The Culture of the World War II Luftwaffe Fighter Ace

By Wg Cdr Dean Andrew

By a convention established in the First World War a fighter pilot with five kills became an ace. In the Second World War the same standard was used by the Allies, whilst the Luftwaffe adopted the term Experte. Experten had to demonstrate overall proficiency in combat rather than attain a set number of victories. This method allowed comparative awards to be made to airmen flying different types, in different roles and operating in differing theatres. The nomenclature of the Luftwaffe system disguises the incredible results achieved by its fighter pilots (Jagdflieger). Any Allied pilot who achieved over 60 kills was regarded as exceptional, yet when Jagdflieger records became available after the War, they were totally eclipsed by the performance of the Luftwaffe fighter pilots. Applying the 'Allied' convention, the Germans had over 2,500 'aces' and, at the higher end of the scale, just 35 pilots were credited with a total of 6,848 kills — an average of 196.[1] Some fought from 1936 with the Legion Kondor in Spain until the final air battles over southern Germany and Austria in May 1945. Most had been shot down more than once (Erich Hartmann, the highest scoring ace with 352 victories, was shot down eight times) and many suffered serious injuries. But despite the deteriorating odds faced by the Jagdflieger as the War progressed and the contradicting and often illogical direction from the Nazi hierarchy — they flew on with pride and determination.

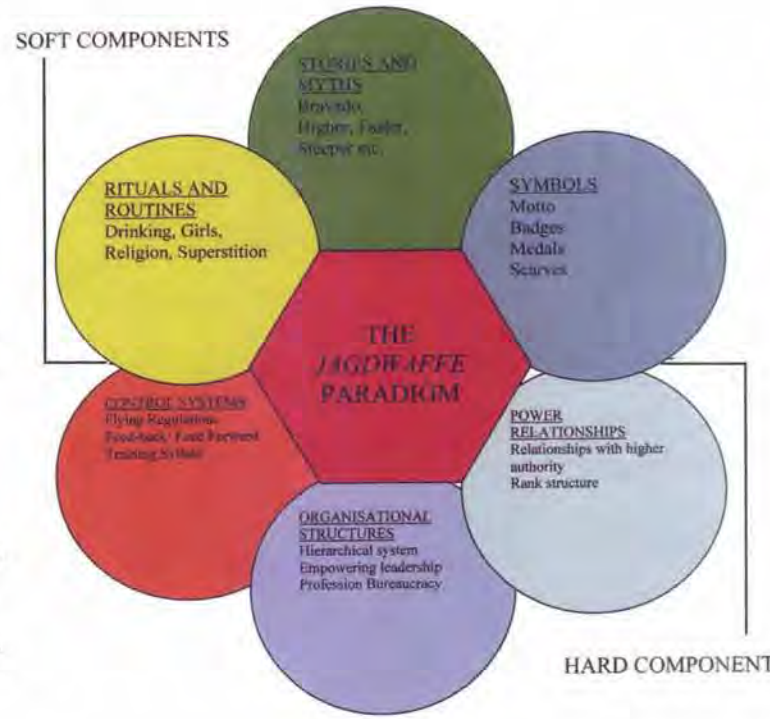
Modern corporate strategic thinking addresses how organisations achieve and sustain superior performance. Organisational features, such as structures, systems and power configuration are considered to be capabilities, which may be unique and provide a source of competitive advantage. Further to that, it is agreed that contextual relationships between such features define the culture of an organisation. Modern theory suggests that strong culture is a powerful capability that can generate advantage even when an organisation lacks the tangible resources of its rivals.[2] The subject of strategic culture matters deeply because it raises the core questions about the roots of, and influences upon, strategic behaviour;[3] and contemporary social science and business academics have tried to identify ways of exploiting the corporate or strategic culture of organisations for competitive advantage.

Defining culture is challenging. Deal and Kennedy[4] suggest that organisational culture is 'the way we do things around here'. Although this popular definition is appealingly straightforward, it is difficult to know what to include in such an idea of culture. A more structured approach, introduced by Johnson[5], is to consider contextual influences as parts of a web. The web tries to make sense of the myriad of internal structures and processes that arise from, and continuously reinforce, an organisation's view of itself. The web influences individual members' self-perception, as well as their internal organisation and external environment. This he terms the cultural paradigm. The constituent parts of the web, and therefore the paradigm, will be unique to each organisation.

This paper will turn Johnson's contemporary 'Cultural Web' model back to the Second World War and apply it to the Jagdflieger. It will show that these pilots were influenced by a web contributing a source of advantage that compensated in several ways for many of the material and intangible inadequacies with which they operated.

The cultural web

Johnson's Web is made up of six parts, the interplay between which characterises the organisation and defines the paradigm. The Jagdflieger Web below gives a snapshot of the inputs that could influence the paradigm. Most organisations have defined control systems and recognised structures and indeed a great deal has already been written by historians on these aspects of the Jagdflieger, but the cultural 'glue' of the organisation that holds the hard components together are the informal, soft components and the meanings they carry.



Starting with the more easily comprehended 'hard' components, this paper will identify the mechanisms that define the Jagdwaffe (Fighter-force) paradigm and establish how its strategic culture became a source of competitive advantage.

Organisational structures

Most organisations identify structure by use of wiring-diagrams, but structure defines more than just who is working for whom. There is a recognised inter-relationship between structure

and culture.[6] Modern business academics accept that hierarchical organisations, with many levels of power, often suffer poor internal communications and can be slow to react to crises. Flatter organisations, with fewer levels of leadership, that push power to as low a level as possible are conversely associated with efficiency and strong culture.

communications specialists and radar controllers associated with air defence units. For the majority of the War, Divisions were commanded by generals with First World War experience. Front-line pilots felt that direction from the Divisions was often out of touch with the realities of modern warfare, but there was little that could be done to rectify the situation.

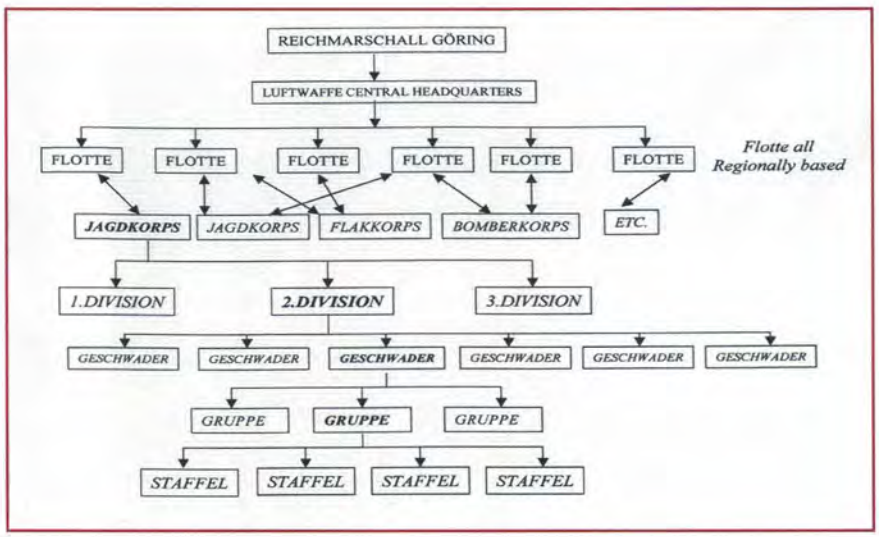


Fig 1: The Luftwaffe Air Organisation 1940

At the start of the War the Luftwaffe was divided into six territorial commands or Flotten, administratively responsible for all units, regardless of type or role, within its area. The Flotten coordinated operations between branches without concern for detailed planning. Below the Flotten, two Jagdkorps commanded Luftwaffe fighters. The Korps were responsible for planning, supervision and analysis rather than operational control and included large intelligence and weather sections. Divisions came below the Korps. There were three divisions in Germany each with a staff of some six – 7,000 people. These included

The 1918 Treaty of Versailles had banned Germany from operating an armed air force. By the time the Second World War started the fledgling Luftwaffe was barely 4½ years old and, although it had grown into the largest air force in the world, it had a hierarchy gap of some 20 years and suffered from a lack of leaders and managers with core skills to fill key posts. Below the Divisions came the Geschwader (Wings). Geschwader were completely self-sufficient often having a fleet of transport aircraft for couriering orders and air rescue assets to collect downed pilots. The smallest independent units were the

Junkers Ju 87 Stuka dive-bombers of the Luftwaffe in action

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Gruppen (Groups), of which there were three per Geschwader. Each Gruppe had repair and administrative facilities and was more often than not co-located at an airfield with one of its three or four squadrons (Staffel). The Staffeln initially consisted of 12 pilots and was usually led by a Hauptmann (Captain), supported by four other officers and seven NCO pilots. As the War progressed the acute shortage of suitable leaders forced Staffeln to be increased to a complement of 16 pilots. By the end of the War most units had at least 20.

This structural overview clearly shows a hierarchical organisation. Higher headquarters were particularly bureaucratic, communication was often slow and direction imprecise[7], probably reflecting a lack of quality and experience forced by the Versailles restrictions. As a First World War ace himself, Goering recognised that lack of leadership throughout the expanding force would create problems as the War progressed. Towards the end of the Battle of France in 1940, he made a bold move. The majority of the then in-place Kommodores (Wing-Commanders) were

Adolf Galland (left) and Werner Mölders (right) each side of Ernst Udet

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pilots who had flown in the 1914–18 War. None of these had modern aircraft experience and all commanded from the comfort of headquarters. Goering replaced these veterans with young 'talent' from the Gruppen. It was his intention to send the clear message that future leaders must set an example to those on the front-line. The selected Kommodore were all under 30 and had been chosen because they were the highest scoring pilots at the time. Despite being selected predominantly for their flying skills, most were also outstanding all-round officers. Galland, Mölders and von Maltzahn (to name but a few) are regarded amongst the Luftwaffe's all-time great leaders. These men were fliers at heart and had empathy with their men on the front-line. Importantly they kept on flying in their staff appointments. They would regularly fly in combat with a squadron or in their own Stab (staff) formations. Whilst the Kommodores were notionally staff officers they had little time for paper-work, being more interested in tactical matters. They encouraged their pilots to think laterally and empowered them to be independent. The German concept of mission command was exploited to the full. They were often seen on the flight-line, were popular with air and ground crews alike and became role models to their subordinates setting the tone of their Wings by example. Their often gregarious personalities broke the mould of their stereotypical Prussian predecessors and became part of a catalyst that began to foster a unique Jagdwaffe culture.

Power relationships

Power relationships often play a major role in determining the efficiency of organisations. Many successful modern businesses encourage devolution of power and respect the views from the lower levels in decision-making. This 'bottom-up' approach often fosters participation in problem solving across all levels. This was

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not the case in the Luftwaffe. The Nazi Party maintained tight control over its armed forces. The concept of mission command, lauded as one of the keys to Blitzkrieg success, was encouraged at the tactical level by the Kommodores, but did not extend to the operational and strategic levels and the relationships between Hitler, Goering and Luftwaffe higher command.

At the outbreak of the War, Goering recognised the dearth of experience and leadership in the Luftwaffe (see previous section), but Hitler centralised control over the military to the detriment of its effectiveness. Although he had little understanding of air power he consistently interfered in strategic decision-making. The entry of America, with its considerable air power, into the conflict in 1943 highlighted the lack of investment in air defence systems in earlier war years. Luftwaffe higher command, including the then General Galland, Armaments Minister Speer and Goering decided to increase production in fighters to arrest the decline. Hitler overturned the decision, insisting on technical investment into the V1 and V2 rockets, which he (virtually alone) believed would deliver the killer blow to the Allies. This probably delayed the Luftwaffe's first jet, the ME 262 into service, and contributed considerably to the loss of the air war.

A lack of respect for this strategic leadership existed on the front-line. Hitler was sarcastically referred to as Grofaz[8], a nickname meaning the 'greatest leader of all time'. He became so

obsessed with detail that he even decided what type of cannons should be fitted to new aircraft types. Despite having not flown since the early 20s, Goering also continually interfered at the tactical level. When at home, Goering maintained a link with headquarters via radio and would listen to reports of in-coming raids. Occasionally he assumed direct command of fighter units operating over Germany. When sitting in his living-room, he would infuriate headquarters staff by radioing, 'The Reichsmarschall is taking over' and, whilst sipping on Brandy, would direct fighters to target enemy raids. On one such occasion, he misinterpreted observation reports and vectored fighters to chase phantom targets across Germany and into the Czech Republic, whilst the actual bomber package attacked Düren in the West. Goering was a Hitler sycophant[9] and pilots who progressed into leadership roles, such as Galland and Trautloft, considered him incompetent, with little comprehension for modern air power. However, although he was not despised by his subordinates (many believed him solely responsible for the establishment of an independent Luftwaffe in the first place), he was disaffectedly referred to on the front-line as der Dicke (Fatty).

In the context of structure and power relationships, the conflict between the centralised control of the Party and the lack of suitable experience in operational headquarters required for the demands of modern fast-moving air warfare, the importance of the 'young' Kommodores (and their subsequent promotion into higher staff posts) should not be underestimated. The Luftwaffe was hierarchical and bureaucratic in structure and, understanding the pressures of the front-line, they empowered their subordinates to 'do what was right'. With input into the selection of their Staffel and Gruppe commanders, the Kommodores were able to pick pilots in their own mould as successors and thereby influence the long-term culture of the force. They believed in what they did and were not afraid to challenge decisions they did not agree with. At one of the regular meetings Goering held in his home to communicate the Führer's wishes to his pilots, Lutzow, one of the original 'young' Kommodores, banged his fist on the table and said:

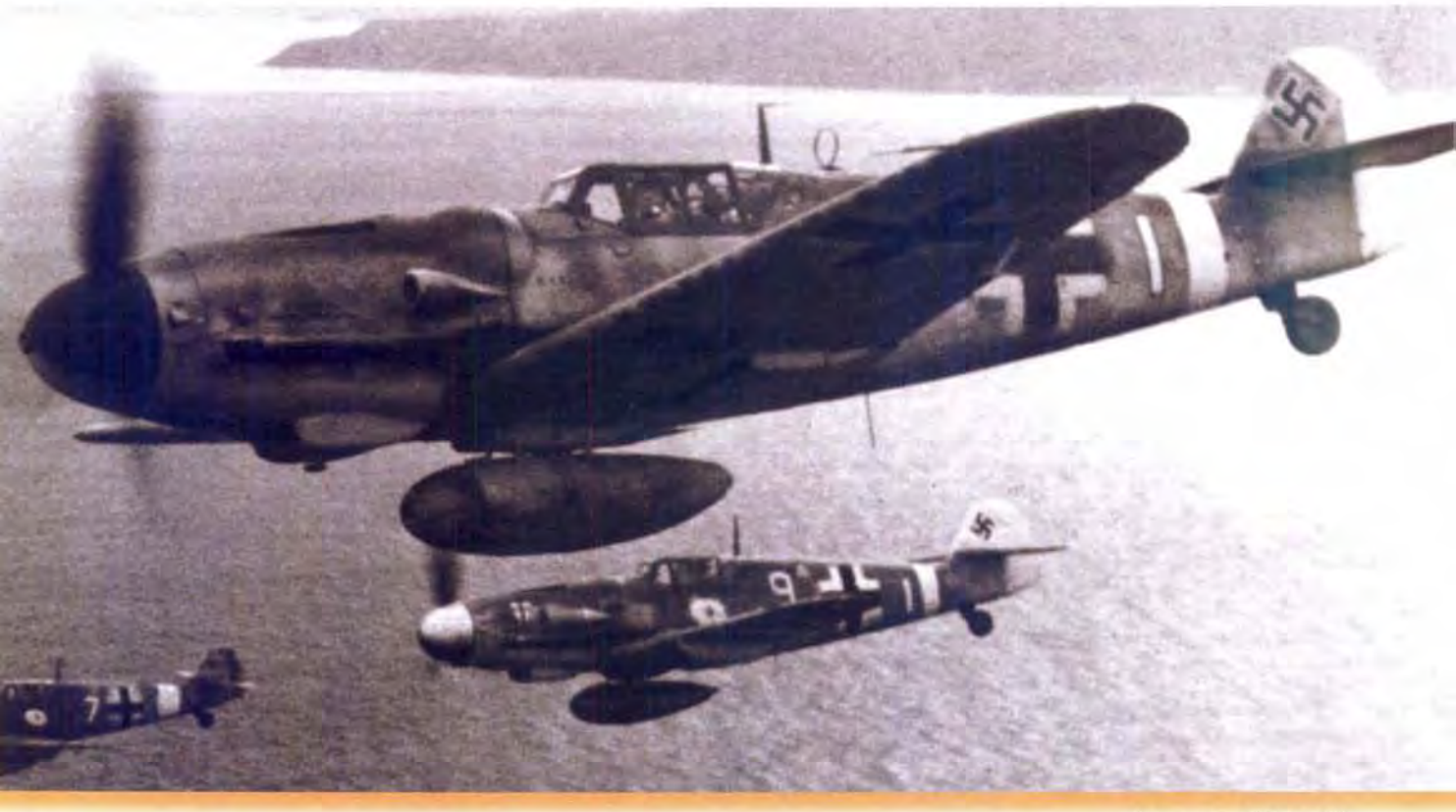
'Herr Reichsmarschall could you stop talking for just 5 minutes and listen to what is really going on, otherwise this meeting will be meaningless?'.[10]

Such forthrightness permeated the ranks of pilots and set a powerful example to the Jagdflieger as a whole.

Control Systems

Control systems include training, reporting, and personnel issues, such as career management. This section will describe the rigid selection and challenging training systems, and how the lack of control systems at strategic and operational level combined with the nature of the Nazi party as a whole led to a number of key strategic lessons being overlooked. The Paper continues by explaining how ad-hoc systems developed at Geschwader level, combined with an effective use of empirical information, helped the Jagdflieger overcome the lack of formal methods and maximise pilot utility.

Pilots could enter the Luftwaffe either as officers or as NCOs. Officer training included two years general service instruction at air warfare school. NCOs went directly to flight training. In both cases selection was particularly intense. The entrance examination required to progress to the interview stages was considered harder than the school leaving examination[11]and only 5% of applicants passed. The selection procedure lasted three days and included motor skill tests as well as leadership games (those unsuccessful for pilot selection were recommended to other forces based on their performances). However, performance in the interviews was most important. The interview team of six officers would question an individual's motivation to become a pilot. In one of his entrance interviews, Meimberg was repeatedly asked what he would do if he was told he didn't have the aptitude to become a pilot. He repeatedly replied that he knew he did have the aptitude and refused to be drawn to discuss possible alternatives.[12] Former Jagdflieger agree that such a single-minded approach was key to acceptance for pilot training.[13] Although most 'cadets' wished to fly fighters, the Luftwaffe considered bomber-flying to require greater skill and selected those



Messerschmitt Me-109s

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with a propensity for instrument flying at an early stage for bomber conversion. Basic piloting was completed as part of the air warfare school and upon graduation prospective Jagdflieger were sent to fighter conversion schools to join with NCOs who had followed the shorter path. These schools were demanding in more ways than one. Pilots displaying insufficient skill or aggression became flying instructors or re-roled to the army. The accident rate for students was also high. Records from the conversion school Schleissheim for October 1939 show 6 serious crashes,[14] whilst an instructor from JS 3 (Fighter School) considered it not unusual to lose 30 from a course of 120.[15] After 4 months conversion training the 'survivors' were posted to front-line units.

Skawran, a German psychologist, conducted a study into the personal qualities of the Jagdflieger. He concluded that graduates who successfully transitioned onto front-line squadrons shared many individual characteristics; the fighter

Wreckage of an Me 109

Towards the latter part of the War the lack of strategy led to disillusioned front-line pilots describing higher authority 'chasing the last bomb crater' as units were re-deployed at short notice to protect areas that had just been bombed. 'The Luftwaffe went into the War as a [leaderless] torso and finished as a torso'

pilot was normally very gifted across the board. Empirical evidence shows that Jagdflieger who were invalided to army units because of flying preventative disabilities made exceptional ground officers. Conversely, very few soldiers aspiring to transfer to the Luftwaffe successfully completed training. In general, the types of people who graduated to fighter squadrons had shown intense competitiveness throughout training and transferred that into a 'killer' instinct upon contact with the enemy. Interestingly, the study was able to show that a majority of these pilots did not grow-up in cities but more than likely came from smaller regional centres or the country and lacked the metropolitan awareness of fashion and style of their army peers. Most had a dislike for crowds and for direct responsibility of others, preferring to work alone or in small groups. They shared an almost universal dislike of textbooks and of the education system, but not of learning itself, demonstrated by a passion for practical activity and things technical. Leisure

time was spent on individual activities such as horse-riding, or hunting, abseiling or driving fast cars (quickly). To a man they enjoyed skiing — even those from northern Germany were keen winter sportsmen and all had a love of pure flying. Comparative research shows that in contrast to day-bomber, night-fighter and transport pilots, who saw their role as procedural in nature, Jagdflieger had a passion for aerobatics. There was very little interest in team related sports. In line with the Nazi party ethos of developing a strong Arian race, organised squadron sporting activities were based on individual prowess, such as swimming, athletics or shooting. None of the pilots interviewed for this Paper expressed any interest in football. The average age of fighter pilots in 1939 was 26, but by the end of the War this had reduced to 23.[16] This cannot solely be attributed to attrition, but is also a reflection of the physical demands of combat and the efforts made to train younger pilots for the front-line. Luftwaffe statistics, used to inform throughout the War, show that the number of victories achieved after the age of 28 dropped off markedly, probably caused by deterioration in eyesight and the extra physical demands due to increased aircraft performance. This feedback encouraged the Luftwaffe to actively recruit younger candidates and to move those in their late 20s, showing signs of burnout, into headquarters. Towards the end of the War the Jagdwaffe had a number of 17-year-old pilots on squadrons [17] and although this was probably more a measure of the desperation of the situation in 1945, that it was permitted shows the faith that the Luftwaffe held in its empirical information.

Despite having described the Luftwaffe as a bureaucratic hierarchy, the Paper argues that it suffered from a lack of over-arching standardisation or strategic control. Inline with the overall politics of the Third Reich, the Luftwaffe was founded on the Führerprinzip — central control with personal momentum to the fore. Structures, processes and regulations were never effectively put into place. This resulted in strong personalities being able to bend or break the rules (if Hitler condoned it). The absence of strategic control is highlighted by the bewildering variety of aircraft types brought into service and the lack of any standardization between them. A lack of overall direction and a dearth of suitably experienced personnel in headquarters to drive through strategy reduced standardisation and led to an increasing number of special units or Sonderkommando being formed.

The Luftwaffe also ignored many strategic lessons. Pilots returning from service with the Legion Kondor during the Spanish Civil War were comprehensively debriefed in Korps headquarters with the intention of using the lessons to help inform the ongoing organisation of the Divisions. However, the only evidence of 'feedback' from this campaign was at the tactical level. The methods of cooperation and integration with ground troops laid down and exercised in Spain gave the German Army overwhelming advantage during the Blitzkrieg of 1939.[18] This paper argues that the air tactics developed ostensibly by (the then Hauptmann) Mölders in Spain provided the Jagdwaffe with tactical advantage until the introduction of the Mustang into the conflict in 1943. The importance of air superiority, so tenaciously contested over the Channel in 1940, was forgotten (or ignored) by the Luftwaffe leadership when Germany came under heavy Allied attack from 1943, and towards the latter part of the War the lack of strategy led to disillusioned front-line pilots describing higher authority 'chasing the last bomb crater' as units were re-deployed at short notice to protect areas that had just been bombed. 'The Luftwaffe went into the War as a [leaderless] torso and finished as a torso'.[19]

Nevertheless, under the command of dynamic Kommodores, ad-hoc control systems existed at tactical level. Squadrons laid great importance on both briefing and de-briefing. Briefing was almost exclusively conducted by the Staka (Squadron Commander) and included the overall plan (as directed by the Divisions), expected enemy activity and the tactics that were to be employed for the particular mission. De-briefing was a far more convoluted process. Purely factual 'hot' debriefs, immediately after engine shutdown were given to the intelligence officer and concentrated mainly on claims of enemy kills or other relevant details. Subsequently the Staka and sometimes even Kommodore would call an overall mission

debrief. Here the sortie would be discussed in great detail. The enemy disposition and tactics would be balanced against the Jagdwaffe plan and execution. Lessons identified would then be passed to other units in the Geschwader to be incorporated into future plans. There is also evidence that Jagdflieger would visit enemy pilots in captivity to discuss their tactics[20]. Considering the structure of the Luftwaffe, discussed above, it is no surprise that there was no formal system in place to disseminate lessons between Geschwader. In spite of this, informal contact was often made between Kommodores, when pilots were posted between wings, or when aircraft diverted to other airfields.

It can therefore be concluded that despite a lack of formal control systems the Jagdwaffe could, at the tactical level, be described as a learning organisation. The training system delivered single-minded pilots with a love of flying and things practical; individual competitors who thrived in the empowered environment fostered by their Kommodores. Encouraged to contribute to all levels of discussion, tactics were often developed at the lowest level. The reliance on briefing and de-briefing to formalise and communicate intention across Geschwader ensured that a good degree of standardisation existed and that lessons were learned. The same cannot be said for the Luftwaffe as a whole. Paralysed by Hitler's Führerprinzip, it entered the War without direction and did not develop suitable systems to learn from its own mistakes. The inability of the organisation to recognise its own failures eventually led to its downfall and the relative efficiency of individual Geschwader could not compensate for this lack of strategic learning.

Rituals and routines

Rituals are events or ceremonies that occur regularly. Contemporary air force rituals are likely to be a flight-hours celebration or a 'hosing' after a last sortie on a squadron. Routines are the interactions that take place between organisational members. For deployed military units this definition expands to cover the whole way of life as members interact with one another. Even more than peacetime organisations, the interaction between individuals under the intense pressures of war play an important part in defining the culture of the unit. The day-to-day existence of the Jagdwaffe was influenced by the characteristics of its members and their interaction. This section will show that Jagdflieger required a special mentality to survive and, unlike other military units, most shared common interests and outlooks.

Jagdflieger lived a nomadic lifestyle. They would remain in one place for only short periods, moving from field to field to in reaction to the battle-tempo. Fear of attack from resistance fighters in occupied territories often forced the squadron to live under canvas next to their aircraft within the protection of an airfield. Field-living became a great 'leveller' and, other than to distinguish the Staka from the rest of the squadron, rank rarely played a role. Indeed, the intensity of the air war meant that squadrons were run as meritocracies. The best pilots, regardless of rank, would plan and lead formations. The adopted 'Mölders' formation was a fighting four-ship (Schwarm) made up of two pairs (Rotte). Although the Staka or his deputy usually led the Schwarm, oftentimes, an experienced NCO would lead the rear Rotte with an officer as his Kaczmarek (Wing-man). The distinction between class and rank was not considered important and rarely played a part in the daily Jagdstaffeln routine. This is in stark contrast to similar sized German army units, where officers lived and ate separately. The Jagdwaffe believed that a class hierarchy existed in RAF fighter units during the Battle of Britain. During combat over St Omer, one of Galland's Geschwader pilots collided with Douglas Bader. Galland went to visit the convalescing Bader in hospital where, not realising he had been accidentally rammed and not shot-down, Bader whispered into Galland's ear, 'Please, tell me that I wasn't shot down by an NCO'. Surprised by this apparently unimportant request, Galland subsequently introduced a tall, blond, Aryan Lieutenant to Bader as his victor[21], and used the story as a source of morale within his Geschwader to show the 'pompous' nature of the enemy.[22]

Jagdflieger started the day with communal breakfast, followed by the day's briefing. Often there would only be time for one briefing per day and this would nearly always be conducted by the Staka and normally close to the latrines. Extreme nervousness would climax in panic and many pilots would be sick during the brief. This was particularly acute in the West during the Battle of Britain; the pilots conscious that the odds against the whole squadron surviving until the end of day de-brief were steadily decreasing. However, once in their cockpits, they gradually built confidence that culminated in a massive rush of adrenalin upon contact with the enemy. Many pilots found it difficult to explain what had happened in combat, but most had recollection of the red 'low-fuel' light flashing on and of nervousness associated with a fear of not reaching a landing site before running out.[23]

At the height of the Battle of Britain and during the defence of Germany in 1943-45, pilots could fly up to 5 times daily. At the end of the day expended energy levels and a drop in adrenalin left them feeling apathetic during de-briefing. With little enthusiasm to move from the mess or de-briefing tent they would often laze around in sweaty flying overalls and slowly sink in to depression. Psychologists and Geschwader physicians recommended reading, horse-riding or even playing table-tennis as relaxation, but more often than not the only forms of escape available were alcohol, cards, cabaret and for some prostitutes.[24] Control of the squadron at this transitional time in the day was one of the most difficult tasks faced by the Staka. Younger more impressionable pilots were often unable to handle the rapid personality changes and became particularly affected. 'New-boys' were integrated onto the squadron as quickly as possible. They were never ostracised by other pilots and oftentimes Staka would take them as their wingmen. Adjusting to squadron life was not easy for a newcomer and squadron commanders often invented ingenious ways to focus younger pilots and prevent them slipping into depression. Hans 'Assi' Hahn established a small zoo on his squadron and each pilot was given responsibility for looking after one of the animals in it. With few alternative distractions pilots took their responsibilities seriously. It is perhaps no little coincidence that Hahn's 4/JG2 (Jagdgeschwader-Fighter-Wing) was regarded as one of the most efficient in the Luftwaffe. The Staka role was understandably demanding; these additional responsibilities almost certainly contributed to the comparative reduction in victories, as pilots became squadron commanders.

Although pilots were very much individuals, their nomadic lifestyle and common experiences moulded squadrons into a brotherhood that was not easily accessed by outsiders.[25] Pilots transferring from bomber or transport aircraft were particularly unsuccessful. Almost all asked about the squadron's combat losses upon arrival and, as bomber pilots were defensive minded in nature and relied on a crew for assistance, many were shot down on the earliest sorties. Those that did survive were often subsequently suspended from the squadron because they had a negative influence on morale.

The Staka had the pivotal leadership role and the personality and style of the squadron commander had a great influence on the character of the unit. The disciplines required for Staka duties were many and varied. Meimberg describes the most difficult aspects of command to be the writing of letters to a fallen comrade's loved ones and telling an experienced pilot that he was burnt-out and to be relieved of flying duties.[26] To achieve these, as well as set discipline and domestic living standards under the stresses of combat was an enormous burden that required a special type of leader. Although the Kommodores were able to influence the selection of squadron commanders, the Reichsmarschall insisted that each of his Stakas had enough credibility to lead. But credibility in the eyes of Luftwaffe higher command was measured in number of airborne victories. This sometimes led to selection of Staka and even Gruppenführer (group-leaders) with less than ideal leadership qualities. One such individual was Helmut Wick, who recorded 11 victories in 10 days in October 1940 and in line with the Führerprinzip, was given command of JG 26. But Wick was only 25 and lacked the skills and experience required to care for the 700 or so men

in his command. His fighting technique was characterised by individualism, always climbing at full power straight from take-off, he showed little concern for the rest of his formation in his quest for advantage over the enemy. This may account for his remarkable striking rate, but also the relatively high losses and lack of morale across his Wing. Wick was impetuous and on 5 November 1940 in his impatience to become the Jagdwaffe's leading ace, he attacked a wing of Spitfires with only his Schwarm as support and was shot-down, never to be found.[27]

Skawran pigeonholes individuals such as Wick in a group he coins 'fighters'. Characterised by incredible self-belief, they found flying easy, amassed kills quickly and consequently achieved leadership positions. They often ridiculed other squadron pilots and had a total disregard for authority, wearing scruffy uniforms and openly criticising the political leadership. This had a negative affect on squadron morale however, 'fighters' almost always fell in combat and were therefore regularly replaced. Nevertheless, whilst the rapid rise of Helmut Wick is extreme, most front-line pilots interviewed agreed the need for credibility within their immediate command chain and, that Kommodores would not normally recommend officers for Staka duties until they had achieved 20 kills regardless of leadership potential was seen as an acceptable compromise.[28]

Despite its challenges, most Stakas interviewed after the War described it as the best time of their careers, developing strong bonds with their units. Such was his bond that, even as a general, Galland spent periods of leave with his old squadron and even flew the occasional operational sortie. Kommodores empowered the Staka to run the squadron his way and many developed close relationships with their pilots. Towards the end of the War, when there was a need to combine units to generate efficiencies, it was almost impossible to overcome these loyalties and sometimes, even when squadrons had officially disbanded, they continued to operate unter-der-Theke (under-the-counter) beneath the umbrella of the respective Geschwader.[29]

The Jagdflieger had a love of good food and of quality wine and spirits. Whenever poor weather or the operational tempo permitted, pilots would frequent high quality restaurants, eat expensive local delicacies and drink the best alcohol available. Adapting to the local tastes was something the pilots loved doing. On evenings off the Jagdflieger considered themselves as elite, and conducted themselves accordingly. In line with their individuality, pilots would rarely socialize in large crowds, preferring small groups of two or three. Pilots drank heavily but were rarely drunk in public, indeed sobriety was an essential ingredient in another of the pilot's favourite pastimes — flirting. Such was their high self-esteem that many considered flirting with local girls to be an essential part of a night out. Nevertheless, a good number of 'country princesses' became engaged or married to Jagdflieger met during evenings away from operations.[30] Many of the less successful 'flirters' used prostitutes as a source of entertainment. Commanders condoned the surreptitious use of brothels, not only as a source of relief from the stresses of battle, but also as a distraction from homosexual temptation, a problem throughout the military at the time.[31] On the eastern front particularly, military brothels were set up at Geschwader level to deter homosexuality that Staka believed would undermine morale. VD was an accepted disadvantage. The Luftwaffe also established two Kur (health) resorts, one each for bomber and fighter crews, on a Bavarian lakeside. Attendance was primarily for rest and recuperation and for the exchange of experiences between crews, however sufficient 'nurses' were available to guarantee complete relaxation. Although not openly admitted the availability of such resorts had a positive input on squadron morale.[32]

Most pilots had a Christian background and many recall a deep sense of religion that accompanied them in the cockpit. This was a conscious or intellectual process, rather a spiritual feeling brought on by the adrenalin rush of combat. The Nazi culture had an aversion to religion and religious services were not available in the Luftwaffe. Nevertheless, most admitted that after

The thrill of duel and not the killing of the opponent distances Jagdwaffe pilots from many of the atrocities associated with Nazi Germany

a period on the ground of about a week, they would turn to the bible as a source of strength and justification[33]. Although Jagdflieger were highly self-confident, they were often very superstitious. Many carried lucky charms or keepsakes into combat and most had a pre-flight routine of checking their aircraft and personal equipment that if interrupted would have to be re-started from the beginning. When interviewed all pilots admitted that they were interested only in shooting down the other aircraft. Most tried not to think about the fate of the opposition pilots, and those that did often suffered from bouts of severe depression. Jagdflieger could not follow a stricken aircraft to its point of impact. In all probability this was not purely based on sound airmanship, but was also a subconscious attempt to prevent the engagements from becoming personal. The thrill of duel and not the killing of the opponent distances Jagdwaffe pilots from many of the atrocities associated with Nazi Germany.

Symbols

A symbol is something that represents another thing. It could be argued that ceremonies and stories are also symbols of the organisation, but this section will focus on specific items. Corporate logos, reward systems or company cars are

contemporary artefacts of what is symbolic. The intangible aspects of beliefs and values become visible through symbols. The Jagdwaffe was no different. Geschwader carried the name of a famous First World War hero or some other dignitary. For instance JG 2 Richthofen and JG 3 Udet named after noted fighter pilots of World War One. JG 26 was named after Albert Schlageter, a 1920s freedom fighter against the annexation of the Rheinland by the French, who operated in the Düsseldorf area where JG 26 was formed. These symbols of German heroes should not be underestimated. Certainly the ruthlessness of yellow painted noses of the Schlageter Messeschmitt's generated a mystique amongst RAF crews that gave JG 26 a psychological advantage over its opponents. But identity and belonging was also important to newly qualified pilots. Meimberg commented upon his assignment to JG 2 after completion of training: '. . . I literally burst with joy and pride: Richthofen the most famous of all fighter pilots'.[34] Pilots would wear the name of their Geschwader on the sleeve of their dress tunic, which would be worn with pride, particularly during evenings 'on the town'. The adoption of these names was particularly successful and sub-consciously many pilots believed that belonging to a famous unit gave them an advantage over the opposition.[35]

The other symbolic item of clothing associated with the Jagdflieger was the silk scarf. The scarf was presented along with a flugschein (pilots licence) and pilot wings upon completion of training. Along with the sense of relief at successfully passing the course, all agree that the silk scarf just visible above the tunic collar was a valued prize.[36] The scarf was an unpronounced message to everyone they met, that they now belonged to an elite band.

Medals were the great Jagdflieger incentive. The first medals awarded were the Iron Cross, second and then first class, for the first and fifth kills respectively and were worn on the tunic. The Ritterkreuz was awarded for the twentieth victory and early in the War was personally presented by Hitler or Goering. The Ritterkreuz was worn around the neck and was much sought after. Although it was presented on a ribbon, it was common practise for recipients to hang the medal from a wife or girlfriend's suitably coloured garter. Again this was a silent reinforcement of a pilot's prowess and superiority in battle and became an incredible motivator. It was intended that the Ritterkreuz would be the highest decoration, but as the War progressed it was necessary to add new superlatives to it. Oak leaves were added for 40 victories, swords for 70 and diamonds for 100. The Front Flight Wings (Frontflugspange) in gold, silver or bronze were given for combat missions with enemy contact and the cup of honour awarded by Goering for exceptional duty. It was also possible to be mentioned in dispatches.

Competition to become the highest scoring pilot was intense and Jagdflieger went to extreme lengths to achieve it. Helmut Wick's pursuit of this goal was described above. Mölders achieved his fortieth kill just before Galland in September 1940 and flew to Goering's lodge at Karinhall to receive his oak leaves. Goering invited Mölders to stay for 2 days hunting with him in the extensive grounds. Knowing that Galland was due at Karinhall 3 days later to receive his award, Mölders asked Goering to invite Galland to remain behind for a similar period after his ceremony to prevent him gaining an unfair advantage. Goering agreed.[37] Although medal chasing provided a great incentive for pilots to achieve victories it also created problems. Oftentimes, pilots approaching a victory milestone would euphemistically contract Halsschmerzen (throat-ache). Otherwise prudent pilots would become fixated on the prize and begin to take excessive risks. Staka would sometimes have to ground them for a short period until they had regained a sense of perspective.[38]

Frustrated at the loss of air superiority over Germany, the ease with which Jagdflieger on the eastern front had achieved victory milestones and a desire to open up the award system to crews operating in different roles, Goering introduced a points system in 1944 to redress the balance. Unfortunately, this system made it harder for Jagdflieger defending the Reich to achieve the milestones and had a detrimental effect on morale just when the Allies were gaining the

upper hand. Nevertheless, Galland believed that pilots continued to be stimulated by the race for decorations despite the policy changes.[39]

Even with the 1944 realignment, there is little doubt that the belonging, pride and competition achieved by the adoption of Geschwader names and recognition of performance through medals and trophies had a disproportionate impact on the culture of the Jagdflieger and one that contributed greatly to competitive advantage over opposition that did not subscribe to a similar system.

Stories and myths

The difficulty of defining culture was described earlier in the Paper; however one way in which it can be 'brought to life' is through the stories that people tell about the organisation. Story telling is a way in which people make sense of events or actions. The myths and legends that build up around particular events and people embed the past in the present. Stories help to identify the negative and positive role models, the villains and deviants who do not fit with the organisation's modus operandi, and the heroes who do. Stories may or may not be strictly accurate because their purpose is to convey a message to show who is valued, the reasons why and the behaviours and actions this represents. They help explain why things are done the way they are.

The heroes of the Jagdflieger were the young Kommodores who attempted to bridge the gap between the realities of the front-line and the often-misplaced demands of higher authority. Without a standing air force to provide role models until the 1935 formation of the Luftwaffe, the stories of the battles in Spain were the first to affect its cultural mould. Mölders is remembered for tactics development and stories surrounding him are embellished to highlight that a smarter thinker can often overcome a superior opponent. Galland was the official face of the Luftwaffe and pin-up of his time and became the role model that encouraged many to volunteer for flying duties. But Galland was more than that to the Jagdflieger and as he progressed through the ranks to become Inspector of Fighters towards the end of the War, stories of his earlier days became folklore for the squadron pilots.

Adolf Galland

Galland and his wingman shot down two Spitfires on the way to Brest and another upon their return. Galland celebrated in his usual style by lighting a large cigar and drinking a brandy by the side of his aircraft. He was a free thinker, interpreting rules liberally without ever disobeying them

Galland was a flyer at heart and did not like periods of inaction. Whilst based in the Pas-de-Calais in the summer 1940, he spontaneously decided to fly to Brest to collect lobsters for a birthday party he was invited to that evening. Although it was forbidden to engage the enemy unless in self-defence, Galland chose to take a detour and fly at low-level across southern England. Naturally he was on the look-out for unsuspecting prey and indeed Galland and his wingman shot down two Spitfires on the way to Brest and another upon their return. Galland celebrated in his usual style by lighting a large cigar and drinking a brandy by the side of his aircraft. He was a free thinker, interpreting rules liberally without ever disobeying them, and it was this attitude, generally shared by the other young Kommodores that began to permeate the Jagdflieger from the autumn of 1940. Even during the successful early part of the War this breed of flyer was not afraid to speak its mind. During a visit to fighter units on the French coast in summer 1940, Goering gathered together his Kommodores and Stakas and asked 'can I get you anything to make your stay here more comfortable?' Galland immediately replied 'a squadron of Spitfires Herr Reichsmarschall'. The relationship between Galland and his superiors was often tempestuous, with Galland never afraid to question the direction of authority. He passionately believed that the Reich should concentrate effort on fighter production to maintain, and later regain, air superiority. Hitler did not agree. As the War turned against the Germans, Goering attempted to blame its failure on the inability of the Jagdflieger to gain control of the air. He suggested to Galland, then in his role as Inspector, that his pilots had turned in the face of the enemy. Galland tore off his medals, threw them on the table and walked out. Reduced in rank to colonel, Galland finished the War as Kommodore of an ME 262 wing in Bavaria.[40] Although these stories centre on Galland, they epitomise the trust and respect the Jagdflieger held for those pilots, including, Kesselring and Ritter von Greim who progressed quickly through the ranks and were not afraid to challenge the Party leadership.

These tales give an idea of the pragmatic type of leader respected by Jagdflieger; however, stories that describe the opposition also influenced culture. There are many stories about RAF pilots in the conflict and interviewees were at pains to stress their respect for them. Merian remembers one battle over Aachen during which a combined RAF and USAAF formation was engaged by his JG 106. One of his colleagues bailed out after being shot-down by a Mustang. His parachute opened at about 2000 metres and immediately RAF Spitfires began to circle the descending airman to protect him from attack by the Mustangs.[41] All the pilots interviewed agreed that RAF pilots were 'fair'.[42] The Americans however, were ruthless and from the beginning of 1944 began to shoot at pilots in parachutes. Seeger describes jumping from his burning Messeschmitt and being repeatedly shot at by USAAF Mustangs. They continued to strafe him on the ground and he only escaped by hiding in a drainage ditch.[43] The Americans were known as the Leichenflederer (body-ransackers), and in light of this, discussion about German willingness to continue fighting against the overwhelming odds towards the end of the War prompted emotional responses:

'We knew we were beaten and deserved to be beaten. We knew that we could re-build our cities — that was not the point, we fought to protect our family and friends below from the bombing — a lot of which was indiscriminate. We weren't fighting for political aims — we didn't understand them. We fought in spite of Grofaz and der Dicke and just wanted to stop those underneath from being killed. We knew what America stood for and we didn't want our children to succumb to its culture. That explains the economic wonder post war. We respected the Tommies but Dresden — what was that all about? You asked why we carried on fighting — why do you think?' If it hadn't have been for the bombing the War would have been over a year earlier'.[44]

So the stories and perhaps the myths surrounding the American way of war and the bombing of civilians had a powerful part to play in the motivation that drove the Jagdflieger on to the end, but there were lighter moments that helped relieve the pressure and reinforce the happy-go-lucky, love of life nature of the pilots. An example of this surrounds the interpretation of a 1943

order to conserve fuel. The order required all oxen grazing within the confines of the airfield to pull carts to replace service trucks that the pilots normally used to get around. Naturally this order was not popular but it had to be implemented by the following morning. Rather than resting for the next day's operations, pilots worked through the night coercing some 20 oxen off the camp and into nearby fields. The story continues with the pilots, covered from head to foot in oxen dung, saved from a snap inspection by headquarters staff checking compliance with the order, by 20 'homeless' oxen blocking the main road through the nearby town. The pilots kept their trucks[45]. Humility and the ability to laugh were characteristics that built a strong bond between the fliers.

The Jagdflieger paradigm

The paradigm can be described as the 'formula for success', which is taken for granted and has grown up over years[46]. The Jagdwaffe Paradigm was like no other in the German military at the time. Within a many layered, bureaucratic and centrally controlled organisation, the Jagdflieger thrived under the direction of some of the finest leaders to command anywhere in the War. By continuing to fly these men understood the pressures of the front, fostered learning systems and promoted pilots in their own mould, thus consolidating the culture. These Kommodores were the filter between unachievable requests from commanders and the realities of combat. Whether by intent or good fortune, Goering's appointment of these men was a masterstroke and became the catalyst from which the strategic culture began to take shape. The training system provided like-minded pilots who had a passion for flying. None were characterised as team players, and all demonstrated proficiency at individual sports. Yet the intensity of the air battles, the constant fear of death and the regular loss of close colleagues, fostered a brotherhood that only those willing to share were allowed to enter. Pilots experienced extremes of emotion, and in the evening, as adrenalin ebbed away, religion for some and alcohol for many became the alternate to depression. But the Jagdflieger were intensely proud of their vocation and when opportunity arose would show it. Affiliation to particular units and the tunic with silk scarf singled them out as elite, and in public they played the role to the full. Differentiation between Jagdflieger was signified by competition for medals and this became a great motivator. Stories express the young Kommodores as heroes and the enemy as villains, the Americans in particular providing motivation to fight to the end of the War. But the Paradigm can best be summarised in the chorus of the Jagdflieger song:

We loved life

We kissed the devil

Gave our hearts to the ladies

And didn't tremble when death welcomed us

That's what we call a pilot's life.[47]

Notes:

1 Spick (1996), p4

2 Grant (2001), p117

3 Gray (1999), p130

4 Deal and Kennedy (1982)

5 Johnson (1999), p83

6 Geoff Mallory et al (2001), p12

7 Wesel Jagdflieger, 28 Dec 02

8 Großter Feldherr aller Zeiten

9 Knopp (1998), p101

10 Skawran (1970), p189

11 Wesel Jagdflieger, 28 Dec 02.

12 Meimberg (2002), p24

13 Wesel Jagdflieger, 16 Feb 03

14 Meimberg (2002), p45

15 Wesel Jagdflieger, 28 Dec 02

16 Skawran (1970)

17 Wesel Jagdflieger, 28 Dec 02

18 Galland (1954), p33

19 Interview Braatz, 18 Mar 03.

20 Meimberg (2002), p265

21 Galland (1954), p84.

22 Wesel Jagdflieger, 28 Dec 02.

23 Wesel Jagdflieger, 16 Feb 03.

24 Skawran (1970), p212.

25 ibid, p138

26 Meimberg (2002), p210

27 Spick (1996), p73

28 Wesel Jagdflieger, 16 Feb 03

29Meimberg (2002), p228

30 Skawran (1970), p138

31 Isby (1998), p61

32 Wesel Jagdflieger, 28 Dec 02

33 Skawran (1970), p212

34 Meimberg (2002), p46

35 Wesel Jagdflieger, 16 Feb 03

36 Wesel Jagdflieger, 28 Dec 02

37 Galland (1956), p63

38 Wesel Jagdflieger, 16 Feb 03

39 Isby (1998), p61

40 41 Galland (1954), p168

42 Wesel Jagdflieger, 28 Dec 02

43 Wesel Jagdflieger, 16 Feb 03

44 Meimberg (2002), p267

45 Wesel Jagdflieger, 28 Dec 02

46 Jägerblatt - 05/2002

47 Johnson (1999), p80