much. Albeit it should read correctly " Blessent mon coeur… ". Therefore it could be **tomorrow**, then, **6th June 1944**.

So now the moment had arrived. Now? Surely not in this terrible weather? That was almost too hard to believe.

Still, that message left no doubt. That was the signal for the Résistance to attack. After that there would be no turning back.

Therefore: full-scale alert!

Since **22.00 hours**[*2] the soldiers of the German 15. Army had been on standby. The 15. Army was defending the position where German High Command expected the invasion: the narrowest stretch of the English Channel, the Strait of Dover. Here were the most well constructed fortifications, bunkers, defensive positions and barbed wire fencing. The 15. Army's headquarters was at Tourcoing, near Lille. They planned to give the American and the British a warm welcome. The sphere of operations of the 15th Army extended westward as far as the mouth of the Orne river. The Orne reached the Channel near Ouistreham, 20 or so miles south-west of Le Havre. The German 7. Army held positions further to the west.

But the 7. Army had been left in ignorance. The state of alert issued in the area of the 15. Army was not passed on to them. The LXXXIV. (84.) Army Corps was part of the 7. Army. At midnight its commanding officer was still sitting at his desk at Saint-Lô, when three officers entered carrying a bottle of Chablis, to celebrate the 53rd birthday of their commander, General Erich Marcks. The celebration was a brief one, since a training exercise was on the programme for the following morning, in the rear area at Rennes. That meant an early departure: the aim of the exercise was to practise defence against enemy airborne troops.

The warning did not reach General Marcks either, nor, indeed, Generaloberst Friedrich Dollmann, the commander-in-chief of the 7. Army. He also intended travelling to Rennes. The 7. Army defended the coastal stretch between Ouistreham and St. Nazaire. It was an area considered to be of only minor importance. The fortifications of the Atlantic Wall here were correspondingly full of gaps.

Caen lay due south-west of Ouistreham. And over Caen and Cherbourg night fell as usual. Sentries carried out their routine duties: all was quiet on the Western Front.

West of Ouistreham.

In Normandy.

The commander-in-chief of Army Group B in France had set out by car on **4th June 1944**, leaving his headquarters in La Roche-Guyon. Feldmarschall Erwin Rommel intended to be at home in Herrlingen, near Ulm, by the evening in order to celebrate his wife's 50th birthday. On **6th June 1944** he had a meeting scheduled with Hitler on the Obersalzberg at Berchtesgaden. Rommel wanted to impress upon Hitler the weakness of his forces and ask for at least two new Panzerdivisions and in addition an anti-aircraft artillery corps and a Nebelwerfer regiment. Since Germany was being pressed on so many fronts, however, where could they spare these forces from? Rommel realised that, but he needed these troops, and they were the bare minimum! His force had been cobbled together from all over the world. A significant proportion of the Wehrmacht defensive force in France comprised Croats, Hungarians, Poles, Latvians, Lithuanians, Russians, Ukrainians, Georgians, Tatars and men from many other nations, whether conscripts, defectors or volunteers. It was difficult to predict how reliable a fighting force they would be once they came under enemy fire. And what of the German troops themselves? The Panzerdivisions, some of them actually Waffen-SS units, were well equipped and highly motivated. However, among the other divisions were many who had sustained minor injuries and had been withdrawn from the murderous battles in Russia and redeployed in France. One entire division, the 70. Infantry Division, was composed of men suffering gastric disorders who required a special diet. The Wehrmacht had lost altogether **2,086,000** men, captured, injured and therefore incapacitated or killed by **the end of the fourth year of the war, 1943**. That was taking its toll.

[*1][*2] The time given corresponds to German time. As it was Double British Summer Time (DBST) 22.00 hours in France meant it was 23.00 hours in Germany and Britain, see page 407. Oberstleutnant Meyer, the head of intelligence of the German 15. Army, alerted Generaloberst Hans von Salmuth, the commander-in-chief of the 15. Army, at 21.15 hours German time (therefore also 21.15 hours DBST).

As for the Luftwaffe? Even the most optimistic of the German generals now realised that the few remaining German wings were so outnumbered by the allied air forces that all they could achieve would be damage limitation. The only question was, in any event, the extent to which they would be able to do so successfully. The idea of air superiority of the German fighter aircraft, let alone even air supremacy over the landing beaches of the invasion force, was completely unrealistic. The fact that the skies would belong to the Americans and the British was a reality they would have to get used to; that was how things actually stood now. The American and British aircraft outnumbered the Luftwaffe in France by **50 : 1**. On **31st May 1944** the Germans could call on **891** aircraft of all kinds on French soil, only **496** of which were operational.

On **4th June 1944** there were only **173** German fighters in the whole of France against the powerful British and American air forces, which were superior, not only numerically, but also in terms of quality. Only 119 were currently air worthy, 71 belonged to **Jagdgeschwader** (**JG**) **26**, the remaining 48 to **JG 2**.

Allied air supremacy had serious consequences. The Desert Fox, Rommel, who in earlier times in North Africa had been an impassioned advocate and master of mobile warfare with fast-moving units, had by the end of the campaign witnessed for himself the destruction of his forces, as they were mercilessly shot to pieces and blown to smithereens from the air. He knew that in France he would have to destroy the enemy directly at the coast. If they were to break through further inland they would be virtually unstoppable, since allied air supremacy meant that German troop movement could only take place at night. Counter attacks by tanks during the day would see them exposed to the extreme danger of the bombs and rockets of the Anglo-American fighter bombers. The wily Desert Fox would be proved right.

Rommel needed reinforcements—and urgently. If the Allies were to get a foothold in France then the war would be lost irrevocably for Germany. That much was obvious to Rommel.

For the moment, however they would apparently have a few days' grace before an invasion. A violent storm was currently lashing the coast, whipping up the waves and making a naval landing operation a huge, completely unnecessary risk. Furthermore the low cloud base would jeopardise the success of the landings, since the crucial deployment of the British and American aircraft—their bombers, low-flying aircraft, transports and reconnaissance aircraft—would be compromised. Also the tide was out. They would never land at low tide since it would mean the soldiers having to run several hundred yards after disembarking from the landing craft, across mudflats offering no protection until they came ashore and reached a minimum of natural cover. That would be suicide. The allied commanders would hardly send their men as cannon fodder into the direct line of German machine guns and shellfire. At high tide the landing craft could approach to the very edge of the shore. The assault troops, who would be crouching in their boats protected from enemy MG fire behind the steel ramps of the landing craft, would thus be able to cover the distance ashore far more safely than soldiers storming ashore completely unprotected. However, sooner or later the ramps would have to be lowered.

The Germans who had carefully analysed all the previous allied amphibious landings, for example those in Italy, were therefore convinced that this one would follow the pattern and take place at high tide and in calm weather conditions. Anything else made no military sense. Now at low tide and in this awful weather they would therefore have a few days' respite, in which to take advantage of the brief delay and undertake some urgent regrouping in safety: one unit being redeployed was not yet ready for action. What was required for redeploying forces were roads, and for the time being the roads were, to a certain extent, safe from the damned omnipresent British and American fighter bombers and medium-range bombers: so, if at all, then now was the time! It was also possible to carry out exercises such as the one in Rennes focusing on the defence against an air landing. It was evident that such a landing would precede the invasion. But not that night. Therefore at that moment they could release the German commanders from their units for such a training exercise as that one with little risk.

It was also possible to travel to Germany for a birthday celebration or—more importantly—for a meeting with Hitler. To this day he reserved the right to have the final say on the deployment of tank reserves, and even redeployments within Army Groups required his agreement. Hitler had ensured that nothing happened without his permission in the decision-making hierarchy of the German forces in France, the structure of which he had deliberately made as complicated as possible. Not even Rommel, who as commander-in-chief of Army Group B had to obtain the agreement of the Commander-in-Chief West, Generalfeldmarschall Gerd von Rundstedt, had absolute powers. In the past Rommel had attempted at least to maintain overall control of the coastal facilities and the deployment zone near the beaches: to no avail. Perhaps his conversation with Hitler might now give him his opportunity?

After all Hitler had at **the end of 1943** ordered him to inspect the defensive facilities on the Atlantic coast and to construct an impregnable fortification. Rommel was diligent, considered and purposeful as he set to his task. But how was he supposed to secure an area from Denmark to the Bay of Biscay? The work was frantic, but with the assistance of many foreign workers and forced labour, the German Todt Organisation constructed bunkers and defensive positions. The French Résistance movement sabotaged what they could, including the poor quality concrete which was nowhere near as bullet-proof as it should have been. Rommel ate very little and forgot to sleep or, perhaps, anxiety kept him awake. He improvised where possible but, in view of the massive tasks confronting him, he had no alternative but to prioritise.

When would they come? Certainly at high tide, that was obvious. Thus Rommel had thousands of posts and entanglements constructed under the water, just below the high water mark. These were hung with mines and pieces of metal which would blow up the landing craft or rip open their hulls, for the helmsman at the wheel of the landing craft would be unable to see these underwater obstacles, since at high tide they would be invisible.

The opposite would be true at low tide—for the Résistance fighters as well as the allied reconnaissance aircraft. On the other side of the Channel these defensive facilities were taken seriously. Perhaps a landing at low tide might be the better option after all?

But then there was the problem of the German guns, mortar launchers and machine gun nests: the casualties among the assault troops would be catastrophic at low tide.

Providing, of course, there were still men capable of firing on the German side. The Allies were confident that they would largely be able to prevent this. The massive bombardment from many thousands of ships' guns, ship-borne rocket launcher batteries together with the enormous hail of bombs intended for the German coastal defences, would guarantee there would be no survivors over there. The planners of allied High Command were absolutely convinced of that.

They would make sure that none of the bunkers or machine gun nests would be left firing at the American, British and Canadian assault troops.

Thus the landings would take place at low tide. Rommel's underwater obstacles would therefore be completely ineffective.

Rommel would not expect that. And yet he had a few other cards up his sleeve. There were tank traps at his disposal on the beach and in the rear area, although they had not posed much of an obstacle to his own tanks four years earlier. The so-called "Rommel Asparagus" were obstacles in inland meadows strung with old French shells and mines. They were intended to destroy gliders on landing. Whole areas would be flooded—death traps for paratroops fully laden, who in general would not have enough time to get rid of the heavy loads which would then take them down into the depths. Two to three million mines were laid, which was far too few. Rommel had requested 100-200 million but that was way beyond the scope of Germany's war economy. Then there were the bunkers. On **1st May 1944** only 299 of the 547 coastal guns were located in concrete defensive facilities, and this was particularly the case in the area most likely to be the scene of the attack at Calais on the Dover Strait. The fortifications in Normandy and Brittany were even further from completion. Time was pressing.

Where would they arrive? Rommel was racking his brains, as were the others in German High Command. There were plenty of indications but these were contradictory in nature. At German HQ they attempted to gauge the enemy's intentions from the incessant allied air attacks. However, the Americans and British were systematically destroying all the transport routes in northern France, roads, bridges, railway stations and railway tracks. On **24th May 1944**, for example, B-26 Marauder medium-range bombers bombed all the bridges across the Seine north of Mantes. Continued attacks meant it was impossible to repair them. The French Underground also played an active sabotage role. How could the Germans predict where the invasion would take place if the enemy had the wherewithal of concealing its intentions behind an area bombing campaign, and attacks were occurring all over the place?

The number of very large ports in Normandy and Brittany suggested the landings could be there. A captured port was essential in order to guarantee immediate supplies for troops who were extremely vulnerable in the hours following a landing. However, there was growing evidence to support an imminent landing at Pas-de-Calais, at the end of the Dover Strait. Opposite here, on the other side of the Channel, German reconnaissance aircraft observed the construction of new airfields filled with aircraft, and the concentration of whole columns of tanks, landing craft and similar war materiel in the ports. Nobody took too much notice of the fact that the British fighters only attacked the reconnaissance aircraft in a very perfunctory manner. Nor was it possible for the reconnaissance aircraft to spot from the air that these aircraft, tanks and landing craft were in fact made of papier mâché. Particularly conclusive was the confirmation by German agents in Britain, known as Garbo, Snow and Brutus, that Calais would be the allied landing area. The Germans did not know that all three were British double agents who had deliberately been plying German intelligence with genuine information which was verifiable, and subsequently false information which was not. The British in turn were able to evaluate the effects of this since they could decrypt the German radio code, having acquired an intact Enigma cipher machine. This machine had been constructed so ingeniously that even in such a case as this the Germans considered cracking its code to be impossible. Nevertheless, however difficult it may have been, the British did succeed in doing so. Therefore now they were able to assess whether they had been able to hoodwink their enemy. On **8th June 1944** Garbo would tell the Germans that the allied landings in Normandy had been a diversionary manoeuvre and the actual landings at Pas-de-Calais were imminent. The Germans would be taken in: a costly error.

The commander of allied forces, the American Commander-in-Chief, General Dwight D. "Ike" Eisenhower and his British colleague, Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery, Rommel's old adversary from North Africa, had a decision to make. The landing area had long been designated after a comprehensive study by allied High Command. The Dutch coast was too susceptible to flooding, and the sea current off the coast of Belgium was too strong. Brittany had favourable conditions on the coast but was situated somewhat too far from Britain, and the roads which led inland were scarcely ideal for a large-scale advance. Pas-de-Calais was not without its merits but the beaches were steep—and it was, of course, here that the Germans expected the advance. Therefore the only logical choice was Normandy. The coast here was mainly flat, the road network was good (once the bomb damage had been repaired) and—in particular—there were large ports. They would attack in Normandy. And they would strengthen the German conviction that they were really going to land in Pas-de-Calais.

Which only left the date to be fixed. Originally the deadline was set for **May 1944**. However at that time there were not enough landing craft and landing boats available. After that **5th June 1944** was the date pencilled in. Now that everything was in place it could go ahead. The circumstances were right, the tide was out, a full moon would not rise until late—therefore around zero hour—a prerequisite for a successful air landing operation. Unfortunately the weather refused to cooperate. Confidentiality was still being maintained. The troops were meanwhile on board their ships and half of the men were seasick. On **4th June 1944** at **04.30 hours** the attack was called off. What now?

The next configuration of a low tide and a full moon would occur on **19th June 1944**. Yet they could not possibly keep the soldiers on board for so long. However they would hardly be able to keep their disembarkation secret, either, which would run the enormous risk of allowing the Germans to discover at the last minute where the invasion would take place. Moreover the weather forecast for **19th June** suggested the conditions would be even worse than they were now. But the day after tomorrow, **6th June 1944**, a ridge of high pressure

was expected, which would bring about a short-term improvement. Even the cloud cover was due to disperse temporarily. In Britain the time was now **21.30 hours**.

The allied Chief Meteorological Oficer, RAF Group Captain J. M. Stagg, was asked if he could guarantee that. He replied that he was a meteorologist, not a soothsayer: that was not a guarantee!

The ultimate decision rested with Ike Eisenhower. His watch showed just before **22.00 hours** on **4th June 1944**. Already that morning Montgomery had been against a postponement and was raring to go.

Eisenhower found this an extremely difficult decision. The lives of thousands of his men depended on it. All in all he had at his disposal 3,500,000 men and 20 million tons of materiel. **22.00 hours** was the final deadline for a yes or a no. He had to make his decision now.

"Okay—Go!"

The meteorologists on the German side were not expecting an improvement in the weather. They did not have the facilities of the American meteorological measuring stations around the Atlantic, nor access to their data. Moreover it was difficult to assess how valuable a single day's improved weather conditions might be from the other side of the Channel. Yet this one day would prove important. And a whole day could be a long time.

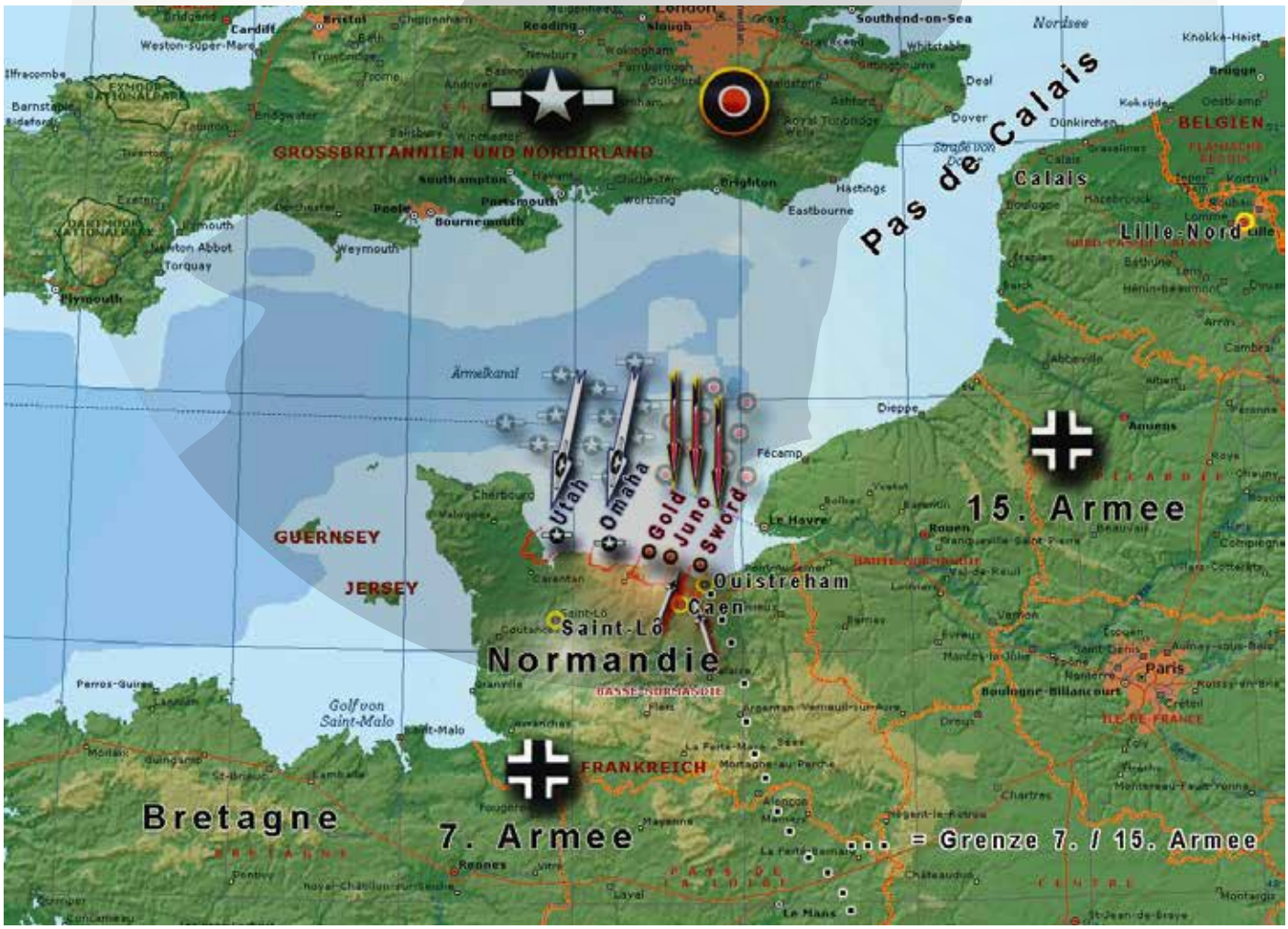
This one would become the "Longest Day".

6. June 1944—D-Day

01.00 hours – 01.45 hours (British Double Summer Time, BDST); for the Germans in France it was **00.00 hours – 00.45 hours**, since in France it was Central European Time (CET), therefore neither British nor German summer time. The time system will be explained in Chapter 15, but it should be briefly pointed out here: in the war years the British put their clocks forward by two hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time, GMT (⇨ GMT + 2h). In France CET applied = GMT + 1h, in Germany German summer time applied = CET + 1h ⇨ GMT + 2 h). In Germany and Britain therefore the clocks ticked in unison, although not in France which was an hour behind in summer.

The German LXXXIV. Army Corps in Saint-Lô received a report of enemy paratroops landing in Normandy. General Marcks had lost his taste for Chablis and without delay broke off his preparations for the departure to Rennes. Evidently they could dispense with the war games—the grim reality was apparently here instead. At **02.00 hours** further reports came in. Dollmann, Salmuth and von Rundstedt—the German commanders—were all wakened. Something was happening there!

The 13,200 British and American paratroops were scattered in all directions, the low cloud base had made locating the landing zones



Großbritannien und Nordirland = Great Britain and Northern Ireland | Frankreich = France | Belgien = Belgium | Bretagne = Brittany | Normandie = Normandy | 7./15. Armee = 7. (7th)/15. (15th) Army | Grenze = (in this case) dividing rule

difficult. Although the gliders did come down, their losses were substantial. In addition they had come under attack from the German anti-aircraft guns. Of those that managed to land, however, some now fell victim to the marshes and the water. Many of the men sank beneath the weight of their equipment in the flooded areas. Others became entangled in their parachute suspension lines and drowned. Some gliders slid into the water as was the case at the Pegasus Bridge. Not all of the occupants were able to free themselves. Large and smaller groups gathered together and formed themselves into assault units. In some places the Germans were on the alert, in others they were taken completely unawares. The bridges over the Dives river were blown up by American paratroops. British paratroops took the German artillery battery at Merville in a coup de main. British Lancaster bombers had been intended to soften up the fortifications a few hours earlier in the night. However the bombs completely failed to hit their target.

The Germans counter-attacked and recaptured the battery, although the guns inside had now been destroyed. At **05.00 hours**, after fire support from the British warship HMS Arethusa, the fortification was back in allied hands. A total of 65 British paratroopers were killed and 190 were missing in action. Their wounded totalled 30 and 22 were taken into captivity. It transpired that the German guns which had now been blown up were of a smaller calibre than expected; they would have posed very little threat to the nearby British landing sector.

Other British paratroop units captured strategically important bridges, such as the Horsa Bridge, as it would later be named, over the Orne, and the Pegasus Bridge over the Caen Canal. The German units in parts of rural Normandy were caught off guard and thrown into confusion. However the allied paratroops were not exactly the model of military unity either.

Counter measures were initiated, although Generalleutnant Wilhelm Falley, the commander of German 91. Infantry Division, was shot shortly before reaching his command post. A sub-machine gun burst caught his car. He jumped out, pistol in hand, but he was fatally wounded by a second burst of fire.

However, in Saint-Lô General Marcks now ordered his single reserve regiment to advance to Carentan and sort out the situation there. Generaloberst Dollmann deployed other troops. The 21. Panzerdivision, the reserve of Army Group B, was brought forward. The order came from Generalleutnant Hans Speidel, Head of General Staff of Army Group B and Rommel's deputy.

Shortly before **06.00 hours** Blumentritt, Chief of Staff of the Commander-in-Chief West, telephoned Berchtesgaden to inform Hitler that the invasion had begun. There Generaloberst Jodl was aroused from his sleep. He was sceptical and considered the whole thing to be a diversionary manoeuvre. The Führer had been awake long into the night and only just fallen asleep. Jodl dared not wake him, knowing full well his reputation for furious bursts of anger: not on account of a diversionary manoeuvre, anyway.

Generalfeldmarschall von Rundstedt, Commander-in-Chief West, left them to it. He felt nothing but contempt for Hitler, the "Bohemian corporal" from the First World War, who had presumed to command his armies and lord it over him, and he effectively washed his hands of him. If the corporal from Bohemia wanted to be a commander then so be it. Generalfeldmarschall von Rundstedt had long since handed in his moral notice.

05.00 hours (BDST):

The countryside of Normandy was shaking beneath the bombardment. In total 1,056 heavy British Lancaster bombers were attacking the ten most important German gun batteries. Merville, Fontenay and Saint-Martin-de-Varreville had already been bombed before the paratroop landing. Now it was the turn of the guns at La Pernelle, Maisy, Point du Hoc, Lonques, Mont-Fleury, Ouistreham and Houlgate. It was a murderous bombardment and yet this was only the prelude.

Through the haze the outline of the invasion fleet could be made out—a huge armada. Meanwhile it had also been detected on the screen of one of the last intact German radar stations off Port-en-Bassin. A deliberately laid smoke screen concealed the ships at the eastern end of the invasion fleet from the gun sights of the heavy gunners at Le Havre. Suddenly three fast-moving shadows appeared. They were three German torpedoes boats, the T-38, the Jaguar and the Möwe. The German navy had little else to offer against the enormous fleet. The torpedo boats came under concentrated fire as soon as they had been identified, and turned away. But their torpedoes were already speeding towards the allied fleet. The Norwegian destroyer Svenner was hit and sank immediately. A few German guns fired from the shore but achieved little.

05.30 hours (BDST):

A total of 1,630 American four-engined B-24 Liberators and B-17 Flying Fortresses relieved the British Lancaster Bombers. An indescribable bombardment ploughed up the coastal stretches of the landing beaches. The bombs left little remaining of the fortifications within the target area—provided that they did hit the mark. The low pressure weather frontal system unfortunately turned out as feared, with visibility on the ground in many places almost down to zero. The bomb aimers were forced to gauge their position from their navigation instruments alone. The bombing in the British landing sectors was to a large extent successfully targeted. In the American Omaha landing sector not so: fearing that the bombs might harmlessly fall into the water here the Liberator bombers dropped their loads a few seconds too late. Those few seconds equalled miles. The majority of them landed some two miles behind the German defensive positions where the installations were particularly well fortified.

Now the ships' guns opened fire in front of the British landing sectors Sword, Juno and Gold. An immense, hellish chain of explosions erupted, unleashing clouds of smoke and billowing flames. The 6,000 ships at the Allies' disposal constituted the biggest invasion fleet of all time by some distance. It included, among others, five battleships, 23 cruisers, 69 destroyers, 56 frigates and corvettes, 247 minesweepers, five monitors and gunboats, 256 smaller ships and 4,126 larger landing craft. The countless small landing craft have not been included. The barrage of steel launched above the German defensive positions and bunkers was beyond description. It was compounded by a hail of rockets, the salvos of which ripped onto the beaches accompanied by an infernal wailing sound which then merged with the explosions of the shells from the ships' heavy guns.

And yet—incredible though it may seem—not all the German guns were destroyed and not all the soldiers in the target area were killed; even though each square metre must statistically have been blown to smithereens several times over.

05.50 hours (BDST):

Now the ships off the American landing sectors, Omaha and Utah, opened fire, twenty minutes later than the British and for a shorter duration. The Americans preferred the element of surprise to the concentrated bombardment. Nevertheless the fire should have been concentrated enough, or so they thought. But it was not quite enough, not in the Omaha sector.

From **06.30 hours** (BDST):

Utah Beach

One of the first Americans to step onto French soil at exactly **06.39 hours** was in the Utah Beach sector, and the man was Brigadier General Theodore Roosevelt Junior. Roosevelt tried to identify the area from known landmarks but he found none. Evidently the whole landing fleet had been driven off course. However they met little German resistance, scarcely any of the Germans could have survived. Some 200 GIs were killed in this landing sector; only two hundred!

Omaha Beach

Things were going to plan despite the rough sea and the towering crests of the waves. At a distance of about three miles off the coast 32 amphibious swimming tanks (DD or Duplex Drive tanks) were launched. They were Sherman tanks which had a collapsible flotation screen which could be erected so that it resembled a gigantic dinghy. It was actually capable of bearing the weight of a tank, provided that the water did not spill over the upper rim of the "dinghy". However that was exactly what happened in the stormy waters. All but two sank to the bottom of the sea along with their crews.

On the right flank another 28 amphibious tanks were to be launched, but 1st Lieutenant Rockwell had witnessed the previous disaster. He therefore steered his landing craft right up to the beach,

DD-Tank: Sherman swimming tank

preferring to run them ashore, rather than have his tank crews suffer a sailor's death. Some landing craft ran into obstacles and sank, the others made it through. The Sherman tanks rolled onto land, only to be greeted by anti-tank shells. German 8.8 cm guns attacked one tank after the other. Once all of them had been destroyed it was the turn of Rockwell's landing craft.

Meanwhile the landing craft with the first wave of infantry came ashore. The Germans in the Omaha sector had in fact survived the pounding of the ships' guns largely intact. The soldiers of the powerful German 352. Infantry Division fired with ferocity and accuracy. The hail of mortar bombs raining down on the Americans was only a fraction of the fire power the Germans had been subjected to. Yet the latter had generally managed to withstand the worst of the attack in their well-protected defensive positions, with the exception of direct hits. The Americans, however, were hopelessly exposed to the German fire on the beaches with no cover—at low tide. Shells exploded all over: the very thing happened exactly the way it should have been avoided.

Omaha Beach: Since Steven Spielberg's Film "Saving Private Ryan" many cinemagoers have gained some sense of what happened here. Despite his unstinting efforts to be faithful to the events, the landing scenes depicted did not come close to the reality.

These photos have been coloured retrospectively but in an extremely professional way.

Gradually the tide came in.

Volleys of machine gun fire lashed the shore. The American losses numbered thousands: the US boys were pinned down on the beach. The next wave followed and they fared no better. Mutilated bodies littered the beach, corpses soaked in blood covered the sand. The scenes of horror were captured in detail on film, although in the film the hell lasted not more than a terrible half hour or so. The actual reality continued for considerably longer: it was a nightmare which refused to end.

Gradually the tide came in. For those who were wounded and no longer able to crawl it was now over.

Next amphibious trucks, DUKWs (known colloquially by the allied soldiers as "Ducks") which had guns on board attempted to come ashore. Without exception they sank beneath the German defensive fire.

It was not until late morning that the tide, figuratively speaking, turned when Colonel Canham and Brigadier General Cota managed to blow a hole in the barbed wire entanglement which barred the narrow pass to St. Laurent by means of a concentrated charge (clusters of hand grenades). The high tide enabled the destroyers lying off the coast to come into the line of sight of the mayhem taking place on that sector of the beach. They directed their fire at the German pockets of resistance. Canham, Cota and a few of their men were able to take advantage of one of these salvos. A direct hit by a destroyer shattered the gun emplacement at Les Moulins.

After that the Americans were through.

In other areas of the beach sector the fighting lasted until evening. The American losses totalled some 3,500 men while on the German side they amounted to 700 or so soldiers.

Gold Beach

The British came ashore at **07.25 hours**. The bombers and ships' guns had done their job. Nevertheless they met desperate resistance. It took the British the whole day to capture the German positions at Le Hamel, in spite of their vastly superior resources. Unlike the Germans, who had little more to offer the British in return other than their tenacity.

As the sea was very rough the landing craft brought the tanks directly ashore here. Some of the armoured vehicles were immediately destroyed by anti-tank guns. The others, however, managed to break through and they quickly received support.

The sheer volume of the materiel, tanks, Sherman Crab mine-clearing tanks and other heavy plant flooding the beach made the task facing the German defenders an impossible one. The British units advanced past the German resistance and headed towards Arromanches and Ver-sur-Mer.

Juno Beach

This was the landing sector assigned to the Canadian 3rd Division. The allied air attacks during the night had inflicted scarcely any damage at all. The murderous ships' fire had also only put some 15 % of the bunkers out of action. As the weather conditions resulted in the landing being delayed by about half an hour the Germans had sufficient time in which to regroup, once the artillery bombardment had ended.

When the Canadians arrived the Germans were ready for them. However the men of the German 716. Division were only fit for action to a limited degree. Many of them were veterans from the fighting in Russia and suffered from various disabilities.

The water was heavily mined. The high sand dunes made the landing difficult and launching and bringing the amphibious tanks ashore safe and sound was an arduous task. Only a few managed to reach the coast and these landed after the assault troops. Up to that point in time the infantry were left without armoured support and suffered correspondingly high losses. At the eastern end of the landing sector the sea was so rough that the infantry had to get by without any tank support at all.

German resistance was fierce and determined. The German strong point in the west at Courseulles-sur-Mer also bravely held firm. Heavy fighting erupted, and after an hour half of the Canadian force which had landed were dead, victims of the German fire. What may be less well-known, that figure corresponded exactly to the overall loss rate of the Americans at Omaha Beach at that time. Now, however, those tanks of the Canadians which were still battle worthy made their presence felt. They succeeded in breaking through the German defensive positions. With the help of their tanks the Canadians negotiated the sea wall and now attacked the Germans from the rear.

Nevertheless the bitter fighting continued—literally to the last bullet and the last hand grenade. The main body of the Canadian army, however, from then on bypassed isolated pockets of resistance and advanced inland.

Sword Beach

This was the easternmost of the landing sectors. At **06.00 hours** the first of the landing craft left their mother ships, and 34 DD amphibious tanks were also launched. The sea at this landing sector was relatively calm, so that the landing of the tanks was successful; or rather, largely successful, since two of the tanks sank in the high tide. The arrival of the others ashore virtually coincided with the first wave of the infantry.

The rocket launchers of the British covered the beach and its fortifications with sustained fire almost to the moment the landing craft came ashore. It was **07.25 hours**. Centaur IV tanks and Sexton self-propelled artillery were positioned in the landing craft so that they were able to fire over the ramp at known enemy positions as they approached the beach.

At La Brèche the British came under desperate, well-aimed defensive fire. Some tanks were knocked out. But then the second wave approached and landed. As the ramps were lowered the soldiers stared directly into the muzzle flash of the German heavy guns and machine guns. The commander of the 1st South Lancs. was killed as was a company leader and his deputy. The battle was fiercely contested. However the tanks succeeded in silencing one German artillery position and fortification after the other. It was not until **10.00 hours** that the task was finally completed.

In the west the British had to deal with other German fortifications. The main strongpoint WN 21 (Trout) was attacked by Royal Marines. Three AVRE tanks came to their assistance. All three were destroyed by a German anti-tank gun.

Nevertheless the British breakthrough could not be prevented.

Some 700 British soldiers were killed.

It is not known how many of them fell victim to the machine guns and cannon of **Oberstleutnant Josef Priller** and **Unteroffizier Heinz Wodarczyk**.

The Luftwaffe

The first German aircraft which appeared above the allied invasion fleet was a reconnaissance fighter of **3./NAGr 13**. Leutnant Adalbert Bärwolf was utterly amazed at the sight which greeted him shortly after sunrise. The size of the death machine far below him was enormous.

Lille-Nord, 55 miles south-east of Calais and barely 155 miles east of Ouistreham, was the headquarters of **Jagdgeschwader** (**JG**) **26**. If it could still be called that, since only the previous day, **5th June 1944**, against the express, determined objections of its commander, it was scattered to the four winds. The valuable aircraft needed to be made safe for the time being from the increasingly dangerous Anglo-American fighter bomber attacks on the ground. **I. Gruppe** was on its way to the area around Rheims, **III. Gruppe** was in Nancy. Whereas **I. Gruppe** would hitherto return in the evening and take itself out of the firing line early in the morning, it was now decided to station it permanently in Rheims.

II. Gruppe was meanwhile based at Mont-de-Marsan, half way between Bordeaux and the Spanish border, and in Biarritz. *"J.w.d."* was how a Berliner would describe it—"*janz weit draußen*" (*"a long way out"*). A Swabian would say *"En Hendrdubbfinga"* (*"In Hintertupfingen"—"The back of beyond!"*).

At any rate it was 500 miles far south-west of Lille—and 375 miles from Ouistreham.

However, suddenly Ouistreham was at the Front.

Sword Beach, to be more precise.

The Kommodore of **Jagdgeschwader 26** had tried to prevent what he referred to as *"sheer lunacy"*. Oberstleutnant Priller was an irascible man, renowned for his furious temper. As he also was for speaking his mind—even to generals—when he blew his top. He felt it was irresponsible, in view of the imminent invasion, to distribute his complete wing all over the place, instead of leaving it where it was probably going to be needed very soon—on the Channel coast. Priller had blown his cool the previous day. It was a vintage, premier cru Priller outburst. *"But that's sheer lunacy!"*, he had shrieked down the telephone. *"If we are expecting an invasion then the Staffeln should be brought forward, not withdrawn! And what would happen if the attack took place during the redeployment? My supplies cannot be in the new bases before tomorrow or the day after tomorrow! You're all nuts!"* He was abruptly reprimanded and told that as a mere wing commander he simply did not have sight of the big picture. And at any rate there was no way that an allied invasion would take place in this awful weather.

Priller slammed down the receiver and looked at his comrade Wodarczyk, the only other pilot from his entire wing who was still there. Then his eyes focused on a bottle of cognac. *"What difference can we make? If the invasion takes place they'll probably ask us to stop it all by ourselves. Why don't we just get blind drunk, instead?"* At **01.00 hours** the bottle was empty. Whether Priller was still standing at that time is unclear.

And then in the very small hours of the following morning the telephone rang. Today was **6th June 1944**. A somewhat bleary Geschwaderkommodore Oberstleutnant Priller answered the phone.

"Priller", he heard an agitated voice at the end of the line saying, *"there seems to be some kind of invasion underway at this moment! I suggest you prepare your wing for immediate take-off"*. At the other end of the line was the "Ia" from the Operations Branch of the higher HQ, Jagdkommando II.

Priller had difficulty registering his thoughts. He wondered if he had heard correctly. So there was an invasion: well, there you go! Was that not exactly what he had thought would happen? First of all Priller felt a compelling need to spell out in detail to the man on the phone exactly what he thought about the entire Luftwaffe High Command in general, and Jagdkommando II in France specifically. He later admitted that the colourful language he used was beyond the realms of decency. *"Who the hell am I supposed to prepare for take-off? I am ready for take-off! Wodarczyk is ready for take-off! And you numbskulls know fine well that I've only got a paltry two aircraft left!"* Priller slammed the receiver down.

However, the telephone did not stay silent for long. It was the same "Ia", who tried with difficulty to compose himself as Priller immediately launched another broadside. The former now gave the all clear: it had all been a false alarm. Priller was lost for words. But now it was impossible trying to get back to sleep.

Nor was that the end of the matter. Some time later the phone rang again. And again it was Jagdkommando II at the other end of the line, again the "Ia" for a third time. *"Priller,"* a dumbfounded Kommodore heard through the receiver, *"the invasion has begun! It would be best if you took off at once!"*

The day before the commander of **Jagdgeschwader 26** still had 71 fighter aircraft at his disposal: now he completely flipped his lid. *"What did I tell you! You damned morons!"*[3] *What am I supposed to do with two aircraft then? Where are my Staffeln? Could you maybe fetch them back?"*

The Ia refused to be provoked. When he finally managed to get a word in edgeways he said: *"Priller, we don't know exactly where your Staffeln landed, but we intend to redeploy them to the airfield at Poix. Please send your entire ground crew there immediately. Meanwhile it would be best if you yourself flew directly to the invasion area. Good luck, Priller!"*

Now Priller regained his composure. Trying to keep his cool as best he could he replied: *"And would you be so kind—if you don't mind—as to tell me* ***where*** *the invasion is taking place?"*

"Normandy, Priller! In the area around Caen!"

It was immediately arranged for all three Gruppen of **JG 26** to be brought nearer to the invasion front and then sent into action. Priller required about an hour or so to give out the relevant instructions and details.

I. Gruppe and **III. Gruppe** were both alerted by telephone. They took off and were directed towards the airfields of Creil and Cormeilles-en-Vexin (12 miles north-west of the Paris city limits), in order to reinforce the fighters of **Jagdgeschwader 2**. Meanwhile **II. Gruppe** had been informed by **05.00 hours** and had been on the way to the scene of the fighting since **07.00 hours**. The redeployment of the large number of ground staff who were still on the road at any rate with all their equipment, was more difficult. The way things were at the moment they were travelling in the wrong direction. What mattered now was to get everything to Normandy. But the roads leading there had all been destroyed and meanwhile become extremely dangerous. The *"sheer lunacy"* was now about to be avenged.

In Lille it was **08.00 hours**[4] on **6th June 1944**. Priller taxied to the take-off point with his comrade Wodarczyk. Neither was under the slightest of illusions as to the prospects of their surviving this mission.

The two Focke-Wulf 190 A-8s took off. Priller was flying a modified aircraft whose outer wing cannon had been removed so as to make the fighter lighter and therefore faster and more agile. It was probable that his wingman also used a 190 which had likewise had its weight reduced. Priller led the pair and Wodarczyk followed orders and stuck closely to his tail.

The two lonely German fighters tore westward through the French countryside at low altitude. Loneliness, however, is a very one-sided affair. In this case for the moment it only related to the aircraft bearing the Balkenkreuz insignia on the fuselage and wings. Above them all hell was let loose. The closer the two fighter aircraft came to the invasion beaches the greater the number of allied aircraft tearing through the skies far above them. There were huge formations of American Mustang fighters and Thunderbolts, as well as British Spitfires. Yet not one of the allied pilots in the overcast skies spotted the two grey-mottled German fighters a few feet above the surface of the ground.

Shortly before Le Havre a blanket of cloud rose ahead of Priller's engine cowling. The Oberstleutnant climbed and disappeared in the grey wall. Wodarczyk followed him. As both aircraft emerged on the other side of the blanket of cloud, having flown through the soup, an indescribably dramatic scene awaited them. There ahead of them lay the entire, colossal allied invasion fleet.

And the landing sector known to the British as **Sword Beach**. But neither Priller nor Wodarczyk knew that. They were also unaware that in the next few minutes they would both achieve historical immortality. Both were expecting the more prosaic mortality of humans. If it had to be so, then at least they would go out with a bang and with fanfares.

The fighting below them on the landing beaches was unyielding. Priller radioed his wingman to keep in close contact with him. *"What a sight—a really great sight! Down there they've got everything you could wish for, as far as the eye can see! Believe me—that's what you call an invasion!"* Priller paused to take a deep breath in amazement. *"Let's go Wodarczyk! Good luck!"*

With these words the Oberstleutnant tipped his Focke-Wulf into a dive and tore towards the beach sector at 405 mph. At less than 160 feet he pulled his fighter aircraft out and raced across the beach with all guns blazing.

The British soldiers dived to the ground as the bullets were sprayed all around them. Then the ships' anti-aircraft gunners woke up, covering the two German aircraft with an unprecedented hail of fire. To

[3] Note: it must be assumed that expressions used in the sources such as the words "damned morons" have been retrospectively airbrushed. It is quite likely that the actual words used were considerably more colourful and involved reference to a certain anatomical region.
[4] This refers to German time, therefore, for the landing troops it was 09.00 hours.

no avail, though. Priller flew onwards, behind him Wodarczyk raced across the beach, firing with all he had. Eventually Priller climbed again. As if through a miracle, neither of the two Focke-Wulfs had been hit by an anti-aircraft shell. Perhaps even more surprising—there was not a single British or American fighter aircraft to be seen.

When these finally arrived, both Focke-Wulfs disappeared into a thick wall of cloud similar to the one they had so suddenly emerged from.

"That must have been the Luftwaffe's greatest moment in history". Priller's words over the radio were laced with irony. Nevertheless the two comrades had survived.

A British sailor who was on board HMS Dunbar, Leading Stoker Robert Dowie, witnessed the virtuoso display of the two German fighter pilots and is said to have shaken his head in disbelief as he commented: *"Jerries or not, good luck to you lads—you've got guts!"*

The two lads landed safe and sound but covered in perspiration.

After Leutnant Bärwolf the two men may well have been the first German pilots over the battleground. They would not be the only ones that day. Nevertheless it remained the most famous low level attack on the landing beaches.

The second Jagdgeschwader represented in France, Major Kurt Bühligen's **Jagdgeschwader 2**, was stationed near the area of the Normandy Front. However one of his three Gruppen, **III. Gruppe**, was also in the process of redeployment at the moment. It was on its way to Fontenay-Le-Comte, to the north of La Rochelle, while **II. Gruppe** was actually in Gütersloh in Germany recuperating. Since the beginning of the year they had lost 50 pilots and were urgently awaiting replacements.

The Gruppe of **JG 2** most rapidly brought to the vicinity of the invasion beaches, at any rate after its hasty redeployment in the early hours from the area around Nancy to Creil, was **I. Gruppe** under Major Erich Hohagen. Even **III. Gruppe** intervened in the fighting and joined the operation after midday, despite the redeployment order. Its Gruppenkommandeur, Hauptmann Herbert Huppertz, would in fact excel himself today. In spite of their recall to the rear area **I.**, **II.** and **III. Gruppe** of **JG 26** also took off on **6th June 1944** after lunchtime against the allied air armada.

On the ground there was initially some grounds for German optimism. The German 21. Panzerdivision managed to give the British a hard time near Caen (Sword-Beach). However eventually the German counter-attack was halted thanks to the additional air support of British Hawker Typhoon fighter bombers. Nevertheless a difficult situation arose for the Allies when the German 192. Panzergrenadier Battalion succeeded in driving a wedge between the Canadian 3rd and British 3rd Divisions, and reached the coast between Juno and Sword sectors. The success of the invasion was on a knife edge. A further advance, the rapid and deliberate exploitation of this tactical advantage would now only have been possible with the introduction of more German tanks, and in broad daylight that would be a very risky operation. Despite all the dangers there was a compelling military logic to it. The armoured divisions were available to von Rundstedt—theoretically. However the Führer had personally assumed sole responsibility for their deployment. And at that moment the Führer was sleeping.

When he woke up he thought it was a diversionary manoeuvre. The main invasion was pending—at Pas-de-Calais, as expected. Therefore he ruled out bringing in any more units to Normandy from the area of the 15. Army, including the deployment of the tank reserve—until it was hopelessly too late. Hitler was still vacillating on **8th June 1944**. The subterfuge of the British double agents was reaping dividends.

Erwin Rommel reappeared in La Roche-Guyon towards evening. He had cancelled his meeting with Hitler. What would have been the point? The enemy had not been destroyed on the beaches, but instead had already brought 150,000 men ashore, established beachheads and was now securing them. Rommel knew the significance of that. He had sat in silence in the car with the driver and his aide-de-camp, Hauptmann Lang, for the entire journey. Then he uttered a single sentence: *"I was right the whole time—the whole time!"* By the end of that first evening the invasion had cost the lives of approximately 9,000 allied troops. In Britain that was far fewer than had been expected.

And, what about the performance of the Luftwaffe? At the end of the first day of the invasion they had flown an impressive 170 missions. The pilots of the other side in comparison could only manage a pathetic 14,000 missions! Those figures make Priller's irony understandable.

Leutnant Wolfgang Fischer of **3. Staffel** of **JG 2** recorded his experiences during the first day of the invasion. Even his description of the days and hours shortly before it began are informative. This is how he recalled the events (the times relate to German time):

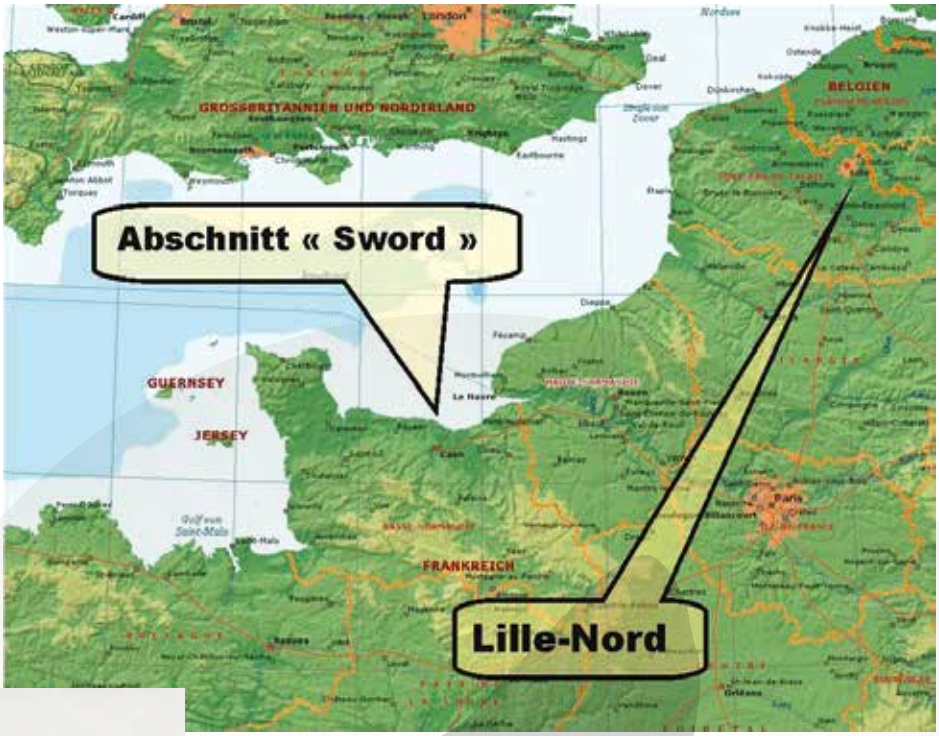
Friday, 3.6.1944:

*On this day our **I. Gruppe** was brought even further inland to Nancy/Lorraine and the surrounding area. **1.** and **3. Staffel** landed on the plateau above the town. We stayed there the whole weekend doing nothing which I found rather pleasant, since I knew Nancy well from the time I spent there at **JG 107** flying school in **1943**. Today with hindsight I realise that our redeployment was probably because they knew the time and place of the invasion and wanted to move the fighter units to safety away from the expected air strikes. German Counter Intelligence, under Admiral Canaris, had in fact achieved great success with a vast network of spies who penetrated positions of trust among the enemy. His colleague, Oberstleutnant Oskar Reile, who was then Commander of Intelligence, Western Front, wrote in his authentic document "German Intelligence in the 2nd World War—Western Front" the following:*

*"Page 351: The responsible officers on the staff of the Commander-in-Chief West (Feldmarschall Rommel) and those in our intelligence units in the West were firmly convinced from **the beginning of the year 1944**, as a result of intelligence gathering, that the main thrust of the invasion would be in Normandy. Nevertheless, Hitler and his advisors would not be swayed by the arguments put forward by those officers, preferring to trust his 'unerring genius as a field commander' and the reports of numerous departments of the RSHA (Reichssicherheitshauptamtes—German State Security) and the National Socialist Party.* [...]

6th June 1944

Aircraft:	Focke-Wulf 190 A-8
Nationality:	Luftwaffe
Unit:	HQ Staffel/JG 26 and 4. Staffel/JG 26
Pilots:	Oberstleutnant Josef "Pips" Priller (front) and Unteroffizier Heinz Wodarczyk (rear)
Stationed:	Lille-North/France/6th June 1944



Abschnitt = sector | Lille-Nord = Lille-North | Großbritannien und Nordirland = Great Britain and Northern Ireland | Frankreich = France | Belgien = Belgium

The aircraft used by "Pips" Priller on 6th June 1944 bore his traditional number Black 13. The photo dates from the days around the time of the invasion. But no. 13 was not the official marking for a Geschwaderkommodore. The photo below left proves that there was an earlier aircraft which bore the regular marking.

On 5th February 1944 the commander-in-chief of Army Group B, Erwin Rommel, visited JG 26. Oberstleutnant Priller's Focke-Wulf 190 can be seen in the foreground. At that time it was still the A-6 variant, serial number 530120. This aircraft still bore the regular insignia of a Kommandeur –✠–>. The serial number has been shortened on the starboard side of the fin to 0120, but appears in full on the port side. The stylised *Adlerflügel* or eagle's wing (the jagged black trim beneath the engine cowling) is likewise asymmetrical: it is shorter on the right than the left.

Oberstleutnant Priller, Feldwebel Schmidtke, Unteroffizier Wodarczyk, Unteroffizier Grad. Note the well-camouflaged Focke-Wulf 190 behind the men.

At the end of the war only one of these men would still be alive. It was the one on the left with a pipe, a man of rather smallish stature nicknamed "Pips".The conversation appears to be a rapport or debriefing of some kind. Priller does not look very happy.

Priller's "Black 13" "♥ Jutta" 13–✠– with overload tank.

Two other flying aces in discussion: Oberst Walter Oesau (left) and Major Heinz Bär (right) in April of the year 1944 in Störmede. Walter Oesau was Geschwaderkommodore of JG 1, Heinz Bär would shortly afterwards on 1st June 1944 be named Kommodore of JG 3.

Josef Priller before a mission in his earlier Focke-Wulf 190 A-6, serial number 530120. Here the starboard side of the tail unit can be seen, only showing the digits 0120, but in larger script. The number on the other side is written in full.

The idea that the main thrust of the invasion would take place in Pas-de-Calais and not in Normandy never gained any traction among the staff of the Commander-in-Chief West (OB West). However this idea was the one repeatedly put forward by the staff of the Wehrmacht (OKW). Their reasoning: this was the narrowest point of the Channel …!"

*"Page 348: On **1st June 1944** at **18.00 hours** the soldiers who had been given the task of listening in to the BBC burst in to inform me that 26 of the code words relevant to the units of the Résistance and the SOE Groups had just been broadcast. This meant that it had placed them on a high-alert footing: the invasion was likely to take place at any minute.*

That same evening I made a long-distance phone call to the Commander-in-Chief West and also informed him by telegram. … [...] *Finally we felt a sense of relief on **5th June** at **18.00 hours** when the BBC broadcast the message we had been expecting to the intended recipients in the Résistance and the SOE groups: it meant that the invasion was imminent, go immediately and fulfil the duties assigned to you for D-Day! I made long-distance calls informing the relevant departments at HQ of the details without delay..."*

Focke-Wulf 190 A-8 with BR-21 (21 cm) rocket launchers.

Leutnant Fischer continues his story:

"Monday, 6th June 1944:

*At **05.00 hours** a motor cycle despatch rider pulled up outside my hotel, bellowed out my name and the word 'invasion!'. He drove me up to the plateau from where we took off in knee-high grass for Creil aerodrome (some 25 miles north of Paris). There our aircraft were equipped with BR 21 rocket launchers* […].

During the two hours' wait while the refitting took place I wondered how anyone was ever supposed to hit anything with those contraptions —I'd never actually 'worked' with them before. We called them 'Dödls', a blanket description for all sorts of things (for example that was the name we gave to the Knight's Cross). The targeting instructions were actually short and to the point:

*'At a distance of 1,100 yards lead 90 yards to port'. To stabilise the flight path the propellants were expelled through 24 slanting holes bored into the base of the rocket so that they twisted right and then drifted to the right. Therefore they were not suitable for small point targets. However against ships, with their great length, I felt that they would have a reasonable chance of success. Well, our 'Revi' gunsights (Reflexvisier—reflector sights) were designed to project a circle before our eyes, the diameter of which corresponded to 1/10 of the distance to the target. Thus, for example, when a fighter aircraft with the usual wingspan of 35' filled the whole of the circle the pilot would be sitting 350' behind it. Therefore it should be possible to determine with sufficient accuracy the distance to a ship and the necessary lead angle to attack from the broadside and score a direct hit—if they informed us how long those damned barges actually were. So, simple pilot that I was, I estimated what the length of certain various vessels might be, for example, a troop transport ship was 110 or so yards long. At **09.30 hours** we then took off with twelve aircraft, Fw 190 As, on our first mission to the invasion front, in the area of the British Gold sector at the coast near the village of Ver-sur-Mer. Hohagen was not flying the mission with us this time, Hauptmann Wurmheller was leading the formation in his place. The sky at this time was about 70% covered with thick cumulus cloud, in between which we spotted flights of allied fighters again and again. We were not supposed to get involved with these but instead our first priority was to deploy our rockets against sea targets. At **10.00 hours** we flew over Bayeux, where I was able to pick out fires. Then we flew at some 10,000 feet shrewdly out over the Baie de la Seine for a while, and then attacked from the sea, thereby managing to outwit the ships' anti-aircraft guns, since to begin with we were left undisturbed by them.*

The critical drawback for us was that the dense fighter protection over the beachhead meant that we had insufficient time to take up favourable positions from which to approach the fleet broadside on. From the altitude we were flying at I had a view of the whole coastal stretch from the Orne Estuary, near Caen, up as far as St. Maire Eglise, off the coast of which a deeply echeloned armada of ships was approaching. Far to the outside were battleships, transports were nearer land and small landing craft were on their way to the beach, leaving behind a stern wake. Thick dark barrage balloons were suspended in the air above the units close to the coast. As I had no benchmark with which to compare the scope of such an operation I initially accepted the glorious scene before me in a matter-of-fact sort of way. Subconsciously, however, I think I had the feeling that we were never going to get a handle on all of this.

However, I was the only one fortunate enough to get one of the bigger barges (it looked like a Victory Class or Liberty Class transport, about 8,000 tons—I had a vague idea of hearing that somewhere) directly in my line of approach on the broadside. I pressed the button and aimed half a ship's length ahead of the bow, not registering immediately that the barge was slowly bearing left and then actually making a gradual left turn. I therefore quickly reduced my speed (so as not to get closer than the 1,100 yard limit), adjusted to a whole ship's length by 1 ½ inches to the left of the assumed ship's course and then waited until by my calculation the diameter of the sight

had filled (therefore I was approximately 1,100 yards away from the target) and launched the rockets. For a fraction of a second I was enveloped in a powerful flash of blinding light accompanied by what sounded like a horde of wailing banshees. At the same time the aircraft jerked upwards after its sudden loss of weight. I was initially stunned with shock from it all but I quickly recovered as the aircraft then settled and flew on safely. Then I followed the two points of light on their downward trajectory and was able to determine that the port side rocket exploded in the stern of the ship leaving a vast cloud of smoke, while the starboard rocket just missed the rear of the ship and the light was extinguished in a plume of water.

Afterwards I dropped the two cartridges and dived towards the coast at increasing speed to avoid the troublesome surge of flak bursts, all the while covering the line of the beach with all guns blazing as I headed for the 'Gartenzaun' ('garden fence'—Luftwaffe slang for the home airfield). The dense allied fighter protection over the beachhead made it impossible to hang around there for any length of time, so home it was then at ***10.45 hours****, although not to Creil, but to Chantilly racecourse near Senlis, where there was a small château which served as our lodgings. My direct hit was confirmed by my comrade, Leutnant Walterscheidt. The Kommandeur offered me his congratulations.*

Strangely enough there were no further missions for the whole of ***I. Gruppe*** *until later in the evening. Only the Kommodore and his HQ Schwarm flew a mission in the afternoon to the beachhead where he shot down a P-47 Thunderbolt* [note: the Kommodore in question refers to Major Hohagen, and the 'P-47' was in fact a Typhoon], *while all the other pilots were actually given permission to leave the base. As it had turned into a warm day a few comrades and I made the most of the opportunity and visited the public swimming baths, where we splashed about among the local residents and soaked up some sunshine. All the time a solitary P-51 Mustang circled at leisure above the town at an altitude of about 7,000 feet but fortunately he did not spot our parked aircraft. At any rate there was no air attack on our 'racetrack' as we liked to call the airfield. This was a truly surreal situation if ever there was one!*

It was not until nightfall that we were back in action when the Kommandeur of ***III. Gruppe****, Hauptmann Huppertz, landed at* ***19.30 hours*** *with five Focke-Wulf 190 A-8s at our base. He took me and two other comrades (Leutnant Eichhoff and Oberfähnrich Beer) with him on a mission against air landing units in the area of Caen. We took off at* ***20.00 hours*** *and flew at about 1,300 feet above the ground almost exactly due west. When we were level with Evreux, however, we spotted twelve P-51s systematically attacking a German army column at low level. That meant that we had to abandon the original objective since our priorities now had to be the protection of the marching column and that led to the jettisoning of our drop tanks. The Mustang pilots were so engrossed in their work that they did not spot our eight Focke-Wulf 190s as we climbed to 4,000 feet behind them so as to be able to attack them from the optimal position from above and behind. As we climbed each one of us was literally able to select at our leisure our own target. Mine was occupied attacking a column on a bridge, when I got on his tail unnoticed and hit him full on as he pulled up away from his target. Because of our steep turns I had to lead at an extreme angle and therefore I was unable to observe my hits as they actually occurred. So I then flew right up to the enemy aircraft and saw for myself the devastating effect of our armament. The bullets had hit the cockpit and the section of the fuselage behind it, carving out four inch square holes, the edges of which were now glowing dark red. The pilot was sitting slumped in his seat, as his aircraft went into a shallow descent and crashed at the foot of a tree which stood directly on the river bank. The tree was immediately engulfed in flames burning from top to bottom like a huge candle.*

The complete success of the mission, given our circumstances at the time, was exceptional since we achieved eight[*5] *aerial victories against no losses of our own. We arrived home at* ***21.30 hours****—flushed with an archaic sense of triumph. Waiting for us was a mobile broadcasting unit from the German radio network who wanted each of the three successful pilots* [he is probably referring to the three pilots of **I. Gruppe**] *to give a live, unscripted interview and each would afterwards receive a recording of it* […].

Tuesday, 7th June 1944:

That morning at ***05.30 hours I. Gruppe*** *again took off under the command of the Gruppenkommandeur with twenty aircraft, firstly to attack shipping targets in the British Gold sector and then to destroy the Würzburg radar installation at Pointe du Hoc which had fallen into allied hands. For this mission the Kommandeur had chosen me as his Katschmarek* [note: wingman]. *At* ***06.00 hours*** *we flew over the beachhead but, given the short period of time we had available before we had company, we were unable to take up any favourable attacking positions, so we fired our rockets too inaccurately to record any direct hits. Then I committed a breach of discipline and acted independently, something for which I would have been severely reprimanded if I had returned. Specifically I left my tactical position as Katschmarek, went into a relatively steep dive and attacked one of the large 2,000 ton landing craft, which was located so invitingly in my flight direction and currently disembarking infantry from its open stern. Of course I intended to climb back up and return to my position after the attack, but I came under such unbelievably dense fire from the light anti-aircraft guns of all the surrounding ships (although the landing craft I was attacking did not offer any defensive fire during my approach), that I had the impression that I was diving into a red-hot spider's web. For between six to eight seconds I was able to spray the barge from bow to stern with all my weapons. But shortly before I pulled the aircraft out just over the landing craft, I heard one direct hit in the rear fuselage and then another one at the front in the engine, which immediately began to lose oil, thereby smearing the windscreen. And with that it was curtains!*

I managed to get the aircraft back to 1,300 feet and then baled out—still over the sea. As I did so I struck my left shoulder against the tail fin—fortunately the left shoulder—since it meant I could still pull the ripcord with my right hand. I was blown gently towards the coast and then, contrary to all the international rules of warfare, I came under light anti-aircraft fire from the landing craft I had attacked. I was feeling like 'Christmas and Easter at the same time' as we used to say.

[*5] In several other sources five or six P-51 Mustangs are cited. According to the source 🕮 "2nd Tactical Air Force" Volume 1/Classic Publications/2005/Chris Shores and Chris Thomas, this discrepancy can be explained by the fact that some of the downed "Typhoons" were in fact P-51s which were taken unawares in the low level attack on 4th FG USAAF.

Then stupidly I landed in a German minefield of all things, roughly 220 yards adjacent to the occupied beach sector. Two Tommies wearing their typical flat steel helmets led me safely out of the minefield, carefully probing the mudflats step by step with small sticks, and took me to a dressing station. It was not much more than a small tent but there I was given a preliminary medical examination, which involved them first of all taking care of my broken shoulder blade, collar bone, upper arm and three ribs. I have to say that I was treated in an extremely friendly manner, thus, for example I was given cigarettes, hot cocoa and a warm blanket upon which I was able to lie down on until I was evacuated.

Incidentally, until that moment I had been a non-smoker but then, probably as a result of nervous tension, I became a rather heavy smoker. Actually today I sometimes wonder if back then we didn't have nerves of steel, since I cannot recall witnessing any of the symptoms of shock we see today after serious accidents, for example, which require psychological treatment." [*6]

At midday on the "longest day" Leutnant Fischer did not yet know that the next day he would be enjoying British hospitality. It was a day of many open questions: would it succeed? Would our calculations work out as planned? Would we be able to defeat the Germans, or would the former Desert Fox have a few aces up his sleeve we did not know about? The British and Americans were keyed up and suspicious. They would certainly not put it past him, not their rival who was renowned for his ingenuity and intelligence. But Rommel was not in the place where he was most urgently needed.

The soldiers at sea and on land were concerned with more life and death matters: will I get through? Will I survive? Linked to these two questions was a further one: on the British and American sides it provoked deep surprise and on the German side it was asked with disappointment and desperation.

Where the hell is the Luftwaffe?

There wasn't one—not in Normandy, with a few honourable exceptions.

A bitter saying was coined by German infantrymen which gradually gained wider currency: "If the aircraft is *silver* it's American; if its *camouflaged* then it's British. But if it's *invisible*—then it must be German!"

6th June 1944: at **05.00 hours** (DBST) four Focke-Wulf 190 G-8 fighter bombers of **3. Staffel** of **Schnellkampfgeschwader 10 (SKG 10)** were on a reconnaissance mission, trying to assess the situation. Instead, four British Avro Lancaster heavy bombers found themselves assessing the power of their armament. The Staffelkapitän of **3. Staffel**, Hauptmann Helmut Eberspächer, shot down three of them in the darkness: between **05.01 hours** and **05.04 hours**, to be precise. For the crew members of the four Lancaster bombers there was no ambiguity: this morning was mourning time. The fourth of the Lancaster bombers was shot down by Feldwebel Eisele. The bombers in question were from **76, 578** and **582 Squadron RAF**.

The next German success on that dramatic day did not take place until several hours later. At exactly three minutes before noon—**11.57 hours** (DBST)—the characteristic silhouette of an American P-47 Thunderbolt filled the cross hairs in the gunsight of a Focke-Wulf 190 A-8. The pair of eyes behind the German reflector sight belonged to no less a person than the Kommodore of **Jagdgeschwader 2**, "Richthofen", as it was known, Major Kurt Bühligen. The victim of his 99th aerial victory crashed near the Orne Estuary. Shortly after **12.00 hours** (DBST) three Hawker Typhoons fell to the guns of what were reported as German Me 109s. In actual fact the successful aircraft in question related to Focke-Wulf 190s of **HQ Staffeln** of **I.** and **III. Gruppe** of **Jagdgeschwader 2**, which encountered Typhoons of **183 Squadron** south-east of Caen, which at the time were busy attacking a German tank column. **No. 183 Squadron** was led by Squadron Leader Scarlett who was now opposed on the German side by Hauptmann Herbert Huppertz, the Gruppenkommandeur of **III. Gruppe**. Huppertz shot down two of the three destroyed Typhoons in succession. Their pilots, Flight Lieutenant R.W. Evans (serial number: MN342), Flying Officer M. H. Gee (MN478) und Flying Officer A.R. Taylor (HF P, R8973) all of whom lost their lives. Evans was a Flight Commander and an experienced pilot. It made no difference at all. The German Hauptmann's aerial victories were timed at **12.14 hours** and **12.15 hours**.

A Hawker Typhoon IB of No. 198 Squadron Royal Air Force (it was the aircraft of Flight Sergeant J.S. Fraser-Petherbridge). The heavy cannon, bombs and rockets of the Typhoon became as big a scourge to the motorised German ground troops as the Stukas had formerly been to the allied units. Any movement by day was no longer safe.

The third Typhoon, which was confirmed as a loss on **6th June 1944** at about midday by **183 Squadron**, was credited to the German Gefreiter Fieseler (**III./JG 2**) who at **12.10 hours** (DBST) claimed to have destroyed a Typhoon near Argentan (a good 30 or so miles south-south-east of Caen). Otherwise it was possibly Oberfeldwebel Hartmann (**I./JG 2**), who claimed a similar success for himself at **12.15 hours** (DBST) 12 miles south of Caen. Therefore four of the Hawker fighter bombers were reported to have been shot down, whereas at that time the actual Royal Air Force losses of that aircraft were confirmed as three. At **12.16 hours** Unteroffizier Nistler (**I./JG 2**) increased his Geschwader's victory tally with the downing of an American P-47 Thunderbolt, likewise at Caen. All of these kills were confirmed by official German documentation.

[*6] Source: 🕮 Fliegerblatt, Gemeinschaft der Flieger deutscher Streitkräfte e.V./Ausgabe Nr. 5/2006.

Fighter aircraft and fighter bombers

American fighters/fighter bombers:

Aircraft: Bell P-39 D Airacobra (saw extensive combat with the Soviet VVS)													
Maximum speed: **367 mph** at 13,780 ft | maximum permissible dive speed **466 mph** | Ceiling: **31,500 ft**													
Data at an altitude of feet (ft): Data at an altitude of meter (m):	0 0	3,281 1,000	6,562 2,000	9,843 3,000	13,123 4,000	16,404 5,000	19,685 6,000	22,966 7,000	26,247 8,000	29,528 9,000	32,808 10,000	36,089 11,000	39,370 12,000
Maximum speed (mph):	**295**	**311**	**328**	**344**	**364**	**362**	**355**	**343**	**328**	**301**	–	–	–
Speed of climb (ft/min):	**2,008**	**2,126**	**2,264**	**2,382**	**2,539**	**2,146**	**1,642**	**1,156**	**703**	**260**	–	–	–
Time for a 360° turn (sec):	**27.6**	**28.7**	**30.0**	**31.6**	**33.2**	**39.0**	**48.4**	**63.0**	**88.6**	**153**	–	–	–
Comparison with the literature:													
Maximum speed according to **William Green: 360 mph** at 15,000 ft **(579 km/h** at 4,572 m**)** Rate of climb according to **William Green:** initial climb rate: **unspecified**, time taken to reach **20,000 ft** (6,096 m): **9.1 min**													

Aircraft: Bell P-39 Q Airacobra (saw extensive combat in the Soviet VVS)													
Maximum speed: **380 mph** at 13,780 ft | maximum permissible dive speed **466 mph** | Ceiling: **32,700 ft**													
Data at an altitude of feet (ft): Data at an altitude of meter (m):	0 0	3,281 1,000	6,562 2,000	9,843 3,000	13,123 4,000	16,404 5,000	19,685 6,000	22,966 7,000	26,247 8,000	29,528 9,000	32,808 10,000	36,089 11,000	39,370 12,000
Maximum speed (mph):	**306**	**321**	**337**	**357**	**377**	**376**	**369**	**359**	**346**	**325**	–	–	–
Speed of climb (ft/min):	**2,264**	**2,402**	**2,539**	**2,677**	**2,835**	**2,441**	**1,890**	**1,384**	**900**	**441**	–	–	–
Time for a 360° turn (sec):	**26.5**	**27.8**	**29.1**	**30.6**	**32.1**	**37.1**	**45.6**	**58.2**	**79.9**	**124**	–	–	–
Comparison with the literature:													
Maximum speed according to **William Green: 376 mph** at 15,000 ft **(605 km/h** at 4,572 m**)** Rate of climb according to **William Green:** initial climb rate: **unspecified**, time taken to reach **20,000 ft** (6,096 m): **8.5 min**													

Aircraft: Bell P-63 A Kingcobra (saw combat primarily in the Soviet VVS)													
Maximum speed: **409 mph** at 24,606 ft | maximum permissible dive speed **482 mph** | Ceiling: **38,000 ft**													
Data at an altitude of feet (ft): Data at an altitude of meter (m):	0 0	3,281 1,000	6,562 2,000	9,843 3,000	13,123 4,000	16,404 5,000	19,685 6,000	22,966 7,000	26,247 8,000	29,528 9,000	32,808 10,000	36,089 11,000	39,370 12,000
Maximum speed (mph):	**310**	**321**	**334**	**345**	**358**	**371**	**387**	**249**	**406**	**394**	**378**	**349**	–
Speed of climb (ft/min):	**2,362**	**2,342**	**2,342**	**2,323**	**2,303**	**2,283**	**2,244**	**2,224**	**1,931**	**1,386**	**872**	**356**	–
Time for a 360° turn (sec):	**24.9**	**26.6**	**28.7**	**31.0**	**33.6**	**36.4**	**39.8**	**43.5**	**50.9**	**65.6**	**92.0**	**160**	–
Comparison with the literature:													
Maximum speed according to **William Green: 410 mph** at 25,000 ft **(660 km/h** at 7,620 m**)** Rate of climb according to **William Green:** initial climb rate: **unspecified**, time taken to reach **25,000 ft** (7,620 m): **7.3 min**													

Aircraft: Curtiss P-36 D Hawk (the French Armée de l'Air received the P-36 A to C as the H-75 A-1 to A-4)													
Maximum speed: **323 mph** at 17,060 ft | maximum permissible dive speed **482 mph** | Ceiling: **38,400 ft**													
Data at an altitude of feet (ft): Data at an altitude of meter (m):	0 0	3,281 1,000	6,562 2,000	9,843 3,000	13,123 4,000	16,404 5,000	19,685 6,000	22,966 7,000	26,247 8,000	29,528 9,000	32,808 10,000	36,089 11,000	39,370 12,000
Maximum speed (mph):	**267**	**276**	**287**	**297**	**309**	**321**	**319**	**317**	**311**	**302**	**286**	**266**	–
Speed of climb (ft/min):	**3,642**	**3,661**	**3,681**	**3,681**	**3,701**	**3,701**	**3,169**	**2,559**	**2,028**	**1,498**	**902**	**411**	–
Time for a 360° turn (sec):	**15.9**	**16.9**	**18.1**	**19.4**	**20.8**	**22.4**	**25.6**	**30.0**	**35.9**	**44.8**	**63.6**	**104**	–
Comparison with the literature:													
Maximum speed: William **Green,** for a **P-36 G: 323 mph** at 15,000 ft **(520 km/h** at 4,572 m**)**, for a **P-36 C: 311 mph** at 10,000 ft **(500 km/h** at 3,048 m**)** Rate of climb according to **William Green:** initial climb rate: **unspecified**, time taken to reach **15,000 ft** (4,572 m): **P-36 G** and **P-36 C: 4.9 min**													

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