

SECRET

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FLIEGERFUEHRER ATLANTIK

AND

GERMAN ANTI-SHIPPING OPERATIONS

A report addressed by General Kessler  
to General Joschonnek, (Chief of the  
General Staff of the Luftwaffe), on  
September 5th 1943.

TRANSLATED BY:

AIR MINISTRY, A.H.B. 6.

22.7.1947

### Editor's Note

The post of Fliegerfuehrer Atlantik was established in March 1941, with the task of co-ordinating and directing G.A.F. anti-shipping operations in the Atlantic and in the coastal waters around the British Isles.

General Harlinghausen, first holder of the post, was succeeded in the Spring of 1942 by General Kessler. Considerable difficulties, due to the inadequate forces available, the intensification of Allied shipping defences, and the squandering of German bomber effectives on reprisal raids against Great Britain, prompted General Kessler to address the attached letter to General Jeschonnek on September 5th 1943, recommending the dissolution of the Command.

German records available to this section give no precise indication of the date at which Fliegerfuehrer Atlantik was formally dissolved. They do however show that by the end of 1943, Fliegerfuehrer Atlantik was a mere 'paper' force, and had no serviceable aircraft at its disposal.

Generalleutnant Kessler

In the field, 5.9.1943

Fliegerfuhrer Atlantik

To The Chief of the General Staff of the Luftwaffe  
Herr Generaloberst Jeschonnek

My dear Jeschonnek,

After the advance notice received from Luftflotte 3 yesterday, that on the orders of the Air Force Supreme Command, Kampfgeschwader 6 also is to be withdrawn from my command, I have asked Generalfeldmarschall Sperrle to dissolve the post of Fliegerfuhrer Atlantik. The few remaining units, (K.G. 40 with III/K.G. 40 - 2 Staffeln plus 1 staffel in formation, IV/K.G. 40 - 2 Staffeln plus 1 staffel in formation, and V/K.G. 40 - 1 Staffel plus 2 staffeln in formation, 3/(F) 123 and B.Fl. St. 5/196,) could be either incorporated in Fliegerkorps IX, or alternatively placed under the command of F. d. L., who has for some time had no formations under his command. It would be a good solution to a position which I have long felt to be very unsatisfactory if my suggestion were favourably received.

Before taking up my command, I was informed that Fliegerfuhrer Atlantik was to be built up to at least division strength. Nothing of the kind has taken place. On the contrary, my strength has been steadily reduced. I know that these measures were necessary, or were at least considered necessary. Regarding the employment of these forces against enemy shipping at other points, one important fact seems to have been ignored; in no other area is so great a volume of essential shipping moved with such regularity and such concentration over such clearly defined shipping lanes as in the coastal areas around Great Britain. Systematic operations against these targets would therefore in my opinion have had the most favourable indirect effect on our position at other fronts.

Such operations were from the very beginning as good as never carried out. The forces of Fliegerfuhrer Atlantik, which I had assumed to be destined for operations against enemy shipping, have been used to an ever increasing extent for combined attacks on targets on the English mainland. Especially lately, all periods suitable for operations, i.e. periods of bright moonlight, were used for such a purpose, my only remaining bomber Gruppe (K.G. 106) being attached to Fliegerkorps IX.

Much as I appreciate that the terror raids of the enemy against our cities must be answered by stern counter-measures, I have never understood why these must be directed against English cities. I am convinced that the 'Achilles heel' of the English is their shipping, and that only in this domain can a really deadly blow be struck against them. So far as I can remember this was clearly realised before the war, the experience of the last war being still fresh in our minds.

How capable the English are of enduring our raids on their towns was evident in the Autumn of 1940 and the Winter of 1940/41. At the time, I regretted that these attacks had not taken place instead exclusively against shipping. Then the fighters, which were shot down at that period would not have reappeared. Now, even more so, I ask myself why, in the face of all our previous experience, and with weaker forces, we have once more decided to attack England, where with all the resources of the Luftwaffe behind us we failed to deal decisive blows in 1940 and 1941. From a purely psychological point of view, it seems repugnant to me that we should allow the English to dictate the course of our operations. Every day it has depended entirely on the English raids as to whether we were to carry on

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with our planned attacks on shipping targets, or whether we would make a reprisal raid. I am myself in favour of reprisals, but believe that in our position the most effective form of reprisal is to attack English supply shipping. Every deviation from this course seems to me personally like a sign of weakness.

You will perhaps reply that the results of the fight against shipping in my area have left much to be desired. Strictly speaking, you are right, but measured against the resources available to me, I regard them as very encouraging.

Practically speaking, I had only one Gruppe at my disposal with an average serviceability of barely one staffel.

K.G. 40, equipped with FW 200's can only be used against solitary ships, which nowadays never sail. An improvement in this unsatisfactory situation may take place if, after the installation of the Lotfe 7 D (bomb sight), attacks from a greater height on convoys can be carried out. III/K.G. 26 (Torpedo bombing Gruppe) was only once available for operations. This was the first time this Gruppe had been used at all. Despite unfavourable conditions, 12 aircraft scored 6 hits and either damaged or sank 6 ships of a total of 20000 G.R.T. without losses. I have felt the withdrawal of this Gruppe very severely; they had proved themselves very useful here, and I have as you know always been a strong advocate of the use of torpedoes in attacks against shipping. The training carried out here for combined attacks by bombers and torpedo bombers as soon as III/K.G. 26 was allocated to me, could unfortunately not be tested in actual operations.

Of the other units which have been placed at my disposal from time to time, I have had very little use, since they have nearly all been formations from other theatres posted here to gain further experience, and have in nearly every case required training before they could be employed against enemy shipping. Thus the whole burden of our anti-shipping operations was carried by K.G.R. 106. After certain training deficiencies among the crews had been overcome, these relatively weak forces achieved satisfactory results during February and March 1942. 21 aircraft were used in the former month and sank 25000 G.R.T. and damaged 14000 G.R.T. of enemy shipping; while in March 21000 G.R.T. were sunk and 11500 G.R.T. damaged by 38 aircraft. After the death of the Gruppe Commander Hauptmann Hass and shortly afterwards of his deputy Hauptmann Werner towards the end of March, operational activity was nearly at a standstill.

I can understand that as a result of the many unsuccessful sorties flown, either because the convoy was not found, or the reconnaissance aircraft was shot down or because no hits were scored or observed, the High Command is dissatisfied with these operations. Displeasure is expressed that so many bombs should be just dropped into the sea, when during land attacks even misses are liable to cause some damage. The interrogation reports of our aircrews seem to justify this view. Photographic reconnaissance however, throws a different light on the picture. Many times not a single bomb landed in the target area, or again many hundreds of bombs were dropped on dummy installations. The observation reports of the aircrew were however quite true. In contrast to these unintentionally misleading statements, it has been proved that during attacks on naval targets, actual results later confirmed have often been better than the statements of the crews led us to believe. This means that especially at night, more ships were damaged or sunk than could be credited to our crews on the basis of their reports.

Successes could be increased, even with the intensified enemy nightfighter defence encountered at present, if fighters could be used for shadowing duties instead of Ju 88 reconnaissance aircraft, which

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frequently get shot down at the most critical moment before the attack. Unfortunately our Me 109 pilots refuse to return in darkness and land by night, even under the best weather conditions.

Nuisance raids, which seem to have now replaced the old form of concentrated attack, are a great improvement on it, making possible considerable successes with very small losses. It is however essential that the original conception of such operations should be remembered. My impression is that in the majority of cases, the aim of our sorties at present is more to placate the High Command than to cause any serious discomfort to the enemy. If, for example, bombs are dropped on English country houses where dances are taking place, there is little possibility of killing anyone of importance, since Churchill doesn't dance, and other prominent personalities are generally beyond the age for such relaxation. It is undoubtedly better to drop bombs on a secondary target than to bring them back as was done in the old days, but with crews of uncertain character, there is a danger that the operation may develop into something which we used in the Army to call a "Wilde Sau".

Storp<sup>\*</sup> turned up here yesterday and told me that he also was planning to attack shipping in order to split the weight of the enemy defences and facilitate his attacks on England. I fail to see the connection between the two, but was pleased to hear of his intentions.

I am firmly convinced that every ton counts in the race between sinkings and construction. If we could succeed in sinking approximately 100,000 G.R.T. of enemy shipping per month, we would not need to worry about the industrial potential of England and America.

This necessitates our giving effective help to the submarine fleet by attacking shipping and shipbuilding yards, and a further strengthening of our defences by night fighters and long range night fighters. Our Air Force has had its greatest successes when working in close co-operation with our land and sea forces. I do not feel that these considerations weight very strongly with our present High Command.

This brings me to the end of my account, which should at the same time be the swan song of Fliegerfuehrer Atlantik. After the withdrawal of K.G. 6 the existence of this post is no longer justified. Compared with the early days, Fliegerfuehrer Atlantik has for some time been but a living corpse. A new lease of life can only be infused by the arrival of new formations, especially of a torpedo bombing Gruppe, and by the realisation that the sole task should be the war against shipping. To underline the theme again: The question of shipping space is the deciding factor in this war.

I consider it my duty to bring these facts to your notice, my dear Jeschonnek, because I wish to be spared later recriminations because of my silence. I think you know me too well to consider that I might be trying to obtain some personal advantage by this report.

Heil Hitler !

Yours,

(signed) Kessler

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/ Evasion of a difficult task by substitution of an easier one.

\* Major Storp At that time O.O. of K.G.R. 106,  
and later General der Kampfflieger (A.O.C. Bombers).

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