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AIR HISTORICAL BRANCH.

TRANSLATION NO. VII/II

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GERMAN AIR FORCE ACTIVITIES

IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

TACTICS AND LESSONS LEARNED.

1941 - 1943

A Study prepared by the German Air Historical Branch. (8th Abteilung)
and dated 30th October 1944.

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8.10.46.

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The attached is the text, in translation, of a lecture prepared in March 1944 by a member of the 8th Abteilung (Archives and Historical Branch of the German Air Ministry).

2. In accordance with the usual procedure it was submitted to higher authority for approval and a number of pencilled annotations were made. As these are of some interest as indicative of the doubtful accuracy of the passages marked, they have been inserted in red on the translation.

3. The names of German formations have been left untranslated. The following brief explanation is considered to be more useful than an attempt to render the terms into a rough English equivalent.

(a) The strength of a Staffel varied at different periods of the war from 9 to 16 aircraft (Initial Establishment), but for the period covered by this study it is safe to take 9 as the correct figure.

(b) A Gruppe consisted of 3 Staffeln, although in the later stages of the war this was often increased to 4. In addition, it had a Gruppenstab - a sort of Headquarters Flight, usually of 3 or 4 aircraft.

(c) A Geschwader was composed of 3 or 4 Gruppen plus a Geschwader Stab of usually 3 or 4 aircraft.

GERMAN AIR FORCE ACTIVITIES IN THE MEDITERRANEAN.

TACTICS AND LESSONS LEARNED 1941 - 1943.

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At the time when the Luftwaffe made its appearance in the Mediterranean area, at first in Sicily, at the beginning of 1941, the position there was as follows.

2. Italy had been at war with England for six months and after advancing a short distance in North Africa across the Egyptian border as far as Sidi Barani, she was obliged to withdraw her forces again to the West owing to a badly organised supply organisation. German Army Units had been moved to Tripolitania to strengthen its defence. The Italian mainland had not as yet been touched by enemy attacks, although a few airfields in Sicily had been bombed by aircraft based on Malta.
3. Since November 1940, the English had been busy trying to establish a base in Greece via Crete from which to invade Central Europe.
4. The Luftwaffe in the Mediterranean was therefore set the following tasks at the beginning of 1941 -
 - (i) To neutralise Malta as a base for air or naval forces, thus securing our own supply route from Italy to Africa.
 - (ii) To interfere with the shortest sea route between England and Egypt through the Mediterranean.
 - (iii) To rout the enemy in the Balkans and in Crete.
 - (iv) To support the army in the battles in Africa.

Whilst the neutralisation of Malta and the interference with British naval traffic in the Mediterranean was to be accomplished through air operations alone, the Luftwaffe had to co-operate closely with the army in the Balkans and in Africa. Further tasks became necessary as the situation developed.

5. Course of Events

A supply convoy sailing from Gibraltar to Malta and consisting of 23 ships, among them the aircraft carrier "Illustrious" and two battleships, was sighted by our reconnaissance aircraft north of Bougie on 7th January, 1941. Fighter bombers and torpedo-carrying aircraft delivered a low-level and dive-bombing attack on the convoy south of Sardinia. Carrier aircraft presented no danger worth mentioning since they were of an obsolete type. Naval flak caused slight losses. Fighters based on Malta found the distance to the target area too great. Bad weather helped the sea operations so that parts of the convoy, including the "Illustrious", reached Malta. There followed a series of day and night attacks by Ju 88's and He 111's and day attacks by Ju 87's and Me 110's on ships in the harbour of Valetta and on airfields on Malta. Dive bombing and level flight attacks made from a medium height, in which escorting aircraft also took part, achieved on the whole good results. Several hits on the aircraft carrier by S.C. 1000 and 500 bombs were reported and confirmed in aerial photographs but she did not sink and on the 24th January, under cover of bad weather, she left port for Alexandria. Our own losses were tolerable and were caused mainly by accurate flak and, to a lesser extent, by Hurricanes. Air supremacy over the Island was won in February, 1941. At times Malta had only three fighters ready for immediate action. Our own air attacks were aimed at the following - Main target, operationally active airfields; second target, heavily occupied airfields; third target, harbour installations and ships in port. It became very difficult for the enemy to bring up supplies to Malta since he was unable to provide any fighter escort for the long sea routes along the coast of North Africa. From the middle of 1941 onwards the task of continuing to pin Malta down fell to the Italians. They did not succeed and Malta rose again.

6. Meanwhile, the German Africa Corps had been in action on the German Front since the beginning of February, 1941, had reconquered Cyrenaica and, with the exception of Tobruk, had established itself up to the Egyptian Frontier. The Luftwaffe gave the land fighting strong support by means of Stuka and long range fighter attacks.

7. The Luftwaffe operations in Spring on the Balkan Front and against Crete formed the most rapidly completed phase of its operations in the Mediterranean during 1941.

8. In the Balkans the Luftwaffe had the following tasks -

- (i) To achieve and maintain air supremacy by crushing the enemy air force and its ground organisation.
- (ii) To give indirect support to the Army by destroying enemy transport and supply services and consequently making enemy operations impossible.
- (iii) To give direct support to the land fighting forces in their battles.
- (iv) To drop parachute and airborne troops at strategic points and to make these airborne landing operations safe.
- (v) To bomb enemy naval forces and harbour installations, thus hindering the bringing up of supplies or, on the other hand, threatening the enemy in retreat.

The Luftwaffe carried out these tasks between the 6th April and 2nd May, 1941, after wresting the air supremacy from a stubborn enemy.

9. Barely three weeks later, on the 20th May, began the conquest of Crete. An island had to be conquered in a campaign where the attacker had practically no naval forces, but a superior air force, whereas the defender had a large naval force and a weak air force at his disposal. The heaviest burden in the battle for Crete fell upon the Luftwaffe. First of all bomber and Stuka formations did the work of the heavy artillery by bombing artillery positions, strongpoints, gun emplacements, reserves, etc. Following the bombardment of the few enemy airfields on Crete, which forced the British air forces there to retreat to Egypt, Cyprus and Palestine, the Luftwaffe landed parachute and airborne troops and attacked naval units which, owing to lack of fighter cover, suffered heavy losses. The successful occupation of Crete and its operational value meant an increased danger from the Luftwaffe to enemy sea transport in the Eastern Mediterranean. In conjunction with the Italian Dodecanese a gateway to the Aegean and consequently to South Eastern Europe had been closed, which meant that so long as Turkey remained neutral the enemy could not break out from the Eastern Mediterranean with the forces then at his disposal. This result was achieved by the efforts of the Luftwaffe.

10. Supremacy on the seas seemed to have been successfully broken by air superiority. The events in Crete cannot, however, be regarded as typical since they took place in an isolated theatre of war and the enemy air force, owing to its numerical inferiority, presented no serious opposition. In the case of Crete, air superiority, however, achieved its aim, namely, the conquest of the island.

11. As early as the middle of January 1941, a successful attack had been made on the Suez Canal by Luftwaffe aircraft based on Benghazi, and with the fall of Crete enemy targets in the Eastern Mediterranean also fell within the orbit of Luftwaffe operations. Targets such as the Suez Canal, Port Said, Suez, Alexandria, and the airfields along the Suez Canal from which night attacks were flown against our Hinterland and which served as bases to the enemy advanced formations, were subjected to repeated dive-and-glide approach night attacks from a medium height; these attacks were to some extent successful.

12. In consequence of sunken shipping and mine sweeping operations, the Suez Canal had to be temporarily closed, at times for as long as three weeks at a stretch. A more permanent closing of the Canal could not be achieved with the forces available.

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No. 13. The 300 km wide gateway between Crete and Cyrenaica was constantly watched by the Luftwaffe and thus the shortest sea route between England and the Near and Far East was practically broken.

14. The advantage of being able to concentrate air forces quickly was in contrast to the British defences which were not yet fully equipped and this was apparent everywhere in the Mediterranean. Surprise and concentration of forces brought the earliest successes. The British, however, continued to build up and fortify their defences in Malta and in the Eastern Mediterranean. The number of aircraft reinforcements to Malta and Egypt from America and England increased from month to month.

15. Towards the end of 1941 it became clear that the Italians were incapable of holding down Malta by themselves and as the losses on the African supply route became heavier, the Fuehrer ordered a concentration of the forces of the Axis powers to be set up in the Mediterranean. Additional formations were moved into the area, the C-in-C Southern Section, who was also head of Luftflotte 2, was entrusted with the Command, and the chief area of Luftwaffe activities shifted again to the Central Mediterranean.

16. Field Marshal Kesselring was given the task of eliminating Malta as a sea and air base. The primary condition for holding the Axis position in North Africa was supremacy in the air and on the seas which was to be achieved by the Luftwaffe. From the enemy's point of view, Malta was the centre of Mediterranean strategy, the aim being to paralyse the German/Italian traffic to Africa, to keep open the sea route from West to East for their own ships and to make possible an attack on Italy.

17. The first task was to smash the enemy air forces and their ground organisation and at the same time to stop the flow of fighter reinforcements. Enemy war and merchant ships in and around Malta had to be destroyed, the ports paralysed and thereby all supplies cut off.

18. For the attack on Malta the following units were available -

- 3 Bomber Geschwader with altogether 8 Gruppen
- 2 Stuka Gruppen
- 2 Torpedo-carrying Staffeln
- 2 Fighter Geschwader with altogether 5 Gruppen
- 1 Night fighter Gruppe
- 1 T.E. fighter Gruppe
- 1 Long range Recce Staffel

19. From the beginning of January until the end of April, 1942, Malta was subjected to constant day and night attacks. At times all flying activity was stopped especially when German and Italian convoys passed to and from Africa.

20. The following figures give some indication of the strength of the attacks. On days of major operations more than 500 aircraft were in action against Malta. In January 1942 alone, Malta had 263 air raid warnings and between January and the end of April 19, 462 aircraft with a bomb load of approximately 8,400 tons were in operation against the island. The enemy lost 251 aircraft shot down or destroyed on the ground, against a loss of 60 of our own. In spite of an additional 80 fighters the operational strength fell from 200 to 30, out of which at times only from 1-3 aircraft were ready for immediate action.

21. At first the fighter defence consisted of Hurricanes, and these did not inflict any great losses; later on Spitfires operating from aircraft carriers south of the Balearics increased the defensive strength of Malta to a considerable degree. Our own convoys were able to sail past Malta at a distance of 150 km. from the island because bomber and torpedo-carrying aircraft were unable to take off from Malta owing to our continuous air attacks and fighter patrols. Low level attacks were never possible on Malta because very heavy and accurate flak of all calibres caused us heavy losses which were not justified by the results achieved.

22. By April 1942, Malta had been temporarily eliminated as a sea and air base. The army was planning an attack on Egypt and its execution depended on the safe passage of the transports destined to reinforce the armoured units in Africa. The route through the Mediterranean was, however, only safe so long as Malta was out of action.

23. The operational air warfare waged against Malta had shown that the air force can be one of the deciding factors even at sea, once air supremacy has been won and maintained, but it has also shown that air superiority alone does not decide the issue. The fortress of Malta could be held down and at times even paralysed, but only the occupation of the island could have achieved a final decision. That Malta was not occupied was primarily due to the fact that the war was being waged in conjunction with the Italians. The Italian Fleet, however, was not ready to join in the fight, the Italian parachute troops were not up to strength. Through an air offensive alone, as was the case in Crete, the conquest of Malta would have entailed very heavy German losses and the Fuehrer therefore decided against it.

24. Some of our own units had to be sent to other fronts and the rest of our forces had the dual task of waging active war on Malta and supporting the army in Africa; as a result Malta made a determined effort at the end of April to regain her air superiority. Spitfires manned by Battle of Britain pilots arrived from England, and on the 19th May the II Fliegerkorps reported that day attacks were no longer possible because of the increased fighter strength on Malta, reinforcements having been coming in since the 28th April. British bomber and torpedo-carrying aircraft were sent to Malta and again threatened the German/Italian supply route to Africa. Thus the great offensive on Malta had not achieved a decisive victory.

25. Field Marshal Rommel launched his offensive on the 26th May, 1942. The supply position was such that an advance into Egypt - with the Suez Canal as its first objective - seemed possible. The Battle of Bir Achim, a desert strongpoint south of Tobruk, deprived this offensive of its desired result. This fortress, defended by 4500 Free French troops under the command of the Alsation General Konig, held out for nine whole days against an attack of nearly three Divisions and three Reconnaissance Battalions supported by about 1500 aircraft. This meant a nine-days gain for the enemy and for our army and air force nine days of losses in material, personnel, aircraft and petrol. Those nine days were irrecoverable. Preparations for an offensive against the fortress of Tobruk now took shape and involving as they did both army and air force, these required precise planning. Preceded directly by an attack by Ju 87's on a narrow strip of the outer ring of defences of the fortress, the German Africa Corps advanced and overcame the outer defences. Clouds of dust caused by the Stuka attack reduced the enemy artillery's range of vision to a minimum. The formations of Ju 87's co-operating closely with the army, destroyed and pinned down targets as briefed by the army and thus cleared a way for the land forces through the defences. Tobruk fell within 24 hours without

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putting up any resistance in the air; the Luftwaffe together with the German Africa corps had conquered it in a combined operation. For the loss of 180 dead we captured 30,000 prisoners and 100 tanks. This superb achievement was mainly due to the Luftwaffe.

26. The German offensive continued to the East, Mersa Matruh fell and the first halt came at Alamein where the ground and air forces had to be re-organised and re-equipped. The R.A.F. although unbeaten was moved further back, and being near its Egyptian bases was able to strengthen its forces rapidly without interference from our own air force which was constantly on the move. The weight of air attacks on our spearheads increased and both the army and air force began to have difficulties with their supplies due to lengthy supply routes. In addition, Malta had again become so much stronger that by June the African supply routes, both east and west-going, were reported unsafe. Following an order from the C-in-C of the Luftwaffe a renewed attack to hold Malta down was launched on the 4th July. It was evident, however, as early as the 7th July, that confronted by 110 enemy fighters, mostly Spitfires, a dive-bombing attack by Ju 88's was no longer possible, even with fighter cover. The battle was continued by means of level and glide-approach attacks and by the 13th July our own air superiority was re-established. Supply convoys with strong naval escorts made repeated attempts to reach Malta, but on the whole they were not successful. In many cases the Luftwaffe, partly supported by the Italian Fleet, was able to force a convoy to change its course and also to sink or damage a large number of vessels; since all British air bases were a long way away, these convoys sailed without fighter escort.

27. The forces assigned to the task of holding Malta down were 2 Bomber Gruppen, 4 Fighter Gruppen and 1 Fighter Bomber Staffel, whilst 1 Bomber Geschwader, 1 T.E. Fighter Gruppe and 1 Night Fighter Gruppe were to ensure the safety of our convoys to Africa. This division of forces shows how important was the task of protecting the sea routes, a task which at times required an all-out effort and most precise calculations. But even then losses of supply vessels were often incurred by reason of the difficulties of a co-ordinated (i.e. Italo-German) campaign. The Supreme Commander of the Southern Area had stipulated that two days notice was to be given before a transport sailed, so that an escort might be provided; that Italian High Command, however, very seldom complied with this order. The C-in-C Southern Area did not know that the ships had sailed either until he heard they had been sunk or too late to provide an escort. On the other hand, ships were sometimes held back without notice with the result that our air escort searched for them in vain.

28. The Operations of our bomber formations covered a wide field, and the same squadrons were at times in action against Malta, giving the armies air support and ensuring the safety of our convoys. This led to a drop in our available strength and Malta was able once more to build up the establishment on her airfields. A force of 121 fighters and 43 T.E. aircraft was sufficient to hamper our African convoys and a renewed attack on Malta was therefore launched on the 10th October, 1942. A surprise attack was no longer possible as the British radar system in Sicily picked up the aircraft as soon as they took off from their bases. During spoof attacks where bombers were used as a bait, a number of enemy fighters were shot down; the many bombing missions to Malta, however, which had as their chief target the airfield at Luca, had to be flown at a disadvantage, the bombers being outnumbered by fighters 1:2. Several attacks were made by 80 Ju.88's with a cover of 160 Me. 109's, but 8 days later on 18th October, the C-in-C Southern Area forbade any further day attacks on Malta by Ju.88 formations, even with fighter cover, because of the heavy losses in bombers. This was the turning point of the German air campaign in the Mediterranean area; the strength of the British defences was superior to the offensive powers of the Luftwaffe. Day attacks by fighter bombers continued in order to give the threatened African supply routes every possible help.

29. Experience had taught us that the destruction of the airfields on Malta through bombing attacks required a considerable length of time and yet at the end of October the Supreme Commander of the Luftwaffe ordered the destruction of these airfields within eight days with the following forces:

- 6 Bomber Gruppen
- 1 Torpedo-carrying Gruppe
- 4 Fighter Gruppen
- 1 Stuka Gruppe
- 1 Fighter Bomber Staffel

The C.-in-C. Southern Area immediately pointed out, that as previous experience had shown, a complete destruction of the airfields was impossible and only the occupation of Malta could provide a decisive answer. The attacks were launched but at the end of October and the beginning of November 1942, a series of events occurred which necessitated switching the Luftwaffe operations from Malta to another theatre.

30. In the Eastern Mediterranean the enemy had succeeded in reorganising and strengthening his land and air forces and was now in a position to risk an attack on the African front. In this campaign T.A.F. made its first appearance at the beginning of October when it was used to prepare and support the British offensive. Our own numerical inferiority was to some extent offset by our mobility, but faced by British superiority in numbers and a deteriorating supply situation the retreat of Rommel's tank army was inevitable.

31. At this juncture, on 6th November 1942 began the Anglo-American landings in French North West Africa with Mediterranean strongpoints of Oran, Algiers, Bougie and Bone. The Luftwaffe formations which had been withdrawn from Malta carried out long range attacks on the first three large convoys which consisted of over 200 ships. A large number of ships was sunk or heavily damaged during day and night glide-and-dive bombing attacks, but a decisive victory could not be achieved owing to the great number of ships which was larger than that of the attacking aircraft. Concentrated attacks on the most eastern parts of the convoy did, however, prevent a suspected enemy landing near Tunis. Our bomber losses increased as land based fighters joined those based on aircraft carriers to provide fighter cover for the convoy route along the North African coast. We therefore concentrated on night attacks against ports where unloading operations were in progress.

32. The following figures indicate the bitterness of the battle. In attacks between 6th November and 25th December, 1942, against the landing fleet and against the troops actually landed, the II Fliegerkorps lost 201 crews and 340 aircraft out of a total strength of 877.

33. At the beginning of January, 1943, the II Fliegerkorps was set the following tasks:-

- (i) To protect our own convoys
- (ii) To combat the enemy air forces over Malta and in Africa
- (iii) To harry enemy supply convoys
- (iv) To attack enemy land forces in co-operation with the army
- (v) To undertake reconnaissance in the Western and Central Mediterranean and its adjoining coastal regions.
- (vi) To combat the U-Boats along sea routes used by our own convoys
- (vii) To undertake and protect transport by air which had to be employed owing to our Naval losses.

There were not enough aircraft available for all these tasks and it was only possible to build up concentrations at various points without being able to force a decision in conjunction with the army. By day, long range aircraft were to go into action only in decisive engagements and their most important task, the battle against landing craft, was restricted to night attacks. This required a constant watch over the harbours. Owing to /the

the lack of reconnaissance aircraft and the strength of the defences, only one uninterrupted reconnaissance flight was made during a period of nine months.

34. On the 17th February, 1943, the tactics which K.G.2. had employed so successfully against England six months before were used for the first time in the Mediterranean. A bomber formation approached at low level to within 70 km. of the target, thus escaping the range of the enemy radar. The formation then climbed to a height of between 3,500 and 4,000 metres and delivered a glide approach attack, releasing its bombs at a height of between 1,500 and 1,800 metres. The target, Bengazi Harbour, was still brightly lit when the attack began.

35. After the fall of Tunis the enemy completed his invasion preparations. It was not yet clear whether the landings were to take place in Sardinia or in Sicily. As mentioned above, our night bombing attacks were at that time directed against assembly ports and convoys sailing East. The Chief of Offensive Operations, Southern Area, who at times had more than 130 bombers at his disposal, ordered concentrated attacks at night or dusk. The approach was flown at low or very low level, preceded by Pathfinders, to within 50-30 km. of the target. The attack itself was a glide-approach one, from a medium height, delivered on a clearly marked target, but the results were not effective enough to interfere seriously with the enemy's landing preparations. It was evident that with the means at our disposal we could not force a decision by air operations over the sea alone while the target areas were so heavily defended by flak and fighters. One bomber and one fighter bomber formation achieved good results against the landing operations in Sicily, but these alone were unable to prevent an enemy victory, and our land defences were weak.

36. In August 1943, the enemy had at his disposal 1,000 aircraft in Sicily, 3,000 in French North West Africa - mainly concentrated in Tunisia - and another 1,500 in Libya and Egypt; of these 750 were 4-engined aircraft, and as a result the Luftwaffe was forced on to the defensive. The Luftwaffe served directly and indirectly as a support of the army. The enemy landings at Salerno presented the Luftwaffe not with a new but a re-doubled task, the support of the land forces in their defensive battle.

37. At the end of 1943 the Luftwaffe's position in the Mediterranean was as follows. By reason of the enemy's numerical superiority - on the 1st December 1943 he had close on 6,600 aircraft in the Mediterranean, of which 2,000 fighters and 900 bombers were in the Italian sector - the Luftwaffe had been forced on to the defensive. It should be emphasised that the activities of the Luftwaffe in the Mediterranean, with a few exceptions such as Crete, Malta and several special missions, were conducted on the lines of a "poor man's war", since the Mediterranean area, as a whole, was considered a secondary theatre of war.

38. Summing up, the following lessons emerged from the course of the Luftwaffe operations in the Mediterranean between 1941 and 1943:-

1) Crete. Surprise and concentration with the use of a new weapon enabled the Luftwaffe to force a position against strong enemy sea and land forces and an inadequate air force.

2) Malta. In spite of unchallenged air supremacy over the island the Luftwaffe alone were unable to eliminate it altogether. Even a temporary paralysis required large forces. An island can only be totally eliminated by its occupation, that is, by a landing operation in which all three fighting services take part.

3) Defence against landing operations. Landing preparations cannot be camouflaged from air reconnaissance. To have any hope of success, attacks on assembly harbours must be delivered in great strength. We did not have a sufficient number of aircraft at our disposal in the Mediterranean. The same applies to the destruction of advancing enemy landing craft where again large numbers of aircraft are needed to oppose the vast number of surface craft in action at one time. This is also true when the enemy has actually landed.

4) Naval objectives without fighter cover are an easy target for the air force. When there is a fighter escort they can only be attacked by day in certain exceptional cases such as when weather conditions are very suitable or with a strong fighter escort. Dusk and night attacks are therefore preferable. The centre of operations against Naval objectives varies according to the general situation. The destruction of aircraft carriers, by eliminating bases for fighter escorts, makes it easier for the Luftwaffe to attack shipping far out at sea. The sinking of tankers can make an enemy army and air force powerless to move. The sinking of troop transports generally causes heavy loss of life. The sinking of freighters destroys precious war material which once landed would require far greater forces to destroy it. It is therefore clear that in the battle of supplies attacks on shipping bring far more satisfactory results than the bombing of land objectives, added to which, of course, the loss in shipping is important in itself.

5) Support of Land Operations. Large close range formations are needed over the battle field and just behind the front lines. Operational bomber formations must deliver attacks on convoys and their escorts. A large and well organised fighter force with a highly developed radar system must be ready for offensive and defensive missions.

39. Of the large number of Luftwaffe operations in the Mediterranean only a few have been mentioned in this lecture and they have been selected to show the varied nature of the air activities. Any lessons learned are not only useful in the Mediterranean theatre of war but are of importance for the conduct of the campaigns still being waged.

Sources - War Diaries
X Fliegerkorps
II Fliegerkorps
Luftflotten Kommando 2
African Tank Army