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AIR HISTORICAL BRANCH

TRANSLATION VII/32

AIR OPERATIONS
OVER THE INVASION FRONT
IN JUNE 1944

A report prepared by the German Air
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TRANSLATED BY:
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I ALLIED OPERATIONS

The operations of the enemy Air Forces during and immediately prior to the invasion were marked by a transfer of the weight of attack to the Western occupied territories; attacks on aircraft production centres did not however cease entirely.

During the first weeks of the invasion, the enemy employed numerous fighter and fighter-bomber formations for ground strafing, in order to prevent supplies from reaching our troops in action and to delay troops on the march. These operations were carried out not only above the actual battle area, but also extended to the routes along which supplies and reserves were moved, sometimes as far as 150 km behind the front.

The aircraft types most frequently used for these attacks were the "Mustang", "Thunderbolt", "Spitfire", "Typhoon", and "Lightning". The aircraft generally flew at heights between 1,000 - 3,000 m, in order to have a sufficiently clear view of the surrounding countryside. The strength of these formations varied between 2 and 12 aircraft, - in rare instances up to 24 aircraft, which nearly always flew in line, so as to be able to cover as wide an area as possible.

When vehicles were spotted, 2 or more aircraft peeled off, according to whether they were in convoy or single, turned towards their target(s) and made either a gliding attack at a gliding angle of 30 - 50° or attacked at low level. Single vehicles were nearly always attacked with cannon fire whereas convoys and tanks were frequently also attacked with bombs or rockets. On occasions, heavy tanks were attacked from the rear with 2 cm aircraft canons, these being aimed at the least armoured parts. The "Typhoon" was the aircraft most used as a rocket firing fighter-bomber. All rockets were fired simultaneously. Following the attack with rockets, a further attack was usually made with the other fixed weapons. The rockets scored more direct hits, even from greater heights, than the normal fighter-bomber attacks.

In the first 3 weeks of the invasion the enemy's short-range bombers and fighters in the frontal areas were controlled by:

- 1) 3 fighter control ships, of which one was in the outer part of the Seine Bay and the other two near the coast, one for British and one for USA formations.
- 2) 3 fighter control posts of 85 Fighter Group.
- 3) Several floating command posts, (which did not however, function perfectly).
- 4) 5 American air support command posts in several different ships.
- 5) Main Command posts.
- 6) Numerous H.Q. posts in Southern England.

In order to cover our troop movements, which took place at twilight or during the night, the enemy employed numerous night reconnaissance aircraft, mostly "Mosquitos" and "Wellingtons". Night photographs were taken with the aid of flares.

The heavy and medium American bomber formations were, during the first month of the invasion, mainly used in the early hours of the morning and late in the evening, so that each formation could do 2 flights a day. British 4-engined bombers also several times attacked the defences of Cherbourg and the Pas de Calais.

In general, the activities of the enemy Air Forces in support of the major landing operations in Normandy were notable for:-

- a) the considerable part played by fighter formations, which although hampered by bad weather, nevertheless by far outweighed the activities of the bomber formations both in numbers and in effectiveness.
- b) the very limited activity of the medium bombers.
- c) the continuation of the strategic air war by long-range bombers; only a few concentrated heavy bomber attacks were made on our coastal defences, and later on on our troops. (RAF long-range bombers dropped 900 kg armour-piercing bombs on our fortifications with considerable effect. (Penetrated 3 m iron-reinforced concrete).)
- d) the rapid, large scale construction of airfields and the establishment of signals communications.

In daytime the activities of the enemy air forces during the first month of the invasion rose to about 120,000 flights into and over the territory covered by Luftflotte 3. (compared with 87,400 the previous month), of which some 8,000 were through-flights into Reich territory, (as compared with 24,000 the previous month). The scale of the American long-range bomber attacks further increased, with 28,000 sorties as compared with 20,300 the previous month.

On the 1st day of the invasion 2,150 American long-range bombers operated at the same time. Although later as many as 3 flights were made by the same aircraft on one day, the total number of aircraft sent out never exceeded 1,600 on a single day.

The main targets attacked in the first hours of the invasion were coastal defences in the landing area, and later railway junctions, airfields and fuel storage depots and refineries. After the V 1 had come into operation, medium bombers also attacked installations in the inner defence zone. From the 14th June onwards, RAF Bomber Command also made small and medium scale raids by day, at first on harbour installations and later, after the V 1 had come into use, chiefly within the inner defence zone. Not only the launching sites, but also traffic installations serving for supply purposes were attacked. "Lancaster" formations were used at first, and later also "Halifaxes".

Long-range bombers from American bases in Italy carried out minor attacks on June 4th, June 7th and June 25th against traffic centres.

RAF medium bombers, with 450 sorties, carried out only minor activities. On the other hand the activities of American short-range bombers had still increased, to some 9,000 sorties. These attacks were directed primarily against our own troops, positions and movements within the sphere of battle, as well as later against railway installations and bridges.

The activity of USA fighter formations rose considerably, with altogether 64,000 sorties, and accounted for more than half of the daily enemy air activity. In 5 days more than 3,000 flights were reported. Targets were:- our troops, movements and positions in the battle and rear areas as well as railway installations and roads, and, to a lesser extent, airfields.

The activities of British fighter units decreased, compared to the previous month. The formations were mainly employed in the immediate frontal area; flights deeper into our territory were nearly always carried out by USA fighters. Some 150 - 200 RAF fighters were daily in operation against our V 1's.

Enemy air activity at night in the operational area of Luftflotte 3

/rose

rose to about 14,000 flights during June, 1944. With few exceptions there was a medium to heavy attack every night. Especially heavy attacks up to 1,300 aircraft were carried out in the first two nights of the invasion. Targets for the attacks during the first night, in addition to continual attacks on coastal defences, were mainly railway installations in Northern France, and between Paris and the Loire as far as Saumur, Vierzon, Saintes and Linoges. Allied air attacks were responsible for the destruction of 551 locomotives in June 1944. A further 295 engines were damaged by saboteurs.

Air activity in connection with the dropping of supplies for Guerrilla bands was particularly intense in Brittany, and also in Southern France, where the aircraft were sometimes missed by our spotters.

Between 5 - 12 nightfighters were continually in operation over the landing area and the Seine Bay; more than half of these aircraft were however employed against our V 1 weapon, and on several occasions reached a strength of 50 aircraft while being so employed.

Formations attacking shipping targets in June carried out 14 operations in 20 nights with the main weight of attack directed between Dunkirk and Etaples. Over the Atlantic and in the Western Channel 2,178 flights by day were reported in June 1944.

Within the bridgehead 32 newly built airfields were reported, and the following have been photographed: Asnelles-sur-Mer, Crepon, Creully, Ver-sur-Mer, Martragny, Sommervieu, 1 km north of St. Croix G.d. Tonne, 1 km north of Brousy, 2 km SSW of Quistreham.

The total strength of the enemy's fighter aircraft employed in Southern England and over the bridgehead stood at 5,400 aircraft at the end of June. The enemy's long-range bombers in England and Italy at the same time totalled approximately 7,300 aircraft, and medium bombers based in England, Sardinia and Corsica approximately 1,800 aircraft.

II GERMAN OPERATIONS

Our own short-range bombers (i.e. ground-strafer and fighters used as fighter-bombers) were all operationally subordinated to Fliegerkorps II. The superiority of the enemy Air Forces did not, however, permit the development of these short-range formations to any extent. The High Command was forced to break off all such bombing operations by fighters as early as June 13th, because of the weakness of the majority of units caused by the effective enemy bombing of our supply routes. The formations thus freed were turned over to Jagdkorps II for fighter duties. Jagdkorps II thus controlled all fighter units in the West from mid-June 1944 onwards and employed these from time to time in combined massed attacks in order to provide temporary relief over the front line and the supply routes of the Army.

At the beginning of the invasion III./S.G. 4 transferred 2 Staffeln from St. Quentin - Clastres, and 1 Staffel from Southern France, where it was stationed to attack submarines, to Laval in Brittany. Although the Gruppe had already suffered losses from enemy fighters during transit, it was able on the same day to carry out three operations with between 4 - 8 aircraft at a time. In the following operations the losses occurred with very few exceptions on taking-off and landing. Up to June 15th only 1 loss was due to enemy action.

Between June 6th and July 7th Luftflotte 3 received a total of 1,105 aircraft from Holding Units, of which 24 reconnaissance aircraft, 998 fighters, and 83 bombers. Between June 6th and July 1st aircraft of the Luftwaffe went into action against the invasion in the following strength.

/Fighters,

Fighters, fighter-bombers, reconnaissance aircraft: 10,061 sorties.

Bombers: (a) Bombing attacks: 2,283 aircraft (a) torpedo attacks: 384 sorties.

Nightfighters: 1,101 sorties.

Transportation: 153 sorties - only over enemy territory.

Making a total of 13,982 sorties.

The following number of enemy aircraft were shot down by aircraft of Luftflotte 3 and elements of Jagdkorps I (only over enemy occupied territory in the West) by day fighters 414; by nightfighters 219; by A.A. fire 672. Total of aircraft shot down 1,305 aircraft.

Our own losses amounted to 458 S.E. aircraft (fighters, fighter-bombers and reconnaissance; 224 bombers, of which 9 He. 177's; 7 aircraft engaged on supply duties; 137 aircraft were completely destroyed on the ground. Total 826 aircraft. To this must be added 86 aircraft severely damaged on the ground and 126 aircraft slightly damaged on the ground.

On mining duties 1,906 mines were laid in 954 operations, of which about 2/3 were BM 1000's and 1/3 LMB's. The main area for mine-laying operations was from the mouth of the Orne to Courseulles. Mines were laid up to 20 km from the coast. The German Navy laid a total of 696 mines between June 6th and July 1st 1944.

In the first 10 days of battle on the invasion front, some 15% - 20% of the aircraft reported as 'missing' actually came back a day or so later, either undamaged or damaged, whereas 88% remained on the 'missing' report, and some were later found to have been totally destroyed. These percentages changed during the last 14 days of June. The number of aircraft which returned undamaged or damaged at a later date was now only 5%, whereas 95% remained 'missing'. In general, the number of our aircraft reported each day as lost was increased by about 10% by additional reports coming in later.

Within Luftflotte 3, Jagdgeschwader 2 bore the brunt of the fighting for Jagdkorps II. The policy was followed of never operating in strength in good weather against enemy bomber formations. In the opinion of Jagdkorps II, there was no point in attacking 4-engined formations, since the destruction of a single aircraft would make little difference to the effect on targets in the West. Attacks were to be directed at fighter bombers and Artillery spotting planes, as these presented the gravest menace to the supply and signals services of the Army. Jagdkorps II was therefore used mainly to help relieve the pressure on the Army and to free our supply routes. In bad weather the enemy only sent out small formations of fighter bombers and ground strafers, - to which our forces were equal.

The enemy tried to avoid combat on the way to his targets, and only engaged our aircraft on his return flight. The losses on these occasions were 2 - 3 aircraft out of every 10 sent up. Fighter losses on the average worked out at 3:1 in the enemy's favour. In personnel, the ratio was 2:1 against us.

Fliegerkorps IX was engaged in operations against the enemy's sea communications in the Channel. The main task was the mining of the Seine Bay. The necessity for this only became apparent from the development of the general situation after the beginning of the invasion. During the first few days bombing attacks against landing operations along the coast were carried out. The LT 350 (Aerial torpedo) proved to be of great value, although really satisfactory results could only be

obtained against shipping targets when used in large numbers.

Subsequently more bombing of enemy troop concentrations and artillery became necessary. This was only done by night and then in mass attacks of 1 or 2 waves, with an average of 60 - 90 aircraft. No fighter cover was provided on these occasions.

Aircraft of Fliegerdivision 2, the brunt of whose fighting was borne by KG 26, flew successfully over the Seine Bay until the middle of June. 60,000 BRT were sunk without loss. The following weather conditions were necessary in order to prevent unnecessary losses in torpedo bombing operations: in the area of approach, a lower cloud base of 200 - 300 m. with a visibility of 10 - 15 km; in the actual area of attack, a lower cloud base of 300 - 400 m., with a visibility of 10 - 20 km and about 5/10 cloud cover. In view of the air situation, these torpedo attacks were only made at night. On the average one operation was flown from Southern France every week. The approach was made, with torpedoes slung, via intermediate landing grounds in the Chalon-sur-Saone, Dijon and Fecamp districts into the operational area, and thence straight back to base.

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