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AIR HISTORICAL BRANCH

TRANSLATION NO. VII/19.

SOME ASPECTS OF
THE GERMAN FIGHTER EFFORT
DURING THE
INITIAL STAGES OF THE INVASION OF NORTH-WEST EUROPE

A survey dated 18th November, 1944, written by Oberst Mettig, of the German Air Historical Branch, and formerly Chief of Staff of Jagdkorps II during the period 25th March - 25th June, 1944.

Translated by
Air Ministry, A.H.B.6.
18th January, 1947.

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SOME ASPECTS OF THE GERMAN FIGHTER EFFORT DURING THE
INITIAL STAGES OF THE INVASION OF NORTH WEST EUROPE.

1. The following recollections are drawn from my experiences as Chief of Staff of Jagdkorps II from 25th February to 25th June, 1944. The invasion was expected to materialize any day during this period, and consequently all preparations bore the stamp of emergency measures. A study of meteorological conditions, tides, etc. was undertaken by the Staff of Jagdkorps II in order to determine the periods during which an invasion was most likely or unlikely. These calculations, justified by the subsequent date of the invasion, - enabled us to plan the disposition of our forces and supplies.

By chance it was learned later that the Supreme Command of the Fleet had made similar calculations, and had apparently selected the period around the 8th June for the probable commencement of the invasion. In spite of several visits to the Naval Command H.Q. in the West, and to the H.Q. of Luftflotte 3 by the Chief of Staff of Jagdkorps II, neither of the Commands informed him of their ideas on the subject.

2. As early as April 1944, Major General Junk, Commanding Jagdkorps II, repeatedly drew the attention of Luftflotte 3, and other authorities, including the Supreme Command of the Air Force, the Air Force Operational Staff, and the Air Officer for Fighters, to the fact that the continuous nature of air operations over France and Belgium indicated that the invasion was at hand, and that forces and supplies should be allocated accordingly. The enemy was carrying out systematic day and night bombing attacks on important military objectives in the Western zones to an ever increasing extent, and the aim of these attacks was obvious.

The objectives were attacked in the following order:-

Large marshalling yards,
Troop-encampments and large-scale troop-movements,
railway bridges,
particularly those across the Seine South of Paris,
ammunition and explosive dumps,
airfields and
radar stations.

Due to the inadequency of our fighter and flak defences and the enormous scale on which the attacks were conducted, the enemy obtained good results everywhere. Only the attacks on airfields remained relatively ineffective due to the dispersal of our forces, (each airfield had 2-4 alternative landing grounds), effective camouflage measures and the frequent transfers of units to different airfields.

These attacks were evidently a systematic preparation for the invasion. Their most damaging effect on our anti-invasion plans resulted from the paralysis of the railway network, the destruction of all bridges across the Seine South of Paris and the considerable dislocation wrought in our aircraft reporting services.

3. The fighter forces available were utterly insufficient; up to the beginning of the invasion they comprised 2 Geschwaders* with a total operational strength of 60-80 aircraft. Both of these units had been in France since the beginning of the campaign in the West in 1940, having never been withdrawn from operations for rest and reinforcement, and there was in consequence a grave shortage of Unit and subordinate Commanders. Geschwaders were often led by a lieutenant (Pilot Officer); and Staffels by Warrant Officers.

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* See Translation VII/2 for an explanation of German Air Force Unit designations.

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This resulted in a considerable decrease in striking power, and it was decided to send one Gruppe at a time from each Geschwader back to the Metz-Nancy area for training under more peaceful conditions. In practice, these measures proved abortive, as both Gruppen had to be employed on continuous operations against enemy aircraft in these areas.

The suggestion that these units might more profitably be transferred to Bohemia or Silesia for training there was turned down by the Air Force Operational Staff with the comments that (a) no airfields were available, and (b) that the danger would exist of both Gruppen being incorporated into the Reich Luftgau Command, and being therefore lost to Jagdkorps II. The fact that such a step could have been averted by an order or even a telephone call from the Air Force Operational Staff was quite obviously never taken into consideration. At the end of April, therefore, the Commanding General decided, despite the critical situation, to transfer 1 Gruppe from each Geschwader to the Bordeaux area for training there.

4. In the meantime, 4 Geschwaders under Jagdivisions 4 and 5 were concentrated in the Paris - Lille area, no fighters being left in Brittany or on the Mediterranean coast, (with the exception of small reserve training units in the latter area).

It soon became evident that the Lille area was too near the front line. Fighter formations operating from this area had to take off as soon as plots of enemy aircraft were received if they were not to run the risk of being pinned to the ground by enemy fighters waiting over the airfield at an altitude of 2-3,000 metres, ready to attack from a superior position any aircraft taxiing to take off or actually taking off. Due to this, and in spite of their jettison-tanks, our fighters often ran short of fuel before the moment had come to attack the enemy bomber formations.

Consequently Jagdkorps II suggested the withdrawal of the fighter formations into the Reims-Creil-Romilly area; the enlargement and improvement of the ground organisation in this Sector had already been begun before the transfer was approved. In actual fact, the transfer did not take place, as the beginning of the invasion necessitated a different course of action.

5. The enlargement of the ground organisation did not meet the requirements of the air war. As mentioned above, our forces were gradually forced to move Eastwards. Luftflotte 3, however, had constructed the majority of the airfields in a belt approximately 100 kms long, running parallel with the Channel coast. Relatively few airfields were available further inland on the Brussels - Reims - Orleans line, and practically none at all in the Metz-Dijon - Limoges sector. Most of the existing airfields in the rear were reserved for bombers and night fighters and were forbidden to day fighters.

Even the airfields, which had long been earmarked for the emergency day fighter Geschwaders from the Reich in the event of an invasion, such as those in the Reims-Romilly area, were completely inadequate. In almost every case no H.Q. buildings had been constructed and dispersal points had not been organised, there was a complete lack of splinter screens, trenches, dug-outs, shelters, teleprinting and wireless installations, and of ammunition and fuel depots.

To urgent requests for the provision of these elementary necessities, the reply received was always that no personnel was available for constructional purposes, and no wire for the installation of signals equipment.

Eventually, a systematic re-shuffle of forces was undertaken; several airfields, in the vicinity of the coast and of great value to the fighter forces, had the Atlantic Wall held, (which was taken for granted at that time), were abandoned and their entire equipment including Flak was installed on airfields in the rear.

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6. During Jagdkorps II's efforts to rouse the Luftgau Commands from their stupor after 4 years of rest, the fact that Fliegerkorps II was also operating in the West proved to be a great advantage. The administrative staff of Fliegerkorps II was able to deal with the question of the provision of airfields, and at the same time look after the interests of Jagdkorps II.

7. Ammunition supplies were a particular source of difficulty. Assuming that the reserve fighter Geschwaders from the Reich arrived on the morning of the invasion, and were ready to be employed on operations, it was obvious that these units would run out of ammunition on the evening of the second day. It was impossible to build up larger ammunition supplies and in particular to ensure flexible distribution to all principal and satellite airfields.

The suggestion that supply difficulties would ensue if railways were put out of action, - in view of the impossibility of transporting supplies by road during the day, - was never heeded. The allocation of 3 cm ammunition, (the most severe bottleneck in Jagdkorps II in May) was just sufficient to allow newly received reserve aircraft to be tested and armed for a single sortie.

When finally the anticipated shortage of ammunition on the second day did not materialize, it could be attributed solely to the fact that the emergency reserve fighter Geschwaders which had been expected from the Reich failed to arrive.

8. In the transfer of several day fighter Gruppen from the Reich to France, the indecision of the High Command led to certain unfortunate results. Such large scale transfers of day-fighters were planned that with the exception of the S.E. night-fighter Gruppen of the former Jagddivision 30, and the T.E. fighters whose operational value was doubtful, practically no dayfighter defence forces remained within the Reich. This was considered to be justified by the fact that no large-scale penetrations into the Reich were expected during the beginning of the invasion.

The longer, however, the invasion was postponed, the greater became the influence of those who contended that the Reich should not be stripped of its defences. Jagdkorps I, in particular, fought for the retention of day fighters in the Reich.

As a result, various measures were adopted which prevented fighter forces of a reasonably high standard from being at the disposal of Jagdkorps II during the first days of the invasion.

- (a) An order was issued that transfer flights in the occupied Western territories, including those of operational fighter units could only be carried out from 1 hour before sunset till 1 hour after sunrise, the fighter units having to provide cover for the transport aircraft and employ their leading crews on these duties. Consequently the formations did not arrive on the morning of the first day of the invasion, but only in the evening of the second day and in some cases even later. Jagdkorps II had protested in vain that even in the twilight hours no fighter cover was required for the JU.52's which were in radio communication with their ground stations.
- (b) One Gruppe from each Geschwader was ordered to remain in the Reich as a reserve unit; this alone reduced the operational strength by 30%.
- (c) 14 days before the invasion started, when the range of targets attacked by the Anglo-American air forces left no doubt as to the urgency of the situation, Jagdkorps II had to cede 6 fully equipped Staffels for the defence of the Reich. As, at that time, the Korps, consisting of 6 Geschwaders, had sent 2 Geschwaders South for refresher training, (see (3) supra). 4 operational Geschwaders remained with an average operational strength of 20 aircraft to each Geschwader.

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After the cession of these 6 Staffels, the operational strength of the Korps sank to 50 aircraft, and it was with these forces that Jagdkorps II entered the battle on the first day of the invasion, during which the enemy employed a total of 7,500 aircraft.

9. On the day on which the above units were transferred to the Reich, Jagdkorps II sent an urgent request to Luftflotte 3, asking that reinforcements be sent to France before all traffic and supply lines had been destroyed. To this no answer was received, and in any case the commencement of the invasion 14 days later rendered pointless any further action on this point.

10. It was therefore not surprising that the opinion prevailed in Jagdkorps II that the possibility of an invasion was no longer seriously considered by the High Command. I had this confirmed later on during a talk with the A.O.C. XIV Fliegerkorps who, at the end of May, had been asked by the Chief of Air Staff whether or not he still believed in an invasion!

11. Our own day fighter forces, which were particularly weak at the beginning, were at first employed exclusively on low-level-attacks on landing-craft, and landing points, and as fighter cover for the fighter bomber formations of Fliegerkorps II which were attacking the same objectives. The success of these operations, however, was only negligible. Often the enemy's superior fighter defence intercepted our own formations before they could reach the invasion front, and after the latter had run out of ammunition and fuel they were forced to return without having carried out their actual mission. Out of the first 12 fighter bomber attacks carried out by all serviceable aircraft of Jagdkorps II and Fliegerkorps II, only in 2 attacks did our aircraft penetrate over the frontline. During the other sorties, the bombs had to be released over our own territory so that our aircraft could take up fighter combat.

12. In view of the hopelessness of attacking large twin and four-engined formations with strong fighter cover, attempts were made during these raids to single out straggling or isolated aircraft for attack. These tactics met with a certain amount of success, but our own forces suffered from the steadily deteriorating quality of the air situation plots, due to the destruction of many radar stations, and from the lack of adequate training among the younger pilots.

13. Apart from operations against artillery spotting aircraft, the defence of the main Army supply lines by fighter bombers and low-flying aircraft became of the utmost importance.

Both Fieldmarshal Rundstedt and Fieldmarshal Rommel have expressed their appreciation of this absolutely necessary and successful operation, but they nevertheless failed to silence the criticism of lesser Commanders who, a fortnight or three weeks after the beginning of the invasion, reported that they had not seen a single German aircraft over the front. Even the General Commanding Flakkorps III made the same complaint to the C. in C. of Luftflotte 3, and destructive criticism of day fighters became increasingly prevalent.

The Supreme Commander of the Air Force himself demanded victories on a scale considered unachievable by the Jagdkorps; the proportion of losses continued to remain 1:1; and whereas the loss of some 50 aircraft meant nothing to the enemy, losses on the same scale to our own fighters would have annihilated our fighter defences.

The principle was adhered to that however small a fighter force may be, it is still of value in surprise actions against the enemy and in hampering his freedom of action. Against the enemy forces, 100 aircraft were however the minimum that could be employed. Any smaller force would have absolutely no effect, and would suffer high losses.

14. In the field of night fighting, the situation appeared to be far more favourable. When I arrived on the Western front at the end of February, night fighter activities were restricted to "Himmelbett" (G.C.I.) operations

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along the Eastern frontier of France, approximately along a line running from St.Trond over Florennes to Dijon, and to the interception of the incoming bomber stream.

By their own untiring efforts, and with the support of the Night Fighter Command of Luftflotte 3, Jagdkorps II succeeded in building up a night fighter organization which, at the beginning of the invasion, covered the whole of Northern France, i.e. the area North East of the line Rennes-Tours-Lyon, and would have permitted single-seater night fighter operations to be carried out over the defence zone on both sides of the Somme from St.Pol to Amale had the necessary aircraft been available.

15. Our numerical inferiority had no noticeably unfavourable effect on night fighter operations, as single night fighter aircraft can easily infiltrate into a dense stream of bombers, whereas day fighters cannot. The considerable successes achieved by our night fighters over France are all the more remarkable considering the very shallow enemy penetration which these raids involved, and the speed with which our pilots had consequently to act.

The short space of time which elapsed between the enemy take off and the actual bombing, as for instance where Paris was the target, necessitated an early take off by our fighters and a precautionary state of readiness of all wireless beacons around Paris. Our fighters usually took off in waves, so that should the target be misjudged, the second wave could still engage the enemy over the real target.

16. The fundamental attitude of the Luftflotten Kommando Reich under whose command Jagdkorps I operated was even more clearly visible in night fighting than in day fighting tactics. The Command regarded all defensive operations over France as wrong strategically, believing it preferable to build up such a strong fighter defence over the Reich that the enemy would no longer risk penetrating into German territory. However desirable a successful defence on these lines would have been, it was clearly impossible at a time when the invading armies had to be fought. A certain amount of friction consequently arose between the various Jagdkorps, the main result of which was to affect adversely the flying units.

17. In conclusion, I should like to summarise briefly my experiences of the period of preparation and execution of the fighter defence plan on the invasion front, and of which only the most important have been mentioned in this Survey.

1. There was no definite and overall command. The results of this were that individual Command H.Q.'s had no uniform situation reports to help them to determine their future tactics, and that the administrative measures for ground organization and supply were often confused and inadequate.
2. Luftflotte 3 was given no reinforcements to make good last minute deficiencies in its fighter organisation.
3. Finally, as the enemy's successes were in large part due to the Allied air forces, our own fighter force became the universal scapegoat, and was blamed for every set-back and loss.

Distribution:

Same as Translation No. VII/14.

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